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SAMSON AGONISTES: THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS OF GOD’S “NURSLING”

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Abstract

This paper draws on Fredric Jameson’s triple model of cultural critique in order to unmask the political unconscious underlying John Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*. First, the play is treated as a work of fiction wherein the discrimination and oppression against political dissenters are symbolically resolved. Second, it is argued that the text exemplifies the playwright’s ideogeme of double tyranny, which he proposed to account for the predicament of the English people in the English Civil War. Third, the generic hybridity of *Samson Agonistes* is emblematic of the evolution of several modes of production (each including not just economic but cultural and scientific dimensions) and class struggle in the mid-seventeenth century. The analysis of the textual, social, and historical horizons of interpretation paved the way for decoding the latent repressed desires and sociohistorical conflicts that permeate Milton’s play.

Key words

Samson Agonistes; political unconscious; symbolic act; ideogeme; mode of production

Introduction

Samson Agonistes (1671), as a canonical literary text, has been studied from multiple and even contradictory critical perspectives. The existing voluminous literature on the play can be roughly placed into three main categories: contextual, intertextual, and analogical. Several critics have focused on how *Samson Agonistes* mirrors the sociocultural aura of the mid-seventeenth century. In *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England*, Blair Worden (2007: 357–383) maintains that the play echoes the language and perspectives of three people (Edmund Ludlow, Algernon Sidney, and Sir Henry Vane) who had a prominent role in pursuing the so-called Good Old Cause¹ of purging England from kings and queens. Christopher Hill (1977) pursues this line of argument and treats the play as a by-product of a failed cause fervently championed by Milton. He provides close analogies between the events leading to the Restoration and Samson’s narrative. In the second category, the intertextual relationship between the Biblical Samson and Milton’s tragic hero is addressed. A good example could be found in the footnotes Jason Rosenblatt (2011) provides on Milton’s play. She enumerates the frequent occasions when the play alludes to different books of the Bible. In the third category, the play’s subscription to or departure from Aristotle’s classical model of

tragedy is pinpointed. In this vein, Barbara Lewalski (2003: 523–525) elucidates the similarities and differences between Milton’s work and Aristotle’s model to aesthetically reinforce the motifs of passion and struggle against oppression.

Despite the insightful contributions these studies have made to Milton’s studies, they inadvertently draw a watershed line between what Gérard Genette calls the “transtextual”² dimensions of a text, as if these dimensions were mutually exclusive. In addressing this gap in the literature on *Samson Agonistes*, this study deploys Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), which provides an inclusive multilayered analysis of the textual, contextual, and generic features of a literary text, in order to disclose the play’s latent repressed desires and sociohistorical conflicts. With this objective in mind, the present paper is divided into three subsections, each dedicated to reading Milton’s closet drama in the light of one of Jameson’s three horizons of interpretation: the textual/formal horizon, the social horizon, and the historical horizon. The main question this study attempts to address is what is the sociohistorical problem for which the play poses a symbolic resolution. Different layers of this problem, i.e., discrimination against political dissenters, are delineated within Jameson’s three interpretive horizons.

The First Horizon: Samson’s Dilemma

For Jameson (2002: 60–61), a work of art at the first level stages a formal contradiction or antinomy and imaginatively resolves it without recourse to extra-textual factors or circumstances. Arguably, *Samson Agonistes* at the outset attempts to symbolically settle a social contradiction or problem: the discrimination and oppression against political dissenters. This problem, which is accessible through “the process of narrative” according to Jameson, is transformed into a double bind whose resolution requires the “formal prestidigitation of narrative” that would bring it to closure even though it cannot be solved through purely abstract, cognitive means (Jameson 2002: 68). Here, the literary text performs a “symbolic act,” without intervening into the status quo the way, say, a new law passed by the Parliament or a strike would. On the other hand, it entails its own specific performative dimension in terms of harnessing the perspective of its audiences and instigating them subtly into particular actions or directions (2002: 66). Meanwhile, this line of investigation resembles the Formalist strategy of “*explication de texte*”, except that here the focus is on diagnosing the text’s basic contradiction (2002: 61, 66). According to Jameson, this diagnosis is what will distinguish such an exploration from those aimed at the sociology of literature that are confined to cataloguing class motifs and concerns in the work in order to prove that the work in question reflects its social background.

Milton refashions the conventional elements of literary forms like epic, elegy, and sonnet as well as Christian doctrines such as trinity and predestination in order to render them compatible with his contemporary society. It should be added, however, that these modifications are not haphazard, but nod in the direction of what could be termed, using Jameson’s words, “a priori conditions

of possibility” (2002: 135), which have an ineluctable grip over the mentality of a given age. Milton’s handling of the Biblical narrative of Samson is a particular case in point in this regard.

