

MILTON, DRYDEN, AND THE IDEOLOGY OF GENRE

Samson Agonistes was Milton's creative response to the political and social forces that shaped the values of the Restoration theatre. These forces included the domination of Crown and Court, the ideological predilections and beliefs of the courtier playwrights and their coterie audience, and prevalent literary taste and stage practices. The rhymed heroic play, especially as it was developed by John Dryden, poet laureate and royal historiographer, most clearly exemplifies the varied social and theatrical elements that constitute the ethos and ideology of early Restoration drama. *

Samson Agonistes as a poetic drama resembles the Restoration heroic play, particularly with regard to heroic themes and neoclassical canons of style. More significantly, however, Milton uses the heroic play as a genre to dissent from its conventions and shared norms. Samson Agonistes, in other words, relates to the heroic play by antagonism and reformation. ^

This study will compare the characteristic qualities of two kinds of poetic drama, analysing their common and distinctive modes in order to understand better Milton's work in his dissenting, antagonistic relation to the ideology of the Restoration theatre. This comparison affords a perspective on the serious drama of the early Restoration. Further, by setting these plays together, one can define their meaning more closely than is possible in isolation. Finally, comparison is a method that clarifies the ways in which Samson Agonistes was unique in its own time.

In his preface to Samson Agonistes, published eleven years after the return of Charles II and the re-opening of the London theatres, Milton declared that his play "never was intended for the stage." This in itself is a significant part of the meaning of Samson Agonistes in the context of Restoration culture. There is a great difference, of course, between the

experience of reading the printed text of a play and watching its realization in the playhouse. Such elements as the performer's stage style, interpretation, and oral intonation are essential in a theatrical production. Equally important are the nonverbal elements of stage activity, the use of settings, costumes, and properties, and the positioning, gesturing, and movement of performers. In addition, there are the auditory dimensions, music and song, and the silences as well as sounds of a production. Dryden's heroic plays made full use of the theatre as a performing art. Moreover, playgoing has always been a communal activity, and the theatrical experience in the Restoration emphasized the interaction of performers and audience, and the interdependence of members of the audience.

The reader of a printed play, in contrast, is very much on his own, independent of theatrical interpretation and embodiment. For the reader must use his intellect and imagination to set his own stage, cast the characters, and watch the drama unfold with his mind's eye. The reader must, then, interiorize thoughts, emotions, and images communicated on the printed page. This "interiorization" of meaning is an integral part of the experience of Milton's dramatic poem. The difference between Dryden's collective externalization and Milton's individual interiorization underscores the opposition between the ideologies of orthodoxy and dissent. Milton's performance, his publication of Samson Agonistes in 1671, is a poetic and political rebellion against the assumptions of the Restoration theatre, which he believed reflected the ethos of court culture, its repression, egoism, and materialism.

The English theatre of Shakespeare's time had represented the national culture in all its diversity. Elizabethan drama had the capacity, according to Robert Wiemann, "to accommodate and synthesize differing cultural and ideological perspectives."³ A new sense of nationalism enabled the dramatist

to integrate widely divergent viewpoints: the plebeian country, the middleclass city, and the aristocratic court. As a result, the drama, with its broadly based social appeal, was rich, vital, and universal. When the balance of social forces on which the Tudor compromise depended began to change, however, social and cultural fragmentation took place. There was a breakdown of the national culture, and a polarization of diverse elements, religious, political, and moral, within the social structure. The underlying tensions which had enabled the Elizabethan playwright to treat his material with flexibility and diversity became in the Caroline period a cultural crisis. There were real divisions between the new court and the Puritan middleclass, and both groups were unwilling to acknowledge the claims of popular culture.

In the Restoration period Dryden's heroic plays and Milton's Samson Agonistes give clear evidence of this polarization and fragmentation. Dryden's plays were written for a coterie and court stage; Milton's play was not intended for the stage at all.

However, Dryden and Milton write contemporaneous poetic dramas that define and represent heroic virtue and deeds; and these plays treat similar themes, the conflict between the individual and external authority, and between love and honor. Both closely adhere, moreover, to neoclassical and humanistic norms of rhetoric and decorum, and thereby exclude the popular and native traditions of English drama. Nevertheless, these dramas are markedly different with respect to the interrelation of theatre, society, and dramatic art. So markedly different are they that one may view Milton's dramatic poem as a deliberate rejection of the heroic play.

Milton, like his own Samson, renounced, resisted, and defied his antagonist. In writing a play not intended for stage performance the poet

withdrew from the social function of Restoration theatre; in writing a religious drama he militantly resisted the secular maincurrents of the cultural establishment; and by creating a hero who in an iconoclastic and revolutionary act destroys the theatre of the Philistines, he defied the courtly culture of the ruling class. Through the example of his own play, Milton attempted to replace the Restoration theatre of Dagon with a new theatre, purified and truly restored because it was consecrated to God.

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The power and prestige of the Crown had played an integral part in the Caroline theatre. The relationship between the theatre and Court had become intimate, and the personal tastes of Charles I and his French consort, Queen Henrietta Maria, had significant influence on the development of Cavalier drama. During the reign of Charles I, playwrights looked to the Court for both patronage and royal approval that would make their plays fashionable and popular. More important than anything else in establishing a dramatist's reputation was approval by the King and Queen.^

The stage was becoming more dependent on the Court through both patronage of the Crown and the increasing authority of the Master of Revels, whose censorship had become part of court protocol. This influence of the Court over the theatre is exemplified by the emergence of Caroline courtier playwrights, of whom the most important was Sir William Davenant. In their plays the coterie of playwrights tended to widen the separation between the Court and the rest of the country by expressing contempt for middleclass taste and morality, and depicting their own aristocratic social code, confident of being sustained by royal prerogative. The cleavage between the Court and the general population became greater, and the courtly elite made their distinctive mark in the drama and the playhouses.

This royal patronage was greatly extended in the Restoration. Returning from exile, Charles II demonstrated his love of plays by granting patents in 1660 to his two courtier friends, Thomas Killigrew and Sir William Davenant. The patents gave them the authority to erect two companies of players, and the theatres of London re-opened. The King knew that a national drama was necessary to the prestige of both the capital city and the Court. Killigrew's company became known as the King's Players, and the Duke of York, the King's brother, was patron of Davenant's players. The theatre was the King's particular hobby, and he was the first English sovereign regularly to attend public playhouses.

The actors and playwrights enjoyed a considerable degree of prestige from royal patronage. They were cavaliers not only because of Court censorship, but because they felt obliged in their plays to express the sentiments of the Court, particularly the absolute monarchism of the Stuart regime. The King in an act of symbolic significance provided vestments, including his coronation robes, for the actors, thereby bestowing an illusion of royal grandeur upon the stage.^

A distinctive genre of the Restoration stage, the rhymed heroic play, presupposed and expressed the sympathies and loyalties bequeathed by the Court. It was a drama written to be performed on coterie and court stages by the King's Players or the Duke of York's Players. The ideology of the Restoration royalist provided the norm in the drama, and through politically and socially determined conventions of the genre Dryden and other playwrights communicated to the audience a code of sanction and congratulations. Dryden's dedicatory epistles prefixed to his heroic plays emphasize the importance of the court influence, both as a reality and an ideal. In the dedicatory epistle of The Indian Emperour (1667), for example, he tells Princess Anne, Duchess of Monmouth:

The favour which Heroick Plays have lately found upon our theaters has been wholly deriv'd to them, from the countenance and approbation they have receiv'd at Court, the most eminent persons for Wit and Honour in the Royal Circle having as far own'd them, that they have judg'd no way so fit as Verse to entertain a Noble Audience, or to express a noble passion.^o

The playgoing public during the Restoration was made up of only a small part of London society. The members of the typical audience were devout royalists who opposed the Puritan Commonwealth that had ended in 1660. The courtiers included the lords and ladies, knights and dames, as well as the servants of the King and the Duke of York. The courtiers and their hangers-on made the playhouse like the private clubhouse or promenade, their own place for social rendezvous. Smart town society sought entertainment in the theatre because it was fashionable in that it had the prestige of the Court. There were others who attended plays, of course, among them office-holders and country squires, students from the university and Inns of Court, and there were footmen and maids sitting in the upper galleries. Men of letters frequented the theatre because they were interested in keeping abreast of literary fashions. Many of the literati were arbiters of taste; they were, Dryden says in one of his epilogues, the "Jury of Wits" who "will stay late,/ And in their Club decree the poor Play's fate."?

