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THE POLITICS OF GREEK TRAGEDY IN *SAMSON AGONISTES*

Hannah Crawforth

This essay charts Milton's engagement in *Samson Agonistes* with Greek political thought as critiqued in Athenian tragic drama, particularly that of Euripides. In early modern Europe Euripides' plays were understood to denounce tyranny but also to remain rigorously skeptical about the workings of Athenian democracy (in itself a highly limited kind of representational politics). Milton knew well the commentary tradition that framed Euripidean tragedy in such terms, and found a corollary to his own political views within it, most notably in the writings of Gasparus Stiblinus whose prefaces are included in the 1602 Stephanus edition of the playwright's works, which he used heavily. Stiblinus shows how Euripides relentlessly scrutinizes corruption, which his tragedies reveal to be not only characteristic of tyrants but also to pervade democratic systems. Milton's allusions to Euripidean tragic form in *Samson Agonistes* evoke these commentaries to denounce political corruption.

Keywords: Milton, Euripides, Tragedy, Politics, Commentary Tradition, Allusion

This is an essay about the politics of form. It explores Milton's engagement with certain formal aspects of Greek – and especially Euripidean – tragedy in *Samson Agonistes*, considering the political implications that I show to be intrinsic to the genre in Restoration England, where Euripides in particular had a uniquely political identity. Milton was a scrupulous and detailed student of Greek tragedy.¹ His copy of the two-volume Stephanus edition of Euripides' plays, first published in 1602 and now held in the Bodleian Library, is extensively annotated and evidence suggests that Milton worked with the books during at least two separate periods of his reading career.² His markings span both volumes and respond to many of Euripides' tragedies in a variety of ways, ranging from metrical scansion to underlined words, highlighted passages and brief commentary notes (which usually refer to other moments in the plays, sometimes to the Latin commentaries appended to the volume and only very rarely to other critical works on Greek drama). This essay will pay particular attention to Milton's use of the Euripidean commentaries, which, I will show, shaped his understanding of the politics of Greek tragedy and

thus are fundamental to the ideological commitments that underpin *Samson Agonistes*, a work that explores both the ideals and the limitations of democratic modes of government.

Milton is of course not himself a democrat. He does not advocate any political system that would be recognized as a democracy either today or in ancient Athens, and writes disparagingly of ‘*Democracy*’ in his 1641 tract, *Of Reformation*, where he uses the term to imply anarchy.³ But he does believe in a form of representational politics in which power is devolved to (an exclusive, intellectually elite proportion of) the people and in which no single individual has exclusive power. Athenian democracy was itself strictly circumscribed, its decision-making powers likewise confined to a select group of men, and was subject to a robust tradition of skeptical critique evident in the writings of the pseudo-Xenophon, Thucydides, Aristophanes, Plato and Isocrates, an ambivalence hinted at in Euripides’ plays as we will see later in this essay.⁴ The multi-vocal nature of this Greek literary inheritance, which celebrates the principle of democracy (however limited its scope in practice) while simultaneously admits dissent, is part of what appeals to Milton, I suggest. And while it hardly needs stating that his own political moment is very different to that of ancient Athens, or that dramatic engagement with the idea of democracy in either Euripides’ plays or indeed in seventeenth-century England is mediated by the history of the tragic form itself, Milton found in Greek tragedy an exploration of the possibilities and the difficulties of representational politics within an often hostile environment that was formative to *Samson*.⁵

This essay first examines the political reading of Euripides that characterized early modern understanding of the tragedian’s work, arguing that the identification of his plays with Athenian democratic values in the commentaries that Milton knew so well from the Stephanus edition plays a crucial role in shaping the notion of poetic liberty that informs *Samson*. I then

address the vexed relationship between Samson and Dalila, showing how contact between *Samson* and Euripides' play *Troades* animates the political function of Miltonic marriage, while simultaneously reflecting on the intermarriage of these texts. Next, I argue that the element of representation that underpins literary allusion likewise has political implications in *Samson Agonistes*, suggesting that Milton's use of a Greek messenger allows him to comment upon some of the problems he considers inherent to representational politics, a claim I make with particular reference to his invocation of *The Suppliants*, a play that explicitly engages with – and critiques – the workings of Athenian democracy. Finally, I situate Milton's defense of the cento form that *Samson* closely resembles within his political commitment to a strictly circumscribed modified democratic ideal, arguing that the highly citational nature of his closet drama permits multiple voices into his text, an idea he models on the Euripidean chorus. Throughout, I show that it is in Greek tragedies that the poet finds his model for a poetic form of liberty, and contend that Milton views Greek tragedy as an intrinsically political form; his close interaction with the formal elements of this drama, its structure, language and metre, involves a particular understanding of Athenian politics as depicted in the works of Euripides.

A strong association between Euripides' tragedies and the democratic politics of ancient Athens had prevailed from the time of the playwright's death in 406BC. The following year saw the first production of Aristophanes' *Frogs*, a comedy in which Dionysus descends to the underworld in order to bring Euripides back from the dead. In a staged discussion with the resurrected figure of Aeschylus, the dramatist claims his tragedies are superior to those of his predecessor because they alone require the intellectual participation of their audience members: "That's how I encouraged these people to think, by putting rationality and critical thinking into my art," says the character of Euripides there, "so that now they grasp and really understand

everything, especially how to run their households better than they used to, and how to keep an eye on things”:

τοιαῦτα μέντοῦγ’ ὠφρονεῖν
τούτοισιν εἰσηγησάμην,
λογισμὸν ἐνθεῖς τῇ τέχνῃ
καὶ σκέψιν, ὥστ’ ἤδη νοεῖν
ἅπαντα καὶ διειδέναι
τά τ’ ἄλλα καὶ τὰς οἰκίας
οἰκεῖν ἄμεινον ἢ πρὸ τοῦ
κἀνασκοπεῖν.⁶

Recent scholars have read this requirement for audiences to “participate actively in the interpretation of the play’s action and the construction of its meaning” as a kind of “thematic and formal openness,” to borrow Donald Mastronarde’s words, noting the democratic possibilities of this understanding of the tragic form.⁷ Such interpretations can be traced back to Aristophanes’ play, in which the character of Euripides explicitly terms his art a “democratic” [“δημοκρατικὸν”] act (1.952). It is worth reiterating here that Euripides’ vision of democracy is restricted to the adult male citizens who formed the Athenian electorate; Milton likewise conceived of the possibilities of representational politics as extending only to certain members of the population.

Milton’s familiarity with such connections between Euripides’ democratic politics and his use of the tragic form is attested by several allusions to the *Frogs* in prose works spanning his career. Prolusion VI, the Latin rhetorical exercise delivered to his fellow undergraduates at Christ’s College, Cambridge in either 1628 or 1631, satirizes the reputations of certain members

of Milton's audience as birds prepared for an imagined banquet.⁸ Amongst them are "several geese, some of this year's hatching and some older," that "have good loud voices noisier than the frogs of Aristophanes."⁹ Milton's mockery of these undergraduates momentarily oversteps the boundaries of his allegory here; his geese have not in fact been cooked but are very much alive, their "loud voices" anticipating the heckles of his classmates. "You will easily recognise them – in fact it is a wonder that they have not already betrayed themselves by hissing," he writes.¹⁰

