

Chapter, we can read her refusal to accept meekly her exclusion from David's story as her way of laying a claim to her own story.

Chapter 3

SAMSON'S WOMEN

The division of women into 'respectable women', who are protected by their men, and 'disreputable women', who are out in the street unprotected by men and free to sell their services, has been the basic class division for women. It has marked off the limited privileges of upper-class women against the economic and sexual oppression of lower-class women and has divided women one from the other. Historically, it has impeded cross-class alliances among women and obstructed the formation of feminist consciousness.

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The story of Samson is a story about women. Just try to imagine it without them. Four women have a significant role in a biblical story of only four chapters. This fact alone invites a feminist response. It seems like a simple story: the characters have no development, no depth—they are types; the plot is episodic and repetitious—a variation on traditional folktale motifs; and the narrator breaks frame from time to time to tell us how to read, lest we decide for ourselves. When Samson expresses his intent to marry a Philistine woman, for example, the narrator informs us, 'His father and his mother did not know that it was from Yhwh, for he was seeking an occasion against the Philistines; at that time the Philistines were ruling over Israel' (14.4). Thus we are meant to read Samson's folly as the design of Yhwh. Or we might translate the verse: 'His father and his mother did not know that she was from Yhwh', a translation that both fits the context and the story's interest in women.

Appearances are often deceiving, as we all know. This not only holds true for the woman Samson sees at Timnah and determines to marry but also for the story itself. Far from

being a simple tale, the Samson saga is a subtle, nuanced, and highly complex narrative with an elaborate literary structure¹ and a sophisticated theological agenda.² It also has an ambitious and problematic androcentric agenda that has rarely been called into question.³ We shall therefore question it in this chapter and inquire how the Samson story functions to reinforce the values of its society. Androcentric values.

In what follows I propose to show how the positive picture of Samson's mother in Judges 13 and the negative pictures of the three 'foreign women'—Samson's Timnite wife, the harlot of Gaza, and Delilah—in Judges 14–16 serve specific gender interests, chief among them, to control women and justify their subjugation. In the process of establishing control, the text shows traces of the problematic of maintaining patriarchy, and these traces will serve as my means for constructing a feminist (sub)version of this story. I shall argue that male fear of women's sexuality lies behind all four images of woman in this story. And I shall attempt to expose a problem in the text's portrayal of women—a problem created by the need to show women as powerful and therefore dangerous *and*, at the same time, to appropriate their power for androcentric purposes. The text has another, related problem that results from its use of binary opposition—a phallogentric way of structuring reality we shall examine shortly—because women belong to both sides of the oppositions the story wants to maintain. In handling these difficulties, the text provides a literary witness to ways by which, historically, patriarchy as a social system has controlled women. If Samson is entrapped by women and they betray him by revealing his secrets, similarly the text is entrapped by its own ideology and betrayed by it.

1. See Exum (1981).
2. See Exum (1983).
3. Bal (1987: 37–67) addresses the text's gender ideology.

Ideology and Reading: The Politics of Motherhood

Judges 13 is a birth announcement. There are a number of such announcement type-scenes in the Bible, where, typically, we have the divine promise of the birth of a son to a sterile woman.⁴ I have argued elsewhere that Manoah takes a secondary role to his wife and that 'the narrative seems intent on stressing the importance of the woman in the events leading to Samson's birth'.⁵ Similarly, Esther Fuchs notes, 'Manoah's wife ... is perspicacious, sensitive, and devout, outshining her inept husband'.⁶ Susan Niditch echoes this evaluation: 'Manoah plays the timid uncomprehending fool to his wife, who is featured in the most important scene with the divine messenger and who is more able than her husband to comprehend his message and true identity'.⁷ Let us begin, then, with a closer look at this positive portrayal of Samson's mother, after which we shall raise the question, What gender interest does this positive portrayal serve?⁸

The woman is alone when the messenger appears to her with the announcement that she will bear a son and with instructions about him (Judg. 13.3–5). When she hears the news, she runs to tell her husband. Manoah knows only what she tells him about this event, and, interestingly, she leaves out some important details (that their son may not be shaved and that he will begin to deliver Israel from the Philistines). She does, however, pass on the essential information: what she must do (abstain from wine and beer) and

4. See Fuchs (1985a); Alter (1983).
5. Exum (1980: 58).
6. Fuchs (1985a: 125). Unlike my 1980 study, Fuchs's investigation identifies and criticizes the androcentric ideology of the text. My analysis focused on Judges 13; Fuchs deals with the announcement type-scene in general.
7. Niditch (1990: 611).
8. On the following discussion of the positive portrayal of Manoah's wife, see Exum (1980, 1985). For a different, rather unfavorable view of the portrayal of the woman, see Polzin (1980: 182–84); similarly, Boling (1975: 220–21) sees the woman as rather dull-witted, 'speaking better than she knew' (p. 221).

the boy's destiny as a Nazirite.

After he hears his wife's account of her encounter with the man whose 'appearance was like the appearance of the messenger of God' (v. 6), Manoah prays that the man 'come again to us, and teach us what we are to do with the boy that will be born' (v. 8). His request is strange in view of the fact that his wife has just informed him about the boy's destiny. Can it be that he does not accept his wife's word for it? Perhaps he wants to know more about the child than his Nazirite status. What is apparent from his request that the man come 'to us' and 'teach us' is that he wants to hear the announcement himself. Significantly, however, though Manoah's prayer that the messenger return is granted, it does not happen as he requested. The messenger appears (v. 9) not 'to us' but again to the woman alone. Lest we miss the point, the text adds, 'and Manoah her husband was not with her'. The messenger does not come to Manoah; rather Manoah must be brought to the messenger by his wife. We might wonder, therefore, whether Manoah would have seen the messenger at all were it not for the woman's intervention. Finally, Manoah gets the audience he wants, but—unlike his wife, who behaves with the proper reserve before such an honored emissary (v. 6)—he has many questions to ask. Ironically, however, for all his efforts, he receives even less information from the messenger than he had from his wife. The messenger merely turns the issue back to the woman: 'Of all that I said to the woman let her beware' (v. 13). By denying Manoah as much knowledge about the child as his wife, the narrative underscores her importance. It also portrays her as more perceptive than Manoah.

Together Manoah and his wife prepare an offering, which provides the occasion for the messenger's divine identity to be revealed. Up to this point, the couple have referred to him as a 'man of God', a title sometimes used for a prophet. The text singles out Manoah's lack of perception ('For Manoah did not know that he was the messenger of Yhwh', v. 16), a situation reversed when he eventually perceives the messenger's identity (v. 21). Nothing is said about the woman's not knowing the messenger's divine status. On the

contrary, she senses it from the start. In reporting his initial appearance, she tells Manoah, 'His countenance was like the countenance of the messenger of God—quite awesome' (v. 6). The response of husband and wife to the revelation of the messenger's status (vv. 22-23) further reflects their different comprehension of the situation. Manoah, in keeping with biblical tradition, knows that one cannot see God and live (see Judg. 6.22-23; Gen. 16.13-14; 32.30; Exod. 19.21; 33.20). His wife, however, recognizes the divine purpose behind the theophany. She understands that God would not have promised them a son with a special destiny if he intended to kill them, and she is therefore able to assure her husband that they will not die (in theophanies, it is usually the deity who gives this assurance).

