

"Of all the characters in scripture, she is the least": the Levite's concubine and
the discourse of silence

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"Of all the characters in scripture, she is the least." So Phyllis Trible writes of the Levite's concubine in her by now canonical feminist reading from 1984.¹ She does not speak; only three actions are attributed to her, of which only one is undisputed. She is pure victim, "alone in a world of men." Trible adds that, unlike Jephthah's daughter, "she has no friends to aid her in life or mourn her in death."² Yet, for someone who is so entirely eclipsed by the narrative, she has generated an enormous amount of commentary, and, I might say, retrospective mourning. Cheryl Exum memorably argues that recounting the story reproduces the rape; the narrator's condemnation facilitates a pornographic gaze, "without guilt."³ Adele Reinhartz, in her fine study of anonymity in biblical narrative, comments that her "anonymity symbolizes (the) denial of her identity and personhood," but at the same time - as with the other anonymous characters in the story - it "lends her a legendary paradigmatic quality."⁴ Along the same lines, Alice Keefe thinks that her fragmented body symbolizes that of Israel in the book of Judges. Both of these play a part in my interpretation.⁵

¹ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1984) p.80.

² *Texts of Terror* p.81.

³ J.Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narrative* (London: Bloomsbury, 2nd ed. 2016) p. 158. See also *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996) pp. 19-53 esp.28.

⁴ Adele Reinhartz, "*Why Ask My Name? Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative*" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.126. For the complexity of anonymity in our story, see also Don M. Hudson, "Living in a Land of Epithets: Anonymity in Judges 19-21" *JSOT* 62 (1994), pp. 49-66. Katherine Southwood, *Marriage by Capture in the Book of Judges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) p.14, comments that "she could be any woman of such a status."

⁵ Alice A. Keefe, "Rapes of Women/Wars of Men" *Semeia* 61 (1993) pp.79-97. See also Susan Niditch, "The 'Sodomite' Theme in Judges 19-21: Family, Community, and Social Disintegration" *CBQ* 44 (1982) pp. 365-378, who comments, citing Mary Douglas, that "In the OT, inappropriate or forced alliances always lead to larger social disintegration" (p.368), and Susan Niditch, *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; London and Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008), p.190, that "the family is a symbol for the family of Israel." For Pamela Tamarkin Reis, "The Levite's Concubine: New Light on a Dark Story" *SJOT* 20 (2006), p.146, the anonymity of the characters illustrates "the disintegration and dehumanization of society."

I have two interests in this essay. The first is to trace how at every point the narrator focalizes our attention on the woman's subjectivity, but only indirectly. In other words, silence speaks. The second is to follow Rhiannon Graybill's plea for an "unhappy" reading of the story. An "unhappy" reading is one that responds to the unhappiness of the text, that notes how it affects us, emotionally and sensually; it does not seek to tell the story, so as to leave it behind; it is not a monument. It sticks with the details of the story however horrible, so as *not* to leave it behind. But it is also "unhappy" in that it is unhappy with itself; it resists the temptation to make a good story. To quote Graybill: "*Speaking as or not speaking on behalf of can be acts of violence. And we should not demand that the Levite's concubine speak.*"⁶

I have two problems with this. One is the sheer brilliance of the narrator. The story is beautifully crafted; I cannot but admire the subtlety of the telling even as I don't want the story to be told. The second is that there is something in the story that resists analysis, namely the woman's silence. How does one interpret a figure who is so thoroughly occluded by the text? One has to acknowledge the mystery, the unfathomability, of the self. As Graybill suggests, giving her a voice risks betrayal. Yet the narrator insistently directs our attention to her presence, while systematically avoiding it.

I assume that the character of the *pilegesh* is complex and multi-levelled, like every character, even if it is almost entirely concealed from us.⁷ At the deepest level, she is defined by a sense of self, an intimate and ineffable psychic reality, which accompanies her throughout her life. One can imagine her being born, growing up, there in Bethlehem, and having all the affective experiences that constitute us as persons, and then that life, that reality - which Lacan

⁶ Rhiannon Graybill, *Texts after Terror: Rape, Sexual Violence, & the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 167. Italics original.

⁷ Benjamin J.M. Johnson, "Character as Interpretive Crux in the Book of Samuel" in Keith Bodner and Benjamin J. M. Johnson (eds) *Character and Characterization in the Book of Samuel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020) pp.1-13 (5). Similarly, Helen Paynter, *Telling Terror in Judges 19* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020) p.37, says that the concubine, whom she calls Beli-Fachad, "is not a one-dimensional literary device, but a complex, ambiguous individual." In contrast, Cynthia Edenburg, *Dismembering the Whole: Composition and Purpose in Judges 19-21* (Atlanta: SBL, 2016) p.16, thinks that she is presented "in uncritical fashion." Much depends on how one interprets ותזנה in v.2.

memorably calls "the mystery of the unconscious"⁸ - being utterly erased. On another level, she is constituted by her relationships, or lack thereof. Finally, there is the symbolic level, resulting from her status, as *pilegesh*, as woman, as daughter, and as a Bethlehemite, and from her intertextual relationships with other figures in Judges and beyond, especially female ones. She thus becomes a figure for the personality of Judges, its sexual and tribal politics.

"And it was in those days, when there was no king in Israel, that there was a man of Levi, sojourning in the far reaches of Mt. Ephraim, and he took for himself a woman, a concubine,⁹ from Bethlehem of Judah" (Judges 19.1).

