INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI

University Microfilms International
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Order Number 9315500

"Samson Agonistes" and Renaissance drama

Samuels, Peggy Anne, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1993

Copyright ©1993 by Samuels, Peggy Anne. All rights reserved.

U·M·I
300 N. Zeeb Rd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

A

SAMSON AGONISTES AND RENAISSANCE DRAMA

by

PEGGY ANNE SAMUELS

A Dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1993

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

c 1993

PEGGY ANNE SAMUELS

All Rights Reserved

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

1/11/93 — Date

Richard C. McCoy — Chair of Examining Committee

1/12/93 — Date

Joseph Wittreich — Executive Officer

Professor Richard C. McCoy
Professor Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr.
Professor Martin Stevens

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank those scholars and friends who so generously gave of themselves during the long process of writing this dissertation. My heartfelt gratitude, first, to Rich McCoy whose combination of genuiness, compassion, and pragmatism continually drew me from the darker realms. Rich was gentle with correction, generous with his own learning, welcoming to my own, inventive, intelligent, and, above all, patient. I am especially grateful to Joe Wittreich who allowed me to find my own way and then responded to my work with acuity and tact, granting me the invaluable benefit of his breadth of knowledge and personal support. I look back fondly on my conversations with Angus Fletcher, whose discourse never ceases to enlighten and fascinate. I thank also Naomi Liebler and Marty Stevens for their advice and their confidence, which both energized and sustained me.

I grasp this opportunity to formally thank my parents Richard and Marlene Samuels whose love, example, support and teaching, on so many levels, made it possible for me to achieve whatever I have achieved. And, finally, I summon Lester Schwalb into the space of ritual gratitude; because, without him, not this nor I could be. To Les, Nate, and Ella, I raise my glass and toast our joy.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter 1
What's in the Seventeenth-Century Closet? 30

Chapter 2
Rest, Calm, Forgiveness?
Milton's Simulacrum of Tragicomedy 60

Chapter 3
Waiting and Striking: Samson's
Forebears in Renaissance Revenge Drama 108

Chapter 4
Resisting the Figure in the Blaze:
Milton Against Heroic Drama 153

Epilogue 198

List of Works Consulted 209

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Introduction

In tragedy, man can contemplate human intention and human action drowned in the surge of its own consequences. In this sense, the failure of the Puritan Revolution qualifies as tragedy. By their own actions, the Puritans set in motion a series of events that eventually overwhelmed them. The contemplation of that tragedy forced Milton to reevaluate the kind of action that God asks of man. As Aristotle says, "Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action" (27). In Renaissance drama, Milton found a repetoire of conceptions of human action against which he could delineate his own models. In the 1671 volume of Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes, he turned to these earlier dramas, drawing upon and revising them in order to transform his own audience's idea of action.

Milton's redefinition of action cannot be viewed as merely a Christianizing of a largely secular dramatic tradition. Renaissance drama had a latent but powerful residue of religious reference. An important part of that residue was the prevailing theorization of drama as the representation of God's judgment on men. The playwright mimicked God's own "authorship." He was a kind of God, shaping his world and orchestrating theatrical outcomes in accordance with a divinely ordained moral decorum. Writing a play provided an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

opportunity to demonstrate God's truth in a particularly overt and striking manner. Samson's action at the temple is read by the chorus as if it were this kind of Renaissance drama. However, Milton's own reticence about the status of Samson's inspiration, a refusal to portray the action from the point of view of God's ultimate judgment of Samson, constitutes a refusal to write tragedy as a dramatic, sudden, conclusive revelation of God's truth. This turn away from decisive climactic revelation must be read in the context of what "dramatic" had come to mean in the seventeenth century.[1]

Each of the genres considered in this study--closet, revenge, tragicomedy, and heroic--incorporates an implied definition of the "dramatic." Much has been lost by our

---

[1] The only documentary evidence for the date of composition of Samson Agonistes comes from the anonymous biographer (generally accepted to be Cyriak Skinner) who, in a list of other works, includes Samson Agonistes as having been begun early and finished late (see Darbishire, 29). The various attempts to date the play are so filled with unwarrantable assumptions as to be nearly unusable. Radzinowicz (387-407) has attacked some of the assumptions used by those who argue for an early date but added some of her own. William Riley Parker ("The Date of Samson Agonistes Again" in Calm of Mind, ed. Wittreich, 169-70) assumes that contradictions between Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes argue for substantially different times of composition. However, it is my belief that such contradictions between the works were calculated, meant to be attended to by readers, and argue either for a late date of composition for Samson, or, equally likely, a started early, finished late, sequence. Most intriguing, even if Milton wrote Samson Agonistes in the early 1640s, his decision to publish the tragedy with Paradise Regained in 1671 can entirely alter its meaning; that is, the pointed contrasts with the brief epic serve as a revisionary, critical retrospective on an earlier mythos of deliverance to which Milton had at one time been attracted. Whether Samson Agonistes was composed early or late, therefore, its time of publication stands as the relevant historical context in which it must be interpreted; the tragedy reflects upon and judges the past half-century of struggle from the point of view of the late 1660s. For a similar view of the retrospective nature of the 1671 volume, see Grose (6-7).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

failure to read Samson Agonistes inside the horizon of expectations for dramatic literature in the seventeenth century. All of Milton's works--with the notable exception of Samson Agonistes--have been read in the light of his recasting or dismantling the genres within which he is working. Readers of Milton have long known that he was tremendously conscious of generic pulls and that he used generic conventions as a springboard from which he could launch his own artistic inventions. To the extent that scholars have been attentive to such concerns in reading Samson Agonistes, it is largely to the context of ancient Greek rather than contemporary Renaissance drama that readers have turned.[2] This study seeks to correct that imbalance; that is, it attempts to place Samson Agonistes in the context of the theater of its own century. However, in tracking generic change, this study is not formalist. Rather, it attends to the ways in which genre encodes contemporary social concerns, for it is only by so doing that one can gauge the full implications of an author's transformation of a genre. Milton's critique of Renaissance drama serves a larger social purpose; namely, it critiques the seventeenth-century Puritans' desire for the dramatic revelation of God's purposes:

---

[2]John T. Shawcross (Paradise Regain'd, 100-15) attends to the question of genre, but he considers genre as defined universally rather than in a particularly seventeenth-century sense, (pp. 100-15). Sandra Kerman has suggested the possibility that Samson Agonistes should be read in light of Latin biblical drama, and Martin Mueller (193-212) has analyzed the relation of Samson Agonistes to some continental biblical dramas. However, these fruitful lines of inquiry must be set in the context of seventeenth-century England in order to understand their relevance to Milton.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

His partiality, His forgiveness, His assurance, and His completion of historical design.

Any consideration of the contemporary theatrical context should begin with other Renaissance attempts to rewrite classical drama. Renaissance translation, adaptation, and reinvention of classical drama already had a long history by the time Milton published Samson Agonistes, and one cannot possibly understand Milton's attempt by considering it a maverick performance. In Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience, Bruce Smith has shown that on the Renaissance stage, classical tragedies were turned into morality plays. The sixteenth-century stagings "hammered out ethical irregularities into dogmatic certainties" (215). Smith emphasizes that the ingredient of wonder, crucial to the Renaissance idea of tragedy, arose not only from the presence of passion, violence, splendid rhetoric, and dazzling spectacle but also from the expression of stern moral truth: "The 'wonder' in Jocasta resides not only in . . . spectacular stage effects but in the sure swift justice that governs the universe of the play" (218). It is to such an idea of drama, with its admiration for the spectacular unveiling of moral truth, that the chorus in Samson Agonistes appears to adhere. But it would be a mistake to read Milton's play as one with such a group of tragedies. Milton was heir to the further development of classical drama's interface with modern experience--that

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

which took place on the public stage and which, as Smith makes clear, did not simplify moral issues so drastically.

In addition, English closet drama provides an alternative site for the intersection of ancient scripts and modern experience, a site that did not fall within Smith's purview because the closet plays were not strictly translations or adaptations of classical scripts. In fact, the tradition of English Renaissance closet drama provides the context for the reception of classical drama most relevant to Samson Agonistes. The writers in this tradition, turning both toward classical drama and toward a reading audience, poised themselves against the values of contemporary productions on the public stages. The closet plays become, therefore, a special showcase in which one can observe experiments in alternative dramas. Those alternatives take shape by drawing on certain characteristics of classical drama and by pressing against certain characteristics of contemporary drama. Although these plays, like those that Smith examined, mold or domesticate classical drama to contemporary ideas of the theatrical experience, the writers of closet drama also seem to use classical drama as a tool to help them press against the contemporary forms. Like the writers of closet drama, in turning toward the classics Milton turns away from particular contemporary forms of drama, and we cannot understand his movement unless we judge it within that contemporary context.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

If we fail to do so, we are left in a marvelously entertaining but ultimately free-floating guessing game, one in which we match up the themes, structures, and concerns of various classical authors with Milton's concerns and wax eloquent about borrowings, imitations, and deletions. Without a contextual grounding, we can make up countless stories about Milton's relation to classical drama. Take, for example, a view of classical drama that sees redemption in that drama as the protagonist's return to his community after having made some kind of isolating, transformative passage.[3] Then, if one reads the ending of Samson Agonistes as the total isolation of Samson from a community which has failed to receive his message or his deliverance, one has come upon an almost unbelievably striking deviation from classical drama. The problem, of course, is that we have no way of knowing that Milton held such an idea about classical drama, nor does this reading of the end of Samson Agonistes arise from a reading of classical drama--rather it precedes it.

In contrast, a fully contextualized reading of Samson Agonistes would include an assessment of Milton's place among the Renaissance users of classical drama.[4] According

---

[3] I choose as my example this particular theory of classical drama because it is a frequent interpretation of two of the classical plays most often linked with Samson Agonistes: Sophocles's Oedipus at Colonus and Euripides's Heracles.

[4] Such an assessment places Milton in the context of Renaissance producers, translators, and rewriters of classical drama as a necessary adjunct to Margaret Arnold's research on the Renaissance editors of classical drama in "Graeci Christiani: Milton's Samson and the Renaissance Editors of Greek Tragedy," Milton Studies 18 (1983): 235-254.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to Bruce Smith, "in the hands of the earliest English producers, performance of Greek and Roman tragedy became a ritual in which indomitable individuals were ceremonially exorcised from the social order" (239). But the closet dramatists, instead, set up an arena in which the act of judging such a character itself falls under scrutiny. They used the classical chorus to present a community which judges a possibly heroic, possibly criminal figure, and they expected their readers to become self-conscious about the criteria of judgment used. They drew on classical drama's reluctance to stage scenes of violence not because they wanted to exclude the lurid and sensationalistic as such from their dramas but because they wanted to place the agents and motives of such spectacular displays of violence under scrutiny. To place Samson Agonistes in the context of such a tradition demands that we see the division in the critical community over the regeneration of Samson as typical of the response to a closet drama; that is, Milton's play fits into a tradition of drama which tries to elicit a metadiscourse about how we should judge an anomalous individual. More precisely, the closet drama tradition presses us to be suspicious of the spectacle at the end of Samson Agonistes, for closet dramas typically end with such a dramatic display but do so with the intention of interrogating the motives for spectacular demonstration.

Thus, writers of early seventeenth-century closet drama were working with a specific sense of the "dramatic." They slowed down the dramatic event of exorcising an individual so

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

that readers could see what lay underneath the sensation of "drama." Milton stands very much in line with such a tradition; his drama is a condemnation of all that the dramatic scene leaves out, what it covers over, fudges, blurs, treats in too facile a manner. His hostility to the dramatic does not derive from the components of what Jonas Barish has delineated as a typical seventeenth-century English anti-theatrical prejudice. Milton does not distrust change or movement and does not label the theatrical "lewd," "effeminate," "hypocritical," or tied to the "unbridled imagination" (Barish, chpts. 4 and 5). The closet dramatists eschewed the dramatic to the extent that it inhibited reflection about criteria of judgment and failed to detect the agency and motives behind spectacular demonstrations. Other seventeenth-century stage genres had other--equally specific--relations to the dramatic.

Seventeenth-century tragicomedy generated the "dramatic" by staging one or several spectacular moments of forgiveness and by the concomitant sudden revelation that suffering constituted part of a beneficent providential design. This genre, too, should be seen in the context of the Renaissance reception of classical drama:

> One of the first results of serious study of Latin tragedy was a widespread attempt to Christianize classical tragedy--or rather, to classicize Christian drama--by applying Seneca's florid diction, five-act structure, and sententious choruses to Biblical subjects. Leicester Bradner's checklist of extant neoLatin plays from all

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> over Renaissance Europe reveals that Joseph, so exemplary in turning every trial into stunning success, emerged during the course of the sixteenth century as the single most popular subject for dramatization.
> (Smith, 200).

Thus one of the dominant modes of the early Renaissance reception of classical tragedy was to remake tragedy into tragicomedy. Renaissance tragicomic form, in so far as it arose from classical drama, does not usually seem to have drawn upon Euripides's tragedies with "happy" endings (the Renaissance discussion of which came into being as an attempt to theorize the "new" genre of tragicomedy)[5] but rather resulted from a desire to reinterpret as providential the suffering found in tragedy. Furthermore, the Joseph story climactically presents not only the providentially orchestrated "success" of Joseph as worldly ruler in Egypt but more importantly the successful reconciliation of the brothers. Joseph can forgive his brothers when they show themselves capable of offering to sacrifice themselves for the youngest brother, Benjamin. God's redemption of these men was dependent upon their own forgiveness of each other.

In the vernacular tradition of tragicomedy this emphasis on mutual human forgiveness became a central component. The ultimate Christian tragicomedy, God's reversal of a sinner's tragic fall into reprobation, became the latent religious subject of Renaissance tragicomedy. The reversal,

---

[5] For allusions to Euripides's plays in Italian theories of tragicomedy, see Herrick, 70-72).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

however, typically arose as a result of the sinner's forgiveness of another character. This genre, therefore, had inscribed within it a certain formulation of redemption: divine forgiveness was dependent on mutual human forgiveness. Milton uses this model in Book 10 of Paradise Lost in which Adam and Eve's receipt of divine mercy must be preceded by their forgiveness of each other. Samson Agonistes--constructed as a simulacrum of tragicomic form--decisively breaks this pattern. By having Samson refuse to forgive Dalila (or forgive her only "at a distance," which in tragicomedy was always a formula for incomplete forgiveness and therefore incomplete redemption), Milton throws open to question whether or not God forgives Samson. Essentially Milton asks what it means for a conflict to be settled by means of a grand dramatic moment of forgiveness. He looks beneath the dramatic scene to examine, to slow down for intensive scrutiny, the conditions under which such a dramatic moment of forgiveness exists. Most Renaissance tragicomedies ask whether humans can forgive one another when evil is unintentional, or a "near-crime" (intended but never completed), or an illusion bred by misunderstanding; Milton asks whether humans can (or should) forgive one another when evil is a fact. Moreover, rather than asking "Can man who is subject to loss be redeemed?" he asks instead: "How can a man who consciously chooses to sin, and does sin, be redeemed?"

Another way to think about the different characterizations of the "dramatic" in seventeenth-century

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

theatrical genres is to consider the different genres as mechanisms for structuring different subjects of revelation. In attempting to recover Milton's relation to the seventeenth-century sense of the dramatic, I am asking what he considered to be the proper subject and mode of revelation. Closet dramatists concerned themselves with the dramatic revelation of power (of an individual, a priest, a king, or God). Read carefully, these dramas ask one to look beneath the apparent revelation to another one, more difficult of access; they ask their readers to see not power manifested but the mechanics of manifesting power. Milton follows the closet dramatists in this regard; in fact, he applies the same hermeneutics of suspicion to the kinds of revelations that are found in other contemporary genres. The dramatic revelation of Renaissance tragicomedy takes as its subject both the demonstration of God's purposive orchestration of events and the demonstration of personal assurance of divine forgiveness. Milton removes the conventional tragicomic signal for such demonstrations--the reconciliation of enemies--and thereby throws open to question the subject of the revelation.

Revenge dramas have a closely related subject of revelation, one concerned not so much with assurance of forgiveness as assurance of what Milton called "sonship." Revengers desire and orchestrate a highly dramatic revelation in order to establish their own status as godly agents. (It might seem that revengers plot a revelation of their enemies' guilt, but that guilt is usually well-established before the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

climactic scene.) In these dramas the suddenness of the revelation, its dramatic quality, takes on an overdetermined significance. The basic plot of a Senecan play, as Gordon Braden has written in his analysis of the Senecan tradition in Renaissance tragedy, "is that of inner passion which bursts upon and desolates an unexpecting and largely uncomprehending world" (39). English revenge dramas are typically constructed upon the tension between reading this suddenness as "rashness," a sign of rage, or reading it as divine impulsion, a sign of the revenger's acting as authorized agent of god. The revelation of the revenger's status concludes an ongoing conflict in the play, where a moral imperative to reform coexists with the difficulty of acting morally in carrying out that imperative. Immoral action is encoded as rage and rashness; the revenger/reformer must clear himself of the charge of wrathfulness in order to establish himself a Son of God.

In Samson Agonistes, Milton draws on the revenge tradition's concern with the conflict between morality of reformation and immorality of means. Milton does not cleanse his drama of such calculated tensions but uses the signal of "ranting" to include it. The revenge tradition presses us to consider questions about Samson's rage, rashness, and violence as central to the drama, in no way to be brushed aside as marginal to its main subject. Moreover, in using the revenge tradition as a context for reading Samson Agonistes, the basis of the contrast between the Son in Paradise Regained and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Samson shifts. The Son is the consummate one who waits, i.e. who does not precipitously, prematurely demand a revelation or demonstration of his own identity as Son of God. In contrast, Samson desires proof of God's partisanship to be immediately revealed. Milton writes his 1671 volume as contrasting answers to the questions: How should we go about demonstrating to ourselves and others that we are Sons of God? What should we take as proof?

Finally, seventeenth-century heroic plays were constructed on a sense of the dramatic that merely pointed to itself, to the quality of being dramatic, as the content of revelation. The Restoration heroic dramas took as their subject the climactic event, the grand, inflated, spectacular gesture which revealed the greatness of the hero. The basis of such a gesture constantly shifted--from grand act of vengeance or conquest, to grand act of forgiveness--but heroic action was always histrionic action; and admiration rose in direct proportion to the histrionic inflation of the protagonists' gestures and towering passions. Milton turns against the contemporary admiration for the dramatic and the hyperbolic. For Milton, any redefinition of heroic action had to consider the question of how one carried the presence of God into the world and thus was linked to humankind's imagination of godly presence. Samson Agonistes incorporates the hyperbolical hero, and his imagination of a hyperbolical God, only to repudiate that kind of hero and that image of God. Milton uses both the Son in Paradise Regained and various

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

hero/prophets in the Old Testament to illuminate Samson's debased heroism.

Milton undercuts the sense of "dramatic" in these genres--revenge, tragicomic, and heroic--because in each case the dramatic rests on a self-interested desire for immediate, conclusive resolution, demonstration, and deliverance. We can see in his demolition of these contemporary genres, in his refusal to accept their construction of the dramatic, a repudiation of the contemporary millenarianism that so hotly desired a conclusive resolution to the personal and political difficulties of the time. Here I disagree strongly with David Loewenstein who sees Milton as "fascinated . . . by the dramatic potential of iconoclasm, with all its turbulence, immediacy, and implications for social change (261; italics mine).[6] In all of his major poetic works--"On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," "Lycidas," Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained, Milton had written open-ended conclusions. Only in Samson Agonistes does the work apparently end with the flourish of dramatic conclusiveness. Such a significant departure from his standard practice should alert us to the possibility that we have been given a negative example and that we should read the ending against the grain.

---

[6] One reason for my disagreement is that Loewenstein tends to rely on Milton's statements in early prose works such as Of Reformation and Animadversions, but Milton's later views, many critics agree, considerably altered his belief in millenarianism. For an overview of Milton's changing views, see Radzinowicz (71-101; 116). See also, Kevin Gilmartin, "History and Reform in Milton's Readie and Easie Way," Milton Studies 24 (1987): 31.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

As Mary Ann Radzinowicz says, "Milton casts himself in the role of physician to the soul; the preface to the tragedy makes it clear that he intends Samson's educative experience to be curative to an audience" (Toward, 55). The question is, "What disease is being cured?" Is the play a renunciation of a kind of debilitating self-incrimination, as Radzinowicz sees it? Is it a renunciation of ties to the human community as Christopher Grose almost declares in his emphasis on Milton's turning against human tradition? Or is it a renunciation of a certain kind of desire for the great event, not only an attack on the wrong kind of hope as held by the "people" as Shawcross ("Irony," 302) believes, but an attack on Milton's own desire for the climactic revelation/resolution of the ultimate reformation? In the context of contemporary controversies about the means of completing the Reformation, there is much at stake in any turn against the dramatic.

In tracing Milton's response to the various seventeenth-century dramatic genres, it is useful to recall Howard Felperin's theorization of generic development. In Shakespearean Representation, Felperin argued that a writer can make a claim to greater verisimilitude by incorporating within his own drama earlier modes that seem crude, or full of artifice, by comparison. Just as in Hamlet Shakespeare uses the inset plays of the mousetrap, and of Pyrrhus's revenge, as contrasts to the mimetically richer texture of his own play, so Milton represents reality by including and surpassing earlier literary genres and conventions. Primarily situated in the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

tradition of English Renaissance closet drama--using closet drama's characteristic suspicion of the dramatic--Samson Agonistes incorporates, interrogates, and refines almost out of existence, the major genres of English Renaissance stage drama. He demolishes those genres by carefully interrogating the construction of the dramatic moment characteristic of each of them. Although Samson Agonistes does not end drama in the way that Paradise Lost finishes off the epic tradition, Milton's rational enquiry renders it almost impossible to write serious drama by casting suspicion on the human desire for the various contemporary forms of the dramatic.

Before launching into any specific discussion of the relation between Samson Agonistes and contemporary drama, it is necessary to address the concerns of those scholars who would argue that Milton was not interested in, or even familiar with, the native English drama.[7] Most recently, T.H. Howard-Hill has charged, "In a striking manifestation of cultural production, scholars in the early part of this century collaborated to construct a myth of Milton's affiliation with contemporary drama and its locus, the theater" (1). According to Howard-Hill, the case for Milton's attendance at theatrical

---

[7] To the corollary objection, that Samson Agonistes is not a drama, I follow Anthony Low's explanation in "Milton's Samson and the Stage, with Implications for Dating the Play" (Huntington Library Quarterly 40; 1977). Low argues that Milton's definition of "a dramatic poem might or might not be meant for the stage: the term is not distinguishing but inclusive" (313).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

performances is both unsubstantiated and unlikely.[8] Moreover, he argues, Milton's interest in, and knowledge of, contemporary drama was not extensive. In the course of countering the construction of the twentieth-century myth, however, Howard-Hill stretches the evidence with as much abandon as he has accused his opponents of doing. To maintain that drama was universally held in disrepute (in comparison with the classics, and especially with poetry) and that men of letters of Milton's time had little interest in their own vernacular literatures may sound as if Howard-Hill has cast off our own twentieth-century biased admiration for Elizabethan drama and recaptured the true alterity of seventeenth-century attitudes. But, on closer analysis, there are too many gaps in Howard-Hill's presentation of the evidence.

If Milton "like most of his scholarly contemporaries, was not very interested in any form of contemporary English literature" (Howard-Hill, 12) it seems most unlikely that he would have chosen to write in the vernacular at all. His poetry can hardly have been an attempt to reach across the centuries

---

[8] The question of whether or not Milton attended the theater is not really germane to my argument, which does not depend on his actually having seen the performances of contemporary plays. Certainly, Milton had the opportunity to see plays while at Christ's College, and he participated in the only theatrical performances the college was still holding during his tenure there. He did attend a theatrical/musical performance at the Casa Barberini while in Italy in 1639. Beyond this, there is no hard evidence for his having attended theatrical performances, nor is there evidence that he did not do so. It is intriguing but ultimately futile to speculate on whether or not Milton saw the revival of Hamlet in 1637. Certainly, a mind filled with the political concerns apparent in "Lycidas" would have been attentive to very different strains in Hamlet than the ones to which audiences in 1600 would have responded.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and reinvent classical poetry without a glance (however adversarial, however transformative) at the centuries of poetic endeavor between. In reviewing the range of poetic practice presented in the 1645 volume, it becomes clear that Milton was closely attentive to the varieties of vernacular poetry practiced by his contemporaries. "Lycidas" partly responds to the kind of poetry one finds in the English section of Justa Edovardo King naufrago; the texture and musicality and themes of "A Mask" bear a strong imitative relation to Fletcher's The Faithful Shepherdess; many of Milton's sonnets combine English and Italian forms; and, of course, in the Preface to Paradise Lost , Milton invokes "our own best English tragedies" to authorize his use of blank verse--hardly the gesture of someone uninterested in the native product.

When considering seventeenth-century attitudes specifically toward the vernacular theater, in addition to evidence which comes directly from Milton, we have the recent work of Margot Heinemann and Martin Butler who have discovered that the gamut of Puritan opinion regarding the theater was far more diverse than was previously thought. Far from being uniformly hostile to the theater, Puritans themselves used the theater to examine and criticize the theories and practices of contemporary government. In reexamining the evidence that led to the prevailing view of Puritan hostility to the theater, Heinemann and Butler found writers of Puritan poetry who wrote also for the theater, patrons of the drama who were leaders or aligned with leaders

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of the Puritan party, and audiences that included many with Puritan sentiments. In discussing the case for a reform-minded masque, David Norbrook cites the examples of Whitelocke, Milton and Weckherlin to show that there was no inherent incompatibility between Puritan sympathies and an interest in masques (106). These critics have given us a Seventeenth Century which can easily accommodate Milton the Puritan, reading, attending, and writing drama. In any case, "serious" literary activity by no means precluded an interest in either the vernacular or the dramatic.

The most accurate statement about Milton's relation to the drama must include his general admiration for drama--which he calls "doctrinal and exemplary to a nation" (CPW I: 815, 819-20). It is within the context of such general praise that we should notice how Milton's direct comments on contemporary drama all suggest a selective admiration for the theater of his own times. The possible exception occurs in the Apology (CPW I:888). But even here Milton directed his criticism of university drama against the indecorum of a particular kind of actor (ministers-to-be) participating in a particular kind of theatrical performance (more raucous than of serious intent). The passage in the Apology tells us more about the rhetorical occasion--in which Milton was defending himself against charges of licentiousness and libertinism--than it does about his attitude toward drama. With reason, Milton does not choose this occasion to defend the worthiness of drama but instead decides to exculpate himself from an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

approving spectatorship of a less than noble performance; that is, he discriminates between kinds of drama. Likewise, in "Il Penseroso," we find: "Or what (though rare) of later age,/ Ennobled hath the Buskind stage" (101-2; italics mine). Likewise, the previously quoted line in the preface to Paradise Lost spoke of the "best English tragedies" (italics mine). John Demaray's work on Milton's use of the Renaissance masque tradition shows the possible practical implications of such a selective admiration: Milton can use contemporary forms but alter them to his own purposes, culling the useful and true from what should be left behind.

More specifically, in regard to Milton's attitude toward Shakespeare, Howard-Hill invokes the aid of A. C. Labriola, who "has so effectively deconstructed the ricketty edifice [regarding Miltonic indebtedness to Shakespeare] put together mainly during the first half of this century" (12). Labriola's deconstruction, however, merely demolishes previous arguments based on parallel phrasing; it does not address the question of the larger structures, issues, and conceptions of drama that Milton shared with his contemporaries. If most scholars readily accept the close relation of Samson Agonistes to classical Greek drama despite Parker's inability to find more than a few verbal echoes, then we had best admit--as have most recent theorists of literary influence--that our sense of connection between works of art does not rest primarily on parallel phrasing. Some earlier editors of Milton, Todd and Newton in particular, annotated heavily with what

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

with what they thought were Shakespearean echoes. It is certainly true that these supposed echoes are difficult to prove when one presses them rigorously. On the other hand, to consider Milton's "On Shakespeare" a "derivative, formal and quite frigid tribute" (Howard-Hill,12) strikes me as a rather surprising reading of a poem that characterizes the Shakespearean line as "delphic" (i.e. the equivalent of prophetic and classical). Particularly in light of "anxiety of influence" theories, to be made into "Marble with too much conceaving" seems like a very profound response to Shakespeare on Milton's part. Furthermore, if one considers the magnitude of Shakespeare's reputation in the latter part of the century, any response to contemporary drama would necessarily also have been a response to Shakespeare. As Allardyce Nicoll writes, "Shakespeare's influence may be taken for granted: the record of productions, the innumerable references to his works and, paradoxically, the many stage adaptations of his plays amply testify to the esteem in which he was held" (92-3). Although he was anomalous in his artistic skill and thus created dramas which will always seem to have the status of singularity, Shakespeare shared with his contemporaries the use of many dramatic structuring devices for each genre and he worked with genres that encoded various cultural conflicts. Milton's response to Shakespeare can be found in his response to these generic conventions more than in the rare moments in which he more or less directly alludes to Shakespeare.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Thus, by examining Milton's relation to the contemporary dramatic tradition, it has also been possible to shed some light on the question of Milton's relation to Shakespeare. Both John Guillory and Paul Stevens have considered that relation primarily under the category of imagination, differing in the extent to which they view Milton as having renounced the faculty of imagination which they feel Shakespeare stood for in Milton's own mind. Guillory sees Milton caught in the crossfire between two strong desires: "the poetic fantasy is under repression in Milton because it means usurpation to him, the intervention of the human into the divinely originated process of mediation. At the same time this usurpation is very deeply desired, because it is the means by which every poet makes his origin, his place of beginning" (Poetic Authority, 21). However, there are other ways to look at Milton's attraction to and self-differentiation from Shakespeare, aside from the category of imagination. Shakespeare stands not only as the possessor of the most fertile imagination but also as the author with the most comprehensive sense of compassion. Milton, therefore, could counter the "presence" of Shakespeare by rewriting the genre of tragicomedy--which explicitly takes compassion as its subject. In Milton's reworking of the genre, Shakespeare appears too casual about the conditions for forgiveness, both human and divine. In addition, Shakespeare, as consummate dramatic artist, must have come to stand for just that--the supreme creator of the great dramatic scene (he shares this position with Beaumont and Fletcher in Dryden's

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"Of Dramatic Poesy," 41). In revising and refining Renaissance genres, Milton repudiated Shakespeare's sense of the dramatic, which involved what is striking in effect. Drama elicited "admiration" by orchestrating revelation. That the 1671 volume is involved in the redefinition of the dramatic can be immediately seen from the endings of both Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes: both protagonists "strike with amaze" those who behold them. The contrast between the brief epic and the tragedy distinguishes between the proper subjects and modes of admiration and revelation.

Everyone who works on Milton's late poetry eventually must grapple with the question of the relationship between the theological and poetic writings. In discussing this relationship, Anthony Low finds it unlikely that Milton would have created fictional worlds based on different laws than those he set down in De Doctrina Christiana ("Theology, Poetry, Truth," 97). Low's argument seems plausible; however, the poetry itself may be Milton's means of allowing doubts to enter that, from the other side of his mind, he may have wanted to settle definitively in a more strictly doctrinal work. Although De Doctrina Christiana includes statements which declare precise limits to human knowledge about certain subjects, a theological treatise by its very nature moves as close as possible to definitive statement. Anthony Low differentiates between poetic and theological discourse primarily by noticing the comparative reticence of the poetry,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

but Low seems to mean that the poetry is temporarily reticent only to come to rest in revelation by hindsight as one reaches the close of the works (98-101). In practice, however, such an attitude leads one to fill in the gaps of the poetic text, its many reticences, with the more accessible, clearly articulated, statements in De Doctrina Christiana. Such a method of interpretation impoverishes and flattens the poetic text, prematurely closing off debate. To settle interpretive problems by referring to De Doctrina Christiana treats Milton's Christianity as if it were for him something already known and merely to be presented rather than something to be progressively discovered.

It is not that De Doctrina should be relegated to the status of uselessness but that it should be used cautiously. A chief caution would have to be attention to the rhetorical nature of citation in the treatise. Mary Ann Radzinowicz would like to use De Doctrina to establish Milton's interpretation of particular biblical passages and stories (Toward, 258). But Milton uses citation in the course of proving specific arguments, not necessarily with a view to interpreting the story from which he has lifted the citation. For example, two of Milton's three citations of the Judges 13 annunciation scene occur in the context of proving that the Son is not of the same substance as the Father. Comments about the status of the angel in that context may or may not include Milton's fuller understanding of the biblical passage as a whole. The problem is that a quotation can be taken out of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

context to prove one argument, while ignoring the larger issues at stake in the passage. The same process occurs with citation of classical texts. Milton quotes Pylades in Euripides' Orestes to demonstrate the nature of true friendship (CPW 4:590); but does this culling out of a fine description of friendship mean that Milton read the Pylades/Orestes team as the beleaguered and ultimately innocent protagonists that they themselves claimed to be?

Mary Ann Radzinowicz does not allow for any gap between Milton's theology and poetry. She finds the ultimate grounding for her reading of Samson Agonistes in Milton's frequent echoes of the Psalms and the Book of Job (Toward, 210). Echoes, however, as the deconstructionists have taught us, have a tendency to slip out of relations of pure repetition. In grounding one's interpretation in the Bible, one must be careful not to oversimplify the Bible's own meaning. Mieke Bal, Joseph Wittreich (Interpreting) and, more recently, Henry McDonald have reopened the Judges text. They have identified those places where other readers, seventeenth-century biblical commentators and modern scholars, have suppressed the stresses and conflicts within the text; it is these very conflicts which are most relevant to Milton's own interpretation of the biblical story.

In contrast, Radzinowicz provides us with a very uncomplicated reading of Job which flattens out the difficulties of interpretation, creating a smoothly plotted developmental narrative that eliminates discrepant elements.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Likewise, Radzinowicz's case for the parallels between the Book of Psalms and Samson Agonistes tends to see a relation of pure doubling. But Hugh MacCallum (265-8) has made clear how incomplete this doubling is, how deficient in joy and love those psalmic echoes are. Even the portion of Samson Agonistes which Radzinowicz cites in order to establish the "very full psalmic texture" (Toward, 220) of the chorus's speeches sharply contrasts with the tone of humility in the psalm quoted as evidence. As in her reading of the biblical texts themselves, Radzinowicz's sense of a perfect complementarity between biblical texts and Samson Agonistes tends to ignore the features which would distinguish and disrupt such a similitude. In my own study of Samson Agonistes, although I have used De Doctrina in some places to support my argument, I have not used Milton's theological treatise as an arbiter of last resort to counteract what I feel the poetic text itself suggests. Likewise, I have not relied extensively on De Doctrina to supply Milton's supposed reading of the Bible but instead have tried to infer that reading from the poetry.

Lastly, there is one other recent study of the Renaissance reception of classical drama which provides a broad context for reading Milton's 1671 volume. In Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition, Gordon Braden attempts to understand the appeal of Senecan drama in the Renaissance. He lays out the "larger emotional and artistic

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

ambience" (66) which made Senecan drama alluring to the later age. Essentially, Braden analyzes the "rage that is the all-consuming subject of Senecan tragedy" and which seems to him to be "the voice of a style of autarkic selfhood distinctly characteristic of classical civilization" (2). According to Braden, Renaissance dramatists refashioned Senecan tragedy essentially by accommodating that rage and that autarkic self to the social demands of a far different community and the religious demands of a different deity.

Braden analyzes both Senecan tragedy and its Renaissance inheritors as the articulation of a complex interaction between rage and stoicism. He writes, "Senecan drama is a furor unleashed because the very force that was to restrain the world [Augustus] has become what it beheld: the emperor is mad" (8). The furor arises from circumstances that leave the individual without dignity, choice, or control. These same circumstances in Augustan and post-Augustan Rome also gave rise to further developments in stoicism. According to Braden, "Stoicism's central strength is its calculus of adaptation to unchangeable realities. Surrendering the world's goods, we find them false and learn how to want what we have instead of striving to have what we want" (17). But this is a philosophy which has "less to do with its announced themes of reason or virtue than a philosophy of the will, even of the omnipotence of the will" (20). "Stoic detachment is continuous and deeply involved with the most paralytic kind of anger" (29), an anger which has to do with one's inability to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

control the world outside the self. Braden writes: "Suicide is the natural fulfillment of the wise man's life, the point where his drive for control becomes totally and unsurpassably self-referential in a final triumph over the world outside. . . . The ultimate integrity is annihilation" (24).

There is a profound homology between the two historical ages of Augustan Rome and Restoration England. From Milton's perspective, that homology is not due to the usual interpretation, that is, that both ages had experienced an imperial restraint of chaotic forces. Rather, both ages had seen the establishment or institutionalization of violence itself. It is possible to see Milton's 1671 volume as a double response, a careful rearticulation of stoicism and anger, as these issues became a part of the heritage of contemporary theater. To the extent that the English tradition of both Herculean heroes and revengers is a metamorphosis of the Senecan interplay between stoicism and rage, Renaissance dramatists renegotiated the story of this rage by setting it in a more finely articulated social setting and by making it respond to Christian limits on the individual will.

