

KIRBY-SMITH, SUSAN, M.A. *Distill, My Beating Heart: Releasing the "Liquid Prisoner" of Shakespeare's Sonnets*. (2006)  
Directed by Dr. Russ McDonald. 24 pages.

Many of Shakespeare's sonnets refer to fermentation or distillation to explain the effects of aging, and the possibilities for preserving love and beauty. The metaphorical attention that Shakespeare gives to those chemical arts in the Sonnets allows him to develop and express a complex interaction between beauty, love, and the passing of time. In this paper I examine portions of sixteenth-century theoretical and practical texts on the subjects of fermentation and distillation, relating what might have been Shakespeare's understanding of them to lines and sections of his Sonnets where the chemical arts enrich his arguments about love.

KIRBY-SMITH, SUSAN, M.A. *An Internal Drama: Spiritual Recovery By Trial in John Milton's Samson Agonistes*. (2006)  
Directed by Dr. Christopher Hodgkins. 21 pages.

*Samson Agonistes* can be understood as an internal monologue Samson performs for himself, and for God. The characters who visit Samson create internal challenges for him that allow him to confront the events of his life and the thoughts that led him to act against God's will. By facing those characters as individual, distinct trials he recovers his spirituality and free will, and only after those achievements regains his physical strength, at which point he can continue to do the work of God.

DISTILL, MY BEATING HEART: RELEASING THE “LIQUID  
PRISONER” OF SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS

and

AN INTERNAL DRAMA: SPIRITUAL RECOVERY BY TRIAL  
IN JOHN MILTON’S *SAMSON AGONISTES*

By

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Approved by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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DISTILL, MY BEATING HEART: RELEASING THE “LIQUID  
PRISONER” OF SHAKESPEARE’S SONNETS

In his 1924 *Shakespearean Enigma and An Elizabethan Mania*, John Forbis sought to convince readers that the Sonnets were not addressed to a young man, or a dark lady, but to a bottle of wine, and the sonnets that did not directly address wine (twelve or so) had something to do with drinking wine. Contemplating Shakespeare as a wine-obsessed alcoholic does not really lead to an enlightened understanding of the Sonnets, but it is linguistically profitable to consider his poetic interest in fine drink, and other complex liquid accomplishments achieved by alchemists, drink-makers, perfume-makers and various artisans. It does seem that in making sense of love Shakespeare turned to scientific developments of his day; his references to the chemical arts express his own efforts to preserve and enhance life poetically. Many of the Sonnets that dwell on the speaker's desire to preserve life and beauty indicate that love, beauty, and time act upon one another almost chemically, transforming one another. To emphasize the careful effort that one must take to preserve beauty, Shakespeare's speaker speaks of fermentation and distillation, both of which had become in the Renaissance arts capable of transforming and “ingraft{ting} new” substance (15.14). Although they were duties of husbandry, the knowledge of their practice came from alchemists, whose scientific discoveries were also a type of spiritual or mystical practice. In the Sonnets, Shakespeare's references to the

chemical arts draw our attention to the way that metaphysical thought fueled seventeenth-century scientific development and in turn how Shakespeare's conception of love gains resonance as it is related to scientific pursuits.

A number of Sonnets in which Shakespeare's speaker undertakes the fight against "Time's fell hand," his "injurious hand, his "cruel hand" and "age's cruel knife" reveal that a battle against time would be nearly impossible to win except through sexual reproduction or the creation of enduring poetic composition (64.1, 63.2,10, 60.14). Beauty and love, as many sonnets claim, are as vulnerable or more vulnerable to time's ravaging as any material substance. In Sonnet 64, for example, the speaker explains, "ruin hath taught me thus to ruminare, / That time will come and take my love away" (11-12). It is clear from that and many other sonnets that without a particular preservation process at work, time spoils the most beautiful entities and eventually removes the beloved from the lover.

According to the Sonnets one cannot "ingraft... new" or preserve beauty except through actions undertaken, or poetry composed, with the utmost care and meticulousness (15.14). Several times in the sonnets Shakespeare voices his disgust with poetic excess, and other times he expresses his despair over separation from a beloved. In a great many sonnets the speaker yearns to recover what he calls in Sonnet 23 the "perfect ceremony of love's rite" (6). In that sonnet an "unperfect actor" who has failed to memorize his "part" in a live romance laments, "So I, for fear of trust, forget to say / The perfect ceremony of love's rite / And in mine own love's strength seem to decay" (5-7). The failed "ceremony" sounds as though it should have been a process parallel to a



perfectly measured scientific process that changes one thing to another, or formalizes a fact already known (6). "Love's rite" in its perfection could better, perhaps, in Shakespeare's view, produce a state of beauty that would outlast that of a common fading flower, or frivolous love, similar to the way that a perfectly measured scientific activity can produce an enduring substance.

Distillation, particularly for the purposes of creating perfume, appears in several of the Sonnets as an uncannily appropriate metaphor. Shakespeare may have considered then that strong, fragrant perfumes can seem to be a metaphysical force at times, invisibly filling a room. Powerfully evocative of memory, strong scents often transport the consciousness to an earlier time or a different location. To consider the other major branch of Shakespeare's chemical concern, the smell or ingestion of distilled or fermented beverages also evokes memories, passion and, to a degree, transformation.

Although fermentation and distillation artists had succeeded in creating perfumes, hard drinks and vinegar long before the Renaissance, these inventions, like many scientific and artisanal feats, experienced growth in variety and in quality during Shakespeare's time. Likewise, the texts concerning fermentation and distillation reflected the progress and subsequently included more meticulous instructions that became worthy of scholarly notice. Those practical and scientific developments and, debatably, the texts concerning them, touched the imagination of Shakespeare and inspired his composition of the Sonnets in more than a few places.

Relating sixteenth and early seventeenth century knowledge of distillation and fermentation to Shakespeare's poetry sheds light on the author's complex relationship

with time: though time is a threat, a stealer of youth and destroyer of beauty, it can, as a catalyst of age, create something more precious and useful than the original object of admiration and desire. Time causes precious things to become different in character, richer, more concentrated, and sometimes even dangerous. Distillation or fermentation refines or purifies so that materials can withstand and even become enhanced by the passing of time. Shakespeare's speaker certainly addresses that chemical reality in the sonnets, despite his obvious despair over aging and time. It seems that familiarity with alchemical achievements in the liquid arts could have, at least in Shakespeare's works, aided him in coping with the passing of time. Chemistry, what he knew of it, helped Shakespeare shape his metaphysical thought and perhaps even his understanding of poetry and his own process of poetic composition. Much can be gained by considering Shakespeare to be an alchemist himself, an alchemist of verses and sentiments, instead of liquids and limbecks; in turning words into poetry he distilled and concentrated complex thoughts and feelings.

The OED defines the verb "distill" as several related actions:

1. To trickle down or fall in minute drops, as rain, tears; to issue forth in drops in a fine moisture; to exude,
2. To let fall or give forth in minute drops, or in a vapour which condenses into drops.
3. To give forth or impart in minute quantities; to infuse; to instil.
4. To subject to the process of distillation; to vaporize a substance by means of heat, and then condense the vapour by exposing it to cold, so as to obtain the substance or one of its constituents in a state of concentration or purity. Primarily said of a liquid, the vapour of which when condensed is again deposited in minute drops of pure liquid;

but extended also to the volatilizing of solids, the products of which may be gaseous.

Shakespeare's use of "distill" refers mainly to the fourth definition of the word in that his metaphors concern perfumes, medicine, and possibly liquor. The use of the word in several of the sonnets becomes clear by recalling the "distill" in *Henry V*, Act IV, when the king says to his men, Bedford and Gloucester, "There is some soule of goodnesse in things euill,/ Would men obseruingly distill it out" (Evans 222-249, IV.i.1848-49). With his statement Henry V observes that fighting the war has made his men earlier risers, which is a good thing, although he still knows war to be wicked. Here distillation is a process by which the good becomes separated from the evil. "Distill" takes a similar meaning in several sonnets, notably 5, 6 and 54, which I will examine in later pages.

