DAVIDMACHINE

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Recent David studies from scholars such as Baruch Halpern and Steven McKenzie have called into question the historicity of biblical accounts and have substituted 'sacred' images of David with decidedly 'secular' ones. But the biblical David is neither purely secular nor sacred; rather, he filters the horrors of warfare and politics into the heroism and ideals of the Deuteronomistic tradition. By analogy to Heiner Müller's 1979 play, *Hamletmachine*, this paper considers the biblical portrait of David as a cyborg-like 'Davidmachine,' a hybridic figure compelled to embody and commensurate competing, if not contradictory, religious and literary demands. As machine, the biblical David illustrates the place of necessity in the canon itself, a necessity that illustrates the concepts of tragedy and tradition in Walter Benjamin's study of German tragic drama.

> I lay on the ground and heard the world revolving step by step into putrefaction.
> I want to be a machine. Arms to grasp legs to walk no pain no thoughts.
> (Heiner Müller 1979a, *Hamletmachine*; 1)

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent studies of David by Baruch Halpern, Steven McKenzie, and Niels Peter Lemche have cast doubt on the historicity of biblical accounts, but their portraits of David are iconoclastic and often simplistic, replacing 'sacred' images of David with decidedly 'secular' ones, such as 'serial killer.' Episodes in the story of David's rise to power and his efforts to maintain it, which include the ability to eliminate rivals without taking personal blame, serve as the main evidence for this trend in studies of David. Putting aside debates on the historicity of the biblical account, this paper argues that current debates over David are already biblical, and that the moral ambiguity of the biblical text is more self-reflexive than naïve, suggesting a sober reflection on human political and religious power. David's alternating patterns of violence and compassion, modesty and grandiosity, render him as a kind of tragic figure, unable to reconcile human passions to literary-biblical imperatives to defeat the house of Saul, consolidate power, and conquer enemies without violating the Deuteronomic Code. But David's tragedy, to apply the term freely, is really the tragedy of biblical tradition itself as it struggles to harmonise competing memories and values.[1]

By analogy to Heiner Müller's 1979 play, *Hamletmachine*, a text that confronts the struggle between canonical text and canonical status, this paper considers the biblical portrait of David in terms of a 'Davidmachine,' a literary-historical figure compelled to embody and enact competing, if not contradictory, religious and literary demands. The image of a machine already describes tragedy in Bernard Williams' *Shame and Necessity*: 'The whole of the Oedipus Tyrannus, that dreadful machine, moves to the discovery of just one thing, that he did it' (Williams 1993: 69). Williams' discussion of necessity, while concerned mainly with the problem of ethics, is nevertheless nuanced, combining as it does one's inner sense of necessity, the necessity imposed by another person, and 'supernatural' necessity (Williams 1993: 130). My concern here is to develop the idea of the biblical David as a kind of machine driven by the necessity of tradition. This paper thus considers theoretical discussions of the human-machine relationship, as well as debates on

'secularity' and 'religion.' Neither purely 'secular' nor 'sacred,' the biblical David is a kind of machine that filters the horrors of ancient warfare and politics into the heroism and sublime religiosity of Deuteronomistic tradition.

2. DAVID SCHOLARSHIP – ICON *VERSUS* ICONOCLASM

David's status as a great Israelite king is the target of Steven McKenzie's *King David: A Biography*. McKenzie's iconoclastic account of David's life speaks of his 'attempted coup' and describes him as a 'holy terrorist,' 'mercenary,' and 'assassin' (McKenzie 2002: 86, 89, 110, 111). Similar language infuses Baruch Halpern's *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King*: 'The David of this book is in a sense the opposite of the David of Samuel. He is the anti-David or, by implication, the anti-Messiah' (Halpern 2001; xv). Halpern describes his project as giving voice to a silenced historical perspective: '[W]e have only one version of his career. In the absence of a competing narrative from antiquity, it falls to us to construct one based on his dynasty's narrative. In so doing, we allow the silent to speak. We permit the people unable to express their own views in the text to do so in our imagination' (Halpern 2001: xv). Like the other iconoclasts mentioned here, Halpern constructs a binary opposition between the biblical account of David and the silent, imagined account that contradicts it. Like McKenzie, Halpern resorts to flamboyant language in constructing his counter-narrative: major victims of David's indirect violence, for example, are described as the 'Ten Little Indians' (Halpern 2001: 77). While Halpern's superb analysis of biblical and extra-biblical sources allows him to cast doubt on David's genealogy, military achievements, popularity, integrity, and even paternity (of Solomon), his tendency always to contradict the 'dynasty's narrative' strains credibility by its relentless suspicion (Halpern 2001: 401-403). Devoting more attention to the historicity of biblical claims than to their cultural and ideological dimensions, Halpern goes as far as to suggest that David may have plotted Absalom's revolt, a claim for which he has very little evidence (Halpern 2001: 380). In the end, Halpern's skilful use of textual and extra-textual evidence serves to construct a simple iconoclastic narrative of David. Halpern and McKenzie challenge the sacred narrative of David with a secularist counter-narrative directly opposed to this stereotype, but in so doing they only reinforce the conceptual binary of sacred and secular.[2]

