

## Seeing Silence: Susanna's Christological Quiet

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The “apocryphal” parts of the biblical book of Daniel have long found a place in Anglican life and worship. These passages, known in two Greek recensions but absent from the Hebrew Bible, form part of that cluster of texts from the early church’s Greek Bible that survived in Latin against Jerome’s better judgment, but were generally separated to an appendix or beyond at the time of the Reformation. Nevertheless, Anglican churches have continued to read these books “for example of life and instruction of manners,” following the words of Article 6. Most widely, the Benedicite from the third chapter of the longer Daniel continues to be sung and said as a canticle, in a practice of long continuity: this song of the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace belongs to the liturgical collection of biblical Odes, attested together at least as far back as the first known commentary on the Odes, written by Verecundus of Junca (d. 552).<sup>1</sup> Or, a worshiper in the chapel of King’s College, Cambridge can look up at a stained glass window to see Jesus break bread with the disciples on the Emmaus road in typological fulfilment of Habakkuk’s bread brought by an angel to Daniel in the second lions’ den, found in the apocryphal Daniel 14. And the tale of Susanna, chapter 13 of the longer version of Daniel, is read in the Church of England before and during Lent, keeping present the memory of the tall, veiled Roman matron who lifts her hands in prayer in the catacomb frescoes.

Susanna in particular has led a varied life in popular culture and in art; and yet there are troubling elements in her reception, which—even more queasily—look as though they originate with the text itself. In the two elders who spy on a beautiful woman and attempt to force

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<sup>1</sup> See Lawrence Frizzell, “A Hymn of Creation in Daniel,” in Asher Finkel and Lawrence Frizzell, ed., *Standing before God: Studies on Prayer in Scripture and in Tradition with Essays in Honor of John M. Oesterricher* (New York: Ktav, 1981), 41–52.

themselves on her, critics have found a narrative proxy for a voyeuristic author; that author in turn beckons readers into an exploitative consumption of the violent viewing practiced on this woman. For proof of guilt, there is the Renaissance artistic tradition that the text has generated, with its acres of fleshy Susannas exposed in accusing mirrors; the painterly perspective of that genre seems to make explicit the text's own invitation to prying eyes.<sup>2</sup> Mieke Bal approaches Susanna through the Renaissance painters but finds what she calls "the germs of the pornographic flavor" already present in the biblical book: the text itself produces "voyeurism through focalization" as the reader is placed at precisely the point from which the elders see and stare.<sup>3</sup> Cheryl Exum draws Susanna into a cluster of biblical narratives whose writer "invites a kind of voyeuristic complicity between the narrator and his assumed or ideal male readers"—Exum calls this whole category of biblical story "rape by the pen."<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, this apparently exploitative visual regime is compounded by the way that the narrative organizes speech and silence: Susanna is seen from all angles but repeatedly goes unheard. Her quietness is like a certain kind of silence in Diarmaid MacCulloch's telling of Christian history: for him, silences are all too often "products of how human beings construct the world around them and negotiate their way through the embarrassments and opportunities created by our search for power and control, over others and over ourselves."<sup>5</sup> Like these silences, Susanna's silence is in one way a product of the

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Mary D. Garrard, "Artemisia and Susanna" in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, ed., *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 147–171, for this set piece through its renditions by Domenichino, Veronese, Tintoretto, Rubens, and (less exploitatively) Amelia Gentileschi and Rembrandt.

<sup>3</sup> Mieke Bal, "The Elders and Susanna," *Biblical Interpretation* 1 (1993): 1–19; this analysis appears with a different emphasis in her *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1991), chap. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield University Press, 1993), 174, 196–197; a similar theory of readerly viewing informs Exum's later *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996). See too Athalya Brenner, "Introduction" in Athalya Brenner, ed., *Feminist Companion to the Bible*, vol. 7, *Esther, Judith and Susanna* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield University Press, 1997), 11, for readers as "accomplices" in Susanna.

<sup>5</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 235.

control exerted over her by the elders. As such, it illustrates what Rowan Williams has called “the moral cloudiness of valuing silence in itself . . . there is silence that is corrupt, abusive, oppressive; and we know it as such by tracing how it came to be.”<sup>6</sup> Following this suggestion, then, I will trace here how Susanna’s particular silence came to be, before eventually exploring some ways in which the visual and oral patterns of the Susanna narrative actually interact to disrupt the oppressive regime of seeing and silencing that the elders represent. Ultimately, I suggest, the narrative is not complicit in the silencing that the elders—and, after them, the painters—have attempted to impose upon the figure of Susanna; but before examining how Susanna’s silence expands out into dramatic and even christological potency, I turn to examine the toxic fusion of Susanna’s silence with her exposure to sight in the story.

