

**POETICS OF LAMENT: JOHN MILTON AND THE INFLUENCE OF
EURIPIDES**

by

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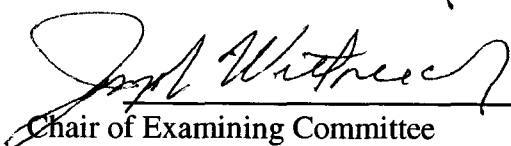
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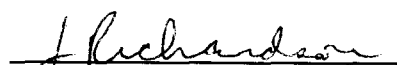
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Dedication

To my parents, Richard and Jane Kelley, one of whom we lost along the way. With deepest love and gratitude. And to Joe Wittreich and Sarah Kennel, whose patience and belief saw me through.

“Would to God that all the Lords people were Prophets.”
—William Blake, *Milton*

MRK
Washington, D.C.
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Introduction

“The axioms and postulates of criticism . . . have to grow out of the art it deals with. . . . [T]here is as yet no way of distinguishing what is genuine criticism, and therefore progresses toward making the whole of literature intelligible, from what belongs only to the history of taste, and therefore follows the vacillations of fashionable prejudice.”

– Northrop Frye¹

In Milton’s eighth sonnet, “Captain or Colonel, or Knight in Arms,” written in 1642, a poet guards his door with a poem addressed to Royalist assailants, pointing out that as a poet he has the power to confer immortality upon appropriate heroes, those capable of “deed[s] of honour” and “gentle acts” of human compassion. This sonnet is a testament to Milton’s belief in the transformative power of poetry in matters both private and public; but just as importantly, the reference is to Euripides, to the story Plutarch records of the Spartans’ capture of Athens in 404 B. C. and their subsequent desire to raze the city until a man stepped forward and began to sing the first chorus of Euripides’ *Electra*, at which “they were all melted with compassion,” remembering the glorious past of the city and thus preserving, as Milton writes, “th’ *Athenian* Walls from ruine bare.”

The sonnet is a perfectly crystallized instance of the way in which Euripidean thinking influences and shapes Miltonic thought in the principal interlocking arenas of Milton’s life: politics, poetry, and religious belief. My project here is the analysis of the influence of Euripides on John Milton. Beginning with his purchase of the Geneva

¹ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), pp. 6, 9.

Euripides in 1634, Milton's exhaustive study and deployment of the Greek poet reveals the progressive development of his intellectual and imaginative life from the early lyric phase through the polemical prose of the revolutionary years. This engagement culminates in his tragedy *Samson Agonistes*, in which the concentration of Euripidean influence is finally to be measured. I argue that the critically underexamined Euripidean context allows us to observe from a new perspective an increasingly radical Milton who, rather than promulgating codified traditions and belief systems, consistently challenges and refines them. Too often exempted from considerations of influence, Euripides was, in extraordinarily subtle yet powerful ways, a very great and very radical influence on John Milton.

Milton criticism, and especially that of *Samson Agonistes*, is commonly founded upon two certainties: the certainty of Samson's regeneration, and the certainty of Milton's idealizing Christianity; thus criticism of *Samson Agonistes*, as Joseph Wittreich maintains, has tended to devolve from "suspect suppositions and dubious declarations," the "uncritical paraphernalia and platitudes of the interpretive community"² that commences in this century with William Riley Parker. In *Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy* in "*Samson Agonistes*," Parker, responding to Richard Jebb's contention that *Samson Agonistes* was more Hebraic than Hellenic³, assays a Greek, and specifically a Sophoclean, context for Milton's tragedy. In terms suitable to Wittreich's "suspect

² Joseph Wittreich, *Interpreting "Samson Agonistes,"* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986), p. x.

³ Richard C. Jebb, "*Samson Agonistes* and the Hellenic Drama," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 3 (1908): 341-48

suppositions,” Parker insists that Milton’s Samson in his final destructive act is “again God’s champion—not a private individual seeking revenge,” and that Samson’s character has been “idealized by a poet who, like Sophocles, preferred to paint men as they ought to be—leaving others to paint them as they are.”⁴ With the idealizing Sophoclean poet and his Christly character firmly in place, Parker concludes, somewhat hesitantly, that though there are numerous specific debts to *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Samson Agonistes* is yet “more” than just an imitation of Greek tragedy, a point F. Michael Krouse seizes upon and foregrounds when he declares that Parker left unresolved “just what that *more* signifies” and proceeds to write *Milton’s Samson and the Christian Tradition*.

Krouse reasons that Parker’s Hellenic paradigm and Jebb’s earlier conception of the ascendance of Hebraism in *Samson Agonistes* must be modified in order to re-illumine the “long-unused lamps of lost tradition” that will assist us in our apparent darkness to “read his [Milton’s] tragedy in the light of the Christian tradition” and thus comprehend it in its proper context as the consummation of Milton’s “exalted purpose.” In an interpretive flattening redolent of Parker, Krouse proposes that the “Samson whom we meet in Milton’s play is a saint, a champion of God, a great hero” and that “Milton invited his readers to think of Samson as a model of virtue . . . a martyr, and a counterpart of Christ.”⁵ It is these two readings—Milton as idealizing, Sophoclean poet and Samson as regenerate Christian hero of faith—that have set the criterion for

⁴ William Riley Parker, *Milton’s Debt to Greek Tragedy in “Samson Agonistes”* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins P, 1937), pp. 8, 102.

⁵ F. Michael Krouse, *Milton’s Samson and the Christian Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1949), pp. 82, 133, 104, 124.

interpretation of Milton and his tragedy for much of the past century; and further, these readings have spawned new generations of acolytes who proceed, in increasingly sophisticated patterns, to remarkably similar conclusions.

Mary Ann Radzinowicz, for instance, in placing *Samson Agonistes* in context to selected antecedents by Milton, rightly argues that Milton's final work is "true to his personal experience, true to his historical experience, true to his national experience," with the cumulative effect "of tragic loss and of the agonizing discrepancy between his vision and the realities of his world" whereupon "no facile optimism about the inevitability of human progress and no self-gratulatory assurance about the easy resolution of contradictory impulses or inconsistent aims can withstand the articulation by Samson himself of his terrible difficulty in facing failure and in seeing and telling the truth." Nevertheless, Radzinowicz's Samson somehow, in reverting to his violent protocol in the killing of himself and thousands of Philistines, "breaks through clusters of time-encapsulated beliefs to achieve a new synthesis of understanding," thus demonstrating, through suicide/mass murder, that "intellectual and psychological change is the internal principle of the drama whose subject is growth and whose mimesis is of a biblical story recording movement from self-destruction to self-transcendence, or from near-death to second birth."⁶ Yet it seems more apparent and crucial that there is *no* "intellectual and psychological change" in Samson and that his tragic failure is precisely in his inability to transcend materialism and violence—a complex recidivist tendency

⁶ Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Toward "Samson Agonistes": The Growth of Milton's Mind* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), p. xx.

most reminiscent of Euripidean tragedy, and specifically characters such as Medea and Pentheus as I shall discuss in the chapters ahead. Radzinowicz ignores as well the possibility that the Judges narrative itself intimates not growth and transcendence (and hence a neat mimetic transference to Milton's drama), but the reverse: a retrograde history of serial cruelty signaling the removal of divinity from the human sphere and the collateral annihilation of the tribe of Dan as indicated in Jacob's prophecy at the end of Genesis, where Dan is described as the "serpent in the way," and in the list of the twelve tribes in the Book of Revelation, where the tribe of Dan is omitted. We should recall here the repeated lines in the Judges narrative, including the manifestly decisive final lines of the narrative, that explicitly recount not growth and transcendence, as Radzinowicz sees it, but rather the very opposite, chaos and dissolution: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Jud. 21:25; see too Jud. 17:6, 18:1, 19:1).⁷ Thus, what deepens the complexity and power of the drama, critics like Radzinowicz wish to remove.

In a similar vein, Joan Bennett theorizes that Samson differentiates himself from the Hebraic Chorus during the course of the play by moving away from the condition of the Chorus—"out of bondage and into sonship"—the resulting liberty of which demands from Samson "as from a Christian" a greater degree of perfection than the law demands from the Chorus: "For he must weigh each deed and motive against his right reason and will not be excused for acting or willing blindly, out of piety." Arguing against the text, Bennett, channeling John Milton, proclaims of Samson's acts before his capture and

⁷ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973), p. 324.

blinding: “In Milton’s view, they were never merely acts of personal revenge or glorification, but were all occasions seized by the natural and appointed leader of a people for their national deliverance,”⁸ a judgment approximate to Radzinowicz’s belief that Samson “led them not as one ambitious of power but as one determined to provide an example to his people of a purposive active force of freedom.”⁹ Such upbeat conclusions, however, ignore Samson’s admission of sin and failure: “Nothing of all these evils hath befallen me / But justly; *I myself have brought them on; / Sole author I, sole cause*” (374-76; italics mine); or later his disclosure that “*like a petty god / I walked about, admired of all, and dreaded*” (529-30; italics mine); or his final warning to Harapha, descriptively reflective of Samson himself, that he remove himself “lest I run upon thee, / Though in these chains, *bulk without spirit vast, / And with one buffet lay thy structure low, / Or swing thee in the air, then dash thee down, / To the hazard of thy brains and shattered sides*” (1237-41; italics mine).

In *De Doctrina Christiana*¹⁰ Milton writes that in the gospel we possess a twofold

⁸ Joan Bennett, *Reviving Liberty: Radical Christian Humanism in Milton’s Great Poems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989), p. 124.

⁹ Radzinowicz, *Toward “Samson Agonistes,”* p. 172.

¹⁰ The current controversy surrounding the authorship of *De Doctrina Christiana* is another example of the critical desire to remove from Milton the possibility of heterodox tendencies. The controversy is recently summarized by Michael Lieb in “*De Doctrina Christiana* and the Question of Authorship,” *Milton Studies* 41 (2002): 172-230. Lieb here takes the middle ground, concluding that “the attempt to prove or disprove Miltonic authorship is misguided” (1) because in the end we simply do not have enough evidence either way, though Milton scholars tend to align themselves with what might flatly be termed “traditional” or “revisionist” positions. To remove this text from Milton’s oeuvre is to excise a radical treatise that proves an evolving system of belief arcing progressively away from normative theodicy, what Christopher Hill terms “the ambiguous chaos of traditional Christianity” [Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (New York: Viking P, 1978) p. 3.], and towards a new and radical Protestant

Scripture: “one external, which is the written word, and the other internal, which is the Holy Spirit, written in the hearts of believers, according to the promise of God, and with the intent that it should by no means be neglected.” Thus “that which is internal, and the peculiar possession of each believer, is far superior to all, namely, the Spirit itself” (CPW 6:273; 275). Moreover, in his *Treatise of Civil Power* Milton asks if Christian belief and practice flow “from faculties of the inward man . . . from love and charitie besides, incapable of force, and all these things by transgression lost, but renewd and regenerated in us by the power and gift of God alone, how can such religion as this admit of force from man, or force be any way appli’d to such religion, especially under the free offer of grace in the gospel, but it must forthwith frustrate and make of no effect both the religion and the gospel?” (CPW 7:254). Parker’s calculation, correct in my view, that Samson’s regeneration begins with his recognition that “His strength, with its resultant pride, had been the source of all his miseries,”¹¹ a thesis echoed by Radzinowicz and Bennett, however fails to account for Samson’s continued and progressive threats of physical

theological system. If we conclude with Lieb that the epistle resonates with typically Miltonic tones, then we might deploy the same analysis—resonances, clusters of thought that we accept as Miltonic—to consider Milton’s participation in what remains. For my purposes, a crucial example is *De Doctrina* 1:13, wherein the author in making his point specifies 1 Corinthians 15:32-33, Euripides as arbiter of scriptural truths, and the Samson story—precisely as Milton does in his preface to *Samson Agonistes*. As I shall discuss further, the Euripidean example that Milton repeatedly turned to in the prose tracts, including *De Doctrina*, supports his authorship of *De Doctrina*. For the base lines of the controversy over the authorship of *De Doctrina Christiana*, see William B. Hunter, “The Provenance of the *Christian Doctrina*,” *SEL*, 32 (1992): 129-42, and in the same issue “Forum: Milton’s *Christian Doctrina*,” with responses by Barbara K. Lewalski (143-54), John T. Shawcross (155-62), and a reply by William B. Hunter (163-66).

¹¹ Parker, *Milton’s Debt to Greek Tragedy*, p. 31.

violence that culminate in his last act of which the Chorus informs us he killed “in number more / Than all thy life had slain before” (1667-68). Hence Bennett’s inapposite conclusion that “Samson . . . views his death not merely as punishment or payment of debt, but as the restoration of his right reason . . . the sign of the just God’s continuing presence with him that frees him to act truly”¹² typifies the determination of too many critics, succeeding Parker and Krouse, to accommodate Samson (and by implication Milton) into a neo-conservative, coolly predictable, brutally formalistic mold that, instead of challenging, enshrines inherited systems of belief.¹³

¹² Bennet, *Reviving Liberty*, p. 137.

¹³ On Milton’s progressive ethical refinements, see Derek N. C. Wood, “*Exiled from Light*”: *Divine Law, Morality, and Violence in Milton’s “Samson Agonistes”* (Buffalo, Toronto, and London: U of London P, 2001). For an opposing conservative view see Alan Rudrum, “Milton Scholarship and the Agon over *Samson Agonistes*,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 65 (2002): 465-88. Rudrum promulgates the idea that where *Samson Agonistes* is concerned there is a critical two camp standoff: the “traditional view” of Samson as regenerate Christian saint, and the “revisionist view” of Samson as false hero and “barbaric foil” (465-66) to the new Christian hero of *Paradise Regained*. For Rudrum, however, the “confusion” in critical approach is entirely on the side of so-called revisionist critics, beginning notoriously with John Carey and advancing through Irene Samuel, Joseph Wittreich, and Derek Wood. Thus for those benighted readers who might offer a new or different view of the poem from that of Rudrum et al., “the discovery and elucidation of what Milton meant by his poem is no longer the primary task of criticism” (466), whereas, apparently, Rudrum’s “traditional” view is. The by now hoary charge bruited by Rudrum that “revisionist criticism . . . outlines what significance the poem might have for modern readers and then imputes it back to Milton as his meaning” (479) is the blunt instrument critics such as Rudrum have used to silence the challenge new thinking presents. The fact remains that the major revisions to our thinking with regard to *Samson*, and here we might consider the work of Christopher Hill, Joseph Wittreich, and David Norbrook to name a few, in direct contrast to Rudrum’s assertions, are historically grounded in *Milton’s time*. Interestingly, in a moment of reflection Rudrum admits, before retreating to his position as defender of tradition, that “[w]hether we consider the human beings represented in biblical narrative or those we have come to know from historical reading or our own acquaintance, we know that good and evil can coexist in the same person” (475). The nod to *Areopagitica* is important here, remarkably so because though Rudrum locates the

Another view of Samson, initiated by John Carey in his 1968 Longman's Annotated English Poets series and again in his 1969 chapter entitled "The Outmoded Hero: Samson," counters the Christ-like, regenerative portrayal with a representation of barbarism so perverse that the ending of the tragedy can only be viewed as "morally disgusting."¹⁴ The essentially problematic question for Carey is less the portrayal of Samson in the tragedy—the cruel savagery is simply apparent—but rather whether Milton is a participant in the barbarism, the author as a kind of violent religious fanatic who demonstrates through his choice of subject his proximity to, and chauvinist approval of, Samson's particular and unremitting methodologies. Or is it, Carey intimates, that the

correct precedent he does not appear to understand, or like Radzinowicz and Bennett cannot bring himself finally to apply, its signification. And this is precisely the point where "traditionalist" criticism, as I have indicated, fails us: they know that there is something deeply ambiguous, darkly problematic in *Samson*—"good and evil can exist in the same person"—but rather than open to it they retreat from it. Samson in the end is neither a "barbaric foil" to the hero of the companion poem *Paradise Regained* nor the prefiguring or antitype of that hero, but rather a complex interweaving of both, underpinned by and interwoven with the Euripidean precedent as I shall discuss throughout this work.

¹⁴ John Carey and Alastair Fowler, eds., *The Poems of John Milton* (London: Longman, 1968), p. 335, and John Carey, *Milton* (London: Longman, 1969), pp. 138-46. See too John Carey, ed., *Complete Shorter Poems* (London: Longman, 1971; 2nd ed. London: Longman, 1997). Carey has recently returned to the fray with an article in the *Times Literary Supplement* in which he compares the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. in September of 2001 to the final act of Milton's Samson: "September 11 has changed *Samson Agonistes*, because it has changed the readings we can derive from it." The application of the lesson of *Samson Agonistes* to contemporary life makes the work progressively, deeply relevant, and continuously the site of contestation amongst Miltonists. See Carey, "A Work in Praise of Terrorism? September 11 and *Samson Agonistes*," no. 5188 (*TLS*, 6 September 2002): 15-16. The charge of terrorist leveled at Samson has been voiced in past years by various critics, one example being Noam Flinker: "Samson's slaughter . . . can be seen as a deranged act of an ancient Terrorist." See Flinker, "Typological Parody: Samson in Confrontation with Harapha," *Milton Quarterly* 24 (December 1990): 136, 138.

author of *Samson Agonistes* is executing a cultural investigation that is at its core skeptical in its review of received tradition, complex, sibylline, indeterminate, as earlier biblical and Euripidean tragedy was in its redaction of Old Testament stories and Hesiodic mythography respectively? The critique Carey initiates is thus crucially important because, rather than acceding to the allotment of *Samson Agonistes* to the tradition of conservative biblical exegesis (i.e. Krouse et al), Carey places the tragedy before us as a living document of Milton's time and, importantly for Carey, of our time. And it is here that a dramatic work such as *Samson Agonistes* gains its power—spanning the generations as a historical document while simultaneously resonating in contemporary events and thinking.¹⁵

Building on Carey's thesis, Christopher Hill seeks to clarify the question of authorial intent with his historical contextualization of the tragedy, expostulating that "Those who interpret *Samson Agonistes* exclusively as a drama of personal regeneration would do well to recall the order of events in Milton's scheme of salvation," where regeneration comes *first*, causing repentance followed by faith, despair falling on the

¹⁵ For a recent extension of the skeptical mode Carey initiates, see the collection of essays in *Altering Eyes: New Perspectives on Samson Agonistes*, ed. Mark R. Kelley and Joseph Wittreich (Newark: U of Delaware P, and London: Associated UP, 2002). Moreover, considering Carey's application of the lessons gleaned from *Samson* to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, we might observe the present Palestinian and Israeli conflict from the viewpoint of two new works, from a Palestinian and an Israeli author respectively, that portray the current situation for both peoples, metaphorically speaking, as a deafening prison whose echoing demands for revenge drown out all other ordinary sound, and from which neither side appears capable of freeing itself. See Raja Shehadeh, *When the Birds Stopped Singing: Life in Ramallah Under Siege* (New York: Steerforth P, 2003), and David Grossman, *Death as a Way of Life: Israel Ten Years After Oslo* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

accursed alone. "Like Satan, like Eve, like the Ranters, Samson had aspired to godhead," and hence Hill draws us closer to the crucial question and its logical continuation: "Was he mistaken, as the Ranters so often were? If so, we must ask how certain we can be that the destruction of the Philistines at the end of the play was really inspired by God"¹⁶—a deduction reflecting Irene Samuel's more contentious assertion that the regenerative readings "focus exclusively on Samson as though no one else were involved and dismiss the victims of his wholesale murderousness as 'God's enemies.'"¹⁷

Carey's opening blast at, and Hill's tempered movement away from, the critical oversimplifications of *Samson*, coupled with Samuel's oppositional conclusions, have been pivotal to the formation of a new interpretation, the first major exponent of which is Joseph Wittreich's *Interpreting "Samson Agonistes,"* which builds on Hill's historical inferences and contests Krouse's Christian contextualization by examining the various and often counteractive terms in which the Samson story was observed in Milton's time. Arguing for a more nuanced historical perspective that problematizes the "easy correlations and oversimplifications of the typologist" that have "displaced narrative, as well as dramatic, ambiguities," Wittreich reads Milton's Samson not as the counterpart but as the countertype of Christ, as the antithesis of Milton's deepest beliefs, and as a foil to the political program Milton urges upon his people in the aftermath of a failed revolution.¹⁸ Emanating from the work of Carey, Hill, Samuel and Wittreich, more

¹⁶ Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, p. 433.

¹⁷ Irene Samuel, "Samson Agonistes as Tragedy," in *Calm of Mind: Tercentenary Essays on "Paradise Regained" and "Samson Agonistes,"* ed. Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve UP, 1971), p. 240.

¹⁸ Wittreich, *Interpreting "Samson Agonistes,"* p. x.

recent critical reviews of Milton, namely those of Stanley Fish, Barbara K. Lewalski, John T. Shawcross, and Derek N. C. Wood, have pursued what we might term this criticism of interrogation, what Wittreich himself in his recent work describes, in lines that suggest movement beyond his earlier view of Samson as simple foil to Jesus, as a criticism “informed not by one but by a multiplicity of traditions, each of them often in conflict, each of them just as often conflicted.”¹⁹ And while we might parse out the differences in their respective approaches to Milton’s tragedy (Fish, Lewalski, and Shawcross tilt to the “traditionalist” side while Wood leans to the “revisionist,” for instance), what matters at this point is that new and more expansive ways of understanding *Samson Agonistes* have not, as Alan Rudrum asserts in his anti-Areopagitan moment, led us astray or to outright error; rather they lead to a deeper apprehension of the complexity and depth involved in experiencing Milton’s tragedy.

My project of fronting Parker’s idealizing Sophoclean context with a skeptical Euripidean context derives its initial thrust from Wittreich’s fronting of Krouse’s Christian context with an anti-Christian context. What I seek to achieve finally is a synthesis of these competing visions that moves the discourse beyond the agonistic, either/or paradigm of Rudrum’s “traditionalist” versus “revisionist” interpretive community. A collateral measure would be the freeing of what John Rumrich fittingly

¹⁹ See Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge Mass. and London: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2001), pp. 391-473; Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton* (Malden, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); John T. Shawcross, *The Uncertain World of “Samson Agonistes”* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001); Wood, “Exiled from Light”; Joseph Wittreich, *Shifting Contexts: Reinterpreting “Samson Agonistes”* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 2002), p. 7; John Rogers, “Delivering Redemption in *Samson Agonistes*,” in *Altering Eyes*, eds. Kelley and Wittreich, pp. 72-97.

terms the “invented Milton”²⁰ from reversion to neo-traditional and neo-religious agendas. The poet-didact of Stanley Fish’s *Surprised by Sin*²¹ who traps us in our indolent stupidity and then, with contemptuous superiority, demands conformity to tradition is a portrayal of Milton directly contrary to Edward Phillips’ evocation in his 1694 *Life of Milton*: “neither his Converse, nor his Writings, nor his manner of Teaching ever savour’d in the least any thing of Pedantry,”²² and importantly, as John Toland would note in his own *Life of Milton* (1698),

he look’d upon true and absolute Freedom to be the greatest Happiness in this Life, whether to Societies or single Persons, so he thought Constraint of any sort to be the utmost Misery. . . . The divine Properties of Goodness, Justice, and Mercy, were the adequat Rule of human Actions . . . Love of Dominion, or Inclination to Persecution, . . . he said, was a piece of Popery inseparable from all Churches.²³

We might also recall Jonathan Richardson’s *Explanatory Notes and Remarks on Milton’s “Paradise Lost”* of 1734, which confirms that Milton “was a Cheerfull Companion; but no Joker: his Conversation was Lively, but with Dignity. and as he was

²⁰ John P. Rumrich, *Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), p. 22

²¹ Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (New York: St. Martin’s P, 1967).

²² As quoted in Helen Darbishire, ed., *The Early Lives of Milton* (London: Constable & Co. Ltd., 1932), pp. 67-68.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

whilst Young, he Continu'd to be in his more Advanc'd Age," and that Milton "had a Gravity in his Temper, Not Melancholy . . . not Sour, Morose, or Ill-Natur'd; but a Certain Severity of Mind, a Mind not Condescending to Little things,"²⁴ a portrait that corresponds with Edward Phillips' remarks that Milton's "deportment was sweet and affable."²⁵

More to the point for my purposes, Milton's daughter Debora also noted of her blind father that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Euripides were the reading, after Homer, that most delighted him, and we should consider the rationale behind Milton's quoting of Euripides in his prose and poetry more often than any other tragedian. In texts such as *Areopagitica*, *Samson Agonistes*, and *De Doctrina Christiana* (in the last, a quotation from the *Suppliants* on the subject of immortality is the longest and most theologically contentious literary citation in the treatise), Euripides is presented as having a special relationship with revealed truth, often as a better scriptural authority than contemporary biblical commentators. Moreover, we note from Milton's annotations of his 1602 Geneva Euripides, purchased in 1634 during several years of intense study at his father's house in Horton, his deep immersion in Euripidean tragedy and his particular interest in those characters who challenged authority and received ideas. We note as well his careful reading of the Stiblin commentary that relates Euripides both to the history of the fifth-century B. C. and to the history of his own time as I shall discuss further in the chapters ahead. Thus, in the febrile political climate of the 1640s references to Euripides

²⁴ Ibid., p. 206, 212.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

begin to appear in the prose: *Suppliants* and *Alcestis* in *Areopagitica* and *Of Education*, *Heraclides* and *Orestes* in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* and *Eikonoklastes*.

Arthur E. Barker observes that Milton's thought between 1640 and 1660 exposes and records "the transformation of the Horton poet into the immeasurably greater poet of the last poems."²⁶ My enquiry here and in the following pages centers on Milton's experience of Euripides, on the consideration of what Milton was thinking as he read his favorite tragedian, how he viewed and effectively and progressively internalized, through the years of the English civil war, the historical underpinnings of Euripidean tragedy in relation to his own remarkably tumultuous historical period; and finally how these many years of study, the cumulative effect of which produced the "immeasurably greater poet" of the last poems, informed his very last poem, framed as a tragedy, *Samson Agonistes*. Milton was well aware that Euripides wrote his own final poem, the *Bacchae*, while exiled in Macedonia at the end of the Peloponnesian War, as Athens, and the democratic experiment it represented, fell to the militaristic Sparta. Through tragedy and the experience of defeat, Euripides, in all his major tragedies but especially in the *Bacchae*, searched the individual and historical boundaries between normality and pathology, between self-determination and divine necessity, locating the source of tragedy, as Milton later would, in the tense interdependence of opposites: the forces of creation and destruction, of good and evil in ourselves, our societies, and our world. Put in Samson's voice these dialectical forces determined the "Inevitable cause" that led Samson freely to

²⁶ Arthur E. Barker, *Milton and the Puritan Dilemma* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1942), p. xiii.

choose “both to destroy and be destroyed” (1586-7;1605-6).

I take Northrop Frye’s simple and important imperative–“[t]he axioms and postulates of criticism . . . have to grow out of the art it deals with”–as my starting point. As such my project here is one of recovery; of retrieving a critical unexamined context for Milton’s intellectual and imaginative development leading to *Samson Agonistes*: the Euripidean context which seeks to question received traditions and belief systems, and which reveals itself, through tragedy, as a compressed cultural vision of dissolution and new beginning. Medea’s infanticide or Pentheus’ dismemberment at the hands of his mother, apposite to the various barbarisms of the Judges narrative and more specifically Samson’s murder/suicide, unfold as a mythical explication of a time of crisis, destruction, of dissolution so profoundly final that embedded within it, most remarkably, is the inchoate potential for new beginning–Agave and Cadmus exiled from a destroyed Thebes at the end of the *Bacchae*, Jesus returning home at the end of the companion poem in the 1671 volume, all those who “stood without” (SA, 1659), escaped a cyclical history of retributive slaughter, dreamed, like Euripides and Milton, of a better world.

Chapter 1

Renaissance Receptions of Euripides

“[I]f the Athenians, as some say, made their small deeds great and renowned by their eloquent writers, *England* hath had her noble atchievements made small by the unskilfull handling of monks and mechanicks.”
– John Milton²⁷

Like other radicals of his period, Milton's early prose tracts, and most notably *Areopagitica*, are imbued with Italian history. The experience of visiting the Italian states and of reading Italian political writing had a profound effect upon English discussions of power and virtue.²⁸ The significance of the Council of Trent was known to most educated English people, but Milton makes specific use, as he would with Euripidean tragedy, of the imaginative patterns of Paulo Sarpi's histories of the Council of Trent and of the Inquisition. It seems inevitable that with the rediscovery and reapplication of classical texts to the political, theological, philosophical, and literary realms of the Italian Renaissance, Euripides, amongst others, would be a progressively defining influence, just as he was for Milton in the succeeding century in England.

²⁷ All quotations of Milton's prose are from the *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, general ed. Don M. Wolfe. 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953-1982), hereafter referred to as *CPW*. The epigraph is from *The Reason of Church-Government* (*CPW* 1:812). All quotations of Milton's poetry are from *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998).

²⁸ Nigel Smith, “*Areopagitica*: Voicing Contexts, 1643-45,” in *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose*, ed. David Loewenstein and James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), p. 111.

Though the Augustans were well aware of Euripides,²⁹ most notably in Ovidian literature and most poignantly as the Republic fell, for our purposes the reception, or renaissance of Euripides, surpassing after a long eclipse the dominance of his imitator Seneca, begins in Italy in the latter years of the fifteenth century and progresses through the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries. During this period the reputation of the Greek tragedian evolves from that of a simple exemplar of Horatian civility and Platonic moral codes, and later Aristotelian tragic theory deployed for comparative purposes, to a singularly prophetic voice that in its chronicling of the disasters of war and its intense searching of divinity rivals, and for some surpasses, the famed Florentine Dante.

In 1495-96 the first printed edition of Euripides' dramas was published in Florence, a folio that contained four dramas, and which was followed in 1504 by the Aldine, complete except for the *Electra*.³⁰ More important for its influence in England is Dolce's roughly contemporary translation, from a Latin version, of the *Phoenissae* and

²⁹ Cicero himself was practiced in Euripidean tragedy, as evidenced by his philosophic works, which are full of extracts translated into Latin verse, as well as his familiar letters, which are marked with the half-finished quotations which denote extreme familiarity with Euripidean tragedy. And so it seems that Cicero was in agreement with his brother Quintus, who remarked of Euripides: "I think his lines so many oracles." More interesting even if apocryphal, it is said that Cicero was reading the *Medea* in his litter when Anthony's assassins slew him. For Cicero and for those who came after him, the death of the Republic was a tragic stage haunted by Euripides, a phenomenon Milton would similarly observe in the wake of the failed Puritan revolution. See F. L. Lucas, *Euripides and His Influence* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1963), pp. 62-63. See too Martin Dzelzainis, "Milton's Classical Republicanism," in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. David Armitage, Armand Himy, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 8. Dzelzainis argues that Cicero, "above all," was the central authority "from whom Milton derived his republican principles." I would qualify this remark by suggesting that Cicero's own "republican principles" were derived from Euripides, as Milton was no doubt aware.

³⁰ Lucas, *Euripides and His Influence*, p. 95.

three other plays (1543-51), and as late as 1556 the *Medea*, *Electra*, *Hippolytus*, *Bacchae*, *Phoenissae* and *Cyclops* were rendered into Latin by Martirano, Bishop of Cosenza. Euripides is thus fully established as a living influence by the first half of the sixteenth century, effectively ending the lengthy reluctance of the Italian Renaissance to recognize the inferiority for its purposes of the Latin tragedian Seneca to his Greek predecessor, and of the Latin tongue to its relative Italian.³¹

Typical of the later fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century commentators on Euripides' dramas is Francesco Patrizi, Bishop of Gaeta (d. 1494), who in his posthumous *De regno et regis institutione, libri IX* (Paris, 1567) would cross Horatian notions of the pleasure and utility of poetry with Platonic ideas of moral criteria. In Book 2, Chapter 9, "A Futuro Rege Qui Scriptores Legendi Discendique sint, quire negligendi," Patrizi writes: "It is not without utility that one may also read tragedies, if morality is respected in them; for they carry weight, and have elegance of expression and gravity of thought, especially Euripides."³² The deployment of Euripidean tragedy as a kind of guidebook for the budding gentleman, as evidenced in Patrizi's note, dramatically shifts at the mid-point of the century, with the publication of the distinguished and influential humanist Giovanni Francisco Pico della Mirandola's neo-Platonic *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium, & veritatis disciplinae Christianae*

³¹ Lucas, *Euripides and His Influence*, pp. 97-98. Beyond the Alps Euripides' influence would take a similar tact, with translations into Latin and then into the vernacular, as exemplified in Desiderius Erasmus' 1506 translations of *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia at Aulis* dedicated to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and Francois Tissard's 1507 French translations of *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, and *Alcestis*.

³² As quoted by Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961), 1:87.

(1573). Mirandola turns from a search of Greek texts for examples of moral rectitude and utility, à la Patrizi, to a careful examination of the portrayal and utility of religion in Euripides' tragedies. Concluding that indeterminacy and subjectivity are not only the foundational blocks of Euripidean tragedy, but that these fundamental strains are typically misunderstood and erroneously extracted and implemented in contemporary experience, Mirandola writes that "men derive from the poets occasions for evil not less significant for vice than for virtue." For Mirandola, the misuse of the Greeks, and especially Euripides, is in need of correction, as "many believe that Epicurus drew from Homer his idea that the greatest good lies in pleasure," and similarly and more problematically "many found the excuse for irreligion in Euripides."³³

Mirandola thus advocates an unconventional reading of the Greeks texts, one that embraces skepticism regarding their typical application to contemporary experience. More specifically Mirandola edges Euripides in particular beyond his mundane role as Greek exemplar of civilized and grammatical platitudes and towards that of philosophic and theologic speculation. Here the fit reader, attuned to Euripides' essential skepticism, must play an active part in deciphering content and meaning even if at last content and meaning cannot be decisively determined (an active role Milton would later underscore in treatises such as *Areopagitica*). In order to distinguish poet from poet and passage from passage, Mirandola concludes that the reader must appeal to the philosopher, as the whole art of poetics is specifically subordinated to

³³ Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium et veritatis disciplinae Christianae* (Rome, 1520), pp. 938-39 (my translation).

philosophy.³⁴

Mirandola's treatise is at first a disbelieving attack on Aristotle, but it is also a broader challenge to the claims of any philosophical school to have arrived at truth. The problem of God undergoes a radical modification in the Italian Renaissance with the recovery of Sextus Empiricus' report (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, c. 365-275 B.C.). Briefly, Pyrrhonism was a form of extreme skepticism which held that judgment must be suspended about whether it is possible to know true reality. As such the suspension of judgment (*epoché*, a Greek term which refers to a cessation) about the true nature of reality leads to serenity and equanimity (*ataraxia*) about what constitutes truth or falsehood. In his *Examen*, Mirandola, working from the skeptical Greek model, rejects the ideal of reconciling all philosophies and religions into one ecumenical insight, and finds in skepticism a potent weapon for disintegrating human certitudes, and especially those about God. Whether it be a philosophy or a reasoned theology of God, whether it be based on sense experience or on an intellectual criterion, every human doctrine on God, argues Mirandola, is infected by incertitude and can rise no higher than to a restricted personal opinion, and hence religious certitude and truth cannot be found exclusively in Christian faith and discipline. It is a lesson Milton would similarly observe and apply to *Samson Agonistes*, where in the end "calm of mind" derives not from the certitude of divine intervention and restoration of moral or theologic rectitude, but from its opposite, the acceptance of doubt and indeterminacy.

Following Mirandola and his pivotal treatise, the combining of traditional Platonism with official Christian ethics would become increasingly prominent during the last third of the sixteenth century, as exemplified in the Florentine academy member

³⁴ Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 1:87., 1:256.

Frosino Lapini's *Letione nella quale si ragiona in universale del fine della poetica* (1567). Lapini's *Letione*, a commentary on Petrarch's sonnet "Lasciato hai, morte, senza sole il mondo," was delivered before the Accademia Fiorentina on May 1, 1567, and argues that the proper end of poetry is "with its delightful and verisimilar fictions presented to us, to profit as much more than would be done if it narrated as does the historian or if it warned and advised us as the moral philosopher does."³⁵ Tragedy especially, Frosino contends in Aristotelian terms, benefits us by purging our souls of all passions, and for this reason Euripides, according to Frosino, always ended his tragedies with useful warnings about human life.

In like manner Franciscus Portus' *In omnes Sophoclis tragoedias*, written around 1575 and published posthumously in 1585, provides a comparison between Sophocles and Euripides that alternates with references to Aristotle's *Poetics*. Euripides is here praised for being more accessible to the ears of the people, more like an orator and thus more capable of inducing people to action, an attribute Milton would elevate in his eighth sonnet, "Captain or Colonel, or Knight in Arms." Euripides was similarly a pivotal figure for another Aristotelian humanist, Lionardo Salviati, an early translator of the *Poetics* in Italian (1586). Salviati distinguishes within poetry between two kinds of imitation, one of which represents the principle action in a general or universal way, the other of which is found in particular parts, wherein "characters or thoughts of the mind or passions which are not true but verisimilar are depicted in this special way . . . by comparison, diminution, augmentation, distinct narration, we are made to appear visibly in their verisimilar form." Salviati notes that Euripides is closest to Vergil in that both poets, though working in different genres, are surpassingly great due to their ability to imitate by thoughts of the mind, create a verisimilar world based

³⁵ Ibid., 1:290.

in the imaginative faculties.³⁶

Euripides' thus emerges in the Italian Renaissance as the pagan poet with the most searching imaginative vision, a status that increasingly would be coupled with his capacities for prophetic utterance, the pre-Christian poet who, in his questioning of the human causes and effects of the Peloponnesian war, succeeded in fusing Hesiodic mythography, the divine system from which Greek tragedy derived its narratives and characters, with a skeptical historiography that examines the motivations of individual human beings operating within that overarching mythic superstructure. This progressive conception of Euripides as transcending poet-prophet above all others is most sharply delineated, in Italy, in Roberto Titi's *Locorum controversorum libri decem* (1583), wherein Titi writes, in a comparative analysis of the eminent Florentine literary prophet Dante, "Although I greatly applaud Dante's genius and am wont to vie with Vettori in saying all possible good of him . . . nevertheless I hold that one cannot conclude that he himself saw, through his own divine nature, what Euripides before him had been able to see."³⁷ It is an astonishing admittance considering the stature of Dante in the Florentine academies of the sixteenth century, academies, moreover, that Milton and other prominent Continental intellectuals would visit and learn from in the first half

³⁶ Ibid, 1:564-65, 613. The notion of Euripidean tragedy as a kind of mental theater resonates, likewise, in *Samson Agonistes*, a tragedy Harold Skulsky has termed "a playhouse of the mind," and Nigel Smith an "internalized, read-only" drama. See Skulsky, *Justice in the Dock: Milton's Experimental Tragedy* (Newark: U of Delaware P, and London: Associated UP, 1995), pp. 11, 96; and Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England 1640-1660* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1994), p. 92. Similar claims have more recently been made in Elizabeth Sauer's "The Politics of Performance in the Inner Theater: *Samson Agonistes* as Closet Drama," in *Milton and Heresy*, ed. Stephen B. Dobranski and John P. Rumrich (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), pp. 199-215.

³⁷ Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2:867.

of the following century.³⁸ Even Francesco Petrarch (1304-74), following Dante and considered the central poetic figure of the emergent Italian Renaissance as he was among the first to realize that Platonic thought and Greek studies provided a new cultural framework, longed all his life, unavailingly as it turned out, to be able to read the poet whom he places next after Homer among the gathered bards of his *Tenth Eclogue*. Here Euripides is the singer who

Chanted the dooms of captains and of kings,
Yet his own doom and allotted destiny
And those grim hounds fast racing on his trail
He saw not,—kings did shave their heads for him
Mourning that he was dead.³⁹

³⁸ Dante himself exhibited his learning, and one of his principal influences, by naming Euripides among the pagan poets of Limbo in *Purgatorio* 22.106, and elsewhere by illustrating how tragedy (goat song) derives its name from being, with its traditional melancholy ending, “as rankly unpleasant as a goat,” whereupon Dante quotes Seneca, as commentators would continue to do for several centuries, as an example. The preference for Seneca over Euripides, whom he imitated, was probably due to the fact that Seneca wrote in accessible Latin, and appeared more Western as a Spaniard living in the Roman center of a Hellenized world. Moreover, Senecan tragedy is filled with the cruelty and cleverness of devils, with passions and uncontrollable rhetoric that transferred neatly into the emerging mystery plays and cycles of the medieval period. That Seneca’s dramas were not intended for the stage appears to have not mattered to continental Renaissance imitators. However by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the superiority of Euripides is widely attested to, as exemplified in Mirandola, Vossius, and especially Daniel Heinsius’ seminal *On Plot in Tragedy* (1611).

³⁹ Petrarch here references the legend that Euripides died in Macedon by being torn to pieces by a pack of dogs, a manner of death (sporagmos) similar to that of Orpheus (who mistakenly worshiped Apollo above Dionysus and was therefore torn to pieces by the Thracians), and even the tragedian’s own Pentheus in *The Bacchae* (who likewise did not pay proper obeisance to Dionysus and was therefore torn to pieces by the Bacchantes, with his mother, horribly, leading the attack). Cf. Milton’s reference to

Importantly for the Continent, it was through the poetry of Euripides, wherein the collision of divine systems with skeptical human motivations was made apparent, that Platonic insight became joined with Christian scriptural exegesis.

