

THE "SPACIOUS THEATER" IN SAMSON AGONISTES

Several months before the ordinance of the Lords and Commons closed the London theatres late in 1642, Milton had boldly proposed that "it were happy for the Commonwealth, if our magistrates would take into their care. . . the managing of our public sports and festival pastimes." Arguing that the people would profit from "wise and artful recreations," he considered whether divinity itself could be taught

not only in Pulpits, but after another persuasive method,  
at set and solemm Paneguries, in Theaters, porches, or  
what other place, or what may win most upon the people to  
receiv at once both recreation, & instruction.<sup>1</sup>

With the Restoration in 1660 the theatres in London were reopened, and eleven years after that, in 1671, Milton's Samson Agonistes was published. The restored theatres, because of their rapidly changing repertoires, constantly demanded new plays, and professional playwrights were active and productive, submitting their dramas to the playhouse for performance. Yet in the midst of this dramatic and theatrical activity, Milton announced in the preface to Samson Agonistes that his own play was "never intended" for the theatre. In the play itself, however, Milton's protagonist redeems himself in "a spacious Theater" (l.1605),<sup>2</sup> and there fulfills God's providential plan.

It is my concern here to discuss Milton's attitude toward the theatre and drama, and show the relationship between Milton's view of an ideal theatre, his refusal to write for the stage, and in his own play, Samson Agonistes, in which the protagonist redeems himself in a theatre as he destroys it.

(I)

Milton the humanist had little sympathy with the hostile and even fanatic attacks on the theatre by the militant Puritan controversialists,

Stephen Gosse, Philip Stubbes, and William Prynne. They had made sweeping condemnations of the drama and public stage as idolatrous and corrupting. By contrast, Milton expressed a personal affection and enthusiasm for drama. His early poetry, written when the Puritan pamphleteers were attacking the stage, reflects the pleasure he had experienced in attending the theatre in London. Praising "the magnificence of the arched theater" in his Elegia Prima, he describes himself in watching a tragedy performed on the stage: "But still I watch and find pleasure in watching and suffering, but sometimes there is a sweet pain even in tears."

Milton's first published poem was in Shakespeare's Second Folio, and he followed this epitaph to the great playwright with another tribute in "L' Allegro." The young poet praises Jonson and "sweetest Shakespeare," the two English masters of "the well-trod stage" (121-34). Celebrating "gorgeous Tragedy" in "Il Penseroso," he alludes to the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the major themes of classical Greek tragedy. Although he suggests that it is regrettable that in this "later age" it is more rare for tragic dramas to have "Ennobled. . . the Buskin'd stage," he does not condemn the less noble, more recent drama.

Young Milton himself wrote two works for theatrical presentation commissioned for live performance, "Arcades" and the Ludlow Maske, written after William Prynne's savage attack on the stage in Histriomastix. In the masque especially Milton gave ample evidence of his familiarity with, and skill in, dramaturgy, in his use of the dramatic conventions: characters in conflict, dialogue, scenic invention and temporal sequence, climax, reversals, and denouement.

His prose works also show his advocacy of drama and theatre. He objects to the arguments of Lactantius on drama, for example, in his entry on "Public Shows" in his Commonplace Book:

He does not seem even once to have reflected that, while the corrupting influences of the theater ought to be eliminated, it does not follow that it is necessary to abolish altogether the performance of plays. This on the contrary would be quite senseless; for what in the whole of philosophy is more impressive, purer, or more uplifting than a noble tragedy, what more helpful to survey at a single glance of the hazards and changes of human life?

(CE XVIII, 207)

Recognizing that although the theatre had been corrupted and in itself can corrupt, Milton in his broad defense of drama argues that it offers both a means of exploring the complexity of our psychological and moral condition, and presents an ennobling view of human life. In addition, after citing Tertullian's warning against drama, Milton praises him for the eloquent plea in his epilogue for "better spectacles, namely, those of a divine and heavenly character, such as, in great number and grandeur, a Christian can anticipate in connection with the coming of Christ and the Last Judgment" (loc. cit.).

Holding an idealized view of drama, Milton in the 1640s projected in the Trinity Manuscript themes for his own prospective plays. He had set down a list of literary subjects suitable for dramatic composition from both Biblical and early British history. This is a list of "Outlines for Tragedies" including Paradise Lost, and sketches of Biblical themes about Abraham, Sodom, and John the Baptist. He had started several times to list the characters in a play on 'Paradise Lost' and sketched out briefly the five acts of the drama. His nephew Edward Phillips specifically mentions Milton's work, which can be dated to the time of the Trinity Manuscript, on a tragedy of the fall of man. Significantly, Milton gave stage directions for several of his

prospective dramas. In addition, he set down the titles of plays dealing with episodes in the life of the Old Testament hero: Samson Pursophorus, Samson Marrying or Ramath-Lechi, Samson Hybristes, and Dagonalia. The themes of the last two works would correspond to Samson Agonistes, the tragic Samson and the overthrowing of the temple of Dagon.

In The Reason of Church Government Milton argues for the cause of reformed drama in a well-ordered state. He demonstrates, moreover, that the theatre need not be secular and unregenerate. That is to say, ideal drama is not only more "impressive, purer, or more uplifting," but it can show prophetic and sacred truths:

Or whether those Dramatick constitutions, wherein  
Sophocles and Euripides raigne shall be found more  
 doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation, the Scripture also  
 affords us a divine pastoral Drama in the Song of Salomon  
 consisting of two persons and a double Chorus, as Origen  
 rightly judges. And the Apocalyps of Saint John is the  
 majestick image of a high and stately Tragedy, shutting up  
 and intermingling her solemn Scenes and Acts with a  
 sevenfold Chorus of halleluja's and harping symphonies:  
 and this my opinion the grave authority of Paraeus  
 commenting this booke is sufficient to confirm  
 (CE III, 237-8).

By defining scriptural works in terms of dramatic genres, Milton consecrates his concept of a purified, regenerate theatre. Moreover, this passage anticipates his later description of tragedy in the preface to Samson Agonistes: "Paraeus, commenting on the Revelation, divides the whole Book as a Tragedy, into Acts distinguisht each by a Chorus of Heavenly Harpings and Song between."

Milton does reveal in his prose works of the early 1640s, however, certain reservations about the recent misuse of drama and theatre. For example, in the Apology for Smectymnuus he objects to the practice of amateur theatricals at Cambridge.

He denounces those divinity students

writhing and unboning their Clergie limmes to all the antick and dishonest Trinculo's, Buffons, and Bawds; prostituting the shame of that ministry which either they had, or were having, to the eyes of Courtiers and Court-Ladies, with their Groomes and Madamoiselles (CE III, 300-1).

Such a description had led Dr. Johnson to say of Milton's objections:

This is sufficiently peevish in a man who, when he mentions his exile from the college, relates with great luxuriance the compensation which the pleasures of the theater afford him. Plays were therefore only criminal when they were acted by academics.<sup>3</sup>

Milton's contemptuous dismissal of these theatricals was based on his attitude toward the new dramatic fashion initiated by Caroline courtiers and Court ladies, and encouraged by worldly prelates. He would object to divinity students prostituting their holy calling by participating in the buffoonery of amateur farce.

Discussing the study of literature in Of Education Milton contrasts ideal and corrupt art. One who studies great literature and learns the decorum of dramatic, as well as epic and lyric, poetry would soon discover "what despicable creatures our common Rimers and Playwriters be, and show them what religious, what glorious and magnificent use might be made of Poetry both in

divine and human things" (CE IV, 206). Milton rejects, therefore, those contemporary poets and dramatists who have corrupted their art by trivializing and profaning it.

