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## **A bird for the ages : national concupiscence in the work of John Milton**

Doug DePalma

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## ABSTRACT

### A BIRD FOR THE AGES: NATIONAL CONCUPISCENCE

#### IN THE WORK OF JOHN MILTON

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This thesis examines the religious concept of concupiscence in the work of John Milton from *Comus* to *Samson Agonistes* with a special focus on Milton's political tracts and histories. I suggest in readings of *Comus*, *Eikonoklastes*, and *The Ready and Easy Way* that we find Milton interacting with concupiscence in a different way as his experiences in the British Commonwealth advanced. In the *Comus* we find Milton willing to forgive the concupiscent Lady, yet in *Eikonoklastes* and *The Ready and Easy Way*, Milton describes the "thralls" that dominate his later prose work in a keenly concupiscent manner such that the people of England are "ravished" by Charles at the end of *Eikonoklastes*. I term this politicization of concupiscence "national concupiscence," and turn to Milton's *History of Britain* to track how politicized concupiscence became a heuristic in Milton's literature for interacting with national failure.

In *The History*, Milton gives startling precedence to the deeply misogynistic overtones of Dalila in *Samson* in his description of an Anglo-Saxon queen Cartimandua. In describing the failure of English nations past, Milton invokes the imagery of national concupiscence to suggest national failure was tied intimately to the queen's sexual deviance. Each iteration of the English nation is described in a similar manner in *The History*. I conclude with a reading of *Samson Agonistes* that seeks to highlight the nationally concupiscent overtones of the text, to suggest in turn that the text must not be read as allegory but instead as an imaginative reckoning of the problem of national concupiscence and national failure and spiritual resistance to it.

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A BIRD FOR THE AGES: NATIONAL CONCUPISCENCE  
IN THE WORK OF JOHN MILTON

BY

DOUG DEPALMA  
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## Introduction

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Milton's invocation to light in the first 55 lines of Book III of *Paradise Lost* has long been seen as one of the most moving sections of the epic. Critics for several centuries have keyed in on the deep ambiguity that emerges from Milton's navigation of physical and spiritual disability and the aonian ambition of his poetic project. Ishmael's ambivalent invocation of Miltonic light in *Moby-Dick* underlies the simultaneous ambition and ambiguity of the section. While Milton's faith is certainly not brought into question in these 55 lines, there is some question over his own personal ability to navigate the problems of vision, physically and spiritually. In those treasured final lines, Milton asks only to be absolved from the moisture that rises unbidden to his eyes, so that he "may" pursue his heavenly narrative. This problem of moisture and unbidden physical limitation to limitless intellectual ambition is rooted in Milton's earliest works, be it the Lady in *Comus* or Milton himself in his self-reflective "Sonnet VII." Nearly 40 years after he worried over his ownership of sufficient "grace" to use the heavenly gifts given to him Milton struggled within *Paradise Lost* to answer the same question ("Sonnet VII" ll. 13).

Critic Debora Shuger accurately described this general problem of unbidden movement in the "hidden caverns of selfhood" as Augustinian concupiscence in her reading of *Comus*, "Gums of Glutinous Heat" (Shuger 21). Shuger makes a compelling argument on the centrality of the question of concupiscence in the development of the themes of *Comus*, and gives further insight into the ubiquity of the question in early modern puritan circles. With the simultaneous decline of confessional culture and growth of modern notions of the self, puritan thought

developed a deep concern over uncontrollable concupiscent impulses. In Milton's iteration of this more general development in early modern England, the Lady finds herself stuck in Comus' seat by birdlime, an image associated in Augustine's *Confessions* (Augustine 186) with wet dreams. While the warm birdlime is purged and dispersed by the cooling waters of a merciful agent of God, the ending belies a deeper anxiety over the issue as Shuger is right to point out.

Outside of this analysis of *Comus*, the question of concupiscence in Milton's work has received relatively little critical attention. Indeed, even the denotative definition of concupiscence in the work of John Milton is contentious. The *OED* defines concupiscence chiefly as "eager or vehement desire," but Milton is given as an example under its secondary definition as a "carnal, sexual desire" ("Concupiscence"). Several critics have commented on the more general, impulsive concupiscence in Milton's Samson and Satan (Christopher Hill in *Milton and the English Revolution*, Anthony Low in *The Blaze of Noon*), but in each invocation the term has the relatively stable definition of fallen human desires. Clay Daniel, writing after Hill and Low, found an interesting conflation of impulses for sex and violence in *Samson Agonistes* but did not pursue the concupiscent nature of these desires in the relationship between Samson and Dalila. With the growth of *The New Milton Criticism* (Hermann and Sauer) and the development of the greater trend over the past several decades to find areas of unorthodoxy and tension in Milton's religion and politics, the time is right to revisit the question of concupiscence as it developed over Milton's career as poet and polemicist.

I will suggest in this project that through Milton's prose tracts concupiscence developed in literary praxis from a problem of the "inner caverns of selfhood" in *Comus* to a problem of the

inner chambers of state in *Eikonoklastes* to an agent of enthrallment and national apocalypse in *The Ready and Easy Way* and beyond. In *Eikonoklastes*, Milton uses the council scene to depict the spread of specifically concupiscent sin from Charles to the country as a whole. In this nationalization of concupiscence, the concept develops and diverges in important ways in Milton's literature from traditionally understood Augustinian concupiscence (that is, a libidinous, uncontrollable impulse for sex). The central concern over unbidden movements and physical limitations to spiritual ambitions remains shared. This project, though, will seek to trace four key divergences as they emerged in Milton's prose and later poetry between Miltonic national concupiscence and Augustinian concupiscence. First, national concupiscence is brought about in Milton's literature not by a universal human physicality but rather by intellectual failure associated with the national and political concept of virtue. Second, this intellectual failure associated with failed virtue is spread through political channels and becomes a sexualized political impulse, specifically through the literary and historical image of the monarchical council in *Eikonoklastes*. Third, in this synthetic political spread of spiritual failure, concupiscence takes on national and historical importance in Milton's prose and later poetry, specifically in explaining the collapse of previous iterations of the English nation. Fourth, as the imagery of concupiscence is increasingly used by Milton to interact with national, political failures, we find specifically in *The History of Britain* the conflation of impulses for sex and impulses for errant political violence. Thus concupiscence in Milton's prose and poetry moves from an Augustinian concern over uncontrollable desire to a simultaneously generalized and nuanced anxiety over an intellectually chosen, politically contagious, historically precedented

catalyst in English national failure. The first chapter of this project will detail the first two facets of national concupiscence thus outlined.

To pursue the increasingly historical and national consequence of England's libidinous impulse for monarchy in Milton's invocation of concupiscent language, I will be using Milton's unfinished *The History of Britain*. The text has received increasing critical attention as the issue of nationhood has risen to central importance in modern critical debates on the nature of Milton's politics. In reading *The History of Britain* within the context of national concupiscence as a politically spread intellectual failure which results in a fall to base impulse, the text shows repeated efforts to suggest that each English national apocalypse was a product of this dynamic of top-down concupiscent failure. The Celts, Romans, and Saxons in *The History* all faced the same problem of monarchical enthrallment that crippled (for Milton) the Commonwealth in the moment of *The History's* authorship. Perhaps most provocatively of all, Milton makes explicit calls for armed resistance in these nationally concupiscent circumstances. As several modern critics have noted with regards to *Samson Agonistes*, the moderate, electoral Milton is increasingly destabilized by later works; and in this textual instance of national concupiscence and history, lies a challenging example of Milton's radical vision of nation crafting. Further precedence is to be found also in the increasing conflation of impulses for sex and impulses for violence in *The History* for the deeply misogynistic nature of Dalila and to a lesser extent Eve. The subject of Milton's call for resistance in *The History* is a violently impulsive and sexually deviant (in Milton's analysis) Anglo-Saxon queen who has startling similarities to later iterations of female characters in Milton's work. Chapter 2 of the project will seek the increasingly



national implications of concupiscence in Milton's work, and how these developments underlie the misogyny of Milton's later work.

Having then established the general schema of national concupiscence as a heuristic for understanding the nature of concupiscence in Milton's work, I will then turn to a reading of *Samson Agonistes* with the vocabulary of national concupiscence. Existing in a period before the divine reason of Jesus as found in *Paradise Regain'd*, Samson resides in a strikingly similar textual and historical position to Milton's national ancestors outlined in *The History*. Yet unlike Milton's perceived English predecessors and contemporaries, Samson cuts through a concupiscent national apocalypse to reach for millennium in a violent manner Milton explicitly advocates for in *The History of Britain*. Thus, *Samson* is not a text in support of terrorism (as it was for Carey) nor a moderate commentary on the weaknesses of violent change (as it is for Carey, Daniel, and Wittrich). It is instead a literary, imaginative vision of one who transcends the limitations of his nationally concupiscent historical period. This dynamic of imperfect change can give further context to the lively critical debate on the potential of Samson's regeneration (Sauer) within *Samson Agonistes*. While historicisms have come under attack in contemporary Milton studies, Milton's own historicist concern with the problem of concupiscence as found in his prose and later poetry can give further insight into notions of progress, nation-craft, and apocalypse in Milton's last, troubling text. The issue of the holy nation crippled by concupiscence and thus destroyed gave pause to Milton throughout his career, and *Samson* is a final, defiant, and contemplative text that seeks the historicist answer to the question of national

concupiscence. Chapter 3 of this project will consist of a reading of *Samson Agonistes* along these lines.

Milton's utilization of the imagery and language of concupiscence in his prose and later poetry gives important context to the modern critical debate over the nature of *Samson Agonistes* and the tense areas of radical political and religious ideology found within it. The central anxieties over the issue found in *Comus* by Debra Shuger in "Gums of Glutinous Heat" developed through Milton's experiences in the English Commonwealth into a problem of national and historical consequence. Milton returns frequently to sexual, impulsive imagery to elucidate the failure of British nations past and on the other end of the Restoration, he invokes the vocabulary of national concupiscence once again in *Samson* to explore the relationship between impulses for sex and violence and the failure of holy nations. Phoenix-like, Samson rises radically from the ashes of his resistance to concupiscent national enthrallment – an image of national resistance Milton only hopes for in *The History* and realizes in the final, blood-anointed lines of his last work.

## Chapter 1: Dark Councilors: The Nationalization of Concupiscence in Milton's Prose

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As Debora Shuger suggests in "Gums of Glutinous Heat," *Comus* reflects a keen anxiety over the nature of concupiscence in the striving of the virtuous. On the surface level, the anxiety is hidden under a rather traditional, and even Catholic, rendering of concupiscence.

Concupiscence is not a threat, Milton reassures his parental audience, if the mind of the virtuous remains steadfast against its advances. Yet the peculiar scope and importance Milton gives to this topic in *Comus* lends to a reading that suggests that there is something greater at stake for Milton in considering the unbidden movements in the "hidden caverns" of self and national history, as Shuger writes. Shuger's context on the development of the crisis of concupiscence in early modern English thought is important for the specifically Miltonic trend I will track here from *Comus* to *The Ready and Easy Way*.

Specifically in *Comus*, there is an early anxiety in Milton's writing on the spread of concupiscence to a universal and even heavenly level. A major catalyst in the making of the dramatic stakes of Milton's masque is the universalizing language that suggests that the scope of the threat Milton ascribes to concupiscence is significant. While the concupiscence to be found in *Comus* is less politically tinged than that which we will find *Eikonoklastes* and *The Ready and Easy Way*, I will suggest here that in Milton's construction of concupiscence as solved by virtue, the social nature of the latter concept invades the ostensibly spiritual matter. The Brothers' faulty virtue demonstrates a kink in the otherwise rather orthodox depiction of concupiscence within the masque. If virtue is to be the solvent for the gums of glutinous heat, what can be done about

those reactionary forms of virtue Milton becomes increasingly in dialogue with? In *Comus*, Milton considers the insufficiency of individual agency in the abolition of the problem of concupiscence. As Milton became progressively more involved in revolutionary activity, the central concupiscent question of scope and intellectual failure found in *Comus* persists and the social nature of Milton's early solution to the problem evolves further in *Eikonoklastes* and *The Ready and Easy Way*.

Detailing this process of political nationalization of an individual spiritual failure (concupiscence) through the image of a council scene is the chief task of my reading of *Eikonoklastes* that will follow a reading of *Comus*. The scope and origin of concupiscence is kept from *Comus* to Milton's later prose, but a fundamental shift occurs in the way Milton describes political monarchism with the terms of sexual impulse (traditionally understood concupiscence). In *Comus*, the threat of concupiscence is more general, a condition of all post-lapsarian humans living in a sublunary, carnal realm. As the English Revolution advanced, Milton, along with his anti-Presbyterian comrades, envisioned a political reach to bring these realms closer together with the catalyst of a saintly commonwealth. In *Eikonoklastes* and *The Ready and Easy Way* the political contagion of concupiscence alters early Miltonic visions of concupiscence found in *Comus*. The abolition of concupiscence is not a grand measure of the potential or the mortal realm and its inhabitants, but rather a necessary political task for the creation of the English Commonwealth - an institution at the end of a long struggle of the English people through historical circumstance.

Milton begins his discourse with concupiscence quickly in *Comus*, framing his tale immediately with themes that persist, though changed, in the images and argumentation of his later prose works. To begin, it is worth looking at how Milton separates in the opening and closing monologues of *Comus* the earthly and heavenly via traditional concupiscence (sexual impulse), and how a failure to reach the latter is fundamentally a failure of intellect. Milton's answer in *Comus* for this concupiscent problem is virtue, a keenly national and political concept in early modern England. Yet as we read further into *Comus*, Milton undermines the potential for virtue to absolve the concupiscent. It is in this moment of ambiguity as the Brothers dialog with their accompanying angel that Milton introduces the stakes he associates in *Comus* with the problem of concupiscence. In this critical textual moment, an early crisis with the concept of concupiscence in Milton's work emerges in the text. Milton simultaneously undermines a cure-all for concupiscence and renders the earthly and spiritual stakes of concupiscence - leaving an unanswered problem at the center of the masque. First, let us turn to those opening and closing textual moments that introduce and conclude the relationship between concupiscence and virtue.

