

## John Milton's *Samson Agonistes*: An Allegorical Self-Portrait of Milton after the Restoration

**Edward R. Raupp, Ph.D.**

Professor of Humanities

Gori State University

+995 599 11 66 56

[edraupp@gmail.com](mailto:edraupp@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5147-7835>

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### Abstract

John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* is an allegory with similarities between the biblical character of Samson and Milton's personal experiences during the tumultuous Restoration period. Samson is Milton's avatar, the image of himself existing both physically and metaphorically in the person of Samson, the Israelite judge and renowned hero of Hebrew mythology. At the same time, Milton navigated through the themes of oppression, blindness, and the ultimate victory over adversaries comparable to the return of King Charles II and the Restoration monarchy. *Samson Agonistes* is an allegory featuring the commonalities of the biblical journey of Samson and Milton's real-life experiences during the Restoration. We examined how Milton physically and metaphorically showed his likeness to Samson. The allegorical and symbolic relations between Samson and Milton are mighty and multifaceted. Both characters appear to be entirely directed by some divine plan, where Samson's physical conflicts with the Philistines emulate Milton's philosophical and spiritual struggle against political and religious oppression. Temptation, weakness, and repentance are the main issues in their stories, showing both the character and spiritual duels they must go through. Moreover, Samson's character, as Milton's embodiment of blindness, is the vehicle through which the writer achieves his most profound insight, which is, of course, the idea that the human frailty that they both share is the main theme in both epics. Milton's major exploration includes how his loss of vision and the overcoming of difficulties contributed to Samson's storyline, which ends the play with the acts of redemption that demonstrate their invincible will. Milton's literary tenacity, despite the tragedy of his blindness, mirrors Samson's final act of strength and destruction, which constitutes the indisputable commitment to the causes they defend. Ultimately, *Samson Agonistes* is a dramatic retelling of a biblical story. At the same time, it is a highly personal allegory telling Milton's story of self-devotion, penitence, and steadfast adherence to principle amid seemingly unconquerable adversity.

*Keywords:* avatar, blindness, Charles II, Milton, redemption, Restoration, Samson

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### Introduction

*Samson Agonistes* is not only a retelling of the biblical account of Samson in the book of Judges (KJV, 2024) but it is also an allegorical reflection on Milton's political and spiritual struggles during the Restoration. This paper examines the allegorical connections between Samson and Milton, focusing on their shared experiences of power, loss, captivity, and eventual redemption.

At the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, England's political and cultural face changed dramatically. It marked an end to the Puritan

Commonwealth, bringing back the monarchy. For Milton, as a staunch supporter of Commonwealth ideals and a strong critic of monarchy in principle, this was probably one of the most trying times of his life, personally and professionally. His blindness and the collapse of support for his political ideas left him in the dark, literally and figuratively. Concerning this background, *Samson Agonistes* can be seen as Milton's response to these challenges using the biblical story about Samson as he reflects upon his feelings of betrayal, loss, and trust for ultimate vindication rather than revenge.

Milton's choice of Samson as the protagonist speaks volumes. Milton and Samson were once strong men brought down by elements beyond their control. A Philistine, Delilah, betrayed Samson, an Israelite judge with great physical strength, and the Philistines later blinded him. In the same way, Milton lost his status as a leading intellectual and poet in the aftermath of the Restoration, which removed him from influence in English politics. This resemblance is not simply biographical but helps emphasize the themes of endurance and divine judgment that pervade *Samson Agonistes*. The story of Samson allows Milton to explore his feelings of disempowerment and search for meaning when faced with such calamities.

The allegoric qualities of *Samson Agonistes* are vivid against the political and religious settings during the Restoration era. The return to power of the monarchy, which was supported by those who had become disillusioned with the strict Puritan rule, can be likened to the Philistines oppressing Israelites. Just as Delilah betrayed Samson for money, some people who facilitated the Restoration sold out on Commonwealth ideals. By portraying these occurrences within Samson's story, Milton can criticize the Restoration and its supporters while holding out hope for divine retribution. Using this allegory, Milton asserts that true justice and redemption are achieved not through earthly power but faithfulness even unto death (See Raupp, 2023).

## Methods

This study began with a close reading of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, watching for lines that might parallel the life and tribulations of Milton during the Restoration. We then went to the Biblical account of Samson in the book of Judges (KJV, 2024), chapters 13-16, comparing and contrasting that text with Milton's retelling and with his life before, during, and after the Restoration, looking especially for clues that might connect Milton's experience with that of the Israelite judge. Understanding that there will be many perspectives on the connections of Milton's life to that of Samson, we referred to poststructuralist literary

theory to discern various meanings from the two texts, Milton's play and the biblical account of the rise and fall of Samson in the book of Judges (KJV, 2024).

