JOHN MILTON

At a Solemn Music

Blest pair of Sirens,1 pledges of Heaven’s joy,
Sphere-born harmonious sisters, Voice and Verse,
Wed your divine sounds, and mixed power employ
Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce,
And to our high-raised fantasy2 present
That undisturbed song of pure consent,3
Aye sung before the sapphire-colored throne
To him that sits thereon
With saintly shout and solemn jubilee,
Where the bright seraphim in burning row
Their loud uplifted angel-trumpets blow,
And the cherubic host in thousand choirs
Touch their immortal harps of golden wires,
With those just spirits that wear victorious palms,4
Hymns devout and holy psalms
Singing everlastingly;5
That we on earth with undiscovering voice
May rightly answer that melodious noise;
As once we did, till disproportioned sin
Jarred against nature’s chime, and with harsh din
Broke the fair music that all creatures made
To their great Lord, whose love their motion swayed
In perfect diapason, whilst they stood
In first obedience, and their state of good.6
O may we soon again renew that song,
And keep in tune with Heaven, till God ere long
To his celestial consort us unite,
To live with him, and sing in endless morn of light.

When the Assault Was Intended to the City1

Captain or Colonel,2 or Knight in Arms,
Whose chance on these defenseless doors may seize,

1. The Sirens, enticing mermaids who led men to destruction (Odyssey), were traditionally sweet but evilly intentioned singers.
2. Imagination.
3. Harmony, agreement.
4. The saints wear palms in token of their victory over sin.
5. “Singing” modifies “spirits” (line 14), and takes as an object “hymns devout and holy psalms” (line 15). Milton is practicing at balancing the masses of his long sentences on a Latin grammar and word order.
6. Before man fell, the whole cosmos was in moral and intellectual concord (“diapason”), hence the music of the spheres could be heard on earth.
1. During the campaign of 1642, the king’s forces seemed at one point in a position to assault London. This sonnet is a half-humorous plea that the poet’s house be spared, though the idea that the Muse might and should protect her spokesman was thoroughly congenial to Milton (cf. Lycidas). Fortunately the king’s armies turned back without a battle, and the poem’s persuasive powers were never tested.
2. Colonel: pronounced with three syllables.
If deed of honor did thee ever please,
Guard them, and him within protect from harms.

He can requite thee; for he knows the charms
That call fame on such gentle acts as these,
And he can spread thy name o'er lands and seas,
Whatever clime the sun’s bright circle warms.

Lift not thy spear against the Muses’ bower:
The great Emathian conqueror bid spare
The house of Pindarus, when temple and tower
Went to the ground; and the repeated air
Of sad Electra’s poet had the power
To save th’ Athenian walls from ruin bare.

A Book Was Writ of Late Called Tetrachordon

A book was writ of late called Tetrachordon,
And woven close, both matter, form, and style;
The subject new: it walked the town a while,
Numb’ring good intellects; now seldom pored on.

Cries the stall-reader, “Bless us! what a word on
A title-page is this!”, and some in file
Stand spelling false, while one might walk to Mile-
End Green. Why is it harder, sirs, than Gordon,
Colkitto, or Macdonnel, or Galasp?

Those rugged names to our like mouths grow sleek
That would have made Quintilian stare and gasp.

Thy age, like ours, O soul of Sir John Cheke,
Hated not learning worse than toad or asp,
When thou taught’st Cambridge and King Edward Greek.

3. Alexander the Great gave orders that Pindar’s house be spared when Thebes was captured. Emathian: Macedonian.
4. Plutarch is authority for the story that when the Spartans had defeated Athens and were about to raze the walls of the city, they were stopped by an Athenian officer, who recited the opening chorus of Euripides’ Electra.
1. The title of Milton’s third tract on divorce (published with the fourth, Colasterion, in 1645). It was called “Tetrachordon,” a Greek term for the four-tone scale in music, because the tract expounded and sought to harmonize the four chief biblical passages on marriage and divorce.
2. Misinterpreting. Mile-End Green was at the East End of London.
3. Scottish names made familiar through Scotland’s involvement in the Civil War.
4. The great 1st-century Roman authority on rhetoric, who disapproved of barbarous words.
5. Sir John Cheke (1514–57) was the first to teach Greek at Cambridge; he was also tutor to Edward VI. In Tetrachordon Milton praises Edward’s reign (1547–53) as the “best and purest” age of the English Reformation, and he commends Cheke’s learning and piety. But even then, Milton is saying, a man of learning had to contend with much ignorant hostility and suspicion.
Lawrence, of Virtuous Father Virtuous Son

Lawrence, of virtuous father virtuous son,
Now that the fields are dank and ways are mire,
Where shall we sometimes meet, and by the fire
Help waste a sullen day, what may be won
From the hard season gaining? Time will run
On smoother, till Favonius\textsuperscript{2} reinspire
The frozen earth, and clothe in fresh attire
The lily and rose, that neither sowed nor spun.
What neat repast shall feast us, light and choice,
Of Attic taste,\textsuperscript{3} with wine, whence we may rise
To hear the lute well touched, or artful voice
Warble immortal notes and Tuscan\textsuperscript{4} air?
He who of those delights can judge, and spare\textsuperscript{5}
To interpose them oft, is not unwise.

1655  
1673

\textit{From Of Education}\textsuperscript{1}

\* \* \* I shall detain you no longer in the demonstration of what we should not do, but straight conduct ye to a hillside, where I will point ye out the right path of a virtuous and noble education; laborious indeed at the first ascent, but else so smooth, so green, so full of goodly prospect and melodious sounds on every side, that the harp of Orpheus was not more charming. I doubt not but ye shall have more ado to drive our dullest and laziest youth, our stocks and stubs,\textsuperscript{2} from the infinite desire of such a happy nurture, than we have now to haul and drag our choicest and hopefulest wits to that asinine\textsuperscript{3} feast of sow-thistles and brambles which is commonly set before them, as all the food and entertainment of their tenderest and most docible\textsuperscript{4} age. I call, therefore, a complete and generous education, that which fits a man to perform justly, skillfully, and magnanimously all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war. And how

1. The “virtuous father” was Henry Lawrence, author of theological tracts and Lord President of Cromwell’s Council for a time; his son, Edward Lawrence, became a member of parliament but died at the age of 24.
2. The west wind of spring.
3. I.e., “light and choice” (line 9).
4. Italian, and specifically Florentine, calling to mind the carnival songs composed by such men as Lorenzo the Magnificent.
5. “Spare”: in one possible sense, afford, spare time; in another, refrain, limit oneself (from too frequent interposing). The poem contains quite as many reinings-in of appetite as invitations to indulgence; it balances out to a very sober festivity or festive sobriety.

1. Written in the form of an open letter to Samuel Hartlib (a noted educational reformer of the 17th century). Of Education was the product of Milton’s leisure hours, and of an occasion. Hartlib had published in 1642 a book called A Reformation of Schools, putting forward some ideas derived from the Bohemian pedagogue John Comenius. On the whole, Hartlib, like Comenius, was interested in simple, easy schemes of education for everyone. Milton’s proposal, which appeared as a tract on June 5, 1644, was courteous enough but definitely modeled on different lines. Characteristically, Milton called for a limited and intensive educational operation aimed at training a few distinguished leaders. But for them it was necessary to know nothing less than everything. Milton’s aim was the humanistic one of producing a complete man who could design a building, storm a city, write an epic, or cure a lame knee. To the noble confidence of this program one can still respond, even though the details of the program itself appear antiquated.
2. Backward students.
3. Stupid; and, of course (reinforcing the metaphor), fit for donkeys.
4. Docile, teachable.
all this may be done between twelve and one-and-twenty, less time than is now
bestowed in pure trifling at grammar and sophistry, is to be thus ordered.

First, to find out a spacious house and ground about it fit for an academy,
and big enough to lodge a hundred and fifty persons, whereof twenty or
thereabout may be attendants, all under the government of one who shall be
thought of desert sufficient, and ability either to do all or wisely to direct and
oversee it done. This place should be at once both school and university, not
needing a remove to any other house of scholarship, except it be some pecu-
liar college of law or physic, where they mean to be practitioners; but as for
those general studies which take up all our time from Lily to the commencing,
as they term it, Master of Art, it should be absolute. After this pattern, as
many edifices may be converted to this use as shall be needful in every city
throughout this land, which would tend much to the increase of learning and
civility everywhere. This number, less or more, thus collected, to the conve-
nience of a foot-company or interchangeably two troops of cavalry, should
divide their day’s work into three parts, as it lies orderly: their studies, their
exercise, and their diet.

For their studies: first, they should begin with the chief and necessary rules
of some good grammar, either that now used, or any better; and while this is
doing, their speech is to be fashioned to a distinct and clear pronunciation,
as near as may be to the Italian, especially in the vowels. For we Englishmen,
being far northerly, do not open our mouths in the cold air wide enough to
grace a southern tongue; but are observed by all other nations to speak
exceeding close and inward, so that to smatter Latin with an English mouth
is as ill a hearing as law French. Next, to make them expert in the usefulest
points of grammar, and withal to season them and win them early to the love
of virtue and true labor, ere any flattering seduction or vain principle seize
them wandering, some easy and delightful book of education would be read
to them, whereof the Greeks have store, as Cebes, Plutarch, and other Socratic
discourses; but in Latin we have none of classic authority extant, except the
two or three first books of Quintilian and some select pieces elsewhere. But
here the main skill and groundwork will be to temper them such lectures
and explanations upon every opportunity, as may lead and draw them in will-
ing obedience, inflamed with the study of learning and the admiration of
virtue, stirred up with high hopes of living to be brave men and worthy patri-
ots, dear to God and famous to all ages: that they may despise and scorn all
their childish and ill-taught qualities, to delight in manly and liberal exer-
cises; which he who hath the art and proper eloquence to catch them with,
what with mild and effectual persuasions, and what with the intimation of
some fear, if need be, but chiefly by his own example, might in a short space
gain them to an incredible diligence and courage, infusing into their young

5. Set apart for particular studies.
6. William Lily, first headmaster of St. Paul’s
School, was responsible for the elementary Latin
grammar one encountered as a schoolboy begin-
nning Latin. Milton is describing education from
the level we should call the beginning of junior
high school through college.
7. Norman French terms in English law-courts
grated harshly on Milton’s humanistic ear.
8. The Picture by Cebes describes and recom-
mends the path to virtue and learning (its author’s
dates are highly uncertain). The book of Plutarch
which Milton has in mind might be his essay on
The Education of Children or perhaps the biogra-
phies; his moral essays are reserved for a later
stage in the student’s education. By “other Socratic
discourses” Milton may mean either discourses
using the Socratic method of question and answer
or discourses teaching Socratic (i.e., Platonic) doc-
trine.
9. Quintilian wrote a famous book of instructions
in oratory (1st century A.D.) which greatly influ-
enced Milton’s ideas on education.
1. Afford.
breasts such an ingenuous and noble ardor as would not fail to make many of them renowned and matchless men. At the same time, some other hour of the day might be taught them the rules of arithmetic; and, soon after, the elements of geometry, even playing, as the old manner was. After evening repast till bedtime their thoughts would be best taken up in the easy grounds of religion and the story of Scripture. The next step would be to the authors of agriculture, Cato, Varro, and Columella, for the matter is most easy; and if the language be difficult, so much the better; it is not a difficulty above their years. And here will be an occasion of inciting and enabling them hereafter to improve the tillage of their country, to recover the bad soil, and to remedy the waste that is made of good; for this was one of Hercules’ praises. Ere half these authors be read, which will soon be with plying hard and daily, they cannot choose but be masters of any ordinary prose: so that it will be then seasonable for them to learn in any modern author the use of the globes and all the maps, first with the old names and then with the new; or they might be then capable to read any compendious method of natural philosophy: and, at the same time, might be entering into the Greek tongue, after the same manner as was before prescribed in the Latin; whereby the difficulties of grammar being soon overcome, all the historical physiology of Aristotle and Theophrastus are open before them and, as I may say, under contribution. The like access will be to Vitruvius, to Seneca’s Natural Questions, to Mela, Celsus, Pliny, or Solinus. And having thus passed the principles of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and geography, with a general compact of physics, they may descend in mathematics to the instrumental science of trigonometry, and from thence to fortification, architecture, enginery, or navigation. And in natural philosophy they may proceed leisurely from the history of meteors, minerals, plants, and living creatures, as far as anatomy. Then also in course might be read to them out of some not tedious writer the institution of physic; that they may know the tempers, the humors, the seasons, and how to manage a crudity; which he who can wisely and timely do is not only a great physician to himself and to his friends, but also may at some time or other save an army by this frugal and expenseless means only, and not let the healthy and stout bodies of young men rot away under him for want of this discipline; which is a great pity, and no less a shame to the commander. To set forward all these proceedings in nature and mathematics, what hinders but that they may procure, as oft as shall be needful, the helpful experiences of hunters, fowlers, fishermen, shepherds, gardeners, apothecaries; and in the other sciences, architects, engineers, mariners, anatomists; who, doubtless, would be ready, some for reward and some to favor such a hopeful seminary. And this will give them such a real tincture of natural knowledge as they shall never forget, but daily augment with delight. Then also those poets which are now counted most hard will be both facile and pleasant: Orpheus, Hesiod, Theocritus,

2. In the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C. and the 1st century A.D., all three wrote books about farming; during the Renaissance these treatises were customarily bound together.
3. Aristotle’s Natural History of Animals would naturally be supplemented by his pupil Theophrastus’s Inquiry into Plants.
4. Vitruvius wrote not only of architecture, but of engineering problems; Celsus was famous for a book on medicine; Seneca and Pliny were natural historians; Mela and Solinus wrote general descriptions of the world. All these authors were of the 1st century A.D. except Solinus, who was of the 3rd.
5. Digest.
6. I.e., mechanics.
7. Instruction in medicine. Milton’s pupils must learn the four “humors” (blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy or black choler) and their “tempers” and “seasons” (i.e., mixtures and timings), in order to avoid a “crudity” (an upset stomach resulting from an ill mixture of humors).
Aratus, Nicander, Oppian, Dionysius; and, in Latin, Lucretius, Manilius, and the rural part of Virgil.\(^8\)

By this time, years and good general precepts will have furnished them more distinctly with that act of reason which in ethics is called *proairesis*,\(^9\) that they may with some judgment contemplate upon moral good and evil. Then will be required a special reinforcement of constant and sound indoctrinating to set them right and firm, instructing them more amply in the knowledge of virtue and the hatred of vice; while their young and pliant affections are led through all the moral works of Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, Plutarch, Laertius, and those Locrian remnants;\(^1\) but still to be reduced in their nightward studies, wherewith they close the day’s work, under the determinate sentence ofDavid or Solomon, or the evangelists and apostolic Scriptures.\(^2\) Being perfect in the knowledge of personal duty, they may then begin the study of economics.\(^3\) And either now or before this they may have easily learned at any odd hour the Italian tongue. And soon after, but with wariness and good antidote, it would be wholesome enough to let them taste some choice comedies, Greek, Latin, or Italian; those tragedies also that treat of household matters, as *Trachiniae*, *Alcestis*, and the like. The next remove must be to the study of politics; to know the beginning, end, and reasons of political societies, that they may not, in a dangerous fit of the commonwealth, be such poor, shaken, uncertain reeds, of such a tottering conscience as many of our great counselors have lately shown themselves, but steadfast pillars of the state. After this they are to dive into the grounds of law and legal justice, delivered first and with best warrant by Moses: and, as far as human prudence can be trusted, in those extolled remains of Grecian law-givers, Lycurgus, Solon, Zaleucus, Charondas; and thence to all the Roman edicts and tables, with their Justinian; and so down to the Saxon and common laws of England and the statutes. Sundays also and every evening may be now understandingly spent in the highest matters of theology and church history, ancient and modern; and ere this time the Hebrew tongue at a set hour might have been gained, that the Scriptures may be read in their own original; whereto it would be no impossibility to add the Chaldee and the Syrian dialect.\(^4\) When all these employments are well conquered, then will the choice histories, heroic poems, and Attic tragedies of stateliest and most regal argument, with all the famous political orations, offer themselves; which, if they were not only read, but some of them got by memory, and solemnly pronounced with right accent and grace, as might be taught, would endue them even with the spirit and vigor of Demosthenes or Cicero, Euripides or Sophocles. And now, lastly, will be the time to read with them those organic arts which enable men to discourse and write perspicuously, elegantly, and according to the fitted style of lofty, mean, or lowly. Logic, therefore, so much as is

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8. All these poets were didactic in character; for instance, the Hellenistic cultists who wrote under the mythical name of Orpheus created a poem called *Lithica* on the magic properties of precious stones; Oppian and Dionysius of Alexandria (2nd century A.D.) wrote on fishes and geography, Manilius (1st century A.D.) on astrology. 
9. An Aristotelian term transliterated by Milton from the *Nicomachean Ethics* (II.iv.3) to suggest the idea of reason as choice. 
1. Plato’s dialogues, Plutarch’s *Moralia*, and Cicero’s moral essays all prescribe the principles of ethical behavior. Diogenes Laertius (ca. 150 A.D.) and Xenophon, the disciple of Socrates, are authorities on the lives of the philosophers. The “Locrian remnants” are a forgery, supposed to be by Plato’s teacher, Timeaus of Locri, and titled *On the Soul of the World*. 
2. In the evening all this pagan learning is shown to be subsumed in the Bible, the last word (“determinate sentence”) of the Proverbs, Psalms, and apostolic Epistles. 
3. Not the dismal science, but household management. 
4. Many passages of the Bible are more thoroughly understood by the man who can compare the Hebrew text with its Aramaic and Syriac versions.
useful, is to be referred to this due place, with all her well couched heads and topics, until it be time to open her contracted palm into a graceful and ornate rhetoric taught out of the rule of Plato, Aristotle, Phalereus, Cicero, Hermogenes, Longinus. To which poetry would be made subsequent, or, indeed, rather precedent, as being less subtle and fine, but more simple, sensuous, and passionate; I mean not here the prosody of a verse, which they could not but have hit on before among the rudiments of grammar, but that sublime art which in Aristotle’s Poetics, in Horace, and the Italian commentaries of Castelvetro, Tasso, Mazzoni, and others, teaches what the laws are of a true epic poem, what of a dramatic, what of a lyric, what decorum is, which is the grand masterpiece to observe. This would make them soon perceive what despicable creatures our common rhymers and play-writers be; and show them what religious, what glorious and magnificent use might be made of poetry, both in divine and human things. From hence, and not till now, will be the right season of forming them to be able writers and composers in every excellent matter, when they shall be thus fraught with an universal insight into things. Or whether they be to speak in Parliament or Council, honor and attention would be waiting on their lips. There would then also appear in pulpits other visages, other gestures, and stuff otherwise wrought than what we now sit under, oftentimes to as great a trial of our patience as any other that they preach to us. These are the studies wherein our noble and our gentle youth ought to bestow their time in a disciplinary way from twelve to one-and-twenty, unless they rely more upon their ancestors dead than upon themselves living. In which methodical course it is so supposed they must proceed by the steady pace of learning onward, as at convenient times for memory’s sake to retire back into the middle ward, and sometimes into the rear of what they have been taught, until they have confirmed and solidly united the whole body of their perfected knowledge, like the last embattling of a Roman legion. Now will be worth the seeing what exercises and what recreations may best agree and become these studies.

Of Education / 7

Their Exercise

The course of study hitherto briefly described is, what I can guess by reading, likest to those ancient and famous schools of Pythagoras, Plato, Isocrates, Aristotle, and such others, out of which were bred such a number of renowned philosophers, orators, historians, poets, and princes all over Greece, Italy, and Asia, besides the flourishing studies of Cyrene and Alexandria. But herein it shall exceed them, and supply a defect as great as that which Plato noted in the commonwealth of Sparta; whereas that city trained up their youth most for war, and these in their academies and Lyceum all for the gown, this institution of breeding which I here delineate shall be equally good both for peace and war. Therefore, about an hour and a half ere they eat at noon should be allowed

5. Logic is a closed fist, say Aristotle and Cicero; rhetoric is an open palm. Phalereus and Hermogenes (2nd centuries B.C. and A.D. respectively) wrote treatises on rhetoric.
6. Only Castelvetro wrote what is properly speaking a commentary on Aristotle; but Tasso’s Discourse on Epic Poetry and Mazzoni’s Defense of the “Divine Comedy” of Dante were important critical documents for Milton the poet.
7. Note how late the art of composition occurs in Milton’s curriculum. He felt that students should not be asked, or even allowed, to write about anything till they had mastered the subject.
8. Milton’s metaphor comes from the sport of fencing; the various “wards” represent so many postures of attack or defense.
9. The academic gown, i.e., study.
them for exercise, and due rest afterwards; but the time for this may be enlarged at pleasure, according as their rising in the morning shall be early. The exercise which I commend first is the exact use of their weapon, to guard, and to strike safely with edge or point; this will keep them healthy, nimble, strong, and well in breath, is also the likeliest means to make them grow large and tall, and to inspire them with a gallant and fearless courage, which, being tempered with seasonable lectures and precepts to them of true fortitude and patience, will turn into a native and heroic valor, and make them hate the cowardice of doing wrong. They must be also practiced in all the locks and grips of wrestling, wherein Englishmen were wont to excel, as need may often be in fight to tug, to grapple, and to close. And this, perhaps, will be enough wherein to prove and heat their single strength. The interim of unsweating themselves regularly, and convenient rest before meat, may both with profit and delight be taken up in recreating and composing their travailed spirits with the solemn and divine harmonies of music heard or learned; either while the skillful organist plies his grave and fancied descant in lofty fugues, or the whole symphony with artful and unimaginable touches adorn and grace the well-studied chords of some choice composer; sometimes the lute or soft organ-stop, waiting on elegant voices, either to religious, martial, or civil ditties; which, if wise men and prophets be not extremely out, have a great power over dispositions and manners, to smooth and make them gentle from rustic harshness and distempered passions. The like also would not be inexpedient after meat, to assist and cherish nature in her first concoction, and send their minds back to study in good tune and satisfaction. Where having followed it close under vigilant eyes until about two hours before supper, they are, by a sudden alarum or watchword, to be called out to their military motions, under sky or covert, according to the season, as was the Roman wont; first on foot, then, as their age permits, on horseback, to all the art of cavalry; that having in sport, but with much exactness and daily muster, served out the rudiments of their soldiership in all the skill of embattling, marching, encamping, fortifying, besieging, and battering, with all the helps of ancient and modern stratagems, tactics, and warlike maxims, they may, as it were out of a long war, come forth renowned and perfect commanders in the service of their country. They would not then, if they were trusted with fair and hopeful armies, suffer them for want of just and wise discipline to shed away from about them like sick feathers, though they be never so oft supplied; they would not suffer their empty and unrecruitable colonels of twenty men in a company to quaff out or convey into secret hoards, the wages of a delusive list and a miserable remnant; yet in the meanwhile to be overmastered with a score or two of drunkards, the only soldiery left about them, or else to comply with all rapines and violences. No, certainly, if they knew aught of that knowledge that belongs to good men or good governors, they would not suffer these things. But to return to our own institute: besides these constant exercises at home, there is another opportunity of gaining experience to be won from pleasure itself abroad; in those vernal seasons of the year, when the air is calm and pleasant, it were an injury and sullenness against nature not to go out and see her riches and partake in her rejoicing with heaven and earth. I should not, therefore, be a persuader to them of studying much then, after

1. I.e., while the organist plays variations on a theme in the form of a fugue. “Symphony”: orchestra.
2. Accompanying.
3. Mistaken.
4. Milton is indignant with colonels who cannot recruit more than twenty men to a company, or who deliberately hold down the rosters so they can collect (and drink up) the pay of the absentees.
two or three years that they have well laid their grounds, but to ride out in com-
panies with prudent and staid guides to all quarters of the land, learning and
observing all places of strength, all commodities of building and of soil, for
towns and tillage, harbors, and ports for trade. Sometimes taking sea as far as
to our navy, to learn there also what they can in the practical knowledge of sail-
ing and of sea fight. These ways would try all their peculiar gifts of nature; and
if there were any secret excellence among them, would fetch it out and give it
fair opportunities to advance itself by, which could not but mightily redound
to the good of this nation, and bring into fashion again those old admired
virtues and excellencies, with far more advantage now in this purity of Christ-
ian knowledge. Nor shall we then need the monsieurs of Paris to take our hope-
ful youth into their slight and prodigal custodies, and send them over back
again transformed into mimics, apes, and kickshaws. But if they desire to see
other countries at three or four and twenty years of age, not to learn principles,
but to enlarge experience and make wise observation, they will by that time be
such as shall deserve the regard and honor of all men where they pass, and the
society and friendship of those in all places who are best and most eminent. And
perhaps then other nations will be glad to visit us for their breeding, or else to
imitate us in their own country.

