

mid-Volie” in order “Not to destroy” (6.853–55), this contrast suggesting that Milton’s tragedy is less an exaltation of a hero than the problematizing of a then received notion of heroism. The ultimate question is whether Milton’s tragedy, as a cherished artifact of Western literary tradition, shows, in Mohamed’s words, “evidence of the very brand of thought that the political dominant vilifies in the Other” (338) or whether, breaking free of his own culture of violence, Milton here mounts a critique of it. When it comes to answering that question, Mohamed writes cunningly; Carey, compellingly.

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TO THE EDITOR:

We can only be grateful for Feisal G. Mohamed’s “Confronting Religious Violence: Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*,” an insightful essay that brings the past and the present into a genuinely productive dialogue. Yet as much as I found myself instructed and delighted by Mohamed’s analysis, I respectfully disagree with him on two key points.

Mohamed argues that we can detect Milton’s approval of Samson’s bringing the roof down through the lack of graphic detail. Mohamed writes:

The Miltonic Messenger’s very brief statement on the human cost of Samson’s actions, by comparison [with Senecan tragedy], seems designed not to grant the Philistines the status of human beings. Unlike the Chorus’s more graphic description of miraculous “slaughter,” which description incorrectly discerns God’s ways, the Messenger’s account glosses over human torment in a way that does allow comfortable attribution of the action to divine agency:

The whole roof after them with burst of
thunder
Upon the heads of all who sat beneath,
Lords, Ladies, Captains, Counsellors, or
Priests
Thir choice nobility and flower, not only
Of this but each *Philistian* City round . . .
(1651–55)

We are never allowed to forget in these lines the victims’ status as Philistine political elite and the attendant association of this class with oppression of Israel. The kind of human suffering

that elicits our horror over Hercules’s actions and complicates our response to Pentheus’s hubris simply does not emerge in Milton’s portrait of the Philistine massacre.

Consequently, Mohamed concludes, we can see in *Samson Agonistes* an example of what Fredric Jameson calls “ideological closure” (336).

While Milton does not give us the precise details of what brick bashed in whose head, nor does he describe the resulting splatter pattern, Milton does *not* gloss over the suffering of the Philistines, as evidenced by the lines immediately preceding the passage quoted by Mohamed. In this passage, Manoa tells us that the Philistines are not united on Samson’s fate. When he approaches various Philistine lords on the matter of ransoming Samson, Manoa recounts:

Some much averse I found and wondrous harsh,
Contemptuous, proud, set on revenge and spite
Others more moderate seeming, but thir aim
Private reward (1461–64)

But a not insignificant minority—one-third, to be precise—Manoa finds

More generous far and civil, who confess’d
They had enough reveng’d, having reduc’t
Thir foe to misery beneath thir fears,
The rest was magnanimity to remit. (1467–70)

It is at this point, immediately after the reader discovers that mercy exists among the Philistines, that we first hear of *everyone’s* destruction: “What noise or shout was that?” Manoa suddenly asks, “it tore the Skie” (1472). Imagining a cry so agonized that “it tore the Skie” highlights rather than glosses over the torment of the Philistines as the building collapses on their heads. And we may speculate that Milton’s blindness would have made sound all the more acute for the poet.

Furthermore, given that some, if not all, of the “[m]ore generous far and civil” are in all likelihood also caught up in the slaughter, one has to ask if they deserved the same fate as their less merciful tribesmen. In other words, the sheer lack of distinction invites the reader to ask if everyone in the theater was equally guilty. Are the generous and civil Philistines, who have had “enough” revenge, as worthy of death as those who continue to desire Samson’s humiliation? Does the simple

fact of one's identity as a Philistine condemn one, regardless of how much or how little one contributes to either Samson's degradation or the war between the Israelites and the Philistines?

One could argue that it is God's will that all the Philistines in the temple die. But as Mohamed rightly points out, neither the reader nor Samson knows God's will. Samson claims that he feels "Some rousing motions in me which dispose / To something extraordinary my thoughts" (1381–82), a passage that echoes the Son's assertion in *Paradise Regained*:

And now by some strong motions I am led
 Into this wilderness, to what intent
 I learn not yet, perhaps I need not know;
 For what concerns my knowledge God reveals
 (1.290–93)

Milton uses almost the same phrase ("rousing motions"; "strong motions") to describe their inner promptings. But a crucial difference separates the two. In *Paradise Regained*, we know that the Son's "strong motions" have their source in God, who tells Gabriel that he wants to "expose [the Son] / To Satan" (1.142–43), and so, God continues:

I mean
 To exercise him in the Wilderness,
 There he shall first lay down the rudiments
 Of his great warfare
 (1.155–58)

But in *Samson Agonistes*, we have no such certainty. Unlike the "strong motions" of *Paradise Regained*, Samson's "rousing motions" are not given an explicitly divine origin. Killing everyone including himself seems to be Samson's idea, and we do not know if God's view as God is entirely absent from this poem.

The discovery that some Philistines want to exercise mercy, the indiscriminate nature of the slaughter, the cry that tears the sky, and the removal of divine agency collectively demonstrate that Milton uses a poetics of incertitude, rather than certitude, as suggested by Mohamed, following Jameson. Far from insisting on ideological closure, *Samson Agonistes* questions the legitimacy of "providential slaughter" and an ideology that marginalizes "the humanity of nonadherents" (336), and Milton does so in a manner particularly relevant today. As many have argued, including

Mohamed, the events of 9/11 lend new urgency to the debates over Milton's poem, as the spectacle of a man committing mass slaughter of the infidels while claiming divine sanction bears a terrible resemblance to the justification used by al-Qaeda. But instead of divorcing *Samson Agonistes* from history or arguing that Milton approves of providential slaughter, I suggest that *Samson Agonistes* invites us to look skeptically at this confluence of religion and mass murder.

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Reply:

I must first express heartfelt thanks to Peter C. Herman for his generous words on my essay and to Joseph Wittreich for sharing some of the nourishing interpretation typical of his two full-length studies of *Samson Agonistes*.

It must be said, however, that neither of Wittreich's books finds a tradition available to Milton denying Samson's divine inspiration. The issue is thus not "Milton and which traditions?" but whether or not Milton departs entirely from tradition. Those claiming he does in *Samson Agonistes* tend to build their houses on shifting sands. Wittreich claims, echoing John Carey, that "[t]o equivocate on Samson's prayer . . . is to equivocate on Samson's heroism." This is simply untrue. In the *Institutes* John Calvin expresses manifest disapproval of Samson's "vicious longing for vengeance" but maintains nonetheless that God grants this "perverted prayer" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 1845 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], bk. 3, ch. 20, sec. 15). I would argue that the removal of this prayer in *Samson Agonistes* allows Milton to distance his hero from a desire to avenge the loss of his "two eyes" (Judg. 16.28) and to emphasize instead a quiet attunement to divine will.

Equally suspect is Wittreich's reference to *A Treatise of Civil Power*, which establishes only that Milton did not think that the members of Parliament he addresses in this tract could hold sufficient confidence in their divine illumination to exercise absolute authority in matters religious. The case of a biblical hero of faith is rather different—the final two books of *Paradise Lost* are