Dryden¹'s prologues and epilogues reflect his understanding of the playgoing public. The dramatist, by means of occasional verse, directly addresses his small and sophisticated audience in an ingratiating, sometimes ironically self-deprecating manner, demonstrating social and political solidarity with it. Dryden makes clear his view of playgoing as a social as well as cultural

activity. He acknowledges in them the range of social, professional, and cultural attainment represented in the pits and boxes of the playhouse. The purpose of these prologues and epilogues was not merely to entertain with witty banter; they reflected the assumptions and expectations of the spectators and at the same time helped shape their ideas, attitudes, and tastes. Speaking of himself as "the Poet," Dryden gallantly addresses "the greatest Wits and Beauties of the Town," commending them on their sophistication and refinement.

Milton¹'s postulated audience for Samson Agonistes, however, was not the "Royal Circle" nor high society that attended either courtly or commercial theatres. His "fit audience . . . though few" could not be found at Drury Lane, Blackfriars, Oxford, or Whitehall. The readers Milton may have had in mind were analogous to the saving remnant who in his play were oppressed in Philistia but kept their faith in God. Samson acts for that separated society of the faithful, and although at the beginning he is defeated, he shows the way of self-knowledge and spiritual regeneration as an individual and as a symbol of a nation. As Milton wrote in his History of Britain, we must "raise a knowledg of our selves . . . for it be a high point in every private man, much more is it in a Nation to know it self."**

It is the essential nature of Milton's play to make the private reader, undistracted by the bustle of stage business or the conduct of the audience, to intensify his concentration on character, poetry, and thought. The written word intensifies both point of view and perspective because it demands from the reader some degree of personal identification in attempting to visualize from within. The reader's private responses recreate and share the inwardness, intellectuality, and the psychological isolation of Samson's experience, as well as the introspective analysis that leads to self-knowledge and

wisdom. Whereas Dryden¹'s concept of drama is communal and collective, Milton stresses Protestant individualism and personal responsibility,

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Dryden first used the generic term, "Heroick Play," in his dedication of The Indian Emperour, and he continued to use it during the period in which he wrote rhymed plays. When discussing the heroic play, he did not distinguish it from another genre, the heroic poem, but treated them as one and the same. In "Of Heroic Plays" Dryden writes, "I have modelled my heroic plays by the rules of an heroic poem."^{1^} These genres use the same material for the same purpose, and the heroic play, like "epic poesy," which combines "the historic and panegyric, which are branches of it" (Watson I: 101), is written for those royal and aristocratic leaders who had served as subjects for panegyric poetry or were recipients of dedicatory epistles.

The heroic play, Dryden says, "ought to be an imitation, in little, of a heroic poem" (Watson 1:158). This definition reveals Dryden¹'s view of the fusion of traditions that produced this genre, particularly with regard to the concept of the hero. In the same essay he traces the literary genealogy of Almanzor, hero of The Conquest of Granada (1671-2), which emphasizes the nature of epic heroism:

I must there avow, in the first place, from whence I took
 the character. The first image I had of him was from
 Achilles of Homer, the next from Tasso's Rinaldo (who was
 a copy of the former) and the third from the Artaban of
 Monsieur Calprenede (who has imitated both). The original
 of these (Achilles) is taken by Homer for his hero. . .
 [who] in strength and courage surpassed the rest . . . of
 so fiery a temper, so impatient of injury (Watson I: 163).

Likewise, in his dedication of The Conquest of Granada, Dryden justifies Almanzor¹'s "roughness of character," impatience of injuries, and "confidence in himself almost approaching to an arrogance." These are errors "incident only to great spirits," because they are coupled with such "greater graces" as his "frank and noble openness of nature" (JD XI:16). Almanzor, like the earlier Montezuma, "our blustering Man of War" (JD VIII:204), is a soldier-hero. Because the aristocratic coterie embraced the ideal of a gallant and chivalrous life of action, the heroic play celebrated the martial attributes of boldness, prowess, and bravado. "Stand off," Almanzor disdainfully commands his enemies, "I have not leisure yet to dye" (JD XI:30).

As exemplary hero of these plays, Almanzor embodies those epic virtues traditionally associated with Achillean arete: self-sufficiency, physical valor, and love of personal honor. Abenamar in the play likens Almanzor to Achilles (JD XI:131). Almanzor, we are told, "Acknowledges no pow'r above his own" (JD XI: 31). Describing himself, Almanzor says:

But know, that I alone am king of me,
I am free as Nature first made man,
^fEre the Base Laws of Servitude began,
When wild in woods the noble Savage ran (JD XI: 30).

Dr. Samuel Johnson's analysis of Almanzor emphasizes the hero's lawless egotism: "He is above all laws; he is exempt from all restraints; he ranges the world at will, and governs wherever he appears."H

The very epic virtue of self-sufficiency sanctioned by Homeric tradition and justified by Dryden in his heroic plays resembles hubris in classical tragedy, and sin in the theocentric universe of Milton's Samson Agonistes. Samson, like the wrathful Achilles and his descendants in Dryden, was a warrior and champion who had shown physical courage, prowess, and love of

personal glory. But his desire for personal honor had made him "like a petty God . . . swoll'n with pride" (lines 529-32).[^] His arrogance, impatience, and disobedience to God's law cause his own downfall and suffering. Samson is a sinner who is chastened by the Lord; the "great Deliverer" becomes an imprisoned slave, "Eyeless in Gaza. . . in bonds under Philistian yoke" (38-42).

In contrast to Dryden's active, ambitious, and aggressive heroes, Samson in the prison is passive, contemplative, renunciatory, and suffering. His resistance to temptation, his growing insight and ultimate self-sacrifice define and represent a heroism of faith. Only through his personal suffering in the trials of faith and patience does Samson learn repentance and gain in humility. Milton's drama of heroism explores Samson's psychological and spiritual experience as he delivers himself, with God's "favoring hand assisting to the end" (1721) from the "Dungeon" of his selfhood (156).

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Both Dryden and Milton dramatize the heroic ethos, and attempt to define it in the relationship between the private will and public virtue. Although the public role of the hero had been a traditional theme in earlier English drama, the experience of the Civil War and Commonwealth had given this theme particular relevance. " The conflicts between ambition and obedience, and between love and honor, are themes that impinge upon the theme of self and society.

Dryden's letter to a fellow playwright, Roger Boyle, Earl of Orrery, discusses the conflict between the hero's individual will and the power of authority.[^] These heroes

walk at liberty, in their own opinion, because their
fetters are invisible; when indeed the prison of their

will is the more sure for being large; and instead of an absolute power over their actions, they have only a wretched desire of doing that which they cannot choose to do (Watson 1:4).

Taking a skeptical, and even Hobbesian, view of free will, Dryden argues that the hero who thinks that he has cast aside all laws as fetters has become the victim of necessity and fate, and is incapable of free will.

Almanzor in II Conquest of Granada doubts whether any free will actually exists. His mother's ghost has appeared and foretold the future, and it seems to him that events are predestined:

Oh Heav'n, how dark a Riddle's thy Decree,
Which bounds our wills, yet seems to leave 'em free!
Since thy fore-knowledge cannot be in vain,
Our choice must be what thou didst first ordain:
Thus, like a Captive in an Isle confin'd,
Man walks at large, a Pris'ner of the Mind:
Wills all his Crimes, (while Heav'n th'Indictment draws;)
And, pleading guilty, justifies the Laws (JD XI: 170).

Almanzor must, if he is to have any exercise of choice, accept this external law. Milton's hero, like the heroes of Dryden, is imprisoned and in chains, and must learn to submit his will in active obedience to external authority. In Milton's play, however, that authority is a personal, providential God.

He presents Samson as a symbolic and literal captive, "a Pris'ner of the Mind" and of the Philistines. Samson's pride and insatiable will have enslaved him, and he is in bondage both to the internal enemy of his conscience and the external enemies of God. Milton places greater emphasis than Dryden does upon man's freedom to bring his will in conformity with the will of a

providential God. He sees that the basis of authentic freedom is God's absolute and beneficent power. Samson becomes the humbled instrument of a personal God operating in man both through conscience and grace.

Important in both Dryden and Milton is the political role of the hero. Dryden uses his heroic figures to support his conservative outlook and to propagandize for the Royalist position. In The Indian Queen (1665) the Ynca of Peru rebukes Montezuma for his change of political alliances: "Rebellion is a greater guilt than pride¹¹ (JD VIII: 194). Ynca insists upon the distinction between "Crowns descended or usurpt by Blood" (JD VIII: 221). Montezuma, in The Indian Emperour, demonstrates his belief in the doctrine of monarchy. He says to the Spaniards that "Heaven . . . It self bestows the Crowns that Monarchs wear" (JD IX: 42). His own crown, he tells the Spaniards, "is absolute, and holds of none" (JD IX: 47). Almanzor in II Conquest of Granada contemptuously refers to the "unthinking crowd," apostrophizing: "Empire, thou poor and despicable thing,/ When such as these unmake, or make a King!" (JD XI: 32). Later Abenamar says, "The name of Commonwealth is popular;/ But there the people their own Tyrants are" (JD XI: 112). Dryden in these plays shows that the people, if misled by their leaders, can be dangerous:

When People tugg for Freedom, Kings for Pow'r,
Both sink beneath some foreign Conquerour,
Then Subjects find too late they were unjust
And want that pow*r of Kings they durst not trust.

