A SHIPWRECK OF FAITH: HAZARDOUS VOYAGES AND CONTESTED REPRESENTATIONS IN MILTON'S *SAMSON AGONISTES*

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In John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671), Samson compares the loss of his divine strength to a shipwreck and the Chorus compares Dalila to an alluring merchant ship as she approaches Samson. This essay argues that Milton uses maritime metaphors to represent contested gender, theology, and representation. The focus on these sites of contestation reveals that Milton invites readers to question his characters' interpretive acts by presenting successive, competing interpretations of Dalila's supposed betrayal and of the moral ambiguity of Samson's death. Samson and Dalila compete –with each other and with other characters – for control over their metaphorical ships, and they risk shipwreck as they seek to represent their actions and choices favourably. Parallel to Milton's characters, readers risk a kind of shipwreck as they navigate competing versions of the biblical story and encounter the conflict between wilful acts of interpretation and the desire to become a vessel for divine will.

In 1642, Milton wrote that to enter contemporary debates about church government would be "to imbark in a troubl'd sea of noises and hoars disputes".[1] Milton saw the hazards of joining debates about right religious practice as akin to setting sail in a stormy sea; like Paul and other New Testament authors, he connects faith in religious truth – a truth about which one can rarely be certain – to the danger of the sea voyage, and considers himself (or his text) a vessel for divine will.[2] Milton would continue to find maritime metaphors useful in

[1] John Milton, *The Reason of Church Government Urg'd against Prelaty*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953, I, 821.
[2] Acts 9:15 is an example of this use of the word "vessel"; see below for further discussion.

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both his prose and his poetry.[3] In Milton's work, the pilot is a figure who enters a contested, watery space; he navigates debates about religious practice, competition and unrest in a troubled marriage, and a chaotic world where maintaining one's faith is like navigating dangerous seas.

In *Samson Agonistes* (1671), Milton foregrounds the marital and epistemological problems that pilots encounter by figuring both Samson and Dalila in maritime terms and by illustrating their struggles to shape their own representations. Milton uses Samson's shipwreck – for which Samson blames himself, Dalila, and God – to focus our attention on Samson's difficulty in navigating his relation to God, and on the hazards of interpreting divine will. Milton sets Samson's version of the narrative from the Book of Judges next to those of several others: Dalila, Manoa, the Chorus, and other characters present interpretations of their own and Samson's acts. Milton's maritime metaphors alert his readers to the "troubl'd sea" of texts that make the project of biblical interpretation dangerous and competitive. His drama resists a coherent, singular retelling of the story from Judges 13-16 because such a coherence would fail to represent the kind of struggle that readers encounter when they attempt to interpret God's will and to navigate a complex world.

In what Alan Rudrum has punningly called the "*Agon* over *Samson Agonistes*", critics have vigorously debated how to read the ending of the play. These critics fall broadly into two camps that Rudrum calls "traditional" – those who read Samson as a heroic, divinely motivated liberator of his people – and "revisionist" – those who read Samson as a "false hero" and perpetrator of a violent massacre.[4] Recently, critics have begun to consider alternatives to reading the play from either of

[3] Metaphors and images of ships, pilots, and shipwrecks appear in several of Milton's prose works across his career, such as *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643), *Tetrachordon* (1645), *Eikonoklastes* (1649), and *The Readie & Easie Way* (1660). In the poetry, examples of these metaphors and images appear in *Lycidas* (1638), *Paradise Lost* (1674) at 1.200-210, 2.1011-24, 2.1041-44, and 3.71-76, and *Samson Agonistes* (1671), among other occurrences. For more examples, see my discussion of *The Doctrine and Discipline* and *Tetrachordon* below.

[4] Alan Rudrum, "Milton Scholarship and the *Agon* over *Samson Agonistes*", *Huntington Library Quarterly*, LXV/3 and 4 (2002), 465. The author includes himself in the "traditional" camp.

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these standpoints.[5] In her essay "Discontents with the Drama of Regeneration", Elizabeth Sauer contends that, in reading *Samson Agonistes*, "readers confront their blindness. Regenerationist interpretations give way to the elusive motives for Samson's final act – an act that leaves the various truths in play." Without entirely disallowing Samson's regeneration, Sauer recasts it as just one of "various truths" that Milton leaves open at the end of the play. In "confronting their blindness", readers take up the position inhabited by Milton's characters, and indeed by living persons, wherein they cannot know the full moral ramifications of any act they see.[6] I will argue that to refocus on the maritime imagery of Milton's drama is to refocus on this quality of unknowability; Milton figures his characters in maritime terms precisely to foreground the uncertainty of the interpretive voyage on which readers embark as we make our way through Samson's story.

