

A Tale of Two Tragedies: Catharsis of Hero and City in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*
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Abstract

In his prologue to *Samson Agonistes*, Milton champions the conventions of Greek tragedy over those followed by Elizabethan dramatists. Great tragedy, he contends, purges fear and pity out of audiences, facilitating a more sober, moral, rational life. Based on his argument and on the content of the poem, the most important difference between classical and Elizabethan tragedy is the Chorus. The Chorus represents a poetic, monolithic, communal voice that interacts dialectically with a strong, independent hero. The Elizabethans eschewed the unified Chorus in favor of realistic and comedic imitation of the various members of the British masses, which, according to Milton, dilutes the dialectical conflict of heroic independence with community morals and weakens the potential of tragedy to produce a cathartic synthesis in the audience. In order to further understand and test Milton's conception of the Chorus, this dissertation compares *Samson Agonistes* with Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*. *Coriolanus* was selected because many critics have contended that it is the closest Shakespearean tragedy comes to imitating the unified structure and aims of classical tragedy while still retaining many Elizabethan conventions. *Coriolanus* is a model of the

Aristotelian tragic hero who is superior in virtue but falls because of an error. His aristocratic, military values are depicted in sharp contrast with the increasingly republican values of the Roman citizens. Those citizens are depicted in typical, Elizabethan fashion, making their conflict with Coriolanus an ideal contrast with the Chorus's conflict with Samson. Further, there are many fascinating parallels between the experiences of Samson and Coriolanus and in the structure of both plays. This dissertation will argue that while Shakespeare's more realistic and entertaining imitation of complex political interactions does produce tragic emotions, especially in the final confrontation between Coriolanus, Volumnia, and Virgilia, Coriolanus dies rejected by Romans, Volscians, and often by audiences. On the other hand, Milton's tightly constructed dialectic between Samson and the Chorus, including the conflicts with Manoa and Dalila, tends to produce a more meditative experience and to mediate a clearer cathartic resolution. Samson dies celebrated by the Danite Chorus, and audiences, with some important exceptions, have accepted him as a hero.

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MILTON'S *SAMSON AGONISTES* AND SHAKESPEARE'S *CORIOLANUS*

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The people is the chorus—passive, deedless:
the heroes perform the deeds,
and incur the consequent responsibility.

—G.W.F. Hegel,

Lectures on the Philosophy of History

(J. Sibree Translation, 1857)

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Chapter I

Introduction

A detailed comparison of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*—two great tragedies by two of England's greatest poets—promises many fascinating delights. Both plays feature a Herculean hero who performs miraculous military feats. Samson defeats 1000 armed Philistine warriors at Ramath-Lechi with nothing but an ass's jaw, and Caius Martius singlehandedly fights his way through the city of Corioli, opens its gates to his army, leads a successful conquest of the city, and, not stopping to nurse his wounds, victoriously engages the greatest Volscian general in hand-to-hand combat. Samson draws his strength from an extraordinary commitment to God and personal revelation, which leads him to disregard some of Israel's traditional laws and customs. Coriolanus draws his strength from an extraordinary commitment to Roman military virtue, which leads him to disregard Rome's republican political forms and ideals. Both heroes, blinded by pride in their strength, also commit silly but destructive errors. Samson, believing God has instructed him to marry the Philistine Dalila, succumbs to her repeated "feminine assaults" and "tongue-batteries" (403-04), reveals his sacred covenants to her, is betrayed by her to his enemies, is apparently forsaken by God, has his eyes gouged out by Philistine

guards, and is chained in a Philistine workhouse to labor and to suffer constant taunts. Coriolanus, believing that his merit speaks for itself, refuses to canvass votes for the consulship from the populace through the customary showing of his wounds to the public, insults the public, their representatives, and their political forms, is accused of undermining republican institutions in order to set himself at the head of an aristocratic revolution, is accused and convicted of treason, and is exiled from Rome, cut off from all of the honors he richly deserves. Both Samson and Coriolanus then muster their respective strengths—Samson’s hair grows back and Coriolanus becomes commander of a foreign army—to humble powerful cities. Rome grovels before Coriolanus, but he finally relents. Samson utterly destroys the Philistine government.

While the strengths and weaknesses of Samson and Coriolanus promise fascinating insights into the nature of tragic heroics, their interactions with their respective communities are even more intriguing. Both men belong to two communities. Samson is an Israelite by birth and by allegiance, but the Philistines have conquered the Israelites, making Samson a Philistine subject. Further, he has married into two different Philistine families, contrary to Israelite religious law, and has thus mingled his affections with the Philistine people. Coriolanus presents himself as a Roman patriot, a paragon of

Roman virtue, and a member of the governing patrician class, but he refuses to obey the more democratic institutions of the young Roman republic because he believes that rights and privileges should be earned through merit, and he holds the martial valor and general virtue of the Roman people in contempt. After the Romans banish him, he makes a league with the Volscians, Rome's enemies, and attacks the city he once defended. Ultimately, after interactions with parents, wives, and statesmen, both heroes side with the land of their birth, dying to liberate and preserve them, but not before encountering and answering soul-crushing questions about the obligation of superior individuals to submit to community, to state, to family, and to religion.

These initial, general comparisons certainly promise a fascinating, detailed comparative study of both plays, but such comparisons have not often been carried out. In fact, in spite of their status as the two great lights of English literature, Shakespeare and Milton are rarely compared in any large-scale work. In 1929, Alwin Thaler observed that critics have generally neglected the textual relationships between Shakespeare and Milton (139). His observation is not strictly true, for before Thaler, Shakespeare and Milton were often compared in brief but substantive critical comments, but sustained, in-depth studies, both before and after Thaler, are rare. This neglect may depend in part on the fact that the major works of

Shakespeare and Milton, other than their sonnets and, in Milton's case, only one tragedy, are in different genres. Thus, many critical comments have focused on Shakespeare's linguistic influence on Milton. As noted by Albert Labriola, Thaler's study spends most of its time tracing "verbal resemblances . . . which center upon a word or phrase" (339) rather than on comparing their respective poetic techniques, ideas, and aims. Thus, Labriola continues, writing in 2010, Shakespeare's influence on Milton remains "uncertain" and there is much need to "analyze their writings from the broader perspective of literary history, including the history of ideas" (340).

This critical reluctance to compare Shakespeare and Milton is made all the more strange by the fact that Milton's prologue to *Samson Agonistes*—the one major poem in which he definitely engaged a Shakespearean genre—calls implicitly for comparison with Shakespeare. Granted, Shakespeare is not specifically named in the prologue. Milton only explicitly mentions being judged against Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, "unequall'd yet by any," but he also clearly wanted to be judged superior to the type of tragedy which "among us passes for best" (550). Perhaps assuming Milton means Shakespeare in this vague phrase risks what Emma Smith calls "the anachronistic critical idea of the 'Shakespearean'" (134), for Shakespeare was "prominent but still not pre-eminent" (133) before

Johnson's famous preface enthroned him, but, as Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns point out, Milton's 1632 poem *On Shakespeare*, which was published along with several other encomiums in the second folio, is "indicative of the early growth of the cult of Shakespeare" and Shakespeare is "the only English poet to whom Milton paid substantial tribute in his own verse" (54). Thus, while claiming Milton had Shakespeare exclusively in mind might be anachronistic, claiming that Milton considered Shakespeare to be one of the chief tragedians passing for best during the Restoration is not.

One might object that Milton's comments on the tragedy of his era are deprecatory, and that *On Shakespeare* clearly indicates Milton's respect for Shakespeare. In fact, two of Milton's biographers have claimed of *On Shakespeare* that it is the noblest "expression of Shakespeare-enthusiasm in our language" (Masson 332), and that in it Milton "explicitly claims the Bard as his model" (Lewalski 41). But Ann Coiro sees "oedipal resistance" in *On Shakespeare* (58). Timothy Burbery points out that while allusions to Shakespearean language abound in Milton's poetry, his only prose reference to Shakespeare, in *Eikonoklastes*, condemns King Charles for reading *Richard III* while in prison because such circumstances called for "meditating on something edifying" (37). While the passage in *Eikonoklastes*, on closer inspection, mainly mocks Charles for using *Richard III* as a

model of piety, it still does hold that Charles has been incongruously reading Shakespeare while in prison and should be modeling his prayers on better authors. As Lois Potter points out, Milton thought Charles's turning to Shakespeare in such times was the sign of a "trivial mind" (84). Milton is not questioning Shakespeare's poetic skill, but he is not counting him among "the gravest, moralest, and most profitable" authors (549), which is what Milton believes tragedians should be. And, as Landor and Southey noted with dismay, Milton's list of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides as "unequall'd yet" in tragedy does not include Shakespeare (Wittreich 330-36).

Milton certainly had Shakespeare in mind in his prologue. He believed English literature and culture needed a Greek tragedy in the vernacular to counteract the corruptions of form and purpose found in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies, and he considered Shakespeare a primary exemplar of those corruptions. Nigel Smith, who published a comparative study of Milton and Shakespeare in 2008—audaciously entitled *Is Milton Better Than Shakespeare?*—found that Milton "trashes recognizably English, even Shakespearean, theatrical incarnations" (40) throughout both the prologue and the body of *Samson Agonistes*. In the prologue, Milton targets the way in which previous tragedians mixed "comic stuff with tragic sadness and gravity" and included "trivial and vulgar" characters (550), thus

damaging the moral credibility of the genre and falling short of the aesthetic and cathartic impact achieved by the ancients. He also mentions their disregard for the unities and other structural practices of the Greeks. But he gives most attention to the Greek chorus, with a nod to the Italians as faithful imitators. Milton does not fully explain why the chorus is the most crucial distinction between *Samson Agonistes* and his predecessors, but he says using a chorus in tragedy is “with good reason . . . of much more authority and fame” (550) and will be recognized as an excellence by those who are most acquainted with the Greek playwrights. He implies that his arguments for the chorus will be discerned by close attention to the body of the poem itself. Comparing the tragic impact of the chorus with the Shakespearean model of a realistic, diverse citizenry is a major purpose of this dissertation.

Milton’s desire for comparison with Shakespeare as a tragedian may seem presumptuous. The Second Folio classifies twelve of Shakespeare’s works as tragedies, and some of the histories are arguably tragic as well. How can Milton’s single tragedy qualify him as a peer, let alone as a superior, to a poet who produced such a large, varied, and widely admired body of work? Milton did make a huge list of tragedies that he wished to write, most of them Biblically themed (Achinstein 475) and, according to Ann Coiro, “indebted to English

tragedies . . . particularly Marlowe's and Shakespeare's" (63), but he never brought any of them to completion, so that we are left with *Samson Agonistes*, which, like its titular hero, must stand as a "single combatant" to duel "thir Armies rank't in proud array" (344-45). This simile is not offered idly. According to Augustus Ralli, Milton conceived of himself, both intellectually and artistically, as "a fighter to the last" (142). The word "yet" in the prologue indicates that Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides can be bested, so, according to Burberry, "Their primacy is acknowledged—and challenged" (169), though Milton may have had in mind the "spiritual superiority" of his Christianity over the spirituality of the Greek gods (170). But, rather slyly, Milton deliberately changes the Biblical setting of Samson's final revenge from a temple to a theater. The blind warrior, like the blind poet, brings the house down on the gentile, idolatrous spectacles popular in his time.

Of course, Shakespeare, a literary giant, would be no mere Harapha who backs down from such a challenge. Dr. Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare* argues that Shakespeare's excellence will be seen especially "by comparing him with other authors" (421), and he argues further, both in his *Life of Milton* and in *The Rambler* 139-140, that Milton did not measure up to Shakespeare, particularly as a dramatist. More recent critics have echoed that sentiment. Derek Wood describes

how J.W. Tupper concluded "that Milton was simply an incompetent dramatist, inferior to Shakespeare in realistic characterization" (22), and A.D. Nuttall believes Milton "knew, in his bones, that, with all his learning, he stood no chance against the boy from Stratford" (383). But Milton's capacity as a dramatist does, of course, have major proponents. Joseph Wittreich's anthology *The Romantics on Milton* contains very favorable comments on *Samson Agonistes* from Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley (136, 195-96, 267, and 529). Wood calls *Samson Agonistes* "a brilliantly unified dramatic poem . . . the greatest Greek tragedy in the English language" full of "precision, understanding, and great inventiveness" (78-79), and William Riley Parker, after a rigorous comparison of Milton with his Greek models in *Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy*, came to similar conclusions. Without analyzing all of the reasons for these various claims, this list of fans and detractors may sound like a pedantic version of the single adjective reviews found on mass market paperbacks, but it serves to show that comparing Milton and Shakespeare as dramatists has stirred some controversy over the years, and that more detailed comparisons of their work is necessary to more fully understand their respective achievements. Burbery argues that this is especially true of Milton, for his "achievement as a dramatist has not even been considered, let alone celebrated" (169).

There are some fundamental problems with judging Shakespeare and Milton as if they are fighting in a contest. For one thing, they intended their tragedies for very different audiences. Milton says he did not explicitly divide *Samson Agonistes* into acts and scenes because they are mainly for convenience in staging, "for which this work never was intended" (550). This raises the question of why Milton did not intend to have his tragedy staged. One might be tempted to assume that he believed his tragedy was not fit for staging, but it seems unlikely that Milton would publish *Samson Agonistes* if he thought it was bad drama, and there would be no reason to consider it less fit for staging than the Greek dramas. Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh believe recent stagings show *Samson Agonistes* to be "intensely performable" (13), and Burbery lists several successful recent stagings. Milton's choice to write closet drama was probably dictated by his distaste for meeting the demands of Restoration theater audiences, by reservations formed during the censorship Puritans had imposed on theater, and by his knowledge of the tradition of English closet tragedies which, according to Tanya Pollard, imitated Seneca's tragedies by circulating "among small elite communities rather than appearing on the public stage" (58).

Shakespeare, by contrast, was a working producer of plays in addition to a writer of them. He wrote in what Mike Pincombe calls "an

age of commercialism in the theater" (11), and meeting the demands of a broad audience was important for his success. Shakespeare paid attention to which jokes got laughs and to which scenes evoked tears. Dr. Johnson inferred from the fact that Shakespeare never published a volume of his plays that he did not intend for them to be studied. He also observed that Shakespeare drew plots from popular works because his audiences could not follow intricate dramas without knowing the story beforehand, and that he crowded his plays with incidents and suspense in order to keep the attention of the lower classes. Even if Johnson is overstating Shakespeare's disregard for elevated craftsmanship, he is still on the right track in pointing out that Shakespeare's poetics are often dictated by the practical concerns of staged drama.

Shakespeare and Milton wrote with very different ideas about the aesthetics of tragedy, which causes more difficulties in comparing their merits as dramatists. Elizabethan writers had very little access to the Greeks. Coppelia Khan reminds us that Aristotle's *Poetics* was not yet translated and neither were the tragedies of Aeschylus (206), and Eric Rothstein notes that Milton himself was the first scholar "to expound in England what might be regarded as a strictly Aristotelian doctrine of tragic functioning" (9-10). Pincombe concludes that terms such as *katharsis*, *hamartia*, *anagnorisis*, and *peripateia* "were

unknown to all but a very few early modern readers" (9) and that neo-classicism was "mainly bandied about by scholars at the universities, often in what seems like a spirit of partisan rivalry" (6). T.J.B. Spencer finds that Elizabethans did not even have a high opinion of the Greeks, holding them to be "luxurious, frivolous, bibulous, venereal, insinuating, perfidious, and unscrupulous" (223). And Milton's strong adherence to Aristotle's authority in poetry may have seemed strange in an era that saw Aristotle's authority waning in almost every other discipline. For Elizabethans, says Russ McDonald, "tragedy usually meant Roman tragedy, specifically and almost exclusively the plays of Seneca" (25). Virgil Whitaker adds "the great medieval mysteries" and Chaucer's "The Monk's Tale" as major influences (20). Thomas McAlindon claims that Seneca's influence in particular accounts for the sensationalism and overblown rhetoric (4) and for the "passion driven protagonists" (6) that are often found in Elizabethan tragedy. Pollard also cites Seneca's "rhetorical treatment of violence" as the source of Elizabethan tastes for "spectacular violence" and revenge themes (67).

Again, Shakespeare would probably have been unconvinced by Milton's arguments regarding introducing comic elements into tragedy. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Theseus laughingly compares mixtures of "very tragical mirth" to "hot ice and wondrous strange snow" (V.i.57-59), and Hamlet mocks Polonius's pedantic and

scatterbrained attempt to define the various dramatic genres as “tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral” (II.2.398-401). These passages suggest that Shakespeare was well aware that he was mixing genres, and that he considered arguing about it to be silly. According to Lawrence Danson, Elizabethans generally believed that the genres “inevitably meet and recombine” (11). But the Elizabethan tendency to mix comedy and tragedy did cause Philip Sidney to question whether they wrote proper tragedies at all, and even Dr. Johnson hedges on whether any of Shakespeare’s plays may properly be called a pure tragedy. Fools and clowns abound, and their riffs, as with Ophelia’s gravediggers, may even put a lengthy pause to the progress towards the tragic climax. Even main characters drop a constant barrage of puns and bawdy jokes. Iago, surrounded by the moral seriousness of Desdemona, Othello, and Cassio, mouths so much bawdiness that a charismatic actor can easily steal the show as the most entertaining character on stage. Shakespeare, like others of his era, also plays with “the grotesque” and “black humor” (Pollard 66), which deeply undermines the cathartic fear Milton believes should permeate weighty discussions of violence and death. Some critics have argued that Shakespeare’s use and abuse of humor may be traced to the demands of his audience—Landor doubted whether Elizabethans

could have appreciated a drama “without a smack of the indecent or the ludicrous” (in Wittreich's *The Romantics on Milton*, 330-336) and Lucy Munro points out that dramatists of the era “regularly complain that their audiences force them to introduce humorous stock characters” into tragedy (97-98)—but this argument does not give Shakespeare’s artistry enough credit. Rather, as McAlindon argues, Shakespeare likely “reflected deeply on the nature of tragedy and evolved a sound rationale for his mixed practice” (5). Elizabethan tragedy, unlike that of the Greeks, depicts violence directly on the stage and imitates characters of great passion, cruelty, baseness, and evil. Comedy serves as relief for audiences from the experience of horror and also anticipates the sort of nervous and inappropriate laughter that “scenes of great tension and high passion are likely to provoke” (5). Comedy “may even intensify the effect of heroic suffering” (6).

Again, Shakespeare’s neglect of the classical unities has been well noted by critics. Elizabethan authors, excepting Sidney and a few other scholars, mocked the notion that audiences are confused by jumps in time and place, and while they held unity of action in higher esteem, they still saw no aesthetic problem with a few entertaining digressions or thematically connected subplots. Shakespeare in particular, argues Brents Stirling, saw unity not so much as a single

action as a relation between “theme,” psychological motivations, and an “interconnection between elements or qualities” (3). Thus, while Laertes’s grief and rage at the murder of his father may seem like a separate subplot from Hamlet’s similar emotions, the two are thematic parallels. Laertes’s immediate response contrasts with Hamlet’s hesitation, which provides insights into Hamlet’s psychology. Fortinbras is even more tangential than Laertes, but provides additional parallels with similar effects.

While Shakespeare often finds ways to unify the seemingly disparate threads of his stories, his disregard of the unities is not without violations of what Milton calls “such oeconomy ... of the fable as may stand best with verisimilitude and decorum” (550). That the ambitious scope of Shakespeare’s historic plays gave him pause is demonstrated by the efforts his Chorus makes in *Henry V* to help audiences envision large shifts in place and time from the courts of England to the fields of France. *Antony and Cleopatra* covers a broad sweep of time and places, and it can be difficult, especially in the 28 quickly shifting scenes that make up acts III and IV, to keep track of the plot or to see exactly how all of these events amount to a single dramatic action at all. Again, Shakespeare’s interruption of the tragic action precisely when it should be focused on the climax is troublesome, as in Act V of *Hamlet*, which features over 350 lines of

witty banter between the gravediggers and between Hamlet and Osric. By comparison, 350 lines back from the end of *Samson Agonistes*, Samson decides he will entertain Philistines at the theater of Dagon, and the remaining lines build up relentlessly to the catastrophe and the final choral assessment.

Of course, for Milton, the most important poetic convention distinguishing *Samson Agonistes* from Shakespearean tragedy is the chorus. The Chorus is more than an interpreter of events, an observer, a narrator, or a didactic device. According to Aristotle, the chorus should be a character who participates fully in the action of the drama (1456a26-33). The chorus serves as the communal voice embodied, a representative of the general morals and norms of the community, morals and norms that the mighty hero, in pursuit of his independence and strength, often violates. The Greeks understood that no one acts in a vacuum, that social pressures always dictate individual tragedy, as, for example, when Oedipus begins his investigations because the community suffers under a plague. The dialectical conversation between the chorus and the hero is crucial in moving both the hero and the community towards catharsis of fear and pity. The hero learns that the communal values are important even when superior strength and skill makes him feel capable of living without them. The community learns to pity rather than to judge the hero for his

transgressions, and they also learn to fear repeating the hero's mistakes when pursuing their own ambitions.

Samson Agonistes follows this model of dialectic between hero and choral community. Samson is superior in strength, will, and faith to the Israelite community. The Israelites live passively in bondage, while he actively attacks the Philistines in pursuit of God's will. But he also lives beyond the moral and cultural norms of Israel. Contrary to God's command to marry within the Abrahamic covenant, he marries Philistine women. He also kills men in battle, which is contrary to his Nazarite vows. He claims that God approves both transgressions through an "intimate impulse" (223) that guides him to fulfill his prophetic calling as Israel's deliverer. While Samson's independence may be a great asset in his fight against Philistine oppression, and does ultimately lead to the destruction of the Philistine government, it is also the cause of his downfall. He violates one too many covenants when he reveals the source of his strength to Dalila, and he finds himself a blinded slave. After that fall, the Chorus visits Samson and engages with him in dialectical conversation about the importance of their morals and cultural norms, and Samson must come to terms with the law, the prophets, and the customs that he has partially disregarded throughout his life before he can act as God's direct, individual agent in destroying the Philistines. The Chorus learns to pity

Samson's plight and to fear God, "our living Dread" (1673), because they see that He "made our laws to bind us, not himself" (309), that he very well may have exempted Samson "by choice / From national obstruction, without taint" (311-12) in some cases, while crushing him utterly in the case of Dalila, that all this only appears cruelly contradictory from our perspective, and that it all ultimately works together to fulfill the prophecy.

Elizabethan tragedians did not share Milton's understanding and appreciation of the chorus. They saw it as a superfluous, clumsy, and outmoded convention of the Greeks, a mere leftover from the origins of drama in Greek rituals. This attitude probably resulted from Elizabethan reliance on Seneca. Senecan choruses can easily appear to be mere act dividers, full of lengthy discourse, aphorisms, observations, and commentary. They are not always specified members of the community, and the protagonists often act as if they are not even present. There are scattered scenes in which they briefly interact with the hero, but they generally do not maintain that presence in the action that Aristotle recommends in *Poetics*. Some Senecan scholars do argue that the chorus has an important function

in his drama,¹ but the Elizabethan dramatists likely did not read him with such subtle scrutiny.

Shakespeare, like his contemporaries, eschews choruses in his tragedies, except in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Henry V* where they serve as a narrator or as a creator of unity of time and place. That Shakespeare did not see the chorus as an integral part of the action can be seen in *Hamlet*. Hamlet summarizes the basic plot of “The Mousetrap” for Claudius, critiques it as “a knavish piece of work,” and announces the name of the main character when he enters. These interruptions lead Ophelia to claim Hamlet is “as good as a chorus.” Hamlet responds that he “could interpret between you and your love” (III.ii.235-47). Both Ophelia and Hamlet assume that a chorus means a summarizer, a critic, a narrator, and an interpreter. They do not assume that the Chorus is a fully participating, communal character.

While Shakespeare does not use choruses in his tragedies, he does use other techniques to mediate the audience’s experience and to represent the conflict between hero and community. Pollard notes how “metatheatricality,” which is without classical precedent, though it does resemble Aristophanes’s chorus leader pleading with audiences for a prize, helps Shakespeare to navigate “between the action and the audience, implicitly watching and commenting on the drama, and

¹ see P.J. Davis’s *The Chorus in Seneca’s Thyestes* and John Allen Stevens’s *The Chorus in Senecan Tragedy: The Uninformed Informer*.

anticipating and guiding audience responses" (69). Also, while Shakespeare does not embody the communal voice or make it explicit, Garrett Sullivan has noted how "early modern tragic subjectivity is created out of the collision between the individual and the social order" (73). Some examples include the shaping of Iago's hatred and envy by his lack of a promotion and the exaggerating of Coriolanus's sense of patrician honor under the pressure of manipulated plebian expectations.

In Shakespeare, communal forces are not embodied in monoliths that voice general social values in conflict with the hero. Rather, they are realistically imitated. The community is made up of a large number of individuals with varying motives and opinions. *Coriolanus* depicts over twenty characters and lists an additional host of generals, lieutenants, senators, patricians, aediles, lictors, soldiers, servants, messengers, heralds, named and unnamed citizens, and attendants. By comparison, *Samson Agonistes*, following the Greeks, contains seven characters. As a result, the scenes of military action and the anarchic, chaotic commotions between patricians and plebes that are depicted in the first three acts of *Coriolanus* have no parallel in Milton. His action is mediated through the dialectic between Samson, a few characters, and the Chorus, or through the description of the Messenger.

Thus, when it comes to depicting the conflict between hero and community, Shakespeare, as Dr. Johnson claims, imitates nature, while Milton imitates Greek convention. One major purpose of this dissertation is to compare the effects of these two approaches to the tragic conflict, particularly their capacity to induce a catharsis of fear and pity. Milton explicitly claims to follow Aristotle in his prologue to *Samson Agonistes*. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle says tragedy aims "through fear and pity" at "the cleansing of experiences of this sort" (1449b28-29), and Milton virtually translates this passage when he says that tragedy is "of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such like passions" (549), but Milton's ensuing clarification of the passage—"that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight" (549)—combined with the interactions he depicts between Samson and the Chorus points to Aristotle's more detailed description of *katharsis* in the *Politics*. There, Aristotle says music plays an important role in educating moral character because it raises passions such as "pity and fear, and further, inspiration" to an intense degree (1342a7), and then, Aristotle claims that listeners are seen "calming down as if obtaining a cure and a purification" (1342a9-10) and "relief accompanied by pleasure" (1342a14). This phrasing is clearly mirrored in the above quoted passage from Milton's prologue. Further, D.W. Lucas, in an excellent study on Aristotelian catharsis,

describes this musical catharsis as a sort of homeopathy, "like was cured by like" (283), and then he cites Milton's parallel description in the prologue, wherein he says, "For so in physic things of melancholic hue and quality are us'd against melancholy, sour against sour, salt to remove salt humours" (549). While the *Politics* speaks of this catharsis relative to music rather than tragedy, Mary Nichols argues, "Aristotle is using music in the broad sense, to include not only tunes but imitative poetry, which also presents likenesses or imitations of character" (161), and Lucas says, "Though this passage refers to music (which does not exclude words), it is folly to deny its relevance to tragic catharsis in view of the promise made at the beginning of the passage of a fuller explanation to be given in a work devoted primarily to poetry" (280).

The emphasis in the *Politics* on the power of catharsis to form moral character is crucial to Milton's understanding of tragedy in *Samson Agonistes*. In the prologue, Milton says, that tragedy, because of catharsis, is "held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems" (549). This description matches that of Aristotle, which, according to Fred Miller, considered "formation of ethical virtue and practical wisdom" as the chief ends of musically induced catharsis (234). But it is in the body of the poem, not just in the prologue, that Milton most models his catharsis on the *Politics*. Aristotle says that the

passions of fear, pity, and inspiration occur "strongly in connection with certain sorts of souls" but also, to a lesser degree, "is present in all" (1342a5-6). Thus, individuals who are prone to "frenzy" in inspiration (1342a9), to intense pity and fear, and who are "generally passionate" (1342a11) can relieve these emotions through music and become more prudent, as can "others insofar as each individual has a share in such things" (1342a12). In Milton's words, poetry can "temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight" (549). The community dynamic described in this passage is mirrored in *Samson Agonistes*. Samson is the individual assailed by frenzies of inspiration (219-36) and strong passions of fear and pity (18-22 and 606-32). He must find relief, which comes to him through interaction with the music and friendship of the Chorus (184-87, 1380-86). The Chorus is not as prone to the passions, but they too find relief for their lesser fear and pity through the heroism of Samson (1268-76 and 1745-58). Thus, the moral formation by means of catharsis happens both for the heroic individual and for the more passive Chorus. The moral character thus developed is valuable both civically and spiritually. Samson learns to temper his extreme inspirations and passions in order to better serve the community and God, and the Chorus learns to temper its judgment of the hero and to honor his sacrifices in their behalf (293-325). According to Nichols, Aristotle

likewise "includes in the beneficial effects of music not merely the obviously political virtues of courage and moderation but also piety" (166). Nichols also argues that Aristotle viewed catharsis as reconciliation between the values of the heroic individual and of the community. "Aristotle," she says, "teaches that . . . individuality and self-knowledge can accompany community. Politics is not a fatal contest between those who would be gods and those who act like beasts. To include both in the city is to transform them, to replace despotism, whether of the one or the many, the mind or the body, with politics" (84). As will be shown in this dissertation, this is an apt description of Milton's aim in *Samson Agonistes*.

Shakespeare's approach to catharsis is entirely different, and the difference is reflected in his rejection of choruses in favor of diverse citizenry. As mentioned above, Rothstein argues that Milton was the first to expound Aristotelian catharsis in England (9-10), and Pincombe argues that the term *katharsis* was "unknown to all but a very few early modern readers" (9). Thus, Shakespeare may not have thought in terms of catharsis at all. But Tanya Pollard argues that Shakespeare and his contemporaries accessed Aristotle's *Poetics*, especially the idea of *katharsis*, through "an avalanche of commentaries, treatises, and literary debates" that proliferated from Italian studies of Aristotle, so that by Shakespeare's time, "tragedy had been firmly defined in the

contemporary imagination as the literary genre best suited to medicating grief" (62). While this historical debate is too divided and too speculative relative to Shakespeare to make any firm declarations about Shakespeare's understanding of catharsis, it is safe to assume that Milton's understanding would have been far more rigorous and faithful to Aristotle through lengthy study of the source texts. Still, catharsis was probably an important concept for Shakespeare. Pollard argues that catharsis is especially present in his revenge tragedies. Scholarly discussions "did not explicitly identify it with revenge," but "the revenge plots" of the "English Renaissance stage" were seen as "especially conducive to treating intense emotions" (62-63). While assuaging the desire for revenge may not be the only thing Aristotle and Milton have in mind when they speak of tempering the passions through catharsis, Pollard points out in the same passage that Renaissance theorists found that revenge fit well with Aristotelian concepts of *peripeteia*, *anagnorisis*, and the recommendation that "the violence of tragedy should ideally take place between people who know and are close to each other" (62-63).

Comparing the approaches of Shakespeare and of Milton to catharsis is the primary aim of this dissertation, especially as it relates to the Chorus. To that end, it would be profitable to compare all of Shakespeare's tragedies with *Samson Agonistes*, and that work should

be done in the future, but *Coriolanus* has been selected for comparison in this dissertation to focus the scope of the argument and to allow for greater depth of comparison. *Coriolanus* has also been selected because of its many peculiar similarities with *Samson Agonistes*, some of which have already been mentioned at the beginning of this introduction. But *Coriolanus* is also ideal for comparing Elizabethan revenge catharsis with Milton's deeper understanding of the Greek catharsis. Coriolanus, like Samson, is the heroic individual who is prone to tremendous passion, but, for Coriolanus, that passion is founded strictly in martial virtue. The Romans feel that passion as well, but with less intensity, and they have other more civic and more political passions to contend with. When the Romans reject Coriolanus, he seeks cathartic relief through revenge for his injured martial honor, and the Romans banish him as vengeance for his contempt of their political institutions and moral character. A detailed comparison between Shakespeare's resolution of these passions and Milton's chorally mediated catharsis will be explored in the final chapter of this dissertation. For now, it may be noted that the catharsis in *Coriolanus*, if there is any, does not arise from vengeance achieved for either Coriolanus or the Romans, nor does it only arise from pitying a colossal failure. Rome, like Milton's Chorus, does end in celebration, but it is not a celebration of "all passions spent" (1758). The Romans

escape destruction only because of Volumnia's brutal evisceration of Coriolanus's desire to find satisfaction in vengeance on his home country. None of the Romans are reconciled to Coriolanus, nor is it clear that they have gained much moral character from their clash with him. Volumnia is certainly not reconciled to his fate. Coriolanus grows morally from Volumnia's rebukes, and his passion for revenge is assuaged, but he is never reconciled to the Roman plebes, and his pitiful end remains unambiguously bitter and disturbing. Shakespeare clearly aimed at very different effects than Milton. If Shakespeare did aim at medicating grief, he did not do it by means of a hero and a community who mutually learned to temper their unequal passions in order to better serve each other civically and spiritually.

The remainder of this introduction will offer some further reasons for comparing *Coriolanus* with *Samson Agonistes* and provide a roadmap of the structure of the dissertation. The similarities between *Coriolanus* and *Samson Agonistes* have proven strong enough to tempt critics to claim a direct influence. In *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, Stephen Orgel writes that while Milton claims "exclusively classical" influences in his prologue, "*King Lear* and *Coriolanus* resonate throughout the work" (300). Margaret Kean notes that John Carey found "Shakespearean echoes" in *Samson Agonistes*, and then claims that "those to *Coriolanus* are certainly significant"

(175). Thaler's list of Shakespearean turns of phrase found in Milton's work does not include any allusions to *Coriolanus* in *Samson Agonistes*, but A.W. Verity makes a similar list in his notes to the 1904 edition of *Samson Agonistes*, and he does mention three or four connections between the two plays, though they aren't very convincing (121, 156-57). In lieu of any explicit documentary evidence, it may be safest to follow William Riley Parker's advice to apply Occam's razor and consider only Judges, the Greeks, a little autobiography, and a "modest invention" as sources for the poem (4).

But then, Parker may be wrong. Milton claimed only classical sources, but he was still a man of his time, and Shakespeare's mark on drama would be difficult to avoid. One Elizabethan innovation in tragedy perfected by Shakespeare was the imitation of characters possessed of what Hegel describes as "the principle of subjective freedom" (James 75). These characters flaunt social mores to such an extreme degree that they become laws unto themselves, obeying only the dictates of a will freed from social conceptions of good and evil. Hegel observes that, in general, Greek tragedy depicted conflicts between competing ethical claims, rather than between good or evil characters. His favorite example was *Antigone*, in which both Antigone and Creon are "penetrated by an ethically justified pathos" (580). Both characters participate in "the absolute identification . . . with one of

the powers governing ethical life" (James 108). In the case of Antigone, she identifies with the demands of family. Creon identifies with the state. According to Glenn Gray, "Each element was justified in its own sphere" (57), and only a *deus ex machina* could resolve the conflict. Other Greek tragedies may be produced as examples—Pentheus vs. Dionysus in *The Bacchae*, Orestes vs. Clytemnestra in *The Orestia*—and it is safe to say that fights between perfectly good heroes and purely evil villains do not abound in Greek tragedy.

Shakespeare's tragedies, argues Northrop Frye, "in contrast to the Greek ones, were tragedies of character" (4). His great central conflicts are between characters of tremendous virtue and of stunningly willful vice. "The great poets and artists of antiquity . . . do not give us the spectacle of wickedness and depravity," says Hegel, but Shakespeare "brings evil before us in its entire dreadfulness" (222), especially in *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Richard III*. Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, Edmund, and Oswald are unambiguously and outrageously base, and Lady Macbeth, Richard III, and Iago exhibit no hesitation, remorse, pity, or morality. Iago's evil led A.C. Bradley to exclaim that he was "a psychological impossibility . . . not a human being" because he "hates good simply because it is good and loves evil purely for itself" (195-96). Shakespeare's villains are not mere evil abstractions or personifications of ambition, greed, or lust.

They are fascinating in their capacity to will their individual desires against all the universal ethical claims of family, state, or religion. "Shakespeare," explains Hegel, "lifts especially his criminal characters above their evil passion by endowing them with a greatness of spirit alike in crime and in misfortune" (420). Shakespeare's tragedies also abound with exceedingly virtuous characters, such as Cordelia, Kent, Macduff, and Desdemona. This is not to say that Shakespeare's great tragedies lack moral complexity. He just achieves that complexity by making his villains admirably liberated in spite of their unambiguous evil. But Shakespearean characters often assert an individuality that does not identify with ethical institutions in the same manner as the Greek choruses.

Following his classical models, Milton eschews the heroes and villains often found in Shakespeare to create characters that identify with competing ethical claims. According to Joseph Wittreich, Milton "forces us to reach beyond an axis of good and evil in the world to a more ambiguous reality" (30-31, 34). Dalila, Harapha, and the Philistines are not villains with whom a virtuous Samson fights. Dalila appeals to her duties as a Philistine to justify her actions, Harapha points out that Samson is a robber and a murderer from the Philistine perspective, and Samson's mass destruction of the Philistine aristocracy at the end of the tragedy has long disturbed many of

Milton's critics. Milton deliberately undermines easy separations between good and evil in his character conflicts because tragedy, in his Greek models, creates catharsis, in part, by preventing audiences from comfortably dismissing characters and their experiences just because they deserved or did not deserve their fate.

But Samson himself exhibits a degree of free will that may owe far more to Shakespeare's willful villains than to the fate of the Greeks. Samson pits the need to fulfill his prophesied mantle as deliverer, his "intimate impulse" (223) from God, against all of the social mores of both Israel and Gaza. He claims something like Kierkegaard's teleological suspension of the ethical, allowing him to pursue divinely inspired individual ends against ethical norms. This strength of individual will develops such immense power throughout the play that Samson arguably gets away from Milton just as Shakespeare's great heroes and villains "all get away from their creator" (Bloom 583). Samson tears down the theater not in accord with any universal ethic, but "of my own accord" (1643). Some critics have even interpreted this as an act beyond the will of God or of Milton. Samson "quit himself / Like Samson" (1709-10), and like no one else, and critics have been unable to stop debating the morality of his mass destruction ever since.

So perhaps Samson's degree of individualism owes more to Shakespeare than to the Greeks, but what does that have to do with the potential influence of *Coriolanus* on *Samson Agonistes*? After all, Coriolanus may have achieved Samson-like military exploits, singlehandedly bringing entire cities to their knees, but he ultimately bows to his mother and to Rome. Harold Bloom feels that Coriolanus is not one of Shakespeare's great wills. No one in Shakespeare "from Coriolanus on is a free artist of himself or herself," argues Bloom, and "we feel that Coriolanus does exactly what Shakespeare wants him to do" (583). "There are degrees of human imperfection and folly," in *Coriolanus*, argues Harold Sowerby Wilson, "but no one is very wicked" (114).