Niels Peter Lemche (1994) argues that ancient Israelite society was held together by a system of patronage he likens to the Mafia of *The Godfather*. People swear loyalty to the king or God in contractual ways that exchange protection and power for service. In the case of David and his house, patronage between God and king mirrors patronage between king and people, hence the idea of biblical covenant. From a divine standpoint, the 'steadfast love' (*hsd*) of God toward Israel, a term that also describes bonds of loyalty between the king and his clients, reflects a concept of patronage that runs throughout Mediterranean cultures.

The literary critic Robert Alter divides the David narrative into two sections: an original history by a literary artist who delights in literary craft and understands the complexity of Israelite politics, and a later Deuteronomistic edition (Alter 1999: xiii-xxiii). The two sources display tension between this earlier, more realistic account and the pious goals of later editors in such passages as David's deathbed speech, which Alter describes as a 'will and testament worthy of a Mafia chieftain,' adding that the 'Deuteronomistic editor could not delete this material but he sought to provide a counterweight to its unblinking realism by first having David on his deathbed

speak in a high moral tone' (Alter 1999: xiv). In Alter's reading, the original author resembles Shakespeare in the secular, artistic shaping of royal history, while the Deuteronomistic editor stands for a religious shaping of the text. Like McKenzie and Halpern, Alter thus analyses the biblical account of David into 'secular' and 'religious' sources.[3]

By contrast, Paul Borgman's *David, Saul, and God* defends a pious, coherent reading of David but admits his complexity: 'The characterization of David suggests a unique and complex individual, a most unusual king' (Borgman 2008: 16). Borgman's study identifies eleven narrative patterns in the David and Saul cycle that suggest a narrative unity usually denied by biblical scholars. Building on Alter's conviction that narrative artistry underlies the David narratives, Borgman argues that stories of anointing, death, near-death, the ark of the covenant, and wrongdoing serve to contrast David favorably to Saul and to generate a complex but coherent portrait of an evolving great man. Borgman thus turns insights by Alter and Halpern on their head to argue for the uniqueness of David: 'David proves exceptional in being *shaped and altered* by a full range of pressures (Alter 1999), but also as one who shapes the way he acts in the world – one whose *individuality drives his behavior* (Halpern 2001)' (Borgman 2008: 242). But unlike other ancient heroes like Odysseus, and unlike the image of David as a serial killer who serves an inscrutable God, Borgman defends the biblical ideology that chooses David over Saul for reasons that become clear as the story unfolds. Seeing a high level of coherence in the text, Borgman acknowledges the 'worldly' dimensions of the story but takes the biblical perspective on David more or less at face value. He thus matches the simple secularism of Halpern and McKenzie with a simple affirmation of biblical theology.

Halpern, McKenzie, Lemche, and Alter are only half-right: David *is* a serial killer whose actions are whitewashed by the Deuteronomistic History, but that reading depends too much on the iconoclastic impulse, which implies there is a profane truth at the core of the sacred tradition of David. Borgman, on the other hand, offers insightful readings of the text but then retreats to the position of echoing Deuteronomistic ideology. Such readings only reinforce an opposition between sacred and profane that has more to do with contemporary thought than the ancient text. An alternative to this view is to see David as a kind of filter between the bloody political realities of warfare and the struggle to rule, and the high-minded ideology of the Deuteronomistic History: thus David's repulsion at the Amalekite's claim to have killed Saul; Joab's pride in killing Abner; a similar killing in 2 Sam 4; the unwillingness to kill Shimei in ch. 16; and the reluctant necessity of the killing of Saul's children and grandchildren in ch. 21.

