
Milton and the Tragic Reader

Alexander Paulsson Lash

ABSTRACT

In the preface to his 1671 tragedy, *Samson Agonistes*, John Milton invokes a surprising precursor: the German biblical exegete David Pareus, who had described the Book of Revelation as a tragedy. This essay locates, in Milton's attraction to Pareus's analysis of tragedy, an ambitious and sophisticated theory of reading. Pareus, I show in this essay, saw the form of tragedy as consisting in a careful patterning of acts and choruses. For Pareus, and by extension Milton, this form demands a particular type of practice from readers. The challenge for those readers becomes to search for the proper harmony among the various parts, a process that is made more time-consuming, and thus more effective at providing spiritual exercise, by the text's obscurity. While those few scholars who have considered Milton's interest in Pareus have been most interested in what it reveals about the character of Samson, I argue that Milton and Pareus share a theory in which biblical tragedy serves as a prophetic interpolation of readers into divine history.

KEYWORDS *Samson Agonistes*, David Pareus, tragedy, reading

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Alexander Paulsson LASH, Assistant Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, National Taiwan University, Taiwan

In the introductory epistle to his 1671 tragedy *Samson Agonistes*, John Milton self-consciously places his work alongside the tragedies of ancient Greece. Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy, with its emphasis on catharsis and the imitation of action, appears on the title page in both Greek and Latin, and the definition then opens the epistle in Milton's English translation; the epistle closes by proclaiming "Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the three Tragic Poets unequall'd yet by any, and the best rule to all who endeavor to write Tragedy" (550).¹ Accordingly, criticism on *Samson Agonistes* has been, and continues to be, attentive to how Milton responds to this ancient tradition in constructing his tragedy.²

Alongside this expected canon of tragic precursors, however, Milton invokes a more surprising source: the biblical exegete David Pareus, who "commenting on the *Revelation*, divides the whole Book as a Tragedy, into Acts distinguisht each by a Chorus of Heavenly Harpings and Song between" (549). This ascription of the literary form of tragedy to a biblical book proved useful to Milton across his career, as he had already referenced Pareus in the 1642 *The Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelaty*. The work Milton references, *A Commentary Upon the Divine Revelation of the Apostle and Evangelist John*, first appeared in 1618 in Latin, and while Pareus wrote Latin commentaries on a number of biblical books, only the commentary on Revelation was translated into English, at Amsterdam in 1644. A German professor of New Testament theology at Heidelberg from 1602 until his death in 1622, Pareus would remain known throughout the seventeenth century as an exegete of Revelation.³ In invoking Pareus's claims about the literary form of Revelation, Milton is not simply suggesting that it is appropriate for Christian writers to produce tragedies. His explicit point is about Pareus's division of Revelation into acts and choruses, seeming to find the meaning of tragedy precisely in that division. This essay locates, in Milton's attraction to Pareus's definition of tragedy, an ambitious and sophisticated theory of reading.

Milton appears to have felt a certain ambivalence about the concept of tragedy. The title page to *Samson Agonistes*, printed after *Paradise Regained* in a 1671 com-

¹ I cite Milton from the edition of Merritt Hughes, poetry by line number and prose by page number.

² The foundational studies are Martin Mueller and William Riley Parker. Among recent critics, Hannah Crawford reads *Samson* as a response to Euripides while Blair Hoxby reads it in relation to Sophocles (137-45).

³ A second English edition of the commentary appeared in 1659 in London, and parts of the commentary would return in anthologies like Hezekiah Holland's 1650 *An Exposition, or a Short, But Full, Plaine, and Perfect Epitome of the Most Choice Commentaries Upon the Revelation of Saint John* or William Atwood's 1689 *Wonderful Predictions of Nostredamus, Grebner, David Pareus, and Antonius Torquatus*. Along with this exegetical work, Pareus would also appear on English title pages for having edited the theological works of his own Heidelberg professor, the reformer Zachary Ursinus.

panion volume, does not call the text a tragedy, but rather “a dramatic poem,” and it is only in the title of the introductory epistle on the next page, “Of that sort of Dramatic Poem which is call’d Tragedy,” that readers encounter the word. Even here, the word “tragedy” seems subordinated to the idea that this is a “dramatic poem.” Milton was highly attuned to the importance of theater in Restoration culture, as Ann Baynes Coiro has shown in her argument that *Samson Agonistes* engages in direct debate with John Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*.⁴ Dryden’s title may make it sound as if he, like Milton, prefers to think of his plays as primarily written works, but he was an enthusiastic writer for the commercial stage. In this theatrical context, the concept of tragedy could become a form of marketing. Dryden’s 1670 *Tyrannick Love, or the Royal Martyr* was not unusual in having “tragedy” be the center of attention and the biggest word on its title page, which proudly continues that the tragedy is “Acted by his Majesties Servants, at the *Theatre Royal*.”

Even more offensively to Milton, the great defender of regicide, Restoration print culture was also marked by the usage of the word “tragedy” in royalist pamphlets celebrating the martyred Charles I.⁵ In 1660 readers could find such books with titles like *The Traytors Tragedy* or *The State Martyrologie. Or, Innocent Blood Speaking Its Mournfull Tragedy*, and in 1662, *A Brief Narrative of That Stupendious Tragedie Late Intended to Be Acted by the Satanical Saints of These Reforming Times*. These titles figure tragedy as occurring when a heroic figure meets an unjust and unhappy end, leaving the moral valence of tragedy clear and simple. In these blunt usages of “tragedy,” readers are above all invited to feel sympathy for their heroic and unjustly persecuted former King. By subordinating his usage of “tragedy” to the term “dramatic poem,” Milton seems to be seeking an alternative, both to the moral and political simplicity of the regicide pamphlets and what he sees as the theatrical opportunism of Dryden.