But Bloom's view of Coriolanus may be inaccurate and based more in personal distaste for the man than an actual failure on Shakespeare's part to produce a living will. Danson includes Coriolanus among Shakespeare's "moral monsters" for his "unbendingness of will" (44). Coriolanus may not have Iago's will to evil, but he has a will to honor and virtue that is just as strong. He is arguably Shakespeare's most willful tragic character, and even his final submission to Volumnia may be the ultimate act of subjecting passion to the demands of Roman *virtus*. This is precisely wherein Samson may be a product of Elizabethan individualism, especially as depicted in *Coriolanus*. Richard

Ide argues that Samson “prized earlier in his career” exactly the same heroic *virtus* as Coriolanus. Ide then makes a list of comparisons between the values of the two men and argues that the “bold individualism and immense pride” that they both exhibit “was nowhere more prevalent than in Elizabethan dramatic portrayals of conquerors” (170-71). That Coriolanus must ultimately submit his will to Volumnia and Rome in order to fully realize *virtus* is similar to the submission Samson must make to God before he can finally fulfill his destined role as Israel’s deliverer. There are many problems with these claims about Samson and Coriolanus, and exploring them further belongs more to the body of the dissertation than to this introduction, but, considering the immense number of parallels between the two plays and the Shakespearean-like independence of Samson, it is not unlikely that Milton did have *Coriolanus* in mind as he wrote *Samson Agonistes*, which might explain the “resonance” and “echoes” felt in the play by Kean, Orgel, and other critics. This dissertation will attempt to render the details of those resonances more explicit and can be seen as a case for believing in a direct influence.

The ostensible classicism of *Coriolanus* could be another reason why Milton may have had it in mind as he wrote *Samson Agonistes*. Many critics have considered *Coriolanus* to be the closest Shakespeare came to imitating ancient tragedy. Piachaud “considered it a regular

classical tragedy, like Corneille's" (George 71), G.R. Hibbard describes it as "the most unified and symmetrical" (8-9) of Shakespeare's plays, and even Bloom, who otherwise holds *Coriolanus* in contempt, noted its "perfection as a neo-classical tragedy" (584). This belief in the classicism of *Coriolanus* may stem from its Roman setting, though it shares that with *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Julius Caesar*. It probably stems more from the dialectical character of the play, which resembles ancient tragedy. Thus, Frank Kermode says, "Coriolanus has been called a debate rather than a tragedy" (1443), and Gail Paster says that in *Coriolanus*, "the social mandate for heroic self-sacrifice collides with the heroic mandate for self-realization conceived in civic terms" (58). But while the classical setting, tighter structure, and dialectical conflict of *Coriolanus* may make it seem more classical, W.H. Auden warns that *Coriolanus* "illustrates the difference between classical tragedy and Shakespeare more than any other play" (250). Auden does not state his reasons for this claim, but *Coriolanus* does uniquely juxtapose Elizabethan conventions—wide jumps in space and time, trivial and base characters, vulgar language and humor, and a realistic citizenry instead of a chorus—with ostensibly classical aims. Thus, when Milton pondered the contrast between Elizabethan and Greek tragic conventions, it seems very likely that *Coriolanus* would have suggested itself as an ideal play for making the comparison, and, in

the process of studying it, comparisons between the lives of Samson and Coriolanus would have been obvious.

That Milton did pursue such a study is historically speculative, but this dissertation will pursue that study, and it will reveal a large number of instructive parallels between the plays. The dissertation will follow a dialectical structure because, as discussed throughout the Introduction, both *Coriolanus* and *Samson Agonistes* imitate the dialectical conflicts found in the ancient Greek dramatists, the former in spirit, the latter with "slavish precision" (Danson 16). Alfred North Whitehead goes so far as to argue Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides invented dialectic (169), which makes dialectical structure a natural fit for discussing neo-classical tragedy. Chapter II of the dissertation will compare the heroic actions and values of Coriolanus and Samson. Such heroism will be shown to have been necessary to the preservation and success of their respective communities. The *hamartia* and even outright villainy of both heroes will also be compared, which will lead to a discussion of the differences between their respective progress and deaths.

Chapter III will compare the communities that both heroes conflict and interact with and will be divided into four sections representing four major societal institutions found in both plays: community, state, family, and religion. Section A will compare the

Roman citizenry with the Israelite chorus and explore both the conflicts the heroes experience and the contrasting effects that are potentially produced by realistic imitation or choral poetics. Section B will compare Coriolanus's participation in the Roman and Volscian states with Samson's participation in the Israelite and Philistine states, including a discussion of the heroes' conflicts with their respective nemeses, Aufidius and Harapha. Section C will compare Coriolanus's conflict with mother and wife, Volumnia and Virgilia, and Samson's conflict with father and ex-wife, Manoa and Dalila. Section D will compare the respective religions of Samson and Coriolanus, showing how monotheism and polytheism impact the experience of both heroes. Throughout chapter III, an antithesis will be provided to the heroism of Coriolanus and Samson. Whereas chapter II argues that their heroism is beneficial to their people, chapter III will argue that it is also in deep conflict with social norms.

Chapter IV will compare the cathartic resolutions depicted in both plays and potentially experienced by audiences. Milton's chorus will be shown to mediate a far more substantial and complete resolution of fear and pity than Shakespeare's citizenry. Coriolanus dies still despised and rejected, but Milton's Chorus celebrates Samson's ultimate triumph. It will also be shown that audiences often tend, unjustly and contrary to Shakespeare's intentions, to despise

Coriolanus, while reception of Samson has been more mixed between the extremes of considering him a Christ-type and a Satan-type.

Milton's attempt to achieve a religious catharsis will be contrasted with both his Greek models and Shakespeare's more political catharsis.

Chapter II

The Heroic Life and Ethic of Samson and Coriolanus Compared

A major comparison that must occur to readers of *Samson Agonistes* and *Coriolanus* is the fact that the titular heroes accomplish their legendary military feats alone against hosts of enemies. The Danite chorus marvels at how Samson, at Ramath-Lechi, "ran on embattled Armies clad in iron" in spite of being "weaponless himself" and singlehandedly "spurn'd them to death by troops" so large that "a thousand foreskins fell" (129-44). In his commemoration speech of Martius's feats at Corioli, Cominius notes that when the Roman soldiers were beaten back by the Volscians, Martius by his "rare example" of holding his ground "stopp'd the fliers" and turned the tide of the battle. Then, when the Volscians fled back into Corioli, Cominius marvels at how Martius entered the gates of the city "alone" and "aidless came off" successful in singlehanded battle against the hosts of soldiers which would have been swarming about those gates before managing to return to his troops to gather "reinforcement" with which to strike "Corioles like a planet" (II.ii.103-14).

The question of how any man could accomplish such feats against such large numbers of enemies is obviously important, but

when considering the importance of both heroes to their respective communities, it is more important to ask why these feats were performed alone in the first place. Where were the Israelites when Samson was fighting for their freedom from Philistine oppression, and where were the Roman soldiers when Coriolanus pressed on into the city of fleeing enemies? That both men fought alone underscores the fact that however threatening and destructive vastly superior military heroes may be to the cohesion and norms of their communities—and many critics of both plays have attacked Samson and Coriolanus for their toxicity to their communities—the people those heroes serve do achieve a great deal of success as a direct result of heroic behavior. The Danite Chorus acknowledges this fact throughout the final choral odes of *Samson Agonistes* (1660-1707 and 1745-58), and the Roman aristocracy acknowledges it throughout *Coriolanus* (see I.ix.1-11, II.ii.37-154, and V.i.1-74), as do the Roman provincials (IV.vi.101-05). Even the Roman plebes acknowledge it before the tribunes begin manipulating their feelings to turn against Coriolanus (II.iii.1-255), and the plebes later regret having denied their debt to him after they find themselves groveling at his mercy (IV.vi.139-60).

While both communities do know that military heroics and virtue are necessary to their success, no one wishes to imitate Samson or Coriolanus. The Danite chorus continues to speak fearful and

submissive sentiments right up to the moment in which Samson decides he will attempt one last feat in Dagon's theater (1348-89), and they say nothing in their final celebration that indicates they have any more faith and courage than before, unless one interprets their final claim to "calm of mind" and spent passions as the replacement of fear with faith-filled valor (1758). Cominius and his soldiers at Corioli are not so entirely passive and deedless as the Danites, for they do participate in the relatively easier portions of the battle, but they lack the nerve to storm Corioli's gates in the crucial moment (I.iv.46-48). Coriolanus attributes their behavior to an inherently diseased character, deficient hearts, and base souls (I.iv.23-36). The last action Shakespeare depicts the Roman populace performing is thanking the gods that "the ladies have prevailed" with Coriolanus and throwing Volumnia a triumphal entry for giving her son a tongue lashing (V.iv.40-v.6), which is hardly an indicator that the Romans have experienced a mighty change of heart about bearing the brunt of a difficult battle with sheer grit and determination.

While neither community wishes to imitate their heroes, they both are glad to make use of them. The Danite chorus sings Samson's praises for accomplishing "the work for which" he "wast foretold / To Israel" (1662-63), and Manoa proclaims that Samson's action has brought the passive Israelites "honor . . . and freedom" provided they

can actually “find courage to lay hold on this occasion” (1715-16). These able-bodied Israelites actually have the audacity to claim honor and to doubt their courage after a blind man went off and died for their liberty by performing a monstrous feat of military destruction. The Romans are no less audacious in their use and abuse of Martius. They are not willing to charge into a heated battle, but they are more than willing to accept the spoils of victory (I.v.1-3), thus confirming all the aspersions Martius cast at them about their petty character. Then, because Martius refuses to grovel to them and to the ambitious tribunes for the consulship, they listen to the specious charges and flattery of the tribunes and banish the man who just won those spoils and that self-governance for them through his willingness to risk wounds and death in their behalf (III.iii.1-135). The Romans know that they need men like Martius, but they also want to control him, which he submits to militarily (I.ii.262), but not politically. Many men ambitious for political power have lied to obtain office, but Coriolanus refuses to stoop down and degrade his hard won honor by begging the petty people that failed to support him in battle.

Both heroes resent their people for abandoning them. Coriolanus can see that he is nothing but a weapon and a tool to his people, and that even the “dastard nobles” (IV.v.75) ultimately fear the masses more than they desire to honor and defend him, so he attempts to

repay them in kind by demonstrating that there is "a world elsewhere" (III.iii.135), that communities can also be discarded and replaced to suit individual purposes. In the words of G. Wilson Knight, Coriolanus "is a power used in the service of power. The spar turns out, in mid flight, to be a boomerang, and hurtles back on the hand that loosed it" (161). Samson's resentment is less explicit and intense, but no less real. He subtly gibes the Chorus when they visit him in his bondage, claiming that he is glad to finally receive friends now that he has learned through bitter experience that "in prosperous days / They swarm, but in adverse withdraw thir head / Not to be found, though sought" (191-93). The Danites are slow to support him even in emotional distress, let alone in the physical risk and rigor of war. Without naming them specifically, in his typical passive-aggressive manner, Samson again gibes the Danites when he speaks about "nations grown corrupt" who "by thir vices brought to servitude" love their "bondage" and "ease" more than they love "strenuous liberty," and who have the audacity to "despise, or envy, or suspect / Whom God hath of his special favor rais'd as thir Deliverer" when they consider his transgressions (268-74). Similar to Martius, Samson accuses "Israel's governors" who failed to seize the opportunity for victory by leading the people into battle when they saw "those great acts which God had done / Singly by me against their Conquerors"

(242-46), but he does so, in part, to soften the blame he is placing on the rank and file Danites. Samson does not respect either the valor or the faith of his people, but he does not utterly hate them like Coriolanus hates the Romans. Samson is glad of their company and does listen to their spiritual contemplations and questions with respect (187, 210-92).

The theme of a community's dependence on a hero who is vastly superior in martial valor and who is embittered at his people's audacious ingratitude is, of course, as old as epic and tragic poetry itself. "Coriolanus," says Lars Engle, "like Achilles, is a warrior whose individual prowess decides the fate of cities" (172). Potential comparisons between Achilles, Coriolanus, and Samson abound. Achilles, in a peculiar way, is often a mean between them. For example, Achilles's wrath leads him to withdraw his services from the Achaean armies, resulting in many defeats and deaths for them. Samson, though angry, never deliberately withdraws his services from the Israelites. Rather, he loses his capacity to serve them after his folly with Dalila costs him his strength and his eyes. Coriolanus, on the other hand, not only withdraws his services from the Romans but also actively opposes the Romans when he joins the Volscian armies. Again, Achilles's strength results in great measure from his divine lineage through Thetis, and, in at least one version of the story, he is

rendered impenetrable in all but his heel when Thetis dips him in the river Styx. Samson's lineage is entirely mortal, but his strength is also divine and outstrips any version of Achilles's strength inasmuch as the Hebrew God outstrips Thetis in power. After all, as mighty as he is, Achilles never performs a feat comparable to hauling the gates of a city on his shoulders up a hill for many miles (146-50). Samson's exploits suggest that he is also impenetrable, since he fought unscathed without wearing any "hammr'd cuirass," "Chalybean temper'd steel," or "frock of mail / Adamantean Proof" (131-34), which is far more than Homer's version of Achilles could boast, and which lacks the disadvantage of the fabled heel found in the other versions. On the other side, Coriolanus lacks any supernatural strength at all, unless his devotions and prayers to Mars are really met with divine intervention (I.iv.10-12). Coriolanus relies strictly on martial training, virtue, will, and a heart that refuses to settle for anything less than honorable death or even more honorable victory (I.iii.13-25; I.iv.25).

While there are many obvious comparisons between Achilles, Samson, and Coriolanus, that is not the comparison Shakespeare and Milton explicitly make in their poetry. Both Shakespeare and Milton ask readers to compare their heroes with Hercules. Shakespeare first references Hercules when Coriolanus calls the Romans "the beast / With many heads" (IV.i.1-2), alluding to Hercules's conflict with the

Hydra. This implicit reference is then quickly made explicit when Coriolanus reminds his mother that she once boasted with heroic optimism that if she had been “the wife of Hercules / Six of his labors” she would have performed herself to save her “husband so much sweat” (IV.i.17-19). Volumnia raised Coriolanus with a Herculean will and value system, and yet the Romans had the audacity to banish him after he singlehandedly rescued them from an ignominious defeat at the hands of Volscian armies. In reality, when it comes to military force, the Romans aren’t even comparable to the Hydra, for when Cominius rebukes the tribunes for having angered Coriolanus, he compares him to an earthquake that will “shake / Your Rome about your ears” (IV.vi.98-99). Menenius then amplifies this comparison by likening Coriolanus’s impending attack on Rome to Hercules shaking “down mellow fruit” from a tree (IV.vi.99-100), suggesting that Rome’s combined strength can only put up as much resistance to Coriolanus’s power as a tree can put up against the god of strong heroes. The aristocrats and the provincials know that rejecting such a man in the name of specious democratic equality is “valiant ignorance” and asking for a fool’s death (IV.vi.104-05). The tribunes don’t have any response to that argument beyond begging that they not be blamed for the catastrophe (IV.vi.120). Noting these allusions, Eugene Waith has argued that while many modern critics exhibit “distaste” for

Coriolanus's "martial heroism" and claim that Shakespeare wants us to reject him for his pride and arrogance, his "Herculean suburbia" really demands an "awe" that suspends judgment because it borders "on the supernatural" (Wells 148), and, as Jan Blits adds, Coriolanus's "Herculean labors make possible a way of life" even if he is not capable, "by nature, to share" it (159).

While Coriolanus may figuratively be able to shake Rome down like an earthquake, Samson literally shakes an entire civilization in a single act of physical strength when he tears a theater seating thousands of aristocrats down with a single shove of his arms, and Milton does exploit the obvious comparison with Hercules. *Paradise Lost* explicitly refers to "Herculean Samson" (IX.1060), and while *Samson Agonistes* does not make the reference quite so specific, it does compare Samson's strength in carrying the gates of Azza for miles uphill to the strength of Atlas, "whom the Gentiles feign to bear up Heav'n" (150), thus alluding to Hercules replacing Atlas for a time when, as Ovid says, Hercules's "neck sustained the sky" (IX.198). It seems unlikely that Judges-era Danites would compare their hero to a Greek myth, so the learned Milton clearly considered the allusion important enough to outweigh the charge of anachronism. As Joseph Wittreich notes in *Altering Eyes*, Hercules is "Samson's classical prototype" (125), and Milton probably wants readers to compare

Samson with Euripides's *Heracles Mad*. Euripides's Heracles murders his own family while smitten with insanity by Hera and then, bound in chains for his crime, he questions the whole idea that divine beings would act so immorally as to cause a man to murder his own family. Samson insanely reveals his secret to Dalila even after she betrays him three times, and then, bound in chains for his crime, he questions a "divine disposal" that would grant him "immeasurable strength" but leave him "with wisdom nothing more than mean" (205-10).

While Milton's subtle allusion to Hercules calls for comparison with Euripides, a practice in line with his prologue, the anachronism of it pulls the reader into Milton's own time, suggesting he may deliberately be calling for comparison with the Elizabethan concept of the Herculean hero. As Robin Wells explains, Elizabethans saw Hercules and Orpheus as representatives of a political dialectic, the former imposing order through physical force and the latter through the persuasion of music and oratory. Elizabethans were especially influenced in this political discussion by Seneca's *Hercules furens*, which explicitly compares Hercules with Orpheus as founders and ultimately settles the question in favor of Orpheus because martial heroism "causes more problems than it solves" (25). The Elizabethan poets directly engaged in this conversation. Thus, Ben Jonson, in his note to *The Masque of Queens*, calls Hercules the epitome of "brave

and masculine virtue,” and Edmund Spenser describes Hercules as the conqueror of ‘all the West’ because he “first taught men to subdue savage beasts” and to build civilization through war (26). Orpheus, on the other hand, was seen by Elizabethan’s as the model poet who used “the magical power of eloquence” to persuade men “to abandon their barbaric practices and to accept the constraints of civic life” (26).

According to Wells, Shakespeare engaged this dialectic perhaps more than any other poet, with Coriolanus and Prospero at the respective extremes. All of Shakespeare’s tragedies explore the Herculean hero, with traceable echoes to Seneca’s *Hercules furens*, but, observes Wells, Coriolanus “is Shakespeare’s most extreme example of the Herculean hero” (27). Wittreich believes Milton directly engaged this Elizabethan discussion of Hercules in *Samson Agonistes*, and he also believes that Milton intended, like Euripides and Seneca, to “cast a dubious eye upon traditional heroism” (125), but, as argued earlier in the case of *Coriolanus*, modern critics often read their own unambiguous distaste for martial heroism into the great poets.

Shakespeare’s Coriolanus is necessary to Rome’s success, and Milton’s chorus ultimately celebrates Samson’s Herculean triumph, just as Milton himself celebrated Hercules as “the grand suppressor of tyrants” in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (760). At the very least,

readers should proceed with extreme caution when attempting to cast simplistic moral judgments on these Herculean heroes.

Besides, making Milton just another participant in the Senecan and Elizabethan reduction of the Herculean hero to a question of the role of military prowess in building civilization risks missing one of the crucial distinctions between Coriolanus and Samson and between Shakespeare's aims and Milton's aims. Coriolanus is the ultimate soldier and votary of Roman *virtus*, which makes him a perfect fit for the Elizabethan concept of Hercules as the exemplar of building and supporting civilization through martial prowess, but Samson, like Hercules, is a divine superhero. He is, in fact, only ostensibly militaristic. Bloom calls Martius "a battering ram of a soldier, literally a one-man army" (577), and his exploits at Corioli do support that claim, but other important details should remind readers that Coriolanus is merely a key component in a military hierarchy. The democratic tribunes can't understand it, but Coriolanus is a faithful commander "under Cominius" (I.i.239-63). He does not truly act alone. Even though he fights his way out of Corioli single-handedly, a truly astounding feat, he still has to rally troops in order to ultimately take the city (I.iv.27-29, 62), and he must even enlist the help of Titus Lartius in order to accomplish and secure that victory (I.iv.62 and I.v.11-12). When he goes after Aufidius, he does so in spite of

extreme wounds, which is indeed a feat, but he also requests permission from his commander, like a good soldier, and enlists the aid of other soldiers (I.vi.50-75). True, he selects only a very few of the best to assist him against Aufidius's forces, preferring quality to quantity, but he does give "thanks to all" of the soldiers (I.vi.80-83), which gratitude and humility should give pause to all of the critics who, like the tribunes, can only see arrogance and childishness in Coriolanus. He is ultimately a skilled and intelligent soldier, he does understand the necessity of obedience and communal cooperation in military victory, and his contempt of the masses is suspended when he sees them earning their rights through necessary combat. Those who would object to this characterization by pointing to his boasting and contempt during the political strife for consulship and during the final scenes among the Volscians would do well to remember the machinations of the hypocritical tribunes and to consider how defensive anyone would likely become under such unexpected and ungrateful public assaults on their worth and character. In the context of the battlefield, everyone is grateful to have Coriolanus on their side, they all admire him, and the feeling is mutual (I.ix.40-70). Coriolanus is the epitome of the Elizabethan concept of Hercules as a community-founding soldier.

Samson, by contrast, is not a soldier at all. He uses no weapons, no armor, and no military art because he does not need them. He makes "arms ridiculous, useless" (130-31), holds "in scorn . . . proud arms and warlike tools" (136), and causes experienced veterans to turn "thir plated backs under his heel" (140) and to soil "thir crested helmets in the dust" (141). Unlike Martius, he is literally "himself an army" (346) with "strength / Equivalent to Angels" (343). Coriolanus boasts that Roman soldiers are worth four Volscians (I.vi.77-78) and ironically (perhaps not coincidentally) boasts that he could personally kill "thousands of these quarter'd slaves" (I.i.198-200). But even his greatest feat in Corioli was only possible because he took shelter "in a poor man's house" (I.ix.83), while Samson could walk Philistine streets openly, "none offering fight" (344-45). Samson has only two commanders, God's "rousing motion" (1382) and his "own accord" (1643), and under that direction, even crippled and blind, he can wipe out an entire governing class with a simple shove. Coriolanus dies stabbed in the back by Aufidius and other conspirators while ridiculously boasting that he could take "six Aufidiuses" (V.vi.128-31), but Samson is killed only "by his own hands" (1584) because no other person could even harm him, unless God permitted it as He did after Dalila cut Samson's hair. Coriolanus is the epitome of military strength and valor, but Samson would crush him like an "infant Mars" (Bloom

579), because Samson has nothing to do with being military. As scornful as the above description of Coriolanus is, the scorn should be mitigated by the fact that Coriolanus's strength and skill are truly his own virtue, while Samson is forced to humbly acknowledge that his strength is a "slight . . . gift" because God "hung it in my hair" (59). Coriolanus and Samson are both compared to dragons (1692; V.iv.13), but the simile with a mythic beast is only truly apt for the latter. Clearly, if Milton was engaging with the Elizabethan conception of the Herculean hero, he was debating the idea that Hercules symbolizes mere military prowess and city building. Hercules's feats are the stuff of myth and legend. He is a superhero, and so is Samson, but Milton would probably add that Samson's power comes from a God who dwarfs the power of Jupiter and of the entire pantheon of the Greeks and Romans.

Of course, the tradition of Herculean heroes is not merely about sheer, physical, brute force. Wells argues that independence from the assistance of others allows these heroes to "transgress normal limits" and to "defy conventional morality" (Wells 2-3). This fact is reflected in the moral lives of both Coriolanus and Samson, though their transgressions, at least before the former becomes a Volscian and the latter tells Dalila his sacred Nazarite secrets, are more like exaggerations of the community's norms. Thus, Coriolanus is an

extreme exemplar of Roman *virtus*, and Samson is an extreme exemplar of faith in and obedience to revelation. Military valor, says Plutarch, was honored in Coriolanus's time "above all other virtues" so that they gave it the "name of virtue itself, "as including . . . all other special virtues besides" (Wells 147), and Shakespeare, probably following Plutarch has Cominius say, "Valor is the chiefest virtue, and / Most dignifies the haver" (II.ii.84-5). Coriolanus takes this notion to an extreme and makes valor his only ethical allegiance. This allegiance transcends any sort of praise or reward from his community. Thus, Cominius says that Coriolanus looks "upon things precious as they were / The common muck of the world" and "rewards / His deeds with doing them" (II.ii.124-28), and Menenius defines this notion as the essence of being "right noble" (II.ii.129). Coriolanus takes this moral self-sufficiency in *virtus* so seriously that he transgresses the traditional political norm of showing his scars for the consulship in order to maintain it. True, he wears the "gown of humility" (II.iii.40) because it is not inconsistent with his ethic, but he refuses to cheapen and exploit his wounds to win votes from a people who "roar'd and ran / From the noise of our own drum" (II.iii.50-55). Perfection in *virtus* should be given the consulship without any canvassing of cowards, because it is natural consulship. Thus, it renders the votes of the people "needless," and justifies disregarding social customs and forms,

which are just “dust on antique time” and “mountainous error” to a man of perfect *virtus* (II.iii.113-31). Coriolanus maintains the superiority of his merit in *virtus* against the gods themselves (II.ii.35-39), causing even Volumnia, the supposed source of Coriolanus’s extreme notions of *virtus*, to accuse him of being “too absolute” (II.ii.39). Coriolanus values his “own truth” over the community’s “inherent baseness” (II.ii.121-23), and he will maintain it even if the community labels him an enemy and a traitor, threatens execution, and banishes him (II.ii.66-139).

Samson exaggerates Israelite obedience to Divine revelation, and thus, like Coriolanus, transgresses the norms and mores of his people. Old Testament law specifically forbids marrying gentile women (Deuteronomy 7:3-4 and Ezra 10:2), but an angel prophesied to Samson’s parents that he would “Israel from Philistian yoke deliver” (39), and, in pursuit of this prophesy, Samson marries the woman of Timna, “the daughter of an Infidel” (221) because an “intimate impulse” (223) from God led him to believe that he would find “occasion” through the relationship with her, her family, and her people to “begin Israel’s Deliverance” (225). This marriage did not honor his parent’s wishes (220 and 420-21), his people’s expectations (215-16), or his “vow of strictest purity” as a “heroic Nazarite” (318-21), but Samson put obedience to personal revelation from God above

obeying the revelations that had already been given to the community, just as Abraham once placed a personal revelation above the command to not kill. The woman of Timna "proving false" (227) does not lead Samson to conclude that he made a mistake. Rather, he marries another Philistine woman, Dalila, deeming it "lawful" not from communal revelations but "from my former act / And the same end" (231-32). Eventually, Samson probably revealed his Nazarite secrets to Dalila because God had already revealed to him that he could violate his covenants with impunity, since he had not suffered any loss of strength from the two marriages. The chorus points out that Samson's supposed personal revelations have actually worked against his role as Israel's deliverer since "Israel still serves with all his Sons" (240), and, as a direct result of Dalila's temptations, Samson is no longer in any condition to fight for his people (150-69). Samson does not accept the rebuke. He does take responsibility for his transgression (234-35), but he places the failure of Israel to achieve freedom squarely back on the Israelites (241-76), thus resisting the communal judgment of his moral failing in favor of his own. The Chorus does accept this rebuke, but Manoa does not. He continues to blame Samson and to reject the notion that the marriages were guided by God (420-30), which leads Samson to admit his decisions did appear

to dishonor God, but he continues to insist that the ultimate result, God delivering Israel, will still be accomplished (448-71).

Both Coriolanus and Samson exaggerate their virtues to the point of transgressing other social mores, which may seem to support the idea that they are destructive to their societies, but both heroes contribute independent, moral leadership in addition to their superior strength and skill. Thus, Coriolanus's extreme *virtus* is a liability in politics, but it is crucial in battle. His impassioned descriptions of valor repeatedly stir his fellow-soldiers up to greater feats and ultimately bring on victory over the Volscians (I.iv.60-62 and I.vi.66-86). Also, it is Martius's extreme valor that pushes him on to fight beyond his physical capacities, especially against Aufidius, an enemy whose destructive potential may be inferred from Coriolanus's respect for him (I.i.228-32; I.v.10-20). Similarly, Samson's final destruction of the Philistine ruling class is inspired by divine "rousing motions" (1382) that resemble his earlier "intimate impulses" (223), which suggests that he continues, right up to his final action, to find moral justification for his choices in divine revelation, and Israel's captors are destroyed as a result. That Coriolanus's extreme *virtus* is beneficial in the context of war but is destructive in politics is probably reflected in the fact that the Romans do not acknowledge Coriolanus's contributions to society at the end of the play, while the Chorus and Manoa celebrate

Samson's actions, acknowledging that God used Samson to work a miracle "for his people" (1533), that Samson's actions were guided by "our Living Dread" (1673-78), and that "highest wisdom" ultimately "bore witness gloriously" to the divine calling of "his faithful champion" (1745-1751).

As a result of their extreme strength and moral independence, Herculean heroes often experience a rich spiritual life, which enhances their contribution to their communities. In the case of Coriolanus, many critics are tempted to accuse him of lacking such an inner life altogether. Danson calls Coriolanus "the least soliloquizing of Shakespeare's tragic characters" (133), having only one soliloquy, and that soliloquy, according to Nuttall, merely "comments on his past acts rather than revealing an inner struggle" (295). Coriolanus, continues Nuttall, is thus a "lesser intelligence" (295). "Coriolanus," says Coppelia Kahn, "is Shakespeare's least inward hero: he has little if any self-knowledge, and only one soliloquy" (218). Wyndham Lewis hurls the most hyperbolic vitriol at Coriolanus's inner life, calling him a "super-snob," a "schoolboy . . . crazed with notions of privilege and social distinction . . . incapable of thinking," a mind full of "unintelligent pride," a "cruel and stupid child," and a "maniacal," "demented . . . madman" (272-77). Much of this critical anger grows out of hatred for Coriolanus's aristocratic politics, but critics have even

felt personally slighted and shut out by what they perceive as Coriolanus's shallow snobbery. Bloom says Coriolanus's puny inner life is "accessible neither to us nor to anyone in the play, including Caius Martius himself" (578). Janet Adelman expresses similar disgust at the personal slight, saying, "We almost never know what he is thinking, and—even more intolerably—he does not seem to care what we are thinking" (332). Just as Coriolanus won't show his wounds to the Roman plebes, he won't address the audience in soliloquy, which is unendurable to his critics. Richard III and Iago, for all their dastardliness, at least share themselves with the audience. Coriolanus, far more virtuous and beneficial to the community than either of those villains, does not, and his reputation has suffered for it

While it is true that Coriolanus's lack of soliloquy may reflect a smaller degree of introspection than many of Shakespeare's other tragic heroes, it is not true that he lacks an inner life or that his heroic merits and benefits to the community are strictly shallow displays of soldiering. Such claims misunderstand Roman *virtus* and Coriolanus's character. His speeches before, during, and after battle may not strictly be soliloquies, but they are full of sincere expressions of camaraderie, humility, and exhilarating emotion, suggesting that Coriolanus, at least on the battlefield, is definitely possessed of an inner life. He calls the soldiers "my fellows" (I.iv.27), "our Romans"

(I.v.11), says they are worth “four Volsces” (I.vi.78), considers it “sin to doubt” their valor (I.vi.68), speaks heartily of his friendship and respect for Lartius (I.iv.25 and I.v.11) and Cominius (I.vi.55-58), and only deprecates the Romans when they “budge / From rascals worse than they” (I.vi.44-5). Everyone honors him (I.ix.66), yet he strives to maintain his humble adherence to *virtus* and expresses consistent gratitude for their services and recognition (I.vi.81 and I.ix.69-73). He is no snob, for he honors a “slave” who does his duty while blaming “gentlemen” who shun theirs (I.vi.39-45). As for emotion, he calls Aufidius “his soul’s hate” (I.v.10), speaks of “love” for wearing blood as a badge, of fear of dishonor, of sublime commitment to bravery and noble living, and of holding country “dearer than himself” (I.vi.68-72). Clearly, Coriolanus is not without expressions of powerful inner emotions, and these emotions stir his fellows up to feats, victory, and gratitude (I.ix.1-10, 53-66).

Contrary to Nuttall’s assessment, Coriolanus’s single soliloquy is not a mere catalog of past deeds and does in reality reflect an inner struggle. The very first words personify and apostrophize the world, complaining of “thy slippery turns” (IV.iv.12). He is bitterly angry at reality itself, at a world in which “friends now fast sworn”—a reference to his vows to Cominius (I.vi.57-8), Lartius, Menenius, Virgilia, and his fellow soldiers—can suddenly “break out / To bitterest enmity”

(IV.iv.17-18). The depths of his love are figured in synecdoche. His relationships appeared to be "double bosoms," but they actually consisted of "one heart" (IV.iv.13). He is in deep agony. He had all things in common with his friends—"hours . . . bed . . . meal . . . exercise" (IV.iv.14)—felt "love / Unseparable" (IV.iv.16), and now he is becoming "dear friends" with "fellest foes" against his "birthplace," and, recognizing this situation as a paradox, he says, "my love's upon / This enemy town" (IV.iv.18-24). This is not a dispassionate recitation of his experience. It is a philosophic marveling at the extreme changes of fortune and character that can happen in a single life. This soliloquy is no less reflective than those spoken by Shakespeare's other tragic heroes. The feelings Coriolanus expresses in the soliloquy are not negated by the fact that he continues with his treachery. Rather, the fact that his uncompromising commitment to *virtus* led to disloyalty is a bitter, tragic paradox, and he knows it.

Coriolanus's speeches and single soliloquy do demonstrate an inner life, but it is important to understand the extent to which Coriolanus's *virtus* emphasizes the value of duty, responsibility, and action over speech or introspection. "His aim," says Danson, "is to express himself solely through his deeds in the moment of their doing" (133). His deeds at Corioli are his soliloquies. In battle, he will give speeches if it inspires others to valor and victory, but he feels that

words of praise sully his actions. Thus, following the battle with Aufidius, he asks Cominius to stop his "acclamations hyperbolical" and his "praises sauc'd with lies" (I.ix.51-53), and later, at a ceremony commemorating his deeds, he tells the tribune Brutus that he ran into battle but "fled from words" and would rather not "hear my nothings monster'd" (II.ii.70-77). "The empty words of the Tribunes," says Warren Chernaik, "are set against deeds demonstrating manly courage" (166). Coriolanus does not even want his wounds to serve as non-verbal communication of his deeds, so he refuses to show them to the populace as a means of canvassing votes (II.ii.135-39). Coriolanus strives to avoid political contest, where words are the weapons, but, throughout Act III, the tribunes, gifted in rhetoric and public relations, goad him into speaking his unpopular sentiments, which leads to his banishment. The inner bankruptcy of the banishers is then demonstrated when they refuse to take responsibility for the consequences of their rhetoric. As Coriolanus bears down on Rome with an army of Volscians and Aufidius, "the second name of men" (IV.vi.125), the patricians, realizing that Rome is no match for Coriolanus, accuse the tribunes. "Say not we brought it," the tribunes respond (IV.vi.120), and then the citizens, imitating their representatives, all disclaim any role in mistreating Coriolanus (IV.140-56). The Romans, excepting three women and a child (V.iii.1-

209), do not have enough inner strength to stand up to Coriolanus, but he has the inner strength to stand up to the whole city.

Coriolanus's ethic of virtuous action over empty words is most exemplified when Volumnia, Virgilia, Valeria, and his son confront him. The moment Virgilia enters, he says, "But out, affection, / All bond and privilege of nature, break! / But let it be virtuous to be obstinate" (V.iii.24-26). Coriolanus attempts to make war with all that is best in himself, but he cannot win. He knows in his heart that fighting his homeland, the home of his mother, wife, and child, is vicious, even by military standards, and he can't stand to be vicious. As he gazes on his wife, he says her eyes "can make gods forsworn" (V.iii.28). These words show that he now recognizes the tribunes were right when they accused him of behaving like "a god, to punish; not / A man of their infirmity" (III.i.81-2), so he now confesses he is "not of stronger earth than others" (V.iii.29). Still, he attempts to maintain his vengeful version of *virtus* and his commitment to the Volscians, but after brief rebukes from wife and son and a lengthy rebuke from Volumnia, he realizes he cannot do so with any semblance of honor. This realization is not explicitly spoken, but it is implied in the emotional exclamations of Coriolanus's reaction. Thus, as Danson explains, Coriolanus's "most poignantly expressive moment is, literally, wordless" (133), What other character in world literature has had to swallow more pride than

Coriolanus does in that moment? He has the power to crush Rome, to crush home, to obtain poetic justice like no single man ever will again, and he chooses not to do it because of the emotions and feelings Volumnia helps him to remember. He has to admit he was wrong, he has to admit he was delusional and short sighted, and he has to admit that war will not solve all of his problems. It may be the most profound inward revolution in all of Shakespeare. As Maynard Mack explains, "Coriolanus, 'boy' though he is and in some ways remains, makes a triumphant choice (detract from his motives as we may), and he knows what it is likely to cost" (144). Thus, while Coriolanus's critics, focusing solely on his impractical stubbornness in refusing to show his wounds, on his defensive arrogance when the tribunes stir the people up to banish him, and on his childish vengeance in attacking his own city, condemn him as a brute, a warmonger, and a selfish and immature tyrant, readers who look at the progress of the whole man over the course of the play will see he is possessed of supreme inner virtue and passes the ultimate test of that virtue in the face of a crushing paradox. How many of Coriolanus's critics have ever even had the opportunity to wield power like his and to make moral choices while possessed of such power? Without taking and passing such tests, they should judge with caution.

While Coriolanus has a heroic inner life grounded in action and *virtus*, Samson has an inner life grounded in faith and revelation. As a result, Samson's inner life displays more recognizably spiritual and contemplative traits. But during the height of his exploits, Samson felt emotions similar to Coriolanus's. He believed in silent *virtus*, that "deeds themselves, though mute, spoke loud the doer" (248), and he saw the passive desertion of Israel as a weak and "corrupt" avoidance of "strenuous liberty" (265-71) and their rejection of him as "ingratitude on worthiest deeds" (276). But Samson, unlike Coriolanus, was also guilty of "shameful garrulity" (491), suggesting that his inner life was less rigorously committed to active *virtus* than Coriolanus's. Samson loves wordplay and riddles (1016 and 1200), boasts to others of his exploits (261-64 and 633-40), and he cannot keep even the most solemn secrets from attractive women (49, 201, 384, 497). In fact, his weakness for speaking freely with women is itself effeminate (562). The Chorus compares his riddling to the mysterious drives of women (1010-17), and his inability to keep a secret imitates both the woman of Timna and Dalila (384 and 782-83). Clearly, Coriolanus would not be impressed with Samson's masculinity or his *virtus*.

Samson's garrulousness also manifests itself in a greater number of soliloquies. Coriolanus has one short soliloquy of 15 lines, but *Samson Agonistes* opens with Samson uttering 114 lines of soliloquy

and contains one other long soliloquy near the middle of the poem (606-51). While this proportionately larger propensity to soliloquize may appear, based on the aforementioned claims of critics, to be evidence that Samson's inner life is richer than Coriolanus's, both of his soliloquies reject the notion that he has an inner life at all. Instead, Samson speaks of "a life half dead, a living death" (100), of his body as "a moving Grave" (102), and of "a lingering disease . . . to black mortification" in his "inmost mind" (611-22). All of these expressions contrast sharply with Coriolanus's joy in battle, his pensive reflections on joining the Volscians, or even his humiliation in capitulating to Volumnia, for he then negotiated a favorable peace treaty for the Volscians in a bid to survive and live with them, indicating a strong love for life.

Samson's inner life is really a living death because of constant regret, remorse, pain, grief, defeat, shame, and sin. He lost his physical strength and his sight, went from godly capacity to crippled incapacity, became "the scorn and gaze" of his "enemies" (34), has been "debas't lower than a bondslave" (37-38), and all because "weakly to a woman" (50) he revealed the sacred and secret source of his strength to Dalila. His fall cannot even be dismissed as the common weakness of mankind. Dalila betrayed him three times when he told her lies about the source of his strength, and he knew that, but

he still finally revealed the truth to her, so he has no one "to complain of but my self" (46). His blindness has left him "helpless with th' irreparable loss / Of sight" (644-45) and in Philistine custody, so he no longer has any option for an external life. All he has is an inner life, but it is a torturous inner life, comparable to an inescapable and perpetual attack by a "deadly swarm / Of hornets arm'd" (19-20).

