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DR. GINA HENS-PIAZZA

"Supporting Cast or Supporting Caste: Reading Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative"

Wednesday November 9 at 7 pm
Lecture at the Pacific School of Religion Chapel,
1798 Scenic Ave., Berkeley.

Reception follows in Badé Museum.
Free and open to the public. No RSVP required.

Dr. Gina Hens-Piazza is professor of biblical studies at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley. She frequently lectures at national Bible institutes, including Georgetown, College Misericordia, LA Catholic Bible Institute, and the Sacred Heart Bible Institute. She serves on the editorial board for *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* and is the author of *New Historicism--Guides to Biblical Scholarship* (2002) and *Of Method, Monarch, and Meanings--An Approach to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (1996). The faculty respondent is Carol Robb, professor of Christian social ethics at the San Francisco Theological Seminary.

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Supporting Cast or Supporting Caste
Reading Practices and Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative

In an age of cyberspace, postmodernism, web blogs and reality T.V., contemplating a talk on the Bible leaves one feeling a bit "unhip" or "uncool" . . . perhaps a lot like an *Old* Testament prophet. Some days, like Jonah, you just want to go down into the bottom of a boat, (better yet, a cruise ship) and sail away from such an assignment. Surrounded by my colleagues like ethicists who struggle with the problems raised by stem cell research, or my colleagues in theology who wrestle the integrity of reality and arguments surrounding creation, you start to identify with Moses. When asked to join the conversation. . ., you feel a bit "slow of speech." On good days you fantasize about being another Huldah, to whom king-like politicians come. They consult you regarding important texts and heed your advise about what measures government should take in response to crises. But then there are those other days when you ally with Jeremiah. And though you're not quite tempted to curse the day you were born, the prospect of flinging some rhetorical indictments at those college professors who urged you into this profession is appealing.

The Bible as a Force in Culture

So now that I have laid bare my occasional musings about the relevance of this ancient text, I want to begin tonight by asserting that in the year 2006, the Bible

qualifies as a powerful force in our contemporary culture[1]. By both direct and subtle means, the Bible continues to inspire, entertain, inform, contradict, converse and remain present in both expected and unexpected ways. Certainly across Jewish and Christian communities, the Bible participates as a formative player, a partner of doctrine and ethics alike. But also in various other sectors of our culture and before people who have never opened its covers, the Bible manifests its cultural import in a host of influential representations and commodifications ranging from the sublime to the absurd. From Carravaggio's "Sacrifice of Isaac" to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, the Bible as subject for art has been unsurpassed. Works like Handel's "Messiah," suggests the Bible's influence upon musical scores. Whether as intertextual partner in Dostoyevsky's works, imagery in Gerard Manley Hopkins' poetry or as analogue for popular fiction like the *Red Tent*, the story and the themes of the Bible are frequently intoned across literary works. Then there are those absurd commodifications of the Biblical texts - from chocolate bars stamped with the Ten Commandments, board games such as Bible trivia, to jello molds in the shape of Noah's arc and all the animals

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[1]Over the past ten years, several program units in the Society of Biblical Literature consider issues specifically related to the Bible and Culture. In addition, an increasing number of essay collections have been published that consider a vast array of these topics. See for example J. Cheryl Exum and Stephen Moore, editors, *Biblical Studies/Cultural Studies* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1998), a work that grew out of the third colloquia on the intersection between Bible and culture.

that went inside. The Bible etches itself in the mundane and the absurd. And let's not forget Hollywood's many articulations whether in the form of Disney's "Prince of Egypt," Cecil deMillle's "David and Bathsheba," or Mel Gibb's "The Passion." Without a doubt, the Bible remains embedded in a whole variety of cultural manifestations suggesting the "here to stay" status of "this ole book".

