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The Carnavalesque-Grotesque in the Story of the Levite's Concubine in *Judges* 19- 21

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by

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Despite the tragic elements of the last story of *Judges*, we nevertheless find in it many of the features of what Bakhtin in his *World of Rabelais*¹ called the “carnavalesque-grotesque.” The comedy, however, is very black.² The following is a list of those features: 1. Many Body parts. 2. Dismemberment and mutilation. 3. Food, wine, and banquets. 4. Degradation, or the downward slope. 5. Positive aspect of this degradation. 7. Topsy-turvy world. 8. Wrong use of common objects. 9. Suspension of normal rules of behavior. 10. Disguises and masks. 11. Exaggeration of numbers. 12. Heterogeneity. 13. Madness. 14. Parody, travesty, and burlesque. 15. Irony. 16. Satire. 17. Riddles, puzzles, and games. 18. Women as destructive of men or as foils. 19. Focus on the common people. 20. Accurate topography of the world. 21. Quirky nomenclature (the adjective is mine).

The last story in *Judges*, the story of the Levite's Concubine, has all the features: eating, drinking wine, feasting, carousing, license, abuse of all kinds, brutality, a great many killings, references to many body parts, bodily functions (those normally conducted in private and not referred to in public except in literature like this), sexuality, rape, dismemberment of the body (letting the insides come outside), degradation (of people, society, religion), satire (of roles, religion, its representatives and its followers), irony, travesty and (akin to travesty), a great deal of intertextuality (both between the stories themselves and between stories in *Judges* and stories in *Genesis*), which may be regarded as a version of Bakhtin's “dialogic.” As in the carnivalesque-grotesque, many conundrums are posed and humorously solved in *Judges*. Not really funny, and certainly not at all like *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, the grotesque elements are explicit, but its humor is latent. But the carnivalesque element can be brought out if and when the storyteller in his performance has the desire and the ability to do it, as well as by the reader who is not completely blindsided by the horror of the unfolding events.

In all the stories of *Judges*, there are always two levels of meaning, the serious and the comic. The comic with its carnivalesque features holds the attention of the storyteller's audience, while the serious does it work for a society needing to judge its leaders and their actions and derive from them a system of

law and ethics. The broad strokes of comedy would appeal to the Everyman in the audience, while the serious aspect of the story appeals to the elite, who understood society's weaknesses all too well. Of course, in a live performance of the stories, whether the comedy is unleashed or suppressed is under the control of the storyteller. He could play it either way. In this paper we will see how the aim of the comedy has an important use: to highlight the flaws of each character and situation, so that the audience can judge them. Thus—and very much *unlike* Rabelais—the storyteller of *Judges* has a serious moral or judgment to wring out of the uninhibited actions of the characters.

The story of the Levite's Concubine³ opens with a carousing scene between the Concubine's father and her husband (the Levite) (19.4-9). The Levite is a religious teacher who theoretically should be dispensing information among the Israelites about religious duties and moral law. In this story he is doing nothing of the kind. His wife has "played the harlot," and has run away from him in anger and fled back to her father. And the Levite has come after her, not to chastize or punish her, as perhaps the social rules of the time demand, but to "speak kindly" to her—which sounds good, but which perhaps was not the right thing for a Levite (a religious man) to do just then, as it appears like an acceptance of her behavior. But instead of tending to his duties, -the Levite and his father-in-law are too busy bonding over their glasses of wine to think of anything else. The scene is amusing because of the way the good-natured father-in-law prevails upon the all-too-willing Levite to "spend the night and let your heart be merry" eating, drinking, and sleeping there night after night after night. In the Bible, the word "merry" or "enjoying oneself" is code for drunkenness.⁴ There are a number of such scenes in *Judges*, in which nothing good happens after people get drunk.⁵ The two bonding men keep drinking until on the fifth day, the slothful Levite has delayed so long that it is too late in the day for any person not in his right mind to depart. He cannot reach home, but at nightfall will have to stop on the way and depend upon the hospitality of strangers. He needed a designated driver. Nevertheless, he unwisely leaves.

In Gibeah, a Benjaminite town, the Levite, ignored by the inhospitable Benjaminites, finally is accepted into the house of an Ephraimite, himself an outsider there. Again, the Levite sits down with his host to carouse. And while they are eating and drinking, "base men" (i.e., sodomites) surround the house, shouting for the host to turn the visitor over to them, that they might "know him"—a biblical euphemism meaning "have sex with him." Fearing for his life, or at least for his "honor," the Levite pushes the Concubine out to them in his place, she is gang-raped, and killed. Modern readers are shocked, horrified, and disgusted.

At this distance in time, we cannot tell how the male audience would react to the homosexuality of the base men, but male listeners to this tale might be titillated by the perverse sexuality—a carnivalesque-grotesque feature—and might argue loudly with the elite afterwards about the Levite's behavior. Possibly the Everyman figure would approve of it, the gang rape of the woman being the lesser of two evils. She had "played the harlot." She got what was coming to her. But the elite, those who knew the story of Lot in Genesis, would realize why it was abhorrent. For this whole scene is a parody, or even a travesty (i.e., a

debasement), of the Lot story in Genesis.⁶ As with many of the parodies in the book, only the elite, educated listener to the story might notice, understand, and appreciate this intertextuality..

