



Queen Esther, by Edwin Long, 1878. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Source: Google Art Project, via Wikimedia Commons.

REPARTEE

LOVE, WAR, & HONEY TRAPS

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“All is fair in love and war.” Not only is this a familiar phrase, it’s one that has long been used to justify scheming, conniving, and misbehaving in two notable and very vulnerable arenas of human life.

For some, it is a cynical dismissal of bad behavior. For others, and especially those with only a few scruples, it’s a welcomed, and dangerous, loophole. But whatever “all is fair” includes in its scope, the possibilities of wrongdoing in romance and warfare can be blurred and even erased by such an expansive platitude.

But from the earliest days of the Christian tradition, when it came to falling in love—and more specifically what we physically do in response—there was no room for “all is fair.” Believers have long demanded chaste behavior in the community of the faithful. The Bible, and those who interpreted it over the centuries, provided certain iron-clad rules. Rule #1 was perfectly clear: Sexual intercourse is exclusively limited to marriage. While never comprehensive, Christian sexual mores had a not inconsiderable effect on the, at least articulated if not faithfully practiced, sexual commitments of the surrounding culture more generally.

So too, when it comes to war, Christian thinking has helped reshape societal perceptions of right and wrong. Altering the contours of the warrior ethos, the just war tradition, grounded in the political thought and practice of ancient Israel and classical Greece and Rome, came into being in the Middle Ages and offered a uniquely Christian conception of the use of force in the context of

responsible government. As this theological ethic developed, it would also strengthen under the influence of the ideas, customs, and practices drawn from the chivalric code and resurrected interest in Roman law.

Times have certainly changed. Today, while the classical just war tradition has not been carried forward in a single, unified stream—but is found in diverse currents both religious and secular—it still has influence. Indeed, the rules of war have been magnified, in some cases, well beyond any theological origins and are analyzed in sometimes overly-exhaustive detail. Battles, and particularly successful ones, are scrutinized for “war crimes,” for violations of Geneva Conventions, and for tallies of civilian casualties. Battle plans are closely defined by stringent rules of engagement and overseen by civilian observers, zealots of various stripes, and journalists with questionable political leanings.

But the opposite fate has attended sexual concerns. Those strong and well-enforced boundaries that once surrounded matters of sexuality in Western society have crumbled and even vanished. Although this is less true in the Christian community, even there some steadfast rules have been reshaped and even replaced by more flexible “best intentions.”

Meanwhile, love and war are always intertwined in human experience, in legends,

tales, ballads, and in the real world. And it is against this backdrop that Darrell Cole has written his thoughtful essay “Sex, Lies, & Spies.”

In his reflection on sexual morality, Cole concerns himself specifically with the realm of espionage, which he understands as an act of coercion. “Spying is an act of force like soldiering,” Cole writes, “Even the most seemingly non-coercive jobs a spy might do—observe and report—are done for the benefit of those who can use that information to guide policies of force.”

Addressing the use of deception and fraud in spying, Cole ultimately questions whether or not sexual seduction is an appropriate weapon in the arsenal of a Christian spy.

Cole’s first step is to make room for the use of deception as such. He takes care to acknowledge the scope of Christian opinion on the matter. On one side is the Augustinian assertion that “truth-telling is essential to the nature of God, and so must be essential to the image of God in human beings.” Cole points out that John Calvin, too, prohibited lying and “condemns Rahab’s lies in a good cause in his commentary on Joshua.”

On the other hand, he notes, John Chrysostom poetically *defended* Rahab’s lies to save Israel’s spies: “O beautiful falsehood! O beautiful deception! Not of one who forsakes divine commands, but of one who is a guardian of piety.” (More about Rahab in a moment.)

Cole’s own conclusion is that the Christian condition “may support the idea that lies told for the public good are justifiable. The lies that spies tell in the line of duty fall into that category and, so, are justifiable.”

But then he asks the question that consumes the rest of his essay: “Can the same be said for sex in the line of duty? Can manipulative sex for the public good be justifiable?”

Cole’s answer is a resounding “No.” And although he makes room for various shadings of interpretation in the pros and cons of

justifiable lying during espionage, and even for the limited use of sexual attraction and sexual circumstances, he is unable to find any defense for the deployment of non-spousal sexual seduction as an instrument of spycraft.

This raises an unavoidable question: What makes sex for the purpose of espionage less acceptable to Christians than lying, deception, violent intervention, or other forms of subterfuge?

