Seeing Saul

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A darkened tent, a figure huddled in the corner. The harper enters the gloom, and begins, softly, to play. A table, richly laid, an embroidered cloth of gold behind. Many seats, but one is empty. “Why didn’t the son of Jesse come to the meal yesterday or today?” (1 Sam 20:27b; NJPS). The visual tradition of the story of Saul the king is quite dependent upon and intertwined with that of David, the youth and friend of Jonathan. Yet we see him, we see Saul, as an independent character – powerful, forbidding, troubled and doomed. We see him in Rembrandt’s colors and through Rembrandt’s eyes. It was Rembrandt who irrevocably changed our image of Saul, and indelibly cast him – literally – in a light that still marks him in our imagination. For it is Rembrandt’s light, dark – yet touched with golden afterglow at its edges, which so wonderfully characterizes Saul and “matches” the powerful and melancholy image of Saul vouchsafed us by the biblical text.

This, of course, is the “late” Saul, the “psychological” Saul, the Saul already more deeply troubled and darkly painted than the young and impetuous Saul, the warrior, the king in spite of God and prophet. And Rembrandt is relatively late in the day as well, in the history of art. Though he represents the quintessence of the manifestation of Saul in art, it might be interesting to return to him after exploring the ways in which the iconographic tradition developed before Rembrandt took up his brush in its service.

Saul is the prototype of the warrior-king, even more so than David. In art before Rembrandt, his coronation, battles, and skirmishes with God’s prophet Samuel seem presented somewhat generally and literally. His importance cannot salvage the fact that he does not seem to be a particularly interesting subject for the oldest stratum of Jewish or for early Christian art. But it is my contention that these “uninteresting” early depictions conceal a subtext that sets Rembrandt off from his predecessors not only in terms of style, technique and painterly subtlety, but also in terms of what we might call political/social iconographic aims.

Saul appears primarily in illuminated manuscripts – the fourteenth and fifteenth century Psalters, illustrated bibles, and royal histories that were the western equivalent of the Persian “the king’s book of kings” – works intended

as “mirrors” of good (and bad) examples of kingship.[1] Created for important kings, they depict the ancient predecessors of the monarch-patron, dressed in *au courant couture* (occasionally embellished with some archaizing details to indicate that these events happened in a “once upon a time” time) doing, more or less, those things done by contemporary kings. The reasons for their illustration were occasionally obvious, occasionally more subtle for the illuminators who created these books as mirrors of the royal life. The battle scenes are made to entertain, but also to encourage the identification of the royal patron with the great heroes of the Israelite past.

The Morgan Library’s so-called Old Testament Picture Book, is a prime example, since it was made for Louis IX of France, and subsequently made its way through the library of a colorful entourage of kings and warriors the world over. Its *raison d’être* is the depiction of bloody conflict, from the battle with the Ammonites, and the even bloodier battle with the Amalekites, to the “hewing” of Agag. But courtly values, morals, and mores are emphasized in many of these sequences as well. Royal justice is highlighted as well. Guyart Desmoulins’ Bible Historiale (fol. 121r) shows Saul, crowned and bearing a scepter, condemning his son Jonathan to death for perjury. This scene is somewhat confusing to me, because Jonathan appears as a bearded man with a military haircut, kneeling before Saul, in contradistinction to his usual appearance as a slender youth. I believe that this illumination was placed at this text juncture in error, as it actually depicts Agag pleading before Saul. But in any case, the illustration is one of the rather civil surrender of one king (or prince) before another, a circumstance that would undoubtedly have been familiar to the king who would have viewed this manuscript. Other details, both formal and sartorial – the arrangement of courtiers around tables, the hierarchies of royal audiences, the configuration of armies, etc. – are “true to life” and would have heightened the sense of familiarity (and hence the potential moral impact) of these illuminations.

Although the *realia* and corroborative detail embedded in the illustrations are interesting, the main importance of the Saul narratives in religious art is to introduce and provide the backdrop for the story of David. But Saul has his own importance as an iconic figure and as an object lesson – his appointment, actions, and attitude are critiqued. This is done, of course, via the narrative, but also by means of the physical depiction of Saul. Compellingly, in order to accomplish this critique, the illustrations in these “mirrors of kingship” must distort the biblical text as if reflecting it in a fun-house mirror.