Whereas Manoah seems inept and overanxious, the woman is portrayed as a worthy recipient of divine favor. She receives from the divine emissary more information about the child's destiny than her husband; she senses something otherworldly about the visitor whereas it takes a miracle for Manoah to recognize him; and she understands the divine intention better than Manoah. One can fairly say, I think, that she is more favorably portrayed than her husband. *Cui bono?*

To see how this positive portrayal of the woman nevertheless serves male interests we have to interrogate the ideology that informs and motivates it. Patriarchal literature reflects an underlying attitude toward woman's sexuality as something to be feared and therefore to be carefully regulated. As we saw in Chapter 1, patriarchy severs the relationship between eroticism and procreation, affirming motherhood but denying the mother's *jouissance*, and associating the erotic not with the mother but rather with the whore. Our story vividly illustrates this division between woman as mother and woman as whore.

In a study of biblical mothers, Esther Fuchs observes:

Male control of female reproductive powers in conjunction with patrilineal and monogamous marriage (for the wife), secures the wife as her husband's exclusive property and ensures the continuity of his name and family possessions through patrilineal

customs and patrilineal inheritance patterns. The institution of motherhood as defined by the patriarchal system guarantees that both the wife and her children will increase his property during his lifetime and perpetuate his achievements and memory after his death.⁹

In conformity with this principle, Judges 13 affirms woman in her role as mother—motherhood controlled by men; motherhood without *jouissance*. Our story not only denies the mother's sexual pleasure; it goes so far as to dissociate her pregnancy from the sex act, not even acknowledging in typical biblical fashion, 'Manoah knew his wife and she conceived'. Rather the story begins with the (male) messenger of Yhwh telling the woman she is pregnant. Indeed, the woman's sterility draws attention to the fact that the deity controls her reproductive ability. The absence of sex from this chapter is even more remarkable and revealing when viewed against Samson's sexual liaisons in chs. 14–16 and against the sexual innuendoes and the pervasive sexual symbolism in these chapters (which we shall consider shortly).

The wife and mother of Judges 13 can be portrayed more positively than her husband because she is no threat. Mothers are not sexually alluring or threatening; they are nurturing, as when Manoah fears death and the woman reassures him. She does nothing on her own, and this is a trait that patriarchy finds desirable in a woman. Unlike the Tinnite and Delilah, who will soon be seeking Samson's secrets, she does not ask questions: 'I did not ask him from where he came and he did not tell me his name' (13.6). In spite of the fact that the messenger appears to her twice when she is alone, she does not engage him in conversation. (Every woman's mother teaches her not to speak to strangers.) Rather she runs off to tell her husband, who will ask all the questions in this family. The woman is neither independent nor selfish nor secretive. Imagine Abraham, when he first hears the promise of numerous descendants, running off to fetch Sarah so she can hear it too. Or recall

9. Fuchs (1985a: 129).

that Abraham entertains divine emissaries who tell him Sarah will bear a son, while Sarah remains in the tent—that is, inside, in the woman's place—and has to eavesdrop to hear the birth announcement. Manoah's wife may be perceptive, and even more perceptive than her husband in sensing something otherworldly about the messenger, but she does not challenge Manoah's position of authority. The references to Manoah's not knowing and then knowing that the man was the messenger of Yhwh indicate that it is *his* knowledge and not *hers* that is important. For whose benefit is the miraculous disappearance of the messenger anyway?¹⁰

In contrast to other biblical birth accounts, we are given surprisingly little background information. We are not told the woman's view of her situation or her circumstances or her name. We are not informed that she was old, as Sarah was. Nor does she complain to her husband about childlessness, as does Rachel. She does not try other means of procuring a child, as Sarah and Rachel do, when they give their maids to their husbands. Nor does she turn to aphrodisiacs, as Rachel apparently does. She does not pray for a child, as does Hannah, nor does her husband pray for her, as Isaac prays for Rebekah. Moreover, we do not learn of her reaction to the birth announcement, as we do in the cases of Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah.¹¹ This suppression of information, I suggest, serves to underscore her role as a *mother*. Like Jephthah's daughter, her importance lies in her fulfillment of a role, and thus she is not even given a name.¹²

Fragmenting women, leaving their stories incomplete so that they are not full characters, is typical of biblical narrative, and readers tend to fill the gaps in the easiest way; that is, according to convention and presuppositions. Patriarchal

10. Cf. how God reveals himself and his plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah to *Abraham* (not to Sarah) in Genesis 18.

11. Exum (1980: 47–48). On the birth accounts in the matriarchal stories, see below, Chapter 4.

12. *Contra* Reinhartz (1992), who argues that the woman's anonymity underscores her centrality. I do not question the woman's important role but rather am interested in the gender motivation that informs both her portrayal and the suppression of her name.

ideology represents women as desiring roles that serve its interests: wife and mother. It expects the sterile woman to be overjoyed at birth, especially at the birth of a son (there are no birth accounts of daughters, except the fragmentary one of Dinah). Not surprisingly, some commentators, reading with conventional expectations, reinscribe this ideology by attributing just this reaction of joy to Manoah's wife.¹³ Our narrator relies on a simple but effective strategy—offering incomplete portraits and relying on convention to encourage the reader to complete the portraits with stereotypes about women—to shape the portrayal not only of Samson's mother, but also of the other women in the saga: his Timnite wife, the harlot of Gaza, and Delilah.

The Good Mother and the Whore

Whereas there is only one good woman in the Samson saga, there are three bad ones. Is this only because—as Prov. 31.10 suggests—a good woman is hard to find? Following the story of the mother in Judges 13, we encounter in Judges 14–16 three important female characters, none of whom is a mother. Rather they are all available and, for Samson, desirable sexual partners. Woman as mother is on a pedestal; in her non-sexual role she is idealized. Woman as object of sexual desire is dangerous. A strategy by which our text seeks to deal with women's threatening yet desired sexuality is to merge the three different women with whom Samson becomes involved (the Timnite, the harlot, and Delilah) into one composite, negative image of the 'foreign woman'. One image of sexual woman is easier to control, and more comfortable, than multiple portraits of women whose sexual attractiveness is acknowledged.

The negative image of the foreign woman is a given in the Bible; it is simply assumed, and exceptions like Ruth only prove the rule. Proverbs warns the young male repeatedly

13. E.g. Blenkinsopp (1963: 69); Boling (1975: 219); Crenshaw (1978: 73, 76–77); Polzin (1980: 182), assuming that 'wonderful news' is not his own point of view.

against her:

Say to wisdom, 'You are my sister',
and call understanding your intimate friend,
to preserve you from the foreign woman
from the strange woman with her smooth words (Prov. 7.4–5).¹⁴

The positive image of the mother is also well established. Mother (legitimate wife) was the only positive role available to most women in ancient Israelite society. 'You shall honor your father and your mother', says the decalogue, and Proverbs admonishes the son to heed the teaching of his father and his mother.¹⁵ The Samson saga therefore does not need to establish a contrast between the negative and positive images, the foreign woman and the mother. It assumes it and builds upon it. And it counts on us to accept it and apply it when we read.