All of these episodes – and several others – render David as a kind of tragic figure, unable to feel and act on human passions because he must defeat the house of Saul, consolidate power, and conquer enemies, using all means available, while remaining within the letter and spirit of the Deuteronomistic Code and History. David filters the horrors of ancient warfare and politics into the heroism and sublime religiosity of the Deuteronomistic History. How much more tragic, then, is David than Saul and Samson, who are customarily regarded as quasi-tragic biblical figures (Adam 2009; Bakon 2007; Exum and Whedbee 1984; Exum 1992). For unlike David – who is radically constrained by the demands of religious ideology, genre, and canon to be powerful as well as pious, merciless and merciful, a virtual impossibility in real terms and a complete strain on credibility (despite efforts to render him in naturalistic terms) – Samson and Saul exercise real

freedom in spite of their fateful deaths; they go down, but they go down in their own way, as individuals.

3. 'MACHINE'

Of course, the idea of David as a machine has little to do with physical equipment or the idea that David is the kind of super-human creation one might expect from science fiction. Rather, I use the word 'machine' to describe how the technology of writing, in the context of biblical tradition, performs certain kinds of cultural work. An illustration of this concept is Foucault's notion of the 'technologies of sign systems,' which he identifies closely with the workings of 'technologies of the self' (Foucault 1988: 18). Similarly, cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg (2010) characterises Marx's economic notion of labour as a 'commensurating machine' that adjusts its value in order to bring equilibrium to an inherently imbalanced system.

The biblical David acts as a commensurating machine for competing understandings of history and memory in Deuteronomy. Readers of the Deuteronomistic History can detect at least three such conceptions of David: heroic, anti-heroic, and post-exilic. The heroic David slays Goliath, defeats numerous enemies, receives divine and priestly sanction, and builds a kingdom. The anti-heroic David plots or enables the death of his enemies, covets and marries Bathsheba, conducts an unwarranted census, and seeks revenge on Shimei. The post-exilic David blends the heroic and anti-heroic portraits in a composite that acknowledges the necessity and limitations of Israelite kingship.

The iconoclastic, secularist readings of David in Lemche, Alter, McKenzie, and Halpern stress the anti-heroic David at the expense of the other two. Alter, for example, valorises the anti-hero at the expense of the post-exilic, pietistic, Deuteronomistic David. While the latter speaks in stock phrases about divine law and the covenant, the former

> is, in sum, the first full-length portrait of a Machiavellian prince in Western literature. The Book of Samuel is one of those rare masterworks that, like Stendhal's *Charterhouse of Parma*, evinces an unblinking and abidingly instructive knowingness about man as a political animal in all his contradictions and venality and in all his susceptibility to the brutalization and the seductions of exercising power. (Alter 1999: xviii)

Unlike McKenzie, Halpern, and Lemche, who focus primarily on debunking the historicity of the biblical account, Alter passes judgment on aesthetic grounds as well, preferring the subtle, Shakespearean David of the early sources to the moralistic (one may even say Puritanical) version of David found in the Deuteronomistic redaction. Alter's recognition of art adds something the others miss, but Alter too relies on the binary thinking of secular (literary) and religious (Deuteronomistic) concerns.

In contrast to the anti-heroic versions of David, the proposed model of David as a commensurating machine that fails tragically (or meta-tragically, since its failure is literary) attempts to combine all facets of the biblical portrait. This David is a nexus of the Deuteronomistic History for competing understandings of action, reality, history, and value. David's anointing at the hands of Samuel enhances his humanity to make him a divinely-chosen king. The 'spirit of the Lord' (1 Sam 16:13) further enhances David's being as his legitimacy extends from divine selection

to popular choice over Saul. What these biblical details admit, certainly, is that the literary and religious work before David requires something more than an ordinary human being can perform. The extraordinary dimensions of the biblical David take at least two forms: exceedingly pious behavior and divinely-managed events in the story. David's reluctance to kill Saul, for example, represents the kind of piety that earns him providential success in countless battles and close encounters with death at the hands of Absalom, Goliath, Saul, and many others. These religious and literary features of David contribute to what I mean by the term Davidmachine.

