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**SOUND AND SILENCE:**  
A PSYCHOANALYTIC ANALYSIS  
OF *THE MEDIUM*

**Margaret McCurry**

“A Mute is one that acteth speakingly...” – Brome,  
*The Antipodes* v. 4<sup>1</sup>

The art of theatre relies heavily upon both visual and auditory cues to inspire emotions in the audience. So vital is the role of auditory perception to audiences that the origins of the word “audience” can be traced back to the fourteenth century Old French word, *audience* (“the act or state of hearing, action or condition of listening”), which developed from the Latin *audentia* (“a hearing, listening”) (Harper).<sup>2</sup> Opera, in particular, relies even more heavily upon sound for audience members to understand the texts, meanings, and emotions. When the curtain rises, audiences anticipate that they will hear *something*. What significance, then, does an opera with a *mute* character hold—a character who auditorily conveys *nothing*?

In this paper, I wish to explore the dialectic of sound and silence in Gian Carlo Menotti’s opera, *The Medium*, by introducing several interrelated psychoanalytic theories and proposing possibilities as to the significance of these binary phenomena. The opera features two auditory anomalies: a mute character and sourceless, haunting echoes. After providing summaries of Act I and Act II, I will analyze the historical

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<sup>1</sup> “Speakingly.” *The Century Dictionary and Cyclopeda*, vol. 7. (New York: The Century Co., 1904), 3804.

<sup>2</sup> Harper, Douglas, “Audience,” Def. 1, *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

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relationship between muteness and melodrama. Next, I will explore “Monica’s Waltz,” the opening scene of Act II, in which Monica, Baba’s daughter, sings to Toby, a mute gypsy boy, and then “sings” his responses for him. This scene exemplifies the semiotic elements of Toby’s communication and captures the quintessence of the melodramatic features of the opera as a whole. After this, I will provide a summary of Julia Kristeva’s theory of semiotic language and I will use the philosophy of Cathy Caruth to study the echoes that haunt Baba, each voice representing a Caruthian “voice that cries out,”<sup>3</sup> for which I argue is Toby’s traumatic “voice.” Finally, I will conclude the paper by placing these ideas in conversation with Sigmund Freud’s research regarding the uncanny.

#### *Act I: “A Cold, Cold Hand”*

The entirety of the two-act opera takes place in the parlor of Baba, a woman who conducts routine séances under the alias of Madame Flora. Act I opens as Monica plays make-believe with Toby, dressing him in silks of brilliant colors. Baba arrives, inebriated, and reprimands Toby for touching her things. Soon thereafter, three guests arrive and a séance begins. Two of the guests, Mr. and Mrs. Gobineau communicate with an entity they believe to be their son. Because he died at the age of two, he is unable to speak to them and only laughs. Mrs. Nolan, the third guest, experiences a séance for the first time. She seeks to connect with her teenage daughter, who comforts Mrs. Nolan (“Mummy, Mummy dear, you must not cry for me”).<sup>4</sup> What the guests do not realize, however, is that Monica is responsible for the responses of the dead—she imitates the laughter of the Gobineau child and she sings replies to Mrs. Nolan into a microphone behind a curtain. As the séance draws to a close, Baba feels a hand around her throat

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<sup>3</sup> Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2016), 3

<sup>4</sup> Menotti, Gian Carlo. *The Medium*, (G. Schirmer, Inc., 1986), 29.

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(“[A]ll of a sudden in the dark I felt on my throat a hand — A cold, cold hand. It wasn’t the hand of a man. Monica, I’m afraid!”<sup>5</sup> She accuses Toby of trying to kill her (“Where is Toby? He! He’s the one! I know now! He did it!”)<sup>6</sup> Act I ends with Monica comforting Baba, who frantically counts on her rosary and begs for God’s forgiveness. Suddenly, they hear a voice coming from offstage—Monica’s voice—singing the “Mother, mother, are you there?” leitmotif that Monica sang to Mrs. Nolan. This frightens Monica and Baba even more, since it is obvious that this time, it is *not* Monica who is singing the refrain.

**Act II: The Emergence of Toby’s Voice**

Act II begins with “Monica’s Waltz” as Toby puts on a puppet show for Monica. Enraptured by her fantasies, Monica sings and dances to her waltz, and begins to include Toby in the realm of her imagination. She sings of her love for Toby in the form of a duet, singing not only her part, but Toby’s responses to her as well. Baba, drunk, arrives with a slam of the door. She confronts Toby and tries to force him to admit that he was the one who touched her throat. She bribes him with costumes and even with Monica’s hand in marriage, but ultimately resorts to physical abuse. The doorbell rings and the patrons return. Still frightened from the hand she felt around her throat, Baba confesses to her patrons that she has been conning them and attempts to pay them back. The patrons beg her to continue the séances, since the connections with their children are all they have to hold on to (“Please let us have our séance, Madame Flora! Just let us hear it once more, Madame Flora! This is the only joy we have in our lives, Madame Flora!”<sup>7</sup> They leave reluctantly. Baba again accuses Toby and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 44-45.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

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forces him to leave the house. He returns during the night and is drawn towards the trunk where Baba keeps her costumes. When he accidentally slams the lid of the trunk shut, Baba wakes up from her drunken sleep. She grabs a gun to protect herself against what she believes to be the spirit that has been haunting her. Baba sees movement within the puppet theater and shoots into it, killing Toby. The curtain falls as Baba bends over Toby's lifeless body and whispers, "Was it you? Was it you?"<sup>8</sup>

### *The Melodrama of Muteness*

While *The Medium* is unique in that it features a mute character in a performance that is fully sung, muteness is a theme that spans broadly across the melodramatic genre. In "The Mute's Voice: The Dramatic Transformations of the Mute and Deaf-Mute in Early-Nineteenth-Century France," Patrick McDonagh examines the history behind the relationship between muteness and the melodrama. Although his research primarily focuses on the way in which historical accounts of muteness have been portrayed on the stage, his work can be applied to fictional accounts as well. McDonagh contextualizes the metaphorical relationship between the melodrama and its corresponding physical manifestations, explaining that the *tragedy* highlights blindness, with an emphasis on foresight, insight, and enlightenment; the *comedy* highlights deafness, with an emphasis on miscommunication and misunderstanding; and the *melodrama* highlights muteness, with an emphasis on verbal and emotional expression.<sup>9</sup> Most significantly, the melodrama lends itself to what he calls "aesthetics of muteness," meaning that mute characters must demonstrate

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>9</sup> McDonagh, Patrick, "The Mute's Voice: The Dramatic Transformations of the Mute and Deaf-Mute in Early-Nineteenth-Century France," *Criticism* 55, no. 4 (2013): 657.

what they mean physically while also metaphorically pointing toward meaning.<sup>10</sup>

What makes *The Medium* a melodrama? Besides “the intentional staging of danger and the subsequent heightened emotions,”<sup>11</sup> the mystery of the mute plays a part. The interrelated correspondences between the mute character, who traditionally holds the truths central to the play’s ideas and enigmas, with the marginalization of the mute creates a melodramatic atmosphere surrounding the recognition of the mute and the secrets he or she has to reveal. Toby’s presence raises questions of suspense that the audience struggles to answer throughout the opera: How did Toby become mute? What secrets does he withhold? Will he ever learn to speak? These questions incite anxieties and feelings of suspense in the audience. Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, associate professor of Musicology at Brooklyn College, explains: “The idea of muteness in fiction is exemplified . . . structurally by the predominance of gaps and textual ellipses, and thematically by an overriding concern with language, silence, speech, muteness, writing, and blankness.”<sup>12</sup> It is these very linguistic features that I wish to explore using Julia Kristeva’s theory of semiotic language.

### *Semiotic Language as an Alternative to Speech*

As this paper relies so heavily upon Kristeva’s notion of semiotic language, it will be helpful to review this concept in detail before applying it to *The Medium*. In *Revolutions in Poetic Language*, Kristeva argues that all signification is articulated by the dialectic of two linguistic modes, *the symbolic* and *the semiotic*. She explains that *the semiotic* is the means

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 657.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 669.

<sup>12</sup> Jensen-Moulton, Stephanie, “‘What is it you want to tell me?’: Muteness and Masculinity in Menotti’s *The Medium*.” PhD diss., CUNY, 24.

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by which humans express physical drives through prosodic linguistic features, including vocal modulations and even sphincteral activity.<sup>13</sup> *The semiotic* is expressed with the fluctuations and modulations within music, poetry, or rhythmic speech. As a companion to *the semiotic*, *the symbolic* is the means by which humans express their thoughts using concrete syntaxes that are defined by pre-existing, culturally constructed standards.<sup>14</sup> Symbolic communication is expressed with sentences that abide by prescriptive grammatical rules. It is important to understand that *the semiotic* and *the symbolic* are *inseparable* features of language. If *the semiotic* acted in isolation, it would only contribute senseless babble; if *the symbolic* acted in isolation, it would only contribute unmotivated speech. Without the dialectical oscillation between *the semiotic* and *the symbolic*, signification would not be possible.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, these two linguistic modes are inseparable because they both exist within the conceptual systems of every speaker. Kristeva explains, “Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either “exclusively” semiotic or “exclusively” symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both.”<sup>16</sup> All speaking subjects, and therefore, all linguistic utterances, are composed of semiotic features as well as symbolic features; the question is, to what extent?

Considering that Toby’s muteness bars him from complete access to the realm of *the symbolic*, how does his linguistic approach fit within Kristeva’s theory of language? Toby’s muteness emphasizes his otherness through a twofold process: His physical disability inhibits him from fully participating in the production of language, and as a consequence,

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<sup>13</sup> Kristeva, Julie, *Revolutions in Poetic Language*, (New York: Columbia, UP, 1984), 38.

<sup>14</sup> Oliver, Kelly, *The Portable Kristeva*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1997), xiv.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>16</sup> Kristeva, *Revolutions*, 34.

he is forced to seek alternative means of communication in the realm of *the semiotic*. The dialectic of sound and the *absence* of sound culminates in Toby's semiotic expressions. Throughout the opera, we see him nod,<sup>17</sup> point,<sup>18</sup> knock,<sup>19</sup> and meaningfully touch other characters.<sup>20</sup> He also expresses himself abstractly with the costumes that he wears, with the puppets that he manipulates, and most interestingly, through the voices of the other characters. Toby enjoys dressing himself in Baba's costumes—Act I opens as Toby dresses himself and Monica chides him, reminding him that “you know [Baba will] beat you if you touch her things,”<sup>21</sup> indicating that this is a circumstance that has taken place in the past. Predictably, Baba's first lines, sung when she catches Toby handling the costumes, are “How many times I've told you not to touch my things! Look at you! Dressed with silk and bangles like a woman! Fancying yourself a King or something? Stop dreaming, you feeble-minded gipsy! I told you not to touch my things!”<sup>22</sup> Later in the opera, Baba offers these very “things” in exchange for a confession, singing, “You like that bolt of red silk, don't you? Would you like to have it? Also the necklace of beads? All you have to make is one little sign, and they will be yours.”<sup>23</sup> Additionally, Toby expresses himself semiotically with the puppets he operates. Because Toby cannot control his surroundings, he finds pleasure in manipulating the puppets as a means of acting out his desires. In fact, the puppet theater is where he retreats when Baba threatens to shoot him at the end of the opera. He runs there for protection and control, but it cannot offer him the safety he desires. Like him, the puppets are

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<sup>17</sup> Menotti, *The Medium*, 58.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.



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voiceless, and like him as well, they are manipulated by forces outside of their control.

Paradoxically, the most important linguistic contributions that Toby makes are his silences. As Jensen-Moulton explains, “[S]ince he does not sign or communicate beyond nodding, miming, and his own expressive face, Toby’s language consists entirely of actions and reactions, and essentially, of silences.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the notion of a mute character in an opera is almost oxymoronic. When it is Toby’s turn to participate in the sung conversations among characters, something interesting happens—the music “speaks” for him through “rests, gaps of vertical dissonance, and one-sided recitatives over sustained single pitches.”<sup>25</sup> I wish to explore the way that Toby’s linguistic expressions are shaped by Menotti’s music—either through the orchestral accompaniment or through the vocal lines of the other characters. An analysis of the musical features within “Monica’s Waltz” reveals that the scene is entirely contingent upon the semiotic melodrama of Toby’s disability.

#### *Monica’s Waltz: “What is it you want to tell me?”*

Swept away by her fantasies, Monica begins her Waltz by describing the instruments, the dress of the dancers, and the supernatural elements of the dance. She takes Toby’s hands, pulling him into her circle and inviting him to dance with her. The Waltz comes to a sudden stop when Toby grabs Monica’s arm. The stage directions over measure 27 indicate, “Toby seizes Monica abruptly by the arm. She turns and looks

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<sup>24</sup> Jensen-Moulton, “Muteness and Masculinity,” 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

at him in complete astonishment,<sup>26</sup> precisely when the orchestra plays a C-D dyad over an A-flat octave. Monica asks, “What is the matter, Toby? What is it you want to tell me?”<sup>27</sup>

Of course, Toby cannot reply to this question within Monica’s symbolic realm. As a result, he demonstrates *the semiotic* in its purest form—through music. The orchestral accompaniment offers a musical response to Monica—a plaintive, three measure motif, *adagio molto espressivo*, slightly faster and more expressive, and *ma inteso e un poco rubato*, more intense, with slight disregard to tempo in order to express more intimately.<sup>28</sup> This passage underscores Toby’s gestures as he struggles to “find the words to speak,” semiotically speaking (see Figure 2, Appendix B).

In response, Monica commands Toby to kneel as she moves behind him and adopts his stance. In this position, Monica “sings” for Toby, exclaiming, “Monica, Monica, can’t you see, that my heart is bleeding, bleeding for you? I loved you Monica, all my life, with all my breath, with all my blood,”<sup>29</sup> expressing the words that she believes he is trying to say—or, at least, the words that she *wishes* he would say. This bizarre, one-sided exchange of vows puts Toby in a subjugated position, both by *what* Monica says and, even more so, *how* she says it. As Jensen-Moulton so astutely observes, “If Toby were not a mute character, surely he would be the one asking Monica to dance the waltz, but Monica is already putting words into Toby’s mouth, both literally and figuratively.”<sup>30</sup>

As the music of the Waltz continues to swell and the tempo accelerates *poco ritenuto poi subito animando*, Monica’s vocal lines ascend and the orchestra’s lines descend simultaneously, culminating at a *fortississimo* dynamic. Then, the

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<sup>26</sup> Menotti, *The Medium*, 65.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>30</sup> Jensen-Moulton, “Muteness and Masculinity” 30.

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orchestra quickly interjects a *fortepiano* C# minor triad while a B-C# dyad is held with a *fermata*, as Toby's stage directions indicate that he is to hide his face into his arms.<sup>31</sup> (see Figure 3, Appendix B).

At this break, Monica's trance is finally broken. She "stares at him, completely bewildered" and asks, "Why, Toby! You're not crying, are you?"<sup>32</sup> The Waltz theme resumes, *tenerezamente* and *pianississimo*, tenderly and very very softly. "With great tenderness"<sup>33</sup> and with a moment of unexpected lucidity, Monica expresses the most poignant line in the entire opera: "Toby, I want you to know that you have the most beautiful voice in the world!"<sup>34</sup> Julia Kristeva's research posits that signifying practices, such as myth, poetry, and art, cannot be reduced to language objects.<sup>35</sup> Correspondingly, "Monica's Waltz," with this touching line in particular, is full of significance that cannot be expressed in simplistic terms. Although the majority of "Monica's Waltz" showcases Monica's delusional trance, this singular declaration shows us that Monica truly cares for Toby and that she believes his semiotic "voice" to be more beautiful than any other symbolic "voice."