What are the differences between the two stories? And why were the two daughters in the Lot story spared from the fate of the Concubine, while the Concubine was not?

First, Lot's visitors were two angels (though Lot was not aware of that at the time). Second, Lot prepared a feast for the visitors, but it did not include wine. No one got befuddled. Third, Lot was prepared to sacrifice the best thing he had (his daughters), but he was not doing it to save himself (as the Levite was), but to save his guests. Fourth, Lot did not push out his daughters. Fifth, when the base men started to move against Lot, the angels saved *him*—and probably because he was clearly a good man, while the Levite in the story in *Judges* was not.

As to why the Concubine was not saved in the story of the Levite, it is first, that she herself was not innocent, and second, the Levite had to accept the consequences of his act. He had to learn, like all the rest of us, that we might not have any ministering angels hanging around to save us in the nick of time and that we had best keep our heads clear so that we can act reasonably and well in an emergency. Without the Lot story, we cannot divine this very clear judgment of the Levite's behavior as dissolute, cowardly, and hypocritical and as the Concubine's earlier behavior (playing the harlot) as wrong—though I am not sure that listeners to this paper might agree with all or any of these judgments.

This is not only intertextuality, it is parody. Parody especially of some revered text is a characteristic of the carnivalesque-grotesque. And intertextuality of this kind is what might be considered a version of the “dialogic” in Bakhtin, though perhaps Bakhtin would not agree.

At the beginning of Chapter 20, when the Levite reports to the Israelites the heinous crime that has been committed, demanding punishment of the wicked Benjaminites, he deliberately omits the crucial fact that *he* was responsible for pushing the Concubine out to the rapists. And he lied to the assembly, significantly “in the presence of Yhwh” (20.1, 5), when he said that the mob had threatened to kill him. These differences between the way it happened and the way he told the story would not be lost on the audience because they (unlike the Israelites listening to the Levite) had just heard the ending of Chapter 19 from the storyteller and knew exactly what had happened. Perhaps, upon hearing the false report, like the children at a Punch and Judy show in Luxembourg Park in Paris, the audience would rise up and shout and raise their fists at this double falsehood.

Finally, the Levite relates how he cut the Concubine's body into twelve “cut” parts—a gory detail important to the grotesque nature of the scene. Again, he leaves out one important fact, that “he took a knife and laid hold of the Concubine's body,” a savage detail that when omitted softens the story a bit. And remember, that immediately preceding this, the audience had “seen” the Levite commit this very heinous act—having chopped up the Concubine's body just like a butcher preparing an animal for a banquet or a burnt offering to Yhwh⁷ and afterwards sent one body part to each of the twelve tribes. Carving up the dead body was a sacrilege even more unspeakable than the gang rape and murder of the Concubine, as

we know from the reaction of the Israelites, for when they Israelites receive the body parts, they respond with horror: “Nothing like this has *ever* happened or been seen from the day when the sons of Israel came up from the land of Egypt to this day” (19.30), commenting, it would seem, on both kinds of abuse of the body. After the Levite tells of his act, he remarks that he did it, “because [the Benjaminites] committed this lewd and disgraceful act in Israel,” not realizing that his remark applied to *both* of his “lewd and disgraceful” acts (of pushing out a defenseless woman and of cutting up her even more helpless body).

Body parts are a favorite feature in the carnivalesque-grotesque, and as Bakhtin points out, in the dismembering of the body, the insides of the body are revealed. Here, with our imagination intact, we can see them all. The whole book of *Judges* is about the body, its various parts, and the dismembering and mutilation of it.⁸ As Seth Lerer put it, “the site of comedy is the body.”⁹ [See Endnote 8 for a list of body parts in *Judges* and the number of times each is mentioned.]

Also comic (although not laughable) is the irony that in the feud and civil war that develop, “all-Israel” is as much to blame as the guilty tribe of Benjamin. True, the Law states: “You shall extirpate evil from your midst,” and it is true that the Benjaminites refused to turn over the felons to the indignant Israelite delegation as they ought to have done. The Israelites in their anger impetuously and blindly rush into war. They should have been fighting off the foreign enemy, but instead have turned upon themselves. At last they are “united as one” (20.11), the very thing they should have been, but were not, in all the earlier stories—but this time in a horribly reprehensible and divisive enterprise—annihilating a fellow tribe.

That the Israelites (like the Danites of the preceding story) inquire of Yhwh does not really alter this interpretation. Boling (who is looking at this as history, not fiction) thinks that the Israelites made the mistake of using “archaic institutions”¹⁰—i.e., using the *ban* against *Israelite* towns. Other commentators have questioned the authenticity of the inquiry (which was probably done by lots). But what happens afterwards is so clearly wrong that the storyteller himself went to great trouble to try to show why Yhwh (in the inquiries) seemed to back this clearly disastrous civil war, but really did not.

