

**SOPHISTRY VERSUS RHETORIC IN *SAMSON AGONISTES***

SOPHISTRY VERSUS RHETORIC IN *SAMSON AGONISTES*:  
THE TRADITIONAL USE OF DEBATE  
IN MILTON'S TRAGIC POEM

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## Introduction

Much attention, by various critics, has been concentrated on Milton's fascination with and artful manipulation of debate and rhetoric in his epic works. Less attention, however, has been devoted to the uniqueness of Milton's dialectic as seen in *Samson Agonistes*. In this thesis I will endeavour to illustrate the subtle, yet pervasive distinctions between rhetorical and sophistic disputation, distinctions which were derived from Milton's respect for and adoption of the "rules" of disputation, as defined both by the Ancients and the Renaissance theorists.

Volumes have been written about the contention that existed between rhetoric and sophistry in Athens<sup>1</sup>, the centre of the classical world. The points of dispute and difference, both in opinion and practice, between these two

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<sup>1</sup> While there have been a number of sophistic movements, as George A. Kennedy notes on pp.15-16, I am concerned only with the second sophistic movement. So, for the purposes of this thesis, when I refer to the Sophists or sophism, in any form, I am confining my understanding of this phenomenon to those practices arising from the second sophistic movement of the fifth century B.C.. Similarly, by sophistry I am referring to what Kennedy calls "sophistic" rhetoric, which developed in the same period. Eventually termed the Second Sophistic, this branch of Sophistry made an art of effective, but often invalid argumentation. For a more detailed history of the origins of sophistry see Kennedy's work, Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times, (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 16 ff.

contending schools of thought proved to be irreconcilable. The champions of the rhetorical school of thought, the more renowned and vocal being Socrates and Aristotle, were adamant in their refusal to acknowledge the merits of a Sophistic education. On the contrary, the Socratic rhetors denounced, in general, the Sophists' advocacy of oratory and education for its own sake. That knowledge should not be conducive to virtue, but function as an end in and of itself was just one of the Sophistic practices that did not sit well with the Socratic rhetoricians, since they were of the mind that all knowledge should impart virtue, or at least tend toward the virtuous endowment of the individual.

The Sophists, on the other hand, represented by the likes of Gorgias and Protagoras, denied that the Sophistic mentors were remiss in their pedagogical duties, maintaining that it was neither their "duty" nor their intention to impart *aretê*, or virtues, to their pupils. Thus, they could not be held accountable for failing or refusing to instill virtues or qualities which they had no intention and made no claim to impart. Rather, Sophists like Gorgias claimed that they merely endeavoured to teach the art of oratory, "the master-art to which all others must defer"<sup>2</sup>, according to Gorgias, and by which men could then become masters of all other

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<sup>2</sup> W. K. C. Guthrie, The Sophists, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971), p. 39.

subjects. By teaching oratorical skills, in addition to a number of other *sophia*, or crafts, which varied from Sophist to Sophist, the Sophists claimed to be offering their students a solid foundation for establishing a promising potential political career.

The contention between these competing schools of thought raged, attracting the attention of numerous historians and critics who have written innumerable pages in their attempt to document and critically analyze this contention. Very little, however, has been said in regard to the effect, existence and implications of these warring factions in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*.

Milton's objections to sophistry, such as that practised by Gorgias, paralleled those of Aristotle, who decried its means and ends for their failure to advocate truth and virtue respectively. Milton thus favoured the Socratic rhetor as the more honourable disputant, as he did not subject the art of verbal combat to the indignities of invalid and fallacious argumentation exploited by the Sophists. It is from these classical authorities that Milton formulated his dichotomy of true and false rhetorical exempla. In effect, it is my intention to demonstrate the extent of Milton's debt to the classicists in *Samson Agonistes*, on the subject and "rules" of interlocution, and further, to show how Milton capitalized on the differences in the debating styles of these two



contending schools by making the play's style parallel a character's moral purpose.

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In keeping with the classical tradition, "debate in *Samson Agonistes* serves the ends of dialectic by bringing truth and falsehood into direct confrontation and thus proving and establishing the truth."<sup>3</sup> Milton's assertion that man is endowed with free will and the ability to reason seems to be an integral part of his conception of debate as a moral inquiry into truth. As a result, Milton saw the need for man to debate things through, and thereby arrive at a truthful conclusion. Both the prominence and frequency with which Milton attends to rational debate in all his works, whether prose or poetry, would seem to indicate that Milton perceived such debate as the most effective, if not the only way by which the truth may be elucidated. It is through this process of rhetorical combat with himself, Dalila and Harapha, in which each debate represents a "trial of faith"<sup>4</sup>, that Samson, having acquired the Miltonic virtue of reason,

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<sup>3</sup> John M. Steadman, Milton and the Paradoxes of Renaissance Heroism, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1987), p. 175.

<sup>4</sup> John M. Steadman, Milton's Epic Characters: Image and Idol, (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1959), p.49.

matures spiritually and intellectually, and thus "becomes an exemplar of 'plain Heroic magnitude of mind'"<sup>5</sup> (l. 1279).

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<sup>5</sup> Steadman, Paradoxes, p. 288.

## I

## Ramus and the Classicists: Sources of Milton's Dialectic

That Milton was a classicist in mind and spirit goes without saying. In his book, John Milton at St. Paul's School, D. L. Clark documents this fact at length, as well as the course of study formulated at St. Paul's, which set the foundation for this classical leaning. Such texts as Cicero's *De Inventione*, Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria* and *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, and Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, as well as Ramist logic and rhetoric, comprised the backbone of rhetorical theory. These then were, by and large, the classical models of rhetoric and logic which predominated during the Renaissance. And it is from these classical authorities that Milton formulated his dichotomy of true and false rhetorical exempla.<sup>1</sup> Using the examples provided by the author of these latter texts, Peter Ramus (1515-1572) (Pierre de la Ramée), Milton modelled his own concept of logical and rhetorical theory and practice. At this point it is necessary to digress somewhat from my general theme in order to acquaint the reader with the basic tenets of Ramism, if a term such as "basic" is, in fact, applicable to Ramist

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<sup>1</sup> Irene Samuel makes note of Milton's willingness to cite Plato and other classical authorities as sources of many of his beliefs. See Irene Samuel's Plato and Milton, (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1947), pp. 16 ff.

logic and the conditions which preceded its formulation.

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Ramus' theory was established in response to and against Aristotle's *Rhetoric*. From these theories Ramus began his anti-Aristotlean crusade in 1536 when he proposed in his M.A. thesis that all that Aristotle had said was false.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, although Ramus was often quite vituperative and vehement in his objections to Aristotle and his logic, he nevertheless maintained most of Aristotle's rhetorical terms while altering their meaning.<sup>3</sup> Although Ramus repeatedly claimed that his complaint was not with Aristotle himself, so much as with his later disciples, who distorted much of his intent, Ramus' vacillations between absolving Aristotle and engaging in unmitigated invective against him seem to firmly establish that Aristotle and his theories were, indeed, the subject and object of Ramus' attack.

One of Ramus' primary objections to Aristotle's rhetorical formula was that it complicated rather than simplified the logical divisions of speech. When one

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<sup>2</sup> Franklin Irwin, "Ramistic Logic in Milton's Prose Works", diss., Princeton University, 1941), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Leon Howard, "'The Invention' of Milton's 'Great Argument': A Study of the Logic of 'God's Ways to Men.'" Huntington Library Quarterly, IX (1946), 151.

considers the three major classical genres of rhetoric set up by Aristotle in the *Rhetoric*, it becomes easy to concede Ramus' point. First there was demonstrative/ *epideictic* speech which involved praise or dispraise and, because it was usually "addressed to an audience more interested in the art of speaking than the subject matter"<sup>4</sup>, it was "usually connected with ceremonial occasions."<sup>5</sup> Deliberative speech, representing the second category, being of a political and advisory nature was employed in addressing political assemblies and concerned the act of making laws and deciding future political moves. Finally, Aristotle designated that branch of rhetoric concerned with the "pleading [of] cases before the court"<sup>6</sup> as judicial or forensic speech. The obvious result of these divisions, Hunter notes, is that judicial rhetoric focused on theory at the expense of demonstrative rhetorical flourishes.<sup>7</sup> In time, deliberative rhetoric dominated the "classroom, limiting judicial rhetoric to the petty courts"<sup>8</sup>, and thus leaving demonstrative rhetoric with a broad range of influence.

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<sup>4</sup> Walter J. Ong, "Rhetoric". A Milton Encyclopedia, Vol. 7. Ed. William B. Hunter, Jr. (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1979), p. 123.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara K. Lewalski, Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Ong, op. cit., pp. 123-124.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

Rhetoric was further divided into five parts: (i) *inventio*/ invention which involved finding arguments which supported one's position; (ii) *dispositio*/ disposition which involved the "arranging [of the] arguments previously discovered or rhetorically 'invented'"<sup>9</sup> such that it would most interest and persuade the audience of the orator's claims; (iii) *elocutio* or style which referred to the style of one's expressions; more specifically, "it is the art of clothing thoughts and feelings in language which is correct, appropriate and pleasing"<sup>10</sup>; (iv) *pronuntiatio*/ *actio* which represents the art of delivery, which essentially "[involves] gestures and modulation of voice"<sup>11</sup>; (v) *memoria* was the memorization of one's oral address. For obvious reasons these last two parts were more significant in classical times than in the Renaissance, as the written word came to be increasingly depended upon. Unfortunately, Aristotle's rhetorical and logical divisions seem to have no bounds as he subdivided invention into artificial and inartificial arguments with the former being defined as arguments "external to the speaker... that is [it] does not involve the speaker's art [as in] the indisputable facts of a legal

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<sup>9</sup> D. L. Clark, John Milton at St. Paul's School: A Study of Ancient Rhetoric in English Renaissance Education, (Columbia: Archon Books, 1964), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> Ong, op. cit., p. 124.

or deliberative question [which] are inartificial."<sup>12</sup> Both of these arguments represent different approaches in persuasion as well as reflections of the orator's character.<sup>13</sup> Having said all that one can now consider the emendations proposed by Ramus.

