

Plotted, Shot, and Painted
Cultural Representations
of Biblical Women

J. Cheryl Exum

Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
Supplement Series 215

Gender, Culture, Theory 3



seems to me that to answer that question we would need more extensive analysis of ancient views of sexuality, which has not been my subject here, and which has hardly been investigated in the field of biblical studies.¹²⁶

Reading texts in terms of our own interests reflects a high regard for those texts, and usually some kind of personal investment in them, as the long and varied history of biblical interpretation powerfully illustrates. I doubt very much that Alpert, for example, whose sensitive lesbian midrash I mentioned earlier, would care very much about finding role models in the book of Ruth if it were not part of a cultural and religious tradition in which she wants to participate. The influence of gender and sexual orientation on reading and viewing needs to be recognized in any kind of reader-response approach to literature and art. At the same time, texts and their visual representations have a way of eluding our attempts to fit them into molds, of destabilizing our interpretations. Relationships in Ruth are not rigidly defined and gender blurring occurs on a large scale, with sexually identified roles shared and transgressed by the book's three major characters. Reading Ruth as an eternally unstable triangle offers a third alternative to reading in terms of same-sex and opposite-sex relationships, yielding an interpretive triangle analogous to our Ruth-Naomi-Boaz triangle created by the irrepressible third person. By destabilizing our gender categories, the book of Ruth, like Calderon's painting with which I began, invites readers to collapse the gender distinctions with which they themselves operate. Or at least to examine, and perhaps to reconfigure, them.

'delicate sensuality' (p. 209); see also above. This is, not surprisingly, a fairly typical scholarly view, where the emphasis is on understanding the story in its ancient context. See also Bos, 'Out of the Shadows', pp. 63-64, who sees the sexual allusions in Ruth 3 as referring 'not to a romantic enterprise but rather to a business one' (p. 63). Though remarking (Ruth, p. 135), 'Whether or not the two whiled away the night at the threshing-floor in tender embrace is doubtless of psychological significance', Sasson nonetheless does not speculate on it.

126. I have in mind approaches like those taken to classical literature in David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (eds.), *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990); John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1990); see also Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

6

Why, Why, Why, Delilah?

Men have never tired of fashioning
expressions for the violent force by which
man feels himself drawn to the woman, and
side by side with his longing, the dread
that through her he might die and be
undone.

Karen Horney

The name Delilah will be an everlasting
curse on the lips of men.

Victor Mature to Hedy Lamarr in
Samson and Delilah

Why should I humbly sue for peace, thus scorn'd,
With infamy upon my name denounc'd?
Delilah in Handel's *Samson*¹

In Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera*, when Christine pulls off his mask, the Phantom exclaims, 'Damn you, you little prying Pandora, you little demon! Is this what you wanted to see? Curse you, you little lying Delilah!' Drawing on Greek and biblical mythology, this name-calling effectively conjures up a vision of female curiosity that is simultaneously a betrayal. 'Prying' and 'lying' attribute evil intention to her. In a song made popular by Tom Jones,² entitled simply 'Delilah', the unidentified male singer asks Delilah to forgive him for killing her in a jealous frenzy because 'I just couldn't take

1. The libretto is by Newburgh Hamilton, based on Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, where Delilah's speech is somewhat different:

Why do I humble thus myself, and, suing
For peace, reap nothing but repulse and hate?
Bid go with evil omens, and the brand
Of infamy upon my name denounced?

2. The song predates Jones; the recording I have of it, sung by the Platters, is older (Audio Archive Collectors Edition [n.d.]).

any more'. The song, from which I take the title for this chapter, is about a woman who betrays her lover with another man and then adds insult to injury by laughing at him when he confronts her. It is not about the biblical Delilah at all. Or is it? Since naming this woman 'Delilah' is neither accidental nor entirely innocent, I shall return to this song and its connection with the biblical character in the discussion below. In the 1949 Hollywood film, *Samson and Delilah*, when Samson, played by Victor Mature, is betrayed into the hands of the Philistines, he says to Delilah (Hedy Lamarr), 'The name Delilah will be an everlasting curse on the lips of men'. This judgment on the woman, which is meant to represent the biblical hero's words at the time of his betrayal, already confirms the status Delilah's name has achieved over the centuries, and of which the film is a reflection.

In the examples above, the name 'Delilah' is clearly overdetermined, in common parlance, her name is synonymous with treachery and deceit. Indeed, Delilah has become a trope for the *femme fatale*, the woman fatal to man—sexually irresistible, at once both fascinating and frightening, and ultimately deadly. As a cultural symbol, what she represents is rivaled perhaps only by two other biblical figures, whose names, like hers, have passed into popular usage: Jezebel, whose image as a shameless or abandoned woman is rather unwarranted, and that other arch-fiend whose name connotes betrayal, and who, like Delilah, does it for money—Judas. All three names, in addition to designating infamous literary figures, have dictionary definitions as common nouns. Under 'Delilah' the *Oxford English Dictionary* has 'used allusively to mean a temptress or treacherous love'. In a recent work of fiction, the two arch-betrayers are linked: 'I surrendered my seed to Delilah after she bestowed upon me the kiss of Judas', says a character in Pat Conroy's *Beach Music*.

Delilah's place as temptress *par excellence* in popular culture is so well established that it needs no documentation. In this chapter I propose to explore her bad reputation and its embellishments by looking first at its roots in the biblical account of Judges 16 and then at some of the ways selected metatexts flesh out Delilah's character. In the biblical story of Samson and Delilah, a story told from a decidedly androcentric point of view, the woman is coded to represent the attraction and danger of female sexuality.³ She personifies that 'violent force',

3. See, especially, Bal, *Delilah Love*, pp. 37–67; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 61–93.

the male longing and dread that Karen Horney speaks about in my epigraph above, and this encoded representation paves the way for her metatextual development as temptress, vamp, and one of film's most compelling *femmes fatales*. The metatexts considered here can be seen as responses to a perceived need to know, or to show, more about this obscure but fascinating character. In the discussion below I shall seek to link this quest for knowledge with the desire to control. Particularly striking in these metatexts is the desire to supply two things lacking, or insufficiently developed, in the biblical account: motivation and closure. They supply one or both of these without, however, ever challenging the fundamental trope of the *femme fatale*. Thus even when some of them manage to portray Delilah in a better light, they nonetheless reinscribe the male attraction to and fear of female sexuality that she represents.

As in the previous chapter, I shall be dealing here primarily with metatexts, and using only a few metatextual examples through which, among many others that could be adduced, Delilah has passed into popular culture as larger than life. Since I am not undertaking to trace the development of Delilah's image nor to offer anything like a comprehensive survey of its manifestations (which would be a fascinating subject in itself), I make no claim that my observations will hold true in every case or that notable exceptions do not exist. My interest lies in the familiar stereotype, and what I offer here is a montage of Delilahs, drawn from art, music, film, literature, and, of course, the biblical account. I want to see how the 'legend' has grown, and to approach this question by allowing for a degree of free-play of and between metatexts, while at the same time drawing attention to the intransigence of the *femme fatale* trope in these various cultural appropriations of Delilah. Finally I want to suggest how we might deconstruct the *femme fatale* trope by inquiring into what motivates the view of women encoded in the source text and reinscribed in the metatexts.

