

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

7:2 2021

“Well-Staged Syllables”:
From Classical to Early Modern English Metres
in Drama

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi

Founded by Guido Avezù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri

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Published in December 2021
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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
<https://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>
info@skeneproject.it

Dir. Resp. (aut. Trib. di Verona): Guido Avezù
P.O. Box 149 c/o Mail Boxes Etc. (MBE150) – Viale Col. Galliano, 51, 37138, Verona (I)

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‘Doubtful Feet’ and ‘Healing Words’: Greek Tragic Prosody in *Samson Agonistes*¹

Abstract

This article will address the vexed issue of Milton’s increasingly free verse forms, with particular emphasis on his late closet drama, *Samson Agonistes* (1671). The metre of this work has long since baffled critics, who have been especially troubled by the prosodic experimentation evident in Milton’s use of the Chorus, a verse form he borrows from Greek tragic drama, which he takes as the model for this work. In the note he prefaces to *Samson* Milton explicitly describes his prosody in the terms of Greek tragedy: ‘The measure of verse used in the chorus is of all sorts, called by the Greeks monostrophic, or rather apolelymenon,’ he writes, quickly qualifying this assertion by offering an alternative terminology, ‘or being divided into stanzas of pauses, they may be called alloeostropha.’ Yet efforts by critics from Benjamin Stillingfleet (in the eighteenth-century) to Robert Bridges (in the nineteenth) and John Shawcross (in the twentieth) have thus far failed to document a genuine Greek metrical inheritance behind Milton’s poem, and *Samson Agonistes* continues to resist efforts to fix its prosody within classical metrical terminology. Taking this difficulty as its point of departure, this article will reconsider the question of how Milton conceived of his metrical innovations in relation to the prosodic systems he inherited from Greek tragedy. I will explore the political implications of Greek metrics in Milton’s understanding, suggesting that his engagement with the verse forms of classical tragedy provide him with a means of critical engagement with the democratic systems of Ancient Athens.

KEYWORDS: John Milton; *Samson Agonistes*; Greek tragedy; Euripides

1. Forms of Representation in *Samson Agonistes*

John Milton’s closet drama *Samson Agonistes* (1671) ends with a gesture characteristic of Greek tragedy, a genre that the poet so remarkably acknowledges in the preface to the work as his chief model for the piece, and which critics have recently worked to restore as a key context for Milton’s work (Chernaik 2012, Crawford 2016, Leo 2016). Lamenting Samson’s sui-

¹ Thanks are due to Sarah Lewis, Lucy Munro, Elizabeth Scott-Baumann and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on this article.

* King’s College, London - hannah.crawforth@kcl.ac.uk

cidal final act, his father Manoa urges: “Let us go find the body where it lies / Soaked in his enemies’ blood, and from the stream / With lavers pure, and cleansing herbs wash off / The clotted gore” (1725-29).² This ritualistic cleansing most immediately recalls the work of Milton’s professed favourite playwright, echoing Euripides’ *Hippolytus* (1153f.), another play that ends with a bereaved father who blames a woman for the violent loss of his son. The need to reclaim and ritually cleanse the body of the deceased is, however, an impulse so characteristic of Greek tragedy as to almost stand in for it as a kind of shorthand, a synecdoche for both the recurring dramatic and formal structures that underpin the genre and also some of the most immediately recognizable political values that the plays so rigorously question and explore. If Milton sees the act of washing the dead body with which *Hippolytus* concludes as a synecdoche for Greek tragic drama, then this symbolism is made all the more apt by the fact that the genre was itself understood to be a form of ritual cleansing by the poet. Milton begins *Samson Agonistes* with an epigraph taken from the sixth book of Aristotle’s *Poetics*: “*Tragœdia est imitatio actionis seriæ, &c. Per misericordiam & metum perficiens talium affectuum lustrationem*” (“Tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious, etc. perfecting, through pity and fear, the purification, by sacrifice, of such affects”, Milton 1671, title page; trans. Leo 2011, 212). As Russ Leo has recently reminded us, Milton departs from standard translations of the period to render the Greek “καθαρσις” by the term “*lustrationem*”, suggesting an act of purification by ritual (and often, specifically, ritual cleansing, Leo 2011, 222). Part of the restorative power of Greek tragedy lies in this ceremonial washing away of all that has passed during the course of the play, Milton believes; this language of purification by cleansing, however, leaves an indelible mark on his own drama.