"Monica's Waltz," as well as the entirety of *The Medium*, depicts a semiotic mode of communication through Toby's deictic gestures, touches, expressions, and most importantly, the musical accompaniment itself. While *the semiotic* is Toby's preferred mode of communication, we must not forget that *the symbolic* plays a role in the opera as well, as the interrelated natures of *the semiotic* and *the symbolic* are always a factor in any linguistic expression. While Toby privileges *the semiotic*, the world in which he lives privileges *the symbolic*, and any semiotic expression that Toby offers is met

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<sup>31</sup> Menotti, *The Medium*, 69.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Kristeva, *Revolutions*, 32.

with responses that are comprised primarily of a symbolic nature. Toby's reliance upon *the semiotic* makes for an enhanced operatic experience, as it expresses ideas in both the symbolic *and* semiotic modes. Furthermore, his command of semiotic language allows Menotti's opera to embrace a full range of expression that cannot be accessed through *the symbolic* alone.

### *The Trauma of Muteness*

Most interestingly, it is only after Baba accuses Toby that the echoes, originally produced by Monica, reappear without any traceable source. Monica's cries of "Mother, Mother, are you there?" were originally used to enhance Mrs. Nolan's séance experience. The score indicates that these refrains, as well as Monica's imitation laughter of the Gobineau child, are to be sung by a "voice" off-stage.<sup>36</sup> These echoes defy explanation; when she first hears them, Monica herself stops and asks "What?" while the echoes of her own voice repeat without her doing.<sup>37</sup> What is the source of these echoes? Where do they come from? This "voice that cries out"<sup>38</sup> demonstrates key components of Cathy Caruth's theory on trauma.

Caruth posits that the force of trauma is intertwined with the violence of the unknowable—a violence that stems from "the inextricability of the story of one's life from the story of a death, an impossible and necessary double telling."<sup>39</sup> This trauma is expressed through an unknowable voice, which tells the story of a former wound in an attempt to bring attention to an inaccessible reality expressed through a language that "defies, even as it claims, our understanding."<sup>40</sup> While this unknowable *other* can be worked through, it will never go

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<sup>36</sup> Menotti, *The Medium*, 56.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>38</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 3.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

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away entirely and manifests itself into different traumatic expressions.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, the unconscious will prompt us to return to the same scene of our trauma so that we may better understand it,<sup>42</sup> prompting a double wound.

As the opera unfolds, we learn more about Toby's traumatic experiences. Baba references the way that she took him in, singing, "I found you, a little starving gypsy, roaming the streets of Budapest without a tongue to speak your hunger."<sup>43</sup> This gives us an indication of the trauma that Toby experienced before the opera even began. Jensen-Moulton proposes a possible explanation regarding Toby's history: While the score indicates that *The Medium* is to take place in "a squalid room in a flat on the outskirts of a great city,"<sup>44</sup> Baba's reference to Budapest suggests that the opera might take place in Budapest. Additionally, while the score indicates that the opera is to take place "in our time,"<sup>45</sup> the nature of Toby's disability suggests that the opera could take place in a setting with which Menotti would have been familiar—post-World War II Hungary.<sup>46</sup> World War II left a high concentration of Roma (gypsies) in post-war Hungary. Believing the Roma to be racially inferior, the Nazis targeted them in a similar way as they targeted the Jews, subjecting them to "arbitrary internment, forced labor, and mass murder."<sup>47</sup> Therefore, it is very possible that German authorities cut out Toby's tongue in an act of racial persecution.

While adopting Toby as her ward may paint Baba as a humanitarian, she is anything but; Toby's exposure to traumatic violence does not end under Baba's guardianship. After

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>43</sup> Menotti, *The Medium*, 73.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., i.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., i.

<sup>46</sup> Jensen-Moulton, "Muteness and Masculinity," 16.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 16.

Baba is spooked by the throat incident at the séance, she targets Toby as her scapegoat and tells Monica, “Just because he cannot speak we take him for a half-wit.”<sup>48</sup> Later however, when Baba confronts Toby about the incident, she tells him, “If I hadn’t taken you with me, who would have cared for you, poor little half-wit?”<sup>49</sup> The first of these references suggests that Baba realizes that Toby is more intelligent than she lets on and that his intelligence renders him capable of slyness. The second reference suggests that despite this knowledge, Baba regularly belittles Toby’s intellect as a means of subjugation and control.

The pivotal scene of abuse occurs when Baba demands from Toby an explanation for the supernatural hand she felt and the echoes she heard. She sings frantically, “But first you must tell me, did you have anything to do with what happened that night? Did you see anything? A light? A shape? Wake up! Did you? Stop staring at me! Did you?”<sup>50</sup> At this point, “with uncontrolled fury,” the tempo suddenly slows *poco ritenuto* for dramatic effect, then quickens *accelerando poco a poco fino al tempo primo*, until it reaches the original tempo again.<sup>51</sup> Baba stops singing and instead begins to yell, “Ah, so— You don’t want to answer. You’re trying to frighten me. I’ll show you, damn little gipsy, I’ll make you talk! I’ll make you talk! You cannot get away from me! I’ll make you spit out blood, I will. I’ll make you spit out blood!”<sup>52</sup> The stage directions indicate, “She goes to the cupboard and brings out a long whip. Toby runs away from her in terror. She chases him around the table. Toby trips and falls near the couch.”<sup>53</sup> At this point, Baba whips Toby in time to the dissonant chords

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<sup>48</sup> Menotti, *The Medium*, 49.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-81.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 81-83.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

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as she screams “So you won’t answer, eh!” *six times*.<sup>54</sup> Of course Toby cannot answer—it is difficult for anyone to answer in the midst of physical abuse—and especially more so for someone who is mute.

At the climax of the play, Baba expels Toby from the home and orders Monica to her room. After Monica exits the stage, again a voice sings the “Mother, Mother, are you there?” refrain.<sup>55</sup> While these voices haunt Baba, they constitute not her traumatic voice, but Toby’s—a “plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard”<sup>56</sup> The manifestation of Toby’s trauma haunts Baba precisely because Baba is responsible for much of Toby’s trauma, and as Caruth maintains, “one’s own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another.”<sup>57</sup> Because Baba is driven insane by “the ghost” who touched her throat and who haunts her with Monica’s voice, this suggests that Toby’s trauma has been translated into Baba’s own trauma. Caruth maintains, “Knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma”<sup>58</sup> ; because Baba doesn’t know who the “ghost” is, and because she doesn’t understand where the echoes come from, what began as Toby’s trauma has become hers as well.

At the end of the opera, Toby reenters the house and sneaks to the trunk where Baba’s costumes are kept. He accidentally slams the lid of the trunk shut. Baba wakes up in a panic and asks, “Who’s there? Who’s there? Answer me!”<sup>59</sup> She arms herself with a gun for self-protection and continues to demand a response, crying, “Speak out or I’ll shoot! I’ll shoot! I’ll shoot!”<sup>60</sup> Toby, of course, cannot “answer,” nor can

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 83-84.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>56</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>59</sup> Menotti, *The Medium*, 117.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 118.

he “speak out.” When he moves behind the puppet theater, Baba sees the curtain of the theater move and shoots into it, killing him. The final moments of the opera feature Baba on her knees, leaning over Toby’s body, whispering, “Was it you?”<sup>61</sup> Baba’s question phrases the truth that she wants to extract from the mute Toby—whether or not the supernatural echoes were of his doing. The reality is that it *was* Toby’s doing—indirectly. When Baba cries, “I’ve killed the ghost!”<sup>62</sup> she isn’t referring to a ghost in the traditional sense of the word; she refers to the manifestation of Toby’s trauma, which haunts her and drives her to near insanity.

Toby’s story conveys trauma not just as a series of uncanny, unknowable repetitions, but as a witness to the unknowable otherness of the wounded, inner voice that longs to bring attention to the trauma that has not been reconciled.<sup>63</sup> Because Toby’s manifestations of trauma are intertwined with Baba’s psyche, one might ask if the traumatic elements within *The Medium* stem from Toby’s abuse and death, or from Baba’s administration of pain upon him and her subsequent experiences with the manifestations of his past violent experiences? Caruth, who suggests “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival,”<sup>64</sup> might argue that the traumatic elements of the opera stem from the intertwined relationship of trauma that Toby and Baba share.

### *The Haunting Uncanniness of the Voice*

Because the theories of Julia Kristeva and Cathy Caruth stem from the psychoanalytic genealogy of Sigmund

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>63</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 7.



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Freud, I would like to conclude my paper with an application of his 1919 essay, “Das Unheimliche” (“The Uncanny”). Freud defines the word “uncanny” (*unheimlich*) by explaining, “[W]hat is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar.”<sup>65</sup> He goes on to explain that while many situations can be uncanny, the idea of the “double,” that is, when “there is the constant recurrence of similar situations, a same face, or character trait, or twist of fortune, or a same crime,”<sup>66</sup> situations become extremely haunting. This *déjà vu*, the “recurrence of similar situations” is precisely what takes place within *The Medium*. While the opera takes place in the comfort of the domestic sphere, the sourceless echoes that repeat throughout the opera are unfamiliar, unexplainable, and therefore uncanny, which destabilizes the familiarity of the home and renders it an unsettling setting.

It is not the occult itself that frightens Baba; what frightens her, rather, is knowledge of the *reality* of the supernatural, a reality that she previously devalued. In an attempt to find a natural explanation for the sourceless echoes, Baba targets Toby as the scapegoat and cries, “[H]e knows a great deal. He knows much more than we think. There is something *uncanny* about him. He sees things we don’t see.”<sup>67</sup> Although Baba is experienced with the occult (or, at least, convincing her patrons that she is experienced with the occult), the sourceless echoes lead her to fully *believe* in the paranormal. As a result, by the end of the opera, she believes that Toby in particular has direct access to the realm of the supernatural.

The feeling of uncanniness detected by the characters in the opera permeates into the audience as well. Freud writes, “It is true that the writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us [the

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<sup>65</sup> Freud, Sigmund, “The Uncanny.” *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 118.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

<sup>67</sup> Menotti, *The Medium*, 49, emphasis added

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audience] in the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his own creation.”<sup>68</sup> When the mysterious echoes begin to haunt Baba, it is difficult for the audience to ascertain whether or not they are simply the product of her own imagination. When the other characters also hear the echoes, however, we realize that these echoes are not merely the manifestation of Baba’s psychosis; something much more sinister is at play which threatens *all* the characters. Freud continues, acknowledging, “He [the composer] has, of course, a right to do either; and if he chooses to stage his action in a world peopled with spirits, demons, and ghosts . . . we must bow to his decision and treat his setting as though it were real for as long as we put ourselves into his hands.”<sup>69</sup> *The Medium* would be uncanny enough if Baba was the only one who heard echoed voices in her head; but by bringing these echoes into the realm of realism so that the echoes are heard by all significantly raises the level of uncanniness.

***Privileging Semiotic Language, its Trauma, and its Uncanniness***

The psychoanalytic significance of *The Medium* lies within Toby in both his disability that lends itself to a privileging of semiotic language, as well as his past and present trauma. *The Medium* is a text that readily lends itself to a thorough psychoanalytic reading. Perhaps this is because Menotti believed the opera to be:

a play of ideas. It describes the tragedy of a woman caught between two worlds, a world of reality, which she cannot wholly comprehend, and a supernatural world, in which she cannot believe. Every character in

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<sup>68</sup> Freud, “The Uncanny,” 423.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

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it has symbolic dimensions: Baba of Doubt, the three clients of Faith, Monica of Love and Toby of the Unknown.<sup>70</sup>

Menotti's interpretation of his own opera may be the reason why *The Medium* can be placed in conversation with psychoanalytic texts with such ease. I disagree, however, with Menotti's claim that Toby is simply a symbol of the Unknown. While it is true that his characterization as a mute establishes him as a pivotal symbolic figure in the opera, we must not forget that he is a multi-dimensional character—he is more than his disability and he is more than his symbolic value. Because Toby's disability has forced him to privilege *the semiotic* and because his trauma has manifested itself on the stage, Toby, as well as *The Medium* itself, is multi-expressional.

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<sup>70</sup> Jensen-Moulton 18, "Muteness and Masculinity," as quoted in Gruen 69.

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Appendix A

Text to “Monica’s Waltz”

Bravo! And after the theater, supper and dance.  
Music! Um-pa-pa, um-pa-pa,  
Up in the sky someone is playing a trombone and a  
guitar.  
Red is your tie, and in your velvetine coat you hide a  
star.  
Monica, Monica, dance the waltz,  
Monica, Monica, dance the waltz,  
Follow me, moon and sun,  
Keep time with me, one-two-three-one.  
If you’re not shy, pin up my hair with your star, and  
buckle my shoe.  
And when you fly, please hold on tight to my waist,  
I’m flying with you.  
O, Monica, Monica, dance the waltz,  
Monica, Monica, dance the waltz,  
Follow me, moon and sun,  
Follow me, follow, follow me,  
Follow me, follow, follow me.

[Pause, quasi recitative]  
What is the matter, Toby?  
What is it you want to tell me?  
Kneel down before me,  
And now tell me.

[Toby kneeling before her as though he were speak-  
ing]

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Monica, Monica can't you see  
That my heart is bleeding, bleeding for you?  
I loved you, Monica, all my life,  
With all my breath, with all my blood.  
You haunt the mirror of my sleep,  
You are my night. You are my light  
And the jailer of my day.

[Monica stands before Toby again, playing]  
How dare you scoundrel talk to me like that!  
Don't you know who I am?  
I'm the Queen of Aroundel!  
I shall have you put in chains!

[Toby kneeling again before her]  
You are my princess, you are my queen,  
And I'm only Toby, one of your slaves,  
And still I love you and always loved you  
With all my breath, with all my blood.  
I love your laughter,  
I love your hair,  
I love your deep and nocturnal eyes,  
I love your soft hands,  
So white and winged,  
I love the slender branch of your throat.

[Monica turns]  
Toby, don't speak to me like that!  
You make my head swim.

[Toby kneels]  
Monica, Monica, fold me in your satin gown.

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Monica, Monica, give me your mouth.  
Monica, Monica, fall in my arms!

[Quasi-recitative: Toby hides his face, Monica notices]

Why, Toby! You're not crying are you?  
Toby, I want you to know that you have  
The most beautiful voice in the world.

Appendix B

(Toby seizes Monica abruptly by the arm. She turns and looks at him in complete astonishment.)

M. *(Toby saisit brusquement le bras de Monica. Elle se retourne et le regarde, stupéfaite.)* What is the mat-ter, To-by? What is it you want to tell me? Qu'est-c(e) qui te prend, To-by? Qu'est-ce que tu veux me dire?

*p (senza misura)*

Figure 1: Gian Carlo Menotti, *The Medium*, page 65, measure 27

66

(He looks at her in desperation,  
and gently touches her face)  
*(Il la contemple d'un air désespéré et promène doucement  
sa main sur son visage)*

(Monica begins to understand)  
*(Monica commence à comprendre)*

M. *Adagio molto espressivo*  $\text{♩} = 60$

④

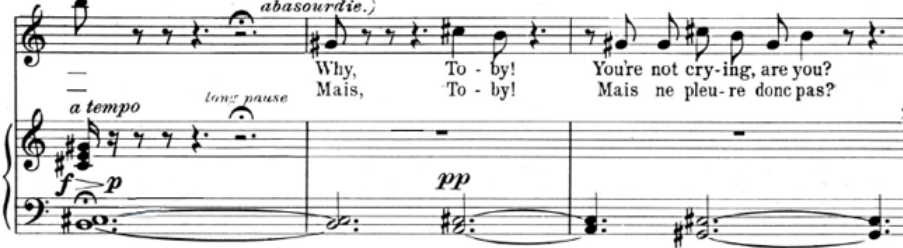
Kneel down be -  
A ge-noux, de -

*p* *ma intenso e un poco rubato*

Figure 2: Gian Carlo Menotti, *The Medium*, page 66, measure 28. Notice the sustained rests in the vocal line.



