A Note on the Context of the Phrase “Women are Temperamentally Lightheaded” in BT Kiddushin 80b

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According to tractate Kiddushin 80b in the Babylonian Talmud, women are “temperamentally light-headed.” Even beyond the misogynistic undertones of such a statement, this phrase is not easily understood: what does it mean for women to be “temperamentally light-headed”? As with any phrase found in the Talmud, the surrounding context of the sugya—the detailed, usually proof-based discussion that follows the quotation of the Mishnah—is essential for a complete understanding; thus this note will explore the phrase “nashim daatan kalot”—translated here as “temperamentally light-headed”—in light of the context of the sugya. Ultimately, I will argue that the statement means the antithesis of what it says: that the men described in this Gemara are physically unable to refrain from reacting to sexual temptation. This analysis will also take into account the popular feminist interpretation of the phrase offered by Judith Hauptman in her book Rereading the Rabbis.

The phrase “nashim daatan kalot” occurs only one other time in the Babylonian Talmud besides in Kiddushin 80b. The reference in BT Shabbat 33b refers to the idea that when women are tortured they will reveal secrets. A similar phrase appears in Succah 51b, in reference to immodest behavior of both men and women; neither of these interpretations explains the usage of the phrase in Kiddushin 80b. One further instance occurs in the writings of the eleventh-century scholar Rashi, who is quoting from this particular passage in Kiddushin. Rashi’s use of the phrase is focused around the character of Beruria, who is pressured into a sexual transgression with one of her husband’s students through a trick her husband plays on her in order to prove a point. The usage of the phrase with the Beruria incident does not explain the usage here within Kiddushin 80b—both because it would be historical inaccurate to use the eleventh-century explanation by Rashi to explain the passage in the Babylonian Talmud, but also
because in the Beruria incident Beruria herself uses the phrase to mock the learned men who know less than she does—a usage quite separate than what one finds in this sugya. This phrase, then, in the larger context of the sugya in Kiddushin, shows that the women represented in this sugya are invisible, something less than a passive player, simple pawns to the stories of men within the narratives.

In order to truly understand this phrase, one must examine the entire sugya in which it occurs. The sugya begins by quoting the Mishnah:

A man may not be alone with two women, but one woman may be alone with two men. R. Simeon said: even one man may be alone with two women, if his wife is with him, and he may sleep with them in an inn, because his wife watches him. A man may be alone with his mother and his daughter, and he may sleep with them in immediate bodily contact; but when they grow up, she must sleep in her garment, and he in his.

This Mishnah follows a larger discussion within the Mishnah of yichud, which describes in detail the laws of when men and women who are not married to one another may be together. According to Hauptman, the larger text of the Mishnah relates specifically to men’s (unintentional?) arousal “simply by being secluded with women.”

However, this is not the same thrust that the Talmud takes, as the meaning for this Mishnah is described by the Gemara as follows:

What is the reason?—Tanna debe Eliyahu [states]: Because women are temperamentally light-headed.

The Talmud then proceeds back to address the question of yichud, as if the statement about the temperamentally light-headedness of women did not exist. What, then, is the purpose for this statement within the Talmud? The reasoning is not forthcoming—that is, at no point in the sugya does the text attempt to tackle or explain this statement. Nor is the phrase extant in the Mishnah or other parallel sources, so there is no place for comparison. According to the Gemara, however, it was a tanna, the earliest of the rabbis quoted in the Mishnah, who made the statement, which, if taken at face value, places the expression within an early tradition. Strangely, there is no back-and-forth, no discussion of the purpose or understanding of this phrase. This tradition about women’s “light-headedness” stands alone in the sugya.
In order to determine the meaning behind the comment, a look at the larger sugya is essential. The Gemara continues with numerous, but brief, stories about various rabbis and their own personal failings when it comes to women:

Rab and Rab Judah were walking on a road, and a woman was walking in front of them. Said Rab to Rab Judah, 'Lift your feet before Gehenna.' ‘But you yourself said that in the case of respectable people it is well,’ he protested. ‘Who says that respectable people mean such as you and I?’ he retorted. Then such as who—E.g., R. Hanina b. Pappi and his companions.

In this narrative, two established, ‘respectable’ rabbis are discussing whether to move away from a woman (aka ‘Gehenna’ in the text) for fear of being tempted. Rab argues that they are indeed not respectable enough and thus they are just as likely to give in to temptation as any other male might be when presented with a lone woman. While it is not clear whether this story is supposed to be humorous, it is instructive: who would be less likely to give in to temptation than the men who know Torah and understand the laws and punishments associated with such transgressions? According to Rab, however, even most of the learned rabbis do not fall into such a category. Further stories in the sugya are also enlightening in this manner:

Abin said: The sorest spot of the year is the festival. Certain [redeemed] captive women came to Nehardea. They were taken into the house of R. Amram the pious, and the ladder was removed from under them. As one passed by, a light fell on the sky lights; [thereupon] R. Amram seized the ladder, which ten men could not raise, and he alone set it up and proceeded to ascend. When he had gone half way up the ladder he stayed his feet and cried out, ‘A fire at R. Amram’s!’ The Rabbis came and reproved him, ‘We have shamed you!’ Said he to them: ‘Better that you shame Amram in this world than that you be ashamed of him in the next.’