Contending that reason was a "natural endowment", Ramus sought to formulate what he called a "natural dialectic", "the rules and methods [of which] should conform with those of nature [whatever those are] and not be bent to the willfulness of its enemies, who attributed their machinations to Aristotle."<sup>14</sup> So saying, Ramus claimed to offer a method of utility which differed from that of Aristotle on three points: first, its structure followed the "natural" laws of reason, which "by nature" moves from generalities to specifics; secondly, Ramus "placed much more emphasis upon the discovery and statement of axiomatic or self-evident

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps this would be a good point at which to outline Milton's understanding of the terms "orator", "logician" and "sophist". According to Aristotle, and obviously accepted by Milton, an orator is anyone who is skilled in the art of speaking. In effect, the term orator refers only to an individual skill in the art of speaking and makes no comment upon that individual's moral principles. Similarly, the term logician offers no comment concerning an individual's morals; it simply refers to the faculty of reasoning that individual is master of. However, to call someone a sophist is to make a direct reference to that individual's morals, or lack thereof. See Aristotle's Rhetoric, Trans. Theodore Buckley, (London: George Bell & Sons, 1890), I. i. 10-11.

<sup>14</sup> Irwin, op. cit., p. 7.

truths than upon careful syllogistic reasoning"<sup>15</sup>; finally, Ramus applauds his dichotomizing of rhetoric and logic which he asserts also parallels the natural reasoning processes of the mind. Thus, Ramus begins with the two part division of logic into invention and disposition/ judgement. He then asserts that there are two types of arguments: artificial and inartificial "under which [both] Ramus and Milton arrange the main forms of thinking."<sup>16</sup> Artificial arguments branch out into cause and "cause is given precedence over all other logical forms, because it is the basis of all argument."<sup>17</sup> From this point on, as Walter Ong notes<sup>18</sup>, Ramus' dichotomies and subdivisions become so numerous that their attempts at simplification and "naturalness" begin to be just as successful and logical as those of Aristotle.

Franklin Irwin would seem to congratulate Ramus for establishing yet another dichotomy between rhetoric and logic in which he brings rhetoric into logic. This dichotomy may be summarized as follows:

The Pre-Ciceronian Alexandrians had divided rhetoric into invention, disposition, elocution,

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<sup>15</sup> Howard op. cit., p. 151.

<sup>16</sup> Irwin, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>18</sup> Walter J. Ong, "Logic and the Epic Muse: Reflections on Noetic Structures in Milton's Milieu." Achievements of the Left Hand. Ed. Michael Lieb & John T. Shawcross, (Amherst: Univ. of Mass. Press, 1974) pp. 247, 253, 262.



delivery, and memory. In the *Rhetorica* (1567), Ramus said that invention, disposition and memory belonged to logic; and that elocution or style and delivery or pronunciation were the properties of rhetoric. Logic invented arguments and arranged them in methodical order for the convenience of memory; rhetoric then decided on the best means of persuading the audience with the logic she unfolded. Rhetoric's medium of persuasion was with style, pronunciation, and gesture, but the content of the argument she offered was logic, for the method of logic "pertains to all things we wish to teach easily and perspicuously."<sup>19</sup>

Having made this distinction, Ramus defined cause as "the

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<sup>19</sup> Irwin, op. cit., pp. 15-16. Milton, however, preferred to leave logic and rhetoric as more distinct. Thus, he defined logic as "perfecting reason for the sake of proper thinking" and rhetoric as "the effective use of words." Milton further distinguished grammar as the "perfecting of speech for the sake of the correct use of words." See John Milton, The Works of John Milton: Artis Logicae, Ed. Frank Allen Patterson, Vol. XI (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1935), 17. Milton qualified and gave precedence to these three terms, noting that

Of all the arts the first and most general is logic, then grammar, then last of all rhetoric, since there can be much use of reason without speech, but no use of speech without reason. We give the second place to grammar because correct speech can be unadorned but it can hardly be adorned before it's correct. (*Artis Logicae*, 17)

Clark notes that Milton accepted logic, grammar and rhetoric as "[comprising the core] of the linguistic arts" (Clark, op. cit., p.3), and thus the foundation and starting point of a sound classical education. Milton's conceptualization of and insistence upon a chronological hierarchy of prerequisite skills in education, and the mastery of these skills can be traced back to this very chronological organization of the curriculum by his masters at school. See Clark, op. cit., p. 105.

first and most important argument"<sup>20</sup> or "that by the force of which a thing exists"<sup>21</sup>, that is, "it is the creator of the thing."<sup>22</sup> At this point, I will have to defer to Franklin Irwin, who offers a simplified example of the four modes of cause: the efficient, material, formal and end/final.

"The cabinet-maker made this wooden box, to contain jewels." The cabinet-maker, the creator of the box, is the efficient cause; it is a wooden box, without wood, the material cause, this box would not exist; it is distinguished from other wooden objects such as chairs and tables by its form; "to contain jewels" was the purpose or end in the mind of the efficient cause, the cabinet-maker, it is the final cause.

"The efficient is the cause by which the thing is, or is brought about"; it is the primary or initiating cause, and is the first in the order of time. Ramus calls it "procreante et conservante"; our cabinet-maker created the box and will conserve or maintain it when the box is in need of repair. The efficient cause may work alone or with other causes which are called secondary, helping or instrumental. The cabinet-maker may have only conceived the plan or design of the box, and given it to his apprentice to execute; the assistant would then be an instrumental cause of the existence of the box. God is an efficient cause; His helping causes are the Son, the Spirit, the Angels, and men. It is not necessary, however, for the efficient to operate through any other causes, for it can function from its own powers.<sup>23</sup>

Leon Howard notes that Milton was not entirely satisfied

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<sup>20</sup> Irwin, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>21</sup> Milton, Artis Logicae, I. iii. 29.

<sup>22</sup> Irwin, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp.34-35.

with Ramus' consideration of cause because "there was no apparent possibility of dividing the efficient cause into mutually exclusive species according to the proper method of dichotomy."<sup>24</sup> Thus, Milton continued the dichotomy by dividing the efficient cause into three subdivisions: procreant and maintaining, singly and with others, and by itself and by accident. The second category is dichotomized into singly and others, and others is, in turn, divided into principal and helping (causes) with the latter divided into impulsive and instrumental (causes). Although this is far from the end of the dichotomizing process, the purposes of this thesis do not warrant the additional burden of these endless subdivisions. Another important fact about Milton and his interpretation of Ramus' theory was his belief that "God can be [entirely dissociated] from other 'more proximate' efficient causes."<sup>25</sup> Inherent in this assertion is the retaining of the Miltonic concept of free will. In effect, Samson, just like Adam, was the principal cause of his own first disobedience or transgression. Although he was the principal cause, he was affected by certain explicable impulses or impulsive causes, that is lust, as well as by an instrument of deception, Dalila, who became the helping cause of Samson's breach of secrecy. Milton explicitly makes this

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<sup>24</sup> Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

distinction between principal and helping causes when he has Samson declare that "... of what now I suffer/ She [that is, Dalila] was not the prime cause, but I my self" (ll. 233-234). It was a combination of Milton's personal beliefs and the influence of his own classical education which accounted for this assertion.

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While Milton's education in the classics made him a devout disciple of the Greek tradition of debate, even Milton did not applaud all the classical traditions. Although he represented both debating styles in his works, Milton explicitly expressed both his respect for the Socratic rhetor and his contempt for the sophist.<sup>26</sup> Milton favoured the rhetor as the more honourable disputant, as he did not subject the art of verbal combat to the indignities of invalid and false argumentation exploited by the sophist. It is important to note that this distinction was not exclusive to Milton alone, for as John Steadman points out, "the traditional opposition between the two forms of disputation

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<sup>26</sup> Irene Samuel observes that "the lists in the Tractate suggest that Milton's view of education was 'Socratic', his concept of rhetoric largely 'Academic', and his ethical theory almost entirely Platonic." *Op.cit.*, p. 32.

can be traced back to the ancient Greeks."<sup>27</sup> It is a reflection of Milton's literary abilities that despite his disdain for sophistry, he was able to use the "difference between the two debating styles, which depended largely upon the speaker's moral purpose"<sup>28</sup>, to his advantage, by making the debating style reflect the character of the disputant who patronized it.

In order to appreciate how Milton achieved this end, one must be familiar with the differences between rhetoric and sophistry. Milton and classical historians define the "distinction between logic and sophistry [as] true and false eloquence, just and unjust discourse."<sup>29</sup> Similarly, contemporary dictionaries adhere to the traditional definition of rhetoric as "the study of the technique of using language effectively, the art of using speech to persuade or please."<sup>30</sup> In direct contrast, these same sources define sophistry as "a piece of plausible, but false reasoning intended to deceive or to display intellectual virtuosity."<sup>31</sup> Collins further claims it is "an argument

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<sup>27</sup> Steadman, Paradoxes, p. 112.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>30</sup> Patrick Hanks, ed., Collins Dictionary of the English Language, (Glasgow: William Collins & Co., Ltd., 1985), p. 1251.

<sup>31</sup> Bernard S. Cayne, ed., The New Lexicon Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language, (New York: Lexicon Publ. Inc., 1988), p. 947.

that is deliberately invalid specious or misleading."<sup>32</sup>

Gorgias, a popular sophist in his time, admitted the deceptive use of fallacious appeals to emotion in sophistic oratory when he intimated, according to Kennedy, that

the function of an orator is not logical demonstration so much as emotional presentation which will stir the audience's will to believe. Thus for Gorgias the power of persuasion involves deceiving "the emotional and mental state of listeners by artificially stimulating sensory reactions through words."<sup>33</sup>

One immediately recognizes that unlike that of sophistry, the definition of rhetoric lacks any implication that it uses or recognizes deliberate falsehoods as a valid basis for argument. While that is not to say, however, that the sophists based all of their arguments upon falsehoods, Frank Frost points out that their philosophy that "while truth helps, a lie can often be more persuasive"<sup>34</sup> did little to

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<sup>32</sup> Hanks, op. cit., p. 1388.

<sup>33</sup> George A. Kennedy, Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Traditions from Ancient to Modern Times, (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1980), p.31.

<sup>34</sup> The caution Milton offers his reader about the sophists who "could make the worse appear/ The better reason" (PL.II. 113-114) has a clear Platonic echo. (See Plato's Apology. II & Aristotle's Rhetoric. II. 24). Milton demonstrates his awareness that "the lie of a Sophist must always approach the truth if it is to be convincing" (Samuel, op cit., p. 118) in the arguments put forward by all of his sophistic characters, Dalila and Harapha among them. Of such sophists Milton warns his reader not to be taken in by their "high words, that [bear]/ Semblance of worth, not substance" (PL.I.528-529).

endear them to the Greeks.<sup>35</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that "the average Athenian distrusted the Sophists."<sup>36</sup> It is this very consensus of distrust toward the sophist which Milton plays upon in depicting Samson in the debates as the rhetorical champion of truth.