When using a poststructuralist literary theory approach to compare Milton's *Samson Agonistes* with the biblical story of Samson in the book of Judges, we find many interpretations and no fixed meaning in texts. Poststructuralism, while acknowledging language's flexibility and the lack of a central base for meanings in texts, permits an exploration of how Milton alters and reinterprets the biblical narrative, identifying distinct themes, character development, and ideological underpinnings from one work to another. In contrast to a direct historical-theological reading presented by the Bible, Milton merges this adaptation with his contemporary politics and personal issues that complicate heroism, freedom of choice, and God's perfect justice. By assessing these works through a poststructuralist lens, it is possible to capture the various dimensions within the works, such as the authors' intentions and the cultural contexts in which they lived, all adding value to our understanding of these two pieces.

## Results

In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton allegorizes and reveals the parallels between Samson's story and his own life experiences. Power, loss, captivity, and redemption are among the themes explored by both characters, and their narratives thus become intertwined, revealing their mutual struggles and eventual resilience.

Parker (1935) reminds us of the debt that Milton owes to the Greek tragedies (p. 355). Woodhouse (2006), however, takes the view that while Milton speaks of tragedy, *Samson Agonistes* does not conform to the Aristotelian characteristics of tragedy manifested in *Oedipus Rex*: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song. Nevertheless, it is not merely conjecture to believe that Milton sees himself as a tragic figure. If it is not a tragedy, what is it? Beer (2008) asserts that *Samson Agonistes*, along with *Paradise Regained* and *The History of Britain*, "spoke powerfully to the

times” (p. 365) and of Milton’s 1671 “Resurgence,” clearly connecting to Samson’s destruction of the Philistine temple (Judges 16:30; Beer, 2008, pp. 372-373). Teskey (2006) offers *Samson Agonistes* as a persuasive argument for Milton’s creativity (p. 5).

#### Samson and Milton: Captivity and Blindness

Forsyth (2008) notes, “It is impossible not to connect the blindness of Samson with Milton’s own, not to hear Milton’s anguish in Samson’s cry ‘O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,’” (p. 10). Samson and Milton both undergo physical and metaphorical blindness and captivity. Samson’s blindness and imprisonment by the Philistines (Judges 16:21) embodies Milton’s political defeat and captivity following the Restoration. Once a dominant figure in the Commonwealth, Milton was alienated and blinded in the latter stages of his life (Lewalski, 2003).

#### Triumph over Adversaries: Restoration and Redemption

Despite their captivity and physical blindness, Samson and Milton eventually overcame their enemies. Shawcross (1993) sees *Samson Agonistes* as a rallying cry against “the oppressive overlord” (p. 163). Samson’s last act of destroying the Philistine temple (Judges 16:30) in an act of “delirious violence” (Teskey, 2006, p. 7) reflects Milton’s literary successes and triumphs over his adversaries. In this “closet tragedy,” meant to be read rather than performed, Milton demonstrates his ability to fight against oppressive forces with powerful argument and penetrating wit.

#### Delilah and the Restoration Monarchy

Asimov (1981) notes that “Samson displayed a penchant for Philistine girls” (p. 250). Delilah, whom Samson married, betrayed him (Judges 16:5). Delilah symbolizes the forces that sought to restore King Charles II to power after the Puritan Commonwealth. The parallels extend to those who supported the monarchy’s return, viewing it as a return to stability and tradition, akin to Delilah’s betrayal of the secret to Samson’s strength.

Teskey (2006) speaks to the parallel irony in the stories of Delilah and Milton’s critics. Delilah exults in her seduction of Samson, but the Israelites, not the Philistines, record the events for posterity. Delilah becomes the symbol of betrayal, while Samson embodies the promise of redemption. Likewise, the opponents of John Milton are happy to incarcerate him, but it is Milton, not his adversaries, whose life and work we still celebrate centuries later.

#### King Charles II and the Philistines

Milton’s allegory equates King Charles II and his adherents with the Philistines. In the same way the Philistines oppressed Samson, many people perceived Charles II’s restoration as a return to despotism, negating the gains of the Commonwealth. Milton’s representation of adversaries, the Philistines, shows his criticism of the role played by monarchy in stifling political and religious liberties.

Serjeantson (2011) rightly raises the question of the legitimacy of violence in the story of Samson (p. 619). Milton considers the violence of the Philistines against the imprisoned Samson to be retaliation for the hundreds Samson has killed. Retribution is also present in the Restoration against the regicides, those who signed the death warrant of Charles I. Whether or not Milton had this parallel in mind is open to question. Gregerson (2020) notes that *Samson Agonistes* “revives the topos of exemplary violence, which the poet had conspicuously rejected in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*” (p. 672).