This essay seeks to cast new light on Milton’s remaking of Euripidean forms in *Samson Agonistes* by exploring the ways in which certain critics have persistently sought to identify a relationship between the innovative metrics of the closet drama and the Greek model he imitates here. I take up the much-debated question of the poem’s unusual prosody and show how Milton’s metres have themselves been seen as a manifestation of the poet’s commitment to tragic form as something that serves a metaphorical, or allegorical, function in *Samson*. I suggest that ongoing efforts – by critics from the eighteenth-century to the twentieth – to position the poem’s metrics in relation to ancient Greek prosody are in themselves significant, reflecting the political allegiances of both the text itself and Milton’s wider consider-

² All references to the poem are to the 1997 edition unless otherwise stated and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

ation of what seventeenth-century English democracy might look like.³ As such, this essay is not an exhaustive survey of the prosody of *Samson*; rather it is a necessarily selective exploration of the way in which a distinct critical counter-tradition – thus far little explored in studies of the poem – has construed the experimental metres of Milton's closet drama in relation to Greek tragic verse forms. I ask why Milton's prosody is so often taken to stand in for his politics, tracing such readings of the poem's metre to the poet's own political thought and (often somewhat misleading) prosodic cues.

Deriving from the Greek, “συν-” prefix (“together” or “alike”), combined with “ἐκδοχή,” (“receiving from the hands of another, succession”) the word “synecdoche” was associated from Hellenistic Greek onwards with the act of interpretation, literally the act of “understanding one thing with another” (*OED*, “synecdoche, *n*”). The term “synecdoche” thus combines at its roots both political and interpretive significance.

In early modern England “synecdoche” was most commonly used to denote a formal device and is frequently defined in rhetorical treatises as “when the part ... is used for the whole”, Thomas Wilson explains (Wilson 1553, sig. Siii). The use of literary epithets – in which a key attribute of an individual is made to represent their whole identity – could be construed as a subset of this figurative device, as John Langley's 1659 rhetorical manual makes clear (the book was used at St Paul's school, which Milton attended). His entry on “Synecdoche” reads: “*Cum nomen proprium Viri qualitate præcellentis, pro aliis, ipsa qualitate præditis, ponitur: ut Thraso pro glorioso, Sauromatæ, pro remotis.*” (“When the proper name of a man outstanding in a quality is used for others who are endowed with the same quality: as *Thraso* for the braggart, and *Sarmatians* for those far-off”, Langley 1659, 4, tab. 7).⁴ Milton chooses to add the epithet “*Agonistes*” to his hero's name in imitation of such tragedies as Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Euripides' *Hercules Furens*. “Multiple meanings of the Greek are relevant for Milton's tragedy,” writes Laura Lunger Knoppers in her notes to the title page of the closet drama. “An ἄγων [*Agon*] is an assembly, contest, place of contest, struggle, gymnastic exercise, agony, anguish. An ἀγωνιστής [*Agonistes*] is a combatant or competitor in the games; one who struggles for something” (Knoppers 2008, 65). It is no coincidence, I would suggest, that both Milton's chosen title and Knoppers' commentary upon it emphasize a social aspect to this Greek term; like the politician, or even the actor, the “ἀγωνιστής” [*Agonistes*] requires the presence of others to witness his tri-

³ I develop the argument that *Samson Agonistes* represents a sustained and close engagement with ancient Greek democratic politics in Crawforth 2016.

⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for the journal for assistance with this point of translation.

umph or defeat. While Milton's use of synecdoche in *Samson* has been much commented-upon – Lauren Shohet calls the work “a drama of synecdoche” (Shohet 98) – Knoppers is unusual in emphasizing the socio-political aspect that is so fundamental to my argument here. From the very title page of Milton's work, which first appeared in print alongside *Paradise Regained*, his reader is made aware of the inextricability of the Greek tradition, with which the text so closely engages, and the constitution of political communities that are built upon conflict, or “struggle”, in Milton's post-Civil War landscape. Milton's Samson is made political via the Greek tragic custom of titular epithets, through the etymology of this ancient Greek word and, I would argue, by the selection of a single quality as representative of his whole being. The use of the “*Agonistes*” epithet is thus a form of synecdoche that places the issue of representation, of how to denote key aspects of both the drama's hero and its subject, front and foremost in the reader's mind at the very beginning of Milton's Greek tragedy.

