Samson Agonistes as drama: Milton's use of syntax to define character

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Samson Agonistes as drama:
Milton's use of syntax to define character

by

Julia Quay Waggoner

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INTRODUCTION

Numerous interpretations have been written about the characters in Milton's Samson Agonistes. Frequently, critics interpret the poem as though it were merely an extended account of the Samson story in the Book of Judges, and therefore treat the characters as Old Testament characters. Having found Dr. Johnson's missing "middle"—Samson's spiritual regeneration—a number of modern critics tend to interpret the play's characters solely in relation to how they aid, unconsciously, in Samson's regeneration. These approaches fail to treat the characters as the characters Milton created. My approach, however, is different; I have attempted to analyze the poem rhetorically by examining what the characters say and how they say it.

One of the significant ways in which Milton's story differs from the Biblical story is that in Milton's poem we have a first-hand account of the events told to us by the characters themselves, whereas in the Old Testament we have the story told to us by an unidentified narrator. Since Milton chose to rewrite the story letting the characters "speak for themselves," it seems reasonable to examine the poem in light of what they say. Furthermore, Milton could have left the story in narrative form, put it in the present tense, and let the characters each have their say as he did in Paradise Lost, linking scene with scene by exposition; but he did not. Instead, Milton chose to change the genre from narrative to drama, a move that should draw our attention to the dialogue as dialogue.
In modern drama, the analysis of syntax is one type of critical approach that has been very useful in helping us to understand what playwrights are trying to do in their plays. Underlying this approach is the assumption "that our expectations of characters are created in the same ways that our expectations of people in everyday life are created" (Potter 1980, 187). And in drama they are created, for the most part, through the characters' use of language. Rosanne G. Potter, who has done extensive research on dialogue in modern plays and upon whose methods this paper is based, justifies her approach to drama on the basis of our responses to language use in everyday life:

We respond to the way people talk; we judge not only what they say, but how they say it. It almost goes without saying that the relationships discovered in the process of describing the correlations between reader responses and characters in first acts of plays certainly hold in the larger world of interactions outside of playscripts; if not, they would not work within. (1982, 65)

And of the playwrights' choice of syntax she says:

Every line in a part contributes to the structure that is character; every pattern of usage builds cumulatively toward the moment when character is created. This is not to say that a playwright sits down to his or her work with some preconceived notion that this character will specialize in exclamations and fragments while the next will use imperatives and questions excessively. But the
type of character intended will, at some preconscious level, dictate the syntactical traits of the dialogue.

(1981, 46)

The results of Potter's research prove that her approach is a valid one (1982), and it has identified a constellation of speech habits which correlate with character dominance (1980; 1981; 1982). What I am interested in is whether or not Milton uses syntax to define and differentiate characters; whether his use of it is similar to that of modern dramatists; and, if so, whether Samson's syntax then is the syntax of dominance. And finally, if Samson's syntax is that of dominance, whether this supports our intuition of Samson's character.

But are we justified in the first place in taking this approach to Samson Agonistes? Can we treat Samson, a seventeenth-century poem, like a play? After all, in his preface to the poem, Milton himself says that Samson "never was intended" for the stage.² Perhaps the differences between this old poem and modern drama are too great to approach them in the same way looking for the same things. But I think not. In the first place, much has been written which either refutes or ignores Milton's "intentions" for the play and treats it as simply a play like any other play. Anthony Low in his article, "Milton's Samson and the Stage, with Implications for Dating the Play," argues cogently that Milton's real intentions for the staging of the play can "never be fully or certainly known" (313) anyway, and that it is not at all unreasonable to assume that Milton might have originally intended for Samson Agonistes to be presented on stage. Other critics have written about
the "actability" of the play (Low, 1974; Frye; Kuykendall), and yet others have simply analyzed it as a play (Andrews; Jose; Stephenson). Furthermore, the play, although not frequently, has been performed several times.3

That Samson has been treated like any other play is clear, but I think, more important, the characters in the play have been treated like real people. Northrop Frye, for example, has said of the play, "Samson Agonistes is a real play, with a real plot and real characters. . ." (145); and Robert H. West has said, "I take the characters to be understandable much as real persons are" (110), recognizing that "in some obvious ways fictitious persons do differ sharply from real-life ones. But if these differences defeat our grasp of them as persons they hurt the author sooner than the critic and worse" (note, 127). In addition, the very fact that modern critics see the "middle" of the play as a psychological/spiritual process implies that they see the character undergoing the change be a "true to life" figure so that they can document the process, from which we, the readers/audience, can learn.

Because Samson Agonistes has been treated like any other play and because the characters have been treated as "real" people, I feel that approaching the dialogue as a reflection of character is a valid approach to the play. I therefore entered the text of Samson Agonistes on a mainframe system and ran a computational stylistics package designed by Potter (originally for use on modern plays) which searches for, counts, and sorts a number of identifiable syntactical structures. Data from my running of the COMP STYLE package on Samson answered my
first question; Milton is clearly using syntax to define and differentiate characters in the play. And, after close examination of the individual sorted syntactical variables, it is also clear that Milton uses almost the same constellation of syntactical structures identified by Potter as the ones used by modern dramatists to mark character dominance—a high use of imperatives, questions, and definitions. (In modern drama, a low use of sentence fragments is also part of the constellation of dominant syntax; however, since Milton uses only one fragment in the entire play, this feature did not figure in at all.) Furthermore, we find that Samson's use of dominant syntax supports our understanding of Samson's character in the play.

