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Reading Solomon J. Solomon's *Samson* against the Book of Judges.

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This paper examines Solomon J. Solomon's Samson, an interpretative artistic portrayal of the biblical Samson and Delilah narrative in Judges 16. Solomon's painting explores themes of eroticism, power, and 'the Other'. Solomon both embellishes and fills gaps in the biblical narrative. By doing so, he conspicuously explores themes only implicit in the Bible, thus creating content where the biblical text remains silent. Filling these narrative gaps and making the implicit explicit changes the focus of the Samson and Delilah narrative, thereby adding to the cultural memory of the biblical text and altering the way in which the biblical narrative is approached by readers.

Introduction

Historically, the Bible has greatly influenced art but art and the artist can also influence how biblical texts are read and remembered (Exum, *Beyond* 157). Art can reveal new dimensions to biblical texts by highlighting certain aspects that the text may have merely implied or left open to interpretation. The artist can suggest new dimensions by filling narrative gaps through their art (Exum, *Beyond* 152) and Graber notes that "the human brain is far more adept at extracting information from audiovisual stimuli than from purely verbal information. Whether spoken or printed, verbal stimuli are processed serially, one verbal unit at a time. By contrast, visual stimuli are processed simultaneously." (96). Therefore, this article will analyse Solomon J. Solomon's *Samson* (Walker Art Gallery, 1887), which interprets the biblical narrative of Samson and Delilah from the Book of Judges, chapter 16, and thus impacts the reader's understanding and memory of the biblical text and the characters of Samson and Delilah. The article will focus on three key aspects of the painting compared to the biblical narrative: eroticism, the portrayal of power, and Delilah as 'the Other'. The first section, on eroticism, considers how Solomon's painting draws on the implicit and underlying themes of sexual intercourse and eroticism in the Samson narrative. It makes them explicit and central to the artistic depiction of the tale, thus shaping the understanding and memory of the Samson narrative. The second section investigates power dynamics to see how Solomon's artistic interpretation of the text mirrors portrayals of power as represented in the Book of Judges. It also addresses how Solomon fills narrative gaps and the ways in which the painting adds to the cultural memory of Delilah as a sexual and immoral being. The final section focuses on Delilah as 'the Other' and on how Solomon has embellished and accentuated the 'Otherness' of Delilah from the Book of Judges.

Eroticism

In the biblical narrative of Samson, the Israelite hero, has avoided capture by the Philistines due to his superior God-given strength. When Samson falls in love with Delilah, who is from the “valley of Sorek” (Jdg. 16:4.), the Philistines approach her. She is to be paid “eleven hundred pieces of silver” from each Philistine (Jdg. 16:5) if she can discover the secret to Samson’s strength. Three times Delilah asks Samson to reveal his secret unsuccessfully. Delilah questions his love for her, before asking a fourth time and thus receives “his whole secret” (Jdg. 16:18). Solomon’s painting depicts the moment the Philistines are called in, by Delilah, for the fourth and final time. Samson awakes to the Philistines, not knowing that his hair has been shorn and not knowing that “the Lord has left him” (Jdg. 16:20).