Aside from these distinctive features, Frost defines the essential difference between Socratic rhetoric and sophistry to be inherent in the actual goal of these two approaches. According to Frost, Socrates sought debate as a means of "defining guides for ethical conduct"<sup>37</sup> by which one acquired the knowledge and thus truth to transcend to a more spiritual realm. It is this higher realm of spiritual understanding which Samson aspires to in each debate. Because of this view, Socrates staunchly argued that there was only one right answer to every argument and this right answer is the only one that can and should be argued. This "golden rule" arose out of the classical belief that "knowledge is virtue" and to exhibit knowledge is to reason, which, in turn, was to exact justice. Thus, for the classicists and "Milton, justice is reason."<sup>38</sup> Essentially, this premise seems to parallel the

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<sup>35</sup> See Guthrie for an elaboration of this theme.

<sup>36</sup> Frank J. Frost, Greek Society, Third Ed., (Lexington: D. C. Heath & Co., 1987), p. 107.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>38</sup> Donald F. Bouchard, Milton: A Structural Reading, (London: Edward Arnold Publishers Ltd., 1974), p. 56. Irene Samuel opens the fifth chapter of her book with a very concise summary of this concept, citing that "knowledge is

classicists' assumption that eloquence was tantamount to truth. Thus, one can imagine the mortification of the Socratic rhetors when the verbal skills which they used "to search for knowledge and virtue"<sup>39</sup> were violated by sophists pretending to use the same skills, not for virtuous ends, but solely as a source of income. Not only did the Sophists violate the art of debate by accepting money, but they exceeded the bounds of all morality by demanding a fee to instruct young orators in the craft of persuasive perjury. Aristotle denounces such oratory, asserting that "when logic is prostituted to the support of false propositions, by the bad principles of its professors, it is branded with the name of sophistry, and the persons who misapply it are called sophists."<sup>40</sup> Similarly, "the word by which Milton expresses his contempt of false learning is 'sophistry'."<sup>41</sup>

The sophists' claim that "there were always two equal and opposite answers to every question and that they could teach

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the ultimate goal of all men's striving... Further knowledge, by producing wisdom produces all virtue- justice, fortitude, and temperance being so many aspects of the single habit of choice that results from vision of truth." Op. cit., p. 101.

<sup>39</sup> Frost, op. cit., p. 112.

<sup>40</sup> Aristotle, Rhetoric, I. ii. 10. Milton associates sophistry with vice, making the two synonymous. See Milton's Artis Logicae, II. x. 403.

<sup>41</sup> A contempt which Milton articulated both throughout the Third *Prolusion* and by appending the label to his political and theological adversaries. See Samuel, op. cit., pp. 106-107.



people to win any argument on either side"<sup>42</sup> "offended many Greeks."<sup>43</sup> And if the approach itself did not offend people, the absence of some higher spiritual and moral goal in sophistry certainly did, as the sophists' maxim that "knowledge was an end in itself" seemed to epitomize moral heresy.<sup>44</sup> In light of these differences, one can appreciate Milton's masterful manipulation of the two debating styles by which Samson becomes the rhetorical paragon of spiritual and intellectual heroism battling sophistic interlocutors who espouse falsehoods.

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<sup>42</sup> Frost, op. cit., p. 109.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>44</sup> See Aristotle's Rhetoric, I. i. note 23. 10-11.

## II

## The Internal Dialectic

It is significant that the first debate (l. 23 ff.) should be an "internal intellectual struggle, that is a self-divided debate"<sup>1</sup>, for it is only by reconciling the conflicts within himself that Samson can hope to overcome the external threats to his faith. "At the beginning of the play, Samson is clearly incapable of harmonious reasoning"<sup>2</sup>. As a result, "the structure of the debate imitates a mind turned against itself and against God"<sup>3</sup>. By accepting that he himself was the author of his fall (ll. 44-46), Samson illustrates a mind turned against itself. Similarly, in questioning (ll. 30-36), almost demanding "why" (ll. 30, 85, 93) God has so used him, Samson demonstrates a mind turned against God. It is due to these contrary passions that, while Samson reprimands himself for questioning the will of God exclaiming,

But peace, I must not quarrel with the will  
Of highest dispensation, which herein  
Happ'ly had ends above my reach to know,

(ll. 60-63)

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Ann Radzinowicz, Towards Samson Agonistes: The Growth of Milton's Mind, (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

he simultaneously experiences a compelling need to debate the issue with himself. Burnett summarizes Samson's "torment as a mental and self-inflicted"<sup>4</sup> conflict, while Hyman sees it as a product of Samson's unabating insistence "for a rational answer for his suffering"<sup>5</sup>. In effect, Samson's internal debate represents "his despair brought about not by unbelief, but by faith, a faith however, that cannot be satisfied by his reason"<sup>6</sup> at the outset of the play.<sup>7</sup> Thus, until Samson "attains perfect heroic balance"<sup>8</sup> between faith and reason, he will not be able to "overcome his self-doubts and despair and rededicate himself to his divinely appointed office as the champion of Jehovah"<sup>9</sup>.

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This very clash and imbalance between faith and reason is

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<sup>4</sup> Archie Burnett, Milton's Style: The Shorter Poems, Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes, (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1981), p. 151.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence W. Hyman, The Quarrel Within: Art and Morality in Milton's Poetry, (New York: Kennikat Press, 1972), p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> A reasonable question to raise then would be: "is it Samson's faith or his reasoning that is in need of repair?" The classical authorities, namely Aristotle, would claim the latter, contending that individuals like Samson, who are not sophists, but who make sophistic statements, are demonstrating the effects of their faulty reasoning, rather than the effects of a faulty faith. For an elaboration of this distinction see page sixty-three of this thesis.

<sup>8</sup> Radzinowicz, op. cit., p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Steadman, Paradoxes, p. 254.

only too apparent throughout Samson's internal dialectic. Samson's efforts to reconcile the two cause him a great deal of mental and spiritual anguish. And despite his agonized cries that "chief of all/ O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!" (ll. 66-67), Samson's monologues clearly indicate that neither his blindness, bondage, loss of strength, nor his degradation through "servile toyl" (l. 5) cause him as much pain as God's lost favour and the loss of his special relationship with his Maker. Moreover, nothing pains Samson so much as the fact that he himself was responsible for and initiated that breach of friendship and trust of his own volition, when it was his duty and within his power, both as servant and friend, to respect and honour "The mystery of God giv'n him under pledge/ Of vow" (ll. 378-379). It is this severed friendship with God which accounts for his desire for death and thus an end to the mental and spiritual torment which assails him unceasingly "like a deadly swarm/ Of Hornets arm'd" (ll. 19-20).

It logically follows then that if Samson cannot be entrusted with fulfilling a simple task of secrecy, how then can he possibly be depended upon to fulfill the far more demanding work of defeating the Philistines. By allowing himself to indulge in self-pitying and despairing arguments Samson demonstrates his lack of faith in God's infinite forgiveness towards those who are truly penitent. More

importantly, however, he displays a mental and spiritual weakness by succumbing to such sophistic syllogisms as the following:

Why was my breeding order'd and prescrib'd  
 As of a person separate to God,  
 Design'd for great exploits; if I must dye  
 Betray'd, Captiv'd, and both my Eyes put out,  
 Made of my Enemies the scorn and gaze;  
 To grind in Brazen Fetters under task  
 With this Heav'n-gifted strength? O glorious strength  
 Put to the labour of a Beast, debas't  
 Lower then bondslave! Promise was that I  
 Should *Israel* from *Philistian* yoke deliver;  
 Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him  
 Eyeless in Gaza at the Mill with slaves,  
 Himself in bonds under *Philistian* yoke.

(11. 30-42)

Inherent in these lines is what may loosely be referred to as the fallacy of negative proof put forth by Samson's sophistic self. Such a fallacy contends that since there is no proof indicating that Samson is God's appointed champion and much evidence of God's disfavour with him, Samson is not God's servant.

Samson's sophistic fallacy takes the form of an enthymeme, that is, an argument with a suppressed conclusion, as Churchill is wont to label it.<sup>10</sup> The first premise states that God promised Samson that he was "Design'd for great

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<sup>10</sup> See Churchill, op. cit., pp. 27-29, 189-190.

exploits", namely to free Israel from Philistian rule (ll. 30-32). The second premise asserts that Samson is betrayed, in bonds under the Philistines and blind (ll. 33-35, 40-42). The suppressed or implied premise in this argument may be found in lines thirty-two through thirty-three in which Samson bewails that he will die in this degenerate state of incapacity and bondage. From these premises follows the suppressed or implied conclusion: "therefore I will not deliver Israel from the Philistine yoke, and God has broken his promise."<sup>11</sup> Samson's refusal to admit, at this point, that of the two he, and not God, was the first and only one to break his promise confirms that the sophist in him is hard at work. This implicit complaint that God is not dealing fairly with Samson is one which his sophistic persona is wont to subtly reiterate when lacking a stronger argument. Samson also takes advantage of this argument in order to deflect attention from the real offender and source of this breach. As a sophist Samson attempts to capitalize upon this concept of a fickle God who maliciously "led [him] on" (l. 638) and then reneged on His promise, with the result that Samson is

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<sup>11</sup> Stanley Fish, "Question and Answer in *Samson Agonistes*." Critical Quarterly, VII (1969), 248. In relating Fish's synopsis of this obvious enough argument, I have taken the liberty of expanding Fish's interpretation of Samson's logic by employing Churchill's labels of the enthymeme and the suppressed premise and conclusion, as the subtle implications of each seem to be in keeping with my argument of sophistic ploys.

"Left... all helpless" (l. 644). By repeating the idea that a "promise" (ll. 38 and 635) was broken Samson, as sophist, endeavours to convince his audience of his own guiltless victimization as a result of "Heav'n's desertion" (l. 632).

As a sophist Samson is aware of the persuasive power of words. This awareness is displayed in his reiteration of the word "promise" (ll. 38 and 635) and in his meticulous choice of prejudicial phrases such as "He led me on...", and "Left me all helpless..." (ll. 638 and 644 respectively). Possibly the most self-absolving of these phrases are those intimating the occasion "of Heav'n's desertion" (l. 632) as the act of a cruel deity who "now hath cast [Samson] off as never known" (l. 641). By assuming the role of the faultless party in this relationship, and focusing on his suffering as a result of this breach, Samson erects a smokescreen intended to deflect attention from the fact that he initiated this breach. Similarly, by refusing to admit that it was he who decided not to honour his agreement with God, Samson, by implication, denies that his breach automatically frees God from fulfilling his part of the promise.

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The rhetor in Samson seems to gain some ground when

Samson begins to ponder the possibility of his own culpability and refute the previous arguments put forward by the sophist. Having debated God's justice and his own degree of guilt, Samson undercuts his preceding sophistic assertions of his ill-treatment at the hands of a temperamental deity with the following rhetorical rejoinder:

Yet stay, let me not rashly call in doubt  
 Divine Prediction; what if all foretold  
 Had been fulfill'd but through mine own default  
 Whom have I to complain of but myself?

