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Caroline Blyth

When Raymond met Delilah

Within cultural retellings of the Samson and Delilah story (Judg 16), Delilah is often presented as the quintessential femme fatale. In this paper, I consider the inspiration for Delilah's cultural afterlives as femme fatale before exploring alternative ways to contemplate her character in the biblical text. As a guide, I read Judg 16 alongside Raymond Chandler's hardboiled novel, *Farewell, My Lovely*, whose plot bears strong echoes of the biblical narrative. I consider how Chandler's complex approach to the femme fatale within his novel might invite new readings of Delilah's character, which grant more multi-faceted insights into her literary persona.

Close your eyes and picture Delilah. Whom do you see? What does she look like? For many contemporary readers, the name Delilah evokes a jewel-toned tapestry, whose multi-hued threads stitch together a woman's presence—dark smoky eyes, delicious lips, whispered secrets, intimate smiles, the sparkle of a razor not quite concealed. We will not, however, find these images presented explicitly to us in Judg 16; instead, we lap them up from the many cultural retellings of this biblical narrative performed in literature, music, and the visual arts. Within these retellings, Delilah shines as leading lady, arousing us, fascinating us, repulsing us. Shamelessly seductive, she is

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the quintessential femme fatale, the "fatal woman" who invites both fascination *and* fear.[1] Her intoxicating sexuality compels *and* repels our gaze and, despite her lethality, we, like Samson, find it impossible to resist her exotic allure. As J. Cheryl Exum notes, the name Delilah has become synonymous in popular culture with "treachery and deceit," emblematic of the dangerous allure of the untamed female body.[2]

Why does Delilah attract such imaginative responses from those cultural authors who recreate her on stage, canvas, or film? Perhaps the inspiration for their artistic and interpretive choices lies in the text of Judg 16 itself, in that it offers the creative reader a temptingly blank canvas to work with. Exuding clouds of ambiguity and scattered with tantalizing narrative gaps, this biblical tale obscures Delilah from the reader's view. It is a text "fraught with background,"[3] which invites us to weave between these narrative gaps with our own interpretive embellishments. Such an invitation likewise grants artists, writers, and musicians carte blanche to respond creatively and resourcefully to Delilah's enigmatic biblical character;[4] consequently, guided by their own cultural experiences, ideologies, and imaginings, they frequently fashion Delilah in the form of a dangerously seductive femme fatale.

And yet, these same textual ambiguities in Judg 16 can also provoke us to challenge such portrayals of Delilah and to create our own alternative tapestries of her character. To begin engaging with these narrative gaps, I have chosen to look to Raymond Chandler's hardboiled novel *Farewell, My Lovely*, whose elegant plot strongly echoes the biblical drama of Samson and Delilah.

[1] 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 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 255; Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 38; David M. Gunn, *Judges*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 211; Dana Nolan Fewell, "Judges," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, Expanded ed., ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 79.

[2] J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2012), 210.

[3] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univerity Press, 2003), 12.

[4] For some wonderful explorations of Delilah's cultural afterlives, see Dan Clanton, *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout: Interpreting the Bible's Women in the Arts and Music* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2009), 65–77; Josie Bridges Snyder, "Delilah and Her Interpreters," in *Women's Bible Commentary: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 138–41; Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 209–75; Gunn, *Judges*, 211–20.

I am not suggesting here that Chandler consciously or unconsciously had this biblical tradition in mind when he wrote his novel; ultimately, Chandler's "authorial intent" vis-à-vis the biblical tradition should not matter. For, I am drawing upon the theory of intertextuality in its broadest sense here—the claim that "no text is produced and received in isolation from other texts."[5] Rather, all texts offer "fragments of open discourse,"[6] which let us eavesdrop on an unceasing conversation that each text has with those coming before it and those following. We can thus read ancient and contemporary texts "fruitfully alongside one another,"[7] regardless of their historical and geographical distance from each other; for, each can still echo the other in terms of shared structures, themes, and concerns. The two texts I am reading together—*Farewell, My Lovely* and Judg 16—relate that timeless and terrifying myth of the strong man brought to his knees by a woman's wiles[8] and both explore that myth in ways that invite us to rethink creatively (and perhaps subversively) the shapes and flavours of its characters and plot lines. Intentionally or not, Chandler's novel can thus rouse us to reimagine the Samson and Delilah story, adding new depths and possibilities to our reading.

Within the framework of this intertextual focus, I am particularly intrigued by Chandler's portrayal in *Farewell, My Lovely* of his leading lady, Helen Grayle, and her potential to enliven our reading of Delilah's character in Judg 16. Helen's delectable and dangerous presence within the novel embodies the enigma of the femme fatale, yet at the same time she succeeds in both affirming *and* challenging common cultural assumptions about this iconic figure. She therefore beckons us to destabilize Delilah's own cultural depictions as a femme fatale par excellence, coaxing us to reinvestigate instead the ambiguities that envelop Delilah's biblical persona. Let us allow ourselves, then, to be coaxed by Helen, to follow her through her own nar-

[5] Stefan Alkier, "Intertextuality and the Semiotics of Biblical Texts," in *Reading the Bible Intertextually*, ed. Richard B. Hays, Stefan Alkier, and Leroy A. Huizenga (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 3. For more detailed discussion of the potential values of intertextuality theory within biblical studies, see Steve Moyise, "Intertextuality and the Study of the Old Testament in the New Testament," in *The Study of the Old Testament in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 14–41; Alison Jack, *The Bible and Literature* (London: SCM Press, 2012), 52–71; Marianne Grohmann, "Psalm 113 and the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1–10): A Paradigm for Intertextual Reading?" In Hays, Alkier, and Huizenga, *Reading the Bible Intertextually*, 119–35.

[6] Grohmann, "Psalm 113 and the Song of Hannah," 120.

[7] Jack, *Bible and Literature*, 69.

[8] Bal, *Lethal Love*, 38–9.

rative, seeing see how her complex presence as "fatal woman" might help us to discern alternative shades of meaning for Delilah. First, however, a word (of warning?) about femmes fatales.