This section will discuss the erotic nature of the biblical text and the ways in which Solomon has explored and highlighted such themes of eroticism, both embellishing and adding to the narrative through his painting. The focus of Solomon’s painting is a tangle of bodies at the centre, purposefully intensifying the struggle, highlighting the mass of bodies, and magnifying the erotic nature of the scene (Miller 129). Samson’s nakedness, and the bed as the centre of activity (Kahr 294), creates eroticism by implying intercourse between himself and Delilah, a narrative gap in Judges, which Solomon subtly begins to fill here. Although the biblical narrative does not explicitly describe a sexual encounter between Samson and Delilah, one has long been assumed by both scholars and readers of the text, religious and non-religious. Such assumptions are based on their intimate sleeping arrangements, with Samson falling asleep beside her (Jdg. 16:14, 19, 20), and the narrative revealing that “she let him fall asleep on her lap” (Jdg. 16:19 (NRSV)). These passages can be coupled with Samson’s historic promiscuity (Jdg. 14:1-3; 16:1). In Solomon’s painting, recent sexual intercourse only assumed in the biblical narrative is emphasized almost to the point of being explicit due to Samson’s complete and Delilah’s partial nudity. However, the nudity of the Philistines is less clear. It could be evidence of the struggle the Philistines are having in detaining Samson, resulting in his clothes being torn off. Samson, after having his hair shorn off by Delilah while he sleeps, should “...become weak, and be like anyone else...”, as we are constantly told in the biblical narrative (Jdg. 16:7, 13, 17). However, Solomon’s Samson does not appear weak at all and definitely not “like anyone else”, as it would not take seven men with ropes to restrain an ordinary man as it appears to in the painting. Rather than the struggle causing the nudity of the Philistines, it seems that their nudity is a deliberate tool employed by Solomon in order to highlight and heighten the eroticism of this episode (Exum, *Plotted* 194). The Philistines’ strained and tense positions, and their intertwined and partially nude bodies, are highlighted by their flesh-coloured garments; at a glance, the two Philistines in the foreground of the painting appear completely naked. This is further evidence of Solomon actively portraying eroticism through the brawl, thereby filling gaps in the narrative through his interpretative painting and, furthermore, shaping the narrative himself.

Samson is feminised through Solomon’s depiction of the struggle. In the painting Samson is being acted upon as an object. This passivity and lack of agency is typically associated with the position of women in a contemporary biblical society (Fiorenza 115). Not only is Samson placed in a passive, and thus traditionally feminized position, but the androcentric and heteronormative text also frames him as dominated and subdued, which further feminises him. At Delilah’s hands, Samson has lost his hair. The struggle ends with Samson being “seized” (16:21) and subdued at the hands of the Philistines. The depiction is not only erotic, but also homoerotic. Samson is held closely and tightly from behind in a

group of partially dressed men, all with sinews and muscles tensed due to the physically energetic, vigorous, and forceful nature of the activity. The tangled battle is emphasised through Solomon's use of light: their bright peachy flesh contrasting with the bronzed and shadow-laden room (Miller 127). This homoerotic portrayal, in a heteronormative text, responds to the feminisation of Samson in Judges and fills gaps that the biblical narrative alludes to but does not make explicit. It puts Solomon in the category of 'woman' by contemporary standards through his domination, both sexual and physical, and ultimately through his forced submission.

Not only is Samson feminised in the text through his loss of power, which in the Bible is closely related to the female and feminine (Bach 137), he is also weakened further by being blinded (Jdg. 16:21) and feminised further through being forced to grind at the mill (Jdg. 16:21). Grinding implies "the domesticated subservient status of a woman or beast" (Niditch 166), and is a role usually reserved for females (Bach 137). The binary of male and female as opposites indicates that the use of language conventionally attached to the female or femininity act to feminise a man and his masculinity (Sedgwick 2). Though Solomon does not depict Samson as grinding in his painting, by emphasising Samson's femininity in the scene in other ways, as we have seen, he draws attention to themes alluded to in the Bible that a reader might not have otherwise considered.

Furthermore, the original biblical text states that the Philistines want to "seize" Samson (Jdg. 16:5), a phrase which is frequently used in the Old Testament to indicate sex, with a strong inference of rape (Jdg. 19: 25, Gen. 34:2) (Niditch 165). This is characteristically (although not exclusively) enacted upon women. Similarly, at the time of Solomon's painting, women were still understood as weak, in contrast to the perception of men as being strong (Beasley 81). Women were perceived as victims and men as aggressors. This binary of strength and weakness, attached to the dualistic pairing of male and female, allows any language traditionally attached to the female or the feminine to reduce a man's status and standing to that of females (Sedgwick 2). Through likening Samson's experience of subjugation at the hands of the Philistines to that of a female rape victim, Solomon responds to biblical and contemporary perceptions of feminine weakness by further exaggerating the narrative and stripping Samson of his masculinity. Solomon therefore has a role in shaping his audience's understanding and memory of Samson and his biblical narrative, and ensures that it is a wholly sexual and erotic one.

