

SHAKESPEARE'S SISTER

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I

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf suggested why a woman of Shakespeare's genius could not have managed to write in Elizabethan England. Woolf was hopeful that, given the proper conditions, Shakespeare's sister would emerge sometime in the future. But lo! in thunder and cloud and thick darkness, Harold Bloom has produced her—from the past.

Bloom's J is a princess of the House of David, living in the reign of King Rehoboam of Judah after the breakup of the kingdom. She is descended from a line of established writers: since King David (possibly her grandfather) is the reputed author of Psalms, and King Solomon of Proverbs, she has a "considerable family literary tradition to inspire her." J works in close rapport with her good friend and rival, the Court Historian. These two "mature survivors of a greater time" make a fine literary couple, "exchanging influences" and engaging in "friendly competition." Although J never writes about King David—the subject of her rival's work in 2 Samuel—she cannot stop thinking about him: "It is as though David's absence from her writing was a void that his presence could not fill." Indeed, "we can assume that J saw David as godlike," Bloom assures us; for her, "Yahweh himself matters because he is the God who fell in love with David."

So far as I know, this is the first time the language of pulp fiction has been employed in the service of biblical scholarship. And the language of hype as well: although J's accomplishments have long been recognized, Bloom is the first to claim that J produced a work so comprehensive that "the entire Hebrew Bible, Greek New Testament, and Arabic Koran could be founded upon it," or that J's power as a writer "made Judaism, Christianity, and Islam possible." The puffery extends to his own project: Bloom attempts in *The Book of J* no less than "a reversal of twenty-five hundred years of institutionalized misreading."

At the heart of this book is the question of how the Bible came into being. For the past century, biblical scholarship has been dominated by the Documentary Hypothesis, which describes the Pentateuch (originally

attributed to Moses) as composed of four primary sources, “J,” “E,” “P,” and “D,” brought together by a Redactor, “R.” This hypothesis clearly marked an enormous advance: contradictions could be explained as the result of parallel versions, and critical puzzles resolved by seeing each document as the product of its own time. But though the sources were subjected to increasingly minute analysis, there was little understanding for the way in which these were woven together. Recently, in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter drew attention to the artistry of the Redactor, who shaped these disparate sources into coherent, subtly articulated narratives.¹ That very Redactor now proves to be the “villain” of *The Book of J*. Bloom claims that J, the earliest of the sources, was censored by the Redactor, and then systematically misinterpreted by the rabbis and the church fathers, who suppressed her bold vision in the name of institutional religion.

Bloom is by nature a roistering critic, moved by the spirit to discomfit the philistines. He has made a name for himself by tying firebrands to foxes’ tails; in this book he seems determined to shake the pillars of the temple. The lad who leads him by the hand is the translator David Rosenberg, whose version of J forms the basis for Bloom’s prolegomenon, exegesis, and conclusions. Both Rosenberg’s translation and Bloom’s commentary are seriously flawed, and I will have something to say about each. But first, a word about the biblical text and the spirit in which our authors approach it.

Recovering the *ipsissima verba* of J is no simple matter. To distinguish J from E (the two oldest sources), one must have the ability to recognize subtle differences of style in biblical Hebrew. It is not enough to know that the name of God is “Yahweh” in J and “Elohim” in E, for even this basic rule is not invariably true. The documents were “cut-and-pasted” in such a way that they cannot always be separated, and not every verse offers a clue to its provenance; hence scholars are still at odds about many of the attributions. Bloom and Rosenberg too have their disagreements, though it is a mark of sloppiness, not scholarly candor, that these are on display here; some of the “fine touches” of the Joseph story, which Bloom singles out for praise, come from passages that Rosenberg omits.²

An elementary blunder suggests the extent of their carelessness. Although the Redactor usually brings his sources together with consider-

able skill, in a few instances the “splicing” is obvious and reveals his hand. In J, for example, Joseph is sold by his brothers to Ishmaelites, while in E, he is cast into an empty pit and stolen away by Midianite traders without the brothers’ knowledge. Gen. 37:28 conflates J and E: the Midianites steal Joseph from the pit and sell him to the Ishmaelites.³ Since a major purpose of the book is to deliver a pristine J, freed of later accretions, it is unfortunate that Rosenberg bungles this verse — a *locus classicus* — giving us not J but the Redactor’s splice:

Some Midianites are camping nearby. They are merchants who discover Joseph and draw him up from the well. For twenty pieces of silver, they sell him to the Ishmaelites from Gilead when their caravan comes by — camels loaded with gum, balm, laudanum — on the way down to Egypt.

