

## HANDS'S OWN TAMAR: SOURCES, CODING, AND PSYCHOLOGY

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HANDS'S OWN TAMAR: SOURCES, CODING, AND PSYCHOLOGY

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THESIS ABSTRACT

HANDS'S OWN TAMAR: SOURCES, CODING, AND PSYCHOLOGY

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44 Typed Pages

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Elizabeth Hands published by subscription in 1789 her lone volume of poetry, *The Death of Amnon*. The title poem of this volume is a biblical verse paraphrase, a genre Hands used to validate herself as a poet as well as subtly, yet undeniably, subvert the patriarchal systems of both the bible and her own time. Comparing Hands's poem to her two most probable source materials, the King James Bible and a translation of Flavius Josephus's *The Antiquities of the Jews*, indicates that Hands made significant changes in the actions, characterization, and introduction of Tamar, the lone female in the tale. Through these changes, along with similar alterations to other characters in the tale, Hands created her own version of Tamar, and in doing so saved Tamar from victimization.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I must thank first and foremost Dr. Paula Backscheider for her seemingly inexhaustible support, encouragement, and collaboration; I have a happier and richer understanding of the academy and my place as an academic thanks to her. I am grateful to my committee, Dr. Chris Keirstead and Dr. Hilary Wyss, for their thorough and insightful comments and guidance.

I owe a special thanks to Stephanie Bogle and Amanda Wood for listening to and discussing parts of this project from the very beginning and their continued patience through all of the stages of progress.

My parents and friends, all of whom I am sure, are rather tired of hearing of Elizabeth Hands and my continued work on her poetry. Despite this, they never failed to offer support and encouragement.

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Style Manual: Chicago Manual of Style

Computer Software: Microsoft Word 2003

## Hands's Own Tamar: Sources, Coding, and Psychology

Elizabeth Hands's *Death of Amnon* presents in five cantos of Miltonic blank verse the story of II Samuel 13:1-29, in which Amnon, son of David, rapes his sister Tamar; Absalom then exacts revenge upon his brother for their sister's attack. This poem presents a woman who troubles or fails to interest the few critics who write about her; in fact Donna Landry accuses Hands of dismissing the "woman question" to focus on the proper etiquette for masters to use with their servants<sup>1</sup>. Tamar does not have enough of a voice in the five cantos of the verse scriptural narrative to engage these critics' feminist interests.<sup>2</sup> However, a careful examination of what Tamar says and when she says it reveals that Hands refuses to allow Tamar to be a subject in the patriarchal system that failed to protect her<sup>3</sup>, as I shall argue here. I will begin with a brief introduction of Elizabeth Hands and her poetry.

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Landry, *The Muses of Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), 41.

<sup>2</sup> See Isobel Clark's entry on Elizabeth Hands in *A Dictionary of British and American Women Poets, 1669-1850*, Caroline Franklin's introduction to the 1996 facsimile of Hands's *Death of Amnon*, and Landry's analysis of Hands's poetry in *The Muses of Resistance*. Critical attention to Hands's poetry is extremely limited; critics' attention to Hands's talent for social commentary and satire, especially in the shorter poems in the appendix to Hands's volume, is of generally high quality but works to decrease the attention to *The Death of Amnon*.

<sup>3</sup> The term patriarchy was introduced to distinguish the forces which maintain sexism from other social forces. As Simone De Beauvoir states, "the triumph of the patriarchate was neither a matter of chance nor the result of violent revolution.... woman's place in society is always that which men assign to her; at no time has she ever imposed her own law." *The Second Sex* trans. H.M. Parshely (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 77.

Elizabeth Herbert was baptized in 1746 in Warwickshire.<sup>4</sup> Within a few years she moved with her parents, Henry and Ann, to Rowington; nothing else is known of her parents. She married William Hands in September of 1784, and the couple had two daughters. The first daughter's birth prompted Hands to compose "On the Author's Lying-In" which appears in the appendix to *The Death of Amnon*. Both her own poetry and letters encouraging subscribers identify her as a servant maid. One letter identified her as having worked in the home of the Huddesfords near Coventry.<sup>5</sup> She published by subscription, for a list of approximately 1,200 subscribers, her lone volume of poetry in 1789. She also published at least four poems under the pseudonym "Daphne" in *Jopson's Coventry Mercury* "a few years since" according to the table of contents in her volume; the exact quantity and date of these individual publications are currently unknown. She died in 1815; her husband was buried next to her when he died ten years later.

Her work fell into obscurity, with a few superficial mentions,<sup>6</sup> until the end of the twentieth century, when there was a burst of attention to her works and life. In 1985 Janet Todd included a brief entry on Hands in *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660-1850*, which focuses on the shorter poems, and mentions *The Death of Amnon* only in passing. Roger Lonsdale anthologized some selections from Hands's

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<sup>4</sup> For a more complete biography of Elizabeth Hands, see the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

<sup>5</sup> See Hands's "On the Supposition of an Advertisement in a Morning Paper of a Volume of Poems by a Servant Maid" and "On the Supposition of the Book having been published and read" and the letter of Henry Homer in *Three Hundred Years of a Family Living* ed., W.K. Riland Bedford. (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1889), 112-113.

<sup>6</sup> See J. Jean Hecht, *The Domestic Servant Class in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), 191 for a specific example of brief mention of Hands, even though the facts presented here are incorrect.

appendix in his 1989 *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*. In 1990 Donna Landry devoted much attention to Hands in her *The Muses of Resistance*. Though the shorter poems of the appendix drew most of Landry's attention, she does argue that in *The Death of Amnon* there is a "shift [in] emphasis from the woman's victimization to the need for a structure of mastery and loyal servitude within the domestic sphere."<sup>7</sup> Susanne Kord gives some attention to Hands's poetry, especially her shorter poems from the appendix, in her 2003 *Women Peasant Poets in Eighteenth-Century England, Scotland, and Germany*. And in the last year, Carolyn Steedman mentions Hands as an example in "Poetical Maids and Cooks Who Wrote," and Paula Backscheider devotes much attention to Hands's use of biblical narrative in the fourth chapter, "Hymns, Narrative, and Innovations in Religious Poetry," of *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry*.

Elizabeth Hands was very well read, despite her lack of formal education<sup>8</sup> and self-deprecating introduction of being "born in obscurity, and never emerging beyond the lower stations in life."<sup>9</sup> Her poetry exhibits a great amount of skill in both form and content. Landry credits Hands with "paying homage to the fathers yet reworking pastoral verse forms in a feminizing way" but warns that Hands "is almost too successful a ventriloquist for her own good."<sup>10</sup> This warning may prove especially true for the poem appearing last in the appendix, "Critical Fragments, on some of the English Poets," a

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<sup>7</sup> Landry, *Muses* 40-41.

<sup>8</sup> The published subscription notice for Hands's volume made note of this fact. See Cynthia Dereli, "In Search of a Poet: the life and work of Elizabeth Hands," *Woman's Writing* vol. 8 no. 1 (2001) 171 for a reprinting of this section of the notice.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Hands, *The Death of Amnon* in Caroline Franklin, ed., *The Death of Amnon: A Poem and The Rural Lyre: A Volume of Poems* (London: Routledge/Thommes Press, 1996). From the letter of dedication for *The Death of Amnon*.

<sup>10</sup> Landry, *Muses*, 186.

poem in which Hands affects the patterns and styles of Milton, Shakespeare, Young, Swift, Pope, Prior, and Butler in turn. Through her very accomplished critical mimicry in the shorter poems of the appendix, Landry writes that Hands makes the argument for “a distinctive poetic aesthetic, uncensurable by critics, superior to and so unfetterable by contemporary judgment or taste.”<sup>11</sup> Hands’s skillful and artful poetry, which intertwines political, feminist, pastoral, and cultural elements, makes her “among the most literary of our laboring-women poets.”<sup>12</sup>

In fact, I assert that Hands’s work has received so little critical attention even after its recovery because she defies classification; she was economically a working class poet, but composed verse much more akin to upper-class poets. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s poetry provides the most striking similarities. Earlier in the century Montagu’s poems were published without her consent, and her poetry remained in publication for most of the century. Her work is marked by her “sure satiric and parodic technique” and often demonstrates “her keen observation of class implications, hypocrisy, and euphemistic conventions.”<sup>13</sup> For example, in one of her personal letters she referred to marriage as “a lottery where there is (at the lowest computation) ten-thousand blanks to a prize.”<sup>14</sup> Her poetry also often challenges such commonplace aspects of society. Given her social position Montagu had access to the male literati of the day, and she certainly did not shy away from the opportunity to engage in literary debates and efforts with them. After Pope attacked “The Lady’s Dressing-Room” which Montagu and Swift collaborated on, Montagu responded with her own attack of Pope. In

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 193.