If the appeal to film and my attempt in this book to describe in words what the screen shows us are ambitious, the use of musical metatexts poses a greater challenge. As this approach is rather experimental, I ask the reader, if at all possible, to pause and listen to the love duet from Camille Saint-Saëns's opera, *Samson et Dalila*, before reading further. In Chapter 5, I used Caldeon's sexually ambivalent representation of Naomi to spark a series of misreadings that eventu-

ally brought us back to the sexually ambivalent role of Naomi (as well as Ruth and Boaz) in the biblical account. Saint-Saëns gives us something of a musical equivalent to the painting, in my opinion. Like Calderon, who identified his central figures as Ruth and Naomi, Saint-Saëns, by locating his music in its 'proper' place, instructs his listeners how to hear it. Delilah and Samson sing this duet just before he yields to her sexual allure and she betrays him to his enemies. But must we listen to it as the composer intended? What if, as sometimes happens, we hear it out of context? The erotic power of the music, I submit, overwhelms the libretto. Could music so beautiful be sung by someone so treacherous? It is difficult to believe that the intensity of passion conveyed by the musical score could be anything less than sincere. How could Delilah sing so convincingly of tenderness (*tendresse*) and rapture (*ivresse*) if deception is on her mind? Does the music perhaps attribute greater depth to Delilah than the libretto allows?

Just as viewers of Calderon's painting were willing to debate what part of the book of Ruth it represents, so we might consider where else in the story of Samson and Delilah this magnificent love duet could be placed. Another of my metatexts, the film *Samson and Delilah*, produced and directed by Cecil B. De Mille, offers one answer.⁴ De Mille gives us a Delilah and Samson who could well sing this duet after the betrayal. His cinematic Delilah repents of her misdeed and, tormented by guilt and grief, she goes to visit Samson in the granary at night. As she enters, he is praying for God's guidance. She walks over to him softly and places her hand on his shoulder. He asks if she is an angel, but when she speaks, he recognizes her devil's voice. Declaring she would give anything to undo what she has done, she begs him to escape with her to Egypt, where she will be his eyes, share his laughter and shed his tears. To his bitter question how she will respond when he curses her for his darkness, she replies that she will kneel and ask his forgiveness. He does not want to forgive her but his love for her prevails. 'Vengeance is yours, O Lord. Strike her, destroy her, for I cannot', he says, and takes her in his arms. Saint-Saëns's musical score would serve very well at this point in the film to convey the intensity of feeling between the lovers.

There is another scene in the film where it would also fit well. The

4. Twentieth Century Fox, 1949. The screenplay by Jesse Lasky, Jr. and Fredrick Frank is based on works by Harold Lamb and Vladimir Jabotinsky, as well as on the biblical account, and the film has a superb musical score of its own by Victor Young.

following morning, when Samson is brought into the temple for the Philistines' amusement, Delilah abandons her seat of honor beside the Saran, the supreme ruler of the Philistines (played by the ever cynical George Sanders), and goes to join Samson in the arena.⁵ It is Delilah, and not a young boy as in the biblical account, who leads Samson to the two pillars that support the temple. She touches his shoulder, and he leans against her. He urges her to leave and declares his enduring love: 'Wherever you are, my love is with you. Go.' She caresses his hand against her cheek, kisses it, and pretends to take her leave. If this were an opera and not a film, one could easily imagine Samson and Delilah singing a reprise of Saint-Saëns's duet before he pulls down the temple and they die together (and, in either this scenario or the one in the granary, the tension in the strings and woodwinds would anticipate the impending doom in the temple).

My point with this musical and cinematic example is that it is not axiomatic that the story must be developed in a certain way and not another. The biblical account is not the only version of the fabula in which a woman learns the secret of a strong man's strength and betrays it to his enemies; the themes are timeless and widespread.⁶ An ancient storyteller adapted the fabula to characters named Samson and Delilah, and his version has become famous and influential in Western culture because it was included in the Bible. As a cultural commodity it has subsequently been embellished and adapted in ways that can not be controlled by its ancient biblical context nor fully accounted for by recourse to it. Before considering some of these embellishments and adaptations, let us take a closer look at the biblical story with an eye to discovering what it is about it that enables and encourages development along different possible lines.

5. In using the designation 'Saran' for the supreme ruler of the Philistines, the film adopts the term the Bible uses for the rulers of the Philistines, which is itself a Philistine loan word (BDB, p. 710b).

6. Numerous parallels are provided by Gunkel, 'Simson', in *Reden und Aufträge*, pp. 38-64; and Theodor H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament*, II (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1981), pp. 436-39. 'Demoniac archetypes of woman, filling world mythology, represent the uncontrollable nearness of nature', argues Camille Paglia in her controversial study of *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 13: 'Their tradition passes nearly unbroken from prehistoric idols through literature and art to modern movies. The primary image is the femme fatale, the woman fatal to man.'

The Biblical Delilah

Could the biblical narrator have anticipated that Delilah would become so infamously famous? Delilah is a relatively minor biblical character, but one whose action has serious consequences. What we know about her as a character is minimal. The entire biblical story of Samson and Delilah consists of a mere 18 verses, and just over 300 words in the Hebrew.⁷

After this he loved a woman in the valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah. The rulers of the Philistines came to her and said to her, 'Entice him, and see by what means his strength is great, and by what means we may overpower him and bind him in order to humiliate him; and we will each give you eleven hundred pieces of silver.'

Delilah said to Samson, 'Please tell me by what means your strength is great, and how you might be bound in order to humiliate you'. Samson said to her, 'If they bind me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, then I shall become weak and be like any other man'. Then the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she bound him with them. Now she had men lying in wait in an inner chamber. She said to him, 'The Philistines are upon you, Samson!' But he snapped the bowstrings as a string of tow snaps when it touches the fire. So the secret of his strength was not known.

Delilah said to Samson, 'You have mocked me and told me lies; please tell me how you might be bound'. He said to her, 'If they bind me with new ropes that have not been used, then I shall become weak and be like any other man'. Delilah took new ropes and bound him with them, and said to him, 'The Philistines are upon you, Samson!' And the men lying in wait were in an inner chamber. But he snapped the ropes off his arms like a thread.

Delilah said to Samson, 'Until now you have mocked me and told me lies; tell me how you might be bound'. He said to her, 'If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web and make it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak and be like any other man'. So while he slept, Delilah took the seven locks of his head and wove them into the web. She made them tight with the pin, and said to him, 'The Philistines are upon you, Samson!' But he awoke from his sleep, and pulled away the pin, the loom, and the web.

7. In the translation that follows I am restoring with the versions material that appears to have been inadvertently left out in the Hebrew text of vv. 13-14; for discussion of the problems, see Jichan Kim, *The Structure of the Samson Cycle* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993), pp. 161-63.

6. Why, Why, Why, Delilah?

She said to him, 'How can you say, "I love you", when your heart is not with me? These three times you have mocked me and not told me by what means your strength is great.' When she harassed him with her words day after day, and urged him, he was vexed to death. So he told her all his heart, and said to her, 'A razor has never come upon my head, for I have been a Nazirite to God from my mother's womb. If I be shaved, my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man.' When Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called the rulers of the Philistines: 'Come up this time, for he has told me all his heart'. The rulers of the Philistines came up to her and brought the money in their hands. She made him sleep upon her knees; then she called to the man, and she shaved off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to bully him, and his strength left him. She said, 'The Philistines are upon you, Samson!' He awoke from his sleep and said, 'I will go out as at other times, and shake myself free'. But he did not know that the Lord had left him. The Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with bronze fetters; and he ground at the mill in the prison house (Judg. 16.4-21).