Through his interest in Pareus, Milton found a formulation of tragedy that was grounded less in a tragic ending, and more in the structuring principles of the form. Pareus, I show in this essay, saw the form of tragedy as consisting in a careful patterning of acts and choruses—precisely the division of parts that Milton highlights in his epistle on tragedy. For Pareus, and by extension Milton, this form demands a particular type of practice from readers. Readers must search for the proper harmony among the various parts, a process that is made more time-consuming, and thus more effective at providing spiritual exercise, by the text’s obscurity.

⁴ For more on the encounter between Milton and Dryden, see also Luxon and Zwicker.

⁵ Recent scholars who have explored how *Samson Agonistes* engages with Milton’s political positions in the post-Restoration moment include Dzelzainis; Gregerson; Knoppers; Prawdzik, 170-217; and Serjeantson.

The earliest extended engagement with Milton's use of Pareus came in a classic article by Barbara Lewalski, who began by noting that "Pareus seems at first to conflate the terms *drama* and *tragedy*" (1051), and she understood the specificity of the latter term in relation to the suffering of the tragic protagonist. More recently, Russ Leo's *Tragedy as Philosophy in the Reformation World* includes separate chapters on Pareus's commentary and *Samson Agonistes*. In his account of Pareus, Leo argues that "audiences are interpolated into apocalyptic history" as "Pareus licenses his readers to use their experiences to confirm the prophecies in Revelation" (80). Despite his exciting analysis of how "Pareus discovers tragedy as prophetic genre" (48), Leo denies that Milton shares Pareus's vision of tragedy (215n29). While I acknowledge that Milton drew on a wide range of sources in his definition of tragedy, this essay turns to the features of tragedy that prove attractive to both the German theologian and the English poet. In doing so, I mean to take Pareus seriously as a resource for understanding Milton's conception of how tragedy affects its readers. It is precisely this type of prophetic interpolation of readers into divine history, which Leo locates in Pareus's commentary, that Milton aims to achieve in his tragedy.

Both Milton and Pareus were attuned to how the interplay of performed visionary event and tragic text created the conditions for the reader's spiritual exercise.⁶ When attempting to categorize drama that has not been written expressly for stage performance, critics have tended to use the term "closet drama," an architectural metaphor that invites images of privacy, domesticity, and, potentially, political resistance.⁷ Pareus gives an alternate account. For him, the point of having a written drama is above all to be able to return to it repeatedly. The process of discovering the obscure harmonies between the various acts and

⁶ Sharon Achinstein and David Ainsworth, in their respective books *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* and *Milton and the Spiritual Reader*, argue in related ways that Milton sought out particularly fit readers for his works, and that those readers could in turn develop that fitness through further reading. Achinstein focuses on the capacity of readers to become political subjects, and she points to a Milton for whom "any rank of citizen may become virtuous—by proper discipline, trial, and reading" (16). For Ainsworth, meanwhile, Milton developed a model that "permits fit and active readers to struggle in uncovering and exploring portions of God's truth as he reveals it, through scripture, through other believers, and through the world at large" (5), and this readerly fitness "compares in many respects to physical exercise and fitness" (4). The image of reading as a strenuous form of discipline or exercise, which these critics find in Milton, applies equally well to Pareus, but neither critic considers the place of tragedy in their model. For recent explorations of the tensions inherent in Milton's demand that his readers be "fit," see Chernaik; Greteman; and Harper.

⁷ The most forceful argument for seeing *Samson Agonistes* as closet drama is that of Elizabeth Sauer, who sees the form as serving as "a vehicle for political criticism" in the case of *Samson Agonistes* because Milton highlights the interior drama, against the theatrical culture of the Restoration (199). Vanita Neelakanta, as part of an argument about the absence and invisibility of God, finds that "Milton's closet drama, produced in old age and blindness, plunges the reader into darkness" (47).

choruses depends on being able to move back and forth in the book, a movement that would be impossible while watching the linear progression of a performance. Influential accounts of early modern reading by Peter Stallybrass and Adam Smyth have taken such discontinuous approaches as central to Protestant reading practices, in which verses from the Bible could be cut up, rearranged, and collated in new ways to meet new situations.⁸ The interpretations that Pareus gives of Revelation and Milton gives of Judges 13-16 similarly assume that readers will labor to collate the different parts of the text, figuring out how to understand the connections between the different “Acts distinguisht each by a Chorus of Heavenly Harpings.”

By casting these biblical texts as tragedies, Pareus and Milton move beyond this process of collation and give each text a unified form, complete unto itself. The tragic catastrophe of each text—the return of Christ and the Last Judgment in Pareus’s case, Samson’s destruction of the Philistine theater in Milton’s—provides a final point of absolute meaning toward which every reader should move. Both tragic interpreters assume the existence of such an absolute meaning, even as it cannot yet be fully perceived: the Last Judgment has not yet arrived, and human perceivers cannot know if Samson’s actions are truly inspired by God. The precise alignments of the tragedy’s parts remain hidden, and they remain doubly hidden for us secular readers in the modern academy. When Milton crafts a disjunction in his tragedy between the interpretation of events given by the Chorus and that given by Samson, he does not simply expect an intellectual analysis of his work: he hopes to inspire faithful readers to a spiritual struggle.

I.