Milton's attitude toward the theatre in the Restoration is inseparable from his feelings of disappointment and bitterness over both the national apostasy and the return of the Stuart monarchy. He had up to the last moment defiantly made a stand against the Restoration, writing and publishing his tract, The Ready and Easy Way (1660), in which he tried to show his own nation that it was tragically erring in returning to monarchical tyranny. The second edition of this tract came out only several days before the return of Charles II. In The Ready and Easy Way he argues that the English people will have betrayed the light of God among them if "after ten or twelve years of prosperous warr and contestation with tyrannie" they perversely backslide, surrendering their religious and political liberty, and "basely and besottedly. . . run their necks again into the yoke which they have broken" (CE VI, 123). He compares the English to the Israelites who returned to Egypt "and the worship of thir idol queen, because they then livd in more plentie and prosperitie," and he fears that the spiritual condition of his own nation is "not sound but rotten, both in religion and all civil prudence" (147). Attempting to prevent or "stay these ruinous proceedings" of the English people from delivering themselves to the "open and unbounded. . . insolence and rage" of their "common enemies," Milton foresees that "the deluge of this epidemic madness" will hasten "a misguided and abus'd multitude" to "a precipice of destruction" (149).

In 1660-61 there were two Restorations in England: the first restored the King and Parliament, and the dominance of the hereditary social class, and

the second restored the Church of England. The Good Old Cause lay defeated, and success had gone to the cause of the king, the bishops, and the Cavaliers.

The immediate consequences of the Restoration were grave for Milton as well as for the Puritan leaders. Because he had served the Commonwealth, publicly justified the deposition and execution of Charles I, and continued to fight the Stuart regime up to the end, his life was in real danger. In May or early June, 1660, his friends helped him escape immediate reprisals by taking him into hiding in Bartholomew Close, Smithfield, and he remained there until the passage of the Act of Oblivion several months later. In mid-June the Cavalier Parliament passed a resolution for the impounding and burning of his major political tracts, the First Defense and Eikonoklastes, by the state authorities. Milton himself was arrested and imprisoned, and he had to sue for pardon. In 1660 many of the regicides were imprisoned for life or executed on the gallows at Charing Cross. Shortly after, Sir Henry Vane, spokesman for religious liberty, was executed. The survivors of the Good Old Cause were divested of their powers by the Clarendon Code, and, as a result of the Acts of Uniformity, nearly two thousand members of the Puritan clergy were forced from their livings in the Established Church. Through an amnesty the blind poet had escaped the fate of some of his Puritan friends, but he was subjected to the misfortunes of sickness and poverty. Jonathan Richardson, in his life of Milton, describes the poet's condition during this period:

For besides what Affliction he must have from his Disappointment on the Change of Times, and from his Own Private Losses, and probably Cares for Subsistence, and for his Family; he was in Perpetual Terror being Assassinated, though he had Escap'd the Talons of the Law, he knew he had Made Himself Enemies in Abundance. He was So

Dejected he would lie Awake whole Nights. He then Kept  
Himself as Private as he could.<sup>4</sup>

Milton and the defeated Puritans found that they had been excluded from political life. They viewed, moreover, the alien society of Restoration London as blasphemous, cruel, and dissolute. Dominated by the Court, both through patronage and censorship, the Restoration stage expressed and enacted its values. However, as John Spencer Hill has remarked, "If the Restoration was, for Milton, a political death, it was at the same time a poetic rebirth."<sup>5</sup>

(II)

The prison and the theatre divide Samson Agonistes into two parts<sup>6</sup>: the prison in which the old Samson must die, and the theatre in which he is reborn. This symbolic two-part structure clarifies Milton's dialectical themes. As Samson moves from the confinement of the prison to the spaciousness of the theatre, from the inward and private to the outward and public, Milton explores the relationship between contemplation and action, renunciation and affirmation, faith and works, Old Man and New Man, and deus absconditus and deus revelatus. The two parts are linked by a discovery scene in which Samson, after refusing to accompany the messenger to the theatre, feels "rousing motions" (1382), and receiving the inspiration of grace, reverses himself and asserts that this day he will perform "some great act" (1389). The emphasis shifts there from the themes of the prison to those of the theatre.

The prison is like a grave, "close and damp" (7-8), and Samson in his blindness, living "a life half dead, a living death" (100), feels himself to be a "Sepulchre, a moving Grave" (102). The prison is not merely a literal, physical place; it is a symbol of his own condition. The Chorus of Danites tells him that he has become imprisoned in the Dungeon of himself (156).

Later, in his bitter exchange with Dalila, he becomes aware that compared to his emotional enslavement to her, "This Gaol I count the house of Liberty" (949). The prison is both a house of bondage and of freedom, and in his forced confinement Samson descends into his inner being to discover his spiritual liberty.

Throughout the play Samson and other characters keep returning to the idea of "inwardness," and the poet weaves a thematic pattern with this recurring motif. At first, the Chorus laments that "inward light. . . puts forth no visual beam" (162-3). Speaking to Manoa of his "inward grief" (330), Samson says that it is not confined to the wounds of the body, "But must secret passage find/ To th' inmost mind" (610-1). The Chorus, after Samson has rejected Dalila's temptation, speaks of his "inner passion" (1006). In all these examples, Samson's inner nature causes his intolerable suffering.

The inwardness in man, however, is also a deep source of spiritual regeneration. "Regeneration," says Milton in Christian Doctrine, "is that change operated by the Word and the Spirit, whereby the old man being destroyed, the inward man is regenerated by God after his own image, in all faculties of his mind" (CE XV, 367). The agony of Samson takes place inwardly but so does the process of regeneration when he begins to feel "within/ Some source of consolation from above" (663-4). "But though our outward man perish," Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, 4:16, "yet the inward man is renewed day by day."<sup>7</sup> Man's inward spirit can be regenerated, however parched and buried, by the plentiful fountain of God's cooperative grace. Manoa reminds his son that God "caus'd a fountain at thy prayer/ From the dry ground to spring" (581-2). The "rousing motions" that Samson experiences, and his subsequent prayer between the massy pillars of the Philistine theatre, exemplify the surging up of that divine life-restoring spring within him.

In progress from the inward prison to the outward theatre, Milton shows the relationship of faith to works. "It is evident," Milton writes, "that good works must be defined to be of faith" (CE XVII, 9). Samson has thrown off the Old Man and become "as it were a new creature." The regenerate Samson as a whole, integrated human being "is sanctified both in body and soul, for the service of God, and the performance of good works" (CE XV, 367).

Although Manoa believes that "God will restore his eyesight to his strength" (1504), his belief, with its emphasis on the "Outward ornament" rather than "inward gifts" (1025-6) is based on an inadequate understanding of God's grace operating on the inner man. Gaining in insight and better understanding God's care for him, Samson's restoration is inner and spiritual. We are told by the Semichorus that Samson, "though blind of sight" has his "inward eyes illuminated" (1689). The Chorus has "with new acquist of true experience" learned, that although "inward light, alas,/ Puts forth no visual beam" (162-3), the inward light of the spirit illuminates man's total being: "If thy whole body therefore be full of light, having no part dark, the whole shall be full of light" (Luke, 11:36).