Similar to the story with Rab and Rab Judah above, R. Amram the pious is put into a situation where he is fully tempted by women, women whose role in the story is so minor it is hard to even qualify as a passive role: these ladies simply exist. There is no interaction between R. Amram and the silhouetted women, and yet this rabbi known for his piety is overcome with inhuman strength and only a last minute attempt to stay himself is successful, an attempt where he must call in other men to view his humiliation.
in order not to succumb to the temptation further. Two other brief stories will help illustrate the point:

R. Meir used to scoff at transgressors. One day Satan appeared to him in the guise of a woman on the opposite bank of the river. As there was no ferry, he seized the rope and proceeded across. When he had reached halfway along the rope, he [Satan] let him go saying: ‘Had they not proclaimed in Heaven, “Take heed of R. Meir and his learning,” I would have valued your life at two ma’ahs.’

R. Akiba used to scoff at transgressors. One day Satan appeared to him as a woman on the top of a palm tree. Grasping the tree, he went climbing up: but when he reached halfway up the tree he [Satan] let him go, saying: ‘Had they not proclaimed in Heaven, “Take heed of R. Akiba and his learning,” I would have valued your life at two ma’ahs.’

Similar to the story of R. Amram, here two upstanding sages are fooled by Satan into acting foolishly in order to pursue a woman with whom they would presumably commit a sexual transgression. It is only through the scholars’ “credit” in heaven that they are saved from the actual act of transgression.

What is of note in these stories is that the “light-headed” nature of women mentioned at the beginning of the sugya is absent. In fact, the only portrayal of women that is seen is one of a silent woman who is completely unaware of the pandemonium she is causing. The women in this sugya are not only silent, but are not even so much as participants in the actions going on around them. The women are, in a nutshell, absent from the text in all but name.

What, then, is the purpose of the Gemara’s comment preceding these stories that “women are temperamentally light-headed?” There is an assumption made by the author(s) of this sugya that the women around whom the stories are told will always succumb to the desire of the male character. Not only do these woman play no active roles in these stories, but it is understood by the readers that if the sages had not been able to stop before they transgressed, that the woman would become a participant—whether by choice or by force—in the sexual peccadillo.

Thus, that women are “light-headed” is not a statement in this Gemara about the intellectual or moral capacity of a woman to decide whether or not she wants to
participate in a sexual escapade. It is not meant to reflect a woman’s physical desire to seduce a man or deflect his advances. Instead, the statement is arguably the antithesis of what it actually says: that the men who are described in the Gemara are physically (and morally?) incapable of not reacting to sexual temptation.

Hauptman, too, addresses the issue of the “light-headed” woman found in Kiddushin 80b. The main thrust of Hauptman’s argument throughout her discussion is to relieve the rabbis of the burden placed upon them by feminists: that man’s arousal and desire and his lack of ability to control his actions based on said arousal/desire is the woman’s fault, and thus the onus of responsibility is placed on her. Through her discussion of the text, Hauptman creates a partial shift of responsibilities, arguing that “‘Light-mindedness’ here means lacking a strong enough will to resist that which one is being pressed into doing. “She did not say no, in their opinion, because of her own shortcomings, not because of the hard-to-withstand pressure a man placed on her…that [the men] would not have sinned had the women only resisted the advances.”

Hauptman’s partial shift of responsibilities, however, gives too much (theoretical) power to the women in the text. As noted above, the women who are “present” throughout the sugya are not active participants, nor are they passive players responding to the advances of the rabbis. They are, to some degree, “filler.” They could be any female, look like any woman, be anyone’s mother, sister, daughter. It is their mere presence that causes the extreme reactions of the rabbis. Hauptman, by bringing up the possibility of a woman’s ability to say “yes” or “no,” gives the women in these stories a voice. And while any feminist would prefer that women have a voice—let alone a choice in her response—this possibility is just not present in the women described in this sugya.

1 All translations are taken from the Soncino Talmud unless otherwise noted. “Tractate Kiddushin.” Soncino Classics Collection CD-ROM. Vers. 2.2 (Chicago: Davka Corp., 2001).

2 Hauptman, Judith. Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman’s Voice (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press: 1998), 57 note 26. While some scholars argue that the phrase in Kiddushin 80b derives from its usage here in Shabbat 33b, the meanings of the two phrases differ and thus must be explained separately.

3 Rashi’s reference to this phrase, and his discussion of the “Beruria incident” will not be analyzed in detail here. However, a discussion of the voice that Rashi gives to Beruria is indeed fascinating, especially in her ability to refuse the advances of Rabbi Meir’s student for so long. It is this voice, which I am arguing, is completely absent from the sugya here. For more information see D. Boyarin, Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993); T. Ilan, Mine and Yours are Hers: Retrieving...
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I have chosen to skip over the several sections, simply because they do not add or detract from my argument. I would like to acknowledge here that while it is important to analyze the entire sugya in which any phrase is present, for brevity and clarity it seems prudent to choose those passages from the sugya, which actually help highlight the meaning of the phrase in question. No meaning is lost based on my exclusion of said passages.

Hauptmann, Rereading the Rabbis, 39.

For her conclusions see: Hauptman, Rereading the Rabbis, 54-55.