Dalila's Role in Milton's "Samson Agonistes"

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ABSTRACT

Dalila episode in John Milton's "Samson Agonistes" is very important to this tragedy for more than one reason. First of all, she represents the "tempter" in this drama. Secondly, she could be compared to many characters such as Eve, Satan, and other great characters in other tragedies. Thirdly, the length of her episode suggests the middle of this tragedy to me in case it is a psychological, internal drama that shows the development of Samson as a character. Finally, Dalila awakens and helps Samson to comprehend his fault and weakness and then he finds his way back, and accepts his fate.

Keywords: Dalila, Samson Agonistes, Milton, Satan, poetry

THE TEXT AND ARGUMENT

Samson's and Dalila's meeting is of great importance to the whole tragedy "Samson Agonistes" by John Milton. She awakens and helps him to understand his weakness. Stasney argues,

> In Samson Agonistes Milton gives Dalila a distinctive, imaginative, and theatrical personality, as well as a voice and an opportunity to defend herself and her actions. Like Eve, Dalila is transformed into a far more developed and complex character than the biblical figure on whom she is based. (iv)

Hence, her part of "Samson Agonistes" represents the middle of this drama despite the opinion that this tragedy has no middle part. In this sense, Balachandra Rajan argues that, "Dalila's encounter with Samson has too much of a middle" (138). In fact, Dalila's encounter, as an external factor, helps Samson to confront his internal reality; this is what Milton manages to add to this epic by manpulating this character. What is more interesting is what John M. Steadman says:

> . . . the spiritual regeneration of the inward man, was the really significant factor in heroic activity . . . External events could provide an occasion for word action – good or bad – but the primary causes were to be found within the self itself (56).

During his first soliloquy, Samson says that he has revealed weakly his secret to a woman (Line 50). Then, he defines this weakness as "impotance of mind, in body strong!" (Line 52). From his soliloquy, it becomes clear that this tragedy is a psychological internal tragedy rather than an external one because each person in the scene, particularly Dalila, causes an internal and mental response on Samson's side. Emphasizing the internal conflict, Marjorie Hope Nicolson clarifies that "Samson Agonistes" is preeminently a psychological study of the development of a human being (357). Indeed, Dalila becomes the focus of Samson's acts. Accordingly, Samson's "mental state as Dalila's husband is a worse blindness than the literal darkness he subsequently endures" (Neelakanta 43).

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(株) リナアンドルナインターナショナル, 筑西市, 日本
ISSN: 2186-8492, ISSN: 2186-8484 Print
www.ajssh. leena-luna.co.jp

Later, while he is talking to Manoa, his old father, Samson blames himself for telling Dalila his secret:

> Fool, I have divulg'd the secret gift of God
> To a deceitful Woman . . .
> (Lines 201-02)

It seems he is trying to find an excuse for himself at this point;he calls himself "fool". At the same time, he does not exonerate Dalila for being "a deceitful woman."

In turn, the chorus tries to comfort him; it says "wisest Men / Have err'd and by bad Women been decev'd" (Lines 210-11). Samson tells them "the next day I took to Wife / . . . / Dalila, / That specious Monster, my acomplisht snare" (Lines 227-30). Then, as part of the internal conflict, he affirms that it is his cause:

> Of what I now suffer
> She was not the prime cause, but I myself,
> . . . . . .
> Gave up my fort of silence to a Woman.
> (Lines 233-36)

Trying to calm him down, the Chorus calls her "unclean / unchaste" (Lines 323-24). It believes that this dilemma is "her stain not his" (Line 325). Apparently, it is a way to console Samson, but in confirming that it is her fault, the chorus pushes him to become reconciled with himself. Hence, his recognition of his dilemma starts to take place gradually:

> Nothing of all these evils hath befall'n me
> But justly; I myself gave brought them on,
> Sole Author I, sole cause . . .
> (Lines 374-76)

Again, while meeting his father, Samson admits his guilt:

> At times when men seek more repose and rest,
> I yielded and unlock'd her all my heart.
> (Lines406-07)

Apparently, Samson yields when she gives herself up to him, when there is a sensual passion, if not sexual, when there is some intimacy. Accordingly, their relationship is a type of reciprocal one, for she gives him what he wants, and in turn he confides in her and tells her his secret.