### (III)

If Samson is to be delivered from his bondage, he must act in a way that is both voluntary and obedient to God. Because of his blindness, captivity, and spiritual paralysis, he feels incapable of, and prevented from, acting, and he suffers in the Philistine prison. He is forced by circumstances to be passive and contemplative rather than active. The epithet Agonistes means not only a champion, an advocate, and a wrestler, but also means an actor.<sup>8</sup> The verb "to act" means to do deeds or execute actions. An action is an expression of human consciousness that is voluntary and purposeful. Human actors, therefore, are responsible for their actions. Milton creates an evolving

pattern, the terms and images of which refer to Samson as an actor, both as a doer of deeds and a performer of entertaining feats. "Acting" also takes on theatrical overtones. Commanded to perform actions for an audience at the Philistine festivities, Samson puts on an act for his enemies by playing the part of strongman or wrestler who performs feats of physical prowess for their entertainment. However, because he is their blinded victim, Samson must also assume the humiliating role of fool or jester and perform actions that will "make them sport" (1328). He will arouse what Thomas Hobbes called "Sudden Glory. . . the passion which maketh those Grimaces called LAUGHTER" caused "by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves."<sup>9</sup>

Samson is tormented by the fact that although an Angel foretold that he would perform "some great act" (28) for God and His people, he is now incapable of such action. Condemning himself for his folly and pride, Samson feels guilt for not having fully shown "some proof/ Of acts indeed heroic" (526-7). He complains to the Chorus of Danites that the Hebrew leaders did not acknowledge "those great acts" (240-5) which God had done through him against the Philistines, nor did they accept his offered deliverance but "persisted deaf" (229). Manoa, fearing that Samson's guilt and self-loathing will cause him to seek death, warns him: "But act not in thy own affliction, Son" (503). Later, the Philistine warrior, Harapha, refers skeptically to Samson's reputation for his "valiant acts" (1101) that demonstrated "prodigious might and feats perform'd" (1083). In response to Harapha's accusations that he is "A Murderer, a Revolter, and a Robber" (1180), Samson argues that God gave him both physical strength and a mission to free his nation: "I was to do my part from Heav'n assign'd,/ And had perform'd it if my known offense/ Had not disabl'd me" (1217-9). When the Officer orders Samson to perform for the

Philistines in the theatre of Dagon, Samson rejects these "absurd commands" (1337), saying that he is not willing to be "thir fool or jester" (1337) by making a spectacle of himself in the "midst of sorrow and heart grief/ To show them feats, and play before thir god" (1340). Upon resolving to perform before the Philistines, Samson tells the Chorus that he will carry out "some great act" (1389). Although action had brought about Samson's downfall, action also provides the means of his personal redemption. When Manoa returns to the prison-house with news of ransom for his son, Samson has "new parted hence/ To come and play before them at thir Feast" (1448-9).

Narrating the catastrophic events that have taken place in "a spacious Theater" (1605), the Messenger describes "the sight of this so horrid spectacle" (1543). Before the completion of Samson's ultimate physical act, he had "still perform'd/ All with incredible, stupendious force" (1626-7). The Messenger tells Manoa and the Chorus Samson's final words to the audience of Philistine Lords. He has "perform'd" (1641) as he had been commanded, he says, and now, of his own accord, he will for an encore display even greater strength "as with amaze shall strike all who behold" (1640-5).

Samson's greatest "act," however, even greater than the destruction of the Philistines, is, paradoxically, a contemplative one-- the act of contrition as he prays in the theatre so that he can be obedient to the will of God. This is an act of voluntary inward prayer serving to express his faith in God and his repentance for his sins, reconciling him to God. The surrender of his will to God leads to Samson's "passion," his passively being acted upon by God, Who is pure act in His providential drama.

Milton in his prose tracts argued the principle of segregation of the temporal and spiritual, "the outward carnality of the Law" and the law of the spirit (CE III, 199). His treatment of Samson's life in his play is based on

a clear separation of the spiritual from temporal authorities.<sup>10</sup> Samson resolves to perform at the Philistine theatre, for example, not because he was commanded to do so by the Philistine Officer but because he is obedient to the law of the spirit. Milton's idea of theatre implies this segregation of the temporal and spiritual: on the one hand, the secular theatre of the Philistines that re-opened in London in 1660, and on the other, the sacred theatre of God that has never closed. Samson's heroic act takes place spatially and temporally in the Philistine theatre, but he performs for God, not the Philistines, in the vaster, spiritual theatre.

These two theatres are somewhat analogous to the juridical, mystical fiction of the "King's two bodies," as explicated by Ernst H. Kantorowicz;<sup>11</sup> for these concepts distinguish between the body mortal and the body immortal, the temporal and natural body and the eternal and supernatural body. The secular or temporal theatre, like the King's natural body, is subject to disease and death, whereas the sacred theatre of God transcends the corruption and defects of the temporal theatre.

We never see the "spacious Theater" of the Philistines, but its presence is felt outside of the prison and in Samson's mind. Because it is unseen, it seems all the more threatening, alien, and evil: it is more overwhelming because it looms in the regions of the reader's mind.<sup>12</sup> It is a symbol of all the historical theatres of fallen mankind.

In his Relation of a Journey George Sandys provides a kind of historicity for this theatre when he reports a visit in the Middle East (1615) where he saw "the ruins of huge arches sunk in the earth, and other foundations of a stately building. . . The Jews do fable this place to have bin the theatre of Samson, pulled down on the heads of the Philistines."<sup>13</sup> Sir Christopher Wren, designer of theatre plans as well as of St. Pauls Cathedral, assumes the

literal existence of this theatre and speculates on its architectural structure:

I conceive it was an oval amphitheatre, the scene in the middle, where a vast roof of cedar beams, resting round on the walls, centred all upon one short architrave, that united two cedar pillars in the middle. Now if Samson, by his miraculous strength, pressing upon these pillars, moved them from their bases the whole roof must of necessity fall.<sup>14</sup>

However, because it is an unseen, imagined theatre, Milton's reader is free to conceptualize and visualize it for himself. The reference to "the throng/ On banks and scaffolds" (1609-10) evokes images of a Roman, as well as an Elizabethan, theatre. It could be conceived of as a Roman theatre where the gladiator, like Samson, displayed his courage and strength in combat and died for the diversion of a sensation-hungry audience, or where the Christian martyr died for his God. It could be visualized as a variety of London theatres: an aristocratic masque theatre of Inigo Jones, or a popular theatre like the open-air Red Bull noted for wrestling and mummung; or, finally, the courtly and private theatre, the Cockpit in Whitehall and the Theatre Royal, which Milton would identify with political tyranny, moral license, and cultural decadence.<sup>15</sup>

In his History of Britain (1670), Milton makes reference to the "hated servitude" of the British under Claudius's Roman rule, and the ominous signs of colonial rebellion when "in the Theater hideous howlings" (X, 65) could be heard. Turning to his own time, he describes "the licentious remissness" of the Caroline "Sundays Theater" (V, 81), and Charles I "who in public at the

theater would wantonly embrace and kiss women, and handle virgins' and matrons' breasts, not to mention the rest" (VII, 237).

The "spacious Theater" of the Philistines, then, is the secular theatre, corrupt and unredeemed, symbol of man's pride, cruelty, and vanity. Samson's destruction of that symbolic theatre in the drama enabled the playwright not only to reject but also to affirm as Samson himself had done. His play is not intended for the Philistine theatre of Restoration England but for a reformed and purified theatre, written for regenerate man and the glory of God.