The beginning and ending monologues of *Comus* share a depiction of the separation between the spiritual and the earthly, and as the story unfolds, the main engine for understanding this separation is concupiscence. The sticks the Lady finds herself stuck to, as Shuger points out, are a climactic example that is not merely an allusion to Augustinian wet dreams, but a symbol of the greater threat of concupiscence. The way in which this separating image is described is noteworthy, as is the critical distance that is created by concupiscence within the text of *Comus*. An angel describes her place of origin to open the masque in the following terms,

In Regions milde of calm and serene Ayr,  
 Above the smoak and stirr of this dim spot,  
 Which men call Earth, and with low-thoughted care  
 Confin'd, and pester'd in this pin-fold here;  
 Strive to keep up a frail, and Feaverish being  
 Unmindfull of the crown that Vertue gives  
 After this mortal change, to her true Servants  
 Amongst the enthron'd gods on Sainted seats. (*Comus* 4-11)

Heat, associated throughout the masque with libidinous desire, separates the “dim spot” of earthly existence from the “mild” and “calm” realm of “insphear’d religion.” Reminiscent of Shakespeare’s poetic portrayal of sex as a dangerous heat of passion, the heat that ultimately imperils the Lady’s chastity and integrity opens *Comus* by marking a distinction between the earthly and the spiritual. The gums of glutinous heat are more than simply sexual desire, however, as Milton already associates here concupiscent “heat” with intellectual failings. Concupiscence cripples only those “unmindfull” of the victories to be had in service to virtue and faith. The idea that concupiscence enthralles the ignorant is a major catalyst in the nationalization of concupiscence from a question of individual reckoning to the doom of an entire, enthralled nation; and in the very first lines of *Comus* Milton uses the image to paint in broad strokes the stakes and moral of his masque. In the action of the masque, the Lady will fly from the birdlime of the dim and feverish heat of earth towards the crowned transcendence of the spiritual. In her journey, she will partake in a rather intellectual debate with Comus and ultimately be saved by a “stooping” angel.

Virtue is a concept that winds its way through texts from Boethius to Chaucer to Spenser through Milton and into the sentimental comedies that dominated the post-restoration stage. Throughout, even in the most misogynistic sentimental comedies, virtue holds a uniquely

national aspect. As J.G.A. Pocock describes in *The Machiavellian Moment*, virtue was a main catalyst in the English republican ideal of self-creation and thus national creation. In England, as Pocock highlights, English republicanism erupted in a society shackled by constitutional tradition (Pocock 336) and a pervading sense of “Englishness” that stressed loyalty to ruling authorities. With resurgent republicanism gaining momentum at universities in England, virtue began to develop as an antidote to these historical shackles. Virtue was both an emanation of personal and economic liberty and a self-refashioning of the Englishman as inherently desirous for liberty of land and mind.

It is fitting, then, that Milton invokes virtue as the avenue or the self-creative method towards the merging of the two spheres separated by concupiscence. Milton’s textual solution to the problem of concupiscence is already a profoundly political and national one. Where virtue served English republicanism as the answer to the conflict between tradition and spiritual visions of a divine future, virtue serves the Lady in *Comus* in her efforts to receive God’s mercy in the final scenes. The final monologue of the masque reflects the change virtue can bring about, as a spirit again takes center stage:

But now my task is smoothly don,  
 I can fly, or I can run  
 Quickly to the green earths end,  
 Where the bow’d welkin slow doth bend,  
 And from thence can soar as soon  
 To the corners of the Moon.  
 Mortals that would follow me,  
 Love vertue, she alone is free,  
 She can teach ye how to clime  
 Higher then the Sphery Chime;  
 Or if Vertue feeble were,  
 Heav'n it self would stoop to her. (*Comus* 1012-1023)

Flight is recalled here as the Lady is freed from her flightless, concupiscent state. Virtue for the spirit, and certainly for the Lady, has unshackled her feet (literally in the latter's case) and allowed them to "follow" her spiritual ambition. For Milton here as it will continue to be, election and salvation are self and freely chosen. Virtue in this passage is also the sole free thing in the universe, mirroring quite strongly Pocock's commentary on virtue in England as a self-fashioning agent in response to perceived tyrannies in the English past. Following this self-creative faculty can teach the bird-limed how to climb, a verb that sits somewhere in between running and flying and portrays the actions of the fallen human living in earth and anticipating transcendence. The verb anticipates the final lines of the masque, that heaven will stoop to earth if true virtue is "feeble," suggesting a certain insufficiency, a "power [in]sufficient" (PL II ll. 103), as it were. This doubt is vanquished in *Comus* with a bow that perhaps even Milton knew was far too perfectly knotted, and the problems of virtue's insufficiency in matters of national salvation are major themes in Milton's late prose works. In the last lines, virtue has transformed the dialogue in the masque from one that describes the limit of the dim and feverish spot we call earth, to one of what is to be won by merely following our Lady virtue. The framing monologues, then, reflect the greater metaphor of the bird limited and then freed to flight. From the birdlime of concupiscence, to the bow'd welkyn stones is the journey of the virtuous should they intellectually reckon the necessity to follow. The moral is certainly heartwarming, but Milton's doubts on the true power of virtue as a self-creative agent seep through the optimism perhaps made necessary by the rhetorical situation of the masque. The brothers, for example, put forth a concept of virtue that is in error as the spirit tells them.



The brothers in *Comus* represent a virtue that is rejected by the spirit, and the stakes Milton ascribes to their naïve virtue is critical in prefacing the continuing importance of concupiscence in Milton's later prose works. The spirit's virtue is one that relies on its aimed at goal, e.g. heaven and the millennium, whereas the brothers' is rendered in a more secular manner. Where Miltonic virtue has thus far been portrayed as the catalyst in the flight, or climb, towards God, the brother's virtue lacks this sense of progression and is tied to the earthly and thus the concupiscent. The Elder Brother grandly claims, before being scolded by their attendant spirit,

Vertue may be assail'd, but never hurt,  
 Surpriz'd by unjust force, but not enthrall'd;  
 Yea even that which mischief meant most harm,  
 Shall in the happy trial prove most glory.  
 But evil on it self shall back recoyl,  
 And mix no more with goodness, when at last  
 Gather'd like scum, and setl'd to it self  
 It shall be in eternal restless change  
 Self-fed, and self-consum'd; if this fail,  
 The pillar'd firmament is rott'nness,  
 And earths base built on stubble. But com let's on. (*Comus* 589-599)

The Elder Brother's confidence may seem in line with the above quoted passages on the power of virtue in the self-creation of the faithful individual. Yet the Elder Brother's placing of virtue as the actor in his thought scheme reveals the error, for Milton, of his confidence. Virtue, in the opening monologue, and as enforced in the ending monologue, certainly is unassailable. Yet in the lines that follow the brother conflates virtue and humanity. He, in other words, conflates the two realms Milton has tried so hard to make distinct with the imagery of concupiscence. In such a conflation, the Elder Brother makes essentially atheistic claims to the fraudulency of the

“pillar” of earth, should the virtuous not be saved from their concupiscence. Thus the brother’s vision of virtue equates virtue and humanity, and dissolves the inherent anxiety to be found in a choice: a choice being made by the denizens of that dim and feverish spot. The stakes Milton gives the question of concupiscence are critical here. When wrong virtue counters the problem of concupiscence, it results in nothing short of a hermeneutical failure of biblical proportions. The brothers resort to atheistic conditional statements when guided by blind faith and old, chivalric virtue. The brother’s depiction of a fallen heaven directly contradicts the conclusion of the angel at the end of the poem. Heaven will “stoop,” as the angel says, to feeble virtue. An earthly virtue reaching for heaven, will find only a gilded pillar, a rotten firmament, and ultimate failure. Milton offers little room for interpretation with their error. Incorrect responses to the problem of concupiscence have a measurable importance for Milton already in this early, theatrical iteration. Before the Restoration or the twilight of the English commonwealth, Milton has already reckoned the tension within his religious schema that will continue to bend under the weight of a “thousand err[ors]” (PL VI ll. 148).

The spirit that accompanies the brother finds the same error in the brother’s judgement. The images he uses also mirrors the connection Milton is drawing between intellectual strength, virtue, and transcendence. She retorts to the verbose claims of the Elder Brother, “I love thy courage yet and bold emprise, / But here thy sword can do thee little stead; / Farr other arms, and other weapons must / Be those that quell the might of hellish charms, / He with his bare wand can unthred thy joynts, / And crumble all thy sinews” (*Comus* 609-616). Physical weapons, which Milton at great length diminishes in works from his sonnets all the way to *Samson*

*Agonistes*, here are used to drive back apart the two realms the brother has tried to drive together. Milton uses the same images here to separate the two realms, namely concupiscence through bodily images. In this spiritual battle, the brothers' chivalric, virtuous skill in combat will not avail them - yet the angel does not describe Comus as possessing the ability to affect their mental acuity. Instead, Comus, with his bare wand, is a threat to the joints and sinews, the fibers of that feverish being. The angel suggests that the brother's idea of virtue is held up by these markers of a concupiscent vision tied to the earthly. But Comus' power is not that of the contagiously concupiscent Charles in *Eikonoklastes* or the infected thralls of *The Ready and Easy Way*. Comus can undo with his magic wand only that which is earthly, only the avenues by which wrong virtue is propagated. The avenue through which right virtue is sought, the open and free mind, is consistently untouched by Comus.

Thus Milton establishes in the framing monologues of the masque that concupiscence drives apart heaven and earth and that virtue has the potential to build a bridge between them. Yet virtue is undermined as the play's great synthesizer by the brothers' hermeneutical failure. In their conflation of earthly and heavenly virtue, the brothers represent an uneasy tension within the play between problem and solution; a tension the framing monologues endeavor to sweep under the theatrical rug. Concupiscence represents a real threat rooted in intellectual failure in *Comus*, and Milton acknowledges in the text of *Comus* that if the problem is to be rooted in intellect it will have vitality in those who put forth unfit virtue. Thus the social invades the spiritual concept of concupiscence in *Comus*. Milton problematizes virtue as a solution to concupiscence by considering that there are many iterations of the concept of virtue in English

society, and that many do not render virtue as a self-creative practice rooted in ancestral, republican unity (as per Pocock). Many in England instead grounded virtue in blind faith and martial skill, and this hermeneutical error for Milton is associated with profound errors in analysis.

In *Comus* Milton anxiously interacts with the issue of concupiscence, the answers for which are left just outside the scope of the genre and rhetorical situation of the masque. Milton stresses from the beginning of *Comus* that concupiscence is a fundamentally intellectual failure. Milton then offers virtue as the intellectual faculty capable of overcoming the problem of concupiscence. But in this invocation, the tidily wrapped conclusion of the masque is problematized by Milton's own inclusion of misused virtue in the equation. Through this political concept of virtue, both his own self-creative, republican virtue and the old chivalric virtue of previous modes, the social concern over concupiscence that reoccurs in his later prose and poetry is already present, if in shadow, in *Comus*. In invoking wrong virtue, Milton also suggests that the problem of concupiscence has a large ideological and hermeneutical scope. In failing to counter concupiscence, the result is atheistic renderings of the world and the conflation of the earthly and the heavenly. These ideological and literary conclusions and concerns do not lose momentum as Milton advanced from aspiring poet to national political actor. Instead, in *Eikonoklastes* these issues are amplified and nationalized in Milton's rendering of Charles' dark council as concupiscent in nature. In this nationalization, concupiscence moves from sexual impulse to sexualized reactionary political impulse, denoting a major distinction in Milton's

conception of concupiscence from traditional narratives; a distinction wrenched from the collision of literary and political experience in the crucible of the English Revolution.

In reading *Eikonoklastes* within the context of the question of virtue and concupiscence found in *Comus*, there are both distinct differences and shared ideological foundations. In the ever-growing pamphlet wars of the triumphant Commonwealth, the explosive success of texts like *Eikon Basilike* put increasing weight on the self-creative concept of virtue tenuously in place within the text of *Comus*. Just as concupiscence separated the earthly and divine in *Comus*, concupiscence in *Eikonoklastes* separates the reality and potential of the holy English nation. Those who do not politically and spiritually follow virtue are increasingly portrayed as slaves to their desires and bodies, such that their conscious self is removed via the Miltonic image of the “thrall.” The very agent that procures the assimilation of the earthly to heavenly, the intellect, is vanquished amongst the English people by the power of a nationalizing concupiscence spread through the literary device of the council scene.

Concupiscence in *Eikonoklastes* originates in the intellect but takes on a specifically political aspect in three critical ways as Milton weaves his dialogue with Charles'. First, Milton's use of the image of a pillar to depict fraudulent reason and the centrality of individual and specifically concupiscent failures in the buttressing of national discourse underlines the above discussed question of wrong virtue and its power. After rendering the threat of this monarchical, intellectually bankrupt pillar, Milton uses a provocative and anticipatory council scene to show how a corrupt pillar reaches politically to a national scale to corrupt the whole. Added to this, Milton shows an interest in *Eikonoklastes* to take this concept of nationalized concupiscent sin to

the history of the English nation with an anecdote on Edward VI later in the text. Third, and after this process of nationalization via dark council, Milton invokes the increasingly important image of the thrall to describe the English people. At the end of the process of the nationalization of concupiscence by monarchical council, Milton depicts the English people as having lost their intellectual faculties, demonstrated by the grim conclusion of *Eikonoklastes* in which Milton attacks the libidinous desire of the English people for servitude.

The recurrence of the image of a pillar in Milton's prose works, specifically *Eikonoklastes*, is certainly provocative for readers of *Samson Agonistes*. One needn't claim the pillar of Charles in *Eikonoklastes* is a direct reference to the biblical story of Samson, yet the image of the pillar in *Eikonoklastes* is used consistently to undermine the greater institution of Monarchy. We have read the incorrect hermeneutical step represented by a pillar in *Comus*, and in *Eikonoklastes* the image serves a markedly similar purpose in the development of Milton's argument. Milton renders Charles' supporters as painting their zeal on a rotten pillar, and the conclusion of this analysis is much the same as it is in *Comus* - wrong virtue has the potential to lead to wrong analyses and a reduction to base impulse. Milton retorts to one of Charles' points by stating, "We know his meaning; and apprehend how little hope there could be of him from such language as this: But are sure that the pietie of his prelatie modell glistered more upon the posts and pillars which thir Zeale and fervencie gilded over, then in the true workes of spiritual edification" (*Eikonoklastes* 328). Milton's description of a gilded pillar is reiterated later in the text (400), and it is at once an attack on the attachment between the English Monarchy and Catholicism, and on the mortality of monarchical ideology. Like the brothers in *Comus*, the zeal

of Charles and his followers is naught but gold on a rotten pillar. It is worth noting that the potential for reform found in *Comus* (as represented by the angel's pedagogical retorts to the brothers) is absent in Milton's invocation of failed virtue as pillar in this later iteration. There is explicitly no "hope" for Charles and his supporters in this section. Their linguistic impulsivity, if not expressly concupiscence in this section, leads to a startling condemnation by Milton. Those who share Charles' "language," those under the pillar of monarchical fervor, are excluded from the avenues for concupiscent reform anxiously outlined in *Comus*. Critically for the council imagery that is at the heart of *Eikonoklastes*, Milton ascribes a linguistic quality to Charles' intellectual and virtuous failure. Charles comes "from" and propagates a language that removes the prospect of spiritual reform. Thus in this imagistic reconstruction of the dynamic of the brothers' errant virtue found in *Comus*, Milton removes the prospect of reform for the unvirtuous and bases their failure in language itself which will promptly be the means for the spread of this failure in council. In the shadow of these images is the problem of concupiscence, which reemerges on the imagistic level in that council scene.

