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Genre

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Milton shows a constant concern with form, with genre, to a degree remarkable even in his genre-conscious era. Among the first questions to ask about any of his poems are what conventions he embraced and what freight of shared cultural significances he took on by casting a poem in a particular genre. In poem after poem he achieves high art from the tension between his immense imaginative energy and the discipline of form. Yet he is never a mere follower of convention and neoclassical rules: his poems gain much of their power from his daring mixtures of generic elements and from radical transformations that disrupt and challenge reader expectation.

In 1642, in the preface to the Second Book of *The Reason of Church-Government*, Milton provided his most extended comment on poetry and poetics. Among other topics, he points to some of the literary genres he hopes to attempt, offering an important insight into his ideas about and ways with genre:

Time serves not now, and perhaps I might seem too profuse to give any certain account of what the mind at home in the spacious circuits of her musing hath liberty to propose to her self, though of highest hope, and hardest attempting, whether that Epick form whereof the two poems of *Homer*, and those other two of *Virgil* and *Tasso* are a diffuse, and the book of *Job* a brief model: or whether the rules of *Aristotle* herein are strictly to be kept, or nature to be follow'd . . . Or whether those Dramatick constitutions, wherein *Sophocles* and *Euripides* raigne shall be found more doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation, the Scripture also affords us a divine pastoral Drama in the Song of *Salomon* consisting of two persons and a double *Chorus*, as *Origen* rightly judges. And the Apocalyps of Saint *John* is the majestick image of a high and stately Tragedy, shutting up and intermingling her solemn Scenes and Acts with a sevenfold *Chorus* of halleluja's and harping symphonies: . . . Or if occasion shall lead to imitat those magnifick Odes and Hymns wherein *Pindarus* and *Callimachus* are in most things worthy, some others in their frame judicious, in their matter most an end faulty: But those frequent songs throughout the law and prophets beyond all these, not in their divine argument alone, but in the very

critical art of composition may be easily made appear over all the kinds of Lyrick poesy, to be incomparable. (*CPW* I: 812–16)

Much as the Renaissance Italian critic Minturno did (Minturno 1559: 3), Milton thought in terms of three general categories or ‘parts’ of poetry – epic, dramatic, lyric – and within each of these categories he identified certain historical genres or ‘kinds’ (the Renaissance term). Here he mentions ‘diffuse’ and ‘brief’ epic, pastoral dramas and tragedies, odes and hymns. Renaissance theorists and poets also recognized many other kinds, identified by a mix of formal and thematic elements, conventions and topics: metre, structure, size, scale, subject, values, occasion, style and more (Fowler 1982: 1–74). Milton’s reference to ‘pastoral’ drama in the passage quoted calls attention to the category of literary modes – what Sidney in *The Defence of Poesie* called ‘species’ and defined chiefly by tone, topics and affect: e.g. pastoral, satiric, comedic, heroic, elegiac (Sidney 1595, sigs C2^r, E3^v–F1^r). These modes may govern works or parts of works in several kinds: we might have a pastoral comedy, or pastoral eclogue, or pastoral song; or a satiric verse epistle, or epigram, or novel. Also, Milton links biblical with classical models – Homer and Job for epic, Sophocles and the Apocalypse for tragedy, Pindar and the Psalms for the high lyric – indicating his sense of the Bible as a compendium of literary genres and poetic art. His final comment privileging biblical lyric over all other lyric poetry not only for truth but also for art assumes a Platonic union of truth and beauty.

Renaissance poets and critics often repeated the Horatian formula for the purpose of poetry, to teach and delight, and Sidney added to these aims the function of rhetoric, to move. Milton was thinking in these terms as he debated with himself whether epic or tragedy might be more ‘doctrinal and exemplary’ to the nation. But Milton’s poetic teaching is not a matter of urging a message or doctrine: it involves representing human life and human values in all their complexity, in a richly imagined poetic universe. Genre is a major element in that representation, for genres afford, in Rosalie Colie’s terms, a series of frames or fixes upon the world (Colie 1973: vii), transmitting the culture’s shared imaginative experience. By his virtuoso use of the literary genre system, and especially by his characteristic mixture of generic elements in most of his poems, Milton can invite his readers to weigh and consider the values the several kinds have come to embody, and to make discriminating choices (Lewalski 1985: 17–24).

During Milton’s earlier career, genres associated with and promoted by the Caroline court took on special political and cultural import. Court masques and pastoral dramas mystified the virtue, power and benevolence of Charles I and Henrietta Maria. Cavalier poets associated with the court wrote witty, sophisticated, playful love lyrics imbued with the fashionable neoplatonism and pastoralism or treated *carpe diem* themes with a light-hearted licentiousness. Other common royalist kinds were panegyrics on members of the royal family and their celebratory occasions, and religious poems treating the ‘high church’ rituals, feasts, ceremonies and arts promoted by Archbishop Laud. During the period of the Commonwealth and Protectorate (1649–60), royalists in

retreat from London and without a court often wrote works in pastoral and romance modes, celebrating retirement and friendship, or courtly chivalry (Potter 1989; Smith 1994: 233–41). By contrast, some writers associated with the revolution reached towards the sublime or prophetic register to celebrate heroic action, as in Marvell's *Horatian Ode* (Norbrook 1999: 251–71). Restoration court culture, with Dryden at its centre, promoted heroic drama, satire and Virgilian panegyric, written in smooth and graceful pentameter couplets.

Milton wrote many kinds of poems: sonnets in Italian and English, elegies and verse epistles in Latin elegiac verse, funeral elegies in English and Latin, songs, literary hymns, odes, epitaphs, encomiums, a masque, an entertainment, a tragedy, an epic and a brief epic. He also wrote several kinds of prose treatises and polemics, both in English and in Latin – college orations, controversial tracts promoting particular causes or answering attacks, defences of the regicide and the Commonwealth, histories and theological exposition. As poet, he identified his career path with that defined by Virgil and imitated by Spenser: beginning with the lesser kinds, pastoral and lyric, and proceeding to the highest – assumed by Renaissance theorists to be epic, though Aristotle gave pride of place to tragedy. Milton wrote both.