One possibility is that the “inquiries” were later interpolated by an editor in order to make the operation seem *kosher*, but a more likely possibility is that the inquiries were conducted improperly. The enlightened half of the ancient audience would be able to make a judgment call. If it was improper, the audience could laugh at the way the Israelites bungle things (the dramatic irony of the audience knowing something that the characters do not know). If it was proper, they might consider “inquiring” a pretext and an amusing act of hypocrisy. And if Yhwh was not in 100% agreement about the decision to go to war, it would explain why Yhwh punished the Israelites in their first two forays against the Benjaminites by giving them so many casualties. That the situation imposes this kind of reasoning on the audience is also part of the humor. The stories are interactive: they make the reader or audience ponder the difficulties of, and reasons for, everything. And remember, the storyteller never intervenes to interpret any story for us.

To begin with, the Israelites have 400,000 armed troops (mentioned twice: 20.2, 17) against a mere 26,700 Benjaminites (20.15-16). As history, these are impossible figures, but are eminently suitable as

carnavalesque-grotesque. The point is, the Israelites, who vastly outnumber the very small tribe of Benjaminites, should have had no trouble defeating them. And in the lore of the Old Testament, those on the “right” side should win. But they don’t. In the first two forays, they are crushingly defeated. Why? We examine the text to find out what went wrong.

In the first inquiry ((20.18), the Israelites simply asked, “Who shall go up first?” The answer to the question: “.Judah.” They go, and the Israelites lose 22,000 men, to zero Benjaminites,¹¹ showing that some mistake in the inquiry had occurred (probably that they assumed too much—that they should go to war).

In the second inquiry (20.23), they ask: “Should we fight against our brother, Benjamin, again?” Yhwh’s answer was: “Go up against them.” This time the Israelites lost 18,000 men, again to zero Benjaminites (showing that some mistake in the inquiry had occurred, this time, that the Israelites again assumed too much—that they should fight, and naturally against the Benjaminites).

The third inquiry (20.26-28) is significantly presided over by Phinehas, a celebrated priest, and done after fasting (the sole reference in *Judges*) and “burnt offerings and peace offerings to Yhwh.” They at last ask: “Should we fight against our brother Benjamin, again *or should we stop?*” This question gives Yhwh a choice. Yhwh then answers. “Go! Tomorrow I will give them into your hand” (20.28). After some fancy ambushes and skirmishes, in which 30 Israelites are killed, the Benjaminites lose 26,100 men (20.35), with 600 of them escaping to the Rock of Rimmon,¹² while Israelites then kill all the inhabitants of the Benjaminite cities and burn the cities to the ground. Like Samson in the cave of Etam, the remnants of the tribe of Benjamin hang out at the Rock of Rimmon for four months, in dudgeon, while the victorious Israelites debate their fate.

Having finally gotten their own role straightened out, the Israelites nevertheless continue making mistakes, which we in the audience are expected to spot without being told.

First, the Israelites, angry at the Benjaminites and wanting to punish them, made a vow: “No one of us shall give his daughter in marriage to Benjamin” (21.1). But in the very next sentence, when they realize that this means that the Benjaminites will not have good Israelite wives, they sit down and weep pitifully, asking, “O Yhwh, God of Israel, why has this come to pass in Israel, that there should be today one tribe lacking in Israel?” (21.2-3). This is another case of faulty logic and of characters “ignoring the future for the sake of the present”¹³ or of slackening “in the attention that is due to life.”¹⁴ But they realize their mistake and quickly try to repair it.

And they said, “There must be heirs for the survivors of Benjamin, in order that a tribe be not blotted out from Israel. Yet we cannot give any of our daughters to them as wives.” For the Israelites had sworn, “Cursed be anyone who gives a wife to Benjamin” (21.18).

The problem now facing them is similar to those in the plays of Aristophanes and Molière, in which the characters have a “happy idea” in the first scene, but in the very next scene, are beset by the law of unintended consequences. Everything goes topsy-turvy—one of Bakhtin’s favorite terms.¹⁵ The happy idea for solving the Israelites’ dilemma requires that they assume the Trickster role and find a way out of their

comical self-contrived trap, to do something that they have vowed not to do, give good Israelite wives to the bad Benjaminites—by appearing not to be doing this.

To get them wives without forswearing their vow, the Israelites think up a pretext for declaring a ban on Jabesh-Gilead: and decide that (like Meroz in the *Song of Deborah*, which the angel cursed) it did not respond to the muster and should be punished.¹⁶ This entailed total annihilation of an ally, if not one of their own cities. On a literal, realistic level, it is no more amusing that Jabesh-Gilead is “utterly” destroyed than that the innocent city of Laish in the preceding story was “utterly” destroyed by the migrating idolatrous Danites (18.27) (an intertextuality intended to supply a similar destruction for comparison, to the disgrace of the Israelites in the present story).

While Jabesh-Gilead may have done wrong, the punishment of that city was a worse wrong: it was surely excessive in that the *ban* (or *herem*, i.e., the *complete* destruction of a town according to the rules of Holy War) was intended for enemy towns, not for Israelite or allied towns.

