

A True Reflection of the Poet: On the Resemblance Between Samson and Milton

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Abstract

John Milton made great use of his youth experience in the writing of *Samson Agonistes*. The image and description of the hero reflected the poet himself almost in all aspects. Both Samson and Milton were divinely appointed to glorious cause and recorded great achievements, persecuted severely by their enemies and suffered a lot from blindness. The unwise marriage and the grappling with God's justice of Samson truly reflected that of Milton. The revolutionary spirit of Samson is truly that of Milton's and his last vengeance reflected Milton's completion of the three great poems. In a sense, Samson is Milton.

Key words: John Milton; *Samson Agonistes*; Resemblance

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INTRODUCTION

John Milton (1608-1674), the great poet of the 17th century English bourgeois revolutionary period “next to Shakespeare”, also a great politician and main practitioner of the time, produced abundant literary works, “*Paradise Lost*”, “*Paradise Regained*”, “*Samson Agonistes*”, some pamphlets and sonnets included, and well secured his place in the history of English literature, culture and

religious thought “like *Teneriff or Atlas unremoved*”. For some readers “*Samson Agonistes*” (jointly published in the same volume with “*Paradise Regained*” in 1671), a magnificent “*closet tragedy*”—drama more suitable for reading rather than for popular performance—moulded on the Greek tragedy, is the most powerful and satisfying of Milton's major works. There is much in common between Samson and Milton, both of them were divinely appointed to glorious cause, persecuted by their enemies, suffered from blindness, embittered by an unwise marriage, grappling humbly with the problem of God's justice and eventually revenged on their enemies, Samson with an act of Physical prowess and Milton with a pen. The following endeavors an introductory discussion of these things and the minnow was thrown in the hope of gaining a whale.

1. GLORIOUS CAUSE AND GREAT DEEDS

“*Samson Agonistes*”, in its original Greek, means “Samson the Contestant or Champion”, that is to say, Samson was divinely appointed to free the Israelites from Philistine yoke. As he declared to Harapha:

*I was no private, but a person raised,
With strength sufficient, and command from Heaven,
To free my country.*

Like the hero, Milton was also a dedicated soul, he would speak with satisfaction of his entry into political conflict:

*I saw that a way was opening for the establishment
of real liberty; that the foundation was laying for
the deliverance of man from the yoke of slavery and
superstition.*

Milton thought it his ordained mission to free the English people from secular and religious tyranny. As early as his Cambridge days and retirement at Horton,

his father's country house, he insisted his lifelong emphasis on freedom and prepared studiously for the calling of a poet. A "Latin Epsitile in Verse", expresses his appreciation for his father's forbearance in not urging him to enter the ministry against his conscience, or to attempt such alternative progression as law that his brother had taken. Later he tactfully reminded his father that no one so devoted to the art of music could condemn his son's devotion to the sister art of poetry.

Milton held an even more elevated view of the poet's role than Johnson's. He wished to "contribute to the progress of real and substantial liberty; which is to be sought for not from without, but within." When he was touring on the continent and in 1639, planning to extend his journey, the news of revolution reached him, as he later said:

...for I thought it base to be travelling for amusement abroad, while my fellow citizens were fighting for their liberty at home...

He felt the divine prompting and responsibility and returned to Britain, ready to plunge himself into the struggle for which he had long been preparing.

During the interregnum, between the execution of Charles I and the restoration of Charles II, Milton saw his role as the intellectual serving the state in glorious cause; he devoted his energies to pamphleting and he became Oliver Cromwell's Latin secretary, "Tenure of Kings and Magistrates" (1649) and the two "Defensiones" (1651,1654) are among the famous ones. Even when his request for the appointment of Andrew Marvell as his assistant secretary was denied and get distrusted, he continued at his self-appointed task of helping to keep Cromwell and his Council aware of the support and demands from the left.

