

Why does Delilah hate Samson so much? At best, her statement about 'aveng[ing] her god, her people, and her hatred' points to religion and nationalism as having a role, and the fact that she is cast as a Philistine priestess lends further support to a religious motive. But in the end, as happens in opera, it is the music that conveys the emotion, and, as I suggested above, Saint-Saëns's music gives Delilah greater depth than she has in the libretto.

Delilah's motive is similarly single-minded yet anything but clear-cut in Cecil B. De Mille's Oscar-winning epic, *Samson and Delilah*. Hedy Lamarr as Delilah has top billing over Victor Mature. Lamarr's character is clearly the more interesting and complex of the pair, with Victor Mature seeming almost as simplistic as the biblical character he plays. Promoting his star gave De Mille the opportunity for developing and exploring Delilah's character. He shows us a woman acting out of a complex, volatile mix of love, desire for revenge, hate, and jealousy. Not one to leave the audience guessing, however, he offers enough guidance throughout the film to establish that it all comes down to one thing: Delilah is motivated by love—but a love so obsessive it must destroy and be destroyed by the object of its desire in order to obtain it. Because De Mille's Delilah is such an impressive creation, outrageous but still convincing, and because his film is so brilliant, not just as cinema but as interpretation, I want to consider motivation in *Samson and Delilah* at length. For the benefit of readers who may not be that familiar with the film, I shall try to provide enough description for my remarks to have a meaningful context.

Film's Femme Fatale and Her Motivation

Who is Delilah? How does Samson meet her? *Samson and Delilah* begins by answering questions that held no interest for the biblical narrator. But this background is essential for establishing her motivation in the cinematic version. As in Vladimir Jabotinsky's *Samson*, one of its primary source texts, the screenplay by Jesse Lasky, Jr, and Fredric Frank makes Delilah the younger sister of Samson's Timnite bride. She is thus identified with the 'little sister' of the biblical account who is offered to Samson by his father-in-law in place of his bride, who has been given to another ('Is not her little sister fairer than she? Take her instead', Judg. 15.2). When Samson comes to visit Semadar, the Philistine woman he wants to marry (played by a golden-haired,

youngful Angela Lansbury), we get our first glimpse of Delilah. She is perched provocatively on the garden wall, nibbling plums and tossing plum pits at Samson (as with Gregory Peck's grapes in *David and Bathsheba*, there is an implicit connection between sex and food as gratification). Already Delilah has her hungry eye on Samson, and from the outset she plots and schemes to get him, regardless of who gets hurt in the process. Having Samson kill the lion is her idea ('If you killed the lion, they'd call you great'), and she steals the family chariot to enable Samson to reach the lion ahead of the Saran and his entourage (Samson's biblical chance fight with the lion has been turned into a lion hunt). To her surprise, Samson chooses her sister Semadar rather than her as his prize for killing the lion. But Delilah does not accept rejection. Ever.

What, in the biblical story, is a series of chance occurrences, reprisals, and counter-reprisals that Samson gets caught up in before he ever meets Delilah becomes, in the film, a plot driven by Delilah's cunning, single-minded determination to obtain the object of her desire. She proposes inviting thirty Philistine warriors as wedding guests, knowing that it will cause trouble. She advises them that the way to find out the answer to Samson's riddle is through his bride. When Samson rushes off in a fury to get the thirty garments to pay off his debt, Delilah gives her father the idea to marry off Semadar to the best man—all to prevent Samson's marriage to Semadar so that Samson can be hers. When Samson returns to pay his debt, and claim his bride, Delilah is more than willing to take her sister's place. But Samson does not want a 'thorn bush'. Oblivious not only to the fact that he does not want her but also to any other feelings he might have, such as shame at being dishonored and heartache at losing Semadar, Delilah bursts into a declaration of her obsessive love that hides nothing of the lengths to which it has driven her:

Did a thorn bush steal the chariot that took you to the lion? Did a thorn bush tell the Saran how you killed it with your bare hands? No, I did. And he believed me. Then you chose Semadar... I made Arrour steal the secret of the riddle from Semadar. I lied to stop you from marrying her. I'd kill to keep you. You're the only thing in the world I want.³⁶

36. Samson interrupts her where I have ellipses in the citation to exclaim, 'Take your claws out of me'. 'You'll never get them out of you', she announces before continuing her tirade, and the audience knows what these words portend.

This is clearly a dangerous kind of love and a dangerous woman, and even the otherwise rather obtuse Samson seems to sense it when he says to her father, 'And you want me to marry this wildcat?' Undaunted, she clutches at him: 'If you crushed the life out of me, I'd kiss you with my dying breath.' This is not the last we will hear of this theme.

When Samson repays the Philistines with 'fire for fire and death for death' and she watches all she has go up in flames, Delilah vows revenge. Shaking her clenched fist at the heavens, she swears, 'If it takes all my life, I'll make him curse the day he was born'. Has her love for Samson turned to hatred? When we next see her, she has conquered the heart of another man, the Saran, chief ruler of the Philistines. When she learns of Samson's capture at Lehi, she proposes to the Saran that Samson be made to turn the gristmill, 'whipped and driven like an animal, where all Gaza can mock him and laugh at him', a foreshadowing of what will happen to him later. The very mention of Samson's name arouses in her such strong emotion that the Saran can see his powerful hold over her, and this is not lost on the audience either. Later, when news arrives of Samson's victory over their army at Lehi, with only the jawbone of an ass as a weapon, the Philistine rulers are at a loss. Upon hearing them bemoan the impossibility of capturing a man with such superhuman strength, Delilah volunteers to discover its secret source. In the cinematic version, unlike the biblical account, the betrayal is her idea, and revenge her stated motive: 'When my father and sister lay dead in the ashes of our home, because of Samson, he laughed at my tears.³⁷ You cannot refuse me, my lord', she tells the Saran. For some reason, however, perhaps the fact that she protests too much, we cannot quite believe her when she tells the Saran 'I go to destroy your enemy and mine' and 'my love is only for you'. Nor can he. He voices our doubts: 'A man who could stop the heart of a lion might stir the heart of a woman'.

Love? Hate? Revenge? Only when we see Samson and Delilah together again can we begin to appreciate how complex a web of motivation De Mille has provided for his Delilah. The seduction scene is set in a splendid oriental tent by a pool, beside the ruins of a

37. Since the film does not show this (and Samson is off burning Philistine fields while Delilah watches everything go up in smoke), we might wonder if Delilah is making it up.

temple. Delilah has camped with her caravan in the valley of Sorek, waiting for Samson, the renegade, to plunder her tent. Tall palm trees cast their shadows against a star-strudded dark blue sky as the soft strains of music fill the (what one imagines as scented) air. Not knowing whose tent it is, Samson sneaks in to steal. Seeing the form of a woman behind a diaphanous curtain, he tells her not to cry out. 'I won't', she answers, 'are you afraid?' 'Of a woman', he pauses, 'yes'. And well he should be, as Delilah puts her seductive arts into action. Samson is almost, but not quite, the fool he is in the biblical version. Although he recognizes what is going on—'The oldest trick in the world, a silk trap baited with a woman'—he falls for it. The *femme fatale* is irresistible. Moreover, she knows it: 'Do you know a better bait, Samson? Men always respond.' Her forward speech is part of her seductive trap. When he asks why the Saran has used her as bait, she admits she asked to come because 'I knew you would yield to any other woman'. Has she therefore come to save him from a trap? he wants to know. 'No, I came to betray you.'

At the beginning of the seduction and betrayal scene, Delilah is behind a curtain and holds a veil over her face. Both curtain and veil signify the woman's dissimulation,³⁸ yet there is both dissembling and forthrightness in this scene. As in the biblical account, Delilah does not hide her intention to betray Samson. Having told him she came to betray him, she is not afraid. 'You could crush me between these two hands, why don't you? I told you once I'd kiss you with my dying breath', she says, referring to the time her father offered her to him and he rejected her. On the other hand, we have reason to doubt that betrayal is really her intention. Everything she says and does testifies to her intense desire to possess Samson, to have him for herself, not to turn him over to the Philistine rulers. As he prepares to leave, she blocks his way and proclaims, 'You're all I want'—again an echo of what she said on that earlier occasion ('you're the only thing in the world I want')—and she looks at him with such adoration and longing and speaks with such fervor that we, the audience, feel sure we must be back in the presence of the obsessively-in-love Delilah, and, in fact, have been there all along.