Next, having procured only 400 women, they have to figure out a clever way get 200 more. Someone had a bright idea:

So they said, “Look, the yearly feast of [Yhwh] is taking place at Shiloh. . . .” And they instructed the Benjaminites, saying, “Go and lie in wait in the vineyards, and watch; when the young women [daughters] of Shiloh come out to dance in the dances, then come out of the vineyards and each of you carry off [seize] a wife for himself from the young women [daughters] of Shiloh, and go to the land of Benjamin” (21.17-21).

Unlike Jephthah (who made the mistake of keeping his rash vow), but like Micah’s mother in the preceding story (who blithely repudiated her rash vow in order to save her son from a deadly curse but who nevertheless incurred the curse, as the audience would realize from Micah’s later losses) and like children, they seem to be unable to connect cause with effect. Oblivious as to who was to blame for the annihilation of so many Benjaminites and now trying to mend the mistake of their rash vow, they are making a second, and more egregious, mistake.

Anticipating that the girls’ fathers will protest this plan, they prepare a charming rationalization: “...we will say to them, ‘Be generous and allow us to have them; because we did not capture in battle a wife for each man. But neither did you incur guilt by giving your daughters to them.’” (NRS, 21.22).

Now they have saved themselves both from the curse of forswearing their vow (they think) and of having their daughters seized in battle. Whoops. Saved from what? (Go back and check on the language they used in the preceding verse: they told the Benjaminites to “seize” their daughters—so the daughters could avoid having been “captured in battle”—reminding us of the female captives (called “wombs” in Hebrew) in *the Song of Deborah* that Sisera’s mother was anticipating and gloating over before she learned that her warrior son Sisera was not going to bring them [5.30].)

And how different was it for the daughters to be “wombs” captured in a vineyard?

[The fact that it is a “vineyard” resonates with many other vineyards mentioned in the book. Was it not the product of the vineyard which got the daughters into this mess in the first place? Was not Gideon beating out wheat in a winepress to hide from the invading Midianites? And are not the Benjaminites to be

likewise hiding, and under the vines that produce wine? –We must credit the storyteller with knowing what he was doing with all these intertextualities. They are sacrificing not one daughter, but 600, and oddly enough, like Jephthah for a rash vow.

Both the inquiries and the dilemma of the vow are conundrums—puzzles with surprise solutions—a feature with which both the carnivalesque-grotesque and *Judges* are strewn, puzzles as knotty as Samson's (which turns out not to be the only puzzle in this book).

There are at least three serious errors here.

First, their revenge against the Benjaminites is excessive. The Law clearly states “an eye for an eye,” as the storyteller had carefully pointed out in the first episode of the book—the punishment of Adoni-Bezel (1.7). You don't take revenge on a whole tribe for the loss of one woman (though this also is the case in the *Iliad*).¹⁷

Second, it was wrong to forswear a vow, no matter how regrettable the vow. The Israelites are trying to reverse their vow (something they consider heinous) not for the well-being of the virgins, but to save themselves from the curse that will fall on them if they give their daughters to the Benjaminites directly. Again, like the Levite, they are doing something considered heinous for selfish reasons.

Finally, the Israelites in their zeal were oblivious to the fact that not only did they invent a preposterous way of supplying wives, but also that their methodology *contradicts* their moral case against Benjamin, in ironically permitting the Benjaminites to commit the same lawless act at the end of the story that they were punishing them for at the beginning! It is like the “wrong logic” in Aristophanes' *The Clouds*.

Unlike the modern reader, the Everyman in the ancient audience would appreciate and enjoy the casuistry involved in reversing the vow, and no doubt laugh over the cleverness of the trick and dismiss the idea of its being a false application of legal principles. The serious elite, however—those understanding the rules of their own society—would be horrified at the specious reasoning, might cry out “foul” and call for a dire punishment on the Israelites—a punishment which does not come in this book, but which can be said to come much later, in the captivities of Israel (by Assyria) in 722 BCE and Judah (by Babylonia) in 598.

For the alert reader or listener to the storyteller, the giving away of daughters by their fathers in the last of four father-daughter relationships in an intricate series intertextual stories in *Judges*: Caleb gives his daughter away to Othniel with what might be construed a rash promise (1.12); Jephthah gives his daughter away to Yhwh as a burnt offering (11.39); the Timnite's father (Samson's father-in-law) gives his daughter (Samson's wife) away to Samson's friend (15.2), while the Concubine's father can be said to have been irresponsible plying the Levite with drink before he left, when he was in no condition to guarantee the daughter's safety (19.8-9). In being overzealous in his hospitality to his son-in-law, the father was equally guilty for the terrible consequences to his daughter.

This series of tales demonstrates “a downward motion,” so important, in Bakhtin's opinion, in the carnivalesque-grotesque. The first story is the ideal—the only ideal story in the book, but oddly enough, a

story about a “rash” promise. Afterwards things go from bad to the very worst. About all this, the storyteller remains silent. He is counting on us to pick up the clues. (See the Table of fathers and daughters at the end of this paper. There are also two mother/son stories and several father/son episodes in the book, but no mother/daughter stories. This book is about family values.)

The last scene is sheer comedy (though perhaps not for the daughters of Shiloh). One smiles at the cleverness of it, despite oneself. It is another of those twists of plot that are baffling to the reader or listener, until one accepts them as comic.