The body of this thesis will be devoted to a discussion of how syntax is used to define character in Samson Agonistes and to a brief discussion of the problems I had using the COMP STYLE package on the play.
However one chooses to look at the play, Samson is the central character, and whether one chooses to view the poem as simply an extension of the Biblical story or as a modern psychological drama, Samson is still the "hero"—he succeeds in the end in fulfilling his prophesy. In Milton's poem, is Samson a hero just because he is one of the heroes of the Old Testament, or has Milton created his own "hero," which we can see reflected in Samson's syntax? Looking at the syntax choices in the poem, it looks as though Milton has tried to create Samson as a hero in his own right. If we look not just at the numbers but also at the quality of the syntax, we find that in Samson's speech the constellation of speech habits which marks dominance is stronger than for any of the other characters in the poem. He is the strongest user of questions, imperatives, and definitions.

Questions

High usage alone is not enough to identify character dominance, though. For example, the percentage of Manoa's use of both questions and imperatives is significantly higher than anyone else's; but the types of each that characterize the speech of Manoa and Samson, the next highest user of both variables, are markedly different such that Samson's use of them clearly identifies him as the dominant character.

Although Manoa asks significantly more questions than does Samson, the types of questions that he asks are weaker than Samson's. Manoa's questions generally fall into the categories of those that express
incredulity, ask for information, or are concerned with practical matters. Samson's questions, however, generally fall into the categories of those that challenge, accuse, or explore. Such usage marks Samson as the dominant definer.

It is also highly noteworthy that Samson's questions, like his imperatives and definitions as we shall see, become stronger as the play progresses. Early in the poem, Samson's questions neither challenge nor accuse. For the most part, they simply complain, but they are also, to some degree, used to explore the nature of his condition. For example, the questions in the passage:

0 wherefore was my birth from Heaven
Twice by an Angel, who at last in sight
Of both my Parents all in flames ascended
From off the Alter, where an off'ring burn'd,
As in a fiery column charioting
His Godlike presence, and from some great act
Or benefit reveal'd to Abraham's race?
Why was my breeding order'd and prescrib'd
As of a person separate to God,
Design'd for great exploits; if I must die
Betray'd, Captiv'd, and both my Eyes put out,
Made of my Enemies the scorn and gaze;
To grind in Brazen Fetters under task
With this Heav'n-gifted Strength? (23-36)
not only function to give us information which sets the stage for the
drama and which establishes the contrast in Samson between "what once I was, and what am now" (22), but allow Samson to complain about his plight. And his complaining questions continue throughout his opening monologue:

O first created Beam, and thou great Word,
"Let there be light, and light was over all";
Why am I thus bereav'd thy prime decree?
The Sun to me is dark
And silent as the Moon,
Hid in her vacant interlunar cave.
Since light so necessary is to life,
And almost life itself, if it be true
That light is in the Soul,
She all in every part; why was the sight
To such a tender ball as th' eye confin'd?
So obvious and so easy to be quench't,
And not as feeling through all parts diffus'd
That she might look at will through every pore? (83-97)

We know that Samson is merely indulging in self-pity here and that his complaints are unjustified. That Samson doesn't know this tells us that he doesn't understand the cause of his imprisonment, which he sees in purely physical terms. His focus is on his literal blindness, "The Sun to me is dark / And silent as the Moon," rather than where it should be, on his spiritual blindness, why "light" is not in his "Soul."
Yet, these questions are not quite as weak as they appear. Following the first passage quoted above, Samson attempts to come to an understanding of his condition by offering a possible explanation for it:

Yet stay, let me not rashly call in doubt
Divine Prediction; what if all fortold
Had been fulfill'd but through mine own default,
Whom have I to complain of but myself? (43-46)

The fact that Samson tries to understand his condition, despite the fact that he appears to relapse a few lines later, shows that he is exploring and searching for a true understanding. As the play progresses, Samson's use of questions to complain decreases and he more frequently uses exploring questions. Two other examples here show Samson exploring for a greater understanding of himself, and, though he does not provide direct answers as he does above, they provide an answer in their asking: "But what avail'd this temperance, not complete / Against another object more enticing?" (558-59), and "What boots it at one gate to make defense, / And at another to let in the foe, / Effeminately vanquish't?" (560-62).

These early exploration/complaining questions are followed by questions that challenge and accuse. These types of questions typify those Samson uses with Dalila, Harapha, and the Public Officer. In the Samson/Dalila scene, Samson uses the same question both to accuse and challenge Dalila. For example, "Why then / Didst thou at first receive me for thy husband, / Then, as since then, thy country's foe profest?"
and

But zeal mov'd thee;
To please thy gods thou didst it; gods unable
To acquit themselves and prosecute their foes
But by ungodly deeds, the contradiction
Of thir own deity, Gods cannot be:
Less therefore to be pleas'd, obey'd, or fear'd.
These false pretexts and varnish'd colors failing,
Bare in thy guilt how foul must thou appear? (895-902)

both accuse Dalila of lying and wrong-doing and challenge her to accept
that truth or prove it otherwise.

The entire Samson/Harapha scene is one challenge after another; not
only does Samson challenge Harapha to physical combat, which Harapha
does not accept, but he also challenges Harapha verbally, to articulate
himself: "Tongue-doughty Giant, how dost thou prove me these?" (1181),
and "Cam'st thou for this, vain boaster, to survey me, / To descant on
my strength, and give thy verdict?" (1227-28), to which Harapha acts
shocked that Samson can still threaten to fight him: "O Baal-zebub! can
my ears unus'd / Hear these dishonors, and not render death?" (1231-32),
which they evidently can since Harapha exits just a few lines later
without "rendering" that death.

At the very end of the play, Samson uses a series of questions
directed to the Public Officer that also challenge and accuse. When
Samson is ordered to appear before the Philistine Lords to entertain
them with demonstrations of his strength, he says:
Can they think me so broken, so debas'd
With corporal servitude, that my mind ever
Will condescend to such absurd commands?

