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MILTON'S SUBVERSION OF THE GREEK TRAGIC FORM IN *SAMSON AGONISTES*

Abstract

When it comes to analyzing Milton's moral vision in his major works, his tragedy *Samson Agonistes* is something of a curiosity. Unlike in Milton's other major two works, the epics *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, where themes of morality, sins, punishment and redemption are relatively clear, the situation in *Samson Agonistes* becomes increasingly ambiguous the more we entangle ourselves with the enigmatic nature of the Old Testament judge Samson, here presented as a tragic protagonist in Milton' first and only tragedy, published in 1671. An especially interesting issue to consider is Milton's treatment of the classical tragic structure and conventions in his own play, which is the topic of this discussion. These elements which Milton subverts, modifies and adheres to give *Samson Agonistes* an intriguing structure that tells a story of its own, a story of a peculiar protagonist whose moral expression starts to assume a mutability which, artistically speaking, establishes Milton's play as a seemingly inexhaustibly fertile ground for analysis of the abovementioned themes. Especially important here are the two texts, one a critical literary analysis, the other a classical tragedy which inspired Milton a lot: Aristotle's *Poetics* and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. With the comparison of these two texts with Milton's play, what emerges is a kind

of a Miltonic tragic figure greatly congruous with Milton's ideas on the complex interplay of artistic and moral expression in a literary text.

Keywords: Milton; morality; *Samson Agonistes*; Aristotle; *Poetics*; Sophocles; *Oedipus at Colonus*; tragedy; structure; Samson; ambiguity

Samson Agonistes, Milton's only tragedy published together with *Paradise Regained* in 1671, presents a multifaceted interplay of artistic and moral vision. Where this moral vision is more complex in *Paradise Lost*, which features mixed elements of subtlety and direct moralizing, and rather less so in *Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes* instead opts for a very indirect and ambiguous approach. Unlike in the epics, in *Samson* there is no ultimate moral authority in the characters of God or Jesus but only people and their multitude of opinions, and readers are invited to decide for themselves which character, if any, has an appropriate moral attitude. To add another layer of complexity, Milton's tragic protagonist Samson is modelled but simultaneously moves away from his Greek role models, primarily Sophocles' Oedipus, and also from the Biblical Samson, the Old Testament judge. This is evident not only in the characterization of Milton's Samson, but perhaps even more so in the unusual structure of his play. Milton's treatment of this classical tragic structure in *Samson Agonistes* is the purpose of this discussion. It is necessary first to investigate the interplay of the classical dramatic elements (in terms of structure, conventions, characterization, etc.) Milton subverts and stays faithful to. Comparing Aristotle's *Poetics* with Milton's preface in *Samson Agonistes* will be very useful in this regard. This will serve as a foundation for a deeper analysis of how his moral vision is expressed in the play, why tragedy is overall a better genre for this purpose than an epic, and how this vision is different from his classical role model, namely Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. So as much as his play is founded on the classical tragic tradition, Milton aims to achieve a new level of moral and artistic contemplation by creating and nurturing ambiguity through his own dramatic structure.

In order to determine the structure and potential Greek tragedy has to offer for Milton's vision, it is necessary to look at the earliest literary critical theory on epics and tragedies, Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 335 BC). Of special importance for this discussion are three specific concepts, the first and foremost being tragedy, which Aristotle defines as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (Butcher, 2003, 10). The second concept is the *object*, which Aristotle terms "men in action" (Butcher, 2003, 5), who are necessarily presented as better, worse and true to actual life. These are usually characters of great ability, whether it be physical or intellectual, such as Heracles, Oedipus, Odysseus, etc. The third is the *manner*, in which the themes are presented and meant to be reflected upon by the audience. They are supposed to put themselves in a protagonist's position through imagination, introspection and empathy, whereby the potential for catharsis and knowledge is increased, as Aristotle says: "Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he'" (Butcher, 2003, 7). This process is even more intense if the protagonists are larger than life type of people who suffer a drastic change in fortune or fate (*reversal*) due to their *hamartia*, a term usually interpreted as a great mistake. However, this *mistake* seems to be combined with the protagonist's internal flaw(s) as well. After this comes the protagonist's *recognition*, or "a change from ignorance to knowledge" (Butcher, 2003, 16). This intense portrayal of life on stage is shared by the audience who experience a purgation of accumulated emotions of pity and fear (*catharsis*), and a tragedy's lessons are then ready to be absorbed by their calm, collected minds. It is important to control and concentrate the cathartic effect, and that is why tragedy is usually defined by what is called the *classical unity* (a theory later expanded in the Renaissance) of time (action should last no more than 24 hours), place (usually a singular location of a palace or temple) and action (one main plot and few