From the point of view of Everyman in the audience, the last verses of *Judges* (21.17-21) might be considered a merry caper, especially if we imagine all the participants to have first partaken of a goodly amount of new wine at the festival, and even more amusing if we imagine each of these crude left-handed Benjaminites to be an Ehud with a difference.¹⁸

Another source of amusement is to reflect that Saul's mother (or grandmother) in *1 Samuel* must have been one of the young women from Shiloh or Jabesh-Gilead. Saul (whose capital was Gibeah, the offending city in the Levite story) was the offspring (or grandson) of one of these oversexed Benjaminites. The mismatching of these people also supplies one of the explanations why the ancient writers thought Yhwh allowed Saul to fail as a king.

On a realistic level, the rape is repulsive to us, and the ending of the book should have been repulsive to the ancient Israelites *who reacted so violently, after all, to the rape of the Concubine*. Yet the ending is presented as a one of madcap joy.

The humor consists not of the actual rape, but of the *paradox* that the Benjaminites raped *one* woman (who was not a virgin), while at the end, the very people who are punishing them are now ironically aiding and abetting the criminals in abducting and raping *600 virgins*—400 from Jabesh-Gilead and 200 from Shiloh. Not only did these Benjaminites learn nothing from the lesson taught by the Israelites; it was the Israelites themselves who were now ironically condoning the behavior that they had first punished them for.

The joke is on the reader. The storyteller makes us loathe the multiple rape of the one woman, but tricks us into countenancing the seizing of the 600 screaming and kicking innocent virgins—all of these women reminding us of *the innocent victim, Jephthah's daughter*. Thus we wonder if, after all, it was such a bad thing that Jephthah's daughter died without “knowing a man” or that Samson's wife, the Timnite, was burned to death for her role as a result of Samon's behavior. Some fates are perhaps worse than to be the designated burnt offering. It is marvelous sleight-of-hand trick by the storyteller.

This festival at Shiloh should also remind us of the festival instituted to commemorate the death of Jephthah's daughter—ironically, one who had never “known a man.” At the end of *Judges*, 600 virgins are each about to be forced to “know a man.” (Keep in mind another intertextuality, about a subsequent festival in Shiloh, in which Hannah was mistaken by Eli to have been drunk, when she was actually

devoutly praying to Yhwh about her barren condition (1 Sam 1.13). That prayed-for child was Samuel, the great antagonist of Saul. The intertextualities are very complex.)

After all the preceding slaughter, the book nevertheless concludes with a “merry” drunken sexual orgy at the wine festival at Shiloh. Like most comedies—in particular, Shakespearean comedies—this one ends with marriage, many marriages. The story culminates in an energetic *gamos*, though it is hardly a *hieros gamos*. But it is a huge fertility rite. “The world must be peopled!” cries Benedick at the end of *Much Ado About Nothing*. The tribe will be replenished with a generation of baby boomers. “In a fundamental sense, every comedy is a thinly disguised re-enactment of the rebirth of the world,” writes Erich Segal, echoing Bakhtin.¹⁹ Tragedy moves toward death, comedy toward the continuing of life. Comedy reintegrates everyone back into society. That is why comedies end in marriage.

Dionysus, who was the titular god of Greek drama as well as of wine, also rules here.²⁰ Of one of the wedding episodes in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Bakhtin, in a marvelous passage, writes: This is the “Vineyard of Dionysus,” the vendange, the feast of the grape harvest. . . . Beyond *the blood-saturated mass of torn bodies* . . . [is given] a glimpse of the vats of that purée septembrale (September-pulp) so often mentioned by Rabelais. *Blood is changed into wine*. . . . *Bloodshed, dismemberment, burning, death, beatings, blows, curses, and abuses--all these elements are steeped in “merry time.”* . . . The figure of propitious time symbolizes in folklore the end of evil days and advent of general peace. For this reason Rabelais develops a popular utopian theme: the *triumph of peaceful labor* [the vineyard] *and abundance over war and destruction* (211, 227-8, my emphasis).

This incredible description applies perfectly to the seizing of the daughters of Shiloh. “Rapacity is one hallmark of savage comedy,” writes Kenneth Steel White. The story of the Levite’s Concubine, like much of *Judges*, is “black humor” or “savage comedy,” which uses humor to attack evil. *Judges* is always profoundly ambivalent and deeply disturbing, it does not contain much of the laughter that Bakhtin so admired in Rabelais.

Judges as a whole is Dionysian. And as in the Rabelaisian world, Disorder rules in *Judges*. But throughout *Judges*, unlike Rabelais’ novel, we sense a deep-seated longing for order in Israel and a desire for moral clarity from its leaders.

Afterthought:

You may well ask: was the storyteller himself aware of *all* these legalistic and humorous ramifications of his story? I cannot answer that question. But I recall a remark made by Robert Browning when asked about an unintelligible passage in one of his poems: “When I wrote that, God and Browning knew what it meant, but now only God knows.” Words have meaning, but sometimes an author himself may not realize the full extent of what he has put into play.