Apart from Dalila's entrance as the "ship / of Tarsus",[7] the maritime imagery in Milton's drama has been little examined. In 1959, Barbara Lewalski highlighted Milton's representations of his characters and their emotions as ships and tempests, and opened intriguing venues for new scholarship.[8] And yet, the topic seemingly attracted no interest until John Guillory, in "Dalila's House: *Samson Agonistes* and the Sexual Division of Labor" (1986), compared Dalila's entrance to the description of Cleopatra on her barge in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (*c*. 1608). In his essay Guillory explores the sexual and political implications of Milton's move to describe both Samson and Dalila in maritime terms, and argues that

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[5] In addition to Sauer, Donnelly has expressed this goal. He argues that the critical divide between "regenerationist and revisionist readings of the play" does not have to remain a stark binary: "a regenerationist reading", he writes, "does not require an orthodox theological interpretation of the play" (Phillip J. Donnelly, *Milton's Scriptural Reasoning: Narrative and Protestant Toleration*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 206), and neither does a "revisionist" reading require complete commitment to heterodoxy (*ibid*., 205).

[6] Elizabeth Sauer, "Discontents with the Drama of Regeneration", in *The New Milton Criticism*, eds Peter C. Herman and Elizabeth Sauer, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 129.

[7] John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 714-15, in *Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, New York: Longman, 1997, 382.

[8] Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, "The Ship-Tempest Imagery in 'Samson Agonistes'", *Notes and Queries*, VI (October 1959), 372-73.

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because of this "narrative doubling … certain properties specific to Samson's identity can be transferred to Dalila",[9] making possible not only her seduction of Samson away from "public vocation" but also her own brief entrance into public life.[10] In what follows, I extend Lewalski's and Guillory's discussions to argue that Samson's and Dalila's parallel characterization as both ships and pilots prompts us to examine our own acts of interpretation as readers of multiple versions of the same story.

Samson describes himself as having been "shipwrecked"[11] after Dalila's betrayal; he divulged his secret to Dalila, and his "vessel"[12] lost its integrity, but Samson struggles to assign stable agency for his wreck. Because Dalila too is an ambiguously guided vessel that might bring good or evil to Samson, we set her voyage and her story beside Samson's and see a competing version of events wherein Dalila, in betraying Samson, saves her people from his violence. Furthermore, Samson's final destruction of himself and the Philistines can be read as either a triumphant rebuilding of Samson as God's "vessel" – since Samson claims that his "consecrated gift / Of strength" has returned with his regrown "hair"[13] – or as yet another misunderstanding of God's will and a tragic, violent shipwreck of the "vessel" that Samson achieves of his "own accord".[14] As Sauer notes, there remain "various truths in play";[15] as a result, the act of reading the play resembles the act of navigation. Indeed, readers risk a kind of shipwreck in interpreting multiple versions of the story, a position that echoes the

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[9] John Guillory, "Dalila's House: *Samson Agonistes* and the Sexual Division of Labor", in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, eds Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 113.
[10] *Ibid*., 116.
[11] Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, l. 198.
[12] *Ibid*., l. 199.
[13] *Ibid*., ll. 1354-55.
[14] *Ibid*., l. 1643. The Messenger reports that Samson says "Now of my own accord such other trial / I mean to show" (Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 1643-44) before he destroys the theatre. Critics debate whether the phrase "of my own accord" confirms Samson's exercise of his free will as God's chosen or represents Samson as acting on his own initiative apart from God's prompting. The phrase provides yet another node of unknowability in the play. For a summary of this debate, see Rudrum, "Milton Scholarship and the *Agon* over *Samson Agonistes*", 474-82.
[15] Sauer, "Discontents with the Drama of Regeneration", 129.

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risks that Samson and Dalila take when they seek to retell competing versions of their past and to shape their future representations.

Early in the play, Samson calls himself a "fool"[16] for misinterpreting God's purpose for him and divulging his secrets to Dalila, precipitating what he sees as a shipwreck. But when Samson describes his shipwrecked state, he only partially assigns blame to himself for his wreck, making the position of pilot obscure and confusing the cause of his dejection. After he greets the Chorus, Samson describes himself as "confused with shame" and asks:

> How could I once look up, or heave the head,
> 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…[17]

Samson claims to have steered his ship – the "Gloriously rigged" body given him by God that allows him to kill enemies so easily – foolishly, and therefore to have wrecked it. And yet, the vessel itself is "trusted" to Samson from "above": does the ship belong to Samson or to God? Is Samson really the "pilot" of the ship? Or might he be suggesting that in taking on the role of pilot, he disregarded God's guidance – usurped the divine pilot – for his own purposes? Additionally, Samson links his downfall to Dalila: not only was he a "foolish pilot", but he also sailed into contact with a "deceitful woman". Samson at first suggests that he is to blame for his failure to carry out God's will, then blurs the control of the ship so that it is difficult to ascertain whether Samson or God was in control, and finally places the blame for the shipwreck itself on an external cause, making Dalila into a storm or a rock or another element outside of himself and his understanding with God and casting her as responsible for his downfall.

In the next few lines, Samson further complicates the issue of blame, casting even more doubt on God's guidance of Samson as divine vessel. After describing his own shipwreck, Samson laments

[16] Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, l. 201.
[17] *Ibid*., ll. 197-202.