With the "high gift of strength committed to him", Samson unarmed,

*...tore the lion as the lion tears the kid
Ran on embattled armies clad in iron,
And, weaponless himself,
Made arms ridiculous,...*

And the description of his fight is really magnificent,

*...then with what trivial weapon came to hand,
The jaw of a dead ass, his sword of bone,
A thousand foreskins fell, the flower of Palestine,
In Ramath-lechi, famous to this day:
Then by main force pulled up, and on his shoulders bore,
The gates of Azza, post and massy bar,
Up to the hill by Hebron,...*

An irresistible giant warrior pictured before us. Samson accomplished great victories with his physical strength, while Milton achieved no less glorious victories with his talent and the high emotional power. He early

showed his talent of letters in Cambridge as a public orator and wrote "On the morning of Christ's Nativity", "l'Allegro" and "II Penseroso". In 1614, Prompted by the restoration of both licensing and the powers of the Stationer's Company, he wrote "Areopagitica", or "Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing", attacked boldly on the censorship and plead nobly and powerfully for the freedom of the press. When the execution of the king aroused hostility not only in England but also throughout Europe, since regicide was then considered the worst of all crimes, Milton justified the execution with the pamphlet "Eikonoklastes" (1649). On defending the English revolution, Milton, in the two *Defensiones*, as a true "acrimonious and surly republican" (Johnson), attacked his controversy fiercely. During the long argumentation, Salmasius, hired scholar of Charles II, died in the effort of writing a reply to Milton. Our poet, so devoted to his work, also lost his sight, which suffered him a lot as will be discussed in the following chapter. All these victories are just as glorious and shining as those of Samson.

2. PERSECUTION AND SUFFER OF BLINDNESS

After fall, Samson was delivered into the hands of his godless enemies, made captive, "Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaver;" There, in prison, he laments mainly of the torment of captivity, degradation, blind servitude and the hurt of dignity. There contains much complains of his blindness, particular in Samson's first speech:

*...O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!
Blind among enemies! O worse than chains,
Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age!...
O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day!...*

Read this verse and imagine what grief he was in. Meanwhile, we may picture to ourselves how the blind poet sitting in his darkness dictating these lines.

Samson lived in Philistine bondage, so lived Milton in disgrace after the Restoration; Samson became blind, so did Milton in London among a nation of slaves. When Charles II was put on the throne, severe persecution immediately fell on the Puritans and the regicides, some of them were tried and executed. Milton, after three months' of hide, was arrested and put to prison. His property was seized, his books were burned by the hangman. Secluded in poverty, Milton spoke out his own grief with the mouth of Samson: "Myself my sepulcher, a moving grave". Light and dark are the warp and woof of which Samson *Agonistes* is woven. References to darkness are innumerable and always depressing.

3. UNWISE MARRIAGE AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Samson's fall is due to the irremediable transgress of his wife Dalilah, who "assayed, with flattering prayers and sighs, and amorous reproaches" to win Samson's "capital secret" and shore him "like a tame wether", all his "precious fleece", and delivered him to his enemies. Just as his first wife of Tinna, who divulged his secret, Samson chose his wife from heathen groups, instead of those of his own tribe "fairer, or as fair at least of thy (his) own nation, and as noble". Of her visit, Samson repelled vehemently her specious excuses and hints of sensual invitation, he says:

*... Out, out Hyaena! These are thy wonted arts,
And arts of every woman false like thee—
To break all faith, all vows, deceive, betray,
Then, as repentant, to submit, beseech
And reconciliation move with feigned remorse, ...
Again transgresses, and again submits;*

Samson now proves that he has conquered his former weakness, though, as someone argued that, he is still in love with her. He dare not even let her touch him. And also the chorus guess "what secret sting of amorous remorse" Samson feels.

