

Samson and Delilah in medieval insular French: translation and adaptation

Book

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Chapter 3. Verse and Music.

This chapter brings together three treatments of the story of Samson that focus on his troubled relationship with Delilah.¹ A verse translation-adaptation of the Old Testament (*Poème anglo-normand sur l'ancien Testament*) has a connection with the Latin *planctus* concerning Samson that is attributed to Peter Abelard. In turn, the *planctus* inspired a musical drama, *Samson, dux fortissime*. All three adaptations depict a hero who is deeply human, caught between unfathomable destiny and erotic betrayal. In all three texts, Delilah acts as the foe who also fulfils Samson's quest for union with women and with Philistines.

The *Poème anglo-normand sur l'ancien Testament* (hereafter, *Poème*) is one of several translations of Scripture into Old French verse that were produced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. As Hoogvliet has noted, these texts do not compete over doctrinal or linguistic authenticity, and they are not heretical.² They are extensive paraphrases or summaries, often reliant on companion books such as the *Historia Scholastica* (c.1170) and the *Aurora* (c.1170-1209).³ Since Jerome, Scripture was meant to be translated *ad verbum*, but these texts privilege the sense.⁴

Thirty-five copies survive of Herman de Valenciennes' *Li romanz de Dieu et de sa Mere* (c.1190). A *Bible anonyme* survives in two copies (c.1200). Two further complete verse summaries were produced half a century later by Macé de la Charité and Jean Malkaraume.⁵ The *Poème* survives in far fewer copies than Herman's poem, but it enjoyed wider diffusion, inasmuch as it was absorbed into the *Bible d'Acre* (produced for King Louis IX of France) and a late-medieval prose summary (see chapter 4).⁶ Anglo-Norman regions also account for earlier verse translations into French of books or sections of the Bible, notably Sanson de Nantuil's Proverbs (c. 1135-65).⁷

The influence of these poems in vernacular culture has often been overlooked. Some unusual allegories and iconography first appear in Old French Bible poems such as Herman of Valenciennes.⁸ The success of biblical poems is probably proved by the fact that they are criticised in the preface of the prose Book of Judges as ‘bel diter’ (lovely poetry) that distracts their readers from ‘la verite dou cens’ (the truth of the sense).⁹ There is a performative dimension to this activity and it involves music as well as reading aloud.¹⁰

In this prose text, as in all others, Samson sings (Judges 15:17).¹¹ These texts’ aural, performative aspect is also sometimes missed. While the previous chapter has examined visual materials, this one is dedicated to the relationship between verse and song. In so doing, it avoids any binary opposition of ‘written’ Latin and ‘spoken’ French.

Vernacular renderings of a Latin text formed part of the education of the monastic and learned reader. The six surviving Latin poems of Pyramus and Thisbe may have been classroom exercises. They made their way into medieval vernacular romances through verse translations, serious or parodic adaptations, and allusions in tales of star-crossed lovers such as Tristan and Isolde.¹² Rachetta has summarised the arguments for and against a similar educational function for Old French verse Bibles.¹³ Its generic intertextuality makes the *Poème* an important marker in the development of new ways of receiving and retelling biblical narratives. Nevertheless, four of the manuscripts of the *Poème* are from a monastic milieu. One is from the Augustinian priory of Llanthony II near Gloucester (Oxford, Corpus Christi College MS 36, Nobel’s MS C), one was in a Cistercian house in Tripoli in 1347, one was given to a nunnery in Derby in the fifteenth century (Nobel’s MS E), and a long fragment is thought to have been from Malmesbury Abbey (Malmesbury Parish Church, MS 2, Nobel’s MS M).¹⁴ A tiny fragment has been discovered recently, and it seems to be from a thirteenth-century English copy.¹⁵ A prose version was made in the fourteenth century, which Nobel has identified as deriving from his MS E (it is discussed in chapter four).¹⁶

Nobel has concluded that the *Poème*'s author was a monk or cleric in Post-Conquest England around the year 1200. He sought to teach the laity and in so doing, he used secular literary devices.¹⁷ He combines the Vulgate with the Latin version of Josephus (possibly via Comestor).¹⁸ Like the Benedictine monk Osbern Pinnock of Gloucester, his text contains ideological biases including anti-Jewish polemic and misogyny.¹⁹

The text's strictly historicizing, non-allegorical approach is a feature of the Parisian schools of Saint-Victor and Notre-Dame, and the *Poème* echoes the method of its near-contemporary, Leonius of Paris.²⁰ A further connection with Parisian intellectual circles is suggested by the *Poème*'s reference to clerics lamenting Jephthah's daughter (ll.4518-23). This is the *Planctus Virginum Israel*, attributed to Peter Abelard (1079-1142). I will return to this matter in the second part of the chapter.

Courtly Verse.