Samson Agonistes begins *in medias res*: the eponymous Hebrew protagonist is already captured and blinded by his foes, the Philistines. In the first scene, Samson muses over and bemoans his condition. He scolds himself for succumbing to his wife and revealing his divine secret to her. There is a chorus that visits him and attempts to console him. Manua, Samson’s father, attempts to ransom his shackled son. Although Samson strongly refuses his offer, he leaves intent to negotiate with the enemy. Samson is then visited by his wife Dalila, who belongs to the Philistine foe and who has betrayed Samson’s secret (i.e., his strength stays with him as long as he does not shave his head) to her people and thus enabled them to capture him. Dalila’s attempt at reconciliation fails and she is dismissed by Samson. Next, a Philistine hero comes over to boast and show off his strength to Samson, but he is challenged by Samson and finally leaves “somehow crestfallen” (Milton 2011b: 1244).³ The play takes a new turn when a messenger from the Philistine lords arrives and informs Samson that he is expected to show his strength to Philistines, who have gathered at a big theatre to celebrate their supremacy over the Israelites after Samson was captured. Samson initially refuses to attend the party and entertain his enemies, declaring it is against his religious faith to attend this “pagan” occasion. But later, when he feels “some rousing motions” (Milton 2011b, 1382), he decides to go and fulfil what he has been ordered. The climax of the play happens when Samson, in an extraordinary feat, is reported to have pulled down the whole theatre and thus caused both the massacre of the lords and nobles of Philistines and his own death. When Manua is informed of the fate of his son, he is both aggrieved for his self-violent act and pleased that he had a glorious end by killing so many of the enemies.

At the textual level, one of the axial points of *Samson Agonistes* seems to be the abuse of free will when the protagonist overindulges his passion and ignores his divine mission. More precisely, the “invincible Samson” is defeated by a “deceitful woman” who cajoles him to divulge the divine secret behind his exceptional prowess, resulting in his captivity and the subsequent defeat of his nation. As a leader, Samson has a public/social/communal role in protecting people against their enemies. Samson’s failure to preserve the secret of his strength is going to yield grave outcomes: the Israelites turn into easy prey to their adversary once deprived of their powerful leader. As a captive, Samson lives a menial life among “inhuman foes” (Milton 2011b: 109). Deeply mournful, he is visited by several characters who either want to console him (the Chorus and Manoa) or to aggrieve him more (Dalila and Harapha), though with little success because for Samson his error is too gross to be soothed. As he is aware of the sources of his weakness (including physical strength without proportionate wisdom, effeminacy, and pride (2011b: 206–209, 410–411, and 532, respectively), he cannot be deceived for the second time. Also, his determination is indicative of genuine remorse and contrition. The worst thing for him, as he believes, is to associate unwittingly or knowingly with the Philistines. He repudiates even negotiation, proposed by his father, with the enemies for his release. When he is summoned

by the chiefs of Philistines to attend a public ceremony in order to entertain the public with his miraculous strength, he retorts: “Thou know’st I am an Hebrew. Therefore tell them/ Our Law forbids at their religious rites/ My presence. For that cause I cannot come” (Milton 2011b: 1319-1321). A few moments later when he is warned by the messenger that the chiefs would treat him harshly if he fails to obey their command, he proclaims:

Shall I abuse this consecrated gift
Of strength, again returning with my hair
After my great transgression? So requite
Favor renewed, and add a greater sin
By prostituting holy things to idols?
A Nazarite in place abominable
Vaunting my strength in honor to their Dagon?
Besides, how vile, contemptible, ridiculous,
What act more execrably unclean, profane? (Milton 2011b: 1354–1362)

There can be nothing more obnoxious and scandalous for Samson to amuse people in the manner of “gymnic artists, wrestlers, riders, runners,/Jugglers and dancers, antics, mummers, mimics” (Milton 2011b: 1324–1325). Nevertheless, later when the messenger returns to give Samson the chiefs’ ultimatum, Samson surprisingly consents to go, claiming that he will do nothing “dishonorable, impure, unworthy/ [to] Our God, our Law, my nation, or myself” (Milton 2011b: 1424–1425). Assuming this is a wholesale rejection of what Samson has just enunciated regarding his determination not to attend the Philistines’ feast, the reader might wonder how Samson’s compromise is to be justified. After an uproar is twice heard from the ceremony’s direction (offstage) and a character announces that Samson has destroyed both himself and the host of Philistines by pulling down the pillars of the amphitheatre, the reader experiences an implausible ending, which may serve to terminate the antinomy in Samson’s conduct. It seems the audience is expected to explain Samson’s paradoxical behaviour in similar terms as Manoa does. For him, the unacceptable acts of participating in pagans’ ceremony and suicide can be forgiven on the basis of Samson’s killing so many of the Israelites’ main oppressors:

... on his enemies
Fully revenged, hath left them years of mourning,
And lamentation to the sons of Caphtor
Through all Philistian bounds. To Israel
Honor hath left, and freedom (Milton 2011b: 1711–1715).