If epithets offer a particular form of literary synecdoche, in which a single attribute stands in for an entire persona and the political world he or she inhabits, then Milton's use of this rhetorical device could itself be considered a political gesture, in which he is responsible for determining how Samson is figured within the climate of Restoration England; his decision to emphasize his protagonist's distinctly social struggle in awarding him this particular Greek tragic epithet is an act of appropriation, in which Biblical myth is recast in early modern terms. We might extend this idea further into the political sphere, in which democracy as an ideal (even in the limited form Milton imagined) might likewise be thought of as a form of synecdoche – an individual standing for the populace at large, or a vote on a piece of paper representing a person and their views (“a part for a whole”). Indeed, there is evidence in George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* that “synecdoche” continued to carry some of its etymological association with politics; two of the three examples for the figure (which he renames “quick conceit”) are explicitly political in this treatise (Puttenham 1936, 195-6). Allusion to a literary work, via a metrical, verbal, or other formal echo, might also be seen as a kind of synecdoche – evoking an entire text, author or tradition by use of a tiny fragment, or triggering an entirely other interpretive framework by making reference to a textual world outside of that in which a particular work is being produced (“understanding one thing with another”). The analogy between such interpretive aspects of this linguistic mechanism and its resonance with the workings of political representation is one that I will explore in detail in this essay, in which I use it to think through both formal and political implications of Milton's relationship to his Greek precursors in *Samson Agonistes*. The figure of synecdoche can help us to reconsider both the relationship between *Samson* and the Greek tragic tradition out of

which Milton makes his poem, and – at the same time – is a particularly apt figure for figuring this relation because of the inherent resonances between its workings and those of Athenian democratic politics. Moreover, I will suggest, the complex prosody of the closet drama has itself served for a small but significant group of critics as a synecdoche for Milton's wider aims in composing *Samson*, symbolizing not only the tension between freedoms and constraints that are so fundamental to the political work of this poem, but also often standing in for the Greek tragic tradition the text reanimates and reforms.

We can see this aspect of the poem – and its critical interpretation – at work in the final Chorus of *Samson Agonistes*, which closely mirrors the poetry with which Euripides concludes several of his tragedies:

All is best, though we oft doubt,
 What the 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. b(1745-58)⁵

The first four of these lines employ language echoing that which served as a stock conclusion to *Alcestis*, *Andromache*, *The Bacchae*, *Helen*, and *Medea* (among other tragedies), and thus represent an Englishing of Euripidean verses that might stand as a synecdoche for Greek tragic form. Milton himself notoriously remakes every genre he writes in, recasting each form he takes up in his own image to suit his own time (Creaser 2008; Lewalski 1985), however (a trait Euripides notoriously shared). His decision to end *Samson Agonistes*, his own self-declared Greek tragedy, with these Euripidean lines

⁵ Compare Euripides' *Helen*: "What heaven sends has many shapes, and many things the gods accomplish against our expectation. What men look for is not brought to pass, but a god finds a way to achieve the unexpected. Such was the outcome of this story." (1688-92): πολλὰ μορφὰι τῶν δαμονίων / πολλὰ δ' ἀέλπτως κραίνονσι θεοί· / καὶ τὰ δοκηθέντ' οὐκ ἔτελέσθη, / τῶν δ' ἀδοκῆτων πόρον ἤρρε θεός. / τοιόνδ' ἀπέβη τόδε πρᾶγμα. Cf. also *Andromache* 1284-88, which concludes in the same way.

reformed here as part of a (metrically unusual) sonnet (one that resists the pull of the Shakespearean final couplet) is therefore representative of his broader method of combining the forms of the past to novel effects. Ten of the fourteen lines quoted above – lines that are bound together through the interlinked rhymes typical of the sonnet – are iambic tetrameter; four iambic pentameter (the more usual metre for sonnets). But the relationship between the two metres, their juxtaposition within the concluding verse, is irregular and unpredictable. The final Chorus is torn between differing prosodies just as it exists in between the spaces occupied by Greek tragedy and a seventeenth-century closet drama, a play and a poem, a narrative on an epic scale and a sonnet. Most of all, the moral uncertainty (the frequent feeling of ‘doubt’ experienced by the Chorus) of the play’s conclusion is perfectly expressed in – and by – these metrical vacillations, the instability, of the verse. The message of consolation (“All is best”) that the Chorus is obligated by generic convention to deliver is profoundly upset by such prosodic disturbance, and the ‘calm of mind’ that Greek tragedy as theorized by Aristotle seeks to bring about seems troubled by the very metrical form in which it is asserted.

For all the irregularity of this final Chorus, Milton’s commitment to an underlying iambic beat is strong here (as, arguably, it is felt throughout *Samson* as a whole). In Janel Mueller’s brilliant prosodic analysis of the poem, “the dynamic of iambic rhythm informs the drama of *Samson Agonistes*” on every level. This is a poem – and a prosody – of “weakness before strength, no way to strength but through weakness, and the advent of strength in a stroke, as a beat that signals the imposition of purposive order from above and beyond, whether by the stress assignment of rules in English or through a human coming to insight and resolve” (Mueller 1996, 66). Mueller’s account of Milton’s metrics, while highly persuasive in itself, interests me not so much for what she says about the poem (although I happen to think she is right), but rather for the form her argument takes here. This is an instance of what Mueller later goes on to call “metrical typology” – by which critics frequently assign prosodic choices meaning that operates both within the world of the poem and beyond (66). In other instances of this kind of reading in Mueller’s article alone, she goes on to consider the way Dalila’s gender identity might be embodied in her uses of feminine and masculine rhymes (68-71) and attributes to the poem’s many short lines ‘the distinctive expressive function’ of symbolizing ‘all the speech that can be won or wrung at the extremity, the boundary of muteness imposed by the limits of mystery or suffering’ (74).⁶ In such readings – the kinds of readings we will encounter

