

SEXUALITY, IDEOLOGY AND THE BIBLE
ANTIPODEAN ENGAGEMENTS

Edited by
Robert J. Myles
and
Caroline Blyth



SHEFFIELD PHOENIX PRESS

2015

THE DELILAH MONOLOGUES

Caroline Blyth and Teguh Wijaya Mulya

I am Delilah. You may have heard a lot about me. Thanks to storytellers, biblical interpreters, artists, filmmakers, and songwriters, my story (or to be precise, their retelling of my story) has become one of the best-known political and sexual dramas of all time.

What I find particularly interesting about my afterlives is that they're all so *straight*; in many of the biblical interpretations of Judges 16 and its numerous cultural retellings, Samson is the heroic, aggressively heterosexual Israelite he-man, whose sexual desire for me is his undoing. I, meanwhile, am that personification of the evil foreign temptress—the *femme fatale par excellence*¹—whose (hetero)sexual allure, Philistine exoticism, and feminine wiles prove irresistible to Samson. In other words, Samson is a typical horny male, I'm a typical duplicitous female (even worse, a foreign female); we have sex, I betray him, and it all ends in tears.

Now these stereotyped assumptions about Samson and me might make for an exciting film, a classy piece of art, or a catchy song lyric, but I'm intrigued that they're all rather alike, particularly in terms of the multiple assumptions they make about me. And they *are* assumptions; as many biblical scholars who have spent time with me admit, my story in Judges 16 is riddled with narrative gaps and absences that leave to the imagination many facets of my character—my race, gender, and sexuality, to name but few. Nevertheless, if you survey the more traditional interpretations of Judges 16, as I have, you will discover that they often fill these gaps and absences using as a guide the many socially constructed normativities of gender, sexuality, and identity that predominate within the interpreter's *own* cultural milieu, rather than being articulated in the biblical text itself. My gender is

1. Dana Nolan Fewell, 'Judges', in *Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, exp. edn, 1998), pp. 73-83 (79).

highlighted as a ‘feature’ of my characterization; in other words, I behave the way I do *because* I am female. My relationship with Samson is assumed to be hetero *and* sexual. My race is binarized—I am identified as *either* Israelite *or* Philistine—and treated, like my gender and sexuality, as a marker of who I am and what ‘type’ of woman I am. And because of all this, you only get to see me in a very limited—or ‘straight’—way, your interpretive view distorted and diminished by the tacit assumptions and ideologies of those interpreters who have gazed upon me before you.

I would argue, though, that there are many other possible afterlives available for me, innumerable potentialities for my character that simply get ignored. And, if you are interested in exploring these potentialities with me, can I suggest that you take off your ‘straight’ reading glasses and start looking at me with more of a queer eye. Let me explain what I mean; if you want to read my story queerly, you need to approach the Judges 16 text with a commitment to scrutinize those taken-for-granted social normativities surrounding my character that are prevalent within both the interpretive traditions and cultural retellings of this text. Visualizing my story queerly challenges you to identify cracks and inconsistencies in these traditional readings, embracing instead a suspicion of socially constructed ‘*prima facie* truths’ and assumptions about my character and thus opening your eyes to fresh ways of seeing me within my narrative milieu.² As Thomas Bohache explains, ‘To queer a scripture is to render it unusual and non-normative, to shake it up and see how it might be reconfigured’.³

Now let me be clear here; reading a text queerly does not necessarily mean that you are anachronistically adding new layers of meaning to it that were never there before. Rather, it involves seeking out textual polysemies—those queer curves and bumps that are *already* in the text, but which have been plastered over and straightened out by previous interpretations because they challenged interpreters’ assumptions about social and sexual identity.⁴ In other words, biblical texts may, through their inherent ambiguities, already acknowledge or even embrace a sense of instability and subversion within the complexities

2. Susannah Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology* (Controversies in Contextual Theology; London: SCM Press, 2011), p. 130.

3. Thomas Bohache, ‘Matthew’, in *Queer Bible Commentary* (ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Shore-Goss, and Mona West; London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 487-516 (493).

4. Cornwall, *Controversies in Queer Theology*, pp. 119-20.

of social constructs such as gender, ethnicity, and sexuality.⁵ Yet, their subversive potential is too often eclipsed by traditional readings that follow the expected lines and trajectories of socially constructed norms. And, certainly, the biblical text of Judges 16 seems to enjoy such subversive potential, its numerous enigmas inviting you to enjoy the narrative in all its glorious and curvaceous queerness. What I need, then, is for you to start delving into these enigmas ‘with an eye towards disruption’, rather than plastering them over with an interpretive hankering after normalcy,⁶ exploring with me those delightfully queer textual moments that complicate and transgress the more traditional renderings of my character.

Before we begin, though, I want to stress something else. I don’t aim to offer you a ‘truer’ or more ‘accurate’ view of who I am or who I was intended to be within the Judges 16 text; after all, I am a literary character in this story, not its author, and all its gaps and ambiguities are as fluid in their meaning for me as they are for you, the reader. All I can do is accompany you as you explore some of these gaps and ambiguities, offering you new possibilities for my narrative persona that are both exciting and subversive—how can you resist?