The Davidmachine, insofar as he is a kind of extraordinary, hybridic human, is also a kind of cyborg. Donna Haraway (2003a: 299) notes how the term was coined 'to refer to the enhanced man who could survive in extra-terrestrial environments ... Enraptured with cybernetics, Clynes and Kline ... thought of cyborgs as "self-regulating man-machine systems."' But Haraway takes this to a new level: 'By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs.' The cyborg's hybridity makes it particularly relevant to any argument against what Haraway calls 'universal totalizing theory': 'Cyborg imagery can,' she writes, 'suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves' (Haraway 2003b: 39).

Like the cyborg, David is 'enhanced,' not so much with physical technologies (though I will argue the ark and ephod are just that) but with religious and literary ones. Of course, there is no way to distinguish 'David' from these 'enhancements' – his hybridity is fundamental. He plays the roles of shepherd, warrior, musician, dancer, priest, king, and others; he does whatever narrative and ideological conditions require, and he crowds out his rivals in the house of Saul, his own family, and the narrative in general. David appears as an unprepossessing underdog who follows a pattern of biblical heroes who surpass their station, birth order, and natural capacities (e.g. Jacob, Joseph, and Moses), but he exercises violent power over his rivals and his own kingdom. His religious and political enhancements underline his humanity and fallibility even as they grant him the strength and authority to rule Israel and conquer enemies. What accounts for this paradox of strength and weakness, greatness and fallibility, is precisely the irreducible hybridity of the Davidmachine.

The characterisation of David commensurates the demands of the distant past, which recall David and Saul; the more recent past, which includes subsequent kings in the Davidic dynasty and eventual exile; and those of the Deuteronomistic ideology that takes form during the exile. Scholars of the Deuteronomistic History would explain the tension between a heroic David and a flawed David in terms of different historical periods with different ideological needs for David – for example, an early David who usurps the rival house of Saul and consolidates power through aggressive military and political means; followed by a triumphant version of the king that reflects the court's viewpoint itself; and later, an image of a king chastened by his flaws, a portrait that may reflect the pessimism toward monarchy following the Babylonian invasion.[4]

David is thus at odds with 'David' – one layer of tradition goes against another. In light of the canonical text, the paradoxical portrait of David must be taken as a whole. But the biblical David cannot avoid the problem of canon. As such, the biblical David must reconcile competing historical and religious demands, between human power and divine sovereignty; between historical accident (e.g., triumph over the house of Saul) and divine plan; between the competing needs of political and military leaders at one stage of history and the priestly and scribal carriers of

tradition at another.[5] As a commensurating machine, David embodies and displays the process of canon formation.

One could object at this point that the conception of David as machine is a kind of warmed-over structuralism in which contradictory or binary attributes combine in a literary portrait. To that I would answer in three ways – first, the hybridity of the Davidmachine (like Haraway's cyborg, part human and part machine, part sacred hero and part literary failure) is inherently dynamic and resistant to binaries; second, my analysis includes historical, cultural, and linguistic context sometimes overlooked by structuralist readings; and third, this approach is more hermeneutical than structuralist: I engage the ancient text from a contemporary standpoint and with a particular set of questions, in this case about the characterisation of David and how biblical scholarship has approached it, particularly in terms of conceptions of the self, religion, and secularity. The idea of David as a machine would not be possible without a particular set of thinkers – including Descartes, Freud, Foucault, Haraway, and Lacan – whose work has made the analogy of human and machine possible and meaningful. Lacan writes: '[T]he brain operates as a buffer-organ between man and reality, as a homeostat organ ... He realizes that the brain is a dream machine' (Lacan 1988: 74-76).

4. PORTRAIT OF DAVID WITH ARK AND EPHOD

As a biblical 'commensurating machine,' David must reconcile not only piety and power but also the demands of the formulaic warrior hero and the embodiment of ritual tradition. Toward this latter end, the biblical text aligns David with the priestly equipment of the ark of the covenant and an ephod. The ark is so central to early chapters of 1 Samuel (2, 4-7) and in 2 Samuel 6 that it has long been identified as the subject of a distinct literary source. The absence of a central human character in the 'ark narrative' suggests the ark itself as a main character.[6]

Citing extra-biblical parallels to this passage (2 Sam 6), particularly texts in which a king presides over the ceremonial introduction of a deity into a royal city, accompanied by sacrifice and feasting, McCarter notes an emphasis on the role and status of the king and his house: 'These accounts are, in the final analysis, testimonies to the special thing the king has done for the god and his people. They are frequently accompanied by professions of the high regard in which the deity holds the king, and, as noted, prayers for divine favor uttered by the king.' Here, notes McCarter, David and the ark are focal, and 'he is the principle celebrant in the rites and the supervisor of the procession. He appears unambiguously as the patron and founder of the cult of Yahweh in Jerusalem' (McCarter 1984: 112.) The ark, which has a narrative life of its own, returns in 2 Sam 15:24 to perform a divinatory function on David's behalf.