To show them feats, and play before thir god,
The worst of all indignities, yet on me
Join'd with extreme contempt? I will not come. (1335-37; 1340-42)

After the Officer departs with Samson's message, the Chorus question
Samson's decision not to go, to which Samson replies with questions that
accuse the Chorus of a lack of understanding and challenge them to re-
see the nature of the Officer's request:

Shall I abuse the Consecrated gift
Of strength

By prostituting holy things to Idols;
A Nazarite in place abominable
Vaunting my strength in honor to thir Dagon?
Besides, how vile, contemptible, ridiculous,

What act more execrably unclean, profane? (1354-55; 1358-62)

We can see, therefore, that, although his questions are relatively
weak at the beginning, Samson uses predominantly strong questions to
challenge, accuse, and explore for greater understanding. Samson's
early questions are typically exploring and complaining; however, having
explored and gained an understanding of his "crime," Samson's later
questions are typified by challenging and accusing questions which pit
Samson's understanding and knowledge against that of the other characters in the poem.

Manoa's questions, as opposed to Samson's, are very weak; they neither challenge, accuse, nor explore. Manoa's questions basically are used to express incredulity, ask for information, or are concerned with practical matters. However, in his opening speech, Manoa appears to ask a number of either challenging or accusing questions; he questions the justice of God's laws and challenges God's authority:

0 ever failing trust
In mortal strength! and oh, what not in man
Deceivable and vain! Nay, what thing good
Pray'd for, but often proves our woe, our bane?
I pray'd for Children, and thought barrenness
In wedlock a reproach; I gain'd a Son,
And such a Son as all Men hail'd me happy;
Who would be now a Father in my stead?
O wherefore did God grant me my request,
And as a blessing with such pomp adorn'd?
Why are his gifts desirable, to tempt
Our earnest Prayers, then, giv'n with solemn hand
As Graces, draw a Scorpion's tail behind?
For this did th'Angel twice descend? for this
Ordain'd thy nurture holy, as of a Plant?
Select, and Sacred, Glorious for a while,
The miracle of men: then in an hour
Ensnar'd, assaulted, overcome, led bound,
Thy Foes' derision, Captive, Poor, and Blind,
Into a Dungeon thrust, to work with Slaves? (348-68)

But when we consider the rhetorical function of this passage and examine the other types of questions that Manoa asks, then we see that these are neither truly challenging nor accusing questions.

If we look at the initial speech of the Chorus in conjunction with the initial speech of Manoa, it will help us to understand the rhetorical function of both:

See how he lies at random, carelessly diffus'd,
With languish't head unpropt,
As one past hope, abandon'd,
And by himself given over;
In slavish habit, ill-fitted weeds
O'erworn and soil'd;
Or do my eyes misrepresent? Can this be hee,
That Heroic, that Renown'd,
Irresistible Samson? (118-26)

In both passages, the questions provide the audience with background information and call attention to a dramatic change in expectations--for Manoa, from what was promised by the angel at Samson's birth to the apparent withdrawal of that promise, and for the Chorus, from Samson's once "heroic" self to his present condition as one "carelessly diffus'd" and "past hope." Both sets of questions voice disbelief at what the Chorus and Manoa see.
Reinforcing this creation of disbelief is the use of another syntactical variable, exclamations. The first thing that both the Chorus and Manoa notice and exclaim about Samson is the change in him: "O change beyond report, thought or belief!" (117), and "O miserable change! is this the man, / That invincible Samson" (340-41) (the Chorus and Manoa respectively). Because the poem begins after Samson's heroic deeds have been done and because we, the audience, see him only as he "lies at random," it is immediately necessary for Milton to establish for us the contrast, between Samson past and present. This Milton does successfully through a high concentration of questions and exclamations positioned in the early speeches of Samson, the Chorus, and Manoa. Rhetorically, therefore, these early questions of Manoa function to call attention to the catastrophic change in Samson rather than to actually challenge or accuse God of anything. (In so much as they do challenge or accuse, they sound more like an angry child complaining because things didn't turn out as expected.) And, unlike Samson, neither the Chorus nor Manoa offer possible answers to their questions. This is a major difference between the complaining questions of Samson, the Chorus, and Manoa.

Now let us consider the other types of questions that Manoa asks in the play. These are essentially requests for information with a few scattered others which merely express concern for the practical matters at hand: "But for thee what shall be done? / Thou must not in the meanwhile here forgot / Lie in this miserable loathsome plight / Neglected," (478-81) and "Some dismal accident it needs must be; / What
shall we do, stay here or run and see?" (1519-20).

The majority of Manoa's questions are located at the end of the play where they function first to call attention to the off-stage action, and then to move the plot along. Since the entire play takes place at the mill, once Samson leaves the audience needs to be informed somehow of the events taking place off-stage. Again, Milton combines exclamations, and this time, questions for the purpose of getting the readers' attention: "What noise or shout was that? it tore the Sky" (1472), and "--0 what noise! / Mercy of Heav'n! what hideous noise was that?" (1508-09). And after the Messenger arrives, Manoa plies him with questions concerning Samson and his death: "How died he?" (1579), "by whom fell he, / What glorious hand gave Samson his death's wound?" (1580-81), "Wearied with slaughter then or how?", and "Self-violence? what cause / Brought him so soon at variance with himself / Among his foes?" (1584-86). All these "plot-moving" questions are strictly information questions. Though numerous, they are not questions which typify the speech of a dominant character.