⁶ On the metaphors of feminine rhyme in terms of gender see forthcoming work by Elizabeth Scott-Baumann and Robert Stagg.

repeatedly in this essay, from recent interpretations of the poem such as Mueller's to early eighteenth-century critics like Benjamin Stillingfleet, via the enormously influential prosodic studies of Robert Bridges and Gerard Manley Hopkins – metre not only reflects meaning but itself constitutes that meaning. It becomes, in other words, a synecdoche for the political work of the poem, standing in for its workings in a very literal way. And – if we follow Milton's own hint in his description of the poem's form – we need to consider the relationship between the poetic representation of this political work and the workings of Athenian democracy.

In her new study of the early modern symbolics of rhyme Rebecca Rush argues that we should attend more carefully to the significance of prosody in early modern texts, to the ways in which the poets of the period employ rhyme in ways that signify. "Premodern poets did not shrink from drawing analogies between forms and ideas and often maintained that the visual and vernal patterns inscribed in verse could be mapped onto social, moral or cosmic structures," Rush writes, calling such a prosodically significant way of writing "analogical" (Rush 2021, 14).⁷ Where Rush argues that critics have been slow to recognize pervasive analogies between rhyme and meaning in early modern prosodic theory and practices, metre has been more readily identified with meaning. In the case of *Samson Agonistes*, analogical readings of Milton's metre have coalesced around the poem's politics and – I will argue – the relationship the poem bears to the specifically ancient Greek practices of democracy. In appropriately Greek fashion, I will suggest, metre has repeatedly served critics of the poem – beginning with Milton himself, in his own account of *Samson's* prosody – as a synecdoche for its politics.

2. Doubtful Feet: Milton's "Greek" Prosody

Milton makes an infamous connection between poetic form and politics, between freedom from rhyme and freedom from tyranny, in the "Note on the Verse" appended to the later, 12-book version of *Paradise Lost*. Declaring there the primacy of "apt numbers and fit quantity of syllables" over "the jin-

⁷ Rush continues: "I have chosen to describe this mode . . . as 'analogical' because the term involves more than a simple arithmetical equality of two things. 'Analogy' comes from the Greek mathematical term for a ratio. . . . Premodern interpreters rarely offer what I would call arithmetical readings, in which the sounds of the words in a line are equated with its local meaning. Instead, they tend to make double comparisons: they carefully consider the patterns formed by rhyme, meter, line length, and so on, and consider how these formal patterns correspond with other patterns inside and outside the poem." (14).

gling sound of like endings,” Milton vows that his epic will restore “ancient liberty” to the heroic poem, liberating it “from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming” (Milton 2013, 55).⁸ In more subtle, and technical, terms, the note prefaced to *Samson* likewise asserts independence from certain metrical restrictions:

The measure of verse used in the chorus is of all sorts, called by the Greeks monostrophic, or rather apolelymenon, 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 of pauses, they may be called alloeostropha. (357)

With pragmatic disregard for those metrical features of Greek tragic choruses “not material” to his own dramatic poem, which is not intended for performance, Milton idiosyncratically announces that the “measure” of his verse is “apolelymenon”. H.T. Kirby-Smith attributes Milton’s appropriation of this descriptor to his “not finding any term from prosody that conveyed the degree of freedom he exercised”. Smith goes on to suggest that in “declaring his freedom from the expectations of a regular form” in this way, Milton may have “had in mind the extreme irregularity of the dithyrambic poets, especially Timotheus (446-357 B.C.), whose productions were admired by Euripides” (Kirby-Smith 1996, 78). By importing this term in order to explain his poetic form here Milton proclaims his liberty from both metrical constraint and, one might argue, prosodic terminology. The fact that English metrical analysis largely depends on ancient Greek for its vocabulary places the relationship to this particular classical precedent at the heart of the question of *Samson*’s poetic form in Milton’s prefatory epistle.