(JD XI: 112)

The orthodox Royalism expressed in Dryden's plays, partially because they fell under the watchful eye of the Lord Chamberlain of the Household, reflected the views of Crown and Court.

Milton bases his political theme in Samson Agonistes on the concept of the individual condition of man. Samson's personal regeneration is exemplary for the individual reader, and the hero embodies the Republican rather than Royalist ideal. Dryden's heroes are rulers or potential rulers, whereas Milton's hero is a spiritual and political revolutionary. Dryden considers kingship to be man's highest destiny; Milton exalts regenerate man's obedience to God. What is true for Samson as an ideal individual is also true of an ideal state and nation. For Dryden, "union preserves a commonwealth" (Watson 1:248); for Milton a commonwealth is a union of spiritually regenerate individuals, "a Nation of Prophets, of Sages, and of Worthies" (CE IV: 341).

The thematic conflict between love and honor in their plays is a metaphor for the more encompassing theme of the conflict between individual will and public virtue. In Dryden's definition of the heroic play as "an imitation, in little, of an heroic poem," he adds, "and consequently, that Love and Valour ought to be the subject of it" (Watson 1:158). The theme of Love and Valour central to the Restoration heroic play, was derived from the Renaissance romance-epic and Davenant's Gondibert, from the French prose romances, and from Caroline court drama and opera. These works provided in large part the ideals that were celebrated in the heroic play, both those of heroic militarism and the romantic idolatry of the lady. This conception of heroic virtue was based on the neo-chivalric code of gallantry cultivated by the Court.

Heroic love, according to this courtly code of behavior, corresponded to martial valour and prowess.^ Both love and valour were trials for the hero, and provided a means by which he could demonstrate his true worth. The hero was a lover because the court coterie believed love to be a noble passion. In his heroic plays Dryden treated this noble passion as a catalyst to make a Montezuma, Porphyrius, or Almanzor reveal his magnanimity of soul. These

heroes, so rough, impatient, and self-reliant, are, because of their "frank and noble openness of nature," vulnerable to love, and their naturalistic impulses are disciplined by it in the ideal conduct of a Caroline courtier.

Feminine in inspiration, the preoccupation with an artificial love and honor code is attributable, by way of the French prose romances and Davenant, to the ideals of the Court of Charles I, especially to Queen Henrietta Maria and her circle. In the Restoration, the platonist societies that revolved around the Duchess of Newcastle and Mrs. Philips inspired Dryden and other later playwrights.¹⁶ The heroic play exalted platonic love, and thereby idealized the ladies of the Caroline Court. Queen Isabel in II Conquest of Granada provides a summary of this view of love:

Love's a Heroique Passion which can find
 No room in any base degenerate mind:
 It kindles all the Soul with Honours Fire,
 To make the Lover worthy his desire (JD XI: 110).

The ladies of Restoration society found much to enjoy in the heroic play. Mrs. Evelyn saw the 1671 performance of The Conquest of Granada at the old Theatre Royal, and she wrote her response in a letter to Dr. Bohun:

I have seen 'The Siege of Granada,' a play as full of ideas that the most refined romance I ever read is not to compare with it: love is made so pure, and valor so nice, that one would imagine it designed for an Utopia rather than our stage. I do not quarrell with the poet, but admire one borne in the decline of morality, should be able to feigne and exact virtue: and as poetick fiction has been instructive in former ages, I wish the same event in ours (JD XI: 411).

In the epilogue of the play, Dryden¹'s notion of moral and emotional refinement parallels that of Mrs. Evelyn: "Love and Honour now are higher rais'd."*-'

Milton's Samson Agonistes, in contrast to Dryden¹'s early heroic plays, shows how love and honor are irreconcilable. Whereas Almanzor's romantic love for Almahide is a means of achieving heroic deeds, Samson's overwhelming passion for Dalila is the cause of his dishonor and disgrace. Montezuma and Almanzor are proud of their great passions and physical drives. The fulfillment of their love demonstrates their magnitude of soul. Samson's surrender to his passions exemplifies not magnanimity of soul but erotic idolatry. Samson confesses to Dalila, "I . . . loved thee, as too well thou knew'st, / Too well, unbosom'd all my secrets to thee"¹¹ (876-9).

Abjectly submitting to Dalila, Samson had surrendered the secret of his spiritual and physical strength. He had chosen love over honor, having chosen idolatry over honoring God. His is not the "Heroique Passion" that "kindles all the Soul with Honours Fire" but concupiscent passion that divests him of his manhood. Enslaved by "Foul effeminacy," Samson exclaims, "O indignity, O blot / To Honor and Religion!" (410-12). He is "Effeminately vanquished" (562), and compares himself to a "tame Wether" (536), a castrated ram. His obedience to Dalila is not a conscious act of gallantry or admirable magnanimity but a blind, unmanly act of spiritual disobedience.

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Samson Agonistes has many of the characteristics of a counter-genre. It stands apart, like a Nazarite, in antagonism to the rhymed heroic play and its literary assumptions and values. Dryden's models are not Milton's. Milton does not turn to the tragicomedies of Fletcher or Davenant, for example, but retrieves from ancient time the Greek tragedy, and uses as his models Aeschylus's Prometheus Bound, Sophocles's Oedipus at Colonus, and Euripides's

Heracles, In his Reason of Church Government Milton asks "whether those Dramatick constitutions, wherein Sophocles and Euripides raigne shall be found more doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation" (CE 111:237). Further, he defends tragedy in his preface to Samson Agonistest "Tragedy, as it was anciently compos¹d, hath ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems." He argues that only those acquainted with Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, "the three Tragic Poets unequall'd by any," will be able to understand his own treatment of tragic plot, style, and decorum.

"Tragedy" in the Restoration tended to be a catch-all term that encompassed different kinds of serious plays, including opera.^{^o} Dryden himself, in his comparison of tragedy and epic, was more inclined to emphasize their similarities than differences. His Neander says in Of Dramatic Poesy that "the genus of them is the same," and "only the manner," dramatic or narrative, distinguishes between them (Watson 1:87-8). Based upon this description, Dryden's heroic plays such as The Indian Queen and Tyrannick Love were called tragedies. Milton's formulation of tragedy, on the other hand, is much more rigorous because he insisted upon the definition and analysis of tragedy in the Poetics.

Based upon Aristotelian principles of tragedy, Samson Agonistes has a well-constructed agon or plot conflict that is central to the drama. It exemplifies the four parts of tragedy identified by Aristotle in the Poetics: prologue, episode, exodos, and choric song. The structure or ordered arrangement of incidents is unified, complex, and whole. Furthermore, Milton scrupulously observes the unities, and follows classical precedent in using a chorus and messenger. The protagonist, "Samson Hybristes," is a man of high station and good fortune who, through a character flaw, falls into misfortune by hamartia. His error in judgment is divulging the secret of his strength to

Dalila. The unravelling does not depend on stage artifice but arises out of the complex plot itself, that is, through the protagonist's discovery and ultimate reversal. Milton takes the suffering Samson through a series of confrontations with Manoa, Dalila, Harapha, and the Public Officer. These incidents bring him increasingly to self-discovery, or anagnorisis, by which pity and terror are aroused. His change of consciousness is revealed through his experience of "rousing motions" (1381). This illumination or self-knowledge coincides with Samson's obedience to God's will, the peripeteia leading to the catastrophe at the temple of Dagon. The Aristotelian concept of catharsis is interpreted by Milton in the preface as a purgation of the passions of pity and terror, and its effects are shown in Manoa's moving elegy, "Nothing is here for tears," and in the final choral ode. Milton follows the Poetics, further, in rejecting spectacle -- so essential to the heroic play -- which Aristotle says is more a matter for the costumier than the poet.

