The ‘body’ and Lady Wisdom (Proverbs 1-9)\(^1\)

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**ABSTRACT**

The personification of wisdom as Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9, evokes quite juxtaposed appreciations. Some believe she is good news for women. She occupies an elevated position close to Yahweh, which is rather unheard of in patriarchal Israelite culture. Others are convinced that she ultimately serves mainly male hegemony and interests being so closely aligned with the (male) divinity. What is her true agency? Utilizing body criticism Lady Wisdom is analysed. Body constructs expose a society’s deepest convictions and values. It is especially the ‘regulatory body’ (ideal, normative, paradigmatic) that becomes a society’s cultural script or ‘corporeal code’, determining all others. Onto and ‘into’ this body-‘text’ is written a society’s values, often hidden. The regulatory body of the time shaped Lady Wisdom primarily into an effective male-empowering mechanism, making her not an attractive model for modern politically active women.

**A INTRODUCTION**

The personification of wisdom as Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 1-9, evokes quite juxtaposed appreciations. Some believe she is good news for women. She occupies an elevated position close to Yahweh, something which is rather unheard of in patriarchal Israelite culture. Schroer (1995:68) points out that she is the one and only acceptable feminine image of Yahweh in post-exilic times. The counselling חַלֵּד becomes an attractive and empowering figure for modern Christian women who often find themselves in similar roles of counsellors and advisers (1995:81). Others are convinced that she ultimately serves male hegemony and interests being so closely aligned with the male divinity. Fontaine (1998:20) remarks rather cynically that she might speak in an F (female) voice but only in the M (male) idiom so as to suppress all contradictory views. Her voice is the cultural voice that speaks through the father (Newsom 1989:145, 156). Even though personified as ‘she’, does she really do ‘she’-things or perhaps ‘he’-things? Is serving Yahweh also serving the feminine cause? The cultural construct of wisdom as Lady Wisdom needs to be looked at again.

Utilizing body criticism Lady Wisdom is analysed. The body is the orientational centre through which we interact with the world and so construct meaning (Vorster 2002:2), and ‘create’ our ‘selves’. Cognitive science of the past few decades has

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convincingly substantiated the bodily basis of our cognition, even our most abstract symbolizations (Lakoff & Johnson 1999). The body as such also begets symbolical or rhetorical value as it is construed as a social script and presented to the body society. And it is on this aspect of the body that this article focuses, not the intricate cognitive processes from body to mind. ‘Body’ as social script refers to the symbolic body of a society or the ideas that a particular society holds about body. These body ideologies do not necessarily coincide with real flesh and blood ones but are ideal constructs. ‘Body’ and ‘person’ are closely linked where the latter points to the sociality of the body. The symbolizations of the body become part of a society’s ideological world, expose its deepest convictions and values and provide a tangible avenue (therefore ‘body’) to the heart of a culture. As part of society’s discursive practices these construals also become embedded in its literary products, sometimes overtly but more often hidden ‘between the lines’. It is especially the ‘regulatory body’ (ideal, normative, paradigmatic) that becomes a society’s ultimate cultural script or ‘corporeal code’, determining all others. The ‘regulatory body’ emerges from culture, and in turn shapes and replicates culture. As ‘text’ the regulatory body begets symbolical or rhetorical value to inform, persuade and construe the adherents of a particular society into the proper bodies they ought to be. It offers them representations of cultural-specific subjectivities or self-understandings. These representations become internalised, incorporated to ensure their effectiveness. When people interact spontaneously there is notably also a corporeal exchange, even from a distance. This exchange can be called mutual incorporation (Leder 1990:94). I become ‘one’ with another and so expand and enrich my bodiliness through that of another person – I experience the world through his/her senses also to complement my own. The same happens when a culture’s subjects interact with their ideal ideas about body, their regulatory ‘body’ – this ‘spirit’ becomes internalised, embodied and it determines the way the followers experience their own bodiliness, especially in terms of the ‘ought’ and ‘ought not to’. In ancient societies it was usually the male ‘body’ regulating inter alia males and females to take up their proper places. How did the regulatory body of the time shape Lady Wisdom, determining her subjectivity, her true agency?