Fifty Shades of Play

According to Simone de Beauvoir, ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’.⁷ You could say the same about me; my character is given form and meaning within the framework of a patriarchal biblical tradition, my story told by a patriarchal narrator. My interpretive and cultural afterlives are each formed by readers of Judges 16 whose visions of my character are shaped by their own cultural preconceptions about what a woman ‘is’. I must confess that I am intrigued when I look at many of my cultural afterlives—the way they portray me as a beautiful, heterosexually experienced woman, who ensnares Samson in a shimmering but sticky web of erotic desirability. Despite the biblical narrator’s silence about my physical appearance or sexual history, I have morphed into Hedy Lamarr, the luscious, dark-eyed Hungarian

5. Deborah F. Sawyer, ‘Gender Strategies in Antiquity: Judith’s Performance’, *FemTh* 28 (2001), pp. 9-26 (13).

6. Kathy Rudy, ‘Queer Theory and Feminism’, *Women’s Studies: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal* 29 (2000), pp. 195-216 (197).

7. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (trans. H.M. Parshley; London: Vintage, 1997), p. 295.

actor who was already ‘notorious for being notorious’,⁸ or Liz Hurley, who offers you a Delilah with pouting lips, smoky eyes, and a no-nonsense briskness when it comes to the business of selling sex.⁹ For author David Maine, I become a sexually voracious whore and a fearless freedom fighter,¹⁰ while Solomon Joseph Solomon captured me on canvas as a raven-haired, bare-breasted prostitute.¹¹ As for music, I have been immortalized in song as a ‘floozy’¹² and a ‘devil in disguise’,¹³ while in Camille Saint-Saëns’s opera *Samson et Dalila*, I am a vindictive ‘temptress *par excellence*’, driven by a hatred for Samson that is white hot in its intensity.¹⁴ I guess I should be flattered at the attention. Or do you think I should take offence that I am depicted like this—a vamp, a tramp, a floozy, a whore?

What’s more, some biblical scholars are likewise influenced by both my cultural afterlives and their own cultural normativities regarding women’s sexuality when it comes to confronting me in the biblical text; imagining me as Lamarr or Hurley, perhaps, they dress my character up in a (hetero)sexually charged and, at times, erotically immoral ensemble. Filling in the textual-sexual gaps in Judges 16 with such images, my dangerousness is thus located in my sex, embodied in my gender—I become a sexualized body, a female body, and therefore a *perilous* body.

8. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, ‘The Fashioning of Delilah: Costume Design, Historicism and Fantasy in Cecil B. DeMille’s *Samson and Delilah* (1949)’, in *The Clothed Body in the Ancient World* (ed. Liza Cleland, Mary Harlow, and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones; Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2005), pp. 14-29 (24). Hedy Lamarr played Delilah in the movie *Samson and Delilah*, produced and directed by Cecil B. DeMille (Paramount Pictures, 1949).

9. Liz Hurley played Delilah in the 1996 movie, *Samson and Delilah*, directed by Nic Roeg and written by Allan Scott.

10. David Maine, *The Book of Samson* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007).

11. Solomon Joseph Solomon, *Samson* (1887), Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool. This painting is discussed by J. Cheryl Exum, in *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2nd rev. edn, 2012), p. 228.

12. George and Ira Gershwin, ‘Sam and Delilah’, from the musical *Girl Crazy* (1930).

13. Neil Sedaka and Howard Greenfield, ‘Run Samson Run’ (1960).

14. Helen Leneman, ‘Portrayals of Power in the Stories of Delilah and Bathsheba: Seduction in Song’, in *Culture, Entertainment, and the Bible* (ed. George Aichele; JSOTSup, 309; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 139-55 (153). See also Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, pp. 209-75 and Dan Clanton, *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout: Interpreting the Bible’s Women in the Arts and Music* (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2009), pp. 65-78, for in-depth discussions of Delilah’s cultural afterlives in art, film, and music.

So, for example, biblical interpreters and cultural artists alike often assume that I was sleeping with Samson, that the nature of his affection was both sexual *and* consummated; I have variously been described as ‘Samson’s mistress’,¹⁵ the object of his ‘sexual desire’,¹⁶ and his ‘lover’.¹⁷ James Crenshaw describes me as a ‘temptress’¹⁸ and posits that the very mention of my name in this narrative ‘is suggestive of amorous conduct’,¹⁹ while Helen Leneman accuses me of ‘overtly using sexual attraction to entice Samson’.²⁰ For Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the nineteenth-century American author of *The Women’s Bible*, I depict ‘the treacherous, the sinister, the sensuous side of woman’, who uses her sexuality ‘as a snare to beguile the man whose lust she has aroused’.²¹ Meanwhile, Anton Koslovic manages both to sexualize my relationship with Samson, while at the same time utterly depersonalizing me by referring to me as ‘alluring human bait’ used by the Philistine elders to wrest from Samson the secret of his strength.²² As Carolyn Pressler notes, I am, in the eyes of so many biblical readers and interpreters, traditionally envisioned as the ‘quintessential deceptive seductress’ who ensnares innocent men through her sex and brings about their downfall.²³

What is interesting, though, is just how few of these interpretive evaluations of my character—my ‘sensuous’ behaviour, my ‘amorous conduct’, my sexual relationship with Samson, even my arousing his

15. Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 231.

16. J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (JSOTSup, 163; Sheffield: JSOT Press; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993), p. 70.

17. James L. Crenshaw, ‘The Samson Saga: Filial Devotion or Erotic Attachment?’, *ZAW* 84 (1974), pp. 470-504 (498); Victor H. Matthews, ‘Freedom and Entrapment in the Samson Narrative: A Literary Analysis’, *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 16 (1989), pp. 245-57 (254).

18. Crenshaw, ‘Samson Saga’, p. 487.

19. Crenshaw, ‘Samson Saga’, p. 498.

20. Leneman, ‘Portrayals of Power’, p. 141. See also Lillian R. Klein, ‘A Spectrum of Female Characters in the Book of Judges’, in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 24-33 (28-29).

21. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible: A Classic Feminist Perspective* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), p. 34.

22. Anton Karl Kozlovic, ‘The Construction of Samson’s Three Lovers in Cecil B. DeMille’s Technicolor Testament, *Samson and Delilah* (1949)’, *Women in Judaism* 7 (2010), pp. 1-31 (6).

23. Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), p. 222.

'lust'—are given explicit voice within the biblical text. Rather, my sexuality remains unarticulated and uncharted, a thing of mystery. And, perhaps as a result, readers therefore choose to fill this enigmatic textual gap by pouring in their own understandings, often concocted from those heteronormative (and at times misogynistic) ideologies about women's sexuality that remain dominant within their own cultural milieus.

So, for example, it's commonly assumed that I am both heterosexual and would have tolerated or even encouraged any sexual advances Samson made towards me. Some biblical interpreters have tried to catch us *in flagrante*, espying in the text hints of innuendo and sexual play, yet the narrator leaves this textual gap titillatingly vague, letting the reader fill it as their own dreams and fantasies dictate.²⁴ Taking a refreshingly queer, but still sexualized view of matters, Lori Rowlett describes our relationship as a 'stock S/M scenario', identifying me as a 'femme dominatrix, teasing and tormenting Samson, who has all the characteristics of a "butch bottom"', relinquishing power to me in our sexual games of dominance and submission.²⁵ Rather than my 'tempting' an unsuspecting Samson with my exotic allure, Rowlett suggests that he enjoys the experience of domination and joins in our games willingly, until he wearies of them and seeks to take our playing to a new and dangerous level.²⁶ Only once he is captured by the Philistines does this next stage of play begin in earnest for him, reaching a climax in the temple of Dagon, when, with divine aid, he is at last able to play to the death.

Now, I am quite drawn to Rowlett's reading here, particularly given it does not confine Samson and my behaviour to a strictly

24. See, for example, Kozlovic, 'Construction', pp. 5-6; Susan Ackerman, 'What If Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?', *BibInt* 8 (2000), pp. 33-41 (39-40); Exum, *Fragmented Women*, p. 79; Carol Smith, 'Samson and Delilah: A Parable of Power?', *JSOT* 76 (1997), pp. 45-57 (53).

25. Lori Rowlett, 'Violent Femmes and S/M: Queering Samson and Delilah', in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Ken Stone; JSOTSup, 334; Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), pp. 106-15 (106). Textual hints at the S/M nature of Samson and Delilah's relationship are also noted by Phillip Lopate, 'Judges: Tests of Weakness. Samson and Delilah', in *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible* (ed. D. Rosenberg; San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), pp. 70-97 (84). Pnina Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero and the Man. The Story of Samson (Judges 13-16)* (Bible in History; Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 173, does not explore this explicitly, but observes a 'sensuality and violent eroticism' that seems to seethe within Samson as he and Delilah play their 'games of deception'.

26. Rowlett, 'Violent Femmes and S/M', pp. 110-11.

(hetero)normative sexual script. Within this S/M relationship, we might have eschewed sexual intercourse of any form and neither of us need have been heterosexual or cisgendered according to contemporary classifications of sexuality and gender.²⁷ I also appreciate her implication that Samson and I were both equal partners in this relationship, rather than him being the unwitting ‘victim’ of my duplicitous allure. After all, he did go along with our games, at least at first. I was honest with him from the outset, asking him directly how I might tie him up and thus curtail his ‘great strength’ (v.6). And he seemed willing to let me try. I did not even have to wait until he was asleep before tying him up on the first two occasions (vv. 8, 12);²⁸ the third time, when I wove his hair into my loom (vv. 13-14),²⁹ I’m not even sure if he was sleeping,³⁰ but he let me do it anyway. As Robert Alter suggests, perhaps Samson was attracted from the outset to the thrill of sadomasochistic fantasy that appeared to permeate our relationship; far from being a naïve dupe, or too blinded by my exotic allure to realize the dangerous undercurrents of my diversions, he enjoyed playing this game of ‘psychological brinkmanship’,³¹ pushing me to indulge his passion for danger, getting aroused by my donning the drag of a dominatrix. This may explain all my ‘nagging’ too (v. 16); rather than wearing Samson down with ‘oppressive’ speech, as James Crenshaw calls it,³² I may simply have been maintaining my role

27. Danielle J. Lindemann, “‘Is That Any Way to Treat a Lady?’ The Dominatrix’s Dungeon”, in *Embodied Resistance* (ed. Samantha Kwan; Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), pp. 26-36 (26).

28. Jack M. Sasson, ‘Who Cut Samson’s Hair? (and Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)’, *Prooftexts* 8 (1988), pp. 333-46 (335).

29. The meaning of these verses is uncertain, owing to the possibly corrupt nature of the Masoretic Text. Most commentators use the different textual versions to translate Delilah’s actions here as somehow weaving Samson’s hair into a ‘web’ or ‘loom’. See, e.g., Robert G. Boling, *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 6A; New York: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 246, 249-50.

30. The LXX explicitly states Samson was asleep when Delilah was performing this operation on his hair, but the MT does not, only noting that he ‘woke up’ once she had completed her task and called out to him.

31. Robert Alter, ‘Samson without Folklore’, in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (ed. Susan Niditch; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 47-56 (53); see also J. Clinton McCann, *Judges* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 108. For further psychoanalytic readings of Samson’s behaviour in Judg. 16, see Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, pp. 252-55; Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 49-67.

