

MILA CASON

IN DEFENSE
of DALILA



An essay: 6 November 2020



“Samson and Delilah” by Lucas Cranach the Younger, 1537.
In the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden.

Despite the beauties of the ending to Milton's drama,

“in calm of mind, all passions spent,” my own felt more stirred than put to rest. Samson, an angry man, contests not only the Philistines, but all whom he encounters, himself as well and, more notably, his contestable author/creator. My effort here will be to *focus* on his contest with Dalila, and, as her defense, to see charges against her dismissed.

We first see Samson before the gates of Gaza. The stage as set reflects his inner state before a word is spoken. We see him outcast, blinded and enchained, enslaved in endless labor, wrestling “restless thoughts” (in line nineteen). Manoa comes on to find his son in sorry condition—a man all but broken by his enemies. “For this,” the old man asks, “did the Angel twice descend?” As we, today, “for this did Christ descend?” Who would not feel pity? Except that this is the “beginning”!

As with his father, Samson too is nursing doubts—doubts. as to his relation to the God from whom he now feels severed, suggesting some residue of strength in his apparent defeat. His anger, expressed throughout, colors all his relations. Yet this rage seems justifiable—a rattling of chains under so heavy a seal set upon him from birth. We may even side with him, questioning as to what kind of god (so “contrarious”) takes side against a people for exercising their choice, *freely given*, in honoring their own Dagon? For theirs is a more indulgent God, who generously accords those pleasures which encourage and support a life otherwise strained. And this while Samson and his own people endure a life as barren as was

once his mother's womb. Samson has tasted of that life in the person of Dalila, which perhaps, like the "finish" of a fine wine, still lingers, fueling doubts. Reason must suspect both these idols as "false gods." Samson's predicament here strikes a chord (though in different key) with the author of "Thou art indeed just, Lord," which repeats as it beats, like a bass note, throughout.

Lo!—Dalila—wafted in on winds scenting of amber, assailing the senses as in full fleet and finery—and yet, "on doubtful feet and wavering." Announced by the Chorus, the name "Dalila" (so kin to "delight") must have fallen on the ear of the blind man as "*Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix*" (Saint-Saëns) resounds to this day (sorry!), as his own heart, in reflex, clamps shut. Thus the contest ensues, Dalila mindful that here she treads deep waters. Yet in the force and fervor of her argument, withstanding all bombastics, she does indeed prove herself a match—divinely sent—for this unruly holy man who cannot see beyond himself. Indeed, in his very resistance she serves to rekindle his strength, and purpose, thus firming his resolve toward all those bent on destroying him. Nor should this surprise, remembering she had already, in her betrayal, revealed a strength, and the persistence required for wresting his secret. And if, as Ortega has it, nothing reveals us so much as our *choice* in love, it must be considered that either our hero is not so "fine" as angelic visitations suggest, or that there's more to this "Hyena!" than meets the eye.

While Dalila is already showing signs of developing, Samson remains impervious. Did he, was asked, marry his in-laws? In a sense one does, or is best advised to at least take a look. That adage, "*Cherchez la femme*" could as well translate as "look for *la mère*." A spouse is after all a product of those in-laws (who could become out-laws); a precursor of things in the winds. And Samson's mother, conspicuously absent here, was barren except for the

Angel, and at that she fumbled, so that the Angel twice came before she got it.

Samson may well feel apprehensive at the change in Dalila's tone. For hers seems a growth from within, unfolding naturally from her own resources, her intuitions, whereas Samson's derives from on high—in his "locks." Dare one propose that, contrary to hearsay, "personal observations" suggest it's not the love received—from parents, family, friends, etc., that effects one's growth (though that could turn the soil). Rather it's what one *feels*—for another being—that nourishes and waters (albeit with tears)—that promotes and strengthens it. However deep or "shallow" Dalila's feeling, it must have been genuine enough to trigger a change in her. Initially it was Samson who chose her, but it is Dalila's own choice that has brought her here now:

Conjugal affection,

hath led me on, desirous to behold

Once more thy face and know of thy estate. (lines 739-42)

Dalila proves a marvel of self-possession, willingly surrendering all but her dignity. Samson, in his own struggle to stay on course, wreaks mass destruction ("pride goeth before...") not so much in that he is less self-controlled, but in that he has so much more to control. His strength allows no humility: "In my weakness is my strength"; St. Paul? Samson's pride, overgrown, cannot bend, as an oak become top-heavy, with withering roots, may break under that same wind in which a birch, more gracefully, "boughs." Deaf to all entreaties, Samson stands alone, "locked out," immune to human intimacy, and seemingly devoid of those commoner feelings of human compassion, companionship, etc., that ease the grind of life and give us "daily bread." More sorely, his mission denies him access to that redemptive quality and life-giving influence of his feminine counterpart that serve to anchor him and keep him from

veering off the map, so to speak. Surely the word “bride” hints at her role as bridle(?), just as his role is to “groom” her, not just materially but especially in that “weakness” which Dalila touchingly owns (line 774) as “incident to all our sex.” Milton himself allows:

*Love once possessed nor can be easily
Repulsed, without much inward passion felt
And secret sting of amorous remorse* (lines (1005-7)

Of all this Samson hasn't a clue.