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[1] There is no book on the subject of Saul in art, but a considerable number of examples, drawn upon for this article, are collected at the Princeton Index of Christian Art, which documents works of art in all media produced from apostolic times through the fifteenth century. Some of these images are accessible via http://ica.princeton.edu/.

As one surveys the several significant examples of Saul iconography in manuscript illumination of the High Middle Ages in the West, one notes that Saul's most obvious physical attribute – that of being "head and shoulders above" (1 Sam 9:2, 10:23) the men of his generation – is only occasionally indicated by depicting him as taller than the other figures on the page. One can see this most explicitly in the Saul sequence in the Morgan Library's Old Testament Picture Book (fols. 23r & 23v). Saul is occasionally represented with his feet or his sword spilling over the frame of the illumination (cf. fol. 24v.). Here he is in accordance with the biblical text not only bigger than other men, but "larger than life" and "too big for his britches" – a representation of excess and of a wild weed grown out of control.

More commonly, however, it is not Saul but Samuel who is depicted as the physically and metaphoric "big man" on the scene. We can understand when Saul is depicted as "larger than life," for it has both literal/textual antecedents and metaphoric significance. But what are we to make of the many (particularly narratologically early) episodes in which it is not Saul, but Samuel who is "writ large" in direct contradiction of the biblical text? In the upper register of fol. 16r of the Morgan's rather static Huntingfield Psalter (M. 43), for instance, young Saul is represented as tiny compared with Samuel, who anoints him. We might put the difference in their relative sizes down to the desire to depict Saul as "young," even though it contradicts the information in the biblical text, which speaks of his extraordinary stature specifically at the time of his anointment. But what do we make of the illumination in the lower register of the same folio? Here, when an adult and bearded Saul rends Samuel's garment, the king is rendered in "normal" adult size, while Samuel is a giant whose feet break the borders of the illumination. These illustrations clearly emphasize the subservience of Saul to Samuel. Metaphorically, they point to and critique his role as a stopgap – an appeasement of the will of the people, and at the same time, somewhat of an affront to the will of God.

At the same time, the oscillation of the relative sizes of Samuel and Saul between biblical text and medieval iconography in the anointment scenes and in the scenes of the encounters between Saul and Samuel serve the purposes of another sort of identification. Through these, the king was encouraged to identify as a monarch who existed "by grace of God," and whose relationship with God, with the clergy, with other kings, and with his own courtiers and people were to be mediated through the dicta of the Church. Not only is Saul's disobedience delineated in the iconography, but Samuel's admonition of him is also unflinchingly depicted. All of the Saul cycles begin with depictions of Samuel's role in the anointing and coronation of Saul, the most extensive elaboration being in the Morgan Old Testament Picture Book, where the entire upper register of fol. 22 is devoted to Samuel's role in Saul's

appointment – the peoples' appeal to Samuel for a king, his meeting with the other prophets (1 Sam 10:10), his presence at the anointing, and the coronation. The dove of the Holy Spirit appears but once in this sequence, and it alights upon Samuel and not Saul, giving considerable force to the possibility that – although this was really a "king's book of kings" – it was made by people trained in the cloister workshop. These artists, although they minutely and accurately depicted the court, ventured through the illuminations a clerical commentary on by just whose grace a king was a king. Queen Mary's Psalter makes this point in a somewhat different way: Samuel is twice depicted anointing young Saul, once in the family context (fol. 50v) and once "before the city" (fol. 60r), i.e., a large complex of buildings, the most prominent of which is inscribed with a cross. In both cases, Samuel appears literally as a towering figure, ostensibly in relationship to the youth (and hence small stature) of Saul, but in contradiction to the biblical text, which describes Saul as being taller than any other Israelite, and in exaggeration intended to heighten the sense of clerical presence and control.

As one moves into the seventeenth century, one encounters a Saul who is less and less an object-lesson for monarchs who would dispute or oppose clerical authority, and more and more the figure of a tragic individual whose life is clouded by what might have been. This transformation of Saul's iconography occurs in the age of Rembrandt, an age of increasing concern with the "internal" life of the "individual."[2] Of course, Rembrandt and his followers would not have expressed their concerns in such psychologically tinged language. They simply began to extrapolate assumptions and observations about what they might have called "the spiritual life of men" into the realm of naturalistic depiction. They became more interested in how peoples' physiognomy, bearing, and expressions responded to various life circumstances and emotional states, including moral dilemmas, trials, callings, and doubts, and how those responses could be reflected in art using the live model. Thus, a model could be sought with the marks of poverty, deprivation, and care on her face, or a model could be told to behave as though he was harried by doubt or fear.