32. Crenshaw, ‘Samson Saga’, pp. 472, 501.

of dominatrix, beating him with my sharp words, before he got weary of our all-too-safe play and brought it to a premature end, preferring instead the thrill of real danger, bondage, and death.³³

This idea that Samson took an active role in our sex life (however you want to imagine it) is something rarely explored within interpretive traditions surrounding this text. Usually, *I'm* the one making all the moves, *I'm* the temptress who lures poor naïve Samson into bed. But think about it this way. Far from my being the conniving woman who pursued and seduced an innocent man in love, it may be that Samson, driven by his erotic attachment to danger, was the one plying his *own* powers of seduction and attraction in this narrative, pursuing *me* using *his* sexual allure. Following traditional constructions of gender and sexuality, readers tend to reason that I am female, ergo, I am the seducer, the sexualized body, the erotic betrayer; as the male, Samson is the hero, the (sexless) victim, the innocent betrayed.³⁴ Reading Judges 16 queerly, however, demonstrates that such rigid gender dichotomies do not necessarily work within this narrative.³⁵ Why should we not imagine Samson, rather than me, as the *personne fatale*—the character who utilizes his own erotic allure and enticing sexuality to lethal effect, ultimately bringing about his own demise? As the person who is 'in love' in this narrative (whatever form his love took), might *he* not be the one trying to seduce *me*? Moreover, the text is utterly silent regarding my sexual history, while we are left in no doubt that Samson is a man who has a history of pursuing women in order to have sex with them (Judg. 15.1; 16.1). I often think that Samson's lofty Israelite standing—God's chosen Nazirite and judge over Israel—makes readers queasy about attributing to him any sense of sexualized desire. Instead, they prefer to see me as the one foisting my sex onto this naïve holy man, despite the fact that, in the narrative, *he* exudes a stronger scent of sex than me.

And here's another thing. Given Samson's reputation for deadly and impetuous violence (Judg. 14.19; 15.15), not to mention the ghastly fate of his first wife thanks to his boastful game-playing (Judg.

33. We get a foretaste of Samson's attraction to bondage and Philistine capture in Judg. 15.10-16, when the men of Judah persuade him (without ado) to let them tie him up and deliver him to the Philistines, after they grow sick of his troublemaking in the area. It is only after the spirit of the Lord 'rushed upon him' that he has to postpone his bondage games, break off his bonds, and return to the task that seems to be his divine duty—killing Philistines (vv. 14-15).

34. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, pp 217-21.

35. Rudy, 'Queer Theory and Feminism', p. 197.

15.6), what makes you think I would want such a man in my bed? Certainly, the narrator claims that he ‘loved’ me, but love is no guarantee against violence—just ask Tamar (2 Sam. 13) or Dinah (Gen. 34). Their rapists claimed to ‘love’ them too (using the same verb ‘*hb*’ that the Judges 16 narrator uses to define Samson’s feelings for me),³⁶ but this did not stop these men violating and hurting the objects of their ‘love’.³⁷ Rather than being Samson’s willing lover—a woman who used her powers of seduction to destroy her hopelessly besotted suitor—perhaps I was too afraid of him to want any sense of intimacy with him. Or, perhaps I did have sex with him because I was too afraid of him to refuse *his* amorous advances. At the end of the day, how *free* was I to shape my sexual destiny with Samson? As Kathy Rudy rightly notes, concepts such as consent and coercion are not necessarily ‘mutually exclusive absolutes’,³⁸ but rather are much murkier than that, overlapping or leaking into each other so that it is hard to see where one begins and one ends. The sexual choices we make always occur in a ‘context of constraint’, the result of processes that limit our abilities to exercise absolute sexual and bodily autonomy.³⁹ And some of my constraints were Samson’s volatile strength, his reputation for violence, and his frighteningly relentless attraction to me, not to mention my own seeming social isolation and potential vulnerability in this patriarchal, war-torn culture. Something to think about the next time you hear me referred to as Samson’s amorous ‘lover’ or read about my ‘treacherous’ sexual allure.

Of course, regardless of Samson’s or my prior sexual history, there is also the possibility that our relationship simply had no sexual contours of any kind, given the narrator’s reticence about this topic. Certainly, I let Samson hang around my house, but at the end of the day, all I seem to have done is occasionally play games with him, tie him up, braid his hair, and let him sleep on my lap. And talk, of course—we, or at least I, talked a *lot*. If you think about it, our characters seem more like Will and Grace—or Sherlock and John—than Napoleon and Josephine. Perhaps he, or I, or both of us were in some way ‘other’ than heterosexual. Remember though, it’s hard to pin down our

36. Gen. 34.3; 2 Sam. 13.1, 4.

37. For a discussion of the complexities of the Hebrew root ‘*hb*’, see Sasson, ‘Who Cut Samson’s Hair’, pp. 334–35; Caroline Blyth, *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34: Interpreting Dinah’s Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 209–12.

38. Kathy Rudy, ‘Sex Radical Communities and the Future of Sexual Ethics’, *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 3 (1999), pp. 133–42 (140).

39. Rudy, ‘Sex Radical Communities’, p. 140.

sexuality, especially as our sexual history is so far removed from contemporary contexts. As Ken Stone reminds us, the socio-cultural meanings, significances, and discourses surrounding sexual orientation have changed radically since the biblical texts were written.⁴⁰ So, it's not easy to define for you the nature of my literary relationship with Samson and what it would have signified back when our story was first told. Nonetheless, it always interests me that biblical interpreters never suggest I am anything but unambiguously heterosexual. As for my cultural afterlives, I always appear dreadfully straight in them too.