Elusive Ladies: Capturing the Femme Fatale

An infamous and intriguing figure, the femme fatale has sashayed her way into cultural myths and traditions dating back millennia.[9] As a "fatal woman," she personifies an inherent "doubleness,"[10] beings both feminine *and* fatal—embodying a malignant eroticism, she exploits her irresistible allure to intoxicate her victims and entice them mercilessly towards destruction or even death. Yet, despite her ubiquity in cultural texts and traditions, the femme fatale remains an enigmatic presence, a mysterious "other" prowling just beyond our view, refusing to reveal to us the catalysts that spark her disruptive behaviour.[11] As Mary Ann Doane observes, the femme fatale "never really is what she seems to be. She harbours a threat which is never legible, predictable, or manageable."[12]

At the core of the femme fatale's identity as "other" lies her sexuality, which is typically condemned as perverse, uncontrolled, and deadly. Disrupting and destabilizing the gendered narrative worlds where they sojourn, femmes fatales move confidently in a man's world; they exist as "lawless agents of female desire, rebelling against the patriarchal relegation of women to the domestic sphere."[13] They detonate actions and reactions that heap chaos and disaster upon whomever they ensnare; they laugh at patriarchal

[9] For more discussion of the femme fatale in myth, tradition, and popular culture, see, for example, Virginia M. Allen, *The Femme Fatale: Erotic Icon* (New York: Whitston, 1983); Janey Place, "Women in Film Noir," in *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 35–68; Elizabeth K. Menon, *Evil By Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); Patrick Bade, *Femme Fatale* (London: Ash & Grant, 1979.); Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-up* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe, eds., *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[10] Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, 7.

[11] Elisabeth Bronfen, "Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire," *New Literary History* 35, no. 1 (2004): 106; Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe, "Introduction: 'Cherchez la *femme*'," in Hanson and O'Rawe, *Femme Fatale*, 1.

[12] Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 1.

[13] Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale*, 4. Grossman here is writing specifically about

traditions, scorning the constrictive gender regulations that are intended to dictate women's lives, exposing their impermanence and fragility.[14] And yet, despite their anarchic dangerousness, they remain a tangible source of desire, one whom we find … oh so hard to resist.[15]

And therein lies the origins of the femme fatale; this iconic figure personifies patriarchal anxieties about *both* women's disabusal of traditional gender norms *and* their terrifying desirability and power to beguile. Creators of the femme fatale sculpt these anxieties into a shapely, sensuous female form, justifying *their* fears of female licentiousness and gendered anarchy by insisting on *her* dangerousness, rationalizing episodes of their *own* weakness and vulnerability by blaming *her* perverse, animalistic allure.[16] In a sense, then, we can see this creative act as another way to contain the feminine and justify her subjugation—women's potential for power and autonomy is proscribed and pathologized as a "symptom" of their aberrant sexuality.[17] The femme fatale, as a patriarchal construct, reinforces powerful cultural ideations relating to gender and affirms our "systemic failure" to challenge deep-rooted fears about female agency and empowerment.[18] Women thus remain defined by patriarchal categories of sex, gender, and the female body, regardless of their potential to disrupt these same categories.

Chandler's Complex Femme Fatale

These highs and lows experienced by the femme fatale as she journeys through countless cultural texts are artfully evoked by Chandler in *Farewell, My Lovely*,

the femme fatale in film noir but her comments are equally applicable to other cultural texts, including literature, music and art, where this iconic figure makes an appearance.

[14] See Lee Horsley, *The Noir Thriller* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 130; James F. Maxfield, *The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir, 1941–1999* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1996), 168—69; Steve Neale, "'I Can't Tell Anymore Whether You're Lying': Double Indemnity, Human Desire and the Narratology of Femmes Fatales," in Hanson and O'Rawe, *Femme Fatale*, 187; Allen, *Femme Fatale*, 196; Place, "Women in Film Noir," 47; Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale*, 9.

[15] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 220, 250–56.

[16] Ibid., 252–55; Exum, "Lethal Woman 2," 267–68; Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale*, 6; Bronfen, "Femme Fatale," 109–10.

[17] Julie Grossman, ""'Well, Aren't We Ambitious,' or 'You've Made up Your Mind I'm Guilty': Reading Women as Wicked in American *Film Noir*," in Hanson and O'Rawe, *Femme Fatale*, 201; Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 255; and *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 163 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 90.

[18] Grossman, "Reading Women as Wicked," 201.

where readers encounter his leading female character, wealthy socialite and "fatal woman" Helen Grayle. The novel relates Philip Marlowe's heady involvement with Helen and his attempts to unravel the tangled threads of her past relationship with the dangerously strong and highly volatile ex-con Moose Malloy, who is searching for Helen after his recent release from prison. As Marlowe follows both characters through the twisting paths of the narrative, he uncovers a tale of deception, sexual treachery and betrayal, which finally explodes into mortal violence at the story's climax. Helen's past relationship with Malloy comes back to haunt her, as does her previous act of betrayal, which resulted in Malloy's arrest and imprisonment. As the story nears its end, Marlowe contrives a meeting between the former lovers and, in a scene he failed to anticipate, witnesses Helen shooting Malloy before making her escape. The book ends with Marlowe learning of Helen's death, at her own hand, after she is tracked down by the police.

As we read this stylish novel, Chandler unfolds before us a world where—amused or aghast—we watch Helen play fast and loose with 1940s North American gender orthodoxies. Oozing sexual confidence, self-assurance, and defiance, she woos male friends in clubs and casinos, disdainful of staying home with her elderly husband. She drinks even our hardened private eye under the table and boldly seizes the sexual initiative when she encounters any man who whets her interest. Indeed, the first time we meet her, we watch, intrigued, as she plies both herself and Marlowe with drinks, until his inhibitions melt like the ice in his scotch and he succumbs to her advances.

Nevertheless, throughout the story, Marlowe's feelings towards Helen remain a complex mix of fascination, desire, and mistrust; in his eyes, her physical sensuality mirrors her moral ambiguity, as though one could not exist without the other. Although he is clearly intrigued (and a bit smitten) by her beauty, a wary cynicism undercuts his desire. Seeing her photograph for the first time, he ranks her as "a blonde to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained-glass window,"[19] thus immediately associating her physical appearance with a strong element of danger. In Marlowe's mind, Helen's sensual allure is intoxicating, making even the most saintly, heavenward-gazing man commit the most unsaintly of acts.