Milton’s unconventional terminology, and the explanation proffered here for his rejection of the “strophe, antistrophe or epode” that more typically comprised the Greek tragic chorus, reveals the depth of his engagement with the metrical features of Euripidean drama. This engagement is already established by the time he writes the ode *Ad Joannem Rousium Oxoniensis Academiae Bibliothecarium* [“To John Rouse, Librarian of Oxford University”], dated 23rd January 1647 in the 1673 Poems in which the poem first appears (Milton 1997, 302). Milton organizes the ode using the traditional designations, consisting of “three strophes and three antistrophes with a concluding epode”. Like *Samson*, Milton prefers to term the ode “monostrophic”; its “metres are partly determined by correlation, partly free” (307). But, he

⁸ Rush persuasively resituates Milton’s famous denunciation of rhyme in the note on the verse of *Paradise Lost* within a longer lineage of thinking about the connections between poetic constraints and political freedoms (Rush 2021, 1-2).

is quick to point out, these terms – while they may not reflect the metrical realities of the poem itself – are nonetheless important to him: “Though the strophes and antistrophes do not exactly correspond either in the number of their lines or in the distribution of their particular metrical units, nevertheless I have cut the poem up in this way in order to make it easier to read,” he tells us, “rather than with a view to imitating any ancient method of versification” (307). This qualification is an important piece of contextual information for understanding the element of self-mythologizing that similarly underwrites the *Samson* preface, I would suggest.

Milton is also acutely aware of the classical prosodic rules he breaks in his own poems.⁹ Throughout his copy of the 1602 Stephanus edition (now in the Bodleian) Milton makes emendations based upon metre, which he conceives of as a formal guide to what each line should contain, and which he uses to deduce necessary corrections to the unreliable Greek (and, occasionally, Latin) text. Milton corrects Stephanus' Latin translation in *Phoenissae*, for instance, where he crosses through l.1737, “*Sufficiunt mihi meæ lacrymæ*,” replacing it with “*Satis habent lamenationum mearum*” (Euripides 1602, Vol. 1, 325) and makes further metrical amendments to the text of Helen (Euripides 1602, Vol. 2, 544). The extremely close attention he pays to the Greek text is particularly evident in *Orestes*, perhaps the most heavily corrected of all the Euripidean plays Milton consults. In the only significant study of Milton's copy of Euripides to date, Kelley and Atkins point out his “minute correction” of *Orestes* 305 is based entirely on the need to complete the measure of the line. Milton changes the printed *οἰχόμεθα* to *οἰχόμεσθα*; “there is no semantic difference between them,” Kelley and Atkins state, “but the meter requires the use of the second” (1961, 686).¹⁰ Their example is one among the many alterations Milton makes to the Stephanus text based on metrical grounds, displaying his assured command of Euripidean prosody and a mechanistic concern with regularity in the texts of others that he feels so free to depart from in his own Greek tragedy.

Milton's understanding of Greek metre may have been unusually sophis-

⁹ Rules regarding poetic composition in early modernity “are at once instruments of technical mastery and marks of a kind of helplessness,” writes Michael Hetherington. “Rule-following, if understood as a conscious experience, is simply too clunky and too slow a process to represent the mental acts performed by Virgil in the exigent moment of composition. Rules may, perhaps, explain cognitive processes that take place in advance of the act of writing, and may later be invoked to measure or judge the product of that process, but they cannot take us into the experiential dynamics of the act itself.” (Hetherington 2021, 13, 18).

¹⁰ The emendation occurs in Stephanus, ed. *Euripides*, Vol. 1, 146. This is one of many Miltonic emendations taken up by the editorial tradition. It is maintained in the modern Loeb text, for instance (*Euripides* 2002, 444).

ticated (perhaps unsurprisingly) but there is evidence that his interest in the formal qualities of ancient tragedy was by no means unique, and that considerable efforts were underway to document and, in rare instances, imitate these verse forms. The quantitative verse experiments of the latter sixteenth-century had prompted increased interest in the Greek poetics that had established so much of the structure and terminology of Latin prosody. As Derek Attridge remarks in his seminal study of the subject, the quantitative experimenters drew encouragement from the fact that the Romans “had done with Greek metrical forms precisely what the English quantitative poets were trying to do with Latin ones” (Attridge 2009, 118-9). The Cambridge debates over Greek pronunciation waged by John Cheke, Thomas Smith, and John Caius, among others, in the 1550s had in part been driven by a desire to restore an original distribution of accent and syllable length that would allow for the proper reading of ancient poetry. In *The Scholemaster* (published in 1570) Roger Ascham had advocated that “the Greeks should serve as models for iambic verse”, while Thomas Watson went on to make notable efforts at recreating hexameter in *The Countesse of Pembroke’s Yvychurch* (1591) (cited in Attridge 2009, 24-5, 92-3, 115). Perhaps the most extensive treatment of Greek metrics in the vernacular literature of the period, however, is Puttenham’s. The second book of *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589) contains several chapters on classical prosody alongside his discussion of English versification, the highly detailed nature of which makes for “dreary reading, and may seem unnecessary,” Attridge observes, but “was, in fact, crucial to his argument”; Puttenham’s attempt to establish that vernacular poetry could equal the classics depended upon its prosodic rules being as detailed and strictly defined as those of Latin or Greek prosody (Attridge 2009, 90). In accordance with this aim he devotes chapters to classical metrical feet varying from the “*spondeus*” to the “*Trocheus*”, the “*dactil*”, and “*Anapestus*”, the more obscure “*Molossus*”, “*Bacchius*”, “*Antibacchius*”, “*Amphimacer*”, “*Amphibrachius*”, “*Tribrachus*”, and half-feet, “*Catalecticke*” and “*Acatalecticke*” (Puttenham 1936, 112-30). Throughout, Puttenham is careful to emphasize the Greek inheritance of these terms and the metrical features they denote, as well as their English applications. His ultimate goal is that “the use of the Greeke and Latine feete might be brought into our vulgar poesie” (112).