In explaining Shakespeare's references to distillation and alchemy during his time, one should consider the works of Aureolus Phillipus Theostratus Bombastus von Hohenheim, otherwise known as Paracelsus, a Swiss-born philosopher, physician, and one of the foremost alchemists of the sixteenth century. Even if Shakespeare did not read Paracelsus, it is certain that some Londoners did, and information and opinions about his work would have been passed along. Paracelsus' scientific and philosophical works would have been an initial source of wisdom for more practical texts and recipes concerning chemical processes, such as Charles Estienne's husbandry book, *Maison Rustique* (1564) and John Evelyn's *Pomona* (1664), a text on cider-making.

In *Of the Nature of Things*, first circulated around 1570, when Shakespeare was six years old, Paracelsus names "distillation" as a degree of "transmutation," which he

says is "when a thing loseth its form and so is altered that is altogether unlike to its former substance and form, but assumes another form, another essence, another colour, another vertue, another nature or property" (Book 7). Later, Paracelsus discusses what he calls the "final separation," which most Christians would call the "Last Judgment." His description in Book 8 concludes as follows:

all Elementary things will returne to the first matter of the Elements and bee tormented to eternity and never bee consumed, &c. and on the contrary, all holy things shall return to their first matter of Sacraments i.e. shall be purified, and in eternall joy glorifie God their Creator and worship him from age to age, from eternity to eternity, Amen.

(162)

Paracelsus' summation of the Christian notion of the end of time sounds alchemical, as though the final judgment, the "final separation" during which holy things become "purified," would, itself, be a kind of super-distillation. Paracelsus' philosophical-alchemical version of the Last Judgment suggests that the process of distillation, in addition to belonging to the scientific realm, could also belong to a religious one. A brilliant poet, let us say Shakespeare, would have readily grasped the secular metaphorical uses of such an analogy.

In *Distilling Knowledge* Bruce T. Moran explains that, according to Paracelsus, "diseases arose in the body, in part due to the work of the shabby 'inner alchemist'"(76). Elizabethan physicians may have viewed distillation as a process that occurred not only in the still or limbeck, but also in the body. Since, in Shakespeare's day, many believed

that physical ailments had origins in or were indications of spiritual or moral maladies, perhaps in the imaginations of the Elizabethans there would also have existed a "spiritual alchemist" or "moral alchemist." Sour characters such as Iago, Tybalt, or even the speaker of the Sonnets at times could be said to have had a weak or deficient "inner alchemist." The goal of physicians such as Paracelsus would have been to restore the inner alchemical balance by delivering, in Moran's words, "a specific astral aid" through medicines made by distillation processes (77).

To himself, would Shakespeare's poetry have been a type of "inner alchemical" practice? Many times emotions, thoughts, and memories of experience can distill or ferment, become more pure, seem more sincere and stronger when contained and preserved in the potent vial of the sonnet. In other cases the sentiment of the sonnet is so intense, so succinctly expressed that the contents of the vial, the substance of the sonnet, become dangerous, almost toxic. This is, of course, not true of many of the sonnets, but occasionally part of a sonnet strikes a reader as being immature, sudden, or strained in sentiment, revealing what Helen Vendler calls "a frantic discourse of unrest," that, while poetic, seems overly persistent and filled with anguish (582). In his notes on the Sonnets Stephen Booth mentions "the inevitable last minute failures of alchemists," "errors of execution" and how they are linked to "the alchemist's lack of moral purity" (400). In Booth's words, "an alchemist whose soul was impure could not succeed in purifying matter" (400). In reading the Sonnets, if we are struck by an unpleasant change in emotion, a "last minute failure," so to speak, it is as though the speaker's "inner alchemy" has slipped temporarily and requires an "astral aid," poetic or otherwise. That kind of

slipping, of course, gives character to Shakespeare's speaker, since many other sonnets display emotional calamity and rational sentiment throughout--in other words, most of the sonnets can be considered exceptional poetic-alchemical achievements and evidence of a superior "inner alchemy."

*The Countrey Farme* (1600), a translation of the French *Maison Rustique* (1564), is, as it says, "A briefe discourse of the distilling of Waters." The document contains instructions and many recipes for creating medicines, perfumes, aqua-vitae, and liquor out of distilled water, showing that "distilled vvaters are of diuers sorts and vertues" (Chap. LXV). According to *Farme* and many other husbandry texts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the products of distilled waters had a variety of uses-- medicinal, restorative, nourishing, flavoring, purgative, and beautifying. *The Countrey Farme's* instructions for distilled perfection fit appropriately into a discussion of Shakespeare's "moral alchemy." *Farme's* cautions can apply to a poet's or any person's ability to balance the spirit or temper the emotions. Among other advice *Farme* suggests that a distillation artist use the finest glass containers, watch furnaces carefully to avoid fires, and not overload the still, or limbeck. The speaker of the Sonnets would have done well to apply that wisdom metaphorically to the more tormented periods of his love affairs.

The instruction in *The Countrey Farme*, to separate the "flegme" from the "humour," or final liquid, makes inevitable a comparison of this process to humour-theory medicine practiced on the human body (Chap. LXVIII). According to *Farme* the "flegme" is "the grossest, thickest, and most waterie part of the humour distilled" (Chap

LXIII). Another text from nearly a century later, *Pomona*, also uses the word “humours” to describe the fruit-juice mid-process. Writing "humours" in this context did not mean that the author thought that bodily humours of yellow bile, black bile, phlegm and blood were present in fruit juices, but it is possible that the same alchemy applied to distillation of beverages in the Renaissance was also applied to medicinal practice on the body. Both at least shared a goal of purifying liquid constitution.

*Pomona, or An appendix concerning fruit-trees in relation to cider-making and several ways of ordering it*, presents a variety of instructions concerning both the distillation and the fermentation processes. Although *Pomona* was published after Shakespeare's death, the dates are close enough so that we can assume the poet would have been familiar with some of the chemical concepts presented in the text. In *Pomona*, Sir Pavl Neil's *Discourse of Cider* defines fermentation:

[It] is really nothing else but an endeavor of the *Liquor* to free it self from those *Heterogeneous* parts which are mingled with it: And where there is the greatest proportion of those *dissimilar* parts mingled with the *Liquor*, the endeavor of *Nature* must be the stronger, and take up more time to perfect the *separation*; which when finished leaves all the *Liquor* clear, and the gross parts settled to the bottom of the *Vessel*, which we call the *Lee*.

(43)

Neil's description anthropomorphizes liquor as well as nature; he gives liquor a desire to escape from the "Heterogeneous parts," and to Nature, he gives, as Shakespeare often does himself, the desire to create perfection. According to the *Discourse*, fermentation

required a delicate practitioner, since under or over-fermentation would cause bitterness in the cider. Sir Neil writes about the final stages of cider-making:

For the great *mystery* of the whole thing lies in this, to let so many of the *spirits* evaporate, that it shall not *ferment* before the *gros Lee* be taken away; and yet to keep *spirits* enough to cause a *fermentation* would have it. For if you put it up as soon as it is *strained*, and do not let some of the *spirits* evaporate, and time by its weight only to be separated without *fermentation*, it will *ferment* too much and lose its sweetness; and left, it will not *ferment* at all; and the *Cider* will be dead, flat, and soure.

(44)

Although in the Renaissance “mystery,” also meant “craft” or “skill,” Sir Neil’s use of the word at least calls to mind the Renaissance belief that men’s actions and accomplishments are closely connected to and influenced by a mysterious spiritual world, instead of being merely the result of an experimental scientist’s methodical procedures.

