

**The Forbidden Pleasure of ‘Scandal’:  
Sex, Race, Beauty, and Convention**

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For this discussion, the following clips of the show ‘Scandal’ should be watched first:

season 2, episode 8-“Happy Birthday, Mr. President”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l7MIV7G2s4I>

season 2, episode 8-“Happy Birthday, Mr. President

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJ3UBneiB9I>

season 2, episode 20-“A Woman Scorned”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xerraE378Ws>

season 2, episode 20-“A Woman Scorned”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKkEPnBL3UM>

season 3, episode 1-“It’s Handled”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5b0-0Op0Do>

season 3, episode 1-“It’s Handled”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmGOHrbX9TQ> ()

season 3, episode 1-“It’s Handled”)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUUyRlv4iNk>

season 3, episode 1-“It’s Handled”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcxVSNN8ELs>

season 3, episode 1-“It’s Handled”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fVYuXIPZKrg>

I am focused on these parts of scripture: Ezra 10, Nehemiah 13, Revelation 2, and Song of Songs.

Finally, I am using the following passage from Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America to discuss the Jezebel stereotype and how ‘Scandal’, if looked at through the lens of Song of Songs, is a radical challenge to that stereotype.

*The promiscuity myth has roots in Southern slaveholding society, which operated by a gendered social and moral code. The Victorian ideal of true womanhood required strict adherence to a code of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—virtues believed to be inherent in feminine nature. Victorian social codes clearly divided public and private realms, made white men the sole authorities in their homes, and stripped married white women of their property and legal personhood. It also advanced beliefs in the essential chastity, innocence, and weakness of women. African American women’s lives and labors in the antebellum South contrasted sharply with this iconic womanhood. Black women were subjected to forced nudity during slave auctions. They often labored in fields with skirts hiked up. They were punished on plantations by being whipped in partial or total nudity. They were banned from legal marriage. The myth of black women as lascivious, seductive, and insatiable was a way of reconciling the forced public exposure and commoditization of black women’s bodies with the Victorian ideals of women’s modesty and fragility. The idea that black women were hypersexual beings created space for white moral superiority by justifying the brutality of Southern white men.....*

*It may seem a stretch to point to antebellum notions of black women’s lasciviousness as a source of contemporary emotional and political meaning for black women. But this early characterization of black women has infiltrated the nation’s understanding of black women’s character in ways that continue to resonate in America’s cultural, social, and political fabric. The myth also resonates in the hearts and minds of black women.*

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Black bodies are complex signs that represent something both appealing and repulsive for the society in which we dwell.<sup>1</sup>

I came late to 'Scandal' in relative terms, as I did not watch more than a handful of episodes before this past summer. Yet in my circle of friends, everybody was talking about the show. And the show was generating a substantial amount of media buzz due to the popularity of the show on social media outlets such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

Things changed when a friend, sent a link to a clip from the show. In that clip came the following line:

**“I am not a toy that you can play with when you are bored or lonely or horny. I am not the girl the guy gets at the end of the movie. I am not a fantasy. If you want me, earn me!”**

Why would the main female character of the show say this to the main male character? If 'Scandal' were any other show, one could point to the fact that the main male character is a married man whose wife, when this line was said, had moved out of the family manse. Yet 'Scandal' is unlike any other show on television. For on 'Scandal', the main male character happens to be the President of the United States and the main female character is the woman the President has had an on-again, off-again affair. Even this would not be as momentous until it is taken into account that the President is a white male and the woman he is having this on-again, off-again affair with is African American.

'Scandal' is the story of Olivia Pope, an African American woman who is a Washington DC lawyer who runs her own crisis management firm and she is widely known as a savvy political strategist. She is highly educated; having graduated from Princeton and Georgetown Law. While every week there is a different case for Pope and her associates to work out (and currently she and her associates are helping with a Presidential primary campaign), the underlying story is Olivia's on-again, off-again relationship with Fitzgerald Grant III (currently the relationship is somewhere in-between).

Fitzgerald Grant III is the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. Before becoming President, "Fitz", as he is called, was Governor of California. He is also a Rhodes scholar and has a Ph.D. Fitz spent time in the Navy as a pilot and was in combat during the Persian Gulf conflict in 1991. Finally, Fitz is the son of Fitzgerald Grant, Jr., a now-deceased former Senator from California.

Olivia and Fitz meet when she was brought in by Cyrus Beene, her college mentor and Fitz's campaign manager, to help with the Grant campaign after its loss in the Iowa caucuses. Cyrus is a gay man who now serves as White House Chief of Staff.