In what follows the focus will be on Proverbs 1, 8 and 9 where Wisdom as an acting person is highlighted. It has hopefully become clear already that she will be highlighted not in terms of her origins but in terms of her effects, it is more about her rhetoricity than her historicity. Her personification gives stability (also tangibility) to all the wisdom values she stands for and simultaneously draws the boundaries of the wise in-group and the foolish out-group (Vorster 2002:39). But first a few comments on the Israelite regulatory body.

### B THE ISRAELITE REGULATORY BODY

Berquist (2002:18-50) describes the Israelite ideal body as a whole body. This body must have all its organs to function properly, and it must be intact: ‘... bodies that leak
or ooze violate the sense of firm fixed boundaries, and ... are not whole’ (2002:19). In this regard the body is much like a container or vessel (2002:66).² The body’s wholeness has to be protected to keep it pure against everything and everyone that are foreign. A man’s body is more whole than a woman’s. Although a man’s body has openings to mediate between himself and the outside world, a woman’s body is seen as more porous than that of the man, and she therefore poses a far greater risk for her society when it comes to impurity (Berquist 2002:80). Apart from all other orifices she has a vagina through which all sorts of impurities could enter. The strict control of women’s sexuality by the males of their household therefore makes sense: ‘Through sexual contact women receive into themselves the male fluids that are appropriate to the man’s household. A woman who enters a household carrying within her the fluids of another household is guilty of impurity. Thus, the society most values women who enter households when they are virgins ... ’ (Berquist 2002:67). The constant warning against the strange woman in Proverbs immediately rings a bell.

It is clear already that wholeness also implies control – self-control and the control of others in need thereof. Being disabled, for instance, means that one is defective in maintaining oneself in all spheres of life. The sedimented idea in the ancient world that a man’s body is more stable than a woman’s adds to the conviction of her looseness or uncontrollability. His body undergoes little changes while hers changes all the time. She is therefore ‘naturally’ in need of far more control than a male. Eilberg-Schwartz (1990:187) points out that although both men’s semen and women’s menstrual blood are regarded as impure, the impurity of women is greater because they have no control over the menstrual flow. The idea of control associated with the Israelite body clearly links it to that of the later Greco-Roman male regulatory body which Vorster (2002:40) names the σώματος ὁράσιμον body! It is the young male body in perfect balance, both on the outside and the inside and in complete control of itself. The Israelites, however, differ in their lesser accentuation of physical beauty than the Greeks. The strong emphasis throughout in Proverbs on discipline and self-control likewise rings a bell – this is the norm that should be strived after.

And the ultimate regulatory body, where is that to be found? In the persona of the god(s). Malul (2002:175 note 92, 288 note 99, 446) rightly describes the god(s) as the ultimate social-structural principle, the embodiment and personification of the ultimacies of a society, a societal strategy or power mechanism (Vorster 2003:4). The god and his/her world is modelled upon the human social world. To observe the body of the god is an important key to a society’s perfect body. How did the Israelite god look? Although seemingly body-less Yahweh nevertheless exhibits upper body functions such as speech, jealousy and anger but no lower bodily functions such as hunger, thirst and sexual activity (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990:138, 193-194; 1994:4, 77,

² Berquist (2002) utilizes the insights of anthropologist Mary Douglas, ‘Purity’ (wholeness) and ‘Danger’ (unwholeness), quite abundantly.
One should rather image him as ‘body-veiled’. Where does Yahweh harbour wisdom? Or which part of the body is predominantly associated with wisdom?

How does this male, whole, controlled and ‘divine’ upper body show itself in Proverbs?