Amid the erotic mass of bodies in Solomon's painting, Samson's prominent position and height show that he is the most important character in this painting (Edwards, 2013). This is also indicated by his dominant position in a triangle created by himself and the two partially dressed Philistines. His heightened position in the painting allows the viewer relate to his perspective, the tension can clearly be seen in Samson's harrowing stare, revealing his physical pain and emotional suffering (Exum, *Beyond* 153). The viewer is drawn to follow Samson's intense gaze towards Delilah, to see what he sees and feel what he feels (Exum, *Beyond* 163). The viewers' eyes move from the action and follow Samson's stare, being drawn to Delilah, separate from the struggle and on the far right of the painting. For most viewers, her bare breasts, which are symbolic of prostitution (Edwards 2013), are prominent: her pale skin is highlighted against a background of warm, rich shades, thereby accentuating her face and breasts. This emphasis on her body works to establish her sexuality and thus her immorality (Exum,

Plotted 195). Solomon's decision to portray Delilah as sexual is a key feature of the painting rather than of the biblical narrative. In the Book of Judges, it is Samson who we are led to believe is sexually driven and immoral due to his encounter with a prostitute and a previous marriage before his relationship with Delilah begins. The biblical text tells nothing of Delilah's sexual history or moral background. She is vilified purely from an Israelite perspective, for having defeated an Israelite hero. It is interesting to note that elsewhere in the Bible, women, such as Esther, Judith, and Jael, similarly use their power and sexuality to defeat their enemies, and are lauded for their actions (Gaines 22-23). Delilah's vilification, then, stems from her betrayal of the Israelite cause; at the hands of Solomon, however, her sexuality performs the same action. Her sexuality becomes a mere pretext; an easy target for depicting her in a negative light.

Solomon magnifies the sexual nature of this story through his depiction of eroticism and homoeroticism. He makes explicit the feminisation and emasculation of Samson, as well as the sexualisation of Delilah, which is only implicit in the Judges text. This shapes the viewers' understanding of the Samson and Delilah narrative, by both complementing and reshaping the original biblical text.

Power

In paintings of biblical texts, it is common for men to be depicted as powerful in comparison to women due to the societal perception of women as weak and subservient and men as strong and dominant (Exum, *Bible* 92). Examples of this include *Susannah and the Elders* (Daniel 13), painted by artists such as Artemisia Gentilesch and Guiseppe Bartolomeo Chiari, as well as *Jezebel and Ahab* (1 and 2 Kings), painted by Willy Pogany and Thomas Matthew Rooke. Solomon's *Samson* digress from this typical portrayal of gendered power dynamics, as Samson the once hyper masculine and potent man has been emasculated both physically and metaphorically.

In both the Book of Judges and Solomon's painting, we see a woman, Delilah, who is in the position of power (Smith 46). She influences and manipulates Samson into revealing his great, self-destructive secret, exerting power over him both through the knowledge she gains and through the physical act of removing his hair (Exum, *Beyond* 153.). Moreover, it is notable that it is a woman who succeeds in defeating Samson where other men have failed (Smith 46). In the painting, her power is emphasised through the contrast which Solomon creates with the men. She is alone, independent, and pleased with the situation as is evident from her gleeful expression and parading of Samson's shorn hair. This is opposed to the Philistines who are clustered together, struggling, in a group effort to subdue Samson; something which Delilah has already managed to do (Smith 46). Delilah's power is further heightened by Solomon in the way she holds her trophy; hair is a symbol of potency and, here, Delilah is gripping Samson's hair - his power.

