

DALILA AND SAMSON'S DESPAIR

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The episode in which Samson encounters Dalila has been generally regarded as the pivot of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* by those critics who discern a process of spiritual growth and change in the hero's experience in the play.¹ John Spencer Hill, for instance, says explicitly that the encounter with Dalila succeeds in "raising [Samson] out of the apathy, hopelessness, and despair into which Manoa's visit had thrown him" (165). A. S. P. Woodhouse holds that right before the encounter Samson "reaches his lowest depth of despair" (452). Don Cameron Allen also thinks that the hero "reaches the bottom level of despair" (87) at the end of his interview with his father. While Woodhouse argues that the encounter demonstrates the completeness of Samson's repentance (453), Allen discerns that Samson's "uxorious weakness, the mother of much of his despair, goes with Dalila's exit" (90). Joseph H. Summers, though he does not single out the Dalila episode, holds that while the Chorus and Manoa bring "challenges and temptations" and "make Samson more determinedly wish for death," Dalila and Harapha ironically effect the revival of his self-respect—"they both retire with some fear for their physical safety from a determined, fearless, and strengthened man" (159). Burton J. Weber also has a similar opinion though he thinks that the Chorus and Manoa bring doubts instead of challenges and temptations (236). Paired with the idea of the regenerating function of the Dalila episode is the opinion that the Harapha episode attests Samson's transformation caused by this encounter with Dalila. The general idea of the same critics is that at the end of the Harapha episode Samson has thoroughly renewed his energy and recovered his godly confidence.²

An examination of both the Dalila and the Harapha episodes, however, shows that in the former episode Samson comes to a complete awareness of his folly and unworthiness through a clear understanding of Dalila's true character and thus reaches his lowest depth of despair; and Samson's bragging in the latter episode is possibly a suicidal boast.

Like most of the other critics who argue for Samson's spiritual regeneration in the play, Anthony Low stipulates that Samson's reaction against his visitors results in his spiritual growth, notably his inner growth in patience (169). But he distinguishes two basic movements in the hero's inward progress: "a steady, upward spiritual progress, and a psychological movement that first travels downward into near despair and lethargy, reaching its low point at the end of the interview with Manoa. . ." (169—

70). He continues to say that from the low point on, "Samson's psychological movement is all upward and takes the same direction as his spiritual progress" (170). Low's distinction of the two movements is illuminating. However, Samson's psychological movement does not go up after his interview with his father. On the contrary, he becomes even more despondent after encountering Dalila.

Samson's despondency is primarily caused by his thorough awareness of his folly in marrying Dalila. As the cause of his fall, Dalila's treachery has been obsessing Samson from the beginning of the play. Before the appearance of Dalila, Samson has mentioned the woman and her betrayal four times—in his soliloquy (line 50), to the Chorus (lines 202, 230) and to his father (line 379). Although she can claim some defenders, Dalila is generally considered a fraudulent temptress or tempting seductress.³ For our purpose, however, the importance of Dalila in the play resides in how her argument leads Samson to see her and himself.

Before the Dalila episode, Samson attributes the cause of his fall primarily to his weakness in character, which made him unable to withstand Dalila's "blandisht parleys, feminine assaults, / Tongue batteries" (lines 403--04). He was ensnared by the sexuality of Dalila, as he says:

Then Swoll'n with pride into the snare I fell
Of fair fallacious looks, venereal trains,
Soft'n'd with pleasure and voluptuous life;
At length to lay my head and hallow'd pledge
Of all my strength in the lascivious lap
Of a deceitful Concubine. . . .

(lines 532--37)

In reasoning with Dalila Samson eventually learns that his sin does not simply reside in his common unmanliness and the "unfitness" of Dalila as his wife does not merely consist in her use of usual female wiles.⁴

First, Samson understands that Dalila's love for him is a possessive and destructive love, for it is based on her selfish intention, i.e. to imprison and enslave him.⁵ But the biggest problem is Dalila's self-defence by her alleged religious and civil duty. Looking at the whole matter from Dalila's point of view, Ulreich suggests that the audience should not take too seriously Dalila's self-justification, for "at worst it seems an ill-judged attempt to appeal to Samson's 'better,' public self: If you showed yourself willing to betray me for the sake of your God, why should I not betray you for mine?" (188). But we must take her argument seriously, for Samson takes it seriously. Nor is the case one of "the pot calling the kettle black" (Empson 215). As Samson argues, it is the wife's duty to accept her husband's religion and nation: "Being once a wife,

for me thou wast to leave / Parents and country” (885–86). Samson’s protest is in keeping with Renaissance ideas about woman: 1. a woman should stay off the topics of politics and religion; 2. when a woman marries, she forsakes her own family, nation and country to be loyal to her husband.⁶ But the problem of Dalila’s transgression is more complicated than this.