With Dalila and Harapha, it is not so much the types of questions that they ask, but the purpose for which they ask them--letting themselves off the hook so to speak. Both ask questions which appear to explore for understanding:

Was it not weakness also to make known
For importunity, that is for naught,
Wherein consisted all thy strength and safety? (778-80)

and from Harapha:
Is not thy Nation subject to our Lords?
Thir Magistrates confest it, when they took thee
As a League-breaker and deliver'd bound
Into our hands: for hadst thou not committed
Notorious murder on those thirty men
At Askalon, who never did thee harm,

Then like a Robber stripp'dst them of thir robes? (1182-88)

While it is true that Samson should not have revealed his source of strength to Dalila and, according to all appearances, Samson did "notorious murder" on thirty "innocent" men, both Dalila and Harapha use the questions not to challenge, accuse, or try to understand, but simply to justify why they did or did not do something. They use questions to avoid facing themselves; they shift the focus away from themselves to something or someone else.

As we can see, Samson marks himself as a dominant character because of the types of questions that he asks. Although Dalila and Harapha appear to be asking challenging, accusing, or exploring questions, they are not actually because the real purpose of their questions is to turn attention away from themselves and to skirt responsibility.

Imperatives

Like questions, a high use of imperatives is part of the constellation of speech patterns of dominant characters, and, like with questions, Manoa's speech is proportionally higher in the use of this variable than anyone else's. Again, though, we need to look at the
types of imperatives being used rather than simply look at numbers.

Samson's imperatives are stronger than anyone else's; they are commanding and authoritative. As Samson's faith is regenerated, we can see the increasing strength of his imperatives. Early in the poem Samson uses few imperatives, and those that he does use are relatively weak; however, in his exchanges with Dalila and Harapha, Samson frequently uses imperatives, and they are strong ones. Following the Samson/Manoa scene, Samson's imperatives are used to tell others what to do, and they usually require some type of response from the individual to whom they are addressed—they are too forceful to be ignored.

Samson's early imperatives reflect the "languish't" Samson, the Samson described by the Chorus "as one past hope." His attitude is that of resignation:

Spare that proposal, Father, spare the trouble
Of that solicitation; let me here,
As I deserve, pay on my punishment;
And expiate, if possible, my crime,
Shameful garrulity (487-91)

The imperatives are weak, one can imagine a slight wave of the hand accompanying them, and his attitude is wrong. Rather than actually having accepted the responsibility for his present situation, he seems to have resigned himself to it with the hope that he will be able to "pay on his punishment" and "expiate" his "crime" in that way. That he doesn't truly know the nature of his "crime" is reflected in his calling it a "shameful garrulity." Were this actually the case, we too would
also sense the unfairness of the punishment just as much as Samson, the Chorus, and Manoa do in their initial speeches quoted above. But it is not, and, as Samson's faith is regenerated, his understanding of himself and his actions deepens.

Whereas in his early use the imperatives sound "tired," the imperatives Samson uses in subsequent scenes are forceful and commanding, full of energy. In the Samson/Dalila scene, Dalila's entrance is framed by strong imperatives. When Samson has been informed by the Chorus of Dalila's approach, he immediately responds with, "My Wife, my Traitor, let her not come near me" (725), something the Chorus can do nothing about, though, except to report that, "Yet on she moves" (726). After Dalila addresses Samson, his reply to her is simply, "Out, out Hyaena; these are thy wonted arts" (748). That this is not what Dalila expected is obvious. She had expected to find the "old" Samson, over whom she had control, but she now must immediately respond to Samson's dismissal of her so that she can try to "win" him back. She counters Samson's strong imperatives with a weak and pleading one, "Yet hear me Samson" (766), an imperative that requires no response and which Samson can choose to ignore if he wants (although he doesn't get the chance since Dalila immediately launches into a long speech about the possible reasons for her "rash but more unfortunate misdeed" [747]--afraid perhaps that Samson wouldn't give her the chance if she let him respond).

Throughout the rest of this scene, Samson's imperatives continue to tell Dalila what to do: "take to thy wicked deed," "take no care," "go
with that," and "bewail thy falsehood." Dalila's only other imperatives in the scene either tell Samson how to be ("Be not unlike all others") or require Samson's assent ("Let me approach at least"); Samson acknowledges neither. Providing the rest of the frame, Dalila's exit is marked by Samson's imperative to the Chorus to:

Let her go, God sent her to debase me,
And aggravate my folly who committed
To such a viper his most sacred trust
Of secrecy, my safety, and my life. (999-1002)

Not only does this show Samson in control of the situation, but there is a radical difference here in Samson's definition of his "crime," from a "shameful garrulity" to "his most sacred trust / Of secrecy, my safety, and my life." Samson has come a long way in his understanding since the early lines of the play.

If Samson's imperatives were strong in the Samson/Dalila scene, they seem even stronger in the Samson/Harapha scene. The Samson of this scene is anything but "languish't," is no longer accompanying his imperatives with a wave of the hand, and he no longer "lies at random." Somewhere Samson has risen to his feet, perhaps when Dalila sailed into sight, and he is now ready for his most commanding scene.

Samson uses more imperatives in his exchange with Harapha than at any other time, and they are his strongest, most active imperatives: "boast not," "let be assign'd," "put on," "add thy Spear," "go to his Temple," "invocate his aid," "answer thy appellant," "come nearer," "part not," "take good heed," "bring up thy van," and "go baffl'd
coward." To this whole barrage of imperatives Harapha can only reply with, "Presume not on thy God, whate'er he be" (1156). This clearly shows that Harapha has no control over this exchange, despite his being a "Giant. . .of Gath," squared off against the fettered and blinded Samson. Whereas in the earlier scenes, imperatives which tell others how to be, relatively weak imperatives, were scattered in among those that tell others what/what not to do, the imperatives in this scene are only those that tell others (Harapha) what to do.

The few other imperatives Samson uses before he leaves the stage are also commanding, despite the fact that they appear to be weak:

Be of good courage, I begin to feel
Some rousing motions in me which dispose
To something extraordinary my thoughts.
I with this Messenger will go along,
Nothing to do, be sure, that may dishonor
Our Law, or stain my vow of Nazarite. (1381-86)

The strength of these imperatives lies in Samson's position to provide comfort and assurance to those who had initially come to comfort him.