Milton may have had the sixth Prolusion in mind as he worked on the *Defensio Secunda* (1654), revisiting the jesting humour of his own early Latin writing in the deadly serious polemic of later years.¹¹ He disparages Morus' Latin by comparing its sound to "croaking like a frog from the hellish swamps in which he swims."¹² Once more, the reference to Aristophanes' play is accompanied by the sound of "geese flying in from somewhere or other"; he hears "Another Cry, something strange and hissing".¹³ Notably, this latter mention of Aristophanes' play attests to the congruence between its depiction of Euripides' political character and Milton's own views of the tragedian. The allusion appears alongside quotations from Euripides' plays *Orestes* (the protagonist asks, "Go slowly as the rudder of my feet," to which Pylades replies, "A precious care is this to me" ["ἔρπε νυν οἷαξ ποδός μοι [...] "φίλα γ' ἔχων κηδεύματα" (1.795)) and *Heracles* ("Give your hand to your friend and helper," ["παῦσαι· δίδου δὲ χεῖρ' ὑπηρέτη φίλῳ"] (1.1398); "Put your arm around my neck and I will be your guide" ["δίδου δέρην σὴν χεῖρ', ὀδηγήσω δ' ἐγώ"] (1.1402)).¹⁴ Both Euripidean citations attest to the value of true friendship, of the kind that has not deserted Milton in the wake of his opponents' attacks on his character and the onset of his own blindness, he states in the *Defensio Secunda*. These quotations are also accompanied here by a commendation of the work of proto-republican George Buchanan, translator of Euripides' *Medea* (1544) and *Alcestis* (1556) whom Milton admires as one "bitterly

hostile to tyrants”.¹⁵ And Milton immediately follows the *Frogs* allusion in the *Defensio Secunda* with an attack on his opponent’s grasp of Greek metrics, in which he denounces Morus for failing to understand the particular prosodic form associated with tragedy, sarcastically offering “to show you how great is his mastery of iambics” by revealing him to be “guilty of two false quantities in a single word, one syllable incorrectly prolonged, the other shortened.”¹⁶ Failure to understand Greek prosody is thus implicitly associated with a failure to follow the guiding principles of Greek democracy. This constellation of references to Euripides, to Aristophanes’ characterization of him as a democratic playwright in the *Frogs*, to early modern translations of his tragedies by a fierce opponent of tyranny and to Greek prosody attests to the distinct political character of Euripidean drama in Milton’s thought.

This identification between Euripides and Athenian democracy was furthered in early modern Europe via the commentaries appended to his works in the printed volumes of the period.¹⁷ The explicitly political nature of this commentary tradition has not hitherto been explored as a key context for *Samson’s Agonistes*. Milton’s Stephanus edition reprints much of the editorial apparatus first published by ~~Joannus~~Joannes Oporinus in Basel in 1562.¹⁸ The main contributor to this book was Gasparus Stiblinus, who offered his own interpretation of each tragedy along with a synopsis of the relevant plot in a series of prefaces (*argumentum*) to each individual play. He also offers marginal textual annotations and notes following every play, in addition to Greek scholia. Incorporating the commentaries of Jacobus Micyllus, ~~Joannus~~Joannes Broadaeus and an index to Euripides’ works, Stiblinus’ contributions would have an enduring influence, as attested by their foundational relationship to the Stephanus’ edition printed over forty years later. There is strong evidence from Milton’s own copy of this text that he engaged closely with the commentaries and other editorial apparatus, as well as the plays themselves.

Atkins and Kelley note one hundred instances in which Milton's annotations draw upon this material, documenting his use of the work of all four scholars, Brodaeus, Canterus, Portus and Stiblinus.¹⁹ Unlike Joseph Barnes, a later reader and annotator of the book, Milton strikingly does not seem to cite any studies of Euripides outside of the Stephanus volume, with the exception of a single remark on *Iphigenia at Aulis* (1.7), where he refers to Scaliger's 1599 preface to Manilius's long astronomical poem of the first century.²⁰

It is Milton's engagement with Stiblinus with which we are primarily concerned here; Stiblinus' prefatory arguments to Euripides' tragedies repeatedly emphasize the most political aspects of the drama, and insist upon a connection between the events depicted onstage and those of the dramatist's contemporary society. Indeed, we find strong resonances between certain political aspects of Euripides' tragedies as highlighted by Stiblinus and particular elements of *Samson Agonistes*' moral landscape (and Milton's writing more generally). This essay will outline some of these under-explored connections, in order to suggest how the explicitly political nature of these remarks shaped Milton's understanding of Greek tragedy and thus determines his use of – and allusions to – this form in *Samson*. A note on *Electra* (missed by the Columbia editors of volume 18 in their series, Milton's markedly incomplete *Uncollected Writings*), and his annotations in the commentary itself on *Rhesus*, 1.29, both offer evidence of Milton's direct engagement with Stiblinus and therefore provide a clear link between the politicized reading of Euripides contained therein and the author of *Samson*, a connection not hitherto explored in the substantial scholarship on the poem.²¹ Intriguingly, Kelley and Atkins identify many unattributed usages of the commentaries in Milton's annotations, including unacknowledged borrowings from the Stiblinus' prefaces to *The Suppliants*, 1.138, and *Rhesus*, 1.271, suggesting that his engagement with these paratextual materials is far more significant than has been widely

acknowledged.²² This essay shows how Milton takes his template for writing politically-engaged drama directly from reading Euripides via the lens of Stiblinus' commentaries.

One of the key aspects of Stiblinus' prefaces to Euripides' works is his fundamental assumption that the tragedian wrote in the hope of influencing contemporary political life. We see this belief in Stiblinus' suggestion that the dramatist wishes to cast light on the superstitious attitudes prevalent in his own society by depicting the brutality of the Taurians in demanding a human sacrifice: "And perhaps he blames indirectly the superstitions of men of his own generation by this example".²³ Stiblinus thus connects the moral problems witnessed on the Euripidean stage with those the dramatist himself encountered in contemporary Athens. While recent critics have striven to restore this important political element to our readings of his plays, such a view has not always been accepted.²⁴ Yet the commentaries found in Milton's Stephanus edition attest that early modern readers saw Euripides in these politically active terms, and took for granted that he sought to contribute to contemporary debates via the medium of his tragedies. As such, Stiblinus' prefaces to Euripides' plays deserve our attention as crucially shaping the understanding of Athenian politics that Milton both evokes and scrutinizes in *Samson Agonistes*. Indeed, Stiblinus' eulogy for the Athens portrayed in Euripides' *Suppliants* reads like an inventory of Milton's key ideological commitments: "For Athens is not only the inventor of all learning, but also produced many other special and divine features of human life, such as laws, proper regimes for states, rules for how to live well - and what didn't they produce?"²⁵ From politics to pedagogy, Stiblinus' list here traces many of Milton's recurring preoccupations specifically to the tragic drama of Euripides.

Living under tyranny is an abject state in Euripides' tragedies, as throughout Milton's own works. For example, *Hecuba* is play about such subjection to a life of servitude in Stiblinus'

reading: “In which first of all this poet, with a tearful lament of the destruction of the Trojan race, seems to delineate the inconstancy and feebleness of human affairs, and to place the miseries and misfortunes of the life of servitude before our eyes”.²⁶ When he is compelled to attend upon the Philistines in the temple Samson has no choice but to go, “Masters’ commands come with a power resistless | To such as owe them absolute subjection,” (ll.1404-5).²⁷ But not all slavery is enforced, “resistless”, Milton’s dramatic poem suggests. Samson will lament the corruption of nations “by their vices brought to servitude,” as he denounces those who are complicit in their own enslavement because they “love bondage more than liberty, | Bondage with ease than strenuous liberty” (ll.269-71).²⁸ Stiblinus emphasizes Euripides’ exploration of the necessity of abolishing tyranny in order to establish good government; Samson characterizes his marriage to Dalila as life under a tyrannous regime in order to justify his breaking with her, speaking of his “former servitude, ignoble, | Unmanly, ignominious, infamous, | True slavery” (ll.415-7). Polynices’ uprising against Eteocles in *Phoenissae* is likewise legitimate because by refusing to share the rule of Thebes as promised his brother is behaving tyrannically, Stiblinus observes: “Indeed it was bitter for Polynices to lay waste to his ancestral gods and the land of his birth: however a most unworthy injustice did not seem to deserve to be met with silent inaction, so that he not take up arms, when he observed the common defense of justice and trust being overwhelmed by the violence of a tyrant.”²⁹ Lest his point escape us, Stiblinus pointedly goes on to quote lines from Maphaeus’ supplement to Virgil on the dangerously corrupting nature of political power, “regarding the destructive desire to rule and the fatal destruction of kings and misery”.³⁰

