

## Visual Persuasion and Biblical Classicism

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Rubens painted "Samson and Delilah" around 1609, relatively early in his career and only just after returning to Antwerp from his tour of the artistically fecund south of Europe. The painting demonstrates this influence, but also a uniquely Netherlandish message. The painting sold quickly and may have been commissioned by burgomaster Rockox, in whose salon it evidently hung. The subject matter is as close to perfect for Rubens as any story could get. Rubens brings his classical scholarship to the treatment of a biblical text, but as an Old Testament text the story of Samson and Delilah has more in common with Greek and Roman myth than any Christian story; It is best described as a Jewish myth. Rubens ultimately synthesizes the whole of western culture, combining Pagan and Christian texts in post-Renaissance visual luxury. We see that Rubens brings a knowledge of the text to his illustration, but uncharacteristically chooses a moment of little brutal violence but of greatest dramatic impact. The episode between Samson and Delilah is Judges 15 in the story of Samson, which lasts from chapters 14-15 and is subtly linked to the ongoing story of the entire Jewish people. Rubens illustrates it as an extrapolation on power interplay between the sexes, in such a way that Delilah seems to represent all women and Samson all men. However, the pictorial moment is one of female triumph, although, as in the biblical text, the woman is subject to demands of politics, a passive figure through which the real male drama proceeds. If anything, Rubens gives Delilah more expression, and certainly pathos, than the text provides, while retaining the spirit of that moment in the myth. The power exchange between male strengths and female persuasion parallels the interplay of narrative substantiality and persuasive visuality.

The painting's composition conveys the themes and situation of the narrative. Rubens's signature diagonal composition with its off-centered pyramid of figures is predominantly delineated by Samson's dormant body, which serves to stabilize and unite the space. Lighting plays the most important role in solidifying the forms, as it should, but the Caravaggiesque single light source appears to be other than either of the two flames visible in the composition, both of which illuminate elements enemy to Samson in the story. The connection between these two flames seems to be the monetary reward that the Philistine army offers the definitively mercenary prostitute Delilah, although unique to Rubens's composition is the

Procuress figure, slightly offset from the continuation of the downwards diagonal along which Samson falls. Also unique is the tenderness in Delilah's expression and posture, a subtle kind of quiet triumph and awareness of her own powers, rendered somehow sympathetic. The hand on Samson's back lends to this sense of erotic tenderness despite treachery, if her actions can be called such; she barely pretends to love Samson, after all. The slope from the upper left to lower right, precipitated by the procuress and barber figures and channeled through the sumptuously lit Delilah echoes Samson's Fall from Grace to the persuasions of a woman he should, the story indicates more than Rubens, know not to trust. As one translation of the bible puts it, "the Lord left him"(16.19) Rubens's offset pyramid divides the picture into light and dark regions, and this contrast is manipulated in order to draw attention to the conspiracy of Philistine soldiers lit by torchlight seen through a doorway in the "background" to the picture. Follow this subtle light space downward and you reach the singularly lit foot of Samson (distantly paralleling Achilles's heel) on the luxurious oriental drapery on which the principal figures are set. Samson's body recedes into darkness, strikingly silhouetting Delilah's feet. The setting is theatrical where not vague, so that the significance of the characters constitutes nearly the entirety of the painting, rather than providing a historically accurate portrayal. Emotional response and universal appeal is primary in Rubens's Counter-reformation context, even for the private, more entertainment-motivated nature of this particular painting. Returning to composition, we see that the elements of shape that run counter to the general diagonal become emphasized. Samson's muscled arm is the most prominent of these, leading echoes throughout the painting that include the barber's hand and face, Delilah's neck, and her feet, plus the drapery in the upper left. The prominence of the arm emphasizes Rubens's ongoing theme of feminine wiles taming masculine physical power; the idea is that Samson (as the prototypical man) possesses an internal weakness, especially for Philistine women and their external weakness. The uncluttered lower right corner helps to ease the crowding around Delilah's head. Samson and Delilah are the only two completely viewed figures, and the closest to the picture plane, although it is not only that placement which makes the painting essentially about their relationship. Perhaps most striking is the sensual, Venetian-inspired used of color, the red of Delilah's dress and the gold drapery on which she sits. That drapery and Delilah's hair, the color of honey, even reference the thematic riddle Samson tells earlier in his story; his fiancée's betrayal of the answer ("What is sweeter than honey? what is stronger than a lion?") to her Philistine brethren results in

Samson's arbitrary slaughter of thirty of their clansmen. Looking at a biblical painting such as this, we forget on first dazzled observation its constructedness, the reason why unique *disegno* and the masculine virtue of creation determine a painting's worth; the calculated effect of a unitary, penetrative composition. Thus the painting is controlled by Rubens's imaginative power, by which multiple visual sources can convey a seductive illusion of bodily presence.