In several early poems Milton invokes the genre system to weigh alternative lifestyles, in both personal and cultural terms. 'Elegy VI', a Latin verse epistle addressed to his close friend Charles Diodati, is a counterstatement to his own 'Elegy V', an ecstatic celebration of love and springtime in Ovidian terms, written a few months earlier. 'Elegy VI' contrasts two kinds of poetry and the lifestyles appropriate to each. He identifies Diodati with the 'gay elegy', which is consonant with a festive life of 'grand banquets' and 'frequent potions of old wine', and locates himself with epic and hymnic poets – Homer, Tiresias, Linus and Orpheus – whose high subjects require an ascetic and chaste life: 'For the poet is sacred to the gods: he is their priest' (line 77). Also, the graceful, urbane companion poems, 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', explore and contrast in generic terms the ideal pleasures appropriate to contrasting lifestyles – 'heart-easing Mirth' (line 13), 'divinest Melancholy' (line 12) – that a poet might choose, or might choose at different times, or in sequence. As celebrations of their respective deities, the Grace Euphrosone (Youthful Mirth) and the allegorical figure imagined as a deity, Melancholy, both poems are modelled on the classical hymn. But they also incorporate elements of several other kinds, among them the academic debate, the Theocritan pastoral idyll of the ideal day and its festivals, the Theophrastian prose 'character' with such titles as 'The Happy Man' or 'The Melancholy Man', the encomium, and the demonstrative or eulogistic oration with its traditional categories of praise: the goods of nature (ancestry and birth), the goods of fortune (friends and circumstances of life), and the goods of character (actions and virtues). The final couplet of each poem echoes and answers the question posed in Marlowe's 'Come live with me and be my love' and its Elizabethan analogues. But despite the familiarity of these elements, Milton's paired poems have no close antecedents.

The title personages of both poems are drawn with some playfulness, as ideal but exaggerated types, their pleasures and values adumbrated through literary kinds. The essence of 'L'Allegro', youthful mirth, is displayed in the activities and values of the pastoral mode and the literary genres harmonious with it: rural folk and fairy tales of Queen Mab and Goblin; court masques and pageants; Jonson's 'learned' comedy; romantic comedies in which 'sweetest Shakespeare fancy's child / Warble[s] his native wood-notes wild' (lines 133–4); and love songs in the Greek Lydian mode. In 'Il Penseroso' the romance mode presents the activities, pleasures and values of a solitary scholar-errant. He wanders through a mysterious gothic landscape with a melancholy nightingale, a 'high lonely tower' (line 86), a drowsy bellman, a cathedral cloister with 'high embowed roof' (line 157), stained glass windows, 'dim religious light' (line 160), a 'pealing organ' and a 'full-voiced choir' engaged in 'service high' (lines 161–3) and a hermitage with mossy cells. These images are appropriate to the medievalism and romance decorum of the poem. Melancholy's devoté enjoys the esoteric philosophy of Plato and Hermes Trismegistus, romances like Chaucer's unfinished *Squire's Tale* for their marvels and their allegory, Greek tragedies about Thebes and Troy by Aeschylus and Euripides, and bardic hymns like those of Orpheus. Finally, *Il Penseroso* turns to Christian hymns that produce ecstasy and vision.

L'Allegro might seem to show some affinity with the Cavalier poets in his pastoralism, his apparent elitist denial of rural labour, and his attendance at masques and stage plays. And *Il Penseroso*'s fondness for the architecture, art and organ music of cathedrals, and his final retreat to a monastic hermitage, seem to register a surprising affinity with Roman Catholic or Laudian ritual (Patterson 1988: 9–22). But Milton uses these images to another purpose: to define and evaluate lifestyles in terms of literary modes, and to reclaim debased genres and art forms to good uses. Milton does not, here or elsewhere, repudiate pastoral, stage plays or masques because he thinks Cavaliers have debased them, or church music and art because he thinks Laudians use them in the service of idolatry. Rather, these poems reclaim such art for innocent delight by excising any hint of licentiousness, or courtly neoplatonism, or idolatry. Through them, Milton contrasts kinds of art and life and sets them in some hierarchical relation. A progression is implied from the genres L'Allegro enjoys to the higher kinds *Il Penseroso* delights in: from folk tales to allegorical romance, from comedy to tragedy, from Lydian airs to bardic and Christian hymns. More important, the eight-line coda of 'Il Penseroso' disrupts the poems' parallelism by opening to the future:

And may at last my weary age
Find out the peaceful hermitage,
The hairy gown and mossy cell,
Where I may sit and rightly spell
Of every star that heaven doth shew,
And every herb that sips the dew;

Till old experience do attain
 To something like prophetic strain.
 (lines 167–74)

The coda makes Milton's poetic strategy clear. He does not, obviously, plan a monastic retreat for himself or hold it forth as an ideal; but he makes those images, which are appropriate to the medievalizing, romance mode of the poem, figure his aspiration to prophetic poetry. In 'Il Penseroso', age has its place, bringing true knowledge of nature and the ripening of 'old experience' into 'something like prophetic strain'. A natural progression from 'L'Allegro' to the higher life and art of 'Il Penseroso' offers to lead, at last, beyond ecstatic vision to prophetic poetry that can convey that vision to others.

When Milton was invited to contribute a poetic entertainment as part of the festivities in honour of Alice Spencer, Dowager Countess of Derby, he had to decide how to situate himself *vis-à-vis* genres traditionally associated with the court. The court masques of the 1630s promoted a fashionable cult of Platonic Love as a benign representation and vindication of royal absolutism and the personal rule of 1629–40, when Charles ruled without Parliament (Parry 1981). The royal pair displayed themselves under various mythological and pastoral guises as enacting the union of Heroic Virtue (Charles) and Divine Beauty or Love (Henrietta Maria). Caroline masques were exotic and prodigiously expensive. Sets and machinery were elaborate, and the ideality of Charles's reign was often imaged in pastoral terms: the Queen is Chloris/Flora in *Chloridia* (1631); the court is imaged as the Valley of Tempe in *Tempe Restored* (1632); and in *Coelum Britannicum* (1634) the reformed heaven (modelled on the court of Charles) is represented as a garden with parterres, fountains and grottoes (Lewalski 1998: 298–301). The King and Queen danced in many masques, symbolizing their personal and active control of all the discordant elements represented in the antimasques – unruly passions, discontented and mutinous elements in the populace, and threats from abroad. At the end the royal and noble masquers unmasked and participated with other members of the court in elaborate dances (the Revels), figuring the continual intermixing of the ideal world and the Stuart court.