#### (IV)

The ancient topos of theatrum mundi or the world as stage was a metaphor that developed from classical antiquity through the Middle Ages, and it had significant philosophical and imaginative impact on the writers of the Renaissance. Ernst Robert Curtius has sketched the development of the metaphor from Plato and St. Paul to John of Salisbury, whose Polycraticus (1159) he views as a major source for many Renaissance writers.<sup>16</sup> Thomas B. Stroup more fully surveys this theatrical metaphor and shows how it assumed particular thematic importance in Elizabethan drama. He says

It came down from the laughing philosopher and the classical satirists on one side and the Platonists and Church Fathers on the other to the Renaissance humanists and English schoolmasters. Its tone changed from one writer to another, and it took on different coloring and associations, but the basic concept remained: the world is a stage, all men are actors upon this stage, and God (or the gods, including Fortune) serves as author, director, and spectator, judging the performance of the actors and taking pleasure in the production.<sup>17</sup>

The formulation of what Raleigh called "this stage-play world" that emphasizes God as spectator and man as actor is one that has important bearing on Milton's theocentric drama.

This theatrical metaphor is given special religious importance in the theocentric drama of the Middle Ages. The Biblical hero of the mystery play enacts the drama of trial and salvation in the sacred theatre; and Mankynde, a didactic figure of the morality play, is exposed to temptation and morally tested before God, who brings him to salvation.<sup>18</sup> As a religious drama, Samson Agonistes draws from its medieval predecessors, its view of the world as a cosmic stage where its protagonist undergoes the trial necessary for his salvation.

The theatre of the world as an emblem of the life of man was a metaphor widespread in the Renaissance. Playwrights frequently expressed the theatrum mundi metaphor, particularly appropriate on the stage, implicitly bestowing on their dramatic art the status of reality. The motto of the Globe Theatre, "Totus mundus agit historionem," used earlier by John of Salisbury, gave significant emphasis to the world as stage, as did Jaques' famous Seven Ages of Man speech in As You Like It. Ben Jonson alludes to the metaphor explicitly in The New Inn (1629) when the Host says that he imagines "all the world's a play" (I,1).

Donne in his sermons makes much use of the metaphor. At times he describes man as the spectator: "Aquinas calls this theater, where we sit and see God, the whole world. . . the world is the theater that represents God, and everywhere every man may, nay, must see him."<sup>19</sup> Other times man is the actor: "Spectaculum sumus, says the Apostle; We are made a spectacle to man and angels. The word is there Theatrum, and so S. Hierom reads it: And therefore let us be careful to play these parts well, which the Angels desire

to see well acted."<sup>20</sup> Francis Bacon also employs the metaphor in Advancement to Learning, II: "But men must know, that in this theatre of man's life it is reserved only for God and Angels to be lookers on."<sup>21</sup> Burton plays with it throughout "Democritus to the Reader" in his Anatomy of Melancholy, describing himself as "A mere spectator of other men's fortunes and adventures" who watches "how they play their parts, which me thinks be diversely presented unto me, as from a common theatre or scene." Later Democritus says that "men like stage-players act a variety of parts."<sup>22</sup>

Robert Herrick bestows his actor and drama with Christian significance that recalls the medieval mystery plays. In "Good Friday: Rex Tragicus, or Christ Going to the Cross," he writes:

The Crosse shall be Thy Stage; and Thou shalt there  
 The spacious field have for Thy Theater.  
 Thou art that Roscius, and that markt-out man,  
 That must this day act the Tragedian,  
 To wonder and affrightment.<sup>23</sup>

Milton himself made explicit use of the theatrum mundi metaphor in several of his works.<sup>24</sup> The earliest example can be found in "The Passion" in which he shows the relationship between that poem and his Ode, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," noting that he had set the dramatic events of the Ode upon a cosmic stage:

Erewhile of Music and Ethereal mirth,  
 Wherewith the stage of Air and Earth did ring,  
 And joyous news of heav'nly Infant's birth,  
 My muse with the Angels did divide to sing (1-4).

Later, in Colasterion he writes that although "the life of man is likn'd to a Scene," he had rather his own actions, "entrances and exits" in the drama of

his life "might mixe with such persons only, whose worth erects them and their actions to a grave and tragic deoprtment, and not have to doe with Clowns and Vices" (IV, 271). In Eikonoklastes he writes of Charles I's departure from the world-stage: "He who had traml'd over us so stately and so tragically should leave the world at last so ridiculously in his exit" (V, 87). In his Familiar Letters he writes to Richard Jones: "You have rightly marked out for yourself the path of virtue in that theater of the world on which you have entered" (XII, 113).

Seventeenth century British history was seen by contemporaries as part of a providential drama, in which Royalists and Parliamentarians were grim players taking the parts of antagonists in the tragic conflict of the Civil War. This dramatic, tragic view of events is expressed in a letter written by the Parliamentary general, Sir William Waller, to his Royalist friend Sir Ralph Hopton, who was later wounded and defeated by Waller's own troops at the battle of Lansdown:

The great God who is the searcher of my heart knows with what reluctance and with what perfect hatred I look upon a war without an enemy. The God of Peace in his good time send us peace, and in the meantime fit us to receive it. We are both on the stage, and we must act the parts that are assigned to us in this tragedy.<sup>25</sup>

That the theatres were forced to close was, paradoxically, a dramatic event in the tragedy of the Puritan Revolution. The edict of a Puritan Parliament, phrased in terms that C. V. Wedgwood remarks, "would not have disgraced a tragedy," announced the reasons for closing the theatres in 1642:

To appease and avert the wrath of God. . . and whereas publicke Sports does not well agree with Publicke

Calamities, nor publicke Stage playes with the Seasons of Humiliation. . . it is therefore thought fit and ordained by the Lords and Commons Assembled, that while these sad Causes and set times of Humiliation does continue publicke Stage playes shall cease and bee forborne.<sup>26</sup>

The Royalists interpreted this Ordinance both as an attempt to prevent any courtly influence on society and as an example of the destructiveness of militant Puritanism on learning, art, and civilization. "We perceive at last, why Plays went down," wrote Samuel Butler, "Mercurius Menippeus" in the Memoirs of 1649-50:

to wit, that Murthers might be acted in earnest. Stages must submit to Scaffolds, and personaged Tragedies to real Ones. Mock-shews of Cruelty are but poor Feasts. Leeches will suck no pictures. They hate all Images and Fables, but must murther the King in sincerity and truth. No need of heightening Revels; these Herods can behead without the allurements of a Dance. These Tragedians have out-vied Inventions, and acted what Monsters in their most monstrous wishes could hardly reach.<sup>27</sup>

The "Loyal Satyrst" here dwells on the irony of real tragedy replacing the civilized arts of theatre and drama. Marvell's theatre metaphor in describing the King's noble performance at his own execution also calls attention to history as a tragic drama:

That thence the Royal Actor born  
The Tragick Scaffold might adorn:  
While round the armed Bands  
Did clap their bloody hands.<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, Mercurius Menippeus in his royalist elegy casts Charles I in a Christ-like role:

And who cannot continue Loyal to such a King that dies for  
the Sins and Safety of his people? Who would refuse to be  
his Subjects, who is their Martyr? He acted a Christian  
better than most Divines can describe one; He shewed  
Graces the Schoolmen scarce even heard of. We might  
edifie more from the Scaffold in one Hour, than for the  
pulpit in an age.<sup>29</sup>

The King is an actor and his death a passion. His Christian act of sacrifice is performed in a liturgical drama and mystery play of God's theatre. It is far more gracious and edifying, says the writer, than the Puritan's preaching in the pulpit. Doctrinal sermons are made up of words without acts; his act, his sacrificial death, is a consecrative ritual. Then, with metaphysical wit, Butler compares Charles I to the Old Testament hero:

Our Samson, though shaved both Hair and Head away, killed  
more Philistins at his Death, than all his life time.<sup>30</sup>

It is a tragic irony of the English Revolution that the Biblical Samson should be seen as the type for both Charles I and Milton's protagonist.