Schwartz (2011) addresses the question of justice in the Samson story. Noting that the first temple, the temple of Solomon, was destroyed in 586 BCE by the Babylonians “Because of three sins: idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed” (p. 632), Schwartz turns to the question of why the second temple was destroyed. Her answer is clear: vengeance. Milton attributes the torture and execution of the regicides by Charles II to the same motive.

While there are many meanings one can discern from *Samson Agonistes*, it seems clear that the play, “a drama that was never meant to be performed” (Harvey, 2011, p. 652), is a didactic device filled with Milton’s perspective of the Restoration with all its worst characteristics. Milton has Samson lamenting, “O that torment should not be confin’d/To the bodies wounds and sores” (Harvey, 2011, p. 256). While the regicides suffered unspeakable tortures and death, Milton’s wounds were of a different kind, the kind that “traces the metaphorical movement from outward to inward and back, from physiological agony to psychic suffering to bodily affliction” (Harvey, 2011, p. 656).

### Discussion

During the Restoration era, *Samson Agonistes* is seen by many critical theorists as a deeply allegorical self-portrait by John Milton, symbolizing his dissent, resistance, and denunciation of political and religious power. Using Samson as his primary character, Milton explored the themes of captivity, loss of sight, betrayal, and ultimate redemption, creating sad similarities between Milton’s situation and the biblical story. The present work clarifies that Milton remains an influential writer facing severe political and personal issues, leaving behind an ineradicable literary heritage for readers and researchers.

As a judge of Israel, Samson is endowed with outstanding physical power given by God, symbolizing divine authority and leadership. His strength makes him a daunting adversary to the Philistines and a hero for his people. On the other hand, Milton does not possess military skills, but as a poet or political philosopher, he has established his reputation for the ages. This influence and authority over political and religious discussions are evident in his writings, especially during the English Civil War and Commonwealth periods.

There are significant losses on the parts of Samson and Milton. Samson’s descent starts with Delilah’s treachery, leading to the loss of his strength and sight. Beyond signifying his physical regression, these ailments indicate spiritual and

moral decay as he gives in to temptations and deviates from his God-given assignment. Milton, too, suffers a great deal of personal loss, particularly blindness. Symbolically, this physical deficiency inhibits Milton’s work and vision, just like Samson’s blindness does. Furthermore, the failure of the Commonwealth and Restoration marks a significant defeat for Milton in his ideological journey.

Both Samson and Milton are captured and imprisoned. The Philistines captured Samson, mutilated, humiliated, and imprisoned him, and compelled him to labor at the mill. This state signifies a period of self-reflection that results in his spiritual rebirth. After the return of Charles II, Milton feared being jailed or persecuted for political activities. He avoided lengthy physical captivity, but he was confined ideologically and socially with condemnation of his works and restrictions on his influence.

Redemption is a theme in the eventual outcomes of Samson and Milton. Samson’s last act against the Philistines brought about his redemption. During this moment, he regained his faith, grew more robust, and destroyed Dagon’s temple, killing himself as a blow to those who were responsible for his enslavement by acts of revenge. This act recovered him spiritually, achieving what God had intended for him. Milton’s redemption is evident in his literary legacy, mainly through *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. These works, created in his later years, showed his undiminished intellectual power and deep spiritual insight. Through his art, Milton reclaims his voice and reinforces his enduring influence on literature and thought.

The allegorical and symbolic connections between Samson and Milton are powerful. Both feel that some higher power directed their lives. Samson’s physical combat with the Philistines and Milton’s intellectual and spiritual warfare against political and religious tyranny reflect their commitment to fulfill divine purposes. Themes of temptation, weakness, and repentance occupy central positions in both narratives. Samson’s



downfall was caused by Delilah's betrayal. Milton's meditations about his shortcomings and blindness (Milton, 2008, Sonnets 7 and 19; Raupp, 2023) highlight that they share common human frailties. In Samson's act of destruction at his death and in Milton, despite his blindness, continuing to write until the day he died, both achieved redemption.

Samson and Milton survive through their resistance to powerful adversaries. Physical rejuvenation in Samson, like Milton's intellectual energy, though he suffered colossal loss, demonstrates the indomitable spirits of these men. Neither Samson nor Milton would recover his physical sight, but each attained an even more precious spiritual insight. *Samson Agonistes* is not merely a dramatic retelling of a biblical story. It is also an allegory of Milton's life with struggles deeply entwined with an indestructible adherence to principle.

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