Milton's *Arcades* was performed in the great hall of the Countess of Derby's Harefield estate by some of the Countess's resident and visiting grandchildren and some others. It proposed to reclaim pastoral from the court, intimating the superiority of these festivities and the virtues of this noble Protestant lady and her household over the Queen and her suspect pastoral entertainments. Milton's designation, 'Part of an Entertainment', relates *Arcades* to the genre usually employed to welcome visiting royalty or their surrogates to a noble house; most often its topics praise the visitor, who brings the benefits and virtues of the court to the hosts. But in Milton's reformed entertainment it is the visitors, coming in pastoral guise from the 'Arcadian' court, who pay homage to a far superior rural queen of a better Arcadia, directed by Genius, its guardian spirit. The Countess replaces the King in the chair of State, and displays royal and divine accoutrements. A 'sudden blaze of majesty' (line 2) flames

from her 'radiant state' and 'shining throne' (lines 14–15), which is also a 'princely shrine' (line 36) for an 'unparalleled' maternal deity (line 25): 'Such a rural queen / All Arcadia hath not seen' (lines 94–5). The critique of the court is sharpened in a pair of lines in the last song of Genius: 'Though Syrinx your Pan's mistress were, / Yet Syrinx well might wait on her' (lines 106–7). The Arcadia/Pan myth had been taken over by the Stuarts, so these lines exalt the Countess above Henrietta Maria and the Caroline court. Milton begins to explore here what his *Masque* develops fully – a stance towards art and recreation that repudiates both the court aesthetics and wholesale puritan prohibitions. The virtues of Harefield are said to be nurtured by good art as well as by the ruling Lady. Genius, the gardener/guardian of the place, embodies and displays the curative and harmony-producing powers of music and poetry, associating his better aesthetics with the virtues of a sound Protestant aristocracy.

Milton's *Masque*, commonly known as *Comus*, challenges the cultural politics of that court genre. In form, theme and spirit this is a reformed masque, projecting reformist religious and political values. Performed in 1634 on Michaelmas night (29 September) in the great hall at Ludlow Castle to honour the Earl of Bridgewater, the newly appointed Lord Lieutenant of Wales and the border counties, Milton's masque builds brilliantly upon the specific occasion, presenting the Earl's three unmarried children on a journey to their Father's house for a celebration, aided by a Guardian Spirit who is their own music master, Henry Lawes. But their journey takes on overtones of the journey of life and of contemporary life, with the children lost in the dark woods and Lady Alice confronting the temptations of Comus, who in Milton's version is not the traditional belly god of drunkenness and gluttony but has the power and attractiveness of a natural force and a contemporary cultural ideal. As Cedric Brown argues, he is the right tempter for the occasion, presenting these young aristocrats with the refined, dissolute, licentious Cavalier lifestyle they must learn to resist (Brown 1985: 57–77). He embodies as well the seductive power of false rhetoric and the threat of rape. With his bestial rout Comus is made to figure not only Cavalier licentiousness, but also Laudian ritual, the depravities of court masques and feasts, and the unruly holiday pastimes – maypoles, Morris dances, Whitsunales – promoted by the court and decried by puritans. Milton's masque requires no expensive and elaborate machinery: no cloud machines for the Attendant Spirit, no elaborate sets. The ideal masque world is Ludlow Castle, not the Stuart court, and it does not, as is usual in masques, simply appear and dispel all dangers: it is attained through pilgrimage. Nor are the monarchs the agents of cure and renewal: that role belongs to Sabrina as an instrument of divine grace from the region, the Welsh countryside, and as an embodiment of the transformative power of song and poetry. Also, the Platonism in this masque is a far cry from that of the Caroline court: external form does not reflect internal worth, and evil is conceived in Protestant, not Platonic terms. At the end of this masque evil remains: the dark wood is still dangerous to pass through and Comus is neither conquered, nor transformed, nor reconciled.

Comus himself is a species of court masquer, enacting 'dazzling spells' and marvellous spectacles, but they only 'cheat the eye with blear illusion' (lines 154–5;

McGuire 1983: 39–40). He deceptively claims the world of pastoral by his shepherd disguise and his offer to guide the Lady to a ‘low / But loyal cottage’ (lines 318–19), alluding to the pastoralism so prevalent in court masques. But instead he leads her to a decadent court with an elaborate banquet and a beast-headed entourage – a none-too-subtle allusion to the licentious Cavaliers. In formal terms, this is a surprise: a masque audience would expect the court scene to be the main masque after the antimasque in the dark wood with the antic dances of Comus’s rout. Instead, the court is another antimasque – not the locus of virtue and grace but Comus’s own residence. Poised against the Comus-ideal is the Lady’s chastity as the principle that orders sensuality, pleasure and love, holding nature, human nature and art to their right uses. And poised against the ‘dazzling fence’ of Comus’s ‘dear wit, and gay rhetoric’ (lines 789–90) is the better art embodied in the songs of the Lady, the Attendant Spirit and Sabrina, and especially the masque dances at Ludlow Castle that figure and display the children’s ‘triumph in victorious dance / O’er sensual folly, and intemperance’ (lines 973–4). The scene images the virtuous pleasure, beauty and art that accord with the life of chastity, intimating that they can be best nurtured in the households of the country aristocracy. If we compare *Coelum Britannicum*, Thomas Carew’s sumptuous court masque of 1634 in which the Caroline court is a model for the reformation of Olympus itself, it will be evident how completely Milton has reversed the usual politics of masquing.

Milton’s pastoral funeral elegy, ‘Lycidas’, is the *chef d’œuvre* of his early poetry and one of the greatest lyrics in the language. In it he confronts and works through his most profound personal concerns: about vocation, early death, belatedness and unfulfilment, fame, and the value of poetry. He also sounds some leitmotifs of reformist politics: the dangers posed by a corrupt clergy and church, the menace of Rome, adumbrations of apocalypse and the call to prophecy. The opening phrase, ‘Yet once more’, places this poem in the long series of pastoral funeral elegies stretching back to Theocritus, and in a series of biblical warnings and apocalyptic prophecies beginning with those words, especially Hebrews 12: 26–8 (Wittreich 1979: 137–53). The headnote identifies this poem as a monody, a funeral song by a single singer (Puttenham 1589: 39), though in fact other speakers are quoted in the poem and the coda introduces another poetic voice. The generic topics of funeral elegy – praise, lament, consolation – are present, though not as distinct parts of the poem. Virtually every line echoes other pastoral elegies by classical, neo-Latin and vernacular Renaissance poets: Theocritus, Moschus, Bion, Virgil, Petrarch, Castiglione, Mantuan, Joannes Secundus, Sannazaro, Spenser and many more (Woodhouse and Bush 1972b: 544–65). Yet no previous, or I think subsequent, funeral poem has the scope, dimension, poignancy and power of ‘Lycidas’; it is, paradoxically, at once the most derivative and the most original of elegies. Milton’s choice of the pastoral mode was by then out of fashion for funeral elegies, but that choice enabled him to call upon the rich symbolic resonances Renaissance pastoral had come to embody. Imaging the harmony of nature and humankind in the Golden Age, pastoral traditionally portrays the rhythms of human life and death in harmony with the rhythms of the seasons. In

classical tradition the shepherd is the poet, and pastoral is a way of exploring the relation of art and nature. In biblical tradition the shepherd is pastor of his flock, like Christ the Good Shepherd. He may also be a prophet like Moses, Isaiah or David, all of whom were called to that role from tending sheep. Pastoral also allows for political comment, as in Spenser's *Shepheards Calender* and several other poems (Revard 1997a: 190–3).