In title and content, *Eikonoklastes* is an explicit effort to curtail the nationalization of monarchical ideology found in *Eikon Basilike*; yet given the association between failed virtue and monarchism highlighted above, the text of *Eikonoklastes* shows an anxiety over the spread of more than just political errors. Indeed, Milton shows an increasing interest in how failed virtue becomes contagious in social institutions. The way in which he describes the council of Charles I invokes from the shadows the spectre of concupiscence in Milton's textual pursuit of failed

virtue. Speaking specifically on how the failures of monarchy had become widespread, Milton states,

These were not some miscarriages onely of Government, which might escape, but a universal distemper and reducement of law to arbitrary power; not through the evil counsels of some men, but through the constant cours & practice of all that were in highest favour: whose worst actions frequently avowing he took upon himself; and what faults did not yet seem in public to be originally his, such care he took by professing, and proclaiming op'nly, as made them all at length his own adopted sins. The persons also when he could no longer protect, he esteem'd and favour'd to the end; but never, otherwise then by constraint, yeilded any of them to due punishment; thereby manifesting that what they did was by his own Authority and approbation (*Eikon* 332).

The use of “miscarriage” is provocative in the first quoted line. The term has a long history with association to failures in justice and governance, but the term had acquired a new meaning in the mid-17th century. In Helkiah Crooke’s popular 1615 text, *Mikrokosmographia*, he designates the failure of a pregnancy as a miscarriage. Crooke came from a prominent puritan family and defended controversially Aristotle’s one-sex theory. The line needn’t be one or the other, but Milton’s use of the term later in the text (369) suggest that the image of a miscarried state was useful for Milton’s overall project in *Eikonoklastes*. Sin and Death’s grotesque birth in *Paradise Lost* serves the same purpose as the various miscarriages of state that Milton highlights here; while in *Eikon Basilike* Charles writes nobly of his court and comrades, underneath his rhetoric is something contagious and terrible.

These miscarriages of state lead Milton into a discussion on the nationalization of the problem represented by them. Milton refers to a “universal distemper,” an idea that will be reiterated several times in *The Ready and Easy Way*, and rejects the idea that the problem was with only one man. The concept of distemper is rooted heavily in medieval physiology,



specifically the notion that mental failures were constituted in an imbalance in “the humors” (*OED*). Critically, Milton associates the intellectual failure of failed virtue (rooted in tradition and established ways of doing things) with a physical, impulsive failure. In the universalization of this bodily unbalance is the “reducement,” and a fall from law to power. The distinction and imagery of declination mirrors heavily the relationship in *Comus* between the heavenly and the earthly.

In a text so concerned with the present moment and with responding to the very specific arguments found in *Eikonoklastes* with rigorous detail, a historical anecdote seems at first out of place. Yet given the cursory discussion of virtue and tradition above, the English monarchy was deeply entrenched in history and tradition, and Milton’s effort to undermine its place of historical hegemony reflects the historicism of the concept of national concupiscence. It is not just any historical anecdote that Milton chooses to engage Charles with, however, it is an anecdote on the repression of Catholics under Edward the Sixth. Edward’s reign is an interesting one for our reading of national concupiscence as an issue of national concern. In the crucible following England’s break from Catholicism, Edward oversaw, during his brief reign, the establishment of Protestantism in England. For Milton, Edward’s reign was historically limited by the same political institutions that under the Stuarts nationalized sin. Of Edward’s reign, Milton writes, “And by this argument, which King *Edward* so promptly had to use against that irreligious Rabble, we may be assur’d it was the carnal fear of those Divines and Politicians that model’d the Liturgie no furder off from the old Mass, least by too great an alteration they should incense the people, and be destitute of the same shifts to fly to, which they had taught the young King”

(*Eikonoklastes* 372). Again we find the conflation of the Catholic and the carnal and the association between the carnal rabble and the limiting of national prospect. In a moment when Protestantism waged war against the irreligious in the English countryside, certainly reminiscent of Milton's own historical moment, the prospect of total victory was robbed by a paralyzing, carnal fear. Inaction led to the reigns of Mary and later of James and Charles, limiting the flight of the Protestant bird in the birdlime of national concupiscence - emphasized by the carnality with which Milton portrays political failure. The final lines of *Eikonoklastes* bring into synthesis how concupiscence became politicized in *Eikonoklastes* by its place as a pillar of the English monarchy, and how in this process of politicization the threat of concupiscence became a national one as the "original" sin of monarchy spread and limited the English nation as it had in history.

The final lines of *Eikonoklastes* reflect the deeply vitriolic nature of the text, if the red text on the title page of the original publication or the off-color jokes about decapitation (286) were not enough to clue a reader in. Milton finishes, in a section that brings together the various elements of national concupiscence found above,

Which perhaps may gaine him after death a short, contemptible, and soon fading reward; not what he aims at, to stir the constancie and solid firmness of any wise Man, or to unsettle the conscience of any knowing Christian, if he could ever aime at a thing so hopeless, and above the genius of his *Cleric* elocution, but to catch the worthless approbation of an inconstant, irrational, and Image-doting rabble; that like a credulous and hapless herd, begott'n to servility, and enchanted with these popular institutes of Tyranny, subscrib'd with a new device of the kings picture at his praiers, hold out both thir eares with such delight and ravishment to be stigmatiz'd and board through in witness of thir own voluntary and beloved baseness. (*Eikon* 424)

Milton begins his end by reasserting the temporally limited scope of monarchical power. *Eikon Basilike* is a product of the dimly lit earth that the opening monologue in *Comus* refers to. In its feverish, quick existence, the ideology of the king is contrasted strongly with the infinite and the divine. Charles is a product of the fleeting moment, the world attached to the senses and the feverish birdlime that is its product. Reflecting further what is found in *Comus*, Milton endeavors, even more tenuously in the textual present of *Eikonoklastes*, that the now national threat of concupiscent ideology will not threaten the wise. To the “well-govern’d and wise appetite,” *Eikon Basilike* offers nothing. Yet, the smashing success of *Eikon Basilike* and the entire necessity of Milton’s authorship of *Eikonoklastes* rather obviously negates this statement. Yet as the second half of the quoted section illustrates, the number of wise and well-governed Christians was dwindling and overshadowed by a great mass of thralls.

Milton’s astonishing disdain for the rabble in these last lines of *Eikonoklastes* highlights with clarity the conflation Milton is increasingly interested in making textually between confusion, stupidity, concupiscence, and the failure of nations. In an attack Milton will later throw against women in *Samson*, the rabble of England are inconstant. This idea of an immediacy to the nationally concupiscent is critical in understanding Milton’s focus on specific historical moments in *The History of Britain*. Charles and his ideology will fade away from the feverish realm of earth, and the people, in all their “beloved baseness,” attach their idolatry to these quickly fading fragments instead of the everlasting glory of virtue and spirituality. Thus Milton’s historicism explicitly stands in opposition to the limited sight of his political enemies. Milton self-fashions himself as capable of not only spiritual vision but historical vision. He sees

the carnal fears that limited Protestantism's victory under Edward the Sixth, just as he sees the everlasting rewards of following virtue, and he sees, ultimately, the unwillingness of the image-doting rabble to follow virtue up the mountain towards Heaven. The "popular institutions of tyranny" that had generalized Charles' "original" sin are now what the reactionary and lustful thralls flock to. They sit, as it were, under the pillar of national concupiscence in the temple of monarchy; and despite Milton's efforts to say otherwise, the attraction to that temple was great. In their baseness, they are ravished by a political institution due to their own desire for it.

In this peculiar conflation of national failure and post-lapsarian sexual imagery lies the Samsonite question. In *Eikonoklastes* Milton first portrays monarchy as supported by those concupiscent lusts identified in *Comus* with shared imagery and a consistent association between political ignorance and the bodily: whether it be the fleeting nature of human physicality and monarchical ideology, the carnal fears of the rabble and the metaphorical failures of Edward the Sixth, or the lustful and ravished thralls who look with unknowing eyes towards the institutions of popular tyranny. *Eikonoklastes* is thus a critical text in understanding the nationalization of concupiscence in Milton's later prose works. The optimism of *Comus* and *Areopagitica* is replaced by a fearful rendering of the people of England as concupiscent thralls, slaves to monarchy and incapable of the intellectual steps highlighted in *Comus* and *Areopagitica*. In the nationalization process, concupiscence becomes a historicist concern for Milton, as highlighted by the anecdote of Edward the Sixth and as compounded further in *The Ready and Easy Way* and *The History of Britain*. Concupiscence was no longer merely a threat to the innocent, but a threat to the creation of a holy English nation. Milton identified the problem of following virtue as an

intellectual one in *Comus*, and the ever-threatening foil to Miltonic virtue was national concupiscence that brought about enthrallment and confusion. *The Ready and Easy Way* shows an increasing interest in English history and the question of dissolving national concupiscence as an obstacle in the creation of an English nation.

*The Ready and Easy* continues the themes found in *Eikonoklastes* and is demonstrative of some key shifts in emphasis within the general thought space of national concupiscence. Chiefly, as England fell into the national concupiscent trap historically preceded by the Anglo-Saxon, Greek, Roman, and earlier English nations, Milton turns to history to find a solution to this problem. Yet even as he writes, the imminence of national dissolution finds its way into the text. *The Ready and Easy Way* is known for its vitriolic condemnations of “the rabble” found also in *Eikonoklastes*, and while Milton suggests a rather dubious council dictatorship system of governance, the impossibility of the suggestion is implicit in his attacks on the English people. Thus *The Ready and Easy Way* is a continuation of an understanding of national concupiscence found in *Eikonoklastes* with an increased interest in historical precedent and an increased association between failed politics and sexual desire. Mere continuation is not without critical insight, however, as the textual life of national concupiscence within Milton’s later prose and poetry suggests a momentum of thought from the earliest anxieties over the concupiscent movements in “the hidden caverns of selfhood” to the painful despair of a nation destroyed by concupiscent thralls. This final conception of a nation destroyed raises the historicist questions pursued in *The History of Britain* and imaginatively answered in *Samson Agonistes*.

In the opening section of *The Ready and Easy Way*, Milton invokes history, English nationalism, and natural law in an effort to offer the prospect of a swift turning of English national dialogues away from restoration and towards a reestablished Commonwealth. Milton writes, “They knew the people of England to be a free people, themselves the representers of that freedom; and although many were excluded, and as many fled (so they pretended) from tumults to Oxford, yet they were left a sufficient number to act in parliament, therefore not bound by any statute of preceding parliaments, but by the law of nature only, which is the only law of laws truly and properly to all mankind fundamental-” (*Ready* 881). Speaking of the right of the English people to divest from their leadership and establish a free commonwealth, Milton invokes a historical English tradition that he has interacted with since *Comus*. Englishness, i.e. virtue, was a tradition of autonomous self-creation and not a tradition of subservience. But readers of the rest of *The Ready and Easy Way* and *Eikonoklastes* can read the conflict in these opening statements. If the English people are truly representatives of an ancient freedom, from what has the necessity to write this text emerged? Indeed, Milton will spend much of *The Ready and Easy Way* castigating these very Englishmen for being concupiscent thralls. As in *Eikonoklastes*, Milton praises the English people with one stroke of the pen and condemns them with the other. Milton, as in *Eikonoklastes*, cannot separate a propagandist appraisal of English nationhood and the English national reality that he painfully if not explicitly reckons in his later prose works. The propagandist contradictions to be found in *Eikonoklastes* and *The Ready and Easy Way* are certainly a product of the genre in which Milton is writing, but they are also evidence of the problem of national concupiscence. As mentioned above, Milton looks both back

and forward towards the threat of national concupiscence and endeavors to counteract it. He consciously fails in this effort, whether it is the woeful sales of *Eikonoklastes* in comparison to *Eikon Basilike* or the popular demand for restoration in light of post-Cromwell Commonwealth failures. This collision of propaganda and the populace provides a provocative window into the form of *Samson Agonistes* and Milton's description of the main purpose of the tragic form - to synthesize. In *The Ready and Easy Way*, Milton tries one last time to synthesize and see an English people, "no less noble and well fitted to the liberty of a commonwealth, than in the ancient Greeks or Romans" (*Ready and Easy Way* 883). In his own era, Milton would find only Sulla, Caesar, and a people lustful for tyranny and carnal temporal fixedness.

As Milton turns his venom on the English people mere lines after praising them, an interesting theological crisis that lies at the heart of *Samson Agonistes* is highlighted. Warning the English people against sliding back, Milton writes,

After our liberty and religion thus prosperously fought for, gained, and many years possessed, except in those unhappy interruptions, which God hath removed; now that nothing remains, but in all reason the certain hopes of a speedy and immediate settlement for ever in a firm and free commonwealth, for this extolled and magnified nation, regardless both of honour won, or deliverances vouchsafed from heaven, to fall back, or rather to creep back so poorly, as it seems the multitude would, to their once abjured and detested thraldom of kingship, to be ourselves the slanderers of our own just and religious deeds-" (*Ready* 883)

Milton associates the establishment of the Commonwealth with the lack of plagues in London, an assertion that flips the accusations of many of the Commonwealth's enemies that God struck down Cromwell or even robbed Milton, a famous defender of the state, of his sight. Yet such assertions beg the question of why the Commonwealth is currently in crisis. Milton offers the rather insufficient answer throughout that some bad man *may* have coopted the Parliamentary

cause, but the main question remains for Milton as it did for all the other radical sects at work in the English Commonwealth - why would God turn his back on the faithful? Milton gives an answer he will continually give in *The History of Britain*. God would never turn his back on a nation of truly the holy, but he would turn his back on nations self-consumed by sin. The English people, free at heart and once enemies of monarchy, now willingly enthrall themselves to secular and "arbitrary power" (*Eikonoklastes*). Thus the theological crisis of an intervening God is answered by an inner failure of the English people. In *Samson*, we are given much the same. It was both Samson and the Israelites' inner failings that brought about the destruction of their nation. A theological problem, in other words, is explained by a national analysis based in a Miltonic historicism concerned with national concupiscence and national dissolution. The English people destroyed themselves - Charles II needed only to board the boat.