Lack of precision is compounded by self-indulgence. Bloom tells us that he brings to *The Book of J* his “experience over half a century as a reader.” His discoveries are spun out of “imaginative surmise” and they rest on “intuitive aesthetic grounds (of no interest to scholars).” This method does not require that he know biblical Hebrew, or even that he read the text closely, only that he trust his “inner ear.” As an example of his way with the text, consider the story of the *Akedah* or Binding of Isaac in Gen. 22. This masterpiece is generally attributed to E, but Bloom’s ear tells him that there was never an independent E source, and that the story is a mutilated version of an original J text. He can divine precisely what has been added: the notion that Yahweh put Abraham to the test seems to him too “normative,” and the “mindless, total obedience” of Abraham is “totally uncharacteristic of J.” He is equally certain about what has been cut: “The supposed E account of the *Akedah* was bowdlerized from a lost account in which Abram fiercely resists Yahweh’s outrageous injunction to sacrifice Isaac.”

As it happens, there is a documented instance of “bowdlerization” just a few chapters earlier in the Book of Genesis, in the only passage of the Hebrew Bible where God actually assumes human form. In Gen. 18:1, Yahweh is one of the “three men” who visit Abraham; in 18:22, two of the strangers go off to Sodom, while Yahweh stays behind to relate his plan of destruction to Abraham. The second half of that verse reads:

“Abraham remained standing before the Lord,” but a note in the critical apparatus of the *Biblia Hebraica* indicates that a more daring version, with the incarnate God standing in a respectful posture before Abraham, was altered by the scribes. In his translation of Genesis, E. A. Speiser restores the original, “Yahweh paused in front of Abraham,” noting that this is “among the rare instances” of *tiqquney soferim*, scribal corrections, where the biblical text was changed “for deferential reasons.”⁴ Why didn’t Rosenberg adopt this reading, or Bloom cite it in support of his thesis? Judging from their performance in *The Book of J*, one can only surmise that they were not aware of it.

Even if Bloom and Rosenberg were better equipped for their task, they would not be able to reconstitute the original J document. In combining J and E, the Redactor often chose between the two, and whatever he left out is lost to us; this is one of Bloom’s complaints, but it is also, clearly, a problem for the translation. Now Rosenberg, in turn, has excised most of E from the Redactor’s Torah, including the story of Hagar and Ishmael in Gen. 21, the Binding of Isaac in Gen. 22, and Joseph’s interpretation of dreams in Gen. 40:1–41:7. The text of J exhibited here, after these two rounds of surgery, is not a thing of beauty; often it limps along painfully, looking for the missing pieces. One need only read the Joseph story in *The Book of J*, and compare it with the version in any Bible, to see the limitations of this enterprise.

II

There is a wry story, probably apocryphal, that Shakespeare’s plays were published in Yiddish early in this century with a boast on the title page: “Shakespeare *farteisht un farbesert*,” “translated and improved.” Now Rosenberg has performed the same service for the Bible. There’s plenty of *creatio* in his version, most of it *ex nihilo*. Given the departures from the Hebrew on every page, it is hard to avoid the impression that we have another source here, haplessly intertwined with J, E, P, and D. In commenting on the translation, I will refer to that source as “R,” for Rosenberg (not to be confused with Bloom’s villain, the Redactor). It is worth looking at R’s work in detail because it furnishes the basis for Bloom’s misreadings, and also because the issues raised by contemporary transla-

tions from the Bible are of some intrinsic interest.

Bloom's high claims for J's deft, nuanced, elliptical style are belied by R's version. R's language is gawky, graceless, a prose of grunts and snorts, inspired by a comic-strip notion of "the primitive." Having learned to be sparing in his translation of *ve-* ("and, but, so"), he roots out connectives; confused by what he calls "the structure of shifting tenses," he twitches from present to past and back again without a discernible motive. Occasionally his prose goes colloquial; and then, as abruptly, it turns mawkish and "poetic." But rarely does it represent the Hebrew with any degree of faithfulness.

The problems are glaringly evident from the very beginning. Gen. 2:7 provides a fair sample:

Yahweh shaped an *earthling* from *clay* of this earth, blew into its nostrils the wind of life. *Now look*: man becomes a *creature of flesh* (my italics).

"Earthling" (apparently an attempt to capture J's pun on *adam/adamah*) presents a science fiction Adam, a creature from Planet Earth, while the contemptuous suffix "-ling" suggests that the narrator is looking down from somewhere in outer space. *Afar* means "dust," not "clay," and the word "dust" is essential here, reaching toward the inevitable conclusion of the story in 3:19: "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return." "Now look:" (*vayyehi*) turns a simple verb into a trumpet fanfare. Finally, *nefesh hayyah* means "a living being." "Creature of flesh" is much too insistently carnal; moreover, it contradicts Bloom's assertion that J is a monist who "refuses to distinguish between flesh and spirit."