As Milton develops the usual topics of pastoral elegy, he evokes the pastoral vision again and again, then dramatizes its collapse. The dead poet and the living mourner are presented as companion shepherds singing and tending sheep in a *locus amoenus* – an idealized Cambridge University characterized by pastoral *otium*. The first collapse of pastoral obliterates this poignantly nostalgic pastoral scene in which nature, humankind and poetic ambitions seem to be in harmony, unthreatened by the fact or even the thought of mortality. Lycidas's death shatters this idyll, revealing in nature not the ordered seasonal processes of mellowing and fruition that pastoral assumes, but rather the wanton destruction of youth and beauty: the blighted rosebud, the taintworm destroying the weanling sheep, and the frostbitten flowers in early spring. The swain then questions the nymphs, the muses and the classical gods as to why they did not prevent the death of a poet, and they cannot answer. Twice Milton signals the collapse of pastoral by genre shifts, as the pastoral oaten flute is interrupted by notes in a 'higher mood' (line 87): the epic speech of divine Apollo assuring the living swain and the dead Lycidas of enduring fame in heaven, and the 'dread voice' of St Peter promising that some formidable if ambiguous 'two-handed engine' stands ready 'at the door' to smite the guilty and cleanse the church (lines 130–2). These consolations, however incomplete, allow the swain to recall pastoral, first with a procession of mourners and later with an imagined funereal tribute of pastoral flowers. But it collapses again, based as it is on a 'false surmise' (line 153) of nature's empathy with and care for humans: Lycidas's body is not here to be honoured by the floral tribute of nature's beauty, but is subject to all the horrors of the monstrous deep. At length, various adumbrations of resurrection throughout the poem are caught up in the swain's ecstatic vision of a heavenly pastoral scene in which Lycidas enjoys true *otium* beside heavenly streams, with his twin roles of poet and pastor preserved. Painfully inadequate to the fallen human condition, pastoral is seen to have its true locus in heaven. That vision enables the swain, in the coda, to take up his several pastoral roles in the world: to warble his 'Doric lay' (pastoral poetry) and, twitching his symbolic blue mantle, to assume poetry's prophetic/teaching role (Wittreich 1979: 142–3). He can now move on to the next stage of life and poetry and national reformation: 'fresh woods, and pastures new' (lines 189, 193).

Milton's sonnets, written over a period of some twenty-five years, offer a prime example of his experiments with, and transformations of, genre. He wrote twenty-three sonnets, almost all in Petrarchan form, and he did so after the great age of sonnet writing in England (the 1590s) had passed. But all over Europe for more than two centuries the sonnet had been used by Petrarch and his many followers as the major

vernacular lyric genre to treat of love and lovers' emotional states, and sometimes also to represent the power relations of patrons and clients. Milton vastly expanded the sonnet's range, using it for all sorts of subjects and incorporating other generic elements as well as a new complexity of rhetoric and tone. In several sonnets, especially those on his blindness and on the massacre of the Waldensians, syntax and rhetoric play off against the formal metrical pattern of octave and sestet, intensifying tensions and providing a formal mimesis of theme.

He began with traditional love sonnets. His first sonnet has in its generic background medieval lovers' complaints which set the nightingale, the bird of true love, against the cuckoo, the bird of hate whose song doomed the lover to disappointment. His Petrarchan mini-sequence of five sonnets and a canzone in Italian displays debts to Petrarch, Tasso, Bembo and especially Giovanni della Casa (Prince 1954): having mastered the Ovidian love elegy in Latin, Milton evidently decided to try out the other major mode of love poetry in the European tradition in *its* original language. Milton's sequence employs familiar Petrarchan topics: his lady's beauty and virtue are 'the bows and arrows of love' (Sonnet II, line 7); potent fire flashes from her eyes which are like suns; and the humble, devoted lover sighs painful sighs and suffers from love's incurable dart. But this speaker resists and redefines conventional Petrarchan roles. His sonnet lady is not coy or reserved or forbidding, but gentle and gracious; she is no silent object of adoration, but charms her lover with bilingual speech and enthralling songs. Also, this lover-poet carefully avoids Petrarchan subjection to the bonds of Cupid and the lady's power, retaining his autonomy and insisting on his own virtue and worth. The sonnet lady is not his Muse, like Petrarch's Laura: indeed, the Italian love poetry she inspires diverts him from greater poetic achievements in English which promise, his friends remind him, an 'immortal reward' of fame ('Canzone', line 11). And the last sonnet in the sequence is a curious self-blazon, praising the speaker's own moral virtues and poetic aspirations rather than the physical beauties of the lady.

Several of Milton's political sonnets take on some characteristics of the comic or satiric epigram – those short, witty, acerbic poems that look back to Martial and often end with a surprising turn at the end, called a 'sting in the tail'. One engages with contemporary history, a threatened assault on the city; others respond to attacks on Milton's Divorce Tracts and threats to religious toleration. They transport into the lyric mode the satiric persona Milton developed in his prose tracts of the early 1640s. Other sonnets to male and female friends – Henry Lawes and Margaret Ley, and the epitaph-sonnet to Catherine Thomason – find some generic antecedents in epigrams of praise as practised by Ben Jonson, with Milton's speaker adopting the Jonsonian stance of an honest man giving well-considered and well-deserved praise. Two other epigram-like sonnets invite young friends to enjoy the pleasant recreation of good conversation and a light repast: they adopt a Horatian tone and recall Jonson's Epigram 101, 'On Inviting a Friend to Dinner'. Three 'heroic' sonnets – to Sir Thomas Fairfax, Oliver Cromwell and Sir Henry Vane – import into the small form of the sonnet the elevated diction, lofty epithets and style of address appropriate to

odes for great heroes and statesmen. But Milton mixes his high praises with admonitions to these statesmen to meet the still greater challenges that remain in settling civil government and religious toleration.