Sir Neil’s explanation of the “mystery” of fermentation brings us to another point: in speaking of Shakespeare’s work in connection with fermented and distilled liquids we must not neglect to examine a crucial word with intersecting definitions--“spirit.” The migrating “spirit” of the fermentation process described in the *Discourse* sounds highly metaphysical. Likewise, since distillation results in vapor midway and since it can result in a final product that is “gaseous,” the process lends itself to poetry, particularly in describing situations that involve strong love and a purified spirit. The *Discourse* makes it clear that in Renaissance terminology, “spirits” caused fermentation, acting as a catalyst in the aging, sweetening, and bittering of a substance. In passing, Sir Neil mentions that



harder cider, with more "spirit," would "so soon make the Country-man think himself a Lord" (40). His comment resonates in two ways, the comical first one addressing, of course, the aggrandizing effects of alcohol on one's self-perception, and the second, an unintentional but relevant point, that if a farmer learned and practiced extensive drink-making he would probably increase his farm's profits and his own prestige.

Shakespeare used the word "spirits" mainly to refer to ghostly presences, as in *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, or the devil and angel spirits of Sonnet 144, which begins, "Two loves I have of comfort and despair,/ Which like two spirits do suggest me still;" (1-2). With Shakespeare's knack for double entendre, he cannot have been unconscious of the word's other meaning. A poet could not ignore that "spirits" also referred to a defining element of the fermentation process, or the desired product of the distillation process.

Shakespeare's use of the word "spirit" corresponds to the OED's definition of "spirit," which is "the temporary separation of the immaterial from the material part of a man's being, or the perception of a purely intellectual character." Although "spirit" still means "ghost," the "spirit" often represents both purification and separation of soul. Also significant is that Shakespeare's use of "spirit" refers to, as in another of the OED definitions, "the animating principle in man (and animals); that which gives life to the physical organism." As it is in drink-making, however, dealing with "spirits" is a precarious business. Sonnet 129 warns against "Th'expense of spirit in a waste of shame," which the speaker says leads to "lust in action," and actions "savage, extreme, rude, cruel" and "mad" (1, 4 7). One cannot ignore here that in the Renaissance "spirit" could also stand for "semen," which apparently Shakespeare believed ought never to be

wasted.

Some of Shakespeare's ghosts, his "spirits," such as Hamlet's father and Duncan in *Macbeth*, seem malevolent or possessing an avenging nature, as though they have become overly fermented souls, spirited bitterness seeking reprisal. Other spirits, such as *The Tempest's* Ariel and *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* Puck, seem both benevolent and free, even while serving their masters. In Sonnet 144 Shakespeare's speaker introduces the "spirits" in saying, "Two loves I have of comfort and despair, / Which like two spirits do suggest me still" (1-2). We learn that these spirits, one, the "man right fair" from heaven, and the other, "a woman colour'd ill," from hell, are the speaker's guides to conscience, provoking him towards his next action (3-4). Instead of helping the speaker, however, the two seem to mingle with one another, fermenting together and producing greater toxicity. In another Sonnet, 86, the speaker envies a rival poet, postulating that the poet's "spirit was by spirits taught to write" (3,5). Although here, also, his primary reference is to phantoms, the double-entendre is unmistakable.

Sonnets 5, 6, 54, and 94 address what seems to have been Shakespeare's favorite use of distillation and fermentation: the preserving and strengthening of precious things, such as flowers, sweetness, and beauty. By careful measures of reproduction or poetic composition the beauty will become a perfume distillation, avoiding over-fermentation, rot, decay, and stench. In these four sonnets the speaker recognizes the "ripeness" of beauty that will not improve with age and must be preserved as it is, perhaps made stronger by distillation, purification and enclosure.

In Sonnet 5, Shakespeare's speaker calls sweet perfume, or "summer's

distillation,” a “liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,” and finds that “flowers distilled” continue to produce sweetness into winter (10,13). As in many other sonnets close to this one in number, the speaker wills that the young man, at the pinnacle of his beauty, find a way to leave some “remembrance” of himself that will survive (12). This sonnet echoes that expressed by Theseus to Hermia in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “Earthlier happy is the Rose distill’d, / Than that which withering on the virgin thorn, / Growes, lues, and dies, in single blessedness ” (Evans 222-249, l.i.76). Theseus means that the sweetness of a Rose turned to perfume through distillation will outlast the sweetness of any rose left to rot on its stem. That is the distilled rose’s advantage on earth. His statement also advises Hermia to experience love and marry, not “wither” on the “virgin thorn.” In this case “distill” means to love and preserve oneself and to preserve one’s beauty in the process. Likewise, in Sonnet 5 the hours that “with gentle work did frame” the young man, or ripen him to a state of perfection, will soon turn against him, or as the speaker of the sonnet says, “play the tyrants” (1,4). The speaker aims to convince the young man to reproduce at his peak age of ripeness instead of dying in winter’s siege against summer. Like the rose's, the young man's beauty will be "Earthlier happy," distilled, or more pleasant and lasting on earth after summer fades and “never-resting time leads summer on / To hideous winter and confounds him there” (5,6). A distilled flower does not cease to exist completely when the winter comes. Although “summer’s distillation” becomes a “liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,” Shakespeare’s speaker asserts that the “substance” of the flowers “still lives sweet” (9, 10, 14). Helen Vendler finds that, according to the Sonnet, "distillation destroys form," which it does, just as any re-

visioning, chemical change, or poetic composition alters the original object or substance (69).

In Sonnet 6, Shakespeare's speaker continues to prescribe distillation as a solution, commanding his youth, "Make sweet some vial; treasure thou some place" (3). As in Sonnet 5, the speaker urges the youth to preserve his sweetness, as though he could become the oils of pressed flowers, or a bottle of precious perfume. Sonnet 6 also addresses the prospect that by "treasuring" himself, the young man will "breed another" of himself, which, if applied to the first metaphor, would make the vial representative of a woman's uterus that would receive the young man's "treasure" (7, 3). Although the image of perfume-making is here a metaphor for human reproduction, the speaker's statement that the young man's distillation could be "ten times happier" brings to mind the way a rose perfume can carry a fragrance at least ten times as pungent as an actual rose.

In this sonnet about self-preservation and reproduction the speaker urges distillation before the beauty will be "self-killed" (4). This phrase certainly refers to the young man's vanity and selfishness, the "all-eating shame" of Sonnet 2, but it also calls to mind the fermentation process, in which too much sweetness, when not distilled properly, rots or turns bitter. Sonnet 6 also brings up what must have been, to the Sonnets' speaker, one of the worst of fates, to "make worms thine heir," or to become merely rotting matter and food for worms (14).

Sonnet 54, which begins "O how much more doth beauty beauteous seem / By that sweet ornament which truth doth give!" is, as Vendler calls it, "a dark reprise of

Sonnet 5" (1-2, Vendler 212 ). Here the speaker makes an analogy between the truth of beauty and the odor of a rose, indicating that a flower can be truly virtuous only if it is capable of producing a sweet scent which can be bottled into perfume. The major division falls between "Canker blooms" and "the Roses," both of which appear similarly beautiful but only one of which can have "Of their sweet deaths" the "sweetest odours made" (5, 6, 12). The odor in this case is, as Vendler says, representative of "superior fairness," or truth (265). The end of the sonnet reveals that to the speaker "verse" becomes a bottle in which the beloved's truth would be distilled and preserved after the youth's beauty has departed.

Sonnet 94 concerns decorum, or preserving oneself not only through reproduction but by modest and upright behavior. It, like Sonnet 54, compares two different plants that stand for different types of people. There are the flowers and the weeds, both kinds grappling with what to do with "the power to hurt," and "temptation" (1, 4). The comparison poignantly relates the human condition to fermentation in the final six lines:

The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,  
Though to itself it only live and die,  
But if that flower with base infection meet,  
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:  
For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;  
Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.  
(9-14)

In analyzing the characters of humans represented by flowers the speaker arrives at a literal and metaphorical truth, "Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds." The

originally more beautiful, fragrant, and sugary "lilies" will become, as Sir Neil's *Discourse* would have said, "dead, flat, and soure," whereas the plain weeds will not fester quite as much. Shakespeare's speaker's point is, of course, that mediocrity is preferable to destroyed or wasted beauty. In the sonnet, a person who once surpasses all others in virtue can also surpass them in vice, just as it is in natural fermentation when "sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds," or when the very sugar that gives substances sweetness helps to create the worst stench of rotting vegetation. In addition to applying this metaphor to the speaker's watchful admiration of the beloved, one could also apply it to the speaker's distaste for the works of excessively complimentary poets, in that the poesy that makes verse sweet can be cloying and even spoiled, rotten when used in excess.