In the *Poème*, Samson does not serve to foretell the life of Christ or the Harrowing of Hell. Instead, the *Poème* traces a set of problems that are remarkably close to the analysis proposed by Greenstein. Greenstein reads the story as a riddle, and focuses in particular on its multiple inconsistencies and narrative twists. The reader is repeatedly surprised, problems are not resolved as they should be, and the promised military adventures never happen.²¹ Greenstein concludes that these anomalies should be taken as evidence that the story itself poses a series of problems for the reader to debate. How can a warrior sent by God fight only for himself? Why does his last massacre of Philistines entail his own death? He suggests that 'in reading the Samson story, one does not know what one thinks one knows'.²²

His interpretation of the story is also of one that plays on the oppositions ‘tell/not tell’ and ‘know/not know’.²³ Protagonists and the reader are repeatedly confronted with the realisation that being told something is not the same as knowing it. Appearances (real and false) and ingenuity emerge as key factors. In particular, *ingenium* (*engin*) is an important thematic element in this part of the *Poème*. The use of the word is interesting and it offers an important clue about the translation’s relationship with courtly romance. Nobel has made a convincing case for the *Poème*’s close relationship with the *chanson de geste*. He also notes some echoes of the *Roman de toute chevalerie* by Thomas, a version of the Life of Alexander the Great. It seems noteworthy too that through its strong interest in *semblant* and in *engin*, the *Poème* carries hints of an intertextual dialogue with courtly romance.²⁴

The *Poème* treats the successive episodes of the Samson story at uneven length. His annunciation is a long sequence (ll.4556-4635). The second important segment of text is an extended narrative of Samson’s disastrous wedding to the woman of Timnah, including the riddle of the lion and the honeycomb (ll.4672-4819). The account of the vengeful Samson’s actions is relatively terse, in that the episodes of the foxes and the miraculous fountain are told without comment (4820-4925).²⁵ There is a similar lack of detail for the episode of the gates of Gaza (ll.4932-4969). However, the narrator comments that by this point, the Philistines realise that they cannot rely on strength to defeat Samson, and must turn to *engin*:

Filisteu se tenent pur enginnez

Quant se parceivent qi'il fu eschapez:

Ore quergent engin pur Samson tuer,

Trestote lur force ne lur avera mester! (E, ll.4970-73)²⁶

(The Philistines think they have been tricked when they notice that he has escaped. Then they seek out a trick to kill Samson, as all their strength will be of no use to them!)

The loaded term of *engin* acts allows the text's emphatic and detailed transition to the Delilah episode. She is introduced into the poem as a significant character, who is recruited to destroy him and who desires his death. The text focuses on this aspect of her relationship with him: 'par tant l'ad enginé' (she tricked him so much) (line 5019). In the final scene of his life, the palace of the Philistines is held together by a single great pillar, 'par engin' (line 5171). When Samson pulls down the pillars, he also destroys his enemies, including Delilah, within a structure that is predicated on *engin*. Continuity is maintained in this last section by adding that Delilah, 'Samson's wife', dies too (line 5202). Samson's burial is omitted.

In the *Poème*, *engin* is the hallmark of Eve: 'Engin de femme nus ad trestoz trahi:/ Gard sei, seignurs, chescun, pur deu vus pri.' (A woman's cunning betrayed us first. Beware, my lords, each one of you, for the love of God) (ll.174-75). The Old French noun *engin* derives from the Latin *ingenium*. It designates cleverness in intellect and mechanical design, but it also has negative connotations of cunning and trickery, artifice and fraud. Robert Hanning's influential study established it as an important term in courtly romances that are from the same insular, late twelfth-century literary milieu as the *Poème*. Tracy Adams supported his conclusions in her study, which includes the schoolroom favourite, Pyramus and Thisbe.²⁷ Ingham's recent reading of another twelfth-century insular romance, *Floire et Blancheflor*, also underlines the importance of the pragmatic deployment of *engin*.²⁸ Hanning draws attention particularly to the importance of *engin* in Hue de Rotelande's romance *Ipomedon*, which was written for an audience in Herefordshire around 1180-85. This text, he

suggests, draws the reader's attention to the limitations of discernment in a society that values appearances over reality. The hero Ipomedon constructs a wholly illusory image for himself as the Queen's lover ('le dru la reine') in a court that for equally partial reasons has dubbed him 'le bel malveis' (the handsome wicked one).²⁹ *Engin* is a skillset that can complement or supplant physical strength: 'la vault engin ou force falt' (*engin* succeeds where strength fails).³⁰ It is the weapon of the weak, particularly used by women, a good weapon to use against a strong man.

A thematic focus on *engin* connects with the importance in the *Poème*'s rendering of the story in terms of riddles and mysteries. The hero's annunciation places *semblance* (appearance) at the heart of his life story, and foreshadows the blindness that will mark his last days. The first riddle concerning Samson in the *Poème* is Samson himself. As in Judges 13, his mother receives the visit of an angel after she prays to have a son: 'L'angele bel lui apareit/ En la semblance d'un hom u ele esteit' (The handsome angel appeared to her in the guise of a man, there where she was, ll.4570-71). He foretells the birth of an exceptional son and gives her instructions about his hair and diet (ll.4576-4587). Her husband rejects her words:

Li ber s'en gabe quant il oi la parole,
 E ben dist a sa femme qu'ele esteit fole,
 Il la mescreit, si que de l'angle deu
 Qu'il seit sun dru u aucun fol Ebreu. (ll.4594-97)

(The noble man scoffs when he hears the words, and he tells his wife that she is mad. He disbelieves her, and he thinks that the angel of God must be either her lover or some foolish Hebrew.)

The adjective *fol* may refer to either foolishness or insanity, either that of the mother or that of her possible lover. *Folie* had a subordinate meaning especially for women of sexual misconduct. Therefore Manoah believes that his wife may be either insane, unfaithful or foolish when she reports her encounter with the stranger.