or no subplots). All of this is meant to provide the maximum cathartic effect on the audiences' mind, which would likely be dissipated if the plot was overly complicated or too long, and the narrative nonlinear and offering a multitude of localities. For Aristotle, the moral impact is chiefly in the action: "For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse" (Butcher, 2003, 11), especially in the ending of the play, and the characters are subservient to it. The audience needs to see the manifestations and consequences of protagonists' actions in the world around them, as Aristotle concludes: "Thus Tragedy is the imitation of an action, and of the agents mainly with a view to the action" (Butcher, 2003, 11). The protagonist's demise is best reported by another character, usually the messenger, instead of it being represented in a visual spectacle, because the audience can then use their imagination, and the cathartic effect is emphasized. As this *denouement*, or unraveling of events is vital, so is the complication which precedes it, where the connection between them needs to be consequential and believable.

The protagonist who is to effect such action must be a complex individual, as Aristotle emphasizes, because if he were purely virtuous, his reversal would merely be shocking. A character must not be a villain getting from adversity to prosperity or vice versa, since catharsis would be lost, even if the audience is appalled in the first case and morally satisfied in the second. The two primary emotions, as mentioned, must be pity and fear, where "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves" (Butcher, 2003, 17). Aristotle therefore outlines a blueprint, a specific type of an individual needed for this purpose:

> There remains, then, the character between these two extremes,— that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous,—a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families. (Butcher, 2003, 17)

He continues the description of his ideal type with four traits: a character must be good, appropriate, true to life and consistent, all of which are essential for the relationship with the audience. Aristotle at the end of his treatise compares the artistic and moral value of epics and tragedy; the common fault with tragedy is that it may be marred with a bad performance of the play, but it can have additional value as a text, just like the epics, and can be made even better with a good stage production and performance, something the epics cannot have as they would have to become plays. The abovementioned concentrated effect of the tragedy is better as opposed to the story's length and dilution in the epics. Also, the very complexity of an epic detracts from its unity for the reason that it can provide material for several tragedies. Aristotle thus concludes that "Tragedy is the higher art, as attaining its end more perfectly" (Butcher, 2003, 40). Thus, if Milton in his creative process was influenced by Aristotle's conclusion here, writing a tragedy seems a better choice for the expression of a more potent artistic and moral vision.

Milton expresses his views on tragedy in the preface to *Samson Agonistes*, where he specifically mentions Aristotle's *Poetics* and adheres to some of its principles, such as a serious and completed action of great magnitude, and a larger than life protagonist who is awe-inspiring, but also relatable. However, he also modifies some of them, such as concentrating more on the characters than the plot, and having a very ambiguous ending. Interestingly, "The preface, 'Of that sort of Dramatic Poem which is call'd Tragedy,' is Milton's only extended commentary on a poem of his own" (Lewalski, 2008, 523). In the beginning Milton states his reason for choosing this form: "Tragedy, as it was anciently composed, hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems" (Raffel, 1999, 745) where its moral potency is obvious. This moral component can assert itself through the exploration of complex themes without being overly didactic, a quality which forms a perfect counterpart to Milton's very dogmatic epic *Paradise Regained*, which was, as stated, published together with *Samson* and invites a meaningful and deep comparison with it. The tragedy also has value as an independent work:

> This air of seriousness [of *Samson*] is enhanced by another important attribute: Greek tragedy is always *thoughtful*–thoughtful in a speculative, almost philosophical fashion. It is concerned with the great problems of human life; beneath its action is an unmistakable strain of reflection, of perpetual questioning. Then, too, it is *didactic*; here was art for life's sake. Though the great tragedians differed in methods, each of them regarded his work as an instrument of instruction. It is didactic, however, without being doctrinal. The desire to teach is seldom offensively evident. But if dogma is rarely flaunted, there is no doubting the *religious* spirit of the plays. Greek tragedy always retained traces of its origin. (Parker, 1937, 197)

The noticeable lack of overt dogmatism in *Samson Agonistes* has led Saurat to believe that Milton here got lost in his didactic mission: "Milton, in his last work, deliberately gives up, in his attempt to find a solution to the problems of his life and thought, the whole fabric of dogma which had helped him so far" (1925, 236). However, this discussion will argue the opposite; that this is not resignation on Milton's part, but a change of manner in expressing the moral aspect described above.