Stylized repetition accounts for much of the story and helps to make it memorable. Who could forget the childishly nagging, 'you have mocked me and told me lies', or the repeated alarm, 'The Philistines are upon you, Samson!'? Like the few lines about Bathsheba bathing, this brief account has fired the imagination of its readers, producing a greater amount of commentary than would seem warranted. But what exactly do these verses tell us about Delilah? We know her name, which is more than we know about the other two women with whom Samson becomes amorously involved, the woman from Timnah in Judges 14 and the harlot at Gaza in 16.1-3. We know where she lives, in the valley of Sorek, which lies between Israelite and Philistine territory, though this does not tell us much about her, not even that she is a Philistine. The picture we get is of an independent woman, for she is not identified, as biblical women typically are, in relation to a man, usually their father or husband. She appears to have her own house, but how she came by it is not revealed. Is she a foreign woman of independent means? A wealthy widow with property, like Judith? A harlot, as is commonly supposed? We cannot be sure about Delilah's social position, or even about her house, which is not described beyond the fact that there is an inner chamber where ambushers could hide from Samson's view.⁸

We are not told whether or not Delilah loves Samson, only that he loves her (v. 4). Should we take the textual silence about her feelings

as a hint that she does not love him in return? Is this a situation similar to that of David and Michal, discussed above in Chapter 2? In their case, I argued, the fact that we are told that Michal loved David but not that he loved her suggests he did not. But in assessing Michal and David's relationship, we had a larger body of evidence from which to draw this conclusion than we have for Delilah and Samson. Here there is not much to go on, apart from the facts that Delilah and Samson are probably lovers and she betrays him. Delilah obviously does not love Samson enough to refuse to betray him at any price, but it does not necessarily follow that she feels no affection toward him. The textual gap concerning Delilah's feelings leaves us sufficiently in the dark for later retellings to fill it in completely opposite ways. In Saint-Saëns's opera Delilah secretly despises Samson and desires his downfall, whereas in the film *Samson and Delilah* she loves him obsessively and wants to make him her prisoner. We could easily imagine a character whose feelings lie anywhere between these extremes.

Delilah's relationship with Samson is no secret; the Philistine rulers know about it and take advantage of it. They offer her money to betray him and she accepts. Does this mean the narrator wants us to think of her as inspired by greed? Not, at any rate, to the extent that he makes capturing Samson her idea. The Philistine rulers come to her; she does not offer her services to them.

Her actions testify to her persistence; she does not give up just because Samson does not reveal his secret at first. Her dialogue and the narrative comment that 'she harassed him day after day with her words until he was vexed to death' indicate both her skillful way with rhetoric and her recourse to nagging to break down Samson's resistance. Does she also use feminine 'wiles', 'flattering prayers and sighs/ And amorous reproaches',⁸ as the metatexts I have selected simply assume? Is this what the Philistine rulers have in mind when they instruct her to 'entice' Samson (*patiti*, v. 5)? Delilah cleverly exploits Samson's affections ('How can you say, "I love you", when your heart is not with me?', v. 15), and she knows it when, at last, he tells her the truth ('When Delilah saw that he had told her all his heart, she sent and called the rulers of the Philistines...', v. 18). Since at first she had ambushers waiting in the inner chamber (vv. 9, 12), but in the end she has to send for the Philistines (v. 18), we might conclude that while she was gaining power over Samson, she was

losing credibility with the Philistines.⁹

Delilah herself carries out the different procedures Samson describes for binding him (first with fresh bowstrings and then with new ropes) and for weaving his hair into the web on her loom. But we cannot be entirely sure whether she, or someone else, cuts his hair. The verb in v. 19 is third person feminine singular, 'she cut the seven locks of his head', but just before it the Hebrew text reads, 'she caused him to sleep upon her knees and she called to the man'. Who is this man and where did he come from? Jack Sasson argues convincingly that 'the man' referred to here is none other than Samson himself. 'Bringing him to sleep on her lap, she called to the man [Samson], then began to cut the seven braids on his hair'. Why does she call to him? To make sure he is deeply asleep, answers Sasson.¹⁰ Still, one must admit that the Hebrew is somewhat awkward. In what appears to be an attempt to make sense of it, some ancient versions make the man a barber and have him shave Samson.¹¹ They are followed by most commentators and modern translations, such as the New Revised Standard Version, for example, where we read: 'She let him fall asleep on her lap; and she called a man, and had him shave off the seven locks of his head'. Thus we have two important and influential textual traditions, one that has Delilah cut Samson's hair and the other that has a barber do the cutting, both of which are firmly established in the metatextual tradition, as we shall see.

After cutting Samson's hair, Delilah 'began to bully him (*le'annoto*) and his strength left him', v. 19. The term I translated 'bully' can be rendered variously as 'afflict', 'humiliate', 'torment', or 'subdue'.¹² But how should we understand it here? Earlier the Philistine rulers used the same terminology when they instructed Delilah, 'Entice him and

9. Jack M. Sasson, 'Who Cut Samson's Hair? (And Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)', *Prolegomena* 8 (1988), p. 337.

10. Sasson, 'Who Cut Samson's Hair?', pp. 336-38.

11. The Septuagint^A and the Vulgate specify a barber; the Septuagint^B has the 'man' do the shaving.

12. The root *ʾnh* in the piel has a wide range of meanings; it is used, for example, to describe the way Sarah treats Hagar that causes her to flee (Gen. 16.6), and also for the way Laban does not want Jacob to treat his daughters (Gen. 31.50); in Ps. 105.18 it describes Joseph's feet in fetters, as a slave; it is used of the Egyptians' treatment of their Israelite slaves (Exod. 1.11-12), but also of God's treatment of Israel in the wilderness to prove them (Deut. 8.2-3, 16). *ʾnh* in the piel also has sexual connotations; it is a term for rape (e.g., Gen. 34.2; Deut. 21.14; Judg. 20.5; 2 Sam. 13.12).

8. Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 403, 392-93.

see by what means his strength is great and how we may overpower him and bind him in order to subdue/humiliate/torment/bully him' (*le'annoto*, v. 5). Does it mean that Delilah teases or pushes Samson around in some way, for example by hitting him or poking at him, in order to test whether or not he is helpless? Is she checking just to be sure he is 'weak like any other man', since Samson has fooled her before? Or is the narrator hinting at something more harsh and heartless?

The biblical story of Samson and Delilah raises more questions than it answers. To make matters worse for readers interested in the woman's point of view, as soon as she has accomplished her mission and enabled the Philistines to capture Samson, Delilah disappears from the narrative. This suggests that Delilah's importance to the story is simply to further the plot, and that her characterization is of little consequence to the narrator. After all, the story is really about Samson, his adventures and misadventures, and how he ultimately fulfills his mission to 'begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines' (Judg. 13.5). As in the story of David and Bathsheba, the woman's subjectivity is irrelevant. Its absence, however, opens the door for all manner of gap filling on the part of readers. Not content with such scanty and tantalizingly ambiguous information about the woman, we want to know more about the mysterious Delilah.

Delilah, the Philistine Prostitute?