In England, in the latter half of the sixteenth century, similar interpretive uses of Euripides appear. Roger Ascham records, in a passage containing what is believed to be the first allusion in English to Aristotle's *Poetics*, that he and his colleague Watson, author of the biblical tragedy *Absolon*, "had many pleasant talks together in comparing the precepts of *Aristotle* and *Horace de Arte Poetica* with the examples of *Euripides*"; and in the section from *The Scholemaster* (1570) titled *Of Imitation*, Ascham writes that "Tragedies" provide "the goodliest Argument of all," and as such are "for the use either of a learned preacher or a Civill Gentleman, more profitable than *Homer*, *Pindar*, *Virgill*, and *Horace*, yea comparable in myne opinion with the doctrine of *Aristotle*, *Plato*, and *Xenophon*." Like the Italians Ascham moves the genre of tragedy away from epic and lyric verse and nearer to philosophy and historical chronicle, concluding, as the Italians did, that the influence of Seneca on Continental dramatists, though strong, nevertheless needed some qualification: "*Euripides* far ouer match our *Seneca* in Latin, namely in *Oἰκονομί et Decoro*, although *Senecaes* elocution and verse be verie commendable for his tyme."⁴⁰

Thomas Lodge in his *Defense of Poetry* (1579) aligns the biblical tragedy of Buchanan with the consoling philosophy of Boethius, and by extension Euripidean tragedy, speculating rhetorically on Erasmus' rationale for choosing Euripides to

and fear of the myth of sparagmos, or being torn to pieces, in *Paradise Lost*: "But drive farr off the barbarous dissonance / Of *Bacchus* and his revellers, the Race / Of that wilde Rout that tore the Thracian Bard (*PL* 7:32-34). See too Michael Lieb, *Milton and the Culture of Violence* (Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell UP, 1994), pp. 235-36.

⁴⁰ *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, 2 vols. (London: Oxford UP, 1904), 1:23-24, 19.

translate: "Pittie weare it that Poetrye should be displaced; full little could we want Buchanan's workes, and Boetius comfortes may not be banished. What made Erasmus labor in Euripides tragedies? Did he indeavour by painting them out of Greeke into Latine to manifest sinne unto us? or to confirme us in goodness?"⁴¹ Here Lodge, ruminating on Erasmus' intent in working so diligently on his translations of Euripides, zeroes in on the indeterminate quality of Euripidean drama. Similarly Sir Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry* (c. 1583; printed 1595) would acknowledge the oracular, consoling power of Euripidean tragedy as he relates the tale first told by Plutarch (and later referenced by Milton in his eighth sonnet) of the saving of the Athenians at the end of the Peloponnesian war: "For onely repeating certaine of *Euripides* verses," Sidney writes, "many *Athenians* had their lyues saued of the *Siracusians*; when the *Athenians* themselues thought many Philosophers unwoorthie to liue."⁴² George Puttenham, in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), echoing Petrarch's

⁴¹ Ibid., 1:68.

⁴² Ibid., 1:190. As Thomas Corns notes, Milton's sonnet was the only composition with political implications written during the period between his last antiprelatical pamphlet and the first divorce tract, appearing in the Trinity Manuscript under the heading "On his door when the City expected an assault," which is crossed through and "When the assault was intended to the City" substituted in Milton's own hand, with the date "1642" later deleted. A line of poetic power is thus established that would include Milton, Pindar, and Euripides on one side, and the attacking and destroying forces—royalists, Alexander, and the Spartans—on the other. Interestingly, when Milton first published his poem, in October 1645, four months after the decisive victory at Naseby, he decontextualized it, omitting all reference to the circumstance of its composition and merely heading it with the roman numeral VIII as a part of a series of sonnets. See Corns, *Uncloistered Virtue: English Political Literature, 1640-1660* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1992), pp. 38-39. Continuing, and in a sense concluding, a sequence of critical exegesis established by sixteenth-century Italians such as Franciscus Portus and Roberto Titi, and in England Roger Ascham and Sir Philip Sidney, Milton's 1642 sonnet is a testament to Milton's belief in the transcendent power of poetry in matters both private and public. But just as importantly, it is a testament to a line of Continental Renaissance poetics and literary theory that held Euripides up as an exemplar of prophetic utterance.

lines regarding kings who in mourning shaved their heads upon hearing of Euripides' violent death in Macedon, remarks that "good Poets and Poesie were highly esteemed and much fauoured of the greatest Princes. For prooffe whereof we read how much *Amyntas*, king of *Macedonia*, made of the Tragicall Poet *Euripides*"; and Gabriel Harvey, the noted physician and theorist of blood circulation, in *Some Matters of Note*, from *Four Letters* (1592), would mention "the sage Tragedies" of *Euripides*.⁴³

Nearing the end of the century Francis Meres' *A Comparison of English Poets*, from *Palladis Tamia* (1598), observes a certain line of literary achievement, or parallelism, when he writes: "As the Greeke tongue is made famous and eloquent by Homer, Hesiod, Euripides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Pindarus, Phocylides, and Aristophanes . . . so the English tongue is mightily enriched and gorgeously invested in rare ornaments and resplendent abiliments by Sir Philip Sydney, Spencer, Daniel, Drayton, Warner, Shakespeare, Marlow, and Chapman." Of these stellar poets Meres singles out Euripides as the "most sententious among the Greek Poets," presumably due to Euripides' critical and questioning approach to the central mythographies of his time, and later in his treatise, in an analysis befitting Milton's last poem, Meres notes that "Georgius Buchananus' *Jephthae* amongst all moderne Tragedies is able to abide the touch of Aristotle's precepts and Euripides's examples."⁴⁴

In the seventeenth century, interest in Euripides as a prophetic, enduring poet would continue in the work of such diverse writers as Ben Johnson, who, in *Timber, or Discoveries* (1620-35?), writes that "For as *Euripides* is sometimes peccant, as he is most times perfect,"⁴⁵ and John Webster, who in the preface to *The White Devil* (1612),

⁴³ *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. Smith, 1:17, 231.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:315, 317, 322.

⁴⁵ *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. J. E. Spingarn. 3 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1957), 1:57.

responding to questions regarding the unusual length of time it took him to complete his tragedy, affords the example of Euripides: “I must answer them with that of *Eurypides* to *Alcestides*, a Tragicke Writer: *Alcestides* objecting that *Eurypides* had onely in three daies composed three verses, whereas himselfe had written three hundred: Thou telst truth (quoth he) but heres the difference; thine shall onely bee read for three daies, whereas mine shall continue three ages.”⁴⁶ Apocryphal as Webster’s anecdote may be, it yet demonstrates the increasingly authoritative influence of Euripides on these various Renaissance writers, as well as the apparent enormous ambition and scope of Euripidean tragedy.

Henry Peacham’s *The Compleat Gentleman* (1622), moreover, underscores the proximity of “heathen” poets to the Apostles and early church fathers, as Milton would later do in his preface to *Samson Agonistes*, by noting “the Apostles themselues haue not disdained to alledge the authoritie of the heathen Poets . . . as also the fathers of the Church, *Nazianzen*, *S. Augustine*, *Bernard*, *Prudentius*, and many others, beside the allowance they haue giuen to Poetrie, they teach us the true use and end thereof.” Peacham writes of the direct and authoritative influence of poetry on politics from the time of Homer to the roughly contemporary John Gower, a line of political influence that would locate Euripides, the sole Attic tragedian mentioned, at its center: “Euery child knoweth how deare the workes of *Homer* were unto *Alexander*, *Euripides* to *Amyntas*, King of *Macedon*, *Virgil* to *Augustus*, *Theocritus* to *Ptolemey* . . . in our owne Countrey, *Chaucer* to *Richard* the second, *Gower* to *Henrie* the fourth.”⁴⁷

Later still, during the interregnum years, Sir William Davenant, in the preface to *Gondibert, An Heroick Poem. To his much Honour’d Friend Mr Hobs* (1650),

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1:66.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 1:118, 120.

referencing Plutarch's story of the Athenian prisoners as others had done before him, writes that "the Heroick being by most allow'd to be the most beautifull of Poems . . . that the *Athenian* Prisoners were thought worthy of life and liberty for singing the Tragedies of *Euripides*."⁴⁸ The repeated reference to this story, and again we are reminded of Milton's own use of the tale in his sonnet, underlines the power of the interrogative mode of Euripidean tragedy as a means of transcending the violent and chaotic and giving voice to something higher—"life and liberty."

In the post-restoration year 1678, Thomas Rymer, as if in summation of the history of the genre, in his *Tragedies of the Last Age Considered and Examin'd by the Practice of the Ancients and by the Common Sense of All Ages*, writes:

I had heard that the *Theater* was wont to be call'd the *School of Vertue*, and *Tragedy* a *Poem for Kings*: That they who fist brought Tragedy to perfection were made *Vice-Roys* and governors of *Islands*, were honoured everywhere with Statues of Marble and Statues of Brass, were stil'd the *Wise Sophocles*, the *Wise Euripides* by God and Man, by Oracles and Philosophers: That for teaching Morality *Crantor* and *Chrysippus* were no-body to 'em (This latter transcrib'd the whole of *Medea* of *Euripides* into his works): That so refin'd a People and so frugal a *Common-wealth* as *Athens* did tax and assess themselves, and laid out more of their publick Exechequer upon the representation of these Plays than all their Wars stood them in, though sometimes both Seas and Land were cover'd with Pagan Enemies that invaded them. And not *Athens* only, but (who hated *Athens*) so austere and glum a generation as those of *Sparta*, by the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 2:31.

care of *Lycurgus*, agreed the same honour to these *Athenian* Poets.⁴⁹

“The *English* want neither *genius* nor *language* for so great a work,” Rymer continues, “and, certainly, had our Authors began with Tragedy as *Sophocles* and *Euripides* left it, had they either built on the same foundation or after their *model*, we might e’re this day have seen Poetry in greater perfection, and boasted such *Monuments* of wit as *Greece* and *Rome* never knew in all their *glory*.” Rymer perceptively observes that tragedy, as written by Euripides, not only observed history but more importantly distilled history into something more true and enduring than the historical chronicles themselves. And it is the repeated reference to Attic tragedy, and especially Euripides, as using the tropes of war and violence to transcend war and violence, of the Athenians literally spending more of their “*Common-wealth*” currency on the production of tragedies than on their various wars, that Milton would translate into his own post-war tragedy. Rymer concludes, adamantly, that Euripides was

for teaching by *examples*, in a graver way. . . . And finding in History the same *end* happen to the *righteous* and to the *unjust*, *vertue* often opprest, and *wickedness* on the Throne, [Euripides] saw these particular *yesterday-truths* were imperfect and improper to illustrate the universal and eternal truths by them intended. . . For, said [he], if the World can scarce be satisfi’d with God Almighty, whose holy will and purposes are not to be *comprehended*, a *Poet*, in these matters, shall never be pardon’d, who, they are sure, is not *incomprehensible*, whose *ways* and *walks* may

⁴⁹ Ibid., 2:182.

without *impiety* be penetrated and examin'd. . . . [Euripides] found that *History*, grosly taken, was neither proper to *instruct* nor apt to *please*; and therefore [he] would not trust History for [his] examples, but refin'd upon the History, and thence contriv'd something more *philosophical* and more *accurate* than *History*.⁵⁰

Rymer's injunction that historical narrative is the raw material with which something more refined may be produced, with the example being Euripidean tragedy, is a lesson not lost on the Milton of *Areopagitica* and *Samson Agonistes*. As I will argue in succeeding chapters, Euripides deployed the narrative of Thebes in his *Bacchae*, for instance, not to realize consolation in repetition or iteration of conservative historical and sacred assumptions but rather to question those very assumptions in order to translate them into something higher and finally more truthful. It is a specific practice Milton would pursue in mining the biblical Judges narrative, following the violent implosion of the English republican experiment, for his re-examination of the Samson story. As Rymer keenly observes of Euripidean tragedy, "The *Phedra* in *Euripides* told us truly that it is *not Natural to do evil when we know good*. Therefore vice can never please unless it be painted and dress'd up in the colours and disguise of vertue; and should any man knowingly and with open eyes prefer what is evil, he must be reckon'd the greatest of Monsters, and in no wise be lookt on as any image of what is Natural, or what is suitable with humane kind."⁵¹ We need to consider Rymer's wise observation on the depth and

⁵⁰ Ibid., 2:188-89.

⁵¹ Ibid., 2:186-89, 192. Even Edward Phillips, nephew of Milton, would single out Euripides as the greatest tragedian, as he writes in his preface to *Theatrum Poetarum* (London, 1675) that there may have been some poets lost to history who were "comparable to *Homer* for Heroic Poesy, or to *Euripides* for Tragedy," yet nevertheless these lost poets, rivaling the greatest of their respective genres, those such as Euripides

complexity of Euripidean tragedy as we explore Milton's own reading of Euripides, and importantly his choice of Samson in the construction of his tragedy *Samson Agonistes*. But first we must turn to the pivotal sixteenth century figure George Buchanan and his biblical tragedies *Jephthes sive Votum* and *Baptistes Sive Calumnia*, which were published in the same volume with his translations of Euripides' *Medea* and *Alcestis* and as such allow us a very specific instance of the influence of Euripidean tragedy on the period.

who achieved a kind of transcendent divine stature, "sleep inglorious in the croud of the forgotten vulgar. . . . Poets, a Science certainly of all others the most noble and exalted, and not unworthily tearmed *Divine*, since the height of Poetical rapture hath ever been accounted little less then *Divine Inspiration*." At the end of Milton's century William Wotton, in *Reflections Upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694), writes that to truly comprehend a poem one must necessarily compare it to the great exemplars of its genre: "those who were the most extraordinary in their several Ways were esteemed as Standards by succeeding Ages, and Rules were framed by their Works to examine other Poems of the same sort. Thus *Aristotle* framed Rules of *Epick Poesie* from *Homer*. Thus *Aristophanes*, *Menander*, *Sophocles*, and *Euripides* were looked upon as Masters in *Dramatick Poesie*, and their Practice was sufficient Authority." *Ibid.*, 3:206.

Chapter 2

Buchanan, Milton, and Euripides

“[W]hat successful dramatic tragedy does for us—is like what the word *tragedy* does for real-life tragedies: it gives local habitation and name to the most terrifying of things.”

— Stephen Booth⁵²

We have considered the influence of Euripides on Renaissance and early modern theorists and thinkers; yet the relation between John Milton and George Buchanan, mediated by the seminal influence of Euripides, has been largely neglected by critics and scholars. To understand the proximity of the philosophical and political positions of Milton and Buchanan, we need to look forward, first, to the failure of the 1683 revolution, wherein the fortunes of the Whig party and of Milton’s posthumous career were at their lowest point. The discovery in June of that year of the Rye House Plot to assassinate Charles II and his brother at Rumbold’s Rye House in Hertfordshire, and the subsequent execution of the Whig leaders Lord John Russell and Algernon Sydney on flimsy evidence, were permanent setbacks to Whig prospects. The Oxford Decree of 1683 was passed as a result of the foiled plot, which banned Milton’s regicide writings and consigned all subsequent copies of his works to the flames. Roger L’Estrange’s was only the loudest of the many voices decrying such authors as Milton, and not the first to couple Milton’s name with that of Buchanan, proclaiming the Tory commonplace that “those Wild and Barbarous Principles . . . Collected out of the Writings of Knox,

⁵² Stephen Booth, “*King Lear*,” “*Macbeth*,” *Indefinition, and Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983), p. 118.

Buchanan, Milton, and other Authors” remained dangerously current in Whig thinking.⁵³ But what were the “Wild and Barbarous Principles” apparently imbedded in the works of both men and so clearly feared by monarchists such as L’Estrange? And furthermore, what is the line of influence in “Knox, Buchanan, Milton, and other Authors” that monarchists such as L’Estrange seem to be pointing out?

In an autobiographical passage in the *Second Defense*, Milton contends that the blind are by “Divine law and divine favor” rendered “safe from the injuries of men” and “almost sacred,” evidenced by the fact that his friends now “visit, esteem, and attend me more diligently even than before” (CPW 4.1:590). Such devout friendship Milton compares with that of Pylades and Orestes in Euripides’ *Orestes* (795),⁵⁴ and Theseus and Heracles in the same dramatist’s *Hercules Furens* (1398, 1402):

Orestes: Go slowly as the rudder of my feet.

Pylades: A precious care is this to me.

And elsewhere:

⁵³ John March, *The False Prophet Unmask’t* (Newcastle, 1683), sig. A2v.

⁵⁴ Philip Vellacott makes the important observation, directly applicable to the dramatic methodology and vision adopted by Buchanan and Milton in *Jephthes* and *Samson Agonistes* respectively, that *Orestes* “contains no fighting, but its drama symbolizes the inward sickness of which bloodthirsty violence is the outward expression.” Vellacott continues to note, and here we might keep in mind Milton’s Samson, “if the reference of the drama is political, then as the action progresses at least a few Athenians in the audience will have identified themselves and their city, sick and insane from a generation of war, with the desperate, floundering, condemned man they are watching. For them at least this makes the piece not melodrama, but tragedy uniting audience with actors in one purgative experience.” Vellacott, *Ironic Drama: A Study of Euripides’ Method and Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975), p. 56.

Theseus: Give your hand to your friend and helper.

Put your arm around my neck, and I will be your guide.

Two pages after quoting these lines from Euripides and assailing popular tragedy for its various excesses, Milton remarks that “poets who deserve the name I love and cherish . . . I delight in hearing them frequently. Most of them, I know, are bitterly hostile to tyrants, if I should list them from the first down to our own Buchanan” (*CPW* 4.1:592).

The assemblage is typically Miltonic in that when making a point in what was for Milton an extremely and even dangerously contentious forum, wherein matters of crucial moment were put forward—from friendship in the *Second Defense* to Mortalism in *Christian Doctrine*—Milton submits the precedent of Euripides; and often, as in the above example, his thinking goes forward to encompass his fellow radical, anti-tyrannical, and biblical tragedian George Buchanan. Euripides here serves as a guide, to use Theseus’ term, to Buchanan and Milton, both of whom found exposed in Euripides’ tragedies the desperation of the human spirit, the terror of the human condition in a civilization emptied of its spiritual reserves.⁵⁵

Milton both admired and carefully read Buchanan, viewing him both as persecuted revolutionary historian and as author of biblical tragedy, as well as distinguished translator, like Erasmus and Grotius, of Euripides. The religious and cultural controversies that swirled around Buchanan in the sixteenth century—his radical 1567 support of the Protestant insurgency that overthrew Mary Stuart and his equally radical theoretical justification of the episode in his treatise *De jure regni*—were familiar to Milton, as was Buchanan’s vindication of the people’s right to overthrow tyrants as

⁵⁵ See Bernard Knox, “Euripides: The Poet as Prophet,” in *Directions in Euripidean Criticism*, ed. Peter Burian (Durham: Duke UP, 1985), pp. 11-12.

delineated in his *History of Scotland*.⁵⁶ Importantly, the two momentous intellectual influences that spurred sixteenth- and seventeenth-century poets to put forward new political questions—humanism and Reformation—were informed by the recovery of classical texts and the attempt to set them in precisely historical and political contexts. Rejecting medieval theories of multiple allegorisation and turning to authorial intention allowed for a critical perspective on the humanist's own time, a praxis that, as we will see, Milton employed in his reading of Buchanan and, more fundamentally, in his reading of Euripides. Euripides in particular of the major Greek thinkers furnished a powerful perspective for radical humanist reformers such as Buchanan and Milton, as they saw reflected in Euripides' time a theologic crisis and political dissent, the rise and violent fall of the Periclean democratic experiment, that was remarkably similar to what they confronted in their own. This is especially true with Milton as the English revolution came to its resounding defeat in 1660.

The sectarianism emerging from political and social dissent led the writers of their respective periods, generally speaking, in one of two directions: toward a mode of reinscribing tradition and defined doctrine, as exemplified in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and

⁵⁶ Milton's persistent reverting to earlier periods of Scottish history was appealing to proto-republican traditions that could in principle be restored. Buchanan, a seminal figure for seventeenth-century republicans, had been tutor to James VI and I and a vehement propagandist for the deposition of Charles' grandmother, Mary Queen of Scots. Milton thus views the transition from Buchanan to James to Charles—from skeptical humanist rhetoric informed by rediscovered Greek thinkers to the mendacious spectacle of court masques—as a certain intellectual impoverishment. Moreover, what was believed to be the first Leveller tract to voice classical republican ideas and sources, *Englands Miserie, and Remedie* (1645), attributed to Edward Sexby, claims judicial abuse of Lilburne and draws on Buchanan's *De jure regni* as its support text. See David Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 91-92; 137; Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England*, p. 148. For a brief discussion of Milton's views of Buchanan in *The History of Britain*, see Nicholas von Maltzahn, *Milton's History of Britain: Republican Historiography in the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991), pp. 83, 93.

Theodore Beza, or toward a radical interrogation of such doctrine, as exemplified in Euripides, Buchanan, Grotius, and Milton. And the seedbed for reinscription or challenge was, as we have seen, the common mythology of the respective culture—in Athens, Homeric and Hesiodic theogony, and in Europe and England through the seventeenth century, biblical discourse and exegesis. Hence for radical, progressive thinkers of the sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries tragic drama would naturally draw from biblical exegesis the raw material used to fashion a critique of and break with the past, just as the Attic tragedies of Euripides would draw on Homeric and Hesiodic myth.

Buchanan was educated at St. Andrews in his native Scotland and at the University of Paris, where he became a dramatist while teaching in the College de Guyenne at Bordeaux. It was required of the instructors that they create exercises to enable young scholars to compose and speak Latin, and typically drama became the prominent methodology of instruction. Accordingly, Buchanan proceeded to write two Biblical tragedies, *Jephthes, sive Votum* and *Baptistes sive Calumnia*, and at the same time translated Euripides' *Medea* and *Alcestis* for student productions. These early translations of Euripides suggest that Buchanan was less influenced by Seneca than many of his contemporaries,⁵⁷ and more intent on rivaling Erasmus, who in 1506 had translated two tragedies that deeply interested Buchanan for their critical portrayals of

⁵⁷ C. H. Herford describes the advent of a "Christian Seneca," originated by Buchanan at Bordeaux with his *Jephthes*, which Herford calls "the earliest tragedy composed north of the Alps in decidedly Senecan form." See C. H. Herford, *Studies in the Literary Relations of England and Germany in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1886), pp. 79-80, 84-6, 98. Both of Buchanan's tragedies begin with a Euripidean prologue, and most of the action takes place off stage and is related by a messenger, thus eliminating the realistic though often wildly hyperbolic descriptions of horrors denotative of Senecan tragedy. And of course it is Euripides whom Buchanan is translating and elevating as the model, not Seneca.

war and sacrifice, *Iphigenia at Aulis*⁵⁸ and *Hecuba*.⁵⁹ Thus the elimination of a Senecanized Euripidean tragedy, as it were, begins with Buchanan as he attempts to translate the original Greek tragedies rather than rely on Seneca as a mediating influence, while simultaneously writing his own biblical tragedy based on the original Greek model. The remarkable result is the publication of four tragedies in the same text, two biblical tragedies penned by Buchanan and two Euripidean tragedies translated by Buchanan.

All the dramas of Euripides we have were written in the last twenty-five years of his life, the years of the disastrous Peloponnesian War. The “Wild and Barbarous Principles” never specifically articulated by L’Estrange are seminally apparent in the world Euripides created in the theater of Dionysus, which we might understand as a distilled meditation on contemporary history—of an elevated public spirit degenerating into corruption, violence, subversion, and theologic uncertainty, wherein customary expectations are betrayed and traditional relationships reversed. In a very real sense Euripidean tragedy portrays, as his *Medea* would declare, a world turned upside down. Hence Euripides’ challenge to historical and religious tradition, exemplified in the psychological probing of motivation and justification involved in such acts as sacrificial killing in the tragedies *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Hecuba*, and *Medea*, powerfully resonated for early modern biblical dramatists such as Buchanan as he searched and settled on the analogous story of Jephthes and the sacrifice of his daughter, and Herod and the sacrifice of John the Baptist. We now can clarify the meaning of L’Estrange’s “Wild and

⁵⁸ In *Christian Doctrine*, 6:235-36, Milton utilizes Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Rhesus* and *Bacchae* in his discussion of plural words used in a singular sense to represent God: “among the Greeks the word *δεσπότης*, that is, Lord, is also used in the plural, but in a singular sense.” In representing his more radical, heretical positions, in this case anti-Trinitarianism, Milton repeatedly turns to the example of Euripides.

⁵⁹ Erasmus’ translations of Euripides can be consulted in a modern edition, *Euripides*, ed. Jan Hendrik Waszink, (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1969).

Barbarous Principles” as a challenge to historical and religious tradition that originated with Euripides and was redeployed in its purest form by Buchanan and Milton, the latter of whose writings were so repugnant and disturbing to the likes of L’Estrange that they were actually banned and burned.

Renaissance biblical tragedies increasingly tend to cluster around an evident focal point in both Euripidean tragedy, especially late Euripidean tragedy, and Renaissance scriptural discourse: the symbol of sacrifice. And it is at this junction that the most famous sacrifice for early modern tragedians, that of Christ, shadows all other references, including Milton’s own in *Samson Agonistes*, the valediction of an epoch and genre as the *Bacchae* was for fifth-century Athens. Debora Shuger has speculated that the problematic nature of sacrifice advanced, for instance, in Grotius’s *De satisfactione Christi* (1617), the “astonishing revelation of divine love and savage ritual”⁶⁰ fused into that single tragic act, lay at the center of early modern theological and ethical controversy, dividing the intellectual landscape of the late Renaissance. Buchanan’s two biblical tragedies, *Baptistes Sive Calumnia* and *Jephthes*, with their respective meditations on this central trope of sacrifice, are examples of such a focus on the collision of violence and the sacred. With such a divided landscape theology for Renaissance and especially biblical tragedians, attendant at the cultural ruptures of the late sixteenth- and seventeenth centuries that would permanently alter worldviews, progresses, as noted earlier, from medieval typology and two-dimensionality to what we might term “speculative myth,” a merging of philosophy and theology as a discursive method of cultural analysis that, rearticulated as tragedy, depicts man’s increasingly complex place in the world. Hence for biblical tragedians such as Buchanan and Milton the normative values and ontological solace of sacred order, the Elizabethan world

⁶⁰ Debora Kuller Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994), p. 6.

picture as it were, give way to eschatological speculations and premonitions—disintegrating myths or end myths characterized by the very absence of divinity and sacred order in the world. As such end myth approaches tragedy, and Euripides, attendant at his own massive cultural disruption, is the ancient tragedian who first articulated this tragedy of disintegration.⁶¹

Euripides in his time gave voice to those who questioned national, social, and religious assumptions, as similarly his precursor Aeschylus, dead a generation before the Peloponnesian War began, spoke for those haunted by the past and who found it threatening to question traditional beliefs and received opinion.⁶² Euripides thus reflects not only the Athenian Enlightenment, but also the reaction against the rationalist psychology and immoralism of the Enlightenment evidenced in the successful prosecutions of intellectuals on religious grounds which took place at Athens in the last third of the fifth century. In 432 B.C. disbelief in the supernatural and the teaching of astronomy were made indictable offences; and the next three decades witnessed a series of heresy trials unique in Athenian history, but which were undoubtedly and disturbingly familiar to Buchanan and later Milton. Those trials would involve most of the leaders of progressive thought at Athens—Anaxagoras, Diagoras, Socrates, Protagoras, and quite possibly Euripides—to say nothing of what must have been a considerable number of less

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 4, 89-90. We should recall that the Judges chronicle, to which Buchanan and Milton turned for their tragic adaptations of the Jephthah and Samson narratives, describes what is in effect the disintegration of the tribe of Dan, a *telos* of violent fragmentation underscored by the repetition of the line which concludes the book with resounding finality: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 16:25).

⁶² See Vellacott, *Ironic Drama*, p. 9. The contemporary contrast between Aeschylus and Euripides is portrayed in Aristophanes’ *The Frogs*, in which Dionysus journeys to Hades to bring back his favorite playwright, apparently reflecting the Athenian’s sense of loss when in 408 Euripides left for Macedon, dying there eighteen months later.

famous individuals. In brief, the great era of Greek Enlightenment was also an era of persecution in which scholars were exiled and put to death, thought censored, and books burned.⁶³ Such a rapid decline from Periclean achievement informs Euripides' stunning departures from the traditions maintained by his predecessors Aeschylus and Sophocles; and considering the historical notation in the 1506 Erasmus edition of Euripides that Buchanan knew and the 1602 Paulus edition that Milton owned, these English biblical tragedians surely saw mirrored in their own respective times the historical realities and implications subtending Euripidean tragedy. Buchanan, by observing the principles of Euripidean tragedy—principles highly commended in the sixteenth century as we have seen—engaged not in a reinscribing of tradition, however haunted by doubt, as he might were he to follow Aeschylus and even Sophocles, but in a radical interrogation of tradition, received thought, and praxis.⁶⁴

Thus, the 1597 publication of Buchanan's poetical works, in which all four tragedies were published, with the two biblical tragedies designated *Tragoediae Sacrae* and the translations of Euripides *Tragoediae Externae*, served not to distance the sacred from the pagan, a typical practice for the religious humanists of the period, but to

⁶³ See E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1951), pp.188-89.

⁶⁴ The Sidney Circle affords evidence of high estimation of Euripidean tragedy as recently translated by Erasmus. The progressive Gabriel Harvey notes in his copy of Erasmus' translation of Euripides that the Greek tragedian is "the wisest of poets, even more sinewed and profound than the Attican Sophocles or the Latin Seneca." Harvey also mentions Buchanan's *Jephthes* next to the argument to Euripides' *Iphigenia*, and beside Erasmus' Epistle to Hecuba Harvey writes "Huc Buchanani Baptista, sive Calumnia." Harvey was no doubt situating Buchanan where he most wished to be, where Sidney landed him in his Apology: among the great ancient and modern dramatists. See *The Renaissance Imagination, A Critical Edition of George Buchanan's Baptistes and of Its Anonymous Seventeenth-Century Translation Tyrannicall-Government Anatomized*, ed. Steven Berkowitz (New York: Garland, 1992), p. 215.

demonstrate their similitude in both content and structure.⁶⁵ It is important to note that, like Euripides, even such deeply religious thinkers as Buchanan and Milton do not retreat from, but strenuously participate in, the dismantling and subsequent dramatic reassembling of their respective theological traditions.⁶⁶ And through this interrogation of tradition Euripides' foremost concerns—concerns later reflected in Buchanan and Milton—emerge: sacrifice, war and heroism, gender roles and definitions, the relationship between parent and child, authority and citizenry, the divine and the human.

Buchanan's tragedy *Baptistes sive Calumnia*, written with *Jephthes* before the dramatist and schoolteacher left Bordeaux in 1544 and according to his autobiography the first tragedy written, was published in London by Thomas Vautrollier in 1577 and later, in Milton's time and after, was often compared to *Samson Agonistes*. Francis Peck, for instance, in his *Memoirs of Milton* notes that *Samson Agonistes* was written "exactly on the same plan"⁶⁷ as Buchanan's *Baptistes*, and that Milton apparently

⁶⁵ For an opposing view of the juxtaposition of sacred drama and pagan in the 1597 volume, see Lily Bess Campbell, *Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1959.), who writes that the volume was intentionally "placing the divine and the secular dramas in opposition" as a means of demonstrating the superiority of the sacred. Campbell also argues, erroneously in my view with regard to Buchanan, that the development of Christian drama was a result of the need to "offset the evils incident to the spread of the 'heathen' drama" recently rediscovered and made available by continental humanist scholars (pp.154, 147-48).

⁶⁶ When Buchanan returned to his native Scotland in 1561 he formally renounced Catholicism and joined the Church of Scotland. And of course Milton's heresies in *Christian Doctrine* have been thoroughly documented and aligned with *Paradise Lost* by Maurice Kelley amongst others. See Kelley's *This Great Argument* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962). See too Dobranski and Rumrich, eds., *Milton and Heresy*.

⁶⁷ Francis Peck, *New Memoirs of the Life and Poetical Works of Mr. John Milton etc.* (London, 1740), p. 278. See too *Tyrannicall-Government Anatomized: Or, A Discourse Concerning Evil-Councillors etc.* (London, 1642). Raymond Lebegue has suggested a seventeenth-century identification of John the Baptist with William Prynne

authored the politically charged 1642 translation of *Baptistes* entitled *Tyrannicall-Government Anatomized: Or, A Discourse Concerning Evil-Councillors etc.* Moreover, Stephen Gosson, in *Playes Confuted in Five Actions*,⁶⁸ locates *Baptistes* in the tradition of *Christ Suffering*, a line of plays then recently made available in George Sandys' translation of Hugo Grotius' *Christus Patiens*, and which Milton cites in his preface to *Samson Agonistes* as a tragedy the church father Gregory Nazianzen "thought it not unbecoming the sanctity of his person to write," and which he entitled, "*Christ suffering*."⁶⁹ We also should recall here Milton's own diligent plans, sketched in his notebook as noted earlier, for biblical dramas entitled "Baptistes" and "Christus Patiens," as well as "Samson pursophorus or Hybristes, or Samson marriing / or in Ramath Lechi Jud. 15 / Dagonalia. Jud 16," with "Hybristes" commonly translated as "Violent . . . wanton, licentious, insolent" (CPW: 8:556, 562). These sketches in Milton's notebook

and of Herod with Charles I. See Lebegue, *La Tragedie religieuse en France* (Paris, 1929), p. 106; Sharratt, *Tragedies*, p. 13.

⁶⁸ Arthur F. Kinney, *Markets of Bawdrie: The Dramatic Criticism of Stephen Gosson* (Salzburg: Longwood P, 1974), pp. 177-78. Gosson was involved at the time in a debate with Thomas Lodge over the public performance of biblical drama. Lodge cited Buchanan's works and Erasmus's translations of Euripides as defense of plays and players, to which Gosson responded in his 1582 *Playes*: "Buchanan perceiving the corruption of the Gentiles, to avoyde that which is evill, and yet keepe that which is good, according to the true use of Poetrie, penned these bookes in numbers with inetrloquutions dialogue wise, as Plato and Tullie did their Philosophy, to be reade, not be played." That this argument exists at all is proof that biblical drama was offered at the public theaters between the opening of the Theater in 1576 and the end of Elizabeth's reign, though only two dramas, *A Looking Glasse for London and England* (1592) and *THE LOVE OF KING DAVID AND FAIR BETHSABE* (1594), are entered in the Stationers' Register and prepared for public performance. See William Ringler, *Stephen Gosson* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1942), pp. 53-82; N. Burton Paradise, *Thomas Lodge* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1931), pp. 66-74.

⁶⁹ I do not mean to conflate what Milton thinks is Gregory's version of *Christ Suffering* with that of Grotius. These two dramas have obvious differences in both sentiment and strategy, thus leading some to speculate that Grotius wrote his own play before ever reading the precursor poem he and his circle ascribed to Gregory Nazianzen as I shall discuss in the following chapters.

confirm not only his awareness of Buchanan's tragedies, but his preoccupation with situating himself in line with them.

Milton also was likely aware that when Buchanan was brought before the Inquisition in Lisbon in 1548 on charges of heresy, he declared that *Baptistes* was indeed a political allegory. At the trial, Buchanan testified:

I used to disagree with the English [particularly in recognizing the King as head of the church]. . . . Accordingly, as soon as possible when I escaped thence, I recorded my opinion of the English in that tragedy which deals with John the Baptist, wherein, so far as the likeness of the material would permit, I represented the death and accusation of Thomas More and set before the eyes an image of the tyranny of that time.⁷⁰

In *Baptistes*, John the Baptist represented Sir Thomas More; Herodias, Anne Boleyn; and Herod, Henry VIII; and in dedicating the drama to the young James VI of Scotland, then Buchanan's pupil, the author warned, with some circumspection, of "the torments of tyrants and the miseries they endure."⁷¹ Similarly, Buchanan's popular prose tract, *De Jure Regni apud Scotos* (1579),⁷² opposes absolutism with the argument that kings exist

⁷⁰ See James M. Atkin, *The Trial of George Buchanan before the Lisbon Inquisition* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1939), p. 23.

⁷¹ Donald Macmillan, *George Buchanan* (Edinburgh: G. A. Morton, 1906), p. 83.

⁷² For a list of Buchanan's works Milton may have owned, see Jackson Campbell Boswell, *Milton's Library* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1975), pp. 42-43. Boswell notes Milton's numerous references to Buchanan in the *Commonplace Book* (460, 478), *Eikonoklastes* (588, 590), *The First Defense* (371, 481), *The Second Defense* (592), *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (223-26, 239), and *History of Britain* (98, 106, 131, 147, 193, 203, 204, 229, 230).

only by the will of the people, and like *Baptistes*, *De Jure* was written for the instruction of the future James I of England and remarkably contains a defense of tyrannicide and declaration that the obligation of subjects to their king is conditioned on the performance of that king in the duties of his office. Appropriately, *De Jure* became a standard work of the Long Parliament and has been thought the inspiration for Milton's *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* and *Defense of the English People*.⁷³ Foremost in Buchanan's thought during his years at Bordeaux and after, and the principal influence on his anti-tyrannical prose tracts and his tragedies, was Euripides, and we can assume that, like Milton, Buchanan had a copy of Euripides before him as he wrote.⁷⁴

Buchanan's *Baptist* commences with a typically Euripidean prologue in which the author warns of "a certain Proteus" who, like Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, "transformed himself into every shape," "now roared as a fierce lion, sprouted as a tree, brindled as a bear, hissed as a snake."⁷⁵ "[I]n all the men I see," he continues, "I behold as many Proteuses who assume new features and turn themselves into every possible shape; and the success of a stageplay always runs the gamut of their calumnies

⁷³ George Buchanan, in *Dictionary of National Biography*, 3 vols. (London: Oxford UP, 1963-65), 3:192; see too Macmillan, *George Buchanan*, p. 236.

⁷⁴ See Peter Sharratt, "Euripides Latinus: Buchanan's Use of his Sources" in *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Bononiensis*, ed. R. J. Schoeck (Binghampton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1985), p. 614. Sharratt concludes that the two plays of Euripides Buchanan imitated most in *Jephthes* were the two which Erasmus translated, *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the only two available in published translation. Milton's own copy of Euripides, the 1602 two-volume Paulus Stephanus edition which he purchased in 1634, is extant at the Bodleian Library under pressmarks Don. d. 27 and 28. The Greek text contains a Latin translation, scholia, commentaries by Brodaeus, Canterus, Portus, and Stiblinus, and a subject index. On the flyleaf preceding the title page, Milton has written his name, the price paid for the volume, and the year of purchase. See Maurice Kelley and Samuel D. Atkins, "Milton's Annotations of Euripides" in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 60 (1961): 680-87.

⁷⁵ All references to and quotations from Buchanan's *Baptistes* and *Jephthes* are from *George Buchanan: Tragedies*, ed. P. Sharratt and P. G. Walsh (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic P, 1983).

especially” (134). Political expediency and the immorality of duplicity are manifest themes in Buchanan, as they are in Euripides and Milton, wherein the “many Proteuses” are exposed and the various submerged and more often ignoble motivations unveiled, Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* perhaps being the ultimate example. But what lies beyond the expositions, which at their most base level form a kind of political theater, at a higher level of artistic achievement allow the possibility for dialectical release from scepticism and irreligion, a process of transcendence Milton exhorts in *Areopagitica* as the necessity of knowing good *by* evil (CPW 2:514). Renaissance figurations of Proteus often merged with those of Socrates to form a symbol of complex knowledge; and hence pagan authors, as Erasmus avers in *Ratio verae theologiae*, could be used as “training ground for reading Scripture,” the essential composite text with its hidden meanings that might reveal “the language of the Protean Christ.”⁷⁶ As Proteus, Socrates, and Christ fuse into archetype—with the opposing Janus face of Milton’s Satan and the “calumnies” of Buchanan’s shape shifters—multiformity, sifted correctly, serves as a generative source of sublimity and ultimate truth. As we will see in our later discussion of *Samson Agonistes*, *Christ Suffering*, and Euripides’ *Bacchae*, this requisite practice of knowing good by evil is the key to a final estimation of the influence of Euripides on Milton’s tragedy.

⁷⁶ On Erasmus and Socrates, see Lynda Gregorian Christian, “The Figure of Socrates in Erasmus’ Works,” *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 3 (1972): 1-10. Notably in *Paradise Regained*, the companion poem to *Samson Agonistes* in the 1671 volume, Jesus remarks that those historic conquerors who (like Milton’s Samson and Buchanan’s Malchus) “swell with pride” (3:81), are worshiped with “Priest and Sacrifice” (3:83), their glory brutally deformed as they have not learned that real honor comes “Without ambition, war, or violence” (3:90). This example of historic conquerors in Milton’s companion poem is counterposed by the example of Socrates in terms startlingly reflective of Jesus’ own nearing fate: “By what he taught and suffer’d for so doing, / For truths sake suffering death unjust, lives now / Equal in fame to proudest Conquerors” (3:97-99).

In the Euripidean Prologue to *Baptistes*, Buchanan defines the power of fable and concludes that, as the motivating design of action, fable carries within it the moral force of history, what Erasmus clarifies in *Ciceronianus* as the “eternal unchanging truth . . . hidden behind the temporal flux of the historical world.”⁷⁷ Euripidean tragedy, as Buchanan and Milton were well aware, reshapes mythical circumstances in terms of fifth-century controversy, and as such penetrates the temporality of history to what is constant, achieving in the process the kind of prophetic sublimity that early modern thinkers such as Buchanan recognized as quintessentially Euripidean. We see this more radically in Roman drama, and surpassingly in Seneca’s adaptations of Euripides, as apocalyptic prophecy similarly derives not from some immutable truth of history but from the discord of immediate experience. Discord, and especially violent experience, form the crucible wherein history is remade, and where passionate individual ferocity proximate to madness—Seneca’s Nero and Medea for instance—crystalizes into a law of its own, substituting for what has been displaced a deeper, if far more disturbing, pattern of historical continuity.⁷⁸

Revision of an orthodox heroic code is sharply exemplified in Euripides’ depiction of Odysseus in *Hecuba* as “that cunning, honey-tongued quibbler, / That pleaser of the mob” who, in seeking to have Hecuba’s daughter sacrificed to appease the gods for the death of Achilles, urged the Greeks “Not to dishonour the bravest of all the Greeks / For the sake of a slave’s throat” (131-34). Moreover, by complicating the motivations of a famous heroic character such as Odysseus (and here we should keep in mind Buchanan’s Jephthes and Milton’s Samson as later exemplars of the same

⁷⁷ Desiderius Erasmus, *Dialogus Ciceronianus*, tr. Izora Scott (New York: AMS P, 1972).

⁷⁸ See Gordon Braden’s superb discussion of Senecan drama, *Anger’s Privilege: Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985), pp. 38-40.

expository tactic), Euripides draws attention to what became the focus of early modern theorists and theologians—the deeply problematic, primitive underside of sacrificial killing. And in drawing attention to sacrifice Euripides forces upon his perceptive audience member secondary and tertiary questions regarding the shifting definitions of slave and citizen, woman and man, parent and child, individual and polis, questions that ultimately lead to the comprehensive inquiry into what sustains the culture, divinity itself. The Prologue to *Baptistes* thus aligns Buchanan with Euripides, who by reevaluating and reworking heroic characterization, exposes conventional belief and mythoi in order to awaken to a more complex evaluation the receptive individual seated in the theater of Dionysus.