It is possible to tease out the interplay between Susanna’s seenness and her silence as the tale unfolds. In Theodotion’s version, almost the first thing we learn about Susanna is that she is very beautiful (2), while in the Old Greek, her beauty comes first, and right from the outset is framed by the elders’ seeing of her, as she is tucked away in a subordinate clause surrounded by description of how the elders see: “These men, when they saw a woman, elegant in appearance, the wife of their brother, one of the elders of the sons of Israel, named Sossanna daughter of Chelkias, wife of Ioakim—walking about in her husband’s orchard, and since they lusted after her, they diverted their mind and turned away their eyes in order not to look to heaven” (7–9 OG).<sup>7</sup> Susanna comes into narrative existence, then, as an object of the elders’ sight: the initial thread of the story in both versions has the elders watching her, turning their sight to her, being transfixed by her, waiting daily to see her, and finally hidden and watching her in the garden (8–12; Th. 15, 18). When the elders ambush her and make their threat, the words given to them by Theodotion make it clear that

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<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 178.

<sup>7</sup> Theodotion’s was the version adopted into the Septuagint, but all the “Additions” to Daniel also exist in another, probably earlier, version of Daniel, the Old Greek: a significant number of patristic citations reflect the Old Greek or its rendition in one or another part of the *Vetus Latina* tradition. Throughout, I cite the translations of both these versions given in parallel in the *New English Translation of the Septuagint*, which reflects the syntax of the Greek rather closely.

their power comes from their own immunity to visual scrutiny and from their control of the channels of speech:

And it happened that when the girls had gone out, the two elders got up and ran to her and said, "Lo, the orchard doors are shut and no-one can see us, and we are in lust with you. Therefore, give your consent to us, and be with us. But if not, we will testify against you that a young man was with you, and for this reason you sent the girls away from you." (20–21)

And this is what happens: they make their accusation publicly in the assembly of all the people while Susanna is silent and, again, the object of visual scrutiny. According to Theodotion, "Now Susanna was very refined and beautiful in appearance. Then the scoundrels commanded that she be uncovered (for she was veiled) so that they could be sated with her beauty. But those who were with her and all who saw her began weeping" (31–32). Now this is obviously not the end of the story, but it is the substance of Susanna's predicament; from this we can see the force of the claim that she is rendered as a silent object of sight by the text as well as by the later painting tradition.

To complicate that judgment, I want to draw upon Rowan Williams's insistence that silence always nevertheless gestures toward speech, whether in renunciation or in protest:

We cannot imagine an "unframed" or pure silence: we can only imagine the silence in which *we* are not hearing anything. . . . Silence for us is always the gap that occurs *here*, in this specific place between words . . . . To talk about silence, I would argue, is always to talk about what *specifically* we are not hearing.

Thus, "Silence 'betokens' in the context of speech and image. . . . Silence actually and particularly criticizes and modifies speech and thus itself 'says' something."<sup>8</sup> Susanna's silences, perhaps, are speaking silences in exactly this sense: they are occasions of deliberate withdrawal, or refusal, or critique, precisely because the story frames them between episodes of speech, including Susanna's own speech. Briefly put, Susanna's silence works *for* her in roundabout ways. Before

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<sup>8</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 157.

unraveling these, it will be useful to draw in one more element in the story's construction of silence, which is the treatment of Susanna's shame.

Shame is typically correlated with a number of sensory experiences and states, and silence is frequently one of these: Julian Pitt-Rivers, in a classic study, noted that silence is part of the script for *female* shame in particular.<sup>9</sup> The story of Susanna modulates the whole range of sensory experiences associated with shame, and this is most clearly focused in Theodotion's version. There, the first shame attaching to Susanna is in fact that of her household servants: "And when the elders told their story, the servants felt very much ashamed [*katēschunthēsan*], for nothing like this had ever been said about Susanna" (27).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, when Susanna is finally vindicated by Daniel, it is again the capacity of others for shame that acts as an index of Susanna's own shame or honor: "Then Chelkias and his wife expressed praise concerning their daughter together with her husband Ioakim and all the relatives, because no shameful [*aschēmon*] deed was found against her" (63). In a similar way, when Susanna is exposed at her trial, it is "all who were with her and all who saw/knew her" who weep (33; OG summons the city assembly, all the sons of Israel, five hundred of Susanna's household, and her four children, 28–30). All this reflects what Bernard Williams has called the "essentially interactive" structures of shame that "serve to bond as much as to divide"; the shame of one person is replicated in another in what Silvan Tomkins calls the "hall of mirrors of shame."<sup>11</sup> The moment of Susanna's greatest shame is of course her trial, where various modalities of shame attach themselves to her from different angles: she is stripped, touched, and seen. The close connection of shame with exposure to sight and especially nakedness is basic; the elders go on to lay their hands on the