On a more serious note, all of us are keenly aware of the Bible's authoritative intonements down through ages. It has been mined to authorize theologians' versions of the sacred. It continues to be quoted to justify politicians' position on moral matters. It is enlisted to support nations in their imperialistic land grabbing escapades. And it is called upon to underwrite the liberation campaigns aimed at overturning such colonizing overtures. Even today, the controversy over territory that has kept some people hostage and others at war or living in fear stems to a biblical tradition about land and to whom it was bequeathed. Whether marshaled as ally or enemy, the Bible is accorded an authority that even in this 21st century makes it a powerful cultural force. All this should serve as warning. Failing to recognize or at least grant the Bible its influence in culture today, will not curtail the Bible's influence.[2]

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[2]When considering the Bible's role in culture, Regina Schwartz in *The Curse of Cain -The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997) 8, goes so far as to warn that "if we do not think about the Bible, it will think (for) us."

Characterization in the Bible

In conjunction with this cultural significance, the impact and intrigue of characters of the Bible is well known. Though far less complex than the characters we encounter in contemporary literature, the biblical players continue to inspire and motivate readers in their lives. So enormous is their impact that the heroic persons of the biblical writings frequently burst off the page and, as I have noted, become subject for colossal sculpture, steamy novels, massive paintings, magical operas, Hollywood blockbusters. In this study, I am particularly interested in exploring the impact of our reading practices when it comes to some of the characters in this complex of ancient stories. However, I am not focused upon the "big" characters that typically command our attention or even the secondary characters, often referred to as antagonist or contrasting characters. The characters upon whom I would like to dwell are those who make up the "supporting cast," those who shoulder the burden of a story that is never theirs. However, my inquiry is not confined to an investigation of their status solely within the literary realm. Rather the cultural yield resulting from more democratized reading practices when it comes to this group of characters, (i.e. "the supporting cast"), is really at the heart of my interest. Three levels of exposition guide my discussion this evening. First, we will consider briefly, *The Anatomy of the Supporting Cast in Biblical Narrative Poetics*; second *The Poetics of Supporting Caste in the Narrative Politics* will be taken up; and finally, *The Politics Surrounding Reading Practices: Supporting Cast or Supporting Caste* will be considered.

The Anatomy of the Supporting Cast in Biblical Narrative Poetics

When the supporting cast in biblical narrative is acknowledged in the literature, scholars either refer to them as the "flat" characters or they are not referenced at all. Often falling outside the specifications of literary categorizations, these characters are less likely to be studied. The problem stems, in part, from the lack of consensus about nomenclature in characterization studies. Classifications of characters are themselves varied and problematic. During much of the twentieth century, most discussions on character were guided by E. M. Forster's categories. Characters were either major or minor, round or flat, protagonists or antagonists[3]. Clay Hamilton's influential work doesn't desert Foster's groupings but defines them further as either static or kinetic depending upon their relation to the action of the tale[4]. Baruch Hochman promulgates other lens by which to view these individuals in the story world casting them as opaque or transparent, literal or symbolic[5]. Seymour Chatman attempts to replace the polarities plaguing character categorization (major/minor, static/kinetic, literal/symbolic) with a continuum. He reframes character as "paradigm of traits" communicated directly or indirectly by the narrator, other characters, the setting, or even an interpreter[6]. In turn, this collation of features yields a character whose rank is determined by their

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[3]E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1927) 60-78.

[4]Clayton Hamilton, *The Art of Fiction (*Garden City, NY: Doubleday,1918) 116.

[5]Baruch Hochman, *Character in Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1985) 89.

[6]Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978) 118-120.

importance to the action of the story. While advancing the discussion beyond oppositions of earlier taxonomies, Chatman's theorizing exposes the presumed hierarchy in the narrative system. A character's worth or importance is determined by their relation to the action of the story, or the number of words recited by them or about them.