(Toby suddenly hides his face in his arms.) (Monica stares at him, completely bewildered.)  
(*Tout a coup, Toby cache son visage dans ses bras.*) (*Monica le regarde, abasourdie.*)

M.   
Why, To - by! You're not cry-ing, are you?  
Mais, To - by! Mais ne pleu-re donc pas?

*a tempo* *long pause* *f* *p* *pp*

Figure 3: Gian Carlo Menotti, *The Medium*, page 69, measure 60

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**THE DIVINE *SOPHIA*:**  
**THE DEVELOPMENT OF JEWISH AND HELLENISTIC**  
**THOUGHT IN THE CHRISTOLOGY OF**  
**THE NEW TESTAMENT**

**James Bergman**

The tradition of wisdom literature was a prominent theme within the Jewish Old Testament. This emphasis on the idea of wisdom continued into the apocrypha, which detailed the presence of a personified Wisdom that helped God create the heavens and earth. In the New Testament, Jesus is the center of the wisdom literature, becoming the teacher of proverbs and parables in the Gospels and in the letter of James, yet also the personified Wisdom in John. In general, both the wisdom teachings and the Wisdom Christology of the New Testament stemmed from the fundamentals of first century Jewish thought, showing a strong continuity between Judaism of the emerging Christian movement as it is reflected in the writings of the New Testament. The impact of the Israelite and Jewish wisdom tradition has been underappreciated in New Testament scholarship, to its own detriment. As a result, understanding the influence of wisdom literature and first century Judaism on the authors of the New Testament allows a more thorough consideration of the ideology behind the theology that appears in the New Testament theme of wisdom.

**Background of Wisdom Literature**

Two streams of thought in first century Judaism converge in the New Testament, creating an amalgamation of “Palestinian” and Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>1</sup> These two strands, as

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow, *Early Judaism: A Comprehensive Overview* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), 221.

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evidenced by the continuing influence of the Old Testament and the apocrypha, greatly influenced the writings of the New Testament in the Epistle of James and the Gospel of John, respectively. The theological and cultural underpinnings behind the development of apocryphal wisdom continued for the writers of the New Testament. Therefore, the lens of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and apocrypha grants greater clarity to a reading of the New Testament.

While it is impossible to establish the common perception of the wisdom literature in first century Judaism, the ideas of the wisdom sayings and personified Wisdom were clearly important to Jewish writers of the era. Greek philosophers of the ancient world gave moral instruction, and the writers of the Old Testament claimed this idea as well.<sup>2</sup> The Israelite wisdom tradition does not focus solely on the cultivation of the intellect, but rather on the practicalities of life. By the time of the apocrypha (200 BCE to 100 CE),<sup>3</sup> both Egyptian and Hellenistic wisdom began to be included with Jewish ideas, forming the basis of Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach.<sup>4</sup> Greek and Egyptian wisdom would likely have been concerned with similar aspects of life to ancient Judaism, so borrowing among the wisdom literature was a prominent phenomenon. The wisdom literature shows a diverse background of Jewish study, combining many kinds of knowledge and appropriating non-Jewish concepts.<sup>5</sup> Even in the most nativist, "Palestinian" circles of Second Temple Judaism, the overwhelming influence of Hellenism would have somewhat inspired their ideas and thoughts.

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<sup>2</sup> Joel B. Green, ed. *The CEB Study Bible with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Common English Bible, 2013), 108 AP.

<sup>3</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Green, 108 AP.

<sup>5</sup> Terrence Y. Mullins, "Jewish Wisdom Literature in the New Testament" in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 68, no. 4 (1949): 336.

Wisdom in Second Temple texts became a reflection back upon the Torah as it developed in significance during the period. The idea of wisdom evolved to encompass more than pithy proverbs or general life advice. The apocryphal literature, and therefore a branch of first century Judaism, saw Wisdom through observance of the Torah.<sup>6</sup> This tradition of wisdom literature illuminates the continuing importance of Wisdom in Jewish life in the time of the apocrypha, and allowed the Jewish biblical interpreters to take part in a continuing tradition while adapting it.<sup>7</sup> This continued in the New Testament, as the Christian authors incorporated Jewish ideas from throughout the Second Temple Period.

#### **James as the “Proverbs of the New Testament”**

The book of James is often referred to as the “Proverbs of the New Testament” by scholars and biblical commentators. While the format of the book of James suggests an epistolary nature, in content it is *paraenesis*, or ethical instruction.<sup>8</sup> James uses ethical instruction from each era of scripture, including Leviticus, the apocrypha, and the Gospel of Matthew. James seems to have known and used the books of the apocrypha, passing on the tradition of moral wisdom.<sup>9</sup> However, instead of quoting the apocrypha as scripture, he simply incorporates those ideas into his writing. This New Testament work integrates the ideas of first century Judaism, the culture and background of the early church. If the epistle of James was truly written by the brother of Jesus, it follows that Jesus would likely have been intensely familiar with these ideas as well. The apocrypha formed another layer in the religious scholarship of the early Christian communities. Perhaps the

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<sup>6</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 174.

<sup>7</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 175.

<sup>8</sup> Gary Holloway, "James as New Testament Wisdom Literature," *Leaven* 8, no. 2 (2000): 1.

<sup>9</sup> Holloway, 2.

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New Testament could even be viewed as another wave of apocryphal literature, focused on the spiritual realm and a new wave of covenantal theology through Jesus Christ. This line of reasoning would explain the fact that, in general, apocryphal texts were preserved by the Christians, not the Jews.

However, the epistle of James focuses overall on the everyday practice of “wisdom from above” (3:17). James puts forth a call to action (2:14-24), continuing the traditions of the Jewish wisdom literature. He contrasts the arrogant wisdom of the world with the heavenly wisdom that produces the “harvest of righteousness” (3:18), providing a virtue list like those of the Greek moralists.<sup>10</sup> James also appears to paraphrase the Sermon on the Mount, which allows him to preserve and rework the words of Jesus. Overall, James “takes conventional moral wisdom, both Jewish and Greek, and redefines it in light of the incarnation and sure return of Christ.”<sup>11</sup> This also continues and redefines the apocalyptic and covenantal theologies of first century Judaism.

### **Other Wisdom References in the New Testament**

Other parts of the New Testament also deal with the Old Testament concept of Wisdom. The parables of Jesus were a part of the tradition of wisdom teaching. This also shows the mosaic of Middle Eastern thought within first century Judaism, as it is a uniquely Jewish idea with Hellenistic influence.<sup>12</sup> Jesus used wisdom techniques when he taught, acting himself as a sage of the Old Testament wisdom literature.<sup>13</sup> The proverb sayings of Jesus show that the New Testament continues the Old Testament manner of expression, as Jesus personifies

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<sup>10</sup> Holloway, “James as New Testament Wisdom Literature,” 6.

<sup>11</sup> Holloway, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Green, *The CEB Study Bible*, 108 AP.

<sup>13</sup> Mullins, “Jewish Wisdom Literature in the New Testament,” 337.

Wisdom in Luke 7:35 and 11:49.<sup>14</sup> References to Christ's involvement in creation are cloaked in the garb of the wisdom texts of the Old Testament. The first century Jewish perspective and text on the nature of Wisdom became central in defining the identity of Christ in the incipient religion. Jesus himself refers to the divine Wisdom, saying that "Wisdom is proved right by her actions" (Matt 11:19). Jesus eventually is equated Wisdom itself as part of the Christology of the first century.<sup>15</sup> A major foundation for this theology comes from Matthew 23:34, in which Jesus substitutes "I" for the understood idea that Wisdom grants understanding and sends teachers forth. Considering the first century Jewish perspective on Wisdom, this declaration is viewed by some to be as bold as the pardoning of sins by Jesus.

Within Christian text and tradition, Jesus is identified not only with goodness but with wisdom. Jesus is referred to as the Wisdom of God by Paul on numerous occasions (1 Cor 1:24-30, 2:7, 8:6; Col 1:26-27, 2:3, 4:5). Jesus is called the "wisdom of God" in 1 Cor 1:24, and the image of the invisible God in Col 1:15. Thus, the author of John's idea of *logos* was inculcated in the personification of Wisdom as Jesus in Paul.<sup>16</sup> This Greek term contained the Jewish concept of Wisdom. While both the proverb and wisdom sayings of Jesus were contained within the tradition of Jewish wisdom literature, the idea that Jesus is the divine Wisdom was a uniquely Christian development. Likewise, the development of the idea that Jesus, as the divine Wisdom, is the "firstborn" (Col 1:15) of creation draws heavily from both the Wisdom of Proverbs and intertestamental texts; as a result, the apocrypha influenced Paul's perspective on Jesus' divine nature. Jewish culture of the first century held the birthright as a preeminent belief, and

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<sup>14</sup> Mullins, 339.

<sup>15</sup> Mullins, 337.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Boyarin, "The Gospel of the Memra: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John" in *The Harvard Theological Review* 94, no. 3 (2001): 256.



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this displays itself in the New Testament texts of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> Jesus, as the divine Wisdom, is the firstborn of all creation, as she is described in Proverbs 8:22-30 and numerous apocryphal texts. This either informed or reflected the Christological viewpoints concerning Jesus' divinity. Jesus was the firstborn of creation, from God, and this message is evident throughout the New Testament, as in Romans 8:29, which describes Jesus as the firstborn among brethren.<sup>18</sup> The idea that Jesus was a part of creation becomes even more important as the trinitarian theology developed.<sup>19</sup> The Jewish cultural understanding of the firstborn influenced a New Testament theme within the Wisdom literature.

Additionally, the book of Hebrews contains the idea of a personified Wisdom, as it shares a multitude of themes with the ethical and theological facets of the tradition of Wisdom/Sophia.<sup>20</sup> Christ is called "The radiance of God's Glory" (Heb 1:3), like his identification in Col 1:15. This idea draws itself directly from the book of Wisdom of Solomon in the apocrypha, which called Wisdom "a reflection of the eternal light, [an] untarnished mirror of God's active power, and image of his goodness" (Wis 7:26).<sup>21</sup> In the same way, Hebrews continues the covenantal theology of the apocryphal wisdom literature. Jesus is the fulfillment of the old covenant and has surpassed the requirements of the Torah (4:14-16), the focus of first century Judaism.

### **The Prologue of John: *Logos***

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Hamerton-Kelly, *Pre-existence, Wisdom, and the Son of Man: a Study of the Idea of Pre-existence in the New Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Hamerton-Kelly, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Hamerton-Kelly, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Mary Ann Beavis and HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Hebrews (Wisdom Commentary Series)* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 2015), 10.

<sup>21</sup> Beavis and Kim-Cragg, *Hebrews*, 12.

Since the inchoate stages of Christianity, a connection between Jesus and the personified Wisdom of the Old Testament was manifest. This is evidenced by the fact that some of the early church fathers, such as Philo of Alexandria, viewed Jesus as the Old Testament figure of Wisdom.<sup>22</sup> The prologue of John can likewise be viewed as continuing the tradition of wisdom literature in the Old Testament and apocrypha, perhaps a Jewish work that became central to the Christology of Christianity.<sup>23</sup> Ostensibly, the idea of *logos* is an abstract concept displaying the separation of Christianity from Judaism at an early stage of the eventual parting of the ways. Many scholars claim that this Hellenistic idea of Christianity is far removed from the Palestinian Judaism of the time.<sup>24</sup> As seen in the apocrypha, this perceived separation is unsubstantiated by the texts of the late Second Temple Jews. In the first century, Judaism and Hellenism (and therefore Christianity) were closely tied.<sup>25</sup> This narrative began to shift only with the developments of Rabbinic Judaism as a nativist reaction.<sup>26</sup> Regardless, it seems that many Christian communities wished to be identified with Judaism.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the Johannine idea of the *logos* is a Jewish one, given new meaning within the Christology of the era.

There are several similarities between *logos* in the Prologue of John and the personified Wisdom of the Jewish scriptures. There was a close connection of the Prologue with certain themes of early and later Jewish Wisdom literature in such biblical and apocryphal texts as Proverbs 8:22-31, Sirach 24, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Baruch 3:37-4:1. This line of reasoning shows that John belongs in the same genre, with

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<sup>22</sup> Boyarin, "The Gospel of the Memra," 249.

<sup>23</sup> Boyarin, 265.

<sup>24</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 398.

<sup>25</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 397.

<sup>26</sup> Boyarin, "The Gospel of the Memra," 246.

<sup>27</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 402.

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thematic parallels, as well as parallel metaphoric language to the Johannine Prologue.<sup>28</sup> An evolution of these parallels, the idea of the divine *logos* as Wisdom, is found personified in the living Jesus. The idea of the *Logos/Sophia* as the mediator between God's transcendence and imminence was widespread in first century Judaism.<sup>29</sup> It is a natural evolution of this Middle Platonic theory that the Son of God assumed the role of the divine Wisdom from the Old Testament and apocrypha- the idea of the *logos* has its roots in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament- to allow a theology that creates a transcendent yet imminent God.<sup>30</sup> The idea of mediators between heaven and earth became increasingly discussed in first century Judaism.<sup>31</sup> The emphasis on angels and other heavenly beings came to the forefront of Second Temple Jewish theology, and the ideas of *Sophia*, *Logos*, and the incarnate Jesus are all aspects of this doctrinal development.

The observance of the Torah was similarly a central theme to the common Judaism of the first century, which underwent a fundamental shift through the New Testament texts, specifically John. Second Temple Judaism saw Wisdom as the representation of a shift toward the renewed importance on the Torah, as evidenced by numerous apocryphal and pseudepigraphal works.<sup>32</sup> In Sirach 24, Wisdom finds a home in Israel because the Torah is being followed. However, in *1 Enoch* and *2 Esdras*, Wisdom is driven back to heaven because of the unrighteousness of Israel. The wisdom literature of the New Testament was aimed at addressing this concern among the early Christians.<sup>33</sup> A new set of explanations emerged among the

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<sup>28</sup> Boyarin, 262.

<sup>29</sup> Boyarin, 248.

<sup>30</sup> Boyarin, 255.

<sup>31</sup> Green, *The CEB Study Bible*, 109 AP.

<sup>32</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 174.

<sup>33</sup> Mullins, "Jewish Wisdom Literature in the New Testament," 338.

early Christian writers and communities to explain the transformation of theology in Christianity. The Epistle of James writes in this same tradition of wisdom literature to show that the Torah has shifted to the new set of instructions from Jesus, centered on living a faithful life.<sup>34</sup> While God's election of Israel, and therefore Israel's obedience to the Torah, are central aspects of Second Temple Judaism, James changed the narrative to focus on the obedience of faith in Christ.<sup>35</sup> In the prologue of John, this notion is further intensified. Here, Jesus becomes the divine Wisdom, and therefore the Torah, which had been the center of Jewish life. As a result, Wisdom literature was used as a focal point for the covenantal shift from early Second Temple Judaism, to first century Judaism, to Christianity. Christian messianism collided with Jewish monotheism when Jesus began to be identified with the personified *Logos*.

This emphasis on following the Torah implicitly continued a debate of what it meant to be Jewish. It seems that the "common Judaism" of the first century was focused on following the Torah and attempted to follow its *mitzvot*.<sup>36</sup> Because of the creation of the Jewish diaspora, each community differed in its understanding of how best to observe the Torah, based on geographical location, socio-economic status of the Jews in the area, and religious requirements from civic leaders. This became necessary because Jews wanted to participate in the Hellenistic culture around them while maintaining a distinct Jewish identity.<sup>37</sup> The fact that these works would prominently feature non-Greek ideas perhaps illuminates the continuing struggle for identity for Second Temple Jews. Most Jewish works written in Greek emphasized the superiority of Judaism

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<sup>34</sup> Holloway, "James as New Testament Wisdom Literature," 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 370.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

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over Greek culture.<sup>38</sup> As an example of a Jewish work, John recognizes major marks of Jewish identity, in the Torah, Temple, Sabbath, and Festivals, but fulfills and replaces these with Jesus.