Now, lastly, for their diet there cannot be much to say, save only that it would
be best in the same house; for much time else would be lost abroad, and many
ill habits got; and that it should be plain, healthful, and moderate, I suppose is
out of controversy. Thus, Mr. Hartlib, you have a general view in writing, as your
desire was, of that which at several times I had discoursed with you concerning
the best and noblest way of education; not beginning, as some have done, from
the cradle, which yet might be worth many considerations, if brevity had not
been my scope. Many other circumstances also I could have mentioned; but
this, to such as have the worth in them to make trial, for light and direction may
be enough. Only I believe that this is not a bow for every man to shoot in that
counts himself a teacher, but will require sinews almost equal to those which
Homer gave Ulysses; yet I am withal persuaded that it may prove much more
easy in the assay than it now seems at distance, and much more illustrious:
howbeit not more difficult than I imagine, and that imagination presents me
with nothing but very happy and very possible according to best wishes; if God
have so decreed, and this age have spirit and capacity enough to apprehend.

Comus After finishing his formal academic work at Cambridge, Milton was liv-
ing at his father’s country house in Horton, Buckinghamshire, and pursuing a course
of independent postgraduate reading, when chance brought him into contact with the
Edgerton family, who owned property in the neighborhood. They were a widespread
family, with estates, positions, and connections—distinguished upper-echelon civil
servants, distantly related to the Sidneys. Having occasions to celebrate, they asked
young Mr. Milton to compose for them some ceremonial verses. The first of these
semi-dramatic pieces was a short spectacle named “Arcades” written perhaps for the
birthday, and certainly in honor, of the Countess Dowager of Derby. The second was
the masque now known to us as Comus, written in 1634 to celebrate the appointment
of her stepson, the Earl of Bridgewater, as Lord President of Wales.

5. A corruption of quelque chose, a thing of no real value, hence a trifling person.
6. In experience.
Socially speaking, Milton’s two masques were altogether different from those of Ben Jonson. It was a family entertainment that Milton was asked to create; *Comus* was performed mainly by children, not sophisticated courtiers; it required little scenery, costuming, or machinery, and that little quite simple. Compared with the court-masques, its budget was tiny. Perhaps for these reasons, Milton evidently felt free to make of *Comus* a personal statement rich in complex implication. The basic story of a temptation triumphantly resisted he found in the conventional Renaissance moral reading of *Odyssey* 10, describing the adventures of Odysseus on Circe’s isle; it needed only a little modification to take account of the very limited troupe of actors at Milton’s disposal, among whom the three young children of the Earl had to be given prominent parts. More importantly, the fable answered to a lifelong preoccupation of the poet’s mind. One could define this central theme as the quarrel between a strongly sensual temperament and a powerful nay-saying sense of personal morality. On these terms the verbal “debate” between the Lady and Comus articulates a quarrel between two aspects of the poet himself. Certainly the dispute between easy sensual indulgence and moral self-control based on a vigilant conscience runs like a red thread through most of Milton’s major works. But in *Comus* one sees it rising toward a particularly idealistic, spiritualized solution. In the formal argument, between Comus speaking for sense and the Lady speaking for virginity, both parties overstate and rigidify the claims involved in their opposed positions. Comus, pretending devotion to Nature, would reduce the Lady to a promiscuous party-girl; her answers, protesting eternal virginity, suggest that she belongs in a nunnery. But in the Attendant Spirit’s epilogue we get a final, carefully balanced glimpse of Venus and Adonis, Psyche and Cupid—images of erotic fulfillment from which the gross and sensual elements have been purged, existing forever in a heaven of transcendent desire. Such love as this, Milton seems to suggest, would be no derogation from the lady’s much-tried chastity; yet it is in no way narrow, negative, or—as we would say—puritanical.

*Comus* is written in a mixture of several different styles, lyric, dramatic, and declamatory; it is often erudite and allusive, just as often charmingly naïve and earnest. From time to time it rhymes, and then breaks off; it pauses to imitate an archaic style of Greek dialogue. The action is set in a vaguely defined place and time compounded of Shropshire and Arcadia, 1634 and mythological antiquity. Without ever being explicitly mentioned, Christian moral values are everywhere present in the masque. Perhaps it is their unusual hidden movement, behind the action, from opposition to nature toward reconciliation with nature that has made this youthful allegory so puzzling to modern commentators.

A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634 (*Comus*)

The Persons:

The ATTENDANT SPIRIT, afterwards in the habit of THYRSIS

COMUS with his Crew

The LADY

FIRST BROTHER

SECOND BROTHER

SABRINA, the Nymph

1. Milton’s masque had at first no other title than “A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle”; it came to be generally known as *Comus* only after Milton’s death. “Ludlow Castle” is in Shropshire, near the Welsh border, in the west of England.

2. Henry Lawes, who composed the music for *Comus*, probably played the part of Thyrsis. “Attendant Spirit”: a guardian, a good daemon, a virtuous spirit, but not quite an angel.
The chief persons which presented, were:

The LORD BRACKLEY.³
Mr. THOMAS EGERTON, his Brother.
The LADY ALICE EGERTON.

The first scene discovers a wild wood.

The ATTENDANT SPIRIT descends or enters.

Before the starry threshold of Jove’s court⁴
My mansion is, where those immortal shapes
Of bright aerial spirits live ensphered
In regions mild of calm and serene air,

Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot,
Which men call earth, and with low-thoughted care
Confined and pestered in this pinfold here,⁵
Strive to keep up a frail and feverish being,
Unmindful of the crown that virtue gives

After this mortal change, to her true servants
Amongst the enthroned gods on sainted seats.
Yet some there be that by due steps aspire
To lay their just hands on that golden key
That opes the palace of eternity:

To such my errand is, and but for such,
I would not soil these pure ambrosial weeds
With the rank vapors of this sin-worn mold.

But to my task. Neptune, besides the sway
Of every salt flood and each ebbing stream,

Look in by lot ’twixt high and nether Jove⁶
Imperial rule of all the sea-girt isles
That like to rich and various gems inlay
The unadorned bosom of the deep;
Which he to grace his tributary gods
By course commits to several government,
And gives them leave to wear their sapphire crowns,
And wield their little tridents; but this isle,
The greatest and the best of all the main,
He quarters to his blue-haired deities;⁷

And all this tract that fronts the falling sun
A noble peer of mickle trust and power
Has in his charge, with temper’d awe to guide
An old and haughty nation proud in arms;
Where his fair offspring nursed in princely lore,

Are coming to attend their father’s state

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3. Lord Brackley was the Earl of Bridgewater’s elder son; he was 11 years old when the masque was presented, his brother Thomas was just 9, and their sister, the Lady Alice, was 15.
4. The Attendant Spirit comes from outside the court of Jove, a bright aerial spirit from the middle regions between heaven and earth.
5. Cattle-pen.
6. “High” Jove was Jupiter, king of the gods, resident on Olympus; “nether” love was Dis or Pluto, resident in hell; Neptune, between them, took in not only the oceans but all the islands in them, including Britain.
7. England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales are the quarters of Britain; the part that “fronts the falling sun” is the western part, i.e., Wales.
8. The Earl of Bridgewater, in whose honor the masque was given, had just been appointed Lord
And new-entrusted scepter. But their way
Lies through the perplexed paths of this drear wood,
The nodding horror of whose shady brows
Threats the forlorn and wandering passenger;
And here their tender age might suffer peril,
But that by quick command from sovereign Jove
I was dispatched for their defense and guard;
And listen why, for I will tell ye now
What never yet was heard in tale or song
From old or modern bard, in hall or bower.

Bacchus that first from out the purple grape
Crushed the sweet poison of misused wine,
After the Tuscan mariners transformed,
Coasting the Tyrrhenian shore, as the winds listed,
On Circe’s island fell. (Who knows not Circe,
The daughter of the sun? Whose charmed cup
Whoever tasted, lost his upright shape,
And downward fell into a groveling swine.)

This nymph that gazed upon his clustering locks,
With ivy berries wreathed, and his blithe youth,
Had by him, ere he parted thence, a son
Much like his father, but his mother more,
Whom therefore she brought up, and Comus named:

Who, ripe and frolic of his full grown age,
Roving the Celtic and Iberian fields,
At last betakes him to this ominous wood,
And in thick shelter of black shades embowered,
Excels his mother at her mighty art,
Offering to every weary traveler
His orient liquor in a crystal glass,
To quench the drought of Phœbus, which as they taste,
(For most do taste through fond intemperate thirst)
Soon as the potion works, their human countenance,
Th’ express resemblance of the gods, is changed
Into some brutish form of wolf, or bear,
Or ounce, or tiger, hog, or bearded goat,
All other parts remaining as they were.
And they, so perfect is their misery,
Not once perceive their foul disfigurement,
But boast themselves more comely than before,
And all their friends and native home forget,

President of Wales, hence the compliments to “an old and haughty nation proud in arms.”

9. The wood is not only the park around Ludlow Castle but, allegorically, the tangled forest of life, as in Dante.

1. The story told by the Attendant Spirit is indeed unknown to classical antiquity, though grafted onto classical mythology.

2. Ovid tells in the Metamorphoses (III) how Bacchus turned into dolphins some Italian pirates who tried to kidnap him. Circe’s island was supposed to lie in the Tyrrhenian Sea, off the west coast of Italy.

Circe the enchantress was a daughter of Helios the sun-god; the major classical fable involving her is Odyssey X, which describes how she enchanted and transformed Odysseus’ men, but not wily Odysseus himself.

3. Comus, in Jonson’s earlier masque Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue (above), was a gross belly-god; Milton makes him younger, gayer, more attractive. The “Celtic” (French) and “Iberian” (Spanish) “fields” define the path by which he got from Italy to wild Wales.

4. Thirst caused by the sun. Orient liquor glitters like the rising (orient) sun perhaps because it has an oriental pearl in it.

5. Lynx.
To roll with pleasure in a sensual sty.
Therefore when any favored of high Jove
Chances to pass through this adventurous glade,
Swift as the sparkle of a glancing star
I shoot from heaven to give him safe convoy,
As now I do. But first I must put off
These my sky robes spun out of Iris’ woof,⁶
And take the weeds and likeness of a swain
That to the service of this house belongs,
Who with his soft pipe and smooth-dittied song
Well knows to still the wild winds when they roar,
And hush the waving woods, nor of less faith,
And in this office of his mountain watch
Likeliest, and nearest to the present aid
Of this occasion. But I hear the tread
Of hateful steps, I must be viewless⁷ now.

COMUS enters with a charming rod in one hand, his glass in the other; with him a rout of monsters, headed like sundry sorts of wild beasts, but otherwise like men and women, their apparel glistering. They come in making a riotous and unruly noise, with torches in their hands.

COMUS. The star that bids the shepherd fold⁸
Now the top of heaven doth hold,
And the gilded car of day
His glowing axle doth allay
In the steep Atlantic stream,
And the slope sun his upward beam
Shoots against the dusky pole,
Pacing toward the other goal
Of his chamber in the east.
Meanwhile welcome joy and feast,
Midnight shout and revelry,
Tipsy dance and jollity.
Braid your locks with rosy twine
Dropping odors, dropping wine.
Rigor now is gone to bed,
And advice with scrupulous head,
Strict age, and sour severity,
With their grave saws⁹ in slumber lie.
We that are of purer fire
Imitate the starry choir,
Who in their nightly watchful spheres,
Lead in swift round the months and years.
The sounds and seas with all their finny drove
Now to the moon in wavering morris¹ move,
And on the tawny sands and shelves
Trip the pert fairies and the dapper elves;
By dimpled brook and fountain brim,
The wood-nymphs decked with daisies trim,

⁶. Robes woven from the colors of the rainbow ("Iris"); "weeds": clothing.
⁷. Invisible.
⁸. Hesperus the evening star bids the shepherd return his flocks to their fold for the night.
⁹. Maxims.
¹. The wavering morris-dance of the waters is the recurrent tides.
Their merry wakes and pastimes keep:
What hath night to do with sleep?
Night hath better sweets to prove,
Venus now wakes, and wakens love.

Come let us our rites begin,
'Tis only daylight that makes sin,
Which these dun shades will ne'er report.
Hail goddess of nocturnal sport,
Dark veiled Cotytto, to whom the secret flame
Of midnight torches burns; mysterious dame,
That ne'er art called but when the dragon womb
Of Stygian darkness spits her thickest gloom,
And makes one blot of all the air,
Stay thy cloudy ebon chair
Wherein thou rid'st with Hecat', and befriend
Us thy vowed priests, till utmost end
Of all thy dues be done, and none left out,
Ere the blabbing eastern scout,
The nice morn on th' Indian steep,
From her cabined loophole peep,
And to the telltale sun descry
Our concealed solemnity.
Come, knit hands, and beat the ground,
In a light fantastic round.

The Measure

Break off, break off, I feel the different pace
Of some chaste footing near about this ground.
Run to your shrouds within these brakes and trees;
Our number may affright: some virgin sure
(For so I can distinguish by mine art)
Benighted in these woods. Now to my charms,
And to my wily trains; I shall ere long
Be well stocked with as fair a herd as grazed
About my mother Circe. Thus I hurl
My dazzling spells into the spongy air,
Of power to cheat the eye with blear illusion,
And give it false presentments, lest the place
And my quaint habits breed astonishment,
And put the damsel to suspicious flight,
Which must not be, for that's against my course.
I under fair pretense of friendly ends
And well placed words of glozing courtesy,
Baited with reasons not unoplausible,
Wind me into the easy-hearted man,
And hug him into snares. When once her eye

2. The Thracian goddess Cotytto was linked with Hecate (pronounced with three syllables) as patroness of witchcraft and nocturnal license.
3. Hecate, the chief classical goddess of witchcraft and sorcery.
4. Milton imagines a European lookout stationed in the Himalayas to watch for the approach of morning from the East.
5. Comus probably flung some confetti in the air to represent magic dust.
6. Deceitful, flattering.
Hath met the virtue of this magic dust,
I shall appear some harmless villager
Whom thrift keeps up about his country gear;
But here she comes, I fairly step aside,
And hearken if I may her business hear.

THE LADY enters.

LADY. This way the noise was, if mine ear be true,
My best guide now; methought it was the sound
Of riot and ill-managed merriment,
Such as the jocund flute or gamesome pipe
Stirs up among the loose unlettered hinds;7
When for their teeming flocks and granges full
In wanton dance they praise the bounteous Pan,8
And thank the gods amiss. I should be loath
To meet the rudeness and swilled insolence
Of such late wassailers;9 yet O where else
Shall I inform my unacquainted feet
In the blind mazes of this tangled wood?
My brothers, when they saw me wearied out
With this long way, resolving here to lodge
Under the spreading favor of these pines,
Stepped as they said to the next thicket side
To bring me berries, or such cooling fruit
As the kind hospitable woods provide.
They left me then, when the gray-hooded ev’n
Like a sad votarist in palmer’s weed
Rose from the hindmost wheels of Phœbus’ wain.1
But where they are, and why they came not back,
Is now the labor of my thoughts; ’tis likeliest
They had engaged their wandering steps too far,
And envious darkness, ere they could return,
Had stole them from me; else O thievish night
Why shouldst thou, but for some felonious end,
In thy dark lantern thus close up the stars,
That nature hung in heaven, and filled their lamps
With everlasting oil, to give due light
To the misled and lonely traveler?
This is the place, as well as I may guess,
Whence even now the tumult of loud mirth
Was rife and perfect in my listening ear,
Yet nought but single darkness do I find.
What might this be? A thousand fantasies
Begin to throng into my memory,
Of calling shapes and beckoning shadows dire,
And airy tongues that syllable men’s names
On sands and shores and desert wildernesses.
These thoughts may startle well, but not astound

7. Countrymen.
8. God in general, but also the special god of shepherds and farmers.
1. As the chariot of the sun (Phoebus’ wagon) disappeared over the horizon, evening rose behind it, like a gray, hooded pilgrim.
The virtuous mind, that ever walks attended
By a strong siding champion, conscience.—
O welcome pure-eyed faith, white-handed hope,
Thou hovering angel girl with golden wings,
And thou unblemished form of chastity,²
I see ye visibly, and now believe
That he, the supreme good, t’ whom all things ill
Are but as slavish officers of vengeance.
Would send a glistening guardian, if need were,
To keep my life and honor unassailed.
Was I deceived, or did a sable cloud
Turn forth her silver lining on the night?
I did not err, there does a sable cloud
Turn forth her silver lining on the night,
And casts a gleam over this tufted grove.
I cannot hallo to my brothers, but
Such noise as I can make to be heard farthest
I’ll venture, for my new enlivened spirits
Prompt me; and they perhaps are not far off.

SONG

Sweet Echo, sweetest nymph that livest unseen
Within thy airy shell
By slow Meander’s³ margent green,
And in the violet-embroidered vale
Where the love-lorn nightingale
Nightly to thee her sad song mourneth well.

Canst thou not tell me of a gentle pair
That likest thy Narcissus⁴ are?
O if thou have
Hid them in some flowery cave,
Tell me but where,
Sweet queen of parley, daughter of the sphere,
So mayst thou be translated to the skies,
And give resounding grace to all heav’n’s harmonies.⁵

COMUS.  Can any mortal mixture of earth’s mold
Breathe such divine enchanting ravishment?
Sure something holy lodges in that breast,
And with these raptures moves the vocal air
To testify his hidden residence;
How sweetly did they float upon the wings
Of silence, through the empty-valuted night,
At every fall smoothing the raven down
Of darkness till it smiled: I have oft heard

² Milton must have expected his new triad of Faith, Hope, and Chastity to strike sharply on ears accustomed to the old formula of Faith, Hope and Charity. The difference is worth some meditation.
³ Meander is a slow-moving winding river in Asia Minor, famous for its twisting and turning.
⁴ The beautiful young man of Greek mythology who fell in love with his own reflection, pined away, and became the flower which now bears his name.
⁵ Echo is “queen of parley” because she talks so much, and “daughter of the sphere” because her voice bounces off the vault of heaven.
My mother Circe with the sirens three,  
Amidst the flowery kirtled Naiades,  
Culling their potent herbs and baleful drugs,  
Who as they sung, would take the prisoned soul,  
And lap it in Elysium; Scylla wept,  
And chid her barking waves into attention,  
Yet they in pleasing slumber lulled the sense,  
And in sweet madness robbed it of itself,  
But such a sacred and home-felt delight,  
Such sober certainty of waking bliss,  
I never heard till now. I’ll speak to her  
And she shall be my queen. Hail foreign wonder,  
Whom certain these rough shades did never breed,  
Unless the goddess that in rural shrine  
Dwell’st here with Pan or Silvan,  
Forbidding every bleak unkindly fog  
To touch the prosperous growth of this tall wood.

LADY. Nay gentle shepherd, ill is lost that praise  
That is addressed to unattending ears;  
Not any boast of skill, but extreme shift  
How to regain my severed company,  
Compelled me to awake the courteous echo  
To give me answer from her mossy couch.

COMUS. What chance, good lady, hath bereft you thus?  
LADY. Dim darkness and this leafy labyrinth.  
COMUS. Could that divide you from near-ushering guides?  
LADY. They left me weary on a grassy turf.  
COMUS. By falsehood, or discourtesy, or why?  
LADY. To seek i’ th’ valley some cool friendly spring.  
COMUS. And left your fair side all unguarded, Lady?  
LADY. They were but twain, and purposed quick return.  
COMUS. Perhaps forestalling night prevented them.  
LADY. How easy my misfortune is to hit!  
COMUS. Imports their loss, beside the present need?  
LADY. No less than if I should my brothers lose.  
COMUS. Were they of manly prime, or youthful bloom?  
LADY. As smooth as Hebe’s their unrazored lips.  
COMUS. Two such I saw, what time the labored ox  
In his loose traces from the furrow came,  
And the swinked hedger at his supper sat;  
I saw them under a green mantling vine  
That crawls along the side of yon small hill,  
Plucking ripe clusters from the tender shoots;  
Their port was more than human, as they stood;

6. Milton imagines Circe keeping company with the sirens and Naiades (sea-nymphs) because they were all seductive-destructive goddesses dwelling by the seaside.  
7. Scylla and Charybdis were another pair of deadly females dwelling by the sea, the first a many-headed monster, the second a whirlpool.  
8. Pan and Silvanus were classical nature-deities. The words “you are” are understood, after “unless.”  
9. The exchange of conversation by alternating lines of verse was popular in Greek drama, under the name of stichomythia; Milton imitates it here as part of his complex of styles.  
1. Hebe (pronounced Hee-bee) was goddess of youth and spring, as well as cup-bearer to all the other gods.  
2. Exhausted.
I took it for a fairy vision
Of some gay creatures of the element
That in the colors of the rainbow live
And play i’ th’ plighted\(^3\) clouds. I was awe-struck,
And as I passed, I worshipped; if those you seek,
It were a journey like the path to heaven
To help you find them.

LADY. Gentle villager,
What readiest way would bring me to that place?

COMUS. Due west it rises from this shrubby point.

LADY. To find out that, good shepherd, I suppose,
In such a scant allowance of star-light,
Would overtask the best land-pilot’s art,
Without the sure guess of well-practiced feet.

COMUS. I know each lane and every alley green,
Dingle or bushy dell of this wild wood,
And every bosky bourn\(^4\) from side to side,
My daily walks and ancient neighborhood,
And if your stray attendance be yet lodged,
Or shroud within these limits, I shall know
Ere morrow wake or the low-roosted lark
From her thatched pallet rouse; if otherwise,
I can conduct you, lady, to a low

But loyal cottage, where you may be safe
Till further quest.

LADY. Shepherd, I take thy word,
And trust thy honest offered courtesy,
Which oft is sooner found in lowly sheds
With smoky rafters, than in tap’stry halls
And courts of princes, where it first was named,\(^5\)
And yet is most pretended: In a place
Less warranted than this or less secure
I cannot be, that I should fear to change it.
Eye me blessed providence, and square my trial
To my proportioned strength. Shepherd lead on.—

The Two BROTHERS.