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his slavery, and speculates with derision about how others see him now. Speaking to the chorus, he says:

> … 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;
> This with the other should, at least have paired,
> These two proportioned ill drove me transverse.[18]

Samson worries that in his dejection and distance from God, he has been made into a "proverb" or a warning for other men of how not to behave. But he also questions his position as proverb – he asks why he must be called a "fool / In every street", and proceeds to answer his own question: if his "immeasurable strength" had been better "proportioned" with wisdom, he would not have been driven "transverse". As John Carey points out, "transverse" means "sideways [or] off-course" and is "a nautical term [that] continue[s] the ship image of 198-200".[19] Samson again appears to take the blame for his own shipwreck: he asserts that had he been wiser, he would have been able to hold his ship on course. He imagines an alternate past where, with strength and wisdom "paired", he might have become a very different figure than the blind slave he now finds himself. But Samson also subtly implicates God; if God had made him better "proportioned" – if God had given him more wisdom, or perhaps if God had been a better pilot of Samson's "Gloriously rigged" ship, he would never have shipwrecked in Dalila's storm, and he would not have become a proverbial warning to those embarking on marriage ventures with foreign women. In his devastation over his lost image as God's chosen strongman, Samson seeks to retell his story, to shift the blame off of his own skill as a pilot and onto God's. He imagines an alternate narrative in which he did not shipwreck, but remained God's chosen "vessel",[20] strong and whole, guided by God's wisdom. And

[18] *Ibid*., ll. 202-209.
[19] *Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, 365, note to l. 209.
[20] Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, l. 199.

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yet, in doing so, he again obscures the role of pilot – is Samson in control of the ship, or God?

Milton prefigures this slippage in control of the vessel in *The Reason of Church Government*, and foregrounds both religious and mercantile associations that maritime imagery might have had for his readers.[21] When Milton describes himself as having "imbark[ed]" on the "troubl'd sea" of discourse, he draws multiple meanings of the word "imbark" into his text, which include: "Of the ship: to receive on board" ("embark", v. 1b), "to go on board a ship" ("embark", v. 3), and "to engage in a business or undertaking, as in war, commerce, or the like" ("embark", v. 4).[22] These meanings bring two seventeenth-century associations with ships into Milton's text. In one sense, Milton the treatise author becomes a ship, or a vessel, among other vessels in a contentious sea. As a vessel, Milton sees it as his "duty" to write this pamphlet since "God [has] given [him] ability the while to reason against" those who have brought the Church "under heavy oppression".[23] Milton calls to mind Pauline uses of the word "vessel" where, as in Acts 9:15, a person becomes the vessel through which God achieves his ends: "But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he [Paul] is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel."[24] Paul, as God's

[21] On the dating of Milton's composition of *Samson Agonistes*, several critics disagree. Parker and Worden set out exemplary arguments for early and later composition, respectively. Worden's analysis makes it clear that those parts of the play that echo republican and regicidal rhetoric were most likely composed after 1662, but this evidence does not necessarily preclude the possibility of an earlier draft or drafts. The rhetorical references to shipwreck in Milton's early prose that are echoed in *Samson Agonistes* suggest either that Milton wrote a draft or drafts of the play before the 1660s or that he returned to his rhetoric of the 1640s as he composed the play. In either case, maritime metaphors were important and productive for Milton at several stages of his career (Walter Parker, *Milton: A Biography*, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968; Blair Worden, "Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, and the Restoration", in *Culture and Society in the Stuart Restoration: Literature, Drama, History*, ed. Gerald MacLean, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 111-36).

[22] "embark, v.", *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, May 2013.

[23] Milton, *The Reason of Church Government*, 804.

[24] In Greek, the word is σκευ'ος (*skeuos*) which, according to Thayer and Smith's *Bible Dictionary*, can mean, among other things, "vessel", "instrument" and "the tackle and armament of vessels, used specifically of sails and ropes". Thayer and Smith count 23 uses of σκευ'ος in the New Testament, 19 of which the King James Version translators render as "vessel" (Thayer and Smith, "Skeuos", *The KJV New*

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"vessel", sails from Tarsus carrying what he sees as religious truths to far away places, even when those foreign places might see him and his message as heretical. But as the final meaning of "embark" suggests, one could also embark on business and commerce at sea. Ships not only called up ancient Pauline ventures, but also more recent mercantile ventures for business where the cargo consisted of English exports to Europe and a variety of imports from the Mediterranean and the New World, such as spices and other commodities. Merchants also brought back stories about people and people themselves who were culturally and religiously foreign. The identity of the pilot, however, remains complex: if Milton is the vessel, and proper religious practice is the cargo with which God has loaded him, then God is the pilot or the merchant, and is ultimately in control of Milton's venture into "troubl'd seas". But we can also see Milton's treatise as a vessel itself, directed by the author, and carrying Milton's ideas into the dangerous waters of religious debate; he ventures his ideas as cargo for mercantile business despite the threat of shipwreck.