This interrogation of my sexuality leads me to address one of the most ubiquitous features of my afterlives that deserves your attention—my identification as a prostitute, or courtesan. The fact that, within the biblical text, I have no identified male kin and yet seem to have my own house (vv. 9, 12) is apparently evidence enough that I am 'on the game' in some sense.⁴¹ Furthermore, Samson's ostensible predilection for prostitutes (v. 1; he slept with *one* prostitute) also serves to confirm this hypothesis; being the first woman Samson met after his visit to the sex worker at Gaza, I am likewise labelled a whore, albeit a whore Samson fell in love with.⁴² My behaviour has also been described as 'promiscuous'⁴³ and 'very prostitute-like',⁴⁴ in that I took advantage of Samson's feelings for me and 'bartered' my sexuality for some sense of financial or social security. According to biblical interpreter John B. Vickery, I am simply a 'whore at heart'.⁴⁵

Three issues come to my mind when I think about this. First of all, the biblical text makes no reference—explicit or implicit—to my being a prostitute.⁴⁶ Sure, Samson had sex with one prostitute, but that does not mean he was attracted *only* to prostitutes; after all, his first

40. Ken Stone, 'Homosexuality and the Bible or Queer Reading? A Response to Martti Nissinen', *TheoSex* 7 (2001), pp. 107-18 (113-15). See also Gerard Loughlin, 'Biblical Bodies', *TheoSex* 12 (2005), pp. 9-27.

41. Ackerman, 'What if Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?', p. 38.

42. Ackerman, 'What if Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?', p. 38; Kozlovic, 'Construction', p. 9.

43. Charles Halton, 'Samson's Last Laugh: The Š/ŠHQ Pun in Judges 16:25-27', *JBL* 128 (2009), pp. 61-64 (61).

44. Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, p. 231.

45. John B. Vickery, 'In Strange Ways: The Story of Samson', in *Images of God and Man: Old Testament Short Stories in Literary Focus* (ed. B.O. Long; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981), pp. 58-73 (69). Cited in Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*, p. 231.

46. Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love*, p. 51, describes the resemblance between Delilah and a prostitute in the text as 'merely superficial'.

wife is never considered by readers of Judges 14–15 in this light, so why should I be? And, while it is true that, in the text, I appear to live independently in my own home, not belonging to any male-led household, this is at best ambiguous ‘evidence’ that I work in the sex industry. Perhaps, like the Apocryphal Judith, I was a woman of means (Jdt. 8.1-8)—a wealthy widow or businesswoman whose hard work and business acumen afforded me a comfortable lifestyle.⁴⁷ For some reason though, shaping me in the form of a harlot seems to make sense to audiences and readers, reflecting their preconceived notions of prostitutes and prostitution; it helps ‘explain’ why, in their eyes, I behave immorally and unscrupulously, why I seem incapable of returning Samson’s love, and yet am willing to trade my sexuality in exchange for hard cash.⁴⁸ This in turn alleviates their anxieties over the potential dangerousness of women; it’s far more reassuring to believe that only ‘certain’ women (that is, prostitutes) will behave like me than to imagine a social world where all women may potentially share my power. Regarding me as a whore may also make it easier for readers to blame me and to see Samson as the helpless victim; labelled as the stigmatized sex worker, I instantly become a tainted and abject presence in the narrative, less valuable, less worthy of empathy or concern, and much easier to marginalize and revile.⁴⁹

Secondly, my sexualized, ‘prostitute-like’ behaviour—as some scholars see it—may simply have been an act; have you considered that? If you look closely at my story you might see that, like Judith, I am an expert in gender subversion and discontinuity; treading across the ‘gender spectrum’, transgressing *and* parodying socially constructed gender norms, I move between traditional masculine and feminine worlds with apparent ease, bringing confusion and chaos to the audience’s carefully scripted assumptions about gender and sexuality.⁵⁰ I appear comfortable within traditional masculine spheres of political and military activity, strategizing and liaising with powerful Philistine

47. Ackerman, ‘What if Judges Was Written by a Philistine?’, pp. 38-39; Bal, *Lethal Love*, p. 51.

48. J. Cheryl Exum, ‘Lethal Woman 2: Reflections on Delilah and her Incarnation as Liz Hurley’, in *Borders, Boundaries and the Bible* (ed. Martin O’Kane; JSOTSup, 313; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 254-73 (257).

49. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p. 229. On the social stigmatization of prostitutes, see Myuki Tomura, ‘A Prostitute’s Lived Experiences of Stigma’, *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 40 (2009), pp. 51-84.

50. Deborah F. Sawyer, ‘Dressing Up/Dressing Down: Power, Performance and Identity in the Book of Judith’, *TheolSex* 15 (2001), pp. 23-31 (25-26).

leaders and co-ordinating my movements with Philistine troops to ensure a successful outcome for our operation (vv. 5, 8, 12, 18, 21). I can thus don the traditionally masculine disguise of a warrior with a heart of steel and a bravery that can outmatch Samson's, single-handedly bringing down this unbelievably powerful warrior whom entire armies of Philistine men had been unable to contain.⁵¹ At the same time, though, I can act convincingly on the domestic front too, adorning myself with the hyper-feminized drag of Samson's querulous and needy lover, or perhaps even his favourite high-price hooker (vv. 15, 19)—the roles that many readers expect of me as a woman. These unstable facets of my character, however, smash such expectations, bringing anxiety and uncertainty into readers' carefully constructed gendered worlds. I evade easy definition, embodying instead a 'myriad individual fragmented selves, performing gender across a full spectrum of possibilities';⁵² and in these 'selves'—or cross-dressings, as I prefer to call them—I show just how artificial socially constructed polarities of 'masculine' and 'feminine' really are. I am a warrior, I am a whore, I am a lover, I am an enemy, I am male, I am female; I am *whatever* you want me to be and more—a master-mistress of disguise.