<sup>13</sup> Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women*, 88

<sup>14</sup> Clifford Siskin. *The Work of Writing*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998), 61-62.

a particularly masculine style of verse that was not uncommon in Montagu's writing, she called for Pope's hatred of mankind to be returned in kind and signaled to all by God's mark – the same mark God gave Cain.<sup>15</sup> "Montagu's poetical range," Keith writes, "includes mordant satires of men and women, lyrical renderings of the torments of love and *critiques of the double standards placed on women in love and marriage*" (82, emphasis added). In this particular set of critiques the parallel in subject matter between Montagu and Hands in *The Death of Amnon* and her other poetry is particularly apparent; both women wrote about the double standards placed upon women in matters of love.

However, although the subject matter may be similar in some ways, it is important to remember that Montagu and Hands came from very different strata in society. Montagu was raised as an aristocrat and was a very accomplished autodidact, learning various subjects, including poetic forms, and French and Latin. In fact, many of her early poems and essays were composed in French.<sup>16</sup> She was also well traveled; she accompanied her husband after he became the British ambassador to Turkey. Montagu also visited "Rotterdam, Cologne, Prague, Budapest, Belgrade, Lesbos, Porto Farina, Italy and France."<sup>17</sup> Lady Mary was an aristocrat and had all of the opportunities and privileges that came with the position, which also led Montagu to feel that frequent publication was beneath her.

Given the common reproduction of Montagu's poetry after its original theft and publication, it is possible that Hands had access to the poetry, and followed Montagu's

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<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Keith. "Lady Mary Montagu (1689-1714): Haughty Mind, Warm Blood and the 'Demon of Poesie'" in *Women And Poetry, 1660-1750* eds. Sarah Prescott and David E. Shuttleton (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003). 79-87, 80-81.

<sup>16</sup> Carol Barash, *English Women's Poetry: 1649-1714*. (Oxford, Oxford UP, 1996) 34-35.

<sup>17</sup> Keith, "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu," 80.

example of “keen observation.”<sup>18</sup> However, regardless of whether or not Hands was influenced by Montagu’s poetry specifically, Hands demonstrates similar themes and techniques in her own poetry; thus aligning her work more with this class of poet than Hands’s own working class contemporaries. Unsure of what to make of the poetry that is not typically working class, critics avoid mentioning working class Hands. Moreover, this would also explain why the majority of the existing critical attention focuses on the shorter poems which appear in the appendix, such as the two “Supposition poems” on the publication of Hands’s volume; they appear out of place in a working class poet’s collection by displaying the “sure satiric and parodic technique” and “keen observations of class implications, hypocrisy, and euphemistic conventions” of her contemporary upper class poetry. Removing the class barrier that has traditionally been enforced on Hands’s poetry and its interpretation allows for a much more developed and appropriate critical response.

The class barrier that plagues Hands’s reception has roots as deep as the poem’s origin, since Hands gained publication as part of the vogue for patronizing working class, and especially women, poets. However, despite the fad for patronizing the working class, these women rarely developed an authorial status. In fact, there is some question as to how often the books published in this manner were even read<sup>19</sup>. Published in late 1789, the same year as Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*, *The Death of Amnon* was most likely composed relatively shortly before publication, though long enough beforehand for a brief excerpt of the first canto to appear with the November 1788 letter requesting

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<sup>18</sup> Backscheider, *Women Poets and Their Poetry*, 88.

<sup>19</sup> See Hands’s poem “A Poem on the supposition of the Book having been published and read” in the appendix to *The Death of Amnon*.

subscription.<sup>20</sup> *The Death of Amnon* is one example of the genre of extended verse Biblical paraphrase in which the author versified a biblical story, often from the Old Testament, and nearly always greatly expanded the tale. As Paula Backscheider writes, under women's pens "[t]hese tales often swoop upon a very small moment in the biblical text and demand sympathy for those objects, not the subjects,"<sup>21</sup> sympathy that is gained from the audience mostly through character development. Biblical paraphrase as a genre enjoyed continuous popularity in the eighteenth century, following the success of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Matthew Prior's *Solomon* in the genre. In fact, the works of Milton "may have been the most popular for public reading in the last quarter of the [eighteenth] century."<sup>22</sup> Hands was undoubtedly familiar with Milton's works, particularly *Paradise Lost*, as her sustained use of Miltonic-style blank verse suggests.

The contemporary reviews of her volume recognize Hands's use of the form and asked that readers "pardon the inexperienced Muse," but went on to compliment the work, insisting that any errors in form were "more than compensated by the sentiments conveyed in the whole."<sup>23</sup> However, like many of her female contemporaries, Hands displays her willingness to adapt to her own ends a form made not only popular, but also respectable, by male authors. Like her predecessors at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Hands's works "share the tones, cadences, and language of this mainstream poetry;"<sup>24</sup> thus she, like other women working-class poets of the century, used this

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<sup>20</sup> See Henry Homer's letter in *Three Hundred Years of a Family Living* ed., W.K. Riland Bedford. (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1889), 112-113. I revisit this point below.

<sup>21</sup> Paula Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005), 156

<sup>22</sup> Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry*, 12-13.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Gough, "Review of *The Death of Amnon, a Poem with an Appendix, containing Pastorals and other poetical Pieces*, by Elizabeth Hands" *Gentleman's Magazine*. June 1790.

<sup>24</sup> Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, 82.

mainstream form to reach a wider audience, while simultaneously playing with the conventions of subject expected of the form and genre. Working class women poets of this time had little hope or expectation of becoming popular or widely read, moreover respected poets, and thus used the accepted forms of poetry to gain access to even a single publication. However, these poems often work within the formal traditions to express subversive themes. As Marilyn Hacker states, “Often enough, the formally ambitious poem is *also* the one where the point of view or narrative thrust is not merely ‘original’ but compelling.”<sup>25</sup> As the changes from the sources in Tamar’s character, actions, and treatment indicate, Hands certainly did create an original “narrative thrust” and “point of view” in her poem. In fact, Hands did more than appropriate the form for a woman’s voice: she invented a place for Tamar to speak (altering the point of view) and a socially and morally acceptable place for Tamar after her attack (altering the narrative thrust).<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, Elizabeth Hands altered the original biblical narrative and plot in significant ways, typical of women poets with biblical allusions and narratives throughout the eighteenth century. Examples include Elizabeth Singer Rowe’s *The History of Joseph* (1736), where Rowe skillfully incorporates contemporary secular themes and motifs into the sacred tale, and in the process alters characterizations, especially of women, and Ann Yearsley’s *On Jephthah’s Vow* (1787), in which Jephthah’s daughter assumes the right to mourn, and thereby delay, her death after her father’s vow to God to slay the first person he sees upon returning home victoriously from battle. This type of

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, 101

<sup>26</sup> Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, 113. Backscheider is speaking of women poets’ invention while using Ovidian forms in this passage, not Hands specifically.

alteration from the biblical originals acted as a way of “engaging in straightforward polemic and. . .cloaking seditious political sentiments.”<sup>27</sup> These political sentiments often involved changing the ways in which characters, especially women, are presented.

In this essay I wish to examine the ways in which Elizabeth Hands changed the presentation of the story in II Samuel 13:1-26 in her *The Death of Amnon*. To do this I will first examine Hands’s poem, explicating the ways in which Hands presents her story of Tamar. Next I will indicate the significance of the changes Hands made to this story by comparing her text in greater detail with her source materials, the King James Bible and Flavius Josephus’s *The Antiquities of the Jews* in translation. Finally, I will account for exactly how Hands committed a feminist act through these changes, a feminization recognizable within her own time as well as today. *The Death of Amnon* proves that Hands feminized her poem in such a way as to demonstrate the dangers of the patriarchy and to free the lone female character, indicating that Hands did in fact take on the Woman Question.