ELDER BROTHER. Unmuffle ye faint stars, and thou fair moon
That wont’st to love the traveler’s benison,
Stoop thy pale visage through an amber cloud,
And disinherit Chaos, that reigns here
In double night of darkness and of shades;
Or if your influence be quite dammed up
With black usurping mists, some gentle taper,
Though a rush candle from the wicker hole
Of some clay habitation, visit us
With thy long leveled rule of streaming light,
And thou shalt be our star of Arcady

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3. Plaited, interwoven.
5. The lady’s moralizing on the frequency of courtesy outside of courts expresses an easy commonplace, perhaps copied from Ariosto; Milton was not yet an ardent republican.
Or Tyrian cynosure. Or if our eyes
Be barred that happiness, might we but hear
The folded flocks penned in their wattlecotes,
Or sound of pastoral reed with oaten stops,
Or whistle from the lodge, or village cock
Count the night watches to his feathery dames,
' Twould be some solace yet, some little cheering
In this close dungeon of innumerous boughs.

345 But O that hapless virgin our lost sister,
Where may she wander now, whither betake her
From the chill dew, amongst rude burs and thistles?
Perhaps some cold bank is her bolster now,
Or 'gainst the rugged bark of some broad elm
Leans her unpillowed head fraught with sad fears.
What if in wild amazement and affright,
Or while we speak, within the direful grasp
Of savage hunger or of savage heat?

ELDER BROTHER. Peace, brother, be not over-exquisite
To cast the fashion of uncertain evils;
For grant they be so, while they rest unknown,
What need a man forestall his date of grief,
And run to meet what he would most avoid?
Or if they be but false alarms of fear,
How bitter is such self-delusion?
I do not think my sister so to seek,
Or so unprincipled in virtue's book
And the sweet peace that goodness bosoms ever,
As that the single want of light and noise
(Not being in danger, as I trust she is not)
Could stir the constant mood of her calm thoughts,
And put them into misbecoming plight.
Virtue could see to do what virtue would
By her own radiant light, though sun and moon
Were in the flat sea sunk. And wisdom's self
Oft seeks to sweet retired solitude,
Where with her best nurse contemplation
She plumes her feathers, and lets grow her wings
That in the various bustle of resort
Were all to-ruffled, and sometimes impaired.
He that has light within his own clear breast
May sit i' th' center, and enjoy bright day,
But he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts
Benighted walks under the midday sun;
Himself is his own dungeon.

385 SECOND BROTHER. 'Tis most true
That musing meditation most affects
The pensive secrecy of desert cell,

6. Ovid tells how Arca, Jove's son by the Arcadian princess Callisto, became the constellation Ursa Minor, one of whose elements is the Pole Star, called also the Tyrian Cynosure because Phoenician seamen from Tyre used it to navigate by. ("Cynosure": dog-tail, i.e., pointer.)
7. Pens made of reeds (wattles).
8. I.e., at the center of the universe, which is the center of the earth.
Far from the cheerful haunt of men and herds,
And sits as safe as in a senate-house;
For who would rob a hermit of his weeds,
His few books, or his beads, or maple dish,
Or do his gray hairs any violence?
But beauty, like the fair Hesperian tree⁹
Laden with blooming gold, had need the guard
Of dragon watch with unenCHANTed eye,
To save her blossoms and defend her fruit
From the rash hand of bold incontinence.
You may as well spread out the unsunned heaps
Of miser’s treasure by an outlaw’s den,
And tell me it is safe, as bid me hope
Danger will wink on opportunity,
And let a single helpless maiden pass
Uninjured in this wild surrounding waste.
Of night or loneliness it recks me not,¹
I fear the dread events that dog them both,
Lest some ill-greeting touch attempt the person
Of our unowned sister.

ELDER BROTHER. I do not, brother,
Infer as if I thought my sister’s state
Secure without all doubt or controversy:
Yet where an equal poise of hope and fear
Does arbitrate th’ event, my nature is
That I incline to hope rather than fear,
And gladly banish squint suspicion.
My sister is not so defenseless left
As you imagine; she has a hidden strength
Which you remember not.

SECOND BROTHER. What hidden strength,
Unless the strength of heaven, if you mean that?

ELDER BROTHER. I mean that too, but yet a hidden strength
Which if heaven gave it, may be termed her own;
’Tis chastity, my brother, chastity:
She that has that, is clad in complete steel,
And like a quivered nymph with arrows keen²
May trace huge forests and unharbored heaths,
Infamous hills and sandy perilous wilds,
Where through the sacred rays of chastity,
No savage fierce, bandit or mountaineer
Will dare to soil her virgin purity:
Yea there, where very desolation dwells,
By grots and caverns shagged with horrid shades,
She may pass on with unblenched majesty,
Be it not done in pride or in presumption.
Some say no evil thing that walks by night
In fog or fire, by lake or moorish fen,³

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9. As one of his many labors, Hercules had to
gather golden apples from the garden of the Hes-
perides, or Western Islands; they were said to be
guarded by a ferocious, wakeful dragon.
1. It doesn’t disturb me.
2. Diana, goddess of chastity, was followed to the
hunt by nymphs armed with bow and arrow.
3. Will-o’-the-wisps and suchlike ghostly appar-
tions were thought to delight in luring simple trav-
elers into deadly swamps (“moorish fens”).
Blue meager hag or stubborn unlay'd ghost
That breaks his magic chains at curfew time,
No goblin or swart fairy of the mine,
Hath hurtful power o'er true virginity.
Do ye believe me yet, or shall I call
Antiquity from the old schools of Greece
to testify the arms of chastity?
Hence had the huntress Dian her dread bow,
Fair silver-shafted queen forever chaste,
Wherewith she tamed the brinded lioness
And spotted mountain pard, but set at nought
The frivolous bolt of Cupid; gods and men
Feared her stern frown, and she was queen o' th' woods.
What was that snaky-headed Gorgon shield
That wise Minerva wore, unconquered virgin,
Wherewith she freeze'd her foes to congealed stone,
But rigid looks of chaste austerity
And noble grace that dashed brute violence
With sudden adoration and blank awe?
So dear to heaven is saintly chastity,
That when a soul is found sincerely so,
A thousand liveried angels lackey her,
Driving far off each thing of sin and guilt,
And in clear dream and solemn vision
Tell her of things that no gross ear can hear,
Till oft converse with heavenly habitants
Begin to cast a beam on th' outward shape,
The unpolluted temple of the mind,
And turns it by degrees to the soul's essence,
Till all be made immortal: but when lust
By unchaste looks, loose gestures, and foul talk,
But most by lewd and lavish act of sin,
Lets in defilement to the inward parts,
The soul grows clotted by contagión,
Imbodies and imbrutes, till she quite lose
The divine property of her first being.
Such are those thick and gloomy shadows damp
Oft seen in charnel vaults and sepulchers,
Linger ing and sitting by a new-made grave,
As loath to leave the body that it loved,
And linked itself by carnal sensuality
To a degenerate and degraded state.
SECOND BROTHER. How charming is divine philosophy!
Not harsh and crabbéd as dull fools suppose,
But musical as is Apollo's lute,
And a perpetual feast of nectared sweets,
Where no crude surfeit reigns.
ELDER BROTHER. List, list, I hear
Some far-off hallo break the silent air.
SECOND BROTHER. Methought so too; what should it be?

4. In Iliad 5, Homer describes Minerva Athena as carrying a shield with a Gorgon face on it; the Gorgon turned to stone whoever looked on it.
ELDER BROTHER. For certain
Either some one like us night-foundered here,
Or else some neighbor woodman, or at worst,
Some roving robber calling to his fellows.
SECOND BROTHER. Heaven keep my sister! Again, again, and near!
Best draw, and stand upon our guard.
ELDER BROTHER. I'll hallo;
If he be friendly he comes well, if not,
Defense is a good cause, and heaven be for us.

The ATTENDANT SPIRIT habited like a shepherd.

That hallo I should know; what are you? speak;
Come not too near, you fall on iron stakes else.
SPIRIT. What voice is that? my young lord? speak again.
SECOND BROTHER. O brother, 'tis my father's shepherd sure.
ELDER BROTHER. Thyrsis? Whose artful strains have oft delayed
The huddling brook to hear his madrigal,
And sweetened every musk rose of the dale.
How cam'st thou here, good swain? hath any ram
Slipped from the fold, or young kid lost his dam,
Or straggling wether the pent flock forsook?
How couldst thou find this dark sequestered nook?
SPIRIT. O my loved master's heir and his next joy,
I came not here on such a trivial toy
As a strayed ewe, or to pursue the stealth
Of pilfering wolf; not all the fleecy wealth
That doth enrich these downs, is worth a thought
To this my errand, and the care it brought.
But O my virgin lady, where is she?
ELDER BROTHER. To tell thee sadly, shepherd, without blame,
Or our neglect, we lost her as we came.
SPIRIT. Ay me unhappy! then my fears are true.
ELDER BROTHER. What fears good Thyrsis? Prithee briefly show.
SPIRIT. I'll tell ye; 'tis not vain or fabulous,
(Though so esteemed by shallow ignorance)
What the sage poets taught by th' heavenly muse
Storied of old in high immortal verse
Of dire Chimeras and enchanted isles,
And rifted rocks whose entrance leads to hell,4
For such there be, but unbelief is blind.
Within the navel of this hideous wood,
Immured in cypress shades, a sorcerer dwells,
Of Bacchus and of Circe born, great Comus,
Deep skilled in all his mother's witcheries,
And here to every thirsty wanderer,
By sly enticement gives his baneful cup,
With many murmurs mixed, whose pleasing poison

5. Drawn swords.
6. The Attendant Spirit is fond of lecturing on mythology, which he presents as a pathway to religious truth. Here the chimeras (fabulous monsters), enchanted islands, and portals to hell are mentioned to render more credible the existence, in 1634, Wales, of Comus, a classical deity.
The visage quite transforms of him that drinks,  
And the inglorious likeness of a beast  
Fixes instead, unmolding reason's mintage  
Charactered in the face; this have I learnt  
Tending my flocks hard by i' th' hilly crofts  
That brow this bottom glade, whence night by night  
He and his monstrous rout are heard to howl  
Like stabled wolves, or tigers at their prey,  
Doing abhorred rites to Hecate  
In their obscured haunts of inmost bowers.  
Yet have they many baits and guileful spells  
To inveigle and invite th' unwary sense  
Of them that pass unweeting by the way.  
This evening late, by then the chewing flocks  
Had ta'en their supper on the savory herb  
Of knotgrass dew-besprent, and were in fold,  
I sat me down to watch upon a bank  
With ivy canopied, and interwove  
With flaunting honeysuckle, and began,  
Wrapped in a pleasing fit of melancholy,  
To meditate my rural minstrelsy,  
Till fancy had her fill; but ere a close  
The wonted roar was up amidst the woods,  
And filled the air with barbarous dissonance,  
At which I ceased, and listened them a while,  
Till an unusual stop of sudden silence  
Gave respite to the drowsy-flighted steeds  
That draw the litter of close-curtained sleep;  
At last a soft and solemn-breathing sound  
Rose like a steam of rich distilled perfumes,  
And stole upon the air, that even silence  
Was took ere she was ware, and wished she might  
Deny her nature, and be never more,  
Still to be so displaced. I was all ear,  
And took in strains that might create a soul  
Under the ribs of death; but O ere long  
Too well I did perceive it was the voice  
Of my most honored lady, your dear sister.  
Amazed I stood, harrowed with grief and fear,  
And "O poor hapless nightingale," thought I,  
"How sweet thou sing'st, how near the deadly snare!"  
Then down the lawns I ran with headlong haste  
Through paths and turnings often trod by day,  
Till guided by mine ear I found the place  
Where that damned wizard hid in sly disguise  
(For so by certain signs I knew) had met  
Already, ere my best speed could prevent,  
The aidless innocent lady his wished prey,  
Who gently asked if he had seen such two,  
Supposing him some neighbor villager;

7. Hillside cottages; "brow": overlook.  
8. Play my country pipe.  
9. Sleep, being sleepy, rides in a closed carriage  
drawn by drowsy horses.
Longer I durst not stay, but soon I guessed
Ye were the two she meant; with that I sprung
Into swift flight, till I had found you here,
But further know I not.

SECOND BROTHER. O night and shades,
How are ye joined with hell in triple knot
Against th’ unarmed weakness of one virgin
Alone and helpless! Is this the confidence
You gave me, brother?

ELDER BROTHER. Yes, and keep it still,
Lean on it safely, not a period
Shall be unsaid for me: against the threats
Of malice or of sorcery, or that power
Which erring men call chance, this I hold firm;
Virtue may be assailed but never hurt,
Surprised by unjust force but not enthralled,
Yea, even that which mischief meant most harm
Shall in the happy trial prove most glory.
But evil on itself shall back recoil,
And mix no more with goodness, when at last
Gathered like scum, and settled to itself,
It shall be in eternal restless change
Self-fed and self-consumed; if this fail,
The pillared firmament is rottenness,
And earth’s base built on stubble. But come, let’s on.

Against th’ opposing will and arm of heaven
May never this just sword be lifted up,
But for that damn’d magician, let him be girt
With all the grisly legions that troop
Under the sooty flag of Acheron,
Harpies and Hydras, or all the monstrous forms
Twixt Africa and Ind. I’ll find him out,
And force him to restore his purchase back,
Or drag him by the curls to a foul death,
Curs’d as his life.

SPIRIT. Alas, good venturous youth,
I love thy courage yet and bold emprise,
But here thy sword can do thee little stead;
Far other arms and other weapons must
Be those that quell the might of hellish charms.
He with his bare wand can unthread thy joints,
And crumble all thy sinews.

ELDER BROTHER. Why, prithee shepherd,
How durst thou then thyself approach so near
As to make this relation?

SPIRIT. Care and utmost shifts
How to secure the lady from surprisal,
Brought to my mind a certain shepherd lad

1. After the Last Judgment, evil will be cut off from
the rest of the world and allowed to burn itself up.
2. “Acheron”: one of the rivers of hell, here stand-
ing for hell itself. “Harpies” are filthy, voracious
birds, “Hydras” many-headed monsters. Africa and
India were thought to be the abode of many
strange, terrifying creatures.
3. Prey.
4. Avid allegorizers say that the “simple shepherd
lad” is Milton himself. How this improves the
Of small regard to see to, yet well skilled
In every virtuous plant and healing herb
That spreads her verdant leaf to th’ morning ray.
He loved me well, and oft would beg me sing,
Which when I did, he on the tender grass
Would sit, and hearken even to ecstasy,
And in requital ope his leathern scrip,
And show me simple of a thousand names,
Telling their strange and vigorous faculties;
Amongst the rest a small unsightly root,
But of divine effect, he culled me out;
The leaf was darkish, and had prickles on it,
But in another country, as he said,
Bore a bright golden flower, but not in this soil:
Unknown, and like esteemed, and the dull swain
Treads on it daily with his clouted shoon,
And yet more med’cinal is it than that moly
That Hermes once to wise Ulysses gave;6
He called it haemony,7 and gave it me,
And bade me keep it as of sovereign use
’Gainst all enchantments, mildew blast, or damp,
Or ghastly furies’ apparition;
I pursed it up, but little reckoning made,
Till now that this extremity compelled,
But now I find it true; for by this means
I knew the foul enchanter though disguised,
Entered the very lime-twigs of his spells,
And yet came off: if you have this about you
(As I will give you when we go) you may
Boldly assault the necromancer’s hall;
Where if he be, with dauntless hardihood
And brandished blade rush on him, break his glass,
And shed the luscious liquor on the ground,
Or like the sons of Vulcan8 vomit smoke,
Yet will they soon retire, if he but shrink.

ELDER BROTHER. Thyrsis lead on apace, I’ll follow thee,
And some good angel bear a shield before us.

The scene changes to a stately palace set out with all manner of deliciousness;
soft music, tables spread with all dainties. COMUS appears with his rabble, and

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5. Herbs, so called because they were used straight, as nature made them, without any artificial preparation.
6. The moly used by Ulysses for protection against Circe (Odyssey X) was an imaginary magic vegetable, much discussed by Renaissance commentators, mythographers, and over-credulous botanists. Pictures of it abound in botanical texts, and theories about the source of its magic power were equally numerous. Generally, though not universally, it bore the allegorical significance of temperance, and Milton himself used it that way in his first Latin elegy.
7. Like moly, haemony can represent many qualities and concepts. Haemonia is Thessaly, a land of magic and witchcraft; the Greek word for “blood” (haemo, as in haemoglobin), is close to hand; and moly was often compared with a plant called “Christ’s thorn,” which Milton might have wanted to suggest. Some of these associations may imply religious, others moral significance.
8. The “sons of Vulcan” (fire, soot, ashes) live in volcanoes and other erupting caverns, to which they retreat after a first fierce onslaught.
the lady set in an enchanted chair, to whom he offers his glass, which she puts by, and goes about to rise.

COMUS. Nay lady, sit; if I but wave this wand,
Your nerves are all chained up in alabaster,
And you a statue; or as Daphne was,
Root-bound, that fled Apollo.

LADY. Fool, do not boast,
Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind
With all thy charms, although this corporal rind
Thou hast immanacled, while heaven sees good.

COMUS. Why are you vexed, lady? why do you frown?
Here dwell no frowns, nor anger, from these gates
Sorrow flies far: See, here be all the pleasures
That fancy can beget on youthful thoughts,
When the fresh blood grows lively, and returns
Brisk as the April buds in primrose-season.
And first behold this cordial julep here,
That flames and dances in his crystal bounds
With spirits of balm and fragrant syrups mixed.

Not that Nepenthes which the wife of Thone
In Egypt gave to Jove-born Helena
Is of such power to stir up joy as this,
To life so friendly, or so cool to thirst.
Why should you be so cruel to yourself,
And to those dainty limbs which nature lent
For gentle usage and soft delicacy?
But you invert the covenants of her trust,
And harshly deal like an ill borrower
With that which you received on other terms,
Scorning the unexempt condition
By which all mortal frailty must subsist,
Refreshment after toil, ease after pain,
That have been tired all day without repast,
And timely rest have wanted; but, fair virgin,
This will restore all soon.

LADY. 'Twill not, false traitor,
'Twill not restore the truth and honesty
That thou hast banished from thy tongue with lies.
Was this the cottage and the safe abode
Thou told'st me of? What grim aspect are these,
These ugly-headed monsters? Mercy guard me!
Hence with thy brewed enchantments, foul deceiver;
Hast thou betrayed my credulous innocence
With vizored falsehood and base forgery,
And wouldst thou seek again to trap me here
With lickerish baits fit to ensnare a brute?
Were it a draught for Juno when she banqueted,
I would not taste thy treasonous offer; none

9. Daphne, pursued by amorous Apollo, turned into a laurel tree to escape him (Ovid, Metamorphoses I).
1. In Odyssey IV, Menelaus describes how he and Helen, returning from Troy, were entertained with a drink of nepenthe by the Egyptian Thone and his Greek wife.
2. Delicious, but with the added implication of "lustful."
But such as are good men can give good things,
And that which is not good, is not delicious
To a well-governed and wise appetite.

COMUS. O foolishness of men! that lend their ears
To those budge doctors of the Stoic fur,
And fetch their precepts from the Cynic tub,
Praising the lean and sallow abstinence.

Wherefore did nature pour her bounties forth
With such a full and unwithdrawing hand,
Covering the earth with odors, fruits, and flocks,
Thronging the seas with spawn innumerable,
But all to please and sate the curious taste?

And set to work millions of spinning worms
That in their green shops weave the smooth-haired silk
To deck her sons; and that no corner might
Be vacant of her plenty, in her own loins
She hutch’d th’ all-worshipped ore and precious gems
To store her children with. If all the world
Should in a pet of temperance feed on pulse,⁴
Drink the clear stream, and nothing wear but frieze,
Th’ all-giver would be unthanked, would be unpraised,
Not half his riches known, and yet despised,

And we should serve him as a grudging master,
As a penurious niggard of his wealth,
And live like nature’s bastards, not her sons,
Who would be quite surcharged with her own weight,
And strangled with her waste fertility;

Th’ earth cumbered, and the winged air darked with plumes,
The herds would over-multitude their lords,
The sea o’erfraught would swell, and th’ unsought diamonds
Would so emblaze the forehead of the deep,
And so bestud with stars, that they below
Would grow inured to light, and come at last
To gaze upon the sun with shameless brows.⁵

List lady, be not coy, and be not cozened
With that same vaunted name virginity;
Beauty is nature’s coin, must not be hoarded,
But must be current, and the good thereof
Consists in mutual and partaken bliss,
Unsavory in th’ enjoyment of itself.
If you let slip time, like a neglected rose
It withers on the stalk with languished head.

Beauty is nature’s brag, and must be shown
In courts, at feasts, and high solemnities
Where most may wonder at the workmanship;
It is for homely features to keep home,

3. Lamb’s wool, used to line academic gowns. Comus imagines the different schools of philosophy distinguished by different trims on their gowns—naturally, the cynics would have the coarsest. They get their lessons from Diogenes, who showed his contempt for material possessions by living in a tub.


5. Gold and diamonds were thought to “grow” underground by the secret influence of the sun; if they grew too much, Comus argues, “they below” (he carefully doesn’t say who) would get used to the bright lights and come out.
They had their name thence; coarse complexions
And cheeks of sorry grain⁶ will serve to ply
The sampler, and to tease the housewife’s wool.
What need a vermeil-tinctured lip for that,
Love-darting eyes, or tresses like the morn?
There was another meaning in these gifts,
Think what, and be advised; you are but young yet.

LADY. I had not thought to have unlocked my lips
In this unhallowed air, but that this juggler
Would think to charm my judgment, as mine eyes,
Obtruding false rules pranked in reason’s garb.
I hate when vice can bolt⁶a her arguments,
And virtue has no tongue to check her pride:
Impostor, do not charge most innocent nature,
As if she would her children should be riotous
With her abundance; she, good cateress,
Means her provision only to the good
That live according to her sober laws
And holy dictate of spare temperance.
If every just man that now pines with want
Had but a moderate and beseeching share
Of that which lewdly-pampered luxury
Now heaps upon some few with vast excess,
Nature’s full blessings would be well dispensed
In unsuperfluous even proportion,
And she no whit encumbered with her store;
And then the giver would be better thanked,
His praise due paid, for swinish gluttony
Ne’er looks to heaven amidst his gorgeous feast,
But with besotted base ingratitude
Crams, and blasphemes his feeder. Shall I go on?
Or have I said enough? To him that dares
Arm his profane tongue with contemptuous words
Against the sun-clad power of chastity
Fain would I something say, yet to what end?
Thou hast nor ear nor soul to apprehend
The sublime notion and high mystery
That must be uttered to unfold the sage
And serious doctrine of virginity,
And thou art worthy that thou shouldst not know
More happiness than this thy present lot.
Enjoy your dear wit and gay rhetoric
That hath so well been taught her dazzling fence,⁷
Thou art not fit to hear thyself convinced;
Yet should I try, the uncontrolléd worth
Of this pure cause would kindle my rapt spirits
To such a flame of sacred vehemence,
That dumb things would be moved to sympathize,

6. Comus’ entire argument, especially the com-
parison with a rose, recapitulates the familiar Re-
naissance theme of carpe diem, “seize the day.”
“Sorry grain”: drab colors; “vermeil-tinctured”: scarlet-colored. The argument that ugly girls are
good enough for wives but pretty girls can go party-
ing has something deliberately sophistical about it.
6a. Blurt out.
7. The art of fence, wordplay by analogy with
sword play.
And the brute earth would lend her nerves, and shake,
Till all thy magic structures reared so high,
Were shattered into heaps o’er thy false head.