If Euripides’ works denounce tyranny they are commensurately read as paeans to Greek democracy in the early modern period. Stiblinus’ remarks preceding *Heracleidae* are especially

striking in their rather nostalgic interpretation of the tragedy as a hymn of praise to Athenian politics. “This drama of the Heracleidae, that is, concerning the fleeing children of Hercules, as far as the arrangement and the purpose of the poet are concerned [...] tends toward praise of the Athenian republic,” begins Stiblinus’ preface to the latter, which goes on to term the play an “*eulogium Atheniensis civitatis*” or encomium for the Athenian city-state and its particular form of democracy.³¹ The particular source of both Stiblinus’ admiration for ancient Athens and that he detects in Euripides is the supposed commitment of the republic to the defence of society’s weakest members, to the values of justice and piety, and to opposing wickedness and tyranny: “their habit of defending supplicants, protecting the wretched and oppressed against violence, fighting for justice without any hesitation, punishing the wicked, cultivating piety, and, finally, maintaining the Republic safe and flourishing without fear of any tyrant or servitude”.³² He goes on to celebrate the “*Heroicae virtutes*” (“heroic virtues”) of the leaders depicted in the play, most notably Demophon’s efforts to defend the persecuted children of Hercules. Demophon asks, “And how is it just to abduct a suppliant?” [“καὶ πῶς δίκαιον τὸν ἰκέτην ἄγειν βίᾳ”], declaring “The disgrace is mine if I let you drag these children off” [“ἐμοί γ’, ἐάν σοι τοῦσδ’ ἐφέλκεσθαι μεθῶ”].³³ Stiblinus commends Demophon for striving “to ward off, regardless of either every hope of advantage or fear of trouble, open violence from the innocent, or freely to defend and support those worthy of help, even if no obligation of services or blood relationship or treaty of friendship existed between them.”³⁴ This praise for the Athenian republic in supporting suppliants, the wretched and the oppressed corresponds with Milton’s version of Samson, an embattled and singular hero who pits himself against the much greater strength of the Philistines. Samson is one “who stood aloof” against his opponents, and whose declaration of implacability

in the face of his enemies earns a jubilant response from the Chorus: “O how comely it is and how reviving | To the spirits of just men long oppressed!” (ll.135, 1268-69).

Amongst the ideological commitments that Milton shares with the version of Euripides presented to him by Stiblinus is a politicized understanding of the institution of marriage.

Throughout Milton’s dramatic poem the relationship of Samson and Dalila mirrors that between their two embattled countries, and their marriage serves as a stage upon which national political tensions are enacted: “for me thou wast to leave | Parents and country,” Dalila says, “nor was I their subject, | Nor under their protection but my own, | Thou mine, not theirs,” (ll.885-888).

Dalila hoped that their union would offer an alternative commonwealth under their own jurisdiction; instead it becomes a microcosm of their warring states, which it must in turn serve.

In his remarks on *Medea*, Stiblinus derives from Euripides’ play a connection between the stability of a happy marriage and that of the well-governed state: “Scarcely ever are marriages consummated in blood and sin characterized by a lasting satisfaction, but they are quite often joined with the ruin of the state,” he writes there, a comment most immediately pertinent to the “inauspicious” marriage of Jason and Medea, but which also hints at the failed union of Helen and Menelaus.³⁵ It is essential that men be “Maisters of Family in thir own house,” Milton writes in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), or else “they can in due esteem be thought no better than slaves and vassals born”.³⁶ In this neo-Roman understanding the early modern family is itself a civic space, in which the duties of the wife and husband are carefully demarcated along Pauline lines; he is to govern, while she must offer the support he requires to do this. Individual liberty depends on “self-directed management of the household and its dependents and property,” Rosanna Cox writes of this passage, “the self-esteem gained through the exercise of such authority is crucial to promoting civic activity.”³⁷ Having mastered his own household, a

man can enter into his duties as a citizen with full authority. The moral obligations of a wife to facilitate her husband's active participation in the political life of the nation are evident in the Greek tragic tradition too, according to Stiblinus' commentaries: "Alcestis sets forth a model of the good wife in as much as she considered her own life of less worth than her husband's well-being," he writes.³⁸ Euripides' play unflinchingly depicts this self-sacrificing aspect of the woman's role in marriage; Admetus 'found no one but his wife he was willing to die for him and look no more on the sun' ["οὐχ ἤρρε πλὴν γυναικὸς ὅστις ἤθελεν | θανὼν πρὸ κείου μηκέτ' εἰσορᾶν φάος"].³⁹ In response, Stiblinus quotes Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* (7.11), where he recounts Ischomachus' view that "a woman ought to be κοινωνὸν βέλτιστον οἴκου καὶ τέκνων, that is, the best partner of the house and the children," while Admetus embodies the type of the 'patrisfamilias', inspiring the loyalty of his citizens, the true measure of a good leader.⁴⁰

Stiblinus discerns similarly apt instances of the political consequences of bad wives in Euripides' plays, of marriages that stray into anarchy or even tyranny, examples that Milton may have in mind when he depicts the notorious Dalila. In *Andromache* the character of Hermione is singled out by Stiblinus as an image of the worst kind of woman, whose marriage to Neoptolemus causes chaos resulting in the disorder and ultimate destruction of the entire household.⁴¹ As Stiblinus observes, "Truly, marriages come about with bad omens whenever the first consideration is made of the dowry and family, and not of virtue, since there is no finer dowry for a woman than modesty and a chaste life, which makes a man truly blessed."⁴² The success or otherwise of a marriage, and thus implicitly the health of the state, depends upon the modest and chaste conduct of women, not the bestowal of lavish dowries. Dalila only at first appears "Soft, modest, meek, demure"; once her "virgin veil" is removed "the contrary she proves," (ll.1035-7). Amongst Dalila's numerous faults is her indiscretion, "a weakness | In me,"

she says, “but incident to all our sex, | Curiosity, inquisitive, importune | Of secrets,” which then – most damagingly – she divulged, “then with like infirmity | To publish them, both common female faults” (ll.773-77).⁴³ Likewise, she is forced to deny that financial considerations or a promised dowry motivated her marriage to Samson, the point that so concerned Stiblinus in reference to Hermione’s union with Neoptolemus. “It was not gold, as to my charge though lay’st | That wrought with me,” she insists (ll.849-50), rather she acted on religious grounds, believing that ensnaring “an irreligious | Dishonourer of Dagon” would please the gods, not to mention “the magistrates | And princes of my country,” at whose political behest she acted (ll. 860-61, 850-51).

I now wish to turn to a tragedy that has long since been of interest to *Samson* scholars owing to its excoriation of the female protagonist, Helen, with whom parallels to Dalila have been discerned: Euripides’ *Troades*, the first of his works to be published in England. This play bears a particularly close relationship to the politicized depiction of marriage in *Samson*, and Milton appears to have consulted it in detail at two or more distinct periods in his reading life. While the annotations on the Stephanus volume are hard to date, changes in Milton’s hand are evident in his notes to this play, including a shift in usage from the Greek epsilon, ‘ε’, to the Italianate ‘e’ form. Kelley and Atkins believe that there was a watershed moment in 1638, after which Milton switched from one letter form to the other.⁴⁴ My own examination of Milton’s annotations to Euripides suggests that there may have been a more gradual transition; the frequent quotation of Greek texts in the Latin comments presents a particular difficulty by introducing the possibility of cross-contamination of letter forms. Things are complicated further by the fact that some of Milton’s Euripidean markings are extremely irregular and appear to be the work of a very frail hand, indicating that he may have been reading the volume later than

previously thought.⁴⁵ *Troades* nevertheless contains annotations in at least two different versions of Milton's hand, with both 'e' forms in evidence, suggesting that he examined the play closely both early and later in his career. Kelley and Atkins neglect the play in their discussion of Milton's annotations on his own copy of Euripides' works, however, and seem not to recognize the extent of his engagement with this particular Greek precedent (which includes marking up the play with reference to Broadeus' commentaries, further evidence of his close reading of such paratextual materials in the Stephanus edition).

Milton's detailed markings on *Troades* would seem to corroborate William Riley Parker's suggestion that the confrontation between Dalila and Samson in Milton's closet drama alludes to Helen's appearance before Menelaus in the latter part of Euripides' tragedy, in which she is called to account for her deception that started the Trojan war. "Helen, let us observe, makes an initial blunder exactly like Dalila's," Parker notes, "she comes before her husband richly attired – her finery bought with Trojan gold."⁴⁶ Helen is likewise denounced for her elaborate costume, in a passage that immediately follows a mention of the Greek ships: "You ought to have come humbly dressed in rags, trembling in fear and with shaven head, showing modesty rather than brazenness over your former misdeeds" ["ἦν χρῆν ταπεινὴν ἐν πέπλων ἐρειπίοις, | φρίκη τρέμουσαν, κρᾶτ' ἀπεσκυθισμένην | ἐλθεῖν, τὸ σῶφρον τῆς ἀναιδεΐας πλέον | ἔχουσιν ἐπὶ τοῖς πρόσθεν ἡμαρτημένοις"].⁴⁷ Picking up on the ship motif, Milton's Chorus asks, as Dalila approaches:

Who is this, what thing of sea or land?