This denouement is reminiscent of what Jameson calls “narrative closure” (1986: 77). When an ideology faces a conundrum or unresolvable contradiction, it attempts to rationalise an ending to bypass it. This tendency also extends to narratives, to which cases Jameson applies the term narrative closure. In this interpretive phase the antinomy in Samson’s action, resolved theologically, should

be regarded not as a mere wish-fulfilment or “gleeful fantasy”, which is what Campbell and Corns suggest (2008: 362), but as a symptomatic and conceptual representation of a concrete social contradiction – to which the authors will turn in the second phase of interpretation. It is reasonable to suggest that the extraordinary act of collapsing the two towering pillars is an imaginary resolution for combating the forces of Samson’s and Israelites’ oppression – which constitutes part of the play’s subtext.

What political unconscious is hinted at by this symbolic act of violence will be discussed below. Here, it should be cautioned that if one does not see this toppling and mass-killing as symbolic and interprets the poem literally, unwarranted conclusions will ensue. In this vein, John Carey (2002) accuses the play of fostering terrorism. Likewise, Louis Schwartz (2007: 199) claims the play is a reflection on how certain dogmatic convictions may result in a “nightmare” whereby multitudes of people who simply think differently are sacrificed.

The second horizon: *Samson Agonistes* and people’s double tyranny

The eradication of the God’s enemies could only happen in this formal, aesthetic realm within the plot of the play; in reality, the Good Old Cause was betrayed and people like Milton could not realise their visions of a religiously-more-tolerant England.⁴ In *Samson Agonistes*, the contradiction that God has abandoned the Israelites despite their repression is partly solved when Samson manages to destroy their enemies. But in England, the repressed dissenters could not be avenged at least in the following generations and the contradiction persisted (Hill 2002: 169). Meanwhile, in line with Jameson’s contention that “history” and its discontents permeate literary texts, the social contradiction which Milton’s tragedy deals with is not immediately accessible in the text but exists as if beneath it like an “absent cause” (Jameson 2002: 68). The interpretive task of Jameson’s second (i.e., social) horizon is to lay bare that contradiction by identifying the text’s ideogeme: “the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes” (Jameson 2002: 61). For Jameson, an ideogeme is over-determined by history and could occur either as a value system (say, an ethical code or civil injunction), a philosophical idea (say, *ressentiment* from Nietzsche’s perspective), or even a fundamental narrative (say, the Original Sin or the Big Bang), all of which serve to provide a coherent picture of an ideological system and symbolically overcome a historical problem. The present study stipulates that “double tyranny” (in Milton’s term which is discussed below) is the ideogeme at work in *Samson Agonistes*.

According to Jameson, opposing voices and parties in a given society interact and operate on the basis of a “shared code” or common ground which is presupposed by all the involved individuals/groups/parties (Jameson 2002: 70). Arguably, religion constitutes the “shared code” of opposing voices during Milton’s lifetime, as Jameson stresses the mediatory role of religion between the private and public or political spheres around the 1660 Restoration (2002: 70). Jameson identifies that the religious community at that time functioned as a “space” where institutions

of power exercised their influence on individual relationships, moral codes, and personal life. He adds that many problems in contemporary politics have been pre-figured in the issues related to church organisation, and the community of believers hotly debated them during the Reformation of the seventeenth century (Jameson 1999: 54). It is within this context that Joan Bennett's (1998: 240) observation of a "structural symmetry between [Milton's] theology and his political philosophy" confirms the dialectical nature of Milton's political theology.

The duality of liberty and slavery (in the sense of dependence and lack of autonomy), which constitutes one of the sociohistorical conflicts of *Samson Agonistes*, posed a grave problem both for individuals and different groups in the era under discussion. Illustrative textual examples are the dialogue between Harapha and Samson and the efforts of Manoa to ransom his son – the three characters who personify different ideologemes. Samson asserts that true liberty and slavery originate from within, though by no means end there (Milton 2011b: 407–419). It might be inferred that Samson believes if people are truly faithful and liberty-loving, they succumb neither to their oppressors nor their own debasing passions in spite of ordeals or torture. Such people will not come to a compromise with their enemy. According to this ideologeme, religious integrity and dignity is coterminous with political freedom. Interestingly, Manoa's mediating attempts to release Samson, despite the latter's will, are abortive, which implies deliverance occurs through self-originating action. *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (originally published in 1649) is exemplary in this regard:

If men within themselves would be governed by reason, and not generally give up their understanding to a double tyranny, of custom from without, and blind affections within, they would discern better what it is to favour and uphold the tyrant of a nation. But being slaves within doors, no wonder that they strive so much to have the public State conformably governed to the inward vicious rule, by which they govern themselves. (Milton 2011c: 385)

Milton could be suggesting that Samson and, by extension, the English surrendered to this tyranny and allowed themselves to be subjugated; thus, he seems to theologially justify the contradiction of their persistent affliction.