Several of Milton's finest sonnets dramatize moments of personal moral crisis, and in this owe something to the traditions of Protestant occasional meditation on the self and on personal experience. Topics include an anxious analysis of belatedness in the choice of vocation and the catastrophe of blindness striking in mid-career. 'When I consider how my light is spent' (Sonnet XVI, line 1) voices a bitter complaint against a taskmaster God who seems to demand service even from a blind poet, then moves towards resolving that problem by projecting a regal God who needs no service but whose kingdom has place for all. A later sonnet on blindness insists, perhaps too urgently, on Milton's calm resignation and pride in having lost his sight in the service of liberty. A moving sonnet to his dead wife, couched as a dream vision, plays off the classical myth of Alcestis restored to her husband Admetus. Here the sestet offers no resolution but ends with a poignant sense of loss – of sight and of love: 'But O as to embrace me she inclined / I waked, she fled, and day brought back my night' (Sonnet XIX, lines 13–14). Most remarkable, perhaps, is 'On the late Massacre in Piedmont', which transforms the sonnet into a prophetic Jeremiad, calling down God's vengeance for the Waldensians slaughtered by the forces of the Roman Catholic Duke of Savoy. It incorporates many details of the atrocities from contemporary news accounts, and creates for the sonnet a high, epic-like style. When Wordsworth revived the sonnet for the Romantics, Milton was his acknowledged model.

In his Proem to Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, the Miltonic Bard alludes to a long period of gestation for his epic poem: 'this subject for heroic song / Pleased me long choosing, and beginning late' (*PL IX*. 25–6). He had been thinking about writing epic for decades – as far back as his collegiate *Vacation Exercise* in 1628. When he wrote *The Reason of Church-Government* in 1642, he was thinking about an epic on the model of Virgil and Tasso, with a great national hero like King Arthur. But at some point the Virgilian model, celebrating the founding of the Roman empire and the concomitant ruin of the Roman republic, came to be problematic for this republican poet. And Tasso's model, celebrating within the story of the first crusade the restoration of Counter-Reformation hegemony over all kinds of rebellion and dissent, was not very useful to this staunch Protestant independent (Quint 1993: 213–47). We cannot be sure just when Milton decided that the great epic subject for his own times had to be the Fall and its consequences – 'all our woe' (*PL I*. 3): not the founding of a great empire or nation, but the loss of an earthly paradise and the need for a new epic heroism conceived in moral and spiritual terms.

By complex generic strategies and specific allusions, Milton set his poem in relation to other great epics and works in a variety of genres, involving readers in a critique of the values associated with those other heroes and genres, as well as with issues of contemporary politics and theology. He included the full range of topics and conventions common to the Homeric and Virgilian epic tradition (Blessington 1979): invocations to the Muse; a beginning *in medias res*; an Achilles-like hero in Satan; a

Homeric catalogue of Satan's generals; councils in hell and in heaven; epic pageants and games; supernatural powers – God, the Son, and good and evil angels. The poem also has a fierce battle in heaven between two armies, replete with chariot clashes, taunts and vaunts, and hill-hurlings; single combats of heroes; reprises of past actions in Raphael's narratives of the War in Heaven and the Creation; and prophecies of the hero's descendants in Michael's summary of biblical history. Yet at a more fundamental level, Milton's epic is defined against the traditional epic subject – wars and empire – and the traditional epic hero as the epitome of courage and battle prowess. His protagonists are a domestic pair; the scene of their action is a pastoral garden; and their primary challenge is, 'under long obedience tried' (*PL* VII. 159), to make themselves, their marital relationship and their garden – the nucleus of the human world – ever more perfect. Into this radically new kind of epic, Milton incorporates many particular genres in many modes: romance, pastoral, georgic, comedic, tragic, rhetorical, lyric (Ide and Wittreich 1983; Lewalski 1985). And into his sublime epic high style he incorporated a wide range of other styles: colloquial, dialogic, lyric, hymnic, elegiac, mock-heroic, denunciatory, ironic, oratorical, ornate, plain.

In the Proems to Books I, III, VII and IX, Milton explores the problematics of authorship (Grossman 1987). In no other formal epic does the poet insert himself so directly and extensively into his work, making his own experience in writing the poem a part of and an analogue to his story as he struggles to understand the roles played by prophetic inspiration, literary tradition and authorial originality in the writing of his poem. By his choice of subject and use of blank verse, he distances himself from Dryden, Davenant, Cowley and other contemporary aspirants to epic; but his allusions continually acknowledge debts to the great ancients – Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Lucan and Lucretius – and to such moderns as Ariosto, Tasso, Du Bartas, Camoens and Spenser. Yet he hopes and expects to surpass them, since his subject is both truer and more heroic than theirs, and since he looks for illumination and collaboration to the divine source of both truth and creativity.

With the striking portrait of Satan in Books I and II, Milton prompts his readers to begin a poem-long exploration and redefinition of heroes and heroism, the fundamental concern of epic. Often he highlights discrepancies between Satan's noble rhetoric and his motives and actions; also, by associating Satan with the heroic genres and the great heroes of literary tradition, he invites the reader to discover how he in some ways exemplifies but in essence perverts those models (Lewalski 1985: 55–78). Satan at the outset is a heroic warrior indomitable in the face of defeat and staggering obstacles, manifesting fortitude, determination, endurance and leadership. He prides himself on an Achilles-like obduracy, a 'fixed mind / And high disdain, from sense of injured merit' (I. 97–8), and he commits himself, like Virgil's Turnus, to revenge, hate and 'eternal war / Irreconcilable' (I. 121–2) – though he has not been wronged as those heroes were. He makes martial prowess the test of worth: 'our own right hand / Shall teach us highest deeds, by proof to try / Who is our equal' (V. 864–6). But instead of winning Achilles-like victories on the battlefield, he is defeated by the Son who wields God's omnipotence yet displays it first and chiefly in acts of restoration

and new creation (*PL* VI. 780–90). Like Aeneas, Satan departs from a burning city to conquer and lead his followers to a new kingdom; but he finds that hell is his proper kingdom, and that he carries it with him wherever he goes. Like Odysseus, he makes a perilous journey requiring the use of wit and craft, but not to return home to wife and son; rather, before he ventures into Chaos he meets but does not recognize his daughter-wife Sin and the offspring of their incestuous union, Death.