It would seem, then, that Samson Agonistes is fully constructed along the lines of an exclusionist generic theory. However, in three very important ways Samson Agonistes is something other than a Greek tragedy. First, Milton's "dramatic poem" is not written for the stage and public performance. The Greek tragedy originally was developed for performance before a vast public audience, whereas Samson Agonistes is written for the individual reader taken out of the social world. -^ Second, unlike Greek tragedy, Samson Agonistes does not oppose the heroic protagonist to the gods before whom he must be defeated, although he demonstrates his heroism even in defeat. 0 Third, Samson is not fated by his tragic flaw, but is free to undergo and experience spiritual regeneration. His self-knowledge and repentance re-direct him toward God and meaningful action in the sacred order of things. This is not a possibility in a tragic world of inexorable necessity. In

contrast to the classical tragic hero, Samson is an instrument of God, and his final heroic deed shows that his will is in accord with that of God. The providential plan of divine cooperation and government replaces the Aristotelian emphasis on external necessity. Although Milton endows Samson's ultimate act with probability and verisimilitude, it is the effect of a supernatural, teleological cause.[^]

In his study of literary genres, Austin Warren says that grouping of literary works should be based "upon both outer form (specific meter or structure) and also upon inner form (attitude, tone, purpose -- more crudely subject and audience)."²² Although Samson Agonistes is modelled in its outer form and in many conventional features on Greek tragedy, its inner form is that of a religious drama.²³ This well-constructed tragedy subsumes into its form a religious drama that explores the relationship between God and man, and examines the individuals's spiritual experiences.

Religious drama, of course, was not very common to the Restoration theatre, which catered to a worldly audience hostile to Puritan biblicism and sermons. The only major dramatist to write something like a religious drama during the period was John Dryden. However, neither his Tyrannick Love (1670) nor The State of Innocence (1677) is comparable to Milton's exploration of inward, personal religious experience. The State of Innocence is an operatic scenario in rhymed couplets that simplifies and thereby reduces and trivializes Milton's richly complex Paradise Lost, which Dryden called "undoubtedly one of the greatest, most noble, and most sublime poems which either this age or nation has produced" (Watson 1:196). Tyrannick Love, or the Royal Martyr, the story of St. Catherine, emphasizes magic, miracle, and illusion; it is sensationalistic in its preoccupation with sadism, violence, and the supernatural effects created by mechanical contrivances and scenery. For purposes

of theatrical spectacle, Dryden fully exploits the "Purple Pageantry" (JD X:160) of Maximin's pagan and courtly world. Although the Epilogue speaks of Tyrannick Love as a "godly out-of-fashion play" (JD X:192), its theatrical sensationalism is very much in the Restoration fashion.

Unlike Tyrannick Love, Milton's religious drama subordinates external action and event to the development of inward crises, both psychological and spiritual. Samson's opening lines in the play prefigure his blind, tentative steps through the spiritual plot: "A little onward lead thy guiding hand/ To these dark steps, a little further on" (1-2). It shows Samson's spiritual progress from the depth of his initial unbelief and accidie, through the lonely struggle between doubt and hope. Then, despite his lapses and regressions, he is guided by his natural reason, will, and God's redemptive grace toward a trustful reliance on God's faithfulness.

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Milton's mimetic treatment of Samson is more psychologically realistic than the conventionalized and stereotypical characters of Dryden's heroic plays. Dryden presented his hero in a manner that reduced his passion and will through a series of abstract and almost schematic oppositions. Heroic choice, the clash between contrasting ideals and emotions, is typically made explicit. Zempoalla in The Indian Queen declares:

'Tis love, 'tis love, that disorders me;
How pride and love tear my divided soul!

For each too narrow, yet both claim it whole (JD VIII:202).

And in the next act, Montezuma apostrophizes: "O Tyrant Love, how cruel are thy laws!/ I forfeit Friendship, or betray thy Cause" (JD VIII: 217).

St. Catherine's speech, addressed to Berenice in Tyrannick Love, follows the same ready-made rhetorical formula:

But 'tis a doubtful conflict I must try
Betwixt my pity and my piety.
Staying, your precious life I must expose;
Going, my Crown of Martyrdom I lose (JD X: 163).

These mechanically antithetic emotions of love-or-pride, love-or-friendship, pity-or-piety explicated by the characters became reflexive for the playwright, and replaced genuine nuances of feeling or subtlety of thought.

The inward, contemplative nature of Milton's play is markedly different. Milton says in The Reason of Church Government that art should be concerned with "whatsoever hath passion or admiration in all the changes of that which is called fortune from without, or the wily suttleties and reflexes of mans thoughts from within" (CE III: 238-9). In his dramatization of Samson's inward condition he explores these "suttleties and reflexes."

Confined and isolated, Samson has been driven by circumstances from meaningless action to contemplation of his life. Especially in his soliloquies, he thoughtfully examines events in order to find meaning in his temptation, sin, and suffering. The "restless thoughts" of his introspective meditations are a means of understanding what once he was and what he is now (22). Although the "anguish of his mind" (600) intensifies his suffering, his growing self-knowledge enables him to assume personal responsibility for his past actions and present condition. "Nothing of all these evils hath befall'n me/ But justly" (374-5), he tells his father, who unwittingly tempts him to criticize God's providence. Assuming personal responsibility, Samson begins his quest for meaning, which allows him better to contemplate God and understand His justice. Samson's wrestling with questions is consistent with his contemplative habit of mind, his effort to attain detachment and perspective. Gradually he gains perspective on his own life, and he says concretely and

simply: "God, when he gave me strength, to show withal/ How slight the gift was, hung it in my hair" (88-9).

However, Milton's hero also reveals his internal condition through his actions. When, for example, Samson finally resolves to accompany the messenger to the Philistine temple, he tells the Chorus, without rational explanation:

Be of good courage, I begin to feel
Some rousing motions in me which dispose
To something extraordinary my thoughts (1380-2).

No words elucidate the change in Samson's inward being, and the process of regeneration is shown in his readiness to serve God. That is, the "rousing motions" within him are the result not of causes external to his mind and will, but rather of those internal events he has experienced. Samson has learned through contemplation that heaven has not deserted him as he had feared. Instead, the love of God will provide him with the necessary spiritual strength to confront any catastrophe, whatever it will be. The illumination of intellect and peripety are enacted, not explained, by him. Similarly, in the Messenger's account of Samson,

with head a while inclin'd
And eyes fast fixt . . . as one who pray'd
Or some great matter in his mind revolv'd (1636-8),

we are not told what that "great matter" is in his mind. We are led, instead, to deduce that, at this moment in the play, when Samson stands between the pillars of the temple, his will and "the will/ Of highest dispensation" (60-1), have become one. When, after his first display of strength, he announces that he will show his "strength, yet greater" (1644), we know that Samson has absolute faith in God and his renewed strength spreads through all his "sinews, joints and bones" (1641-2).

(VI)

In the early Restoration when Milton published Samson Agonistes, the use of rhetorical declamation and rhymed couplets were stylistic features of the heroic play, Dryden notes that Waller had taught the art of rhymed couplets and Sir William Davenant brought it to the stage, "and made it perfect, in The Siege of Rhodes" (Watson 1:7). According to a contemporary account, Roger Boyle, Earl of Orrery, "presumed to lay at his majesty's feet a tragi-comedy, all in ten feet and rhyme" because he "found his majesty relished the French fashion of writing plays than in English."[^] It was Charles II who urged the dramatist to write in the French fashion, thus politicizing the verse form. The literary preferences of Charles II's Court and its love of French fashions dominated the poetic style in drama in the early years of the Restoration.

In the controversy between Dryden and Sir Robert Howard about the relative merits of rhyme and blank verse in serious drama, Dryden's Neander in The Defense of Poesy asserts that "a greater part of the better sort" in the audience, the noblesse, are favorably disposed to rhyme, "and that no serious plays written since the King's return have been kindly received by them than The Siege of Rhodes, the Mustapha, The Indian Queen, and The Indian Emperor" (Watson 1:86). Dryden called rhymed heroic verse "the last perfection of art" (Watson 1:157).

The couplet enabled Dryden to have his characters analyse their experience in carefully balanced parallels or pointed antithesis, closing up a comparison formally and concisely, often sententiously, with a rhymed couplet. By the time he wrote Aureng-Zebe (1675), however, he announced in the prologue that he had grown weary of "his long-lov'd Mistris, Rhyme," and expressed the view that "Passion's too fierce to be in Fetters bound."

As early as in Of Education (1644) Milton speaks of "our common Rimers and Playwriters¹¹ whom he calls "despicable creatures¹¹ because they do not understand the decorum of great literature "in divine and human things" (CE IV:206). Samson Agonistes gives evidence of Milton's own understanding of decorum, with respect to the interrelation of genre, theme, and style.

Milton himself showed his familiarity with the Dryden-Howard debate when he added his note in 1668 on the verse of Paradise Lost, attacking rhyme in longer works as "the invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter in lame Meter" used by "some famous modern Poets, carried away by Custom." Moreover, he defended blank verse as "an ancient liberty recover¹d to Heroic Poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of Riming."

It is ironic, of course, that Dryden himself had come to ask Milton's permission to turn Paradise Lost into "an heroic opera" written in rhyming couplets. "Well, Mr. Dryden," Milton is said to have replied, "it seems you have a mind to tag my points, and you have leave to tag them. But some of them are so awkward and old fashioned that I think you had as good leave them as you found them."²⁶ Dryden writes in his "Discourse Concerning Satire" (1693) that the reason Milton did not use rhymed verse "is plainly this, that rhyme was not his talent; he had neither the ease of doing it, nor the grace of it" (Watson 11:85).