"Christian culture generally enforces an acknowledgment of the self's accountability to standards and powers beyond its own willfulness; imitation of the classical often entails revision on just this point (Braden, 110). Milton extends this tradition, typically pushing it to its extremes. Simply by turning toward Greek drama in a context of classical imitation that was largely Senecan, Milton would have been turning

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

toward an increased attentiveness to both a social web of relations and a cosmic restraint on the individual will. Braden's theory about the underlying issues of the Senecan tradition, his description of the emotional and cultural conditions which make rage and stoicism alluring, provide a clue to the linkage of Milton's two works in the 1671 volume. In Paradise Regained, Milton creates a tranquility that is pointedly not stoical--it is not a turning away from the public toward a private realm which the individual can control, not a self-restraint that ultimately grants the individual complete power. Unlike stoicism, the Son's tranquility incorporates knowledge of and commitment to the world and a continuous and intricate balancing between the power of the self and the power of the Other, that is, of God. In Samson Agonistes, Milton presents the rage out of which the tranquility of the Son must come.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Chapter 1

What's in the Seventeenth-Century Closet?

By declaring that Samson Agonistes never was intended for the stage,[1] Milton explicitly invokes kinship with a Renaissance tradition: closet drama. Because of our knowledge that the theaters were closed during the Interregnum and because of a lingering critical bias that sees Milton as antagonistic to the theater,[2] we may tend to brush past Milton's stated intention without pausing to register sufficiently the implications of his choice. It is worthwhile, however, to determine the characteristics and the possibilities that a seventeenth-century English dramatist would have been likely to associate with the choice to write for the closet rather than for the stage.[3] The romantic

---

[1]Milton makes his explicit claim in the preface to Samson Agonistes: "Division into Act and Scene referring chiefly to the Stage (to which this work never was intended) is here omitted."

[2]Arguments for and against Milton's participation in the anti-theatrical prejudice have flourished. William Riley Parker, Milton, A Biography (Oxford, 1968; vol. 1, p. 218), Dame Helen Gardner, "Milton's Satan and the Theme of Damnation in Elizabethan Tragedy" (English Studies NS 1; 1948, pp. 46-66), and James Holly Hanford, "The Dramatic Element in Paradise Lost" (rprt. in John Milton, Poet and Humanist; Cleveland, 1966), have all argued that Milton was attracted to and influenced by the theater of his own century; A.C. Labriola, "Shakespeare" (A Milton Encyclopedia, ed. Wm. Hunter, et. al.; Lewisburg, PA, 1979) and T. Howard-Hill (paper presented at the Fourth International Milton Symposium, U. of B.C., Vancouver, 1991) have attempted to prove that it is the pro-theater prejudice and particularly the affection for Shakespeare of later centuries which leads to a misinterpretation of Milton's attitude. Those arguments that rely on the scarcity of specific verbal parallels of drama in Milton's poetry fail to consider his use of the larger generic characteristics of Renaissance drama (for these generic connections, see especially Ide, "On the Uses of Elizabethan Drama").

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

conception of closet drama as a transcendental or visionary form should not be applied to earlier writers without examination of the Renaissance context.[4] Likewise, the image of Renaissance closet dramatists as aristocrats composing for each other rather than for a "vulgar" audience must be fleshed out: who were these writers and what were their concerns?

In 1543 Giraldi Cinthio wrote, "Plots that are terrible because they end unhappily (if it appears the spirits of the spectators abhor them) can serve for closet dramas; those that end happily for the stage."[5] Cinthio's comment suggests that closet drama frees itself from the necessity of pleasing an audience, or, put another way, turns toward an audience that can stomach unpleasantness, unhappy endings, even terror. The closet dramas written in England by those writers associated with Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, confirm and extend

---

[3] An awareness of the existing tradition of closet drama provides a compelling alternative to Anthony Low's interpretation of the phrase "never intended for the stage." See "Milton's Samson and the Stage, with Implications for Dating the Play," Huntington Library Quarterly 40 (1977): 313-24.

[4] In the context of arguing against a transcendental view of Samson Agonistes, Arthur Barker,"Calm Regained Through Passion Spent: The Conclusions of the Miltonic Effort," pp. 3-48 in The Prison and the Pinnacle, ed. Balachandra Rajan (Toronto and Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 1973) relies on the romantic view of closet drama: "We see that it is a closet-drama, and we conclude that we are to read it in the isolation of our closets, as we think Milton wrote it in the blinded isolation of his closet, despairingly closing the door on all merely mundane and human relations, in favour of a transcendent spiritual and poetic relation to something immutably absolute" (35).

[5] *"Quelle terribili (se gli animi degli spettatori forse le abborriscono) possono essere delle scritture, queste de fin lieto delle rappresentazioni."* Discorso intorno al comporre de i romanze; delle commedie, e dell tragedie, etc. Venice, 1554, p. 34. The English translation in my text is by Allan H. Gilbert, Literary Criticism (Detroit, 1962), p. 256.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Cinthio's comment.[6] These writers clearly felt able to alter dramatic composition in ways that would not be acceptable to a popular audience. Their dramas tend to replace action by narrative, increase the use of lyricism, grant a vastly greater role to a chorus and a nuntius, and accommodate a more explicit and extended philosophical and moral discourse. These are some of the more apparent features of classical drama, and the fact that Samson Agonistes shares these characteristics may only indicate that both Milton and the writers in the Pembroke circle were attempting to reinvent classical drama. At the very least, though, one must consider Milton's turn toward classical drama not as a maverick performance but as part of the history of such attempts in the Renaissance. The classical translations written as closet dramas in the latter half of the sixteenth century in England, in conjunction with the plays written by the Pembroke circle, indicate that closet drama was considered to be the site first for translations of classical drama and then for modern experiments in classical form.[7]

---

[6]The writers associated with the Pembroke circle include: Mary Sidney, Fulke Greville, Samuel Daniel, Thomas Kyd (Cornelie, 1595), William Brandon, Elizabeth Cary, and William Alexander. The works of these writers have been studied by Alexander Witherspoon, The Influence of Robert Garnier on Elizabethan Drama (NY; Phaeton Press, 1968) and H.B. Charleton, intro., The Poetical Works of Sir William Alexander, eds. L.E. Kastner and H.B. Charleton (Edinburgh; Scottish Text Society, 1921).
[7]For a list of English plays classified as closet dramas, see Alfred Harbage, Annals of English Drama, 975-1700 (Philadelphia; U of Pennsylvania P, 1964) and Yoshiko Kawachi, Calendar of English Renaissance Drama, 1558-1642 (NY: Garland, 1986).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

In the context of previous closet dramas, some of the peculiarities of Samson Agonistes come to seem less peculiar. For example, the oddity of a work that wavers uneasily between poetry and drama may seem less odd if one considers the tendency of closet dramas, with their lyrical choruses and long speeches, to become dramatic poems. Choral songs appeared in every closet drama of the period, and some provide a precedent for Milton's combining the classical choral ode with the biblical psalm. In addition, the ruminative quality of Samson's speeches and the extended debates between the characters, bear a striking resemblance to many of the closet plays which represent men and women in the prolonged and detailed process of making a decision. Quite a few of the plays begin at what one might consider the end of the play, for example, at the point where Caesar has already triumphed over Antony and Cleopatra and all that remains is for the characters to review and judge the past and choose their final acts. These dramas distend the Elizabethan stage soliloquy, permitting the acts of reasoning to take up the entire space of the play.

With their extended soliloquies and dialogues that read like monologues, the main interest of these plays often seems to be watching men and women think. Jephthah deciding whether or not to sacrifice his daughter (Buchanan's Jephthes); a sultan deciding whether or not his son is a usurper (Greville's Mustapha); a usurper deciding whether or not to kill the King, his father (Greville's Alaham); Herod deciding

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

whether or not to kill John the Baptist (Buchanan's Baptistes); Cleopatra deciding whether or not to submit to Caesar (Daniel's Cleopatra); Mariam deciding whether or not to oppose her husband (Cary's Tragedy of Mariam); Abraham deciding whether or not to obey God's commandment to sacrifice Isaac (Sandys translation of Grotius's Christus Patiens): these are some of the plots of the closet plays by writers of the Pembroke circle or those associated with them. Freed from the necessity of providing spectacle and certain kinds of dramatic tension, the writers of closet drama could concentrate on presenting a character's corrupted, flawed or right reason which leads him toward or away from sin.[8] In these terms, English Renaissance closet drama extends Cinthio's description by presenting drama that is unpleasing because it demands difficult listening: it requires an ear open to extended passages of lyric and a mind willing to distinguish between the relative merits of various paths of reasoning.

Two corollary effects of this emphasis on reasoning can be observed in Samson Agonistes. The beginning of Milton's drama emphasizes the entry into a mental space. We are gently lowered into a realm of turbulent contemplation as Samson remarks, "Retiring from the popular noise, I seek/ this unfrequented place to find some ease;/ Ease to the body some, none to the mind/ From restless thoughts" (16-19). The image

[8]By looking at the tradition of closet drama, then, the "distinctive" characteristics of Samson Agonistes noticed by Mary Anne Radzinowicz in "The Distinctive Tragedy of Samson Agonistes" (Milton Studies 17, 1983) come to seem less idiosyncratic.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of Samson as "a moving Grave" still subject to "restless thoughts" seems to be an intensification of the stance of the heroes and heroines of the closet plays. Daniel's Cleopatra comes closest to this image of Samson. Cleopatra, trapped inside her monument, reasons about her past actions and future course. With its figure of the great queen physically imprisoned but wide-ranging and bold in her thoughts, the play is in a very real sense about the freedom of thought in a condition of slavery. Because closet drama is usually severely limited in action while full in its representation of thought, the strongest image one receives from these plays is of a static figure flinging him or herself about in mental anguish--exactly the literal figure of an imprisoned, anguished Samson. With this emphasis on mental struggle, the ubiquitous tragic image of the plot as an ever-tightening net--originating in Agamemnon--becomes, in closet drama, an image of an ever tightening net of thought. Greville's Solyman, a king who must decide whether or not his son is attempting to take his crown, expresses quite clearly the sense that his own thoughts comprise his doom: "His netts are layd: our thoughts for stales pitch'd downe,/ To catch our selves in, and in us, the crowne" (Mustapha, 307). In Samson Agonistes, such an emphasis on reasoning as action transforms thought into the actual mechanism of the plot and inhibits our acceptance of the chorus's description of Samson's downfall as, "tangl'd in the fold/Of dire necessity" (1665). Instead, the play has

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

presented Samson tangled in the fold of a specific course of thought, a course which has led him to his own death.

The presentation of the hero as an imprisoned thinker who is self-captured in his own net of thought has the effect of intensifying the personal quality of the voice. Critics have been understandably tempted to see in Philotas and Mustapha not only the record of Essex's but also Daniel's and Greville's struggles with Elizabeth and Cecil. Likewise, one can hardly avoid thinking that Cary was representing the undocumented difficulties of her own marriage to a much older man of a different religion from herself. It is difficult, too, to resist hearing Buchanan's personal voice in Baptistes when one remembers his suffering from misjudgment and calumny under Scottish, French, and Portuguese authorities. Many readers of Samson have remarked upon the curious sense in which one seems to hear the sound of Milton's thinking inwrought in Samson's voice.[9] In fact this characteristic is a traditional feature of closet drama. Partly because of the juxtaposition of individual monologue and choral response, partly because closet dramas (as we shall see) treat the central, deeply problematic issues of the society in an audacious manner, and partly because the texts are meant to be read rather than publicly performed, they often feel as though they are pulling us into a more personal realm than that which we encounter in stage drama.

---

[9] See, for example, Angus Fletcher, The Transcendental Masque (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1972), p. 192.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

But, beyond the freer hand to create a more poetic, a more personal, and a more intellectual discourse, what would a writer have imagined himself as gaining permission to do when he chose to write for the closet rather than for the stage? Here, a remark that Una Ellis-Fermor made when speaking of Fulke Greville may give us some assistance: "He was able to make explicit the profound intellectual conflicts latent in the theater of his day" (199). Now, it is well known that censorship of Elizabethan drama restricted its explicit entrance into questions of religious controversy or matters of state that were considered to be the exclusive realm of the magistrate, not to be dabbled in by those "incapable" of such high matter.[10] But closet dramas which were not meant to be staged could to a certain limited extent escape such strictures. I emphasize "limited" because if, as I believe, what was latent in Elizabethan drama appeared in a less veiled manner in closet drama, fear of reprisal remained strongly felt. Greville burned his closet play on Antony and Cleopatra for fear of its touching too nearly the fall of Essex, and he did not print Mustapha without making significant cuts from the manuscript version of the play. Samuel Daniel was forced to appear before the Privy Council concerning Philotas, and his "Letter to the Prince" and "Apology" (both framing the text) demonstrate his trepidation about having crossed over the

---

[10]See Annabel Patterson, Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Reading and Writing in Early Modern England (Madison, Wisc.: U of Wisconsin P, 1984).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

boundary of permitted speech. Nevertheless, closet drama allowed an author to indulge in a discourse that had a less muted political content than would have been permissible on the stage.

A political content closer to the surface sometimes meant a closer correspondence to contemporary events, as in Richard Brathwaite's Mercurius Britannicus (1641), a fantasized revenge in the form of a parliamentary trial and punishment of those judges implicated in the Ship Money case. But most closet dramas employed figures distant in time or space from the present, using them to step indirectly but deeply into the most sensitive of contemporary controversies. In The Tragedy of Mariam Elizabeth Cary orchestrates a complex opposition between freedom of conscience and wifely duty. She wrangles with the highly charged issues surrounding a woman's transgression against her husband by witholding-- or offering too much of-- her thought, speech, and body.[11] Samuel Daniel treats the matter of Essex's rise and fall in his Philotas. As Richard C. McCoy has shown in The Rites of Knighthood, the Essex debacle touched on a dilemma close to the hearts of many aristocrats, as they found their individual honors disparaged by the needs of a national state as defined by Elizabeth and Cecil. Far from providing a harbor for musings on the transcendent, Cary's and Daniel's closet plays grapple

[11]For a comprehensive analysis of Cary's treatment of extremely sensitive controversial matters, see Margaret Ferguson, "The Spectre of Resistance" in Staging the Renaissance, eds. David Kastan and James Shapiro (NY and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 235-50.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

with the most worldy of concerns--how does an individual negotiate his/her own way in the face of immensely constraining communal demands and judgments?

Albert Tricomi has described the Pembroke circle's closet dramas as anti-court, oppositional drama (63-71). I would add to his analysis an emphasis on the sheer audacity of these dramas. In Mustapha, Greville gives to the messenger and the chorus lines that, in their outspokenness, are unequalled by any on the Renaissance stage. In 1681, Richard Baxter wrote of Greville's closet plays: "There are no books that have been Printed these twenty years, that I more wonder at (that ever they were endured) than . . . these poems" (quoted in Bullough, 27). The chorus of Bashas considers "honor" to be "a bewitching bait which ultimately entraps liberty"; laws are "nets" which the people themselves weave "to catch their freedomes in"; "conscience" is controlled by doctrines molded "large, strict, mild, severe;/ As Power intends to stirre up hope or feare" (315). With surprising clarity, the play announces that those ideals about which men feel passionately--honor, law, conscience--are the "instruments" by which those in power, priests or magistrates, accomplish their own purposes. The last lines of the play, which earned Greville the name of "skeptic" (Croll, 41), reveal that even God will not escape this critique of ideology. The priests confess:

> We that are bound by vowes, and by promotion
> . . . to preach beleefe in God and stirre devotion,
> To preach of Heaven's wonders and delights:
> Yet when each of us in his owne heart lookes,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

He findes the God there, farre unlike his bookes.
(Mustapha, 417)

Mustapha is far more than an anti-tyrant play which might serve merely as a mirror for magistrates; it sows distrust of, and opens to scrutiny, some of the most cherished ideals in the Renaissance. It seems that some writers, having chosen to treat subjects which were likely to graze against the raw nerves of the contemporary audience, and doing so under conditions of censorship, chose the comparative freedom of the closet. Samson Agonistes, too, by treating figures distant from the present and from England, involves itself in the most sensitive questions of the 1660s: unforced compliance with a tyrannical overlord; reconciliation with former enemies; responsibility for failure; the means of imagining a rebirth of the self and a reconfirmation of covenant; and, most controversially, questions about the proper mode of imagining and demonstrating the presence and partiality of God.

Although there is no clear evidence that Milton read the English closet dramas, it is entirely possible that he did so. Greville's closet plays were published in 1633, and there may have been renewed interest in these plays during the interregnum when his Life of the Renowned Sr. Philip Sidney was published (1652) and when there were some false ascriptions to him of vituperative treatises attacking James's ministry (Tricomi, 60). Continued interest in Daniel's Philotas is shown by its having been five times reprinted between 1604

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and 1623. In addition to any continued reading of Daniel's and Greville's plays, when attempting to construct a sense of audience expectation with regard to closet dramas, one must consider trends later in the century as well. Immediately preceding and during the Commonwealth years, political dialogues and pamphlet plays (mostly Puritan before 1642 and mostly royalist afterwards) began to appear as closet dramas. This later development of the genre must have heightened the sense of closet drama as a site for an oppositional voice.

In fact, closet drama takes as its subject, the oppositional voice: the individual who sets himself at odds with his community because his values are more extreme than that community's. In closet drama, it is the individual's integrity, honor, truthfulness that are at issue; his refusal to compromise with society and to live by standards other than his own. Daniel's Cleopatra says, "I must not be, unless I be mine owne" (1.1.73); his Philotas opens with the hero's refusal to "make thy self lesse Philotas then thou art" (1.1.1). Closet drama is concerned with how to judge these possibly heroic, possibly criminal (and therefore self-deceived) figures. One can see a link to stage tragedy here, of course, because all tragedy may be said to present a marginal figure, both higher and lower, than his or her peers. However, closet drama focuses on the terms of judging rather than on a dramatic representation of the story.

Partly, this focus on the terms of judgment is achieved by the use of a chorus. By looking at these closet dramas we

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

can see Samson Agonistes in the context of other Renaissance attempts to revive the use of the classical chorus, and that tradition shows us Renaissance dramatists using the chorus to interrogate both the prevailing communal judgments of the times and the judgments of a particular, strong individual. Greville tends to give the voice of audacity to his choruses or to messengers, pulling what might be conventionally interpreted material towards a more radical point of view. In contrast, Samuel Daniel allows his characters to voice thoughts and desires which are far more audacious than the chorus's summary acknowledges. The choral commentary on Cleopatra's downfall, for example, runs along a well-worn track: the torment of conscience; the errant, restless, ultimately unsatisfying path of desire; greatness's vulnerability to defeat as a punishment for riotousness and looseness. In other words, the chorus hands us the conventional moral explanations for the fall of a great woman and a powerful state. Yet, Cleopatra's speeches can hardly be contained by such a commentary. While the chorus describes her penitence, she moves through a process of inner turmoil that brings her finally to a declaration of continuing love. And while the chorus describes her search for honor as a mistaken desire, Daniel reveals, partly through the use of foil characters, that her struggle to maintain her honor is what makes her admirable. Whether, as in Greville, the chorus radicalizes the action of the play or, as in Daniel, highlights the audacity of the characters by providing a contrast of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

conventional, limited analysis, the frisson between choral commentary and characters' speeches works as a method of mutual interrogation. We shuttle between the characters' and the communal acts of reasoning; and as we register the dissonances, we cannot reconcile them without examining our criteria for judging. Although the form of these dramas, with choral speeches usually appearing only at the end of each Act, follows Senecan convention, the sophistication with which these writers use the chorus, while not nearly approaching Greek excellence, resembles Greek use. The Senecan chorus did little more than establish mood, primarily registering horror and loss; the Renaissance closet drama's chorus, like the Greek, served as a double-edged tool of inquiry, probing the individual's and the collective's standards for judgment.[12] It is especially appropriate, then, that Milton, at a time when--to judge from The Readie and Easie Way--he must have felt acutely the dissonance of individual and communal judgment, chose to publish a drama in Greek form using a chorus.

The most significant element of dramatic structure in a closet play, therefore, sets communal and individual judgment at odds and examines them both. Furthermore, these plays frequently do so without pronouncing any definitive verdict on the protagonist. What is peculiar about both Greville's and Daniel's closet dramas is that in constructing a scene of

---

[12] For an alternative view of the use of the chorus in Renaissance closet drama, see Laurence Michel, The Tragedy of Philotas (1949, Yale UP; rprt. Archon Books, 1970) intro., p. 21.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

judgment for their protagonists, both authors retreat from conclusiveness, ending on notes of ambiguity barely tolerable to a modern audience. In spite of our sympathy for the "Essex" figure, that is, Philotas, he is reported by the chorus as having buckled under torture and cravenly confessed his own guiltiness. We simply do not know whether or not Daniel considered him guilty. Similarly, in Mustapha, the people "remember their own force"; i.e., they seem to have seen through the mystification of obedience that the play all along has urged them to tear down, but Greville retreats from condoning their action, and again we simply cannot know how he ultimately stands on the issue.[13] Was he afraid of his own radicalism as David Norbrook believes (159), or was he presenting what Joel Altman calls "sophistic drama" (drama that does not come to a conclusion but presents a controversy from various points of view)?[14] In any case, when we consider Milton's choice of genre, we should consider it a choice not only of dramatic form, which presents conflicting views and forces without an authoritative voice to pronounce a

---

[13]Although far from establishing any direct influence on Milton, it is worth noting that Greville records this ambiguity by using an image of Samson: "Nor will they more by faith,/ or zeale, in warre be led/ To sacrifice their lives to Power,/ for fame when they be dead./ Or, to shunne mortall paines,/ provoke the Infinite;/ Wrong in man's nature stirring sparks,/ that give both heat and light,/ To gather in againe those strengths/ they gave away;/ And so plucke downe that Sampson's post/ on which our Sultans stay" (398). The irresolution with which Greville's play ends is compactly presented in this reference to Samson: the people righteously tear down the support of an evil monarchy but in so doing wreak destruction on their own selves.
[14]See Joel Altman, The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama (Berkeley, 1978).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

conclusive answer, but also a choice specifically of closet drama, in which quite frequently the protagonist, set on trial, receives no definitive verdict. In other words, the closet drama tradition would lead us to expect an ending which opens rather than closes critical controversy about the protagonist.

While drawing attention to such a characteristic of closet drama will not of itself help to determine one way or another the critical controversies surrounding Samson Agonistes, awareness of such a tradition should make us more comfortable with the fact that such sharply divergent, polarized verdicts have bedeviled Samson criticism. The metadiscourse that readings of Samson Agonistes inevitably enter--what terms should we use to judge an individual's claim to inspiration, for example--seem native to the tradition of closet drama. The plays propel their readers to this level of metadiscourse. One cannot ask, "Is Cleopatra honorable?" but only "What constitutes true honor?" One cannot ask, "Was Philotas ambitious?" but only "What is the proper limit of personal ambition?" It is possible that Milton's choice to "ambiguate" the moment of Samson's inspiration at the temple[15] (and his word choice in the Preface indicating only that Samson was "inwardly persuaded that this was of God") should be seen in this light, as a characteristic strategy of closet drama. As in Samson Agonistes, the endings of the English closet plays violently throw us back toward the text

[15]This point has been made in full by Stanley Fish in "Spectacle and Evidence," Critical Inquiry 15 (1989): 556-86.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

we have already read, asking us to search for the solution to our problems of interpretation in the material we have already passed. We cannot depend on the chorus to settle our difficulties, for as in other closet plays, in Samson, the chorus does not resolve but rather focuses ambiguity. The chorus's comments on fate, God's justice, patience, Samson's heroism, blame, pardon, calm, and many other such issues serve not so much as pronouncements but as invitations to interrogate the chorus's and Samson's criteria of judgment, indicators of sensitive points that are "in play."

ii

Until this point I have merely used the tradition of closet drama to set up a context in which certain characteristics of Samson Agonistes appear expected rather than peculiar. The wavering between drama and poem, the presence of a chorus, the emphasis on deliberation rather than action, the audacious entry into sensitive, controversial, contemporary issues, the spectral presence of the personal voice of the author, the conflict between communal and individual judgment, the pressure on the reader to enter a metadiscourse about the criteria of judgment used, the thrown-back motion with which the play ends, returning the reader into the text to "decide" about the protagonist--these characteristics are common to English Renaissance closet plays and Samson Agonistes. One could describe these features of the closet drama tradition as

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

falling under the heading of "anti-dramatic." The foregoing section provides some idea of the advantages a writer would have accumulated by refusing the stage. Milton's play may be considered anti-dramatic along these same lines. However, there is one further anti-dramatic feature of closet drama which would allow us not only to see Samson Agonistes as a participant in a particular generic context but also would press us toward a specific interpretation. Closet plays partly manifest their anti-dramatic nature by being deeply suspicious of the spectacular scene. They tend to set up and simultaneously undermine spectacular demonstrations, providing too much background about the agents and motives that stand behind the spectacle.

To investigate this aspect of closet drama, I would like to turn to the final group of plays that were considered to be closet dramas in England. Plays with a biblical subject written in classical form and performed in schools on the continent, such as Beza's Abraham Sacrifiant, Grotius's Christ Suffering, and Buchanan's plays on John the Baptist and Jephthah, seem to have been thought of as closet dramas by Englishmen.[16] Buchanan, admired by Milton as a poet,[17] has

---

[16]In Playes Confuted in Five Actions, Stephen Gosson writes: "So Naciancen and Bucchanan perceiving the corruption of the Gentiles . . . penned these bookes in numbers with interloquutions dialogue wise, as Plato and Tullie did their Philosophy, to be reade, not be played . . . . " (quoted in Lily Campbell, Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England (Berkeley, 1959), 244. Martin Mueller (Children of Oedipus; Toronto UP, 1980) sees Samson Agonistes in a line of scriptural tragedy established by Buchanan's Jephthes. I would concur with this view, only adding that, as some continental biblical plays in classical form were taken into England, they became part of the closet

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

been considered to be an unusual instance of a Renaissance dramatist turning towards the Greeks as a model rather than towards Seneca, thereby linking him with Milton's turn in the same direction. In addition, Buchanan has an especially strong connection to English closet drama; he was read, cited, and admired by the Pembroke circle of writers, some of whom were his correspondents, friends, and literary agents.[18] This connection resurfaces in 1637, when Falkland, in his preface to Sandys's translation of Grotius's Christ Suffering, refers to Sandys as "our English Buchanan." In all probability, Milton would have come across Buchanan's plays. Buchanan was traditionally used as a schooltext in England, and Jephthes was attached to the edition of Buchanan's psalm translations printed in England. In addition, Buchanan's Baptistes was translated into English under the title of Tyrannical Government Anatomized in 1643. While the attribution of this translation to Milton is probably false, the translation itself still proves that the play was read in mid-seventeenth-century England and that it was read as an allegory about a reformer.[19]

---

drama tradition and so must be seen from that perspective as well. Sandra Kerman has previously argued for the need for further study of Buchanan in regard to Samson Agonistes in "George Buchanan and the Genre of Samson Agonistes." Language and Style 19.1 (1986): 21-25.

[17] See "The Second Defense of the People of England," CPW 4.592.

[18] See James E. Phillips, "George Buchanan and the Sidney Circle," Huntington Library Quarterly 12 (1948): 23-55.

[19] For an account of the seventeenth-century English translation and Francis Peck's eighteenth-century attribution of that translation to Milton, see Steven Berkowitz, "A Critical Edition of Buchanan's Baptistes Sive Calumnia and the anonymous English translation Tyrannical Government Anatomized" (Diss., Harvard U, 1986). Peck wrote his notes while under the impression that the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Both Buchanan's and Grotius's plays may have interested Milton because they treated the traditional issue of closet drama--an individual who seems to be the voice of "truth" set apart from and judged by his community--in terms not only of the individual's honor but in terms of his godliness. As many closet dramas tended to do, these biblical dramas performed a kind of translatio, carrying an ancient subject into the modern era, working a complex accommodation of classical form and subject to a contemporary context. As Buchanan's prologue states: "In many ages past transacted therefore ancient. But in late memory revived so new." The seventeenth-century English translation clearly considers John the Baptist to be a godly reformer wrongly judged by his community's figures of authority. Buchanan, like Milton, revived an old story in order to provide insight into contemporary experience.

One of the figures that closet plays decided to "translate" was the man dedicated to God--Bacchus, John the Baptist, Christ--set in the context of a profane society. Grotius's Christ Suffering "translates" the story of Euripides' Bacchus to the time of Christ, and leads the reader to "translate" the time of Christ to the seventeenth century. Jesus, called an "innovator, who abolishes old rights," is clearly a holy reformer and much of the play is concerned with the process of judging him to be either a sinner or a son of god.

---

play was an original composition by Milton, and the notes provide an interesting and detailed attempt to read the play as an allegory of seventeenth-century English politics. Peck's notes can be found in his New Memoirs of the Life and Poetical Works of Mr. John Milton (London, 1740).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Buchanan's play covers the same territory, and he focuses even more forcefully on the arguments for judging such a figure, declining to take the opportunity for lyrical bewailment as far as Grotius had.

Baptistes bears a striking resemblance to Samson Agonistes.[20] The play concerns the proper course of action to be taken while the Jewish nation is in distress, enslaved by another nation and a tyrannous king. The debate is focused by the need to determine the moral status of John the Baptist, who is thought by some to be a deliverer and by others a reprobate. Like Samson, the Baptist has transgressed religious law and, in terms of the play's argument, can only be exonerated if he is being "taught by the spirit of God." He is asked: "By what miracle Provest thou th'authority which thus thou claimest?" (Buchanan, 151). And like Samson, he is accused of prolonging rebellion: "You do not allow our rebellious nation to be at peace, and as if we had not borne sufficient calamities you seek in lunatic fashion to challenge Roman arms again" (Buchanan, 143). The chorus attempts to convince the Baptist to relent and sue for Herod's mercy, but,

---

20 One of the most interesting phrasal echoes of Buchanan's play in Samson Agonistes concerns the hyaena. Buchanan characterizes the "deceiving sport of the Egyptian hyenae" (141) as a fantasm of men's minds. The chorus says, "O, if only some contriver could remove the clouds of man's countenance, and permit us to gaze on the naked cares of the heart, exposing the dark sanctum of the mind hidden deep within, then you would see dwelling in that tiny cavern monsters of varied and wondrous shapes, greater in number than those which Nile and Ganges bred in distant lands . . . (140-1). It is intriguing to think that Milton took up Buchanan's challenge to be that "contriver" and created his characters, as Christopher Grose has argued, as aspects of his protagonist's own mind.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

like Samson, the Baptist responds by explaining that he must put God's commands above man's. Aside from these similarities, parallels to Samson Agonistes include a chorus of Jews, choral odes with a strong imagistic sequence concerned with darkness and light, choral pleas for another act of God resembling the miracles of old, a prophecy of the destruction of the buildings and farms of the city, and the use of a nuntius to recount the Baptist's death.

Baptistes--like all of the closet plays I have mentioned so far including Samson Agonistes--concludes with an act of violence that is meant to demonstrate either royal, priestly, or godly power. In Baptistes, Herod feels that it is necessary to re-demonstrate the extent of his kingly power to people who have begun to unnerve him with their signs of unrest. As Herod's wife states: "It is vital to establish by a great and fresh precedent that the kingship is sacrosanct before men" (Buchanan, 161). The Pharisee most opposed to the Baptist gives a reason for killing him that resembles the secular reason given by Herod's wife. This Pharisee intends to "repress the enemy, console the good, strengthen the doubtful, deter the shameless, and fortify our ancestral laws by this bloodshed" (138). In this statement the Pharisee begins by speaking vaguely of the "enemy," a term that could refer to an enemy of the king, an enemy of the Jews, an enemy of the priestly class, or an enemy of God. Such a conflation of terms allows the real motive behind the murder of the Baptist to remain concealed. However, the Pharisee's interpretation of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the definitive demonstration that he is planning--and that the king finally agrees to perform--has already been placed in doubt by Buchanan. Here are two of the Pharisees arguing about what to do with the Baptist:

> Gamaliel: Cruelty is foreign to our rank.
>
> Malchus: Whatever is offered to God is holy and pious.
>
> Gamaliel: It is an impious piety to consign the innocent to death.
>
> Malchus: Do you call him innocent when he overturns our whole world? (Buchanan, 138)

Malchus's willingness to kill an innocent man in order to demonstrate and reinforce the power of his position marks him as a tyrant. Suitable for a play written by a Protestant reformer, Buchanan gives the audience responsibility for differentiating between priestly and godly authority. He expects his reader to reinterpret the demonstration's lesson, removing it from the authority of priestly interpretation and seeing it instead as God would judge the demonstration.

Tyrant plays, and many closet plays, thematized the king's use of spectacle, dazzlement and amazement to consolidate and reinforce his power. The temptation to secure one's position and reestablish one's authority by an act of violence would be conventionally seen as just that--a temptation, one that a good king would resist and to which a tyrant would succumb. In Daniels' closet plays, Cleopatra fights against being used in such a spectacle, and in Philotas Alexander kills Philotas partly to stage his own power. The

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

entire spectacle of Philotas's trial, in which he is scorned in terms that directly contradict information the reader has already been privy to, undermines any faith the reader can have in that spectacle. In both of his original plays, Jephthes and Baptistes, Buchanan creates a conflation between the staging of royal, priestly, and godly authority. The grand, dramatic spectacles that end these plays cannot be taken at face value but demand that the reader carefully investigate the motives of those who are staging the demonstrations.

Buchanan's plays are largely an examination of forms of judgment and censure and what might be the proper and improper ways of judging a man. In fact, the full title of the play Baptistes Sive Calumnia emphasizes that the play's subject is as much about communal judgment as about the Baptist. Milton's closet play treats a similar figure in a similar manner, placing a man who has a special relationship to the divine in the midst of a group of people who attempt to judge him. Milton's play, however, turns this Bacchic plot inward, giving us the unrelenting examination of the man himself in his attempt to determine his own relation to the divine.[21] The question becomes not only how may the group determine whether a man is inspired by God, but also, how may

---

[21]Buchanan's description of the Baptist plays on this Bacchic allusion: "Dwellling alone in the lonely crannies of the unfrequented countryside, he has beguiled the simple folk with the appearance of stern sanctity. With his shaggy hair, his frame covered with skins, his diet of wild game and deceits of that kind, he has attracted the attention of all" (135). Bacchic qualities can be seen in Samson's uncut hair, his association with sexual desire, his imprisonment and "fantastic" release from prison, and the terror he brings down upon those who do not believe in him or his God.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the man himself determine his having been touched by the Spirit of God. John the Baptist and Christ are figures of "guileless Truth," speaking truth with a wondrous clarity to a profane audience. Milton chooses as his subject, not the clear godliness of Christ or John the Baptist, but the far more ambiguous godliness of Samson. In this respect, Milton follows more closely the English tradition which, as we have seen, works with a more ambiguous and controversial protagonist. The difficulty of self-judgment also comprises the central subject, and central interpretive difficulty, of Buchanan's Jephthes and may have provided an even more instructive model for Milton.

In Jephthes, Buchanan molds a figure who truly believes that his act of violence demonstrates both the power of God and his own godliness. Jephthah believes that, by sacrificing his daughter, he will have sealed his relationship to God as having been His deliverer. When told by his wife that "vows that are wicked are not welcome to God," Jephthah responds, "My victory attests that mine was welcome" (Buchanan, 88). The Priest has earlier argued against Jephthah:

> You have no excuse here by which you can defend your deed. He 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. (Buchanan, 83)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Although the reader may be swayed more by the Priest's arguments than Jephthah's, Buchanan does not allow any secure resolution of this debate. Jephthah's own daughter calls the sacrifice a "necessity" (90) and the crowd that watches the spectacle of her death poignantly glorifies her death. As the messenger reports: "She diverted and drew the eyes of the crowd upon herself as they stood astonished at the marvel" (93). Isolated, diverging from such an adulation of the young heroine, stands Jephthah's wife, Storge. Unlike the chorus and the messenger, she refuses to allow her daughter's beautiful heroism to function as consolation. As in his earlier play, Buchanan expects his reader to remove the demonstration from its interpretation by Jephthah and see it instead as God would see it; however, as in the other English dramas we have discussed, here there is no clear indication of whether or not Jephthah is in error. The reader is thrown back to reexamine the criteria of judgment that Jephthah, the priest, the chorus, and the daughter have used in order to come to their various pronouncements.