Whereas Samson's imperatives are direct and active, telling others what to do, Manoa's are less direct and less active. They are relatively weak and, though numerous, lack authority. Like Samson's, Manoa's imperatives become stronger as the play progresses, though they are never anywhere near as strong as Samson's. And the only reason Manoa's imperatives become stronger is that those individuals who have authority over him (Samson, the Philistines) are killed.
At the beginning of the play, however, when Manoa first appears, he uses a group of imperatives which look fairly strong and commanding but which really are not; they sound more like advice than commands: "be penitent," "act not," "reject not," "believe not," "repent the sin," and "be calm," all of which are directed to Samson. Not only are they weak imperatives, but they are bad advice as well since Manoa doesn't understand Samson's condition any more than Samson does at this point. Through these imperatives Manoa seems to be offering reassurance to a "hopeless" Samson. They appear to be commanding simply because Samson is so weak at this point in the poem. That they are ineffectual is obvious since Samson chooses not to take his father's advice.

As the play progresses, Manoa uses imperatives basically to demand information from others: "tell us," "relate by whom," "speak them out," "say first," "explain," and "give us [an account]." This particular grouping of imperatives is clustered toward the end of the play, after Samson's death. Rather than indicating authority or control of the situation at this point, these imperatives function simply to move the story along and to create some minor suspense by dragging it out. The Messenger doesn't just come out with his story; it must by coaxed out of him by Manoa bit by bit. So, although the audience knows the ending of the story, we are forced to go through Manoa's suspense and anguish with him—as his passions are purged, ours should be too.

At the very end of the play, after the destruction of both Samson and the Philistines, Manoa assumes control of the situation at hand (rather by default than by any virtue of his own), and this is reflected
in his use of these imperatives: "Come, come no time for lamentation now," "let them," and "let us go." We are left with a vision of Manoa leading the Hebrews off to the temple to find Samson's body.

The use of imperatives by other characters in the poem is negligible but of interest to see how else Milton uses them in the play other than to develop character. The Chorus, like Manoa, sometimes use imperatives to give advice to Samson ("tax not," "deject not"), but the major use of imperatives by the Chorus is to move the plot along by signalling new scenes: "But see here comes thy reverend Sire" (326), "Look now for no enchanting voice, nor fear / The bait of honied word; a rougher tongue / Draws hitherward, I know him by his stride" (1065-67), and "Expect another message more imperious" (1352-53). These three lines introduce the next scene by "seeing" or predicting the arrival of a new or returning (the Public Officer) character. (Dalila's approach is an exception to this as her approach is signalled by a question, "But who is this, what thing of Sea or Land?" [710].) In two instances the Chorus use apparently strong, forceful imperatives, but since they are directed toward God, they lack authority. They are used rather, as they frequently are in religious poetry and prayer, as invocations or benedictions:

So deal not with this once thy glorious Champion,
The Image of thy strength, and mighty minister.
What do I beg? how hast thou dealt already?
Behold him in this state calamitous, and turn
His labors, for thou canst, to peaceful end. (705-09)
Go, and the Holy One
Of Israel be thy guide
To what may serve his glory best, and spread his name
Great among the Heathen round:
Send thee the Angel of thy Birth, to stand
Fast by thy side, who from thy Father's field
Rode up in flames after his message told
Of thy conception, and be now a shield
Of fire; that Spirit that first rusht on thee
In the camp of Dan
Be efficacious in thee now at need. (1427-37)

Thus we see that the Chorus' imperatives are used basically to move the plot along, to invoke God, or to confer a blessing.

It is clear that Samson's use of imperatives identifies him as a person in control of situations. His imperatives are more direct, active, and forceful than anyone else's; they usually demand an immediate response of some type from the individual to whom they are addressed. Manoa's use, though significantly higher, is weaker; his imperatives are advice-giving, which require no active response, or information-seeking, which require only a verbal response.
A high use of definitions is the third syntactical variable characteristic of dominant speech which is observable in Milton's play. When we look at this variable, however, a problem arises. Virtually every utterance in *Samson Agonistes* involves some type of definition—of self, of other, of past or present situation. The problem is the sheer amount of data generated—in this case, almost the entire poem. (In the plays for which the COMP STYLE package was originally designed, not as much defining takes place as in *Samson*, so the output is much more manageable.) Here, the numbers told me that Samson and Dalila define on a relatively similar basis, but with Dalila doing somewhat more than Samson, which, considering the size of her role, is quite significant. Significant too is the fact that Manoa does the least amount of defining in the play. What the numbers show us is that Samson and Dalila are the major creators of reality in the poem, and that Manoa, who does comparatively little defining, is a reactor to the established reality, and is, therefore, a passive character.

Since Samson and Dalila do almost the same amount of defining, I see these two characters as major contenders in the play. The difference between them lies not only in the nature of the realities they define, but in why they define as they do.

It is at this point that the world view which the poem embraces becomes important to some degree. Since the world view which underlies the poem is a Christian one, any defining contrary to that reality is "wrong," and since Dalila is not a Christian but a Philistine, the
reality she defines is bound to be the "wrong" one (and thus Samson emerges as the dominant character because his reality is the "right" one). But it would be wrong to simply dismiss Dalila with this argument. Because Milton created her as a complex character, he would not have us dismiss her on these grounds alone; it would not have been worth his effort to have developed her character. Dalila, though, provides us with sufficient other grounds to dismiss her.

Samson, although defining less, again emerges as the dominant user of this feature, as he has with questions and imperatives. And, although Samson's view of reality is the "right" one, he shows himself as dominant in spite of his "right" reality--just as Dalila shows herself to be weak beyond the "wrongness" of her reality.