In describing Revelation as a tragedy, Pareus assumes that it records an original dramatic performance. He opens his chapter on the “parts of the Revelation” with the assertion that the bulk of John’s book is taken up with a series of “*seven Visions*,

⁸ Stallybrass gives the example of the Protestant martyr Anne Askew, featured in Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, who committed remarkable feats of biblical collation in the face of her Catholic interrogators—Stallybrass cites a single paragraph in which “Askew collates John 2, Exodus 34, II Corinthians 3, the history of Bell, Daniel 14, Acts 7, Luke 21, Amos 9, Isaiah 59 (one reference to the Pentateuch, three references to the Prophets, one reference to the Apocrypha . . . , two references to the Gospels, and two references to the Epistles)” (72). Smyth’s key example is Nicholas Ferrar’s religious community at Little Gidding, which made fifteen so-called “Gospel Harmonies”: “lavish folio books constructed by selecting printed texts of the four Gospels; cutting up these printed texts, often on a word-by-word level; reorganizing the text, and distributing, and gluing, the new word order under 150 chapters, describing Christ’s life” (461).

clearly enough and distinctly shewed by Christ unto John in the Spirit, in the Ile *Patmos*,” where the apostle was traditionally assumed to have been exiled (19). The reference to these visions being shown “in the Spirit” might seem to suggest that John only saw them inwardly, but Pareus insists that the performance was real. In the next chapter, “Touching the Forme of the Revelation,” Pareus compares his own dramatic reading of Revelation with the church father Origen’s reading of the Song of Songs as a drama with four characters, and goes on to claim that Jesus revealed the visions to John “by his Angell, after the manner of a *Dramaticall Representation*, and that it is an *Heavenly Drama* or interlude, not onely of foure, but of diverse persons and things, by Typicall Speeches and Actions, exhibiting to John’s sight or hearing those things in the Heavenly Theater, which God would have him to understand” (20). Just as twentieth-century scholars imagined so-called bad quartos to have come into existence when actors memorially reconstructed a play in which they had taken part, Pareus here seems to imagine Revelation as a bad quarto of sorts, with Christ the playwright, the Spirit or the Angels as actors, and John the scribe who provides the textual record. The main difference, it would seem, is that this quarto escapes being “bad,” thanks to the safeguards of divine inspiration. In presenting John’s book as a tragedy, then, Pareus does not picture it as a closet drama, which would have been written without a stage history in mind. Instead, he locates John’s visions, recorded in the scriptural text, as having their origin in that “Heavenly Theater” where the angels performed for John.

As Pareus imagines a dramatic provenance for John’s book, he encourages its readers to keep that provenance in mind. Since the original performance was only meant for John, however, readers are left with the task of distinguishing between that performance and the text that they are reading. The proper reader of Revelation, for Pareus, should vacillate between imagining the original performance and treating the book as a written tragedy on which to meditate. Pareus shows, first, that Revelation invites its reader to see and hear a drama acted out: “For as in humane Tragedies, diverse persons one after another come upon the Theater to represent things done, and so again depart: diverse Chores also or Companies of Musicians and Harpers distinguish the diversity of the *Acts*, and while the *Actors* hold up, do with musicall accord sweeten the wearinesse of the Spectators, and keepe them in attention” (20). John may have been the only audience for the original visions, but Pareus allows the reader to approach the text as if the visions and the “new Songs, and worthy Hymmes” can be seen and heard.

While Paraeus has placed his readers in John’s seat in the audience, he immediately goes on to remind them that they are, in fact, readers. The book has

been given its dramatic form “not so much to lessen the wearisomnesse of the Spectators, as to infuse holy meditations into the mindes of the Readers, and to lift them up to Heavenly matters” (20). On the one hand, the spectacular elements here, such as the “Companies of Musicians and Harpers,” aid readers in paying attention to the text, and the sweetness of these elements will inspire them to keep reading. On the other hand, there is the risk that readers will focus too much on the spectacular moments of the “Heavenly Drama” and end up ignoring the “Heavenly matters.” Even if readers can and should try to see John’s visions in their minds, this imagined spectatorship is not their main task, but only in service of their “holy meditations.” By keeping the heavenly drama visible in their mind’s eye, returning to it again and again, readers can allow the text to infuse them. This infusion, attempting to unify the mind with the heavenly matter of the text, depends on spending significant time poring over the book, and Pareus suggests that God would have us, “by continuall prayers, meditations and observations to search out [such things], touching the future state of the Church” (20). It would be impossible to engage in this type of meditation if one were simply watching a performance, and Pareus thus demands that readers of Revelation finally be readers, not spectators.

The meditative mode of reading, or spiritual engagement with the biblical text, that Pareus proposes is highly demanding, and to inspire his readers he points to the “more then thirty yeers” he has himself “employed” in studying Revelation. In the next chapter of his introduction, “Touching the Generall Method of the Revelation,” he begins by admitting that he still has not accurately and fully grasped the order of John’s book. He can only tell readers “as much as the Lord in mercy hath for the present revealed unto mee,” and he will do so mainly “to stir up the endeavours of others” (20-21). Pareus proceeds to give readers a model of this endeavor in his own intellectual biography. He began his serious study of the Bible under the guidance of “my Master Zacharie Ursinus that great divine” fifty-two years earlier, but he was not allowed to progress to the reading of Revelation until he had further mastered the earlier parts of the New Testament. Referring to himself as “the *Reader*,” Pareus describes arriving at the penultimate book, Jude, only to be told by his master to recommence and “READ . . . *Matthew*,” for the reader remains “ignorant of the difficulties” particular to Revelation. After at least five years of this frustrated desire to read the final book of the New Testament, Ursinus finally guides our “reader” forward, at which point the young Pareus carefully notes down his master’s words on the text, until he “began to observe somewhat of the obscurity about the distinction and analogie of the Visions” (21). The first step toward becoming a reader of

