A Comparison of Samson Agonistes with the Classical Drama of Greece, Particularly Oedipus Tyrannus

By
M. G. Dallman

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M.A. Dallman, M.G.

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Samson Agonistes will always be of interest to the student of Milton, because the poet has put into the mouth of the blind Samson the expression of his own feelings of frustration and bitterness. With the exception of "On His Blindness", "Samson Agonistes" reveals to us more poignantly than anything else the deep pathos of the loss of sight - the tragedy of a strong and free spirit forced into absolute dependence. Nothing can surpass the passionate sense of loss in passages like the following:-

"O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day! "

Samson Agonistes stands out as the most perfect example of the classical drama in English. In it, Milton has caught the spirit of the Golden Age of Greek Literature more nearly than any other English writer. The so-called Classical drama of Milton's predecessors was written in imitation of Seneca and bears little resemblance to Attic tragedy, quite apart from the general mediocrity of the work. Since Milton, other English poets have tried to write in the form and spirit of the great Greek Tragedians, but certainly they have not equaled Samson Agonistes. Goethe said, that he knew of hardly any work

which had been composed so entirely in the spirit of the ancients. It is certain, that very few could have taken the strict structural form of the drama of Sophocles and used it conscientiously in English, without the situation seeming to have been forced and a feeling of unnaturalness produced. In Milton's hands there is no resting of the situation, and one is nowhere conscious of any strain in making the story fit the mould of the dramatic form.

In making a comparison with the Sophoclean play, the student who is unable to read the original is forced to depend on a translation, in which almost necessarily the diction and versification of the original cannot be carried out, so that for the purposes of general comparison he is forced to depend on what is known of these characteristics of Greek tragedy.

In structure, Milton has scrupulously followed his model. He has preserved the rules with regard to the unities of time and place. Without any difficulty the action has been kept within twenty-four hours. Indeed, in spite of the great length of the speeches and the unhurried action the play seems to cover only a very short time. The scene remains unchanged throughout - the action all takes place in an open space before the prison at Gaza. Although no division has been made into acts, Milton's play falls naturally into the regular Greek divisions. It opens with a prologue, followed by the Parodus, or entry of the chorus. Each act is brought to its conclusion and the fifth act begun by a Stasimon. The announcement of the catastrophe is immediately followed by the dirge sung by the chorus. The final chorus concludes the play on a note of tragic comtemplation such as

was used in Greek tragedy. The only point at which Milton has failed to use Sophocles as his model is in the metrical construction of the chorus and here he follows the practice of Euripides in making them monostrophic instead of strophic and antistrophic. In using this form for his choral odes he has lost the opportunity of introducing a lyric quality, which would have relieved the heavier passages and lent a variety to the whole play. For, while he has varied the metre in the choruses, there is no distinct difference in their tone, such as sharply defines the choral odes of Sophocles and separates them from the rest of the speeches. Knowing that it was not through lack of ability to write lyric verse, for there are lyric passages of great beauty in his other works, particularly in Comus, one comes to the conclusion that he felt that the strophic form was appropriate only when it was intended to be sung. Since in the preface, he clearly says that Samson Agonistes was not intended for stage production, he must have felt that he was using a more suitable form. One cannot but regret that he chose to make them as he did.

One of the distinctive features of Greek tragedy is its great variety of metric form. Each form has its own purpose in expressing shades of feeling and differences of movement. The predominate measure is Blank Verse, or rather Iambic Hexameter, since it has one more foot than the English form. One peculiar variation of it is found in parallel or stichomuthic verse, which consists in the rapid interchange of studied dialogue , the remark followed by an answer of the same construction in length, sometimes one line, sometimes a line and a half and sometimes half a line. For sudden changes

in dramatic episodes an acceleration of the rythm is produced by the use of Trochaic verse. A special rythm with a predominance of Anapaestic foot is used for the entrance of the chorus and to indicate any sudden excitement in the course of the play. So it may be called the marching rythm. The full choral odes are antiphonal - the antistrophe reproducing exactly the form of the strophe. The great triumph of Greek poetry was its ability to so combine these various rythms as to produce an effect in sound which corresponded to the movement of the play.

When we compare the metrical forms of Samson Agonistes with these of Sophocles we realize the difficulty of reproducing them in English. It could be done, but not without destroying the naturalness and ease of the verse, so that Milton has had to achieve his affects without a strict copying. With the exception of the choruses the predominating form is blank verse, varied with irregularities. The most common is the frequent introduction of an accented syllable at the beginning of the line and the addition of an unaccented syllable at the end of the line. Quite often we found a trochaic first foot and an occasional line of twelve syllables which seems to scan best as a trochaic hexameter. Occasionaly too, we find a spondee in the second foot. In speeches of Samson where the emotion is very strong trimmter and tetrameter lines are interspersed with the pentameter lines, giving an impassioned feeling to the movement of the verse. The choruses present a most difficult problem. If they are ment to be metrical, the meter is irregular to a most unusual extent, for the lines vary in length from dimeters to hexameters. It seems probable that they were intended to be rythmic rather tham metric, the

stress falling on the word accent rather than on that of the syllable. "What he seems to have aimed at was precisely what Matthew Arnold describes himself as aiming at in the choruses of "Merope." Finding it impossible to adapt Greek measures to English verse he followed rythms, which produced on his own feelings a similar impression to that produced on it by the rythm of the Greek choric poetry."*