Female of sex it seems,

That so bedecked, ornate, and gay,

Comes this way sailing

Like a stately ship.

(ll.710-14)

The close relationship between Milton's play and its Greek tragic precedent seems to inform the sense of uncertainty here as to exactly what kind of entity we are dealing with. At the moment the Chorus wonders whether Dalila comes from "sea or land," and is unable to identify her gender with absolute certainty, readers of *Samson* are reminded by the allusion to *Troades* that the text is itself a hybrid work, tragic and biblical, Greek and Christian, Euripidean and Miltonic.

Milton goes on to emphasize the extravagance of Dalila's dress with an equally extravagant continuation of this epic simile; she approaches

With all her bravery on, and tackle trim,

Sails filled, and streamers waving,

Courted by all the winds that hold them play,

An amber scent of odorous perfume

Her harbinger, a damsel train behind;

Some rich Philistian matron she may seem,

And now, at nearer view, no other certain

Than Dalila thy wife.

(ll. 717-224).

Milton thus chooses to allude to a moment in *Troades* that explicitly addresses the borrowing of another's splendid garb, just at the moment he describes Dalila putting on the apparel of a different culture to her own, her "bravery" and "tackle trim". Dalila's fault – like Helen's – is that which Milton despised most vehemently in political life: hypocrisy, feigning at being something she is not. Putting on the "bravery" of "Some rich Philistian matron" is a breach in decorum, too. By alluding to Euripides so closely at this particular moment Milton raises questions about what it means for his own poem to put on another's finery, to clothe itself in

Euripidean language. He too risks hypocrisy or indecorous behaviour, charges his prefatory remarks seem designed to pre-empt by acknowledging his Greek borrowings and citing impeccable previous instances of Christianized Euripidean texts. As is so often the case with Miltonic allusion, this echo of *Troades* in *Samson* is therefore significant in form as well as in content; it is a borrowing about borrowing, an allusion concerned with what it means to allude. If the ideal marital union posited in Milton's prose and Stiblinus' commentaries alike requires both parties to conduct themselves in a manner conducive to morally efficacious political life, then this is an ideal that Samson and Dalila – like Helen and Menelaus before them – consummately fail to live up to. Likewise, in alluding to Euripidean tragic drama to tell a biblical story Milton himself risks breaching literary decorum and failing to successfully integrate the moral universe of *Samson Agonistes*. The political efficacy of literary texts and marital relationships alike are shown to depend upon co-operation rather than hybridity, of both parties preserving their distinct and unique identities rather than totally assimilating themselves to one another.

We might in this way consider allusion as part of the subject matter of *Samson Agonistes*, as well as an element of its form. Euripidean allusions in Milton's dramatic poem frequently raise the question of what it means to borrow the splendor – or words – of another writer. This issue is brought into focus by Milton's borrowing of the Greek tragic device of the Messenger in *Samson Agonistes*. In this regard *Samson* specifically recalls the *Hippolytus* of Milton's self-professed favourite playwright, Euripides, in ending with a bereaved father who blames a woman for the violent loss of his son.⁴⁸ Samson's father Manoa urges: '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' (ll.1725-29). In Euripides' *Hippolytus* Theseus likewise demands to see his fatally wounded son's body (ll.1265-6); Hippolytus himself will entreat his father to

perform due rites, covering his face upon his death (ll.1456-7). Part of the restorative power of Greek tragedy lies in this ceremonial treatment of the corpse, washing away of all that has passed during the course of the play, Milton believes; this language of purification by cleansing, however, leaves an indelible mark on his own drama.⁴⁹ This view of the influence of *Hippolytus* upon *Samson* seems to be supported by evidence provided by the annotations in Milton's copy of Euripides' plays, where the level of attention paid to this particular tragedy is unusual, and little remarked upon by previous students of the text.⁵⁰ *Hippolytus* – like *Troades* – displays signs of being read on at least two separate occasions in the poet's life; Milton's Stephanus text contains annotations in different versions of his hand, with both 'e' forms in evidence.

Hippolytus' final scenes, in which a father learns of his son's self-destructive act and imminent death, bear an especially close relationship to the latter moments of *Samson*, where the Messenger reports Samson's final, suicidal, act of strength. In keeping with Aristotelian ideas of tragic decorum both Hippolytus' fatal injury and Samson's pulling down of the Temple of Dagon upon a crowd of assembled Philistines (and himself) occur off-stage, enacted only through the dramatic narrative of reported speech. When the Messenger enters for the last time in *Samson Agonistes*, breathless and horrified, Manoa repeatedly asks him "How died he?" urging him to "explain" how his son has died (ll.1579, 1583), just as the Theseus of Euripides' *Hippolytus* demands to know "How did he perish?" [πῶς καὶ διώλετ] (l.1171). Unsatisfied with the Messenger's first, brief, account, however, Manoa again entreats "give us if thou canst, | Eye-witness of what first or last was done, | relation more particular and distinct" (ll.1593-95). Manoa causes us to ask what makes a convincing account of another's acts and motivations, and whether it is possible to convey such information in the first place. How important is 'Eye-witness' testimony to the truthfulness of such a recitation? Does chronological accuracy matter,

what ‘first or last was done’? Can the words of another convey enough detail, ‘particular and distinct’, to replace the experience of living through such an event for ones-self? These are all questions prompted by Manoa’s entreaties here, each one contributing to the larger overarching concern of *Samson Agonistes* as a whole: on what authority does the Messenger speak?

Milton is unusual in questioning the source of the Messenger’s authority. Earlier in the closet drama the Chorus had warned Samson to be careful about using this intermediary to deliver a message to the lords in the temple when he first refuses to attend upon them, asking “who knows how he may report | Thy words by adding fuel to the flame?” (ll.1350-51). The report of Samson’s death that the Messenger ultimately delivers contains a level of architectural detail about the temple of Dagon that seems oddly redundant given the magnitude of what happens there:

The building was a spacious theatre,
Half round on two main pillars vaulted high,
With seats where all the lords and each degree
Of sort, might sit in order to behold,
The other side was open, where the throng
On banks and scaffolds under sky might stand;
I among these aloof obscurely stood. (ll.1605-1611)

John Carey attributes the specificity of this description to Milton’s engagement with a “long tradition of rationalistic exegesis” resulting in such early modern scholarly productions as Arias Montanus’ floor-plan of the temple of Dagon, published in *De Varia Republica* (1592).⁵¹ I would suggest, however, that the exaggerated precision with which the Messenger delineates the positioning of pillars and seating in the temple places the issue of the authority of reported

speech at the centre of Milton's tragic denouement, asking who gets to tell the story of another's life while telling of the tragic end of the life of Samson. By emphasizing his position as an outsider to the scene, standing "aloof obscurely," an interloper from Euripidean tragedy, an entirely different literary tradition, the Messenger calls into question his own status within the text. As such, suggestions that *Samson Agonistes* fails to meet the primary criteria for tragedy in that its main event has occurred prior to the beginning of the text seem to me misguided; Milton's drama instead stages a debate about how to represent the tragic, and about who has the power to depict, and thus interpret, tragic events. Writing at a moment in which polemical disputes about how the regicide should be depicted continued to rage more than twenty years after that event itself, this question was a particularly poignant one for Milton.⁵²

Milton's Samson is repeatedly portrayed as a besieged hero, over whom others hold a power that is symbolically figured in the text as a form of narrative control. Very early in the closet drama, Samson expresses his anxiety that he is being portrayed as foolish by the unnamed multitude: "Am I not sung and proverbied for a fool | In every street, do they not say, how well | Are come upon him his deserts?" he asks (ll.203-5). There are two aspects of this lamentation that I wish to draw attention to here. First, Samson opposes his own singular self to the many who now discuss his fate "In every street," setting his own isolation against the multiple voices who clamour over the events of his life. Second, the key verb here, "proverbied", reflects the anonymity of these voices. Milton thus suggests that ownership of Samson's story has become collective and his experiences universalized. We should not underestimate the political aspect of these components of *Samson Agonistes*; when Milton writes the dramatic poem he is acutely aware that history has yet to determine how the story of the Civil War will be told. If Milton is in some ways positioning himself and his drama in counter-distinction to a prevailing, overtly

monarchical, theatrical tradition – of which Dryden was the key exponent in the latter years of his life – then his position of embattled solitude reflects that of his own protagonist. *Samson Agonistes* is thus preoccupied by the question of what it means to speak for, and on the behalf of another, a concern it shares with both its Greek precursors and the Christianized dramas of the pseudo-Nazianzen, which ventriloquize Euripides' words to quite different effect from that with which he intended them. As such it speaks to Milton's primary political preoccupation: the question of democratic representation and its limits, both practical and ideological.