Appendix

(adapted from *Intricacy, Design, and Cunning in the Book of Judges* E. T. A. Davidson [Xlibris, 2008])

Twelve Preposterous Acts

- 1) Ehud's escape from the locked room in Eglon's palace (3.23)
- 2) Shamgar's killing of 600 Philistines with an oxgoad (3.31)
- 3) the roll-calling of the elders of Succoth so that Gideon could "thresh" them with thorns and briers (8.16)
- 4) Abimelech's hired men managed to kill all 70 of Abimelech's brothers on one stone (9.5)
- 5) the accuracy of the aim of the women in the tower of Thebes in dropping the upper millstone squarely on Abimelech's head 9.53-54)
- 6) the Gileadites identified 42,000 Ephraimites in the Jephthah story by asking each one to pronounce the word "shibboleth" so that Jephthah can kill them (12.5-6)
- 7) Samson's killing of the 30 Ashkelonites not only to wrest 60 articles of clothing from them to pay off the wedding companions, but also of getting back to the party, one man, heavy-laden with 60 garments (14.19)
- 8) Samson's catching of 300 foxes, carrying them all to the fields of the Philistine, tying them in pairs by their tails, setting their tails on fire, and succeeding in burning up the Philistines' crops (15.4-5)
- 9) Samson's feat of killing of 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass (15.15)
- 10) Samson's ability, when at his most powerless (blind and in chains), to perform his greatest feat, pulling down the Temple of Dagon (15.29-30)
- 11) Delilah weaving Samson's hair into the fabric on her loom (16.14).
- 12) the Israelites identified the 400 virgins of Jabesh-Gilead, separated them from the married women, and carried them off to become the wives of 400 Benjaminites (21.10-12).

Chiasmus of Iconic Poses

- A. Achsah, newly married, alighting from her ass (1.4). (She is not, dead, or old, or stiff, but very much young, active, and alive in contrast to her counterpart at A, the Concubine, who is dead.)
- B. Eglon, sword stuck through his belly, lying *inside a room with a locked door* (3.25);
- C. Sisera, tent peg through his temple, lying in bed covered with a blanket (4.22; 5.26-7);
- D. Joash (with Gideon perhaps cringing behind him) being threatened by a mob of angry men (6.30);
- E. The decapitation of the two Midianite princes by the Ephraimites: Oreb on the rock and Zeeb at the wine press (7.26) and the slicing up of the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, by Gideon [8.21];*
- F. Gideon and a small army of 300 men chasing after an army of 15,000 Midianites;
- G. Abimelech slaughtering his 70 brothers on one stone;
- H. Abimelech, skull crushed by a millstone (one stone), sword through his body (9.54);
- G. Jephthah slaughtering 42,000 Ephraimites for one word as they crossed the river;
- F. Micah and a handful of neighbors chasing after an army of 600 men (18.22)
- E. Samson fallen beneath the rubble of the collapsed temple amid a tangle of corpses (16.30);
- C. Samson lying prone, asleep, his hair being woven with a weaving pin into the fabric of a loom (16.14);** [the item is out of place in the chiasmus];
- D. The Ephraimite host trying to negotiate with the mob of the base Benjaminites surrounding his house (the Levite, perhaps, cringing behind him) (19.22-24);
- B. The Concubine fallen dead *outside a locked door*, with her hands on the threshold (19.27);
- A. The corpse of the Concubine, thrown over an ass, ready to be transported home (19.28)

Add to these the pictures of animals being killed or used by Samson: the lion being torn apart by Samson, bare-handedly (14.6), and later seen as a decomposing carcass (14.8); the ass—a skeleton (carcass with the flesh removed)—from which Samson takes a jawbone and kills a thousand Philistines (15.15); and the foxes—300 of them, tied by their tails together in pairs, a torch tied to each pair, soon to be charred carcasses (15.4-5).

Representing things symmetrically is an integral part of the design and art of Judges, and it is also an aspect of the game (humor). There are many other symmetries. From analyzing the differences in a given symmetry we elicit significant meanings.

* 2 + 2 are killed here (Midianite enemies of the Israelites), while only one is killed in E (an important Israelite enemy of the Philistines)

** E is not an exact mirror image of E, however, except that the fallen Midianites were royalty, while Samson was a champion.

