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Samson Agonistes, Charles II, and Restoration Delilahs

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The anonymous satirical poem “Further Advice to a Painter” (early 1671), sometimes attributed to Andrew Marvell, opens with the spectral figure of Charles I weeping as he watches his “degenerate” son, King Charles II, neglect the “work of State” to romp with “his Player,” Nell Gwyn (Marvell 1: l. 310). The ghost of the former King appeared in this manuscript poem just a few months after the publication of John Milton's closet drama *Samson Agonistes* (1670/1), which gives voice to another disappointed father. When Manoa, Samson's “reverend Sire” (326), reproaches his son for the “shame” that has “befall'n thee and thy Fathers house,” he articulates an accusation of dynastic failure, a charge that Samson's defeat by an idolatrous ideology and seduction by a series of treacherous women is a betrayal not only of God the Father, but also of Samson's family record and of his people (446–47).¹ A nation's hope transmuted to disappointment is a theme elaborated on by Milton's Chorus, for whom Samson is “The glory late of Israel, now the grief” (179), as they confront the downfall of a leader once heralded as a hero and wonder whether the etiolated man before them can really be “That Heroic, that Renown'd, / Irresistible *Samson*?” (122, 125–26). Some of the first readers of *Samson Agonistes*, remembering the hopes that had accompanied the King's triumphant Restoration in 1660, may have asked a similar question of Charles, as his once celebrated public image had gradually tarnished (see “The King's Vows” in Marvell 1: 173–75). Like Milton's Samson, who is “sung and proverb'd for a Fool / In every street,” and whose behavior has “brought scandal / To Israel” (203–04, 453–54), the King had become the subject of much gossip, with his sexual exploits remarked upon and wondered at in private and, increasingly, in public. Unsurprisingly, few points of likeness have been assumed to exist between Milton's verse and the largely anonymous, scandal-fixated, frequently obscene political satires that circulated in manuscript in the decades after the Restoration, but I wish to suggest that *Samson Agonistes* can be illuminated by this highly topical material.

In this article I propose a reading of Milton's last work that tethers the text firstly to its moment of publication in late 1670 and then to the publication of a second, posthumous, edition in 1680 at the height of the Exclusion Crisis, both difficult moments in Charles's reign. I examine the repeated deployment of the Samson and Delilah story to censure the King, which coincides with the publication of the drama's first and second editions. Central to my argument is the scandalous speech given by Lord Lucas in the House of Lords (and manuscript reports of it) in early 1671, and the numerous manuscript satires composed in 1679–80 that explicitly align Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of

*I am grateful to Emily Buffey for providing thoughtful comments on a draft of this article, and to Tom Lockwood and Valerie Rumbold, with whom I enjoyed early conversations about this material.

Portsmouth with Delilah. I assert that the publication of *Samson* may have influenced perceptions of Charles's sex-life, resulting in subsequent invocations of the story by Lucas in 1671 and by later anonymous satirists; I also suggest that, in turn, subsequent readers of *Samson* would have been able to map the swirling commentary around Charles's mistresses back onto Milton's drama. While critical interpretations informed by Milton's own politics often stamp *Samson Agonistes* with a radical, even revolutionary, purpose, this was not necessarily the framework through which many of its early readers would have experienced the drama. Like Dryden's allegorical *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), which can be read as "both a defense and an indictment of Charles II" (Battigelli 263), *Samson Agonistes* allowed its original readers the opportunity (should they be so inclined) to understand the King as a flawed hero, even offering some possibility of an eventual recovery. I do not claim it offered any reader a comprehensive portrait of Charles II (or any other real-life figure or event); rather, I am interested in the surprising congruence between the Samson and Dalila episode of Milton's drama and wider satirical and political contemporary commentaries. These archetypal figures become charged in 1670–71, and again in 1679–80, with a range of sexual and xenophobic meanings that invite a reconsideration of early readers' encounters with *Samson Agonistes*. The strange topicality of *Samson* may have occurred to those prepared to criticize the King and, I contend, was plausibly noted (even encouraged) by Milton's own publisher, John Starkey. In a climate in which analogies between Charles and the biblical Samson were being made and circulated, Milton's tragic protagonist can be seen to offer a model through which Charles's problematic sexual behavior might be challenged, critiqued, or even vindicated. I argue that independently of its author's intentions, the closet drama—a fable of a leader's sexual weakness being taken advantage of by a foreign enemy and ultimately proving disastrous for himself and his nation—formed a timely contribution to a wider discourse about the monarch's abjuration of his responsibilities.

Little scholarly attention has been paid to Samson's relation to Charles II. Helmer J. Helmers has examined Milton's drama alongside the 1660 work *Samson, or Holy Revenge* by the Dutch dramatist Joost van den Vondel, who was inspired by the English Restoration to construct a royalist discourse from the biblical story (233–58). Helmers argues that Vondel's Samson can be read as an inconsistent depiction of Charles II's triumph over Puritanism, a reading that registers allusions to contemporary antitheatricality debates and to the death of Charles I. Nicholas Jose has highlighted the imagery of regality that surrounds Samson, arguing that Milton was "subverting, or at least stripping away, the contemporary Stuart connotations" of such motifs in a bid to undermine the principles of the Restoration (161–62); for Jose, such symbolism becomes attached instead to Milton's own cause, one far removed from celebrations of the monarch's return. My reading places Charles II at the center of the drama in order to draw attention to how easily attentive readers might have assimilated Milton's Samson, consoled that "wisest Men / Have err'd, and by bad Women been deceiv'd," into a Restoration England in which "Women have grossly snar'd the wisest prince," according to the anonymous "Fifth Advice to a Painter" (Lord I. 135). Such readers, many perhaps sympathetic to the institution of monarchy, were not necessarily the fit audience that Milton would have envisaged for his drama. An examination of the cultural and political moment at the time of publication, however, reveals how contemporary anxieties and tensions collided with Milton's final work.

