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## Islam, Sacrifice, and Political Theology in John Milton's Samson Agonistes

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ISLAM, SACRIFICE, AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY  
IN JOHN MILTON'S *SAMSON AGONISTES*

by

RENEE E. MARVIN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the Honors in the Major Program in English  
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## ABSTRACT

A shift in gaze has occurred in the study of the early modern period, one which has begun to examine the Western world in a more global and comprehensive context. This shift has been extensively written upon with regards to a historical consideration by researchers like Nabil Matar, Jeremy Brotton, Gerald MacLean, and others. This “re-orientation”, as MacLean calls it, has extended itself into the realm of literature studies, though Shakespeare and his works have been the focus of much of the scholarship circulating today. While the Bard has much to tell us, in the spirit of this expansion my thesis will focus on the work of another early modernist: poet, activist, and scholar John Milton.

Utilizing both the knowledge provided by historicist scholars for contextualization and the critical apparatus of scholars like Gil Anidjar and Daniel Vitkus as a framework, my thesis will work to examine the possibility of the Islamic holy text, the Qur’an, as an influence for Milton. Focusing on the text of *Samson Agonistes* as a site for this influence and interaction, it will be my intention to deconstruct specific passages from Milton’s text and verses from the Qur’an in order to expose a thematic and dialectic connection between these two seemingly incongruous corpi. I will accomplish this through a careful deconstruction of elements of monotheistic religious violence and political theology as well as an examination of the inclusion or exclusion of certain events, people, or themes in Milton’s text which deviate from their Judeo-Christian origins. Finally, I will discuss the early modern Christians’ historical fear of Islamic conversion and conquer alongside an examination of Samson’s destruction of the Philistine temple in the context of political theology, in an attempt at elucidating the link between this historical fear of “turning Turk” and the supposed justification for violence against an ideological

other that drives Samson towards his violent and self-conclusive act. Through this research I intend to broaden the scope of Miltonic and early modern literature studies in the hopes of creating a more global and considerate understanding of Milton's texts.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the introduction to *The Jew, The Arab: A History of the Enemy*, Gil Anidjar explains that, despite the provocative title, the work is “less a history [...] than a preliminary account of why that history has not been written” (xii). While *The Jew, The Arab* is concerned with “the enmity between Arab and Jew” (xiii) in a political, theological, and cultural setting, it is this idea of the “history that has not been written” that is of interest for my thesis topic: namely, the history of interaction between Christian and Islamic cultures in the literature of the early modern period. Recently, the study of early modern literature has experienced an eastward shift in focus – in the words of Gerald MacLean, a “re-orienting” (7) of the scholarship that encourages, if not demands, the deconstruction of the “seeming perdurability of conflict between the East and the West” (21) that similarly seeks to deconstruct the binary of history and present as well. With the tension of Imperialism and the advent of a cultural understanding that is optimistically a more global and comprehensive one, there is no denying the importance of such a shift in scholarly consideration.

Much preliminary scholarship has undertaken an examination of Shakespeare's works in relation with Islamic and Judaic theologies. *The Jew, The Arab* devotes a chapter to the deconstruction of *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* in the context of the “enemy's two bodies” (101), the conflation of the ideological Other in the figures of Othello and Shylock, the Moor and the Jew of Venice, respectively. Daniel Vitkus also engages with the Bard, exploring both *Othello* and *The Tempest* not in the context of imperialism but rather as works that are at once mimetic in their creation of eroticized borders and protoimperial in their chronology. He decries the trend of

analyzing early modern texts in terms of “representations of the Other' according to a teleological historiography of Western domination, conquest, and colonization” and “the critical practice of reading all English Renaissance texts as the products of an imperialist culture that looked across the Atlantic—and across the globe—toward its colonies-to-be” (Vitkus 5, 5). Vitkus's insistence that literature of the early modern period cannot be colonial or orientalist, because in the early modern period there was no concept of Orient or indeed of empire, is one that underlines the importance of a reconsideration of early modern and Renaissance texts.

However, while Vitkus and Anidjar both propose and engage in new treatments of early modern texts, there exists a certain lack of scholarship utilizing these novel approaches toward critical analysis of the works of John Milton. The author of such influential works as *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, *Lycidas*, *Areopagitica* and *Samson Agonistes*, Milton's body of work is both substantial and ripe for this new form of engagement with early modern texts. One of the most prolific and provocative poets of his day, Milton's work exhibits a focus on political theology, and concerns itself almost exclusively with matters of both social and religious relevance. Of his corpus, the text of *Samson Agonistes* provides a perfect opportunity to examine Milton's work in the context of re-orientation. Concerning itself with political theology and the division of nations, Milton's dramatic re-telling of the life of the biblical Samson will function here to provide a text in which to examine the relationship between Milton and Islam. This relationship has been extensively explored from largely historicist perspectives, but locating *Samson Agonistes* as a space of reciprocity and of dialogue – a “contact zone,” wherein “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (Pratt 33) – is the focus of this endeavor.

While the creation and exploration of the “contact zone” is the aim of my work, there are

two concerns regarding my thesis topic which must be addressed before continuing. The first is an issue of historical accuracy; however, while some might argue against the possibility of Milton's interaction with the Islamic faith from a purely historical standpoint, there are a number of factors which point toward validity in this regard. Scholar Eid Abdallah Dahiyat in his work *Once Upon the Orient Wave* discusses at length the probability of Milton's interaction with contemporary "Arabists" in England, and while he concludes that "there is nothing whatsoever to suggest that [Milton] knew Arabic" (50), it is "safe to say that Milton was probably quite aware of the scholarly activity in the field of Arabic studies that was going on in his own time" (52). While Milton also "read works about Islam and Muslims" and was "familiar with some travel literature about the Arab and Muslim world" (Dahiyat 54), it is the possibility of Milton's interaction with the Qur'an itself which presents itself as potentially problematic to my analysis. In my first chapter I trace the translation history of the Qur'an more thoroughly, but here give a brief explanation to address the concern for historical accuracy. The earliest translation of the Qur'an from Arabic to Latin is from 1143 by Robert of Ketton, but the text was dubious in its authenticity; other Latin translations in 1543 were more legitimate in quality (Fatani). It is not farfetched, then, to wonder if Milton, a consummate Latinist, was aware of not only this translation, but more truthful subsequent translations into Italian in 1547, into French in 1647, and eventually into English in 1649 (Fatani). Working, then, from this presupposition that Milton had exposure to and contact with a translated text of the Qur'an, a consideration of how *Samson* might be understood in the context of this contact is the chief concern of my thesis.

The absence of the story of Samson in the Qur'an presents the second point of contention in this endeavor. Though the character of Samson is absent from the text of the Qur'an itself,

scholarship on the presence of this figure within the Islamic tradition has provided a solid foundation on which I intend to build. The work of Andrew Rippin, for example, points out the medieval and modern interpretations of Samson by medieval Muslim scholars al-Tabari and al-Tha'labi, explaining how, in the versions of the Samson narrative presented by Rippin, Samson's story "[takes] on a Muslim character in its emphasis on the role of a prophet to struggle against the unbelievers" (244), another point which is explored in depth in my first chapter. Instead of regarding this lacuna as an issue that problematizes my thesis, my intention is to point out instances wherein influences from the Qur'an are reflected in Milton's text, particularly through a comparative analysis of passages from *Samson Agonistes* and selected verses from several surahs concerning themes found in both texts. Of particular interest will be verses which explore the idea of a guiding inward sense of light (as in Ayat an-Nur), themes of blindness and vision in both a physical sense, particularly the healing of the blind (as in 'Ali `Imran and Al-Ma'idah), and in a figurative sense of "blinding" the heart (al-'Abasa). While care will be taken to contextualize the verses when referencing them so as to not misrepresent the text, these elements are utilized to foster a consideration of the relationship between the Qur'an and *Samson* through a hermeneutic and holistic frame.

In order to consider ourselves in this "re-oriented" space of early modern literature, a comprehensive outlook on the goals and specifics of my thesis must be provided. In my first chapter, I work to provide the reader with a working understanding of historical context for the dissemination of the Qur'an in early modern England as well as establishing the principles of "Muslim hermeneutics" (Rippin 240) in the form of *tafsir*, or quranic exegesis. I then examine the ways in which Milton incorporates thematic elements of sacrifice and denial into his text.

The second chapter of my thesis locates binaries in *Samson* – inward/outward, vision/blindness, Self/Other – that can also be located in the Qur'an. Utilizing deconstruction as a critical apparatus, the goal of the second chapter is the destabilization of these binaries through the interaction of the texts in which they present themselves, the goal of which is to ultimately destabilize the separation between the structures each text represents – Milton and the West, the Qur'an and the East. My third chapter turns to a consideration of how political theology functions in *Samson* by exploring instances of the body natural and the body politic in the text, and analyzing the role both these bodies play while exploring the contact zone. Focusing on the alterations made to Samson's physical body – the cutting of his hair, his blinding, and his circumcision – this chapter will also consider the ways in which these changes determine Samson's ultimate act of suicide-genocide. The destruction of Samson's body natural and the subsequent effect this destruction has on the Philistine body politic will be given special consideration, as will the work of Giorgio Agamben in exploring the ways in which Samson acts as *homo sacer*, the person who may be killed without legal consequence but may not be sacrificed. Through examining Milton's Samson as *homo sacer* and as a perpetrator of religious violence, I consider the influence of the Qur'an on Milton and his subsequent representation of Samson's destruction as something morally ambiguous, as opposed to necessarily justifiable or condemnable. The juxtaposition of religious violence and *Samson Agonistes* has been explored, particularly in the context of the post-9/11 West, by scholars like John Carey and Feisal Mohamed, but it is the identification of Samson as *homo sacer* which here informs my analysis.

My first chapter works to present the idea of Milton in communion with the Qur'an despite the pervasive fear of “Turning Turk,” of forced conversion by Islamic others that ran

rampant in the imagination of the early modern West. The research undertaken by scholars like Nabil Matar explores this careful space of interaction more explicitly, and also works to pave the way for a more comprehensive study of selected early modern texts and the potential of Islamic influence and interaction with/in those texts. The work of these scholars is important for an overview of the political, social, and cultural history of the perceived “Islamic threat” to England in the early modern period, an essential component for a historicist consideration of early modern literature, as well as providing a study of the representations of Islam in early modern texts. *Samson Agonistes* is one of the locations of this dialogue between early modern Islam and Christendom, where the cultures of Milton's England and that of the far-off Islamic world “meet, clash, and grapple”. One of the ways that Milton’s text may be considered in communication with the Qur'an is through the theme of sacrifice. Building upon Girard's exploration of sacrifice in *Violence and the Sacred* to consider sacrificial purpose within Islam, I examine this concept in conjunction with the work of Fethi Benslama in his book, *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*. Benslama's discussion on the inherent violence in monotheistic-Abrahamic religions provides a definitive foundation for this analysis. The psychoanalytic consideration of sacrifice as “an incorrect interpretation” (183) of God’s will, also explored by Benslama, is similarly of critical importance when considering the “heroic” Samson's interactions, not only with the Philistines but with Samson's own people in the text.

In working to address the themes of sacrifice in the context of both *Samson* and quranic hermeneutics, a series of binaries may be traced throughout. A consideration of these binaries and their presence in both the text of *Samson Agonistes* as well as in the Qur'an is presented in my second chapter, which considers the roles of emotions, such as grief and passion, as they

influence acts of violence, the concept of “inward light” as presented both by Milton and the Prophet, and ultimately ideas of Self and Other. In particular, the binary of Self/Other in the texts – the civilized, knowable Self as compared to the unknown, frightening Other – allows for an examination of the more present-day considerations that follow, such as whether Samson can and should be regarded as a terrorist.