Both the political and personal elements in Milton's play are an inevitable result of viewing history as drama on the cosmic stage. His treatment of the political themes in Samson Agonistes, it has been argued by F. Michael Krouse, was an integral part of the Samson tradition in that many Christian commentators in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had emphasized the political as well as religious and moral failure of the Israelites of Samson's time, explaining that it was by their vices that they were brought to slavery.<sup>31</sup> Milton showed that a corrupt nation fails to maintain the freedom

that has been won for it, and through its vices delivers itself into the hands of godless tyrants.

And what more oft in Nations grown corrupt,  
 And by thir vices brought to servitude,  
 Than to love Bondage more than Liberty,  
 Bondage with ease than strenuous liberty (268-71).

The failure of the Israelites is analogous, therefore, to the return of the English through their own folly and spiritual blindness into slavery, as Milton had shown in The Ready and Easy Way. Moreover, one passage in which the Chorus questions God's justice suggests the brutal trials and punishments of heroic men like Sir Henry Vane by the Restoration government, "unjust tribunals, under change of times" (695). The phrase, "Thir carcasses/ To dogs and fowls a prey" (693-4), recalls the terrible indignities to which the exhumed bodies of Cromwell, Ireton, and Bradshaw were subjected. Although Milton himself had escaped such barbaric treatment, he was afflicted by the misfortunes of "poverty/ With sickness and disease. . . Painful diseases and deform'd" (696-8), blind, tormented by physical sickness and mental suffering.

There may also be contemporary or even personal allusions in the recurring themes of ridicule and folly in Samson Agonistes.<sup>32</sup> Samson's subjection to Philistine ridicule is not unlike Milton's own experience in the early years of the Restoration. Royalist pamphleteers mercilessly attacked Milton. In the anonymous pamphlet, The Character of the Rump (March 1660), he is satirized as a "goose-quill champion." The pamphleteer gleefully prophesies that Milton will be "condemned to travel to Tyburn in a cart." That same month, William Collins in The Spirit of the Phanatiques Dissected contemptuously calls Milton a "fool": "Whether such a fool as the author not be sent to Bridewell. . ." Collins pairs Milton and Harrington as fools, asking "Whether

any ingenious person can choose but laugh at these fools' assertions and pretence of maintaining such a ridiculous thing as a free state." In a series of books and pamphlets that appeared in 1660 Milton was mocked and condemned to royal punishment. Roger L'Estrange, author of No Blind Guides, was particularly insistent in his attacks on Milton. In pamphlets by other Royalists Milton was branded as a knave, told that his blindness was God's punishment, and urged to commit suicide.<sup>33</sup> These pamphleteers were spokesmen for the victorious Royalists of the Restoration, and their excoriation of Milton without doubt afflicted and agonized the blind champion of the defeated Republican cause. One can better understand the emotional intensity with which the poet portrayed his protagonist's failure, doubt, and sense of abandonment, then his need for vengeance, and finally his cathartic act.

## (V)

Milton's treatment of the theme of folly includes the lowest and highest sense of the word, that is folly as imprudence and shortsightedness, and folly as absolute faith and humility. At first Samson calls himself a fool because he had succumbed to Dalila and betrayed the holy secret of his strength. He had been made a fool by Dalila and his Philistine captors. Moreover, he had acted the fool in that he lacked both prudence and foresight. As a result of his folly, he is blinded and imprisoned "Within doors or without, still as a fool,/ In power of others, never in my own" (76-7). Throughout much of the play Samson condemns himself for his folly. When he had physical sight and strength he was "like a foolish Pilot" who has "shipwreck't" his vessel "trusted to him from above" (198-9). Later, however, when Samson gains self-knowledge and humility through his trials and suffering, he becomes a fool to the world, a holy fool who surrenders his pride and personal will to God.<sup>34</sup> Prudence is elevated to wisdom, and foresight to prophetic vision.

An analysis of Milton's complex treatment of the theme of folly must consider the concept that each mortal man plays the fool in the theatrum mundi. One major formulation of the theatrum mundi topos interprets the drama of human life as a comedy and man as a comic fool. Saint Augustine in a spirit of contemptus mundi writes: "Here on earth it is as if children should say to their parents: Come! For naught but a comedy of the race of man is all this life, which leads from temptation to temptation."<sup>35</sup> The persona Folly, in Erasmus' Praise of Folly, remarks: "And what is all this life but a kind of comedy, wherein men walk up and down in another's disguises and act their respective parts, til the property-man brings them back to the attiring house."<sup>36</sup> Raleigh's poem, "What is Our Life," elaborates on the theatrical imagery of the human comedy, but he dwells more fully on the melancholy pathos of man's mortality:

What is our life? a play of passion,  
 Our mirth the musicke of division.  
 Our mothers wombes the tyring houses be,  
 Where we are drest for this short Comedy,  
 Heaven the Judicious sharpe spectator is,  
 That sits and markes still who doth act amisse,  
 Our graves that hide us from the searching Sun,  
 Are like drawne curtaynes when the play is done,  
 Thus march we playing to our latest rest,  
 Onely we dye in earnest, that's no jest.<sup>37</sup>

In Shakespeare's tragedy King Lear tells Gloucester: "When we are born, we cry that we are come/ To this great stage of fools" (IV,6). Democritus, in Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy, alluding to John of Salisbury and the Globe

motto, says: "For now, as Sarisburiensis said in his time, Totus mundus histrionem agit, the whole world plays the fool; we have a new theatre, a new scene, a new Comedy of Errors, a new company of personate actors."<sup>38</sup> Sir Thomas Browne observes in his Religio Medici: "The world to mee is but a dreame, or mock show, and wee therein but Pantalones and Antickes to my severer contemplations."<sup>39</sup>

In addition to the tradition of the human comedy, Milton's interpretation of folly was derived from these sources: classical myth and drama, the Old Testament, especially Proverbs, and the Gospels and Epistles.

The resemblance between Samson and the Hercules of classical myth has been noted by many commentators throughout the centuries. Most early writers had elaborated on the parallels between these two heroes.<sup>40</sup> Both heroes have divinity attending their births, and both were prodigiously strong. The careers of Samson and "Herculeaeque manus," as Milton calls him in Elegy VII, involve the performance of incredible labors, including the slaying of lions. Both were enthralled and brought low by women, and both died voluntarily. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, writers of biblical exegesis and poetry paired the two heroes. Spenser in The Faerie Queene (V.8, 2) couples them, and Milton in Paradise Lost compares the fallen Adam rising from his lovemaking with Eve to "the Danite strong/ Herculean Samson from the Harlot-lap/ Of Philistean Dalilah" (9. 1059-61).