Wearing the ephod, a type of garment usually associated with priests, David brings the ark into Jerusalem in a way that merges his power with the priests'. In fact, it is an ephod (though probably a different one), that symbolises David's pact with the high priest Abiathar (1 Samuel 23:9, 30:7). David's ritual union with this priestly paraphernalia renders him a powerful synthesis of warrior, king, and priest, but also a figure offensive and baffling to Michal. No mere man or king, David here is a hybridic, cyborg-like machine:

> So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; and when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling. David danced before

> the Lord with all his might; David was girded with a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet. As the ark of the Lord came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul looked out of the window, and saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart. They brought in the ark of the Lord, and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it; and David offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being before the Lord. When David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name of the Lord of hosts, and distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins ... But Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and said, "How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!" David said to Michal, "It was before the Lord, who chose me in place of your father and all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the Lord, that I have danced before the Lord. I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in my own eyes; but by the maids of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor." And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death. (2 Sam 6:12b-23, NRSV)

The anti-heroic portrayals of David in Halpern and McKenzie miss the strange particularity of this David, while Alter's account gives it some due. Alter notes parallels to the narrative of the ark earlier in 1 Samuel and comments that Michal's criticism of David illustrates a broader rule in the narrative that 'no triumph should be simple and unambiguous' (Alter 1999: 229 n. 20). But none of them can capture the sense in which David here enters into a cultic frenzy that overcomes the danger of meddling with the dangerous ark of the covenant. Like Saul in his prophetic frenzy of 1 Sam 10:9-11, David here defers to divine power, but unlike Saul, who seems powerless to resist, David finds a way literally and virtually to steer divine power in the direction of his own political control and the new capital of Jerusalem. Dressed only in the linen ephod (see 1 Sam 2:18, 28), he has seized and steered the ark toward his new capital. No outburst of spontaneous joy, his dance performs a brilliant synthesis of political and priestly power, recalling the dancing that accompanied David's earlier military victories (1 Sam 18:6, 21:11, 29:5, and 30:16) and the refrain, 'Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands' (1 Sam 21:11, 29:5). David's dancing makes him a 'vulgar fellow' (McCarter [1984: 185] amends *hrqym* as *hrqdym* with LXX *ton orchoumenon* to read the similarly contemptuous 'like some dancer') in Michal's eyes, but like his musical performance in the court of Saul and frequent bouts of weeping and mourning (cf. 1 Sam 20:41), it only extends the range of David's abilities to an activity often associated with women (cf. 1 Sam 18:6) and brings him honor among the 'servants' maids' if not with Michal herself (see Ackerman 2005). In his protean, hybridic way, David fills the narrative space once again, crowding out the female daughter of Saul.

David also performs sacrifices and distributes food like the levitical priests. Saul had also played the role of priest (1 Sam 13:8), but somehow without success; it is striking that his

daughter Michal offers the only criticism of David's feast. Her resentment alerts us to the commensurating work performed by David – his dance is wilder and more unkingly than Saul's prophetic frenzy and unwarranted sacrifices put together, and yet David pulls it off while Saul's actions led to death and the loss of a dynasty. The scene's tag line on Michal's childlessness brings to mind other women swept into the whirlwind of tragedy, from Antigone to Ophelia, as well as biblical women from Hagar and Dinah to Jephthah's daughter and David's daughter Tamar. Greek tragedy and biblical narrative pursue their inexorable ends at a high cost to the women whose agency is restricted by patriarchal systems. Michal's barrenness helps wipe out the house of Saul, but it also signals the tragic and mechanical necessity of the story itself: in spite of his Saul-like excesses, David must win every time. Why? Because in order to commensurate historical memory with Deuteronomistic ideology, he must.