Like every marriage in Judges, this has theological and political implications. It promises the union of the two major tribes, Ephraim and Judah, representing north and south, and thus a pan-Israelite identity. The notation, "when there was no king in Israel", not only sets the narrative in the anarchic past, from the point of view of the reader, but it also inserts the monarchy proleptically into the text. This transaction is a sign of the future. Its significance is underlined by her provenance from Bethlehem, the birthplace of David. However, its promise is subverted. She is a *pilegesh*, a secondary wife. In the absence of a first wife, we do not know exactly what this means, but at any rate she is something less than a full wife, the union is not quite complete. Using Graybill's vocabulary, it is "icky" if not "sticky."¹⁰ Perhaps the Levite wants her for sexual gratification, but is unwilling to pay a full bride price. She is uneasily between roles, her indeterminate status reinforced by the apparent lack of children. As Isabelle Hamley argues, *pilagshim* in the HB are characterised by vulnerability, sexual transgression, and liminality.¹¹ The only other *pilegesh* in Judges is the mother of the fratricide Abimelech, and

⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Encore: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX. On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, 1972-1973 ed. Jacques-Alain Miller tr. Bruce Fink, (New York and London: W.W.Norton 1999) p.131.

⁹ The meaning of *pilegesh* is much discussed, particularly since Mieke Bal's thesis that it refers to patrilocal as opposed to virilocal marriage (Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988] pp.84-86. In my view, the conventional translation, "concubine," is adequate, since in classical times at least it referred to a legal arrangement. In this essay, I use *concubine* and *pilegesh* interchangeably.

¹⁰ "Icky" is, I think, quite clear. "Sticky" refers to the aptitude of affects to stick to objects, as well as the uncomfortable feeling that we experience when something is sticky. The rhyme is important.

¹¹ Isabelle M. Hamley, "Dis(re)membered and Unaccounted For: *Pilegesh* in the Hebrew Bible" JSOT 41 (2018), 415-34 (415). See also Hamley *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: An Irigarayan Reading of Otherness and*

thus associated with the first abortive attempt at a kingdom. Like Jephthah's prostitute mother, she is a strange woman, living outside the comfortable patriarchal home among Gideon's many wives (8.30-31), in the half-indigenous enclave of Shechem. That the woman in our text is a *pilegish* is already a sign that ours will not be a happy story.

The Levite, too, is fraught with significance.¹² He belongs to a tribe that has no territory, that is sacred but marginal. He is a stranger in Ephraim, who comes from its "far reaches" (ירכתי), from the back of beyond.¹³ That he is a stranger makes the union of Judah and Ephraim still more problematic. The Levite, as the divine representative, might evoke the ideal unity of Israel and its YHWHistic affiliation.¹⁴ But the image of Levites in Judges has already been tarnished by the previous story in chs.17-18, in which a meretricious Levite from Bethlehem of Judah goes to Mt. Ephraim and is stolen by migrating Danites to serve as priest in their sacrilegious shrine in Dan.¹⁵ The two stories are mirror images of each other. Levites travel in opposite directions between Judah and Ephraim, and are involved in sordid stories of apostasy and rape.

The woman is traded, an object of exchange between father and Levite, a transaction in which she apparently has no say. As a *pilegish*, moreover, she is of less value, presumably, than a regular wife. Why we do not know, nor what she makes of her status. Does she feel

Victimization in Judges 19-21 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2019) p.137: "There are no good stories of פלגש: they are all dark tales."

¹² A number of scholars think that the identification of the man as a Levite is not integral to the story and was added as a redactional bridge to chs.17-18. See, for example, Yairah Amit *The Book of Judges: The Art of Editing* tr. Jonathan Chipman (Leiden: Brill, 1999) p. 353, and "Editorial Considerations Regarding Ending" in *In Praise of Editing in the Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays in Retrospect* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012) p. 157. Sara J. Milstein, *Tracking the Master Scribe: Revision through Introduction in Biblical and Mesopotamian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) pp.193-94 thinks that the Levite is a stand-in for Saul, in a polemical recasting of an "original Saul complex." Edenburg, *Dismembering the Whole* p.20, comments on the irony in the presentation of the Levite.

¹³ David Moster,, "The Levite of Judges 19-21" *JBL* 134 (2015), pp.721-30 (724) notes that he is the only character in the HB to be described as coming from ירכה, the "edge" of a place, and that it already establishes his marginality.

¹⁴ See my essay "Between Centre and Periphery: Space and Gender in the Book of Judges in the Early Second Temple Period" in Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin (eds) *Centres and Peripheries in the Early Second Temple Period* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016) pp.133-62 (142). Mark Leuchter, *The Levites and the Boundaries of Israelite Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) argues that the Levites, as a priestly caste, were among the principal agents in the emergence of Israelite identity in the late premonarchic period (see especially pp.81-92).

¹⁵ Hamley, *Unspeaking Things Unspoken* p.132; Landy, "Between Centre and Periphery", pp.148-50.

depreciated? Her father might wish to discard her, at any price, with whatever effect on her morale; the Levite might look down on her. She is doubly a stranger, both in being translocated, and by appertaining to a man who is himself a stranger. She is in-between-and-between, neither a full wife nor a prostitute, or even a maidservant (אמה), and consequently suspect.¹⁶ Ickiness, to cite Graybill again, sticks to her. She is lower class, whatever that entails.

Suspensions are borne out by the following words:

ותזנה עליו פילגשו ותלך מאתו

"And his concubine fornicated against him, and went from him." (19.2a)

Whatever this means, and great are the confabulations, she seizes the initiative; the centre of attention shifts from him to her. Clearly, the couple are estranged; if she is promiscuous, it is more, so the preposition "against" suggests, a sign of alienation from him rather than intimacy with anyone else. That she leaves and goes back home does not portend any lasting attachment.