The third thing I want to say about the reputation I have as a prostitute is this: If I were a prostitute, so what? Does that by necessity make me the villain of the narrative? Perhaps I did sex work because it was the only means I had of making money, living in this war-torn borderland. As Avaren Ipsen has noted, history betrays a timeless proximity between militarism and prostitution, war being an occasion when sexual exploitation (including rape, slavery, and coerced sex work) becomes ubiquitous.⁵³ I may have been forced into this occupation by the military groups in the region, held captive and abused for the sexual 'pleasure' of local troops. Or, given my seeming lack of kinship support, I would, out of necessity, have had to find some means of sustaining myself (and perhaps my family) within this patriarchal narrative world in which I was located, where biblical women's survival was so often dependent on their male kin. Prostitution may have been the only way I could do this, whether I wanted to follow this lifestyle or not. Moreover, it may also explain why I accepted the Philistines' generous offer in exchange for betraying Samson—my motivation for doing so is another gap within this biblical tradition.⁵⁴

51. Ackerman, 'What if Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?', pp. 35-36.

52. Sawyer, 'Dressing Up/Dressing Down', p. 24.

53. Avaren Ipsen, *Sex Working and the Bible* (London: Equinox, 2009), pp. 61-62.

54. Clanton, *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout*, pp. 66-67.

Rather than simply assuming that I betrayed him because I was an avaricious whore who was ‘enslaved to money’,⁵⁵ perhaps you could see my actions instead as a matter of exigency and survival. Taking the moral high ground around the topic of sex work is easy—if you have a roof over your head, a safe place to sleep and food in your belly. Without these things, sex can take on more shades of grey than you might care to imagine.

Pushing Boundaries

Okay, so let’s change the subject. Let’s talk about race. When people discuss my gender and sexuality, they often bring my race and ethnicity into the mix too. These are also textual gaps that are forever rubbing up against the narrative ambiguities surrounding my identity; as another politically and socially constructed category of identification and regulation, race intersects unavoidably with concepts of gender and sexuality, and, together, these categories inform and shape each other.⁵⁶ As such, you cannot really think about my sexualized, feminized body without likewise thinking about my race, for it is only by holding these *together* that you can see their impact on my various interpretive afterlives.

According to the Judges 16 narrator, Samson and I met when I was living in the Valley of Sorek (v. 4), on the border of Israelite and Philistine territory. It was a vast area, yet the narrator never specifies which town, or more significantly, which people I originate from. My name may derive from Hebrew, Akkadian, or Arabic—no one is entirely sure⁵⁷—and I conspire with Philistine elders against a Hebrew man who, according to some biblical scholars, has a predilection for Philistine women.⁵⁸ Does this, then, suggest that I too am a Philistine? Well not necessarily; the Philistines were not the only community

55. Galpaz-Feller, *Samson*, p. 176.

56. Tat-siong Benny Liew, ‘(Cor)Responding: A Letter to the Editor’, in Stone (ed.), *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 182-92 (186-87); Ian Barnard, *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), pp. 2-3; Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), p. 59.

57. J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (trans. John Bowden; OTL; London: SCM Press, 2nd edn, 1987), p. 253.

58. E.g. K. Lawson Younger Jr, *Judges and Ruth: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), p. 316; Lillian R. Klein, ‘The Book of Judges: Paradigm and Deviation in Images of Women’, in Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, pp. 55-71 (62 n. 1).

who wanted Samson contained—some of his fellow Israelites were sick of his troublemaking in the region and were keen to get him out of *their* hair (Judg. 15.9-13). So it's not so hard to believe that, as an Israelite woman (or simply a woman from *anywhere* who happened to be living in this battle-scarred territory), I may have taken a role in ridding my neighbourhood of this unruly pest.

This tantalizing ambiguity about my race is rarely allowed to remain unprobed or unfilled by biblical interpreters and creators of my cultural afterlives, who usually insist on my being either Israelite or Philistine, considering this an essential identity marker of *who* I am and *why* I behave the way I do. And, as I am most often identified as the 'villain' of the story, I am usually likewise marked out as a 'foreign' woman, that is, a non-Israelite (and, in some of my cultural afterlives, this translates to non-'Western') woman, my foreignness wrapping itself around my sexuality and gender, sculpting my literary persona into the sensuous shape of a lethally exotic *femme fatale*.⁵⁹ Lillian Klein, for example, identifies me as a Philistine, arguing that given prostitution was a cultural institution and '*modus vivendi*' among Philistines, I 'cannot be judged by Israelite standards'.⁶⁰ Her assumption here seems to be that 'Israelite standards' for women's sexual behaviour would be intrinsically different from those for Philistine women. In other words, as a Philistine woman, I would have had looser morals than an Israelite woman—only a foreign woman would behave like the prostitute I am often regarded as.⁶¹ And only a foreign woman could be so duplicitous and so poisonously effective, her alien charm capable of driving this seemingly invincible Hebrew Nazirite to destruction.⁶² As a symbol or symptom of antipodal hyper-sexuality, dangerousness, and otherness, I thus become an alien body to be reviled, feared, or—in some of my cultural afterlives—even eradicated.⁶³

59. Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, p. 220; *idem*, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 69-70.