After that, Samson points out to his father Manoa, that she "held me yok't / Her Bond-slave . . ." (Lines 410-11). He affirms it is his crime:

> Let us here,
> As I deserve, pay on my punishment,
> And expiate if possible, my crime.
> (Lines 488-90)

Later Samson assures the effect of Dalila's sensuality in his talk with his father: " . . . voluptuous life . . . the lascivious lap / Of a deceitful Concubine . . . like a tame Wether, all my precious fleece" (Lines 534-38). Here he acknowledges her power and influence on him. All these gestures in his speech show Dalila's sexual and attractive effect on Samson. In addition, he compares his hair with "precious fleece" as quoted above. Fleece, as we know, is sold and here he suggests that she has got some price; it is gold. In addition, from the above

quotation, Milton recalls the story from the Bible and seemingly forgets that he has already mentioned that Dalila is Samson's wife, not his "Concubine."

Subsequently in the tragedy, the Chorus marvelously describes her arrival. It seems a female with her finery, "Like a stately ship" (Line 714) which is coming to carry off her would-be captin. Anyhow, she is perfumed (Line 720) in order to assert her might and effect. Although, he has lost his sight, yet her attraction remains influential for other senses; particularly hearing of her feminine voice and smelling her perfume, not to mention, her request to "touch thy hand" (Line 951).

Given such a situation, Samson recognizes her, "my Traitress, let her not come near me" (Line 725). Consequently, the Chorus tells that she is determined, "on the move." She says, "I came [to] acknowledge, yet if tears / May expiate . . . " (Lines 739-45). Here, she seems as a predatory animal. She is waiting for the chance to attack the prey. This is why Samson, later, calls her "Hyaena" (line 748). She entreats him in the name of "conjugal affection" — she tries all ways to influence Samson; Stasney argues, "Milton deliberately complicates and elevates her character in such a way so as to give her identity" (14).

Whatever the case may be, Samson rejects her plea, calling her "Hyaena" and affirming that marriage is a vow that false women like Dalila break. They try to deceive others, they have "feign'd remorse" (Line 752). Then he sees himself as "penitent." The penitent

> Are drawn to wear out miserable days,
> Entangl'd with a pois'nous bosom snake,
> If not by quick destruction soon cut off
> As I by thee, to Ages an example.
>
> (Lines 762-65)

Here he compares her with a snake for he believes that she decieves him. She makes an example of him to other generations.

On her part, Dalila is resolved to make at least his "hatred less" (Line 772). She claims the weakness that is "incident to all [her] sex" (Line 773). She admits her fault, "But I to enemies reveal'd, and should not" (Line 782). Here, "she is given a voice that allows her to defend herself and her actions, and to present herself to Samson as a victim" (Stasney 14). Yet, at the same time, she is blaming him for his own weakness, then she says, "Thine forgive mine" (Line 787). She continues telling him her "jealousy of love" (Line 791). All she tries to say is that she has been tempted and received by those who have assured her that there is no harm on him (Line 800). And she starts explaining her reasons for what she has done. First, she has in mind "safe custody" designed for him (Lines 801-02). Second, she wants him to live with her (Lines 806-10). Then, she concludes, "These reasons and love's law pass'd for good" (Line 811).

For Samson, Dalila has come out of "malice not repentance" (Line 821). Then, he keeps admitting his fault, "to myself was false ere thou to me" (Line 824). This is self-judgement; he realizes his guilt; this causes him to regret his mistake. Thus, his regeneration starts, because this tragedy is an internal, psychological drama. Here, Samson starts to wonder, "weakness is thy excuse / And I believe it, weakness resists philistian gold" and continues contemplating if everything is going to be attributed to weakness, then "all wickedness is weakness" (Lines 829-34). Hence, he reminds her of her lust (she calls it love).