The traditional range of Hercules' attributes was complex enough to provide varied interpretations and emphases. On one hand, Hercules symbolized fortitude, prudence, and wisdom; on the other, Hercules was presented as a popular comic character. Milton's treatment of Samson's folly includes the second tradition, that of the comic Hercules, whose origins are found in ancient festive comedy.<sup>41</sup>

This comic Hercules appeared in satyr plays as a gross glutton, bully, and libertine. The mask of Hercules in Old and Middle Comedy featured goggling eyes and an enormous mouth. Euripides presented the lion-hearted Hercules in the Alcestis as a clownish strong man known for his sensual vices of gluttony and lechery. In Hellenistic New Comedy Hercules was presented as a braggart soldier, anticipating the stock type which became very popular in Roman farce and the commedia dell'arte. It is the comic Hercules, Hercules the buffoon and object of ridicule, to whom Milton alludes in his prose tract Colasterion:

Yet Hercules had the labour once impos'd upon him to carry dung out of the Augean stable. At any hand I would be ridd of him; for I had rather, since the life of man is likn'd to a Scene, that all my entrances and exits might mixe with such persons only, whose worth erects them and their actions to a grave and tragic deportment, and not to have to doe with Clowns and Vices (CE IV, 271).

Samson's relationship to Dalila in Samson Agonistes calls to mind Hercules' folly. The account of Samson surrendering to Dalila's temptation resembles Hercules' carnal subservience to Omphale. Classical writers had interpreted the story of Hercules and Omphale as an allegory of how easily a strong man is made a fool by a lustful and ambitious woman. Sir Philip Sidney, for example, writes: "Hercules, painted with his great beard and furious countenance, in womans attire, spinning at Omphales commaundment. . . breedeth both delight and laughter."<sup>42</sup> Just as Hercules relinquishes his club, symbol of prudence and wisdom, and is given the womanly distaff, so Samson loses his "precious fleece" to his "deceitful Concubine." Cutting his hair, "hallow'd pledge" of all his strength, Dalila then turns Samson out,

"ridiculous, despoil'd,/ Shav'n, and disarm'd" (535-40) among his Philistine enemies.

When Samson asks the Chorus in anguish, "Tell me, Friends,/ Am I not sung and proverb'd for a Fool/ In every street?" (202-4), his phrasing echoes two Old Testament sources, Job and Psalm 49. Job expresses the shame he feels before the people: "And now am I their song, yea, I am their byword" (Job 30:9), and the Psalmist in despair over his "foolishness" says that he has become a "proverb" to his enemies. Samson's phrase, "proverb'd for a Fool," recalls, moreover, the Proverbs with its opposition of wisdom and folly. Milton follows that opposition in his Christian Doctrine. He defines Wisdom as "that whereby we earnestly search after the will of God, learn it with all diligence, and govern all our actions according to its rule" (CE XVII, 27). Folly, on the other hand, consists "first and chiefly, in an ignorance of the will of God" (XVII, 31). A characteristic of folly, he says, is "a false conceit of wisdom" (XVII, 33), and he supports this interpretation by citing Biblical sources, giving particular emphasis to Proverbs. Samson, like the Fool in Proverbs, had lacked understanding and wisdom when he disobeyed the divine will. In his suffering, however, Samson comes to realize that he deserved

Contempt, and scorn of all, to be excluded

All friendship, and avoided as a blab,

The mark of fool set on his front (493-6).

Not keeping God's counsel he had "Presumptuously. . . publish'd" his "holy secret" (496-8), violating "the sacred trust of silence." The Proverbs tells us that "the heart of fools proclaimeth foolishness" (12:23). Samson's presumption is the "rod of pride" which is "in the mouth of the foolish" (14:3), and in his own mind he deserves for his "shameful garrulity" the contemptible

name of "blab." He describes his insolent self-glorification prior to his fall, saying he had been "swoll'n with pride" (532). He was neither truly heroic nor humble, since "the way of a fool is right in his own eyes" (12:15). Because of his pride, passion, and sensuality, he had become an idolator when he violated his sacred covenant with God by revealing to deceitful Dalila the secret of his strength: "He goeth after her straightaway, as an ox to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correcting stocks" (7:22). As a result of his foolishness he is degraded to a beast of burden that grinds "Among the Slaves and Asses" (1142-3). In the Philistine prison-house he undergoes correction through humiliation. He was brought low by his presumption, and his story illustrates the well-known proverb, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (16:18).

The Proverbs, however, also tells us that the Lord loveth those he correcteth (3:12). Corrected for his folly by his own guilt and humiliation as well as by Philistine servitude, Samson agonizes over the arrogance that had brought about his fall. He tells Dalila: "I to myself was false ere thou to me;/ Such pardon therefore as I give my folly" (824-5). After he violently rejects her temptation to be "Love's prisoner" (808), he cries out to the Chorus:

So let her go, God sent her to debase me,

And aggravate my folly who committed

To such a viper his most sacred trust (998-1000).

At this point in the drama Samson in his sorrow and disgrace does not fully comprehend the meaning of his words. That is, he interprets God's actions as harshly punitive, a holy cruelty scourging him deservedly for his folly. Only later, when he at last agrees to perform at the public thanksgiving that will celebrate his own captivity, does Samson deliberately and humbly assume the

role of God's Fool. Learning that his own will can achieve nothing without obedience to the divine will, he freely chooses to be a victim of indignity and humiliation at the idolatrous festivities. He will pay the ransom for the Hebrews and himself, and liberated, die for God.

It is in his "trust in the living God" (1140) as he had told Harapha, that his sacred folly, his faith, resides. Samson's triumph of faith as told in Judges enabled patristic and other commentators to establish Samson as hero and saint. This traditional Christian view of Samson as a hero of faith is the result primarily of the reference to him in the Epistle to the Hebrews, 11:32. With Gideon and Jephtha, Samson is transformed from a military hero to an elect saint: "Samson. . . through faith. . . out of weakness [was] made strong." This phrase succinctly describes Milton's characterizational development of Samson from weakness to spiritual strength.

Saint Paul says in Corinthians (3:18): "Let no man deceive himself, if any among you seemeth wise in the world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise." Samson, who was "right in his own eyes" (Proverbs 12:15), acted as if he were self-sufficient, "like a petty God" (529), and is blinded by his overweening pride. However, at last he gains the insight to see in the darkness of his hopeless suffering that he had been a fool, "wise in the world." Samson's foolishness is transfigured by God's grace and his own growing self-knowledge and humility. Renouncing the worldly wisdom of Manoa, Dalila, and Harapha, he becomes more and more a fool to the world. He is despised by the Philistines who think him weak and a fool. But his folly becomes a divine folly, in that, like Christ, he is a fool for God's sake. Milton wrote earlier in his Reason of Church Government of the great Christian paradoxes:

Yet God when he meant to subdue the world and hell at  
once, part of that to salvation, and this wholly to

perdition, made no other weapons, or auxiliaries than those whether to save, or destroy. It had bin a small maistry for him, to have drawn out his Legions into array, and flankt to them with his thunder; therefore he sent Foolishnes to confute Wisdom, Weaknes to bind Strength, Despisednes to vanquish Pride (CE III, 243).

Milton and his contemporaries saw in Samson an Old Testament prefiguration of Christ. In "Sunday" George Herbert treats Samson prefiguratively:

The rest of our creation

Our great Redeemer did remove

With the same shake which at His Passion

Did th'earth and all things with it move

As Samson bore the doores away,

Christ's hands, though nail'd, wrought our salvation,

And did unhinge that day.<sup>43</sup>

Samson's Passion and destruction of the temple of Dagon prefigure Christ's fulfillment of his prophecy at the Crucifixion. The redemptive suffering of Milton's Samson is like the "foolishness of the cross." The men who passed Christ on the cross reviled him, "wagging their heads, and saying, 'Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself.'" But when Jesus "yielded up the ghost. . . the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom" (Matthew, 27:40-51).

