

God's Aristotelian Tragedy

Toward "Samson Agonistes": The Growth of Milton's Mind, by Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978. xxiii + 436 pp. \$27.50.*

ADMIRATION FOR MILTON'S classical tragedy has frequently been qualified by reservations about the central theme and the character of the protagonist. Samson's exploits are heroic, but they are exercises of physical strength and his triumph over the Philistines has been seen as a vengeful genocide. He has been called a "cantankerous old fighter-priest," "something of a monomaniac," an "unintellectual Samson"; and in one extreme view the theme of the drama is "morally offensive and intellectually negligible."

Mary Ann Radzinowicz, Lecturer in English at Cambridge University and Fellow of Girton College, confronts such criticisms, emphatically rejects them, and sets out to demonstrate—in what surely must be the longest and most intensive study ever centered on the play—that *Samson Agonistes* is a rich and culminating work, Milton's most mature statement of "the permanence of human desire for liberation," and a "fully tragic vision of reality."

As the title indicates, this is not another "intrinsic and formalist" study of the play in isolation, but rather an "author-contextual" study which reads *Samson Agonistes* in the context of Milton's total *oeuvre*, prose as well as poetry. The approach is based on the traditional view, accepted by the majority of scholars, that this drama is Milton's last poetic work, and the author concedes that her study would lose much of its weight if objective evidence should turn up to establish an earlier date. A significant section of the book therefore is the substantial appendix reviewing and convincingly rejecting the minority speculations. In Dr. Radzinowicz's view the ending of *Paradise Lost*, when Adam and Eve leave Paradise with the world "all

before them," is "supremely ambiguous and open"; it "concluded everything, but likewise concluded nothing." Milton needed to write "a double sequel: an epic of spiritual triumph or a divine comedy, and a tragedy of human failure encompassing regeneration or redemption." The publication of *Samson Agonistes* following *Paradise Regained* in the single volume of 1671 is deliberate and not—as some have argued—accidental or casual.

This massive study is organized as an examination of Milton's developing thought, culminating in *Samson Agonistes*, in six "contexts": Dialectic or Logic, History, Politics, Ethics, Theology, and Poetics. These "traditional humanistic branches of learning" are derived from the headings in Milton's youthful *Commonplace Book*, and their use here stresses that they are "perpetual concerns" which "indicate arc upon arc of the poet's developing thought."

The chapters on Milton's Dialectic are an answer to those who have questioned whether *Samson Agonistes* is a true tragedy and those who have seen an "unintellectual Samson." After an account of the poet's understanding and adaptation of Aristotle's theory of tragedy, Radzinowicz analyzes the play as "a dialectical structure imitating the mind at work for the purpose of attaining balance." Stressing the frequency of "words expressive of intellectual processes," she demonstrates in detail that the "density of logical patterns or schemes...prompts attention to mental processes" especially in Samson's responses to the specious arguments of Dalila and the blustering charges of the Philistine champion Harapha.

Each successive context is represented as moving to a broader and more inclusive area of human experience. Through Milton's conception of history we are shown how the poet came to understand God's providential use of tragic experience which arises from man's exercise of his freedom in actions foreseen though not necessitated by God. Samson was a chosen man who had failed in his covenant with God. Like Samson, God's Englishmen,

whom the younger Milton had hailed as an elect nation, had through their own errors and weaknesses failed to fulfill their appointed mission. After 1660, with the defeat of their cause and the return of prelates and monarch, they were dismayed and disheartened. Like the Chorus in the tragedy they could ask bewildered questions about God's ways to men, especially to His chosen men. The answer proposed here is that "God too works like an Aristotelian tragic poet. God places before men the spectacle of human life, and that spectacle is tragic." In the biblical history of Samson, shaped as Aristotelian tragedy, the English people can learn wisdom by "feeling the full impact of the lack of wisdom," be "purged of passion and of evil," and come to recognize that "defeat and tragedy has become the condition of recovery and deliverance." In this context Radzinowicz challenges some common views about the Chorus—that their responses are "ordinary commonplace musings" in "some of the flattest lines that Milton ever wrote," or that "they never fully understand the meaning of what they observe." On the contrary, Radzinowicz argues, the tragic catharsis takes place in the Chorus as well as in Samson himself, and "such readings fail to note that the Chorus undergoes its own agonistic recapitulation of Samson's agony." She sees the Chorus as an "on-stage audience," a surrogate for the defeated people of England and for all audiences or readers of the play. They "strive to understand," and with them the English people can come to see that "there is no 'ready and easy way' to establish a perfect and stable society; there is only a difficult and tragic way. Each must deliver himself from bondage into freedom."