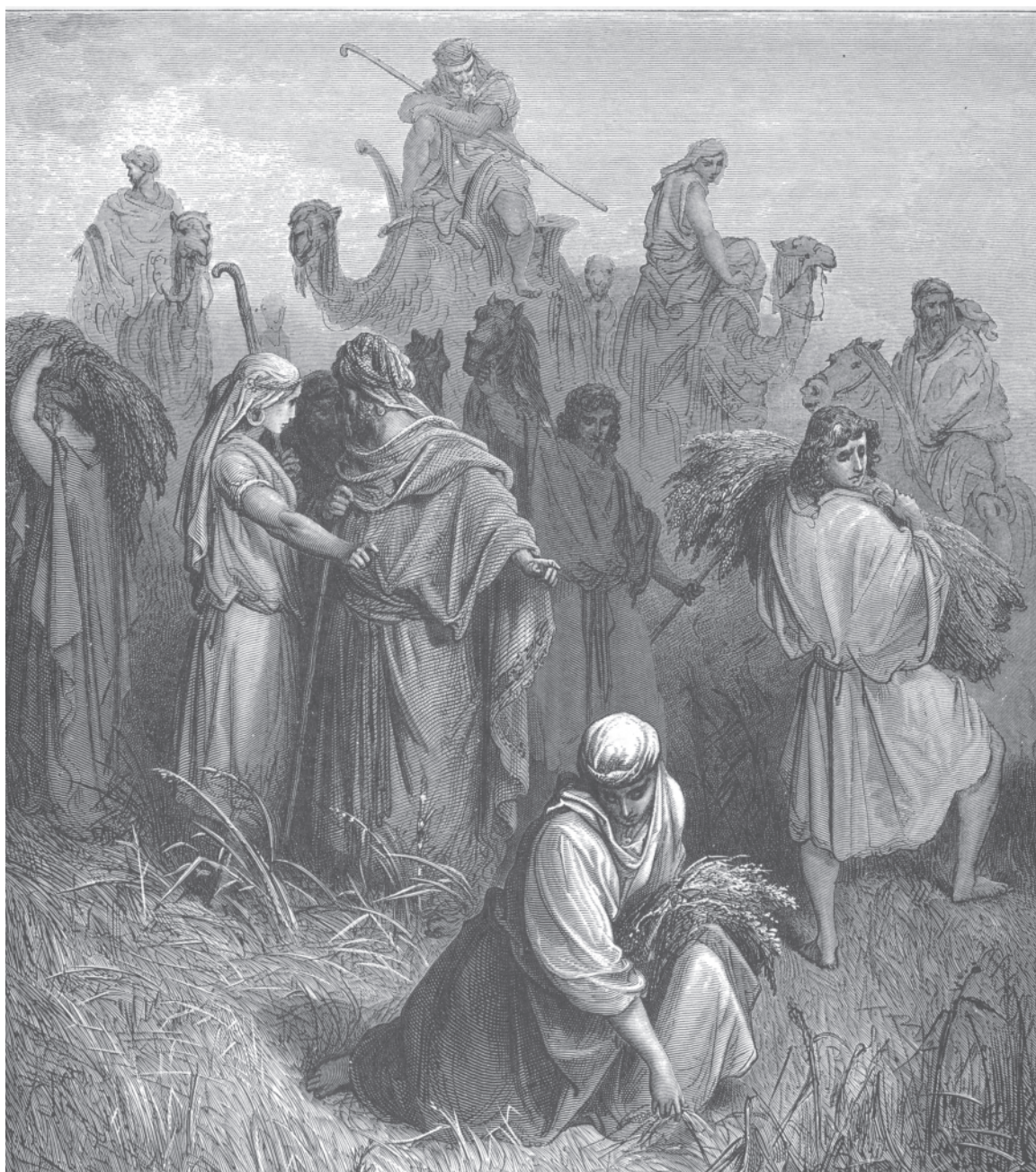
First, a couple of queries about the purpose of espionage. Why is spying as defensible as soldiering in a Christian’s chosen career? Simply put, espionage is used to discern the plans of an enemy, to minimize military losses, and to bring warfare to a successful end as quickly as possible. In that context, cannot spying be viewed as an act of mercy? Is it not a means of saving lives of both civilians and warriors?

In any case, it isn’t always pretty.

For one thing, spies do more than fib to accomplish their missions. They steal, forge, blackmail, infect, assassinate, kidnap, blow up, incinerate, raise false flags, and create complex distractions that may involve even further casualties. And sometimes they lead entirely double lives—perhaps for a lifetime.

In the 2016 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Sympathizer*, author Viet Thanh Nguyen, whose lead character is a double agent for the Viet Cong, describes his struggle with a dual identity: “[S]ometimes I dreamed of trying to pull a mask off my face, only to realize that the mask was my face.” Not only was he lying to the world, he was also lying to himself.