They spend some happy days together, during which she tries to discover his secret, but his secret does not seem to be her primary

38. See Mary Ann Doane, 'Veiling over Desire: Close-ups of the Woman', Chapter 3 in her *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 44–75.

interest. She seems to be enjoying her assignment too much. De Mille uses her interest in the source of Samson's strength to highlight the possessive nature of Delilah's love. 'What would you do if you—knew the secret of my strength?', Samson asks. 'Bind you,' she replies. 'Why?' 'So you could never leave me.' Here she resembles Milton's and Handel's Delilah, who wants to make Samson the prisoner of her love. She is not jealous of any specific rival, but rather jealously possessive of Samson in general. A rival will arrive soon enough, in the form of Miriam, the wholesome girl-next-door, who provides a safe but uninteresting alternative to the *femme fatale*.³⁹

In the meantime, however, Delilah decides to break off the relationship because Samson does not love her enough to trust her with his secret. The question arises whether this is simply a ploy or an expression of her true feelings. Having earlier passed up two opportunities to have Delilah as his bride (first when he chose Semadar as his prize for killing the lion, and then when he refused to accept Delilah in Semadar's place), Samson now asks her to marry him. He is about to reveal his secret to her, when she puts her hands over his mouth and declares, 'No, Samson, no. I don't want to be armed with a weapon to destroy you.' Should we believe her? Like Delilah in Saint-Saëns's opera, she sounds so convincing that it is hard to see her as insincere. Why would she call it a weapon otherwise? Samson wonders, too. 'It wouldn't be a weapon if you really loved me,' he protests. But that remains to be seen.

After he tells her that his strength comes from his hair, there is a moment when Delilah's mood seems to take a sudden, cruel turn. 'Shall I pull it out and steal your power?', she chides as she wraps his dark, curly hair around her fingers and tugs at it. To a certain extent, her remarks about being armed with a weapon to destroy him and stealing his strength keep the audience guessing about Delilah's true motive, thus building on the mystery of the *femme fatale*. When

39. DeMille also uses the 'good woman versus temptress' motif in *The Ten Commandments*, where Moses finds inner beauty in his wife Sephora (actually the rather beautiful Yvonne de Carlo) to match the charms of the seductive siren Nefetiri (played by the gorgeous Anne Baxter). It is difficult not to compare De Mille's biblical temptresses. Each of them openly desires the hero, Moses or Samson, and offers herself to him. Neither too good nor too bad, each is driven by obsession (Nefetiri even kills to protect Moses). Like Nefetiri, Delilah has an opposite in the 'homeown girl'. Like Nefetiri, she loses him not to this other woman, of whom she is so jealous, but to his higher mission, his calling, his people, and his god.

Samson answers that 'You can't steal what's yours already', her mood again rapidly changes, this time to one of wistfulness. She asks him to come away with her to Egypt, away from the conflict between their peoples, to a place where they will no longer be Danite and Philistine but simply Samson and Delilah. Her love is everlasting: 'For all eternity nothing can ever take you out of my arms'. At that moment, Miriam, the hometown girl, shows up, with the young boy Saul (who is destined to become Israel's first king). They have come to bring Samson back to his people, who need him to deliver them from Philistine persecution. Now Delilah's jealousy has a specific object: 'I cannot fight against his god', she tells Miriam, 'but no woman will take him from me'. She invites Samson to drink with her a farewell cup of wine, which she has drugged. As a *femme fatale* whose desire is all-consuming, she would rather destroy him than risk losing him. Miriam will give her one more opportunity to express this jealousy later, in the temple scene, when she comes to beg for Samson's life and Delilah refuses: 'I'd rather see him dead than in your arms'.

De Mille keeps the focus on Delilah's excessive, obsessive jealousy as the betrayal scene reaches its conclusion. Waving Samson's hair in his face as Delilah does in Solomon's painting, she mocks her helpless captive: 'I've taken away your strength, Samson. Your little Danite sparrow will nest alone.' When Samson hears about the money and curses the name 'Delilah', she pronounces the film's definitive revelation about her feelings and her motive:

I could have loved you with a fire to make all other loves seem like ice. I would have gone with you to Egypt, left everything behind, lived only for you. But one call from that milk-faced Danite lily and you run whining at her heels.

Once before, when Samson turned down the chance to marry her, Delilah confessed her love of Samson and described the ends to which it drove her. Then she spoke, as she does here, out of anger at being rejected and she told him she would kill to have him. Now, when at last he *wants* to marry her, she perceives his leaving with Miriam as a rejection, and her response is to destroy him. Both confessions of love reveal how dangerous her obsession is. Ironically, even though this time he does not reject her—on the contrary, he says he will come to her in Egypt—she cannot see it as anything else. She concludes this second confession with a finishing touch worthy of the *femme fatale*: 'No man leaves Delilah'.

As the above discussion indicates, De Mille uses every possible explanation to lend complexity to Delilah's motivation. He takes her through the gamut of motives: love, revenge, hate, jealousy. The only motive he underplays is greed. Delilah volunteers to discover the secret source of Samson's strength, but the idea to do it for payment appears to be an afterthought, for the first reward she asks for is simply the Saran's favor.⁴⁰ She comes up with her outrageous price when the Philistine leaders patronize her by asking if she wants some bauble as a reward. The other motives—hate, revenge, and jealousy—are but manifestations of her obsessive love. De Mille emphasizes obsession as her overriding motive in two ways. One is by means of the you-could-kill-me-and-I-would-still-love-you motif ('If you crushed the life out of me, I'd kiss you with my dying breath'; 'I told you once I'd kiss you with my dying breath'). The motif appears a third time at the end of the film, when, unable to bear the thought of his suffering any longer, Delilah goes to Samson in the granary. When he threatens to kill her if she comes close to him (as in Milton's poem and Handel's oratorio), and she offers herself willingly—'I am here; I will not cry out—we see that she meant what she said.

De Mille's other strategy for conveying his message about the nature of Delilah's love is using the unflappable George Sanders, as the Saran, to provide a kind of reliable narratorial commentary on events. It is Sanders, for example, who observes wryly, 'one tax collector is worth a thousand soldiers', 'the weak always band together to pull down the strong', and, of Samson, 'he'll not kneel to any god but his own'.⁴¹ But his most important lines are about Delilah's attachment to Samson. 'I'm jealous of your hatred. Don't share even that with anyone else', he tells her when she speaks of wanting to see Samson humbled. What is intimated here is spelled out clearly when, after the betrayal, Delilah says that her greatest reward was in serving her king. The Saran's reply is a clichéd but vital insight into her motive: 'Men have been betrayed by love. Love and hate are but two

40. 'Such devotion is touching but what will you gain from his capture?', asks the Saran after Delilah volunteers to discover Samson's secret. 'My lord's favor', replies Delilah. 'But you have that. Is that all you want?', he asks again. She pauses for a moment, as if thinking (and perhaps intuiting that her first answer was too transparent), says 'No', and then lights upon the idea of silver.

41. Also, 'Like all soldiers, when you fail by the sword, you ask for more swords', 'No man with eyes could resist you, Delilah, but only a fool would trust you.'

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sides of the same coin.' Finally, in the film's closing scene in the temple, the Saran lets Delilah decide whether or not to hand over the blinded Samson to Miriam. When she refuses, the Saran's response captures perfectly the film's ultimate verdict on the *femme fatale*: 'Your mercy is like your love, Delilah—ruthless.'

De Mille uses the Saran not just as a commentator but also as a counterpart to Delilah, a kind of rational male alternative to her irrational female passion.⁴² Whereas her jealousy burns hot, his is cool and dispassionate. He is realistic, and even open-minded; his jealousy of Samson does not lead him to curtail her freedom. The Saran agrees to let Delilah serve as bait to discover Samson's secret because, he philosophizes, 'As a king, I have no choice. As a man, I am letting you leave because you want to.' Delilah, in contrast, does not respect Samson's freedom, and because she will not let him go, she destroys him. The Saran allows Delilah the right to choose, even when it means he will lose her. In the temple scene, unable to bear Samson's humiliation any longer, Delilah says she will go to him in the arena. 'If you go to him, you cannot return to me', the Saran warns her, and then sits by and watches her walk away.

In weaving a complex web of motivation for Delilah, De Mille also exploits the 'she is duped by the Philistines' theme. Before she goes to entice Samson into revealing his secret, Delilah extracts from the Saran a promise that 'no drop of his blood shall be shed; no blade shall touch his skin'. She does not know about the blinding, and discovers it only later, when she reluctantly accompanies the Saran to the granary, where Samson slaves at the mill. Her initial response is, 'He's magnificent, even in chains', but then, when she sees that he is blind, she is devastated. Not even trying to conceal her distress, she accuses the Saran of deceiving her by playing with words, to which he replies, 'It was you who betrayed him, not I'. When she complains that he showed no mercy to a helpless captive, he also has a ready answer: 'Did you show him mercy, Delilah? You wanted vengeance. You have it.'