Milton continues this idea by turning later to attack those thralls for their failures, and the way in which he does it is keenly associated with not only bodily images but images of love and desire. Endeavoring to explain this failure of the English people, Milton writes, "Certainly then that people must needs be mad, or strangely infatuated, that build the chief hope of their common happiness or safety on a single person; who, if he happen to be good, can do no more than another man; if to be bad, hath in his hands to do more evil without check, than millions of other men" (*Ready* 886). Milton's language is notable in two ways. First, and perhaps most obviously, Milton associates a desire for monarchy with lust, or as he states it here, infatuation. The image, repeated throughout and also in *Eikonoklastes*, serves as an imagistic example of the concept of national concupiscence. Thralldom is constituted of a failure to see beyond the immediate



moment, and an attachment to the physical - manifested here by an infatuation. Second, Milton establishes a relationship in which good men in supreme power are only marginally impactful while bad men are exponentially corrupting. The relationship is interesting, and the underlying assumptions seem to be that bad men can do more harm than millions of other men because they have the support of those millions. The figurehead of a sinful state takes the sins of millions and generalizes them to those of a nation. Just as Eglon with his bloated belly is evident of everything wrong with the oppressors of Israel, so too is Charles the symbol of the English people's failure. In this way, Charles can do more damage than any of his concupiscent thralls because he is the agent of their generalization and power. The concupiscence of the Lady and her brothers is washed away, but the concupiscence of a nation cannot be so easily saved. This is the dynamic highlighted here, and one that is preceded at great length in Milton's earlier works.

In the final sections of *The Ready and Easy Way* Milton warns the English people not to "prostitute religion and liberty" (*Ready and Easy* 893). The line is demonstrative of much of what is to be found in the text. For Milton in *The Ready and Easy Way*, prostitution is exactly what the English people have done. They have given up their innocent, virtuous, and self-creative tradition of Englishness and sold it for a lustful and infatuated relationship with monarchy. Thus the lustful thralls of *Eikonoklastes*, who look with glassy eyes at the institutions of popular tyranny, persist into Milton's understanding of England as a nation failed by its concupiscent masses.

From *Comus* to *The Ready and Easy*, there has been a development in Milton's use of the concupiscence in the work of John Milton. In *Comus*, concupiscence serves as the catalyst in the

virtuous journey towards heaven, yet the brothers' flawed virtue holds within it the anxiety to be found in the topic in Milton's early work. The movements in the "hidden caverns of selfhood" as critic Debora Shuger puts it, insert a certain sense of anxiety over the chastity of the Lady in *Comus*. In *Eikonoklastes* Milton becomes increasingly interested in how the intellectual failure of one person or an institution can become generalized or nationalized. In his analysis, the image of the pillar becomes central in understanding concupiscence as a buttressing phenomenon for the political establishment of the English monarchy. In the nationalizing process of the threat of concupiscence, the prospect of redemption is eliminated. Charles and his ilk are condemned, as are the concupiscent thralls who support them. In *The Ready and Easy Way* we find a continuation and "magnification" (*Ready and Easy*) of these themes in Milton's understanding of the English apocalypse as one caused by an inner failing of the English people to reconcile an intervening God and national apocalypse. Over all these texts Milton becomes increasingly interested in answering and posing the historicist questions of national prospect and national birdlime. The English reached for a new Rome yet fell to those same riotous masses that toppled the Senate, and had stopped Edward the Sixth from asserting total Protestant hegemony over England. After the Restoration and in light of national failure, *The History of Britain* and *Samson Agonistes* reveal a Milton that does not seek direct allegory but historicist, creative avenues for resistance and insight vis-a-vis national dissolution. Samson acts in a national environment of confusion and inaction, and his passion is spent rather than used to continue a lustful historical wheel of monarchical victory over the faithful.

## Chapter 2: A Nation “Effeminated”: National Concupiscence, Violence, and Misogyny in *The History of Britain*

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Martin Dzelzainis provided in his article "Dating and Meaning: *Samson Agonistes* and the 'Digression' in Milton's History of Britain," a provocative thought experiment on the nature of the much discussed “digression” found in Milton’s unfinished *The History of Britain*. In the digression, Milton makes an explicitly historicist analysis on the failures of the English Commonwealth. For Milton in *The History*, the failure of the Commonwealth is rendered by Milton as just another in a long line of national failures brought about by national concupiscence. The imagery Milton uses to describe this national failure is critical in understanding both the lineage and movement of national concupiscence in the work of John Milton toward a reading of *Samson Agonistes*. Yet, as Dzelzainis points out, there is some debate on the date of authorship of *The History of Britain*. He concludes with a majority of the critics that the digression was written in the second phase of authorship of *The History*, that is the 1650s, while the surrounding material was authored in that climactic year of 1649. Thus *The History of Britain* is a historicist analysis and a text fundamentally attached to the time in which it was written as Dzelzainis is keen to highlight. If the digression was authored in 1649, it can illuminate with more clarity some of the anxious and hopeless sections of *Eikonoklastes*, written in the same year. If it was authored during the protectorate, it can offer an understanding of the progression of national concupiscence in Milton’s historicist rendering of national failure in the era leading up to Charles II. I argue that it does the latter.

So historicism is not foreign to Milton as some have suggested but instead a critical facet of Milton’s own thought, as *The History of Britain* is both denotatively and functionally a

historicist text. In it, Milton considers his own national apocalypse as precipitated by a series of nationally concupiscent events. *The History of Britain* is an example of Milton's own historicist concerns on the nature of his perceived people and nation. From *Comus* to *Samson Agonistes*, and from the "thousand errs" noted by Abdiel in *Paradise Lost* to the gilded pillar of earth and monarchy in *Comus* and *Eikonoklastes*, Milton shows an interest in his poetry in pursuing what David Loewenstein refers to as "the identification of his poetic vocation and creativity with his sense of national identity and chauvinism" (Loewenstein 54). What Loewenstein aptly calls an "instability" (54) in Milton's vision of the English nation is a product of what we previously saw in *Eikonoklastes* and in *The Ready and Easy Way* – the simultaneous expression of national potential and an anxious reckoning of the threat of national concupiscence to that prospect. Thus Milton's "identification of his poetic vocation with... national identity" in *The History of Britain* is at once concerned with national prospect and historical examples of that prospect's failure under the weight of national concupiscence.

The instability Loewenstein highlights in Milton's vision of nation can be further explored by seeking how the question of national concupiscence destabilized the way Milton interacts in his texts with the prospect of nation building. In my reading of *The History*, I will also suggest that national concupiscence takes on a third distinct quality from Augustinian concupiscence to be added to the two highlighted in Chapter I. When in specifically historical circumstances, Milton adds violence to the same set of images that he previously associated with concupiscence or impulses for sex. The main engine for this generalization of concupiscence from impulses for sexual politics to impulses for both sexual and violent political ideologies is

his personification of national concupiscence in deeply problematic female characters from English history. In the misogyny of sections of *The History* there is provocative precedent for the violent and libidinous actions of Dalila. Milton's use of the term "effemination" to describe national collapse in *The History* will serve as the central way to understand this synthesis between political violence, national concupiscence as we have thus far defined it, and misogyny in *The History* and as I will argue, in *Samson*. To pursue these developments, I will first analyze that timely digression that Dzelzainis used to elucidate the importance of historical moment within *The History* itself. I will then pursue the similarities between the national apocalypses detailed in *The History* and the images found in *Eikonoklastes* and *The Ready and Easy Way* which will ultimately lead to a reading of the violently misogynistic characterization of the Celtic Queen Cartimandua and Milton's challenging desire for violent resistance against a nationally concupiscent, female monarch.

It is appropriate to begin with that much discussed digression at the beginning of Book III in *The History of Britain* as the section tenuously holds both prospect and apocalyptic dread for the fate of the English Commonwealth. The digression has justifiably received the most critical attention in scholarship on the relatively little-studied *History* due to the fact that it is the most explicit area of the *History* where Milton analyzes the collision of history and the present moment of the climactic years surrounding 1649. In this critical juncture in Milton's historicist project of understanding the tension of national failure in the English national heritage, what era he invokes and what imagery he uses to describe that era's similarity with his own is critical in understanding the way national concupiscence shaped Milton's description of national failure.

Milton writes in the digression about the Anglo-Saxons, “From the confluence of all their Errors, Mischiefs, and Misdemeanors, what in the eyes of Man could be expected, but what befel those Antient Inhabitants whom they so much resembled, Confusion in the end?” (*The History of Britain*). The Anglo-Saxons are an appropriate example for Milton to invoke in this digressive commentary on his present moment, as they represented a key national heritage that became central in anti-monarchical left Puritanism during the Civil War and Commonwealth. For many including Gerrard Winstanley and John Lilburne, the almost mythical Anglo-Saxon nation was ascribed to a true Englishness that was conquered from without and put under the Norman yoke. In their effort to find an English precedence for anti-feudal struggles that could legitimate their own struggle and vanquish royal assertions of a monarchical English nature, the Anglo-Saxon lords emerged as national ancestors for the emergent Commonwealth. Interestingly, Milton refutes this analysis of the Norman yoke just as he refutes the threat to the Commonwealth as merely foreign in *The Ready and Easy Way*.

Instead, Milton again suggests that the similarity between the Anglo-Saxons kingdoms and the Commonwealth was that their doom was self-created. The causes of the collapse of the Anglo-Saxons as well as the diminishing of the Commonwealth are a collection of mischiefs and misdemeanors. Milton goes on to associate both nations’ self-destruction with a state of confusion. In the first chapter the importance of intellectual failure in the imagery of national concupiscence was found in *Comus*, *Eikonoklastes*, and *The Ready and Easy Way*. Because Milton established the idea that to follow the virtuous way of nation-craft and selfhood was a process of self-reckoning and intellectual strength, the reciprocal destruction of the nation and

self was a product of an intellectual failure specifically in *Eikonoklastes* and *The Ready and Easy Way*. As the image of the thrall became more important in Milton's later prose, that forgivable intellectual failure in *Comus* became the unforgivable slavery of the intellectually inept who love their own "baseness" (*Eikonoklastes*). It is intellectual failure begotten of an earthly and concupiscent attachment to monarchy and vice that brings together the Anglo-Saxons and their Commonwealth ancestors "who they so much resembled" for Milton in the digression. It was not their shared struggle against monarchy, but rather their shared inner-failing that for Milton tied together Anglo-Saxon and early modern England. For Milton, there was that other part of English nature, a beloved baseness and servility (*Eikonoklastes*), and throughout history these two parts of English nature had waged war and limited the reach of the triumphant English nation. Thus the digression shows the instability in Milton's national vision as partly a product of the instability of Milton's vision of English nature - a nature holding both national virtue and national concupiscence. In his illumination of English history that surrounds the digression, Milton continually associates the fall of the English nation with the fall of English liberty to English servility, vice, and ultimately concupiscence.

The material surrounding the digression is equally important to the general project of *The History of Britain* as it in many instances reaffirms and reiterates the above highlighted conflict and instability within Milton's English nation. Describing in Book IV the fall of the Christianized Anglo-Saxons to the Normans, Milton renders the fall as one of vice. Mirroring what can be found in *The Ready and Easy Way*, and refuting the Norman yoke ideology highlighted above, Milton writes of the Anglo-Saxons,

their neglect of breeding up Youth in the Scriptures, the spruce and gay Apparel of their Priests and Nuns, discovering their vain and wanton minds. Examples are also read, even in Beda's days, of their wanton deeds: thence Altars defil'd with Perjuries, Cloisters violated with Adulteries, the Land polluted with the Blood of their Princes, civil Dissensions among the People; and finally, all the same Vices which Gildas alledg'd of old to have ruin'd the Britains (*The History of Britain*).

As before, Milton attributes the fall of the Anglo-Saxons to a conglomeration of inner-failures, yet unlike in the digression, Milton here gives “vice” the final blow. These vices leading to political failure are in each case sexual and intellectual in nature – mirroring the dynamic of national concupiscence found in *Eikonoklastes*. In a method that anticipates later bourgeois renderings of the fall of Rome as a product of urban depravity, Milton defines the fall of the Christian Anglo-Saxons as a product of their own, specific vices such as adultery, neglect of God, civil disunity (a main argument of Cromwell at Putney), and a land polluted with blood - a fate seen before by the Sixth Century Christian historian Gildas. Critically, Milton’s vision of national collapse here is not at all a vision of pitched battle or foreign conquest. Instead, Milton puts on the very land of England the vices of his ancestors. It is their sexualized vice (adulteries, as Milton suggests) that ruins the Anglo-Saxon nation in this passage. The shadow of violence also makes its mark in this section. Sexualized vice coexists immediately next to an impulse for betrayal and self-violence. Milton does not even mention the military collapse of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the nation in this rendering has already fallen under the pressure of a sexualized, violent political failure. The militaristic conquest of the Norman lance was but a formality after the national concupiscent apocalypse described here once again with images of sex and violence.