Samson Agonistes is written primarily in unrhymed heroic verse. Milton had, like his nephew Edward Phillips, who wrote Theatrum Poetarum (1675), rejected "the continued Rhapsodie of Riming Couplets"²¹ as unsuitable for tragedy. Furthermore, the poet threw off the constraints of French syllabic verse and uniform line length. In both the choral odes and monodies, his lines range in length from four to twelve syllables. The Italian heroic manner, as F. T. Prince has shown, provided Milton with a flexible and

expressive model of verse, both in the canzoni and the "monostrophic"¹¹ choruses of Italian drama,²⁸ These were verse forms written primarily in rhythmically varied lines, Milton's preface makes reference to "the Ancients and Italians"^{ff} as the sources for his prosodic variety and freedom. He explains that in Samson Agonistes "the measure of the Verse us'd in the Chorus is of all sorts," and he uses terms associated with choral verse in Greek tragedy, one of the most significant being "Apolelymenon," which means "free" from strict stanzaic patterns.

The passion of the shackled Samson is, to use Dryden's phrase, "too fierce to be in Fetters bound." Samson's private lament (80-114) demonstrates Milton's freedom in metrics and is expressive of the hero's fierce passion. There are lines in regular iambic pentameter, but these corroborate God's beneficent order: "O first created Beam, and thou great Word,/ 'Let there be light, and light was over all'" (83-4). This provides the spiritual and metrical pattern from which Samson in alienation and hopelessness deviates. In contrast to the iambic regularity of God's universal order and light, Samson's anguished cry, "O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon," with its thudding monosyllables, expresses his own disorder and darkness. Moreover, the length of lines in this monody contract and dilate, suggesting the speaker's tormented, irregular breathing. Although the creative Word of God is sufficiently expansive, Samson fears a deus absconditus, that God is hidden:

The Sun to me is dark
 And silent as the Moon,
 When she deserts the night,
 Hid in her vacant interlunar cave (87-90).

Through the narrow, almost broken lines, he expresses with concentrated intensity the emotional bleakness of the estrangement of self from God, his "total Eclipse" (81).

The opening speech of the Danite chorus also illustrates the variety of movement in Milton's syllabic line. The broken cadences of "This, this is he; softly a while,/ Let us not break in upon him¹¹ (116-7) suggest the hushed hesitation and apprehension of the Danites as they approach and first behold their great hero imprisoned, blind, and broken. The Chorus's description of Samson,

See how he lies at random, carelessly diffus'd,
With languish't head unpropt,
As one past hope, abandon'd,
And by himself given over (119-22)

in its metrical ambiguity and irregular line lengths, that is, in its apparent randomness, supports their perception that Samson has surrendered both emotional and physical command of himself.

At times Milton makes his monostrophic choral odes rhyme, but each ode achieves a different effect. For example, the ode beginning "Many are the sayings of the wise" (652) has some ingeniously wrenched rhymes (various-contrarious; course-rulst; mute-brute). This strain after verbal harmony, however, reveals the facile and platitudinous wisdom of the Chorus, "carried away by Custom," and its misunderstanding of the nature of Samson's tragic experience. Indeed, the Chorus has just spoken of the "sayings of the wise" as a sound that "seems a tune,/ Harsh, and of dissonant mood . . . with the afflicted in his pangs" (660-2), and the jangling rhymes imitate the dissonance.

Dryden in his heroic plays emulated epic grandeur by creating a special stylistic idiom of elevated rhetorical declamation. The players in performance spoke these lines in musical cadence, a kind of operatic recitative. This highly stylized oratory is as extravagant as the character of his hero or

villain. "Serious plays ought not to imitate conversation too nearly," Dryden argues in "Of Heroic Poetry," and then attempts to justify Almanzor's talking "extravagantly in his passion" (Watson 1:157). Passion is expressed by a poetic diction, and the speeches often are in danger of being exclamatory, hyperbolic, and turgid. Heroic playwrights frequently tended to substitute rhetorical extravagance for genuine feeling, as in Tyrannick Love when Placidius, captain of the Pretorian band, delivers a long bravura monologue:

O Honour, how can'st thou invent a way
 To save my Queen, and not my trust betray!
 Unhappy I that 'ere he trusted me!
 As well his Guardian-Angel his Murd'rer be.
 And yet--let Honour, Faith, and Vertue flye,
 But let not Love in Berenice dye.
 She lives! -- (JD X:165).

In this same play Maximin's speeches in particular demonstrate Dryden's exploitation of over-wrought rhetoric. As the dying tyrant sits astride the body of Placidius, he repeatedly stabs him and utters a final imprecation against the gods: "And shoving back this Earth on which I sit,/ I'll e mount_____and scatter all the Gods I hit" (JD X:189). In his "Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy" (1679), Dryden urges his reader to distinguish between "true sublimity" and "the blown puffy style" (Watson 1:257), and admits that

the roar of passion, indeed, may place an audience
 three parts of which are ignorant enough to think
 all is moving which is noise, and it may stretch
 the lungs of an ambitious actor, who will die upon
 the spot for a thundering clap; but it will move
 no other passion than indignation and contempt
 from a judicious man (Watson 1:254).

Three years later, in his dedication of The Spanish Friar (1681), the judicious and contrite Dryden confesses:

I remember some verses of my own Maximin and Almanzor which cry vengeance upon me for their extravagance, and which I wish heartily in the same fire with Statius and Chapman. All I can say for those passages, which are, I hope, not many, is that I knew they were bad enough to please, even when I writ them. But I repent of them amongst my sins (Watson 1:276).

Milton writes a serious poetic drama that attempts to imitate conversation more nearly, in opposition to Dryden¹'s critical dictum, and in so doing he rejects the stylistic idiom of the heroic play. Through his plainer diction, more colloquial rhythms, and sense-units more complete than those of the closed couplet, he is able to modulate and vary his characters¹ speech for greater naturalness. Edward Phillips observes in Theatrum Poetarum that "Riming couplets . . . appear too stiff and of too much constraint for the liberty of conversation and the interlocution of several Persons."^ The dialogue in Samson Agonistes demonstrates Milton's skill in imitating natural speech and "the liberty of conversation."

When Manoa says to Samson, "I cannot praise thy marriage choices, Son" (420), the directness and plainness of his language imitate speech, as do the seemingly extemporaneous interjections of Manoa¹'s "I state not that; this I am sure; our Foes/ Found soon occasion thereby to make thee/ Thir captive, and thir triumph" (423-5). The unrhymed, emjambéd lines create a rapidity of movement similar to a man who thinks while he speaks.

In the extended dialogue between Samson and Dalila there are instances of variation in pause and stress that suggest a conversational idiom. It is Samson's habit to re-state Dalila's explanations for her behavior: "I gave, thou say'st, th'example,/ I led the way" (822-3), or "Weakness is thy excuse,/ And I believe it," and then after a pause he repeats the critical word, and adds his own bitter, resentful interpretation, "Weakness to resist/ Philistian gold" (829-31).

The Chorus's speech to Samson as he persists in refusing to accompany the messenger to the Philistine festivities illustrates many of Milton's stylistic traits in the play:

Consider, Samson; matters now are strain'd
 Up to the height, whether to hold or break;
 He's gone, and who knows how he may report
 Thy words by adding fuel to fire? (1348-51).

The conversational idiom is accentuated by the short, emphatic phrasing of "Consider, Samson" and "He's gone." The simple diction and the proverbial phrase, "adding fuel to the fire," illustrate the everyday language of the Chorus.

Finally, Manoa's well-known speech on the heroic death of his son demonstrates how plain diction, caesura, and cadence all eloquently express the father's sorrow, respect, and serenity:

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
 Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
 Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair
 And what may quiet us in a death so noble (1721-4).

Manoa's grief is revealed in the repetition of the negatives, "nothing" and "no," but at the same time this personal sorrow is tempered by rhythms that suggest his restrained emotion in a stately, even impersonal, elegy.

Through unrhymed lines and variety of rhythm, cadence, and pause, Milton carefully modulates expressive tone; Dryden's greater metrical regularity and his closed couplets often have an overall effect of uniformity and monotony. Dryden's closed couplet, like the picture-frame stage in the theatre, is containing; Milton's verse is less circumscribed, freer and more adaptable, enabling the reader's imagination to contract or expand so that the action of the play can take place in Samson's mind, the prison, the spacious theatre, or the cosmic stage.