Milton's description of the vessel, especially the shipwrecked vessel in *Samson Agonistes*, also echoes 1 Timothy 1:18-20, where Paul (or the author of 1 Timothy writing as Paul) likens having strong faith and conscience as a leader of a Church to manning a strong and stable ship. He asserts that lacking these qualities leads to shipwreck:

> 18 This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophesies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare;
> 19 Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck.
> 20 Of whom is Hymeneus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.

Here, Paul instructs his disciple Timothy to guard his faith and conscience in order to fight "good warfare", presumably against those who were practising or preaching early Christian faith incorrectly. Failure to keep a good conscience – to properly identify and defend

Testament Greek Lexicon, 2012: BibleStudyTools.com). Even in this brief definition we see that *skeuos* is both vessel and sail; the word's multiple meanings destabilize the metaphor of the divine vessel even as they set it forth.

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religious truth – results in shipwreck. In 1655, Daniel Cawdrey, a clergyman and member of the Westminster assembly, explicated these verses from 1 Timothy at length in a sermon called "A Late Great Shipwrack of Faith". Cawdrey sought to use the Pauline metaphor of the shipwreck of faith to lament what he saw as the growing problem of "*Apostacie*"[25] in England, and to give his congregation a maritime representation of correct, stable faith and conscience. Cawdrey's attempts to assign correlations between the human body and a merchant ship, instead of providing a stable metaphor for his congregation as he might have hoped, illustrate the ambiguity of the ship and shipwreck metaphor. Cawdrey takes 1 Timothy 1:19 word by word, finally writing:

> The last word considerable is, *ἐναυάγησαν*, have made *shipwrack*; a *Metaphor* taken (as I said) from *Mariners* or Seafaring men, who when the *Ship* is broken or sunk, lose the *Merchandize* therein contained. So that *Faith*, or the *Truth* of the Gospel is the *Merchandize*; a *good Conscience* is the Ship.[26]

Faith is to be protected from those who would lead one away from the "Truth", such as the Jesuits – the perennial Catholic enemy whom Cawdrey labels "locusts" – and also the various "Sectaries" who hold "monstrous and blasphemous Opinions" and actively seek to convert the unwary to their ideas.[27]

But Cawdrey's explanation of the metaphor leaves us with a few important questions. Does the human actor stand on the ship of his own conscience with his faith tucked safely below decks? Or is the human a ship, guided ultimately by God? Or might the human actor be the merchant still on shore, having sent his ship out into the world for economic gain? Is God then his ship's captain? Or someone else? What at first seems an easy and useful comparison quickly devolves when we try to ascertain how the guidance of the ship works in practice. This confusion inherent in the metaphor creates space for

[25] Daniel Cawdrey, *A Late Great Shipwrack of Faith: Occasioned by a Fearful Wrack of Conscience. Discovered in a Sermon Preached at Paul's the First Day of July, 1655*, London: Joseph Cranford, the Phoenix in St. Pauls Church-yard, 1655, Epistle Dedicatorie, A2r.
[26] *Ibid.*, 3.
[27] *Ibid.*, Epistle Dedicatorie, A2v.

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readers of Timothy – like Milton – and also for readers of Cawdrey's sermon, to interpret the metaphor to their own purpose, writing themselves into the role of ship, pilot, or passenger, as they see fit. Responsibility for the shipwreck blurs as we are less and less able to assign the role of pilot either to a human actor or to God or to external causes like rocks and storms.

Despite Samson's Old Testament origin, Milton makes him echo 1 Timothy; as though he had been exhorted to do so by Paul, Samson seeks to wage "a good warefare" against the Philistines. And yet the venture of his "vessel" has failed not only because of the wiles of a "deceitful woman", but also because of the difficulty Samson has had in properly interpreting the direction he receives from God. He seems confused about how to properly pilot his ship, or how to carry out God's will. Samson justifies his first choice of wife as the result of an "intimate impulse"[28] from God – a reasonably clear assertion of divine pilotage in this venture. But with Dalila, Samson applies his own logic in place of divine "impulse", saying that he married Dalila because "[he] thought it lawful from [his] former act".[29] Samson's choice seems, then, to have come as a product of his own thought – his own piloting – and not as divine inspiration. He appears ignorant of God's will in the matter, but attempts to assert that his marriage was "lawful" because he entered into it for the same reasons as he did his first marriage.

Previously, as God's chosen instrument, Samson carried out violence against the Philistines: it would now seem that Samson, as vessel, has agency to direct his voyage even while God is the ultimate pilot. And yet, that very agency – wherein Samson claims to be the "Sole author … sole cause"[30] of his downfall – produces shipwreck. Samson has perhaps recognized that, in claiming sole authorship, he misinterpreted God's will. In his choice to marry Dalila, he does not weigh carefully enough the possibility that the story of this marriage might not map perfectly on to the story of his previous marriage. The project of interpreting God's will is complex: Samson finds himself in a "troubl'd sea" where he cannot ascertain the right position for

[28] Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, l. 223.
[29] *Ibid*., l. 231.
[30] *Ibid*., l. 376.

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himself within God's vessel, and where he shipwrecks because of his own desire to control his actions.