While it is true that Samson does not have a vigorous inner life of *virtus* like Coriolanus, his slavery humbles him and blindness forces him to look inward. As a result, Samson achieves a degree of humility and introspection unknown to Coriolanus. Samson begins his first soliloquy by reflecting on his circumstances as a Philistine slave. He is happy just to experience resting by a river and to breathe "the breath of Heav'n fresh-blowing" during a reprieve from the constant manual labor and the "unwholsom draught" of the Philistine workhouse (1-11). This reflection should remind us that the intense introspection that follows has no parallel in Coriolanus precisely because he never experiences a comparable degree of humiliation. Coriolanus never feels shame before his people because he never stoops to violate his *virtus*, but Samson cannot hide the fruits of his irrational vice from the Chorus and suspects he is "sung and proverb'd for a Fool / In every street" (203-04). Exile is ignominious, but Coriolanus voluntarily joins and comes into command of the Volscians and, in full strength and

vigor, forces his accusers to grovel for his mercy. Volumnia then forces him to reflect on the dishonor of his intentions, but he soon relents and then negotiates a peace that honors his obligations to both Romans and Volscians (V.iii.196-98, V.vi.70-83). He then experiences a brief repeat of ingratitude and humiliating rejection when the Volscians turn on him, but Aufidius quickly stabs him in the back before he spends much time enduring the bitter humiliation of his choices (V.vi.111-30). In contrast, Samson falls from the heights of divine favor and heroic invincibility into the depths of slavery to idolaters. He spends much time in this state before finding a path to either vengeance or redemption by the end of the play.

But Samson's pain pushes him beyond mere lamentation and humility. He asks deep ontological questions. Coriolanus's soliloquy briefly ponders his marvelous changes of fortune, and he does envision the gods laughing at him (V.iii.184-85), but he only observes these feelings for a moment, and then acts without further questions.

Samson, paralleling Satan in *Paradise Lost*, constantly challenges the "divine disposal" (210) of monotheistic omnipotence. Why would an Omniscient foresight choose him from before birth to deliver Israel from bondage if his real end is blind slavery to Israel's captors (23-29)? Why would that same Omnipotence give specific instructions about his upbringing if that education did not give him the wisdom to

avoid dying "Betray'd, Captiv'd, and both my Eyes put out" (30-33)? Why would the true God of Heaven give him strength only to have it enslaved by the worshippers of Dagon" (34-42)? Samson may feel as though his inner life has become a living death, but, in many ways, his circumstances have actually pushed him into a much deeper life of the mind. He now asks questions about God that he would never have asked while he was a successful one-man army.

Samson's inner life consists of deep ontological struggles about the nature of God, but his pain does not simply overcome his faith. Coriolanus's inner fight is always quickly resolved and followed by a plan of action, but Samson faces an inner battle of immense complexity. His God is no mere Mars, but the God of Abraham. Samson fights with himself to maintain faith in the ultimate justice of the Divine. He follows his questions with self-rebuke. "Yet stay, let me not rashly call in doubt / Divine Prediction," he says (43-44). He then squarely accepts blame for his own circumstances, a disposition which mirrors Coriolanus's belief that Romans will maintain their rights and luxuries only if they accept the responsibility to work and fight for them. But Samson cannot long maintain such inner strength. He is a moral agent, but an agent created by the Almighty, so he quickly follows his resolution with more questions. He asks, "What is strength without a double share / Of wisdom" (53-54)? God supposedly gave

him a gift, but it was a curse without the wisdom to use it rightly. Like Coriolanus in his brief vision following Volumnia's speech, Samson feels that he is the object of some sick divine joke, for God "hung" the strength "in my Hair" just to make him an object lesson of "How slight the gift was" (58-59), but, showing his desire to preserve faith in Israel's God, he again rebukes himself for quarreling "with the will / Of highest dispensation," for he knows that God's ways are not his ways, and He may yet have "ends above my reach to know" (60-62). Clearly, Samson's inner life is richer than Coriolanus's not only because of the extremity of his humiliation and pain, but also because of the supremacy of the God to whom he strives to submit.

In the second half of his opening soliloquy, Samson expresses deeper and more sophisticated theological, philosophic, and emotional experiences than Coriolanus would desire or be able to imagine. Samson describes his blindness as not merely a handicap preventing him from earthly success, but as an expression of God's most wrathful condemnation. Light is "the prime work of God," but to him it has been made "extinct" (70). He feels as though God has cast him into outer darkness, where there is weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth. He no longer has the power of a human being, but has become "inferior to the vilest . . . of man or worm" because even the lower organisms "creep, yet see" (73-74). Filled with immense pain he cries out, "O

dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon / Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse / Without all hope of day!" (80-82). The opening epizeuxis emphasizes the intensity of the pain darkness causes in him, and expressing it reveals layers of repressed anger, so that he must utter it more than once as the totality of the darkness impresses itself upon him. He can feel the "blaze" of the sun, so he knows it is there, but that only adds bitter irony to his state. The source of light still exists, but his capacity to ever access that light has been permanently removed. Samson interprets his blindness both theologically and metaphorically as the ultimate punishment, for light was the "first created Beam, and thou great Word," and God said "Let there be light" as His very first blessing upon the Universe (83-84). Thus, Samson feels cut off from the Divine Logos, cast back upon the chaotic void of darkness before God began his organization of all things, leading him to pray to that light and ask, in lamentation and anger, "Why am I thus bereav'd thy prime decree?" (85). The question contains an unexpressed reproach against God. Samson feels that his punishment is disproportionate to his crime. He does not understand why God has treated him so poorly.

Samson does not stop at asking about the extreme cruelty of God's punishment against him. The feelings lead him to question the very nature of the Creator's creation. If physical life depends on light,

and if the Soul can only live when permeated by light—we speak of spiritual sight and enlightenment—then “why was sight / To such a tender ball as th’ eye confin’d?” asks Samson (93-94). Why did God not make light “like feeling through all parts diffus’d, / That she might look at will through every pore?” (96-97). Samson’s suffering has led him to ask the metaphysical question Aristotle asks: Why are things the way they are? We can imagine completely different orders of creation, including orders that seem far more loving and perfect than the one we find ourselves in, so why did a loving and perfect God create the absurdly inefficient and inherently painful universe that we know? This question, when detached from human suffering, is the primary question of metaphysics, but when imbued with human suffering, it is the primary question of tragedy.

In his second soliloquy, Samson asks the primary question of tragedy again, this time framed in terms of God as Father. He was God’s “nursling once and choice delight” (633), was watched over, raised, and led “on to mightiest deeds” (638), but, God has now “cast me off as never known” (641). He feels like a forsaken child. A loving Father has rejected him. This is an expression of deepest emotional pain. Rather than engaging with scripture and theology, he engages directly with the pain of betrayal and the grief of loss he feels at having lost his Heavenly Father. The abandonment leaves him feeling

assaulted by personified Torment, who is not satisfied to attack the body alone, but must also attack his soul, and “there exercise all his fierce accidents, / And on her purest spirits prey” (612-13). This inner torture is “more intense” than bodily pain, and leaves his psyche “As a lingering disease” which “no cooling herb / Or medicinal liquor can assuage” (618-27). The only “balm” for the disease is “speedy death,” for which he prays at the end of the soliloquy (649-51). Coriolanus, by contrast, strives to survive and thrive all the way until Aufidius stabs him in the back, but just as his feats of strength never reach Samson’s superhuman heights, so his miseries never reach his subhuman depths. Coriolanus is defeated by a paradox of *virtus*, but Samson is crushed by the paradox of the Almighty God. There results a proportionate difference in their inner worlds. Critics are wrong to suggest that Shakespeare’s Coriolanus has no inner life, for he does feel the primary question of tragedy in that moment when he sees the gods looking down and laughing at him, but it remains inarticulate and passes away quickly from him. Milton’s Samson, with nothing but time to ponder and think, has learned to articulate those questions and to sit with the feelings they provoke.

While Samson may appear to be experiencing nothing but a bankrupt spiritual death during this soliloquy, new introspective life appears to be achieved near the end of the poem. Before departing for

the theater of Dagon, Samson claims "to feel / Some rousing motions in me which dispose / To something extraordinary" (1381-83), suggesting that his former despair has begun to be replaced by feelings of hope. Samson now believes, in spite of his blindness, that God may yet use him for some great deed against the Philistines. This new hopeful introspection is perhaps what fills Samson when, moments before he tears the theater down, he stands "as one who pray'd, / Or some great matter in his mind revolv'd" (1637-38). As with Coriolanus's moment of silence before Volumnia, Samson's "most poignantly expressive moment is literally wordless" (Danson 133). Milton, contrary to the Judges account, chooses not to explicitly depict the words of Samson's prayer (compare 1635-38 with Judges 16:28), and he does not even allow the reader to know that Samson prayed at all, for he may simply have meditated on some "great matter." This choice may be a result of his using the tragic convention of a messenger to report violent events which take place off stage, for the messenger would not be privy to Samson's unspoken thoughts, but Milton probably could have solved that problem if he had wished to depict the content of Samson's final inner moments. The reader is left to speculate on exactly what Samson was experiencing, and critics have debated that very question, but Samson's inner life, in those final moments, must have involved questioning the ethics and honor of

what he purposed and then deciding that it would ultimately be an act of personal triumph, of sweet vengeance, and of fulfillment of prophetic purpose, allowing him to die what he and the Chorus perceived as a heroic death.

Thus, both Shakespeare and Milton depict their Herculean heroes as possessed of superior physical, moral, and spiritual capacities, and both heroes use these traits to benefit their respective communities. But not everything about Coriolanus and Samson is heroic and beneficial. Like Hercules himself, Coriolanus and Samson follow the tragic convention of *hamartia*, though critics have not always been able to agree about the error each hero commits. Also, both heroes have critics who believe that their shortcomings extend beyond *hamartia* into outright villainy, which would violate Aristotle's maxim about how absolutely detestable characters cannot inspire tragic pity. Some of this debate about the *hamartia* of Coriolanus and Samson has been alluded to earlier, but a more detailed comparison between the errors of the two heroes will further define the relationship between tragic hero and community expressed in both plays and the benefits Coriolanus and Samson confer upon their communities.

Identifying one error for either Samson or Coriolanus is difficult. They are complex characters possessed of multiple attributes that work together subtly to cause their respective falls, but both men

experience what McDonald calls the "tragic paradox" in which "the sources of human greatness and the sources of human failure are identical" (24). Samson, in contemplating the question of his own failure, calls attention to his physical strength as one such double-edged sword. He celebrates his feats of strength in battling Philistines, but strength is also his "bane, / And proves the source of all my miseries," because it is "vast, unwieldy, burdensome," and gives a false sense of security while one is, in reality, "yet liable to fall" (54-64). The maxim that absolute power corrupts absolutely applies not only in politics, but also in physical capacity, as Socrates knew in his famous parable of Gyges and the invisibility ring. Humans are not practiced in being superhumanly above their peers, and Samson claims his super strength overwhelmed his all too human virtue. Physical strength is not Coriolanus's bane, for he is not so supernaturally strong above his peers that external attacks from friends or foes are no threat, but his superior military capacities do contribute to his fall because they give him the delusional moral confidence and actual physical ability to turn on his own people, to take command of a foreign army, to "stand / As if a man were author of himself" (V.iii.36), and to cause the Romans to plead for his mercy. In Menenius's hyperbole, Coriolanus might as well be supernatural, for

he "wants / Nothing of a god but eternity and a heaven to throne in"
(V.iv.23-24).

While strength and military ability do contribute to the falls of Samson and Coriolanus, these traits cannot be the exclusive causes of error and failure. They do not necessarily always lead to abuses of power. Samson admits that strength only blinded his judgment because it is nothing "without a double share / Of wisdom" (53-54). Sometimes he blames his foolishness on God, who "should at least, have paired" strength and wisdom in him, but gave him "wisdom nothing more than mean" (207-08). At other times, Samson retracts this accusation against God and takes responsibility for his own foolishness, as when he tells Manoa that he is "sole author I, sole cause" of his miseries (373-76), for he, "like a foolish Pilot" wrecked a ship that had been "gloriously rigged" (198-200). Either way, Samson says it was strength and wisdom "proportioned ill drove me transverse" (209). Coriolanus may also have needed a double share of wisdom to counterbalance his superior military strength with political tact, but it was his mother rather than God who failed to instill it in him, at least until the fatal moment when she finally does.

Samson may indeed be foolish, but this raises a question about exactly what sort of knowledge or wisdom he lacks. His revelation to Dalila is not a mere error of judgment or of ignorance. It is, in the

words of Stanley Fish, "causeless weakness" (402). Samson was "warn'd by oft experience" that Dalila would betray him (382). He gave her false ideas of the source of his strength three times, and she "openly," with "impudence," and with "contempt" betrayed his feigned secret to the Philistines (375-401). That he would then reveal the truth to her is outright absurdity, and Samson never gives a plausible account of why he did it. He admits that even "a grain of manhood well resolv'd / Might easily" have withstood the temptation (408-09). Coriolanus's foolishness is clearer. It is not that he underestimates the potential power of a mob stirred up by cunning machinations and rhetoric, for he knows the multitude is a "Hydra" capable of "insurrections" when managed by malicious tribunes and indulged with "dangerous lenity" by patricians (I.i.221 and III.i.93-9), but he is ignorant of the true springs of political power, for he seems to believe that he can obtain consulship without compromise. He understands brute might, military discipline, and virtuous character, but he believes his incorruptible aristocratic virtues are sufficient to sustain him in any contest, even in democratic contests for office, where appeasement, compromise, negotiation, and even corruption have always been necessary. He also foolishly forgets that *virtus* is inseparable from obedient loyalty, and that no man can possibly be author of himself or live without a country.

Samson's foolishness may simply be lust, and that could be the best explanation for the absurdity of his lapse. After Samson blames God for not pairing wisdom with his strength, the Chorus rebukes him for attacking "divine disposal" and then comforts him with the reality that "wisest men / Have err'd, and by bad Women been deceived" (210-11). Now, women have many methods of overcoming a wise man. Samson first describes Dalila as overcoming him with "importunity and tears" (51), suggesting that she merely pestered him, pleaded with him, and appealed to the compassion men feel for beautiful weeping women. But later, Samson uses military metaphors to describe "the fourth time," when he "unlock'd her all my heart." Dalila, "must'ring all her wiles," made aggressive "feminine assaults" upon him with "tongue-batteries" (402-05). The use of tongue here may still suggest only words and tears, but the combat language also hints that Dalila used the physical, sexual power of her tongue to manipulate Samson. Still later, as if he is finally willing to reveal the real source of Dalila's unaccountable power over him, Samson's description becomes overtly sexual. Dalila used "fair fallacious looks" and "venereal trains" to soften Samson "with pleasure and voluptuous life" until he finally lay the "hallow'd pledge / Of all my strength in the lascivious lap" (533-36). Dalila apparently withheld sexual gratification from him until she was sure he was finally revealing the true source of

his strength. One would think a man like Samson could easily find another woman to fill such needs, but perhaps Dalila lured him back after multiple betrayals because of her inordinate charms, beauty, and skills, and Samson, in the heat of the moment, could not resist.

Samson may also have hoped that he had won Dalila over to a sincere and real intimacy, that he could finally trust her, and his desire for intimacy with her overrode his good sense. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that Samson believed his marriage to Dalila had divine sanction, mostly as a means to find "occasion hence" to "begin Israel's deliverance" (219-31), but perhaps also as a revelation that Dalila could become a helpmeet for Samson.

Coriolanus is never overcome by lust, for he insists to Virgilia that he has remained faithful to her, that his "true lip / Hath virgin'd it ever since" (V.iii.47-48) he left Rome, and he reverences mother, wife, and Valeria as virtuous, chaste women (V.iii.25-29, 48-52, 64-67), but, peculiarly parallel to Samson, he is conquered by his softness for women. Volumnia's tongue lashing of Coriolanus is not sexual, but, as with Dalila's "tongue-batteries," it is a weapon with which she wins "a happy victory to Rome" (V.iii.186), for it is her words, in the end, that have done more than "consuls, senators, patricians, / A city full" (V.iii.53-54), and she is given the triumphal entry of a war hero upon her return to Rome (V.iv.1-6). Thus, Dalila's "importunity and tears"

overcame Samson, and Coriolanus succumbed, according to Aufidius, to “a few drops of women’s rheum” (V.vi.45). Of course, in spite of Aufidius’s angry spin on it, Coriolanus’s surrender to the women in his life can be seen as a redemptive choice rather than an error, though it does lead to his death. For a word and a tear, Samson divulged God’s secret to a woman; for a word and a tear, Coriolanus betrays the Volscians, or at least sacrifices their military triumph in favor of a diplomatic peace. But, in doing so, Coriolanus saves himself from that utter infamy into which Samson descends. Samson winds up “proverb’d for a Fool / In every street” (203-04) while Coriolanus’s death, inflicted ostensibly for his submission to women (V.vi.91-9) is regretted and honored by the Volscians and even Aufidius (V.vi.130-53).

Samson claims that his foolishness consisted of more than lust. He links the power of lust over him to pride. His strength, he says, because unaccompanied by wisdom, made him “fearless of danger,” so that he felt “like a petty God . . . admir’d of all,” which led him “swoll’n with pride into the snare . . . of fair fallacious looks” (529-33). Samson felt protected by prophecy, and he believed, based on his divinely revealed “intimate impulse” (219-32) that his relations with Dalila were sanctioned, that he could pursue her, in spite of her being a Philistine, with impunity, that nothing he could do would render him

vulnerable to his enemies. Samson believed divine favor was not conditional upon good behavior, especially since he believed God had excused him from the command to marry an Israelite. The Chorus even ultimately validates Samson's assumption, claiming God has "full right to exempt / Whom so it pleases him by choice / From National obstruction" (310-12), suggesting that while Samson's belief that God excepted him from obedience to otherwise universal commandments was prideful, it was not without some theological precedent in Israelite thinking.

The agony between Samson and his antagonists revolves around the theme of pride and humility. The Chorus asks Samson to admit that he has transgressed God's bounds and failed to deliver Israel, but they finally grant that God may have given him a dispensation. Manoa asks him to return home to a life of ease and luxury through groveling for the favor of the Philistines. Dalila asks him to submit his honor to her far more valuable feminine comforts. Harapha asks him to admit that blindness and filthiness render him an unfit opponent for a duel. The officer commands him to submit to degrading Philistine requests on pain of corporal punishment. All of these people assume that Samson's pride has angered the Divine and left him in need of repentance. Samson does claim to be sinfully proud, but he resists all of these calls to humility. As always, he desires to live by direct

revelation rather than by the codes and expectations of the community. This desire may be the source of his error, for he has the audacity to travel the path of personal revelation and blind faith to a place beyond good and evil, and some critics believe that these revelations should be interpreted as false and evil delusions. Joseph Wittreich, one of the most prominent examples of these critics, writes in *Shifting Contexts: Reinterpreting Samson Agonistes* that Milton drew mainly upon "Euripidean models" (2) that deepen Sophoclean "skepticism toward both myth and prophecy" (62). Accepting Samson's revelations as errors does lead to the conclusion that his final victory over the Philistines, prompted by "rousing motions" (1382), is not prophetic fulfillment or divine inspiration but murderous vengeance, so readers will accept or reject the idea based on their feelings and interpretations of the play's calamity.

Like Samson, Coriolanus is accused of pride. Sicinius calls him the proudest man ever (I.i.252), Brutus says his ambition defies comprehension (IV.vi.31), and both Brutus and Sicinius say he has every human flaw, especially pride (II.i.18-20). Just as Samson acted like a "petty God," Coriolanus, says Brutus, behaves to the people "as if you were a god, to punish; not a man of their infirmity" (III.i.81-82). Later, before Virgilia and Volumnia, Coriolanus will humbly admit that he is "not / Of stronger earth than others" (V.iii.29), but his earlier

words and behavior do appear to verify Brutus's hyperbolic rhetoric, as when he boasts that he can fight "with thousands of these quarter'd slaves" (I.i.199), or refers to the Romans contemptuously as "rogues" (I.i.164), "scabs" (I.i.166), "curs" (I.i.168), "rats" (I.i.249), "measles" (III.i.78) and "minnows" (III.i.89). And while the hyperbole of the tribunes is hypocritical and biased, as Menenius points out (II.i.35-40), Volumnia seconds the notion of Coriolanus's virtue being a cloak for pride when she tells him that his unwillingness to compromise and submit to community customs dishonors her and comes of pride and does not belong to the *virtus* she instilled in him (III.ii.123-30).

It is easy for some people to exaggerate the pride of heroes like Samson and Coriolanus because they envy what is really just natural superiority. Samson may have been full of pride when he succumbed to Dalila, but, even before he was humbled by defeat, blindness, and enslavement, Samson says "God had done" the actions performed "singly by me," and that he "us'd no ambition to commend" his deeds (243-47). The Chorus does not gainsay Samson's humble claim that God was the source of his power and that he acted from altruistic motives, but confirms it, admitting that Samson resembled their historic "great Deliverer . . . The matchless Gideon" and Jephtha in his warfare, and that it was themselves who, like "ingrateful Ephraim," had their pride "quelled" by heroic "prowess" (277-89). Similarly,

Coriolanus, in time of battle, is exceptionally humble. The tribunes have a difficult time fitting his humble willingness to be commanded into their conception of his prideful character (I.i.260-63) because their understanding of human motivations does not include *virtus* but can only reflect the ambitions in their own hearts. Coriolanus refuses praises of his wounds and merits, asking only to “stand upon my common part with those / That have beheld the doing” (I.ix.39-40), by which he means those soldiers who had enough *virtus* to fight with him. He does not want the empty praises of men, nor does he honor titles, medals, office, birth, wealth, or a false sense of superiority. He honors every man who fought with him and who fought “with hearts more proof than shields” (I.iv.24-25), even if their skills and abilities were less than his own, for he tells them, “I have done / As you have done—that’s what I can” (I.ix.16). He does expect to be given the consulship based on military merit, which suggests a false sense of entitlement, and he is certainly arrogant to the Roman masses throughout the play, but it must be granted that the extreme, inhuman arrogance he is known for—G. Wilson Knight likens him to a “planet in the dark chaos of pride, pursuing his self-bound orbit: a blind mechanic, metallic thing of pride and pride’s destiny” (161)—is provoked by the all-too-human audacity and ingratitude of the Romans, and he finally swallows all of his angry vengeance and

accepts certain mockery and death because he knows Volumnia is right about the utter violation of *virtus* that he will commit in treading on the womb and wombs of Rome.

The causes of error listed above—more strength than man’s nature can bear, foolishness, ignorance, lust, pride—is perhaps useful to understanding the efficient cause of each hero’s fall, but both plays also contain some ambiguity about whether either hero made errors of judgment at all. Aufidius considers this point in his soliloquy when, after listing pride, defective judgment, and an innate militarism as possible reasons for Coriolanus’s banishment, he says that Coriolanus “hath spices of them all” and that the combination of these in him “made him fear’d, / So hated, and so banish’d” (IV.vii.37-48). But Coriolanus remains powerful enough to make the Romans rue their decision, so Aufidius leaves whether Coriolanus has erred or not up to “th’ interpretation of the time” (IV.vii.50). Similarly, Samson’s decisions could be interpreted as ultimate sources of his success. Because of his decision to marry Dalila and reveal to her his divine secrets, Samson is enslaved and blinded, but this very state gives the Philistines confidence to bring him into the theater of Dagon after his strength has returned, and, receiving what he believes are divine “rousing motions,” Samson realizes that this places him and the entire, celebrating, mocking Philistine aristocratic class under one gigantic

stone ceiling, an opportunity that probably never would have arisen otherwise.

While both plays suggest ambiguous and nuanced judgments of heroic errors, critics sometimes oversimplify the rich complexity of Coriolanus and Samson and describe them as cruel, vicious, violent, militaristic villains, and they go so far as to believe this was Shakespeare's and Milton's intent, in spite of Aristotle's observation that villains are not capable of producing tragic fear and pity in audiences who are rather glad to see them come to grief. Often, these critics conflate their own pacifistic political beliefs about toxic masculinity with the opinions of the poets. Thus, in the case of Shakespeare, Wyndham Lewis reduces Coriolanus to a "maniacal," "demented" "madman" (272-77) and then argues, on the strength of Valeria's and Volumnia's admiring description of young Martius torturing and murdering a butterfly, that *Coriolanus*, from beginning to end, is a satire of "the whole notion of feudal aristocracy, martial virtue, and masculine heroics" (279). Robin Wells, while granting that modern criticism has a "skeptical distaste for martial heroism" (148), finally agrees with Lewis's sentiment that *Coriolanus* is "Shakespeare's last and most emphatic denunciation of heroic values" (176). Reginald Foakes calls Coriolanus "Shakespeare's most powerful critique of the heroic code and of war," though he also admits that the deviousness of

Roman politics in the play also has “no clear sense that peace is preferable to war” (180). Nuttall claims that “the strongest, fiercest male protagonist in Shakespeare” is “psychically stunted, undernourished,” and abnormal (299).

In the case of Milton, critics have divided into two schools. Regenerationists see *Samson Agonistes* as a tale of spiritual redemption. But another school of thought, led by Joseph Wittreich and John Carey, has argued that Samson is a fanatical terrorist and that Milton wants readers to see him as such. “Samson’s slaughter of the Philistines,” says Noam Flinker, “can be seen as a deranged act of an ancient terrorist” (136, 138). The bulk of Wittreich’s work on *Samson Agonistes* claims that Milton intended Samson as a negative model, that Samson’s vengeance “was a barbarous perversion of his divine mission which Milton could not possibly have wanted us to approve” (Evans 151). Wood echoes this sentiment, saying Milton has Samson act “out a savage pre-Christian morality” (xvii). Milton, says Wittreich in *Altering Eyes*, followed Euripides more than the other Greeks (17), leading him to reject Herculean heroism (125) and “the barbarism of Hebrew culture” which is “hostile, hateful, lawless, vengeful, and murderous” (110). After the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centers, John Carey extended this line of thinking even further. In “A Work in Praise of Terrorism,” Carey takes

regenerationists to task for suggesting that Milton approves of Samson's final actions. He also calls out Stanley Fish for suggesting that Samson is "praiseworthy because he intended it to be answerable to the divine will . . . whether it was or not does not matter." "Milton," Carey continues angrily, "was a subtle-minded poet, not a murderous bigot" (15-16). Thus, Carey challenges the moral understanding of any one with the audacity to read Samson as a hero. Interestingly, Ezra Pound, perhaps calling a spade a spade, would have agreed with Carey and Wittreich that Samson is a villain, but he thought Milton saw him as a hero and accused Milton of "asinine bigotry . . . beastly Hebraism" and a "coarseness of . . . mentality" (109). Other critics have agreed with Pound. "The man" says Martin Evans, "who defended the execution of Charles I and applauded Cromwell's massacres in Ireland was not likely to lose much sleep over Samson's vengeance on his country's oppressors" (152), and Campbell and Corns call *Samson Agonistes* a "gleeful fantasy in which the downcast champion of an oppressed people slaughters their oppressors as they gloat. The wish fulfilled . . . is that the gleeful court of Charles II could somehow share their fate" (362).

This litany of critical voices has been quoted at length to demonstrate just how difficult critics have found it to accept Coriolanus and Samson as tragic heroes deserving pity and inculcating fear.

Shakespeare and Milton, they believe, must be attacking the evils of such men, for surely they could not be attempting to purge fear and pity when the emotions presented are so immature, so petty, so full of persecution complexes, masculine quixotism, and personal revenge fantasies. But this dissertation argues that understanding Coriolanus and Samson as virtuous heroes is crucial to experiencing the tragic emotions aimed at in both plays. The individual heroism of Samson and of Coriolanus does threaten some of the values of their respective communities. Milton seeks to resolve this threat through the type of empathic catharsis described in Aristotle's *Politics*. Shakespeare may not resolve the threat at all, but the audience is not meant to celebrate Coriolanus's defeat as if he is a mere villain. His clear virtues and surrender to Volumnia make his fate all the more bitter and his conflict with Rome's values and politics all the more broken, suggesting that Shakespeare tempers his audience's passions by humbling them before the terrifying and irreconcilable plight of hero and community. Milton differs from Shakespeare primarily in using the Greek chorus to represent the communal conflict, and the Chorus allows for a different type of mediation of the heroic conflict than Shakespeare's diverse Roman citizenry.

That both playwrights admire aspects of their heroes has been argued at length above, but a few more comments may prove useful

to understanding the critical debate on the subject and the aims of the poets. Shakespeare did attempt to write tragedies about total villains, and he did attempt to engage his audiences in admiration and pity for them, as has been argued in my introduction. One can easily cite the examples of Richard III and Macbeth. These villains, in the name of power, make war with all that is good within them, and the Herculean effort that war requires struck Hegel as an odd, dialectic, and heroic attempt at a sort of liberty that people shun out of cowardice rather than any real moral superiority. Danson includes Coriolanus among these "moral monsters" for his "unbendingness of will" (44). But should Coriolanus really be compared with Richard III, Iago, and Macbeth? He is a greater war hero than any of them, he is an absolute exemplar of *virtus*, and he does not go through with his vengeance because it is wrong. Coriolanus would never kill his nephews to obtain power, connive to kill Othello, or kill an old king sleeping in bed. Coriolanus is far more committed to his principles than Shakespeare's moral monsters are to their ambition. Bloom bemoans Coriolanus's lack of Hamlet's personality and wonders why Shakespeare wrote *Coriolanus* at all. The old bard, he seems to say, was fagged out in his older years and could no longer muster the sort of character who comes to life and runs away from the poet. Shakespeare, he says, is in complete control of Coriolanus. But Coriolanus is not a personality

because he is more of an idiosyncrasy, of a personification, than any other of Shakespeare's characters. He is the personification of Shakespeare's project of rendering the inhuman human. Lady Macbeth, Richard III, and Iago are all inhuman humans. They become monsters. Coriolanus is on that path too, and one must wonder at the fact that he is so in spite of, or because of, such tremendous virtue, but in Coriolanus's encounter with his mother, and perhaps only there, Shakespeare achieves one of his greatest victories. Ultimately, Coriolanus can't bring himself to commit treason. No one, not even Shakespeare, controls Coriolanus. Bloom cannot see the personality of Mars, of reveling, angry, bloodlusting VIRTUE! There is an overwhelming vitality of personality there. Critics are often too bound down by their narrow ethical and political constructs, even Bloom, who escapes them more than most. *Coriolanus* is Shakespeare at the height of his tragic power, in control of form and of creating a man who is not controlled—not by Shakespeare, not by Volumnia, not even by his own pettiness and immaturity. Only Coriolanus could make war with the pride of Coriolanus and conquer, which makes him one of the most morally profound and courageous heroes in the entire Shakespearean canon. The disapprobation of plebian critics is hardly a rebuke. What do they expect? That Coriolanus would be better off and more virtuous if he embraced mediocrity and hypocrisy? Who is more

honest with the masses and clearer about his real beliefs than Coriolanus? Is the political hypocrisy either of Brutus or of Menenius a virtue? The gods laugh at Coriolanus because of the extreme paradox into which they push his valor. Coriolanus is required to humble himself in the most shameful way in order to finally be as honorable as he has always longed to be, and he does it. The supposedly inexorable warmonger negotiates a peace treaty between the Volscians and the Romans (V.vi.78-83).

Critics have long acknowledged Shakespeare's profound ambivalence in moral, religious, and political matters, but they sometimes consider Milton's beliefs to be relatively clear. He is obviously republican and a somewhat heterodox protestant. So, claims Wells, Milton's stance on martial heroism is clear. "Having created a portrait of the charismatic warlord with 'Browes / Of dauntless courage, and considerate Pride / Waiting revenge' (*Paradise Lost*, I.602-4), Milton then cuts his Homeric hero down to size, making it clear that the kind of heroism he is going to celebrate reveals itself, not in the 'long and tedious havoc' (IX.30) of chivalric warfare, but in the 'better fortitude / Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom' (IX.31-2)" (24). One could challenge Wells's generalization by remembering the Romantic reaction to Milton's Satan—Blake, for example, says Milton was unconsciously of the Devil's party—but it should also be

remembered that Milton wrote multiple poems and that the depiction of martial heroism in *Samson Agonistes* has consistently stirred up critical debate. In fact, the violent catastrophe in *Samson Agonistes* has always proven to be exceedingly disturbing. Perhaps, as in Euripides's *Bacchae* or Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, Milton's tragedy raises fear by depicting the seemingly irrational and morally ambiguous dispensation of the gods, or perhaps it outdoes those gods in proportion as Abraham's God excels them in power. God's ways and thoughts, says Isaiah, are infinitely higher than ours (Isaiah 55:9), and Samson voices a similar sentiment when he recognizes that God "has ends above my reach to know" (62).

Carey and Wittreich have done a service to Milton's readers by calling attention to just how disturbing Samson's violence should be, for his destruction of thousands of Philistine aristocrats is at least somewhat comparable to modern terrorism and to mass destruction, but Evans is correct in claiming that these critics go too far when they superimpose "their own humanitarian ideology on *Samson Agonistes* and its author" (152). Milton's tragedy is not meant to teach a nice moral lesson against violence and religious bigotry by presenting an evil man committing evil acts and then rebuking him. That Milton aimed at tragic catharsis as understood by Aristotle is clear from his preface, and Aristotle says that catharsis is impossible when the

protagonist is evil. But regenerationists and other opponents of calling Samson's actions evil may also err in being absolutely dismissive and in suggesting that the historical Milton lacked modern sensibilities towards violence. Evans, citing the early political tracts, says Milton obviously approves of Samson because he applauded regicide and Cromwell's militarism. Campbell and Corns "see no reason to doubt that the poem endorses the exultation over the carnage shown by Manoa and the Chorus" because choruses are authorial voices (361). Michael Lieb says, "There is no equivocation on Milton's part in his depiction of Samson's final act . . . The act is conceived not just with approval but with applause: Milton celebrates it . . . His actions are the true mark of a hero indeed" (235-36). Such certainty misunderstands what makes tragedy cathartic, what makes it, in Milton's own words, "the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all" other types of poetry. Tragedy, according to Milton, is morally instructive not because it is didactic or because it produces absolute certainty, but because it "tempers" and "reduces to just measure" the passions of "pity, fear, or terror," the very passions that, in certainty and in excess, cause bigotry and fanaticism. When seeking to understand *Samson Agonistes*, critics should refer not only to the morals of our time or of Milton's time, but to his Greek models, and not to just one of them, but to Aeschylus and Sophocles equally with Euripides. Milton says

these authors “are unequal’d yet by any and the best rule to all who endeavor to write Tragedy” (549-50). Milton, of course, wrote a Biblical tragedy just as he wrote a Christian epic, but he did not dismiss the Greek playwrights as lesser moralists simply because they were not Christian. He held them up as the greatest moralists, by which he meant that they produced cathartic tempering of pity and terror by depicting and reconciling the passions behind individualistic heroics and communal morals.

A comparison between the final outcomes Coriolanus and Samson experience from their choices offers further insight into what Shakespeare and Milton felt about the virtues and vices of their Herculean heroes. Each hero suffers the severest forms of punishment for treason. Coriolanus is exiled as a traitor for seeking to subvert the republican form of government and to make himself Rome’s sole tyrant (III.iii.63-66). His first sentence is execution (III.iii.75), but the tribunes soften this to banishment after an appeal from the patricians (III.iii.110-19). According to Hibbard, citing *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard II*, *King Lear*, and *Timon of Athens*, exile is “one of the worst things that can happen to a man; it is a severing of the roots by which he lives” (42). There is no real evidence that Coriolanus consciously intended the crimes the tribunes charge him with—he seems sincerely shocked at the whole notion that he is treasonous (III.iii.67)—but his

arrogant attitude towards the plebeians suggests that he prefers aristocratic to democratic forms of government, though note that he believes he has received the voice of the people and that it is the tribunes who arrogantly aggrandize themselves (III.iii.58-61, 68-74). Further, his willingness to avenge himself upon Rome by leading her enemies against her indicates that he was capable of treasonous actions upon provocation, that his motives were not as patriotic as he sometimes claimed (I.ix.17). Coriolanus comes close to committing the ultimate crime, for, as Lee Bliss notes, "Denying his kin and destroying his native city would have been unnatural because inhuman, not simply inhumane; it would have translated Coriolanus beyond the world of men, beyond the possibility of tragedy" (50), and he therefore arguably deserves the negative outcomes that he experiences, though, as I've argued above, he backs down from absolute infamy, a choice that, in his case, requires a Herculean degree of maturity and humility.

Samson also suffers for treason, though the Chorus bears "witness" that he "never was remiss" in "seeking just occasion to provoke / The Philistine, thy Country's Enemy" (237-40). Samson's treason is committed against God when he "profan'd / The mystery of God given me under pledge / Of vow, and have betray'd it to a woman" (377-79). His perfidy is so evil that even the "Gentiles in their Parables condemn" similar criminals "To their abyss and horrid pains

confined" (500-01). For his treason, Samson says he is condemned to live "Blind among enemies, O worse than chains, / Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age" (68-69). Like Coriolanus, he lives among his enemies, but, unlike Coriolanus, he is crippled and enslaved, whereas Coriolanus commands a foreign army and leads them to victory. Coriolanus betrays his people, but he only threatens to violate that which he holds most sacred, his *virtus*, so he never suffers the level of ignominy that Samson suffers. But while Samson betrays God and that which he holds most sacred, God is far more merciful than Mars. Coriolanus feels that Mars laughs at him, and he dies stabbed in the back, even after he maintains *virtus*, albeit grudgingly, by rescuing Rome and negotiating a peace that honors his obligations to the Volscians. Samson acknowledges his punishment is just, but he still despairs "not of His final pardon / Whose ear is ever open" (1171-72). He defends God to Manoa and Harapha, and looks above all for God to achieve a mighty victory over Dagon (468-71 and 1150-55). In other words, Samson's betrayal of God is a temporary lapse for which he sincerely repents. He spends his slavery acknowledging God's goodness, authority, and seeking a way, if possible, to serve Him still.

Coriolanus stops short of destroying Rome, but Samson chooses to utterly destroy the Philistines. Some critics hold this choice against Samson, but the situation is not parallel to Coriolanus's situation. The

Romans are Coriolanus's people, whereas Samson sees the Philistines as foreign oppressors and enemies. Harapha argues that the Philistines are acknowledged, legitimate rulers (1182-85), but Samson responds that the Philistines spied on him, even after he married into their nation, which shows that they were "all set on enmity" against him (1197-1202), and he argues further that the Philistines took Israel by "force of Conquest," so "force with force / Is well ejected when the Conquer'd can" (1206-07). And Samson does not kill Israelites, commoners, or other conquered people, as the Messenger, adding a detail not mentioned in Judges, specifies that "the Lords and each degree / Of sort, might sit in order to behold" under the stone-roofed theater, while "The other side was op'n, where the throng / On banks and scaffolds under sky might stand" (1607-10). Samson's act is politically targeted against his country's oppressors. Coriolanus's treason would wipe out Roman patricians, tribunes, and commoners, including his own flesh and blood, and would hand his homeland over to barbarians.