Uncertainty surrounding the composition dates of *Samson Agonistes* and the wider mutability of the "extraordinarily supple" biblical Samson episode have also left Milton's tragedy open to appropriation for varying political purposes (Wittreich 215). Milton's Philistines have historically acted as autofit enemies, able to represent infidel adherents to the opposing religious or political doctrine of the reader. In the seventeenth century, the Samson of the Book of Judges was an equivocal figure variously interpreted by writers as hero or as an exemplum of ungodly behavior (17–23). Positive accounts of Samson are notable for their reluctance to confront his lustful nature, choosing instead to focus on his famed strength (Shawcross 51), and it has been argued that Milton himself attempted to "clean Samson up" by obscuring his morally questionable actions in order to present an unambiguously devout figure (Gregory 181). Critics have agreed upon little about Milton's Samson, who has invited a wealth of attempts to identify real figures behind the character. Some believe that

the drama offers a comment on the English Revolution and a rejection of post-1660 pageantry and spectacle (Radzinowicz 113; Knoppers, *Historicizing* 42–66). Samson has been branded a “militant saint,” recalling contemporary political revolutionaries (Loewenstein 270; also Hill 228–48); he has been identified as a figuration of Charles I, with the drama a warning against a possible Restoration (Daniel 123–48); and his blindness and political isolation have been read as an autobiographical portrait of Milton himself (Rowse 255; Fallon 250–64; Martin 62–63). There has been a tendency to understand Samson in relation to Milton's radical politics, such as Blair Worden's exploration of the poet's status as a frustrated republican, focusing on Milton's sense of dislocation after the failure of the Commonwealth and subsequent Restoration (“Milton” 111–36; *Literature* 358–83). Doubtless, *Samson* contains echoes of its author's disillusionment, but such a reading is ultimately limiting. When read against wider contemporary discourses within the Houses of Parliament, circulated manuscript satires, and private writings, *Samson Agonistes* looks at home: England had found itself led by a King in thrall to a succession of mistresses (many with Catholic links), who were often figured as devious threats to the nation's stability. While Milton's closet drama is often reckoned to be backward-looking, it was, in fact, strikingly timely.

My reading is rooted not in Milton's Republican nostalgia or radical disillusionment but in the immediate political concerns of 1670–71. Laura Lunger Knoppers has done much to situate *Samson* in its 1670 context, emphasizing the atmosphere of political and religious unrest in England in the year of publication (“Englands Case” 571–88; Milton xx–xxxii). Little scholarly attention has been paid, however, to testing Kevin Sharpe's assertion that “in some ways, all Restoration texts presented and represented the monarchy and Charles II” against *Samson Agonistes* (*Rebranding* 83). While Milton's politics preclude any intentional alliance between the biblical hero Samson and the King whose restoration he bitterly regretted, I explore the ways in which such interpretations were nonetheless available to readers looking to find a consoling vision of their King as a naïve victim of a succession of scheming, provocative, and Catholic Delilahs, rather than the irresponsible, dissolute alternative. My focus here is on Samson's sexuality: typically, when Restoration writers and politicians turned to the biblical story, it was Samson's misguided enthrallment to the foreign Delilah that interested them. In 1670, Charles's sexual profligacy was set against a backdrop of growing concern about French expansionism, the court's Francophile sympathies, and Catholic infiltration into English politics and culture, all of which were discussed and debated publicly and privately. As Milton neared the end of his life, his work, as it had not been for at least a decade, was in tune—however circumstantially—with the zeitgeist.

1

Attempts to historicize Milton's drama have been complicated by uncertainty not only about the date of composition, but also about the precise moment of publication. While *Paradise Regained*, printed alongside *Samson*, is thought to have been written before 1660, a consensus on when Milton wrote *Samson* has not been reached. John T. Shawcross has considered the implications of composition both in the 1640s and in the 1660s, concluding that if Milton had begun the drama during the civil wars years it would embody the more general perennial concerns of the “high-minded reformer,” whereas if it were a work solely of the 1667–70 period, it would “reflect disappointments of the past and anxieties over the present and the future” (25; see also Radzinowicz 387–407; Kermode 59–78; Milton xciii–xcviii). Yet, as has been argued elsewhere, the point of a work's publication is as crucial as the point of production (von Maltzahn 480). Although the title page of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* is dated 1671, it seems to have been available the previous year, with the 1671 date on the title page an example of “post-dating,” whereby a publisher could prolong a book's appeal with the allure of newness and topicality (von Maltzahn 488). Milton's publisher, John Starkey, had advertised it in late May 1670 and the printed text states that it was licensed for print on 2 July. The book was entered into the Michaelmas *Term Catalogues*

(56), and was likely obtainable from booksellers by autumn 1670, coinciding with the start of the theatrical season, parliamentary session, and legal term, when London would have been at its most socially, culturally, and politically vibrant.

The year 1670 was a definitive one in Charles's reign, marking a discernible breakdown of many of the hopes and expectations that had been sustained throughout the 1660s. The public mood was increasingly febrile, as religious and political tensions simmered; in January 1671, Marvell highlighted the chasm between royal hedonism and popular opinion, observing that "The Court is at the highest Pitch of Want and Luxury, and the People full of Discontent" (2: 322). Consequently, there was a tonal shift in satirical writing, as critics began to pen personal and openly hostile attacks on the monarch, focusing particularly on his notorious sexual exuberance (Lord xxx). This was a point at which Charles's personal and political inadequacies were being addressed—often boldly—in all spheres of Restoration culture: discussed in the Houses of Parliament, circulated in manuscript satires, and reflected and dissected in veiled stage references. Imprudent remarks regarding the King's fondness for actresses were made by Sir John Coventry in the House of Commons in December 1670 (earning him a beating that cost him his nose); the incident was remembered by Gilbert Burnet as "the first time that the king was personally reflected on," and he warned that "more of the same kind would follow" (1: 487–48). A priapic commentary was developing around the King, with one contemporary satire, "A Ballad Called the Haymarket Hectors," casting the royal "cazzo" (slang for penis) as Charles's principal advisor (Lord l. 11), and popular notions of Charles's renowned sexual vigor increasingly entwined with perceptions of political impotence.