Dalila parallels Samson: she is another kind of vessel – perhaps divinely directed by Dagon, or perhaps directed only by Dalila's conscience – and we set her voyage next to Samson's. Her representation as both ship and pilot, presented to readers by the Chorus, is just as ambiguous as Samson's.[31] She does not shipwreck, but the ambiguity of her portrayal highlights the complex navigations that Milton undertook in creating her character; she is a "troubl'd sea" of texts within Milton's play. At her entrance, the Chorus make Dalila out as like Shakespeare's Cleopatra.[32] They present her to Samson as a woman who must have been (and therefore must still be) so alluring that even Samson, God's chosen, could not resist her:

> 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
> Of Javan or Gadire
> With all her bravery on, and tackle trim,
> Sails filled, and streamers waving,
> Courted by all the winds that hold them play,
> An amber scent of odorous perfume
> Her harbinger, a damsel train behind;
> Some rich Philistian matron she may seem,

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[31] Introduced in the Argument as "friends and equals of [Samson's] tribe" (*ibid*., l. 64), the Chorus describe Dalila as they would have Samson see her: since Samson cannot see, they are at liberty to represent Dalila as they desire. They are also the audience's eyes, serving often as conveyers of stage directions – in a sense, we must take them as honest reporters of what they see. And yet, as Charnes argues, we would do well to recognize "the degree to which reporting is a constitutive, rather than merely conductive, performance all its own" (Linda Charnes, *Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993, 104). The Chorus is made up of biased observers who, as Samson's friends, have an interest in representing his actions favourably and those of his enemies unfavourably.

[32] For more on Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* as an intertext for *Samson Agonistes*, see Guillory, "Dalila's House: *Samson Agonistes* and the Sexual Division of Labor".

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And now at nearer view, no other certain
Then Dalila thy wife.[33]

She is at first difficult to make out – "what thing of sea or land" is Dalila, the Chorus ask? After their initial query, the Chorus liken her to a "ship / Of Tarsus".[34] Dalila may be a problematic precursor to Paul, who also sailed from Tarsus – like the apostle (but before him and without his vision on the road to Damascus), she appears to sail toward Samson in order to communicate her religious message, her own version of the "good news" of Christ.[35] As characters in the Old Testament, the Chorus can have no knowledge of Paul, but Milton asks us to consider the connections between the Old and New Testament Mediterraneans and, in doing so, portrays Dalila as a voyager whose religious purpose might bear resemblance to a divinely sanctioned voyage, even if the divinity driving her vessel is Dagon and not God. Samson and the Chorus can only see her as a dangerous, seductive figure from a false religion, but Milton does not allow us to completely disavow Dalila's potential as a divine vessel.

From Tarsus, Dalila's ship sails either toward the "isles / Of Javan" or toward "Gadire".[36] If she sails toward Javan, the Chorus continue to ascribe biblical significance to her ship. If she sails toward Gadire, given England's history with the city of Cadiz – and its importance as a port of commerce for both Atlantic and Mediterranean trading routes – the Chorus begin to place her as a mercantile vessel. As Dalila approaches Samson, the Chorus extend the mercantile simile and the initial biblical simile drops away; the "amber scent of odorous perfume" allies Dalila not only with Cleopatra, but also with spice

[33] Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 710-24.
[34] Carey posits a connection here to "The biblical phrase 'ships of Tarshish' (i.e., probably Tartessus in S. Spain) … found in *Isa* xxiii 1, 14, and *Ps*. xlviii 7" (*Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, 382, note to l. 715).
[35] Dobranski notes that Parker had already pointed out the association between Tarsus and St Paul in an unpublished annotation to *Samson Agonistes* (Stephen Dobranski, *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton. Volume Three: Samson Agonistes*, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne, 2009, 268).
[36] The "isles / Of Javan" are identified by Carey as the Ionian Isles, west of Greece, where "Javan, son of Japhet (*Gen*. x 2) and grandson of Noah" was supposed to have landed and become the "ancestor of the ionians". "Gadire" is an old Phonecian and Greek name for Cadiz, a port in southern Spain (*Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, 382, note to ll. 715-16).

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traders sailing out of the east and bringing the exotic Mediterranean and Turkish goods to Europe. Through the Chorus's struggle to identify Dalila, she becomes both a divinely guided vessel and a merchant ship: she blurs the line between religious and economic commerce in the Mediterranean, and this blurring constitutes both her allure and her danger. In the Chorus' brief description, and in their struggle to define and narrate Dalila, we see beyond their voices to the complex textual negotiations that have gone into retelling Samson's story in the political and religious climate of Milton's time. Their confusion mirrors the difficulty Milton faces as he writes his closet drama amidst a "troubl'd sea" of texts.