Just like the character, Milton himself embittered by an unhappy marriage. In June 1642, he married Mary Powell, daughter of a squire of Oxfordshire. The Powell family was strongly royalist, indifferent in matters of religion or learning, and Mary who was altogether unable to share her husband's interests, may well also have been frightened by his intensity. Success and happiness could hardly be predicted for the marriage of a scholar and poet of 33 to an uneducated girl of half his age. Less than a month after the wedding, she paid her family a visit and refused to return. In 1645, after the decisive defeat of the royalist army, Mary's family decided that a Puritan son-in-law could be an important asset, and purposely arranged a meet and begged for a reconciliation. Still the marriage life was unhappy. In the end of 1656, Milton married the twenty-eight year old Katherine Woodcock. They seemed to have been well suited and deeply devoted to each other. But soon in 1658, she and her infant daughter both died. The sonnet "On his deceased wife" was for her. In 1662, he married his third wife, Elizabeth Minshull, who survived him. All these misfortunes, to Milton, who considered love and marriage a glorious gift of life, were really heart-breaking.

In the reading of *Samson Agonistes*, we may repeatedly encounter with the questions of God's justice, as:

*Just or unjust, alike seem miserable,
God of our fathers! What is Man,
That thou towards him with hand so various—*

*Or might I say contrarious?...
He should not so o'erwhelm, and as a thrall
Subject him to so foul indignities,
Be it but for honour's sake of former deeds.*

And at the of end the chorus' praise and Manoa's eulogy turned into an assertion of God's oft-hidden but unwavering support of his faithful champion, though neither of them understand Samson's real victory. Samson, although experiences a sense of God's desertion, warns himself and his father of God's justice from time to time:

*But peace! I must not quarrel with the will
Of highest dispensation, which herein
Haply had ends above my reach to know...
Appoint not heavenly disposition, father.*

Milton, seen as "the last great exponent of Christian humanism" in its historical continuity, from the beginning to the end, conveyed to us a vindication of divine law and justice, and like the ancients, does not offer an easy formula in solution of the mystery of pain and evil. He was anxious about the Puritan cause. Early in his denunciation of hiring clergy in "Lycidas", Milton had virtually declared his puritan allegiance. His last three great poems, *Samson Agonistes* included of course, expressed a purified faith in God, Milton puts God really unpredictable and beyond the reach of human mind. As Qiuxiao Long argued, the character of God is not merely a despot, even in "Paradise Lost". He chooses Christ as his successor only because he has affection towards man, though some of his deeds to Adam and Satan, in our point of view, cruel and merciless. For more examples, we may see from the sonnet "On his Blindness", like, Samson, he questioned:

*Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?
And the Patience's reply likes this:
... God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best, His state
Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er land ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and wait,...*

4. REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT AND VENGEANCE

Samson accomplished many feats which his servile Israelites failed to turn to advantage. Milton devoted his whole heart to the cause of Commonwealth only to see the restoration of Charles II. Both of them fell enemies' captives, suffered indignity and blindness, and both of them remained at last unconquerable.

There is a resurgence of the hero's spirit under stress. Samson was betrayed by his people, then by his wife.

Though he has conquered his former weakness, a sense of Heaven's desertion is hovering in his mind. Still he has to conquer despair. Samson, "Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves," moves gradually from preoccupation with his misery and disgrace to selfless humility and renewed spiritual strength. Manoa's reference to the feast of Dagon enlarges the consequences of Samson's sin, with a new access of contrition, he sinks the thought of his own fate in the contest between God and Dagon, a contest which, he vaguely feels, must end with him. He says:

*...I begin to feel
Some rousing motions in me, which dispose
To something extraordinary my thoughts.*

Comparing to his former speech:

*...the strife
With me hath end. All the contest is now
Twixt God and Dagon.*

There is an obvious change of his attitude. He once again feels himself God's chosen champion. In the fourth act he challenges Harapha, Dagon's champion, to combat from time to time.