Another important distinction between the outcomes of Coriolanus and Samson is their degree of personal liberation. Coriolanus receives ambassadors from Rome, for he is the commander of the Volscians and her potential conqueror, and he delights in turning them away, because he fully desires to consummate his revenge

(V.i.63-74 and V.ii.60-94). But later, he receives Volumnia and Virgilia, and they show him that he must say no to that conquest or achieve nothing but ultimate infamy (V.iii.94-182). He must assume the yoke of *virtus*. He resigns himself against his will, knowing that the choice will probably get him killed (V.iii.183-93). He tries to survive, but his efforts win him another charge of treason, this time from Aufidius, then a stab in the back, and then an honorable funeral (V.vi.86-153). Samson receives the Officer from the Philistines, but he does so as a slave (1309-1412). The Officer tries to force him to participate in the festival of Dagon as entertainment, and he refuses because it is a violation of his fundamental human right to freedom of conscience and worship (1319-42). But he then receives "rousing motions" that indicate he can comply with the Officer's request without dishonor and, perhaps, achieve some signal victory over the Philistines in spite of his slavery and blindness (1382-1426). When he finds himself on the brink of committing mass murder, he pauses "as one who prayed / Or some great matter in his mind revolved" (1637-38). Coriolanus has a similar moment of introspection, and then knows he must say no to the destructive vengeance he desires, but Samson says a loud, exultant yes. In the beginning of the poem, he laments that he is always "in power of others, never in my own" (78), but now he cries out that he is through "obeying" the "commands imposed" by the Philistines, and

he now acts "of my own accord" (1641-43). Samson is not sure if the choice will kill him (1426), for his Divine strength has proven indestructible in past battles, but, after prayer or meditation, he feels confident about his decision and kills the "choice nobility and flower, not only / Of this but each Philistine City round / Met from all parts to solemnize this Feast" (1654-56). The same action spares the vulgar, but kills Samson, and Milton insists in the opening argument that Samson did not commit suicide. The play ends with Manoa and the Chorus celebrating his decision and planning a magnificent funeral (1660-1758).

The degree of liberation Samson achieves when he says he acts of his own accord is worth further consideration. It may not have a precedent in Shakespeare or in the Greeks. In fact, Samson may be Milton's ultimate expression of his unique views on liberty. Coriolanus does pursue what Adelman calls "the fantasy of self-authorship" (325), but his final triumph over his own base desire for a conspicuous revenge is a grudging concession to Volumnia's persuasion. Samson, on the other hand, chooses his final destructive act in spite of Manoa's desire to bring him home (502-22 and 1454) and the Chorus's desire to keep him safe (1348-53 and 1380). Even in bondage, Samson prides himself on responsibly choosing to "pay on my punishment; / And expiate, if possible, my crime" (489-90) and boasts that his slave

labor remains “Honest and lawful” work to “deserve my food / Of those who have me in their civil power” (1365-67). His choice to marry Dalila in spite of all Hebrew law and then to reveal to her God’s secrets is almost the ultimate expression of random, arbitrary freedom. As Stanley Fish has insisted, we cannot assign a cause for that choice, and it is this irrationality—so much deplored by Dr. Johnson when he famously could see no middle premise joining Samson’s opening state and his final choice to destroy the Philistines—that may be exactly what attracted Milton to Samson. Milton’s Samson sees his war with the Philistines as a battle for ultimate liberty, which the Danites have avoided because bondage is easy while liberty is “strenuous” (271), suggesting that Samson, even in slavery, still prides himself far more on his moral stamina for real freedom than he ever did on his physical prowess. Samson follows personal revelation. He knows no law but God, and the fact that Milton omits the prayer assigned to Samson in Judges before he kills the Philistines and hints that he may have simply revolved the great matter in his mind suggests further that Samson’s final action may even be entirely of his own accord.

Other critics have recognized Samson’s liberation as somehow ultimately sovereign, even from the will of God, and they have seen it as what distinguishes *Samson Agonistes* from all other poems.

Suzanne Woods describes Milton as creating an “elective poetics” in

Samson Agonistes (179). "The reader," she argues, "accompanies Samson on his journey from helplessness, to responsibility, to courage, and finally to renewed agency" (184-85). Critics will always debate the morals of Samson's decision, she continues, precisely because the only moral criteria he acted on was his own. Milton's intent, she says, is to directly involve the reader "in Samson's evolving choices, and so invites and empowers the reader's own exercise of choice and freedom" (179). Nigel Smith also uses this idea of extreme liberty as the main distinction between Milton and Shakespeare. In the provocatively titled *Is Milton Better Than Shakespeare*, Smith claims that Milton's depiction of extreme liberty in *Samson Agonistes*, sets him apart from and above Shakespeare, especially for American audiences. Smith's claim is somewhat dubious, but consider those characters in Shakespeare who attempt to transcend all constraints. Lady Macbeth and Macbeth strive to free themselves from all moral constraints, but the former is driven mad by the attempt and the latter dies ignominiously. Richard III battles his conscience before he dies in the battle of Bosworth, but succeeds only in achieving a villain's death. Iago seems free from almost any constraint, but he is bound to a rather petty envy. Hamlet refuses to act of his own accord and spends his time trying to figure out if revenge would be justified. When he finally acts, Laertes's passionate desire for revenge and Claudius's

machinations have dictated the context. Lear's decision to banish Cordelia seems groundless and irrational, but he acts in a rage, something similar to Samson's irrational lust with Dalila, and nothing like the final contemplative Samson of mass destruction. Of all Shakespeare's heroes, Samson is most aligned with Coriolanus, for Coriolanus seeks to live as "author of himself" and still remain a hero (V.iii.36), but he is not finally free like Samson. Samson is like Coriolanus in prowess, but he has Hamlet's depth and the freedom of Shakespeare's villains without their loss to total villainy. Samson resembled Coriolanus in his salad days, but his humiliation and blindness have rendered his personal will profound. With Coriolanus, Shakespeare attempted to invent the superhuman, but he failed. He ended in a critique of the possibility of such an attempt. But Milton completes the superhuman, for Samson really does act of his own accord, for he will have no one to answer to but God, if anybody, or maybe Joseph Wittreich.

So both Coriolanus and Samson are Herculean heroes who benefit their communities with superior physical, moral, and spiritual abilities, but who also hurt themselves and their communities because of errors induced by that very superiority. In the case of both characters, the damage they inflict on their communities is severe enough to provoke many readers to question whether they are heroes

at all, but questions of individual and social morality are very complicated throughout the writings of Shakespeare and Milton, perhaps especially in *Coriolanus* and *Samson Agonistes*. It is important to consider Coriolanus and Samson as heroes in order for the plays to achieve tragic effects, which is certainly Milton's aim and presumably Shakespeare's. Both heroes do finally choose to benefit their communities. Coriolanus heroically subdues his inexorable pride, honors the demands *virtus* makes for loyalty to motherland, spares Rome, and negotiates an honorable peace for the Volscians. Samson sees a way through his blindness and slavery to fulfill his prophesied mission as Israel's Deliverer from Philistine rule. Coriolanus's victory could be described as Pyrrhic because his desired revenge remains unconsummated and he must accept, in spite of his final, desperate efforts, the title of traitor, of boy, and being stabbed in the back by Aufidius. Samson's victory, if one is willing to see Philistine rule from the Israelite viewpoint rather than Dalila's or Harapha's, is a glorious act of complete liberation—liberation from political tyranny for his people and liberation from all bondage of the will for Samson, a divine action in a play full of enervated Danites and dissipated Philistines. The difference in outcomes experienced by Coriolanus and Samson suggests that while both poets do present much that is positive and socially necessary in their Herculean heroes, there is a difference in

their ultimate view of those heroes, that Shakespeare's admiration and acknowledgement of the strong, militaristic individual is more reserved than Milton's. The details of this difference will continue to be clarified in the next section through comparison between the communities presented by Shakespeare and Milton.

Chapter III

The Communal Ethics of the Danite Chorus and of the Roman Citizens Compared

While it is true that *Coriolanus* and *Samson Agonistes* depict Herculean heroes who are admirable benefactors of their communities, each poem also depicts heroic values in conflict with communal values. These value conflicts are severe and destructive. That the heroic values of *Coriolanus* and *Samson* both build and destroy their communities is not a contradiction, because neither Shakespeare nor Milton, in spite of what critics often claim, are making systematic arguments for or against one value system or the other. Rather, both poets know that complex dialectical collisions between heroic and communal values produce dramatic tension in tragedy. Milton, following his Greek models, makes his dialectic explicit by depicting a communal chorus in direct dialogue with his hero because he believes that catharsis is a tempered synthesis rising out of just such a depiction. Shakespeare makes the dialectic more explicit in *Coriolanus* than in his other plays, but he relies on a realistic mixture of communal voices made up of plebeians, tribunes, aediles, generals, senators, patricians, lictors, and soldiers, which leads to a more varied, ambivalent, and ponderous effect than the Greek catharsis.

In addition to depicting their heroes in conflict with community values in general, both poets also emphasize specific collisions with state, family, and religion, three institutions that are a sort of Holy Trinity presiding over civilization as a whole. While Shakespeare and Milton do emphasize all three, Shakespeare ultimately connects and emphasizes the supremacy of state and family while Milton acknowledges God. In *Samson Agonistes*, the state is represented by Samson's interactions with Harapha and with the officer, the family is represented by his interactions with Manoa and with Dalila, and religion is represented by references from all characters to direct conflict between God and Dagon. In *Coriolanus*, the state is represented by Coriolanus's conflicts with Aufidius and the Roman and Volscian populace, the family is represented by his final conflict with Volumnia and Virgilia, and religion is represented by his changing attitude towards Mars, Jove, and the gods. That the two previous sentences are so easily expressed in parallel structure is a wonderful accident of the dramatic structures found in both plays, and one could probably claim, without any other evidence, that Milton had *Coriolanus* specifically in mind when he wrote *Samson Agonistes*. In fact, *Coriolanus* would be remarkably similar to *Samson Agonistes*, and to the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, if Shakespeare had limited himself to the events of the fifth act, had opened with a

soliloquy from Coriolanus and a Chorus that filled in the background details depicted in Acts I-IV, had featured visits and dialogues with Menenius, Volumnia, Virgilia, and Aufidius, and then had ended with Coriolanus butchered in the Volscian camp.

Of course, it might be presumptuous to claim that such parallels really do point to *Coriolanus* as one of Milton's primary models when he specifically disassociates himself with Elizabethan influence in his preface to *Samson Agonistes*, but such a claim is unnecessary. The parallels rising from comparison between the heroic and communal value conflicts in the two plays are intriguing and valuable in their own right, and this dissertation will explore those parallels in four sections that cover the community, the state, the family, and religion respectively.

A. Community

Differences in *Coriolanus* and *Samson Agonistes* between the depiction and function of communal values are apparent immediately in the opening scenes. *Coriolanus* opens with Roman citizens in mutinous tumult because of their poverty and hunger. These citizens occasionally and briefly speak in unison, but their sentiments are mostly voiced through two distinct citizens, and these two citizens disagree with each other about Martius's complicity in their plight. A representative of the patrician class, Menenius, then takes up the

second citizen's argument in favor of Martius, and he clashes with the first citizen for about 112 lines. Milton opens with Samson soliloquizing for roughly the same number of lines, whereas Coriolanus only enters after Menenius debates the first citizen. In fact, by the time Coriolanus finally receives a brief soliloquy, Shakespeare has depicted multiple opinions of his inner life using lengthy debates and intrigues of citizens, patricians, tribunes, other Roman officers, enemy generals and officers, family members, and Roman and Volscian ambassador spies, and Coriolanus has often not been present to participate and defend himself.² In other words, Shakespeare presents conflicting public opinions of his hero long before the hero himself has a chance to speak, while Milton immediately provides his audience with an intimate glimpse into Samson's soul. Shakespeare appears to be more concerned with depicting the motions of Rome's soul relative to Coriolanus than with depicting Coriolanus's soul, while Milton is almost exclusively concerned with the progress of Samson's soul. Samson is never off stage until roughly 330 lines of the play remain, and then he leaves to commit the play's catastrophe while the Chorus, in dialogue with Manoa and the Messenger, offers commentary on the character of his final actions. Milton never depicts conversations or actions in which

² See, for example, I.i.1-163, 252-279; all of I.ii and I.iii; II.i.1-160, 205-270; II.ii.1-35, 77-130, 155-160; II.iii.1-39, 151-263; III.i.253-333; III.iii.1-30; IV.i.1-53; III.iii.1-51.

Samson is not present to respond, which suggests that immediate dialectic between Samson and various member of his community is Milton's exclusive technique.

This distinction between opening with citizen voices or with the hero in soliloquy, and between centering the play on the community's development relative to the hero or on the hero's immediate conflict with the community is rooted in the difference between Milton's Greek models and Shakespeare's Senecan and medieval sources. Only three extant Greek tragedies—Aeschylus's *The Suppliant Maidens* and *The Persians*, and Euripides's *Rhesus*—begin with a Chorus. Some begin with an important character or a god, but a good number—for example, Aeschylus's *The Seven Against Thebes*, Sophocles's *Trachiniae*, and Euripides's *Andromache*—open with the hero or heroine in monologue. By contrast, none of Shakespeare's tragedies open with a depiction of the hero's sentiments, but almost always with communal sentiments. *Titus Andronicus* begins with conflict between aristocrats. *Romeo and Juliet* begins with a Chorus, but not in the classical sense. *Julius Caesar* begins with tribunes interacting with the Roman people. *Hamlet* begins with guards and Marcellus. *Othello* begins with Iago and Roderigo scheming. *King Lear* begins with noblemen bantering about Lear's behavior and their own sons. *Macbeth* begins with witches, who may be taken as a chorus of three

and something like the Chorus of Furies in Aeschylus's *Eumenides*. *Antony and Cleopatra* begins with friends of Antony lamenting his degeneracy. *Timon of Athens* begins with a poet, a painter, a jeweler, and a merchant. *Pericles* begins with a chorus named Gower, something like the chorus in *Romeo and Juliet*, but more pervasive structurally than in the earlier play. The hero, if discussed at all, is always first refracted through public opinion. But nowhere else in Shakespeare are the commoners playing the role they play in *Coriolanus*, in which public opinion of the hero is almost exclusively the topic of discussion.

When Milton finally introduces a communal voice in the form of the Chorus, it differs drastically from the community in *Coriolanus*. 60 lines of uninterrupted Chorus follow Samson's 114 lines of soliloquy. Unlike Shakespeare's conflicts between two citizens with each other and with Menenius, Milton's Chorus speaks as one voice. They speak out of earshot, and he cannot see them, so these lines, at least until the final scenes, are the only time the community speaks without heroic response. Samson is now seen through their eyes, and their feelings are consistently shock and lamentation at how much blindness and slavery have changed him since they last saw him. But they mostly second much of what Samson said, adding to his list of exploits and contemplating the curse of lightlessness. Shakespeare's mob, by

contrast, is fickle and mutable in the opening scenes, arguing various and changing opinions about Coriolanus. Milton, like his Greek models, represents communal values through one strategically chosen group of people. They are a choral community of Danite kin, elders, and friends, who contemplate the state of the hero and console him, whereas Shakespeare's citizens are individuals of a given class involved in political struggle for power and rights against Coriolanus's class. The Danites are not engaged in political action, and have never been so, as Samson later laments (241-76). Early in the play, the Chorus does raise some dialectical objections against Samson, as when they question his theology and his marriages to Philistines (210-18), but, after he responds, they ultimately reconcile themselves to him for the remainder of the poem, except some subtle repartee about Dalila (995-1065) and when they fearfully question his audacity against Harapha and the Officer (1244-1307 and 1348-90). They are not heroes. They are passive and deedless. Some of Shakespeare's citizens cavil in war, but they can be stirred up to anger and action, though not a constant, long-term purpose (IV.vi.140-46). Samson is the only real agent in his play, and, by the end of the play, as argued above, he is completely acting of his own will, while Aufidius, Brutus, Sicinius, Menenius, Virgilia, Volumnia, and the citizens are all, to some extent, agents in *Coriolanus*.

Milton's Chorus is a dialectical foil for the hero. They are a monolithic voice representing general communal values with which Samson interacts. This helps Milton to maintain the Greek unities of place, time, and action. The scene never shifts from the Philistine prison, the time is the final day of Samson's life, and the action is dialectical conflict with the Chorus and with some solos. This conflict leads Samson to see a way to consummate his revenge and to fulfill his prophesied role as Israel's Deliverer. Shakespeare's citizenry, by contrast, stretches out into world-building realism. He peoples a city and depicts various actions and emotions in conflict. Shakespeare is not attached to only one goal, to one tragic effect. His drama ebbs and flows, is even digressive, is certainly aimed at the tragic, but remains relatively diffusive compared to Milton's single-minded purpose.

Some examples will help to clarify the extent of Shakespeare's world building and its contrast with Milton and his Greek models. Shakespeare depicts class conflict in the community by featuring specific characters from both the patrician and the plebeian classes. The plebes are not generally named, but, except for a few choral shouts or chants, they are distinguished from each other. The patricians and other authorities are generally named, and they play a very active role in the debates, the military exploits, and the final bargaining with Coriolanus. Menenius Agrippa, for example, is a good

friend to Coriolanus, even a father figure (V.ii.59-90). He is less committed to *virtus*, but he is also more politically savvy, and he believes in the nobility of Coriolanus's character (II.ii.77-153; III.254-59). He defends Coriolanus against the charges of the citizens and the tribunes (I.i.51-160; II.i.1-96). He often attempts to mentor Coriolanus through the complex conflicts that arise during his campaign for the consulship (III.i.48-60; III.ii.31-89). When Coriolanus rejects his request to desist from harming Rome, he feels sad and dejected, but he still admires Coriolanus's impractical, otherworldly virtue (V.ii.101-08; V.iv.1-33). Many of these traits and actions are depicted in scenes that do not feature Coriolanus. Menenius is even given a speech that reflects upon his own character independent of any interaction or even indirect association with Coriolanus (II.i.47-65).

No character such as Menenius Agrippa exists in *Samson Agonistes*. Menenius's failed mission to get Coriolanus to come home to Rome does somewhat resemble Manoa's failed attempt to get Samson to come home, but the more complete parallel with Manoa is Volumnia. Milton does select three or four characters to stand forth from the Danites and from the Philistines to debate with Samson on specifics that are less appropriate to a general Chorus, and so the size of his *dramatis personae* resembles those found in his Greek models,

but the rest of Samson's friends, family, leaders, and colleagues are conglomered in the Danite Chorus. The Philistine ruling class, "the Lords and each degree / Of sort" (1607-08), are distinguished in the final scenes from "the throng" (1609) or "the vulgar" (1659) for the purposes of giving Samson a political target rather than unmitigated and wanton destruction, but, even though the messenger makes a brief list of "Lords, Ladies, Captains, Counsellors, or Priests" (1653), they are a conglomered mass of idolatrous gentiles to be murdered by Samson. Milton's focus is on the development of his hero, and depictions of the community are always aimed at furthering the reader's understanding of that development. In *Coriolanus*, as in all of Shakespeare's tragedies, the *dramatis personae* is much larger than in any Greek tragedy, and they exist partly as foils for the hero, but they also function for themselves as individuals.

According to Chernaik, another way in which Shakespeare builds a detailed community is his frequent use of "clowns and minor characters, with no heroic pretensions" to provide "ironic counterpoint" with the main action (169). An example occurs in Act V, scene ii, when Menenius receives about 75 lines of witty banter with some Volscian watchmen before and after his attempt to talk Coriolanus out of attacking Rome. More lines are dedicated in the scene to this banter than to the core dramatic exchange of the scene between Coriolanus

and Menenius. The banter also constitutes more lines than Coriolanus receives of soliloquy in the whole play. The ironic counterpoint is, perhaps, that Menenius's nobility is now unworthily challenged by vulgar Volscians, just as Coriolanus's *virtus* was challenged by the Roman plebes, and that Coriolanus's commitment to *virtus* has caused that undeserved situation for his noble friend, but such scenes of levity, especially so close to the end of the play, are exactly what Milton bemoans in his preface when he accuses his predecessors of "intermixing comic stuff with tragic sadness" and "introducing trivial and vulgar persons" in order to "gratify the people" in their desire for mirth and entertainment (550).

The banter between Menenius and the watchmen is not an anomaly in *Coriolanus*. In Act IV, scene v, Coriolanus banter for 45 lines with three Volscian servants in Aufidius's home. The servants do not recognize his nobility because he is disguised in mean apparel. The ironic counterpoint here is that when Coriolanus canvassed for the consulship, he was unwilling to put on appearances for the Roman plebes when custom demanded him to show them his wounds, but now he is very willing to put on appearances for the vulgar Volscians in order to gain access to their commander for the purposes of negotiating revenge on the Romans. But the scene could have achieved this counterpoint with its opening lines. Shakespeare

dedicates about 85 more lines at the end of the scene depicting the three servants bantering after Coriolanus and Aufidius have exited. These lines depict the servants speculating on whether nobility is really discernible in the body or only in the clothes (IV.v.148-71), incredulously gossiping about Aufidius actually partnering with his nemesis (IV.v.172-217), which serves as plot exposition, and celebrating that the league with Coriolanus promises more glorious warfare (IV.v.218-34), which contrasts the *virtus* of the Volscian vulgar with the more ambivalent attitude of the Roman plebes (e.g. I.i.166-70), but a scene of such length dedicated to the thoughts and feelings of servants has more in common with Aristophanes than anything found in the Greek tragedians and represents a lengthy break in the unity of action demanded by Aristotle and Milton.

The two scenes of clowns and minor characters already cited are at least attached to exchanges between noble, primary characters, but Shakespeare sometimes dedicates entire scenes to minor characters bantering, as in Act IV, scene iii. The entire scene depicts a Roman named Nicanor conversing with a Volscian named Adrian. Nicanor turns out to be a traitorous spy, for he says to Adrian, "I am a Roman," but his "services are, as you are, against 'em" (IV.iii.4-5). Nicanor then reveals to Adrian that Rome has banished Coriolanus, and that Aufidius should take advantage of his absence to attack

Rome, just as “the fittest time to corrupt a man’s wife is when she’s fall’n out with her husband” (IV.iii.32-33). This scene does not really further the plot, for Aufidius does not appear to have received the intelligence when Coriolanus makes a league with him (IV.v.65-135). It does provide ironic counterpoint with Coriolanus, for it depicts what base treason really looks like, and that it does not involve the sort of machinations that led to Coriolanus being charged with a similar crime. The scene also subtly testifies of the necessity of Coriolanus to his community, for even if he had not brought his services to the Volscians, the banishment could have led to Aufidius invading Rome, and while the Romans might theoretically be able to defeat Aufidius without Coriolanus’s inspiration (I.vi.79-80), Nicanor and Adrian seriously doubt it (III.iii.30-39), especially when a spy has been and is undermining Rome’s strategic capability (I.ii.1-17; III.iii.40-42). All of this counterpoint is certainly interesting and appeals to the ponderings of the mind, but it cannot be denied that it represents a break in the action of the play, especially the action of the hero, and it does not appear to contribute in any way to his tragic fall. Milton, following Aristotle's *Politics*, believed that catharsis of fear and pity for the hero comes out of uninterrupted movement in the hero’s mind and heart towards the catastrophe of the play, and that such movement

develops from direct dialectical interaction between the intense passions of the hero and the lesser passions of the community.

Act I, scene vii does not consist of witty banter, but it again depicts minor characters interacting far away from the central action of the hero. Following Martius's victory at Corioli and his march with a select group towards Aufidius, Titus Lartius sets a guard upon Corioles and then, in company with an unnamed lieutenant, soldiers, and a scout, he announces his intention to rejoin the fighting, and he gives orders that the guards be sent into the action if he requests it, because "If we lose the field," he says, "We cannot keep the town" (I.vii.4-5). The lieutenant assures Lartius of their dedication, and Lartius then departs for the Roman camp. It is hard to account for Shakespeare's inclusion of this brief scene. It violates the unity of the action without even offering the insights audiences gain from Nicanor and Adrian. The scene does show that Martius is not without support in his war with the Volscians, that Lartius, in spite of his injuries (I.i.241-44), is not content to rest and guard a post, that he is eager to reenter battle, which suggests that his *virtus* is worthy of the faith Martius puts in it (I.i.25), and that the Roman army contains lieutenants who at least speak dutifully. The scene also accounts for Lartius entering in scene ix in time to celebrate Martius's victory over Aufidius, but he doesn't really make any contribution to the tide of the battle. What

else does the scene offer? It can only be accounted for as an example of Shakespeare's naturalism, his desire to make his battle scenes as realistic as possible by peopling them with many acting individuals. Thus, he goes out of his way to depict Lartius giving orders to a trumpeter to "call thither all the officers a' th' town" one scene prior to his determination to rejoin the battle (I.v.26-28) and after the central hero, Coriolanus, has exited the stage.

Besides dialogues between Samson and Manoa, Dalila, Harapha, and an Officer, Milton never depicts specific members of Samson's community. Samson never names any of the old friends and acquaintances that comprise the Chorus (188-93), nor does he ask for details about any one of them. He interacts with Israel and with the tribe of Dan as a conglomerate. The Chorus always speaks in unison, representing the views of multiple people as if they were identical. This is not a realistic depiction of the conversation Samson would really have with a visiting group of Danites. Coriolanus, on the other hand, interacts with Lartius, Cominius, Menenius, the tribunes, individual Roman citizens, Aufidius, individual servants of Aufidius's household, and individual Volscian citizens, but, by the end of the play, Coriolanus does see Rome as a general conglomerate, all equally implicated in betraying him, so that he even rejects his good friends Cominius and

Meneuius. Only his mother, wife, and son are able, at that point, to pierce through his generalizing into special consideration.

Shakespeare's details about the members of the community may be realistic, but the Greeks would deliberately omit them because they do not contribute to the hero's progress towards tragic catastrophe. In *Samson Agonistes*, Milton imitates the dialogues in Sophocles's *Antigone*, such as the dialogue between Antigone and the Theban elders about the priority of family over state (806-81), or in Aeschylus's *The Libation Bearers*, such as the dialogue between Orestes and the Libation Bearers about the importance of avoiding matricide over avenging patricide (1007-64), or the dialogue in *The Eumenides* between Athena and the Eumenides about the necessity of courts over blood vengeance (711-891). Milton depicts dialogues with several characters in his tragedy, but the hero's conflict with the general community centers on a theological dispute (187-325) between the right of heroes to follow personal revelation and the necessity of obeying community norms. This dispute replaces Shakespeare's imitation of natural community action. Everywhere in Greek tragedy, in accord with Aristotle's conception of musical catharsis serving a political purpose, dramatic tension always results from dialectical conflict between the hero and the community, and the focused dialogues and disputes in Milton and in his Greek models lead

heroes to new convictions, to different choices, or just to firmer confirmations of already held beliefs, and these internal changes directly lead the hero on to their final, tragic actions.

While Shakespeare does depict a realistic community made up of various individuals, he does not entirely avoid presenting the general citizens as a sort of monolithic mass, and, in fact, as noted by Hibbard, "One of the marked features of *Coriolanus* is the large number of choric scenes in it" (22). No one in the play is designated a chorus, but the Roman citizenry resembles a classical chorus far more than the Choruses in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry V*, or *Pericles*. The general citizenry are often depicted as speaking simultaneously with one voice. In the beginning of the play, the general citizenry, with the exception of the Second Citizen, is united against the patricians and against Martius (I.i.1-13), and their unity is expressed in common cries made by all of them. These cries consist of common imperatives to speak (I.i.2), commitments to revolt (I.i.6), agreements about Martius's culpability (I.i.9), and agreements about actions to be taken (I.i.13). If the second citizen had not objected, the citizens presumably would then have marched off to butcher Martius (I.i.9-14). The unified voice in this scene does not violate Shakespeare's naturalism because mobs often do chant simple sentiments in unison.

The Roman soldiers are often depicted as a unified voice throughout the battle scenes of Act I. The soldiers flee as a group from the Volscians, and then, inspired by Martius, they combine to beat the Volscians back into Corioli. Martius follows the Volscians into the city, and individual soldiers are depicted backing down from the pursuit (IV.iv.46-47), but then the soldiers predict Martius's demise and report his death as a chorus (IV.iv.47-48). Staging the scene with unison voices saying "To th' pot, I warrant him" and "Slain, sir, doubtless" would not appear or sound natural. Later, the soldiers and the officers all speak in choral celebration of Martius's victory by simultaneously chanting the name "Martius!" (I.ix.40), and then hailing him to music by his new name, "Martius Caius Coriolanus!" (I.ix.67), which is another example of a natural choral shout.

Similar scenes of political chorus follow these scenes of soldiers in war chorus. When Coriolanus appears in Rome at a celebration of his triumph, the nobility, the officers, and the soldiers greet him with a choral shout, "Welcome to Rome, renowned Coriolanus!" (II.i.165-67), which would probably be an unnatural unison if the herald did not prepare it by uttering the lines to be shouted beforehand. Later, when Coriolanus canvasses the people's voices for the consulship, they generally speak as individuals, but they do signify as one their willingness to view the wounds (II.iii.47), and, after individually

accepting Coriolanus as consul, all of the citizens cry out as one the words, "Amen, amen. God save thee, noble consul!" (II.iii.136), both of which unisons may be customary chanted responses. When the tribunes then challenge the ritual and ask the plebes if they saw the wounds, all are directed to say, "No, no; no man saw `em" (II.iii.165), which would be unnatural as a unified chant, but could easily be staged as a series of asynchronous denials talking over each other. When the tribunes direct the crowd to return to the capitol to withdraw their election of Coriolanus, they simultaneously say, "We will so. Almost all repent in their election" (II.iii.254-55), which would sound unnatural as a unified chant, and, unless a chorus leader has been selected by the director to speak for the crowd, it is hard to imagine how it could be staged realistically, which suggests that Shakespeare, following Seneca's influence, may really have something like the Greek Chorus in mind for some of these unison lines.

The unisons occur with greatest frequency in Act III during the political tumult that leads to Coriolanus's banishment. The political commotion depicted at the center of *Coriolanus* has no parallel in *Samson Agonistes*, but Shakespeare uses voices in chorus to heighten the sense of turmoil. Unison choral odes, which often feel like the least dramatic parts of Greek tragedy and of *Samson Agonistes*, are among the most dramatic moments in *Coriolanus*. When Brutus and Sicinius

first call for the masses to accuse Coriolanus of treason, the patricians attempt to intervene as a chorus, crying out together that they will “surety him” (III.i.177). The rabble bursts in with Aediles chanting, “Down with him, down with him!” (III.i.182). The entire stage, both plebeians and patricians, then bursts into fighting and into a chaos of voices shouting in unison and over one another, “Tribunes!—Patricians!—Citizens!—What ho!—Sicinius!—Brutus!—Coriolanus!—Citizens!—Peace, peace, peace!—Stay, hold, peace!” (III.i.184-87). The plebeians continue to chant sentiments and decisions in unison throughout the remainder of the scene and of the act with varying degrees of naturalness, but these lines capture the essence of Shakespeare’s implicit opinion about using communal choruses in drama. For Shakespeare, a real life choral community voicing sentiments in unison is a dissonant cacophony.

Thus, while Kermode says *Coriolanus* “has been called a debate rather than a tragedy” (1443), and that claim has some merit because it is in *Coriolanus* that Shakespeare most approaches the classical ideal of a hero in dialectical conflict with the community and with a few specific, thematically important members of it, it remains a fact that a cacophony is difficult to debate with. While the Greek chorus lacks realism and variety, it is highly efficient at representing dialectic between heroic values and communal norms. Intellectually,

Shakespeare's citizens are more of a formless mass than Milton's Chorus. Their attitudes are a Heraclitean flux, a directionless Socratic becoming, for they do not progress towards or learn any particular thing. Martius's charge that the citizens are "no surer, no, / Than is the coal of fire upon the ice, / Or hailstone in the sun" (I.i.172-74), and that "With every minute" the plebes "do change a mind, / And call him noble" (I.i.182-83) the same man they recently hated may sound like arrogant hyperbole, but the tribunes learn, to their great horror, that the emotions they stirred up in the masses against Coriolanus were indeed extremely temporary (IV.vi.118-60). In contrast, Milton's Chorus thinks and learns over the course of *Samson Agonistes*, as when they realize that their strict application of communal norms to Samson may need to be tempered because men should not presume to "confine th' interminable, / And tie him to his own prescript, / Who made our Laws to bind us, not himself, / And hath full right to exempt / Whom so it pleases him by choice / From National obstruction" (307-12). Thus, the Danites, like Samson, and like the choruses and heroes in Milton's Greek models, learn from the dialectical discussion they engage in, while Shakespeare's citizens remain ever fickle according to their whims, appetites, and fears.

Shakespeare's commitment to realistic representation of the community and Milton's commitment to explicit dialectic between the

community and the hero create an important linguistic difference between Shakespeare's citizens and Milton's Chorus. Shakespeare's citizens often use the common vernacular, euphemisms, neologisms, contractions, oaths, and slang. The First Citizen calls Martius "a very dog to the commonalty" (I.i.28), observes that, "The other side a' th' city is risen" (I.i.47), enthusiastically promises, "We'll show `em in deeds" (I.i.59-60), and calls the "cormorant belly" the "sink a' th' body" (I.i.121-22). One Roman soldier discovers the utensil he has taken as plunder is not silver and cries out, "A murrain on't!" (I.v.3). One citizen, while waiting for Coriolanus to present himself for their voices, insults another citizen by saying his wit "'tis strongly wadg'd up in a blockhead" (II.iii.28). When Coriolanus asks the second citizen for his voice, the citizen responds, "You shall ha't, worthy sir" (II.iii.79). When the tribunes convince the citizens to withdraw their vote, one says he'll get five hundred of his fellows to withdraw, and another citizen follows this by boasting he will "twice five hundred, and their friends to piece `em" (II.iii.212). When Coriolanus is banished, the citizens chant out a celebratory chant of "Hoo! hoo!" (III.iii.137). More examples could be cited, but the above list suffices as a contrast between the language of Shakespeare's general citizens and the poetic diction of Milton's Chorus.

Shakespeare's realistic diction is also on display with Aufidius's servants, who constantly use common diction and vulgar language. We are first introduced to them when the first servant cries out for "Wine, wine, wine!" and speaks of his "fellows" sleeping (IV.v.1-2).

Throughout their banter with Coriolanus, the servants repeatedly use "Pray you," and "Prithee" to make requests (IV.v.19-35). One servant responds to Coriolanus's joke about living homeless "I' th' city of kites and crows" by calling him an "ass" (IV.v.40-44). After Coriolanus departs with Aufidius, the servants swear many oaths, such as "By my hand," "Would I were hang'd," "I'll be sworn," and "Faith," (IV.v.148-69), use insulting epithets for each other, such as "slaves," and "rascals" (IV.v.172-73), coin the corrupt neologism "directitude" (IV.v.205-09) and the questionable adverb "cannibally" (IV.v.188), describe Coriolanus as "wont to thwack our general" (IV.v.178) and as having "scotch'd and notch'd him like a carbinado" (IV.v.186-87), and frequently use the contractions with which Shakespeare often represents lower class accents. Again, no comparable list could be made from *Samson Agonistes*, or, for that matter, from any of Milton's poems.

Even the Roman aristocrats use common diction and vulgar language. In fact, they may use it more often than the Roman plebes. The first scene of Act II is riddled with examples. Menenius refers to

his attachment to frequent sexual activity as conversing “more with the buttock of the night than with the forehead of the morning” (II.i.51-53), insults the tribunes by saying their words contain “the ass in compound with the major part of your syllables” (II.i.58-59), exclaims “Hoo!” and “Ha?” when he learns Martius is returning (II.i.102-06), bids “God-den” to the departing tribunes (II.i.93), and coins the use of “fidius’d” as representing a good thrashing, such as that Aufidius just took from Coriolanus (II.i.129-32). Volumnia dismisses Virgilia’s hope that Martius is indeed successful by uttering “pow, waw” (II.i.142). She uses contractions, such as describing Coriolanus’s wounds “On’s brows . . . I’ th’ shoulder and i’ th’ left arm” (II.i.124 and 147), thanking the gods “for’t” that Coriolanus has been wounded at all (II.i.121), and telling the returning soldiers that “y’ are welcome” home (II.i.182). Both Volumnia and Virgilia repeat themselves in the manner of casual conversation, such as “Good ladies, let’s go.—Yes, yes, yes” (II.i.133) and “O no, no, no” (II.i.120).

This example from Volumnia and Virgilia reminds us that Shakespeare does not exempt aristocratic women from vulgar usage, for the conversation of Volumnia, Valeria, and Virgilia is particularly full of common diction, including the usual contractions to represent a low accent and many trifling observations and sentiments. They also frequently swear, such as Virgilia crying out “O Jupiter” at the prospect

of Martius bleeding (I.iii.38), and Valeria exclaiming "A' my word" and "A' my troth" that young Martius resembles his father (I.iii.57-58), and "Fie" to Virgilia's desire to avoid social excursions until Martius returns from battle (I.iii.76). Valeria also has a habit of interjecting "la" into her discourse (I.iii.67, 89), a detail which can only be accounted for if one accepts that Shakespeare is more committed to representing realistic speech patterns than he is to writing in an elevated, poetic diction, even to the point of giving minor characters idiosyncratic usage.

Even proud Coriolanus speaks more like a vulgar soldier and commoner than like an educated and elevated poet, a fact which Menenius says should not surprise us when we consider that he was "bred i' th' wars / Since 'a could draw a sword, and is ill school'd / In bolted language" (III.i.318-20). Coriolanus uses the contractions typical of all characters in the play, though perhaps less often. For example, he commands his soldiers to "follow 's" into battle (I.iv.42), repeatedly says of the plebes that he would like to figuratively "hang 'em" for being worthless (I.i.181-203), and clips conjunctions, prepositions, and articles, such as "press'd to th' war," (III.i.122), "Being i' th' war" (III.i.125), and "Break ope the locks a' th' Senate" (III.i.138), all of which is selected at random from a single speech. Like his mother's "pow, paw," Coriolanus uses dismissive

exclamations, such as "Tush, tush!" (III.ii.45). He also frequently and angrily swears oaths, such as "'Sdeath" (I.i.217), "Pluto and hell!" (I.iv.36), "Plague upon't!" (II.iii.50), and "'Save you, sir" (IV.iv.6). Granted, Coriolanus utters the latter greeting to a Volscian commoner while disguised as a beggar, but he certainly has no problem imitating low class speech, for the Volscian servants, who claim that they recognized all along that Coriolanus's "clothes made a false report of him" (IV.v.151) and that there was "more in him" than his beggar's disguise would make them suspect (IV.v.159), never mention his speech as betraying a more exalted mind, but only his physical strength, his arm, and his face (IV.v.149-61).

This lengthy list of examples of vernacular diction in *Coriolanus* has been made to demonstrate just how pervasive it is in the play. Shakespeare may be known for his beautiful poetry and exalted diction, but very large portions of all his plays contain the opposite of this expectation because he is concerned with imitating real speech. Shakespeare may even be particularly concerned in *Coriolanus* to avoid poetic diction because of the play's military violence and class conflict. As Kermode notes, the verse in *Coriolanus* has a "grating vigor" and "extraordinary harshness of diction" (1443), and George Wright seconds this description, claiming that speech in the later

tragedies "tends to be abrupt and agitated" (870), which lends a conversational tone and a feeling of violence to the poetry.

The list of examples has also been made to emphasize just how much Shakespeare's citizenry differs from Milton's Chorus in diction. Compare the list above with the language in the following passage from one of Milton's choral odes:

Just are the ways of God,
 And justifiable to Men;
 Unless there be who think not God at all:
 If any be, they walk obscure;
 For of such Doctrine never was there School,
 But the heart of the Fool,
 And no man therein Doctor but himself. (293-99)

The meter is irregular from line to line, a feature Milton claims to copy from the Greeks, and which he calls "Monostrophic, or rather Apolelymenon" (550), meaning something like the modern idea of free verse, but the meter is often regular within a given line, as in lines 295, 297, and 299—every other line after the opening couplet—which are three lines of perfect iambic pentameter. The other lines contain either trimeter or tetrameter, alternating in the manner of common balladry. The passage is organized into two opening couplets followed by a third passage that opens with a rhymed couplet and closes with a

pentameter punch line about the delusions of atheists. Milton uses polyptoton—"just" and "justifiable," "doctrine" and "doctor"—to add poetic and persuasive power to the argument. The diction throughout the passage alludes both to *Paradise Lost*—"to justify the ways of God to men"—and King James English—"the fool hath said in his heart there is no God"—lending the argument a sense of authority and inviting theological contemplation.