The way R doggedly goes about finding equivalents for biblical word-play shows how little he understands the purposes of translation. The name "Ishmael" is explained as "Yahweh heard your *punishment*: you will hear a *male*" (Gen. 16:11), and "Joseph" as "May this son enjoy *safety* from Yahweh" (30:24). In the same spirit, R invents an etymology for the place-name "Eshkol": "the section of vine cut by Israel's sons was packed as a *school of fish*" (Num. 13:24; R's italics). From these goofy examples, a reader might conclude that J's wordplay is meant to be comic; in fact, for all its playfulness, it is intensely serious, a testimony to the biblical belief that pattern and meaning are everywhere to be found. But why torture

English this way? Where no reasonable equivalent can be found, a footnote, though awkward, is certainly preferable to a labored approximation.

The freedoms that R allows himself (in the name of poetic license?) too often subvert J's finely calibrated effects. R has learned that the biblical writers often repeat thematic key-words to point up the multiple levels of meaning in a narrative, and whenever J fails to meet her quota, he rattles up with some key-words of his own devising. In the Eden story, for example, the word "touch" occurs once only, when Eve informs the snake of Yahweh's commandment about the forbidden fruit: "'Do not eat of it or so much as touch it, lest you die!'" (3:3, Anchor Bible). The detail about touching is Eve's own invention, enlarging on Yahweh's command in 2:17; in this one quick stroke J conveys Eve's eagerness and excitement, her self-dramatization. R interpolates the word "touch" four other times in this brief tale, depriving Eve's speech to the snake of its most telling effect. He also introduces the word "smooth," making the snake "smooth-tongued" and Adam "smooth-skinned," and telling us that Eve was named Hava because "she would have all who live smooth the way, mother." Page after page is filled with this kind of clutter. In the Appendix, R catalogues the words he has "intimately played upon," advertising what is new and noteworthy in his product. This is the only Bible with added wordplay. In almost every case, a cluster of repeated words should be taken as a warning signal. Caveat lector: the contents have been tampered with.

R embellishes J's terse narrative with sentimental clichés: Hagar is "escaping . . . the cold eyes of [her] lady," Rebecca is "lovely as an apparition," and Joseph "a handsome vision." Whenever there is a flash of poetry, he sinks to the occasion. Moses' Song of the Sea begins, in the KJV's exalted language, "I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously" (Ex. 15:1). R gives us: "Sing to Yahweh overcoming / He overflows our hearts," in the banal diction and clunky phrasing of the Sunday school hymnal. Or compare Gen. 45:3, the celebrated climax of the Joseph story, in the KJV and R's version:

And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were troubled at his presence.

“I am Joseph,” his brothers were hearing. “Is my father still alive?” No word returned from their lips, stunned into silence.

Oddly enough, apart from a few obsolete forms, the KJV is closer to the plain speech of our own day. With its grave and measured cadences, it conveys the high grandeur of the original, which is entirely lost in the contortions of R’s mannered version.

The wish to be up-to-date, to make the text more accessible to a twentieth-century audience, is one of R’s besetting impulses; this has its counterpart, as we shall see, in Bloom’s flagrantly anachronistic interpretations. R draws upon contemporary images in the name of relevance. Cain is sentenced to be a *na venad* (“a ceaseless wanderer,” Gen. 4:12); for R this means “homeless” — actually, “homeless as the blowing wind,” the final inspiration courtesy of Bob Dylan. No one in Egypt could “raise his fist or boot” (41:44) without Joseph’s protection. The terms for sacrificial offering (*minhah, olah*, 4:5, 8:20) are translated “holocaust,” demonstrating R’s knowledge of etymology and his lack of taste. R’s uses of the colloquial are equally inept. Pharaoh’s chief cup-bearer is a “head-waiter” (41:9), and Jacob instructs his sons in the language of the wholesaler, “Pack an assortment of our fruit delicacies” (43:11). Esau’s bitter play on Jacob’s name, *vayya’kveni* (“he supplanted me,” 27:36) now reads “that he might jaywalk behind me” — or is this intended to prepare us for the fact that the foremen of the Israelites in Egypt have become “policemen” (Ex. 5:14)?