For Milton, representational politics are seriously impeded by the unsuitability of many people to make properly informed decisions (although democracy remains the least worst option in his view). In *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) after establishing the indubitable right of the people to endow – or deny – power to the King, or Magistrate, Milton owns that in fact it is only 'the uprighter sort', a minority "though in number less by many" that are adequately able to fulfill this role; "then comes the task to those Worthies which are the soule of that enterprize, to be swett and labour'd out amidst the throng and noises of Vulgar and irrational men."⁵³ Paul Hammond astutely notes that Milton's references to "the people" move "between a vision of the people of England as a nation defined by God for great things, and, in tension with that, a series of distrusting, disappointed senses which define the people *per contra* as a mass which has insufficient aptitude for spiritual and political choices."⁵⁴ Euripides likewise does not have unqualified faith in the masses, far from it. The moral inconstancy of the "*uulgus*," or common people, as revealed in his tragedies is explored in Stiblinus' commentary upon *Orestes*, a play in which the titular protagonist is condemned to death by an assembly of citizens. Recounting this trial, Euripides' Messenger there describes the way an Argive "with no check on his tongue" swayed the crowd with his rhetoric, "the obtuse license of his tongue" (ll.902-3,

905). The people are deeply susceptible to such persuasion, the play shows: “When someone of pleasing speech but without sense persuades the people, it is a great misfortune for the city. But those who always give good counsel with intelligence are useful to the city in the long run, if not immediately” [“ὅταν γὰρ ἡδύς τις λόγοις φρονῶν κακῶς | πείθῃ τὸ πλῆθος, τῇ πόλει κακὸν μέγα· | ὅσοι δὲ σὺν νῶ χρηστὰ βουλευούσ’ αἰεὶ, | κἂν μὴ παραυτίκ’, ἀάθις εἰσι χρήσιμοι | πόλει”].⁵⁵ The episode prompts Stiblinus to comment upon the vulnerability of the majority of the population to the flattery and hollow rhetoric of politicians: “far more beneficial for the affairs of mortals are ineloquent men, who are nevertheless upright and sensible, rather than those gifted with insidious and artificial eloquence,” he writes. “Nevertheless, for the most part few of this type occur among the common people, for whom flattery and deceit are always preferable to integrity and truth.”⁵⁶ Dalila shows herself to be prone to exactly this kind of “flattery and deceit” when she tells her husband she was persuaded that betraying him would earn her the favour of the gods: “what had I | To oppose against such powerful arguments?” she asks (ll.861-2). With the priest “ever at my ear,” Dalia is convinced that bringing about Samson’s downfall will accomplish a “public good”, an argument that cleverly panders to her own sense of self-importance and deploys every bit of “insidious and artificial eloquence” that Stiblinus condemns in Euripides’ *Orestes* (ll.858, 867).

The debauchery of *The Bacchae* reveals a similarly dangerous potential for the corruption of the masses. In an unusual moment of explicit political comment upon his own contemporaries Stiblinus’ reading of the play leads him to outline what he sees as a loss of public discipline of the kind staged by Euripides in ancient Greece:

But if we look at our own age, in which that religion ought to thrive which the son of God himself bore to men from heaven and established, and which blesses those who observe it

with heavenly and eternal rewards: we will easily understand what sort of deluge destructive of all good things has today overrun the whole world as a result of the neglect and downfall of this, to such a degree that public discipline has been destroyed, virtue lies prostrate, constant battles of men disagreeing and disputing increase: finally, licentiousness, misfortune, bloodshed, perjuries, insurrections, overthrowings of governments profane and desecrate everything.⁵⁷

Notably, Stiblinus contrasts the pagan beliefs of Euripides' characters with his own Christian moment, beginning a process of situating the tragedies within early modern religious beliefs that Milton will continue in *Samson*. That the figures who populate Euripides' stage should so assiduously pursue their false religion, while Christian beliefs and practices go astray in his own time, is lamentable for Stiblinus; indeed one is left with the sense that the tragedies' capacity to show up what is so lacking in his perception of early modern religion and politics is one of the most tragic things about them for their sixteenth-century commentator (as it will be for Milton, responding to them over a hundred years later).

The figure of the Messenger thus embodies for Milton in *Samson* some of the dangers inherent in democratic politics, deriving this insight from Euripides' treatment of comparable issues as highlighted by Stiblinus. The potential for misrepresentation, or for manipulating the will of the often unquestioning people via persuasive rhetoric, is made clear in the questioning of the Messenger's status within Milton's closet drama, as it is similarly evident in the Euripidean tragedies (and particularly Stiblinus' interpretation of them) that so influence the composition of *Samson*. At the same time, the troubled marriage of Samson and Dalila, while mirroring the politicized depiction of marriages (good and bad) that Milton found in the Stiblinus commentaries on Euripides, also problematizes what it means to speak on behalf of, or using the

words of, another. As such *Samson Agonistes* both draws upon Euripidean tragic precedent (especially as the plays were read by Stiblinus) and also warns against any straightforward politics of allusion. Milton's text does not simply cite the Greek tragic model, just as the figure of the Messenger cannot fully represent the words of those whom he ventriloquizes on the imagined stage of *Samson* or the more tangible Euripidean stage. Instead Milton seeks to place numerous strands of literary and political influence into conversation with one another, juxtaposing different forms in order to create a work in which multiple voices, and multiple viewpoints, are all represented. If delegating one's democratic right to a single representative is shown to be morally dubious, by the Messenger of *Samson* and his Greek forbears in Stiblinus' commentaries, then in literary terms privileging any single textual precursor (even one Milton esteems as greatly as Euripides) is similarly vexed. *Samson* presents a stage on which numerous voices interact to achieve a carefully orchestrated end. As such the dramatic poem's politics of allusion has much in common with the role of the Chorus in Euripidean tragedy, to which I now turn in the final part of this paper.

In the preface to *Samson* Milton sets out his justifications for following the model of Greek tragedy in creating his biblical closet drama. Even "The Apostle Paul himself thought it not unworthy to insert a verse of Euripides into the text of Holy Scripture, 1 Cor. xv. 33," he writes, establishing the moral credibility of both his own Christianizing of the Greek tragedian and also the particular suitability of the genre for commonplacing.⁵⁸ Milton recasts Saint Paul as a seventeenth-century scholar who carefully excerpts a key phrase, ostensibly from Euripides, and then subjects it to a divinely-inspired process of *imitatio*, in which the source text remains sufficiently recognizable to carry with it into the language of the Bible the essence of Greek tragedy.⁵⁹ Furthermore, Milton implies that there is something already biblical in Euripides'

work; his plays here formally resemble scripture, from which ‘a verse’ can be extracted to represent the whole. Conversely, Greek drama has shaped our understanding of the Bible, Milton notes, citing Pareus’ commentary on *Revelations*, which he chooses to structure as a tragedy, subdivided into acts “distinguished each by a chorus of heavenly harpings and song between” (355). This symbiotic relationship between Greek tragedy and the Bible, mediated in both directions via the commentaries adhering to these forms, lies at the moral heart of *Samson*, Milton tells us, and his text places these traditions in dialogue with one another.