<sup>9</sup> Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," in J. G. Peristiany, ed. *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 19–77, at 42.

<sup>10</sup> For a thorough treatment of shame in Greek literature mostly organized around *aischunē*, see David Konstan, "Shame in Ancient Greece," *Social Research* 70, no. 4 (2003): 1031–1060. The other instance of the lexeme in Susanna is in Th. 11, where the elders are ashamed (*ēschunonto*) of their lust: shame adheres to them in a more uncomplicated way.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1993), 81; Silvan Tomkins, "Shame-Humiliation and Contempt-Disgust," in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, ed., *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 154–155.

stripped Susanna's head (34), and this seems to constitute the climax of her shame in the story.

But at this very moment of Susanna's greatest shame, I want to suggest that she in fact resists it, and that she does so by a strategy that pulls two ways: she refuses shame but also embraces shamelessness. At the point of her exposure and the imposition of the elders' hands, Susanna does not look downward in the classic gesture of shame, but upward: she looks up to heaven (Th. 35), or lifts up her head (OG 35). We might contrast this with the expected dropped eyes and bowed head: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the posture of eyes down and head turned away the "proto-form" of shame, speaking of "blazons of shame, the 'fallen face' with eyes down and head averted."<sup>12</sup> And here, significantly, Susanna breaks her silence: in Theodotion Susanna "cried out with a loud voice" (42–43). Staying quiet is another gesture in the register of shame's symptoms that Susanna simply casts off. Further, her cry itself does not squirm away from exposure, but rushes to welcome it: she addresses God as "you who are familiar with secret things, you who know all things before their beginning," actively seeking the scrutiny of a God who is, in Hippolytus's striking image here, "all eye."<sup>13</sup>

In all of this, the presentation of Susanna's shame resonates closely with the subtle twists and turns of shame analyzed by Virginia Burrus in her treatment of shame in a different set of literary texts.<sup>14</sup> Susanna performs what Burrus calls the "innovatively shameless turn toward shame" of Christian martyr narratives: exactly like Burrus's subjects, Susanna's shamelessness is

balanced between a refusal and a willful embracing of shame. Whatever it is, it is not simply outside shame but is at once resistant to and contiguous with it. . . . Cultivating courage, shamelessness engages the fear of being shamed and thus also exposes the coercive force of shaming: as eye meets eye, defying shame's inhibition, shame is itself shamed.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Eve Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality and Queer Performativity," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 36; behind this is Tomkins, "Shame-Humiliation," 134–137.

<sup>13</sup> *holos ophthalmos*; Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel*, 1.33.

<sup>14</sup> Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 9, 3.

It is for good reason that Susanna would later become an emblem of this Christian ideology of martyrdom: rather than shrinking from shame, she faces it down and thus transfigures it. The genealogy becomes plain when Susanna is assimilated to the idea of spectacle by Pseudo-Chrysostom, who introduces his celebration of Susanna as a martyr in this way: “So let Susanna also contend in this common theater, where both God and the angels and men and women may see her.”<sup>16</sup> As Susanna engages her own seen-ness and her forced silence in these ways, she turns them back on the enforcers of her shame.

I have said that it is Susanna’s loud cry that co-opts and thus resists her shame—in other words, her strength comes from a refusal of silence, the seizing of a moment of oral agency that is obscured by all those mute paintings. We need also to pay attention to one other place in the text where Susanna commands the narrative by breaking silence; as before, what is important and effective about these two loud cries is the way that they punctuate her silence—the way they create a “framed” silence, in Williams’s terms. There is a tensely timed quality to Susanna’s utterance that gets much of its power from her stillness: the economy of words here is predicated on silence, and the dramatic scoring of the story makes this clear. That other moment is back in the garden, as Susanna responds to the elders’ ultimatum. In both Greek versions she explains, to herself and to them, that she would rather risk her life than sin, but then Theodotion has a further dramatic scene:

