Desolation's Descendants: Feminism, Politics, and Modern Reimaginings of "The Rape of Tamar"

Aubrey C. Geyer
Advisor: Dr. Stephen Cushman

BA, University of Virginia, 2017

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia
May, 2018

Introduction: Feminism and the Bible

The Bible has generally been relegated to the religious and to the scholars of religion. While a line of scholarship reading "the Bible as literature" occupies its own niche, literary scholars tend to encounter the book as context for an allusion in later works. Meanwhile, the religious political right uses the Bible as a code for authority in popular discourse, legitimizing through its authority a cultural institution of Christianity inextricably bound up in principles of misogyny, racism, and homophobia packaged as "traditional values." When this association is the only context for the Bible, it can easily color others' perception of the book, even for scholars who assert the value of direct interaction with a text. Thus the work of another group of interpreters to reframe the conversation surrounding parts of the Bible[1] has immense value for literary scholars, as well as the public conversation; it is my intention to bring their perspective to bear on certain texts of the modern western tradition which explicitly refer to the Bible, using the work of a Jewish feminist biblical criticism to reframe analysis of these works and prompt new lines of investigation and comparison. Athalya Brenner, working from a cultural framework which values the Hebrew Bible but also encourages a discourse of challenge and discussion, brings that perspective to her work; thus, she and the tradition of criticism she represents are particularly capable of balancing a sense of the cultural value of the Bible with an intense scrutiny of its flaws. By putting her work in conversation with authors in modern western literature, I find that creative readers have often identified and responded to the same "pressure points" which feminist criticism challenges and social conservatives embrace.

---

[1] For a discussion of the various "parts of the Bible" and canons constructed from it, see "The Canons of the Bible" in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, 4th ed.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pages 2185-2191. Except where otherwise specified this is the edition I use for my biblical source material.

By using literary works that appropriate the same specific incident in the Hebrew Bible, I strengthen this conversation with an illuminating variety of strategies for adaptation, critique, and transformation. The incident I place at the center of my study is from the historical books of the Hebrew Bible, among the books of the prophets of "Nevi'im," called Second Samuel in most English translations: "The Rape of Tamar." The thirteenth chapter of Second Samuel, this narrative tells of the eldest son of King David of Israel, Amnon, raping his half-sister Tamar. David refuses to punish his eldest and favorite son, so another of his sons, Absalom,[2] steps in to provide for her. Though Tamar vanishes from the narrative, the succession story continues, as Absalom later murders Amnon and then rebels (unsuccessfully) against his father, which explains in part why David's throne would pass to a much younger son, Solomon. Its position in the succession narrative and its treatment of the female subject provokes much discussion amidst feminist scholars, while the themes of incest, rape, and familial strife have proved fascinating for western authors. I rely on Athalya Brenner's innovative 2017 book *I Am: Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories* to provide the critical framework for my study. Once this perspective is established, I then analyze each in turn of three authors who have, in the twentieth century, not only retold Tamar's story but reset the action of the narrative in their own geopolitical contexts, while consciously acknowledging the progenitor text. Robinson Jeffers, in California, published the long narrative poem "Tamar" in 1922, beginning his successful career as a poet. William Faulkner, already established in the American south, published his modernist novel *Absalom, Absalom!* in 1936. The Irish short story and novel writer Margaret Barrington is too little known

[2] Convention makes Absalom Tamar's full sister, though her mother is not specified either as the same as his or otherwise. The source for this tradition is probably a combination of 2 Samuel 13:1, "Absalom the son of David had a lovely sister, whose name *was* Tamar; and Amnon the son of David loved her," which suggests that Absalom was somehow more fully Tamar's brother than Amnon, in combination with the lengths to which Absalom goes on her behalf.

for the precise date of her short story "David's Daughter, Tamar" to remain accessible, but it must have occurred sometime after she started publishing in 1921 and before it was republished in a posthumous collection in 1982.

Trends arise over the course of the analysis, showing certain points of tension in the biblical narrative that trouble or inspire its literary inheritors, critical and creative both. The central flaw that feminist critics identify in the biblical story is that its creators use Tamar not as a narrative subject but as a thematic object to reveal masculine and national conflicts. This marginalizes the woman in her own life and her own personal tragedy, resulting in an abrupt "ending" wherein Tamar "remained desolate in her brother Absalom's house" (2 Samuel 13:20). This reflects a larger interest in political themes over the particular reality of a female character; each of these literary authors makes their work a clear and critical reflection on their contemporary context, and so must either accept or remedy the narrative exploitation of the biblical female subject. The variety and manner of these reflections yields a fascinating comparative framework amidst the works, leading to an overarching question for feminist literary studies: at what point is the author reinforcing rather than critiquing a pattern by writing it? Can an author be held responsible for replicating the flaws of the material they inherit?

Athalya Brenner: Recovering Tamar

Athalya Brenner is a Jewish feminist biblical scholar of significant accomplishments, but I am focusing here on a text in which she challenges the limits of critical genres and undertakes a creative project bearing all the weight of her academic expertise. *I Am: Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories* is a valuable literary experiment, but it is convenient too as an introduction to the feminist insights into "The Rape of Tamar" which I intend to carry onwards in my later critical assessments. Brenner uses the literary device of pseudo-autobiography to assert the

suspiciously absent subjectivity of women in biblical narrative. She employs a frame narrative of great ingenuity to further her discussion: her "characters" exist simultaneously as biblical women theoretically surviving into the present and as creative vehicles for Brenner's discontents and critical perspective. In this way she reflects both on the Bible and on interpretive traditions of it. I remain reserved on the efficacy of this blending, but so does Brenner herself: she refuses to call it fiction, saying instead it is "a median form, something a little different in style, a hybrid between academic content and non-academic—almost fictional, certainly bastard—style" (Brenner, XII).[3] She is acutely self-conscious of the work's position partway between academic and literary forms, having undertaken it precisely for that experimental purpose; in her own preface she disclaims the literary status of her work: "'My training,'" she recalls saying, "'is academic. I can't write fiction.' And of course, as this book amply shows, this is true" (XII).

While self-conscious of the potential flaws of her project, there is nothing diffident about Brenner's title, *I Am*. In addition to defying the academic fiction of disclaiming subjectivity, she links her female subjects with the God of Israel, who identifies when asked with the tetragrammaton, translated to English as "I Am who I Am" (Exodus 3:14). This is deliberately high company, with which she elevates the many women in the Hebrew Bible marginalized into narrative objects, portrayed as incidental, used to illuminate male subjects, and quickly dismissed. This is, of course, one of the fundamental objections brought against the story of Tamar, though even then the princess is perhaps uniquely privileged in that the text actually ascribes direct speech to her. In Brenner's own words, this is the premise of her project:

> I've chosen to tell the partly known, yet rarely complete biographies of biblical female persons who do not die in the text—that is, no mention is made of their

[3] After first citing the primary text for a given section, I will refer to it solely by page number throughout that section.

> death and burial, hence they have been made immortal by the same text that doesn't pay them the tribute of decently and naturally disposing of them. … In order to make those "women" contemporaneous and accessible to each other, I bring them together, so to speak, into one location at one time (roughly the present), so that they can tell their stories—imagined yet deeply rooted in the biblical text as well as in selectively chosen chapters of canonical and reception history—to each other. (XIII-XIV)

What Brenner sees as flawed and exploitative in the Hebrew Bible is its tendency to refer to female characters only while they serve a narrative purpose, not regarding them as central enough to deserve closure in their own right. Each chapter of *I Am* except the first and last is a first-person "presentation" by its subject or subjects; the first is a narrative of the setting by the character "the convener," the last, a discussion by the characters of their various thematic groupings. Each speaker tends to foreground a particular critical or interpretive grievance while articulating the story of her life insofar as biblical authority has ascribed it; Brenner makes little effort to cover her own authorial voice with robust literary personalities. She writes skillfully but refrains from adding narrative elements of her own invention except in those first and final chapters.

Tamar's chapter in Brenner's text is shared with her ancestress, the other "Tamar."[4] Their chapter-title is "A Double Date," which foregrounds both the sexual concerns of both stories and the name shared by the two: Tamar of Genesis introduces the chapter (as many others begin) by

---

[4] Often referred to as "Tamar of Genesis 38" or "Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah" and "Tamar of 1 Samuel 13" or "Tamar, daughter of David," in Brenner's text these introduce themselves as "Tamar I and Tamar II, if you wish" (133). One of the major complaints of feminist criticism, and indeed this text, is the difficulty of referencing women without resort to masculine-contingent identifiers. A woman's name may not be given or unique in the biblical text. Unfortunately, one of the conventional methods of referencing Tamar as distinct from Tamar here merely reinforces the ubiquity of male referents: "Tamar of 2 Samuel 13" serves only to emphasize the degree to which her story is subordinated to a male-centric narrative.

revealing the meaning of their name, "date-palm." "You may assume then, and rightly, that Tamar is a name that runs in our family" (133). This familial connection is a prized connection in an almost exclusively patrilineal context: when Tamar from Genesis, as the elder and the narrative prior, relates her story, she concludes, "As a consequence of the risk I took, Ruth could marry Boaz, a descendant of my son Perez… Indeed, do remember, my name is used as a blessing—and warning—to her upon her marriage (Ruth 4:12). Without me, and without Ruth, my namesake Tamar II wouldn't have been born and wouldn't have come to grief, either" (136). Tamar the second follows; she begins by close reading her own story, presenting parallel translations of a phrase or sentence and analyzing its relevance.

Though in the preface Brenner claims no "wish to psychologize biblical female figures' inner lives" (XVII), she is clearly interested in psychological implications. For example, beyond Tamar's attributed first-person speeches from the Bible, Brenner renders Tamar's inner life prior to the rape, when she was baking and "idly wondering about the following intriguing possibilities" (139). Thus, Brenner works in a fresh subjectivity while leading into an academic question, one which she provides grounds for in her carefully spare critical apparatus, of whether David actually thought Amnon had some innocent reason for requiring his sheltered sister to personally prepare food in his own private kitchen, or just didn't care enough to question it. Added to this interior curiosity, Brenner extrapolates for Tamar shrewd insight:

> In a flash, I comprehended that the publicity of my new state, the loss of my virginity, would be a better response than concealment. … I tore my garment and went into highly visual mourning: I put ashes on my hands and my head and started wailing loudly. And I went on wailing, and screaming and tearing my hair,

> which was partly a put-on but a great release after all I'd gone through, until I came to my full brother Absalom's house. (141)

In asserting that Tamar's highly symbolic mourning is not *only* a natural outpouring of emotion, Brenner reinforces the characterization she has built up of intelligent women, culturally aware even though Brenner disclaims any intent of cultural reconstruction.

One major burden of complaint in Tamar the second's portion of the criticism is summarized towards the end of her narrative: "all my virtues do not save me from my fate… In fact, all the male kin who should have supported me and should have looked after my well-being—my father, David, Amnon, Absalom, Jonadab—betrayed me one way or the other" (142). Tamar's focus is on familial abuse. In addition to her matrilineal connection, she finds community with allusion to Dinah, another biblical rape victim, highlighting similarities and differences. Of especial importance here is the full number of male family members Tamar considers to have wronged her: not only Amnon, her rapist, nor the father who "uncritically" (142) sent her into a trap, or even Jonadab who schemed her suffering. For both herself and Dinah, Tamar claims that "In both cases the revenge advances the brother's or brothers' political, military, and territorial ambitions" (145). She accuses Absalom, often characterized as her protector, as complicit in her destruction by soliciting her silence and then exploiting her downfall. This demonstrates Brenner's overall tone for the individual chapters: her subjects have no reprieve from canonical suffering, only bitter and full recognition.

