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SAMSON AGONISTES: THE DRAMATIC ROLE OF RATIOCINATION

by

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SAMSON AGONISTES: THE DRAMATIC ROLE OF RATIOCINATION

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To Alice

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H.A.D.

## PREFACE

The present study deals with a problem which arises in the Dalila and Harapha scenes of Samson Agonistes but which proves to have rather wide implications for the interpretation of the poem. Various critics, the most famous of them Dr. Johnson, have complained that the middle of Samson Agonistes fails in one way or another to accomplish its purpose. Dr. Johnson said that the middle scenes lacked both cause and consequence. My own problem is related to Dr. Johnson's comments but was arrived at first by a close reading of the play itself. It struck me that the Dalila and Harapha scenes were a good deal more ratiocinative than they needed to be if Samson were simply being tempted to concupiscence by Dalila and to fear by Harapha. Furthermore, the great amount of exposition in the play seemed to present a problem that was related to the problem of ratiocination. In the course of my study I conclude that Samson's sin, like any grave sin, involved certain kinds of reasoning, and that his recovery must include a rejection of the kinds of reasoning that led him to fall and led him nearly to despair. But the process of solving the problem also leads to certain other discoveries about the mode of existence of Samson Agonistes. The great amount of discussion in the poem about the morality of Samson's actions, notably his marriage to Dalila, leads to an analogy between the kinds of reasoning that are associated with a literalistic interpretation of

the Mosaic Law and an acceptance of the tragic form as a final comment upon the human condition. It appears that Samson Agonistes, in providing a triumph for Samson at the end violates the usual Greek use of the outward form of tragedy, which involved the triumph of Dike. But, at the same time, Samson Agonistes fulfills the implications that Greek tragedy has for the Christian imagination. Neither tragedy, as an important invention of man, nor the Mosaic Law is what it appears to be to the unenlightened mind. Both appear to trap man in a series of events that lead man to death because of man's imperfection. That is, both appear to be harsher than they really are.

If man is to learn from tragedy, he must see that tragedy shows him his dependence upon a power which conquers time. Samson's reason, the faculty associated with timelessness, or eternity, is the faculty that he mis-used, and it is the faculty that he must use properly in order to rise from his own ashes, to become spiritually independent of sequential, time-bound events. The main targets of Samson's attack in the Dalila and Harapha scenes become, then, the premises and the reasoning processes of his antagonists. It seems at first remarkable that Samson will take the trouble to argue with two enemies whom it would appear better to ignore. But Samson must attack particularly those aspects of the arguments of Dalila and Harapha that belong most to him, that parody the kind of reasoning that he has to have used with himself in order to fall to Dalila and in order to look upon God as Harapha does. These scenes cannot be highly emotional, for Samson must destroy the last vestiges of false

reasoning that still belong to him. Besides, the purgation of emotion that we see in the first two episodes has already accomplished the more spectacular part of his repentance.

Chapter I deals with some initial assumptions. If Samson Agonistes uses a Hellenic form and Christian content, what are the adaptations of the Hellenic form that are open to a seventeenth-century Christian poet? How do all the Christian adaptations of Hellenic literature throughout the Patristic, Scholastic, and Renaissance ages come into a consideration of the outward model of Greek tragedy? Secondly, how have the usual interpretations of Christian themes in Samson Agonistes accounted for the relationship between form and content? These are some of the questions to which answers are attempted in Chapter I as a preliminary investigation into what we can fairly demand of Samson Agonistes in relation to the problem which I pose.

Chapter II then gives an exposition of the problem that I have mentioned above. The aim is to show that it is indeed a problem that can interfere with a correct reading of the poem and to show that reflecting upon it can lead to some discoveries of deeper layers of meaning.

Chapter III is a digression, but a necessary one. Since I am dealing extensively with Samson's inner states of mind in attempting to describe precisely what the Dalila and Harapha scenes do for Samson, it seems prudent to discuss the states of mind that can reasonably be attributed to a hero who lived, historically, before the Atonement. Some critics make much of Samson's having lived before



a time when, from the Christian point of view, regeneration was generally available. But Milton makes it clear in his summa, On Christian Doctrine, that the Mediator was available from the beginning of man's existence, and that several of the elders of the Old Testament enjoyed renovation, regeneration, repentance, saving faith, Christian liberty, and so on, although they may not have been specifically aware that these processes were carried out through the offices of the Son. This may be a peripheral matter, but it needs clarifying before one can leave mere definitions and go on to Samson's actual experiences.