**C LADY WISDOM ‘THE PUBLIC TEACHER’**

We find Lady Wisdom right in the centre of the city’s public life, the busy streets, squares and gateways leading into the city (Pr 1:20-21) and at the heights of the city (Pr 8:2), where buildings of government and commerce are usually situated (Clifford 1999:94). The public domain is normally men’s world, whereas women’s ‘place’ is the domestic world. Lady Wisdom, however, moves around here with ease, grace and authority, active and mobile as if a man. Scholars agree that aristocratic and influential women had more freedom than ordinary women and would therefore be tolerated in men’s domains (cf wise woman in 2 Sm 20:16-19). Add to this Lady Wisdom’s special status as ‘divine’, it is perhaps not that strange to find her here, a ‘goddess’ has freedom of movement. It is important, however, to ask what is she actually doing here while promoting wisdom. Is she strengthening the fabric of society? And what/whose society? Her sinister opposite, Lady Folly, operates in public as well, but is not welcome at all.

She sells herself, ‘wisdom’, to the inexperienced and very vulnerable young males of society – they, however, would not accept and suffer the fatal consequences, poetic justice in action and typical of retributive wisdom. She offers the following: Proverbs 1:22ff – knowledge (דעת), discipline/rebuke (חכמים), inner thoughts (‘my spirit’ עמי, ‘my words’ עבידתי), advice (יענה); in Proverbs 8:5ff the inexperienced are offered prudence (ודעים), understanding (‘heart’ לב, right words (רדשים), truth (אמת), just words (]>=ן), instruction (ধারণ), et cetera, worth more than precious metals and gemstones; rulers govern and judge through her counsel (מענה), judgement (משפט), understanding (דעתו) and power (อำนาจ), confirming her exalted worth. All of these faculties emerge from the inside of the body, the heart/mind as centre of consciousness, they are therefore concrete/bodily dependent, not some objectivistic ‘revelation’ from somewhere. The ancient epistemic process, obtaining knowledge, is not an abstract philosophical process as it is in the Western world but a bodily reaction and interaction with the mundane physical world – ‘… cognitive processes are perceived in concrete, sensory terms’ (Malul 2002:139, 417; cf also Fontaine 2002:60 note 91). And this applies not only to the process but to wisdom/knowledge itself, which seems to be material: Proverbs 1:23: ‘I would have poured out my spirit to you ….’

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3 One should not think of the Israelite body in terms of a (Cartesian) dualistic split of spirit and flesh, but a rather mild hierarchy of upper against lower body.
These wisdom virtues are also focused on or associated with the upper body with which males are predominantly identified – men are mind and women body! Yahweh, the ultimate male, as we have just seen images this. Lang (1986:74 following McKane) points to advice (πράξεις, politics of policy-making) as an activity proper to men,\(^4\) but so also the other capabilities (cf also Vorster 2002:36), at least as they are practised and demonstrated in the public sphere. Males use it to ensure success in life, to give them control (!) of life. One clearly senses here the inscribing of the male regulatory body, the body that is very much in charge of itself and simultaneously protects and regulates body society. And it matches the Greco-Roman \(σωφροσύνη\) body. This is what Lady Wisdom represents and sells, she empowers the males of her society, ‘… an advertiser for the dominant male culture’ (Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993:54).

Wholeness of the body is also hinted at by referring to what the body consumes. One hears an interesting resemblance of the Greek body, that should have the right humoural mixtures of blood (heat), yellow bile (dryness), black bile (coldness) and phlegm (moistness) (Vorster 2002:17)\(^5\) so as to be considered healthy and in balance.\(^6\) Fools will eat the fruit of their deviant ways, sending them on the path to inevitable destruction (Pr 1:31-32). The fruit of wisdom, on the other hand enriches (Pr 8:19). The internalisation of (‘substance’) wisdom leads to a healed (‘whole’) body: Proverbs 3:8 (cf especially also vv 1, 3): ‘This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones.’ Lady Wisdom produces perfect wisdom from her inards implying she is in balance and whole as her model, the male regulatory body. Incorporating her is the same as becoming her herself (cf Leder above), or better, ‘him’, this ideal yardstick of a well-ordered society. A woman does not have this balance (and control) as the ‘strange one’ will shortly prove.