Satan casts himself in the mould of the tragic hero Prometheus, enduring with constancy, indomitable will and ‘courage never to submit or yield’ the punishment meted out by an implacable divine tyrant (I. 108) – though Prometheus angered Zeus by bringing humans the gift of fire, whereas Satan brings them misery and death. Satan claims that his mind will remain unchanged and will transform his surroundings: ‘The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven’ (I. 254–5). But he finds the reverse: ‘Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell’ (IV. 75). Like many romance heroes, Satan enters a Garden of Love and courts its lady with exaggerated Petrarchan compliments (Giamatti 1966: 295–351), but he cannot win love, or find sensual delight, or enjoy sensuous refreshment or ease there; on the contrary, he feels more intensely than before the agony of his own loneliness, lovelessness and unsatisfied desire. Against the model of Camoens’s *Lusiads*, Satan is represented as an explorer bent on conquest and colonization, a ‘great adventurer’ undertaking to search ‘foreign worlds’ (X. 440–1). He sets out courageously to sail through an uncharted sea (Chaos) enduring as yet unknown dangers and difficulties; he discovers the site of a future colony, the Paradise of Fools, to be peopled chiefly by Roman Catholics; and he discovers the paradise of Eden where, after conquering Adam and Eve, he means to settle the fallen angels. At his first sight of Adam and Eve, he makes clear in soliloquy that he means to use Eden and its inhabitants for his own purposes, that his excursion is about empire-building as well as revenge. He justifies his enterprise by ‘public reason just, / Honour and empire with revenge enlarged’ – characterized by the narrator as ‘necessity, / The tyrant’s plea’ (IV. 389–94). He then practises fraud on Eve, causing her to lose her rightful domain. Such associations do not mean that Milton thought exploration and colonization necessarily Satanic, but they do suggest how susceptible the imperial enterprise is to evil purposes. All these Satanic perversions of the heroic find their climax in Book X, when Satan returns to hell intending a Roman triumph like that attending the formal coronation of Charles II (Knoppers 1994: 96–114) – to be greeted instead with a universal hiss from his followers turned into snakes, as all of them are forced to enact a grotesque black comedy of God’s devising. Milton does not use these comparisons to condemn the various literary genres, nor yet to exalt Satan as hero, but to let readers discover how Satan has perverted the noblest qualities of literature’s greatest heroes, and so realize how susceptible those models of heroism are to perversion. He invites readers to measure all other versions of the heroic against the poem’s standard: the self-sacrificing love of the Son, the moral courage of Abdiel, and the ‘better fortitude’ (IX. 31) of Christ in life and death, with which Adam and Eve at last identify.

Milton's representations of hell, heaven and Eden employ a variety of generic resources to challenge readers' stereotypes, and their bases in literature and theology. In his poem, all these places are in process: their physical conditions are fitted to the beings that inhabit them, but the inhabitants interact with and shape their environments, creating societies in their own images. Hell is first presented in traditional terms with Satan and his crew chained on a lake of fire, but they soon rise up and begin to mine gold and gems, build a government centre (Pandæmonium), hold a parliament, send Satan on a mission of exploration and conquest, investigate their spacious and varied though sterile landscape, engage in martial games and parades, perform music, compose epic poems and argue hard philosophical questions. Milton portrays hell as a damned society in the making, with royalist politics, perverted language, perverse rhetoric, political manipulation and demagoguery. By contrast, he portrays heaven as a unique place, a celestial city combining courtly magnificence and the pleasures of pastoral nature. The mixture of heroic, georgic and pastoral activities and modes – elegant hymns suited to various occasions, martial parades, warfare, pageantry, masque dancing, feasting, lovemaking, political debate, the protection of Eden – provides an ideal of wholeness. But, surprisingly, Milton's heaven is also a place of process, not stasis, of complexity, not simplicity, and the continuous and active choice of good rather than the absence of evil. Eden is a lush and lovely enclosed garden with a superabundance of natural delights and a wide range of pastoral and georgic activities, and it is pre-eminently a place of growth and change. Adam and Eve are expected to cultivate and control their burgeoning garden and their own sometimes wayward impulses and passions; to work out their relationship to God and to each other; and to deal with a constant succession of challenges relating to work, education, love and sex, intellectual curiosity, the duties pertaining to their places in a hierarchical universe, and temptations from Satan. Milton presents these challenges as components of an ideal human life in innocence and as preparation for a more exalted state.

Paradise Lost also uses the resources of genre to engage with contemporary political and cultural issues. At some point while he was writing and revising his epic for its first publication in 1667 Milton decided on a ten-book format, thereby distinguishing his poem from the twelve-book Virgilian model consciously followed by Tasso and others. He may have rejected the Virgilian format to emphasize that his is not an epic of conquest and empire, but another reason was surely that royalists had appropriated the Virgilian heroic mode before and especially after the Restoration. In what Laura Knoppers terms the 'politics of joy' following the Restoration, poets hailed the new era in Virgilian terms as a Golden Age restored, and celebrated Charles II as a new Augustus (Knoppers 1994: 67–122). His coronation procession was designed as a magnificent Roman triumph through elaborate Roman arches that identified him with Augustus, Aeneas and Neptune. Dryden's *Astraea Redux* (1660) rings explicit changes on those motifs: 'Oh Happy Age! Oh times like those alone / By Fate reserv'd for Great *Augustus* Throne' (lines 320–1). By contrast, Milton's opening lines indicate that the true restoration will not be effected by an English

Augustus but must await a divine hero: 'till one greater man / Restore us, and regain the blissful seat' (*PL* I. 4–5). And his portrayal of Satan contains a powerful critique of monarchy as civil idolatry, with allusion to Charles I and Charles II. By adopting a ten-book format, Milton associates his poem explicitly with the republican Lucan's unfinished epic, *Pharsalia*, or *The Civil War*, which was the font of a countertradition to Virgil's celebration of an Augustan empire predestined by the Gods. Lucan celebrated the resistance of the Roman republic and its heroes, Pompey and Cato, and by Milton's time the *Pharsalia* was firmly associated with antimonarchical or republican politics through several editions and translations, especially the 1627 English translation by the Long Parliament's historian-to-be, Thomas May (Norbrook 1999: 23–63). Milton alludes to and echoes Lucan especially in the treatment of contingency in Satan's flight through Chaos, in the portrayal of the War in Heaven as a civil war, and in Satan's echo of Caesar's opportunistic republican rhetoric (Norbrook 1999: 438–67; Quint 1993: 255–6, 305–7). In 1674 Milton produced an edition of *Paradise Lost* in twelve books by dividing Books VII and X but adding very little new material. By then, Virgil was no longer so obvious a signifier of royalism, and Milton seems to have decided to reclaim that central epic tradition from Dryden and the court for his own sublime poem and its values.