In the case of biblical characters, artists reading the bible speculated concerning what would have been inscribed on a subject's face and bearing, given his or her emotional experience under the conditions described in the narrative. They could then select models of appropriate appearance and instruct them as to what psychological states to represent. This resulted in the depiction of biblical characters – hitherto relative abstractions – as individuals who seemed to react to specific personal circumstances. Instead of striving to depict biblical characters as a mirror of kings or as a mirror of guidance

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[2] On the tenor of Rembrandt's age and the place of the individual (and Rembrandt in particular) within it, see SCHAMA, Rembrandt's Eyes.

toward right behavior and away from wrong, artists and viewers began to look at the bible as a mirror that also offered reflections of what we would today call psychological states.

Medieval art would have been unconcerned, for example, with expressing the potential tension between Abraham's desire to serve God and his love for his son, because, while that might have been one of the concerns of religious literature, that was not what art was about. In art Abraham was, rather, a symbol of something: the quality of faith. He was a metaphor for a divine quality: the altruism of God the Father, who gave up his own son to be sacrificed for the salvation of humankind. He was an exemplar of someone: the man of faith striving for perfection of faith. But Abraham, while considered a real person who had lived a long time ago, was not a representative example of anything particular or individual. He was not Everyman. On the contrary, it was the task of Everyman to aspire to reach his level of faith. In Rembrandt's hands, however, Abraham became Everyman. He represented not only a principle, but a dilemma, not only an example, but a state of mind. In Rembrandt's magnificent etching of the Sacrifice of Isaac, when Abraham turns his head, his unseeing eyes haunt us as he hears the word of God from the mouth of the angel. Rembrandt is depicting not only a moment in the narrative, but all the potential psychological nuances of that moment. Now, viewers of the medieval illuminations of Abraham were not unconcerned with Abraham's internal state, his dilemmas, his conflicts, and his pain. But they needed to project those feelings onto a static, iconic, and symbolic image. A viewer unaware of the story of Abraham or unclear about its details (and in the twenty-first century there are many such viewers) experiences difficulty in effectively identifying with Abraham in the presence of a medieval image, which, while so symbolically and theologically rich, is at the same time so emotionally static. Viewers of Rembrandt who are unfamiliar with the biblical narrative have an easier time; they can test their own emotions against those so clearly expressed by Rembrandt's Abraham. But, at the same time, a new set of ways of looking emerges with the new circumstances of depiction – a new set of questions, relevant especially to those who are intimately familiar with the text. Central among these is the crucial one of timing and psychology: Which moment, exactly, is being depicted? For Rembrandt is, in fact, depicting an exact moment.

In the case of our etching, is this the moment when the angel has just called Abraham: "Abraham, Abraham" (Gen 22:11)? Or when he tells him, "Lift not your hand against the boy" (Gen 22:12), or even – given the magnificent precision and sensitivity of Rembrandt – is this moment between the two "Abrahams" of the angel's call? For even subtlety such as this can be limned by the emotional mastery of a Rembrandt, whose aim was to portray biblical subjects in such a way as to give the viewer a sense of being there,

having a privileged and private view of the scene, and feeling with the characters depicted.

It is in the service of these goals of imminence, intimacy, and emotional realism that certain dramatic junctures in the biblical narrative of Saul are taken up anew in the age of Rembrandt. These scenes – while always deemed worthy of illustration and surfacing again and again in the iconography of the Middle Ages – now emerge as paramount in the representation of a Saul re-envisioned as a doomed and tragic individual.

Two images of David playing the harp before Saul survive as part of what has historically been regarded as the Rembrandt canon. There are questions –

as with the vast majority of Rembrandts – regarding what parts of these paintings were done by the master himself and what parts by his studio or students.[3] No preliminary sketches remain from these works, although we can assume that such sketches once existed. All that can be said of their place in the canon at this juncture is that one is a relatively early and the other a relatively late work. Nonetheless, let us regard these paintings as the product of Rembrandt's hand or as having been created under his direction.