E. R. Dodds has argued that what is less often noticed of the Athenian Enlightenment is the regressive character of popular religion that first appeared during the Peloponnesian War. The stresses the war generated eroded Periclean Age achievement, severed the ties of civic religion so that individuals were independent to choose their own gods. And as the intellectuals withdrew further into themselves, the popular mind was left increasingly defenseless, a large number of the citizenry relapsing into the pleasures and base comforts of the primitive.⁷⁹ In “Thoughts on War and Death,” Freud provides the modern equivalent of the dissolution of a Periclean Golden Age:

the state seldom proves able to indemnify [individual man] for the sacrifices it exacts. Nor should it be a matter for surprise that this relaxation of all the moral ties between the collective individuals of mankind should have had repercussions on the morality of individuals; for

⁷⁹ Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, pp. 192-3.

our conscience is not the inflexible judge that ethical teachers declare it, but in its origin is 'social anxiety' and nothing else. When the community no longer raises objections, there is an end, too, to the suppression of evil passions, and men perpetrate deeds of cruelty, fraud, treachery and barbarity so incompatible with their level of civilization that one would have thought them impossible.⁸⁰

For Euripides and for the educated in his audience, the withdrawal of the daemonic world rendered the language of Homeric and Hesiodic myth and theogony as merely the semantics of a traditional symbology; individuals were now alone with their passions. As a result Euripides' studies of crime, the murders of Hecuba's children Polydorus and Polyxena in *Hecuba* for instance, have a singular trenchancy because he presents to us men and women confronting the mystery of evil no longer as a supernatural presence assailing their reason from without, but as an immanent part of their own being. Thus Buchanan, declaring *Baptistes* "an old story refurbished," and prophesying that "As long as the human race lasts, wicked spite will always oppress worthy men" because "[v]iolence will prevail over right, deceit over innocence" (135), learns from Euripides' use of contemporary contentions and his subsuming vision of cultural dissolution not to proselytize or indoctrinate, but to create dramatic art out of their tension.⁸¹ It is a dialectical praxis at the very heart of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*.

⁸⁰ Sigmund Freud, "Thoughts on War and Death," from *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 22 vols. (1914-1916), 14:280.

⁸¹ See E. R. Dodds' edition of *The Bacchae* (Oxford, 1960), p. XLVI. For the use of the Judges narrative in Milton's time, see Wittreich, *Interpreting "Samson Agonistes,"* pp. 54-61. Wittreich makes the interesting observation that *Samson*, like *King Lear*, is a fictionalized history cast as tragedy: "if *Lear* is a representation of the tragedy of Christian humanism, *Samson* is similarly and simultaneously a representation of the tragedy of Renaissance Puritanism and of the English Civil War" (55). I would

Buchanan's despairing, prophetic gloss in *Baptistes* measures human history as Euripidean tragedy while signaling forward to end-time, an eschatological forewarning captured in Michael's vision in *Paradise Lost* of the tragedy of human history as "violence / Proceed(ing), and Oppression, and Sword-Law" (*PL* 11.671-72), and in Samson's death by "self violence," "at variance with himself" (*SA*, 1585-86) in *Samson Agonistes*.⁸² In *Baptistes*, Malchus reviews his experience of a world turned upside down: "our land in slavery, our temples sacrilegiously polluted, things sacred and profane confounded" wherein "Judaea is the slave to Idumaea, Sion to an Arab ruler, Jerusalem to one profane, god's people to one unholy" (135). At a moment when "some spark of ancient dignity" renewed the hope of his enslaved people, "a new Baptist" appeared, "one of us by race, a Levite by tribe, dedicated to God from his very cradle" who had "beguiled the simple folk . . . [w]ith his shaggy hair" and "appearance of stern sanctity." Malchus' continuous attacks on John's sermon and the common people who follow him suggest his incapacity to perceive clearly, a lack of judgment that resonates powerfully in Milton's ironic use of the Judges narrative in *Samson Agonistes*. Like Samson, Malchus sees himself as a tragic hero whose suffering should induce pity and fear; and later in the drama, in terms approximating Euripides' Polymestor in *Hecuba* as well as Samson, Malchus pities himself as the forsaken champion of the supremacy of

extend this point to argue that, as a literary mode, the re-casting of history as tragedy begins with Euripides, most notably in such tragedies as *The Trojan Women*, *The Suppliants*, and *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

⁸² Michael Lieb writes in *Milton and the Culture of Violence* that *Samson Agonistes* is "a work of violence to its very core. It extols violence. Indeed, it exults in violence" (p. 237). For an early acknowledgment of Samson's violence, see Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. MacNeill, tr. Ford Lewis Battle, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster P, 1960), 2:870, where Calvin writes that in Samson a "burning and hence vicious longing for vengeance was in control."

his order, an inimical sect he believes he can revalidate through violence—"fortify . . . by this bloodshed" (138).

Gamaliel concludes that Malchus "stray[s] far from the mark of truth" in thinking he can "protect [their] dignity by pride, violence and arrogance" (137), and that Malchus is "fired with anger and swollen with pride," a derangement which can only lead to renewed cycles of violence as the "precedent which we cruelly set in attacking others" will "later rebound upon our own heads." The Chorus adds the summary note:

the cover of piety conceals the impious. On their faces men who are
disturbed feign tranquillity, and deceivers feign truthfulness . . . [y]ou
bring to birth such evil, O desire for glory swollen with empty pride, and
you, praise accorded to honour with your veneer of gleaming outward
show. (138, 140)

Similarly in *Samson Agonistes*, Samson in his opening soliloquy laments the upside down world of the deliverer "Design'd for great exploits" who "Should *Israel* from *Philistian* yoke deliver" and who now finds himself "Eyeless in *Gaza* at the Mill with slaves / Himself in bonds under *Philistian* yoke" (32, 39, 42-3). Acknowledging that he was, like Malchus and the conquerors in *Paradise Regained*, "swoll'n with pride," Samson roamed hostile ground, paradoxically "Full of divine instinct," "admir'd of all and dreaded," "like a petty God" fired with anger and desire for bloody renown equivalent to "The Sons of *Anac*, famous now and blaz'd," the proverbial race of giants whose progeny would include Samson's rival and reciprocative Harapha (532, 526, 530, 529, 528).

As Gamaliel predicts of violent reciprocity in *Baptistes*, the "precedent" of

cruelly attacking others, what Manoa proudly refers to as his son's being "Fully reveng'd" by leaving his enemies "years of mourning," rebounds upon Samson's head as the ending of Milton's drama situates its dead tragic hero in the grotesquely mutual "Sok't in his enemies blood" (1712, 1726). The "cover of piety" and "gleaming outward show" of the impious noted by the Chorus in *Baptistes*, moreover, are profoundly involved with the Messenger's account of Samson's operatic finale in the "spacious Theatre," where as "Sacrifice" filled the assembled Philistine hearts with mirth, Samson stood before them, "eyes fast fixt," acting "as one who pray'd, / Or some great matter in his mind revolv'd" before announcing to the crowd with remorseless irony that thus far his performance had been "Not without wonder or delight," though now he would "shew you of my strength . . . / As with amaze shall strike all who behold" (1605, 1612, 1637-38, 1642, 1644-45). In sum the genuine glory of tragic sacrifice, as Milton argued in *Eikonoklastes*, "can never be put to him whose sufferings are his own doings" (*CPW* 3:435).

In Euripides' *Hecuba*, sacrificial killing similarly reverts back upon the imperceptive Polymestor as Hecuba, enslaved and bereft at the brutal murders of her two children, lures Polymestor to her prison tent where with the aid of her attendant women she proceeds to blind him and then murder his own children. In remarkably similar terms to Samson's theater demolition, less the ironic gloating, Polymestor cries out in a blind rage, "I'll smash everything, I'll tear the place down" (1043), to which Hecuba counters, "rage as you will, tear down the walls . . . / You'll never put the sight back in your darkened eyes" (1047-48). Hecuba's note of the permanently darkened eyes of the violent sinner resonates in Samson's admission of himself as "Now blind, disheartn'd, sham'd, dishonour'd, quell'd" (563) and Milton's observation in *Christian Doctrine* on blinding and the disclosing of true character: "It is evil when God . . . either withdraws his grace from a man or throws opportunities for sin in his path or hardens his heart or

blinds him. This is generally an evil temptation from the point of view of the man tempted, but on God's part it is absolutely just . . . as for example when it is used to unmask hypocrisy." Spiritual death for Milton equates with "the loss or at least the extensive darkening of that right reason, whose function it was to discern the chief good, and which was, as it were, the life of the understanding," and as such the "standard of judgement will be the individual conscience itself, and so each man will be judged according to the light which he has received" (CPW 6:338, 395, 623). Like Samson's encounters with Dalila and Harapha, whom in his "sudden rage" he would respectively "tear thee joint by joint" and "dash thee down / To the hazard of thy brains and shatter'd sides" (953, 1240-41), the blind Polymestor warns Hecuba that if he catches her he will "tear her flesh and break her bones," thus maintaining the cycle of violent retribution by doing "to them what they've done to me" (1070, 72).

In *Baptistes*, John contends in an indictment applicable to Milton's Samson, "Only man, for whom much more than for the rest of creation it would be fitting to rejoice in and to obey god's commands, amongst all and supremely registers contempt. He spurns God's commands, rejects the reins of the laws, and rushes headlong into every crime. He measures justice by wantonness, and weighs law by violence" (149). And the Rabbis whose duty it is to lead their people nearer to God are "yourselves the wolves," "feeding and devouring" (150-51) the flock in terms approximate to Milton's repeated reference to the clergy as rapacious wolves⁸³ and Hecuba's prophetic dream in which she

⁸³ In *Lycidas*, for instance, Milton writes of the "grim Woolf with privy paw" who "Daily devours apace" (128-29), and in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* the clergy are "left rambling from Benefice to Benefice, like rav'nous *Wolves* seeking where they may devour. . . . a pack of hungrie *Church-wolves*, who in the steps of Simon Magus thir Father . . . have got possession, or rather seis'd upon the Pulpit, as the strong hold and fortress of thir sedition and rebellion against the civil Magistrate" (CPW 3; italics mine). As Roy Flannagan notes in *The Riverside Milton*, wolves were associated with the Catholic threat, and especially with the Jesuits, whose coat of arms included two

envisions the sacrifice of her daughter as “a dappled fawn cruelly dragged / From the protection of my lap, and torn / By a wolf’s fangs, and slaughtered” (91-93).

In *Hecuba*, the Herald of the Greek army Talthybius’ asks the question, “is all our belief in gods a myth, a lie / Foolishly cherished?” (490-91), to which Hecuba later replies: “It is by Law that we believe the gods exist; / By Law we live, by Law distinguish right and wrong” (799-800). Hecuba’s ironic note on tyranny and its legal underpinning is echoed in *Baptistes* by Malchus:

kings mount for their enjoyment shows which exploit the blood of citizens from opposing sides, and sport with the slaughter we inflict on each other. Whatever plan the crowd approves they claim as their own, and proclaim that they have carried it out. They arrogate the diligence of our toil for their own praise . . . and divert the effect of their sinning by spilling innocent blood and by destruction of life held cheap. (153)

In the epistle to *Christian Doctrine*, Milton correspondingly writes that without the freedom to read and interpret any doctrine there can be no religion and no gospel, and in consequence “violence alone prevails; and it is disgraceful and disgusting that the Christian religion should be supported by violence. Without this freedom, we are still enslaved: not as once, by the law of God but, what is vilest of all, by human law, or rather, to be more exact, by inhuman tyranny” (*CPW* 6:123).

In the tragedies of Euripides and Buchanan, and especially in *Jephthes* as will be discussed, sacrificial violence is an inevitability indifferent to reason and justice.

wolves (p. 105).

Similarly, *Samson Agonistes* presumes the certainty of sacrificial violence; yet Milton's exploration of the theme is more nuanced in its discernment that Christianity and tragedy, ostensibly mutually exclusive, have a common interest in the problematic of sacrificial praxis as it foreshadows simultaneously the death of Christ and the barbarism of a pre-Christian world. If we can agree with Rene Girard that Euripides was concerned, however obliquely, with the destruction of a cultural order, we might also conclude that the violent reciprocity that consumes his characters is a manifestation of this destructive process.⁸⁴ The symmetry between tragic rivals in Euripidean tragedy is so resolutely applied that in the end it dissolves even the difference between man and god: divinity becomes a prize in the struggle between two rivals, a mirroring strategy Milton deployed in his tragedy, as Samson concedes in his violent challenge to Harapha that will conclude "whose God is strongest, thine or mine. / . . . By combat to decide whose god is God" (1155, 1176).

On the discovery of the death of John in *Baptistes*, the Chorus mourns: "That divine vehemence and handsome face has withered in grim death; that mouth so recently full of God's sacred power foul violence has closed in enduring silence" (163). Polymestor and Samson, too, die violently, though Samson's death was induced, as the Chorus tells his bereft father, by "Self-violence," the "Inevitable cause / At once both to destroy and be destroy'd" (1584, 1586-87). The theme of sacrifice that so interested early modern thinkers, and especially Buchanan, takes on greater force in *Samson Agonistes* and returns us to Euripides' seminal vision of sacrificial revenge as the operative cause of cultural breakdown. Euripides' repeated portrayals of the ruinous effects of retaliative warfare, both individual and collective, are perhaps best captured in the *Suppliants*—a tragedy from which Milton quotes on the title page of *Areopagitica* and

⁸⁴ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. P. Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977), pp. 55, 132.

in *Christian Doctrine*—wherein the failed warlord Adrastus, in profoundly elegiac mode, laments that at one time

We thought ourselves irresistible, superior
 In numbers and in youth; so, when the king of Thebes
 Offered us peace on fair conditions, we refused;
 And then we were defeated. Next, the tables turned,
 Victorious Thebes acts like a poor man newly rich;
 Grows insolent; and in turn insolence leads the whole
 City of Cadmus through stupidity to ruin . . .
 O foolish states, who have the power to avert defeat
 By conference, yet choose instead the ordeal of blood. (737-49)

The “ordeal of blood”—retaliative warfare as opposed to “conference” between peoples—is a recurrent theme in Euripidean tragedy and lies at the core of Buchanan’s tragedies as well as Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, where Samson understands his place as “At once both to destroy and be destroy’d” (1586-87). We as participants in the tragedy, moreover, gain greater understanding, in view of the Euripidean precedent, of the complexity of Milton’s drama as well as the potential use of irony in depicting his fallen protagonist.

Chapter 3

Jephthes and Iphigenia in Aulis

[A]re these things just stories, without point or truth, brought to man from the pages of poets?"

–Euripides⁸⁵

Buchanan's last tragedy, *Jephthes*, written before he departed Bordeaux in 1544, was published in Paris in 1554. Roger Ascham in his *Scholemaster* wrote of the connection between Buchanan, Aristotelian precepts, and Euripides, in terms reminiscent of Milton's preface to *Samson Agonistes*: "Few men, in wrytyng of Tragedies in our dayes, have shot at this marke. . . . of the which not one I am sure is able to abyde the trew touch of *Aristotles* preceptes and *Euripides* examples, save onely two that I ever saw, *M. Watsons Absolon* and *Georgius Buckananus Jepthe*."⁸⁶ All we know of Watson's *Absalon* is that it was performed at St. John's College, Cambridge, circa 1579, and that its metrical exactness, more pagan than Christian as Ascham makes clear, disallowed its use abroad. But Buchanan's tragedy *Jephthes*, a drama redacted from the Judges narrative and modeled on Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (and written while Buchanan was translating Euripides' *Alcestis* and *Medea* into Latin), is a radical departure from the customary didactic intent of continental and English biblical tragedy,

⁸⁵ Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, in *Euripides Ten Plays*, tr. Moses Hadas and John McLean (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), p. 333.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Campbell, *Divine Poetry*, p. 182. The first French biblical tragedy of the period is believed to be Theodore de Beza's *Abraham Sacrifiant* of 1550. Beza's subject is very close to that of *Jephthes*, but it is not strictly a tragedy because it has a happy ending, and Beza himself mentions in his preface that it contains both tragedy and comedy.

which was written for and performed by schoolboys as a means of learning Latin. In essence, *Jephthes* continues Buchanan's exploration of the increasingly complex interrelation between divinity and the human sphere, the difficulty of comprehending a God whose meaning and intention remain systematically inscrutable. In *Samson Agonistes*, as in the corpus of Euripides, this complex, problematic question of the interrelation between divinity and man is given extraordinary power, and thus questions arise as to where we might locate the line between a benign divinity and one that wishes to destroy human happiness, and correspondingly how human volition and desire interact with or are subsumed within systems of belief.

In Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, translated by Erasmus and published by Josse Bade in 1506,⁸⁷ the human sacrifice does not depend on a vow to god, as in *Jephthes*, but rather was a condition laid down by Artemis by which the Greeks could leave Aulis for the war at Troy. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, one of the original versions of the legend of Aulis, the Greek fleet is held at harbor by stormy north-east winds, and as such the sacrifice is clearly to appease Artemis. But in Euripides' version there is no wind at all—"No cry of a bird, no sound from the sea, / The winds are silent, Euripus hushed" (9-11)—a modification of the Aeschylean and other early versions that reduces the supernatural to unintelligibility. Euripides' alteration thus shifts the responsibility for action, in this case the sacrificial murder of a young girl, from divinity to man alone, dramatically underscoring the cruel irrationality of the murderous act, the *mania* that possesses all from Agamemnon and Odysseus, famous heroes of the past, to the Myrmidons. Euripides' drama thus reflects the contemporary context of corrupt and brutal military behavior near the end of the Peloponnesian War, and the war itself is portrayed as senseless, the brutal machinations of arrogant and incompetent individuals

⁸⁷ See Sharratt, "Euripides Latinus: Buchanan's Use of his Sources," p. 614.

devoid of physical and moral courage who are quick to transfer their responsibilities and motivations to a dimly perceived, if not altogether removed, divinity.

Turning again to Aeschylus' earlier portrayal, the Chorus comprehends that the real meaning of the sacrifice is to induce courage in an army of men heading off to certain death.⁸⁸ In Euripides' tragedy, conversely, the Chorus expounds the total loss of meaning involved in the violent sacrifice:

Where now can the clear face of goodness,
Where can virtue itself live by its own strength?
When ruthless disregard holds power,
When men, forgetting they are mortal,
Tread down goodness and ignore it,
When lawlessness overrules law,
When the terror of God no longer draws men together
Trembling at the reward of wickedness? (1089-96)

Euripides' ironic representation of traditional and mythic figures, the great names of the Trojan War—Odysseus, Agamemnon, Achilles, Menelaus—presses upon the reader or audience member a questioning of the very conception of heroism passed down from Homeric epic. Buchanan's portrayal in *Jephthes* of the sacrifice of Iphis (a name not in the biblical account and that signals the Euripidean subtext) is thus sharply qualified by the Euripidean precedent, and in consequence renders equivocal the implicit parallel of

⁸⁸ See Vellacott's discussion of *Iphigenia* in *Ironic Drama*, pp. 42-49.

God's sacrifice of his Son—the Christian typological tradition that would extend to *Samson Agonistes*.

When the Peloponnesian War began in 431 B.C. Euripides wrote *The Children of Heracles*, a tragedy followed over the next twenty years by seven more plays about war, and two known to us in fragments. Philip Vellacott has observed that in the first year of the war Thucydides' transcription of Pericles' Funeral Speech early in Book 2 of his *History* extols the honor of sacrificial valor in time of war with a supreme veracity that contains no irony. For Thucydides, the irony emerges later in the *History* as the subsequent narrative recounts an unremitting practice of military and civilian killing that escalates to engulf the entirety of Hellas for the succeeding twenty years. Only by viewing the Funeral Speech from the perspective of the total historical pattern, wherein the early mark of exalted moral confidence has been replaced by the corrosive rationalism of the Melian Dialogue and the despair of Nicias retreating from Syracuse—both being preludes to genocidal slaughter—do we perceive its profoundly disturbing irony.⁸⁹ Notably, Milton's *History of Britain* expounds a similar vision of historical patterning. "For what wonder," Milton writes, "if in all Ages, Ambition and the love of rapine hath stirr'd up greedy and violent men to bold attempts in wasting and ruining Warrs, which to posterity have left the work of Wild Beasts and Destroyers, rather than the Deeds and Monuments of men" (*CPW* 5:40). This projection of the escalating senselessness of war and slaughter, tacitly reflected in Thucydides and more forcefully and explicitly in Milton's *History of Britain*, is exemplified and distilled in Euripidean tragedy as it instructs us, in contrast to Aeschylean drama,⁹⁰ that no divine or moral principle underlies the pattern of history and that justice, or more acutely the

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

⁹⁰ Cf. Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* 750-81, 1001-16. In *Ten Greek Plays*, ed L. R. Lind (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957).

barbarities of war and injustice, is something which humanity may infrequently realize by its own efforts, but never by the warrant of a god.⁹¹ Euripidean drama was so important to dramatists such as Buchanan and Milton (and their respective protagonist judges Jephthes and Samson) because it allows us to see, as Philip Vellacott concludes, that the result of protracted war and violence on those who yield to its influence is mental and moral degeneration:

The fighting youth of Hellas have, in the name of an imaginary 'freedom,' destroyed the land that gave them birth; and this deterioration is now indistinguishable from insanity. . . . What Euripides is showing in *Iphigenia at Aulis* is what twenty-five years of war have taught him: the power that falsity has over truth; the commanders who cannot command, the reasons which are covers for real reasons, the loyalty which is expedient, the resolves which are provisional; the banner of freedom held aloft by men who know their own slavery and find 'freedom' a useful excuse for doing what they intend to do.⁹²

Iphigenia at Aulis, like the *Bacchae*, is a late Euripidean tragedy in which the crisis of values experienced at the end of the Peloponnesian War is projected into the legendary past.⁹³ Euripides' exposure of customary notions of heroism and the real

⁹¹ F. M. Cornford, in *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), argues that Thucydides was working out tragic patterns of self-destruction in the Greek city states. For early modern historiography of the kind Milton endeavors, the Machiavellian tradition would observe the development of such patterns to determine which route to decline a state would pursue.

⁹² Vellacott, *Ironic Drama*, pp. 173, 175.

⁹³ See Martin Mueller, *Children of Oedipus and Other Essays on the Imitation of Greek Tragedy, 1550-1800* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1980), p. 39.

consequences of war does not slip into parody, however, because heroism emerges at last in the character of Iphigenia. Buchanan, conscious of the Euripidean precedent, employs a similar irony in his redaction of the Judges story yet removes what is in Euripides the single redemptive potential. In *Jephthes* as in *Samson Agonistes*, the strain of Euripidean irony, however implicit, quietly undermines the vow Jephthes makes to his god and the “Promise” (38) Samson makes to his.⁹⁴ Transferred to Buchanan’s tragedy and fused with the incendiary history of Israel portrayed in the Judges narrative, the Euripidean subtext becomes a radically complicating, rather than restorative, source text.

Buchanan’s choice of the story of Jephthes’s vow implies a recognition of the problem of Christian tragedy and set a precedent for dealing with it: if tragedy is incompatible with the outright promise of salvation, then Christian tragedy must draw on those phases of Christian experience in which the promise of salvation is attenuated and deferred to such an extent as to raise doubts about its very existence. Milton, writing his tragedy in the wake of a failed revolution, injects attenuation and deferment into his narrative as a means of complicating and advancing a traditional story. The promised end, as in *Lear*, is not utterly denied and may indeed be foreshadowed, but Christian tragedy as represented in *Jephthes* and *Samson* requires a compression of perspective and a focusing on situations of suffering and despair and seemingly random violence in which a full vision of transcendence is systematically withheld.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ An example of a traditional interpretation Milton and Buchanan would interrogate through ironic representation is St. Paul’s enumeration of Old Testament heroes in *Hebrews*: “of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah . . . who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight” (11:32).

⁹⁵ See Mueller, *Children of Oedipus*, pp. 155-56.

The medieval scriptural and canonical commentary on the Jephthes narrative, like that of Samson, is equivocal when determining the legitimacy of sacrifice. Buchanan himself observed of the central issue in his tragedy: "On vows, I revealed my opinion by a passage in my tragedy on the vow of Jephthes. The sum of the discussion was as follows: vows which were lawfully made should always be kept, and moreover many know that at Coimbra it was my custom gladly to read and always to commend the speech of Barthelemy Latomus on this subject against Bucer."⁹⁶ Yet Buchanan's exploration of the vow in *Jephthes* is complicated by the stichomythic exchanges (typically Euripidean) between Jephthes and a priest and between Jephthes and Storge, as both interlocutors argue against Jephthes' fulfilling his vow. The priest contends that human sacrifice is an irrational perversity, the projection of blunt human cruelty onto the divine, while Storge argues that it is a violation of natural law, the inviolable bond between parent and child. Moreover Storge stresses what was already implicit in the priest's argument and toward which the focus on the vow compels us: that the sacrifice of Iphis subverts the distinction between Israel and the pagans Jephthes has just conquered, as the stable opposition between Israel's God and the barbaric enemy breaks down. Aquinas affords another perspective, pursuing the same problem though with qualification by allowing that "[o]ther actions are good considered in themselves, and for this reason can be the matter of a vow, yet they may have an evil result, *in which case the vow may not be observed*. This happened in the case of Jephthe, who, as related in *Judges*, made a vow to the Lord." Aquinas proceeds casuistically to absolve Jephthes, though he is clearly uneasy at the violence of his actions and the potential for evil therein:

⁹⁶ See Atkin, *The Trial of George Buchanan*, p. 13.

This vow could have an evil result, were he to meet some animal that should not be sacrificed, such as . . . a human being, as indeed happened. Hence Jerome says, 'In vowing, he was foolish because he did not use discretion, and in keeping the vow he was impious'. Yet the Scripture says that the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, because his faith and devotion which moved him to make the vow were from the Holy Spirit. For this reason, because of the victory he won and because he probably repented of his evil deed (which however prefigured something good) he is placed in the catalogue of the saints.' (Cf. *Hebrews* 2.32).⁹⁷

Buchanan probably knew the work of Aquinas, as well as the medieval tradition which admonished Jephthes (and similarly Samson⁹⁸) as mistaken while admiring the strength of his piety. In *Jephthes*, the Messenger reports to Storge and Iphis the preparations and confrontation before fighting began. Countering the Ammonite's charge of past deceit and violence on the part of the Israelites, Jephthes had declared

No mention has ever been made . . . about uncertain rights, except perhaps that what your god Chamos held will pass to you by right, whereas our God will abandon the lands He possessed. He will not abandon them, but as previously He deprived his enemies of their lands as victor in war, so too now as just Judge He will bring a successful outcome

⁹⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, tr. Kevin D. O'Rourke (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948): 2a 2ae 88.2 ad 2. This view may be partly shaped by Cicero, *Off.* 3.95f.; see *Baptistes* 1250n.

⁹⁸ For an overview of such tradition, see Paul Carus, *The Story of Samson and Its Place in the Religious Development of Mankind* (Chicago: Open Court, 1907).

to this battle, according to justice and right.⁹⁹

Justice and right thus become entirely relative terms dependent upon which tribe one belongs to. In *Samson Agonistes*, it is precisely this conflict between warring tribes who assign motivation to their respective god that leads to resumption of cyclical violence, especially pronounced in the interchange between Samson and Harapha, wherein Samson as duelist contests not Harapha but Harapha's god: "challenge *Dagon* to the test, / Offering to combat thee his Champion bold, / With th' utmost of his Godhead seconded: / Then thou shalt see, or rather to thy sorrow / Soon feel, whose God is strongest, thine or mine" (1151-55). In *Jephthes*, only the sudden *deus ex machina* appearance of the Israelite god alters the chaotic "din of arms" to their favor. "It is God, yes God" Jephthes cries at the apocalyptic vision of "flames" incinerating the enemy lines as the "whole sky gleam[ed] with squadrons of fire" (70). In a particularly gruesome description, the Israelite army, led by Jephthes, pursues the now fleeing Ammonites until they reap in a final massacre in God's name "the entire flower of that treacherous race," a line reflected in Milton's Samson's own mass slaughter of "the flower of *Palestin*" (144) and his portrayal of the Philistine Dalila as a "Traytress" (725), who, as the Chorus informs us, "so treacherously / Had shorn the fatal harvest" (1023-24) of Samson's head.

In the aftermath of the war with Ammon in Buchanan's tragedy, the Messenger concludes of Jephthes's heroics:

So the slain enemy in piles of corpses hold the position at which they

⁹⁹ *George Buchanan: Tragedies*, ed. Sharratt and Walsh, p. 70.

stood, or strewn over the fields in ghastly carnage they feed the vultures.
 And our leader, with thought for the future, has ensured that no new war
 will break out afresh for many years; he has won peace even for
 descendants late-born. In victory he has swiftly borne his arms through
 the whole of Ammon's nation, and upturned twice six towns after
 destroying their walls. He has burnt their houses, executed their youth,
 ravaged their lands. Only feeble elders, slight children, women unfit for
 war wander over the desolate soil and lament their land's calamity. (71)

If we think back to the Thucydidean and Euripidean examples, there is a terrible irony in "our leader, with thought for the future," as we know all too well that the nearing murder of his only daughter is, to understate the matter, the symbolic and literal counter to *any* consideration of futurity and succession. Rather, it is the killing of the future, a theme powerfully reiterated in tragedies such as *Macbeth* and, I believe, *Samson Agonistes*. Milton's drama poignantly concludes with Samson's mass-murder/suicide and return "Home to his Fathers house" (1733) for public enshrinement, a denouement dramatically at odds with the ending of its companion poem *Paradise Regained* in which the son in readiness for saving humanity "unobserv'd / Home to his Mothers house private return'd" (4:638-39). The Messenger's ironic account in *Jephthes* compels us to re-examine what has just occurred, as well as check the drama's omissions from and additions to the source text in the Judges narrative. Thus in the final analysis the destruction and bizarre overkilling engaged in by Jephthes appears so excessive as to be psychopathic. If we assume "In victory" to mean the battle was over, Jephthes's subsequent assault on "the whole of Ammon's nation"—in which he demolished "twice six towns after destroying their walls," "burnt their houses, executed their youth, ravaged

their lands” (71)—is starkly outside any traditional notion of ethical heroism. And what is pivotal and determinant in the drama, the brutality exercised upon a vanquished enemy, removes sympathy for Jephthes and his tribe just as Medea’s murder of her children and Agamemnon’s of his daughter in Euripidean tragedy leave us unsympathetic and despairing: in the progressively ambiguous, violent narrative world of Buchanan’s drama, we come away with anything but calm of mind and passion spent. It is much the same world in Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, and again we recall the haunting phrase that concludes the Judges narrative from which both biblical dramas are drawn: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judg. 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25).

Buchanan’s Jephthes, returning from the encounter with the Ammonites, prays to his god:

ills of slavery have oppressed us . . . [f]or we abandoned you, our king,
 advocate and God, father of the world and source of enduring good. . . .
 This is why, creator and mighty judge of the world . . . we shall sacrifice
 at your altars with victims according to ancestral ritual. . . . Mindful of the
 compact made with you, be pleased to receive in kindly fashion this vow
 of your servant. . . . The first thing to encounter me on my safe return at
 my house will be your welcome victim and will steep your altar with its
 blood, even though no victim can be counted equal to your kindnesses.
 But you must with good will consider this as the gift of a mindful heart.
 You both redeem your promises faithfully and rejoice that vows are
 faithfully paid to you; you practise your power against those who war on
 you, but practice clemency towards those who fear you. There is no other

strength which earth, sky and hell obey. (72-73)

At the conclusion of his soliloquy his daughter Iphis appears: "I am come forth. How glad and happy I am to see the face of my sire back with us! Father whom I must revere second only to God, allow me to enjoy your embrace. Why, father, do you turn your frowning eyes from me?" (73-74). The irony is made more unbearable as it comes directly after Jephthes's supplicate petition to his god, a poignancy that is repeated in Jephthes's subsequent conversation with Symmachus which underscores the total relativity of Jephthes's position. In his unanticipated desolation Jephthes wistfully covets the luck of one "who lives his life unknown in secure silence, far removed from the din of affairs" (76), to which Symmachus counters:

Nay, I shall account as blessed rather him for whom true excellence has won eternal fame, whom deserved glory has rescued from the darkness of the masses, separated from the idle mob, and hallows for future generations. . . . So since a kindly deity has bestowed on you all that he can give a man—praises, distinctions, achievement, glory, victory—be grateful, and acknowledge the kindness of the deity . . . for nothing can be more welcome to God than a spirit mindful of a kindness conferred. (77)

In his newfound perspective, Jephthes replies: "Achievement, distinction, victory, honour, triumph, glory won in war sound splendid on the tongue. But look closer at things which seem pleasant at first sight, and you will realise that they are spiced with the sharp bitterness of bile. . . . You count me blessed, measuring blessedness by empty brightness and the plaudits of the mob, but the most palpable wretchedness oppresses

me” (77).

Further complicating the matter is the Priest, who advises Jephthes, arguing from natural law, that “it is open to you to choose whether you sacrifice your daughter or not,” yet “How is it open to you to carry through what our sacred mother nature forbids, that our love of kin struggles against, and what God loathes?” (81-82). And most pointedly and searchingly, in a statement that resonates in *Samson Agonistes*, the Priest concludes:

It is not enough for us to pollute our hands with sinning; we delight in attributing the sacrilegious deed to heaven. We pretend that God takes joy in bloody victims, a ritual which neither Egypt which does not know God nor Assyria uniquely devoted to false superstitions perpetrates. . . . Our God is not offered gory victims or the blood of cattle; but the hearts defiled by no pollution, a mind refined by ingenuous truth, and a chaste conscience are to be offered him. (82)

The priest’s humanist rationalism exposes the projection of human cruelty onto the divine and thus advances a sharp critique of sacrificial religion and, by extension, of biblical religion. The Priest argues in terms reminiscent of Milton’s Samson that “[h]e who binds himself to carry out unspeakable crime obeys without compulsion his own dreams and foolish feelings. So whatever that vow of yours, cease to associate God with your cruelty. . . . If you think that foolish vows can be expiated by unspeakable sacrifices, you are misled; this cruelty will increase rather than remove your crime” (83-84). And in what may be the most momentous speech in the entire drama, the Priest concludes:

the more ignorant a man from the common folk usually is, the more haughtily he arrogates the authority of pronouncing judgment in matters most uncertain; and (what is usually the mark of ignorance) with obstinate spirit he defends a belief once adopted. Meanwhile he does not weigh with just scrutiny whether his fast-held tenets are evil or right; but although his lack of vision is the most pronounced of the whole populace, the blind man accuses those with sight of blindness. People like you are like the man whose entrails are ablaze and roasting with fever; he thinks that everything is bitter, and believes that he alone is sane when he is totally delirious. . . . True religion, true piety is not to worship God by a practice which you have self-deceivingly established for yourself, and not to slaughter any victims whatsoever in sacrifice, but those which the decrees of laws sent from heaven demand, and which ancestral custom approves. . . . [H]aving fallen into willful blindness you seek praise in your wrongdoing by use of honourable labels. You abolish distinctions of all kinds when you decide that what is just and unjust, mean and honourable depends on the opinion of the fickle mob. (85)

The Chorus then repeats the Priest's words, intensifying the critique of a violent martial tradition: "One man who cannot abide leisure seeks for himself the laurel purchaseable by death, and with grim arms at the cost of another's grief wins whispers of empty fame" (87).

In *Samson Agonistes*, the laurel purchaseable by death is "eternal fame"—"A monument" planted round with "Laurel ever green, and branching Palm, / With all his Trophies hung, and Acts enroll'd / In copious Legend, or sweet Lyric Song" (1717,

1734-37). Milton's critique, however, is more subtle and, as such, more Euripidean than Buchanan's as Milton removes the counterpoint of *Jephthes'* Priest and Storge and leaves us to grapple with the outcome on our own. Moreover if we search Milton's other works we find that in *Christian Doctrine*, for instance, he writes in emphatic opposition to legend and lyric song, which he derisively terms "Human traditions, written or unwritten," that lead the unthinking away from truth. Quoting Titus 14 that we should pay "no attention to Jewish fables or to the precepts of men who turn from the truth," Timothy 4, "let him pay no attention to fables and endless genealogies, which give rise to questioning rather than to God's edification of us through faith," and Colossians 2:8, "look out, lest anyone rob you by means of philosophy and delusive vanities, based on human traditions and worldly principles, and not in Christ" (CPW 6:591), Milton glosses and problematizes, indeed invites the most probing questions of his tragedy redacted from the Samson fable. Further still, Milton's allusion to fable in his regicide tracts serves as an occasion to ridicule the Royalists.¹⁰⁰ By 1650 fable was largely about kings and opposition to kings. In *Samson Agonistes* as in *Jephthes*, Milton and Buchanan, following the ideologically skeptical mode set by Euripides, submit the Samson and Jephthes fables to their demythologizing inquiry, searching the ideological content of the stories to their origins in the understanding that what the scriptural stories offer is not necessarily theocratic and political structures, but a frame for a sustained critique of these structures. As such *Samson Agonistes* and *Jephthes* emerge as

¹⁰⁰ Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England*, p. 8. Andrew Marvell's "Upon Appleton House" (1651) provides another example of anti-royalist use of fable. The royalist tree is pecked down by the "hewel" or woodpecker, a surprise demonstration of strength until we learn that the tree is rotted—internally corrupted by a worm: "And yet the worm triumphs not long, / But serves to feed the hewel's young, / While the oak seems to fall content, / Viewing the treason's punishment." (557-60). The felling of the tree signals the fall of corrupt monarchy, but also, for republican literary purposes, the eradication of fable. See Andrew Marvell, *Selected Poems*, ed. Bill Hutchings (New York: Routledge, 2002).

unsettling poems not meant to put us at ease with their world.¹⁰¹

In Buchanan's *Jephthes* it is Storge, finally, who provides the most cutting blow to traditional notions of sacrificial heroism. "If you believe that the deity approves sacrifice only if it be pious and piously performed," she counsels, "dispense with barbaric custom; but if God can be placated with cruelty, make me in company with our daughter an additional victim of your butchery" (88). Storge puts before us a profoundly disturbing question: whether or not god delights in cruelty, the barbarisms of what was thought to be a former, and far more primitive, age. And certainly the answer to her binary imperative—dispense with barbaric custom, or, if god fetishizes cruelty and barbarity, one cannot remain alive—is embedded in the text of the tragedy as the gruesome ritual killing of the innocent Iphis is indeed carried out. Debora Shuger notes that in departing from conventional Renaissance accounts of primitive religion for one viewed through the lens of cultural anthropology, Renaissance theologians realized the proximity of Christianity to what was believed to be barbaric and foreign: the primitive, savage myth at the center of Christian doctrine, the praxes of Christianity originating in a period when human sacrifice was in the name of divinity still widely practiced. Shuger makes the interesting observation that at its core *Jephthes* is concerned with the question of whether God takes pleasure in evil; or as disturbing, whether divine necessity contains the possibility of predestination to evil. Because the angel in the Euripidean prologue relates both the vow and its terrible consequences *before* the audience hears Jephthes promise, "a dark possibility emerges that the same power that punishes Jephthes' vow has also, in some sense, staged it."¹⁰² What *Jephthes* forces upon us in its disconcerting opening monologue and in the problematic forwarded by Storge is, in essence, the question of whether the Christian God wishes to destroy human happiness.

¹⁰¹ See Wittreich, *Interpreting "Samson Agonistes,"* pp. 174-181.

¹⁰² Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible*, pp. 83, 138.

In a moment of self-pity and abdication of responsibility Jephthes submits, “I alone am compelled both to do and to suffer wickedness,” to which Storge caustically retorts, restating Aquinas’ inference more incisively: “But surely you compel yourself readily and voluntarily” as “vows that are wicked are not welcome to God” (88). Further still, Storge argues that their daughter is not Jephthes’s possession alone but is “a shared pledge of love” and as such “a marriage-bond would be an alliance weak and fraught with arrogance if a mother could not save but a father could destroy” (88-89).¹⁰³ Storge excoriates Jephthes as one who “anticipates glory from the blood of his children” and “balances the crime with an air of virtuousness” (89). Where in *Samson Agonistes* Samson’s numerous self-pitying laments find support in Manoa and the Chorus, in Buchanan’s drama Jephthes’s conceits are powerfully countered, in effect invalidated, by Storge and the Priest. And more remarkably and opposed to Jephthes’s violent self-absorption, Iphis, in a Christ-like moment reminiscent of Euripides’ Iphigenia, surrenders her life for the good of the others:

so whatever the fate which necessity impels, I readily consent to suffer,
and I gladly offer my life which I owe to my father and my land. . . . Let
me, if I must, though innocent, bring expiation to the altar with my blood,
and with one victim readily and gladly compensate for the slaughter of so
many foes. (99-91)

Though redemptive heroism indeed emerges in the form of Iphis as it does in Euripides’ Iphigenia, Buchanan’s recursive glance at Euripides collapses historical distance into a

¹⁰³ In the 1671 poetic volume containing *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, the mother (Mary) can save but the father (Manoa) cannot.

single sacrificial moment that eradicates any lingering notion that a historicity of justice and generative futurity, of Aristotelian entelechy, can be sustained in such a world. We become instead the inheritors of Storge's desolate vision—alone, in a violent, deranged, godless void.