800 COMUS. She fables not, I feel that I do fear
Her words set off by some superior power:
And though not mortal, yet a cold shuddering dew
Dips me all o’er, as when the wrath of Jove
Speaks thunder and the chains of Erebus eight
To some of Saturn’s crew, I must dissemble,
And try her yet more strongly. Come, no more,
This is mere moral babble, and direct
Against the canon laws of our foundation; nine
I must not suffer this, yet ’tis but the lees
And settlings of a melancholy blood;
But this will cure all straight, one sip of this
Will bathe the drooping spirits in delight
Beyond the bliss of dreams. Be wise, and taste.—

The brothers rush in with swords drawn, wrest his glass out of his hand, and
break it against the ground; his rout make sign of resistance, but are all driven
in; the attendant spirit comes in.

SPIRIT. What, have you let the false enchanter spare?
815 O ye mistook, ye should have snatched his wand
And bound him fast; without his rod reversed,
And backward mutters of dismembering power,
We cannot free the lady that sits here
In stony fetters fixed and motionless;
Yet stay, be not disturbed, now I bethink me,
Some other means I have which may be used,
Which once of Meliboeus’ old I learnt,
The soothest shepherd that ere piped on plains.

There is a gentle nymph not far from hence,
That with moist curb sways the smooth Severn stream,
Sabrina is her name, a virgin pure;
Whilom she was the daughter of Locrine,
That had the scepter from his father Brute.
She, guiltless damsel, flying the mad pursuit
Of her enraged stepdam Gwendolen,
Commended her fair innocence to the flood
That stayed her flight with his cross-flowing course.
The water nymphs that in the bottom played,
Held up their pearléd wrists and took her in,

835 Bearing her straight to aged Nereus’ hall, four
Who piteous of her woes, reared her lank head,

8. Jove killed his father Saturn and threw into hell ("Erebus") the whole generation of Titans and Giants who had supported the old ruler.
9. Comus pretends that his religion of lust and greed is a “foundation” like a monastery and is ruled by its own canon laws. “Lees”: dregs.
1. Crowd of followers.
2. “Meliboeus” is a traditional shepherd’s name; it’s doubtful if Milton had a particular person in mind, but it may have been Spenser.
3. The story of Sabrina was retold by Spenser (Faerie Queene II) from an original medieval version by Geoffrey of Monmouth. She was a girl descended through Locrinus from Brute (Brutus), the Trojan founder of Britain; her wicked stepmother Gwendolen so persecuted her that she drowned in the Severn, thus giving the river her name.
4. Nereus, an ancient sea-god, took care of her corpse: his daughters supervised her change into the patron saint of the river.
And gave her to his daughters to imbathe
In nectared lavers strewed with asphodel,
And through the porch and inlet of each sense
Drop in ambrosial oils till she revived
And underwent a quick immortal change,
Made goddess of the river; still she retains
Her maiden gentleness, and oft at eve
Visits the herds along the twilight meadows,
Helping all urchin blasts, and ill-luck signs
That the shrewd meddling elf delights to make,
Which she with precious vialled liquors heals.
For which the shepherds at their festivals
Carol her goodness loud in rustic lays,
And throw sweet garland wreaths into her stream
Of pansies, pinks, and gaudy daffodils.
And, as the old swain said, she can unlock
The clasping charm and thaw the numbing spell,
If she be right invoked in warbled song,
For maidenhood she loves, and will be swift
To aid a virgin, such as was herself,
In hard-besetting need. This will I try
And add the power of some adjuring verse.

SONG

Sabrina fair

Listen where thou art sitting
Under the glassy, cool, translucent wave,
In twisted braids of lilies knitting
The loose train of thy amber-dropping hair;
Listen for dear honor’s sake,
Goddess of the silver lake,

Listen and save.

Listen and appear to us
In name of great Oceanus,
By the earth-shaking Neptune’s mace
And Tethys’ grave majestic pace,
By hoary Nereus’ wrinkled look,
And the Carpathian wizard’s hook,
By scaly Triton’s winding shell,
And old soothsaying Glaucus’ spell,
By Leucothea’s lovely hands
And her son that rules the strands,
By Thetis’ tinsel-slipper’d feet,
And the songs of Sirens sweet,
By dead Parthenope’s dear tomb,
And fair Ligea’s golden comb,
Wherewith she sits on diamond rocks
Sleeking her soft alluring locks,

By all the Nymphs that nightly dance

5. Plant diseases supposed to be spread by hedgehogs (“urchins”). The “meddling elf”: Robin Goodfellow, or Puck.
Upon thy streams with wily glance,
Rise, rise, and heave thy rosy head
From thy coral-paven bed,
And bridle in thy headlong wave,\(^6\)
Till thou our summons answered have.

Listen and save.

**SABRINA rises, attended by water-nymphs, and sings:**

By the rushy-fringéd bank,
Where grows the willow and the osier dank,
My sliding chariot stays,
Thick set with agate and the azurn sheen
Of turquoise blue and emerald green

That in the channel strays,
Whilst from off the waters fleet
Thus I set my printless feet
O’er the cowslip’s velvet head,
That bends not as I tread;

Gentle swain at thy request
I am here.

**SPIRIT.** Goddess dear
We implore thy powerful hand
To undo the charméd band
Of true virgin here distressed
Through the force and through the wile
Of unblest enchanter vile.

**SABRINA.** Shepherd ’tis my office best
To help ensnaréd chastity;

Brightest lady look on me,
Thus I sprinkle on thy breast
Drops that from my fountain pure
I have kept of precious cure,

Thrice upon thy finger’s tip,

Thrice upon thy rubied lip;
Next this marble venomed seat
Smeared with gums of glutinous heat
I touch with chaste palms moist and cold.

Now the spell hath lost his hold;

And I must haste ere morning hour
To wait in Amphitrite’s bower.\(^7\)

**SABRINA descends, and the LADY rises out of her seat.**

**SPIRIT.** Virgin, daughter of Locrine
Sprung of old Anchises’ line,\(^8\)

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6. The incantation invokes numerous water-deities: Oceanus and his wife Tethys, Neptune the sea-god and Triton his herald, Proteus the “Carpathian wizard” (Virgil says in **Georgic** IV that he lived in the Carpathian sea between Rhodes and Crete), and Glaucus, whom Spenser mentions as a soothsayer (**Faerie Queene** IV.11). Leucothea was a sea-nymph who rescued Odysseus from drowning (**Odyssey** V); Thetis was the sea-nymph mother of Achilles; Parthenope and Ligea were sirens who lived near Naples.

7. Amphitrite was the wife of Neptune.

8. Anchises, the father of Aeneas, was also—by the kind of fantastic genealogy easily accessible to Renaissance writers—an ancestor of Brutus and hence of Sabrina.
May thy brimméd waves for this
Their full tribute never miss
From a thousand petty rills,
That tumble down the snowy hills:
Summer drouth or singed air
Never scorch thy tresses fair,
Nor wet October’s torrent flood
Thy molten crystal fill with mud;
May thy billows roll ashore
The beryl and the golden ore,
May thy lofty head be crowned
With many a tower and terrace round,
And here and there thy banks upon
With groves of myrrh and cinnamon.

Come lady, while heaven lends us grace,
Let us fly this curséd place,
Lest the sorcerer us entice
With some other new device.
Not a waste or needless sound
Till we come to holier ground.
I shall be your faithful guide.

Through this gloomy covert wide,
And not many furlongs thence
Is your father’s residence,
Where this night are met in state
Many a friend to gratulate
His wishéd presence, and beside
All the swains that there abide,
With jigs and rural dance resort.
We shall catch them at their sport,
And our sudden coming there
Will double all their mirth and cheer;
Come let us haste, the stars grow high,
But night sits monarch yet in the mid sky.

The scene changes, presenting Ludlow town and the President’s castle, then come in country-dancers, after them the ATTENDANT SPIRIT, with the two BROTHERS and the LADY.

SONG

SPIRIT. Back shepherds, back, enough your play,
Till next sun-shine holiday;
Here be without duck or nod
Other trippings to be trod
Of lighter toes, and such court guise
As Mercury did first devise
With the mincing Dryades
On the lawns and on the leas.

9. The Earl of Bridgewater was newly appointed Lord President of Wales.
1. Characteristic motions of peasant dances, as opposed to the smoother figures of court dances.
2. Mercury, footing it with the “Dryades” (wood-nymphs), invented court-dancing.
This second song presents them to their father and mother.

Noble lord, and lady bright,
I have brought ye new delight,
Here behold so goodly grown
Three fair branches of your own.

Heaven hath timely tried their youth,
Their faith, their patience, and their truth,
And sent them here through hard assays
With a crown of deathless praise,
To triumph in victorious dance

O'er sensual folly and intemperance.

The dances ended, the Spirit epiloguizes.

SPIRIT. To the ocean now I fly,
And those happy climes that lie
Where day never shuts his eye,
Up in the broad fields of the sky:
There I suck the liquid air
All amidst the gardens fair
Of Hesperus, and his daughters three
That sing about the golden tree:
Along the crispéd shades and bowers
Revels the spruce and jocund spring,
The graces and the rosy-bosomed hours,
Thither all their bounties bring,
That there eternal summer dwells,
And west winds with musky wing
About the cedarn alleys fling
Nard and cassia’s balmy smells.
Iris there with humid bow,
Waters the odorous banks that blow
Flowers of more mingled hue
Than her purfled scarf can shew,
And drenches with Elysian dew
(List mortals, if your ears be true)
Beds of hyacinth and roses
Where young Adonis oft reposes,
Waxing well of his deep wound
In slumber soft, and on the ground
Sadly sits th’Assyrian queen;
But far above in spangled sheen
Celestial Cupid her fam’d son advanced,
Holds his dear Psyche sweet entranced
After her wandering labors long,

3. The tree in the garden of the Hesperides, containing the golden apples.
4. Aromatic roots and barks. Iris, goddess of the rainbow, wears a “purfled,” i.e., embroidered, scarf.
5. Spenser describes (in Faerie Queene III.6) the Garden of Adonis, a kind of half-Heaven where Venus preserves, after his death, her unfortunate lover Adonis. Because this happened in the Middle East, she is “the Assyrian queen.” Cupid and Psyche are another pair of mythical lovers, unfortunate on this earth, translated to another sphere, and there spiritualized to illustrate the reconciliation of love and virtue.
Till free consent the gods among
Make her his eternal bride,
And from her fair unspotted side
Two blissful twins are to be born,
Youth and Joy; so Jove hath sworn.
But now my task is smoothly done,
I can fly, or I can run
Quickly to the green earth’s end
Where the bowed welkin slow doth bend,
And from thence can soar as soon
To the corners of the moon.
Mortals that would follow me,
Love virtue, she alone is free,
She can teach ye how to climb
Higher than the sphery chime;
Or if virtue feeble were,
Heaven itself would stoop to her.

To My Friend, Mr. Henry Lawes, on His Airs

Harry, whose tuneful and well measur’d song
First taught our English music how to span
Words with just note and accent, not to scan
With Midas’ ears, committing short and long,
Thy worth and skill exempts thee from the throng,
With praise enough for envy to look wan;
To after age thou shalt be writ the man
That with smooth air couldst humor best our tongue.
Thou honor’st verse, and verse must lend her wing
To honor thee, the priest of Phoebus’ choir
That tun’st their happiest lines in hymn, or story.
Dante shall give fame leave to set thee higher
Than his Casella, whom he woo’d to sing,
Met in the milder shades of Purgatory.

7. Here again critical debate has flourished. Has heaven in fact “stooped” (like a falcon dropping to its prey or a tall man bending down) to help the young people—or have they made it on their own? If grace has combined with virtue in bringing the lady safely to her father’s house, in what proportion are these two energies to be seen as operating?
1. Henry Lawes, who composed the original music for Milton’s Comus, was a real innovator in the art of setting poems to music; he brought the two elements into closer harmony than anyone had achieved before.
2. Ovid tells, in Metamorphoses II, how Midas was given ass’s ears because he preferred Pan’s pipes to the music of Apollo. “Committing”: confusing, setting into conflict with one another.
3. The choir of Phoebus consists of the muses.
4. Dante met Casella (Purgatory II) on the lower slopes of the mountain, and persuaded him to sing.
Paradise Lost: The Arguments

Paradise Lost appeared originally without any sort of prose aid to the reader, but the printer asked Milton for some “Arguments,” or summary explanations of the action in the various books, and these were prefixed to later issues of the poem. Following are the “Arguments” for all twelve books of Paradise Lost.

Book I: The Argument

This first book proposes, first in brief, the whole subject, man’s disobedience, and the loss thereupon of Paradise wherein he was placed: then touches the prime cause of his fall, the Serpent, or rather Satan in the Serpent; who revolting from God, and drawing to his side many legions of angels, was by the command of God driven out of heaven with all his crew into the great deep. Which action passed over, the poem hastes into the midst of things, presenting Satan with his angels now fallen into hell, described here, not in the center (for heaven and earth may be supposed as yet not made, certainly not yet accursed) but in a place of utter darkness, fittest called Chaos: here Satan with his angels lying on the burning lake, thunderstruck and astonished, after a certain space recovers, as from confusion, calls up him who next in order and dignity lay by him; they confer of their miserable fall. Satan awakens all his legions, who lay till then in the same manner confounded; they rise, their numbers, array of battle, their chief leaders named, according to the idols known afterwards in Canaan and the countries adjoining. To these Satan directs his speech, comforts them with hope yet of regaining heaven, but tells them lastly of a new world and new kind of creature to be created, according to an ancient prophecy or report in heaven; for that angels were long before this visible creation, was the opinion of many ancient Fathers. To find out the truth of this prophecy, and what to determine thereon he refers to a full council. What his associates thence attempt. Pandemonium the palace of Satan rises, suddenly built out of the deep: the infernal peers there sit in council.

Book II: The Argument

The consultation begun, Satan debates whether another battle be to be hazarded for the recovery of heaven: some advise it, others dissuade: a third proposal is preferred, mentioned before by Satan, to search the truth of that prophecy or tradition in heaven concerning another world, and another kind of creature equal or not much inferior to themselves, about this time to be created: their doubt who shall be sent on this difficult search; Satan their chief undertakes alone the voyage, is honored and applauded. The council thus ended, the rest betake them several ways and to several employments, as their inclinations lead them, to entertain the time till Satan return. He passes on his journey to hell gates, finds them shut, and who sat there to guard them, by whom at length they are opened, and discover to him the great gulf between hell and heaven; with what difficulty he passes through, directed by Chaos, the power of that place, to the sight of this new world which he sought.
Book III: The Argument

God sitting on his throne sees Satan flying towards this world, then newly created; shows him to the Son who sat at his right hand; foretells the success of Satan in perverting mankind; clears his own justice and wisdom from all imputation, having created man free and able enough to have withstood his tempter; yet declares his purpose of grace to him, in regard he fell not of his own malice, as did Satan, but by him seduced. The Son of God renders praises to his Father for the manifestation of his gracious purpose towards man; but God again declares, that grace cannot be extended towards man without the satisfaction of divine justice; man hath offended the majesty of God by aspiring to Godhead, and therefore with all his progeny devoted to death must die, unless someone can be found sufficient to answer for his offense, and undergo his punishment. The Son of God freely offers himself a ransom for man: the Father accepts him, ordains his incarnation, pronounces his exaltation about all names in heaven and earth; commands all the angels to adore him; they obey, and hymning to their harps in full choir, celebrate the Father and the Son. Meanwhile Satan alights upon the bare convex of this world’s outermost orb; where wandering he first finds a place since called the Limbo of Vanity; what persons and things fly up thither; thence comes to the gate of heaven, described ascending by stairs, and the waters above the firmament that flow about it: his passage thence to the orb of the sun; he finds there Uriel the regent of that orb, but first changes himself into the shape of a meaner angel; and pretending a zealous desire to behold the new creation and man whom God had placed there, inquires of him the place of his habitation, and is directed; alights first on Mount Niphates.

Book IV: The Argument

Satan now in prospect of Eden, and nigh the place where he must now attempt the bold enterprise which he undertook alone against God and man, falls into many doubts with himself, and many passions, fear, envy, and despair; but at length confirms himself in evil, journeys on to Paradise, whose outward prospect and situation is described, overleaps the bounds, sits in the shape of a cormorant on the Tree of Life, as highest in the Garden to look about him. The Garden described; Satan’s first sight of Adam and Eve; his wonder at their excellent form and happy state, but with resolution to work their fall; overhears their discourse, thence gathers that the Tree of Knowledge was forbidden them to eat of, under penalty of death; and thereon intends to found his temptation, by seducing them to transgress: then leaves them a while, to know further of their state by some other means. Meanwhile Uriel descending on a sunbeam warns Gabriel, who had in charge the gate of Paradise, that some evil Spirit had escaped the deep, and passed at noon by his sphere in the shape of a good angel down to Paradise, discovered after by his furious gestures in the mount. Gabriel promises to find him ere morning. Night coming on, Adam and Eve discourse of going to their rest: their bower described; their evening worship. Gabriel drawing forth his bands of nightwatch to walk the round of Paradise, appoints two strong angels to Adam’s bower, lest the evil Spirit should be there doing some harm to Adam or Eve sleeping; there they find him at the ear of Eve, tempting her in a dream, and bring him, though unwilling, to Gabriel; by whom questioned, he scornfully answers, prepares resistance, but hindered by a sign from heaven, flies out of Paradise.
Book V: The Argument

Morning approached, Eve relates to Adam her troublesome dream; he likes it not, yet comforts her: they come forth to their day labors: their morning hymn at the door of their bower. God to render man inexcusable sends Raphael to admonish him of his obedience, of his free estate, of his enemy near at hand; who he is, and why his enemy, and whatever else may avail Adam to know. Raphael comes down to Paradise, his appearance described, his coming discerned by Adam afar off sitting at the door of his bower; he goes out to meet him, brings him to his lodge, entertains him with the choicest fruits of Paradise got together by Eve; their discourse at table: Raphael performs his message, minds Adam of his state and of his enemy; relates at Adam's request who that enemy is, and how he came to be so, beginning from his first revolt in heaven, and the occasion thereof; how he drew his legions after him to the parts of the north, and there incited them to rebel with him, persuading all but only Abdiel a Seraph, who in argument dissuades and opposes him, then forsakes him.

Book VI: The Argument

Raphael continues to relate how Michael and Gabriel were sent forth to battle against Satan and his angels. The first fight described: Satan and his powers retire under night: he calls a council, invents devilish engines, which in the second day's fight put Michael and his angels to some disorder; but they at length pulling up mountains overwhelmed both the force and machines of Satan: yet the tumult not so ending, God on the third day sends Messiah his Son, for whom he had reserved the glory of that victory: he in the power of his Father coming to the place, and causing all his legions to stand still on either side, with his chariot and thunder driving into the midst of his enemies, pursues them unable to resist towards the wall of heaven; which opening, they leap down with horror and confusion into the place of punishment prepared for them in the deep: Messiah returns with triumph to this Father.

Book VII: The Argument

Raphael at the request of Adam relates how and wherefore this world was first created; that God, after the expelling of Satan and his angels out of heaven, declared his pleasure to create another world and other creatures to dwell therein; sends his Son with glory and attendance of angels to perform the work of creation in six days: the angels celebrate with hymns the performance thereof, and his reascension into heaven.

Book VIII: The Argument

Adam inquires concerning celestial motions, is doubtfully answered, and exhorted to search rather things more worthy of knowledge: Adam assents, and still desirous to detain Raphael, relates to him what he remembered since his own creation, his placing in Paradise, his talk with God concerning solitude and fit society, his first meeting and nuptials with Eve, his discourse with the angel thereupon; who after admonitions repeated departs.
Book IX: The Argument

Satan having compassed the earth, with meditated guile returns as a mist by night into Paradise, enters into the serpent sleeping. Adam and Eve in the morning go forth to their labors, which Eve proposes to divide in several places, each laboring apart: Adam consents not, alleging the danger, lest that enemy, of whom they were forewarned, should attempt her found alone: Eve loath to be thought not circumspect or firm enough, urges her going apart, the rather desirous to make trial of her strength; Adam at last yields: the Serpent finds her alone; his subtle approach, first gazing, then speaking, with much flattery extolling Eve above all other creatures. Eve wondering to hear the Serpent speak, asks how he attained to human speech and such understanding not till now; the Serpent answers, that by tasting of a certain tree in the garden he attained both to speech and reason, till then void of both: Eve requires him to bring her to that tree, and finds it to be the Tree of Knowledge forbidden: the Serpent now grown bolder, with many wiles and arguments induces her at length to eat; she pleased with the taste deliberates a while whether to impart thereof to Adam or not, at last brings him of the fruit, relates what persuaded her to eat thereof: Adam at first amazed, but perceiving her lost, resolves through vehemence of love to perish with her; and extenuating the trepass, eats also of the fruit: the effects thereof in them both; they seek to cover their nakedness; then fall to variance and accusation of one another.

Book X: The Argument

Man’s transgression known, the guardian angels forsake Paradise, and return up to heaven to approve their vigilance, and are approved, God declaring that the entrance of Satan could not be by them prevented. He sends his Son to judge the transgressors, who descends and gives sentence accordingly; then in pity clothes them both, and reascends. Sin and Death, sitting till then at the gates of hell, by wondrous sympathy feeling the success of Satan in this new world, and the sin by man there committed, resolve to sit no longer confined in hell, but to follow Satan their sire up to the place of man: to make the way easier from hell to this world to and fro, they pave a broad highway or bridge over chaos, according to the track that Satan first made; then preparing for earth, they meet him proud of his success returning to hell; their mutual gratulation. Satan arrives at Pandemonium, in full assembly relates with boasting his success against man; instead of applause is entertained with a general hiss by all his audience, transformed with himself also suddenly into serpents, according to his doom given in Paradise; then deluded with a show of the Forbidden Tree springing up before them, they greedily reaching to take of the fruit, chew dust and bitter ashes. The proceedings of Sin and Death; God foretells the final victory of his Son over them, and the renewing of all things; but for the present commands his angels to make several alterations in the heavens and elements. Adam more and more perceiving his fallen condition, heavily bewails, rejects the condolement of Eve; she persists and at length appeases him: then to evade the curse likely to fall on their offspring, proposes to Adam violent ways which he approves not, but conceiving better hope, puts her in mind of the late promise made them, that her seed should be revenged on the Serpent, and exhorts her with him to seek peace of the offended Deity, by repentance and supplication.
Book XI: The Argument

The Son of God presents to his Father the prayers of our first parents now repenting, and intercedes for them: God accepts them, but declares that they must no longer abide in Paradise; sends Michael with a band of Cherubim to dispossess them; but first to reveal to Adam future things: Michael’s coming down. Adam shows to Eve certain ominous signs; he discerns Michael’s approach, goes out to meet him: the angel denounces their departure. Eve’s lamentation. Adam pleads, but submits: the angel leads him up to a high hill, sets before him in vision what shall happen till the Flood.

Book XII: The Arguments

The angel Michael continues from the Flood to relate what shall succeed; then, in the mention of Abraham, comes by degrees to explain, who that Seed of the Woman shall be, which was promised Adam and Eve in the Fall; his incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension; the state of the church till his second coming. Adam greatly satisfied and recomforted by these relations and promises descends the hill with Michael; wakens Eve, who all this while had slept, but with gentle dreams composed to quietness of mind and submission. Michael in either hand leads them out of Paradise, the fiery sword waving behind them, and the Cherubim taking their stations to guard the place.