In the second horizon of interpretation, ideologemes mainly represent the antagonistic relationship between social classes. Correspondingly, by the Restoration of 1660 one can observe three different tendencies in England: that of the majority who "lapsed" into monarchy and forsook commonwealth; that of the minority who remained steadfast to the objective of abolishing monarchy; and that of individuals who chose a medium path, i.e., compromise. As suggested above, all of these groups based their political position on their understanding of religion and the Scripture as their shared code. Within Jameson's second frame of interpretation, *Samson Agonistes* can be considered a symbolic gesture in a polemic and ideological face-off between these three ideologemes. From this perspective, one might question the validity of some critics' claim that the play's uncertainty/indeterminacy is symptomatic of Milton's own conflicted thought.

Believing Milton to have resigned from politics for the rest of his life, Wittreich (1986: 273) pigeonholes Milton with Marvell and Dryden, concluding that Samson's destruction of the Philistines' hall is a "pretense, a fall" and a denunciation of the agendas of both Royalists and Republicans. This reading serves to downplay the determination with which Samson proceeds with his plan despite knowing that he may lose his life in the process. Similarly, Elizabeth Sauer (1998: 211) attributes paradoxical characteristics to Milton by considering him representative "of the revolutionaries', the radicals', and of the royalists' parties without knowing it." Commenting on the final act of the play, Stanley Fish (1969: 244) opines that Samson was confused regarding his state, but the present study argues that Samson's final words demonstrate that he has some definite plan to perform since he promises to do nothing treacherous either to his religion, nation, or himself (Milton 2011b: 1423–1425).

A work of art represents various contradictory and antagonistic attitudes and practices of its time, all of which jostle to obtain greater and greater dominance. Jameson (2015: 18) observes that "Milton's Samson is [...] the expression of the experience of political defeat, of the desolation that follows the collapse of superhuman revolutionary enthusiasm." Milton's text *is* such an expression, yet it also acknowledges the past defeat and strives to compensate for it. Although Samson is dissatisfied with his own state and that of his nation, he is not disappointed; otherwise, he would not even repent and would be morally cold and unresponsive. One may not deny the possibility for the posterity to follow the liberationist and slavery-hating spirits of Samson, which could be what Milton hoped for – though it was not feasible to be realised during Milton's own period. Despite affirming that *Samson Agonistes* is neither a pessimistic play nor a "historical treatise," Hill (1977) insists that while men must do their own part, it is God who decides when liberation is achieved. This perspective runs counter to what the play communicates. For Milton, it is people who either prefer bondage or "strenuous liberty" (Milton 2011b: 71), and when they go for the latter, God will inevitably assist them, and He leaves them in the hands of the oppressor when they opt for the easier way.

The mentioned compromise in *Samson Agonistes* arguably hints at the significance of liberty and free will – another (unconscious) repressed desire of the play. A person like Samson who firmly believes that by nature he is free to choose and takes responsibility for his actions will not charge the Providence for his misconduct, a thought which may creep into the psyche of individuals like Manoa. In *Samson Agonistes*, these opposing tendencies are exemplified in the first encounter between the son and the father, who is appalled by his son's plight. Manoa wails why God had accepted his prayer for having a child when he was to end up "Ensnared, assaulted, overcome, led bound,/[His] foes' derision, captive, poor, and blind, / Into a dungeon thrust, to work with slaves" (Milton 2011b: 365–367). However, he does not refer to Samson's own role in his predicament. On the other hand, Samson urges his father:

Appoint not Heav'nly disposition, father.
Nothing of all these evils hath befall'n me

But justly. I myself have brought them on,
Sole author I, sole cause (Milton 2011b: 373–376)