In Manoah's understanding, the mysterious stranger who spoke to his wife is simultaneously acceptable (a Hebrew) and unacceptable (either a lover or a fool). His use of the term *dru* introduces the vocabulary of courtly love that will thereafter cluster around Samson's emotional life. The wife prays for the angel to return and to repeat his exact words to her in the presence of Manoah. She hopes that this will remove the accusation of *folie* (line 4607). The re-enacted scene is shorter than in the Vulgate. The angel's words are reduced to three short lines that fail to convince Manoah, who decides to determine the truth by performing a sacrifice (ll.4598-4615). He prefers a ritual act that will draw him away from spoken language. Manoah does not believe his wife's words, the stranger's words, or indeed any words at all.

In the Vulgate, the angel commands Manoah to make a burnt sacrifice, and refuses to reveal his 'wonderful' name. He flies up to Heaven on the flames (Judges 13: 15 -21). In the *Poème*, the angel also resolves the matter of Manoah's doubts by flying away, but there is none of the Vulgate's insistence on the importance of the ritual:

Il ad fet a deu son sacrefise al seir

Pur saver mun de l'angele s'il fu veir.

Veant la dame e veant Manué

L'angele s'en part, si est el cel munté. (ll. 4616-19)

(He made his sacrifice that evening, in order to know if the angel were real. In sight of the lady and in sight of Manoah the angel went away, he went up into the sky.)

The angel's action is designed to be seen by both man and wife, 'Veant la dame et veant Manué'. Sight now offers a logical connection with Manoah's knowledge about angels: they fly, whereas human beings do not. Manoah is caught up in an ontological quest concerning whether or not someone who looks like a man can be an angel. He refuses to believe oral report, he rejects eye-witness evidence, and he turns to symbolic, ritual gestures. The angel only convinces him by displaying the properties of angelic beings.

Samson's annunciation is marked by his father's reluctance to trust appearances and words. Gaps between appearance, words and facts mark Samson's life. The hero's strength remains superficial. When the fallen hero is shorn, it is as if his hair had been no more than clothing: 'Il se trovat esnué de vertu / E de la force dunt il ert einz vestu' (He found himself stripped of the strength and of the bodily power with which he had been dressed) (ll.5140-41). Samson's actions are hardly ever ascribed to his divine mission. This Samson is not so much a strong man as a man who happens to be strong as long as he has hair. We are returned to the problems posed by his annunciation. An angel might be no more than a man in disguise, or (worse) either a lover or a fool. A hero defined only by his hair might well be no hero at all. He might also be either a lover or a fool – or both.

Samson's failed marriage to a woman of Timnah foregrounds this problem. The contrast between 'knowing' and 'seeing' plays a crucial role:

A l'enveiuse survint une meschine

Od ses compaignes e od ses veisines.

Samson esgarda mult la damoisele,

Si vit q'ele esteit a demesure bele:

Il la coveitez, si l'aimez mult de quer,

Prendre la volt a femme e a muiller. (ms. E, ll. 4644-49)

(On the town's outskirts there came a girl with her women companions and neighbours.

Samson gazed at the damsel, he saw that she was lovely beyond measure. He coveted her, indeed he loved her with all his heart. He wanted to take her as woman and wife.)

The range of vocabulary establishes a courtly Samson. The simple *meschine* (girl) becomes a *damoisele* as Samson gazes at her. His perception of her is that she is immoderately beautiful (*a demesure*). His emotion is heartfelt love; his aim is to marry her. Samson's love is derived from sight, and his gaze is courtly. However, there are a number of inconsistencies in that love, and they are expressed through his repeated failures to speak. When Samson sets off with his parents to open the marriage negotiations for the woman of Timnah, he kills a lion in secret, as if on a whim. The *Poème* omits divine inspiration:

A ço qu'il passent les pleines e les boscages,

De la forest vint un leun sauvage,

Vers els se tret, ferement fet semblant

Qu'il seit venu pur devorer l'enfant.

Samson l'esgarde, si se tret arere

Fors del chemin qu'il ne voist sun père.

Entre ses poinz occist le leun,

Trestut sanz arme e sanz compaignun,

Puis s'en tornat corant tantost cum il pot

Tresqu'a sun pere, mes ne li dit un mot. (ms. E, ll.4676-4685)

(As they crossed the plains and the woodlands, there came a savage lion from the forest. It headed in their direction, it acted fiercely as if it had come to eat the boy. Samson looked at it, he drew back away from the path so his father would not see him. He killed the lion with his fists, with no weapons and unaccompanied. Then he ran back to his father as fast as he could, but he did not say a word.)

He tears the lion ‘as he would have torn a kid in pieces’, echoing Manoah’s burned sacrifice of a kid on the orders of the angel (Judges 14: 6). Samson kills the lion because he interprets its *semblant* (appearance) as a sign that it intends to devour him. He acts alone, ‘sanz compaignun’ (with no comrade), on the strength of what his eyes saw and his mind concluded about the lion. This echoes the moment when he fell in love first sight with the

woman. The lion does not actually attack the hero. It only gives the *semblance* that it intends to eat him. Has Samson made the right decision on the basis of what he has seen? He avoids being seen by Manoah (line 4681). The *Poème*'s stress on his deliberately leaving the path that he shares with his parents is loaded, as straying from the path is what sinners do, especially those who are seduced (*subducere* is the etymology of seduction).³¹ The family are travelling to Timnah because Samson has already strayed from his father's path by deciding to marry a pagan woman. The mother is omitted in this scene in the *Poème*, making the key element Samson's relationship with his father. Here, Samson 'l'enfant' is not protecting his parents. Rather, he is replicating his betrayal of Manoah's values, this time in secret.