Samson Agonistes  The figure of Samson, as one finds him in the Book of Judges, does not seem at first glance particularly adaptable to the elevated mode of tragedy. He is a promiscuous, violent fellow, given to riddles and practical jokes—the last of which puts a gruesome end to himself and his enemies. His long shaggy hair, his name (Samson, in Hebrew Shimshun), which includes the Hebrew word for “sun,” and a persistent association with fire, all suggest a connection with some primitive solar cult, such as can be seen behind the equivalent figure of Hercules. A burly, taciturn, and not-very-clever giant, in short; one would not easily see in him the dignified and purifying figure of the tragic sufferer.

But though Samson’s rude vigor and vengeful nature appealed to Milton on one level, the story of his fall through the treachery of a woman on another, and the fact of his blindness on still another, there was a last level on which he could in fact be represented as the type and precursor of the Christian hero. He suffered for his people; in the very pit of despair he was rendered suddenly capable of God’s revivifying grace; long exercised in physical warfare, he gave evidence in his last heroic action of having learned the principles of spiritual warfare.

Milton approached the idea of tragedy with hesitations and misgivings; for a Puritan of his day, the very idea of a stage play was instinct with moral danger. But the example of the Greeks and of his much-admired Tasso prevailed; he wrote a “closet drama,” a drama intended not for the actual stage but for reading. When he wrote it is not clear: it was published, with Paradise Regained, in 1671, but may have been begun years earlier. The work is closely modeled on Greek tragedy. Unmoved by this noble ancestry, Samuel Johnson proclaimed it deficient as a play: it had, he said, a beginning and an end but no proper middle. Modern criticism, dissenting as usual from Johnson and stimulated as usual by his judgment, has exercised itself to find in Samson’s spiritual progression during the successive visits of Manoa, Dalila, and Harapha ample psychological movement to sustain both action and interest. This is beyond doubt a useful exercise; but it is also useful to reflect that Samson acts in the end by direction of an inward spirit, a private, intimate inspiration, and that for the
coming of this spirit there is no sufficient preparation. “The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (John 3.8).

The story of Samson is told in Judges 13–16. Agonistes means “in struggle” or “under trial”; it is a term derived from the Greek word for a wrestler and suggests not only that Samson is an athlete of the Lord but that he will wrestle with the pillars, and with his own fierce temper.

Samson Agonistes

A DRAMATIC POEM

Of That Sort of Dramatic Poem Which Is Called Tragedy

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 suchlike 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.¹ Nor is Nature wanting in her own effects to make good his assertion; for so, in physic, things of melancholic hue and quality are used against melancholy, sour against sour, salt to remove salt humors.² Hence philosophers and other gravest writers, as Cicero, Plutarch, and others, frequently cite out of tragic poets, both to adorn and illustrate their discourse. The Apostle Paul himself thought it not unworthy to insert a verse of Euripides into the text of Holy Scripture, 1 Cor. 15.33; and Paraeus, commenting on the Revelation, divides the whole book, as a tragedy, into acts, distinguished each by a chorus of heavenly harpings and song between.³ Heretofore men in highest dignity have labored not a little to be thought able to compose a tragedy. Of that honor Dionysius the elder was no less ambitious, than before of his attaining to the tyranny.⁴ Augustus Caesar also had begun his Ajax, but unable to please his own judgment with what he had begun, left it unfinished. Seneca the philosopher is by some thought the author of those tragedies (at least the best of them) that go under that name. Gregory Nazianzen, a Father of the Church, thought it not unbeseeming the sanctity of his person to write a tragedy, which he entitled Christ Suffering.⁵ This is mentioned to vindicate tragedy from the small esteem, or rather infamy, which in the account of many it undergoes at this day, with other common interludes⁶—happening through the poet’s error of intermixing comic stuff with tragic sadness and gravity, or introducing trivial and vulgar persons, which by all judicious hath been counted absurd, and brought in without discretion, corruptly to gratify the people. And, though ancient tragedy use no prologue,⁷ yet using sometimes, in case of self-defense or explanation, that which Martial calls an epistle;⁸

1. Milton is paraphrasing Aristotle’s Poetics 6.
2. Italian Renaissance critics like Minturno had applied notions of homeopathic medicine (like cures like) to tragedy; the idea is not Aristotelian. “Physic”: medicine.
3. David Paraeus (1548–1622) was a German Calvinist who wrote biblical commentaries.
5. Seneca the philosopher was indeed the author of tragedies; but Gregory Nazianzen, a Greek ecclesiastic of the 4th century, did not write the tragedy Christ Suffering, which scholarly opinion of Milton’s day attributed to him.
6. Stage plays.
7. Prologues and epilogues were frequent on the Restoration stage; Milton sets himself apart from contemporary styles.
in behalf of this tragedy, coming forth after the ancient manner, much different from what among us passes for best, thus much beforehand may be epistled: that chorus is here introduced after the Greek manner, not ancient only, but modern, and still in use among the Italians. In the modeling therefore of this poem, with good reason, the ancients and Italians are rather followed, as of much more authority and fame. The measure of verse used in the chorus is of all sorts, called by the Greeks monostrophic, or rather apoleymenon, without regard had to strophe, antistrophe, or epode, which were a kind of stanzas framed only for the music, then used with the chorus that sung; not essential to the poem, and therefore not material; or, being divided into stanzas or pauses, they may be called alloeostropha. Division into act and scene, referring chiefly to the stage (to which this work never was intended), is here omitted. It suffices if the whole drama be found not produced beyond the fifth act.

Of the style and uniformity, and that commonly called the plot, whether intricate or explicit—which is nothing indeed but such economy, or disposition of the fable, as may stand best with verisimilitude and decorum—they only will best judge who are not unacquainted with Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the three tragic poets unequaled yet by any, and the best rule to all who endeavor to write tragedy. The circumscription of time wherein the whole drama begins and ends is, according to ancient rule and best example, within the space of twenty-four hours.

The Argument

Samson, made captive, blind, and now in the prison at Gaza, there to labor as in a common workhouse, on a festival day, in the general cessation from labor, comes forth into the open air, to a place nigh, somewhat retired, there to sit a while and bemoan his condition. Where he happens at length to be visited by certain friends and equals of his tribe, which make the chorus, who seek to comfort him what they can; then by his old father, Manoa, who endeavors the like, and withal tells him his purpose to procure his liberty by ransom; lastly, that this feast was proclaimed by the Philistines as a day of thanksgiving for their deliverance from the hands of Samson—which yet more troubles him. Manoa then departs to prosecute his endeavor with the Philistian lords for Samson’s redemption; who in the meanwhile is visited by other persons, and, lastly, by a public officer to require his coming to the feast before the lords and people, to play or show his strength in their presence. He at first refuses, missing the public officer with absolute denial to come; at length persuaded inwardly that this was from God, he yields to go along with him, who came now

9. For example, Torquato Tasso’s tragedy Re Torrismondo was modeled closely on classical examples.
1. Not divided into strophe, antistrophe, and epode.
2. Free from stanzaic patterns altogether.
3. With various forms of strophe, irregular.
4. The reader who cares will not find Milton’s drama hard to divide into the customary five acts, each ending with a chorus: act 1 (Samson and chorus), lines 1–325; 2 (Samson and Manoa), 326–709; 3 (Samson and Dalila), 710–1060; 4 (Samson and Harapha), 1061–1296; 5 (Catastrophe), 1297–the end.
5. Drawn out.
6. “Decorum,” for a Renaissance writer, is not simply solemn or sedate behavior but the use of appropriate and suitable style, depending on speaker, subject, setting, genre, and so on. “Intricate or explicit”; complex or simple.
7. The so-called unity of time, limiting dramatic action to twenty-four hours, was derived from Aristotle’s Poetics by the Renaissance critic Castelvetro.
8. The Philistines, warlike and commercial, lived in southwest Palestine (the southern coast of modern Israel between, approximately, Tel Aviv and Gaza) in five great cities splendidly named Ashdod, Eshkol, Gaza, Gath, and Ashkalon. They were a wholly urban people as against the largely rural Israelites.
9. People of about the same age.
the second time with great threatenings to fetch him. The chorus yet remaining on the place, Manoa returns full of joyful hope to procure ere long his son’s deliverance: in the midst of which discourse an Hebrew comes in haste, confusedly at first, and afterwards more distinctly, relating the catastrophe—what Samson had done to the Philistines, and by accident to himself; wherewith the tragedy ends.

The Persons

SAMSON
MANOA, the father of Samson
DALILA, his wife
HARAPHA of Gath

PUBLIC OFFICER
MESSENGER
CHORUS OF DANITES

The Scene, before the Prison in Gaza.

SAMSON. A little onward lend thy guiding hand
To these dark steps, a little further on;
For yonder bank hath choice of sun or shade.
There I am wont to sit, when any chance
5 Relieves me from my task of servile toil,
Daily in the common prison else enjoined me,²
Where I, a prisoner chained, scarce freely draw
The air, imprisoned also, close and damp,
Unwholesome draught. But here I feel amends—
10 The breath of heaven fresh blowing, pure and sweet,
With day-spring³ born; here leave me to respire.
This day a solemn feast the people hold
To Dagon⁴ their sea-idol, and forbid
Laborious works. Unwillingly this rest
15 Their superstition yields me; hence, with leave
Retiring from the popular noise, I seek
This unfrequented place, to find some ease—
Ease to the body some, none to the mind
From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm
20 O hornets armed, no sooner found alone
But rush upon me thronging, and present
Times past, what once I was, and what am now.
O, wherefore was my birth from Heaven foretold
Twice by an angel,⁵ who at last, in sight
25 Of both my parents, all in flames ascended
From off the altar where an offering burned,
As in a fiery column charioting
His godlike presence, and from some great act

1. Hebrews of the tribe of Dan, Samson’s tribe.
2. When the land of Canaan was divided among the twelve tribes, they received the southern portion, adjacent to the Philistines.
3. The metrical pattern of this line, with its many unaccented syllables and careful placement of the strong word “else,” merits careful study. Similar bold effects are found throughout.
4. Dagon’s name comes from dag, “fish,” and he seems to have had a fishy shape. His would thus be a marine cult to correspond with that of the many Baals, or land gods, of the Philistines (see Paradise Lost 1.457–66).
5. Before Samson was born an angel foretold that he would begin the delivery of Israel from the Philistines (Judges 13.5).
Or benefit revealed to Abraham’s race?

Why was my breeding ordered and prescribed
As of a person separate to God,
Designed for great exploits, 6 if I must die
Betrayed, captivated, and both my eyes put out,
Made of my enemies the scorn and gaze,
To grind in brazen fetters under task
With this heaven-gifted strength? O glorious strength,
Put to the labor of a beast, debased
Lower than bondservant! Promise was that I
Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver;
Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him
Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves,
Himself in bonds under Philistian yoke.
Yet stay; let me not rashly call in doubt
Divine prediction. What if all foretold
Had been fulfilled but through mine own default?
Whom have I to complain of but myself,
Who this high gift of strength committed to me,
In what part lodged, how easily bereft me,
Under the seal of silence could not keep, 7
But weakly to a woman must reveal it,
O’ercome with importunity and tears?
O impotence of mind in body strong!
But what is strength without a double share
Of wisdom? Vast, unwieldy, burdensome,
Proudly secure, 8 yet liable to fall
By weakest subtilties; not made to rule,
But to subserve where wisdom bears command.
God, when he gave me strength, to show withal
How slight the gift was, hung it in my hair.
But peace! I must not quarrel with the will
Of highest dispensation, 9 which herein
Haply had ends above my reach to know.
Suffices that to me strength is my bane,
And proves the source of all my miseries,
So many, and so huge, that each apart
Would ask a life to wail. But, chief of all,
O loss of sight, of thee I most complain!
Blind among enemies! O worse than chains,
Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age!
Light, the prime work of God, 1 to me is extinct,
And all her various objects of delight
Annulled, which might in part my grief have eased.
Inferior to the vilest now become
Of man or worm, the vilest here excel me:
They creep, yet see; I, dark in light, exposed

6. Samson was a Nazarite, member of an ascetic group specially dedicated to the service of God (see Numbers 6).
7. I.e., who could not keep silent about the high gift of strength committed to me, or about where it was located, or about how easily it could be taken from me.
8. Confident, free from care (Latin securus).
1. God’s first (“prime”) act in creating the world was to say “Let there be light” (Genesis 1.3), a phrase Milton paraphrases below.
To daily fraud, contempt, abuse, and wrong,
Within doors or without, still as a fool,
In power of others, never in my own—
Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half.

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day!
O first-created beam, and thou great Word,
“Let there be light, and light was over all,”
Why am I thus bereaved thy prime decree?2
The sun to me is dark
And silent3 as the moon,
When she deserts the night,
Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.4

Since light so necessary is to life,
And almost life itself, if it be true
That light is in the soul,
She all in every part,5 why was the sight
To such a tender ball as th’ eye confined,
So obvious6 and so easy to be quenched,
And not, as feeling, through all parts diffused,
That she might look at will through every pore?
Then had I not been thus exiled from light,
As in the land of darkness, yet in light,
To live a life half dead, a living death,
And buried; but, O yet more miserable!
Myself my sepulcher, a moving grave;
Buried, yet not exempt
By privilege of death and burial
From worst of other evils, pains, and wrongs;
But made hereby obnoxious7 more
To all the miseries of life,
Life in captivity
Among inhuman foes.

But who are these? for with joint pace I hear
The tread of many feet steering this way;
Perhaps my enemies, who come to stare
At my affliction, and perhaps to insult,
Their daily practice to afflict me more.

CHORUS. This, this is he; softly a while;
Let us not break in upon him.
O change beyond report, thought, or belief!
See how he lies at random, carelessly diffused,8
With languished head unpropped,
As one past hope, abandoned,
And by himself given over,
In slavish habit, ill-fitted weeds9

2. I.e., why am I thus deprived of the first-created (and most important) thing?
3. I.e., unperceived.
4. Ancient astronomers supposed that during its dark (“interlunar”) phase, the moon hid in a cave.
   “Vacant”: i.e., where the moon is at ease (Latin vacare, whence modern “vacation”).
5. A famous formula of Plotinus (Ennead 4.2.1) describes the soul as “all in all and all in every part.”
7. Vulnerable, subject.
9. Rags.
O’er-worn and soiled.
Or do my eyes misrepresent? Can this be he,
That heroic, that renowned,
Irresistible Samson? whom, unarmed,
No strength of man, or fiercest wild beast, could withstand:1
Who tore the lion as the lion tears the kid;
Ran on embattled armies clad in iron,
And, weaponless himself,
Made arms ridiculous, useless the forgery2
Of brazen shield and spear, the hammered cuirass,
Chalybean-tempered steel, and flock of mail
Adamantine proof;3
But safest he who stood aloof,
When insupportably4 his foot advanced,
In scorn of their proud arms and warlike tools,
Spurned them to death by troops. The bold Ascalonite
Fled from his lion ramp;5 old warriors turned
Their plated backs under his heel,
Or groveling soiled their crested helmets in the dust.
Then with what trivial weapon came to hand,
The jaw of a dead ass, his sword of bone,
A thousand foreskins fell, the flower of Palestine,
In Ramath-lechi, famous to this day;
Then by main force pulled up, and on his shoulders bore,
The gates of Azza,6 post and massy bar,
Up to the hill by Hebron, seat of giants old,
No journey of a Sabbath day, and loaded so,
Like whom the Gentiles feign to bear up heaven.7
Which shall I first bewail,
Thy bondage or lost sight,
Prison within prison
Inseparably dark?
Thou art become (O worst imprisonment!)  
The dungeon of thyself; thy soul
(Which men enjoying sight oft without cause complain)
Imprisoned now indeed,
In real darkness of the body dwells,
Shut up from outward light
To incorporate with gloomy night;
For inward light, alas!
Puts forth no visual beam.8
O mirror of our fickle state,

1. Judges 14.5–6 tells the story of Samson ripping apart a lion with his bare hands.
2. Weapons of forged steel, but also fraudulent, exterior protections.
3. Hard as adamant, i.e., diamond. The Chalybes lived on the Black Sea and were famous iron-workers.
4. Irresistibly.
5. A lion in the act of attacking its prey, rampant. “Ascalonite”: a man from Ascalon, or Ashkalon, one of the five great Philistine cities.
6. On one occasion Samson killed a thousand Philistines (i.e., “foreskins,” uncircumcised warriors), using the jawbone of an ass (Judges 15.15–17). Judges 16.3 tells how Samson, to escape his enemies, picked up and carried off the gates of Gaza (Azza).
7. In Greek (or, as Milton calls it, Gentile) mythology, Atlas supports the heavens. From Gaza to Hebron would be about forty miles—no journey for the day of rest.
8. Renaissance physiologists supposed the eye saw by sending forth a “visual beam,” which it directed at various objects.
Since man on earth unparalleled!\(^9\)
The rarer thy example stands,
By how much from the top of wondrous glory,
Strongest of mortal men,
To lowest pitch of abject fortune thou art fallen!
For him I reckon not in high estate
Whom long descent of birth,
Or the sphere of fortune,\(^1\) raises;
But thee, whose strength, while virtue was her mate,
Might have subdued the Earth,
Universally crowned with highest praises.

SAMSON. I hear the sound of words; their sense the air
Dissolves unjointed ere it reach my ear.

CHORUS. He speaks: let us draw nigh. Matchless in might,
The glory late of Israel, now the grief!
We come, thy friends and neighbors not unknown,
From Eshtaol and Zora's fruitful vale,
To visit or bewail thee; or, if better,
Counsel or consolation we may bring,
Salve to thy sores: apt words have power to swage\(^2\)
The tumors of a troubled mind,
And are as balm to festered wounds.

SAMSON. Your coming, friends, revives me; for I learn
Now of my own experience, not by talk,
How counterfeit a coin they are who “friends”
Bear in their superscription (of the most
I would be understood). In prosperous days
They swarm, but in adverse withdraw their head,
Not to be found, though sought. Ye see, O friends,
How many evils have enclosed me round;
Yet that which was the worst now least afflicts me,
Blindness; for, had I sight, confused with shame,
Who like a foolish pilot have shipwrecked
My vessel trusted to me from above,
Gloriously rigged, and for a word, a tear,
Fool! have divulged the secret gift of God
To a deceitful woman? Tell me, friends,
Am I not sung and proverbed for a fool
In every street? Do they not say, “How well
Are come upon him his deserts”? Yet why?
Immeasurable strength they might behold
In me; of wisdom nothing more than mean.\(^4\)
This with the other should at least have paired;\(^5\)
These two, proportioned ill, drove me transverse.\(^6\)

CHORUS. Tax not divine disposal. Wisest men

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9. I.e., no such example (has been seen) since man (was) on earth. “Fickle”: changeable.
1. “Sphere”: wheel. Fortune was described as possessing a wheel that, merely by rotating, automatically interchanged the highest and lowest social positions. Milton’s definition of “high estate” is interior and spiritual; he has no interest in the old “Fall of Princes” theme. In fact, the play exactly reverses that theme.
2. Assuage.
3. Lift.
4. Average.
5. Been equal.
6. Off the true course.
Have erred, and by bad women been deceived;  
And shall again, pretend they ne’er so wise.\(^7\)
Deject not then so overmuch thyself,  
Who hast of sorrow thy full load besides.  
Yet, truth to say, I oft have heard men wonder  
Why thou should’st wed Philistian women rather  
Than of thine own tribe fairer, or as fair,  
At least of thy own nation, and as noble.  

SAMSON. The first I saw at Timna, and she pleased  
Me, not my parents, that I sought to wed  
The daughter of an infidel.\(^8\) They knew not  
That what I motioned\(^9\) was of God; I knew  
From intimate impulse, and therefore urged  
The marriage on, that, by occasion hence,\(^1\)  
I might begin Israel’s deliverance,  
The work to which I was divinely called.  
She proving false, the next I took to wife  
(O that I never had! fond wish too late!)  
Was in the vale of Sorec, Dàlila,\(^2\)  
That specious monster, my accomplished snare.  
I thought it lawful from my former act,  
And the same end, still watching to oppress  
Israel’s oppressors. Of what now I suffer  
She was not the prime cause, but I myself,  
Who, vanquished with a peal of words (O weakness!),  
Gave up my fort of silence to a woman.  

CHORUS. In seeking just occasion to provoke  
The Philistine, thy country’s enemy,  
Thou never wast remiss, I bear thee witness;  
Yet Israel still serves with all his sons.\(^3\)  

SAMSON. That fault I take not on me, but transfer  
On Israel’s governors and heads of tribes,  
Who, seeing those great acts which God had done  
Singly by me against their conquerors,  
Acknowledged not, or not at all considered  
Deliverance offered. I, on th’ other side,  
Used no ambition to commend my deeds;\(^4\)  
The deeds themselves, though mute, spoke loud the doer.  
But they persisted deaf, and would not seem  
To count them things worth notice, till at length  
Their lords, the Philistines, with gathered powers,  
Entered Judea seeking me, who then  
Safe to the rock of Etham was retired,  
Not flying, but forecasting in what place  
To set upon them, what advantaged best.  
Meanwhile the men of Judah, to prevent  
The harass of their land, beset me round;  

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\(^7\) I.e., however much they profess to be wise.  
\(^8\) Judges 14.1–4 tells the story of Samson’s first decision to marry outside his own tribe and nation.  
\(^9\) Intended.  
\(^1\) I.e., so that it might provide an occasion for me to begin Israel’s deliverance.  
\(^2\) Judges 16.4.  
\(^3\) I.e., Israel and the children of Israel are still in servitude.  
\(^4\) I.e., sought for no testimonials to my actions.
I willingly on some conditions came
Into their hands, and they as gladly yield me
To the uncircumcisèd⁵ a welcome prey,
Bound with two cords. But cords to me were threads
Touched with the flame: on their whole host I flew
Unarmed, and with a trivial weapon felled
Their choicest youth; they only lived who fled.⁶

Had Judah that day joined, or one whole tribe,
They had by this⁷ possessed the towers of Gath,
And lorded over them whom now they serve.
But what more oft, in nations grown corrupt,
And by their vices brought to servitude,
Than to love bondage more than liberty,
Bondage with ease than strenuous liberty,⁸
And to despise, or envy, or suspect,
Whom God hath of his special favor raised
As their deliverer? If he aught begin,
How frequent to desert him, and at last
To heap ingratitude on worthiest deeds!

CHORUS.  Thy words to my remembrance bring
How Succoth and the fort of Penuel
Their great deliverer contemned,
The matchless Gideon, in pursuit
Of Madian and her vanquished kings;⁹
And how ingrateful Ephraim
Had dealt with Jephtha, who by argument,
Not worse than by his shield and spear,
Defended Israel from the Ammonite,
Had not his prowess quelled their pride
In that sore battle when so many died
Without reprieve, adjudged to death
For want of well pronouncing Shibboleth.¹

SAMSON.  Of such examples add me to the roll.
Me easily indeed mine² may neglect,
But God's proposed deliverance not so.