The fact that the capabilities mentioned mark/characterize the male regulatory body does not mean they are absent from women. Typical, however, of the gender hierarchy in ancient thought, males would have more of it. If a female testified of having an abundance of this she would be perceived as ‘manly’. Philo, for instance, describes the empress Livia as ‘male’ in her reasoning power.

‘Wisdom’ described here in many different terms neatly matches the notion of ‘common sense’ which is part of the natural, god-given ‘order’ of life and normally not questioned. Wisdom is the upholding of society’s lore, tradition, customs, and values (Malul 2002:446). And this brings us to the ultimate patron of Wisdom, namely Yahweh. The notion of god as the ultimate structural principle, a societal control mechanism (cf above), is aptly illustrated in Proverbs. He (!) symbolizes the idea of ‘common sense’ or the wisdom order and therefore all wisdom begins with the

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\(^4\) Commentators agree that leaders should have \(בַּלִּים\) (power) as well to implement their policies effectively.

\(^5\) These elements are derived in turn from the macro-cosmos – the sun, air, earth and water.

\(^6\) In terms of humoural theory men are better ‘balanced’ than women. Men are viewed as ‘warmer’ and ‘drier’ than women who are ‘colder’ and more ‘moist’ (Vorster 2002:27ff).
fear/acknowledgement of Yahweh (Pr 1:7). As a male he embodies a predominant male-friendly society, enhancing all the above qualities that males should strive after. Lady Wisdom utilizes Yahweh here as a very effective rhetorical argument from authority (cf Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:307). This kind of argument closes all debate and seeks only its confirmation. If the god embodies wisdom or the way society works and should work, how can any one refuse it? It is foolish to argue or go against this ultimate personification of cherished values. Those that do not accept/fear him reject knowledge (Pr 1:29) and even though Proverbs 8:13 (‘To fear Yahweh is to hate evil …’) is a gloss, the glossator sensed Lady Wisdom’s mission clearly. She is his spokes-‘man’ (sic!) reiterating his and those of the society he represents deep-seated values. Lady Wisdom promotes male hegemony.

D LADY WISDOM ‘THE DIVINE’

Lady Wisdom being the authoritative spokes-‘man’ of Yahweh reaches new heights when her origins are described in Proverbs 8:22-36. Her defence of Yahweh and his creational order as acknowledged by the wisdom perspective thus far becomes remarkably clear, because she is ‘part’ of Yahweh. The argument whether she is his hypostasis or a person is well-known (cf e.g Lang 1986). Although the latter is the more acceptable, her closeness and dependency on Yahweh also support the idea of her being a ‘quality’ of Yahweh.

Her cosmic origins, before time, right at the beginning of creation is strongly emphasized. Fontaine (2002:139-140) defends the rather remarkable feminine portrayal of Yahweh here as birth-giver – there was no one else bringing her to life. But the three verbs (=create, we=weave/form and l=to give birth to) indeed create ambiguity as to her exact origins (Baumann 1998:70), but here she is, of divine origin and intimately aligned to Yahweh. One could perhaps describe this intimate relationship between her and Yahweh in terms of modern bio-technology as her being his ‘clone’. This undergirds the argument thus far that she inhabits the ultimate male regulatory body (= Yahweh). And this also explains why it is difficult to distinguish between her and Yahweh’s voice.

Being a ‘clone’ of Yahweh obviously lends her (ultimate) authority, honour and status. She is to be acknowledged as Yahweh is. And this makes her part and parcel of the rhetorical argument of authority pointed out above where only acceptance of what she offers is expected and the right thing to do. You cannot resist this divine figure, even though she is ‘feminine’, an idea that might have been considered by her male audience (Pr 8:32). She and Yahweh are ‘one’. Therefore, no contra-arguments can be tolerated.