While *Samson Agonistes* is generally written in free blank verse, Milton's Chorus sometimes speaks in sophisticated and musical rhyme schemes. Consider the following example:

For him I reckon not in high estate
Whom long descent of birth
Or the sphere of fortune raises;
But thee whose strength, while virtue was her mate,
Might have subdu'd the Earth,
Universally crown'd with highest praises. (170-75)

As in the previous example, this passage contains lines of perfect or approximate iambic pentameter—lines 170, 173 and 175—interspersed with the trimeter and tetrameter of balladry. But whereas the previous passage indulged in one rhyming couplet, this passage rhymes the first three lines with the final three lines—"estate"/"mate," "birth"/"Earth," "raises"/"praises." As in the former passage, the

Chorus is making an argument, this time about Samson's natural aristocracy being superior to birthright aristocracy. As with Shakespeare's citizenry, the Chorus does use contractions—"subdu'd" and "crown'd"—but the purpose here has to do with maintaining meter rather than Shakespeare's imitating dialect.

It is not the point of these examples to argue that Shakespeare uses no comparable poetic diction in his tragedies. He certainly does, even in *Coriolanus*. The point is that Milton always uses exalted, poetic diction for his choral community, whereas Shakespeare gives his citizenry the loose dialect of common conversation. This disparity results partly from a difference of audience. Shakespeare writes to entertain live audiences of mixed class, and he writes so that they can relate to and enjoy the language, even if that requires anachronisms, such as Coriolanus's profane Christian oath, "'Sdeath" (I.i.217), or Menenius's joking allusion to Galen (II.i.117), while Milton writes a closet drama aimed solely at educated, contemplative readers. But the disparity mainly comes down to a difference of poetic priority. Shakespeare aims at realism by imitating natural speech patterns, and he has a proclivity for creative earthiness, especially in his aristocrats. Milton aims at creating a poetic dialectic between his hero and the choral community in order to imitate the Greeks in achieving catharsis

of the passions of heroes and citizens by writing "the gravest, moralest, and most profitable" of all types of poetry (549).

Of course, Shakespeare's tragedies do not lack a classical chorus only because of his commitment to naturalistic representation. He also did not have enough exposure to Greek tragedy to do anything more than simply agree with Elizabethan disdain towards the dramatic and dialectical potential of Greek choruses. I have already argued in the introduction to this dissertation that Aristotle's *Poetics* was unknown to Elizabethans and so were many of the tragedies (Kahn 206), that Milton was the first English scholar to expound Aristotle's tragic doctrine (Rothstein 9-10), that Elizabethan dramatists did not hold the Greeks in particularly high regard (Spencer 223), that they modeled themselves instead on Roman poets, especially Seneca (McDonald 25), and that Senecan choruses resemble the Shakespearean choruses that act as commentators and narrators rather than the Greek choruses that participate as a communal character in the drama. But there is also a sociological reason why Shakespeare and Milton might hold different views about representing the general community, and it will serve as a transition into the comparison of the institution of the state in *Coriolanus* and in *Samson Agonistes*.

B. State

In *The Sociology of Greek Tragedy*, Edith Hall, addressing the relationship between artists and their consumers, argues that the Athenian tragic poets were political equals with their audience. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were not hired by aristocrats, as was Demodocus in Homer's *Odyssey*, nor were they aristocratic leaders writing laws and didactic propaganda for the populace, as was Solon in his elegies. Rather, they were Athenian citizens, as were their audiences and the sponsors, actors, and chorus members who interpreted their texts in performance, and their plays were performed at festivals that celebrated that citizenship. "Tragedy," concludes Hall, "consequently defines the male citizen self, and both produces and reproduces the ideology of the civic community" (95).

The idea that the tragic form of the Greeks reflects their ideology about the community has interesting implications when applied to Shakespeare's and Milton's approach to dramatic form, especially their attitude towards the use of a chorus to represent the ideas of the general community. Shakespeare wrote during a monarchy, and his audience included citizens who were aristocrats of varying degrees and others who were commoners. Shakespeare may not have represented the general community with a monolithic chorus because the socio-political values of his audience were so diverse. The Rome he wrote

about in *Coriolanus* was also made up of diverse sociopolitical values and class distinctions. Romans had just expelled the Tarquin monarchy and then founded a republic, and the extent to which that republic should be either aristocratic or democratic was still being debated. While Rome's form of government in *Coriolanus* differs from that of Elizabethan England, Shakespeare exploited the large number of parallels they share in common to explore political themes of interest to his audience.

The Elizabethans may very well have eschewed the tragic chorus as much on political as on aesthetic grounds. They had fewer common values to represent in a monolithic group of citizens than the Greeks had. The chaotic class conflict depicted in *Coriolanus* was far more relatable to them. As Stephen Greenblatt has noted, the crowd in *Coriolanus* was "an urban mob rioting for bread and threatening to overturn the social order" (169-70). Greenblatt then, using words that reflect Coriolanus's concern about "dangerous lenity" towards the potentially violent "Hydra" (III.i.93-99) and its "stinking breaths" (II.i.236 and III.iii.120-23), equates the crowds of Coriolanus's Rome with the crowds of London:

And it is the London crowd—the unprecedented concentration of bodies jostling through the narrow streets, crossing and recrossing the great bridge, pressing into taverns and churches

and theaters—that is the key to the whole spectacle. The sight of all these people—along with their noise, the smell of their breath, their rowdiness and potential for violence—seems to have been Shakespeare’s first and most enduring impression of the great city . . . Ancient Romans may have worn togas and gone hatless, but when the rioting plebeians in *Coriolanus* get what they want, they throw their caps in the air, just as the Elizabethan Londoner did. (169-70)

The anachronisms mentioned above in connection with Shakespeare's use of common language provide support for Greenblatt's association between the two crowds. Shakespeare includes Elizabethan insults, accents, and other linguistic conventions, especially Coriolanus swearing on Christ's death and Menenius alluding to Galen, a 2nd century A.D. physician-scholar, because he wants his audience to conflate his Romans with Londoners.

Another possible anachronism in *Coriolanus*, noted by John Dover Wilson, suggests a way in which Shakespeare's relation to the political ideology of his audience encouraged using a type of choral community. Shakespeare, says Wilson, depicts the tribunes "organizing a clique, 'voices' meaning, not votes, but cries in chorus. This matches up with an English poll and is a mistake in North's translation of Plutarch" (209). Lee Bliss also saw the English poll in

Coriolanus, and describes it as requiring only "simple acclamation . . . from the voters, and no candidate need pursue the distasteful and demeaning task of canvassing for votes" (27). The political process depicted in *Coriolanus* does indeed appear to require only acclamation of voices in chorus. For example, the name "Coriolanus" is granted by choral acclamation (I.ix.63-67). Again, the tribune Sicinius tells Coriolanus he will have to obtain the people's "voices" (II.ii.140) in a public ceremony, the citizens gather together not to cast votes but to give "voices" (II.iii.1, 36), and Coriolanus presents himself to the people seeking their "voices" (II.iii.78, 105, 109, 112), claiming "For your voices I have fought; / Watch'd for your voices; for your voices bear / Of wounds two dozen odd . . . for your voices have / Done many things, some less, some more" (II.iii.126-30). Coriolanus is then elected in choral acclamation, "Amen, amen. God save thee, noble consul!" (II.iii.136), and he is banished by the same means (III.iii.119). Plutarch does depict some shouts of applause, but all of the parallel scenes in Plutarch—including the new name of Coriolanus, the election, and the banishment—are depicted as complex electoral voting processes. This is so obvious in Plutarch's text that it is hard to believe that Shakespeare, who clearly read Plutarch very close while writing *Coriolanus*, was led astray by a mistaken translation of North. The third citizen does hint that the electoral process is more complex

than the acclamation Shakespeare depicts when he tells Sicinius that Coriolanus may yet be denied because "He's not confirm'd" (II.iii.209). Whether this confirmation was a mere ceremony of ordination or an election to formalize the ritual acclamation is not made clear. Either way, it seems likely that Shakespeare imitated the English poll because he kept his audience in mind. Choral acclamation is far more dramatic on the stage than the casting of secret ballots, and, as argued above, Shakespeare deliberately conflated Rome and London to heighten the interest of the play for his audience.

That Shakespeare wrote for a socio-politically mixed audience suggests one reason why Coriolanus himself has always experienced a mixed reception from audiences and critics. Shakespeare's own politics are hard to discern from his plays. Harold Bloom, who read Shakespeare voraciously, admitted, "His politics, like his religion, evades me, but I think he was too wary to have any" (8). This ambiguity is especially evident in *Coriolanus*, even though it is arguably Shakespeare's most political play. "Adapters," says David George, "found themselves free to demonize one party or another, according to their political leanings, and according to their sense of a receptive audience" (2). But Shakespeare skillfully aimed at satisfying a diverse audience. Coriolanus's arrogance has made him hated by some audiences, readers, and professional critics, just as Roman

commoners, or at least the power hungry tribunes, hated him. This raises an interesting caveat to Aristotle's theory about the virtues of tragic heroes. They can be neither despicable nor innocent, he says, for audiences will be glad at the destruction of the former and upset at the misfortune of the latter, but, as Nietzsche reminds us, moral value systems vary by class. What commoners find despicable may be honorable to aristocrats. One poetic law for the lion and the ox may very well be oppression.

Unlike Shakespeare, Milton's politics, while complex, are anything but ambiguous. He did not write during stable Elizabethan or Jacobean monarchies, but during a period of political upheaval in which the Caroline monarchy ended in revolution, regicide, and republic, and then republic, a short decade later, gave way again to monarchy. Thus, Milton's relation to the political ideology of his audience is quite complex and bears only passing resemblances to the relatively stable relation enjoyed by his Greek models. But Milton remained a thoroughgoing republican through all of the political and social turmoil he experienced, and while critics are not clear on whether *Samson Agonistes* was written during Cromwell's protectorate or closer to its date of publication during the reign of Charles II, Hall and Macintosh are correct in claiming the poem serves "broadly republican ends" (12-13). Hall and Macintosh offer a good description

of Milton's political relation to theater audiences when *Samson Agonistes* was published:

In marked contrast to the heroic drama being performed at the Lincoln's Inn theatre, in which the aristocratic hero typically engages in chivalric acts in order to win the love of a princess, Milton's protagonist is deemed too filthy for even the giant Harapha to challenge to a fight. In the same year as the publication of *Samson Agonistes*, the Duke's Company moved to the Dorset Garden Theatre, ushering in a new era of spectacular theater. Indeed, the theatre of the 1670s as a whole is marked by a significant increase in the use of sophisticated stage machinery, and the extensive use of stage spectacle may well be considered the defining feature of English tragedy by the end of the decade. In returning to Greek tragic form in *Samson Agonistes*, Milton was deliberately eschewing current aesthetic tastes; and in setting the revenge of his decidedly non-heroic hero in a theater, we see how aesthetic and political preferences were inextricably linked at the time. (14)

Milton wrote closet drama partly because he had no desire to meet the demands of a theater full of aristocrats addicted to the sort of lavish spectacle that Aristotle calls "less artful" (1453b8). Further, Milton's desire to return to the traditional Greek chorus was rooted in politics

as well as in aesthetics. Unlike the Greek tragedians he admired, Milton did not live in a time of democratic equality, but he wished for such equality. He turned to closet drama and to the Greek Chorus in order to find among sympathetic, educated readers a "fit audience . . . though few" for republican values (*PL* VII.31). In the words of Joseph Wittreich, "*Samson Agonistes* is a protest poem in every aspect: in its epistle, even in its generic and prosodic forms, directing 'a counterblast' at the Restoration" (169).

Of course, as Aristotle points out, the relationship between the hero and the choruses is not one of equality. The hero is superior in merit, and often in political station (1448a15-19). The hero is sometimes a king or even a god. But the members of a chorus, though their political status varies from play to play, are equal to each other within a play, are, in fact, embodied as a single, monolithic voice, and the hero generally feels some level of equality in relation to them (1453a5-12). Thus, in Aeschylus's *The Libation Bearers*, the Chorus consists of foreign serving-women, while the heroes are the children of King Agamemnon, but Agamemnon's murderers have reduced both Electra and Orestes to a status not far above foreign slave women. Electra is more at home with the Libation Bearers than she is in the palace with Aegisthus and her mother, and she relies upon them for friendship and counsel. Orestes has been raised a foreigner because of

the threat he poses to Aegisthus's legitimacy, and he is to be arrested and killed if he ever returns to Argos. When he does return, he is safely received and aided by the Libation Bearers. In Sophocles's *Antigone*, the Chorus consists of Theban elders, a respected class, while Antigone is a member of the royal family and is possessed of heroic integrity, but her political height has been greatly mitigated by her father's violation of the incest taboo, so that when she violates Creon's decree, he tries to persuade her to repent, but he ultimately treats her with no greater privileges than any other common criminal or member of the Chorus would be treated if they had committed a similar crime. In Euripides's *Hecuba*, the Chorus consists of captive Trojan women, while Hecuba was queen of Troy, but the Greek victory has rendered her politically equal with the other captives. She is more famous, perhaps treated with a little indulgence out of sympathy for the greatness of her fall, but she has become politically equal with the Chorus, and she shares in their common fate. Many other similar examples could be provided. In Greek tragedy, the Choruses can be from any class, but they are all of the same class within the same play, and the hero is superior to them, always in heroic merit, often in political station, but has fallen or will fall into circumstances that make him at least partially equal with the Chorus.

Milton, following his Greek models because they match his aesthetic and political preferences, imitates this relationship between chorus and hero in *Samson Agonistes*. The Chorus consists of Danite elders, and Milton describes them in the argument of the poem as "certain friends and equals" of Samson's tribe (551). Samson is not their equal in physical prowess, military skill, or divine calling, but he is their equal politically. He speaks of "Israel's Governors, and Heads of Tribes" (242) as a group separate from himself and from the Chorus, and the Chorus, Israel's Governors, and Samson are all equally in political bondage to the Philistines. Samson was not in bondage to the Philistines when his strength allowed him to buck their authority with impunity, but after his strength is lost through vice and blindness, he falls lower than the Chorus. Thus, they say,

O mirror of our fickle state,
 Since man on earth unparallel'd!
 The rarer thy example stands,
 By how much from the top of wondrous glory,
 Strongest of mortal men
 To lowest pitch of abject fortune thou art fall'n.
 For him I reckon not in high estate
 Whom long descent of birth
 Or the sphere of fortune raises;

But thee whose strength, while virtue was her mate,
 Might have subdu'd the Earth,
 Universally crown'd with highest praises. (164-75)

The members of the Chorus consider themselves equals of Samson, for they see themselves in him as in a mirror. According to O.B. Hardison, the Chorus has followed Aristotle's cathartic model because "pity for the hero has shaded off into fear for the self" (325). But the Chorus does not just see themselves mirrored in Samson's fall. They also see the fall of all mankind mirrored there, for they extend their comparison to include man since Adam and Eve. The Chorus is able to see itself and all men in a superior hero like Samson because his current condition proves that God is no respecter of persons. Samson was superior not in political stature, "high estate," or in birth, but in the only true foundation of superiority, which is merit received by grace of God, and that superior merit, his Herculean strength, has been lost through vice and blindness, so that he has now fallen below the Chorus because the height he has fallen from renders his slavery bitterer.

Samson, like many of the Greek heroes, reciprocates the feeling of equality with the Chorus. He feels revived by their visit, though reproachful that they have not visited before (187-93). He fears for his reputation among them and their opinion of his deeds (202-05). When

the Chorus challenges his decision to marry Philistines, he feels obligated to justify his choices to them and to assure them that he has remained loyal to the community (215-18). When they again charge him with failing in his calling as Deliverer, he defends himself, placing the blame squarely on Israel's governors for not joining him in revolting against the Philistines while he still had his strength (240-76). Again, later, when the Chorus challenges his laboring in the mills of Dagon, he justifies himself as working "honest and lawful to deserve my food / Of those who have me in their civil power" (1365-67), and when he decides to perform in the Temple of Dagon for the purpose of destroying it, he makes sure to account for his decision to the Chorus, telling them that he will do "nothing dishonorable, impure, unworthy / Our God, our law, my Nation" (1424-25). Thus, while Samson often appears to disregard the norms set by his community, he feels obligated to justify that disregard because he esteems their opinions as his equals, as a tribe of Israel, as the people of God.

Coriolanus, by contrast, feels no obligation to justify his actions to the Roman plebeians, because he holds the citizens in contempt. Whereas Samson greets the Chorus as friends, Coriolanus refers to them only as slaves (I.i.199) and rabble (I.i.218), and at no point in the play, even after his fall, does he ever identify with or even sympathize with their vulgar condition. Coriolanus believes he has

every right to disregard the political custom of showing his battle wounds to the Romans because he is, in fact, naturally superior to the Romans in military virtue, which is the only virtue that matters. The Danite Chorus celebrates Samson's superiority in military prowess, but they feel ambivalent disappointment about his flaunting their law and its aftermath. Still, they are willing to understand and forgive (315-25), because they sympathize with Samson's fall, knowing it can happen to anyone, whereas the Roman citizens unflinchingly hate Martius at the beginning of the play and are easily stirred against him later. At no point do the citizens forgive Coriolanus. They merely regret the decision to banish him after their safety is threatened by his vengeance (IV.139-56). The Roman citizens also never learn from Coriolanus's change of fortunes. They celebrate Volumnia's triumph without witnessing Coriolanus's fall and suffering. Milton uses the Chorus to help readers identify with Samson, while Shakespeare's audience equally observes and judges Coriolanus and the Roman citizenry as outsiders.

This difference between Samson's sense of equality with the Chorus and Coriolanus's sense of elevation above the citizens may be more than an accident of these two particular plays. It may be rooted in differences between the governmental forms of the Elizabethans and of Milton's models. Athens had a direct democracy composed of

voters who were political equals, so Greek tragedians had an audience that could identify with a monolithic voice made up of similarities in class and ideology. Rome, on the other hand, had a republic that included representation for patricians and plebeians as distinct, unequal classes, which resembled the Elizabethan parliament, and thus Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote for audiences who identified with a deeply rooted class conflict. Milton's experience with political equality may have been brief and imperfect, but it was long enough, coupled with his intense study of the Greeks, to lead him to prefer it to the monarchy and aristocracy that he experienced throughout the majority of his life, and so he, like Greek audiences before him, identified with the intellectual dialectic of equality found between Greek heroes and choruses rather than with the class conflict of the Elizabethans. Equality between hero and community lends itself to the Aristotelian theory of catharsis in the *Politics* in which passions of heroes and communities are moderated and reconciled (1342a5-12).

While it is true that the Danites are on an equal footing politically with Samson, and express, like Samson, equality based political ideology (165-75, 265-71, and 1418-20), they are, in fact, not living in a democracy. Like many of the Greek choruses, and like Milton, they live in bondage. Thus, an important political distinction experienced by

the characters in *Samson Agonistes* and in *Coriolanus* is that between foreign oppression and internal class conflict. Samson is an apparently failed deliverer from Philistine oppressors (240). Coriolanus twice delivers Rome from foreign oppression, once as warrior (Act I) and once as ambassador of peace (Act V), but the plebes, rather than groveling in gratitude, see him throughout the play as leader of an oppressive patrician class. Samson is also seen as a quasi-member of a foreign oppressive class, for he marries into Philistine society and speaks sometimes of having been one of them (1193-94). He also has a suspicious preference for Philistine women, as if he somehow finds Israelite women wanting in some fundamental way (216-18). But Samson always speaks of Israel as first in his devotions (237-39), claims to have married Philistines as part of his role as deliverer (225-36), and sits enslaved to Philistine masters, which renders him far more sympathetic to the Chorus, and probably to many audiences, than Coriolanus is to the citizens.

While Rome is never ruled over by the Volscians, Coriolanus himself, like Samson, serves two states, Roman and Volscian, but Samson receives the Philistine officer as a slave while Coriolanus receives Roman ambassadors as a Volscian commander (Act V.i-iii), because he deliberately betrayed his Roman citizenship after they exiled him. Just as Samson feels some affinity with Philistine women

and marries them against his people's will, Coriolanus feels some affinity with the Volscian people because the Volscian plebes are martial while the Romans prefer to play at politics with the tribunes (IV.vii.1-5, 19-25; V.vi.70-83). Coriolanus even comes to view himself as obligated to the Volscians as his governors, calling them "lords" whose "great command" he continues to obey even after his attempt on Rome is abandoned, and he disclaims any love for Rome, but claims to be a Volscian soldier (V.vi.70-73). Volumnia also recognizes that honor binds Coriolanus to continue serving the Volscians when she acknowledges that if her "request did tend / To save the Romans, thereby to destroy / The Volscies whom you serve, you might condemn us, / As poisonous of your honor" (V.iii.132-35). Instead, she recommends that Coriolanus negotiate a peace between both nations, which he does, but the treaty, he boasts happily, is strongly in favor of Volscian interests (V.vi.78-80). Granted, necessity drives Coriolanus to seek survival by pleasing his new Volscian government, but the Roman Senators do intimate that Volumnia's success would be rewarded with Martius's repatriation (V.v.4), so his decision to favor and to return to Volsce indicates both adherence to his concept of honor, to his preference for living with the Volscians, and to his intention to succeed at securing the favor of the Volscian government through his honorable negotiation of the treaty. The Volscian lords appear to

acknowledge this shared countryhood formed through military affinity, for they speak as if Coriolanus had rights to expect from their government (V.vi.123-27) due to his extreme valor and nobility (V.vi.133, 143), and, in spite of the fact that he had "widowed and unchilded many" Volscians, which leads the Volscian populace to rise up against him in hate, the Volscian lords and citizens finally mourn him and give him honorable funeral rites befitting a great soldier, as if he had been one of their own (V.vi.146-53).

Thus, both Samson and Coriolanus feel oppressed by the institution of the state—the former by a state composed of foreign tyrants, the latter by the state into which he was born and raised—and both seek to change the political form of the governments they suffer under, albeit in very different directions. Samson seeks constantly to eliminate the foreign rule of the Philistines through "single rebellion" and "hostile acts" (1210). Harapha believes that Samson is "a Murderer, a Revolter, and a Robber" (1180) against a government whose legitimacy is acknowledged because Israel's "magistrates confest it, when they took thee / As a League-breaker and deliver'd bound / Into our hands" (1183-85). Samson, in response, says, "My Nation was subjected to your Lords. / It was the force of Conquest; force with force / Is well ejected when the Conquer'd can" (1205-07). Not only were his people conquered, but Samson feels that Philistine

rule is particularly "inhuman" (109), and the intensity of that tyranny (1291) can be seen from the cruel and unusual nature of Samson's enslavement (1160-63), from the fact that the government spies on him, even after he signaled conjugal amity with the Philistines, so that the governors clearly intend malicious enmity against him (1195-1204), and from the humiliation and violation of religious worship and personal conscience that the Officer, representing the Philistine Lords, threatens to force on Samson (1310-34). With all these considerations in mind, Samson probably doesn't feel much remorse at obeying "command from Heav'n / To free my Country" (1212-13) when he decides, after much deliberation (1638), that he is justified in destroying the "choice nobility and flower" (1654) of Philistia because they are foreign tyrants directly oppressing his people against their will.

Coriolanus also seeks to change the form of government he lives under because of what he perceives as a threatened tyranny of the majority run by the tribunes (III.i.90-97, 130-39). The tribunes harbor similar suspicions about Coriolanus's intentions (II.i.221-31, 243-59). They not only see him as disposed against democratic institutions, but as actively opposing them. They tell the plebes that he plans to overthrow "Your liberties and the charters that you bear" (II.iii.180), to not endure any "article / Tying him to aught" (II.iii.195-96), to use

his "power to crush" them with the physical force of government (II.iii.201-03), and to "make them no more voice" in the commonwealth "Than dogs, that are as often beat for barking / As therefore kept to do so" (II.iii.215-17). While certain comments by the tribunes undermine the purity of their patriotic concern for the people's rights in these claims, as noted by Coriolanus and Menenius (II.i.35-41; III.i.90-97), the tribune's charges do not turn out to be entirely specious, for Coriolanus reveals in the heat of debate over his pending consulship that he does really oppose the republican form of government, or at least the democratic portions of it. He decries a form that prevents "gentry, title, wisdom" from making decisions without "the yea and no / Of general ignorance" (III.i.144-46), explicitly calls upon the patricians to defend "the fundamental part of the state" from the "multitudinous tongue," even if they must trade a long life for a noble one by fighting to "pluck" the tongue out (III.i.152-57), and demands that the people eliminate their representative tribunes from the state and submit to the full governance of the senate (III.i.163-70). These words may be uttered in anger, but there is no reason to doubt that they reflect Coriolanus's innermost thoughts about the more democratic aspects of Rome's republican institutions, and the fact that he uses a moment of political agitation as an opportunity not just to state his opinions but to call

upon the senate and the people to change the form in that moment is fairly strong evidence that he indeed intended to do so all along, whether consciously or unconsciously, and would use every opportunity to exercise his consular power towards that end.

As G. Wilson Knight argues, Coriolanus "will not, cannot, mix harmoniously with lesser men. Essential aristocracy drives out his citizenship" (174). This enmity between Coriolanus and the common citizens is perpetual, even at the end of the play when the final scenes depict Rome celebrating Volumnia's victory over Coriolanus (V.v.1-6) without any remorse about Coriolanus's fate. Coriolanus's honorable funeral may represent a weak, posthumous reconciliation with the Volscian commoners after they reject him as a traitor and stab him in the back, but Coriolanus is never reconciled to the Roman citizens. True, they do repeal his banishment out of gratitude to Volumnia (V.v.4-5), but this is not reconciliation with Coriolanus's values. The Romans are merely glad that they have been delivered from destruction. They remain as unreflective as ever, still the same vulgar populace who celebrated Coriolanus when he defeated Volscians for them, who turned against him when the tribunes convinced them he was opposed to their political power, who turned against the tribunes and rejected any responsibility when Coriolanus threatened to destroy them (IV.vi.140-60), and who would likely turn against Volumnia if

they thought it suited their interests. Thus, Knight continues, Coriolanus's "despise, certainly, is shown at every turn to be justified, but, justifiable or not, it is a poison" (179). Coriolanus is ultimately destroyed by this poisonous adherence to his aristocratic values. Shakespeare is not interested in depicting a monolithic chorus reconciled to a hero's violations of its norms. Such depictions were interesting and beneficial to the Greek community made up of political equals, but they did not reflect the experience of Elizabethan lords and commoners. Shakespeare depicts the realistic class antagonism with which he was intimately familiar, and his aristocrats and his masses exhibit the respective foibles that perpetuate that conflict and its destructive consequences.

Coriolanus wants to remove the Roman citizens from the government because their class interests are inherently at enmity with his aristocratic values, but Samson, as in Milton's Greek models, shares many political and moral values with the Chorus, and he would like to see them participate fully in their own governance (241-76). The Chorus acknowledges that they have a historic habit of not helping their heroes, and that they have even worked against their hero's efforts to achieve and preserve self-governance, as when "Succoth and the Fort of Penuel / Thir great Deliverer contemn'd" (278-79), or when "ingrateful Ephraim / Had dealt with Jephtha" (282-83). "Of such

examples add mee to the roll," says Samson. "Mee easily indeed mine may neglect, / But God's propos'd deliverance not so" (290-92).

Samson acknowledges Israel's historic ill treatment of their heroes and their lack of political responsibility, and he does offer a soft rebuke to the Danite Chorus for perpetuating it, but he does not allow the Chorus's behavior to completely embitter him against them because his political relationship to the Chorus is inseparable from a shared spiritual heritage that remains inviolable. Samson and the Chorus have some dialectical conflict over Samson's disregard of community norms, but their affections are ultimately united by their hatred against the foreign foe and their shared heritage. That shared heritage also reconciles the Chorus to Samson's violations of communal norms when they acknowledge that Divine sanction sometimes operates beyond their ability to understand (293-325). On his side, Samson increases his respect for the community norms when he realizes that his worst affliction is not suffering physical blindness amid foreign foes (65-69) but is the "True slavery, and that blindness worse than this, / That saw not how degenerately I serv'd" Philistine brides who were a "blot" on his "Honor and Religion" (410-19). Thus, Milton ensures that the political sympathies of his Chorus and of his hero remain close enough that tensions between them can finally be cathartically reconciled, just as Aeschylus keeps the political interests of the Eumenides and of

Athena's new gods close enough that they can finally develop new political institutions that reconcile their conflict about Orestes's exoneration, or as Sophocles keeps the interests of Oedipus and of Colonus close enough to reconcile that city to having the trespassing pariah buried as an Athenian citizen.

C. Family

The idea that Samson's shared spiritual heritage with the Danite Chorus provides him with political sympathies that Coriolanus does not feel for the Roman citizens points us towards family and religion, two other social institutions with which both heroes clash. As Derek Woods points out, not only does the Chorus see Samson as a mirror of their fickle state, but also, "Through the Chorus, Samson encounters self in others" (149). As argued above, this identification between hero and chorus is a frequent characteristic of the dialectic between hero and community depicted in Milton's Greek models. Samson identifies with the Chorus as a Danite and as an Israelite. He would never seek "a world elsewhere" (III.iii.135) because the God of the Abrahamic covenant is everywhere. Coriolanus never experiences a similar identification with the Roman citizens, which may be why he never returns to the Roman community, but sees himself reflected far more in the hot lust for war exhibited by the Volscian Aufidius (IV.v.106-35) and even by Aufidius's servants (IV.v.218-33). Samson would never

feel similar kinship for his nemesis, Harapha, because he values his kinship with Israel, in spite of their cowardice, more than he values Harapha's false show of *virtus* (1224-36). Thus, he challenges Harapha to combat in order "to decide whose god is God, / Thine or whom I with Israel's Sons adore" (1176-77).

While Coriolanus identifies more with Volscian war mongering than with Roman republicanism, he does encounter self in his family, in Volumnia, his Herculean hero (IV.i.15-19), in Virgilia, whom he calls the "best of my flesh" (V.iii.42), in Valeria, "the noble sister of Publicola," who reminds him of the superiority of Roman noblewomen over Volscian women (V.iii.65-67), and in his son, called by Volumnia "a poor epitome of yours" (V.iii.68), and young Martius certainly lives up to that description when he exhibits extreme commitment to *virtus*, boasting against his own father that Coriolanus "shall not tread on" him because he will "run away till I am bigger, but then I'll fight" (V.iii.128-29). When Coriolanus surrenders his bid for revenge against Rome, it is because he bows to the obligations and affections of these relationships. He sees his equals in his family. He may reject the Roman plebes as beneath him, but there is no world elsewhere when mother, wife, and son are Romans.

In contrast to Coriolanus's submission before Volumnia and Virgilia, Samson, curiously mirroring Coriolanus's resolve to remain

Volscian, rejects Manoa's bid to bring him home, arguing that he would rather stay in Philistia to "pay on my punishment" (489) than "sit idle on the household hearth, / A burdensome drone" (566-67). He also rejects Dalila's bid to bring him back to her home so that she may renew her conjugal duty and affection (913-37). Samson's rejection of Dalila's bid is an easily understood contrast with Coriolanus's self-abasing justification to faithful Virgilia (V.iii.40-48) because long separation has rendered the divorce complete, causing Samson to say, "It fits not; thou and I long since are twain" (929), and also, Dalila betrayed him, so, as Samson says, "So much of Adder's wisdom I have learn't / To fence my ear against thy sorceries" (936-37), but Samson's rejection of Manoa may appear strange at first glance. Coriolanus rejects his community but cowers before his mother, while Samson, in spite of his emphasis on ancestral ties with Dan and Israel and in spite of the Mosaic command to honor father and mother, argues with his father's request and ultimately denies it. The obvious reason for the difference is that Manoa and Volumnia have made very different requests. Coriolanus realizes that sacking Rome cannot be an honorable choice, while Samson sees no remedy for his condition in returning home useless to "my Nation, and the work from Heav'n impos'd" so that he can be "To visitants a gaze / Or pitied object" (562-76).

There may be a more subtle reason for the contrast in filial obedience between Coriolanus and Samson, one with roots in fundamental differences between Shakespeare and Milton as men, as poets, and as tragedians. State, family, and religion are the three primary institutions with which any Herculean hero must grapple when he attempts to violate general community norms with impunity. Both Coriolanus and Samson utterly reject their respective states, which leaves only family and religion as potential opponents for intensifying dramatic tension against their heroic values. For Shakespeare, living near the end of an aristocratic age, blood is thicker than water, and Coriolanus's bid for individual liberty in "a world elsewhere" meets its final match not in paganism or in patriotism, but in the duties and affections of familial relationships. The emotional climax of *Coriolanus*, the showdown between Coriolanus and Volumnia, offers a profound embodiment of the conflict between individual and familial virtue, and, at least in terms of which of the two is more powerful, Shakespeare appears to come down unequivocally on the side of the family, albeit with some sympathetic ambivalence towards the tragic fate that familial power inflicts on the individual.

Milton admired Greek democracy, was deeply Protestant, published multiple tracts advocating the democracy of presbyterian rule in the Church rather than the hierarchy of prelacy, lived through

the first revolts of an impending age of political democracy, and published multiple tracts advocating even the most extreme actions of those revolts. He exhibited far more commitment to the ideal of equality between all men—albeit a "proportioned equality" (884) like that enjoined by Aristotle as the good form of government by the many—than to the ideal of inequality enjoined by filial obligation and affection. Thus, Samson's bid for individual liberty clashes mostly against his equality with the Chorus and against his submission to God, while conflicts with Manoa and Dalila, though important to his development, are more easily resolved. The Christian religion does advocate for strong family relationships, but Christians, unlike Coriolanus, do not treat mother, wife, and son as especially inviolable. Rather, they see all mankind as brothers and sisters of one Father. Samson lives before Christ, but Samson's denial of Manoa, which is not in the Old Testament version of the story, mirrors Jesus's denial of Mary and his siblings when they requested him to return home, and he responded that his fellow disciples in obeying God's word are his mother and siblings (Matthew 12:49; Luke 8:21). Manoa, who also believes that obligation to God trumps obligation to parents, does not get angry at Samson's denial and invoke a child's moral obligation to obey parents, but attempts instead to convince Samson that God prefers "humble and filial submission" and would approve of his

returning to his father's home (509-20). Samson grants that he owes God a penitent submission (521), but, echoing Jesus's reminder to Mary that he was about his real Father's business (Luke 2:49), he repeatedly refers Manoa to his divine mission and to his failure to fulfill it, and he prefers punishment (490-501) and death to living at home with the knowledge that he has failed his Divine Father (521-31 and 564-76).

After Manoa leaves, Samson explicitly describes his relationship to God under the figure of fatherhood, saying,

I was his nursling once and choice delight,
 His destin'd from the womb,
 Promis'd by Heavenly message twice descending.
 Under his special eye
 Abstemious I grew up and thriv'd amain;
 He led me on to mightiest deeds
 Above the nerve of mortal arm
 Against th'uncircumcis'd, our enemies. (633-40)

These sentiments, expressed immediately after Samson's rejection of Manoa's request, are strong evidence that Milton had the priority of divine obligation over filial obligation in mind when he wrote *Samson Agonistes*, and that the priority is rooted in the idea that God is the Father of all men and is the only Father to whom anyone owes

obedience. If one betrays the Divine Father, no further filial obedience to a Manoa or a Volumnia can atone for it. Thus, after describing his despair at having been disowned and shunned by God (641), Samson closes his ode to God as Father by saying that he despairs of any future happiness and prays only for "speedy death, / The close of all my miseries, and the balm" (650-51).

Samson's contrast between his divine and human fathers indicates that Milton purposely prioritized his Herculean hero's clash with divine obligation, but Volumnia's arguments against Coriolanus indicate that Shakespeare prioritized the family. Regardless of country, era, or religion, we know in our innermost conscience that one must honor family or be a scoundrel. Before his banishment, when Coriolanus insists that honor demands him to not prostitute his wounds to obtain votes from the plebes, Volumnia argues against him that various duties often compete, and that one must sometimes compromise honor in lower relations in order to honor higher relations. "I would dissemble with my nature where / My fortunes and my friends at stake requir'd I should do so in honor," she says, and she then reminds him that his mother, his wife, his son, and the nobles all have stakes in his consulship (III.ii.62-65). His mother also tells him that she taught him *virtus*, but that he must "owe thy pride thyself" (III.ii.130), a reminder that everything he knows about *virtus* he owes

to her parenting, and that only pride would cause him now to presume that he knows better than she what is honorable in the pursuit of the consulship. Coriolanus, still not grasping the gravity of Volumnia's moral claims, laughingly promises to "mountebank" the people's loves in order to make her proud (III.ii.132-35).

Coriolanus may plan to play at politics to satisfy his mother, but both he and Volumnia underestimate the skill, the strategy (III.ii.39-45), and the humility that politics will require of him, and, as Whitaker explains, he "allows himself to be propelled into a political contest for which neither his training nor his temperament have fitted him and in which he must be false either to the mother who has made him what he is or to his own nature" (276). Coriolanus decides to assert the supremacy of his own nature. In fairness to Coriolanus, his most selfish behaviors and his paradoxical assault on his inner concept of honor take place after his banishment, and his common vices are exacerbated by his unjust treatment by the plebes. The tribunes are the real villains here. Their fear and envy drive them to provoke passions and to call out immediately for banishment when calm diplomacy, negotiation, and deliberation were more appropriate. The people banish him, and he naturally banishes them. But Coriolanus's great mistake lies in his refusal to examine the fact that the ties of consanguinity cannot be cut by banishment. He wants to test the

notion, then developing in the young Roman republic, that the rule of law, of contract, and of ideology can form the basis of a strong community, so that it is theoretically possible for a strong man to take his friends, family, and tribe off and on like a glove and to form social contracts with new groups when the old cease to serve his individual will. Coriolanus probably imbibed this attitude from Rome's developing governmental form, for Rome had clearly reached a stage of development in which it felt safe banishing blood kin with his skill set if the kin violate or even disagree with parts of their charters. Therefore, if community and social contract, he attempts to assert, are the foundation of familiar attachment, then it is possible to find or create "a world elsewhere" (III.iii.35). But Volumnia soon shows him that family is really the foundation of social contract. It is similar to Socrates's argument in Plato's *Crito*, which is why Socrates does not draw his sword like Coriolanus (III.i.220-25) or flee when the Athenian authorities unjustly condemn him to execution. It is also the argument of Samson's Israelites who constantly refer to themselves and their blood heritage as "Abraham's race" (29) when using the personified metonym Israel, as when they say, "Yet Israel serves with all his Sons" to refer to their own bondage (240), suggesting that their individual liberty is inseparable from their identity with the ancestral group.