There is little evidence that Milton himself embarked upon such an undertaking in any literal sense in *Samson Agonistes*. Writing of John Shawcross’s attempt to establish by scansion that the Samson choruses (and the “Ode to Rouse”) might derive from a quantitative metrical system based upon an early modern understanding of Greek and Roman prosody, Attridge notes that Shawcross “finds so many irregularities that he unintentionally demonstrates that they are not” (Attridge 2009, 129). Yet as early as the eighteenth-century critics began to turn to Greek verse in search of an explanation for Milton’s

prosodic style. And – perhaps responding to the poet's own cues in the preface to Samson – they likewise begin to associate such a model with the idea of certain metrical and (implicitly) political freedoms. Interspersed among the opening pages of a copy of Richard Bentley's highly interventionist edition of *Milton's Paradise Lost* (1732), now owned by the British Library, is an extensive letter signed by Benjamin Stillingfleet.¹¹ Stillingfleet's deep-rooted enmity to Bentley is evident on every one of the ten pages of this epistle, which documents in detail the "gross & frequent mistakes that Dr. Bentley has fallen into", subdividing his predecessor's many errors into sections including "Imitations from other Authors", "Grammar", and – of most interest here – "Prosody". Amongst his observations on the latter, Stillingfleet states his view that "Milton certainly observed the resemblance between our Heroic & the Greek Iambic verse & formed his Prosody upon it as far as difference of the two tongues would admit of" (Stillingfleet 1745-6, 5). Stillingfleet goes on to develop further this belief that Milton took Greek prosody as a model for his own metrical innovations, identifying certain patterns in his verse that he traces to this supposed origin. The letter observes that "when he aims at smooth verse he gives long & short syllables alternately," Stillingfleet noting that "he makes great use of Elisions," and, in a puzzlingly similar point, "He gives frequently three short syllables for two". Referring repeatedly to the Greek tragedians as Miltonic exemplars, Stillingfleet even claims that the poet's "Diction is formed on the Greek Language," revealing his own plans to "bring Instances of similar Greek Expressions & compare them with His Imitations of the Manner & Turn & Position of the words in the Greek" (*ibid.*).¹²

Stillingfleet's instinct that Greek verse might underly, and hence justify by precedent, some of Milton's prosodic liberties is intriguing, perhaps most so in his failure to really make the argument stick (much as Shawcross would some 250 years later). The unsatisfactory – and yet oddly compulsive – nature of any such attempt to explain away Milton's innovative verse forms by reference to a Greek model is made even clearer a little over a century later when Robert Bridges makes his well-known effort to explain *Milton's Prosody*, in notes on the verse that begin life as introductory remarks to a teaching text of *Paradise Lost* intended for use in schools. Pity the poor student seeking clarity on this complex issue in Bridges' remarks, which rapidly sprawled beyond their original confines with ever-expanded editions appearing between the years of 1887 and 1921, when they reached

¹¹ *Milton's Paradise Lost. A New Edition, by Richard Bentley, DD.* (London, 1732), BL copy C.134.h.1. See Adlington 2015.

¹² While many of Stillingfleet's observations address *Paradise Lost* most directly, examples are drawn from across Milton's verse, suggesting that such comments are based on a wider survey of the poet's prosody than first appears.

final form in an extremely popular book that featured seven appendices and comprised chapters on a variety of Miltonic works, including *Samson Agonistes* (the irony of encountering resistance to formal constraints in trying to explain a system of formal constraint is not entirely lost on Bridges). Writing some thirty years after its publication, and attesting in some measure to the failure of any other critic to surpass this deeply flawed explanation of *Milton's Prosody*, George Kellog brands the study "both highly promising and a little repulsive" (Kellog 1953, 286). Bridges' methodology, which relies on the use of a concordance to examine Miltonic usage of words elsewhere in order to infer how they must be scanned at any given moment, is certainly a little suspect, as is his elaborate rhetorical artifice, by which he infamously has Milton write in one way and read in another: "He wrote the choruses of *Samson* in a rhythmical stressed verse, and scanned it by means of fictions," Bridges notoriously observes (Bridges 1893, 68). But there is sense in Bridges' readings too – his emphasis on accent or stress in scanning English verse, while remembering that its "hybrid" nature "cannot be explained exclusively by English or by classical rule," for instance, or his rebuttal of those who consider *Samson Agonistes* "unmusical" or, for that matter, his willingness to look to models of the past as sources for Milton's supposed metrical innovations (Bridges 1893, 68, 32, 43). And Bridges is often unwittingly prescient in his rather muddled remarks.