In considering Jephthes's precedent in relation to Samson's demonstration of God's power and his own godliness, we should remember that Buchanan's reliance on his audience's reinterpretation of a sacrifice has classical precedents. It is widely acknowledged that Buchanan used Euripides' Iphigenia at Aulis as a subtext for his Jephthes. In looking at the Euripidean parallels, Peter Sharratt has decided that "Buchanan seems to stress those very aspects of Euripides's text where

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

his irony is most evident" (618); i.e. where Euripides ironically presents the community's amazed adulation of the sacrifice. I think that we can see this irony as part of Euripides's ongoing interest in the analysis of human freedom and human choice and the role that an ideology of divinity plays in allowing men to abandon responsibility. Compare, for example, Orestes, who says: "Look at Apollo:/ there from his shrine at the earth's centre he dispenses/words of pure truth; what he commands, that we obey--/I killed my mother in obedience to him" (Euripides, 320)-- a statement deflated by the context of the play in which it is clear that Orestes has made his own choices. The question becomes--and it is a question that I think interested Milton very much--under what conditions and with what right does a man (Agamemnon, Orestes, Jephthah, Samson) attribute an act to God? How should we judge a man who claims that his violence stems from his loyalty to God? I believe that if Milton read Buchanan's original plays--as is not unlikely--he may have been attracted to Buchanan's use of classical drama in his engagement with these issues.

Buchanan, relying on Euripides, gives us a chorus that interprets Jephthah's daughter's death as a kind of beautiful, consoling heroism, while Jephthah's wife remains inconsolable. The choice between interpretations remains unsettled, suspended, at the end of the play--which does <u>not</u> mean that we are invited to rest in ambiguity. Unless Buchanan meant for his readers merely to subject themselves to contemplation of an irreconcilable opposition (Jephthah as

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

pious criminal), the audience must judge Jephthah using the criteria for judgment presented during the play's "action." Milton, too, gives us a chorus imbued with a sense of consolation, a sentiment which has increasingly been seen by critics as an unfinished or unrefined sense of the meaning of the play.[22] Milton's strategy of reticence, written about by Fish, Mueller, and Wittreich among others,[23] finds an earlier counterpart in Buchanan's reticence and his use of Euripidean irony--his demand that his audience distinguish between competing interpretations of demonstrations of royal, priestly, and godly power. In short, Buchanan's plays provide a precedent for Milton's contrivances designed to throw that act of judgment back to his audience by forcing them to reinterpret a demonstration of power and to examine their own criteria of judging.

The spectacular, ultra-theatrical nature of the ending of Samson Agonistes is obvious to every reader. The suggestion that Samson is an actor in disguise and playing a part; the description of the temple of Dagon as "a spacious Theatre" (1605); the messenger's repetition of one of the most oft-used

---

[22] A good example worth quotation is Barbara Lewalski's comment in "Samson and the "New Acquist of True [Political] Experience" (Milton Studies 24; 1988): "The sententious maxims the Chorus pronounces at the end resonate against the entire drama. It is of course true--and obvious--that only 'in the close' can we 'best' know the champions to whom God--or history--bear witness. But the drama has demonstrated that political choices must be made and actions taken in medias res, in circumstances always characterized by imperfect knowledge and conflicting testimony" (248).
[23] See Stanley Fish, "Spectacle and Evidence" (Critical Inquiry 15, 1989); Martin Mueller, Children of Oedipus (U of Toronto P, 1980); Joseph Wittreich, Interpreting "Samson Agonistes" (Princeton UP, 1986).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Renaissance stage directions "with burst of thunder" (1651) to describe the moment of Samson's pulling down the roof; the stylistic change to a more inflated, highly metaphorical language in the semichoruses--all of these signals demand to be read as a self-conscious movement on Milton's part toward spectacle. David Loewenstein regards this whole theatrical atmosphere as typical of Milton's fascination with the theatricality of iconoclasm (261). But in the context of a dramatic tradition that was profoundly anti-dramatic and deeply suspicious of spectacle, Samson's theatricalism demands to be examined with respect to what it purports to demonstrate; and such an examination must turn toward an analysis of the motives of the demonstrators. In the following chapters, I attempt to provide such an analysis. The deconstruction of the dramatic scene which the closet drama tradition accomplished was taken up by Milton as a tool. The components of the dramatic scene in revenge dramas, tragicomedies, and heroic dramas became Milton's raw material from which he could construct his own anti-drama.

Renaissance closet drama does not provide a determinative context for the interpretation of Samson Agonistes; that is, the context cannot decide the problematic issues of interpretation for us. However, this context does provide an explanation for the atmosphere of wildly opposing arguments that have been generated in the interpretation of Samson Agonistes. For closet drama in seventeenth-century

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

England seems to have been a form designed to set up a difficult-to-determine debate about a possibly heroic, possibly criminal figure, one who stands in isolation from the rest of his society and yet simultaneously serves as the locus for sensitive controversies that wrack that society. In one crucial respect the context of Renaissance closet drama does press us toward interpretation by leading us toward an increased suspicion of Samson's demonstration of godly power. Such theatrical show-stoppers are never taken at face value in Renaissance closet drama; the audience of a closet play is always forced to examine the highly theatrical event in terms of motive, effect and meaning.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Chapter 2

Rest, Calm, Forgiveness?: Milton's Simulacrum of Tragicomedy

Reticence about things that cannot be reconciled is characteristic of [Shakespeare's] last plays.

--Geoffrey Hill
The Lords of Limit

The Renaissance dramatic genre that most dominated theatrical life from the time that Milton first attended the theaters, through the interregnum, and on into the Restoration was tragicomedy. Publishers catalogues indicate that during the interregnum, when Londoners were buying and reading plays in large quantities, they were reading mostly Beaumont and Fletcherian tragicomedies.[1] The large number of revivals of tragicomedy--particularly of Fletcher and Shakespeare--decisively colored the memory of pre-war drama in the early years of the Restoration.[2] It should not be surprising, then,

[1]See Louis B. Wright, "The Reading of Plays During the Puritan Revolution," Huntington Library Bulletin (1934), pp. 73-108. Milton's publisher of the 1645 Poems, Humphrey Moseley, published many of the plays in the interregnum. The work of Margot Heinemann, Puritanism and Theatre (Cambridge UP, 1980) and Martin Butler, Theatre and Crisis (Cambridge UP, 1984) has expanded and enriched the ways that we read tragicomedies without altering our perception that tragicomedies were the most popular genre.
[2]See A Calendar of Plays on the London Stage, 1660-1800, ed. William van Lennep (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1965). For an analysis of pre-war drama probably approximately contemporaneous with Milton's Preface to Samson Agonistes, see Of Dramatic Poesy (ed. George Watson; London: Dent, 1964) in which Dryden clearly names Fletcher, Jonson, and Shakespeare as the preeminent pre-war dramatists, and in which he sheds some light on the post-war fascination with tragicomedy (esp. pp. 41-44, 69).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

that in the Preface to Samson Agonistes, the two characteristics of contemporary drama that Milton explicitly denounces are part of Renaissance theory authorizing tragicomedy: "intermixing Comic stuff with Tragic sadness and gravity" and "introducing trivial and vulgar persons" in tragedy.[3] But Samson Agonistes turns against the Renaissance practice of tragicomedy in a far more significant and precise manner than Milton indicates in the Preface, and it is by using the concerns and structures of Renaissance tragicomedy as a template of comparison that we can begin to read more precisely the significance of Milton's treatment of the interpretive crux of Samson Agonistes, that is, the questions surrounding Samson's regeneration. Only by acknowledging and understanding the deep fascination that tragicomic form had for Milton, and only by recognizing the ideological uses of that form in the Renaissance, will we be able to read Samson Agonistes in its own theatrical, historical moment.

Although one of the purposes of this dissertation is to move away from a sense of genre abstracted from transformation and historical change, I would like to review the general features of tragicomedy most relevant to Samson Agonistes. To the extent that one can say any genre has an

---

[3] For an overview of theories of tragicomedy, see Marvin Herrick, Tragicomedy: Its Origin and Development in Italy, France, and England (Urbana: U of Illinois, 1962). Of course, the practice of tragedy in the Renaissance, particularly Shakespeare's, also included comic matter and vulgar persons in tragedy proper, and Milton is probably directing his comments against this practice as well. The theory of tragicomedy, however, began the authorization of such practices.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

elemental form, tragicomedy's is the movement out of loss to triumph by means of a reversal. This reversal occurs as a rising movement away from tragedy's insistence on the irrevocable nature of past action. In tragedy one cannot have a second chance and succeed; tragicomedy reverses this impossibility by revoking the irrevocable. In tragicomedy, and in Shakespearean romance which concentrates certain characteristics of tragicomedy, the dead (as sign of irrevocable event, irrecoverable loss) rise. The reversal comes about through improbability, miracle or deus ex machina, and as Frank Kermode has written in discussing Shakespearean romance, the "interest in improbability is related to the serious motif of redemption, of an unexpected and undeserved second chance for erring mankind."[4] In many tragicomedies, that recovery has everything to do with erasing history and regaining innocence. Medieval and Renaissance writers used tragicomic form to present redemption of

---

[4] Frank Kermode, intro., Tempest (Arden, 1954). In this essay, I focus on Shakespearean romances not because the problem plays should not be read as tragicomedies but because the romances are more relevant to the concerns of Samson Agonistes. As Barbara Mowat writes in "Shakespearean Tragicomedy" (in Renaissance Tragicomedy, ed., Nancy K. Maguire; AMS Press, 1987), there is "near universal consensus that Shakespeare's late romances are Guarinian (or Fletcherian) in spirit," p. 93. Moreover, the literary influence of Fletcher's Faithful Shepherdess on Milton's A Mask provides evidence that Milton would have been familiar with, and interested in revising, the early Fletcherian mode of tragicomedy. For my view of tragicomedy and romance, I am indebted to Kermode's description, in William Shakespeare: The Final Plays (London: Longman's Green, 1963), pp. 11-12, of Shakespearean romance as an attempt to release the energies in the reconciliation and recognition scenes of comedy.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

reprobates by means of repentance and forgiveness.[5] Reconciliation of enemies--even within a context of executing distributive justice--dominates the endings of these plays.[6] The close of the plays (and the aftertaste of the form) is imbued with a sense of renounced vengeance, a turn toward gentleness, solace, and calm. The reconciliation always involves a reunion with a missing lover, missing child, or parent. The suffering that the characters experience during the course of the play proves, from the point of view of a retrospective eye, to be providential.

Samson Agonistes takes up the essential concerns of tragicomedy. The shape of Milton's play, either uses or mimics (depending on one's reading of the play) the rising motion from loss to triumph by means of reversal. Samson, and all of the other characters in the play including the chorus, are involved in the dream of undoing history, of reversing past events and redeeming personal and collective sin. The improbability of

---

5 See Mimi Still Dixon, "Tragicomic Recognitions: Medieval Miracles and Shakespearean Romance," in Renaissance Tragicomedy, ed. Maguire, and Robert G. Hunter, Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness (New York: Columbia UP, 1965).

6 Richard Ide, in"Shakespeare's Revisionism: Homiletic Tragicomedy and the Ending of Measure for Measure" (Shakespeare Studies, 1987), building on Perry J. Gethner's "Jean de Mairet and Poetic Justice: A Definition of Tragicomedy?" (Renaissance Drama 1980, pp. 171-187), has emphasized the importance of equitable distributive justice in the English dramatic practice of tragicomedy. Ide sees Shakespeare as placing under suspicion the forgivenesses at the end of Measure for Measure. In his apt analysis, Ide demonstrates that the play questions the idea of impartial distributive justice: mercy does not resemble Christ's redemption but instead arises from amorous desire, justice (for Lucio) arises from private vengeance. Shakespeare's romances, however, tend not to heighten but rather to submerge the question of distributive justice under an aura of grand reconciliation.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the ending, the suggestions of deus ex machina, the concern with human and godly forgiveness, the reconciliation with a father (or two), the lyrical evocation of solace and calm, the retrospective view of suffering as providential, and the meting out of distributive justice--these concerns, in all of their interpretive complexity, demand that we read Samson Agonistes as engaged with the Renaissance theory and practice of tragicomedy. My interests lie in the direction of Milton's complication, refinement, and renouncement of Renaissance tragicomedy and how those qualifications of generic characteristics help us to read Samson Agonistes.

i

In order to rethink Samson Agonistes in terms of Renaissance tragicomedy, one needs to recognize that forgiveness has always played a crucial role in the genre. In many Renaissance tragicomedies, forgiveness works not only as the sign of, but as the cause of, the reversal from failure to triumph. The most widely known Renaissance tragicomedy, Guarini's Il Pastor Fido, provides the ur-pattern for forgiveness as a component of peripeteia, one that ranks of equal importance with anagnorisis. In each of the three plots of the drama, tragedy is averted by means of forgiveness. Coridon pardons and pities Corisca even though she appears to have betrayed him. Dorinda pardons Silvio even though he has (unintentionally) attempted to kill her. Montano pardons

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Mirtillo, releasing him as victim of sacrifice and thus allowing him to unite with Amaryllis. These mortals forgiving one another, releasing one another from revenge and death, compose the human analogue to the godly forgiveness that defines the play's larger shape, namely the removal of god's vengeance from Arcadia. Guarini made explicit that which most other Renaissance writers of tragicomedy left implicit: mutual human forgiveness prepares the way for divine forgiveness.

The scenes of forgiveness in tragicomedies are suffused with an atmosphere of gentleness, and gentleness as the renunciation of vengeance or violence became a standard feature of the genre. In Il Pastor Fido Montano's recounted dream, which anticipates and encapsulates the action of the play, gives us this description of gentleness after "dire tempest":

> Straight all the welkin turn'd
> Serene, and thunderbolts to ashes burn'd
> Fell hissing in the River, with bows broken
> And shafts by thousands, signes which did betoken
> Extinguisht vengeance. (845-49)

The atmosphere of gentleness associated with tragicomedy becomes particularly strong when pastoral enters the form, and even though English, in contrast to Italian, tragicomedy tended to diminish the presence of pastoral, one finds this atmosphere in Beamont and Fletcher as well as Shakespeare's late plays. Much of the dream of Arcadia, of a world wiped free

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

from sin and corruption, took shape as a dream of human and godly gentleness, of mutual love and mutual forgiveness. The expectation and deferral of such scenes and such an atmosphere can be said to provide an important structural element of these dramas. Milton constructs Samson Agonistes by frustrating in specific ways these expectations for forgiveness and gentleness; and in order to discern his deviance from the model of tragicomedy, we must more precisely define that model.

For a Renaissance audience the great dream of extinguished vengeance, forgiveness, and gentleness was Christ's merciful redemption of sinners. While much of secular Renaissance drama echoes, parodies, reflects upon, naturalizes and/or complicates Christian subjects, one does not find in either Renaissance tragedy or comedy an equally conventionalized reference to a specific Christian subject as one finds in the averted sacrifice that so frequently ends tragicomedies of this period. In Philaster, the hero imitates Bellario's offer of self-sacrifice; in Il Pastor Fido, Mirtillo offers to replace Amaryllis as sacrificial victim; even in Antonio and Mellida, Andrugio offers to allow himself to be killed, which makes way, in turn, for Antonio's rise from seeming death. Whatever the popularity of this plot device owed to the theories of tragicomedy (which in Fletcher's cursory rephrasal of Guarini stipulated that the genre "wants deaths, which is inough to make it no tragedie, yet brings some neere it, which is inough to make it no comedie" (522)), it

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

must also have owed its recurrence to the unavoidable overtones of the Crucifixion. Mutual human forgiveness, pardoning, evocations of mercy and gentleness continually appear in the context of a swerve away from an expected rigor and quite often take place by one person offering himself as the victim of sacrifice in place of another. It would be quite impossible for a Renaissance audience to put aside the Christian analogue of Christ's sacrifice which turned God's justice to mercy in order to redeem sinning mankind; and, thus, whatever human story of forgiveness tragicomedy put forth, the shadow of its godly analogue was hovering nearby, nearly palpable. Consequently, not only was tragicomedy structured by the expectation and deferral of scenes of forgiveness and gentleness but also, even when gods were not explicitly present, those scenes always led a double life: the echo of the Christian plot lifted the human plot into a region of larger significance, heightening the sense of a new world redeemed from sin, and granting a stamp of ultimate approval to human action.

Tragicomedy produced this spectre of the Crucifixion not only by staging the scenes of redemption as scenes of averted sacrifice, but also by staging those scenes as moments in which the father recognizes the potential victim as his own son. Renaissance writers of tragicomedy may have found support for this element of their plot in some of the Euripidean tragedies with happy endings (e.g. Iphigenia in Tauris, Ion). They may even have been attracted to the plot by its adapting

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the Aristotelian preference for familial recognition as the anagnorisis of tragedy so that tragicomedy would provide a familial recognition *before* the crime. But, again, this plot device seems more significantly to owe its popularity to its resemblance to the Crucifixion, where redemption takes place by the Father recognizing Christ as his own Son. Through the self-sacrificial action of that Son, God "recognizes" man, pardons him, redeems him. The relation between the two plots of tragicomedy (human and divine) follows this Christian model. The divine plot is resolved (that is, gods forgive mortals) when mortals forgive one another. The sinner gains redemption for himself by means of bestowing his own forgiveness on another, imitating Christ's own mercy. The submerged Christian typology of Renaissance tragicomedy focussed on one specific aspect of Christ: "in his face/ Divine Compassion visibly appeared, / Love without end, and without measure Grace" (*PL* 3.142). At the moment that the familial recognition appears on the human level, we are to understand that the godly father will claim these "children" as his own, granting them pardon, redeeming them.

Let me offer one example, from a well-known play, of the double layering (human and divine) in tragicomedy that I have been discussing. Here are Leontes's first words on seeing the statue of Hermione in Act V of *The Winter's Tale*:

> Her natural posture!
> Chide me, dear stone, that I may say indeed

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Thou art Hermione; or rather, thou art she
> In thy not chiding; for she was as tender
> As infancy and grace. (5.3.23-7)

Leontes emphasizes Hermione's "not chiding," her act of forgiveness, or rather her forgiving nature. In fact, though, the play has all along been working toward Leontes' act of forgiveness, and his words, his tenderness, his posture at this moment all convey that forgiveness, which we must take as the final signal of his repentance. This moment of mutual human forgiveness, however, gains part of its potency from Leontes' allusion to the divine pardon which makes it possible. For Leontes invokes exactly here the Christian story of the infant who is the vehicle of God's grace for men. This moment, ostensibly a moment of human reconciliation, is enfolded in an aura of divine forgiveness. Likewise, in The Faithful Shepherdess, we find grace both in the cleansing, magical, waters that the shepherdess has at her disposal and in the prayer which ends the play, reminding the shepherds that they cannot keep themselves from falling without the assistance of Pan's "power" (Fletcher, 443). In most tragicomedies, the very coincidence of accidents, the chain of events that brings the parties together in such a way that misunderstandings can be corrected, is spoken of as if it were due to the operation of grace.

Milton places Samson Agonistes squarely in the tradition of Renaissance tragicomedy by constructing his work on the basis of two plots of forgiveness: Samson's forgiveness of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Dalila and God's forgiveness of Samson. However, as usual in Milton's engagement with generic models, the divergences from the tragicomic model disclose the crucial significances of the borrowing. In this case, we will see that Milton concentrates his attention on the conditions on which pardon--either godly or human--should be granted. Renaissance tragicomedies had inscribed within them a certain formulation of redemption, and it is this formulation which Milton chooses to attack.

In examining the lower (human) plot, Milton's major alteration is clear. In many Renaissance tragicomedies, the protagonist "divorces" a woman because he mistakenly believes she is guilty; and he forgives her when the misunderstanding is removed. Hermione is innocent--as are Imogen (Cymbeline), Amaryllis (Il Pastor Fido), Bellario and Arethusa (Philaster), Mellida (Antonio and Mellida), and Eroclea (The Lover's Melancholy). Milton gives us Dalila. Not innocence maligned but true traitoress. In this alteration Milton transforms one of the major questions of tragicomedy. Instead of asking whether humans can forgive one another when evil is an illusion bred by misunderstanding, he asks whether they can (or should) forgive one another when evil is a fact. Later in the chapter, I will discuss Milton's exploration of the conditions of such a forgiveness. Now, however, let us consider his alteration of the higher (divine) level of the tragicomic plot.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The focus of Milton's attack on this level seems to have been Renaissance tragicomedy's wavering about the nature of sin, a wavering which in fact allowed redemption to take place. While Fletcher's tragicomedies concern themselves with renewed faith and temperance as the means to a renewed purity and redemption, the redemptive moment has, as condition of possibility, a loophole: the crime remains potential rather than acted (e.g., Philaster sins because he lacks faith in Arethusa, but his murder of her remains intended rather than completed). In many other tragicomedies, the unintentionality of the sin allows redemption to take place (e.g. in Il Pastor Fido, Silvio did not intend to kill Dorinda; he was aiming at a wolf that happened to be Dorinda in disguise). In Shakespeare, although loss may have its origin in moral failing (Leontes's jealousy, Prospero's retirement or his trusting too far his brother, Posthumous's lack of faith in Imogen), that moral component frequently feels irrelevant; the sins are unmotivated, coming upon the sinners as an accident might occur. The sins mark the nature of the universe as prone to sin and loss, or, in John Shawcross's words, "there is no hint that sorrow of the past could have been avoided" ("Tragicomedy," 25).

This wavering about the nature of the sin that originates loss in tragicomedy has its counterpart in the extra-moral element that marks the recovery from loss. In other words, part of the convention of tragicomedy included the qualification of necessary but not sufficient conditions for

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

redemption; the hero needs faith, temperance, and repentance, but those moral characteristics are not sufficient, by themselves, to earn redemption. Pardon, or grace, arrives because of certain loopholes in the nature of the sin: it was unintentional, or intended but not committed, or it was merely a result of inevitable human weakness. So, one can say that tragicomedy exists on a kind of cusp between the moral and the accidental, and the genre allows an author to worry over or explore the friction between these two categories. Loss, in most tragicomedies, has both moral and accidental causes; redemption has a moral _and_ an accidental, in the sense of undeserved, component. Part of Milton's work in _Samson Agonistes_ consists in renegotiating by more precisely defining the relationship between morality and accident. One might think of Milton as having chosen the figure of Samson for the very reason that Samson cannot have fallen into the condition of loss by means of accident: he makes his error with open eyes, both with the knowledge that his former wife had betrayed him and with the knowledge that Dalila had thrice divulged his secret. By eliminating the wavering about the origin of loss, Milton again transforms the question that tragicomedy traditionally asks: not, "Can man who is subject to loss be redeemed?" but rather, "Can man who consciously chooses to sin, and does sin, be redeemed?"

In Renaissance tragicomedy the great "improbability" of the genre was that God could forgive a reprobate. Milton retains this focus, but he alters the precision with which the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

issue is addressed. To see that Milton attacks, refines, and partly renounces the genre in its portrayal of the mechanism of grace should not surprise us; the major theological controversy of the seventeenth century concerned that mechanism.[7] However, my concern here is not to reexamine Milton's stated theological position, but to explore his position as it engaged, or took the shape of, tragicomic form.

Tragicomedy acts as a form which reflects on divorce and reunion in two registers: the divorce and reunion of man and woman, and the divorce and reunion of God and man. In most Renaissance tragicomedies, the reunions happen simultaneously, and they are both marked/caused by forgiveness, gentleness, repentance, renewed faith, temperance, and grace. In Samson Agonistes, Milton disengages the two reunions and examines them separately. He precipitates out of solution, as it were, the nearly dissolved, but nevertheless crucially important, residue of a Christian redemption that inhabited Renaissance tragicomedy, and he presents two separate scenes of forgiveness, reunion, and reconciliation: in the first he shows Samson's incomplete forgiveness of Dalila, and in the second he examines the grand improbability of God's forgiveness for Samson. Because in The

[7] For recent overviews of the controversies concerning grace and the relation between these controversies and political parties in the seventeenth century, see Dewey D. Wallace, Jr., Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology, 1525-1695 (U of North Carolina P, 1982) and Nicholas Tyacke, Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminiansm, 1590-1640 (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1987).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce Milton seriously takes up the questions of divorce and reunion, forgiveness, gentleness, reconciliation, morality, accident, and redemption of reprobates, one can use the early tract to focus Milton's later reimagining of the story of reprobate redeemed.

ii

We have seen that tragicomedy's movement from utter loss to triumph served as a means to imagine the movement from reprobate to redeemed. Redemption, signalled by or even caused by, mutual forgiveness between lovers, also had to be completed by God's forgiveness of men. Milton crosses this same territory in The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce. In that tract it becomes apparent that Milton associated immurement in a bad marriage with the state of being reprobate. He portrays a husband in a state of utter desolation and loss, and the excruciating nature of that loss he compares, cautiously, gingerly, to the loss a man feels upon being separated from God:

> In the single life the absence and remotenes of a helper might inure him to expect his own comforts out of himselfe, or to seek with hope, but here the continuall sight of his deluded thoughts without cure, must needs be to him, if especially his complexion incline him to melancholy, a daily trouble and paine of losse in some degree like that which Reprobates feel. (CPW II:247)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The figure of the husband is spiritless, unable to be revived. He "will be ready to dispair in vertue, and mutin against divine providence" (CPW II:254) and will be driven "at last through murmuring and despair to thoughts of Atheism" (CPW II:260).

Early in The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce Milton tells a parable about his spiritless state that serves as a powerful fantasy of redemption:

> Love, if he be not twin-born, yet hath a brother wondrous like him, call'd Anteros: whom while he seeks all about, his chance is to meet with many fals and faining Desires that wander singly up and down in his likenes. By them in their borrow'd garb, Love, though not wholly blind, as Poets wrong him, yet having but one eye, as being born an Archer aiming, and that eye not the quickest in this dark region here below, which is not Loves proper sphere, partly out of the simplicity, and credulity which is native to him, often deceiv'd, imbraces and consorts him with these obvious and suborned striplings, as if they were his Mothers own Sons, for so he thinks them, while they suttly keep themselves most on his blind side. But after a while, as his manner is, when soaring up into the high Towr of his Apogaeum, above the shadow of the earth, he darts out the direct rayes of his then most piercing eyesight upon the impostures, and trim disguises that were us'd with him, and discerns that this is not his genuin brother, as he imagin'd, he has no longer the power to hold fellowship with such a personated mate. For strait his arrows loose their golden heads, and shed their purple feathers, his silk'n breades untwine, and slip their knots and that original and firie vertue giv'n him by Fate, all on a sudden goes out and leaves him undeifi'd, and despoil'd of all his force: till finding Anteros at last, he kindles

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> and repairs the almost faded ammunition of his Deity by the reflection of a coequal and homogeneal fire. (CPW II:255)

This parable strikingly resembles the movement of divorce, reprieve, and second chance as fiery rebirth that one finds later in Samson Agonistes.

As in Samson, Milton describes a mistaken choice which leaves the lover "undeified, and despoil'd of all his force." In the parable, the reprieve for such a loss, that which will kindle and repair, comes in the shape of a homogeneal fire, an equal and similar and reciprocating lover. Here, Love, as protagonist, resembles the half-blind lovers of tragicomedy wandering through misty regions until they reemerge to be saved by a true lover. The passage is significant in its compact representation of Milton's own search in the Divorce tracts: the fantastical, spectral presence of this lover haunts The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce. As James Turner has written, "Every proposal in these tracts is weighed by the standard of love, and every complaint issues from a wounded expectation of love. . . . 'Love' in the context of Scriptural Interpretation may mean 'the rule of Charity, the agape of Christ, but far more often it refers to interpersonal Eros, the 'acts of love and peace' generated by the conjunction of male and female" (209-10). I would qualify Turner's comment by suggesting that one think about Eros and Charity not in terms of their relative weights in the tract but rather in the story of how one replaces the other. In fact, The Doctrine and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Discipline of Divorce replaces the fantasy of the lover with the fantasy of Charity. Charity works as the saving force that will turn this tragedy into comedy. Charity provides the guiding principle that will allow Milton to interpret the Scriptures to save himself (one interprets texts according to the rule of Charity) and as the movement which will allow him to part from his wife (it will be Charity to cast her away).

In fact, the sub-text of both the search for Eros and the search for Charity, and the ground upon which the turn from Eros to Charity is made, is Milton's search for forgiveness, his search for a pardon freely given. The intensity of this longing for pardon feeds the turn from Eros to Charity. One could say that The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce was written with the aim of reclaiming the law of pardoning and unpardoning which the church (both Catholic and Protestant) had monopolized and corrupted. Charity becomes dispensation to divorce, and Milton must gain his dispensation to divorce not as a favor to excuse his own culpability but as a free grant which supposes him not guilty of error. He writes: "Dispence therfore presupposes full pardon, or els it is not a dispence, but a most baneful & bloody snare" (CPW II:297). The search for a pardon freely given tells us that Milton's comparison of the husband to reprobate is not unmotivated or merely a case of similarity but rather central to the tract.

Thus, it seems that the question of marriage and divorce engaged Milton's imagination of himself as reprobate, and this, in fact, may be the reason that Samson Agonistes "houses" the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

material on divorce. The reappearance of such material in Samson Agonistes gives us Milton's revision of imagining the scene of possible pardon. In tracking this revision, one must recall that in The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, there are two stories of forgiveness. Milton clearly and unequivocally assigns to the man the forgiveness of God; and, just as unequivocally, he refuses to grant forgiveness to the woman. We find here the kind of slippage in assigning blame that Elizabeth Hodgson has pointed out in Tetrachordon, where Milton begins with two blameless partners and "slides over on that story" the assignation of culpability to the woman.[8] In the Divorce tracts the man is pardonable because his error occurred in the realm of accident. In fact, one might add "accident" to the list of categories--immurement, spiritless condition, state of being reprobate--under which Milton seems to have thought of a bad marriage. He writes: "Did he [Christ] open so to us this hazardous and accidentall doore of mariage to shut upon us like the gate of death without retracting or returning, without permitting to change the worst, most insupportable, most unchristian mischance of mariage . . ." (CPW II:311, italics mine). An accidental mistake allows the man to remain blameless and gain pardon. In this tract, then, Milton writes an altered tragicomedy in that he permits God's forgiveness while renouncing human forgiveness. He writes a traditional tragicomedy, however, in that he allows moral

[8] Elizabeth Hodgson, "When God Proposes: Agency, Marriage and Gender in Milton's Tetrachordon," paper given at the 1990 MLA Convention.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

failing to reappear, later, as merely accidental and so redeemable.

In Samson Agonistes, Milton departs significantly from this story. On the one hand, the woman remains unforgiven. Now there is no equivocation; her position has been entirely removed from the condition of blamelessness by the careful iteration and refutation of reasons that would have allowed her to be forgiveable. On the other hand, the blamelessness or culpability of the man has been moved to the center of scrutiny. Unlike his counterpart in the Divorce tracts, Samson is the very epitome of the conscious and repetitive sinner. While the husband in The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce has a mind "not conscious to itself of any deserved blame" (CPW II:224), Samson's mind is full of self-recriminations. And while the husband in the divorce tract is called a "discreet man . . . mistak'n in his choice" (CPW II:249), Samson's story seems to be one of lust, or at least of choices not sufficiently discriminated.

While writing Samson Agonistes Milton revised his thinking on divorce and on the state of being reprobate by choosing to look in a more clear-eyed manner at the culpability of the "spiritless," "drooping," "disconsolate," "dejected" husband. The crucial implication for reading Samson Agonistes lies in the extent to which careful scrutiny of the culpability of the husband disturbs the certainty of God's pardon for that husband. The evidence for the pardoning of Samson is tied to the much debated evidence for his regeneration, and as Stanley

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Fish has observed, that evidence is presented as "radically indeterminate." Milton differs from all his predecessors in ambiguating the moment of Samson's final act:

> At length for intermission sake they led him
> Between the pillars; he his guide requested
> (For so from such as nearer stood we heard)
> As over-tir'd to let him lean a while
> With both his arms on those two massie Pillars
> That to the arched roof gave main support.
> He unsuspitious led him; which when Samson
> Felt in his arms, 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. (1630-38)

Fish argues: "In all of the sources and analogues, this moment [Samson's preparation for his final act] is the hinge of the action, and it is virtually saturated with interpretive direction . . ." ("Spectacle," 567). "Everything that serves in the sources and analogues to produce interpretive certainty is also to be found in Samson Agonistes, but it is found in the wrong place, that is, in a place where it multiplies rather than reduces interpretive crisis" (570). One can agree with Fish in his description of the interpretive uncertainty and, simultaneously, disagree with his analysis of the significance of that interpretive uncertainty. Fish moves back from the moment of undecideability to pronounce that Samson rightly undergoes a leap of faith. However, the radical indeterminacy not only forces us to ask whether or not Samson was inspired by God, but, from Samson's point of view, from the point of view of Samson's ultimate interest, also forces us to ask

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

whether or not he was ultimately pardoned by God. If one looks at Samson Agonistes as a revision of the material in the Divorce tracts, Milton has left the pardon, the act of God's forgiveness of the reprobate, in a state of careful unknowability.

iii

There was a time in Milton's career when he acknowledged and examined the culpability of man and wife and clearly pronounced them pardoned by God. In Paradise Lost, Milton wrote the story of Adam and Eve's recovery from the Fall as a tragicomedy. As Richard Ide has noticed, "The Son's intercession on behalf of Adam and Eve constitutes a Christian deus ex machina in the tragicomic drama of the regenerate soul" ("On the Uses,"132). In his description of tragicomic elements in Paradise Lost, Ide does not mention that the moment of peripeteia is prepared for by Adam and Eve's mutual forgiveness. The rising movement away from tragedy springs from this turn toward forgiveness. Adam and Eve blame one another, pardon one another, offer to sacrifice themselves for one another--and only after this extensive and moving mutual forgiveness does God pardon them by sending his Son to grant them mercy. This progression from human forgiveness to godly forgiveness comprises, as we have seen, the traditional structure of Renaissance tragicomedy.

Milton would have found the same structure in Genesis. It seems clear that it was in the Bible itself that Milton found

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

his warrant for inventing or expanding biblical scenes; he read and interpreted Scripture in order to "know" what happened during and after the Fall. He filled in the white space of the biblical text by reading into it from other places in Scripture. In the case of Paradise Lost, his warrant for writing these scenes of Adam and Eve's mutual recriminations and mutual forgivenesses most probably came from reading back into the story of Adam and Eve the later stories of Jacob and Joseph. In fact, the last half of the book of Genesis is comprised of two long stories of reconciliation: Jacob's reconciliation with Esau and Joseph's with his brothers. Milton read, and then used for his own epic, the Scriptural version of the double plot of tragicomedy. The connection between mutual human forgiveness and divine forgiveness (or blessing) would have been especially striking at the climactic moment of the Jacob and Esau tale. Here is the moment of mutual human forgiveness:

> [Jacob] went on before [his wives and children], bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. (RSV 33:3-4)

Jacob speaks to Esau, urging him to take the offered gifts, and in the process unveiling the larger significance of their reconciliation, a kind of divine analogy:

> I pray you, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> face is like seeing the face of God, with such favor have you received me. Accept, I pray you, my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have enough. (RSV 33:10-11)

The pun on "favor" in Elizabethan English emphasizes the analogy between Esau's forgiveness and God's forgiveness. To see a human "favor" (face) which expresses "favor" (blessing, pardon) is like seeing God face to face. The order of scenes in the text presses the point home. Jacob's reconciliation with Esau is followed by the story of God's blessing for Jacob, the culmination of his lifelong struggles for blessing.[9]

The vast implications of Milton's having chosen Judges rather than Genesis as subtext for Samson Agonistes can only be understood by acknowledging how Judges reverses the scenes of reconciliation in Genesis. The first book of Scripture tells stories which lead toward the reconciliation of brothers and the blessing of God. The Book of Judges serves as an anti-Genesis: it tells stories that lead to civil war and dismemberment, where the human community disintegrates and God virtually disappears.[10] Judges repetitively explores

---

[9] The story of the revenge for Dinah may appear to interrupt the movement from human to divine reconciliation, but it does so only as a demonic parody of reconciliation. It portrays, as transgression, the use of excessive revenge, a refusal of sincere attempts at reconciliation (see Genesis 34:8-12 and 34:18-22).