Saint Paul is accordingly not the only precedent that Milton’s preface evokes for his deliberate reworking of Greek tragic fragments in *Samson Agonistes*. “Gregory Nazianzen a Father of the Church, thought it not unbecoming the sanctity of his person to write a Tragedy, which he entitl’d *Christ Suffering*,” we learn. At the time of writing Nazianzen (ca. AD 330-390) was held to be the author of *Christos Paschon*, a Christianized version of Greek drama that provoked a series of imitations of its own by authors whose work Milton knew well, including Hugo Grotius and George Buchanan. The text (of which Nazianzen is no longer considered the author) is a cento made up of multiple Euripidean quotations and allusions stitched together with additional verse that its recent translator Alan Fishbone has termed a “fusion of classical tragic style with the theological vocabulary of later Greek,” which reaches “to the point of parody.”⁶⁰ Milton’s attribution of the piece to Nazianzen is significant; few seventeenth-century readers of *Christos Paschon* believed him to be the author of the text.⁶¹ Joseph Wittreich argues that following Grotius in this belief is a sign of the scholar’s influence over Milton at this time; their relationship is certainly attested by Milton’s warm praise of Grotius as a “*vir eruditissimus*” [most erudite man] in the autobiographical excursus to his *Defensio Secunda*.⁶² Milton’s attribution of the Euripidean cento to Nazianzen thus works to secure the endorsement of both a

Church Father and, implicitly, one of Europe's most respected intellectuals, for his own quotation of Greek tragedy.

There is another reason for us to take Milton's self-declared debt to the pseudo-Nazianzen seriously; by following Grotius in this attribution of authorship the poet may have wished to signal his political and theological sympathies with the scholar.⁶³ Noting ongoing comparisons between Grotius's *Adamus Exul* (1601) and *Paradise Lost*, Wittreich goes on to observe that each man was "a devotee of Euripides, each with Arminian tendencies, each with spiritual ancestry in sects and schisms, each with books on the Index, and each fascinated by the story of paradise lost".⁶⁴ Wittreich's argument that shared theological and even political sympathies lie behind Milton and Grotius's accordance on the authorship of this Euripidean cento is compelling, because there is evidence that genre was highly susceptible to moral or even political interpretations in early modern England. Evidence from Milton's polemical writings of the interregnum suggests that the composite cento genre was one that Milton felt needed particular rehabilitation because of its strong association with his adversaries. In the *Defensio Secunda*, a text that I have already suggested Milton had firmly in mind when composing *Samson*, he attacks Alexander More (Morus) for having created a cento, or textual "monster," misidentifying him as the author of the vitriolic *ad hominen* abuse launched against him in *Regii sanguinis clamor ad cælum adversus parricidas Anglicanos* (1642). Milton derides his opponent for producing "some rhapsode or other, strewn with centos and patches."⁶⁵ As the Yale editors remind us, the ancient Greek rhapsodists were well known for interpolating excerpts from the writings of other poets, including themselves, into their readings of Homer. The charge against Morus is therefore one of casual and unpolished intellectual dishonesty; just as the rhapsodists attempt to pass off their own work as Homer's, so the author(s) of the tract patch up their ragged

prose with unacknowledged borrowings from others. While Milton's derision of the cento form when used by his polemical adversaries is necessarily disputatious, his evocation of its possible associations with a type of academic fraud or plagiarism here, along with the efforts he goes to in order to justify the use of extensive Euripidean allusion and other forms of quotation in citing the Christian precedent of the pseudo-Nazianzen in his preface to *Samson*, suggests the political freight of the cento genre for him at the time *Samson* was written.

Like *Christos Paschon* (and later translations by Erasmus and Buchanan) Milton's *Samson* is a Christianized Greek tragedy that contains multiple echoes of plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. *Samson Agonistes* is so rich in allusions to Greek dramatic texts that at times it resembles a cento itself. "A little onward lend thy guiding hand | To these dark steps, a little further on," the blind Samson says at the very start of the poem (ll.1-2). His lines immediately recall Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, in which Teiresias asks: "Lead on, my daughter! You are the eyes that guide my blind steps, as a star guides sailors" ["ἡγοῦ πάροιθε, θύγατερ· ὥς τυφλῷ ποδὶ | ὀφθαλμὸς εἴ σύ, ναυβάταισιν ἄστρον ὥς"].⁶⁶ Milton does not simply follow Euripides here though; a further allusion to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which Antigone leads her blind father, also guides his poem's opening. *Samson* thus begins with a moment of supreme self-consciousness, in which Milton, the blind poet, not only alludes to following in the footsteps of his Greek precursors, but also hints that his own tragedy will incorporate his predecessors' fragments. From the earliest moments of *Samson Agonistes* it is clear that Milton does not simply echo aspects of the Greek tragic form but rather assimilates the genre in a text that will at times resemble a cento itself.

This continues throughout *Samson*. Euripides' *Suppliants* (l.650), from which Milton takes his epigraph to *Areopagitica* in a passage marked in his own extensively annotated copy of

the play, lies behind Samson's figuration of sunlight as a "fiery rod" (l. 549) ["λαμπρὰ μὲν ἄκτις ἡλίου," (l.650)]. Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* (ll.526-34) is a possible source for the proverbially tricky "bosom snake" with whom Samson is entangled (l.763). Dalila's haughty exit at ll.995-6 echoes Sophocles' *Ajax* (ll.1038-9). The Chorus's warning that Samson should be wary of the Messenger's potential to misreport events (ll.1350-3) seems indebted to Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* (ll.1014f. 1080-5). And Samson's growing apprehension and presentiment of his doom summons Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (ll.1169-73): "If there be aught of presage in the mind, | This day will be remarkable in my life | By some great act, or of my days the last" (ll.1387-9).⁶⁷ The Messenger's stark declaration, "take the worst in brief, Samson is dead," (l. 1570), is haunted by Sophocles' *Electra*, "In short, Orestes is dead" (l.673), and the very existence of the Messenger seems to owe much to the same playwright's *Oedipus Colonus*. I cite these examples to show both the extent and the proximity of Milton's borrowing from Greek tragedy, and to give a sense of the way in which he makes his text out of the language of multiple precursors, in emulation of the pseudo-Nazianzen's Euripidean cento. As befits his deeply reasoned commitment to a limited and rigorously challenged form of democratic debate and the rich tradition of political dissent that can be traced back to ancient Greece, Milton admits multiple divergent voices into his poem.

The role of the Chorus in *Samson* thus embodies, while revealing the difficulties of, attempts to unify multiple voices into a coherent whole, in both literary and political terms, just as the Chorus had served Euripides as a means by which to offer varied and yet fully integrated perspectives on the tragic events enacted on his stage. In the first act of *Alcestis*, Stiblinus observes that on learning of their queen's imminent death the members of the Chorus "debate amongst themselves using conjectures" before joining together to bemoan their state.⁶⁸ The paradoxical unity and multiplicity of the Chorus is further emphasized by the fact that *Alcestis*

shares its final lines with several other Euripidean tragedies. Stiblinus notes that despite the happy ending of this drama the emotional disquiet of *Alcestis* is such that a moment of consolation is needed if the audience is to reconcile the gods' treatment of Admetus: “πολλὰ μορφαὶ τῶν δαιμονίων” (“There are many shapes of divinity”), the play concludes.⁶⁹ There are many shapes of Euripidean tragedy, too, and despite the diversity of his *oeuvre* such sentiments are fitted to the endings of many of them. The fact that these lines serve as conclusions to other Euripidean tragedies rather undermines their consolatory power, their multipurpose usage attempting to reconcile everything and consequently succeeding in redeeming nothing. The final chorus of *Samson* echoes the stock phrasing with which Euripides ends numerous tragedies, including *Alcestis* and *Helen*:

All is best, though we oft doubt,
 What the unsearchable dispose
 Of highest wisdom brings about,
 And ever best found in close. (ll.1745-8)

πολλὰ μορφαὶ τῶν δαιμονίων,
 πολλὰ δ' ἀέλπτως κραίνουσι θεοί·
 καὶ τὰ δοκηθέντ' οὐκ ἐτελέσθη,
 τῶν δ' ἀδοκίμων πόρον ἦρε θεός.
 Τοιόνδ' ἀπέβη τόδε πρᾶγμα.⁷⁰

In uncharacteristically cross-rhymed lines of relatively regular iambic tetrameter, Milton concludes his tragedy in the borrowed garb of Euripides. The long pre-history of these words take on new resonance at this moment of political frustration for Milton; their repetition here

with the hollow resonance of rhyme serves to undercut the very sentiment they express, revealing it to be purely sentiment. It seems there can be no consolation at the end of *Samson*, in 1671, just as there is little real comfort at the end of Euripides' tragedies (even the supposedly comic *Alcestis*).