This understanding of the relationship between Jewish and Gentile culture differed in other parts of the New Testament, in which the historical continuity between Israel and the Christian movement is emphasized in Acts and the Gospels. The apostles are the new leaders of Israel, but God still uses the Jewish people, even as participation in Christianity is no longer limited to those who are Jews by birth but open to “anyone in every nation who fears him and does what is right” by “believing in Jesus and receiving forgiveness of sins through his name.” (Acts 10:34, 43). As a result, Gentiles do not have to convert to the “nation” of the Jewish people by following their customs.<sup>39</sup> The exemption of Gentiles from circumcision does not mean the dismissal of the Torah, but the fulfillment of its true, prophetic intention. However, the Jewish notion of covenant election was radically spiritualized when Gentiles were welcomed in without having to be circumcised, changing the understanding of the continuity between these groups.

### **Conclusion**

The New Testament theme of Wisdom, along with the idea that Jesus is the personification of the divine *Sophia*, lends credence to the idea that the early Christians did not view themselves as distinct from other first century Jews, but rather a development upon the ideals of the Second Temple period. Examining all these facets of Second Temple Judaism presents a clearer picture of the way in which wisdom literature was incorporated into the canon and message of the New Testament. The idea of Jesus as a teacher of Proverbs and parables

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<sup>38</sup> Collins and Harlow, *Early Judaism*, 237.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 404.

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was a direct development from the Jewish emphasis on such forms of thought in the first century. Moreover, the identification of Jesus as the divine *logos* stems from both an Old Testament and apocryphal understanding of the interactions between God and mankind. As is evident from the wisdom literature of the New Testament, both normative Judaism and reflection upon the idea of Wisdom in Jewish circles interacted to create the theology of Christianity. Overall, this understanding reveals the level to which Christians built their Christology from the ideas of their Jewish predecessors, while incorporating their own Hellenistic understanding.

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**HUME, MIRACLES, AND MATHEMATICS:  
A CASE STUDY FOR THE USE AND PREVALENCE  
OF PROBABILISTIC ARGUMENTATION  
WITHIN BIBLICAL STUDIES**

**Joshua Brickell**

In David Hume's *Enquiry*, he states: "No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavours to establish... the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force, which remains, after deducting the inferior."<sup>1</sup> Hume's statement may seem captive to the realm of philosophy. One could discuss how Hume eventually dismisses the existence of miracles not because he sees them as theoretically impossible, but rather because no witness could ever be reliable enough to show otherwise. But as Holder, Sobel,<sup>2</sup> Owen,<sup>3</sup> and others argue, Hume's statement is inherently mathematical. While these scholars have differing opinions as to whether miracles exist or not, all interpret Hume's statement in light of Bayes' theorem, a statistical technique developed by Thomas Bayes. In this paper, I will analyze the debate about Hume and miracles, arguing that under certain conditions the existence of a miracle

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney Holder, "Hume on Miracles: Bayesian Interpretation, Multiple Testimony, and the Existence of God." *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 49, no 1 (1998): 50. (quoting Hume's *Enquiry*)

<sup>2</sup> Jordan Howard Sobel, "On the Evidence of Testimony for Miracles: A Bayesian Interpretation of David Hume's Analysis." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 166-186.

<sup>3</sup> David Owen, "Hume Versus Price on Miracles and Prior Probabilities: Testimony and the Bayesian Calculation." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 187-202.



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could be rationally accepted. This discussion about Hume will serve as a case study, showing how mathematics and specifically probability can be integral to analyzing important questions present in philosophy and religion. I will then explore more broadly the realm of biblical studies, arguing that biblical historians frequently employ probabilistic argumentation and mathematical reasoning when assessing the truthfulness of biblical narratives. Finally, I will suggest that given the case study about miracles and the commonplace of probabilistic language in biblical studies, having a degree of mathematical literacy can be a useful and important tool in dissecting the arguments made by biblical historians today.

### **Hume and Bayes' Theorem**

In Rodney Holder's article on Hume and miracles, he interprets Hume's statement above to be making an argument that draws upon the logic of Bayesian probabilities. Here, Hume brings up two significant probabilities: the probability of a witness making false testimony, and the a priori probability of a miracle occurring. Seeing the probabilities that Hume has stressed in his analysis, Holder uses Bayes' Theorem to mathematically express Hume's argument. Bayes' Theorem is a statistical technique that combines the use of a priori and conditional probabilities<sup>4</sup> in order to assess the likelihood of the event in question. In this case, the central event in question is this: what is the probability of a specific miracle having occurred (denoted by the variable "M" in the formulas to follow), given an individual's testimony to that specific miracle occurring (denoted "T"). Using these variables, Bayes' Theorem is as follows, where  $P(T | M)$  is the conditional probability that testimony would be provided given that the miracle occurred, and  $P(T | \sim M)$  is the conditional probability that an individual

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<sup>4</sup> A conditional probability is the probability of event A occurring given that event B occurred and is denoted  $P(A|B)$ .

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would provide testimony to the miracle occurring given that the miracle did not actually occur:

$$P(M | T) = \frac{P(T|M)*P(M)}{P(T|M)*P(M)+P(T|\sim M)*P(\sim M)} \quad (\text{Eq. 1})$$

Since Hume argues that miracles are intrinsically improbable, the  $P(M) \ll 1$  (a really small number), and the  $P(\sim M) = 1$  (technically, very close to 1). If the miracle occurs and someone is there to see it, it is almost certain that it will get reported, so  $P(T|M) = 1$ . Using Hume's assumptions and inserting these values, the following is left:

$$P(M | T) = \frac{P(M)}{P(M) + P(T|\sim M)} \quad (\text{Eq. 2})$$

Holder argues that for a miracle to be "rationally acceptable"<sup>5</sup> the probability of the miracle occurring given the testimony about that miracle must be greater than 0.5. Using the equation above, this means we are looking for what is greater, the a priori probability that the miracle occurred, or the probability that the witness testified to the specific miracle occurring, given that the miracle did not actually occur. Mathematically expressed:

(Eq. 3)

$P(M) > P(T|\sim M)$  indicates belief in a miraculous event is rational,  
 $P(M) < P(T|\sim M)$  indicates belief in miraculous event is not rational

Notice this is exactly where Hume left us, comparing the probabilities of a miraculous event to the conditional probability of false testimony.

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<sup>5</sup> Rodney Holder, "Hume on Miracles: Bayesian Interpretation, Multiple Testimony, and the Existence of God." *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 49, no 1 (1998): 51.

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Now that the basics of Bayes' Theorem have been laid out, in order to assess whether or not Hume's intuition and arguments against miracles hold weight when expressed mathematically, we must explore the assumptions and simplifications used by later scholars who agree and disagree with Hume's analysis. Owen, in his article assessing Hume's argument and its Bayesian interpretation, makes some assumptions that cause him to diverge from Holder. Owen of course holds to the basic Bayes' Theorem presented in equation 1 above. However, he then proceeds to use a simplification of equation 1 in his analysis of Hume's arguments:<sup>6</sup>

(Eq. 4)

$$P(M | T) = \frac{P(T|M) * P(M)}{P(T|M) * P(M) + (1 - P(T|M)) * P(\sim M)}$$

Note the only difference here between Holder and Owen is that Owen replaces  $P(T|\sim M)$  with  $(1 - P(T|M))$ . Owen notes that these two expressions are equal so long as  $P(T|M) = P(\sim T|\sim M)$ , where the last conditional probability means that the witness testified to any event other than event M, given that event M did not occur. As will be seen later, whether or not one accepts this as a justifiable becomes crucial in determining whether or not Hume's logic makes sense mathematically.

The issue with Owen's logic here is his assumption regarding the equality above. The variable  $T$  refers to a witness testifying that the specific event  $M$  occurred. So then, the negation of this statement,  $\sim T$ , here refers to the same witness

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<sup>6</sup> To keep mathematical notation consistent throughout this paper, I have translated Owen's notation into the notation already expressed by Holder. Owen uses the notation as follows:

$$= \frac{pt}{pt + (1 - p)(1 - t)}$$

making a testimony about some other event occurring. This could be any number of possible events, so long as the testimony is not about event M occurring. Thus, the event  $\sim T \cap \sim M$  (meaning not T *and* not M) would include any possible scenarios where the witness testifies about an event other than M (or perhaps does not testify at all), and M does not actually occur. For example, say event A actually occurred, and the witness testified that event B occurred (the witness did not accurately report what happened). This scenario would be consistent with the expression  $\sim T \cap \sim M$ , as would a scenario where event A actually occurred, and the witness testified that event A actually occurred (the witness accurately reported what happened). How does this compare to the event  $T \cap M$ ? The only scenario consistent with this expression is the scenario where the witness testifies that event M occurred, and event M did occur. Given the disparity between the number of compatible scenarios with each of these events, it would be incredibly unlikely that  $P(T|M) = P(\sim T|\sim M)$ . Given this, why does Owen make this error? If we are being sympathetic to Owen here, it appears that he means that the probability that the witness would testify to event M given that M occurred should be equal to the probability that the witness would testify to a different event, say event A, given that event A actually occurred. Holder argues along a similar vein when noting his difference with Owen, saying that by being more careful with formulating the language used in describing the variables, the matter cannot be simplified the way Owen does.<sup>7</sup> It is important to stress here that Holder and Owen are not doing vastly different math: their approaches to this problem are quite similar. Rather, Holder is a bit more precise in how he defines his terms, and this leads to him rejecting one assumption that Owen makes.

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<sup>7</sup> Rodney Holder, "Hume on Miracles: Bayesian Interpretation, Multiple Testimony, and the Existence of God." *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 49, no 1 (1998): 52.

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As has already been shown, Holder disagrees with the way Owen simplifies  $P(T|\sim M)$ . Holder's logic centers around how he defines his terms: "our background knowledge K is that W [the witness] is in a position to make a report on what occurs and does so. T is, specifically a testimony for M, i.e. 'W states the M occurred'. But given that M did not occur there are many ways for W [the witness] to give a false report... and it is most unlikely that the false report W would come up with is M."<sup>8</sup> This leads Holder to provide the following formula:<sup>9</sup>

(Eq. 5)

$$P(T|\sim M) = P(W \text{ gives a false report}) * P(\text{the false report W gives is T}) \\ = (1 - t) * (1/n)$$

Again it must be stressed that the difference between Holder and Owen is small. All Holder does is recognize that if the witness were to give a false report, there are other possible false reports other than the exact event M. While the difference in their assumptions is small, this can produce a large effect on the end results. Factoring Holder's assumption into equation 2 and rearranging terms we have the following:

(Eq. 6)

$$P(M) > (1 - t) * \left(\frac{1}{n}\right)$$

*indicates a miraculous event can be rationally accepted,*

$$P(M) < (1 - t) * \left(\frac{1}{n}\right)$$

*indicates a miraculous event cannot be rationally accepted*

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<sup>8</sup> Rodney Holder, "Hume on Miracles: Bayesian Interpretation, Multiple Testimony, and the Existence of God." *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 49, no 1 (1998): 52.

<sup>9</sup> *n* here is the endless numbers of false reports that one could choose from.

Now Holder assumes that  $n$  would be sufficiently large, suggesting that there are a multitude of false reports to choose from. However, Holder's argument goes too far here, as it would be more likely that there are only a couple other explanations that one could be reasonably expected to testify to. For example, if one saw a healing and testified to a miracle occurring, there would be a couple other ways to possibly testify about the event: the work of a particular medicine, or the care of a doctor. So for our case,  $n$  would be greater than 1, but not very large. Even with this adjustment to Holder's argument, he still seems to have supplied a way in which one could rationally accept that a miracle has occurred. This is not the same as saying that Holder has proved that a particular miracle has occurred, or that this formula could determine if a specific event was a miracle. Rather, it is a response to Hume's earlier statement from his *Enquiry*, that in certain cases it may be rational to accept the existence of a miracle based on witness testimony.

### **Objections to Hume and the use of Bayesian Statistics**

So far our discussion around Hume's argument against miracles is that using a formula like Bayes' theorem, centered around the idea of conditional probability, is an appropriate way to measure the reliability of testimony and the probability of a miracle (or any other event) occurring. While on different sides of the debate as to whether Hume was correct, Owen and Holder both agree that interpreting Hume in a Bayesian manner is appropriate, and that using prior probabilities in assessing the likelihood of a particular occurrence is a valid approach. However, there are some who have questioned the logic of using prior probabilities in assessing the reliability of witness testimony. In this next section, the thoughts of Richard Price, an eighteenth century mathematician, and David Cohen, a twentieth century philosopher, will be explored. Both Cohen

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and Price offer arguments as to why this probabilistic reasoning is an inappropriate way to measure things such as witness reliability. Furthermore, Cohen and Price show how this topic has implications far beyond the field of miracles, affecting things such as the reliability of a courtroom witness to the reliability of medical tests for diseases. Finally, we will examine the objections brought by Sobel, who argues that there are some limitations to Bayes' theorem, and provides examples where our intuition may show Bayes' theorem to not be entirely reasonable.

Sobel quotes Price as saying that, "the turning point in Mr. Hume's argument is... the principle, that no testimony should engage our belief, except the improbability in the falsehood of it is greater than that in the event which it attests... he [Price] maintains 'that improbabilities as such do not lessen the capacity of testimony to report truth.'"<sup>10</sup> Price provides a number of examples to show his case. His cases can generally be characterized as examples that appeal to our intuition, where we might be led to believe a trustworthy source despite the fact that there are long odds that the event being reported would actually occur. For example, Price provides the example of a newspaper that is generally accurate two out of every three times. This newspaper one day "reported the loss of a ferry boat during a crossing it had previously made safely two thousand times. In this case, Price asserts, "testimony that is accurate only two out of three times would overcome odds of thousands to one against."<sup>11</sup> In addition, Price offers another reason

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<sup>10</sup> Jordan Howard Sobel, "On the Evidence of Testimony for Miracles: A Bayesian Interpretation of David Hume's Analysis." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 177, quoting Richard Price's 4th dissertation.

<sup>11</sup> David Owen, "Hume Versus Price on Miracles and Prior Probabilities: Testimony and the Bayesian Calculation." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 194.

that prior probabilities should not usually be relevant. Owen attempts to sympathetically give the case for Price's second argument as follows: "One could argue that the *likelihood* of the event reported, or the distribution of past occurrences or non-occurrences, is independent of the accuracy of the testimony, so that when we are to consider whether or not to believe testimony, only its accuracy should be taken into account."<sup>12</sup>

Owen also examines the arguments of a more recent philosopher, L.J. Cohen. Cohen comes to similar conclusions that Price does, but along a slightly different vein. Cohen will accept the use of prior probabilities and conditional statements when discussing the case of long term frequencies of a certain event, just like Hume. But if the concern is with the likelihood of one particular instance of an event occurring, the prior probabilities should be ignored.<sup>13</sup> This has some quite practical implications. Say one is experiencing health symptoms indicating that he or she has either disease A or B.<sup>14</sup> For every 20 people experiencing symptoms, 19 have A and 1 has B. We also know that the test is 80% accurate. Cohen might want to point out that if one was to use Bayes' theorem the probability

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Another example with the same newspaper is given, where 9 highly improbable events occur. Price alleges that Hume's probabilistic reasoning would lead us to believe none, despite the fact that with 9 events and a fairly accurate newspaper, it seems reasonable to think that we ought to believe some of them!