Examining the role of the body in political theology, the “doctrine of a complex relationship [...] of sacred and social” (Anidjar 101), is a crucial step made in my third chapter. Milton makes no concessions regarding the “abus'd” state of Samson's natural body in the text of *Samson Agonistes*, frequently discussing his “bondage” and “lost sight” (SA 152), his “troubled mind” (185) and “festered wounds” (186). As a biblical judge, “a term that in ancient Israel as elsewhere in the ancient Near East designates leaders who exercised not only judicial but also military and political functions” (Coogan 115), Samson is representative of the Israelite body politic. In a similar vein, Harapha, the giant who visits Samson in his cell, may be considered a representative of the Philistine body politic in Milton's text: he is the only Philistine character who is named and has some clear degree of authority, traits which place him in an important position in the text. Indeed, the very inclusion of Harapha at all is a deviation from Milton's traditionally biblical source material, and this indicates a marked difference in interpretation of the Old Testament tale.

Harapha's presence may point toward a divergence with regard to some aspects of the biblical tale, but one of the primary driving forces behind Milton's text is Samson's dogged pursuit of vengeance for his abused body. My third chapter will examine this desire for vengeance and violence in the character of Milton's Samson in the context of more modern

aggressions within Christian and Islamic perspectives, with special attention given to Giorgio Agamben's discussion on the character of the *homo sacer*. Violence to the body is at once integral to and removed from the action of Milton's interpretation of Samson; we are introduced to the blinded, weakened, humiliated Samson at the drama's opening, and at its close we hear of Samson's destruction of the temple of the Philistines, with an understanding that this means Samson himself is also destroyed. In this final, desperate act of self-violence, Milton's Samson presents a new idea in the confines of the bodies at work, both textual and physical: the idea of self-destruction as a means to a political end. The third chapter of my thesis will serve to examine Samson's final act as a suicide/attack – the dual destruction of bodies natural and politic, how the one informs the other, and the way this destruction may be considered an act of not only religious violence, but of terrorism.

Tantamount to this analysis is an understanding of the (typically Western) conflation of Islam with acts of religious violence, a dangerous connection but one which must be addressed. A brief discussion of research presented in the first and second chapters of my analysis will serve to explain the fear with which early modern England regarded Islamic power. With this knowledge of the heightened state of anxiety over “turning Turk” which pervaded early modern England and post-Crusades Christendom, a return to the text of *Samson* is necessary to build the case for what seems to be the converse: that Samson, the biblical hero, is the perpetrator of a terrorist act. Giorgio Agamben's reflections on the concept of *homo sacer* is here essential, as they present a method of deconstructing Samson in terms of his inclusion by way of exclusion, the unsacrificeable and yet legally-killable “sacred man” whose death is neither sanctified nor reprehensible.

While for Milton Samson serves as the aggressor in his encounters with the Philistines during his captivity, the Chorus is integral to perpetuating the rhetoric of violent dissociation of the Israelites with the Philistines. The Chorus's very presence seems to agitate Samson from lamenting his "Life in captivity / Among inhuman foes" (SA 108-9) to his violent retaliatory actions with their words. The Chorus's frequent references to Samson's condition, fallen "To lowest pitch of abject fortune" (SA 169), stir him to action by recalling his "glory late" (179) while continuously appealing to his promised deliverance of Israel from "The Philistine, thy country's enemy" (238). These instances of politico-theological manipulation and violence and stark rhetorical and ethnic separation, particularly those located in Gaza, illustrate the pervasive patterns which also present themselves in early modern texts as well as biblical and Islamic ones. Considering Samson's place in both the political and the religious, my third chapter works at an understanding of his extreme actions in the context of the suicide bomber, highlighting the ambiguity Milton presents regarding Samson's classification as a hero of faith as well as the importance of this ambiguity in dealing with early modern conventions of the representation of the Other.

Concluding my project is an emphasis on the need for continuing study of early modern literature, particularly the works of John Milton, in a multiplicity of realms: political theology, Islamicist criticism, hermeneutical, contemporary. The research and readings which I intend to present are only a starting point, the initial incision to the body of work to be done on Milton's corpus and the influence of Islam with regards to literary study. Considering Milton's work and the potentiality of Islamic influences in a way that is both holistic and critical is relevant and contemporary, and it is my intention to help foster a growing trend toward hermeneutic,

comparative studies of Miltonic and early modern literature.

## CHAPTER I: MANOA, HARAPHA, AND MUSLIM HERMENEUTICS

“So We ransomed him for a great sacrifice. And left (his hallowed memory) for posterity.”

The Holy Qur'an, 37:107-8.

Sacrifice plays a crucial role in the tradition of monotheistic religions. All three iterations of Abrahamic faith – Judaism, Islam, and Christianity – provide accounts of the sacrifice of Abraham, wherein the eponymous founding patriarch prepares for and nearly goes through with the murder of his son as a sacrificial offering. The sacrificing of the son may thus be considered an Abrahamic standard. For Christians, however, the idea of sacrifice is not only understood in terms of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac, but also the sacrifice of Jesus, the Christian son of God, for the sins of mankind. This sacrifice is made manifest by the ritual of the Eucharist in Christian tradition, the representational consumption of the body and blood of Christ in remembrance of this ultimate sacrifice. Milton, of course, was interested in the idea of Eucharistic sacrifice, particularly in the wake of the heated debates regarding transubstantiation undertaken by theologians like Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, and John Calvin. Milton makes his opinion apparent in more than one place in his considerable corpus; in his *Apology for Smectymnuus*, for example, he asserts that the Eucharist has moved from a “communion of saints to a communion of liturgical words” (Milton, *Smectymnuus* 93) – that the keen resemblance of the English Church's liturgical communion shared too many similarities with that of the Roman Catholic church and therefore “repel[led]” its own members (Manuszak 40). Perhaps even more telling is the following passage from Book V of *Paradise Lost*:

So down they sat,

And to their viands fell, nor seemingly

The angel, nor in mist, the common gloss  
Of theologians, but with keen despatch  
Of real hunger, and concoctive heat  
To transubstantiate... (5.433-8)

In her discussion of this unorthodox communion, Regina Schwartz points out that “the repast in the garden is not a 'traditional' eucharist: man has not sinned, Christ has not been sacrificed, and so such a eucharist is impossible” (13). By introducing ideas of transubstantiation and mealtime, Milton is able to construct a “sinless eucharist”, presenting a communion between man and God *without* sacrifice – an interesting view when considered in the context of Milton's situation and the uproar being made by the various doctrines denouncing, invoking, and proclaiming the symbolism of the eucharist in the early modern era.

Sacrifice is implicit in the Christian rite of the eucharist, whether symbolically (for the reformers) or in a more manifest way (as with the Catholics). In his book *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, Fethi Benslama explains that “Judaism and Islam appear to agree in providing a solution wherein sacrificial desire is unrealized but finds a means of substitution, but the Christian solution opts, radically, for the actual enactment of the killing of the son” (178). For Milton, then, the scene in Book V of *Paradise Lost* seems to work towards this notion of “substitution” rather than the death of the son. This substitution invokes a consideration of this sinless eucharist as René Girard explains, “an institution essentially if not entirely symbolic” (Girard 1) – that is, one wherein the representation of the body is sacrificed and consumed, without the cannibalism sometimes called to mind by the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Sacrifice in *Samson Agonistes*, however, does not function only on the level of the symbolic: compared to Christ's unbroken body in *Paradise Lost*, Samson's body in *Samson Agonistes* is fully destroyed. In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard states one of the “fundamental truths” of violence: if left without the opportunity to satisfy itself, violence “will accumulate until it overflows its confines and floods the surrounding area” (10) – an act we see all too often in Samson's original biblical narrative, where violent act upon violent act is committed in retribution or retaliation. Girard continues: “the role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions” (10) – an important role indeed for the Danites and the Philistines. Girard explains that “[t]he sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence” (8) through the violence it receives. Samson's death may then be seen to serve as a purgative, ridding the Danite community from the violent menace of not only the Philistines, but his body and his indiscretions as well – and the typically violent consequences of his actions. But while Milton borrows the narrative from the Judeo-Christian tradition, thematically much of what is presented in his text aligns more closely with what we may classify as a quranic or Islamic interpretation. As Benslama aptly points out in his own analysis, in the Qur'an, “god does not directly demand or order Abraham to kill his son” (179); similarly, in *Samson Agonistes*, Milton's patriarch and Samson's father, Manoa, does not receive instruction to condone Samson's destruction. Samson's death, whether sacrificial in nature or not, is in fact not even presented to the reader but through the horrifying ekphrasis of the Messenger; the gruesome event itself is moved to the periphery of the text, with the destruction only signified by the Messenger's representation.

Throughout this chapter my aim is to present the ways in which Milton may be seen in interaction with the Qur'an through an interpretation and synthesis of the Qur'an in *Samson Agonistes*. The idea of Abrahamic sacrifice, whether symbolic or corporeal, god-ordained or otherwise, is an important component of this analysis, and in tracing depictions of sacrifice in both texts we see a pattern of interaction and involvement begin to emerge.

In order to engage this argument in the most efficient way, providing an outline of this chapter is necessary. I begin with a fundamental explanation of the critical apparatus of hermeneutic analysis, followed by a consideration of how “Muslim hermeneutics” – largely codified as the *tafsir* and typically understood to be the polyphony of interpretations presented by exegeses of the Qur'an – engage Milton with the Qur'an. Through the framework of Muslim hermeneutics, this chapter aims to address the Christian-Muslim dialectic as revealed through a deconstruction of the Self-Other binary within, and the violence and sacrifice of, Milton's Samson.

The establishment of a critical apparatus for my analysis is of utmost importance, especially in light of the necessity of achieving a holistic and thorough consideration of each of the texts I address. In order to achieve this holistic understanding of both *Samson Agonistes* and the Qur'an and therefore engage in the dialogue between them, the critical treatment of each of these texts must necessarily be a hermeneutic one – that is, at its most basic level, one which employs the notion of the “hermeneutical circle” in its interpretation. In her article “Hermeneutics, religious language and the Qur'an,” Victoria S. Harrison explains the process of this hermeneutical circle, as developed by German theologian Freidrich Schleiermacher:

First, a preliminary understanding of the text's individual part is acquired; then, in the light of that understanding, the reader strives to understand the text as a whole. The next step involves reassessing the understanding of the parts of the text that has been acquired in the light of the newly acquired understanding of the whole. (Harrison 209)

Harrison goes on to explain that while Schleiermacher was the initiator of hermeneutic interpretation, other philosophers – namely Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer – are responsible for the present understanding of hermeneutics as a process “principally concerned with the interpretation of texts” (208). Heidegger, however, claimed that hermeneutics was applicable to every act of understanding, “not just textual interpretation” (Harrison 210), and from there worked against “the traditional scholarly distinction between the arts and the sciences” by arguing that “scientific statements were no less in need of hermeneutical understanding than were works of literature” (Harrison 210). Gadamer's contributions to hermeneutics, meanwhile, included the theory of preunderstandings, which posits that “any new act of understanding always takes place in the context of one's 'preunderstandings', that is, of what one already understands” (Harrison 210), and that these preunderstandings inform not only the interpretations available to a given reader, but also contribute to creating the context of a given piece of literature. In order for a hermeneutical interpretation of a text to function properly, Gadamer claims, there must be a fusion of these understandings – a point of convergence wherein the specific temporal contexts of a text meet and interact with the preunderstandings of the reader.

In Islam, quranic hermeneutics often takes the form of *tafsir*, or exegesis of the verses of the Qur'an. Interpretation and explanation is of considerable importance for Muslims in understanding the guidance presented by Allah in the Qur'an, and any scholar attempting to present their commentary is expected to follow a rigorous set of conditions laid out for *tafsir*. This chapter will attempt to examine the ways in which certain *tafsir*, particularly those presented by medieval Muslim scholars al-Tha'labi and al-Tabari, the Qur'an, and Milton's text interact with one another to formulate a reasonable consideration of the interaction of these texts.