Revelation, he suggests, involves the realization of its deep obscurity, and one must begin, Pareus implies, by accepting that this text will be more difficult to understand than any other book of the New Testament. It is only after Pareus has himself taken over Ursinus's chair as professor, and has lectured on Revelation "seven times at least," that he can move away from the initial state of confusion: "I at length seemed unto my selfe to observe some kind of Harmony in certain *Visions*, and as it were some distinct *Acts* of most of the *Visions*" (21). The harmony that Pareus begins to observe here is tied to the tragic form of Revelation, particularly the division into separate "*Acts*." In his own model process of reading Revelation, then, Pareus implies that other readers have begun to progress when they start seeing the various parts of John's book as such "*Acts*," pointing toward the form of tragedy.

Pareus thus links this mode of reading he advocates, which would infuse readers' minds with holy meditations, with the work of piecing together and interrelating the various parts of the biblical tragedy. He finds an earlier proponent of this mode of textual meditation in St. Augustine, and he twice quotes a comment on Revelation from Augustine's *Christian Doctrine*, which focuses on the processes of reading:

In [Revelation] many things are obscurely spoken, to exercise the mind of the Reader: and in it are a few things, by the manifestation whereof the rest might with labour bee found out: chiefly because it so repeateth the same things after a diverse manner, as if it seemed to speake of different things, whereas we shall finde that it speakes of the very same things, after a diverse manner. (21)

Pareus is especially attracted to this quote for the connection Augustine draws between the reader's spiritual exercise and the labor of understanding how exactly the "same things" are repeated in "a diverse manner," that is, how an idea that appears in one form in one act can reappear in a different form in a later act.

Working to understand the interrelations of the various acts and choruses will allow the reader of Revelation to develop his or her spiritual fitness, and Pareus positions himself as having seen this mode of interrelating the parts more clearly than most other interpreters. He frames his claim about Revelation as a tragedy polemically, against those earlier readers who have not understood that the various parts of John's book are the acts and choruses of a drama, and who have thus been led "to seeke and imagine Anticipations, Recapitulations, and unnecessary Mysteries in those things, which either served onely to the *Dramat-*

icall Decorum, or else had a manifest respect to the method of the Visions” (20). This method refers to the way in which Revelation is constructed out of the acts and choruses of tragedy, meaning that the reader’s task lies in considering the relationships among these various parts. One must move in one’s mind from what is clear in one portion, the whorish woman, for example, who stands for the Church of Rome, to illuminate that which is obscure—in this case, that “the woman clothed with the Sun, signifies the true Church” (22). This process involves carefully moving back and forth between different elements of the text: “the former Visions are for the most part more obscure, the latter bring clearer light to the darknesse of the former, if you rightly observe them” (24). Thus, for example, “The *measuring of the Temple*, and the Prophecie of *two Witnesses* seems to be obscure, in the *third Vision*: but it is illustrated by the preaching of the *three Angels* against Antichrist, in the *fourth vision*” (24). For Pareus, this interpenetration of obscure and clear parts is particular to tragedy, and he implies that readers must approach Revelation differently than they would other biblical books. The reader, in his model, is forced to labor intensely in connecting the parts, a labor made all the more intense because so many parts of Revelation are not clear in and of themselves. The *Commentary* provides an aid in this work, but readers would be mistaken in relying entirely on the results of Pareus’s labor. They must pore over the biblical tragedy themselves, investing themselves in the time-consuming process of discovering its hidden harmonies—a particular mode of reading that represents, for Pareus, the highest form of spiritual exercise. This model of reading biblical tragedy, especially demanding for its readers, would have been attractive to Milton as he thought through the spiritual value of challenging dramatic forms.

II.

When Milton first refers to Pareus’s model of Revelation as tragedy, in the preface to Book 2 of *The Reason of Church Government*, he highlights—as he will again almost three decades later in the introductory epistle to *Samson Agonistes*—the division of parts so central to the *Commentary*. Complaining that he has had to turn away from poetic composition to engage in direct polemic, Milton lists various types of literature he hopes to write in the years to come, including epic, odes, and hymns, and he finds examples of “dramatic constitutions” in Sophocles, Euripides, and Origen’s reading of the Song of Songs. Invoking “the grave authority of Pareus,” he also notes that “the Apocalypse of St. John is the majestic image of a high and stately tragedy, shutting up and intermingling

her solemn scenes and acts with a sevenfold chorus of hallelujahs and harping symphonies” (669). Milton shows sensitivity, here, to Pareus’s sense that the book of Revelation originated with a spectacular performance that was visible, and above all audible. In noting that the “solemn scenes and acts” have been intermingled with the “sevenfold chorus,” Milton also points toward Pareus’s faith in the value of a reading practice focused on the interrelation of parts. Milton is above all concerned, throughout this preface, with the contrast between poetic labor, which leaves the poet “soaring in the high region of his fancies,” and “the cool element of prose,” the more immediate work of his polemical pamphlet (667). The poet in Milton desires to engage in the long-lasting and timeless labor of literary creation while the polemicist hopes to make his mark in the here and now. Pareus’s model of reading tragedy as spiritual exercise, then, serves Milton the future poet well, for it allows him to imagine that his literary creations will have a lasting spiritual impact on readers.