Yet, despite acknowledging Helen's dangerousness, Marlowe cannot keep away. As he savours Helen's photograph, his fantasies run unchecked: "Whatever you needed … she had it,"[20] he muses, nudging us to gaze with him at

[19] Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940; Camberwell: Penguin, 2009), 97.
[20] Ibid.

her image, to visualize her as an object of desire, rather than a subject in her own right.[21] Accepting Marlowe's invitation, we stare at Helen with him—perhaps with longing, perhaps with disapproval, but always with fascination. Even the warnings Marlowe receives from another character, the plain and sensible Anne Riordan, do not immediately dampen his (or our) enthrallment with Helen, whose blonde presence *glows* throughout this novel, lighting up each page on which she appears. Frustrated by his fascination with Helen, Anne snaps at Marlowe, "a woman like that—with her looks—can't you see."[22] As a woman "like that," Helen's explicit and unconventional sensuality confirms, for Anne, her dangerousness. She murders Malloy because she is *that* sort of woman, a treacherous femme fatale, a venomous blonde with sensual lips and a smile Marlowe could feel in his hip pocket. Desperate to cling onto the life that marriage to a rich, liverish husband afforded her, she does not think twice before filling her former lover's belly with lead. As Marlowe admits to Anne as they discuss Malloy's murder, "I think she meant to kill anybody she had to kill. She had a lot to fight for."[23] In the end, though, such untamed female violence cannot go unchecked; Helen has to be destroyed, ironically by her own hand. And yet, while we watch Marlowe ultimately heeding Anne's warnings and settling down with this safe, conventional, and colourless woman, we are left wondering if Helen still bewitches, bothers, and bewilders him, her captivating looks and enigmatic deadliness forever tangled together in his dreams and fantasies.

Yet, woven through Chandler's characterization of Helen Grayle are a number of shimmering threads, which offer us glimpses of her persona that complicate or even subvert her typical categorization as a femme fatale. These glimpses invite us to contemplate Helen, not as a figure of malignant female sexuality but instead as a subject of her own narrative, whose words and actions are guided—or necessitated—by insufferable contexts of violence, poverty, or threat, rather than feminine malice.[24] Trapped within an oppres-

[21] Ronald R. Thomas, "The Dream of the Empty Camera: Image, Evidence, and Authentic American Style in *American Photographs* and *Farewell, My Lovely*," *Criticism* 36, no. 3 (1994): 428–30.

[22] Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*, 99.

[23] Ibid., 299.

[24] Elisabeth Bronfen, "The Female Side of Crime: Film Noir's Femme Fatale and the Dark Side of Modernity," in *Crime Culture: Figuring Criminality in Fiction and Film*, ed. Bran Nicol, Eugene McNulty, and Patricia Pulham (London: Continuum, 2011), 76; Julie Grossman, "Film Noir's 'Femme Fatales' Hard-Boiled Women: Moving beyond Gender Fantasies," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 24, no. 1 (2007): 19–23.

sive and brutal world that is "psychotically gendered,"[25] she seeks to escape from intolerable situations by transgressing gendered codes of sexual and social conduct, as this arms her with the only source of power to which she has access. Encountering Helen in this light—gazing beyond her seductive curves and sensuous mouth to understand the context that informs her own experience—we can start to see her as more than just a stereotyped cliché of poisonous feminine sexuality. Rather, she is a woman with her own complex story to tell, who is attempting to liberate herself from an unbearable and threatening narrative world. If we fail to recognize this, we simply categorize her, like Anne Riordan does, as "a woman like that—with her looks," thereby reaffirming our cultural preconceptions about the sexual and moral deviance of the femme fatale. As Julie Grossman suggests, we need to focalize the narratives of women labelled as femmes fatales through *their* eyes, allowing us to view them beyond this derogatory label: "rather than promoting images of women that rely on their bodies, finally, we need to illustrate the contexts that inform women's experience."[26]

This strategy of "reading" Helen, which starts to deconstruct the cultural construct of the femme fatale, may then allow us to read the narrative of *Farewell, My Lovely*, not as a misogynistic confirmation of repressive sexual stereotypes but as a critique of these stereotypes and the ideologies and institutions that perpetuate them.[27] Such a reading strategy is certainly plausible, as Chandler's depiction of Helen itself offers us much more than a two-dimensional photograph of a sexually alluring, objectified blonde. Throughout this novel, he conjures up a woman haunted by her past relationship with a violent and volatile man, a woman who, desperate to escape this relationship, betrayed her lover to the police. We see a woman who felt impelled to change her identity and appearance in order to protect herself, who, alone and vulnerable in 1940s Los Angeles, acted from necessity to ensure some sense of social and financial security—marrying an affluent and well-connected husband. Whenever something came along that threatened her new-found security, such as an inquisitive private eye, she resorted to her only *real* source of power in this "psychotically gendered" world—her sexual allure—to ward off the danger.

Moreover, when contemplating Helen's role in the murder of playboy Lindsay Marriott earlier in the novel and her eventual shooting of the terri-

[25] Grossman, "Film Noir's 'Femme Fatales'," 19–20.
[26] Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale*, 5.
[27] Neale, "Narratology of Femmes Fatales," 188.

fyingly persistent and volatile Malloy, Chandler leaves us to consider that she resorted to violence here out of necessity, to protect herself from a life and a fate she had never wished for. We discover that Marriott knew secrets from Helen's past which could have destroyed her current life; convinced that he will ultimately betray her to either Malloy or Marlowe, Helen orchestrates his murder before he has the chance to blow her cover. Meanwhile, Malloy lumbers dangerously through this novel, searching for his former lover with a chilling single-mindedness, wreaking deadly violence wherever he goes. With his grotesque size and strength, he seems unstoppable, evading the police, agitating Marlowe, killing a nightclub owner and beating to death an elderly woman, both of whom refused to help him find his girl. Offering these details, Chandler may well be inviting us at least to entertain the possibility that Helen fired those fatal shots at Malloy as a last, desperate act of self-defence. Rather than passively accepting Malloy's threatening presence, she fought against social conventions of female passivity and weakness in a frantic attempt to hold onto the life she had made for herself. We are therefore able to envision Helen, not as a heartless and manipulative femme fatale, but as the embodiment of women's powerlessness in a world where men traditionally call the shots.