Samson Agonistes was published into an environment in which even loyal royalists were tiring of the King's exploits. It was no coincidence that a sermon highly censorious of the Restoration court, which the royalist John Evelyn heard in January 1671, was preached to commemorate the Fast Day for the Martyrdom of Charles I. Implicitly exposing the gulf between the mores of Charles II's court and that of his father, Evelyn recorded that the country was being punished for the regicide: "the leudnesse of our greatest ones, & universal luxurie, seemed to menace some yet more dreadfull vengeance: we have had a plague, a Warr, & such a fire, as never was the like in any nation since the overthrow of Sodome" (3: 569). The royalist narrative of a country restored to glory by a heroic returned King had been challenged by plague (1665–66), the Great Fire (1666), and naval defeat in the Second Dutch War (1667). *Samson Agonistes* was published in an environment in which republicans were not the only ones confronting what they regarded as an increasingly uncertain political future: even loyal supporters of the monarchy were beginning publicly to express their disquiet. Steven Zwicker has stressed how attuned late seventeenth-century readers were to the allegorical potentials of literature (101–15), and appearing in the midst of these commentaries, Milton's work could itself be appropriated as an allegory of the monarch's behavior and of the threat posed by royal mistresses and wider Catholic forces. Samson's commitment to personal satisfaction over public responsibilities led to the breakdown of self and country, and in Milton's enervated figure—visited by a deceitful former lover, a disappointed father, and choric onlookers—can be discerned echoes of a disappointing, politically damaged King, whose lustful nature increasingly worried his nation.

2

Lord Lucas's notorious 1671 speech, published c. 1673 as *My Lord Lucas His Speech in the House of Peers, Feb. the 22. 1670/1 upon the Reading of the Subsidy Bill the Second Time, in the Presence of His Majesty*, employs the Samson and Delilah story in its discussion of domestic politics.² The speech was subsequently reported by Milton's publisher, John Starkey, and it is striking that he echoes Lucas's use of the Samson tale. With the recent publication of *Samson Agonistes*, the biblical story gained a new currency, suggesting the particular and complementary ways in which the printed drama could inform, and be informed by, the disapproving conversations surrounding fears of the King's enthrallment to women and his consequent emasculation.

On 22 February 1671 Lord Lucas spoke before the House of Lords—and the King himself—mounting an unprecedented public critique of the financial policies of Charles II and his government. The speech picked up on widespread popular concerns but was ostensibly occasioned by the Subsidy Bill, passed in response to the King's disingenuous requests for finances, supposedly to thwart the threat of imminent attack from France (Witcombe 111–12). After a winter of lavish court balls and masquerades, many commentators raised an eyebrow at the King's pleas for money. Articulating the various problems and crises that the country faced, Lucas expressed a wider frustration that, following the pressures and losses of the Interregnum, the royalist hopes that had initially accompanied the Restoration had been disappointed. Despite its careful, guarded tone, Lucas's speech caused controversy: Marvell described it as “fervent” and “bold,” and reported that manuscript copies swiftly began “going about every where” (2: 322–23). When challenged with a copy, Lucas acknowledged that “part was [his], and part was not,” although according to the Venetian ambassador, this scribal publication was “allowed” by Lucas himself (Hinds 32). By late March, the House was sufficiently worried by the “seditious” applications of the circulating speech to order that these scribal separates be burnt by the public hangman. On 1 April a government official gestured toward its subversive potential, observing that before the public's “tongues [were] tyed” by this decree, the speech had emboldened people to “prate unbecomingly” (National Archives SP 29/289, 3). When Lucas died in July, rumors spread that he had perished from the shame of the scandal (Walter).

When printed around 1673, the speech was framed as a brave act of patriotism. A prefatory Note to the Reader asserts that Lucas was moved to speak out of “*Loyalty* to his *Prince*, and his inviolable *Love* to his *Country*,” declaring that the burning of the speech will have horrified “all *True Englishmen*” (Lucas 2 [italics reversed]). Memories of the past perpetuate fears for the future, as the anonymous writer recalls how the “poor *Kingdom*” has been afflicted by “*Calamities* and evil *Counsels*” and predicts further “*Evil to Come*.” Subtle parallels with the Samson story might be detected here. Parliament's assault on the “*Wealth* and *Liberties*” of the country has reduced the British to a “now weak and perishing (but once *Mighty and Invincible*) *People*,” whose King is vulnerable to attack by “*French Fraud*, and *Popish Malice*,” on the “precipices” of which he is expected not only to “fall, but to dash himself.” With the apparently oblivious monarch teetering on the brink of self-annihilation, Charles risks treading the path of Milton's “self-kill'd” Samson (1664), who destroys both the Philistines and himself in the drama's violent climax. Before the reader has encountered Lucas's speech, a gloomy picture is painted of an England brought to its knees by its leaders, recalling *Samson's* Israel, a country whose “Governours, and Heads of Tribes” have seen it invaded by Philistines and “grown corrupt,” by its “vices brought to servitude” (242, 268–69). Knoppers, who identifies Israel as “the true tragic figure in the drama,” has read Milton's presentation of God's chosen nation as a parallel to an England devastated by plague and fire in the 1660s, phenomena that were regarded by people of varying political and religious beliefs as evidence of divine displeasure (see Knoppers, *Historicizing* 142–63; Guibbory, “Jewish Question” 184–203). Whilst the writer of the Preface (likely the unnamed publisher) only hints at such similarities, the correspondence between England and Israel, Charles and Samson, is made explicit in Lucas's speech itself, and becomes especially remarkable when read with an awareness of *Samson's* topicality.

Lucas draws a series of precise biblical parallels. Discussing the pre-1660 political landscape, he presents analogies to Israel, incorporating scriptural references that recall the bondage of the Israelites to the Philistines, their sinfulness, and the prophecy of the eventual restoration of Jerusalem in the Book of Micah. Directly echoing Micah 4.4, in which God promises the Israelites future prosperity, Lucas remembers how royalists naïvely believed that after the Restoration “thenceforth every man should sit under his own Vine, enjoying the Fruits of Peace and Plenty” (3). England's own Restoration is figured as a political and religious emancipation that saw the country freed from its “heavy Buthens, under which we had lain so long opprest”; yet this vision of liberation has, by 1671, proved unattainable, and England's “Burthens are so far from being made lighter to us, that they are heavier than ever they were! and as our Burthens are increased, so our Strength is also diminished” (3).