[10] Joseph Wittreich, Interpreting Samson Agonistes (Princeton UP, 1986) has argued that Milton, along with other seventeenth-century interpreters, sought to remove the typological interpretations that obfuscated the Judges story. Wittreich has shown in what ways seventeenth-century interpreters used the Samson story to represent the ambiguities and the tragedies of the Puritan revolution.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the eruption of violence within the domestic, as Israelites pass into the category of "stranger." The culmination of this pattern is not Jephthah's sacrifice of his own daughter but rather the story of the Levite and the "concubine" in Judges 19. The concubine or wife (the translation of the Hebrew "pilegesh" is, and was in the Renaissance, a vexed issue[11]) is raped and killed by members of the Israelite tribe of Benjamin. The story pictures in horrible intensity a rift inside the Israelite community. The Levite's dismemberment of his own dead concubine/wife, the civil war that ensues, and the closing scene of collective tribal rape confirm in devastating detail the Book of Judges' devolution from, in fact reversal of, mutual human forgiveness and reconciliation. The final line of the Book of Judges, "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (21:25) asserts the necessary connection between the atomization of the community and the absence of godly presence and blessing. Although seventeenth-century monarchists read that "king" as if it referred to the monarchical head of state, every anti-monarchical word that Milton wrote stands as evidence that Milton would have taken "king" as a reference to the King of Heaven.[12]

---

[11] For a discussion of the translation of "pilegesh" and related biblical terms, see Mieke Bal, Death and Dissymetry (Chicago UP, 1988), p. 89.
[12] See Robert Filmer, Observations upon Aristotle's Politiques (1652) in ed. David Wootton, Divine Right and Democracy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.112.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

It would have been odd if Milton had not studied this first eruption of civil war in the land of Israel in his search to understand and portray his own country's civil war. Evidence that he particularly attended to the story of the Levite and the concubine near the time of publishing Samson Agonistes comes from Peter Stallybrass's research into Milton's revisions for the 1674 edition of Paradise Lost.[13] In that second edition Milton made very few revisions unrelated to the alteration from ten to twelve books. One revision that he did make, however, shows him correcting a reference to the story of the Levite and the concubine. Amid his wide-ranging analysis of this alteration, Stallybrass remarks, "Milton's revisions seem to move in the direction of revealing the husband as the agent of the rape. This was noted by eighteenth-century commentators but seems to have been forgotten since" (39). The revision to Paradise Lost suggests that not only was Milton interested in the precise event in Judges that led most directly to civil war but also that he was analyzing that story in terms of a husband's refusal to forgive his wife. Although the Levite had gone to retrieve his wife from her father's house, and therefore had presumably forgiven her for that return, his exposure of her on the doorway suggests just the opposite.

---

[13] Quotations from Peter Stallybrass are taken from "Milton and the Politics of Sexuality," an unpublished paper given to the annual meeting of the Milton Seminar, hosted by City University of New York Graduate Center, October 1990.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

<u>The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce</u> revealed a Milton who allowed the husband his refusal to forgive while retaining the forgiveness of God. The revisions to <u>Paradise Lost</u> reveal a later Milton who has been reading just that portion of Judges which concerns itself with a husband who does not forgive his wife, who exposes her on a doorway, offering her to the "sons of Belial." Those revisions in the 1674 edition indicate that Milton is reading Judges 19 with his attention focussed on the husband's responsibility for the effects of a refusal to forgive.

iv

I have tried to demonstrate one of the central structures of Renaissance tragicomedy (its double-layered form composed of mutual human and divine forgiveness), and I have discussed the use of this structure both in Milton's <u>Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce</u> and in the scriptural books that Milton used as subtexts for <u>Paradise Lost</u> and <u>Samson Agonistes</u>. However, it is impossible fully to reconstruct Milton's own understanding of the structure and significance of tragicomic form without acknowledging the particular ideological uses to which tragicomedy had been put in the years just previous to the publication of <u>Samson Agonistes</u>.

Recent work on Renaissance tragicomedy has explored the political significance and political motivation of the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

popularity of the genre in the Renaissance. "In Italy," writes James Yoch, "the hope for a happy ending despite the appearance of chaos was a matter of belief central both to princely and ecclesiastical systems" (124). Lois Potter has discussed the term "tragicomedy" as it was used to label royalist political satires of the English civil war period. She writes, "the very contrivance of tragicomedy, the complex unravelings of its denouement, and its emphasis on the mysteriousness of the ways in which God moves, lent themselves to the expression of both the hopes and the uncertainties of the royalists in the years between the defeat at Naseby and the King's execution" (204). Potter emphasizes that the royalist experience during the interregnum--the experience of disorder, failure, and hope for a sudden reversal--made tragicomedy a particularly alluring genre. Moreover, Potter's later research has made it clear how thoroughly the genre of tragicomedy became associated with royalism. She writes:

> . . . there were some literary forms which belonged specifically to the royalists. . . . These were plays, whose performance had been forbidden by ordinance since August 1642, and romances. Simply to write in either form [during the interregnum] was to make a statement about one's relation to the party in power.
>
> (Secret Rites, 74)

These forbidden forms rose to a position of official prominence after 1660. Poets, dramatists, ministers, and officials spoke about the restoration in terms that echoed the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

themes of tragicomedy. Charles's return was a return from captivity or exile, a recognition of him by the people, a meeting complete with mutual forgivenesses, a providential recuperation of erring history. The early years of the Restoration lent a particular force to the scenes of mutual forgiveness and reconciliation that structured tragicomedy. "Charles's very mildness was ravishing, subduing that nation's hearts 'by Love' (42), writes Nicolas Jose. Furthermore, he says, "a pervading tone of sudden wonder, of uniform and patently irrational marvelling, to a considerable extent explains how the king, once invited back, could return without conditions" (6). In writing the interchange between Dalila and Samson, in refining the terms of reconciliation, in refusing reconciliation under certain conditions, Milton was moving against the prevailing interpretation of restoration as "romance," just as earlier he had moved against the royalist interpretation of Charles I's death as "tragedy" in Eikonoclastes. Milton had already proved himself interested in, and able to accomplish, the use of a "royalist" form against itself when writing A Mask. Annabel Patterson has discussed Milton's continued interest in, and the development of some of his thinking about, narrative, chivalric romance in her essay "Paradise Regained: A Last Chance at True Romance." In choosing to write a drama that calls up in so vital a manner the themes and structures of romance, Milton cannot merely be turning toward Greek drama but must also simultaneously be turning away from a specific kind of contemporary drama: to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

revive the gravity of drama, for Milton, meant to take it out of the hands of the royalists.

What were the characteristics of tragicomic reconciliation scenes that Milton felt it necessary to oppose? First, Milton moves powerfully against the glorification of oblivion. He places under suspicion the magnanimous gesture of "forgetting" the past. In Fletcher's Philaster, one of the most popular seventeenth-century tragicomedies, when the King asks Philaster to "forget to urge/ My vexed soul with that I did before," Philaster replies without any hesitation: "Sir, [it is] blotted from my memory,/ Past and forgotten" (142). And Shakespeare, in The Winters Tale, seriously qualifies this convention by stressing Hermione's wrinkles and including Mamilius's death. Although the past in some sense has been wiped away, time itself cannot be recovered and one child has been truly lost. Erasing history is so much a part of the generic form as to be burlesqued by Shakespeare in the same play: the son of the old shepherd keeps repeating that he has just been made a "gentleman born" (5.2.135; italics mine.). Forgetting history has everything to do with rewriting conscious sin as mere accident. Like Hamlet in his plea to Laertes, "Let my disclaiming from a purpos'd evil/ Free me so far in your most generous thoughts/ That I have shot my arrow o'er the house/ And hurt my brother" (5.2.237-239), the protagonists in tragicomedy would like their actions to be accepted as accidental.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Shakespearean tragedies often include scenes, such as the opening of the duel scene in Hamlet, that rise toward and then ebb away from romance. These moments are characterized by reconciliation and forgiveness and thus can provide a condensed version of the terms by which reconciliation was portrayed in Renaissance drama. Lear offers several moments as strongly evocative of romance as any in Shakespearean tragedy. Cordelia's "sunshine and rain at once" (4.3.18), her holy water from . . . heavenly eyes" (4.3.30) that aligns itself with all that is "aidant and remediate" (4.4.17), her plea to let "restoration hang thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss/ repair . . . " (4.7.26-7), and Lear's return from exile, his awakening, his "fresh garments"--all of these suggestions of romance culminate in the moment of forgiveness when Lear acknowledges that Cordelia has cause to do him wrong and she answers, "no cause, no cause" (4.7.74). In the context of the extensive use of the word "nothing" in Lear, Cordelia's "no cause, no cause," takes on a monumental significance. In direct confutation of Lear's earlier "nothing will come of nothing" (1.1.89), Cordelia's "nothing" here, her "no cause, no cause," creates the world anew. Forgiveness is the originary moment; by wiping out sin, erasing history, calling something nothing, forgiveness creates human community out of nothing.

With this insistence on the creative significance of forgiveness in Lear, Shakespeare takes forgiveness to a cosmic level, past even the usual Christian typology of tragicomedy

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(even though he does offer the conventional tragicomic reference to Christ's redemptive mission in Cordelia's "O dear father!/ It is thy business that I go about" (4.4.23-4)). Milton's drama, however, pronounces Shakespeare too absolute in his valorization of forgiveness. In Samson Agonistes, forgiveness between Samson and Dalila is examined, then granted only "at a distance." This moment, taken in the context of Renaissance drama, can hardly be read--as it has been by far too many Miltonists--as a gesture of generosity or charity.

> Dalila: Let me approach at least, and touch thy hand.
> Samson: Not for thy life, lest fierce remembrance wake
> My sudden rage to tear thee joint by joint.
> At distance I forgive thee, go with that.
> (951-54)

The chorus will have no part of any forgiveness for Dalila; and although one must surely distinguish the choral response from Samson's own position (particularly in that he does not take part in the choral diatribe against women [1010-60]), Samson does align himself specifically with the choral failure to forgive in his use of the word "viper" (1001) to characterize Dalila. One need only turn to the corresponding refusal in Paradise Lost to know that both the chorus and Samson have essentially issued a refusal to forgive. When Adam turns against Eve, at the highest pitch of casting blame outward, he says:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Out of my sight, thou serpent, that name best
> befits thee with him leagu'd, thy self as false
> And hateful. (PL X.867)

> Chorus: She's gone, a manifest Serpent by her sting
> Discover'd in the end, till now conceal'd.
> (SA 997-8)

The comparison with Paradise Lost reveals Samson and the chorus to be caught in a moment of incompletion, where completion means comedic ending.

Samson's refusal is a refusal of the terms of reconciliation presented in Renaissance tragicomedy. In a long series of arguments, Dalila attempts to obtain forgiveness by plotting her story as capable of becoming tragicomedy. Here is her self-introduction:

> With doubtful feet and wavering resolution
> I came, still dreading thy displeasure, Samson,
> Which to have merited, without excuse,
> I cannot but acknowledge; yet if tears
> May expiate (though the fact more evil drew
> In the perverse event then I foresaw)
> My penance hath not slack'n'd, though my pardon
> No way assur'd. (732-39)

In the structure of this opening sentence we have the story of the Protestant redemption: " . . . thy displeasure . . . to have merited . . . yet . . . may expiate . . . though . . . pardon no way assur'd." In the parentheses, and in the conditional clause, we

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

find the story of redemption as presented in tragicomedy: "if tears may expiate . . . though the fact more evil drew in the perverse event then I foresaw"; that is, Dalila sees the severity of the crime as unintentional consequence, one which mere sorrow may redeem. And she ends this speech by transforming moral error into accident: "my rash but more unfortunate misdeed" (747). In Samson's' final comment about Dalila, he denies all possibility of reconciliation: "Love-quarrels oft in pleasing concord end,/ Not wedlock-trechery endangering life" (1008-9).

For Samson, Fletcher's definition of tragicomedy, a genre which "wants deaths . . . but brings some neere it," cannot include a comedic ending. Throughout the scene with Dalila, Samson's speeches bring to the surface the ideology of responsibility and excuse by which Dalila asks for forgiveness. What Samson objects to in this offer of amends, this scene, or scenes, of forgiveness as written by Dalila, is the repetitive nature of Dalila's version of forgiveness--it has no closure ("Again transgresses, and again submits," 758). Samson sees that Dalila's claim for forgiveness on the basis of weakness is an equating of crimes ("the same of kind," 786) where evils are not distinguished and where man's inevitable weakness leads to an automatic redemption. He responds, "All wickedness is weakness: that plea therefore/ With God or Man will gain thee no remission" (834-5). Her story of Love's woe recouped at the end without rancor ("Love hath oft, well meaning, wrought much wo,/ Yet always pity or pardon hath obtain'd," [813-4]) is

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the story of lovers reunited in tragicomedy, a means of recuperation that, in Samson's view, cannot suffice for redemption. The terms of discussion between Samson and Dalila are not entirely determined by a refutation of the terms of tragicomedy; but, by the care with which Milton examines the grounds of forgiveness, he turns against reconciliation as portrayed by Renaissance tragicomedy (and those moments of romance that surface in Renaissance tragedy). Milton resists a reconciliation that would wipe away history, rewrite sin as accident, redeem merely by sorrow, name weakness inevitable, and transform a near death into "comedy."

V

In the episode between Samson and Dalila, then, forgiveness becomes a temptation to be resisted; and, as we have seen, Samson does so in his final refusal to allow Dalila's touch:

> Dalila: Let me approach at least, and touch thy hand.
> Samson: Not for thy life, lest fierce remembrance wake
> My sudden rage to tear thee joint by joint.
> At distance I forgive thee, go with that.
> (951-4)

In the language of Renaissance tragicomedy, this qualification of forgiveness can mean only an incomplete repentance,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

incomplete redemption, and a turn toward tragedy. The clearest tragicomic analogue is in Philaster. In 3.1, Philaster draws back from killing Bellario for his supposed betrayal and releases him but makes distance a condition of that release. Philaster says, "Let me not see thee more; something is done that will distract me and make me mad, if I behold thee" (3.111). In this case, Philaster's rage, his incomplete forgiveness, are indisputably wrong: Bellario is chaste. The same convention is repeated in The Lover's Melancholy, where Palador hesitates to reconcile with Eroclea: "Turn, turn from me, prithee,/ For my belief is armed else" (64). In the language of Renaissance tragicomedy, to invite, allow, cause, or threaten physical distance between lovers both opens the way for further misunderstandings and signifies a fault in the banisher. One sees the motif again, in Shakespearean tragedy, for Coriolanus to agree to see Volumnia and Valeria and especially to take their hands, will mean reconciliation (even though in tragedy that reconciliation is allowed to take place only inside a tragic sequence). In contrast, Samson's banishment of Dalila to the "distance," his refusal to forgive her, pronounces reconciliation not allowable because not desirable.

In terms of Renaissance drama, I can see two ways that one might interpret Milton's choice to present human forgiveness as undesirable. First, Milton may be revising the genre of tragicomedy, redefining it to show that the comedic ending proceeds not from a willingness to forgive but rather

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

from a refusal to forgive, a careful distinguishing of whom to forgive. In this case, one must read the "at a distance I forgive thee" as a sympathetic move--an act of incomplete charity for which Samson should be not only exonerated but admired. One could find support for such a view by recalling Milton's love for what rightfully divides. The Miltonic characterizations of division that Sanford Budick discusses in The Dividing Muse, the intensity of Milton's paeans to division in The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, his use of division in The Art of Logic, and the reference to Alpheus as principle of unmixing in "Lycidas"[14] are truly remarkable evidences for the intensity of Milton's awe for division. Here is an example from the Divorce tracts, where Milton writes in great heat of the necessary divorce between sin and law:

> . . . but sure sin can have no tenure by law at all, but is rather an eternal outlaw, and in hostility with law past all attonement: both diagonial contraries, as much allowing one another, as day and night together in one hemisphere. Or if it be possible, that sin with his darknes may come to composition, it cannot be without a foul eclipse, and twylight to the law, whose brightnesse ought to surpasse the noon. (CPW II.288-9).

"Diagonial" is only one of several neologisms and rare usages that Milton employs in this tract in developing a vocabulary for division (e.g. "antonomie,""irreconilable," "antagony").

---

[14] Don Cameron Allen ("Milton's Alpheus," MLN 71 [March, 1956]) argues that the significance of Milton's Alpheus is that he can "flow through an ocean of evil and corruption without being tainted" (173).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

However, it is this very evidence for Milton's overwhelming interest in dividing sin from good--which might have authorized us to commend without reservation Samson's overturning the conventions of tragicomedy in his distancing of Dalila--that finally works against any such interpretation. For, in view of Milton's intense appreciation for division, we cannot fail to find shocking the description of Samson's end, where he is "inmixed" (1657) with the Philistines in the temple. The word "inmixed" cannot have been chosen idly by a Milton who is so impassioned in his portrayal of rightful division. What are we to make of this mixture? "With them inmixed" must mean that Samson does not remain "at a distance" from Dalila, for she is presumably with the lords at the temple, and so "with [her] inmixed" is implied. This seems to cancel out the work of separating that Samson's refusal to forgive effected. If Samson and Dalila are inmixed at the catastrophe, Milton can hardly be redefining tragicomedy as necessitating the work of separation.

Does "with them inmixed" indicate that Dalila and Samson come too close when he enters the temple and so he is forced to "remember" his rage? If so, does it indicate a kind of pollution, a mixture of Samson and the enemy because he is too full of rage? I will consider such a possibility in the following chapter. For now, however, "with them inmixed," in giving us a final image of Samson commingled with the enemy, may also or only indicate that one cannot determine God's pardon from the visual evidence, or from any evidence this side of the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

grave. In regard to the question of God's pardon for Samson, Milton throws us back with a kind of violence on the life and words of Samson as the only possible interpretive context, one that must remain without proof as to God's point of view. We might say that the reader, in regard to God's forgiveness, is in the position of Samson as Milton so delicately describes that position in his Preface: "at length perswaded inwardly that this was from God." We do not know whether or not God forgives Samson, and we do not know if this "with them inmixed" indicates that the refusal to forgive Dalila turns his story towards comedy or tragedy.

In following this complication of reading "at a distance, I forgive thee" sympathetically, I would like, then, to turn to the second way that one might interpret Samson's refusal to forgive Dalila. In the terms of Renaissance tragicomedy, where the refusal to forgive turns a play towards tragedy, Samson Agonistes may be tragic precisely because it turns away from forgiveness. In Renaissance tragicomedy forgiveness may be delayed, and, in Renaissance tragedy, forgiveness may be cruelly refused, belated, or irrelevant, but in neither case is it undesirable. If we read Samson Agonistes as a tragedy, in this respect, it may be a tragedy not because people did not or could not reconcile with one another but because people should not.[15] The crucial implications of such

[15] In reading John Shawcross's "Irony as Tragic Effect: Samson Agonistes as Tragedy of Hope" (in Calm of Mind, ed. Joseph Wittreich, Jr., Cleveland: Case Western Reserve, 1971) in conjunction with his essay on the definition of tragicomedy (in Renaissance Tragicomedy, ed. Maguire), I take it that he also

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

a refusal--in light of the double layered structure of Renaissance tragicomedy--must be registered in the second layer of the plot: God's forgiveness of Samson. By troubling the first component of the conventional tragicomic plot (mutual human forgiveness), Milton presses us to consider the repercussions on the second component of that plot (God's forgiveness of man). Hugh MacCallum has written, in his apt analysis of Samson's tragic imperfection:

> Nor is love a word [Samson] can use of his own response to God. His aim is to destroy idolatry and restore honor to God. This is the characteristic mission of prophets and leaders throughout the Old Testament, for whom adultery often stands for idolatry in what Milton calls the "borrow'd metaphor between God and man" (CPW II, p.673). The destruction of false worship opens up the possibility of truly loving God, but Samson does not appear to take that final step. His marriage, which has revived idolatry, ends in bitter divorce, so that human love is not allowed to function in a positive way as a metaphor for the relations between God and his church. (283)

Knowledge of Renaissance tragicomedy changes and deepens our sense of the significance of that missing metaphor. In

---

reads Samson Agonistes as a tragicomedy turned to tragedy. Shawcross, however, believes that tragicomedy turns to tragedy when the people do not act to help themselves. It is on this basis that he classes Euripides' tragicomedies as tragedies. In fact, Euripides' tragicomedies can be classified as tragedies not because people do not act to help themselves (allowing the deus ex machina to act for them) but, more specifically, because they do not act to reconcile themselves with one another, allowing the deus to accomplish the reconciliation for them at a point where they clearly would not have done it for themselves. This is true of Helen, Ion, Orestes, and Iphigenia at Aulis. In contrast to Shawcross, I believe that Samson Agonistes is tragic not only because of the chorus's passive and misplaced hope but because of the necessary thwarting of Samson and Dalila's reconciliation and the possible thwarting of Samson's reconciliation with God.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

tragicomedy, marriage depends on human forgiveness and resembles not so much man's love for God but God's love for man. De Doctrina Christiana (CPW VI:194) reassures us, and Paradise Lost (11:1-30) reassures us, regarding divine grace offered to those of sincere, contrite heart; but does Samson Agonistes reassure us? It seems to open rather than to close the question.

Milton, like his precursors in the genre of tragicomedy, does include a moment of dramatic power which strongly alludes to God's mercy through recognition of Christ's sacrifice. As Manoa and the Chorus listen to the fall of the temple of Dagon, they speak in language unmistakably marked by echoes of the Passion. Manoa begins with a seemingly offhand interjection, "Mercy of Heav'n," which sets up an expectation for a scene of mercy. Then, with such phrases as "universal groan," and "blood, death, and deathful deeds," the Chorus speaks the familiar topoi of the Crucifixion: all of nature and mankind let out a commiserating and self-regarding groan, and Christ's blood and death recall the first Adam's deathful deed (i.e. the act which brought about death for man).

> Manoa: Mercy of Heav'n what hideous noise was that!
> . . . .
>
> Chorus: Noise call you it or universal groan
> As if the whole inhabitation perish'd;
> Blood, death, and deathful deeds are in that noise,
> Ruin, destruction at the utmost point.
> (1509-14)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

By means of these echoes, Milton sets up an expectation for a shift into another key, a transition to the tone of mercy and forgiveness which this Passion should bring forth. Instead, however, while continuing to allude to the Passion in the line, "they have slain my Son," Milton conspicuously blocks any movement toward a thematics of forgiveness or mercy, offering only a truncated version of the Passion that never modulates from death to life:

> Manoa: Of ruin indeed methought I heard the noise,
> Oh it continues, they have slain my Son.
>
> Chorus: Thy Son is rather slaying them . . . (1515-17)

According to Renaissance and particularly tragicomic convention, the theme of God's forgiveness of man would be expressed by images of rest, of arriving safely at harbor from a turbulent voyage at sea. In many English Renaissance tragicomedies, particularly in Shakespeare's romances and in much of Fletcher, the sea occupies a significant place. It is the realm of chaos, chance, accident, loss, which also always throws man on the shore, towards recovery. Pericles would be the most visible example; but Shakespeare's Tempest, the first play in the 1623, 1632, and 1655 Folios and much revived along with Dryden's Tempest in the Restoration, contributed substantially to the conventionalization of the sea motif. The first two scenes of Shakespeare's Tempest give the movement of such a convention in miniature: in the first scene, a tempest that appears to be a stroke of fortune casts men

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

toward seeming death; in the following scene, the storm proves to be an arranged rather than a random occurrence, and we learn that the arranger holds the power to assuage.

Even while it helps to establish the convention, Shakespeare's Tempest slightly troubles the retrospective reading of chance events as Providential. In 3.3., when Ariel costumes himself as a Harpy, he becomes the spirit of vengeance who pronounces the tempest a scourge for the evil usurpation perpetrated by "the three from Milan." Speaking of their crimes. Ariel says, ". . . For which foul deed/ the powers, delaying, not forgetting, have/ Incens'd the seas and shores." The masque becomes a kind of theophany in which Ariel speaks with godly voice. He says, "You are three men of sin, whom Destiny . . ." and "I and my fellows/ Are ministers of Fate." But this theophany is deflated by Prospero's lines immediately following the vision: "Bravely the figure of this Harpy hast thou/ Perform'd my Ariel . . . ." After the grand illusion of the masque, Prospero's praise of Ariel sharply reminds us that the theophany was in fact staged not by a god but by Prospero. Alonso's "methought the billows spoke" only serves to heighten this reminder that we have witnessed not an appearance of a godly messenger but a theatrical performance staged by Prospero.

Dryden's Tempest or the Enchanted Isle eliminates any hint of a gap between Prospero and God (or Providence) as controlling force. His reduction of the scenes that involve the courtly party strictly refocusses the interest of that part of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the plot to a story of guilt, repentance, and pardon. The masque of sacred vengeance comes earlier and is clearer, more explicit, more focussed on moral retribution by Providential forces. At the end of Act 5, Dryden presents a huge elaborate masque of the sea becalmed, balancing the first storm scene. Intestine war, all war, all discord ceases. Violence is avoided by mutual pardons. The tying and the untying of knots--of plots, of marriages, of rulerships--has all been under the hand of Providence.

Moving in a diametrically opposed direction from Dryden's Enchanted Isle, Samson Agonistes grabs onto and focusses the Tempest's ambiguity of agency which quietly, almost marginally, disrupted the smooth story of a providential force at work. Milton's revision takes place by presenting his main character not as subject to tempests, or even as orchestrator of tempests, but as himself a tempest. Dalila constructs the image:

> I see thou [Samson] art implacable, more deaf
> To prayers, then winds and seas, yet winds to seas
> Are reconcil'd at length, and Sea to Shore:
> Thy anger, unappeasable, still rages
> Eternal tempest never to be calm'd. (960-64)

The accusation, of course, relies for its force on the anachronistic reference to Christ calming the seas: "And, behold, there arose a great tempest in the sea . . . then he arose, and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm" (Matthew 8:24 and 26). Dalila's suggestion--again reading anachronistically--is that Samson should be

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

considered an anti-Christ, that godly forces calm rather than prolong tempests. Dalila's questionable status as teller of truth presses us to take this biblical allusion as a demonic parody of a biblical text, but the story of the tempest does not end with Dalila's description of Samson.

In his narration of the climactic moment of destruction at the temple, the messenger again portrays Samson as tempest:

> As with the force of winds and waters pent
> When Mountains tremble, those two 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 . . . .
> (1647-1651)

In reading this portrait in terms of Renaissance drama, we should remember that in one of the dominant images in Renaissance drama (because one of the most dominant images in tragicomedy) tempest is pronounced retrospectively providential. In Samson Agonistes there is no place from which to retrospect. The place of retrospection is taken up by the chorus and Manoa, recorders and remembers whom most readers of this text do not consider reliable.[16] The final choral sonnet to "calm of mind" repeats most eloquently, but most uncertainly, the retrospective movement of tragicomedy

---

[16] See, for example, Louis Martz, "Chorus and Character in Samson Agonistes" (Milton Studies 1 (1969), pp. 115-34; John T. Shawcross, "Irony as Tragic Effect: Samson Agonistes and the Tragedy of Hope," in Calm of Mind, ed. Wittreich, pp. 289-305; Stanley Fish, "Spectacle and Evidence" (Critical Inquiry 15, 1989), pp. 237-64; Joan Bennett, Reviving Liberty (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

in which tempests are seen to have been both guided and assuaged by Providential forces. By moving so forcefully against any image of rest in his depiction of Samson and by undercutting the authority of the choral pronouncement of calm of mind, Milton has refused to provide the conventional tragicomic signals for God's forgiveness of man.

In revising the question that most interpreters ask of Samson Agonistes, in seeing Milton's focus to be the question of godly forgiveness rather than godly inspiration, I am placing Samson Agonistes in the context of one of the most crucial theological debates of the seventeenth century: the issues surrounding the perseverance of the saints. Calvinists argued that, once having attained a state of grace, an individual could not fall away totally nor finally; but Arminians argued that grace could be lost. Milton, it must be remembered, stood in an unusual position with regard to this debate. He opposed himself to both the Calvinists and the English Arminians (the Laudians), aligning himself more closely with the Dutch Arminian position. Milton thought that the attempt to unyoke election from faith, that is, to unyoke election and reprobation from an individual's faith (which for Milton included action) involved one in "perplexing and indeed, in repulsive and unreasonable doctrines" (CPW VI:180). Samson was a figure mentioned in the context of these debates:

> . . . although a justified man sinning was subject to God's wrath, there remained in him the 'seed of God' which 'would repaire him, as in water there remains a principle

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> of cold, even when it boyleth over, that will undoubtedly reduce it when the heate and fire is removed, as in Peter, David, Sampson and others'. God 'did not disinherit them and blot their names out of the Book of Life'. For if one cease to be a sonne because he commits a sin that doth deserve eternall death . . . we should be always out of sonshipp, and have neither certeinty nor comfort in our estate.' (Tyacke, 175)

The images of shipping, so prevalent in Samson (e.g. "My vessel trusted to me from above, /Gloriously rigg'd," 199-200) call forth the context of these doctrinal struggles. The metaphor of the vessel--vessel of wrath or grace--was tirelessly repeated by contenders for and against perseverence of the saints ("vessels made for contumely cannot become vessels of salvation"). It was Milton's position that, "even a genuine believer may sometimes fall irrecoverably" (CPW VI:508). "Obviously, if we grieve the Spirit, or if we quench that through which we are sealed, we must at the same time snuff out the assurance of our salvation" (CPW VI:505).

The tragicomedies of this period released and explored man's desire for salvation and transformation, and did this for the most part in the shape of man's desire for humankindness, for mutual human forgiveness, and in the shape of man's desire for divine redemption or pardon. Samson's refusal to completely forgive Dalila and the indeterminacy of God's forgiveness for Samson must be interpreted in this context. In the necessity of that refusal and in the unreadability of that godly pardon lie Milton's destruction of the terms of Renaissance tragicomedy. Milton's choice of "temple" (1370) and "theater" (1605) as translations for the Philistine's

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

gathering place ("beth," in Judges) clearly marks Samson's destruction of the Philistine temple as also simultaneously a destruction of a theater. We should not read that as Milton's turning against all kinds of theater, just as he does not turn against all kinds of temples, but I have tried to distinguish the kind of theater that he may be said to have been aiming to destroy.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Chapter 3

Waiting and Striking: Samson's Forebears in Renaissance Revenge Drama

John Andrews has already called our attention to the long list of parallels between the conventions of Renaissance revenge drama and Samson Agonistes,[1] and of all the dramatic sub-genres surely it is revenge drama that Milton's play most blatantly recalls. However, Andrews's work still leaves us in the dark about why this sub-genre would have been of special interest to Milton. The vague sense of many readers that Samson Agonistes is somehow Milton's own fantasy of revenge on the Royalists begs for a more refined reading of what the vernacular tradition would have provided as tool for Milton's portrayal of revenge. In 1671, the "godly" party was in the position of Hamlet and the other revengers from the tradition. Adherents to the Good Old Cause were now malcontents, forced to hide their dissent and their plans for future action. But if Samson Agonistes appears to suggest a future course of action, that suggestion can only be seen, and understood, as arising from a reflection upon the attempt at reformation during the preceding years. For such a review of the past, English revenge drama provided an apt means. Elizabethan and Jacobean stories of moral, well-intentioned reformers who, during the course of implementing reform, themselves fall into

[1]"'Dearly Bought Revenge': Samson Agonistes, Hamlet, and Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy," Milton Studies 13 (1979): 81-107.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

a kind of blunted moral consciousness mirror proleptically the transformation of the Puritan revolutionaries. English revenge dramas before the closing of the theaters depicted the tangled morality of individuals acting as ministers of God's justice. Samson Agonistes is one man's attempt to write a revenge tragedy after having witnessed and participated in a historical process in which whole sections of society thought of themselves as God's ministers.

It is my contention, then, that Milton would have been interested in the revenge tradition because that tradition had inscribed within it the painful conflicts inherent in any project of reformation. To establish some sense of those conflicts as they surfaced during the Civil War and Interregnum, it is worth recalling the words of those who began to be repelled by the force of a godly reformation mired in ungodly activities. In 1646 John Goodwin published Twelve Considerable Serious Cautions very necessary to be observed, in, and about a Reformation according to the Word of God. Wherein diverse particular inconsistencies with the word of God, very incident to Reformations (so called) are briefly insisted upon, and argued from the Word of God. Goodwin chose this sentence as his epigraph: "Adulterum est, impium est, sacrilegum est, quiquid humano furore instituitur, ut dispositio divina violetur." In keeping with this epigraph, the first of the twelve cautions gives this warning to reformers who wish to reform in accordance with God's word:

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> . . . take heed of admitting human passions into [your] consultations: For (as in James his Divinity) the wrath of man worketh not the righteousnesse of God, it subjects a man to an incapacity of doing that which is truly agreeable unto His will. (1)

Goodwin continued his definition of a godly reformer:

> [that reformer] must be free from all collaterall ingagements unto other patterns besides this Word of God . . . Now then, when Reformers shall look partly upon the Word of God, partly upon other Reformations, wherein it is a thousand to one, but there is some flesh, as well as spirit, they must needs (upon the supposition) bring forth a party-coloured Reformation. (5)
>
> . . . .
>
> [that reformer must be] no striker, no brawler, must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient; In meekness . . . Therefore certainly that Reformation which is froward, rough, peremptory, impatient, imperious, and will gather where it hath not strewed . . . by advancing it self by wayes, and methods, and practices that favour more of the subtility of the serpent, then the simplicity of Christ; . . . . (7)
>
> . . . .
>
> A Reformation (I say) that seeks to build it self an house with such polluted stones as these, certainly doth not build with God, nor God with it: The word of God knows no such art of building as this. (11)

Prompted by his outrage against the persecution of the sectarians, Goodwin spoke out against the infiltration of secular motives, private emotions, and violent methods in the activities of supposedly godly reformers.

The suggestion that Milton shared such an outrage becomes plausible when we remember that Goodwin and Milton

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

have been linked by both seventeenth-century and twentieth-century commentators. Early biographers of Milton seem to link these men because their books were called in and burned together and because they seemed to have received similar treatment when the Act of Oblivion came forth (see Darbishire 43; 74; 176-7; but also, against this, 260-71). In his detailed account of the range of religious belief in seventeenth-century England, the twentieth-century historian of theology, Dewey Wallace, classes Milton and Goodwin among the comparatively small number of those who held to a sectarian Arminianism as opposed to either a Laudian Arminianism or Cambridge Platonism (108; 130-2). Aside from his attacks on the Presbyterians and his comments in the "Digression" in the History of Britain (more about which later), Milton does not write as explicitly as Goodwin concerning the immorality of the reformers. His more circumspect stance may be due to his desire to work with and for the reformers during the Civil Wars and Interregnum and a disinclination to criticize those who were being persecuted after the Restoration. In Milton and the Experience of Defeat, Christopher Hill has argued persuasively for Milton's criticism of the revolutionary party, especially as that criticism appears in the major poems.[2] It seems safe to say, therefore, that Milton would have been in

---

[2] For an overview of the arguments concerning Milton's supposed repudiation of Cromwell and the Protectorate, see Robert Thomas Fallon, "Milton in the Anarchy, 1659-60: A Question of Consistency," SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 21.1 (1981): 123-146. Fallon argues that Milton does not repudiate either.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

agreement with the tenor of Goodwin's pamphlet.

Goodwin's subject in the pamphlet--the infiltration of secular motives, private emotions, and violent methods in a "godly" reformation--also served as the subject of revenge tragedies in the Renaissance. In play after play, revengers work as reformers to "set right" the moral flaws of their cultures. They discover, are amazed by, and then take arms against the "fallen" world. Revenge drama is partly an arena for lament, for feelings of disgust and mourning directed at the depravity of the world and of the men and women who inhabit it. The genre provides a space in which deep grief can be uttered, explored, expressed. The implications of such a state of deep grief, however, lean toward dangerous territory. The danger is that the revenger's actions will be born out of a despair of God; there is an implied rebuke of God's failure to redress wrongs, out of which the revenger begins to act on his own behalf. In this way, the despair of the revenger bleeds over, tainting his relationship with God. One of the Senecan tag lines used by Marston and Webster in their revenge tragedies expresses succinctly and directly a movement from despair of God to alliance with the forces of evil: *Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo* (If I cannot direct/turn [the eyes of] the Gods above, I will move the infernal regions). In that pivot begins the revenger's degradation.

If we begin with the juxtaposition of violent method and godly purpose, it will easily be seen that the revenge tradition decisively attempts to foment discomfort in its audience on

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

just this issue. At the same time that Renaissance revenge tragedy elicits and fulfills our desire for violent redress, it asks us to be troubled by violence used as an instrument of reformation. In a consideration of the self-consciousness with which revenge drama treats violence, the inset speech where Hamlet describes Pyrrhus provides a glittering example:

> The rugged Pyrrhus, he whose sable arms,
> Black as his purpose, did the night resemble
> When he lay couched in the ominous horse,
> Hath now this dread and black complexion smear'd
> With heraldry more dismal. Head to foot
> Now is he total gules, horridly trick'd
> With blood of fathers, mothers, daughters, sons,
> Bak'd and impasted with the parching streets,
> That lend a tyrannous and a damned light
> To their lord's murder. Roasted in wrath and fire,
> And thus o'ersized with coagulate gore,
> With eyes like carbuncles, the hellish Pyrrhus
> Old grandsire Priam seeks. (2.2.448-460)[3]

The passage which follows this description clearly reveals the link between such a ghastly, doomsday-like figure and the fall of civilization. The pause, the sword up-poised and motionless, image of Hamlet's delay, is a pause filled with a listening to the sounds of destruction.