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[3] To appreciate the scope of the disputes over original and derivative works, see the monumental continuing work of the Stichting Foundation Rembrandt Research Project, namely, BRUYN et al., Corpus. Early studies often betrayed their revisionist agenda in their titles, like VAN DYKE'S Rembrandt and His School. A Critical Study of the Master and His Pupils with a New Assignment of Their Pictures, and BIÖRKLUND'S Rembrandt's Etchings, True and False. A Summary Catalogue in a Distinctive Chronological Order and Completely Illustrated. A good recent study of the problem of sorting the master out from his school is BLANKERT'S Impact.

They present two, quite different views of the same scene. In one, painted around 1629, now in the Städelsches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt, we see David, a shadowy figure in the corner, half-formed except for his hands, harping for

the king, who sits centrally, illuminated by a dusky half-light – monumental, monolithic, iconic, the soldier (apparently) garbed in silver armor; the king, with his massive chain of office. Saul maintains a tight grasp on his javelin with his massive-knuckled right hand. Although its point is stuck resolutely

into the ground, there is a tension in the arm and hand as he pulls the shaft toward himself, looking – yet not looking – at David. His left hand grasps the arm of the heavy "Spanish" folding camp chair. He is about to pull up the javelin and rise to skewer the young shepherd boy, yet he is frozen in the act, paralyzed by the indecision of a troubled mind, which could, at any moment, crack and instantaneously precipitate wildly unrestrained and unconsidered action.

Rembrandt's typical use of "exotic" costume, particularly headgear, is literally revealing here. Saul wears a turban surmounted by a feather, this vertical object standing in sketchy and ephemeral contrast with the more firmly manifested javelin shaft. The turban itself is wound around his chin in the manner of desert-dwellers – designed, in other words, to cover his face. But here, in the tent, the king's face is revealed, even as it is protected. And although his tunic at first appears to be metallic, like a cuirass of some type, on closer inspection, the garment – the blood-red cloak that lies heavily over his huge bulk almost as if (and possibly, knowing Rembrandt, exactly as if) an Oriental rug had been thrown over the model – Saul's undergarment reveals itself to be worn cloth-of-gold, now reduced to the silver-grey ground of the once-sumptuous fabric, shot through with the occasional remnants of the gold thread that catch the light as reminders of a literally faded glory. This is not a military uniform. For all his bulk and monumentality, the king is alone, fading, unprotected.

Most fascinating about this picture is the way in which the spare curve of David's harp is confluent with the much more fleshed-out curve of the king's bulk, just as the feather, as we observed before, is a reduced or softened mirroring of the javelin shaft. While the figure of David is inexpertly limned – one indication that the painting was completed by collaborators or students – it is clear that David's face is meant to be averted and that it is his hands that are paramount. Those hands, while held in the correct manner for playing his harp, are also positioned at a distinctive, grasping angle. They are emphasized, moreover, by being depicted as the first two points on a straight diagonal bisecting the painting from lower left to top right, with Saul's big and tense hand at its center, and ending in inky darkness. If we project the position of David's hands onto the larger harp-shape of Saul's body, David would have one hand over the King's heart, grasping at it, and one hand at his left shoulder, restraining him. The position of David's hands on an instrument which is the same general shape as the body of Saul, his audience of one, explicitly signals that he has ensnared the seat of the monarch's emotions and shows the effect of this capture – to restrain Saul from the angry and impulsive action he might have taken. So, it is not only the king's heart and unstable mind that hold him back from dire action; the music itself precipitates a contradictory welter of impulses and emotions. It angers Saul

because it advertises indisputably the fact that the hand of God rests upon David, but, at the same time, it calms him because the music, channeled from the Divinity, has the power to soothe him like nothing else. The wild, yet somewhat perplexed and lost look in Saul's eyes is the result of this ambiguity and tension. As one deep-set and disturbed eye focuses outward on us, the viewers, Saul's other eye is drawn inexorably to David's hands as his head pulls back, slightly recoiling. It is as if Saul is aware that in playing his harp, David is also playing him; and he turns slightly outward, toward us, as we witness this confusion and its ensuing paralysis.