Most of Samson's defining at the beginning of the play is done for our benefit to establish the "what once I was, and what am now," what had been expected of Samson and what Samson actually did. Through the definitions of Samson and the Chorus, we also get the historical situation defined, and through that, which is the "right" reality and which is the "wrong" reality. Such definitions help set the stage for the drama.

Samson's early definitions, however, when not "setting the stage," show him to be a weak definer. As already pointed out, Samson's early definition of his "crime" is inaccurate in that a "shameful garrulity" completely misses the mark in defining the nature of Samson's "crime." This "mis-defining" is typical of Samson's early definitions. Samson uses his definitions to evade the responsibility for his actions; he
blames God for making him intellectually weak:

O impotence of mind, in body strong!
But what is strength without a double share
Of wisdom? Vast, unwieldy, burdensome,
Proudly secure, yet liable to fall
By weakest subtleties, not made to rule,
But to subserve where wisdom bears command.

* * *
Suffices that to mee strength is my bane,
And proves the source of all my miseries (52-57; 63-64)

It is not God's fault that Samson has misused, or failed to use, the
wisdom he has. Samson had no need of "a double share of wisdom" to make
the right choices; had he merely made good use of what he had, he would
not have found himself "eyeless in Gaza."

In another early passage, Samson again "mis-defines" his "crime"
and tries to shift responsibility for his actions to God again, and he
is concerned not with his relationship with God, but with what members
of his tribe think of him:

Yee see, O friends;
How many evils have enclos'd me round;
Yet that which was the worst now least afflicts me,
Blindness, for had I sight, confus'd with shame,
How could I once look up, or heave the head,
Who like a foolish Pilot have shipwrec't
My Vessel trusted to me from above,
Gloriously rigg'd; and for a word, a tear,
Fool, have divulg'd the secret gift of God
To a deceitful Woman: tell me Friends,
Am I not sung and proverb'd 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 pair'd,
These two proportion'd ill drove me transverse. (193-209)

Samson calls himself a "foolish Pilot" and twice a "fool." He has not been foolish but negligent in keeping his vow, something he cannot blame God for. And who is he to presume what God "should, at least" have done? Furthermore, Samson's concern here for what others think of him demonstrates that he does not yet understand what his true concerns should be, not with what men think of him, but with what God thinks of him.

But as the poem progresses, Samson's definitions become stronger in that they become more accurate and that he uses them to accept responsibility for his actions: "of what now I suffer / She was not the prime cause, but I myself" (234), "Nothing of all these evils hath befall'n me / But justly, I myself have brought them on, / Sole Author I, sole cause" (374-76). And he eventually defines accurately and precisely what it is that he has done:

Father, I do acknowledge and confess
That I this honor, I this pomp have brought
To Dagon, and advanc'd his praises high
Among the Heathen round; to God have brought
Dishonor, obloquy, and op't the mouths
Of Idolists, and Atheists; have brought scandal
To Israel, diffidence of God, and doubt
In feeble hearts, propense enough before
To waver, or fall off and join with Idols:
Which is my chief affliction, shame and sorrow,
The anguish of my Soul, that suffers not
Mine eye to harbor sleep, or thoughts to rest. (448-59)

From the middle of the play onward, Samson does not try to use language to cover up what he has done, rather he admits it directly and, for the most part, calls a spade a spade. And this he does more precisely than anyone else in the play.

In the original design of the COMP STYLE package, adverbs were included as a syntactical feature which correlates with intellectual, educated characters, and while Samson cannot be said to be educated or intellectual as we understand the terms, his language is, nonetheless, more precise than anyone else's. (Where adverbs are the most significant feature of Samson's speech, they are the least significant of Dalila's. In fact, Dalila uses adverbs less than anyone else in the play.) Because Samson's definitions progress from being evasive and "misdefining" and because, for the most part, Samson uses definitions to acknowledge and accept responsibility for his actions, he emerges as a
strong definer in the play.

Dalila, on the other hand, uses definitions strictly to redefine her "crime" so that she can shift responsibility for her actions somewhere else. Nowhere in her speeches does she really acknowledge or accept what she has done. Her initial speech is a tour de force in "mis-defining":

With doubtful feet and wavering resolution
I came, dreading thy displeasure, Samson,
Which to have merited, without excuse,
I cannot but acknowledge; yet if tears
May expiate (though the fact more evil drew
In the perverse event than I foresaw)
My penance hath not slack'n'd, though my pardon
No way assur'd.

*     *     *

If aught in my ability may serve
To light'n what thou suffer' st, and appease
Thy mind with what amends is in my power,
Though late, yet in some part to recompense
My rash but more unfortunate misdeed. (732-39; 744-48)

It is quite an understatement to label what she did a "perverse event" and a "rash but more unfortunate misdeed." Not only is everything "mis-defined," but Dalila thinks that "tears / May expiate" her crime, which shows that she has not acknowledged her responsibility for Samson's blindness and imprisonment.
If we examine several other speeches of Dalila, we can see the same sort of thing going on, as well as find some other faults:

First granting, as I do, it was a weakness
In me, but incident to all our sex,
Curiosity, inquisitive, importune
Of secrets, then with like infirmity
To publish them, both common female faults:

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

(785-89; 773-777)

It was not gold, as to my charge thou lay'st,
That wrought with me; thou knowst the Magistrates
And Princes of my country came in person,
Solicited, commanded, threat'n'd, urg'd,
Adjur'd by all the bonds of civil Duty
And of Religion, press'd how just it was,
How honorable, how glorious to entrap
A common enemy, who had destroy'd
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
Dishonorer of Dagon (849-61)