Reception theory (reader response criticism) complicates the discussion further by questioning whether this system of a character's importance is a product of production or reception of the text. Hence, the turn to the reader brought another set of considerations that furthers compounds our take on character. Influence by Soren Kierkegaard's understanding of the self as that which is discovered and disclosed in the presence of the other, the more said by and about a character the more the reader had access to that individual.[7] Others like Norman Holland and Wolfgang Iser would argue the opposite. The less said about a character, the more readers must supply to fill in the contours of the character[8]. Michel Bakhtin's conception of character in the novel seems at first to straddle both sides of the argument contending that the development of the character occurs both within the text and beyond the text[9]. For Bakhtin, character rests

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[7]Soren Kierkegaard, *Soren Kierkegaard's Journals and Paper* Vol.4 Trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975) 4.634.

[8]Norman Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975) 278 and Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 119.

[9]Michel Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays.* Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981)

both on the assumption of reception and on the quantity of what the narrative (in his case, the novel) yields about a character. However Bakhtin's privileging of composition in the development of character becomes clear. He argued that "the human being in the novel is first, and foremost always a speaking human being. . . ." [10] Presumably the more they speak, the more they become marked by what Bakhtin calls "trangredience," a consciousness that results from that essential "dialogic" relation with other characters.[11]

For many members of the supporting cast in biblical narrative, none of these categories adequately frame their construction or role within the story. In the subtitle of the talk, I refer to them as minor, but they are not minor in the classic sense of literary categories. In the most minimalist of sense, they are the *minor* of the minor characters. At best, they are like Forster's flat characters who though they have a role to play, receive minimal descriptive attention by the narrator and reside in a most constricted

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[10]M. Bakhtin, 332.

[11]Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle* Trans. Wlad Godzich. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 95.

space of the narrative. Often they may have no apparent role. They are literary props, agents of action, or painted into the backdrop for the unfolding of the real action and the main characters of the tale. They are often not even transparent as intended by Hochman. At best they are shadows or fleeting suggestions who, at first glance, presumably lack depth.

The difficulty encountered in classifying these very minor characters in the Bible might stem, in fact, from the distinctiveness of biblical narrative itself. Years ago, Robert Alter noted a real curiosity about biblical characters that challenges the notion of characters being equal to the sum of the words in a text or their importance to the action of the story.[12] He observed that while interpretations and representations outside the Bible tend to portray characters such as Moses, Esther, David (main or major characters) with depth and complexity, they are in fact, by most literary standards, thinly drawn in their biblical story world. When compared to the sharply detailed portraits of personalities we encounter in Western literature or placed alongside the heroes of the great Greek classics, the biblical characters (and again he was speaking about the major characters) appear rudimentary. If the significant players of the biblical world (Moses, Esther, David) don't exactly qualify as major in contemporary literary terms due to their narrative "sveltness," it is not surprising that the minor characters are even more difficult to capture in the currency of contemporary literary

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[12]Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1981) 56.

categories.

Accorded little or no description in the text, they do not conform to any of these familiar theoretical confines -round, flat, protagonist, antagonist. Falling outside quantifiable frameworks governed by the number of words they recite or words recited about them, there is little to justify attention to them in interpretation. Entered into the story with the most economic description, their identity is rarely personalized; often they are ensconced in a social category – "widow," "child," "foreigner," "servant," etc. – or merely suggested by a collective reference – "villagers," "peasants," "enemy." Accorded only a few words or altogether voiceless, they serve as fixtures or agents enhancing or advancing the action of a story that obscures them. Located somewhere in the junction between implied person and narrative form, they exist not so much on the margins of the story. Rather the supporting cast lodge in the interface between story and discourse.

In the story they are signified. They reside in the content of the tale. Typically, an abbreviated appearance marks their time in the narrative They may utter a few words to move the story forward. They may serve as collateral in a tense exchange between main players. They may be servants that accompany the protagonists. Discourse delimits and determines their existence. Once their function is fulfilled, they may be quickly disappeared. Or the form of the story may warrant they linger as accouterments of the background or as animators of suspense. Hence, the social dimensions of these very minor characters emerge not only in their reflection in the story's content but also by way of the inflection of their character in the story's form, the

discourse. Their story is not told, their plight is never addressed, nor is the interest they might generate ever fostered.