A long commentarial tradition, novelistically summarized in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*,¹⁷ has seen in the story a lesson for wayward women. According to this reading, the concubine suffers ghastly poetic justice for her unfaithfulness.¹⁸ Cheryl Exum, for instance, writes, "the message that the story of Bath-sheber (*her name for the Levite's concubine*) gives to women is that the consequences of sexual autonomy ... are terrible or deadly."¹⁹ Others sanitize the text, through adopting one or other of the Septuagint readings,²⁰ or proposing alternative meanings for זנה,²¹ or even suggesting that the Levite pimps her.²² These create a black-and-white morality tale, in which the concubine is the only innocent character. As Isabelle Hamley

¹⁶ Hamley, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, p.137.

¹⁷ Peter J. Sabo and Rhiannon Graybill, "Arcane Energy: An Afterword on the Bible and *The Testaments*" in Rhiannon Graybill and Peter J. Sabo *"Who Knows What We'd Make of It, If We Ever Got Our Hands on it?" Margaret Atwood and the Bible* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020), pp.409-421 (413-14). See also Brandon M. Hurlbert, "Cut & Splice: Reading Judges 19 Cinematically" *BibInt* (advanced articles), 1-25 (1-2).

¹⁸ Hamley, "What's Wrong with Playing the Harlot?" pp.55-56.

¹⁹ Exum, *Fragmented Women* p. 146.

²⁰ LXX^A has "she became angry"; LXX^B "she left him". This is adopted by Edenburg, *Dismembering the Whole*, p.16, NSRV and others.

²¹ Thus it is frequently emended to חנן, "scorned", or alternative meanings are proposed, such as "leave". For details, see Hamley, "What's Wrong with Playing the Harlot." pp.47-52. Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, p.88, thinks it refers to the tension between patrilocal and virilocal marriage, to both of which the woman is unfaithful

²² Reis, "The Levite's Concubine" pp.128-31.

says, this assumes that "a 'real' victim must be 'guiltless'".²³ That she may be sexually active makes her character more interesting, more ambiguous, perhaps more desperate. We glimpse her as a morally responsible subject, whose eclipse is consequently the more poignant.

הַזָּנָה is a key metaphor in Judges, and the Deuteronomistic History generally, for Israel's betrayal of YHWH. Thus the concubine is both a representative, a symbol, for perfidious Israel, and marginalized, as woman, as *pilegesh*, as a stranger married to a stranger. That she takes charge, in Hamley's Irigarayan reading, effects a Copernican revolution.²⁴ Man is no longer the centre of the universe. One can imagine the cost to the Levite's masculinity, in one way or another. Not only might he be cuckolded, but his aspiration for establishing a house in Israel is thwarted.

However, the motif is entirely undeveloped. She goes home, exchanging one patriarchal domain for another: "to her father's house, to Bethlehem of Judah." This is perhaps a safe place, somewhere she can resume her old life. The amplification, "to Bethlehem of Judah", suggests that it is more than her father's house to which she returns, it is to a landscape, a dialect, a society, and to a symbolic site, whose meaning is yet to unfold, but which is surely implicit, at least in the mind of the reader. But home might also be uncanny, in the Freudian sense, as a place which is both intimately familiar and strange.²⁵ One cannot go back without the knowledge of everything that has happened in between. There is much speculation about how her father welcomes her, why he does not enforce the Deuteronomic law against adulterers.²⁶ Is a *pilegesh* subject to the same restrictions as a full wife? What do her friends think? In any case, she comes back under a cloud, and perhaps with a reputation (though who knows what her life was like

²³ Paynter, *Telling Terror*, p.36.

²⁴ *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, p.138. Hamley's first chapter is an exemplary introduction to Irigaray's work, and her second discusses and evaluates her influence on biblical studies (*Unspeakable Things Unspoken* pp.1-62).

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" in James Strachey (trans). *The Penguin Freud Library. Vol.14: Art and Literature* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp.335-76.

²⁶ See for example, Edenburg, *Dismembering the Whole*, pp.244-45, who, despite her adoption of an alternative meaning for הַזָּנָה, thinks that the choice of the homonym creates an intertextual echo; Karla G. Bohmbach, "Conventions/Contraventions: The Meaning of Public and Private for the Judges 19 Concubine" *JSOT* 23 (1999), pp.83-98 (90); Paynter, *Telling Terror*, p.33, who notes the contrast. In my view, it illustrates the disconnect between the legal codes and actual practice.

before her departure, and what were sexual mores in ancient Israel, at least on the evidence of the Song of Songs). Was it only men who “did what was right in their own eyes”?

There is no mother in view; she may have died, or simply be effaced by the narrator, for whom a house is the patriarchal institution *par excellence*. The absence of the mother, at least textually, renders the domestic space unsafe, a void where maternal nurture once was. Mieke Bal asks “Where is Clytemnestra?”²⁷. The empty house is haunted, either by the dead mother or her textual absence. What memories are there, for father and daughter? Bal’s answer is that the figure of Clytemnestra is displaced onto the various murderous women of Judges: Jael, the woman with the millstone, Delilah. The displacement is a sign of repression. Hamley comments, “There is no mother to provide a female genealogy. She is cut off and rootless.”²⁸

Four months pass, in which nothing happens. Periods of time are pregnant; we do not know what she thinks and feels. Day follows day; the addition of ימים, "days", to ארבעה חדשים, "four months", gives one a sense of repetition, normality, perhaps even tedium. It could drag on forever; if so, there would have been no story. If only the Levite had not come to fetch her. It is the first of the counter-factuals, ways not taken, that render the story pathetic. Perhaps distance makes the heart grow fonder, perhaps the domestic space becomes more uncomfortable, especially if, as Mieke Bal suggests, it unconsciously signifies the mother's womb.²⁹ Relationships between fathers and daughters throughout the book of Judges are fraught and perilous. Two daughters are immolated in their father's houses; other daughters are raped; the apparently perfect daughter, Achsah, obtains something associated with fertility from her father and gives it to her husband, who, as her uncle, himself embodies the possibility of incest. Ideally, daughters are "sent out" from the paternal home and other daughters brought in, as in the case of the so-called minor judge, Ibzan (12.8-9). A daughter who stays home, or worse, returns home, threatens the system of exchange through which Israelite identity is constructed. Not a word

²⁷ *Death and Dissymmetry* p.197. In Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra murders her husband, Agamemnon, to avenge his sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia.