Are all espionage tactics acceptable for Christian spies except sexual intercourse? Although in this particular essay Cole neither defends nor really even discusses violent and lethal tactics, he has written extensively elsewhere on the just war tradition and the participation of Christians in the martial vocation, including the use of deadly force. So it’s safe to suppose he does believe that, apart from sexual intercourse, so long as the given action falls within just war conceptions



Ruth and Boaz (*Ruth 2:2-20*), by Gustave Doré, 1866. Doré's English Bible. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

of discrimination and proportionality then, as the augmented saying goes, “All [else] is fair in war.”

So why the denial of sexual action in espionage? Cole explains, “Marital intercourse is, in a sense, a Trinitarian act in that the couple give themselves completely to each other in the sexual act. Loving sex within a marriage expresses not only a romantic desire (*eros*) but is informed by a God-like love (*agape*) that is totally giving to the other for the other’s sake... When spies have sex in the line of duty,

they are clearly not expressing *agapeic* love for their partners.”

Cole goes on to say that there are no biblical sources from which to build a case for morally justified non-spousal or manipulative sex. Now that is a startling statement, and debatable.

At this point it is worth noting that, in terms of espionage, “honey traps” usually involve women using their beauty and sexual allure to lure targeted men into compromising situations



Rahab and the Emissaries of Joshua, by unknown artist, 17th century. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nîmes. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

where secrets are revealed, blackmail is initiated, poisons are inflicted, and so forth.

Interestingly, the most notable biblical accounts of sexuality (including intercourse) being used for worthy causes involve, indeed, clever and cunning women. Not all those involved in sexual acts were engaged in anything like formalized warfare, but in the following examples one did, in fact, take place at risk of imminent war, one involved the survival of the Jewish people, and the others, at the very least, were battling to continue their vulnerable existence, both for those they loved and to whom they belonged. And, amazingly, all of them played a role in an almost unbelievable legacy.

To begin, Cole cites Queen Esther as a woman who clearly used her beauty to obtain

a politically advantageous marriage, and used the terms of that marriage to further advantage still. While he avoids the claim of some that Esther and Xerxes did not have sexual relations until after she had been made queen, I am not convinced he gives the sexual element its due weight.

Consider again the biblical text (Esther 2, NIV):

Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. *In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another*

part of the harem... She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name. (My italics)

Clearly, harem girls and the king were not playing backgammon during that evening-till-morning interlude. But it's also less convincing that Esther was purely "forced into concubinage." I say this because it seems that Esther made the most of her time in the king's palace. The sex was apparently quite good, for the biblical account reveals that "the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women." Presumably this doesn't just happen without at least some enthusiasm on Esther's part. In any case, she wins the day, and the king places the royal crown on her head.

This series of events wouldn't, perhaps, seem so significant if it didn't fit a pattern. But Esther is not the only biblical account of intentional non-spousal or manipulative sex that is described without condemnation. Tamar, whose story appears in Genesis 38, found herself victimized by her irresponsible father-in-law, Judah, who was the son of the Jewish patriarch Jacob.

Tamar had been married to Judah's firstborn son, Er, but what Er "did was wicked in the Lord's sight; so the Lord put him to death." Tamar did not have a child with Er, so after his death, Judah gave Tamar to his next son, Onan. Onan decided to shirk his familial duty to provide his older brother with a son and used his sister-in-law for his own sexual gratification. He "went into" Tamar several times and "wasted his semen on the ground" to prevent pregnancy. This action was evil enough to warrant the Lord to put Onan to death as well. Still Tamar was childless. At this point, Judah promised Tamar his third but much younger son, Shelah, who was not yet old enough to perform his familial duty. But even when Shelah was old enough, he was not given to Tamar in marriage.

Still without proper standing, and therefore security, within the family and larger community, Tamar, in an act of what can only be described as "non-spousal or manipulative

sex," decided to take matters into her own hands. She covered her face with a veil and placed herself directly in the path of her foolish father-in-law.

The Bible says, "When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. Not realizing that she was his daughter-in-law, he went over to her by the roadside and said, 'Come now, let me sleep with you.'"

One thing led to another, and Tamar stealthily obtained Judah's personal seal and staff. Three months later, she was pregnant and her community—including Judah—called for her death. At that point, Tamar outed Judah as the child's father by offering to return his seal and staff to him. "She is more righteous than I," Judah confessed, "since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah." *Mea Culpa*.

And then there was Rahab. Her story is well known (Joshua 2). She really was a prostitute in the ancient city of Jericho. And there really was a war going on.

Joshua, the Israelite general and spymaster, sent two of his intelligence officers to Jericho to assess and analyze the city's defenses. (Precisely why the two spies happened to be overnighing in a prostitute's house isn't spelled out in the biblical text.) But Rahab was very much afraid of the Israelites—their reputation for military valor preceded them.