(VI)

As a full-time, professional dramatist writing plays for a commercial theatre, Dryden understood the interrelationship of writing, business, and production. For a long time he was under contract to produce three plays a year and was a shareholder in the King's playhouse. Moreover, when he worked with a repertory company he had to create particular roles with individual performers in mind, and take into account the special abilities and stage styles, for example, of Charles Hart, Edward Kynaston, Michael Mohun, or Elizabeth Boutell, Nell Gwynn, and Rebecca Marshall.

The appearance of actresses was an important inducement to frequent the Restoration playhouse. This innovation was in imitation of both court masque and the French theatre. Davenant and Killigrew engaged a number of actresses for the first time on the public stage. These actresses changed the style of performance and provided a new dimension of sensual realism to the dramatist.^ Dryden and other playwrights used the charms of the actresses by exploiting sexual relationships in their plays. The preoccupation with sexual pursuit, central to the plot and action of Restoration comedy, was reflected in the behavior of the audience.

The playhouse became a meeting-place for fops and beaux and women of doubtful character, some of whom wore "vizard Masks," the signs of prostitutes. Common whores or punks boldly solicited custom in the galleries and boxes. It was difficult for a virtuous woman to attend a play in London without casting doubts on her motives. Writers of prologues and epilogues satirized the dissolute behavior of the young sparks in the pit.

The actresses were often the well-known mistresses of noblemen and even of the King himself. John Evelyn writes (18 Sept. 1666):

This night was acted my Lord Broghill¹'s Tragedy called Mustapha before their Majesties at Court, at which I was present; very seldom going to public theatres for many reasons now as they were abused to an atheistical liberty; foul and undecent women (and never till now) permitted to appear and act, who inflaming several young noblemen and gallants, became their misses, and to some, their wives. Witness the Earl of Oxford, Sir R. Howard, Prince Rupert, the Earl of Dorset, and another greater person than any of them, who fell into their snares, and to the reproach of their noble families, and ruin of both body and soul.³¹

Samuel Pepys, in writing about the actress Moll Davis, says she calls herself "the most impertinent slut in the world," and he laments the fact that the King gave her a ring and furnished a house for her "in Suffolke Street most richly, which is a most infinite shame."² These affairs are relevant to the public attitude toward the theatre, and the performers toward the public. They reflect as well the Restoration cult of seductive pleasure and sexual promiscuity.

By the time Tyrannick Love was produced, Nell Gwynn, who played the emperor's daughter, Valeria, had become a popular actress. The amusing epilogue was written especially for her, and its effectiveness depended on the audience's awareness of the disparity between Valeria's virtue and Nell Gwynn's reputation as "a bold merry slut," to use Samuel Pepys's phrase.³ In the final act of the play Valeria stabs herself and is about "to be carried off the stage by the bearers." She refuses to be carried off, however, and leaps up to speak her own epitaph in a doggerel couplet: "Here Nelly lies, who, though she liv'd a Slater'n/ Yet dy'd a princess, acting in S Cathar'n" (JD X:193). Nell Gwynn's epilogue, addressed directly to the audience, is really an extradramatic reference in that it emphasizes the social rather than the dramatic identity of the actress. Moreover, it makes very clear the illusion of the play in which she performed. The effect of the epilogue, then, is both to create rapport with the audience and to distance it from the play by calling attention to what was merely the appearance of the truth. The truth, it will be recalled, is that, shortly after her performance in Dryden's religious play written to honor Charles' queen, Catherine of Berganza, Nell Gwynn became the royal mistress.

Although Milton did not intend to have a Nell Gwynn or Rebecca Marshall play the role of Dalila in his play, Dalila herself is perceived by the Chorus and Samson to be an actress. Both the Danites and Samson dwell on her dissembling and pretence. The Chorus, in announcing her theatrical arrival at the prison-house, emphasize her appearance; they not only describe how she is dressed but suggest she "seems" to be what she is not. The Chorus's description of Dalila recalls the sumptuousness of costume in Restoration stage production. The temptress comes from the Philistine Magistrates, Princes, and priests, dressed in finery purchased by "the gold/ Of Matrimonial

treason . . . so bedeckt, ornate, and gay, . . .With all her bravery on"
(711-24).

A decade after the publication of Samson Agonistes, John Dryden in his dedicatory epistle of The Spanish Friar, confessing his earlier sins of rhetorical extravagance, uses a curious, and allusive, figure of speech: "But I repent of them amongst my sins; and if any of their fellows intrude into my present writings, I draw a stroke over all those Dalilah's of the theatre" (Watson 1:276). Milton's Dalila is "of the theatre" in that her amber scent, her eloquence and displayed emotions seem to Samson a performance calculated to provoke and tempt him.

In their confrontation, Samson stresses her "arts" in feigning remorse. He construes her behavior as an impersonation of love and repentance. Dalila tells him that he was weak when he had succumbed to her beauty, and he reacts angrily, saying of her: "How cunningly the sorceress displays/ Her own transgressions, to upbraid me mine!" (820-1). He then accuses her of pretending that she loved him. He becomes enraged by her feminine trickery, by what he perceives as her attempt to seduce him once more as she promises him that she would still enjoy him day and night, in her courtly phrase, as "Love's prisoner" (808). Earlier she had used her arts, more as a courtesan than wife, to betray him, and once again she seems to be playing for the Philistine prompters off-stage. Despite his blindness, Samson sees through her "false pretexts and varnish¹d colors" (901), and as she approaches to touch him, Samson's reaction is savage: "Not for thy life, lest fierce remembrance wake/ My sudden rage to tear thee joint by joint" (952-3).

Milton provides no explicit stage directions, but the language of this scene enables the reader to imagine the characters' gestures and movements as well as their speech intonation.

Dryden's explicit stage directions reflect the playwright's skill in exploiting stage business and nonverbal performance, including gestures and movement. In Part II of The Conquest of Granada, for example, there are many stage directions that depend upon the conventions of theatrical representation. They call for gestures and movement: drawing of swords and disarming, binding and unbinding, embracing or wringing of hands, falling at feet, kneeling and kissing of hand or snatching away of hands.

Throughout his playwrighting career Dryden demonstrated his familiarity with the affective functions of representation and illusion. Later in his career he wrote in his dedication of The Spanish Friar:

In a playhouse, everything contributes to impose upon the judgment: the lights, the scenes, the habits, and, above all, the grace of action, which is commonly the best where there is most need of it, surprise the audience, and cast a mist upon their understanding.

But then he adds, "But these false beauties of the stage are no more lasting than a rainbow; when the actor ceases to shine upon them, when he gilds them no longer with his reflection, they vanish in a twinkling" (Watson 1:275).

The image of Samson, however, does not vanish in a twinkling. Because the poet has enabled us to see his character from both the inside and the outside, the image of the character at the prison-house and in the "spacious Theater" (1605) of the Philistines, is imprinted on our mind's eye. Samson is the Actor no mere actor can play. Born to perform "some great act" (1389), he is finally called upon by God, when his faith is restored and he is ready to offer himself as a means of personal redemption, to act out his part "from Heav'n assign'd" (1217) in the providential drama.

(VIII)

The Restoration theatre took over both actresses and scenic spectacle that before 1641 belonged principally to English court drama. Sir William Davenant had an intense interest in enhancing stagecraft with greater artifice and illusion, featuring the effects of perspective, painted settings, and stage machinery. With the art of scenic spectacle rapidly becoming technically advanced, one playhouse competed with another in producing more and more extravagant shows, Edward Howard, in his preface to Six Days¹ Adventures (acted 1671), complained that "Scenes, Habits, Dancing, or perhaps an Actress, take more with Spectators than the best Dramatick wit."34

The playwrights called upon the technical expertise available to them in stage effects and scene changes. The popularity of heroic plays was based in large part on their grandeur and pageantry, elements that gratified the expectations and tastes of the playgoing public. Scene and spectacle, resembling that of masque and opera, were considered very important features in Dryden¹'s heroic plays.

The dramatic action of these plays took place in the royal courts of Peru, Mexico, Italy, and Spain, exotic lands associated with intrigue, eroticism, and violence. These picturesque and idealized settings were symptomatic of the desire to the Restoration audience to escape from the ordinary and recognizable surroundings of London society.

The stage directions in The Indian Queen demonstrate Dryden¹'s attention to the spectacular nature of his heroic play. The set and costumes described for Act V reveal a theatrical lavishness and exoticism intended to leave the spectators breathless: "The Scene opens, and discovers the Temple of the Sun all of Gold, and four Priests, in habits of white and red Feathers attending by a bloody Altar, as ready for sacrifice" (JD VIII:220). In the epilogue to

the play Montezuma says to the audience: ^{fM}"Tis true, y'have marks enough, the Plot, the Show,/ The Poets Scenes, nay, more, the Painters too" (JD VTII:231). So popular, and so expensive, was the scenery of The Indian Queen that Dryden wrote a sequel, The Indian Emperour, in order that it could be used again.