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In all of the Josephus translations and the King James texts, Tamar pleads and attempts to reason with Amnon before he attacks her. In contrast, Hands writes Tamar as the only character not to lie or deceive and to always have fruitful words. In the King James text and in most of the Josephus translations she again pleads with Amnon before

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<sup>27</sup> Claudia Thomas Kairoff, “Classical and Biblical Models: the Female Poetic Tradition” in *Women and Poetry, 1660-1750* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2003), 185

he turns her out of his house. All times her pleas “were in vain.”<sup>28</sup> Amnon then sends Tamar out -- which she calls the greater shame in all source materials -- to wander the public streets in her torn garments with ashes upon her head, both signs of mourning, while proclaiming her shame in the public streets. None of these events occur in Hands’s text. Tamar remains silent until she speaks with Absalom after her attack. By removing Tamar’s unsuccessful pleas and public announcement, Hands actually empowers Tamar; she becomes the only character whose words are always effective. Jonadab’s plans and manipulations fall through, Absalom repeatedly falters from his calm words, showing his murderous desire for revenge, and Amnon spends two years impotently lamenting his deed, “But now in morn or night, or sleep or ‘wake, / I feel no joy. Oh that I could forget / I once was happy!” (V: 15-17). Tamar then is the only character with a composed mind and content words when she is last seen, despite even her brutal rape. Tamar’s words of contentment with her new life praising God are the last that the reader encounters of her, leaving her the lone character to have a fulfilling and happy life.

The other characters in the poem, all male, spend the bulk of the poem in misery. David is torn between avenging his daughter and punishing his petted heir “if I / Avenge my daughter, I destroy my son. / Then, all a father’s tenderness prevail’d / He wept” (IV: 62-65). David’s “tenderness” here is for his son, at the exclusion of justice for his daughter, a feature absent from the King James version, but which appears in all of the Josephus translations in some form or another. And in a twist unique to Hands’s text, David then dwells on his own sins and lustful ways. Again, Hands has expanded upon the characterization present in the source material; she includes David’s probable

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<sup>28</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus* trans., Roger L’Estrange (London: 1736) 187.

psychological reactions to tragic events which parallel events from his own life. This change in David leaves him ego-centric and, worse still, heartlessly silent to his daughter. Absalom spends two years plotting revenge and an attempt to capitalize greedily upon his brother's sin. Jonadab flits from prince to prince to king attempting unsuccessfully to manipulate his way into a position of influence over the throne. Hands, then, presents all the men, from the Patriarch to the cousin, as unhappy and uncertain of their own fates. Hands's Tamar, in contrast, is the lone character to have a clear conscience at the end of the poem. Although Tamar is hardly mentioned after her speech in the third canto, this lack of closure prevents her from having to deal with the men and their various problems. Instead, Hands leaves Tamar happily praising God.

Tamar makes the decision concerning her life's focus and vocation after her rape. She thus gains agency from her attack. Before her attack, Tamar functioned as a woman should within the traditional, and biblical, patriarchy; she devotedly and unquestioningly followed her father's orders; "The King's command she instantly obey'd" (II: 85). Tamar submits to David's commands, even though she never sees him herself, "The King with fond solicitude retir'ed [from Amnon] / And speedily dispatch'd a messenger / To Tamar" (II:34-36). The narration of David's command is the closest David comes to directly naming his daughter. Neither in the Josephus nor the King James texts does he speak his daughter's name, a feature that Hands kept. Tamar is so accepting of her father's rule that she does not need his direct order, but will accept the bidding of his messenger. The king's order to send Tamar to Amnon constitutes the first wronging of Tamar by the patriarchy in the poem. Had David not been the "partial parent [who] overlooks / An obvious fault, or by affection blind / Discerns it not" he would have

discovered Amnon's scheme (II: 21-23). Instead, David indulges his petted first born, and sends Tamar to her attacker. The very patriarch who should have protected Tamar sent her to her attacker, an attacker who also had a patriarchal duty to protect her virginity. Had David not doted so blindly upon his eldest son and heir, or if Tamar had resisted her father's wishes, Amnon would have not had the opportunity to rape Tamar.

After her rape, Hands frees Tamar to choose her own actions. Unlike the favored and petted Amnon, there is apparently little bond between father and daughter to be broken. The King James and the Josephus texts hint that David never directly contacts Tamar, but Hands explicitly removes possibility of direct contact between David and Tamar, either before or after her rape by stating David's use of a messenger. This tentative bond would certainly be broken after her father's role in her attack and his absolute silence with her afterwards; David laments only to himself and only for the unfortunate position of disciplinarian he holds because of his son's action. Tamar owes nothing to the father who sent her to her rapist and then neither avenged the wrong nor spoke to or of her. And having thus broken free of the patriarchal rule of her father and eldest brother, Tamar is free to make her own decisions concerning her future. The choice she makes is to turn away from the courtly life, including her father, and "accept / Thy [Absalom's] offer'd boon" (III: 249-250).

As a permanent guest in Absalom's house, one must wonder what becomes of Tamar at the end of the text after Absalom and his servants flee to Geshur. After swearing to provide for Tamar, Absalom abandons her so that he may selfishly avoid responsibility for Amnon's murder. In Absalom's absence, the lack of closure in Tamar's story becomes even more apparent. Even so, the poem ends at the moment of

Amnon's death, just before Absalom flees, abruptly ending the poem in the middle of the biblical and Josephus chapters. Hands includes Absalom's intention to flee to Geshur in his speech to his servants about forty-five lines before the end of the poem. Hands has again taken liberty with the plot development of the original; she has transposed the order of events so as to end with Amnon's death, rather than Absalom's flight. By ending with Amnon's long-awaited penalty for this transgression, Hands gives warning to men who would commit the same offense as Amnon: no matter how long it takes, you too shall receive justice.

Additionally, Hands's choice not to include the remainder of the story eclipses the patriarchal turmoil that ensues in the biblical and Josephus versions: after Absalom's servants murder Amnon the guests flee. One guest quickly arrives at David's home and misinforms him that Absalom has murdered *all* of the royal sons. By ending with Amnon's blood mixing with spilt wine, Hands does not present the distraught David, who in all of the translations of Josephus and in the KJV takes actions similar to Tamar's after her attack. When David hears of the reported murder of all of his sons, the news is "so afflicting to him, that he rent his garments, and prostrating himself on the earth, he passionately lamented the horrid wickedness."<sup>29</sup> While this could be interpreted as Hands missing an opportunity to show the severity of Amnon's crime, I would argue that showing David's similar reaction to all of the royal sons' murder would minimize the effects of Tamar's reaction to her attack. Hands's audience, as discussed below, would have had greater sympathy for the Patriarch and, thus, found his reaction justified.

Consequentially, David's reaction would outweigh and overshadow Tamar's justification,

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<sup>29</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Whole Works of Flavius Josephus*. trans., Charles Clarke. (London) 1785. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*. Gale Group, Auburn University Library, 1/26/2006.

rendering her merely an overreacting, histrionic female. However, lest one despair that Tamar is without protection after the poem's ending, Hands has left clues that Tamar will persevere without the patriarchal figures that have now three times wronged her.

The conclusion of Tamar's story, as presented by Hands, allows for multiple possible readings of her relationship with the patriarchy. One possible reading is that Tamar is silenced by the patriarchy after her rape: she is never consoled, nor even named, by her father, and Absalom imprisons her in his house. This reading does not, however, account for Tamar's absence from the remainder of the poem nor her declaration that she will devote her life to God. By leaving Tamar's story unfinished, and clearly it is unfinished -- Tamar nearly vanishes from the text after she speaks in the third canto -- Hands eschews the dominant patriarchal need to have closure in Tamar's life.<sup>30</sup> Hands chooses to flout the patriarchal assumption that a raped woman is a fallen woman and therefore is destined to a marginalized life. And in a radical departure from the King James and Josephus texts, Hands's Tamar *only* speaks to Absalom and *only after* she is raped. The source material narrates her answer to Absalom, and she is voiced only immediately preceding and following her attack, ineffectively pleading with Amnon not to commit the crime and not to turn her out in daylight, respectively. Hands has Tamar express appreciation that Absalom has "offer'd [a] boon" by welcoming her into his house.<sup>31</sup> Tamar is not Absalom's prisoner; she is his invited, protected guest who chooses to stay:

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<sup>30</sup> For a more complete discussion of closure serving the patriarchy see Paula Backscheider, *Spectacular Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), 62.