#### (VI)

When the Philistine Officer orders the blind Samson to perform at the theatre, he refuses, telling him that Hebrew Law forbids him to participate in "thir Religious Rites" (1319-20). Furthermore, he asks why the Philistines

have chosen him "To make them sport with blind activity" (1327). Is it, he asks, because they wish to "make a game" of his calamities? (1327).

Have they not sword-players, and ev'ry sort  
Of Gymnic Artists, Wrestlers, Riders, Runners  
Jugglers and Dancers, Antics, Mummers, Mimics? (1323-5).

Spiritually corrupt and morally bankrupt, the Philistines on "thir Holy-days" are "Impetuous, insolent, unquenchable" (1421-2). Their celebrations resemble the pastimes and games instituted in Charles I's Declaration of Sports (1633), and edict sanctioned, Milton said in Of Reformation, "by Bishops and pretended Fathers of the Church" (III, 53). These English prelates Milton had attacked in the same pamphlet with two biblical analogies: "Have they not been as the Canaanites, and Philistins to this kingdom?" (III, 45). Samson is commanded to play the fool for the entertainment and gratification of his enemies, "the well-feasted Priest" (1419) and the Philistine lords and ladies.

Three times he tells the Officer, "I will not come." He cannot "condescend to such absurd commands" (1337), for the thought of exercising and playing before them and their idol is agonizing to his sense of self-esteem. He will not, he says, be "thir fool or jester" (1338-40). Suddenly, however, he tells the Chorus that he will go along with the Philistine. He begins "to feel/ Some rousing motions" (1381-2) within him that enable him to perceive that he must be the fool or jester. He begins to understand that he must obey these "absurd commands" because they are the will of God. He speaks now with a kind of solemn lightheartedness when he agrees finally to perform as a gymnastic artist and fool for the Philistines: "Because they shall not trail me through their streets/ Like a wild Beast, I am content to go" (1402-3). Keeping his final decision to himself, he asks ironically, "And for a life who will not change his purpose?" (1406). Samson will go to the Philistine

theatre, because, as Arnold Stein has observed, "He has been the Athlete of God and failed. Now he is the Fool of God."<sup>44</sup>

Purged of his pride and folly, Samson humbles himself by surrendering to the divine will; grace now operates in him as "some rousing motions." He will play the fool for God, and will make a spectacle of himself, as the object of Philistine merrymaking and mockery.<sup>45</sup>

Milton shows how Samson's "folly" is a sign of his mysterious dedication to God's will; he will take part in the celebration of his own ruin. He obeys those rousing motions that urge him on to a readiness to participate in a sacrificial ritual. In her study of The Fool Enid Welsford says that the "clown who accompanies our familiar May games, morris dances, mummers' plays and carnival ceremonials. . . bears unmistakable traces of being the descendant of an ancient scapegoat or sacrificial victim."<sup>46</sup> Throughout the play Milton emphasizes the sacrificial aspects of the Philistine celebration:

The Feast and noon grew high and Sacrifice  
Had fill'd thir hearts with mirth, high cheer, and wine,  
When to thir sports they turn'd (1612-4).

Later, the Semichorus, upon hearing of Samson's final act, describes the Philistines:

While thir hearts were jocund and sublime,  
Drunk with Idolatry, drunk with Wine,  
And fat regorg'd of Bulls and Goats,  
Chanting thir Idol (1669-72).

In the midst of this idolatry, the ultimate sacrifice is offered by the idol-breaking Samson. His sacrifice, however, is not to the idol of Dagon, "Sea Monster, upward Man/ And downward Fish" (Paradise Lost, Book 1, 462-3), but to the living God. In this carnival ceremonial his sacrifice is a sacramental

offering of his own life. Samson has become the sacred fool who has surrendered his egocentric will, and is possessed by the wisdom of folly.

God is no longer hidden from Samson but has been revealed to him. Samson is a New Man, free from the prison of selfhood, and capable of playing, or performing a spectacle in the theatre. He is free, and his playing is a manifestation of his spiritual freedom, for play involves both freedom of will and free movement or action. He plays, like David before the Lord (II Samuel 6:21), and his play reflects Samson as homo ludens. After performing feats of strength, he plays with words, stressing his freedom:

"Hitherto, Lords, what your commands impos'd  
I have perform'd, as reason was, obeying,  
Not without wonder or delight beheld.  
Now of my own accord such other trial  
I mean to show you of my strength, yet greater  
As with amaze shall strike all who behold" (1640-5).

Samson is God's player, and his sacred play resembles Plato's religious conception of man as "God's plaything":

Life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win in the contest.<sup>47</sup>

This platonic identification of play and holiness corresponds to Milton's treatment of Samson's "playing" in the theatre. Samson will play out his life, making himself a sacrifice, and thereby propitiate his God. As Johan Huizinga writes in his Homo Ludens:

The agon in Greek life, or the contest anywhere else in the world, bears all the formal characteristics of play,

and as to its function belongs almost wholly to the sphere of the festival, which is the play-sphere. It is quite impossible to separate the contest as a cultural function from the complex 'play-festival-rite.'<sup>48</sup>

Although Samson the agonistes plays for an idolatrous festival in a temporal theatre, his play, festival, and rite take place in a sacred theatre for a redeeming God.

A man of faith, Martin Buber says, is one who has transcended himself into the realm of God. Such a man "does not possess the power of God; rather the power possesses him. . . when he has given himself to it and is given it."<sup>49</sup> Samson has become that possessed man of faith. Leaning "With both his arms on those two massy Pillars" he inclines his head, "And eyes fast fixt he stood, as one who prayed" (1632-7). It is here in this moment of prayer that Samson experiences the ultimate spiritual freedom as both his faith and strength are restored. God-intoxicated, Samson destroys the secular theatre. His divine possession recalls Robert Burton's commentary on "sanctum insaniam": "I may not deny but there is some folly approved, a divine fury, a holy madness, even a spiritual drunkenness in the saints of God themselves."<sup>50</sup>

Milton's religious drama presents the temptations, trials, and salvation of a man in God's sacred theatre. Like its medieval predecessors, the mystery and morality plays, Samson Agonistes is a potential rather than actual tragedy. In the final scene of redemption and restoration, Milton completes a structural pattern that is essentially Christian. His play is a divine comedy in which a man's tragic fall provides the happy occasion for God's saving grace.

Although the Danites' emblem of the phoenix, "that self-begott'n bird" that "From out of her ashy womb. . . revives" (1699-1704) points explicitly toward their concept of fame (1706), the Christian poet evokes through

association the spiritual pattern of death and rebirth. Northrop Frye, in his discussion of the quest-myth, argues that

the ritual pattern behind the catharsis of comedy is the resurrection that follows the death, the epiphany or manifestation of the risen hero. . . Christianity, too, sees tragedy as an episode in the divine comedy, the larger scheme of redemption and resurrection. The sense of tragedy as a prelude to comedy seems almost inseparable from anything explicitly Christian.<sup>51</sup>

Samson Agonistes is not explicitly Christian; it is an Old Testament play about a Hebrew hero. The Christian poet, however, develops the ritual pattern of Samson's death and rebirth, presenting him as a prototype of the rising Christ. That Milton alludes to the phoenix in the final moments and leads the reader, as well as Chorus, to "calm of mind, all passion spent" demonstrates the principle of a double catharsis, that of tragic purgation and of Christian rejoicing.