Samson takes full responsibility for all that have befallen him, and he relates his present condition to his own past conduct. Whereas Manoa's position is of a piece with a Calvinistic ideogeme in which man's destiny is always already determined by God, Samson's accords with the doctrine of Arminianism to which Milton generally adhered. In chapter three of *The Christian Doctrine* (1853: 33), Milton cites a great many passages from the Scripture contending that God had made His will contingent on the faith, obedience, transgression, or repentance of his creatures. Furthermore, he invokes "the laws of human reason" so as to infer that "the most high God has not decreed all things absolutely." In particular, God has not decreed anything which is within the power of humans absolutely. Milton's ultimate judgement is that human freedom is part of what God has planned for from all eternity. In an Arminian context, final redemption is not secured by the mediatory role of Christ but is contingent upon an individual's own character. In the case of Samson, God's forgiveness is not procured simply through repentance and prayers or other sorts of pieties that his father recommends. In proportion to his status as a leader, he has to undergo a commensurate punishment. To atone himself, Samson longs either to undergo this punishment in this life or, as later he realises, to accomplish such a great feat that could earn him the merit to be forgiven. It is important that he is well aware of the collective outcome of his action: infamy and disgrace to his nation, which cannot be repaired simply by negotiating with the foes and giving concessions to them as the likes of Manoa tended to do after the Restoration, when anyone who was associated with the regicide was under prosecution. It is tempting to suggest that the antagonistic mindset between Samson and his father is symptomatic of the opposing ideogemes they uphold regarding free will and predestination.

The analogy between Samson and the historical Milton⁵ should be approached with caution. While Samson rejects Manoa's proposal for negotiation and ransom, Milton was not averse to his friends' (chiefly Andrew Marvell) intermediary attempts to release him from prison after the Restoration persecutions reached him (Lewalski 2003: 403–404). Lewalski's (2003: 523) contention that "Samson is not Milton Agonistes, but Milton put much of himself into Samson's lamentations about blindness and captivity among enemies" is illuminating in this regard. Indeed, Samson's fate better recalls some of Milton's contemporaries like Sir Henry Vane, Algernon Sidney, and Edmund Ludlow (alluded to in the Introduction to the present paper) with whom the blind poet had close relationships. These staunch men were willing to endure any persecution but not to compromise on their belief in the right of people to depose their unjust ruler (Worden 2007: 112). Samson's character is also reminiscent of Milton's contemporary dissenter Thomas Young (1644: 38), who encouraged his repressed fellows to patiently wait for their Heavenly rescue while taking action against their oppressor when they have the necessary means.

Although this move is merely symbolic (textual), given that Puritan dissenters could not directly encounter the Establishment in England during Milton's life-

time, *Samson Agonistes* is an act that pointed to collateral real-life implications. A close reading of the play may suggest that Milton calls for a radical transformation in one's beliefs regarding two central issues. The first would be people's right to keep their rulers in check and to have authority in both appointing and deposing them, while the second concerns their perseverance in the face of calamities that follow such a liberationist doctrine (Loewenstein 2004: 275–276). Hence, Milton had not lost all hope in the long-term success of the presently betrayed Good Old Cause. Basing victory and defeat not on the temporary outcomes of events, Samson does not hesitate in his conviction when taunted by a scoundrel like Harapha, who judges the Israelites to be on the wrong side because God has left them captured and humiliated by the Philistines (Milton 2011b: 1155–1162). Samson replies that his nation's plight has nothing to do with either the falsity or truth of the Israelites' religion, but stems from their own misconduct in delivering their hero to their enemies and preferring easy compromise to committed resistance (Milton 2011b: 1213–1216).

Since for Milton victory is predicated on unshakable faith, he expected devout individuals not to waver in their conviction as soon as they were prosecuted/persecuted and seemed to be defeated. In this context, Gordon Teskey (2009: 188) posits that *Samson Agonistes* “does not intend to justify the ways of God to men; it intends to wring commitment from their hearts.” Milton's text does not propagate fatalism. Rather, the poet intimates that Samson and, by extension, all human beings partake in the fulfilment of divine and human agency. In the next section, the authors will explore this vision and political unconscious in the generic form of the play: tragedy.

Third horizon: tragic hero and generic discontinuities in *Samson Agonistes*

In the third horizon of interpretation, sociocultural conflicts and contradictions are analysed according to various modes of production. According to Jameson, a mode of production, among other things like politics and culture, also incorporates considerations for artistic/literary production: “genre is essentially a socio-symbolic message, or in other terms [...] form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right” (2002: 127). The generic heterogeneities of *Samson Agonistes* could demonstrate certain aspects of the mid-seventeenth-century society in retrospect, a line of analysis that is absent from the existing literature on this play. In the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, Milton acknowledges that he draws on Aristotle to pen the play as a tragedy. The tragic hero is one of the integral elements of tragedy, who is inevitably doomed to failure, notwithstanding the momentary flashes of insight. For Jameson (2002: 85), the way a particular literary convention is defined and established has a lot to do with its contemporary sociopolitical unconscious/subtext. He uses the term “ideology of form” to refer to this ideological charge of literary conventions and literary representation (2002: 62). The failure of the Aristotelian tragic hero is, the present paper argues, associated with the “modes of production” or “the synchronic system of social relations as a whole” (Jameson 2002) which were dominant roughly from Aristotle's time to the dawn of the seventeenth

century. Before the inchoate emergence of the capitalist mode of production in the Elizabethan England, human being was conceived of as a weak creature beset and governed by supernatural forces (Bobzien 2004: 140) – the Olympian gods and the inscrutable Fate in the Classical Greece and Divine Providence in the Christian Middle Ages. According to Frye (2000: 34–37), tragedy departs from romance when a wholly metaphysical world enters the social and the collective realm, whereby miracle is supplanted by reason and free will, natural law becomes accountable, and the supernatural is diminished.