> . . . Pyrrhus at Priam drives, in rage strikes wide;
> But with the whiff and wind of his fell sword
> Th'unnerved father falls. Then senseless Ilium,
> Seeming to feel this blow, with flaming top
> Stoops to his base, and with a hideous crash
> Takes prisoner Pyrrhus' ear. For lo, his sword,
> Which was declining on the milky head

---

[3] All quotations from Hamlet are taken from the Arden edition, Harold Jenkins,ed., (Metheun, 1982).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Of reverend Priam, seem'd i'th'air to stick'
> So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,
> And like a neutral to his will and matter,
> Did nothing.
> But as we often see against some storm
> A silence in the heavens, the rack stand still,
> The bold winds speechless, and the orb below
> As hush as death, anon the dreadful thunder
> Doth rend the region; so after Pyrrhus' pause
> Aroused vengeance sets him new awork,
> And never did the Cyclops' hammers fall
> On Mars's armour, forg'd for proof eterne,
> With less remorse than Pyrrhus' bleeding sword
> Now falls on Priam. (2.2.468-488)

Like Hamlet's own delay, Pyhrrus's is difficult to read. I think, however, that we must read his pause as motivated by a hesitation to wreak destruction on civilization and on humans; this reading seems justified by the later reference to "with less remorse" which indicates that it was "remorse" (pity or conscience) that had held him back. Certainly the next, and final, passage in the inset speech, and one significantly spoken not by Hamlet but by the player, asks us to contemplate the human effects of revenge, asks us to feel pity for Hecuba. Her plight and her mourning "would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven . . ." (2.2.513), i.e. would have made that punishing ("burning") heavenly force of correction pity its own victims. Hamlet, of course, takes this part of the speech as a cue to increase his own passion for revenge (or at least for acting), not his passion for pity. But the audience, I believe, is being asked to take the speech otherwise, to consider remorse, pity, and compassion. By following the description of Pyhrrus,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the figure of revenge, with the narration of Hecuba, the quintessential object of pity in the Renaissance, Shakespeare sets up as violently contrastive partners revenge and pity. The play as a whole asks us to do the same when we see the victims of revenge, particularly Ophelia.

"Pity" is not the only, or even necessarily the primary, sign of a current that runs counter to revenge in Hamlet. The shade of meaning in "remorse" that aligns it with "conscience" has been explored by Catherine Belsey in her essay, "The Case of Hamlet's Conscience." Belsey reports on the medieval and sixteenth-century dramatic heritage which aligns revenge with wrath and aligns the drawing back from revenge with conscience (particularly with the contemplation of the consequences for the revenger in the afterlife). In tracing the lineage of revenge as Wrath, Belsey comments:

> One part of [Hamlet's] nature is committed, because he loved his father and because he is outraged by his mother's incest and his uncle's villainy, to passionate, mindless vengeance. That is the Hamlet who would outrant the Player, "make mad the guilty and appal the free" (2.2.557); who castigates himself with his own inaction and calls it unmanly cowardice (2.2.565-83); who falls a cursing like Moros, "Bloody, bawdy, villain. . ." (2.2.575); and who asserts, like Wrath, that "rightly to be great / Is . . . greatly to find quarrel in a straw (4.4.53-3). The language of these passionate, self-castigating soliloquies is often crude and blustering, and the values they express fall little short of those of Pyrrhus, drenched with blood. [. . .] The imagery of vengeance is gross: "Now could I drink hot blood" (3.2.380); "I should have fatted all the region kites/ With this slave's offal" (2.2.574-5). [. . . Revenge] is crude, extravagant, and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

wildly in excess of justice. (140)

Belsey describes a tradition of ranting that would signal the audience of a revenge drama to suspect the protagonist.[4] The suspicion that the revenger acts out of wrath conflicts with our sense that he is performing a heroic, noble, act of liberation; this is a conflict that is endemic to the construction of revenge tragedy in the Renaissance, a conflict that reappears in Samson Agonistes.

Reading Samson Agonistes with this tension in mind, we may very well decide that Samson describes himself as a "moving grave" not only because he feels himself too dejected to be considered one of the living, and not only because he should be considered spiritually "dead," but also because he will "over heaps of slaughtered walk his way" (1530). In The Revenger's Tragedy, Vindice feels himself to be a walking ghoul; and this image, which begins by marking him as one who survives himself in a living death due to deep grief, later indicates his status as Death, as the one who spreads death throughout the court.[5] Milton seems directly to mark Samson

---

[4] One of the signals may have been the word "resolution," which Belsey points out almost always has a wrathful connotation in Shakespeare. The word reappears with emphasis in Samson Agonistes at lines 732, 1344, and 1410. In Milton's prose and poetry, "resolution" itself is not a quality that can be applauded without an examination of what one is "resolved" of. The Shakespearean use of resolution merely presses us to avoid--as we should do anyway--any tendency to pronounce Samson's "resolution" good in itself. See especially Coriolanus where "resolution" appears to rise out of personal shame and results in brutality.

[5] The suggestion that the revenger is a "dismal" figure gives these plays an apocalyptic tone. Linda Hoff (Hamlet's Choice, Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) has pressed this reading to its ultimate conclusion in reading Hamlet as "a

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

as a figure of the descent to barbarism in the description of his past exploits:

> [He] by main force pull'd up, and on his shoulders bore
> The Gates of Azza, Post, and massie Bar
> Up to the Hill of Hebron, seat of Giants old,
> No journey of a Sabbath day . . . (146-9)

That is, he took the gates of the city, the sign of civilization, and returned them to the "seat of Giants old," the site of barbarism. That the action took place on the Sabbath is a Miltonic addition to the biblical text, and thus demands that we pause to register what Milton thought the Sabbath signified. In De Doctrina Christiana he stipulates five meanings: 1) a memorial to God's creation; 2) a sign to distinguish the Israelites from other nations; 3) a provision for the rest of slaves and cattle; 4) a remembrance of the liberation from Egypt; 5) a shadow or type of things to come (i.e. sabbath rest or eternal repose in heaven) (CPW 6.705-7). To call attention to Samson's transgression against this day of rest may be to indicate his Christian liberty; however, it might just as easily indicate (using the relevant numbers above) that Samson is 1) a destroyer rather than a creator, 2) inmixed with the Philistines, 3) not a granter of relief to the unfortunates among his people, 4) not a liberator of his people,

---

reformation allegory" in which Hamlet represents the "final prince" of the Second Coming. Hoff's interpretation is important corroboration for the view that a contemporary audience would have associated revengers with reformers. But to read Hamlet, or other revenge plays, only on this level cancels too easily the distinction between revenger and divine avenger, erasing the primary tension of the genre.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

5) moving backward from the eternal repose in heaven.

Most tellingly, however, Milton takes up the issue of the use of force, the use of violence, in the order with which he places his episodes. If one reads the confrontation with Harapha as a temptation to violence,[6] Samson has failed to resist the final temptation. The catastrophe at the Temple of Dagon is sharply linked with the Harapha episode by the wording of Samson's threat to Harapha: Samson promises that he will "with one buffet lay thy structure low" (1239), exactly what Samson does in the climactic scene. So, the stakes for interpreting the Harapha episode are high. Samson's tone indicates his failure to resist the temptation of violence. His tone merely repeats, without any sense of progressive knowledge or maturity, his parting words to Dalila, "Not for thy life, lest fierce remembrance wake/ My sudden rage to tear thee joint by joint" (952-3). Samson parts from Harapha similarly, "Go . . . lest I . . . swing thee in the Air, then dash thee down/ To th'hazard of thy brains and shatter'd sides" (1237-41). Patrides would like to read his blustering as comic; Radzinowicz would like to forget about this blustering and label all of Samson's speech the language of reason; while Grose would like to cast such speech as clever disguise, appropriate to the addressee but not indicative of Samson's own spirit. However, in the context of the Renaissance revenge tradition, it seems more likely that Samson's ranting

---

[6] As John Shawcross reads the episode in "Irony as Tragic Effect," in Calm of Mind, ed. Wittreich, 292.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

language aligns itself with the ranting of the wrathful revenger. In the use of such ranting, Milton draws our attention to the problematics of the tension between godly reformation and wrathful ranting that revenge plays have always taken as their territory. The tradition of revenge drama makes it impossible for us to brush aside this ranting as if it were innocent of implication, of no consequence.

For a reinforcement of this reading, one must also examine Samson's final explanation of his past to Harapha, where the issue of force becomes explicit. Samson tells, in brief, the story of his wedding to the Timnian woman and then explains:

> When I perceiv'd all set on enmity,
> As on my enemies, where ever chanc'd,
> I us'd hostility, and took thir spoil
> To pay my underminers in thir coin.
> My Nation was subjected to your Lords.
> It was force of Conquest; force with force
> Is well ejected when the Conquer'd can. (1201-1207)

"To pay my underminers in thir coin," a phrasal definition of the code of revenge, indicates that even near the end of the play, Samson is still defending his past in terms of the ethic of revenge. Consonant with Belsey's discussion of the tradition, the act of revenge to which Samson refers gives a story of excessive violence rather than measured justice. The revenge Samson wreaks does not repay in equal measure but explodes violence exponentially. The wedding guests used guile against Samson; in return, Samson uses force. It is true

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

that in the biblical account, and in Samson Agonistes, the guests threaten death to the bride; but in the context of a discussion of the justification for the use of force, it seems a curious elision to ignore the distinction between the threat of force (used by the guests) and the use of a widened (i.e. incommensurate) force (by Samson against the thirty men of Ashkalon). If the force of the conquerer is here brought in to justify Samson's actions, one must wonder why the story of the wedding, where a private cause for revenge is engendered, is necessary at all to the justification. In any case, Milton, in choosing to locate Samson's defense of violence in this particular episode of his past, uses one of the most oft repeated images of the degenerate revenger: the reformer who "strikes wide."

Striking wide, succumbing to an indiscriminate choice of object, quickly became a standard feature of Renaissance revenge drama. Allied with the Senecan portrayal of revenge as always necessarily excessive, as an overgoing one's predecessors in crime, the revenge drama portrayed every revenger as running amok with the desire to reform by revenge. In Antonio's Revenge, Antonio sets off on this course by choosing to kill Pietro's innocent son, Julio:

> O that I knew which joint, which side which limb,
> were father all, and had no mother in't
> That I might rip it, vein by vein, and carve revenge
> in bleeding rases! But since 'tis mix'd together,
> Have at adventure, pell-mell, no reverse!
>
> (Marston, 3.1.165)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The revenge, arising from Antonio's moral urge to set right the injustices of Piero's tyrannic rule, is clearly too wide. In Hamlet, too, the ghost warns Hamlet to confine his revenge, to stop short of working harm to Gertrude. The issue reappears in Hamlet's rewriting of the sealed commission to the King of England. For, why was it necessary for Hamlet to change Claudius's wording of the directive for Hamlet's own death, which argued great speed, rather than simply to alter the names on that directive? The first message demanded "on the supervise, no leisure bated, / No, not to stay the grinding of the axe,/ [Hamlet's] head should be struck off" (5.2.23-25). But Hamlet rewords the commission: "That on the view and knowing of these contents,/ Without debatement further more or less, /He should those bearers put to sudden death,/ Not shriving-time allow'd" (5.2.44-47). In this way Shakespeare raises the issue of the degrees of revenge by raising the question of a "more or less"; that is, is death perhaps too much, and further, is death "whithout shriving time" too much?

In fact, the code of "an eye for an eye" works to limit the excesses or widening of revenge by demanding that revenge be commensurate with injury. It is entirely possible that Shakespeare, in using the undersong of the Cain story in his own play, may be jogging the audience's memory about such a limitation placed on revenge; Cain's mark did not signal iniquity, but served to warn potential avengers to desist from wreaking their own vengeance on Cain (Genesis 4:15). So that, although the New Testament can be seen as erasing God's

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

permission for human revenge, even the Old Testament developed a code to prevent the spiralling of excesses that revenge invites. The increasing freneticism with which Jacobean revenge plays move to their conclusion, the ever widening murders that whirl the plays toward their end, is heightened in revenge drama far more than in other kinds of tragedies of the period. The very structure of these Jacobean plays--with their continual increase in the speed and frequency of action--emphasize the problematic linkage between moral revenge and excessive means.

The revenge genre's problematizing of violence, wrath, and excess in a work of reformation comes into sharpest focus when, in this increasingly frenetic movement, exultation and horror converge.[7] As a rule, revenge dramas harbor, or rather chafe, a discrepancy between emotional response (the sense of fantastic release) and moral judgment (the sense of violence as excessive).[8] The revenger is "refreshed" by thoughts of, and then the implementation of, his revenge. Antonio's self-description in Marston's Antonio's Revenge provides a clear, if less than subtle, example:

> O my soul's enthroned
> In the triumphant chariot of revenge.
> Methinks I am all air and feel no weight
> of human dirt clog. (3.2.80-84)

---

[7] The echoes of Senecan horror and exultation that reappear in Renaissance revenge tragedy heighten doubts about the morality of the revenger's actions.
[8] For a fuller description of this tension, see Richard Brucher, "Fantasies of Violence," SEL 21 (1981): 257-70.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Then will I dance and whirl about the air
Methinks I am all soul, all heart, all spirit.
(5.2.47- 8)

This juxtaposition of reviving spirits and violent revenge comprises the apparent plot line of Samson Agonistes: a man subject to grave despair undergoes a rebirth or regeneration linked with a great act of revenge. The linkage between these two "events"--rebirth and revenge--has always given rise to a certain sense of disturbance or discomfort in the minds of Milton's readers. Milton seems to invite this kind of disturbance, and our contemplation of it in, for example, the sharpness of the following transition:

Chrous: What if his eye-sight (for to Israel's God
Nothing is hard) by miracle restor'd,
He now be dealing dole among his foes,
And over heaps of slaughter'd walk his way.
Manoa: That were a *joy* presumptuous to be thought.
(1527-31; italics mine)

The sheer joy that rises from revenge, the sense of release from one's despair, is evident here. The "dole" which John Shawcross glosses in his edition of Samson Agonistes as "both 'alms' and 'pain,'" may be used by commentators as a signal that Milton thinks of the suffering inflicted by Samson as ultimately a kind of beneficial act, a gift of alms. However, there is no guarantee that the pun marks a conflation of suffering and benefit rather than a drawing of attention to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

divergence. The generic context presses us to opt for the latter choice.

The disjunction in Samson Agonistes between the promise of a "breath of Heav'n fresh-blowing, pure and sweet" (10), "consolation from above/ secret refreshings" (664-5) and the act of violence that is associated with relief, assuagement, and reinvigoration repeats a disjunction in earlier revenge dramas. The chorus's spiritualization of Samson in its image of him as phoenix at the moment of his revenge, and the critics' spiritualization of Samson as "inspired," has a precedent in these earlier dramas. The generic convention of a clash between spiritual flight and the excessive violence which engenders it gives license to the critic of Samson Agonistes to consider the similar tension in Milton's tragedy as purposeful intention rather than anomolous, superfluous, unexpected effect. If critics are periodically struck by doubt about foisting on Milton the twentieth-century critics' sensibility regarding violence, one need only look at the self-consciousness with which revenge dramas treated the subject of violence to reassure oneself that Milton shared our concern.

Far from cleansing his revenge story of the moral perplexity involved in revenge, Milton chooses as his revengeful figure the very man who would be certain to raise the issues of excess, violence, crudeness, and wrath.[9] The

---

[9] See Wittreich (Interpreting *Samson Agonistes*, 174-239) for a detailed account of seventeenth-century interpretations of Samson. Those

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

terrible mixture of these qualities in the godly revenger is exactly what Milton witnessed during the Interregnum. The bind in which the Puritans found themselves--dependent on the military to defend their cause against the majority of the population--excruciatingly heightened the tension between the violent means and the pacific ends of their endeavour. So did all of the politic maneuvering, the factional struggles, the purging and vindictive "justice" of the operations of the godly party when its members were scrambling to reach and then to retain power. Even very early on in the struggle "it was not safe for any man in a public place to utter a word against Parliament" (Wedgewood, 65). The King's accusations against the "iniquitous taxes imposed by Parliament without consent of the subject, the confiscations of property and the arbitary imprisonments" (Wedgewood, 155) were eventually accusations voiced by those who were otherwise in support of the revolutionaries.

No one who sincerely took the part of the "godly" in the Puritan Revolution could fail to be deeply dismayed by the terrible discrepancy between the purity of purpose and the baseness of the means; that discrepancy served as one of the crucial subjects of Renaissance revenge tragedy. The observer of a Renaissance revenge drama was asked to keep constantly in mind the clash of violence and godly purpose:

---

interpretations included censure of Samson for "his continual backsliding, his retaliatory spirit, his wanton lust, his becoming inured to blood and violence, [and] his quick beckoning to what he presumes to be divine promptings" (218).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Antonio [having bound Piero and plucked out his tongue]:
I have't Pandulpho; the veins panting bleed,
Trickling fresh gore about my fist . . . .

Andrugio: Blest be thy hand.

(Marston, Antonio's Revenge 5.2.65- 8)

This terrifying clash must have made the genre alluring to Milton. The tragic nature of revenge drama and the tragic unfolding of the Puritan revolution rests upon the same sharp point: the reformer redresses moral wrongs but finds it impossible to do so by using moral action.

ii

Milton's disgust with the godly reformers is recorded in The Digression to The History of Britain where he writes:

> Britain . . . as it is a land fruitful enough of men stout and couragious in warr, so is it naturallie not over fertil of men able to govern justlie & prudently in peace.[10]
> (CPW 5:451)

Gary D. Hamilton, in discussing The History of Britain and its Restoration audience, succinctly draws the connection between the historical survey and the present times:

---

[10] Sensitivity to such a problem would make The Book of Judges--where Judges are both warrior/deliverers in times of war and governors in times of peace--a natural point of interest for Milton. The Renaissance dramatic tradition includes several plays that explore such a problem, including Shakespeare's Coriolanus.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> The History, though ostensibly incomplete, conveys a sense of completion by pushing ever forward to a supreme punishment for a whole nation--the Norman conquest, an event that represented to many critics of the Stuarts the beginning of the abhorrent notion of king as feudal landlord . . . . For some 1670 readers, the future that Milton warned against had already come to be; the past (the fall of the Britons and Saxons due to factionalism and slothful clergy) was but an image of England's recent history, a point which Milton's suppressed Digression would only have made more explicit. (246-7)

In summing up his narrative of the events of recent years, Milton clearly considers timing to be central to any work of reformation.

> Thus they who but of late were extolld as great deliverers, and had a people wholy at thir devotion, by so discharging thir trust as wee see, did not onley weak'n and unfitt themselves to be dispencers of what libertie they pretented (sic), but unfitted also the people, now growne worse & more disordinate, to receave or to digest any libertie at all. For stories teach us that libertie sought out of season in a corrupt and degenerate age brought Rome it self into further slaverie.
> (CPW 5:449)

As French Fogle comments in his introduction to The Digression:

> The logical conclusion follows that the times were not right for the establishing of liberty, that the leaders were lacking, and that therefore the effort was bound to fail, since "libertie sought out of season in a corrupt and degenerate age" could only bring a nation into further slavery. This would seem to imply that the effort should not even have been made, the times not being propitious. The ancient Britons should have accepted stoically the inevitability of their subjugation, and the contemporary

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> English should have submitted placidly to the continued tyranny of king and prelate, since liberty, with its "sharp and double edge," to such dissolute people could only be "a mischief unwieldie in thir own hands." The logic of such a conclusion might conceivably satisfy a "pure" historian, but it can only be seen as flatly contradictory to every principle and every cause to which Milton had devoted his previous public life. The antiprelatical pamphlets and the tracts dealing with domestic liberty had advocated an unceasing pursuit of strenuous liberty and had proclaimed a sublime confidence in England's ability to achieve it. The fatalism implicit in the conclusion is obviously inconsistent with the temperament and convictions Milton has revealed elsewhere.
>
> (CPW 5:423)

Although others have since proposed alternative explanations,[11] Fogle believed that the suppression of such an inconsistency would have been one of the primary reasons that Milton deleted the Digression from the 1670 edition of his History (CPW 5. 426). There is another explanation for the deletion of the Digression which still takes account of such a vital inconsistency. What if Milton remained concerned with the question of timing, of waiting for the right time? What if, among other reasons, he deleted the analysis of "timing" in the Digression not because he was ready to jettison completely the idea of fatalism but because he was presenting in his 1671 volume of the joint publication of Samson Agonistes and

---

[11]See Austin Woolrych, "The Date of the Digression in Milton's History of Britain," in Richard Ollard and Pamela Tudor-Craig, eds., For Veronica Wedgwood These: Studies in Seventeenth-Century History (London: Collins, 1986). Woolrych explains the deletion by noting that Milton would not have wanted to persecute still further by his own accusations men who had already been subjected to persecution by the new regime.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Paradise Regained a more refined resolution of such a contradiction between fatalism and action?

Revenge tragedy takes as its special field of speculation the question of timing in a work of reformation. The most important source[s] for Hamlet (Saxo and Belleforest) give the mythic image of the revenger sitting by the fire, covered with ashes, sharpening the points of sticks, biding his time.[12] He waits until a series of events enables him to feel the euphoria of the conjunction of his own will and the world, opening his way to revenge. As Robert Chamberlain wrote in 1638: "Devilish is that disposition which to wait an opportunity of revenge, will seeme to rake up its malice in the cinders of oblivion; but when the time serves will not stick to give fire to the whole heap of its hell-bred mischief" (quoted in Bowers, Revenge,121). Chamberlain characterizes waiting as devilish, but the writers of revenge tragedy did not, or at least not quite so easily. The foil characters in revenge tragedies are arranged across a continuum of alternatives of waiting. Horatio in Hamlet, Pandulpho in Antonio's Revenge, Cornelia in The White Devil, Charlemont in The Atheist's Tragedy articulate various philosophies of patience, suffering, waiting, stoicism that never appear to be quite sufficient. It is as if revenge tragedies present a crux in which neither calmness nor rage, waiting nor action appear to be the correct response. It is to this exfoliation of kinds of waiting in

---

[12] See Sir Israel Gollancz, ed. and intro. The Sources of Hamlet (NY: Octagon Books, 1967), 103; 193-9.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Renaissance revenge tragedy that Milton turned in trying to represent his own thinking on the timing of reformation.

In thinking about the question of waiting in revenge drama, I have found it useful to return to an earlier generation of Shakespearean critics. Here is Fredson Bowers in his essay, "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge":

> . . . is [Hamlet] to be the private-revenger scourge <u>or</u> the public-revenger minister? If scourge, he will make his own opportunities, will revenge murder with murder, and by this means visit God's wrath on corruption. If minister, God will see to it that a proper opportunity is offered in some way that will keep him clear from crime, one which will preserve him to initiate a good rule over Denmark. . . . Hamlet at the start finds himself in this peculiarly depressing position. He has been set aside from other human beings as an agent of God to set right the disjointed times, and he may reasonably assume from the circumstances of the ghostly visitation that he is a minister. Every private emotion urges him to a personal revenge of blood as the only means of solving his problem, and this revenge seems enforced by the secrecy of the original crime. But if he acts thus, he will be anticipating God's will, which in its good time will provide the just opportunity. If he anticipates and revenges, he risks damnation. If he does not revenge, he must torture himself with his seeming incompetence. . . . With these considerations in mind, the two months' delay between the Ghost's visitation and the next appearance of Hamlet in Act II may seem to have more validity than certain rather bloodthirsty critics will allow. I suggest that this delay, which Shakespeare never explicitly motivates, was caused not alone by rising doubts of the Ghost, or by the physical difficulties of getting at Claudius, or by the repugnance of a sensitive young man to commit an act of murder, or by his examining the circumstances so over-scrupulously as to become lost in the mazes of thought, motive, and doubt; but instead as much as anything by Hamlet as minister waiting on the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> expected opportunity which should be provided him, and not finding it. (745)

Although a later critic has rightfully taken exception to Bowers's ascribing any kind of certainty to the connotations of "minister" and "scourge,"[13] and although Bowers himself in his book on revenge tragedy tends to diminish the tension involved in the revenger's "case of conscience," his description of revenge tragedy as a kind of "waiting" retains its usefulness. Tourneur's The Atheist's Tragedy corroborates this reading of revenge tragedy as the difficult struggle to "rest" in God's Providence. D'Amville presumptuously takes on the status of providential force by striving to order his own world as a god; in contrast Charlemont waits on God's providence, allowing God to accomplish revenge.[14] Tourneur provides us with at least one example of a later reader and imitator of Hamlet, previous to Milton, who sees the subject of revenge tragedy as the story of an individual's success or failure in waiting and acting according to the will of God. What is important to keep in mind is the difficulty of this "waiting," for it demands not inaction but a kind of stillness within action, a stillness that marks a receptiveness to reading God's will. And for this reason, Tourneur's "solution" would have been unacceptable to Milton, because Charlemont opts for patience as inaction. Both

---

[13] R.W. Dent, "Hamlet: Scourge and Minster," Shakespeare Quarterly 29: 82-84.

[14] For an extended pertinent discussion of providence in this play, see R.J. Kauffmann, "Theodicy, Tragedy, and the Psalmist: Tourneur's Atheist's Tragedy" in Drama in the Renaissance: Comparative and Critical Essays ed. Clifford Davidson, C.J. Gianakaris, John H. Stroupe (NY: AMS, 1986).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Charlemont's and D'Amville's pronouncements at the end of the play make it clear that Tourneur is leaving very little space for human iniative. When D'Amville strikes himself with the ax, he declares that "[God] commanded it./ To tell thee that mans wisedome is a foole" (254). Charlemont's response sums up his attitude during the play:

> Onely to Heav'n I attribute the worke
> Whose gracious motives made me still forbeare
> To be mine owne Revenger. Now I see,
> That, Patience is the honest mans revenge. (255)

The result of such an empty waiting on man's part must be a corresponding highly dramatic appearance on the part of God (who presumably guides the axe).

Such an attitude would have been entirely understandable to those who had passed through the Civil Wars, Interregnum, and Restoration. After all, it seems probable that there would have been tremendous sensitivity to the problematics of initiating any action when, at the Restoration, the grand human iniatives toward completing the reformation seemed to have been reversed. To opt for a form of patience that implied inaction on the part of man and dramatic action in the "consequence," at the finale, on the part of God would have been seductive. Milton includes in his 1671 volume such a story, but he does so in a context that subverts this attraction to the dramatic.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

On the most basic level, I believe, Milton would have seen the space of a revenge drama as in fact a long prelude to an act of reformation. That prelude is taken up with a self-consciousness--or else a conspicuous absence of self-consciousness--about the relation between an individual's action and God's will. Much as Goodwin wanted each reformer to keep checking himself against God's Word, the protagonist of a revenge drama must ask how one can know whether or not one's actions accord with God's will. Hamlet opens with the troubling speech act of a man, who, when asked to "Stand and unfold yourself," identifies himself by saying, "Long live the King" (1.1.3); and Shakespeare's play is partly a consideration of the extent to which one's identity can be folded up in the identity of the being one serves (father, King, or God). In Hamlet's response to the ghost in 1.5, he promises to erase himself and replace himself with the ghost's "word." It cannot have struck Milton as anything less than a stupendous error for Hamlet to say:

> . . . Remember thee?
> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
> That youth and observation copied there,
> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain,
> Unmix'd with baser matter. Yes, by heaven! (1.5.97-104)

However Shakespeare meant for us to take this vow, the use of "table" which must remind a devout reader of the two tables of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

stone on which the ten commandments were written, the reinforcement of this connotation by Hamlet's reference to the ghost's words as a "commandment," and the mention of "book" in the following line, must have seemed to Milton as if Hamlet were throwing away the Scriptures, the only possible guide to his determining how and when to act. That Hamlet also uses the word "table" for his own writing tablets only serves to reinforce this point; for a Protestant the table of one's memory and the tablet one uses for writing and the tablets of the commandments and the tables of Scripture should, ideally, conflate.

It is the speed with which Hamlet embraces the idea of revenge, the speed with which he imagines acting his revenge, that prompts this casting away of the rule or measure by which he might regulate his reformation. Hamlet's first response to the ghost excludes any hint of waiting. He is the picture of earnestness and zealotry: "Haste me to know't, that I with wings as swift/As meditation or the thoughts of love/ May sweep to my revenge" (1.5.29-31). Later, however, the intensity of his concern with timing, with not being too precipitous, reveals itself. This concern surfaces as a subtle distinguishing made at a moment that emotions and drama are wrought to a high pitch, the moment that, on the edge of confronting his mother, he kills Polonius. Gertrude's response, "O what a rash and bloody deed is this" (3.4.26), Hamlet emends to, "A bloody deed . . . ." With such an emendation, Hamlet declares himself as waiting. And this declaration is crucial,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

for in the word "rash" must be read all of the wrath, excess and violence discussed in the previous section of this essay. To be "rash" would signal Hamlet's degradation from godly reformer to villain.

In fact, "rashness" is in transition in the play--it is moving from a positon as indicator of wrath to serving as an indicator of godly sanction. The transition occurs during the sea voyage. During that voyage, Hamlet embraces the idea of rashness. He "cleanses" rashness from its imputation of wrath by reading and interpreting events as providential. The religious connotation of "seal" (Horatio: How was this seal'd?/ Hamlet: Why, even in that was heaven ordinant" (5.2.47-8)) as the "seal" of the elect further defines the kind of "reading" in which Hamlet is engaged. In working up to this moment of election, Hamlet says: "Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting/ That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay/ Worse than the mutines in the bilboes" (mutineers in iron shackles; 5.2.4-6). Hamlet does not explain what fight he is engaged in, but it seems likely that any reader attuned to the controversies about grace in the seventeenth century would have read this description as a "working out one's salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12; CPW 6. [ ]), as a movement from a position of slavery to one of freedom. Hamlet, himself, interprets the series of events to mean that his rashness is guided by Providence ("Rashly--And prais'd be rashness for it" (5.2.6-7); "There's a divinity that shapes our ends,/ Rough-hew them how we will" (5.2.10-11)).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Hamlet's vision of himself as one who is acting, in spite of his own "deep plots," in consonance with providence and towards the salvation of his soul has a troubling undercurrent. As we have seen, Hamlet's belief in providential ordering has served to cleanse "rashness." And, in the graveyard interchange with Laertes, Hamlet clears himself of a rashness that would be attached to spleen:

> Hamlet. This is I,
> Hamlet the Dane.
>
> Laer. [grappling with him] The devil take thy soul!
>
> Hamlet. Thou pray'st not well.
> I prithee take thy fingers from my throat,
> For though I am not splenative and rash,
> Yet have I in me something dangerous,
> Which let thy wiseness fear. Hold off thy hand. (5.1.250-56)

The moment bears a resemblance to Samson's own declarations before his final act. Samson, too, would like to clear himself of any charge of rashness that is not a divine rashness and declares himself the potential worker of something dangerous, which wisdom should fear (1265-7; 1347). To some extent the regenerationist reading of Samson depends on trusting that Samson has achieved this equilibrium. Witness Mary Ann Radzinowicz's comparison of Samson taking leave of the chorus "gently and magnanimously, thoughtful of them in the plangent calmness of all tragic heroes parting from men to meet their destiny--Faustus taking leave of the scholars, Hamlet of Horatio, Oedipus of his children" (53). The problem

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

in Hamlet is that Hamlet's clearing himself of the charge of splenetive rashness immediately precedes the extended set of "ranting" lines in which he declares his love and his grief for Ophelia. How, then, are we to take Hamlet's claim to differentiate divine and splenetive rashness? The uncertainty of Hamlet's differentiation of rashness from wrath does not disappear. In his "rash" choice to accept the King's offer to fight Laertes, Hamlet continues to read his own "timing" as in the hands of providence, while the audience is left to wonder who it is that Hamlet serves ("I am constant to my purposes, they follow the King's pleasure," [5.2.196-7]). The continuing difficulties reappear at the end of the interchange between Osric and Hamlet: Osric: "Shall I deliver you so?/ Hamlet: "To this effect, sir, after what flourish your nature will." The various resonances of the word "deliver" are dizzying (to set free or release; to get rid of; to surrender; to give up to an evil fate; to hand over legally or formally); but the meat of the matter is that one man serves the will of another along with a "flourish" that comes from his own nature. It is the nature of that flourish and its possible deviance from the will of the master that is at issue.

In the theological terms of the seventeenth century, the question is one of the assurance of one's election.[15] The means by which Hamlet believes himself to be elect would

---

[15] For an account of the significance of this issue in the controversies surrounding grace and predestination, see Dewey Wallace, Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology, 1525-1695 (U of North Carolina P, 1982).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

have come under scrutiny by a reader such as Milton. The sense that Hamlet is undergoing a regeneration and believes that he is serving the will of God and the doubts about whether or not he is correct in his sense of his own election would have become, for Milton, inevitably, a question of assurance. To cleanse a revenge play of the impurities of the tradition, as John Andrews argued that Milton did in Samson Agonistes, an author would have to clear his protagonist from a charge of rashness by demonstrating the assurance of his election.

Before turning to Samson Agonistes, let us follow Shakespeare's lead and use Laertes as foil in order further to characterize Hamlet's rashness and his assurance. Here is Laertes, in his own rash vow of revenge:

> Conscience and grace, to the profoundest pit!
> I dare damnation. To this point I stand,
> That both the worlds I give to negligence,
> Let come what comes, only I'll be reveng'd
> Most throughly for my father. (4.5.132-5)

This is a kind of openness to the future, running into the future with open arms ("let come what comes"); but the stance of openness is without thought or rather thought is totally taken up by the idea of revenge. "Conscience" the faculty which distinguishes right from wrong, the faculty which makes one fear the eternal consequences of wrong action, and "grace," the possibility of pardon or redemption, are thrown away to arrive at this openness. The vaccuum which is thus created is immediately filled by Claudius. Laertes's casting off the direction of God by casting off any concern for His will leaves

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

him vulnerable to the avuncular, crafty maneuverings of Claudius, essentially, that is, replaces God's direction with that of the usurper's. Laertes's purposes will now be coopted by Claudius; thenceforth, Claudius will be the one Laertes serves. He has fallen into slavery. Any hesitation on Laertes's part finally resolves itself by means of Claudius's temptation to immediate action:

> That we would do,
> We should do when we would: for this 'would' changes
> And hath abatements and delays as many
> As there are tongues, are hands, are accidents, ...
> But to the quick of th'ulcer:
> Hamlet comes back; what would you undertake
> To show yourself in deed your father's son
> More than in words? (4.7.117-124)

In this temptation to assure oneself one's father's son, and to do so by immediate, conclusive, visual proof of violent revenge, stands the conjunction of interest between Samson Agonistes and Hamlet.

iii

While Milton incorporates in his tragedy all of the impurities of the revenge tradition--barbarism, violence, wrath, ranting, striking wide, exultation--he calls attention to rashness and, particularly, to a rash method for gaining assurance mostly by setting Samson Agonistes in communication with Paradise Regained. It is Paradise Regained that confirms my sense that Milton would have been

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

interested in the revenge tradition as the presentation of the interval before an act. In the list of words that Sanford Budick proposes as Paradise Regained's mysterious subject--"now, deeds, ends, means, time, due time, retiring, waiting, fulfilling"--one can hear Milton rephrasing the traditional subject of revenge tragedy as we have been discussing it (Budick, 124). Paradise Regained is, of course, the story of revenge, Christ's revenge on Satan, prophesied in the protevangelium. Milton's brief epic is also the serious reconsideration, serious rewriting of the struggle in which Hamlet was engaged.

> [Christ's activity] combines the determinate action of an independent agent with the passive acceptance of another's higher direction; it embodies kinetic actuality within static potentiality, the particular relation of passive to active being which seems to me to express the poem's most startling perception about human-divine relations in the Christian universe. (Budick, 126)[16]

Here, then, is Milton's own solution to the difficulties of waiting and acting that appear over and over again in Renaissance revenge dramas. I enlist myself on the side of those critics who read Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes as contrastive companion poems ,[17] and I believe

---

[16] Compare Gordon Braden on Hamlet: "By the end Shakespeare's moral lesson is not the immorality (or morality) of revenge, but the Christian abnegation of the individual will" (222).

[17] For an overview of critical opinion on the relationship between the two works, see John Shawcross, "The Genres of Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes" in Composite Orders, eds. Richard Ide and Joseph Wittreich (Milton Studies 17), pp. 240-1.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

that we should also read these two works, taken together, as a rewriting of the revenge tradition in English drama. Just as most revenge dramas have a pair of contrasting but allied characters, the stoic, patient man of reason and the rash revenger, so too does Milton's revenge drama, the 1671 volume. Paradise Regained gives us Milton's version of a revenger who during the course of the work remains innocent of sin, overcoming what had remained elusive in all earlier revenge dramas: the tremendous difficulty of balancing patience and action. In contrast, Samson is still subject to the degraded moral consciousness of his predecessors in English drama. Only by looking at Paradise Regained's characterization of rashness and patience can one ascertain Milton's reworking of the thematics of rashness that plays so prominent a role in Hamlet.