<sup>12</sup> David Owen, "Hume Versus Price on Miracles and Prior Probabilities: Testimony and the Bayesian Calculation." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 195. Owen claims that Price's original argument does not mount much of a challenge to Hume, and so reformulates it in a way that provides a stronger attack against Hume's position.

<sup>13</sup> David Owen, "Hume Versus Price on Miracles and Prior Probabilities: Testimony and the Bayesian Calculation." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 196.

<sup>14</sup> See Cohen describe this example on p. 196-198



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that one actually has disease B, given that a B test result is provided, is only 17.39%.<sup>15</sup>

(Eq. 7)

$$P(\text{have disease B} | \text{positive B test}) = \frac{.80 * .05}{.80 * .05 + .95 * .20} = 17.39\%$$

If it is true that given a positive B test, there is only a 17.39% chance of actually having the B disease, then many might turn to wonder and ask, what is the point of taking the test at all?

But if we ignored the prior probabilities when assessing the chance that one particular individual has the disease, then we might decide to trust the results of the test. Owen describes how this is not simply a matter of academic debate, but has important applications: "suppose that the likelihood of a nuclear attack is one in a thousand, but that the accuracy of one's radar or other early warning devices is only about 99.8%. Would it be rational to act on the information given by one's equipment, or more rational not to set up such warning devices at all?"<sup>16</sup>

Owen's response to Price and Cohen's objections centers around the need for specificity of language. Recall the medical test, where the test is accurate 80% of the time. What does 80% of the time mean? If it means that looking at the subset of the population who have disease B, the test is correct 80% of the time, then we will get the surprising result above, where even if one tests positive for disease B, using Bayes'

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<sup>15</sup> How we interpret the statement "accurate 80% of the time" really affects how this is calculated. This will be explored in the next section on precision of language. Also, this is meant purely as a hypothetical example, and is not an attempt to say that medical tests for diseases are not accurate enough to be worth taking.

<sup>16</sup> David Owen, "Hume Versus Price on Miracles and Prior Probabilities: Testimony and the Bayesian Calculation." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 197.

theorem it would not make sense to trust the results of the test. But, what if 80% accuracy meant that if one tested positive for disease B, one had an 80% chance of actually having disease B? Well this would drastically change one's thinking, and if an individual tested positive for disease B, it would be quite logical to trust the results of the test! Where Cohen has confused his readers with his disease example is that he has been ambiguous with language that could cause one to mistake the value for the  $P(\text{have } B | \text{test positive for } B)$  conditional with the  $P(\text{test positive for } B | \text{have } B)$ . What we are looking for in the final answer is former, but the example presents the 80% as if it should be final answer intuitively, and then uses the .8 figure as the latter probability in erroneously calculating Bayes' Theorem. Owen provides sufficient explanations to the rest of Price and Cohen's objections, which center around the same idea of ambiguous language. Owen is not providing a math lesson here: rather, the point to be made is linguistic. When using variations of the terms credible, reliable, and accurate, we must be acutely aware of and careful to define what those terms mean. A lack of specificity of language here creates the confusion highlighted in our previous examples.

Another interesting possible objection made against Hume/Bayesian probabilities comes from Sobel. in his reaction to the important work of Tversky and Kahneman.<sup>17</sup> Tversky and Kahneman give an experiment where they tell the following story: 85 taxicabs in a town are green, and the other 15 are blue. One taxicab is in an accident at night, where a witness, who can correctly identify the color 80% of the time, has identified the taxicab as blue. Kahneman and Tversky ask their subjects, what is the probability that the taxicab in the

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<sup>17</sup> he is specifically citing their 1977 work, "Casual Thinking in Judgment under Uncertainty." Tversky and Kahneman here say that there taxicab experiments imply that people are irrational in their decision making. Sobel provides another possible way to tell the story of the results of their experiments.

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accident was blue? The median response in their experiment was that there is an 80% chance that the cab is blue. Respondents to this scenario had no intuitive idea of Bayes' Theorem and conditional probability, and "when *updating* initial probabilities for the taxicab's being blue, these subjects in fact *ignored* them and set them aside."<sup>18</sup> If the experiment ended here, it would be no more than a real life example of an experiment almost identical to the hypotheticals concerning newspapers and disease testing above. But, Tversky and Kahneman take things one step farther: they do the exact same experiment, except instead of telling respondents that 85% of cabs are green and 15% are blue, they say that 85% of cabs involved in accidents are green and 15% of cabs involved in accidents are blue, providing no information as to the general percentage of taxicabs in the city. Given the same question as before, these subjects respond much differently than those told about the general ratio of taxicabs, as the median response is that there is a 55% chance that the taxicab was actually blue. In either scenario, if the subjects had responded by using Bayes' theorem, all would have answered 41%, which is much closer to the answer given by the second group of respondents. The typical response to this experiment might be that it shows how people's intuition is irrational and does not line up with the math. But, another explanation is that the Bayesian formulation we have been using might not be as robust as originally thought. In this experiment, which is a stronger piece of evidence that the specific taxicab in the accident might not actually be blue: 85% of cabs in the city are green, or 85% of cabs involved in accidents in the city are green? The latter, as it provides an additional piece of relevant information. If we only knew the former, and were then asked the *expected* ratio of blue to green cabs in accidents, 41% would be the correct

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<sup>18</sup> Jordan Howard Sobel, "On the Evidence of Testimony for Miracles: A Bayesian Interpretation of David Hume's Analysis." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 182.

answer. But the *actual* ratio in question will have some variation from our expected value. This means that using Bayes' theorem to find the results in both scenarios will lead to an accurate answer, in that in both scenarios the calculations will have been done correctly in accordance with the data given. Where these two scenarios differ is in their precision: scenario two has more detailed information and therefore we should have a higher level of confidence in them. To put another way, both Bayesian formulations give us a 41% chance that the cab is actually blue, but we can trust the 41% figure in scenario two more than we can trust the 41% figure in scenario one. Note also that in both scenarios, we did not change the reliability of the witness to the crash: the variance in confidence we have in our answer is so far due to completely to the difference in the quality of other prior evidence.

Sobel has a similar argument here. In his assessment that normal Bayesian probabilities may not always accurately reflect the situation at hand, he imagines how a perfectly rational being who is limited in data and capacities but logically omniscient in that he or she is quite certain of every logical necessity might assess the total credence-state of a particular problem.<sup>19</sup> "The main thing to say is that it might be better represented by a many-membered *set* of probability functions than by any single probability functions."<sup>20</sup> A Bayesian probability function might be a member of this set of functions, but not the only one used. These functions would then be combined into singular probabilities, which would be a sort of weighted average based on the accuracy and precision of the data available. These singular probabilities could be described by their quantities and qualities. The quantities are easy

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<sup>19</sup> Jordan Howard Sobel, "On the Evidence of Testimony for Miracles: A Bayesian Interpretation of David Hume's Analysis." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 183.

<sup>20</sup> Jordan Howard Sobel, "On the Evidence of Testimony for Miracles: A Bayesian Interpretation of David Hume's Analysis." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 183.

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enough to describe, as the end results from the calculation, for the example the 41% probability derived previously. Qualities, "would correspond to what some might term the 'weights' or 'degrees of ambiguity' of evidential bases for propositions, and to the confidence a person had in his various 'singular probabilities', displayed perhaps in his readiness to accept bets based on them."<sup>21</sup> In Tversky and Kahneman's example, I am more likely to place bets based on the second scenario rather than the first, despite the fact that both Bayesian probabilities are the same.

What conclusions can we draw from these objections to Hume and Bayesian probabilistic thinking? We can certainly see that we must certainly be careful in our language, and that terms such as reliability, credibility, and accuracy can mean different things depending on their context. In Owen's example, if a test is advertised as 80% accurate, does that mean that considering those who have the disease the "test is right 80% of the time," or does it mean that considering those whom the test indicates as having the disease, "it is right 80% of the time?"<sup>22</sup> As we have seen, these two statements mean drastically different things. By following Owen's lead, recognizing and clearing up some of the ambiguity in our language, it is fair to say that Price and Cohen's main objections to Hume and Bayes can be accounted for. While being more careful in our language can alleviate us from the objections of Price and Cohen, Sobel's critique is more interesting. Sobel does not claim that Bayesian statistics provide wrong or inaccurate results to a situation at hand; rather, he illustrates that Bayes' Theorem,

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<sup>21</sup> Jordan Howard Sobel, "On the Evidence of Testimony for Miracles: A Bayesian Interpretation of David Hume's Analysis." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 184.

<sup>22</sup> David Owen, "Hume Versus Price on Miracles and Prior Probabilities: Testimony and the Bayesian Calculation." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 198.

while a good tool to use, is limited in its ability to assess the quality<sup>23</sup> of the evidence at hand.

### **Revisiting Miracles in Light of Sobel's Objection**

Earlier, I concluded that given Holder and Owen's work interpreting Hume's statements on miracles in ways consistent with Bayes' theorem, Hume misses the mark on denying the existence of miracles based on probabilities, and that there could be cases where it may be reasonable to believe that a miracle has occurred. And while Sobel's argument using just Bayes' theorem is nearly identical and reaches the same conclusion as Owen, Sobel's argument that Bayes' theorem may not be all we need to look at when considering evidence of prior probabilities could be a strong counter to Holder and is essential to this discussion. When Sobel applies his additional argument to the miracle situation, he claims that that an individual's singular priors for and against miracles will be of the highest qualities. As he says, "probabilities averaged of such miracles, given their unambiguous inconsistency with what one takes to be the natural and necessary order of nature, will be concentrated closely around the average value."<sup>24</sup> Sobel is saying that the argument against miracles is like the second taxicab scenario, in that the quality of evidence (related to the prior probability that miracles are highly improbable) is extremely high. He claims that, "it is not that probabilities for miracles are apt to be of extraordinarily low and infinitesimal

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<sup>23</sup> As Jordan Howard Sobel defines it, described previously in relation to confidence levels or the precision of the data at hand.

<sup>24</sup> Jordan Howard Sobel, "On the Evidence of Testimony for Miracles: A Bayesian Interpretation of David Hume's Analysis." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 184.

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quantities, but that they are apt to be extraordinarily 'concentrated' and 'focused', and of highest quality."<sup>25</sup> This last statement summarizes the key assumption in Sobel's argument. He does believe that the probability of a miracle is low; but his primary argument here is that one should have a high degree of confidence in this low probability.

Sobel's arguments about confidence levels in prior probabilities are not specifically addressed by Holder. However interestingly enough, Holder does provide different examples of scenarios where we may be able to have more confidence in support of a result that provides evidence for the reasonability of a miracle. Holder's additional arguments center around the difference between individual and multiple independent testimony. It is intuitive that if there were two people who independently testified to the occurrence of event M, then to use Sobel's terms both the quantity and quality of the resulting probability would be higher. The higher quality of this singular probability can be explained as being akin to a larger sample size in a poll. Having a poll with 500 people is going to create a result that has lower variance than a poll showing the same result but with only 100 people. Both Holder and Sobel's additional arguments, beyond the basics of explaining Bayes' theorem, center around the quality of the evidence and the confidence level one would apply to the final probability. Unfortunately, their arguments here sidestep each other. One could perhaps rebut Sobel, claiming that he is making a huge assumption about the extremely high quality of a singular prior of a miracle occurring. Sobel does not give much justification for this assumption, other than saying that we all know that miracles do not occur, therefore the quality of our prior evidence against miracles is high. But in a discussion where Sobel's conclusion is that belief in a miracle is not reasonable, it would seem circular to suggest that the evidence

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<sup>25</sup> Jordan Howard Sobel, "On the Evidence of Testimony for Miracles: A Bayesian Interpretation of David Hume's Analysis." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no 147 (1987): 185.

for this is that we know miracles do not occur. On the other side, one could take issue with Holder by claiming that he creates a very neat and clean world in order to perform his mathematical analysis. For example, Holder assumes a highly reliable and trustworthy witness; how do we know if this condition is fulfilled in the real world? Furthermore, Holder assumes independent multiple testimony; it is an open question how often this condition could actually be fulfilled. All in all, my earlier assertion that given Hume's formulation, we should disagree with him and leave open the option that there could be cases where we could reasonably believe in the existence of a miracle, still holds weight given these additional arguments. However, the further arguments of multiple independent testimony and the quality of singular priors present quite a challenging situation to analyze. Needless to say, there is much room for further research and analysis on these two advancements of the argument beyond the basic Bayesian formula.

### **Probabilistic Language in Biblical Studies**

So far, we have examined David Hume's probabilistic argument against the existence of miracles, and responses from modern day mathematicians and philosophers on both sides who use Bayes' theorem as the foundation for their argument in support of or against Hume. Overall, Holder's argument using Bayes' theorem is convincing, and should be seen as strong evidence that there could be cases where belief in the occurrence of a miracle is rational. However, given Sobel and Holder's arguments that go beyond the scope of the basic Bayesian formulation, the waters become muddied, and I have no tidy conclusion to offer. But, the purpose of this paper is not to prove Hume right or wrong; rather, it is to use the debate around Hume's argument as a case study for how scholars across disciplines integrate mathematical language and concepts into arguments that may at first glance seem to have



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nothing to do with math at all. If convinced of this, a few questions no doubt arise. First, why do scholars use this sort of language? Second, is probabilistic or mathematical reasoning an appropriate way to evaluate truth claims in the humanities? In the natural sciences the scientific method and statistical evaluation certainly dominate in the quest for truth. (although I would argue the conclusions drawn from the data involve a certain amount of storytelling as well) So is expressing arguments couched in probabilities and conditionals the humanities version of the scientific method? And finally, do scholars' probabilistic statements make sense when expressed mathematically? In this concluding section, I will zoom in on the field of biblical studies, to provide some examples of this sort of language being used and analyze the role it plays in developing arguments.

In discussing how biblical historians assess the historical truth of events in the bible, Bart Ehrman states that, "Historians more or less rank past events on the basis of the relative probability that they occurred. All that historians can do is show what *probably* happened in the past."<sup>26</sup> N.T. Wright sees the biblical historian as one who is, "looking... at evidence about the past, trying to reconstruct the probable course of events... defending such reconstructions.... on the scientific grounds of getting in the data, doing so with appropriate simplicity, and shedding light on other areas of research."<sup>27</sup> Marcus Borg discusses how empirical verification has become a staple of the modern worldview, forcing one to reduce truth, "to factuality, either scientifically verifiable or historically reliable facts."<sup>28</sup> Ernst Renan, arguing that the lack of modern day miracles should cause great doubt that biblical miracles

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<sup>26</sup> Bart Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted*: (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 175.

<sup>27</sup> Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 17.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

occurred states that, "If it is proved that no contemporary miracle will bear inquiry, is it not probable that the miracles of the past... would equally present their share of illusion, if it were possible to criticise them in detail?"<sup>29</sup> As we can see from a brief survey of prominent biblical historians, the common hermeneutic in analyzing texts and their historical truth claims is to gather data, see what is verifiable, and then to express what is probable, possible, or unlikely to have occurred. This is exactly what the Jesus Seminar of the 1980s and 1990s set out to do, organizing Jesus' statements by whether they believed Jesus said something like what was written down, probably said what was written, did not say what was written but contains his ideas, or did not say the passage and the passage does not come from Jesus' tradition. Biblical historians follow this approach because we are captives of this worldview, as Borg says, "like all worldviews, it functions in our minds almost unconsciously, affecting what we think possible and what we pay attention to."<sup>30</sup>

While not outright rejecting the use of probabilistic reasoning and empirical verification to assess the veracity of biblical truth claims, Borg does claim that this approach should certainly not be the exclusive way of assessing the truth of the bible. As he states, "I realized that there are well-authenticated experiences that radically transcend what the modern worldview can accommodate. I became aware that the modern worldview is itself a cultural construction, the product of a particular era in human intellectual history."<sup>31</sup> This is evident in his explanation of the truth of the post-Easter Jesus:

the truth of Easter itself, does not depend upon their [Easter stories] being literally and historically

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<sup>29</sup> Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), 22.