Although the text specifically identifies only one of the three women with whom Samson becomes involved as Philistine (Samson's wife from Timnah), most readers assume all three are Philistines. The harlot, because she lives in Gaza, is viewed by all commentators I am aware of as Philistine (but what's to prevent her from being a 'foreign woman' who happens to live in Philistia? an Israelite woman, for example). Only a few commentators raise the possibility that Delilah, who has a Hebrew name and lives on the boundary between Israelite and Philistine territory, might be Israelite. Basically we take her for a Philistine too because we assume the other women are Philistine, and also because she deals with the Philistine lords, and surely an Israelite woman would not betray Samson to his enemies! To follow such reasoning is to be lured into the ideology of the text, into accepting the proposition that Israelite women

14. Note that it is 'with her words' that Delilah breaks down Samson's resistance.

15. Proverbs does not offer instructions to daughters, but they must learn somewhere if, when they grow up and have sons, they are to teach them. For compelling analyses that undermine the opposition between the good female figure (Wisdom) and the evil woman, see Camp (1988) and Newsom (1989).

behave respectably, while foreign women are disreputable and treacherous.

The text encourages us to confuse and to conflate the three women by various means.¹⁶ It shows them doing the same things: both the Timnite and Delilah 'entice' (*pittah*) Samson in order to get him to 'tell' (the key word is *higgid*) his secret—in one case, the answer to his riddle; in the other, the source of his strength. In both cases 'he told her' (14.17; 16.17) 'because she harassed him' (14.17; 16.16). Both women pass on the answer to the Philistines.¹⁷ Similar vocabulary is also used to link the Timnite and the harlot. Judges 14 begins:

Samson went down to Timnah and he saw a woman in Timnah.

Judges 16 begins:

Samson went to Gaza and he saw there a woman, a harlot...

These women have something in common. The sight of them arouses the desire to possess them.¹⁸ Both are objects of sexual desire: 'I will go in to my wife in the chamber', says Samson (15.1)—the verb used here, *bo*, is commonly used for sexual intercourse. 'Samson went to Gaza and saw there

16. Bal (1987) comments upon the tendency to superimpose the pictures of the women and warns against it; we do it readily, I think, if we (unconsciously) accept the text's ideology.

17. On the extensive parallels between the account of Samson and the Timnite and that of Samson and Delilah, see Exum (1981).

18. The text says that the Timnite was 'right in the eyes of Samson' (14.7; 'right in my eyes', 14.3) and not the more usual 'beautiful in his eyes'. On the significance of the difference, cf. Greenstein (1981: 249), who sees the phrase as referring not to physical attractiveness but rather to proper conduct (indicating Samson's attraction to alien culture) and Sasson (1988: 339 n. 2), who exploits the ambiguity. Gunn (1992: 232, 252 n. 6) concludes that Samson has not just sex but marriage in mind. I see no reason why 'sexual attraction alone would demand at least "beautiful"' (Gunn, p. 232); that men are sexually attracted only to beautiful women is but another gender stereotype. The phrase 'right one in his eyes' echoes an important theme from the end of the book of Judges: in this period without kings, 'every man did what was right in his own eyes'.

a harlot and went in to her', the narrator tells us (16.1), and again the verb is *bo*.

Another way the text suggests common features among the three women is by juxtaposition: the story of Delilah follows the story of the harlot with only the clause 'and it happened after that' to separate them. It strengthens the associations by way of suggestion. Delilah is not identified as a harlot, but commentators who consider her one—and they are numerous—are reading according to patriarchal ideology and convention. Because she is not identified in terms of her familial relationship to a male—she seems to have her own house, and Samson is apparently her lover though she is not his wife—other possibilities for understanding her position in society are rarely entertained. Incidentally, the text does not say they have sexual relations (as in 16.1-3), only that Samson loved her; the sexual aspect is something, once again, *we* supply, encouraged by the numerous sexual innuendoes and *double entendres* in the story. Even the Timnite, Samson's legal wife (almost: the ceremony is not concluded¹⁹) is disparaged and cast in the role of a loose woman²⁰ when Samson charges that his wedding companions 'plowed with my heifer' (14.18), a coarse reference to sexual intercourse.²¹

In a brief sexual interlude described in Judg. 16.1-3, Samson goes to visit a harlot at Gaza and the Philistines learn about it. *How* they get this information is not stated in the text. The placement of this story between accounts in which Samson is betrayed by women encourages the assumption that the harlot was the informant, though, in fact, this story

19. With many scholars, I accept Stade's (1884) famous emendation of 14.18, 'before he went into the chamber'. The point is, I think, that the marriage is not consummated. Samson storms away in anger and the woman is then married off to the best man.

20. The concept of a 'loose woman' is, of course, a patriarchal notion based on the double standard (Samson, for example, is never described as a loose man); see below.

21. Plowing was a common metaphor for sexual intercourse; see the discussions of Levy (1916) and Crenshaw (1974: 493-94).

is different in important ways from the others.²²

For the identification of all three women as foreign women and, by implication, disreputable women, the text relies on its readers to read according to convention. Encouraging readers to fill gaps with stereotypes about women enables the narrator on the one hand to give abundant testimony to the dangers of the foreign woman and, on the other, to provide as little information as possible about the individual women from which we might construct their stories.

Binary Opposition and the Problem of Woman as Other,
Or, 'Is there no woman among the daughters of your

brothers or among all my people, that you are going to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?'

Binary opposition is a way of structuring reality, differentiating it into a hierarchy of opposition, in which one side of the opposition is always privileged. In binary thought, each term achieves significance only through its structural relationship to the other.²³ 'Self', for example, acquires meaning only in terms of and in relation to what is not self; that is, to 'other'. Some feminists consider binary opposition a hallmark of phallogentric thinking; in any event, it is widespread and everywhere observable. Consider some of the oppositions that figure prominently in the Samson saga.²⁴

Israelite / Philistine
own kind / foreign
male / female

22. Even Bal, while aware of the danger of confusing the women, succumbs to the temptation when speculating about the identity of the informant: 'It is plausible to assume that it is the prostitute' (1987: 49). As I argue below, the Philistines triumph over Samson when a woman helps them—which suggests that in this case, where they fail to defeat him, the woman is not involved.

23. See Moi (1985: 104-105).

24. Niditch (1990: 609, 614) notes some of these; Bal (1987: 40) discusses other oppositions at work.

circumcised / uncircumcised
nature / culture
endogamy / exogamy
paternal house / women's houses
clean / unclean
self / other
good woman / evil woman

Israelite / Philistine. This is the dominant set of oppositions in the story. It is the concrete expression of another opposition, *own kind* versus *foreign*. The Israelite side is the 'right side', the 'us', as opposed to the Philistines who are the 'wrong side'—'them'.