42. But does the effete, non-athletic George Sanders not really qualify as a man's man? He is certainly not macho like Victor Mature's Samson, but actually he is a wise ruler and not really such a bad fellow at all, in spite of being a Philistine.

Lack of Closure

Just as readers are not satisfied with the Bible's simple report of a bribe offered and accepted, so also we perceive the lack of closure in the biblical story of Samson and Delilah as unsatisfactory. We want to know not only why she did it but also what happened to her afterwards. Did Delilah suffer remorse? Most people would like to think so. Did she live a long and happy life as a Philistine national hero? Why are we less likely to be drawn to this possibility? Does it have something to do with accepting the ideology of the text that privileges Israelite over Philistine? Is it a reluctance to make the woman the subject of the story? Is it simply our aversion to betrayal?⁴³ Our desire to see the bad woman pay for her perfidy? Metatexts satisfy our desire to hear more about Delilah by bringing her back. The desire to know what happened to Delilah is often a desire to see her punished, by, for example, dying in the destruction of the temple, although the biblical account does not mention her being there. The temptation to see her among the thousands of spectators who are killed when Samson pulls down the temple (Judg. 16:27) is so great that even some biblical commentators entertain it.

In Saint-Saëns's opera *Delilah* is brought back on the scene after the betrayal in order to have her die in the temple. She and the chief priest ridicule Samson for falling into her trap, urging him to entertain them by repeating to her his tender avowals of love. They revile his god and give thanks and glory to Dagon. As they stand before the sacrificial offer, awaiting an epiphany, they get one vastly different from what they anticipate: Samson, empowered by his god, pulls down the temple upon them all. In the operatic version of the story, in which Delilah appears so calculating and callous, we somehow feel

43. I suspect the answer has more to do with readers' political and gender ideology than with betrayal per se. At least this is the case with biblical commentators. Samson is also betrayed by *his own people*, the Judaites, in this story (Judg. 15:9-13), but they are not usually censured, probably because they do it under duress (but the same could be said of Samson's Timnite wife, yet she is blamed). In the book of Judges, Ehud is usually praised by commentators for his clever deception and murder of Eglon, the enemy king. Jael too receives acclaim (Judg. 4-5), but in the woman's case, commentators have reservations about the way she carries out the deed against the unsuspecting enemy.

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she gets what she deserves. Not so when the temple comes crashing down in the cinematic version, where Delilah is Samson's accomplice, not his unwitting victim.

Delilah is not brought back to be part of the temple massacre (which takes place offstage) in either Milton's *Samson Agonistes* or Handel's *Samson*; as in the biblical version, the silence of these metatexts leaves us in the dark about her fate. Nevertheless, bringing her back after the betrayal achieves a kind of closure, though the question still haunts us. Does she regret her deed? She says as much, but Samson rejects her version of events. *Samson Agonistes* and *Samson*, as we have seen, bring Delilah back to sue her blinded, embittered husband for forgiveness and reconciliation. When Samson rejects her various self-justifications, she does not abandon her suit, but presses on, offering to take him home with her and care for him, and promising him insofar as possible to atone for her wrongful deed. This is Milton's version:

Afford me place to show what recompense
Towards thee I intend for what I have misdone,
... though sight be lost,
Life yet hath many solaces, enjoyed
Where other senses want not their delights,
At home, in leisure and domestic ease ...
I to the lords will intercede, not doubting
Their favourable ear, that I may fetch thee
From forth this loathsome prison-house, to abide
With me, where my redoubled love and care,
With nursing diligence, to me glad office,
May ever tend about thee to old age
With all things grateful cheered, and so supplied
That what by me thou hast lost thou least shalt miss
(*Samson Agonistes*, ll. 910-11, 914-17, 920-27).

In Handel's oratorio this speech becomes a charming duet, evoking the cooing of turtledoves,⁴⁴ sung by Delilah and the virgins who attend her. Delilah urges Samson to adopt a *carpe diem* attitude and savor what pleasures he can from life.

44. She begins her plea by comparing herself to a turtledove left alone, who burns with doubled raptures when her absent mate returns.

Dallia

My faith and truth, O Samson, prove,
But hear me, hear the voice of love!
With love no mortal can be cloy'd
All happiness is love enjoy'd.

Virgin

Her faith and truth, O Samson, prove,
But hear her, hear the voice of love!

Chorus of Virgins

Her faith and truth, O Samson, prove,
But hear her, hear the voice of love!

Dallia

To fleeting pleasures make your court,
No moment lose, for life is short!
The present now's our only time
The missing that our only crime.

Chorus of Virgins

Her faith and truth, O Samson, prove,
But hear her, hear the voice of love!

Dallia

How charming is domestic ease!
A thousand ways I'll strive to please
Life is not lost, though lost your sight;
Let other senses taste delight.

Chorus of Virgins

Her faith and truth, O Samson, prove,
But hear her, hear the voice of love!

In both *Samson Agonistes* and *Samson*, Samson rejects her appeal as insincere. In *Samson Agonistes*, but not in *Samson*, he claims that she would only mistreat him if he were helpless in her power.

How wouldst thou use me now, blind, and thereby
Deceivable, in most things as a child
Helpless, thence easily contemned and scorned,
And last neglected? How wouldst thou insult,
When I must live uxorious to thy will
In perfect thralldom, how again betray me,
Bearing my words and doings to the lords
To gloss upon, and, censuring, frown or smile?
This jail I count the house of liberty
To thine, whose doors my feet shall never enter

(*Samson Agonistes*, ll. 941–50).

In both poem and oratorio, he will not even let her approach to touch his hand, fearing his anger might lead him to tear her limb from limb.

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He forgives her at a distance, while shunning reconciliation.

The closure offered by Milton and, following him, Handel is a closure to the relationship for Samson. On the one hand, he does not go to his death bearing a grievance (and this makes him, as Christian tradition sometimes portrayed him, more Christ-like). On the other hand, we can see that he has come to understand the folly of his ways and his failure to live up to his calling. He has learned his lesson, something sinners do well to do, and, having paid dearly for the folly of trusting a woman's deceptive ways, he does not make the same mistake again. As for the woman, Delilah leaves the story when her plea for reconciliation is rejected. Her side of the story and her vision of a possible future together vie with Samson's, but since Samson's is the privileged version, it is the one readers and listeners are most likely to accept.⁴⁵ We tend to think he is right not to trust her again. Indeed, it might strike us as unreasonable for her to think he could forgive her, not just for the betrayal but also and especially for the darkness he must forever endure (it bears recalling, however, that she claims not to have known in advance about the blinding). But is it any more unreasonable for Samson to forgive Delilah than for an abused wife to agree to reconciliation to her abusive husband? Such was God's expectation in the examples of prophetic pornography we examined in Chapter 4. Commentators on that relationship did not find the idea of reconciliation unreasonable or unrealistic. Why, then, should it be unimaginable here? The double standard works effectively to privilege the divine and the male point of view. If we were to privilege Delilah's point of view instead, we would need to read Milton and hear Handel differently.

The chorus in *Samson Agonistes* provides us with the authorial judgment (in the oratorio, this is done by Micah, a character who does not appear in the poem): 'She's gone, a manifest serpent by her sting/ Discovered in the end, till now concealed'. Closure for these metatexts involves punishing Delilah by exposing her as a hypocrite, whose deceptive wiles Samson is able to resist this time. Moreover, the closure they offer moves beyond a concern with Samson and Delilah to draw a moral about all womankind. The chorus offers a

45. In the oratorio their competing versions are well captured in the duet, 'Traitor to love!/Traitor to love!', where they seem to be vying for the moral high ground. But this is followed by Micah's definitive evaluative judgment, 'She's gone! a serpent manifest: her sting/ Discovered in the end.'

long commentary (shorter in the oratorio) on the enigma of woman and the treacherous mixture in women of physical beauty, lack of judgment, self-love, and mischief. It is the lucky man indeed 'who finds One virtuous'. Just as Milton had Delilah begin her defense with an appeal to the natural frailty of women, he achieves a closure of sorts (followed by Handel-Hamilton) by having the chorus end with a description of woman's fickle nature. Women are seductive and dangerous, and it is therefore in the interest of society that women be subordinate to men and their behavior controlled. Indeed, justification for this state of affairs is inscribed in the very order of creation itself:

Therefore God's universal law
Gave to the man despotic power
Over his female in due awe...