The speech goes on to address the King's repeated requests for financial subsidies and the related mismanagement of national funds. Lucas's primary source of concern relates to pecuniary difficulties, a consequence, he believes, of financial corruption and the costs of defending against the threat of Catholic powers. These issues are compounded by a King who allows himself to be "Couzened," leaving himself exposed to foreign "Enemies" (4). Having obliquely suggested a comparison between England and Israel, Lucas further entrenches the analogy by making a more specific and pointed allusion to the Israelites' leader. He asks that the Lords consider their political obligations and "call to mind the Story of *Samson*, who while he preserved his Hair wherein his Strength lay, was stil *Victor over his Enemies*; But when (by the enticement of his *Dalilah*.) his Hair was cut off, the *Philistines* came upon him, and *overcame* him" (4–5). The point is ostensibly a political one, but careful attention is drawn to the concomitant sexual threat posed by Delilah. In a speech understandably wary of overt criticism and careful to note the King's admirable qualities, this is the closest Lucas comes to a comment upon the monarch's private behavior. *Samson Agonistes* may have been called to mind by some readers of (or listeners to) the speech. The verb "overcame" echoes the language of Milton's drama, with Samson's admission that he was "O'recome with [Dalila's] importunity and tears" (51), and Manoa's later lamentation that his son was "Ensnar'd, assaulted, overcome" by his foes (365).

Lucas focuses on the careless administration of the country's wealth, preaching the virtues of economic prudence, and the threat is implied to be primarily financial, emanating from foreign powers; yet the reference to "*Dalilah*," suspended within parentheses, is a blunt reminder of the political influence that the royal mistresses were feared to exert over the King. Chief among these in 1671 was Barbara Villiers, Duchess of Cleveland, whose level of control was widely scrutinized, mocked, and feared, with Evelyn referring to her, just a week after Lucas's public intervention, as the "curse of our nation" (3: 573). A verse satire of 1669 suggests she was the most prominent of the "political bitches" surrounding the King, and another poem immediately contemporary to Lucas's 1671 speech pours scorn on the political privileges she was perceived to enjoy as the "prerogative whore" ("Nell Gwynne" and "Haymarket Hectors" [Lord l. 6; l. 53]). By the time of the speech's publication in 1673, the widely hated Duchess of Portsmouth was the King's principal mistress and could easily be substituted into Lucas's analogy.³ The largely anonymous hostile satires of the 1670s may have employed cruder language than Milton, but the problem they address is essentially Samson's. The allusion to Delilah is crucial to Lucas's analogy: it is here that blame for the nation's woes is attributed. Lucas's summary of the Samson episode is selective, neglecting to recall the hero's ultimate triumph over his enemies with the destruction of the temple and the mass killing of the Philistines. Rather, the listener/reader is reminded of Samson's victimhood, his seduction and inability to withstand Delilah's sexual advances, adumbrating his helplessness when confronted by political assault.

The identification of the King with Samson was not without precedent: in March 1660, little more than a month before the Restoration, the royalist Anglican preacher Matthew Griffith wrote in a sermon that Interregnum opponents of Charles had seen him divested of his

native and legall rights, one of which is his powers[;] they look upon him (as the *Philistines* did upon *Samson* without his hair, in which his strength lay) with scorn and contempt, as if he were as weak and worthless as other men: but let them remember how God renewed *Samsons* strength, to revenge himself at last.

(9)

The change in focus in Lucas's speech is a telling measure of the deterioration of royalist hopes surrounding the King. In 1660 Griffith had been able to extract a message of Samson's triumph over political enemies, but as the reign progressed occasional analogies between the King and Samson tended toward humiliation. The capture in 1667 of the ship, HMS *Royal Charles*, the pride of England's naval fleet, had been a serious blow to national pride. In Marvell's "Last Instructions to a Painter" (1667), the vessel, boarded by Dutch seamen, is likened to Samson: "Such the fear'd *Hebrew*, captive, blinded, shorn, / Was led about in sport, the publick scorn" (1: ll. 728–36). The ship is a metonym for the King: once feted as a

symbol of Charles's vitality with "masts erect, tough cordage, timbers strong," after the defeat it embodies only his failures. Lucas's 1671 speech found a new significance in Samson (refocused onto his sexual woes), one that complemented Milton's contemporaneous verse adaptation of the Book of Judges story.

Lucas's parallel between Samson and Charles had an afterlife that extended beyond the House of Lords speech and its unauthorized publication: a manuscript witness survives in the personal miscellany of verse and prose compiled by the royalist and antiquarian Sir William Haward (MS Don.b.8, 198–201).⁴ Situated among topical pieces that date from the spring of 1671, the copy is largely the same as the published speech but variants suggest that the scribe was working from another source. In Haward's transcription, the reference to Delilah is taken out of parentheses, becoming integral to the sentiment communicated by the sentence. Strikingly, the consequence of Delilah's betrayal is not, as in the printed speech, that the Philistines "*overcame*" Samson, but—in a far more politically charged and dangerous word, and one twice applied to Milton's Samson (463, 1698)—that they "*overthrew*" him. This alternative word carries threatening undertones of revolution, a topic alive with dangerous political resonances, particularly to supporters of the monarchy in the years following the Restoration.⁵ But it also recalls the victorious Samson briefly glimpsed at the end of Milton's drama, who though "Deprest, and overthrown, as seem'd," will rise as a phoenix from the ashes of his own devastation (1698), offering perhaps (in Haward's context) the more hopeful prospect of royal recovery. Haward, a court insider, was a loyal supporter of the monarchy, serving under each King from Charles I to William III: the inclusion of Lucas's speech within his collection is revealing of the widening audience for the expression of political unease, with even staunch defenders of the crown evidently following and engaging with (if not necessarily subscribing to) increasingly pervasive criticisms of the King.

