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Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible

edited by
Ken Stone

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Jacket painting:
Jonathan's Token to
Lord Frederick Le
By kind permissio
The Minneapolis
The John Van Der

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VIOLENT FEMMES AND S/M: QUEERING SAMSON AND DELILAH

Lori Rowlett

Although the story of Samson and Delilah can be read in a number of different ways, stereotypical role assumptions are usually made about the two main characters. According to the established paradigms of biblical studies, Samson is seen as the flawed, tragic Man of God, with Delilah as the evil foreign temptress. As Danna Nolan Fewell notes, commentators usually consider her 'the *femme fatale par excellence*' (Fewell 1998: 79, emphasis in original). However, what happens when the story is read through a glass queerly? The pattern of domination by the exotic Other in a tale of bondage and degradation emerges as a stock S/M scenario. Delilah is the femme dominatrix, teasing and tormenting Samson, who has all the characteristics of a 'butch bottom'. (The role-play terms butch and femme may apply to anyone, male, female or other, in any combination.) The constant give and take between the two lovers resembles S/M role-play, complete with ritual questions, hair fetishism and other power games. Delilah does not trick him into saying or doing anything. Samson deliberately relinquishes control to the dominatrix who repeatedly subjects him to humiliation and bondage. The story therefore can be read in terms of the ritual codes of S/M games. Other codes come into play as well: issues of gender, political identity and power are interwoven with a deeper question of divine control and relinquishment of control, raising the possibility that the structure of the book of Judges places Yahweh in a rotating game of S/M.

Gender in Samson and Delilah

The genders of the two characters in the Bible are apparently static. One is a man and the other a woman. The process of gender identification in other versions of the Samson and Delilah story is never quite so simple.

The earliest musical versions (other than a few madrigal songs sung by males) of the Samson and Delilah story were oratorios written during the era when the great divas were male castrati, which set up the expectation of imaginative identification across gender lines. Benedetto Ferrari (a seventeenth-century Italian composer) wrote an oratorio, *Sansone*, but, unfortunately, very little survives of the earliest performance history. Handel wrote his *Samson* oratorio late in life, and while castrati were used extensively in his operas, none were used in his oratorios (Smithers 1977). However, musical performance was and still is often a gender-bending masquerade (Rosselli 1992). Many operas popular today have 'trouser roles' in which a woman singer portrays a young man. In an earlier era such roles could be played by a boy pretending to be a woman pretending to be a boy.

As women came to be cast in female parts, due to increasing acceptance of women as public performers, opera developed toward the kind of romantic melodrama seen in Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*, with libretto by Ferdinand Lemaire (Scherer 1998). The overripe emotional treatment gives it a campy flavor, very much like a drag performance. As Umberto Eco points out in 'The Myth of Superman' (Eco 1981), the message of a text may be expressed at the outset in terms of a fixed code, but it is caught by divers groups of receivers and deciphered on the basis of other codes. The sense of the message often undergoes filtration or distortion in the process, which completely alters its 'pragmatic' function. Grand opera, like musical comedy, is often received by a gay male audience through a code of camp sensibility which involves no small measure of identification with the femme characters.

A role like the Saint-Saëns' Dalila is already full of hyperbolic female characteristics, like a drag performance. As Judith Butler makes clear, all gender is like drag in that gender, even in heterosexual contexts, is constantly being performed (Butler 1993: 125-26). Drag is not a secondary imitation of an original set of gender norms, which are stable and in some way 'natural'. Instead, hegemonic heterosexuality requires a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations (even by heterosexuals). The illusion of naturalness is achieved through constant repetition, but heterosexuality's attempts to become its own idealizations can never be fully or finally achieved. Not only is constant performance of gender norms required to maintain the illusion, but an elaborate structure of pathologizing practices and normalizing sciences

is needed to consecrate its claim. Drag, according to Butler, reflects on the imitative structure by which heterosexualized gender produces itself, disputing its claim to naturalness.

No one has ever accused grand opera of naturalness in any case. Already a complex code in which every aspect of character is conveyed by a set of conventions well known to its fans, opera invites identification with the stylized performance of the femme. Although both male and female characters are likely to pour out their hearts in an aria, female opera characters are especially made to operate in the sphere of romantic relationships. The focus on love as sphere of influence is a way of performing gender, along with the hyperfeminine wigs, make-up, gestures and costumes. Therefore power usually has to be confined to this sphere for female characters, whether they are victims or victimizers. They are not always the more vulnerable partner, as the Samson opera demonstrates. Samson is the more vulnerable, but he can act out his power in various contexts. For Delilah, the romantic sphere is where her power finds an outlet, as is typical for the diva roles. John Crum, in a review of several books on the queer reception of opera (Crum 1996), says that during the era of the closet (by which he means mainly the pre-Stonewall era), gay males identified with the opera diva because she suffered and yet she was powerful. I would argue that the diva is still a figure of great importance for identification because of her role(s) as powerful femme and expressive outlet for strong emotion.