Milton continues to elevate tragedy in his preface by adding a certain degree of religious validity from a Christian perspective with a Biblical reference: "The Apostle Paul himself thought it not unworthy to insert a verse of Euripides into the text of Holy Scripture" (Raffel, 1997, 746). The implication is that a classical tragedy's moral scope is not merely confined to the Classical Greek (pagan) civilization. For Milton, this project would also appeal to his versatility, satisfy his creative urge and place him into the highest echelon of authors: "Heretofore men in highest dignity have labored not a little to be thought able to compose a tragedy" (Raffel, 1997, 746). The project also had a reactionary element, namely in the context of 17th century tragedies which have degraded its ancient esteem with what Milton terms "the poets' error of intermixing comic stuff with tragic sadness" (Raffel, 1997, 746), as well as "introducing trivial and vulgar persons, which by all judicious hath been counted absurd" (Raffel, 1997, 747). He establishes the play's gravity in direct comparison to the popular dramas of his day: "in behalf of this tragedy coming forth after the ancient manner, much different from what

among us passes for best" (Raffel, 1997, 747). As for staging the play, "to which this work never was intended" (Raffel, 1997, 747), Milton opts to keep it as a closet drama, since its stage performance would de-emphasize its primary purpose, that of a reader's contemplation. Indeed, the play was intended to stay with us after reading it, where its themes are supposed to be questioned and wrestled with, the foremost perhaps being the recurring curse of violence and unmerited suffering, instead of simply accepting it.

There are some common moral lessons available in Greek tragedy: "Respect for the gods, obedience to divine commands, humble acquiescence to circumstance imposed from above-these are the principles taught by ancient tragedy in the hands of each of its great masters" (Parker, 1937, 207). This is much more pronounced in closet tragedy, despite the staging of many classical tragedies in Ancient Greece. It is also compounded by Milton's obvious dislike of the staging of 17th century popular plays, with all the accompanying spectacle, bombastic acting and rhetoric, costumes, scenery, makeup, etc. It also seems obvious that Milton negates the moral impact of then contemporary stage plays, and that he aims to restore this with Samson: "Instead of stirring up the public to licentiousness and drunkenness, classical drama will teach the public virtue through catharsis" (Burbery, 2007, 34). Milton is also irreverent in employing the prominent irregularity of rhyme and meter, a direct antithesis to the ordered verse of 17th century dramas.

Indeed, Milton's drama would be atypical in the modern staging as well: "It is a fatal mistake to judge Milton's tragedy as we would judge a modern play. It is 'good drama' as the Greeks thought of drama, though 'much different from what among us passes for best.' Milton's warning in the preface is plain enough. If we damn his play for lacking suspense, or surprise, as we now experience those emotions in the theatre, then we must damn almost all of the extant Greek tragedies" (Parker, 1937, 25). Hanford further explains: "The adherence to these and other conventions was not with Milton a mere mechanical or formal matter; it was rather an attempt to secure by their use the artistic effect – the

symmetria prisca [pure symmetry] – which he admired in ancient, and felt the lack of in modern drama" (1933, 254).