Milton, "an acrimonious and surly republican", even at the last point of restoration, published his powerful pamphlet "The Readie And Easie Way To Establish A Free Commonwealth". This was a clarion call for continued resistance to tyranny and devotion for free. He knew well the crucial situation of the danger for him. It was rather himself than Satan who welcomes the defeat and torments as a glory, a liberty and a joy:

*...hail horrors, hail
Infernal world, and thou profoundest Hell
Receive thy possessor;*

His revolutionary spirit shows itself even more fervently in the sonnet "To Mr. Cyriack Skinner Upon his Blindness" (1655?):

*...still bear up, and steer
Right onward. What supports me, dost thou ask?
The Conscience, Friend, to have lost them over ply'd
In Liberties Defense, my noble task.
...Content, though blind, had I no other Guide.*

John Milton was an early believer in revolution's inherent ability to help a society to realize its potential. He also saw revolution as the right of society to defend itself against abusive tyrants, creating a new order that reflect the needs of the people. This spirit can be reflected by Samson's speech:

*...force with force
Is well ejected when the conquered can!*

There is another striking feature of Samson's spirit. In reading of the following lines:

*...in nations grown corrupt,
And by their vices brought to servitude,
Than to love bondage more than liberty—
Bondage with ease than strenuous liberty--...
...If their servile minds
Me, their Deliverer sent, would not receive
But to their masters gave me up for nought,
The unworthier they;...*

We cannot but find Samson's sense of loneliness. A spiritual isolation grows with his self-knowledge. His people betrayed him. Even his father does not understand the real nature of his present anguish. Until to the end, his father and the chorus, of course, an average not an ideal spectator, cannot understand his real victory. Back to Milton, we come to his historical limitation, that is, hero worship, and the contempt of people's power, though he was always on the people's side. He considered the masses as:

*A miscellaneous rabble, who extol
Things vulgar, and, well weighed, scarce worth the
praise?*

He praised Cromwell blindly all his life, even when in 1653, he dissolved the parliament, assumed the title of Lord Protector and adopted a virtual dictatorship. Here we are not trying to (and we cannot) find fault with our ancient poet, but point out the fact for the fact's sake.

Samson finally avenged himself by tugging down the pillars of the temple "both to destroy and be destroyed". Though the triumph itself is so imaginatively realized, it strongly suggests Milton's fierce longing that he, too, could bring destruction down upon the enemy at the negligible cost of his unhappy life. But Milton avenged himself in a different way, that is, by pen. He conquered his own despair and sublimated it in his last three great poems. He finished his masterpiece "Paradise Lost" and "Paradise Regained" and "Samson Agonistes". They take their roots deeply in the radical experience of the 1640's and 50s of Milton's political ensuing. And "Samson Agonistes", in particular, shows Milton used all his strength and talent. There is a tremendous sense of release in the accomplishment, as shows in Samson's final vengeance. He "created an engine which would help avenge his defeat long after his death", and would be rejoiced to know, for example, that in 1788, the year before the French Revolution, there were twenty-one editions of his great epic published in France!

CONCLUSION

Above we discussed some of the main similarities between Samson and the poet himself such as their divine vocation, blind servitude, unconquerable spirit and last vengeance upon their enemies. For many others (for

example, the chorus and Samson's disgust at "wine and all delicious drinks" and the praise of "fountain" and "fresh current", may well be a reflection of Milton's contempt of drinking in one of his public address connected with his college nickname "The Lady of Christ"), remained undiscussed due to the length of this passage, and mostly, the limitation of personal energy. We say Samson is a true reflection of the poet, does not necessarily mean that Samson equals Milton, but also, bear such differences in mind as, Samson—may be, in his sin—the English people and the terrible triumph of his death is, of course, not Milton. For the difference we say, *Samson Agonistes* is *Samson Agonistes*. The poet is not writing an autobiography. With the restraint of his art, Milton must show us that nothing in the drama does not belong to the story of Samson. So, in this sense, we can well be assured, Samson is Milton.

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