Most critics view such characters as so minor as not to warrant attention or investigation. Percy Lubbock argues that they show such insubstantiability there is little to study.[13] Wayne Booth ignores them altogether and deals with character in his work on fiction as primarily a succession of major figures.[14] William Harvey will study minor characters if they fit into his taxonomy of characters - protagonists, intermediate figures and significant background characters.[15] However, years ago, Eric Auerbach in comparing Homeric characters with biblical characters recognized that what is background, left obscure, and unexpressed is loaded with multiplicity of meaning and fertile ground for interpretation.[16] More recently, Chatman also called character an

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[13]Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957) 68.

[14]Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[15]William Harvey, *Character and the Novel.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966) 54.

[16]Erich Auerbach, *Memesis: The Representation of Reality in Western*

occasion that provides for "an amplitude of associations" and thus allows space for consideration of even these very minor players.[17] What might be the yield if we train our attention on these very minor characters, allowing for their "multiplicity of meanings" or the "amplitude of associations" that they might conjure?

The Poetics of Supporting Caste in the Narrative Politics

Who are these biblical characters, members of a supporting cast? Fleetingly referenced, they are "the maidens dancing in Shiloh" who are kidnapped and taken for the Benjaminites as wives (Judg 21. 15-24). They are remaining "inhabitants of Gath, Gaza and Ashod" after Joshua's bloody campaign against the Anakim (Josh 11. 21-23). Among their quiet ranks list "the prostitute of Gaza" visited by Samson in his exploits of the Philistines (Judg 16. 1-3), "a man of Baal-Shalisshah" who provided a loaf of bread for Elisha's miracle (II Kgs 4. 42-44), "the captain" who fell before Elijah to save his army of 50 (II Kgs 1.13-16), the "four lepers" who discovered the deserted camp of the Arameans (II Kgs 7. 3-11), the "woman nurse" guardian who protects Jehoash as a child (II Kgs 11. 1-3), or "the servant girl" who informs Naaman's wife how he can be cured (II

Literature. (Princeton: Princeton University Press,1953) 23.

[17]Chatman, 115.

Kgs 5. 2-3). Embedded in the text, they constitute the scaffolding of the story-world. Though they provide the infrastructure upon which to build the narrative, their involvement often means effacement. Full development of the protagonist is contingent upon the utilization and delimitation of these background figures.

One of the most effective ways to ensure their delimited status is to refuse them a name. *In Theory of Literature,* Rene Wellek and Austin Warren contend that naming is the simplest form of characterization. "Each appellation is a kind of vivifying, animizing individuating."[18] of a character. William Gass reinforces this observation with his definition. A character is first and foremost, "the noise of their name and all the sounds and rhythms that proceed from them."[19] Even Roland Barthes speaks about name as the start of character.[20] Thus denying a name to a character qualifies as one of the foremost

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[18]Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (London: Cape Publishers, 1966) 226.

[19]William Gass, *Fiction and Figures of Life* (Jaffrey: David R. Godine, 1978) 49.

[20]Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) 92.

strategies for denying them any recognition in the narrative.

Most of these minor characters in biblical narrative are not named. They are hardly visible, and often not even heard. If they speak, they are silenced after the sentence or two they have been assigned. Often they are expelled from the story line as soon as their function has been completed. Nameless, silenced, expelled, they are the subaltern of the literary world. Hence, their actual role unfolds a lot like those functionaries in Marx's system of utilitarianism. They provide a service but the work they do covers over their exploitation in this labor system, in this case the narrative system. They are cast in light of their function - servant, guardian, prostitute, survivor, soldier. References to their person are expeditiously converted into abstractions of utility. This function effectively effaces any manifestation of human qualities. With slight of hand, such narrative utilitarianism accomplishes a conceptual theft. The actual expropriation of center stage and character importance of the many is overshadowed and sacrificed for the sake of the few. Hence, these less than minor characters become the proletariat of the narrative world. They are the serfs of the narrative system, at the service of a story line that is not theirs.[21]

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[21]See Alex Wolloch's discussion on a labor theory of character in *The One and the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 2003) 26-30.