²⁸ *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* p.139.

²⁹ *Death and Dissymmetry*, p.196.

passes between father and daughter in our text, but who knows what possibilities remain unspoken?

After four months the Levite comes, "to speak to her heart." Whatever the alienation between them, he tries to cross it. Speaking to the heart suggests tenderness, affection, the choosing of words which will appeal to her and re-establish intimacy. It is sweet-talk. We might expect to hear what he says, and, even more important, her reaction. Will she take him back, if one reads according to the Ketiv? Will he bring her back, if one follows the Qere?³⁰ The effort involved is indicated by the succession of verbs, formulaic as they are: "And her husband rose up, and went after her." It is quite an expedition, accompanied as he is by a servant and two donkeys. Why it takes him so long, we do not know, nor is it our business, in an essay concerned with her character, except insofar as we see it through her eyes. The very possessive, אִישָׁהּ, "her husband," as Helen Paynter says,³¹ uniquely makes her the focus of the relationship, and implies reciprocity. She may be surprised to see him, she may wonder at his dilatoriousness, she may be pleased or anxious. Her heart may be all a-flutter. As with every instance of reconciliation after a breach, it is against a background of tension, of unresolved conflict. For the moment, the text uses its rhetorical resources to give him the benefit of the doubt, perhaps in her eyes also.

At any rate, there seems to be no question. She comes out to meet him, and brings him into her father's house.³² This is her last action before the denouement; thereafter the text constantly refers to her, so as to keep her before our eyes, for example by calling her father "the father of the girl", but without allowing her any subjectivity. We watch her disappearing into the background. The detail, "she brought him into her father's house," captures this moment of fade-out. Presumably she greets him in some way, and he answers her back; they must look at each other. She brings him across the threshold, into the intimate space of the house, which, as we

³⁰ The Ketiv, or written Masoretic text, reads להשיבו, "to bring him back." The Qere, or text as traditionally read, goes להשיבה, "to bring her back." For the different readings, ignored in most commentaries, see Paynter, *Telling Terror*, p.37.

³¹ *Telling Terror*, p.34. Paynter notes that in every other case where the construction is used, it is a sign of strong female agency.

³² Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, p. 91, thinks that she does not come out of the house, but that is surely wrong. Some translations, e.g. NRSV, follow the Septuagint in seeing the Levite as the subject.

know, has become strange and uncanny. It is no longer a refuge. However, he seems to leave her outside. She watches her father rejoice to see him; perhaps the father smiles, and the two men engage in a drinking bout that lasts for five days. Brandon Hurlbert comments that hers is a "felt absence."³³ What happens between father, daughter, and Levite we do not know. The threshold, as Jennifer Matheny writes, is a key term in our text, anticipating the threshold at the climax.³⁴ The threshold symbolically marks the difference between the public and the private, and the turning point. She quotes Bakhtin that, metaphorically, the threshold "is connected with the breaking point of life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life" (638).³⁵ Once he crosses the threshold, the Levite cannot go back. In her dramatic representation of "Beth the movie,"³⁶ Mieke Bal describes how "the long scene will slowly move into uncanniness."³⁷ The uncanniness is caused by "a split between what the actors do and what they feel." Meanwhile, Beth is "sitting, waiting, anxious."

She has a hermetic function. She introduces the Levite into the house, which is representative, a microcosm, of Bethlehem, "the house of bread," and thus of the future destiny of Israel. There he will have nourishment. But she also introduces us, as well as the characters in the story, to an alternative story, insofar as she is representative of Israel. The inner space, the matrix, is also a sexual space, into which the man intrudes. The "house of bread", then, is associated with fertility, and blessing, notably, of course, in the accompanying story of Ruth. Life, with all its promises, turns into death.

But that is to run ahead of ourselves.

The men eat, drink, sleep. Whatever they talk about, the bonhomie is strained, as the repeated injunctions by the host that the Levite should "feast his heart" and that his heart should

³³ Hurlbert, "Cut & Splice", pp.11-12. Hurlbert, like Bal, imagines how the scene might be filmed, with the camera constantly switching between the different faces.

³⁴ Matheny, Jennifer M. "Mute and Mutilated: Understanding Judges 19-21 as a **לשון** of Dialogue" *BibInt* 25 (2017), pp. 625-46 (38).

³⁵ Mikhael M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981) p.248.

³⁶ Feminist critics delight in inventing names for the woman. Bal calls her "Beth", Exum "Bath-sheber", Paynter, "Beli-Fahad".

³⁷ *Death and Dissymmetry*, p.189.

be "good" suggest. The father urges the guest to stay, to enjoy his hospitality; the son-in-law resists, but complies, until it is too late. There is of course an irony, that father's solicitude for the Levite's heart contrasts with the Levite's failure to talk to the woman's heart. Apparently, male bonding, the camaraderie of father-in-law and son-in-law, takes precedence over any affection for the wife and daughter. That is indeed the patriarchal construction of marriage, as an exchange between men, in which women are purely instrumental.³⁸

The father's motives are much discussed.³⁹ The Levite may be an asset, as in the previous story of Micah (Judges 17-18); the father may be suspicious after the previous estrangement; he may want to hang on to the daughter. He may want to restore the family's good name, and erase the past. Who knows? But the daughter is trapped. If home is unsafe, and the Levite is unsafe, she has nowhere to go.⁴⁰ The men compete for her, and exclude her.