Treating Milton's concept of ethics, Radzinowicz emphasizes the theme of the "Good Temptation," which recalls familiar passages in *Areopagitica* and the less familiar but more fully developed discussion in *De Doctrina Christiana*. Good temptations "are not the cause of virtue, but they are the stuff from which it is made" and "they are instruments of

understanding as well as exercises of will." As in the companion work, *Paradise Regained*, though less explicitly, Milton replaces "classical constructs" with "Christian constructs," and writes this drama "under the dominance of Hebrew poetry." He conveys his ethical teaching by "a richly allusive biblical diction," especially from the Psalms.

Throughout the book Radzinowicz brings contextual evidence to support her positions on still disputed questions. Milton did not retreat from political thinking after his party's defeat; as in all of his major poetry from *Lycidas* on, a political message is one of the motives in a many-layered work of art, for "Milton saw no incompatibilities in multiple perspectives, complex structures, and a spectrum of intentional effects." *Samson Agonistes* is not theologically barren; rather it "contains Milton's most advanced theological position," and is "a fully Christian and fully theological poem...more radically ecumenical and existential than the epic." The Miltonic "heresies" are not relatively unimportant beside the poet's dominant orthodoxy; these doctrines, especially Arminianism with its implications for freedom and responsibility, are centrally significant for this tragedy. In his concept of the role of the poet Milton did not believe that he was "an amanuensis of God, a modern prophet in direct line of descent from Moses and Isaiah," or that "his poetry was an act of mystic worship." Although a note of prophetic inspiration can be found in some of the earlier poems and prose, contextual study shows that the direction and course of Milton's comments on inspiration is "a process of diminishing emphasis upon ecstatic, unearthly music and an increasing emphasis upon speaking reason to sensible men." In the later writings "the rhapsode is replaced by the sage."

The depth and comprehensiveness of this contextual study are not achieved without cost. The tracing of the play's action in five successive contexts involves a good deal of repetition, and it is not always clear why a particular observation comes

under History rather than Politics or Theology. The copious survey of Milton's writings and of the relevant scholarship is required for this kind of study, but it makes for a long and crowded book and sometimes difficult reading. One can hope that when the insights of this impressive study have been assimilated there will be—from this author or another—a shorter book setting forth more briefly for the non-specialist reader or student the revised and enriched interpretations which are here developed in detail and at length. But this book had to be written first, and the admirer of Milton will welcome the wealth of persuasive evidence that in his final poetic work Milton has quit himself like Milton and triumphantly fulfilled the hope—expressed three decades earlier—that he would write, in English and in classical Greek form, a tragedy "doctrinal and exemplary to a nation."

Reviewed by CHARLES D. MURPHY

The American Alcibiades?

The Papers of John C. Calhoun, 1829-1832, edited by Clyde N. Wilson, Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1978. Volume XI. xlii + 728 pp. \$27.50.

A NOW QUITE elderly law school teacher of mine, who served with defense counsel when frantic officials succeeded in their disgraceful efforts (in 1953) to expedite the Rosenberg atomic espionage executions, recently recalled, "It was an episode of governmental insanity." I am inclined, whenever I am reminded of the decades which led up to the American Civil War, to make a similar assessment of the conduct of the extremists of that period, abolitionists and secessionists alike.