Two of the most common assumptions about Delilah is that she is a Philistine and that she is a prostitute, neither of which is expressly stated in the biblical account. One encounters these assumptions not only in popular thinking but in the scholarly literature as well. Let us take them in turn, though, as we shall see, they are mutually influencing. A few biblical commentators raise the possibility that Delilah might be Israelite. In support of this identification are the facts that she has a Hebrew name and her home is located between Israelite and Philistine territory, neither clearly part of one or the other. So many foreigners in the Bible have Hebrew names, however, that this interesting bit of evidence does not prove anything. Even when the possibility that Delilah is an Israelite is raised, its implications are never pursued. Against it, there appear to be three main reasons for believing that Delilah is a Philistine: (1) because Samson's fatal weakness is his

attraction to Philistine women, as his other liaisons show; (2) because Delilah has dealings with the Philistine rulers, and it is unlikely that the Philistines would appeal to an Israelite woman for assistance; and (3) because she betrays Samson to the Philistines, and surely an Israelite woman would not betray the hero of her people to their enemy. These are all good reasons, but they involve certain assumptions and prejudices.

If we examine closely the claim about Samson's attraction to foreign women, we discover that in actuality only one of the women with whom Samson becomes involved is specifically identified as a Philistine, the woman from Timnah who becomes his wife, with disastrous consequences for everyone involved (Judg. 14.1–15.6). The harlot (16.1–3), just because she lives in the Philistine metropolis of Gaza, is not necessarily a Philistine; she might be a foreigner, possibly even an Israelite woman for all we know. Yet, to my knowledge, no commentator identifies her as anything other than Philistine. Perhaps it is not only the harlot's place of residence but the fact that she is a harlot that disinclines biblical commentators and ordinary readers alike from thinking she might be Israelite. Such a conclusion, however, is based on an unexamined presupposition that Israelite women would not behave in such a way, or, to put it in literary-critical terms, that the Bible would not present an Israelite woman behaving in such a way. This applies especially to the second and third reasons given above. I suspect that readers find it difficult, if not downright troubling, to imagine that an Israelite woman would have any dealings with the 'uncircumcised Philistines', as the Bible disparagingly calls them, let alone betray her people's champion to their dreaded foe! Or if we can imagine it, we feel it must be a misreading, for we deem it highly unlikely that a biblical narrator would portray one of his own countrywomen so negatively, especially without further comment or explanation.

And what about the identification of Delilah as a harlot? This identification, too, seems to be based on three reasons: (1) she and Samson appear to be lovers, but there is no indication that they are married; (2) she seems to be a woman of independent means and she is not identified in terms of her familial relationship to a man; (3) we know of Samson's involvement with one harlot, so why not view this as another? Again, all good reasons, but none definitive. The woman and man in the Song of Songs, for example, are lovers and

not married, yet we do not rush to label this woman a harlot. Would we be so quick to jump to this conclusion about Delilah if it were not for the harlot at Gaza? We are not told that Delilah has other lovers besides Samson. Why identify *Delilah* as a harlot because of *Samson's* profligacy?

Although nothing in the biblical text specifically confirms the identification of Delilah as a Philistine or a prostitute, nothing in the text discourages readers from drawing such conclusions either. Indeed, like Bathsheba, Delilah is betrayed by a kind of conspiracy against the woman, not necessarily conscious or deliberate, between the narrator and his implied androcentric audience. As I argued in Bathsheba's case, our response to the suppression of information about the woman's subjectivity is a combination of reading preconceptions and familiar stereotypes back into the text and of picking up on latent messages within the text. In particular, the process that results in typecasting Delilah as a Philistine prostitute can be understood as what happens when readers automatically adopt the view of women encoded in this story.

The story of Samson in Judges 13–16 recognizes basically two kinds of women, good and bad. This is simply a variation on the age-old division of women into two types, the woman on the pedestal who is venerated (the virgin, the mother) and the whore, the fallen woman, the woman to be scorned and looked down on. The story offers one example of a good woman, Samson's mother (Judge. 13). She is a wife and mother, the two valued roles for a woman in ancient Israelite society, and she knows her place. She may be cleverer than her husband, sensing something of the true identity of the mysterious 'man of God' who appears to her to announce Samson's birth and showing superior understanding of the divine intention, but she does not challenge his authority. The other women in the story are 'bad women', for whom we have three examples, women whose sexual attraction leads Samson astray.¹³ Delilah is a bad woman.

Another opposition as important to the story as the good woman–bad woman dichotomy, and one that, unlike the good woman–bad woman opposition, is readily apparent in its surface structure, is the

13. To say that their attraction leads Samson astray is to use the patriarchal perspective reflected in the story, in which women are blamed for male desire and are held responsible for male sexual behavior. We saw this same kind of logic at work in the Bathsheba story.

opposition between the Israelites, who are privileged as the 'us', the 'right side', the heroes of the story (personified in their hero, Samson), and the Philistines as the villains.¹⁴ Hared of the Philistines has deep biblical roots. The Philistines are the arch-enemy against whom Israel is engaged in a fierce struggle for possession of the land, and the animosity toward them in the Samson story is but a reflection of this. No self-respecting Israelite man should become involved with one of their women, as Samson's parents' incredulous response to his marriage plans makes clear: 'Is there not a woman among the daughters of your brothers and among all your¹⁵ people, that you are going to take a woman from the uncircumcised Philistines?' The only good woman is an Israelite woman.¹⁶ And with this assumption, an (other) important stereotype comes into play, the foreign woman as an evil snare.

Foreign women are a threat, both to Israel's ethnic and religious identity in general and to the well-being of the Israelite man in particular. Deuteronomic legislation counsels against intermarriage with foreigners: 'You shall not make marriages with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons. For they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods; then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly' (7.3–4). Even though daughters are not to be given in marriage to foreigners, the concern here is for the sons who the biblical narrator fears will be led astray. The allure and danger of the foreign woman or 'strange woman' is particularly emphasized in the book of Proverbs, where the impressionable young man is repeatedly warned against her charms and against the danger she poses to life itself: 'for her house sinks down to death...none who go to her come back nor do they regain the paths of life' (2.18–19).¹⁷

14. For a fuller treatment of oppositions in the story and its inability to maintain them, see Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 72–77, 90–92.

15. Reading with the Lucianic recension and the Syriac, the Masoretic text has 'my people', but both parents are represented as speaking. From a text-critical perspective, I view the Masoretic text as the preferred reading (with the singular possessive pronoun suggesting that only his father's point of view is important). In v. 3 Samson's response is addressed to his father.

16. Matters are not quite so simple, for women are by nature suspect. The text is uneasy about the Israelite woman, who undermines from within its neat system of hierarchies; see the discussion in Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 76–77, 86–93.

17. Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila* repeats this ideology. At her first appearance

The narrator of the Samson story does not need to establish any of these negative characterizations; he can simply assume and build on the prejudices against Philistines and foreign women that he expects his audience to hold. The fact that these stereotypes are interrelated makes them all the more effective. Within this ideology, it seems only 'natural' to conclude that if Philistines are trouble, surely Delilah must be one.¹⁸ As a foreign woman who entices the unwitting Israelite man Samson, she can be easily identified with the seductive, deadly foreign woman of Proverbs. In addition, the juxtaposition of the story of Delilah (16.4-22) to that of the harlot (16.1-3) with only the clause 'and it happened after that' to separate them exerts a considerable influence on our reading. It is difficult not to naturalize this encounter in the light of that one, and as a result to assume that Samson has embarked on another 'illicit' union—this in spite of the fact that the text does not specify that Samson and Delilah have sexual relations, as it does for Samson and the harlot. All it says is that Samson loved Delilah. Naturalizing, however, happens so automatically that, encouraged by the context as well as by numerous sexual innuendoes in the story,¹⁹ readers readily supply the sexual dimension to Samson and Delilah's relationship. An early reader who draws on the text's latent message to identify Delilah as a harlot is Josephus (*Ant.* 5.8.11). And the moral he draws from the story will be repeated over the centuries: 'But as for his being ensnared by a woman, that is to be ascribed to human nature, which is too weak to resist the temptations to that sin; but we ought to bear him witness, that in all other respects, he was one of extraordinary virtue' (*Ant.* 5.8.12). The moral that describes yielding to feminine temptation as the result of human nature is, of course, a moral about *male* nature, taken as the norm. The moral of this story does not address women at all, except to define their role as temptation and snare.

(Act 1 Scene 6) Delilah is presented as alluring and threatening. Samson recognizes her as a dangerous attraction and prays to God to close his heart to her. An old Hebrew warns him, 'Turn aside, my son, from her path! Shun and fear this alien girl. Close your ears to her lying tongue, and avoid the serpent's venom.'

18. See the remarks about naturalization and the control convention exercises over the reading process in Chapter 2 above. For the influence of convention in the Samson story in particular, see Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 68-72.

19. See Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 77-80.

Delilah Painted as Prostitute

Western art has played a role in perpetuating the contemporary image of Delilah as a prostitute. For the purposes of this chapter, I want to consider closely only four rather typical examples: one, because it shows Delilah alone; two by the same artist, but representing the variant textual traditions discussed above, in which a barber cuts Samson's hair or Delilah does the cutting; and the fourth, because it shows Delilah's response to Samson's capture in a way that dramatically links it to the first example and to the *femme fatale* trope. Since the *femme fatale* as we now imagine her owes much to the nineteenth-century styles of Decadence, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau, it is perhaps appropriate to begin with a painting by Gustave Moreau (fig. 6.1), whose paintings helped shape her image (Salome, Semele, and the Sphinx were some of his favorite subjects). As in some of the paintings of Bathsheba we looked at, where David could barely be seen or was not even present, the woman's body here, in the absence of Samson, serves as a signifier of male desire. Displayed for the pleasure of the male spectator, her voluptuousness accounts for Samson's inability to resist. Unlike Bathsheba, however, whose privacy is invaded by the voyeuristic look, Delilah the courtesan invites and plays to the gaze (and in this, she is more like the movie star Bathshebas). She is aware of her erotic power and knows how to use it. Moreau's Delilah captures on the canvas the attributes we expect of the *femme fatale*: sensuality, excessiveness, temptation, shamelessness, and excitement tinged with danger.²⁰ Moreau originally exhibited this painting under the title *Biblical Courtesan*, implicitly judging the woman for her display of sexuality which he chose, on more than one occasion, to paint. The painting thus functions in much the same way as the paintings of Bathsheba we looked at in which the woman is held morally accountable for the way painters depicted her body for both their pleasure and that of (male) spectators.²¹

Delilah's left breast is bared. Jewelry is the only adornment on the otherwise exposed flesh of her shoulders, left arm, hands, and legs. Her left arm and fingers are extravagantly jeweled and she wears

20. It should be obvious that I am speaking about the impression she makes on men. Women know the stereotype as well as men do, for we are all socialized into it.

21. Like the nudes John Berger discusses in *Ways of Seeing*: see above, Chapter 1.



Figure 6.1. Gustave Moreau, *Delilah*, Museo de Arte de Ponce, The Luis A. Ferré Foundation Inc., Ponce, Puerto Rico

6. *Why, Why, Delilah?*

191

jewels around her ankle and even on her toes, a particularly decadent touch. Her opulent clothing and headdress are heavily ornamented. One is struck by the fact that she is dressed almost wholly in white, as if flagrantly defying its conventional association with virginity. There is, however, a dramatic strand of scarlet in her robe to signal her true status as a harlot, as well as touches of red among the ornaments in her hair and in what appears to be a jewel provocatively located at her lap. The artificiality of the bright red birds flying about in the background signals her artifice. She seems to be awaiting a suitor (Samson?) in a kind of temple of love that calls to mind the temple Samson will destroy—both forbidden temples of infidels. Her rich clothing, countless jewels, and the flowers strewn at her feet suggest she has conquered many hearts in addition to Samson's.

Since Samson is not portrayed in the painting, we might ask, Is this before or after the betrayal? Perhaps it is before, and we should imagine that Delilah is waiting for him, possibly even plotting how to discover his secret. If so, does Moreau want to underscore her greed (for she appears well enough provided for by her admirers not to need the money she will receive for betraying Samson)? In another painting by Moreau, located in the Louvre, Delilah is similarly portrayed in an opulent setting, this time with a languorous Samson draped across her lap in an intoxicated slumber. In this painting, too, the temptation to condemn the *femme fatale* as avaricious is great, for she is already wealthy enough. On the other hand, could it be that greed plays no role whatsoever? Does the painting in figure 6.1 suggest that betraying a man is simply something this kind of woman would do, that it is simply in her nature as *femme fatale*? If we take the painting to represent a time after the betrayal rather than before, then perhaps Delilah's opulent apparel is a sign of her ill-gained wealth. If she is contemplating the foul deed she has done, it is without the slightest trace of remorse, much like some of Moreau's paintings of Salome contemplating the head of John the Baptist. Regardless of whether the betrayal has already taken place or soon will, the depiction of the *femme fatale* in isolation conveys her availability to the male spectator in a more direct way than if Samson were with her, and, along with it, the allure and danger of female sexuality that could destroy him.

Two paintings by Rubens also perpetuate the image of Delilah as prostitute. In neither of them is she surrounded by the decadent

opulence of Moreau's Delilahs, but rather she looks as if she could use the money the Philistines offer her. In *Samson and Delilah* in the National Gallery in London (fig. 6.2), Delilah appears as a young prostitute in a rather tawdry brothel, whose dim lighting barely camouflages the dingy brown walls. Among the rather stock furnishings (a flaming brazier, heavy curtains, and a patterned Oriental carpet), a statue of Venus and Cupid in an alcove provides a bordello atmosphere. An old madam looks over Delilah's shoulder and holds a candle for the barber, who deftly snips off Samson's hair while he sleeps, apparently exhausted after spending his passion in arduous love-making. Amid the warm, rich hues that lend to the painting a feeling of sensuality, the stark whiteness of Delilah's face, shoulders, and large breasts catches the viewer's attention. The exposure of her breasts, 'some of the fleshiest [flesh] ever painted' according to the



Figure 6.2. Peter Paul Rubens, *Samson and Delilah*, reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London

6. *Why, Why, Delilah?*

193

*National Gallery Companion Guide*²² strikes me as rather gratuitous—a bid for the male gaze—but it does serve, along with the red dress she wears, to mark her as a harlot.