Finally, in *Farewell, My Lovely*, Chandler seems to whisper to us the suggestion that Helen's persona as femme fatale may have been little more than a façade—a disguise worn by a woman living in an unbearable narrative world. As the novel nears its end, we discover that the character of "Helen Grayle" has, all along, been an invention—an illusion—conjured up by nightclub singer and Malloy's former girlfriend Velma Valento in an attempt to vanish from the scene after she betrays Malloy to the police. We learn that Velma has abandoned her singing career and stepped out of her "very ordinary" looks and "strictly assembly line" prettiness[28] to reinvent herself, changing her name, appearance, and even her voice and mannerisms in order to become Helen Grayle—stunning blonde and glittering socialite. Throughout the novel, we catch glimpses of Helen's illusory nature, long before we discover, with Marlowe, her real identity. Marlowe notes on more than one occasion that her presence reminds him of an act—not quite real; in one scene, after speaking to her on the phone, he feels as though he has just "talked to

[28] This bland description of Velma given by Marlowe when he looks at her photograph stands in stark contrast to his desirous gaze when poring over a picture of this same woman dressed up in the persona of Helen Grayle (Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*, 34).

someone that didn't exist."[29] Later, as he sits with Helen/Velma in his apartment, waiting for Malloy to arrive, the full realization of Helen's "Grade B Hollywood" artificiality[30] seems to hit him square between the eyes; her mask peeled away, she is ultimately nothing but smoke and mirrors—an act, which allowed her to escape her former lover and make her way in a world filled with uncertainty and violence. As a disguise, the persona of the femme fatale is therefore not some marker of Velma's perversity, but rather is a masquerade she adopts from necessity in order to survive the game of cat and mouse she is fated to play, both with Malloy and, later, with Marlowe. It is telling that, at the end of the story, as she attempts to evade the police after shooting Malloy, Velma returns to her old job as nightclub singer and, discarding her "Helen" costume—losing her blondeness, changing her name, terminating her life as a wealthy socialite and wife—her vulnerability returns, ultimately, with fatal effect. Without her femme fatale guise as "armour," the world is too perilous a place for her to survive.

As the novel ends, we watch Marlowe receive news of Helen's death. Despite her multifaceted portrayal throughout this narrative, we are left with an uneasy sense that, amidst the ethical complexities and convolutions of the story, Helen's self-destructive act by no means restores the moral order. Any sense of moral absolutism is clouded by Marlowe's own emotional responses to the diverse characters and situations he has encountered along the way. While his gaze continues to regard the now-dead Helen as a perpetrator of unacceptable female violence, we are left with a typical Chandleresque refusal to grant his characters or readers any sense of satisfactory closure.[31] There is no tidy ending here, no promise of redemption or remedy for a hopelessly corrupt and horribly brutal world. Marlowe's concluding thoughts about Helen are undoubtedly ambivalent, recalling her as both victim *and* victimizer, trapped within the misogyny of her cultural milieu. He condemns her violence, yet he also questions; wondering why, asking what if, tentatively raising the possibility that Helen's life *and* death had some form of redemptive meaning—these questions remain unanswered, and we are left uncertain of whether or not Marlowe quite believes what he is saying. Again, we are offered the chance to gaze upon Helen as someone who is as much casualty

[29] Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*, 285.

[30] Ibid., 292.

[31] John. Hilgart, "Philip Marlowe's Labor of Words," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 44, no. 4 (2002): 368–92; John Paul Athanasourelis, *Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe: The Hard-Boiled Detective Transformed* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), 120–21.

as criminal; who responded to the threat of misogynistic violence and disruption with an equally gendered violence and disruption of her own,[32] and whose sexuality and sexual allure were not so much the source of her treachery as simply marks of who she was, or who she felt she *had* to be in order to survive as best she could within her world.

When Raymond Met Delilah: Reimagining a Biblical Femme Fatale

So far, we have walked part of the way through this essay with Helen Grayle as our companion. Joining us for the rest of the journey will be Delilah from the biblical narrative of Judg 16. Considering these two literary figures side by side, I am keen to see if Helen's very complex portrayal as a femme fatale might help us to view the biblical Delilah from new angles and directions. Like Helen, Delilah is often identified and portrayed as a "fatal woman" in her cultural afterlives—a woman whose perverse sexuality and irresistible allure proves fatal to even the strongest man; and yet, as I mentioned in the introduction, the biblical text of Judg 16 is notoriously gap-ridden, leaving out multiple details about Delilah's personality, motivations, and sexuality. We are told next to nothing about her relationship (sexual or otherwise) with Samson; any whispers of her sexual involvement with the Hebrew warrior that we might *just* discern are so muted that we wonder if we could have imagined them.[33] While we know that Samson loved Delilah (v.4), we remain in the dark concerning what *she* thought of him. Moreover, we are handed no clues as to her appearance or her sexuality; was she a beautiful, enthralling woman who made Samson feel like kicking a hole in a temple window? Was she in a sexual relationship with Samson, or was their rela-

[32] Thomas, "Dream of the Empty Camera," 433.

[33] For example, the comment in v.19—that Samson slept upon (or between) Delilah's knees—is sometimes understood to carry some sexual connotation (Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 79), given that the Hebrew word for "knees" is associated in other texts with childbirth (e.g., Gen 30:3; Job 3:12) and, as Susan Ackerman suggests, may also be a euphemism for female genitals. However, exactly what is meant by this phrase remains obtuse; certainly, if the narrator is suggesting to us that Samson and Delilah were sleeping together, he (or she) is being very coy about it using such phraseology. Moreover, we can just as easily read alternative, non-sexualized nuances into the image of Samson sleeping "on" or "between" Delilah's knees. As Ackerman notes, such an image evokes more powerful nuances of birthing and mothering than it does those related to sexual intercourse: "Samson lies shorn between Delilah's knees in the same way he lay as a newborn, bald, between his mother's." See Susan Ackerman, "What If Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?," *Biblical Interpretation* 8, nos. 1–2 (2000): 39–40; also Bal, *Lethal Love*, 58–59.

tionship wholly platonic? Was she even heterosexual, however that may have been understood within the narrative world of Judg 16? Was she a prostitute, like the other woman Samson encounters in Judg 16:1, who utilized her sexuality to earn a living? Moreover, and integral to her sexual characterization, why did Delilah agree to help the Philistines discover the source of Samson's strength? Again, the text keeps tight lipped about this narrative point—which Bal refers to as "*the* shocking detail in this episode" [original emphasis][34]—refusing to share with us any details about Delilah's personality, motivations, or cognitive processes. Given that the Philistine elders offered her a fortune to complete her mission—1,100 pieces of silver from each elder—can we deduce that she was inflamed by avarice? Or does she betray Samson simply because she was "a woman like that"—a fatal woman—who relished using her erotic allure to manipulate and emasculate men?