On the other hand, whenever there is a real opportunity for lively colloquial speech, R grows fastidious. Esau’s brusque demand, “Give me a swallow of that red stuff,” sounds polite and refined here: “Please, pour me some mouthfuls from that reddish stuff” (Gen. 25:30). In sexual references, where J is typically straightforward, even blunt, R is inexplicably euphemistic. The townspeople of Sodom demand that Lot bring out the two men who have come to his house because “we want to know their intimate ways” (19:5). Dinah is delicately raped by a dangling participle: “Lying with her, her guard was broken” (34:2). And Judah’s curt address to Tamar, “Let me lie with you,” is gussied up as “Entertain me in your arms. I wish to enter there” (38:16).

A translation should aspire to be a transparent medium, or at the very

least, to offer a clear view of the original; this one is a mirror that reflects only the face of the translator. R describes J as having “enough experience of life and history to be just over forty, with a still vital appetite for life.” He concludes, in an unabashed display of narcissism: “I realized I was only identifying myself.”

Bloom appears to admire R’s translation especially for its unbridled inventions. He praises R’s “care in repeating the subtle J’s play upon ‘bound,’ ‘boundary,’ ‘unbound’” in the story of Babel—puns which are nowhere to be found in the Hebrew. Later he himself provides an accurate translation of Ex. 19:12, *kol hannoge’a bahar mot yumat*, which describes the terrifying holiness of Mount Sinai: “Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death,” and suggests that we compare it with “Rosenberg’s admirably literate version”: “For those who overstep boundaries, death touches them, steps over their graves.” A reader who makes the comparison can only wonder about Bloom’s literary judgment.

Upon this foundation, Bloom has erected a tower of babble. Look what he makes of R’s image of “smooth-skinned” Adam and the “smooth-tongued” snake: “The nakedness of the man and the woman is their child-like astuteness, even as the slyness of the serpent is its nakedness, its quality of being wholly natural. . . . Solomonic culture, we can infer, was neither a shame culture, like the Homeric, nor a guilt culture, like the Christian.” With R as guide, Bloom uncovers new heartbreak in the Sodom story. Gen. 18:16 describes the two strangers as they leave Abraham and turn toward their errand of destruction: *vayyashkifu al pnei Sdom*, “they looked down toward Sodom.” R rephrases this: “They could see [Sodom’s] upturned face,” and evokes a sympathetic quaver from Bloom: “The Sodom sequence opens with a hint of terrible pathos in the image of the ‘upturned face’ of the city that is to be destroyed.”⁵ Errors of interpretation of this kind, which distort the plain sense of the original text, are precisely what Bloom inveighs against throughout the book. But Bloom relies on Rosenberg’s English, and Rosenberg relies on the standard authorities “superseded by the insights of Harold Bloom.” This is a classic instance of the blind leading the blind.

III

In the course of this book, Bloom compares J to Homer, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Milton, Austen, Tolstoy, Proust, Kafka, Babel, Nathanael West—and above all, to Shakespeare. J is said to resemble Shakespeare because of her “vitalism,” her irony, her wordplay and her understanding of human character. More often than not, “Shakespearean” is used as a category of value, roughly equivalent to “great.” This book is packaged to sell, and Shakespeare is still top-of-the-line.

Looking at J through the lens of these later writers may provide an occasional clarification; more often, it is like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. Bloom’s view of the Bible lacks all historical awareness. He cannot imagine the tenth century B.C.E. as any different from our own day, three millennia later. Because J lived just after the Solomonic “Enlightenment,” he takes her to be a modern, one of us. Indeed, he goes further: “J is the most blasphemous writer that ever lived, far surpassing the beleaguered Salman Rushdie.” He insists on describing J as an ironist “rather than a historian or theologian,” choosing a limited perspective that reflects his own skepticism. One need not be a believer to read the Bible, but to approach it with any understanding, one must realize that it was addressed to a believing audience.

Because of his bias toward the ironic, Bloom entirely misses the numinous dimension of the biblical narratives. Describing the Covenant Vision of Gen. 15, that quintessentially numinous scene, he can only exclaim at its queerness: “Nothing even in J is weirder” than these “weirdly archaic rituals.” The real casualty is Yahweh, who in Bloom’s view is capricious, “outrageous,” “scandalous,” “impishly human,” a “mischief-maker.” (The writer who most resembles Bloom’s J, though he is never mentioned, is Isaac Bashevis Singer, with his imps and his irony, his dark comedy.) Bloom’s notion of Yahweh as comic, ironic—anything but “holy”—is probably his wildest misconception.