That Delilah has used her sexuality to put her newfound knowledge into practice and remove Samson's strength is evident from her bodily position in Solomon's picture. As Samson arches his body in a brutal struggle, so too does Delilah arch her body, but in one that exemplifies her exuberance. Her body is the mirror image of his as, for Solomon, the power that was once accorded to Samson now

belongs to Delilah. It is particularly interesting that Solomon chose to portray, and exaggerate from the biblical narrative, such a starkly gendered role reversal considering the androcentric socio-cultural context of reception.

Solomon's decision to empower a female in his painting is intertwined with an ascription of guilt upon Delilah. Solomon's *Samson*, in a similar fashion to many other artistic depictions of Samson and Delilah such as Guercino's and Matthias Storm's paintings (both titled *Samson and Delilah*), magnifies Delilah's guilt. Solomon has painted Delilah in a manner which presents her as the culpable character and as a result makes the men in the text, Samson, the Philistines, and Yahweh, less responsible for the events. The blame is placed upon the one female in this painting even though in the biblical narrative Samson was never forced to reveal the secret of his strength, meaning that the blame should also lie with him (Exum, *Beyond* 162). Delilah never misleads or lies to Samson. She tells him that she wants to know what makes him so strong "so that one could subdue you" (Jdg. 16:6; 16:10; 16:13).

When the painting is read against Judges 16, a different image of power is portrayed, one where Delilah's power is a tool wielded by men in a patriarchal world in which patriarchal agendas and interests are served (Smith 47). In both Judges and the painting, she is given power so as to be used as a scapegoat for Samson and Yahweh's actions (Exum, *Beyond* 163). In biblical texts, it is easier for men to accept the treachery of a woman rather than acknowledge their own guilt (Kahr 285). In Judges we are told that Yahweh has a plan for Samson and that the plan is on track (Jdg. 14:4). Yahweh decides when to keep Samson alive (Jdg. 15:19) and when Samson should die (Jdg. 16:28-30) (Exum, *Beyond* 157). In this instance, Solomon clearly follows the biblical depiction and places blame on Delilah. This blame has been placed on Delilah in such an effective manner that it has been reproduced on numerous occasions by artists such as Solomon, Guercino and Storm. Paintings by artists such as these compound the cultural memory of Delilah as powerful, but only in a negative sense due to the guilt laid upon her. Through multiple repetitions of this motif, 'Delilah' has become cultural shorthand for a seductress, temptress and an untrustworthy woman (Solle 138).

It would be possible to view Delilah as a positive figure if she were presented as the hero rather than as a prostitute, a characterization which automatically paints her as a morally culpable woman and which therefore prejudices the viewer against her (Exum, *Bible* 81). Delilah as a Philistine hero would be considered brave for going against the powerful Samson, resourceful for using her sexuality and femininity, and clever for using "the only kind of power available to her" (Smith 46). This active choice in portraying Delilah negatively reveals that there are "multiple social meanings" which can be conveyed by artists (Miles 169). However, this image of a strong and independent woman is not presented positively in the Bible, nor in Solomon's painting, as it would challenge the status quo of the patriarchal society of the time (Smith 46). Rather, Solomon's depiction of Delilah allows men in a male dominated society to continue "controlling the danger" a prostitute can pose (Exum, *Plotted* 157).

Delilah as 'the Other'