His secrecy is important also when he returns to find the lion's carcass (Judges 14: 8). The narrator insists on this feature: 'Cele part se tret tut sul, si que nel sout/ Pere ne mere ne parent qu'il out' (He went there alone, so that no one would know about it, neither his father, nor his mother, nor any relative of his) (ll.4716-17). Again, there is no explanation for his secrecy. He gives the honey to his father, his relatives and his bride (the bride receives no honey in the Vulgate, but she is the sole recipient of three honeycombs in Josephus).³²

Samson i mangat, si fist sun pere,
 E une partie dona il a sa mere,
 E del plus bel dona il a s'amie,
 Si li portat od altre druerie. (ms. E, ll.4724-27)

(Samson ate some of it, so did his father. He gave part of it to his mother, and he gave some of the best part to his *amie*, he carried it to her with other *druerie*.)

The sense is that he brought her the honey along with other tokens of his courtly lover's relationship with her as *dru* to her *amie*. The honey becomes a love token for his new wife, but its significance for his father must be of a different sort. Since the marriage seals Samson's successful campaign to break with his father's values, this is a complicated gift for him to bring. We know that Manoah prefers information to be clearly supported by facts, and here he receives and eats a gift of honey with no explanation. Unbeknownst to him the gift carries withheld information of some import.

The lion and the honey come to play a destructive factor in this new family unit. The need for secrecy only acquires a meaning once the lion and honey are turned into the ingredients of a riddle that Samson uses against the Philistines. The *Poème* provides a new version of the riddle scene. In the Vulgate, Samson offers a feast for the wedding and thirty Philistine men are appointed to be his companions. He sets them a riddle (Judges 14: 11-12). In the *Poème*, the stress is on their unwilling presence:

Li Filisteu aveient ja grant pour

Qu'il ne destruie ne toille lur honur,

Ils unt grant creme que Samson nes ocie

Einz que les noces seient del tot finie. (ms. E, ll.4742-45)

(The Philistines were very frightened that he might destroy or take their lands. they were very afraid that Samson might kill them before the end of the wedding feast.)

Thirty men are appointed to keep an eye on Samson ‘Pur lui garder qu’il nes estotie’ (to guard him so he might not make fools of them)(line 4749). The detail is taken from Josephus and expanded.³³ Samson does not show his suspicions (a return to *semblant*): ‘Samson entent mult bien la felonie/ Ne fet semblant, kar il nes doute mie’ (Samson understands the treachery very well, but he makes no show of it, because he is not afraid of them at all) (ll.4750-51). Samson’s riddle is a challenge to battle, not a game. Nor is it called *engin*. The *devinaille* itself is not the same as in the Vulgate, ‘de comedente exivit cibus et de forte est egressa dulcedo’, ‘Out of the eater came forth meat,/ And out of the strong came forth sweetness.’ (Douay-Rheims, Judges 14: 14):

Viande eissi de li que tut devore

E li durs fist de dulçur engendrure. (ms. E, ll.4761-62)

(Meat came from he who devours everything, and the hard one had issue of sweetness.)

The meat/food (*viande* also means ‘food’) issues from a ravenous masculine third person object (he), and the fertile ‘li durs’ refers to a hard thing or man, rather than to a strong man. Manoah has eaten honey a few lines earlier. The lion’s tough bones are the parent of the honey. Once more, the *Poème*’s version cunningly stresses parent-child relationships and specifically Samson’s relationship with his father.

Despite its alteration of the riddle, the *Poème* omits the important answer (a riddle in itself) that is offered to him by the Philistines, and omits Samson’s enraged counter-riddle

(Judges 14: 18). The focus is on Samson's emotional relationship with his wife. Although the *Poème* preserves the Philistines' death threats against her and her father, the woman's attempts to persuade Samson to tell her the key of the riddle are described as *engin*: 'En ceste maniere l'enginnat sa muiller' (In this way, his wife tricked him)(line 4797). She is no longer his *amie*, now that she is working to undermine Samson's secrets. She pretends to faint all the better to deceive him ('E fet tel dol cum ele volsist pasmer/ Pur sun barun deceivre e enginner', ll.4792-93). Samson's reaction to the Philistines solving the riddle is narrated in terms of his fury about her *engin*:

Quant ot, dunc sout il ben de fi

Que par l'engin sa femme fu il trai.

Par maltalant parti il de sa amie (ll. 4810-12).

(When he heard it, he knew for sure that he had been betrayed by his wife's *engin*. Angrily, he left his *amie*.)

The focus is on the wife's trickery of a strong, fatally silent man. Samson is depicted in this episode as the victim of *engin*. He may be able to maintain silence and *semblant*, but ingenuity lies in the hands of the Philistines.

The narrative retains this thread at Judges 16, when Samson decides to tell Delilah the secret of his strength. The narrator urges him to avoid the snares posed by women and to remain true to his family, father and religion. He is echoing Manoah's words when Samson

announces that he loves the woman of Timnah. This is unusual for the *Poème*'s narrator, whose voice is sometimes heard, but never explicitly aligned with a character:

Samson se cele, Dalida l'angoisse:

Dur est li quers que feme ne desfroisse.

A deu! Samson, ne vos lessez trahir!

Si tu descovres, tei estovera morir,

Ne vus lessez par femme desheriter

De la grant force dunt vus estes si fer,

Ne suffrez que par femme seez enginné

De la grant force que deu vus ad done. (ll.5094-5101)

(Samson stays silent, Delilah torments him. It is a hard heart that a woman cannot shatter. For God's sake, Samson, do not let yourself be betrayed! If you uncover [your secret], you will be killed. Do not allow a woman to dispossess you of the great strength of which you are so proud. Do not endure to be tricked by a woman out of the great strength that God gave you.)