Milton is very clear in naming his role models, the grand ancient trio of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles, "the three tragic poets unequalled yet by any, and the best rule to all who endeavor to write tragedy" (Raffel, 1999, 748). He remains faithful to the well-known unity of time, place and action, as the location is the prison in Gaza, there is only one main plot of Samson's bondage, and the play ends well within a day. The title is also styled in Greek fashion: "Of the three or four hundred titles of Greek tragedies which are still preserved, all but about twenty fall into two classes--those which are called after the chorus, and those which are called after the leading personage" (Parker, 1937, 12). Naturally, *Samson Agonistes* has all the basic parts of its Greek structure: *prologue*, *parodos*, *episodia*, *stasimon* and *exodus*. The play has many parallels with its foremost influence, Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* but also features a very different ending, as Oedipus dies in peace, taken by the divine light, while Samson perishes in carnage, amidst chaos and destruction. The spectacle of Samson's death is also conventionally reported by a messenger, where the terrifying slaughter is appropriately not seen onstage: "Nor must we forget that the object of the early tragedians–and presumably Milton's object– was to focus attention upon the spiritual aspect of their story; and too much spectacle, especially repulsive spectacle, would have thwarted such a purpose" (Parker, 1937, 153). Milton, however, does provide an auditory part which only heightens the audience's trepidation of Manoa's words: "O what noise! / Mercy of Heav'n what hideous noise was that! / Horribly loud unlike the former shout" (*Samson Agonistes*, 1508–10), even if we know what just happened. This slight modification is likely intended to bring this tragic ending closer to the reader, in order that the subsequent moral lesson can be more readily absorbed and contemplated. Burbery in this regard notes: "Still, the catastrophe is aurally, if not visually, present – even though it occurs off-stage, we 'hear' the crash of the pillars, the fall of the roof, and the cries of the trapped victims. Milton thus has it both ways: the disaster occurs backstage yet feels at hand" (2007, 90). *Deus*

ex machina, a technique of introducing deities to resolve plot issues in a sudden and unexpected way at the end, was derided by Aristotle and rightfully avoided by Milton: "In most cases it seems an artificial and unsatisfying method of producing katharsis. Aristotle objected to it, with qualifications; and Milton passed by several opportunities of using it in *Samson Agonistes*" (Parker, 1937, 155).

Oedipus at Colonus is an example of a tragedy which was very politically relevant for the contemporary Greek audience, where they were presented with a dualism of the timeless values that the play expresses and hard reality of the unstable political situation in Athens:

> The democratic audience of fifth-century Athens viewed itself in comparison with an aristocratic, pre-democratic world. That democratic world was then elucidated by the contrast with the world presented on the stage (Wiles 1997, 209). Tragedy thus allowed the Athenian audience to confront its heroic values and religious representations in comparison with developing civil law in Athens. (Fainlight, Littman 2009, xix)

Milton also utilizes this contemporary societal relevancy of tragic plays in *Samson* by presenting a far more challenging contrast to his readers: that of the apparently traditional values of the Biblical story with the volatile political situation in Restoration England after 1660. Of course, both Milton's and classical tragedies present these dilemmas as universal too, and the broad appeal of classical tragedies is well established: "This allowed Athenian dramatists to examine universal themes that confronted not only Athens but also societies throughout history. Consequently, many issues raised by Greek tragedy, still faced today, have contributed to the survival, adaptation, and performance of these plays even in the twenty-first century" (Fainlight, Littman, 2009, xx).

However, Milton in his preface modifies Aristotle's well-known definition of tragedy, which is "therefore said by Aristotle to be of power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such like passions. That is, to temper and reduce them to just, with a kind of delight, stirred up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated" (Raffel, 1999, 745). When we compare this rendition to the one of Aristotle,

we can see that the most important word *action* is here missing; instead, Milton uses the word *passions*. What was paramount for Aristotle was the imitation of the action, not of characters who are merely in its service, but Milton instead wants to bring the tragedy ever closer to the character, thereby emphasizing and putting the character and his passions as the primary manner of achieving catharsis and its concentrated effect:

> Unlike Aristotle, Milton emphasizes the moral profit of tragedy, and also glosses catharsis as a purging or tempering of the passions by aesthetic delight – a concept encapsulated in the drama's final line: 'Calm of mind, all passion spent.' He also changes the object of imitation: for Aristotle it is 'an action,' the plot or mythos; for Milton, it is the tragic passions, pity or fear and terror, that are to be 'well imitated' – a definition that locates the essence of tragedy in the scene of suffering, here, the agonies and passions of Samson. (Lewalski, 2008, 524)

