

‘If I Be Shaven, Then My Strength Will Go from Me’

A Queer Reading of the Samson Narrative*

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Abstract

Samson is well known for his long hair and exceptional strength. Most commentators, however, have overlooked the fact that it is Samson himself who constructs a connection between his hair and his strength. He had considered his hairstyle a sign of his hypermasculine identity instead of a demarcation of his Naziriteship. Reading the Samson narrative from a queer perspective, this article shows how Samson’s ‘heterosexuality’ is produced, appears, and dissolves back into queerness. Samson’s hypermasculinity is a covering for his queer identity and results in his construction of several interrelated dualisms (Israel/Philistines, male/female, strong/weak, etc.) and in his excessive use of violence (physical, sexual, rhetorical, symbolic) against both women and men. When he meets a woman (Delilah) who doesn’t fit in his phallogocentric ideology, he reveals his secret through a non-genital erotic play (BDSM) with her and loses his strength when she symbolically castrates him by cutting his hair.

Key words

gender; Judges; Old Testament; queer criticism; sexuality; violence

‘Real men don’t eat honey; they chew on bees.’¹

Queer Eye on a Straight Guy

Samson is well known for his strength. This strength resided in his long hair – at least that is the claim he makes in his final answer to Delilah (Judg. 16:17). But in the narrative, neither the angel nor Samson’s parents nor the narrator have drawn this connection. Most commentators have overlooked this and have failed to ask what makes Samson so strong. This question can be answered by reading the final form of the Samson narrative (Judg. 13–16) from a queer or gender-critical perspective.²

Although at prima facie queer criticism seems to focus on (non-normative) sexualities and gender criticism on constructions of gender, both approaches are strongly related, and preferring to work under either of these two rubrics does not seem to be a matter of strong ideological difference.³ For example, in her book *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies*, Deryn Guest writes that “do[ing] gender criticism within biblical studies involves engagement with

* This paper is a full elaboration of an earlier popular publication in Dutch (“Als de zon ondergaat: De deconstructie van Simsons ‘heteroseksualiteit’ naar aanleiding van Rechters 16,4–22,” in A.S. van Klinken and N. Pruiksma (eds.), *Onder de regenboog: De Bijbel queer gelezen* [Vught: Skandalon, 2010]: 29–44), and a conference paper presented at the Biblical Criticism and Cultural Studies Unit of the International Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, London, July 6, 2011. A short popular essay, reflecting on the process of doing this research and presenting the results, will soon be published as “Keeping up Appearances: The Impossibility of Samson’s Heterosexual Performance,” *The Scholar & Feminist Online*. I would like to thank Deryn Guest, Ed Noort, Susanne Scholz, Anne-Mareike Wetter and the reviewers of *Biblical Interpretation* for their helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

¹ Translation of a slogan by a Dutch free speech organisation, Loesje. Accessible at http://www.loesje.nl/posters/goud-0307_6/.

² I use the Masoretic Text of the fifth edition of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Elliger and Rudolph 1997). Unless noted otherwise, I have used the New Revised Standard Version for the English translation.

³ For example, both Deryn Guest and Ken Stone have published both under the rubric of queer criticism (Guest et al. 2006; Stone 2001b; Hornsby and Stone 2011) and gender criticism (Guest 2012; Stone 2007).

feminist theory, queer theory and critical studies in masculinities” (Guest 2012: 30). She further explains that “gender criticism, while it shares many of the questions that feminism poses and is informed by it, broadens the lens so that the gender of all the characters is included in the remit” (Guest 2012: 25). In his introduction to *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, Ken Stone explains that queer readings do not share a single method, subject, or group of readers, but they “take as their point of departure a critical interrogation and active contestation of the many ways in which the Bible is and has been read to support heteronormative and normalizing configurations of sexual practices and sexual identities” (Stone 2001b: 33). Instead of critically interrogating such heteronormative readings of the Samson narrative, I use a queer perspective to find queer characters, constellations, and practices in the text that are often overlooked in implicitly heteronormative readings. This means that queer readings also look at sexualities that are not primarily defined in terms of sex/gender (Guest 2012: 49). Moreover, they do not necessarily or primarily focus on non-hegemonic sexualities, but on the construction of both non-hegemonic and hegemonic configurations of sexuality, sex, gender, race, ethnicity and class at their intersections. Queer biblical interpretation, therefore, focuses on the role these categories play or have played in the process of writing/editing texts, within the texts themselves (which is the primary focus of this article), and in the reception and interpretation of these texts.

This article differs from discussions of the Samson narrative provided by other scholars in how it deals with issues of gender, sexuality, and ideology. Many biblical scholars – and feminist critics in particular – have already paid significant attention to the motifs of gender and sexuality in the Samson narrative. In their influential contributions in the late 1980s and early 1990s, feminist cultural critics Mieke Bal and Cheryl Exum have focused primarily on (the negative depiction of) the female characters (Bal 1987; Exum 1993; 1996). However, Edith Davidson notes that in their interpretations of the book of Judges many feminist critics focus on violence against women, but hardly mention the slaughter of men (Davidson 2008: 12).⁴ Deborah Sawyer remarks that “[b]y focusing on the female characters in these narratives feminist critique has often overlooked what happens to constructed masculinity” (Sawyer 2002: 51).⁵ To fill this lacuna, Ela Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska has more recently shifted the focus towards Samson’s masculinity in terms of male honour (Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska 2010). In this article, then, I will explore the construction of both femininities and masculinities in the Samson narrative.