(ll. 43-46)

Although he recognizes his guilt, Samson remains in the grips of self-pity and anger with himself which leaves him in the depths of despair. Even without the Chorus' observation that Samson has assumed the state of mind "As one past hope, abandon'd/ And by himself given over" (ll. 120-121), the reader is given ample insight into the degree of despair into which Samson has thrown himself:

Nor am I in the list of them that hope;  
 Hopeless are all my evils, all remediless;  
 This one prayer yet remains, might I be heard,  
 No long petition, speedy death,  
 The close of all my miseries, and the balm.

(ll. 647-651)

Such speeches assume added impetus when preceded by Samson's



impassioned request for a pardon from God which he despairs of receiving even before articulating the request. As a result Samson undercuts his very petition for forgiveness by denying its possibility: "His pardon I implore; but as for life/ To what end should I seek it?" (ll. 521-522) While recounting God's infinite goodness, Samson contradicts himself by asserting that he has nothing for which to live or hope. Such pessimism increases the gap between Samson and his Maker because it makes Samson guilty of a lack of faith in God's mercy, as well as ungrateful for the gift of life. Samson's guilt lies in his refusal to embrace either at this point. In effect, Samson demonstrates that he is remorseful, but not repentant. To be truly repentant one must cease to offend. And Samson's despair proves to be a repeated offence. It is not until he rejects the world of comfort, lasciviousness and pride offered by Manoa, Dalila and Harapha, respectively, that Samson is able to conquer his despair. In effect, each debate seems to bring Samson closer to an assertive rejection of the impulsive causes of his sin against God.

Although Samson's acknowledgement of his own culpability is clearly a movement towards, rather than away from, his heroic reinstatement, this acknowledgement soon proves to be double-edged. Christian authorities define despair as a sin, because it is an infraction against faith. Samson's

inability to accept guilt without coupling it with despair is, thus, representative of a regression in his healing process. In conceding his own guilt Samson effectually removes the blame he previously allotted to God and redirects it towards its rightful source. Thus, he demonstrates a greater control over his intellectual faculties, as well as a respect for the truth. However, when he finally reaches a rational state in which he can appreciate the magnitude and effects of his transgressions, he negates his previous progress by degenerating into a state of severe despair, which directs his cognitive abilities.

The debilitating effects of such despair upon Samson's intellectual processes is clearly demonstrated in lines forty-three through forty-six. These lines (ll. 43-46) represent just one of many vacillations between Samson's acceptance and then refutation of the truth. And while each debate clearly brings Samson closer to his heroic reinstatement, it is not until the end of his verbal confrontation with Harapha (ll. 1156-1177) that a more acceptable, if not completely perfect, champion of God and truth emerges. That is why, in lines such as forty-three to forty-six, after seeming to have quieted, if not proven himself master over, his sophistic cries of despair the reader can witness a resurgence of such sophistic cries as the following:

This onely hope relieves me, that the strife  
 With me hath end, all the contest is now  
 'Twixt God and *Dagon*; *Dagon* hath presum'd,  
 Me overthrown, to enter lists with God,  
 His deity comparing and preferring  
 Before the God of Abraham. He, be sure,  
 Will not connive or linger, thus provok'd,  
 But will arise and his great name assert:  
*Dagon* must stoop, and shall e're long receive  
 Such a discomfit, as shall quite despoil him  
 Of all these boasted Trophies won on me...  
 .....  
 Now blind, dishearten'd, sham'd, dishonour'd, quell'd  
 To what can I be useful...  
 (ll. 460-470, 563-564, my emphasis)

This excerpt significantly illustrates that although Samson has faith that God will yet triumph over the Philistines, he demonstrates an equally strong conviction that he will not play his "prescribed" (l. 30) role in their subjugation. This being the case, Samson bemoans his prolonged existence as useless. In so doing he once again repeats the offence of calling into question "heavenly disposition" (l. 373). While his faith is capable of envisaging a contest between God and *Dagon*, it cannot envisage himself as even a remote, let alone an integral, part of that contest. As a result, Samson laments his continued existence (ll. 563-564) if and only if he must live life as an ordinary man. The source of this lament stems from Samson's *hubris*. Samson's preoccupation with his own honour, blemished at the hands of the Philistines, taints even his assertion of faith (ll. 462-463, 468-470). Samson lived life convinced of his own superiority

to other men, because he was a chosen servant of God. But, if he cannot live life distinguished from other men by a superhuman gift of strength and a chosen role, he neither sees nor exhibits any purpose or will to live. By Samson's own proud definition of the value of life, the average man is useless and ill-equipped to serve God. Samson perceived his service as preferable to God and superior in worth when compared to that of the average man. Before he can resume his role as God's champion Samson must practise and learn humility, and that "they also serve who only stand and wait."<sup>12</sup> Once Samson can unconditionally accept this maxim, and his own fallibility, he will prove himself to be repentant as well as remorseful, and thus worthy to be God's servant.

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Prior to the realization of such worthiness our Miltonic hero digresses into a number of self-absolving and sophistic arguments. To begin, Samson asserts that God inspired him to marry his first wife:

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<sup>12</sup> See Milton's sonnet "When I Consider How My Light is Spent", l. 14 in Hughes, op. cit., p. 168.

The first I saw at *Timna*, and she pleas'd  
 Mee, not my Parents, that I sought to wed,  
 The daughter of an Infidel: they knew not  
 That what I motion'd was of God.

(ll. 219-222)

But when she "[proved] false" (l. 227) Samson marries his second wife, Dalila, whom God did not counsel him to marry. But Samson, reasoning by association, rationalizes that marrying Dalila is justified by precedence, as he asserts "I thought it lawful from my former act,/ And the same end" (ll. 231-232). God approved and sanctioned Samson's first marriage to a Philistine; He even bid that such a marriage take place. So, God would then, based on precedence, have no reasonable grounds for objecting to Samson's second marriage outside of his tribe, since the "occasion" (l. 224) or circumstances of marrying a Philistine woman were similar and therefore the means by which "[he] might begin *Israel's* Deliverance" (l. 225).

The fallacy of Samson's faulty logic is obvious. Samson allows the sophistic fallacy of unwarranted assumptions<sup>13</sup> to mask the true motives of his acts. In this particular syllogism Samson takes a specific and isolated incident in which God sanctioned his first marriage outside of his tribe and nation, and makes an unwarranted and groundless assumption by applying its precedence to all generalities or

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<sup>13</sup> See Churchill, *op. cit.*, pp.183, 249, 412 ff.

parallel circumstances, because to do so satisfies and somehow authorizes his own desires. For obvious reasons Churchill refers to this specific fallacy of unwarranted assumptions as the wishful thinking fallacy.<sup>14</sup> In a moment of sophistic flourish Samson's argument takes the following form: Dalila is not a Nazarite, neither was my first spouse. God not only approved, but motioned me to marry my first wife in order that I might begin the subjugation of her people. Therefore, my marriage to Dalila is sanctioned by God. The leap in logic which Samson makes in this rationalization is only too apparent. Samson's logic is nothing if not self-serving. Samson employs this sophistic argument, intimating that his union with Dalila was one which he initiated on behalf of his feelings of religious and national responsibility. Recognizing that lust, the real motive for his union, does not escape his audience's perception, Samson degenerates into sophistic equivocation by claiming that the ends justify the means: "I thought it lawful.../ And the same end" (ll. 231-232). In the latter of these two lines Samson subtly intimates that he is absolved of his lust and presumption in marrying Dalila because, distasteful as these means are to God, they would facilitate the end, the subjugation of the Philistines, which God had intended Samson

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<sup>14</sup> See Churchill, op. cit., pp. 429-432.

to fulfill. The Socratic rhetoricians would take issue with such a premise by insisting that one's ends and means be justified in and of themselves, that is they should justify themselves-- you cannot lie to get at the truth. And Samson cannot sin in order to serve God. In effect, brief as these two lines (ll. 231-232) are, each infers a fallacy in itself, and each is intended to present Samson as one who sacrificed rather than sinned. The reader who accepts the basic tenets of such logical manipulation is the reader who gives in to sophistry.

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A number of critics have acknowledged the importance that Samson's epithet plays in foreshadowing his natural tendency to engage in debate. The epithet "Agonistes" is a "rhetorical term denoting 'the attempt to overcome an adversary in argument,'"<sup>15</sup>. It is not until after Samson accepts that "he is his own worst enemy"<sup>16</sup> (ll. 44-46) that he begins to tread a path toward heroic reinstatement. Despite the fact that Samson initiates the possibility of self-fault, he does not accept the premise immediately.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert L. Entzminger, Divine Word, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1985), p. 162.

<sup>16</sup> Burnett, op. cit. p. 151.

Indeed, the suggestion that he is "the Sole author" (l. 376) of his fate serves to foster self-debate. First the rhetor (ll. 49-50) in Samson bluntly, yet truthfully, informs him that "his carelessness with words has played a crucial role in his downfall"<sup>17</sup>, to which the sophist in him characteristically responds on unrelated grounds, belittling God's gift to him as unbalanced (ll. 53-59) and the direct cause of his misjudgement: "This with the other should, at least, have pair'd,/ These two proportion'd ill drove me transverse" (ll. 208-209). The subsequent responses of the rhetor parallel those of a faithful champion of God: "But peace! I must not quarrel with the will/ Of highest dispensation" (ll. 60-62). In the process of this "inward dialectic"<sup>18</sup> one is confronted with the rhetorician in Samson who, espousing the ideal that "right reason is nothing else than the distinction of true and false"<sup>19</sup>, seeks to extract the truth, even if that quest should necessitate self-abnegation.

In direct contrast, the sophist in Samson endeavours to win the inner debate at all costs and to do so without incurring self-blame. Truth, therefore, in keeping with the classical tradition, is not an issue for the sophist. Thus

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<sup>17</sup> Entzminger, *op. cit.* p. 160.