The Chorus subsumes the horror of the sacrifice, lifts it from base cruelty to legendary and mythological status as it proclaims that Iphis “will for long be the sorrow and glory of our maidens. Those who have no part in marriage will sing for you repeatedly as the years come round a song of weeping with mournful lament” (92). Similarly in *Samson Agonistes*, Manoa, faced with the “so horrid spectacle” (1542) of Samson's final vengeance, what the Chorus terms “Blood, death, and deathful deeds” (1513), proclaims of Samson's monumentalization, with an ill-timed parting shot at his marriage choices, that “Virgins” shall “on feastful days / Visit his Tomb with flowers, only bewailing / His lot unfortunate in nuptial choice, / From whence captivity and loss of eyes” (1741-44). The final narrative speech of the Messenger in *Jephthes* describes Iphis at the sacrificial altar in terms reminiscent of Euripides (“Father . . . my body I freely give on behalf of my own country and on behalf of all the land of Hellas” [1548]) and as such provides a counterexample to the description of Samson's prayer at the pillars:

Then that girl of manly spirit raised her eyes to the bright stars, and
uttered a prayer from chaste lips, her voice unbroken by her evil fortunes:
‘Eternal Begetter of the Universe, Father of men, now finally show mercy
and pardon to the sin of your race, and receive this victim with gentle
heart. But if you demand expiation of our madness, whatever the

punishment our stubborn arrogance has deserved in abandoning you our Father, may this blood atone for it. I wish that I could shed this blood more often, and if the salvation of my parents and fellow-citizens lies in me, I wish that I could turn the force of your fury and anger repeatedly on myself with a thousand deaths. . . . Discharge from the vow the people, my father and myself.'(93-94)

In *Samson Agonistes*, the Messenger's account of Samson's last act opposes the selfless heroism, however emptied out, of Iphis' last words:

. . . with head a while enclin'd,
 And eyes fast fixt he stood, as one who pray'd,
 Or some great matter in his mind revolv'd.
 At last with head erect cryed aloud,
 Hitherto, Lords, what your commands impos'd
 I have perform'd, as reason was, obeying,
 Not without wonder or delight beheld.
 Now of my own accord such other tryal
 I mean to shew you of my strength, yet greater;
 As with amaze shall strike all who behold.
 This utter'd, straining all his nerves he bow'd,
 As with the force of winds and waters pent,
 When Mountains tremble, those to massie Pillars
 With horrible convulsion to and fro,
 He tugg'd, he shook, till down they came and drew
 The whole roof after them, with burst of thunder

Upon the heads of all who sate beneath. (1636-52)

The “madness” and “stubborn arrogance” Iphis expiates in her death Samson resumes in his. Yet the consoling speech of the Messenger in *Jephthes* is not the last; the final words of the tragedy are Storge’s, and they press upon us the endgame of a powerful and disturbing counterpoint to the Chorus’ attempt at heroic closure: “This consolation is more painful than the ill itself; with its soft touch it irritates the long-standing sore. It renews continually the recollection of bitter grief, and it forces the wound which had closed over to break open afresh. The braver the spirit with which my daughter bore her death, the sorer the anguish which gnaws my heart” (94). The “peace and consolation” (1757) the Chorus in *Samson Agonistes* finds in Samson’s end are rejected in Storge’s last words in *Jephthes* as worse than the sacrificial catastrophe itself, and as such any vision of sublimity and cathartic transcendence is sharply qualified, if not wholly denied.¹⁰⁴ Storge, unlike Manoa and the Chorus in *Samson Agonistes*, sees no heroic majesty nor the wider vision of a savior of a people in the senseless slaughter of her daughter. One last time Storge underscores what was implicit in the Priest’s argument: that the sacrifice of Iphis removes any dissimilarity between Israel and the pagan Ammonites Jephthes has just vanquished. The very notion of “gods” is transformed by Storge, through a rationalizing Euripidean orientation, into mere projections of base human cruelty onto the divine, a kind of Blakean Nobodaddy or Freudian Id in the sky. *Samson Agonistes*, like all Euripidean tragedy, is shot through

¹⁰⁴ The Greek text of the *Poetics* was first printed in 1508 and was edited by Erasmus in 1531. Shuger notes that Buchanan’s friendship with the elder Scaliger, author of *Poetices libri septem* and foremost sixteenth-century authority on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, is significant because it increases the likelihood that Buchanan knew the *Poetics* before Robertello’s popular 1548 edition, making *Jephthes* perhaps the first Renaissance drama written by a poet aware of the relation between *katharsis* and tragedy. Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible*, p. 135.

with the presence of this delicate balance between divine and human motivation, a deep question exemplified explicitly in Samson's exchanges with Harapha wherein Samson gracelessly seeks to discover "whose God is strongest, thine or mine" (1155). What is in question in Buchanan's drama, finally, is whether or not the biblical God is, in human terms, morally perverse.¹⁰⁵

In his comparative study of Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, an adaptation of the Euripidean drama, and Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Martin Mueller observes that in Goethe's drama the transcendence of violence finds its objective correlative in a denouement that rejects violence:

Iphigenia's internal development gathers sufficient force to break the deadlock of the action. . . . She becomes a secular redeemer who in full consciousness brings about a moral revolution. From the perspective of Goethe's play one sees very clearly what Milton does not do. Whereas Goethe's play enacts the transcendence of tragedy by Christianity, albeit in a form of secular displacement, Milton's Christian tragedy does not take the step of transcendence its classical model invites. Iphigenia is portrayed as a redeemer who in her vision of the unredeemed Tantalus becomes a type of Christ harrowing Hell, but the typological significance of Samson is muted. In Goethe's play, the protagonist's consciousness creates the act that transforms a world of violence and gives full expression to the ethos underlying this act; in Milton's play, the

¹⁰⁵ See Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible*, pp. 142-46.

protagonist's consciousness is opaque to us and probably to himself as well, and the final action returns us to a world of destruction that we thought we had left behind.¹⁰⁶

The typological significance of Samson is indeed muted, and it is for this reason that Milton's drama resonates so powerfully and complexly in its final indeterminacy, and as such it contains its predecessors, from Euripides to Buchanan (as well as the future work of Goethe), leaving the audience and reader to sift through various interpretive potentialities in search of truth. The use of the biblical motif of sacrifice as a controlling metaphor, moreover, signals back to Buchanan's *Jephthes* and draws nearer Milton and Buchanan, yet Buchanan's and Goethe's interpretations of Euripides' *Iphigenia* offer radically contrary conceptions of the underlying myth, as Buchanan asserts the inevitability of sacrificial violence and stresses its indifference to reason and justice while Goethe provides reason and justice—a resurrection, as it were—at his poem's denouement. From the perspective of Goethe's drama, *Iphigenie auf Tauris* is a secularized version of the Abraham and Isaac story, anti-tragic and progressive in its belief in the power of human reason and love.

Like Buchanan, Milton insists on the tragic inevitability of sacrificial violence, but his preoccupation, similar to Euripides' in his later work, is not so much with the impotence of reason in man as the wider doubt whether any rational purpose can be seen in the ordering of human life and the governance of the world. For Milton, dramatic religious content becomes a recognition of divinity as outside received moral categories and inaccessible to our reason. If the affirmativeness of Euripidean tragedy, as Nietzsche observed of tragedy generally, is founded on its negativity, on its inquiry into radical

¹⁰⁶ Mueller, *Children of Oedipus*, pp. 209-10.

negation as a basis for overcoming negation, then Milton's tragedy, building on Buchanan, presents a problematized, Euripidean vision of a world emptied of discernible providential order, a world in which divinity, and hence the capacity for regeneration, can only be perceived as immanent: Jesus' quiescent movement within in *Paradise Regained*, the converse to Samson's carnal recidivism in *Samson Agonistes*.

Euripides, like his contemporary Thucydides, deemed the passion for revenge as the principal source of evil in the world. A scan of Euripides' tragedies, and especially the late tragedies, reveals a preoccupation with and representation of revenge as the ruin of law, tradition, human bonds, and reason. Milton too rejected revenge, associating it with the Satanic in *Paradise Lost* and with monarchy in *Eikonoklastes*: "that savage & barbarous revenge which they do no thing els but *study & contemplate*" is the resource of "Traitors & assassiners of all Law both Divine and human" (CPW 3:578).¹⁰⁷ As Freud speculated of primal guilt in his anthropological exploration *Totem and Taboo* and repeated later in "Thoughts on War and Death":

If the Son of God was obliged to sacrifice his life to redeem mankind from original sin, then by law of talion, the requital of like by like, that sin must have been a killing, a murder. Nothing else could call for the sacrifice of a life for its expiation. And the original sin was an offence against God the Father, the primal crime of mankind must have been a parricide, the killing of the primal father of the primitive human horde, whose mnemonic image was later transfigured into a deity.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ I reiterate here Calvin's early acknowledgment that in Samson a "burning and hence vicious longing for vengeance was in control." See *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2:870.

¹⁰⁸ Freud, "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," 14:293.

In *Orestes*, a tragedy Milton read with great care and interest, referencing it in the first academic exercise and *Eikonoklastes* and quoting from it in the *Second Defense*, we hear that “Our ancestors established a sound principle: / The man found guilty of murder they forbade to intrude / On sight or presence of the citizens” (512-14), and thus his crime, rather than be allowed to precipitate an unending series of retributions,

Must be atoned by exile—not by blood for blood;
 Otherwise always one man’s lot is to be involved
 With murder, taking on his hands the last blood-guilt. (515-17)

Moreover, the defeated son Orestes reasons in terms strikingly near to Milton’s Samson:

Since I am now at my last gasp in any case,
 I want to hurt my enemies before I die,
 To pay back those who have betrayed me in their own coin,
 And hear them howling who brought misery on me.
 I am the son of Agamemnon, whom Hellas
 Chose for command by merit—no despot, but one
 Who had god’s strength in him; whom I will not shame
 By a slave’s death, but breathe my last like a free man,
 Getting revenge . . . (1163-71)

In *Samson Agonistes*, Samson too claims himself to be “a person separate to God” who acts on god’s “special favour” (31, 273), the gift of strength Samson would not shame by

remaining “at the Mill with slaves” (41), but would, with Orestes, assert Freud’s law of talion—“hostility, and too thir spoil” to “pay my underminers in thir coin” (1203-04). And just as the omission of the tribe of Dan from the Book of Life in Revelation might be seen as a metaphor for the failed English Revolution, the judgment on the House of Tantalus in *Orestes* is pronounced in what must have been a caustic speech for the once exalted Periclean Athens:

Here is pity, here is indignation
For the fate of those who will die
Who once were leaders of the armies of Hellas.
Lost, lost and vanished,
Gone is the race of Pelops, root and branch,
The prosperous home that was the world’s envy. (968-74)

If Samson’s violent sacrifice foreshadows the sacrificial violence of the crucifixion, it also is, following Euripides and Buchanan, an ironic representation of the projection of personal motivation onto a divinity long removed from the human sphere. Vellacott observes of Euripides’ audience what is a defining perception in thinking of Buchanan’s real audience and especially Milton’s “fit audience . . . though few” (*PL* 7.31):

the nature of irony, as Euripides uses it, implies that some will see it and some will not; and the people for whom *Orestes* was an absorbing piece of escapist melodrama, and *Alcestis* a touching and happily-resolved story of domestic love, comprised a large part of Euripides’ audience, and he

certainly had them in mind when he wrote. But that section of the audience surely did not include those whose minds were closest to the author's. The unreflective, or the religiously conditioned, response to the play did not need exposition then, needs little now, and is of passing importance; the ironic meaning has an interest and a power which are timeless.¹⁰⁹

Jephthes and *Samson Agonistes*, in accord with late Euripidean tragedy, invert the largely classical paradigms of tragedy in which suffering leads to reconciliation, offering instead the reverse—suffering as neither purposeful nor ennobling. Although the protagonist in any one of these tragedies temporarily achieves spiritual and intellectual regeneration through suffering, each is left as Lear is left, in sheer misery and devastation. Nor are we purged of fear and pity in watching the protracted agony of what we know must come any more than we are in witnessing in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* the cowardly and cruel murder of Hector. Prepared for such tragic effects as catharsis and closure, we nevertheless find ourselves experiencing their opposites: all ends cheerless, dark, and deadly.

The tragic world of Euripidean drama, the bright promise and subsequent decline of Thebes, merges into the incendiary history of Israel through Buchanan's *Jephthes*, whose concluding line is not the messenger's attempts to mitigate tragedy and degeneration—the loss of divine sanction so pronounced in *Samson Agonistes*—but Storge's Euripidean vision of unrelieved sorrow in the senseless sacrifice of her

¹⁰⁹ Vellacott, *Ironic Drama*, p. 81.

daughter. The traditionally promised end in which something decisive is accomplished through suffering is replaced by an image of horror, a breakdown of order and sanity that leaves only, as the ending of *Samson Agonistes* articulates, “years of mourning” (1712) in its wake.

Chapter 4

Of War and Peace: Hugo Grotius

“Violence is characteristic of wild beasts, and violence is most manifest in war; wherefore the more diligently effort should be put forth that it be tempered with humanity, lest by imitating wild beasts too much we forget to be human.” –Hugo Grotius¹¹⁰

Renaissance commentators of Greek tragedy, as we have seen, increasingly approached classical drama, broadly speaking, and the work of Euripides more specifically, as poetry which contained fragments of truth (a fundamental aspect of Pauline doctrine) but which was finally superseded by Christian revelation. Hugo Grotius, the renowned Renaissance scholar and biblical tragedian, introducing passages from selected Greek tragedies, expresses this theory succinctly when he compares Greek works, and especially Greek dramatic works, to fragments of a shipwreck, the scattered remains of which constitute “the one God, about his most pure nature separate from the world . . . about eternal providence, about freedom of choice in human actions . . . and about the true worship of God.”¹¹¹ In terms remarkably similar to the choral endings of five Euripidean tragedies,¹¹² as well as the crucial metaphor in *Areopagitica* of a single,

¹¹⁰ Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, tr. A. C. Campbell (Washington and London: M. Walter Dunne, 1901), 3.25:1, 2.

¹¹¹ Hugo Grotius, *Excerpta ex Tragoediis et Comoediis Graecis* (Paris, 1626), sigs. a iiv and a iiir. See Margaret J. Arnold, “*Graeci Christiani*: Milton’s Samson and the Renaissance Editors of Greek Tragedy,” *Milton Studies* 18 (1983): 235-36.

¹¹² As I discuss in a later chapter, Milton would quote this line in an early letter to Charles Diodati Letter dated 23 September 1637: “for many are the shapes of things divine” (*CPW*, 1:326-27).

overarching truth that “may have more shapes than one” (CPW, 2:563), Grotius notes that one must have faith, and thus must read the ancient tragedies in the light of faith, because “there are many things, especially concerning divine matters, which cannot be reduced to clarity by the investigation of reason alone.”¹¹³

Milton was well aware of Grotius, both through his writings and having met with Grotius in May or June of 1638 while Milton was on his way to Italy, and importantly Grotius is one of the few Renaissance authors Milton mentions in the margins of his Geneva edition of Euripides as I shall discuss further.¹¹⁴ Grotius had visited England in 1614, the year of Sir Arthur Gorge’s translation of Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, and Grotius admired Lucan to the extent that later in the same year he composed and published his own edition of the civil war between Pompey and Caesar. For Grotius, the *Pharsalia* should have been compulsory reading for the Dutch so that in admiring the Spanish bard,

¹¹³ Grotius, *Excerpta ex Tragoediis et Comoediis Graecis*: “quia multa sunt, praesertim de rebus divinis, quae sola rationis indagine ad liquidum perducere nequeunt. . . . de Deo uno, de eius purissimae et a rebus aliis secreta natura, de Dei opere Mundo, de perpetua providentia, de libertate humanarum actionum . . . et de vero Dei cultus,” sigs. a iiv and a iiir.

¹¹⁴ For a list of Grotius’ works Milton owned or may have owned, see Boswell, *Milton’s Library*, pp. 117-18. For Milton’s annotations of the Geneva Euripides, see Kelley and Atkins, “Milton’s Annotations of Euripides,” p. 682, who attribute this mention of Grotius to a “second non-Milonic hand,” whom they identify as the “Hierocles annotator.” In *The Works of John Milton*. 18 vols. Ed. F. A. Patterson et al. (New York: Columbia UP), 18:318, the editors assume it is Milton who notes in the margin of *Ion* 436f: “vide Grotium de veritate religionis Chris: pa: 140”[See Grotius in (his work) on the truth of the Christian Religion, (on the subject of virgin births.)]. For a more recent study of Milton’s use of Euripides’ *Ion* in his Ode to the Oxford librarian John Rouse, see Kevin H. Lee, “Milton’s Ode *Ad Joannem Rousium* and Euripides’ *Ion*,” *Milton Studies* 27, (1999): 1-17. See too Richard Jodrell, *Illustrations of Euripides, on the Ion and the Bacchae* (London: Nichols, 1781). A second volume on *The Alcestis* was published in 1789.

who was a native of Cordoba, they would more decisively turn against the Spanish king¹¹⁵—a republican position that allows us to see Grotius in the Euripidean tradition that included his fellow republican and anti-monarchists Buchanan and Milton.

Although Lucan clearly was an important figure in the establishment of an anti-monarchical, republican ideology in early modern Europe as evidenced by Grotius and others, my contention is that Euripides was the seminal precedent to Lucan for these early modern thinkers, as through the dramatic works of Euripides they recognized the need to press beyond mere republican ideology and towards sacred and cultural transformation. Preceding Lucan, Euripides was for early modern humanists, as he had for the Greek Fathers of the early Church, a chronicler of the devastations of war, a progressive interrogator of theocratic and secular procedures and systems, and a prophetic voice through whose tragedies was exposed, as Bernard Knox observes, the desperation of the human spirit, the misery and terror of the human condition in a civilization which had reached the end of its spiritual reserves.¹¹⁶

Grotius authored the major Renaissance treatise on war and peace, *The Rights of War and Peace* (1625), as well as the biblical tragedies *Adamus Exul* (1601), *Christus Patiens* (1608), and *Sophompaneas* (1635)¹¹⁷, works which were admired by Milton,

¹¹⁵ Letter to Daniel Heinsius, 20 April 1614, in *Briefwisseling van Hugo Grotius*, I, ed. P. C. Molhuysen (The Hague, 1928), p. 307. David Norbrook reminds us that it was said that Grotius always traveled with a copy of the *Pharsalia* in his pocket, and that he declared Lucan to be a freedom-loving and tyrant-hating poet, convictions for which Milton had a natural sympathy. David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), p. 42.

¹¹⁶ Knox, "Euripides: The Poet as Prophet," ed. Burian, pp. 11-12.

¹¹⁷ The link between Grotius and George Buchanan is established in the preface to *Sophompaneas*, wherein Grotius offers his drama as a model of Aristotelian precepts

with *Christus Patiens* translated by George Sandys in 1640.¹¹⁸ The Sandys translation of *Christus Patiens* is important here because Sandys not only marks the line of influence stemming from Euripides to the biblical tragedians of the period, but also attaches to Grotius' drama a summary of the controversy over authorship and attributions of earlier versions of *Christos Paschon*, which was first published in Rome in 1542, then Louvain and Paris in 1544, and Antwerp in 1550. In his summary, Sandys views Grotius as an author whose particular aptitude lies in his ability to surpass commonplace arguments concerning attributions, or mis-attributions, of authorship:

The Tragedie of CHRIST'S PASSION was first written in Greek by
Apollinarius of Laodicea, Bishop of *Hieropolis*: and after him by
Gregory Nazianzen; though this, now extant in his Works, is by some
 ascribed to the former: by others accounted supposititious, as not agreeing
 with his Strain in the rest of his Poems; which might alter in that

and examples established in the biblical dramas of Buchanan, thus signaling the importance of examining the biblical source of the story, as well as its various scriptural and interpretive contexts in order to better comprehend the intent of the dramatist. And of course this line of enquiry commences with Euripides.

¹¹⁸ George Sandys, tr., *Christs Passion. A Tragedie* [by Hugo Grotius]. *With Annotations* [by Sandys] (London, 1640), p. 74. See too Richard Crashaw's "Christ Crucified," in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Ed. Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1919, [c1901]); and Crashaw's divine epigram, *Samson to his Delilah*, in *The Complete Works of Richard Crashaw*, ed. William B. Turnbull (London: John Russell Smith, 1858), p. 33. See too James A. Parente Jr., "The Development of Religious Tragedy: The Humanist Reception of *Christos Paschon* in the Renaissance." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 16 (1985): 351-68; and Sandro Sticca, "The Christos Paschon and the Byzantine Theater." *Studies in Medieval Drama in Honor of William L. Smoldon on his 82nd Birthday*. Ed. Clifford Davidson. (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan UP, 1974): 13-44.

particular upon his imitation of *Euripides*. But *Hugo Grotius*, of late hath transcended all on this Argument: whose steps afar-off I follow.¹¹⁹

Sandys commentary on the Grotius text illuminates a pivotal strain, beginning with Euripidean tragedy and later consolidated by Buchanan and Grotius, that Milton would ultimately pursue in *Samson Agonistes*: by reexamining the sources of a religiously based dramatic work—in this instance *Christus Patiens*, which Milton mentions in his preface to *Samson Agonistes* as *Christ Suffering*—the core question of the linkage between violence practiced in the name of divinity and cultural dissolution is underscored. Yet the analysis, the sifting of facts required of the Miltonic fit reader, does not end in conventional resolution. Sandys, commenting on *Christus Patiens* and the Chorus of Soldier's brief meditation on violence, notes the classical antecedents, "Not [even] Hercules so many Monsters slew," and then explains:

Hercules, saith Seneca, travelled over the world, not to oppresse it, but to free it from Oppressors; and by killing of Tyrants and Monsters to preserve it in Tranquillitie. But how much more glorious were the victorie of *Christ*; who by suffering for Sinne, subdued it, led Captivity captive, was the death of Death; triumphing over Hell, and those Spirits of Darknesse.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ See Sandys' annotation to Grotius' *Christs Passion*, p. 74.

¹²⁰ See Grotius, *Christs Passion*, tr. Sandys, 45, 58, 113-14.

Sandys here alludes to the ending of the Samson story in the Judges narrative, wherein “the dead whom [Samson] slew at his death were more than those whom he had slain during his life” (16.31), the point being that where Hercules/Samson kills, even if the slaughtered include “*Oppressors . . . Tyrants and Monsters*,” the more humane and progressive Jesus/Christ saves, a comparative analysis Milton would lay bare in his contextual publication of *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Regained*. Similarly Sandys reviews the controversy surrounding the authorship of the earlier *Christos Paschon*, with summary emphasis, as we noted above, on the Grotius redaction at hand as having not only transcended his predecessors, but of successfully reaching back to the original Euripidean precedent. Hence an interpretive pattern emerges, advancing from Euripides to the author of *Christos Paschon*, to Grotius and to Sandys, that shifts the emphasis away from sacrificial killing, the Crucifixion and resurrection, and toward a kind of transfiguration, what Grotius’ Mary terms a “reformed world.”¹²¹ It is precisely such a reformed world, or the possibility of such a world, that we are left with in the apocalyptic aftermath of Euripides’ *Bacchae*, the tragedy on which *Christos Paschon* was based, and similarly in Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* with the theater demolition and mass-murder/suicide. Moreover Sandys, in view of the desolation experienced by the Israelites in the Judges narrative, provides just such a critique in his annotations to Grotius’ *Christus Patiens* when he refers to the progressive severity of God’s punishment of his own people as “calamities which the Divine Vengeance inflicted on the *Jews*: more, and

¹²¹ See Grotius, *Christ's Passion*, tr. Sandys, 73.

more horrid, then ever befell any other Nation,”¹²² a line resonant in Milton’s own “so horrid spectacle” of “Blood, death, and deathful deeds . . . / Ruin, destruction at the utmost point” (1542, 1513-14) in *Samson Agonistes*.

In Grotius’s *De satisfactione Christi* (1617), the deeply problematic nature of sacrificial killing—the “astonishing revelation of divine love and savage ritual”¹²³ fused into that single tragic act—captured the center of early modern theological and ethical controversy, dividing the intellectual landscape of the late Renaissance. Departing from conventional Renaissance accounts of primitive religion for one viewed through the lens of cultural discourse, Renaissance theologians and exegetes, and especially Grotius in *De satisfactione* and *Christus Patiens* (and earlier Buchanan in his biblical drama *Jephtha*), realized the proximity of Christianity to what was believed until then to be barbaric, foreign, pagan and ritualistic: the primitive, savage myth of sacrifice at the center of Christian doctrine, the foundational praxes of Christianity originating in an era when human sacrifice was, in the name of divinity, still widely practiced. Sandys picks up on this in his elucidation of Grotius’ *Christus Patiens* as he realizes and questions the convergence between savagery and obedience to God, the thematic nexus Euripides repeatedly exposed in his tragedies culminating in the *Bacchae*, wherein the god Dionysis orchestrates the savage murder of king Pentheus at the hands of his own mother, or earlier in *Medea*, wherein the god Helios, bearer of light and life, arrives *deus ex machina* to lift Medea from her troubled world having just murdered her own

¹²² Grotius, *Christ's Passion*, tr. Sandys, p. 119.

¹²³ Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible*, p. 7.

children. Through Euripides the sacred and the profane collide; and the devastating aftermath serves to expose the profound contradictions between those two worlds, a lesson and seminal thematic focus revisited and cultivated in Buchanan's *Jephtha*, Grotius' *Christus Patiens*, and John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*.

Stepping back a bit, the influence of Grotius on Milton first appears in *Paradise Lost*, wherein Grotius' seventeenth-century legal treatment on the problem of war, *De Jure Belli Ac Pacis*, published in March 1625, is evident.¹²⁴ Grotius' monumental treatise is indebted to the work of his predecessors St. Thomas Aquinas on natural law and the Spanish jurist Victoria on the distinction between *jus naturale* and *jus inter gentes*, as well as the underlying basis of Roman law.¹²⁵ Anticipating Hobbes' theory of the social contract in *The Leviathan*, a theory anathema in many ways to Milton's increasingly republican formulations in his prose writings, the rationale of Grotius' treatise is that individuals come together in society and need the mediation of laws to preserve their common interests. Crucial to Grotius' argument is the distinction between "natural law" and the "law of nations." Natural law he defines, in terms reminiscent of Milton's own, as "the dictate of right reason, shewing the moral turpitude, or moral necessity, of any act from its agreement or disagreement with a rational nature, and consequently that such an act is either forbidden or commanded by God, the author of nature."¹²⁶ Grotius supports his definition, in typically progressive Renaissance fashion,

¹²⁴ See, for instance, J. M. Evans, *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1968), pp. 212-216.

¹²⁵ Philip Dust, "Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Grotius' *De Jure Belli Ac Pacis*," *CITHARA: Essays in the Judeo Christian Tradition* 33:1 (1993): 17-26.

¹²⁶ Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, p. 21.

with examples from Paulus, Ulpian, and finally and most trenchantly Euripides, where a quote from *Helena* on the immorality of violence resonates in Milton's own searching in *Samson Agonistes*:

For God himself hates violence, and will not have us to grow rich by rapine, but by lawful gains. That abundance, which is the fruit of unrighteousness, is an abomination. The air is common to men, the earth also, where every man, in the ample enjoyment of his possessions, must refrain from doing violence or injury to that of another.¹²⁷

The law of nations, by comparison, is described by Grotius as "a more extensive right, deriving its authority from the consent of all, or at least of many nations."¹²⁸ We recall that the same emphasis on right reason in natural law is central to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where God is the foundation of it and as such is not to be rebelled against. In Book 3 God elaborates on the subject in his explanation that man is not subject to necessity:

What pleasure I from such obedience pain,
When Will and Reason (Reason also is choice)
Useless and vain, of freedom both despoil'd. (*PL* 3:107-09)

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 21-22.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 25. In *The Reason of Church Government*, Milton also furnishes the example of "*Helena* in the fables" (*CPW* 1:849) in his discussion of prelatical corruption.

In *War and Peace*, Grotius writes that “Neither the law of Moses, nor that given to Noah established any thing new, they were only a declaratory repetition of the law of nature, that had been obliterated by depraved custom.” And with regard to violence, importantly, Grotius contends, in carefully nuanced terms that once again powerfully signal, and complicate, the final act in *Samson Agonistes*, and which remind us of Sandys’ careful elucidation of Grotius’ *Christus Patiens*:

that the shedding of blood in a criminal and wanton manner is the only act prohibited by those commandments. Thus every act of homicide does not amount to murder, but only that, which is committed with a wilful and malicious intention to destroy the life of an innocent person. As to what follows about blood being shed in return for blood, it seems to imply not a mere act of personal revenge, but the deliberate exercise of a perfect right, which may be thus explained; it is not unjust, according to the principles of nature that any one should suffer in proportion to the evil he has done.¹²⁹

More specifically in relation to Milton’s, and by allusion Euripidean tragedy, Grotius later locates Samson as his example of *Lex Talionis*, aligning the Judge’s acts with those Thucydides chronicles in his history of the Peloponnesian War:

¹²⁹ Grotius, *Rights of War and Peace*, p. 37.

Sampson, making his Defence against the *Philistine*, does by this *Natural Right* declare his Innocence, if he injured them who had first injured him: And after he had revenged himself of them, he justifies himself with the same Reason, saying, *As they have done to me, so I have done to them.* Thus the *Plataeans* in *Thucydides*. . . . *We have deservedly punished them, for by a Law that Universally prevails, we may without any Crime be revenged on an Enemy, who first assaults us.* And *Demosthenes* . . . urges, *That the Law common to all Men offers us to Revenge ourselves upon him, who takes away any thing from us by Force.* And . . . *Salust* . . . adds, *That the Romans would not do him common Justice and Equity, if they should hinder him to . . . take his Revenge.* And *Aristides* the Orator proves it from *Poets*, from *Lawyers*, from *Proverbs*, from *Orators*, and all other Authorities, to be lawful to take Revenge on those, who have first attempted to do us an Injury. *St. Ambrose* commends the *Maccabees* for revenging and . . . calls *Retaliation* the Law of Nations.¹³⁰

Grotius' extensive series of proofs of the legitimizing of violent retaliation, whether by divine or secular rationale, indicates a subtle but increasing uneasiness, even an ironic undertone, in light of the results of those most famous biblical and historic examples: the obliteration of the tribe of Dan encompassed in the Judges narrative, and Thucydides' increasingly skeptical chronicling of the Peloponnesian War and the fall of Athens. But

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 454-55.

most interestingly, Grotius' technique reminds us of Euripides' repeated portrayals of various examples of violent and apparently legitimate retaliation, from Medea to the god Dionysus, that in final analysis do not clinch the argument for violent revenge and the law of *Lex Talionis* (though the characters speak at length of the validity of their actions), but just the reverse—open up questions and very serious doubts as to the utility of a code of violent revenge, sanctioned by divinity, within the construct of an emerging or purportedly civil society.

Grotius proceeds, moreover, to qualify, even undermine, his earlier position by then drawing attention to the problematic spirit of the law of revenge, most critically when related to divinity: "But because we are apt to be *Partial* in our own Cases, and to be hurried on too far by Passion, that *Liberty* which *Nature* indulged . . . [people] in of vindicating every Man his own Quarrel, was then taken away, and Judges appointed to determine all Controversies between Man and Man." Again we are reminded of Milton's seeming extension of Grotius' qualification in that Milton takes it to the logical next step, as if to interrogate the proposition, by providing us with the oxymoronic vengeful judge—Samson—who appears "*Partial*" in his vengeance, "hurried on too far by Passion" (as was Medea), and hence unable to fulfill the promise and possibility of judgeship as envisioned by Grotius. Grotius' proviso, substituting judgment for natural right, is followed by the support text of Lucretius:

*For when each angry Man aveng'd his Cause,
Judge to himself, and unrestrain'd by Laws,*

*The World grew weary of that brutal Strife,
Where Force the Limits gave to each precarious Life.*¹³¹

Citing “*Demosthenes against Conon*,” Grotius determines that “*It has been ordained by the Wisdom of our Ancestors . . . that all these Injuries should be redressed by Law, and not by every private Man’s Passion and Caprice. So Quintiliam, Private Revenge is not only unlawful, but an Enemy to Peace. . . . So likewise the Emperors Honorius and Theodosius. . . . And King Theodorick: Hence sprung the sacred Reverence of Laws, that no Man might revenge himself by his own Hand.*” Grotius at last secures his point regarding the mediative function of Christian religion and the functions of law: “Yet the ancient *Liberty*, which the *Law of Nature* at first gave us, remains still in Force, where there are no *Courts of Justice*, as upon the Sea . . . or [as] amongst the *Germans* before the *Christian Religion* was planted in that Nation, . . . [then] finding that they could redress Injuries by *Justice*, and determine Controversies by *Law*, which us’d to be decided by Force of Arms.”¹³² Christianity and justice thus serve as a kind of progression on, or antitype to, the relative barbarism of the “antient Liberty”—force of arms, retributive violence. It is precisely the question lodged at the center of so many Euripidean tragedies, carefully elucidated by Sandys in his notes on Grotius’ *Christus Patiens*, and finally in Milton’s own *Samson Agonistes*, where religion, judgeship, and the “antient Liberty” fuse into an explosion of abominable violence.

¹³¹ Ibid., pp. 455-57.

¹³² Ibid., pp. 457-58.

What we are left with at the end of these tragedies—Euripides’ *Medea* and *Bacchae*, Buchanan’s *Jephthes*, Grotius’ *Christus Patiens*, Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*—are, in Grotius’ terms, the fragments of a shipwreck, and in Milton’s, the scattered shards of truth that we are to consolidate, reevaluate, reconstitute in our search for a higher order of civilization, the “reformed world” of Grotius’ *Christus Patiens*.

Chapter 5

The Geneva Euripides

“. . . he [Euripides] is not so much a fine author as an oracle.”
– Daniel Heinsius (1611)¹³³

In Sandys' review of the controversy surrounding the authorship of the *Christos Paschon* he concludes that Grotius not only transcended his predecessors, but successfully reached back to the original Euripidean precedent. Following Sandys' example, we turn now to Milton's reading of his own volume of Euripides in an attempt to define any special emphasis Milton may have placed on certain texts and subject matter. In 1634, in the midst of his retreat to his father's house in Horton, Milton purchased the complete 1602 Paulus edition of Euripides. Not only was Milton intently reading and studying the tragedies of Euripides, but as importantly, he also was reading and scrutinizing the commentaries that ran with them in the Paulus edition. The Stiblin commentary, for instance, is especially germane in that it reveals how a Renaissance commentator that Milton knew pointed him directly to political applications of Euripides' dramas, a lesson Milton would reassert in his repeated use of Euripides in his prose writings. Thus to dismiss the political implications of *Samson Agonistes*, as some critics have attempted in the past, the tragedy that Milton conceived from the Euripidean example, would be to ignore the logical result of Milton's concentrated, lifelong study of

¹³³ Daniel Heinsius, *On Plot in Tragedy* (1611), ed. and tr. Paul R. Sellin and John McManmon (Northridge Ca.: San Fernando Valley State College, 1971), p. 129.

his favorite Greek dramatist. Martin Dzelzainis has argued that the main authorities from whom Milton derived his republican principles were Aristotle, Sallust, and most importantly Cicero.¹³⁴ While conceding to these influences, I would add that Milton's intensive study of Euripides, as well as the commentary and especially that of Stiblin, during his years at Horton and after, played a crucial, formative role in the shaping of his artistic, political, and even theological positions preceding and throughout the turbulent early years of the puritan revolution.

Milton's copy of the Geneva Euripides, printed in 1602 by Paul Estienne and considered the best of the extant texts of Euripides produced by Renaissance scholars, evidences Milton's fastidious attention not only to the Greek text, but also to the Latin translation, the scholia, and the commentaries. The marginalia of Milton's Euripides, like that of other Greek texts that he owned, as Maurice Kelley has observed, consists primarily of single word emendations of readings of the Greek, as well as occasional corrections of speaker designations and revisions of the Latin paraphrase supplementing the Greek text.¹³⁵ Milton's emendations were at times so excellent that the nineteenth-

¹³⁴ Dzelzainis, "Milton's Classical Republicanism," in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. Armitage et al, p. 8. Dzelzainis is countering Zera Fink's thesis in *The Classical Republicans* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1962) that the Greek historian Polybius's theory of a mixed state that balanced monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy (King, Lords and Commons) was the principle and constant influence for Milton. See Fink, pp. 97, 109, 120, 122.

¹³⁵ See J. T. Christie, "John Milton's Copy of Euripides," Vol. XVIII, *Greece and Rome* XI (1941), pp. 304-20; Kelley and Atkins, "Milton's Annotations of Euripides," pp. 680-87; John K. Hale, "Milton's Euripides Marginalia: Their Significance for Milton Studies," *Milton Studies* 27 (1991): 23-35.

century classical scholar Richard Porson published them in his *Museum Criticum* list of 1814, and Joshua Barnes, Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and editor of a 1694 edition of Euripides, acknowledged his use of Milton's copy as well as introduced Milton's emendations, with questionable tact, into the tradition of classical textual criticism.¹³⁶ In addition to these various emendations to the text, Milton's marginalia also concern exegetical and historical matters, and are inscribed not only in the margins of the dramas, but in those of the commentaries that follow Euripides' text. In Brodaeus' commentary on *Heraclides*, for instance, Milton inserts a note on the sacrifice of virgins, countering Brodaeus' view with that of Canterus:

Vide Brod: recte intellexit Canterus. Videtur tamen potius eo in loco
 βροτείων sumi pro βροστοέντων hoc est cruentatis nam hominum
 immolationes apud Athenienses admodum raras fuisse et magnis de
 causis notum est, ideoque hic etiam tanto cum horrore auditur oraculum
 de Macaria diis mactanda, rex etiam plane recusavit, se vel ullum e
 civibus coacturum filiam suam interimere, salute publica itaque non est
 verisimile post virginis voluntariam necem alias fuisse humanas, si ita
 Brodaeus intellexerit, sed vide Cant. versione.

¹³⁶ Kelley and Atkins, "Milton's Annotations of Euripides," pp. 686-87. John K. Hale notes that Barnes' use of Milton is at times problematic as he appropriates without citing his source. The most egregious example is his note on the *Bacchae*, line 188, a precise borrowing from Milton: "I think we should read *hedeos* for *hedeon*, and then the sense runs much better, 'We have sweetly forgotten that we are old men.' No one before has had any inkling of this blemish." Hale, "Milton's Euripides Marginalia," p. 25.

[See Brodaeus; Canter understands it correctly. It nevertheless seems rather better to assume here βροτειῶν (bloodstained) for βροστοέντων, that is, because it is known that the cruel sacrifices of human beings were very rare among the Athenians, and for great necessity only. Thus here too the oracle commanding Macaria's sacrifice to the gods is heard with extreme horror, the king himself bluntly refused to force himself or any of the citizens to put his daughter to death, even for the public safety. And so it is unlikely that after the voluntary death of the maiden there should have been other human victims. Even Brodaeus does so understand it, rather than Canter, in the translation.]¹³⁷

Milton's insistence on the importance of a single word or term is remarkable and illuminating, as is his clear sensitivity to the idea of sacrifice, ordered by an oracle for the satisfaction of the gods, an idea and motif that remained at the center, we might say, of all the poems he would write and especially his final poem, the tragedy *Samson Agonistes*. Milton's clear uneasiness with the "cruel sacrifices of human beings" is buttressed by his belief that enlightened Athenians, the very precursors to the English revolution, would resist the barbaric practice on principle, a gloss that throws a very different light on Milton's Samson's mass sacrifice in *Samson Agonistes* as we shall see. Again in *Heraclidae* 321, and with particular attention to the character of Theseus and

¹³⁷ *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Patterson et al., 18:316-17.

the *intent* of Euripides, Milton notes:

desideramus et Canteri, et Brodaeï diligentiam in hoc loco vertendo,
neuter enim videtur assequutus quid sibi vellet poeta itaque sic
intelligendum puto ego vero et vivus et mortuus, cum mortuus ero multa
te laude o amice apud Theseum, sive Theseo prope stans apud inferos (id
enim sibi vult Θησέως πέλας) extollam te, et haec dicens illum delectabo
scil: quod et humaniter exceperis nos &c. atque hoc modo sensus est
planior et multo elegantior.

[We miss the care of Canter and Brodaeus in turning this passage, for
neither seems to have followed out what the poet intended. And so I think
this passage is to be understood “Both alive and dead, for thy great glory,
O friend, I shall be a witness, for standing by Theseus among the shades
(for the phrase Θησέως πέλας means this) I will praise thee and telling of
this—(how humanely you rescued us, etc.,) I shall delight him.” Thus the
sense is clearer and much more elegant.¹³⁸

Milton here counters his earlier question of violent sacrifice with emphasis on Euripides’
purpose in validating the higher value of friendship and humane treatment of slaves and
prisoners. Moreover Milton’s interest in historical witness (“Both alive and dead . . . I

¹³⁸ Ibid., 18:315-16.

shall be a witness”) as exemplified in the character of Theseus, whom Milton viewed in his prose writings as a moral and ethical exemplar,¹³⁹ aligns Milton’s interests, and his reading of Euripides’ *intent*, with a tradition of prophesy. What Milton suggests here is that a strong reader of Euripides must go beyond simple narrative structure, and especially when the narrative is a redaction of common theologic or mythic texts, to divine and correctly comprehend the individual author’s actual application of these culturally common materials. Milton’s search for authorial intent above all else is thus evident as he opposes or substantiates the commentaries of Brodaeus and Canter, and in so doing we gain insight into Milton’s developing understanding of Euripides’ signification on crucially important subjects such as sacrificial killing, friendship, slavery.

Although the marginalia provide just fragmentary glimpses into Milton’s thought on the characters and ideas contained within Euripides’ dramas, and Milton never comments specifically on whether he read political history into Euripides’ dramas, nevertheless a deeper understanding of what he learned from Euripides, as well as how he read Euripides, may be attained through the commentary of his edition. In Brodaeus, Canterus, Portus, and especially Stiblinus, Milton would learn that indeed the ancient dramas were not only interpreted for their contemporary political import, but for what

¹³⁹ In the *Second Defense*, as noted earlier, Milton contends that the blind are by “Divine law and divine favor” rendered “safe from the injuries of men” and “almost sacred” (CPW 4.1:590) as evidenced by devout friendship on a level with that of Pylades and Orestes in Euripides’ *Orestes* (795), and Theseus and Heracles in the same dramatist’s *Hercules Furens* (1398, 1402): “Theseus: Give your hand to your friend and helper. . . / Put your arm around my neck, and I will be your guide” (1398, 1402).

they might elucidate for the history of their own time.