5. DAVID THE POWERLESS KING

The procession with the ark, of course, is a triumphant instance of the Davidmachine and one that runs on all cylinders, so to speak. But one can occasionally glimpse a more reflective David, one who questions or resists the role assigned to him. One such instance is the episode of Joab's revenge killing of Abner:

> Afterward, when David heard of it, he said, "I and my kingdom are forever guiltless before the Lord for the blood of Abner son of Ner. May the guilt fall on the head of Joab, and on all his father's house; and may the house of Joab never be without one who has a discharge, or who is leprous, or who holds a spindle, or who falls by the sword, or who lacks food!" So Joab and his brother Abishai murdered Abner because he had killed their brother Asahel in the battle at Gibeon. Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, "Tear your clothes, and put on sackcloth, and mourn over Abner." And King David followed the bier. They buried Abner at Hebron. The king lifted up his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept. The king lamented for Abner, saying, "Should Abner die as a fool dies? Your hands were not bound, your feet were not fettered; as one falls before the wicked you have fallen." And all the people wept over him again. Then all the people came to persuade David to eat something while it was still day; but David swore, saying, "So may God do to me, and more, if I taste bread or anything else before the sun goes down!" All the people took notice of it, and it pleased them; just as everything the king did pleased all the people. So all the people and all Israel understood that day that the king had no part in the killing of Abner son of Ner. And the king said to his servants, "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel? Today I am powerless, even though anointed king; these men, the sons of Zeruiah, are too violent for me. The Lord pay back the one who does wickedly in accordance with his wickedness!" (2 Sam 3: 28-39, NRSV)

Suspicious readers rightly wonder whether David and the narrator protest too much here: David's claim of innocence, his curse on the house of Joab, his mourning behaviour, which includes

the conditional curse on himself if he breaks his fast, and his statement of powerlessness (*w'nwky hywm rk, v. 39*) add up to an excessively defensive stance. The defensiveness applies also to McCarter's translation, which reads: 'And I, though anointed king, am still a gentle man' (McCarter 1984: 105). The conditional curse, which probably includes a physical gesture of choking or cutting the throat, is particularly vivid, and it is this that leads to the people's adulation and the narrator's emphatic statement of the people's faith in David. Yet this curse formula is not air-tight. Another text, 1 Sam 25:22, shows David uttering a version of the oath that he will later fail to uphold.

There is another way to read the text, particularly David's words in v. 39, as genuine anguish over his position. On this reading, David is powerless not 'even though' he is king but rather *because* he is king. David's lament matches the Deuteronomistic ambivalence toward kingship, a necessary but dangerous institution. Even if David's regret over Abner's death and the aggression of Joab is insincere, he nevertheless voices the central problem of reconciling divine and kingly sovereignty, theology and politics. This monologue bears some resemblance to David's self-doubting speech in 2 Sam 16, where a curse against the king is answered with a (temporary) stay of execution and an explicit recognition that David's actions may deserve condemnation: 'My own son seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite! Let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord has bidden him. It may be that the Lord will look on my distress, and the Lord will repay me with good for this cursing of me today' (vv. 11-12). While David's action can certainly be read here as self-serving, one can also see here a frame-breaking moment of honesty, in which David, as it were, addresses the audience of the narrative who may be wondering how to reconcile Deuteronomistic ideology with historical memory (cf. Deut 17:14-20 and 1 Sam 8). The suspicious reading of David is not incorrect, but the iconoclastic conclusion that the biblical account covers up his vices is unwarranted, and, as I have suggested, driven by a secularist understanding of scholarship.

6. HAMLETMACHINE

Heiner Müller (1929–1995), an East German playwright closely associated with Bertolt Brecht, wrote and directed visceral, experimental plays that challenged social and formal conventions of theatre. In Müller's 1979 *Hamletmachine*, Hamlet wants to be a machine. In the opening speech, Hamlet says:

> I was Hamlet. I stood on the coast and spoke with the surf BLABLA at my back the ruins of Europe. The bells sounded in the state funeral, murderer and widow a pair, the town councilors in goose-step behind the coffin of the High Cadaver, wailing in badly-paid grief WHO IS THE CORPSE IN THE MEAT-WAGON'S STY / FOR WHOM IS THERE SUCH A HUE AND CRY? / THE CORPSE IS OF A GREAT / GIVER OF ESTATE ... I stopped the corpse-train, sprang the coffin with my sword, broke it to the hilt, succeeded with the blunt remains, and distributed the dead progenitor FLESH ENJOINS HAP'LY FLESH to the surrounding faces of misery. Grief gave way to joy, joy into munching, on the empty coffin the murderer mounted the widow SHOULD I HELP YOU UP UNCLE OPEN THE LEGS MAMA. I lay on the ground and heard the world