While other readings “have already noted how sex permeates the text,” Guest argues that “a queer reading is particularly well placed to take up these notices and explore them further” (Guest 2006: 168). In her provocative and innovative contribution to the earlier-mentioned volume, *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible*, Lori Rowlett has suggested that the encounter between Samson and Delilah resembles a classic S/M bondage game (Rowlett 2001). However, her essay has been overlooked or ignored by most commentators (e.g., Spronk 2004; Galpaz-Feller 2006; Jost 2006; Van Wieringen 2007; Niditch 2008a; Niditch 2008b; Davidson 2008; Butler 2009; Herzberg 2010; the contributors to Eynikel and Nicklas 2014).⁶ Although I see some complications in Rowlett’s reading, I consider it still helpful in

⁴ See also Guest, who argues that in “the pornoprophetic debate . . . the kind of masculinity performed, and the way it interacts with other models of ancient Israelite masculinity, has not, generally, been under feminist scrutiny” (Guest 2012: 113).

⁵ See also Smith 1999 for an early critique of Exum, Bal, and similar feminist biblical scholars.

⁶ Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska calls Rowlett’s article “noteworthy” (Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska 2010: 177), but doesn’t elaborate Rowlett’s argument. A few years before the publication of Rowlett’s chapter, Carol Smith published an article in which she showed how the Samson narrative “reflects very accurately different kinds of power, how they are used, and the consequences of so using them” (Smith 1997: 56), but she pays no attention to the *erotic* power play between Samson and Delilah. Emma England, in an unpublished paper, has engaged more

my attempt for a different reading of Samson, including what to make of the connection that Samson makes between his hair and his strength.

With respect to the (supposed) androcentric ideology of the text this article takes a different direction than several feminist contributions. For example, by claiming that the text “has an ambitious and problematic androcentric agenda that has rarely been called into question” (Exum 1993: 62; cf. Exum 1996: 176) and that “[n]ationalism reinforces the gender ideology of the text” (Exum 1996: 184), Exum reads “the text” too flatly and only in a single dimension. Carol Smith has already argued that “the narrative is at the same time more subtle and more simple” than what Exum suggests: Smith speaks of a “qualified neutrality,” by which she means that, “while the narrative certainly does reflect the values and preoccupations of the patriarchal society from which it arose, it does not so much reinforce them as leave open the possibility that they may be questioned” (Smith 1997: 48). My suggestion, however, is that the androcentric ideology is not that of the text or the narrator, but that of its main character (Samson); that it is questioned throughout the story; and that it is finally deconstructed in Samson’s encounter with Delilah. The primary focus, then, will be on Samson, because, as I will work out below, the gender construction of the characters in the narrative is the ‘result’ of Samson’s gender performance.

I will show that Samson tries to negate his queerness by performing a kind of hypermasculinity that renders him, so to speak, a prototype of the modern ‘heterosexual.’ Heterosexuality, according to Judith Butler, is a cultural ideal, a regulatory fiction that is constructed by all those who live up to it, while its supposed naturalness is achieved by a continuous repetition of its gender norms (Butler 1990: 1–78). The more it is contested, the more it requires an excessive gender performance.⁷ It is this very excessiveness that we encounter in Samson’s blatant flirtations and suggestive riddles. But, as Teresa Hornsby and Ken Stone argue, “[t]he production of heterosexuality is from the deep, appears briefly as a precise formed entity, but moves, shifts, takes on new forms, and dissipates, dissolving back into queerness” (Hornsby and Stone 2011: xii). Samson’s ‘heterosexuality’, too, is produced, appears, and dissolves back into queerness.

Born This Way?

Samson’s gender performance needs to be understood against the background of the annunciation scene in Judges 13 (Niditch 2008a: 142). Whereas his mother has no name in the story, the angel appears and speaks only to her, leaving Manoah unnoticed and his question unanswered. As Schneider explains, “[o]ne reason for the message being given directly to Samson’s mother is rooted in the messenger’s intention that Samson be a Nazirite from the womb” (Schneider 2000: 197). Although the woman is barren, the angel promises her she will give birth to a son.⁸ The narrator doesn’t speak of any sexual intercourse being the cause of the woman’s pregnancy (Schneider 2000: 195). According to Exum, the fact that the narrator leaves the sexual intercourse unmentioned serves male purposes: that is, it downplays the woman’s *jouissance* (Exum 1993: 66). However, the *jouissance* of either men or women is rarely expressed in biblical stories when speaking of sexual intercourse.⁹ My interpretation runs almost contrary to that of Exum. In the narrative itself, Manoah plays no key role in

critically with Rowlett by “expanding the interpretation of the narrative around words Rowlett only casually uses: dominance and submission.” (England 2013)

⁷ Butler writes, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1990: 33).

⁸ A similar annunciation scene can be found in Genesis 18, but there the angel appears to the husband (Abraham) instead of the wife (Sarah). On the thematic and structural parallels between Judges 13 and Genesis 18, see Fuchs 2000: 57–58.

⁹ An exception might be Gen. 18:12 (cf. Sawyer 2002: 55).

either the reception of the message or the conception of the child (cf. Schneider 2000: 200). As masculinity was connected to the lineage of father to son, the story questions this traditional patriarchal pattern. In the case of Samson, it makes his gendered identity unstable from the very beginning. He is not the son of Manoah, but foremost a ‘son’ of Yahweh, a Nazirite (Judg. 13:5, 7; cf. 16:17).