<sup>18</sup> Radzinowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>19</sup> Bouchard, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-134.



he, that is the sophist in Samson, presents the convincing, yet misleading plea of innocence on the grounds that Samson was given a "raw deal" by God who made him "[impotent] of mind [but] in body strong" (l. 52). For this reason the sophist falsely counsels Samson to accept "that evils have befallen him unluckily or without reason"<sup>20</sup> and to indulge in self-pity at the injustice of a seemingly temperamental God. But the rhetor in Samson is quick to assert that it was a disproportionate sense of pride and not intelligence which led to his misdemeanour:

Fearless of danger, like a petty God  
 I walk'd about admir'd of all and dreaded  
 On hostile ground, none daring my affront.  
 Then swoll'n with pride into the snare I fell  
 Of fair fallacious looks, venereal trains,  
 Softn'd with pleasure and voluptuous life.  
 (ll. 529-534)

It is not until the arrival of Dalila that Samson gets an opportunity to prove his immunity and disdain for the "softn'd" life of ease and lust which he once indulged in with her. Not only must Samson reject such a sinful life, but he must do so freely, just as freely as he once embraced such a life. The fact that Samson emerges victorious during this "test of faith" by refusing to succumb to the arguments

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<sup>20</sup> Burnett, op. cit., p. 153.

of the sophist illustrates a "heroic mind battling with itself and achieving true integration"<sup>21</sup>. This integration finds expression in Samson's acceptance of the Chorus' conclusion: "Just are the ways of God/ And justifiable to men" (ll. 293-294).

By far the most poignant example of "Samson's growing control over words reflecting his spiritual convalescence"<sup>22</sup> occurs when Samson reprimands Manoa (ll. 373-375)<sup>23</sup> for

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<sup>21</sup> Radzinowicz, op.cit., p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> While there are those who would and who have argued that Samson's interaction with his father represents one of the three sections or debates in *Samson Agonistes*, I am inclined to interpret Samson's confrontation with Manoa not so much as a debate, but as a reiteration and confirmation of that which was established in Samson's preceding debate with himself. That is, in his debate with himself, Samson questions both God's competence and His fairness in His dealings with man. The inner dialectic between the sophist and the rhetorician within himself eventually allows Samson to accept the truth that he is the "Sole author" (l. 376), or principal cause, as Milton would have it, of his fall. Having reconciled himself to the fact of his own guilt Samson is now confronted with his father. But Manoa simply revisits those very same issues and raises the same objections to and queries concerning God's competence (ll. 356-360) and fairness (ll. 368-372) which Samson has already resolved within himself. In effect, Manoa is seen passing through those stages of growth from which Samson has already graduated. As a result, the normative teacher-student role between father and son is reversed and Samson is seen consoling his father and counselling him to "Appoint not heavenly disposition.../ [since] Nothing of all these evils hath befall'n [him]/ But justly" (ll. 373-375). For this reason I would argue that Manoa is clearly not an intellectual and spiritual foil to Samson in the same way that Dalila and Harapha are. Moreover, he is an inadequate interlocutor from whom Samson, at this point, could learn very little. On the contrary, Samson's relationship with his father is such that Samson must be the tutor. Thus, it would seem that Manoa's role in

doubting God's competence, yet he himself one hundred and sixty-three lines earlier had to be similarly reproached by the Chorus to "Tax not divine disposal" (l. 210). This interchange is significant insofar as it illustrates how Samson's spiritual and intellectual growth, during the course of his self-debate, has allowed him to accept that "he will triumph over the Philistines after first having triumphed over himself by exercising his strength of mind"<sup>24</sup>. In retrospect, Samson's victory over his sophistic self, by adhering to the traditional virtues of rhetoric, makes him a champion of truth, worthy of the classical "laurel" (l. 1735) symbolizing such heroic achievement.

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*Samson Agonistes* is confined to reinforcing the fact that Samson is undergoing not only a spiritual convalescence, but also an intellectual period of growth. Moreover, the fact that Samson and Manoa are not spiritual adversaries, but members of the same faith renders a debate between Samson and his father unnecessary, as Manoa does not pose a threat to Samson's faith in the way that Dalila and Harapha, who are his spiritual adversaries, do.

<sup>24</sup> Steadman, *Paradoxes*, p. 254.

## III

## Samson Versus Dalila

"Mary Ann Radzinowicz has argued that it is through debate that Samson achieves both an integration of his personality and truth."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Steadman claims that "ethically, the debates mark the progressive stages of Samson's reviving virtue"<sup>2</sup>, and for this reason "the debate with Dalila produces less a change than a stage of growth."<sup>3</sup> His debate with the accomplished sophist, Dalila, proves to be a most rigorous trial of his faith, indeed. As a result "the debate between truth and falsehood, right reason and sophistry occupies a prominent position in *Samson Agonistes*"<sup>4</sup>. This fact explains "the use of language as offensive and defensive weapons"<sup>5</sup> in the verbal warfare between Samson and Dalila. Dalila confronts Samson initially with the defensive excuse that she hurt Samson through an act of human folly, which should be forgiven by Samson as all humans are prone to fallibility (ll. 773-788). "Samson answers her overt point by the decision to forgive her

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas O. Sloane, Donne, Milton and the End of Humanist Rhetoric, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1985), p. 277.

<sup>2</sup> Steadman, Paradoxes, p. 254.

<sup>3</sup> Sloane, op. cit., p. 278.

<sup>4</sup> Steadman, Paradoxes, p. 132.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Mustazza, "Such Prompt Eloquence": Language as Agency and Character in Milton's Epics, (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1988), p. 132.

weakness as much as he forgives his own, which is not at all"<sup>6</sup> (ll. 824-826):

I to myself was false ere thou to me;  
 Such pardon therefore as I give my folly,  
 Take to thy wicked deed: .....  
 .....  
 ..... Weakness is thy excuse,  
 .....  
 .....: if weakness may excuse,  
 What Murderer, what Traitor, Parricide,  
 Incestuous, Sacrilegious, but may plead it?  
 All wickedness is weakness: that plea therefore  
 With God or Man will gain thee no remission.  
(ll. 824-826, 829, 831-835)

Samson's decision to withhold his forgiveness arises out of his recognition of the fact that in trusting Dalila so freely with his secret, and thus violating his vow of secrecy, he demonstrated that he distrusted God. Similarly, by now refusing to validate Dalila's sophistic and self-absolving arguments and give in to her renewed sexual overtures, Samson reaffirms his trust in God.

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Dalila initiates a debate with Samson convinced that she can win Samson over once again by using arguments founded

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<sup>6</sup> Radzinowicz, op. cit., p. 38.

upon fallacious appeals to emotion<sup>7</sup>. Her confidence in her own powers of persuasion rests on the fact that it was the emotion of passion which Samson willfully harboured for Dalila which allowed her to subjugate him in the first place. Thus, it is Samson's duty to prove Dalila wrong and resist both Dalila and his own impulsive cause of lust, both of which contributed to his initial breach. That resisting Dalila's flesh still proves to be a trial for Samson is evident in his plea to the chorus that they "let her not come near [him]" (l. 725) and in his impassioned command that Dalila not touch him (ll. 951-953). The fact that Dalila confronts Samson in this debate, equipping herself with perfume (l. 720) and hoping to win a convert in Samson again by touching him when she has exhausted all of her sophistic arguments in reserve, attests to her sophistic willingness to pervert the traditional and normative rules of interaction between the disputants during the course of a debate. Dalila demonstrates such sophistic inclinations in her attempts to incorporate physical contact between herself and Samson when fallacious words, arguments and rebuttals fail to produce the desired effect.

While Samson clearly emerges victorious from this

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<sup>7</sup> See Churchill, *op. cit.*, pp. 437-438. On pp. 411-444 Churchill offers a comprehensive discussion of various fallacies and their common uses.

confrontation with Dalila by willing himself not to fall victim to the lust which once paralyzed him and consequently made him deny God, he remains unconscious of his real victory: that by rejecting Dalila whom he once favoured before God, he is once again embracing God. While Samson is clearly moving towards an heroic reinstatement he remains removed from its full achievement by allowing his overweening sense of pride to interpret Dalila's arrival as God's way of debasing him (l. 999), rather than as a test of Samson's repentance and renouncement of his sinful ways.

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Perceiving his inclination to blame himself for his present situation Dalila, ever the sophistic opportunist, endeavours to take advantage of Samson's mood by laying all of the blame for Samson's present condition at his door:

Was it not weakness also to make known  
 For importunity, that is for naught,  
 Wherein consisted all thy strength and safety?  
 To what I did thou show'd'st me first the way.  
 But I to enemies reveal'd, and should not.  
 Nor shouldst thou have trusted that to woman's frailty:  
 Ere I to thee, thou to thyself wast cruel.

(ll. 778-784)

This self-righteous chastisement and recounting of Samson's

errors, however, hardly seems to be the approach one would recommend in order to seek forgiveness. But Dalila is bent on deflecting all blame from herself. And what little fault she does concede is hardly sincere. Moreover, she refuses to assume any personal fault, as she credits the origin of her sins not to herself, their rightful source, but to the entire female race. In effect, her sin is not her own, "but incident to all [her] sex" (l. 774). By employing such a genetic fallacy<sup>8</sup> this sophist subtly diminishes the magnitude of her own transgression, attributing it to others, primarily Samson, and asserting that hers is a common fault. In between all of these self-absolving apologies Dalila inserts a solitary line of guilt (l. 782). Bordered by so many and so potent and accusing assertions, this only line conferring any guilt on herself is almost imperceptible, which is just as Dalila intended. The line is merely a token gesture of repentance on Dalila's part. Samson, however, recognizes this line and Dalila's accompanying arguments for what they are, sophistic rationalizations intended to play upon his emotional state of mind. But

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<sup>8</sup> I am not referring to the technical definition of a genetic fallacy such as that offered by Churchill, *op. cit.*, pp. 442-443 of his book. By genetic fallacy I am referring to Dalila's fallacious inductive argument that her disloyalty to Samson is a direct function of her sex, rather than her personality. In effect, Dalila implies that she cannot possibly be held accountable for the inherent genetic weaknesses of her sex.



Samson is impervious to Dalila's method of "adding salt to the wound" in order to solicit a pardon. Denouncing her reproaches as "bitter... but true" (l. 823) he notes

How cunningly the sorceress displays  
 Her own transgressions, to upbraid me mine?  
 That malice not repentance brought thee hither,  
 By this appears.

(ll. 819-822)

For repentance, as with love, if truly felt as Dalila professes, would try to console Samson in his pain rather than aggravate his suffering by elaborating upon his sins and singling him out as the source of all the blame.