Of the commentators on Milton's edition of Euripides, Kaspar Stiblin is the most interesting and informative in that his commentaries are expansive and, most importantly, he interprets Euripides' dramas for his contemporary audience. It appears certain, moreover, that Milton read and absorbed Stiblin's commentary, as Milton's margin notes attest to the fact that he read the entire double volume of Euripides—text, notes, commentary, glossary—at least two times between the years 1634, when he purchased the volume, and 1652, the year of his total blindness. Specifically, as Maurice Kelley noted in his early and important study of the text, the evidence indicates that Milton went through his Euripides once before and once after 1638, and with variations in ink color, pen point used, and size of script it is quite likely that Milton worked in his Euripides at regular intervals throughout the eighteen year period.¹⁴⁰

Stiblin, the commentator Milton appears most interested in, avidly read Euripides with attention to the history of the fifth-century B.C. as well as to the history of his own time, as evidenced both in his arguments to the dramas and in his commentary. At times his comments are merely commonplace, as when he articulates Hecuba's afflictions as representative of the universal horrors of war. Glossing *Troades*, however, Stiblin progresses from universal to particular by noting that Euripides in his "fable" wishes to

¹⁴⁰ Kelley and Atkins, "Milton's Annotations of Euripides," p. 684, observe that "many of his annotations may be dated as before or after 1638 according to whether the *e*'s in the Latin comment show the pre-1638 Greek epsilon or the post-1638 Italian form, and whether the annotation mark is the pre-1638 asterisk or the post-1638 supralinear x." See too Kelley and Atkins, "Milton's Annotations of Aratus," *PMLA* 70 (1955): 1090-1106; and Helen Darbishire, "The Chronology of Milton's Handwriting," *Library*, 4th ser., 14 (1933-34): 229-35.

set the experience of captive Troy before the people of his own time in order to demonstrate and document the insanity of war—its afflictions both for the conqueror, in this case Sparta, and the conquered, his native Athens.

Stiblin remarks that it is not necessary to limit oneself to antiquity to observe the catastrophes of war, as parallels between ancient and modern history and ancient and modern writers can be drawn in contemporary wars that set Christians against Christians—wars that equally demonstrate the universal disasters of war. Stiblin supports his contention by noting that the Dutch humanist Erasmus, who in 1506 had translated Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Hecuba*, two tragedies notable for their searingly critical portrayals of war and violent sacrifice, eloquently commented on both war and peace in his *Adagia* (1500) with convictions remarkably similar to those Euripides imparts in *Troades*. In the *Bacchae*, moreover, a tragedy that would prove very important to Milton's tragedy *Samson Agonistes* as I shall discuss further, Stiblin remarks that Pentheus, as an impious ruler who foolishly and violently rejected the god Dionysus, brought absolute ruin to himself and his people. For Stiblin the plight of Pentheus serves as is a lesson in piety applicable to all leaders and states, whether ancient or modern, and as such substantiates Stiblin's contention that piety must be practiced as a public as well as a private virtue. Citing the classical examples of Plato and Cicero on the advantages of piety to the state, Stiblin remarks that Euripides, in the *Bacchae* especially, intended to warn his fellow Athenians of how impiety may in the end undermine the republic. Hence the lessons Stiblin draws from Euripidean tragedy are meant to be expanded to apply not just to Athens and the ancients in general, but to all

political states at all times—lessons Milton surely learned and applied, following the undermining of his own English republic, in selecting the remarkably impious Judge Samson as the protagonist of his tragedy *Samson Agonistes*.

Stiblin thus recognized in his reading of Euripides what Milton would also recognize and admire: that the Greek tragedian spent his life commenting on the inconsistencies of Athenian culture and politics during the most tempestuous era of Athens' history—the twenty-seven years of the Peloponnesian Wars with Sparta. With increasing cynicism, and let us keep in mind the progress of Milton's prose tracts leading up to 1660, Euripides witnessed Athenian politicians advancing from cold calculation to brutal pragmatism and finally to desperation, abandon, and capitulation. Jason in *Medea* (431 B.C.), a tragedy I shall discuss further, is one of the most bitter portrayals of this type of politician, the self-serving Athenian who knowingly practices sophism, the pretext of expediency, to defend gross self-interest in his drive for power and prestige. *Medea* is believed to have been written at the start of the war, and if we follow the tragedies chronologically to the end of the war, we note that the cynicism and stark depictions of the horrors of war increase significantly: *The Suppliant Women* (424 B.C.), *The Trojan Women* (415 B.C.), *Electra* (413 B.C.), *Orestes* (406 B.C.), and the *Bacchae* (406 B.C.).

The Trojan Women, presented shortly after Athens violated the neutrality of Melos, summarily executing its adult male population and enslaving its women and children, is perhaps the most famous and directly terrifying of the anti-war tragedies. But in the other late tragedies Euripides accommodated assorted ancient myths to

illuminate contemporary conditions, a dramatic vision that culminates in the *Bacchae*, his last tragedy, which prophesies through its portrayal of the mythical Thebes the destruction of Periclean, democratic Athens. At the conclusion of the *Bacchae* Cadmus and his family, bearing the cost of Pentheus' intemperate and tyrannic rule, are exiled by the god Dionysus, leaving their native city in ruin. Readers such as Stiblin and Milton would see quite clearly that the political implications of the *Bacchae* illuminate Athens' own perilous situation in 406 B.C., where the leaders, like Pentheus, were about to witness the results of their reckless political machinations. As I shall discuss further in a late chapter, the inceptive myth of Thebes, of Cadmean dragon's teeth and fratricidal, internecine warfare, became a recurrent and defining topos in the outpouring of literary, political, and religious tracts during the English Civil War and Interregnum years.

In *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (February 13, 1649), Milton addressed his Presbyterian adversaries who, during the Civil War, had supported the parliamentary cause against the king but who had since drawn back and urged leniency for Charles just before his execution. In defending regicide so openly and forcefully, Milton risked the charge of antinomianism, an action for which there "appeared to be no sanction in positive or moral law."¹⁴¹ In *The Tenure*, Milton marshals to his cause the anti-tyrannical example of Seneca's fabled Hercules—"the grand suppressor of Tyrants"—and then, widening his argument while remaining attentive to the classical example, "[t]he Greeks

¹⁴¹ Victoria Kahn, "The Metaphorical Contract in Milton's *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*," in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. Armitage et al, pp. 83, 94; Michael Fixler, *Milton and the Kingdoms of God* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 146.

and *Romans*,” those central pivots of proto-republican ideology who “held it not onely lawful but a glorious and Heroic deed . . . to kill an Infamous tyrant” (CPW 3:212-14). Subsequently in *Eikonoklastes* (October 6, 1649), Milton would extend his defense of the regicide by fusing classical ideology and imagery with biblical in order to excoriate Charles Stuart as an enemy of true piety: “with his glorious title of the *Churches Defender*, we leave him to make good, by *Pharaoh’s Divinity*, if he please, for to *Josephs Pietie* it will be a task unsutable” (CPW 3:496).¹⁴²

In the Geneva Euripides, Stiblin points out that Euripides’ intent in *Supplikes* and *Heraclides*, two tragedies even more deliberately political than the *Bacchae*, is to extol the Athenian state and to urge Athens to retain those historical ideals of piety and moral rectitude that made it great. Surely, when we consider the repeated impieties and indeterminate moral rectitude of Milton’s Samson we see that this lesson was not lost on Milton. Theseus, the strongest and most noble of the Athenian leaders, is the hero of *Supplikes*, and Demophoon, Theseus’ son and equally pious leader, is the hero of *Heraclides*. Both are examples of great leaders, whose piety is a civic as well as a personal virtue, and both dramas concern the vigorous defense of civil liberty—a defense that provides a measure of a ruler’s virtue and, for Stiblin, is the culminating achievement of the state. Analyzing the character of Theseus and Demophoon, Stiblin again draws contemporary politics and a specific contemporary leader into the picture: Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, whom Stiblin presents as an estimable heir to

¹⁴² Elizabeth Tuttle, “Biblical Reference in the Political Pamphlets,” in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. Armitage et al, pp. 74-75.

Theseus. Remarking that not only is Charles V, like Theseus, a virtuous and magnanimous prince, Stiblin notes that he is also confronted with many of the same problems as Theseus. Charles' attention to the state of Christians captured by Moslems in Africa and Turks in the East is thus paralleled to Theseus' conference with and assistance to the suppliants from Thebes: both leaders, the Christian prince and his ancient predecessor, are seen as dispassionate, judicious, and humane rulers. Substantially, then, Stiblin's commentary on Euripidean drama throws into relief the contemporary application that the ancient poet directs him to.

Milton would not have agreed, certainly, with Stiblin's views of sixteenth-century politics. Yet he would have approved Stiblin's interpretive methodology of reading Euripides for its contemporary application. Milton purchased the Geneva Euripides in 1634 and began a period of exhaustive study of the volume, which included his annotations, during the reposeful years at his father's house in Horton. These years, and the influence of Euripides, were pivotal for the young Milton not only as a developing poet, but also as an evolving political theorist soon to be expressing himself in prose in the national and international arena. In the 1640s references to Euripides begin to appear in the prose that are strikingly similar, in their dual preoccupation with ancient and contemporary politics, to those we find in Stiblin's commentary. Like Stiblin, Milton refers to *Supplices* and *Heraclides* during the 1640s to support his specific political positions; and like Stiblin, he was able to conflate fifth century B. C. Athens with his own contemporary situation.

In *Areopagitica*, Milton commends Euripides and his *Andromache* (CPW 2:496)

as exceptionally moral as well as draws his epigraph for the entire tract from one of the most sharply political passages in Euripides *Supplices*. Milton theorizes an intertextual approach which allowed Paul, “skillful in all the learning” (*CPW* 2:508) of the Greeks, to insert a passage from Euripides (though more likely Menander) into holy scripture: “evil communications corrupt good manners” (I Corinthians 15:33). Milton’s epigraph, moreover, expresses not only his own vehement approval of free speech as the paramount liberty, but also indicates his understanding of one of the most important political passages in Euripides’ *Supplices*. The epigraph is a paraphrase of a crucial speech by Theseus, where the ruler of Athens is explaining to the herald from Thebes that Athens, unlike Thebes, is a city ruled not by one man, but by a plurality, a place where law protects equally the weak and the strong. To illustrate his point, Theseus quotes the axiom Athens used to open their popular assembly, and which Milton paraphrases as:

This is true liberty, when free-born men,
 Having to advise the public, may speak free,
 Which he who can and will, deserves high praise;
 Who neither can nor will, may hold his peace;
 What can be juster in a State than this?

Milton, in his Geneva edition of Euripides, marked the very lines that appeared on

Areopagitica's title page.¹⁴³

In quoting Athens' warrant of free speech, Milton intimates that he is aware not only of the literal application of the quotation, but also of its wider currency in the context of the drama. Theseus is defending the very principle that sustains republican government—free speech—and defending it, furthermore, to a representative of an ancient tyranny. As Thomas Corns has argued, throughout Milton's republican prose he asserts the dignity of the common citizen, and as such the cause of English republicanism becomes, in effect, a language, "an idiom in which a value system and an aesthetic are inscribed."¹⁴⁴ The relaxation of censorship during the period and the existence of a republic in England caused "a shift of mood, of vocabulary,"¹⁴⁵ which sanctioned the expression of a republicanism that had been evolving in England in the first half of the century and which was based on the works of Greek and Roman authors revered by Italian humanists.¹⁴⁶ Euripides, as Milton was certainly aware, was conveying a specific political point, a "value system and an aesthetic" as it were, by having Theseus, the most renowned and pious of the Athenian heroes, allude to the free speech of Athenian assemblies.

At the time the *Supplices* was produced, near to or during the year 524 B.C.,

¹⁴³ David Norbrook, "Euripides, Milton, and *Christian Doctrine*," *Milton Quarterly* 29:2 (1995): 39.

¹⁴⁴ Thomas Corns, "Milton and the Characteristics of a Free Commonwealth," in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. Armitage et al, pp. 38, 42.

¹⁴⁵ Blair Worden, "Milton's Republicanism and the Tyranny of Heaven," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), p. 226.

¹⁴⁶ Tuttle, "Biblical Reference in the Political Pamphlets," in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. Armitage et al, p. 77.

Athens had just contracted a defensive alliance with Argos and was involved in a campaign against the Spartan ally Thebes. Like the mythical Thebes of the Euripidean tragedy, the Thebes of the fifth century B.C. had transgressed one of the principal tenets of war in denying Athens the right to retrieve its war dead for respectful burial. In his copy of Euripides, Milton wrote of this passage in *Supplices*:

v. ille sic potius reddendus, turpe autem erit, si iustitia etiam cum illis
peribit. h. e. jus sepeliendi.

[This verse rather should be thus rendered, "It will indeed be evil if justice too (that is, the right of burial) die with them.]"¹⁴⁷

Although Milton does not specifically mention the historical nexus, it seems likely that he would have been aware of the situation through another work he knew, presumably owned in his library, and which recounts the same incident: Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian Wars.¹⁴⁸ Euripides, by closely paralleling mythic history and modern history, was urging Athens, once again, to stay true to fundamental democratic principles, to remain the merciful and humane state that it was in the past. The Athenian audience would not have missed the lesson; nor would a Renaissance reader, such as Milton, well acquainted with Thucydides' history. Hence Milton, taking

¹⁴⁷ *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Patterson et al., 18:309.

¹⁴⁸ See Boswell, *Milton's Library*, p. 244, for notice of Milton's copy of *De Bello Peloponnesiaco*; William Riley Parker, *Milton: A Biography*, 2 vols., 2:1122. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1968), 2:1122 CM, XVIII, 572 notes a copy assumed to be autographed by Milton.

his ancient medium one step further, addresses the lesson in democracy to his English audience. In *Areopagitica*, Milton urges that the liberty of free speech—"the nurse of all great wits" which has "rarify'd and enlightn'd our spirits like the influence of heav'n"—is one of the principles that distinguishes republican government from tyranny, and as such the English parliament would gain immeasurably by following the precedent of the Athenian assembly in guaranteeing that fundamental principle which "your own valorous and happy counsels have purchast us" (CPW 2:559).

Four months after the publication of *Areopagitica*, with its title page epigraph from Euripides' *Supplikes*, Milton would again marshal the example of Euripides, mined from his Paulus edition, this time an epigraph from *Medea* on the title page of *Tetrachordon*, dated March 4, 1645.¹⁴⁹ The speaker in this instance is Medea, a startling choice on Milton's part considering her infamous reputation for violent and heretical behavior. Moreover, the lines Milton extracts for his title page occur at a pivotal moment in Euripides' drama. Medea is attempting to persuade King Creon to let her remain at Corinth one last day, knowing that if she succeeds she will kill, in elaborately gruesome fashion, not only Jason's bride-to-be, but ultimately, in one of the most shocking scenes in all of literature, her own young sons. Preparatory to her meeting with King Creon, Medea announces her intentions with chilling precision:

¹⁴⁹ See Martin Dzelzainis, "Milton and the Protectorate in 1658," in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. Armitage et al, p. 199; David Davies and Paul Dowling, "'Shrewd books, with dangerous Frontispieces': *Areopagitica*'s Motto," *Milton Quarterly*, 20 (1986): 33-37; Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985), p. 115.

[Jason] shall never see alive again
 The sons he had from me. From his new bride he never
 Shall breed a son; she by my poison, wretched girl,
 Must die a hideous death. (802-04)

Tetrachordon is a part of Milton's divorce series, and thus the relationship between Medea and Jason, signaled (however obliquely) in Milton's choice for his title page, is remarkably reminiscent of that between the star-crossed Dalila and Samson (though in reverse gender fashion, as it were, with Samson as an antitype to Medea rather than to Jason). It seems likely that Milton was fascinated with Medea not as a kind of poster-femme fatale for his latent misogyny, but quite the opposite, as an intelligent outsider embroiled in marital dissolution and surrounded by the hostile and less intelligent, a remarkable fusion of what Milton himself was and harbinger of the tragic circumstances to come—the "evil dayes" and "evil tongues," the darkness and danger of the restoration years (*PL* 7:25-26).

Medea, as a non-Greek, would never be recognized by Greeks as Jason's wife, and hence the dissolution is in a sense preordained though the level of violence induced is not. Similarly, the fissure between Dalila's Philistines and Samson's Danites becomes not only unbridgeable in the end, but the very terms of their violent disintegration. In lines that would find their way onto the title page of Milton's *Tetrachordon*, Medea laments to King Creon:

. . . if you bring strange wisdom to fools
 You shall be seen as foolish and worthless
 And if you are thought superior to those
 Held wise, you will become hated. (298-301)

For the ancient Greeks, civilized life meant controlled, orderly, proportionate life: Τὸ μὴδὲν γὰρ, “No excess.” The want of this proportionate life was considered a kind of living death, and those who had died for it in the great historic battles or in resistance to tyranny were the Athenians’ most honored heroes. Thus Milton’s use of Medea’s brief speech is especially salient in that Medea so precisely challenges the very tenets upon which this civilization is based. In the text of *Tetrachordon*, Milton returns to the example of Euripides when he compares his adversaries to Pentheus in the *Bacchae*, who, through his rigid adherence to a static and proportionate life, rejecting the strange eastern god Dionysus, destroyed lawful worship and brought on the ruin of Thebes.

Moreover, in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* and in *Eikonoklastes* Milton yet again turns to Euripides, in this case *Heraclides* and *Orestes*, to plead for dispassionate and just proceedings in England’s serious crisis of parliament against king. In *The Tenure* Milton cites the enlightened speech of Demophoon in *Heraclides*, “a Tragedy of Euripides,” where the youthful king and son of Theseus concedes that the rule of law is applicable in equal proportion to kings and their subjects. In a characteristic rhetorical move, Milton allows classical authority, and especially

Euripides, to prevail over biblical authority.¹⁵⁰

Yet some would perswade us, that this absurd opinion was King *Davids*; because in the 51 *Psalm* he cries out to God, *Against thee onely have I sinn'd*; as if *David* had imagin'd that to murder *Uriah* and adulterate his Wife, had bin no sinn against his Neighbour, when as that Law of *Moses* was to the King expresly, *Deut. 17. not to think so highly of himself above his Brethren. David* therefore by those words could mean no other, then either that the depth of his guiltiness was known to God onely, or to so few as had not the will or power to question him, or that the sin against God was greater beyond compare then against *Uriah*. What ever his meaning were, any wise man will see that the pathetical words of a *Psalm* can be no certaine decision to a poynt that hath abundantly more certain rules to goe by. How much more rationally spake the Heathen King *Demophoon* in a tragedy of *Euripides* then these Interpreters would put upon King *David*, *I rule not my people by Tyranny, as if they were Barbarians, but am my self liable, if I doe unjustly, to suffer justly*" (CPW 3:205).

¹⁵⁰ Cf. the preface to *Samson Agonistes*: "The Apostle *Paul* himself thought it not unworthy to insert a verse of *Euripides* into the Text of Holy Scripture, 1 *Cor. 15.33*"; and *Christian Doctrine*, where Milton supports his position on the complex theological question of mortalism with an example from Euripides' *Supplices*, "a far better interpretation" (CPW 6:407-08).

Demophoon in this instance speaks more rationally than the biblical David and thus serves as the better example. Similarly in *Eikonoklastes*, Milton brings forward the tragedians Euripides and Aeschylus to support his view that governments have the power not only to condemn their rulers to death through legal proceedings, but also to exonerate them. In *Orestes* (943-49), Euripides relates how the government at Argos condemned Orestes, while Aeschylus in *Eumenides* (775-81) recounts how the court at Athens acquitted him. Milton writes that

In Greece, *Orestes* the Son of *Agamemnon*, and by succession King of *Argos*, was in that Countrey judg'd and condemn'd to death for killing his Mother: whence escaping, he was judg'd againe, though a Stranger, before the great Councel of *Areopagus* in *Athens*. And this memorable act of Judicature, was the first that brought the Justice of that grave Senat into fame and high estimation over all *Greece* for many ages after. And in the same Citty Tyrants were to undergoe Legal sentence by the Laws of *Solon*" (CPW 3:589).

Though Milton was certainly in at the birth of republicanism, we nevertheless hesitate in proclaiming him without qualification a republican. Milton supported the overthrow of the Commonwealth in 1653 and its replacement by the semi-monarchical

regime of Cromwell.¹⁵¹ In endorsing that regime Milton returned to the distinction he had made throughout the 1640s (often with Euripidean tragedy as his example), and which he had repeatedly made in his publications of the Rump period, between tyrants, who are by definition evil, and kings, who may be virtuous.¹⁵² Only in the relatively desperate years of 1659-60 did he unambiguously renounce monarchy of any kind. Blair Worden has argued that Milton was aware of Machiavelli's *Discourses* and the republicanism contained therein before 1649; yet before 1649 republicanism in England seemed merely a hypothetical ideal, where after 1649 it was advanced to meet a crisis and an opportunity.¹⁵³

In the 1637 letter to Charles Diodati, Milton had applied Euripides, and what would substantively be the final chorus of *Samson Agonistes*, to proclaim a literary career. At approximately the same moment two publications, the *Masque at Ludlow Castle* and *Justa Edouardo King Naufrago*, initiated that career on a national level. The choral ode that Milton quoted in his letter to his friend and that concludes several Euripidean tragedies,¹⁵⁴ πολλὰ γὰρ μορφαὶ τῷ Δαιμονίῳ, "for many are the shapes of

¹⁵¹ His views on Cromwell would change as well. In 1654 Milton did not publicly challenge or sharply criticize Cromwell. However in *The Readie and Easie Way* (1660), with thinly veiled references to Cromwell, Milton excoriates "ambitious leaders of armies," who adopt "hypocritical pretences" in order to destroy parliaments and to "make way to their own tyrannical designs." See Worden, "Milton and Marchamont Nedham," in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. Armitage et al, p. 177.

¹⁵² CPW 3:198, 212, 388, 397, 453, 458, 530. *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Patterson et al., 7:111, 147, 235, 245, 267, 305, 307, 433-35, 475-77, 551. Ibid., 8:25, 27, 93. See Worden, "Milton and Marchamont Nedham," in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. Armitage et al, pp. 166-67.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 168; Worden, "Milton's Republicanism and the Tyranny of Heaven," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Bock et al, pp. 231-35.

¹⁵⁴ See, for instance, the *Bacchae*, *Helen*, and *Alcestis*.

divine things,” registers not only an early fusing of classical and protestant Christian principles through which Milton would shape his complex artistic, theologic, and political ideals—the postulate of a scattered truth that “may have more shapes than one” (CPW 2:563) in *Areopagitica*, for instance—but what Renaissance exegetes and artists, and especially the religious and political radicals, had believed to be the historical role of the ancient poets.¹⁵⁵ For Milton, the Euripidean chorus represented one of pre-Christianity’s prophetic, visionary comments on the mysterious, protean processes through which God had revealed himself in antiquity, an oracular prophecy, moreover, that would find its way into the erudite Paul’s cautionary imperative, reiterated throughout the radical pamphlets of the 1640s as well as in Milton’s own works, and pointedly in *Areopagitica*, to “prove all things, hold fast that which is good” (CPW 2:510-11; Cf. 1 Th. 5:21).

In the years just after his departure from Cambridge, Milton sought an alternative to the traditional methodologies of the clerical order to which he was destined “of a child and in mine own resolutions,” and “by the intentions of my parents and friends,” and which he would refer to in *The Reason of Church-Government* as an anti-Athenian “prelatical Sparta” (CPW 1:855) where one must “subscribe slave, and take an oath withall, which unlesse he took with a conscience that would retch, he must either strait perjure or split his faith” (CPW 1:823). Milton had been “church-outed by the Prelats . . . under whose inquisitorius and tyrannical duncery no free and splendid wit can flourish

¹⁵⁵ Christopher Grose, *Milton and the Sense of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988), pp. 36-37.

(CPW 1:823). In the Diodati letter of 1634, Milton joins the fabled pagan world with the Pauline texts concerned with the extension of the covenant of grace. Such a move was crucial to seventeenth-century Protestant theologians such as William Perkins and William Ames, who wished to relax Calvin's Procrustean theory of predestination by arguing against divine fiat and for an individual believer's ability to respond to divine call, and to proto-republican radicals and influential predecessors such as the "sage and serious" Spenser, who was in Milton's view "a better teacher then *Scotus* or *Aquinas*" (CPW 2:215).¹⁵⁶

Typically, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century treatises on government and rhetoric warned that a metaphorical interpretation of Scripture, derived from its inherent ambiguity, might foment antinomianism, false prophecy, rebellion and political anarchy. As Victoria Kahn notes, Hobbes, perhaps the best known example, expressed just this fear in his *Leviathan*. Nevertheless the Civil Wars, the regicide and the outpouring of anti-monarchical pamphlets gave the treatises a new urgency in the 1640s and 1650s, and hence scriptural exegesis and prophecy, feared by Hobbes and the Royalists generally, became a political act that contributed directly to the outbreak of Civil War. In this way scriptural covenant was used to underwrite the political contract. Milton's republicanism was therefore as much a product of his interpretation of the biblical

¹⁵⁶ Kahn, "The Metaphorical Contract in Milton's *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*," ed. Armitage et al, pp. 82-86. In addition to Hobbes, Kahn also cites George Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie*, which linked "doubtfull speeches" with "blind" prophesies and the resultant "insurrections," and Thomas Wilson's *The Rule of Reason*, which warns not to construe the New Testament in an inappropriately metaphorical sense: spiritual "freedom" should not be understood metaphorically to imply political "freedom."

covenants of Abraham and Moses as it was of his reading of the ancients and especially Euripides.¹⁵⁷

Milton's use of Euripidean precedent throughout his life, from the first prolusion and the Diodati letter to the concluding choral ode in *Samson Agonistes*, gleaned through the lifetime study of his Paulus edition, tells us much about his views on the purpose of tragedy as an artistic, political, and moral medium. It also helps clarify his definition of tragedy as proposed in *The Reason of Church Government*, where he tells us that his aim in imitating those "dramatic constitutions, wherein Sophocles and Euripides reign," shall be to present something "more doctrinal and exemplary to the nation" (CPW 1:814-15). Tragedy, then, has a unique political intention, and Milton, like his predecessor Euripides in constructing tragedy based upon the ancient stories common to his culture, used these stories and myths to teach specific lessons. Inquiry into the political underpinnings of Euripides' tragedies—*Medea* and the *Bacchae* especially as we shall observe in the following chapters—thus sheds light on the political underpinnings of *Samson Agonistes*, a tragedy Milton constructed, after all, in their image.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p.105.

Chapter 6

Toward a Theory of Tragedy: *Medea* and *Samson Agonistes*

“a tragedy, well acted, affecteth no less than a murder.”
 –Thomas Hobbes (1640)¹⁵⁸

Euripidean drama, as we have seen, unlike its predecessor Aeschylean and its contemporary Sophoclean drama, does not oppose man to an objective theophanic world; the tragic situations and actions of Euripidean drama occur within a human or social context in which the catastrophe is no longer the dramatic center of the play, and as a result the individual tragic hero is no longer regarded as the indispensable locus in the portrayal of human suffering. In *Medea*, moreover, a drama which held particular interest for Milton as we have noted, the decentering of the conception of human suffering, the interrogation of the mythological contexts, and the exegesis of the psychology of vengeance take on primary importance. And it is in this mode of expression that the fundamental resemblance to *Samson Agonistes* is revealed, for Milton absorbs from Euripides not only the limitations and structure of tragedy, but the dialectic devices, the liminal process whereby tragedy is transcended and a higher syncretic mode achieved.

In the context of his time Euripides is the poet of decline, as events at the end of

¹⁵⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature* (London, 1640), in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Sir William Molesworth, 11 vols. (London: Longman, 1839-45), 4:75.

the Peloponnesian War signal a collapse in the Athenian democratic world, a social and political declension paralleling the end of tragedy as an art form. It is a fall charted, as mentioned earlier, in the histories of Thucydides, a work Milton knew and Hobbes translated,¹⁵⁹ and more intimately and powerfully in the tragedies of Euripides—a fall that must have been profoundly relevant and illuminating for Milton in the wake of the failed Puritan revolution and the restoration of Charles II in 1660. The aesthetic fundamentals of Euripidean drama, the loss of sense and meaning as a rejection of received traditions and ideologies, the enigmatic merging of humanity and monstrosity, the preoccupation with the blurred line between divine and human causality, especially when related to violence, the astonishing fusion of inharmonious elements that led Nietzsche to blame Euripides for the death of tragedy, reflects back to the Athenian populous the fragmentation and decline of republican culture. And like Milton's use of the Judges narrative in *Samson Agonistes*, it is a relationship refracted through the veil of mythology.

Nietzsche, in a penetrating observation on the decline of Greek tragedy, summarily records of the necessary interrelationship between a people and their culture, religion and tradition, tragedy and the commonwealth:

We have seen how Greek tragedy declined through a curious sundering of the two sources that nourished it, a process which went hand in hand with the degeneration of the Greek national character and which should make

¹⁵⁹ Thucydides, *Eight Bookes of the Peloponnesian Warre*, tr. Thomas Hobbes (London, 1629). See too Boswell, *Milton's Library*, p. 244, for confirmation of Milton's ownership of Thucydides' *De Bello Peloponnesiaco*.

us consider how inextricably bound up with one another are art and the people, myth and custom, tragedy and the commonwealth. The disappearance of tragedy also spelled the disappearance of myth. Heretofore the Greeks had felt an instinctive need to relate their experience at once to their myth, indeed to understand it only through that connection. In this way even the immediate present appeared to them . . . in a certain sense as timeless. The commonwealth, as well as art, submerged itself in that timeless stream in order to find respite from the burden and avidity of the immediate moment. It may be claimed that a nation, like an individual, is valuable only insofar as it is able to give to quotidian experience the stamp of the eternal. Only by so doing can it express its profound, if unconscious, conviction of the relativity of time and the metaphysical meaning of life. The opposite happens when a nation begins to view itself historically and to demolish the mythical bulwarks that surround it.¹⁶⁰

It is just such “mythical bulwarks” that Euripides, and later Milton, set out to demolish, and it is for this reason that Nietzsche considered the destruction of tragedy, its removal finally from its metaphysical preoccupations, to be the fault of Euripides. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that through tragedy Euripides and Milton were able to break down and reconfigure mythology—and hence religious custom and tradition—to get

¹⁶⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, tr. Francis Golffing (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), p. 138.

beyond what they viewed as a slavish or at least indifferent adherence to prescription, failure, barbarism, in an attempt to capture what might transcend prescription, a move powerfully illustrated in the regenerative friendship between Hercules and Theseus in *Heracles* as we noted earlier, or, in the counterpoint and companion poem to *Samson Agonistes*, Jesus' quiet return to his mother's house at the end of *Paradise Regained*.¹⁶¹ In both instances, the tragedy of violent retribution, a violence chaotically intermingled with warring gods and spilling over onto the innocent, is transcended through the simple bond of human compassion.

In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton turns to biblical exegesis, where the brooding depictions of human pathos and barbarism in the Judges narrative—the retributive clipped thumbs and toes of Adonibezek, the Benjaminites rape and murder of the concubine, Samson's firing of the fox's tails and indiscriminate butchering of the Philistines, the loss of divine necessity in the singular choral refrain "in those days there was no King in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes" (21.25)—proceeds through a dialectical process to the heart of the questions posed in Milton's drama. If, as C. H. Whitman has proposed, Euripides centered his drama on a blind human struggle that is both mocked and blessed by divine concern, we are then confronted with the meaning of divinity as it enters the human sphere.¹⁶² And it is this focus on the uncertainty of

¹⁶¹ This is not to say that with the restoration all religious and civil progress was reversed. It is more accurate that religious orthodoxy of the Calvinist variety passed into a deism wherein morals and conduct became more important than dogmatic theology. See Christopher Hill, *Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1980), pp. 68-74.

¹⁶² C. H. Whitman, *Euripides and the Full Circle of Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974), pp. 30; 53-54.

divinity, the implications of human process released from external necessity that leads to the comparison with *Samson Agonistes*. For the revelation of this liminal sphere, where all identifying markers have been removed, simultaneously validates and vitiates the mythic systems both as narrative representation and as a reflection of a coherent world order; it culminates and dissolves what has been as it turns a collective memory toward a renewed, transfigured world.

Walter Burkert has argued that tragedy in its essence reproduces the sacrificial scenario in dramatic form by bringing its audience into a therapeutic confrontation with a sacrificial death. Sacrificial killing is thus the basic experience of the sacred, as we noted earlier of sixteenth century theologians and thinkers, and as such “*Homo religiosus* acts and attains self-awareness as *homo necans*,” or man as killer.¹⁶³ Translating *tragoidia* as “a song at the sacrifice of a goat,” Burkert locates the origins of tragedy in a group of masked, and thus anonymous and guiltless, men who form a chorus to confront and lament death at a sacrifice. Just as the killing of the sacrificial animal included the *ololugmos* (shrieking women) and the accompanying music of the *aulos* (a flute-like instrument), so the tragic chorus went on to lament the tragic hero to the music of the *aulos*, thus effecting a kind of catharsis.

Euripidean prologues and choral endings, however, unlike those of Aeschylus and Sophocles, typically are sharply set off from the body of the drama, and in their

¹⁶³ Walter Burkert, *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth*, tr. Peter Bing (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983), pp. 1-3. See too Burkert, “Greek Tragedy and Sacrificial Ritual” in *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 7 (1966): 87-121.

marginal status signal a very different reality. The air of unreality contained in these moments, with their singular formality, aridity and general artlessness destabilizes the easy Nietzschean metaphysics of solace by pressing the audience into a radically ambiguous space in which the disparity between what has just been witnessed and what the chorus is now saying is pronounced.¹⁶⁴ As a result the prologues and choral endings become, as Manoa and the Chorus do in *Samson Agonistes*, a kind of proleptic metacommentary on the central narrative, a chronicling or summing up that in its pedestrian rigidity resonates as a dissembling of the truth of what has only just occurred. And yet this very disparity of understanding, this revision of immediate history adhering to a traditional interpretation, serves to force the reader or audience to reject the pretended solution and interpret the significance of the facts in themselves. That is, the reader moves back to the ambiguous center of the drama.

That *Samson* ends with a regular Italian sonnet glorifying the “faithful champion” (1755) who has led all to “true experience from this great event” (1760) intimates, considering Milton’s renowned rejection of rhymed verse and disapprobation of the “noise and shouting of a rude multitude” (*CPW* 7:442), the restricted consciousness of the chorus-public, the bonding of barbarous traditions and values, the cyclical pattern of an inscribed history of violence and retribution awaiting the intervention of God to realign the world. The deliverer has not even freed himself, let alone redeemed his people and country. We need only remember the succeeding Judges narrative in which

¹⁶⁴ I would except the *Bacchae* from this analysis. The choral odes in the *Bacchae*, written by Euripides while he was in exile in Macedonia, are some of the most profoundly and darkly beautiful in all literature.

the Danites proceed to arm themselves, steal Micah's idols and priest, then slaughter the "quiet and secure" (Jud. 18:27) people of Laish and burn down their city in order to found the new city of Dan. Through indeterminacy and warring moral valences, which are the very precepts of Euripidean drama, we are forced back upon the liminal center of the drama, the Hegelian or Blakean dialectic, the middle that Johnson failed to observe. And it is here that we perceive what might be termed the anti-structure of the drama.

Victor Turner, in his anthropological study of ritual in primitive cultures, has described anti-structure as not

a structural reversal, a mirror-imaging of 'profane' workaday socioeconomic structure, or a fantasy-rejection of structural 'necessities,' but the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc., from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses. . . . This is the fact that when persons, groups, sets of ideas, etc., move from one level or style of organization or regulation of the interdependence of their parts or elements to another level, there has to be an interfacial region . . . an interval, however brief, of *margin* or *limen*, when the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in

the balance.¹⁶⁵

Thus revolutions, violent or not, successful or not, become the limina between major distinctive structural orderings of society, the totalizing liminal phases for which the limina of tribal rites of passage or, for Milton and Euripides, biblical and mythological typologies, were merely foreshadowings or premonitions.

Liberty for Milton, as Northrop Frye reminds us,¹⁶⁶ is a release of energy through revelation; action without revelatory vision is mindless, habitual action, the action grounded in tradition and custom. In the preface to *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* Milton contends that man's slavish adherence to custom fills "each estate of life . . . with abject and servil principles; depressing the high and Heavenborn spirit of Man, far beneath the condition wherein either God created him, or sin hath sunke him" and that custom is fundamentally incorporated with error, the "blind and Serpentine body without a head," the two together serving to "persecute and chase away all truth and solid wisdom out of humane life" (CPW 2:223). Moreover, in *The Tenure Of Kings and Magistrates* we witness Milton's attempt to give a coherent account of revolution as a force of history, and in *Areopagitica* Milton insists on the necessary recognition of the dialectical twining of good and evil, on the ability of the individual to "apprehend and

¹⁶⁵ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), p. 44. See too William Kerrigan, *The Sacred Complex: On the Psychogenesis of Paradise Lost* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983), pp. 151; 272-74; Regina Schwartz, *Remembering and Repeating: Biblical Creation in "Paradise Lost"* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), p. 18; and Charles Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides Bacchae* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982), p. 13.

¹⁶⁶ Northrop Frye, *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth, and Society* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1976), 222.

consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better” (*CPW* 2:514-15).

Liberty for Milton, therefore, is dependent upon a break with tradition, an inversion or reversal of quotidian processes and structures, and thus the effect of the coupling of reason and revelation is to explode custom and mechanical habit, to supplant habituation with the potentiality for the formation of new ideas and models of belief. Similarly, we find in Euripides’ febrile urgency, the uneasy mood pervading a drama like *Medea*, an indefatigable straining after new solutions, a cutting away of what is stale and spurious joined with a receptivity to all that is new, a profound desire to expose through dialectic the violent, consumptive degeneration of war-ravaged Athens. The late *deus ex machina* appearance of the sun-god Helios, the source of all life and warmth vindicating the cause of passionate disorder and violent cruelty, leaves us with a profound disjunction of meaning: do we understand this to be a warning that the gods are not on the side of the cold, orderly, self-protective processes of civilization, or a critique of historical justification of mass killing in the name of the divine?

Medea commences, like *Samson Agonistes* and *Macbeth* post act 2.2, with a depiction of the central character alone and despairing, isolated in a foreign place. By implementing a narrative tactic that pivots on the moment of redemption and regeneration, or conversely return to the violence and destruction of the past, Euripides underscores and deepens the psychological complexity of his character. *Medea* takes place on the day the mature Medea first discovers that her husband Jason has chosen a

second wife. Banished from her new home in Greece, Medea plans and carries out her revenge, and the revenge plot dramatizes her decision to punish her husband by murdering their children as well as his new bride.¹⁶⁷ Ultimately Medea's final explosion of violence, so out of proportion to the offence against her, becomes the distinguishing mark, the character trait with which a reader or audience is left. Similarly in Milton's tentative re-working of *Macbeth* in his commonplace book, for instance, we note that he would not begin where Shakespeare did; Milton is closer to Euripides in that his concentration is on the mature, fallen character, a narrative strategy and use of legend he would finally implement in *Samson Agonistes*. And like Medea, Samson's killing in *Samson Agonistes*, as the chorus exhorts the "slaughter'd foes in number more / Then all thy life had slain before" (1667-68), shifts sympathy not toward the protagonist, but, because of the disturbingly disproportionate violent response, decidedly away from him.

Medea's nurse, in her opening remarks, describes what is a primary tenet of *Medea* and *Samson*, when she says of Medea, "poor creature, she has discovered by her

¹⁶⁷ A contrast to Euripides' version of the Medea legend is contained in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which concentrates on the young Medea's initial attraction to Jason. Ovid differentiates his portrait of Medea from earlier versions of the legend, and especially Euripides', by telescoping the murders into four lines late in his narrative (cf. 7.394-97). Such a tack diminishes the revenge motive and its effect of awe and horror, precisely the reverse of what Euripides had achieved. In the generation after Ovid, Seneca, in contrast, emphasizes the horror and frenzy in his rendition of the Medea narrative. See Richard J. DuRocher, *Milton and Ovid* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1985), pp. 99-110. Medea also appears in Corneille's tragedy (1635), which Milton may have known. Ovid's tragedy *Medea*, now lost, was referred to by Quintilian and others as a masterpiece of Roman drama (see *Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.98). Milton would have been aware of Ovid's *Medea* through his studies of Quintilian at St. Paul's School and through his copy of the *Institutio Oratoria* in his adult library. See Boswell, *Milton's Library*, p. 206.

sufferings / What it means to one not to have lost one's country" (34-35).¹⁶⁸ The loss of country intimates not only geographical displacement, but a displaced, progressively divided subjectivity forced to confront its own ambivalent responses to violence.¹⁶⁹ The function of traditional myth for the majority of fifth century Greeks and early modern English, Hesiodic theogony and biblical exegesis respectively, was to provide culture with normative values and ontological consolation, to alleviate apprehension and uncertainty by grounding social experience—and especially social rupture and upheaval—in sacred and sovereign order, the Nietzschean metaphysical solace mentioned earlier. Thus war and violence, familial and national trauma in Aeschylus and Sophocles finds cathartic resolution in sacred and civic order: in the *Oresteia*, Orestes is purified through his participation in the foundation of the Athenian law court of the Areopagus, a grand parable of progress and eventual stability following serial disaster; in the Theban plays, the Athens of Theseus is made sacred through the patronage of Oedipus while alive, and the custody of his remains after his death.

Similarly, early modern tragedy, from *Doctor Faustus* to *Hamlet*, largely provides cathartic resolution in the restoration of spiritual and civic order. Euripidean tragedy,

¹⁶⁸ All quotations are from *The Medea* in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, Euripides I, ed. David Grene and Richard Lattimore, tr. Rex Warner (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1955).

¹⁶⁹ We should recall here Milton's quotations from *Medea* on the title page of his *Tetrachordon* (1644). Medea, resolute in her plan of revenge, assays to convince King Creon to let her remain one last fateful day in Corinth: "For if you bring wisdom to fools / You shall be seen as foolish and worthless. / And if you are thought superior to those / Held wise, you will become hated (298-302). That Milton would extract this quotation for his treatise on divorce suggests a deep affinity with the recalcitrant, violence-prone Medea and hence with those outside Royalist or traditional power structures.

however, exemplified in *Medea* and in those tragedies modeled on Euripides such as Buchanan's *Jephtha* and *Samson Agonistes*, can be characterized by a purposive resistance to this kind of resolution. Rather than introducing an idealized depersonalization of society and culture, what Debora Shuger terms "end myths" or "disintegration myths" involve an inversion of a culture's traditional symbology for the articulation of the complexities of inner experience.¹⁷⁰ By interrogating and often invalidating traditional symbols, end myth exposes their inadequacy to provide moral coherence and hence relief from personal and civic trauma. As such, end myth approaches not just tragedy, but a particular kind of tragedy initiated by Euripides.