According to the prescriptions in Num. 6:1–21 (a Priestly text written in the postexilic period), Naziriteship was a voluntary and temporal status, democratized in the sense that both men and women could take a Nazirite vow, and at the same time controlled by the male priesthood in terms of purity laws, giving the priests the role of mediators between Yahweh and the Nazirites. Naziriteship in its primordial form (as in the book of Judges), however, was a divinely bestowed and permanent status, involving a more direct relationship between Yahweh and the Nazirite through the operation of the divine *רוּחַ* (Niditch 2008b: 81–6). These were charismatic men who could at the same time be a priest, a prophet or – in the case of Samson – a warrior and judge (Niditch 2008b: 88).

The only prescription that clearly applied to Samson was the prohibition of the cutting of his hair (Judg. 13:5; cf. Num. 6:5). “Many of the terms derived from *nzr* . . . refer to symbols or signs of set apart, consecrated, special status involving the hair, head, or headdress, all of which are related” (Niditch 2008b: 70). The hair was, therefore “invested with holiness” (Niditch 2008b: 85), but, as I will work out below, Samson had invested his hair with something else.

The angel tells Samson’s mother “not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean” (Judg. 13:4). In Num. 6:3–4 we find an even more restricted prohibition on drinking or eating anything that comes from the grapevine, whereas the prohibition to eat unclean food is absent because that was at that time a prohibition that applied to all Israelites (Niditch 2008b: 87–88). The text of Judges, however, does not clarify whether these prohibitions applied to Samson as well. But to a reader familiar with the prescriptions from Numbers and the angel’s commands to Samson’s mother, Samson’s entering a vineyard (Judg. 14:5) and drinking wine (14:10) as well as eating honey from a lion’s carcass (14:8–9) must have been ominous – and it is at least possible that the narrator uses later Nazirite prescriptions as a frame to disqualify Samson.

So there’s a lot of messiness in this nuclear family: a father/husband who is passed over; a wife/mother who has to adhere to several Nazirite prescriptions; and a son who is a little different, whose masculine identity is unstable and who will never be like the other boys.¹⁰

Making War (Not Love)

In order to understand what happens when Samson meets Delilah, we first need to pay attention to his encounters with the other two women in the narrative. Samson had found a wife among, as his parents put it, “the uncircumcised Philistines” (Judg. 14:3; cf. 15:18).¹¹ His parents do not fear Samson’s subjugation to the Philistines, but his assimilation with them (Amit 1999: 280). Samson, as the narrative develops, will rather reinforce the opposition between the Israelites and the Philistines.

The bodily difference between the circumcised Israelite men and the uncircumcised Philistine men was, of course, usually invisible in daily life. But there was another sex-related bodily difference – at least between the warriors of both people – that was usually visible and which also had to do with ‘cutting.’ On pictures from the Early Iron Age we see that “Philistines wear feathered or spiked headdresses when portrayed as participants in war or as prisoners of war, and their hair seems not to be a visible feature of their presentation as

¹⁰ On being like the other boys/men, see Judg. 14:10; 16:7, 11, 17 (cf. Judg. 16:13, where Samson tells Delilah that he would be weak “like anyone else” if and when something was done with his hair).

¹¹ Schneider translates *הַפְּרִימִים* as “foreskinned” and points to the disdain in this word (Schneider 2000: 204).

warriors. Israelite warriors, however, have shoulder-length hair, held in place by a fillet, and beards” (Niditch 2008b: 68–9). This extrabiblical evidence is supported by the depiction of Israelite soldiers in the first line of the Song of Deborah: “When locks are long in Israel . . .” (Judg. 5:2).¹² At the same time, there are no indications that Israelite soldiers *never* cut their hair (as must have been the case for Nazirites). When we compare Samson’s headdress (according to descriptions in Judges) with that of the Israelite soldiers (according to these pictures and the Song of Deborah) and that of Nazirites (according to the instructions in Numbers and Judges), Samson clearly stands out by having long hair which not only has never been cut but also has been braided into seven (dread)locks (Judg. 16:14).¹³ This might have made him feel like he was a unique representative of the Israelites over against the Philistines.¹⁴

As “hairiness, maleness, war, and charisma share the same web of connotations” (Niditch: 2008b: 75), this bodily difference demarcates a gendered difference between Israel (and Samson in particular) and the Philistines. As I will work out below, in the story we see how Israelites and Philistines are contrasted as masculine/feminine, strong/weak, and active/passive. This gendered opposition between these two ethnicities emerges out of Samson’s libido, which becomes clear in his riddle. Earlier he had torn a lion apart and when travelling to Timnah for his wedding feast, he had discovered “a swarm of bees in the body of the lion, and honey” (14:8).¹⁵ Crenshaw notes that “such an occurrence as honey in a lion’s carcass was extremely rare, despite popular belief to the contrary” (Crenshaw 1978: 113). Therefore, Samson might have taken the strange occurrence of honey in the carcass as a special sign. What this seems to have signified to Samson becomes clear in the riddle he puts to the thirty companions that were brought to him at his wedding feast: “Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet” (14:14). In general, “[r]iddles . . . most frequently deal with sex and religion” (Butler 2009: 337). Samson’s riddle clearly contains sexual innuendos, the most obvious one being honey, “a symbol of fertility in many cultures and an appropriate food eaten on the way to form marriage relations” (Niditch 2008a: 156; cf. Davidson 2008: 127).¹⁶

In the riddle, “food” and “sweet” refer to “honey,” while “eater” and “strong” refer to “lion.” On a primary level, Samson interprets his experience with the lion as a sign of what he hopes – and believes he will – experience with his future wife: the tearing of the lion symbolizes the defloration of the bride, while the honey inside the lion’s body symbolizes sexual pleasure – of the male consumer, that is (Bal 1987: 45–46; cf. Davidson 2008: 127).¹⁷ As a lion is a signifier of strength, one might consider it unlikely that it symbolizes the bride, but in the narrative women are not unambiguously ‘weak’ – despite Samson’s belief to the contrary. On a second level, however, the lion symbolizes the Philistines in general, who wanted to kill Samson (just as the lion had tried), but who could be killed by Samson (just as

¹² For arguments supporting a hair-related interpretation of פִּרְעַת see Niditch 2008b: 75–77.