. . . Farewell, ye courtly scenes;  
 No more shall Tamar shine in your resorts;  
 But here recluse and tranquil ever 'bide;  
 Regaling in that never-cloying feast,  
 Th' internal calm of an untainted mind.  
 This none can ravish from me; this is life.  
 That God which rais'd my father to the throne,  
 And still protects him with his pow'rful arms,  
 Shall be my all in all. To him I'll pray  
 Incessant, and the great Jehovah's name  
 Shall fire my theme, and fill my heav'nly song. (III: 250-265)

Tamar considers herself pure of mind and soul, though physically she has been attacked.

Tamar's purity of soul and mind leaves her able to pray and devote her life to God.

Ironically, though David not only failed to protect Tamar, but also dispatched the trusting maid to her fate, Tamar chooses a life of endlessly praising the very God she identifies as not only the source of David's power, but also his continuing protector. By doing so

Tamar has removed David from the authorial hierarchy: Tamar is protected by David who is protected by God. Once David fails to protect Tamar she seeks instead the shelter of God, presumably because Divine God cannot fail her as mortal David did. Her

sacrificing courtly life is not in exchange for her happiness. Tamar will spend her life

“regaling” in her intellect and “tranquil” in her choice to leave “the meaning leer, the vain

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Hands *The Death of Amnon* in Karen Jacobsen McLennan ed., *Nature's Ban: Women's Incest Literature* (Boston: Northeastern Press, 1996), 29-56. (III: 250) All subsequent line numbers refer to this edition.

contemptuous smile, / Or the more humbling pity of the proud” (III: 232-233) she would face in courtly life.<sup>32</sup> Her devotion to God takes place in her brother’s house, avoiding the convent and, thus, marginalization. Hands prevents Tamar’s being forced to act fallen despite her rape through her familial acceptance.

The change to Tamar’s role in her destiny is indicative of a trend in the genre. As Backscheider writes, “Women figure prominently and are often given unusual subjectivity in these biblical tales adapted to expose the ways in which power operates and its consequences.”<sup>33</sup> Although Backscheider here refers to “subject” in terms of its theoretical function, meaning that women are given consciousness and the capacity to act and are not merely objects, the word also evokes the political subject as originally discussed by Althusser, and adapted by Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power*. From this perspective, Tamar and her actions function as a palimpsest: she is the literal subject of the story- woman who has a consciousness and uses it to assert her own role in society- and the subject of the patriarchal system who gains awareness of both the political system and her status therein and therefore works to subvert the system. She is victim to her brother’s lust, and therefore should she remain in courtly life would become the victim of what Butler identifies in Foucault, as the “injurious interpellation [that] will constitute identity through injury.”<sup>34</sup> Hence, Tamar leaves the courtly society that failed to protect her and would subsequently label and treat her as a fallen woman. Instead she chooses to assert her voice by praising Jehovah. Here again the palimpsest is exposed-

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<sup>32</sup> The choice to retire from courtly life and live a peaceful life was a common motif in eighteenth century poetry.

<sup>33</sup> Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, 162

<sup>34</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP. 1997) 104-105.

Tamar, on one level, withdraws from courtly, patriarchal life and its shame, but on another level she has subverted patriarchal rule by proclaiming her innocence and her right to praise God.

The allegory of Althusser's subject being hailed by the Law is actualized for Tamar in the source materials, but not in Hands's text. In the King James Bible and in the Josephus texts, through Tamar's public display and announcement of Amnon's actions, she is exposed to "the Law" figure, in the form of her brother Absalom, who literally hails her. Hands has Tamar refuse, and forcefully state her refusal, to "turn around" to the hailing of courtly life and the identity it would entail. Additionally, by removing Tamar from the streets and into Absalom's house, Hands has removed not only Tamar's interpellation of self identity as fallen woman, but also the hailing of Tamar as guilty subject altogether.

However, Althusser's interpellation of subject identity is not absent from *The Death of Amnon*. Hands has made another radical departure from the source materials in creating an interview between David and Amnon concerning Tamar's rape. Here is the Law hailing the guilty subject figure. Amnon's being "unprepar'd to see / This unexpected visitant" (IV: 36-37) and his standing "speechless and confounded" "to hear" (IV:40) David's address to him as law breaker keeps with Butler's analysis of the Althusserian allegory; Amnon is "compelled to turn to the law prior to any possibility of asking a set of critical questions: Who is speaking? Why should I turn around? Why should I accept the terms by which I am hailed?" (108). Indeed, in Hands's version, Amnon almost need not ask these questions even after he is hailed, for he is "Already self-convicted" and is "now abash'd" by the king's presence (IV:38). Through these

changes – the transference of the Law hailing the guilty subject from Tamar to Amnon – Hands solidifies her absolution of Tamar’s guilt, and places guilt firmly upon Amnon through his interpellation. Meanwhile, Tamar is not subject to the actualization of the allegorical hailing and also refuses the hailings implied through courtly life.

Tamar has been absolved of any guilt, both by Absalom, the patriarchal Law representative, and by her own actions. However, in a continuation of Amnon’s hailing, he received the names of guilt which the King James and Josephus versions imply belong to Tamar. And what names they are: “Thou bitter herb, - thou blemish of my honour” (IV:52) and “thou worse than enemy” (IV:55). No longer is Amnon David’s “first and greatest joy” (IV:45). This certainly demonstrates the severity of Amnon’s crime, and furthermore provides a glimpse of the type of fallen woman labels Tamar would have been subject to had she chosen to “turn around” to courtly life. Again, as Butler writes, the naming of the subject “cannot be accomplished without a certain readiness or anticipatory desire on the part of the one addressed” to accept the name.<sup>35</sup> Amnon demonstrates this readiness, for not only is he depicted as acknowledging his guilt by silently standing before the literal embodiment of the Law, but also after being so named he is “no longer able to support / Such *just reproof*, in silence turn’d away / And bursting into tears withdrew” (IV:56-58 emphasis added). Lest the reader think that David is being overly harsh in his labeling of Amnon, Hands has included the reminder that this is “just reproof” for such a heinous departure from the law. These names will constitute

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<sup>35</sup> Butler, 111.

Amnon's identity for the remainder of his existence, for as Butler points out, Althusser's examples of the Law's hailing and God's naming are equivalent in strength.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, one is left to wonder if Amnon's death occurs metaphorically before his literal murder at the end of the poem. For in an Old Testament verse paraphrase the line between God and the Law is already blurred, for a holy text is intended to be read as the Divine revealing itself in a way that dictates ideal human behavior. These ideals are revealed through the actions of people who defer to the laws of God, despite the societal Law they are participating in. By having David, a figure associated with God's power but who has also manipulated his way into a woman's bed,<sup>37</sup> speak out so strongly against Amnon Hands has effectively ended Amnon's life. He is no longer the petted heir to the throne; in fact he loses his right to rule for David asks "Where are thy princely virtues / Inculcated so long? Now blasted all" (IV:43-44). Amnon is shown living in agony, unable to sleep, feeling only misery and guilt, and pursued by Absalom who aims to "steal away his life" (IV140). The life of ease Amnon knew is now dead to him; he is despised by his father and brother and even himself. Through Amnon's interpellation as a guilty subject, Hands has in effect ended his life.

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To appreciate fully the changes Hands made, one must examine her two most probable sources, The King James Bible and Flavius Josephus's *The Antiquities of the*

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<sup>36</sup> Butler, 110-111.

<sup>37</sup> See II Samuel chapter 11, which tell how David lusts after Bathsheba and murders her husband so that he may marry her.