Milton seems to have made no attempt to use the parallel verse form, unless the very few one line speeches and replies can be counted as stichomuthic. There is nothing that resembles even remotely the dialogue on this form between Oedipus and Tiresias. Nor does Milton attempt the use of a trochaic meter to indicate a sudden change, and since his choruses are monostrophic it is impossible to compare them with those of Sophocles in rythm. One thomoughly classical effect which Milton does achieve is broken verse, for example -

"Ensnared, assaulted, overcome, led bound,
Thy foes' derision, captive, poor and blind"

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"Curiosity, inquisitive, importune."

The verse throughout is lofty and majestic, although frequently harsh and lacking in grace as compared with that of Oedipus Tyrammus.

In the diction, Milton has kept, not only the spirit, but has frequemtly taken over the idiom of the Greek, as in the use of the participle in line 840 "Noing by thee betrayed" and as in line 444 "Which to have come to pass." He uses, too,

* John Churton Collins, in his introduction to "Samson Agonistes."

the figures common to classical literature - synecdoche, metonymy and oxymoron. The use of oxymora was almost a mannerism in Sophocles. The use of the ethical dative occurs frequently, in Milton and suggests his classical models. The language is elevated and extremely dignified throughout.

Milton, quoting from Aristotle, tells us that the purpose of tragedy is "By raising pity and fear or terror to purge the mind of those and such like passions." Milton certainly does raise pity to a very high pitch, but he does not excite the other emotions to so great an extent.

The entire spirit of Samson is quite in keeping with the ideals of ancient tragedy. The one colossal figure in which all the interests centers controls the attention from beginning to end. The use of the chorus as a reasonable, judicial, prudent spectator is entirely Greek in its conception. The sense of destiny and inevitable oracular fulfilment, the mingling of hope with despair even to the moment of the catastrophe, the horror aroused, all contribute toward the correctness of Samson as a Greek tragedy. In Greece, it was considered quite all right for the writer of tragedy to introduce comments on political and social questions, especially on woman, as Milton has done.

If a comparison is made with one particular play, Oedipus Tyrannus, the similarities and differences will be very marked. Both dramas have one colossal figure to which all others however well portrayed are distinctly subordinate. In a well known passage of the Poetics, Aristotle has said that the hero should be "a person neither eminently virtuous or just, nor yet involved in misfortune by deliberate vice or villainy, but by some error

of human frailty and this person should also be some one of high fame and flaurishing prosperity." How exactly this describes Oedipus and Samson - both of high fame and both have known flourishing prosperity; neither are outstanding examples of virtue, yet both are concerned for the rescue of a people, and both fall by reason of human frailty, in the case of Oedipus opposition to oracles, pride and haughtiness - in that of Samson, through inability to retain the secret entrusted to him. Yet as individuals they are entirely different. While neither seeks to evade destiny, in Samson there is no alternation of hope and despair in the hero's mind. The only hope that visits him, is that he may accomplish something to honor his God before the welcome release of death. We have the feeling that Samson's fate is of his own making, and while we may feel that the catastrophe of Oedipus is brought about, partly by his pride and his resistance of the oracles, yet Oedipus seems entirely the plaything of fate. In no adequate sense is he deserving of the fate brought on him. From the beginning of the play both of them are entirely resolute, and not to be turned aside from the accomplishments of fate, by any means. Both are honest and make no effort to conceal the facts that tell against them. The other persons in both plays are well drawn and fully characterised.

In the action of the plays, we are faced with the outstanding difference between them - a difference of dramatic method and effect. In Samson Agonistes, it seems as though the chief interest is that of character. In Oedipus the plot interest is all predominent. In Oedipus, the action rises with

heighthening of interest as the "Knot is tied" - the crisis hurries one on breathlessly to the catastrophe. In Milton's play persons enter, conversations take place, but there can scarcely be said to be any rising action progressing regularly through entanglements to a crisis, as a result of which the tragedy occurs. There is none of the suspense which Oedipus arouses. Nor is there that accumulating horror and sense of pollution which makes the Greek play so terrible. Perhaps this is almost inherent in Milton's subject. When the life of Samson is considered, the real tragedy takes place in his betrayal of his secret and the real catastrophe consists in his blinding, so that we are not overcome by a sense of horror at the end, but we feel that Samson has fulfilled himself, that he is glorious in his death and we rejoice that it has been granted him to die so worthily. "The feeling I mean is the impression that the heroic being, though in one sense and outwardly he has failed, is yet in another sense superior to the world in which he appears; is in some way which we do not seek to define, untouched by the doom that overtakes him; and is rather set free from life than deprived of it."* There is no such feeling inspired by Oedipus Tyrannus. The tragedy takes place within the play, and leaves an atmosphere of horror, terror, and unrelieved darkness.