Identification with a gender, Butler maintains, is always an ambivalent process, which involves identifying with a set of norms 'that are and are not realizable' at the same time. There is always a cost in every identification because it implies the loss of other possible identifications. The identification of (at least some) gay men with opera divas provides a way of vicariously participating in overdetermined gendered emotion, emoting 'as a woman', while at the same time allowing a man to 'reverse and resignify' (to use Butler's terms) the performance as camp.

The overdetermined gender characteristics given to Delilah are not limited to opera. Milton's closet play *Samson Agonistes* (Milton 1963) employs a set of seventeenth-century gender descriptors built into Delilah's words. Unlike her biblical counterpart, Milton's Dalila (as Milton spells her name) attempts a reconciliation with Samson in which she presents her self-defense as a speech. In it she blames her woman's 'frailty' and 'weakness' which make her 'inquisitive, importune of

secrets, then with like infirmity to publish them'. Hope Parisi points out that these are faults assumed to be specifically female (Parisi 1994). Parisi goes on to contextualize Dalila's deference to male opinion and her reticence to speak as conventions of femininity in the seventeenth century, a period in which women's speech was problematic. Women were to remain silent, at least in public life. Romance was one area, however, in which they were allowed a voice, so Dalila speaks in terms of love. Love, she says, caused her to do what she did. The use of feminine clichés in the characterization of Dalila constitutes another example of 'gender performance' in Butler's terms, although Milton's play was never performed in an actual theater. Closet plays, by definition, were only meant to be read, not performed. Nevertheless, Milton's Dalila, while not necessarily a woman on the stage, provides another example (albeit a two-dimensional one) of the performance of gender. She is a woman (on the printed page) performing herself female by her impersonation of a hyperfeminine ideal.

When the biblical Samson and Delilah story is read through the lens of its literary and musical performance history, we end up with a butch bottom and a dominatrix femme of either indeterminate gender or gender so overdetermined as to verge on the camp sensibility of gender impersonation. The sexes could easily be further altered by transposing the Samson role into the contralto range for an all-female cast, but no one has yet done so. It would be fascinating with an all-male cast too, like the controversial *Swan Lake* ballet in 1999.

Male and female are, as Butler says, unstable categories. Similarly, butch and femme, in gay and (especially) lesbian aesthetics, are intentionally fluid roles, meant to be played with, not meant to be immutable categories. Either one can be male or female, or some other interstitial category. Relations of dominance and submission in S/M are likewise fluid. As Foucault says, there are roles, but the roles can always be reversed. Even when roles are stabilized, S/M is a strategic game in which power structures are creatively acted out for the purpose of bodily pleasure. Some S/M practices produce intense sexual pleasure while bypassing the genitals themselves. Because S/M involves the eroticization of body parts other than (exclusively) the genitals, it represents what David Halperin calls a remapping of the body's erotic sites (Halperin 1995: 88). Therefore, any role may be played by any person, regardless of genital configuration.

S/M Play

Although Delilah is popularly thought of as a temptress and deceiver, she is remarkably straightforward in the biblical account. As Fewell notes, Delilah asks directly for what she wants. It is Samson who deceives her by giving her false information about the source of his strength and how to subdue him. She does not 'tempt' the information out of him either. Instead, Samson gives it willingly when he grows tired of their bondage play and tired of her asking. Perhaps he is merely tired of winning the bondage game and is willing to take it up to the next level, knowing it to be a dangerous move, yet desiring it.

Danger and lure of the unknown may be what attracted Samson to foreign women in the first place (Crenshaw 1978). According to the Deuteronomistic History, the problem with non-Israelite women as wives is not their sexual ways, but their religion. The assumption is that they bring their non-monotheistic practices into the community, where they become a source of pollution. Nevertheless, the mystery of the forbidden may have been attractive to him in all three of his liaisons with foreign women, because the unknown always includes an element of danger. One wonders too whether part of the attraction might be power. The Philistines were the ones with political power. Does Samson want to match wits with them? Or, more likely, does he harbor a deep desire to be dominated by a woman from the powerful group, a woman who represents power itself?

Judging from the structure of Samson's game with Delilah, he desires her as dominatrix. Fewell, a perceptive critic, recognizes the 'game' element of the Samson and Delilah story: 'He submits to her willingly, as if it were some kind of game', and then later, 'He is indeed playing games with her' (Fewell 1998: 79). Fewell does not follow up the implications of the sexual game of dominance and submission, however. Samson submits willingly to Delilah so she can tie him up, a classic bondage game. When he tires of winning every time, he delves into an act of deeper submission. In modern S/M, both partners have a codeword to stop the game to keep it safe, but part of the allure is being on the edge of danger. As John Preston points out in his article on the gay male leather scene (Preston 1996), 'overcodification' makes the game too safe, too predictable, and that makes it unsexy: 'For me, S/M had all been about living on the edge, being on the very cusp, being an outlaw: roles were something to be tried on, mocked, challenged'

(Preston 1996: 176). When Samson takes the game to the next level, he is seeking a new challenge.