Taking her part, Dalila insists on defending herself, "It was not gold" (Line 849), but it is "the Magistrates / And Princess of my country [who] came in person . . ." (Lines 850-51). She confirms later the pressure of the priests. Here she is defending what she calls her weakness; she is "press'd" by those who "urg'd, / Adjur'd by all the bonds of civil Duty / And of

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ISSN: 2186-8492, ISSN: 2186-8484 Print
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Religion" (Lines 852-54). She wants to say that she has been deceived that he is an enemy and she is weak as a female. Indeed, "Milton evokes a picture of Dalila as a woman situated between two conflicting sets of patriarchal expectations imposed upon her, those of her husband and the men of her country" (Mazzacane 4-5). She uses logic in order to convince Samson. Afterwards, she changes her tone back to her earlier tone of love:

> What had I
> To offer against such powerful arguments?
> Only my love of thee held long debate.
> (Lines 861-63)

She sees herself "against all these reasons," at least combating in silence (Line 864). Stasney clarifies that "Dalila is essentially permitted, by Milton, the opportunity to explain to Samson the reasons for her crime against him—something the Bible did not allow her to do" (2).

At this moment, Samson attacks "all thy circling vile would end." Then, he commences to regret his marriage:

> I before all the daughters of my tribe
> And of my Nation chose thee from among
> My enemies . . .
> (Lines 876-78)

He has told her all his "secrets", "not out of levity, but overpow'r'd / By [her] request" (Lines 880-81). Thus, her country has sought him "unjustly / Against the law of nature, law of nations" (Lines 889-90). Here, in this epic Milton makes Dalila marry Samson instead of being a mistress; he wants to add a sense of legality to the story. Then, Samson attacks her religion: "But zeal mov'd thee, / To please thy gods . . ." (Lines 895-97). Her gods are not able to do anything. Hence, she is used to trick him in favour of her gods and people. Samson compares his God with hers and realizes his God's mercy and ability to redeem him. It is the turning point towards self-realization.

In her desperate effort, Dalila points out that a woman always loses while debating whatever the point she is trying to defend:

> In argument with men a women ever
> Goes by the worse, whatever be her cause.
> (Lines 903-04)

While she appears to be persuasive and articulate about her action, Samson refutes her claim and assures that her defeat is merely "for want of words, no doubt, or lack of breath" (Line 905).

Then, Dalila admits, "I was a fool, too rash, and quite mistaken" (Line 907). She wants Samson to forgive her and to recompensate what she has done because she has "misdone / Misguided" (Lines 907-12) him. She tries to intercede to the lords to free him as Manoa has tried to do. She tells him that she will redouble her love and care if he accepts to live with her. As a matter of fact, "though Dalila's apology and love may be genuine, they may in fact still be rhetorical, and as such her argumentation may be read as more than simply a defense against Samson's accusations" (Mazzacane 42).

In return, Samson's answer is "No, no, of my condition take no care." (Line 928) He thinks that she is trying "To bring [his] feet again into the snare" (Line 931). Then, he explains his attitude towards her:

> Warbling charms
> No more on me have power, this force is null'd
> So much of Adder's wisdom I have learn't
> To fence my ear against thy sorceries.
> (Lines 934-37)

After refusing her care, he goes beyond, and talks about something she hasn't talked about, it's her efficacious charm. At this moment, she wants to try another sense; she wills to touch his hand later (Line 951).

In the interim, Samson compares between his past and future in case he accepts to live with her; in the past she can "slight," "sell," and "forego" him, but now he is blind – she will use him as a "child." He will "live uxorious" to her will "in perfect Thraldom" (Lines 940-46). Anyway, he believes in his God and his redemption, if he has recovered "how again betray me / Bearing my words and doing to the Lords" (Lines 946-47). He sums up, "To thine whose doors my feet shall never enter" (Line 950). After falling all "wiles," she asks him to let her appraoch and touch his hand in a line that represents the most sensual part in the tragedy; "Let me approach at least, and touch thy hand" (Line 951).

Right away, Samson refuses and explains unpersuasively, "Lest fierce remembrance wake / My sudden rage to tear thee joint by joint" (Lines 952-53). Probably he will submit to her charms which he has already talked about if he touches her. "Samson's fierce revulsion is a sign of the powerful attraction which she still holds" (Louis L. Martz 128). He tries to rationalize "his carnal passion for" (Neelakanta 41) her and later to justify his punishment. His weakness against her sensuality appears clear when he forgives her at distance, "At distance I forgive thee, go with that" (Line 954). He points out that she will be "memorable" for her "treason." On her action, Anthony Low argues:

> One can argue that Dalila may have acted partly out of malice, partly because she is preasured by the Philistine leaders and priests, partly of gold, partly out of desire for fame (151).