Male / female. This opposition is also an expression of *own kind* versus *foreign*. But it does not correspond to the Israelite/Philistine opposition, since some women are Israelite. Hélène Cixous, in a trenchant critique of patriarchal binary thought, suggests that the underlying paradigm for all oppositions is the hidden male/female opposition with its inevitable evaluation of one element as positive and the other as negative.²⁵

Circumcised / uncircumcised. Circumcision is the mark of participation in the covenant community of Israel, the community by and for whom this text was produced. Religious difference is inscribed in the penis as a physical difference setting Israelite men apart from Philistine men.²⁶ The Philistines as a people, which includes both men and women, are referred to as 'the uncircumcised' (14.3). Women, who are uncircumcised, are by nature on the Philistine side of this opposition. And Philistine men, who do not bear the distinct mark of covenant relationship on the male organ, are strongly identified with the female, as we shall see.

Nature / culture. The best statement of this set of oppositions in the Samson saga is still to be found in the work of

25. Cixous (1986: 63-132).

26. Sexual aggression, fear, and envy are all at work in the account of Saul's demand of one hundred Philistine foreskins as a bride-price for his daughter Michal and David's double payment. For further discussion of circumcision as it relates to gender bias, see Chapter 4 below.

Hermann Gunkel, who characterized Samson as *Natur-mensch* over against the Philistines as *Kulturmenschen*:

Simson tut alle seine Taten ohne ein Mittel der Kultur: den Löwen zerreißt er mit der Hand; mit der Hand hebt er die Tore von Gaza aus; er zerschneidet nicht, sondern zerriesst seine Bande; an den Haaren reißt er den Aufzug des Webstuhls aus dem Boden; mit der Wucht seines Körpers stürzt er den Dagon-Tempel um; und nur mit einem Eeselskinnbacken, wie man ihn auf dem Felde findet, also einem Werkzeug, wie es die Natur bietet, erschlägt er seine Feinde.²⁷

[Samson does all of his deeds without any instrument of culture: he tears the lion with his hands; with his hands he lifts up the gates of Gaza; he does not cut but rather tears his bonds; with his hair he tears the warp of the loom out of the ground; with the weight of his body he pulls down the temple of Dagon; and with only an ass's jawbone such as one would find on the ground—a tool offered by nature—he kills his enemies.]

Ordinarily, one would expect culture to be privileged over nature. Women are usually thought of as closer to nature, while men are identified with culture.²⁸ The situation is reversed in our text, however, where the privileging of nature over culture reflects the Israelite position as culturally inferior to the Philistines and is a case of the underdog taking pride in the ability to overcome the superior culture.

Endogamy / exogamy. This opposition finds expression in the reaction of Samson's parents when he tells them he wants to marry a Philistine: 'Is there no woman among the daughters of your brothers or among all your people,²⁹ that you are going to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?' (14.3). The book of Deuteronomy insists on Israel's separateness from the surrounding people in the land of Canaan: '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 Yhwh

27. Gunkel (1913: 40; emphasis his).

28. Ortner (1974); Cixous (1986: 63-132).

29. Reading with the Lucianic recension and the Syriac; MT has 'my people'—as if only his father were speaking?

would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly' (7.3-4; notice that even though daughters are not to be given in marriage to foreigners, it is sons who the biblical narrator fears will be led astray).

Paternal house / women's houses. In my opinion, there is insufficient evidence for the often found reference to Samson's marriage to the Timnite woman as a *tsadighah* marriage; that is, a marriage in which the wife remains in her parents' house and is visited there by her husband.³⁰ But the fact remains, Samson does not bring a woman back to his house. Delilah appears to have her own house, and the introduction to her mirrors the introduction to Manoah in such a way as to present her as the negative counterpart to Manoah and the paternal house.

Now there was a certain man from Zorah, from the clan of the Danites, and his name was Manoah.

Now after this he loved a woman in the valley of Soreq, and her name was Delilah.

Not only is the narrative style similar but also these are the only characters in the saga who are named, except Samson. *Clean / unclean.* Samson, even before he is born, is set apart as a Nazirite. He is to eat nothing unclean and drink no wine or strong drink.³¹ And his hair is not to be cut. He does not, however, keep these regulations. Scooping honey out of the carcass of the lion exposes him to the unclean; and the description of his wedding feast as a *mishleah* suggests that there is drinking going on and that Samson participates.³²

30. *Tsadiqah* marriage is frequently mentioned in the commentaries in connection with Samson's marriage to the Timnite woman. Samson, however, has left the wedding feast in a fury; the woman's father understands his action as signaling that Samson has renounced his claim to her (cf. Boling 1975: 232, 235); and the woman is married off to another. It is hard to see how she can be understood as still married to Samson. Samson returns later with a gift, but since he is denied access to the woman, it is impossible to know what kind of marriage arrangement, if any, the narrator wished to suggest.

31. These injunctions are actually placed on the mother in Judg. 13.

32. Burney (1970: 344); Gunkel (1913: 40); Blenkinsopp (1963: 66). Though I am not entirely persuaded that the narrator presents Samson

Self / other. This is an important opposition for the gender politics of the narrative. In the androcentric symbolic world of our text, 'self' is defined as male, and woman, who most fundamentally represents that which is not self, is 'other'. When Samson surrenders himself to the other, he becomes symbolically the other, as we shall see.

Good woman / evil woman. In patriarchal thought, women occupy a marginal position; they are at the boundary of the phallogocentric symbolic order, the border between men and chaos. As borderline figures, women can be perceived as either inside or outside male society. When women are viewed as inside the border, they are romantically idealized (the woman on the pedestal; the virgin or the mother); when viewed as outside, they are victimized and cast off (the whore).³³ Motherhood and nurturing characterize the good woman; sexuality and sensuality, the evil one.³⁴ This opposition also reflects the double standard. Men are not characterized as 'respectable' or 'disreputable' according to their sexual behavior.

In the list of oppositions given above, the categories that appear first are privileged in our story; those in the second position are viewed negatively. Women occupy an ambiguous position in this schema; they belong to both sides of the oppositions. The Philistines are enemies, alien, the other. Women are also enemies, alien, the other. Philistine women are doubly other. But what happens if one is woman and not a Philistine? The text is uneasy about the Israelite woman, for she is good only to the extent that her sexuality (her femaleness, which belongs on the negative side) is controlled. The negative categories are dangerous; they threaten the integrity of the privileged categories. But Samson is

as breaking the Nazirite regulations against contact with what is unclean or drinking wine or strong drink (see Exum 1983: 31-32). I acknowledge the potential for such a reading.

33. See Moi (1985: 163-67); Kristeva (1986b).

34. Reading with the text's ideology, which opposes idealized motherhood to the danger of sexual women, Crenshaw (1974; 1978: 65-98) sees the conflict between filial devotion and erotic attachment as the leitmotif of the story.

attracted to them. He is always crossing boundaries. He does not keep the Nazirite regulations, thus violating the distinction between clean and unclean; he marries a Philistine woman, entering an exogamous relationship; and he prefers foreigners to his own kind. Samson is a limen, a marginal figure who moves between the Israelite and Philistine worlds but does not belong to either of them.³⁵ He is also a mediating figure between Israelite and Philistine.³⁶ It is difficult, if not impossible, to remain in a liminal stage, a state of transition marked by ambivalence and ambiguity, and thus of danger. Samson cannot be a successful mediator between the two worlds, the Israelite and the Philistine, because the distinctions between them must be rigorously maintained by our story, even if at the price of the hero's life.