*Jews* - in some detail. From these similarly structured texts, Hands significantly changed plot structure, characterization, added psychological motivation, and most importantly for my purposes, radically changed the introduction, description, and actions of Tamar. Hands capitalized upon these sacred sources, and, as Landry writes of other working class poets of the era, found biblical narrative “the most hospitable form in which eighteenth-century women poets could approach questions of urgent philosophical and political importance.”<sup>38</sup>

Despite the religious themes, unless an author leaves explicit notes of using a source, or the parallels between the two texts leave no room for doubt, it is always difficult to say with certainty that an author used a particular source when writing. However, we can point to probable sources and closely examine the texts for common traits. Some authors make this easier than others. Mary Ann Radzinowicz’s study of John Donne’s religious poetry allowed her to assert comfortably that Donne used “either the *Biblia Polyglotta* of 1514-1517 or the *Biblia Sacra Hebraica, Chaldaice, Graece, et Latine* of 1569-1572”<sup>39</sup> since he leaves behind records of attending seminary, reading Latin, Hebrew, and other languages, and notes for his sermons. Additionally, Radzinowicz uses Donne’s historical context to rule out the Authorized translation’s having an effect on his religious training. Unlike the well-educated, well-known and well-read Donne, Elizabeth Hands leaves no record of her literary efforts and achievements other than her single volume. From this volume and her historical context

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<sup>38</sup> Donna Landry, “The Traffic in Women Poets.” *Eighteenth-Century: Theory and Interpretation* 32 (1991):180-92, quoted in Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, 157.

<sup>39</sup> Mary Ann Radzinowicz, “ ‘Anima Mea’ Psalms and John Donne’s Religious Poetry” in “*Bright Shoots of Everlastingness*” *The Seventeenth Century Religious Lyric* eds., Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: Missouri UP, 1987), 44.

her two possible and probable sources are the King James Bible and a translation *The Antiquities of the Jews* by Flavius Josephus, a first century AD Roman citizen of Hebrew decent. Although we do not have a record of the private library Hands had access to,<sup>40</sup> Flavius Josephus's histories were quite popular and frequently reprinted, as is discussed below. Moreover, Mary Collier noted her own fondness for reading Josephus in her autobiographical sketch published in her collected *Poems* in 1762,<sup>41</sup> proving that Josephus was in fact read by laboring women of the era.

Authors have long relied upon Flavius Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* for inspiration and Biblical history. Walter Stephens notes that authors as early as the Middle Ages used Josephus as a source, and later authors, such as Rousseau and Du Bartas, continued to rely upon his texts.<sup>42</sup> Josephus wrote *The Antiquities* as a "concise yet evocative story mainly to defend the Hebrew Bible against the scorn of pagans, especially Greeks, who dismissed it as barbarous and unhistorical" during his life time (S74). The first printing of the "Greek original" occurred in 1544, though Stephens clearly indicates that some form of Josephus was used by scholars in the interim (S65). Stephens comments that "Du Bartas granted Flavian myth the same authority as Biblical history" (S73). The tradition of using Josephus for authorial inspiration can be traced back "to the twelfth century and earlier, when Christian scholars regularly paraphrased and expanded the stories of Genesis, often with the help of Josephus, sometimes in verse" (S72).

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<sup>40</sup>See Henry Homer's letter in *Three Hundred Years of a Family Living* ed., W.K. Riland Bedford. (Birmingham: Cornish Brothers, 1889), 112-113.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Donna Landry, "The Labouring-Class Women Poets: 'Hard Labour we most cheerfully pursue,'" in *Women and Poetry, 1660-1750* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2003), 226.

<sup>42</sup>Walter Stephens "Livres de haute gresse: Bibliography Myth from Rabelais to Du Bartas" *MLN* 120.1 Supplement (2005): S60-S83. Subsequent notes in this section are from this work.

In the eighteenth century Josephus was translated into multiple languages, with no fewer than twenty-eight editions of his works published between 1732 and 1739; 1773 alone yielded an impressive nine editions internationally, including translations in English, German, and French. And 1779-1789, the decade immediately preceding Elizabeth Hands's publication, saw twenty-three editions published; of these ten were translations into English, and seven of these were published in London or Oxford, relatively close to Hands's activities in Coventry. All of these editions contain the Jewish Antiquities, and many editions contained additional works by Josephus and supplementary materials such as regional maps. Sir Roger L'Estrange's English translations of Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* were published throughout the eighteenth century, starting in 1702, and reprinted an average of at least once a year. L'Estrange's translation was apparently wildly popular, printed by multiple publishers, both in Great Britain and America; 1773 was very kind to L'Estrange's translation, with no fewer than seven printings in that year alone. Later in the century, George Henry Maynard also published his English translations of Josephus's collections. Between 1785 and 1787 Maynard published five editions. Clearly the works of Flavius Josephus were extraordinarily popular and easily accessible during the time of Elizabeth Hands's flourishing.

In all of the translations I have examined, Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* closely resembles the Biblical Old Testament but has a more narrative form. Josephus's text often develops characters more fully through psychological insights and increased dialogue. Generally, the episode is slightly longer than its biblical counterpart, but reads more easily because of its more developed characters. For example, consider the

following versions of Tamar's unsuccessful pleading with Amnon not to rape her. In the King James Version Tamar says, "And I, whither shall I cause my shame to go? And *as for thee*, thou shalt be as one of the fools in Israel. Now, therefore, I pray thee, speak unto the king; for he will not withhold me from thee."<sup>43</sup> In L'Estrange's translation of Josephus in 1733, Tamar shows a bit more depth and cultural awareness in her appeals, "Let me be gone, (cried she) and learn to regulate your desire by the dictates of honour, religion, and law: or think how you may obtain your father's consent; nor seek to gratify your passion by violent means."<sup>44</sup> A 1770 translation gives even more emotion to Tamar, " 'Let me go,' says she, 'for the love of God, and keep your exorbitant desires within the compass of the law, honesty, and religion; or, if you cannot master them, try if you can get your father's good will and never think of extorting a kindness from me by violence.'"<sup>45</sup> This outpouring of emotion borders on the histrionic, and proves her to be an emotional, ineffective female, unable to persuade, or defend herself from, her rapist. Although ultimately an unflattering representation of Tamar, this version does give her a more passionate plea, and therefore a more developed sense of boundaries and self. Hands drew upon similar strategies, dialogue, psychological development, and character development, to make her poem even more engaging than Josephus's text.

In major plot development there is no variation between the King James text and the *Antiquities* text, even if minor clauses are presented in different orders or in some cases omitted, usually by the translator's word choice. For example, compare different

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<sup>43</sup> *KJV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 2002) II Samuel 13:13. Subsequent citations are to this edition.

<sup>44</sup> *The Works of Flavius Josephus* trans., Roger L'Estrange (London, 1733), 187

<sup>45</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus: Faithfully Translated from the Original Greek*. (Birmingham, 1770), 262.

versions of Absalom’s speech to his servants and the order of the events that must occur before Amnon is murdered. Of the eight editions I have examined, five list Amnon’s “be[ing] in his cups”<sup>46</sup> as first; three editions list Absalom’s sign as the first event. In Charles Clarke’s 1785 edition, he translates Absalom’s orders as “when Amnon should be intoxicated, he would give a signal, immediately upon which they were suddenly to attack and kill him.”<sup>47</sup> In contrast the 1736 and 1751 editions read, “upon giving them [his “domestics”] the sign, when Amnon should be in his cups, they should fall upon him, and kill him.”<sup>48</sup> These slight variations offer no substantive change in the development of the plot and only minor changes to the characterization, nor is there any pattern to the variations across the century. Rather, there appears to be a myriad of minute changes to key phrases whose permutations form overarching structures for the development of the story as a whole. Continuing with the example immediately above, of the three translations that list the first event preceding the murder as Absalom’s sign to his servants, the only difference is the exclusion of “should fall upon him, and” in the 1770 translation.<sup>49</sup> For every part of the narrative, from the constituent events to the character descriptions, there are these types of small alterations from one translation to the next, even within translations published by the same man but in different years. These alterations to minute parts of the narrative often appear in exact forms in different translations, leaving the translations *en total* with an almost jig saw puzzle, mix-and-match feel.