In *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto, the great historian of religion, associates the numinous with the “uncanny,” the “incommensurable,” and the sublime—Bloom’s very vocabulary. The “Wrath of Yahweh,” Otto writes, “has no concern whatever with moral qualities.” It is

like stored-up electricity, discharging itself upon anyone who comes too near. It is 'incalculable' and 'arbitrary.' Anyone who is accustomed to think of deity only by its rational attributes must see in this 'Wrath' mere caprice and wilful passion. (18)

Bloom doesn't see that in the stories of J, the arbitrary nature of God represents the unpredictable, the unfathomable, in human experience, and is meant to evoke not ironic laughter but terror and awe.

There remains the question of whether J was a woman. Richard Friedman raised this intriguing possibility in *Who Wrote the Bible?* According to Friedman, though the scribal profession in ancient Israel was male, it is not inconceivable that a woman could have written the J document, since it probably originated in the Judean court, where women had some status. To arrive at a conclusion, one would need more information about the scribal profession and the role of women in the Judean court. Bloom produces no new evidence, just a glib mix of assertion and exaggeration.

The difference between the creation of Adam and of Eve, he says, is that between "making a mud pie and building a much more elaborate and fairer structure"; "surely J's ironic point is that the second time around, Yahweh has learned better how the job ought to be done." Bloom achieves this irony by describing the creation of Adam as "grotesque," "childlike and haphazard," and declaring the creation of Eve to be the "second and greater creation." It seems to me quite the contrary, that the tale of Adam's creation celebrates in a metaphor what must have once seemed a miracle: that life can spring out of the bare ground. There is no "mud pie" here, but mystery; no irony, but amazement. Bloom's reductive language, his rhetorical trick of deflation, trivializes the text for the sake of a trumped-up irony.⁶

At the same time, Bloom overstates the role of women in the Pentateuchal narratives. J "exalts women throughout her work," Bloom tells us; "J had no heroes, only heroines." If the women seem more appealing on occasion than Jacob, Joseph or Moses, I suspect it is because J devotes less time to them, presenting them in broad outline rather than exploring their inner contradictions. But even granted that J is sympathetic to the women characters, Bloom's conclusion seems a little simpleminded. Is only a woman writer capable of representing strong and interesting

women? (Did a woman write the Book of Ruth? Was Shakespeare a woman?) Bloom traces his own first thoughts about J's sex to his pique about feminist criticism of his work. Of all the reasons he produces, this is the only one that has the ring of conviction, and it casts some doubt on his conclusions. I would like to believe that a woman wrote part of the Bible, but first, I would like to see the issue addressed in a serious manner. What we have here is only a sop to Bloom's critics tricked out as an argument.

The Book of J is of a strangely mixed genre: part fiction, part "creative" criticism, part sermon. Its motive force is a Blakean rage against the "normative moralists and theologians," those priests in black gowns who bind with their briars our joys and desires. Bloom's stated intention is to clear away twenty-five hundred years of misreadings, but in the end he succeeds only in imposing his own, which is rather more trendy than that of the rabbis or the church fathers. He goes after the women's vote: "J's women, more than her men, . . . live at the edge of life, rushing onward, never in a static present but always in an incessant temporality." He echoes the rhetoric of the human potential movement: J exalted "freedom of personality"; "the Blessing in J is always the gift of more life." He even gives a quick nod to the ecology movement: "Adam is fashioned out of the *adamah*, or red clay, as a tribute to the earth."

The questions Bloom raises are important, even momentous, and they deserve a commensurate answer. Unfortunately, it is impossible to take this book seriously. Both translation and commentary are sloppy, self-indulgent, arbitrary and frivolous. Still, *The Book of J* has succeeded in drawing attention to biblical studies, and with luck it will serve as a cautionary example for translators and exegetes. By its very presumptions and excesses, it reminds us all of the First Commandment for those who labor in the vineyard: "Learn Hebrew; honor English; walk humbly with thy text."

Notes

1. New York: Basic Books, 1981; see especially ch. 7, "Composite Artistry."
2. Pp. 232, 236-7; the effects Bloom praises are in Gen. 43:23b, 44:27-9, 45:5-8.

3. E. A. Speiser, "Genesis," *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 291: "This single verse alone provides a good basis for a constructive documentary analysis of the Pentateuch; it goes a long way, moreover, to demonstrate that *E* was not just a supplement to *J*, but an independent and often conflicting source."
4. Speiser, pp. 132, 134.
5. The Hebrew phrase *al pnei* does not carry the concrete physical connotation R attributes to it. It is as if we were to postulate a "face" in the sentence, "On the face of it, war is likely," and then claim the speaker is anticipating the sorrowing glance of the victims.
6. He does the same with "the picnic scene at Mamre," p. 202, and the "picnic on Sinai," pp. 258, 282.