In popular literature, they might be the street vendor who sells flowers to the hero protagonist. Or they could be drawn as an unnamed housekeeper who for purposes of suspense, unknowingly pauses to check her watch outside the hotel room where the murder is under way. In the biblical tradition, these obscured personalities are also present though often in the shadows or as mere suggestions in the story line. They are the occupants of the less desirable towns of Galilee that Solomon hands over to Hiram in exchange for gold and bronze to finish his extravagant temple and palace projects (I Kgs 9. 10-11). They are workers who weave clothing for Asherah that Josiah fires in an account about his effort to centralize cult, allegience, and tribute in Jerusalem (II Kg 23. 7). They are the friends of Jephthah's daughter, fleetingly referenced in the text, accompanying her to the hills to mourn her unfulfilled life, and presumably left with the grief and horror of their friend's death(Judg 11.39). They are the unnamed children about to be sold into debt slavery whose mother, a widow, insists that the prophet protagonist Elisha assist her (II Kg 4. 1-7). They are the peasants referenced by Amos who subsistence farming is taxed beyond what it can endure during the reign of Jeroboam II (Amos 5.1).

As the literary gear they drive the narrative forward. Given this status as mere functionaries, is it legitimate to amplify this cast of characters beyond the literary task they perform in the narrative? Such expositions could appear as a violation of the text's hierarchy of values. Indeed, the label "minor" is already a value assessment, suggesting their delimited role while at the same time distracting the reader from the important part they might play. But still we might object. Isn't training our attention upon these

lesser characters a disruption of the author's initial vision. Attention to minor characters need not be an affront to how the biblical texts have been composed. Nor does such an inquiry urge that authors might have been composed their works differently. Instead, investigating minor characters recognizes the essential openness of a literary text. It invites us to entertain the possibility that narrative tells more than one story at the same time. Our reading practices determine what stories we tune in to. Thus the decision and the responsibility for listening for the other accounts, (i.e. the stories of servants, survivors, war hostages, residents of towns bartered for god and timber, etc.) reside with readers. Do we read past these characters and support the caste system of the narrative or do we entertain the other stories that the supporting cast might have to tell?

Politics Surrounding Reading Practices - Supporting Cast or Supporting Caste?

Authors cannot possibly give emphasis to all characters. But, how the narrative unfolds certainly calls attention to the process of emphasis and strategy. Thus, narratives themselves offer clues suggesting how a shift in emphasis might yield other possible stories and how other full lives might be foregrounded. Alternate accounts are resident there. Though interwoven in the story line, they remain obscured by the focus highlighted by the narrator.

For example, II Kings 5 recounts Namaan's cure by Elisha the prophet. First, we are introduced to this influential military general from Aram, a country with which Israel was frequently at war. He is described as a great man, an army commander who enjoyed the respect and favor of his master, the king. However, all that greatness is

qualified by a follow up notation. He has leprosy. Now, if we follow the narrator's direction, the story appears to revolve around Naaman traveling to Samaria, Israel's capital and enemy territory to procure a healing from the prophet Elisha, a man also of significant reputation. Great narrative tension builds when the two first meet. The proud military general Naaman becomes indignant because Elisha doesn't even give him an audience but sends word from his house that Naaman should go wash in the Jordan seven times if he wants to be cured. A series of exchanges follows and eventually Naaman is not only cured of his leprosy and his arrogance but also converts to belief in Israel's God before he heads back home.