The closure we seek for the story of Delilah and Samson can be discovered in the paintings we looked at as well. In Rubens's painting of Samson and Delilah (fig. 6.2), for example, the old madam's face is just above Delilah's and there is a noticeable similarity between the profiles. The conclusion drawn by the author of the *National Gallery Companion Guide*, that the juxtaposition 'reveals [the procuress's] own past and suggests Delilah's future',⁴⁶ is a form of closure. It suggests that the large sum of money the Philistines are supposed to have paid for Samson's secret plays no role; at least it makes no difference in Delilah's life. It also envisions a 'suitable punishment' in store for Delilah: she will spend all her days working in a brothel, with no option but to become a procuress herself when her youth and beauty are gone (a cruel punishment that could be compared to the one intended for Samson: spending the rest of his life grinding at the mill).

A different but significant kind of closure is provided by the popular song to which I referred at the beginning of this chapter. As I noted above, the song is not about the biblical Samson and Delilah. It does, however, deal with the same subject as the biblical story, a woman's betrayal of a man who loves her. The themes of love, jealousy, betrayal and death, together with the use of the name 'Delilah' for the treacherous woman, provide enough of a connection for us to regard the song 'Delilah' as a popular commentary on

the biblical story and to ask what happens if we pursue its logic in the light of the biblical story. From outside the woman's house at night, the singer sees the shadows of Delilah and another man on the shade. A jealous rage comes over him ('She was my woman. As she deceived me I watched and went out of my mind'). He waits until the man leaves at daybreak. When Delilah opens the door and sees him, she makes a fatal mistake: she laughs. 'I felt the knife in my hand and she laughed no more', he tells us. The refrain, 'My, my, my Delilah; why, why, why, Delilah?', suggests that the song is about her motivation, and, indeed, he does want to know why, in a rhetorical sort of way. In reality, however, the song is about his motivation, being laughed at in addition to being deceived: 'I just couldn't take any more', he repeats in the refrain, as he asks her to forgive him before they come to take him away.

I take this song as a variation on the Samson-Delilah fabula and propose seeing it as Samson's revenge. It satisfies our need to have Delilah punished. The woman betrays the man, but he does not die as a result. Instead he kills her. The betrayer dies and not the betrayed, as in the biblical story, and this is more satisfying. (We are left with the impression that he will be punished, but the song itself is about her death, not his punishment. Perhaps he will get off with a light sentence, as men who kill women for sexual infidelity have throughout history.) Another telling variation on the biblical version is that the crime here is not the woman's betrayal of a secret, but rather a sexual betrayal with another man. This reflects the popular notion that Delilah's betrayal in the Bible has to do with sex. Unlike what we (do not) know in the case of the biblical Delilah, the singer who stands in for Samson is sorry for what he has done—in any event, he asks for forgiveness. In spite of significant differences from the biblical account, the fatal attraction of woman still lurks in the background of the song. It is the woman's fault that the man got into trouble over her in the first place: 'I could see that girl was no good for me, but I was lost like a slave that no man could free'. The irresistible attraction of the *femme fatale* and the feelings of intense jealousy she arouses in him are the man's undoing in this song—not to mention hers.

Closure in the film *Samson and Delilah* is handled in much the same way as motivation. De Mille pulls out all the stops in this biblical spectacle; there is forgiveness, reconciliation, and he even has Delilah die in the temple too. What more could an audience wish for? A love

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

story, perhaps? We have it, and what a love story!

Classical Hollywood cinema of the forties and fifties typically dealt with the 'bad woman' in one of two ways: she was investigated and punished (usually she died in the end) or she was investigated and saved (she became a 'good girl').⁴⁷ De Mille does both for Delilah. Her death serves as punishment for her crime; she does not, as she proposed to do in the granary scene, go off with Samson to Egypt to live happily ever after. It is a punishment she accepts: 'I will not be afraid', she tells Samson when he warns her that death will enter the temple. De Mille's 'redemption' of Delilah is a *tour de force* that makes the story of Samson and Delilah into a love story for all time. Delilah, in effect, converts. She prays to Samson's god, and ends up being that god's instrument in Samson's final victory over the Philistines.

When Delilah discovers that, in keeping with the letter but not the spirit of her agreement with the Saran, Samson has been blinded, her love for Samson is evident. De Mille's mouthpiece, the Saran, tells her, 'There can be only one master in a kingdom or a woman's heart. Until you saw him like this, you could not forget him.' The audience, along with the Saran, has sensed all along that Samson is the master of Delilah's heart. 'Forget him', she says plaintively, as if she could, and we know only too well she cannot. When she insists that the guilt is not wholly hers ('No, I did not blind him'), the Saran replies, 'You cannot undo what has been done'. In the following scene, however, Delilah wakes up from her recurrent nightmare in which Samson endlessly turns the millstone, the phrase 'you cannot undo what has been done' echoing in her head, and cries out, 'I can, I can'. Distracted ('I'm being crushed like the grain beneath the stone') and weeping, she prays: 'O God of Samson, help me! He said you are everywhere, that you are almighty. Hear me! Give back the light of his eyes and take my sight for his. O God of Samson, help me! De Mille encourages us to feel sympathy for Delilah. She is genuinely repentant and would gladly undo what she has done. She goes to the granary to seek Samson's forgiveness and to beg him to go away with her to the valley of the Nile, where they can be together. When she enters, Samson is praying, and as the scene proceeds we realize that Delilah is the answer to his prayer. That she truly loves him, and he her, is borne out by their (under the circumstances)

47. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 21-26; and see the discussion of film's *femme fatale* below.

romantic exchange, and by her third confession of love, vastly different from her earlier angry outbursts: 'All I want is to comfort you... Won't you believe I would give my life to undo what I have done.' When he accuses her of selling his sight, she pleads, 'I would endure your hatred, Samson, if it would bring back your sight. Let me be your eyes.' When he says that 'through all the long darkness I prayed that you'd be delivered into my hands', she answers simply, 'I am here. I will not cry out.' He lifts her over his head to dash her to the ground, breaking his chains in the process. This sign of his strength's return shows him that his god has heard his prayer. Still, it is not clear to him what he, a blind man, can do, since he even needs someone to put food and drink to his mouth. Delilah promises to care for him, they embrace and affirm their love, and she tells him that she has arranged their escape. As she is leading him out of the prison house, she mentions the plans to bring him to the temple in the morning. He realizes now what he must do, and, choosing to remain in prison, warns Delilah not to come to the temple.

In the climactic temple scene, all the Philistines gather to watch Samson be humbled before their god, Dagon. Delilah joins Samson in the arena in spite of the Saran's warning that she can never return to him. Whereas the Philistine crowd thinks she enters the arena to join in the tormenting of Samson, the audience, like the Saran, knows differently. She leads Samson by the end of a whip to the two columns that support the temple. When he tells her to go, she only pretends to leave. He pulls down the temple and they die together in a brilliant cinematic resolution. Delilah enables Samson to achieve his destiny. She and he are redeemed together: he, through his newfound faithfulness to his god, and she, through him.

Seduction and Betrayal: The Femme Fatale and the Samson Complex

The film *Samson and Delilah* ends with a theological message. Derek Elley observes that 'De Mille never resolved the struggle in his films between sexual and devout content'.⁴⁸ But must it be one or the other, sexual or devout? Readers interested in the theological message of the biblical story, for instance, may debate whether its purpose is to show the consequences of not living up to one's divine calling or to

48. Elley, *The Epic Film*, p. 36.

illustrate God's power to use even an unworthy servant⁴⁹ but, alongside its theological agenda, a message about gender relations lies close to the story's surface, as the moral Josephus drew from it illustrates. In terms of its gender code, the biblical story serves as a warning to men about the danger posed by women and the difficulty, but importance, of resisting their allure.⁵⁰

Twice in the biblical version Samson reveals his secret to a woman in order to prove his love. 'You only hate me, you do not love me!', the Timnite chides. 'How can you say, "I love you", when your heart is not with me?', reproves Delilah. Samson tells his Timnite bride the answer to his riddle and, in the ultimate, fatal self-revelation, he discloses the secret of his strength to Delilah. He proves his love by making himself vulnerable, by furnishing the woman with knowledge that gives her power over him; in other words, by surrendering himself to the woman. She uses this knowledge against him. The story thus illustrates how surrender in love is both attractive—even an apparently invincible strong man like Samson cannot resist a woman's charms—and dangerous—it costs him his freedom, his sight, and his life.⁵¹ Women, the Samson story teaches us, are deceitful, treacherous, and lethal. A man should never yield to them, for, given the opportunity, women will use their power over him against him. A man who surrenders himself to the temptation a woman offers loses his potency, his manhood,⁵² and does so, as the book of

49. I have argued against the common view that the theological point of the story has to do with Samson's failure to live up to his Nazirite calling; other theological themes, such as prayer and its answer, are more central; see J. Cheryl Exum, 'The Theological Dimension of the Samson Saga', *Veins Testamentum* 33 (1983), pp. 30-45. I would not, however, rule out the importance of the Nazirite vow. For other ways of looking at the biblical story, see Exum, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, pp. 18-44.