### The “Turkish Threat”

For a hermeneutic treatment of both texts to function, there must be contextualization for the reason behind any perceived interaction between the Qur'an and *Samson Agonistes*. As discussed in my introduction, there was considerable anxiety among the English towards their powerful trade partners to the east – namely, the “Muslim Empire” with whom Britain enjoyed healthy trade in fabrics, spices, and “other material” (Matar 10). These anxieties were not altogether unfounded: from before Milton's birth year of 1608, records exist of British ships “relentlessly pursued, captured or sunk by the Muslims: between 1609 and 1616, it was reported that 466 English ships were attacked and their crews enslaved” (Matar 6). Attacks on British ships continued in this way throughout the Jacobean period extending into Charles I's reign, attacks which “increased and confirmed the image of a forceful and powerful Islam” which the English both feared and reviled (Matar 7). Even with regards to more positive outlooks on Islam in early modern England, the “toleration” with which the Ottoman empire treated non-Muslim

inhabitants was used at best as “a stick to beat Roman Catholicism” with, and presented as an option that would likely have been considered the lesser of two evils (286).

Throughout early modern narratives these “Turkish threats” arose as personifications of the anxieties of the English with regards to the exaggerated threat of capture and conversion by the Ottoman Empire. Perhaps one of the best-known depictions this threat is to be found in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, a fantastical construction of the military career of Tatar warlord Timur the Lame. Marlowe's Islamic world “is merely decorative and used to amuse the Elizabethan audience” (Al-Olaqi 182), and the titular character of *Tamburlaine* is one who “would strike the audience as a paragon of a robust Western force of resistance against the Turks” (183). While throughout the two-part play, *Tamburlaine* is actively responsible for the deaths of numerous Turks, against whom he fights relentlessly, it is his penultimate act of terror against “the infidel enemy and his theology” (Al-Olaqi 190) that is of particular interest here: *Tamburlaine*, in the last act of the second part of his narrative, orders a public burning of the Qur'an. Marlowe's deliberate and vicious mistreatment of the Islamic faith via *Tamburlaine* on stage reveals the early modern dual-consideration of the Turks as both powerful enemy and thrillingly mysterious trade-partner. Likewise, then, the holy book of the “Muslim empire,” the Qur'an, was to be considered a dangerous source of heresy – and, possibly, inspiration.

#### Translation, Dissemination, and Accessibility of the Qur'an in England

To assess this dual-function of the Qur'an as discussed above, one must consider the accessibility of the text to an early modern audience. The history of translations of the Qur'an in the West is unfortunately marred by frequent error and infidelity to its source material; for, as

explained by scholar Fahd Mohammed Taleb Al-Olaqi, far from being concerned with semantic accuracy, Western translators of the Qur'an were prone to subjecting the text to “semantic shifts to suit their own ideological purposes” (179). The first printed instance of the translated Qur'an in the West is the Latin edition, included by Zurich theologian Theodor Biblander in his *Machumetis saracenorum principis*, published in the year 1543. Biblander's Latin Qur'an is “identified primarily as a political document”, “understood to be a law-code, on a par with the Papal Decretals rather than the Bible” (Miller 244), and largely follows the previous Latin translation of Robert of Ketton from 1143, the offensively-dubbed *Lex Mahumet pseudoprophete*. While largely “apologetic” and problematic in presentation due to the defamatory claims made by its inevitably Islamophobic translators, this translated Qur'an is noted as being “treat[ed] [...] with the respect due to a text worthy of reference and citation. This is a Qur'an intended to be consulted, perhaps even mined for information” (Miller 246).

Similarly, the translation of the Qur'an into English in 1648-1649 was “intended by the translator to be akin to the public display of a monster” (Feingold 483), in that the representation of any Islamic articles of belief put forth in the English translation was meant to be considered in terms of their error in relation to Christianity. “[R]eading the Koran would spur one to 'enjoy the glorious light of the gospel’” for “staid and solid Christians” (Feingold 483-4), and was intended to educate people on the perceived errors of the Islamic faith, not as any sort of paradigm of virtue – it represented physically and ideologically the “necessity of knowing evil in order to avoid it” (484). Both the 1649 English version and the 1543 Latin translation would have been available to Milton; indeed, the somewhat subversive nature of the text's circulation (if not its subject matter) and Parliament's numerous attempts at halting its production would have been

enough to interest Milton, both as a scholar interested in religious texts and as a writer staunchly opposed to Parliament's attempts at censorship (Feingold, 481-2).

### The Absent Samson

That the Qur'an was accessible to Milton is therefore apparent. Citing *Samson Agonistes* as the focal point for a study of the influence of Islam on Milton's work is, however, complicated by a single, conspicuous fact: while much Judeo-Christian tradition shares roots with Islamic dogmatic conventions, the story of Samson is not one of them. Samson's life and deeds, as recorded in the Book of Judges as part of both Christian Old Testament and Hebrew *Tanakh*, are altogether absent from the Qur'an. In considering Milton and the Qur'an, we observe a similar lacuna in the scholarship regarding Milton's interaction with Islam. Eid Abdallah Dahiyat is a valuable resource for a historical consideration of these interactions, particularly in his analysis of "oriental references" in Milton's works. Similarly, aspects of this lacuna are addressed by Andrew Rippin in his article "The Muslim Samson: medieval, modern and scholarly interpretations", where he explores how the "peripheral" nature of Samson in the context of Islamic scripture "facilitates direct access into Muslim hermeneutics" (240). Rippin's article serves dual functions with regards to quranic hermeneutics: it considers medieval notions of a Muslim Samson as presented by two eminent scholars of the time, as well as introducing the relative "absence" of Samson from the quranic narrative. For Rippin, Samson is not entirely absent in the Qur'an, but rather exists in the periphery of the text, as implied in the attempts by medieval Muslim scholars to "fit" Samson into a Muslim character which are presented in his article. Rippin's discussion begins with the assertion that "the biblical prophet Samson, famous

as the strong man of Judges 13:1 – 16:31, is not mentioned by name in the Quran” (239), though his focus quickly turns to the attempts to incorporate Samson into the “quranic prophetic world” (240) by two medieval Muslim authors, Abu Ja'far ibn Jarir al-Tabari and Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Tha'labi. According to Rippin, these attempts to fit the biblical character of Samson into the mold of an Islamic narrative culture indicate the “variety of competing priorities” (240) for the aforementioned scholars. While the narrative of Samson given by al-Tabari and al-Tha'labi deviates from the biblical source, there is a uniformity to the two as depicted in Rippin's translations that is only occasionally interrupted by differences in the retellings. The “competing priorities” mentioned by Rippin are frequently matters of sourcing, as in their introductions; al-Tha'labi cites previous scholarship and the revelation on the Night of Power, while al-Tabari's authorities differ and do not mention the Night of Power whatsoever (Rippin 240).

Besides the introductory matter, Rippin points out that “the body of the text of the narrative is then reasonably uniform” (241), with occasional deviations noted in the translation, including al-Tha'labi's remark that Samson is “a Muslim among [his people]” and al-Tabari's additions regarding Samson's doing battle “in the way of God” (241, 242). One of the significant deviations from the biblical source comes from al-Tha'labi's conclusion of the story: “God restored [Samson's] sight to him and made whole the parts of his body that [his enemies] had afflicted, and he returned as he had been” (Rippin 242); indeed, in neither account does the narrator imply that Samson is dead, but in both accounts he is able to destroy the seat of his enemies' power and has his sight restored by God. Rippin indicates that the narrative has “taken on a Muslim character”: “the role of a prophet to struggle against the unbelievers, to denounce

evil in his own community, and to be guided and supported by God in his struggles” (244) align more easily with Islamic ideas of piety. This notion is supported by scholar Farid Esack when discussing his idea of a “qur'anic theology of liberation”: the text of the Qur’an “singles out a particular section of humankind, the marginalized, and makes a conscious and deliberate option for them against neutrality and objectivity, on the one hand, and the powerful and oppressors, on the other” (qtd. by Harrison 215).

The marginalized are, ironically, of central consideration here – not only in the world of Muslim hermeneutics and the Qur'an, but for sacrifice at large. With regards to the marginalized, René Girard points out the following:

If we look at the extremely wide spectrum of human victims sacrificed by various societies, [...] we notice at first glance beings who are either outside or on the fringes of society [...] What we are dealing with, therefore, are exterior or marginal individuals, incapable of establishing or sharing the social bonds that link the rest of the inhabitants. Their status as foreigners or enemies, their servile condition, or simply their age prevents these future victims from fully integrating themselves into the community (12).

Samson can be considered in the contexts which Girard presents; his inability to marry within his community, his status as enemy to the Philistines, his forced servitude all render him as marginalized, putting him on the periphery not only of scholarship but also of his own narrative. Scholars like Rippin and Dahiyat do an excellent job revealing the historical presence of Samson in Islam and of Islam in Milton's day, supporting the foundation for further exploration into the

ways in which Milton's text understands Samson in communication with the Qur'an and quranic hermeneutics.

### Manoa and Abrahamic Sacrifice

Themes of marginalization and Otherness seem to blend with themes of sacrifice in *Samson Agonistes*. Samson is notable for his placement both inside and outside of the community of the Israelites: the Chorus hails him as "the glory [...] of Israel" (SA 179); Manoa declares Samson is "the dread of Israel's foes" (342); and Samson himself, when referring to his deeds, typically relates himself to Israel, citing that he "might begin Israel's Deliverance" (SA 225), that he was "watching to oppress / Israel's oppressors" (232-3), and that his indiscretion and capture "have brought scandal / To Israel" (453-4). His consecration as a Nazirite, however, "his vow of strictest purity" (SA 319) functions to separate him from his community as a holy figure of protection; he is the one who "should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver" (SA 39), blessed with strength from God that removes him from the regular class of "Abraham's race" (SA 29) – a position at once revered and marginalized for its exclusivity, a designation that will be explored later in my third chapter.

So Milton's Samson is both within and without, in more ways than one. In the narrative, he is both a part of his Israelite community by his birthright, and apart from them because of both his vow and his captivity; likewise, he may be located in a fallen, marginal position in the Philistine society because of his captivity and servitude, but it is clear also in his interactions with the Philistines that they keep him at arm's length, with good reason. In a broader sense, however, Milton works to present a conflicted vision of Samson – he is at once within the

context of the biblical narrative, as evidenced by the overall events of the story, while simultaneously forcing the reader to consider Samson in another way altogether by taking some liberties with the biblical source. Keeping in line with the structure of a Greek tragedy, from which Milton bases the structure of *Samson Agonistes*, the text begins *in medias res* with the introduction of Samson. Samson presents himself first as a weary prisoner, setting the scene for his incoming unannounced visitors and his ability to receive them by explaining that “This day a solemn feast the [Philistines] hold / To Dagon their sea-idol, and forbid / Laborious works” (SA 12-14), leaving Samson free to rest and consider what brought him to the state he is presently in, “Betrayed, captived, and both [his] eyes put out” (SA 33). Samson's woeful musings are soon brought to an end, however, with the arrival of his friends, the Danites, in the form of the Chorus, as well as his father, Manoa. In the traditional scriptural story, neither Manoa nor the Chorus are present with Samson during his incarceration by the Philistines; indeed, the book of Judges seems to imply that Manoa is actually dead during Samson's capture by the Philistines, as it states that Samson, after his death, is taken to “the buryingplace of Manoah his father” (KJV Judges 16:31). Already, Milton is breaking from the expected narrative to present his own version of things, and the insertion of Manoa into the narrative of Samson's final hours begins a pattern of unexpected characters that spurs the plot of the tragedy ever onwards. For Milton, Manoa presents a neat foil for Samson's own character: faithful where Samson is lost, penitent and hopeful where his son is vengeful and despairing, Manoa appears to fit the role of saddened father when confronted with the reality of his mutilated, imprisoned son. He even seems impotent where Samson, despite his loss of sight, is autonomous; while Manoa urges Samson to “Repent the sin” (SA 504) that caused his incarceration in the first place – namely the breaking

of his vows and his infidelity with Dalila – and rejoices that he and the Chorus have been sent “to return [Samson] / Home to thy country and his sacred house”, Samson is quite the opposite: “but as for life, / To what end should I seek it?”, he wonders, interrupting his father's happy reflections on their return journey home (SA 517-8, 521-2). Apart from providing a “voice of reason” to oppose Samson's apparent inclination for self-destruction, Manoa's presence in Milton's text provides an earthly figure of the father for Samson, the patriarch who must be served and, ultimately, revenged.