Lucas's speech, and specifically the employment of the Samson analogy, merited the attention of a keen collector of satirical material, but it was also newsworthy. John Starkey was the publisher of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, known for his republican politics and involvement in printing and circulating radical works from his bookshop, a notorious center of political dissent (see Knights, "John Starkey" 127–45). As Knoppers notes, his notoriety was such that readers would have been aware of the "political overtones of seemingly innocuous works" (Milton xxxiv). He was also a distributor—and shaper—of news. In a private manuscript newsletter that kept its Staffordshire recipient, Sir Willoughby Aston, abreast of the latest parliamentary news and gossip from London, Starkey relayed the furor generated by the publication of Lucas's speech. In his report dated 28 February 1671, Starkey includes a brief summary of the speech's content, writing how the peer had argued that wealth was England's "strength and our treasure which he saw too much consumed in pleasure, that his Ma:tye [Majesty] was a good a gracious and a strong Prince and so was Samson yet he suffered his locks to be clipt by his Delilah" (British Library, Add MS 36916, 212). The comparison here is direct and unmistakable. Starkey's account of the haircutting aligns not with the scriptural narrative in which Delilah's manservant performs the task, nor even with Lucas's more ambiguous account, but with Milton's, in which it was Dalila herself who "shore" Samson's hair (537). While a parenthetical, deliberately fleeting, remark in Lucas's speech, the sentiment is at the heart of Starkey's brief report to Aston. Notably, Starkey also augments the account with his own comment on the sybaritic temperament of the monarch and his dangerous preoccupation with being "too much consumed in pleasure," recalling Milton's Samson, who now remembers how under Dalila's influence he became "Softn'd with pleasure" (534). Starkey's relation of the analogy is less equivocal than Lucas's initial statement: the strength of both men, Samson and Charles, is threatened by a fatal effeminacy.

Here it is possible to see Starkey navigating the triple roles of purveyor of news, political critic, and publisher: the very recent publisher of *Samson Agonistes* allows himself to indulge in some subtle self-advertising, as he shares, encourages, and emphasizes the connection made by Lucas, promulgating his own oppositional agenda while effectively pointing to a framework for understanding Milton's new work. Although only one collection of Starkey's newsletters is known to survive, to the government's concern Starkey was at the center of "an important network of those critical of Charles II's court and its policies" and he sent his newsletters around the country (Knights, "John Starkey"

127). As was common with such newsletter writers, it is also likely that Starkey was involved in the distribution of manuscript poetic satires and separates (of the kind with which this article has also been concerned); certainly by 1675 he was operating a scriptorium that disseminated material that the government considered threatening (Love, *English* 261–63). It is unsurprising then if he utilized his position as an important oppositional figure within a wider network of critical voices, to weave a politicized reference to the poetry he had recently published into the complementary arenas of London news and court gossip. Milton, living his final years in internal exile, may or may not have been alert to the meanings that his text could generate, but Starkey, an “ideologically oriented bookseller” (Knights, “John Starkey” 129), was certainly complicit in pressing them. If *Samson Agonistes* could be purchased from Starkey's shop alongside highly topical, anti-government material, then it seems that readers' attentions were being directed toward the drama's immediate political applications from the point of purchase.

3

Thinking about *Samson* within the key contexts of 1670–71—specifically of the King's mistresses and deteriorating Anglo-French relations—allows us to see more clearly the ways in which contemporaries might have been warranted in approaching the drama from a political perspective. *Samson Agonistes* was published in a fractious atmosphere of increased fears of Catholic influence and a linked nervousness about French expansionism. Alarm about domestic Catholicism merged with and was exacerbated by fears of foreign, specifically French, Catholic “armed aggression” (Bosher 6). Lucas's February speech in the Lords, in which he worried that granting the King further funds would lead to the country being “*Conquered by a Forreigner* [i.e., France]” (4), emerged out of a climate in which politicians were concerned with Catholic machinations in England. The Catholicism of the Queen and of the Duchess of Cleveland rankled,⁶ and rumors that the Duchess of York (who died in March 1671) was also a Catholic “enormously increased the hatred against the Papists” (Hinds 34). In February, voices in the Commons spoke “strongly against the liberty accorded to the Catholics in England” (22), and the findings of a parliamentary committee tasked with investigating the Growth of Popery reported intensified Catholic activity (*Journal* 206). An increasingly draconian official approach was threatened, although never legally enforced, and all Jesuits and priests (excepting those in the Queen's household) were warned that they must leave England before 1 May 1671 (*London Gazette* 1).

Suspicious of a treaty between England and France had also been recently aroused. Charles had indeed agreed to an alliance with Louis XIV in exchange for French money, using the pretext of his sister's visit to Dover in May 1670 to negotiate terms; furthermore, he promised to convert to Catholicism (see Milton xxvi–xxvii). While this was not publicly known, whisperings of a growing and covert closeness to France pervaded public discourse, and John Starkey reported in his newsletter of July 1670 a “secret affaire” concerning France of which he “dare not write” (British Library, Add MS 36916, 187), reflecting (and contributing to) the rumblings that inspired popular anxiety and distrust. The Venetian ambassador reported confusion in April 1671 about why the King would react with insouciance to an encroaching French military presence in Dunkirk “unless there is some promise of understanding with France” (Hinds 41). A year after the Dover treaty, a satirical verse mused on the King and court's “glorious bacchanals” whilst “the King of France with pow'rful arms / Frightens all Christendom with fresh alarms” (Lord, “Further Advice” ll. 35–37).

Set against panic around the French threat, much of the dismay about Charles's sexual affairs had a religious basis. In 1670–71 it would have been easy to draw comparisons to the pre-enlightened incarnation of Samson, who involved himself with a series of unsuitable women. Milton's Samson's “captivity and loss of eyes” are a direct consequence of “His lot unfortunate in nuptial choice” (1733–34), and the events of 1670–71 would not have persuaded many that their own King was any wiser. Enfeebled masculinity is at the heart of Milton's Samson's tortured recollections of his extreme uxoriousness.