50. On the disciplinary tendency to read through one particular code (e.g., historical, literary, theological, anthropological, gender codes, etc.) and the call for an approach that combines several codes, see Mieke Bal, *Murder and Difference: Gender, Genre, and Scholarship on Sisera's Death* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

51. The rabbinic explanation that Samson sinned with his eyes and therefore lost his sight has its analogue in De Mille's film when, upon hearing about the woman he has seen in Timnah, Samson's mother tells him, 'your eyes always find what they should't', 'a man's heart can be blind, son, and, lastly, 'O Samson, Samson, you're blind!'

52. Samson is symbolically placed in the position of a woman as a result of surrender; see Susan Niditch, 'Samson As Culture Hero, Trickster, and Bandit: The

Proverbs likewise warns, at the risk of his life.

This view of women encoded in the biblical story is a man's view of women, not a woman's, and as such it tells us more about the men responsible for it than it does about women. Women are not alluring and menacing *in themselves* but to men. Since masculinity, like femininity, is a construct, one way to dismantle the *femme fatale*, the trope of the woman fatal to man, is to ask what this image of women seeks to disavow or suppress about men. If instead of focusing on the woman as constructed by the biblical text, we focus on the man as constructed by the text, we confront not the *femme fatale*, but what I call the Samson complex.

By the Samson complex I refer to the man's desire to surrender to the woman and his fear that he will be destroyed by her, for, psychologically speaking, this is what the story of Samson and Delilah is about. With Delilah, Samson has three chances to learn his lesson about the danger of women, for three times she does to him exactly what he confided to her would rob him of his strength. It is clear the fourth time that she will use what he tells her against him, but he tells her anyway. Why? For sex? Yes, but something else seems to be involved as well, for, as we have seen, he could satisfy his sexual urges with a harlot without risking so much. From a psychoanalytic perspective, we may conclude that if Samson tells Delilah how to subdue him, knowing what the consequences will be, it can only be because he must, because he has a deep need to do so. The risk holds a certain attraction. The attraction of losing himself in love, transcending the self through the intimate knowing of the other, is overwhelming. Such is the longing that draws him inexorably to the woman. It may possibly be connected to what Freud called the 'death instinct', so that 'side by side with his desire to conquer, [the man feels] a secret longing for extinction in the act of reunion with the woman (mother)'.⁵³

Empowerment of the Weak', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990), pp. 616-17; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 84-85.

53. Karen Homey, *Feminine Psychology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), pp. 138-39. If surrender in love is attractive and exhilarating, the oblivion/ extinction of the self is also threatening, and thus the desire to yield vies with the instinct for self-preservation. In an essay on 'The Distrust between the Sexes', Homey attributes the fear of losing the self in love to our instinct for self-preservation (*Feminine Psychology*, p. 108). I am speaking in this context of male desire for the woman, but the attraction of losing the self in the other and desire for self-preservation applies to women as well, though there are cultural as well as psychological

Samson yielded, and look what happened to him, says our story. If even an apparently invincible man like Samson can be undone by a woman, how much more so should the ordinary man be on his guard. Such is the fear the woman inspires.

Karen Horney discusses the feelings of longing and anxiety that women arouse in men in her famous essay on 'The Dread of Women'. Like Freud, she finds its origins in infantile sexuality, but, unlike Freud, for whom castration anxiety was primary, for Horney, castration anxiety is rather a secondary development from the fear of the vagina, the sinister female genital. The boy desires his mother's body but, sensing that his penis is too small for her vagina, is frustrated by feelings of inadequacy, Horney argues, and he carries a deeply hidden anxiety about his potency with him into adulthood. What he fears most is being rejected and derided by the woman. The crucial issue for Horney is the subconscious threat the woman poses to the man's self-respect, a threat that men deny even to themselves by externalizing their desires and fears and projecting them onto women. Among the examples Horney gives of objectifications of men's dread of women are the sirens, the Lorelei, the Sphinx, Kali, Judith, Salome, and, not insignificantly, Delilah. She writes,

'It is not', he says, 'that I dread her; it is that she herself is malignant, capable of any crime, a beast of prey, a vampire, a witch, insatiable in her desires. She is the very personification of what is sinister.' May not this be one of the principal roots of the whole masculine impulse to creative work—the never ending conflict between the man's longing for the woman and his dread of her?⁵⁴

Horney's emphasis on the 'objectifying' of this dread in artistic and scientific creative work⁵⁵ is suggestive, and, if she is correct, it should come as no surprise that we find this psychic conflict played out again and again in literary, musical, and visual versions of the story of Delilah and Samson.

What interests me here is not the validity or deficiencies of Horney's psychoanalytic theory but rather its heuristic value for illuminating the (subconscious) narrative dynamic of the story of Samson and Delilah, which I see as partly responsible for its cultural impact and differences (e.g. women are supposed to surrender to men and not the other way round, as I note below) beyond my scope here.

54. Horney, *Feminine Psychology*, p. 135.

55. Horney, *Feminine Psychology*, p. 136.

lasting appeal. The fact that a psychoanalytic reading makes sense of so many elements of the story alone invites its adoption.⁵⁶ More important, psychoanalytic criticism is an important tool for the feminist critic because it allows analysis of the text to move beyond mere description to interrogation: in this case, beyond reiterating the text's view of women as deceptive and menacing to a questioning of the interests and drives that motivate that view. The division of women that I mentioned above into either good or bad (virgin/mother or whore), for example, corresponds to Horney's observation that men seek to handle their dread of women through adoration (there is no need to fear someone so good, lovely, and, indeed, saintly) or disparagement (there is no need to fear such an unworthy creature). Debasing the love object mitigates her threat to the male ego. 'From the prostitute or the woman of easy virtue one need fear no rejection, and no demands in the sexual, ethical, or intellectual spheres', Horney writes. 'One can feel oneself the superior.'⁵⁷ Samson, we recall, had nothing to fear from the prostitute he visited in Gaza.

In giving his most secret part of himself to Delilah, in contrast, in allowing the object of his love (16.4) to have power over him, he becomes vulnerable, and as a result he becomes weak, emasculated. The fear of losing potency because of the woman is but a thinly veiled allusion to castration anxiety, fear of the *vagina dentata*. 'Metaphorically, every vagina has secret teeth, for the male exits as less than when he entered', writes Camille Paglia. 'Physical and spiritual castration is the danger every man runs in intercourse with a woman. Love is the spell by which he puts his sexual fear to sleep.'⁵⁸ Since Freud, we have come to recognize the symbolism both of the cutting of hair and of blinding—precisely what happens to Samson—as expressions of castration anxiety. Scissors or a knife according to Horney is a female

56. I am following here a psychoanalytic literary reading that takes the text, and not simply the characters, as its subject. On the analogy, established already by Freud, between analyzing dreams and analyzing texts, we can consider all the characters in the text as split-off parts of the narrative voice. Texts, like dreams, are overdetermined. I am speaking here of unconscious drives embedded within this text, of its repressions, displacements, conflicts, and desires. When I speak of Samson's fears and desires, I am not seeking so much to psychoanalyze the character as the part of the narrative psyche he represents, the libido. See, further, Brooks, 'The Idea of a Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism'.

57. Horney, *Feminine Psychology*, p. 146.

58. Paglia, *Sexual Personae*, p. 13.

symbol; Delilah, who wields the knife (either directly or through the agency of a barber), represents the castrating woman, the woman with the terrifying, sinister genital, the *femme fatale*.