Joan S. Bennett argues that it is right for Samson to use his two Philistine marriages in the Hebrew cause while it is wrong for Dalila to use her marriage to attack the enemy in the Philistine cause because of their difference in ends and means. Bennett indicates that Milton set down for his readers in *Of Reformation* a definition of the only true government: “to govern well is to train up a Nation in true wisdom and vertue.”⁷ She continues to say: “The validity of anyone’s claim to be acting in the public interest can thus be tested against this criterion of natural law which is available to all human understanding” (156–57). The difference between Samson and Dalila is that while Samson is genuinely committed to the public good without acting against Dalila, Dalila has “rendered service to a sinful public cause” by dishonoring her own marriage (158). Bennett’s employing Milton’s idea about public and private cause explicated in his prose to interpret the play is illuminating. However, the premise she assumes—Samson wants to use his two Philistine marriages in the Hebrew cause—is problematic.

Although whether the first marriage is motioned by God, as Samson claims, is also a question, our discussion will be limited to the second marriage.⁸ Some critics go even further than Bennett by assuming that Samson’s marriage to Dalila is a divine dispensation for providential purposes.⁹ In fact, Samson himself says that while he knew from “intimate impulse” (223) that his wedding the Timna woman was urged by God, he married Dalila simply by following his own reasoning: “I thought it lawful from my former act, / And the same end” (lines 231–32). It seems he does not know that relying on his reasonable deduction was wrong until his debate with Dalila.

Dalila argues that she betrayed Samson because she was “Solicited, commanded, threat’n’d, urg’d / Adjur’d by all the bonds of civil Duty / And of Religion. . .” (lines 852–54). In addition to reminding Dalila of her wifely duty, Samson attacks the falsity and impurity of her government and religion:

Being once a wife, for me thou wast to leave
 Parents and country: nor was I their subject,
 Nor under their protection but my own,
 Thou mine, not theirs: if aught against my life
 Thy country sought of thee, it sought unjustly,
 Against the law of nature, law of nations,
 No more thy country, but an impious crew

Dalila and Samson's Despair

Of men conspiring to uphold third state
By worse than hostile deeds, violating the ends
For which our country is a name so dear;
Not therefore to be obey'd. But zeal mov'd thee;
To please thy gods thou didst it; gods unable
To acquit themselves and prosecute their foes
But by ungodly deeds, the contradiction
Of thir own deity, Gods cannot be:
Less therefore to be pleas'd, obey'd, or fear'd.
(lines 885- 900)

In doing what is “worse than hostile deeds” the Philistines are far from training up their nation in true wisdom and virtue; thus they should not be obeyed. And if in order to destroy their enemies they should employ Dalila to perform treachery, the Philistine gods are not true deities, for true deities must be virtuous and righteous. Hence, Dalila's obedience to the impious crews and false deities reflects her lack of wisdom, virtue and moral principle.

Inferring from this Samson must have attained some new knowledge about himself and his religion. First of all, his marriage to Dalila was a mistake and could not be motioned by God because his God is true and just, and will never utilize a woman or capitalize upon Samson's marriage to achieve his purpose. Second, if his God is indeed just and virtuous, his present afflictions must be God's punishment. At this moment he realizes more than ever his particular folly in marrying Dalila: he knows how far he violated the law of his God by his marriage. Thus, after Dalila leaves, he says to the Chorus: “God sent her to debase me, / and aggravate my folly who committed / To such a viper his most sacred trust / Of secrecy, my safety, and my life” (lines 999–1002). With this crushing realization Samson must have experienced an even stronger sense of unworthiness and despair than what he feels at the end of his interview with his father.