As Ashraf Rushdy has said, Satan's urging Jesus to premature activity is the "leitmotif of all the temptations" in Paradise Regained (198). Satan's temptations are meant to lure Jesus not only to misconstrue the nature of action but also to begin too soon:

> . . . and thinks't thou to regain
> Thy right by sitting still or thus retireing? . . .
> If Kingdom move thee not, let move thee Zeal,
> And Duty; Zeal and Duty are not slow;
> But on occasions forelock watchful wait.
> They themselves rather are occasion best,
> Zeal of thy Fathers house, Duty to free
> Thy country from her Heathen servitude;
> So shalt thou best fullfil, best verifie
> The Prophets old . . . (3.164)

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Satan, the one who "cut[s] shorter" (3.269), lures Jesus to a reformation accomplished "in short time with ease" (3.378).[18] The satanic view of the mechanics of reformation, in its vision of swiftness, resembles Hamlet's first promise to "sweep" to his revenge.

To Satan's suggestion that Jesus, as reformer, should act instantly to free his people, Jesus responds with a rationale and a description of waiting:

> Should I of these the liberty regard
> Who freed, as to their antient Patrimony,
> Unhumbl'd, unrepentant, unreform'd,
> Headlong would follow; and to thir Gods perhaps
> Of Bethel and of Dan? no, let them serve
> Thir enemies, who serve Idols with God.
> Yet he at length, time to himself best known,
> Remembring Abraham by some wond'rous call
> May bring them back repentant and sincere,
> . . . To his due time and providence I leave them.
> (3.427-440).

Here, Jesus has restated the conclusion that Milton reached in The Digression--the time is not yet ripe--in a context that clears it from the charge of fatalism, for fate has been redefined as the will of God.

Satan himself gives a description of the means by which he will continue to tempt Jesus to abandon his proper form of waiting. Describing himself, the Tempter announces

---

[18] The desire to cut short and make easy the work of reformation is so strongly characterized as satanic that it leads one to read ironically the title of Milton's Readie and Easie Way. It is as if he were condemning his own suggestions as misconceived from the start, labeling his recommendations directed at a benighted audience.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

that his intervention in the life of men accosts them in their machinations to move from present to future: "[I] lend them oft my aid/ Oft my advice by presages and signs,/ And answers, oracles, portents and dreams,/ Whereby they may direct their future life" (1.393). Thus we find so prominently displayed the various readings of the signs (the public recognition by John, the descent of the Dove, and the voice from Heaven) in the scene of baptism, which Jesus interprets as his "prompting to begin":

> . . . by which I knew the time
> Now full, that I no more should live obscure,
> But openly begin, as best becomes the
> Authority which I deriv'd from Heav'n.
> And now by some strong motion I am led
> Into this Wilderness, to what intent
> I learn not yet, perhaps I need not know;
> For what concerns my knowledge God reveals. (1.286)

Milton makes it quite clear that the temptation to begin too soon, to abandon waiting, is in fact a temptation to look for assurance, for a sign, that one is elect in a fashion other than one should actually look for assurance. Several times Milton names the story of Paradise Regained as the story of "proof." The plot summary given in the invocation to Book I says as much:

> Thou Spirit who ledst this glorious Eremite
> Into the Desert, his Victorious Field
> Against the Spiritual Foe, and broughtst him thence
> By proof th'undoubted Son of God, . . . (1.8)

God's first and only words in Paradise Regained confirm that

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

vision of the plot:

> Gabriel this day by proof thou shalt behold,
> Thou and all Angels conversant on Earth
> With man or mens affairs, how I begin
> To verifie that solemn message late,
> On which I sent thee to the Virgin pure
> In Galilee, that she should bear a Son
> Great in Renown, and call'd the Son of God . . . .
> (1..130-136)

From these passages one must draw the strange but unavoidable conclusion that the "proof" of sonship does not derive from God's having pronounced Jesus his beloved son. The plot of Paradise Regained is comprised of a fundamental pun: the "proof" that one is Son of God arises from one's having been "proof" against temptation. And, as Louis Martz has written, Milton's use of "Son of God" in preference to "Jesus" and instead of "Christ" (Martz, 252) indicates that the protagonist's choices are meant to represent human choices, ones that all men face in maintaining themselves as Sons of God.[19] Satan's temptations are temptations to conceive wrongly of the proof that one is a Son of God. His first test for Jesus requires him to renounce any desire to see proof of his relation to God via immediate, visual evidence: "If thou be the Son of God, command/ That out of these hard stones be made thee bread" (1.342-3). This temptation, to see the visual immediate proof of one's sonship, is clearly linked to

---

[19] The most thorough of the recent commentators on Paradise Regained, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, argues along these lines as well: "[Jesus} is neither the agent nor the recipient of a miracle" (203); "He stands. I argue that he stands of human volition and by human power" (204).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the fundamental desire of the revenger to feel God's regard for him and his cause. In Book 2, Jesus makes clear that one should not confuse the feel of hunger for the need of food (2.249-259), and the answer has relevance to the following less corporeal temptation when Satan tries to persuade Jesus that he has been deserted by God. A hunger for the reassurance, the visual proof, of God's regard should not be confused with need for that kind of proof.

These questions concerning the form of assurance were central to Milton's contemporary experience. From the time Milton attended university through the years following the Restoration, the controversies surrounding proof of God's regard and proof of one's own sonship underlay the most profound internal and external struggles of the time. According to Milton's view in De Doctrina, faith means faith in one's personal salvation (CPW 6:471). To know God in the most important sense is to know that He will do for oneself what He has promised. But one knows that one knows God only by keeping His commandments (CPW 6:129)--not commandments as the word of the Law but rather works in accordance with His will (CPW 6:490). Assurance of one's salvation comes by means of observing one's works or one's action; and action must involve the particular relation of kinetic to potential, passive to active, waiting to action which the Son embodies in Paradise Regained.

To such an insistence on the word and concepts of "proof" in Paradise Regained, we should respond by a corresponding

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

attentiveness to the use of the word in Samson. When we come upon Samson's "inmost mind" we come upon his "sense of heaven's desertion." Although Samson rises to the height of faith ("My trust is in the living God"), he errs in his desire for immediate, conclusive proof of God's presence and his partiality.

> I know no Spells, use no forbidden Arts;
> My trust is in the living God who gave me
> At my nativity this strength, diffus'd
> No less through all my sinews, joints and bones
> Then thine, while I preserv'd these locks unshorn,
> The pledge of my unviolated vow.
> For proof hereof, if Dagon be thy god,
> Go to his Temple, invocate his aid
> With solemnest devotion, spread before him
> How highly it concerns his glory now
> To frustrate and dissolve these Magic spells,
> Which I to be the power of Israel's God
> Avow, and 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.
> (1139-55; italics mine)

If one can say that the course of Samson's progress through the drama has resulted in a confident, saving faith, it seems equally true that Samson looks for, that he expects, the presence of God, and his own sonship, to be demonstrated "soon," so that he and Harapha can dramatically "see" and "feel" it.

A few lines later, Samson repeats this slide from hard-earned trust to the desire for immediate, visual, dramatic

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

proof:

> All these indignities, for such they are
> From thine, these evils I deserve and more,
> Acknowledge them from God inflicted on me
> Justly, yet despair not of his final pardon
> Whose ear is ever open; and his eye
> Gracious to re-admit the suppliant;
> In confidence whereof I once again
> Defie thee to the trial of mortal fight,
> By combat to decide whose god is God,
> Thine or whom I with Israel's Sons adore. (1168-77)

Samson rises to the peak of trust only to descend to an idolotrous conception of sonship and deity, one that ties its faith to an immediate revelation. Compare the protagonist of Paradise Regained as Stanley Fish describes him:

> When the narrative voice comments that the Son "added not" (I: 497), he is paying tribute to the precision of Christ's performance; despite the opportunity to go too far in one direction or another (by either embracing or judging Satan). The Son says just enough to establish his dependence, and no more. More would have almost certainly been self-assertion in some way or another, and Christ is in the business not of asserting the self but of giving it no scope--including linguistic scope--beyond that necessary to affirm his obedience.
> ("Things and Action,"174)

In contrast, Samson adds too much. As if to mark his decline to idolatry, Samson here aligns his own conception of God with the chorus's: he says, "[that one] whom I with Israel's Sons adore." This is the only time in the tragedy that Samson identifies himself so completely with his people; he is misconceiving God as they have done and continue to do. The rhythm of the latter part of the drama seems to be this: a

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

moving upward with sound argument and hope only to fail at the crucial moment of applying that reason, or seeking assurance for that hope. This is the picture of history (in the sense of history as composed of individuals' choices) that Milton gives us--a significant, poignant success, but a wrong turn, pivot, choice at the peak.

Laertes's rashness led him to subservience to a devil figure, Claudius. Such a fall into slavery cast an ambiguating shadow on Hamlet's own claim to a divine rashness. Similarly, in Paradise Regained, any slip by Jesus into rashness would certainly have landed him in the clutches of the devil; he would have been serving the Tempter rather than God. Such a fall is more difficult to perceive in Milton's tragedy. Just as the perfect man is missing from Samson Agonistes, so too is any single satanic tempter. We must locate the temptations not only as they exist in Dalila's, Manoa's, Harapha's, and the Chorus's speeches but also as they exist in Samson's own mind. It becomes easier to do so when one places Samson in the context of Paradise Regained and in the context of the revenge tradition whose protagonists typically fall by desiring too rashly to demonstrate and reveal their identity as sons. Harapha's words, "If thou at all art known. Much I have heard/ . . . And now am come to see of whom such noise" (1082-7) sounds too reminiscent of Satan's attempt to know Jesus to be ignored as a pointed echo. Samson's answer, that Harapha will know him, and his God, by being put to "the trial of mortal fight" (1175), betrays the kind of demonstration of sonship to

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

which Samson adheres.

The meaning of "revenge" in the Renaissance comes very close to "punish." One "revenged" one's authority, that is, proved one's authority by punishment. On the one hand, this proof works to reveal merely the identity of the revenger, as when Vindice euphorically cries out at the moment of his revenge: "Tis I, tis Vindice, tis I" (Tourneur, Revenger's, 3.5.166). Such a declaration of identity has its concomitant claim to an undying fame, as in The White Devil when Francisco declares: Tush for justice? We now, like the partridge, purge the disease with laurel: for the fame shall crown the enterprize and quit the shame" (Webster, 5.3.267). But in English revenge dramas, the ultimate claim to identity, and the ultimate means of purging oneself from the impure components of the revenger's task, could only be the revelation of one's identity as godly agent.

Revenge drama was always about man's attribution of godly sanction to private action. "Heaven sits clapping of our enterprise" (Marston, 5.130) says the damned[20] revenger/reformer of Antonio's Revenge. The revengers of the tradition eventually--after various kinds of waiting--choose to desire immediate, visual, and conclusive proof of such godly sanction. The visual spectacle that they stage, however, never means what the revenger thinks it will mean because their

[20] Far from releasing him from damnation, Antonio's self-exculpation at the close of the play serves as just one more instance of his having usurped God's place.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

stories implicate them too heavily in "casual slaughter[s]," in violence, wrath, ranting, striking wide, exultation, and rashness. But, to pass too easily to a universal condemnation of revenge, as some critics have done, erases the fundamental tension of the genre, in which a moral imperative to redress stands heavily poised against the difficulty of using moral means. Rashness, in Hamlet, begins by representing all that is brutal, excessive, wrathful, and therefore ungodly in the act of reformation. Hamlet's attempt to cleanse his action of that debased form of rashness and re-seal his actions and his rashness under divine sanction must involve him in the question of proof. One of the cruxes of interpreting Hamlet has been the means by which Hamlet moves from establishing the proof of Claudius's guilt to establishing the certainty of his own warrant for action. Shakespeare asks us to be troubled by, and to distinguish between, the evidence of another's guilt and the evidence justifying one's own response to that guilt. On what basis, as Goodwin asks, can one perform the work of a godly reformation? Milton had seen his countrymen unable "after so many years doeing and undoing to hitt so much as into any good and laudable way that might shew us hopes of a just and well amended common-wealth to come: (CPW 5.441). That his suggestion for future action would be the destruction of the temple would seem to be a highly unlikely positive image in 1671. It was not force that defeated the revolutionaries

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

and thus force could not be appropriate to the regeneration of their struggle.[21] The problem in the attempt at reformation was that the reformers had not been able to construct a just society on the ruins of the unjust society that they had destroyed. The process of construction was impeded, in Milton's view, by the infiltration of private motive into godly motive. Samson Agonistes is not simply about the private motives of greed and lust, but also about the private motive of looking for assurance, and the undue violence that that desire engenders. Milton does not cleanse Samson Agonistes of the doubts of providential agency, as John Andrews thought but instead refines the terms. In his revenge drama, Milton asks: How does a reformer become degraded, fall away from godly action? And answers: By looking for assurance in a crude manner, by acting too soon because he desires to prove himself immediately and conclusively a Son of God.

From reading Paradise Regained as a revenge drama, one can conclude that, for Milton, revenge could only have a positive meaning in so far as one revenged oneself against those who were working against the purposes for which God had ordained the universe. But those who work contrary to His purposes are not solely those who, as the chorus's final words suggest, attempt to impede His "uncontrollable intent" but

---

[21]The sonnets to Cromwell, Fairfax, and Vane convey Milton's view on the limitations of violence to work social change. In addition, Milton's letter to Robert Jones, Lady Ranelagh's son, 1656, demonstrates a world-weariness, an easy condescension, for those who are prone to an undue admiration for the successful use of force (CPW 7:493-4).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

also those who misconceive the nature of action and therefore work too precipituously, too violently, too rashly, to further that intent. What did Christ do after his period of waiting/temptation in the wilderness? Teach. What did Samson do after his period of waiting/temptation in his version of wilderness, the prison house? Destroy. The first alternative, the Son's, grounds itself upon an idea of action that is internal, patient, and non-dramatic but not for all that cut off from effect on the world. The second alternative, Samson's, grounds itself on an idea of action that, however internally prepared for, affects the world in a sweeping, dramatic, and destructive revelation of one's own sonship and God's dramatic power.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Chapter 4

Resisting the Figure in the Blaze: Milton Against Heroic Drama

In two articles on Milton's poetry, Stanley Fish has argued for the vital importance of Milton's renunciation of the dramatic moment and the plotted narrative.[1] In Paradise Lost, "what [Satan, Adam, and Michael] desire is that someone do something, that something happen; but in Milton's poetry that desire is invariably disappointed, either because the action is withheld, or because it occurs, but is not decisive in the way that had been anticipated, or because it occurs and is decisively disastrous" ("Temptation, "516). In discussing Paradise Regained, Fish demonstrates how precisely Milton "resist[s] the appeal located in words like crisis, climax, change, development, denouement, and suspense" ("Things,"166). As poet, Milton struggles against "taking some action that would amount to the 'single stroke' for which so many of Milton's heroes and villains and readers long . . . " ("Things," 180). Drawing on the early poetry as well as on Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained, Fish has identified and articulated a characteristic concern which is central to Milton's career: the desire and the renunciation of desire for an intensively anticipated single, decisive action.

---

[1]This chapter both depends on Fish's identification of an essential and enduring Miltonic stance and extends his argument to Samson Agonistes, concerning which Fish's own reading seems to contradict his former work (see "Spectacle and Evidence").

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Because all dramatic genres press toward the climactic event, it might be thought that drama, as such, would stand diametrically opposed to Milton's own view of what constitutes significant action in the world. However, it is not only closet drama which asks its audience to resist the fascination of the spectacular, theatrical moment. Revenge drama and tragicomedies must, in order to have a middle at all, include a continuous series of impediments to the desired climactic event. With its exfoliation of kinds of waiting, revenge drama attends quite self-consciously to alternative modes of desiring that event. And the usually unanticipated death of the revenger during the closing scene serves to draw up into itself all of the doubts about the revenger's method of reaching his desired climax, as well as doubts about the morality of his desire. So that, as we have seen, Milton seems to have worked _with_ these anti-theatrical trends in the sub-genres of revenge and closet drama; while, in the case of tragicomedy, the tendency to dissolve all dramatic conflict in one climactic moment of recognition and forgiveness incurs Milton's opposition. Or, one could say, Milton examined and expanded tragicomedy's use of refused forgiveness as blocking mechanism, as obstacle to the happy climax. In sum, Milton seems very interested in the anti-theatrical and anti-dramatic components that inhere already in drama.

Now, one can surely find within any kind of drama a special attentiveness to defining action _qua_ action. Drama, as genre, meditates on the nature of action--its causes, its

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

ground, its consequences, its relation to the self and to community. However, the heroic drama of the seventeenth century takes up that inquiry with particular emphasis on the theatrical, dramatic, climactic component of action. Heroic dramas present the grand gesture, the histrionic pose, the great, decisive, magnanimous act. These plays are concerned with the definition of heroic as histrionic action, and the progression of the plays is constituted by a continual redefinition of that action.

In Samson Agonistes Milton follows the seventeenth-century heroic tradition in concerning himself with redefining heroism, but he is idiosyncratic in that redefinition. He incorporates the critique of society that one finds in Chapman and questions, with Shakespeare, the motivation and consequences of heroic poses; but he also goes further by, I think, trying to remove our fascination from the arena of the grand action, the grand gesture. Consonant with the long-standing renunciation of desire for dramatic, conclusive action that Fish noticed, Milton deflates heroics to replace it with another more understated, less flamboyant heroism. Unlike any of the previous dramatists, Milton grounds heroism in God. The climactic event, for Milton, was the revelation of God's presence to set right the wrongs of this world. The question for Samson and for readers of Samson Agonistes is primarily the question of the form of heroical action that bears witness to, or somehow carries, that godly presence into the world. To change the idea of heroism is therefore to change the idea of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

godly presence and to alter one's imagining of human relation to that presence. These issues are Milton's focus of attack when redefining heroic drama.

I

In order to situate Samson Agonistes in the context of seventeenth-century heroic drama, it is necessary to review briefly the various modes by which dramatists defined heroic action. Eugene Waith has given the most detailed picture of the Renaissance Herculean hero, a figure that transforms but does not essentially change the classical version of Hercules:

> His exploits are strange mixtures of beneficence and crime, of fabulous quests and shameful betrayals, of triumph over wicked enemies and insensate slaughter of the innocent, yet the career is always a testimony to the greatness of a man who is almost a god--a greatness which has less to do with goodness as it is usually understood than with the transforming energy of the divine spark. This is not to say that tales about the hero excuse his moral defects but rather that they point to a special morality. What matters most is something difficult to define, which pushes the hero to the outermost reaches of the human and even beyond.
> (Herculean Hero, 17)

In discussing the hero's arete, his vertus, Waith stresses one point in particular: "'admiration,' rather than a strict moral accounting is the expected response to a Herculean hero" (Herculean Hero,145). According to Waith, "the author of a Herculean play looks beyond the failings of his hero to virtues

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

so awesome that the world can ill afford to lose them (Herculean Hero, 44). "Virtue and vice are distinctions of secondary importance when discussing so vast a soul" (Waith, Ideas of Greatness 74). Although Waith considers Samson to be a Herculean hero, one who fits without difficulty into the class that Waith has described at length,[2] there are reasons to doubt such a classification. Principal among them must be that Milton, creator of some of the most meticulous moral distinctions in English literature, would be unlikely to detach admiration from a "strict moral accounting." One would rather expect him to grant or invite admiration only in cases of the strictest moral accounting.

In fact, by heightening the resolution with which the morality of the hero is scrutinized, Milton would be participating in a slightly different tradition of heroic drama in the English Renaissance. One can recall, here, the unsettling ambiguity of the Marlovian protagonists whose "admirable" acts slip uncertainly into the realms of inhumanity and horror. In Possessed with Greatness , Richard Ide has widened Waith's

---

[2] In "Milton's Hebraic Herculean Hero" (Milton Studies 6, 1973; 243-258), Carole S. Kessner has already established quickly and cogently that Milton thought of Samson as a Herculean hero. Kessner aligns Samson Agonistes with Euripides's rather than Sophocles's Heracles, a more spiritual and humane hero. While this insight is apt, Kessner tends to slide over the more troubling aspects of the Euripidean play, aspects which prevent us from reading the Hercules story as one of such a resounding resurrection of the hero. (For such an analysis, see Henry McDonald, "A Long Day's Dying: Tragic Ambiguity in Samson Agonistes" (Milton Studies 27, 1991; 263-283). Consequently, Kessner relies too easily on a fall/resurrection model for Samson. She mentions but does not examine the place of Samson Agonistes in the context of seventeenth-century adaptations of the Herculean hero.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

inquiry to include heroic dramas rather than just Herculean heroic dramas. In analyzing the heroic tragedies of Shakespeare and Chapman, Ide presents a tradition that is constantly undercutting the posture of the hero. According to Ide, Chapman creates morally ambivalent titanic heroes by setting heroical acts in a "degrading" context, usually unnoticed by the hero. Bussy D'Ambois, for example, is "unaware that the role he is playing in the corrupt world has been transformed from minister of virtue to servant of adultery" (Ide, Possessed 89). In addition, Chapman presents the inspiration of his heroes as an amoral, irrational compulsion (Ide, Possessed 99). The critique of heroics is double-edged: it passes judgment on a Jacobean society which cannot accommodate the ancient virtues and arraigns a hero who cannot use his extraordinary gifts for unambiguously moral goals. Nevertheless, Chapman conceives of heroism "as an extraordinary, transcendent 'height' to be attained by fulfilling the heroic ideals of classical and Renaissance epic. Shakespeare, according to Ide, performs a full and severe deconstruction of the heroical mode, a mode defined in Shakespeare's plays as rife with self-delusion and self-idolatry. Carol Neely's work on Othello and Janet Adelman's on Coriolanus both lend support to this vision of a Shakespeare who critiques the ideology of honor and heroism from the point of view of the more humane and frail human being.

In some cases, heroic plays examine and then replace the terms on which the heroical pose has been struck. According

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to Janet Adelman in The Common Liar, Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra redefines heroism by removing it from the realm of action and repositioning it in the realm of imagination. According to Adelman, the scrupulousness with which Shakespeare tests the validity of the heroic imagination contributes, finally, to a more confident assertion of that validity. As Adelman argues, the process of reconstructing heroism in the realm of the imagination involves a validation of the hyperbolical mode itself. The negation of heroism, then, lies in the direction of temperance. In Antony and Cleopatra, writes Adelman, Shakespeare presents temperance as "inimical to heroism" (132). This opposition becomes crucial for Samson Agonistes and, therefore, is worth examining in some detail.

In Antony and Cleopatra, as Shakespeare occupies himself in articulating the nature of action, temperance becomes associated with lack of action. This is not only a reversal of that Roman scorn which refuses to grant love the name of "action" and labels it "lethargy." The critique of temperance arises from a complex thematics of doing, undoing, and wavering in the play. The cupids on the barge who, fanning, "what they undid did" (2.2.204), become a figure for slippage, a falling away from a model of decisive action in the play. Partly, the wavering refers to the will itself, which cannot direct itself toward a single object. This wavering encompasses not only the lack of a single love object but the lack of almost any constant object. Of Antony's loss in battle,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

it is said, "what willingly he did confound, he willed." Partly, as the wavering becomes associated with the element of water (the battle at sea, the watery realm of the Nile, the ungraspable nature of Cleopatra herself), it refers to the loss of identity in too much change ("That which is now a horse, even with a thought/The rack dislimns, and makes it indistinct/ As water is in water," 4.14.9-11; ". . . here I am Antony/ Yet cannot hold this visible shape" (4.14.13-4). But Shakespeare will not permit one to opt for inactivity as the "answer" to too much changeability. Lepidus's choice of inactivity is shown to be a paltry option: "To be called into a huge sphere, and not to be seen to move in't" (2.7.16). And Octavia's stability (her "motion and station are as one," 3.3.22) reveals a chastity which is too cold and too immobile. The play valorizes neither a temperance that refrains from action, nor one that stabilizes the will's desire on a single object; in this context temperance only connotes the lukewarm in a world of fiery passions. Finally, it is the hyperbolical mode itself which is opposed to temperance and which carries the approval of the playwright. The terms of heroic hyperbole may have been transformed (from martial to imaginative heroism), but the valorization of hyperbole itself has been carefully substantiated.

Dryden's All for Love significantly alters Shakespeare's play, but this attachment to hyperbole remains a constant. All for Love is constructed as a series of heroic hyperbolic poses. Each of these poses is undercut by placing under erasure the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

basis upon which Antony is posing. Act I ends with Antony regaining the heroic pose of martial valor. Persuaded by Ventidius, Antony casts off Cleopatra's love and his own lethargy and embraces his fate in the shape of a great military action:

> Oh, thou hast fired me; my soul's up in arms,
> And mans each part about me. Once again
> That noble eagerness of fight has seized me,
> That eagerness with which I darted upward
> To Cassius' camp. In vain the steepy hill
> Opposed my way; in vain a war of spears
> Sung round my head, and planted all my shield.
> I won the trenches while my foremost men
> Lagged on the plain below.
> . . . .
> Come on, my soldier!
> Our hearts and arms are still the same. I long
> Once more to meet our foes, that thou and I,
> Like Time and Death, marching before our troops,
> May taste fate to 'em; mow 'em out a passage,
> And ent'ring where the foremost squadrons yield,
> Begin the noble harvest of the field. (I.338-453)

Act II destroys this pose of martial heroism, at least in so far as it is constituted by the rejection of love. By the end of Act II, Antony poses again: he will keep Cleopatra <u>and</u> fight Caesar. Act III, however, reveals the fissures in this prematurely cemented conjunction of love and martial heroism. For, martial heroism of the Roman variety cannot be so easily divorced from the honor of dutiful love towards family and children. To hold fast to <u>this</u> honor, Antony must pose again: he is now the hero that sacrifices himself for his family, casting off the role of the great lover and casting out

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Cleopatra. In the nadir of Act IV, Antony, still posing, full of grand gestures, is abandoned by those whom he would serve and left with an honor that can only encompass the self. Act V rings changes on this final pose of heroic isolation. He declares himself ready to battle the Romans with Ventidius as audience to his heroism; then the heroic isolation becomes a gesture towards death for the sake of love lost. As Rose Zimbardo says of Dryden's Aureng-Zebe, these characters are "conceptual counters"; they represent various kinds of heroism, and the play "uses them as pieces to be grouped and regrouped in various patterns of conceptual contrast" (98). In All for Love, unlike Aureng-Zebe, the various conceptions of heroism take place one after the other inside the single character of Antony.

Thus, Dryden's play is constructed by replacing one value after another as the foundation of heroism. However, as in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra, there is one value that Dryden never relinquishes. The grand, dramatic, theatrical quality of the pose is always admired, even when the terms upon which the pose is struck have been swept away. It is this grandeur, this gigantism of pose, which seems to have drawn Dryden to echo Samson Agonistes in Antony's opening soliloquy:[3]

Why was I raised the meteor of the world,

---

[3]Both Edward LeComte ("Samson Agonistes and Aureng-Zebe," Etudes Anglaises 2 (1958): 18-22) and John Shawcross (Milton Bibliography for the Years 1624-1700) list this Dryden passage as an echo of Samson Agonistes.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Hung in the skies, and blazing as I traveled,
> Till all my fires were spent, and then cast downward
> To be trod out by Caesar? (All For Love, I.206-9)

Here, Antony is a Samson with no sense of task, no prophetic role, no relation to God. (Compare: "Why was my breeding order'd and prescrib'd/ As of a person separate to God,/ Design'd for great exploits; if I must dye/ Betray'd, Captiv'd, and both my Eyes put out . . . ." (Samson Agonistes, 30-3). We come to understand, through the comments of Ventidius, that Dryden's admiration for Antony, and apparently for Samson, was an admiration for the scale of the figure. Ventidius marvels at the grandeur of Antony's grief: "How sorrow shakes him!/So, now the tempest tears him up by th' roots,/ And on the ground extends the noble ruin" (I.213-5). The scale of Antony's grief, the sheer size of the fall he has undergone, draws Ventidius to fascinated admiration: "On my soul,/ 'Tis mournful, wondrous mournful!" (I.20-8-9). Ventidius's description of Antony reveals precisely that which is unproblematic about his stature. He is: "My emperor; the man I love next heaven;/ If I said more, I think 'twere scarce a sin-- /Y'are all that's good, and good-like" (I.252-4). This line's echo of "god-like" with its erasure of "god" is palpable, and the fifth quarto (1709) as well as the 1717 Collected Works has in fact substituted "god-like" for "good-like" (All for Love, Veith, 39). Dryden is patently unconcerned with adulation's approach to blasphemy. Milton, however, increases one's sensitivity to the relation between hyperbolical action and god-like qualities. It is the attachment to hyperbole--even amid the various

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

deflations of the heroic pose--which Milton turns against in Samson Agonistes. In order to do so he incorporates within his own drama the hyperbolical, grand, theatrical vision of heroic action which was much admired by other dramatists.

ii

Manoa serves as a collection point for language expressive of a heroical mode close to that which is found in renaissance and restoration heroic drama and which, in relation to earlier epic models, Milton had already criticized in his portrayal of Satan in Paradise Lost.[4] In his first description of the imprisoned Samson, Manoa steps heavily into the martial heroic vein: "[Samson] single combatant/ Duell'd thir Armies" (344-5; italics mine). Looking at Samson, Manoa sees the story of a Herculean hero who was "the miracle of men" (364) but was subsequently horribly rewarded with the imposition of extraordinary suffering. Manoa's closing speech

---

[4]John M. Steadman, Milton and the Renaissance Hero (Clarendon P, 1967) lays out the tissue of differences between Renaissance epic heros and Milton's heros. Concerning Samson, Steadman writes: "Milton's critique of magnanimity places greater emphasis on the moral and psychological preconditions of great actions than on the actions themselves . . . In describing the exploits of 'great-souled heroes,' he stresses the inner conquests that precede heroic action. In depicting the essence of magnanimity--'greatness of mind'--he represents it in the mind itself before tracing its effects in heroic action" (160). Here I think Fish's argument provides a necessary corrective: it is the nature of heroic action that has been redefined by Milton. Steadman implies that the external action could be the same as any other version of Renaissance epic heroism, while the internal preparation has differed. Fish suggests that the heroic action is internal. For Steadman's full argument on Samson, see "'Faithful Champion': The Theological Basis of Milton's Hero of Faith," Anglia 77 (1959), 13-28.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

constructs a hero cult for Samson which, in classical times, was most often associated with Hercules:

> I will build him
> A Monument, and plant it round with shade
> Of Laurel ever green, and branching Palm,
> With all his Trophies hung, and Acts enroll'd
> In copious Legend, or sweet Lyric Song.
> Thither shall all the valiant youth resort,
> And from his memory inflame thir breasts
> To matchless valour, and adventures high:
> The Virgins also shall on feastful days
> Visit his Tomb with flowers, only bewailing
> His lot unfortunate in nuptial choice,
> From whence captivity and loss of eyes. (1732-44)

Manoa is totally engulfed by the heroic atmosphere that in Paradise Regained appears only as temptation: "Therefore," says Satan, "with manlier objects we must try/ His constancy, with such as have more shew/ Of worth, of honour, glory, and popular praise" (2.225-7). The line break's emphasis on "shew" foreshadows the Son's response to this temptation, which will characterize all of these enticements of honour and glory as too theatrical. Looking to Paradise Regained for the precise terms in which glory is refused, one can discover a basis from which to judge both Manoa's and Samson's attachment to "glory" in Samson Agonistes. The Son debunks glory primarily on three counts: 1) the desire for glory is actually a desire for fame, and fame involves one in a choice of a wrong audience; 2) fame argues an over-wrought sense of self-interest; and 3) those men who have received glory through empire-building have actually been engaged in destructive thievery of others' freedoms and cultural productions.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

It is worthwhile quoting the Son's description of glory at some length because it is on these very grounds--whether from a comparison to Paradise Regained or simply from an interior analysis of Samson Agonistes--that one must judge Samson's heroics.[5] The Son rejects "glory" in terms that deconstruct the fascination with incipient empire-building found in Interregnum and Restoration heroic drama, from Davenant's Siege of Rhodes to Dryden's Aureng-Zebe.[6] The Son argues:

> They err who count it glorious to subdue
> By Conquest far and wide, to over-run
> Large Countries, and in field great Battels win,
> Great Cities by assault: what do these Worthies,
> But rob and spoil, burn, slaughter, and enslave
> Peacable Nations, neighbouring, or remote,
> Made Captive, yet deserving freedom more
> Then those thir Conquerours, who leave behind
> Nothing but ruin wheresoe're they rove,
> And all the flourishing works of peace destroy,
> Then swell with pride, and must be titl'd Gods,
> Great Benefactors of mankind, Deliverers,
> Worship't with Temple, Priest and Sacrifice;
> One is the Son of Jove, of Mars the other,
> Till Conquerour Death discover them scarce men,
> Rowling in brutish vices, and deform'd,
> Violent or shameful death thir due reward. (PR 3.71-87)

---

[5] For a more wide-ranging comparison between the heroes of Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes, see the last chapter in Wittreich's Interpreting Samson Agonistes, "Samson Agonistes in Context," pp. 329-85.

[6]At the time of the publication of Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes, Restoration drama was the site for glorifying that kind of heroics. According to John G. Demaray, Milton's Theatrical Epic: The Invention and Design of Paradise Lost (Harvard UP, 1980), Milton would have been familiar with Davenant's work both during the Interregnum and after the Restoration (n.8, p. 127).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The echoes of a comparison with Samson--who through destruction is titled a Deliverer and who will be worshipped if not with Temple at least as a sort of god or icon, and who ends in a violent death--should not be overlooked.[7]

Manoa certainly describes Samson's transformation into an idol:

> It shall be my delight to tend his eyes,
> And view him sitting in the house, ennobl'd
> With all those high exploits by him atchiev'd,
> And on his shoulders waving down those locks,
> That of a Nation arm'd the strength contain'd. (1490-94)

There can be no question that Manoa's idolatry is based on the very characteristics that the Son has already devalued.

For this debased, idolatrous glory, the Son substitutes an alternative:

> But if there be in glory aught of good,
> It may by means far different be attain'd
> Without ambition, war, or violence;
> By deeds of peace, by wisdom eminent,
> By patience, temperance. (PR 3.88-92)

Likewise, after criticizing the insufficiency of an earthly audience that can bestow only "the blaze of fame"(PR 3.47), the Son offers an alternative audience:

> This is true glory and renown, when God

---

[7]Certainly one could quibble about Samson's resemblance to the items in this list. He does not attack a "peaceable nation," and therefore does not destroy a "flourishing work of peace," and the Philistines do not deserve freedom more than the Israelites. However, the Son's debunking of martial conquest in general and particularly of those men who desire the name of "Benefactor" and "Deliverer," who require others to worship them, who themelves are brutish in vice, and who die violent deaths--these criticisms can surely be taken as directed partly against the hero of the companion poem.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Looking on th'Earth, with approbation marks
> The just man, and divulges him through Heav'n
> To all his Angels, who with true applause
> Recount his praises. (PR 3.60-64)

Lastly, the Son debunks glory on the basis of its pridefulness: "Yet if for fame and glory aught be done,/Aught suffer'd; . . . ./The deed becomes unprais'd, the man at least,/And loses, though but verbal, his reward" (PR 3.100-104). Again, he replaces the false glory with the true: "Shall I seek glory then, as vain men seek/ Oft not deserv'd? I seek not mine, but his/ Who sent me, and thereby witness whence I am" (PR 3.105-7).

In response, Satan turns toward a discussion of God's glory, hoping to impel the Son's desire by using God as model of the hunger for glory. The Son's answer acknowledges God's receipt of glory but also, or primarily, de-emphasizes it, almost eclipsing it by a desire for simple, easy thanks. To Satan's description,

> Think not so slight of glory; therein least
> Resembling thy great Father: he seeks glory,
> And for his glory all things made, all things
> Orders and governs, nor content in Heav'n
> By all his Angels glorifi'd, requires
> Glory from men . . . . (3.109-114)

Milton creates this response:

> To whom our Saviour <u>fervently</u> reply'd.
> <u>And reason</u>; since his word all things produc'd,
> But to shew forth his goodness, and impart
> His good communicable to every soul
> Freely; of whom what could he less expect
> Then glory and benediction, that is thanks,
> The slightest, easiest, readiest recompence
> From them who could return him nothing else. . . .

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

(3.120-9; italics mine)

Of all the adverbs used to characterize the Son's replies in Paradise Regained, "fervently" moves most strongly against the tranquility of the Son's characteristic posture. The adverbs that come closest to any kind of heightened emotion, "with disdain" (4.170) and "sternly" (1.406), can still be read as leaving the Son unruffled. In no other speech does the Son appear to take on the quality of the position he is attacking. Only in respect to "glory" does the Son become fervent; but he immediately redefines "fervor" by beginning his speech "and reason" (To whom our Saviour fervently replied:/ And reason . . ."). After having proven that fervor for glory is irrational, the Son offers an alternative fervor that aligns itself with reason. He is involved in a defense of God through reason, and by this means both pays God glory and redefines the kind of glory that God requests. God produces the world not in order to show his own glory but to "shew forth his goodness" and "impart his good communicable to every soul freely." There is an evenness, an uneventfulness, a lack of pride in this "shewing" which rests in quiet but total opposition to the more theatrical glory of Satan's descriptions.