In terms of its cultural consequences, Horney considers men's most important strategy for dealing with their fears to be the diminishing of women's self-respect, for example, by viewing women as infantile, emotional, and incapable of responsibility and independence. She asks, in fact, whether the type of woman who fits this picture is 'cultivated by a systematic selection on the part of men'.⁵⁹ Milton (followed by Handel–Hamilton) illustrates this tendency to lower women's self-respect when he describes Delilah in terms that suggest her vanity and emotionality (she enters 'bedecked, ornate, and gay', 'sailing like a stately ship...with all her bravery on and tackle trim' and weeping copious tears), in addition, as we have seen, to having her appeal to unflattering stereotypes of women's inferiority in her defense.⁶⁰

Horney's work is important for exposing the *femme fatale* as a male construct, a projection of male fears of inadequacy and an expression of the man's need to protect his self-esteem by feeling superior to the woman. She thus provides us with a useful tool for deconstructing the *femme fatale* trope. What the image of woman as *femme fatale* suppresses is the fragility of the construction of masculine superiority.⁶¹ Samson is masculinity writ large. As the episodes with the lion (14.5–6), the thirty garments in payment of his wager (14.19), the jawbone of the ass (15.14–16), and the gates of Gaza (16.1–3) make clear, he is superior in strength, not just to women but also to other men. He is

59. Horney, *Feminine Psychology*, p. 146. The implications of her argument are disturbing. It is not, she says, the arguments that have been put forth over the centuries to prove masculine superiority, 'What really counts is the fact that the ever-precious self-respect of the "average man" causes him over and over again to choose a feminine type that is infantile, nonmaternal, and hysterical, and by so doing to expose each new generation to the influence of such women.'

60. See, however, Lewalski ('Milton on Women—Yet Again', pp. 50–51, 60–65), who argues that whereas Milton's Delilah 'has internalized both the feminine stereotypes and the cultural constraints of her society, and makes them her excuses', the text 'refuses them as excuses' (p. 64), and that Milton honors women 'by insisting on the badness of Delilah' (p. 65). See also, Diane K. McCollery, 'Milton and the Sexes', in *The Cambridge Companion to Milton* (ed. D. Danielson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 147–66.

61. See Jennifer A. Glancy, 'Unveiling Masculinity: The Construction of Gender in Mark 6.17–29', *Biblical Interpretation* 2 (1994), pp. 34–50.

also superior in wit, as his poetic and occasionally bawdy bon mots reveal (14.14, 18; 15.16). He is in control, unconquerable; he has a unique, secret potency that women want to possess and that other men (the Philistines) envy and want to deprive him of because his prowess exposes their weakness. Even with Delilah, Samson is in control on the three occasions that he teases her with the wrong answer to the secret of his strength. By toying with Delilah he is courting disaster; he uses the game to prove to himself his manhood by tempting fate, showing how close he can come to calamity and still escape, like men for whom daredevil stunts are a macho pursuit. His interactions with her represent the subconscious desire to meet the calamity head on, and the fear that this might happen.

It does happen. Samson's yielding to a woman's lure exposes the fissures in the edifice of masculinity. By surrendering, he reveals his superiority over the woman as an illusion, for women are supposed to surrender to men, and not the other way around. The text works hard to repair the damage to the masculine image by showing Samson's final victory in the end (where in toppling the temple he symbolically destroys woman, his gesture of pulling together the two pillars that support it signifying a refusal of sex or sexual difference).⁶² In an attempt to have it both ways, the text not only uses Samson as a moral lesson, it redeems him too. Samson's god, who is *de facto* male-identified, rescues him from his emasculated state brought about by a woman. Moreover, the story implies that everything that has transpired has been controlled by this god for his purposes ('for he was seeking an occasion against the Philistines', Judg. 14.4).

To some extent, putting God in control lessens both Samson's responsibility and Delilah's power, but it does not negate either one. The illusion of masculine superiority is maintained at the cost of the hero's life, which is a big price to pay. And in any case, the resort to a *deus ex machina* to vindicate the hero does not alleviate the deep-rooted textual anxiety about the allure and danger of women, as readers throughout the centuries have instinctively recognized.

62. Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 84–85. Mieke Bal offers a different interpretation of his symbolic destruction of woman in this scene as a 'solution to the birth trauma...He outdoes woman, making the gap acceptably large' and the woman superfluous (*Leitlaid Love*, p. 62).

'Are you afraid?'
'Of a woman?—yes.'

This snippet of dialogue from the film *Samson and Delilah* is astonishingly revealing. The man, momentarily at least, openly admits his fear. Why is he afraid? If we follow Horney, his fear, on a subconscious level, is of being rejected and derided by the woman. Rather than risk this, to protect his male ego he projects his fear onto the woman, thus producing the *femme fatale*, the menacing woman. And this is precisely what the cinematic Delilah, like all the others, turns out to be, in spite of the fact that in some ways, as we have seen, De Mille seeks to redeem her image.

Investigating the Woman: Knowledge that Leads to Mastery

Knowledge of the other is a way of gaining mastery or control; this is a lesson the story of Samson and Delilah teaches us. Knowledge of the secret of Samson's potency gives Delilah (and, through her, the Philistines) power over Samson. What is unknown is much more frightening than what is known. This is why the *femme fatale* is so scary. Her unknowableness, her mystery and the mysterious secret of female sexuality she signifies, is the *femme fatale*'s most salient trait. Deceit is an important ingredient of her mystery; she is risky; the man cannot know for sure. The *femme fatale* seems to have no useful function in society.⁶³ She is neither a nurturing mother nor a dutiful wife, the principal female roles patriarchal society assigns to women, roles that men find familiar and comforting. As the woman whose sexuality appears uncontrolled, beyond the strictures of patriarchal authority, she disrupts the social order, and so she gives rise to a certain discomfort, a feeling of apprehension, in the man. And she presents him with the challenge to tame her. Her passion is fierce—a fire to make all other loves seem like ice—and her desire, insatiable; indeed, she seems to have no other purpose than to desire and be desired. The shadowy suggestion of the illicit and risqué that surrounds her figure provides a thrill; as the cinematic Samson tells his mother, 'Forbidden figs are sweeter'.

The *femme fatale* represents for the man both a fantasy of female sexual desire, whose nature he does not really understand, and the

mystery of female sexuality, the secret he cannot divine. As a reminder of sexual difference and activator of castration anxiety through her possession of the castrating genital, she is frightening. According to filmmaker and critic Laura Mulvey, the male unconscious has two effective avenues of escape from the anxiety she produces. One is by investigating the woman, explaining her, which serves to demystify her mystery. Once investigated, the woman is usually either punished or saved (thus we have metatextual Delilahs whose duplicity is exposed by Samson and Delilahs who die in the destruction of the temple). The other mechanism for mitigating the threat she poses is fetishizing the woman, making her a fantasy object for the man that marks her as reassuring rather than dangerous.⁶⁴ Now the biblical text does neither of these; it neither explains Delilah nor fetishizes her. Ignoring her as the biblical text does could be viewed as yet another unconscious mechanism for mitigating her threat. But at the same time (and I do not see the two as mutually exclusive), this narrative neglect makes the biblical Delilah particularly threatening in that she cannot be accounted for.

The metatexts we have examined in this chapter respond to the need to account for her by supplying information to compensate for this narrative lack. They can all be viewed as attempts to tame the *femme fatale* by supplying knowledge about her that produces a sense of security. As we have seen, all of them endeavor in one way or another to explain what motivates her to betray Samson. Their various recipes

64. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 21. Feminist film critics have taken over Freud's theory of fetishism, finding the penis in the woman in an attempt to escape from or deny the existence of the sinister female genital, to refer to the ultimate objectification of the woman in cinema. According to Freud, fetishism arises from a feeling of abhorrence due to the absence of the penis in women. Horney (*Feminine Psychology*, p. 137) locates its basis elsewhere, in anxiety, in 'dread of the vagina, [which is only] thinly disguised under the abhorrence'. Whether Freud or Horney, or either of them for that matter, is correct on this point is irrelevant for my purposes. Like the feminist film critics who have informed my thinking on this subject, I see psychoanalytic theory as a useful tool for analyzing patriarchal texts (since it pursues the same patriarchal logic) without necessarily accepting the validity of its claims. See Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 15; Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 7-9, 44-46; Kaplan, *Women and Film*, pp. 24-26; Silverman, *The Asexual Mirror*, pp. 1-32; Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 30-31.

63. Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 2.

for supplying closure are also ways of investigating her, by envisioning how the aftermath of the betrayal affects her. The more the man knows about the temptress, the less threatening she appears. Only one of the metatexts discussed here, the film, goes to any length to fetishize Delilah, and like everything else De Mille does in this film, he carries the fetishization of the woman to impressive lengths. Since of all my metatextual examples the film represents by far the most full-fledged development of Delilah as *femme fatale*, it offers the best place to examine this trope in detail.

Another Look at Looking at Film's Femme Fatale

In addition to giving me the opportunity to pay homage to his splendid film, consideration of Cecil B. De Mille's Delilah as *femme fatale*, the most fully developed portrayal of Delilah in popular culture I know of, will enable me to conclude my study of cultural representations of biblical women by returning to some of the issues raised at the beginning of this book: scopophilia or the pleasure of looking, the positioning of the woman as object of the look, and the probable different reactions that male and female spectators have when confronted with the woman objectified by and for the male gaze. I will limit my remarks to the film here, though, as I hope to have shown in Chapter 1, these issues apply to texts and their readers as well.