But Manoa is not an entirely successful foil for Samson. Quite the opposite; in reminding Samson of his “glorious strength” (36), now lost, by upbraiding him for his capture by pointing out that the “popular feast” the Philistines celebrate is in praise of “their god who hath delivered / Thee Samson bound and blind into their hands” (434, 437-8), and by encouraging Samson to repent for his sins, Manoa is responsible for stirring his son towards his final act. While throughout his interactions with Samson Manoa is quick to discourage Samson's negative thoughts, insisting that he “Believe not these suggestions, which proceed / From anguish of the mind and humors black” (599-600), his actions toward attempting to free Samson through the payment of a ransom – another Miltonic deviation from the biblical source – imply a kind of sacrifice that Samson seems vehemently reluctant that his father should pay: “Spare that proposal, father, spare the trouble / Of that solicitation; let me here, As I deserve, pay on my punishment” (487-9). Manoa does not thus spare himself, instead departing the central action of the text in the hopes of winning Samson's freedom “With supplication prone and father's tears” (1459) – a largely unsuccessful tactic.

Manoa's sacrifice, unwanted as it is by Samson and unsuccessful as it is in the end, is important to a consideration of *Samson Agonistes* in the context of quranic hermeneutics. The work of Fethi Benslama in his book *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam* is here invaluable to understanding the idea of the Abrahamic “sacrifice” as it pertains to the Islamic ethos. Benslama discusses that for monotheism, sacrifice is “an interpretation of and solution to the problem of violence” – specifically, sacrifice “between the father and son [...] at a point where their existence, their future, their salvation is presented in terms of the murder of one or the other” (177). For Manoa, it is not so much the “spectacle” of his son's suicide, but rather his “consent to the murder of [his] son” (Benslama 177) that marks him and the Danites as potential recipients of the benefits of Samson's sacrifice. Given an eye-witness account of Samson's death by the Messenger, Manoa responds:

Come, come, no time for lamentation now,  
Nor much more cause, Samson hath quit himself  
Like Samson, and heroically hath finished  
A life heroic, on his enemies  
Fully revenged... (SA 1708-12)

These are not the words of a mourning father. There is a swelling pride in Manoa's remarks, his praise that Samson “quit himself / Like Samson”, as if Samson's truth to himself and his design as God's warrior is to be regarded as more valuable than his life.

Interestingly, Manoa's initial response to the Messenger's description of the “horrid spectacle” (1542) of Samson's death is a request for clarification: “Give us if thou canst, / Eye-witness of what first or last was done, / Relation more particular and distinct” (1593-5). This

episode, entirely contrived by Milton and without biblical sourcing save the events related by the Messenger of Samson's actions, is reminiscent of the quranic account of the foremost monotheistic tradition of sacrifice, the almost-sacrifice of Abraham's son by his father:

Then, when (the son) reached (the age of) (serious) work with him, he said: 'O my son! I see in vision that I offer thee in sacrifice: Now see what is thy view!' (The son) said: 'O my father! Do as thou art commanded'[,] (*Holy Qur'an*, 37:102)

The quranic depiction of the non-event of the sacrifice is then one that highlights the relationship between father and son, particularly the son's understanding of the father's desire for sacrifice. This, as Benslama points out, is important because "in the Koranic version, god does not directly demand or order Abraham to kill his son" (179). Similarly, in Milton's depiction of sacrifice, Samson the son is not instructed to sacrifice himself, nor is Manoa directly commanded to "condone" Samson's final act of violence, but rather each acts of his own accord in reflecting upon the desire for sacrifice of the son by the father. This, too, follows Benslama's commentary that "It is the son who considers that his father has received an order" (179). Unlike the quranic depiction, however, there is no divine prevention or animal substitution: Samson's attempt at sacrifice is complete, as is Manoa's acceptance of it, with the cycle of vengeance between the communities in the narrative presumably at an end, though the potential for a resurgence of vengeance on either side lingers, the potential for the continuation of Girard's "vicious circle of revenge" (24).

### Harapha and Philistine Ethics

Milton's inclusion of Manoa in his retelling of the story of Samson is indeed a deviation from the biblical narrative, but one that draws on tradition and employs a biblical figure from the same book and lineage as Samson to reconsider the character. The inclusion of the giant Harapha, however, is one which is not only a considerable departure from the biblical narrative, but one which upsets the entire structure of the story insofar as it introduces the possibility that Samson is *not* the great warrior and defender of the Children of Israel that he is claimed to be. While Harapha is a biblical figure, he is certainly one that may be considered peripheral; his name is quite literally “the giant” in Hebrew (*ha*, the article, and *raphah*, “giant”), and while there has been some contention as to whether or not *haraphah* should be treated as a proper noun (Jacobson 70), there remains an obviously marginal nature to the character in the biblical account of 2 Samuel 21:15 (which references the “sons of the giant”).

But Harapha the giant in Milton's text is far from peripheral; he is instead a Philistine powerhouse, essentially contrived as Samson's match and, logic dictates, the eminent cause of Samson's death. Interestingly, though, while Harapha's intention in coming to see Samson is “to see of whom such noise / Hath walked about, and each limb to survey, / If thy appearance answer loud report” (1088-1090), he is not overtly cruel to the captive Samson. To the contrary, it is Samson – perhaps unsurprisingly – who initiates any aggression. During Harapha's visit, Samson is almost constantly challenging him to fight or threatening him with violence: “Go baffled coward, lest I run upon thee / [...] And with one buffet lay thy structure low” (SA 1237, 1239), threats to which Harapha responds by leaving “somewhat crestfall'n, / Stalking with less unconscionable strides, / And lower looks” (SA 1244-6). Harapha refuses Samson's proposals in

the way that a noble warrior would refuse to do combat with a wounded foe, as Samson, blinded and weakened, would for Harapha prove no worthy opponent: “To combat with a blind man I disdain” (SA 1106).

Harapha in Milton's text should function as a negative foil, a representation of the pagan enemy, the Other: Philistine, barbarian, and, if one is to once again consider the anxieties of early modern England, “Muslim” – insofar as he serves as a stand-in for the generalized pagan threat posed by the Islamic Ottoman empire. Harapha as Milton depicts him, however, is vastly different from what an early modern reader's expectations of him might be, and this difference highlights a dual functionality of his character. To one effect, Harapha's refusal to engage with the debased Samson is indicative of the aforementioned quranic denial of the Abrahamic sacrifice; Harapha does not ascribe to the “incorrect interpretation” (Benslama 183) of Manoa and Samson's dreams of sacrifice, but instead resigns himself to Samson's vitriol and departs “in a sultry chafe” (SA 1246). This denial seems to imply a paternal authority in Harapha, placing him in the role of the father who must resist the request for sacrifice; however, while Harapha refuses to engage with Samson's violent behavior and in so doing refuses to commit the sacrifice, his refusal is ultimately rendered pointless by Samson's attempt at sacrifice through the destruction of the temple.

Harapha's other function is one of subversion. Milton's presentation of Harapha does not conform to the ideas of the barbarous Other, but rather implies a chivalric, “noble” representation. Daniel Boughner points out “Harapha's emphasis on his 'honor'”, “his knightly disdain for Samson's feats of strength” and “his taking refuge, when directly challenged by Samson, in the pretext that 'no man of arms' would fight with a condemned man” (298); while

Boughner implies that these actions imply a comedic reading of Harapha that flies in the face of Milton's apparent disdain for such figures in tragedy, I believe that these aspects of Harapha's character imply something else entirely. Namely, by introducing a perceived Other who is concerned with traditionally Western ideas of a “hero” – honor, chivalry, and courtly behavior – Milton presents a Philistine with whom his readership would sympathize. Unlike al-Tha'labi and al-Tabari's attempts at portraying Samson's struggle against nonbelievers as indicative of the “conscious and deliberate option for them against [...] the powerful and oppressors” (Harrison 215), Milton's Samson is displaced by Harapha, who is representative of a Philistine Self, a Self from which Samson is differentiated by the nature of his crimes, his servitude, and his Otherness. This places Samson, by virtue of his behavior, in the position of Other, an assertion consolidated when one considers the position of Samson outside the realm of normativity even within his culture. This notion of Samson's consecration as indicative of his Otherness is further explored in my third chapter.

With Samson as Other, the perceived Christian audience of Milton's text is forced to reconsider the boundary of Inside/Outside that is largely responsible for giving structure to the Western worldview, and this consideration of Samson “outside” – outside the realm of civilization, outside the normative culture, and yet by nature of his blindness trapped *inside* himself – not only reinforces the idea of absence/presence in the texts of both *Samson* and the Qur'an, but may also be reflected in his own most frequent lamentations: the loss of his sight.

The attempted sacrifice of Samson thus plays an important role in the text, particularly in considering the ways in which *Samson Agonistes* as a text communicates with the hermeneutical principles laid out in the Qur'an. His death seems purgative; his blood, spilled for Israel, at once

“serves to illustrate the point that the same substance can stain or cleanse, contaminate or purify” (Girard 37) by nature of the results of its spilling – the destruction of Israel’s enemies, but also of its champion. The dualistic nature of this aspect of Samson illuminates the presence of other qualities in the text of *Samson Agonistes* which serve dual functions, qualities which I consider more thoroughly in my next chapter.

## CHAPTER II: A DOUBLE SHARE OF WISDOM: BINARIES IN *SAMSON AGONISTES*

“But canst thou guide the blind, even though they will not see?”

*The Holy Qur'an*, 10:43

“How wouldst thou use me now, blind, and thereby  
Deceivable, in most things as a child  
Helpless, thence easily contemn'd, and scorn'd,  
And last neglected?”

*Samson Agonistes*, lines 941-4

In my last chapter, I discussed the theme of sacrifice and its function both in an Abrahamic, theological context as well as its construction and roles in *Samson Agonistes*. I considered the “marginal” nature sacrifice necessitates in multiple ways: in the Qur'an, in Samson himself, and in two of the more “minor” players in Milton's text, Harapha and Manoa. In this chapter, I seek to more deeply examine a connection between the Qur'an and Milton's text by engaging in a deconstruction of *Samson Agonistes* with the Qur'an.

Derrida insists that “one of the gestures of deconstruction is to not naturalize what isn't natural – to not assume that what is conditioned by history, institutions, or society is natural” (*Derrida*). More importantly, the binaries which construct language and culture are not to be considered in “the peaceful coexistence of *vis-a-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy”, where “one of the two terms governs the other, or has the upper hand” (*Positions* 41). With this in mind,

this chapter turns to a deconstruction of some of the binaries in the text of *Samson Agonistes* which find points and counterpoints in the Qur'an. By examining these binaries, I explore the complicated relationships they present in the text of *Samson Agonistes*, in the hopes of highlighting the interaction of Milton with the Qur'an through a consideration of similar thematic elements in both texts.

As before, it is important to provide an overview of this chapter so that the ideas presented therein may be considered in the most efficient and direct way. I begin with a brief discussion of binary opposition and deconstruction as the central critical mechanism of this chapter, followed by a more thorough consideration of how the specific binaries I have chosen to explore in this chapter manifest themselves in not only the text of *Samson Agonistes* but in the Qur'an as well.

Binary opposition, the conflation of two opposing but related terms, is an organizational tool for structuralism that is foundational in understanding social constructs such as language and culture. Deconstruction then necessitates the inversion of the “violent hierarchy” of binaries, by means of taking these two seemingly opposing terms and examining the ways in which they correspond, correlate, and converge to ultimately uncover the instability which makes up the rigid structure of the binary in the first place. This destabilization of binaries is constantly at work in a text, and indeed in language itself, as Derrida notes: “deconstruction is not an operation that supervenes afterwards, from the outside, one fine day. It is always already at work” (*Memoires* 75).