Knowledge, Power, and Sex

Extensive sexual symbolism in the Samson saga has long been recognized.³⁷ There is, for example, the association of hair with sexual potency, documented in many cultures,³⁸ and the connection between cutting the hair and castration established by Freud. At a wedding feast—a suitable setting for banter about sex—Samson asks a riddle: 'From the eater came forth food; from the strong came forth sweet'. Most commentators agree that the present story has made use of existing riddles to produce the present riddle and answer. Whereas Gressmann thought the original answer to this riddle was 'vornit',³⁹ Eissfeldt opted for the answer

35. On the concept of liminality, see van Gennep (1960); Turner (1977). Samson's marginality is further indicated by his lifelong status as a Nazirite, a word meaning 'separate, dedicated', and by his superhuman strength that makes him not 'like other men' (Judg. 16.7, 11, [13], 17).

36. See Niditch (1990: 613-14); Bal (1987: 43-44).

37. Levy (1916).

38. Gaster (1981: 436-38); Leach (1967); Huston (1986: 119-20); Bal (1987: 54-55); Niditch (1990: 616-17).

39. Gressmann (1922: 243).

'semen'.⁴⁰ Crenshaw sees in the riddle an allusion to sexual intercourse,⁴¹ and recently Camp and Fontaine have further explored its erotic symbolism.⁴² To the riddle's answer, 'What is sweeter than honey, what is stronger than a lion?', Gunkel proposed the solution, 'love'.⁴³ Lévi-Strauss has explored the sexual symbolism of honey,⁴⁴ and Bal observes of Samson's tearing the lion and taking honey from its belly: 'The tearing has positive consequences, a feature it shares with that other kind of tearing that gives pleasure: defloration'.⁴⁵ When the Philistines answer his riddle, Samson's repartee, 'If you had not plowed with my heifer you would not have found out my riddle', is a *double entendre* bordering on the obscene.

Samson's attraction to women is a projection of the narrator's own obvious interest in sex. It seems to me that the story of Samson's involvement with the woman from Timnah makes a kind of sexual joke about Samson's not consummating the marriage. The Philistines wait until the last possible moment before giving their answer: 'And the men of the city said to him on the seventh day [of wedding festivities] before he went into the chamber, "What is sweeter than honey and what is stronger than a lion?"' (14.18). The reading, 'before he went into the chamber', for the Masoretic text's 'before the sun had set', rests on a widely accepted textual emendation suggested by Stade.⁴⁶ But regardless of whether or not Samson's sexual desire is frustrated here, it clearly is sometime later, when he returns to visit his wife with one thought on his mind: 'I will go in to my wife in the chamber' (15.1). Desire meets with constraint: 'her father would not allow him to go in' (the verb *bo'* here indicates sexual intercourse).

Later, when Samson engages the services of a prostitute,

he encounters no opposition: 'he went in to her' (*vayyabo' eleha*, 16.1). The Philistines learn of his presence among them and plan an ambush for the morning, but Samson surprises them by leaving at midnight. He escapes, pulling up the city gates and carrying them off all the way to Hebron. Commentators (mostly men), as much as the biblical narrator, I would say, have relished this story of Samson's prowess. In the middle of a night of sexual activity, his vigor apparently undiminished, he struts off, carrying the Gaza gates on his shoulders, right under the Philistines' noses. Gunkel comments that this is the time when even a strong man needs rest, citing the dictum, *omne animal post coitum triste*.⁴⁷ (This is, of course, a male joke.⁴⁸)

The narrator's choice of vocabulary reinforces the sexual symbolism. Both the Timnite and Delilah are told to 'entice' Samson. The verb used, *pittah*, also refers to seducing a woman (Exod. 22.16 [Heb. 15]; Hos. 2.14 [Heb. 16]). Delilah asks, 'How might you be bound in order that you might be humbled?' (16.6). The verb here, *'innah*, is elsewhere used of raping a woman (Gen. 34.2; Deut. 21.14; 22.24, 29; Judg. 19.24; 20.5; 2 Sam. 13.12, 14, 22, 32; Ezek. 22.10, 11; Lam. 5.11). I shall return shortly to the significance of applying these terms to Samson. The picture of Samson's sleeping on Delilah's lap, or, as the Greek has it, 'between her knees', is suggestive of love-making. Not only is Samson symbolically castrated when his hair is cut and he is blinded, the labor he is forced to perform, grinding at the mill, has sexual connotations. Grinding seems to be a term for sexual intercourse in Job 31.9-10, for example:

If my heart has been enticed (the verb is *niphtah*) by a woman, and I have lain in wait at my neighbor's entrance,⁴⁹ then let my wife grind for another, and let others bow down upon her.

40. Elissfeldt (1910: 134).
41. Crenshaw (1974: 490; 1978: 115).
42. Camp and Fontaine (1990); see also Bal (1987: 45-46).

43. Gunkel (1913: 54).

44. Lévi-Strauss (1973: 1978: 412-13).

45. Bal (1987: 45).

46. Stade (1884: 253).

47. Gunkel (1913: 44).

48. Bal (1987: 49), in contrast to most commentators, suggests that Samson 'had to break off prematurely'.

49. Probably also a *double entendre*.

The verb *tsahaq/sahaq*, used of Samson's 'playing' or 'serving as amusement' for the Philistines, also has sexual connotations. It is used of Isaac's fondling of Rebekah, behavior that alerts Abimelech to the true nature of their relationship (Gen. 26.8-9). Finally, there is the image of Samson standing between the two pillars on which Dagon's temple rests, an image Bal likens to correcting the act of birth by breaking the woman's thighs.⁵⁰

What, we might ask, is the significance of this sexual symbolism that is everywhere to be found in the accounts of Samson's encounters with foreign women, but absent in the account of Samson's parents? Sex, knowledge, and power are intimately related.⁵¹ Indeed, the verb 'to know' (*yada'*) also refers sexual intercourse: 'Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore a son'. Riddles and riddling have been connected to sexual knowledge. We have seen the sexual symbolism in Samson's famous riddle about the sweet and the strong and its answer, which is itself a riddle. Niditch observes that riddles are a type of power game, in which the one who knows the answer gains status.⁵² Bettelheim holds that riddles in fairy tales have to do with the sexual knowledge, at least on the unconscious level. The riddle is the mystery of the other sex: 'whoever understands the secret which the other sex presents has gained his [sic] maturity'.⁵³

Knowledge is elusive in the Samson saga. The line between question and riddle is sometimes thin, as in 13.18: 'Why do you ask my name, seeing that it is wonderful?'⁵⁴ Of the many questions—fifteen to be exact⁵⁵—posed in a story

50. Bal (1987: 62).

51. For an exploration of their relationship, see Bal (1987: 37-67), whose psychoanalytic reading of the story is a *tour de force*.