These questions go unanswered in our gap-riddled text, and yet, within her many cultural afterlives in music, literature, and the visual arts, these gaps are filled in ways that dress Delilah up in the paraphernalia of the archetypal femme fatale—on stage, screen, and canvas, she struts around as Samson's treacherous lover, purveyor of erotic temptation and dangerous sensuality. And, as we turn to look at Delilah in the *biblical* narrative, our thoughts about her here are inevitably shaped by her cultural afterlives and perhaps by our own gendered assumptions and ideologies too. As Dan Clanton has noted, these afterlives "have a unique power in their ability to alter and adapt biblical narrative for different times in ways with which people can identify," imposing onto the biblical Delilah "widespread assumptions" about her character that simply are not present within the text itself.[35] Consequently, we tend to visualize the biblical Delilah likewise as a femme fatale—a sexually subversive and treacherous woman that myths are made of—because that is the image with which we can "identify" in light of the patriarchal ideologies pertaining to women, gender, and sexuality that are rooted and omnipresent within our own cultures. And so, we accept this culturally-constructed femme fatale as *the* biblical Delilah, without ever asking what alternative views of her persona might be possible.

[34] Bal, *Lethal Love*, 50.

[35] Clanton, *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout*, 65–66. Speaking more broadly about the cultural afterlives of biblical characters, Exum makes a similar point here: "What many people know or think they know about the Bible comes from more familiar representations of biblical texts and themes in the popular culture than from the study of the ancient text itself" (*Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 14).

Such a myopic view, however, ignores all those tantalizing layers of ambiguity within the narrative of Judg 16 that provide, as David Fishelov suggests, a "multi-layered system of realized and unrealized potentialities" for understanding Delilah's character.[36] Or, as Lilian Klein observes, "Despite her reputation, the Delilah of the text is more complex and more interesting as a character than a mere one-dimensional seductress."[37] And, like Chandler's depiction of Helen Grayle, we may find that when we explore these textual ambiguities, focalizing Delilah's story through her eyes, new facets of her character may emerge that impel us to complicate and challenge her negative representation as the manipulative and dangerously erotic femme fatale. Letting these two literary characters meet one another, look closely at one another, and talk to one another will offer us insights into potentially new areas of familiarity and affinity between them that allow us to delve deeper into these narrative gaps surrounding Delilah's persona in Judg 16.

To initiate this rendezvous between Delilah and Helen, let us first consider Delilah's possible motives for betraying Samson to the Philistines. In movie retellings of the Judg 16 narrative, these motives are carefully harmonized with her overall depiction as a femme fatale. Within Cecil B. DeMille's classic movie, *Samson and Delilah* (1949), for example, Delilah is the archetypal "woman scorned," her betrayal an act of vengeance fuelled by obsessive jealousy. Wielding her deadliest weapon—her erotic enchantment—to terrifying effect, she plies the smitten Hebrew with soft utterances of love, before coldly cutting off his hair and handing him over to her fellow Philistines. Similarly, in Nic Roeg's movie, *Samson and Delilah* (1996), Liz Hurley's incarnation of Delilah as a beautiful, unsentimental, and sexually sophisticated Philistine courtesan presents this same amalgam of wayward female sexuality and utter deadliness that typifies the femme fatale.[38] Underneath her sensuous veneer, we glimpse her icy pragmatism and her selfish desire for financial gain, regardless of its personal costs. Thus, in both of these filmic retellings Delilah effectively destroys Samson because she is "a woman like that"—hypersexualized, rapacious, erotic, wholly "other," and therefore deadly.

[36] "Roads Not Taken, Taken by the Adapter: The Case of Biblical Samson," *Connotations* 18, nos. 1–3 (2008-2009): 28. See also Carol Smith, "Samson and Delilah: A Parable of Power?," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 76 (1997): 47–49.

[37] Lillian Klein, "The Book of Judges: Paradigm and Deviation in Images of Women," in *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 61.

[38] For further exploration of Delilah's afterlife in Nic Roeg's *Samson and Delilah*, see Exum, "Lethal Woman 2," 254–73.

This very negative view of Delilah as an avaricious and sexually immoral femme fatale is, at times, likewise voiced by biblical scholars in their interpretation of Judg 16. Pnina Galpaz-Feller, for example, describes Delilah as a "foreign and seductive" woman, a "negative protagonist"[39] who is "enslaved by money" and "femininely and financially gratified" by her act of betrayal.[40] Similarly, Klein describes the Philistine Delilah as a woman who "betrays for a price the man who loves her" and who is therefore "lacking ethics and morality."[41] While both these interpreters regard Delilah as a Philistine, interestingly, her ethnicity is not confirmed by the biblical tradition; all we are told is that she lives in the valley of Sorek (v.4), an area that lay between Israelite and Philistine territories.[42] Yet, it is a common conjecture among both biblical scholars and creators of Delilah's cultural afterlives that she was a Philistine, and a Philistine prostitute at that.[43] Similarly, assumptions about Delilah's degenerate sexuality tend to be based less upon explicit textual data than the reader's own suppositions regarding her lack of a husband, her possible sexual relationship with Samson outside of marriage, and her "guilt by association," given Samson's visit to a prostitute in Gaza (16:1), immediately prior to his encounter with her.[44]

So, if the biblical text of Judg 16 does not reveal to us Delilah's nationality, sexual history, or sexual preferences, why do so many of her cultural afterlives present her as a Philistine prostitute, or at least, as a Philistine woman whose sexual history is morally "suspect" in some regard? Surely we cannot simply assume that Samson's sexual penchant for prostitutes or Delilah's apparently unmarried status has any bearing on her sex life or sexual preferences?[45] And, even if she were a prostitute, why would we think that would

[39] Pnina Galpaz-Feller, *Samson: The Hero and the Man* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 178.

[40] Ibid., 176.

[41] Lillian Klein, "A Spectrum of Female Characters in the Book of Judges," in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, 28–29.

[42] Ackerman, "What If Judges Had Been Written by a Philistine?," 37; Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 218–19.

[43] Lilian Klein, for example, argues there is at least the "suggestion" that Delilah is a Philistine, based on her loyalty to the Philistine elders and on Samson's seeming proclivity for "foreign" women (Klein, "Female Characters," 62n1). Although, as Exum points out, while Samson's Timnite wife was undoubtedly a Philistine, we are not told the nationality of the prostitute he visited in Gaza—her identification as a Philistine is based more on the association often made in biblical texts and biblical interpretation between women's foreignness and their "suspect" sexuality (*Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 218).

[44] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 218–19; Snyder, "Delilah and Her Interpreters," 139.