Milton's own stage directions for Samson Agonistes, by contrast, indicate only that the action takes place "before the prison in Gaza." The setting of the prison is lacking in verbal scenery or visual imagery, and this absence recreates Samson's inability to see. Instead of the sense of sight, the poet cultivates the auditory, olfactory, and tactile senses so that we join with the blind prisoner in his sensitized perceptions of the ^f'air imprisoned . . . close damp/ Unwholesome draught" (7-8). Samson is briefly described by the Chorus "In slavish habit, ill-fitted weeds/ O'er-worn and soiled" (121-2). His ragged clothes recall the words of Isaiah that "all our righteousness are as filthy rags" (64:6, Authorized Version). This visual austerity in scene and costume also reflects the renunciation, characteristic of both Samson's patience and Milton's poetic art.

For Dryden, stage machinery was an important factor in creating a sense of wonder. Machines created rapid and amazing illusory effects, making it possible for playwrights to use the supernatural frequently in their heroic plays. There were traps under the stage from which ghosts and demons would rise, and mechanical devices above to raise and lower spirits and gods. As in the masque, heavenly aid could descend by machinery and intervene in human affairs. The incantation scene in The Indian Queen and the "Indian Cave" episode in Tyrannic Love exemplify this exploitation of supernatural machinery. In the Indian Cave episode (Act IV,1), Dryden's stage directions make it very clear that he is depending on masque-like stage effects to create a sense of supernatural mystery. Spirits descend in clouds, a bed arises with

St. Catherine in it, and at the end of the song and dance of the spirits, "Amariel, the Guardian-Angel, descends to soft Musick, with a flaming Sword" (JD X:151). Amariel in the next act descends once more, and with his flaming sword he strikes at the wheel of torture prepared for the Saint, breaks it in pieces, and ascends. The scenic and operatic effects of these scenes were unsurpassed by anything shown on the English stage up to the time.

Dryden defended his use of "astral or aerial spirits" by arguing that they are "heroic representations, which are of the same nature with the epic" (Watson 1:142). Although he supported his use of supernatural machinery in this way, it should not be forgotten that such use of theatrical spectacle was designed to arouse emotional excitement in the audience. "Our theaters now," Richard Flecknoe complained in 1664,

for cost and ornament are arriv'd to the height of
Magnificence; but that which makes our Stage the better
makes our Playes the worse perhaps, they striving now
to make them more for sight then hearing, whence that
solid joy of the interior is lost, and that benefit which
men formerly receiv'd from Playes, from which they seldom
or never went away but far better and wiser than they
came.³⁵

Theatrical illusion in Tyrannick Love gives the appearance of truth, whereas Milton in Samson Agonistes rejects all illusion. Samson had been deluded by his own physical strength and Dalila's beauty, but in becoming blind to the external, physical world he gains insight. The individual reader of the play, likewise, being undistracted by the illusion of the play-world, is able to concentrate on the inward and spiritual. In this way the poet offers his reader "that solid joy of the interior."

There are no supernatural machines in Samson Agonistes; no deus ex machina or guardian-angel descends with flaming sword to destroy Samson's wheel of torture. As a shackled slave of the Philistines he is "put to the labor of a Beast" (37) at the public mill, his "servile toil/ Daily in the common Prison" (5-6), as the unseen millstone, like the "sphere of fortune" (173), rotates slowly, relentlessly crushing his spirit. Samson must accomplish his restoration to God's favor by his own agon at the wheel. That there are no supernatural machines places far greater emphasis upon Samson's own effort and will. His regeneration comes from within, and his final act, though it is divinely inspired, is free.

(IX)

The Restoration playhouse was a place of potential and at times actual violent activity, and this violence was symptomatic of the debauchery and moral decadence of the society for which the heroic play was written and performed. Arguments would sometimes break out in the theatre among the spectators, disturbing the progress of the play, and when one of these quarrels led to sword play within the theatre itself, the spectators were threatened by real physical danger.

The coterie of cultivated gentry, in spite of its refined tastes, had become habituated to, and enjoyed, the brutal amusements of the mob. Persons of Quality had thronged to witness executions on the gallows at Tyburn and Caring Cross. Members of the audience also attended blood-sport events. For example, John Evelyn reports in his diary (16 June 1670): "I went with some friends to the Bear Garden, where was cock-fighting, dog-fighting, bear and bull-baiting, it being a famous day for all these butcherly sports, or rather barbarous cruelties."3"

Dryden and other Restoration playwrights felt obliged to compete with these activities by inventing scenes of violence and murder for the stage. Sensational scenes of armed struggle, suicide, and murder became a distinctive feature in the heroic play. Most notably in The Indian Queen and Tyrannick Love, Dryden created scenes that required representations of pursuit and flight, combat, physical torture, and violent deaths.

The stage directions in these two plays illustrate Dryden's exploitation of violence. In The Indian Queen, for example, Zempoalla "sets a Dagger" to the breast of Ynca's daughter, and in another scene, of Montezuma. Later, her general Traxalla "draws and thrusts at Montezuma, he puts it by and kills him." Then Montezuma "goes to attaque the Guards with Traxalla's Sword." At the beginning of the fifth act, Zempoalla's son stabs himself, and then she kills herself at the end of the play. Even more lurid in its violence in Tyrannick Love. A scene opens to reveal the wheel of torture prepared for St. Catherine, and the mad tyrant Maximin dwells at considerable length on the prurient details of torture in a kind of sadistic foreplay:

Her Paps then let the bearded Tenters stake,
 And on each hook a gory Gobbet take;
 Till th¹upper flesh by piece-meal torn away,
 Her beating heart shall to the Sun display (JD X:176).

Although St. Catherine and her mother Felicia are spared actual physical torture, Dryden provides compensatory acts of brutal violence on the stage in the same scene, involving physical struggle, murder, and suicide.

Justifying his use of weapons and violent action as an essential feature of the genre, Dryden writes in "Of Heroic Poetry":

that these warlike instruments, and even the representation of fighting on the stage, are no more than necessary

to produce the effects of an heroic play; that is to raise the imagination of the audience, and to persuade them, for the time, that what they behold on the theatre is really performed (Watson 1:162).

Dryden's view of the imagination in this passage is rather crudely literalistic, suggesting that only by physical and sensational means is the audience persuaded of a play's reality.

Physical action and violent death on the stage, of course, create emotional excitement and easy gratification for a sensation-hungry audience, and Dryden admits without shame that "To please the people ought to be the poet's aim, because plays are made for their delight"¹¹ (Watson 1:120). In several of his later essays, however, he expresses a growing contempt for his audience, particularly with regard to their love of sensational action. The Epilogue to Aureng-Zebe, for example, speaks of "Bold Britons, at a brave Bear-garden Fray,/ Are rous'd: and, clatt'ring Sticks, cry, Play, play, play."³

Because of the physicality and violence of Samson's heroism in Judges, Milton could have taken the opportunity to dramatize his protagonist's deeds in spectacular scenes of violent action. Indeed, the Chorus recalls Samson's brute force and ferocity, the deeds of "That Heroic, that Renown'd,/ Irresistible Samson . . . Who tore the Lion," and weaponless himself, "Ran on embattl'd Armies clad in Iron" (124-31), but this is a description of the earlier Samson who loved his own physical strength and by sin fell away by the divine will. The poet dramatizes the later, more tragic aspects of Samson's life, and references to the physical heroism of the past are used primarily to contrast with his blind and weak condition in captivity. It is therefore thematically significant that the pathos, the deed of violence that constitutes the catastrophe, should take place off stage, and not only because the

playwright adheres to the conventions of Greek drama. Samson is the hero of a religious drama who triumphs through faith, and his works-- the destruction of the Philistine temple-- are merely an outward manifestation of that faith.

Two episodes, Samson's confrontations with Dalila and then with Harapha, illustrate Samson's struggle to restrain his violence by learning patience, which the Chorus says is "more oft the exercise/ Of Saints, the trial of thir fortitude" (1287-8).

When Dalila perceives that she is powerless to persuade Samson to believe her love for him, she appears to resort to physical intimacy, saying "Let me approach at least, and touch thy hand" (951). In his refusal to allow her even that touch, he expresses the violence of his mental agony: "Not for thy life, lest fierce remembrance wake/ My sudden rage to tear thee joint by joint." However, in his resistance to her temptation he reveals his conscious need for patience and self-command when he tells her, "At distance I forgive thee, go with that" (952-4).