To some extent De Mille is restrained by the biblical story. I suspect he was not really happy with the biblical story's ending, where the hero is betrayed and dies, and the relationship between Samson and Delilah is not resolved. De Mille deals with the ending of biblical tale, which he cannot change, by setting his version within the framework of the struggle between faith and superstition. At the beginning of the film De Mille speaks to us about the growth of fear and superstition, the loss of human dignity, and the rise of tyranny ('human dignity perished on the altar of idolatry and tyranny rose'), and about the 'unquenchable will to freedom'. Nothing that happens in the film after his introduction has any connection with this moral lesson, however. (Interestingly in this respect, the film mirrors the biblical book of Judges where the amoral Samson story is set within the moralistic Deuteronomistic frame ['The people of Israel again did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of the Philistines for forty years...He judged Israel in the

6. *Why, Why, Delilah?*

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days of the Philistines twenty years').⁶⁵ At the film's end, Miriam serves as De Mille's mouthpiece to tell us that, to borrow the phrase from another fictive commentator, Milton's Manoaah, 'Samson hath quit himself like Samson'. 'His strength will never die', Miriam assures young Saul and theater audiences everywhere. 'Men will tell his story for a thousand years.'

As we have seen, De Mille responds to the source text's unsatisfying ending by turning the relationship between the protagonists into a love story for all time. With Delilah, he does not face the same restrictions that the biblical portrayal of Samson imposed upon him. His is a sympathetic Delilah, but there is a certain tension in her presentation, for it is not possible to retell the biblical story without reinscribing its representation of woman as deceptive and dangerous. To be sure, it was not necessary to reinscribe the text's gender ideology to the extent De Mille does, but he is not merely retelling a biblical story for the edification of his audience. He is making a movie to make money, and using his film as a vehicle for insuring his star's status as erotic icon in his interest. Furthermore, he is not just adopting the biblical ideology; his film is typical of the dominant cinema of the forties and fifties, and as such promotes and transmits conventional patriarchal values.⁶⁶ In making Delilah a consummate *femme fatale*, De Mille is simply exaggerating the gender ideology implicit in the biblical story and other versions of the fabula, pushing it to its (il)logical conclusion. 'Bring in a woman and she'll bring on trouble.'

Whereas the film focuses on Delilah and shows her point of view, Samson remains at its center, as the film's hero and the one who has, so De Mille's voice-over tells us, 'a bold dream—liberty for his nation', though we are never shown any evidence of it. Samson is the hero with whom the spectator is aligned; he is on the 'right' side, the side of truth, freedom, God, and the law of the Father. Delilah, the *femme fatale*, is on the wrong side. She is foreign, she even goes to bed with the enemy, and as activator of his desire she is a snare for the hero ('I'll never be free of you, Delilah').

65. The Deuteronomistic framework has almost totally broken down by the time we reach the Samson story; see J. Cheryl Exum, 'The Centre Cannot Hold: Thematic and Textual Instabilities in Judges', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990), pp. 410-31.

66. Readers and viewers familiar with film noir and melodrama will recognize how much *Samson and Delilah* has in common with these genres.

She is also a reminder of the danger of desire ('More men have been trapped by smiles than by ropes'). She is overtly and threateningly sexual, a man-eater confident about her ability to use her sexuality to get what she wants, and she deliberately uses her body as spectacle. Mulvey argues that 'the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified';⁶⁷ that is, castration anxiety. Delilah is a castrating woman, as demonstrated by the fact that she returns the look. De Mille, who cast Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr in the title roles because 'they embody in the public mind the essence of maleness and femininity',⁶⁸ uses the mechanisms of both investigation and fetishism for coping with the anxiety the *femme fatale* arouses. In the discussion of motivation above I described how he investigates Delilah in detail in order to show, in the end, that her conflicting emotions converge in obsessive love. I also indicated how, having investigated her, he both saves her for the man and punishes her: he redeems her by having her repent of the betrayal and by using her as the instrument of Samson's deliverance. And he punishes her, something the biblical version neglected to do, by killing her off in the end.

Hedy Lamarr's realization of Delilah on the screen as the ultimate object of the look makes her a prime illustration of the second mechanism Mulvey speaks of, fetishistic scopophilia. Fetishistic scopophilia focuses on the look; it transforms the physical beauty of the object into something satisfying in itself.⁶⁹ Besides being about the biblical Samson, and vaguely about the 'unquenchable will to freedom', *Samson and Delilah* is first and foremost a film about the woman as object of the look. The camera angles, the lighting, the close-ups of Hedy Lamarr's face (fetishization through fragmenting the female body), her lavish wardrobe of provocative outfits with color-coordinated jewelry (down to the decadent touch of anklets, as in Moreau's painting, and bejeweled sandals) all remind us that she is the object of the look for the spectators in the theater audience as well as for the characters in the film. Through the dialogue, attention is continually drawn to her beauty ('Look, look, have you ever seen eyes like that?... See the whiteness of her skin, smooth as a young dove's'), her

sexual appeal ('Why can't I lead you like that?' 'You're not Delilah'), and her irresistibility (to men, of course: 'Do you still have the same shears, Delilah, my hair's rather long'; 'Some time you might bait a trap for me, Delilah'). Like Susan Hayward and Alice Krige in the films about David and Bathsheba, Hedy Lamarr knows we are looking, and, rehearsing her carefully cultivated screen image as siren, she plays to and holds the gaze more deliberately and more self-consciously than either of them.

As a fetish, Delilah becomes non-threatening. In every scene, she appears as a model of visual perfection—gorgeous, flawless, and most of all, sexy. Her fabulous outfits signify her fetishization, especially in the final scene where she struts around in a glamorous peacock gown, whose meaning as a symbol of her vanity is transparent.⁷⁰ An onlooker, addressing the Saran, calls her 'your peacock', an epithet that diminishes her threat and marks her as being for the man. In this scene she performs for the male spectator and not the male protagonist, for Samson, the object of her desire, cannot see her.

What about the *femme fatale's* desire? Can the woman ever win, either in the Bible or in classical narrative cinema? De Mille's Delilah openly expresses her desire, and, as we have seen, it is all-consuming. It is not for nothing that Samson on more than one occasion calls her a 'wildcat'. But her desire is never realized; she never gets what she wants, which is Samson. When he prepares to go off with Miriam, even though he promises to return to her, she betrays him rather than lose him ('I cannot fight against his god, but no woman will take him from me'). She wants him as love's prisoner, her prisoner. She does not want him blinded, which she knows nothing about, or even harmed ('No drop of his blood shall be shed. No blade shall touch his skin'). She is caught between the good in her, her genuine love for Samson, and the bad, which is that same love carried too far, into an obsession that destroys first him and then both of them. She cannot win, which is to say, her desire, their mutual desire, is realized only in death.

The *femme fatale's* inability to become a 'correct' or 'proper woman' and 'suitable wife' is underscored by the presence of her opposite, Miriam, the cow-eyed, sweet-natured, wholesome girl-next-door from Samson's own tribe of Dan, whose 'hands are never idle' and

67. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 21.

68. Cited in Elley, *The Epic Film*, p. 36.

69. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 21.

70. Costumes were designed by the famous wardrobe-to-the-stars, Edith Head, among others.

who would have made Samson a perfect wife. Miriam is the virginal woman, the woman on a pedestal. 'You're further above me than the moon', Samson tells her. She poses no threat to Samson, but also presents no challenge, no danger or excitement. He prefers the *femme fatale*: 'A man must marry where his heart leads him', he tells his little mother' (a diminutive that, like 'your peacock', shows that the woman is not to be taken seriously).⁷¹

Within feminist film theory, where the fetishization of woman has arguably been given most attention, Ann Kaplan observes that fetishization represses motherhood,⁷² and Mary Ann Doane speaks of the *femme fatale* as the 'antithesis of the maternal'.⁷³ In contrast to Miriam, who would make an ideal wife and mother ('You want to bear his children', claims Delilah) there is nothing remotely suggestive of the maternal about Delilah. This is not only true for the film but for the biblical story as well, where none of the women who represent desirable sexual partners for Samson becomes a mother, and where the one woman who is a mother (Samson's mother) is desexualized.⁷⁴ The cinematic Delilah recognizes that Miriam has the 'acceptable' qualities she lacks: 'You belong to Miriam, she is the good in you. I'm the weakness, the love that would enslave you', she tells Samson. This explains in part why Delilah sees Miriam, in whom Samson has shown no romantic interest, as a rival—something that is otherwise only explicable as an irrational response on the part of an insanely jealous woman.