52. Niditch (1990: 620-21).

53. Bettelheim (1976: 128); I owe the reference to Bal (1987: 43).

54. On the riddle behind 13.17-19, see Torczyner (Tur Sinai) (1924:

141). LXXB writes 14.14 as a question.

55. Judg. 13.11, 12, 17, 18; 14.3, 15, 15.2, 6, 10, 11 (twice); 16.6, 10, 13, 15. The Hebrew does not supply an interrogative particle in 14.16. In

ch. 16, Delilah's inquiries into the source of Samson's strength do not

of only four chapters, it is not only the famous one in ch. 14 that is a riddle; others too take on a riddling cast. Whereas some of these questions are rhetorical (14.3, 15, 15.2, 11), and others are unremarkable in their contexts (e.g. 13.11, 15.6, 10), still others probe more deeply, impinging upon privileged information. In seeking to learn more about the mysterious stranger who has appeared to his wife, Manoah asks three questions: 'Are you the man who spoke to the woman?' (13.11); 'When your word(s) come(s) to pass, what will be the boy's manner of life and what will he do?' (13.12); 'What is your name?' (13.17). Knowledge of the name would give Manoah power over the divine emissary, and the question, like all questions after the divine name, meets with an evasive and ambiguous answer. Similarly, Delilah questions Samson three times about his strength (the fourth time she upbraids him for not telling her), and the correct answer gives her power over Samson.⁵⁶ Knowledge is power, and *women* are the ones who succeed in obtaining forbidden information in the story. To be precise, women—the Timnite and Delilah—are the ones who obtain forbidden information directly. Manoah does not succeed, though he tries; and the Philistines gain the information they seek indirectly, through the women: the Timnite tells them the answer to Samson's riddle, and Delilah obtains for them the secret of his strength. The Philistines' use of women to obtain knowledge is significant for the gender ideology of the saga, as we shall see.

necessarily have to be read as questions (cf. LXX, Vulg.), but in any event they serve that function.

56. In ch. 13 we have three questions (vv. 11, 12, 17) and a request (v. 15). Similarly, in ch. 16, Delilah questions Samson three times about his strength (vv. 6, 10, 13), but in v. 15 she upbraids rather than questions him. Both 13.15 and 16.15 imply a question ('Will the messenger stay? Wherein is Samson's strength great?') and both call for and receive an answer. Thus if we understand the term 'question' in a broad sense, both Manoah and Delilah ask four questions. On the patterning of the saga and the paralleling of ch. 13 and ch. 16, see Exum (1981).

*What Is Sweeter Than Honey
and What Is Stronger Than A Lion?*

The answer to Samson's riddle is a riddle whose answer is 'love', whatever other sexual meanings can be found in it. Why does Samson reveal his secrets to a woman? Is he simply stupid or is this a display of hubris?⁵⁷ Samson's riddle offers the key. The verb 'to love' (*ahav*) appears three times in the story. Both women demand of Samson that he prove his love. The Timnite laments, 'You only hate me; you do not love me' (14.16). Delilah complains, 'How can you say "I love you" when your heart is not with me?' (16.15). The narrator informs us in 16.4 that Samson loved Delilah. There is no reason to assume that the narrator wishes to suggest that Samson does not love the Timnite simply because he does mention it explicitly. After all, he has Samson answer her challenge to prove his love by telling her the answer to his riddle. The narrator's statement that Samson loved Delilah is, I think, not a sign that this is the first time Samson has loved, but rather a signal that this time is going to be especially important—a fatal attraction.

The story of Samson and Delilah is a variation of a traditional folktale whose latent meaning discloses male fear of women. There are numerous parallels in world literature. Gunkel cites two Egyptian examples, among others: the tale of the man whose heart is hidden in a tree and who dies when his wife reveals his secret and the tree is cut down; and the myth of Re, who is tricked by Isis into revealing the secret of his name, thereby giving her magic power over him.⁵⁸ There is a Greek legend about King Nisus of Megara, who had a purple or golden hair on the middle of his head. When the Cretans besieged Megara, his daughter Scylla fell in love with the enemy king and pulled out the hair from her father's head, so that he died.⁵⁹ One can imagine the story of Samson and Delilah as an Israelite folktale that

circulated independently before its incorporation into the Samson saga.⁶⁰ In my opinion, the story of Samson and the Timnite has been modeled on it by the biblical narrator, who wants to emphasize the moral by repeating it. The first time Samson makes the mistake of entrusting his secret to a woman, the consequences are worse for her than for him (*she* pays with her life). The second time is deadly for *Samson*.

The story expresses the male fear of surrendering himself to a woman, of betraying the self to the other. It also recognizes the temptation the other offers, the male's attraction to her. Samson sees women as desirable but chooses to ignore their danger, even with three chances to learn. Delilah does not betray Samson so much as he betrays himself by telling her 'all his heart' (16.18). She does not use subterfuge or deception. By the fourth time she inquires about Samson's strength, it is clear what she will do with this important information, but Samson reveals it to her anyway. And he tells her because he cannot resist her, because, as the text informs us, he loves her. Samson has to prove his love by surrendering something uniquely his—the answer to his riddle (Judg. 14), the source of his strength (Judg. 16)—something that gives the other power over him. Giving power to the other is always dangerous according to the androcentric ideology of the tale. The text's message to the Israelite male is, 'Don't do it!' (Recall similar advice given to the young man in Proverbs.) Women rob men of their strength. The man who surrenders is emasculated; he loses his potency. At another level, this is the male fear of losing the penis to the woman, an anxiety that finds representation in Samson's symbolic castration that takes place when his hair is cut and he is blinded.

At its psychosexual level, the text's message is about the danger of becoming one with the other. Losing the distinction between self and other in sex is both exhilarating and

57. So Niditch (1990: 616).

58. Gunkel (1913: 54-55).

59. Gaster (1981: 436-39) cites this and other examples.

60. Gunkel (1913: 55) found this 'die eigentliche Simson-Sage'. As he points out, it contains a number of connected motifs that appear individually in other parts of the saga.

threatening. As Samson illustrates, surrendering the self to the other in love is both attractive and dangerous. Too dangerous, according to our story, since it threatens a man's distinctness as male and thus his superior status (women are supposed to surrender to men, not the other way around). Surrendering, making himself vulnerable, is to make himself like the female. This is what happens to Samson. After he makes himself vulnerable by disclosing his secret, he becomes symbolically a woman.