Harapha also tempts Samson's rage and physical violence. Harapha comes to the prison-house to satisfy his curiosity and to gloat over Samson's captivity and weakness. Taunting the slave of the Philistines with reminders of his humiliation and defeat, Harapha boasts of his physical superiority and the victorious power of Dagon. Samson's reaction to these taunts reveals a renewed self-confidence. The way to know his strength, Samson declares in a challenge, is not to see but taste. Eager to defy his antagonist in "a trial of mortal combat" (1176), Samson tells Harapha that though his "heels are fetter'd, his "fist is free" (1235), and finally he speaks in a language charged with threats of physical violence (1237-41). The Samson who threatens, however, resembles his own enemies, the blustering, intimidating Harapha and the earlier Samson, a physical champion who, because of his preoccupation

with his natural strength, had foolishly presumed that he was self-sufficient, Fighting Harapha to vindicate himself and defend his personal honor, then, would be succumbing to the temptation of presumption, which is the opposite of patience and humility. Samson must resist that temptation, and instead of acting precipitously he must patiently and humbly wait for his divine "Father's timely care"¹¹ (602) to prosecute the means of his deliverance. Samson's confrontations with Dalila and Harapha are intended to elicit the passions of pity and terror, pity for Samson's impotence, and terror of his potential violence.

Milton's description of the Philistines at the "spacious Theater" of Dagon recalls the mood of the sensation-hungry, violent Restoration audience: "Drunk with wine" they are "only set on sport and play," and call in haste for the main "act" of violence, hero-baiting, having "unwittingly importun'd/ Their own destruction" (1669-81).

The passions of pity and terror are finally purged in the cathartic experience of the catastrophe at the temple when the violence is made actual:

As with the force of winds and waters pent
 When Mountains tremble, those two massy Pillars
 With horrible convulsion to and fro
 He tugg'd, he shook, till down they came, and drew
 The whole roof after them with a burst of thunder

(1647-51).

The terrible violence that had been welling up in Samson is transformed, and released, as he pulls the edifice of the temple down upon the enemies of God and on his own head. The vehicle of this simile conveys the devastating upheaval of impersonal, elemental nature in which the forces of earthquake and flood purge the world. But the violence is also supernatural, an

apocalypse or uncovering, in "the great day of his wrath" (Rev. 6:17, Authorized Version) of the once hidden God. It is a violence, then, not of Samson's personal strength but that of divine retribution and omnipotence of which he is but the obedient instrument.

(x)

Several years after Dryden wrote his rhymed heroic plays, he first repudiated the dramatic use of rhyme, and then the ranting style and the theme of love and honor. These heroic conventions, however essential to the genre, do not in themselves limit the achievement of Dryden¹'s dramatic art. They are symptoms nevertheless of larger issues, mainly of the playwright's dependence on the taste of his aristocratic coterie audience. A practical man of the theatre, he wanted first and foremost to please, and flatter, his patrons and audience, and as a result his art was circumscribed not only by the age but by an isolated and exclusive group of playgoers with shared concepts of honor, love, and ambition. Dryden originated fashions as well as followed them, but he condescended to his audience by creating temporary novelties, and exploiting, for its easy gratification, those conventions of plot, characterization, and style, that, for all their grandeur and extravagance, impoverished his art. There is no denying that Dryden had considerable gifts as a writer of heroic plays; he is inventive, vigorous, and intelligent. Some of the scenes are moving by virtue of his treatment of characters in conflict, and many passages of dialogue and soliloquy reveal Dryden's imaginative and verbal powers. But because he accommodated his heroic plays so narrowly to the desires and expectations of his audience, those plays reflect the moral, social, and political defects of its ideology.

Milton's drama, by contrast, is purified from both the superfluities of Restoration theatrical production and the ethos of the ruling class. Samson

Agonistes is the work of a free mind and Promethean fire. It is the expression of the poet's intense, personal feeling and original vision, and his willingness to explore the depths of the human soul. The fact that he did not intend his drama for the stage reflects his alienation from, and antagonism towards, Restoration theatre and society, and although that restriction is symptomatic of a cultural dislocation, it enabled him to write a dramatic poem that is liberated from the temporal and passing values of Restoration drama. In his antagonism to the secular, cultural wisdom of Restoration society, Milton did not merely renounce the temptations of either withdrawal or compromise. He affirmed, in relation to God, his faith in "that one Talent which is death to hide." Despite the limitations of a play not intended for stage performance, Milton wrote a work that transcends the limitations of his literary age, having left "something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die" (CE 111:236).

NOTES

1. In this study I shall focus on Dryden's early rhymed heroic plays, from The Indian Queen, written with Sir Robert Howard (1665), to The Conquest of Granada (1671-72). These plays were written before or contemporaneously with the publication of Samson Agonistes. I exclude from analysis his Aureng-Zebe because it appeared in 1675, four years after the publication of Milton's dramatic poem. Moreover, Aureng-Zebe is not typical of Dryden's earlier plays, as Arthur C. Kirsch has argued in Dryden's Heroic Plays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965) since it undermines the heroic ethos and exploits a new kind of sentiment. Dryden's style in this play, in addition, marks a distinctive change in that his rhythms are more variable and subtly expressive, and he uses fewer end-stopped lines. Anne Davidson Ferry, in Milton and Milton's Dryden (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968) provides a full account of the "special kind of literary relationship"¹¹ between Samson Agonistes and All for Love (1677), exploring their parallel concerns and attitudes.
2. In this study I am following the date of composition most often proposed by most modern Miltonists, 1667-70. The fact that the poet saw fit to publish his dramatic poem in 1671 is as important to the present discussion as the controversial date of composition.
3. Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 196.
4. See Chapter I, "The Court Invades the Drama," in Alfred Harbage, Cavalier Drama: An Historical and Critical Supplement to the Study of the Elizabethan and Restoration Stage (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), pp. 7-27.
5. Anne Richter, "Heroic Tragedy" in Restoration Theatre, eds. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (New York: Capricorn Books, 1967), p. 135.
6. John Dryden, The Works of John Dryden, eds. Edward Niles Hooker and H.T. Swedenberg, *JFi* and others (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956-79), IX:218. Cited throughout my text as JD.
7. The Works of John Milton, ed. Frank Allen Patterson and others (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931-38), X:103. Cited throughout my text as CE.
8. For the initial suggestion I am indebted to Milton and Milton's Dryden, p. 131.
9. The Prologues and Epilogues of John Dryden: A Critical Edition, ed. William Bradford Gardner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), p. 17.

10. John Dryden, Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays, ed. George Watson (New York: E.P. Dutton, Everyman's Library, 1962), 1:162. Hereafter cited in the text as Watson.
11. Lives of the English Poets (New York: E.P. Dutton, Everyman's Library, 1950), 1:192.
12. Citations from Milton's poetry in my text are to Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1957).
13. See Dryden's Heroic Plays, pp. 94-6.
14. For a fuller discussion of the conflict between the individual will and external authority, see Anne T. Barbeau, The Intellectual Design of John Dryden's Heroic Plays (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).
15. See Dryden's Heroic Plays, p. 55.
16. See "Heroic Tragedy," pp. 138-9.
17. The Prologues and Epilogues of John Dryden, p. 39.
18. John Harold Wilson, A Preface to Restoration Drama (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 52.
19. Milton and Milton's Dryden, p. 178.
20. A. S. P. Woodhouse, "Tragic Effect in Samson Agonistes" reprinted in Milton: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Arthur E. Barker (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 447.
21. See John Steadman, "'Faithful Champion': The Theological Basis of Milton's Hero of Faith," reprinted in Barker, p. 479.
22. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature Third Edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1956), p. 55.
23. See Una Ellis-Fermor, "Samson Agonistes and Religious Drama" in The Frontiers of Drama (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 17. Una Ellis-Fermor argues that Milton has written "a play that belongs to the rare category of religious drama, a kind which by the nature of some of its basic assumptions, cannot be tragic."
24. Quoted in Cecil V. Deane, Dramatic Theory and the Rhymed Heroic Play (London: Humphrey Milford, 1931), pp. 164-6.
25. The Prologues and Epilogues of John Dryden, p. 68.
26. Quoted in William Riley Parker, Milton: A Biography (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), I: 635.
27. Preface to Theatrum Poetarum, or a Compleat Collection of the Poets in Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century, ed. J. E. Spingarn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), 11:270.

28. The Italian Element in Milton's Verse (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954).
29. Critical Essays in the Seventeenth Century, 11:270.
30. Hugh Hunt, "Restoration Acting," in Restoration Theatre; p. 182.
31. The Diary of John Evelyn, ed. William Bray (New York: E.P. Dutton, Everyman's Library, 1952), 11:36.
32. Helen McAfee, Pepys on the Restoration Stage (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1916), p. 241.
33. Pepys on the Restoration Stage, p. 248.
34. Quoted in Dramatic Theory and the Rhymed Heroic Play, p. 63.
35. The Diary of John Evelyn, 11:49.
36. The Prologues and Epilogues of John Dryden, p. 70.