Chapter IV, in its turn, offers the solutions that are pointed to at the beginning of this summary. That chapter argues that Samson progresses toward Christian liberty. This is a state in which Samson's will is more and more free to follow his reason. And in such a state Samson's reason itself is more and more properly related to timelessness. The name of Samson's state of mind is not as important as its qualities, since Milton obviously is not attempting to apply rigid psychological categories. But the name, Christian liberty, is useful. It is a term that Milton himself might be likely to use.

Chapter V is meant to be something of a coup de grâce which shows that the principal images of the poem reflect the themes that I arrive at earlier by a study of Samson's rhetoric. Thus, the information about Samson's earlier life, which is given on a purely expository level in some parts of the poem, is mirrored by the rhetoric in the Dalila and Harapha scenes on a dramatic level, and the themes which are represented on a dramatic level in the Dalila

and Harapha scenes are repeated by the imagery. By the end of Chapter V my reader ought to see the poem as much more unified than it is usually credited with being, and ought to see that my discoveries, such as they are, have come about through an attempt to remove an obstacle between the reader and a right reading of the poem. That is my hope.

NOTE: References to Milton's works including Samson Agonistes, are to the Columbia edition. For convenience, references to Milton's prose works are given by book, chapter, and paragraph.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: TRAGEDY AND TYPOLOGY

#### i

#### Hellenic Form and Christian Content

A poet's decision to work in a given literary form is re-made and re-affirmed as the work progresses. I shall be concerned throughout this dissertation with the welding of form and content which is peculiar to Samson Agonistes. It seems to me that, although Milton does not set out to write a poem about poetry, his play attains some remarkable revelations about both the central themes and the possibilities of the tragic form. As the only tragedy in Milton's works, Samson Agonistes represents Milton's most impressive testament as to the importance of the genre to man's experience. In his prefatory "Epistle" the poet says, "Tragedy, as it was anciently compos'd, hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems." This is not precisely instructive as to how "profitable" tragedy, modeled after the ancient plays, might be in Milton's own time, but it implies that tragedy can still be the most profitable of poems. The difficulty is that tragedy must make adjustments of the sort that Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained had to make as compared with their classical models. A comparison of Samson Agonistes with Paradise Lost will make it clear that Milton must not only adjust the tragic form to his times but must adopt completely different goals. Paradise Lost apparently began as a tragedy, expanded to a

ten-book epic, and then to a twelve-book epic.<sup>1</sup> The artistic necessities of the work, and perhaps a temperamental tendency in Milton to the baroque, led to the tremendous expansion upon the original plan. For instance, a dramatic treatment might have required the use of allegorical stage figures; instead of that device the final version presents vast amounts of universal history, narrated by Raphael and Michael, in great part, but at any rate too long for drama. The inspired narrative voice of the epic poet is also an integral part of the poem. Samson Agonistes, on the other hand, requires brevity and disallows the use of Milton's famous epic voice, and therefore demands a whole new strategy. The subject matter, of course, lends itself better to the tragic form than that of Paradise Lost, which treats of the supernatural. But some question remains as to why Milton could not just as well have written another epic. Although a number of tragedies had been written about Samson, the fashion, in treating Old Testament heroes, seemed, in the middle of the century, to be the epic. Francis Quarles wrote his History of Samson in narrative form, at least, even if one might hesitate to denominate his style as high style.<sup>2</sup> This form allowed the inclusion of lengthy explanatory "meditations" at the end of each episode. Such an opportunity to expand would appear to be congenial to Milton, although one must note that Milton does not, even in Paradise Lost, engage in much direct moralizing of the sort that we find in Quarles. Milton lets his characters do most of the interpreting of events.

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<sup>1</sup>R.H. Perkinson, "The Epic in Five Acts," SP, XLIII (1946), 465-81.

<sup>2</sup>The Complete Works of Francis Quarles, ed. by Alexander B. Grosart, II (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1880).

Abraham Cowley, also, in his Davideis very self-consciously uses the epic form.<sup>3</sup> One can surmise that Milton would have used a great amount of dialogue had he chosen the epic form, but the finished product would still not have the sort of brevity that we have to deal with in Samson Agonistes. Moreover, even Paradise Regained has a narrative voice as part of its scheme. The point of comparing poetic forms here is to approach some of the functions which are unique to tragedy. If the tragic form is a mode of thought which provides truths other than those provided by epic, what are those truths? They will be of two kinds, those provided by any tragedy, and those provided by Samson Agonistes as a unique creation. A close analysis of the play itself, with form-content problems always in mind, may be more profitable than rushing at the outset to matters of cultural history, as many studies do. Whether the play is primarily Christian, Hellenic, or Hebraic, can be considered after an analysis of the ways in which form reflects, and symbolizes, content, and the ways in which themes change the form from initial general conceptions of what the tragic form is.