And Susanna cried out with a loud voice, but also the two elders shouted against her. And running, the one opened the orchard doors. But when those from the house heard the shouting in the orchard, they rushed in through the side door to see what had happened to her. (24–26)

This is a classic instance of a dramatic tableau, where sudden noise catches the attention, doors are opened onto a scene, and characters are caught red-handed.<sup>17</sup> The striking thing about this instant of freeze-frame is that it is generated by Susanna: it is her loud shout in

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<sup>16</sup> Pseudo-Chrysostom, “On Susanna,” *PG* 56.589–594. I am grateful to Janet Downie for help with the Greek text.

<sup>17</sup> The essential study of the tableau in Greek theatre is Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1978).

the orchard that shatters the quiet of the elders' approach and summons the household to witness the captured scene. Her weighing of her options in the previous two verses gives deliberateness to this cry: it is not a startled reaction, but a purposeful seizing of the initiative in a decision to display; in Williams's terms, it is one of those moments when "the transfiguring energy given in silence is expanded" into speech.<sup>18</sup> Susanna's later loud shout at her trial gets its power from the preceding quietness in exactly the same way: there, the redactor of Theodotion has introduced a dramatic delay so that Susanna's voice—this time, strategically withheld—is again the controlling force behind the story's visual organization. Both versions present an unveiled Susanna publicly scrutinized by the elders, but where OG places Susanna's prayer quietly (*en heautē*) before the elders' accusation, Theodotion's version holds back Susanna's prayer until after the elders have spoken, and transposes it into a loud cry (*aneboēsen de phonē megalē*). It has often been noted that this makes Susanna's voice the force that summons Daniel; what it also does, however, is to create a tableau of the silent Susanna, abstracted, with all eyes on her. As a lingering after-image, this tableau is invested with all the pent-up energy of the shout that breaks from it, and while Susanna's agency here (as earlier) is primarily oral, that agency is exercised through a tensely timed silence that at the same time captures the visual field. Susanna may be the object of the elders' sight, but she is the subject marshaling the narrative's organization of perception.

I turn finally to a cluster of readings that make Susanna's silence her central characteristic; here, too, her seen-ness and her silence are mutually implicated. Rather different treatments of Susanna and her silence are found scattered across the works of Ambrose of Milan, who is just one representative of the widespread tendency to do exegetical and theological work with Susanna's silence. In Ambrose, there is often a sense of purposeful will behind Susanna's silence: it is busy or, at one point, prophetic—in *De Ioseph* we read that "although silent at her trial, Susanna gave the better speech in prophecy [*oraculo*] and thus merited to be defended by the prophet, while she did not seek the help of her own voice."<sup>19</sup> Similar to this is the busy silence mentioned in *De officiis* (1.8), where Ambrose gives Susanna

<sup>18</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 178.

<sup>19</sup> Michael P. McHugh, trans., *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1972), 207.

as an example of what he calls an active silence or busy silence, contrasted with idle silence (*negotiosum silentium* as opposed to *otiosum silentium*).

She achieved more by keeping silent than she would have done if she had spoken. In keeping silent before men, she spoke to God, and she devised no greater proof of her chastity than this silence. Her conscience spoke when her voice was not heard.<sup>20</sup>

Partly, this reflects a general belief that not defending oneself is better proof of innocence; we could perhaps compare this with Williams's category of silence as a kind of refusal, in certain situations, to trade in a debased currency of speech. On this account there are those who stay silent under accusation as "instances of self-chosen silence bringing scandal and suffering that is accepted as somehow imperative, even desirable or perhaps reparative; instances of giving meaning to the experience of injustice . . . from a refusal to compromise or endanger another, or to engage in burnishing a self-image."<sup>21</sup> Susanna's silence at her trial has a certain overlap with this construal of the dignified silence of those unjustly accused. More specifically, though, for Ambrose Susanna's silence here is a Roman marker of feminine modesty. This is most explicit in *de Tobia*: "She kept silent before men, but spoke to God, for a woman's defense of herself before the people was shameful, and while her modesty was being defended, her shamelessness was shown."<sup>22</sup> This is not Susanna facing down shame, but simply conforming to classical canons of shame, and especially female shame.<sup>23</sup>

But there are a few scattered hints that Susanna's silence for Ambrose is not always only that of the modest Roman matron. In Letter 54 to Simplicianus, giving examples of what it means to be truly

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<sup>20</sup> Ivor J. Davis, trans., *Ambrose: De officiis* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2001), 123.