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<sup>46</sup> *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus: Faithfully Translated from the Original Greek.* 1770

<sup>47</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Whole Works of Flavius Josephus.* trans. Charles Clarke

<sup>48</sup> *A Compleat [sic] Collection of the Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus, Faithfully Translated from the Original Greek.* trans. Roger L’Estrange, (London:1736), 194, and *The Works of Flavius Josephus,* trans. Roger L’Estrange, (Edinburgh: 1751), 458.

<sup>49</sup> *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus: Faithfully Translated from the Original Greek.* 1770,

Despite this variation in many parts of the translation, there are certain features that all of the translations of Josephus share. None of the translations correlate with either the King James version or Hands's text in naming Tamar. All but the 1754 and Court's 1733 translations name her "Thamar," and these editions both use "Tamara." Hands apparently relied upon the authority of the Bible when naming her characters. Also, all of the Josephus translations mention early within the text Amnon's specific intentions with Tamar, be it called "addressing" her, or "enjoying" her. However, neither the King James Version nor Hands's paraphrase start with Amnon's intentions for Tamar being sexual gratification. Instead, these two call attention to Amnon's scruples; he "thought it hard for him to do any thing to her" (II Samuel 13:2). All of the translations present Amnon as a ready confessor to Jonadab, and as immediately willing to adopt his scheme for "curing" him of his love for Tamar. This pair of constituent events is also present in the biblical verses, and only Hands changes Amnon to a tormented and bullied love sick youth.

There is evidence that Hands used both the King James and at least one translation of Josephus. In all of the Josephus translations David's reaction upon learning of Amnon's raping Tamar results in David's emotional state being adversely affected ("infinitely" or "sorely" "troubled" occurs with the most frequency) followed by his expressing fondness for his first born son, resulting in refusal to punish Amnon. However, in the King James, David is "very wroth," upon hearing of Amnon's actions, but there is no mention of his favoring his eldest son leading to his pardoning; the narrative advances directly to Absalom's grudge against Amnon (II Samuel 13:21). In Hands's poem, however, Amnon's attack leads to "indignation flashing from [David's]

eyes” (IV:34), the emotional response present in all possible source materials. But, like the Josephus translations and unlike the King James, Hands has David express his favor for “my first and greatest joy” (IV:45). Interestingly, David’s “wrath subsided” calling upon the word used in the Bible, but never in a Josephus translation (IV:65). This blending of sources would appear to indicate that Hands modeled language after the Bible but modeled plot after Josephus. Although Elizabeth Hands’s *Death of Amnon* shows evidence of using both a translation of Josephus and the King James Version, it is clear that Hands capitulated to the Bible’s authority in that several elements of her text are present in the biblical verse and are absent from Josephus, such as Tamar’s name and Amnon’s original scruples concerning his sister. Although Josephus’s text differs from the Bible in some ways, the differences are slight and could only have provided a rudimentary starting place for the character and narrative development present in Hands’s text.

Hands’s other source is the King James Bible had been in publication long enough to become the most common and influential Bible, despite the use of other translations, removing one obstacle that Radzinowicz had with her analysis of Donne. Although Hands almost certainly used the King James Bible as a source, she did not feel it necessary to adhere to the story as presented in the Bible. The biblical text establishes patterns in the structure of the plot and in character presentations.<sup>50</sup> These narratological patterns reinforce the events of the plot, introducing Tamar as the link between Absalom, Amnon, and David. Additionally, the entire episode about Tamar in II Samuel 13 forms a chiasmus, and Tamar’s rape is the center of this structure. However, by expanding the

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<sup>50</sup> To examine carefully ways in which Hands varied the biblical episode I rely upon Phyllis Trimble’s thorough examination of scripture in *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 37-64.

story from its compact biblical verse, Hands shatters these narratological forms and structures. In expanding the biblical text, Hands removes Tamar from the center of Absalom and Amnon's power struggle for David's attention. Tamar is no longer introduced through Absalom, "Absalom the son of David had a fair sister, whose name was Tamar" (II Samuel 13:1). This structure emphasizes the men by introducing them first and by naming them specifically and relegating the "fair sister[ 's]" name to another clause. Hands establishes the familial link between Tamar and Amnon immediately and directly, "The Royal youth I sing, whose sister's charms / Inspired his heart with love" (I:1-2). Hands eschews mentioning the king and Absalom at all, nor does she name any character, placing equal verbal importance Tamar and Amnon; they are both nouns (youth and sister). Changing the structure of the introduction also prevents Tamar from being the site for a power struggle of David's attention and throne.

However, Hands retains an element of the biblical text when she has Absalom protect his sister after the attack. Hands writes a dialogue for Absalom's consolation of Tamar similar to the verse in the King James Bible, "hold thy peace, my sister: he *is* thy brother; regard not this thing" (II Sam 13:20). This verse, though appearing to silence Tamar for the benefit of family pride takes on a different reading when placed in context with the narratological structure of the story. Just as before Tamar's attack Jonadab was the counselor and advocate for Amnon, Absalom is now the counselor and advocate for Tamar after the attack, forming a mirror image and completing the chiasmus.<sup>51</sup> Again, Hands has expanded the biblical verse in such a way as to weaken the narratological parallelism of the story, and in fact establishes a new parallel between the royal brothers.

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<sup>51</sup> Trimble, *Texts* 51.

Absalom's emotional outburst upon seeing Tamar after her attack indicates his connection with Tamar and foreshadows his offer of protection, but also links Absalom with Amnon as the "effeminate" male, subject to emotion, while highlighting the atrocity of Amnon's crime,

He stopp'd, turn'd pale; then in his changing face  
Resentment flush'd, and sorrow swell'd his heart,  
Which lab'ring to suppress he trembling stood;  
But like a torrent, which breaks down a bank  
New rais'd to stop its course, so burst his grief  
Thro' all his feign'd composure. In his arms  
He clasp'd the grieving fair, and mutual tears  
Proclaim'd the anguish of their burden'd hearts (III:188-195)

This melodramatic emotional display prepares Tamar and reader alike for Absalom's consoling his sister;

I know the occasion of thy woe;  
But he's thy brother; silent bear thy wrongs,  
Nor by immoderate grief enhance the ill  
Which cannot be redress'd. No blame is thine;  
My sister still in heart is undefill'd (III: 199-203)

Clearly, Hands has retained the essential message of the biblical text, establishing Absalom as the lone male advocate for Tamar, but she embellishes it in significant ways. While Hands continues the idea of maintaining family honor by Tamar's silence about her brother's actions, Hands adds psychological motive and analysis that is absent from

the biblical text. Hands demonstrates an awareness of the tendency of victims of violent crimes to relive their attack when Absalom urges Tamar not to act violently upon herself out of desperation.

Simultaneously, Absalom admits that there is nothing Tamar can do to alter Amnon's violence against her, thus upholding patriarchal rule and order, silencing the victim because her attacker is her brother. But, Absalom continues, making explicit that Tamar is not at fault, nor is she completely defiled, a point the biblical verses and few Josephus translations only hint at, "regard not this thing" (II Sam 13:20). Hands takes the initiative to absolve Tamar of any guilt in her attack. The addition of this basic psychological realism in each sibling's response increases the humanity of the characters, making Hands's decision to absolve Tamar more powerful. The Bible's sparse skeleton of a plot leaves readers unaffected by the plight of the flat characters who fail to address the issues that would certainly arise in their situation. Hands addresses these issues and uses this character development to absolve Tamar from guilt in her attack, both in preventing her rape (the ill / Which cannot be redress'd) and from blame afterwards (My sister still in heart is undefill'd). Hands could not arrive at Absalom's final statement, "My sister still in heart is undefill'd" without examining the full range of Tamar and Absalom's reactions to her rape.