<sup>30</sup> Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 10.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

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factual. For me, the historical ground of Easter is very simple: the followers of Jesus, both then and now, continued to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death... Those experiences have taken a variety of forms. They include dramatic forms such as visions and mystical experiences, and less dramatic forms such as a sense of the presence of Jesus... The truth of Easter is grounded in these experiences, not in what happened (or didn't happen) on a particular Sunday almost two thousand years ago.<sup>32</sup>

Borg believes that this truth about Easter can be verified through different people's experiences, but not through some historical or scientific verification. He does not necessarily believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus, but still accepts that dramatic visions or mystical experiences of Jesus are an expression of the truth: "I think visions and apparitions can be true, by which I mean truthful disclosures of the way things are. I do not put them in the category of hallucinations."<sup>33</sup> I agree with Borg that these are experiences that could not be empirically verified with our five senses, or as Borg says, would not be caught on a video camera.<sup>34</sup> But Borg delineates between visions, which are truthful disclosures of the way things are, and hallucinations, which are not truthful disclosures of the way things are. So while he initially may seem to avoid issues of historical accuracy, and thus his arguments would not be able to be evaluated by something like Bayes' theorem, he still must discern between whether a particular experience is a vision or hallucination. By making this distinction, Borg opens the door for questioning the validity of someone's experience. How should we question the validity of

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<sup>32</sup> Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 135.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

someone's experience? Do we assess the credibility of the individual who had the experience, and see whether the truth experienced lines up with other evidence we have? See how this is no different than what we did in the case study about Hume and miracles. So while Borg successfully posits that certain experiences cannot be evaluated through the five senses (or cannot be seen by a video camera), he is still in a sense stuck in the modern worldview by having to distinguish between the truth of certain dramatic experiences.

If we are still left in a situation where there must be some way to analyze the truthfulness of certain experiences or events in the bible, what should that standard be? In suggesting how we can see if it is possible that Jesus could have raised an individual from the dead (or been himself physically resurrected), Renan posits that a modern day thaumaturgus would need to prove that resurrection is indeed possible, and the power is to resurrect is vested within certain individuals:

A commission... would be named. This commission would choose a corpse, would assure itself that the death was real... If, under such conditions, the resurrection were effected, a probability almost equal to certainty would be established. As, however, it ought to be possible always to repeat an experiment... the thaumaturgus would be invited to reproduce his marvelous act under other circumstances.<sup>35</sup>

For all the modern day thaumaturgi reading this, (after all, you are my target audience) the bar has not been set low. Wright describes this sort of approach to verifying biblical stories: "It is proposed that the way to study Jesus is to break the material

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<sup>35</sup> Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), 22.

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down into its component parts and to evaluate these on the basis of certain rules."<sup>36</sup> In this case the relevant parts are resurrection stories, and the rule is, can resurrections be proved via the scientific method? Wright offers a different method that he still describes as, "the scientific method of hypothesis and verification,"<sup>37</sup> but yet looks nothing like what Renan describes above.

The researcher, after a period of total and sometimes confusing immersion in the data, emerges with a hypothesis, a big picture of how everything fits together... it is tested against three criteria: Does it make sense of the data as they stand? Does it have an appropriate level of simplicity, or even elegance? Does it shed light on areas of research other than the one it was designed to cover?<sup>38</sup>

Wright notes that within biblical studies there is no universally agreed upon way to decide what gets to count as appropriate answers and evidence for these questions. This is certainly the subject of much debate. For the purpose of this paper, see how the answers to Wright's first question in particular invite the sorts of probabilistic language used in the discussion of Hume and miracles. As Wright notes, the data does not always present a coherent picture.<sup>39</sup> So pieces of data must be weighed against one another. This comes to light when the biblical historian tries to piece together the relationship between the four gospels: when was each written, which gospel copied from which other gospel, and what other sources were used? Wright describes how

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<sup>36</sup> Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 23.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

Mutually incompatible theories abound as to where, when, and why the synoptic gospels came to final form. Since there is no agreement about sources, there is no agreement as to how and why the different evangelists used them. If, for instance, we believe that Matthew used Mark, we can discuss Matthew's theology on the basis of his editing of Mark. If we don't believe Matthew used Mark, we can't.<sup>40</sup>

These arguments quickly become about if-then statements, or probabilities of occurrence: regardless of whether of one's definition of a scientific method for historical analysis lines up with Renan or Wright, logical and mathematical reasoning becomes crucial in order to understand the arguments at hand.

From this survey of important biblical historians and scholars, we can conclude that mathematical language and probabilistic reasoning have an important role to play in ascertaining the truth, however one wishes to define it, of biblical narratives. Biblical historians' work is replete with argumentation that utilizes probabilistic reasoning, and is thus able to be analyzed through techniques such as Bayes' theorem. This means that to be able to assess the quality of arguments of philosophers, theologians, and historians, a degree of mathematical literacy may be required. I will now conclude with a story of how a bit of mathematical intuition may be helpful beyond the realm of biblical studies and miracles. Consider the story of Stanislav Petrov, former officer in the Soviet Air Defense Force, known as "the man who saved the world" from nuclear war in 1983. Petrov was in charge of monitoring the Soviet satellites that were supposed to tell the Air Defense Force when an American ballistic missile was in the air. At this time the Soviet Union was on high alert, as they had recently shot down a civilian airliner, killing 269 people on board, including 62 Americans (among them was a sitting U.S. congressman).

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<sup>40</sup> Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 21.

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Fearing retaliation, one day Petrov's radar screen showed five missiles had been launched by the U.S. towards the Soviet Union. Petrov claimed he had a "gut instinct,"<sup>41</sup> that this was a false alarm. Petrov noted that it would be odd for the U.S. to launch a strike, but to only send five missiles, instead of sending a salvo of hundreds. And while the satellites were certainly set up to prevent a false alarm, Petrov recognized that there was still the possibility for failure. Needing to make a decision fast, Petrov decided to not inform his superiors that missiles were on the way; only when sufficient time had passed and no missiles hit the Soviet Union did Petrov know he had made the right call. While Petrov most certainly was not frantically scribbling out Bayes' Theorem, his intuition lines up with the mathematical logic of conditional probability. Petrov's prior knowledge was that the chance that the U.S. would launch a strike was low, and if they did, they would most likely launch hundreds of missiles at once, not five. Petrov then had to update his knowledge based on new information: he saw five missiles on his radar. The question, expressed using Bayesian conditional probabilities: what is the probability the Americans are beginning a missile attack on the Soviet Union, given that the radar is showing five missiles coming towards the Soviet Union on the screen? This is the same question that Hume asks, only instead of in the realm of miracles, it was in the realm of nuclear defense. Given this, perhaps Thomas Bayes should also get the moniker, the man who saved the world?

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<sup>41</sup> Marc Bennetts, "Soviet Officer who Averted Cold War Nuclear disaster dies aged 77," *The Guardian*, September 18, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/18/soviet-officer-who-averted-cold-war-nuclear-disaster-dies-aged-77>

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## **THE EVOLUTION OF THE REVOLUTION IN THE CENTENNIAL AND BICENTENNIAL ERAS:**

**“THE INEVITABLE PROGRESS  
OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT?”**

### **Anna Doremus**

The early years of the United States are often shrouded in a heroic mythology—the names of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and King George III populate a story that is collectively considered to be one of a hearty and ideological people rising up in unison against a merciless, tyrannical empire. Redcoats, flags, and cannons are envisioned in this romantic ideal of our nation’s birth. This heroic American pageant was deliberately fashioned by Centennial historians like George Bancroft. At the time of the 1876 Centennial, American values of patriotism and national pride were being cemented, and the historians of that era played their part in defending the honor of the American people. A century later, at the Bicentennial of the nation’s founding, there were fewer grand notions of patriotism. Criticism and internationalism began to play a larger role in the historiography; these later historians realized that, perhaps, there had been fewer fireworks, greater injustices, and a greater dependence on Europe than traditional historians preferred to remember. Centennial historians wrote glorious patriotic tales of war, great men, and the American indomitable spirit; Bicentennial historians preferred more discussion of social history, constitutional ideology, and international factors.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Histories being considered as Centennial history or Bicentennial history for this paper were published within 15 years surrounding

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A study of key movements and specific historians in the field of American history can show the interesting transition from nationalist glorification to scrutinizing analysis. Particularly influential in the Centennial era was the immense narrative of George Bancroft, his *History of the United States*, emerged as the definitive and patriotic account of the early American years. Magazines such as *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* followed the thematic path forged by Bancroft in patriotic works that used histories to create an estimation for certain smaller communities or people. These authors and their works propagated a progressive and Whiggish understanding of the United States and are therefore worthy of further study. By the time of the Bicentennial, a new crop of prominent authors were focusing on dramatically different themes—there was an “air of detachment, a sense of balance, in which conventional nationalism is less in evidence than was the case in a centennial observance.”<sup>2</sup> Historians such as Richard B. Morris and Lawrence S. Kaplan showed the changing role of American history as their works were characterized by national criticism, sharp analysis, and a disappearing sense of the divine providence of the American people. The study of authors from both periods reflects how changing popular thought affects historiography.

Historiography around the time of the American Centennial was marked by an intense desire to preserve honor. George Bancroft sought to cement every detail of the Revolution in ten definitive tomes on the battles, the nature of the Patriots, and the character of the nation as a whole. His work was in fact laden with nationalist and Whiggish rhetoric that

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either date— there are obvious exceptions, the contributions of which must be studied due to their effect on the thought of that era, even if their dates of publication are not strictly within the general parameters.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence S. Kaplan, “The American Revolution in an International Perspective: Views from Bicentennial Symposia,” *The International History Review*, Vol. 1, no.3 (July, 1979), 426.

would continue to appear in subsequent histories of this era. Historians also wanted to declare the accomplishments of their town, state, family, or ethnic community. These years when the standard history of the American Revolution was being established were critical, and it was very important to establish one's connections to the heroism of the patriot cause. More than any other common thread, the histories published in the late nineteenth century were characterized by a profound wish to glorify patriotism and reinforce a nationalist ideal of the American people and their revolution.

Inaugurating the early tradition of narrative history, Bancroft's *History of the United States* "helped to establish the framework within which we see our early history."<sup>3</sup> Ten volumes published in the years surrounding the Centennial study the history of the American colonies from the mid-1500s through the 1780s. He wrote with the intention of telling a story of progress and fomenting the idea that "some exalted destiny awaited America at the end."<sup>4</sup> The idea of a complete narrative history coupled neatly with Bancroft's Whiggish notions of America's divinely ordained linear progress and of the American man as the most perfect man. Bancroft believed that the "American experience demonstrated the inevitable progress of the human spirit" which he conveyed through the construction of "a narrative action, a plot with a beginning, middle, and end."<sup>5</sup> This style glibly praised the positive aspects of the American Revolution and glossed over some more controversial aspects to better reinforce the idea of the singular American narrative.

More notable than his narrative style was his patriotic tone—it was this combination that made him the historical standard for Centennial-era historiography. Writing with an

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<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Canary, *George Bancroft*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc.), i.

<sup>4</sup> Canary, *George Bancroft*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

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unreserved love of country, Bancroft cemented ideas of American exceptionalism and glory. At the commencement of his romantic and somewhat poetic tale, he wrote

The hour of the American Revolution was come. The people of the continent with irresistible energy obeyed one general impulse, as the earth in spring listens to the command of nature, and without the appearance of effort bursts forth in life in perfect harmony.<sup>6</sup>

This idea of an ideological current pushing the people towards the Revolution was a favorable one as it supported the early conceptualization of “manifest destiny.” Even choosing to deemphasize American diplomacy, he wrote that the colonies’ European allies became such as a result of “the movement of intellectual freedom.”<sup>7</sup> Bancroft’s overwhelming love of country detracted from the credibility of his work. However, his *History*, was still an incredibly influential work which bolstered the idea of American Centennial historiography as a fundamentally patriotic field.

Following logically from the idea of the great American story was the idea of history replete with patriotic and admiring tones in order to better encourage a sense of national pride. This was exhibited in the staunch defense of the American colonies and their proud stock in an 1889 piece by Charles Stillé, refuting the idea of American colonies as penal settlements. Australia, a fellow British colony, had been populated largely by criminal exiles, and naturally rumors began to circulate about the character of the American colonists as well. The notion that the American colonies were influenced by the

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<sup>6</sup> George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America, from the discovery of the American continent*. Vol. 7, 1875. (Reprint: University of Michigan: Making of America Digital Library, 2007), 21.

<sup>7</sup> Bancroft, *History of the United States of America*, Vol. 9, 499.

number of criminals among them was repugnant to Stillé. He rejected any argument that the American identity was one shaped by lawless exiles. Obviously affronted, Stillé remarked that it was “strange and novel to a student of American history” to hear writers claim that “the race which people the American colonies was infected with the same ineradicable taint of crime and villany [sic]” as the criminal population in Australia, a true penal settlement. Essentially crying out against defamation of the American character, Stillé defended the idea of the noble American spirit—the spirit that was responsible for their victory in the Revolution. This spirit was a common cord among a disparate American people, and historians of this era actively sought to emphasize this particular cord. He declared the claim utterly nonsensical and found the unnamed English writers’ “ignorance on this subject as great and as invincible as ever.”<sup>8</sup>

There was a sense of local and not just national honor as well, and, because of the Quaker religious beliefs, many Americans outside of Pennsylvania did not consider Pennsylvanians to be true patriots. As a result, a plethora of works emerged defending their participation in the Revolution. During the period leading to and at the time “when the Declaration of Independence was adopted, there was a large party in Pennsylvania, led by some of its most distinguished public men, who thought the time decided upon for that purpose premature.”<sup>9</sup> However, this 1890 publication in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* went on to detail the importance and truly American nature of dissension. Men of considerable influence such as John Dickinson, James Wilson, and Robert Morris were to be hailed as patriotic even in their

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Stillé, “American Colonies as Penal Settlements,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 12, no. 4, (1889), 458.

<sup>9</sup> Charles J. Stillé, “Pennsylvania and the Declaration of Independence,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 12, no.4 (1890), 385.

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objection to separation in July of 1776 because they held their country's best interests in their hearts. Charles Stillé wrote that, lamentably, "approval of the Declaration of Independence nowadays is the sole test of patriotism, and very little heed is given to the earnestness of their opinions or the energy of their conduct during the war, either before or after that event."<sup>10</sup> Ostentatious and conventional patriotism was of the utmost importance to the reputations of states and men, so the nuanced position of many prominent Pennsylvanians during the founding was heavily discussed. Men like Dickinson were defended at length.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, Stillé wanted recognition that

America has produced no class of citizens whose career during the Revolution was more constant in its loyalty or more full of devoted service of all kinds to the country than those much-abused men who defended to the last the chartered rights of Pennsylvania.<sup>12</sup>

Here it was readily apparent that there was a desire to defend the honor of one's fellow countrymen by ensuring that they were in fact patriotic if unique in their opinions. Patriotism was an essential quality of good and honorable men in America in 1876.

Continuing in the trend of histories preserving local honor and memory, Duffield Osborne's 1887 article on Irish participation in the war provides a rather incendiary argument against the Irish. Osborne's piece was used to attack a small, locally-known group instead of promoting one—he believed that the Irish in Boston gave themselves far too much credit

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Thomson, "Early Days of the Revolution in Philadelphia," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 2, no. 4 (1878), 411.