When we compare the methods used we are again conscious of the great difference. In Oedipus destiny rules and is accomplished even through opposition to its oracles. The sense of overpowering destiny ruling the actions of men is not so strong in Samson. Samson attributes all his woes and the frustration of the prophecy to his own deeds, maintaining indeed the validity of the

* Bradley - "Shakespearean Tragedy" page 324.

prophecies which had been given him;

"Yet stay: let me not rashly call in doubt
Divine prediction: what if all foretold
Had been fulfilled but through mine own default?
Whom have I to complain of but myself?"

Thus while there is as strong an upholding of the infallibility of the Divine oracles, there is na sense of the moral freedom of action accorded to man, which is absent from Greek tragedy.

As has been said, in discussing the action of the play, while the blindness of Samson does arouse horror and pity, there is no sense of overpowering terror comparable to that inspired by Oedipus. Nor is the use of Tragic Irony as predominant in Samson, true it is used with strong effects in some places, notably the conversation of Manoa with the chorus, after Samson has gone and just preceeding the catastrophe, but it does not pervade the whole play, as it does in Oedipus where from the first it deepens the sense of approaching tragedy. In Sophocles' work, there is a naturalness and arresting reality in the dialogue which Milton has not achieved. In Samson, one long declamatory speech follows another. One feels that not even the great figures of a heroic age did not always speak in long measured, sonorous, rhetorical, speeches. This is one reason why there is so little excitement felt. In the few instances where there is an alteration of short speeches, the play gains much in interest, for example take the following -

"Dalila: In argument with men a woman ever
Goes by the worse, whatever be her cause.
Samson. For want of words, no doubt, or lack of breath:

Witness when I was worried with thy peals."

This is how one might suppose Samson and Delila would talk together, but, immediately it is followed by an interchange of long speeches. In the episode in which Harapha appears, while for the most part the speeches are long, still they are relieved by several short taunting speeches, and toward the end, when both the champions are aroused, the dialogue is much more natural and the speeches shorter. Milton might well have studied the dialogue of Shakespeare and through it have come nearer to his classical models.

It is said that the philosophy of Samson Agonistes is Sophochlean. While in a very broad sense this is true, yet ~~the philosophy and~~ the theology of Samson is not that of Oedipus Tyrannus. Perhaps it is scarcely fair to compare the two in this respect, since the Oedipus Colonnus is undoubtedly the necessary completion of the earlier play. While it is possible to conceive of Oedipus as suffering for the crime of Jocasta and Laius, in disbelieving the oracle and in the intended murder of a son, and while his own haughtiness and seeking to escape the prophecies may have deserved punishment, still in no real sense can it be said that for his sufferings he has to thank himself as can be said quite truthfully of Samson. Rather Oedipus appears the sport of a cruel fate. Throughout both plays there is a feeling of the misery of man, but in Samson it is combined with a firm belief in the ultimate goodness of the purpose of God. Both plays seek to inculcate belief in the infallibility of the decrees of a higher power, but in Oedipus it is the

unfailing verity of the oracles and carries with it no thought of an eternal kindness of Providence. While Sophocles had some conception of a supreme God, it is a God who does not interfere in the lives of men, which are controlled by the fates and the desires of lesser gods. There is no conception of a personal interest in or contact with man. There is an essential optimism in the philosphy of Milton, which no vicissitudes of life could change and which appears throughout "Samson Agonistes." It is entirely lacking in "Oedipus Tyrannus." It stands out most clearly in the difference between of the concluding speeches of the chorus. Oedipus ends with the gloomy reflection -

> "Therefore, O man, beware, and look toward the end of things that be,
> The last of sights, the last of days; and no man's life account as gain,
> Ere the full tale be finished and the darkness find him without pain."

"Samson Agonistes" closes with the thought -

> "All is best, though oft we ~~go~~ doubt,
> What the unsearchable dispose
> Of highest Wisdom brings about,
> And ever best found in the close."

In the diction and metrical forms, Milton has produced an effect very similar to that of the Greek drama. In the failure of the dialogue to appear at all natural, we see the reflection of Milton's genius. He was essentially an epic poet. His "Voice is like the sea, majestic, free." - Unconfinable, it is also

unflexible and the verse of "Samson Agonistes" reminds us again and again of that of "Paradise Lost." It is high and lofty, but it is epic rather than dramatic. In his philosophy, he has transcended Sophocles, gone far beyond him, because of his greater knowledge of God. He has been most successful in reproducing the construction and spirit of the Greek drama. After a detailed comparison, we feel more than ever, that "Samson Agonistes", in spite of ~~a part from~~ the dramatic defects inherent in a play written only for reading and in Milton's spare style, has a right to be called the finest classical drama in English and should be more widely known.

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