Tamar's whole speech is recrimination. In contemporary feminist biblical criticism, there are two major approaches; Esther Fuchs describes them as a sort of binary "in which recuperation and resistance feed into each other as major trends in Jewish feminist

interpretation."[5] Brenner falls on the side of resistance: Tamar voices that Absalom *might* have attempted some restoration, seeking out a husband for her, but "preferred to have me remain by his side, a permanent silent reminder of Amnon's transgression" (142). Thus, Absalom's actions are rendered self-interested rather than compassionate, predatory rather than protective.[6]

This status of desolation and the question of redress proves intriguing for many of my other authors, but for critics as well. What would recovery even look like? Did the death of her rapist offer her any consolation, or did it simply deprive her of a protector when her brother Absalom went into exile as a murderer? The biblical text offers nothing, though it does mention that Absalom had a daughter named Tamar, "a beautiful woman" (2 Samuel 14:27), in addition to three unnamed sons. Brenner takes this as oblique confirmation that Tamar had no other legacy of her own; "It is implied… that my brother Absalom had a daughter and called her Tamar after me" (142). Yet instead of reading this as any kind of restoration, Brenner's Tamar links this with her own lack of progeny, and Absalom's failure to offer even a modicum of redress. She implies that Absalom's passing her name to his daughter confirms that she herself never saw offspring, that this legacy precludes her having one of her own and confirms Absalom's interest in her remaining a symbol of bereavement rather than achieving any sort of healing. A kinder interpreter might see this legacy as confirmation of her excellence, reaffirming

---

[5] See Esther Fuchs, "Jewish Feminist Approaches to the Bible" in *Women and Judaism: New Insights and Scholarship"* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). For an example of recuperation, see the earlier work of Phyllis Trible, both her manifesto for this kind of interpretation, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation" (*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 41.1, 1973. 30-48), and her work on Tamar specifically, the chapter "Tamar: The Royal Rape of Wisdom" in *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984. 36-63). For Fuchs's own take on the Rape of Tamar, see *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

[6] Brenner does not go quite as far as some here. Another scholar, Andrew E. Hill, has suggested that based on Jonadab's recurrence potentially supporting Absalom, "Absalom and Jonadab collaborate to remove [Amnon]… while a most reprehensible allegation, it seems Tamar may have been an unwitting pawn of a devious schemer, an expendable token in the power play for the throne" ("A Jonadab Connection in the Absalom Conspiracy?" in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theology Society* 30.4, 189).

her worthiness of a namesake despite the injuries against her; not so Brenner. Others find some satisfaction in more optimistic flights of fantasy; there's an academic essay in a collection curated by Brenner herself where, after arguing for female authorship in the book of Ruth, the scholar Adrien J. Bledstein concludes:

> I suggest we think of this narrator as Tamar, the daughter of David, who could have written during the later part of David's and the early years of Solomon's reigns. She was the great-great-granddaughter of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz, and descended from the earlier Tamar of Genesis. …Experiencing and living beyond these griefs, Tamar… draws attention to the survival tactics of female companions. (Bledstein, 133)

Bledstein suggests that Tamar, without reference to the role of procreative property for which society regarded her as damaged, recovered a functional productivity and healing in her own "original" or "real" life. By contrast Brenner refuses to make such a creative leap towards healing *within* the body of her text though avowedly literary unlike Bledstein's ostensibly academic framework; Brenner presents her character within the framework of desolation so that she may protest that framework. Trauma scholar L. Juliana M. Claassens would support this approach, in fact: her chapter "Trauma and Recovery: A New Hermeneutical Framework for the Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13)" applies trauma theory to assert that the first necessity for Tamar is for her voice, fundamentally and explicitly ignored in the act of rape, to be heard again asserting the reality of what happened to her so that she can move on from its shadow. Both Brenner and Bledstein, albeit in different ways, insist on space for Tamar to recover and process through her own voice.

For Brenner does offer a hint at recovery; she is simply judicious in separating her creative work from the critical body, reserving “recovery” for the purely artistic frame. She admits from her preface that she means to work with “academic content,” unwilling to commit herself absolutely to artistic license and find things not suggested by the text. This is typical of a “resistant” reading: she emphasizes the absolute bleakness of the woman in a patriarchal landscape, in the hands of a patriarchal narrator, and destroyed by patriarchal power structures. Though she is writing “pseudo-fiction,” she is determined to explore her characters’ canonically elided suffering to the full extent allowed by the gaps in the text. Therefore, only after furiously asserting the absolute absence of restitution in the original can she offer it to her own incarnations of the characters. In the final “colloquium” chapter, Tamar reasserts the community she found with Dinah in her own chapter. Tamar claims as her own in her final, brief speech “the hateful category of victims of sexual violence, together with Dinah” (213). To this Dinah responds, “Will it help if I asked you to join me in the rape crisis center, so that we can help others overcome what we had to undergo?” (213) This final dialogue suggests, at last, a healing for Tamar, even while Brenner refuses to invent one within the original context; only in her own artistic frame does this Tamar find healing.[7]

In proclaiming that Absalom was using her suffering to further his own political aims, Tamar gets at a point which will remain deeply troubling in each of the works I examine next.

---

[7] This suggestion is particularly interesting in light of existing literature to that effect, though I have no way of knowing if Brenner was aware of this particular example. Deirdre Brouer is precisely one of those “others” who asserts that she is helped to “overcome” by Tamar’s voice. Her essay “Tamar’s Voice of Wisdom and Outrage in 2 Samuel 13” (*Priscilla Papers* 28.4, 2014) appears in an avowedly evangelical publication pursuing, according to its website, gender equality and justice in the Christian context. This provides an interesting parallel voice to the many Jewish feminist scholars who have challenged and consulted the Hebrew Bible for its treatment of women.

“Tamar’s desolation validates my own desolation,” Brouer writes. “Millions worldwide live in this reality: men and women, young and old, rich and poor. Even the daughter of King David” (Brouer, 10). Regardless of Brenner’s potential unstated intentions, there is an echo between the forward-looking suggestion and the actual relief that a 21st-century community of similar sufferers finds in recovering the “company” of these women.

Brenner has her Tamar articulate the accusation of a merely cursory, functional inclusion of women's stories as the last paragraph of her story:

> My rape is narrated as a covert, albeit decisive argument against Amnon's suitability for the throne, an incidental kingpin in the unfolding story of King David's domestic chaos… the Bible's silence about my ultimate fate, together with the story's extension into both my brothers' doom… indicate my less than central role in my "own" story, which is, ultimately, more about Amnon and Absalom and their competition vis-á-vis our king-father than about a raped royal daughter. (143)

The biblical text treats her as emblematic, an object of accusation against her relatives, rather than a person owed the dignity of restitution. Many readings both challenge and reassert this problem: as an example, April Westbrook argues that this treatment is actually evidence of the emphasis placed on women as the litmus test of masculine responsibility with power.[8] Though this more positive reading seeks to reverse the duality of the symbol and posit the woman as the central focus rather than the marginal referent, it nonetheless acknowledges that the primary interest is in the text's masculine entities and their moral status.

Overall, Brenner's project is daring and innovative in its ambition, and skillful in its execution. Yet by limiting her innovations as she does to a narrow but fruitful frame, Brenner refuses to recreate "the Bible as it was," only to wind up producing "the Bible as we see it" (where "we" would be modern Jewish feminist scholars). Thus, her "characters" are fairly homogenous and speak from a static, unified viewpoint. Allowances must be made for intention: *I Am* is not meant to be feminist midrash, a tradition of retellings more interested in rounding out

---

[8] See *"And He Will Take Your Daughters": Woman Story and the Ethical Evaluation of Monarchy in the David Narrative* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

the characters as people with inner lives. She does not give herself transformative license within the majority of the text, a caution which means aside from her frame she sees herself as highly referential and even deferential to the work of other authors or scholars. That frame is deeply intriguing in its own right, of course; Brenner proposes immortality through textual neglect. Brenner literalizes the possibility that the text may birth the characters, but its very neglect deprives it of the power to limit their existence. This reinforces the necessity for an intertextual framework when examining later works which mine existing narrative material for new readings and new stories. Thus, I want to retain Brenner's more detailed criticisms, as well her emphasis on the characters as reflective of human persons recorded but not limited by any given text. This view offers continuity: while those characters are available for transformation, they retain a person-status which invites ethical inquiry into the transformations enacted. This is not new, of course, though Brenner's literary incarnation is; authors' authority over their characters and accountability for their ethical treatment is an old, old subject for literary investigation. All the more so when those characters are part of the pervasive (perhaps foundational) element of literary tradition, the Bible, wherein the materials of the past are recycled or refigured to build new edifices for current thought.

Brenner's work has also provided a foundation for some of the major concerns of contemporary scholarship on Tamar, which she emphasizes: familial treachery, narrative utility, and modern interiority. In addition, there is the question of whether emphasizing Tamar's desolation or attempting to redress it serves "her" better. These will be particularly useful in discussing the treatments of texts more literary in their execution than explicit in their values. I must consider how each text builds upon a flawed foundation, wherein I cannot but acknowledge

with Brenner's Tamar that the flaw of "her" story being subducted into that of the patrilineal drama exists *ab origine.*

Robinson Jeffers: Tamar's Revenge

Jeffers is earliest of my authors, and *Tamar and Other Poems* was the book that first made Jeffers's fame in 1922. The titular poem is a long narrative, amidst shorter lyric and political poems which have their own considerable merits.[9] "Tamar" incorporates into the biblical material several other elements of Jeffers's intellectual heritage and personal philosophy: Greek tragedy, cosmic mythos, and local tragedy. In addition to blending traditions, Jeffers incorporates his own personal philosophical innovations, as well as the trend of modernity towards acute self-consciousness; both of these devolve onto his "heroine." Tamar Cauldwell is his heroine, insofar as she is at the center of a web of external forces, brought by them to disaster like the hero of a Greek tragedy. These external forces are a blend of cosmic and societal patterns; in addition to critiquing human social structures, Jeffers expresses through his narrative his intense personal philosophy to an extent which sometimes dramatically overshadows the individual characters. Though early in his career, this poem exhibits many of the ideas that would characterize his poetry: incest as a metaphor for excessive self-involvement, the linkage of nature and women, and human depravity evident even in the victims. This last becomes most troubling in Jeffers's adaptation of the story of Tamar: the biblical text reduces her to a symbolic victim, but Jeffers transforms her into an active agent of destruction. Neither a symbolic victim nor a symbolic survivor can satisfy him. Perhaps this is due to Jeffers's distaste for causes,[10] for

[9] While I do not summarize "Tamar" here, in deference to Jeffers's obscurity and the complexity of the poem, I summarize it in an appendix. For this paper I cite the authoritative edition of Jeffers's poetry, *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers,* ed. Tim Hunt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988). Unless otherwise specified, all poems referenced are in Volume 1.

[10] Jeffers believed that human causes were small in the grand scheme of things, and that commitment to them destroyed any chance of personal peace; he would eventually lose the fame and respect which "Tamar" and

unqualified approbation; perhaps, to his affinity with tragedy and his involvement with the terror of the sublime scope.[11] Jeffers saw humanity as a small part of a diffuse, impersonal God; only an incredibly broad temporal and spatial vision could integrate pervasive cruelty with profound beauty. These ideas, while present in "Tamar," are not yet fully implemented; in some ways critical readings of "Tamar" have suffered from retrospective analysis attributing a more mature and controlled execution of fully-formed ideas than Jeffers was yet capable of.