Now if we abondon the directions of the narrator and examine the story more closely, we hear another story. Reference to a young Israelite servant girl working in the house of Naaman resides at the very beginning of the account. She is a captive of war who tells Naaman's wife about Elisha. She also asserts that Naaman would be cured if he presented himself before the prophet. Then she disappears from the tale. Who is this servant child? Can we prod the narrative for her "implied story"? For example, what were the risks of promising a healing for your master in enemy country? What might the consequences have been for this servant girl if Naaman had not been healed? What if, because of his leprosy, Naaman, the great general, had been scorned in Israel? And why would a military general so great as Naaman believe the testimony of a young captive of war? Can we deduce that there was something about her that gave her master enough confidence to act on such a precarious proposal from an Israelite war captive? Even

before we have done our homework in response to these inquiries, the young servant girl's character begins to emerge. In the midst of a story riveted upon the great army general Naaman, the hostile and powerful kings of Aram and Israel who exchange correspondence, and the miracle working prophet Elisha, she may emerge as one of the most interesting and compelling figures of all. Hence, in a study of characters resident here, we could focus upon the healing and personal transformation of Naaman. Or we could set our attention upon the great power of the prophet Elisha to accomplish a physical healing that leads to a spiritual conversion as disclosed in this tale. We could even be enamored with the antagonist here, Gehazi (who we have not mentioned) but who in the second half of the story, because of ambition and greed ends up with the very condition, i.e. leprosy, of which Naaman was cured. Or we could train our attention on the little servant girl at the beginning of the tale and realize that only at her initiative did the story unfold. And as we proceed in studying her, we may even conclude that of all the courage and personal strength expended in this story, hers perhaps might have been the greatest. Such a discovery emancipates the reader from the narrative system of caste. It nudges us toward engendering alternative reading practices, the kind that result in a more equitable assessment of the characters there.

First, we take seriously the license and responsibility that reception theory has accorded us. Despite their brevity in the text, whether actual or merely suggested, these characters manifest a remarkable quality. They persist in the reader's memory. Their brevity or insufficiency as a character has a paradoxical affect upon the reader. Adopting here Iser's notion that "less is more," the less presented on the page, the more

engaged the reader becomes. Hence, the realm of these very insignificant individuals offers an invitation for readers' deep involvement in a story. The vast cache of social scientific studies, historical investigations and cultural comparative studies provide us with information to thicken the position, the portrait, the plight, of these otherwise passing references. Moreover, readers themselves contribute dimension to characters by both identifying with them and supplementing their sketchy portraits with projections. Norman Holland notes, identification with a literary character is "a complicated mixture of projection and introjection, of taking in from the character certain drives and defenses that are really objectively "out there" and of putting into them feelings that are really our own."[22]

Second, feminist and readers of the two thirds world have taught us to resist narrators, which themselves are characters in the text (so often the construction of men) when we read. This allows us, for example, to fix attention on the women characters not featured by the story's MC, the narrator. This resistence toward the narrator can also be extended in our pursuit of attending to these "other" nameless or implied individuals in the story world. Trespassing the narrator's direction, we read against the story's organizational strategy. Thus we disregard the character ranking erected and

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[22]Norman Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975) 278.

maintained by this keeper of the narrative keys.

Finally, we take seriously the outcome of our reading practices. Years ago, Michel de Certeau in his essay, "Reading as Poaching" discloses that what and how we write and read construct "the real" in our lives.[23] As in texts so also in life. Both share the same power and the same limitation, namely, language. More recently, in her monumental work, *Poetics of PostModernism,* Linda Hutchinson observed that how we read important cultural texts, especially ones so influential as the bible, stands in close relation to how we read the cultural texts of our own world.[24] The namelessness that enshrines some characters, the opportunity for speech denied to others, the delegation of some women and men as expendable and the lack of social standing to such characters as virgin daughters are all subtle but nevertheless real examples of degradation and even violence in these tales. Failing to cultivate a sensitivity to these individuals in the story, we risk failing to cultivate a sensitivity to such persons in our own lives. Moreover, we also gamble our ability to recognize some of the unsung heroes of our own society, to take note of the uncelebrated examples of self giving individuals of our surroundings, or to miss the subtle but nevertheless real occasions of abuse or valor

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[23]Michel de Certeau, 'Reading As Poaching," in *The Practice of Everyday Life* Trans. by Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 165-176.