<sup>12</sup> Stillé, "Pennsylvania," 429.

for Ireland's efforts in the war. He cited a wide cultural "misapprehension that the Irish were of any great and special service to this republic of ours, in the days of the Revolution."<sup>13</sup> Although anti-Irish undertones were apparent in his piece, his claim was that undue gratitude to the Irish was impeding upon the gratitude reserved for the true American allies, the French.<sup>14</sup>

This interest in a topic of a specialized and detailed nature was replicated in George Inman's 1883 firsthand account of his experiences in the Revolution—which was essentially the unedited publication of a diary kept by Inman during the war years. The content of this diary contained no groundbreaking historiographic text—its relevance instead came from the mere fact of its publication. This diary, published in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, demonstrated the historical and societal interest in firsthand narratives of the war. His work was peppered with patriotic sentiments and closed with "God's name be praised," reflecting the patriotic and religious sentiment in which many academic works were immersed.<sup>15</sup> These smaller accounts showed an interest in the histories of certain towns, men, and ancestries—this tradition is present in historical works of today but often with more analytical tones and broader references to supplement the narratives.

Works of history published at the time of the Centennial were fewer in number but not smaller in power than later works. Historians, especially Bancroft, used their relatively early appearance in the field of American history to inundate our field with notions of progress, patriotism, and honor. The existence of both personal histories and grand narratives came

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<sup>13</sup> Duffield Osborne, "Irish Aid in the American Revolution," *The North American Review*, Vol. 145, no. 386 (1887), 97.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>15</sup> George Inman, "George Inman's Narrative of the American Revolution," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 7, no. 3 (1883), 248.



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from a singular desire to protect the honor of a people and of a nation. Centennial histories lacked a depth of analysis that later became critical at the time of the Bicentennial. This was due in part to History in 1876 being a comparatively unsophisticated field and to the then-limited access to primary documents and others' work. The need to tell an engaging and patriotic story of their honorable American ancestors usurped any desire to examine the colonies' cause with criticism or skepticism.

The flurry of publications at the time of the Bicentennial was more critical and of a decidedly different nature than the comparatively primitive efforts of Centennial historians. Historians like Richard B. Morris, Joan Hoff-Wilson, Jonathan Dull, and Lawrence S. Kaplan produced histories with more specialized and analytical natures—examining aspects of the Revolution such as social history and women's rights, the legal nature of the Constitution, and international diplomacy. No longer was history of the all-encompassing narrative sort popular; historians delved into lesser-studied elements and themes during the Bicentennial era. Characterized by a shift from patriotic intentions to motives of curiosity and then by a more confident desire for self-examination, these historians produced more social and political histories discussing the Revolutionary period not simply as a line of dates, documents, and men. Bicentennial historians showed an interest in histories of marginalized people, constitutional and legal histories, and diplomatic histories. These new themes reflected the changing era and the changing needs of the American people.

Historians of the twentieth century began to study the Revolution through the lens of social history—a field which would never have entered the minds of more traditional historians like George Bancroft. Historian Richard B. Morris brought this study succinctly to the attention of the academic world in 1977 with his work emphasizing the war as a People's Revolution—a movement primarily propelled forward by the

Everyman. Morris examined the small towns and communities of the colonies and found evidence of extralegal bodies seeking to participate politically before such republicanism was widely instituted. Though the colonies had disparate peoples, they “did unite in a common cause. What unified the discordant elements of the Patriot populace was the conviction that only through independence could they build a free society.”<sup>16</sup> The Revolution was painted as a thoroughly grassroots movement, and Morris perhaps considered the strategic decisions made by the Founding Fathers too lightly. He reflected harshly on the historiography of the Revolutionary laity, saying “If we have lost sight of the people who waged the war, it is partly the fault of the pompous or trivial portraits of the leadership with which biographers have beguiled us.”<sup>17</sup> In his many works on the American Revolutionary War, Morris sought to uncover what Revolutionary life was like and what ideologies and motives pushed the Revolution forward. This interest in plain people and disdain for our founders was a departure from the grand and starkly nationalist histories of the Centennial. Morris, while patriotic, elected not to wax poetic about the mythological and divinely-ordained beginnings of America and its founders.

Expanding historical criticism to include not just previous historians, but historical actors themselves, Joan Hoff-Wilson examined the American Revolution with a focus on women’s rights. Unsurprisingly, women were initially allocated very few constitutional rights, and their power in society ebbed and flowed as a result. Their most significant charge in

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<sup>16</sup> Richard B. Morris, “‘We the People of the United States’: The Bicentennial of a People’s Revolution,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 82, no. 1 (Feb., 1977), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Richard B. Morris, *The American Revolution Reconsidered*, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), 14.

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the Revolutionary era was “the privately virtuous task of raising patriotic children.”<sup>18</sup> Domestic roles gave women a sense of private citizenship, but not of public citizenship, a disparity which Hoff-Wilson disdained. In fact, the legal treatment of women in this era is deserving of the phrase “constitutional neglect.” At this point in Hoff-Wilson argument, her social history research of early American women transformed into type of legal research, as she outlined the broader progress of American women.<sup>19</sup> Her brief history of women in the Revolutionary era was important, particularly because it was a relatively new idea to be considering a group of early American figures who were not traditionally powerful or enfranchised, but who had to seek legal power later. Issues of women’s rights were more hotly newsworthy during the Bicentennial period than the Centennial, so the introduction of these histories analyzing less popular themes from a national perspective logically follows from the social developments of the twentieth century. Understanding the experiences of the previously disenfranchised and overlooked had become more important by 1976.

Evolving from entertaining Centennial narratives replete with anecdotes and a full cast of characters, constitutional and legal history emerged in the late-twentieth century as politicians began to reference the founding legal document and the “original intent” of the Founding Fathers. What was the ideology of their republicanism? Were they conservatives or liberals? The struggle to effectively combine these ideological studies with the modes of history characterized much of the historiography of the era, and in fact, it continues to be a point of contention today. In the early stages of these efforts,

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<sup>18</sup> Joan Hoff-Wilson, “Women in American Constitutional History at the Bicentennial,” *The History Teacher*, Vol. 22, no. 2 (Feb., 1989), 147.

<sup>19</sup> Hoff-Wilson, “Women in American Constitutional History,” 152.

Peter S. Onuf, in a study of Bicentennial historiography, commented that “Until recently, however, the founders *as political actors* have been lost to view. From a structuralist perspective, the story of how and why the constitutional reformers created a ‘more perfect union’ simply does not seem very important.” As increasing Bicentennial scholarship developed, however, it became more problematic for constitutional historians that “the story of the founding is so difficult to disentangle from patriotic mythology.” Onuf called for a pure narrative free of these patriotic undertones—“no narrative is more important for the subsequent course of American history than the drafting and ratification of the federal Constitution and the successful inauguration of the new national government.”<sup>20</sup> The analytic emphasis on the political views of the Founding Fathers, their exact intentions, and the repercussions of those intentions was a popular subject in Bicentennial historiography. The combination of this legal concept of history with the ideas of social history produces “a new history of ideas that seeks to give meanings to the structures uncovered by social historians.”<sup>21</sup> The addition of constitutional history and ideological study to the body of early American scholarship was an important contribution of Bicentennial historians, as it reflects the popular debate of the period regarding our modern understanding of the Constitution and of the intentions of its framers.

Jonathan Dull, a prominent diplomatic historian of the Bicentennial era, considers American foreign policy with a decidedly critical and realist eye. He studied the American Revolution from a more Euro-centric perspective than American historians of the past, choosing to emphasize primarily the colonies’ role in European balance-of-power politics. His perceived anti-American tones made him controversial to some,

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<sup>20</sup> Peter S Onuf, “Reflections on the Founding: Constitutional Historiography in Bicentennial Perspective,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 46, no. 2 (Apr., 1989), 346.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

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particularly in his claim that “victory in the war for independence depended on a heavy dose of foreign help and abundant good luck.”<sup>22</sup> Eschewing the traditional notions of American greatness and patriotic destiny, Dull redefined a major American moment of success as merely a theatre of the grander war between Great Britain and France. In evaluating Dull, Lawrence S. Kaplan found his conclusions rather narrow, identifying his major flaw in “the treatment of the United States, revolutionary diplomacy, and American diplomatic historians. The American position is denigrated partly by its absence at critical times, partly by pejorative comments.”<sup>23</sup> Writing with themes clearly contrary to those of Bancroft, Dull reflected a transition in thinking that no longer relied on patriotism and American nationalism as the sole ideological actor of the Revolutionary era.

Kaplan sought to present the American Revolution in its broader global context. Writing to analyze the Bicentennial-era surge of research in this field, he readily introduced his article as a product of Bicentennial feeling. In reviewing a deep analysis of the effects of the war on the British Empire and King George III, Kaplan challenged “the simplistic American view of the king as a classical villain” and noted that “the tone appropriately in a bicentennial theme conveys tolerance, some sadness, and an understanding of both sides in 1976 that was impossible in 1776.”<sup>24</sup> He also encouraged psychological analysis of the diplomatic relationships of the period—a revolutionary undertaking. Perhaps most importantly, he soundly debunked the idea of Franco-American good feeling and

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<sup>22</sup> Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University, 1985), 163.

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence S. Kaplan, “The Diplomacy of the American Revolution: The Perspective from France,” review of *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774-1787*, by Jonathan R. Dull. *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 4, no. 3 (September, 1976), 389.

<sup>24</sup> Kaplan, “International Perspective,” 412.

shared ideals, citing a marked “minimum of sentimentality” in recent scholarship devoted to Franco-American relations. Having no Bancroftian ideals of brotherhood, Kaplan made clear that “France entered the American alliance in pursuit of its own interests, and Americans’ detachment from that alliance less than a generation later was equally a product of national interest.”<sup>25</sup> In closing, he also noted the rise of scholarship of the American impact on Russian and Latin American bids for liberty as an example of how, in fact, the American people were not so different from other people desiring freedom and republicanism—the direct opposite of the Centennial construction of the uniquely American spirit. His discussion of how other nations experienced the war enhanced the history from one of a uniquely patriotic, American event to one of international importance.

The Bicentennial historiography of the American Revolution was diverse and inclusive of analyses that took a more critical view of the period, pointing out failures and successes rather than creating a solid narrative of American greatness. After two world wars and with an intensely globalizing economy, it is no wonder that this period demonstrated a new understanding of the American Revolution in an international, diplomatic perspective. The desire to understand the war and independence movement through the lenses of modern trends of critical study was a difference between the Centennial and Bicentennial—twentieth-century historians promoted a fluctuating and developing idea of history, not a definitive timeline of unquestionably patriotic events and men.

The historiography of the Centennial era demonstrated a cultural need to shape the American past as a glorious, honorable, and indisputable march of progress; the Bicentennial historiography showed a preference for a history complete with the negative and positive, emphasizing international themes as well as a discussion of ideological victories and failures. Studies of Bancroft, Stillé, and other contributors

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<sup>25</sup> Kaplan, “International Perspective,” 421.

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to the Revolutionary histories of the late nineteenth century showed an unmatched patriotism and desire to protect the founders' reputations. Centennial historians were undoubtedly guided by the desire to heroize the early American years and thus create a common sense of admirable ancestry and ideological unity during an otherwise divided period of post-Civil War Reconstruction. Histories rife with notions of a glorious nation rising, in its desire for freedom and republican government, reinforced the greatness of a single American Union and attempted to discourage the divisive rhetoric which had abounded during the Civil War. These works did not, generally, discuss slavery—which seems at odds with the view of Unionist academic liberals, but perhaps this was an attempt to avoid the controversy of America's noble and laudable Founding Fathers owning slaves themselves. Bicentennial histories shied away from some controversies while bringing to light others. In an era tense from the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Bicentennial histories did not tend to emphasize African-American and slave narratives. This can perhaps be contributed to the heavy sociopolitical climate of the Vietnam War and post-war periods. American pride was low, and there was a certain desire to encourage community and unity during this period that perhaps made studies of African-American narratives less popular. Late-twentieth century works did, however, discuss the constitution's initial failure to enfranchise women, the ongoing debate of the "original intent" of the Constitution and its amendments, and American dependence on foreign powers. In a modern era vastly different from that of the Founding Fathers, the Constitution and the thoughts of the Founding Fathers were and still are being examined and theorized upon in an effort to improve the nation.

Such diverse interpretations and points of emphasis regarding American history may seem daunting or questionable, especially when they so clearly reflect the environment in which they were written, but

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There would be no point in dismissing works that reflect current preoccupations of society. They are inevitable. They are also frequently useful. They reveal how each generation looks afresh at the past and comes up with insights another or earlier generation may not have seen or understood.<sup>26</sup>

Historiography of the American Revolution is a medium through which one can see academic trends, societal forces, political debates, and ideological developments. Perhaps the Revolution is not as glorious as was once taught, but there is still much to be learned about the American character through the study of it.

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<sup>26</sup> Kaplan, "International Perspective," 409.



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**FREEDOM THROUGH MENTAL HEALTH  
IN CRYSTAL WILKINSON'S  
*THE BIRDS OF OPULENCE***

**Lucy Lansing**

Mental illness in Appalachia, especially among women, is both stigmatized and misunderstood. Deeper examination of the states of mental health in the region is necessary for developing a more complete and accurate portrait of reality. Appalachian women's stories—especially those concerning mental health status—must be written about and loudly proclaimed so that the necessary infrastructure can be erected to aid women in their own healing processes. Enabling women is not synonymous with speaking for them or constructing solutions for Appalachia based on nonnative conceptions of the region; rather, outside resources can help improve states of mental health only if implemented on a foundation of accurate accounts of real circumstances. As Emily Hauenstein states in *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, “invisible women cannot speak on their own behalf.”<sup>1</sup> It can be dangerous to assume that women are inferior or incapable of solving their own problems. Doing so can breed a toxic culture of submissiveness and acceptance of negative circumstances; further, patriarchy obstructs frank discussions regarding mental illness among women. Opening up dialogues about differing states of mental health could create a new kind of culture within Appalachia, or at least augment some of its existing aspects. Casting off the links of patriarchy and peering into their own psyches, invisible women could become visible.

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<sup>1</sup> Emily Hauenstein, “No Comfort in the Rural South: Women Living Depressed,” in *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* (2003), 7.

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Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence* serves as a tool for creating such a new atmosphere in Appalachia. The novel, written in 2016 and set in a fictional Kentucky town, spans the decades adjacent to either side of the early 1960s that are pertinent to the multigenerational Goode-Brown family's lives. *The Birds of Opulence* is littered with characters who battle against either their own mental illness or that of loved ones. While mental illness is only named by overbearing neighbors and fellow churchgoers, it still pervades the universe of Opulence and the lives of the Goode-Brown family. The Goode-Browns are comprised of a host of female characters struggling to understand sex, mental illness, and their roles in Appalachian society. The matriarch, Minnie Mae, does her best to look after her daughter, Tookie, as well as the family property. Lucy, Tookie's daughter, struggles with what might be characterized as post-partum depression, among other issues; Lucy's husband, Joe, can fix any broken thing except for his wife's mind. As the daughter of Lucy, Opulence's resident crazy woman, Yolanda seeks solace in her best friend, Mona. Relationships between and among the girls and women of Opulence are multifaceted but are largely centered on understanding personal histories in the context of mental illness. Life in Opulence is based on Wilkinson's personal and factual understanding of Appalachia. Because of the grounding of the text in reality, the author illuminates ways in which contemporary and future iterations of Appalachia might seek to improve women's access to and understanding of mental health in its various states. Women in Appalachia are not simple creatures, as so many non-regional authors have characterized and romanticized them; they are real people who have real triumphs and real struggles. They deserve real mental health care.