In translating Tamar to the remote Californian coast in the nineteen-tens Jeffers leans heavily on the genre of Greek tragedy, which sometimes exists in poorly-integrated tension with the biblical element; further he adds a theme of symbolic cosmology, wherein his recovery of the female sufferer effectively sacrifices her. This uneasy tension is my main criticism of the poem: Jeffers at first maintains a balance between the human identity and the symbolic function of his characters, but these roles become lopsided when the main character either goes insane or is quite literally possessed by the cosmic ideas Jeffers is interested in. Jeffers frequently correlates female victimization and ecological exploitation, and in so doing he does at least place Tamar at the center of her own narrative. While this rhymes with the scholarly interpretation of biblical women as symbolic sufferers of masculine vices, Jeffers shows perhaps more sympathy for the sufferer than his biblical predecessors. On the other hand, Jeffers's sympathy is to some extent a consequence of the trend in literature towards increased interiority, and his Tamar is compromised by her symbolic value in other ways. The complexity Jeffers ascribes to his women must acknowledge their inclusion in the humanity which is the abuser of nature. Thus, he

---

later works earned him by unyielding criticism of the second world war (he had lived through, and been repeatedly denied service in, the first).

[11] See Robert Zaller, *Robinson Jeffers and the American Sublime* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

sometimes has difficulty balancing that symbolic role with the literal, as he does with Tamar: he cannot write humans as deserving unmitigated praise or even compassion.

Instead, Tamar is a potent champion of repressed nature, but unnatural in her contamination by modern self-consciousness; her triumphal vengeance is a vision of unstable violence, consuming both her mind and her physical surroundings. This Tamar's misery should make her sympathetic, but her "her self-hatred" which "Reflecting itself abroad burned back against her, all the world growing hateful" infuses her with an alienating bitterness which combines with her strength to distance compassion (42). This is in part in service to Jeffers's idea of humanity as inevitably corrupt, but also part of the modernist tendency to foreground complex characters to evoke similarly complex sentiments and emphasize the grey areas of human nature. Yet it is mixed in its success for those ends because Jeffers's symbolic register ultimately overwhelms and reduces Tamar's complexity. Jeffers redefines the terms of Tamar's victimhood, and then in proposing a solution to her desolation and its environmental corollary he erases her personhood; partway through the poem she experiences a shift in register from human and personal to ideological, exclusively symbolic. Jeffers undertakes an ambitious balancing act, and while he does not perhaps achieve clarity, he does achieve intensity. This bears multiple interpretations, accidental and deliberate, which I will explore later; in either case, it falls short of Jeffers's ambition by lending itself to misunderstanding. Most critics read the poem as a mythical portrayal of the historical cycles whereby nature, species, and societies "thicken to corruption,"[12] are cleansed by absolute destruction, and leave nature to take its course once again. Some are able to balance this interpretation with the literal human narrative of the poem, but the ease with which others ignore that humanity suggests the extent to which Jeffers, in

[12] From Jeffers's famous poem "Shine, Perishing Republic" (15), which conveys his prediction of and resignation to the supposed inevitable decline of the United States.

performing this synthesis, does not quite harmonize the disparate elements. Frederick Carpenter for example places too much emphasis on this mythic strain; he asserts that the alienation of readers from the central female character, and indeed the moral repulsion towards incest, are casualties of misunderstanding.[13]

More recently than Carpenter, Robert Brophy has proposed a more complex reading of the mythic themes of "Tamar" and Jeffers's other works. In his chapter on "Tamar" in *Robinson Jeffers: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol in His Narrative Poems,* Brophy sees Jeffers drawing a connection between the biblical narrative and Mediterranean fertility rituals. Thus, he reads the poem as the ritual subjection of a female goddess to suffering in order to purge profanation, following which she is reborn to annihilate the masculine symbol that the cycle may begin anew. "The 'spoiled house' to which Tamar has 'come home' is not only her betrayed body but, more significantly, the corrupt family-line, the grotesque fivesome whose struggles in microcosm mimic the story of the whole of mankind" (Brophy, 46). Brophy sees the turning-point as the poem as the "underworld encounter," Tamar's third sexual experience, wherein

> It seemed to her that all her body
> Was touched and troubled with polluting presences
> Invisible, and whatever had happened to her from her two lovers
> She had been until that hour inviolately a virgin,
> Whom now the desires of dead men and dead Gods and a dead tribe
> Used for their common prey. (46)

I agree with Brophy to some extent, but I assert that in this epoch of the mythical schema the ritual element also overrides Tamar's human complexity: after this time, she can be read either as

[13] See *Robinson Jeffers* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc. 1962). Carpenter insists that incest is a mere natural symbol, like the mythological relationship of sea and sky.

cosmically enlightened or as insane, but the careful balance of external recognition of her situation and interior struggle against it is lost. That Brophy too recognizes this as a turning point reinforces my interpretation; Carpenter simply reads Tamar throughout as a figure of primal, almost sublime evil. Jeffers replaces desolation for his Tamar with retribution—violent, inhuman, and self-destructive retribution. In so doing, he makes her part of a pattern that is mythic and tragic, antithetical to any vision of reintegration or social healing.

If Tamar is mythic throughout, it is not as a goddess. She is not, as critics like to retroactively assert, "inhuman." Her role in myth is that of a tragic hero, who transgresses the realm of the human in her *hubris* and meets with the repercussions of fate. This hubris is underpinned by the a very modern overabundance of consciousness: Tamar overleaps the limits of humanity *because* she is conscious of human society as a flawed construction, which the narrator reinforces, qualifying condemnation of incest as unnatural with "for custom makes nature" (26). Tamar, before the incestuous act, acknowledges the limitations of humans; "'what are we for?' said Tamar wearily, 'to want and want and not dare know it'" (24). Humans, in Jeffers's conception, are crippled by their social consciousness, which cuts them off from more instinctive natural fulfillment; it is not that they do not know, but that they do not *dare* to know. The recognition of a constructed social constraint on sexual activity catalyzes Tamar's fall; this knowledge does nothing to save her from the consequences of her actions, nor does the artificiality of the rules by which she is punished. Thus, Tamar has a superhuman consciousness, but like Euripides' Hippolytus, knowledge and adherence to a higher law do not save her from the doom inscribed by larger forces. She may be, like Hippolytus' father Theseus, a human creature mixed with something superhuman; still, in keeping with Jeffers's idea of human consciousness as crippling, that perspective only rebounds to her cost.

Jeffers is highly conscious of the burden of history and of consciousness on his poetic project, and the struggle for self-definition in the face of extensive literary tradition. Tamar reflects this anxiety: she reads herself, and history collapses. To her father and to Jeffers she says

> "You named me for the monument in a desolate graveyard,
> Fool, and I say you were deceived, it was out of me that fire lit you and your
> Helen, your body
> Joined with your sister's
> Only because I was to be named Tamar and to love my brother and my father.
> I am the fountain." (63)

The poetic process arranges ancient material to suit a present moment, and represents a construct of history which collapses into the immediacy of the poem. She uses a textual metaphor for her own life, as though conscious of her literary existence: "'we have turned every page / But the last page, and now our paper's so worn out and tissuey I can read it already / Right through the leaf, print backwards'" (73). Ironically, this comes about fifteen pages before the end of the poem in the collected works, which is not confined in size. Jeffers himself had a reputation for prophetic tone, articulating similar sentiments of doom in "Shine, Perishing Republic" (16); Tamar's position of racial omen is no incidental feature of his cosmic symbolism. Early in the poem Tamar dreams of the march of successive dominant human societies, where the one edifice still standing wherein she shelters her father is a "church… beautiful and white" (35), figuring that father as the embodiment of yet another patriarchal culture preserved by its racial and religious edifice. Not merely an avenger but a participant, Tamar's own body is described as "white" in some variation five times in and around the incestuous sex scene. Jeffers's own national and racial history, then, is a book worn thin, its assumptions and stabilities gone as fragile as those

conventionally delicate leaves of family Bibles; Jeffers burdens Tamar with the curse of foresight, which he attributes to himself and bemoans in his poem "Cassandra."

Consciousness itself is not Tamar's *hamartia,* however, her "tragic flaw," merely the basis of her *hubris.* Her presumption is that, knowing human social conventions are constructed, she cannot bear to submit to them; but overleaping social bounds is also her transgression of her role in nature. This must trouble the purely mythic reading: what Brophy reads as the appropriate underworld journey of the goddess, the poem itself posits as a disjuncture with the timeliness of nature. "The hard and dry and masculine tyrannized for a season. Rain in October or November / Yearly avenges the balance; Tamar's spirit rebelled too soon, the female fury abiding / In so beautiful a house of flesh" (41). If the cosmic cycle is duly fulfilled by her suffering, her decision is on the human level a rebellion in an excess of bitterness. Jeffers's Tamar is still, here, tragically human; what she seeks is an escape from the cycle of nature, a release from pregnancy as the biological sequel of sex. The underworld ritual is actually part of Tamar's personal alienation from nature and, as a part of nature, from death. Once her profanation is complete, Tamar discovers in her misguided séance that her aunt chose escape rather than confrontation. "'As for me, I chose rather to die'" (46). Tamar has been entertaining thoughts of suicide throughout the poem, but this conversation not only serves to make suicide anathema but puts her bitterly at odds with a dead woman, even though the sincerity of that dead woman's depiction of death is deeply suspect. Tamar's liaison with Lee was preceded by an unclear suicide attempt, and before resorting to Andrews Tamar "walked the cliffs to tempt them" (34). Helen, the ghost who makes death most dreadful to Tamar, admits she is a reflection of Tamar, rather than an empiric truth-teller; death may not be so terrible. In consequence of the meeting Tamar's desolation is really complete: "'there is no one in the world as lonely as I, / Betrayed by

life and death'" (48). In this light, reading Tamar as alienated from nature and from its natural consequences, Jeffers's ending is not only a restoration for nature, but for the individual. This is perhaps missed by most critics except insofar as it represents a mythic cleansing, because death is not usually conceived of as the happy ending. For Jeffers, though, death is not evil. In "The Treasure" (102), Jeffers describes nonexistence as its titular object. This attitude of Jeffers's is not limited to *Tamar and Other Poems,* either; it is not a passing thought, but an enduring conceit in his poetry. "Meditation on Saviors" (396) states at lyric length that death is "a huge gift reserved" (401) for humans, wherein they "having touched a little of the beauty and seen a little of the beauty of things, magically grow / Across the funeral fire or the hidden stench of burial themselves into the beauty they admired, / Themselves into the God, themselves into the sacred steep unconsciousness" (401). Rather than a corruption, reintegration with nature is the greatest relief Jeffers can imagine.

Jeffers does propose an alternate escape for Tamar, rather than suicide, rather than vengeful self-immolation. Jeffers has her encounter the possibility of socially-sanctioned marriage, specifically on the heels of her walking the cliffs in contemplation of suicide. Where Brenner's Tamar suggests that Absalom might have sought her a husband as a form of restoration (Brenner, *I Am,* 142), Will Andrews is actually earnestly interested in marrying Tamar and providing that social shelter to her. However, given the feelings with which she has sex with Andrews to cover her pregnancy by Lee, being constrained to marriage would be a further degradation of her right to liberty and self-definition; it would not heal the great wounds of society and of spirit that all women and this woman have endured and which, by extension, nature endures. Though Tamar shudders at death, the double-dealing of the dead seems to begrudge her peace rather than earnestly represent the sleep of death, and only the side-effect of

her cosmic cleansing—her own death—can bring her back into harmony with nature. Given this vision of death as the deepest peace wherein the body is dissolved into that all-encompassing God comprised of nature's beauty, the line which begins the final brief stanza of Tamar is not a mere picturesque. "Grass grows where the flame flowered" (90). Tamar, who shuddered at the "the breasts the worms have worked in" (48), Tamar who flowered into vengeful flame, has destroyed the human institution and been reintegrated into nature.