Even though Dalila does not shipwreck in the play, her ship does not signify a stable set of ideas about being either a pilot or a vessel carrying out the will of a god. After her speech to Samson, the Chorus go on to label her an incompetent "steers-mate"[37] with whom even the most "expert" pilot "needs must wreck";[38] just as Samson cannot easily place himself as either vessel or pilot, the Chorus cannot decide whether Dalila is an alluring, dangerous foreign vessel that Samson steered to shipwreck, or whether her bad pilotage was responsible for the wreck of their marriage. The Chorus seem to argue that marriage is a joint voyage that can end in shipwreck. Milton prefigures this idea in two of his prose works from the 1640s. In *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643), Milton argues that even a good Christian, when faced with a marriage that he cannot dissolve, is likely to "mutin against divine providence" and is in danger of "shipwrack" because of "an over-tost faith".[39] In *Tetrachordon* (1645), Milton again describes a bad marriage as one which "brings on such a scene of cloud and tempest, as turns all to shipwrack without havn or shoar but to a ransomles captivity".[40] Marriage partners who are not capable of communicating successfully and being good "steers-mate[s]" cannot have a successful marriage.

[37] Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, l. 1045.
[38] *Ibid*., l. 1044.
[39] John Milton, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Ernest Sirluck, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959, II, 254. See also Lowell Coolidge, "Introduction and Notes to the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*", in *ibid*., 217-360.
[40] John Milton, *Tetrachordon*, in *ibid*., 600-601.

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According to the Chorus, Samson has experienced such a marriage with Dalila, but Samson subtly fashions his own version of their story, refusing to give Dalila any part in piloting their vessel. Instead, she embodies the storm that causes his shipwreck. Samson accuses Dalila of having used her femininity as a specifically sea-based assault on his vessel. As he remembers and discusses his past with the Chorus, he laments:

> 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 bond-slave; O indignity, O blot
> To honour and religion![41]

Dalila and Samson engage in a battle at sea, and instead of seeing Dalila as a "steers-mate", Samson figures her as an enemy force. In Samson's version of their past, Dalila is emphatically not the ship of 1 Timothy 18-20 that can wage good religious warfare on those who deviate from her faith. Rather, she is either war ship or a storm or another sea-based hazard that assaults Samson with her "Tongue-batteries" and causes his ship to sink. She can change Samson with her beauty – "feminine assaults" – and with her words to such an extent that after Dalila is finished with him, Samson finds himself in great pain and with a keen "sense of heaven's desertion".[42] He asserts that his relationship to God changes as a result of his sea battle with Dalila – he has suffered a shipwreck of faith at her hands.

And yet, even in his tirade against Dalila's wiles, the terms of Samson's accusations slip, and our sense of who is to blame again blurs. Is Samson the "Sole author" of his loss of divine direction or is Dalila to blame? When Dalila enters and tells her own version of their story, we compare Samson's account to hers, and we see that each

[41] Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 402-12 (my emphases).
[42] *Ibid.*, l. 632.

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marriage partner attempts to rewrite the story in his or her own favour, adding complexity and ambiguity to their joint venture in marriage. Dalila, at first, seems to blame the men and priests of her tribe for her betrayal of Samson's secrets but, in her apology to Samson, she begins to take agency, and the question of culpability and motivation becomes vexed. Dalila laments:

> Adjured by all the bonds of civil duty
> And of religion, pressed how just it was,
> How honourable, 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
> It would be to ensnare an irreligious
> Dishonourer of Dagon: what had I
> To oppose against such powerful arguments?[43]

Dalila portrays the men of her tribe as advising her to make "good warfare" on Samson, just as the Paul of 1 Timothy 18-20 advises his disciple: she ought to fight "glorious[ly]" to entrap Samson and to achieve revenge for his wrongs to her religion and society. And yet, the decision to betray Samson ultimately rests with Dalila. She "held long debate"[44] with her love for him, and eventually finds the "bonds of civil duty / And of religion" strong enough within her to motivate her actions. Loyalty to her state and to her religion are, for her, worth the price she pays in betraying her marriage bonds. As Stoll argues, Dalila makes a case for "the equal legitimacy of Philistian religion"[45] and asserts its worthiness as a cause for fighting a good war. She does not fight for the God of 1 Timothy, but she asserts that her religious war against Samson is no less legitimate. In doing so, she also presents her version of the past, seeking to justify her actions and rewriting her role in Samson's shipwreck: in Dalila's version, Samson no longer appears as God's dejected Nazarite but is the vanquished foe, a casualty of a religiously and nationally necessary war.

[43] *Ibid*., ll. 853-62.
[44] *Ibid*., l. 863.
[45] Abraham Stoll, *Milton and Monotheism*, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2009, 297.

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In addition to joining Samson as a pilot and attempting to rewrite their past, Dalila fully reverses the storm imagery that Samson uses to accuse her of treachery. Dalila recognizes the inherent difficulty in the joint venture with Samson. At the beginning of her final speech, she exclaims:

> I see thou art implacable, more deaf
> To prayers then 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.[46]

Dalila reverses Samson's earlier figuration of her as a storm that caused his shipwreck. Samson, now, is the "implacable" storm, and Dalila the pilot who must navigate his angry tempest. She turns his metaphor to her own purposes and takes control of the ship. She recognizes that being a co-pilot with Samson in his "anger" can never lead to a productive, profitable voyage, and so she turns away from him and sails to her own end, outside of the drama. Dalila does not shipwreck: like a wise sailor, she opts to find an alternate route – or to wait for safer passage – instead of continuing to batter herself against Samson's upheaval.