In 1671, the year of the publication of Samson Agonistes, the temporal and secular theatre of man produced such comedies as Dryden's Marriage A-la-Mode, Shadwell's The Humorists, Wycherly's Love in a Wood, and George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham's The Rehearsal. In the sacred theatre of God, however, Milton's Samson Agonistes is the greatest of all Restoration comedies.

## NOTES

1. The Works of John Milton, ed. Frank Allen Patterson and others (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931-38), 3:240. Cited throughout in my text as CE.
2. Citations from Milton's poetry in my text are to Complete Poems and Major Poetry ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1957).
3. Lives of the English Poets (New York: E.P. Dutton, Everyman's Library, 1950), 1:58.
4. "Explanatory Notes and Remarks on Milton's Paradise Lost, with the Life of the Author" (1734), in The Early Lives of Milton, ed. Helen Darbishire (London: Constable, 1938), pp. 275-6.
5. John Milton, Poet, Priest and Prophet: A Study of Divine Vocation in Milton's Poetry and Prose (Totawa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), p. 201.
6. This description of the play's two-part structure with a linking discovery scene is indebted to Martin Mueller, "Pathos and Katharsis in Samson Agonistes," reprinted in Critical Essays in Milton from ELH (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969), p. 263.
7. All references to the Bible are to the Authorized Version.
8. F. Michael Krouse, Milton's Samson and the Christian Tradition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), p. 109.
9. Leviathan (New York: E.P. Dutton, Everyman's Library, 1962), I,6, p. 27.
10. See Northrop Frye, Five Essays on Milton's Epics (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 114.
11. The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 7.
12. Roy Daniells in Milton, Mannerism and Baroque (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964) writes that "Milton's Baroque structures and compositions in chiaroscuro are vaster, more overwhelming, more sumptuous than anything the dealers in stone or paint or plaster could produce, and they subsist, immune from decay, in the regions of the mind." p. 19.
13. Quoted in Samson Agonistes, Sonnets, & c., eds. John Broadbent and Robert Hodge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 214ft.
14. Quoted in John Milton's Samson Agonistes: The Poem and Materials for Analysis (San Francisco: Chandler, 1966), p. 76ft.

15. David Masson in The Life of John Milton makes very explicit the autobiographical and historical analogy in his treatment of Samson in the Philistine theatre:

But in the entire idea of the drama what else have we than a representation of the Puritan and Republican Milton in his secret antagonism to all the powers and all the fashions of the Restoration? Who are the Philistines but the partisans of the Restoration, all and sundry, its authors and abettors before the fact, and its multitudinous applauders and sycophants through the nation afterwards? Who are the Philistine lords and ladies, and captains, and priests, assembled in their seats within the covered part of the temple of Dagon on the day of the festival? Who but Charles himself, and the Duke of York, and the whole pell-mell of the Clarendons, Buckingham, Buckhursts, Killigrews, Castlemaines, Moll Davises, Nell Gwynns, Sheldons, Morleys, and some hundreds of others. . . . But was there not a very real sense in which he had been performing feats of strength under the gaze of the Philistine Congregation, to their moral amazement, throughout their physical destruction? Degraded at the Restoration, dismissed into obscurity, and thought of for some years, when thought of at all, only as a shackled wretch or monster, incapacitated for farther mischief or farther activity of any kind, had he not re-emerged most gloriously? By his Paradise Lost already, and now by his Paradise Regained and this very Samson Agonistes, he had entitled himself to the place of preeminency in the literature of that Philistine age, the Philistines themselves being the judges.

The Life of John Milton: Narrated in Connection with The Political, Ecclesiastical and Literary History of his Times (Cambridge and London: Macmillan, 1859-94), 6: 676-7.

16. "Theatrical Metaphors" in European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages tran. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), pp. 138-44.
17. Microcosmos: The Shape of the Elizabethan Play (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1965), pp. 13-4. William Kerrigan has taken a somewhat different view of the theatrum mundi theme in Samson Agonistes in The Prophetic Milton (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974). For other interesting studies of the theatre metaphor, see Roy W. Battenhouse, "The Doctrine of Man in Calvin and in Renaissance Platonism," JHI 9 (1948), 447-91, and Frances A. Yates, Theatre of the World (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).
18. See Stroup, p. 35.
19. "Sermon XXIII, Folio of 1640" in Seventeenth Century Prose and Poetry (2nd ed.), eds. Alexander M. Witherspoon and Frank J. Warnke (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 80.
20. Quoted in Kerrigan, p. 80.
21. Selected Writings of Francis Bacon, ed. Hugh Dick (New York: The Modern Library, 1955), p. 231.

22. 1: 18; 66.
23. Quoted in Stroup, p. 66.
24. See Stroup, p. 21.
25. Quoted in Patrick Crutwell, The Shakespearean Moment and Its Place in the Poetry of the 17th Century (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 123.
26. Quoted in C.V. Wedgwood, "Social Comedy in the Reign of Charles I," in Truth and Opinion: Historical Essays (London: Collins, 1960), p. 191.
27. Samuel Butler, Satires and Miscellaneous Poetry and Prose, ed. René Lamar (Cambridge: University Press, 1928), p. 363.
28. "An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from England," in The Poems of Andrew Marvell, ed. Hugh MacDonal (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), pp. 118-21.
29. Butler, p. 365.
30. Ibid.
31. Krouse, pp. 92-3.
32. The autobiographical analogy, of course, raises the problem of dating the composition of Samson Agonistes. In this study I am following the date most often proposed by modern Miltonists, 1667-70. The fact that the poet saw fit to publish his dramatic poem in 1671 is as relevant to the present discussion as the controversial date of composition.
33. Quoted in William Riley Parker, Milton: A Biography (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), I: 548-9; 549; 568-9.
34. On the subject of Samson as God's Fool, see Arnold Stein, Heroic Knowledge: An Interpretation of Paragained and Samson Agonistes (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1957).
35. Quoted in Curtius, p. 38.
36. Translated by John Wilson, 1668. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1958), p. 44.
37. Quoted in Frank J. Warnke, Versions of Baroque: European Literature in the Seventeenth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 68-9.
38. 1:52.
39. The Major Works, ed. C.A. Patrides (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), I,42, p. 112.
40. Krouse, p. 44.

41. See Chapter IV, "The Comic Hero," in G. Karl Galinsky, The Herakles Theme: The Adaptations of the Hero in Literature from Homer to the Twentieth Century (Totawa, New Jersey: Rowan and Littlefield, 1972), pp. 81-100.
42. "An Apologie for Poetrie," in English Literary Criticism: The Renaissance, ed. O.B. Hardison, Jr. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Goldentree Books, 1963), p. 141.
43. The Poems of George Herbert (Oxford: University Press, 1955), pp. 66-8.
44. Stein, p. 196.
45. In Chaucer's "The Monk's Tale" we are given a description of Samson as a fool at the Philistine festival:
 

The ende of this catyf as I shal seye.  
 His foomen made a feeste upon a day,  
 And hym as hire fool biforn hem pleye;  
 And this was in a temple of greet array.

The Poetical Works of Chaucer, ed. F. N. Robinson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), p. 227.
46. The Fool: His Social and Literary History (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 69.
47. Quoted from Laws (7. 803) in Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 18-9.
48. Huizinga, p. 31.
49. Two Types of Faith tran. Norman P. Goldhawk (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1961), p. 21.
50. The Anatomy of Melancholy, 1: 77-8.
51. Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University, 1957), p. 215.