Identification with the Other

We have already noted the sexual symbolism of the hair and the connection between shaving the hair and the loss of strength and sexual potency. We can now see the significance of the sexual vocabulary applied to Samson: 'entice', 'humble/rape', 'play/serve as amusement', 'grind'. Blinded and shaven, Samson is put to work at the mill, doing the work of women, slaves, or animals. Such punishment of prisoners of war in the ancient Near East had as its object not only to exploit, but also to humiliate them. 'Could a warrior be more ridiculed', asks K. van der Toorn, 'than by making him do the work traditionally assigned to slaves and women?'⁶¹ Having symbolically become woman,⁶² Samson must now destroy the other or remain in this emasculated state. Bal, in a brilliant interpretation of the scene in which Samson pulls down the Philistine temple, observes that Samson 'has found a better solution to the birth trauma than anybody else. He takes revenge, breaking the thighs and killing the impure Philistines with it. He outdoes woman, making the gap acceptably large. Not only does he kill the woman and with her, her people; he makes her superfluous, too.'⁶³ In this act of violence against women, it is interesting to note how Samson topples the pillars. The text says he grasped them and leaned upon them, one with his right

hand and one with his left. Burney points out that 'if he pushed the pillars apart, he would hardly have *grasped* them'.⁶⁴ Samson's act of destruction is thus an act that requires holding on. This dual aspect reflects the male view of women as object of both aggression and desire. Might grasping the pillars, in effect pulling them together rather than pushing them apart, represent a refusal of sex—Samson's solution to being taken in by women? The impossibility of refusal as a solution is witnessed by the fact that with it comes death (this is the commonplace that sex is necessary for life to continue).

After he has symbolically destroyed woman, Samson is reincorporated into the male domain of Israelite society, symbolized by the retrieval of his body from the wreckage of the female by 'his brothers and all his father's house' and by his burial in the tomb of Manoah his father (16.31). The ending has a moral: this male setting is where he should have stayed instead of going off to live with women. If the ending is unsatisfying (after all, the hero dies), it is because there is no satisfactory solution to the problem of the other within patriarchal binary thought. The other is both necessary to define the self—to be held onto—and threatening to the self's identity—to be destroyed.

Whereas Samson is temporarily identified with the other, the Philistines are permanently identified with otherness. They are on the negative side of the binary oppositions the text maintains, and they appear more negatively in the story because women are their representatives in their most important dealings with Samson. Women do their dirty work for them, and, in the process, get labeled treacherous and deceptive. The ideology works through circularity; treachery and deception then become identified as *women's* ways of behaving.⁶⁵ The (female-identified) Philistines cannot overcome Samson so long as they fight him in the male

61. Van der Toorn (1986: 249).

62. Niditch (1990: 616-17).

63. Bal (1987: 62).

64. Burney (1970: 390).

65. On women and deception, see the essays in Exum and Bos (1988).

way, in physical combat; they have to become the other, to resort to the female way.

The Other Controlled

In popular notions of the tale, women are the cause of Samson's downfall. In the actual story, however, neither the Timnite nor Delilah acts on her own initiative to harm Samson. Their motivation for disclosing his secrets is supplied by others. The Philistine guests at Samson's wedding threaten his bride in order to get her to find out the answer to Samson's riddle: if she does not tell it to them they will burn her and her father's house with fire (14.15). The Philistine lords bribe Delilah, offering her eleven hundred pieces of silver from each of them in return for discovering (uncovering) the source of Samson's great strength and the means to bind him (16.5). Without a woman's help, the Philistines cannot get the better of Samson; this is made clear in the episode with the harlot at Gaza. Only in this case, where a woman is not part of the Philistine plot to trap him, does Samson escape their trap without incurring any losses. There is a paradox here: without women the Philistines are impotent, but for all their power over Samson, the Timnite and Delilah are the pawns of men.

Women, according to the text's gender ideology, are powerful and dangerous. Samson can fight off Philistines by the thousand (15.14-16), but the strong man is powerless against a woman's charms. Now interestingly, the text does not say that the women used sexual favors to get the answers out of Samson. In both cases 'he told her' (14.17; 16.17) 'because she harassed him' (14.17; 16.16). The Timnite uses tears; Delilah presses Samson 'with her words' (16.16). How do convention and stereotyping come into play here to produce a negative picture of women? When commentators suggest that the women used sexual wiles to obtain the answers, are they simply reading in accordance with the ideology of the text, picking up on the latent message about the danger of

women's sexuality? Or do they create this association from their own biases, which they project onto the text?⁶⁶ Fear of women's power engenders the need to render women powerless. How is this done? In showing us how, the story in which women betray Samson's secrets betrays its own patriarchal agenda. It exposes patriarchy's reliance on two highly effective strategies to assert its control over women: You can threaten them, and they'll give in. You can bribe them, and they'll give in.

The androcentric agenda of the story requires some complicated textual maneuvers to mask its intentions. Women are portrayed as powerful and dangerous and yet subject to control by men. Through literary legerdemain, the biblical narrator manages to attach the blame for Samson's downfall to the women, who are themselves actually victims of exploitation. When it comes to the concept of betrayal, commentators have frequently outdone the text in blaming the women. They are sometimes willing to consider extenuating circumstances in the Timnite's case, because she acts to avert a threat to herself and her father's house. Also, the consequences of her betrayal are not so grave for Samson: he does not fall into Philistine hands, whereas she does. Unlike Delilah's betrayal, which leads to Samson's death, the Timnite's betrayal of Samson brings about her own death: the Philistines burn her and her father after all (so she gets what she deserves).⁶⁷ Men, and in fact his fellow Israelites, also betray Samson. Though the Judahites, like Delilah, bind Samson and give him over to the Philistines, they are not generally said to 'betray' him, for they not only tell Samson what they are going to do, they also promise not to harm him themselves. The brunt of the blame is reserved for Delilah—which is really not fair since Samson is complicit.⁶⁸

66. On this point, see Bal's reading (1987: 37-67).

67. The Philistines threaten the woman and her father's house with destruction in Judg. 14.15, but, according to the MT of 15.6, not the father's house but only the woman and her father are burned.

68. Bal's psychoanalytical reading (1987: 37-67) shows this quite clearly.

Like the Judahites, Delilah makes no secret of her intentions to bind Samson; three times she binds him in the manner he has described as able to render him 'like other men', and there is no question she will do so again.

Once they have used the women to gain mastery over Samson, the Philistines do not need them any more. They kill the Timnite. And they credit their god, and not Delilah, for their victory over their enemy (16.23, 24). Having served her purpose for males, Delilah is written out of the story (she is not even present among the spectators at Samson's final performance). The only motivation the text suggests for her is greed: other possible motives for aiding the Philistines—patriotism, for example—are suppressed.⁶⁹ She is not allowed to become the Philistine equivalent of Jael, for unlike Deborah's victory song (Judg. 5), which praises human agents along with Yhwh, the Philistine victory songs (Judg. 16.23, 24) give Dagon all the credit for giving Samson into their hands. And in the Greek text, Delilah even loses her role as subject of all four attempts to subdue Samson; the Greek supplies a barber and has him, not Delilah, cut Samson's hair.⁷⁰

Women are frequently the locus of the competition between male rivals, and all too often they become the victims of male rivalry. The man who controls the woman's power can gain control over other men. The Philistines exploit women's power, and with it reduce Samson figuratively to the position of a woman under their control. He grinds for them and serves as their amusement. In the end, of course, Samson destroys Philistines, but this requires a *deus ex machina*. Samson is rescued from his emasculated

69. See Fuchs (1988) on suppression of motivation as a patriarchal literary strategy for portraying women as deceptive.

70. LXXA and the Vulgate have a barber shave Samson. The Hebrew is third-person feminine singular, indicating that Delilah does the shaving, just as she is the agent in the other accounts of binding (16.8, 12) and weaving (vv. 13-14). A problem, however, is created by the phrase *waitiqn' la'ish* in v. 19. Sasson (1968) convincingly argues that the man is Samson and that Delilah calls to him to make sure he is soundly asleep.

state by his god, who, as Judg. 14.4 intimates, may have been controlling everything that has happened.⁷¹ Male superiority is reasserted when Samson, empowered by a god who is *de facto* male-identified, symbolically destroys woman.