Throughout this preface, Milton is concerned with the varied effects of various types of writing, both on society at large and on individual readers. The form in which Milton is speaking at the moment, the polemical prose pamphlet, aims more at the reformation of society than individuals, and this goal demands a more immediate effect. *The Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelaty*, as the title suggests, argues against a hierarchical model of church rule, with bishops the prelates who direct from afar, and instead proposes a local form of government in which the priest would be able to minister and respond to the individual needs of parishioners. In trying to bring about this new mode of church government, Milton feels there is no time to waste, and right before revealing his poetic interests, he imagines the regret that he will feel if he retreats into literary composition at this key moment. If his fears come true and the church continues to suffer at the hands of the prelates, he will hear a voice within calling him “[t]imorous and ungrateful,” while a successful transformation brought about without his help would leave him feeling “[s]lothful, and ever to be set light by” (666). The time for political action is now, and the slow labor of literary composition must be set aside.

The sense of immediacy that Milton feels in 1642 means that a different type of reading is called for, and Milton explicitly abandons the deliberate mode of reading he would have found in Pareus. In the preface to the first book of *The Reason of Church Government*, long before we find out about his poetic aspirations, he argues that deciding an issue like church government demands not a long meditation on scripture, but a clear and immediate perception of its meaning:

Let others, therefore, dread and shun the scriptures for their darkness; I shall wish I may deserve to be reckoned among those who admire and dwell upon them for their clearness. And this seems to be the cause why in those places of holy writ, wherein is treated of church government, the reasons thereof are not formally and professedly set down, because to him that heeds attentively the drift and scope of Christian profession, they easily imply themselves. (642)

The model of reading scripture that Milton proposes here is directly opposed to that of Pareus. Where Pareus, following Augustine, highlighted the challenging obscurity of Revelation, Milton argues that verses about the church should be perfectly clear; where Pareus showed that reading scripture could exercise the mind, Milton seems to believe that Christian readers are already fit to believe. When the reader is not approaching a particularly difficult part of scripture, like the tragedy of Revelation, the process of reading can be very different.

But if the present polemical context allows certain parts of scripture to “easily imply themselves” to readers, Milton nevertheless makes it clear that other forms of writing necessitate a more complex process of production and consumption. In part, these literary forms, like epic and tragedy, will require a significant investment from the writer. Milton begins his list of the types of work he hopes to write by noting that “[t]ime serves not now” to fully develop an account of these forms, and he cannot yet “give any certain account of what the mind at home in the spacious circuits of her musing hath liberty to propose to herself” (668). Milton does not know how right he will prove to be, for just as Pareus needed decades of reading to fully grasp Revelation, he would need nearly three decades of musing until he in fact produced works in these genres.

Milton does not restrict this sense of a time-consuming process to himself as a writer, but also hopes that his future writings will have a profound effect, in part on his nation, but above all on individual readers. On the wider scale, there is the goal of “the adorning of my native tongue,” interpreting “the best and sagest things among mine own citizens,” and Milton aims to inspire the “just and pious nations doing valiantly through faith against the enemies of Christ” (668, 670). Alongside these civic goals, Milton plans to inspire and instruct individual readers, and this work of influence will require writings with a particular type of literary shape:

Teaching over the whole book of sanctity and virtue through all the instances of example, with such delight to those especially of soft and delicious temper

who will not so much as look upon Truth herself, unless they see her elegantly dressed, that whereas the paths of honesty and good life appear now rugged and difficult, though they be indeed easy and pleasant, they would then appear to all men both easy and pleasant, though they were rugged and difficult indeed. (670)

With the suggestion that truth should be “elegantly dressed” to attract readers, Milton might seem to present a model at odds with Pareus’s depiction of biblical tragedy as particularly obscure and challenging, but Pareus did allow that the musical choruses were there to “sweeten the weariness of the Spectators.” This sweetness would only be problematic, for Pareus, if it distracts from its proper use of inspiring readers to “holy meditations,” and Pareus thus assumes that readers are assisted in their spiritual labor by the literary elements particular to tragedy, in this case choruses.

The pleasant literary form must be added to content that inspires meditation, and Milton is even more worried than Pareus about the risk of improper readerly pleasure. He complains about those “libidinous and ignorant poetasters, who . . . for the most part lap up vicious principles in sweet pills to be swallowed down” (670)—a concern with matching form and content that follows directly from his discussion of dressing truth elegantly. It is not clear if the “paths of honesty and good life” are in fact “easy and pleasant” or “difficult and rugged,” and Milton creates significant ambiguity by first stating that they are “indeed” the former, only to repeat that they are “indeed” the latter. The dressing up of truth itself seems to worry Milton, for he proposes it specifically for readers “of soft and delicious temper,” and his goal here would seem to lie in inspiring his readers to move beyond that disposition. Using an elegant garment for truth, covering it with pleasing poetic lines, will invite readers to stay with the text, and Milton thereby hopes to inspire them to meditate on the extent to which virtue is foremost “easy and pleasant,” but will also prove itself challenging, “rugged and difficult.” Just as Pareus imagined Revelation to have a form that was engaging and pleasant, with its heavenly harpings, and simultaneously obscure and difficult to understand, Milton hopes to create literary works that both inspire and challenge readers.