Milton's use of the Chorus in *Samson* thus reveals further limitations of representational politics, which his engagement with Euripidean tragedy via the commentaries of Stiblinus so poignantly elucidates for him. The repetition of the Euripidean Chorus's final words of consolation both across the tragedian's works and here within Milton's own dramatic poem, serves to emphasize the discord that can lie beneath unity, and the hollowness of such attempts at justifying the ways of the gods to men. Yet in another sense the presence of the Greek Chorus within *Samson* does hint at redemption, of a sort. If Milton follows Euripides in showing some skepticism about the united voice of the Chorus, he nonetheless admits this perhaps most emblematic Greek tragic device into the world of his poem, and gives its multiple voices the last word. If the projected unity of the Chorus rings hollow, is undermined by discord and debate, this remains for Milton preferable to the alternative – a single voice, as embodied in *Samson*, and in Euripides, by the role of the Messenger. And by so publicly registering the ways in which Greek tragedy shapes his dramatic poem Milton allows another voice into its Biblical world. The politics of *Samson Agonistes* are influenced by Athenian democratic and republican ideals, and by Euripides' exploration of the limits of such ideals, as much as by neo-Roman or other forms of liberty thus far emphasized in accounts of Milton's work. As *Samson Agonistes* shows, Milton engages with this alternative strand of Euripidean political thought in complex and subtle ways, prompted by the Stiblinus commentaries that in turn shape his understanding of Greek democracy.

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¹ William Riley Parker has shown that Milton engages closely with the works not just of Euripides but Aeschylus and Sophocles as well, Parker, *Milton's Debts to Greek Tragedy*, 75. The latter's *Oedipus at Colonus* has been thought to bear a particularly close resemblance to *Samson Agonistes*, see Brewer, "Two Athenian Models." Milton names all three Greek tragedians in his preface. This essay suggests particular formal and political reasons for privileging the Euripidean precedent for Milton's work, however.

² *Euripidis tragoediae quæ extant &c.* (Geneva, 1602). Milton used and annotated what is now Bodleian Library copy Arch. A d. 36.

³ See Hammond, *Milton and the People*, 4.

⁴ Ober, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens*.

⁵ As such my argument offers a complementary alternative to the neo-Roman ideas of liberty that have been so convincingly expounded in recent studies of *Samson* and indeed in Milton criticism as a whole. See Cox, "Neo-Roman Terms of Slavery in *Samson Agonistes*"; Dzelzainis, "Milton and Roman Law" and Skinner, "John Milton and the Politics of Slavery."

⁶ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, ll.971-78. Throughout I use the Loeb texts for Greek plays, unless otherwise specified (see bibliography).

⁷ Mastronarde, *The Art of Euripides*, 72. Victoria Wohl has lately argued that "In its gleeful break from traditional mythic and narrative probabilities and its openness to contingency and reversal, Euripidean tragedy seems to mirror contemporary democracy, its structural freedom a mimesis of the democracy's *eleutheria*." Wohl, *Euripides and the Politics of Form*, p.21.

⁸ On the uncertainty of this dating see Campbell and Corns, *John Milton*, 58-9. The 'Irish birds' with their 'lanky figures', apt 'to produce lice' seem a likely allusion to the Irish undergraduates amongst Milton's cohort, as Loewenstein notes, *John Milton. Prose*, 10, n.54.

⁹ Unless otherwise indicated references to Milton's prose are taken from the Yale *Complete Prose Works*, hitherto YP. Prolusion VI, YP IV.1, 592??

¹⁰ Prolusion VI, YP I, 281.

¹¹ On the relationship between Milton's Prolusions and later (especially Latin) prose, see Knight, "Milton's Forced Themes", 146.

¹² *Defensio Secunda*, YP IV.1, 594 and n.206. The Yale editor Robert W. Ayers detects a further allusion to Aristophanes' *Frogs*, l.1200ff. in the First Defence, *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio* (1651), YP IV.1, 385.

¹³ *Defensio Secunda*, YP IV.1, 592.

¹⁴ *Defensio Secunda*, YP IV.1, 590.

¹⁵ *Defensio Secunda*, YP IV.1, 592. On Milton's admiration for Buchanan see Dzelzainis, "Milton, *Macbeth* and Buchanan" and "The Ciceronian Theory of Tyrannicide." Buchanan has long since been recognized as a model for Milton's Englishing of Euripides, see for example Revard's introduction to the 1671 *Poems*, 373.

¹⁶ *Defensio Secunda*, YP IV.1, 594 and n.207. The word 'Morus' is accused of mistreating here is 'tucidate', *Regii sanguinis clamor*, 164.

¹⁷ Mastronarde, *Art of Euripides*, 9-12.

¹⁸ Stiblinus' Preface is dated October 22, 1559; another letter to the reader in the same volume is signed off on October 23, 1558.

¹⁹ Kelley and Atkins, "Milton's Annotations of Euripides," 685. They observe that the majority of these can be found in plays appearing in the second Stephanus volume, where the commentaries are appended.

²⁰ On this text, see Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger*, vol. 1, 180-226. Barnes' later annotations on Milton's copy of the Stephanus edition are seemingly produced in preparation for his own 1694 edition of Euripides; his hand is the first of those described by Kelley and Atkins, "Milton's Annotations of Euripides," 682.

²¹ The authorship of *Rhesus* is widely contested, as Stiblinus indicates, a debate that continues today.

²² Kelley and Atkins, "Milton's Annotations of Euripides," 685 and n.22. The editors of the Columbia text mistranscribe "*vide Stiblinum*" as "*vide Scholium*," ("see the notes of the scholiast"), *The Works of John Milton* Vol. 18, 320, item 78.

²³ "*Et fortasse oblique sui saeculi hominum superstitiones hoc exemplo reprehendit*" Stiblinus, preface to *Iphenia Taurica* in *Euripidis tragoediae*, trans. Risa Takenaka. All translations of Stiblinus' prefaces are taken from Donald Mastronarde's digital edition of *Stiblinus' Prefaces and Arguments on Euripides*, unless otherwise indicated.

²⁴ A useful summary of these differing approaches is provided by Hall, "The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy."

²⁵ "*Drama encomium continet Athenarum quae ciuitas ob multas eximias res semper tam Graecis quam Latinis literis celebrari meruit. Non enim solum omnium doctrinarum inuentrices Athenae sunt, sed etiam alia multa diuina ac eximia hominum uitae pepererunt, ut leges, rectas rerum publicarum rationes, recte uiuendi instituta, et quid non?*" Stiblinus, preface to *Supplices*, trans. Clare Whitehead.

²⁶ "*In qua poeta primum lachrimosa illa Troianae gentis excidii deploratione, humanarum rerum inconstantiam ac imbecillitatem delineare uidetur, seruiliisque uitae miserias et incommoda ob oculos ponere*". Stiblinus, preface to *Hecuba*, trans. Erin Lam.

²⁷ Carey, ed. *Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*. All subsequent references to *Samson Agonistes* are taken from this edition, and are cited parenthetically in the text, unless otherwise indicated.

²⁸ The image recurs at l.1213 when he bemoans the 'servile minds' of the populous at large.

²⁹ "*Acerbum quidem erat Polynici patrios penates natalemque terram populari: tamen iniuria indignissima non uidebatur mussitanda esse quo minus arma caperet, quum iustitiae et fidei commune praesidium uiolentia tyranni opprimi animaduerteret.*" Stiblinus, preface to *Phoenissiae*, trans. Jeremy Simmons.

³⁰ "*uersus de pernicio dominandi libidine et funestis regum cladibus et miseria.*" Ibid.

³¹ “*Hæc Heraclidarum, id est de Herculis liberis profugis Fabula, quod ad æconomiam et consilium poetæ attinet, [cum Supplicibus colludere videtur,] quas supra diximus pertinere ad laudem Atheniensis reipub[licae],*” Stiblinus, preface to *Heracleidae*, trans. Meghan Bowers. Stiblinus compares the play to *The Suppliants*, discussed in this context below.

³² “*defendere supplices, miseros et oppressos adversus vim tueri, iustitiam absque omni respectu propugnare, malos persequi, pietatem colere, denique Rempublicam saluam ac florentem sine omni tyrannidis vel servitii metu continere*” Ibid.