The first words uttered by Medea, strikingly similar to Milton's Satan's inner dialectic on Mount Niphates, "Ah, wretch! Ah, lost in my sufferings, / I wish, I wish I might die" and "Oh, what use have I now for life? / I would find my release in death / And leave hateful existence behind me" (96-97; 145-47), locates Medea in the category of fallen hero. Medea's recognition of pain through soliloquy and her simultaneous desire for an end of pain in death resonate in Macbeth's "rooted sorrow" and "troubles of the brain" which might be eradicated by "some sweet oblivious antidote" (41-43), and in Samson's similarly reflective gaze, which sees "My self, my Sepulcher, a moving Grave, / Buried, yet not exempt / By privilege of death and burial" (102-04). Collectively, these characters are portraits of souls at war with themselves. Each no longer seeks regeneration but rather further degeneration, as Samson would reiterate in "but as for life / To what end should I seek it / . . . oft-invoked death / Hast'n the welcom end of all my

¹⁷⁰ Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible*, pp. 89-90.

pains” (521-22; 575-76). In context, the two prayers at the end of the Samson story in the Judges narrative that Milton would exclude from *Samson Agonistes*, as if to emphasize their import through omission, provide stirring testimony to Samson’s final state of mind: “O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes. . . Let me die with the Philistines” (Judg. 15:28-30). If these are the prayers Samson speaks at the pillars in Milton’s dramatic redaction of the Judges story, they are prayers on the self, on personal vengeance and the desire to die, terms directly contrary to the divine witness the Chorus finds in Samson’s death.¹⁷¹

Medea in the end, like Samson, makes no mistake in her moral arithmetic any more than she mistakes her passion for an evil spirit, and therein lies her supreme tragic quality.¹⁷² Only through her experience of suffering has Medea learned the deeper lesson; through reversal she has discovered a bitter truth, and thus the nurse fears lest Medea “think of some dreadful thing, / For her heart is violent. She will never put up with / The treatment she is getting” (37-39). When Medea becomes set in her overriding passion for vengeance on her perceived enemies, she summons god to her side:

God, and God’s daughter, justice, and light of Helius!

¹⁷¹ Gregory F. Goekjian, “Suicide and Revenge: *Samson Agonistes* and the Law of the Father,” *Milton Studies* 26 (1990): 253-70; George F. Butler, “New Light on Samson’s Darkness: *Samson Agonistes* and Suicide in the Seventeenth Century,” *College Language Association Journal*, 37:4 (1994): 443-52; cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 1, 17-27, for the orthodox position on suicide and the exempting of Samson from the suicidal prohibition.

¹⁷² Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 186.

Now, Friends, has come the time of my triumph over
 My enemies, and now my foot is on the road.
 Now I am confident they will pay the penalty. (764-67)

We remember that Medea is related to the “holy light of Helius” (752) as the sun-god is the “father / Of my father” (746-47), and that the poisoned dress and diadem she delivers to Jason are gifts which “Helius of old, / My father’s father, bestowed on his descendants” (954-55). Thus the sun-god effectively bestows upon his descendant the tools of cruel and pitiless destruction of other human beings. The Chorus submits the telling narrative when in their incomprehension they pray to the very god Medea calls upon for assistance in her slaughter:

O Earth, and the far shining
 Ray of the Sun, look down, look down upon
 This poor lost woman, look, before she raises
 The hand of murder against her flesh and blood.
 Yours was the golden birth from which
 She sprang, and now I fear divine
 Blood may be shed by men.
 O heavenly light, hold back her hand,
 Check her, and drive from out the house
 The bloody Fury raised by fiends of Hell. (1251-60)

An Athenian audience who saw the first performance of Euripides' *Medea* at the state dramatic contest in 431 B.C. would have known the *Medea* of mythology as a barbarian princess and as a sorceress, related to the gods and to "Whom most I honor and have chosen as partner, / Hecate, who dwells in the recesses of my hearth" (396-97).¹⁷³ Samson, too, in the Judges narrative as well as under Milton's tutelage, is a barbarian prince nominated by God through the mysterious angel whose face was "very terrible" (Jud. 13.6) and who ascends, as Samson describes, "all in flames" (25) as a "fiery column charioting" (27) in the smoke of Manoa's "Off'ring burn'd" (26). The ritual and sacrificial aspect of the Judges narrative is thus preserved, if in adumbrated form, in Milton's transgressive syncretization of Old Testament typology and Christian soteriology. Milton depicts a Samson who, like *Medea*, views himself as a descendant of a god who has bestowed upon him the strength that is the destruction of his enemies and, finally and paradoxically, of himself.

It has been suggested by many critics that Milton knew the etymology which derived the names of both Samson and Hercules from *sun*, thereby making them fit comparisons to the Sun of Righteousness; and thus in both the *Nativity Ode* and *Paradise Regained* Milton alludes to Hercules as a type of Christ.¹⁷⁴ Yet Milton must also have known *Medea* to be closely related to the sun as the ending of that tragedy depicts her ascending to the heavens in the chariot of Helios, drawn, we are told

¹⁷³ See Lattimore's introduction to *The Medea* in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*. In the state contest of 431 B.C., *Medea* was awarded the third prize.

¹⁷⁴ See, for instance, Raymond Waddington, "Melancholy against Melancholy: *Samson Agonistes* as Renaissance Tragedy," in *Calm of Mind*, ed. Wittreich, p. 259.

parenthetically, by dragons, having slaughtered her own children in a final explosion of unspeakable violence. Moreover, fire in its most destructive form is repeatedly linked to Samson in both the biblical portrayal and *Samson Agonistes*. The lighting of the fox's tails and the resultant burning of the standing grain and olive yards, the rope that falls away from Samson's hands as if "Toucht with flame" (262), the Philistine threat of fire and the burning to death of the woman of Timnah and her father all allude less to Christ than to Satan, the former Light-bearer who lies chained to the burning lake at the opening of *Paradise Lost*, and who might be viewed as Hecate is to Euripides' Medea, a being dwelling in the very recesses of her "hearth" (397). The fire symbology accruing to Samson virtually becomes, as Robert Alter observes, "a metonymic image of Samson himself: a blind, uncontrolled force, leaving a terrible swath of destruction behind it, finally consuming itself together with whatever stands in its way."¹⁷⁵

Medea's desire for revenge and glory overrides her love for her own children when she contends, in terms reminiscent of Samson, that "it is not bearable to be mocked by enemies. . . . / Let no one think me a weak one, feeble-spirited, / A stay-at-home, but rather just the opposite, / One who can hurt my enemies and help my friends; / For the lives of such persons are most remembered" (797; 807-10). Samson's analogous drive for revenge and glory—"This day will be remarkable in my life / By some great act, or of my days the last" (1389-90)—leads him willingly to the theater because he does not want to be mocked in the streets as Jesus will be. The fundamental interiority of both

¹⁷⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p. 95. See too Wittreich, *Interpreting "Samson Agonistes,"* p. 128.

portraits, the extreme emphasis on the self, serves to emphasize the repercussive, ineradicable nature of violence and vengeance. Through the veneer of sacrificial self-oblation emerges a human soul at war with itself, the disjunctive interior patterns characteristic of the satanic in *Paradise Lost* and of the demonic in the corpus of Euripides. Medea, alone and spiraling through the cyclical pattern of desire and revenge, in a passage strikingly analogous to Samson's dark inner dialectic and importantly Satan's deeply conflicted monologue atop Mount Niphates, laments

Do not, O my heart, you must not do these things!

Poor heart, let them go, have pity on the children.

If they live with you in Athens they will cheer you.

No! By Hell's avenging furies it shall not be—

This shall never be, that I should suffer my children

To be the prey of my enemies' insolence.

Every way it is fixed. (1057-64)

Like Samson, Medea admits that “stronger than all my afterthoughts is my fury, / Fury that brings upon mortals the greatest evils” (1079-80).

A startling *paripeteia* thus occurs in *Medea* as our sympathy shifts suddenly since the punishment she metes out is far more brutal and cruel than the crime, and we remember such acts as the murdering of her own brother and the strewing of the pieces

of his body over the water so that their father's fleet, while collecting the fragments for burial, might lose time in their pursuit of the fugitives. The mythological contexts thus operate to infuse the violent valences of the past into the present dramatic characterization much as the biblical contexts do in *Samson Agonistes*.¹⁷⁶ In the end Medea's revenge is complete; and Jason inherits through the cycle of violence and revenge her earlier lament of despair and longing for death. In *Samson*, the Messenger, those to whom Manoa pleads his son's ransom, and even Harapha are all too human for

¹⁷⁶ For the infusion of the more violent aspects of classical mythology into English republican rhetoric, see John Hall's *An Humble Motion to the Parliament of England Concerning the Advancement of Learning* (London, 1649), wherein Hall elaborates on Milton's imagery in *Areopagitica* of the disunited body of truth by referencing Medea's dismembering of her brother. Cited in Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic*, p. 214. The Medea legend and the fear of fragmentation surfaces as well in Thomas Hobbes' *De Cive* (London, 1642; English translation 1651). Hobbes illustrates the danger of factionalism by referencing Medea's manipulation of the daughters of Pelias, who proceed on Medea's counsel to dismember and boil their father: "For folly and eloquence concur in the subversion of government in the same manner (as the fable hath it) as heretofore the daughters of *Pelias* King of Thessaly, conspired with *Medea* against their father; They going to restore the decrepit old man to his youth again, by the counsell of *Medea*, they cut him into pieces, and set him in the fire to boyle, in vain expecting when he would live again; So the common people through their folly (like the daughters of *Pelias*) desiring to renew the ancient government, being drawne away by the *eloquence* of ambitious men, as it were by the witchcraft of *Medea*, divided into *faction*, they consume it rather by those flames, then they reforme it" (12.13). Cited in H. Warrender, ed., *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1957), pp. 155-56. See too *A Discovery of 29, Sects here in London, all of which, except the first, are most Divelish and Damnable, being these which follow* (London, 1641), which notes the "Bacchanalians," who are "more mad, ignorant, or impious then the rest, for they thinke, nay they certainly beleieve, that they shall gaine Heaven by drinking healths, and he which can drink most is worshipped among them, saying that hee is chosen a Priest to Bacchus," and the "Chadeans a notable Negromancer," who were "the first which brought up this new Religion, they hold it fit to goe to the Divell to know any secret." The author then provides this brief verse: "Just like Medeas charmes who then durst tell, / If heaven did faile, she would command all hell" (pp. 7, 5-6).

us to desire their unqualified annihilation at the hands of Samson. Even Dalila, if we read her as the “bird-brained” naif of Irene Samuel or the wronged, loving wife of William Empson, earns at least our partial pity and empathy if for no other reason than she so much resembles Samson.

The ending of *Medea*, with the sun itself, the source of all life and warmth, vindicating the cause of passion, disorder, violent cruelty, against the cold, orderly, self-protective processes of civilized man is a reminder that the universe is not on the side of civilization; and that a life combining order with happiness is something individuals must win for themselves through a reasoned and continual struggle with an unsympathetic environment. Through the shock of discord and failure represented in each drama we glimpse the potential for the historical growth of human consciousness just as Adam’s education in *Paradise Lost* suggests the personal growth of religious consciousness. Samson’s externally imposed prisons of blindness and bondage mirror his internal prison of spiritual darkness and bondage, effectively rendering him impotent to act except in the established patterns of transgression and destruction. With his recognition of his repeated breaking of the Mosaic law Samson sinks deeper into a state of sin, and this sin is finally immured in a despair that obviates redemption and renewal. In *Medea*’s remarks, “What profit have I in life? / I have no land, no home, no refuge from my pain. / My mistake was made the time I left behind me / My father’s house, and trusted the words of a Greek, / Who, with heaven’s help, will pay me the price for that” (798-802), we hear the echo of Samson’s dark considerations of his condition, his foreign wife, and the implicit vengeance of his god in “but as for life, / To what end

should I seek it? . . . / I fell / Of fair fallacious looks, venereal trains, / . . . My love how couldst thou hope, who tookst the way / To raise in me inexpiable hate” (521-22; 838-39).

It has been suggested that the concomitant activity of Philistine god-worship and discordance, willing the evil course with unbalanced passion, serves a homeopathic function in purging Samson of his degenerative state. Yet it seems more that the discordance reflects, rather than purges, Samson’s and the Danite’s own implacable proclivity for whoring and the most ruthless forms of violence. Similarly in *Medea*, the rational, ordered world of Jason and the Corinthians belies a violent, barbarous underside; and it is Medea who finally illustrates this underside in her actions, holding up a mirror as it were to an entire society and tradition. When Medea, speaking to Jason, adopts the civilized, rational approach to his demands, reminiscent of Samson’s obliging manner when he suddenly concedes to go to the temple and perform for the Philistines, resolving that she should “give up anger, for the gods are kind to me” (879), we recognize the extent of the deception and the furious inhumanity that lies just beneath it.

Thus the contention forwarded by William Riley Parker and maintained by numerous subsequent critics that Milton’s portrayal of Samson was “undeniably . . . idealized by a poet who, like Sophocles, preferred to paint men as they ought to be—leaving others to paint them as they are,” that Samson’s “excellencies have been somewhat magnified; his petty defects have been carefully and deliberately concealed,” seems a profound misreading.¹⁷⁷ The Euripidean nexus, contrary to Parker, suggests not

¹⁷⁷ Parker, *Milton’s Debt to Greek Tragedy*, p. 115.

an idealized portrayal at all but rather a deeply psychologized one, an inner dialectic and struggle for faith and redemption and love that does not conceal defects, but rather illuminates them through the liminal procession of the drama. We observe these defects with an ever-sharpening focus, a near visceral sense of the inevitability of the culminating act of destruction much as the Chorus does very early on in *Medea*. As participants in the drama we know the broad outlines of the story and the chaotic conclusion just as an Athenian audience, seated in the theater of Dionysus, knew the legend of Medea. Hence our responsibility and challenge lies not in reiterating and bulwarking a traditional line of interpretation but rather in our ability to perceive the subtle and at times not so subtle differences between the legend and the redaction of legend before us.

In *Samson* as in *Medea*, we survey a progression of mistakes that compound one another and propel ineluctably to the final experience of death, wherein we comprehend cathartic healing not by revising and thus rejoicing in the violence—as do the Chorus and Manoa in *Samson*—but by experiencing deeply the horror and pathos of the mistakes and the human sufferings that ensue. It is this very sense of being deeply moved and yet uneasy, as if life had suddenly turned upside-down, that tragedies like *Medea* and *Samson* induce; even as Medea ascends in the chariot of the sun-god we do not revel at her departure as if it were heroic or an apotheosis, as if the terrible destruction and rent bodies left behind proved anyone redeemed: it is much the same with the “Assailant” Samson, who, contrary to the attempts at heroic closure proffered by Manoa and the Chorus, leaves in his wake only the charred remains of “a Holocaust” (1693, 1702).

In 1651 Milton published his *Defensio pro populo Anglicano* in response to Salmasius and more broadly to all of Europe, a vindication of the English people and the emergent republic following the execution of Charles I. Justifying the regicide in this first defense, Milton levels a charge at Charles that is remarkably applicable to Samson, cautioning that as an interpretive community we should not

pay too much heed to that presence of mind so often manifested by the commonest criminals at their death; frequently desperation or a hardened heart gives, like a mask, an appearance of courage, as dullness does of peace. In death as in life, even the worst of men wish to seem good, fearless, innocent, or even holy . . . display as showily as possible their fraudulent pretence, and, like the most tasteless of writers or actors, strive madly for applause as the curtain falls. (CPW 4.1:508)

Moreover in *Eikonoklastes*, Milton responds to Charles' conflation of himself with Shakespeare's Richard III in terms of acting, playing a role, and the genre of dramatic tragedy: "Other stuff of this sort may be read throughout the whole tragedie, wherein the Poet us'd not much licence in departing from the truth of History, which delivers him a deep dissembler, not of his affections onely, but of Religion" (CPW 3.301).¹⁷⁸ We should recall here Christopher Hill's assertion that, in addition to "wrestler" and

¹⁷⁸ Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England*, p. 16-17.

“struggler,” a tertiary definition of the word *Agonistes* is one who deceives while entertaining¹⁷⁹—a knowing deceiver, a fool¹⁸⁰—and that Milton’s extraction from Euripides’ *Medea* for the title page of *Tetrachordon* is precisely the moment at which Medea, set in her plan of revenge and killing, is knowingly and fatally deceiving King Creon. Further still, Milton’s substitution of a “spacious Theatre” (1609) in *Samson Agonistes* for the temple of the Judges narrative indicates the author’s awareness and utilization of the theatrical trope and its linguistic resonance. As such Milton poses a critique of tragic sacrifice that prefigures and parodies the crucifixion in order to demonstrate *difference*, as the glory of genuine tragic sacrifice, as Milton argues in *Eikonoklastes*, “can never be put to him whose sufferings are his own doings” (CPW 3:435).

In *Christian Doctrine*, Milton contends that the Mosaic law may serve as a window onto sin, but any attempt to live by the law makes one stray further away from Christ and ultimate redemption, a position contrary to Calvin who maintains the validity of the law and hence a closer relationship between the law and the gospel. Milton equates all things evil with that “which seems to lead to destruction”—evil and its attendant destruction encompassed within the rubrical “name of *death*” (CPW 6:393). Milton proceeds to distinguish four degrees of death as the “affliction or punishment” (CPW 6:393) of sin, the first two of which provide trenchant comment on Samson’s

¹⁷⁹ Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, p. 467.

¹⁸⁰ Samson admits that for the Philistines’ festival he is to be a “drudge . . . thir fool or jester” (1338), a symbolically feminine, Christ-like posture similarly represented in the form of Christ in *Christ Suffering* and Pentheus in the *Bacchae* as each is led to their execution as I shall discuss further in the following chapter.

psychological trajectory in *Samson Agonistes*. The first degree of death is guiltiness, which Milton terms a “prelude to death,” and which Samson amply demonstrates in his laments for his past behavior and the resultant loss of divine origination and sanction. Milton describes the affliction associated with guiltiness as that “by which we are fettered to condemnation and punishment as by some actual bond” (CPW 6:393), a masochistic thralldom followed by “terrors of conscience” (CPW 6:394) and the loss of divine protection and favor. The result is mental degeneration, wherein “the whole man is defiled” (CPW 6:394), a defilement echoed in the Chorus’ first sight of Samson, whom they describe as “past hope, abandon’d,” and clothed in “slavish habit . . . / O’er worn and soild” (120, 22-23).

The second degree of death Milton designates “SPIRITUAL DEATH,” a progress marked by “the loss of that divine grace and innate righteousness by which, in the beginning, man lived with God” (CPW 6:394). This stage is crucial with regard to Samson, for Milton proposes that “Those who are delivered from it are said to be regenerated” (CPW 6:394). Arguing that it is an extensive darkening of right reason that ensues—the trope of darkness fundamental to *Samson Agonistes*—Milton evidences Ephesians. 4.18: “*having a mind obscured by darkness, and alienated from the life of God on account of the ignorance that is in them*”; 2 Corinthians 3.5: “*not that we are fit to think anything out by ourselves*”; and most acutely for Samson, 4.4: “*the god of this world has blinded their minds*.” Following Milton’s metaphor in *Christian Doctrine*, Samson’s blindness becomes metonymic for his spiritual and intellectual darkness, for his loss of the inner light of right reason Milton repeatedly refers to in his work as a kind

of divine essence.¹⁸¹ Spiritual death, this second phase, inevitably leads the subject into a compound downward spiral, to what Milton calls a “slavish subjection to sin and the evil which is, as it were, the death of the will” (CPW 6:395). Again, Milton makes interesting use of biblical passages, all of which allude to the fundamental similitude of Samson and Satan, when he charges that this sin, “*the spirit now working in arrogant men*” (Eph. 2.2), derives from “*the power of Satan*” (Acts 26.18), as those sinners spring “*out of the snare of the devil*” and as such are “*made captive of him at his will*” (2 Tim. 2.26). Moreover as sins increase they “bind the sinners to death more surely, make them more miserable and constantly more vile, and deprive them more and more of divine help and grace, and of their own former glory” (CPW: 6:395-96).

The compounding of sin and the repeated references to darkness, binding, and former glory remind us of Samson in his opening monologue lamenting his current state and former self as he sits shackled, soiled and blind in the enemy camp. Yet it also reminds us of the once glorious Satan in *Paradise Lost*, who, expelled from heaven and lying upon the burning lake in “adamantine chains and penal fire,” would later exclaim of his infernal predicament, “Me miserable! Which way shall I flie / Infinite wrauth, and infinite despaire? / Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell” (PL 1.48; 4:73-75). In view of Samson’s extraordinary final act at the theater, his end, like Satan’s, is a return to infinite wrath and infinite misery, literally raining down hell upon the unknowing philistines.

¹⁸¹ Cf. *Paradise Lost* 3.1-12; 51-55. See too Kerrigan, *The Sacred Complex*, pp. 25,36,99,119-21,143,167-68,189-91.

Milton does not go so far as to say in *Christian Doctrine* that at this point the sinner is lost; rather that God has given to man freedom of will, even if that will is so weakened by sin, and that it is up to the individual to exercise it properly that he might attempt a regeneration. Thus, with the gift of free will comes freedom of action, and it is precisely here that Samson's regeneration, following the Euripidean characterization of Pentheus and Medea, is nullified:

As a vindication of God's justice, especially when he calls man, it is obviously fitting that some measure of free will should be allowed to man, whether this is something left over from his primitive state, or something restored to him as a result of the call of grace. It is also fitting that this will should operate in good works or at least good attempts, rather than in things indifferent. . . . But if [God] turns man's will to moral good or evil just as he likes, and then rewards the good and punishes the wicked, it will cause an outcry against divine justice from all sides. It would seem then that God's general government of all things . . . should be understood as operating in natural and civil matters and in things indifferent and in chance happenings—in fact in anything rather than in moral or religious concerns. . . . Obviously if religious matters were not under our control, or to some extent within our power and choice, God could not enter into a covenant with us,

and we could not keep it, let alone swear to keep it. (CPW 6:397)

Samson, like Medea, knows very well what he is about to do as he departs for the Philistine theater. At the end of *Medea* Jason may explain his wife's violence as the act of an *alastor*, an evil spirit produced by unrepentant past cruelties, but for Euripides and the educated in his audience the assigning of cruel, inhumane acts to divinity serves only to expose a traditional symbolism and the possibility that the divine has withdrawn from the human sphere, leaving man alone with his passions. And it is this very subtle question of the relationship between free will and necessity, a tension which is the mainspring of Euripidean drama and which gives Euripides' studies of violence their singular intensity, that Milton explores in *Samson Agonistes*. In *Medea* as in *Samson Agonistes*, we observe fallen individuals confronting the mystery of evil no longer as an alien thing assailing their reason from without, but as a part of their own being. "I know what wickedness I am about to do," Medea informs us, "but the thumos is stronger than my purposes, thumos, the root of man's worst acts." With these words Medea proceeds to the killing just as Samson proceeds to the Philistine theater.

In Euripidean tragedy, the boundaries between normality and neurosis, between individual psychology and pathology, are blurred, made purposively unclear. Euripides is particularly concerned with the disintegration of personality, of personality at war with itself, the extreme representation of which being the physical dismemberment of Pentheus in the *Bacchae*. It is a concern shared by Milton in *Samson Agonistes*,

especially when viewed beside its companion poem *Paradise Regained*.¹⁸² But in Euripides it is always more than just an individual tragedy as the individual evolves into a culturally symbolic representation of secular and sacred order; the ecstasy of the early choral odes in the *Bacchae*, for instance, and certainly the death of King Pentheus at the hands of his mother and the subsequent exile of Cadmus from Thebes evidence an awareness of cultural loss that cannot be recaptured in the emergent age of abstract reasoning and analytical scepticism.

In the late fifth-century B.C. the symbolisms of the sacred begin to be seriously threatened just as they were in the latter half of the seventeenth-century. Built into the extraordinary tensions Euripides brings to the fore in a drama like *Medea* is the question of how much of the symbolic systems of the past can be retained. Milton seems to have understood this substructure of Euripidean drama, with its implicit questioning of cultural value systems, as the counterpoint between Samson's end in killing and suicide and return to his father's house for memorialization in *Samson Agonistes* and Jesus' quiescent return to his mother's house to begin the deliverance of humanity in *Paradise Regained* imply a very far-reaching question of cultural values. And perhaps what is most profound about such an interrogation is that it is left to us to sort out the truth; it is a gesture that presses powerfully and infinitely on futurity.

Euripides is always deeply concerned with the truth-value of myth, and tragedies such as *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, and *Heracles* view their central myth in the retrospective light of a ritual of which the dramatic action then becomes the *aition*, the historical

¹⁸² See Wittreich, *Interpreting "Samson Agonistes,"* pp. 164-67, 294-95, 327-85.

explanation. *Samson Agonistes*, similarly, is a redaction of a fundamental mythology that, rather than adhering to traditional viewpoints and simplistic representations, interrogates them by allowing ritualized dramatic action to burn into historicity. In *Heracles* the mythical motif of the descent to Hades is juxtaposed to, and in a sense superseded by, a figurative descent into the hero's personal underworld of madness and murderous violence, a hell that Heracles can only depart through the reestablishment and renewal of the human bonds of friendship and compassion.¹⁸³ Heracles in the end no longer believes, unlike Samson, that one "god is tyrant of another": "If god is truly god, he is perfect, lacking nothing. These are poets' wretched lies" (1345-46).

And yet Euripides never entirely relinquishes his hope for a purer, more ethical and humane conception of divinity.¹⁸⁴ Heracles courageously refuses to capitulate to a limiting and facile incrimination of divine cruelty just as the young heroine in *Ephigenia at Taurus* rejects the gods' responsibility for the blight of human sacrifices of which she is the priestess. In all these passages an intensely searching, and in its own way religious, spirit is at work; Euripides, like Milton, is striving to apprehend the "multiple forms"¹⁸⁵ of divinity—of humanity's need for gods and for definitions of gods, of how

¹⁸³ Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, pp. 275-76.

¹⁸⁴ In the famous fragment of the lost *Bellerophon*, for instance, Euripides writes: "If the gods do something shameful, then they are not gods."

¹⁸⁵ Milton echoes this Euripidean notion of a manifold divinity in a letter to Diodati dated 3 November 1637: "What besides God has resolved concerning me I know not, but this at least: He has instilled in me, if indeed any one, a powerful love of the beautiful. Not with so much labor, as the fables have it, is Ceres said to have sought her daughter Libera as I am accustomed day and night to explore this idea of the beautiful, just as for a certain beautiful image, through all the forms and countenances of things (for many are the shapes of divine things) and to follow as I am led on by some sure signs." See J. Milton French, ed., *The Life Records of John Milton*, 5 vols. (New

divinity manifests itself to people, and how individuals see it and comprehend it within the conditions of human passion and understanding.

The inverted arc of Heracles' journey, from madness and death to a renewed humanity, is a journey Medea and Samson never complete. Indeed, Samson ferociously returns to his nadir of divinely inspired mass-killing, only now he takes himself down with the thousands of Philistines assembled at the theater. Milton learns from Euripides to bring to his dramatic production the power to act out conflict and bring opposites into the sharpest possible confrontation without having to resolve the contradictions, thus allowing the competing problematics to express their most threatening implications: the potential malignancy of gods and the inherently random barbarity beneath the ordering, reasoning power of individuals. Through the powerful interplay of colliding elements Euripidean drama, as Charles Segal observes, contrary to Nietzsche, "reveals the sinister shadow-side of existence both in the world and in our souls."¹⁸⁶

In *Christian Doctrine*, Milton meditates on the shadow-side of existence as he returns to the trope of light and dark, of vision and blindness, describing renovation and regeneration as change issuing from God, "*light and the gift of will*" (CPW 6:457), and in his biblical examples as "*having given light to the eyes of your mind*" (Eph. 1.17,18) "[f]rom the Father of lights" (James 1.17). Regeneration thus occurs when the "the inner man is regenerated by God," returns to a pristine state "as if he were a new creature," and as a consequence "the whole man, both soul and body, is sanctified to

Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1949), 1:343, 345-50.

¹⁸⁶ Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, pp. 53-53, 309.

God's service and to good works" (*CPW* 6:461). If we apply Milton's definition of regeneration to the Euripidean examples of Heracles and Medea we see quite clearly the contrasting conditions of these characters, with Heracles achieving regeneration and Medea recidivating to the bestial murdering of her own children. It seems hardly plausible, moreover, that Milton, in light of his attention to Euripides and his own prose writings, would have considered Samson's slaughter of more Philistines than ever before as an act of good works and hence the incipient stage in Samson's sanctification to God's service. Manoa's claim that Samson's demise was a "death so noble" is immediately followed by his desire to find his son's body where it ignobly lies, "Sok'd in his enemies blood" and covered in "clotted gore" (1724, 1726, 1728). Furthermore, grace, for Milton, was either extended to all men or extended proportionally to free individual choice. In consequence man has a moral responsibility for his deeds:

God explicitly and frequently declares . . . that he desires not the death of any one, but the salvation of all; that he hates nothing that he has made; and that he has omitted nothing which might suffice for universal salvation . . . If then God reject none but the disobedient and unbelieving, he undoubtedly gives grace to all, if not in equal measure, at least sufficient for attaining knowledge of the truth and final salvation . . . an adequate proportion of saving grace shall be withholden from no man; for if otherwise, it does not appear how his truth towards mankind can be justified . . . God

excludes no one from the pale of repentance and eternal salvation,
till he has despised and rejected the propositions of sufficient
grace. (*CPW* 6.1:4?)

It would be difficult in terms of Milton's specific comments on grace and election to conclude that the catastrophe of *Samson Agonistes* results from any special illumination afforded Samson by Providence. In the Judges narrative Samson's last words are "Let me die with the Philistines," which might be interpreted more literally as "Let my soul die with the Philistines" (Judg. 16.30). The notion of praying to God to die with one's enemies is troubling enough, especially because it equates the avenger with, rather than distinguishes him from, the avenged; but the fact that Samson wishes his soul to die intimates a desire for total extinction—an end to both life and afterlife, an end to his relationship with God. Milton would argue in *Christian Doctrine* that the gospel is another name for "the ministry and word of reconciliation," and that "the law brings anger" (*CPW* 6.523). Samson's death and the annihilation of the Philistines is in this sense a demonstration of his unregenerate condition, of a despair so intense that a kind of communal oblivion, a terrorist act that leaves enemies paradoxically and literally sharing blood, is the only solace now available, a state of mind and spirit near to Kierkegaard's observation in his treatise on despair:

[I]n the Christian understanding of it death itself is a transition unto life.

In view of this, there is from the Christian standpoint no earthly, bodily

sickness unto death. For death is doubtless the last phase of the sickness, but death is not the last thing. If in the strictest sense we are to speak of a sickness unto death, it must be one in which the last thing is death, and death the last thing. And this precisely is despair.¹⁸⁷

Samson's last words may be viewed initially as heroic and sacrificial, Christlike as many critics have averred, but Samson's surrendering himself to the Philistines is alluded to in two earlier scenes that signal the reverse of Samson's deliverance of Israel—his betrayal of her. The first scene occurs after the Philistines, in retaliation for Samson's pernicious firing of the foxes tails, have burned to death the woman of Timnah and her father. Samson retaliates against the Philistines, declaring, "I swear I will be avenged on you, and after that I will quit" (15.7). And though Samson twice violates this promise to quit, what is more problematic is that his punitive expedition is a private, not a public act, which deliberately disregards the vulnerable condition of his own people. Observing the revenge code of *Lex Talionis*, the Philistines retaliate yet again by assailing the men of Judah, three thousand of whom then approach Samson and in fearful exasperation enquire: "Do you know that the Philistines are rulers over us? What then is this that you have done to us?" (15.11). The Hebrew word for "know" here is the same one used for knowledge of good and evil in Genesis, thus implying that Samson indeed does not possess such knowledge. Moreover, three thousand is the same number of people "on

¹⁸⁷ Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death*, tr. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1954), p. 150.

the roof" (16.27) whom Samson destroys at the end, and as such a parallel is developed between the Israelites whom Samson compromises and the Philistines whom he kills.

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The second scene alluded to in Samson's closing words, "Let me die with the Philistines," is his calling on the Lord to quench his thirst having just killed en masse one thousand men with the jawbone of an ass: "Thou has granted this great deliverance by the hand of thy servant; and shall I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?" (15.18). The Hebrew word for deliverance here is the same one used in the first account of the Annunciation in the opening, the only times the word is employed in the Samson section of the Judges narrative. As a result an ironic note is struck: the first occurrence referred to the communal deliverance of Israel, the second to the personal deliverance of Samson from thirst and then violence.¹⁸⁹ Samson's rescue by divine intervention is thus an unequivocal violation of the traditional miracle story, in which the miracle is performed to promote a common good.

Robert Alter observes of biblical narrative that "one of the most probing general perceptions of the biblical writers is that there is often a tension, sometimes perhaps even an absolute contradiction, between election and moral character."¹⁹⁰ Such "absolute contradiction" is abundantly observable in the disconnect between Samson's divine mission and the moral tenor of his actual deeds. The promise of Samson's role as deliverer of his people in the Judges narrative is undercut by its breaking of the cycle that

¹⁸⁸ Henry McDonald, "A Long Day's Dying: Tragic Ambiguity in *Samson Agonistes*," *Milton Studies* 27 (1991): 271-72.

¹⁸⁹ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 117.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

is common to many biblical stories—of petition, intervention, and deliverance. The revelation here is that to all appearances God has removed himself from the human sphere—precisely the ambiguating methodology, the twilight world of Euripidean tragedy.

In his discussion of the portrayal of the death of history in *Macbeth*, Francis Barker speculates that the “assault on what counts in the depicted society of that text as history, is bloody, violent and eventually resolute,” and thus “the play begins in a moment of decision from its own pre-history, with the ‘hurly burly’ of both insurrection and invasion.”¹⁹¹ It is a crucial point in thinking about tragedies such as *Medea* and *Samson Agonistes* in that the confluence of the tragic individual and a tragic human history unmediated by divinity discloses that what is finally in question is not simply the death of an individual or individuals, horrific as those instances and reverberations from past actions are, but of something more profound, the death of “an entire ideological and social system, a whole symbolic order.”¹⁹² *Macbeth*, *Medea* and *Samson Agonistes* are dramas deeply rooted in the intellectual, artistic, and religious life of their respective times, yet they also speak to our time with an extraordinary clarity and power. Their common concern with the dissolution of order and boundaries—the boundaries between divinity and bestiality in man, reality and imagination, reason and madness, self and other, art and life—make them remarkably accessible and important to any notion of present time. These tragedies more than any others press urgently upon futurity, and as such the tragedy of *Samson Agonistes* is an individual and a national tragedy delineating

¹⁹¹ Francis Barker, *The Culture of Violence: Essays on Tragedy and History* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993), p. 51.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Israel's eschatological trajectory and history's endtime much as *Medea* represents a disappearing Athenian culture and history.

In the poetry of Homer, Hesiod, and Aeschylus the myths of the gods are a source of order, as Nietzsche observed and approved, while in Euripidean drama the myths of the gods are most often a source of tragic disorder. One must either reject the "poets' wretched lies" (1346), as the hero does at the end of *Heracles*, or else, as the *Bacchae* and *Medea* do, allow the tension between order and chaos, destructive randomness and creative meaningfulness, to become instead the motivating force of the work. The centrality of an heroic protagonist of the Aeschylean or Sophoclean type is here secondary to the artistry of the work itself, where the competing forces, the collision of opposites inadequately labeled "ironic," generate meaning as a taught dialectic that neither cancels out nor fully reconciles, but allows tragic signification to emerge as the interchange between, and mutual influence of, world as disorder and art as order.¹⁹³ Late Euripidean tragedy, in Charles Segal's elegant terms, "points up the fragile isolation of beauty and art in a world rent by ugly motives, base character, and irrational forces," while simultaneously, wondrously, "it reveals the strength of the work of art as a radiant center illuminating the darkness of its surroundings."¹⁹⁴ It is just such a radiant center that Milton creates in *Samson Agonistes*, and that in the succeeding chapter will be explored in relation to the irrational forces Milton found himself surrounded by during the civil war years and beyond.

¹⁹³ Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, p. 340.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

Chapter 7 Euripides and the English Revolution

. . . the wakeful Bird / Sings darkling¹⁹⁵

Nearing his twenty-ninth year, flush from what in early September he called a “great period” of his studies (*CPW*, 1:323), a period that included the death of his mother, the anonymous publication of *A Mask*, and the commencement of *Lycidas*, Milton writes to Charles Diodati, in a letter dated 23 September 1637:

For though I do not know what else God may have decreed for me, this certainly is true: He has instilled into me, if into anyone, a vehement love of the beautiful. Not so diligently is Ceres, according to the Fables, said to have sought her daughter Proserpina, as I seek for this idea of the beautiful, as if for some glorious image, throughout all the shapes and forms of things (“for many are the shapes of things divine”); day and night I search and follow its lead eagerly as if by certain clear traces.
(*CPW*, 1:326-27)

The literature of Plato, here exemplified in Milton’s professed pursuit of the beautiful

¹⁹⁵ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 3:38-39.

and the conception of the one reflected in the many, was never for this poet merely a source, but, like that of other pagan writers, was a stimulant, a means of converting the heterogeneous materials of pagan, biblical, and Christian writings he knew and would use in his prose and poetry.¹⁹⁶

Committed to the prophetic tradition, Milton was at this time reconsidering the idea, rejected by John Bale and George Foxe, that the Millennium lay not in an Edenic past but in the future—that Christ’s reign would take place in a renewed and transfigured world. It was an apocalyptic, millenarian strain in radical puritan thinking that would explode after the collapse of censorship in the 1640s.¹⁹⁷ Yet in elucidating the characteristically compressed series of images that constitute the brief correspondence, we note that in his sustained quest for beauty Milton intimates a Cerean journey to an underworld where Liber, Proserpina’s complement, reigned, the three often represented in fable as a chthonic triad. “Father Liber,” as Milton names him in the *Second Defense*,¹⁹⁸ was the old Italic fertility god who would later become the Greek god Dionysus—divinity of fertility and wine, patron of the arts—and from whose worship in the form of music and dancing at the Athenian Greater Dionysia evolved Greek drama, with the earliest tragedies as centerpieces of the religious festival held in honor of the god. More specifically, Milton’s parenthetical reference in the Diodati letter, “for many are

¹⁹⁶ Irene Samuel, *Plato and Milton* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell UP, 1965), p. viii.

¹⁹⁷ Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics*, pp. 242-45.

¹⁹⁸ Milton writes in the *Second Defense* (1654): “Now, surrounded by such great throngs, from the Pillars of Hercules all the way to the farthest boundaries of Father Liber, I seem to be leading home again everywhere in the world, after a vast space of time, Liberty herself, so long expelled and exiled” (*CPW*, 4:555).

the shapes of things divine,” rendered by Euripides as “πολλὰ γὰρ μορφαὶ τῶν Δαίμονων,” is the concluding chorus in five Euripidean tragedies, including the last of them, the *Bacchae*, and is substantively the final chorus of *Samson Agonistes*.¹⁹⁹ Thus, with the announcement of his artistic career in the last correspondence with Diodati, Milton conceives his vocation in apocalyptic terms that signal forward to *Samson Agonistes* and the genre of tragedy, and pointedly Euripidean tragedy, with inferential reference to the *Bacchae*. From the etiological depths of tragic form, as it were, Milton would return beauty to the world.

This chapter takes for its starting point Milton’s immersion in, and passionate involvement with, Euripidean tragedy, evidenced in his letter to Diodati and continuing through the Civil War and Interregnum years. Like Milton and the puritan reformers of the 1640s and 1650s, Euripides lived through an epoch of great expectation following the Persian Wars, an era that encompassed the achievements of Periclean Athens and that was witnessed by a generation for whom the Golden Age was no lost paradise of the dim past, as Hesiod had believed, but an imminently achievable aspiration. With the end of the Persian conflict, the supereminent achievements of Periclean Athens flowered for nearly twenty years; and Euripides experienced the high hopes and the final annihilation of those hopes as Athens plunged, in the latter half of the century, into the fatally internecine Peloponnesian war. Additionally, this chapter explores Milton’s reference to the twelfth-century cento *Christ Suffering* in his preface to *Samson Agonistes*, arguing that Milton was aware of the historical and textual reciprocity between Euripides’

¹⁹⁹ See Grose, *Milton and the Sense of Tradition*, pp. 36-37.

Bacchae and the *Christus Patiens*. The close intertextuality that informs the Euripidean and this earliest of biblical tragedies has not been examined by Milton scholars, a notable gap as these intertexts further problematize the notion of theodicy in *Samson Agonistes*. Pentheus and Christ, the protagonists of the *Bacchae* and *Christ Suffering* respectively, are at once antithetical and identical; and dovetailing into *Samson Agonistes* they sponsor an equivocal, at times kaleidoscopic, vision of Milton's tragic protagonist. Exiled in Macedonia as Athens fell, Euripides, in his final tragedy the *Bacchae*, searches the individual and historical boundaries between normality and pathology, between self-determination and divine necessity, locating the source of tragedy itself in the tense interdependence of opposites: the forces of creation and destruction, of god and man, of good and evil in ourselves and the world. Similarly, Milton's tragedy, completed in the aftermath of the failed English revolution, contains a compressed vision of this necessary dialectical interrelation, the "Inevitable cause" that led Milton's Samson freely to choose "both to destroy and be destroyed" (1586-87).

Criticism of *Samson Agonistes*, as we have seen, is commonly founded upon two certainties: the first of Milton's idealizing Christianity, and the second of Samson's regeneration. Thus criticism of this poem has tended to devolve from "regenerationist pieties," the "uncritical paraphernalia and platitudes of the interpretive community,"²⁰⁰ which commence in this century with William Riley Parker. In his study of *Samson Agonistes*, responding to Richard Jebb's contention that *Samson Agonistes* was more

²⁰⁰ Fish, *How Milton Works*; see too Fish's earlier essay "Spectacle and Evidence in *Samson Agonistes*," *Critical Inquiry* 15:3 (Fall, 1989): 580; Wittreich, *Interpreting "Samson Agonistes"*, p. x.