At the end of the play, Dalila remains a follower of Dagon, and Samson remains a follower of the Hebrew God, whether or not he has regenerated or rebuilt his vessel, and whether or not we see him as a terrorist, suicide, martyr, hero, or other character. Despite their fundamental difference of religion, the parallel that Milton has set up for us between Samson and Dalila – describing them both as ships and pilots and having both of them engage in navigating and interpreting their representations – extends to the end of the play. Toward the end of her argument with Samson, Dalila imagines an alternative future for herself that we, as readers, know cannot come to be, but that is nonetheless compelling in the moment. Having realized that her attempts to reconnect with Samson are futile, Dalila says:

> Fame if not double-faced is double-mouthed,
> And with contrary blast proclaims most deeds ….

[46] Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, ll. 960-64.

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> My name perhaps among the circumcised
> In Dan, in Judah, and the bordering Tribes,
> To all posterity may stand defamed ….
> But in my country where I most desire,
> In Ecron, 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 odours visited and annual flowers.[47]

Dalila first considers her unpleasant, "defamed" future in which readers of Judges and of *Samson Agonistes* participate, but she then paints a different scene. Dalila imagines an alternative narrative in which she has violently rescued her "country from a fierce destroyer", and in which she is the scriptural saviour instead of Samson. As Stoll asserts, "Fame's double mouth suggests a competing historical truth": "[Dalila] compare[s] herself to Jael, and therefore her legacy to sacred Scripture… [and here Milton] takes the truly subversive step of imagining another sacred history."[48] Dalila fashions a new narrative, attempting to wrest authorial control for herself. As we have seen, she attempts to legitimate the Philistine religion, and argues here for an unsettling alternate view of Samson's biblical story. Dalila seeks to rewrite her ending: she takes control of her ship from the Chorus and navigates on her own the dangerous waters of authorship. But her version of the story does not stand alone: we read it alongside Samson's version and the Chorus's version, and alongside a widening set of texts that tell her story.

Samson too seeks to shape his future representation – as he considers the summons to give "public proof"[49] to the Philistines of his "strength … surpassing human rate",[50] Samson sees an opportunity to shape his story and to perform a heroic role in the Philistine "theatre".[51] Samson shifts from initially abusing the Officer and

[47] *Ibid.*, ll. 971-87.
[48] Stoll, *Milton and Monotheism*, 300.
[49] Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, l. 1314.
[50] *Ibid.*, l. 1313.
[51] *Ibid.*, l. 1605.

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roundly refusing to come to the theatre to talking himself into going along, finally saying: "I begin to feel / Some rousing motions in me which dispose / To something extraordinary my thoughts."[52] As he did in his earlier dejection, Samson here begins to imagine a narrative for himself where he will perform this unspecified "extraordinary" deed as the "enemy"[53] of the Philistines. And yet, his decision is fraught with justifications. He assures first himself[54] and then his father and friends that his actions will involve "Nothing dishonorable, impure, unworthy / [to] Our God, our Law, my nation, or myself".[55] The negative phrasing seems to belie Samson's conviction that he does the right thing by going to the "theatre". As Dalila did before him, he carefully considers the religious and civic ramifications of his plans: as he presumably contemplates a violent action that he hopes is as righteous as his earlier violent acts, Samson seeks to claim civic and religious justification for the action that will come from his "thoughts".[56] Samson attempts to again become God's vessel and hopes that he has learned – by means of his shipwreck – the wisdom that he lacked in his venture with Dalila.

But just as Dalila's version of her own future does not stand alone, Samson's justifications are not the only account of Samson's motives and actions that readers encounter. In fact, because Milton places Samson's death and the death of the Philistines off-stage, readers cannot access Samson's version of the final event and must, instead, rely on the words of the Messenger, the Chorus, and Manoa in order to interpret the end of the play. But reporting itself is an interpretive act; the Messenger highlights the ambiguity of his own reporting, describing the moment before Samson pulls down the pillars with two different interpretations simultaneously: he says that Samson "stood, *as* one who prayed / *Or* some great matter in his mind revolved".[57] Does Samson pray or think in his final moments? Does he ask God to make him a potent vessel, or does he still struggle to interpret – to think through – God's will or the implication of his "rousing

[52] *Ibid.*, ll. 1381-83.
[53] *Ibid.*, l. 1416.
[54] *Ibid.*, ll. 1408-409.
[55] *Ibid.*, l. 1424-25.
[56] *Ibid.*, l. 1383.
[57] *Ibid.*, ll. 1637-38 (my emphases).