At around the beginning of the seventeenth century, there was a paradigmatic shift in the dominant mode of production from a feudal system based on the cultivation of land to a proto-capitalist society increasingly defined in terms of the new science and “economic rationality” (Katz 1993: 375–376). This unprecedented development was flanked by the empiricism of Francis Bacon and the scientific discoveries of figures like William Harvey and Galileo and was deemed capable of sorting out all the problems which had perplexed human beings up to that time. In the following paragraphs, the generic elasticity of *Samson Agonistes* is examined according to these modes of production.

In its attempt to perceive the world in a new light and rationally mathematize/quantify everything, the new science called into question the dominant mode of production, namely, feudalism (Westfall 1973). The feudal man was a fallen creature whose salvation depended on steadfast commitment to Christianity. This attitude gave rise to a passive and mediocre state of being (Giddens 2001: x-xiii) – its promised redemption notwithstanding. Denouncing the fatalism of Christian orthodoxy, the new science placed the responsibility for human beings’ destiny squarely on their own shoulders. With no higher metaphysical power presiding over them, people had to take advantage of the resources made available through the scientific cause-and-effect order of nature. The science and religion dichotomy in this century, however, was soon solved, at least for the period in question: the proponents of science had to couch their knowledge in quasi-religious terms, and religious institutions, challenged by the assumptions of new science, endeavoured to legitimise their position by associating themselves with the emergent natural philosophy (Feldhay 2006: 730). It is not an exaggeration to suggest that Samson’s destruction of the pillars of the amphitheatre could allude to the play’s (unconscious) repressed desire to annihilate the hegemony and power of feudalism.

Adhering to a reformed and enlightened religious perspective, Milton rejected the boasts of science, as well as the blind dogmas of Christianity. In *Paradise Lost* (2005: Book VIII, ll. 190–197), he discouraged the astronomical pursuit of heavenly bodies as a scientific endeavour and underlined the importance of wisdom and piety in conducting one’s daily life. Meanwhile, Milton was not averse to science as conducive to a life marked by constant interrogation of the received ideas of the past (Flotats 1996: 165). Thus, some years after his European tour (1638–1639), he regrettably recalled how a genius like Galileo had been imprisoned simply for “thinking in astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought” (Milton 2011a: 363). In line with his religious unorthodoxy, Milton subscribed to an individual quest after religious truth but dis-

missed an uncritical acceptance of inherited beliefs – a pursuit which he likened to an ever-flowing fountain that would become stale if its current was occluded (Milton 2011a: 365).

Another strand that was still present in the seventeenth century concerns the remnants of “oligarchical slaveholding society (the ancient mode of production)” (Jameson 2002: 75). In spite of being relegated to a residual position by then, this mode of production exerted its impact on the conception and conventions of art. Given the extremely Puritan climate of the time, Milton’s *oeuvre* is replete – both in substance and spirit – with classical influences and conventions. He generally appreciated literary, as well as non-literary, conventions of the ancients: in the preface to *Paradise Lost*, he supported the blank verse of the classics as against that “barbarous” rhyming prescribed by modern critics, and specified that in avoiding this cloyed and restrictive convention he aimed to revive the “ancient liberty” (2005: 2); in the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, he justified writing a tragedy, by citing St. Paul who, he believed, would approve of interpolating a line of Euripides into the text of the Bible (2011b); in the same preface, he subscribed to the Aristotelian requirement that the tragic hero should be a person beyond an ordinary human being and disparaged the insertion of comic episodes in tragedy (2011b).

It seems Milton’s generic exercises are not exclusively aesthetic gymnastics but evoke deep political messages. Drawing on a number of occasions such as Milton’s preface to the play (2011b) – where he situates *Samson Agonistes* against the Restoration tide of interludes and other obscene plays – many critics have stressed that the old Milton continued his political engagement in his literary works (Sauer 1998: 202; Ashinstein 2003: 412; Norbrook 2000: 440; and Crawford 2016: 240). However, the present paper argues, Fredric Jameson’s approach to literary interpretation provides a more convincing conduit from which to explore ideology of form in Milton and the relationship between his politics, theology, and art.