After painting a landscape of vice and violence, Milton makes a provocative statement on resisting this political landscape that provides critical context to *Samson* and to later episodes found in *The History*. Describing the conquests of Egbert of Wessex, Milton writes, “In this estate Ecbert, who had now conquer'd all the South, finding them in the year 827, (for he was march'd thither with an Army to compleat his Conquest of the whole Island) no wonder if they submitted themselves to the Yoke without resistance” (*The History of Britain*). Again revisiting the popular English Revolutionary image of the yoke of monarchy, Milton reiterates the idea that yokes are self-imposed. Yet Milton here describes the repeated image of a self-failure limiting the ability of a nation to resist that yoke. The fall of a nation is not inevitable in cases of national concupiscence, as Milton had so fervently argued in *The Ready and Easy Way*. The image of resistance here and elsewhere (Milton repeatedly refers to Roman incursions as encountering no resistance) recalls that instability Loewenstein remarks upon in Milton’s national vision and the tension between potential and reality found in *Comus*, *Eikonoklastes*, and *The Ready and Easy Way*. If a nation’s yoke is self-imposed, why is the concept of resistance even relevant? The inevitability of national concupiscence invoked by Milton’s historical project collides here and elsewhere with Milton’s deep belief that the English people could transcend toward a righteous and Christian republic. Thus the idea of resistance is central in understanding Milton’s vision of an antidote to the problem of national concupiscence in historical moments of national creation and dissolution yet the logic here seems circular. Resistance is necessary to avoid the violence and vice of a national collapse, but that very violence and vice makes such resistance impossible in every case found in *The History*. Inferred in this section is that for Milton there could be

righteous resistance to a foreign yoke but it could only be possible in a nation not crippled by enthralled masses. Resistance will be critical in understanding *Samson* as an imaginative solution to the problem of national concupiscence, as in *The History* we find it as a potential solution that is ultimately and continually denied the English people by their own failure. Equally important to *Samson* and found in *The History of Britain* is the increasingly misogynistic nature of national concupiscence as Milton's career advanced, and that blatant misogyny's relationship with the potential antidote of resistance.

The story of Dalila is directly invoked in Milton's recounting of the Roman subjugation of the various Celtic tribes in England. He tells the story of Cartimandua, Queen of the Brigantes, who betrayed the brave warrior king Caractacus to the Romans for better considerations from them. In his description of the Queen, we find the deeply misogynistic overtones of Dalila's character as well as the specter of national concupiscence in the making of the misogynistic narrative. Milton describes the queen in the following terms,

She who had betray'd Caractacus and her Country to adorn the Triumph of Claudius, thereby grown powerful and gracious with the Romans, presuming on the hire of her Treason, deserted her Husband; and marrying Velloctatus one of his Squires, confers on him the Kingdom also. This Deed so odious and full of Infamy, disturb'd the whole State; Venutius with other Forces, and the help of her own Subjects, who detested the Example of so foul a Fact, and withal the uncomeliness of their Subjection to the Monarchy of a Woman, a piece of Manhood not every day to be found among Britains, though she had got by subtile train his Brother with many of his Kindred into her hands, brought her soon below the confidence of being able to resist longer (*The History of Britain*).

Cartimandua does exactly what Dalila does in the Judges account, as she is both national traitor and libidinous adulterer. The image of a woman selling her nation for personal, worldly gain while simultaneously seeking some kind of sexual satisfaction is where the concept of national

concupiscence takes on a deeply misogynistic tone that many critics have discussed within the bounds of *Samson* criticism. Milton chooses a woman to be a physical embodiment of the question of national concupiscence in history. She is at once a catalyst in national collapse and a lusty, inconstant thrall with ambition for earthly, arbitrary power. Surely, Milton tells us, the English were appalled at the rule of a woman, a peculiar statement given the importance of women in Celtic society and the much celebrated rule of Elizabeth I before the Stuarts. The suggestion that the rule of a woman takes a “piece of manhood” away from the subjugated Britons is an undeniably misogynistic interlude. Milton returns after this story to the concept of resistance, and Milton again seemingly supports action against this objectified female image of national concupiscence. Indeed, he recalls with no prejudice the uprisings of her own people against her base and libidinous treachery. These outward and inward rebellions serve the function of disarming the concupiscent Queen’s own ability to resist any further in spite of her capture of the former king’s brothers and sons. In Milton’s deeply problematic conflation of womanhood and national concupiscence in *The History* and later in *Samson*, forceful resistance is, perhaps startlingly, portrayed as justified and applicable. If we seek to dissolve this connection between national concupiscence, gender, and Milton’s visions of resistance, we achieve only the whitewashing of a potentially problematic, and critically rich, development in Milton’s later thought.

The collision of national concupiscence, misogyny, and national apocalypse is not singular to certain tales within *The History*, but repeated even as Milton is summarizing the

critical concepts of the entire volume as he concludes the last book of *The History*. Milton begins his ending sequence,

The great men given to gluttony and dissolute Life, made a prey of the common People, abusing their Daughters whom they had in service - spent all they had in Drunkenness, attended with other Vices which effeminate men's minds. Whence it came to pass, that carried on with fury and rashness more then any true fortitude or skill of War, they gave to William their Conqueror so easy a Conquest (*The History of Britain*).

The key image in this passage is the process of “effemination” that Milton uses here and earlier in the Queen Cartimandua anecdote. The men of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom willingly (and thus intellectually) give themselves to vice and in doing so nationalize their concupiscence.

Previously we have seen the conflation of gender and national apocalypse via national concupiscence, but here Milton offers verbiage that is singular and anticipatory of what is to be found in *Samson*. The process we have been calling national concupiscence (national collapse via intellectual failure leading to a libidinous materiality) is textured here with what Milton calls an effemination. The intellectual failure that brings on national concupiscence is described as being brought about by the effemination of “men’s minds,” a profoundly misogynistic and unprecedented (in *Eikonoklastes* and *The Ready and Easy Way*) notion. Further, Milton not only associates the effeminate with intellectual failure of concupiscence, but also with the crippling of a nation’s ability to resist. Effeminated men deal in fury and rashness, not skill and fortitude. So Milton’s answer to the contradiction of inevitability and resistance is that the qualities of women are both a catalyst in national concupiscence and a shackle for those that attempt to resist the subservience that must come. The reasons for this development in Milton’s thought in 1649 and into the 1650s is a subject that demands further research while outside the bounds of this project,

given its potential impact on the way we understand Milton's sexism in *Paradise Lost* and beyond. The key point to extract in a reading of *The History* in the context of later developments in *Samson* is that even in 1649 and the 1650s Milton was associating national collapse with concupiscence and concupiscence itself with the stereotypical qualities of femininity. Tracing national concupiscence in *The History* suggests that the misogyny and resistance found in *Samson* are not aberrant but rather preceded in Milton's historicist concern with national collapse and transcending the limitations of a state dragged down by enthralled, effeminate commoners. What immediately follows the above quoted section can effectively wrap up the discussion of misogyny, national concupiscence, and Milton's historicist concern with national collapse in *The History of Britain*.

The final lines of *The History of Britain* move away from the specific effeminizing quality of national concupiscence to a more general, historicist reflection on the threat of national concupiscence. Milton concludes,

Not but that some few of all sorts were much better among them; but such was the generality. And as the long-suffering of God permits bad men to enjoy prosperous days with the good, so his severity oft-times exempts not good men from their share in evil times with the bad. If these were the Causes of such misery and thraldom to those our Ancestors, with what better close can be concluded, then here is fit season to remember this Age in the midst of her security, to fear from like Vices without amendment the Revolution of like Calamities? (*The History of Britain*)

“But such was the generality” is an accurate summation of the nationalization process I tracked in *Eikonoklastes*. It also serves as an example of the simultaneously hopeful and fearful specter of national potential in *Eikonoklastes*, *The Ready and Easy Way*, and *The History of Britain*. Milton hopes and argues for “the better among them” to save the English nation from its

historical cycle of restoration and collapse, but fears at the same time the ever-dangerous threat of “thralldom.” Milton’s explanation of why God does not save his faithful is certainly useful for *Paradise Lost*, but it is also useful in understanding Milton’s view of the historical moment (e.g. the historicist concern of national potential and national present) as an active scale of struggle that could with any development swing one way or another. Milton’s deep concern with ebbing the concupiscent tide makes his text keenly public, and hopeful to partake in a Habermasian public realm that Milton idealizes in *Areopagitica*. Yet in 1649 and beyond, the effectiveness of the Areopagus and the public realm of reasoned debate faded in Milton’s work in favor of a vision of England dragged down by thralldom rather than pulled up by thinking heads (as in *Areopagitica*).

In these historical moments in 1649 and the 1650s, Milton went to history to find precedent and warning for potential “revolutions” that could unseat the Commonwealth’s present “security.” What he warns his national peers to avoid should be expected given our study thus far - vice. The slavery of the mind to libidinous desires is what Milton focuses on here after an extremely in-depth study of thousands of years of history. For Milton, the creation of the holy nation was a process of generalizing the intellectual steps that led to a certain decision to follow virtue, and the destruction of the holy nation was the generalization of an effeminizing national concupiscence. As the restoration approached, “such was the generality” in England that for Milton the fall of the Commonwealth was inevitable as it was for the Anglo-Saxons. National concupiscence had vanquished the nation and effeminated its leading men such that they could not resist the restorations that plagued their national ancestors.

Thus in reading *The History of Britain* three key shifts in emphasis and implementation in Milton's interaction with the historical, national question of concupiscence reveal themselves. First, the instability of Milton's national vision as highlighted by David Loewenstein in his article "Late Milton: Early Modern Nationalist or Patriot?" can be further explored, along with his analysis, with the vocabulary of national concupiscence and the rift it tore between national potential and national reality within Milton's thought space. In the anxious relationship between hopeful assertions and monarchical thralls in the public sphere in England, Milton's understanding of national creation vacillates between historicist warnings of past failures (as in *The History*) and present condemnations of the poverty of popular politics. The concupiscent nation is at once inevitably fallen and denied resuscitation. Second, in that unstable historical moment crippled by national concupiscence, Milton makes explicit references to justified and violent resistance. This theme is repeated throughout *The History*, and I focused in this chapter on the anecdote of Queen Cartimandua. Resistance, as Milton says quite clearly, disarms the traitor Queen who gave away her nation because of her own libidinous and vain desires. Third, and related to the above anecdote, the specter of national concupiscence takes on in *The History of Britain* a deeply misogynistic tenor as Milton personifies the general principle in the character of Queen Cartimandua - herself a textual forerunner of Milton's Dalila. In Milton's representation (found in *Comus*) of national concupiscence as an intellectual problem, Milton increasingly associates this mental ineptitude with women's supposed furies and impulses. All of these facets are critical in taking the concept of national concupiscence as found in Milton's political tracts toward a more nuanced reading of *Samson Agonistes* as an imaginative solution to

the historicist problem represented by national concupiscence. In a biblical time frame inherently limited by the lack of Jesus' sacrifice, Samson is crippled by a confused nation and the treachery of a woman, and the imagery used to describe his moment of passion is deeply involved with the discourse of national concupiscence as it developed before, during, and after the English crucible of 1649



### Chapter 3: Imagination and Metaphors for Resistance in *Samson Agonistes*

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National concupiscence then as we have defined it constitutes a major part of Milton's understanding of the general question of uncontrollable impulses in the "hidden caverns of selfhood" as an intellectually rooted problem that became one of historical and national consequence as Milton advanced through the crucible of the English Revolution. As I suggested in Chapter II, when Milton applied this concept to history we see a conflation between national concupiscence and violence, which led in turn to deeply misogynistic characterizations of women in *The History of Britain*. Having then established this sketch of national concupiscence in Milton's early poetry and prose, the critically important *Samson Agonistes* sustains these questions of national concupiscence found in Milton's work from *Comus* to *The Ready and Easy Way*.

As I have suggested throughout, the question of national concupiscence is fundamentally a question of national potential and historical limitation in Milton's literature. Consistently from *Eikonoklastes* onwards there exists a deep concern over the way concupiscent impulses actively separate the Heavenly and the Earthly as first outlined in *Comus*. Where in *Areopagitica* Milton outlines a vision of nation in which the top thinkers of society pull up and enrich their society, we find in Milton's later prose and poetry a vision of nation in which the low, base, and impulsively concupiscent masses drag down those thinkers into apocalypse. Throughout Milton's interaction with the idea of concupiscence, the historical moment served as a key way of understanding the problem; and *Samson Agonistes* is a text where from a Christian perspective time and historical moment are of utmost centrality.

The idea of a specific “time” within *Samson* has been pursued by critics with an eye for biblical timeframe, such as Anthony Low in *The Blaze of Noon*. Samson is denied the salvation of Jesus, and is thus cursed to suffer from the pride, desire, and death of post-lapsarian, pre-salvation existence. The timing of *Samson* is critical, but I will suggest in this chapter that the specific time of *Samson* is neither directly allegorical nor exclusively theological in nature. Instead, the time period within *Samson* is a metaphorical and imaginative one that uses biblical precedence to explore the problem of a nation limited in its transcendence by politicized, historical sexual impulse, or in other words, national concupiscence. Samson’s final passion is not a political allegory for political terrorism (as it was sometimes read in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, nor a pedagogical trick for the uninitiated (Carey). It is instead a metaphor for resisting national concupiscence - a resistance Milton explicitly calls for in *The History of Britain*. Samson’s actions are imperfect, as the text quite clearly suggests, yet his imperfection is in response to a very specific set of circumstances that constitute what I have called national concupiscence. Samson breaks through confusion, the treachery of women, and the inaction of his countrymen to resist the historical tide of national concupiscence that so plagued the English nation for Milton. As I have suggested, the problem of national concupiscence was always one of intellectual failure brought on by communal lust, and in such a reading Samson’s violent end is a fundamentally intellectual one, made of an imaginative and metaphorical solution to national concupiscence. Samson does not need to be read as on either pole (a radical saint, or a condemnation of radical action) of the current critical spectrum regarding the text, but rather read as a literary exploration of the problems of national limitations via national concupiscence.

Before a reading of *Samson* can begin, Milton's innovations to the Aristotelian tragic form in his "Of that sort of Dramatic Poem which is call'd Tragedy" are worth stopping upon to engage the concept put forth by several critics that the tragic nature of *Samson* emerges chiefly from Samson's ultimate failure to transcend, not his partial success as this chapter will suggest. Second, the critically popular idea that Samson is in fact satanic must be engaged. The romantic sympathy for the devil has long been excised from Milton criticism, and if Samson is truly congruent with Satan on a theological, imagistic, and political level, any argument of Samson's transcendence (historically limited or not) cannot move forward. I will suggest that the satanic imagery found accurately by critics such as Clay Daniel is matched in number by associations of Samson with anti-satanic qualities. This seemingly untenable contradiction is a product of the specific time period that Milton makes concerted efforts to establish within the text. A discussion on the satanic imagery associated with Samson will thus serve as an effective transition into a discussion of *Samson* with the vocabulary of national concupiscence.