Retardation induces an affect of slow motion. Everything happens in an alcoholic haze, as the father plies more and more drinks. The Levite may also feel trapped. "One imagines (the Levite) thinking, 'If I don't leave now, I never will.'"⁴¹ For the *pilegash*, it may be boring, as well as suspenseful. In Graybill's terms, it is "icky" as well as "sticky." Affects stick to each moment of the sequence, as one dwells on the incidents, the passing words and thoughts. This is especially so in moments of anticipation and surprise. For example, in v.5, they "get up early in the morning" (וישקימו בבוקר) and one can contemplate the excitement of departure, the early morning freshness, a strange clarity despite the previous day's inebriation, only for inertia to settle in once again.

³⁸ For the Irigarayan Marxist-oriented view of the role of women in patriarchal economy, see Hamley, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, pp.18-19: "women become both goods and objects of exchange between men" (19). See also *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, pp.118-21.

³⁹ See, for instance, Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power & Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993) p. 133, who think that the father may be showing solicitude for his daughter, and on the contrary, Reis, "The Levite's Concubine" pp.131-34, who considers him to be indifferent to her fate. Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry*, pp.90-91, sees the issue as being patriarchy. I discuss the different possibilities in "Between Centre and Periphery", p.147. See also Edenburg, *Dismembering the Whole*, p.19.

⁴⁰ For the reversal of public and private in the narrative, see Bohmbach, "Conventions/Contraventions": "Just as the woman is not safe in public, neither is her private positioning any guarantee of safety" (97). But see Hamley, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, p.123, who questions whether the public/private distinction might not be anachronistic.

⁴¹ "Between Centre and Periphery" p. 147,

The Levite and the concubine may have sex, since they pass the night. If so, it will consummate the reconciliation, but at an indeterminate emotional cost. For her, it might be a surrender of whatever drove her away in the first place. The father may feel ambivalent about having another man sleeping with his daughter in his own house, especially if he harbours incestuous desires. Or, on the contrary, they may not have sex, in which case one wonders what has actually happened. If there is no wooing, no seduction, no intercourse, there is perhaps no relationship. She may feel jealous, frustrated, or relieved. If they do not have sex, it suggests that the problems between them have not been resolved. Or perhaps the Levite merely feels inhibited in the presence of the father. His adoption into the familial nest turns him into a quasi-brother, a surrogate son, and hence evokes the spectre of incest, at one remove.

Off they go, late in the day, on the fateful journey home. Again, she has no say, even though she may think, like her father, that it is stupid. She is part of his entourage, like the servant and the donkeys. As they come to the vicinity of Jerusalem, she is mentioned parenthetically, in tandem with the beasts, in a neat chiasmic parallelism: ועמו צמד חמורים חבושים "and with him the pair of laden donkeys, and his concubine with him" (v.10). Hamley suggests that she is "a mere afterthought", following the donkeys,⁴² but the point is that both are encompassed by him, just as the singular verbs - "and he rose, and he went, and he came..." - governs all of them, so that he is the sole actor. More important, the passing reference, for the last time until v.19, draws attention to the role of the servant in vv.11-13. The servant's common sense not only exposes the Levite's lack of it,⁴³ but may make us wonder what the woman thinks, or not. She is entirely eclipsed by the narrative, silent and invisible.⁴⁴ It gets

⁴² *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, p.139. See also Bohmbach, "Conventions/Contraventions" p.87. However, the relationship between the A and B clauses in a parallelism is less definitive. The B clause may indicate that they are of equal status, or it may be climactic.

⁴³ The Levite is an ironic "exemplar of misplaced piety" cf. Landy, "Between Centre and Periphery", p. 153. Jan P. Fokkelman, "Structural Remarks on Judges 9 and 19" in Michael Fishbane and Emanuel Tov (eds) *Sha'arei Talmon: Studies in the Bible, Qumran, and the Ancient Near East Presented to Shemaryahu Talmon* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992) pp. 33-45, comments that the refusal to spend the night in Jerusalem is the turning point that reveals that all values are reversed, that, for example, the servant is right, contrary to convention (44-45).

⁴⁴ Lilian R. Klein, *The Triumph of Irony in the Book of Judges* (JSOTS 68; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), p.164.

darker and darker; they find themselves in the square of a strange city, houseless and unwelcome; no one asks her opinion or seems to notice her. Night is associated with terrors, "the fear of the night" (Song of Songs 3.8; Ps.91.5). Nocturnal dread lacks an object; throughout the text the oncoming night is regarded with foreboding, the danger of which is unspecified, and has something primeval about it. One can imagine, from the woman's point of view, there in the shadows, that familiar shapes become unfamiliar, uncanny. Night is the realm of the unconscious, of ghosts and demons.⁴⁵ To be unsheltered at night, especially in a public place, surrounded by eyes that refuse the demand for recognition, by closed doors, evokes a lack of the primal human need for containment, for community.⁴⁶ But there is no indication as yet that the woman fears risk to herself. Such things are not done in Israel.

And then salvation comes, an old Ephraimite, like the Levite a stranger, but settled enough to have a field and a house. The concubine surfaces momentarily as the Ephraimite's "handmaid" (אמה), an expression into which I read no more than common politeness, since the Levite includes himself among the Ephraimite's servants.⁴⁷ Equally politely, he claims he will be of no trouble and expense, since he has fodder for the animals and bread and wine for the humans. Everything seems quite normal; the Levite provides the concubine with the basics. Whatever the dynamics between the Ephraimite and the Levite, she may be reassured of her sustenance. The Levite puts on a good show. Of course, the echo of Gen.19. 1-3 may alert the suspicious reader; Cynthia Edenburg, in particular, notes the contrasts.⁴⁸ But the concubine may have no such anxieties.