In both of these passages it is clear that the ultimate end of
Dalila's defining is, in essence, to define away her "crime." In the
first of these passages, Dalila defines her action in terms of Samson's
for the sole purpose of not accepting responsibility for her actions.
Dalila is arguing from an "if it's all right for you, then it's all
right for me" basis, demonstrating that she is operating without a set
of standards or principles, which weakens her position. (Even "wrong"
standards are at least preferable to having none at all. Satan's
position in Paradise Lost, though "wrong," is very strong because he
argues from a set of very solidly "wrong" principles.) In the second
passage, Dalila is ultimately trying to avoid acceptance of
responsibility too, but her argument is also wrong for other reasons.
Even if we grant Dalila the validity of her religion, she does not do
the right thing for the right reason. It is not for the glory of Dagon
that Dalila betrays Samson, but for Dalila's own glory:

But in my country where I most desire,
In Ekron, Gaza, Asdod, and in Gath
I shall be nam'd among the famousest
Of Women, sung at solemn festivals,
Living and dead recorded, who to save
Her country from a fierce destroyer, chose
Above the faith of wedlock bands, my tomb
With odors visited and annual flowers. (980-87)

Thus, not only does Dalila define away her actions, her sole interest is in herself. The reality that she defines is without standards, and it recognizes only Dalila and the gratification of her desires.

Besides weakening her use of definitions by using them solely to evade responsibility for her actions, that Dalila defines her world and others by what they are not rather than by what they are. Significantly, Dalila uses negatives almost twice as much as anyone uses any of the other syntactical variables. Time and time again Dalila defines her actions by saying what they are not. Her initial speech is loaded with negatives ("displeasure," "without excuse," "I cannot but acknowledge," and "unfortunate misdeed"), which should immediately put us on our guard. And the rest of her speeches are likewise filled with similar negatives and negative constructions: "It was not gold, as to my charge thou lay'st" (849), and she tells Samson what not to do/be rather than what to do/be: "nor shouldst thou," "exact not," "Be not unlike all others, not austere" (815), "In uncompassionate anger do not so" (817), and "bear not."

Not only does Dalila use an extremely large number of negatives, but she uses the fewest adverbs of anyone in the play. Because of her extremely high use of negatives and low use of adverbs, Dalila creates an imprecise, ill-defined reality. We know why things are not, but we really don't know why things are. So she leaves us unsure of her and thereby unsure of the reality she offers us in the play. Because of this hedging, and because she defines in order to shirk responsibility,
Dalila weakens herself as a definer.

We can see, then, that it is not so much the nature of the realities defined that makes Samson syntactically stronger than Dalila as the reasons why they define as they do. Although Samson initially “mis-defines” his “crime” and does so to avoid accepting responsibility for his actions, as the play progresses Samson’s definitions become more accurate and precise, and he uses them to acknowledge and accept responsibility for his actions. Dalila, though, more than justifies our dismissal of her reality for several reasons. Her only purpose in defining is to shift the responsibility for her actions elsewhere and to redefine them to the point where they are virtually unrecognizable. Furthermore, the concentrated use of negatives and negative constructions combined with her low use of adverbs create for us a reality so indefinite that it is difficult for us to say just what it is.

Having examined the syntactical features that Potter has identified as characteristic of speech habits of dominant characters in modern plays (with the exception of low fragment usage which doesn’t figure into this play), we can see that Samson’s speech is the speech of dominant characters. His questions are challenging, accusing, and exploring; his imperatives are forceful, telling others what to do, and they require an immediate response from the individual to whom they are addressed; and his definitions precisely, positively define his reality, and through them he accepts responsibility for his actions. But what happens when we look beyond the syntax and examine the rest of the poem?
Does Samson still emerge as the dominant character in the play?

I think that it goes without saying that Milton intended Samson to be a dominant character. We are, after all, dealing with a tragedy: the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems . . . 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 measure with a kind of delight, stirr'd up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated.

(Milton, 549)

And if tragedy is to "purge the mind of those and such like passions," which passions are they that we see "well imitated" in Samson Agonistes that are to "temper" and "reduce" those in us? Just what kind of "hero" is Samson? His syntax is extremely definite in marking him as a dominant character, but he doesn't seem to do anything, let alone anything "heroic" during the course of the play, or in much of his reported past.

In order to understand what kind of "hero" Samson is, it is necessary to examine a passage from Paradise Lost in which Milton defines, or rather redefines, heroic action:

I now must change

These Notes to Tragic; foul distrust, and breach
Disloyal on the part of Man, revolt,
And disobedience: On the part of Heav'n
Now alienated, distance and distaste,
Anger and just rebuke, and judgement giv'n,
Not less but more Heroic than the wrath
Of stern Achilles

Since first this Subject for Heroic Song
Pleas'd me long choosing, and beginning late;
Not sedulous by Nature to indite
Wars, hitherto the only Argument
Heroic deem'd, Chief maistry to dissect
With long and tedious havoc fabl'd Knights
In Battles feign'd; the better fortitude
Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom
Unsung; or to describe Races and Games,
Or tilting Furniture, emblazon'd Shields
Impreses quaint, Caparisons and Steeds;
Bases and tinsel Trappings, gorgeous Knights
At Joust and Tournament; then marshall'd Feast
Serv'd up in Hall with Sewers, and Seneschals;
The skill of Artifice or Office mean,
Not that which justly gives Heroic name
To person or to poem. Mee of these
Nor skill'd nor studious, higher Argument
Remains, sufficient of itself to raise
That name (IX, 5-10; 13-15; 25-44)
From this lengthy passage we can see that Milton's conception of heroic action is quite different from what we have traditionally called heroic action. Ever since Homer wrote of the exploits of Odysseus we have conceived of the hero as a warrior, a man of action. Samson, however, becomes truly heroic only after he no longer is a "man of action."