Speaking in terms redolent of kingship, Samson acknowledges that while it had been his duty to “serve / [His] Nation,” he failed his God and his country when he was “Effeminatly vanquish’t . . . by which means, / Now blind, disheartn’d, sham’d, dishonour’d, quell’d” (562–65). Effeminacy—the propensity to be influenced by women—had long been a criticism levelled at Charles (see Weil, “Sometimes” 125–53; Sharpe, *Reading* 218–25). Much of this can be linked to concerns around Catholicism. Charles’s own nuptial choices had been placed under renewed scrutiny in the spring of 1670, when his attentiveness to the acrimonious public divorce of Lord Roos, debated in the House of Lords, prompted rumors that this precedent could see him end his own childless marriage to his Queen (see Stone 309–12). Advisors hostile to the Queen proposed that the King might wed a new, preferably Protestant, bride and thus provide the country with an heir.

Crucially, the women to whom Samson has been attracted are notable for their foreignness and religious difference: all are Philistine, and thus enemies of Israel, a superstitious and idolatrous people who worshiped multiple gods and honored them with shrines and feast days. Samson’s appetites led to his marriage to the “false” and politically “corrupted” woman from Timnah, “daughter of an Infidel” (227, 386, 221); to his night with the harlot of Gaza (referenced in the biblical account though unmentioned by Milton); and finally to his imprudent desire for Dalila. This susceptibility to women from an alien culture is a source of consternation for the Chorus, who tell Samson that his romantic and racial preferences have provoked comment: “I oft have heard men wonder / Why thou shouldst wed Philistian women rather / Then of thine own Tribe fairer, or as fair, / At least of thy own Nation, and as noble” (215–18). Certainly, Dalila’s otherness is central to her characterization and to her danger: in Samson’s denunciation her threatening femininity and heritage merge, as he dismisses her as “a woman, / A Canaanite, my faithless enemy” (379–80). The Chorus’s xenophobia speaks to a popular apprehension regarding who might be an appropriate bride for the nation’s leader and the inability of that leader to choose wisely, risking a wider political betrayal.⁷

Dalila’s sexual power has been read as an extension of the political and religious threat that her pagan culture posed to her husband, and her idolatry as an allegory for the wider excesses of Restoration society that presented temptations to Puritans (DiSalvo 253–80). The danger she embodied in 1670, however, was specifically Catholic, inviting comparison to the prominent and controversial women in Charles’s romantic life. Primarily, these were his unpopular Portuguese and Catholic Queen and the Duchess of Cleveland, whose conversion to Catholicism in 1663 was a consistent target in malicious satirical attacks.⁸ When Dalila finally enters in *Samson Agonistes*, “bedeckt, ornate, and gay” and wafting “An Amber sent of odorous perfume” (712, 720), she would have carried the whiff of the ceremonial accoutrements of the Catholic church. Followed by her “damsel train” Dalila arrives with the trappings of royalty; she is portrayed as mercenary, having provided “Spousal embraces, vitiated with Gold” and been bribed with the Philistine “gold / Of Matrimonial treason” (389, 958–59). It would have been easy for contemporary readers to imagine her as a biblically-framed royal mistress: Barbara Villiers, created Duchess of Cleveland in the summer of 1670, whose decadence, funded by the public purse, was increasingly and particularly resented. Throughout the winter of 1670 she had been present at extravagant court balls, her luxurious attire marveled at by onlookers (Lyte 2: 23). In May 1671 she was—according to John Starkey’s newsletter—seen in Hyde Park riding in a coach drawn by eight horses “when the King and Queen had but 6 in theirs” (British Library, Add MS 36916, 221), and that summer Marvell would complain that the House of Commons had agreed to increase her annual subsidy by an astonishing ten thousand pounds (2: 325).⁹

A wider religious conspiracy lurks behind Milton’s Dalila, who in addition to the “Princes of my country,” admits to having a Philistine Priest “ever at my ear” (851, 858). In a climate worried by popish influence and concerned by the twenty-eight priests in Queen Catherine’s household (Miller 22), Dalila’s religious otherness must have invited disturbing parallels with the prominent Catholic women who surrounded the King. Her treachery also looks forward to Louise de K eroualle’s supposed role as a spy for Louis XIV. Though such a parallel would, as we shall see, be drawn several years later, this French ploy to “ensnare the King,” initiated in 1670, was attempted precisely because it was widely known that (like Samson) Charles was “easily taken with that sort of trap” (Reresby 93).

A letter written in September 1670 by one of Louis XIV's courtiers demonstrates that even before de K roualle had arrived in England, it was assumed that she would seduce Charles, thus securing an influence advantageous to the French: "on croit que c'est dans le dessein d'en faire la ma trese du roi de la Grande-Bretagne, ... et [Louis XIV] ne sera pas f ch  de voir dans ce poste-l  une de ses sujettes, car on dit qu'elles ont grand pouvoir sur l'esprit dudit roi d'Angleterre" (Chabod 487–88; "It is thought that the aim is to make her the mistress of the King of Great Britain ... and [Louis XIV] would not be angry to see one of his subjects in that position, because it is said that they have great power over the King of England."). The King's notorious weaknesses were exploited by foreign powers, leaving him exposed not only to ambitious mistresses, but also to scheming men who recognized that an attractive woman was a means by which Charles might be influenced. The Samson of Milton's work is an insightful (though ruined) figure who understands his sexual weaknesses and condemns them; in 1670 the King demonstrated no evidence of such self-awareness. Thus, Samson (as will be seen again when the parallels were reenergized during the Exclusion Crisis) offered readers not just a framework for reproaching the King, but might have assured those inclined to optimism that better political purpose might be discovered if the King could only be persuaded to alter his course.