⁴⁵ There are any number of spooky nocturnal tales in the Hebrew Bible, for example Jacob's struggle with the angel in Gen.32.23-33 and Moses' encounter with YHWH in Exod.4.24-26. The only equivalent I can think of in Judges is Gideon's victory over the Midianites in 7.9-23, though that, of course, is entirely positive from the narrator's point of view. Alice Bach, "Rereading The Body Politic: Women and Violence in Judges 21" *BibInt* 6 (1998), pp.1-27 (6) comments that night is not always sinister in the Hebrew Bible, citing Gen.32.23-31, the visions of Zechariah, and the Witch of Endor! I venture to disagree.

⁴⁶ According to the psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion, the sense of being contained is essential to infantile development. For a useful introduction to Bion's work, see Joan and Neville Symington *The Clinical Thinking of Wilfred Bion* (London: Routledge, 1996). For the concepts of container and contained, see especially pp.50-58.

⁴⁷ Hamley, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, pp.139-40, thinks that an אמה is less than an עבד, but I do not see the evidence for this. Lapsley, *Whispering the Word*, p.44, comments that usually in the HB אמה is a self-designation. The Levite's appropriation of the term exceeds his prerogative.

⁴⁸ *Dismembering the Whole*, pp.175-76.

So they enter the house, wash their feet, eat and drink, and they "make their heart merry". We have no reason to think that the concubine does not share in the general well-being.⁴⁹ All's well that ends well. Washing the feet associates our text with the hospitality type-scene, particularly Gen.18.3, 19.2, and 24. 32;⁵⁰ it marks the transition from the outside to the inside, it is the first act of a good host. Metonymically, as well as sensually, it signifies the end of the journey, the weariness, grime, and sweat of the road. One can feel the water against the skin, especially in an era when water was precious, and the sense of relief. It is a sociable experience, shared by all the participants; one can imagine, for instance, that she has good feelings for her companions. Of course, as Sara Ahmed says, happiness is precarious;⁵¹ any anxiety might be relieved by alcohol. Happiness sticks to things; it pervades the room. The alienation suggested by the Levite's failure to speak to the pilegish's heart, and the father's repeated appeals that he gladden and feast his heart, seems to be resolved. The heart (לבם) is a collective entity, a conviviality in the literal sense.

It does not last long. There is a hammering at the door. The sons of Belial make their scandalous request.⁵² The scandal is intensified by the Levite's status as a member of the sacred tribe, whose inheritance is YHWH, and thus dishonours the deity. This is clear from the parallel with the Sodom story, in which the guests are divine emissaries. As Bal says, the house becomes a prison.⁵³ In demanding to open the door, they want to break open the prison; they have become a lynch mob. The concubine hears the threat to her husband, and may react in different ways, with astonishment, panic, or even worry for him; the consternation is contagious. Teresa Brennan writes, "Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and felt the atmosphere."⁵⁴ There is a sea-change in mood, as if a gusty wind blows through the door. But for

⁴⁹ Some, however, do harbour doubts, for instance, Lapsley, *Whispering the Word*, p.45.

⁵⁰ For the hospitality type-scene, see Edenburg, *Dismembering the Whole*, p.15, esp.n.22.

⁵¹ Sara Ahmed, "'Happy Objects'" in Melissa Gregg et al (eds) *The Affect Theory Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 29-51 (33).

⁵² James Harding, "Homophobia and Masculine Domination in Judges 19-21" BCT 6 (2018), pp.41-73 (54), wonders whether ידע might actually be ambiguous here, and that the Gibeahites might simply wish to get to know the Levite. This seems scarcely plausible to me, especially in view of what follows.

⁵³ *Death and Dissymmetry*, p.183.

⁵⁴ Teresa Brennan, *Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004) p.1.

the moment at least there is no direct danger; she can try to make herself inconspicuous. The old man goes to the door; perhaps he will save the situation.

The host makes his equally surprising offer. It is a long speech, and she has time to absorb its implications. Again it is not our business here to discuss the Ephraimite's motives, his construction of his duty, whether he exceeds his authority; only how she might understand it. She is at his disposal, with no capacity to object. As the Ephraimite expatiates on their fate, "and rape them and do to them what is good in your eyes", we can imagine the two women listening, assuming that the walls are not too thick. Each word is experienced viscerally, as something that might happen, if he gets his way, with all the accompanying outrage. The *pilegish* is de trop; the real import of the Ephraimite's words is that he is prepared to sacrifice that which is most valuable to him, his family's principal asset, for the sake of his guest.⁵⁵ That, of course, is what Lot offers. The *pilegish* is expendable, worthless, an extra little treat. That is what her life has come to. She may expect the Levite to protect her, but he does not. The crowd refuses the proffered gift: "the men did not want to listen to him" (v.25). Rejection compounds abjection; she is worthless and not worth having. That could be a relief. But that is not what transpires.

As Hamley says, the Levite throws her "to the wolves."⁵⁶ It says, **ויחזק האיש בפילגשו ויצא**, "and the man took hold of his concubine and brought her out to them outside." **ויחזק** can mean "force"; it is not a single act of ejection; one can imagine him dragging her outside. That requires determination, as well as suggesting her resistance.⁵⁷ It would take some seconds, or maybe more, to push her out, in which time her eyes would be opened to the true character,

⁵⁵ Milstein, *Tracking the Master Scribe*, p.176, thinks that the virgin daughter is "a blind motif", since she does not appear again, and only introduced to make the connection with Gen.19. I think that the opposite is the case: the daughter is the real point of the Ephraimite's offer.

⁵⁶ *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*, p.134. Graybill, *Texts After Terror*, p.160, thinks it is ambiguous whether the Ephraimite or the Levite throws her out. Moster, "The Levite" p.728, argues that the subject is most likely the Ephraimite, and in general tries to exculpate the Levite. However, Hamley adduces many reasons why it has to be the Levite, of which the syntactical one is the most important.