Samson's despondency is suggested, if not testified, by his reaction to Harapha's taunt and humiliation. Most of the critics hold that the Harapha episode demonstrates Samson's invigorated spirit and redeemed faith.¹⁰ Indeed Samson uses strong words and appears recalcitrant in retorting Harapha. However, some ambiguities remain unresolved. First of all, Harapha is his enemy; the giant's motive for coming is to humiliate him. Angered by his humiliation Samson understandably reacts violently. If it is not possible for him to act, he can at least respond in kind the Philistine's verbal taunting. Thus it is a question whether Samson's boasting faithfully reflects his opinion of his own strength and fate. When Harapha leaves, the Chorus warn Samson that Harapha being infuriated might stir up the Philistine lords with malicious counsel

to afflict him, he replies: “Come what will, my deadliest foe will prove / My speediest friend, by death to rid me hence, / The worst that he can give, to me the best” (lines 1262–64). This answer throws light on some passages in his exchanges with Harapha. For instance, the following passage may be understood as one uttered for the purpose of infuriation. Samson challenges Harapha to one combat:

Therefore without feign'd shifts let be assign'd
Some narrow place enclos'd, where sight may give thee,
Or rather flight, no great advantage on me;
Then put on all thy gorgeous arms, thy Helmet
And Brigandine of brass, thy broad Habergeon,
Vant-brace and Greaves, and Gauntlet, add thy Spear
A Weaver's beam, and seven-times-folded shield,
I only with an Oak'n staff will meet thee,
And raise such outcries on thy clatter'd Iron,
Which long shall not withhold me from thy head,
That in a little time, while breath remains thee,
Thou oft shalt wish thyself at Gath to boast
Again in safety what thou wouldst have done
To Samson, but shalt never see Gath more.

(lines 1116–1129)

If he wins, he may perhaps know God's dispensation again. If he loses, it is possibly a sign of God's desertion; thus death will be the best for him. At any rate, it seems inappropriate to believe a person's angry words completely. As Stanley Fish puts it, “the striking thing about the affirmation of faith which Harapha draws from Samson is its unexpectedness. . .” (228).

Moreover, we do not know whether Samson has regained all his strength so far. Harapha describes Samson's hair as bristles which are “rang'd like those that ridge the back / Of chaf't wild Boars, or ruff'd Porcupines” (lines 1137–38). Obviously, the hair is far shorter than Samson's original hair which had never been shorn until Dalila's betrayal. Later after the officer fails to carry out the Philistine lords' command to bring Samson to the Dagon temple, Samson says that his strength is “returning with [his] hair / After [his] great transgression” (lines 1355–56). Yet, his strength is only returning; there is no way to know how much strength he has regained. Besides, it must not be forgotten that he is blind. Thus his bragging towards Harapha seems to be more like suicide than a sign of spiritual regeneration. Later when the officer returns, Samson has felt some “rousing motions in [him] which dispose / To something extraordinary [his] thoughts” (line 1382). This time the sign is certain and

Samson knows this. However, the gap between Samson's feeling of the "rousing motions" and his great despondency after Dalila's visit is not easy to bridge.

Notes

1. As Hill discovers, "almost without exception, recent commentators have read *Samson Agonistes* as a study in regeneration. . ." (151).
2. See, for instance, Summers 168, Woodhouse 454, and Allen 91.
3. William Empson is her first defender. Empson is followed by critics such as Allen, Asals and Ulreich.
4. In *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* Milton proposes intellectual incompatibility as grounds for divorce: "That indisposition, unfitness, or contrariety of mind, arising from a cause in nature unchangeable, hindering and ever likely to hinder the main benefits of conjugal society, which are solace and peace, is a greater reason of divorce than natural frigidity, especially if there be no children, and that there be mutual consent" (705).
5. Low's eclectic view of Dalila's love seems more acceptable than seeing Dalila as completely body. Low holds: "Dalila's passion. . . does not consist merely of physical attraction, although that is plainly strong: it is also a deep spiritual perversion. It is a love that is not life-giving but death-dealing, that wishes not the good of its object, but its own satisfaction. So it easily becomes jealousy or, to all appearances, hatred" (157).
6. See Weinkauff 144–45.
7. Qtd. in Bennett 156.
8. Labriola argues that even the first marriage of Samson is not motioned by God. The "intimate impulse" Samson feels is in effect an evil temptation.
9. Fish holds: "The promise that Samson 'should Israel from Philistine yoke deliver' will be fulfilled when he is brought to the temple, and his deliverance to the temple follows upon this apparently disastrous marriage" (216–17). Haskin argues: "The marriage of Samson and Dalila was planned in heaven, then, not as a means for mutual sanctification through loving conversation, but as part of God's plan to deliver Israel from the philistines" (366). Kerrigan also has a similar idea, as he asserts: "As Milton designs the irrational coherence of Samson's tragedy, the marriages in their direst consequences—betrayal, blindness, imprisonment, guilt, humiliation—are the strict precondition for his triumph" (231).
10. See, for instance, Summers 168, Woodhouse 454, and Allen 91.

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