If we are to apply Sir Neil's wisdom to Sonnet 94, it would seem that in fermenting more quickly and violently, the "lillies" would have had stronger desires than the weeds to free themselves from their "heterogenous parts." The most strapping young men or poets, or "lilies" that the speaker admires, desires, and sometimes scorns would have been so strong and rebellious, anxious in their sweetness, that they spoil themselves. Ordinary "weeds" would be slow to ferment and less likely to create overpowering stench.

Other sonnets, such as 119 and 114, describe situations that involve either literal or metaphorical poison, which also would have been created through distillation. Sonnet 114 has the speaker's mind drinking up "the monarch's plague, this flattery," or "insincere praise," as Booth defines it (114.2, Booth 375 ). The flattery is compared to a

deceptive magic potion, and in the following lines the speaker brings up the “transmutation” that takes place within the vision of the speaker’s own eye as he sees his beloved, whose “love taught it this alchemy” (114.4). This type of malevolent alchemy, he says, aspires “To make of monsters and things indigest / Such cherubins as your sweet self resemble, / Creating every bad a perfect best” (5-7). In other words, things that were never good to begin with have been made to look or taste good. To the acrid conclusion of the sonnet the speaker affirms that his mind continues to drink the most likely “poisoned” substance, flattery, from the “cup,” signifying, as Colin Burrow says, “the misrepresentation of the world in the shape of the friend,” or malevolent forces perceived as good (lines 13,12, Burrows 608).

In Sonnet 119 the speaker speaks again from agony:

What potions have I drunk of Siren tears,  
Distill’d from limbecks foul as hell within,  
Applying fears to hopes and hopes to fears,  
Still losing when I saw myself to win!

(1-4)

“Potion” at this time could have meant a liquid either medicinal or deadly, as well as something merely intoxicating. Shakespeare’s “potion” does not seem to be a medicinal one, but something consumed by accident, in unawareness, as though someone had spiked the speaker’s drink. The “Siren tears,” of course, indicate something sweetly seductive while deadly, like the Sirens themselves from Homer’s *Odyssey*. In her article, “Sex in a Bottle: The Alchemical Distillation of Shakespeare’s Hermaphrodite in Sonnet

20," Peggy Muñoz Simonds explains that in alchemy "Siren tears" also referred to a specific substance, "condensed drops of distilled mercurial water on the sides of the alembic," which she says were "both dangerous and purifying," and used "as strong purgatives" (101). Whether he laments a mere hangover, stronger chemical treatment, such as what Simonds mentions, or severe emotional sickness caused by a metaphorical love "potion," it is obvious that the speaker has swallowed a harsh chemical substance distilled and separated from more palatable fluids. In recognizing "poisons," as in Sonnet 114 and 119, Shakespeare's speaker emphasizes that a potion-creator can willfully change the nature of a substance for good or for bad and, as was firmly believed in the Renaissance, a distillation takes on the spiritual nature or intent of its maker or alchemist. In other words, distillation, fermentation, and alchemy are not naturally either good or wicked acts but derive their morality from the one who practices them.

If we move beyond drinkable and wearable alcohol, we come to vinegar, the English word for which comes from the French, "vin aigre," sour wine. Useful during Shakespeare's day, as now, for a variety of pickling purposes, vinegar was also used in medical practice as a healing or cleansing potion. According to *The Countrey House*, vinegar served as an antidote for resolving distillation gone awry. "If your distilled vvaters become troubled, you shall restore them to their clearenesse by putting thereinto some two drops of Vinegar for euerie pint of water," it says in Chapter LXIII.

Sonnet 111 mentions "eisel" or a type of vinegar used as medicine against the plague (10). In the sonnet the speaker's "harmful deeds" have spoiled him (2). He feels that his capacity for love, or his "nature," has been "subdued," which according to



Stephen Orgel means “overpowered by” – in other words, the speaker’s abilities to give and receive love freely have shrunk in the shadow of his various sexual deeds (111.6, Orgel 111). For his malady the speaker must drink “Potions of eisel,” or a type of strong medicinal vinegar (9-10). The soured wine, his healing agent, surfaces significantly, recalling earlier sonnets’ mention of distillation, or the bottling and aging of flowers to create perfumed substance, immortalizing beauty, or at least making it last into winter. The fermented product of “eisel” differs of course in that it is meant to eradicate or clear the infection left by the speaker’s recent sexual congress, but the application of eisel is still tied to the act of purification. In this sonnet Shakespeare may, of course, be speaking of moral or spiritual malady, not literal physical infection, and the “bitter” vinegar may also be metaphorical. In several plays, such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*, Shakespeare uses “vinegar” to express the quality of an acidic temperament--perhaps the indication was that a sour, “vinegar” temperament was strong enough or harsh enough to “clear” other substances, or keep people of other temperaments from having any effect.

Shakespeare's presentation of distillation and fermentation complicates the poet's relationship with time. The speaker continuously asserts his fear of or contempt for time, the “tyrant” who steals both youth and beauty, and yet sometimes the speaker presents evidence that he understands that the passing of time helps to create treasured substances, such as perfume, wine, vinegar, and deep, lasting bonds between lovers (16.2). Time without love, in the landscape of the Sonnets, is known to be like winter--barren, cold, halting and destructive of life. In the Sonnets, as 115 says, “Time debateth with Decay,”

as though the two negotiate how to best destroy youth and beauty (11). With love, however, time can become a positive rather than a negative catalyzing agent, helping to bring something to its richest or purest form. The substance, Shakespeare knows, either receives "time's love" or "time's hate," and although some things rot and spoil or are willfully altered beyond goodness, some things can last, can be preserved, and can reach an elevated condition in their longer-than-ordinary lives (124.3).

But what does love have to do with the process of distillation? Distillation was both the heating and the filtering of a liquid. In Sonnet 33 we find the beloved's gaze, represented by the morning sun, "gilding pale streams with heavenly alchemy" (4). The transformative power in the gaze has "heating" properties there, and in Sonnet 49, where the speaker refers to "that sun, thine eye" (6). Other times, it is love itself that brings heat. In Sonnet 153 there is the "holy fire of love"; in Sonnet 147 the speaker's "love is as a fever"; and in Sonnet 154 he reports, "Love's fire heats water" (5, 1, 14). Could love itself, according to Shakespeare, be capable of heating and evaporating metaphorical water and therefore distilling what it acts upon? It seems that in Shakespeare the heat of love can ripen beauty, bringing it closer to its full potential and starting the process of either fermentation or distillation – of an emotion perhaps. "Still" seems to have been one of Shakespeare's favorite words describing the passing of time – Sonnet 76 uses the word three times and several other sonnets use it twice. Many critics, particularly Stephen Booth, have found that the word playfully refers to the practice of distilling something several times to get the purest substance (403).

As in literal science, heat also leads to decay and rot. In Shakespeare festering

does not come only from too much time, but also from too much love, as in Sonnet 80, which concludes, "my love was my decay" (14). It is nowhere clearer than in Shakespeare's sonnets that love both makes men good and drives them mad, and as with cider, the trick is to catch love when it has ripened but not over-ripened. When in Sonnet 100 the speaker instructs his muse to, "Be a satire to decay," he seems to say that redemption or purest form is achieved by capturing beauty or love at its peak and not letting it go a moment further into decay. Shakespeare's theory of love mimics *The Countrey Farme's* instruction, "Everie thing is to be distilled in the time wherein it is best disposed, and best fit, that is to say, rootes, hearbes, flowers, and seedes when they are ripe" (Chap. LX). But what is the value of ripeness? Of course, it signals fertility, the ability to reproduce. Shakespeare does not limit his conception of reproduction to the act of producing children, but extends it to include the production of thought, inspiration and poetry, as in Sonnet 86 where the speaker mentions his "ripe thoughts" about his beloved, which one would assume lead to poetic composition (3).