¹³ Mobley considers this an Israelite version of the six locks worn by the Mesopotamian *lahmu* or “hairy one” (Mobley 2006: 22–25).

¹⁴ However, according to Judges, Samson doesn’t evoke sympathy among his fellow Israelites with his solo actions (cf. 15:11–3).

¹⁵ Segert suggests that an earlier version of the story had used a word for “honey” that was phonologically the same as the word for “lion” used here (Segert 1984: 456; cf. Baumgartner 1967: 84b).

¹⁶ Niditch is citing Bynum 1978: 42–51, 58–64.

¹⁷ According to James Crenshaw, “‘food’ and ‘sweetness’ signify semen, which is sweet to the bride who ‘eats’ the sperm” (Crenshaw 1978: 115). However, as I will argue, Samson does not seem to be interested in women’s experiences of sexual pleasure.

had happened to the lion).¹⁸ On this level, the honey refers to a different – though not unrelated – kind of delight: Samson’s delight in killing Philistine men.

By telling this riddle Samson shows both his sexual prowess (to dominate Philistine women) and his muscular strength (to dominate Philistine men). His message to his Philistine companions is that he is sexually mature, whereas they are not. Moreover, he implicitly assures them they should not underestimate his strength (i.e., overestimate their own strength) as the lion had done: the lion – and, subsequently, the Philistines – might be strong, but Samson is stronger. In short, with this riddle Samson emphasizes his hypermasculinity over against women and/or his bride, but most of all over against (Philistine) men. Through this riddle, Samson the hypermasculine hero is “feminizing” all Philistines.

In epic literature the solving of a riddle is a proof of a man’s maturity (Bal 1987: 43; cf. Crenshaw 1978: 102–105). But as riddles should be solved by rational thinking, “Samson’s riddle was not really a riddle since it was based on his personal experience and could not be solved by anyone who was not in the vineyard with him when he encountered the lion” (Schneider 2000: 208; cf. Galpaz-Feller 2006: 111–12; Exum 2014: 19 n. 10). By giving his companions a riddle that he thinks they cannot solve, he tries to “rub it in” that they are less mature than he. Yet by successfully solving the riddle – having asked Samson’s bride to diddle the solution out of him – they indirectly question his maturity. In response Samson kills thirty men at Ashkelon and gives their garments to his companions as a sarcastic ‘proof’ of his companions’ maturity (Bal 1987: 43–46). Although this maturity also had to do with rationality and power, there are several indications in the narrative that it is primarily Samson’s *sexual* maturity that is at stake here. After some time he returns to Gaza to have sexual intercourse with his wife.¹⁹ But his father-in-law tells him he has given his daughter i.e. Samson’s wife away to another man (15:1–2). Samson’s revenge with the foxes and burning torches resembles certain ancient fertility rituals and, therefore, again symbolizes his sexual frustration (Davidson 2008: 127–28; cf. Judg. 15:4–5).²⁰

In his confrontation with the Philistines, Samson becomes aware of his being different: He is circumcised, he has long hair, and he is exceptionally strong. He is circumcised as a Jew; he has long hair because of his Naziriteship; but what about his strength? For Samson, this is part of his masculine identity. He pretends to be a sexually mature and strong man, who gets off with willing women and insults the Philistine men as sissies. The problem is that he doesn’t always get what he wants: His marriage feast prematurely comes to an end.²¹ When his sexual power over women is questioned, he uses violence against men – making war, not love.

¹⁸ The connection between the lion and the Philistines is suggested by the verbal similarity (לִקְרֹאֵיהֶם) between the roaring of the lion in 14:5–6 and the shouting of the Philistines in 15:14 (Exum 1983: 38). It is further supported by the occurrence of the expression “the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson” in both Samson’s attack of the lion (Judg. 14:6) and his attack of Philistine men (Judg. 14:19 and 15:14).

¹⁹ Assis explains that חֲדָר (Judg. 15:1; cf. 16:9, 12) is not any “room” (as the NRSV suggests) but the “bedroom” (Assis 2014: 6).

²⁰ The numerical relation between the thirty men at Ashkelon (14:19), the three hundred foxes (15:4), and three thousand men of Judah (15:11) connects these three events and further supports this interpretation. Webb draws a connection with another story and hero in the book of Judges: “Compare in particular the torches (לפירים) used by Samson with his three hundred foxes (15:4) with the torches (לפירים) of Gideon and his three hundred men (7:16, 20)” (Webb 1987: 164). This connection neither supports nor contradicts the interpretation that Samson’s revenge is caused by *sexual* frustration.

²¹ The marriage is “likely not consummated” (Davidson 2008: 157). According to Exum, the reading “before he went into the chamber” for the Masoretic text’s “before the sun had set” (14:18) “rests on a widely accepted textual emendation”; Samson would later return “to go into my wife’s room” (15:1), where the verb בָּיָא indicates sexual intercourse (Exum 1993: 78).