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motions"?[58] Manoa and the Chorus interpret the Messenger's words according to their own ideas about what Samson's story should mean. They offer a model for reading the end of the play, but not one that readers ought to follow blindly after experiencing the hazards of the interpretive act through Samson's shipwreck and Dalila's approach as a ship. Manoa's final words echo Dalila's: instead of clearly delineating Samson as a divinely inspired hero, Manoa imagines a future that prompts us to again compare Samson to Dalila, and to ask ourselves if their versions of destructive heroism are in fact so different. Indeed, as Neelakanta contends:

> Discerning readers of Samson Agonistes are … confronted by the similarities between Samson and those he destroys. Manoa is made to envision Samson's tomb in language that is uncomfortably similar to Dalila's depiction of the statue that she imagines the Philistines will erect in her honor.[59]

As Neelakanta further points out, Manoa's description of "a monument"[60] where all of Samson's "acts [will be] enrolled / In copious legend, or sweet lyric song"[61] and to which "virgins" will bring "flowers"[62] closely echoes the tomb and songs that Dalila describes as she imagines her alternate future. Manoa wants fame and glory to follow Samson's death and the killing of the Philistines, and he wants Samson to be God's vessel that strikes down the infidel. But, in imagining a future for Samson like the future that Dalila imagines for herself, Manoa makes Samson's final action echo Dalila's betrayal even as he seeks to justify and glorify Samson's violence.

Whether Samson has, through repentance, become God's vessel again, or whether he still seeks to control his own ship and misinterprets divine will remains ambiguous. The violence at the end of the play can be seen as righteous or not, but Milton focuses our attention on Samson's endeavours at navigation, both maritime and

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[58] *Ibid.*, l. 1382.
[59] Vanita Neelakanta, "*Theatrum Mundi* and Milton's Theater of the Blind in *Samson Agonistes*", *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, XI/1 (Spring/Summer 2011), 53.
[60] Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, l. 1734.
[61] *Ibid.*, ll. 1736-37.
[62] *Ibid.*, ll. 1741-42.

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authorial. Samson attempts to tell his story in such a way that he can escape his dejection in shipwreck and reconnect with God, but other versions of the story – those told by Dalila, Harapha, the Chorus, the Messenger, and even Manoa – compete with Samson's narrative attempts and make his control over his own representation unstable. Just as Dalila tries to shape how she will be seen and performed in the future, Samson attempts to fashion and perform his own story in the Philistine "theatre" so that he can counter those who would sing and proverb him "for a fool". By placing Samson's death off-stage – in a text conspicuously not "intended" for the stage[63] – Milton asks his audience to occupy the position of interpreter. Just as Samson cannot pin down either responsibility for his shipwreck or a stable interpretation of his marriage to Dalila, so we readers cannot pin down a stable interpretation for his action at the end of the play. We risk shipwreck in our analytical practice and encounter a scattering of possibilities on the "troubl'd sea" of interpretation. In some sense, perhaps, we have to experience shipwreck in order to acknowledge the ambiguity of biblical narrative and to see that each interpretation of a biblical story is a vessel that may or may not be filled with divine purpose, and that may or may not make a successful voyage toward its recipients.

[63] Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, "Introduction" (*OF THAT SORT OF DRAMATIC POEM WHICH IS CALLED TRAGEDY*), in *Milton: Complete Shorter Poems*, l. 48, 357. The essay prefaced *Samson Agonistes* when the play was published in 1671.

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Islands and Irelands: Journeys, Mappings and Re-mappings

Barra Ó Seaghdha

The journey of one family from Cork City to the West Kerry Gaeltacht is set within larger east/west patterns. As an island beyond the island of Britain, Ireland was seen, negatively, as peripheral, underdeveloped and culturally inferior or, positively, by both nationalist intellectuals and romantic visitors, as a repository of ancient, pre-Conquest and pre-industrial values. This seemingly immemorial cultural pattern was shaped by the centuries during which military, administrative, economic and linguistic power was exercised along an east/west axis. Through a West Kerry lens, this essay considers ancient population movements, the Vikings, medieval trade, Spanish/English rivalries, Ireland as theatre for English civil wars, the geo-political consequences of Ireland's location, the Atlantic, global and cross-European connections created by emigration and recent immigration. A simple east/west mapping of Ireland is inadequate, even though that pattern retains a powerful hold on our imaginations.

There were eight of us – my father and mother, three girls and three boys – by the time we got our first car. When holiday time came, we children watched or got in the way as the Volkswagen was loaded – suitcases went on the roof-rack, bags of clothes and all kinds of necessities were stuffed under the bonnet, under seats, behind the back seat (along with our youngest and smallest, one year at least) and, amid much drama and excitement, we all squeezed in and began the journey westwards. (As we grew bigger, one or two of us had to make our way by train, bus and bike.) Leaving the suburbs of Cork, we watched the smooth green landscape flow past until it turned rocky and became West Cork. We crossed the border into Kerry, passed through Killarney and on, till at last we were trundling up and down the twisting, bumpy roads of the Dingle Peninsula. The sea and the Iveragh peninsula were on our left, fields or rocky slopes or mountains on our right; soon the ocean was opening up out beyond the

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