As I observed in Chapter 1, the gaze is male in classical Hollywood cinema, and women as well as men in the theater audience are invited to adopt the male gaze at the female image on the screen. As Mulvey observes, for women 'trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second nature*'.⁷⁵ The male spectator can participate in the

71. He makes this statement, at the beginning of the film, about Semadar, who is also a dangerous and deadly (just not for him) liaison.

72. Kaplan, *Women and Film*, pp. 53-57.

73. Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, p. 2.

74. The story not only denies the mother's sexual pleasure, it dissociates her pregnancy from the sex act, avoiding even the typical biblical formula, 'Manoah knew his wife and she conceived'; see Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 65-66.

75. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 33; italics hers. Actors are looked at too, but in a different way: 'As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic

male protagonist's power and possess the woman vicariously through him. In Samson's case, the male spectator can identify with him up to the point he is duped by the woman, and then take the superior position by thinking, 'Of course, I wouldn't fall for that'. The female spectator can, as I also argued in Chapter 1, resist the identification with the male point of view. Does this mean, as I speculated there, that the resisting female spectator must forgo the pleasure of narrative cinema?⁷⁶ If so, what accounts for the attraction feminist film critics admit to, and I share, to classical Hollywood cinema of the forties, fifties, and sixties?⁷⁷

It seems to me that the female spectator, though not necessarily approving of it, might envy Delilah's power to get what she wants, her ability to use her sexuality to manipulate the men around her.⁷⁸ There is, after all, a way that women can control men. 'Even Samson's strength must have a weakness', insists Delilah. 'There isn't a man in the world who will not share his secrets with some woman.'

Desire for the male spectator is active. For the female spectator desire is passive: the desire to be attractive like the woman, the desire to be desired.⁷⁹ For both there is likely to be something fascinating about the possibility of being loved obsessively, at least in the safe

look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence. A male movie star's glamorous characteristics are thus not those of the erotic object of the gaze, but those of the more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego conceived in the original moment of recognition in front of the mirror' (p. 20). The comparison is with Lacan's mirror stage.

76. It seems to me that this is Mulvey's contention, at least in her earlier article on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', but she puts a different spin on the question in 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"'. Inspired by King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946), reprinted in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, pp. 29-38. Kaplan and other feminist film critics have resisted this conclusion; the influence of their work, and Mulvey's, on my discussion here will be evident to those familiar with feminist film theory.

77. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, p. 29; Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p. 26; Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, pp. 3-13, 178-83; and especially the survey of female spectators in Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 126-75.

78. It is not entirely clear why Samson is able to resist Delilah at first. Is it because he has eyes only for Semadar? Because Delilah has not yet perfected her *femme fatale* arts?

79. Again I want to emphasize that I am speaking of classical Hollywood cinema, where heterosexuality is the norm.

fantasy world of film. A desire so intense that it consumes itself along with its object is a heady aphrodisiac.⁸⁰

For the female spectator both the focus on the woman's point of view and the portrayal of Delilah as a strong, independent woman may have some appeal. Showing the heroine's point of view makes contradictory demands on women spectators.⁸¹ We may derive satisfaction from Delilah's self-sacrifice for the sake of love. On the other hand, we may wonder, Why was this sacrifice narratively and cinematically necessary? The answer to this question lies not within the biblical story, which offers no closure where Delilah is concerned, but within the film itself, which reflects, as Kaplan has shown for classical cinema, the positioning of woman within patriarchy.⁸²

As for Delilah's independence, it is more apparent in this film than real, and in this respect De Mille's Delilah resembles the Delilah of the biblical story, who is a pawn of the Philistines. In the Bible the Philistines gain Delilah's cooperation through bribery and use her power for their own ends. In the film, Delilah is not the pawn of the Philistines; seducing Samson in order to learn the secret of his strength is her idea. But even though the betrayal is her idea, she needs the Saran's permission in order to undertake it. The *femme fatale* needs permission to seduce! She manipulates the Saran through the one way available to her, her sexuality. Her power, like her only visible means of support, comes from him, and she has quite an extravagant life-style, as witnessed by her gowns, jewels, and valuable possessions ('The woman that rules the ruler of the five cities must have great wealth', says Samson as he plunders her rich caravan). Delilah's independence, then, is based on manipulation, greed, and betrayal. This is not a very happy model for the woman spectator. In classical narrative cinema perhaps the female spectator, like the *femme fatale*, cannot win.

Delilah is her own person in at least one respect. She, like Samson, follows where her heart leads her. In the final scene she turns her back on the Saran and all he has to offer. But where does her heart

80. The pun is intended.

81. Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p. 49; Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, pp. 157, 168-69.

82. Kaplan (*Women and Film*, p. 49) compares the function of such films to soap operas today: 'To the extent that women see reflected in the films dilemmas that are indeed theirs (as the result of their positioning within patriarchy), the works speak to them.'

lead her? The film has an ending typical of melodrama, with the woman sacrificing her happiness and herself, which Delilah does literally by remaining with Samson in the temple, for 'higher' male ends.⁸³ Delilah sacrifices herself so that Samson, and ultimately his god, can triumph over tyranny and evil.

The *femme fatale*, like any representation, is never fully under the control of its creators. Kaplan suggests how a female spectator may read the fetishized female as a resisting image through a kind of complicity with the actress, who knows herself to be an object and plays with her own objectification.⁸⁴ What Kaplan says about Marlene Dietrich in *Blond Venus* applies to Hedy Lamarr in *Samson and Delilah* as well. She self-consciously uses her body as spectacle, positioning herself as object of the male gaze and making the female spectator aware of this placing (fig. 6.5).⁸⁵ She knows men are watching her and she is confident of the effect she will have on them ('Do you know a better bait, Samson? Men always respond'). Lamarr as Delilah looks directly at the camera, sure of her beauty and its impact on the viewer. The way she plays for the camera inhibits our immediate identification with her and causes us to identify instead with the gazing camera. Her self-conscious positioning defamiliarizes us with the image before us, making us aware that we are watching spectacle and that we are watching from a distance.⁸⁶ Through becoming more conscious of the film's mechanisms for masking the anxiety the *femme fatale* produces (investigation, fetishism), the female viewer can accept, and even enjoy, the illusion of the *femme fatale* for what it is.

Deconstructing the *femme fatale* trope, either by asking what motivates it, as Horney's work encouraged us to do, or by looking for ways to appropriate it for a female audience, as Kaplan's approach suggests, does not mean doing away with it. What deconstructing the trope does is expose the paradox that male self-esteem depends upon the image of the *femme fatale*. Men need the *femme fatale* and women will play her for the power she has over men. She is here to stay as long as gender relations remain fundamentally unchallenged. That may not be such a bad thing, if we can learn to recognize the figure

83. Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p. 38.

84. Kaplan, *Women and Film*, pp. 50-59; similarly, Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, pp. 180-83.

85. Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p. 51.

86. Kaplan, *Women and Film*, p. 58.



Figure 6.5. Hedy Lamarr as Delilah, in *Samson and Delilah*

for the construct it is and imagine new ways of seeing the trope. Doane suggests using fantasy 'as a space for work on and against the familiar tropes of femininity'. Everything depends, she points out, on how we see ourselves. 'And it is now possible to look elsewhere.'⁸⁷

It will be interesting to see what happens to the story of Delilah and Samson in its next cinematic incarnation, starring Liz Hurley as Delilah (so far no one is disclosing what *this* Delilah is being paid). Will it offer steamy sex scenes, as do other films by its director, Nicolas Roeg? Or will it provide family entertainment 'with high production values' befitting its biblical subject, as a spokesperson for its producer, Turner Network Television, has claimed?⁸⁸ If Martin Scorsese in *The Last Temptation of Christ* could make Judas a hero of sorts, could something similar be done for Delilah? That is a version I would like to see. Whatever way Roeg decides to tell this old story yet again, it will be difficult for the new *Samson and Delilah* to approach the cinematic power and interpretive genius of De Mille's version. Since

87. Doane, *The Desire to Desire*, p. 183; italics hers.

88. *The Evening Standard* (London), Wednesday, 24 January 1996.

I am ending my investigation of Delilah with discussion of film, I would like to let De Mille's version have the last word. Readers who know the film will recognize its aptness as a final comment on one of film's most remarkable *femmes fatales*. When Victor Mature as Samson topples the colossal image of Dagon and the temple comes crashing down on the Philistines in a spectacular finale, George Sanders, the urbane, unflappable, and worldly-wise Saran, lifts his cup in a toast of admiration and says, simply: 'Delilah'.