I would like to follow this turn of attention (the definition of glory with respect first to man and then to God) when studying Samson Agonistes. For Manoa--and I think this is crucial for understanding Samson Agonistes-- the heroic ethos not only encompasses Samson's arena of combat but also

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

God's. In imagining God, Manoa, like Satan, speaks the same heroic language that he uses for man: "For God, /Nothing more certain, will not long defer/ To vindicate the glory of his name /Against all competition" (473-6). We need only remember Paradise Regained to see such a concern for glory as a satanic imagination of God. If we are to ask to what extent Samson frees himself from this ethos, we must not only consider Samson's understanding of his own action but also his conception of God's heroism. In the Judges version of the Samson story, Manoah has a particular role to play in regard to the conceiving of God, and it is this role to which I would like to turn in trying to understand both Manoa's and Samson's relation to the heroic mode.

Samson associates his expectation for heroic action with the prophecy given to his parents. In reminding himself and the chorus of this prophecy, he consistently emphasizes, "foretold twice by an angel, who at last in sight of both my Parents all in flames ascended" (24-5). Samson reads the "twice" as sign of a double surety. That is, if the angel came twice then he definitely came. In fact, however, in this reading of the doubled appearance, Samson forgets why the angel had to descend twice: Manoah's disbelief, his need for visible proof. From Manoah's point of view, the annunciation sequence in Judges 13, works toward, and climaxes in, the moment of visible proof: the moment in which the angel ascends in flames from the fire that burns the offering. The remarkable feature of the biblical version of this story is that

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

even after the visible proof, Manoah persists in misunderstanding the significance of the event. The angel has explicitly reproved Manoah for asking the name of the angel: "Why askest thou after my name seeing it is secret" (Judges 13:18). The taboo against asking the name of an angel was glossed by some Jewish and some Protestant interpreters as a taboo against the confusion of angelic with godly presence. The question is prohibited because it can too easily lead to a mistaken case of identification, a mistaken sense that God has himself become visible or that the angel possesses powers attributable only to God. The Geneva Bible glosses the angel's prescription to offer sacrifice unto the Lord as "shewing that he sought not his own honor, but Gods, whose messenger he was." And Ramban, a commentator that Milton would have known from the Selden collections of rabbinic material or from De Synedriis,[8] says that an angel denies to give out his name in order to say: "Of what use could the knowledge of my name be to you? I am powerless except for HASHEM [the Lord]. Should you summon me, I would not respond, nor can I help you in your distress" (Bereishis, 1443). The refusal to give the name constitutes a gesture of self-effacement designed to cast the questioner's attention back towards God.

But, after the angel has ascended in the flame, the biblical text reports: "Then Manoah knew that he was an angel

---

[8]I am relying here on the recent work of Jason P. Rosenblatt ("Milton's Chief Rabbi," Milton Studies 24 (1988), 43-72). Rosenblatt discovered that Milton had relied on Rashi, Selden and De Synedriis et praefecturis juridicis veterum Ebraeorum (London, 1650, 1653, 1655).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

of the Lord. And Manoah said unto his wife, We shall surely die, because we have seen God" (Judges 13: 22; italics mine). That is, stupefied by the spectacular, theatrical event, he has persisted in making the very mistaken identification that the angel warned him against. His error, here, is the flipside to his earlier error in not distinguishing the "man" as angel (Judges 13:16). Manoah's wife, in contrast, retains a calm, unamazed voice. She does not speak directly of the flame, or the "man" rising, but speaks only of God's having received a burnt offering and a meat offering and of God having "shown us all these things" (13:23). Of her own conversation with the "man of God," as she calls him, she says, "I asked him not whence he was, neither told he me his name" (13:6). Milton deletes the part of Manoah's wife from his drama, but as Derek Wood has written, a deletion of biblical material by Milton does not obviate the Word of God: "What he leaves unmentioned must be what the Bible says it was. Omitting to mention something stated in Scripture does not erase the word of God" (248). Perhaps Milton, having deleted the character of Manoah's wife, expected his readers to recall her biblical role, her own restraint in asking the man of God's (or angel's) name and her attentiveness to God rather than to the fiery theatrical display.

In retelling the story of his own birth, Samson repeats Manoah's error.

O wherefore was my birth from Heav'n foretold

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> Twice by an Angel, who at last in sight
> Of both my Parents all in flames ascended
> From off the Altar, where an Off'ring burn'd,
> As in a fiery column charioting
> His Godlike presence, and from some great act
> Or benefit reveal'd to Abraham's race? (23-29)

The entire annunciation scene in Judges presses against the phrase "Godlike presence." To make this comparison is falsely to conceive of God's presence in the world. It is, I believe, by means of his choice of the word "charioting" that Milton propels us toward a biblical comparison that can unlock the significance of this scene and its misinterpretation by Samson. The image of a fiery "charioting," while not explicitly taken up in the ending of the play, reappears in the choral images of Samson as filled with a "fierie vertue" (1690), a "sudden flame" (1691), which rises up out of the ashes of what appears to be a sacrifice. The passage quoted above reinforces the impression that the chorus watches Samson as if he were the annunciating angel of Judges 13: the locution of "from off the altar . . . from some great act or benefit revealed" has a kind of awkwardness in its almost forced parallelism between "altar" and "great act or benefit revealed." So that, looking back from the closing choral images, the chorus seems to repeat this parallelism when viewing Samson as having risen up from a "great act" and an "ashie womb." Although Milton does not repeat the word "charioting," the image of a "fierie charioting" seems to dominate, even to control the trajectory of, the play.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The famous biblical moment of "charioting" is, of course, the prophet Elijah's ascension to heaven in a chariot. We should, in reading Samson Agonistes, pay special attention to the story of Elijah in any case because it becomes a reference point for Paradise Regained--where the Son seems to out-Elijah Elijah. That is, the Son intensifies the quiet strength of Elijah's trials in the wilderness. In two places, the biblical story of Elijah concerns itself directly with the question of the mode of God's presence in the world, the question of how He appears. In the first case, Elijah sets up the theatrical event par excellence. On Mount Carmel, Elijah arranges a contest between Ba'al and God. While to the offering of the prophets of Ba'al, "there was neither voice, nor any to answer, nor any that regarded," to Elijah's offering,

> the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The Lord, he is the God; the Lord he is the God. And Elijah said unto them, Take the prophets of Ba'al; let not one of them escape. And they took them: and Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon, and slew them there.
> (1 Kings 18: 38-40)

The outcome of this event, however, is nil. For all of its dramatic finality, it has no real conclusiveness. It leads to no reformation of those who witness it; Ahab continues to transgress the laws of the Lord, and the story continues as if such spectacular theater had never occurred. In what appears

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

to be the biblical alternative to this high theater, the solitary Elijah is permitted to hear the presence of God. The mode of that presentation is the subject of explicit definition. God reveals his presence not in a "strong wind that rends mountains and rocks," not in an earthquake, not in a fire, but in a "still, small voice" (1 Kings 19: 11-12). In other words, the biblical story of Elijah itself contains a tension between two poles of God's appearance: theatrical/public/tempestuous and understated/private/still. Milton picks up this tension in the allusions to Elijah in Paradise Regained. The Son's allusions to Elijah all concern his private experiences of isolation, dearth, and God's sustenance; Simon and Andrew's allusion concerns the fierie chariot.[9] In terms of the biblical sequence of prophets presented in Kings 1 and 2 (discussed further below), theatrical, fiery demonstrations become associated with a compromised form of prophecy. Whether or not Elijah himself should be faulted, he participates in a sequence of stories that downgrades both the display at Mt. Carmel and the "fierie charioting" in contrast to the experiences of isolation in the wilderness.

---

[9] For a similar view of Milton's partially critical attitude toward Andrew and Simon, see Grose who notices that they are called "'the brethren,' a group bound to remind us of Milton's own Presbyterians" (112); they are "proleptic in their zeal" (124); "their 'belief' seems to depend upon the physical presence of the Son, not exactly on the evidence of things unseen" (124). In addition, Grose sees "the attachment of staging to demonic agency" (130) in Paradise Regained; Satan has become the "purveyor of the story in its external aspect--the visible world within the brief epic" (130).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

2 Kings forges the connection between the fiery theatrical demonstrations and the contamination of the prophetic role with self-interest. Elisha's own complicated status as prophet arises immediately from his having requested a double share of Elijah's power (2 Kings 2:9; italics mine). The suspicion of self-interest deepens when, after his having received the mantle of Elijah, Elisha curses the children who mock his bald head; that is, he curses them for a private reason of self-interest or pride: "[He] cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she-bears out of the wood, and tore forty and two children of them. And he went from thence to mount Carmel, and from thence he returned to Samaria" (2 Kings 2: 24-5). Mount Carmel appears to have taken on a symbolic status as location of both a theatrical and a self-interested display of godly and prophetic power. Later, Elisha sets up an astounding spectacle for the Arameans, blinding them and transporting them to Samaria, then feeding them. The result, as in the Mt. Carmel episode, negates this theatrical demonstration of godly power. 2 Kings 6:23 reports: "And the bands of Aram came no more into the land of Israel. While the next line does an about-face: "And it came to pass after this, that Ben-hadad King of Aram gathered all his host, and went up, and besieged Samaria [i.e. the Arameans did come into Israel]." But the point does not seem to be only that a theatrical display of godly power has a nugatory effect, but also that its motivation is suspect.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Samson's use of the word "charioting" and the implicit reference to Elijah, therefore, places under suspicion the grand theatricality of the ending of Samson Agonistes, which resembles the contest on Mount Carmel far more closely than it resembles Elijah's own "listening" to God.[10] The presence of a chariot in 2 Kings unfolds the relation to Samson Agonistes even further. If Samson is being contrasted to Elijah's anti-theatrical mode; perhaps he is being subtly compared to Jehu, for in the Jehu story the chariot image gets transformed.

> And when [Jehu] was departed thence, he lighted on Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him: and he saluted him, and said to him, Is thine heart right, as my heart is with thy heart? And Jehonadab answered, It is. If it be, give me thine hand. And he gave him his hand; and he took him up to him into the chariot. And he said, Come with me, and see my zeal for the Lord. So they made him ride in his chariot. And when he came to Samaria, he slew all that remained unto Ahab in Samaria, till he had destroyed him, according to the saying of the Lord, which he spake to Elijah. (2 Kings 10:15-17)

We know from the highly impassioned famous set piece in the Apology[11] that Milton associated the chariot with zeal, at

---

[10] Noticing that Milton theatricalizes iconoclasm in the ending of Samson Agonistes, David Loewenstein argues that "Milton is particularly fascinated . . . by the dramatic potential of iconoclasm, with all its turbulence, immediacy, and implications for social change" (261). However, Loewenstein bases his argument on statements from early prose works such as Of Reformation and Animadversions. Other readers, for example Radzinowicz (71-101) and Gilmartin (31), have shown that Milton's career demonstrates a progressive renouncement of enthusiasm for turbulent and apocalyptic social change.

[11] ". . . then Zeale whose substance is ethereal, arming in compleat diamond ascends his fiery Chariot drawn with two blazing Meteors figur'd like beasts, but of a higher breed then any the Zodiack yeilds, resembling two of those four which Ezechiel and S. John saw, the one visag'd like a Lion to expresse power,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

least partly because of this passage in 2 Kings. Later in his career, as Christopher Grose has shown (154), Milton revised his opinions about zeal, subjecting it to a skeptical scrutiny. In fact, in De Doctrina Milton used Elijah and Jehu as contrasting examples of zeal, describing "an ignorant . . . imprudent . . .too fervent . . . hypocritical and boastful zeal like that of Jehu" and citing as proof text this passage in 2 Kings.

Presumably, this revisionary stance would have made Milton sensitive to reading the Jehu story against the grain, as recent commentators such as George Savran have done:

> In a connected series of vignettes in 2 Kings 9-10, Jehu is proclaimed king by his fellow army officers and proceeds to assassinate King Joram of Israel, the queen mother Jezebel, and their ally King Ahaziah of Judah. Continuing in an ever-widening circle of carnage which claims numerous kinsmen and supporters of the house of Ahab, the destruction culminates in a scene reminiscent of Odysseus' vengeance upon his wife's suitors, in which all adherents of Baal are trapped within their temple and mercilessly slaughtered. The intensity with which Jehu acts is reflected in his constant movement throughout the narrative in 9:14-37 (the verb rakab, "to ride," recurs ten times in this section). In 9:20 Joram's lookout sees Jehu "driving . . furiously," refusing to rest until his enemies are destroyed. The repeated use of the greeting hashalom, "Is it peace?" by Joram and his messengers (9:17, 19, 22)

---

high autority and indignation, the other of count'nance like a man to cast derision and scorne upon perverse and fraudulent seducers; with these the invincible warriour Zeale shaking loosely the slack reins drives over the heads of Scarlet Prelats, and such as are insolent to maintaine traditions, brusing their stiffe necks under his flaming wheels. Thus did the true Prophets of old combat with the false; thus Christ himselfe the fountaine of meeknesse found acrimony anough to be still galling and vexing the Prelaticall Pharisees. (CPW I:900-1).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> serves as foil for Jehu's repudiation of their overtures: "What hast thou to do with peace?" (9:19). The only shalom which is of concern to Jehu is the avenging of Naboth's death--"I will requite [shilamti] thee (9:26)--in accordance with Elijah's oracle.
>
> Jehu's victory over the house of Ahab and his elimination of Baal worship seem to make an overwhelming case for regarding him in a positive light as a divinely appointed avenging angel. But there is something suspicious in the way Jehu conveniently has a divine oracle ready to defend his every action, as he does in 9:26, 9:36, and 10:10. Oracles are nearly always spoken by a prophet or by the narrator himself, but Jehu dares to assume the authority reserved for the prophetic voice in quoting and interpreting the words of Elijah. When we realize that all those connected with the house of Ahab are the essential political targets of his coup d'etat . . . the extent of divine support for Jehu's bloodbath is thrown into question. And as it becomes clear that Jehu is not a prophet the difference between him and Elijah is brought into focus: in 1 Kings 18, Elijah the prophet is concerned with repentance; he seeks to turn the hearts of Israel back to God and executes only the prophets of Baal. Jehu the king, on the other hand, is motivated by political considerations; in 2 Kings10 he destroys all those who worship Baal, for they are potential enemies of the new regime. (Alter, Literary Guide, 152-3)

The biblical text itself, therefore, sets up a contrast between Elijah and Jehu; so that, if we are alert to Milton's comparison of the Son to Elijah and the concomitant contrast of Samson to that prophet, it seems that we should also be attentive to the Jehu/Samson comparison. Indeed, Samson speaks of Harapha ("Or peace or not, alike to me he comes," 1074) in language reminiscent of Jehu's repeated rebuffs to those who approach

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

him with the question, "Is it peace?" (2 Kings 9:17-26). In addition, Jehu's method is much like Samson's:

> And Jehu gathered all the people together, and said unto them, Ahab served Ba'al a little; but Jehu shall serve him much. Now therefore call unto me all the prophets of Ba'al, all his servants, and all his priests; let none be wanting: for I have a great sacrifice to do to Ba'al; .... But Jehu did it in subtilty, to the intent that he might destroy the worshippers of Ba'al. And Jehu said, Proclaim a solemn assembly for Ba'al. And they proclaimed it. And Jehu sent through all Israel: and all the worshippers of Ba'al came, so that there was not a man left that came not .... And it came to pass, as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt offering, that Jehu said to the guard and to the captains, Go in, and slay them; let none come forth. And they smote them with the edge of the sword; and the guard and the captains cast them out, and went to the city of the house of Ba'al. And they brought forth the images out of the house of Ba'al, and burned them. And they brake down the image of Ba'al, and brake down the house of Ba'al, and made it a draught house unto this day.
>
> (2 Kings 10:18-27)

The point is that the investigation of prophecy in 1 and 2 Kings, like the investigation of deliverance in Judges, works by presenting a series of prophets who have a variegated relation to certain themes: relation to God; worldly demonstration of that relation; worldly reform; use of theatricality; contamination by self-interest; use of violence; response to conditions of isolation, abuse, and mockery. The central thematic resembles quite closely the discussion of glory in Paradise Regained, where the Son defined the desire for glory

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

as a desire for self-interested display actually harmful to others.

The contrast between Elijah/Son and Jehu/Samson concerns itself with a range of interrelated categories: the theatrical presence of God vs. a quieter one; how one imagines that God will show his presence and his partiality; the prophet/hero as revenger vs. the prophet/hero as carrier of God's word.[12] Savran emphasizes the contrast between the prophet/hero as revenger and as carrier of God's word; but, although all of these categories would surely be relevant to any comparative reading of Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes, the context of the allusion to Elijah in Paradise Regained presses us to attend most carefully to the

---

[12] Although Milton, in his prose works, for certain rhetorical purposes praises both Elijah at Mt. Carmel and Jehu's assaults by chariot, the question remains--did he notice and did he use the distinctions between various modes of prophecy represented in Kings 1 and 2. In alluding to Elijah in the Apology (CPW I:903), Milton explicitly brings up and rejects the idea that Elijah would have been acting in his own self-interest, "to display his own wit." Although this tells us that Milton at that time read the Mt. Carmel episode in a fashion opposite from the one that I am suggesting, it also tells us that the category of self-interest and self-display was one which he used in reading the story. Likewise, in the allusion to Jehu (CPW 3: 215), Milton shows that he noticed the fury of Jehu's driving, even though he explicitly states that he considers Jehu to be acting rightly in killing the King. While, later, in the De Doctrina passage quoted in my text, he has obviously changed his mind about Jehu, clearly reading Jehu as a model of false zealotry. The allusion to Elijah at the end of "Lycidas" seems very much to stress the anti-theatrical aspect of Elijah's prophecy--his quiet, confident intensity. The difficulty is that Milton's readings of these biblical passages can change both in regard to the rhetorical purpose to which he is applying them and with regard to his own changing opinions during the course of his life. I have primarily relied on the use of Elijah in Paradise Regained as the closest and most relevant guide to Milton's reading of Kings 1 and 2.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

conceptualizing of godly presence. In the passage followed by the dream of Elijah, the Son remarks:

> Where will this end? four times ten days I have pass'd
> Wandring this woody maze, and human food
> Nor tasted, nor had appetite; that Fast
> To Vertue I impute not, or count part
> Of what I suffer here; if Nature need not,
> Or God support Nature without repast
> Though needing, what praise is it to endure?
> But now I feel I hunger, which declares
> Nature hath need of what she asks; yet God
> Can satisfie that need some other way,
> Though hunger still remain: so it remain
> Without this bodies wasting, I content me,
> And from the sting of Famine fear no harm,
> Nor mind it, fed with better thoughts that feed
> Mee hungring more to do my Fathers will. (2.245-59)

Milton, here, takes care to establish a distinction between the feeling of need and the imagination of that need's satisfaction. To say that "God can satisfie that need some other way" is to say that one must be precise as to the exact nature of the need and that one must not restrict God's means of fulfillment to just those ways which one has already oneself imagined. In the face of disappointment, or in an apparent lack of fulfillment, the Son's strategy is to reject any suggestion of abandonment (2.315) replacing the sense of desertion by an openness to God's possible "answers." If we relate this to the felt need of Samson Agonistes, the sense of abandonment experienced by Samson and the other Israelite characters, we must turn to an investigation of how those characters imagine their need will be fulfilled, that is, how they imagine that God

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

will make his presence felt. When reading Samson Agonistes we cannot settle for the observation that Samson regains his trust in God. A crucial question follows: how does he imagine his trust will be confirmed? and, concomitantly, what is the nature of the God in whom he puts his trust?

In the regenerationist reading of Samson Agonistes, the ending locates the power of God, bringing that power down to earth in a specific time and place. The chorus tells us "how comely and reviving" this "locating" is ("Oh how comely it is and how reviving/ to the Spirits of just men long opprest! /When God into the hands of thir deliverer/ Puts invincible might" 1268-71). But the thematics of a "located," "present" God has been scrutinized during the course of the play, and if we are to understand the ending, we must attend to the progressive articulation of such a theme. The story of Samson, biblical and Miltonic, is partly about the strangeness of a located power, power located in the hair. Milton does not downplay this strangeness; instead, he dwells on the subject of godly power situated in the hair. When Samson claims that this power is not located in the hair but rather diffused throughout all the sinews and joints of his body, we must remember that Samson Agonistes has already set up a colloquy with the reader on the question of diffusion and concentration--that this thematic pair carries with it the idea of godly presence and absence.

Although the basic movement of the play seems to consist of a rising toward action, a bursting into action by

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

means of concentrating the diffused energies of remorse and grief, there is an equally strong pull in the direction of diffusion. First, Samson bewails that sight is confined to such a tender ball as the eye (94), rather than diffused throughout the body. Milton seems to be suggesting here--given the previous lines about light as "in the Soul, /She all in every part" (92-3)--that a located vision is not the essential vision or knowing. Instead, he wants to value a more diffused kind of knowing, one that would be associated with the Soul. Another example of this theme appears in the discussion of temperance. Flowing water, a "fresh current/. . . translucent, pure/ With touch aetherial of Heav'ns fiery rod" (547-9), is praised in opposition to the grape, which would traditionally be seen as concentrating the power or virtue of the sun's rays. The concentrated seems to be associated with the located and the visible. It is Dalila's having located love in the physical presence of Samson ("I knew that liberty/ would draw thee forth to perilous enterprises,' . . . Here I should still enjoy thee day and night/ Mine and Loves prisoner," 803-8) rather than in a more diffused kind of holding, that partly constitutes her error.

Yet, Milton cannot be valorizing all kinds of diffusion, for Samson also says that "strength is my bane,/ And proves the sourse of all my miseries" (63-4); this strength is, without wisdom, "vast, unwieldy, burdensome" (54). In other words, his strength is in some way too diffuse, not concentrated or directed enough. And Milton clearly identifies despair and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

lassitude with a Samson who "lies at random, carelessly diffused" (118). It is as if Milton is setting up an extremely delicate balance between diffusion and concentration. In asking us to negotiate between these different images of human strength and divine power, Milton suggests that human access to divine power cannot be generated by pure concentration. Rather, human and the divine meet by a concentrated kind of diffusion, a holding together by means of a controlled, tensile, loosening or letting go--just as the clear, flowing water seems to hold onto heavenly rays more essentially than the grape which condenses them in too concentrated of a fashion.

The entire thematics of speaking and silence, profaning a secret of God's, also participates in this articulation of concentration/diffusion. For, speaking and publishing are a diffusion which Samson profoundly regrets and views as a seminal error. In analyzing his own present condition, Samson speaks of having committed three errors that led to his downfall. He revealed: 1) "who this high gift of strength committed to me"; 2) "in what part lodged"; and 3) "how easily bereft me" (47-8). The second two errors have received attention by critics of the play, but the first error has not, presumably because it does not in any obvious way seem to be reprehensible. Why is Samson not to speak of who gave him his gift? What kind of law could this be which forbids him to mention God? There is no Nazarite rule which enjoins the Nazarite to refrain from praising or proclaiming God. I think

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

we can only understand this error by remembering that the second two errors are here misinterpreted by Samson. That is, he does not sin by speaking of "in what part lodged," but by conceiving of God's power as having been lodged, or located "in," his hair. He does not err by speaking of how easily the power can be stolen by cutting the hair, because the power is not really located in the hair. If we ask, then, what kind of law forbids Samson to reveal "who this high gift of strength committed to me," I think we must answer that the law forbids him to imagine a located God just as he should not imagine his gift as located in his hair. The alternative point of view would again be associated with the chorus, who proclaim: "Oft he seems to hide his face,/ But unexpectedly returns/ And to his faithful Champion hath in place/ Bore witness gloriously" (1749-52), where "face" rhymes with "place" thereby emphasizing that God's presence should be conceived as located in a "place."

I have run through a number of interrelated themes in Samson Agonistes; and, before going on, it might be helpful to summarize them. I began by saying that heroical action, for Milton, must be action that somehow carries God's presence into the world. The "somehow" here has been under discussion. To escape from any misguided sense of one's own heroic action, one must be free from false ideas of how God appears to men, or, concomitantly, how one should proceed in demonstrating God's presence. The annunciation scene in Judges 13, and the memory of such a scene by Samson in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Samson Agonistes, becomes a focal point for characterizing men's conceptualization of godly presence. In his use of the word "fierie charioting" and in his emphasis on repeating the image of a rising "fierie vertue" at the catastrophe, Milton strengthens an implicit contrast between Samson and the anti-theatrical Elijah that Paradise Regained had first suggested. The biblical story of Elijah takes as explicit subject the mode of God's appearance and the mode of demonstrating that appearance. It seems to place under suspicion a theatrical, hyperbolical demonstration, with its hope of a single, decisive, public, great act which will turn men's minds toward God. Milton takes a stance on this issue by means of the thematics of diffusion and concentration and by the suspicion of a located godly power. The chorus and Manoa and, as we shall see, Samson, imagine the appearance of God, his fulfillment of their needs, in this theatrical manner; they imagine the hero/prophet as agent of the theatrical, public demonstration of godly power, presence, and partiality.

iii

The parallel between how Samson conceives of his own heroism and how he conceives of God comes to the surface when Samson is most explicit about his vision of heroism. In the very opening of the drama he is "attacked" by thoughts of

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the disjunction between past and present self.[13] The "work" of the drama, the task to which Samson appears to be oriented, is to make those two selves reconverge. In describing his past self, Samson declaims:

> . . . when in strength
> All mortals I excell'd, and great in hopes
> With youthful courage and magnanimous thoughts
> Of birth from Heav'n foretold and high exploits,
> Full of divine instinct, after some proof
> Of acts indeed heroic, far beyond
> The Sons of Anac, famous now and blaz'd,
> Fearless of danger, like a petty God
> I walk'd about admir'd of all and dreaded
> On hostile ground, none daring my affront. (522-31)

The lines read like a precis of heroic language: excelling in strength, full of courage, magnanimous, high exploits, heroic, blaz'd, admired, dreaded. This is the terminology of Renaissance heroism. Samson's valorization of his own heroic actions as "far beyond the Sons of Anac" decisively judges this kind of heroism to be crude, belonging to a former age of giants.[14] If Samson's object is to recover this former self, the attempt can only be a misguided sense of the heroic and the glorious. He cannot avoid this problem simply be resurrecting in himself this kind of heroic ethos while eliminating the

[13]This consciousness of a crack in, or divergence from, one's own identity is a characteristic of heroic drama. Shakespeare's Coriolanus struggles to maintain a consistent identity; and, in refusing to "contaminate" that identity, he betrays the very city by which the identity was formed and to which the identity was dedicated. The Antony's of Shakespeare and of Dryden are equally concerned with the loss of identity. The redefinition of heroism in these plays always involves the question of whether one's glory and one's identity can be maintained even when the arena of heroic action has shifted.
[14] See Paradise Lost XI 675-99 for such an indictment of giants.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

pridefulness attached to it.[15] The phrase "like a petty God" has a double edge. It not only condemns Samson as prideful, which he readily admits in the line following this passage ("swollen with pride, into the snare I fell"); but also betrays a crude sense of what constitutes Godlike action. In other words, Samson does not only err because his pride leads him to believe that he is godlike; he also errs because he conceives of God in crude terms of giantship.

So, it should come as no surprise that the language of chivalric heroic action appears with equal force in Samson's imagination of God's return:

> . . . all the contest is now
> 'Twixt God and Dagon; Dagon hath presum'd,
> Me overthrown, to enter lists with God,
> His Deity comparing and preferring
> Before the God of Abraham. He, be sure,
> Will not connive, or linger, thus provok'd,
> But will arise and his great name assert:
> Dagon must stoop, and shall e're long receive
> Such a discomfit, as shall quite despoil him
> Of all these boasted Trophies won on me,
> And with confusion blank his Worshippers. (461-71)

The concentration of chivalric heroic language here reappears with respect to God: "contest," "lists," "great name assert," "discomfit," "despoil," and "Trophies." These are the words that Manoa takes as prophecy. That is, this is the form which

---

15 Radzinowicz argues that "there was in Samson's self-indictment the possibility of regeneration, which follows upon correct self-evaluation" (34), but I am arguing that Samson fails to rid himself of this pridefulness partly because he continues to imagine God as needing to demonstrate His power in a theatrical, grandiose, public stroke.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

he expects a prophetic speech to take: prediction for a great battle, a huge spectacle, an immediate revelation, a dramatic event.

> Manoa: . . . these words
> I as a Prophecy receive: for God,
> Nothing more certain, will not long defer
> To vindicate the glory of his name
> Against all competition, nor will long
> Endure it, doubtful whether God be Lord,
> Or Dagon. (472-78)

Why is there this affinity or correlation between an imagination of human heroism and an imagination of God's power? It begs the question to see this confluence as the inspiring of man by godly power so that they share the same qualities. Instead, the text of Samson Agonistes suggests that such a correlation--in which both the vindication of God and of Samson is imagined as the creation of a spectacle of their own power--is motivated by self-interest.

The final choral comment brings such a motivation nearly to the surface. In its statement that God has "to his faithful Champion . . . in place/bore witness gloriously" (1751-2), the chorus reverses the usual term, to bear witness to God; here, God bears witness to Samson. In this reversal of values, Manoa seems to concur. He is consistently interested in Samson's own glory, responding to the messenger's speech with a series of questions that attempt to ascertain Samson's gain or loss of honour. He revels in Samson's having recovered a former identity and attained a level of heroism, "Samson hath quit

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

himself like Samson, and heroicly hath finish'd a life Heroic" (1710). But he betrays himself as too interested in the deed as Samson's more than anything else, especially in his seeing the conversion from sorrow to joy as residing in the fact that Samson has caused the Philistine's fall (1564). There seems to be an implied criticism of Manoa's sense of glory as too self-interested--either for his son, or by reflection from Samson, for himself.

The chorus conceives of God's glory as a theatrical demonstration of godly power, and man's glory will be in his having been the agent of such a theatrical display of "presence." But it is not only in relation to Manoa and the chorus that Milton makes it clear that self-interest contaminates the theatrical display of godly power. Samson's fear of obscurity (SA 572) contrasts sharply with the Son's "deeds/ Above Heroic, though in secret done" (PR 1.15), who "unobserv'd/Home to his Mothers house private return'd" (PR 4. 638-9). Samson remains confused about the agency of his own former deeds. He first grants them to God: "those great acts which God had done/ Singly by me" (SA 244-5); but then recants: "I . . . /Us'd no ambition to commend my deeds,/The deeds themselves, though mute, spoke loud the dooer" (SA 246-7), implying that he, himself, was the "dooer" rather than God. He aligns himself with the chorus's definition of a self-interested heroism, to "subdue the Earth,/ Universally crown'd with highest praises" (SA174-5) and in the process reveals his addiction to the kind of glory the Son had debunked.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Considering deliverance the opportunity to "oppress Israel's oppressors" (SA 232) and lambasting the chorus for having missed the opportunity to "lord over them whom now they serve" (SA 267), Samson fits neatly into the terms used by the Son when defining the true nature of the heroism associated with martial deliverers.

At the first entrance of heroic language in the poem, Samson describes himself as having been "separate to God,/ designed for great exploits" (SA 31-2). As so frequently with Milton, the break in the line ending indicates a point of choice: it presses us to consider that the phrase hidden behind the corner of the line break, as it were, may have been other. The same technique of suspicion should be applied to Samson Agonistes as Helen Vendler has used so successfully in reading George Herbert's poetry; namely, one should resist the temptation to elide the difference between appositions. An apposition is a kind of definition, the apposition defining the preceding phrase; and in Samson Agonistes, Milton expects his reader to make a judgment about the correctness of such definitions. Does "separate to God" mean "designed for great exploits"? And, more importantly, what is the nature of that "great exploit" which would indicate a separateness to God? Milton renounces the drama of "great exploit," the theatricality of heroism. He does so partly by making fire imagery so prominent in Samson Agonistes and so debased in Paradise Regained.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

The blaze of fire imagery in Samson's memory of the annunciation scene and in the choral song should be read with Paradise Regained in mind. Paradise Regained consistently associates flame and fire with heroic action and false glory. The word first appears in the Son's description of his own youth:

> . . . victorious deeds
> Flam'd in my heart, heroic acts, one while
> To rescue Israel from the Roman yoke
> Then to subdue and quell o're all the earth
> Brute violence and proud Tyrannick pow'r,
> Till truth were freed, and equity restor'd:
> Yet held it more humane, more heav'nly first
> By winning words to conquer willing hearts,
> And make perswasion do the work of fear.
> (1.215-23; italics mine)

Later, Satan speaks of "glory the reward/That sole excites to high attempts the flame/ Of most erected Spirits" (3.26; italics mine), and speaking of Julius Caesar, says, "The more he grew in years, the more inflam'd/With glory" (3.40-1; italics mine). To this argument the Son responds, "what is glory but the blaze of fame, the peoples praise . . and what the people but a herd confus'd . . . ." (3.47-9; italics mine). Fire is never associated with the Saviour, while Satan is described by the Saviour as "inflam'e[d]" with torment (1.418). In other words, while the Son casts off his youthful attraction to flame, "inflam'd" is a characteristic of Satan's own tormented, evil inner being. The use of flame in the context of a project that sounds much like Samson's (to rescue Israel from a conqueror), the association of flame with the kind of glory and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

"high attempt" which consumes Samson, the further association of flame with the kind of people's praise which arises in the fiery phoenix imagery at the end of Samson Agonistes--all of this points to a sustained comparison between the two works which asks us to place Samson's "heroic" endeavor in the context which Paradise Regained has set out. It severely restricts the adulation with which one can view Samson at the close.

Fire had already collected negative connotations in the biblical Samson story. Samson's firing of the foxes' tails (Judges 15:4-5), the consequent conflagration of the woman at Timnah and her father in their house (Judges 15:6), and the melting of the cords that bind Samson (Judges 15:14) contribute to a characterization of Samson as wild, uncontrollable, raging. As Robert Alter has written:

> By the time we get to the captive Samson bringing down the temple of Dagon on himself and several thousand of his enemies, though there is no actual fire in this climactic scene, fire has become 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. (Art of Biblical Narrative, 95).

If Milton appears to de-emphasize these fiery plot elements of the biblical Samson story, he does so only to place fire imagery internally--in the awe of Manoa, Samson, and the chorus. The destructiveness of fire migrates inward, becomes a symbol of the destructiveness of human desire to see flame,

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

that is, to be awed by a fiery God and a fiery hero. In contrast, as Waith points out, heroic drama consistently employs the image of flame to characterize the hero's divine spark. In Seneca, for example, the hero "identifies his will with cosmic order--again flame with flame, the primal element in nature--and thus transcends his mere humanity" (Herculean, 37).

Heroic drama participates in the construction of an idea of heroism that is motivated by pride and self-interest and which culminate in a fascination with the hyperbolic. Milton responds to the tradition of heroic drama by placing under suspicion the entire idea of fascination. The heroic is that which fascinates, therefore, that which becomes an idol. Samson wants to "blank" the worshippers of Dagon, that is, to "de-fascinate" them. But Milton resists the temptation to replace the fascinating Dagon with a Hebraic or Christian God and a corresponding hero that would fascinate in the same way. When Manoa asks, "Can this be hee,/ that Heroic, that Renown'd,/ Irresistible Samson?" we should hear in that "irresistible" its literal meaning: "too strong, weighty, or fascinating to be resisted" (OED). Samson's final action and his final purposes cannot be distinguished from the faults of his former style of heroism. His final claim to perform a feat that "as with amaze shall strike all who behold" (1645) allies him again with the kind of theatrical display that Elijah used on Mount Carmel. If he formerly "under the seal of silence could not keep" God's secrets, it hardly seems to be a reformation of character that he foregoes the "noise" of talk

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

for the "noise" of the big boom declaring God's presence and partiality. In creating a kind of flame or blaze rising, through the choral speech at the end of Samson Agonistes, Milton chose to make Samson appear as the angel charioting his presence from off the altar. The challenge for the reader of Samson Agonistes, as for Manoah in Judges 13, is to keep from idolizing the figure in the blaze.