⁵⁷ L.Juliana M. Claassens, *Claiming Her Dignity: Female Resistance in the Old Testament* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016) understandably does not mention our text. As Paynter, *Telling Terror*, p.30, says, "few of these acts of resistance can be said to apply to (the concubine)." However, perhaps here we do have a trace of resistance.

and indeed masculinity, of her man (איש) and the value of their relationship. His is the first violation.

And what follows..

וידעו אותה ויתעללו בה כל הלילה עד הבקר

"And they knew her, and worked their will on her, all night till morning."

Here we reach the limit of our unhappy reading. The euphemism for sex, ידע, "know", designates an act of un-knowing, non-recognition. If "knowing" connotes intimacy, this is as impersonal as possible. She is raped as a substitute for the Levite, but also as a defiled and subjugated body. Rhiannon Graybill writes of the temptation to make of this a "sad story", even the worst of stories, and, especially among feminist critics, to give the woman a voice, for example through her speaking body.⁵⁸ But she is voiceless. Helen Paynter says that it is possible that "she *cannot* speak; her experience has rendered her incapable of speech."⁵⁹ She quotes Elaine Scarry that "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it" and causes "a reversion to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned."⁶⁰ All we can do, Graybill says, is to "stay with the story and its difficulties",⁶¹ without foreclosing it, without attempting to speak on behalf of the woman, to give her a voice.⁶²

Yet, as she also says, I cannot resist "the pull of its sadness." I have been writing and avoiding writing this section. Paynter writes, helpfully, of Judith Butler's "notion of grievability."⁶³ One can grieve for the *pilegesh* without finding words for one's grief. Paynter thinks that the pain is "in the mind of the narrator, who has given her an obituary."⁶⁴ In this it is typical of the book of Judges, which is a book of grief.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ *Texts After Terror*, p.157.

⁵⁹ *Telling Terror*, p.48. Italics original.

⁶⁰ The quotation is from Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.324

⁶¹ *Texts After Terror*, p.157.

⁶² *Texts After Terror*, p.165-66

⁶³ *Telling Terror*, p.51. The full discussion is on pp.51-52.

⁶⁴ *Telling Terror* p.52.

⁶⁵ I agree here with Deryn Guest's recent psychoanalytic reading, *YHWH and the God of Israel: an Object-Relations Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), though I disagree fundamentally with her interpretation of that grief.

James Harding argues that the story exemplifies masculine domination.⁶⁶ The woman is raped so as to assert the Gibeahites' power over the Levite as well as the woman's body. Reducing it to an object symbolically displays their phallic supremacy, both over women and over enemies.⁶⁷ Juliana Claassens writes movingly how rape "destroys the innermost core of the human being"⁶⁸ and that this is the source of the perpetrator's pleasure. "The new world of the perpetrator is built on the ruins of the victim's world ... Through the rape the perpetrator becomes invincible and removed from any earthly law; he becomes a law unto himself."⁶⁹

The story exemplifies the interfusion of sex and violence endemic in human culture as well as in the book of Judges, a metaphorical equivalence as terrifying as that of knowing and unknowing. It is not plausible that the men of Gibeah are not sexually excited: how else would they get an erection? Or that the sexual excitement is distinguishable from that of violence. The sadistic fantasy plays out endlessly, at least all night, on the woman's body, and thereafter in the their imagination, perhaps beyond the grave. And that fantasy means evoking the woman's subjectivity, so as to destroy it again and again. The more she cries, the more she resists, the greater the pleasure.

Where do we see this in the text? After "they knew her" the text continues ויתעללו בה כל הלילה עד הבקר, "and worked their will on her, all night until morning." The root עלל refers to deeds, generally bad, often cruel. They don't just rape her, but they perpetrate all sorts of acts on her; not once, but the entire night. The Hitpa'el ויתעללו, in particular, is associated with waywardness and torture (e.g. Num.22.29; I Sam.31.6); they use her body as a sex toy, in a ghastly parody of foreplay, thus demonstrating, as with any torturer, absolute power over the female body. They do it to elicit a response (whimpers, cries, screams), investing themselves in the body of the other as the site of pain and pleasure. And it goes on all night, boring, interminable.

⁶⁶ Harding, "Homophobia and Masculine Domination".

⁶⁷ Bach, "Rereading The Body Politic" p.1.

⁶⁸ *Claiming Her Dignity*, p.41

⁶⁹ Claassens is quoting Louise du Toit, but does not give a reference.

And we, what do we feel? If we adopt her subject position? Perhaps two things:

i) Dissociation. This isn't really happening to me. I am somewhere else, in a land without pain or fear.

ii) Consciousness. I am who I am, despite all that they do to me.⁷⁰ They cannot really touch me.

Perhaps there is just pain, horror, disintegration. Anyway, at dawn, like the night demons they are, they let her go, and she crawls back to the threshold. It is here that we reach the end of our journey, since I cannot bear to carry on. Mieke Bal, in her cinematic reading, brilliantly describes what it looks like from below.⁷¹ She looks up at the man as he comes out, nonchalantly or not, in the morning, and says, "Get up, let's go." Her hands are focus of attention, as if imploring or trying to reach that threshold of safety, and as witness to her incapacity. We do not know if she is alive or dead. She does not answer, *ואין ענה*. She may see the man, now called "her lord", stepping out into the new day. Bal imagines his legs over her. But it is all "dreamlike"⁷², a world on a journey she can never again enter. She sees the life that she had, the entire misadventure, slipping away. I imagine her opening her eyes, wondering, hovering between life and death, too weak to care.

He hoists her on the donkey, they go home, he cuts her up into twelve pieces. We do not know if she is alive, dead, unconscious. Perhaps she dies on the way. I don't want to go there.⁷³

What do we make of all this in terms of character and characterization? Obviously, there is rather little to work with. She is not a character with a fully developed trajectory, like Saul,

⁷⁰ I do not have any references for these speculations, but I am thinking of the wonderful description of gang rape in Bernardine Evaristo's novel, *Girl, Woman, Other*.