In the last two books of *Paradise Lost* Milton reworks another common epic topic, the prophecy of future history. The series of visions and narratives Michael presents to Adam show over and over again the few righteous overwhelmed by the many wicked, and the collapse of all attempts to found a permanent version of the Kingdom of God on earth. Adam and Milton's readers must learn to read that history, with its tragic vision of an external paradise irretrievably lost – 'so shall the world go on, / To good malignant, to bad men benign, / Under her own weight groaning' (XII. 537–9) – offset only by the projected millennial restoration of all things at Christ's second coming and the possibility, now, of inhabiting a pastoral of the spirit, 'A paradise within thee, happier far' (XII. 587). This might seem a recipe for retreat from political engagement, but the thrust of Michael's prophecy is against any kind of quietism or passivity, spiritual, moral or political. His history shows that in every age the just rise to oppose, when God calls them to do so, the Nimrods, or the Pharaohs, or the royalist persecutors of puritans, even though – like the loyal angels in the Battle in Heaven – they can win no decisive victories and can effect no lasting reforms until the Son appears. Eve learns something of the history to come through dreams, which lead her to recognize her divinely appointed agency in bringing the messianic promise into history. Remarkably, Milton's poem ends with Eve's recognition of herself as the primary human agent in God's redemptive plan and the primary protagonist of *Paradise Lost*: 'though all by me is lost, / Such favour I unworthy am vouchsafed, / By me the promised seed shall all restore' (XII. 621–3). The poem ends in the elegiac register: the poignant, quiet, wonderfully evocative final lines conjoin loss and consolation. Prophecy and Providence provide part of that consolation, but so does the human love of Adam and Eve, as those new domestic heroes wander forth 'hand in hand' to meet the harsh challenges of life in the fallen world.

In a note added in 1668 explaining his use of blank verse, Milton openly contested the new norm for heroic poetry and drama, the heroic couplet. By remarkable coincidence, his blank verse epic greeted the reading public at about the same time as Dryden's essay *Of Dramatick Poesie* (1668) with its claim that rhyme is now the norm for modern poetry of all sorts, and especially for tragedy and heroic drama. Dryden's persona, Neander, affirms categorically that 'Blank Verse is acknowledg'd to be too low for a Poem, nay more, for a paper of verses; but if too low for an ordinary Sonnet, how much more for Tragedy' (lines 66–7) – or for epic, he implies, since drama and epic are of the same genus. In the preface, Dryden states that rhyme enjoys the favour of the court, 'the last and surest judge of writing' (sig. A3^f). Though Milton's note on the verse form was requested by his publisher, who recognized that in this cultural milieu readers expected rhyme, Milton did rather more than was expected, challenging not only the new poetic norms but also the court culture and royalist politics that fostered them: 'This neglect then of rhyme so little is to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar readers, that it rather is to be esteemed an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming' (*PL*: 54–5). That language of liberty and bondage associates Milton's blank verse with (it is implied) the restoration of English liberty from the bondage of Stuart tyranny (Zwicker 1987: 249), making Milton's epic an aesthetic complement to republican politics and culture.

In 1671 Milton published in a single volume a brief epic, *Paradise Regained*, and a tragedy, *Samson Agonistes*, which offer two models of political response in conditions of severe trial and oppression after the Restoration. The brief epic presents in its hero Jesus an example of unflinching resistance to and forthright denunciation of all versions of the sinful or disordered life, and all faulty and false models of church and state. The tragedy presents a warrior hero through whose deeds and final catastrophic act God offered the Israelites opportunities to free themselves from ignominious defeat and slavery, though only if he and they can rise to the moral and political challenges involved. These poems continue Milton's redefinition of the heroic. Even more directly than *Paradise Lost*, they challenge the aesthetics and cultural politics of the contemporary heroic drama: its pentameter couplets and what Steven Zwicker terms 'its bombast and cant, its aristocratic code of virtue and honor, its spectacle and rhetoric . . . its warring heroes and virgin queens, its exaltation of passion and elevation of empire' (1995: 139–40, 151). Milton's largely dialogic brief epic celebrates in blank verse the heroism of intellectual and moral struggle and entirely redefines the nature of empire and glory. And his severe classical tragedy, written in a species of free verse with varying line lengths and some irregular rhyme, eschews every vestige of exotic spectacle, links erotic passion with idolatry, and presents a tragic hero whose intense psychic suffering leads to spiritual growth.

Paradise Regained offers a daring challenge to and revision of epic norms. Its epic proposition makes the quite startling claim that this poem treats a vastly more noble and heroic subject than *Paradise Lost*, with a hero who conquers his enemy, regains the

regions lost to Satan and establishes his own realm. These lines allude to the verses, then widely accepted as genuine, that introduce the *Aeneid* in most Renaissance editions (Virgil 1960: 240–1) and supposedly announce Virgil's turn from pastoral and georgic to an epic subject:

I who ere while the happy garden sung,
By one man's disobedience lost, now sing
Recovered Paradise to all mankind,
By one man's firm obedience fully tri'd
Through all temptation, and the Tempter foil'd
In all his wiles, defeated and repulsed,
And Eden raised in the waste wilderness

(I. 1–7)

That echo, and the reference to *Paradise Lost* as a poem about a happy garden, suggest with witty audacity that Milton has now, like Virgil, graduated from pastoral apprentice-work to the true epic subject: in his case, the spiritual warfare and victory of Jesus. Also, several allusions to the Book of Job suggest that Milton is now carrying out the poetic project he imagined a quarter of a century earlier in *The Reason of Church-Government*, when he proposed the Book of Job as a 'brief model' for epic (CPW I: 813). This poem is in part shaped by the exegetical tradition that interpreted Job as epic, and also by the long tradition of biblical 'brief epics' in three or four books, in Latin and in the vernacular literatures (Lewalski 1966: 3–129).