The Third Gender

Samson reduces the Philistines to the women he shows interest in: He uses both the bride from Timnah and the prostitute from Gaza as means for the gratification of his desires. Both are ‘objects’ that lack a name, a voice, and a role independent of men (Exum 1993: 72–77; Davidson 2008: 127).²² Moreover, together they represent a caricature of a woman as either a wife or a harlot (Bal 1987: 84–85). But instead of reading the narrative as depicting Delilah as, for instance, “the female arch-villain of biblical narrative” (Sawyer 2002: 66) or “worse than a prostitute, a claim supported by her appearance as the female climax in Judges’ cyclical sequence of flawed characters” (Klein 1993: 62–63), I want to focus on the differences between Delilah and the previous two women. In what the narrator does and does not tell about Delilah, an effect is caused among the readers that I suggest must have been – in the readers’ perception – the effect Delilah had on Samson. Whoever Delilah is, Samson’s – and maybe some original/contemporary readers’ – stereotypical conception of women is deconstructed in his encounter with her. Therefore, Delilah represents a ‘new’ (gender) identity.²³ There are several arguments to substantiate this interpretation.

First, whereas the previous two (nameless) women represent to Samson two ‘categories,’ Delilah resists such categorization by having a name, which gives her subjectivity and agency. Moreover, her name has various meanings. It might be related to לַיְלָה (“night”), casting a shadow over Samson (שֶׁמֶשׁוּן, “little sun”).²⁴ Other meanings that are possible etymologically and that are supported by different motifs in the narrative are “flirtatious,” “loose/long-haired,” and “small/humble” (Koehler and Baumgartner 2001: 1.222; Segert 1984: 460; Schneider 2000: 219; Mobley 2006: 89 n. 14; Niditch 2008a: 164). The very fact that her name carries so many possible meanings with it might have had a dazzling effect on Samson – as well as on the narrative’s readers – making her identity ambiguous (Schneider 2000: 219).

Second, the text does not explicitly define Delilah as either a Philistine or an Israelite woman. On the one hand, Samson had previously shown interest in Philistine women, which, according to Exum, makes some commentators easily presuppose that Delilah too was a Philistine (Exum 1993: 69–71; 1996: 184–85; 2014: 15).²⁵ On the other hand, “Delilah” is “a good Hebrew name,” but this does not necessarily mean that she was an Israelite (Schneider 2000: 219). Delilah has an ‘in-between’ identity: She lives in the valley of Sorek, “which lies between Israelite and Philistine territory” (Exum 1996: 181; cf. Sasson 1988: 334). Although Zorah, Mahaneh-Dan, and Timnah all lay in this valley, Martin argues that Delilah’s geographical location is less precise than that of the other two women (Martin 1975: 177). Moreover, “[t]he book of Judges never defines the precise borders of Philistia” (Schneider 2000: 220). The rather imprecise description of her abode obscures, therefore, her ethnic background.

Third, Delilah’s position among the Philistines seems to be more independent than that of Samson’s bride. For whereas the bride would have been *killed* if she hadn’t succeeded in discovering the solution to Samson’s riddle, Delilah will *receive a reward* if she succeeds in

²² He also ‘feminizes’ the Philistines by penetrating the Philistine area and entering their cities—cities are considered ‘female’ (Mobley 2006: 95).

²³ Although the differences between Delilah and the previous two women are not all primarily gendered, they do intersect with, and reinforce, the gendered difference between Delilah and the other two women.

²⁴ According to Schneider, לַיְלָה and דִּלְיָה are “not really related linguistically but the biblical text often creates meanings out of less than precise etymological similarities” (Schneider 2000: 219).

²⁵ See also n. 22 above in terms of the connection between females and (female) cities. While stating that this is one of “the most common assumptions about Delilah,” Exum does not mention any author who shares this assumption; Exum does provide three good reasons to suggest that, after all, Delilah *was* a Philistine woman, although she remarks that these still “involve certain assumptions and prejudices” (Exum 1996: 184).

solving that other mystery: the source of Samson’s strength (Van Wieringen 2007: 287).²⁶ Therefore, she is more than just an extension piece of the (male) Philistines.²⁷ In addition, while the woman from Timnah was marriageable and the woman from Gaza available for a one-night stand, with Delilah the narrator does not explicitly present us with a woman who considers herself an ‘object’ available for either of these two purposes.²⁸

Whereas Samson didn’t want to be like the other men, Delilah is not like the other women in the narrative. She’s the only woman in the narrative who has a name. With her rather ambiguous name, obscure ethnicity, and unusual position Delilah has a different impact on Samson: With her he “falls in love,” with her he converses, and to her he seems to be more open and vulnerable.²⁹ She is a queer character who does not fit in Samson’s phallogocentric framework and thereby deconstructs his masculine identity, as I will work out below.