This identification of narrator and Manoah foregrounds Samson's filial rebellion. It is all a bit too late: the hero has never rejected women, and he has rebelled several times against his father, family and religion. Delilah's relationship with Samson reprises the failed marriage at Timnah and his dangerous relationship with the woman in Gaza. The terms of engagement between the two opponents consist of Samson's desire to remain silent and Delilah's

determination to make him speak the truth. The narrator intervenes as a third party, and joins in the dramatic dialogue with exclamations of his own about Adam (traditionally the victim of woman in the shape of Eve) and Joseph (ll.5110-13). This narrator has lost control of his protagonist, as if he were now a helpless eye-witness.

The narrator's stress on hair and on unveiling draws further attention to *semblance*. The relationship with Delilah is a thing of appearances alone, marked by her false seeming and by his *folie*. The two manuscript traditions of the *Poème* differ slightly in their treatment of Delilah's actions. In MS E, Delilah drives Samson mad with 'false love' ('de fals amur l'afole', line 5021). Instead, in MS B her seductiveness is only skin-deep and she maddens him with *semblant* ('par fals semblant l'afole', line 5021). Delilah in MS E is identified with a whore, in line with exegetical tradition: 'Ele se cuntint come femme de male vie' (She behaved like a woman of immoral life, line 5017). Delilah in MS B is more concerned with self-control, 'Ele se content cum femme qui ne s'ublie' (She behaved like a woman who does not forget herself, line 5017). Thus the Delilah in MS E is both lustful and deceitful, whereas in B she is primarily a deceiver. Ultimately, in both versions the narrator comments that Samson cannot break out of a woman's cunning, 'L'engin de femme l'ad pris en mal laçun' (a woman's wiles have caught him in a bad noose)(line 5115).

The *Poème* embraces the embellishing potential of verse and the generic filter of courtly romance to create a vivid, dramatic version of sacred history. The narrative is transformed through a series of subtle omissions, additions and developments. The narrator's anguished intervention (above) is reminiscent of a *planctus* (lament) for Samson attributed to Peter Abelard (1079-1142). As the *Poème* makes an explicit reference to Abelard's *planctus* for Jephthah's daughter, it is likely that this is no accidental resemblance:

Icest est la femme, ne vos mentirai pas,

Dunt li cleric chantent *Ad festas choreas*.

Deus! Quel dol de demoisele,

Qui tant par fu vaillante sage e bele. (ll.4518-23).³⁴

(This is the woman, I tell you no lie, about whom clerics sing *Ad festam choreas*. God! What grief for a young lady, who was so brave, wise and lovely.)

The *planctus* of Israel for Samson (*Abissus vere multa*) later inspired a lyric drama, *Samson dux fortissime* (c.1250). Both pieces invite compassion as well as debate in their respective audiences. Despite being songs composed in Latin and preserved for the most part in monastic environments, they are neither allegorical nor Christological works. Rather, their approach is emotional, affective, and compassionate.

The *Poème*'s Samson is a man bound by appearances who lacks insight into his duties and his emotions. His youthful exploits as 'l'enfant' earn him the epithet 'Samson le fort' (the strong man)(ll. 4702, 4712). When the Philistines ask for him to be surrendered to them, they ask first for 'Samson le meschin' (the youth)(line 4775), but after his destructive acts, they ask for 'Samson li duc' (the military leader)(line 4863). The epithet marks the highest point of Samson's career. As he experiences reversals of Fortune, his name alters once more. He dies as a fierce warrior: 'Trestoz sunt mort, si est Samson li fers' (They are all dead, and so is Samson the fierce man) (line 5205). This section argues that the Old French 'Samson li duc' influences the Latin *Samson, dux fortissime*, via the *planctus*.

Each of Abelard's six *planctus* depicts the emotional crisis of a figure of the Old Testament. The cycle survives without attribution in one thirteenth-century manuscript (BAV MS Reg. Lat. 288). The third in the cycle is the lament for the daughter of Jephthah, cited

above. *Dolorum solatium*, the lament of David for Saul and Jonathan, survives in two copies in isolation from the group, including a cathedral troper. It was probably the easiest piece to reconcile with liturgy, because it connects the grieving David with the penitent David of the Psalms.³⁵ Abelard's considerable lyric production includes a collection of hymns and sequences for the nuns of the Paraclete.³⁶

Samson, Hercules, Oedipus and other figures of biblical and classical legend were the objects of sung monologues in Latin. Hercules's labours and suffering in love are described in a long poem preserved in several copies including the *Carmina Burana* (Germany), and a poor-quality English copy, attributed to the Archpoet and to Peter of Blois.³⁷ These songs' wide dissemination underscores the fact that they formed part of a soundscape that is now only known through fragments. Their presence in monastic song collections points to Gillingham's conception of 'a kind of blended morality' that permitted monasteries to produce (not just tolerate) non-sacred material, and secular audiences to engage creatively with sacred songs.³⁸ The two pieces concerning Samson are associated with religious houses of the geographical cluster in this study: a strong musical culture at Augustinian Llanthony II and the Victorine house at Wigmore, plus the copies of *Samson, dux fortissime* at Benedictine Reading Abbey and Cistercian Buildwas.³⁹ By contrast, the *Planctus Oedipi* may be a school resource, as it survives in seven copies of Statius's *Thebaid* and in a later compilation of Seneca's tragedies.⁴⁰