> revolving step by step into putrefaction. I want to be a machine. Arms to grasp legs to walk no pain no thoughts. (Müller 1979a: 1)

Pitting Hamlet the character against the actor who plays him, the work against its reception history, *Hamletmachine* asks whether it is possible to resist the canonical status of a work like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The answer may lie in the category of tragedy, insofar as it applies both to the classic and its latter-day counterpart. What Müller's play shows is that iconoclasm and tragedy can go hand in hand, for *Hamletmachine* is not simply an anti-tragedy depicting an anti-heroic Hamlet. Rather, it is a *meta*-tragedy insofar as it presents Hamlet in agonistic conflict with the actor portraying him:

> I am not Hamlet. I play no role anymore. My words have nothing more to say to me. My thoughts suck the blood of images. My drama is cancelled. Behind me the scenery is being taken down. By people who are not interested in my drama, for people, to whom it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter to me either. I'm not playing along anymore ... My drama has not taken place. The script was lost. (Müller 1979a: 6)

Ophelia, similarly, speaks beyond her immediate role as Elektra and in the name of sacrifice in general, in the final words of the play: 'Here speaks Electra. In the Heart of Darkness. Under the Sun of Torture. To the Metropolises of the World. In the Names of the Victims. I expel all the semen which I have received. I transform the milk of my breasts into deadly poison' (Müller 1979a: 8). Müller's focus on Ophelia stresses the impact of violent, patriarchal narratives on women. Does the tragic necessity of a Hamlet or David require the destruction or sacrifice of women? The experiences of Bathsheba, Tamar, and Michal suggest an affirmative answer to the question. The agency of these women is fiercely curtailed, while the 'feminine' space of the text is filled with 'deadly poison' of various kinds, including the hybridic (and perhaps androgynous) figures of David and Hamlet. An even larger question is the extent to which the work of biblical canon is inherently and violently patriarchal. The questions require further discussion, but my wager here, following feminist scholars of the Bible and feminist theorist Judith Butler, is that there is always space within the world of patriarchal texts for agency on the part of readers as well as characters in the story (Butler 1990; Irigaray 1985; Britt 2007).

By rejecting the canonical relevance of *Hamlet*, *Hamletmachine* paradoxically shows the enduring power of Shakespeare's drama. Müller's fondness for the statement that 'Germany is Hamlet' indicates the author's sense of this lasting relevance (Barnett 2006; Ravit 1999–2000). Insofar as it survives, the canon enjoys the status of comedy. But insofar as it falls short of a 'happy ending,' the history of the canon may best be described by the hybridic term *tragicomic*.

The afterlife of *Hamlet*, like the afterlife of the Bible, depends not only on audience engagement with the text but also the iconic status of the text. As Walter Benjamin shows in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*Trauerspiel*), this iconic status can lead paradoxically to the breakdown of textual authority and signification. Allegory attempts to shore up the status of scripture and tradition, but in so doing it allows anything to mean anything else. Stories of the fall of the tyrant and the collapse of meaning coincide in the *Trauerspiel* to produce a literary version of the cult of the ruin. The tragic dimension of these plays applies not only to plot and character but to

what Benjamin calls 'antinomies of the allegorical,' including dialectics of sacred and profane, speech and writing (Benjamin 1977: 174–175). Benjamin's reading of the *Trauerspiel* applies also to my reading of the David narrative. Like the baroque allegory studied by Walter Benjamin, the influence of David or *Hamlet* today depends on their enduring by decaying meaning: 'Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things'(Benjamin 1977: 178).[7]

Benjamin's study of German tragic drama (*Trauerspiel*) pertains to David and Hamlet not only for its awareness of the decay inherent to allegorical tradition but also for the central place of authority and sovereignty in the theory of tragedy. In German tragic drama, the sovereign or tyrant who often stands at the center of the play suffers from indecisiveness: 'The prince, who is responsible for making the decision to proclaim the state of emergency, reveals, at the first opportunity, that he is almost incapable of making a decision' (Benjamin 1977: 71).[8] The melancholic figure of Hamlet naturally comes to mind here but, for Benjamin, Shakespeare's tragic hero succeeds where *Trauerspiel* fails: 'Only Shakespeare was capable of striking Christian sparks from the baroque rigidity of the melancholic, un-stoic as it is un-Christian, pseudo-antique as it is pseudo-pietistic' (Benjamin 1977: 158). Benjamin's study of the *Trauerspiel* centres on the paradox that authority – in the form of written tradition and in the form of the sovereign – tragically fails in proportion to the intensity of efforts to prop it up: hence the Davidmachine and Hamletmachine.