For this chapter, I discuss binary opposition as it presents itself most blatantly in the text of *Samson Agonistes*, in the form of three specific binaries: Inside/Outside, Vision/Blindness, and

Self/Other. These themes structure the text of *Samson* both narratively and in such a way that their deconstruction reveals a deeper understanding of the Self/Other binary. Simply pointing out these binaries is, of course, not enough for their destabilization, and in order to consider the themes more deeply I look to the Qur'an and analyze the three binaries in *Samson* in the context of quranic hermeneutics. The original biblical story of Samson becomes, I argue, a sort of palimpsest for Milton, where layers of history, culture, theology, and politics coalesce to form a new narrative that highlights the connection between East and West. The physical place of the setting is no accident, nor are the themes of violence and blindness presented in the text, and even Samson's absence in the Qur'an may be understood in terms of its latent presence within quranic hermeneutics.

#### Inside/Outside – Emotion and Action

Throughout the text of *Samson Agonistes*, Milton presents ideas of inward reflection as compared with external representation of emotions. While internal reflection in the poem must necessarily be represented externally, particularly considering the designation of the text as a “closet drama,” there are certainly moments of privacy that can be regarded as moments of Samson's inwardness. Indeed, the fact that Milton presents *Samson Agonistes* in the form of a “closet drama” seems to indicate an anticipatory deconstruction of internality/externality, as the form presents itself as something to be read privately that which was originally intended to be performed – a play without actors, and an audience of one.

Samson frequently appears preoccupied with internal issues, rather than external events. Almost immediately we see that Samson is beset with “restless thoughts [...] like a deadly

swarm / Of hornets” (SA 19), thoughts that “present / Times past, what once I was, and what am now” (SA 21-2). Like any ancient hero, the focus of an epic drama as Milton intended with *Samson Agonistes*, Samson is fully aware of his emotions and more than willing to discuss them at length. His opening speech is a litany of woes, a thorough list of each of his present afflictions and a condemnation of his shortcomings that led him to such a debased state, “Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves” (SA 41). Alone, Samson laments his sightlessness and his foolishness in trusting Dalila, revealing the downright hateful state of his life as it is in blind captivity:

Inferior to the vilest now become  
Of man or worm; *the vilest here excel me,*  
They creep, yet see, I *dark in light* exposed  
To daily fraud, contempt, abuse and wrong,  
Within doors, or without, still as a fool,  
In power of others, never in my own;  
Scarce half I seem to live, *dead more than half.* (SA 73-9) [emphasis added]

Samson now considers himself “vile”, as do his captors; half of the abuse he suffers, however, comes by his own hand, or rather his voice. While he claims that insult and injury by the Philistines is “their daily practice” (114), as the narrative progresses we see more and more that Samson, through his constant self-degradation, also acts as his own abuser. He asks his friends, the Chorus of Danites, “Am I not sung and proverbied for a fool / In every street, do they not say, how well / Are come upon him his deserts?” (SA 203-5), as if the whole of his own country is surely glad to see him captive and blind. Samson also declares that “another inward grief” (SA 330) in him awakes at the mention of his father, Manoa, and his coming to see him, more

ashamed of his present state than happy to be reunited with his father.

Samson as Milton presents him here is concerned almost entirely with his own preoccupations and thoughts, without much regard for others around him. His outward actions, from his antagonism towards Dalila and Harapha to his eventual destruction of the temple, work to reflect his inward-turning thoughts and emotions. Although Samson is cruel and angry in his interactions with the Philistines and melancholy when he speaks with his father and Danite friends, he is never particularly rash or thoughtless. The care that Samson takes with his actions is most visible, ironically, when Samson has left the central action of the text, and is instead recounted to the audience via the character of the Messenger. The Messenger describes how, when led to the pillars to be put on display in the temple of Dagon, Samson stood “with head a while inclined, / And eyes fast fixed he stood, as one who prayed, / Or some great matter in his mind revolved” (SA 1636-8) before he spoke his last. Samson then pulls the pillars down around himself and the Philistines, “As with the force of winds and waters pent, / When mountains tremble” (SA 1647-8). This moment, where Samson stands “with head a while inclined”, is evident of the inward struggle he experiences, and while the Messenger is careful to note that Samson resembled “one who prayed”, Samson's declaration that “I mean to show you of my strength” (SA 1646) indicates that he has determined to carry out this violent act without external guidance.

#### Vision/Blindness – Inward Light

As we see in both *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Lost*, the idea of light, both as an inward guiding force and as an external “visual beam” (SA 163), is for Milton something to be

addressed at length. For Milton, light itself was a crucial element, both physically as the “prime work of God” (SA 70) and as a more personal, guiding kind of light – a “Celestial light” (PL 3.51), which Milton himself implores to “Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers / Irradiate” (PL 3.52-3). This notion of inward light, to which Milton appeals so that he “may see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight” (PL 3.54-5), is also present in the Qur'an, most notably in sura an-Nur 24:35, usually called the “Light verse”:

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass, the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor o--f the west, whose oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. *Allah guides to His light whom He wills*. And Allah presents examples for the people, and Allah is Knowing of all things. (Qur'an 24:35) (emphasis added)

This quranic depiction of Allah as a guiding light is certainly not a foreign idea to the Abrahamic mindset: the Word of God is “a lamp unto [believer's] feet, and a light unto [their] path” (KJV, Psalm 119:105). In Psalm 27, the Lord is referred to as “my Light and my salvation” (KJV, Psalm 27:1), and frequently throughout the Old and New Testaments, the idea that the Lord is light and guides the faithful can be found. For Milton's Samson, however, the inward light provided by God is a concept from which he is alienated, left alone with his capture, servitude, and sightlessness. He is “with blindness internal struck” (1686), “exiled from light; / As in the land of darkness yet in light, / To live a life half dead, a living death” (SA 98-100).

While “inward light” is an integral part of Samson's characterization, the importance Milton places on light in the text must be considered in physical terms as well – that is to say, in

visual terms. Vision itself, the act of seeing, is another omnipresent theme in Milton's corpus, a fact which is perhaps unsurprising when considering Milton's own blindness; from the passion of the verses themselves we can imply that the lamentations given by Samson regarding his loss of sight were deeply personal moments for Milton, and his own experiences undoubtedly contributed to his interest in and execution of writing of the text itself. However, while Samson's own vision and subsequently his blindness seem to resist a definitive categorization, Milton's drama seems to privilege the latter by virtue of its potential for spiritual renewal.

We can see two kinds of blindness existing in *Samson*. The first is a physical blindness caused by the removal of his eyes by his enemies, while the second is a blindness of the spirit, of the heart, a figurative blindness that works to trap Samson in the inwardness discussed previously. While Derrida insists that for Milton, "the blind man *regains*, he guards and regards, retains and recoups, and compensates for what his eyes of flesh have to renounce with a spiritual or inner light" (*Memoirs of the Blind* 109), the same cannot be said for Samson. His physical blindness parallels his spiritual blindness, dulling both kinds of vision and extinguishing the possibility of "illumination" of the inward sight. Although Samson is made captive and forced into slavery at the hands of his enemies the Philistines, his blindness is, for him, "worse than chains, / Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age" (SA 68-9), a means of crippling him far beyond the measure of any other physical prison. Unable to see, Samson is truly made all the more aware of his inability to escape his enemies and driven to more and more desperate thinking throughout the play. Indeed, Samson refers to himself as "a moving grave, / Buried yet not exempt / By privilege of death and burial / From worst of other evils" (SA 102-5), implying that he already considers himself dead because of his blindness. That Samson considers himself a "moving

grave” without his sight makes clear how important sight is. The sentiment is echoed by the Chorus, who when first confronted with the imprisoned Samson wonder “Which shall I first bewail, / Thy bondage or lost sight[?]” (SA 151-2), and conclude that Samson has become “the dungeon of [him]self” (SA 156).

Samson's physical blindness is a powerful element in the text of *Samson Agonistes*, and one which presents itself in the text of the Qur'an, as well. With regards to physical blindness, the text presents depictions of the healing of the blind, particularly by the character of Jesus through Allah:

And [make him] a messenger to the Children of Israel, [who will say], 'Indeed I have come to you with a sign from your Lord in that I design for you from clay [that which is] like the form of a bird, then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird by permission of Allah. *And I cure the blind and the leper*, and I give life to the dead - by permission of Allah.' (Qur'an 3:49) (emphasis added)

Similarly, elsewhere in the Qur'an, Allah speaks to Jesus at the end of days, reporting again how Jesus “healed the blind and the leper” with Allah's permission (Qur'an 5:110).

Jesus's appearance and recognition as a prophet in the Qur'an would likely have been somewhat surprising to Milton, considering the frequently negative, “heathen” reputation of the Muslims among the early modern English. Surely, then, the suras which depict the life of Jesus would have drawn his attention. It is no coincidence that the healing spoken of in these two suras reflects Manoa's later expectations of Samson's restored sight: “since his strength with eyesight was not lost, / God will restore him eyesight to his strength” (SA 1502-3). This restoration of sight for Samson is also present in the accounts of al-Tha'labi and al-Tabari discussed in my first

chapter.

As much as his physical blindness afflicts and traps him, elements of Samson's tragic and violent end are similarly brought about by his destructive figurative blindness, as well – the blindness of his anger, his vengeance. Samson laments that “Light the prime work of God to [him] is extinct” (SA 70), and the truth of this statement is apparent in more ways than one. Not only is Samson, blind and bound, unable to experience the “visual beam” of physical light, but he is also blind to the light of truth, of hope, and, indeed, of faith in God. In her article “*Theatrum Mundi* and Milton's Theatre of the Blind”, Vanita Neelakanta asks, “Where is God in *Samson Agonistes*?” (30) – a question Samson himself is certainly unable to answer, despite his appeals to his God throughout the text.

This idea of a more figurative blindness, a blindness from truth, is another theme we see in the Qur'an. Sura an-Naml says that, for unbelievers, “their knowledge is arrested concerning the Hereafter. Rather, they are in doubt about it. Rather, they are, concerning it, blind” (Qur'an 27:66), and sura al-Haj notes that “For indeed, it is not eyes that are blinded, but blinded are the hearts which are within the breasts” (Qur'an 22:46). The latter verse is almost in direct correlation with what Milton has to say about Samson's own state of gracelessness, the blindness of his heart that leaves him captive and more fettered than his physical blindness ever could. It is his blindness to truth, this imprisonment within himself – more agonizing, it would seem, than his similarly self-caused physical imprisonment by the Philistines – that truly traps Samson without hope of renewal or aid.

By comparison, a number of supporting characters in the text of *Samson Agonistes* have relative clarity of vision when compared with Samson himself. Every character besides Samson

has vision in the physical sense; much of the text concerns itself with matters of appearance, particularly Samson's. Interestingly, though, while the Danite Chorus and Manoa present much of the description regarding Samson's body, the character of Dalila has much to say about vision, sight, and revelation. Her approach is marked by her staring; the Danites note that she “stands and eyes [him] fixed” (SA 726), before dissolving briefly into tears at seeing her husband so decrepit. Confronted by Samson for her betrayal, Dalila remarks that her infidelity could not have come about without Samson: “To what I did thou show'dst me first the way” (SA 781). Dalila also encourages Samson despite his blindness, insisting that “though sight be lost, / Life yet hath many solaces, enjoyed / Where other senses want not” (914-6). Indeed, where the Danites and Manoa encourage Samson similarly, Dalila takes it a step further, commenting that it may even be to Samson's advantage to be blind: he is now “Exempt from many a care and chance to which / Eyesight exposes daily men abroad” (918-9). While her own vision was clouded by the “powerful arguments” of the Philistine magistrates and priests (862) to betray Samson, along with her conception of Samson as “mutable / Of fancy” (793-4) and therefore necessarily in need of controlling through the learning of his secrets, Dalila expresses an element of proleptic clarity which Samson and the Danites are unable to achieve. Her attempts at apologizing and making up with Samson very much thwarted, Dalila notes that while her name “In Dan, in Judah, and the bordering tribes, / To all posterity may stand defamed” (SA 976-7), she will among her own people be remembered as a woman who “save[d] / Her country from a fierce destroyer” (984-5).