In this description of his future literary works inculcating virtue, Milton does not distinguish between the various types of literature he hopes to write, with epic and tragedy seemingly equal in their fitness for meditative reading practices. He does, however, give pride of place to tragedy as a model for his current situation, and in doing so he suggests that it is the ideal site for laborious, but ultimately rewarding, modes of reading. In the opening of the second preface, Milton com-

plains that his knowledge, which would seem to be the “lightsomest possession of the mind,” has instead become “a sorer burden of mind, and more pressing, than any supportable toil or weight which the body can labor under” (665). Polemically positioning himself as a prophet, Milton explicitly casts himself as playing a role in a tragedy, and just as he will in *Samson Agonistes*’s epistle on tragedy, he brings together Revelation and Greek tragedy. He is first reminded of “that mysterious book of revelation which the great evangelist was bid to eat, as it had been some eye-brightening electuary of knowledge and foresight, though it were sweet in his mouth and in the learning, it was bitter in his belly, bitter in the denouncing,”⁹ and then continues that he is like Tiresias in *Oedipus Rex*, entering the stage “be-moaning his lot, that he knew more than other men” (665-66). Only a few pages later, Milton will make clear that he imagines Revelation to be a tragedy, so the textual encounter presented here stands in for tragic experience, pointing to the suffering that can come to the virtuous. The sweetness of this “mysterious book” is completely unlike the “sweet pills” of those “libidinous and ignorant poetasters” who simply allow their readers to sink into a seemingly pure pleasure.

This “mysterious book” that Milton finds in Revelation has been given a pleasant covering to make it attractive, but that sweet cover serves mainly to induce a laborious reading, discovering the pain of needing to convey the truth. In his commentary on the same verse, Pareus likewise treats it as a model for dedicated reading. He admits that this “little book” is metaphorical, for “[b]ookes of paper or parchment are not to be eaten *properly*, as not being fit food for man,” and the lessons it teaches have to do with the importance of continuously meditating on scripture: “Here the ministers of the word are taught earnestly to devour, or eat up the doctrine of salvation divinely written & received from Christ, that is, diligently to read, understand, search, and meditate, & as it were to turne it into their verie moisture and blood” (207). Even if the transformation of text to “moisture and blood” is metaphorical, Pareus insists that repeated, continuous, and time-consuming labor with a book will allow its reader to fully grasp the truths contained therein. For the young Milton of *The Reason of Church Government*, this is a model to aspire to. The polemical pamphlet he is now writing will have a different, more direct, effect, and need not be meditated on until it has become the reader’s “moisture and blood.” In the future, however, his dream is to write a work that would be so sweet in the mouth that readers will meditate on

⁹ Milton is referring here to a curious passage in Revelation, where John is approached by an angel with a “little book”: “And I went unto the angel, and said unto him, Give me the little book. And he said unto me, Take it, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey” (Rev. 10.9).

it long enough that they can fully swallow down its bitter truths. A successful tragedy will provide the perfect form for inspiring this type of reading, with its elegant choruses and verse lines inviting readers to keep meditating on the text, while it will simultaneously reveal to them the tragic truths of life in the fallen world.

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III.

When Milton did come to write a tragedy, three decades later, he remained equally concerned with what effect it would have on readers, as he combined his interest in both Aristotelian and biblical models of the genre. He opens his introductory epistle to *Samson Agonistes* by noting that tragedy “hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems” (549), suggesting that it is a form particularly suitable to influencing its readers in positive directions. Milton continues by explaining how tragedy can have this effect, for it is “said by Aristotle to be of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of these and such like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirr’d up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated” (549). Milton has great faith that tragedy can have a transformational effect on his readers, even if the process described for the audience here would seem to differ from the one found in Pareus, considering that Milton seems to focus more on the purging of passions than on spiritual meditation. Russ Leo, who sees Milton’s use of Aristotle’s *Poetics* as more important than the influence of Pareus, argues that the purging discussed here can in fact be seen as part of a spiritual process. He points to Milton’s Latin translation of Aristotle’s Greek term catharsis as *lustratio*, or purification, instead of the expected focus on purging in the usual terms *expiatio* or *purgation* (227-37). For Leo, what takes place in *Samson Agonistes* is less a purging of emotional states, and more of a purification by sacrifice or a ritual cleansing in which God himself might enter the tragedy, even if only ambiguously, through his direct influence on Samson.¹⁰ But if Leo thus stages a possible divine encounter for Samson, he is less interested in how this purification might work for the reader.

The stirring up of the reader’s passions is an extraordinary process in a Christian tragedy, especially as readers might hope to replicate Samson’s purifying direct encounter with God. In fact, Milton does suggest that the reader’s passions can be purged, for he immediately goes on to make an analogy with medi-

¹⁰ “What is at stake” in Milton’s testing of Aristotelian tragedy, Leo writes, “is the extent to which one can rationally understand or depict the causality of divine inspiration” (247).

cine: “for so in Physic things of melancholic hue and quality are us’d against melancholy” (549). Milton’s use of melancholy here has been explored by Karen Edwards, who argues that he used the condition as a source of possible divine inspiration against a Restoration medical culture intent on pathologizing any such religious enthusiasm. While the melancholic’s possible inspiration would seem to take place in a single moment, Edwards shows that Milton in fact figures Samson’s experience above all as one of extended waiting.¹¹ She notes that the tragedy opens with Samson pointing to a bank with the words “There I am wont to sit” (4), indicating for Edwards “a longstanding habit of dreary waiting” in the sense that “[t]here is no hint that justice, vengeance, or revelation approaches” (234). Edwards does not translate this sense of waiting directly to readers, but Milton’s Aristotelian sense that tragedy can “temper and reduce [the reader’s passions] to just measure with a kind of delight” suggests that readers will in fact experience something of Samson’s waiting. A “just measure” cannot be reached in a flash, and the focus on slow meditation demanded by tragedy that we found in Pareus and in *The Reason of Church Government* is strongly implied here. Just as those earlier texts invited readers to savor the sweetness of the musical passages in a tragedy, Milton assumes that readers will take “delight” in this tragedy, and in this process of readerly delight, they will be inspired to remain with the text for a long time, exercising their own capacity for sustained reading.