The dominating partner in S/M sometimes plays a parental role. Preston describes what he calls the 'daddy thing' as a fetish with an element of truth underneath: 'Daddy has some lessons he can show a good boy who wants to learn. He knows how to put a bottom through a rite of passage... Daddy knows where the edge is...' (Preston 1996: 185). In S/M with a female top, the parental role may be a mother-figure. Delilah in the Samson story has strong motherly overtones, another fact noticed by Fewell:

He transfers his allegiance from his real mother to his substitute lover-mother. Not only does he reveal the secret known only to himself and his mother, but he entrusts himself to Delilah as a child might trust his mother. As he sleeps upon Delilah's lap (some texts read, 'between her knees'), he loses his manly hair and his manly strength (Fewell 1998: 79).

Shaving hair is also a classic element of S/M play, although the modern reader has no way of knowing how long it has been so. In the biblical story, Samson's hair had to remain uncut because of the Nazirite vow, in which his mother said that no razor would touch his head. His strength departs from him as divine favor departs from him for breaking this vow. What is usually not remarked upon in discussions of Samson's manly strength being bound up with his long hair is the fetish aspect of hair shaving. Having the power to make someone submit to the removal of his hair, or to remove his own hair, whether of the genitals, body or head, is the prerogative of the top. Having the power to command someone not to is a dominating move also. Since Samson's mother was the one who made the original vow dedicating him as a Nazirite, she and Delilah are in competition to be the top, a competition Delilah wins. However, Yahweh is the real top, since the vow was ultimately made to Yahweh.

The one sense in which Delilah acts as deceiver of Samson, as she is so often accused by critics of doing, is in quitting the S/M game. Instead of continuing to keep him on the edge of danger, she at that point abandons him and the sex play. She disappears from the story altogether, leaving him in other hands, divine as well as human. First the Philistines have their way with him, then Yahweh does.

Theological Application of the Pattern

On a deeper level, the S/M reading of Samson and Delilah lays bare the underlying power relations of the book of Judges, which is a constituent part of the Deuteronomistic History. The cycle of stories in Judges centers on various heroes with divinely bestowed powers. As Eco has pointed out, superhuman heroes often operate within the confines of a 'closed text', so that a series of events repeats according to a set scheme. The hero's extraordinary powers are brought to bear on petty localized manifestations of evil which always resurface, only to be vanquished again and again on a small scale. The same divinely bestowed powers could presumably end the underlying evil once and for all, but instead, like S/M role-play, the scenario always begins again at the same point.

Human heroes, according to Eco, are 'consumed' by the action of the story, which brings death or some other denouement to the human characters and eventual closure to the text. With Superman and other superhuman characters, however, events become cyclical. While the individual human Judges, who act as Yahweh's surrogates in the biblical stories, eventually die, Yahweh is the one character who never does. Furthermore, he is, like all superheroes, invincible. Why, then, is Yahweh limited to violent small-scale victories, again and again, over local opponents?

Yahweh, in the S/M pattern, alternates between being a top (deploying power) and being a bottom (relinquishing power), toying with the ancient Israelites, who (by definition) are not gods and therefore have considerably less power in the game. Yahweh emerges as a sadistic character in the Deuteronomistic Historian's (henceforth called DH) schema in Judges because he/she has the power to do 'good' on a grand scale, but chooses to dole it out in small doses and then pull back, letting people be overcome by 'evil'.

'What is good?' Eco asks in his analysis of the Superman stories. Because Superman is 'practically omnipotent', he should have in front of him an enormous field of action for doing good:

From a man who could produce work and wealth in astronomic dimensions in a few seconds, one could expect the most bewildering political, economic, and technological upheavals in the world. From the solution of hunger problems to the tilling of uninhabited regions, from the destruction of inhuman systems (if we read Superman into the 'spirit of Dallas',

why does he not go to liberate six hundred million Chinese from the yoke of Mao?), Superman could exercise good on a cosmic level, or on a galactic level, and furnish us in the meantime with a definition that through fantastic amplification could clarify precise ethical lines everywhere (Eco 1981: 122-23).