The literature pertaining to mental health among women in Appalachia is inconclusive but makes clear that cultural values impact regional women's conceptions of mental health. As evident in Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence*, social norms can affect how women view themselves based on

both personal convictions as well as community standards. In *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction*, Danny Miller breaks down selections of Appalachian literature in terms of gender and mental health;<sup>2</sup> Hauenstein, Ida Slusher et al. in the *Journal of Cultural Diversity*, and Henrietta Yurchenco in *American Music* have examined many of the real-life cultural implications of Appalachian life that promote mental illness stigma.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup> For example, Hauenstein writes, “In the rural South there is a greater tolerance of aberrant behavior, beliefs that illnesses arise from God and must be removed by God, and the value of self-reliance.”<sup>6</sup> If women exhibit what those around them term “aberrant behavior,” their conceivable illnesses might be said to come from God, as is evident in Wilkinson’s chapters focused on Lucy Brown. Regional value systems have significant impacts on the states of mental health in Appalachia, such as emotional repression and isolation; accurate representations of the cultural circumstances in the region are crucial for developing solutions to these and related issues. The integration of critical work on mental health in the region with literary interpretations of the phenomenon, such as *The Birds of Opulence*, can prove beneficial for navigating the complexities of Appalachian culture’s effects on women’s mental health. This paper will illustrate that Appalachian

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<sup>2</sup> Danny Miller, *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Emily Hauenstein, “No Comfort in the Rural South: Women Living Depressed,” in *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* (2003), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ida Slusher, Cora Withrow-Fletcher, and Mary Hauser-Whitaker, “Appalachian Women: Health Beliefs, Self-Care, and Basic Conditioning Factors” in *Journal of Cultural Diversity* (2010), 84-89.

<sup>5</sup> Henrietta Yurchenco, “Trouble in the Mines: A History in Song and Story by Women of Appalachia” in *American Music* (1991), 209-224.

<sup>6</sup> Emily Hauenstein, “No Comfort in the Rural South: Women Living Depressed,” in *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* (2003), 7.

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women already possess the cultural abilities to assuage some negative implications of mental illness in the region. Examining Crystal Wilkinson's novel in conversation with the pertinent literature can offer valuable answers for some of the questions surrounding mental health among women in Appalachia. Specifically, in manifesting the daily trials of Appalachian women whose lives are tainted by mental illness, Wilkinson's characters serve as experiments in confrontation with some of the factors, such as patriarchy, that inhibit efforts to curb the negative effects of mental illness.

Patriarchy is the system of Opulence. Though Crystal Wilkinson's *The Birds of Opulence* focuses on women, the cultural values of the community in which the female characters live are centered on a male-dominated interpretation of the world. The relationship between Yolanda and Mona particularly affirms this point. Both girls, whether or not they do so consciously, subscribe to the masculine superiority complex of Opulence in ways that damage their self-images and therefore their mental health. As one scholar argues, "Appalachian history has been constructed out of masculinist narratives...broadening the concept of agency to include women's critique and challenge of power, particularly through hidden transcripts of subversion, illuminates the anti-isolationist emphases that are revealed in women's networks."<sup>7</sup> Agency is a complicated topic in Wilkinson's novel because women build their levels of personal freedom on a male-oriented foundation. When Obie Simpson sexually assaults Mona, Yolanda's "legs won't move, but she thinks that if she wills it hard enough, Obie Simpson will let Mona go."<sup>8</sup> There is a specifically male sense of entitlement undergirding Obie's aggression that, in addition to the violence and suddenness of the

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Beaver, "Women in Appalachia and the South: Gender, Race, Religion, and Agency" in *NWSA Journal* (2008): xx.

<sup>8</sup> Crystal Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2016): 70.

event, likely stalls Yolanda's response to coming to her friend's aid in a time of danger. The communication of women's realities to a broader community is therefore necessary to stem the pervasiveness of female-female malevolence; girls and women, such as Mona and Yolanda, are capable of instead pulling each other up to stand on the platform where positive mental states exist. The girls were friends once, but the bond has been broken by external pressures. Were the friendship reestablished, it is plausible that at least the girls' mental suffering caused by rivalry might be mitigated.

The social rift that gradually develops between Yolanda and Mona is the fault of neither of the girls; rather, they unintentionally succumb to the patriarchal norms of their community. Yolanda shrinks in on herself while Mona actively and intentionally subverts many of Opulence's expectations for women, including how she chooses to dress. The network of women in which they live is anti-isolationist, but Mona extends the web of relationships further, eventually exploring networks outside Opulence; in contrast, Yolanda relies on the existing social framework of her home. Competition for attention from men is derived from male superiority, not any inherent need on the part of the girls to please the male residents of Opulence. Appealing to the power structure is a natural response to a socially imposed position of inferiority. When such inferiority is exacerbated by the actions of Obie Simpson and others, Mona and Yolanda attempt more vehemently to clamber up the social slope toward the pinnacle of maleness. Mona is, however, able to temporarily subvert the unequal power dynamic even during such an overt display of male dominance when "a little, tiny feeling of glee replaces her fear and anger" at discovering "this certain kind of weakness she has not known that men and boys have until now."<sup>9</sup> She experiences, for a moment, the sensation of control. Within a patriarchal framework, Mona asserts her cultural

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<sup>9</sup> Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 77.



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power derived from her sex; still, she is like the birds of Opulence, trying to escape from a cage she was born into.

Social circumstances disrupt the friendship between Mona and Yolanda, but the Appalachian emphasis on relationships is present even in difficult times. At Tookie's funeral, Lucy notices Yolanda and Mona clinging to one another; the female friendship remains strong, despite years of cultural tensions. It is this tendency of women to cleave to one another in times of strife that ensures they are able to withstand the stresses of mental illness affecting themselves or loved ones. Lucy exhibits this very strength when she gives birth to her daughter in the rough environment of a squash patch and again when she wrestles with the fact that "mama gone, granny gone, roots still here."<sup>10</sup> Lucy seems to cling to who she used to be, though she has irreparably changed. Joe notices the shift in his wife: "The cooking, cleaning part of her is all he recognizes now, all she recognizes of herself. It's all that's inside her left to give."<sup>11</sup> After Lucy comes home from Eastern State, presumably a mental institution, she takes up smoking but is still affected by something deep within her. Joe's taking Lucy to seek professional help paints him as a symbol for the empathy that must exist in communities if mental health is to be successfully treated and integrated into holistic health systems.

Francine Vernon demonstrates how social connections can be forged and severed depending on how one conforms to or diverges from communally established norms pertaining to mental health. These female- and Appalachia-specific norms include voluntary integration into social networks and participation in communal care of children, among others. Through losing loved ones, Francine suffers a degradation of connection with her community. She loses two important people in her life, and then eventually a third. The first is her mother, Helen, who suffers a breakdown, and the second

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<sup>10</sup> Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 183.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

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is her husband, Sonny; later, her daughter, Mona, leaves Opulence in pursuit of what a city might provide for her. When Helen's mind warps into something unrecognizable, Francine splits herself into two versions of Francine—"the lady of the house...and another Francine Vernon...curled up into the girl she was."<sup>12</sup> The deaths of her mother and her husband cause Francine to further retreat within herself, to feel "smothered beneath her own skin, smothered beneath all this worry."<sup>13</sup> Francine's shift in mental state, whether or not it can or should be termed an illness, influences her relationships with her community. Soon after she brings her daughter Mona home from the hospital, members of the church stop by, seemingly to offer support and sustenance. Francine interprets their presence as nosy and stifling, and "something rolls through her hot and quick as thunder."<sup>14</sup> She distances herself from these members of the community when she demands that they leave her home. The major mental shift—possibly, a break—in Francine that comes when her mother changes in personality and then dies affects how she chooses to interact (or not) with those outside her home. Francine also begins to hoard food, evidently in response to negative changes in her life. Perhaps it is because she has lost people close to her that Francine chooses to abstain from much of the social life of Opulence; she may want to avoid forging any relationships that could result in more personal loss. Whatever the reason for her relative isolation, Francine's tendency to largely keep to herself negatively impacts other women's views of her. The harmful repercussions of this tendency—namely, the disapproval of women who might otherwise be in her social circle—are not solely due to Francine's actions. The women around her must realize that they have the ability to relieve at least some of the internal discord Francine experiences because some of it is

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<sup>12</sup> Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 54.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

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wrought by their treatment of her. Casting more light on the truths of women's realities can reveal specifically female abilities to change circumstances affecting mental health.

Examination of Francine in particular can prove beneficial for understanding female interactions with Appalachian value systems. Wilkinson communicates a particularly troubling event in Francine's history—the rape of this character. Francine recalls this disturbing episode in terms of physical sensation when an unwitting neighbor tries to soothe with what is supposed to be a calming hand; Francine lashes out against the women who purport to want to help her.<sup>15</sup> She does not act in the way the women of Opulence expect that she will. The “pathetic mountain women...accepting of their lots in life” regarding abuse from men and other hardships, represented in such Appalachian literature as that by Mary Noailles Murfree, can inspire pity in some.<sup>16</sup> Francine's rape and fairly solitary life, in some views, might breed pity. She might appear to fit into the beaten-dog schema derived by those onlookers of Appalachia who lack a real understanding of regional culture, but she supersedes the constraints of simple categorization. Francine, for all the emotional manipulation she has endured, still has the capacity to care deeply for her daughter. “Usually quiet and somber as a cow,”<sup>17</sup> Francine vehemently protests Mona's romantic involvement with a married man, possibly to protect her from the sort of trauma from her own past. “Although the picture of the mountain women as hardworking, patient, in many ways subservient, and victims of the mountain social system is accurate in some respects,” overemphasis of the effect of hardships Appalachian

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<sup>15</sup> Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Danny Miller, *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 36.

<sup>17</sup> Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 160.

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women suffer incorrectly paints these women as weak.<sup>18</sup> Francine, by many standards, might lead a difficult life, but she is not defined by what she endures. Though not wholly in accordance with Opulence cultural norms, her responses to trying events are the result of personal agency and will. Francine represents the strong Appalachian women that nonnatives romanticize and misunderstand through their “externally imposed structures of domination.”<sup>19</sup> This character in particular exemplifies the approach that must be taken toward Appalachia in general if progress is to be made in the arena of regional mental health; assumptions about women in Appalachia must be cast aside and the truth examined for community-level responses to mental illness to be more flexible.

In grappling with the effects of mental illness, family responses can prove critical for affected individuals’ success in overcoming otherwise debilitating illnesses. As previously discussed, Francine exemplifies one route a life characterized by mental illness can take; Lucy also struggles with what might be called mental illness, but her proximity to this phenomenon is perhaps more immediate than Francine’s. Lucy is arguably the most complicated character in *The Birds of Opulence*. Much of her understanding of the world is portrayed through others’ perceptions of her, rather than through her own thoughts and motivations. The community of Opulence widely regards Lucy to be crazy. This characterization is pervasive; it even affects Joe’s perception of his wife, though “he could never have left her side, no matter how crazy she was.”<sup>20</sup> Lucy denies her child milk,<sup>21</sup> drops her on the floor,<sup>22</sup> and plays with

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<sup>18</sup> Danny Miller, *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 37.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Anglin, “Moving Forward: Gender and Globalization in/of Appalachian Studies” in *Appalachian Journal* (2010): 291.

<sup>20</sup> Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 27.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

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suffocating her.<sup>23</sup> Familial responses to these events differ from those of members of the community; Tookie shoulders the tasks of caring for both infant Yolanda and distant, adult Lucy, matter-of-factly feeding the child and cleaning human milk and blood from Lucy's skin when Lucy is seemingly unable to do so. When people aggregate in such large groups as the population of Opulence, individual mindsets can be blurred by the overwhelming nature of a dynamic conversation. Bunches of women viewing Lucy through a communal lens chastise her for being an incompetent mother, while Lucy's individual family members cast a more compassionate eye on her mental state. Even when she "feels hollow, a drained riverbed" after Yolanda is born,<sup>24</sup> Lucy is still engaged enough with her surroundings to feel a deep love for Joe Brown. Especially because of her struggle against the confines of her mental state, she should be understood in terms of her abilities to seek freedom from mental illness rather than by what binds her. Family responses to mental illness, in contrast with the constricting community response from many of the women of Opulence, help Lucy as she tries to free herself from the depression she never asked for.

The motif of the bird, emblematic of freedom, is integral to *The Birds of Opulence*. Evident in the novel's title and throughout the book, birds communicate the flights undertaken by Wilkinson's various characters. Lucy is shackled by what some purport to be mental illness; Mona seeks the freedom that might lie beyond the fields of Opulence as a "bird in the darkness."<sup>25</sup> A bird motif strings together seemingly disparate narratives of women who are linked by blood and history. As Tookie relates, "birds were always a sure sign" of

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<sup>23</sup> Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 34.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

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some important emotional encounter;<sup>26</sup> several chapters include the names of birds, and female characters are often likened to the flying creatures. The concept of freedom, inherent in birds' flight, is embodied by the bird-like characters looking skyward for escape and answers. Several characters' (especially Lucy's) wings seem to have been clipped by direct and indirect experiences with what might possibly be categorized as mental illness. Though the image of birds with clipped wings might engender pity, Wilkinson's characters—and non-fictional Appalachian women—possess the ability to implement solutions to problems pertaining to mental health.

Using their own cultural power, women can derive the freedom they seek from the snares of mental illness. Through community fluency, familiarity with the social trends of Opulence provides some freedom from the stresses of daily life; even in the act of taking her own life, Lucy is still aware of the cultural practices in which she has been immersed since birth. "When she slices through her wrist, she is reminded of cutting through chicken bone and gristle."<sup>27</sup> The memory of cutting chicken, perhaps for a meal enjoyed by her family, temporarily distracts her from her current emotional and physical pain. Still, because Lucy lives in Appalachia, the culture in which she has evolved has restricted certain elements of her life, especially her ability to speak freely about what ails her, a circumstance that could have led to her suicide. "Cultural, social, and economic practices may constrain expressions of self-determination."<sup>28</sup> It is possible that in the face of trouble, Lucy feels she has run out of options. Edging out stigma through education and awareness might stem some of the issues pertaining to senses of loneliness that often pervade those groups of people suffering from mental illness. It appears that "Rural poverty also contributes to Southern women's invisibility and

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<sup>26</sup> Wilkinson, *The Birds of Opulence*, 139.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Anglin, "Moving Forward: Gender and Globalization in/of Appalachian Studies" in *Appalachian Journal* (2010): 290.

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increases their risk for MDD (Major Depressive Disorder).”<sup>29</sup> Even if Lucy were to want to articulate how she feels, “the language of nerves or other colloquialisms for depressive symptoms may not be associated with MDD by primary care providers.”<sup>30</sup> Establishment of open dialogue as a trademark of Appalachian cultural systems could help to solve some of the problems associated with the stifling of the voices of currently “invisible” women. Such establishment requires complete, accurate understandings of the cultural practices of Appalachia, including native forms of language.

Mental health among women in Appalachia needs to be examined more deeply in the context of regional cultural systems. Such literature as Crystal Wilkinson’s *The Birds of Opulence* can provide insight into the implications of cultural norms for women’s perspectives on both their own mental states as well as those of their loved ones. Deviance from the implicitly agreed-upon cultural standards can result in being ostracized, as Wilkinson’s Francine and Lucy demonstrate; attempted compliance with such standards can be injurious to mental health if stretching to fit a socially prescribed form is taxing or ultimately unattainable. Women in Appalachia have the cultural power to solve the very problems associated with mental health that can result from culturally induced stressors. Accurate portrayals of the mental struggles Appalachian women face do not involve external voices speaking on regional realities; rather, they are comprised of the perspectives of women intimately familiar with the intersection of cultural values and mental health. Wilkinson’s novel provides valuable tools for peering into the lives of people navigating daily the questions of mental illness. Surmounting the minimization of emotions’ importance and other obstacles on the path toward greater levels of regional mental health among women might be difficult, but it can only be accomplished with the guiding

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<sup>29</sup> Hauenstein, “No Comfort,” 6.

<sup>30</sup> Hauenstein, “No Comfort,” 7.

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principle that Appalachian women can use their own cultural power to solve their own problems.



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