With his frequent references to chemical arts in the Sonnets, Shakespeare's arguments of love and poetic composition thus include scientific discovery as well as literary experimentation. His references to fermentation and distillation show that in the Renaissance the progress of arts and poetry were not divorced from that of science, nor were they held back by it. The Sonnets in particular reveal that tempestuous human love occasionally derives something from scientific explanation, and can become either enriched or tempered by logical, near-scientific processes, which in his time drew inspiration from metaphysical thought.

The Sonnets are known for their dense language and expression, as though unnecessary words have been boiled away from the phrases, evaporated. The poet's effort of writing the Sonnets is, of course, in itself, an act of love, which purifies, empowers, and preserves emotions and thoughts into the poem. Love, without time--perhaps, too hasty poetic composition--would distill or ferment the emotions too quickly, creating a sour or poisonous substance. But Shakespeare's metric sophistication shows, in most cases, such evenness, as though his love for rhythm, like a low but constant heat beneath a limbeck, has helped him distill his phrases perfectly into the sonnet form. Like his "liquid prisoner" of Sonnet 5, the perfume made from summer's essence, Shakespeare's sonnets are meant to be released from their tight, formal enclosures by the reader's interpretation. Having been preserved for centuries in the vial of the Sonnet they can, in new readings, expand and fill the atmosphere with their tender and thought-provoking fragrances.

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AN INTERNAL DRAMA: SPIRITUAL RECOVERY BY TRIAL  
IN JOHN MILTON'S *SAMSON AGONISTES*

John Milton's poem-play *Samson Agonistes* is an internal drama that follows Samson's psychological or spiritual progression as relayed to him by a series of three visitors and by the Chorus. In *The Unfolding God of Jung and Milton* James Driscoll has written, "the struggle for that inward vision called consciousness is the quintessential heroic quest" (175). This is the case in *Samson Agonistes*--the play more or less operates as a type of prayer that Samson uses in his quest to liberate first his mind and then himself from the prison at Gaza. But how does one dramatize a prayer? Milton's use of the Greek tragic conventions--particularly Aristotle's Unities of Action, Time, and Place--enabled him to present most of the drama as from within Samson's mind so that an audience member or reader sits in almost full observance of Samson's developing "inward vision," making the reader a complete witness to his contemplative prayer.

The action of *Samson Agonistes* revolves around Samson's efforts to reformulate his free will by conquering his self-obsession and his preoccupation with the humiliation of having been betrayed by his wife. Unlike one of Samson's previous prayers, that according to his father, "caus'd a fountain" "From the dry ground to spring," the prayer Samson delivers now is not one that asks for and receives a solution from God, but that which cleanses Samson's soul through reflection and internal trial (Hughes 531-593,

l. 582).<sup>1</sup> In his preamble Milton restates Aristotle's belief about tragedy's ability to cleanse the soul, by using "sowr against sowr" and "salt to remove salt humours." In Milton's version of Samson's story there appears to be plenty of "sowr" and "salt humour" to be removed in the course of the play. Since, also in his preamble, Milton mentions a "Poets error" of "introducing trivial and vulgar persons," we can assume that he intends for us to take all of the characters of his play seriously and regard them as essential parts of the drama. In the play Samson's three visitors challenge him, playing the parts of the soul-cleansing agents. As though echoing Milton's claim in *Aereopagitica*, "that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary," in *Samson Agonistes* it is the trials, the visitor episodes, particularly the appearance of Samson's enemies, that give his prayer meaning by provoking him to leave his contemplative mental cave and allowing him to recover his internal strength (Hughes 728). His free will restored by the prayer, Samson may then decide to leave the dungeon .

At the beginning of the play, Samson is, as Mary Ann Radzinowicz says, an "unfit instrument" of God. "Betray'd, Captiv'd, and both my Eyes put out," Samson labels himself in his agony. (33). Previously a leader of divine strength, "whom unarm'd/No strength of man, or fiercest wild beast could withstand," a warrior who "made Arms ridiculous," as the Chorus later says, he cannot sit quiet. He remembers and still seeks to fulfill God's mission for him, recalling, "Promise was that I/ Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver" (127-128,131, 38-39). Since he has lost his physical powers, Samson must develop his wisdom, as well as re-establish his free will, or as

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<sup>1</sup> All further references to *Samson Agonistes* will be to this edition, by line number.



Radzinowicz puts it, the "part of the rational mind which bridges knowledge and action" (59). Imprisoned by the Philistines, however, it is difficult, especially now that he is blind. As the Chorus says, he is "Ensnar'd assaulted, overcome, led bound, / Thy Foes derision, Captive, Poor, and Blind/ Into a Dungeon thrust, to work with Slaves" (365-67). As Samson compares himself to a shipwreck, Milton draws on Sophocles' use of imagery of blindness and sight, representing ignorance and knowledge as presented in the classic tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*. The Greek play ends when a despairing, grief-stricken Oedipus blinds himself after he has made a series of fatal errors. Conversely, this is where *Samson Agonistes* begins. "O loss of sight, of thee I most complain! / Blind among enemies, O worse then chains,/ Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age!" Samson anguishes (67-69). He feels excluded from God, and in his miserable, blind state, Samson appears to be obsessed with his own disassociated condition and wracked with self-doubt. "Light," says Samson, "the prime work of God to me is extinct" (70). The importance Milton places on light here recalls the light invocation of Book 3 in *Paradise Lost* which begins, "Hail holy light" and affirms "God is light" (Hughes 206-469, 3.1,3).<sup>2</sup> In Milton's works light seems to be synonymous with truth, justice, progress and wisdom. The way that Samson aligns light with inspiration and the opportunity to serve God also resembles the perspective expressed by the speaker in Milton's Sonnet XIX, "When I consider how my light is spent" which was probably composed after the onset of Milton's own blindness. (Hughes 168). Encompassed by darkness, Samson lacks spiritual inspiration and finds himself to be without a spiritual mandate. Without God's guidance he can no longer do

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<sup>2</sup> All further references to *Paradise Lost* will be to this edition, by book and line number.

God's work and he fears his own gullibility or spiritual blindness, now represented to him by literal blindness.

"Irresistible Samson" as the Chorus calls him, faces psychological torments as well as his physical limitations (155-165). Though Samson has retired from "popular noise," either to recover or to wait for "Death's benumbing Opium," his mind is unquiet (16, 630). Though he struggles with his blindness, he experiences greater pain from the regret he feels realizing his errors. Unfortunately for Samson, he realizes "Torment" "must secret passage find/ To th'inmost mind" (610-611) and he finds that thoughts, as his "Tormenters," "Mangle apprehensive tenderest parts," or what we might call his ego (618, 619). Samson consumes himself with guilt and remorse at having betrayed himself and God to his wife's prying on behalf of the enemy, the Philistine regime. Sightless, he begins his psychological or spiritual recovery, or, as John T. Shawcross calls it, his "renovation" (4). At the start of this "renovation" Samson turns inward, alternately assigning blame to himself, to his wife and to God. "Exil'd from light," in a "life half dead, a living death," Samson allows his mind to run wild, and in his cell, he finds "Ease to the body some, none to the mind / From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm / Of Hornets arm'd" (98, 18-19). In other words, his conscience is not free, as it was before, but his guilty thoughts are overly free, tormenting him and bringing him to a state of paralytic despair. The Chorus's report upon first encountering him reveals as much about his state as Samson's own cries. They observe him:

See how he lies at random, carelessly diffus'd  
With languish't head unpropt

As one past home abandon'd  
And by himself given over;  
In slavish habit, ill-fitted weeds  
O're worn and soil'd...  
(120-124)

Suicidally depressed, it seems, Samson, the noble warrior has not only become a slave, but he has become one without a true desire to be free. Despite all his unrestrained lamenting, he seems, perversely, to relish his captivity. He does not know what to do, and rather than risk doing the wrong thing, initially he does nothing but mourn his losses. His tendency to self-torment is obvious even to his first visitor, his father, Manoa, who later tells him, "act not in thy own affliction, Son" (503).