Taking Jeffers's attitude towards death into account, perhaps Tamar is not merely a sacrificial victim for his cosmic scheme. Perhaps this cleansing for the individual as well as the landscape is the only viable option for real restoration. Yet in executing this vision, Jeffers becomes fantastic, almost idealistic in the purity of annihilation he represents; Brenner's realistic expectation that Tamar may find some healing is too personal, particular, and therefore petty for Jeffers. It is, in short, too human. Yet if Jeffers's best hope for his individual character is that she should die in pure tragic vengeance, it is no vision of restoration by conventional human standards. Indeed, Jeffers sacrifices Tamar's individuality and her vivid, deeply personal suffering long before he sacrifices the character herself for his grand vision. He does critique his own project; Jeffers is conscious of this sublimation of the human into the narrative when he describes his characters as "puppets… idols for God to enter" (40), recognizing that as the poet he is exposing his characters on the metanarrative level to that very violation of humanity which Tamar herself undergoes on the seashore. That Jeffers is aware of the compromising ethics of his artistic decision, however, does not entirely excuse him of continuing to consciously abuse his characters for rhetorical and ideological effect.

For comparison, another of Jeffers's long poems accomplishes the human social critique without the sacrifice, an example perhaps of the change Carpenter mourns when saying that this

earlier Jeffers in "Tamar" is "innocent of ideas." The shift may be in response to the very problem I highlight: perhaps Jeffers, though still reluctant to be champion, became at least less willing to be a priestly executioner. Or perhaps he recognized that his ambition went beyond the capacity of his prose. Jeffers's 1928 poem "Cawdor" engages with very similar themes, and also ends in annihilation; however, its heroine is less cosmic in her proportions and proportionally less omnipotent. Taken in conversation with "Tamar," "Cawdor" represents a purifying vengeance stunted by the real limitations of human power. Fera's delirium, unlike Tamar's apotheosized clarity, is based in human sickness and human malice rather than a surrender to cosmic absolutes; Jeffers makes a stronger distinction between metaphor and reality. Had "Tamar" operated on a purely mythic level from the beginning, as Carpenter insists it does, it might have been more successful; as it is, Jeffers performs a human sacrifice he later shies away from.

Though Jeffers sacrifices the humanity of Tamar's suffering partway through, he does continue his critique of patriarchal family. He agrees with Brenner in the complete inadequacy of every male figure who ought to have borne responsibility towards Tamar, focusing especially on the father: besides Tamar, David is the only one in the poem to retain the biblical name. David Cauldwell, like his biblical predecessor, represents a flawed power structure and primes the way for sexual misconduct in his children.[14] Jeffers, however, makes the sexual impropriety a direct pattern which the younger generation follows, furthering his concept of cyclical time. Jeffers's David gestures at justice, but inadequately; he lets the Bible fall open, and happens to see the proviso that if a virgin is raped in the field, she shall not be put to death with her aggressor. This is done without reference to Tamar's own account and ironized by the fact that the relationship

[14] See Mark Gray, "Amnon: A Chip Off the Old Block? Rhetorical Strategy in 2 Samuel 13.7-15 The Rape of Tamar and the Humiliation of the Poor" in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament,* 77: 1998. 39-54.

wasn't forcible. Jeffers, himself the son of a preacher, is not only consciously adapting biblical material but directly confronting his inheritance of a western canon heavily influenced by the religious legacy of Christianity. David's indifferent application of literal text is serves two theoretical functions: it reflects on organized religions claiming to understand the Bible while exploiting its aura of authority, and it reveals the unstable influence of the generative text over interpretive derivatives. It also serves a revealing narrative function, in that like the biblical David, David Cauldwell's anger leads to no genuine punishment. The quality of Lee's "exile" casts suspicion on David's intention towards justice. David Cauldwell ostensibly punishes Lee by banishing him from the family and requiring him to enlist in the war. Yet the effect is to give Lee freedom once again, and again trap Tamar in isolation.[15] Thus, the biblical pattern of disproportionate suffering is merely reinforced by David's pale imitation of justice, which has no reference to restitution for the victim.

David's partiality to the son builds on an earlier element of partiality, revealing the unequal social perception of men and women and their desires. The mare that Lee destroys in his drunken cruelty at the beginning of the poem, a clear symbol of women and of nature, recurs when Lee announces his determination to domesticity: David, however little wise, foresees danger. "'Don't do it; better dance your pony down the cliffs again than close / Young life into a little box; you've been too wild; now I'm worn out, but I remember / Hell's in the box'" (23). David recognizes what the narrator has said, "Youth is a troublesome and magical thing" (20), but only applies this to Lee. Lee, who has already experienced freedom, is not likely to be content in aesthetic contemplation of the mountains and platonic companionship with his sister.

[15] Though Tamar recognizes the hellishness of war with a kind of clairvoyance, "it's possible if I'd let you go asoldiering, there on the dunghills / Of death and fire…'" (83) she is ultimately convin'ced that this suffering is inadequate and contains too many comforts: "'you'd taste nothing even there but the officers' orders, beef and brandy, / And the tired bodies of a few black-eyed French dance-girls.'"

Yet Jeffers illuminates what David cannot see or care for: that Tamar is equally full of troublesome magic. She has said to Will Andrews, after becoming sexually active, "'You didn't know that a clean girl could want a man. / Now you will take me and use me and throw me away / And I've … earned it'" (39). Tamar recognizes that society is blind to the desire of women; Tamar was closed in that very box long before Lee decided to lock himself in with her. She is miserable in the knowledge that like Lee and the mare, those women who experience and pursue desire tend to be used and discarded by men. In enclosing himself, Lee also intensified Tamar's isolation by driving away Tamar's socially acceptable outlet, Will Andrews. At the time Lee thought himself protective rather than jealous, as the narrator insinuatingly acknowledges, but in doing so he further forced Tamar's thirst for knowledge and experience into a narrow and recursive channel.

David, looking out for his son, knows the dangers but does not prevent them. Rather, he enjoins Lee to continue in the pattern of exploitative destruction rather than try to constrain his own youth, which will turn to a different kind of excess if not released in "all other license" (25) that is natural; David may even be thinking of his own past, though no explanation of his relationship with Helen is given here. David, a Bible-reading man, later tells Tamar to fear hell: but he and Lee and custom try to keep Tamar in the figurative box of proper female behavior and the literal box of the house. In that sense, Tamar herself brings to the box not hell but purifying fire, and by including Will Andrews in the destruction takes not only the family structure but heteronormative marriage with them: the entire concept of human social mores and the female role of domesticity and chaste homemaking. Jeffers sets out to do both more and less for his female central figure than his biblical predecessors did. On the one hand, he gives Tamar a kind of agency, and a kind of revenge narrative. On the other hand, that agency is so deeply embedded

in advocacy for his own philosophy of human nature that her revenge is self-immolation and her agency is used for manipulation and choices deeply suspect to conventional morality. While Jeffers acknowledges Tamar as victimized by society, he makes her the initiator in a sexual encounter which, though *not* rape in this story, overwrites the rape in the narrative prototype. Unlike the biblical Tamar, Tamar Cauldwell's sexuality is both active and deeply complicated; the narrator carefully excuses Tamar from blame, suggesting that desire is natural and only "custom" (25) makes it otherwise, but Tamar initiates her sexual encounters despite her divided feelings for doing so and clear lack of anything resembling sexual satisfaction or sensual interest.

Jeffers's narrative positions Tamar as a compromise between victim and agent. In recovering the strength of natural urges and positioning social structures as the true aggressors with men as the repugnant but petty agents injustice, Jeffers makes Tamar the only deliberate actor. Carpenter reads Tamar as an embodiment of evil, a Manichean opposition to masculine order and agent of purifying chaos; this shows precisely how open to misinterpretation Jeffers's over-ambitious structure is. As Jeffers reveals through Tamar the corruption of human society, he succeeded; as he had Tamar transcend humanity to perform a purification, he succeeded; yet, as he meant to offer annihilation as a vindication of the universalized victim, he failed, for that reading requires extensive reference to his other poetry. Instead he compromised what human sympathy or admiration he had curated for Tamar, as well as failing to fully endorse her project *because* she remains human and tragically fated. Jeffers intermixes his biblical source with a structure resembling classical tragedy and a symbolism tied to mythic renewal cycles; different elements overshadow the others at different times, rather than fully cohering for a direct and clear communication. In some ways, he does improve upon the biblical structure: Tamar firmly occupies the central role, insofar as anything but cosmic forces do. Jeffers is interested in

something like recovery for her, considering and rejecting social re-integration and giving to her a highly tragic flavor of resolution. But he imbues Tamar with strength while stripping the male characters of it; the men are pathetic while the true blame lies with the abstracted social structures embodied in the house itself. Thus, Jeffers's striking figure of Tamar, reasserting agency both in sexuality and in retribution, is so powerful as to easily overshadow these abstractions; systematic violence and oppression which are manifested through her conflict with them, and that conflict is largely lost when her interior suffering gives way to symbolic clarity. In this sense the tendency of Greek tragedy to embody social catastrophe in personal conflict, as with Medea (whom Jeffers would later write of), conflicts with the biblical framework; the figure that balances too precariously between divine and human makes a mockery of the blameless sufferer. Attributing to her the power to resolve her fate seems to make her responsible for it, undermining the compassion due either to the doomed or to the abused. Jeffers's project is ambitious, his intentions fairly good, but the scale of his ideas and the variety of his sources challenge his still-growing poetic capability.

William Faulkner: Dynastic Disaster

The title of William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* brings to the fore its biblical connections, but those connections are not straightforward: Faulkner's "Rape of Tamar" is interwoven with and layered under other elements of the Davidic succession narrative. The title also reveals what will become evident, that "Tamar" is, in the pattern of the original narrative material, incidental to the true purposes of the text, and even incidental to the network of relationships Faulkner chooses to focus on. Faulkner, like Jeffers, overwrites the defining incident of "The *Rape* of Tamar." Though the Henry Sutpen-Judith Sutpen-Charles Bon triad maps in terms of incest and murder onto the Absalom-Tamar-Amnon triad, Faulkner draws on

other relational arrangements and other points of interest in the Hebrew Bible to hybridize his narrative, add complexity, and fulfill his ultimate end. Published a decade after the poem of his contemporary Jeffers, any potential has been little discussed, though John Irwin cites "Tamar" along with other potential influences on the novel.[16] *Absalom, Absalom!* is a recursive text, treading out new ground in the plot slowly and painfully while introducing narrative events long before their contexts and interpretive explanations. Faulkner paints out a thoroughly tragic tale of southern prejudice creating, shaping, and ending the lives of an entire family, creating through his structure a sense of almost helpless frustration at the seeming senselessness of the serial disasters. Faulkner's novel is grounded in the American south, with its profound racial and social divides; the narrative encompasses the Civil War of the United States, but like Jeffers with the "war in France," does not focus on it: the armed conflict, for all it signals the impending end of a certain social structure and its set of values, provides a brief stay of execution for the family being actively destroyed by those values.