³³ Euripides, *Children of Heracles*, ll.254, 256.

³⁴ “*citra omnem vel commodi spem vel incommodi metum apertam vim ab immerentibus propulsare aut dignos auxilio libere defendere ac tueri, etiamsi nulla obligatio officiorum aut cognatio generis aut foedus amicitiae intercesserit,*” Stiblinus, preface to *Heracleidae*, trans. Meghan Bowers.

³⁵ “*Raro enim matrimonia sanguine et scelere contracta diuturnae felicitatis sunt, sed saepenumero cum publica perniciæ coniuncta,*” Stiblinus, preface to *Medea* trans. Michaelangelo Macchiarella.

³⁶ YP III, 237.

³⁷ Milton likewise “locates the liberty of men as rooted in the household,” Cox reminds us, “couching the liberty of the people in terms of household (and indeed land) management. Cox, “Neo-Roman Terms of Slavery in *Samson Agonistes*,” 157-58. See also Crawford and Lewis, Introduction to *Family Politics in Early Modern England*.

³⁸ “*Alcestis bonae matronae exemplar proponit, ut quae suam ipsius animam mariti salute uiliorem habuerit,*” Stiblinus, preface to *Alcestis* trans. Jeremy Simmons.

³⁹ Euripides, *Alcestis*, ll.17-18.

⁴⁰ “*mulierem debere esse κοινῶν βέλτιστον οἶκον καὶ τέκνων: id est, optimam consortem domus et liberorum,*” Stiblinus, preface to *Alcestis* trans. Jeremy Simmons.

⁴¹ “*pessimae imaginem exhibet, [...] totiusque domus confusio et dissipatio,*” Stiblinus, preface to *Andromache*, trans. Erin Lam.

⁴² “*Malis vero auspiciis nuptiae fiunt quoties dotis et generis, non virtutis prima ratio habetur, cum non alia pulchrior dos sit matronae quam modestia et vita pudica, quae vere beatum virum facit*” Ibid.

⁴³ Such indiscreet behaviour is described by Stiblinus in the *Andromache* preface: “*Accesserat et alia quaedam corruptela, nimirum consuetudo et commercia (quod et ipsa Oresti fatetur) cum exteris mulieribus, quae nonnumquam probas matronas transuersas agunt. Quid enim aequè ad omne genus malitiae ingeniatur quam muliebris sexus? Unde a piis feminis prauarum mulierum consortia cauenda sunt, tamquam peruersorum morum et impudicitiae scholae quaedam.*” [“A certain other form of corruption had also been added to the mix, namely conversation and exchanges (which she herself confesses to Orestes) with women from outside the house, who sometimes lead astray dutiful women. For what is equally endowed by nature for every manner of wickedness as the female sex? Therefore, associations with depraved women must be avoided by dutiful women, as if they were a sort of school of corrupt customs and immodesty.”] Ibid.

⁴⁴ Kelley and Atkins, “Milton’s Annotations of Euripides,” 684, n.18.

⁴⁵ [CROSS-REF. TO NICK’S ESSAY HERE, ON DATES AT WHICH M READ EURIPIDES?]

⁴⁶ Parker, *Milton’s Debt to Greek Tragedy*, 126.

⁴⁷ Euripides, *Trojan Women*, ll.1025-28 The lines have been directly preceded by Hecuba telling Helen: ‘And yet I often advised you, “Daughter, depart! My sons will make other marriages. I will help to conceal you and send you down to the Greek ships. Deliver both the Greeks and us from war.” But this suggestion was unwelcome to you.’ (ll.1016-1019)

⁴⁸ “The parallelism of situation is supplemented by some parallelism in small details,” writes Howard Jacobson, observing that both heroes will be honoured posthumously, lamented in commemorative song, subject to sacrificial offerings by virgins, and mourned with tears.” Jacobson, “Some Unnoticed Echoes and Allusions,” 502.

⁴⁹ As Russ Leo has recently reminded us, Milton’s epigraph to *Samson* departs from standard translations of Aristotle’s *Poetics* in the period to render the Greek *catharsis* by the term ‘*lustrationem*,’ suggesting an act of purification by ritual (and often, specifically, ritual cleansing). Leo, ‘Milton’s Aristotelian Experiments,’ 222.

⁵⁰ Kelley and Atkins believe *Helen* and *Electra* are most annotated plays, “Milton’s Annotations of Euripides,” 685.

⁵¹ Carey, ed. *Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, 408, n.

⁵² On the political significance of *Samson Agonistes* in its own moment see Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*, chapter 31, and Knoppers, “*Samson Agonistes* and the Execution of the Regicides”.

⁵³ YP III, 197, 194.

⁵⁴ Hammond, *Milton and the People*, 11.

⁵⁵ Euripides, *Orestes*, ll.907-911.

⁵⁶ “*longe fructuosiores esse rebus mortalium uiros infacundos, integros tamen et prudentes, quam insidiosa et fucata eloquentia praeditos. Eiusmodi tamen plerumque parui fiunt apud uulgus, cui semper potior adulatio et fucus est quam integritas ac ueritas,*” Stiblinus, preface to *Orestes*, trans. Meghan Bowers.

⁵⁷ “*Quod si ad hoc nostrum saeculum respiciamus, in quo ea religio uigere debebat quam ipse Dei filius e caelo ad homines et tulit et fundauit quaeque sui obseruantes caelestibus et aeternis bonis beat: facile intelligemus, quale omnium bonarum rerum diluuium ex huius neglectu ac interitu hodie orbem terrarum obruerit, adeo ut publica disciplina extincta sit, iaceat virtus, dissentientium ac disputantium pugnae perpertuae gliscant: denique licentia, clades, caedes, periuria, seditiones, euersiones civitatum, omnia profanent funestentque.*” Stiblinus, preface to *Bacchae*, trans. Meghan Bowers.

⁵⁸ Carey, ed. *Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, 355. [CROSS-REFERENCE RUSS’S ARTICLE HERE?]

⁵⁹ Tanya Pollard has argued that printed commonplace markers in early modern editions of the Greek plays were influential in establishing similar models for reading English drama of the period, noting that “The heightened linguistic inaccessibility of Greek plays, and their elaborate forms of translation and mediation, lent themselves to a particular emphasis on individual phrases and sentences.” She goes on to note, “Paradoxically, close attention to the forms of individual lines offered a crucial route to conceptualizing the broader forms of the plays’ dramatic genres,” “Greek Playbooks and Dramatic Forms,” 105-7. While early modern biblical commentaries attribute this quotation to Euripides, he was not in fact the primary source.

⁶⁰ Fishbone, “Christ Suffering,” 129.

⁶¹ Hillier, “Grotius’s *Christus Patiens* and Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*,” 9.

⁶² Wittreich, “Still Nearly Anonymous,” 195.

⁶³ [CROSS REFERENCE RUSS'S ARTICLE HERE?]

⁶⁴ Wittreich, "Still Nearly Anonymous," 195. Wittreich also makes the important observation that both men would preserve the role of dissent in theological discourse. On Nazianzen's ardent Trinitarianism and opposition to Arianism, see Simut, *Traditionalism and Radicalism in the History of Christian Thought*, 9.

⁶⁵ *Defensio Secunda*, YP IV.1, 592, and n.197.

⁶⁶ Euripides, *Orestes*, ll.834-5. Carey detects a further allusion to the second book of Sidney's *Arcadia* here, see *Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, 358n.

⁶⁷ On the 'bosom snake' see Le Comte, "Samson's Bosom Snake Again"; for the similarities between the Chorus's warning and *Prometheus Bound*, see Jacobson, "Some Unnoticed Echoes and Allusions"; the echo of Sophocles' *Trachiniae* was first noted in Maxwell, "Milton's Samson and Sophocles' Heracles".

⁶⁸ "*secum ipse coniecturis disceptat*," Stiblinus, preface to *Alcestis* trans. Jeremy Simmons.

⁶⁹ Euripides, *Alcestis*, l.1159.

⁷⁰ 'What heaven sends has many shapes, and many things the gods accomplish against our expectation. What men look for is not brought to pass, but a god finds a way to achieve the unexpected. Such was the outcome of this story.' *Helen*, ll.1688-1692; *Alcestis*, ll.1159-63.