CHORUS.  Just are the ways of God,
And justifiable to men,
Unless there be who think not God at all.
If any be, they walk obscure;
For of such doctrine never was there school,
But the heart of the fool,
And no man therein doctor but himself.³
Yet more there be who doubt his ways not just,
As to his own edicts found contradicting;
Then give the reins to wandering thought,

5. Foreigners, the people outside the covenant of Abraham.
7. By this time.
8. Milton appears to have in mind not only early Israel but also contemporary England.
9. Judges 8: Succoth and Penuel refused aid to Gideon when he was pursuing the common foe, and he punished them.
Regardless of his glory’s diminution,
Till, by their own perplexities involved,

They ravel more, still less resolved,
But never find self-satisfying solution.

As if they would confine th’ Interminable,
And tie him to his own prescript,
Who made our laws to bind us, not himself,

And hath full right to exempt
Whomso it pleases him by choice
From national obstriction, without taint
Of sin, or legal debt;

For with his own laws he can best dispense.

He would not else, who never wanted means,
Nor in respect of the enemy just cause
To set his people free,
Have prompted this heroic Nazarite,
Against his vow of strictest purity,

To seek in marriage that fallacious bride,
Unclean, unchaste.

Down, Reason, then; at least, vain reasonings down;
Though Reason here aver
That moral verdict quits her of unclean:

Unchaste was subsequent; her stain, not his.

But see! here comes thy reverend sire,
With careful step, locks white as down,
Old Manoa: advise

Forthwith how thou ought’st to receive him.

SAMSON. Ay me! another inward grief, awaked
With mention of that name, renews th’ assault.

MANOA. Brethren and men of Dan (for such ye seem,

Though in this uncouth place), if old respect,
As I suppose, towards your once gloried friend,

My son, now captive, hither hath informed

Your younger feet, while mine, cast back with age,
Came lagging after, say if he be here.

CHORUS. As signal now in low dejected state
As erst in highest, behold him where he lies.

MANOA. O miserable change! Is this the man,
That invincible Samson, far renowned,
The dread of Israel’s foes, who with a strength
Equivalent to angels’ walked their streets,
None offering fight; who, single combatant,

Dued their armies ranked in proud array,
Himself an army—now unequal match
To save himself against a coward armed

4. Become entangled.
5. Infinite.
6. Obligation, i.e., the law against marrying Gentiles (Deuteronomy 7.3). The chorus here accepts Samson’s argument that God had prompted him inexplicably to marry the woman of Timna.
7. The chorus, having accused the woman of Timna of being unclean (i.e., Gentile and taboo) and unchaste, now admits that since Samson married her at God’s instigation she was not unclean to him and that she was unchaste only after Samson left her. Reason is therefore puzzled.
9. Reflect, consider inwardly.
1. Unknown, unfamiliar.
2. Directed.
3. Notable, eminent.
At one spear’s length? O ever-failing trust
In mortal strength! and, oh, what not in man
350 Deceivable and vain?4 Nay, what thing good
Prayed for, but often proves our woe, our bane?
I prayed for children, and thought barrenness
In wedlock a reproach; I gained a son,
And such a son as all men hailed me happy:
Who would be now a father in my stead?
355 O wherefore did God grant me my request,
And as a blessing with such pomp adorned?
Why are his gifts desirable, to tempt
Our earnest prayers, then, given with solemn hand
As graces, draw a scorpion’s tail behind?
For this did the angel twice descend?5 for this
Ordained thy nurture holy, as of a plant
Select and sacred? glorious for a while,
The miracle of men; then in an hour
Ensnared, assaulted, overcome, led bound,
Thy foes’ derision, captive, poor and blind,
Into a dungeon thrust, to work with slaves!
Alas! methinks whom God hath chosen once
To worthiest deeds, if he through frailty err,
360 He should not so o’erwhelm, and as a thrall
Subject him to so foul indignities,
Be it but for honor’s sake of former deeds.
SAMSON. Appoint not heavenly disposition,6 father.
Nothing of all these evils hath befallen me
375 But justly; I myself have brought them on;
Sole author I, sole cause.7 If aught seem vile,
As vile hath been my folly, who have profaned
The mystery of God, given me under pledge
Of vow, and have betrayed it to a woman,
380 A Canaanite, my faithless enemy.
This well I knew, nor was at all surprised,
But warned by oft experience. Did not she
Of Timna first betray me, and reveal
The secret wrested from me in her height
385 Of nuptial love professed, carrying it straight
To them who had corrupted her, my spies
And rivals?8 In this other was there found
More faith, who, also in her prime of love,
Spousal embraces, vitiated with gold,
Though offered only, by the scent conceived
390 Her spurious first-born, treason against me?9

4. I.e., what is there in man that is not deceivable and vain?
5. The angel who announced Samson’s birth was sent a second time, in answer to Manoah’s request, to give instructions concerning his education and training.
6. I.e., do not presume to control heaven’s decisions.
7. Like Adam, in Paradise Lost 10, Samson proves his own resurgent virtue by accepting responsibility for his own faults.
8. Samson’s first wife, the woman of Timna, revealed Samson’s riddle to his enemies (Judges 14.8–19).
9. At the mere scent of gold, Dalila conceived a bastard (“spurious”) offspring for Samson—treason.
Thrice she essayed, with flattering prayers and sighs,
And amorous reproaches, to win from me
My capital secret, in what part my strength
Lay stored, in what part summed, that she might know;
Thrice I deluded her, and turned to sport
Her importunity, each time perceiving
How openly and with what impudence
She purposed to betray me, and (which was worse
Than undissembled hate) with what contempt
She sought to make me traitor to myself.
Yet the fourth time, when, mustering all her wiles,
With blandished parleys, feminine assaults,
Tongue-batteries, she surceased not day nor night
To storm me, over-watched and wearied out,
At times when men seek most repose and rest,
I yielded, and unlocked her all my heart,
Who, with a grain of manhood well resolved,
Might easily have shook off all her snares;
But foul effeminacy held me yoked
Her bondservant. O indignity, O blot
To honor and religion! servile mind
Rewarded well with servile punishment!
The base degree to which I now am fallen,
These rags, this grinding, is not yet so base
As was my former servitude, ignoble,
Unmanly, ignominious, infamous,
True slavery; and that blindness worse than this,
That saw not how degenerately I served.

MANOA. I cannot praise thy marriage-choices, son,
Rather approved them not; but thou didst plead
Divine impulsion prompting how thou might'st
Find some occasion to infest our foes.
I state not that; this I am sure, our foes
Found soon occasion thereby to make thee
Their captive, and their triumph; thou the sooner
Temptation found'st, or over-potent charms,
To violate the sacred trust of silence
Deposited within thee; which to have kept
Tacit was in thy power. True; and thou bear'st
Enough, and more, the burden of that fault;
Bitterly hast thou paid, and still art paying,
That rigid score. A worse thing yet remains:
This day the Philistines a popular feast
Here celebrate in Gaza, and proclaim
Great pomp and sacrifice and praises loud,
To Dagon, as their god who hath delivered

1. The secret Dalila learned was of capital importance; also, it involved the hair on Samson's head (Latin caput).
3. Forborne.
4. Uxoriousness, overfondness, the fault of Adam.
5. Samson’s repeated reliance on extraordinary divine inspiration aligns him, for Milton, with the godly party of the 17th century—as against worldlings who doubted or disliked the idea of recurring divine intervention.
7. Debt.
Thee, Samson, bound and blind, into their hands,
Them out of thine, who slew'st them many a slain.

So Dagon shall be magnified, and God,
Besides whom is no god, compared with idols,
Disglorified, blasphemed, and had in scorn
By th' idolatrous rout amidst their wine;
Which to have come to pass by means of thee,
Samson, of all thy sufferings think the heaviest,
Of all reproach the most with shame that ever
Could have befallen thee and thy father's house.

SAMSON. Father, I do acknowledge and confess
That I this honor, I this pomp, have brought
To Dagon, and advanced his praises high
Among the heathen round; to God have brought
Dishonor, obloquy, and oped the mouths
Of idolists and atheists; have brought scandal
To Israel, diffidence of God, and doubt
In feeble hearts, propense enough before
To waver, or fall off and join with idols:
Which is my chief affliction, shame and sorrow,
The anguish of my soul, that suffers not
Mine eye to harbor sleep, or thoughts to rest.

This only hope relieves me, that the strife
With me hath end. All the contest is now
'Twixt God and Dagon. Dagon hath presumed,
Me overthrown, to enter lists with God,
His deity comparing and preferring
Before the God of Abraham. He, be sure,
Will not connive or linger, thus provoked,
But will arise, and his great name assert.
Dagan must stoop, and shall ere long receive
Such a discomfit as shall quite despoil him
Of all these boasted trophies won on me,
And with confusion blank his worshipers.

MANOAH. With cause this hope relieves thee; and these words
I as a prophecy receive; for God
(Nothing more certain) will not long defer
To vindicate the glory of his name
Against all competition, nor will long
Endure it doubtful whether God be Lord,
Or Dagon. But for thee what shall be done?
Thou must not in the meanwhile, here forgot,
Lie in this miserable loathsome plight
Neglected. I already have made way
To some Philistian lords, with whom to treat
About thy ransom. Well they may by this
Have satisfied their utmost of revenge
By pains and slaveries, worse than death, inflicted

8. Glorified. "Who slew'st them many a slain": i.e.,
who slew many a one of them.
9. Mistrust
1. Inclined.
2. Jousting courts, as in medieval tourneys.
3. Hesitate, palter.
4. Confound, turn pale.
5. By this time.
On thee, who now no more canst do them harm.

SAMSON. Spare that proposal, father; spare the trouble
Of that solicitation. Let me here,
As I deserve, pay on my punishment,
And expiate, if possible, my crime,
Shameful garrulity. To have revealed
Secrets of men, the secrets of a friend,
How heinous had the fact been, how deserving
Contempt and scorn of all; to be excluded
All friendship, and avoided as a blab,
The mark of fool set on his front\(^6\) But I
God's counsel have not kept, his holy secret
Presumptuously have published, impiously,
Weakly at least and shamefully: a sin
That Gentiles in their parables condemn
To their abyss and horrid pains confined.\(^7\)

MANOA. Be penitent, and for thy fault contrite,
But act not in thy own affliction, son.
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 thyself. Perhaps
God will relent, and quit\(^8\) thee of all his debt;
Who ever more approves and more accepts
(Best pleased with humble and filial submission)
Him who, imploring mercy, sues for life,
Than who, self-rigidious, chooses death as due,\(^9\)
Which argues over-just, and self-displeased
For self-offense more than for God offended.
Reject not, then, what offered means who knows
But God hath set before us to return thee
Home to thy country and his sacred house,
Where thou may'st bring thy offerings, to avert
His further ire, with prayers and vows renewed.

SAMSON. His pardon I implore; but, as for life,
To what end should I seek it? When in strength
All mortals I excelled, and great in hopes,
With youthful courage, and magnanimous thoughts
Of birth from Heaven foretold and high exploits,
Full of divine instinct, after some proof
Of acts indeed heroic, far beyond
The sons of Anak, famous now and blazed,\(^1\)
Fearless of danger, like a petty god
I walked about, admired of all, and dreaded
On hostile ground, none daring my affront—
Then, swoll'n with pride, into the snare I fell

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6. Forehead.
7. In classical legend, Tantalus was confined to hell and torment because he betrayed the secrets of the gods, and Prometheus was savagely punished for giving humanity the secret of fire.
9. This is similar to Adam’s argument against suicide in Paradise Lost 10.1013–19.
Of fair fallacious looks, venereal trains,  
Softened with pleasure and voluptuous life;  
535 At length to lay my head and hallowed pledge  
Of all my strength in the lascivious lap  
Of a deceitful concubine, who shore me,  
Like a tame wether, all my precious fleece,  
Then turned me out ridiculous, despoiled,  
540 Shaven, and disarmed among my enemies.

CHORUS. Desire of wine and all delicious drinks,  
Which many a famous warrior overturns,  
Thou could’st repress; nor did the dancing ruby,  
Sparkling out-poured, the flavor or the smell,  
545 Or taste, that cheers the heart of gods and men,  
Allure thee from the cool crystalline stream.

SAMSON. Wherever fountain or fresh current flowed  
Against the eastern ray, translucent pure  
With touch ethereal of Heaven’s fiery rod,  
550 I drank, from the clear milky juice allaying  
Thirst, and refreshed; nor envied them the grape  
Whose heads that turbulent liquor fills with fumes.

CHORUS. O madness! to think use of strongest wines  
And strongest drinks our chief support of health,  
555 When God with these forbidden made choice to rear  
His mighty champion, strong above compare,  
Whose drink was only from the liquid brook!

SAMSON. But what availed this temperance, not complete  
Against another object more enticing?  
560 What boots it at one gate to make defense,  
And at another to let in the foe,  
Effeminately vanquished? by which means,  
Now blind, disheartened, shamed, dishonored, quelled,  
To what can I be useful? wherein serve  
565 My nation, and the work from Heaven imposed?  
But to sit idle on the household hearth,  
A burdenous drone; to visitants a gaze,  
Or pitied object; these redundant locks,  
Robustious to no purpose, clustering down,  
570 Vain monument of strength; till length of years  
And sedentary numbness craze my limbs  
To a contemptible old age obscure.  
Here rather let me drudge, and earn my bread,  
Till vermin, or the draff of servile food,  
575 Consume me, and oft-invocated death  
Hasten the welcome end of all my pains.

MANOAH. Wilt thou then serve the Philistines with that gift

2. Sensual, sexual lures.  
3. A castrated sheep.  
4. The rays of the sun. Samson is saying that wherever water was purest and cleanest, he drank of it—never of wine. “Rod” intimates a parallel with Moses, who like Samson brought forth a spring in the middle of the desert.  
5. Samson’s calling as a Nazarite forbade him the use of wine.  
8. Weaken, twist.  
9. Garbage given to slaves as food.
Which was expressly given thee to annoy them?
Better at home lie bed-rid, not only idle,
Inglorious, unemployed, with age outworn.
But God, who caused a fountain at thy prayer
From the dry ground to spring, thy thirst to allay
After the brunt of battle,¹ can as easy
Cause light again within thy eyes to spring,
Wherewith to serve him better than thou hast.
And I persuade me so. Why else this strength
Miraculous yet remaining in those locks?
His might continues in thee not for naught,
Nor shall his wondrous gifts be frustrate thus.

SAMSON. All otherwise to me my thoughts portend,
That these dark orbs no more shall treat with light,
Nor th’ other light of life continue long,
But yield to double darkness nigh at hand;
So much I feel my genial spirits² droop,
My hopes all flat. Nature within me seems
In all her functions weary of herself;
My race of glory run, and race of shame,
And I shall shortly be with them that rest.

MANOAH. Believe not these suggestions, which proceed
From anguish of the mind, and humors black
That mingle with thy fancy.³ I, however,
Must not omit a father’s timely care
To prosecute the means of thy deliverance
By ransom or how else: meanwhile be calm,
And healing words from these thy friends admit.

SAMSON. O that torment should not be confined
To the body’s wounds and sores,
With maladies innumerable
In heart, head, breast, and reins,⁴
But must secret passage find
To th’ inmost mind,
There exercise all his fierce accidents,⁵
And on her purest spirits prey,
With answerable pains, but more intense,
Though void of corporal sense!
My griefs not only pain me
As a lingering disease,
But, finding no redress, ferment and rage;
Nor less than wounds immedicable
Rankle, and fester, and gangrene,
To black mortification.⁶
Thoughts, my tormentors, armed with daily stings,
Mangle my apprehensive tenderest parts,

¹. The story of how Samson, with divine aid, created a spring in the desert after the battle with the ass’s jawbone is told in Judges 15.18–19.
². Life forces, vital energy.
³. Black bile, the melancholy humor, was supposed to have specially ill effects on the imagination.
⁴. Kidneys.
⁵. I.e., there put into effect all the fierce qualities (of torment).
⁶. A medical term for decay.
Exasperate, exulcerate, and raise
Dire inflammation which no cooling herb
Or med’cinal liquor can assuage,
Nor breath of vernal air from snowy alp.
Sleep hath forsook and given me o’er
To death’s benumbing opium as my only cure;
Thence faintings, swoonings of despair,
And sense of Heaven’s desertion.⁷

I was his nursling once and choice delight,
His destined from the womb,
Promised by heavenly message⁸ twice descending.
Under his special eye
Abstemious I grew up and thrived amain;
He led me on to mightiest deeds,
Above the nerve⁹ of mortal arm,
Against the uncircumcised, our enemies:
But now hath cast me off as never known,
And to those cruel enemies,
Whom I by his appointment had provoked,
Left me all helpless with th’ irreparable loss
Of sight, reserved alive to be repeated¹
The subject of their cruelty or scorn.
Nor am I in the list of them that hope;
Hopeless are all my evils, all remèdiless.
This one prayer yet remains, might I be heard,
No long petition—speedy death,
The close of all my miseries, and the balm.

CHORUS. Many are the sayings of the wise,
In ancient and in modern books enrolled,
Extolling patience as the truest fortitude,
And to the bearing well of all calamities,
All chances incident to man’s frail life;
Consolatories writ
With studied argument, and much persuasion sought,
Lenient² of grief and anxious thought.
But with th’ afflicted in his pangs their sound
Little prevails, or rather seems a tune
Harsh, and of dissonant mood³ from his complaint,
Unless he feel within
Some source of consolation from above,
Secret refreshings that repair his strength
And fainting spirits uphold.⁴

God of our fathers! what is man,
That thou towards him with hand so various—
Or might I say contrarious?—
Temper’st thy providence through his short course:
Not evenly, as thou rul’st

⁷ Samson comes close here to suggesting that religious despair is the symptom of a physical condition.
⁸ Messenger.
⁹ Sinew, hence strength.
¹ Continually.
² Soothing (from Latin leniens).
³ The musical mode, or psychological mood, of the comforter jars on that of the sufferer.
⁴ Cf. Job’s answers to his comforters, especially in chap. 14.
The angelic orders, and inferior creatures mute,
Irrational and brute.\(^5\)
Nor do I name of men the common rout,
That, wandering loose about,
Grow up and perish as the summer fly,
Heads without name, no more remembered;
But such as thou hast solemnly elected,
With gifts and graces eminently adorned,
To some great work, thy glory,
And people’s safety, which in part they effect.
Yet toward these, thus dignified, thou oft,
Amidst their height of noon,
Changest thy countenance and thy hand, with no regard
Of highest favors past
From thee on them, or them to thee of service.\(^6\)
Nor only dost degrade them, or remit
to life obscured, which were a fair dismission,
But throw’st them lower than thou didst exalt them high,
Unseemly falls in human eye,
Too grievous for the trespass or omission;
Oft leav’st them to the hostile sword
Of heathen and profane, their carcasses
To dogs and fowls a prey, or else captiv’d,
Or to the unjust tribunals, under change of times,
And condemnation of the ingrateful multitude.\(^7\)
If these they ’scape, perhaps in poverty
With sickness and disease thou bow’st them down,
Painful diseases and deformed,
In crude\(^8\) old age;
Though not disordinate, yet causeless suffering
The punishment of dissolute days. In fine,\(^9\)
Just or unjust alike seem miserable,
For oft alike both come to evil end.
So deal not with this once thy glorious champion,
The image of thy strength, and mighty minister.\(^1\)
What do I beg? how hast thou dealt already!
Behold him in this state calamitous, and turn
His labors, for thou canst, to peaceful end.
But who is this? what thing of sea or land—
Female of sex it seems—
That, so bedecked, ornate, and gay,
Comes this way sailing
Like a stately ship
Of Tarsus, bound for th’ isles

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5. The chorus feels that the beings above and below man on the Great Chain of Being (the nine orders of angels above, the mute beasts below) are ruled by a less capricious code than is man.
6. Manoa has already voiced this plaint (lines 368–372).
7. After the Restoration, many Puritan leaders were executed, jailed, or exiled, while even the corpses of some were exhumed, beheaded, and publicly exhibited.
9. In short. “Though not disordinate”: i.e., though they have not been dissipated. Milton resented having the gout, supposed to be a disease of the luxurious. 1. Agent, but with a religious connotation as well.
Of Javan or Gadire,\textsuperscript{2}  
With all her bravery on, and tackle trim,  
Sails filled, and streamers waving,  
Courted by all the winds that hold them play;  
An amber\textsuperscript{3} scent of odorous perfume  
Her harbinger, a damsel train behind?  
Some rich Philistian matron she may seem;  
And now, at nearer view, no other certain  
Than Dalila thy wife.  

SAMSON. My wife! my traitress! let her not come near me.  

CHORUS. Yet on she moves; now stands and eyes thee fixed,  
About t' have spoke; but now, with head declined  
Like a fair flower surcharged with dew, she weeps,  
And words addressed seem into tears dissolved,  
Wetting the borders of her silken veil.  
But now again she makes address to speak.  

DALILA. With doubtful feet and wavering resolution  
I came, still dreading thy displeasure, Samson;  
Which to have merited, without excuse,  
I cannot but acknowledge. Yet if tears  
May expiate (though the fact more evil drew  
In the perverse event than I foresaw),\textsuperscript{4}  
My penance hath not slackened, though my pardon  
No way assured. But conjugal affection,  
Prevailing over fear and timorous doubt,  
Hath led me on, desirous to behold  
Once more thy face, and know of thy estate,\textsuperscript{5}  
If aught in my ability may serve  
To lighten what thou suffer'st, and appease  
Thy mind with what amends is in my power—  
Though late, yet in some part to recompense  
My rash but more unfortunate misdeed.  

SAMSON. Out, out, hyena!\textsuperscript{6} These are thy wonted arts,  
And arts of every woman false like thee,  
To break all faith, all vows, deceive, betray;  
Then, as repentant, to submit, beseech,  
And reconcilement move with feigned remorse,  
Confess, and promise wonders in her change,  
Not truly penitent, but chief to try  
Her husband, how far urged his patience bears,  
His virtue or weakness which way to assail:  
Then, with more cautious and instructed skill,  
Again transgresses, and again submits;  
That wisest and best men, full oft beguiled,  
With goodness principled not to reject  
The penitent, but ever to forgive,  

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{2} Tarsus (the birthplace of St. Paul) is a trading city in modern Turkey. The isles of Javan are the isles of Greece, supposed to be populated by descendants of Javan, son of Noah’s son Japhet. Gadire is modern Cádiz in Spain. “Ships of Tarshish” is a common Old Testament emblem of pride and worldliness (e.g., Isaiah 23, Psalm 48).  
\item \textsuperscript{3} Ambergris.  
\item \textsuperscript{4} I.e., my action turned out worse than intended.  
\item \textsuperscript{5} Condition.  
\item \textsuperscript{6} Apart from being an animal of odious habits and appearance, the hyena was a traditional beast of hypocrisy, supposed to entice men to destruction by its power of imitating the human voice.
\end{itemize}
Are drawn to wear out miserable days,
Entangled with a poisonous bosom-snake,
If not by quick destruction soon cut off,
As I by thee, to ages an example.

DALILA. Yet hear me, Samson; not that I endeavor
To lessen or extenuate my offense,
But that, on th’ other side, if it be weighed
By itself, with aggravations not surcharged,
Or else with just allowance counterpoised,
I may, if possible, thy pardon find
First granting, as I do, it was a weakness
In me, but incident to all our sex,
Curiosity, inquisitive, importune
Of secrets, then with like infirmity
To publish them, both common female faults;
Was it not weakness also to make known,
For importunity, that is for naught,
Wherein consisted all thy strength and safety?
To what I did thou show’dst me first the way.
But I to enemies revealed, and should not!
Nor should’st thou have trusted that to woman’s frailty:7
Ere I to thee, thou to thyself wast cruel.