The frame that Faulkner uses is that of a young man, Quentin Compson, who lives some decades after the events, attempting to piece them together and then to retell them to a Canadian roommate named Shreve in order to convey an understanding of the south. This sometimes condemnatory, agonizingly conflicted recollection attempts to recuperate a sense of identity. In a sort of exile themselves, Quentin and Shreve, are at Harvard (173)[17] and not in either of their homelands. Layering up multiple resonances is central not only to the narrative vehicle, but also

---

[16] See *Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pages 17-20. There are roughly contemporary critics who linked them in terms of style: one named Hatcher Harlan argues that they are part of a similar movement of disenchanted realism which obsesses too much upon the shocking, cruel, and terrible. ("The Torches of Violence," in *The English Journal,* 23.2. National Council of Teachers of English, 1934). Harlan did not explicitly link "Tamar" and *Absalom, Absalom!,* probably because the later would not be published until 1936.

[17] For this I cite a facsimile of the first edition of *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Random House, Inc, 1964).

to the text's relationship to the Hebrew Bible, with Faulkner's a branching and innovative incorporation of elements. Yet in one thing he is mainly faithful to the biblical text: the woman is a vehicle for conflicts and a cause for tensions, but she is rarely active in her own right. Faulkner removes the rape element entirely and complicates the incest narrative with racial tensions.

Faulkner's novel is, in many ways about the father.[18] The paternal is, however, writ large in its consequences for his children. Second to the patriarch, the sons are center-stage; the daughter is present and moderately complex, but passive. However, as the patriarch's actions in many ways provide the script for his children, it seems necessary to address him first, and the economy of paternal love represented. The narrative presents clarity on Sutpen's perspective very late, not clear until the seventh chapter. His "design," as it turns out, is simply for equality with a white southern gentleman, whose remote contempt inspired Sutpen to single-mindedly pursue unimpeachable social equality with him. To pursue this design Sutpen, in what he reportedly called "innocence" (220), participated in a system of social values which he later fought to defend and saw destroyed. In attempting to place himself on an equal level with this white man, Sutpen attempts to weaponize his inherent whiteness, since according to these values it should at least elevate him above people who are black. This obsession in execution alienates or destroys everyone he involves in it, and the irony in it is that Sutpen lives out his values with the detached precision of the unbeliever, taking them to extremes in his treatment of others while not particularly caring to live by them himself. On the one hand, he doesn't care: his fundamental monstrosity in the eyes of a southern gentlewoman is expressed by his treatment of his slaves. The problem is not that he, standing aloof, makes them engage in brutal combat for the

---

[18] Faulkner himself affirmed this in an interview given at the University of Virginia; see "Remarks on *Absalom, Absalom!*" in *William Faulkner's* Absalom, Absalom!*: A Critical Casebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

entertainment of his circle, but that he himself participates "'as if they should not only have been the same color, but should have been covered with fur too'" (29). On the other hand, he enforces those social structures ruthlessly. He is so inflexible in his pursuit of an impeccably white dynasty that he not only repudiates a wife and son but drives another son and daughter to desolation. This desolation—the spinsterhood of the disappointed virgin and the exile of a murderer—echoes, but does not precisely replicate, that of Tamar and Absalom.

Love and justice both play roles in intensifying the pathos of this story, but Sutpen seems incapable of love: children are recurrently his tools, not his kin. He requires for his design "'"money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family—incidentally of course, a wife"'" (263). He wants "a" son, and believes the universe owes this to him, only disappointed and not grieved when any particular son is lost. He spoke of repudiating his first wife and son simply, saying "I merely explained how this new fact rendered it impossible that this woman and child be incorporated in my design" (264). In later discussing potentially inciting his legitimized son to kill that first son and invite legal repercussions, at this point a seemingly inevitable outcome if Sutpen chooses to intervene, the options are *either* by prompting murder to "'"destroy my design with my own hand"'" or to "'"see my design complete itself quite normally and naturally and successfully to the public eye, yet to my own in such fashion as to be a mockery and a betrayal"'" (274). He chooses maintaining the potential to achieve the design in a new iteration over the lives of all his children.

The interpreters do value love, however. The two chapters following that revelation of Sutpen's history and intention show Quentin and Shreve imagining the motivations of the characters involved: they posit that if Sutpen had only bestowed love on his eldest son, or even recognition, disaster would have been avoided. Sutpen was fully convinced in his own

"conscience" that he had treated his first wife and son with justice; Quentin imagines his grandfather demanding in thought """what conscience""" Sutpen had """to trade with which would have warranted you in the belief that you could have bought immunity from her for no other coin but justice""" (265). In this case, the "her" is the eldest son's mother, whom he scorned and expected to be satisfied with only material compensation for the insult. Sutpen implements values foreign to his instinct as absolutes and uses what "morality" he has by rote rather than with any inflection of instinctive feeling. This is, perhaps, the real monstrosity of Sutpen: "that innocence which believed that the ingredients of morality were like the ingredients of a pie or cake and once you had measured them and balanced them and mixed them and put them into the oven it was all finished and nothing but pie or cake could come out" (263). Having transacted his material support, he offers nothing emotional, nothing personal. He is incapable of love, but still stands like David apart from justice. Sutpen, like David, does not himself interfere in his daughter's potential match, even though it stands fair to destroy his "design." The only explanation which others can assign to it is Quentin's recollection that

> "Grandfather said that his subsequent actions (the fact that for a time he did nothing and so perhaps helped to bring about the very situation which he dreaded) ... were the result of his conviction that it had all come from a mistake and until he discovered what that mistake had been he did not intend to risk making another one." (268)

An explanation, filtered through many layers, is given for the father's inaction, even though in this case it is the father's design and not the demands of human, royal, or divine justice. Sutpen procures the facts; he passes those facts to his legitimized son; he does nothing. Sutpen's love and justice are peculiar in reference to biblical types; he refuses to act, because he believes that

earlier he has acted in justice; he refuses love to his eldest son, and thereby impels the very relationship which, in either story, causes destruction.

Next to the patriarch who impels the narrative, the drama of his sons dominates the work. They work out the consequences of his broken morality and whole-cloth embrace of southern values, with their sister as the lynchpin. The frame narrators Quentin and Shreve posit that for lack only of paternal love, Charles Bon, the eldest and disinherited son, pursues a course of destruction for himself and his half-siblings whom he supposedly loves. Contrast with this the eldest son in the biblical narrative who, secure in his position as favorite, plays on his father's excessive affection to accomplish his burning desire for his sister's body; Charles Bon's interest in Judith is consistently downplayed as secondary, incidental, perhaps even nonexistent. "'Because he loved Judith. He would have added doubtless "after his fashion"'" (94).[19] The lust the Bible portrays is downplayed or even destroyed, as "he paid Judith the dubious compliment of not even trying to ruin her" (98-99), while the absent fraternal relationship is emphasized to make all the more horrible the foredoomed fratricide. The deep homosocial bond transforms the tragedy of Absalom from one of hatred and vengeance to one of love, heightening the tragedy. Faulkner's masterful playing-out of these affections, the recirculation of motive and cause, keeps the pointless horror of it ever before his reader's eyes.

It would be counterproductive to reduce these works to the pattern upon which they expand; it is that expansion in which I am interested, the way in which literature grows like ivy upon the brick wall of the past, altering the face of that wall as it does so. *Absalom, Absalom!* is the largest of the works I have here to cover, and like others would suffer greatly if interpreted as

---

[19] These words are part of the narrative that Quentin receives from Miss Rosa Coldfield. I hope my reader is familiar enough with Faulkner's text to have an inkling of the various narrators and framers by which the "central narrative" is circumscribed; it is certainly a complex and fascinating narrative technique to which I can give only incidental justice in pursuit of my central theme.

merely, or even primarily, a rewriting of an elder narrative. Yet Brenner's recognition and complaint that Tamar's story is not about Tamar remains pertinent: Faulkner obliquely as well as explicitly marginalizes Judith, the Tamar-figure of his novel, as merely incidental to the great tragedy unfolding. For "'it was not Judith who was the object of Bon's love or of Henry's solicitude. She was just the blank shape, the empty vessel'" in which the relationship of the two brothers plays out (120). This is in part by design, for Faulkner is interested in the point at which people become ideas: Judith not the beloved woman but the ideal of the beloved white sister threatened by a man who is not a black man but the idea of a black man. Faulkner writes out this misery at length and in a style designed for aching bewilderment. The vehicle for this reduction is again the father, Sutpen: Sutpen whose design uses people as tools to implement values he does not understand, mechanisms according to "his morality which had all the parts but which refused to run, to move" (279).

Judith's exclusion from narrative events is in part generated by the behavior of the men towards Judith. Aware of the impending match, Sutpen consciously incited his son to block it; Quentin's father "said that maybe by now, after his New Orleans trip, he had learned at last enough about women to know it wouldn't do any good to go to Judith first" (269). This implies that Judith's responses were recognized and managed. Furthermore, Henry knew that the charges of bigamy would not have prevented her (and at this point in the narrative, it is the bigamy only that stands in opposition, as Quentin unfolds it).

> "Even if she had known it, it would have made no difference to her. She would have acted as Sutpen would have acted with anyone who tried to cross him: she would have taken Bon anyway. I can imagine her if necessary even murdering the other woman." (120-1)

Both seem to believe that Judith's implacable determination mirrors her father, only hers is more sentimentally set on a man rather than a grand "design." In theory, as Quentin and Shreve resolve it, both Henry and Charles "'knew what Judith would do when she found [their kinship] out because they both knew that women will show pride and honor about almost anything except love'" (341). Neither Thomas nor Henry Sutpen seems ever to actually consult Judith, assuming they know precisely how she would respond.

Judith is by no means a boring character; though she is often characterized in relationship to father or brother, the image that emerges is an interesting woman, loving somehow and yet trapped at home. Judith and Henry are said sometimes to be a "single personality with two bodies" (91-2), and to have "a relationship closer than the traditional loyalty of brother and sister even; a curious relationship: something of that fierce impersonal rivalry between two cadets in a crack regiment'" (79-80), but also to be entirely different. From the beginning, Miss Rosa relates how it is "'not Henry, mind; not the boy, which would have been outrageous enough; but Judith, the girl'" who orders a man to race the horses for her pleasure knowing they will be beaten to maintain an illusion of their having run away. This continues; Quentin notes an absolute distinction, too, recalling Miss Rosa's account of that brutal fight between Sutpen and his slave which both children watched. It's Judith

> "'who was the Sutpen with the ruthless Sutpen code of taking what it wanted provided it were strong enough, of the two children as Henry was the Coldfield with the Coldfield cluttering of morality and rules of right and wrong; who while Henry screamed and vomited, looked down from the loft that night on the spectacle of Sutpen fighting halfnaked with one of his halfnaked n-----s with the

> same cold and attentive interest with which Sutpen would have watched Henry fighting with a negro boy of his own age and weight.'" (120)[20]

Judith's strength of character is an intriguing layer, though it is presented in terms of taking after that father whose traits provokes the whole tragedy of the story. She and her brother are clearly close, sometimes even two parts of a unit, despite this dichotomy of inheritance. Yet Henry's final action, which seems to come from a place of deep understanding of his sister's character coupled with fundamental unwillingness to yield to her a right to choose her own fate, shares much with the ambiguity of Absalom's heroism which Brenner and Jeffers both explore: in pursuing violence, did he fulfill her wishes or ignore her wellbeing?