Two distinct, but inter-related, aspects of his work are of particular interest to our study of the ways critics have sought to bring a Greek tragic inheritance to bear on our understanding of the metrical innovations of *Samson*. First, taking his lead from Milton's own preface (like Stillingfleet) Bridges repeatedly turns to Greek (and Roman) prosodic practice in conjunction with what he terms Milton's "liberties" of metre. In *Samson Agonistes* Milton uses multiple inversions in a variety of positions ("not confined to the first foot of the line") and in combination with lines "of various lengths", we learn, to create "what are called dactylic (that is true tri-syllabic verse) rhythms into his verse, which is all the while composed strictly of disyllabic feet" (Bridges 1893, 34). But the jostling of essentially contradictory terms against each other here serves mostly to demonstrate the inadequacy of such prosody to capture the metrical feats (and feet) of *Samson Agonistes*. Bridges describes the way that Milton's poetic freedoms "strain . . . the analogy of Greek and Latin quantitative feet," as if prosody is a battleground upon which the fight for personal liberty is won and lost. Indeed, Bridges is himself prone to the very kinds of "analogical reading" (to borrow Rush's phrase) of Milton's metrics that he urges readers of the poem to resist: "The relation of the form of the verse to the sense is not intended to be taken exactly," he admonishes. "Poetry would be absurd which was always mimicking the diction or the sense," Bridges writes, after devoting two pages of his study to glossing the

way the prosody of the opening Chorus of *Samson Agonistes* mimics the sense of its words in precisely this way (Bridges 1894, 43). "See how | he lies | at ran|dom, care|lessly| diffus'd" (117), is "the first twelve-syllable line in the poem, 7+5," Bridges notes, "In describing great Samson stretched on the bank, it describes itself." "With lang|uish'd head| unpropt," (119) is "a six-syllable line, its shortness is the want of support." While "And by | himself | given o-(ver);" (121) contains an "extrametrical final syllable . . . suggestive of negligence" (42). Bridges repeatedly makes metrical features of Milton's verse signify – or stand in for, serve as a synecdoche of – its sense.

This tendency is picked up by Bridges' correspondent Gerard Manley Hopkins, in the letters exchanged between the two men on the subject of *Samson's* metre, which the latter claims to have "mastered", subjugating his predecessor to his own metrical system, dependent upon "sprung rhythm" and "counterpointing" (Hopkins 1991, 87, 91, 108, 144). There is an almost painful sense throughout Hopkins' letters of a contest in which Milton is the agon to his own attempts at metrical innovation, an antagonism exacerbated by the Jesuit poet's moral disgust at his precursor's support for divorce: "I think he was a very bad man," he writes in a letter sent to Bridges on 3rd April 1877 (88). Despite this, Hopkins reveres Milton, singling him out as being the only poet – aside from himself – to have successfully trodden a narrow line between metrical liberty, "apparent licences", and "strictness": "In fact all English verse, except Milton's, almost, offends me as 'licentious'. Remember this" (21st August 1877, 89-90). Milton's ability to use metre "freely" is what sparks this admiration, but only because of its moderation (a moderation that Hopkins rather wishes had tempered the poet's political views) (108).

In this aspect of his relationship to Milton Hopkins mirrors the second element of Bridges' study of *Milton's Prosody* that is relevant to our present study. The tempering of metrical (and, concomitantly, political) innovation is something that all three men appear to value. Experimentation is licensed by recourse to the poetry of the past. Liberty is underpinned by historical precedent. Just as Shakespeare triumphs over metrical restrictions in his late plays, where "he threw off the syllabic trammels of his early style," so Milton in *Samson Agonistes* "came to determine rhythm by stress, though he learnedly disguised his liberty by various artifices," Hopkins writes to Bridges (68). The stories one tells about poetry and politics alike are often crucial in justifying one's endeavour, and at times seem to take precedence over it. Once again, the idea of the synecdoche is helpful in thinking this through. The etymology of the term, with its emphasis on interpretation, "understanding one thing with another", by which a single element can stand as a kind of shorthand for an entire system to which it belongs, resonates with the component of "artifice" involved in Milton's supposed disguising of his own

formal liberties. Greek prosody becomes a useful set of terms with which metrical liberties can be disguised, terminology that in turn stands in for the whole literary and political system to which ancient Greek tragedy belongs.