This departure fuels Samson's moral value. Milton is aware how controversial, polarizing and vigorous a tragic protagonist can be: "The heroic figures… not only come to life before the eyes of the spectators, but furthermore, through their discussions with the chorus or with one another, they become the subjects of a debate. They are, in a way, under examination before the public… In the new framework of tragic interplay, then the hero has ceased to be a model. He has become, both for himself and for others, a problem" (Vernant, Vidal-Naquet, 1990, 25). The potential here for research, reflection and discussion is enormous. It is Milton's perfect method and form to challenge his readers. Some failed to see how Samson deviates from the ordinary Greek structure by favoring conversation between the characters rather than action, as Chambers says: "'*Samson Agonistes* is the work of an old, a world-wearied, an exhausted man,' and continues: 'The plot lags lamentably, unfolds itself tediously. The opening part is intolerably prolix… And the two long interviews with Dalila and Harapha which follow advance the action but little…'" (qtd. in Parker, 1937, 22). As said before, Milton deliberately focuses more on the character as a further development of catharsis, which is notably ambiguous and unnerving primarily due

to Samson's final act. Milton here does not make it easy or simple for readers to immediately grasp the moral lesson of the curse of violence. His increased focus on the character in this context ironically seems to be at Samson's expense as a human, rounded character, instead turning him more into a type, or a symbol. Milton was surely aware of this as he utilizes several well-known techniques of the Greek tragic form to obfuscate the issue, such as dramatic irony and oscillation between fate and free will. The conventional chorus usually has a supportive, compassionate and cautionary role, as traditionally seen in *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* but is much more varied in *Samson Agonistes*: "They often commented on the actions of the characters, and at times, especially during the last lines of the play, acted as the voice of the poet. Note how Milton avoids this authorial presence in Samson's chorus" (Fainlight, Littman, 2009, xviii). Parker also detects this mutability: "The Chorus in Samson, for example, is capable of great kindness, but also of great tactlessness. (...) Furthermore, it is somewhat irresolute in its opinions, being easily influenced by speakers or events" (1937, 148). Besides the usual aspects of their role, they also challenge Samson's assumptions, engage in sycophancy and unwitting irony, and occasionally offer glimpses of the truth. They are effectively the embodiment of a multitude of opinions and pitfalls fit readers would encounter and consider in their quest for understanding. Milton enhances their role to serve in the moral method he outlines in *Areopagitica*, where he praises an active and thinking, struggling Christian, rather than a passive one.

Milton's modification of Greek tragedy is also seen in the way Samson goes through the elements of reversal, *hamartia*, recognition and catharsis. Samson himself and other characters like the chorus, Manoa, and Harapha comment on his reversal (from God's elect to a prisoner) and his *hamartia* seems obvious enough, it being a combination of pride, unrestrained anger and revealing the secret of his irresistible strength to Dalila. However, it is in the last two elements where Milton uses dramatic irony to great effect, especially in the recognition, and catharsis is ambiguous and ethereal, as it simply does not impact the reader as it usually would in other tragedies, or if it does, the impact is not what

one would expect: "The connection with the Aristotelian reference to catharsis in the prefatory remarks has repeatedly been noted: but has catharsis occurred? has one reached 'calm of mind'? has all 'passion' (all 'suffering') been spent? Critical reactions to the uncertain world of Samson Agonistes suggest that not all readers have felt catharsis, calm of mind, or all passion purged" (Shawcross, 2001, 137).

Milton for *Samson Agonistes* uses a sort of a modified catharsis of Oedipus seen in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, and that play often seems just as appropriate for moral comparison as *Paradise Regained* is. Parker argues that the catharsis is achieved in a traditional way and states that it is evident and traditionally brought about by the plot, especially the reversal: "The play seems to me an obvious attempt to bring about katharsis. The many references to the hero's glorious past are meant to provoke our pity and most of the last portion of the play is a conscious attempt to arouse fear" (1937, 70). Parker quotes Manoa: "Nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail / Or knock the breast, no weakness, no contempt, / Dispraise, or blame, nothing but well and fair, / And what may quiet us in a death so noble" (*Samson Agonistes*, 1721–724), and concludes: "These lines have been aptly quoted as expressions of the doctrine of katharsis, but they are more--they are the very instrument of it. Dramatically appropriate in their context, they nevertheless produce upon us a calming effect" (1937, 70). It seems that Parker misses here the bitter irony Milton particularly emphasizes in the play's ending, both in Manoa's and the chorus' words. As in Greek tragedies, the audience would likely be aware of the main elements of the story before reading or seeing the play, with the legends of Oedipus and Samson respectively being so well known, so they would have known that Samson's mission as a deliverer failed, that tribes of Israel remained slaves, were involved in idolatry and engaged in a long cycle of violence both as the oppressor and the oppressed. Since Manoa was ignorant of this and actually thought or hoped that his son's bloody death would bring freedom: "To *Israel* / Honour hath left, and freedom" (*Samson Agonistes*, 1714–715), then the irony is even more poignant. It is hard to believe that Samson's bloody demise and his state of mind at that moment were meant to be