60. Klein, 'Book of Judges', p. 66.

61. Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted*, p. 218, makes this point in reference to the prostitute in Gaza (Judg. 16.1-3), but the same point can also be made with regard to Delilah.

62. Gail Corrington Streete, *The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), p. 56; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, pp. 69-70.

63. Tat-siong Benny Liew, 'Queer Closets and Perverting Desires: Cross-Examining John's Engendering and Transgendering Word across Different Worlds', in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia; Semeia Studies, 57; Atlanta: SBL, 2009), pp. 251-88 (252); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race,*

These toxic assumptions about my race, however, surely warrant a rejoinder—and a queer rejoinder at that. You may take your lead from the narrator, who refuses to identify my race or ethnicity, preferring to leave these as gaps that are either irrelevant or invitations to contemplate further this ambiguity within my character. In essence, though, I am a person existing on the border, seen by both sides, perhaps, as a foreigner, an outsider, an ‘other’. I am neither Israelite nor Philistine, but maybe a little bit of both, though not fully identifying with either—a border-dwelling ‘hybrid’ if you like, who undermines any ‘idea(l) of racial purity’, refusing to fit into one racial category or the other, but rather belonging to ‘both but simultaneously neither’.⁶⁴

And, as a border dweller, I evade racial definition, viewable to the reader from a myriad of multiple ethnic and racial angles. This is further complicated by my gap-ridden gender and sexuality in the Judges 16 text, which, as you have seen, can likewise potentialize the many facets to my narrative persona. In order to identify me and make sense of me, creators of my interpretive afterlives therefore have to move me from my border location and reposition me *somewhere*; in most cases, they invite me to sojourn on *their* home turf, hosting me within the landscape of their own socio-cultural ideologies and identities, where I am always and invariably the ‘other’, the exotic foreigner in their midst. Think of me, then, as a diaspora dweller, as well as a border dweller—a wayfarer, or accidental tourist—dislocated from my original textual domain, then repositioned, assimilated, and finally reinvented, dressed up in the local costumes and customs of each new interpretive location, and presented in a way that makes sense to my new audience.⁶⁵ Thus, I become a Philistine *femme fatale*, an Israelite *femme forte*, a whoring hetero/hypersexual harpy or a delightfully domesticated dominatrix, each ‘costume’ I adorn reflecting the local colours and fashions of whatever landscape I am currently touring and telling you more about my hosts’ socio-cultural peccadilloes and idiosyncrasies than it does about me. My ‘foreignness’, my gender, and my sexuality—ultimately, these are all figments of the interpreter’s own imagination, just as they remained imagined but never explicitly articulated by the narrator of Judges 16. Envisaged another way, my cultural afterlives thus become reflections of their creators, whom I

Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 22. In both Cecil B. DeMille’s and Nic Roeg’s *Samson and Delilah* movies, Delilah dies along with Samson and the Philistines when Samson brings the temple crashing down.

64. Sullivan, *Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, p. 73.

65. Clanton, *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout*, pp. 65-66.

think of as standing before a mirror, donning their Delilah drag. They make me up to emulate the contours of their own cultural worldviews and identities, admiring in their own reflection the curves and embellishments with which they have decorated my textual body to hide those unsightly absences and gaps. Imagined thus, perhaps I *should* feel lauded by those biblical interpreters and cultural creators of my many afterlives—after all, imitation is the sincerest of form of flattery. Although, it would be nice, once in a while, if they tried to get to know me a little better first, peeping underneath the culturally constructed layers that adorn my character into the depths of my textual gaps and absences, where all my potential queerness—my Delilah ‘realness’—lies.⁶⁶

Last Words

I am a persona on the border, a persona of gaps, absences, and ambiguities. I am a myth, a literary body, and I have made my way through history as an accidental tourist, mesmerizing and misbehaving as I go. I hope that you have enjoyed spending time with me. Do I seem clearer now to you, or has my queerness just made you more confused about me, opening up all sorts of possibilities about my character that you’d never imagined before? I hope it’s the latter; for, it is in my queerness that my extraordinary and multifaceted character sparkles the brightest.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ackerman, Susan, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).
 —‘What if Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?’, *BibInt* 8 (2000), pp. 33-41.
 Alter, Robert, ‘Samson without Folklore’, in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore* (ed. Susan Niditch; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 47-56.
 Bailey, Marlon M., ‘Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture’, *Feminist Studies* 37 (2011), pp. 365-86.

66. ‘Realness’ is a term used formally and informally in discourses on gender and sexuality to refer to ‘performances, self-presentations, and embodiments’ that are understood to ‘capture’ the authenticity of particular gendered identities and senses of ‘being’. See, for example, Marlon M. Bailey, ‘Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture’, *Feminist Studies* 37 (2011), pp. 365-86 (377); Mark Blankenship, ‘Mocking Drag Slang’, *Out* (24 April 2012) (<http://www.out.com/entertainment/2012/04/23/drag-queen-rupaul-race-language-slang>, accessed 25 September 2014).