In *How Milton Works* Stanley Fish observes Samson "hugging to himself the guilt he has so eagerly acknowledged" (408). He also states that "the unforgiving nature [of God] is what Samson desires and fears, since to have posited such a God is once again to have found a reason for not doing anything, for remaining in the place you are in now, for pitching your tents here" (408, 462). Although Samson claims to want to serve God, to have become totally unredeemable would free him from responsibility, and quite possibly, more suffering. "O dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon," Samson wails uselessly (80). His self-pity goes on for such a long time, one could almost conclude that Samson feels relieved to have been jailed, blinded, incapacitated - in this state it seems that he cannot fail God any further. Paralyzed with grief, but determined to take responsibility for his situation, he does not yet see what Radzinowicz asserts, that Samson becomes "his own jailor" in a dungeon of solipsism, or, as the Chorus says "The

Dungeon of thy self; thy Soul" (Radinowicz 36, Milton 153-156). What could be the benefit of Samson's self-captivity, one must wonder. I can only conclude that his brooding is a necessary early stage in his psychological or spiritual recovery. The "prayer" of the play allows him to experience his pain and regret completely before becoming capable of throwing them off.

Radzinowicz calls attention to flaws in Samson's initial questioning. She writes, "The questions are not *why did I* and *now how can I*, questions calling for self-analysis and resolution; they are questions of God's benevolence" (Radzinowicz 19). Though Samson strives not to blame God in his lamenting, his instinct to do so is obvious. Fish mentions "God's broken promise" and concedes, "an obvious solution to these problems is to refer them to God" (400, 402). Fish also asserts that at this point it remains unclear what God wants anyone to do. Samson must understand his predicament without any guidance, save from the Chorus, whose ambivalence I will discuss later. It seems then, according to Divine Providence, a truly strong man must be able to bear an extraordinary spiritual weight as well as accept physical challenges. Samson must turn his mind toward discerning God's plan for him; he still must find a way to deliver Israel, if only to liberate himself from despair.

Though he finds his present situation unbearable, Samson cannot long for a return to his previous state because he now knows that in that state, though physically free and attempting to carry out the will of God, he was separated from God by his naiveté, his weakness for Dalila and his spilling of his secrets to her, which was against the will of God. Samson's paradox illustrates what in *Milton and the Renaissance Hero* John S.

Steadman called “the antithesis between external and internal freedom,” meaning that throughout most of Milton’s play Samson remains physically captive, but internally he attains moral and spiritual freedom as he gradually re-commits himself to carrying out God’s will (105). He must, during this time in physical captivity, free his mind to discover the errors and sins that led him away from God.

Samson’s new state of consciousness appears to be a developing strength, like a unused muscle that is initially weak. Radzinowicz states, “Milton sublimates [Samson’s] loss of sight through the consideration that God may give to the blind a compensatory vision with the inner eye” (20). The “compensatory vision” does not at first seem to be useful. Knowledge has replaced Samson’s ignorance but it does not satisfy his need for wisdom. Samson’s heavy lamentations strive to situate blame. He directs his blame first toward his previous ratio of physical strength to wisdom:

O impotence of mind, in body strong!  
But what is strength without a double share  
Of wisdom, vast, unwieldy, burdensom,  
Proudly secure, yet liable to fall  
By weakest subtleties, not made to rule,  
But to subserve where wisdom bears command.  
(52-57)

He means that his deceptive wife and the Philistines have surpassed him in their wisdom because God had not given him the “share” that he required to defeat his adversaries. They are clever, calculating and politically cunning; Samson has always acted from simple motives. Samson does not want to blame God for his shortcomings and yet he is

tempted. After lamenting his slight intellectual powers he subsides for a moment and decides, "Peace, I must not quarrel with the will/ Of highest dispensation, which herein / Happ'ly had ends above my reach to know" (60-61). A few lines later he complains of God's design of the human body, housing man's access to light in "such a tender ball as th'eye" (93). That criticism trails back into Samson's critique of his intellectual-physical ratio, saying "These two proportion'd ill drove me traverse" (209). Samson knows, however, that it was not God's design of him that caused him to fail, but his lack of fortitude, or an overestimation of his abilities, or just merely a lack of wisdom. The essential error is that Samson recklessly sacrificed his great strength, a gift of God intended for liberating the worshippers of Jehovah. Having labored valiantly and tirelessly to lead the people of Israel, including having fought with "The jaw of a dead Ass," Samson had been innovative but he had not been wise (143). His understanding of intellectual power is limited, echoed by that of the Chorus who agrees, "For inward light alas / Puts forth no visual beam" (162-163). While it is true that internal enlightenment does not create visual light, the fixation on Samson's limitation does not help him in his plight.

In the midst of his despair Samson interjects a significant critique of the Philistine nation and its rule:

But what more oft in Nations grown corrupt  
And by thir vices brought to servitude,  
Then to love Bondage more then Liberty,  
Bondage with ease then strenuous liberty;  
And to despise, or envy, or suspect  
Whom God that of his special favour rais'd  
As thir Deliverer; if he aught begin,

How frequent to desert him, and at last  
To heap ingratitude on worthiest deeds?  
(267-276)

Although Samson speaks of the citizens' ingratitude towards him, he must subconsciously understand that he has become also ungracious toward himself and fallen in love with the ease of bondage. Samson's recognition, however, that the Philistine nation creates slavery where there was none before shows that Samson may still retain a degree of passion for carrying out his mission. His criticism reveals that is no longer plausible to him that he, a moral agent of God, could remain enslaved by an immoral government.

One must consider the role played by the Chorus in Samson's spiritual journey. They come, they say, as Samson's "friends and neighbors not unknown," and that is precisely the problem. The Chorus, abstractly critical, "forever philosophizing," "playing physician" and often giving "poor advice," does not create mental challenges for Samson's enlightenment (Fish 404; Radzinowicz 29, 30). Many times simply reiterating what Samson has already said, the Chorus does not so much push the myopic prisoner toward spiritual progress as merely keep him company as he pushes himself toward enlightenment. William Riley Parker observes that the Chorus' "position is largely that of a sympathetic witness" (147). Although aiming to bring "Counsel or Consolation" and "Salve to [his] sores," (185, 186) the Chorus only operates as a sounding board, or as an ambivalent or slow-witted companion, displaying what Shawcross calls a "variability, a mercurial stance, depending on the specific circumstance in which and with whom

Samson is involved” (Shawcross 35). Shawcross explains of the Chorus: “Its ‘integrity’ is there, though based on reaction,” that is, Samson’s reaction to their words (35).

Although the Chorus provides Samson, and the audience, with a visual narration that Samson cannot himself provide, in counseling him they mostly echo or produce redundancies in Samson’s thoughts instead of challenging him or creating trials. The Chorus generally rephrases what Samson has already said, despairing of God’s particular mode of rule over man or of Samson’s choice in wife. If Samson were left with only the Chorus as his company he would probably die of self-pity and resentment. Samson, the captive strongman, requires a more solid cast of interveners. He must, it seems, re-confront the elements of his mind or life that led him to go against God’s will in such a careless way.