4

The fact that these same tropes were resurrected nearly a decade later suggests how little Charles heeded such pleas and warnings. The second edition of Milton's drama was published posthumously in 1680 (advertised in the Trinity 1681 Term Catalogues 453), at the height of the panicked political and religious tensions of the Exclusion Crisis (1679–81), the most troubled period of Charles's reign. In this moment, Milton's drama seems to have found a renewed relevance. England also had a new Delilah onto whom collected ire could be focused. Sent to Charles's court by Louis XIV, Louise de K roualle had entered the English political stage in the autumn of 1670, becoming an established presence when she was created Duchess of Portsmouth in 1673, a year after giving birth to Charles's son. The publication of Lucas's speech in c. 1673 may have been stimulated in part by widespread frustration at the bestowal of this title, although there was persistent frustration at English losses and a distrust of the French alliance during the unpopular Third Anglo-Dutch War (1672–74; see Pincus). The anonymous editor lists twenty-six grievances that have arisen since the speech was given in 1671 (twelve of which relate directly either to popery or to France); the final complaint is that Charles had made "*French Carwell an English Dutchess*, to the great Disgrace of the Ladies and Gentlewomen of this Nation" (7 [italics reversed]). Lucas's 1671 reference to Samson and Delilah is thus recast in 1673 by this new threatening figure. Although never popular, by the late 1670s Portsmouth attracted intensified hostility, expressed privately and publicly—in Parliament, in satires, and in the playhouses. Just as 1670 had marked a turning point in Charles's reign, 1680 proved to be another critical moment when there was "much to play for . . . in terms of the struggle for control of the King's ear" (Knights, *Politics* 79). Literary interventions into the political debate can also be identified: theater-goers were invited to detect veiled references to Portsmouth in a range of lustful and avaricious female characters created by both Tory and Whig dramatists, including in Dryden's adaptation of *Troilus and Cressida* (1679), Elkanah Settle's *The Female Prelate* (1680), and John Crowne's adaptation of *Henry VI, Misery of Civil War* (1681; Maguire 252; Warner 23). The hatred she inspired—often symptomatic of the period's anti-French and anti-Catholic feeling—is attested to most unpleasantly in numerous verse satires circulated during these years (see Maguire).

The most prominent royal mistress for much of the 1670s, Portsmouth attracted particular scrutiny due to her interventions into domestic and foreign politics, her continued closeness to the French court, and her fluctuating allegiances, having shifted her support from the Duke of York to the Duke of Monmouth in mid-1680. By 1679, her involvement in the political landscape had deepened, with the prominent politician Henry Sidney recording in his diary in June that Portsmouth "hath more power over [Charles] than can be imagined" (1: 15); by November she had "more power

than ever" (1: 187). While the influence actually wielded by Portsmouth may, as Rachel Weil notes, have been far more limited than her political enemies alleged ("Female" 179–80), it was the perception of its reach rather than its reality that fuelled her unpopularity. Her links to France had provoked concern throughout the decade as she facilitated clandestine meetings between the King and the French ambassador (Wynne, "Kéroualle"), and in early 1680, she was offered £5,000 by Louis XIV to "keep Charles in the interests of France" (Dalrymple 385). Published around the same time, the anonymous *Articles of High-Treason and Other High-Crimes and Misdemeanors against the Dutches of Portsmouth* accused her on twenty-two counts of seeking to undermine the English nation by working to further French and Catholic interests. The tract alleged that she "does nourish, foment and maintain that fatal and destructive Correspondency and Alliance between England and France, being sent over and pensioned by the *French* King to the same end and purpose," asserting that

having that high and dishonourable absolute dominion and power over the Kings Heart, she has opportunity to draw from him the secrets of his Government, opportunity by her self, or other Engines of hers, to poison, or otherwise, to destroy the King.

(1–2)

There are some attractive Miltonic parallels to be drawn, to which such accusations may implicitly allude: just as Dalila employed "amorous reproaches" to learn Samson's "capital secret" (393–94), Portsmouth is imagined sweetly wresting political "secrets" from a besotted Charles, in order to weaken him before his French enemies.

We do not have to look far to find such parallels being more forcefully pressed. Remarkably, in 1679–80, amidst the most strident attacks on Portsmouth, antipathy was repeatedly conveyed through the figures of Samson and Delilah, a recurring trope that coincided with the publication of the second edition of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. The popular revulsion toward Portsmouth is evident in the lengthy title of a vicious, undated satire that combines a catalogue of sexual and political slurs, "The Downfal of the *French* Bitch, *England's* Metropolitan Strumpet, The three Nations' Grievance, The pickled pocky Whore, *Rowley's* Dalilah, all in a Word, The damn'd dirty Dutches" (*Poems* 211 [italics reversed]). In 1679, in the aftermath of the Popish Plot, the King's relationship with Portsmouth was probed in the anonymous poem "Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey's Ghost." The censorious, ghostly voice of the magistrate Godfrey, whose suspicious death in October 1678 had fueled anti-Catholic hysteria, claims to stand for "religion, rights, and liberties" in the manner of a Protestant martyr (Mengel l. 12). He laments that in a vice-ridden country, "Priests and French apes do all the land annoy" and once again Charles, governed by "nauseous" sexual appetites (ll. 24, 28), is portrayed as a weakened Samson, victim of a devious, spying mistress:

Each night you lodge in that French siren's arms,
She straight betrays you with her wanton charms,
Works on your heart, soften'd with love and wine,
And then betrays you to some Philistine.

(ll. 30–33)

The royal instinct for pleasure and the attendant public disapproval endured the decade, but the articulation here is bolder than it had been ten years earlier. Portsmouth's French countrymen are figured as dangerous Philistines keen to undermine English interests, and she tacitly becomes the instrument for this, a scheming and destructive Delilah. In a poem of the following year, the Philistine-like enemy is closer to home. In "Satire on old Rowley" (a nickname for Charles, deriving from the stallion racehorse he owned) written in late 1680, the King is urged to free himself from the malign influence of "slimy Portsmouth's creatures," the leading Tory politicians Sidney Godolphin, Laurence Hyde, and the Earl of Sunderland (Mengel l. 20). Charles is implored:

Rise, drowsy Prince, like Samson shake
 These green withes from about thee;
 Banish their Delilah, and make
 Thy people no more doubt thee.
 In vain they fright thee with a war;
 Thou art not hated, though they are.