The critic Jessie McGuire Coffee, in analyzing the biblical inheritance of Faulkner, proposed a schema that positions Henry as a "scapegoat" for his father's sins.[21] At least his role as the extrapolation of flawed principles gives his suffering personal meaning, in a way; "scapegoat" or "heir" makes him one of the central triad of Faulkner's own "design" as well as Sutpen's. Judith is not included in the main triad of meaning. She is incidental, the vector through which relationship passes. Faulkner reinforces the rather disheartening marginalization of Tamar within her own story by making Judith a stoic, reserved figure, barely emotional, most remarkable for her likeness to her own father. Stephen M. Ross attempts to read Charles Bon's goad to Henry, "*I'm the n----- that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry*" (358) as a threat, equal in the value-system of the characters to the actual crime which Amnon commits, but he reaches in applying the biblical pattern.[22] Rather, Faulkner sets up a purposeful

---

[20] I do not find it appropriate to use the word which will be recognized as effaced here, even in direct quotation.

[21] See *Faulkner's Un-Christlike Christians: Biblical Allusions in the Novels* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983).

[22] See "Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and the David Story: A Speculative Contemplation" (*The David Myth in Western Literature.* West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1980).

non-equivalence, wherein the revelation of Charles Bon's "crime" exposes the unequal substitution of racial background for violent assault as the irreconcilable offense. Reading them simply as equivalent would imply that female consent is irrelevant, which to an extent happens within Henry's reconstructed perspective but which is not a flaw that can be laid to the account of the biblical narrative. In saying "now you can't marry him" (172), Henry clearly and explicitly knows he has made his sister's choice irrelevant, thereby invalidating her given consent to the marriage and *his* supposition of her ongoing consent even should all be revealed. Faulkner's Judith is no less an emblem of desolation and betrayal than Tamar; and yet, by imbuing her with elements of implacability and cruelty, Faulkner makes her slightly more dimensional a character, if almost less sympathetic.

Margaret Barrington: David Revisited

Margaret Barrington's short story "David's Daughter, Tamar" takes place in Ireland, "an Ulster tale" according to its epigraph (162).[23] Ulster, however, is not a precise geographical or even national location, but an idea: Ulster is a region of "Ireland," divided as of 1921 into nine counties, three in the Republic of Ireland and six in Northern Ireland. A map of Ireland shows a vertical line run up the northern end of the island as if on purpose to divide Ulster in half, struggling to separate the two demographics which in this tale come into conflict in the person of Tamar, "David's Daughter": Catholic Irish and Protestant Anglo-Irish. The story begins "One evening in late July, when the smell of the retting flax lay heavy on all the countryside and the blue Sperrin mountains shimmered in a haze" (162); Barrington's prose is rich with the sensuous detail of the countryside, and imbued with a personal, bodily experience that integrates into the

[23] I quote from the 1982 edition of *David's Daughter, Tamar* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1982), as no scholarly edition has been published. This collection sadly does not include original publication dates for each story, but as one character speaks of emigration to England to escape the legal authority of the national government, I can safely assume it was published after the Irish Free State became a separate nation from the United Kingdom in 1921.

natural one. The main character is introduced in context; “Tamar Osborne wandered through her father’s fields” (162), a figure of natural liberty at once circumscribed by paternal possession. This possession becomes the crux of the story, wherein Tamar’s nascent agency as a woman and desiring subject is manipulated by her earnest but over-urgent suitor and quashed by a father who props up his authority with religion.

The social and religious divide is codified from the very beginning as the background to the tale. Osborne is a Norman English name, placing David Osborne squarely as a representative of the Protestant imperial establishment, though now become naturalized to the land and confident of his absolute right to it. Barrington’s own beliefs are not clear given a scarcity of biographical information let alone textual evidence, but her father was part of the Royal Irish Constabulary, authorized by the Protestant crown. It is this authority, and the divide it causes by its prejudicial enforcement of justice, which Barrington roundly criticizes; Barrington’s David is so insistently referential to the Protestant biblical authority which he uses to prop up his patriarchal power that I am able, indeed forced, to specifically cite the King James translation of the Bible for this particular chapter. The King James Bible remains well known, of course; it is also called the “Authorized Version,” having been created specifically for the Church of England. Yet rather than the violence and temporal markers of world and civil wars, or even the socioreligious strife of the Troubles, Barrington grounds conflict in the personal lives of three characters.

Barrington embeds Tamar in the miseries of a country where love can destroy its object. She calls it love, but David Osborne’s perspective on his daughter is clearly mixed with obsession and possessive jealousy. And it is David’s love that is at issue; she operates in the conspicuous void of the biblical narrative, the relationship between father and daughter, carefully

rewriting the relationship of Tamar and her lover to erase the incest and to diminish the rape, a deliberately managed choice which I shall explore more fully later. The incestuous theme is transferred instead, as is the biblical David's obsession with a single child: David Osborne is obsessed, not with a son and heir, but his single daughter, an inheritance. David's perspective on his daughter is patriarchal and objectifying:

> David Osborn was one of the strong farmers of that countryside. He was an honest man, a hard man and a man of God. Austere and just, he robbed no man and let no man rob him. He was proud of his good name, proud of the wealth he had gathered, proud of his flocks and herds and his wide fields. But he was proudest of his only child, his daughter Tamar. He loved her above all his possessions. (164)

From the first, Tamar is united in her Father's perspective with the land itself, listed as highest among his "possessions." This narratorial introduction makes it clear that David's attitudes are inflexible and self-righteous, and that his daughter is linked to his material wealth. This is emphasized when he is forced to contemplate her potential marriage: "he would straighten his broad shoulders in anger, for he hated the thought of giving his daughter in marriage to any man, or of any stranger having a claim on his beloved land" (165). Allowing her to marry would be contrary to his determination to "let no man rob him."

Fertile land, valuable beasts, and beautiful Tamar; Barrington draws the parallel with rather disturbing insistence. David's daily routine includes "reckoning the yield of this field or that, wondering what price the crops would fetch," after which he would

> watch his daughter Tamar milk, her lovely, young red head resting against the cow's silken flank and listen to her young voice as she sang some country song

> while the milk flowed in long regular squirts into the great can between her legs. (164)

There is a suggestive quality to this ritual, emphasized further when he ends each day closed in a deliberately darkened room with his daughter where "he read her long chapters concerning the anger of God against His people Israel" (165). This is emphasized again in the specific instance where Tamar dares to miss the voyeuristic ritual of milking to spend time with a man her own age. "David Osborne opened the Word of God and read to his daughter of the manifold transgressions of the people of Israel and of God's anger against them" (166). The subject matter further emphasizes the associations which David has between woman and land and sexuality; God's relationship to the nation Israel is frequently figured as the father-lover of a woman angry at her sexual promiscuity. See, for example, Ezekiel chapter sixteen; a single verse will suffice, though the whole is in keeping. "And I will judge thee, as women that break wedlock and shed blood are judged; and I will give thee blood in fury and jealousy" (Ezekiel 16:35). This seems to be what David Osborne might read nightly to his daughter in a dark, enclosed room to reinforce his ownership of her.

While at its most intense in David himself, he is not alone in the covetous association of the woman with wealth, either; it is saturated into society, the parallel of beast and bride. "When on market days [Tamar] stood by his side as he bought or sold cattle, many a one would say: 'I'll give ye what price ye like for that beast, David Osborne, if ye give me that girl for a luck penny'" (164). This recurs in the second scene between Tamar and John Cloughry, the young Catholic carpenter she begins a relationship with. Property-related jealousy fires the young man to press Tamar to agree to their eventual marriage, though they have met since school only the once, the first scene which ended with Cloughry winning Tamar's first kiss. "'Tamar, they were

talking about you. They were saying how rich yer father was and how ye would fall in for it all. James Watson said ye were the handsomest girl in seven parishes forbye." (167) Her material prospects come first, though John himself in their first meeting had focused on her freshly matured womanly body.

Yet while John Cloughry is fired with jealousy in response to others' designs on Tamar as part of a property, he professes his own disinterest in that property. John moves from securing an admission of love from Tamar to plans to craft their marriage bed from oak on the morrow. Still embedded in the material environment of possession, he at least couches it in terms of provision and support: "when it's finished we'll get married. I'll go til yer father and say I'm young and strong, an' if ye don't give me yer daughter, I'll take her portion or no portion" (168). He proclaims his disinterest in the association of Tamar with David Osborne's land, and seems to be sincere. Rather, John Cloughry seems more interested in Tamar as a person and as a sexual partner. Seems being the operative word: his promises are suspect, as he is constantly leaning upon her desire and pressing past her boundaries, and narrative events demonstrate that he feels regret once the immediate purpose of his promises is fulfilled. Cloughry is never violent, stops when physically and verbally rebuffed—yet Tamar is young, and he is urgent and persuasive; he may be sincere, but he promises more than he desires, and he commits statutory rape.

Barrington's language around their relationship carefully suggests a balance of Tamar's desire and her reluctance. Tamar's gaze and desire are important: society and men may render her an object, but Barrington gives Tamar Osborne a measure of sexual agency balanced by normalized social mores. From the beginning, Tamar's "wild eyes linger softly on [John's] beauty," giving to her even before he first speaks the right of desire; her desire to touch, too, is vivid and sensuous. In their first meeting in the lush green lane, she "laughed softly, running her

fingers through the grass" (163). In their second encounter, her restless fingers find his hair. He lays his head in her lap, stilling if not withdrawing in response to her demands for him to "stop." "She could not, for the life of her, resist touching it. She ran her fingers through those thick dark curls, feeling their strong growth" (167). Later in the same scene when they kiss, she is "running her fingers lovingly through his thick black hair" (168). Barrington uses gestural detail to suggest interiority throughout, rendering deftly in prose the nonverbal component of communication, using this too for a productive tension as she carefully navigates the relationship of the two. For Tamar, the daughter of David Osborne, certainly becomes desolate, though in her father's house. While he is the mechanism, John Cloughry is not precisely the agent.

John is eager but not violent. While he occasionally accepts firm refusal, he constantly presses past her stated boundaries and takes more license than allowed. When he teases or manipulates her into allowing him to kiss her, she "offered him her mouth, very shyly" and "he threw his arms about her and pressed her closely to him he kissed her wildly" (163). Though he takes more than offered, she voluntarily returns the next day when pressed. When she arrives, "he seized her… and carried her, half-protesting, to the grassy bank" (166): a little too much force on his part, a protest undercut by her participation, and a lush natural setting. When they have sex, it is in this same vein. John Cloughry proposes that she might conceive, and thereby obligate her father to permit their marriage, despite his virulent hatred of Catholics; she vehemently protests. He does not touch her aggressively: "Tamar cried aloud, pushing his hand from her" (168), and he does not resume touching her immediately though he continues to pressure her. He couches his argument with the pressure of stark necessity: "'there's no other way'" (168-9). This is the description of their coupling:

> "It wudna be right," she kept repeating, but each time she said it, her voice grew fainter and when at last he threw his arms around her, pressing his mouth to hers, uttering little soft noises that were not words, she did not resist. (169)

Barrington walks a delicate line here. Tamar verbally denies her consent on grounds of social mores, and John stops touching her when physically or verbally rebuffed. But her consent is never fully given; the final "negotiation" is with sounds that were not words—all of desire, and not of rational, deliberate consent.

John Cloughry is over-urgent, but not violent; the seriousness of his promises, however, is undercut by immediate regret after their sexual intercourse.

> When she looked at his face again, it was sad, sad and cold and still. He sat there beside her, his head in his hands, his knees drawn up to his chin. She… wondered why he sat thus away from her, distant and withdrawn. (169)

This is not the attitude of one anticipatory or confident of his plan's outcome. Nor, however, is it the attitude of one who has satisfied himself and is indifferent to social consequences which would fall unequally on the woman. While "it was now she who made advances… It was now she who pleaded" (168), John is not the Amnon of the Hebrew Bible, who commands the servants to "'put this woman out from me'" (2 Samuel 13:16). John makes an earnest attempt to follow through on his promises and marry her. Barrington uses a fascinating strategy here which reduces the number of characters and focuses the narrative; she contrives to shift John's role. "He kissed her, but distantly, as a brother might kiss" (169). John Cloughry's desire has clearly been satisfied, but he becomes the protective brother instead of committing the second sin of discarding the woman whose objections he has overridden and whose future he has jeopardized. Thus, in choosing to honorably attempt to satisfy his promise, he shifts into the role of Absalom.