In arguing for the value of tragedy in the remainder of his epistle, Milton specifically highlights the importance of properly using choruses. We have already seen him point to Pareus’s division of Revelation “into Acts distinguish’d each by a Chorus of Heavenly Harpings and Song between,” a description which emphasizes the centrality of the choruses, and he is quite concerned with showing that these choruses contribute to making tragedy a form especially suited for gravity. He notes that “Men in highest dignity have labor’d not a little to be thought able to compose a Tragedy” (549), and he includes Augustus Caesar, Seneca, and the church father Gregory Nazianzen among those thought to have made the attempt. Milton provides this list as a contrast with those who have included improper material in their tragedies:

This is mention’d to vindicate Tragedy from the small esteem, or rather infamy, which in the account of many it undergoes at this day with other common Interludes; happ’ning through the Poet’s error of intermixing Comic

¹¹ For an alternative interpretation of Samson’s melancholy focused on masculinity and effeminacy, see Daniel, *Melancholy Assemblage* 200-28.

stuff with tragic sadness and gravity; or introducing trivial and vulgar persons, which by all judicious hath been counted absurd; and brought in without discretion, corruptly to gratify the people. (550)

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In drawing this contrast between a proper and an improper mixture of parts, Milton also contrasts audiences, with the judicious who reject the presence of low material clearly superior to the people who are gratified by this mingling.

The ideal reader of Milton's tragedy will understand the importance of a proper balancing of parts, a balancing supported by the use of a Chorus, which "is here introduc'd after the Greek manner, not ancient only but modern, and still in use among the *Italians*. In the modeling therefore of this Poem, with good reason, the Ancients and *Italians* are rather follow'd, as of much more authority and fame" (550). Milton has built his tragedy on a classical model, paying particular attention to how the chorus structures the drama, and he expects the judicious reader to appreciate this structure. As we know from Pareus, the search for the harmonious connection of parts is an important struggle particular to readers of tragedy, and in Milton the central connections lie between the chorus and the passions imitated in the main plot. On the one hand, that is, readers are expected to feel their own passions stirred up by seeing them imitated, and, on the other hand, this process is balanced, controlled, and slowed down by the classical presence of the chorus.

The chorus of *Samson Agonistes* is itself concerned with the processes of reading, and it explicitly rejects a model that makes reading too facile. In a key scene, Samson's father Manoa ends a debate about accepting God's will by urging his son to admit "healing words from these thy friends" (605), and the chorus proceeds to consider what type of words might have such an effect. First, it considers if one might gain lessons from books:

Many are the sayings of the wise
In ancient and in modern books enroll'd,
Extolling Patience as the truest fortitude,
And to the bearing well of all calamities,
All chances incident to man's frail life
Consolatories writ
With studied argument. (652-58)

The mode of reading suggested here is quite different from the tragic reading we would recognize from Pareus. While Pareus argues for a special force to the

reading of tragedy, because the reader must struggle to understand the text's obscure connections, the arguments on behalf of patience are presented clearly and logically in the books imagined by the chorus. Readers thus, paradoxically, seem much less likely to learn lessons from these books, and the chorus itself goes on to suggest why such books are less likely to have a significant effect:

But with th'afflicted in his pangs thir sound
Little prevails, or rather seems a tune
Harsh, and of dissonant mood from his complaint,
Unless he feel within
Some source of consolation from above;
Secret refreshings, that repair his strength,
And fainting spirits uphold. (660-66)

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For the chorus, these books, with their studied arguments, are like dissonant music to their readers, raising the inverse possibility of books that would provide a more pleasing harmony. Most importantly, this would be a harmony between text and reader, with the book able to imitate the afflictions of readers, allowing them to feel their own fear and terror stirred up—an imitation accessible in a tragedy like *Samson Agonistes*.

If readers of this passage recognize themselves, unable to feel consoled by exhortations to patience, the Chorus can point outward toward the tragedy as a whole, invoking the hope that the reader can feel refreshed by recognizing his or her own suffering in Samson.¹² But the harmonious musical effect sought here is not only between text and reader, but also within the text itself, for Milton is quite clear in his epistle that the tragic chorus was in the original Greek context given “a kind of Stanzas fram’d only for the Music, then us’d with the Chorus that sung” (550). Just as Pareus imagines the choruses of Revelation as originally having been “heavenly harpings and songs,” Milton imagines that tragic choruses originated as harmonious musical tunes. By having the chorus in *Samson Agonistes* oppose disharmonious modes of reading, he points toward the possibility that tragedy can have a deeper harmony, both in the sense of containing pleasing musical harmonies, and in the sense of its parts fitting together in a unified harmony. Pareus believed that he had become a qualified reader of Revelation when he began to observe “some kind of Harmony in certain *Visions*,” and Milton

¹² In his recent study *Milton, Music and Literary Interpretation*, David Ainsworth argues that the tragedy “leads readers to pity Samson, and through that pity aligns them with Christ’s redemptive harmonies” (120-21).

seems to hope that his readers will similarly begin to discover the harmonies between acts and choruses in *Samson Agonistes*.