At the beginning of the passage quoted from *Paradise Lost*, Milton says that he "now must change / These Notes to Tragic"--the disobedience of Man, his separation from God. This is the state in which we find Samson at the beginning of *Samson Agonistes*, not "a person separate to God" (31, emphasis mine) as his destiny prescribed for him, but a person separated from God. Both *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes* deal, in part, with how we can move from being "separated from God" to being "separate to God." This is the true "action" of *Samson Agonistes*, the "better fortitude / Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom / Unsung," which is "Not less but more Heroic than the wrath of stern Achilles," or any other old "hero." If we expect the heroic action of *Samson* to be that of "Wars, hitherto the only Argument Heroic deem'd," with "races and games," "gorgeous Knights / At Joust and Tournament" and feasts, we will not find it. The heroic action of *Samson Agonistes* is the regeneration of Samson's faith and his acting on that faith, rather than on his own. When Samson stops believing in his physical strength and articulates his trust "in the living God" (1140), he becomes a true Miltonic hero. The passions in the play which we see "well imitated" are those things which keep us separated from God, for Samson, his pride and self-reliance. Samson is indeed a true "hero." Not only do his "actions" show us that,
but his heroic nature is reflected in the development of his syntactical choices through the course of the poem-play.
Some difficulties with the COMP STYLE package were encountered with its application to *Samson Agonistes*. My major difficulty was with entering the text on the mainframe system. Potter has established a 500-character maximum for text entry. This allows her "the freedom to use one sentence when that sentence was free-standing and interpretable, and more when it was not sufficient for rhetorical analysis" (1980, 189). All too frequently, however, the 500-character maximum proved too short to handle a rhetorical unit of Milton's poem, and frequently too short to cover a Miltonic sentence. Therefore, before I began entering the text on the computer, I had to go through the text, pencil in hand, to mark off units enterable on the mainframe system. As unit markers, if the passage didn't fit the 500-character maximum, I first looked for full stop punctuation, either a period or question mark. Not being able to locate either of those, I next looked for, in descending order, a semicolon, colon, and finally an independent clause separated from another independent clause by a coordinating conjunction. Although this produced some rather artificial rhetorical units, the procedure worked adequately most of the time.

As already mentioned, the definition program was not very helpful on this particular project because it simply gave me back most of the text unsorted. A change in the definition program could be made if categories were established for different types of questions and then given a symbol which the computer could read so that it would sort and count the definitions.
Several programs, exclamations, adverbs, comparisons, and fragments and pauses, did not produce results in accordance with their modern usage. Exclamations in Milton do not seem to be functioning to define excitability in characters, and adverbs do not define intellect or level of education of characters. Comparisons in modern drama suggest a poetic nature of the character, but in a poem characters are bound to speak poetically, comparisons being part of that poetic language, so the program was not very helpful. A high use of fragments and pauses in modern drama frequently marks a character who is dominated by others. This feature, as has already been noted, is not part of Milton's syntax. It is not clear at this point whether this absence of this feature and the extremely high use of definition is related to the nature of poetry and poetic language, or whether it is related to the age of the poem.

Much work needs to be done on older drama to understand how early dramatists are using syntax to define their characters and how their use differs from that of modern dramatists. Research on earlier playwrights such as Shakespeare, Marlow, Jonson, Webster, Ford, Wycherley and others could perhaps identify other syntactical variables that we should be looking at. Such research might also lead us to a better understanding of the nature of audience expectations of characters and how this expectation has/not changed over the centuries. Research on Milton's poem-plays, Samson Agonistes and Comus, and on Marlow's Doctor Faustus might reveal some interesting differences in the way early dramatists used syntax in poem-plays as opposed to prose plays.
CONCLUSIONS

From this study we can conclude that Milton uses syntax to define and differentiate the characters in Samson Agonistes. We can further conclude that Samson uses the syntax which marks him as a dominant character, which confirms our understanding of Samson's character in the poem. We can follow the development of Samson's character in the syntax he uses. Early in the play his questions, imperatives, and definitions are comparatively weak: his early questions, though attempting to explore, usually are used to complain; his imperatives are few and weak; and his definitions, when not providing background information, are used to evade responsibility for his actions and to "mis-define" the nature of his "crime." In the middle of the play, Samson's questions are challenging and accusative; his imperatives are more frequent and are forceful, direct; and his definitions are now more accurate and are used to acknowledge and accept responsibility for his actions. At the end of the play, Samson's dominance is reflected not only in the continued use of the types of questions, imperatives, and definitions characteristic of his encounters with Dalila and Harapha, but in his position as someone able to provide reassurance to others, and, despite their lack of understanding, the Chorus and Manoa are reassured and find themselves with "calm of mind, all passions spent" (1758).

The COMP STYLE package has made possible a closer examination of the text than has previously been done. It allows us to "scientifically" support our understanding of the character of Samson, and it is a useful tool in that it invites a new perspective to be taken.
and it is a useful tool in that it invites a new perspective to be taken on older literature. It brings to our attention things heretofore hidden in our texts and makes new what we once thought so familiar.
NOTES

1. For a general view of the argument see John S. Hill's "Vocation and Spiritual Renovation in *Samson Agonistes*." Other critics have seen Dalila's, Manoa's, and Harapha's roles as different temptations, but the general argument is the same.


3. See for example the special issue of *Milton Quarterly* dedicated to the production of *Samson Agonistes* at LeMoyne College. Of particular interest is William P. Shaw's article, "Producing *Samson Agonistes*," which discusses some of the problems involved with the staging of the play.


- - -. (1978) "Normal Circumstances, Literal Language, Direct Speech Acts, the Ordinary, the Everyday, the Obvious, What Goes Without Saying, and Other Special Cases." Critical Inquiry 4.4: 625-644.