Milton situates Samson's heroism in a matrix that encompasses the protagonists of Renaissance heroic drama, the Son in Paradise Regained, the Samson in Judges, and the prophets in 1 and 2 Kings. Out of the subtleties of the comparisons and contrasts between Samson and these heroes, we are to construct a judgment of Samson and ascertain Milton's prescription for a truly heroic mode of Christian action. Milton shows us a hero who has taken the secular heroic mode and rededicated its theatrical, hyperbolical passions and actions to God. Instead of creating a laudatory Christian hero, however, this rededication has merely thrust Samson into a mode of debased heroism (or debased prophecy) for which the Old Testament provided other models. At issue is how the hero imagines that God will "answer" man, how He will show His presence and partiality both to the hero and to the hero's larger audience. Milton's engagement with the traditions of revenge drama and tragicomedy was mostly concerned with Samson's desire for assurance of Sonship and assurance of God's forgiveness. Milton's engagement with heroic drama concerns the desire to demonstrate those

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

assurances to an audience outside the self. Samson, Manoa, and the chorus all continue to imagine human and godly heroism as a fiery display of God's power. The comparison with Paradise Regained unveils the self-interest, futility, and destructiveness of this desire for dramatic demonstration.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Epilogue

The history of Samson criticism has been largely the history of discerning and then filling gaps in Milton's text. For many years critics busied themselves in supplying the cavernous missing middle announced by Samuel Johnson.[1] In the process, readers tended to create a smooth narrative of rising consciousness and regeneration that could explain, motivate, and serve as authenticating, sanctifying guarantor for Samson's final action in the drama. It wasn't until John Carey, Irene Samuel, Stanley Fish, and Joseph Wittreich[2] began to dismantle that smooth narrative--partly by looking at the means by which and motives for which such narratives are created--that another gap took primary place in Samson criticism: the uncertainty of godly inspiration for Samson's pulling down the pillars.

Even to be able to see such a gap in the text depended on making a preliminary opening of the critic's mind with respect to reading Milton. This openness was called for by Irene Samuel in her essay, "Samson Agonistes as Tragedy." She argued that critics do Milton a disservice and misunderstand Samson by treating Milton as a doctrinaire Puritan who,

---

[1] Johnson wrote that Samson Agonistes has a beginning and an end but no middle. His view was first printed in The Rambler, No. 139 (July 16, 1751).
[2] Carey, "Sea, Snake, Flower, and Flame in Samson Agonistes"; Samuel, "Samson Agonistes as Tragedy" in Calm of Mind, ed. Wittreich; Fish, "Question and Answer" and "Spectacle and Evidence"; Wittreich, Interpreting Samson Agonistes.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

> never wrote except to assert divine providence and herald ultimate doomsday with its sure division of the elect from the damned when, of course, his party would be of the elect. (236)
>
> . . . .
>
> What somehow gets between Milton and readers is an assumption that he is less poet than polemicist, doctrinaire rather than doctrinal, rigidified by his Christian convictions into inhumanity rather than illumined to a clearer reading of the human condition. (256)

In essence, Samuel cried "foul" at the means by which critics had forced speech from the reticences of Milton's text. To use De Doctrina Christiana, or a flattened, unified view of the Medieval/Renaissance typological tradition, or even Milton's own polemical prose to supply what is elided in his poetic text cheats us of the full view of the range and meaning of Milton's poetry.

The best of recent work on Samson Agonistes has taken such an open view of Milton, leaning less on the doctrinaire and digging beneath the received wisdom about him and his age. Such work, first, has acknowledged the reticence of the text and, second, provided the "thick description" (in Clifford Geertz's phrase) of the material used to fill the gap. That is, critics have begun to replace the "doctrinaire" Milton with a more refined and complex, less univocal, sense of both Milton and the social, political, and theological contexts in which he was enmeshed. Joseph Wittreich unearthed the controversies surrounding Samson typology, disclosing in the process that it was the very ambiguity of Samson's heroism that made him an

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

especially appropriate figure for representing the ambiguities in men's and women's experience of seventeenth-century history.[3] Joan Bennett and Christopher Grose placed Samson Agonistes in the context of Milton's own lifelong struggle with the prophet's relation to human tradition and God's law. Although these above-named critics differ finally on the crucial issue of Samson's status as inspired godly agent or prophet, they have all succeeded in providing a far more finely articulated view of Miltonic thought and Miltonic context.

My own study has been an attempt to provide the literary equivalent of such forays. I wanted to be able to speak about the themes of Samson Agonistes in a literary sense but to leave behind the vagueness of, for example, Anthony Low's discussion of Samson which tended to treat "universal" themes like "isolation," without stopping to ask what specific contemporary resonance these themes had.[4] Therefore, in seeking to build a "thick description" of the literary context, I attended to the ways in which Renaissance dramatic genres had inscribed within them particular political, social, and theological tensions. A knowledge of these tensions helped me to maintain the kind of openness to Milton for which Irene Samuel had pleaded. Just as knowledge of the contradictions in Samson typology made it impossible to see Milton as

[3] Wittreich, Interpreting Samson Agonistes. In the next sentence, Bennett's and Grose's work appears in Reviving Liberty and Milton and the Sense of Tradition, respectively.

[4] The Blaze Of Noon: A Reading of Samson Agonistes (NY and London: Columbia UP, 1974).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

elegantly rephrasing the commonplaces of his age (for those commonplaces ceased to exist as commonplaces and became vexed, debatable issues), so too a knowledge of the calculated tensions within the dramatic tradition made it impossible to see Milton as merely purifying the drama of his own century. This investigation into Renaissance drama has shown that the major critical issues of reading Samson--the ambiguity of Samson's heroism, the uncertainty about his regeneration, the moral status of his "revenge," the questions about whether the text emphasizes his movement toward freedom or emphasizes how he uses that freedom to choose his own and his culture's destruction--have their precedents in the calculated ambiguities of previous Renaissance drama.

For example, as this study has shown, revenge drama earlier in the century was already about the immoralities arising from a well-intentioned reformation of the state, the difficulty of discerning Protestant election and vocation, the difficulties of timing in relation to reformation, the desire for precipitating the Apocalypse. Such drama was already suspicious of the personal, self-interested desire to dramatically confirm and display one's own Sonship. Social issues were already inscribed within the various seventeenth-century genres, and Milton extends that inscription to his own time. He writes into the genres a response to the history of the Interregnum and Restoration as well as a prescription for present action.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Recent New Historicist work on Renaissance drama provides a jumping off point for seeing such social, political, and theological issues inscribed in literary genres. But that same New Historicist emphasis on subversion and containment can only begin--given the course of the subsequent civil war--to approach the major dynamic of Milton's time in which subversion succeeded and then subverted itself. Such a setback made it likely that men would become uneasy (in a different fashion from previous forms of uneasiness) about the prospects of rebellion. It seems entirely explicable that men would be less interested in the difficulties of accomplishing rebellion and more interested in carefully defining _what kind of rebellion, really what kind of action, was desirable_.

In taking on such a subject, Milton's choice of drama, and particularly of tragedy, as medium was particularly apt for several reasons. First, Milton conceived of tragedy as the interinvolvement of individual failure and historical consequence. In _Paradise Lost_, Adam and Eve's tragic fall could only reveal its full significance when Books 11 and 12 portrayed its effect on human history. In the Outlines for Tragedies in the Trinity manuscript, we find that, in looking for subjects for tragedies, Milton turned to either biblical or chronicle history even though by the early 1640s, when these notes were made, there was overwhelming precedent for using sources more focused on the individual (such as Boccaccio's or Cinthio's tales).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Second, drama has no authoritative narrative voice and so leaves the audience in a position of spectatorship similar to that which history itself demands; that is, one must read the events and act upon one's own interpretation of those events. The appropriateness of his choice of medium becomes apparent when we allow ourselves to speculate about the Miltonic answers to the larger questions concerning that medium: what does tragedy ask of us as audience? In what position does it place us? What is the mode of attention it demands? How does that mode of attention interact with the broader issues of history--of human initiative and autonomy in historical change? What is tragedy's relation to the present moment? Here Stanley Cavell's theorization of such issues dovetails with Milton's own practice.[5] Cavell claims our complicity in the characters' failures. In our missing the same significances that the character is missing; in wanting what the character wants; in refusing to see what he refuses to see, we too reveal ourselves. Cavell goes on to say that, partly out of the acquisition of such self-knowledge, "a purpose of tragedy [is] to make us practical, capable of acting" (118). Milton would have agreed with such a statement. Whatever Milton's position was vis a vis the Renaissance interpretations of Aristotelian theory,[6] his comment in the Preface to Samson Agonistes that

---

[5] Cavell addresses such issues in the second part of his essay, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear," in Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), pp. 81-123.

[6]The fullest discussions of Milton's relation to Renaissance Aristotelian theory occur in Paul R. Sellin, "Sources of Milton's Catharsis: A Reconsideration," in

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

tragedy is "of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure . . . " also leaves room for the interpretation that one tempered the passions in order to prepare oneself for a different kind of action than was formerly used. In short, Milton conceived of tragedy as a multifaceted engagement with history: tragedy demonstrates the individual's effect on history (where history could itself be subject to a tragic fall); tragedy demands the independent judgment of the audience (particularly a kind of judgment that can become detached from its own empathy); and tragedy prepares the audience for action.

Finally, drama was the appropriate medium for Milton's concerns because the redefinition of desirable rebellion or action had to seriously contend with the desire for the dramatic, in its most elementary, almost pedestrian sense: sudden resolution of difficulties, sudden reversals of power, sudden revelations of truth, sudden reprieves from disaster, sudden and conclusive manifestations of moral authority. Milton seems to have been very aware of his community's deepest desires for this kind of drama and deeply critical of the social, political and religious consequences of yielding to such desires. In addition, he was highly sensitive to, and highly self-critical of, his own desire for drama. That is,

---

Milton Studies in Honor of Harris Francis Fletcher (Urbana, 1961), pp. 104-122 and John M. Steadman, "Passions Well Imitated"" Rhetoric and Poetics in the Preface to Samson Agonistes" in Calm of Mind, ed. Wittreich, pp. 175-208.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Samson Agonistes engages Milton's own long-standing desire both for his country to be the locus of the dramatic revelation of God's authority and for himself to be the harbringer of such a revelation. One may find it entirely explicable, therefore, that Milton decided to reinvent the dramatic medium, in essence writing two anti-dramas in the 1671 volume.

This study has served to unpack the significance of "anti-drama" for Milton. The various Renaissance dramatic generic structures helped Milton to analyze the composition of his own and his contemporaries' desires for the dramatic. His response to those generic structures helped him to formulate the way in which redefining the dramatic could help to redefine action, to find a proper, preferable, mode of action to suggest to his countrymen. Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes both end with "strike with amaze," (in Paradise Regained actually "smitten with amazement," [4.562]), and by constructing such a doubling, Milton forces us to ask what is the nature of each of the "strikes" and what the nature of "amaze"? That is, what is the nature of action in each work and what is the consequence for the audience of that action? Thus Christopher Grose is absolutely correct in seeing the significance for Milton of how a conjunction can be effected between internal knowledge and external audience. But finally Grose's analysis of Samson as a prophet who is still riddling rather than communicating is puzzling. Cut off from any successful transmission of his knowledge (except in so far as Milton, the artist/prophet resurrects the deliverer's story),

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Grose's Samson cannot serve as a model for Christian action. Likewise, Stanley Fish's contention that Milton thought of Christian action as pure, internal choice or faith leaves the central question unanswered: what consequence in the world will be produced by such internal action?

Samson Agonistes constitutes a tragedy not only in this very disjunction between internal knowledge and external action but also in the failure of internal knowledge itself. As this study has shown, Samson's striking action arises from a trust in God, where "trust" means largely the belief that God will empower the actor to demonstrate his own Sonship through destruction of God's enemies and "God" means largely one who flashes forth in a visible, saving, manifestation of presence. But in transferring the "wonder" proper to tragedy to the "wonder" of God, Milton demands that we ask in what way should we expect to be amazed by God, in what ways does a misplaced, misdefined amazement make us "miss" God? In what ways should we expect to be amazed by men? How does the desire to be the bestower of amazement ruin the chances for successful, righteous action? He uses the genre of closet drama to cast suspicion on the spectacular demonstration of power that ends Samson Agonistes. Such a suspicion is not only a reflection on the staging and reading of military victories of the preceding years but also a prospective comment on any future attempt to recapture a sense of election by a new staging of power. Milton's drawing on the calculated tensions of revenge drama suggests that he

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

attributed the failure of the Puritan revolution at least partly to the personal, self-interested desires of the participants to dramatically and immediately confirm and display their own Sonship. In part, he accomplishes this condemnation of Revolutionary tactics by casting his drama in the shape of tragicomedy while disrupting the symmetrical relation between human and divine forgiveness that Renaissance tragicomedy used as its model. Finally, by pitching Samson against the shadow both of the protagonists in Renaissance heroic drama and against the shadow of Jesus in Paradise Regained, Milton defines a kind of model for action that is temperate, understated, tranquil, and emptied of self-interest.

In his 1671 volume, Milton undoes the entire history of Renaissance drama's fascination with Senecan drama as that fascination has been excavated by Gordon Braden.[7] In Samson Agonistes Milton condemns the rage of the Senecan hero or revenger. That rage, which arises from the hero's inability to control the world and which turns him toward annihilation of self and world, cannot remain admirable under Milton's gaze even if it thinks of itself as operating under the aegis of God. The other pole of the Renaissance Senecan tradition, the Stoic tranquility which, also in frustration at the powerlessness of the human will to effect the world outside, withdraws from that world into the contemplation of its own (isolated) power, Milton replaces with the more active, engaged tranquility of

[7] Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985).

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

the Son in Paradise Regained. By placing these heroes face to face in the same poetic volume, Milton shows his hope that a contemplation of the ultimate futility of a rage which desires to overturn the corrupt world may prompt his contemporaries to embrace the active patient tranquility of a more self-controlled kind of actor. The details of tranquil action, as Milton comprehended it, remain to be investigated. How did Milton conceive of such action, not as an otherworldly but as a worldly possibility? Part of the answer can perhaps be found in the history of Latin biblical dramas of the Renaissance. In such a tradition may lie an entire gamut of kinds of actors with which Milton would have been familiar and from which he may have constructed, by a process of selective imitation and differentiation, his own vision of human action in a sacred world.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Works Consulted

PRIMARY SOURCES

Aeschylus. The Oresteia. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1975.

---- . Prometheus Bound. Trans. James Scully and C.J. Herrington. New York: Oxford UP, 1975.

Aristotle. Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art. Trans. S.H. Butcher. 1895; London: Macmillan,1927.

Bereishis. Trans. Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz. Two Vols. Artscroll Tanach Series. NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1986.

Brathwaite, Richard. Mercurius Britannicus, or the English Intelligencer. The Censure of Judges. Printed in the yeare, 1641.

Buchanan, George. George Buchanan Tragedies. Eds. Peter Sharratt and P.G. Walsh. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983.

Calderon de la Barca, Pedro. Life Is A Dream; A Play. Trans. and Intro. Edwin Honig. New York: Hill and Wang, 1970.

Calvin, Jean. Institutes of the Christian Religion. Ed. John T. McNeill. Trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster P, 1960.

Cary, Elizabeth. The Tragedie of Mariam, 1613; Malone Society Reprints. Oxford: Horace Hart for the University Press, 1914.

Chapman, George. Bussy D'Ambois. Ed. Nicholas Brooke. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1964.

Cinthio, Giraldi. Discorsi intorno al comporre de i romanzi, delle commedie, e delle tragedie, etc. Venice, 1554. Trans. Allan H. Gilbert. Literary Criticism, Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1962.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Daniel, Samuel. The Complete Works of Verse and Prose of Samuel Daniel. Ed. Alexander Grosart. 1885; NY: Russell & Russell, 1963.

---- . The Tragedy of Philotas. Ed. Laurence Michel. 1949, Yale UP; rprt., Archon Books, 1970.

Darbishire, Helen, ed. and intro. The Early Lives of Milton. NY: Barnes and Noble, 1932.

Davenant, William Sir. The Works of Sir William Davenant. 2 Vols. Facscimile, 1673 edition. New York: B. Blom, 1968.

Dryden, John. All For Love. Ed. David M. Vieth. Regents Renaissance Drama. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P,1972.

---- .Aureng-Zebe in John Dryden: Four Tragedies. Ed. L.A. Beaurline and Fredson Bowers. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1967.

---- . "Conquest of Granada" in The Works of John Dryden. Vol. 11. Ed. John Loftis, et. al. Berkekly: U of California P, 1978.

---- . Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays. Ed. and intro. George Watson. Vol. 1. London: Dent; New York: Dutton, 1962.

---- . "Tyrannick Love" in The Works of John Dryden. Vol. 10. Eds. Maximillan E. Novak and George R. Guffey. Berkeley: U of California P, 1970.

Euripides. Orestes and Other Plays. Trans. Philip Vellacott. NY: Penguin, 1972.

Fletcher, John. The Works of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher. Ed. Arnold Glover. NY: Octagon Books, 1969.

Ford, John. "The Lover's Melancholy" in John Ford (Five Plays). Ed. Havelock Ellis. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1957.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Golding, Arthur, trans. A Tragedie of Abraham's Sacrifice, written in French by Theodore Beza, and translated into Inglish by A.G. Imprinted at London by Thomas Vautroullier dwelling in the Blacke Friers, 1577.

Goodwin, John. Twelve considerable serious cautions very necessary to be observed, in, and about a Reformation according to the Word of God. Wherein diverse, particular inconsistencies with the Word of God, very incident to Reformation (so called) are briefly insisted upon, and argued from the Word of God. London. Printed by M.S. for Henry Overton, 1646.

Grene, David and Richard Lattimore, eds. The Complete Greek Tragedies. New York: Modern Library, 1941-1959.

Greville, Fulke, Lord Brooke. The Works in Verse and Prose of the Right Honourable Fulke Greville, Lord Brooke. Ed. Rev. Alexander B. Grosart. Vol. 3. 1870; AMS Press, 1966.

Guarini, Giovanni Battista. Il Pastor Fido. Trans. Fanshawe, Richard, 1647. Ed. Walter Staton and William Simeone. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1964.

Heywood, Thomas. A Woman Killed with Kindness. Ed. Brian Scobie. New York: Norton, 1986.

Jonson, Ben. Ben Jonson's Sejanus His Fall. Ed. Henry de Vocht. Vaduz: Kraus Reprint, 1963.

Kirkconnell, Watson. That Invincible Samson: The Theme of Samson Agonistes in World Literature with Translations of the Major Analogues. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1964.

Kyd, Thomas. The Spanish Tragedy. Ed. Thomas W. Ross. Berkeley: U of California P, 1968.

Marston, John. Antonio and Mellida. Ed. G.K. Hunter. Regents Renaissance Drama Series. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P. 1965.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

---- . Antonio's Revenge. Ed. G.K. Hunter. Regents Renaissance Drama Series. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1965.

Middleton, Thomas. Women Beware Women. Ed. Roma Gill. London: Ernest Benn, Ltd., 1968.

---- . Middleton, Thomas and William Rowley. Ed. N.W. Bawcutt. The Revels Plays. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1958.

Milton, John. The Complete Poetry Of John Milton. Ed. John T. Shawcross. 1963. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, rev. ed. 1971.

---- . The Complete Prose Works of John Milton. Eds. Don M. Wolfe, et al. 8 vols. New Haven: Yale UP, 1953-82.

Racine, Jean. Four Greek Plays. Trans. and Intro. R.C. Knight. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1982.

Sandys, George. Christs Passion. London: John Legatt, 1640.

Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. Four Tragedies and Octavia. Trans. and Intro. E.F. Watling. Baltimore: Penguin, 1966.

Shakespeare, William. Antony and Cleopatra. Ed. M.R. Ridley. Arden. London and New York: Methuen, 1954.

---- . Coriolanus. Ed. Philip Brockbank. Arden. London and New York: Routledge, 1976.

--- . Cymbeline. Ed. J. M. Nosworthy. Arden. London: Routledge, 1955.

--- . Hamlet. Ed. Harold Jenkins. Arden. London: Metheun, 1982.

--- . King Lear. Ed. Kenneth Muir. Arden. London: Metheun, 1972.

--- . The Tempest. Ed. Frank Kermode. Arden. London: Routledge, 1954.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

--- . The Winters Tale. Ed. J.H. P. Pafford. Arden. London: Metheun, 1963.

Spencer, Christopher, ed. and intro. Five Restoration Adaptations of Shakespeare. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1965.

Tourneur, Cyril. The Works of Cyril Tourneur. Ed. Allardyce Nicoll. 1929; NY: Russell & Russell, 1963.

Webster, John. The White Devil. Ed. John Russell Brown. The Revels Plays. 1960; Manchester UP, rprt., 1979.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Adelman, Janet. "Anger's My Meat": Feeding, Dependency, and Agression in Coriolanus." In Bevington, David and Jay L. Halio, eds. Shakespeare, Pattern of Excelling Nature. Newark: University of Deleware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1978.

---- . The Common Liar: An Essay on Antony and Cleopatra. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1973.

Alter, Robert. The Art of Biblical Narrative. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981.

Alter, Robert and Frank Kermode, eds. The Literary Guide to the Bible. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard U, 1987.

Altman, Joel. The Tudor Play of Mind: Rhetorical Inquiry and the Development of Elizabethan Drama. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 1978.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Andrews, John F. "Dearly Bought Revenge': Samson Agonistes, Hamlet, and Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy." Milton Studies 13 (1979): 81-107.

Arnold, Margaret. "Graeci Christiani: Milton's Samson and the Renaissance Editors of Greek Tragedy." Milton Studies 18 (1983): 235-54.

Baines, Barbara. "Antonio's Revenge: Marston's Play on Revenge Plays." Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 23.2 (1983): 277-94.

Bal, Mieke. Death and Dissymetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges. Chicago Studies in the History of Judiasm. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988.

Barish, Jonas. The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice. Berkeley, L.A., London: U of California P, 1981.

Barker, Arthur. "Calm Regained through Passion Spent: The Conclusions of the Miltonic Effort" in The Prison and the Pinnacle, ed. Balachandra Rajan. Toronto and Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 1973, pp. 3-48.

Belsey, Catherine. "The Case of Hamlet's Conscience." Studies in Philology 76 (1974): 127-48.

---- . The Subject of Tragedy. London; New York: Metheun, 1985.

Binns, J.W. Intellectual Culture in Elizabethan and Jacobean England: The Latin Writings of the Age. Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1990.

Bowers, Fredson. Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642. Princeton UP, 1940.

---- . "Hamlet as Minister and Scourge." PMLA 70 (1955): 740-49.

Braden, Gordon. Renaissance Tragedy and the Senecan Tradition. New Haven, Yale UP, 1985.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Brucher, Richard. "Fantasies of Violence," Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 21 (1981): 257-70.

Budick, Sanford. The Dividing Muse: Images of Sacred Disjunction in Milton's Poetry. New Haven: Yale UP, 1985.

Butler, Martin. Theatre and Crisis, 1632-1642. Cambridge UP, 1984.

Campbell, Lily. Divine Poetry and Drama in Sixteenth-Century England. Berkeley: U of California P, 1959.

Carey, John. "Sea, Snake, Flower, and Flame in Samson Agonistes." Modern Language Review 62 (1967): 395-9.

Cavell, Stanley. Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.

Charleton, H. B. intro. The Poetical Works of Sir William Alexander, eds. L.E. Kastner and H.B. Charleton. Edinburgh: Scottish Text Society, 1921.

Christopher, Georgia. Milton and the Science of the Saints. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982.

Croll, Morris, intro. The Works of Fulke Greville; A Thesis by Morris W. Croll. Philadelphia. Printed by J.B. Lippincott Co., 1903.

Darbishire, Helen, ed. and intro. The Early Lives of Milton. NY: Barnes and Noble, 1932.

Demaray, John G. Milton's Theatrical Epic: The Invention and Design of Paradise Lost. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980.

Dixon, Mimi Still. "Tragicomic Recognitions: Medieval Miracles and Shakespearean Romance" in Renaissance Tragicomedy, ed. Nancy K. Maguire. New York: AMS Press, 1987.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Doran, Madelaine. Endeavors of Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1964.

Ellis-Fermor, Una. Jacobean Drama. NY: Random House, 1964.

Fallon, Robert T. "Milton in the Anarchy, 1659-60: A Question of Consistency." Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 21.1 (1981): 123-46.

Felperin, Howard. Shakespearean Representation: Mimesis and Modernity in Elizabethan Tragedy. Princeton UP, 1977.

Ferguson, Margaret. "The Spectre of Resistance" in Staging the Renaissance, eds. David Kastan and James Shapiro (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).

Ferry, Anne Davidson. Milton and the Miltonic Dryden. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1968.

Finney, Gretchen Luke. "Chorus in Samson Agonistes." PMLA 58 (1943): 649-64.

Fish, Stanley. "Question and Answer in Samson Agonistes." Critical Quarterly 9 (1969): 237-64.

---- . "Spectacle and Evidence in Samson Agonistes." Critical Inquiry 15 (1989): 556-586.

---- . "The Temptation to Action in Milton's Poetry." ELH 48 (1981): 516-531.

---- . "Things and Actions Indifferent: The Temptation of Plot in Paradise Regained" in Composite Orders: The Genres of Milton's Last Poems. Eds. Richard S. Ide and Joseph Wittreich. U of Pittsburgh P, 1983.

Fletcher, Angus. The Transcendental Masque. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1972.

Flower, Annette C. "The Critical Context of the Preface to Samson Agonistes." Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 10 (1970): 409-23.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Frye, Roland Mushat. The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1984.

Gilman, Ernest B. "Milton's Contest 'Twixt God and Dagon'" in Iconoclasm and Poetry in the English Reformation: Down Went Dagon. Chicago, Ill. and London: U of Chicago P, 1986, pp. 149-77.

Gilmartin, Kevin. "History and Reform in Milton's Readie and Easie Way." Milton Studies 24 (1988): 17-42.

Greene, Thomas M. The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry. New Haven: Yale UP, 1982.

Grose, Christopher. Milton and the Sense of Tradition. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.

Guillory, John. "Dalila's House: Samson Agonistes and the Sexual Division of Labor" in Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe. Eds., Margaret Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers. Chicago, Ill. and London: U of Chicago P, 1986, pp. 106-22.

---- . Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton and Literary History. NY: Columbia UP, 1983.

Hamilton, Gary. "The History of Britain and its Restoration Audience" in Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose. Eds. David Loewenstein and James Grantham Turner. Cambridge; NY: Cambridge UP, 1990.

Heinemann, Margot. Puritanism and Theater: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama Under the Early Stuarts. Cambridge UP, 1980.

Herrick, Marvin. Tragicomedy: Its Origin and Development in Italy, France, and England. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1962.

Hill, Christopher. The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries. NY: Viking, 1984.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Howard-Hill, T.H. "Milton and Contemporary Theater; An Investigation of Experience and Influence." Paper given at the Fourth International Milton Symposium, Vancouver, B.C., 1991.

Hunter, Robert Grams. Shakespeare and the Mystery of God's Judgments. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1976.

---- . Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness. NY: Columbia UP, 1965.

Huntley, John F. "A Revaluation of the Chorus' Role in Milton's Samson Agonistes" Modern Philology 64 (1966): 132-45.

Ide, Richard. "On the Uses of Elizabethan Drama: The Revaluation of Epic in Paradise Lost." Milton Studies 17 (1983): 121-40.

---- . Possessed with Greatness: The Heroic Tragedies of Chapman and Shakespeare. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1980.

---- . "Shakespeare's Revisionism: Homiletic Tragedy and the Ending of Measure for Measure." Shakespeare Studies (1987).

Jebb, Richard C. "Samson Agonistes and the Hellenic Drama," Proceedings of the British Academy 3 (1908): 341-8.

Jose, Nicholas. Ideas of the Restoration in English Literature 1660-1671. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984.

Kerman, Sandra. "George Buchanan and the Genre of Samson Agonistes." Language and Style 19.1 (1986): 21-25.

Kermode, Frank. William Shakespeare: The Final Plays London: Longman's Green, 1963.

Kessner, Carole. "Milton's Hebraic Herculean Hero." Milton Studies 6 (1973): 243-58.

Kranidas, Thomas. "Milton and the Author of Christ Suffering." Notes & Queries, N.S. 15 (1968): 99.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Krouse, F. Michael. Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1949.

Labriola, A.C. "William Shakespeare" in A Milton Encyclopedia. Eds. William B. Hunter, et. al. Vol. 7. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1979.

LeComte, Edward. "Samson Agonistes and Aureng-Zebe," Etudes Anglaises 2 (1958): 18-22.

Lennep, William Van, ed. A Calendar of Plays on the London Stage, 1660-1800. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1965.

Lewalski, Barbara K. "Samson Agonistes and the 'Tragedy' of the Apocalypse." PMLA 85 (1970): 1050-62.

Limon, Jerzy. "Revenge Tragedy, or, a Decayed Form: A Review Essay." Southern Humanities Review 16.3 (1982): 259-67.

Loewenstein, David. "'Casting Down Imaginations': Milton as Iconoclast." Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts 31.3 (1990): 253-270.

Low, Anthony. The Blaze of Noon: A Reading of Samson Agonistes. New York and London: Columbia UP, 1974.

---- . "Milton's Samson and the Stage, with Implications for Dating the Play," Huntington Library Quarterly 40 (1977): 313-24.

---- . "Samson Agonistes: Theology, Poetry, Truth." Milton Quarterly 13.3 (Oct., 1979): 96-102.

MacCallum, Hugh. "Samson Agonistes: The Deliverer as Judge." Milton Studies 23 (1987): 259-290.

Madsen, William. From Shadowy Types to Truth. New Haven: Yale UP, 1968.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Maguire, Nancy K. "The 'Whole Truth' of Restoration Tragicomedy." In Renaissance Tragicomedy, ed. Nancy K. Maguire. NY: AMS Press, 1987.

Martz, Louis. "Chorus and Character in Samson Agonistes." Milton Studies 1 (1969): 115-34.

---- . Milton: Poet of Exile. New Haven: Yale UP, 1980.

Maxwell, J.C. "Milton's Knowledge of Aeschylus." Review of English Studies 3 (1952): 366-71.

McCoy, Richard C. The Rites of Knighthood. Berkekely: U of California P, 1990.

McDonald, Henry. "A Long Day's Dying: Tragic Ambiguity in Samson Agonistes." Milton Studies 27 (1991): 263-283.

Mowat, Barbara. The Dramaturgy of Shakespeare's Romances. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1976.

Mueller, Martin. Children of Oedipus and Other Essays on the Imitation of Greek Tragedy, 1550-1800. Toronto; Buffalo: Toronto UP, 1980.

Neely, Carol. "Women and Men in Othello": 'What should such a fool/Do with so good a woman?'" in The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare. Eds. Carolyn R.S. Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1980.

Nicoll, Allardyce. A History of English Drama, 1660-1900. Vol 1. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1952.

Norbrook, David. Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.

---- . "The Reformation of the Masque," in The Court Masque, ed. David Lindley. Manchester; Dover, N.H.: Manchester UP, 1984. 1984.

Parker, William Riley. Milton, A Biography. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1968.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

---- . Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy in Samson Agonistes. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1937.

Patrides, C.A. "The Comic Dimension in Greek Tragedy and Samson Agonistes." Milton Studies 10 (1977): 3-22.

Patterson, Annabel. Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Reading and Writing in Early Modern England (Madison, Wisc.: U of Wisconsin P, 1984.

---- . "Paradise Regained: A Last Chance at True Romance." Composite Orders: The Genres of Milton's Last Poems. Eds. Richard S. Ide and Joseph Wittreich. Milton Studies 17. U of Pittsburgh P, 1983.

Phillips, James E. "George Buchanan and the Sidney Circle." Huntington Library Quarterly 12 (1948): 23-55.

Potter, Louis. Secret Rites and Secret Writing: Royalist Literature, 1641-1660. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.

---- . "True Tragicomedies' of the Civil War and the Commonwealth." In Renaissance Tragicomedy, ed. Nancy K. Maguire. NY: AMS Press, 1987.

Radzinowicz, Mary Ann. "The Distinctive Tragedy of Samson Agonistes," Milton Studies 17 (1983): 249-80.

---- . Toward "Samson Agonistes": The Growth of Milton's Mind. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978.

Rajan, Balachandra. The Prison and the Pinnacle. Toronto, Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 1973.

Rosenblatt, Jason P. "Milton's Chief Rabbi." Milton Studies 24 (1988): 43-72.

Rushdy, Ashraf. "Standing Alone on the Pinnacle: Milton in 1752." Milton Studies 26 (1990):

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Samuel, Irene. "Samson Agonistes as Tragedy" in Calm of Mind, ed. Joseph Wittreich. Cleveland and London: Press of Case Western Reserve U, 1971.

Savran, George. in The Literary Guide to the Bible. Eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode. Belknap Press. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1987.

Sharratt, Peter, "Euripides Latinus: Buchanan's Use of his Sources," Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Bonóniensis. Proceedings of the Fourth International Congress of New-Latin Studies. Bologna 26 August to 1 September, 1979. Ed. Richard Schoeck. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 37. Binghamton, NY: 1985.

Shawcross, John T. "The Genres of Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes" in Composite Orders, eds. Richard Ide and Joseph Wittreich. Milton Studies 17. Pittsburgh: U of Pennsylvania P, 1983.

---- . "Irony as Tragic Effect: Samson Agonistes and the Tragedy Of Hope" in Calm of Mind: Tercentenary Essays on Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes in Honor of John S. Diekhoff. Ed. Joseph Anthony Wittreich, Jr. Cleveland and London: Press at Case Western U, 1971.

---- . "Milton and Covenant: The Christian View of Old Testament Theology" in Milton and Scriptural Tradition: The Bible into Poetry, eds. James Sims and Leland Ryken. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1984.

---- . Paradise Regain'd: Worthy T'Have Not Remain'd So Long Unsung. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 1988.

---- . "Tragicomedy as Genre, Past and Present." In Renaissance Tragicomedy, ed. Nancy K. Maguire. NY: AMS Press, 1987.

Smith, Bruce. Ancient Scripts and Modern Experience on the English Stage 1500-1700. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1988.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Steadman, John M. "Faithful Champion: The Theological Basis of Milton's Hero of Faith." Anglia 77 (1959): 13-28.

---- . Milton and the Renaissance Hero. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1967.

Stevens, Paul. Imagination and the Presence of Shakespeare in Paradise Lost. Madison, Wisc.: U of Wisconsin P, 1985.

Tricomi, Albert. Anti-court Drama in England, 1603-1642. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1989.

Tung, Mason. "Samson Impatiens: A Reinterpretation of Milton's Samson Agonistes." Texas Studies in Literature and Language 9 (1968): 475-92.

Turner, James G. One Flesh: Paradisial Marriage and Sexual Relations in the Age of Milton. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1987.

Tyacke, Nicholas. Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism, 1590-1640. Clarendon Press. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.

Ulreich, John C. Jr. "'Beyond the Fifth Act': Samson Agonistes as Prophecy." Milton Studies 17 (1983): 281-318.

Vendler, Helen. The Poetry of George Herbert. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1975.

Waddington, Raymond B. "Melancholy Against Melancholy: Samson Agonistes as Renaissance Tragedy" in Calm of Mind. Ed. Joseph Wittreich, Jr. Cleveland and London: Press of Case Western Reserve Univ., 1971.

Waith, Eugene. The Herculean Hero in Marlowe, Chapman, Shakespeare and Dryden. NY: Columbia UP, 1962.

---- . Ideas of Greatness. Heroic Drama in England. NY: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1971.

Wall, John. "The Dramaturgy of Buchanan's Tragedies," pp. 163-9 in Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Guelpherbytani.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Eds., Stella P. Revard, Fidel Radle, Mario A. Di Cesare. Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1988.

Wallace, Dewey D. Puritans and Predestination: Grace in English Protestant Theology, 1525-1695. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1982.

Wedgewood, C.V. The King's War, 1641-1647. New York: Macmillan, 1959.

Wilks, John S. The Idea of Conscience in Renaissance Tragedy. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.

Witherspoon, Alexander. The Influence of Robert Garnier on Elizabethan Drama. New York: Phaeton P, 1968.

Wittreich, Joseph Anthony Jr. Calm of Mind: Tercentary Essays on Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes in Honor of John S. Diekhoff. Cleveland and London: Press of Case Western Reserve Univ., 1971.

---- . Interpreting Samson Agonistes. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986.

Wood, Derek. "Exil'd from Light: The Darkened Moral Consciousness of Milton's Hero of Faith." U of Toronto Quarterly 58 (1988-9): 244-262.

Woolrych, Austin. "The Date of the Digression in Milton's History of Britain" in For Veronica Wedgwood These: Studies in Seventeenth-Century History, eds. Richard Ollard and Pamela Tudor-Craig. London: Collins, 1986.

Wright, Louis B. "The Reading of Plays During the Puritan Revolution." Huntington Library Bulletin (1934): 73-108.

Yoch, James. "The Renaissance Dramatization of Temperance: The Italian Revival of Tragicomedy and The Faithful Shepherdess." In Renaissance Tragicomedy, ed. Nancy K. Maguire. NY: AMS Press, 1987.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Zimbardo, Rose. A Mirror to Nature: Transformation in Drama and Aesthetics1660-1732. UP of Kentucky, 1986.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.