D/S

The fact that Samson has shown interest in *Philistine* women hints that he is not looking just for sex, but for danger as well – or for dangerous sex. Unlike many commentators, I see a *development* in his sexual activities, leading to a climax in his encounter with Delilah. Their encounter can be seen as a kind of BDSM game. BDSM (Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism) includes a wide range of queer sexual practices that differ from – or even contest – dominant conventions about pleasure and power by eroticizing body parts other than (exclusively) the genitals (cf. Rowlett 2001: 109; Stone 2001b: 27–28). Lori Rowlett points to typical S/M elements in the story, such as the ritualistic questioning, the bonding, and the shaving of hair – the presence of the Philistine men might even add an element of voyeurism/exhibitionism (Rowlett 2001: 106).³⁰ In addition to Rowlett’s arguments, there is another element in the text that points to this direction. Whereas Delilah doesn’t tell Samson about her deal with the lords of the Philistines, Samson shows that he is aware of this – or at least of its possibility. Delilah formulates her question by using a passive verb: “how could you *be bound* (תִּאָסֵר), so that *one* could subdue you (לְעִנּוֹתְךָ)?” (16:6).³¹ But in his answer, Samson uses an active plural verb: “If *they* bind me (יִאָסְרוּנִי)” (16:7; cf. Bal 1987: 51–52). He knows about the involvement of the lords of the Philistines. But instead of defending himself (e.g., by escaping the scene), he willingly surrenders himself to his dominatrix.³²

²⁶ This difference is emphasized by the fact that both Samson’s bride (14:15) and Delilah (16:5) are told to “coax” Samson (cf. Van Wieringen 2007: 208–209).

²⁷ Contra Galpaz-Feller, who argues that Delilah was “forced” to take part in the game with Samson (Galpaz-Feller 2006: 184), and Smith, who assumes that Delilah is “less powerful in economic and political terms” (Smith 1997: 55)—but compared to whom?

²⁸ According to Exum, the fact that no husband is mentioned is not a sufficient reason to conclude that she was a harlot (Exum 1996: 185). Neither is Delilah’s “venerability” a sufficient reason to draw that conclusion, as Zwick argues in response to Exum (Zwick 2014: 224 n. 14).

²⁹ The נִאָהֵב (“he fell in love”) in Judg. 16:4 is more intense than the נִרְאָה (“spotting someone”) in Judg. 14:1 and 16:1. Exum writes, “The narrator’s statement that Samson loved Delilah is, I think, not a sign that this is the first time Samson has loved, but rather a signal that this time is going to be especially important—a fatal attraction” (Exum 1993: 82).

³⁰ Van Wieringen also speaks of “a love game with SM elements,” but she does not further explore this (Van Wieringen 2007: 316). She only quotes Lilian R. Klein, who calls Samson “a slave to sexual passion” (Klein 1988: 118), and Eugen Drewermann, who speaks of “a masochist triumph.” In her author-date reference Van Wieringen refers to page 214 of a 1994 publication by Drewermann, while the only publication by Drewermann she mentions in her bibliography is a 1997 Dutch translation of *Den eigenen Weg gehen: Predigten zu den Büchern Exodus bis Richter* (München: Piper, 1995).

³¹ Both the nif’al and the pi’el inf. conceal whether Delilah is thinking of one person or a group as the actor in the subduing.

³² Contra, for instance, Schneider who remarks that “[e]ven now he did not realize that he should question Delilah’s query” (Schneider 2000: 221).

However, there are two reasons why I find Rowlett's reading problematic. First, she does not fully take into account the variety of S/M practices (ancient and modern) when she claims that Samson "has *all the characteristics* of a 'butch bottom'" and that the S/M role-play is "*complete* with ritual questions, hair fetishism and other power games" (Rowlett 2001: 106; emphasis added). But Delilah does not humiliate Samson, her questions sound whining rather than commanding, and the binding is not her idea but that of the lords (16:5). Moreover, it is not evident that Delilah inflicts any pain on Samson (an essential element in S/M), although ענה (16:5, 6, 19), "a visceral term implying physical pressure" (Niditch 2008a: 170; cf. Exum 1993: 79–80; Jost 2006: 250), could indicate this. Second, Rowlett argues that the sadomasochistic relation between Samson and Delilah mirrors the sadomasochistic relation between Yahweh and Israel in the book of Judges:

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 . . . 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.' (Rowlett 2001: 112)

This passage shows some serious internal tensions and inadequacies in Rowlett's reading. It seems to me that "relinquishing power" is part of the same dynamics as "deploying power," both being characteristic of the role of a top. In Rowlett's reading, Yahweh indeed seems to be a "top" only, as her (dis)qualification of Yahweh as "a sadistic character" indicates. But then, this sadism lacks the playfulness and mutual delight characteristic of S/M. There is no mutuality, no informed consent, no trust (Guest 2012: 102–103). The same can be said of another type of relation or encounter, to which Rowlett does not pay any serious attention: Samson's violent games with the Philistine men and women.

Frequently Asked Questions

My focus, therefore, is on Samson: *He* yearns to be overpowered.³³ In his first answer, he shows his awareness of not only Delilah's trick, but also how the means (the power play) is inextricably bound up with the purpose (the disclosure of his secret). So he does not, as Stump argues, betray her in order to prevent her from successfully betraying *him* (Stump 2012: 238). Instead, each time he gives her a hint and at the same time he implicitly challenges her to bind him. In the context of the narrative, this non-genital erotic play can be seen as the effect of the fact that Samson's masculinity, 'heterosexuality,' and sexual maturity were not recognised by the male Philistines. In the game, Samson's sexual and gendered identity is deconstructed, as it becomes clear in his answers to Delilah's questions.