Hands's addition of psychological development in her characters occurs not only with Tamar and Absalom, but also with Amnon and Jonadab. As with Tamar and Absalom, Hands retains the essence of the biblical text, but embellishes to make the characters more human. Hands creates depth of character in Amnon, making him less of the willing villain that the King James version and Josephus translations all portray, and

more of the confused romantic duped by evil. Indeed, rather than have a malevolent Amnon, Hands casts Jonadab as the villain. As in the King James text and a number of the Josephus translations, Hands identifies Jonadab as “a man by nature subtle.”<sup>52</sup> Hands expected her reader to have an intimate knowledge of the scripture; she only identifies Jonadab as “the son of Shimlah” (I: 77) without relating Shimlah to David, as the Bible does, “Jonadab, the son of Shimeah David’s brother” (II Sam 13:3). However, this clarifies a contradiction present in some translations of Josephus in which Jonadab has been “standardized” to Jonathan. This change is especially problematic when inconsistent within the text, that is both “Jonadab” and “Jonathan” are used to nominate the same character. Hands relies on her readers to know, or at least to consult the Bible, that Jonadab is a cousin to the royal family, thus making his longing and plans to access the throne reasonable and pertinent. As a royal cousin, Jonadab is close enough to the throne to desire it but far enough removed to need to scheme to get there. Thus Jonadab’s being “by nature subtle, / Proud and ambitious” (I: 78-79) establishes his motive for the total of his actions within the poem. His pride and ambition, traits which are completely absent from both the King James and the Josephus texts, pull him toward the throne; Hands marks Jonadab and these characteristics as the source of malevolence in her poem. Jonadab will “meanly stoop / To the most ignoble acts, / To serve his private ends” and is thus a “serpent” hiding “beneath the cloak / Of formal flatt’ries” (I:79-81). Identifying Jonadab as a “serpent” cannot be an accident in a narrative taken from the Old Testament. Hands clearly wants her readers to see Jonadab as a devil and the initiator of the royal family’s woes.

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<sup>52</sup> Hands, I: 78. In the KJV II Sam 13:3 Jonadab is called “a very subtil [sic] man”

Accordingly, it is Jonadab who convinces Amnon that as a prince he should not be denied any thing that he desires, even his sister. In the biblical text and Josephus's *Antiquities* Jonadab inquires as the object of Amnon's affection, and Amnon is all too eager to confide, with his response to Jonadab translated from a simple "said" in the King James, to the ready "confessed" appearing most often in the Josephus translations. However, after twice being refused, Hands has the serpentine ambitious Jonadab manipulate Amnon into participating in the plot he presents to seduce Tamar. Jonadab challenges Amnon's masculinity, telling him that while the nation of Israel worships and envies him, he "effeminately weeps, / Like some fair captive maid, snatch'd from the arms / Of her fond lover" (I: 203-205). Amnon's only hope, according to Jonadab, is to "enjoy" Tamar (I: 189). Significantly, this is the same word used in three translation of Josephus, but this aspect of the seduction plot is absent from the King James. Only the feigned illness and request for David's sending Tamar are present in the biblical text.

Like Josephus, Hands has Jonadab present sexual gratification as the "cure" for unrequited love. When Amnon, still the naive victim of love, protests "Oh! I cannot injure her," (I: 192) Jonadab again calls upon Amnon's status as a man and a prince, insisting "Better ten thousand injur'd virgins mourn, / Than David's son thus live inglorious" weeping for unrequited love (I: 206-207). For Hands, Amnon is not the ready villain that he is in the Bible. Rather she develops him into an unfortunate youth struck by love and manipulated by a malevolent and envious cousin. In fact, even to consummate the plan to "cure" himself of his love sickness, Amnon must remind himself that "Jonadab will at my weakness laugh" (II: 124). Hands adds another element absent from either the Josephus translations or the biblical text; Amnon must "drown his scruples" (II:

126) in wine and Amnon's "love and wine unite their frantick pow'rs / And leaving virtue fainting in the rear, / Rush on impetuous" (II: 133-135). Amnon would not, could not, carry out Jonadab's plan without the aid of shame and wine and the inhibitions it brings. Hands uses these elements of realism and psychology to change Amnon from an eager rapist to a confused, lovesick youth who also falls victim to Jonadab's attempt to gain the throne.

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Landry identifies the passage in which the traits of a good master are listed in *The Death of Amnon* as the most Hands strayed from the religious sources: "The longest digression from the biblical original concerns how masters can best assure their servants' loyalty, a class-specific address from servant to master in the manner of literary advice to the king from the courtier-writer."<sup>53</sup> While I argue that Hands made many other, more significant changes, as a substantial deviation from the source materials, Hands's servants do require attention. I draw upon Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser's theory of the techniques of coding in female authored texts to explain Hands's deviation from the sources; Radner and Lanser define the coding method of distraction as "strategies that drown out or draw attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message."<sup>54</sup> Although Radner and Lanser state that in a written text "the 'noise' that drowns out the message is stylistic," (15) I argue that Hands used this very "technique" in *The Death of*

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<sup>53</sup> Landry, *Muses*, 41.

<sup>54</sup> Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser "Strategies of Coding in Women's Culture" in *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture* ed., Joan N. Radner (Chicago, Illinois UP, 1993) 1-29.

*Amnon*, but rather than use an opaque style Hands draws upon the political climate of her time to distract from her feminist message.

Publishing in 1789, between the end of the American Revolution and the beginning of violence of the French Revolution, Hands capitalized upon the political unrest of the Age of Revolution.<sup>55</sup> The eighteenth century was one in which rebellion and war were nearly constant realities. The volatile political climate inevitably became the subject of poetry by both men and women of the time, and as Backscheider writes, “even when [these subjects] are not central, traces of them tint men’s and women’s writing and their texts’ reception.”<sup>56</sup> The extensive development of the relationship between Absalom and his servants, and their subsequent uprising against Amnon, taps into upper-class British consciousness of the lower-class masses following the American Revolution and during the opening days of the revolutionary tumult in France. For though the servants are following orders of their master, their actions constitute rebellion; they act together to murder the prince and heir to the throne. The ease with which Absalom convinces his servants to rebel against their royal leader and own consciences certainly must have played upon upper-class British awareness.

The suddenly openly didactic verses in the third canto of *The Death of Amnon*, a guide for masters, appear out of place. And indeed this is another of Hands’s inventions in the structure of the story. The only mention of servants in either the King James or Josephus texts are passing comments that Amnon orders his servants to withdraw and to

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<sup>55</sup> For a more complete discussion of English perceptions of the French Revolution, see Gary Kelly *Women, Writing, and Revolution: 1790-1827* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 13-21. As early as 1788 there are written records of English reactions to the French Revolution.

<sup>56</sup> Backscheider *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005), 2.

be quiet while he attacks Tamar and Absalom's very brief orders to his servants to kill Amnon. Hands shifts the tone and attention of the narrative, moving away from the specific "Grief and revenge [that] now labour'd in the breast / Of Absalom" (III: 150-151) to the general advice that

Too often do masters, void of judgment, check,  
By forward peevishness and discontent,  
The many little assiduities,  
Which otherwise a servant's zeal would mark,  
Nor make distinction between good and bad.... (III:159-163)

Hands continues her lesson, providing her readers not only with a negative example of masterly behavior, but also proof that the positive example reaps the most benefit from his servants. Hands accomplishes this by making Absalom the embodiment of the perfect master:

But Absalom, with nicest judgment, scans  
Their merits and defects; he in reproof  
Is slowly cautious, and exactly just;  
No clam'rous oaths re-echo thro' his hall,  
Nor mutt'ring servants whisper imprecations;  
Tho' affable and courteous, yet he ne'er  
To low familiarity descends. (III:164-170)

Interestingly, this paradigm of masterly behavior starts as a listing of positive advice, but then changes to a listing of negative advice. Apparently, Hands feels that masters need more lessons on what not to do than lessons on what they should do. Hands makes clear

the benefit Absalom reaps by his perfect treatment of domestics. For his efforts he is likened to a king, he “Reigns in their hearts, and by enliv’ning smiles / Encourag’d, they spontaneously attend, / And love completes their servitude with joy” (III:172-174).