Rembrandt's other and more famous treatment of the scene, painted between 1655–1660 and now in the Mauritshuis in The Hague, is touched with a bit more light than the earlier work, but as a painting – even if

ostensibly of the same subject – it is a much darker work. If it can be said that the earlier painting is all about the inner Saul, with David present only as the precipitator of the psychological action, this is even truer in the latter picture, even though David is physically more present – more fully, convincingly, and masterfully rendered. Although they share the space of the painting, with David taking up the entire lower right quadrant of the horizontal canvas, the broken, tragic figure of Saul is definitely the subject here. The king's clothes are more sumptuous than in the earlier recension, his turban more voluminous and set within an impressive crown, his beard more lush. And yet, for all this

grandeur of dress (or more accurately, *because* of it) it seems as if he is a man hiding behind clothes far too big for the body that no longer really inhabits them. The crown is perched precariously on a confection of a turban, and the king is in near collapse at facing himself, since he, like the diadem, is propped up on a foundation of meaningless splendor. We see, in fact, not a king, but a careworn man whose entire being is summed up in one staring, inward, deep-set, and tortured eye, and in one slack, exhausted hand resting – cadaver-like – at crotch-level.

The curtain that hung behind Saul in the earlier painting, whose curve echoed both the bulk of the king's body and the shape of the harp, now bisects the painting. Rather than symbolizing the separation of royal from common space, as it does in the earlier work, here it symbolizes the separation between the public and the intensely private, which we are permitted to witness. The curtain here is grasped, abused, used, the closest thing at hand for hiding the intense shame of the king as he weeps with misery, contrition, self-pity, and self-loathing. Again, it echoes the arc of the king's body and that of the harp, but instead of drawing our eye to the center of the scene, where the tension of inaction is manifest, here the curves – the King's shoulder, the curtain, the harp – lead us ultimately from the king's tragedy-riven face to David's closed eyes, his internal knowingness. Here, if David's hands were transposed onto Saul's body rather than the harp, he would – he could with Saul in this state – gently pluck the javelin from Saul's hand, as easily as he plucked the strings of the harp.

In the earlier painting, the javelin, as we noted, is held point-downward. Here it seems to be point-upward. In the downward position, it needs merely to be shouldered and thrown; in the present position, it would require two movements – turning around and shouldering – before it could be thrown. In the first recension, Saul wants to throw the javelin, but cannot. By this recension, Saul no longer wants to throw the weapon at all, or, indeed, do much more than listen, reflect, and weep. The devolution of Saul's will – from desiring to act and not being able to, to not even desiring to act – is a testimony to Rembrandt's ability to depict the king's progressive psychological impotence. Much has been written about the position of this painting in Rembrandt's life and about his supposed identification with the figure of Saul.[4] It is unpopular nowadays to write psychohistories of artists or to try to fit the "mood" of their paintings to specific periods and times in their lives. It is more fashionable, *á là* Simon Schama, to situate the artist in cultural history. The differences between these paintings are striking; and it does seem as if Rembrandt read the story several times in the course of his life, and each time a different aspect of the narrative sparked his imagination. Yet, who is the character with whom Rembrandt identifies? Notice that

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[4] See LANDSBERGER, Rembrandt, pp. 170-171.

David, too, is transformed here. In the first painting, he is not even important enough to be painted by the master, only his controlling hands are expertly rendered. But the later David is all sly, self-assured inwardness and knowingness. He plays with eyes closed, a tune of whose (literally) disarming power he is confident. Are both of these paintings allegories of artist and patron, seen from early and late in the artist's career? I am delighted and satisfied about the fact that some perceptible "earliness" in the one painting and "lateness" in the other is capable of inspiring such speculation, but I will leave any claims as to what in Rembrandt's life or cultural surroundings the paintings may be "really about" to experts in Rembrandt, allegoresis, and seventeenth-century Dutch cultural history.

What we can say is that the result of the transformation of the iconography of Saul was a transformation of the way in which Saul came to be seen. He remains an individual with all the valences of the kingship/authority dichotomy of the medieval portrayal intact, if one chooses to look at the iconography from that perspective. But the age of Rembrandt imbued him with additional dimensions, accessible by and relevant to a growing middle-class patronage and viewer base. And eventually, because of Rembrandt's artistic genius and the growing availability of access to art by members of all social classes, the figure of Saul gained a relevance that could cross all social boundaries, so that a laborer, a merchant, a burgher, or a monarch might "connect" with Saul, each in his or her own way. And likewise, eventually, a stockbroker, a grocer, a computer programmer, a lawyer or a high school teacher, as well as parents, the sad and middle-aged, the young and inspired, and artists and patrons from the Bronx to Beijing. Through Rembrandt's legacy, the first king of Israel has truly become "our" Saul.

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