Hebraic than Hellenic, Parker assays a Greek, and specifically a Sophoclean, context for Milton's tragedy.²⁰¹ Parker insists that Samson's character has been "idealized by a poet who, like Sophocles, preferred to paint men as they ought to be—leaving others to paint them as they are," and that Samson in his final destructive act is "again God's champion—not a private individual seeking revenge,"²⁰² a reading of Milton as idealizing Sophoclean poet and Samson as regenerate Christian hero of faith that has set the criterion for interpretation of the author and his tragedy for much of this century.²⁰³ Summing up the collective Oedipal conceit, Parker argues that "It is this spectacle of awful suffering, rewarded at last by a death which brings some measure of heroic

²⁰¹ See Parker, *Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy*; and Parker, "The Greek Spirit in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*," *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association* 20 (1934): 21-44; cf. Richard C. Jebb, "*Samson Agonistes* and the Hellenic Drama," pp. 341-48; see also P. W. Timberlake's "Milton and Euripides," in *Essays in Dramatic Literature: The Parrott Presentation Volume*, ed. Hardin Craig (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1935), pp. 315-40; and Arnold, "Graeci Christiani: Milton's *Samson* and the Renaissance Editors of Greek Tragedy," pp. 235-54.

²⁰² Parker, *Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy*, pp. 8, 102.

²⁰³ See, for instance, Blair Worden, "Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, and the Restoration," in *Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration*, ed. Gerald MacLean (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), p. 112; John Milton, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1991), p. 946; Bennett, *Reviving Liberty*, p. 124; Mary Ann Radzinowicz, "The Distinctive Tragedy of *Samson Agonistes*," *Milton Studies* 17 (1983): 249-80; Georgia B. Christopher, *Milton and the Science of the Saints* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982), pp. 226, 246; Louis Martz, *Poet of Exile: A Study of Milton's Poetry* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980), p. 287; Radzinowicz, *Toward "Samson Agonistes"*, p. xx; William Kerrigan, *The Prophetic Milton* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1974), pp. 249, 258; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 221; Krouse, *Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition*, pp. 82, 104, 124, 133. For contrary conclusions, see Fish, "Spectacle and Evidence," pp. 556-86; Wittreich, *Interpreting "Samson Agonistes"*; Samuel, "*Samson Agonistes* as Tragedy," in *Calm of Mind*, ed. Wittreich, pp. 235-57; and John Carey, "Sea, Snake, Flower, and Flame in *Samson Agonistes*," *Modern Language Review* 62 (1967): 395-99

dignity, that makes the plays of Sophocles and Milton particularly akin.”²⁰⁴ Though the structural, surface symmetries between *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Samson Agonistes* are apparent—the defeated blind king maundering onto the stage and the Chorus’s stunned recognition—the endings of the two tragedies, what Aristotle terms “the most significant thing of all,”²⁰⁵ glossed into filiation by Parker’s “a death which brings some measure of heroic dignity,” are yet so radically divergent as to require a reconsideration.

Oedipus at Colonus essentially demonstrates *pathei mathos*, or learning through suffering, as Oedipus quits his former self and determinately turns away from thoughts of dying, tempered and regenerated by what Antigone calls “the lesson in your sightless eyes” (1199).²⁰⁶ Prophetically, Oedipus blesses Theseus and his city with a “source of strength greater than many thousands / Of yeomen shields or allied spears” (1523-24), the militaristic effects of the Theban “sons of the Dragon’s Seed” (1535). In Greek tragedy, the most absolute danger to the city was division—political faction and civil war, what the Greeks termed *stasis*. Thebes, anti-city to the united Athens of Theseus, the city whose original citizens sprang from the dragon’s teeth, represented *stasis* in its most virulent form.²⁰⁷ Hence Oedipus’ departure from Thebes and his final transformation into “one inspired with inward vision,” as he hears the voice of, and silently and

²⁰⁴ Parker, *Milton’s Debt to Greek Tragedy*, p. 184.

²⁰⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, tr. Leon Golden (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), chap. 6, 12.

²⁰⁶ Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, tr. E. F. Watling (New York: Penguin Books, 1947).

²⁰⁷ Pierre Vidal-Naquet, “Oedipus Between Two Cities,” in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, ed. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, tr. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990), pp. 332-35.

privately merges with, divinity in a secret place whose whereabouts even his daughters are unable to discern, removes him both spiritually and materially from the increasingly positivist, internecine Thebes of his past. In the *exodos* of the poem, the Chorus inquires as to how Oedipus died, to which Antigone answers: “As you would have wished for him; / Not in the peril of war” (1678-79).

Furthermore, Oedipus’ final malediction against his son, the fratricidal Polynices, prophesies that he shall “in dying, kill your banisher, / And killing, die by him who shares your blood” (1387-88). It is a defining moment in that the confrontation with and rejection of Polynices separates Oedipus not only from his own past but, importantly, from the Homeric and Hesiodic martial tradition of tragic heroism that Polynices represents as he abandons divinity and persists in his injudicious enterprise—his “quest for vengeance / Against the brother who has supplanted me” (1329-30)—that will destroy his city and himself. And this last counterpoint, brilliantly realized, is finally the source of the redemption compassed at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*, as Oedipus indeed becomes a human divine, transcending suffering and violent internecine retribution to achieve a penetrating, Lear-like understanding of himself and his relation to the world.

Significantly, Oedipus’ wholesale rejection of the martial tradition that his son exemplifies and undertakes is directly opposite to the conclusion of *Samson Agonistes*, where Manoa glosses and celebrates his son’s end in personal revenge: “*Samson* hath quit himself / Like *Samson*, and heroically hath finish’d / A life Heroic, on his Enemies / Fully reveng’d hath left them years of mourning” (1709-12). Furthermore, Oedipus’ final rejection of his son’s ways, that in “killing” Polynices shall also “die by him who

shares your blood,” is registered, though in reverse terms, in Manoa’s uneasy elucidation of what is “best and happiest yet,” that God had not parted from Samson “as was feared, / . . . But favouring and assisting to the end,” wherein Samson lies amid the rubble of the destroyed theater “Soak’t in his enemies blood” and covered with “clotted gore” (1719-20, 1726, 1728). In *Oedipus at Colonus*, the transfiguration of man marked by divine necessity and his own hamartia anticipates a future bright with possibility; the destructive horror that invades life here becomes the passport to an enlargement of consciousness. Samson, unlike Oedipus and more closely related to Polynices in *Oedipus at Colonus* and Pentheus in Euripides’ *Bacchae*, as I shall discuss, cannot comport with a recurrent presentiment of loss sublimated into serial acts of progressively brutal retaliation. Recidivating to anarchic militancy at a moment when purportedly communing with god, Samson is returned to his father’s house: dead, publicly memorialized, and contained within the heroic tradition.

Thus the *telos* or end of Milton’s tragedy, what Hegel designates the “universal and essential content . . . the ethical claims of human consciousness in view of the particular action in question,”²⁰⁸ and where Milton’s transvaluation of predecessors such as Sophocles always manifests itself, is in *Samson Agonistes* less related to *Oedipus at Colonus*, as Parker and others would have it, and more nearly analogous, in its exploration of cultural dissolution, to Euripides’ *Bacchae*. The problem of the *Bacchae*, approximate to the concluding “so horrid spectacle” (1542) of *Samson Agonistes*, has no

²⁰⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *On Tragedy*, ed. Anne and Henry Paolucci (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 60.

definitive resolution; and the impact of the tragedy—"the horror . . . of the final reckoning / that embrace of blood" (1164-65)²⁰⁹—lies in the ferocity with which the two sides collide and in the indiscriminate carnage that emerges from that transaction.

The myth of Cadmus and Thebes, the sowing of the dragon's teeth and the attendant thematics of internecine and fratricidal division was, like the biblical Judges narrative and the Samson story in particular, used to express contending ideologies during the English Civil War and interregnum years.²¹⁰ In *Areopagitica*, as Annabel Patterson and Christopher Hill have noted, Milton knew the stratagems and the venerable topoi deployed by those who preceded him in the pamphlet wars, including the topos of the dragon's teeth, and as such Milton's "dialogue with the radicals had begun."²¹¹ A few years earlier, Robert Greville, Lord Brooke, published his tract on toleration for the emerging protestant sects, *A Discourse Opening the Nature of that Episcopacie, Which is Exercised in England* (1641), which Milton praises in *Areopagitica* as being "so full of meekness and breathing charity, that next to His last testament, who bequeath'd love and peace to his Disciples, I cannot call to mind where I have read or heard words more

²⁰⁹ Euripides, "The Bacchae," in *The Complete Greek Tragedies*.

²¹⁰ For the use of the Samson story during the Civil War, see Wittreich, *Interpreting "Samson Agonistes,"* pp. 174-238. I assume the composition of *Samson Agonistes* to have begun in the late 1640s, with major revision and revaluation after the Restoration. See William R. Parker, "The Date of *Samson Agonistes*," *Philological Quarterly* 28 (January, 1949): 145-66; John T. Shawcross, "The Chronology of Milton's Major Poems," *PMLA* 76 (1961): 45-58; and Stephen B. Dobranski, "Samson and the Omissa," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 36 (Winter 1996): 149-69.

²¹¹ Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, p. 92; and Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, p. 114.

mild and peacefull” (*CPW*, 2:560-61). Responding to the warnings of the dangers of sectarianism by arguing for a more tolerant Church, Brooke here contends that “by *Church* must be understood the whole congregation,” upon which he acknowledges his opponents’ argument, which alludes to the Cadmean myth while conflating it with the Judges narrative, a typical practice on both sides of the ideological debate leading up to the first civil war: “if Episcopacy be taken away, *Schismes* and *Heresies* will break in as armed men; *Tyranny* is more eligible then *Anarchy*; the wofull sense of *Anarchy* begot that sad Proverb, *It is as it was with Israel, when there was no King*.”²¹²

Brooke agrees that “a confusion is a most lamentable condition; and that those times are very perillous, when every mans hand is up against his brother.” Nevertheless it is clear from experience, scripture and reason that “*Sects, Schismes, and Heresies* will stil come, and must come,” and that “all Nations, and all times” are necessarily fraught with difference of opinion, “[a]nd therefore if by keeping such Bishops we think to keep out all Divisions, we are much deceived.”²¹³ The Cadmean myth, here deployed against the reformers and refuted by Brooke, would be redirected by Milton in *Areopagitica*, where a series of dialectical images serves to challenge argument from authority, generating “an immense charge of redefining intellectual energy”²¹⁴ wherein the dragon’s

²¹² Robert Greville, Lord Brooke, *A Discourse Opening the Nature of that Episcopacie, Which is Exercised in England* (London, 1641), pp. 83.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 91.

²¹⁴ Michael Wilding, “Milton’s *Areopagitica*: Liberty for the Sects,” in *The Literature of Controversy: Polemical Strategy from Milton to Junius*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (London: Frank Cass, 1987), p. 35.

teeth become “a metaphor for intellectual energy”²¹⁵ rather than symbols, as in Brooke’s tract, of chaos and disintegration. Books are characterized by Milton as “lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous Dragons teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men” (CPW, 2:492).

In the year following Brooke’s pamphlet, Henry Parker published his *Observations Upon Some of his Majesties Late Answers and Expresses* (1642), a tract sensitive to the rapid approach of war and the appropriateness of the Cadmean subtext with regard to the question of control of the army. Parker opposed royalism, and royalist attempts to gain control of the militia, with the assertion that power is originally inherent in the people. “If it be by force,” however,

Then we must suppose that our Aristocraticall heads carry about them
great store of that Serpents teeth which yeilded heretofore so sudden and
plentifull a harvest of armed men, being but cast into the furrows of the
earth, Though their armies have been hitherto invisible, yet we must
suppose, That they are in a readinesse to rise upon the first Alarum
beaten. . . . Nay, we see tis not the House, but the opposite part that
desires to scatter, divide, and draw away, and as much as in them lyes to
hinder a full assembly.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation*, p. 116. For her discussion of the Cadmean myth, see pp. 114-19.

²¹⁶ Henry Parker, *Observations upon some of his Majesties late Answers and Expresses* (London, 1642), p. 38.

Parker concludes that “*The King hereupon charges the Parliament of levying Warre against Him, under pretence of His levying Warre against them,*” a retaliative process that lasts “*in infinitum,*” thus leading to “generall confusion” and perpetual “Civill Warre.”²¹⁷ Later in the same year, having effectively inserted the theory of the social contract into the crisis of civil war, Parker would respond to the outpouring of royalist replies to his *Observations* with *The Contra-Replicant*, a tract which animates accusations of Romish/Royal international conspiracy with the image of the dragon’s teeth: “The maine Engineers in this Civill Warre,” Parker proclaims, “are Papists, the most poysonous, serpentine, Iesuited Papists of the World. And the Papists in *Europe* either pray for the prosperity of the design, or here contributed some other influence and assistance to it. This warre was not the production of these last two yeares, nor was England alone the field wherein the Dragon’s teeth were sown.”²¹⁸

Moreover, in the same year John Goodwin, responding to the battle of Edgehill and Charles’ dispatching of his Cavaliers to Turnham Green, delivered and later published his rousing sermon *Anti-Cavalierisme* (1642). Goodwin believed with Parker that the Parliament represented the people, and that the safety of the people was

²¹⁷ Ibid., p. 43.

²¹⁸ Henry Parker, *The Contra-Replicant* (London, 1642), p. 9. See Smith, “*Areopagitica: Voicing Contexts,*” in *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton’s Prose*, eds. Lowenstein and Turner, pp. 109-11. William Haller, however, dates *The Contra-Replicant* as January 31, 1644. Haller, *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution, 1638-1647*, 3 vols. (New York: Octagon Books, 1965), 1:26, n. 14. The reference to *The Contra-Replicant* at The Union Theological Seminary brackets the date 1642.

threatened by those who had seduced Charles from his obligation under the social contract. With the advance of civil war, Goodwin marshals the trope of violent internecine division in the Judges narrative, pointing to the similarity between the “bloody and horrid entendments” at “the heart and hands of some of her [England’s] own Children,” and “that inhumane butchering and quartering out into pieces of the *Levites* wife by her owne husband, [who] cryed out, and said, *There was no such thing done or seen, since the time that the Children of Israel came up out of the Land of Aegypt, until that day,*” a phrase he amplifies and dilates a few lines later: “There has no such thing been done or seen in the Land, since God first caused men to dwell on the face of it.” “[T]hat Legion of Devils,” Goodwin continues, “who now possesse the Land . . . seek all to rent and teare it in pieces”—the “Philistims” and “Atheists,” “that bloody and butcherly Generation, commonly knowne by the name of Cavaliers.” Interestingly, Goodwin clusters Cadmean mythology, the demonically insidious and the Judges narrative, a tactic Milton would utilize in *Paradise Lost* (1:500-04), when he warns: “There are sons of Belial that are risen up against you, full of a spirit of hatred and revenge gainst you . . . threaten you with the utmost insolencies they can execute upon you.”²¹⁹

²¹⁹ John Goodwin, *Anti-Cavalierisme, Or, Truth Pleading As well the Necessity, as the Lawfulness of this present War, for the suppressing of that Butcherly brood of Cavaliering Incendiaries, who are now hammering ENGLAND, to make an IRELAND OF IT* (London, 1642), pp. 1-2, 12. Cf. Milton’s conflation in *Paradise Lost*, completed during the dark days of the Restoration, of Belial with *Judges* 19:22-30: “And when Night / Darkens the Streets, then wander forth the Sons / of *Belial*, flown with insolence and wine. / Witness the Streets of *Sodom*, and that night / In *Gibeah*, when the hospitable door / Expos’d a Matron to avoid worse rape” (1.500-04). For the counter-possibility in *Areopagitica* of violent persecution in the mutilation of bodies—books as men—see

The tropes of bodily and doctrinal division are also evident in the Presbyterian heresiographer Thomas Edwards' *Reasons against the independent Government of Particular Congregations: As also against the Toleration of such Churches to be erected in this Kingdome. Together with an Answer to such Reasons as are commonly alledged for such a Toleration* (1641), a tract which has affixed to its title page 1 Corinthians. 12.21: "And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee, nor againe the head to the feete, I have no need of you," and Romans. 16.17: "Now I beseech you Brethren marke them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the Doctrine which you have learned, and avoid them." Edwards laments the fratricidally "weakened and wounded" Protestant family, "their weapons being turned against each other," and pressing the trope of internecine division that Milton would redirect in *Areopagitica*, he concludes that "This toleration will not onely breede Divisions and Schismes, disturbing the peace and quiet of Churches and Townes, by setting them who are of different families, and in more remote relations one against another, but it will undoubtedly cause much disturbance, discontent, and divisions in the same families even between the nearest relations of husbands and wives, Fathers and children, brothers and

Wilding, "Milton's *Areopagitica*," pp. 7-38. For further discussion of competing subtexts built into *Areopagitica*, a premise my essay wishes to extend to *Samson Agonistes*, see Blair Hoxby, "The Trade of Truth Advanced: *Areopagitica*, Economic Discourse, and Libertarian Reform," *Milton Studies* 36 (1998): 176-202, esp. pp. 188-89; Smith, "Areopagitica: Voicing Contexts," in *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose*, eds. Lowenstein and Turner, pp. 103-22; Stanley Fish, "Driving from the Letter: Truth and Indeterminacy in Milton's *Areopagitica*," in *Re-membering Milton*, ed. Mary Nyquist and Margaret W. Ferguson (New York: Methuen, 1988), pp. 234-54.

sisters, Masters and Servants.”²²⁰

Amongst others, Katherine Chidley refuted Edwards point by point in *The Justification of the Independant Churches of Christ* (London, 1641). Chidley’s counterargument begins ominously with the title page epigraphs: 1 Samuel.17.45: “*Thou comest unto me with a Sword, and with a Speare, and with a Sheild, but I come unto thee in the name of the Lord of Hoasts the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied,*” and Judges 4.21: “*Then Jael, Hebers wife tooke a naile of the tent, and tooke an hammer in her hand, and went softly unto him, and smote the naile into his temples and fastened it into the ground, (for he was fast asleepe and weary) and so he died.*”

Chidley’s comparative reference to Jael resonates in *Samson Agonistes* with Dalila’s assertion that for her deeds against her people’s enemy she shall be “Not less renown’d then in Mount *Ephraim*, / *Jael*, who with inhospitable guile / Smote *Sisera* sleeping through the Temples nail’d” (988-90).

Thus the parallel established between the puritan radical Chidley and Dalila—a parallel Milton may have knowingly created and that would be underscored and broadened later in the Royalist tract *Walwins Wiles* as we shall see—renders Samson, by extension, not the symbolic representation of a reformist puritan cause, but its very opposite, a regal usurper blocking the paths of progressive enlightenment. Moreover, in *Christian Doctrine* Milton defends Jael’s deceptive and deadly actions: “and there was

²²⁰ Thomas Edwards, *Reasons against the independent Government of Particular Congregations: As also against the Toleration of such Churches to be erected in this Kingdome. Together with an Answer to such Reasons as are commonly alledged for such a Toleration* (London, 1641), pp. 1-2, 26.

Jael who enticed Sisera to his death when he sought refuge with her, Judges iv. 18, 19, though he was God's enemy rather than hers" (*CPW*, 6:764). Such a matrix—Jael, puritan radicals, Dalila, Milton—accords with Ann Baynes Coiro's recent proposal that "In this elusively autobiographical drama [*Samson Agonistes*] . . . it can be argued that Dalila is the voice of Milton the Author."²²¹ Further still, Chidley's tract concludes by countering Edwards' divided family metaphor with allusions both to Cain and Abel and to a fratricidal Cadmean mythology, a reading reminiscent of Euripides' portrayal of Thebes in the *Bacchae*: "To which I answer, There was a division in the first Family that ever was, and brother rose up against brother, but Toleration was not the cause of it; but the malice of Sathan in the seed of the Serpent, as it hath beene, and is now at this day."²²²

Chidley's deployment of the Judges story of Jael and Sisera, interwoven with Cadmean mythology, is later expanded upon by Stephen Marshall in *Meroz Cursed* (1642), a tract based on the song of Deborah (Judges 5:23), a text and a theme Marshall declared especially germane at a time "when abundance of mighty enemies rise up against the Lord, and against his Church." As Marshall's audience knew, the angel of the Lord cursed Meroz because "*they came not to the helpe of the Lord, . . . against the*

²²¹ Ann Baynes Coiro, "Fable and Old Song: *Samson Agonistes* and the Idea of a Poetic Career," *Milton Studies* 36 (1998): 143.

²²² Katherine Chidley, *The Justification of the Independant Churches of Christ. Being an Answer to Mr. Edwards his Booke, which hee hath written against the Government of Christs Church, and Toleration of Christs Publike Worship; Briefely Declaring That the Congregations of the Saints ought not to have Dependencie in Government upon any other; or direction in whorship from any other than Christ their Head and Law Giver* (London, 1641), p. 25.

Mighty,” and Meroz, Marshall argued, comprised all those “who stand as *neuters*,” “shewing themselves neither open enemies nor true friends,” the most notable example being “*Judg. 8. when Gideon was pursuing Zeba and Zalmunnah the Kings of Midian,*” wherein “hee calls to the men of *Succoth*, and the men of *Penuel* to helpe to vicutall his armie. . . . But they would first see what would be the event of the warre, *Are the heads of Zeba and Zalmunnah in thine hands, that we should give bread unto thine army?*” *Meroz Cursed* concludes that “doome and execution shall all politick neuters receive from the hand of Christ”—“politick neuters” being those who failed to bring aid to parliament and the Puritan brotherhood.²²³ Marshall’s aligning of the King of Kings with the Puritan brotherhood and Sisera with King Charles was angrily condemned and not forgotten by stung royalists. And importantly, it accords with Chidley’s and later Milton’s positioning of Jael as visionary tyrannicide.

The repeated accusations aimed at the leveling reformers—heretical, sectarian, schismatic, seditious, satanic—were refuted in the 1640s by a powerful rhetoric of non-violence, a rejection of revenge and the martial practice of *lex talonis* that would culminate in the year of Charles’ execution. In *The Charity of Church-men* (1649), a reply to the earlier *Walwins Wiles* (1649), the author [Humphrey Brooke?] writes “‘Tis a course, indeed, that if we should retaliate in the like kind, would in time heighten us to the extremest acts of violence one towards another, and beget everlasting feuds and enmity amongst us,” and William Walwyn himself admits in *Walwyns Just Defence*

²²³ Stephen Marshall, *Meroz Cursed. Or, A Sermon Preached To the Honourable House of Commons, At their late Solemn Fast, Febr. 23. 1641* (London, 1641), pp. 4, 1 (cf. 54), 22, 23.

(1649) that “so carefull have I ever been, as much as in me is to have peace with all men; bearing, and forbearing to my own losse, rather then I would return evil for evil.”²²⁴ Yet perhaps the most eloquent and forceful statement on non-retaliative practice comes from John Lilburne, who in *The Legall Fundamentall Liberties of the People of England* (1649) details his torments and his enlightened, Christlike reaction to torture:

I had above 500 stripes with knotted cords, given me by the bloody decree of old Sir Henry Vane, &c. and endured a world of other unheard of miseries and barbarous cruelties for three yeers together: and at my deliverance by the Parliament, I could have had his eares for perjury, as easily as to have kissed my hand, if I had been revengefull; but so far was I from that, that I never questioned him for it, but contrarily I requited him good for evill, when he was prisoner in Oxford Castle with me, and ready to starve, being destitute both of money and friends there; and to save him alive, I readily lent him both gold and silver, as he very well knowes, by the same token I was without money long enough; and in the day of his prosperity here, I was fain to ask often enough for it, before I could get it again.²²⁵

Walwins Wiles, a tract addressed “*To the Noble and Successful Englands Army, Under*

²²⁴ William Haller, ed., *The Leveller Tracts, 1647-1653* (New York: Columbia UP, 1944), pp. 333, 370.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 405.

The Command of his Excellency Thomas Lord General Fairfax,” denounces the reformers, and especially Walwyn, as “those sons of violence” who through “revengeful . . . language” convey their preference for “Martial Discipline over Souldiers in time of peace,” their belief that “the design of the House at Westminster, and Councel of State, &c. is to keep down the people under Tyranny and Slavery by an Army,” and their contention that “the sending over Forces to Ireland is for nothing else but to make way by the blood of the Army to enlarge their territories of power and Tyranny, That it is an unlawful War, a cruel and bloody work to go to destroy the Irish Natives for their Consciences.”²²⁶

We should recall that Milton himself, according to Edward Phillips, was “more inclinable to Reconciliation than to perseverance in Anger and Revenge,”²²⁷ and in *Defensio Secunda* Milton advises that he can “easily pardon” his enemies, “endure . . . with greater equanimity all the curses that are uttered” against him (*CPW*, 4:591, 596). Though Milton would extol an anti-tyrannical violence in *Eikonoklastes* (1649), where Charles Stuart is described as more evil than Ahab, Jeroboam, Rehoboam or Saul and therefore an enemy of true piety as revealed in Scripture and the history of Reformation, we must take into consideration Milton’s evolving views on the issue of violent revenge, and especially divinely inspired revenge, as exemplified in the late *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes* (1659), which modifies the earlier position to argue that Scripture can only be interpreted—and acted upon—with the aid of “divine illumination,

²²⁶ *Walwins Wiles* (London, 1649), 30, 4.

²²⁷ Edward Phillips, “Life of Mr. John Milton,” in *The Early Lives of Milton*, ed. Darbishire, p. 67.

which no man can know at all times to be in himself.” This same treatise concludes with a poignant, qualifying gloss on Milton’s earlier thinking and on *Samson Agonistes*: “no man or body of men in these times can be the infallible judges or determiners in matters of religion to any other mens conscience but thir own” (*CPW*, 7:242-43).

As Plutarch and Machiavelli helped Lilburne to understand that violence breeds violence,²²⁸ so Euripides, through his subtle deployment of the Cadmean myth in the *Supplices* and the *Bacchae*, helped Milton to understand the same. Unlike Lilburne and his fellow Levellers who would requite declared enemies “good for evill,” emerge from the *miasma* of relentless fratricidal violence at the core of Theban mythography, Milton’s Samson, in this matrix aligned with the violence inhering in Royalist tyranny, “us’d hostility” on his enemies “where ever chanc’d,” engaged as a matter of course in massively violent retaliation in order to “pay my underminers in thir coin” (1203, 1202, 1204). *Walwins Wiles*, extolling just such a brutal efficacy in its address to the army, abruptly aligns the anti-martial rhetoric of Levellers such as Walwyn with Dalila:

[B]ut the Lord that raised you and called you to his foot (Isa. 41.2) gave
the Nations before you, making you Rulers over Kings and Princes,
giving them as dust to your sword, and as driven stubble to your bow,
making you to eat up the Nations, your enemies, to break their bones,
and pierce them through with your arrows, and then causing you to

²²⁸ Nigel Smith, “Popular Republicanism in the 1650s: John Streater’s ‘heroick mechanicks,’” in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. Armitage et al, pp. 146-47.

couch down like a Lion, none daring to stir you up; but this whorish Dalilah perceiving your might by breaking her forces like Sampsons coards, is trying her tricks to finde out your strength, and the seat thereof, and well perceiving that it lies in your hair, rooted together in your head, (we mean in your Union with Christ, and each with other,) she hath applyed her self in her several Instruments, by her enticing words to cut you from him, and then to divide you each from other, whose curious cunning in that unhappy work is here set forth in one of her supposed faithful factors, Mr William Walwyn, whose various manners in corrupting and dividing (by himself, and others,) the honest and truehearted party to Religions, and the Kingdoms interest in the Army, City and Country, is truly declared.²²⁹

The tract characterizes Levellers as “Serpents spawn” who would “destroy the Interest of England,” and Walwyn is singled out for comparison with “the Serpent that deceived our first Parents.” In *Samson Agonistes*, Dalila is repeatedly compared with the satanic and the serpentine, and as I shall discuss shortly, it is a comparison that originates in Euripides’ Theban tragedy the *Bacchae*, wherein Pentheus is one “spawned by the dragon,” and Cadmus, whose dragon’s teeth sprang up the original fratricidal men of arms, it is prophesied, “shall be changed to a serpent” (539, 1330). *Walwins Wiles*, obsessed with the very tropes of violence, theophany and division that underpin *Samson*

²²⁹ Haller, ed., *The Leveller Tracts*, pp. 287-88.

Agonistes and the *Bacchae*, concludes by returning to the Judges narrative and asking, rhetorically, whether the English people have “quitted the tents of Israel, and struck hands with the Philistines?”²³⁰

The interfusing of the tropes of fratricidal war, division, tyranny, divinity, and kingship, exemplified in the Judges and Cadmean stories, would persist throughout the civil war years and into the 1650s. The year before the outbreak of the first civil war, Milton would allude in *Of Reformation* (1641) to Cadmean Thebes, declaring that the Bishops “seek to rouze us up to . . . a cursed, a Fraternall Warre. ENGLAND and SCOTLAND dearest Brothers both in *Nature*, and in CHRIST must be set to wade in one anothers blood” (*CPW*, 1:595-96), and in the year before the regicide and the end of the second civil war, Marchmont Nedham in *A New discovery of Old England* (1648), a tract epitomizing the struggle against kingship, would likewise record that

Spight of all contradiction, a match must be struck between *Reformation* and *Independency*, I feare while the Nuptials are celebrating, their borthor [sic] *Presbyterians* (as very *Centaures* as themselves) will endeavour a rape. And then like *Cadmus* earth-born enemies, those twin prodigies will by mutuall execution open a passage through their own bowels for injured Majesty to reascend the throan. True virtue is irrelative to either extream, and thee is hopes the House may stand while two contrary winds strive to overthrow it. The *Independent* craftily

²³⁰ Ibid., pp. 288, 290, 292, 315.

cedes to the *Presbyterian*, and while he seems by easie compliance to
 give ground destroys his pursuer; thus a flying Parthian shoots
 backward.²³¹

Later still John Cleveland, in *The Idol of the Clownes, or, Insurrection of Wat the Tyler, With his fellow Kings of the Commons* (1554), comparing the rebellion at the “beginnings of the Second Richard’s reign” that was “not more against Religion and Order, than Nature and Humanity” would reverse the charge and compare republican agitators with “spawnes of Nile,” “Canibals” who had “risen like those Sons of the Dragons teeth, in tempests, without policy or advice,” and on the eve of the restoration Richard Watson in *The Panegyrike and The Storme* (1659) would lament, summarizing and commemorating an era at its end: “The Land unnaturally beares, by charmes, / From serpents teeth Cadmean men in armes.”²³²

²³¹ Marchmont Nedham, *A New discovery of Old England* (London, 1648), pp. 4-5.

²³² John Cleveland, *The Idol of the Clownes, or, Insurrection of Wat the Tyler, With his Priests Baal and Straw, Together with His Fellow Kings of the Commons, against the English Church, the King, the Laws, Nobility, and Royal Family and Gentry, in the fourth year of K. Richard the 2nd. An. 1381* (London, 1554), sig. A3, A5, A4; and Richard Watson, *The Panegyrike and The Storme* (London, 1659), 7. Nigel Smith notes that the figure of the dragon’s teeth was central to political apologists during the interregnum years. See Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England*, pp. 101, 104, 147. Arthur E. Barker provides an early allusion to Cadmus and fratricidal war in *Milton and the Puritan Dilemma*, p. 84: “The Civil War offers no more painful illustration of the tragedy of human kind than their deaths on opposing sides. In temperament they were brothers, not opponents in arms; but they were caught in a mist of passion from which death (in Falkland’s case through suicidal recklessness) provided an escape. For Milton a yet more dispiriting fate was reserved. He was to learn through hard experience something of their tolerance.”

Chapter 8

Samson Agonistes, Christ Suffering, and the Bacchae

“We are all conceived in close prison; in our mother’s wombs, we are close prisoners all; when we are born, we are born but to the liberty of the house; prisoners still, though within larger walls; and then all our life is but a going out to the place of execution, to death.”

—John Donne (1640)²³³

In his defense of tragedy in the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, that “gravest, moralest, and most profitable” of literary forms, Milton lists “philosophers and other gravest writers” who cite tragedy, and then “men in highest dignity” who have attempted to write tragedy, a second category that includes “*Gregory Nazianzen* a Father of the Church” who “thought it not unbeseeming the sanctity of his person to write a Tragedy, which he entitl’d, *Christ suffering*” (CP, 574). We know from Milton’s outlines for biblical tragedies in the Trinity College Manuscript that he at one time considered as possible topics for tragedy not only “Samson pursophorus or Hybristes, or Samson marriing or in Ramath Lechi Jud. 15,” “Dagonalia,” and “Comazontes or the Benjaminites or the Rioters. Jud. 19. 20. &c,” but also from the New Testament “Christus patiens,” “Christ bound,” “Christ Crucifi’d,” and “Christ risen” (CPW, 8:236-41). The twelfth-century cento known as the *Christus Patiens* or *Christ Suffering*, a pastiche religious drama of 2,610 verses written by a Byzantine

²³³ John Donne, “Number 9. Preached to the Lords upon Easter-day [March 28, 1619],” in *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1962), 2:197. This sermon was first published in 1640.

author whom Milton identifies as Gregory Nazianzen (though perhaps Constantine Manasses), had at his disposal a miscellany of Greek tragedy and an undamaged text of Euripides' *Bacchae*. As a result, *Christ Suffering* contains a considerable number of modified verses from seven Euripidean tragedies, a few from Aeschylus and Lycophron, and roughly two hundred from the *Bacchae* alone.

Remarkably, when segments of the *Bacchae* were lost after the twelfth century as a result of damage to the medieval codex, *Christ Suffering* was used to fill in the missing lines. Thus a reciprocal intertextual lineage between the two tragedies was initiated of which Milton, recognizing his intense interest in Euripides and knowledge of *Christ Suffering*, must have been aware. But above all, these ostensibly counteractive intertexts, coded into *Samson Agonistes* through the preface, sponsor a highly equivocal valuation of Milton's protagonist and hence the meaning of Milton's tragedy. What is so interesting about the versions of *Christ Suffering* and the *Bacchae* that came down to Milton is that Christ is not interchangeable with Dionysus, a radical enough comparative proposition, but rather with the positivistic Theban King Pentheus, human though serpent born.²³⁴ Consequently a startling problem emerges: how to resolve the absolute contradiction between Christ's sacrifice of one for all and Pentheus' sacrifice of all for one. What I wish to argue here is that, released from doctrinal necessity as exemplified in *Christian Doctrine*, *Samson Agonistes* is informed by both at once and, as such, becomes Milton's most penetrating poetic enquiry into the many

²³⁴ For a psychoanalytic reading of Pentheus' paternity, see Charles Segal, *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text* (Ithaca, N. Y. and London: Cornell UP, 1986), pp. 282-93.

shapes of things divine.

In the prologue to *Christ Suffering*, Gregory the Theologian acknowledges the drama's debt to Euripides:

Since, having heard poems sacredly,
You now wish to hear sacred things poetically,
Listen attentively: now, along the lines of Euripides,
I shall proclaim the world-saving passion;
And from this you will learn of many mystic things. (1-5)²³⁵

Euripidean poetics thus informs “sacred things,” a principle Milton affirms in the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, where he writes that “The Apostle *Paul* himself thought it not unworthy to insert a verse of *Euripides* into the Text of Holy Scripture, 1 *Cor.* 15.33,” an attribution he earlier assigned in *Areopagitica*: “*Paul* especially, who thought it no defilement to insert into holy Scripture the sentences of three Greek Poets, and one of them [*Euripides*] a Tragedian” (*CPW*, 2:508), and in *Christian Doctrine* where, on the subject of associating with the wicked, Milton quotes the verse Paul thought “not unworthy”: “*make no mistake, evil company corrupts good manners*” (*CPW*, 6:751). Moreover, on the heretical subject of mortalism, Milton returns to the evidence of Paul in Corinthians 15 along with “Christ’s own words” (*CPW*, 6:406) in John 11, substantiating his case by arguing *sui generis*, with the longest literary citation

²³⁵ *Christus Patiens*, tr. Alan Fishbone, *Milton Quarterly* 36:3 (2002).

in *Christian Doctrine*:²³⁶

Euripides, in the *Suppliants*, has given a far better interpretation of this passage than my opponents, without knowing it:

*Each various part
That constitutes the frame of man, returns
Whence it was taken; to th'ethereal sky
The soul, the body to its earth. (CPW, 6:407-08)*

Importantly, the Pauline directive to search all things, remarkably similar to Euripides' repeated concluding injunction regarding the manifold nature of divinity and the rationale, presumably, for Paul's thinking it "not unworthy" to insert a verse of Euripides into "Holy Scripture," provided a foundational tenet for puritan reformers and their evolving notions of liberty.²³⁷ John Lilburne's *A Worke of the Beast or a Relation of a Most Unchristian Censure, Executed upon John Lilburne* (1638) exhorts its reader to

search out diligently the truth of things, and try them in the *Ballance of the Sanctuary*. I beseech you take things no more upon truth, as hitherto

²³⁶ See David Norbrook's use of Euripides in his defense of Milton's authorship of *Christian Doctrine* in "Euripides, Milton, and *Christian Doctrine*," pp. 37-41.

²³⁷ See Sharon Achinstein, *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994), pp. 37-42.

you have done, but take paines to search and finde out those Spirituall and hidden truthes that God hath enwraped in his sacred Booke, and finde out a bottom for your owne soules. For if you will have the comforts of them, you must bestow some labour for the getting of them, and you must search dilligently before you finde them *Pro. 2.*²³⁸

Likewise John Goodwin in *Anti-Cavalierisme* (1642) counsels that scripture reading Christians “heard from *Paul* himselfe, that he hath left it upon Record as matter of especiall commendation to them, *That they daily searched the Scriptures, whether things were so or no,*”²³⁹ and William Walwyn’s *The Power of Love* (1643) correspondingly advises,

But come, fear nothing, you are advised by the Apostle to try all things, and to hold fast that which is good: to prove the Spirits whether they bee of God or not . . . you will finde upon tryall that scarcely any opinion hath beene reported truly to you: and though in every one of them you may finde some things that you cannot agree unto, you will yet be a gainer, by discovering many excellent things that you as yet may be unsatisfied in, and by due consideration of them all perfect your owne

²³⁸ John Lilburne. *A Worke of the Beast or a Relation of a Most Unchristian Censure, Executed upon John Lilburne* (London, 1638), p. 17.

²³⁹ Goodwin, *Anti-Cavalierisme*, p. 19.

judgement.²⁴⁰

Related references appear in [Henry Robinson's] *Liberty of Conscience* (1643), Walwyn's *The Compassionate Samaritane* (1644), and John Goodwin's *ΘΕΟΜΑΧΙΑ; Or the Grand Imprudence of Men Running the Hazard of Fighting Against God* (1644), all pretexts and contexts to Milton's *Areopagitica*.²⁴¹ Goodwin had previously argued that Christ's gift to man in the atonement was not perfect righteousness or perfect knowledge but the power to progress toward both through faith and the exercise of reason.²⁴² Turning with his Cambridge colleagues away from Calvin and to neo-Platonism, Goodwin would argue, in imagistic terms reminiscent of the scattered truth in *Areopagitica*, that "truth exists to be discovered by reason, planted in us by the creator for that purpose," and therefore each individual believer, through ceaseless inquiry, "must search for it, that will find it out,"²⁴³ search through "every Way, Doctrine, and

²⁴⁰ Haller, ed., *Tracts on Liberty*, 2:277. Christopher Hill notes that "There is much similarity between the arguments of Walwyn's *The Compassionate Samaritane* and *Areopagitica*. In their turn Lilburne and Overton seem to have been influenced by Milton's tract." Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, pp. 81-82. See too Wilding, "Milton's *Areopagitica*," pp. 7-38.

²⁴¹ [Henry Robinson], *Liberty of Conscience or the Sole means to obtaine Peace and Truth* (London, 1643), p. 4; John Goodwin, *ΘΕΟΜΑΧΙΑ; Or the GRAND IMPRUDENCE of Men Running the Hazard of Fighting Against God, In suppressing any Way, Doctrine, or Practice, concerning which they know not certainly whether it be from God or no* (London, 1644), p. 48; and William Walwyn, *The Compassionate Samaritane* (London, 1644), in Haller, ed., *Tracts on Liberty*, 3:76-78.

²⁴² Goodwin, *Imputatio Fidei* (London, 1642). See Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution* (New York and London: Columbia UP, 1955), pp. 147-49.

²⁴³ Goodwin, *Certain briefe Observations and Antiquaeries: on Master Prin's Twelve Questions about Church-government* (London, 1644), p. 1.

Ordinance” by which divinity “communicates and imparts [it]self graciously unto the world.” For Goodwin, God will scatter and destroy in his own time what is not of him; yet to oppose, however inadvertently, what is of him is to fight against God himself, a lesson Euripides’ Pentheus learns in the *Bacchae*.²⁴⁴

For Milton as well as Paul and the author of *Christ Suffering*, Euripides was the poet who went the furthest in his attempt to fathom and know the multiformity through which divinity reveals itself in the world. The tragic reciprocity apparent between the Euripidean and the Scriptural is what Milton will finally bring together in *Samson Agonistes*, as the fusion of the poetic with the divine, the pagan with the Christian, the cruel and doctrinaire with the merciful and tolerant, elevates into the prophetic. The scattering of truth in *Areopagitica* and the difficulty of apprehending god as “God [is] revealed to us . . . [f]or the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor. 2.10) is contained in late Euripides, and most poignantly in the *Bacchae*.