Three times Delilah asks him exactly the same question: "How could you be bound?" (בַּמָּה תֵּאָסֵר). Each time Samson gives a different answer.³⁴ In his first three answers we can discern a development on four levels. First, in his first and second answer he uses the same verb as Delilah (אָסַר, "binding"), but in his third answer he uses a different verb (אָרַג,

³³ Contra Fewell, who argues that "[i]t is her [Delilah's] desire that drives the plot" (Fewell 1992: 73). The nif'al ענה that is used here in Judg. 16:6 and 16:19 means "to become weak." The pi'el ענה describes the rape of women in several instances in the Old Testament (Koehler and Baumgartner 2001: 853; Bal 1987: 51; Exum 1993: 79; Niditch 2008a: 165). Van Wieringen does not seem to recognize Samson's submissive role when, having shown awareness of the S/M character of the encounter, she suggests: "Could it be that in her role as mistress she more or less became a victim of a muscleman, who not only showed his enormous muscular power in fights with lions and men, but also in bed might have treated her in a anything but subtle way and might have overwhelmed her?" (Van Wieringen 2007: 316; cf. n. 30)

³⁴ The fourth question and Samson's final answer will be discussed in the next section.

“weaving”) (16:7, 11, 13). Apparently, something different should be done to him than what Delilah thinks. Second, in his first two answers Samson uses a verb in the third person plural: “If *they* bind me (יִאֶסְרוּנִי, יִאֶסְרוּנִי),” but in his third answer a verb in the second person singular: “If *you* weave (תִּאָרְנִי).”³⁵ As I have already pointed out above, by using a verb in the third person plural, Samson shows his awareness of the involvement of the Philistine men. When we read their encounter as a D/S game, Samson is here “topping from the bottom,” but Delilah trains him into submission until he uses the verb in the second person singular and, thereby, confesses that only a woman, only this particular woman, Delilah, can subdue him and destroy his strength (England 2013: 12). Third, in the Masoretic Text Samson doesn’t finish his third answer: “If you weave the seven locks of my head with the web and make it tight with a pin . . .” (16:13).³⁶ Here he mentions his hair for the first time. Although he hasn’t used the word “razor” yet, the mentioning of his hair and the cutting off of his answer already allude to the cutting of his hair (Bal 1987: 55). Fourth, we can discern a development in the different types of binding that Samson suggests. In the beginning, he speaks of “seven fresh bowstrings” (16:7).³⁷ He then mentions “new ropes that have never been used” (16:11), but the reader knows that ropes *have* already been used to bind him – and without success (15:13–15). Next he suggests that Delilah “weave the seven locks of (his) head with the web” (16:13). In the succession of materials and actions of binding, we can see a development from simple and ‘natural’ to complex and ‘cultural’: The making of bowstrings and ropes and the work of weaving required increasingly complex human activities. On a symbolic level, what Samson implies is that his strength is neither a “natural given” nor a “supernatural gift” (cf. Bal 1987: 53–55; Niditch 2008a: 168–69). The spinning wheel Samson mentions in his third answer is a tool that was connected to women’s work (Bal 1987: 54).³⁸ Samson desires his hair to get ‘mixed up’ with Delilah’s hair, as can happen when two long-haired lovers lie in bed. That is how he would become powerless. Put differently, Samson faces what Susan Niditch calls “the ultimate psychological dilemma for men”: He simultaneously desires and fears to get ‘mixed up’ in an emotional relationship (Niditch 2008a: 168; cf. Bal 1987: 53–55).

No Strings Attached?

“Third time lucky is not only a common cliché but a deeply rooted symbolism also found in the Bible,” writes Bal (Bal 1987: 53). But again, Samson sets himself free. After Delilah’s continuous nagging and pestering, Samson is tired to death (16:16; cf. לָמוּת). Then the man who knew the power of riddles reveals the riddle of his power. The first word that breaks through the fence of his teeth is “razor” (16:17).³⁹ If his hair is cut, Samson claims, he will lose his power. The fact that this confession seems to be proven to be true shortly afterwards might explain why the majority of commentators fail to ask critical questions about Samson’s sudden disclosure of his hair as the source of his strength (Moore 1895: 355; Boling 1975: 250; Webb 1987: 168–69; Fewell 1992: 74; Exum 1993; 1996; Block 1999; Galpaz-Feller

³⁵ Butler, for instance, wrongly translates the first and second answer in the second person singular (Butler 2009: 309).

³⁶ The NRSV follows the LXX, which has Samson continuing to say: “then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else.” The sentence that the LXX adds—or, depending on which text one gives priority, that the MT leaves out—might be a translation of a sentence that in the Hebrew original started with וְהִקְנַתָּהּ. As the next sentence starts with a different form of the same verb (וְהִתְקַנַּתָּהּ), it is possible that the MT is the result of a *metabepsis*, although the difference between these two words makes such a miscopy not very likely.

³⁷ Seven is not only the number of fullness, but also the number of his locks (cf. Judg. 16:13). According to Block, Samson asks Delilah for contact with an object that was *unclean* for him, because *fresh* bowstrings (like the fresh jawbone in Judg. 15:15) “would have been construed as still parts of a corpse” (Block 1999: 732).

³⁸ Bal adds that there are even mythical stories of women who wove their own hair.

³⁹ The phrase “breaking through the fence of his teeth” is, of course, derived from Homer (*Iliad* IV.350–351).

2006: 174–75; Niditch 2008a: 170; Butler 2009: 350–51).⁴⁰ After all, in the narrative neither the angel nor Samson’s parents nor the narrator has drawn this connection. Neither is there a reason to think that his strength was part of his Naziriteship.⁴¹ It is Samson who draws this connection – but why?