In addition to the presence of the madam and the barber, Philistine soldiers stand ready, if somewhat apprehensively, at the door. It is as if all these people have been waiting for this moment to rush onto the scene. Delilah, however, seems not to mind—or not really to notice—all the activity going on about her. Her attention is focused on Samson, at whom she looks down languidly, with something of an expression of tenderness on her face. Her hand rests almost affectionately upon his back. The painting thus suggests a reading of the story according to which, although she is 'doing her job', Delilah is actually rather fond of Samson. There seems to be, as in Rembrandt's *Bathsheba*, a humanizing of the woman that competes with the blanning of her. The intensity of their love-making is suggested by the position of Samson's body, the disheveled carpet and bedclothes, and Delilah's state of undress. Samson still lies partially upon Delilah, with his head in her lap and his hand resting on her lower abdomen. A modern example of reader response to the painting plays up suggestions both of a shared passionate intensity and of Delilah's affectionate disposition. In Paul Durcan's 'Samson and Delilah II',²³ one of a series of poems inspired by paintings in the National Gallery in London, the barber recounts what Delilah has whispered to him:

He make the big love...
He do the whole intercourse—
Not just middle
But beginning end middle.
He jump up, he jump down.
He carry me around room.
He put me down.
He caress me...
He wait for me until I am so far out
I think I am going to vanish my throat.

Another painting of Samson and Delilah by Rubens (fig. 6.3) represents a moment slightly later in the story, when Samson, his hair

22. Erika Langmuir, *The National Gallery Companion Guide* (London: National Gallery Publications, 1994), p. 240.

23. 'Talking Pictures', *The Independent Magazine*, 12 March 1994, p. 25 (the collection, *Give Me Your Hand* by Paul Durcan is published by Macmillan).

shorn, is set upon by the Philistine soldiers. Delilah is again depicted as a prostitute; the red bedclothes and curtains signify her profession. The old madam stands over her shoulder, and a dog and slippers, conventional symbols for sex, are in the foreground. It seems apparent from their positions on the bed and their state of undress that the couple has recently made love. Samson attempts to get up and 'shake [himself] free' from his captors, as in Judg. 16.20. Here even more of Delilah's fleshy flesh is exposed, though her left hand covers her genitals. Once again the woman's nakedness accuses her as 'loose' and as the activator of desire, and her ample white flesh, which as in fig. 6.2 sets her apart from the other figures in the painting, suggests perhaps a pampered life style. This Delilah is less sympathetic than the other. In this painting, she, and not a barber, has cut Samson's hair. She still holds the scissors in her hand. This makes it easier for viewers to hold her more accountable than the Delilah Rubens painted as watching passively and perhaps with regret.²⁴

The British artist Solomon Joseph Solomon, in a painting dating from around 1886 or 1887, also gives us a Samson and Delilah in a bordello setting, where, once again, the evidence indicates that the couple has made love (fig. 6.4). There is a great deal of erotic energy in this painting, not just in the *femme fatale's* pose and the muscular torso of Samson but also in the taut bodies of the men who are straining to restrain him. Why they too are so scantily clad is not

24. Accountability is not automatically decided by who does the cutting, but depends on other factors of the pose. Two paintings of this subject by Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) also follow the double tradition regarding who cut Samson's hair, but with Delilah's attitude seemingly the reverse of that in the Rubens paintings. In one, in the Dulwich Picture Gallery, Delilah, with her hand raised in front of her bare breasts as if cautioning quietness, looks on as a barber cuts Samson's hair. The procuress and another figure look over her shoulder, while the soldiers wait in the background. In the other painting, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Samson's hair has just been cut and the soldiers are seizing him, wrenching him as it were out of Delilah's arms. She holds out her arm as if reaching for him and their mutual looks of anguish suggest their attachment. But the scissors lie on the floor by the bed, where they appear to have fallen out of her hand—or perhaps she threw them aside. These variations show something of the wide range of feelings artists attributed to Delilah even when they depicted the same elements of the story. Reproductions of both paintings can be found in Solle *et al.*, *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Literature*, pp. 144, 146-47.



Figure 6.3. Peter Paul Rubens, *Gefangennahme Simsons*, Alte Pinakothek, Munich

clear (except, perhaps, to give the artist the opportunity to demonstrate his skill in representing anatomy). Should we take them as bordello patrons as well, or as the ambushers of Judg. 16.9 and 12 who are *posing* as bordello patrons in order to respond swiftly to Delilah's call? The number of men it takes to subdue Samson and their apparent difficulty convey a sense of his enormous strength. One can almost see the motion in the painting: Samson struggles against the men, who are actively gripping and pulling, other soldiers are busting in at the door, a table is about to crash to the floor, and delicate brush strokes give a blurring effect that makes us feel we are watching Delilah waving Samson's shorn locks.

Just by looking at her we know she is a prostitute and a *femme fatale*. Her bare breasts are provocatively exposed and accented both by her dark, disheveled hair and by the gaudy necklace she wears; her jewelry and gold-trimmed garment are vulgarly showy. She exudes sensuality. The furnishings are a mixture of the extravagant and

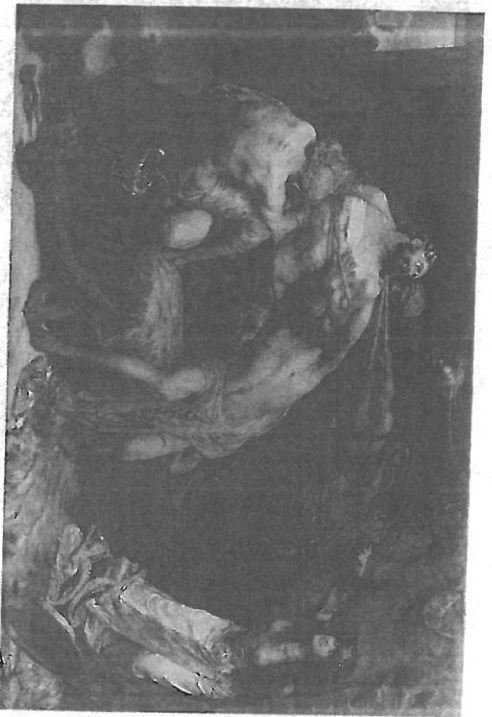


Figure 6.4. Solomon Joseph Solomon, *Samson, The Board of Trustees of the National Museums & Galleries on Menseyside*, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

tawdry; who but a *femme fatale* would have a tiger-skin rug in her boudoir? Samson looks at her with what strikes me as fear, and possibly even disbelief, more than accusation in his eyes, as if he only now realizes the *femme fatale*'s deadly danger, and she gazes back with a look of absolute will frenzy in her wide eyes. Waving his hair proudly before him like a trophy, a gesture that will be copied by the cinematic Delilah, she taunts him with his weakness. This Delilah has no affection for Samson, only contempt. This makes her an even more formidable *femme fatale*. She resembles Moreau's courtesan (fig. 6.1) both in physical appearance and in the impression she gives of being vain and unscrupulous—only she is more animated.²⁵ This is what we might imagine Moreau's Delilah to look like at her moment of victory over Samson.