[24]Linda Hutchinson, *The Poetics of PostModernism - History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge Press, 1988) 160.

that are often right before our eyes.

This relationship between reading texts (in this instance, the Biblical texts) and reading

and interpreting texts of culture is at the heart of what I up to in this presentation tonight. The title who might challenge our partisan way of proceeding? Does how we read corroborate a narrator's version an individual whose prejudices and shortsightedness we share? Do our reading practices reinforce a fictious sense of self in relation to what, in our own hierarchical system, are deemed the minor characters of our world? Our sense of self is mediated by others, and those "others" are made up not only of persons in life and on the page that we are quick to identify with or who seem most like us; some of the most compelling insights about ourselves and what is possible for our lives will be prompted by those least like ourselves and perhaps among that supporting cast we might be trained to turn away from or encouraged to ignore. Whether in life or in literature, reading only the central figures, those spot-lighted by the narrator, or those crafted as the tragic or comic protagonists, breeds a fallacious understanding of ourselves. Self-understanding demands an enormous range of characters to learn from and identify with. Only then can we begin to achieve an honest assessment of our strengths and vulnerabilities, our virtues and vices, and our potentials and limitations.

How we grapple with "minor characters" whether in the biblical text or as these designations ricochet across to the cultural texts of our world, saddles the reader with further responsibility. At first glance, epistemology appears inevitably yoked to ontology. What the texts says about character "A" is the very means by which character

"B" exists. Since less information is provided about these lesser characters, their ontological pull upon us seems minimal. But if we take them seriously, do research to better understand their social standing, interrogate the text as to their minimalization, and consider based upon appropriate comparative studies their potential contribution, we begin to shoulder as it were, the epistemological burden with the writer. This interest, inquiry, investigation and resulting exposition thickens this slim character and in turns affects ontology. One dimensional readings zoom out and offers a three dimensional view. New details, greater complexity, and other potential plots come into focus. In the process, new lives, previously deemed as "the other," assume center stage commanding attention and understanding. In texts and in life, the existence of these sidelined individuals is brought into focus and foregrounded. In its new bold relief, it beckons recognition at our initiative.

Hence, this overture tonight, attempts to promote a reading practice that grows out of a literary theory where categories of major and minor characters are abandoned. It seeks a solid artistic motive for all characters and their exposition in analysis. It aims for a more democratized assessment of the text where all characters deserve a hearing. The motive animating such interest eclipses mere literary intrigue. It presumes the relationship between the critical eye trained to survey important cultural texts as the Bible and that same critical eye's attention to the presence and import of (as it turns out) these not so minor characters in our own world. How we read this text matters. Grappling with the broadest range of characters grants us urgently needed insights into the many and different "others" who make up our world. It redefines who among us are

assigned to categories of privilege and importance in our private and communal schemes of reality. It gives us pause before those whose importance we might otherwise have missed. At this difficult juncture in the life of our world's ever-shrinking global village, the value of such knowledge and understanding needs little explanation.

So I end where I began tonight, . . . with the Old Testament prophets - but not with Amos, decrying any relationship to those in my profession (You can just hear him, "I am no biblical scholar nor do I belong to any ban of biblical scholars"). Rather I end with Jeremiah. Indeed, like the prophet, I am confounded once again by the perplexing influence of this ancient text in our modern/postmodern world, this time in the form of its supporting cast. And as I pause to take them seriously, I encounter them and the challenge they raise like "a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones, the effort to restrain it wearies me and I can not be silent."(Jer 20.9b)

Gina Hens-Piazza
Professor of Biblical Studies
Jesuit School of Theology
Graduate Theological Union,
Berkeley, CA