Milton's "Of That Sort of Dramatic Poem which Is Call'd Tragedy" is an introduction to *Samson Agonistes*, and as with *Paradise Lost*, Milton does not merely introduce the work but seeks also to place his more general poetic project within the discourses of poetry from past and present. Of note, Milton both rejects modern tragic attempts (as he rejected the modern fancy for rhyming, in his preliminary materials for *Paradise Lost*), and places himself more in the camp of the classic tragic playwrights, specifically referencing Aristotle's *Poetics*. Yet Milton does not merely inherit Aristotle's method, but makes key innovations that lead to a reading of *Samson* as a text of passion and politics in resistance to their respective "salts" and "sour" ("Of that Sort"

66). Milton begins, “Tragedy, as it was antiently compos'd, hath been ever held the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other Poems: 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 measure with a kind of delight, stirr'd up by reading or seeing those passions well imitated” (“Of that Sort” 67). Mirroring the ideology of *Areopagitica* based in Augustine, Milton asserts here that tragedy serves the purpose of refining passions by the experience of them. The best tragedy limits negative emotions such as fear and terror, emotions associated with the thralls in *Eikonoklates* and *The Ready and Easy Way*, and replaces them with delight. Importantly, Aristotle asserts in his *Poetics* that tragedy is the art of “actions well imitated.” Milton has thus diverged from Aristotle in a meaningful way. Replacing actions with passions has significant theological and textual implications for *Samson* as a text of national concupiscence. Milton’s project is to ameliorate passions by their artful imitation. This is much in line with the corrupting role passions served throughout Milton’s later prose, but this represents a problem for any reading of Samson as a character of progressive passions. Yet, Milton’s innovation of passion in place of action is delivered to readers by only the footnotes of astute editors - Milton himself says nothing of his innovation. Milton’s silent innovation complicates the Aristotelian equation of passions being refined by their representation in tragedy. The collision of action and passion, such that their difference is not worth mentioning, suggests that the “passion” of the tragedy, the pedagogical passion, is not the passions of those thralls who were described in every case as profoundly inactive and paralyzed by their concupiscence. The image of Samson’s passion, both his physical suffering and his deeply felt sorrow, is one of

action. In this impassioned action, Milton hopes to refine the lower passions of the thralls toward a progressive passion that reaches for the penultimate passion of the Christian tradition.

Lines later, Milton moves from an impassioned and active pedagogy for his tragedy to a discussion on the relevancy of tragedies in the understanding, and more importantly, the countering of political maladies. Milton continues,

-for so in Physic things of melancholic hue and quality are us'd against melancholy, sowr against sowr, salt to remove salt humours. Hence Philosophers and other gravest Writers, as *Cicero*, *Plutarch* and others, frequently cite out of Tragic Poets, both to adorn and illustrate thir discourse. The Apostle *Paul* himself thought it not unworthy to insert a verse of Euripides into the Text of Holy Scripture - commenting on the *Revelation*, divides the whole Book as a Tragedy, into Acts distinguished each by a Chorus of Heavenly Harpings and Song b'tween ("Of that Sort" 67).

Illustrating rather clearly the coexistence of secular republicanism and biblical precedence that marks Milton's era, Milton describes the use-value of tragedy for Cicero, Plutarch, and Paul. Milton also mirrors Sophocles' definition of the tragedian's task, "he brings from the darkness all things to the birth, and all things born envelops in the night" (as cited in *The Alexiad*). Milton begins his dialogue with the genre of *Samson* with a profound historicism, and his tale, due to its very genre, will pursue both a birth and death in Sophoclean terms. Further, Milton's use of tragedy is not one of mere decoration but of purpose (illustration, as he says). Just as he had suggested that his tragedy would refine lower passions with the artful depiction of higher, active passions, Milton now moves on to suggest that this concept of tragedy will not serve as mere decoration but instead as an illustration of a greater "discourse." This discourse, one of passion and simultaneous mortality and immortality will recall our earliest readings of national concupiscence in *Comus* through the later *Ready and Easy Way*. Ever-present for the

intellectually capable is the path to the infinite, the impassioned, active rejection of base impulse in favor of virtue. Surrounding this potential, from the era of Harold Godwinson to Gerrard Winstanley, was the threat of the national concupiscent impulse for the worldly and bodily. This distinction between passions and thus potentials is the distinction Milton outlines as the main catalyst in tragedy. It is not surprising, then, that he uses revelation as his biblical example. The death of the world and the triumph of the son is the biblical precedent Milton gives to his literary project to tell Samson's story. Barbara Lewalski in her article "*Samson Agonistes* and the Tragedy of the Apocalypse" also points to this not often commented upon reference to Revelation to connect Milton's tragic project to the question of politics and the English revolution (Lewalski). Thus for Milton, tragedy is made by infinite potential and finite circumstances, the bird and the lime, the Anglo-Saxons Kings and their treacherous queen, the saints and the thralls, and perhaps most provocatively, the death and rebirth of the faithful as recounted in the book of Revelations.

In the conclusion of "Of That Sort of Dramatic Poem which is Call'd Tragedy," Milton again diverges from commonly accepted tragic developments, namely that a play needn't take place in only 24 hours. Shakespeare's plays, ever present in Milton's literary imagination, commonly violated these Aristotelian unities. Yet, Milton chooses in favor of the classics. There is something timely about *Samson* for Milton, something that is better served by a short dramatic scope. Like the thralls in *The Ready and Easy Way*, the potential for salvation is but one intellectual step away for Samson, and in a span of mere hours, he reaches for it. Thus Milton's preliminary interaction with tragedy and its purpose mirrors already that *Samson Agonistes* is to

be a text of impassioned purpose that illustrates a discourse of action rather than paralysis. By fighting sour low passions with sour high passions, Milton grounds himself in classical renderings of tragedy as well as biblical precedent. In the death and rebirth imagery of revelation and Sophocles' understanding of tragedy, lies the tension that national concupiscence elicits in *Eikonoklastes* and *The Ready and Easy Way*. Milton in one stroke of the pen in each prose work praises the historical virtue of the English people and castigates their failure to fulfill their historical character. The very form of *Samson Agonistes* owns a national character when contextualized with Milton's use of passion and concupiscence in his later prose works. For Milton specifically, tragedy was a form of active (Samsonite) and passive (concupiscent) passions. Discovering the nature of these passions, the passions of Samson and his countrymen, is my chief aim in the following reading of *Samson Agonistes*.

The opening lines of *Samson* have received relatively little critical attention in comparison to Samson's debate with Dalila or his verbal duels with his conquerors. Yet for my purpose of reading *Samson* as a text of national concupiscent historical limitations, the opening lines of *Samson* are critical. Milton, in his paratextual summary of what is to come, rejects the idea that Samson killed himself. As the text progresses, the specter of national concupiscence specifically with the imagery of the yoke advances to centrality in Milton's depiction of the history before these climactic twenty four hours. Of note, we find several of the key images of national concupiscence as it developed throughout Milton's later prose and poetry. Milton begins his drama by depicting a common throng self-destroyed by intellectual failure - a failure Samson admits of himself. From lines one to approximately five hundred, Milton contextualizes his

purposed, impassioned tragedy with the vocabulary of national concupiscence. To fulfill the Aristotelian and Sophoclean tragic project of pedagogy through synthesis between sour and sour, Milton presents us with the problem of national concupiscence as the subject of authorial and reader synthesis. The resulting sour of Samson's climactic actions are thus not merely ambiguous or the "revenge fantasy" of a disheveled Milton (Forsyth), but instead a biblically precedented, historicist imagining of a solution to the age-old English problem of national concupiscence. An imagining that dissolves historical circumstance in the limitless intellectual space where salvation occurred for Milton from *Comus* to *Samson*.

In the debate that erupted around John Carey's article regarding the question of Samson and radical religious actions little was said on Milton's rather explicit opening statements that Samson did not kill himself but instead died on accident. Perhaps the difference is marginal, whether Samson meant to kill thousands of people excluding himself or not is not central to the debate on the political ramifications of the drama in the era of terrorism. Yet if critics are going to invoke the image of the suicide bomber with regards to Samson (Feisal Mohamad is right to criticize the term's western exceptionalism)(Mohamed) the question of suicide is an important one. If, as John Donne suggested in his thought experiment *Biathanatos*, Samson represents a biblically sanctioned suicide, the theology of the drama becomes more complex. In opening his drama, Milton writes, "in the midst of which discourse an Ebrew comes in haste confusedly at first; and afterward more distinctly relating the Catastrophe, what Samson had done to the Philistins, and by accident to himself; wherewith the Tragedy ends" (*Samson* 71). Milton's rejection of Samson's suicide, repeated later in the play, is obvious. The idea of Samson's



passion as a suicide was not uncommon in the time of authorship, yet Milton chooses to reject it in the very first lines to be read by his reader. Rather than a difference of little meaning, the difference is one of conflict and significant divergence. If Samson is to be a pedagogical Satan, why make this innovation? Why take sin away from one who is portrayed as sinful? These opening, narrative lines give us little reason to doubt Milton's sincerity over the issue of Samson's suicide, and considering Milton's relative comfort with advocating for violent resistance in *The History of Britain*, the notion that Samson did not intentionally kill himself is meaningful in this very first depiction of his character from Milton. In such a rendering, Samson can more closely be related to the imprisoned John Lambert rather than a singular agent of anachronistically labeled terrorism.

Yet the nature of Samson's death is not the only thing at work in the Argument. Milton curiously describes the intellectual state of the Hebrew who delivers the tragic news of Samson's demise. As in the text itself, confusion is slowly ameliorated after Samson's act of war. The Hebrew messenger begins in confusion, but continues and ends with more "distinct[ness]." Samson's actions, before the drama has even started, are interacting with the vocabulary of national concupiscence. Samson's passion directly counters the root cause of concupiscence in Milton's work from *Comus* onwards. Samson's death, a tragedy, gives distinctness to the Hebrews suffering under the Philistine yolk. It thus serves an active purpose, and can be considered an active passion. This early reading is buttressed in later sections, but it is critical that before the play has even begun Samson's death is depicted as a dialectical counter to the intellectual failure Milton continually associated with national concupiscence. The opening lines

pick up where the Argument ends, immediately entering the reader into the thought space of national concupiscence; a space of choice, intellectual strength and weakness, and passions.

A close reading of a good portion of the opening section of *Samson* is helpful in understanding Milton's tragic project of dialectical, tragic opposition and imaginative synthesis to the problem of national concupiscence. The play begins,

A little onward lend thy guiding hand  
 To these dark steps, a little further on;  
 For yonder bank hath choice of Sun or shade,  
 There I am wont to sit, when any chance  
 Relieves me from my task of servile toyl,  
 Daily in the common Prison else enjoyn'd me,  
 Where I a Prisoner chain'd, scarce freely draw  
 The air imprison'd also, close and damp,  
 Unwholsom draught: but here I feel amends,  
 The breath of Heav'n fresh-blowing, pure and sweet,  
 With day-spring born; here leave me to respire. (*Samson* 1-11)

Milton beautifully begins by describing the movements of the blind *Samson*, as he moves his hands to guide his darkened steps. He is moving to a favored spot of respite, where, keenly, there is a choice of sun or shade. In *Comus*, the angel represents its viewers with a choice to climb the mountains toward the sun and heaven or to stay perilously attached to the "dim," lightless earth. *Samson Agonistes* begins with that same imagery and with Samson's desire to rest in a place of choice. He goes to that place, between sun and shade, fleeing the unwholesome air of his life of servitude. Unlike Milton's countrymen, and indeed Samson's countrymen, Samson chooses this point of tense choice for rest rather than a life under the yoke and dim of back-breaking work. Here, in this place of conflict between light and dark, the breath of Heaven blows purely. Purity, for Milton, made its home in choice. Milton does not begin this sad tale with only toil and

suffering, but also with the beautiful respite that Samson feels his way toward in the realm of sun and shade's coexistence. The path is difficult for the blind Samson, but he takes it none-the-less. This active decision is critical in understanding Milton's tragic project, specifically with regards to national concupiscence as the dialectical opposition with which the tragic form of the drama will interact. For Samson as it was for Milton, choice is the pure and fresh avenue; and in both their cases, their countrymen find no solace in that path, surrendering instead to the easy way of thralldom.

Lines later, those thralls make their first of many appearances within the text. Milton elaborates through Samson his need for sun and shade: "This day a solemn Feast the people hold / To *daagon* thir sea-idol, and forbid / Laborious works, unwillingly this rest / Thir Superstition yields me; hence with leave / Retiring from the popular noise" (*Samson* 12-16). Samson's flight to choice then is elicited unintentionally by the Philistine's heresy. The connection between this dynamic and the restoration is clear, but the importance of the section goes beyond pure historicist insights. The "people," who Milton had dedicated his adulthood to defending from continental attacks, are now reduced to worshipping their sea-idol (Charles sailed toward Restoration) through superstition. Superstition, the quality of Catholicism, monarchism, and concupiscence for Milton, now serves as a source of "popular noise." A noise that Samson flees from to a quiet retreat associated with choice. Thus the opening lines of the drama introduce a subtle and progressively less subtle allusion to the problem of national concupiscence deeply struggled with by Milton in his later prose. When read in the context of these developments, Samson's fundamental nature as a character is brought into focus. He is put into opposition

immediately with the enemies and thralls of Milton's later prose. He goes, explicitly unlike them, to a place of choice through a difficult journey. Rest for Samson is in the place where sun and shade coexist and are chosen by the fit reader and thinker. In the construction of two sours, Milton has seemingly made a rather clear division between Samson and his enemies. As an antithesis to the Philistine and enthralled Israelite thesis, Samson represents many of the qualities Milton wishes for in his prose and poetry. Like the Lady in *Comus*, Samson is portrayed as not rejecting the existence of that which should be opposed, but instead welcomes the choice from which all true virtue emerges. As Samson continues, the nature of this retreat to a realm of choice is complicated and textured with further reflections on the problem of national concupiscence as depicted by Milton.