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When Dalila realizes that her efforts to capitalize on Samson's mood are failing she once more alters her strategy and seeks to score points with Samson by now claiming that "virtue", "truth" and "duty", both religious and political, were the real motives for her actions. Dalila's decision to claim virtue, truth and duty as motives stems from her awareness of the high value which Samson himself places upon all three. Denouncing the motives which Dalila offers as "smooth hypocrisy" (l. 872), Samson proceeds to refute, one by one, all of her sophistic assertions. The first argument

Samson attends to is the one in which Dalila pleads her genetic weakness. Samson denies that Dalila's weakness is a function of her sex. Rather he asserts that Dalila's "weakness" is not attributable to all women, but to a gross lust for "*Philistian gold*" (ll. 830-831), a lust peculiar to Dalila alone. Samson is frank and implacable in his rhetorical assessment of Dalila's behaviour; he counters Dalila's sophistic subtlety with rhetorical bluntness and truth. While Dalila is careful not to label her past actions as sins or wrongs, but rather as "weaknesses", Samson is adamant in his refusal to mitigate either his own or Dalila's crimes with comforting labels and half truths. Thus, Samson offers challenges for each and every one of Dalila's sophistic assertions. To Dalila's claim that she was

Solicited, commanded, threaten'd, urg'd  
 Adjur'd by all the bonds of civil Duty  
 And of Religion...  
 ..... to entrap  
 A common enemy

(ll. 852-856)

Samson offers a rhetorical question which clearly contradicts her assertions that she "judg'd [Samson] an enemy" (l. 882) and was working toward "the public good" (l. 867) by treating him as such:

..... Why then  
 Didst thou at first receive me for thy husband  
 Then, as since then, thy country's foe profest?  
 (ll. 882-884)

Samson here credits Dalila's arguments of being motivated by a sense of national and political duty as specious at best. For if she was truly moved by national concerns she would not have married Samson in the first place, since honouring such obligations would have prevented Dalila from befriending Samson, let alone embracing him as her spouse. But, since she did marry the conqueror of her people, Dalila, following the strain of her own logic, committed an act of treason, rather than one of national duty. Moreover, as Samson is still considered the enemy of the Philistines, Dalila's renewed overtures to re-establish friendly relations with Samson can only be interpreted as national desertion and fickleness at best.

Samson further refutes Dalila's claims of national duty by pointing out that such loyalty, if truly felt, would have demanded that she embrace Samson's political and religious loyalties and renounce those to which she herself was born:

Being once a wife, for me thou wast to leave  
 Parents and country; nor was I their subject,  
 Not under their protection but my own,  
 Thou mine, not theirs.

(ll. 885-888)

Samson qualifies his argument by deftly pointing out that

..... if aught against my life  
 Thy country sought of thee, it sought unjustly,  
 Against the law of nature, law of nations,  
 No more thy country, but an impious crew  
 Of men conspiring to uphold thir state  
 By worse than hostile deeds, violating the ends  
 For which our country is a name so dear;  
 Not therefore to be obey'd.

(ll. 888-895)

Samson plainly informs Dalila that he is not oblivious to the fact that she is constantly changing the basis of her plea for forgiveness as well as her reasons for her betrayal of him. Her inability to remain loyal even to her own arguments for any length of time causes Samson to respond with unmasked disgust towards Dalila's claims of being moved by her sense of religious conviction:

..... But zeal mov'd thee;  
 To please thy gods thou didst it; gods unable  
 To acquit themselves and prosecute their foes  
 But by ungodly deeds, the contradiction  
 Of thir own deity, Gods cannot be:  
 Less therefore to be pleas'd, obey'd, or fear'd.

(ll. 895-900)

Implicit in this excerpt, particularly lines eight hundred and ninety-six through eight hundred and ninety-eight, is the sophistic equivocation that the ends justify the means. Having denied himself the benefit of self-absolution by a

parallel sophistic argument earlier in the play (ll. 231-232) Samson is not about to concede such fallacious premises at this point in order to accommodate Dalila. But despite the fact that Samson informs her that it is "In vain [that she] striv'st to cover shame with shame,/ [For] by evasions [her] crime uncoverst more" (ll. 841-842)<sup>9</sup>, Dalila, in true sophistic spirit, refrains from responding to Samson's rebuttals and simply proceeds to argue her innocence on new grounds. It is little wonder therefore that Dalila's malipulation of the debate in which she indiscriminantly chooses to assume new arguments without responding to those presented by Samson has earned her a number of unflattering epithets. While hardly conclusive in and of themselves the various appellations such as "that specious Monster" (l. 230), "my faithless enemy" (l. 380), "my traitress" (l. 725), "a manifest serpent by her sting" (l. 997), which precede and follow Dalila's entrance, in conjunction with her willingness to exploit her sophistic tendencies, and seemingly endless

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<sup>9</sup> Both Louis L. Martz and William Riley Parker in their respective books Poet of Exile: A Study of Milton's Poetry, p. 284, and Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy in Samson Agonistes, p. 126, make interesting cases for Dalila as a moral and intellectual twin of Helen of Troy, as depicted by Euripides in the latter half of the *Troades*. Both Dalila and Helen offer patriotism and religion as excuses, as well as female weakness. Like Dalila, Helen presents herself before Menelaus suing for forgiveness while dressed in finery bought with Trojan gold. Martz seems more inclined than Parker to wonder if Milton used the *Troades* as a model for his female sophist.

powers of persuasive perjury, do much to confirm Samson's denunciation of her as a "fallacious Bride" (l. 320) and unprincipled verbal combatant.

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Even before Samson deflates all of her arguments and motives as meretricious, Dalila attempts to evaluate her rhetorical opponent. Being an accomplished sophist and debator, in general, Dalila first tests the level of sophistry she must employ against Samson by beginning with the weakest possible fallacy one can, that is an *ad hominem tu quoque* fallacy<sup>10</sup>. By this strategy, Dalila shows herself to be a most competent verbal adversary who knows how to keep in reserve her more potent verbal artillery until the situation should warrant its use. Based on her previous experience with Samson, Dalila infers that she probably will not have to exhaust her mental and oral energies in order to deceive Samson once again. Such reasoning would be sound if Samson had not mentally, and thus spiritually, progressed from his previous state of "impotence of mind, in body strong" (l. 52). The recognition of Samson's changed state

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<sup>10</sup> Hughes in his editorial notes defines such fallacious logic or reasoning with the term antistrophon, (p. 692, n. 15).

alerts Dalila to the fact that only her most sophisticated dissimulations and sophistries will be worthy of use in her rebuttal against her now inspired opponent. Thus, Samson's denunciation of Dalila's "circling wiles" (l. 871) is a most appropriate metaphor for the sophist who employs *non-sequitur* fallacies and "circling" arguments which merely beg the question. Milton manipulates this metaphor in order to accentuate the contrast between the circling fallacies of the sophist and the logically linear arguments of the rhetor.

"To Dalila's second argument of love (ll. 811-814), Samson counters a definition: Dalila was moved by lust not love, for love does not seek possession or enslavement (ll. 836-837), it seeks love"<sup>11</sup> (l. 837). Dalila's argument of love represents a fallacious appeal to tradition, as well as emotion. As an appeal to emotion, generally, and an appeal to sympathy or the gallery, more specifically, this fallacy represents one of the most elementary of all fallacious appeals, since an honourable rhetorician would never knowingly subjugate either the art of debate or his own arguments to emotive, rather than logical appeals. The essence of this fallacious appeal is self-explanatory. As its name implies, by citing her love for Samson (ll. 790-793, 807-810, 863) and their mutual fallibility (ll. 773-774, 784-

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<sup>11</sup> Radzinowicz, op. cit., p. 38.

786) as reasons for her mistreatment of him, Dalila endeavours to conceal the real motives for her betrayal while calling attention to the similarities between Samson and herself. By calling for their sympathetic union in their time of mutual misery and assaulting his faculties of reason with emotional appeals Dalila endeavours to deflect attention from the fact that she betrayed Samson.

Dalila's appeal to tradition, also called an *ad verecundiam* fallacy, is a species of the genus fallacy known as an appeal to authority.<sup>12</sup> Being one of the most basic of all fallacies, according to Robert Churchill's hierarchy of common fallacies, the *ad verecundiam* represents an appeal to common practices and to what everyone else does or believes. The rationale of Dalila's fallacy, in this case, argues in favour of precedence: "everyone in the past has been willing to accept this argument or excuse, why can't you?" Dalila continues her sophistic syllogism by insisting that

These reason's in Love's law have pass'd for good,  
 Though fond and reasonless to some perhaps:  
 And Love hath oft, well meaning, wrought much woe,  
 Yet always pity or pardon hath obtain'd.  
 (ll. 811-814) (my italics)

In this fallacious appeal to tradition Dalila cleverly argues

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<sup>12</sup> See Churchill, *op. cit.*, pp. 428, 439-442.



that although love is seen by some to be purely emotive and lacking in rationality, it has, nevertheless, been accepted by many people in the past as as understandable, if not a wholly justified, motive for wrongs inflicted against others. Implicit in Dalila's argument is the sophistic intimation that those who have accepted the plausibility of this argument of love were the injured parties themselves. In addition, the latter part of Dalila's statement asserts that well-intended acts of love have often been the cause of woe. Nevertheless, these well-intending parties have "always" been forgiven, according to Dalila. Once again Dalila's sophistry may be found in her misleading intimation that forgiveness was conferred by the injured party when the case, in fact, may have fostered more leniency from parties who were observers, rather than the victims of the injury. Moreover, not only is Dalila's assertion that such injuries were "always" forgiven highly dubious, but the word "always" in this argument is used fallaciously, as Churchill notes that many fallacy-advocating interlocutors append such words as "clearly", "undoubtedly", and "always" in an attempt to give undue weight or credibility to their specious arguments.<sup>13</sup> Such words are meant to coerce the reader into accepting the argument, and thus deflect attention from the inherent

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<sup>13</sup> Churchill, op. cit., pp. 77ff. refers to this tactic as "assuring".

fallacy. The coercion of the reader is dependent upon the reader's feelings of intellectual inadequacy should he/she fail to see the validity of the argument's premise or conclusion which is "obvious", "clear" or "inevitable".

Similarly, Dalila's manipulation of the word "always" implies that the forgiveness which she is seeking is deserved based on precedence. In effect Dalila intimates that Samson's withholding of a pardon is reprehensible because there is no precedence or appeal to authority which justifies such an act. Such arguments compound the fallacy by implying that all actions must be founded upon a precedent, and that one's verbal opponent is not in a position of authority which qualifies him/her either to set new precedents or to act without them. In this particular argument Dalila endeavours to conquer Samson's reluctance to forgive her by pathetic threats of peer pressure which demand that Samson "Be not unlike all others" (l. 815). But Samson eludes Dalila's "[cunning]" (l. 819) fallacies, preferring to be very much "unlike all others, ... austere/ As [he is] strong, inflexible as steel" (ll. 815-816). For it is only by being "austere" and "inflexible as steel" that he will avoid falling prey to her inverted logic. It is through a heroic "labouring [of] mind" (l. 1298) that Samson exemplifies Milton's belief that "reason is the faculty without which

there could be no virtue."<sup>14</sup> It is Samson's innate virtue, reinforced by his reason, which allows him to see through Dalila's falsehoods. It is this very reviving virtue and reasoning which enables Samson to elude Dalila's persuasive professions of love at a time when such professions are probably most favourable to Samson's ear. Dalila undercuts her own professions of love, however, by adorning such professions with blatant lies. While his eyes may be blind, his heart and his mind are not, and Dalila simply adds insult to injury by affronting both of these organs when she claims that she

..... was assur'd by those  
 Who tempted [her], that nothing was design'd  
 Against [Samson] but safe custody, and hold.  
 (ll. 800-802)<sup>15</sup>

"By rejecting what is false"<sup>16</sup>, "for Milton intended Dalila to be a liar"<sup>17</sup>, Samson, now an accomplished rhetorician, "has raised his 'unpropt head' (l. 119) to look directly into truth."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Radzinowicz, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> Even if Dalila's protestations of good intentions were not so blatantly false, biblical references (Judg. xvi, 5), as Hughes points out in his editorial notes, cite that Dalila's lie is not as opaque as she imagines.