Now we need to bring together and elaborate on the findings from the preceding sections. The prohibition of the cutting of a Nazirite’s hair was a prohibition of a kind of cultivation, an intervention in the natural growth of hair. But Samson seems to have made a virtue of necessity by cultivating his hair into a piece of art: not – as his sunny name might have caused us to expect – by bleaching his hair into a *coupe soleil*, but by braiding his hair into seven (dread)locks.⁴² As Niditch comments, “[t]he hair is braided, prepared in a special way implying care, working with the hair, a particular style, and a degree of control – in short, a culture of hair” (Niditch 2008b: 65). With his conspicuous hairstyle he had distinguished himself in various degrees from Philistine men/warriors, other Israelite men/warriors, and other Nazirites. He had made his hairstyle a symbol of what made him so unique: his masculine power.⁴³ Put differently, it had become a phallic symbol. Instead of regarding his long hair as a sign of his Nazirite status, Samson took it as a sign of his gendered and sexual superiority. In his blatant overtures to Philistine women, in his violence against Philistine men, in the telling of a suggestive riddle to his wedding companions, and in many other of his actions, he had the penetrating fume of a hypermasculine sexuality hanging around him like a musky *eau de toilette*. In all this he had constructed or reinforced several interrelated dualisms (Israel/Philistines, self/other, male/female, strong/weak, active/passive) that Exum has called “a phallogocentric way of structuring reality” (Exum 1993: 62).⁴⁴

But, as I have argued above, when he meets a woman who doesn’t fit in his caricatured view of women and the dualisms involved in it, his phallogocentric ideology is deconstructed. Contrary to what his first three answers suggest, he shouldn’t be *bound* to be subdued; something needs to be *cut* (Bal 1987: 58). His hair, that is. As his hair had become a phallic symbol, the cutting of his hair symbolizes castration – or, as Bal puts it, “by cutting off his locks, the temporary weakness of the penis is made permanent” (Bal 1987: 59; cf. Niditch 2008a: 170; 2008b: 67; Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska 2010: 178). Just like many modern men, Samson faces a double bind: proving your masculinity without making a direct reference to

⁴⁰ Other commentators recognize the remarkability of Samson’s answer, but don’t explain it. For example, Schneider notes that “this is the first time that the text states the source of his strength, and the first time since Samson has been alive, not in utero, that reference is made to his Nazirite status” (Schneider 2000: 222), but she does not ask why “the text” draws a connection between his hair and his strength. Niditch only remarks that “[s]ignificantly, throughout these chapters, the writer does not comment on Samson’s hair as a source of his super powers. Samson’s mother . . . has told to his father about his status but not about the instructions concerning hair” (Niditch 2008b: 64). Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska considers it “sufficient to point out that in his confession Samson draws the link between his strength, his hair, and his [N]azirite status” (Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska 2010: 177). Van Wieringen takes a step further by noting that “[i]t is Samson’s own interpretation that losing his hair implies losing his strength” (Van Wieringen 2007: 292), but she does not explain *why* Samson draws this connection. Bal does not explicitly address this question as such, but her 1987 commentary provides much material for answering it.

⁴¹ Neither Num. 6:1–8 nor Judges 13 provides a reason to think that Samson’s strength was part of his Naziriteship. But the fact that the narrator explains Samson’s use of violence by remarking beforehand that “the Spirit of the LORD rushed on him” (Judg. 14:19; 15:14; cf. 16:20) at least draws a connection between Yahweh and Samson’s strength. This is, of course, an explanation provided by the narrator.

⁴² See n. 13 above about Mobley’s reading of Samson’s locks. For a brief and critical discussion of reading the Samson narrative as a solar myth see Mobley 2006: 6–7 (cf. 33–39).

⁴³ This has numerous parallels in “the widespread belief that the strength, or very life of men (especially of heroes), resides in their locks” (Boling 1975: 250, quoting Gaster 1969 without mentioning a page number).

⁴⁴ Contra Van Wieringen, who criticizes Exum by arguing that “statements on the basis of oppositions run the risk of arbitrariness” (Van Wieringen 2007: 324). See n. 22 above regarding Samson’s penetration of females and female cities.

what seems to be the biological marker of the masculine sex – the penis – which is why, according to Judith Butler, it is often “treated like the Hebraic *Yahweh*, never to be spoken” (Butler 1990: 48). The reason for this cultural ‘prohibition’ – or at least reticence – to mention the penis is that it needs to be kept concealed that a penis is not always erect – that is, male strength and superiority are not a ‘natural given.’⁴⁵ In short, Samson does not lose his strength because of a natural or supernatural relation between his hair and his strength, but by meeting Delilah (who doesn’t fit in his caricature view of women), by revealing his secret (i.e., demythologizing his phallic symbol), and finally – and crucially – in the cutting of his hair (symbolic castration).

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that it is Samson who draws the connection between his strength and the length of his hair, and that his headdress had become a phallic symbol. Contrary to traditional interpretations that (to some extent) blame Delilah for Samson’s downfall, and contrary to the commentaries of (feminist) biblical scholars (e.g., Bal, Exum, Lazarewicz-Wyrzykowska) who blame the narrator for siding with Samson (and subsequently accusing Delilah), I have argued that Samson is himself to ‘blame’ for his downfall. As a strange Nazirite boy born from a miraculous conception, his inability – and maybe even his unwillingness – to accept his queer positionality had resulted in a performance of hypermasculinity, with different yet similarly damaging effects on both men and women. When he meets a woman whose ambiguous identity forces open his androcentric worldview, we see his ‘heterosexuality’ dissolving back into queerness.

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⁴⁵ According to Smelik, “Because the phallus is a symbol and a signifier, no man can fully symbolize it. Although the patriarchal male subject has a privileged relation to the phallus, he will always fall short of the phallic ideal” (Smelik 1998: 140).

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