From Prostitute to Wife to Cinematic Courtesan

Having considered the suggestiveness of the biblical account and the more explicit representation of Delilah as a prostitute in art, we might

25. She also looks a bit like pictures of Oscar Wilde in the title role of his play, *Salome*.

6. *Why, Why, Why, Delilah?*

197

ask at this point, What is achieved by making Delilah a prostitute? If she is a prostitute, we have less respect for her; and if we have less respect for her, we can more easily put all the blame for Samson's downfall on her. More important, casting Delilah as a prostitute is a way of controlling the danger she poses, for a prostitute has a clearly defined role within society and a circumscribed place within the patriarchal symbolic order. A prostitute poses less of a threat to a man than a woman from whom sex cannot be bought for money because the whole point of sex with a prostitute is sex without commitment and obligations, love without strings. A man can love them and leave them, as, interestingly, the biblical story of Samson illustrates rather well. There is only one time in the biblical story that Samson is clearly involved with a harlot. When the Philistines learn that Samson has gone to visit a harlot, they set an ambush for him ('let us wait until the light of the morning, then we will kill him', Judg. 16.2). Samson, however, leaves her in the middle of the night, taking his would-be ambushers by surprise, and escapes, carrying the city gates with him.

The text does not say who told the Philistines that Samson was in Gaza with a harlot.²⁶ Readers often assume that the woman informed them, on the grounds that the other two women, the Timnite and Delilah, both betray him to the Philistines.²⁷ The important difference, however, is that in this case Samson escapes unscathed from a Philistine trap. The Philistines succeed in getting the better of Samson only when they manage, by hook or by crook, to enlist a woman's help. Since the incident with the harlot does not end in a Philistine victory over Samson, we might conclude that it is precisely because the woman was *not* involved. In other words, the biblical account does not consider the harlot to be a threat. Only in the two cases where commitment is involved does Samson suffer defeat. Samson gave in to the other two women and disclosed his secrets to them out of love. The story provides an object lesson in the danger of love.

In terms of their tacit recognition of the danger of committed love, two of my metatexts, Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and Handel's oratorio

26. Even the verb, 'told', is lacking in the Masoretic text of 16.2, which reads defectively, 'To the Gazites, "Samson has come here"'.

27. Even so astute a reader as Bal, who warns against confusing the women, succumbs to the temptation to naturalize here, when speculating about the identity of the person who informed the Philistines of Samson's presence in Gaza: 'It is plausible to assume that it is the prostitute' (*Lethal Love*, p. 49).

based on it, are more akin to the biblical story than are the artistic representations of Delilah as a prostitute. They portray Delilah as Samson's wife. There is, of course, no more evidence in the biblical story that she is his wife than that she is a harlot; metatexts are simply filling a perceived gap when they clarify the relationship for their audiences. I am not suggesting that these metatexts represent a conscious reflection on the implications of love with commitment versus sex for sex's sake. They have a different agenda altogether.²⁸ Casting Delilah as Samson's wife is more an attempt to rehabilitate Samson than Delilah, for Samson the profligate has disappeared from the poem and the oratorio. The question then arises, What does becoming a 'respectable woman' do for Delilah? It can not render her any more dangerous, for in these versions of the story the damage has already been done, but it does underscore her ever-present danger. These metatexts begin almost at the point where the biblical story ends, with Samson in prison. If Delilah is to have a role in them at all, one has to be provided, since the seduction and betrayal scene has been eliminated and is referred to only in the dialogue. Making Delilah Samson's wife helps explain her (re)appearance to seek a reconciliation. More important, her appearance with another offer of temptation ('though sight be lost, / Life yet hath many solaces, enjoyed / Where other senses want not their delights, / At home, in leisure and domestic ease')²⁹ provides the opportunity to show that Samson has learned his lesson: he is able to resist her this time. The temptation scene is thus replayed, with the dangerous woman still plying all her deceptive charms, but this time without the duping of the hero.

In the cinematic version, Delilah is neither Samson's wife, as in the poem and the oratorio, nor a prostitute, as the paintings suggest. By the time she sets out to seduce him, in her lavish tent in the valley of Sorek, she is clearly the Saran's woman, and Samson knows it. His description of her as 'the great courtesan of Gaza' and 'the woman

28. John Guillory ('Dalia's House: *Samson Agonistes* and the Sexual Division of Labor', in *Reinventing the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe* [ed. Margaret Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy Vickers; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986], p. 108), who sees the conflict between Samson and Delilah in *Samson Agonistes* as a conflict between vocation and marriage, observes, 'For Milton, the cutting off of Samson's hair, not simply by a woman but by his wife, is the precise point of impact on the narrative of its historical conditions'.

29. Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 916-17.

6. *Why, Why, Delilah?*

199

that rules the ruler of the five cities' makes her sound infamous already, but since the Saran is the only man besides Samson with whom Delilah is involved, she hardly qualifies as a prostitute. Indeed, De Mille is subtle rather than explicit about her sexual relationship with the Saran. There are no sex scenes between Hedy Lamarr and George Sanders in the film; they never even kiss. At the same time, there is never a moment in the film when Delilah is not clearly aware of her sexual appeal. She is an independent woman, in control of her sexuality ('I have no husband', 'I have no master', she tells Samson). She decides when and to whom to grant her sexual favors. But her sexual freedom is something of an illusion, for she is really a one-man woman. 'You are all I want', she tells Samson. So why does she betray him?

The Problem of Motivation

The biblical Delilah betrays Samson for money. The simple acceptance of a bribe, which is all the biblical account gives us, has proved insufficient to clarify her motives to the satisfaction of readers. Over the centuries numerous reasons have been put forward to explain her deed, among them, avarice, patriotism, jealousy, and revenge. In some versions of the story, Delilah has been cast as the unknowing pawn of the Philistines, or even removed from blame altogether by having her sister betray Samson.³⁰ The popular identification of Delilah as a prostitute partially satisfies the need for motivation. A harlot can be bought for betrayal as well as for sex. No one expects fidelity from her. Already considered morally reprehensible, her nature is to dissemble. Both the outrageously decadent and confidently poised Delilah of Moreau's painting and the jeering vamp of Solomon's look like women devoid of moral scruples. In the paintings by Rubens, in contrast, there is nothing to suggest unambiguously that Delilah is either unfeeling or mercenary. In these paintings, the Philistine rulers who offer Delilah one thousand pieces of silver each are not repulsed. Does the presence of the old madam encourage viewers to replace them with her as the one who puts pressure on Delilah to betray Samson? Delilah seems to be working for her as much as for the Philistines. Might we not therefore imagine that she, and not Delilah, has made the deal to hand over Samson to them?

30. For a sketchy but interesting survey of some versions, see Solle et al., *Great Women of the Bible in Art and Literature*, pp. 142-45.

If prostitution can be said to provide Delilah with a motive for betraying Samson, the commonly assumed identification of Delilah as a Philistine suggests another, even stronger one. If Delilah is Philistine, we could conclude that she is patriotic. Why should she betray her own people by protecting Samson when offered the opportunity to perform a great national service? On the other hand, if she is patriotic, why is a bribe necessary? Perhaps she cares for Samson, or is interested in him sexually. Perhaps her loyalty to her people comes first and the payment is incidental, as Saint-Saëns would have us believe (see below).