Of course, the idea that Milton's Israel believes family is the foundation of communal attachment may appear to contradict what was said above about Milton's prioritization of God over consanguinity, but it must be remembered that while God's Abrahamic covenant is the basis of the Israelite's sense of communal attachment, and that is certainly a familial covenant, Abraham is also the patriarch who was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac at God's command, so that while loyalty to tribe and family are very high ethical considerations in both the Old and New Testaments, the obligation to God is higher still. Jesus still sees to his mother's care (John 19:25-27) while he finishes his Father's will on the cross, and Samson still regards his father's feelings (325-31) even as he prepares to respectfully decline his insistent invitation to return home. Further, Samson partly accepts Manoa's rebuke against his marriage to "a Canaanite, my faithless enemy" (380-420), and confesses that he has indeed dishonored Manoa's name in allowing Dagon to feel the honor of defeating God (444-59), though Samson reminds him that while Dagon won the battle, the Almighty will win the war (460-78). And Samson's final belief that blindness does not inhibit God from using him as Deliverer probably developed from the fact that he listened respectfully to Manoa's testimony that God can still "cause light again within thy eyes

to spring" and use Samson to liberate Israel (compare 30-36, 584-89, 1381-83).

While Manoa attempts to lovingly rebuke Samson's lack of filial regard with varying degrees of success, and Samson grants some parts of the rebuke while rebuffing others, Volumnia coldly and completely rebukes Coriolanus as he prepares for his assault on their capital, and he sees that he has no choice but to either submit entirely to her argument or to destroy his *virtus*. Her first argument is the simple presentation of Virgilia, Valeria, young Martius, and herself. Wisely, as Coriolanus notices in terror, Volumnia places Virgilia "foremost" (III.iii.22). Some critics have accused Coriolanus of not caring at all for Virgilia, as when Wells says his "marriage appears to be almost non-existent" (173). The plan of the play does not leave room for many domestic scenes, and Coriolanus is banished too soon after his military service to say for certain what his home life was like, but evidence is strong that Virgilia cares much for her husband, as in Act I, scene iii, which is dedicated to depicting Volumnia's martial zeal and Virgilia's worry and longing for her husband, and as in the moment Coriolanus sees Virgilia, for he is filled with longing and devotion, and he knows his resolve to stay Volscian is in trouble. The strength of Coriolanus's marriage may be seen by comparing Coriolanus's teary cry that Virgilia has "doves' eyes, / Which can make

gods foresworn" (V.iii.27-28) with Samson's "Out, out Hyaena" (748) upon first seeing Dalila after a long absence, or Samson's "thou and I long since are twain" (929) with Coriolanus's oath to Juno, "the jealous queen of heaven," that his "true lip / Hath virgin'd it e'er since" he left Rome and joined the Volscians (V.iii.44-47).

The man who some critics say has no inner life is here experiencing a soul-crushing change. He is confronted with his wife, his mother, and his son. Even gods are not strong enough to endure it, and his oath melts at this very moment because of a woman's eyes (V.iii.28). Coriolanus, recalling the accusation of the tribunes that he thought he was a god and not made of the same infirmities as others (III.i.80-82), now admits that he is "not of stronger earth than others" (V.iii.29). Few people have ever endured a moment as humiliating as this. It deserves to be classed with moments experienced by Oedipus, by Agave, by Creon, by Orestes, and, yes, by Samson as he gradually learns to his horror that his physical blindness and slavery (67), though "a living death" (100), is not so terrible as his public ignominy (195-205), which he then realizes is not so terrible as was his spiritual blindness (410-19), which he finally realizes is not nearly as terrible as his handing an apparent victory over God to Dagon (457). That is a lot to take in during one day.

Coriolanus attempts to steel himself against Virgilia (V.iii.38) and her arguments, but just seeing Virgilia, Volumnia, Valeria, and young Martius and seeing them bow to him (V.iii.29-78) for mercy has already defeated him, and Volumnia knows it. She has only to shame him with clear images of what he is really doing to his family. He tells her that he cannot foreswear his oaths against the Romans no matter what she says, and he enjoins her not to "bid me / Dismiss my soldiers, or capitulate / Again with Rome's mechanics" (V.iii.80-83), but he immediately begs her not to tell him "wherein I seem unnatural; desire not / T'allay my rages and revenges with / Your colder reasons" (V.iii.83-86), which indicates that he already knows that he is unnatural, that Volumnia will be able to produce cold reasons, and that he has already lost the coming conflict. Coriolanus tries to find a way to escape the impending lash of Volumnia's tongue, but Volumnia cruelly intends to show him the full meaning and fruits of his choices and actions, and he is far too intelligent and honorable to deny that she is correct. He is no mere brute, and he is not equal to Mars, and, at any rate, Mars bows to Mother Juno (IV.ii.53). He wants to pretend that he can attack Rome's mechanics without attacking its noble women and children, but Coriolanus, of all people an experienced disciple of Mars, should know better. There is always collateral damage. Besides, Mars, as god of war, is no mere barbarian

in love with barbaric war. Coriolanus's martial capacity is the fruit of Rome's superior political, familial, and religious institutions and virtues. Mars grants victory to *virtus*, which is why Martius has always handily defeated Aufidius (I.x.7-10).

After Coriolanus tries to assure the Volscians and himself that he can withstand what is coming (V.iii.92-93), Volumnia unleashes a barrage of images and arguments about the rascality of Coriolanus's attack on his own mother. Coriolanus has made his mother and his wife "more unfortunate than all living women" (V.iii.97) because they have lived to witness their hero son, husband, and father "tearing / His country's bowels out" (V.iii.102-03). "Bowels" refers back to the parable of the body politic that Menenius and the First Citizen debated in Act I, but there bowels were considered as the stomach, as base appetites which should be subjected, like in Plato's *Republic*, to mind and heart (*virtus*) for the good of the commonwealth, but cared for by the mind as the source of nourishment to the whole, while here, "bowels" refers to womb, still an organ of appetite, but one far more creative and sacred than the stomach, and one to which mind, heart, and stomach owe existence. Volumnia, who equates Rome with "our dear nurse" (V.iii.110), cannot pray for Coriolanus's victory or defeat, for one kills her motherland and the other kills her son, so she is rent in twain, and, in an anguish she never imagined she would experience

when she raised him to be an exemplar of Roman *virtus*, she chooses to fight him, so that he can only take Rome by treading "on thy mother's womb / That brought thee to this world" (V.iii.123-25).

Seconding this claim, as if to emphasize that this is no mere idiosyncrasy of martial Volumnia's will, the timid Virgilia says firmly that he will have to tread on her womb as well (V.iii.125-27). Volumnia deliberately uses "tread" twice to equate the assault on her womb and the assault on Rome, because there is no way for a man to attack his own country without "having bravely shed . . . wife and children's blood" (V.iii.116-18).

After Volumnia asks Coriolanus to negotiate a peace rather than continue his attack, she makes an argument which should be self-evident, but which is sometimes obscured by the quest for individual liberty from communal expectations:

If thou conquer Rome, the benefit
Which thou shalt thereby reap is such a name
Whose repetition will be dogg'd with curses;
Whose chronicle thus writ: 'The man was noble,
But with his last attempt he wip'd it out,
Destroy'd his country, and his name remains
To th' ensuing age abhorr'd.' (V.iii.142-48)

This argument has a force similar to one depicted by Homer in *The Iliad* when, after Odysseus and Phoenix try rhetoric and enticements to persuade Achilles to set aside his anger, to swallow his pride, and to help his fellow Greeks, Ajax simply shames him by telling him to put basic human kindness in his heart. Achilles simply knows Ajax is right, and his respect for Ajax's prowess assures him that he has no excuse. Similarly, Coriolanus knows Volumnia is right, for she taught him his whole concept of *virtus*, and she reminds him of it, saying, "There's no man in the world / More bound to 's mother, yet here he lets me prate / Like one i' th' stocks" (V.iii.158-60). Further, she sees his shame on his face, for he visibly averts his eyes (V.iii.168), squirms over his wife's tears (V.iii.156), and remains silent (V.iii.153), and Volumnia refuses to back down. She has brought "reasons" to bear against him (V.iii.158), the ultimate, familial reasons that stand as the first postulates of all human virtue, and she dares him to prove her "unjust, / And spurn me back" (V.iii.164-65), because if he can't, he is "not honest" (V.iii.166) and any claim he makes to *virtus* is obviously nothing but the most shameless and hypocritical of scams. She punctuates this treatise on the priority of family with the most stinging contempt imaginable, saying, "This fellow had a Volscian to his mother; / His wife is in Corioles, and his child / Like him by chance" (V.iii.178-80). A parent's primary job is to affirm their child's existence

no matter what, even when the rest of society may not, but Volumnia's son does not exist if he is not Roman. He is just some Volscian fellow that she does not know or care for, and whom she will fight as an enemy to Rome.

Coriolanus concedes that Volumnia is correct because he sees that she is right about the moral supremacy of the family and its inseparable connection to the community and the state. Whitaker suggests that Coriolanus "seems to yield rather because he cannot disobey his mother than because he is convinced by her moral arguments" (282), but this does Coriolanus too little credit. Volumnia does not simply bark out an order and then watch as Coriolanus unthinkingly obeys. She knows she must make arguments, and she also knows that her cause is greatly helped by the presence of Valeria, Virgilia, and young Martius. With the aid of these emotional symbols and supports, Volumnia argues that heroic *virtus* is inseparable from loyalty to family and to the state. Coriolanus tries to resist the argument throughout her speech, but he can't, because he remains committed to *virtus*, believes, in fact, that his vengeance is grounded in *virtus*, and Volumnia reminds him that *virtus*, at least for him, is inescapably Roman, and, what's more, only a means to serving and preserving the real end, which is the commonwealth. In raising him, she had always emphasized the means because she assumed she

could take the end for granted. Volumnia never anticipated that her son, especially if he followed *virtus* with zeal, would ever be fighting against Rome.

Earlier, I compared Coriolanus to great heroes in Greek tragedy because of his profound humiliation before Volumnia, but Whitaker, again doing too little credit to the understanding of Coriolanus, argues that Coriolanus does not resemble Greek tragic heroes because of "his utter dependence upon his mother for moral support" (282). A true tragic hero, continues Whitaker, pursues "dramatic action centered primarily within the soul of the hero and involving a reversal in his character," whereas Coriolanus only experiences a reversal of fortune (282). This claim ignores the paradox of *virtus* that tears Coriolanus apart. He believes he has acted entirely according to his upbringing in *virtus*, but Volumnia shows him that he has not or certainly will not if he continues his conquest of Rome. His entire definition and all his rules of *virtus* are completely upended. To preserve *virtus*, one must give up *virtus*. *Virtus* could only be preserved if he had shown his wounds to the multitude or had avoided running for the consulship altogether, both of which actions contradict his ideas of the respect and merit due to *virtus*.

While Coriolanus experiences the profound paradox of tragic suffering when Volumnia confronts him, it is true that he does not

entirely resemble the Greek tragic heroes when he concedes to Volumnia, but the reason is not that he mindlessly obeys his mother. Coriolanus acts, but he acts to keep communal taboos associated with the institution of the family, while many Greek heroes break those very taboos. Eteocles kills his brother, Oedipus kills his father and sleeps with his mother, Orestes kills his mother, Medea kills her children, and Deianira kills her husband, just to name a few examples. Even in *Antigone*, in which the heroine fiercely defends family, Creon loses his niece and his son because he prioritizes duty to the state over duty to the family. Milton, always with his Greek models in mind, has Samson break family taboos of Israel by having him marry Philistines and betray God the Father. Coriolanus, in contrast to all of these examples, merely threatens to violate the taboos of family. When Volumnia convinces him that his actions violate those taboos, he backs down from committing such dastardly actions. His decision gets him killed, but he avoids the utter infamy he would have acquired if he had actually tread down mother, wife, and child (V.iii.147-48).

Bloom calls Volumnia's barrage of verbal attacks her "most unpleasant moment" because it "transcends nastiness" and "pragmatically it murders Coriolanus" (586). But what else should she do? Volumnia knows and Coriolanus knows that the Volscians will kill him if he stops his assault on Rome (V.iii.185-89), but neither of them

has any other choice. Yes, there are smug, self-righteous tribunes, spineless people, a questionable governmental form, and cowardly nobles, but only Coriolanus's pride has put Volumnia in the position of having to kill her son. Volumnia raised him to be the ultimate exemplar of Roman virtue, and she raised him to fear dishonor more than death. Bloom forgets that this is the woman who once said, "The breasts of Hecuba, / When she did suckle Hector, look'd not lovelier / Than Hector's forehead when it spit forth blood at Grecian sword" (I.iii.40-43). But Hecuba would never have celebrated, no matter what, Hector helping Greeks to shed Trojan blood. She would rather see him dead. Volumnia does not murder Coriolanus. She rescues his honor with one final maternal lesson about the connections among *virtus*, family, and country. He still strives to survive by negotiating a favorable peace for the Volscians, and then Aufidius murders him.

Bloom's characterization of Volumnia as nasty and cruel, though too extreme, does receive partial corroboration through comparison with Manoa. After Volumnia disowns Coriolanus, she never speaks to him again, even after he laments that she has defeated and killed him. She offers no condolence, no mitigating praise, no sorrow, and no signs of love. Her last words to Coriolanus refer to him as an unnamed Volscian fellow. Volumnia tacitly confirms Coriolanus's description of derisive gods laughing at him because she says absolutely nothing to

contradict it. Manoa, on the other hand, never ceases striving to comfort his son and to change his conception of God, even after Samson rejects his offer to return home. He says, "I however / Must not omit a Father's timely care / To prosecute the means of thy deliverance / By ransom or how else" (601-04). In other words, he agrees to disagree with Samson's self-punishing desire to remain a Philistine slave, but he does not leave angry. Manoa's final words to his son encourage him to "be calm, / And healing words from these thy friends admit" (604-05). Compared to Manoa, Volumnia does come across as a cold, nasty woman, but the gender expectations here are curious. Shakespeare's matriarch appears inexorably cruel and violent. She shows no signs of maternal affection. She is like a stern patriarch. Manoa, on the other hand, attempts to persuade Samson of God's mercy and to offer him a life of comfort and ease. Manoa scolds Samson for his errors while remaining proud of his exploits. He is, in this sense, maternal Manoa.

The difference in Volumnia's and Manoa's affection towards their fallen sons may have other explanations. Manoa continues to hold out hope that God may yet allow Samson to return home, but Volumnia accepts that the gods are either incapable of such miracles or unwilling to perform them in Coriolanus's case, so she silently leaves Coriolanus to his despair, and, in doing so, expresses her own. She also never

speaks again to the Romans. Her return is celebrated as a triumph, but she is not depicted gloating or making requests for compensation. Her silence could equally be inexpressible grief for her son and anger at the cowardly stupidity of the Roman people. She is shattered by what she has been forced to endure. Also, the difference in cruelty between Manoa and Volumnia results from a difference of mission. Manoa must persuade his son to what he considers a better course of action, for what is done is done, and all that is left is to retire to the best life possible under the circumstances, which he believes to be growing old in the comfort of parental care. Volumnia's mission is driven by an absolute moral imperative. Coriolanus must be vanquished at all costs. For Volumnia, the stakes are the freedom of Rome and the preservation of her family and of her son's honor, so she shows no affection, no empathy, and no mercy because cruel rejection is the only thing that will move Coriolanus's sense of honor.

Even more curious than the swapped gender attitudes of Manoa and Volumnia is the fact that both Coriolanus and Samson have conspicuously absent parents. No mention is made of Coriolanus's father at any point in *Coriolanus*, though there may be a subtle, indirect reference to him when Coriolanus reminds Volumnia that she always claimed that if she "had been the wife of Hercules, / Six of his labors you'd have done, and sav'd your husband so much sweat"

(IV.i.17-18). The "if" could be a jibe at her husband. Perhaps she was not married to a Herculean hero, and she did take over the role of exacting patriarch in order to ensure her son would be raised up to manly virtue. Of course, it could be that Volumnia thought highly of her husband and merely enjoyed boasting that she would be patriarchal even if she had been married to a Hercules, but the father's absence is striking. One might expect to hear some passing reference to him, but neither Coriolanus nor Volumnia ever mentions his memory or whether he died in combat. Volumnia does not use the father to shame the son in the final scenes. Coriolanus does not mention his father as a source of his *virtus*. Volumnia does not credit stories about her husband's valor as one of her primary teaching tools. Instead, she claims all the credit for her son's *virtus* to herself alone (V.iii.158-59), and he has always credited her with even his earliest desires to be a great soldier (III.ii.108), whereas both Volumnia and Valeria attribute young Martius's militaristic outlook to Coriolanus's example (I.iii.51-67), a moment in which a short reference to the boy's grandfather would have been fitting.

Just as any reference to Coriolanus's father is absent from *Coriolanus*, Samson's mother is missing from *Samson Agonistes*. This is odd, says Walker, in light of the fact that Samson's mother is at least as important as Manoa in the Biblical source material, "with its

unusual emphasis on the hero's mother" (59). Samson's mother is alluded to when he remembers the prophecy about his role as Deliverer, but she is then only mentioned in conjunction with Manoa, as when he says the angel appeared to "both my Parents" (25), or under the synecdoche of womb, as when he calls himself God's "destin'd from the womb" (634). She is also included with Manoa as disliking Samson's choice to marry the woman of Timna, for "she pleas'd / Mee, not my Parents" (220). These three references constitute more of a presence than Coriolanus's father, but Samson's mother is still conspicuously absent. This absence is particularly remarkable when one considers that Samson was not visited by any Israelites throughout his long bondage, for neither the Chorus nor Manoa has heard any report of his condition, but they are shocked by his unrecognizable appearance and manner (115-27 and 340-44). In other words, his mother has never visited him in his affliction, either because she has disowned him or because she cannot bear to see him in his altered state. She does not consider that she could be of comfort to him. Perhaps she does not feel safe in Gaza, as the Chorus speaks from a solely male perspective (1010-60), which suggests that Israelite women did not travel with them among the Philistines, perhaps because such an "uncouth place" was not thought fit for anyone, let alone their women (332-33). Perhaps she is dead, for it is

strange that neither Samson nor Manoa makes any mention of the chance to enjoy her presence if Samson were to return to live in his childhood home (558-605), and Manoa makes no mention of her as he plans Samson's funeral, but speaks of sending for "all my kindred" and marching the body in a "funeral train / Home to his Father's house" (1732-33). Whatever the reason, Milton seems to have consciously avoided any but the most vague and objectifying references to Samson's mother. She is one with Manoa, she is a womb, but she is not a character present in the narrative or even in the mind of Samson or Manoa.

Perhaps Milton had *Coriolanus*, his Elizabethan rival's most Herculean tragedy, in mind when he wrote *Samson Agonistes*, and he consciously mirrored Volumnia in choosing to have Manoa visit Samson in his exile, but he also avoided the exact parallel of having Samson's mother visit. Coriolanus accepts an ultraviolent matriarch's arguments and then goes on to negotiate peace, while Samson rejects a passive patriarch's plea and then goes on to mass murder. Milton could also have observed that Shakespeare seems to have deliberately excised Coriolanus's father, and so he deliberately excises Samson's mother, thus achieving a similar exploration of gender and family norms. Shakespeare chose the confrontation between Volumnia and Coriolanus as his emotional climax because he wanted to emphasize

the absolute supremacy of the family, especially of the womb, in shaping individual *virtus*, so Milton places his confrontation between Manoa and Samson earlier in the play because he wants to later emphasize the supremacy of individual liberty found in rejecting state and patriarchal authority and in submission to conscience and God (78, 1334, and 1643). Milton's reasons for this contrast could be grounded in his political differences with the Elizabethans and with Shakespeare, and he could also be thinking about his Greek models, for while Shakespeare writes his tragedy to lay bare the false premises of a community who mistreats its Herculean hero and of a hero who thinks he can author himself even though he has a mother, Milton writes to purge fear and pity, "to temper and reduce them to just measure" (549), and he has in mind a small audience of educated, Christian readers with disappointed republican values rather than a large, mixed class, theater-going public, so he focuses on the transformation from doubt to faith in one man and in the small community of his close friends and kin.

Of course, Samson does not reject only state and patriarch. He also rejects Dalila, while Coriolanus bows to Virgilia. This is a crucial difference between Coriolanus and Samson. Coriolanus's moment comes before Volumnia, but Samson's comes first in Dalila's lap and second when confronting her blind. Women overcome both men, but

then Samson, in accord with Milton's project of total emancipation into individual liberty before God, overcomes Dalila, while Coriolanus remains vanquished by Volumnia. But while there is certainly enough Oedipal tension between Coriolanus and his mother to make Freud happy, the proper comparison with Dalila is Virgilia. Coriolanus is conquered the moment he sees Virgilia's beauty and receives her kiss. Volumnia has only to capitalize on the emotions her son experiences upon seeing his chaste wife. But Samson now has a gift that he did not have when Dalila conquered him. Dalila's sexual beauty awes the Chorus (710-31 and 1003-07), but Samson is now blind. He can no longer see Dalila's feminine charms. God has made his weakness for Dalila into strength, so the sexual charms that caused his downfall no longer have the same power over him. Samson is free to listen to Dalila and to argue with her without experiencing the persuasion of her sexual appearance. Dalila realizes this fact to her dismay, for when she attempts to win Samson back to her bed (913-26), she discovers that she must now rely solely on words, so she says, "In argument with men a woman ever / Goes by the worse, whatever be her cause" (903-04). Whereas Dalila used to be able to seduce Samson into absurd actions, she sees that Samson now finds it easy to resist her, so she attempts to at least touch him (951), hoping her soft femininity may prove seductive enough, but Samson, strengthened by his anger

against her treachery, is able to resist that temptation, but only because he vehemently threatens to kill her if she tries, perhaps fearing that the touch itself will prove too much for him (952-61). Critics, such as Dr. Johnson, who claim that Samson's encounters in the play's middle have no causal connection with his final ability to destroy the Philistines would do well to think through the liberating effect Samson experiences in encountering Dalila as a blind man.

At this point, we have explored key conflicts between the Herculean heroes in both plays and the social institutions of state and family that they encounter. Both Coriolanus and Samson are disillusioned by their conflicts with the social institution of the state. Coriolanus sees that the people, especially under the influence of ambitious tribunes, are enemies to *virtus*, while Samson sees that idolatrous foreign rulers are antithetical to his freedom of conscience and of religion (1334-37). But Coriolanus and Samson have a different experience when encountering the institution of the family. Coriolanus's mother, wife, and son never do anything to betray him. Rather, he betrays them, and when they point that fact out to him, he sees that he has no other honorable choice but to surrender to them. Coriolanus is thus conquered in this encounter and never offers any more dialectical conflict with the family. But Samson's father is part of a passive Chorus of Danites, and they do not support his fight for their

own liberty (268-71), and Samson's wife has betrayed him, and he has suffered the pain of decoupling and divorce (928-29 and 999-1009). Samson is thus able to assert his individuality against the institution of the family and to move forward towards the consummation of his divine mission. For Samson, conflict with God constitutes the highest dialectical challenge, so we will now turn to explore the encounter of both heroes with the institution of religion.

D. Religion

For both Coriolanus and Samson, religion is important as an individual rather than as a communal experience, for the community is out of touch with what makes religion important. Israel emphasizes strict adherence to the Mosaic Law and to tradition, so that they hold Samson strictly accountable for his Nazarite vows and blame him for breaking them (215-18, 318-21, 1385-86), yet they do not have enough faith in God to support Samson against the Philistines, even when his feats clearly manifest God's power (243-46 and 1348-53). The Roman aristocrats do invoke the gods for personal strength in battle, as when Cominius prays for the gods to assist the Romans in defeating the Volscians, so that they may offer "thankful sacrifice" (I.vi.9), or when Coriolanus expresses total confidence that his mother has been praying for his success (II.i.170-71), but, while the plebes often invoke the gods for trivial oaths and greeting, they most often,

says Engle, "make frequent use of the gods in persuading or browbeating others" without invoking them "as guides to personal behavior " (176). When they do pray for help, they do so only when they are under extreme threat, and then they appear to use a rote expression, as when both the citizens and the tribunes say, "The gods be good to us" as they panic over Coriolanus's impending conquest (IV.vi.153 and V.iv.30). Menenius then rebukes them for praying to the gods with empty words rather than obeying them with good deeds, for when they banished Coriolanus, and he includes himself in the rebuke, "we respected not them; and, he returning to break our necks, they respect not us" (V.iv.31-34).

For the hero, religion should be so much more than adherence to traditional norms revealed from heaven. The individual and society should turn to heaven for specific strength and for justification and then go to work honoring heaven through action. Thus, Coriolanus expresses his belief that the foundation of social order and of the senate's governance is in divine right (I.i.185-88), and he does so as a remembered aside, as if he fears presuming to claim the right to govern without divine sanction. Again, he prays to Mars for the whole army, asking the god to "make us quick in work, / That we with smoking swords may march from hence / To help our fielded friends" (I.iv.10-12), which indicates that, in spite of his extreme skill in

soldiering, he still considers it necessary to pray for help in battle, and he offers the prayer using plural pronouns, so that he is invoking help for the whole community of soldiers. He then gets up and matches his prayer with faith and determination, for he immediately encourages his men to fight when they wish to flee (I.iv.23-30) and then rushes into the gates of Corioli alone because, he says, "'Tis for the followers fortune widens them, / Not for the fliers" (I.iv.44-45). It may be thought that Coriolanus is not sincere in his beliefs because these examples are spoken in front of crowds and may have rhetorical purposes, but Volumnia knows better. Most of her final speech to Coriolanus focuses on the priority of family in the formation of *virtus*, but she knows she will persuade him if she invokes the curse of the gods, so she tells him that if he attacks Rome even though he cannot answer her charges against him, then "the gods will plague thee, / That thou restrain'st from me the duty which / To a mother's part belongs" (V.iii.166-68), and it is the opinion of the gods that he first cites when he grants that she is correct (V.iii.183-85). As Engle puts it, for Coriolanus, virtue "is not socially constructed, but has a transcendent audience" (178).

Samson also believes that religion is not so much about obeying the social religion as it is about turning to God for strength and then acting according to God's will. Israel and Manoa blame him for

marrying outside of the Mosaic Law and of the Nazarite covenant, but Israel was not helping him fulfill his divine mission, so he believes that God, through "intimate impulse," encouraged him to marry the woman of Timna in order that "by occasion hence / I might begin Israel's Deliverance" (219-26). Again, Samson acts differently than his fellow Israelites, so they "despise, or envy, or suspect" him of being evil, but "God hath of his special favor rais'd" Samson up (272-73), and that special favor implies special privileges and abilities, or, in the words of the Chorus after they agree with Samson's line of argument, a special exemption from the general "national obstruction" (310-12). Again, the Chorus would have no problem with Samson attending the idolatrous feast of Dagon because he has been threatened by the government, and "where the heart joins not, outward acts defile not" (1368), but Samson holds himself to a higher standard, claiming that if the Philistines don't drag him there physically—and he implies that he does not fear that outrage because of his strength—then he would be obeying them freely, "venturing to displease / God for the fear of Man, and Man prefer, / Set God behind" (1373-75). But Samson does reassert his belief that special dispensation from God based on favor and faith is a legitimate reason for violating the communal religious norms, so "that he may dispense with me or thee / Present in Temples at Idolatrous Rites / For some important cause, thou needst not doubt"

(1377-79). By mentioning either "me or thee," Samson indicates that he is not specially exempting himself from national obstruction, but any man whom God chooses. Then Samson, having remembered that God can dispense with rules for him, is moved upon by "rousing motions" (1382) to attend the feast of Dagon in order to perform his great feat of destruction, though, influenced by his dialectic interaction with the Chorus, he assures the community that he will do nothing else to "dishonor / Our Law, or stain my vow of Nazarite" (1386-87).

Thus, Coriolanus has extreme faith in the honor the gods will give to individual virtue, and Samson has a similar faith in his God, but Coriolanus should probably have bent his virtue to the popular political customs, even a little, to avoid his fate, while it is not clear whether or not Samson should have bent his will to the community norms about marriage. His marriages result in his greatest humiliation and suffering, but they also facilitate the fulfillment of his prophetic role, for, says O'Connor, Samson remains "an instrument, not a victim of providence" (81) to the very end of the play. The Philistine lords gather at the festival of Dagon to celebrate their victory over Samson, and his condition of slavery and blindness gives them confidence and the desire to force him to entertain them under the stone roof of their theater. The Chorus sees this behavior as some sort of divinely inspired death wish, for God "a spirit of frenzy sent, / Who hurt their

minds, / And urg'd them on with mad desire / To call in haste for their destroyer" (1675-78). Perhaps if Samson had obeyed communal norms in the matter of marriage, God would have found some other way for him to quickly and decisively destroy the Philistines without destroying himself, for God proves that he can fulfill prophecy one way or the other, even if his prophesied hero has become crucially crippled, but it is also possible that God intended this method of fulfillment all along, that Samson's violation of marriage laws was foreknown or even prompted as the primary means by which Samson would deliver Israel from Philistine rule.

This distinction between how Coriolanus and Samson should have handled their respective community's religious norms underscores a crucial distinction between the two heroes. They may have similar attitudes about the priority of individual relationship to the divine over merely obeying social religious norms, but they have very different ideas of the divine itself. Samson is an Abrahamic monotheist and Coriolanus is a pagan polytheist. Samson's God is Almighty, and therefore exercises a degree of control over events and over the meaning of virtue that transcends the power of the Roman divinities in the same way that infinity transcends any assignable numeric proportion. As Samson puts it, "highest dispensation" may have had "ends above my reach to know" (60-61). Again, the Chorus

says men cannot presume to "confine th' interminable" even if they try to "tie him to his own prescript" (307-08). At the same time, this infinite God can be paradoxically personal, as in the story of Abraham, who was the friend of God (James 2:23). Thus, Samson can personally betray Him and feel guilt about violating their covenant relationship. Coriolanus's gods are tremendously powerful, so that they are believed to be able to alter the course of battles and to protect a commonwealth, but they are not omnipotent, and they are not as personal. No one in *Coriolanus* speaks seriously of divine power in the same way that Samson and the Chorus speak of it. The gods are there, may help if pleased or curse if displeased, but they do not have unfathomable historic ends beyond human concerns. They are super beings, but they are not the Being that created and governs all things. In fact, they must be subject to some such unknown first cause.

Samson's God is a frightening mystery that transcends the human, but the human remains inexplicably in His image and His concern, while Coriolanus's gods are relatively understandable, very human in their weighing of virtue and vice, yet divine in their power to mete out rewards and punishments based on their favor. As a result, Coriolanus's tragic fall is entirely his own, and the gods simply sit back and laugh at the spectacle of human folly (V.iii.183-85), but Samson's fall, while he finally accepts sole authorship for it (374-76), is also

God's will, for He exercises a Providential power over all events, especially those which concern Israel. Samson, the Chorus, and Manoa may all complain at times about the Divine disposition (205-10, 293-320, 365-73), and Samson might even question the wisdom of all design, as when he wonders at the limits of the eyeball (90-96), but this is ultimately impotent questioning because of God's omnipotence, wisdom, and complete justice. Still, try as they might to accept that God is irrational from the human perspective (321-25), the Chorus remains unsatisfied until some sensible closure between Divine and human reason is achieved. That is, in fact, the catharsis sought throughout the whole play (1745-58). Coriolanus never mounts an argument against the gods, nor does he ever presume to prove their ways "justifiable to men" (294), for men have higher expectations of God than they have of gods. The gods can be far more idiosyncratic, erroneous, and fickle than God and still retain their godhood, though men believe that the gods do favor states and individuals who do justice to subjects and family, as seen above when Menenius rebukes Rome for unrighteously banishing Coriolanus (V.iv.31-34), and when Volumnia threatens divine curses against Coriolanus (V.iii.166-68).

The dispositions of Samson and Coriolanus towards virtuous conduct and towards the community are directly shaped by differences between polytheism and monotheism. Samson worships a universal

God, but Coriolanus prays to Mars, a god dedicated to war. Samson has been a warrior, but he has a multitude of higher metaphysical concerns that Martius never seems to consider. Samson must grapple with God's foreknowledge, creation, plans, love, and honesty, while all of Coriolanus's worship centers around military conquest and honor. Polytheism, in spite of its multiple options, has led Coriolanus to single-minded focus on one, narrow god, while monotheism has led Samson to contemplate a very broad range of human concerns, precisely because the God he focuses on is infinite in scope. This explains why Coriolanus has been seen as Shakespeare's least interior hero, while Samson, who really should have been nothing but a dumb, strong warrior, is lifted above his own disposition into deep contemplation.

While Coriolanus's adherence to Mars seems to stunt his interior life, he does show signs of growth when he offers a prayer for his son that acknowledges the supremacy of Jove over Mars:

The god of soldiers,
 With the consent of supreme Jove, inform
 Thy thoughts with nobleness, that thou mayst prove
 To shame invulnerable, and stick i' th' wars
 Like a great sea-mark, standing every flaw,
 And saving those that eye thee!" (V.iii.70-74)

Volumnia forces Coriolanus to encounter wife, mother, and son while he is most intent upon martial conflict against Rome, and the thoughts and emotions induced by that encounter force him to acknowledge that Mars must have Jove's consent. Thus, even before she begins making verbal arguments, Coriolanus unconsciously recognizes that Volumnia is right about *virtus* and the state being means to the protection of justice, of family, and of community, and he expresses that recognition in a spontaneous prayer for his son. The simile of the stalwart soldier being a "sea-mark" that serves as a guide to flawed comrades is evidence of Coriolanus's sense of community. He believes that good soldiering is grounded in communal values like service, duty, leadership, and working together toward a common cause. The disciple of Mars, to gain Jove's consent, must endure the flaws of his compatriots and be a savior to those, both soldier and civilian, who look to him as a model and a protector.

For Samson, it is absurd to worship a god like Mars who can only operate justly if Jove supervises him. Samson tells Dalila that she betrayed him to please "gods unable / To acquit themselves and prosecute their foes / But by ungodly deeds, the contradiction of their own deity, Gods cannot be: / Less therefore to be pleas'd, obey'd, or fear'd" (896-900). Had she directly worshipped that Supreme Deity who alone is worthy of worship, she would have remained faithful not

to the local god of the Philistines, but to the Universal God who lays down "the law of nature, law of nations" (890) for all of mankind. That law requires a wife to be loyal to husband rather than to "parents and country" (886) if the husband is a just man while the country is "an impious crew" who uphold the local power of their god over other peoples by means of "worse than hostile deeds, violating the ends / For which our country is a name so dear" (891-94). A god of war is no god at all because he fights for a side and only for war's sake. The true God is supremely worthy of worship in every way, for He lays down universal laws for everyone and everything, while a god of war can only create law for and by means of war. Such a god must appeal to a higher god, such as Jove, for other concerns, while Jove, were he worthy of worship, would be able to handle all things in war and peace on his own.

Again, people who worship idols imitate the weaknesses of their idols and always give undue emphasis to the god's preferred expertise. This, Samson would argue, is why Coriolanus places disproportionate honor on *virtus*, treats his battle scars as far more sacred than they deserve, refuses to submit to political custom, and ends up blindly attacking his mother country in a vicious pursuit of martial revenge. This type of behavior can be avoided only if one worships the true and living God, for His power covers a scope of interests as deep and wide

as His infinite and eternal nature. Also, a man may falsely presume to emulate or even to compete with a lesser god, as when Samson's strength allowed him "like a petty God" to walk "about admir'd of all and dreaded / On hostile ground, none daring my affront" (529-31), or when Coriolanus "affected the strains of honor, / To imitate the graces of the gods" (V.iii.149-50). This can also lead the common people to undue worship of the hero, as when the Romans bow to Coriolanus "as to Jove's statue" because of his martial success (II.i.266), which, says Foakes, caused turmoil by increasing the envy of the tribunes and by leading the Romans to reinforce Coriolanus's "basic isolation from them in his limited perception of the value of life as centered in war" (156-57). According to Wells, Mars's "presence within the city can be almost guaranteed to cause 'strange insurrections, / The people against the senators, patricians, and nobles' (IV.iii.13-14)" (171). The worship of idols invites quixotic delusions that are destructive of both individual and social happiness, but these delusions become impossible when one measures one's self not against a particular god with whom one's own talents share some affinity, but against an absolutely Supreme Being. Before such a Being, one can only humbly submit in all things and reverentially worship with one's fellows, who are all, with their special talents and affinities, absolutely equal in proportion to the infinity of God.

For Samson, worship of the God of Abraham is the only sound basis for individual or social happiness, and he frames his personal tragedy and the entire political situation of Israel in terms of a fight between God and Dagon:

This only 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 ere long receive
 Such a discomfit, as shall quite despoil him
 Of all these boasted Trophies won on me,
 And with confusion blank his worshippers. (461-71)

In *Coriolanus*, there is no similar contest between the gods of the Volscians and the gods of the Romans, as both worship the same or similar gods (IV.v.103-06). The real conflict of the play is political and pits individual martial valor against the honor owed to family. Coriolanus's perfidy disgraces himself, his family, and his countrymen, but there is never concern that the Volscian gods are honored above

the Roman gods. But Samson's conflict with the Philistines is not really political at all because Samson does not separate the sphere of politics from religion. Samson does not intend to glorify Dagon when he succumbs to Dalila, but his fall leads to Dagon's illusion of exaltation over Abraham's God, which Samson comes to see as his greatest shame and affliction (457). His personal tragedy of betrayal, failure, slavery, blindness, and death is no longer his ultimate concern. He is comforted with the knowledge that the fight for him is over and that God will take care of his own concerns from now on, that his weak will is no longer a variable in the conflict between God and Dagon. For Samson, idolatrous political rule over worshippers of the true God is an intolerable situation. God cannot permit it, for only He has a real sovereign right to rule. All other rule is usurpation and antagonistic to equality and liberty (890-900 and 1418-22).

In framing the remaining conflict between Philistia and Israel in terms of Dagon and God, Samson has also removed himself from the central conflict of the drama. He is happy that he will have to perform no more actions, for God will find some other way to "blank" Dagon's worshippers. If Samson were correct, *Samson Agonistes* would be nothing more than a long denouement to the tragic choice Samson made when he allowed himself to be seduced by Dalila. But, says Whitaker, a Greek tragedy must depict "dramatic action centered

primarily within the soul of the hero and involving a reversal in his character" (282). *Samson Agonistes* adheres to the forms of Greek tragedy, so Samson still has a choice to make and an action to perform in the conflict between Dagon and God. Milton depicts this in the catastrophe when Samson "pray'd / Or some great matter in his mind revolv'd" (1637-38). Samson pauses before he crushes the Philistines, and he may be praying, but he may be pondering. He may be realizing that this may kill him as well, but then he has wished for death throughout the poem. He may be worried that Dalila is in the crowd, but then his love for her has grown cold, and if she can stand to watch him mocked for sport, then she deserves what she gets. He may be pondering if Israel's liberty is really worth such a potentially infamous mass classicide. They have always been passive in the pursuit of their own liberty, and he may be destroying a fighting race in favor of a lazy one. This distinction may be why he has always preferred Philistine women to Israelite women. But in the end, the choice comes down to the conflict between God and Dagon. Samson is merely an instrument of the Divine will. Regardless of the work of the Philistines or the sloth of Israel, God will be glorified, and Samson knows he can achieve that end with a simple push of the pillars. What is at stake for Samson, according to Jackie DiSalvo, is an "idolatrous culture that could smother the fragile advances of enlightenment and

drive Israel, as England, back to the Dark Ages" (257). It is idolatrous lords, "the well-feasted Priest" and the "impetuous, insolent, unquenchable" people (1418-24) who, "drunk with idolatry" and "chanting their Idol" (1670-74), have forced him, against his natural right of conscience and worship, to join them in worshipping Dagon (1334-36), and who, through use of "hostile . . . ungodly deeds" (893 and 898) and brutal conquest (1204), have violated the law of nature and the law of nations in subjecting all of Israel (890), so Samson, for his God, for his country, and for the liberty of all men, acts "of my own accord" (1643) and tears the theater down on their idolatrous heads.