<sup>16</sup> Entzminger, op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>17</sup> William Empson, Milton's God, First Ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1961), p. 224.

<sup>18</sup> Radzinowicz, op. cit., p. 38.

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Finally realizing that "while in bluntness he cannot match the eloquence with which she attempts to regain control of him, he is her match in reason"<sup>19</sup>, Dalila changes her strategy by arguing on new grounds. While she initially sued for forgiveness with the plea of human fallibility (ll. 773-774, 784-786), she now claims the nobility of a deliberate act of betrayal, exclaiming that,

It was not gold, as to my charge thou lay'st,  
That wrought with me: thou knowst the Magistrates  
.....  
Solicited, commanded, threat'n'd, urg'd,  
Adjur'd by all the bonds of civil Duty  
And of Religion, press'd how just it was,  
How honourable, how glorious to entrap  
A common enemy, who had destroy'd  
Such numbers of our Nation: and the Priest  
Was not behind, but ever at my ear,  
Preaching how meritorious with the gods  
It would be to ensnare an irreligious  
Dishonorer of *Dagon*: what had I  
To oppose against such powerful arguments?  
.....  
..... that to the public good  
Private respects must yield, with grave authority  
Took full possession of me and prevail'd;  
Virtue, as I thought, truth, duty so enjoining.  
(ll. 849-850, 852-862, 867-870)

Desperate now to score some debating points against her now accomplished verbal adversary, Dalila, without ceremony,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

offers one excuse after another in this passage, without waiting for a response. It is Dalila's intention and hope to confuse Samson's logical thinking processes by bombarding his faculty of reason with what she believes appear to be a number of sound and valid arguments. In so radically changing her argument, however, and refuting her previous arguments in the process, Dalila proves herself to be a lying sophist of the kind that "Aristotle and Milton cautioned the reader against accepting their remarks at face value."<sup>20</sup> Dalila definitely falls into this category, being a sophist whose "arguments carry a wealth of subsidiary motives"<sup>21</sup> (ll. 841-842), each of which are less honourable than their antecedent.

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"In their exchanges, Samson sees himself as having formerly been Dalila's toy, and thus, it is significant that language, the instrument with which she had earlier defeated him, now becomes the 'trivial weapon' (l. 142) he uses to

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<sup>20</sup> Steadman, *Epic*, p. 259. We see Milton raising Samson as an intellectual and thus spiritual hero in the reader's eyes, as he explicitly outlines in his *Artis Logicae* that logic or reason was a far more important skill to master than eloquence. See the latter part of footnote 19 on p. 12 of this thesis.

<sup>21</sup> Radzinowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

withstand her verbal barrages."<sup>22</sup> In keeping with the Miltonic belief that "men are 'purified by trial'"<sup>23</sup>, Samson's victory over the "trial of faith" presented by Dalila can be accounted for by the fact that "Samson has studied the paradoxes of his own life too closely to fall victim again to her sophistry."<sup>24</sup> Herein lies Samson's spiritual and intellectual heroism.

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<sup>22</sup> Entzminger, op. cit., p. 155.

<sup>23</sup> Radzinowicz, op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Entzminger, op. cit., p. 135.

## IV

## Samson Versus Harapha

In his final debate with Harapha, the epitomized *miles gloriosus*, Samson is presented with a mirror image of his former self who

..... like a petty God  
 ..... walked about admir'd of all and dreaded  
 On hostile ground, none daring [his] affront.  
 (ll. 529-531)

In retrospect, Samson now recognizes his arrogance for what it was, citing the period before his fall as a time when he was "swoll'n with pride" (l. 532). Thus, Samson's challenge of Harapha represents his rejection of his former self. As a result of his renewed faith in himself and in God, during his last two debates, Samson has matured both spiritually and intellectually. Thus, during the short-lived debate with Harapha Samson's unwavering faith in the "strength of his Living God" (l. 1140) prompts him to challenge Harapha's god, Dagon, rather than Harapha himself. And, while Harapha is not necessarily convinced that he has anything to fear from Samson, Samson's assertion that their duel represent God against Dagon induces the giant to cowardly refuse the challenge because of his own lack of faith.

Harapha endeavours to conceal his cowardice and

faithlessness behind irrelevant and pathetic excuses why he disdains to fight Samson. He complains that Samson "hast need much washing to be toucht" (l. 1107), that he is a sorcerer (ll. 1130-1135), and that Samson is "no worthy match" (l.1164) for a "noble Warrior, ...to stain his honor" (l. 1166). Harapha even goes so far as to offer the argument that Samson is a murderer, a revolter and a thief. For someone who is clearly concerned with his own pride and proving himself, arguments based on Samson's poor personal hygiene appear to be ridiculous sophistic evasions, as are Harapha's intimations that he never engages in battle with disreputable characters.

The reasons for Harapha's evasions are obvious to the reader even if not to himself. Harapha simply does not possess a faith in Dagon comparable to Samson's faith in God. As a result Harapha is unwilling to risk being throttled on Dagon's behalf. While he would most likely be more than willing to fight on behalf of his own honour, he is not willing to fight on behalf of Dagon. So, although seeming to possess all the advantages conducive to a potential victory on his side, Harapha shies away from a physical confrontation in which the honour of his god is at stake. Because, unlike his opponent who attributes his strength to his "living God" (ll. 1139-1141), he credits himself for his physical vigour, it is understandable that he confines his trust and worship



to self-idolatry. With this in mind, how then can Harapha be expected to fight on behalf of that for which he has neither respect or faith. And how can he respond but by evasions and sophistic equivocations, when Samson repeatedly challenges:

..... if Dagon be thy god,  
 Go to his Temple, invoke his aid  
 With solemnest devotion, spread before him  
 How highly it concerns his glory now  
 To frustrate and dissolve these Magic spells,  
 Which I to be the power of *Israel's* God  
 Avow...

(11. 1145-1151)

\* \* \* \* \*

Harapha's faithlessness reflects his agnosticism, which inevitably affiliates him with the sophists. Frost points out that while not all, most Sophists were agnostic, refusing to believe, much less argue on behalf of that which could not be physically substantiated. "Divine Providence had always been a mystery because of the inability of corrupted reason to grasp the causes of God's ways to men."<sup>1</sup> It is Harapha's reason, corrupted by his sophistic agnosticism, which accounts for his inability to understand Samson's faith in

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<sup>1</sup> Howard, *op. cit.*, p. 153. Here Howard seems to be anticipating Frost's distinction between the rhetor and the sophist.

God, who, according to Harapha's simplistic and fallacious reasoning, has clearly forsaken Samson. As a result Harapha feels that it is incumbent upon him to caution Samson to

Presume not on thy God, whate'er he be,  
Thee he regards not, owns not, hath cut off  
Quite from his people, and delivered up  
Into thy Enemies' hand, permitted them  
To put out both thine eyes, and fetter'd send thee  
Into the common Prison.....

(11. 1156-1161)

Here Harapha employs the fallacy of negative proof by assuming that because there is no proof that Samson is still God's champion, the opposite must be true. It is with a renewed sense of faith and humble repentance which replaces his once debilitating sense of despair and pride that Samson responds to Harapha's faithless taunts:

All these indignities, for such they are  
From thine, these evils I deserve and more,  
Acknowledge them from God inflicted on me  
Justly, yet despair not of his final pardon  
Whose ear is ever open; and his eye  
Gracious to re-admit the suppliant.

(11. 1168-1173)

Harapha is clearly taken aback by Samson's response. Here is Samson physically incapacitated, yet confirmed in his conviction that God has not abandoned him. And Samson will further honour such a conviction by challenging his religious

adversary to a "mortal fight" (1.1175), wherein the honour of their respective deities, rather than of themselves, will be the stake. And then there is Harapha exhibiting all the effects of good health and vigour, yet experiencing all of the internal ailments of a lack of faith. If a God can reduce a man to Samson's condition and still retain his worship, He surely is a God to be feared. In fearing Samson's God Harapha ironically demonstrates that he has more faith in Samson's God than he does in his own. Faith has been known to fill the faithless with fear. Harapha can be numbered among the fearful and the fools<sup>2</sup> "who think not God at all" (1. 295).

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It is important to make the distinction between Harapha, as a sophist whose reason is corrupted because his faith is corrupted, and Samson whose faith is not corrupted even in his moments of greatest sophistic indulgence; at such times, Samson's reason is not corrupted, only "faulty". Aristotle made this important, however seemingly marginal, distinction in the *Rhetoric*:

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<sup>2</sup> See Psalms 14 and 53 of the King James version of the Holy Bible, (Nashville, Tn: Thomas Nelson Inc.,1977).

But when logic is prostituted to the support of false propositions, by the bad principles of its professors, it is branded with the name of *sophistry*, and the persons who misapply it are called *sophists*: whereas, in the case of rhetoric, no such distinction in reference to the principles of its professors ever obtained; but the name of orator is enjoyed equally by all who are masters of the art, whether they exercise it fairly or not. A reason for this distinction may perhaps be furnished from the nature of the subject matter respectively. The subject matter of logic... is uniform, absolute, and admits of no degrees. Hence the sophistical logician may fairly be supposed aware of the fallacy he uses, and is [thus] stigmatized accordingly. But the subject matter of rhetoric has many and various degrees, from the lowest presumption up to moral certainty. Here then a fallacy is not so easily discoverable, even by the orator himself; and candour requires us not to brand as *moral* what after all may be merely *mental* imperfection in the speaker.<sup>3</sup>

This distinction qualifies Samson's initial sophistry not as a reflection of Samson's possibly defective morals, but rather as a reflection of his flawed or "faulty" reasoning at the time. It is this faulty reasoning which contributed to Samson's earlier displays of sinful pride and despair.