So, Rahab made a deal with the spies and agreed to lie and hide them from the local king, but at a price. She demanded they protect her and her family when the city was finally assaulted by Joshua and his army. "Our lives for your lives!" Joshua's fervent spies assured her. "If you don't tell what we are doing, we will treat you kindly and faithfully when the Lord gives us the land" (Joshua 2:14).

And so they did.

Another heroine of the Bible is Ruth, who devotedly remained with her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi during hard times. After the death of Naomi's husband and two sons,



Judah and Tamar, *School of Rembrandt, circa 1650 – 1660. Residenzgalerie, Salzburg, Austria. Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

grief-stricken and with no one to care for her, Naomi decided to leave Moab and return to Israel, her homeland. Ruth lovingly refused to leave her side. “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.”

It so happened that Naomi had a wealthy relative named Boaz. He owned fields of barley, and Naomi told Ruth to glean in his fields, following behind his harvesters. Boaz was a kind and good man, and Naomi trusted him.

Later she instructed Ruth, “Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do” (Ruth 3).

The *NIV First-Century Study Bible* explains in an extensive footnote:

“Uncover his feet”...has some potential sexual overtones. “Feet” can refer to the genital region... To “uncover” can sometimes mean to have sexual relations. It’s

not obvious that Boaz and Ruth had any sexual contact, but the scene is charged with such possibility. This explains why Boaz wanted no one to know that Ruth came to see him at night (see 3:14). It’s likely that the narrator wanted to communicate Ruth’s culturally scandalous actions and tremendous risk while at the same time maintaining her noble and righteous reputation. This is not unlike the story of Tamar’s morally questionable actions in pursuit of a greater good.

And then there’s the story of Bathsheba and David, which has been told and retold, and is perhaps best recalled in Leonard Cohen’s discography:

Your faith was strong but you needed
proof
You saw her bathing on the roof
Her beauty and the moonlight overthrew
you...
Hallelujah!

The biblical version is found in 2 Samuel, chapter 11:

One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, and David

set someone to find out about her. The man said, “She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite.” Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him and he slept with her... The woman conceived and sent word to David saying “I am pregnant.” (2-6)

Bathsheba and David’s first child died because of the Lord’s judgment against David, as revealed by the Prophet Nathan. But the next son Bathsheba bore to David, Solomon, not only ruled as a king of legendary status, but he reigned and wrote with enormous wisdom and gained unimaginable wealth. He also built the first Jewish Temple that crowned the holy city of Jerusalem and the iconic Davidic kingdom.

Did Bathsheba realize that she was in plain sight of King David’s palace when she bathed on the roof? Most of us know when to pull down the window shades, but who can say? Perhaps she had grown weary of Uriah’s obsessive devotion to the army and his endless tours of duty and secretly hoped the king was watching. Or was she simply forgetful of her surroundings and caught unawares?

In any case, David’s moral failures are indisputable. How could Bathsheba say no to the king? Whatever may have been going on in her mind, David was responsible for the adultery, and that was not the worst of it. He had also abused the royal authority the Lord had given him by arranging to have Bathsheba’s husband killed in battle. David murdered Uriah so he could marry Bathsheba.

In the aftermath, however, Bathsheba remained a key player in the royal court. She was regally waiting in the wings while David was shivering on his death bed. And, in that strategic moment, she made sure that David decreed, before he died, that their son Solomon should be next in line for Israel’s throne. She, too, used another’s sexual attraction to her for her own benefit. While the sexual activity was, eventually, rightly within the nuptial covenant, it remains an open question whether Bathsheba ever freely gave the kind of self-giving, *agapeic* fidelity

that Cole requires. Surely spousal sex can be just as mercenary as non-spousal. In either case, *agape* is absent.

Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba—all strong-willed women with clever minds, courageous hearts, and, not incidentally, pleasing forms. And what was their legacy?

In the book of Matthew, chapter 1, we read the genealogy of Jesus in the lineage of his adoptive father, Joseph, who like his mother Mary was of the “house and lineage of David.” Uncharacteristic of most genealogies of the time, four women are included in the list: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. The rest of the listed characters are fathers—Jesus’ forefathers.

Those four women, along with Queen Esther, were not only heroic and notable for their cleverness and courage. They were also involved in somewhat risqué escapades. In our day, they would be thought of as women with a past.

Fortunately for all concerned, they were also women with a promising future, although they might not have imagined it at the time. In fact, to this day, illustrative of God’s unpredictable wisdom, justice and mercy, they remain unforgettable heroines. And while we cannot say that it is the risqué elements of their pasts for which they are found worthy to be in the lineage of Christ, they, at least, are in that lineage *despite* such risqué moments. While not a wholesale endorsement of sex in deception—espionage or otherwise—we ought, perhaps, to pause to consider. P

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