<sup>21</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 162.

<sup>22</sup> Lois Miles Zucker, trans., *S. Ambrosii De Tobia* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1993), 93 (slightly altered).

<sup>23</sup> Joy Schroeder has in fact laid out a critique of the early Christian trope of Susanna's silence as part of a strategy of silencing victims, in *Dinah's Lament: The Biblical Legacy of Sexual Violence in Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2007).

free, Ambrose holds up the exemplar of Susanna: she prayed with outstretched arms at her trial, showing her freedom from the fear of death; this posture, though not in the biblical text, here forms part of an extended composition about the wisdom and freedom of outstretched arms in the Bible.<sup>24</sup> In this treatment of freedom Ambrose draws comparisons to the female martyrs (Thecla, Agnes, Pelagia) who were, like Susanna, free not to fear death. This silent Susanna who boldly stretches out her arms in freedom is a different figure from the muted, bowed model of classical shame who is Ambrose's Susanna elsewhere. And she is a similarly powerful presence in Ambrose's comparisons of her silence with the silence of Christ:

The Lord is accused and stands mute. And he is fittingly mute, who does not lack a defence; let those who fear to be overcome solicit a defence. Thus, by remaining silent, he does not confirm the accusation, but by not refuting it, he disdains it. . . . But why should I speak of God? Susanna remained silent, and conquered, for better is the cause which is not defended and proven.<sup>25</sup>

Comparing the silence of Susanna at her trial with the silence of Jesus when brought to trial is a commonplace of early Christian exegesis of Susanna. In the hands of Abelard later, this silence will become further entwined with the silence of Christ by quotation of Isaiah 53:7: "He did not open his mouth just as a sheep led to the slaughter, and like a lamb in the presence of the shearer he was silent and did not open his mouth."<sup>26</sup> We might again read with Rowan Williams: comparing the cross of Jesus and the inner emptying of the believer in the writings of St John of the Cross, he writes that "these are what we could call achieved silences: they are silences with a history behind them of free decision. . . . And their effect is thus also to challenge any specific bids to power over the body and language of any other person."<sup>27</sup> Susanna, Christlike in her free decision to remain silent

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<sup>24</sup> Sister Mary Melchior Beyenka, trans., *Saint Ambrose: Letters* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1954), 298–299.

<sup>25</sup> Theodosia Tomkinson, trans., *Exposition of the Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke* (Etna, Calif.: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2003), 423.

<sup>26</sup> Victor Cousin, *Petri Abaelardi Opera* (Paris: Aug. Durand, 1849), 1.544.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 178.

under trial, challenges the claims to power over her body and language from all around.

This comparison seems to exercise a particular visual appeal: those two trials with their two silent victims sometimes appear alongside one another in iconographical schemes. For example, the fourth-century Brescia casket has Susanna standing before a seated judge, held by the two elders on either side of her, as the typological counterpart to Jesus under arrest and standing before the seat of Pilate. Or a sixteenth-century lectern from Notre Dame cathedral in Tournai, Belgium has Susanna before her judge as the Old Testament counterpart to Pilate's presentation of the silent Jesus to the crowds in John 19; that pairing in particular seems to revolve around the aspects of display and subjection to visual scrutiny—"Behold the man!"—alongside a magnetic silence.<sup>28</sup> There seems to be something about silence, Susanna's and Jesus', that makes it particularly suggestive for visual representation. In her essay "The Aesthetics of Silence," Susan Sontag suggests that silence opens up possibilities for what she calls a "cleansed, non-interfering vision, in which one might envisage the making of art-works that are unresponsive before being seen, inviolable in their essential integrity by human scrutiny."<sup>29</sup> At the risk of taking her out of context, I wonder whether Sontag's words here can push us to see silence creating something like a penumbra of inviolability around Susanna and Christ in these representations. Their twin figures are, in Sontag's words, "unresponsive before being seen, inviolable in their essential integrity by human scrutiny." If all this might be so, then the silences of Susanna in the biblical text and in its artistic reception could complicate the visual hierarchy of the story; the choice to be silent and to be seen might not be a position of subjection, but a posture with its own self-contained and sometimes numinous power.

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<sup>28</sup> These and many other christological uses of Susanna are documented in Catherine Brown Tkacz, "Susanna as a Type of Christ," *Studies in Iconography* 20 (1999): 101–153.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence," *Aspen* 5+6 (1967).