Emotional impact could occur when performing the Psalms in the persona of King David as both hero and penitent.⁴¹ Bennett suggests that in a psalter, the life of David 'resembles a medieval romance of a hero whose triumphs and travails marked his career'.⁴² The Psalter could be sung outside religious frames, in contexts that were institutional, public, legal and intimate.⁴³ Historical and mythical figures expressing their suffering and doubts through song can be seen as a reflection of the psalter's penitential voice. The poems were

more than rhetorical exercises, as they could give voice to ideas that were incompatible with theological and legal norms.⁴⁴ The monologue from Hell of Oedipus, entitled the *Planctus Oedipi*, allowed the speaker to express such thoughts as 'I wish I could be turned to nothingness' (line 52).⁴⁵ Samson is blind in the *planctus* and *Samson, dux fortissime* : he hears but cannot see his interlocutors. This consideration raises the problematic moral and judicial status of Samson's blinding. There was a real-life aspect to details such as the blinded man with a shaven head, led by a boy.⁴⁶ Blinding sometimes marked a prisoner of war or a common criminal.⁴⁷ Blindness feeds into the oscillation between belonging and marginality that characterises so much of this story's interpretative tradition.

The *Poème* describes a *planctus* that is performed by religious men (*clercs*) to an audience that includes the laity, and it is clear that a dramatic lament of this kind could straddle the lay - secular divide to powerful effect. Unlike his hymns, Abelard's *planctus* do not slot easily into liturgy, but Abelard's circle contributed to the development of liturgical drama in the twelfth century.⁴⁸ Buckley and Wulstan have debated the resemblance between the *planctus* for Jephthah's daughter and a dance-song entitled the 'Lais des Puceles' ('Lai of the girls').⁴⁹ Wulstan notes Abelard had allegedly composed vernacular songs, and evokes Jephthah's daughter in his hymns.⁵⁰ Likewise, the *Poème* devotes forty-seven lines to David's lament for Jonathan (ll. 8783-8830). Nobel attributes this speech to the *chanson de geste* but surely Abelard's *Dolorum solarium* cannot be far away.⁵¹ Another possible dialogue is with Jewish poetry, though this can only be suggested, as the only surviving example is the much later Judeo-French 'Troyes Elegy' (after 1288), which also draws on the *chanson de geste* and alludes to dance-song or *carole*.⁵² The Victorine presence in the geographical cluster of the 'Hereford Sculpture School' makes the influence of the Parisian schools plausible for the Anglo-Norman *Poème*'s audience.

The story of Jephthah comes immediately before that of Samson (Judges 12-13). The first narrative concerns a father's vow that is kept although it should be broken once he realises that his child will suffer. The other focuses on the fragility of a vow that is imposed on a child by his parents before he is even conceived. If the *Poème*'s author knew the *planctus* of Jephthah's daughter, it is likely that he also knew the *planctus* of Samson.

Dronke calls the *planctus* of Israel for Samson 'the strangest of the six' in the cycle.⁵³ Initially, the collective male voice of Israel mourns for Samson and meditates on the unfathomable nature of God's judgement. It is presented as an observation, not a complaint:

Abissus vere multa
 iuditia, deus, tua,
 eo plus formidanda
 quo magis sunt occulta
 et quo plus est ad illa
 quelibet vis infirma! (Part I, st. 1a)

(Truly a great abyss are your judgements, God, to be feared the more, the more they are mysteries, the more that, faced with them, all other strengths are weak!)⁵⁴

From the outset, the poem explores the mystery of seeing a man in torment and seeking to know what the divine purpose is in that punishment. Its tenor is first fear of the unknowable, and second, the loss of strength that is induced by that fear. Israel is an eye-witness to the

‘strongest of men’, whose birth was heralded by an angel, now fallen, humiliated, in pain and betrayed in love. He has been flung from the ‘games’ and ‘sport’ of war into the harsh labour of captivity, reduced to the level of a beast of burden (Part I, stanzas 1b-3b). The audience are invited to share in the compassion of the narrator: ‘cuius cor vel saxeum/ non flet sic perditum?’ (whose hard is so like stone/ it will not weep that thus he fell?)(Part I, st. 1b). This reflection switches abruptly into a diatribe against Delilah (st. 3c) :

Quid tu, Dalida,
 quid ad hec dicis, impia,
 que fecisti?
 quenam munera
 per tanta tibi scelera
 conquisisti?
 Nulli gratia
 per longa manet tempora
 proditori.

(What do you say, Dalila, what do you say, impious one, to what you have done? What kind of recompense for such deeds of shame did you seek to win? To none is favour shown for long, if she’s a traitor.)⁵⁵

His hair ‘reborn’, his strength restored, Samson finally brings down the pillars. What follows is not a triumphant hymn but an attack on ‘Woman’ handing every man the cup of Death (‘et mortis poculum / propinat omnibus’, Part II, st.2b).⁵⁶ The poem’s closing words warn men against the company of women (Part II, st. 3c). Part II of the *planctus* strips away typology and allegory in order to depict Samson as the victim of the war between the sexes. Dronke traces the poem’s ‘incongruous’ misogyny to the Samson of the schools.⁵⁷ It also appears in the narrator’s intervention in the *Poème* (cited above, ll.5094-5101).