The didactic digression takes a full page in the original publication.<sup>57</sup> The lesson provided by Absalom and his servants usurps the place of Tamar’s public shame and being invited to Absalom’s house. Instead, Hands has Tamar already inside Absalom’s house, waiting for him to finish “scan[ning] / [the servants’] merits and defects” upon his arrival home (III: 164-165). By placing the handbook for proper master/servant relations at a point in the narrative where she significantly diverges from her source material Hands distracts her readers from the full impact of her feminization of the Biblical text. Rather than have Tamar wander the public streets in torn garments and ashes, as she does in both the King James and Josephus versions of the story, Hands places Tamar in the privacy and safety of her brother’s home. In this way Hands omits the second wrong of public dismissal after her rape present in both the King James and Josephus versions, the wronging which both sources identify as the greater harm. Hands moves Tamar from a figure of public shame to one of private mourning. While Hands cannot prevent Tamar from being raped, she can protect Tamar after her attack. This feminist act is coded by directly juxtaposing the distraction of the servants with Tamar’s rape. While the interruption of the servants would function on its own as a distraction from the feminist message, the political climate made this “noise” all the louder in the text.

The servants also distract the reader from Hands’s feminization of the text when they again usurp the attention from Tamar at the end of the poem. Rather than address

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<sup>57</sup> See the facsimile edition of *The Death of Amnon* ed. Franklin.

the issue of Tamar's abandonment by her brother, the third and final wronging of Tamar by the male relatives supposed to protect her, Hands again draws attention to the servants. In much greater detail and length than is present in either the King James or the Josephus texts, Absalom commands his servants, those who had given him "Great proofs . . . of their fidelity," to strike and kill Amnon in the closing canto of the poem (V: 101). Again departing from both sources, Hands depicts the servants' reaction to this criminal command, and thus simultaneously develops the humanity of the servants and the callousness of Absalom. After an initial shock, the servants all agree to carry out the murder "more by love than duty bound / All pos'd obedient to his [Absalom's] sov'reign will" (V: 134-135). To convince his servants that the sin of murder shall be his alone Absalom details the reasons for his actions. Significantly, he only speaks of the king and Amnon; "since justice sleeps / In his [Amnon's] fond father's hand, 'tis right that I / Assume pow'r" (V: 124-126). Hands has skillfully given psychological depth to Absalom; he indicates a motive. He desires the throne, "pow'r," and considers himself the only man in the family worthy of the crown, since his father and brother are both blind to justice, and thus unfit to rule. Tamar has vanished from Absalom's concerns. She is no longer even present in the crime and impetus for Absalom's power grab; it is only an unnamed, generic "atrocious crime" which Absalom avenges (V: 123). As mentioned above, this lack of closure in Tamar's story undermines the patriarchy that has thrice wronged her. With the final image of Tamar rising out of the ashes of her mourning, promising that "the great Jehovah's name / Shall fire my theme, and fill my heav'nly song" Hands makes Tamar a phoenix (III: 259-260). Although Tamar was wronged, she shall rise from the ashes of her mourning to praise God. It is in heavenly

fires of God's love that she will continue her life, not in the fires of the marginalized, hellish life that the patriarchy would relegate her to as a fallen woman.

With the argument I have presented here, that Hands used the coding technique Radner and Lanser classify as distraction to convey safely her feminist message, another aspect of coding becomes pertinent. Intentionality in Radner and Lanser's sense "mean[s] assumption inferable from the performances-in-context, which includes what we know of the performer and her circumstances but does not rely up these performer's own words for its guarantee" (7). Contemporary reviews and Hands's own poetry provide this context. In a letter to Richard Riland, Henry Homer the Rector of Birdingbury, requests Riland to "procur[e] the names of some respectable Inhabitants of Sutton" for Hands's subscription list.<sup>58</sup> Homer first commends Hands's poetry through the opinion of his son, a master at Rugby school. Homer then notes her servant status before commenting that "her subject I am afraid will not be a popular one, but the manner in wch She has decorated it will in my opinion get over the prejudices wch it may have to struggle with."<sup>59</sup> Homer was apparently concerned about Hands's subject of incestuous rape. The section of the poem enclosed with the letter comes from the first canto, and relates explicitly Amnon's passionate and romantic love for his sister.<sup>60</sup>

According to her other poems, Hands considered the subject of *The Death of Amnon* to be Tamar's rape. Hands also expected her readers to focus on the rape. In her blatantly satirical "A Poem on the supposition of the Book having been published and read," Mrs Routella asks Miss Rhymer "Is there any thing in it worth reading, I pray?"

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<sup>58</sup> Bedford, 113.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>60</sup> The section in question of the poem is Hands's *Death of Amnon*, I: 45-74. Homer's enclosure shows relatively insignificant alterations in the punctuation from the 1789 published version.

For your nice attention, there's nothing can 'scape.

She answer'd – There's one piece, whose subject's a Rape.

A Rape! interrupted the Captain Bonair,

A delicate theme for a female, I swear.<sup>61</sup>

Hands thought her readers would focus on Tamar's attack, and Hands's own sex when reading her volume. And this is not an unreasonable assumption. As Backscheider points out through "[Mary] Barber's ladies" who also "have no 'taste' for poetry," and they assume that "women's subjects were sure to be low," similarly Hands has "combine[d] the theme of the writing woman's difficulties in obtaining access to publication with the condemnation of women who maintain the tyrannical force of custom." Hands knew to expect this reaction, in fact, even predicted it in her poems, as these satirized women are "merely behaving like men" and showing "the effects of the sex-gender system."<sup>62</sup> Hands was part of an unbroken line of women poets who recognized the difficulties working-class women experienced, including, among many others, Ann Yearsley, Mary Collier, and Mary Masters. Hands, like "almost every poet of the second half of the century," considered herself an individual with great sensitivity, and as such, "expressed horror at the cruelty and violence and even insensibility and rudeness" that surrounded her.<sup>63</sup> For, a close reading of the poems "Supposition of an Advertisement appearing the Morning Paper, on the Publication of Volume of Poems, by a Servant Maid" and *On the Supposition of the Book having been published and read* reveals that the servant maid author who is the subject of the satirical upper-class figures'

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<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth Hands, "A Poem on the supposition of the Book having been published and read," in *The Death of Amnon*, Caroline Franklin, ed., lines 29-33.

<sup>62</sup> Backscheider *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry*, 105

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 8

gossip is in fact the servant maid in the house of the hostess in these poems and hears the gossip. Thus, in an effort to draw attention away from the rape and the feminist point Hands makes using Tamar's actions and unfortunate fate she developed a satirically didactic relationship between Absalom and his servants.<sup>64</sup>

Hands uses the servants to distract from her deviation from her sources' plot and development, coding her feminist message for those of us who are willing to decode it. These deviations fill in missing details from the sources, such as Jonadab's telling David and Absalom of Tamar's rape, or center on Tamar's protection and empowerment, such as her not speaking until after her rape. By adding psychological development to her characters, including motives and self examination, Hands was able to turn a short and often overlooked<sup>65</sup> biblical passage of twenty-nine verses into 986 engaging lines of Miltonic blank verse. Analysis of her skillful poetic and character development reveals a feminist message at the heart of Hands's poem. Through the changes in Tamar's speech, actions, and psychological development, and by including a focus for the remainder of Tamar's life, Hands presents a Tamar who is obviously different from the Tamar in the source material. Elizabeth Hands has solidified the Tamar in *The Death of Amnon* as her own version of Tamar,<sup>66</sup> an independent woman, radically different from the victimized woman in the *Antiquities of the Jews* and King James Bible. Through the changes that Hands made from the book of II Samuel 13 in her sources she wrote a feminist work so

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<sup>64</sup> Admittedly, the master/servant relationship is a minor theme in Hands's work, as evidenced in *The Death of Amnon* in conjunction with the poems about her position as a servant maid with a pen.

<sup>65</sup> See Richard Gough, "Review of *The Death of Amnon*" in *Gentlemen's Magazine* (June 1790), 540, in which he comments upon "the novelty of the subject" of Hands's poem.

<sup>66</sup> I owe credit to Stephanie Bogle for first mentioning how radically distinct Hands's Tamar is from the Biblical Tamar.

removed from the androcentric sources that it had to have a different title: *The Death of Amnon*.