[45] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 221; Snyder, "Delilah and Her Interpreters," 138.

make her any more likely to betray Samson to the Philistines?[46] While her nationality and sexuality remain tantalizing gaps in the narrative, these labels of "Philistine" and "harlot" continue to be foisted pejoratively upon her, tapping into that age-old biblical and extra-biblical myth of the "strange" foreign woman whose lethal allure and perverse sexuality ensnare hapless men within her web of treachery (cf. Prov 7:6–23).[47] This myth echoes the iconography and mythology surrounding the femme fatale, which meld together Orientalist notions about foreign women's sexuality and moral integrity.[48] Within both the interpretive traditions surrounding Judg 16 and Delilah's cultural afterlives, common misperceptions about female sexuality and foreignness thus interweave with each other,[49] until Delilah *becomes* a Philistine, she *becomes* a harlot, and ultimately, she *becomes* "the epitome of an avaricious femme fatale."[50] And, to paraphrase Carol Smith, our visualizing Delilah as a foreign prostitute therefore tends to reveal more about our own culturally-located ideologies pertaining to gender and women's sexuality than it does about the actual content of the text of Judg 16.[51] In other words, just as we might regard Helen Grayle and see, through our patriarchally-trained eyes, only a manipulative, sexually immoral femme fatale, when we look at Delilah, we likewise tend to see what we expect (or want) to see, filling in the narrative gaps that surround her character with our own beliefs and presumptions about "women like that."

Nevertheless, as Exum observes, the Samson narrative of Judg 16 has the potential to present us with an alternative portrayal of women, other than that of the foreign, sexually subversive femme fatale; if we look closely, it can

[46] Exum notes the common belief, underlying the notion that Delilah was a prostitute, that "a harlot can be bought for betrayal as well as sex" (*Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 232) but is that true? A prostitute sells sex—this ought to have no bearing on our evaluation of his or her moral integrity or ability to deceive and dissemble. Moreover, the prostitute we meet in Judg 16:1 is presented to us in a decidedly straightforward and non-judgmental manner. There is nothing to suggest that she was involved in any activities, other than those common to a sex worker, within this narrative.

[47] Ibid., 219–20; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 69–70; also Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 222.

[48] Allen, *Femme Fatale*, 3.

[49] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted*, 217–21.

[50] Adrien Janis Bledstein, "Is Judges a Woman's Satire of Men Who Play God?" In Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Judges*, 38.

[51] Carol Smith, "Delilah: A Suitable Case for (Feminist) Treatment?," in *Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner, A Feminist Companion to the Bible. Second series 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 115.

also highlight the way that women may be used by men as "pawns" to serve the patriarchal agenda, being kept under control either through threats or, in Delilah's case, by bribery with cold, hard cash.[52] In other words, Exum suggests that, within this narrative, Delilah may be regarded as a powerful manipulator of men—a classic femme fatale—but she is also shown to be a woman who is manipulated *by* men, who exploit her avarice and her willingness to "sell out"; as she comments, "The only motivation the text suggests for her [betrayal of Samson] is greed."[53]

Yet is it greed? Or is it something else—exigency, perhaps—that drives Delilah to accept the Philistines' offer? While I agree with Exum's evaluation of male power here, Delilah's reasons for betraying Samson are far from clear. Although the Philistines give her an exorbitant price for her complicity, ought we to take this as a sign of her avarice or moral cupidity?[54] If we really look at Delilah within her narrative context, focalizing this event through *her* eyes, might we be able to imagine alternative motivations underlying her actions?

So, for example, just as Helen sought financial security in order to survive the harsh realities for single women in 1940s North America, might Delilah have assented to the Philistine's proposal because it was the only practical way that she could survive within her own narrative world? She is, after all, a woman living in the patriarchal culture of the biblical Near East, seemingly without any form of familial or social support. Unlike many other biblical women, she is not introduced to us in terms of her relationships with male kin or her membership to any particular family or "house."[55] Without family and kinship support networks, Delilah may have been in a precarious situation, both socially and economically, given women's typical dependence on male kin for financial provision within the cultural confines of biblical Israel. While it is true that she seems to have had a house (vv.9, 12), there is nothing to suggest that she enjoyed a secure financial or social status within her community.[56] And, while we might see her solitary existence and lack of kinship ties as a sign of her "independence," "strong personality,"[57] or sexual free-

[52] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 86–87.

[53] Ibid., 88, 90.

[54] Clanton, *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout*, 66–67; Helen Leneman, "Portrayals of Power in the Stories of Delilah and Bathsheba: Seduction in Song," in *Culture, Entertainment, and the Bible*, ed. George Aichele (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 145.

[55] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 215; Bal, *Lethal Love*, 50.

[56] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 215.

[57] V. H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 159.

dom,[58] this is not to say that Delilah relished—or even chose—the situation she was in.[59] Perhaps, like Helen, life without financial and social stability (in the form of an expedient marriage) held little appeal for her, given the lack of alternative opportunities in society that enabled women to thrive or even survive. Delilah may thus have accepted the Philistine elders' generous offer because she was worn down by grinding poverty and needed some form of lasting financial security during this precarious time of war and unrest.[60] After all, the price proposed by the elders (a total of 5,500 silver shekels) was incredibly high;[61] perhaps we should regard their excessive generosity as a narrative device, which nudges us towards a pragmatic understanding of why Delilah, living in a harsh war-torn environment, unsupported and seemingly without kith or kin, accepted this offer.

Alternatively, we could equally propose that, despite their offer of a generous reward, Delilah was *coerced* by the Philistine elders into conspiring in Samson's downfall; as Helen Leneman points out, how much choice did she, a lone woman, really have, trapped between the volatile Samson and those powerful politicians who were so keen to drag her into their military strategies?[62] What if, like Helen Grayle, Delilah was impelled to play a role here, camouflaging herself as Samson's love interest, not out of cupidity but from a necessity borne of social disenfranchisement and vulnerability? It is interesting to note that the Hebrew term *seren*, used as a moniker for the Philistines who meet with Delilah, is a Philistine loan word, meaning "lord" or "tyrant."[63] Focalizing v.5 from Delilah's perspective, we have to ask: how would she have felt, a lone woman summoned before five powerful local leaders, whose appellation carried unmissable connotations of violence and tyranny?

[58] Klein, "Female Characters," 62.

[59] Smith, "Delilah: A Suitable Case?," 110.

[60] As Dana Nolan Fewell notes, "Doubtless, as a woman alone, Delilah finds that the love of a wanted man is no match for the security of wealth." (Fewell, "Judges," 79.) See also, Bal, *Lethal Love*, 51.