7 ‘… “knowledge of God”, the latter the epitome of law and order, the incarnation of society … means exactly the idea of living up to society’s lore and tradition by actually practicing them in one’s everyday life’ (Malul 2002:446).
Her one-bodiliness with Yahweh is confirmed in what she does. She rejoices and delights in his creation, his presence and ‘man’-kind. And when she promotes her ways, her instruction, herself, she guarantees life to her recipients. Life (בְּיֵיתָ) is paralleled by Yahweh’s favour (ברכה), receiving the one is receiving the other (Pr 8:35). She is not autonomous but wholly from Yahweh (McKinlay 1996:75). To submit to and accept her is to acknowledge and do Yahweh’s will (McKane 1970:358), which implies adherence to the patriarchal order.

Even though elevated to a goddess-like status Lady Wisdom does not seem such good news for women. She reinscribes the values of the male regulatory body. McKinley (1996:80) summarizes aptly: ‘She is feminine, yes, but a feminine dimension of a divine power who is understood for the most part as masculine.’ She is there to serve ‘masculinity’ and not act in her own right from authentic female experience.

**E LADY WISDOM THE QUEENLY HOST**

The representation of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 9:1-6 is that of an aristocratic woman, even a queen (cf Esther), celebrating her new lavish house with a fitting banquet. Her house with its seven pillars speak of royalty and likewise the food served – meat and wine mixed with spices. Everything underlines her authority and dignity (Clifford 1999:103). The vein of the preceding chapter of her authoritative ‘godly’ status is continued here. Someone so special can only offer what is worthwhile and therefore to be fully accepted. This banquet scene is one of the few if not the only time that we find her within an atmosphere of sensuality, evoking an expectation of enjoying the whole body (lower body included) which is normally the case at such banquets. It strikes a note of eroticism but it is not. What does the meat and wine represent? – the ‘... way of understanding’ (v 6). As before, Lady Wisdom offers upper body qualities and values, the things of the wise mind, adorning and honouring men folk especially.

The same happens earlier when the young inexperienced male is encouraged, by way of love-language, to take hold of wisdom. He must take her (4:5 הניה), love her (4:6 התורך) and embrace her (4:8 העון), but this is falling in love with higher spiritual virtues (‘spiritual relationship’ – Baumann 1998:71), the male regulatory body that Lady Wisdom personifies. Sex is not possible with her because Lady Wisdom is not ‘womanly’ but ‘manly’. He can only love his own wife, the own ‘fountain’ and attractive ‘deer’ (cf 5:15ff) in a bodily, physical way.

And to make sure once again that the reader grasps clearly what Lady Wisdom actually stands for, a few editorial lines are added (vv 7-12; McKane 1970:357; Clifford 1999:106 accepts 11 as part of vv 1-6) with emphasis on the reiterative expression that all wisdom begins with the fear of Yahweh. Wisdom is the avenue to God’s will, those who know ‘her’ know and respect the order, structure and workings of their ‘man’s world’.
Lady Wisdom’s foil, Lady Folly in verses 13-18, exemplifies just the opposite. She is a deliberate creation as anti-wife (‘stolen water’) against the own wife (‘own fountain’), and especially as anti-wisdom against true Lady Wisdom. Where the latter exemplifies elevation and divinity, life, discipline, order and mind (and no sex), Lady Folly personifies earth and humanness, death, no discipline, anti-structure and body, that is sex (adultery; Clifford 1999:104, 107). Wherever Lady Folly appears eroticism is highlighted, the lower body consistently comes into focus. In terms of the body of antiquity, who does she really exemplify? How does she measure up against the male regulatory body? And what impact does her figure have on the shaping of gender stereotypes in society? It is time to also take a closer look at Lady Folly, the strange woman (רעה וере) and destroyer of the social fabric.