Barrington uses matrimony differently from the other authors; though critiquing in the background the social necessity of matrimony and possession, she makes it clear that as a human member of society it is the happiest option for Tamar. Doing this, of course, makes all the more poignant the alternative fate which falls on her.

Barrington has Tamar's protector attempt to restore her to the security of social respectability, with the intent to provide for her. Refused by the father, he "called on Father Walsh and told him" (171) of their situation; denied by the priest and threatened with legal action, it is then, perforce, that he passes into exile. By making him honorably interested in her protection, Barrington can shift the focus back to Tamar's relationship with her father. John will go to "Glesga," Scotland's Glasgow, where the legal authority of John Osborne cannot follow him; even then he promises to "work hard there, that hard, dear, and make some money and then ye can come til me and we'll go til America thegither" (172). While Tamar clearly doubts his sincerity, and previous events have shown him fully able to make promises beyond his realization of their weight, he seems at least to intend honor. Contrast this earnest persistence with the indignant assertion of Brenner's Tamar that Absalom might have tried to secure matrimony if he wished to restore his sister to social security, and Jeffers's clear condemnation of marriage as a revolting concession to patriarchal structures. Faulkner makes marriage the object of Judith and the threat in the eyes of her relatives, too; there is a parallel then in his writing of racial bias and Barrington's interest in religious tension, though David Osborne's objection on the grounds of John Cloughry's Catholicism is undercut by his absolute jealousy of his daughter's possession.

David has the power to force John into exile, not because he holds any office, but Tamar is under the age of consent. This is another factor of the human grounding of the story, which

David still abuses rather than implementing it for affection. He has the authority to decide if Tamar may marry at this age. John Cloughry's final resort, the priest, "'said he cudna marry us, not without yer father's consent, let alone a dispensation'" (171). The national power is intensified in the paternal, because Tamar is legally a child: fifteen. She is at the cusp of womanhood, which John observes when he encounters her; this perhaps rebounds to his discredit, for though he claims it is "'time [Tamar] began'" to kiss men (163), remarking on her physical maturation, she tells him she is "'o'er young yet'" (167). The narrator gives her age, saying "though she was not yet sixteen years of age, every young man in the countryside cast longing glances at her" (164), which gives her age as a time of transition—one in which she is at once a possessed object for her father and object of desire for others, coming into her own agency but increasingly to be subject to the social pressures of patriarchal co-option of women's bodies through subduction of their sexuality into its social and biological propagation. John recognizes this when he says "'Ye're that lovely, Tamar! No man'll have peace til ye take someone'" (166), at once suggesting her right to choose and the necessity of her choice for the peace of men. This precise time gives David power over Tamar's vulnerability. John tells Tamar "'After I got home a message came from yer father sayin' that if I did not leave the country, he'd have me arrested, as ye were not sixteen years of age'" (171). Not as king but patriarch does David have the power to send John into exile, thus to quell his daughter's agency; when she threatens to run away he says "'I'd bring ye back and I'd ruin him. Ye're not yet sixteen years of age'" (174). David uses the legal definition of their relationship as statutory rape to exert his authority, making all the more poignant his disinterest in protecting Tamar or the actual complexities of her experience when he verbally attacks her for her deeds as voluntary actions. He asserts that "'the desire of the eye and the lust of the flesh'" has led her astray from

obedience to him, demonstrating that he perceives her not as the child to be sheltered which she is in the eyes of the law but as a sexual agent. She is a woman belonging to him, a sexual property to be jealously guarded rather than a human individual to be nurtured and protected until she can make her own choices.

David reveals throughout the abusive potential of absolute patriarchal power coupled with social prestige and religious dogma, and throughout his dialogue explicitly appropriates to himself the authority of doctrine. He uses his religion and his King James Bible to enforce his possessive control over Tamar, and uses religious prejudice given the weight of principle by way of excuse to separate her from her suitor; when she chooses to spend time with John Cloughry, he tells Tamar to "think shame on yerself" (165) for even merely social intercourse. When refusing his consent, he insists on his righteousness and divine authority: "'I'm a just man, Tamar, an' I obey the voice of God. "Be ye not equally yoked with unbelievers"'" (174). Tamar protests the extremity of this bias towards what is after all another sect of Christianity, but he insists. He exploits an existing social divide and the canonized authority of the Bible in order to support his own possessive mania. In so doing, his interpretation of religion also suggests a reverse resonance, that the character of the deity that could be used in such a way shares in his attitudes; after all, it's the existing attitude of God towards "his elect" that David insists on as the narrative for him and his daughter.

David also misuses the Bible badly, which Barrington uses for bitter irony. Just as he applies laws of statutory rape with an eye only for his authority and not for Tamar's wellbeing, so he applies a biblical narrative of rape only to reinforce the desolation he himself is insisting on for his daughter.[24] The text of the intimate reading after Tamar's lover asks for her hand is 2

---

[24] The date—or lack thereof—on this story prevents me from drawing any direct line of inheritance or inspiration to Jeffers's David Cauldwell and his autocratic, seemingly indifferent misapplication of biblical law.

Samuel 13, the chapter wherein "The Rape of Tamar" is found. He quotes the biblical Tamar: ""'And I, whither shall I cause my shame to go?'"" (173). This is her appeal to Amnon for clemency, which David uses to introduce his own absolute refusal of mercy. By using the passage thus, Barrington shifts from Amnon to David Osborne the culpability for not permitting Tamar the social healing of marriage; further, she shows David using the social stigma of shame to assert moral condemnation. Yet David describes her crime not in terms of sexual license, but offense against him.

> "This is a terrible thing ye have done, Tamar, bringing shame on yer *father's house*. An' yer punishment will be terrible both here and hereafter. The hand *of the Lord* is heavy against ye. All yer life will be spent in vain regrets and remorse. Through *disobedience* our first parents fell and were cast forth from their earthly paradise. Have *I* not said, Tamar, that ye should hold no conversation with a Catholic. *The Lord* has placed enmity between their seed and our seed. They do not belong to *His* Congregation. But the desire of the eye, and the lust of the flesh have drawn ye aside from the true path an' yer punishment is grievous.'" (emphasis mine,174)

David heavily mixes divine authority and his own throughout, and just as Israel's God rebukes her disobedience in language of sexual infidelity, David condemns Tamar's assertion of sexual agency in terms of disobedience to himself. He describes Tamar's terrible fate in terms of inevitable moral punishment, though he himself is responsible for insisting on it. Tellingly, his first item of reproof is that she has brought shame on her *father's house*: she has offended against the edifice of pride and possession which he prizes over her wellbeing, her happiness, even her life.

The narrator concludes the story with an image of David, crying. Yet this seeming sympathy is undercut by an emphasis on the dark implications of David's obsession, again using poignant direct biblical allusion. The last line is "for he loved his daughter, Tamar, exceedingly." This word "exceedingly" is a particular hallmark of the King James Bible, appearing too frequently for specific accounts—it implies excess or abundance. It appears in 2 Samuel 13:15, too: "Then Amnon hated her exceedingly; so that the hatred wherewith he hated her was greater than the love wherewith he had loved her." This is the hatred of a rapist for his victim; this is the love of a father for the daughter whom he would rather destroy than allow another man to challenge his ownership. Clearly the love wherewith David loves Tamar is greater, at least in power, than the love wherewith a father desires what is best for his child. The biblical language which David has used throughout to prop himself up as the embodiment of authority and the absolute embodiment of divine authority, human law, and paternal power to Tamar is now used by the narrator to reveal an emotion so strong it aligns directly with the utter depravity of a rapist who drives his victim out into public shame, fully aware of her fate and fully hardened against her help.

Barrington creates a compelling narrative and a poignant social critique while maintaining a vivid focus on the emotions and experience of her central character, the woman. While the narrator sometimes gives broader perspectives on her father, the prose is mainly focalized through Tamar; her youth, her desire, her indecision, and her suffering are the principle matters of the plot. Though David's obsession shapes the story, giving it a disturbing dimension critical of patriarchal power, he exists in relation to her while she presses for agency and identity outside of his control. In part, this vivid narrow focus is an intrinsic element of the short story form, especially in contrast to the expansive circular novel of Faulkner or Jeffers's near-epic

narrative poem. Barrington renders the future as vividly as the biblical narrative but builds a more substantial humanity for her character through rich sensory and emotive detail. Barrington explores Tamar and David foremost, transforming a relationship in the biblical narrative most poignant in its absence. Tamar becomes an individual young woman, bereft of hope in all the bloom of youth and the innocence of natural desire, whose controlling, obsessive father would rather destroy her than accept the loss of her value to another man or reconciliation for the ancient socioreligious divide. Barrington uses explicit biblical allusion to do this, emphasizing at the very end the moment of complete destruction by one with most obligation to restore. While Tamar represents the crisis of the land, she does so in a naturalized manner, and the narrative deliberately critiques those men who consider women and land equally objects of possession and measures of pride; she is vivid and sympathetic, and her suffering, though contributing to a biting critique of patriarchal power, is also a vivid and provocative personal disaster.

John Cloughry disappears from the narrative, murdering no one and starting no rebellions. Barrington layers up biblical elements upon each other, but rather than to expand like Faulkner she uses this to heighten the focus by combining characters; she discards entirely the fraternal incest narrative that so fascinated Jeffers and Faulkner, subsuming that dark threat into paternal obsession instead. Tamar will be desolate, but not "in her brother's house," not a symbol for future succession conflicts. This fate too is focalized first through her, even before her father pronounces it. "She saw the long, weary years stretching before her, lonely, hopeless, grey years. She realized some of the suffering which lay before her and knew that henceforth she was an outcast" (173). This is a girl so young that her father can legally charge her lover with statutory rape; the emphasis on her youth contrasts strongly with the apotheosized Tamar, and with Judith Sutpen who as a child manifests her father's character by voluntarily sneaking into her father's

barn to watch the brutal boxing matches he held. This naivete contrasts, too, with Brenner's immortal and incensed survivor, and even with Brenner's characterization of Tamar as capable of strategizing the publicity of her suffering. She is conscious of the social perspective on her choices, telling her lover she is over young, that premarital sex is wrong—but trusts too much. By grounding it in personal tragedy, Barrington upends the negligence of the biblical narrators who use her desolation to further patriarchal narration. Barrington does not offer to recover Tamar by transcending the social fabric in which she exists, showing her instead human in her suffering as well as her pleasure. The story exists for Tamar, as the daughter of David, too human in her dimensional wildness to be merely a symbol.

Conclusion: Desolation's Descendants

Athalya Brenner directs our attention to the marginalization of Tamar in her own story, the emphasis on the male characters and their relationships, and the utter failure of those male characters to protect or heal Tamar. While it is perhaps the unique synchronicity of familial and political disaster, of incest and of rape, that draws subsequent writers, each has to deal with this structure of masculine emphasis in their own way. Often a particular relational dynamic seems to generate literary descendants for the desolate Tamar, either hers with a father or brother or society, that between brothers. It becomes apparent that while the original narrators are at fault for subordinating the personal to the political, these modern authors—perhaps as a consequence of the trends of their time, towards expansive interiority—achieve their most poignant political, social, or religious critiques by foregrounding the personal effects of political systems.