By way of clarifying my own assumptions, let me put the problems of Samson Agonistes criticism in a kind of crude framework. Many of the disagreements as to what Samson Agonistes is all about stem, on the one hand, from underlying disagreements about what themes the outward form of Greek tragedy ought to represent, and, on the other, from underlying disagreements about how Milton is applying

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<sup>3</sup>The English Writings of Abraham Cowley, ed. by A.R. Waller, Cambridge English Classics, II (Cambridge: The University Press, 1905-6).

the exegetical tradition on the Samson figure.<sup>4</sup> The disagreements about the proper uses of the outward form almost inevitably bring in Aristotelian poetic theory, and involve one in thickets of discussion that obscure the play itself. Since Greek tragedies themselves do not follow Aristotle's "rules" very well, it is not surprising that subsequent plays do not always conform. Oedipus Rex, for instance, Aristotle's favorite play, can be shown to diverge considerably from Aristotle's formulae.<sup>5</sup> Many other extant Greek plays also refuse to conform. Aristotle, of course, not only proceeded by observation of a great many plays which are no longer extant, but also depicted an ideal toward which tragedy was, presumably, working. But even so, modern critics do not agree as to what Aristotle's ideal tragedy was. Milton's own theoretical comments are sparse enough so as to afford little assistance. Later, I shall select some of Milton's remarks which appear to be most helpful in analyzing Samson Agonistes. For now, I am interested in the a priori alternatives open to Milton as he set out to write the play. His choices are rather broad in many respects, but I shall deal in this chapter with some restrictions which are fundamental to drama, and later I shall allow the minutiae to grow out of a close analysis of the play itself.

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<sup>4</sup>R.C. Jebb, "Samson Agonistes and the Hellenic Drama," Proceedings of the British Academy, III (1908), 1-8; W.R. Parker, Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy in Samson Agonistes (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1937); F. Michael Krouse, Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949). Krouse, pp. 10-11, gives an account of the disagreement between Parker and Jebb.

<sup>5</sup>Bernard M.W. Knox, Oedipus at Thebes (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 31; Parker, Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy in Samson Agonistes, pp. 189-95, illustrates further difficulties in defining "Hellenic."



The other side of the framework into which I am putting criticism of Samson Agonistes can be represented by F. Michael Krouse's book, Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition. This procedure may be a bit summary, but, since Parker's book grows out of a close attention to the literary form, and Krouse's book grows out of a pre-occupation with thematic materials, sometimes at the expense of form, the two books are representative of the extremes that I want to avoid in my own attempt to deal as closely as possible with the relationship between form and content. I also mention Krouse's book because it is the most valuable study of the exegetical tradition on the Samson figure. Without Krouse's work one could not adequately understand the choices available to Milton as he worked out his conception of Samson. But knowledge of the tradition does not solve all the problems which I shall describe in Chapter II. In fact, one is made aware, by a study such as Krouse's, of some problems that would not be as noticeable if one were left in ignorance. My own study disagrees with much of Krouse's application of the tradition, but always with a sense of debt to his book.

## ii

### Restrictions of Drama

In view of the many disputes over themes in Samson Agonistes it seems wise to consider some of the very fundamental restrictions that the outward form of Greek tragedy imposes upon the presentation of theme. It will be time enough, then, in Chapter II, to analyze the problem scenes. First, the absence of a narrator in drama and the brevity impose restrictions not present in the epic. The space that Milton devotes to his lists of names in Paradise Lost in itself

represents a more exuberant esthetic than is possible in drama, even in spite of the availability of a chorus for explanatory comment.<sup>6</sup> In whatever way Milton may hope to place Samson in the context of universal history and the cosmic drama, he must do so within the relatively limited world of the play. Specifically, the characters have the additional disadvantage--from the point of view of presenting a Christian view of the universe, at any rate--of being pre-Christian. They do not have available to them the vast panorama that Adam receives. However much the Christian reader might provide information about the Christian exegetical tradition, he must also imagine what it is like to be without this information. Not that it is necessary for a dramatist to provide an exact historical context for the world of the play. King Lear, for instance, appears deliberately to have opaque outer limits, from beyond which the gods appear to torture humanity during the middle portions of the play. In Samson Agonistes we do not expect the vast cosmology that we are afforded in Paradise Lost. We do expect the dramatist, however, to put the limitations themselves to some functional use. As Krouse shows, Samson is a Christian agon,<sup>7</sup> but part of his struggle involves the restrictions upon his imagination which are repeated symbolically by the restrictions of the drama. Kester Svendsen, in commenting upon the function of the vast cosmology of Paradise Lost, also comments indirectly upon

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<sup>6</sup>Robert Martin Adams, Ikon: John Milton and the Modern Critics (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), pp. 188-89. Adams accounts for Milton's exuberance in listing diseases in Book VI of Paradise Lost by appealing to a "baroque esthetic" of the late Renaissance. One can see that it is just this exuberant expansion that is not allowed in drama.