The passage Rubens chooses consists of a single identifiable sentence. Rubens would have read it in Latin; the English translation provided has gone through a different translation and revision process and is therefore befuddled with ambiguities and potential linguistic manipulations. Judges 16.19 reads "She made him sleep upon her knees, and she called a man, and had him shave off the seven locks of his head. Then she began to torment him, and his strength left him."<sup>1</sup> Within the story that precedes, Samson has developed the character of a counter-Philistine terrorist, granted incredible strength by God, keeping in mind that God seems to grant almost everything in Judges. The theme that runs through said Book is that of balance, especially in the balance of the sexes. Stories usually consist of Israelite heroes and heroines physically attacking their deity-imposed invaders and occupiers. Women are almost always portrayed as employing seductive subterfuge. Delilah in this case is an enemy's woman using subterfuge less for the honor of her people than for the 1100 silver pieces her countrymen offer her that tops Samson's payment for her services. Thus the procuress is not so much overseeing the economic exchange between Samson and Delilah but between Delilah and the Philistine army huddled outside her door. The "man" upon whom Delilah relies to perform the rape of seven locks is an assistant implacably in the story, and rather than ignore his presence and have Delilah perform the pelvic disarmament as she performed the previous mistaken tricks for defeating Samson (Samson lied to her twice already, either to test her trustability or continue her attentions toward him, so God knows he fell worst when she still gets the truth from him), Rubens includes the barber in the same relatively assumptive role he does in the text. Delilah's breasts figure prominently, gesturing to a kind of Oedipal betrayal and collapsing of the mother/whore dichotomy of female roles: visually Delilah prefigures the Virgin, but the viewer should know that she's an unreformed Magdalen (if anyone; her position seems entirely defined by the men operating through her and Samson's

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<sup>1</sup> My translation is, ironically, my father's Reformation standard Lutheran version, supposedly translated "from the original tongues" (in this context, from Hebrew) in 1611 (two years after the execution of "Samson and Delilah"). New York: Thomas Nelson and sons, 1952.

vulnerability). The nurturing posture also references the interesting matter that God's messenger only comes to Samson's unnamed mother to proclaim Samson's Achilles-like importance. Interestingly, Delilah's persuasive abilities are granted an anthropomorphic power; she undermines Samson by "press[ing] him hard with her words".

Following the haircut, that lurking threat of the vengeful Philistine law blinds Samson. That the damage is to his eyes, the mode by which the sumptuousness of this painting is perceived, is of some significance as a precarious threat and tension to "Samson and Delilah", should the story be known to the viewer. Choosing the sentence or two just previous to this blinding may be Rubens's classical influences at work. This also allows Samson to add his say to the Old Testament theme of balance and justice (an eye for an eye), when he regains God's support as a pre-industrial suicide bomber: "I will be avenged for one of my two eyes." The Oedipal theme again lurks in this image, although about as strongly as it lurks in anyone's psychology.

If forms of power are genderized, Rubens's own writings illuminate a certain parallel. One noticeable comparison is that Rubens discusses the imitation of classical sculpture, relevant in that he incorporates a sculpture of Cupid, masculinized lust, entreating Venus, feminized love, into the background of "Samson and Delilah" as a reference and typically Netherlandish allegorical warning to the viewer. Such an inclusion complicates a setting already de-historicized by the Northern European look of the models. Rubens seeks to synthesize a replication of classical statuary's perfection with the realities of human flesh and produce a convincing image. But most interestingly he confronts the mistake of non-differentiation as a failure to paint convincingly: "there are unwitting...painters who can distinguish neither the material from the form, the stone from the figure, nor the marble's constraints on the artist from art."<sup>2</sup> Artists must possess an Aristotelian capability for categorization in order to successfully manipulate their own medium to reproduce visual reality. Rubens attributes the supposed decline of observable human physical fitness to causes similar to Samson's own self-betrayal: "God permits us, after having overlooked the opportunity, to free ourselves from the mistakes which drove us into even worse mistakes".

Reproduction and replication is a womanly virtue, and persuasion like Delilah's is the feminine power. A painting like Rubens's seeks to replicate perception, but at the same time exceed its beauty, exaggerate its

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<sup>2</sup> P.F. Rubens, excerpt from "On the Imitation of Ancient Sculptures in Painting"

sympathy, and beguile the viewer. It's no wonder that Delilah is the most sensuously illusory of the figures in "Samson and Delilah"; she represents not just the power of women but the power of painting. Such an illustration could only be unique to its medium; Rubens has successfully converted the convincing illusions of language, which itself uses Delilah as an example of its own threat, to a perhaps less threatening illusion of corporeal beauty. Each narrative uses Delilah as a vessel of disarmament.