3. Healing Words: The Useful Fictions of Metre...

This element of useful fictionality in accounts of Milton's Greek tragic precursors is a striking feature of writings about *Samson's* metre from his own explanatory preface onwards. From Stillingfleet (whose only partially convincing narrative of the Greek aspects of its choruses we have already encountered) to Hopkins, Bridges and beyond, we have seen how there have been repeated attempts to explain the form of Milton's dramatic poem by positing an origin in the metres of ancient Greek poetry, particularly that of Euripides. James Holly Hanford believed that the metrical variations of the *Samson* choruses "are so great that one is inclined to abandon the attempt to recognize a theoretical conformity to this English pattern and consider them frankly as a reproduction of Greek and Roman rhythms" (Hanford 1954, 326, 324). Before going on to scan this poetry "in the Greek way", as he asserts Milton would himself have done (a method that requires leaning heavily on "trochees, spondees [and] dactyls" and that produces a prosody "often very similar to the logaoedic patterns" or mixed metrical mode of prose), Hanford makes the fascinating suggestion that "His own inventions are simply in the way of further modifications such as the ancients themselves might have made" (325). Hanford imagines a Milton who tells himself that his metre is more truly Greek verse than that written by the Greeks themselves, a prosody that is licensed by a fiction about what ancient Greek poets were doing or might have done.

It is not just Milton who creates ultimately unsustainable fictions about what his poetry is doing in Hanford's account. Hanford himself posits explanations that he clearly does not believe in, but that are revealing in their inadequacies. When he claims that the metre of the *Samson* choruses is "the freest form known to the ancients, the logaoedic . . . a trochaic measure with dactyls and other substitutions," he trails off into vagueness, making apparent the failure of any such explanation (325-6).¹³ This is made all the more obvious by the efforts to scan Milton's verse in this measure that follow, and which prompt the admission that "the general movement is more clearly iambic". Ultimately, "The genius of the language and the traditions of English

¹³ The term "logaoedic," first recorded by the *OED* in 1844, would perhaps not have been as familiar to the "ancients" as Hanford here suggests. See "logaoedic, *adj.*," *OED* Online. September 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109746?redirectedFrom=logaoedic> (Accessed October 18, 2021).

verse were too strong to admit of Milton's giving us real Greek verse, even in *Samson*, without doing violence to his instincts," Hanford concludes, creating his own fiction of the kind of man Milton was (one driven by instinct, and genius, in response to language and tradition, unwilling to do violence), a narrative that is just as vivid as Hopkins' version of him as a "very bad man" (326). The frustrating unwillingness of Milton to deliver 'real' Greek poetry does not deter Hanford from his own instinct that the choruses of *Samson* in some sense approximate the metre of the ancient tragic drama, or his insistence that recreating such a form is what the poet told himself he was doing in creating its notoriously free metre.

These unsuccessful attempts to tie Milton's metrical innovations to a Greek precedent are nonetheless revealing, speaking of his deep involvement with classical prosody and also casting light on the way in which all metrical systems have this element of fiction about them. Prosodic theorists such as Attridge and Paul Fussell recognize the provisionality of any metrical system, even one as ancient as the Greek. Yet the desire to adhere to such strictures, to maintain this terminology, persists. There is something poignant, for Milton, in the tension between formal restraint and poetic experiment, just as there is something poignant in his own work between the reader who insists on absolute regularity and the writer who asserts metrical freedom. Efforts to explain prosodic innovation such as that we encounter in *Samson Agonistes* suggest nothing so much as the fact that metre is in the eye – and ear – of the beholder. And here is a chance for Milton's ideal of personal liberty to assert itself. His readers have repeatedly read their own personal sense of Milton's metre into *Samson*, insisting on fitting its verse to prosodic systems the dramatic poem endlessly resists. This tension, between form and poetry, between metre and meaning, is exactly the territory Milton is interested in, the terrain upon which individual freedom, poetic or political, vies with the structures and systems that surround it. Insofar as he is willing to accept such terms, Milton says in his preface to *Samson* that his own choruses are closest to "alloeostropha", containing "irregular strophes". The only term fitting to his exercise in formal liberty is one that itself describes a freedom of form within a system of constraint whose inadequacy is partly Milton's point. If a prosodic system can stand in for – can be a synecdoche for – a political system then *Samson Agonistes* shows the limits of all pre-existing modes, ancient and modern, Greek and English, and asks its readers to find – perhaps to create through their own work of fiction – alternatives, to make their freedom within constraint itself.

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