We have seen that, although Delilah may be holding the power, it is deliberately turned into something negative through ascription of guilt. A similar aim is achieved in both the Bible by ‘Othering’ Delilah. This view is then reproduced and strengthened over time through portrayals such as Solomon’s, thus shaping the text and the perception of its characters in a visual format that increases memorability (Vargas and Yoon 58). Delilah is “Othered” in Solomon’s painting through her gender (Solomon’s audience was predominantly male) (Edwards, 2013), her sexuality (she is remembered as a prostitute), her nationality (she is believed to be a foreigner), and her ethnicity (she is exoticised) (Wiersbe 153). The Book of Judges portrays Delilah as an independent woman; unlike other women in the Bible she is not identified in relation to a man but with where she lives (Exum, *Plotted* 181), the “valley of Sorek” (Jdg. 16:4). This is not the Israelite way of being introduced, which highlights her difference: she is not an Israelite as she has no genealogical roots. It is therefore assumed by most biblical scholars that she is a foreigner, and Samson has a weakness for foreign women (Jdg. 14:1-4). No Israelite woman would betray an Israelite hero to the Philistines for money (Exum, *Bible* 81). The theme of the seductive foreign woman running through the bible “finds quintessential expression in the character of Delilah” as depicted by Solomon (Niditch 167). Solomon subtly indicates the ‘Otherness’ of Delilah through the décor of her room. “Suggesting the mystery and decadence of the orient” (Exum, *Bible* 82) is the tiger skin rug that carries connotations of vanity (Cope 56), eroticism, foreignness, and exoticism (Miller 131). The rug also indicates a bestial nature; like the tiger, Delilah is beautiful, dangerous, hungry, powerful and deadly, but above all, a wild animal (Miller 131).

Moreover, the emphasis placed on Delilah being from “the valley of Sorek” (Jdg. 16:4) carries connotations of wildness and abandon, as the root meaning of the Hebrew word for “valley” is related to “torrents”, while the root of “Sorek” is related to “grape wine”. Both of these terms are associated with passion and a lack of control. Solomon picks up on the implicit meaning of Delilah’s introduction by portraying her as demented and wild in accordance with the Hebrew. This again depicts her as an ‘Other’, as this is not how Israelite women should behave, but how many foreign women were presumed to behave (Klein 61).

As mentioned, Solomon causes the viewer to interact with the painting and follow Samson’s intense gaze upon Delilah (Miller 127). This intense male gaze upon a partially dressed woman highlights Delilah’s nature as a prostitute, accentuating her ‘Otherness’, as the viewer follows the dramatic and painful stare upon the dishevelled figure. Samson’s look reveals hurt and betrayal, whereas Delilah’s stare reveals intensity and wildness. There is no indication in the biblical text as to how Delilah feels about Samson’s capture, defeat, and eventual death, yet Solomon has chosen to vilify her further through his visual portrayal of her reaction to Samson’s situation. Solomon’s painting shows Delilah revelling in her victory, won through her sexuality and lust-inducing nature. This suggests that the play on her name *dildela*, meaning to “enfeeble” is apt, and that she uses her sexuality in a way others would not be expected to: as both a tool and a weapon, making her different to the audience and therefore highlighting her nature as ‘the Other’ (Bronner 92).

Solomon further emphasises Delilah’s ‘Otherness’ through her physical appearance. In the painting, Delilah is wearing white clothes, a colour which normally represents purity, virginity, and

innocence (Manning 112). By depicting her in white, Solomon juxtaposes the virtuous qualities brought to mind by her dress with her brazen sexuality and immorality, thereby enhancing her provocative and dangerous nature. Solomon also paints Delilah wearing gaudy jewellery, which not only depicts her as materialistic, but which also draws attention to her bare body, thereby emphasising her nudity and forward sexuality to the viewer (Exum, *Plotted* 195).

Conclusion

It is clear from Solomon's painting that art can influence the way a text is read in a number of ways. In this case, Solomon fills narrative gaps in the Book of Judges as well as introducing "encoded messages about sexual identities, gender roles and the expectations these images give us" (Exum, *Bible* 93). Solomon magnifies the sexual and erotic nature of Judges in a way that draws out the multi-layered sexual motif throughout the Samson saga, feminising Samson and making Delilah explicitly sexual. This painting also responds to its socio-cultural context by maintaining traditional gender roles, showing that a woman who is independent and powerful is not a positive figure but an 'Other'. Highlighting Delilah's 'Otherness' not only preserves social structures in a patriarchal society by portraying female power as negative, it also serves to ensure Delilah is culpable for the scene depicted in Solomon's painting, whether or not she is to blame. Solomon's painting both draws on the biblical text and adds to it, thus shaping the memory of the narrative and its characters.

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