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The dichotomy between these two disputants is a function not only of their respective spirituality, but also of their

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<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*. Trans. Theodore Buckley, (London: George Bell & Sons, 1890), I. ii. 10-11.

dialectical abilities. Even without the chorus' advice to

Look now for no enchanting voice, nor fear  
The bait of honied words; a rougher tongue  
Draws hitherward

(ll. 1065-1066),

Samson soon recognizes that neither the dissimulations of the "Adder's wisdom" (l. 936), nor the verbal barrages of "Tongue batteries" (l. 404) will be forthcoming from the likes of Harapha, for this interlocutor's sophistic skills do not exceed the elementary levels of the *ad hominem* fallacies. Even then Harapha opts for the most primary species of this genus of fallacies-- the abusive. Harapha does not even possess sufficient sophistic polish to conceal his invective and vituperative articulations with rhetorical flourishes, such as those employed by Dalila; he simply denigrates Samson as "a Murderer, a Revolter, and a Robber" (l. 1180). The fallacy inherent in Harapha's diatribe is twofold: first, Harapha tries to prejudice the issue by poisoning the well, so to speak. He attempts to do this by ignoring Samson's overt offer of physical combat on behalf of their respective deities (ll. 1145-1155, 1174-1177), and thereby hides behind the fallacy of irrelevance. Rather than accepting or rejecting Samson's call for combat, like a truthful and honourable orator, Harapha violates the Miltonic and

classical "rules" of dialectic by not only failing to offer a rebuttal, but also by making the irrelevant assertion that Samson is a murderer, revolter and thief.<sup>4</sup> Inherent in these epithets is the giant's sophistic attempt to libel Samson according to the inverted laws of sophistry, which claim that by discrediting the character of one's opponent, that is by poisoning the well, one automatically dismisses all of his/her arguments.<sup>5</sup>

Being a perceptive logician Samson, recognizing Harapha's evasions or "shifts" (l. 1220) as he calls them, uses the language of the rhetorician and recalls Harapha to "answer [his] appellant" (l. 1220). According to classical and thus Miltonic "rules" of dialectic, it was both a matter of honour and a reflection of skill in the art of debate to respond sequentially and completely to each of the arguments of one's

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<sup>4</sup> That is not to say, however, that Harapha's claims that Samson is a murderer, a revolter, and a thief, are completely unfounded; nor am I now implying that Samson is any of these three things. I am simply pointing out that Harapha's denunciation of Samson as a murderer, revolter and a thief is irrelevant and invalid. First of all, the fact that Samson may indeed be one or even all three of such depraved individuals is completely irrelevant to the argument at hand. Secondly, Harapha's inability to justify and thus "prove" (l. 1181) the validity of appending such labels to Samson renders his assertions invalid by virtue of their libellous and *ad hominem* nature.

<sup>5</sup> Milton's acquaintance with and manipulation of this fallacy has its origins in the "[influential Ciceronian] conception of the ideal orator [and] the necessity of his being an impeccably virtuous man whose arguments will be recommended as much by his own character as by their logical force." Hunter, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

opponent, in the course of his/her rebuttal.<sup>6</sup> Failure to do so inevitably alerted one to sophistic tendencies. Despite the prevalence of these sophistic "shifts" (l. 1220) in Harapha's responses, Milton insists that Samson adhere to the classical code of honourable rhetorical combat and thus has Samson "these shifts [refute]" (l. 1220). Samson is gentle with his unequal disputant and clearly spells things out for him with a most explicit: "I have honoured your irrelevant points, now answer my question." Harapha's refusal to directly respond to either Samson's offer or his arguments, since to do so would result in an unmitigated confession of cowardice, affirms not only his sophistry, but more importantly, his representation of all that is antithetical to heroism. The latter part of Harapha's fallacy (ll. 1180, 1181-1191) consists of Harapha's appending these libels against Samson by citing the situation out of context (ll. 1192-1219). In effect, Samson wins the debate with Harapha by default as Harapha, a figure of intellectual depravity, is both a false hero and an unworthy verbal adversary for the rhetor whose "inward eyes [have been] illuminated" (l. 1689).

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 126.

Having examined the three main debates, it is possible to reconsider the dispositions of these three interlocutors and that which influenced their debating strategy. The Sophists were not interested in knowledge for its own sake or for the virtues it could confer, but for the debating points it could gain for its sophistic pupils. That Milton was aware of the sophistic concept of education is apparent in the very structural format of the debates in *Samson Agonistes*. The eristic<sup>7</sup>, meaning to seek to win, or make debating points is a phenomenon that one sees in *Samson Agonistes*, particularly in the debates with Dalila and Harapha, as Samson lets them

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<sup>7</sup> G. B. Kerferd offers a most interesting and concise explanation of this term, citing that Plato and his followers reserved the term "dialectic" for the Socratic method of conducting debates "in contrast to the 'eristic' of the sophists" (pp. 33-34). A more comprehensive appreciation of the implications of a debate with a sophist who is skilled in eristic techniques is to be found in Kerferd's summary:

... as Plato uses the term, eristic means "seeking victory in argument, and the art which cultivates and provides appropriate means and devices for so doing. Concern for truth is not a necessary part of the art--victory in argument can be secured without it, sometimes more easily so... It [eristic] can use any one or more than one of a series of techniques in order to achieve its aim, which is success or at least the appearance of such success (cf. *Theaetetus*. 167e 3-6). Fallacies of any kind, verbal ambiguities, long and irrelevant monologues may all on occasion succeed in reducing an opponent to silence and so be appropriate tools of eristic.

G. B. Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 62-63.



both have the last word. This occurs because Dalila and Harapha are both sophists. As such, their ultimate goal is to win the debate. They strive at making debating points, rather than at asserting the truth. In order to win a debate it is important to the sophist that he/she have the last word. It was an unspoken, if fallacious, rule with the sophists that the interlocutor having the last word was the undisputed victor. With this in mind it is significant therefore that Samson should not have the last word in his debates with either Harapha or Dalila. It is more significant, however, that Samson, in either of his verbal confrontations, does not seek to have the last word.

The fact that Dalia is the last to speak in the debate between Samson and herself could very well be attributed to coincidence or authorial fancy. But when the final debate between Harapha and Samson also concludes with a mute Samson, the explanation of authorial fancy gives way to that of authorial intent. Milton intended Samson to embody and espouse the virtues, values and concepts of debate of the Socratic rhetorician. By way of contrast, Dalila and Harapha, as proponents of falsehood and seekers of self-aggrandizement, were sculpted by Milton in the form of sophists. Denying Samson the last word in both of the later debates only serves to reinforce Milton's concept of the sophists' tactical manoeuvres reflecting their degenerate

moral character.

Samson defers having the last word to his sophistic opponents in both cases because, unlike his verbal adversaries, he is more interested in finding and asserting the truth than he is in winning the debate. For the rhetorician, as for Samson, the real victor is he/she who not only wilfully seeks the truth, but who does so even though such a quest should necessitate self-abnegation. Thus, we even see Samson conceding points to Dalila<sup>8</sup> such as when she offers an *ad hominem tu quoque* fallacy asserting that Samson betrayed himself before she betrayed him and that she was only following his example (ll. 778-784). While recognizing the unrepentant hypocrisy by which Dalila seeks to absolve and lessen her own transgressions by hiding behind and calling attention to his own, Samson, nevertheless, acknowledges Dalila's accusation not because he necessarily wants to lose the debate, but because Dalila's accusation, in this case, is based upon the truth. But, as with all of Dalila's arguments, a grain of truth is made the foundation of elaborate falsehoods in order to furnish fallacious debating points.

Irene Samuel once pointed out that the "lie of a Sophist

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<sup>8</sup> Samson makes parallel concessions in his debate with Harapha (ll. 1168-1171).

must always approach the truth if it is to be convincing."<sup>9</sup> It is for this very reason that Dalila proves to be such a potent verbal adversary. As a result, Samson spends much breath qualifying and extracting the truth from the falsehoods in Dalila's argument. In any case Samson exhibits no reservations at all in giving in to Dalila's desire to amass debating points since extracting the truth, rather than a verbal victory, is his goal. It just so happens, however, that the arguments put forward by Dalila and Harapha are so riddled with sophistic fallacies that Samson's rebuttals serve not only to reassert the truth, but to nullify and negate the arguments of his sophistic opponents, and win the debate for Milton's rhetorical champion.

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel, op. cit., p. 118.

### Conclusion

In retrospect, one can see how Milton, by manipulating both the Socratic and the sophistic methods of debate and "opposing right reason and sophistry.... has brought truth and falsehood into direct opposition."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it is through the debates in *Samson Agonistes* that Milton affirms "language to be the instrument capable of redeemed use."<sup>2</sup> In essence, the debates become an integral part of Samson's spiritual and intellectual convalescence for the simple reason that they provide him with the opportunity to reject, just as freely and vehemently, those temptations to sin which he once embraced.

In general, the debates serve as a testing ground for the degree and sincerity of Samson's spiritual and intellectual rehabilitation, as he is forced to revisit those very impulsive causes of ease, lust and pride to which he once succumbed. As a result, the chronology of the debates is, in my opinion, irreversible. Samson's debate with Harapha cannot logically precede that with Dalila. In his rhetorical confrontation with Dalila Samson exerts most of his rhetorical skills in defending himself, because Dalila makes him, by and large, the object of her attack. And in his

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<sup>1</sup> Steadman, *Paradoxes*, p. 135.

<sup>2</sup> Entzminger, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

debate with Harapha Samson is forced to defend his own deity. Not yet possessing sufficient confidence in himself, prior to his second debate, Samson would be ill-equipped to assume a verbal defence of God should the order of the last two debates have been reversed.

Similarly, Samson cannot possibly be considered a serious moral or intellectual opponent to Dalila prior to his internal dialectic. He is in no condition, either mentally or spiritually, prior to his self-debate, to refute Dalila's eloquently constructed sophistic syllogisms. Mentally, Samson has yet to logically explain his misdemeanours without lying to himself. Because of his self-pitying preoccupation with his physical ailments, Samson does not even begin to attend to those of an internal nature. And it is this internal canker of despair, at this point, which is preventing the realization of his spiritual convalescence. In fact, it is not until the end of his internal debate that he even endeavours to suppress his despair. But once he has honestly debated these issues with himself he can now debate these very same issues anew far more competently with his moral adversaries.

In effect, by the time Samson defiantly renounces, in true Socratic form, everything which his sophistic opponents represent, he is ready to resume his "prescrib'd" (1. 30) role as God's champion, and the reader can leave him, assured

that he will do "Nothing... that may dishonour/ Our Law" (ll. 1185-1186).

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