[61] Robert G. Boling, *Judges: A New Translation* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 249.

[62] Leneman, "Portrayals of Power," 146. Matthews disagrees, suggesting that there is "no sense of coercion, or for that matter, of any reluctance by Delilah to betray her lover" (*Judges and Ruth*, 160). While I concur that there is no explicit coercive measures voiced in this text, I would argue for the possibility that an implicit threat might be laced through the Philistine tyrants' offer here in this gap-riddled text.

[63] Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, 222; J. Alberto Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 254.

Moreover, these Philistine tyrants approach Delilah and ask her to "entice" Samson (v.5)—the same term the Philistine guests at Samson's wedding use when they ask his new wife to discover another of Samson's secrets—the answer to his wedding riddle (14:15). The guests' request, however, is quickly followed by a threat—if the Timnite woman were to refuse, "we will burn you and your father's house with fire." She does accede to their demand—and who would blame her? Like Delilah (Jdg. 16:15–16), she wrestles this information from Samson using tears and emotional recriminations about his *lack* of love for her. We can only imagine how desperate she must have felt, the threat of death hanging over her as she scrabbled desperately to use whatever means possible to wrestle from her smug husband the solution to his brainteaser, which had, inadvertently, become a matter of her own life and death.

Did Delilah feel such desperation too? Might the narrator be inviting us in 16:5 to see a threat (albeit unspoken) cutting through the words of these five Philistine tyrants, like a sword held against Delilah's throat with its double edge of promise and menace? Perhaps the Philistines have learned from the Timnite bride that a threatened woman is an effective instrument for extracting valuable secrets from Samson. As Exum has noted, threats form a "highly effective" strategy used by patriarchy to exert control over women.[64] The Philistine tyrants' arrangement with Delilah may therefore not be so much a straightforward business proposition but an assurance of the very *conditional* nature of the deal about to be struck and the inherent guarantee that unfulfilled business "agreements" will meet with violence, even death. Delilah, then, might be seen as more of a victim of these tyrants than their co-conspirator; saying "no" would, in her mind, have been out of the question, especially given the fate of Samson's Timnite bride. Her conspiracy with the Philistine tyrants was therefore less a sign of her avarice than a life-or-death necessity, less the contemptible actions of an immoral femme fatale than the very reasonable actions resorted to by a vulnerable woman.[65]

As well as feeling threatened by the Philistine tyrants, Delilah would also have had every reason to fear *Samson*, given his past history of violence, which not only resulted in his killing countless local Philistines but also led to the death of his former bride (14:19; 15:1–8). The biblical text tells us nothing about her emotional attachment to the Hebrew strongman, only that *he* loved *her* (16:4). And, while this love may well have been genuine, we

[64] Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 87, 90.
[65] Smith, "Parable of Power," 46.

cannot presume that she welcomed it, or that she even felt *safe*—physically or sexually—with him around. Like Helen, who still perceived the explosively violent Malloy as a very real threat to her security, *despite* his claims that he still loved her, perhaps Delilah too saw in the volatile Samson a real source of danger to her personal integrity. Remember, Helen was desperate to stop Malloy finding her or learning about her past betrayal—we can perhaps understand (if not condone) her final act of violence against him, ending his life before he could turn his devastating strength against her. So too might Delilah have also dreaded Samson discovering *her* complicity with the Philistines, especially given his previous lethal responses to those who had betrayed his trust.

And so, like Helen, Delilah stops the strongman in his tracks before he uncovers her duplicity, striking him down, not with bullets, but using the only power she has at her disposal—her emotional hold over him.[66] She wastes no time getting started on her task;[67] after meeting with the Philistine tyrants (v.5), she immediately begins quizzing Samson (v.6), suggesting perhaps the sense of urgency and exigency that, for her, underlay this mission. At first, she addresses Samson with a crystal clear honesty, essentially divulging to him the entire Philistine plan to discover the source of his strength: "Tell me please, what makes your strength so great, and how you could be bound, so as to subdue you."[68] And, while Samson appears to understand her request, he seems to treat it as a joke, or a game,[69] complacently teasing her time and again with incorrect answers, as though he wanted to prove to her how clever he is.[70] After his third act of deception, and realiz-

[66] As Lilian Klein notes, "Delilah strikes Samson at the one spot where he has no strength"—that is, his love for her (Klein, "Female Characters," 65).

[67] J. Cheryl Exum, "Harvesting the Biblical Narrator's Scanty Plot of Ground: A Holistic Approach to Judges 16:4–22," in *Tehilla le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic Studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg*, ed. Mordechai Cogan, Barry L. Eichler, and Jeffrey H. Tigay (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 41.

[68] Betsy Meredith, "Desire and Danger: The Drama of Betrayal in Judges and Judith," in *Anti-Covenant: Counter-Reading Women's Lives in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mieke Bal (The Almond Press, 1989), 70; also Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 83.

[69] Rather like the game Samson played with his wedding guests in chapter 14, in order to show off his "superior wit" to the Philistines. See James L. Crenshaw, *Samson: A Secret Betrayed, A Vow Ignored* (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 1978), 99; also Galpaz-Feller, *Samson*, 170.

[70] Clanton, *Daring, Disreputable, and Devout*, 67. Although, if this was Samson's agenda, it appears to have been an epic fail. As Soggin suggests, his behavior here "smacks of stupidity or even mental abnormality" (*Judges*, 257). Similarly, J. Clinton McCann describes Samson as "utterly clueless" (*Judges* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 107).

ing that her task may be more protracted than she had hoped, Delilah then moves from her direct and honest approach to one where she masquerades as a disgruntled lover, tugging at Samson's emotions and exploiting his feelings for her: "How can you say 'I love you', when your heart is not with me?" (v.15). Delilah's question here may betray both her frustration and her fears; if Samson really does not "love" her, would he not be more likely to harm her if he discovers her plan to betray him? As Carol Smith notes, Delilah is far less physically powerful than Samson, so she uses the only power she has here—her ability to attract and engage him emotionally—to curtail his power, thereby lessening the potential threat that he poses to her.[71]