As Samson leaves an almost narrative tone for more direct thought, the reader is given a glimpse into the tormented mind of Samson. This torment serves as a starting point of contradiction to the almost beautiful beginning of a struggling yet steadfast man going to the place of heavenly respite. Cursing his fate, Samson remarks of his location, "I seek / This unfrequented place to find some ease, / Ease to the body some, none to the mind / From restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm / Of Hornets arm'd, no sooner found alone, / But rush upon me thronging, and present / times past, what once I was, and what am now" (*Samson* 16-22). The specter of ease, or easiness is recalled from the very first lines, and for a meaningful purpose. Samson, in this very early section, makes the first of several distinctions between mind and body. This place of sun and shade, Samson clarifies, is not a place of intellectual ease. While seemingly a negative reflection, given the discussion above on Milton's desire for intellectual

struggle rather than intellectual capitulation, the insight is critical. Samson does not seek intellectual comfort, and he never achieves it. Instead, he wants only to ease his physical suffering. The nature of these thoughts invokes quickly the language of historical circumstance, potential, and limitation. Samson is tormented by thoughts that like hornets remind him of “times past, what once I was, and what am now.” As his body finds ease in the cooling breeze, his mind broils with thoughts of history. As in *The History of Britain*, Milton portrays the conflict between present circumstance and historical precedent. Like the Anglo-Saxons, Picts, Romans, and English under the Norman yolk, Samson was once great but has fallen from grace. Critically, the future is out of Samson’s vision at this textual moment. He thinks only of the past, only of those previous iterations of himself (and of the nation), and not what future iterations might look like. Samson’s defiance in his moment of passion, his refusal to participate in this present moment of heresy represents his turn from history toward the attainment of a future devoid of the shackles of a nationally concupiscent past. National dissolution and its association with national concupiscence in the beginning of *Samson* is a theme worth stopping on briefly before continuing our reading of Samson’s intellectual struggle.

At the end of the five hundred line beginning we are working with, Samson reflects on the dissolution of the Israelite nation in a strikingly similar fashion as that found in *Eikonoklates*, *The Ready and Easy Way*, and *The History of Britain*. Samson remarks of the Israelites, “But what more oft in Nations grown corrupt, / And by thir vices brought to servitude, / Then to love bondage more than liberty, / Bondage with ease then strenuous liberty” (*Samson* 267-271). Mirroring what is found several hundred lines earlier, Samson attacks his countrymen for

seeking intellectual ease under the shade of monarchy and concupiscence. Again Milton invokes the idea of vice, an idea that dominates *The History of Britain's* explanation of English national apocalypse. It is concupiscence that has brought servitude to the Israelites. Yet in their servitude there is a fundamental difference between Samson and his peers. Samson does not flee from the difficulty of his own vice involving Dalila. He instead struggles with it deeply and throughout the entire drama. Thus the Israelite nation is dissolved in exactly the same way and by the same things as the English nation, and Samson takes on the Miltonic role of distancing himself from those who brought about national apocalypse by seeking choice and active passion against those concupiscent vices and people who destroyed the elect nation.

Returning to the earlier sections of our 500 lines, Samson moves from the more general, national themes that elicited the above digression to more specific renderings of his place within the general scheme of national dissolution via national concupiscence. Milton's introduction to the prophecy that haunts Samson will also serve as a proper prologue to a discussion on the critical debate over the shadows of Satan found in Samson. Samson laments, "O glorious strength / Put to the labour of a Beast, debas't / Lower then bondslave! Promise was that I / Should *Israel* from *Philistian* yoke deliver; / Ask for this great Deliverer now, and find him / Eyeless in *Gaza* at the Mill with slaves, / Himself in bonds under *Philistian* yoke" (*Samson* 36-41). The bodily strength Milton had previously used to illustrate the difference between mind and body here is turned to evil purpose by the self-destruction of Israel and its defender. The bodily strength of Samson cannot endure past the intellectual failure and vice of his nation and of himself. Instead, the presence of the bodily evokes the dehumanization of Samson such that he is

nothing more than a beast to haul and sow. Like in *Eikonoklates* and *The Ready and Easy Way*, an attachment to the physical from an intellectual failure (concupiscence, in other words) results in the enthrallment of the subject and the removal of their humanity. Because choice was central to the human condition, indeed central to its very creation as depicted in *Paradise Lost*, the destruction of choice by a subservience to monarchy turns humans into beasts of burden. Yet Samson is no thrall. Lines later, he ponders a critical “yet” in this scheme of national concupiscence and thralldom.

While Samson finds his bodily strength turned into a mere beastly quality, he fervently fights against atheistic claims from his father and from his own doubts. While he claims to be impotent in mind himself, readers of the concept of national concupiscence throughout Milton’s later prose works will notice key signs of resistance to concupiscence that Milton hopes for in *The History of Britain* specifically. He says lines after the above quoted section, “Yet stay, let me not rashly call in doubt / Divine Prediction; what if all foretold / Had been fulfill’d but through mine own default, / Whom have I to complain of but my self? / Who this high gift of strength committed to me, / In what part lodg’d, how easily bereft me, / Under the seal of silence could not keep, / But weakly to a woman must reveal it, / O’recome with importunity and tears. / O impotence of mind, in body strong!” (*Samson* 43-53). Throughout *Eikonoklastes* and *The Ready and Easy Way* Milton attacks the concupiscent thralls of monarchy for shirking responsibility away from themselves and onto the various failures of the Commonwealth. The inconstancy of those bloody hands that held the hair of Charles I and then supported the moderate measures of the Presbyterian Parliament (*Eikonoklastes*) was their great failure and demonstrative of their

complacency in Charles' monarchical heresy. Satan similarly takes responsibility for almost nothing even in his breakdown at the beginning of Book IV in *Paradise Lost*. Here, Samson reckons his failure openly and takes full responsibility. He identifies the source of his weakness, and in the following lines, will reject its temptation in a *Comus*-esque interrogation.

Within the first 500 lines of *Samson*, Milton enters the reader into the vocabulary and dynamic of national concupiscence that developed in Milton's prose and poetry in the Commonwealth and Restoration. Samson intends only struggle and not suicide against the forces of intellectual failure, attachment to the bodily, and a national collapse catalyzed by national concupiscence. Milton firmly establishes in his depiction of tragedy a dialectical synthesis between the concupiscent masses and Samson. Samson seeks choice and acknowledges his failures while Dalila, his own father, and the other Israelites brings about their own destruction without responsibility. Thus national concupiscence is at work within the text of *Samson Agonistes*, it is now necessary to engage the critical debate on the satanic imagery associated with Samson.

As the critical debate between New Formalisms and Historicisms rages over *Samson Agonistes*, one major point of contention has been the satanic nature of Samson. Specifically for the goal of reading Samson as neither saintly nor satanic, addressing the critical debate surrounding the Satanic imagery found in *Samson Agonistes* can give more context to the grey area constituted by Milton's interaction with historical limitations in the text in response to national concupiscence. Critic Clay Daniel interestingly uses the quoted prophecy to compare him to Satan in his article "Lust and Violence in *Samson Agonistes*." Daniel writes, "But



providence reacts to Samson's license with the same devastating subtlety evident in its dealings with the Satan of *Paradise Lost*, using Samson's evil actions to damn him while producing the good promised by the prophecy" (Daniel 28). The condemnation Daniel finds in Samson's revolutionary prophecy is complicated by Milton's advocacy for violent resistance in response to national concupiscence in *The History of Britain*. Samson's "evil" is actively asked for by Milton in *The History of Britain*, but of course it is desired in a very specific historical moment in *The History*; a historical moment that mirrors Samson's own of a fallen Christian kingdom brought down by concupiscence. Thus a level of nuance is needed in approaching Samson's prophecy and his fulfillment of it. As Mary Nyquist suggested in her recent article on Greek Anti-Tyrannicism shared between Milton and Hobbes, violence cannot be considered a universal evil in Milton's political thought (Nyquist) as he consistently invokes it and even makes a joke of political violence in *Eikonoklastes*. Certainly not every action or prophecy short of Jesus and the Millennium is satanic for Milton, and much of *The History of Britain* is a testament to that. Samson is most closely precedented in Milton's literature not by Satan but by the historically limited actors in his *History* that destabilize the narrative of Samsonite violence as equivalent to Satanic, martial war.

Critic Helen Damico makes a similar point on Samson's satanic nature but focused on his relationship with Dalila instead of his prophecy and his actions. In her article "Duality in Dramatic Vision," Damico argues, "Broadly viewed - Samson and Dalila, although combatants on a literal level, on a symbolic level are merged as a single antagonist of God" (Damico). This merging of male and female within Milton is something William Blake could admire (in his own

attempt to do so in his epic *Milton*), but such a reading avoids many deeply problematic and misogynistic sections in the poem. For example, Samson laments, “How could I once look up, or heave to thead, Who like a foolish Pilot have shipwreck’t My Vessel trust to me from above - Fool, have divulg’d the secret gift of God to a dectful Woman” (*Samson* 197-202). When we first see Dalila in the play, she is compared to a boat again, as Samson remarks, “But who is this, what thing of Sea or Land? Female of sex it seems, That so bedeckt, ornate, and gay, Comes this way sailing Like a stately ship Of *Tarsus*, bound for th’ isles” (*Samson* 710-715). On the symbolic level, Dalila is portrayed as inconstant and at the whims of winds. What is more, she is associated with the boats of Tarshish that are themselves associated with pride which are attacked by a vengeful God in The Old Testament. Dalila is symbolically (via an explicit biblical reference) rendered as an antagonist of God - the same cannot be said for Samson.

There is something deeply ambiguous about Samson that makes readers of *Paradise Lost* eager to read him as part of the devil’s party without his knowledge of it. As I have suggested, there is precedent in Milton’s work for Samson that is not Satan, making the above sampled effort to fit him into Pandaemonium problematic. Samson even makes several anti-Satanic claims, for example, “I on th’ other side , Us’d no ambition to commend my deeds, The deeds themselves, though mute, spoke loud the doer” (*Samson* 246-7). This sentiment mirrors both Jesus in *Paradise Lost* and *Regain’d* and God in *Paradise Lost*. The unreliability of Samson’s self-narrative also seems diminished in his remarkable silence at the end of the drama. We are only told narratively what he said at his end, and it takes up a mere four lines of poetry. Far from

the satanic chatterbox of Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, Samson is silent - much like Abdiel when he realizes words are of no use against Satan and his army.

It is unnecessary, though, to vanquish and avoid sections of the poem in which have shadows of Milton's famed arch-fiend. David Loewenstein in his article "The Saint's Revenge" pursues a nuanced reading of Samson in the context of Milton's Puritanical peers, and suggests that Samson is fundamentally a radical saint as defined by Michael Walzer in his *Revolution of the Saints*. He wrote of Samson at the conclusion of the text, "Exercising his own agency one last time "with eyes inward illuminated," Samson the militant, faithful champion of God embodies Milton's unsettling climactic vision of a radical saint-" (Loewenstein 291). Samson does look with inward eyes at himself and his nation and Loewenstein's reading of the ending of *Samson* gives important context to the readings I highlighted above regarding Samson's satanic nature. Yet J.G.A. Pocock's critique of Walzer's concept of the radical Puritan saint as too homogenous is valid here as well. Only lines later, Milton writes of Samson, "But he thought blind of sight, Despid'd and thought extinguish't quite, With inward eyes illuminated his fiery virtue rous'd From under ashes into sudden flame - His cloudless thunder bolted on thir heads" (*Samson* 1685-1696). The image of inward eyes invokes the beautiful opening to Book III in which Milton implores God to let him "see and tell of things invisible to mortal sight" (PL III ll. 55). Yet as we read further, Samson is portrayed as throwing cloudless thunder at his enemies, such that it is bolted on their heads. This recalls the "scars of thunder" (PL I ll. 601) that mark Satan's head. The thunder on Satan's brow originates from God himself, and its presence in the moment of Samson's textual passion complicates a purely transcendent reading of this moment. Certainly

one could read it as placing Samson in God's place of vengeance against the Satanic, but the rest of the passage reflects a more ambivalent imagistic rendering of Samson by Milton. There is something limited or crude about Samson's cloudless thunder and licks of flame, but Loewenstein is apt to point out that the section is not merely one of satanic influence. I suggest further that it is also not a section of only Walzerian saintliness, but of a contradicted, historically limited actor that is ultimately sanctioned in Milton's poetic project. While critics seeking an ambiguous or even sympathetic Samson should avoid with care ignoring moments of Satanic influence, I have argued here that these moments cannot be used to equate the two characters but instead suggest a sense of historical limitations from which Samson endeavors to leap and pull however problematically. Rather than Samson, it is perhaps more apt to look for Satanic and nationally concupiscent trends within his great enemy, Dalila.

In *The History of Britain* I read the anecdote of Queen Cartimandua as a strong corollary to the development of Dalila's character in *Samson*. Cartimandua is portrayed as a self-interested Queen who sells her Kingdom for personal clout amongst the Romans. In *The History of Britain*, it is in the Cartimandua anecdote that Milton provocatively sanctions the violent resistance of her people against her. While Helen Damico suggests that both Samson and Dalila share satanic influence, I will suggest here that it is Dalila that is associated with satanic influence and more importantly, with the national concupiscence of Cartimandua. The profound sexism of *Samson* as highlighted by critics such as John Rogers, Joseph Wittreich, and Christopher Hill is not rooted in the subject matter (the Samson myth itself) as Hill suggests, but rather the collision of sex, violence, and national collapse within the topic of national concupiscence. Like Cartimandua,

Dalila's transgression is associated with treason and thus punishable by extreme measures in Milton's own words. In studying Dalila's national concupiscent, satanic sin, I will focus on Milton's association of Dalila with his depiction of Comus, his use of Selden's Law of Nature and Nations to condemn her actions, and Milton's Ciceronian understanding of love to cast Dalila in a nationally concupiscent light.

Comus is one of Milton's least complex characters and his similarity to Dalila speaks to the misogyny of her character. He is the dancing temptation of vice for the ever-virtuous Lady, and the threat of his magic wand and cup is the chief purpose of his presence within the maske. Problematically, Milton associates this mouth piece for anti-virtue with Dalila rather explicitly in Samson and Dalila's confrontation. Samson responds to his former wife's calls for reconciliation by saying bitterly,

No, no, of my condition take no care;  
 It fits not; thou and I long since are twain;  
 Nor think me so unwary or accurst  
 To bring my feet again into the snare  
 Where once I have been caught; I know thy trains  
 Though dearly to my cost, thy ginns, and toyls  
 Thy fair enchanted cup, and warbling charms  
 No more on me have power, their force is null'd,  
 So much of Adders wisdom I have learn't  
 To fence my ear against thy sorceries (*Samson* 928-937).