For Jameson, the form of a literary work is not a haphazard juxtaposition of words, images, and other verbal nuances. Rather, the very choice of a writer to compose in a specific genre, besides other things, has to do with the politics and socioeconomic circumstances of the time in which the author lives. This especially holds true for Milton, who is, one may posit, the most formally self-conscious author of his generation. One of the more salient features of any narrative (understood in the broadest sense to include drama, fiction, and poetry) is the characterization of its protagonist. Any deviation from or assimilation of such conventions is not arbitrary or the result of merely aesthetic preferences on the part of its author. As Jameson remarks, “such a deviation could be understood as a meaningful symbolic act” (2002: 114). In *Samson Agonistes*, the hero does not have mastery over natural laws, but Providence bestows it to whom He wills at rare occasions. In other words, Samson – as confirmed by himself – is subject to the laws of nature set by God, and his marvellous feats that seemingly violate this order are in fact contingent upon divine permission. As a tragic hero, Samson personifies what Jameson calls a “horizon figure” (2002: 155): at once he performs extraordinary feats and is liable to natural laws, a narrative trajectory where romance and tragedy meet. This dynamic generic negotiation

between romance and tragedy crystallises a desire to depart from feudalism as the hegemonic ideological order, a shift which is accompanied by the discussed scientific and economic modes of production. In Samson, moreover, one may discern a transition figure: he does miracles and yet is subject to the order of nature. Samson, a re-conceptualization of the tragic hero, faces an excruciating dilemma on how to represent himself: a classical hero? an enlightened Christian in the seventeenth century? a feudal citizen? or a fusion of all?

Milton scholars have occasionally equated Samson's predicament with that of Puritan dissidents (most notably Thomas Harrison and Henry Vane) under Charles I (Rosenblatt 2011: 153). This study argues that Samson's fate could be more fruitfully approached in the context of Jameson's modes of production and their "antagonistic dialogue" (2002: 70). It should be specified that, for Jameson, unlike classical Marxism, modes of production are not "'stages' in a [...] linear narrative which would be the 'story' of human history, nor are they 'necessary' moments in some teleological historical process" (Jameson 1979: 67). As hinted at the beginning of this section, modes of production for Jameson are not only particular types of "economic 'production' or labor process or technology," but also "specific and original form[s] of cultural and linguistic (or sign) production" (1979: 67). For instance, when one speaks about the feudal mode of production, economy is not the whole story; rather, this mode of production includes its own distinct politics, culture and artistic representation, even though from a Marxist perspective they are the superstructure and not the ultimate factor with deterministic outcomes. Furthermore, it should be stressed that for Jameson, mode of production is a "differential" notion, with each mode necessarily implying the projection of other modes (Jameson 1979: 68). Thus, as discussed above, in the seventeenth century, one sees at once the residual classical mode, the dominant feudal mode, and the emergent proto-capitalist mode.

Initially adhering to the fatalist view that everything befalling him is actually ordained by God, Samson wonders how as a creature elected for a noble mission – liberating the Israelites from the "Philistian yoke" (Milton 2011b: 38–39) – he should be downgraded so much as to be blinded and made captive (Milton 2011b: 109). Here, Samson represents the feudal mode of production, according to which one's destiny is determined by supernatural elements, most often a divine power. By the same token, justifying his misconduct in marrying a pagan and disclosing the divine secret to the enemies, Samson claims he had been prompted by God and that he had simply obeyed God in doing so (Milton 2011b: 221–224). Next, he argues that all he has done has been based on his own decisions. Thus, when Manoa, upon arrival, bemoans Samson's unfortunate situation and questions why God has humiliated him, Samson admits his own responsibility: "Nothing of all these evils hath befall'n me/But justly. I myself have brought them on,/Sole author I, sole cause" (Milton 2011b: 374–376).

The question arises as to why Samson emits such contradictory responses with respect to his plight. In this context, Jameson's concept of nonsynchronous development of several modes of production in the seventeenth century could best explain Milton's tragic hero. Samson's second reaction concerning his predicament is symptomatic of the inchoate capitalist mode of production which

underscored rationality, individuality, discipline, and human beings' capacity to determine and shape their world – which is another (unconscious) repressed desire and subtext in the play. This perspective runs counter to the feudalist and, by extension, the ancient modes of production that introduced human beings as a puppet cast into the world and manipulated by forces beyond their own control.

Regarding the ancient mode of production as aesthetically formulated in Aristotle's *Poetics* and staged by Greek playwrights, it is noteworthy that *Samson Agonistes* is faithful to its time by preserving a quintessential leftover of the classical world: the importance of reputation, fame, and glory, especially one that is won in battle and could be described in terms of physical prowess. It is striking that “glory” and its derivatives (including “glorious,” “inglorious,” “gloriously,” and “disglorify”) have been repeated 21 times, and “honor” alongside its related words (“dishonor,” “honorable,” “dishonorer,” and “honored”) recurs 20 times, expressed whether by the Chorus, Manoa, Harapha, Dalila, or Samson. More specifically, this classical residue is exemplified in Samson's burial. Thus, Manoa states he will send after his tribe and friends to come and take the body of Samson to his homeland, where appropriate rites might be conducted and a sanctuary built for him so that “Thither shall all valiant youth resort/ And from his memory inflame their breast/ To matchless valor” (Milton 2011b: 1738–1740). This is reminiscent of how the corpse of Homeric heroes was solemnly treated with grandeur and ceremony (Morris 1989: 46–49).