<sup>7</sup>Krouse, pp. 108-18.

the way in which form and subject-matter are related in all literature:

In Paradise Regained and the rest, much was left to inference. Those poems did not require a cosmological system as part of their substance. In Paradise Lost the formulations had to be made, not because they were unfamiliar to its readers but as part of the mode of existence in a poem whose subject was the first man.<sup>8</sup>

The universe organized by Paradise Lost requires and--more to our point--allows great amounts of cosmology. But if Paradise Lost is not merely a monument to dead ideas, then the world of Samson Agonistes must be a part of the world depicted by Paradise Lost. That is, we value Paradise Lost as more than merely a well-organized myth. One can think of it as a poetic re-creation of Creation itself. The vastness of such a world must be present to the imagination of the reader as part of the experience of the epic. On the other hand, the world that we see through Samson's blind eyes, and through the less perceptive eyes of the other characters in the play, is a world restricted and darkened. Whether we call this restriction of the imagination form or theme will, I hope, by the end of this study, be irrelevant. One could also, I suppose, talk about the restrictions in Paradise Regained, but there a narrator and the supernatural are at least admitted. The elimination of outside points of view is complete in Samson Agonistes. As S.H. Butcher says, in tragedy, "Man is imprisoned within the limit of the actual."<sup>9</sup> The technical challenge, at any rate, is different in Samson Agonistes from that presented to the poet by Paradise Lost.

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<sup>8</sup>Milton and Science (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1956), pp. 242-43.

<sup>9</sup>Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art (4th ed.; New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1951), p. 350.

Milton foregoes to a great extent, at least pushes beyond the limits of the play, the vast cosmos that he created for Paradise Lost. In setting himself the technical challenge of Samson Agonistes the poet must repudiate that narrative vision for which he is most famous. What we are not allowed to see in Samson's cosmos is a functional part of the drama. We can have confidence, if we are devout, that the vast providential order is still in existence, but it is not created for us in the poem. Samson Agonistes is a bit of a special case since it is not secular drama and it is not really sacramental. Milton's repudiation of the narrative vision can be a repudiation of good or an ill, depending upon how we interpret the play: his act could be sacrificial. But solutions to such conjectures must wait upon an analysis of the play in detail. Whatever Milton's initial motives, I hope to show that the restrictive form tends to become one with the content in ways that transcend initial motives.

### iii

#### Adaptations of Classical Tragedy Available to Milton

The outward form of classical tragedy was, of course, not at first developed to represent Christian attitudes. It is deceptively easy to confuse the form itself with the themes that it seems to require because of its Greek origins. On the other hand, neither is it entirely agreeable to the imagination to think that Milton is merely yoking Christian themes inharmoniously with the Greek form. One looks, instead, for a development of the given form after the masterful fashion of Lycidas or Comus, where the classical pastoral

world is transformed into a Christian world containing the pastoral<sup>10</sup> and the world of the masque is raised to moral seriousness. But it is not really necessary for Milton to accept or reject the Greek themes which go along with classical tragedy. Milton's adaptations of form and content, as Krouse points out,<sup>11</sup> had, in many ways, already been made for him by the Christianizing of Hellenic literature throughout the Patristic, Scholastic, and Renaissance periods. But it will be instructive to look in the next few sub-sections at some of these possible adaptations in detail, because Milton is known for his rather independent choices from the traditions available to him.

#### a. Historicity of the Action

If the Greeks chose what were for them famous personages from their own history for tragic material, Milton, in borrowing the outward form from them, makes, not an identical choice, but an analogous one. What was history for the Greeks was for Milton Providence as seen darkly in a Grecian glass. The fables of Hercules and other Greek heroes were thoroughly Christianized for Milton by long centuries of tradition, so that they were regarded as shadowy forms of divine truths, and could be used conveniently for allegorical lessons.<sup>12</sup> But Milton was also part of the movement

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<sup>10</sup>Rosemond Tuve, "Theme, Pattern and Imagery in Lycidas," in *Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957), pp. 73-111.

<sup>11</sup>Krouse, pp. 31-80; my debt to Parker will also be obvious here, but, whereas he speaks more in terms of adopting Greek conventions, I prefer to talk about adaptations.