Let weakness then with weakness come to parle,8
So near related, or the same of kind;
Thine forgive mine, that men may censure thine
The gentler, if severely thou exact not
More strength from me than in thyself was found.

And what if love, which thou interpret’st hate,
The jealousy of love, powerful of sway
In human hearts, nor less in mine towards thee,
Caused what I did? I saw thee mutable
Of fancy; feared lest one day thou would’st leave me,
As her at Timna; sought by all means therefore
How to endear, and hold thee to me firmest:
No better way I saw than by importuning
To learn thy secrets, get into my power
Thy key of strength and safety. Thou wilt say,
“Why, then, revealed?” I was assurred by those
Who tempted me that nothing was designed
Against thee but safe custody and hold.
That made for me; I knew that liberty
Would draw thee forth to perilous enterprises,
While I at home sat full of cares and fears,
Wailing thy absence in my widowed bed;
Here I should still enjoy thee, day and night,
Mine and love’s prisoner, not the Philistines’,
Whole to myself, unhazarded abroad,
Fearless at home of partners in my love.

7. Like Eve, who wore down Adam with importunity, then blamed him for giving in (Paradise Lost 9.1155–61), Dalila blames Samson for doing what she herself had demanded. Underlying the scene as a whole are the ancient stereotypes and accusations of traditional antifeminism.
8. Parley, agreement.
These reasons in love’s law have passed for good,
Though fond⁹ and reasonless to some perhaps;
And love hath oft, well meaning, wrought much woe,
Yet always pity or pardon hath obtained.

Be not unlike all others, not austere
As thou art strong, inflexible as steel.
If thou in strength all mortals dost exceed,
In uncompassionate anger do not so.

SAMDSON.  How cunningly the sorceress displays
Her own transgressions, to upbraid me mine!
That malice, not repentance, brought thee hither,
By this appears. I gave, thou say’st, th’ example,
I led the way—bitter reproach, but true;
I to myself was false ere thou to me.

Such pardon, therefore, as I give my folly
Take to thy wicked deed; which when thou seest
Impartial, self-severe, inexorable,
Thou wilt renounce thy seeking, and much rather
Confess it feigned. Weakness is thy excuse,
And I believe it, weakness to resist
Philistine gold. If weakness may excuse,
What murderer, what traitor, parricide,
Incestuous, sacrilegious, but may plead it?
All wickedness is weakness; that plea, therefore,
With God or man will gain thee no remission.
But love constrained thee? Call it furious rage
To satisfy thy lust. Love seeks to have love;
My love how could’st thou hope, who took’st the way
To raise in me inexpiable¹ hate,
Knowing, as needs I must, by thee betrayed?
In vain thou striv’st to cover shame with shame,
Or by evasions thy crime uncover’st more.

DALILA.  Since thou determin’st weakness for no plea
In man or woman, though to thy own condemning,
Hear what assaults I had, what snares besides,
What sieges girt me round, ere I consented;
Which might have awed the best-resolved of men,
The constantest, to have yielded without blame.
It was not gold, as to my charge thou lay’st,
That wrought with me.² ’Thou know’st the magistrates
And princes of my country came in person,
Solicited, commanded, threatened, urged,
Adjured by all the bonds of civil duty
And of religion—pressed how just it was,
How honorable, how glorious, to entrap
A common enemy, who had destroyed
Such numbers of our nation: and the priest
Was not behind, but ever at my ear,
Preaching how meritorious with the gods

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1. Inextinguishable.
2. Judges 16 is very explicit that Dalila betrayed Samson for money—eleven hundred pieces of silver offered her by each one of the Philistine lords.
It would be to ensnare an irreligious
Dishonorer of Dagon. What had I
To oppose against such powerful arguments?
Only my love of thee held long debate,
And combated in silence all these reasons
With hard contest. At length, that grounded maxim,
So rife and celebrated in the mouths
Of wisest men, that to the public good
Private respects must yield, with grave authority
Took full possession of me, and prevailed;
Virtue, as I thought, truth, duty, so enjoining.

SAMSON. I thought where all thy circling wiles would end,
In feigned religion, smooth hypocrisy!
But had thy love, still odiously pretended,
Been, as it ought, sincere, it would have taught thee
Far other reasonings, brought forth other deeds.
I before all the daughters of my tribe
And of my nation chose thee from among
My enemies, loved thee, as too well thou knew'st;
Too well; unbosomed all my secrets to thee,
Not out of levity, but overpowered
By thy request, who could deny thee nothing;
Yet now am judged an enemy. Why then
Didst thou at first receive me for thy husband,
Then, as since then, thy country's foe professed?
Being once a wife, for me thou wast to leave
Parents and country; nor was I their subject,
Nor under their protection, but my own;
Thou mine, not theirs. If aught against my life
Thy country sought of thee, it sought unjustly,
Against the law of nature, law of nations;
No more thy country, but an impious crew
Of men conspiring to uphold their state
By worse than hostile deeds, violating the ends
For which our country is a name so dear;
Not therefore to be obeyed. But zeal moved thee;
To please thy gods thou didst it! Gods unable
To acquit themselves and prosecute their foes
But by ungodly deeds, the contradiction
Of their own deity, gods cannot be;
Less therefore to be pleased, obeyed, or feared.
These false pretexts and varnished colors failing,
Bare in thy guilt, how foul must thou appear!

DALILÀ. In argument with men a woman ever
Goes by the worse, whatever be her cause.

SAMSON. For want of words, no doubt, or lack of breath!
Witness when I was worried with thy peals.

DALILÀ. I was a fool, too rash, and quite mistaken
In what I thought would have succeeded best.

3. Reason of state, political “necessity,” was in Milton's eyes the worst of all possible motives for an action (cf. Paradise Lost 4.393–394).
4. I.e., you were under my protection, not theirs.
5. Comes off second best.
Let me obtain forgiveness of thee, Samson;
Afford me place to show what recompense
Towards thee I intend for what I have misdone,
Misguided. Only what remains past cure
Bear not too sensibly,⁶ nor still insist
To afflict thyself in vain. Though sight be lost,
Life yet hath many solaces, enjoyed
Where other senses want not their delights
At home, in leisure and domestic ease,
Exempt from many a care and chance to which
Eyesight exposes, daily, men abroad.
I to the lords will intercede, not doubting
Their favorable ear, that I may fetch thee
From forth this loathsome prison-house, to abide
With me, where my redoubled love and care,
With nursing diligence, to me glad office,
May ever tend about thee to old age,
With all things grateful cheered, and so supplied
That what by me thou hast lost thou least shalt miss.

SAMSON. No, no; of my condition take no care;
It fits not; thou and I long since are twain;
Nor think me so unwary or accursed⁷
To bring my feet again into the snare
Where once I have been caught. I know thy trains,
Though dearly to my cost, thy gins, and toils.⁸
Thy fair enchanted cup, and warbling charms,
No more on me have power; their force is nulled;
So much of adder’s wisdom I have learnt,
To fence my ear against thy sorceries.⁹
If in my flower of youth and strength, when all men
Loved, honored, feared me, thou alone could hate me,
Thy husband, slight me, sell me, and forgo me,
How would’st thou use me now, blind, and thereby
Deceivable, in most things as a child,
Helpless, thence easily contemned and scorned,
And last neglected! How would’st thou insult,
When I must live uxorious to thy will
In perfect thraldom! how again betray me,
Bearing my words and doings to the lords
To gloss upon, and, censuring, frown or smile!¹¹
This jail I count the house of liberty
To thine,² whose doors my feet shall never enter.

DALILA. Let me approach at least, and touch thy hand.
SAMSON. Not for thy life, lest fierce remembrance wake
My sudden rage to tear thee joint by joint.³
At distance I forgive thee, go with that;

6. With too great sensitivity.
7. I.e., so neglectful or bewitched.
9. Psalms 58.4–5 describes the “deaf adder that stoppeth her ear; which will not hearken to the voice of charmers, charming never so wisely.”
1. Milton’s libertarian hatred of censorship and managed liberty is apparent. “Gloss”: comment.
2. Compared to thine.
3. What Samson might remember, at the touch of Dalila, which would lead him to tear her to pieces, is a problem in domestic psychology.
Bewail thy falsehood, and the pious works
It hath brought forth to make thee memorable
Among illustrious women, faithful wives;
Cherish thy hastened widowhood with the gold
Of matrimonial treason: so farewell.

DALILA. I see thou art implacable, more deaf
To prayers than winds and seas. Yet winds to seas
Are reconciled at length, and sea to shore:
Thy anger, unappeasable, still rages,
Eternal tempest never to be calmed.

Why do I humble thus myself, and, suing
For peace, reap nothing but repulse and hate,
Bid go with evil omen, and the brand
Of infamy upon my name denounced?
To mix with thy concernments I desist
Henceforth, nor too much disapprove my own.
Fame, if not double-faced, is double-mouthed,
And with contrary blast proclaims most deeds:
On both his wings, one black, th’ other white,
Bears greatest names in his wild airy flight.

My name, perhaps, among the circumcised
In Dan, in Judah, and the bordering tribes,
To all posterity may stand defamed,
With malediction mentioned, and the blot
Of falsehood most unconjugal traduced.

But in my country, where I most desire,
In Ekron, Gaza, Asdod, and in Gath,
I shall be named among the famousest
Of women, sung at solemn festivals,
Living and dead recorded, who to save
Her country from a fierce destroyer chose
Above the faith of wedlock bands; my tomb
With odors visited and annual flowers;
Not less renowned than in Mount Ephraim
Jael, who, with inhospitable guile,
Smote Sisera sleeping, through the temples nailed.

Nor shall I count it heinous to enjoy
The public marks of honor and reward
Conferred upon me for the piety
Which to my country I was judged to have shown.

At this whoever envies or repines,
I leave him to his lot, and like my own.

CHORUS. She’s gone, a manifest serpent by her sting
Discovered in the end, till now concealed.

SAMSON. So let her go. God sent her to debase me,
And aggravate my folly, who committed

4. I.e., dismissed with predictions of ill fame.
5. The figure of Fame, in Milton’s youthful poem
On the Fifth of November, does indeed have a double tongue, one for truth and one for lies. Fame or Rumor was a favorite grotesque allegorical figure in classical poets like Ovid (Metamorphoses 12.43 ff.) and Virgil (Aeneid 4.173 ff.).
6. Perfumes.
7. Jael lured Sisera, who saw in her the wife of his ally and friend, into a tent, and there drove a large nail into his head (Judges 4.17–21).
To such a viper his most sacred trust
Of secrecy, my safety, and my life.

CHORUS. Yet beauty, though injurious, hath strange power,
After offense returning, to regain
Love once possessed, nor can be easily
Repulsed, without much inward passion felt,
And secret sting of amorous remorse.

SAMSON. Love-quaerrels oft in pleasing concord end;
Not wedlock-treachery, endangering life.

CHORUS. It is not virtue, wisdom, valor, wit,
Strength, comeliness of shape, or ampest merit
That woman’s love can win, or long inherit;
But what it is, hard is to say,
Harder to hit,
Which way soever men refer it
(Much like thy riddle, Samson), in one day
Or seven though one should musing sit.
If any of these, or all, the Timnian bride
Had not so soon preferred
Thy paranymph, worthless to thee compared,
Successor in thy bed,
Nor both so loosely disallied
Their nuptials, nor this last so treacherously
Had shorn the fatal harvest of thy head.

Is it for that such outward ornament
Was lavished on their sex, that inward gifts
Were left for haste unfinished, judgment scant,
Capacity not raised to apprehend
Or value what is best
In choice, but ofttest to affect the wrong?
Or was too much of self-love mixed,
Of constancy no root infixed,
That either they love nothing, or not long?
Whate’er it be, to wisest men and best,
Seeming at first all heavenly under virgin veil,
Soft, modest, meek, demure,
Once joined, the contrary she proves, a thorn
Intestine, far within defensive arms
A clening mischief, in his way to virtue
Adverse and turbulent; or by her charms
Draws him awry, enslaved
With dotage, and his sense depraved
To folly and shameful deeds, which ruin ends.
What pilot so expert but needs must wreck,
Embarked with such a steers-mate at the helm?
Favored of Heaven who finds

8. Suffering.
1. Samson’s riddle is propounded and answered in Judges 14:14, 18.
2. I.e., if any of these (virtue, etc., lines 1010–11) sufficed, Samson’s first wife (“the Timnian bride”) would not have preferred to marry his “paranymph” (best man) (see Judges 14).
3. I.e., nor would both your wives have been so careless about their marriage vows.
4. Because.
5. Desire.
6. An inward thorn, a viper in the bosom.
7. Clinging; a traditional emblem of marriage was the elm and the vine.
One virtuous, rarely found,
That in domestic good combines:
Happy that house! his way to peace is smooth:
But virtue which breaks through all opposition,
And all temptation can remove,
Most shines and most is acceptable above.
Therefore God's universal law
Gave to the man despotic power
Over his female in due awe,
Nor from that right to part an hour,
Smile she or lour:
So shall he least confusion draw
On his whole life, not swayed
By female usurpation, nor dismayed.

But had we best retire? I see a storm.

SAMSON. Fair days have oft contracted wind and rain.
CHORUS. But this another kind of tempest brings.
SAMSON. Be less abstruse; my riddling days are past.

CHORUS. Look now for no enchanting voice, nor fear
The bait of honeyed words; a rougher tongue
Draws hitherward, I know him by his stride,
The giant Harapha of Gath, his look
Haughty, as is his pile high-built and proud.

HARAPHA. I come not, Samson, to condole thy chance,
As these perhaps, yet wish it had not been,
Though for no friendly intent. I am of Gath;
Men call me Harapha, of stock renowned
As Og, or Anak, and the Emims old
That Kiriathaim held. Thou know'st me now,
If thou at all art known. Much I have heard
Of thy prodigious might and feats performed,
Incredible to me, in this displeased,
That I was never present on the place
Of those encounters, where we might have tried
Each other's force in camp or listed field;

8. Drawn after them.
9. Harapha does not appear at all within the story
told in the Book of Judges; Milton invented him
with the help of some hints from the image of
Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 and some other giants in 2
1. Body; with the suggestion that he is tall as a
tower.
2. That the various visitors of Samson are blown
hither and yon by the winds of occasion serves to
emphasize the deep steadiness of Samson's final
resolution. “Habit” (next line): garb. (He's not
dressed for fighting.)
3. Freight, i.e., business.
4. The chorus of Danites.
5. Og was a giant king of Bashan in Deuteronomy
3.11; Anak and his sons were giants in Numbers
13.33; the Emims were giants in Deuteronomy
2.10–11 and Genesis 14.5.
6. I.e., you know me now if you know anything;
but also, “if you are anyone worth knowing.” Cf.
Satan's brag to Zephon and Ithuriel: “Not to know
me argues yourselves unknown” (Paradise Lost
4.830).
7. Lists, tourney ground. “Camp”: field of battle
(from Latin campus).
And now am come to see of whom such noise
Hath walked about, and each limb to survey,
If thy appearance answer loud report.

SAMSON. The way to know were not to see, but taste.⁸

HARAPHA. Dost thou already single me? I thought
Gyves⁹ and the mill had tamed thee. O that fortune
Had brought me to the field where thou art famed
To have wrought such wonders with an ass’s jaw!
I should have forced thee soon wish¹ other arms,
Or left thy carcass where the ass lay thrown;
So had the glory of prowess been recovered
To Palestine, won by a Philistine
From the unforeskinned race, of whom thou bear’st
The highest name for valiant acts. That honor,
Certain to have won by mortal duel from thee,
I lose, prevented by thy eyes put out.

SAMSON. Boast not of what thou would’st have done, but do
What then thou would’st; thou seest it in thy hand.

HARAPHA. To combat with a blind man I disdain,
And thou hast need much washing to be touched.

SAMSON. Such usage as your honorable lords
Afford me, assassinated² and betrayed;
Who durst not with their whole united powers
In fight withstand me single and unarmed,
Nor in the house with chamber ambushes³
Close-banded durst attack me, no, not sleeping,
Till they had hired a woman with their gold,
Breaking her marriage-faith, to circumvent me.
Therefore, without feigned shifts, let be assigned
Some narrow place enclosed, where sight may give thee,
Or rather flight, no great advantage on me;
Then put on all thy gorgeous arms, thy helmet
And brigandine of brass, thy broad habergeon,
Vant-brace and greaves and gauntlet; add thy spear,
A weaver’s beam,⁴ and seven-times-folded shield:
I only with an oaken staff will meet thee,
And raise such outcries on thy clattered iron,
Which long shall not withhold me from thy head,
That in a little time, while breath remains thee,
Thou oft shalt wish thyself at Gath, to boast
Again in safety what thou would’st have done
To Samson, but shalt never see Gath more.

HARAPHA. Thou durst not thus disparage glorious arms,
Which greatest heroes have in battle worn,
Their ornament and safety, had not spells

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8. Make a trial of.
1. In the 18th century, editors changed “wish” to “with,” easing the grammar at the expense of the sense.
2. Treacherously assailed.
3. Samson refers to the four occasions on which Philistines hid in his bedroom while Dalila tried unsuccessfully to betray him to them.
4. “Brigandine”: a padded chest-protector, covered with iron scales or rings. “Habergeon”: a coat of mail, a hauberk. “Vant-brace”: a steel cuff for the forearm. Greaves protect the shins and thighs, and gauntlets the hands. A weaver’s beam, emblem of weightiness, is used to keep threads hanging tautly in a loom. All these military details are from the description of Goliath, 1 Samuel 17.4–7.
And black enchantments, some magician’s art,
Armed thee or charmed thee strong, which thou from Heaven
1135 Feign’dst at thy birth was given thee in thy hair,
Where strength can least abide, though all thy hairs
Were bristles ranged like those that ridge the back
Of chafed wild boars or ruffled porcupines.

SAMSON. I know no spells, use no forbidden arts;
My trust is in the Living God, who gave me
1140 At my nativity this strength, diffused
No less through all my sinews, joints, and bones,
Than thine, while I preserved these locks unshorn,
The pledge of my unviolated vow.

For proof hereof, if Dagon be thy god,
Go to his temple, invoke his aid
1145 With solemnest devotion, spread before him
How highly it concerns his glory now
To frustrate and dissolve these magic spells,
Which I to be the power of Israel’s God
Avow, and challenge Dagon to the test,
Offering to combat thee, his champion bold,
With th’ utmost of his godhead seconded:
Then thou shalt see, or rather to thy sorrow
1150 Soon feel, whose God is strongest, thine or mine.

HARAPHA. 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
1160 To thy enemies’ hand; permitted them
To put out both thine eyes, and fettered send thee
Into the common prison, there to grind
Among the slaves and asses, thy comrades,
As good for nothing else, no better service
With those thy boisterous locks; no worthy match
1165 For valor to assail, nor by the sword
Of noble warrior, so to stain his honor,
But by the barber’s razor best subdued.

SAMSON. All these indignities, for such they are
From thine, these evils I deserve and more,
1170 Acknowledge them from God inflicted on me
Justly, yet despair not of his final pardon,
Whose ear is ever open, and his eye
Gracious to readmit the suppliant;
In confidence whereof I once again
1175 Defy thee to the trial of mortal fight,
By combat to decide whose god is God,
Thine, or whom I with Israel’s sons adore.

HARAPHA. Fair honor that thou dost thy God, in trusting
He will accept thee to defend his cause,
1180 A murderer, a revolter, and a robber!

SAMSON. Tongue-doughty giant, how dost thou prove me these?
HARAPHA. Is not thy nation subject to our lords?
Their magistrates confessed it when they took thee

5. Thy people.
As a league-breaker, and delivered bound
Into our hands; for hadst thou not committed
Notorious murder on those thirty men\(^6\)
At Ascalon, who never did thee harm,
Then, like a robber, stripp’dst them of their robes?
The Philistines, when thou hadst broke the league,
Went up with armed powers thee only seeking,
To others did no violence nor spoil.

SAMSON. Among the daughters of the Philistines
I chose a wife, which argued me no foe,
And in your city held my nuptial feast;
But your ill-meaning politician lords,
Under pretense of bridal friends and guests,
Appointed to await me thirty spies,
Who, threatening cruel death, constrained the bride
To wring from me, and tell to them, my secret,
That solved the riddle which I had proposed.
When I perceived all set on enmity,
As on my enemies, wherever chanced,
I used hostility, and took their spoil,
To pay my underminers in their coin.

My nation was subjected to your lords!\(^7\)
It was the force of conquest; force with force
Is well ejected when the conquered can.
But I, a private person, whom my country
As a league-breaker gave up bound, presumed
Single rebellion, and did hostile acts!
I was no private,\(^8\) but a person raised,
With strength sufficient, and command from Heaven,
To free my country. If their servile minds
Me, their deliverer sent, would not receive,
But to their masters gave me up for naught,
Th’ unworthier they; whence to this day they serve.
I was to do my part from Heaven assigned,
And had performed it if my known offense
Had not disabled me, not all your force.

These shifts refuted, answer thy appellant,\(^9\)
Though by his blindness maimed for high attempts,
Who now defies thee thrice to single fight,
As a petty enterprise of small enforce.\(^1\)

HARAPHA. With thee, a man condemned, a slave enrolled,
Due by the law to capital punishment?
To fight with thee no man of arms will deign.

SAMSON. Cam’st thou for this, vain boaster, to survey me,
To descant on my strength, and give thy verdict?

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6. Judges 14.8–20 and 15.9–15 describe the episode. When he came to Timna to be married, Samson proposed a riddle and a bet to the marriage guests; they got his intended bride to reveal the riddle, and in revenge, he killed thirty of their people and left the lady to the “paranymph,” or best man. Old Testament Samson is indeed a rude and savage figure; Milton, with characteristic confidence, undertakes his legal defense in everything.
7. I.e., you argue that my nation was subjected to your lords.
8. I.e., lawless individual.
9. I.e., now that we’ve disposed of these dodges, answer your challenger. “Apellant”: literally, caller; one who calls you out.
1. Difficulty.
Come nearer; part not hence so slight informed;
But take good heed my hand survey not thee.

HARAPHA. O Baal-zebub\(^2\) can my ears unused
Hear these dishonors, and not render death?

SAMSON. No man withholds thee; nothing from thy hand
Fear I incurable; bring up thy van;\(^3\)
My heels are fettered, but my fist is free.

HARAPHA. This insolence other kind of answer fits.

SAMSON. Go, baffled coward, lest I run upon thee,
Though in these chains, bulk without spirit vast,
And with one buffet lay thy structure low,
Or swing thee in the air, then dash thee down,
To the hazard of thy brains and shattered sides.

HARAPHA. By Astaroth,\(^4\) ere long thou shalt lament
These braveries,\(^5\) in irons loaden on thee.

CHORUS. His giantship is gone somewhat crestfallen,
Stalking with less unconscionable\(^6\) strides,
And lower looks, but in a sultry chafe.

SAMSON. I dread him not, nor all his giant brood,
Though fame divulge him father of five sons,
All of gigantic size, Goliath chief.\(^7\)

CHORUS. He will directly to the lords, I fear,
And with malicious counsel stir them up
Some way or other yet further to afflict thee.

SAMSON. He must allege some cause, and offered fight
Will not dare mention, lest a question rise
Whether he durst accept the offer or not;
And that he durst not plain enough appeared.
Much more affliction than already felt
They cannot well impose, nor I sustain,
If they intend advantage of my labors,
The work of many hands, which earns my keeping,
With no small profit daily to my owners.
But come what will; my deadliest foe will prove
My speediest friend, by death to rid me hence;
The worst that he can give, to me the best.