In *Samson Agonistes* the Chorus likewise displays a mixed reaction toward what happened to the “dread of Israel's foes” (Milton 2011b: 342). Proclaiming that not only are the ways of God just, but that human being too can make sense of them (Milton 2011b: 293–294), the Chorus' opinion fits more a rationalistic theology and a proto-capitalist mode of production appropriate for the modern era. However, in the concluding speech, the Chorus evokes an agnostic response marked by resignation: human beings have to be content with whatever transpires and should not go after justifications, for God, whose works are mysterious, will settle everything for the best. As previously explained, this latter perspective dovetails with the feudal mode of production, which had persisted by the time Milton wrote *Samson Agonistes*.

In short, the uneasy evolution of the inchoate capitalism along with the dominant feudalism and the residual classicism in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* does not give birth to a hero that, as its chorus wishes, might end in “peace and consolation /and calm of mind, all passions spent” (Milton 2011b: 1756–1758). Rather it generates a self-subversive hero who occasionally attributes his fate to the divine decree, but at other times relates it to his own actions. This paradoxical treatment was addressed in the light of Fredric Jameson's concept of nonsynchronous development of multiple modes of production: associating the hero's initial disposition with the feudalist and classical modes of production, and the subsequent disposition with the rationalistic and empiricist inclination promoted by the rise of inchoate capitalism in the seventeenth century.

Conclusion

Investigating sociocultural contradictions, antinomies, and conflicts through the prism of Jameson's textual, social, and historical horizons of interpretation helps disclose the subtext and the underlying repressed desires that are encoded in the unconscious of a literary text. As delineated throughout this study, the emancipation and protection of oppressed political dissenters comprises one of the repressed desires of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, and Milton imaginatively and symbolically resolves this issue by having the protagonist eradicate the forces of oppression. Within the textual (first) horizon, this implicit concern is projected through the antinomy between the freedom or slavery of the protagonist. Within the social (second) horizon, the play showcases dialectical clashes between antagonistic ideologemes held by different parties in the English Civil War, and it is argued that the ideologeme of double tyranny is what Milton thinks is the cause of the predicament of the English people. This ideologeme entails acquiescence and compromise on the larger scale of politics and a collective preference not to act to change the status quo. Within the historical (third) horizon, the jostling of the ancient, feudalist, and inchoate proto-capitalist modes of production within the play was investigated in terms of the ideology of the form. The play's generic elasticity – its elaborate fusion of tragedy and romance that highlights its historical juncture – is suggestive of the concomitant but uneven presence of these modes of production in England. The textual, social, and historical horizons of *Samson Agonistes* exhibit a complex matrix of repressions and aspirations that make up the political unconscious of Milton's closet drama. Samson's participation in the Philistines' party and his subsequent demolition of their amphitheatre allude to an unconscious desire for a utopian future, and, more specifically, intimate for the blind playwright an ideal society freed from the shackles of religious and political repression and oppression.

Notes

- ¹ The phrase was used in the mid-seventeenth century by the supporters of Parliament to describe their political objectives during the English Civil War and the Commonwealth. While it was not a concerted movement, its supporters were united in their opposition to monarchy, determination to create a more just and egalitarian society, and promoting social and religious reform. See Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972: 168).
- ² Genette divides transtextuality into five subcategories: intertextuality; paratextuality; metatextuality; architextuality; and hypertextuality. See Genette's *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1997).
- ³ All references to the text of *Samson Agonistes* are indicated by the number of line(s).
- ⁴ Milton has been consistently identified as a defender of toleration, rather than a staunch Puritan dismissing non-Puritans, within the limits of his age. For example, his early pieces such as the divorce tracts (1643–5) and *Areopagitica* (1644) presented theological arguments with biblical examples in support of toleration. Later in his career, he critiqued the Presbyterians' intolerance in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) and spoke for extending civil liberties in *Defences of the People of*

- England (1651, 1654). Even immediately before the Restoration, his *Of Civil Power* and *The Likeliest Means* (1659) proposed church disestablishment as a way toward realising a more politically inclusive society.
- ⁵ This is the tendency of the classical biographer of Milton, David Mason, as well as the orthodox Marxist interpretation of Christopher Hill in *Milton* (428–448) and *The Experience of Defeat* (310–319).

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