(ll. 31–36)

The fury reserved for Portsmouth is, notably, not directed at Charles, who many satirists continued to paint as a passive, if foolish, victim, formulating a fantasy of royal reformation if only he could rid himself of the enemy in his bed. Another (undated) contemporary manuscript satire, “On the Dutchess of Portsmouth,” warns the King:

That base false *Dalilah* by which you're led
 Will shave the vigorous tresses from your head
 Enfeeble them & then the power betray
 To foes or flattering Favourites as a prey.

(British Library, Harley 7317, 67^r–68^v)

Again, this is prediction rather than description, and the satirist apparently reserves the possibility that the impending tragedy of Samson still might be averted. The anxieties of 1670 had not been resolved, becoming only more urgent. While the identities of the real women behind the satirical Delilahs changed during the course of the King's reign, Charles remained an inveterate Samson. A decade on, Charles's passions had not been spent, and as the nation turned on itself over fears of foreign, Catholic infiltration and the issue of succession, satirists dusted off a familiar narrative model, one that avoided placing blame too squarely on the royal shoulders.

And in 1680 *Samson Agonistes* re-entered the marketplace, in the Fleet Street shop where the purchase of literature, lampoons, and news intersected. By this point in Starkey's career, his shop had become a notorious center of radical activity and a meeting place for the Green Ribbon Club (Knights, “John Starkey” 127). His output during the Exclusion Crisis included many texts that demonstrated their publisher's commitment to a republican and anti-Catholic, Exclusionist agenda. Knoppers notes that the inclusion of an Appendix to the second edition of *Samson Agonistes*, advertising Starkey's other politically charged works, saw Milton's poems “even more firmly placed in a radical print context” (Milton xlix). A shrewd bookseller, accustomed to exploiting the political potentials of literature to be consumed by a readership equally versed in such contingencies, Starkey may well have recognized an apposite moment for *Samson's* republication. It became newly obtainable, once more available to be drawn into cultural conversation with the provocative, usually anonymous, political satires that busied themselves with diagnosing the nation's ills.

Utilized particularly at moments of national crisis, when satirists and commentators turned to the story to articulate their anxieties, the equivalence between Charles and Samson that had been alluded to in 1671 was brought into sharper focus by the turmoil of the Exclusion Crisis. Renewed rumors of foreign influence and French-sponsored Catholic infiltration inflamed tensions that had been simmering for years. The political resonances of *Samson Agonistes* remained the same in 1680 as they had in 1671, and the biblical Samson story was again employed, always at the point of Samson's enthrallment, arresting the figure at the moment of greatest risk, before his enlightenment and—crucially—before his complete destruction. The message that Lucas and the later satires all communicated through their various appropriations of Samson was that it was not too late for the King to change course, dismiss the mistresses that damaged his and the country's health, and rectify the deficiencies of his approach to kingship. By intervening at this point in the story and offering the prospect of interruption and correction, they all insist that a myopic Charles need not suffer the tragic fate of the blinded Samson, the broken cautionary figure of Milton's drama. Of course, not all passing references to Samson or Delilah would have recalled *Samson Agonistes*, nor were they

intended to. But Milton's drama was published at two critical moments during Charles's reign, and each of these periods coincided with a striking concentration of advisory references to the King as a struggling Samson. For those familiar with the drama, for perspicacious readers skilled at unpicking and unpacking classical and biblical parallels and seeking out their topical relevancies, such allusions proposed a viable, alternative framework for understanding Milton's text at the most precarious points in Charles's reign, and for adjusting the faded hopes of 1660 to the realities of the present.

NOTES

- ¹ All line references to *Samson Agonistes* are from Volume 2 of the Oxford *Complete Works of John Milton* edited by Laura Knoppers.
- ² Although the title page of the printed speech bears the date 1670 [1671], the catalogue of the "Mischief" that occurred since the speech was given (appended by the publisher) refers to the creation of Louise de K roualle as Duchess of Portsmouth; therefore, it cannot have been printed before 1673 (6–7; see Daniell, *CSPD* 94).
- ³ While Portsmouth did not become a focus of scurrilous satires that attacked her political interventions until c. 1674/5, her presence was remarked upon and resented before this (see Maguire).
- ⁴ Another manuscript witness can be found in the miscellany of Sussex vicar John Watson (British Library, MS. Add. 18220, 64v-67v). As in Haward's collection, the speech is surrounded by poetic, often satirical, material including extracts from "Last Instructions to a Painter" and "The King's Vows." Containing few variants on the printed speech, the reference to Samson is much the same; Watson records that he received it from a Thomas Percivall on 24 March 1671.
- ⁵ As early as 1667, Pepys had muttered darkly about the consequences of the King's preoccupation with women, concluding: "people do well remember better things were done, and better managed and with much less charge, under a commonwealth then they have been by this King" (8: 378).
- ⁶ As will be seen, similar concerns would later be expressed about the French, Catholic Louise de K roualle (future Duchess of Portsmouth). While she first visited England in May 1670, accompanying Charles's sister for the signing of the secret Treaty of Dover and returning permanently that autumn, she did not become the King's mistress until October 1671; this fact was "universally reported," with Evelyn noting that she was "coming to be in greate favour with the K-" (3: 598; Wynne, K roualle").
- ⁷ A similar sentiment is articulated in the anonymous, undated (probably late 1670s) "Whore of Babylon" satire, which castigates Charles for his enthrallment to France and French women. The speaker pleads, "Let us be govern'd by an English C—t," and hopes that the country might avoid ruin if only Charles would "swive" "Loyal strumpets of his own" (British Library, Harley MS 7319, 33v-35v).
- ⁸ Nell Gwyn's Protestantism shielded her from much of the vitriol reserved for the Catholic mistresses (Wynne, "Gwyn").
- ⁹ From around 1673 onward, Portsmouth's profligacy would see her recognized as another significant drain on public finances (Maguire 265).

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