Fathers and Daughters

Achsah (Othniel's wife)	Jephthah's Daughter	the Timnite (Samson's wife)	the Levite's Concubine, the virgins of Jabesh-Gilead, and the daughters of Shiloh
1. Girl (alive) on an ass	No ass mentioned	Dead ass (jawbone of an ass)	Girl (dead) on an ass
2. Dutiful daughter	Dutiful courageous daughter	Cowardly daughter when threatened by the Philistines; disloyal wife	Angry daughter who walks out on her husband; returns to her father
3. Good father	Erring father (consorts with worthless fellows)	Unwise father (misjudges wife's husband, Samson)	Convivial father, negligent of daughter's safety (father and husband do not let her leave early enough in the day)
4. Father & Daughter behave well	Father behaves badly, but daughter behaves well	Daughter speaks kindly to her husband but behaves badly	Husband speaks kindly to his wife, but later behaves badly
5. Father makes a (rash) promise and keeps it	Father makes rash vow; father keeps vow	Rash act: father gives away daughter; father tries to make amends; husband violates Nazirite vow	Israelites later make rash vow (fathers will not give daughters to Benjaminites)
6. Father breaks no law	Father breaks law (child-sacrifice)	Father breaks commandment in causing daughter to marry another (i.e. she commits adultery)	Wife played the harlot; husband forces wife to be raped (result: she commits adultery).
7. One husband; good man (a hero)	No husband; Lack of husband bewailed	Two husbands Angry hot-tempered husband	Many "husbands" (gang rape). Negligent, cowardly, drunken(?), self-serving husband (saves himself, not wife)
8. Daughter happily married	Daughter (unhappily) unmarried; daughter given (or "married") to Yhwh	Daughter married to another man; husband divorced against his will	Daughter unhappily married
9. Husband delivers Israel	Father delivers Israel	Husband kills enemy but causes trouble for Israel	Husband causes trouble for Israel, but kills no enemy
10. Girl goes to her husband	Girl goes out of house to father with joy; leaves father with sorrow; returns to him with fear	Husband storms angrily from wife; husband returns hopefully to wife, only to be disappointed	Wife leaves house angrily, away from husband, back to father. husband goes to father to retrieve his wife
11. Father gives daughter to husband	Father gives daughter to Yhwh	Father gives daughter to another man (two husbands)	Husband gives (pushes out) wife to many "husbands"
12. Father gives daughter present (basins of water)	Father gives a present (daughter) to Yhwh, but gives no present to daughter	Husband plans to give wife a present (a kid)	Wife given (a present) to base men
13. Daughter prospers	Daughter burnt	Father and daughter burnt	Daughter raped and murdered
14. Father, daughter, husband live	Father lives	Husband lives for a while, then dies in aftermath	Father and husband live
15. Lucky ending for father, daughter; Israel saved	Unlucky ending for father and daughter; but Israel is saved	Unlucky ending for father, daughter & husband; but Israel begins to be saved	Unlucky ending for daughter; Israel split up by civil war; Israelite virgins given to the Benjaminites, uniting Israel after civil war* © 1983

*All this reaches a climax in the last story. The Israelite fathers, who have vowed not to give their daughters to the Benjaminites in marriage, out of pity that this will mean the extinction of the tribe of Benjamin, find away of letting the Benjaminites have the daughters, without actually "giving" them away. (21.7-23).

¹ (Trans. Helene Iswolsky Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press), 1965, 1968, 49.

² The reader of this paper should regard these endnotes as “links” as in a html document.

One of the problems in analyzing this story is that those who think it is literally history, will have a different and more sober interpretation, while those who regard it as fiction, will be free to enjoy the comedy.

³ Because the concubine is one of the women-without-names in *Judges*, I have capitalized “Concubine” whenever referring to her. Other nameless women are: Sisera’s mother; the woman with the upper millstone in the tower in the Abimelech story; Jephthah’s daughter; Samson’s wife, whom I call “the Timnite,” since she is an inhabitant of Timnah; Samson’s mother; and the Levite’s Concubine. That these women have been singled out thus is part of the “quirky nomenclature” category. Perhaps the storyteller not simply dishonoring them in this way but wants to call attention to their roles. He might also have thought that memorizing so many names would have been too laborious for him or for his audience.

⁴ Carey Ellen Walsh, “Under the Influence: Trust and Risk in Biblical Family Drinking,” *JSOT* 90 (2000): 13-29.

⁵ As for other instances in *Judges* involving the drinking of intoxicating beverages, there are three: 1) After Gaal and his cronies steal grapes from the vineyard, make wine, and carouse in the Temple of Baal-Berith, Gaal instigates an uprising against Abimelech, the king of Shechem (9.27). 2) After drinking for seven days at the *mishteh* (feast, or drinking party), and hearing the Philistine guests solve his riddle, Samson goes berserk and kills 30 Ashkelonites for their clothing, which he lugs back to the feast as his part of the bargain (14.19). The word “enjoy oneself” is not used in this episode, but it is used 3) by the Philistines in the Temple of Dagon before they call in Samson “to entertain them” (15.25). Drinking is always followed by serious consequences in this book, and thus has a moral attached to it that is probably not found in Rabelais.

⁶ There are also parallel bullying scenes in several places in *Judges*: the base men surrounding Gideon’s house; the contentious Ephraimites confronting both Gideon and Jephthah; and the bullying by the Danites of Micah after the Danites steal his priest and his idols. (From Bakhtin’s point of view the comparing of two text is not “dialogic,” but to me it is. I often think of two parallel texts as texts talking to each other.)

⁷ Compare with Eglon [the “fatted calf”] and Jephthah’s daughter. Eglon’s name, as is often noted, means “fatted calf,” and so Eglon is one of the first of a long list of “offerings” to Yhwh in the book: obvious ones like Gideon’s extravagant meat and bread offering to the visiting messenger-angel, the burnt offering that Samson’s mother and father made to another such visitor, and another when the Israelites are trying to propitiate Yhwh before going into war against the Benjaminites. There is also the meat offering (specifically, a *burnt* offering) of the body of Jephthah’s daughter to Yhwh. Meanwhile, people are killed on slaughtering stones—like animals being prepared for offering—as when Abimelech kills his seventy brothers on “one stone” (probably a slaughtering stone) and when he in turn is killed by “one stone”—not a slaughtering stone, to be sure, but an agricultural instrument, an upper millstone. Then there is the blind Samson grinding grain in the Philistine prison, or as Milton puts it, “eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves”—another reference to food. [See Item #4 of carnivalesque-grotesque features.]