Dronke reconciles the two parts of the poem by tracing patterns of repetition and mirroring between the secularized ‘man of sorrows’ of Part I and the unnamed Eve of Part II.⁵⁸ Dronke suggests that the invective is a knowing joke about misogyny, but Ruys, Orlandi and Flynn have noted serious versions of similar sentiments in Abelard’s other writings.⁵⁹ The *planctus* is of course not written in the voice of Abelard but in that of two fictional speakers : ‘Israel’ (a collective masculine voice) and Samson, who has subjective reasons for disliking women. In the *planctus* cycle, it follows a lament by a collective feminine voice (the daughters of Israel) for a woman who has been sacrificed to her father’s pride. There are contrasts between the poems of that cycle as much as within this song.

These contrasts chime with Dronke’s second suggestion, that the incongruous misogyny invites its audience to think critically. If Samson’s death is part of the divine plan, then there are no grounds for attacking Delilah, as she is merely its agent. The poem provokes reflection on Samson’s predicament without proposing a typological or allegorical metanarrative.⁶⁰ The fractured structure and internal contradictions of the Samson *planctus* signal that Abelard is using his own dialectical method as a springboard for reflection. The text is full of contradictions because it opens up an intellectual exercise.⁶¹

In her study of dialectic, Brown highlights the contradictory pairing ‘both-and’. Her suggestion has been developed by Kay and by Newman in relation to Old French literature.⁶² Samson is ‘both’ a hero ‘and’ a fool. ‘Both’ victor ‘and’ victim, his predicted victory against the Philistines comes at the cost of his dignity and his life. His love for women ‘both’ draws him into social life ‘and’ causes him to attack cities and social rituals such as weddings and feasts. This *planctus* brings together the clashing interpretations of Judges 13-16 and it does so in a way that highlights their inconsistencies.

In a syllogism, Delilah is a woman and she betrays Samson, but it does not follow that all women will betray all men. Should Samson be interpreted as the victim of one woman, of Woman, or of himself? As the poem’s incipit invites us to ponder, there are no reasons for seeing Samson’s terrible fate in terms of divine punishment. If the speaker is Israel (only the *planctus*’s title identifies the speaker), then that speaker knows that Samson’s preordained mission is to liberate Israel from the Philistines. Is the diatribe against women to be read as part of the *planctus*’s narrative, or as an attempt to blame the natural order of things (according to which men and women have always been in conflict) for the failure of the divine plan? Or does an idea emerge that women’s power will always be at odds with masculine authority? In Part II, the overblown allegory of ‘Woman’ as agent of ‘Death’ cannot conceal Delilah’s role as the agent of contradiction, turning the divine plan into an incomprehensible abyss.⁶³

The *planctus* opens as a riddle and it ends without an answer, or rather with an overstated non-answer. This is in keeping with Kay’s argument about literary riddles as modes of reflecting on the most threatening ideas, those that propose that the divine plan might not exist at all.⁶⁴ Other Latin *planctus* of the twelfth century tread similar ground. Oedipus describes himself as a series of paradoxes and incompatible pairings (husband and son, father and brother). He invites compassion while stressing that he is a criminal. Oedipus

is ‘both’ victim and villain, ‘and’ he embodies a divine punishment that he cannot fathom.⁶⁵

The reader is able to measure Oedipus’s clashing statements against the narrative itself, because the poem was preserved in copies of Statius’s *Thebaid*. Likewise, those who understood the *planctus* of Samson could read Judges 13-16 for themselves.

The same can be said about *Samson, dux fortissime*, a lyric drama based on the Samson *planctus* that blends vernacular and religious musical and poetic genres.⁶⁶ Its surviving copies are from monastic houses and no later than c.1240. Two are from German-speaking regions, notably the Benedictine Abbey of Weingarten, near Ravensburg, and one is from a Dominican house in Sicily. It was owned at Reading Abbey (British Library Harley MS 978), and Christchurch Priory, Canterbury (lost).⁶⁷ A ten-line fragment (ll.1-10) was copied in the late thirteenth century into a miscellany of schoolroom texts and sermons at the Cistercian abbey of Buildwas, Shropshire (Lambeth Palace Library ms. 456, f.1a).⁶⁸

Reading Abbey’s musical repertoire was extensive, as is known from Harley 978 as well as from records of other music books, and it is agreed to reveal the importance of European networks to the development and diffusion of music.⁶⁹ The musical notation of *Samson, dux fortissime* was enhanced by a later hand, evidently for performance. *Samson, dux fortissime* opens a collection of Marian sequences. Like them, it is modelled on the secular *lai lyrique* and the *estampie*. The Northern French *lai lyrique* is very similar to the German *Leich*, meaning that the case for composition in German-speaking regions is as strong as French-speaking regions.⁷⁰ The compilation also features goliardic poems, including the *Apocalypsis Goliae* (ff.75-78) and the *Archpoet’s Confession* (ff.78-78v).⁷¹

Weingarten Abbey was a Welf foundation that became an imperial abbey in 1274. In terms of the Samson story, both tablemen and mosaic pavements depicting Samson are attested in the Rhineland city of Cologne (see chapter 2). Between the late twelfth century and the early thirteenth century, Cologne merchants were awarded exceptional privileges in

London by the Plantagenet kings, who were keen to build up an anti-French alliance with the Welf rulers.⁷² While not discounting the Benedictine musical network, there remains a strong likelihood of a semi-dramatic song like *Samson, dux fortissime* circulating between friendly Welf and Plantagenet secular and ecclesiastical retinues. It may also be useful to adduce the diffusion in Harley 978 of the work of the Archpoet, who had composed his poems for the Archbishop of Cologne, Rainald of Dassel.⁷³