The final character to be looked at for the purpose of this conversation is Millicent Grant, known to most as "Mellie." Mellie has been in a marriage of convenience with Fitz for almost 20 years. Like Olivia she is highly educated, having graduated from the University of North Carolina and Harvard Law. Mellie has political ambitions of her own, part of which was being First Lady. That position has been placed in jeopardy because Fitz has stated that he wants to divorce Mellie and marry Olivia.

'Scandal' enters the national consciousness at a particular period of time. The nation has its first African American President and First Family. However, history matters. And in the racial history of the United States, interracial relationships—especially those of a sexual nature—have been not only frowned upon, but legislated against. So to have a television show in which the two main characters are not only engaged in an adulterous relationship, but an interracial relationship has significant import in terms of how a conversation around sexuality and pleasure can be had.

Scripture has shown an unease with intimate relationships outside of one's own group:

*In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab; and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples. And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, 'You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Did not King Solomon of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?' (Nehemiah 13:23-27)*

*Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, 'You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the Lord the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.' (Ezra 10:10-11)*

Taking into account that these condemnations of Israel's exogamy are a direct response to being conquered and exiled, it is still very interesting that the men of Israel were required to “put away” their foreign wives and the children that came from those marriages.

In order to start the conversation about the intersection of sex, race, beauty, and convention when it comes to 'Scandal', there is one more passage of scripture to look at.

*But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants\* to practise fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead. (Revelation 2:20-23)*

In recent episodes of 'Scandal', Mellie has taken to calling Olivia a whore. In her book Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America, Melissa Harris-Perry says:

*It may seem a stretch to point to antebellum notions of black women's lasciviousness as a source of contemporary emotional and political meaning for black women. But this early characterization of black women has infiltrated the nation's understanding of black women's character in ways that continue to resonate in America's cultural, social, and political fabric.<sup>1</sup>*

I contend that Mellie, in using the word “whore” when talking about Olivia, is bringing forward the “Jezebel” stereotype (the antebellum bastardization of the Revelation passage above) in order to dehumanize Olivia and to make Olivia out to be the temptress that has lured her husband away from her.

Yet Mellie is not the only one who is looking at the relationship between Fitz and Olivia through a racial lens. Olivia does as well. During a flashback to time before the action of the show started, Olivia says to Fitz, “I’m feeling Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson about all this.” (season 2, episode 8- “Happy Birthday, Mr. President”) And one can ask the question, given the racial history of the country, if anybody can look at Olivia and Fitz's relationship without confronting the stereotypes of black women.

Given that for the majority of American history, black-white interracial relationships were outlawed (the first anti-miscegenation laws were enacted in the 1650s and the Supreme Court finally overturned anti-miscegenation laws in 1967), how can we look at the “forbidden” pleasure that is in 'Scandal' in a way that confronts stereotypes, not just of black women, but of any group of marginalized people.

A way of confronting the stereotypes and opening the conversation about sexuality and pleasure is to use one of the least referenced parts of scripture, Song of Songs.

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!  
For your love is better than wine,  
your anointing oils are fragrant,  
your name is perfume poured out;  
therefore the maidens love you.  
Draw me after you, let us make haste.  
The king has brought me into his chambers.  
We will exult and rejoice in you;  
we will extol your love more than wine;  
rightly do they love you.*

*I am black and beautiful,  
O daughters of Jerusalem,  
like the tents of Kedar,  
like the curtains of Solomon.  
Do not gaze at me because I am dark,  
because the sun has gazed on me.  
My mother's sons were angry with me;  
they made me keeper of the vineyards,  
but my own vineyard I have not kept!  
Tell me, you whom my soul loves,  
where you pasture your flock,  
where you make it lie down at noon;  
for why should I be like one who is veiled  
beside the flocks of your companions?*

*If you do not know,  
O fairest among women,  
follow the tracks of the flock,  
and pasture your kids  
beside the shepherds' tents.*

Because of the circumstances of 'Scandal' I am using verse 5 literally, "black" in other readings could be made to be any marginalized group in a culture. And in fact, Song of Songs, read with deconstructive eyes, can be made to talk about issues of power and how sexuality and pleasure can overcome cultural convention.

[i](#)Anthony Pinn, "Bodies Beautiful: The Religious Implications of Constructing Black Humanity" in *Religious Studies Review*, 33 (2007), 1.

[i](#)Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2011), 69.