Jeffers is interested in the desolation itself, overwriting it but also overwriting the rape that caused it; Tamar's relationship to all of patriarchal society dominates, but if the diffusion of responsibility into a structure and the diminution of the men themselves allow Tamar to loom

large, they make her enormity almost grotesque in its exaggerated symbolism. Jeffers seizes upon incest to figure human self-obsession, such that rape takes a backseat—Tamar is active, if not enthusiastic, in driving the narrative. This is a certain way of centering Tamar, but in overwriting her with cosmos and in destroying her for wholesale vengeance, Jeffers's one apology is that he, at least, gives her a decent burial, and grass to grow where this rather twisted Tamar once flowered.

Faulkner is interested primarily in that patriarchal structure, the father and the two sons, replicating the marginalization of the woman. Nevertheless, his Judith participates in the structure, if only as a subordinate symbol. She figures once again the purity and value of a high-status virgin, threatened by some kind of evil, but Faulkner exploits the emphasis of the original narrative to show the near-absurdity emphasizing mere racial mixture as a substitute. Faulkner's most masterful adaptation of the biblical narrative is in layering up and collapsing various relational configurations of Abraham, Saul, David, Jonathan, Absalom, and Amnon; when he redefines the terms of Tamar's victim-status, it is not to restore her, but to refocus the narrative on those who abuse or fail her.

Margaret Barrington's interest is in that void in the narrative, the father who cared too much for one child, and apparently not at all for another. She shifts the vectors of incest and culpability, not erasing but simplifying the rapist and protector brothers in a single character, who has no incestuous relationship with Tamar. In doing so she cultivates a disturbing undertone of desire and obsession in the paternal relationship, creating a political and religious critique that nonetheless is so subtle in her prose style as to focus narrowly on Tamar's experience within that structure and the effect on her of this dangerous absolute power.

In each work the form is important: Brenner's hybrid allows her some balance of critical and creative process, while Jeffers's near-epic allows for Greek tragedy, heavily coloring the tone and thematic schema of his work, as well as the character of the "heroine." Faulkner's novel allows expansion, but his personal style of recursive frustration denies linear progression, instead layering up the attitudes and events of the individuals through the gradual relation of the frame narrator. Barrington's short story with its lush but reserved impersonal prose renders experience as the foremost lens upon the larger political interests of the works. I am grateful that my works happened to arrange themselves into this representative sample of forms; though I did not select my criteria for this reason, those being for twentieth-century modern-set works that explicitly reference their biblical roots, it is a happy and interesting consequence. The story of Tamar has inspired retelling in other forms and other times; in addition to theological criticism as part of the biblical canon,[25] there have been many literary works expanding the "original Tamar's" story. Had I included these, I would have to consider the work of a seventeenth-century Spanish playwright,[26] a working-class eighteenth- century Englishwoman poet,[27] and the South African novelist Dan Jacobson as well as playwright John Schaeffer—the novel *The Rape of Tamar* and play adaptation *Yonadab* even fall within my arbitrary timeframe.

Had I the time, I might certainly have investigated them with great pleasure, as well as the legacy of the works here that have entered the canon; a novel *Absalom's Daughters* responds to some of the same critiques I have raised against Faulkner's work, as well as the racial dimension that he introduces. The author of *Absalom's Daughters* uses the mechanism of a

---

[25] See Joy Schroeder, *Dinah's Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

[26] See Tirso de Molina's *The Rape of Tamar,* trans. Paul Whitworth (London: Oberon Books, 1998).

[27] See Elizabeth Hands's "The Death of Amnon," ed. Karen Jacobsen in *Nature's Ban: Women's Incest Literature* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996. 29-56).

sequel, however, presuming illegitimate children for Henry Sutpen; the others I have mention retell the original biblical narrative with their own expansions, interpretations, and forms. They, like Brenner, do not quite indulge the liberty which my chosen works take by choosing to re-inscribe Tamar on their own modern contexts and political concerns. The limitation of the original context is productive in a different direction, but perhaps the most fascinating thing in the works I chose has been their choices in changing the fundamental terms of the narrative, and the interests those changes imply. The Rape of Tamar does not always stay the *rape* of Tamar. But the transformation is always productive of new meaning, even if troubling in its terms; in addition to the dramas of rape and incest, the political dimension which so easily overshadows Tamar's own fate draws later authors to this text. The premise of *Absalom's Daughters,* seeking to respond to the racial concerns Faulkner raises and the marginalization of women, certainly confirms what I have found here: the problems of a text are perhaps its most potent generative elements, defining the relationship of the present authors with the past work.

The Bible, of course, has contributed material either by allusion or by adaptation to perhaps the majority of literature that follows in the western tradition. Rather than merely reading backwards from modern literature to the Bible and letting cultural assumptions about its interests stand, I put those assumptions into conversation with the more acute interrogations of Jewish feminist biblical criticism allows for a pointed analysis of that inheritance. Brenner's frame narrative relies on the communicative expertise of her "convener," who proves to be "the witch of Endor," a canonical biblical necromancer who summons the supposedly immortal women to an academic conference. Brenner's text has allowed me to "convene" disparate authors even within a narrow window of time under her academic authority; using this method, one can begin to see the possibilities for assembling further such conversations. Milton might sit

on the panel on the narrative of the Fall, but Athalya Brenner's Eve or perhaps Esther Fuch's voice should arbitrate the discussion.

Works Cited

Barrington, Margaret. "David's Daughter, Tamar," in *David's Daughter, Tamar.* Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1982. 162-174.

Bledstein, Adrien J. "Female Companionships: If the Book of Ruth Were Written by a Woman…" in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth,* ed. Athalya Brenner. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993. 116-133.

Brenner, Athalya. *I Am… Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.

Brophy, Robert J. *Robinson Jeffers: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol in His Narrative Poems.* Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973.

Brouer, Deirdre. "Tamar's Voice of Wisdom and Outrage in 2 Samuel 13," in *Priscilla Papers* 28.4, 2014. 10-13.

Carpenter, Frederic I. *Robinson Jeffers.* New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc. 1962.

Claassens, L Juliana M. "Trauma and Recovery: A New Hermeneutical Framework for the Rape of Tamar (2 Samuel 13)," in *The Bible Through the Lens of Trauma.* Atlanta: SLB Press, 2016. 177-192.

Coffee, Jessie McGuire. *Faulkner's Un-Christlike Christians: Biblical Allusions in the Novels.* Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983.

Coogan, Michael D, ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, 4th ed.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

De Molina, Tirso. *Tamar's Revenge.* Trans. John Lyon. Westminster: Aris & Phillips, 1988.

Faulkner, William. *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Random House, Inc.: 1964.

---. “Remarks on *Absalom, Absalom!*” in *William Faulkner’s* Absalom, Absalom!*: A Critical Casebook.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Gray, Mark. “Amnon: A Chip Off the Old Block? Rhetorical Strategy in 2 Samuel 13.7-15 The Rape of Tamar and the Humiliation of the Poor,” in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament,* 77: 1998. 39-54.

Hands, Elizabeth. “The Death of Amnon,” in *Nature’s Ban: Women’s Incest Literature,* ed. Karen Jacobsen McLennan. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996. 29-56.

Hatcher, Harlan. “The Torches of Violence,” in *The English Journal,* 23.2. National Council of Teachers of English, 1934.

Hill, Andrew E. “A Jonadab Connection in the Absalom Conspiracy?” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30.4: 1987. 387-390.

Hobson, Fred. *William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! A Casebook.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Irwin, John T. *Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge: A Speculative Reading of Faulkner.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975.

Jacobson, Dan. *The Rape of Tamar.* London: Secker & Warburg, 1970.

Jeffers, Robinson. *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers Vol. 1 1920-1928,* ed. Tim Hunt. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.

Feldman, Suzanne. *Absalom’s Daughters.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC. 2016.

Fuchs, Esther. “Jewish Feminist Approaches to the Bible,” in *Women and Judaism: New Insights and Scholarship”.* New York: New York University Press, 2009. 25-40.

---. *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

Marks, Herbert, ed. *English Bible: The Old Testament, King James Version.* New York: Norton, 2012.

Priscilla Papers, www.cbeinternational.org/content/priscilla-papers-academic-journal. CBE International. Accessed 4 April, 2018.

Ross, Stephen M. "Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and the David Story: A Speculative Contemplation," in *The David Myth in Western Literature.* West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1980.

Schaffer, Peter. *Lettuce and Lovage and Yonadab.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989.

Schroeder, Joy A. *Dinah's Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Christian Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007.

Trible, Phyllis. "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 41.1, 1973. 30-48.

---. "Tamar: The Royal Rape of Wisdom," *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives.* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984. 36-63.

Westbrook, April D. *'And He Will Take Your Daughters…': Woman Story and the Ethical Evaluation of Monarchy in the David Narrative.* New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015.

Zaller, Robert, Ed. *Centennial Essays for Robinson Jeffers.* Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1991.

Appendix A: Summary of Robinson Jeffers's Poem, "Tamar"

In the first half, the brother Lee Cauldwell is injured, and he and the sister Tamar grow closer during his convalescence. He repudiates his youthful excesses and attempts to enjoy a closeness to home, nature, and his sister. He tells a companion of his drunken days, Will Andrews, to stop courting Tamar; there is already a growing awareness that his jealousy is more than fraternal, though Lee resists his desire. Tamar confronts him with desire, and they sleep together. When she realizes she is pregnant, Tamar turns a chance encounter with Will Andrews into seduction that she may have an excuse for her condition. For a time, she maintains both relationships without either man having knowledge of the other, but her self-loathing reaches a crisis-point. Tamar turns to her aunts. One is dead and two live with the family: Helen, Tamar's father's dead sister, has taunted Tamar before (using Aunt Stella, Tamar's dead mother's sister, as a medium) with the knowledge that Tamar and Lee were foredoomed to their relationship by Helen's with David. Tamar takes Stella to the seashore at night to privately contact Helen, and Jinny (the other sister of the dead mother, mentally handicapped) comes with them as Stella is her keeper. Instead of receiving advice, Tamar suffers a traumatic violation by the spirits of the earlier inhabitants of the land, and a miscarriage occurs; this is the turning-point of the poem.

When Tamar recovers from her three- or four-day coma her father David claims Levitical law spares Tamar and punishes Lee; therefore, Lee is to be sent to war (World War One). Tamar, who now sees the house as a locus of abomination and herself beyond hope, begins antagonizing the men around her, controlling them with their emotions; she forces David to admit he desires her, seemingly in order to antagonize the mocking spirit of her dead aunt, but disdains his embraces. Lee speaks to her with pity, but, unable to endure pity, she turns it to anger and then disgust by accusing him of abandoning her (by going to war) and proclaiming her sexual

relationship with Will Andrews, saying it predated that with Lee (which he knows not to be true) and that the baby was his. She forces Lee, who despairs of the mind-games and determines to simply leave, to lure Andrews to the house to confirm whether he was responsible for setting a fire in the house which Lee extinguished on the night of the miscarriage—which Tamar herself had set before consulting the spirits through Stella. Tamar eggs Andrews and Lee into a physical confrontation, which David attempts to dissipate; Stella, possessed by Helen, attempts to get David away from the situation. This leaves the mentally handicapped sister of David and Helen, Jinny, alone with a candle; she sets fire to first herself and then the house. None escape. Stella was trying to save David, David praying helplessly, Andrews reactively eviscerated by Lee, and Tamar physically preventing Lee from climbing out the window. The final lines are an image of grass growing over the ruins.