Milton references Pentheus and the *Bacchae* when he writes in *Tetrachordon* of the negligence and imperceptivity of “common textuaries, who abolish lawes, as the rable demolish images,” and who

in the zeale of their hammers oft violating the Sepulchers of good men,
like *Pentheus* in the tragedies, they see that for *Thebes* which is not, and
take that for superstition, as these men in the heate of their annulling

²⁴⁴ See Goodwin, *Theomachia*, pp. 17-19. We should recall that the *Bacchae*, Euripides’ last tragedy, ends with the Choral ode Milton quotes in his letter to Diodati: “for many are the shapes of things divine.”

perceive not how they abolish right, and equall, and justice under the
appearance of *judicial*. (CPW, 2:640)

Milton's account of Pentheus (the Cretan name "Pentheus" being a combination of *peithos* and *dolores*, signifying a person who is "full of suffering"²⁴⁵) alludes to Samson and the Judges narrative as "in the zeale of their hammers" and the "heate of their annulling" they, like Pentheus, "under the appearance of *judicial*" vacate all that is "right, and equall, and justice." In Euripides' tragedy Pentheus attempts the destruction of the Bacchic festival and the confining of divinity as incarnated by Dionysus and, in consequence, is dazed by the god who at last possesses him, sees "two suns blazing in the heavens. / And now two Thebes," whereupon Dionysus counters: "It is the god you see. / . . . You see what you could not / when you were blind" and "Your blasphemies have made you blind" (918-19, 922-24, 501). Pentheus' searching of divinity—"Where is he? I cannot see him" (500)—is reminiscent of Samson's blindness and "sense of Heav'ns desertion" (632) in *Samson Agonistes*. In *Christian Doctrine*, Milton describes the sinners spiritual death metaphorically: the intellect is "blinded," and there is a "darkening of . . . right reason" which initiates a "slavish subjection to sin." Thus Milton elucidates: "Who are these but the unbelievers, whom God deserted because they followed the beast"? (CPW, 6:321, 395, 190).

In *Christ Suffering*, as in the *Bacchae* and *Samson Agonistes*, the passion and

²⁴⁵ Carl Kerényi, *Dionysos: Archetypal Image of Indestructible Life* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976), p. 70.

death of the protagonist serves as an essential point of convergence through which to approach the complexity of Milton's theodicy in his last poem. The Messenger enters early in *Christ Suffering* to inform the Mother of God that her son, tortured and scorned by a "murderous, evil-doing mob," is "now no longer" (679, 650). The Messenger elaborates:

The vengeful mob, dragging my Lord,
 Led him to a beam pointing skyward,
 They led him up, they led him to the hill top;
 The beam stuck straight up into the sky. (660-63)

Arrived at their destination the mob "nailed / His hands and feet into the thick wood" and, augmenting their cruelty, "Struck him with hard-swung reed" (665-66, 668).

Similarly in the *Bacchae*, the Messenger informs Coryphaeus that "Pentheus, the son of Echion, is dead," as a "whole horde / of Bacchae swarmed upon him" (1030, 1130-31), at length literally tearing him into pieces. More specifically, the Messenger reports that Pentheus was placed astride the "highest branch of a great fir" that "rose, towering to heaven," while the mob, now assembled below, "showered him / with stones and javelins . . . hurled their wands" until at last "down, down / from his high perch fell Pentheus . . . screaming as he fell, / for he knew his end was near" (1064, 1073, 1096-97, 1110-13). The "great fir" functions in a manner similar to the "heavenly pillar" of Pindar's first *Pythian Ode* (17-20b), a symbol of cosmic unity that binds together sky, earth, and

nether world. But more importantly for our comparison, the great fir is a kind of *axis mundi*, simultaneously signaling Christ's cross and Samson's pillars. In *Samson Agonistes*, Samson stands with arms outstretched between the "two main Pillars vaulted high" for that elliptic, indeterminate moment, surrounded by the Bacchant-like "Idolatrous rout amidst thir wine" in whom "Sacrifice / Had fill'd thir hearts with mirth," until "With both arms on those two massie Pillars"—like Christ crying out to his father and Pentheus to his mother—"At last with head erect thus cry'd aloud" (1606, 443, 1612-13, 1633, 1639).

Moreover, the ritualistic procession and passion of Christ in *Christ Suffering*, the "mockery they set upon [him]" (1119), alludes to a similar development in the *Bacchae* and resonates in *Samson Agonistes*. Searingly reported by Matthew, Christ is prepared for his scapegoat death:

Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the praetorium, and they gathered the whole battalion before him. And they stripped him and put a scarlet robe upon him, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on his head, and put a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him they mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' And when they had mocked him, they led him away to crucify him. (27:27-31)

Correspondingly, Pentheus in the *Bacchae*, in preparation for his sacrifice on the hill, cross-dresses as a Bacchant, sees double visions, and at last leaves the protective walls of

Thebes for his fatal journey to the outlying wilds where the female Bacchants rapturously venerate their divinity. Dionysus thus reduces King Pentheus, in terms evocative of Christ, to “the laughingstock of Thebes, / paraded through the streets, a woman” (854). These sacrificial processions shadow Samson’s passage to the theater, where Milton’s Messenger reports that as “The Feast and noon grew high”

Immediately

Was *Samson* as a public servant brought,
In thir state Livery clad; before him Pipes
And Timbrels, on each side went armed guards

as Samson performed pending a break in the action, at which “they led him / Between the pillars” (1612, 1614-17, 1629-30).²⁴⁶

Returning for a moment to the early years of puritan radicalism we note that Milton’s muted awareness of martyrology and *imitatio Christi* was not lost on his fellow English reformers. Lilburne, for instance, in *A Worke of the Beast* (1638), writes of his own proximity to the tormented Christ:

²⁴⁶ The spectacle of cross-dressing and the notion of the “woman within” are appropriate to these intercurrent ritual, liminal scenes. See e.g., Michael Lieb, ““A Thousand Fore-Skins”: Circumcision, Violence, and Selfhood in Milton,” *Milton Studies* 38 (2000): 212-213; Jackie DiSalvo, “Intestine Thorn: Samson’s Struggle with the Woman Within,” in *Milton and the Idea of Woman*, ed. Julia M. Walker, (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1988), pp. 211-29; and Herman Rapaport, *Milton and the Postmodern* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983), pp. 131-64.

For I thought I should not have been whipt through the streete but onely at the Pillory: And soe passing a long the Lane being attended with many Staves and Halberts, as Christ was when he was apprehended by his Enimies and led to the *High Priests Hall*. *Mat. 26*, we came to ffleete-bridge where was a Cart standing ready for me. And I being commanded to stripp me, I did it with all the willingness and cheerefullnes, where upon the executioner tooke out a Corde and tyed my hands to the Carts Arsse, which caused me to utter these words, *Wellcome be the Cross of Christ*. . . . I stand here in the place of ignominy and shame. Yet to mee it is not so, but I owne and imbrace it, as the *Wellcome Crosse of Christ*. And as a badge of my *Christian Profession*.²⁴⁷

Victor Turner has observed that during what he terms a “liminal period” ritual subjects “pass through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state,” a threshold experience that is often “likened to death; to being in the womb; to invisibility, darkness, bisexuality, and the wilderness.” These “liminars,” Turner submits, are “stripped of status and authority, removed from a social structure maintained and sanctioned by power and force, and leveled to a homogeneous social state through discipline and ordeal.”²⁴⁸ Here Pentheus, Christ, Samson and Lilburne converge on liminal space—a space tragedy opens between secure structures of society,

²⁴⁷ Lilburne, *A Worke of the Beast*, pp. 5, 9.

²⁴⁸ Victor Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia UP, 1978), p. 249.

between order and disorder, a realm of disintegration of familiar boundaries and identities. We need only recall Samson's early lament that he is "Blind / Into a Dungeon thrust" (366-67), a physical and spiritual darkness the shocked Chorus terms a "Prison within Prison"—"The Dungeon of thy self" (153, 156). Additionally, Samson's "oft-invoked death" (575; see 79, 100, 102-04, 630, 650-51, 1263) and his obsession with his origin (21-33) mark him, with the intercurrent Christ and Pentheus, as one of Turner's "liminars." (We might also consider, as a counter-example, Jesus in *Paradise Regained* and his journey into a "pathless Desert" replete with "dusk with horrid shades," accompanied only by "things past and to come" (1.296, 300).

The fundamental contingency of divinity, tacitly demarcated in the biblical and Euripidean tragedies commended in Milton's preface to *Samson Agonistes*, reveals and then augments the ritual pattern of expulsion of the *pharmakos*. In ancient Athenian festivals such as the Thargelia, the symbolic bearer of all ills and pollutions of the society, the ritual scapegoat, was through a sacred procession or *pharmakos* ceremonially driven out of the city.²⁴⁹ Jean-Pierre Vernant expains of this upside-down world:

The king unburdens his responsibilities upon an individual who is a kind of inverted image of all that is negative in his own character. This is indeed what the *pharmakos* is; the king's double, but reversed like the

²⁴⁹ Charles Segal, "Euripides *Bacchae*: The Language of the Self and the Language of the Mysteries," in *Interpreting Greek Tragedy*, p. 305.

carnival kings crowned for the duration of the festival, when order is turned upside down and the social hierarchies reversed: Sexual taboos are lifted, theft becomes lawful, slaves take the place of their masters, women exchange their clothes with men—and in these circumstances the one who sits upon the throne must be the lowest, the most ugly, the most ridiculous, the most criminal. But when the festival is over the counter-king is expelled or put to death, carrying away with him all the disorder that he embodied and of which he thereby purges the community.²⁵⁰

Samson's admittance of his "foul effeminacy" (410), his being "Effeminatly vanquish't" (562), cross-dressed "In thir state Livery" (1616), and his understanding that at the Philistine festival he is to be their "drudge . . . thir fool or jester" (1338), represents just such an expulsive process.

Similarly, Renaissance passion narratives, and especially Calvinist passion narratives, present a scapegoat ritual in which the sharply contrasting figures of oppressor and oppressed ultimately fuse into a single figure. Debora Shuger observes that the self-divided reader produced by the Calvinist passion narratives is the rhetorical mirror of the Protestant psyche—a psyche which incorporates, interestingly, the fragmented selfhood of the late medieval Christ. As terms like "conflict," "Christian warfare," and "struggle" indicate, the divisions are not benign segments but sites of

²⁵⁰ Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Ambiguity and Reversal," in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, p. 132.

violence. The appropriate response to the Crucifixion, in Freudian traumatic terms, is to repeat it: self-inflicted violence replacing penal suffering—the Freudian strategy of the superego here construed as an *imitatio Christi*. The revulsion from the cruelty and the ecstasies of aggression flow into one another, allowing the Christian to introject the scene of torture, becoming both crucified and crucifier, what Freud viewed as the first phase in the death drive—becoming the internal executioner.²⁵¹ Shuger explores the contemporary apprehension and portrayal of the crucifixion as end myth, an exploration that sheds light on Milton’s tragic protagonist:

If . . . the function of dominant myths is to provide normative values and ontological solace—to relieve anxiety by grounding social experience in sacred order—then disintegrating myths, what we may call ‘end myths,’ can be characterized by their failure to effect this. The end myth does not validate traditional symbols but discloses their inadequacy to provide moral coherence, stable boundaries between right and wrong, strategies for escaping dread. . . . The end myth thus approaches tragedy. Euripides, whose introspective character studies dramatize crumbling cultural values and ambiguous intimations about both social and cosmic intelligibility, is the great ancient poet of end myths.²⁵²

²⁵¹ Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible*, pp. 105-06.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

In the *Bacchae*, Pentheus allows Dionysus to “lead me through the very heart of Thebes, / Since I, alone of all this city, dare to go,” to which Dionysus replies:

You and you alone will suffer for your city.
 A great ordeal awaits you. But you are worthy
 Of your fate. I shall lead you safely there;
 Someone else shall bring you back. . . .
 An example to all men. . . .
 You shall win
 A glory towering to heaven and usurping
 Gods. (961-62, 963-66, 968, 972-73)

When the author of *Christ Suffering* was working with the text of the *Bacchae* he transferred these lines to the Mother of God and her description of Christ’s passion and redemption of mankind:

And you will save them all, being free yourself alone.
 For you are the only man sufficiently strong for this
 And you alone suffer on behalf of mortals.
 The struggles are past, now it is the end
 And you have victory over your enemies,
 Crushing hell, the serpent, death. . . .

And you will establish glory on the earth,
 Since you cancel the common doom with your death,
 Rising from the ground and bringing salvation
 And changing your form to the kinship with your Father.

(1523-28, 1530-33)

Paradoxically, the Christian spirit of divine mercy and forgiveness, the passion whose end in death cancels “the common doom” of humanity, is exactly opposite to the way in which Pentheus’ suffering effects destruction rather than salvation. Cadmus mournfully recognizes at the end of the *Bacchae*, the palace destroyed and the city in flames, that “the god has brought us all to ruin at one blow” (1303), intimating that the sacrifice of one for all—the constitutive principle of *Christ Suffering*—is reversed in the *Bacchae*. The intertextuality is deepened in the unfolding of the serpent/dragon imagery, wherein the portrayal of Christ as serpent/dragon slayer, “Crushing hell, the serpent, death” (1528), is opposed to Pentheus *as* serpent/dragon—“spawned by the dragon,” “inhuman, a rabid beast, a giant in wildness raging . . . whose violence abuses man and god outrageously” (539-43, 555). When Dionysus pronounces sentence on Agave and Cadmus, he appends the prophecy that Cadmus and his wife Ares “shall be changed to a serpent” (1330), to which Cadmus acknowledges, in a scene reminiscent of the transformation of the fallen angels in *Paradise Lost* 10.520; cf. 10.507-47), that “Transformed to serpents, I and my wife, / . . . / Never shall my suffering end” (1357, 1360).

In Book 3 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Milton’s third favorite reading after

Euripides and Homer and an author he termed the “choicest poet” in his first Prolusion (CPW, 1:231), the alignment of Pentheus with the destroying, avenging serpent is amplified as Pentheus is described as one “who despised the gods.” Upon Dionysus’ arrival from the east, Pentheus exhorts the martial citizens of Thebes—“descendants of the serpent’s race,” “children of Mars”—to “remember your parentage . . . and show the spirit of the serpent who, one against many, destroyed them all. . . . bringing down her walls with their engines of war.”²⁵³ The sole Ovidian serpent who “destroyed them all” evokes the Genesis characterization of the judicial tribe of Dan as “a serpent in the way, a viper in the path” (49:16-18) that would be expunged from the list of twelve tribes in the Book of Revelation (7:4), which for Milton would mean, as Northrop Frye notes, “being erased from the book of life.”²⁵⁴ In *Samson Agonistes*, furthermore, Samson is aligned through simile with the “Assailant” “ev’ning Dragon” (1693, 1692), in the hermeneutics of Revelation 12 the “great red dragon,” “that ancient serpent who is called the Devil and Satan” with whom Michael and the angels do battle, and in *Paradise Lost* the “Dragon” who, “put to second rout, / Came furious down to be reveng’d on men” (4.3-4).

The intertextual pressure of *Christ Suffering* and the *Bacchae* throws into relief Samson’s removal to the “spacious Theatre” (1605), preceding which the Chorus admonishes, “Where the heart joins not, outward acts defile not” (1368), and a sophistic Samson responds:

²⁵³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. Mary M. Innes (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1955), pp. 87-88. Similarly, Christ in Revelation 7 is the angel coming, like Dionysus, “from the rising of the sun” to put the twelve tribes under his protective seal.

²⁵⁴ Frye, *Spiritus Mundi*, p. 222; see too Wittreich, *Interpreting “Samson Agonistes,”* pp. 97-99.

Where outward force constrains, the sentence holds;
 But who constrains me to the Temple of *Dagon*,
 Not dragging? the *Philistian* Lords command.
 Commands are no constraints. If I obey them,
 I do it freely; venturing to displease
 God for the fear of Man, and Man prefer,
 Set God behind: which in his jealousy
 Shall never, unrepented, find forgiveness.
 Yet that he may dispense with me or thee
 Present in Temples at Idolatrous Rites
 For some important cause, thou needst not doubt. (1369-79)

It is an uncertain moment as just prior to the above exchange Samson had relayed to the otherwise well-meaning Messenger that “Perhaps thou shalt have cause to sorrow indeed” (1347). The notion that Samson did not yet know what he was soon to do, the spectacular theater/temple demolition, is further qualified by Aristotle’s reminder that “it is possible for the action to occur, as our early poets handled it, with the characters knowing and understanding what they are doing, as indeed Euripides makes Medea kill her children.” For Aristotle, “it is necessary either to do the deed or not and either knowingly or in ignorance.”²⁵⁵ “If I obey them,” Samson hypothesizes, “I do it freely,” suggesting that Samson, like Euripides’ Medea, knew for some time the violent act he

²⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics*, p. 24.

was to perform. The now confused Chorus voices its apprehension and unwillingness to concede what they have inferred: “How thou wilt here come off surmounts my reach” (1380), to which Samson, like Christ and Pentheus, announces his decision to go:

Be of good courage, I begin to feel
Some rouzing motions in me which dispose
To something extraordinary my thoughts.
I with this Messenger will go along,
Nothing to do, be sure, that may dishonour
Our law, or stain my vow of *Nazarite*.
If there be aught of presage in the mind,
This day will be remarkable in my life
By some great act, or of my days the last. (1381-89)

Samson agrees to go to the theater because, like Christ, he does not wish to be mocked in the streets: “Because they shall not trail me through thir streets / Like a wild Beast, I am content to go” (1402-03), and like Christ and Pentheus, he goes forward alone: “[Y]our company along / I will not wish (1413-14).

In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton, like Euripides before him, explores the increasingly complex interrelation between divinity and the human sphere, the “moral heteronomy”²⁵⁶ of a God whose meaning and intention remain systematically inscrutable. The passion

²⁵⁶ Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible*, p. 138.

texts, Shuger notes, generate a “rhetorical system of cross-identifications” that, in turn, produce an unstable selfhood “fissured by its own ambivalent responses to violence.”²⁵⁷ Consequently the incoherent self “collapses distinctions between selves, because all the persons, whether implied or represented, in these narratives share a taste for violence and revenge,” and thus “at the site of sacrifice, torturer and tortured, Father and Son, victim and aggressor converge and exchange roles.”²⁵⁸ Viewed through the mediating intertexts *Christ Suffering* and the *Bacchae*, this complex, problematic question of the interrelation between divinity and man is powerfully transferred to *Samson Agonistes*, as questions arise as to where we might locate the line between a benign divinity and one that wishes to destroy human happiness, and correspondingly how human volition and desire interact with or are subsumed within systems of belief. Cycles of violence do not terminate but continue; triumphant closure opens to unremitting repetitions of violence.

In *Christ Suffering*, the Mother of God in a moment of violent fury urges Christ to “kill our enemy” and “take revenge upon your torturers,” whereupon Christ counsels: “I implore you, hate no one of mortals, / Not even those who nailed me to this wood” (745, 747, 827-28). And later, cradling Christ’s body in her arms as Agave cradles a dismembered Pentheus in hers, the Mother of God retreats to the convention of honor and memorial (“Why did you wish to die without honor?”) as Manoa and the Chorus would do in *Samson Agonistes*, before calling for divine retaliation: “but neither Judas nor that wretched Pilate / Will escape a double justice, but the avenging / And just eye of

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 99.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 111.

the Father will punish them / And the whole city and the murderous people” (1328, 1407-10). Similarly in the *Bacchae*, where Pentheus’ passion ends, Agave’s begins, and so the cycle might continue; however Agave, plunged in grief at the death of her son and recognition of her role in his death, rejects the thyrsus memorial in order to confirm and endure her suffering. In so doing Agave projects tragedy’s separation from its mythic and ritual context, from prescriptive, customary patterns of regeneration or resurrection that might provide closure to the ontological problem tragedy raises. “Now, now I see,” Agave laments, “Dionysus has destroyed us all” (1296). And in a moment of wide human sympathy she asserts:

O Father, now you can see
 how everything has changed. I am in anguish now,
 tormented, who walked in triumph minutes past,
 exulting in my kill. And that prize I carried home
 with such pride was my own curse . . .
 O gods, what dirge can I sing
 that there might be a dirge for every
 broken limb? (1331-35, 1339-41)

In *Samson Agonistes*, Manoa offers to bring Samson’s body home (Milton’s supplement to the Judges narrative) and there build him “A monument . . . With all Trophies hung, and Acts enroll’d / In copious Legend, or sweet Lyric Song” where “all the valiant youth

resort, / And from his memory inflame thir breasts / To matchless valour and adventures high" (1734, 1736-40). Like the Mother of God in *Christ Suffering* and unlike Agave in the *Bacchae*, Manoa wishes to contain the "so horrid spectacle" of human destruction within the confining mythos of heroism, a pressure toward monumentalization as a recuperative measure that finds voice in Dalila as well, in her belief that for her deeds against the enemy she "shall be nam'd among the famousest" (982) and that her memorial tomb will be with "odours visited and annual flowers" (987). Samson's exit nightmare of death and destruction is thus glossed by Manoa into heroic legend and assurance of eternal fame; yet in *Samson* we have no Agave, as we do in the *Bacchae*, to counter the exculpation of heroic monumentalization, nor do we have the Mother of God in *Christ Suffering*, who by degrees apprehends the meaning her dead son has left behind: we the fit audience are left alone with the deep contradiction set before us.

Walter Burkert has argued that ritual is not merely a theatrical dramatization of myth, but rather the function of ritual is to dramatize the order of life and, in so doing, shape the mythic patterns, exposing basic modes of behavior, especially aggression.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ Burkert, *Homo Necans*, pp. 32-33; see also Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1979); Burkert, Rene Girard and Jonathan Z. Smith, *Ritual Killing and Cultural Formation* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford UP, 1987). See too John Guillory, "The Father's House: *Samson Agonistes* in Its Historical Moment," in *Re-membering Milton*, pp. 202-25. Guillory notes that the problem of aggression in Milton's tragedy has been "evaded in criticism of the drama, or reduced to the merely contingent circumstances of Samson's regeneration" (218). On the sublimation of aggression, Guillory contends that the narrative of *Samson Agonistes* "acknowledges the victory of this class rationally by negating it in the fantasy of desublimation, of 'terrorism,' which is nothing other than an image of the abolition of all structural domination, the whole of political economy, in the face of its actual continuance." Thus in exempting himself from the law, Samson's culminating act of destruction extends to global, or at the least civil, proportions:

For Burkert, the formative period of civilization, and hence culture and religion, becomes discernable with hunting and funerary ritual, through which modes of behavior were instituted that included sympathy for quarry and remorse over killing. Through observance of rituals we identify relationships and structures that recur—the repetition of trauma as a means of evading past trauma that is central to the Cadmean tragedy of Thebes as well as the failure of the puritan revolution. The structure of ritual—and here we might consider the Interregnum as just such a ritual period—thus moves from preparation through the “unspeakable” central point to the act of “setting up” an order, a pattern which can be repeated but not reversed, signifying that “all orders and forms of authority in human society are founded on institutionalized violence,” and hence those who turn to religion for salvation from aggression, whether pagan or Christian, puritan or Royalist, are confronted with violence, specifically sacrificial killing, as the intrinsic experience of the sacred.²⁶⁰ Hence the shock felt in the act of killing is

answered later by consolidation; guilt is followed by reparation, destruction by reconstruction. Its simplest manifestation is in the custom of collecting bones, or raising the skull, the horns, or the antlers, thereby establishing an order whose power resides in its contrast to what went

“‘Disestablishment’ proceeds unchecked; all temples are demolished, all states, all societies” (219).

²⁶⁰ Burkert, *Homo Necans*, pp. 1-3. Burkert argues convincingly that of our earliest impulses toward religious signification, the “gathering of bones, the raising of a skull or stretching of a skin is to be understood as an attempt at restoration, a resurrection in the most concrete sense” (17).

before. In the experience of killing one perceives the sacredness of life; it is nourished and perpetuated by death. This paradox is embodied, acted out, and generalized in the ritual. Whatever is to endure and be effective must pass through a sacrifice which opens and reseals the abyss of annihilation.²⁶¹

If civilized life endures only by giving a ritual form to the brute force that still lurks in humanity, then the ritual or poetics of mourning and lament, as evidenced at the end of the *Bacchae*, *Christ Suffering*, and *Samson Agonistes*, is clarified as it assumes or rejects a tradition of public grievance at the martyrdom of the hero that allows for the restoration of his place in society. In tragedy, furthermore, the audience's identification with the hero moves from the isolation of the scapegoat king to identification with the forces of solidarity and reintegration available to the community.²⁶² Thus "by encountering death as symbolized in word and ritual, succeeding generations are molded into successors," and in consequence "society is consolidated and renewed"²⁶³ as the basic structure of sacrifice—its preparations, homicidal central act, and restitution—reemerge as order: civilized life born of its antithesis, the encounter with death.

Milton, looking to the Euripidean and biblical examples in the *Bacchae* and *Christ Suffering*, explores and fundamentally reworks the intersecting of memorial rituals with a masculine warrior code whose literary origins extend back to Hector in *Iliad* 24

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 60.

²⁶² See Segal, *Dionysiac Poetics*, pp. 43-44.

²⁶³ Burkert, *Homo Necans*, pp. 56, 212.

and Achilles in *Odyssey* 24. With the failure of the English Revolution before him, as the fall of Athens and Periclean Democracy was before Euripides, Milton leaves us in his final work with a mournful vision of cultural dissolution, of the futility of heroic monumentalization, a vision that adheres not to a traditional system of values that would build upon communal norms and the continuities of social and religious forms—testaments to past suffering and the potentiality for the continuance of suffering—but rather to a deep interrogation of such systems, a plea, finally, for the construction of a more ethical and humane futurity.

To the faithful, in a moment that clarifies the potential for human regeneration in terms reminiscent of Michael's historical brief to Adam in the final books of *Paradise Lost*, the Theologian in *Christ Suffering* advises:

For it is necessary for you to leave the murdering
 And to settle a land of gentle people, blessed one,
 Revealing God, exchanging the dying coarseness
 And casting off the mortality of destruction
 Which you had since the Fall, since you were born mortal.

(1756-60)

In the Epistle to *Christian Doctrine*, Milton writes that “it is disgraceful and disgusting that the Christian religion should be supported by violence,” and later, “that which is internal, and the peculiar possession of each believer, is far superior to all, namely, the

Spirit itself" (CPW, 6:123, 275). Earlier, in *The Reason of Church-Government*, Milton had exhorted: "This is the approved way which the Gospell prescribes, these are the *spirituall weapons of holy censure*, and ministeriall warfare, not carnall," as Christ's "glory is in the weaknesse of fleshly things to tread upon the crest of the worlds pride and violence by the power of spirituall ordinances" (CPW, 1:848-49). In like manner *Eikonoklastes* warns of "that savage & barbarous revenge" indulged in by "Traitors & assassiners of all Law both Divine and human" (CPW, 3:578), and in *Treatise of Civil Power* Milton asks if Christian belief and practice flow

from faculties of the inward man . . . from love and charitie besides,
incapable of force, and all these things by transgression lost, but renewd
and regenerated in us by the power and gift of God alone, how can such
religion as this admit of force from man, or force be any way appli'd to
such religion, especially under the free offer of grace in the gospel, but it
must forthwith frustrate and make of no effect both the religion and the
gospel? (CPW, 7:254)

The crucial question of the signification of the "rouzing motions" (1382) that propel Samson to mass murder and suicide in the "spacious Theatre" (1605) is thus answered: "this divine illumination . . . no man can know at all times to be in himself, much less to be at any time for certain in any other," and as a result "no man or body of men in these times can be the infallible judges or determiners in matters of religion to any other mens

consciences but thir own" (*CPW*, 7:242-43).

In the *exodos* of the *Bacchae*, Cadmus and Agave are exiled from Thebes at the decree of Dionysus following his destruction of the city. Recollecting the inceptive historiography of Thebes that was a crucial metaphor during the English civil wars—Cadmus planting the slain dragon's teeth and the immediate flowering of warriors who proceed to kill one another, the five survivors being the original Thebans—Euripides' culminating vision, remarkably resonant in the Theologian's words in *Christ Suffering* and in Samson's mass-murder/suicide and the subsequent erasure of Dan from the Book of Life, distills into a repudiation of a civilization founded not on acceptance and exemplification of divinity, as in Oedipus, but on the violence of a mutually destructive martial code.

Through "Tragedy, as it was antiently compos'd," Milton, like Euripides and the author of *Christ Suffering* before him, observes a fading world of myth as it loses its consistency and dissolves; while simultaneously the real protagonist emerges as the culture—the world of the city and state, as its system of values, modes of thought, norms, beliefs are challenged, revised, reformed. Through these seemingly incompatible valences—what we might think of as Hegelian *collisions*—tragedy poses the moral and ontological problem of human agency, transforms a dramatic art into "a questioning to which there can be no answers . . . riddles whose double meanings can never be pinned down or exhausted."²⁶⁴

²⁶⁴ Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy," in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, p. 38.

Milton famously contends in *Areopagitica* that “the knowledge of good is so involv’d and interwoven with the knowledge of evill, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discern’d, that those confused seeds which were impos’d on *Psyche* as an incessant labour to cull out, and sort asunder, were not more intermixt” (C, 2:514). The choral ode that Milton quoted in his letter to Diodati and that concludes five Euripidean tragedies, *πολλὰ γὰρ μορφαὶ τῷ Δαιμονίῳ*, “for many are the shapes of things divine,” registers not only an early fusing of classical and reformist Christian principles through which Milton would shape his complex artistic, theologic, and political ideals—in *Areopagitica*, the postulate of a scattered truth that “may have more shapes than one” (CPW, 2:563), for instance—but what Renaissance exegetes and artists, and especially the religious and political radicals, had believed to be the historical role of the ancient poets. It is a quintessentially Miltonic admonition in *Areopagitica*, learned from his close study of Euripidean tragedy, that we must develop our capacities to “distinguish,” to “look back and revise what hath bin taught heretofore,” in order to move ever closer to “the discovery of truth” (CPW, 2:514, 566). Victoria Kahn writes that “[T]he Restoration was a tragedy for Milton,” a stage on which he was forced to act alone, without fellow citizens. Milton was never content, however, as Hobbes was, to equate justice with de facto authority. “Precisely because justice is not simply a matter of authority,” Kahn notes, “there is room for the conscientious individual to reason about the . . . justice of our individual acts; but because, in the words of *Areopagitica*, truth has been ‘hewed . . . into a thousand pieces,’ there is also room for the tragedy of the will. *Samson Agonistes* gives us a

tragic version of *Areopagitica*'s 'reason is but choosing..'"²⁶⁵

²⁶⁵ Victorial Kahn, "Political Theology and Reason of State in *Samson Agonistes*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 95:4 (Fall, 1996): 1088.

Epilogue: The Soul of All the Rest

"I have borne witness, I might almost say I have erected a monument that will not soon pass away. . . . Yet there was not wanting one who could rightly counsel, encourage, and inspire, who could honor both the noble deeds and those who had done them, and make both deeds and doers illustrious with praises that will never die."

– John Milton²⁶⁶

"[T]hey were for a time like those that dreamed."²⁶⁷

In *Samson Agonistes* as in the corpus of Euripides, we are consistently challenged to accept doubt and division in seeking truth, to perceive that the interfusing of good and evil, our human capacity for sin and defeat, were inextricably involved with human life and encounter with them the only path to virtue and the reassembling of the scattered truth that would signal the end of time. *Christ Suffering* and the *Bacchae* as defining intertexts reinstate, in tragic form, Milton's central pronouncement in *Areopagitica*: the necessary complexity and heterogeneity of life, a monism inclusive of the many "shapes of things divine" that remained thematically integral in all that Milton wrote. In the end we as readers are left, like Samson, with "choice of Sun or shade" (3): do we see the regenerate King Christ at the vaulted Philistine pillars, conveyed by a god to suffer and die for the salvation of his people, or do we see the hubristic, positivist King Pentheus, conveyed by a god to suffer and die for his incapacity to apprehend divine immanence, a

²⁶⁶ The epigraph is from John Milton, *History of Britain*, CPW 5:249; *The Second Defense of the English People* (CPW 4.1:684).

²⁶⁷ *The Memoirs of Anne, Lady Halkett and Ann, Lady Fanshawe*, ed. J. Loftis (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979), p. 28.

failure that leads to the extinction of the Theban people?

Samson Agonistes does not urge us to choose one or the other, for in choosing we suppress the astonishing textural complexity Milton has involved in his tragedy; rather, the purpose here is to allow the pressures each intertext brings to bear on interpretive possibilities to remain fluid, “involv’d and interwoven,” speculative, liberated from didactic intent. Like the redefinition of time at the end of *Lycidas* and the dialectical images and voices imbedded in *Areopagitica*, Milton’s tragedy is composed, we might say, of “multiple writings,” drawn from different “cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation,” and as such the unity of *Samson Agonistes* “lies not in its origin but in its destination.”²⁶⁸ Subsuming and reworking both Euripidean tragedy and biblical exegesis, *Samson Agonistes* opens outward, prophetically, to futurity.

Thomas Mann once said of Beethoven and his audience that “in the works of the last period they stood with heavy hearts before a process of dissolution or alienation, of a mounting into an air no longer familiar or safe to meddle with.”²⁶⁹ Similarly, Milton and Euripides throughout their lives progressively maximized the tensions between tradition and innovation, between the communal voice and the voice of interrogation and iconoclasm, at last “mounting into an air” with visions of extraordinary force and resonance. In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton has removed the narrative scaffolding, as it were, and left us, his fit readers, to interpret for ourselves. And it is the consummate

²⁶⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981), 26.

²⁶⁹ Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), p. 52.

power of such a polysemous vision that remains resonant in our minds—intimate, problematic, speculative as Beethoven's last quartets are, a sense of uncertainty that is fearful and exhilarating and remarkably similar in effect to the culminations of *Lear* and *Macbeth*, *Medea* and the *Bacchae*.²⁷⁰

I wish to propose in this closing an alternative appreciation of Milton that militates against the prescriptive, authoritarian, and narrowly Protestant Milton of much contemporary, and not so contemporary, criticism. From the early 1640s until the end of his life, as John Rumrich notes,²⁷¹ Milton in his poetry and prose writings consistently exhorted his contemporaries (and now us) to tolerate uncertainty and division in seeking truth, to see that evil and error—the scattering of truth in *Areopagitica*—were inextricably involved with human life and encounter with them the only path to virtue and the reassembling of truth that would signal the end of time. In *Samson Agonistes* as in the corpus of Euripides, complications and ambiguity cannot be so easily resolved, and as such the interfusing of good and evil, our human capacity for sin and defeat, do not necessitate an undoing so much as a recognition and a moving beyond.

Milton's importance, and enormous influence upon succeeding generations, is related to the extraordinary ingenuity with which he, in the Euripidean tradition as I have attempted to describe, dismantled and then reassembled the literary past under the

²⁷⁰ Longinus, the theorist of the sublime whom Milton placed on his ideal syllabus in *Of Education*, identifies precisely this uncertain quality in his praise of Euripides' refusal to provide easy resolutions (*On the Sublime*, chap. 8, p. 22). See Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic*, p. 138.

²⁷¹ Rumrich, *Milton Unbound*, p. 22.

pressure of his experience and understanding of defeat in the English Revolution.²⁷²

Indeed, the approbation and prestige in England of the greatest civil war epic, Lucan's *Pharsalia*, was ended: the Civil War had demonstrated the debasement of patrician, militaristic culture, and after 1660 traditional genres, and especially epic and tragedy, were no longer possible. Paralleling the two careers and lives, Euripides and Milton, P. W. Timberlake wrote in 1935:

It is in the realm of ideas . . . that the kinship of the two poets reveals itself. If this kinship may be summed up in a phrase, it lies in the fact that each of these men was a great and essentially non-conformist thinker, and, as a corollary, idealist. . . . Euripides carried to their full conclusions the speculative interests of the Greek Enlightenment, as Milton did, in another way, the intellectual interests of the Renaissance and the Reformation. . . . Milton, even more actively than Euripides, fought for the Utopia which he hoped was coming; and he fought with the same unfettered intellect. His divorce tracts were startlingly unorthodox. His progress in religion led him to champion the Presbyterians, to oppose them, and finally to compose his own body of doctrine, which was unorthodox enough to shock England when it was finally published in 1825. So with *Areopagitica* and his labors for the Commonwealth; in all these Milton worked for an enlightened and free nation . . . and all ended

²⁷² Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England*, p. 7.

for him, in the Restoration.²⁷³

In *The Readie and Easie Way*, Milton moves away from an analysis of considered action to an analysis of unintended consequences, a transition from the methods of classical history, that is, to those of providential historiography. In his letter to Henry de Brass of 1657, Milton elucidates the procedures of the historian, insisting that he inquire into the intentions *behind* actions: “he who would write worthily of worthy deeds ought to write with no less largeness of spirit and experience of the world than he who did them, so that he can comprehend and judge as an equal even the greatest, and, having comprehended, can narrate” (CPW 7:501).²⁷⁴ In *The Readie and Easie Way*, Milton abandons the intentions of “mortal men” and rational agency for a prophetic voice authorized by God where the words of the prophet reflect the agency—the “largeness of spirit”—of God, not that of rational actors.

Milton’s approximation of the prophetic voice at the conclusion of the tract—added to the second edition of *The Readie and Easie Way*—not only registers his belief in his own authority to “comprehend and judge,” and thus to “narrate,” but also serves as a barometer of his perceived isolation: “Thus much I should perhaps have said though I were sure I should have spoken only to trees and stones; and had none to cry to, but with the Prophet, *O earth, earth, earth!* To tell the very soil it self, what her perverse inhabitants are deaf to” (CPW 7:462-63). Here the stoic language of Milton’s 1659 letter

²⁷³ Timberlake, “Milton and Euripides,” pp. 339-40.

²⁷⁴ Kolbrener, *Milton’s Warring Angels*, p. 44.

to Jean Labadie, in which Milton reflects positively on public and civic authority (*CPW* 7:509), transforms into unqualified prophetic speech. This prophetic utterance, addressed to a “deaf” nation of “trees and stones,” is necessarily incompatible with a republican argument which requires for its articulation the existence of a virtuous and rational audience.²⁷⁵ If we can agree with William Kerrigan’s assertion that “by the time Milton finished *Paradise Lost*, the solitary watchman [had become] for him the principle of divine truth in human societies,”²⁷⁶ then by *The Readie and Easie Way*, Milton seems well on the way to fashioning himself as that lone figure, just as Euripides had done, exiled and alone in Macedonia, at the close of the Peloponnesian war.

In Freud’s late work *Civilization and its Discontents*, the human inclination to aggression is seen as an original, self-subsisting instinctual disposition, one that constitutes, for Freud, the greatest impediment to civilization. Thus the meaning of the evolution of civilization is no longer obscure for Freud: it is the struggle between Eros and Death, between the instinct of life and the instinct of destruction, as it works itself out in the unrelenting drama of the human species. Freud ended his work with what seems profoundly pertinent to the study of Euripidean and Miltonic tragedy and to the end of my exploration of *Samson*: “The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-

²⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

²⁷⁶ Kerrigan, *The Prophetic Milton*, p. 177; Kolbrener, *Milton’s Warring Angels*, p. 30. See also Martz, *Poet of Exile*.

destruction.”²⁷⁷ Or to put it in terms of Milton’s contemporary Jeremy Taylor, who wrote in reference to the national calamity just passed and the sense of divine justice being acted out:

For it is a sin that turns into rage, and loss into madness, and sorrow to amazement and confusion. But if either we were innocent, or else by the sadness are made penitent, we are put to school, or into the theatre, either to learn how, or else actually to combat for a crown. The accident may serve an end of mercy, but is not a messenger of wrath.²⁷⁸

The tragedy of *Samson Agonistes*, similarly, signals forward to the Apocalypse and is therefore the same tragedy projected onto the human history of *Paradise Lost* by Michael in his vision of “violence / Proceed(ing), and Oppression, and Sword-Law”(PL 11.671-72), a vision which leaves Adam in tears, mourning:

O what are these,
Deaths Ministers, not Men, who thus deal Death
Inhumanly to men . . . (PL 11.674-77)

The “yelling monsters” with “ceaseless cry,” the progeny of Sin and Death who are

²⁷⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, in *Standard Edition*, tr. James Strachey, vol. 21 (London: Hogarth P, 1961. Originally published 1930), p. 92.

²⁷⁸ Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living* (London, 1652), p. 80.

“hourly born, with sorrow infinite” (*PL* 2.795; 797), Medea and Heracles departing for the refuge of Athens having committed terrible atrocities, survive in the visionary poetics of Milton and Euripides as the inheritors of a darkling plain of human history. Through “resolution from despair” (*PL* 1.186-91) Satan consciously resolves to mitigate his pain and fallen status by diverting his full ambition to revenge on the professed enemy, much as Samson and Medea revert to their violent agon at the very moment catharsis is supposed to occur. Calm of mind is, as a result, an impossibility.

Hegel beautifully articulated a theory of tragedy with its universal fate as embodied in the single person of Socrates; it is a theory we might easily transport to the single person of Milton in the context of the English Civil War and the tragedy of an emergent republicanism, all the while remembering Euripides and his experience of defeat at the end of the Peloponnesian War:

In what is truly tragic there must be valid moral powers on both the sides which come into collision; this was so with Socrates. His is likewise not merely a personal, individually romantic lot; for we have in it the universally moral and tragic fate, the tragedy of Athens, the tragedy of Greece. . . . The Athenian people had come into a period of culture, in which this individual consciousness made itself independent of the universal spirit and became for itself. This was perceived by them in Socrates, but at the same time it was felt that it meant ruin, and thus they punished an element which was their own. The principle of Socrates is

hence not the transgression of one individual, for all were implicated; the crime was one that the spirit of the people committed against itself. . . .

This meant the disintegration of this people, whose mind and spirit consequently soon disappeared from the world, but yet out of its ashes a higher took its rise, for the world-spirit had raised itself into a higher consciousness.²⁷⁹

The Phoenix imagery at the end of *Samson Agonistes* intimates a time when history will emerge from the ashes of death and defeat, an emblem of desire for more abundant life fastened to the very heart of the drama; but for the present we are confronted with the old dispensation, with darkness and violence and attendant despair. Milton, like his predecessor Euripides, asks and probes these central historical questions, revealing in the process, in Hegel's terms, the crime "that the spirit of the people committed against itself," while demonstrating through an ancient form the urgent necessity of transcending a violent heroic code; that through our recognition of human degeneration, beautifully crystallized in Euripidean tragedy, we might comprehend and hence begin again, as the pilgrim Dante, "regenerate, even as new plants renewed with new foliage, pure and made apt for mounting the stars" (*Purg.* 33:140-42).

²⁷⁹ Hegel, *On Tragedy*, p 364.

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