Considering its concern about lessons presented too clearly, however, the Chorus ironically tends to speak in a voice strikingly similar to those unsatisfactory “consolatories writ.” In its first conversation with Samson, the hero begins by, in part, taking the blame for his own suffering, having given up his “fort of silence to a Woman” (236), but he also transfers his fault to “*Israel’s* Governors, and Heads of tribes” (242), who abandoned him to their enemies. Samson seems left despairing if God will ever deliver his people, and in response to this despair the Chorus warns against doubting that God will justly care for the Israelites. It proclaims that “Just are the ways of God, / And justifiable to Men” (293-94), and discourages any doubt of that justice: “Yet more there be who doubt his ways not just, / As to his own edicts, found contradicting, / Then give the reins to wand’ring thought, / Regardless of his glory’s diminution” (300-03). The chorus, then, seems to “extol patience” for Samson, and considering its own later skepticism of such extolling, the tragic reader who returns to this passage might wonder just how Samson is supposed to rein in his wandering thoughts.

Indeed, if readers move even further backwards, all the way to the beginning, they will find a Samson completely unable to control his thoughts, complaining of the “restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm / Of hornets arm’d, no sooner found alone, / But rush upon me thronging” (19-21). In moving their way through the tragedy, backward and forward, readers find that they cannot simply trust what the chorus tells them. Rather, they are forced to ask themselves how the chorus’s moral aphorisms fit with Samson’s real pain. Should Samson be able to rein in his “restless thoughts”? And, for that matter, to what extent should readers themselves allow their buzzing thoughts to wander freely in their encounter with tragedy? These are the types of questions that a tragedy forces upon its readers. As Milton would know from the model of tragic reading he found in Pareus, the connection between the parts of a tragedy could not simply appear clearly. Readers must be invited to struggle through the parts, trying to discover when their own emotions are properly stirred up and when their thoughts should be shaped by the exhortations of the chorus.

The reader’s struggle is especially heightened at the key moment when Samson resolves to go to the feast of Dagon, leading to his final act of violent destruction. Samson here tells the chorus to “Be of good courage, I begin to feel / Some rousing motions in me which dispose / To something extraordinary my thoughts” (1381-83), demanding a judgment from the reader, who must decide if they believe these “rousing motions” to be from God, or Samson’s own mis-

guided feeling. This moment of decision has been hotly debated for many years.¹³ I do not attempt to contribute directly to this debate here; rather, I hope to show that Milton invites his readers to struggle in trying to properly judge and understand Samson's act, and that this work for readers is tied up with properly reading the relations between Samson and the Chorus. Coiro points out that questions about "whether the poem is a triumphant affirmation of a Christian narrative or whether it is a mordant meditation on religious extremism" come down to a more precise question: "[D]o we accept the Chorus as definitive? Or do we suspect them?" (108).

Right before Samson finally decides to be displayed in front of his Philistine enemies, the Chorus tells him, "[w]here the heart joins not, outward acts defile not," to which he immediately replies, "where outward force constrains, the sentence holds" (1368-69), and he continues by claiming that "Commands are no constraints. If I obey them, / I do it freely" (1372-73). Samson and the Chorus have directly opposed views on the extent to which Samson's spirit is soiled, with the Chorus believing that his inner experience can be disconnected from his outward act, and Samson arguing that he is in fact making his own choice. In presenting these opposing viewpoints in close proximity, Milton forces readers to engage in a labor at once intellectual and spiritual, seeking to understand the underlying truth.

Milton ends his tragedy by pointing to another way in which the Samson story could be read, highlighting by contrast what is at stake in reading it as a tragedy. Manoa, in his final speech with the Chorus, lets us know that he will bring Samson's corpse home with him, as a memorial:

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 enroll'd
In copious Legend, or sweet Lyric Song.
Thither shall all the valiant youth resort,
And from his memory inflame thir breasts
To matchless valor, and adventures high. (1733-40)

¹³ The bibliography of this debate is massive. For an extensive survey, see Gregory, who argues that Milton in fact means for readers to take Samson's final outbreak of violence as divinely inspired. Important proponents of the view that Milton leaves the judgment of Samson's final act ambiguous include Joseph Wittreich and Peter Herman. For recent attempts to think about Samson's subjectivity in ways that move beyond or reframe the debate, see Lodine-Chaffey and Shullenberger.

This monument, with its trophies and legends, records Samson's story as heroic narrative, and those who see it will not need to struggle in reading its meaning. The readers of Manoa's monument will immediately understand that it enrolls Samson among the heroic, and the correct response is an attempt to emulate his actions. Readers of tragedy, however, might take pause at this monument. It erases the struggle, the time-consuming focus, that would allow readers true spiritual exercise. Milton returns his readers to the beginning of the tragedy, asking them to re-read with this monument in mind, a re-reading in which they can judge if Manoa's ascription of legendary status to Samson is correct, if Samson is in fact a model of "matchless valor, and adventures high."

This question—what is the proper relationship between tragedy and monument?—is itself one of the more obscure questions raised by the text, but that does not mean that it is unanswerable. Pareus consistently highlighted the obscurity of Revelation, but he did not do so to deny that it could be understood. Instead, he saw the obscurity as inspiring the reader to dedicated and serious spiritual exercise, and this is the same type of exercise that Milton hopes to inspire in his Christian readers by filling the tragedy with so many mysteries of interpretation. Scholars may continue to debate the subtle tensions between Samson and the Chorus, but from Milton's perspective we can never discover the true answers without submitting to divine inspiration. On the model presented in this essay, it would almost be impossible for me to answer questions about the moral value of Samson's act, for as an essentially secular reader I do not accept I should read this text as spiritual exercise. For Milton, readers must trust that their reading is a spiritual activity, so to the extent that we think of our interpretative practices as secular, we are not the readers Milton sought.

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