- Bal, Mieke, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).
- Barnard, Ian, *Queer Race: Cultural Interventions in the Racial Politics of Queer Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004).
- Blankenship, Mark, 'Mocking Drag Slang', *Out* (24 April 2012) (<http://www.out.com/entertainment/2012/04/23/drag-queen-rupaul-race-language-slang>, accessed 25 September 2014).
- Blyth, Caroline, *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34: Interpreting Dinah's Silence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- Bohache, Thomas, 'Matthew', in *Queer Bible Commentary* (ed. Deryn Guest, Robert E. Shore-Goss, and Mona West; London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 487-516.
- Boling, Robert G., *Judges: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 6A; New York: Doubleday, 1975).
- Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).
- Clanton, Dan, *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout: Interpreting the Bible's Women in the Arts and Music* (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2009).
- Cornwall, Susannah, *Controversies in Queer Theology* (Controversies in Contextual Theology; London: SCM Press, 2011).
- Crenshaw, James L., 'The Samson Saga: Filial Devotion or Erotic Attachment?', *ZAW* 84 (1974), pp. 470-504.
- de Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex* (trans. H.M. Parshley; London: Vintage, 2010).
- Exum, J. Cheryl, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (JSOTSup, 163; Sheffield: JSOT Press; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993).
- 'Lethal Woman 2: Reflections on Delilah and her Incarnation as Liz Hurley', in *Borders, Boundaries and the Bible* (ed. Martin O'Kane; JSOTSup, 313; London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 254-73.
- Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2nd rev. edn, 2012).
- Fewell, Dana Nolan, 'Judges', in *Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, exp. edn, 1998), pp. 73-83.
- Galpaz-Feller, Pnina, *Samson: The Hero and the Man. The Story of Samson (Judges 13-16)* (Bible in History; Bern: Peter Lang, 2006).
- Halton, Charles, 'Samson's Last Laugh: The Š/ŠHQ Pun in Judges 16:25-27', *JBL* 128 (2009), pp. 61-64.
- Klein, Lilian R., 'The Book of Judges: Paradigm and Deviation in Images of Women', in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 55-71.
- 'A Spectrum of Female Characters in the Book of Judges', in *A Feminist Companion to Judges* (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible, 4; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 24-33.
- Kozlovic, Anton Karl, 'The Construction of Samson's Three Lovers in Cecil B. DeMille's Technicolor Testament, Samson and Delilah (1949)', *Women in Judaism* 7 (2010), pp. 1-31.

- Leneman, Helen, 'Portrayals of Power in the Stories of Delilah and Bathsheba: Seduction in Song', in *Culture, Entertainment, and the Bible* (ed. George Aichele; JSOTSup, 309; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 139-55.
- Liew, Tat-siong Benny, '(Cor)Responding: A Letter to the Editor', in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Ken Stone; JSOTSup, 334; Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), pp. 182-92.
- 'Queer Closets and Perverting Desires: Cross-Examining John's Engendering and Transgendering Word across Different Worlds', in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism* (ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia; Semeia Studies, 57; Atlanta: SBL, 2009), pp. 251-88.
- Lindemann, Danielle J., "'Is That Any Way to Treat a Lady?' The Dominatrix's Dungeon', in *Embodied Resistance* (ed. Samantha Kwan; Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), pp. 26-36.
- Llewellyn-Jones, Lloyd, 'The Fashioning of Delilah: Costume Design, Historicism and Fantasy in Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949)', in *The Clothed Body in the Ancient World* (ed. Liza Cleland, Mary Harlow, and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones; Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2005), pp. 14-29.
- Lopate, Phillip, 'Judges: Tests of Weakness. Samson and Delilah', in *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible* (ed. D. Rosenberg; San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), pp. 70-97.
- Loughlin, Gerard, 'Biblical Bodies', *TheoSex* 12 (2005), pp. 9-27.
- Maine, David, *The Book of Samson* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2007).
- Matthews, Victor H., 'Freedom and Entrapment in the Samson Narrative: A Literary Analysis', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 16 (1989), pp. 245-57.
- McCann, J. Clinton, *Judges* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989).
- McClintock, Anne, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- Pressler, Carolyn, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002).
- Rowlett, Lori, 'Violent Femmes and S/M: Queering Samson and Delilah', in *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Ken Stone; JSOTSup, 334; Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), pp. 106-15.
- Rudy, Kathy, 'Queer Theory and Feminism', *Women's Studies: An Inter-Disciplinary Journal* 29 (2000), pp. 195-216.
- Sasson, Jack M., 'Who Cut Samson's Hair? (and Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)', *Prooftexts* 8 (1988), pp. 333-46.
- Sawyer, Deborah F. 'Dressing Up/Dressing Down: Power, Performance and Identity in the Book of Judith', *TheoSex* 15 (2001), pp. 23-31.
- 'Gender Strategies in Antiquity: Judith's Performance', *FemTh* 28 (2001), pp. 9-26.
- Smith, Carol, 'Samson and Delilah: A Parable of Power?' *JSOT* 76 (1997), pp. 45-57.
- Soggin, J. Alberto, *Judges: A Commentary* (trans. John Bowden; OTL; London: SCM Press, 2nd edn, 1987).
- Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, *The Woman's Bible: A Classic Feminist Perspective* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002).
- Stone, Ken, 'Homosexuality and the Bible or Queer Reading? A Response to Martti Nissinen', *TheoSex* 7 (2001), pp. 107-18.

- Streete, Gail Corrington, *The Strange Woman: Power and Sex in the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997).
- Sullivan, Nikki, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).
- Tomura, Myuki, 'A Prostitute's Lived Experiences of Stigma', *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology* 40 (2009), pp. 51-84.
- Vickery, John B., 'In Strange Ways: The Story of Samson', in *Images of God and Man: Old Testament Short Stories in Literary Focus* (ed. B.O. Long; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981), pp. 58-73.
- Younger Jr, K. Lawson, *Judges and Ruth: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).