Contemporary readers were no doubt surprised, as many modern critics have been, by Milton's choosing as his subject the Temptation in the Wilderness instead of the Passion–Crucifixion narrative, and by his portrait of an austere, nay-saying Jesus who discounts and refuses all worldly pleasures and goods. But this choice of subject follows naturally from Milton's belief that self-knowledge and self-rule are preconditions for any worthy public action in the world. The temptation episode allows Milton to present Jesus's moral and intellectual trials as a higher epic heroism, as a model for right knowing and choosing, and as a creative and liberating force in history. As a political gesture, it allowed him to develop a model of nonviolent yet active and forceful resistance to the Restoration church and state (Loewenstein 1994: 63–89). The debates between Jesus and Satan can lead readers to think rightly about kingship, prophecy, idolatry, millenarian zeal, the proper uses of civil power, the place of secular learning, and the abuses of pleasure, glory and power. The poem's structure gives primary attention to the Messiah's kingdom and its relation to secular monarchies and their values, with Books II and III, and much of Book IV, given over to that issue.

Milton reworked and adapted epic conventions and topics to this unusual subject. He transformed the central epic episode, the single combat of hero and antagonist, into a three-day verbal battle, a poem-long intellectual and moral struggle. The poem begins *in medias res* with Jesus's baptism. There are two Infernal Councils in which

Satan plots his temptation, and a Council in Heaven in which God prophesies his Son's immediate and ultimate victory over Satan. Also, there are two transformed epic recitals – Christ's meditation about his youthful experiences and aspirations, and Mary's reminiscences about the prophecies and promises attending the hero's early life – as well as a transformed prophetic vision in which the hero, instead of viewing his own destined kingdom (as Aeneas does), sees and rejects all the kingdoms that are not his. There is an epic catalogue of the Kingdoms of the World displayed to Jesus, a martial pageant of the Parthian warriors and a few striking epic similes. Like *Paradise Lost*, this poem incorporates other genres into the epic frame: continuous dialogue in which Satan's inflated epic rhetoric is met by Jesus's spare answers; a pastoral grove where Satan presents a sensuous banquet, and the still more enchanting 'Olive Groves of Academe'; a romance situation in which Jesus reprises the trials of a young knight in the wilderness before he is recognized as champion or king; and angelic hymns at the beginning and end of the temptations. But this poem forgoes the soaring, eloquent style of *Paradise Lost* for one appropriate to this subject: more restrained, dialogic, and tense with the parry and thrust of intellectual exchange.

The title page of *Samson Agonistes* terms it a 'Dramatic Poem', not a drama: Milton did not suppose that it might be presented on the Restoration stage alongside Dryden's exotic tragedies. But as a written text it might still prove 'doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation', the effect he had projected for tragedy in *The Reason of Church-Government* (CPW I: 815). Milton made large alterations in the biblical story from Judges 13–16: conflating the biblical strong man with Job and the Psalmist (Radzinowicz 1978: 188–260), he creates a hero capable of self-analysis, intellectual struggle, tragic suffering and bitter self-castigation as he seeks to understand God's ways to him. In the preface, Milton's only extended commentary on a poem of his own, he explicitly sets his practice against that of his contemporaries, describing his tragedy as 'coming forth after the ancient manner, much different from what among us passes for best' (CSP: 356). Milton begins by paraphrasing Aristotle's famous definition of tragedy (*Poetics* 6.1, 1973: 24–5) in terms tailored to his own poem:

TRAGEDY, as it was anciently composed, hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems: therefore said by Aristotle to be of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such-like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirred up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated. (CSP: 355)

Unlike Aristotle, Milton emphasizes the moral profit of tragedy. He glosses catharsis as a purging or tempering of the passions by aesthetic delight – a concept encapsulated in the drama's final line: 'calm of mind all passion spent'. He also changes the object of imitation: for Aristotle, it is an action, the plot or mythos; for Milton, it is the tragic passions, pity or fear and terror, that are to be 'well imitated' –

a definition that locates the essence of tragedy in the scene of suffering, the agonies and passions of Samson. In Aristotle's paradigmatic tragedy, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, the hero falls from prosperity into abject misery through an error or fault (*hamartia*) that enmeshes him in the toils of Fate. Milton's tragedy begins with Samson already fallen into misery, like the heroes of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* or Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*. Again, as he did in *The Reason of Church-Government*, Milton finds a biblical model for tragedy in the Book of Revelation and the commentary of David Pareus, who described that book's tragic subject as the 'sufferings and agons' of the saints throughout history (Lewalski 1970: 1050–62). Whatever intimations of providential design or apocalyptic destruction of the wicked are conveyed by Milton's drama, they do not dispel the tragedy of Samson's agony and his people's loss.

Pointing to Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides as 'the best rule to all who endeavour to write tragedy' in regard to the disposition of the plot, Milton follows the structure of Greek tragedy closely (CSP: 357). There is a prologue spoken by Samson, a *parados* or entry song of the Chorus, five agons or dialogic struggles with visitors separated by choral odes, an *exode* containing the report of and responses to Samson's death, and a *kommos* containing a funeral dirge and consolations (Parker 1970). Like Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex*, Samson gains self-knowledge through the dialogic agons, in this case partly by encountering and overcoming versions of his former self: as a Danite circumscribed by his tribe and family, as a sensualist enslaved by passion, and as a swaggering strong man. Milton states that his Chorus of Danites is designed 'after the Greek manner', but it is much more than the voice of community mores. Especially in the long segment after Samson leaves the scene, it falls to them to try to understand what Samson's life and death mean for Israel, and what they themselves are called to do. The preface also indicates the drama's adherence to the neoclassical unities of time and place: the action takes only a few hours with no intervals of time, and the single locale is a shady bank in front of Samson's prison, with all the action in the Philistine Temple reported by a messenger.

The tragic effect of *Samson Agonistes* is intensified by its portrayal of the great obstacles to political liberation, whether in Israel or England. All human heroes are flawed, and peoples generally are more disposed to choose 'Bondage with ease than strenuous liberty' (line 271). Yet in the drama's historical moment a future in bondage is not yet fixed and choices are still possible. If the Israelites, or the English, could truly value liberty, could reform themselves, could read the signs and events with penetration, could benefit from the 'new acquit / Of true experience' (lines 1755–6), moral and political, that Samson's experience offers to the Danites and that Milton's dramatization of it offers to his compatriots, liberation might be possible. But that can only happen when a virtuous citizenry understands the political stakes and places a true value on liberty. Milton's exemplary tragedy makes a fitting poetic climax to his lifelong effort to use the resources of genre to help create such citizens.

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