Samson, dux fortissime is composed for three protagonists. Modern editors have assigned the anachronistic label of ‘Chorus’ to the first, who is an onlooker. The second speaker is Samson. A third voice intervenes only twice, identified as that of Delilah (the Stuttgart/Weingarten manuscript provides a rubric for this role, ‘*Dalida dixit*’).⁷⁴ The piece echoes Abelard’s *planctus* through its use of a collective eye-witness, as well as its focus on Judges 16 and the ‘Samson of sorrows’ figure identified by Dronke.⁷⁵ Handschin suggested that the piece has a strongly emotive, non-religious character: ‘the celebration of the feat of a hero’.⁷⁶ Bourgain suggests instead that this piece depicts Samson’s attempt to recover some glory from his humiliation by a woman.⁷⁷ Multiple interpretations are also evidence of the song’s hybrid positioning between secular and religious genres. A bystander’s compassion for Samson’s emotional and physical downfall echoes the horrified comments of the *Poème*’s narrator and of Israel in Abelard’s *planctus*. For Stevens, the piece offers a very ‘medieval’ interpretation, ‘both strongly antifeminist and strongly theological in its glorification of the hero.’⁷⁸

Bourgain suggests that the opening questions directed to Samson by the Chorus are unsympathetic.⁷⁹ The humiliation visited on Samson by the Chorus’s questions positions the audience as witnesses to a strong man’s downfall. He is blind, and these voices are reaching him in the dark:

Samson, dux fortissime,
 victor potentissime,
 quid facis in carcere,
 victor omnium ?
 quis te vi vult vincere,
 vel per sompnium?
 o victor omnium, victus es,
 o captor principium, captus es,
 o raptor civium, raptus es. (ed. Hunt, ll.1-9)

(Samson, strongest of leaders, most powerful of victors, what are you doing in prison, defeater of all? Whoever could have overcome you, even in your sleep? Oh defeater of all, you have been defeated! Oh capturer of princes, you have been captured! Oh abductor of men, you have been abducted!)

The Chorus suggests that Samson's downfall was due to 'fraus mulieris' (line 15) (a woman's deceit) before it describes his reduction to an object of mockery: 'Your eyes plucked out, you are blind and you have been made a laughing-stock for your enemies. Your hair shaved off now, you are bald. If it grows back, you will be saved!' (ll.16-19). Samson lists his achievements and regrets that they were all undertaken only for a young woman ('propter te, iuvencula', line 28). His downfall came when he fell in love with Delilah, an appetising woman in body, a vixen in mind (ll. 68-9). His description of Delilah handing him a cup of wine with

a kiss (ll.70-3), is followed by Delilah's own voice, as she asks Samson for the source of his strength (ll.75-82). Delilah's handing the cup dramatizes Abelard's *planctus*, in which it is 'Woman' that hands the cup (of Death) to 'Man'.

Delilah asks Samson the same question four times in the biblical text, but in the song, she only sings her questions once. Samson deplores his fate; he describes himself as a drunkard seduced by a harlot into sleeping with his head in her lap (ll.100-03). Delilah sings again, this time in triumph:

i et o, i et o,

hostem victim teneo!

i et o, i et o,

calvatum derideo! (ll. 110-13)

(Hurrah, hurrah, I have captured your enemy! Hurrah, hurrah, I am laughing at him, shaven!)

The stress placed on Samson's captors and Delilah's laughter echoes the mocking tone of the Chorus's opening series of questions and exclamations. The audience are placed at the outset among the hero's tormentors from many nations ('Amorites, Canaanites, Jebusites... Idumeans, Gergesenes, Pharezites' ll.114-17). The audience of this piece is invited more explicitly and more threateningly into the story than in the *planctus*. Compassion for the fallen hero is not explained away by commonplace misogyny. Instead, Delilah speaks in her own voice, and she expresses the challenge to masculine and divine authority that she represents.

Given the conventional exegetical association between Judges 16 and Christ's Passion, it is easy to view *Samson, dux fortissime* in typological terms. Details such as

Samson's blinding were paired with the 'Man of Sorrows' in the *Pictor in carmine*.⁸⁰

However, there is no typological or Christological material in this drama. Instead, it focuses on the extrabiblical tradition of Samson and Delilah, with suicide the logical outcome of the hero's emotional distress. Ultimately, this Latin, sung drama stages a conflict between human protagonists that invites its audience to respond with empathy as well as compassion. The fact that its audience was almost certainly monastic and enclosed adds to the power of this claustrophobic drama. Men who were tonsured and celibate were implicated in the fate of a shaven man, doomed by his love.

The Samson *planctus* and *Samson, dux fortissime* indicate the dynamic reception and transmission of a familiar story in a literate, musical context. The *Poème* drew on musical performances of such pieces as well as on courtly romance to create a vivid literary treatment of its subject-matter. The generic classifications of various lyric genres as 'high' and 'low' style, 'courtly' and 'popular' are now questioned, as can be seen in the disputed relationship between a *planctus* and the *Lai des Pucelles*.⁸¹ The examples of the *Planctus Oedipi* implies that the schools offered as much of a location for such complex emotional narratives as the secular court or the cloister. This is an example of the multi-layered ways in which biblical material moved into the vernacular and into the literary sphere. The next chapter continues this enquiry, turning to the fourteenth century and to the relationship between words and images.

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NOTES

¹ Parts of this chapter are reproduced with permission from “Giving Voice to Samson and Delilah: Troubadour and Monastic Songs of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries”, in *Performing Medieval Text*, ed. Ardis Butterfield, Pauline Souleau and Henry Hope (Oxford: MHRA – Legenda, 2017), 39-52.

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