CHORUS. O how comely it is, and how reviving
To the spirits of just men long oppressed,
When God into the hands of their deliverer
Puts invincible might
To quell the mighty of the earth, th’ oppressor,
The brute and boisterous force of violent men,
Hardy and industrious to support
Tyrannic power, but raging to pursue

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2. Baal-zebub is Beëlzebub, god of the flies.
3. The vanguard of an army was, naturally, the first group engaged. Samson invites Harapha to start the fight.
4. Moon goddess of the Philistines, consort of Dagon (see Paradise Lost 1.437–446).
5. Boasts.
7. 2 Samuel 21 describes four giants “born to the giant in Gath” and brothers of Goliath, slain by David’s men; Milton makes the identification with Harapha on his own.
The righteous, and all such as honor truth!
He all their ammunitions
And feats of war defeats,8
With plain heroic magnitude of mind
And celestial vigor armed;
Their armories and magazines9 contemns,
Renders them useless, while
With wingèd expedition1
Swift as the lightning glance he executes
His errand on the wicked, who, surprised,
Lose their defense, distracted and amazed.

But patience is more oft the exercise
Of saints, the trial of their fortitude,
Making them each his own deliverer,
And victor over all
That tyranny or fortune can inflict.
Either of these is in thy lot,2
Samson, with might endued
Above the sons of men; but sight bereaved
May chance to number thee with those
Whom patience finally must crown.3

This idol’s day hath been to thee no day of rest,
Laboring thy mind
More than the working day thy hands.
And yet, perhaps, more trouble is behind;
For I descry this way
Some other tending; in his hand
A scepter or quaint4 staff he bears,
Comes on amain, speed in his look.

By his habit I discern him now
A public officer, and now at hand.
His message will be short and voluble.5

OFFICER. Hebrews, the prisoner Samson here I seek.
CHORUS. His manacles remark 6 him; there he sits.

OFFICER. Samson, to thee our lords thus bid me say:
This day to Dagon is a solemn feast,
With sacrifices, triumph, pomp, and games;
Thy strength they know surpassing human rate,
And now some public proof thereof require
To honor this great feast, and great assembly.
Rise, therefore, with all speed, and come along,
Where I will see thee heartened and fresh clad,
To appear as fits before th’ illustrious lords.

SAMSON. Thou know’st I am an Hebrew; therefore tell them
Our Law forbids at their religious rites
My presence; for that cause I cannot come.

8. A touch of the pervasive Miltonic punning.
9. Storerooms, hence the contents, military stores.
1. Haste.
2. Fate.
3. The Christian tragedy, like the Christian epic, must center ultimately on an act of passive, not active, fortitude. It is the special achievement of Samson to combine in a single dramatic action both qualities.
4. Ornamented.
5. To the point.
6. Distinguish.
OFFICER. This answer, be assured, will not content them.

SAMSON. Have they not sword-players, and every sort
Of gymnic artists, wrestlers, riders, runners,
Jugglers and dancers, antics, mummers, mimics,
But they must pick me out, with shackles tired,
And over-labored at their public mill,
To make them sport with blind activity?
Do they not seek occasion of new quarrels,
On my refusal, to distress me more,
Or make a game of my calamities?
Return the way thou cam’st; I will not come.

OFFICER. Regard thyself; this will offend them highly.

SAMSON. Myself? my conscience, and internal peace.
Can they think me so broken, so debased
With corporal servitude, that my mind ever
Will condescend to such absurd commands?
Although their drudge, to be their fool or jester,
And in my midst of sorrow and heart-grief
To show them feats, and play before their god,
The worst of all indignities, yet on me
Joined with supreme contempt! I will not come.

OFFICER. My message was imposed on me with speed,
Brooks no delay: is this thy resolution?

SAMSON. So take it with what speed thy message needs.

OFFICER. I am sorry what this stoutness will produce.

SAMSON. Perhaps thou shalt have cause to sorrow indeed.

CHORUS. Consider, Samson; matters now are strained
Up to the height, whether to hold or break.
He’s gone, and who knows how he may report
Thy words by adding fuel to the flame?
Expect another message, more imperious,
More lordly thundering than thou well wilt bear.

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

CHORUS. Yet with this strength thou serv’st the Philistines,
Idolatrous, uncircumcised, unclean.

SAMSON. Not in their idol-worship, but by labor
Honest and lawful to deserve my food
Of those who have me in their civil power.

CHORUS. Where the heart joins not, outward acts defile not.

SAMSON. Where outward force constrains, the sentence holds:

8. Enjoined, ordered.
1. Taboo.
2. I.e., where outward force constrains, your maxim is right.
But who constrains me to the temple of Dagon, 
Not dragging? The Philistian lords command: 
Commands are no constraints. If I obey them, 
I do it freely, venturing to displease 
God for the fear of man, and man prefer, 
Set God behind; which, in his jealousy, 
Shall never, unrepented, find forgiveness. 
Yet that he may dispense with me, or thee, 
Present in temples at idolatrous rites 
For some important cause, thou need'st not doubt.

CHORUS. How thou wilt here come off surmounts my reach.

SAMSON. Be of good courage; I begin to feel 
Some rousing motions in me which dispose 
To something extraordinary my thoughts. 
I with this messenger will go along—

Nothing to do, be sure, that may dishonor 
Our Law or stain my vow of Nazarite. 
If there be aught of presage in the mind, 
This day will be remarkable in my life 
By some great act, or of my days the last.

CHORUS. In time thou hast resolved: the man returns.

OFFICER. Samson, this second message from our lords 
To thee I am bid say: Art thou our slave, 
Our captive, at the public mill our drudge, 
And dar'st thou, at our sending and command, 
Dispute thy coming? Come without delay; 
Or we shall find such engines to assail 
And hamper thee, as thou shalt come of force, 
Though thou wert firmlier fastened than a rock.

SAMSON. I could be well content to try their art, 
Which to no few of them would prove pernicious; 
Yet, knowing their advantages too many, 
Because they shall not trail me through their streets 
Like a wild beast, I am content to go. 
Masters' commands come with a power resistless 
To such as owe them absolute subjection; 
And for a life who will not change his purpose? 
(So mutable are all the ways of men!) 
Yet this be sure, in nothing to comply 
Scandalous or forbidden in our Law.

OFFICER. I praise thy resolution. Doff these links: 
By this compliance thou wilt win the lords 
To favor, and perhaps to set thee free.

SAMSON. Brethren, farewell. Your company along 
I will not wish, lest it perhaps offend them 
To see me girt with friends; and how the sight 
Of me, as of a common enemy, 
So dreaded once, may now exasperate them

3. God will make a special dispensation for Samson to attend idolatrous ceremonies “for some important cause,” which Samson cannot yet define but which he intuits.
4. By a classic device of dramatic irony, Samson proposes as alternatives two events that will both simultaneously come true. “Presage”: premonition, presight.
5. So that.
6. Take off these chains. “Resolution”: decision.
I know not. Lords are lordliest in their wine;
And the well-feasted priest then soonest fired
With zeal, if aught religion seem concerned;\(^7\)
No less the people, on their holy-days,
Impetuous, insolent, unquenchable.
Happen what may, of me expect to hear
Nothing dishonorable, impure, unworthy
Our God, our Law, my nation, or myself;
The last of me or no I cannot warrant.

CHORUS. Go, and the Holy One
Of Israel be thy guide
To what may serve his glory best, and spread his name
Great among the heathen round;
Send thee the angel of thy birth, to stand
Fast by thy side, who from thy father's field
Rode up in flames after his message told
Of thy conception, and be now a shield
Of fire; that Spirit that first rushed on thee
In the camp of Dan,
Be efficacious in thee now at need!\(^8\)
For never was from Heaven imparted
Measure of strength so great to mortal seed
As in thy wondrous actions hath been seen.
But wherefore comes old Manoa in such haste
With youthful steps? Much livelier than erewhile
He seems: supposing here to find his son,
Or of him bringing to us some glad news?

MANOA. Peace with you, brethren! My inducement hither
Was not at present here to find my son,
By order of the lords new parted hence
To come and play before them at their feast.
I heard all as I came; the city rings,
And numbers thither flock: I had no will,
Lest I should see him forced to things unseemly.
But that which moved my coming now was chiefly
To give ye part with me\(^9\) what hope I have
With good success to work his liberty.

CHORUS. That hope would much rejoice us to partake
With thee. Say, reverend sire; we thirst to hear.

MANOA. I have attempted, one by one, the lords,
Either at home, or through the high street passing,
With supplication prone and father's tears,
To accept of ransom for my son, their prisoner.
Some much averse I found, and wondrous harsh,
Contemptuous, proud, set on revenge and spite;
That part most reverenced Dagon and his priests:
Others more moderate seeming, but their aim
Private reward, for which both God and State

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\(^7\) Milton's animus against paid priests, whom he considered particularly likely to contaminate the Word of God with their own private interests and worldly desires, comes out plainly here.

\(^8\) As a Nazarite (specially consecrated person), Samson had been frequently inspired by the "Spirit of the Lord."

\(^9\) I.e., to impart to you.
They easily would set to sale: a third
More generous far and civil, who confessed
They had enough revenged, having reduced
Their foe to misery beneath their fears;
1470 The rest was magnanimity to remit,
If some convenient ransom were proposed.¹
What noise or shout was that? It tore the sky.

CHORUS. Doubtless the people shouting to behold
Their once great dread, captive and blind before them,
Or at some proof of strength before them shown.

MANOA. His ransom, if my whole inheritance
May compass it, shall willingly be paid
And numbered down. Much rather I shall choose
To live the poorest in my tribe, than richest
1480 And he in that calamitous prison left.
No, I am fixed not to part hence without him.
For his redemption all my patrimony,
If need be, I am ready to forgo
And quit. Not wanting him, I shall want nothing.

CHORUS. Fathers are wont to lay up for their sons:
Thou for thy son art bent to lay out all;
Sons wont to nurse their parents in old age:
Thou in old age car’st how to nurse thy son,
1485 Made older than thy age through eyesight lost.

MANOA. It shall be my delight to tend his eyes,
And view him sitting in the house, ennobled
With all those high exploits by him achieved,
And on his shoulders waving down those locks
That of a nation armed the strength contained.
1490 And I persuade me God hath not permitted
His strength again to grow up with his hair
Garrisoned round about him like a camp
Of faithful soldiery, were not his purpose
To use him further yet in some great service—
1500 Not to sit idle with so great a gift
Useless, and hence ridiculous, about him.²
And since his strength with eyesight was not lost,
God will restore him eyesight to³ his strength.

CHORUS. Thy hopes are not ill-founded, nor seem vain,
1505 Of his delivery, and thy joy thereon
Conceived, agreeable to a father’s love;
In both which we, as next,⁴ participate.

MANOA. I know your friendly minds, and—O what noise!
Mercy of Heaven! what hideous noise was that?
1510 Horribly loud, unlike the former shout.

CHORUS. Noise call you it, or universal groan,
As if the whole inhabitation perished?

¹. The three parties are in effect bigots, swindlers, and gentlemen—types common enough in Restoration England, with whom Milton and the defeated Puritans had frequently to deal.
². Much of the play deals with the concept of rel-
evance and irrelevance; outward weapons and outward strength are often beside the point (“ridic-
ulous”) in the face of inward and spiritual powers.
³. In proportion to.
⁴. As kinsmen.
Blood, death, and deathful deeds are in that noise,
Ruin, destruction at the utmost point.
MANOA. Of ruin indeed methought I heard the noise.
Oh! it continues; they have slain my son.
CHORUS. Thy son is rather slaying them; that outcry
From slaughter of one foe could not ascend.
MANOA. Some dismal accident it needs must be.

What shall we do, stay here, or run and see?
CHORUS. Best keep together here, lest running thither
We unawares run into danger’s mouth.
This evil on the Philistines is fallen:
From whom could else a general cry be heard?
The sufferers then will scarce molest us here;
From other hands we need not much to fear.
What if, his eyesight (for to Israel’s God
Nothing is hard) by miracle restored,
He now be dealing dole among his foes,
And over heaps of slaughtered walk his way?
MANOA. That were a joy presumptuous to be thought.
CHORUS. Yet God hath wrought things as incredible
For his people of old; what hinders now?
MANOA. He can, I know, but doubt to think he will;
Yet hope would fain subscribe, and tempts belief.
A little stay will bring some notice hither.
CHORUS. Of good or bad so great, of bad the sooner;
For evil news rides post, while good news baits.
An Hebrew, as I guess, and of our tribe.

MESSENGER. O whither shall I run, or which way fly
The sight of this so horrid spectacle,
Which erst my eyes beheld, and yet behold?
For dire imagination still pursues me.
But providence or instinct of nature seems,
Or reason, though disturbed, and scarce consulted,
To have guided me aright, I know not how,
To thee first, reverend Manoa, and to these
My countrymen, whom here I knew remaining,
As at some distance from the place of horror,
So in the sad event too much concerned.
MANOA. The accident was loud, and here before thee
With rueful cry; yet what it was we hear not.
No preface needs; thou seest we long to know.
MESSENGER. It would burst forth; but I recover breath,
And sense distract, to know well what I utter.
MANOA. Tell us the sum; the circumstance defer.
MESSENGER. Gaza yet stands; but all her sons are fallen,
All in a moment overwhelmed and fallen.

5. From Latin ruina, downfall.
6. Grief, pain, with perhaps a pun on “dole,” that which is handed out.
7. Pauses to renew (“bait”) the horses.
8. Greek tragedy forbade the representation on stage of actual bloodshed; a messenger is, therefore, a frequent figure at the end of these plays, arriving posthaste from the scene of the final catastrophe, to deliver in a long set speech a descriptive report.
1. The construction “as . . . so . . .” is equivalent to “though . . . yet . . .”
MANOA. Sad, but thou know'st to Israelites not saddest,
The desolation of a hostile city.
MESSENGER. Feed on that first; there may in grief be surfeit.²
MANOA. Relate by whom.
MESSENGER. By Samson.
MANOA. That still lessens
The sorrow, and converts it nigh to joy.
MESSENGER. Ah! Manoa, I refrain too suddenly
To utter what will come at last too soon,
Lest evil tidings, with too rude irruption
Hitting thy aged ear, should pierce too deep.
MANOA. Suspense in news is torture; speak them out.
MESSENGER. Then take the worst in brief: Samson is dead.
MANOA. The worst indeed! O all my hope's defeated
To free him hence! but Death who sets all free
Hath paid his ransom now and full discharge.
What windy³ joy this day had I conceived,
Hopeful of his delivery, which now proves
Abortive as the first-born bloom of spring
Nipped with the lagging rear of winter's frost!
All by him fell, thou say'st; by whom fell he?
What glorious hand gave Samson his death's wound?
MESSENGER. Unwounded of his enemies he fell.
MANOA. Wearied with slaughter, then, or how? Explain.
MESSENGER. By his own hands.
MANOA. Self-violence! What cause
Brought him so soon at variance with himself
Among his foes?
MESSENGER. Inevitable cause
At once both to destroy and be destroyed.
The edifice, where all were met to see him,
Upon their heads and on his own he pulled.
MANOA. O lastingly over-strong against thyself!
A dreadful way thou took'st to thy revenge.
More than enough we know; but while things yet
Are in confusion, give us, if thou canst,
Eyewitness of what first or last was done,
Relation more particular and distinct.
MESSENGER. Occasions drew me early to this city;
And as the gates I entered with sunrise,
The morning trumpets festival proclaimed
Through each high street. Little I had dispatched,
When all abroad was rumored that this day
Samson should be brought forth, to show the people
Proof of his mighty strength in feats and games.
I sorrowed at his captive state, but minded
Not to be absent at that spectacle.
The building was a spacious theater,
Half round on two main pillars vaulted high,

² I.e., there may be all too much grief to follow. ³ Empty and talky.
With seats where all the lords, and each degree
Of sort,⁴ might sit in order to behold;
The other side was open, where the throng
On banks and scaffolds under sky might stand:⁵
I among these aloof obscurely stood.
The feast and noon grew high, and sacrifice
Had filled their hearts with mirth, high cheer, and wine,
When to their sports they turned. Immediately
Was Samson as a public servant brought,
In their state livery clad: before him pipes
And timbrels;⁶ on each side went armèd guards;
Both horse and foot before him and behind,
Archers and slingers, cataphracts⁷ and spears.
At sight of him the people with a shout
Rifted the air, clamoring their god with praise,
Who had made their dreadful enemy their thrall.
He, patient but undaunted, where they led him,
Came to the place; and what was set before him,
Which without help of eye might be essayed,
To heave, pull, draw, or break, he still performed
All with incredible, stupendous force,
None daring to appear antagonist.
At length for intermission sake they led him
Between the pillars; he his guide requested
(For so from such as nearer stood we heard),
As over-tired, to let him lean a while
With both his arms on those two massy pillars,
That to the archèd roof gave main support.
He unsuspicous led him; which when Samson
Felt in his arms, with head a while inclined,
And eyes fast fixed he stood, as one who prayed,
Or some great matter in his mind revolved:
At last, with head erect, thus cried aloud:
“Hitherto, Lords, what your commands imposed
I have performed, as reason was, obeying,
Not without wonder or delight beheld;
Now of my own accord such other trial
I mean to show you of my strength yet greater
As with amaze shall strike all who behold.”
This uttered, straining all his nerves,⁸ he bowed;
As with the force of winds and waters pent
When mountains tremble,⁹ those two massy pillars
With horrible convulsion to and fro
He tugged, he shook, till down they came, and drew
The whole roof after them with burst of thunder
Upon the heads of all who sat beneath,
Lords, ladies, captains, counselors, or priests,

4. Of rank.
5. The temple at Gaza comprised a covered pavilion or shell for the gentry, semicircular in shape and supported at the center of the semicircle by two pillars; on the open side, under the hot sun, and behind the stage, as it were, stood the common people.
6. Tambourines.
7. Armored horsemen on armored horses.
8. Muscles.
9. Earthquakes in Milton’s day were supposed to be the effect of escaping winds and waters imprisoned (“pent”) beneath the earth.
Their choice nobility and flower, not only
Of this, but each Philistian city round,
Met from all parts to solemnize this feast.
Samson, with these immixed, inevitably
Pulled down the same destruction on himself;
The vulgar¹ only 'scaped, who stood without.

CHORUS. O dearly bought revenge, yet glorious!
Living or dying thou hast fulfilled
The work for which thou wast foretold
To Israel, and now li'st victorious
Among thy slain self-killed;
Not willingly, but tangled in the fold
Of dire Necessity,² whose law in death conjoined
Thee with thy slaughtered foes, in number more
Than all thy life had slain before.

SEMICORHUS.³ While their hearts were jocund and sublime,
Drunk with idolatry, drunk with wine
And fat regorged⁴ of bulls and goats,
Chaunting their idol, and preferring
Before our living Dread, who dwells
In Silo, his bright sanctuary,⁵
Among them he a spirit of frenzy sent,
Who hurt their minds,
And urged them on with mad desire
To call in haste for their destroyer.
They, only set on sport and play,
Unweetingly⁶ importuned
Their own destruction to come speedy upon them.
So fond are mortal men,
Fallen into wrath divine,
As their own ruin on themselves to invite,
Insensate left, or to sense reprobate,
And with blindness internal⁷ struck.

SEMICORHUS. But he, though blind of sight,
Despised, and thought extinguished quite,
With inward eyes illuminated,
His fiery virtue roused
From under ashes into sudden flame,
And as an evening dragon⁸ came,
Assailant on the perchèd roosts
And nests in order ranged
Of tame villatic⁹ fowl, but as an eagle
His cloudless thunder bolted on their heads.
So Virtue, given for lost,¹
Depressed and overthrown, as seemed,

1. The common people.
2. Samson must not be supposed guilty of suicide (see lines 1586–87).
3. In classical theater a chorus was commonly split in two parts, their speeches to be recited alter-
nately.
4. Greedily devoured. “Jocund and sublime”: joy-
ous and exalted.
5. Shiloh, where the Israelites established their tabernacle (Joshua 18.1).
6. Unwittingly.
7. The play accomplishes itself by showing the internal blindness of the Philistines at the very moment of Samson’s spiritual illumination.
8. Serpent (from Latin draco).
1. Given up for lost. “Bolted”: cast as a thunder-
bolt.
Like that self-begotten bird,\(^2\)
In the Arabian woods embossed,\(^3\)
That no second knows nor third,
And lay erewhile a holocaust,\(^4\)
From out her ashy womb now teemed,
Revives, refloresces, then vigorous most
When most unactive deemed;
And, though her body die, her fame survives,
A secular\(^5\) bird, ages of lives.

**MANOAH.** Come, come; no time for lamentation now,
Nor much more cause. Samson hath quit\(^6\) himself
Like Samson, and heroically hath finished
A life heroic, on his enemies
Fully revenged; hath left them years of mourning
And lamentation to the sons of Caphtor\(^7\)
Through all Philistian bounds; to Israel
Honor hath left and freedom, let but them
Find courage to lay hold on this occasion;
To himself and father's house eternal fame;
And, which is best and happiest yet, all this
With God not parted from him, as was feared,
But favoring and assisting to the end.

Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail
Or knock the breast; no weakness, no contempt,
Dispraise, or blame; nothing but well and fair,
And what may quiet us in a death so noble.
Let us go find the body where it lies
Soaked in his enemies' blood, and from the stream
With lavers\(^8\) pure and cleansing herbs wash off
The clotted gore. I, with what speed the while\(^9\)
(Gaza is not in plight to say us nay),
Will send for all my kindred, all my friends,
To fetch him hence and solemnly attend,
With silent obsequy and funeral train,
Home to his father's house. There will I build him
A monument, and plant it round with shade
Of laurel ever green and branching palm,\(^1\)
With all his trophies hung, and acts enrolled
In copious legend, or sweet lyric song.
Thither shall all the valiant youth resort,
And from his memory inflame their breasts
To matchless valor and adventures high;
The virgins also shall, on feastful days,
Visit his tomb with flowers, only bewailing
His lot unfortunate in nuptial choice,
From whence captivity and loss of eyes.

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2. The mythical phoenix begets itself out of its own ashes; it is unique, in that there is only one phoenix alive at any one time, and it lives in the scrubland of Arabia.
3. Enclosed, hidden.
4. A sacrifice burned whole on the altar.
5. Living through the centuries (Latin saecula).
6. Acquitted.
7. In Amos 9.7 the Philistines are described as immigrants from Caphtor (perhaps Crete).
8. Basins.
9. I.e., with what speed (I may) in the meanwhile.
1. Leaves of laurel were worn by civic conquerors on triumphal occasions; wreaths of palm were given to victors in the Olympic games. Samson, as both an athletic victor in his agor and the savior of his people, gets both.
CHORUS. All is best, though we oft doubt
What th' unsearchable dispose
Of Highest Wisdom brings about,
And ever best found in the close.
Oft he seems to hide his face,
But unexpectedly returns,
And to his faithful champion hath in place
Bore witness gloriously; whence Gaza mourns,
And all that band them to resist
His uncontrollable intent.

His servants he, with new acquist
Of true experience from this great event,
With peace and consolation hath dismissed,
And calm of mind, all passion spent.

2. The final chorus of the play is cast in the rhyme pattern of a sonnet.
3. Appointment, disposition.
4. On this very spot, at this very instant.
5. Increase, acquisition.