The question then becomes what is the 'evil' in the book of Judges and what is the 'good'. In the DH's frame around each episode, 'doing evil in the sight of Yahweh' always consists of taking part in Canaanite or Philistine religious practices. In other words, religious diversity is the problem. The good is a rigid monotheism that must be reinstated and reinforced by means of physical violence. The same supernatural power could eliminate the need for violence by establishing permanent peace and justice, thereby short-circuiting the cycle of dominance and submission. However, the DH's Yahweh makes no attempt to end the violence. Instead, to use Eco's words, the closed text remains static. The accomplishment of only partial or temporary acts mirrors the author/compiler's sense of order, a concept of order that pervades the cultural model in which he lives, and which involves the frequent deployment of violent action. The violence of the cycle in Judges is therefore useful because it is exactly the same power strategy that the DH wants to legitimate in his own context.

In his article on Superman, Eco discusses the way that an iterative scheme 'sustains and expresses a world'. The world has the same configuration as the structure which expresses it: If we examine the ideological contents of the Superman stories, says Eco, we find not only that the content sustains itself through the structure, but that, on the other hand, the stories help define their expressive structure as 'the circular static conveyance of a pedagogic message which is substantially immobilistic' (Eco 1981: 122). In Superman, evil is defined only as crimes against private property. In his little town, Superman constantly has to battle evil incarnate: organized crime, usually in the form of bank and mail-train robbers. At the same time, he expends huge amounts of energy organizing parochial benefit performances in order to collect money for orphans and indigents, when presumably the same energies could be employed directly to produce riches or to modify the larger situation. The point, Eco argues, is that since evil in Superman's moral world assumes only the form of crimes against private property, good assumes only the form of private charity. Eco describes the moral structure as civic consciousness completely split from political

consciousness, and he says that the narrative structure helps to keep political consciousness from developing (Eco 1981: 122-24). Therefore, the capitalist politics of the context, mid-twentieth-century America, not only remain unchallenged but are continually, and ritualistically, reiterated in the content of, and by the iterative structure of, Superman.

Superman's petty actions for (narrowly defined) good and against evil constitute a cyclical pattern to express and impose societal norms, just as gender, drag and S/M rituals are repeating cycles. Likewise, the cycle of divine power assertion is a stylized repetition of acts in the text of Judges. In all of these cases, the illusion of a stable essence is structured by repeated acts that approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity. If acts and attributes which produce cultural signification are performative, then identity is revealed to be an illusion, in this case, an illusion created by the DH by a series of redundant displays. No lasting effects result, necessitating more cyclical violence. Divine power is revealed to be a regulatory fiction which the DH can deploy to keep the people of his own political context in line (or, dare we say, in bondage?).

What then is the historical context of the DH? I have argued extensively elsewhere that the first edition of the history was most likely compiled, using a plethora of older traditions, during the Josianic period, when the Jerusalem monarchy was attempting to reassert itself in the wake of Assyrian collapse (Rowlett 1996). Political and religious power were being consolidated in the capital city and the lines of hierarchy were being re-established with one place of worship, the temple in Jerusalem. The rhetoric of monotheism was essential to Josianic power. It depended upon the idea of one king under one deity (who gave him his authority), with one religious power structure subordinate to both. Competing shrines, with their own lines of power, would not be tolerated because they constituted a threat to the regime. The pre-monarchic heroes in the DH serve as models for later kingly behavior. They succeed to the extent that they maintain the monotheistic hierarchy and fail when they deviate from it.

Other scholars have recently argued that the Josianic date is too early for the DH's compilation, and that the DH is most likely post-exilic. For purposes of the present article, rather than reiterate my own lengthy arguments, I would point out that the same type of power consolidation was taking place in the exilic context, so my observations would apply

to that situation as well. When the exiles returned and began the process of rebuilding their temple and their religio-political structure, they were not impeded by their new overlords, the Persians, who kept their distance. Josiah's era may have been considered a model to emulate by those establishing power in Second Temple period Jerusalem, which would account for the idealized picture of Josiah in the DH if that were the case. Either way, the governing authorities in Jerusalem were deploying a rhetoric of violence in an unstable situation. Because monotheism was essential to the line of hierarchical authority being put forward in power centralization, religious diversity was made the identifiable evil. It represented competing loyalties and dispersion of power. Consequently, it had to be repeatedly vanquished in a cycle of recurrence.

Conclusion

Reading the Samson and Delilah story through an S/M lens reveals a power structure replicated at several levels. The titillating play of Samson and Delilah mirrors the cat-and-mouse game Yahweh plays with the Israelites, which in turn serves the political purpose of the DH, the author/compiler who constructed the story. Queering Samson and Delilah, viewing them as role players without fixed identities or essences, calls into question by analogy the stability of the divine/human dichotomy as well. If Yahweh has enormous divine powers, sufficient to establish his or her will globally many times over, then why does he or she allocate just enough of it to various heroes to keep the cycle of violence going? Perhaps he or she derives pleasure from the game, or perhaps the sadistic pleasure belongs to his or her (literary) creator, the DH.