Unfortunately for Dalila, the latter part of her brief prophecy goes largely unfulfilled. While to this day her name is often associated in the Judeo-Christian tradition with “the blot / Of

falsehood” (978-9) and she is given as a penultimate example of a traitorous bad wife, any vindication she had won among her own country was lost when Samson pulled down the pillars of the temple of Dagon, thereby destroying the Philistines. The destruction of the temple is undoubtedly one of the “cares” to which Dalila was alluding earlier, as the only character who did witness it – the Messenger – is considerably affected by the sight. The Messenger plays an important role in the narrative because of his ability to re-present the “horrid spectacle / Which erst [his] eyes beheld and yet behold” (SA 1542-3). The Messenger not only gives the news that Samson has died, but also provides an account of Samson's destruction, in great detail and to the effect that the Danites and Manoa are able to “see”, or at least envision, the event. The Messenger's capacity to see stands in opposition to Samson's blindness, and the way the Messenger is able to quite literally re-create and re-present the scene of the temple's destruction contrasts Samson's own inability to “see” beyond his own imprisonment and disfigurement. The other characters in *Samson Agonistes* are all able to see, albeit with varying degrees of clarity. That the blinded central character of Milton's drama is surrounded by those who do possess vision may be seen to serve as a commentary on Milton's part regarding the relative vision – or blindness – of the audience itself, particularly in the way both the physical and figurative aspects of blindness are presented.

#### Self/Other – Samson and Tamburlaine

Despite his blindness and self-serving behavior, Samson is the protagonist of Milton's story, the tragic hero of the narrative. That much is incontestable; the plot centers on Samson, and while he is absent for the last section of the text, his actions, while unseen by the audience,

continue to be the focal point. Because he is the center of the narrative, despite his previously-discussed marginalized position, it is safe to assume that the initial position of Samson should be the privileged one in the binary of self/other – that he should be understood as representative of the West, of England, of Christendom, where his enemies – Harapha, Dalila, the Philistines at large – are East, Islam, and Other. This pattern of representation via a historical figure can also be seen in texts like Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, as explored by scholar Fahd Mohammed Taleb Al-Olaqi:

Wolff notes that in creating *Tamburlaine*, Marlowe was striving to come up with a textual figure who, instead of coming across as a character built around the prevailing mood of European distress viz-a-viz the Turkish threat, would strike the audience as a paragon of a robust Western force of resistance against the Turks.

(Al-Olaqi 183)

*Tamburlaine*, with his Qur'an-burning and vicious treatment of the Turks he does battle with, can also be seen then as what would have been for English audiences of the time a depiction of the Self – an England that was powerful, able to hold up against and defeat the potential, looming threat of the Turks.

Samson's privileged position, however, like *Tamburlaine's*, gets muddled, particularly in light of the analysis in my first chapter, where Samson's position is indeed not Self, but Other; he is One-turned-Other, where Harapha by contrast is Other-turned-One. Where *Tamburlaine's* downfall comes from his arrogance, Samson, blinded and devalued as he is, suffers from a necessity for revenge. His need for vengeance, more than his love for God, is what delivers him to his violent self-conclusive act. Samson is a violent bully til the bitter end, vicious and

unyielding where even his father is kinder and more inclined to save Samson's life. When Manoah implies that a renewal of his own vows may yet lead Samson to restoration, Samson is impetuous, replying:

Now blind, disheartened, shamed, dishonored, quelled,  
To what can I be useful, wherein serve  
My nation, and the work from Heaven imposed, [ 565 ]  
But to sit idle on the household hearth,  
A burdenous drone; to visitants a gaze,  
Or pitied object (SA 563-8)

His pride here shows by virtue of his perceived inability to regain his sight and strength, thereby rendering him “a burdenous drone”. While Samson admits he previously “walked about admired of all and dreaded / On hostile ground, none daring my affront” (SA 530-1), it is obvious that he no longer feels so invincible. However, his pride persists and is most evident in his interaction with Harapha. Harapha is hardly a picture of humility himself when he comes to see Samson, but Samson demands a fight with the giant despite his handicaps, berating Harapha in telling him he'll be defeated regardless: “Thou oft shalt wish thy self at Gath to boast / Again in safety what thou wouldst have done / To Samson, but shalt never see Gath more” (SA 1127). No self-respecting English citizen would have appreciated such a nasty, negative portrayal, even if only in analogy.

Let us consider Samson's character as Milton presents him in terms of the “six 'hermeneutical keys’” presented by Muslim scholar Farid Esack, which “emerged from reflection on the Qur'an and the Muslim tradition” (Harrison 215). The keys are as follows: *'taqwa*,

“integrity and awareness in relation to the presence of God”; *tawhid*, “divine unity”; *al-nas*, “the people”; *al-mustad'afun fi 'l-ard*, “the oppressed on the earth”; *'adl* and *qist*, “balance and justice”; and *jihad*, “struggle and praxis” (Harrison 215). While Samson adheres to a few of these keys, particularly in his struggle, his sense of justice and balance, and his position in relation to the Philistines as an oppressed figure, the main point against which he comes up short is *'taqwa* – awareness in relation to the presence of God. It is clear by his actions that Samson is very much unaware of his relation to God’s presence; he is unable to locate God, within himself or without.

The Godlessness of Samson, who had previously been one “Whom God hath of his special favor raised” (SA 273), exposes the inversion of his position for an early modern audience; he is not the god-hero anticipated by the biblical source but rather represents a radically displaced Other, leaving the Self to be represented by the ruined nation of the Philistines. Confronted with what must have been an unsettling perspective, readers of Milton's *Samson* must then have considered the implications of this divergent viewpoint wherein the perceived Other is in fact in closer relation to one's self. This idea of Self/Other as an inverted and fractured identity comes in to play in my third chapter, as does Samson’s role as *homo sacer*; Giorgio Agamben’s idea of the sacred man who cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed. Overall, this third chapter will seek to answer the question of how Samson’s actions allow him to fit into the role of suicide terrorist in a modern context.

### CHAPTER III: DOUBLE EXCLUSION: SAMSON AND *HOMO SACER*

The violence perpetrated in *Samson Agonistes* can therefore be seen to operate on multiple levels, with a multitude of causes which lead to the final act of Samson's destruction of the temple. Samson's imprisonment by a political and theological enemy, his desire for vengeance, and the culmination of these desires in an attempted sacrifice are all elements of Milton's text which call for an examination of the violence located therein as a religious violence, especially in light of *Samson Agonistes*' setting: Gaza, an area historically known for politico-theological unrest. The Messenger informs the Danites and Manoa that the cause which drove Samson to his conclusive act served "At once both to destroy and be destroyed" (SA 1587), implying the destruction of the temple is for all involved a special kind of destruction – one with "inevitable cause" (SA 1586) which designates it. Whether the religious violence Samson engages in marks him as a terrorist, whose purpose is to destroy his enemies, will be the focus of this chapter, as will examining Samson's understanding of himself in Milton's text, the ways in which his identity is altered, and the effects these alterations have on his sense of godly duty. For this analysis, Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*, the sacred man who is unable to be sacrificed and yet able to be killed, will be of considerable importance, as will more contemporary concerns in the field of terrorist scholarship by scholars like Jeff Victoroff and Feisal Mohamed.<sup>1</sup>

I begin this chapter with a discussion of the special circumstance which acts to set Samson apart and grants him the godlike strength he later uses to destroy the temple, his nazirite

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<sup>1</sup> It will also be helpful here to mention that throughout this chapter, unless otherwise noted, any mention of "Samson" is to be understood as reference to the title character from *Samson Agonistes*, as opposed to his biblical counterpart.

vow. Examining the qualities of the nazirite vow disrupts viewing Samson as purely a “hero of faith” because of the implied lack of choice Samson has regarding the vow itself. From this discussion I move to Giorgio Agamben's notion of *homo sacer*, and explore the ways in which Samson may be considered as acting the part of the sacred man, a role which contributes, ultimately, to the violence he commits. This violence is regarded in terms of terroristic activity, which I then explore through a deconstruction of three cuts inflicted on Samson's body – his circumcision, the cutting of his hair, and his blinding – which serve to alter him, both bodily and ideologically. I discuss the ways in which these cuts inform a reading of Samson as terrorist before examining the role vengeance plays for Samson, not only in terms of the terrorist, but also in Girard's notions of the cycle of vengeance and the necessity of sacrifice, as well as considering Samson's role as *homo sacer*. I conclude with a brief reflection on modern ideas about Samson, religious violence, and terrorism.

Before commencing with this part of my analysis, it will be necessary to explain why I seem to be engaging with a problematic relationship of ideas: Islam and terror. For clarity, I do not wish to conflate the two terms, despite the insidious early modern fear of “Turning Turk” I addressed in my first chapter. However, the relationship of *Samson Agonistes* to terror, particularly in the post-9/11 perspective, has been examined by scholars like John Carey and Feisal Mohamed, to name only a few, who in particular address the conflation of Islam with terror. While analysis by such scholars is a result of the “re-orientation” of early modern literature scholarship, these preliminary investigations are ultimately somewhat cut-and-dry in a way that does not consider themes I address in this chapter and elsewhere in my thesis. It is these initial considerations which inform my own. By introducing topics like Abrahamic sacrifice, the

figure of *homo sacer*, and Muslim hermeneutics, I hope to engage in a more thorough analysis of *Samson* and terror than that of preliminary scholarship.

### The Nazirite Vow

To begin with, we must discuss the history of the character of Samson as a theological ideal – a “hero of faith.” Classically, Samson's acts of violence – the destruction of the temple, the murder of the Ashkelonites, the slaughter of the thousand men with the jawbone – are justified through the lens of Samson's perceived godliness; because Samson possesses “the secret gift of God” (SA 201), his acts of violence “against the uncircumcised, [his] enemies” (640) are not only reasonable, but condoned, even necessary, a sentiment best explained by Girard: “Violence and the sacred are inseparable” (19). This “secret gift of God” possessed by Samson can initially be understood as a direct result of his faith: he is a nazirite, a member of a special sect of Judaism separated from the rest of the community by acts of self-imposed limitation. Nazirites are encouraged to consecrate themselves through certain acts of abstinence or temperance, which are, according to Morris Jastrow, Jr.'s examination of the *Mishneh Torah*, as follows: “(1) to abstain from wine; (2) and to allow his hair to grow, or, expressed negatively, that no razor should touch his head; (3) not to contaminate himself by contact with a corpse; (4) to regard himself as sanctified” (274).

Nazirites are by definition separated from other practitioners of Judaism. The word “nazirite” itself comes from the Hebrew *nazir*, meaning “consecrated.” The period of time a nazirite is expected to keep his vows varies, however, creating a multiplicity of different and further-separated designations of nazirites. A nazirite's vows must be kept for a minimum of

thirty days, at the conclusion of which the vower offers a sacrifice, to mark the end of the period of his naziriteship. By not presenting an offering, one indicates that one has taken up the mantle of a lifetime nazirite, and that their vow will not end (Morell 224-5). In the Jewish tradition, however, there is a kind of caveat, described in the *Code* of Maimonides, a famed Judaic philosopher and Torah scholar; essentially, that “the vower's present regret suffices for the granting of a release” from the vow (Morell 225).

Thus, the differences between a standard nazirite vow and a lifetime vow become circumspect from a modern perspective, as the established length of time the vow is in place is made negligible by modern practices and standards of law. Still, traditionally nazirites are held apart and made special in their community by their commitments. In the biblical narrative, Samson’s parents are responsible for his initial commitment to naziriteship, a fact which perhaps implicates them in Samson’s eventual Otherness. In Milton’s text, however, Samson seems to fully possess his naziriteship: it is “his vow of strictest purity” (SA 319), “the pledge of my unviolated vow” (1144) that his uncut hair represents, “my vow of Nazarite” (1386) that he does not wish to stain. The kind of *nazīr* vows that Samson ascribes to, however, are even more separately designated. He is the prototype for what will be known after him as, perhaps unsurprisingly, a “nazirite like Samson.” In his deconstruction of why the Samson variety of naziriteship gained popularity in the sixteenth century, scholar Samuel Morell provides a background as to how this specific kind of naziriteship differs from others: “he [the vower] is not prohibited from defiling himself by contact with the dead. On the other hand, he is never permitted to trim his hair, even if it grows heavy” (225). There is, finally, a third difference that Morell refers to for the Samson nazirite: “unlike a standard nazirite, 'He who vows to become a

Nazirite like Samson may not seek absolution from his vows” (226). Samson seems aware of this final stipulation, and still considers himself a nazirite even after his blinding and the cutting of his hair, as he promises to do nothing “that may dishonor / Our law, or stain my vow of Nazarite” (SA 1385-6).