The Androcentric Agenda

At its most obvious, the text teaches the Israelite male a lesson about the dangers of foreign women (cf. Proverbs). Nationalism reinforces the gender ideology of the text. Philistines are by definition bad. The reader identifying with the ideology of the text is predisposed to think the worst of women who are allied with them. As we have seen, the women do not have to be specifically identified as foreign women. They have only to behave like foreign women to be foreign women and therefore dangerous, capable of robbing a man of his vitality. The text complicates the nature of the male-female relationship by casting it in terms of Israel's relation to foreigners. The only good woman is an Israelite woman, and the only Israelite woman in the story appears in her role as mother. Beneath the apparent, surface distinction between Israelite and foreigner lies the gender issue of non-sexual (and thereby non-threatening) woman versus sexual (and threatening) woman.

Women's sexuality must be controlled. In order to reduce its threat, women's behavior must be regulated. Both the Timnite and Delilah are manipulated by the Philistines; their power over Samson ultimately is appropriated by an androcentric agenda to serve male interests. Samson's miraculous birth to a sterile woman shows that the deity, not woman, controls fertility. In teaching its lesson about the danger of women, the text illustrates the strategies that patriarchy has historically relied upon to control women. One is reliance on female fear of male aggression; in other words, by threat, as

71. We might say that women's power is appropriated by the Philistine men, whose power, in turn, is controlled by Yhwh who is the guarantor of the patriarchal status quo.

in the case of the Timnite. The threat of physical harm has traditionally been an effective means by which men control women. But it is not always the most desirable. Often a better way to regulate female behavior is by reward, as Delilah's example indicates. Women 'sell out' all the time in patriarchy. To gain an advantage for themselves they cooperate with the oppressor. A third way patriarchy controls women is by dividing women into respectable women and disreputable women, and thus, as we saw in Chapter 1, making gender solidarity impossible. (What might have happened if Samson had brought his wife from Timnah to his parents' house and she had met his mother?) We can now see why Samson is not endangered by the harlot as he is by his wife and by Delilah. The harlot is no threat to the patriarchal system; she already appears in an inferior, subordinate, and carefully regulated role in society. The women to whom men are inclined to make a commitment are the ones they must beware of; Samson gave in because he loved. Women are not to be trusted; this, in turn, justifies patriarchy's control of them. Women, as the account of the Timnite shows, are easily intimidated and manipulated, and, as Delilah shows, morally deficient. Even Manoah's wife, who is portrayed more favorably than her husband, is shown not to be trustworthy. She, after all, does not tell Manoah the whole message concerning Samson's future. Nor does Manoah really trust her, since he is not content with her account of the visitation but prays that the messenger come 'to us'. Even though Manoah never gets as much information as the woman about his son's future, he does get confirmation of the woman's story from the (male) messenger.

In the series of binary oppositions listed above, one of the story's central oppositions was omitted. It is the one the narrator wants to have reversed. The Samson saga deals with the struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors.⁷²

72. On the stories about Samson as resistance stories told by the underdog Israelites to poke fun at the superior Philistines, see Wharton (1973) and Niditch (1990).

These are 'resistance stories' told by the underdog Israelites unable to get the better of the militarily superior Philistines—stories in which their hero single-handedly triumphs over their enemies. We may consider, then, another set of oppositions:

oppressors / oppressed
strong / weak
Philistine / Israelite

Keeping in mind the basic male/female hierarchy, we can view the categories on the left as male-identified and those on the right as female-identified except in the case of the Philistine/Israelite opposition. It is this Philistine/Israelite opposition—the oppression of Israel by the Philistines—that the text wishes to see reversed. The powerful Philistine oppressors are represented by women; the weaker, oppressed Israelites are represented by Samson. As we have seen, the Philistines are strongly female-identified. Samson, who also becomes female-identified when his hair is cut and he is blinded and made to grind at the mill, reclaims his male-identified status when he pulls down the Philistine temple. Samson provides a model for Israel. Just as Samson moves from his humbled (female) position to reclaim his 'rightful' superior status, so too Israel will eventually, under David, make the transition from the weak and oppressed nation to the powerful oppressor of its enemies, beginning with the Philistines.

Whereas our story expresses the desire that Israel's situation of oppression be reversed, the oppression of women is taken for granted. Women's subordination to men is, after all, considered to be the natural state of things. For our text, it is not binary thinking, with its inevitable reinforcing of a hierarchy in which one side of the opposition is always privileged, that is problematic, but only the relative positions of Israelite and Philistine that are in need of reversal. But the recognition in the story that something is wrong with the structure of power relations opens the possibility that other relations may be imbalanced. In order to deny that this is the case with the position of women and to justify

patriarchy, the text relies on a variety of means to portray women as deserving their inferior status. That Samson loses his life in the process of establishing his superior position over the other betrays an implicit awareness of how costly the struggle to maintain supremacy is, and perhaps even of its ultimate futility.

If the text teaches men a lesson about the dangers of women and justifies patriarchy's control of women's sexuality, its lesson to women depends upon women's accepting its distinction between respectable and disreputable women. The story encourages women to become lawful and loyal mothers. This is the only role in which they can achieve status. As Esther Fuchs observes, this message constitutes a powerful ideological strategy:

By projecting onto woman what man desires most, the biblical narrative creates a powerful role model for women. The image of the childless woman (barren wife or widow) who evolves from vulnerability and emptiness to security and pride by giving birth to sons offers a lesson for all women. It should be ascribed to the imaginative and artistic ingenuity of the biblical narrator that one of the most vital patriarchal concerns is repeatedly presented not as an imposition on woman but as something she herself desires more than anything else.⁷³

We have seen that the text idealizes Samson's mother and relies on convention to encourage its readers to supply the maternal desire. As in the portrayals of the three foreign women, suppressing details prevents the woman from becoming a full personality. The only alternatives this text offers to the image of mother is that of the disreputable woman, and it relies on nationalism to bolster its gender ideology.⁷⁴ Given these choices, what Israeliite woman

73. Fuchs (1985a: 130).

74. Interestingly, in Proverbs the negative female figure is identified as the 'foreign woman' and the 'strange woman'. The combination of terms suggests that behavior is what is really at stake in defining the 'bad' woman, and not simply, or even necessarily, nationality. Indeed, the same kind of ideology is at work here as in the Samson saga, where whatever is outside the androcentric symbolic order is

would opt to behave like 'one of those *foreign* women'?

described as dangerous, other, strange, and foreign.