At last, Dalila makes her concluding speech. She says his anger is great "yet winds to seas / Are reconcil'd at length, and sea to shore / Thy anger; unappeasable, still rages . . ." (Lines 961-93). Earlier, she has come as "a stately ship" and here she compares his anger to the sea, she does "reap nothing but repulse and hate?" (Line 966) from the angry sea. She questions, "Why do I humble thus myself . . .?" (Line 965). This is to remind him of his contemplation over his creation. Then, she turns to fame, "Fame if not double-fac't [as she has done] is doubled-mouth'd" [she will be memorable in both nations but with different interpretations]. She compares her fame in both nations; in his she is defamed, but in her nation, she will "be nam'd among the famousset / Of Women . . . who to save / Her Country from a fierce destroyer . . ." (Lines 982-85). In these lines she is persistent, and talks the truth. Her tomb will be a shrine "With odors visited and annual flowers" (Line 987). Finally, she declares her departure, "I leave him to his lot and like my own" (Line 996). In the last speech, her pride and vanity are clear. Arnold Stein comments, "her character is dominated by vanity and self-love . . . she suffers from the spiritual death which has lost the freedom to do good" (124).

Later, the Chorus declares, "She is gone, a manifest Serpent . . ." (Line 997). It sees her deceiving and compares her to the Satan in "Paradise Lost." Hence, Leonard Mustazza argues:

> Both [Dalila and Satan] may actually feel the strings of remorse, but, on the other hand, both also have selfish motives

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ISSN: 2186-8492, ISSN: 2186-8484 Print
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> for action, both want to maintain the affections of those whom they have led into disaster, both want to maintain control (248).

What is written here is correct and can be found in both characters. Samson comments on the purpose of her coming:

> God sent her to debase me,
> And aggravate my folly who committed
> To such a vigor his most sacred trust
> Of secrecy my safety and my life.
> (Lines 999-1002)

In this tragedy "snake," "Adder," "Serpent," and "viper," all those names represent some sort of deceit. In fact, Dalila's encounter leads to Samson's self-confidence which is important for him to acknowledge his fault and accept the consequences. William Riley Parker argues, "Samson . . . has gained confidence through the encounter. It was a trial, he realizes, sent by God" (43). Likewise, Sarkar argues that "Dalila acted only as a tool to bring out the inner wrath of Samson. It was with the conversation with Dalila that the hatred of Samson reached the pick point" (227).

Moreover, Samson doesn't forget Dalila while he is talking with Harapha, the giant who mocks Samson in prison, he says:

> Till they had hir'd a woman with their gold,
> Breaking her Marriage Faith to circumvent me.
> (Lines 1114-15)

More and more, he repeats his regret and fault to choose this women:

> Among the Daughters of the Philistines
> I chose a Wife, which argu'd me no foe.
> (Lines 1192-93)

He believes that he has been deceived. Again the repetition makes him more conscious and aware of his fault and responsibility for what he has done. Even the relative pronoun "which", used in Line 1193, denotes that these deeds are not human at all. Indeed, passion, love, and honesty should prevail during any marital relation. On the contrary, Samson looks at her as if she were not human "though Dalila's apology and love may be genuine" (Mazzacane 42). In such a situation, one may find it difficult to decide who is deceived by whom. Does "Milton deliberately complicates and elevates her character in such a way so as to give her identity[?] (Stasney 14). However, Martz argues most clearly:

> Whatever her nature, whatever her motives, the power of her appeal has certainly accomplished a remarkable change in Samson; she has stirred him out of his sense of loss, sitting him into more positive, mental responses (128).

Indeed, Martz has summed up the importance of Dalila's episode in the tragedy.

To sum up, Dalila helps Samson to comprehend his total failure and find his way back to what he believes in. He proves himself master of his old weakness through Dalila that has caused his loss and suffering. It is Dalila that prepares Samson finally to accept his destiny and acts according to what his powers guide him to do. Consequently, it is Dalila's episode

that constitutes the middle of this Miltonic tragedy and gives it the sense of a literary work regardless of its religious origin.

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