Samson’s trials with the three visitors, first his father, Manoa, then his wife, Dalila, and finally the Philistine Giant, Harapha--all of them ushered in by the Chorus--help him to recover, to “renovate” his soul, to find a way to re-establish his own free will to serve God even without the re-growth of his hair or the recovery of his eyesight. Samson receives his visitors vaguely and suspiciously. His feeling of alienation is such that the outside characters could appear onstage as ghostly spirits or “voices” that Samson’s troubled mind fabricates, representing as Mary Ann Radzinowicz proposes, “Samson’s own cast of inner personalities” (52). If we are to follow this psychological line of thought it is not overly important, then, to understand the individual motivations and independent strengths of these characters but instead what they represent to Samson and how they affect him.



Samson's father, Manoa, the first visitor, and a proponent of logic, initially does not seem as if he could be a source of inspiration. His encounter with Samson occurs during the beginning stages of the transformation of Samson's grief, when his psychological movements remain in slow acceleration. Upon hearing of Manoa's arrival Samson feels immediate pain, as he says, "Ay me, another inward grief awak't / With mention of that name renews th'assault" (330-331). The shame that he must face, however, is just beginning with this first visit. While speaking with Manoa, Samson acknowledges his wife's "feminine assaults" and berates his own "foul effeminacy" (403, 410). These bitter thoughts may seem unproductive, but during this conversation Samson begins to emancipate himself by considering his spirituality and his current place in the universe. It is during his visit from Manoa that Samson says, "The base degree to which I now am fall'n / These rags, this grinding, is not yet so base / As was my former servitude, ignoble" (414-416). Samson, of course, means that he was ignobly enslaved within Dalila's seductive grasp when he languished, as he admits later, "Sofn'd with pleasure and voluptuous life" (534). The significance of all of those lines is that Samson now recognizes himself as having moved closer to an understanding of God than he was before. His newfound wisdom, though painful, has finally re-ignited his interest in carrying out God's will. "Spare that proposal, Father, spare the trouble" he says, when offered the chance to leave by allowing Manoa to free him by paying a ransom to the Philistines. He prefers to do penance, he says, and suffer, not to "sit idle on the household hearth" (487, 566). Manoa then counsels him:

Repent the sin, but if the punishment  
Thou canst avoid, self-preservation bids;  
Or th'execution leave to high disposal,  
And let another hand, not thine, exact  
Thy penal forfeit from they self; perhaps  
God will relent, and quit thee all his debt;  
Who evermore approves and more accepts  
(Best pleas'd with humble and filial submission)  
Him who imploring mercy sues for life,  
Then who self-rigorous chooses death as due;  
Which argues over-just and self-displeas'd  
For self-offence, more then for God Offended.  
(504 – 515)

This is good advice for Samson, too eager to condemn himself and thus make himself unable to serve God once again. Manoa has identified one of Samson's major internal impediments, that he does not seem to accept his predicament as a continuing servant of God, but one presently denied his super-human powers. He cannot imagine himself having any use or value apart from his physical strength and he would rather, at this time, remain not only a slave, but a condemned slave by his own judgment of himself. In this manner he denies God the chance, says Manoa, to have any part in Samson's fate. Samson's lack of faith has made him overeager to self-punish, making himself unable either to reconnect with God or move toward liberation. Manoa further tells him, "Believe not these suggestions which proceed /From anguish of the mind and humours black," in response to Samson's carrying-on that all of his hopes have fallen "flat" and that his "race of glory" is over and that he will soon die (599-600, 595, 597). Manoa's visit also, it seems to me, provokes in Samson the desire to live a little longer for some purpose, or at least to ask the possibly rhetorical question, "as for life, / To what end

should I seek it?" for which he may, it seems, eventually provide some answer that does not involve dying a common slave in the Philistine prison (521). Though the hero still speaks there in defeated tones, his state of mind is slowly changing, growing more to include ideas about what he might further accomplish.

Samson reaches the peak of his psychological struggle during Dalila's visit to his cell. Although she has been Samson's major mortal enemy because of her betrayal of him, Dalila seems to help him in some way, partially because of her candidness and partially because of her ability to rouse his emotions. She entreats Samson to go with her, to be released by her and to give himself over to her "domestic" care entirely, to live with her, more or less as a cripple. She expresses her dominatrix-like desire frankly, declaring, "Here I should still enjoy thee day and night / Mine and Love's prisoner, not the Philistines'" (807-808). This proposal must be humiliating to the former strong-man, but cannot be any kind of trick--as far as the wicked Philistines are concerned, Samson has been defeated and been made unfit for anything other than clowning and brute labor. Dalila comes merely for herself, aiming to re-entrap Samson in a spousal snare, probably because keeping him as a prize in her home would either assuage her guilt or elevate her socially, or both. The Chorus has already urged Samson to blame Dalila instead of God for his predicament. In their words he must, "Tax not divine disposal," because "wisest Men / Have err'd, and by bad Women been deceiv'd" (210-211). The Chorus has also indicated, however, that the larger part of the blame falls on Samson for having chosen Dalila, as well as his first wife, the Woman from Timna; the Chorus has admitted, "I oft have heard men wonder / Why thou shouldst wed Philistian women rather / Then of thine

own Tribe” (215-217). Having had no other way to explain those choices, Samson had briefly mentions to the Chorus the malevolent power of his “intimate impulse,” which led him to the Woman of Timna, before Dalila (223, 229).

Samson goes back and forth many times, however, between blaming himself and his weakness and blaming Dalila and her evil nature. Early on he declares, "She was not the prime cause, but I my self, / Who vanguisht with a peal of words" (234-35). Many lines later he says that he abandoned his "fort of silence," because of Dalila's "flattering prayers and signs" and "amorous reproaches" (36, 392, 393). Shawcross indicates that despite what Samson says, the main force at work was Samson's either indiscriminate or self-destructive carnal desire for both the Woman of Timna and Dalila, that “neither was pursued for any reason other than his fleshly desire [for Philistine women]” (8).

Shawcross continues, “Having succumbed to the temptation of the flesh, Samson is no longer in charge” (8). Samson had given up control of his body, then, before the cutting of his hair. Samson's lamentations, his insistence about Dalila's sinfulness, his descriptions, such as “She sought to make me Traytor to my self” and “Thrice I deluded her, and turn'd to sport / Her importunity,” as well as his descriptions of having languished in Dalila's lap, seem to indicate that, as he does in the jail, he lingered in that circumstance as though enjoying the challenge (401, 396-97). His past with Dalila, like her visit, seems curiously steeped in a combination of sexual desire for her and competitiveness with her. The temptation of this marriage must have been strong to have drawn Samson away from his divine mission.

Joan S. Bennett's "A Person Rais'd": Public and Private Cause in *Samson Agonistes*" and Derek N.C. Wood's *Exiled from Light* raise the questions of why we are on Samson's side, and how is what Dalila has done for her people less honorable than what Samson has done for his. Radzinowicz goes as far as to say that Dalila has acted "selflessly" in serving the Philistines, and John Steadman states, "One of the most galling ironies of Samson's predicament is the disparity between his own abortive heroism and his wife's triumph" (Radzinowicz 168; Steadman 135). Whether or not Dalila serves on the side of "good" or "evil," she has defeated Samson not only through her sex appeal but also because she has been mentally stronger. Samson, after all, received from God immense physical strength and dexterity, but not necessarily intellectual power. His main intellectual tool against Dalila seems to have been "a fort of silence" and she, with the help of "Israel's Governours, and Heads of Tribes" has torn through the walls of that fort (235, 241).

Samson, in his grief, considers Dalila to be incapable of repentance, and, as has been observed by a number of commentators on the work, he requires not just physical communion but a communion of mind for his marital relationship. The play is most complimentary to Milton's *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* which states in Book VI, "Marriage is a covenant the very being whereof consists not in a forced cohabitation and counterfeit performance of duties, but in unfeigned love and peace" (Hughes 696-715). Dalila appears to be the "mistaken object" Samson must reject if he is to avoid living "sadly and injuriously," as Milton affirms a person in an unsatisfactory marriage would if unable to divorce (*Doctrine IV*). Samson resents Dalila for her loyalty to the Philistines

and seems temporarily weakened by her presence, as though still desirous of her. He cannot see her, of course, but can smell her, hear her, and expressively avoids being touched by her, threatening to "tear" her "joint by joint" if she approaches (953).