"imitated" in Aristotelian terms and that the readers would be effectively purged of emotions of pity and fear. In addition, Milton added a sense of dread which does not purge itself and evaporates, but lingers, when one considers the amount of violence that ensued after Samson's futile act in the specific context of Israel's history, but also undoubtedly in a universal one. Dramatic irony, one of the most powerful and memorable techniques in a tragedy, is therefore deliberately irreverent to the cathartic tradition and is brought to its climax by the very last lines of the chorus, where the drama would normally subside and the calming effects would wash over the readers/audience. They speak of what "good" lessons Samson's followers would attain: "His servants he with new acquist / Of true experience from this great event / With peace and consolation hath dismist, / And calm of mind all passion spent" (*Samson Agonistes*, 1755–758). This is the finest example of the subversion Milton achieved in the most important part of a tragedy.

In conclusion, Milton simultaneously embraces and changes the conventional Greek tragic form, all in the service of achieving a particular moral effect in his own tragedy. The conformity to the classic form arises from appropriating the effectiveness, impact and legacy Greek tragedy exerts on readers from all ages, specifically in that special kind of *pathos*, i.e. protagonist's (un)merited and elevated suffering. The subversion occurs in the need to adapt this form to Christian morality and culture, where *Samson Agonistes* would have both specific and universal moral range. Milton with this varied technique aims at moving his tragic protagonist to the next level of development, just as he strove in all his previous literary work to build upon the classical foundations his Christian worldview. In other words, Milton uses the style of classical tragedy as a starting point on which he builds his specific Christian moral vision through the complex figure of the Old testament judge Samson. What is built is simultaneously an homage, but also a modification of the classical dramatic aspects Greek tragedy.

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MILTONOVA SUBVERZIJA GRČKE TRAGIČNE FORME U *SAMSONU AGONISTESU*

Sažetak

Pri analizi Miltonove moralne vizije u njegovim glavnim djelima ona izražena u tragediji *Samson Agonistes* predstavlja određenu enigmu. Za razliku od dva velika Miltonova djela, epova *Izgubljeni raj* i *Nanovo stečeni raj*, gdje su teme o moralnosti, grijesima, kazni i iskupljenju izražene relativno jasno, situacija u *Samsonu Agonistesu* postaje sve dvosmislenijom što se više uplićemo u zagonetnu prirodu starozavjetnoga suca Samsona, ovdje predstavljena kao tragična protagonista u Miltonovoj prvoj i jedinoj tragediji, objavljenoj 1671. godine. Posebno je zanimljiva Miltonova obrada strukture i odlika klasične grčke tragedije što je i tema ovoga istraživanja. Ovi elementi, neki kojih se Milton vjerno pridržava, ali i neki koje prerađuje i odbacuje, daju *Samsonu Agonistesu* neobičnu strukturu koja i sama iskazuje određenu viziju ili ima svoju priču. To je priča o neobičnu protagonistu čiji moralni izražaj počinje poprimati promjenjivost koja, s umjetničkoga gledišta, predstavlja nepresušivo vrelo za analizu tema koje se tiču moralnosti. Pri toj analizi posebno su korisna dva teksta, jedan je rana književna kritika, a drugi klasična tragedija koja je uvelike inspirirala Miltona pri pisanju njegove drame; riječ je, naime, o Aristotelovoj *Poetici* i Sofoklovoj tragediji *Edip kod Kolona*. Ono što proizilazi pri usporedbi i analizi ovih tekstova jest svojevrsni miltonovski klasični tragični protagonist, tvorevina koja je u skladu s njegovim idejama o složenoj isprepletenosti umjetničkoga i moralnoga izričaja u književnome djelu.

Ključne riječi: Milton; moralnost; *Samson Agonistes*; Aristotel; *Poetika*; Sofoklo; *Edip kod Kolona*; tragedija; struktura; Samson; višeznačnost