<sup>12</sup>Krouse, p. 10, suggests that a study of Renaissance editions of Greek plays would be useful in determining seventeenth-century interpretations of them.

toward abandoning the allegorical method and the classical myth in favor of Biblical subjects the historicity of which was attested by the Scriptures. He, along with many other reformers, felt that change to Biblical subjects could well accompany other kinds of reform.<sup>13</sup> He also argued that the Scriptures contained literature superior to classical literature.<sup>14</sup> Thus, we can expect Milton to have a great deal of respect for the Greek literary forms but not a slavish respect. Milton's choice of subject-matter from Sacred History, then, is analogous to the practice of the Greek poets without being identical. The Greeks show the way, even though their knowledge of history--that is Providence--is imperfect. The difference is that Milton evidently believed more intensely in the historicity of his source than the Athenians did in theirs, especially toward the end of the fifth century.<sup>15</sup> But the desire to realize the full significance of the historical event, and of actuality, is apparently common to Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, and Milton.

b. "Now for the poet, he nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth. . . ."

In view of the tremendous interest in the historicity of the Old Testament often evinced by Milton and his contemporaries, and in view of the comparison with Greek attitudes in the previous section, a word should be said at this point about poetry and history.

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<sup>13</sup>Reason of Church Government, Ch. II; Areopagitica, par. 19; E.O. Kurth, Milton and Christian Heroism: Biblical Epic Themes and Forms in Seventeenth-Century England (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959), pp. 53-79.

<sup>14</sup>Reason of Church Government, Ch. II, par. 1.

<sup>15</sup>Butcher, pp. 391-392.

Aristotle's answer to Plato's charge that art is only an imitation of things as they are is to say that the things represented by art are made over to represent the ideal in some manner. The things and actions represented have the appearance in many ways of actuality, but the poet never pretends that he is writing history, and the reader or audience never takes the poet's efforts as actuality. Or, as Sidney, from whom the subtitle for this section is taken, puts it, "What child is there that cometh to a play, and seeing Thebes written in great letters upon an old door, doth believe that it is Thebes?" The appearance of actuality is presumably what Milton means by verisimilitude in his prefatory Epistle. But neither Aristotle nor Milton could be expected to admire what we today call realism. Butcher makes some helpful distinctions in this regard in commenting on Greek art in general:

First, pure realism is forbidden; that is, the literal and prosaic imitation which reaches perfection in a jugglery of the senses by which the copy is mistaken for the original. In the decay of Greek art this kind of ingenuity came into vogue, but it never found favour in the best times. Even the custom of setting up votive statues of athletes who had been thrice victors in the games did not lead to a realism such as in Egypt was the outcome of the practice which secured the immortality of a dead man through the material support of a portrait statue.<sup>16</sup>

But Butcher goes on to say that pure symbolism is also forbidden. The upshot of what we can infer, then, of Greek and Renaissance attitudes is that the poet gives the appearance of depicting a real action without intending to imply that that action is historical. This presents some problems with regard to Old Testament materials which I shall discuss in the next section, but the point now is that Milton is not very likely, in view of his use of the Greek form, to

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<sup>16</sup>Butcher, p. 391. The Complete Works of Sir Philip Sidney, ed. by Albert Feuillerat, III (Cambridge: The University Press, 1921-29), 33.



stint the appearance of the actual in his play. Where he does violate realism it is for a purpose and with a fine sense of showing greater truths than actuality shows. Milton is clearly on the side of Sidney and Aristotle in favoring the use of poetry as a means of instilling virtue when he gives his own short defense of poesy in Reason of Church Government.<sup>17</sup>

It would seem, then, that we must attempt to see the characters of Samson Agonistes as flesh and blood people first, with the understanding that they are created from an artistic point of view. The course that Milton steers between realism and symbolism is often not recognized by critics who become preoccupied with his themes alone. Milton may look upon art as didactic, but not in the sense that the poet is polemical. Samson's speeches, for instance, should be looked upon as part of his characterization, although they may at times take on the tone of Milton interpreting the exegetical tradition for us in too direct a fashion to be appropriate to drama.

#### c. Imitation and Probability

Milton's use of the appearances of things, a subject only touched upon in the previous section, can perhaps be discussed even more profitably by bringing in two other terms from Aristotelian theory. This procedure may also advance the main purpose of the larger section, section iii, which is to consider, in an a priori fashion, some of the adaptations from Greek drama that were available to Milton in writing Samson Agonistes. These possible adaptations, then, are "imitation" and "probability." Aristotle's observation that the

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<sup>17</sup>Ek. II, Introduction, par. 2.