Those who are most disturbed by Samson's act of violence know that it is ultimately about killing idolaters because that is the essence of their complaint. They cannot accept Milton if he depicts a violent God punishing people for practicing a different religion. Wittreich, for example, believes Milton may have once favored the violence of the revolution, but now "the failure of the revolution seems to have left Milton with an urgent need to reexamine those assumptions—where they lead and how to modify them, especially those that breed contempt, foster cruelty, and foment violence" (169). He goes on to claim that Milton is protesting against the politics of the Restoration, "as well as in the theological tenets and religious values subtending both" (169) the Restoration and the previous republican revolution.

Wittreich cannot stand the idea that Milton would depict God inspiring Samson to kill people, so, he insists that, "Whether we are to view Samson as going to the temple with divine commission, or of his own accord . . . is just now being accepted as a crucial matter of uncertainty in Milton's poem . . . whether in Milton's tragedy those rousing motions come from within or from above" (xviii). He bases this uncertainty on Samson's claim that he acted "of his own accord" (171), but Samson spoke this with reference to the Philistines forcing him to entertain them and not necessarily with reference to the Divine. Still, it is interesting that Samson does not preach to the Philistines in that moment about Yahweh's superiority to Dagon, and that Milton does not follow Judges in making it clear that Samson prayed before he tore the temple down. Instead, Samson possibly ponders what he is about to do and then speaks of the freedom of his will from their enslavement. Michael Bryson, in *Atheist Milton*, takes Wittreich's line of thought to a greater extreme. Noting that God is not present in *Samson Agonistes* as He was in *Paradise Lost*, and, ignoring arguments for an earlier composition date of *Samson Agonistes*, he claims, "Milton removes God from his poetic world entirely. The deity is reduced to words on the lips of tongues and fools . . . a reflection of the desires fears, hatreds, and wishes of the speaker. From divine presence, Milton has come to divine absence, from being with God to

without God, from theos to atheos" (135). *Samson Agonistes*, he continues, "is Milton's final and most devastating critique of theism, of the belief that a personal God exists, that you know the will of that God, and that the will of that God is that you kill in his name" (137). Whereas Wittreich merely makes Milton question Samson's claim to divine revelation, Bryson, in spite of the entire tenor of Milton's life and work, makes Milton doubt the very existence of revelation at all. Both authors believe Milton judged Samson to be a moral monster.

While the opposition these critics feel to religious bigotry and murder may be commendable, they are misreading *Samson Agonistes*. There are many arguments that could be brought forward, but only one is really necessary, and Manoa utters it. If God has no intention of using Samson to destroy Philistines and thereby liberate Israel, then, he says, "Why else this strength / Miraculous yet remaining in those locks? His might continues in thee not for naught" (586-88). Wittreich, Carey, and Bryson all claim that God is not evident in the poem, that His participation in the final destruction is not provable since Samson alone believes that he has internal rousing motions from the divine, while God never actually appears to endorse the event. But Samson's strength is undeniably supernatural and must be accounted for. Perhaps God has really hung it in Samson's hair (59) according to some scientific law of cause and effect, so that the strength has

returned with the hair and God simply does not interfere when Samson decides, of his own accord, to tear down the theater. But this line of argument is ridiculous. Strength is not found in hair if there is no God, and, at any rate, both Samson and Manoa speak figuratively when they refer to the long hair as the place of strength. The strength derives from his covenant relationship as a Nazarite—all Nazarites, to set their order apart, have long hair, though not all of them can tear buildings down with their bare hands—and from the prophetic promises of the angel who appeared to Samson's parents.

Disturbing divine violence is also a key component in many tragedies. Lawry, answering those who deplore the presence of divine violence in *Samson Agonistes*, reminds us that

such violence may be an essential component of most tragedy and martyrdom. To wish it utterly away is to wish away the rare, ultimate trial of spirit with flesh, exemplary of lesser struggles of far less (or no) violence. Tragedy often suggests that the great triumphs of the spirit must be gained in company with great agony of the flesh. Perhaps the modern world has evolved beyond such ideas by holding that physical suffering is absurd and without meaning, but in literature and religion they remain current. To discard them from Milton would ask that we also discard the bloody deaths around Hamlet and the physical

torments of Christ and Christian martyrs. Theology as well as literature and history led Milton to this end for this hero. (385)

Samson Agonistes, *Hamlet*, and the Bible are not the only tragedies that depict divine power inflicting disturbing suffering and destructive violence on human beings, perhaps as exemplary allegories of the conflict between the flesh and the spirit. Such depictions are common in Milton's Greek models. Who feels easy about Apollo encouraging Orestes to kill Clytemnestra, about Dionysus tricking Agave into ripping Pentheus's head off, or about the horrific punishment inflicted by the oracle of Apollo on Laius and Jocasta for their presumption that gods can be prevented from fulfilling their oracles? These plays do, of course, feature some protest against the wicked actions of the gods, especially in Euripides, whose repeated criticisms of the gods Samson echoes when he says the idols are "unable to acquit themselves and prosecute their foes but by ungodly deeds, the contradiction of their own deity, Gods cannot be" (896-99), but these plays, even many of those by Euripides, also feature the presence of the gods themselves. Apollo is present in *The Oresteia* as a character, and Dionysus is present in *The Bacchae*, and their power and their arguments must be accounted for. The gods, as in *Samson Agonistes*, are not present in *Oedipus the King*, but their prophecies are definitely fulfilled, just as prophetic strength is definitely exercised by Samson, and, again, this

supernatural power cannot merely be dismissed but must be accounted for in any interpretation of the poem.

The presence of divine power is one difference between Miltonic and Shakespearean tragedy. Shakespeare certainly explores Christian themes in some tragedies, and some of his characters receive strength from spiritual beliefs, but God does not obviously intervene in any events. Miracles are absent. For this reason, Bloom argues that Shakespeare's tragedies implicitly reject any kind of spiritual reality, and that Dr. Johnson, "firmly Christian, would not allow himself to say that, but he clearly understood it, and his uneasiness underlies his shock at the murder of Cordelia at the end of *King Lear*" (3). Cordelia's undeserved death happens by mere chance, and God could have subtly and justifiably prevented it. Bloom's claim is suspect, for one need not be Christian to find Cordelia's death disturbing, but his general observation about the apparent absence of divine intervention in Shakespeare's plays is generally true, though it should be noted that *King Lear* is set in a pre-Christian era. In other tragedies, though miracles are not explicitly present, a spiritual worldview may perhaps be implied in the results characters experience from their choices or symbolized in their inner conflicts, but *Coriolanus*, like *King Lear*, takes place in a pre-Christian era, and as Hibbard notes, "Characters may occasionally call on the gods, but

there is no sense of the numinous anywhere in it" (16). Engle notes that the gods do serve the nobles in the play as "guides to behavior more reliable or objective than the interests of the community" (177), but, again, he grants that the presence of the gods, either in person or in power, is not depicted in the play.

While Shakespeare, unlike Milton and the Greeks, does not depict anything numinous in *Coriolanus*, he does depict a polytheist society, and, in this sense, Shakespeare's characters live in a world that resembles that of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, while Milton has written a monotheistic tragedy. If theologic form impacts tragic form as much as political form impacts it, this may lead one to conclude that *Coriolanus* is more classical in form than *Samson Agonistes*, but that would be a mistake. In *Coriolanus*, the gods do not meddle, for good or for evil, in human affairs, and no character ever mentions Fate, the supreme power that governs in Greek tragedy. Instead, they speak of Fortune, as when Lartius prays that "the fair goddess, Fortune" will "fall deep in love" with Coriolanus and grant him victory (I.v.19-24), or when a patrician laments to Menenius that Coriolanus has "marr'd his fortune" (III.i.253) by incurring the enmity of the plebes. Some characters in the play do appear to believe that prayer can influence fortune, as in the example of Lartius just cited, or when Menenius tells the plebes to stop protesting the government and

start praying for an end of the dearth, because weather and crops have more to do with the gods than with the state (I.i.72-74), but Coriolanus speaks of the gods as passive spectators of man's fortunes, and the spectacle, for them, is a comedy. "The gods," says Blits,

inspire men to scale heaven, but then laugh when men,
attempting to 'imitate the graces of the gods' (V.iii.149-50) and
become more than human, are brought down by their own
humanity . . . If man affirms his nature by trying to surpass his
nature, his nature finally causes him to fall. (216)

Coriolanus first voices this view when he asks Cominius to reward a poor man who helped him in Corioli. "The gods begin to mock me," he says, because "I, that now / Refus'd most princely gifts, am bound to beg / Of my lord general" (I.x.79-81). Coriolanus sees the irony in having his victory depend on a poor Volscian's service and in the fact that his uncorrupted *virtus* must seek reward in order to honor that service, but he does not see the gods as teaching him a lesson in humility. Rather, they enjoy and laugh at the paradoxical irony his mortality forces on his *virtus*. Later, when his seemingly strict adherence to uncorrupted *virtus* has brought his mother, his wife, and his son to bow before him (V.iii.30-33) and to plead with him not to kill them and their country, Coriolanus again claims the gods laugh at him, saying, "Behold, the heavens do ope, / The gods look down, / and

this unnatural scene / They laugh at" (V.iii.183-85). He talks as if he actually sees the gods laughing in heaven, and while this is probably figurative rather than an actual vision or break with sensory reality, the extreme intensity of his humiliation could have led him to vividly imagine the bitter scene and the mocking sound in his mind during the silence that ensued after Volumnia finished speaking.

In *Samson Agonistes*, the characters do not describe God as laughing, but they do wonder for a time at what appears to be God's trifling concern towards the ironic suffering humans experience from their choices. Samson questions why God would give him extreme strength without giving him extreme wisdom, leaving him to be "proverb'd for a Fool / In every street" (203-09). Manoa laments how God's blessings are ruses because the very things people pray for and receive often turn out to be "our woe, our bane" (351). The Chorus notes how God behaves differently towards man than towards lower and higher orders of being, using his providential power in ways unpredictably "various" or even mischievously "contrarious" (667-73) to shape man's fortunes from good to ill, especially the fortunes of good men (674-81), as if He enjoys playing with man's suffering rather than dealing with him justly or at least benevolently, and that He even seems to delight in doling out particularly bitter and disproportionate punishments, so that He not "only dost degrade

them, or remit / To life obscur'd, which were a fair dismissal, / But throw'st them lower than thou didst exalt them high, / Unseemly falls in human eye, / Too grievous for the trespass or omission" (687-91). While these accusations against God do appear to attribute to Him an attitude similar to the mocking gods of Coriolanus, they also all assume a providential power shaping the destinies of men, which contrasts with Coriolanus's concept of the gods as laughing spectators, and both Manoa and the Chorus, after Samson's blindness and enslavement turn out to have placed him in a position to fulfill his role as Israel's deliverer and Philistia's destroyer, believe throughout their final choral odes that God has acted justly, solemnly, and benevolently towards Samson and towards themselves. God, says Manoa, had "not parted from him, as was fear'd," but had been "favoring and assisting to the end" (1719-20), and the Chorus sings that while God often "seems to hide his face," he "unexpectedly returns / And to his faithful Champion hath in place / Bore witness gloriously" (1749-52).

Thus, Shakespeare, at least in *Coriolanus*, depicts man as caught in a bitter paradox of striving after godhood and achieving an approximation to it, but then always tragically failing because he is a very low, mortal animal compared to the immortal gods, and they laugh at his vain efforts as humans might laugh at chimps attempting to compose sonnets, while Milton depicts man as striving for godhood

and tragically failing, but then sometimes granted a sort of progress because the mysterious power of Fate or of Providence does feel a benevolent kinship towards man's condition. These facts do appear to give some support to Bevington's claim that Shakespeare was disillusioned in his final exploration of tragedy and offered "skepticism as the only honest answer to humanity's tragic dilemma" (66), while Milton's exploration of the genre offers faith and hope as the only hopeful answer to humanity's tragic dilemma. Shakespeare lays bare man's terrifying condition and then leaves Coriolanus believing the gods cynically laugh at man's inescapable weakness, while Milton lays bare the same condition, but then shows that while God's pursuit of higher ways sometimes leaves man feeling laughed at by the "divine disposal" (210), He turns out to have been quite solemn about human suffering all along.

In depicting a positive outcome to man's tragic experiences, Milton is following his Greek models. As Alfred North Whitehead notes, the essence of Greek tragedy "is not unhappiness." Rather, it is "the solemnity of the remorseless working of things" (10-11). Many Greek tragedies, like *Samson Agonistes*, end with a fated human tragedy being turned to the community's general good, as when the matricide of the *Oresteia* ends in Athena establishing a judicial system to resolve blood feuds, and she even finds a way to give the Furies a role in the

system, or when the horrific incest, insanity, and injury of *Oedipus the King* is turned by the gods in *Oedipus at Colonus* into transcendent wisdom for Oedipus and divine protection granted to the community that protects and buries him. In these tragedies, the driving force shaping man's destiny is Fate, and God's Providence plays a similar role in *Samson Agonistes*. Fate crushes man, and God crushes man, but Fate often mysteriously turns tragedy to man's benefit, and God finds a way to instruct and exalt His elect. In this way, says John Collins, "the theology" of *Samson Agonistes* "is Sophoclean" (Collins 7), and, in spite of its monotheism, is more aligned with Greek tragedy than is Shakespeare's polytheistic *Coriolanus*, for Coriolanus is merely crushed by his folly and laughed at. Of course, in *Samson Agonistes*, the fact that the divine crushes and tortures humans before the positive turn of Fate remains tragically troubling "in human eye" (690), and certainly great tragedy does not simply wrap up all human suffering caused by the remorseless working of higher powers into a nice, neat, satisfactory, little bow, but, for the Greeks and for Milton, it also does not merely stir up fearful contemplation of man's inevitable failure, helplessness, and mortal weakness. Rather, it depicts the extremes of man's fearful and pitiful miseries to audiences for contemplation within the safe confines of a book or of a theater, aestheticizes those sufferings through poetic imitation, and then

explores possible lessons, benefits, and resolutions that both Chorus and hero can experience even from what seems to be the worst and the most unjust of those sufferings, especially because higher, mysterious powers and meanings are at work in the destiny of man. Fear and pity are not wholly resolved in this process, but the imitation does "temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirr'd up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated" (549).

While Milton's theology in *Samson Agonistes* bears a great resemblance to Sophoclean theology in the Theban plays, when he replaces Fate with the Judeo-Christian God, he does change the theology of tragedy. The difference lies in the infinitely comprehensive extent of Providence over Fate and in the degree of agency man has in shaping his destiny. In *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus, in spite of his best efforts, could not avoid fulfilling the oracle of Apollo. He tried to do what he believed was right, and the gods proved that their will remained inescapable in spite of his best efforts. In *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus's extreme suffering is mitigated by the fulfillment of another oracle of Apollo that predicted Oedipus would eventually find a new home city and be a boon to it in his death and burial. The gods also grant him some justice for the ill treatment he experienced from Creon and his sons when they mercilessly exiled him and then neglected him in spite of the familial and filial duty they still owed him.

Oedipus is humbled by his experience and has faith in the oracle because he has learned that oracles will be fulfilled, but the oracle is not necessarily granted because of his penitence. The oracle acts as a *deus ex machina*, for the gods and Fate provided all along for a more just resolution to Oedipus's disproportionate suffering, as often happens in Greek tragedy, but the purpose of the suffering and of the resolution is either particular to one man's situation and to a particular community or is vague, whereas the *deus ex machina* of the Judeo-Christian God claims to be a universal resolution to the universal tragedy of Adam's fall for any one who exercises faith unto repentance. In *Samson Agonistes*, the full Gospel of Christ has not yet been preached, but Manoa still speaks of Divine forgiveness if Samson will "be penitent and for thy fault contrite" (502-15), and Samson, when Harapha tells him his blindness and slavery are signs that God will no longer favor him, says that he has been punished "justly," but he does not "despair" of God's "final pardon" because His "ear is ever open; and his eye / Gracious to readmit the suppliant" (1156-73). Thus, Milton depicts a Sophoclean theology sublimated by Puritan Protestantism. Samson, says Whiting, is "a character, a pattern of life, and an attitude toward God that is essentially Protestant and Puritan" (33), and Tillyard adds that Samson is Protestant, in spite of the Old Testament setting, because he must accept "every shred of

responsibility” for his actions and their consequences (compare 206-10 with 373-80), and then “it is by that acceptance that he is regenerated” (86-87). In *Alcestis*, Euripides uses Heracles, the son of Zeus, as a *deus ex machina* to rescue Admetus's wife from Hades, but Milton believes that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, worked out the ultimate *deus ex machina* for the real life tragedy of man, and while the details about Jesus and His atonement were vague in Samson's time, Milton's Israel still sees the basic tenets of Christ's gospel—that God will be merciful to those who believe in Him and repent of their sins—as inherent to God's character.

God's character is the most potent cause of the different outcomes that Coriolanus and Samson experience in their dialectical conflicts with the social institutions of their respective communities. Both heroes are members of native and foreign general communities. Coriolanus encounters a Roman community and a Volscian community composed of realistic crowds of individuals who have diverse political values and interests. Samson encounters a similar crowd of Philistines, but he also interacts with his native people in the form of a chorus, and all of its members have identical political and spiritual values and interests. Samson is therefore able to achieve a more comprehensive and unified resolution of his conflict with his native community, while Coriolanus fails to navigate the political complexities he faces and is

rejected twice as a traitor. Both heroes fight particular officials, customs, and laws of the state, but only Coriolanus fights them in two different states. Aristocrats in both the Roman state and the Volscian state support his heroic values, but the common people of both states reject them as utterly antithetical to the democratic portions of their institutions, rights, and feelings. Samson, inspired by the concepts of individual liberty and equality that are rooted in his spiritual heritage, destroys the tyrannical Philistine state and provides Israel with an opportunity for self-governance. Both heroes fight the authority of the family institution, but Coriolanus has to submit to it as the supreme source and end of *virtus*, while Samson, though he gratefully honors the family and receives strength from Manoa, can choose to reject the family's demands when they conflict with God's commands, for God is the only source and supreme end of virtue. Finally, both heroes fight with the institution of religion, but Coriolanus encounters a complex of competing polytheistic institutions, such as Mars's war and Juno's marriage, while Samson encounters a monotheistic covenant. Coriolanus must appease the expectations of a multitude of gods who are a higher species of creatures than him, while Samson must submit only to the omnipotence of Abraham's God, in whose image he is created and who has established a perpetual covenant of mercy towards his people when they repent and behave in accord with the

absolute justice and love that make up His character. Coriolanus can never really say with Samson that nothing "hath befall'n me / But justly" (374-75), because the envious tribunes harnessed the power of an ignorant majority to bring about an exile he did not entirely deserve, and his gods, though they encourage men to do good and worship them, feel no obligation to intervene when puny mortals destroy themselves and each other through folly, while Samson's God, though infinite and eternal, has bound Himself to care for Abraham's posterity and to intervene in their fortunes when they exercise faith in Him alone, repent, and live in accord with the excellent justice inherent in His character, so that Samson, though he can't always see justice in God's actions, knows, or at least strives to believe (60-62), that God has and will always treat him justly. Samson also learns, through his encounters with Israel and Manoa, that he may yet hope for the fulfillment of all the promises and prophecies that have been made concerning him, or at least for a peaceful resolution of his suffering, even when blindness and slavery have made that hope seem impossible from the human perspective (577-605 and 705-09).

Coriolanus and Samson are very similar heroes, but they experience vastly different ends to their conflicts with communal institutions, because the former trusts too much in Mars while disregarding Juno, and she deals him a crushing defeat, while the latter receives personal

and communal revelation from Almighty God and is thereby roused to unforeseen victory (1381-1440).

Chapter IV

Catharsis of *Coriolanus* and *Samson Agonistes* Compared

Both *Coriolanus* and *Samson Agonistes* depict dialectical conflicts between the individualistic values of Herculean military heroes and the communal values of regular civilians, of the state, of the family, and of religion, but Shakespeare, following the forms and tastes of Elizabethan tragedy, portrays a realistic community of individual citizens with diverse interests speaking in natural dialogue, while Milton, imitating his Greek models, uses a chorus voicing general communal values in elevated poetic diction and punctuated by solo voices that express the interests of the particular social institutions. Milton believed that the Greek mode of representing communal values would raise and purge fear and pity from audiences better than the Elizabethan mode used in *Coriolanus* and would therefore give them greater moral growth, profit, and delight. Of course, this claim is hard to prove because every person's emotional experience of a tragedy is subjective and based on their particular character and attributes, but by comparing the emotional experiences the characters have in the denouements of the two poems, as well as the different effects the forms of the denouements are designed to produce, we can perhaps begin to understand what led Milton to make such a claim.

Samson Agonistes ends with five lengthy poetic odes sung by the Chorus and Manoa. These odes pass unified moral judgments on Samson's final choice to destroy the Philistines, draw didactic general conclusions from observations about the causes of the catastrophe, express emotions of awe, wonder, joy, fear, and pity, and they end with tranquil contemplation of the unexpected way in which Providence has fulfilled Samson's prophetic destiny. The Chorus does break into semi-choruses and Manoa is given a solo, but these breaks do not represent any conflict of opinion about the events of the play. They simply serve to distinguish the topic of each ode. *Coriolanus* ends with three short scenes that depict two different and divided communities reacting to Coriolanus's decision to spare Rome. The first two scenes depict Rome in a unified celebration of Coriolanus's defeat, but the tribunes, Menenius, the senate, Volumnia, Virgilia, Valeria, and the general populace do express subtle differences of opinion and feeling about it. The final scene switches to Volsce and dramatizes more conflict between Coriolanus and various members of the Volscian community, including Volscian lords, the populace, and a band of assassins led by Aufidius. This conflict ends with Coriolanus murdered and the Volscians in general mourning that a man of his valor ended so pitifully.

Already, without examining specific details of the character's emotions, this general outline of the denouements of *Coriolanus* and *Samson Agonistes* suggests at least two important contrasts in the cathartic experience the poems are likely to produce in audiences. First, Shakespeare imitates the complex socio-political interactions that always exist in a real body of people using language that approximates how people really speak, while Milton imitates a poetic convention that depicts the community as a monolithic voice uttering shared truths, lessons, and feelings in poetic language. Shakespeare is aiming at an illusion of naturalism, and each member of his audience is invited to judge the accuracy of the illusion based on personal experience, to reflect upon the meaning of the illusion based on that personal experience, and to find useful applications of the illusion to their personal experience. It is not, as Wilson points out, "Shakespeare's way to provide any such comment" as one finds in "the closing chorus of *Samson Agonistes*" (49). The audience gets to judge for themselves based on the facts. But Milton's Chorus sings to the audience, with all the power of poetry and rhetoric, of the cathartic experience they are having, which means the audience has only one emotional response to interact with and is aware that the response does not accord with an external reality. Instead, Milton has invited unity, or harmony, with the Chorus's internal reality, as in Nietzsche's

description of the Dionysian unity experienced by Greek audiences. Milton has forced a mediation of the reader's experience of the poem's climax. Readers must contemplate the final catastrophe through the medium of exalted poetry uttered from one emotional perspective.

Second, Shakespeare depicts the reactions of two different communities made up of divided political classes who express different opinions about Coriolanus's choice, while Milton presents a unified community reaction to Samson's final choice. In Rome, the tribunes are just relieved that they will no longer be punished by the populace's anger (V.iv.35-59), the populace sings choral shouts of joyful celebration at their personal safety (V.iv.45-57), Menenius celebrates the good fortune of Rome but feels angry that the stupidity of the tribunes brought down a noble man (V.iv.30-34 and 51-55), the Senators honor Volumnia and wish to forgive Coriolanus (V.v.1-6), and Volumnia, Virgilia, and Valeria march silently through the streets of Rome, suggesting that while they are glad at Rome's preservation, they are solemn and upset that the unjust stupidity and cowardice of their city has cost them a man they loved (V.iii.104-18 and V.v.1-6). Meanwhile, in Corioles, Aufidius and conspirators express anger and disgust with Coriolanus's decision to rob them of their conquest of Rome (V.vi.1-59), the Volscian lords express dissatisfaction with Coriolanus's treaty and plan to calmly try and punish him for any

wrongs he committed (V.vi.60-68, 110, and 123-27), the conspirators publically mock and murder Coriolanus (V.vi.85-130), the Corioler masses clamor hungrily for vengeance upon all the suffering Coriolanus's military exploits inflicted upon their families (V.vi.120-22), and the Lords and Aufidius finally express regret and mourning that a man of Coriolanus's *virtus* died ignobly stabbed in the back (V.vi.130-43), but their pity and indignation are tempered by the fact that Coriolanus was a foreigner who once killed their people (V.vi.144-45). While it is not possible to predict exactly what emotions audiences will experience when faced with such a varied and divided picture of the reactions in Coriolanus's two communities, it is safe to speculate that the experience will be as varied as the depicted reactions. In these final communal scenes, says Hibbard, "antithetical views of Coriolanus are put forward and left unreconciled . . . men are either for him or against him" (22), and the audience is left to weigh and judge all of the variables and then observe or choose their own reaction. According to Honigmann, character commentary alternates "so rapidly that the audience soon settles for the middle ground between them" (181), so that the audience may end in a version of the tempered moral judgment Milton describes in his preface to *Samson Agonistes*.

Milton depicts only one communal reaction to Samson's choice to destroy the Philistines, and this fact should guide interpretation of the poem. "As in Aeschylus and Sophocles," says Hardison, "the Chorus in *Samson Agonistes* is an intermediary between the character and the audience. It speaks for the spectators, drawing them into the action, giving voice to their motions, and formalizing their responses to the events they witness" (324). Claims that the Chorus speaks "Miltonic truth . . . in an authorial fashion" (Flannagan 787), overstate the case, for the Chorus, in Aristotelian fashion, is an independent character capable of expressing views that differ from the author's or from those expressed by other character's in the poem, but readings that claim Milton condemns Samson, Manoah, and the Chorus are also misguided, such as Derek Wood claiming that the main pathos of the poem is neither Samson's death nor his triumphal regeneration but "is the monstrous destructive act perpetrated on the Philistines, in tribal hostility and in ignorance of any higher bond uniting human being with human being in charity" (73). Milton makes it clear in his preface that he is imitating the Greeks in aiming at a specific type of catharsis, and the Chorus, Hardison points out, "objectifies the process of catharsis" (324) that Milton intends for his audience, which is clear from the Chorus's final description of having "calm of mind, all passion spent" (1758).

There is precedent in Milton's Greek models for sympathizing with enemies Greece defeated in war, such as Aeschylus's *The Persians* and several of Euripides's plays about the plight of Trojan women, but in all of these cases, the Chorus selected by the tragedian is composed of members of the defeated community, so that all cathartic pronouncements that wrap up the plays are expressed from that point of view. Nowhere does Milton express the Philistine view of Samson's final choice. One can assume, even without Dalila's and Harapha's arguments for Philistine opinion of Samson and God (843-70, 960-96, and 1178-91), that, had any Philistine aristocrats survived Samson's destruction of the theater, they would have found Samson's action reprehensible (1729), but Milton does not allow any such character to cast ambiguity upon the choral pronouncements. He could have had such a character survive because they were away from the theater at the moment, and then that character could enter, as Aegisthus suddenly enters for the first time at the end of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, during the final choral odes to provide an antithesis to the choral reaction. Milton could also have chosen a chorus of Philistine commoners for the play or some other group of non-Israelite commoners who survived the theater destruction, but no such antithesis exists in the play. The Chorus is allowed to mediate audience responses to Samson's choice without interruption, and all

ambiguity, if any, must be drawn from exceedingly subtle hints dropped throughout the poem, all of which suggests that while Milton may want us to contemplate and feel tragic disturbance at the violence of the play's catastrophe, the ultimate emotional response he is mediating is clearly similar to the Chorus's. Critics have always expressed conflicted emotional responses to the climax of *Samson Agonistes* and have sometimes outright opposed the Chorus's cathartic experience as bigoted and immoral, which may reflect a failure on Milton's part to successfully produce the catharsis he intended for his readers, but it may also reflect the fact that the catharsis is intended for readers who sympathize with Milton's political and religious views, while unbelievers must endure feelings of disgust and horror at the vision of retributive, apocalyptic salvation that the poem offers.

The fundamental difference between the way in which Shakespeare and Milton mediate the final emotional experiences of their denouements may be seen in their contrasting use of messengers. The final communal reactions in both poems are preceded by information from a messenger, but, again, Shakespeare's messenger imitates reality, while Milton's Messenger serves a dramatic function that follows Greek tragic convention. Shakespeare's messengers fulfill a real world function. Before telegraphs, telephones, and Internet, men riding quickly from place to place were employed by

governments to obtain intelligence about the course of important events. Shakespeare's first messenger, an agent of Sicinius, arrives to warn his master that Brutus has been seized and that the populace intends to execute him if Volumnia's mission fails (V.iv.35-39). This messenger does serve as a plot device because he gives the audience quick information about the ironic and satisfying retribution the tribunes are experiencing for their unjust treatment of Coriolanus. They manipulated the masses into threatening to execute Coriolanus in order to tear down his rising power, and now the tribunes find themselves targeted by the very type of dangerous insurrection Coriolanus warned them of when they started playing with the Hydra in the first place (III.i.90-99). But Shakespeare does not allow this slight jab at the tribunes to last long, which may lend some credence to Bloom's claim that the tribunes "are more right than not to banish" Coriolanus (578). The audience will enjoy seeing their hypocrisy censured, but the tribunes are not villains to be executed or heroes to be pitied, so, before Sicinius has time to react to his impending doom, Shakespeare introduces another messenger who announces that Volumnia, Virgilia, and Valeria have succeeded in persuading Coriolanus to spare Rome (V.iv.40-44). Again, this messenger serves the real world purpose of informing governors of events at which they could not be present. He also serves as a unifying plot device to

quickly explain how the people of Rome gained knowledge of their relief.

Milton's Messenger does partially fulfill the real world function of bearing intelligence of events at which others were not present, but he is primarily a plot device that fulfills several aims of Greek aesthetics, including mediation of cathartic experience. Shakespeare's messengers deliver very short pieces of information with which the audience is mostly already familiar, but which the characters could not learn in any other way. But Milton's Messenger tells the Chorus a long narrative of events (1596-1659) at which they could have been present, but, partly because Samson instructs them to remain behind (1413-15) and partly to maintain unity of time and place, they were not. The audience is also not permitted to directly witness the same events. Coriolanus's defeat by Virgilia and his violent death are directly and realistically depicted for audience observation, but Samson's destruction of the Philistines, following almost every extant Greek tragedy, takes place off stage and is then described in great poetic and rhetorical detail. Thus, the emotional experience of the violence is mediated and guided, for both the Chorus and the audience, through poetry. "A reader versed only in Shakespearean tragedy," says Lawry, and, one could add, modern audiences versed only in action dramas consisting primarily of CGI spectacles and of tension based almost

solely on uncertain outcomes of violence, "may find it surprising that classical tragedy manifests . . . a long ending, seemingly anticlimactic" in which "the hero leaves the stage when the play is only four-fifths run" and only "reports of his death manage to keep his action current on the stage" (392), but the Greek model does not necessarily reduce the potential emotional impact of a violent scene. In fact, the rhetoric with which the Messenger describes the violence may serve to heighten both the audience's and the Chorus's emotional reaction, since there is no question of bad acting or poor spectacle. Compare Coriolanus's death, which is covered by a realistic depiction of mob tumult and by brief stage directions that leave much to a director's capabilities and discretion (V.vi.129-33), with this figured language of Milton's Messenger:

This utter'd, straining all his nerves he bow'd;
 As with the force of winds and waters pent
 When Mountains tremble, those two massy Pillars
 With horrible convulsion to and fro
 He tugg'd, he shook, till down they came, and drew
 The whole roof after them with burst of thunder
 Upon the heads of all who sat beneath,
 Lords, Ladies, Captain, Counsellors, or Priests,
 Thir choice nobility and flower, not only

Of this but each Philistian City round

Met from all parts to solemnize this Feast. (1646-56)

A director would find it difficult to represent Samson's act of violence in such a way that the audience feels it resembles the most frightening acts of Nature's God, and the loud crashing sound, as realistic as it might be, would not really call to mind the thundering wrath of God. Audiences would judge the spectacle according to their real world experience, but they would not likely contemplate the spiritual and emotional content Milton achieves with his poetic imagery.

"The mistake," says Lawry, "is to suppose that in a play influenced by Aristotle, the hero alone would compose the substance of the drama." For Aristotle, tragedy is about a cathartic experience for both hero and Chorus, and probably primarily for the latter. "The final parts of the play," Lawry concludes, "like the resolution of Samson's individual agon, lead all its participants from doubt within the chaos of death to cathartic 'calm of mind, all passion spent'" (392). The final catharsis of the Chorus and of contemplative audiences who attend closely to their words is a direct reaction to the Messenger's poetic description, for the Chorus begins their poetic descriptions of their emotions and thoughts immediately after he concludes, and they continue without interruption to the end of the poem (1659-1758).

The first choral ode begins with grief and marveling at the Messenger's news. "O dearly bought revenge, yet glorious!" (1660). The Chorus pities Samson because he once could fight weaponless and naked against whole armies without receiving any injury but now has been reduced, because of vice, slavery, and blindness, to purchasing the death of his enemies at the expense of his own life. They also imagine the sweetness Samson would have felt in obtaining vengeance and marvel that he managed to achieve immense glory even in his crippled condition. The Messenger, who has not been privy to the contemplations of the Chorus and Manoa with Samson, sees the same event only as a "horrid spectacle" (1542) that he cannot unsee (1543-44), and he does not know how to interpret the tragedy, because the unmediated experience of violence has left him too "distract, to know well what I utter" (1556). He sees Samson's death and the destruction of a whole ruling class as cause for immense grief, because he does not share the Chorus's understanding of the meaning of Samson's action (1543-50), but, again and again, his expectations of lamentation from Manoa and from the Chorus are met with increasing joy (1551-95), until the Chorus concludes his narration with a very different immediate reaction than what he experienced and then proceeds to interpret the catastrophe for him and for the audience in choral odes that inject a spiritual peace into the physical violence.

The Romans are unable to arrive at a similar interpretation of Coriolanus's defeat because they are not informed of the spiritual meaning of his action. They are joyful that Volumnia has rescued them against all expectation, and they marvel at her feat, but they seem to have forgotten Coriolanus's tragedy altogether (V.iv.40-62 and V.v.1-7). The Senators speak of bringing him home, but they don't really mean it (V.v.4-5). They are merely trying to make silent Volumnia happy. They did not witness the meaning of Coriolanus's defeat or his situation among the Volscians, but she did, and she will not explain it to them, for she knows that her son is going to die an ignominious death among foreigners who hate him, that no Roman will witness the death or really care too much about it, that they are simply glad to be safely rid of him, and that they are not likely to feel much remorse that their own ingratitude and political hypocrisy unnecessarily provoked his folly. His death will be so pitiful and dishonorable that the Volscians who hate him will not be able to stand seeing him unmourned (V.vi.135-53). If a messenger had witnessed Coriolanus's reactions to Volumnia's crushing speech, his death, or even the mourning of the Volscians, and had known him well enough to understand the import of his choices, he could have reported the event to the Romans in such a way that the best of them might have felt the tragedy of his experience, and perhaps they would have celebrated his

fate with more mournful circumspection. Audiences do get to witness Coriolanus's choice before Volumnia and his death, but without poetic mediation and faced with the complex tangle of contradictory and sometimes absurd reactions Shakespeare depicts in both the citizens and in Coriolanus—what could be more ill-advised and ridiculous than his "relapse" into boasting of his military prowess to the Volscian families of the people he killed (V.vi.111-16) after the mature "self-sacrifice" and "self-knowledge" he arrived at during Volumnia's speech (Honigmann 188)—they may agree with Harold Wilson when he says, "The whole point of the play is that catastrophe for Rome is averted through the sacrifice of Coriolanus, by the sacrifice of his pride and by the heroic self-denial of his own will, as he chooses to spare Rome in the clear understanding of what the consequence of his choice is likely to be" (100), but they may also, like Harold Bloom, find Coriolanus stupid and reprehensible, and they may question whether "the aesthetic experience of tragedy" is even possible in a play "where there is no consolation, even if it is only the sharing of grief" (587).

Milton ensures that his Chorus shares consoling emotions and interpretations throughout the cathartic choral odes of *Samson Agonistes* in order to poetically guide the reader towards an aesthetic experience of Samson's tragedy. After the first choral ode opens with a comment on the glory of Samson's revenge, it continues celebrating

the Messenger's description of the destruction of the Philistines as a fulfillment of prophecy:

Living or dying thou hast fulfill'd
 The work for which thou wast foretold
 To Israel, and now li'st victorious
 Among thy slain self-kill'd
 Not willingly, but tangl'd in the fold
 Of dire necessity, whose law in death conjoin'd
 Thee with thy slaughter'd foes in number more
 Than all thy life had slain before. (1661-68)

The apostrophe of the ode suggests that the vivid imagery of the Messenger's poetic description has conjured Samson up before their very eyes. They speak to this apparition as if he still lives and can hear their praise, but they also speak to his fallen corpse, which they envision lying "victorious among thy slain." They then engage in some apologetics about the Messenger's and Manoah's initial description of Samson's action as "self-violence" (1582-86), claiming that he did not choose death but could not avoid it since it happened as an unintended result of his bringing the theater down on his enemies. In the words of the Messenger, "Samson with these immixt, inevitably / Pull'd down the same destruction on himself" (1657-58). Perhaps Samson may not have been certain that the rubble would kill him, for he had not

accurately gauged the limits of an invulnerability that withstood steel weapons and carried city gates over mountains (129-50), but he chose to act in faith on the rousing motions he had received earlier (1382) and decided the risk was outweighed by the undeniable opportunity to annihilate the whole of the oppressive Philistine government in a single act of his God-given strength. The Chorus's apologetics second Milton's direct claim in the argument of the poem that Samson's destruction of the Philistines was only "by accident" deadly "to himself" (551), which is strong evidence that Milton does intend the Chorus's feelings and opinions as mediation of his audience's judgments of the catastrophe. Hughes claims that Milton included the argument at the beginning of the poem because he "felt it necessary to explain that his death was not an act of despair—not suicide, as some biblical commentators had said" (545), and Milton makes sure that his dry authorial argument is reinforced by the poetic and rhetorical force of the choral ode that follows the Messenger's emotionally charged description of that death.

Coriolanus's death is not mediated by any similar emotional reactions of his community. The Romans do not witness his death, and they receive no description of it in the course of the play. The Volscians do witness his death, and they do make a few comments upon it, but these comments are brief and emotionally ambivalent, closer to Fortinbras's brief and uncertain honoring of a foreign warrior

who was "likely," based on report, "to prove most royal" than to Horatio's passionate prayer that the cracked, noble heart of his dear friend and "sweet prince" would be accompanied by "flights of angels" to "sing thee to thy rest" (*Hamlet* V.359-403), a scene that suggests Shakespeare did understand the potential power of mediating his audience's reactions to a hero's death through the poetic pronouncements of characters. The Volscians, unlike Fortinbras, do know that Coriolanus was a worthy warrior, so they feel that "valor will weep" at his assassination (V.vi.133), and they decree that he will be mourned as "the most noble corse that ever herald / Did follow to his urn" (V.vi.141-44), but sincere, spontaneous grief requires no decree, and they readily excuse the assassin's action as partially justified by Coriolanus's "own impatience" (V.vi.144) and by the fact that he had "widowed and unchilded" many of the Volscians (V.vi.151) and then had boasted of that deed to their faces just before they killed him. Their emotions rise more out of simple decency and duty to the undeniable merits of the soldier than out of any deep affection. Though his corpse lies physically before the Volscians, they do not, like Horatio or like Milton's Chorus, apostrophize the man as if present. They describe the corpse and the dead man with the impersonal third person pronoun "him," because people speak or pray to the dead as if present only when they feel intense affection for or emotion about

them and hopefully imagine that the dead may really be present in spirit. Horatio has the corpse of Hamlet before him, so he may fancy that Hamlet's ascending spirit is still near enough to hear his prayer, while the vivid imagery of Milton's Messenger brings Samson's corpse into the Chorus's mind, and they address their friend one last time and commend him for the victory they recently hoped and prayed for with him (1413-40).