⁷¹ *Death and Dissymmetry*, pp.195-96. See also Hurlbert, "Cut & Splice" pp.15-16, who thinks it is focalized entirely through the eyes of the Levite. Hurlbert seems unaware of Bal.

⁷² *Death and Dissymmetry*, p.195.

⁷³ There is no indication in the text that she is alive and conscious. Graybill, *Texts after Terror*, pp.159-61, insists that rape is not murder. "*People survive rapes, even gang rapes*" (161). But some people do not. Paynter movingly compares our text to the story of Jyoti, the young woman who died of her rape in India in 2012 (*Telling Terror*, pp.59-60). Of course, we may react affectively to the Levite's dissection of the *pilegish*. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p.239, thinks that the ambiguity serves to implicate both the Gibeahites and the Levite in the death, in a characteristically masculinist reading. But from the woman's point of view, the story is mercifully over.

David, or Samson. Robert Alter typically, magnificently, comments on the "art of reticence" in biblical characterization; and that "though biblical narrative is often silent where later modes of fiction choose to be loquacious, it is *selectively* silent" (*my italics*).⁷⁴ I am always astonished at the Hebrew Bible's capacity to bring a character alive with a few words, and to give (almost) everyone their due, even those it portrays as fools or enemies.⁷⁵ It is an extraordinarily generous text. What I have tried to do is to show how the narrator invests in the character of the concubine, through all the odd details - why is she a *pilegesh*? What is the meaning of זונה? Why does she bring him in? - so as the more radically to occlude her. Secondly, I suggest that she remains the focus of attention throughout the story, as we wonder why she is not consulted about a lodging place, how she reacts to the Ephraimite's outrageous offer, and so on; the servant is there precisely to make us aware of her exclusion from the dialogue. Thirdly, I argue that she is interesting because she is morally ambiguous. She is not a pure innocent victim. As Isabelle Hamley says, the assumption is that a "real" victim must be guiltless. Her action, whatever it is, asserts her independence, her alienation from the situation in which she finds herself, and briefly turns the patriarchy on its head. It may be, as Cheryl Exum argues, that the Gibeahites exact patriarchy's revenge.⁷⁶ But we know what the narrator thinks of them, since he calls them בני בליעל, "scoundrels", not to speak of the unspeakable Levite!

Her promiscuity, if such it is, renders her typical of the world of Judges. It is a morally compromised world, in which people make their way as best they can. That she is human, with a past, suggests that she is not unsullied by life, social conditions, fate, and nonetheless worthy of compassion. She is like the rest of us.

Her character is constituted by her life experiences and her relationships. What is important is her isolation, from her father, her lover, even the servant, the absence of a mother, of female friends. But, like the rest of us, she was also a dreamer. She had her imaginary world,

⁷⁴ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Book, 1981). "Characterization and the Art of Reticence" is his chapter 6 (pp.114-130). The second quotation is from p.115.

⁷⁵ Examples are when Nabal says "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse...?" (I Sam 25.10) and one sees matters from the perspective of a well-established landowner; or when Jezebel dies with dignity.

⁷⁶ *Fragmented Women*, pp.151-52.

which connected her social, conscious self to the unconscious processes of thinking and feeling, which constituted her subjectivity,⁷⁷ and to the fantasy life of ancient Israel. We have no access to that world; she left no poems or diaries; but we have an ethical responsibility to acknowledge it, and its erasure.

And finally, there is the symbolic dimension. She is in touch with the deepest forces of life and death. Alice Keefe writes of the female body as the "site of the power of life, and the Israelite community as that in which life is sustained and encompassed."⁷⁸ What is violated is "the sacrality of the female body as the source and matrix of... life". The woman is connected intertextually to all the other women, daughters and mothers, of Israel, especially, but not only, the victims. Structurally, she corresponds to Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11.⁷⁹ There is a further correlation: with Rachel, the arch-mother of the Benjaminites, who died giving birth to them.⁸⁰ Rachel is a houseless ghost throughout the Hebrew Bible. I have noted Bal's suggestion that the absent mother haunts the text. The absent mother is recollected in the childless daughter, in the children she will never have. As the text goes on, the void gets bigger and bigger, sucking in the bodies of ever more raped and traumatized women and murdered men, women and children. The vagina as the source of life becomes the hollow which destroys Israel. This is a terrible fantasy, and we have to evoke the narrator imagining it, inhabiting the body of the woman as one of his personae, writing and protesting. But this leads us elsewhere. For she connects YHWH and the land. She is a displacement of the Levite, as the object of the Gibeonites' desire, and thus of YHWH, but she also represents the land, and hence the trauma of conquest. She enacts the tension between endogamy, going back to the father with its incestuous implications, and exogamy, denoted by the verb *נזן*. As Matheny writes, the future is "founded on rape and dismemberment."⁸¹ In my view, this is the essential problem of the book of Judges,

⁷⁷ For the creative function of dreaming, I am indebted to Thomas H. Ogden, *Reclaiming Unlived Life: Experiences in Psychoanalysis* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016), pp.30-35.

⁷⁸ "Rapes of Women/Wars of Men" p.89.

⁷⁹ Fokkelman, "Structural Remarks on Judges 9 and 19".

⁸⁰ Landy, "Between Centre and Periphery", pp.158, 160.

⁸¹ Matheny, "Mute and Mutilated", p.627.

the reason why it tells the same story again and again. Israel has to occupy the land, wiping out its inhabitants, but at the same time, it has to marry into the land, to make it truly its own. This is an impossible predicament, whose implications are worked out in the disastrous final chapters.