F LADY FOLLY, WISDOM’S CONTRAPOLE OR ANTITHESIS

To understand Lady Wisdom to the full, it is necessary to appreciate her in regard to her contrapole, her antithesis, that which she vehemently opposes. Who is Lady Folly, this strange woman (רעה וере), moving around in the same public places and imitating Lady Wisdom with her invitation of smooth, but deceptive and subversive words, offered to the inexperienced young males? Camp (1991:27) argues a strong case that she is not an ethnically ‘other’, a foreigner but an Israelite. Her ‘otherness’ is in terms of her gender, her being a wayward (cf NIV translation) woman or anti-wife, subverting the patriarchal control of family, property and society. She stands outside the family structure. This she does especially through her irresistible sexual attraction. She is not a true prostitute either, she only dresses and acts like one (Camp 1991:27). In her sexuality as a woman, she instils fear in the male mind, being a dangerous, uncontrollable and mysterious dark force. And this is how she is consistently depicted, the one who lures the innocent with her body to destroy them. It is clear already she is predominantly body (= woman), whereas Lady Wisdom as seen above represents mind (= man), she is chaos while Lady Wisdom is order.

The ancients did not only know through the mind, that is receiving information through the eyes and ears and internalising it into the heart so as to understand. The lower senses like smell, taste and touch also participated in the epistemic process. Even the sexual organs were regarded as part of a person’s sensorium (Malul 2002:171, 301, 310): Genesis 4:1 ‘… Adam knew (ברא) his wife …’! When Simone de Beauvoir (quoted in Malul 2002:338ff) has the following to say on the physiognomics of sexual organs, she verbalizes ancient ideas that are very much alive today. The penis of the man is visible and neat as a finger; but the feminine sex organ is mysterious even to the woman herself, concealed, mucous, and humid. When having sex with a woman the man is ‘surveilling’ (knowing) her and controlling her (cf posture of copulation). At the same time he is being ‘known’. Knowing, controlling and being known imply the creation of an identity. To have sex with the
strange woman is therefore venturing into the unknown chaos, into יָמָה. Fontaine (2002:270) captures the essence of ‘foreign’ women succinctly: ‘… the passage to their womb is in fact a tunnel leading to the Underworld’. The young man is putting his life at risk because he will not only know these forces of darkness but simultaneously be known and controlled and ultimately destroyed by them. The body of the נָשָׁה interestingly also reflects the ancient notion of the human body being the microcosm of the macrocosm.

Incorporating the words of Lady Wisdom, that is wisdom itself, leads to a well-balanced, healthy and whole body (Pr 3:8), the male body par excellence. However, incorporating the words of the נָשָׁה leads to exactly the opposite. Although her words may appear to be sweet as honey and smooth as good olive oil, it is in fact gall that is internalised (poison; Pr 5:3-4), which leads to death. It brings a fatal imbalance, the last the mark of the female body. Incorporating her is the same as becoming her (cf Leder above), loose, uncontrollable and wayward.

And this highlights an interesting hidden script which Vorster has also pointed out in his study on The Wisdom of Solomon (2002:38). Having incorporated (intimately through sex and eating her words) the נָשָׁה is becoming one (body) with her. Just as incorporating Lady Wisdom leads the young male in becoming more and more like the ideal (male) body, inclining to Yahweh, so the opposite happens by becoming strange and ‘other’ as she is. She is loud and restless, uncontrollable, devious, loose and so on. And the fools who are her victims display exactly the same behaviour, that of the irregular body. And the last is per (ancient) definition women. If you align with the strange woman you will become ‘womanish’ as such. And what better and effective rhetoric of the body than this! To become ‘womanish’ in a male-biased society is shameful and should therefore ipso facto be rejected. To accept what Lady Wisdom offers, is natural, god(Yahweh)-given and therefore has to be embraced. The constructs of Lady Wisdom and the נָשָׁה are very effective rhetorical instruments to re-inscribe the status quo of male hegemony and female inferiority.

The נָשָׁה unfortunately does not only stigmatise deviousness, waywardness and destructiveness but it in fact demonises womanhood as such. Uncontrollability is the mark of women in general, the more so the ‘strange one’ of Proverbs.

G FINAL REMARKS: ‘LADY’ WISDOM – WHENCE, WHY AND WHERE TO?