Samson mirrors rather strongly the language of the Lady in *Comus*. His ears are immune to Dalila's trickery just as the Lady displays her own immunity with reasoned verbal retorts. To the virtuous Lady, mirroring Augustinian notions of virtue, all is virtuous and the unvirtuous thus hold no appeal. Much has happened between *Comus* and *Samson* in Milton's understanding of concupiscence as we have traced, and certainly Samson was once ensorcelled by Dalila's

language but here Milton gives Samson the virtuous strength of the Lady from *Comus*. Samson rejects the “cup” of Dalila’s rhetoric (an image directly from *Comus* and of the general depiction of the devilish trickster in the period) and reaffirms his resolve against her national concupiscent rhetoric. The relation of Dalila to the tropish trickster and specifically to Comus is deeply problematic for readers looking to liberate *Samson* from the misogyny of the biblical tale. Dalila here is nothing more than the antithesis for Samson’s anti-concupiscent thesis. Her cup and charms tempt Samson only to reaffirm his own opposition to the “low passions” the play has set out to vanquish. There is no critical escape for the deep misogyny of this portion of the text, and it is a misogyny rooted in the development of national concupiscence from *Comus* to *The Ready and Easy Way to Samson*. Dalila as Comus is a troublesome but explicit connection Milton draws within the text to further the depiction Dalila and “her country” as agents of national concupiscence.

Samson invokes before the Comus comparison John Selden’s (the most learned man of the time, according to Milton) (*Areopagitica*) terminology of the laws of nature and nations. The concept of natural law was touched on briefly in Chapter I on the discussion of Miltonic virtue, and the concept is central in the general impetus behind Milton’s *The History of Britain*. Milton endeavors to rewrite the laws of the English nation that had crippled the Commonwealth’s political actions. In his rewriting, it is national concupiscence that had crippled the English nation and not violation of an idealized British common law. Samson retorts to Dalila by invoking the notion of law,

Thy countrey sought of thee, it sought unjustly,  
Against the law of nature, laws of nations

No more thy countrey, but an impious crew  
 Of men conspiring to uphold thir state  
 By worse then hostile deeds, violating the ends  
 For which our countrey is a name so dear;  
 Not therefore to be obey'd. 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 their own deity, Gods cannot be:  
 Less therefore to be pleas'd, obey'd, or fear'd,  
 These false pretexts and varnish'd colours failing,  
 Bare in thy guilt how foul must thou appear? (*Samson* 889-902)

There are two main points to extract from this allusion to Selden with regards to Dalila as satanic and nationally concupiscent. First, like Cartimandua, Dalila violates Selden's laws of nature and nations. Second, Milton associates transactions with concupiscence, or the active contradiction of something based on its trade for something else; a theme that will be central to his Ciceronian ideal of love offered several lines earlier in the conflict between Samson and Dalila. Of the violation of natural and national law, Dalila is moved by heretical zeal to violate the ends to which Israel strives. Strikingly, the satanic serpent in Samson's construction is another nation, the Philistines. It is not one who deceives Dalila but many. The "conspiring men" of *Eikonoklastes*, the very agent for the nationalization of concupiscence highlighted in Chapter I, are the ones who have corrupted Dalila. In this dramatized depiction of the nationalization of concupiscence, Dalila becomes the figure of Charles: one who took the "mischiefs" of a group of aristocratic, self-serving men and nationalized them to every corner of the country. This act is a violation of natural and national law - a provocative Miltonic riposte to the restoration discourse of the inhumanity and ahistorical nature of the English Commonwealth.

The second part of the above quoted section worth considering further is the way Milton portrays the core contradiction of religion in Dalila's faux-zeal that is repeated later throughout the drama. There is a keen notion that in the exchange of godly principle for godly ends everything is lost. This is a provocative message for the general theological space of the drama at large. Is this a self-revealing commentary made by Samson? Does he reveal the problem of his own actions in his attacks on Dalila? The image of varnishing or gilding, used also in *Eikonoklastes* to describe the pillars of Charles' monarchy, can help unpack the issue. Dalila is gilded with zeal, such that she does what she does to please the various gods in the Philistine pantheon. Samson seeks exclusively penitence from the Christian God, and never gilds himself in anything other than self-criticism. This distinction between authentic faith and heretical self-serving faith is problematic and perhaps the source of modern discomfort with the text. From a secular perspective, the arbitrary distinction between faiths seems insufficient to differentiate between the deeply misogynist description of Dalila and the triumphant imagery used to describe Samson in his act of passion. Yet we must read it within the context of Milton's own body of work. The image of varnish and gilding has precedent in *Eikonoklastes* in differentiating the ones who held the axe and the one who received it outside Whitehall Castle on a cold January morning. The varnish of the pillar of national concupiscence, specifically with regards to a woman, had elicited Milton's unsettling calls for violence politically and textually in the past.

This idea that exchange comprises the virtue of a thing begins earlier in the debate between Samson and Dalila. Milton in this section uses the example of love rather than faith in



this more general construction, and it is an idea also found in the writings of Cicero. Samson responds to Dalila's claims of love by retorting,

Confess it feign'd, weakness is thy excuse,  
 And I believe it, weakness to resist  
*Philistian* gold: if weakness may excuse,  
 What Murtherer, what Traytor, Parricide,  
 Incestuous, Sacrilegious, but may plead it?  
 All wickedness is weakness: that plea therefore  
 With God or Man will gain thee no remission.  
 But Love constrain'd thee; call it furious rage  
 To satisfie thy lust: Love seeks to have love (*Samson* 829-837)

The ending line strongly mirrors a section of Cicero's *On Friendship*, where he defines love as existing for itself. Love, like faith, needn't please anything. It seeks only to be returned. Because Dalila seeks to please others and to fill her pockets, she does not feel love in Ciceronian terms. Her concupiscent lust for Mammon's gold keeps her eyes fixed to the gold on the pathways of heaven (*Paradise Lost*). In such a metaphor, Dalila fails to see more than the blind Samson. A sense of true blindness was associated with national concupiscence in Milton's prose, and it is asserted here that Dalila is the one who lacks vision. Her earthly, feigned love constrains and not frees her. She sticks herself in the birdlime of concupiscent lust and cannot out of intellectual blindness be saved. The dogmatic statement that all wickedness is weakness fits much in line with Miltonic renderings of virtue from *Comus* to *Paradise Lost*, and is the proper reciprocal for the Lady's claim that to the virtuous all is virtuous. To the nationally concupiscent, all is wickedness due to their self-made intellectual weakness, and their love for their own "baseness" (*Eikonoklastes*).

Thus Dalila is a varnished pillar of national concupiscence in every aspect. She is associated with Comus and made a talking mouth for the threat of concupiscence. She violates natural and national law like Cartimandua in *The History of Britain*. She violates Ciceronian concepts of love in favor of lusty, earthly, and passing notions that suggest a concupiscent blindness. I must agree in this light with the many critics that have noted the startling misogyny of the collision between the two characters that truly defines the tale. In rejecting Dalila's religiosity and ideology, the justification for Samson's actions is constructed on the imagistic and thematic levels. Dalila serves within the tale, problematically, as national concupiscence personified. In their actual meeting in the dialogue, Dalila serves as the antithesis to Samson's thesis in the Aristotelian tragic project Milton has ascribed his drama. Her faux passion and zeal, and her concupiscent lust and intellectual failure contextualizes Samson's violent and troubling thesis at the end of the story. Having established this antithesis which Samson will serve as a thesis to in the general project of impassioned action highlighted above, it is certainly time to turn to a reading of that final act of passion in the context of imaginative resistance to national concupiscence.

One of the first images we get with regards to Samson's sacrifice from those who saw it is the phoenix, a bird. Some of the chorus sing, "Deprest, and overthrown, as seem'd, Like that self-begott'n bird In the *Arabian* woods embost, that no second knows nor third, And lay e're while a Holocaust, From out her ashie womb now teem'd Revives, reflourishes, then vigorous most When most unactive deem'd, And though her body die, her fame survives, A secular bird ages of lives" (*Samson* 1698-1707) Raphael is similarly seen as a phoenix by Adam as he

descends to warn Adam and Eve of the approach of Satan and to explain why Satan is an enemy. But Milton goes out of his way to come short of such a direct comparison, as Samson's phoenix is "A secular bird ages of lives," not truly divine. Yet the comparison has weight not only in the debate on the satanic Samson sampled above, but also in understanding Samson as a character of rebirth and "reflourishing" that "no second knows." It is not the immortal rebirth of those faithful to Christ, but a rebirth associated with Raphael the messenger. This role as a messenger of knowledge (that opposes intellectual failure, the root of national concupiscence) is reiterated as the poem concludes. Samson here is portrayed as a historical catalyst, or agonist, for a radical reach for freedom from the yoke. Inactivity, which Milton so intimately connected with national concupiscence in his later prose works and in *The History of Britain*, is vanquished by Samson. Even in his most seemingly "inactive" moment, he breaks through the vocabulary of national concupiscence and reaches for a timeless state.

Yet we must consider further that the image, a bird of rebirth, is associated with the feminine in this critical moment in the text. In a text that I and several other critics have argued is profoundly misogynist, what is implied by associating the resistance to national concupiscence with Samson, and using the feminine article for the image? Given the discussion above on the nature of Milton's critique of national concupiscent themes in this textual moment, the "she" here can certainly be written off as referring to the commonly accepted article for Phoenixes in literature. Yet the national quality of this section, from its secular nature to the rebirth imagery associated with her ashen womb leads to a reading of a nationalist impulse in the section, an impulse David Loewenstein and others have increasingly found in Milton's later poetry. The

feminine English Britannia, in its most inactive, restored state, strikes from the ashes to reach for metaphorical millennium. Thus the bird, the long-lived image for the question of national concupiscence in the work of John Milton, is at once Samsonite and English. Samson can be read, if compared to Raphael which Milton encourages and rendered with the question of the bird's femininity, as an agonist in this imaginative, imagistic solution to the problem of national concupiscence in England. This moment of comparison between Samson and a bird "for the ages," invokes the historicist concern of national concupiscence as a catalyst in national destruction from the dawn of the first English nations.

The very last lines of the poem reinforce the idea above that Samson is comparable to a messenger or agonist in a greater movement toward Christ in a historical period where the people are denied him by national concupiscence. The chorus concludes, "All is best, though we oft doubt, What th' unsearchable dispose of highest wisdom brings about, And ever best found in the close. And all that band them to resist His uncontrollable intent; His servants he with new acquist Of true experience from this great event With peace and consolation hath dismissed, And calm of mind, all passion spent" (*Samson* 1745-1758). Samson has first assuaged the doubts of the Israelite chorus in the divine wisdom of God - Raphael's chief task. The chorus also remarks upon a "true experience" taught by Samson to his compatriots, denoting our earlier reading of the pedagogical nature of Samson in *The Argument*. Samson's truth is by no means pure and he is quite literally covered in the blood of his enemies by the end of the story, yet the chorus sings of a true experience begotten of this great and terrible event. There is the pedagogy in Samson's active passion, a pedagogy of truth that leaves the mind calm and free of passion - a truth rooted

in Milton's Aristotelian goals for the tragedy and certainly a truth very familiar to readers of *Paradise Lost's* Book III. There is a sense in these closing lines that Samson has done something more than simply kill his enemies, and this is corroborated a few lines earlier when the Chorus learns of Samson's demise.

In a statement that seems to merely boast of Samson's deeds, there is a betrayal of the transcendence of historical and physical limitations that Milton has associated with Samson at the end of the closet drama. Milton writes, "The work for which thou wast foretold To *Israel*, and now ly'st victorious Among thy slain self-kill'd Not willingly, but tangl'd in the fold Of dire necessity, whose law in death conjoin'd Thee with thy slaughter'd foes in number more Than all thy life had slain before" (*Samson* 1662-1669). Milton again challenges the reading of Samson's death as a suicide, reflecting the text's argument in which his death is dubbed accidental. This concept that Samson failed to do what he intended but still succeeded in his Raphael-like role of warning the Israelites textures Samson as a historically limited yet striving character. What he warns them of is key; Satan is never mentioned in *Samson Agonistes*, but Samson's failure to escape was due to Philistine "law" creating an opposition between the striving Samson and secular governance. The secular bird teaching the confused Israelites and becoming a dreadful enemy to the secular conquerors represents the implications of historical limitations within the text, yet there is a move for something greater at the end of the quoted section. While seemingly a simple display of pre-Christ pride, the end also denotes a sense that Samson has killed something more than the Philistines. The phoenix that anticipates Christ with his failed yet just effort to liberate the Israelites from their violent, Philistine attackers has killed more than men -

he has killed the ideology of the philistines with a piercing strike through the confused concupiscence of his countrymen.

Thus in the final lines of *Samson Agonistes* I have suggested that Samson does make progress toward to the circumvention of historically limited circumstances. His end is not triumphantly transcendent, but given the problem of national concupiscence in Milton's own experience of the failure of the English nation, such an end would be ill-fitting. Keenly, Samson's passion and progress occurs chiefly on the literary and imagistic level that rather carefully avoids strict allegories or political reference. The problem of national concupiscence weaves its way through *Samson Agonistes*, but the historicist question it represents is answered by Milton with the imaginative faculties and not by those political faculties that had once defended the English Commonwealth from its textual attackers. Through the image of the phoenix, Milton envisions the circumstances for the rebirth of the English nation from the ashes of national concupiscence, and his solvent here is not perfect virtue as it was in *Comus* but imperfect struggle as represented by the tortured yet defiant Samson. In this way, the closet drama ends as it begins; Samson seeks choice rather than paralyzed inactivity, and in doing so, he resists the tide of national concupiscence that had crippled his nation.

*Samson Agonistes* is a text that demands our modern critical attention. It brings to a head concerns over the analytical methods we bring to Milton and his era. In such an environment, our criticism and critical methods can only improve. In this chapter I have read *Samson* as a text at the end of a long interaction between Milton and the problem of national concupiscence and dissolution. For all early modern ideological ancestors of Brutus, Cassius, and Cicero the

questions brought about by plebeian control, Sulla, Caesar, Antony, and Octavian were of central importance. For Milton specifically, this question became one of concupiscence. Milton's tragic form as dictated in "On That Kind of Dramatic Poetry Called traged'y" demonstrates that Milton had a specific interest in representing tragedy as a catalyst in refining paralyzed passions into active, purposed passion. The first 500 lines of *Samson* bridge Milton's interest with the central questions of national concupiscence found in his paratextual information to the closet drama. As the text progresses, Dalila's antithesis and the Samsonite thesis lead to a final, impassioned, and imaginative synthesis of the drama that seeks to intellectually dissolve the threat of national concupiscence on the historically limited actor. At the end of Milton's life he writes this troubling, introspective tale that reckons the weaknesses of English nations past and present, and envisions on the fiery wings of a phoenix a figure who could transcend the weaknesses of those past nations. In that moment of conflagration, Milton turned his inner eye to things invisible to mortal sight and delivers the reader with a vibrant blaze of hope, framed in the irrevocable dark of historical circumstanc

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