Milton's second cathartic choral ode expresses fear and pity for the fate of the Philistines, and identifies their suffering with the common lot of all human beings, but it does not impugn God's justice in punishing them for their idolatry.

While thir hearts were jocund and sublime,
 Drunk with Idolatry, drunk with Wine,
 And fat regorg'd of Bulls and Goats,
 Chanting thir Idol, and preferring
 Before our living Dread who dwell
 In Silo his bright Sanctuary:
 Among them hee a spirit of frenzy sent,
 Who hurt thir minds,
 And urg'd them on with mad desire
 To call in haste for thir destroyer;
 They only set on sport and play

Unwittingly importun'd
 Thir own destruction to come speedy upon them.
 So fond are mortal men
 Fall'n into wrath divine,
 As thir own ruin on themselves to invite,
 Insensate left, or to sense reprobate,
 And with blindness internal struck. (1669-86)

The imagery of the Philistine crowd conjured by the Messenger's rhetoric has been no less vivid for the Chorus than was the description of Samson's feat. The Chorus's description is a disgusting and repellant satire of the reveling Philistines. They are drunk on wine, but also on idolatry, which suggests that idolatry has an intoxicating power on feelings and behavior. This intoxication is not physiological. It is spiritual. The idol, like Euripides's Dionysus, distorts perception of physical and spiritual reality and weakens spiritual inhibitions about one's life and standing before the god. Also, the physical and spiritual intoxication of the Philistines has both exacerbated and been exacerbated by their extreme gluttony. They are drunk on wine and on fat, and they have "regorged" (1671) the fat, a strange verb that suggests that they have burped or vomited the fat they have eaten back up and either dribbled it on their fronts or greedily reswallowed it. Their fat bodies have fattened further through consumption of large

amounts of fat, and they don't care about their sloppy filthiness because they are drunk and lost in "sport and play" (1679). Confronted with this imagery, the Chorus speaks of God as their "living Dread" (1673). The contrast between God's noble champion and Dagon's disgusting idolaters has inspired the Chorus with that awesome fear that comes only from consciousness of God's infinite holiness, of the Holy of Holies found in "Silo his bright sanctuary" (1674).

God has answered the Philistine prayer for intense intoxication by sending them "a spirit of frenzy" (1675), and this begins a parallel with Samson that subtly invites readers to sympathize and identify with the idolaters even as it also invites them to acknowledge the justice of their destruction. Earlier in the poem, the Chorus celebrated the abstinence from alcohol required by Samson's Nazarite vows. Though they themselves find wine and "all delicious drinks" to be a beautiful "dancing Ruby . . . that cheers the heart of Gods and men" (541-45), they admire Samson for drinking only the clean waters of "the cool Crystalline stream" and admit that their belief in the benefits of alcohol is an unjustified "madness" because God required his "mighty Champion" to abstain, and he is "strong above compare" (553-56). Samson then rejects the choral praise because he allowed himself to be intoxicated by the idolatrous sexual charms of Dalila

(558-59), an intoxication that inflicted upon him "a blindness worse than" the physical loss of his eyes because it "saw not how degenerately" he served Dalila (402-19). Samson's absurd behavior in telling Dalila the true secret of his strength, even after she had already failed three tests of her loyalty on that very issue, may thus be accounted for by the extreme intoxication and "blindness internal" with which God "struck" (1686) him for regorging himself of her sexual charms. The parallel with the Chorus's poetic imagery of the Philistine frenzy is clear. The Philistines chose the charm of Dagon's wild revels over the commands of the true God, and their minds were damaged by that choice, so that they irrationally chose to invite Samson, even though they knew his dangerous, supernatural strength had returned (1313-15), to join them in their theater. The Chorus, seeing the parallel with Samson, formulates an aphoristic general law from the Philistine's self-destruction, stating that all "mortal men" (1682), Israelite or Gentile, should beware of the insensibility and spiritual blindness that God, in His "wrath" (1683), inflicts upon those who intoxicate themselves with idolatrous pleasures that He has forbidden, for they will have no one to blame for their destruction but themselves, and only the prophesied elect, if they repent of their idolatrous desires, acknowledge the true God and accept full responsibility for their sufferings (375-76), can hope to be restored to

their senses and blessed with Divine fulfillment of their potential. Critics who doubt Milton would approve the Chorus's aphorism, who doubt that he would teach the idea that some men are specially elected to salvation through their faith, and who doubt he would deem it just that God punished idolaters with spiritual blindness and self destruction would do well to review Milton's teaching on predestination in his *Christian Doctrine* (Hughes 916-32)³.

As already noted above, Wilson observes that it is not "Shakespeare's way to provide any such comment" as one finds in "the closing chorus of *Samson Agonistes* (49). Nowhere in the final scenes of *Coriolanus* does Shakespeare formulate an aphoristic truth from what he has depicted throughout the play. These sorts of aphorisms frequently appear in the final choral odes of Milton's Greek models, but Shakespeare does not have clear cut didactic aims for his tragedies, while Milton explicitly claims that the ancient form of tragedy is the "moralest and most profitable" of all poetic genres. While Milton's use of the monolithic Chorus appeared in the previous section of this dissertation to stem from his love for Greek equality and democratic liberty, it is Shakespeare who takes a laissez-faire approach to the

³ The chapter on predestination ends with a particularly relevant passage about those who fail to make "the proper distinction between the punishment of hardening the heart and the decree of reprobation . . . for such do in effect impugn the justice of God, however vehemently they may disclaim the intention; and might justly be reprov'd in the words of the heathen Homer: 'they perish'd self-destroy'd / By their own fault.'" (931)

emotional and moral judgments of his audience. He trusts his audience to draw their own conclusions because the fidelity of his descriptions to nature guarantees that an infinite number of potential truths are contained in them, while Milton appears to be an authoritarian wishing to control his audience's reactions. This paradox may be a result of the different forms of government that produced the Elizabethan and Greek forms of tragedy. Shakespeare feels free to permit anarchy in the theater because the populace is politically under control, while the extreme political liberty of the Greeks and of Milton's ideal republic calls for a self-governing populace who has been taught in the theater how to temperately and harmoniously resolve the internal and external conflicts that inevitably arise between their heroic and communal values.

Milton's third cathartic choral ode seeks to mediate the reader's response to Samson's victory by contrasting its causes with the causes of the Philistine's destruction and by attributing it to powers so unexpected and incomprehensible that men must couch them in myth, especially the miraculous power of God's regenerative spiritual blessings:

But he though blind of sight,
Despis'd and thought extinghish't quite,
With inward eyes illuminated

His fiery virtue rous'd
 From under ashes into sudden flame,
 And as an ev'ning Dragon came,
 Assailant on the perched roosts,
 And nests in order rang'd
 Of tame villatic Fowl; but as an Eagle
 His cloudless thunder bolted on thir heads.
 So virtue giv'n for lost,
 Deprest, and overthrown, as seem'd,
 Like that self-begotten bird
 In the Arabian woods embost,
 That no second knows nor third,
 And lay erewhile a Holocaust,
 From out her ashy womb not teem'd,
 Revives, reflourishes, then vigorous most
 When most unactive deem'd,
 And though her body die, her fame survives,
 A secular bird ages of lives. (1687-1707)

As in all the choral odes but the second, Milton here adds a musical quality through the sorts of end rhymes he eschewed with contempt in *Paradise Lost*—sight/quite, flame/came, lost/embost/Holocaust/most, bird/third, seem'd/teem'd/deem'd, survives/lives—though not all the

lines rhyme, and the rhyme scheme, like the meter, is irregular, so that Milton has still allowed himself the "ancient liberty . . . from the troublesome and modern bondage of Riming" (210). A few of the rhymes—sight/quite and bird/third—have the forced quality of being added for rhyme's sake, calling to mind Milton's claim that rhyme forces authors in "vexation, hindrance, and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse than else they would have exprest them" (210). As Milton notes, complimenting in the preface to *Paradise Lost* the same poets he censures in the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, "our best English Tragedies" have "rejected Rime," and so *Coriolanus*, in contrast to *Samson Agonistes*, depicts its final scenes in conversational diction without any attempt to persuade or evoke emotion through "the jingling sound of like endings which is only appreciated by "vulgar Readers" (210). Perhaps Milton included rhymes in his choral odes as an approximate imitation in a closet drama of the actual music to which ancient choral odes may have been sung.

The third choral ode opens by contrasting the "blindness internal" (1687) that the Chorus attributed to the Dagon worshippers in the second ode (1686) with Samson's "inward eyes illuminated" (1689). Throughout the poem, Samson's physical blindness has been a bar in the minds of Samson (41), Manoa (366), and the Chorus (151-

63) to the possibility of Samson fulfilling his prophetic mission. Even when they speak of God forgiving him and allowing him to complete his mission, they always assume God will have to miraculously restore Samson's sight (584 and 1526-30). Now, in the third choral ode, the Chorus understands that God can bring about His will in subtle ways and make the very things in which man appears to himself to be weak into his greatest strengths. Just as Samson's blindness gave him power to resist Dalila's visual charms, his blindness gave the Philistine Lords confidence to invite him into their crowded theater, for they "Despis'd" (1688) his strength because of his blindness and "thought" his "fiery virtue" "extinguish't quite" (1688-90). But the Philistines learned to their horror, and the Chorus has now learned to their joy, that "virtue" is not a matter of physical ability but of spiritual insight. His physical strength returned a while ago with his hair, but the spiritual strength to use it in God's service only returned with the repentance he arrived at through the discussions depicted earlier in the poem. The use of the word "rous'd" here (1690) recalls the "rousing motions" (1382) Samson claimed to receive from God just before he left for the theater of Dagon. Thus, while Joseph Wittreich argues that the divine sanction of those rousing motions is uncertain, the Chorus is very certain that God has acted through Samson to destroy the Philistines, and they are mediating for the reader a final

response to the problem of Samson's physical and spiritual blindness that has been presented throughout the play.

Samson's physical strength is not the only supernatural phenomenon that must be accounted for in the poem. The Chorus marvels at "his fiery virtue rous'd" after their certainty that it had been "extinguish't quite" (1688-90). The Chorus uses three similes to express the miraculous and mythic quality they feel is on display in the spiritual regeneration Samson experienced. At the beginning of the play, Samson's physical condition gave the Chorus the impression of "one past hope, abandon'd, / And by himself given over" (120-21), but now the Messenger's poetic description of Samson's final words and actions has given them an impression of Samson's inner virtue being like a Dragon, an Eagle, and a Phoenix. His last feat may not have the external visual splendor with which the Chorus envisioned his battles (126-45), for it consisted of a few brief, albeit mighty, shakes of two pillars, but the internal splendor of his final feat can only be figured in mythic symbols. The Dragon is a predator that sneaks up and swoops in unexpectedly upon "tame villatic Fowl" (1695). Samson's physical blindness served him as camouflage since it made the Philistines in their spiritual blindness assume there was no danger in allowing Samson into the theater. The Eagle is the bird of Zeus, the supreme God of the gods. Zeus is also the God of thunder and lightning, and

the speed of lightning is an apt simile for the suddenness with which God "bolted" the roof on the Philistine's "heads" (1695-96). The Phoenix is a symbol of unexpected resurrection. It dies in "a Holocaust" of flames (1702). It is considered "most unactive" because its body has been destroyed (1705), so there is nothing into which the spirit may return. Yet, against all expectation, "From out her ashy womb" the Phoenix "Revives, reflourishes," though there was no sign the womb had been "teem'd" to cause such a birth (1703-04).

The symbolic power of the third choral ode accords with the most sanguine regenerationist interpretations of *Samson Agonistes*, for the Chorus mediates through it a catharsis of regeneration for the modern reader. This symbolism led T.S.K. Scott-Craig to claim, "Samson Agonistes is really Christus Agonistes" and is entirely "typological" (46-47). The phoenix simile, says Hardison, supports the "commonplace typological reading of Samson as a foreshadowing of Christ" and is an "affirmation of the justice of history" (326). Like Samson, we moderns are filled with fear and doubt by the consequences of our sins, and we seek pity for our suffering, but if we accept, as did Samson, sole responsibility for our sins and begin to believe again in His miraculous power, what we now deem a salvational myth may yet become a reality. As in St. John's *Apocalypse*, *Samson Agonistes* depicts the power of God as coming

upon blind idolaters like a thief in the night and as bringing about a glorious resurrection long after men, even the elect, have assumed that death is final and God's prophecy will not and cannot be fulfilled.

Shakespeare, with his more moderate pretensions, does not climax *Coriolanus* with similar odes of poetic prophecy, but Menenius, just before the messengers enter to inform the tribunes that Coriolanus has relented, utters a curiously similar set of similes about the spirit of Coriolanus's impending vengeance. "This Martius is grown from man to dragon" he says, because he now "has wings, he's more than a creeping thing" (V.iv.13-14). Just as Samson has moved from helpless cripple to God-empowered destroyer, Coriolanus has become more than a mere man. He is a destroying dragon, an "engine" of war (V.iv.19), a living weapon "able to pierce a corslet with his eye" (V.iv.20-21), "a thing made for Alexander" (V.iv.22), "a male tiger" (V.iv.28), and practically a god, lacking only "eternity and a heaven to throne in" (V.iv.24). While Milton's similes resemble Shakespeare's as an attempt to amplify the spiritual power of his Herculean hero and to mediate a typological catharsis for his readers in the third choral ode, Shakespeare's similes differ because they are full of comedic irony. Menenius is using hyperbole to fill Sicinius with despair. Rome cannot hope for victory or for mercy, because Coriolanus is a fierce monster with unstoppable power. The exaggeration is born partly out of

Menenius's hurt feelings. He felt sure Coriolanus loved him enough to relent when he asked, but even he was rejected (V.iv.16-17), so neither can Volumnia hope to move him. But the real joke here is that the audience already knows Volumnia has succeeded and that Coriolanus has relented. The similes are empty of any real meaning or potential power for the audience because they know Menenius has inaccurately exaggerated Coriolanus's lack of mercy. His attempted conquest of Rome has ended not in mythic, monstrous destruction, Alexandrian conquest, and godly rule, but with the whimper of a boy scolded by his mother, or, if one prefers Van Dyke's more sympathetic description of Coriolanus—and Shakespeare has left the matter up to one's unmediated preference—with an appeal to Volumnia for "emotional support" that is "an admission to his common humanity" (307). Good actors will increase the comic effect of the scene by exaggerating Menenius's dismissive certainty and Sicinius's terror, and audiences will laugh and enjoy themselves, but this is exactly the type of scene Milton deplors as "an error of intermixing Comic stuff with Tragic sadness and gravity" (550).

Immediately after the tragic intensity of Samson crushing himself and thousands of Philistines, Milton attempts to get his readers to share in the Chorus's interpretation of that event as a religious catharsis of fear and pity, but immediately after the tragic intensity of

Volumnia cruelly defeating Coriolanus, Shakespeare attempts to get his audience laughing. Milton argues that Shakespeare therefore fails to achieve the sublime effects of catharsis, but Shakespeare may have his own ideas about how to purge fear and pity. The audience has just watched a man of Coriolanus's *virtus* subject himself utterly, in front of his nemesis, to Volumnia's harsh rebukes. Coriolanus experiences nothing but bitter irony, mortifying humiliation, complete failure, zero vindication, and not a shred of human compassion. The horrible pain of the scene is relentless. For Coriolanus, unlike Samson, there is no regeneration, no *deus ex machina*, and not even the smallest victory. Once Shakespeare has left his audience overcharged with such emotions, what type of purging is available to them? Finding some way to let Coriolanus off the hook would be cheating and would fall short of the stark realism that governs Shakespeare's aesthetics. So, he provides comic relief. Bitter irony is replaced with comedic irony. Sicinius and Menenius make fools of themselves, and the foolishness is amplified by the audience's knowledge that Coriolanus has already behaved contrary to their anxious expectations. Rome then celebrates, and the audience is presented with Coriolanus's pitiful death. If that death had been presented without the mediation of the intervening scenes, it would have been very awful to bear. But comedy and celebration has changed the mood. The audience realizes that

Coriolanus having to swallow his pride is a far less terrible tragedy than the results of his vengeful destruction of Roman men, women, and children would have been. Coriolanus's death is sobering and is a cause for solemn contemplation, but it is not overcharged with unbearable pathos. In fact, his relapse into defending his manliness to Aufidius and his absurdly ill-advised boasting to the Corioles that he single-handedly killed their loved ones detracts even more from the spectator's sorrow. Coriolanus's audacity in the scene is almost comic, and he sort of gets what he has coming to him. The audience is likely to end with a feeling similar to the tempered regret of the Volscians in the final funeral procession.

The final scenes of *Coriolanus* are an example of what Pollard calls Shakespeare's "metatheatricality," wherein Shakespeare mediates audience responses by implicitly inviting their participation in the action (69). The audience knows very well that they are privy to information about which Menenius and Sicinius are ignorant, and this allows the audience to feel like insiders with Shakespeare. He winks at them, and, if they are astute, they catch the wink and remember that, after all, this is only a play. Also, if the audience did not join the gods in laughing at Coriolanus before, they will laugh now and realize the ironic identity. Adelman observes that the gods are "the only spectators that Coriolanus allows himself to notice," and that those

gods "look down on this unnatural scene and laugh" because they are "so far removed from men that they find this human tragedy a comedy" (332). The audience is made up of mere mortals, but when Coriolanus states that the gods are laughing at the unnatural scene of Volumnia bowing and scolding him, the actor playing him could just as easily, without compromising the text in any way, stare out at the audience as at the sky. The audience would then become aware that they are the laughing gods, and if they still don't get the joke during the intensity of the scene itself, Shakespeare helps them get it in the ensuing scene by providing obvious comic relief. The audience then assumes a station above and outside of the tragedy, which allows them, after experiencing the fear and pity of the climactic scene, to begin coolly reflecting upon and learning from it. Thus, Shakespeare may not use a Greek Chorus to mediate audience catharsis, but that does not mean he neglects such mediation altogether. He just integrates the mediation with his plot structures and poetic images. This technique is subtler than Milton's Chorus and allows the audience a more flexible experience of learning and interpretation.

Milton's fourth choral ode is a lengthy solo by Manoa. Volumnia does not speak again after her final exchange with Coriolanus, leaving the audience to guess at the reasons for her silence, but Manoa expresses just under forty percent of the final lines of *Samson*

Agonistes after the messenger describes the catastrophe. His ode is less musical than the other odes, and it claims to narrate Samson's funeral and burial, but it still serves a mediative function, like the other choral odes, rather than serving as an addition to the dramatic imitation by an individual character. Manoa begins by mediating someone's response to the death:

Come, come, no time for lamentation now,
 Nor much more cause: Samson hath quit himself
 Like Samson, and heroically hath finish'd
 A life Heroic, on his Enemies
 Fully reveng'd hath left them years of mourning,
 And lamentation to the Sons of Caphtor
 Through all Philistian bounds. (1708-14)

It is not clear whom Manoa is addressing. The Chorus has just been celebrating the phoenix-like regeneration of Samson's spiritual virtue, so an attempt to stop them from lamenting seems out of place. Manoa could be addressing the Messenger, for he was last seen in a state of lamentation and horror before he related the details of the catastrophe (1541-1659), but the Messenger is not mentioned in the speech. The mostly likely solution to this problem is that Manoa is addressing the reader. The Chorus is very specifically mediating the audience's response to the catastrophe. They are singing to the audience to sync

or harmonize the audience's catharsis with their own, and Manoa's speech, couched between the final choral odes, is really a solo by the Chorus Leader, by the chief of Samson's Danite kin, and it serves a similar function of mediating the reader's catharsis.

The next two sentences of Manoa's ode mediate the emotional reactions of Samson's community, family, and religion:

To Israel

Honor hath left, and freedom, let but them
Find Courage to lay hold on this occasion;
To himself and Father's house eternal fame;
And which is best and happiest yet, all this
With God not parted from him, as was fear'd,
But favoring and assisting to the end.

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair

And what may quiet us in a death so noble. (1714-24)

These lines act as an explicit value judgment on and resolution of the central dialectical conflicts of the play. Earlier, both the Chorus and Manoa complained that God had given them a disappointing Deliverer. The community complained that Samson's pursuit of "intimate impulse" in marrying Philistine women had not led to their deliverance,

but, instead, "Israel still serves with all his Sons" (240). Samson responded by blaming the passivity of Israel's government for not helping him fight the Philistines while he was still healthy. Then, Manoa complained that the son who angels proclaimed would save him and his people had turned out to be a total disgrace (358-72 and 444-47). Manoa's sentiments in his final ode directly resolve these earlier complaints against God. God, it turns out, was helping them and his Champion all along, which is the "happiest" fact of all (1718). If Israel will now act, they are completely delivered as promised (1714-16), and Manoa's house has won the "eternal fame" (1717) prophecy had led him to anticipate. The directness of Manoa's allusion to earlier complaints of the poem is more evidence that Milton is using the final choral section to resolve the central conflicts of the play. All questions about the divine disposition are neatly resolved for every character and for every social institution, with the exception of the Philistine state, represented earlier by the questions of Dalila and Harapha, though those questions have been met with destructive repudiation. Manoa makes it clear that the appropriate emotional reaction to all of these resolutions is joy.

In contrast to Manoa's complete resolution of Samson's tragedy, Volumnia's silence and the Volscian regrets express dissatisfaction with Coriolanus's final fate. Rome triumphs loudly, but Volumnia has paid a

bitter price for that celebration. She marches into Rome, and they give her a triumphal entry and attempt to appease her by paying lip service to ending Coriolanus's exile, but she does not thank any one for their gratitude, join in the shouts and celebrations, or give any speech, either of joy or anger, on her supposed victory (V.v.1-6). She has nothing to say because her emotions cannot be resolved through words. Earlier, she described her grief to Coriolanus as a most bitter and unresolvable tragic paradox. She is "more unfortunate than all living women" because she lived to see the son she raised to be an exemplar of Roman *virtus* "tearing / His country's bowels out," and there is no possibility of a happy ending for her because "we must lose / The country, our dear nurse, or else thy person, / Our comfort in the country," and "either thou / Must as a foreign recreant be led / With manacles through our streets, or else / Triumphantly tread on thy country's ruin" (V.iii.94-124). She has even been denied the last comfort of the afflicted, prayer, because she cannot hope for any of the possible answers the gods might grant (V.iii.103-09). She ultimately makes her choice for the state (V.iii.118-24) instead of for the family, but she receives no resolution for the other half of her conflict. Her beloved son dies shamefully in a foreign land because of the ungrateful hypocrisy of the tribunes and the stupidity of the Roman masses. When the Volscians decree Coriolanus an honorable

burial and mourning, they do so because deep down inside they cannot endure the nihilism of his ending, and they pity him because he received no just recompense before his death. They don't love him, and they do acknowledge that his own folly brought upon him his end, but his *virtus* is undeniable, so they just have to "make the best of it" and offer what little resolution they can (V.vi.146) to the human aspects of Coriolanus's tragedy that transcend identity as Roman or Volscian.

Manoa pictures far different funeral rites for Samson. He closes his choral ode with plans for Samson's funeral procession and burial monument:

Let us go find the body where it lies
 Soaked in his enemies' blood, and from the stream
 With lavers pure and cleansing herbs wash off
 The clotted gore. I with what speed the while
 (Gaza is not in plight to say us nay)
 Will send for all my kindred, all my friends
 To fetch him hence and solemnly attend,
 With silent obsequy and funeral train
 Home to his father's house: there will I build him
 A monument, and plant it round with shade
 Of laurel ever green, and branching palm,

With all his trophies hung, and acts enrolled
In copious legend, or sweet lyric song.
Thither shall all the valiant youth resort,
And from his memory inflame their breasts
To matchless valor, and adventures high;
The virgins also shall on feastful days
Visit his tomb with flowers, only bewailing
His lot unfortunate in nuptial choice,
From whence captivity and loss of eyes. (1725-44)

Mediation is a primary function of funerary monuments. Monuments are a form of propaganda that dictates and interprets the story of the dead for future generations. Thus, according to Weber, Manoa's monument "possesses a powerfully tutorial function, meant to enforce strict ideological lessons" (94). Manoa does not merely wish to grieve his son's death or to celebrate his life. He also does not necessarily wish to have his son's character remembered with rigorous accuracy and objectivity. He wants future generations to learn and accept his ideas about heroism and morality from Samson's example. He longs for Samson's tragedy to have a lasting legacy and an ideological influence over family, friends, foreigners, and foes. He wants his monument to create a new narrative for Samson's life. While Samson lived, Samson, the Chorus, and Manoa all celebrated his superhuman

military exploits, but they also saw his revelation of God's secrets to Dalila and his subsequent blinding as failures that eliminated all hope that he would fulfill his role as prophesied deliverer. The Philistine characters saw him not as a fallen hero, but as a punished villain. Dalila says posterity will remember her as the deliverer of her people from "a fierce destroyer" (985), and Harapha sees Samson's military exploits as the acts of "a murderer, a revolter, and a robber" (1180). While these various characterizations and interpretations competed to be the dominant narrative about Samson during his life, Manoa, now that Samson is dead, wants his monument to be the final word on what Samson's life really meant. The monument will testify to Jew and Gentile that Samson was neither a failure nor a murderer, but that he was the chosen liberator of God's people. Samson's unwise "nuptial choice" (1743), the monument will say, did not prevent God from using his strength to deliver Israel, and the mass killing of the whole Philistine upper class was heroic and divine. As Anderson puts it, Manoa "wants to aestheticize Samson, covering over the ugly result of violence with vegetation and marble" (218). Manoa's monument is an example of how victors get to write history. Death is defeat, and the living tell the story of the dead, partly through funerary monuments. Milton's detailed ekphrasis of Manoa's monument allows the audience to participate in the mediation Manoa is seeking to establish.

Coriolanus does not receive a similar monument. He does receive a procession, but it is not made up of loved ones, as is Samson's, which will be composed, says Manoa, of "all my kindred, all my friends" (1730). It is made up of people he "widowed and unchilded" (V.vi.151), of his nemesis Aufidius (V.vi.148), and of men who honor him only for his military prowess but bear him no love and feel no gratitude for what he did. He will receive a simple "urn" (V.vi.143) followed by a herald and a "noble memory" (V.vi.153). Again, as argued above, Shakespeare is providing a meager consolation prize for the unrelieved pity and fear of Coriolanus's failure and death. The effect, as in *King Lear* and other of the later tragedies, is nihilistic rather than cathartic. Fear and pity are not purged. Rather, the grounds for them are emphasized. The audience feels more complete comprehension of man's tragic plight. Rome celebrates, but those brief choral shouts—"Welcome, ladies, welcome!" (V.v.6)—are shallow and are not given the final word. The audience, in the end, is left with the sober mourning and reflections of the Volscians. They hate Coriolanus, and they are reasonably sure their hatred is justified, but they can't help but acknowledge that his end is terrible, and that there is some unresolvable injustice mixed in with it, an injustice all humans experience, but that we become aware of only when tragedy forces us to confront it.

Milton's final choral ode recalls the theory of catharsis put forward in his preface, which again strongly indicates his intent to use the Chorus to mediate a cathartic, healing response in the reader.

All is best, though we oft doubt,
 What th' unsearchable dispose
 Of highest wisdom brings about,
 And ever best found in the close.
 Oft he seems to hide his face,
 But unexpectedly returns
 And to his faithful Champion hath in place
 Bore witness gloriously; whence Gaza mourns
 And all that band them to resist
 His uncontrollable intent;
 His servants he with new acquist
 Of true experience from this great event
 With peace consolation hath dismiss,
 And calm of mind, all passion spent. (1745-58)

According to Hughes, the opening sentence of the ode is almost a direct translation, "virtually identical in every case," of the final choral odes in Euripides's *Alcestis*, *Andromache*, *Bacchae*, *Helen*, and *Medea* (545; cf. his note on 593). Milton is calling at the end of his poem, just as he did in the preface, for direct comparison with his Greek models,

especially these plays of Euripides. These lines offer a final judgment on the events of the tragedy, and, as in Euripides, they universalize the conclusion of that judgment and apply that conclusion to all human suffering. The workings of God and of fate may appear at times to be terrible and unjust, but, in the end, they turn out to be full of transcendent wisdom and unexpected resolutions of suffering and conflict. But there are, in the comparisons, some disturbing ambivalences to be dealt with. The Choruses in the five Euripidean plays referenced do not always describe an unequivocally good conclusion to the tragedies they judge, as in the case of *Medea* and *Bacchae*, for characters near the end of both of those plays complain of unforeseen and unrelieved horrors—Jason laments Medea's murder of her children by him because of his infidelity and abandonment of her, and Agave accuses Dionysus's vengeance of unjust severity because she is exiled after ripping her own son's head off while in a Dionysian frenzy—so the Choral pronouncements at the end of those plays remain full of fear and pity at the suffering humans experience from the mysterious doings of the gods. On the other hand, the Chorus in *Alcestis* comments on the unforeseen joy Admetus experiences when Heracles returns his wife from Hades, the Chorus in *Helen* comments on the highly unlikely and unexpected divine preservation and rescue of Helen's chastity and life from the threats of

Paris in Troy and Theoclymenus in Egypt, and the Chorus in *Andromache* comments on how Thetis rescues Andromache and her son from the persecutions of Hermione by having Orestes carry off Hermione and having Peleus protect her and his great grandson, which somewhat softens the otherwise unresolvable horror of Andromache's slavery. While the negative examples do lend some credence to the claims of critics who read ambivalence into the final destruction of *Samson Agonistes*, it is important to remember that Milton wants comparison not only with these five plays of Euripides, but with all the Greek tragedies, including the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, that several Euripidean plays, including some in this group of five and others, are positively resolved, that Milton would have known that the Euripidean plays mentioned may have been parts of trilogies that probably would have resolved positively, as happens in the trilogies that have survived in their entirety or in substantial portions, and that Milton is injecting his own theological beliefs into the Greek models, which suggests a different type of resolution than what Euripides was aiming at in his assessments and critiques of polytheism.

Besides, in interpreting Milton's final choral ode, the comparison with Euripides plays only a partial role. The opening sentence may be Euripidean, but since Euripides applied the idea of unexpected and mysterious disposition by the gods in various ways, the sentiments

Milton has the Chorus express in the final sentence of the ode is a stronger guide to how the unexpected act of God should be interpreted. That final sentence does take note of Gaza's mourning, which recalls the Chorus's comparison in the third choral ode between Gaza's blindness and destruction with Samson's blindness and suffering, but this compassion, observes Hughes, does end up "submerged in the final tribute . . . to Highest Wisdom" (545). The Chorus believes that they have acquired new, cathartic experience through the Divine's disposition of the "great event" (1756), and they ultimately feel a new sense of peace and consolation about what has taken place. They remain in fear of their Living Dread (1673), because they see what he did to the Philistines, and they know He will do the same to them if they return to their own versions of idolatrous practices, but they also know He is merciful to those who suffer under his wrath when they repent, and that He guides the affairs of men in subtle ways that unexpectedly fulfill all of the promises and prophecies He has revealed. This gives the Chorus "calm of mind, all passion spent," an obvious reference to the catharsis promised in Milton's preface, though it should be observed that the Chorus claims all passion has been eliminated, while Milton promises his readers only that the passions will be purged so as to "temper and reduce them to just measure" (549).

Thus, while there is room for some ambivalence in Miltonic tragedy, for tragic paradox and dialectic cannot be thoroughly resolved, at least not from a purely human perspective, interpretation and experience of the tragic catharsis must be guided by the emotions expressed in the final choral scenes of the poem, for these are the final emotions Milton intends to imitate, induce, and purge in his readers. Comparison with the emotions expressed in Milton's Greek models helps to provide clarity, for even in the aforementioned Euripidean plays, a celebrating chorus is depicted when fate has brought about an unexpected happy ending, whereas a horrified or solemn chorus is depicted in the opposite cases. Milton clearly depicts a celebrating Chorus. The first choral ode defends Samson's self-slaughter and proclaims that Samson fulfilled the prophetic liberation of Israel that he and the Chorus once despaired about. The second choral ode sympathizes with the Philistines because all men, including Samson and Israel, have sinned against God, but it ultimately makes their destruction an object lesson about the need for humble repentance. In no way does it impugn the justice of God. The third choral ode celebrates Samson's spiritual regeneration under the figures of the dragon, the eagle, and the phoenix. The fourth ode features Manoa celebrating Samson as a hero, acknowledging the satisfactory resolution of the conflicts that the community and the

family felt against Samson and God, and describing a glorious monument to Samson's legacy. The final choral ode has the Chorus progress to a higher synthesis of understanding until, in the final line, they express the peace which passes understanding, a catharsis of all dialectical tension, "calm of mind, all passion spent" (1757-58).

Comparison with the ending of *Coriolanus* can also help readers to clarify Milton's aims. A tragedy that aims at having the audience experience pure horror rarely ends, like *Samson Agonistes*, with celebration. If Shakespeare had wanted audiences to rejoice at Coriolanus's fate—and some critics do rejoice unequivocally at it—he could have ended with Rome's triumphant cheers. But Shakespeare follows those cheers with Coriolanus's murder and the mourning and sorrow of the Volscians. These are the final emotions Shakespeare leaves us to ponder. Milton, on the other hand, could easily have undermined his celebratory choral odes much more explicitly than with subtle and vague references to Euripides, but the choral odes at the end of *Samson Agonistes* consist of 100 lines of rejoicing, solemn gratitude, and acknowledgement of God's just disposition of affairs, and the ambivalence is really quite subtle, more like causes for tempering the celebration with sober and humble reflection than like sharp criticisms, repudiations, or undermining ironies.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Of course, the endings of *Samson Agonistes* and *Coriolanus* are not the only parts of the plays that promise fruitful comparison. Throughout this dissertation, the central dialectical conflicts of both plays have been compared, producing useful insights into Shakespearean and Miltonic tragedy. In chapter II, the heroic thesis of both plays was compared. Coriolanus and Samson are both Herculean heroes of a type found in classical Greek, classical Roman, and modern British poetry. Both heroes are far superior to their communities in physical, moral, and spiritual endowments and achievements, which makes them a threat to typical community norms, but they both also use their abilities to serve their communities in crucial ways, and it is important to understand the benefits they give to their communities in order to appreciate both tragedies. Shakespeare and Milton expect their audiences to sympathize with men whose abilities and values are far above and beyond them. Samson derives his Herculean abilities from supernatural intervention and faith while Coriolanus receives his from his upbringing and his extreme military discipline, and these differences greatly influence the nature and the results of their Herculean feats.

In chapter III, the communal antithesis of both plays was compared. Samson's heroic values collide with a unified Greek Chorus that voices the general community values of theocratic Israel, while Coriolanus's aristocratic *virtus* collides with many individual voices that express the conflicting class values of the young Roman republic. Both Coriolanus and Samson also clash with the state, the family, and religion, three social institutions that preside as a sort of trinity over the values of the general community. Coriolanus encounters the state in the machinations of the tribunes, in the clamors of the citizens, and in the compromises of the senate, the family in Volumnia's scolding of the dishonor he has brought her, in Virgilia's loving but firm commitment to oppose his disloyalty to Rome, and in his son's fiery patriotism, and religion in the fickle and multifarious powers, expectations, and judgments of polytheism. Samson encounters the state in the oppressive Philistine officials and Lords he confronts, the family in Manoa's sincere and Dalila's hypocritical requests for him to return to their homes for care, and religion in the inescapable, omnipotent, mysterious, wrathful, but merciful Providence of monotheism. Coriolanus and Samson experience a great deal of variation in their respective dialectical conflicts with communal values because of differences between the Roman and Israelite cultures depicted in the poems, between the Elizabethan and Restoration

cultures in which the poet's wrote, and between the disposition and education of the poets themselves. In general, Coriolanus rejects the Roman community and state in favor of the Volscians, but he is forced to admit that his beloved *virtus* is inseparable from the rights of the family and of the motherland, and that the gods mock his attempts to be superior to his fellow Romans. Samson rejects the Philistine state and accepts the Danite community, though he wishes they would exercise more faith in God, and his encounters with the community, with Manoa, with Dalila, and with Harapha help him to regain his faith in God.

In chapter IV, the synthesis of heroic and communal values in both plays was compared. This synthesis is the emotional catharsis Aristotle claims audiences will experience when they see tragic fear and pity well imitated. While it is not possible to predict how the differences of poetic form and technique found in *Coriolanus* and *Samson Agonistes* will influence the emotions of specific audiences and readers, it is possible to draw some inferences about the cathartic synthesis each poem aims at and is likely to produce from the form and the content of the emotions imitated at the end of each tragedy. Milton ends *Samson Agonistes* with five choral odes that depict the Chorus and Manoa celebrating Samson's destruction of the idolatrous Philistine government. Shakespeare ends *Coriolanus* with two short

scenes of the Roman populace celebrating Volumnia's triumph over Coriolanus and a final scene of the Volscian populace angrily killing Coriolanus and then mourning his fate while confirming the grounds for their vengeance. Milton's odes mediate a poetic catharsis in which the Chorus and readers experience Samson's destruction of the Philistines through the second hand verse description of the Messenger, and then the Chorus uses powerful poetry and rhetoric to persuade readers that Samson's choice fulfills prophecy, sins not, metes out justice on the idolaters, regenerates Samson and Israel, honors his life, mission, and religion, deserves a fantastic monument, and exalts the Chorus to a state of transcendent peace and wisdom. Shakespeare's final scenes imitate realistic dialogue and actions by individuals in two communities. This approach invites audiences to coolly observe, compare, and judge the events for themselves. Shakespeare does allow Volumnia's rhetoric against Coriolanus to relentlessly ramp up his audience's emotions, but he helps the audience calm down through some metatheatrical comedy, and he then relies on the accuracy of his realism and on his audience's good judgment to produce a tempering catharsis of the tragic emotions depicted in the final scenes.

The introduction to this dissertation suggested comparing *Samson Agonistes* and *Coriolanus* in order, among other things, to

determine which was the superior tragedy. In the preface to *Samson Agonistes* and in his changing of Samson's catastrophe from Dagon's temple to Dagon's theater, Milton does seem to invite his readers to compare his poem with Shakespearean tragedy, and he seems to believe that readers who are familiar with Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides will acknowledge that he has written the best English tragedy. I even played with the conceit that Milton's one tragedy would stand up against the entire Elizabethan canon just as Samson stood successfully against thousands of armed Philistines. I could not, in a single dissertation, compare all of Shakespeare's tragedies with *Samson Agonistes*, and that work should be done in the future, but I selected *Coriolanus* as a worthy opponent because it contains a curious number of similarities with *Samson Agonistes* and because mighty Samson cannot be opposed by any but Shakespeare's most Herculean hero. Now, at the end of the dissertation, will its astute readers be capable of firmly deciding which of the two plays is superior? Perhaps, though I doubt it, but I do hope that the comparison has clarified and suggested many similarities and differences between the techniques and the aesthetic aims of each poet, for while preferences for one poem or one poet over another will always be a matter of subjective taste, subjective taste, especially when comparing poets of the highest

caliber, increasingly matures into useful and valuable insight as it acquires more knowledge of each poet's art.

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