What inspired the femaleness of wisdom, why did this personification in Proverbs 1-9 ‘work’ or make sense in its generating post-exilic context? Feminist scholars especially, have incisively researched Lady Wisdom’s roots. Wise women were well-known in Israel in all sorts of social roles; the mother in the household always played

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9 Many see the male fear of the so-called vagina dentata reflected in this imagery.
10 This study was also the inspiration for the writing of the present article.
an important part in keeping the household intact, the more so in the turbulent post-
exilic times ensuring, among other things, the safeguarding of the culture as well
(e.g. Baumann 1998:72 following Camp, Schroer and many others). But there were
many other wise women also, acting as counsellors, healers, mourners and so on
(Fontaine 2002:84-85). There were also the memory of bygone ‘goddesses’ in earlier
Israelite history (Fontaine 2002:27) and the (post-exilic) influence of goddesses of
neighbouring countries competing with Yahweh (Baumann 1998:72 note 99). If they
had goddesses Israel could have one too, although subservient to Yahweh.

The focus, however, of this article is not primarily on what lies behind Lady
Wisdom, but her shaping effect on her audience. Rhetorically she becomes a very
effective tool. She encompasses the call to abide to wisdom’s ways with her
‘femininity’. A father/teacher as well as this special Lady persuades to accept
society’s traditions (wisdom), who can refuse? Fontaine (2002:97) says it aptly: ‘To
turn a deaf ear to this voice is like ignoring one’s own mother or father … a wonderful
touch of guilt-tripping provided by the male sages to make their recommendations
seem impossible to refute or refuse.’ And the subtle rhetoric of the body confirms and
underlines her appeal. She inhabits the male regulatory body to prove how attractive
its values are, and becomes a very effective male-empowering mechanism.

It should have become clear that the politically active woman in her own right, a
model for modern women, is sought in vain in Proverbs. Proverbs enhances the idea
of only two kinds of women, ‘saints’ and ‘whores’ (Baumann 1998:75, 77). Lady
Wisdom, the mother, the graceful young ‘deer’ of a wife and the dutiful wife towards
the end, are all subservient to the patriarchal order and cause. They are the ‘policers’
hereof. All contradictory views against the traditional order are pictured in terms of
the wayward הזרה זת, or the foolish young men who become uncontrollably
‘womanish’. Contradictoriness as such is seen as bad and therefore also ‘good’
women who would oppose the established ways would be regarded as ‘adulterous’
(Maier 1998:106-107). One can understand the sympathy of many feminist scholars
with the הזרה ז initWith not for her destructiveness but for taking an alternative stance which
is not tolerated within the patriarchal system. And along with alternativity and
contradictoriness are also condemned the womanish, loose body that harbours these
qualities. The body is also thrown away for the sake of the mind, and the result: an
impoverished experience of life. Perhaps the sympathetic feminists have also sensed
the implication of Isherwood’s (2000:14) timely remark that bodies know deeper than
minds alone. The body is an indispensable epistemic source as confirmed by modern
Cognitive Science. Women are more in touch with their bodies than men and have
therefore a unique experiential contribution to make to life. But then their agency,
their true subjectivity, should be acknowledged. This is not possible with the Ladies
Wisdom, they are men’s ‘minds’. The הזרה ז initWith is unfortunately so demonised that she
is downright rejected, the good that the body can contribute included. The

11 It is asking the ‘why’ of the rhetoric of inquiry (Amador 1998:403), why construct the
wisdom figure as a ‘she’?
‘strangeness’ of the body, this untapped source of knowledge of which women know more than men, is commendable.

A last brief comment: Is all masculinity bad as such? Is this article an exercise in masochism, a critique of my own masculinity? Not at all. But a one-sided emphasis on masculinity, a continuous reiteration of (life-estranged) rationality alone, indeed leads to one-dimensionality of life. Femininity, utilizing enriching insights from the body, makes life accordingly rich and multi-dimensional. Women’s (body) experience are much needed today, which the Ladies Wisdom cannot offer.

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12 For example, the fact of a woman being able to give birth, nurturing a new life inside her, gives her an edge over the man – she has a deeper respect for life. Why otherwise would men agree so easily to an abortion of a fetus he does not carry, while a woman often finds this impossible to consider?

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