Dalila blames her sex, blames Samson for having trusted her, and blames her "love" for him for her betrayal. She also claims that it was "civil duty," finally drawing a line between her politics and his politics (853). Samson, of course, evaluates her at some emotional distance, untrusting and a bit afraid of her because of her seductive power. Decidedly through with her, he may even offer her pardon, although can no longer accept her as a wife. He refutes her claim to love him with some strength, informing her that "love seeks to have love," and indicating that her desire for him was lust for power, not love (837). In the end, she won't join his cause and he certainly won't join hers and so they have reached an impasse. She calls him "deaf" and scornfully refers to his refusal to become corrupted and deceived by her again (960). Cast off, Dalila finally reveals her ambitious pride and her true desire, fame among her people. To stop the Chorus from remarking on the "secret sting of amorous remorse" Samson states, "Love-quarrels oft in pleasing concord end, / Not wed-lock trechery endangering life" (1009-10).

What is remarkable and paradoxical about Dalila's appearance is that although Samson perceives her as an enemy, she has an even more restorative effect on him than did his father, Manoa. During Dalila's visit Samson becomes fully responsive and even "aggressive," as John Dale Ebbs has noted (386). In that Dalila inspires Samson's waxing inner strength, she acts, however unintentionally, as a galvanizing adversary that pushes him toward his freedom. Indeed, Samson and Dalila have a competitive

relationship; as husband and wife they can debate at length, as they do here. That competition seems to be the major event that restores Samson's energy. The opportunity to face his wife and resist her offered temptations helps him turn his mind toward what he can still do for God instead of how he has failed in the past. After her visit Samson will no longer even be drawn into the Chorus' misogynistic musing and riddling, now that he has cast off Dalila. "Be less abstruse, my riddling days are past," he says to shut them up (1064).

Fish mentions how Dalila provokes a lifting of Samson's mood, shown by invigorated speech. He writes, "the contorted syntax and the irregular rhythms of his self-pitying lament give way to the straightforward vigor of anger and indignation (410). Dalila, though she is rejected, has performed a function; she has unintentionally re-empowered her husband to face his future challenges and carry out what he perceives to be the will of God. Dalila's visit, then, is integral to Samson's impending escape.

The appearance and challenge of Harapha, the Dagon-worshipping Giant, also gives strength to Samson by igniting his anger and allowing him the opportunity to refuse a petty challenge. Harapha's condescension and disrespect, telling Samson that he "hast need much waching to be toucht," is, of course meant to provoke the prisoner and engage him in physical challenge (1107). Harapha attempts to anger Samson by calling his divine strength "Magicians Art" (1132). Instead of attacking, however, Samson replies that he "know[s] no Spells, use[s] no forbidden Arts," and that he his "trust is in the living God (1139, 1140). Because Samson remains calm and faithful Harapha then turns his verbal provocations toward God's regard for Samson. He attempts to offend him:

Presume not on thy God, whate'er he be,  
Thee he regards not, owns not, hath cut off  
Quite from his people, and delivered up  
Into thy Enemies' hand, permitted them  
To put out both thine eyes, and fetter'd send thee  
Into the common Prison,

(1156-62)

Here Harapha attempts to suggest that Samson's God has willed that Samson be imprisoned, blinded, and shamed. Samson, however, has already gone through all of these possibilities independently, and rejected them for himself. As in Milton's *Paradise Regained*, when Satan's attempts to provoke insecurities from Jesus appear laughable in their ineffectiveness, Harapha's attempts, though they remind Samson of his former concerns, in this moment merely fortify his ability to deter such a doltish challenger. Significantly, Samson does not release his anger just now in petty challenge; instead he reserves his strength for his divine mission. He calmly denies Harapha the fight and, as the Chorus reports, "His Giantship is gone somewhat crestfall'n" (1244). Samson's restraint signals great internal change for the prisoner, who was just previously so outwardly emotional.

According to many critics, Shawcross, for one, the visitors represent various temptations – Manoa, the "lure of ease," Dalila, the "lure of wife and home," and Harapha, "the lure of championing his God by the violence of combat" (4). To other critics, such as Bennett, the two Philistine visitors exist as distorted mirrors for Samson, or, as Bennet says in her article, "parodic versions of Samson's genuine commitment to



the public good,” Dalila showing Samson’s former weakness and Harapha representing a Samson without consciousness, unwise, and, as Bennett has said, “proud, unthinking,” and “glorified mainly in his own renown” (156, 161).

Samson’s visitors bring him power by helping him to resolve his regrets and to become what William Myers calls an “acting person” (47). Manoa, Dalila, and Harapha have caused internal trials for Samson that purify and release him, both physically and spiritually (90). As in *Paradise Lost* when the Archangel Michael explains to Adam and Eve that, post-lapse, they “shalt possess / A paradise within thee, happier far,” here Samson is now closer to God and genuine enlightenment for having suffered defeats and experienced painful challenges (7.586-7). By resisting the lures and understanding his sins to a greater degree than earlier, Samson invokes superior strength and, as William Parker has written, “He can destroy the Philistines because he has first conquered himself” (54). We can then understand the visitors as representative of Samson's imperfect, confused thoughts about his faith and he has defeated them, the visitors and the thoughts.

After Harapha's visit, when summoned by a messenger to appear before the Philistines as a clown, Samson debates briefly with the Chorus and then decides, "Commands are no constraints. If I obey them,/ I do it freely" and he goes along with the guard to the Temple (1371-72). He seems to have become aware that there may be opportunities for moral action even from within and when fighting against an immoral set of boundaries.

There is obviously a plan lurking under the surface of Samson's words and actions

now, as he hints to the Chorus:

Be of good courage, I begin to feel  
Some rousing emotions in me which dispose  
To something extraordinary my thoughts  
I with this Messenger will go along,  
Nothing to do, be sure, that may dishonour  
Our Law, or stain my vow of Nazarite.  
(1381-1386)

Since Samson has repented extensively and refused all manner of actions he deems unholy, one can assume he does not go before the Philistines merely to perform as a clown or acclaim their Dagon-God. His “Law” and “vow of Nazarite” are so strict, he has shown us, that he must be going to do something in their favor instead of against them. At this point, he no longer even needs the support of the Chorus and to them says, “your company along / I will not wish” (1413-14). In the next exchange of characters, when Manoa comes to release a now absent Samson, we find out that the agent of God has victoriously and violently destroyed the Temple of Dagon and, as Milton says in his initial summation “accidentally,” himself.

The Messenger tells that Samson acted out of “Inevitable cause / At once both to destroy and be destroy’d” and Manoa reacts to the news with an anguished cry, “O lastly over-strong against they self!” But Samson, Manoa and Milton, too, perhaps, might say that Samson had served God in the way that he knew how and that he did not enact the violence out of a suicidal desire for death, but instead to forward his mission of removing the Philistines from power and restoring worship of the true God (1590). Parker finds

Samson "almost unconscious of his returning strength" (53). This seems true and brings to light that when Samson's strength seems to have returned fully he has disappeared to the Temple of Dagon to insure its destruction. Although dead and "Sok't in his enemies blood," Samson has done what he set out to do and has moved from inaction to action. What is Milton's purpose in making Samson absent during the last part of his drama? There is, as Myers says, the idea that "Grace never takes effect except in one who is his own deliverer" or that full spiritual recovery is so personal that it cannot be witnessed (54). It seems then that in this case when Milton's hero is fully reconciled with God, he is no longer encased in a contemplative internal drama but has moved elsewhere, toward external accomplishment. The prayer has been completed, has served its purpose of freeing Samson literally and spiritually, and his recovery of his free will through the prayer has united him with God.

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