### Agamben and *Homo Sacer*

Samson's consecration as a nazirite is an especially interesting idea when discussing figure of *homo sacer* in the work of Giorgio Agamben, as both figures are considered sacred in their respective communities, and both have complex associations with sacrifice and death. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben discusses the figure of *homo sacer*, the sacred man. Agamben presents an explanation of the term given by Pompeius Festus in his *On the Significance of Words*: “the sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide” (qtd. in Agamben 71). He goes on to explain that the life of the sacred man is “situated at the intersection of a capacity to be killed and yet not sacrificed, outside both human and divine law” (Agamben 73); *homo sacer* presents an intriguing figure for study precisely because of this outside-yet-inside position, a position that should necessarily make him eligible for sacrifice and yet in fact proscribes it.

Agamben notes that “in the case of *homo sacer* a person is simply set outside human jurisdiction without being brought into the realm of divine law” (82). While Samson is captured, mocked, and injured by the Philistines, there is no clear indication that they intend to kill him; to the contrary, keeping him alive in order to mock him seems to be the general plan of action,

implied clearly through their intention to parade Samson around and display him during the festivities of Dagon's feast day. It does not appear, however, that there is any outright consequence for killing Samson, legal or otherwise. The interactions between Harapha and Samson are here again important. While Harapha does not engage Samson in a fight, it is because Harapha imagines them not to be equals due to Samson's blindness, not because of any perceived repercussions for slaying him.

While killing Samson is not explicitly prohibited by the Philistines, it is implied that he is not to be sacrificed, either. Again, fully intending to make a mockery of their captive enemy, the Philistine court demands that he is present at their pagan festival, and Samson worries about “prostituting holy things to idols”, defining his forced labor as “Vaunting my strength in honor to their Dagon” (SA 1358, 1360). Samson, then, may be said to be acting as *homo sacer* in the text of *Samson Agonistes*: he represents the “human victim who may be killed but not sacrificed” (Agamben 83), caught between human and divine law. Consecrated to God as a nazirite, Samson cannot be sacrificed from a Judaic perspective because his life has already been given to God. In the Philistine perspective, Samson is similarly unsacrificeable because his life is intended as a sacrifice to Dagon. For Samson, this sacrificial designation by the Philistines is one which necessitates that he not only destroy himself, the Othered body enslaved and planned for pagan sacrifice, but in destroying himself must destroy whatever he can of his enemies. Samson's understanding of his situation, what is required by him to continue to ensure “Israel's deliverance” (SA 225), and the consequences of that revelation may be the “great matter in his mind” (SA 1638) just before his act of self-conclusion. His recognition that he must act to remedy his liminal state – at once consecrated and condemned – is tantamount to an

understanding of Samson as a terrorist.

### The Terrorist's Body

To examine Samson the terrorist, understanding the ideology of the terrorist becomes a paramount priority. In his compilation article “Mind of the Terrorist,” Jeff Victoroff explains that the problem of terrorism “is one of atypical human behavior” (4) before going on to define the two common elements of a terrorist's nature, according to recent literature: “(1) that terrorism involves aggression against non-combatants and (2) that the terrorist action in itself is not expected by its perpetrator to accomplish a political goal but instead to influence a target audience and change that audience's behavior in a way that will serve the interests of the terrorist” (Victoroff 4). A more thorough deconstruction of Samson's character may be made by comparison, particularly in view of his destruction of the temple in the terms of this definition. The destruction of the temple is itself an act of suicide, as Samson is inevitably responsible for his own death – although, this responsibility comes without culpability, as Samson represents *homo sacer* and thus his death goes without punishment. But the temple's destruction is also very much an attack on the Philistine body politic. In pulling down the pillars of the temple and thereby killing “Lords, ladies, captains, counsellors, or priests, / Their choice nobility and flower” (SA 1653-4), Samson's suicide becomes not only an act of self-destruction but an act of political aggression as well – particularly when taking into account that the Philistines were “met from all parts to solemnize this feast” of their principle god (SA 1656).

The second element – that the action is committed to influencing the behavior of an audience – is more difficult to determine, considering Samson's destruction of the temple occurs

“off-stage” while the audience (and, indeed, the majority of the play's cast) is only given a description of the horror. As discussed in an earlier chapter, the Messenger's arrival and horrified ekphrasis provides a better understanding of the sight of the temple's destruction: “Gaza yet stands, but all her sons are fall'n, / All in a moment overwhelmed and fall'n” (SA 1558-9). It is clear from his description that, although the Messenger is, as the Chorus notices, “an Hebrew, as I guess, and of our tribe” (SA 1540), he is disturbed by the sight he has witnessed: “O whither shall I run, or which way fly / The sight of this so horrid spectacle / Which erst my eyes beheld and yet behold” (1541-3). Despite the fact that he, like the Chorus, Manoa, and Samson himself, is a Danite and thus an enemy of the Philistines, the image of the temple being destroyed has ruined the Messenger's vision in a different way, one which continues to linger in “dire imagination” (1544). While Samson's destruction of himself and of the temple served to decimate the body politic of the Philistines, it is the effect and influence of his destruction which lingers, horrifying the Messenger with not only its sheer scale but also its perpetration by a Danite. Reading Samson's final act of violence against the Philistines and against himself as an event that serves “at once both to destroy and be destroyed” (SA 1587), we realize the destruction of the temple not only was an act of theological destruction, but one with lasting political implications as well.

Like *homo sacer*, the terrorist – particularly the suicide terrorist – is at once included by way of exclusion: distinguished from their representative group in order to die for that same group, the terrorist is located at once within the community and without it. Designated for their single, “inevitable” purpose, the suicide terrorist is thus altered from their community, set apart and marked culturally for their willingness to act. For Samson, then, this cultural alterity

translates to his physical body, with a series of cuts made to his person that similarly serve as marks which distinguish him for his final act. There are three instances of cutting which separate Samson not only from his enemies, but from his own people, as well, further removing him from the center and marking him with alterity: circumcision, the ritual cutting of the foreskin; the cutting of his hair by the Philistines and the subsequent removal of his strength; and his blinding, the violent cutting out of his eyes.

As an Israelite, Samson would have undoubtedly been circumcised, in light of Elliot R. Wolfson's conclusion that "the somatic rite of circumcision" can be considered "the supreme mark of ethnic identity" for those of the Hebrew faith (58). Again, here we may determine Samson's initial movement toward Otherness as a direct result of the actions of his parents, at least in the biblical narrative, as male infant circumcision would certainly require consent of one if not both of the parents. While Samson's parents, pressured by angels to thus designate their son, may be responsible for Samson's preliminary Otherness, however, it is clear in Milton's text that Samson regards his circumcision as part of his identity, a fact particularly illustrated by references to the Philistines as "the uncircumcised" (SA 640) or even simply as "fore-skins" (144). Wolfson goes on to explain, ideologically the circumcision of the penis functions in another way: instead of merely a bodily identifier, Wolfson conflates circumcision with the Lacanian idea of the phallus or phallic signifier. Wolfson suggests that because of the patriarchal tradition of the rite of circumcision within Hebrew culture, the penis itself signifies the phallus. If the foreskin is a "veil", Wolfson argues, the "lifting" of said veil through the rite of circumcision exposes "not the organ but an insignia, a sign to re/present the unrepresentable" – namely, a covenant with one's god (59). In circumcising the phallus, however, one alters the state

of alterity itself. Wolfson notes that “The phallus is the 'dimension that founds and mediates alterity’” (60), and it may reasonably be argued that this degree of alterity extends not only to sexual difference (as in Lacan) but also to cultural Otherness, as is the case in *Samson Agonistes*. Because of the narrative's frame, where the altered Samson is imprisoned and enslaved and the uncircumcised Philistines are his oppressors, Samson's circumcised body further designates him as Other, placing him squarely in a position outside of the society which has included him by enslaving him.

This discussion on the phallus necessitates a relation back to the paternal or patriarchal figures who have presence in *Samson Agonistes*: Samson's biological father, Manoa, and the paternal, authoritative figure of the Philistine giant Harapha. While Manoa acts as the inceptor of the sacrifice, the one who requests and desires sacrifice from his son, Harapha resists this patriarchal desire, in the tradition of Islam. As discussed in my first chapter, in the Islamic tradition of Abraham's sacrifice, the father asks the son for his interpretation of the sacrificial vision. The son responds that the father should do as he is bidden by the Lord (Qur'an 37:102). While, as Benslama describes, “god does not directly demand or order Abraham to kill his son” (179), it is the son's perception that the father has been given an order by God that must be reexamined here. While Manoa is responsible for the altering cut of Samson's circumcision, as paternal authority within his tribe and over Samson's body, Harapha, by comparison, complicates things with his refusal, despite his “uncircumcised” state. Harapha represents another potential paternal figure here, but one whose authority is undermined by his bodily difference from Samson and Manoa. Harapha's own alterity in relation to Samson and Manoa – his uncircumcised, unaltered body – is ultimately the cause of his refusal's impotence: although he

seems to occupy a similar place to Manoa with regards to the initiation and rejection of Samson's sacrifice, the difference of Samson's circumcised body from Harapha's own uncircumcised one undermines his perceived paternal authority and allows Samson to persist in his attempt at sacrifice.

The other cuts which alter Samson's body, while important still, differ from his circumcision because they have been made not by his own people, but by his enemies. His hair, the mark of his nazirite covenant, is cut, leaving him "by the barber's razor best subdued" (SA 1167). This shearing is a vision of emasculation, an act of "sexual violence" committed against Samson by the Philistines, who are more importantly "the 'uncircumcised'" (Silverman 55) – not so much an inclusive ethnicity of oppressors, but an excluded designation set apart by their unaltered bodies. If Samson, physically marked for alterity and yet implicitly part of the Philistine society in even a marginalized way, is *homo sacer*, the Philistines must be considered in terms of their relation to Samson as such. Samson is, for the Philistines, "not to be put to death according to ritual practices" (Agamben 72); he is stuck between "the unpunishability of his killing and the ban on his sacrifice" (73). Samson exists as both set apart from and thereby included in the society of the Israelites, by way of his consecration as a nazirite; he is also, however, both inside and outside of the community of the Philistines, as slave, sacrificial candidate, and enemy. The shaving of Samson's head serves not only as a way for his captors to humiliate him, but also as a means of literally subduing him by breaking the vow which provided him his superhuman strength and further dissociating him from that strength. Stripped of his physical ability, Samson is however able to maintain some degree of agency, as shown in his destruction of the temple; he controls his ability to affect his own circumstances and those

around him in a radical way. Thus shaved, Samson considers his sacred body dishonored and his vow broken. However, while the physical reminder of his consecration to God have been destroyed, the continuation of Samson's emotional adherence to his vows – particularly by way of Samson's special connection to God as *homo sacer* – maintain his consecration, despite this period of temporary physical limitation during his imprisonment.

Samson's blinding by the Philistines presents the third instance of cutting done to Samson's body that served to alter him both physically and mentally. His blindness, as discussed earlier, becomes a focal point for his own lamentations: “O loss of sight, of thee I most complain! / Blind among enemies, O worse than chains” (SA 41) are the words that begin an ode to the light Samson can no longer see. Because Samson is made “eyeless in Gaza” at the hands of his unaltered enemies, he is outside himself – an Other in a community of Others, included through his captivity and yet excluded by his ethnicity and his altered body. Samson's father Manoa and his friends the Danites allude to this, while still attempting to maintain Samson as Israel's champion: according to Manoa, God “will not long defer / To vindicate the glory of his name / Against all competition” (SA 474-6). Still, Samson falters, asking, “Now blind, disheartened, shamed, dishonored, quelled / To what can I be useful, wherein serve / My nation” (SA 563-5)? Samson clearly implies, first through his rhetoric and later through his actions, that some critical action must be taken to justify his self-perceived infidelity to Israel and his subsequent enslavement.