7. CONCLUSION

Müller's *Hamletmachine* wrestles with the inheritance of literary canon in a way that illuminates the biblical David. Studies of David that polarise between icon and iconoclasm, coloured by the distinction between religion and secularity, miss the tragic complexity of the biblical portrait. Like the monologues in *Hamletmachine*, David's statement that 'Today I am powerless, even though anointed king' reveals self-awareness not only within the story but about the story: the biblical king is always powerless, subordinated not only to divine sovereignty but also to the burden of tradition as well. Driven by the literary and religious necessity that lies at the heart of Greek tragedy, David must always be the Davidmachine. The melancholy tragedy of this tradition resembles the allegorical *Trauerspiel* studied by Walter Benjamin more than the high-pitched drama of pity and fear theorised by Aristotle. Seen in this way, the biblical text contains the seeds of its own destruction, but it is a destruction that only generates new texts and meanings. The juxtaposition of *Hamletmachine* with the biblical David thus evokes the tragedy, or perhaps tragicomedy, of the canon itself.[9]

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ENDNOTES

1 This essay takes up a subject of J. Cheryl Exum's important study, *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative*, which focuses on Saul, Jephthah, and David. While Exum dedicates attention to David's complex character, my interest follows her separate observation that the Deuteronomistic History itself is tragic (Exum 1992: 148–149).

2 Similar iconoclastic tendencies can be found in biblical fiction about David as well. See, for example, Heym (1973) and Heller (1984).

3 A new and distinct approach to the layers of David material is taken by van Seters (2009), who argues that there is a late, Persian period saga of David that undercuts the respectful accounts in the earlier Deuteronomistic history. Van Seters says this saga 'subverts and parodies the divine promise to David in 2 Sam 7' with stories of 'injustice,' 'bloodshed,' and 'power politics' (van Seters 2009: 357–358). Van Seters thus fits the pattern of the other scholars surveyed here as one who divides David's story into more or less secular and religious strands.

4 Martin Noth's basic insight on the unity of the Deuteronomistic History has been developed in a variety of ways, not only in suggestions on how the Deuteronomist may have shaped earlier material about David, but also with various layers within this history itself, including Frank Cross's idea that an early, idealistic version was completed before the exile and followed by a more sober, post-exilic one (Cross 1973). See the surveys of scholarship in McCarter (1984): 4–19 and van Seters (2009): 3–39.

5 The tensions between these layers of tradition were already noted by Friedrich Nietzsche (1990, 147-150), a reader of Wellhausen and other biblical scholars, and while scholars divide the layers in various ways, they continue to agree that such layers exist See Weinfeld (1991): 13–57 and van der Toorn (2007): 143–172.

6 'Rost recognized a distinctive character in the AN in that within it interest is focused on no human being, as it is on Samuel in cc 1-3, but on the ark of Yahweh itself' (McCarter 1980: 23).

7 Müller's engagement with Benjamin centres on the problem of history. His poem 'Glücklose Engel' (1958) depicts Benjamin's angel of history, caught in the space between past and future. In a 1991 interview on Benjamin's influence on his own work, Müller (1992: 351–352) remarks on Benjamin's idea of shock, which comes from the displacement of past and future. He illustrates this displacement by reference to a trip to Milwaukee in 1975, in which he experienced a 'strange feeling' that he was witnessing, in the faces, architecture, and politics of the American city, the Nazi culture of 1933.

8 The influence of Carl Schmitt's theory of sovereignty on Benjamin's book is well-known, but this passage is evidence that Benjamin's use of Schmitt was far from an endorsement of Schmitt. Lutz Koepnick (1996: 291) argues that Benjamin's analysis of baroque drama subtly undermines Schmitt's political theory: 'Benjamin uncovers the inner contradictions of ethicopolitical authority when he portrays the seventeenth-century invention of secularized politics as a misdirected entrance into the modern age.'

9 Exum considers the story of Samson a combination of tragic and comic features (Exum 1992: 19). On the boundary between tragedy and tragicomedy in modernity, see Surin (2005).

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