⁸ Body Parts (*excluding* Samson’s) anklet (2x), back (1x), belly (3x), blood (1x), body (6x), bone (2x) carcass (1x), ears (6x), eyes (8x), face (3x), feet (13x), flesh (16x), hands and palms (43 important instances), head (23x), heart (27x), hooves of horses (1x), knees (8x), mouth (8x), navel (1x), neck (3x), nose (8x), shoulder (1x), side (1x), skull (1x), soul (8x), spirit (6x), temple (3x), thigh (3x), thumbs and toes (2x), tongue (3x), voice (10x), and womb (2x). Mentions of virginity and rape may be thought of as references to sexual body parts.

Bodily References in the Samson Story (Including “Hands”): Arms (2x), Belly (see Womb), Body (3x), Bone (see Jawbone), Carcass, Corpse (3x), Eyes (not counted when used 5x in an idiom) (13x), Face (1x), Hands [but not when used 7x idiomatically] (17x), Hair of Head (3x as “locks, 1x as “hair”) (4x), Head (5x), Heart (4x), Hip [as in Hip and Thigh] (1x), Jawbone (4x as body part and 5x as place name), Knees (1x), Penis (alluded to in reference to “the uncircumcised”) (4x), Shoulder (1x), Soul (2x), Spirit (not, strictly speaking, a body part) (5x, and 1x implied), Tail (1x), Thigh as in Hip and Thigh] (1x), Voice (2x), and Womb (7x).

⁹ Seth Lerer, “Lecture One,” *Comedy Through the Ages* (audio tapes; [Chantilly, Va.]: The Teaching Company, 2000).

¹⁰ Robert G. Boling, *Judges: An Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (AB 6A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 277.

¹¹ Jephthah did not inquire of Yhwh at all. He took matters into his own hands. He went up to Mizpah, to confirm his vow, but it is not recorded that he “inquired.” Perhaps he should have, and posed the question to Yhwh thus: “Do you want me to sacrifice my daughter?” Then the answer might then have been “No.”

¹² There is a confusion of statistics in this part of the chapter. Since the Benjaminites had only 26,700 men to begin with; thus they could not have lost another 25,000 men (20.46). This later figure is probably a second version of the first report of 26,100 men killed, 1,000 others not being accounted for by the storyteller (20.35). The only certain figure is that only 600 Benjaminites escaped alive.

¹³ W. H. Auden, “Notes on the Comic,” *Thought* 27 (1952): 60.

¹⁴ EB Macro 4, 958.

¹⁵ In Aristophanes, the “typical hero is a dyspeptic old man who gets fired up by an idea and in pursuing it, turns the world topsy-turvy.” [Erich Segal, *The Death of Comedy* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 45-46.] The “happy idea” of the women in *Lysistrata* is that in order to stop the war, the women, who have no power at all in that society, except the power of sex, will issue an ultimatum to their husbands: either make peace with Sparta, or the women will stage a sex strike. The ultimate result of the happy idea is that *everyone* is miserable. The misery ends only when all reconcile and exit to a feast of revelry.

¹⁶ Since Meroz in the *Song of Deborah* was cursed by the angel for not having responded to the muster, we have evidence that Jabesh-gilead probably did something wrong.

Jabesh-gilead, it must be remembered, also had a special relationship with the tribe of Benjamin, and that may be the motivation for destroying it. Saul was very likely an offspring or descendant of one of the marriages between the virgins of that city and the Benjaminites at the end of *Judges*. His home was Gibeah in Benjamin, the very town in which the Concubine was raped and killed. The town of Jabesh-Gilead (obviously rebuilt by that time) owed him a debt of gratitude for having saved the inhabitants of that city from having their eyes gouged out by an Ammonite King. After Saul’s defeat at the battle of Gilboa, the men of Jabesh-gilead, traveled all night, took his body and those of his sons from the wall of Beth-shean back to Jabesh, and burned and honored them there (1 Sam 31.11-12).

¹⁷ As in the *Iliad*, the revenge on the tribe of Benjamin is a warning to all others of what will happen if anyone messes with one of their women.

¹⁸ Ehud was a left-handed Benjaminites who early in the book saved Israel by committing an audacious trick against the enemy (3.1-30).

¹⁹ *The Death of Comedy* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²⁰ The final scene of *Judges* brings to mind the Dionysian orgies, the religious origins of Greek drama and the Satyr plays, the comedies of Aristophanes (with their licentious sexuality), given at just such wine festivals as this. It is also, of course, the Rape of the Sabine women in Roman legend, as well as the Roman Saturnalia, with all the carnivalesque license, which (according to Bakhtin, lies behind grotesque comedy of Rabelais