In a long dialogue between Delilah and Samson in *Samson Agonistes*, Milton explores and rejects several explanations for the betrayal. The fact that he considers a variety of motives, if only to reject them, demonstrates the need to find compelling reasons for Delilah's behavior. The reader of the poem is given various possibilities to consider, through which Delilah becomes a fuller and, in many ways, more believable character. Some readers, especially resisting ones, may even find her sympathetic.³¹

The first explanation Milton has Delilah offer for her conduct is an appeal to the nature of woman. It is the same kind of argument that is often applied to the prostitute: if dissimulation is in her nature, her behavior is self-explanatory. Curiosity and not being able to keep a secret are 'both common female faults'; Milton's Delilah maintains, and Samson should therefore have known better than to trust a woman. The stereotype thus becomes the 'truth' about Delilah. She proceeds to justify what she has done by attributing it to jealousy, or possessive love. She believed that knowledge of Samson's secret would place him in her power, and that, if he were a captive of the Philistines, she would have no cause to fear that he might leave her for another woman (a theme the cinematic version exploits with verve). More important, she did not know that any real harm would come to him: 'I was assured by those / Who tempted me that nothing was designed / Against thee but safe custody and hold...' All this is, of course, her version of events. Though Milton gives Delilah a plausible case, he refutes it by privileging Samson's point of view, which

31. See the attention given to gender issues in John Guilly, 'Dalia's House', pp. 106-22; Virginia Mollenkott, 'Relativism in *Samson Agonistes*', *Studies in Philology* 67 (1970), pp. 89-102; John C. Ureich, Jr., 'Incident to All Our Sex': the Tragedy of Dalia', in *Milton and the Idea of Woman* (ed. Julia M. Walker; Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1968), pp. 185-210.

6. Why, Why, Why, Delilah?

201

his audience is also expected to privilege. Samson does not believe any of her excuses. He does not accept weakness as a motive, except insofar as it was 'weakness to resist Philistine gold'. He objects to her describing her possessive jealousy as 'love', insisting it was only 'furious rage to satisfy thy lust'.

The simple explanation that Delilah betrays Samson for money proves, for Milton as for most readers, unsatisfactory by itself. He thus furnishes her the rather convincing argument that, urged on by the Philistine leaders, she acted out of a sense of civil and religious loyalty. Delilah becomes all too human as she describes herself as torn between the rival claims of love versus patriotic and religious duty.

Only my love of thee held long debate,
And combated in silence all these reasons
With hard contest. At length, that grounded maxim,
So rife and celebrated in the mouths
Of wisest men, that to the public good
Private respects must yield, with grave authority
Took full possession of me and prevailed;
Virtue, as I thought, truth, duty, so enjoining (ll. 863-70).

Religion supplies a very believable motive (Delilah calls Samson an 'irreligious Dishonorer of Dagon'), but it rarely receives serious attention because, like Milton, most readers privilege Samson's god as the true god and reject Delilah's god as false. Discrediting Delilah's religion as 'superstition' is a way of discrediting her religious motivation; the betrayal of a follower of the true god by someone in the service of an idol hardly merits our admiration, only our scorn. Samson, who knows that her god is only an idol, remains unconvinced and rejects her suit.

Patriotism is also a believable motive. In her parting speech, Delilah entertains a vision of herself as a national hero—a Philistine Jael, remembered for deliv'ring her people from a tyrant:

My name, perhaps, among the circumcised
In Dan, in Judah, and the bordering tribes,
To all posterity may stand defamed,
With malediction mentioned, and the blot
Of falsehood most unconjugal traced.
But in my country, where I most desire,
In Ebron, Gaza, Asdod, and in Gath,
I shall be named among the famousest
Of women, sung at solemn festivals,

Living and dead recorded, who, to save
 Her country from a fierce destroyer, chose
 Above the faith of wedlock-bands, my tomb
 With odours visited and annual flowers.
 Not less renowned than in Mount Ephraim
 Jael, who, with inhospitable guile,
 Smote Sisera sleeping, through the temples nailed.
 Nor shall I count it heinous to enjoy
 The public marks of honour and reward
 Conferred upon me for the piety
 Which to my country I was judged to have shown (ll. 975-94).

Her speech is so passionate that some readers might find her behavior laudable if it were not in the service of the wrong people and a false god.³² The honors Delilah speaks of are honors she never receives, but perhaps only because the story is never told from the Philistines' point of view. Even the brief glimpse of their point of view given to us in the Bible leaves her out: the Philistines celebrate their victory by singing, 'Our god has given Samson our enemy into our hand' (16.23) and 'Our god has given our enemy into our hand' (16.24). It is important to keep in mind, however, that this is the Israelite storyteller's version of the Philistine point of view. That the biblical narrator does not let her compatriots praise Delilah is not without significance. Is she really not of interest, or does she need to be ignored in order to underplay her importance?

The comparison that Milton's Delilah draws between herself and Jael, which could lead to an alternative, more laudatory version of Delilah's story, is, interestingly, omitted from Newburgh Hamilton's libretto for Handel's *Samson*, which is based on *Samson Agonistes*. For an audience acquainted with Handel's *Deborah*, in which Jael's praises are roundly sung, the comparison to Jael could easily be seen as favorable to Delilah.³³ In general, Handel and Hamilton's Delilah is a flatter

32. Samson, Milton's spokesperson, does not. According to Barbara K. Lewalski ('Milton on Women—Yet Again', in *Problems for Feminist Criticism* [ed. Sally Munnage, London: Routledge, 1990], p. 64), his response, in which he denies ultimate authority to civil and religious leaders, has 'all the polemic of the English civil war echoing in the background'. On the political significance of *Samson Agonistes*, see Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Toward Samson Agonistes: The Growth of Milton's Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 167-79.

33. Deborah was first performed in 1733, and Samson in 1741; the order in which one listens to the oratorios, however, does not affect my point.

character than Milton's, and her motivation receives less elaboration.³⁴ Curiosity and the inability to keep secrets are collapsed into one female fault, curiosity 'greedy of secrets but to publish them', and Delilah's jealous love becomes her primary motive: 'Fearless at home of partners in my love, / 'T was jealousy did prompt to keep you there / Both day and night, Love's pris'ner, wholly mine'. What in Milton was a clear protest on her part that she was ignorant of what the Philistines would do to Samson becomes in *Samson* a mere suggestion ('Alas! th' event was worse than I foresaw') that could be lost on anyone who does not know its basis in *Samson Agonistes*. Religion and patriotism are not specifically invoked, which leaves the impression that what most motivates women is emotional attachment to a man.³⁵

Motivation lacks all complexity in Saint-Saëns's opera, *Samson et Dalila*, which features a single-minded Delilah whose sheer hatred of Samson and desire for vengeance are never too well explained. We can only assume that Samson's victories over the Philistines drove her to avenge 'her god, her people, and her hatred'. Here too, significantly, the simple motive of betrayal for money is rejected in favor of something else. It is as if librettist Ferdinand Lemaire felt that Delilah needed strong emotions to make her a powerful stage presence, and so he made her vengeful. Greed is too weak a motive for this Delilah, who does not care about the money at all:

Qu'importe à Dalila ton or!
 Et que pourrait tout un trésor
 Si je ne rêvais de vengeance!

[What matters your gold to Delilah?
 And what would avail an entire treasure
 were I not dreaming of vengeance?]

34. The scene between Samson and Delilah is not short, but greater musical attention is given to a rather charming duet between Delilah and one of her virgins, with a reprise by a chorus of virgins, on the theme, 'Her faith and truth, O Samson, prove, But hear her, hear the voice of love!', and a memorable duet between Delilah and Samson, 'Traitor to love! I'll sue no more / Traitor to love! I'll hear no more'.

35. Handel's *Samson*, like Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, nonetheless has a political message. On some of the differences between Hamilton's libretto and Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and their political significance, see Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 292-99.