This last point is particularly important, especially given that Delilah's support from the Philistine tyrants and troops begins to dwindle during her protracted attempt to ensnare Samson. His strength undiminished, this man clearly poses a serious threat to her safety, yet she is essentially left to entrap him single-handedly. As we follow her through each futile attempt to discover Samson's strength (vv.6–18), we see her increasingly isolated from her Philistine allies, whose presence recedes ever further away, perhaps indicating that, in their eyes, her credibility was on the wane.[72] During her initial two attempts to bind him, there is a definite Philistine presence, albeit backgrounded; the first time, the Philistine tyrants bring her the "fresh bowstrings" Samson has mentioned (v.8) and in addition, we are told that, as she attempts to bind Samson, "men" (presumably Philistine) are hiding out in an "inner chamber," seemingly within her house (v.9). At the second attempt, the Philistine tyrants appear to have retreated, as Delilah herself gets the "new ropes" that Samson has identified as the material to bind him; she does, nonetheless, continue to be supported by those men who still wait within the inner chamber, although their presence is now reduced to a parenthetical gloss (v.12).[73]

After these two failed attempts, however, when Delilah makes a third go of binding Samson, her backup appears to have vanished entirely (v.14); even Samson seems to recognize, albeit unconsciously perhaps, that she is now acting very much on her own. Compared to his first two responses to Delilah's questions (vv.7, 11), where he informs her how "they" might bind

[71] Smith, "Parable of Power," 55.

[72] Meredith, "Desire and Danger," 71; Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 216; and "Holistic Approach," 42; Jack Sasson, "Who Cut Samson's Hair? (And Other Trifling Issues Raised by Judges 16)," *Prooftexts* 8, no. 3 (1988): 337.

[73] Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, 162.

him (presumably referring to his enemies, the Philistines[74]), by the third attempt, he instructs her directly: "If *you* weave the seven locks of my head with the web and make it tight with the pin, then I shall become weak, and be like anyone else" (v.13). This subtle change, as Betsy Meredith suggests, focuses the reader's attention on Delilah's status as autonomous actor in this scene.[75] And, as she makes her final attempt at binding Samson (vv.18–20), the Philistines are nowhere in sight. There are no troops this time waiting in the inner chamber of her house, while the Philistine tyrants have likewise kept their distance, preferring to make sure this volatile giant of a man (who has already slain hundreds of Philistine warriors) has been rendered powerless before risking their approach. Indeed, she has to "call" them twice, first to tell them her mission has been successful and again, once Samson has fallen asleep on her lap. Clearly in control of events, she is the subject of most of the verbal action in vv.18–20, barely stopping for breath until the dangerous deed is done. As a figure left alone with a powerful and dangerous killer, we can understand her sense of urgency, especially given that the Philistine tyrants have foisted upon her sole responsibility for a task that no *army* had yet been capable of fulfilling.

Thus, just as we imagined Helen shooting the dangerous Malloy as a desperate act of self-defence, we can envisage Delilah's frantic need to take action in a similar light, given Samson's history of unpredictable aggression against those he felt had betrayed his trust. Perhaps to placate him, she donned the disguise of a woman in love, for this gave her access to a form of power that she knew could protect her against Samson's brute strength; underneath, however, she may have loathed *and* feared him, doing everything in her power to escape his dangerous presence. This need not betray her unscrupulous or deviant sensuality; rather, it speaks plainly of her absolute vulnerability within her cultural context and the sense of crisis and desperation that shaped this period in her literary life. Such crisis and desperation led her to masquerade as Samson's love interest, ultimately playing a role that might just save her life. As Hope Parisi notes, we should remember that Delilah is situated, very much alone, in "a world of dangerous male anger" before we dismiss her as an avaricious or sexually depraved femme fatale.[76]

[74] Bal, *Lethal Love*, 52.

[75] Meredith, "Desire and Danger," 71.

[76] Hope Parisi, "Discourse and Danger: Women's Heroism in the Bible and Dalila's Self-Defence," in *Spokesperson Milton: Voices in Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Charles W. Durham and Kristin Pruitt McColgan (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1994), 270.

Farewell My Delilah

The potential reading of Delilah's character that I have offered above invites us to visualize this biblical persona in ways that look beyond her more traditional portrayals in biblical interpretation and within her cultural afterlives and see her, not as an object of moral opprobrium—a sexually and morally depraved femme fatale who uses her exotic allure to ensnare men—but as an active subject whose choices and actions are shaped by an urgent exigency and whose literary representation radiates multiple complexities and hidden facets of her character.

That being said, however, I have no desire to erase every reference to Delilah's sexuality within her cultural afterlives (although, as I said earlier, the biblical tradition is silent on this issue). I have no objection to her portrayal as a beautiful, sexually autonomous woman whose irresistible allure makes men go weak at the knees. For all we know, the author of the Judg 16 tradition may have envisioned Delilah thus, or at least envisioned her donning such a guise in order to fulfil her dangerous mission. What I do challenge, though, are the assumptions that often lie embedded within such portrayals, which are both maintained *and* subverted in Chandler's depiction of Helen Grayle. The assumption that a woman's sexual attractiveness by default renders her a lethal femme fatale whose eroticism, allure, and autonomy are a source of danger to her unsuspecting admirers; the assumption that women who break traditional gender roles and claim their right to sexual self-determination will jeopardize the social order and leave a trail of intolerable chaos in their wake; the assumption that female violence can be sourced in women's "perverse" sexuality and moral cupidity, rather than being necessitated by an imperative to escape an oppressive, threatening, and misogynistic social context. With Helen Grayle, we are at least offered the *possibility* that her sizzling sexuality and allure are not so much markers of a perverse feminine lethality than essential elements of a costume she had to wear in order to survive in her new, safer life. I would suggest that we likewise take seriously this possibility when evaluating and critiquing the cultural retellings of Judg 16, which represent Delilah as a femme fatale. Indeed, through exploring the gaps in the biblical narrative, we can envision Delilah quite differently, successfully destabilizing traditional assumptions about this literary character and offering alternative readings that invite glimpses of the Delilah that hides behind her own disguise. Like Helen, Delilah single-handedly brings down the strong man, thereby disrupting the gendered expectations perva-

sive within her own patriarchal culture. Like Helen, she acts to improve her life situation, using what power she has at her disposal to gain financial security and, possibly, to rid herself of her dangerously volatile and potentially violent suitor. Unlike Helen, though, Delilah seems to get away with it—rather than self-destructing, she apparently survives to fight another day. The reader is thus invited to accept and experience her destabilizing presence in the narrative and, like the readers of *Farewell, My Lovely*, is perhaps left at the end without any neat solutions, but rather with many unanswered questions and possibilities to contemplate about this enigmatic and multifaceted "fatal woman."