### Samson and Vengeance

While Samson is blinded physically, there is a metaphorical aspect to his sightlessness as

well, one which “imprisons” Samson “In real darkness of the body” (SA 159) and serves to separate him from his people and, initially, his God. Samson’s figurative blindness, especially in relation to the relatively “clear” sight of Harapha and Dalila, spurs his desire for vengeance. Victoroff again supplies an appropriate phrase in his article “Mind of the Terrorist” when he refers to “the blindness of ambition” as one of the many factors that can lead a terrorist to action, and this notion is certainly applicable in Samson’s case. According to John Rosenberger, a suicide attack makes “death an act of aggression, affirming [...] strength, not [...] helplessness” (14). While Samson's act, like many terrorist acts, is premeditated (albeit briefly) as he stands “head a while inclined, / And eyes fast fixed” (SA 1636-7), it is the act itself which is caused by blindness – not in the physical sense, but rather one of blind vengeance.

The vengeful aspect of Samson's action, however, is subsequently the thing which disqualifies Samson's act as one of sacrifice, at least for Girard, for whom “vengeance [...] is an interminable, infinitely repetitive process” (14) which sacrifice seeks to subvert. While between Samson and the Philistines “a crucial social link is missing”, as Girard explains, Samson is not and cannot be “exposed to violence without fear of reprisal” (13). His death is not without the implication of “an act of vengeance” (Girard 13), but rather, to the contrary, is necessarily read by those still present – the Danites and Manoah – as “dearly-bought revenge” (SA 1660). While Samson’s expression of vengeance is for the Danites the completion of a cycle, the length of this appeasement of violence is indefinite; as Girard states, “Only violence can put an end to violence, and that is why violence is self-propagating. Everyone wants to strike the last blow, and reprisal can thus follow reprisal without any true conclusion ever being reached” (26), indicating, in the case of Samson, that there is no real certainty to the conclusive nature of Samson’s

destruction.

If we cannot qualify Samson's death as an act of sacrifice, what can it be classified as? Samson does seem to fit the definition of suicide terrorist, while also appearing to represent something of the notion of the “ambivalence of the sacred” discussed by Agamben, the “scientific mythologeme” that “has consistently led the social sciences astray” (75). The “ambivalence” Agamben refers to is one of “the sacred that completely coincides with the concept of the obscure and the impenetrable” (78). However, Agamben demands that the “ambivalence of the sacred” necessarily, in a sense, be violated, that it must be unpacked to allow for true examination and analysis of *homo sacer*. Agamben concludes that “only an attentive and unprejudiced delimitation of the respective fields of the political and the religious will make it possible to understand the history of their intersection and complex relations” (80), determining that *homo sacer* may exist because of this intersection. The space of “double exclusion” “without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice” (Agamben 83) is what ultimately allows *homo sacer* to exist.

Samson, then, acting as *homo sacer* and marked as the unsacrificeable-yet-killable Other, may similarly be understood in terms of his existence in a space of “double exclusion.” Samson's life is a sacred life, consecrated and cursed simultaneously, but it is more than that. He is excluded from the community of his enemies, the Philistines, by way of his inclusion in their society as captive and slave, but he is also similarly excluded from the community of his own people, the Danites, by the inclusive nature of his nazirite vow. The fractured identity this double exclusion describes is what ultimately provides Samson with his final decision: to die, he must kill, and in so doing engage in what may be called in modern terms an act of terrorism.

Can it be concluded, then, that by acting as *homo sacer*, Samson is similarly acting as terrorist? The moral implications of the latter are almost rendered indefinable by the former; if Samson is indeed *homo sacer* in Milton's narrative, he is caught between the earthly and the divine order, as Agamben explains: "The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life – that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed – is the life that has been captured in this sphere" (83). Samson, thus "captured", may neither be condemned nor celebrated; his suicide, even his murder, are located outside the realm of the law, but his sacrifice is not necessarily included in the realm of faith, suspending him in a position of extreme moral ambivalence.

To highlight this ambivalence and to assess the notion of religious violence in an updated way, let us turn briefly to a modern and ongoing politico-theological conflict which rages in the same setting of *Samson Agonistes*: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, what Gilles Deleuze calls "a model that will determine how problems of terrorism will be dealt with", in Gaza (161). Deleuze remarks:

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the actions of the Israelis are considered legitimate retaliation (even if their attacks do seem disproportionate), whereas the actions of the Palestinians are without fail treated as terrorist crimes. And the death of a Palestinian has neither the same interest nor the same impact as the death of an Israeli. (Deleuze 161)

While Deleuze is not particularly ambiguous with his sentiments regarding Israeli-Palestinian aggression, it is the notion of consistent designation as either "retaliation" or "terrorism" he raises which strike at the heart of this argument. Through his attempt at sacrifice and the

ruination of the Philistine body politic, Samson attempts what is typically seen as an act of “legitimate retaliation” against the Philistines, the politico-theological enemy who has enslaved him and in so doing complicated his God-ordained position as Israel’s deliverer. By comparison, the decimated Philistines do not receive nearly as much or as thorough treatment, either historically or in a scholarly context, indicating that there is “neither the same interest nor the same impact” on the death of a fictional Philistine.

The presentation of Samson as simultaneously within and without, included and excluded, neither hero nor terrorist, does not fit with any sort of conventional consideration but is instead peculiarly Miltonic. This analysis, considering as it does the multitude of ways in which Samson’s actions resound – morally ambivalent or reprehensible, heroic or terroristic – serves to illustrate the hermeneutic possibilities of Milton’s text itself. Particularly for this project, Samson’s position as *homo sacer* and the proceeding implications of that designation for early modern audiences indicates a revelatory aspect of Milton’s interaction with and inspiration by the Qur’an. By representing Samson in new ways, Milton introduces the possibility of communication and cooperation with the Qur’an and Islam that had previously been almost unheard-of, a truly revolutionary idea and one which matched Milton’s innovative, prophetic vision.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Just as Samson is absent from the text of the Qur'an, so too is there a lacuna in early modern literary scholarship which my project has attempted to address. The work of historicist scholars like Nabil Matar, Eid Abdullah Dahiyat, and Gerald MacLean has laid the foundation for a dialogue between the early modern East and West; the work of critics like Regina Schwartz, Daniel Vitkus, and Gil Anidjar has been invaluable in presenting a method of exploring early modern texts with poststructuralist and hermeneutic treatments. In discussing Milton's version of *Samson Agonistes* in dialogue with Islam, the particular treatments of sacrifice, binaries of inside/outside, vision/blindness, and Self/Other, and notions of *homo sacer* and double exclusion presented in this project have worked to formulate a view of the text that challenges conventions not only of Milton's time, but which reach through history to force scholars and critics to evaluate these aspects in new and inventive ways.

My last chapter discussed Samson's placement in Milton's text – caught somewhere between two radical states, neither justified nor condemned, having destroyed by being destroyed. The discussion of Milton's Samson as a terrorist here might seem unusual, particularly when considering my intention with this project has been an examination of *Samson Agonistes* as a site of communication between Milton and the Qur'an. While a discussion of religious violence does not necessarily require a consideration of Islamic studies as I mentioned in my third chapter, the historic conflation of the two, particularly in the context of the early modern period and the relationship between Milton's England and its Islamic counterpart, here requires some reflection.

As discussed previously, the early modern Christian world was preoccupied by an intense

anxiety over Islam, particularly for England, with their worries of capture and conversion to Islam by the Turkish. This pervasive fear influenced much of the writing and thought of Milton's day, as reflected not only in the Qur'an's publication history as a "monstrous" text, but also in depictions of Islam in works like *Tamburlaine* and Shakespeare's *Othello*. The history of this fear of an Islamic Other has arguably persisted to modern day, and the Western representation of the Middle East in the media is almost always influenced by an Islamophobic predetermination that insists upon terrorism in what Michael Ziser calls "the Western fascination with the Muslim suicide bomber" (334). Ziser goes on to describe how "the militia and the terror cell composed of religious suicide bombers [...] become key objects of thought for a reinvigorated political theology in a West that is once again speaking the apocalyptic language of Abrahamic religion" (335), an idea which is interestingly reflected in both the text of *Samson Agonistes* and its post-9/11 scholarship.

Similarly, the setting of the text desires consideration, as I discussed in my third chapter. Gaza's geographical location as the point of convergence for the three Abrahamic religions designates its need for special reflection, and in focusing my discussion on *Samson Agonistes* and religious violence, a continuation on the discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as regards *Samson Agonistes* is necessary. In their article "Israelis and Palestinians: Contested Narratives", Mohammed S. Dajani Daoudi and Zeina M. Barakat explain that "in the dispute over who 'owns' Palestine, Israelis and Palestinians brandish arguments from history and religion going back to antiquity" (55). This statement certainly invokes the events of *Samson Agonistes*, particularly when considering both "a long historical presence for the Palestinian national identity that goes back to the Canaanites" and the fact that "Israelis trace their history

back more than 4,000 years” (55).

Besides the setting and the subject matter of *Samson Agonistes*, there is a recent and somewhat obvious factor that both interests and informs my analysis of Samson-as-terrorist, particularly in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That factor is the existence of the Samson, or Shimshon, Unit, a now defunct Gaza-based Israeli special forces unit. Described as made up of “aggressive, combat-oriented soldiers” (*License to Kill* 180), the exclusive purpose of the Shimshon Unit was “to kill their enemies efficiently and quickly, while minimizing the real or perceived threat to their own lives” (*License* 179). The Shimshon Unit’s very name is a tribute to Samson’s memory, and while the unit is no longer operating in Gaza, the very existence of a “counterterrorist” branch of any military who shares a name with Samson highlights the necessity for continued analysis.

In my last chapter, I quoted Gilles Deleuze, who, commenting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, noted the differentiation between “legitimate retaliation” and “terrorist crimes” (Deleuze 161). Motivated by my previous analysis of Samson in conjunction with these modern considerations, the question becomes one of categorizing Samson’s actions as one or the other. I have discussed how Samson’s death is an act of terrorism; Samson, acting as *homo sacer* to the Philistines, radically concludes that to kill his enemies he too must die and thus pulls down the temple, simultaneously killing himself and the gathered Philistines in a resonating act of politico-theological destruction. But it is certainly not farfetched to consider Samson’s death and the resulting ruination of the Philistine body politic as an act of “legitimate retaliation”. This depiction of Samson, as a faithful man driven to violent retaliation by the circumstances of his consecrated life and resulting God-given strength, is indeed the favored one of historical and

cultural Western tradition; Samson is at no point to be considered a terrorist, nor are his actions violent without reason; he is rather a “hero of faith”, one of God’s chosen and responsible for the singlehanded deliverance of Israel from its enemies. This sentiment is echoed in the text of *Samson* itself, when Samson declares that he “might begin Israel’s deliverance” (SA 225), though the narrative is inconclusive as to the success of Samson’s attempts at deliverance. In his article “Confronting Religious Violence”, Feisal Mohamed nicely points out this narrative ambivalence: “the biblical hero [Samson] is consistently evoked as morally benighted, threatening, and blindly destructive” (327).

Samson, ultimately, is for Milton a figure who resists categorization. He is and is not a hero of faith, a *homo sacer*, a terrorist; he sacrifices himself and yet cannot be sacrificed, and in killing himself fixes himself interminably in the history and culture of an entire community. The persistent ambivalence of Samson’s character in *Samson Agonistes* is a testament to Milton’s ability not only as a poet, but as a theologian and a politician, as well. The synthesis of Islamic hermeneutical principles as presented into a traditionally Judeo-Christian narrative is in itself remarkable, but Milton’s ability to invert apparent binaries in said narrative and in so doing present a completely new iteration of the traditional is worth further investigation. Samson is more than an illustration of Milton’s innovative spirit and interest in political theology, however. Rather, *Samson Agonistes* serves as a determined and excellent example of the interaction and influence of the Qur’an and Milton. In concluding this project, it is my hope that this research fosters and inspires further consideration on Milton and early modern studies and their interaction with and relation to the Qur’an and Islam.

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