An obvious target here is the sincerity of Dalila's intentions in appealing for recovery of Samson's favor. Were her intentions honorable? Here the purpose of defense is not to judge, but to defend as best she can. We may however point to Dalila's language in lines 917-27 as similar in spirit to that in which Manoa makes plea for the life of his son in 503-20. Dalila speaks (lines 811-3) of “Love's law.” It is that law (so “contrarious”) that is operative here, and which guides her throughout. “There is in you *la virtù* that counsels” (Dante). In this regard, Milton provides no hard evidence for or against her—none “beyond a reasonable doubt.” Interestingly, too, considering his own stance *vis-à-vis* her sex. Here the defense begs Dalila deserving of that doubt. True, in her betrayal, Dalila did show a lapse, but so as well did Samson. In Italian, the word “tradire” means both to “betray” and “draw from.” Did not her action result in “drawing from” it a reinforcement of her own strength, as her cut of his locks, re-grew their roots? Both have paid dues, and both await absolution. Our trust is that in Highest Court insight prevails, our hope, that “Mercy seasons justice.”

And yet, how many have betrayed, yea, killed for love? How many and how often, have sat long hours in darkened halls, uncomfortably seated (likely at great cost) to watch those on stage *pretend* to acts and emotions otherwise abhorred and denied—following with wild applause and stamping of feet? What woman, given the chance, would not gladly throw off her rubies,

abandoning herself with all the devotion of a nun, in hope of being seen from *behind* a pair of eyes—eyes in which she so often sees distrust? (See Balzac, “Passion in the Desert”). Now, in light of Samson’s blindness, Dalila has reason to hope for a new dimension to their relationship, perhaps for a tenderness and shared sympathy which earlier his sight had blocked, and in which, in fact, she feels most in her element. Hear Dalila as she sings (now on *terra firma*), accompanied and directed by Milton himself:

Tho sight be lost,

Life yet hath many solaces, enjoyed

Where other senses want not their delights (lines 914-6)

Compare with, “Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter.”

And is this not the same for “worthy men”—those Romantics of all times? Men too seek recognition for themselves, not just their “goods,” in belief that they *are* their goods. Haven’t the strongest been those who conceived these dramas—those many forms that repeat, like a bass note, and which with living breath they imbued with *life*—against all odds—as *witness* to what they saw and felt? And all in pursuit, however knowingly or not, of that Form, fairest of all (and most elusive), which is Love—which some even call “God”? In those countless icons of St. George that circulate the world over, not one has made clear to me which of the three is the real Dragon.

In closing, all as recorded here is a trial, presuming no more claim to truth than that handed down by *Judges* or set down here by Milton. If the position taken seems somewhat stretched, to fit the case, that too is “but incident...”. In any case, those who dare face, “unlock,” or seek to take upon themselves the “Mystery” of things, do well to remember we are all on stage, appropriately masked to shade our tell-tale eyes, and that this, our play, is still “the thing.”

If there be a moral to this story, the lesson for this reader is— *should* you transgress, and *should* you see an Angel heading toward you, beware. Be not blinded by the light in which it appears, or by the beauty of the words in which it may be clothed. Above all, hearken to the message: “And the Angel of the Lord said unto Manoah, Of all that I Said unto the woman let her beware,” (Judges 13.13). So pause, reflect—then *turn* on that Achilles’ heel—take the money and run! Stop only when in the quiet of your room to count, and safe-keep, lest *against your will*, you too should be consumed in flames of the altar.

Now, with all due respect to Samson’s Agonies, your Honor, the defense here pleads weary. Here, in peace, it rests its case—if only for now.

* * *

On second thought, the reason Samson recoils

at Dalila’s touch is not (or not only) threat of obvious charm, but from some deeper, more unconscious instinct in him, as mirrored in the words of that woman who cried, “*Noli me tangere.*” One recalls that hideous figure in Florence, ruthlessly conceived by Donatello and made to stand, of all places, in the Baptistery. To lessen the impact of his graphic image, a more “tactful” rendering of the subject by Giotto is substituted here as Exhibit A.

In Michelangelo’s own “Creation” (Exhibit B), the reach, of both God and Adam, seems ambiguous, in that each of the figures suggests a “yes,” and “no,” so the hands do not touch. The “touch” here is instead “synapsed.” Eve, within the arm of God, seems held in check (or, in protection?—*check!*). The artist himself, in a letter,

cries "*La mano non mi serve.*" And when asked to write a treatise on art, responds, "the pen cannot even approach one's right intention." This "gap," so "incident to..." the very *stuff* of creativity (*cadenza?*)—is in truth the bane of every artist. Perhaps it was this, and not so much his blindness *per se*, that so tormented Milton, and that underlies the misogyny of a man otherwise of exquisite sensibilities.

We may better understand now too how so many Italian painters, "for whom the visible world exists"—urgent and at hand—have portrayed their Love not as Beatrice or Eve, but as Madonna—with child and with weeping—and with sadness.

Even the ballet, at its best, suggests this gap as a "dance" in which grace equals balance, and in which the duo may never be seen to "kiss." "Bold Lover, never canst thou..." Here one may be almost tempted to wonder, what is so "dark, dark" about that? Except that our pity, unlocked, flies out now to Samson, and to all who would love, "face to face" (though in truth, my own weighs more heavily in support of Dalila). For though "her sins may be forgiven," she remains to this day a marked woman, well deserving of our "pity."

And now, after long absence, we "come down from the Mountain," blinders removed. As we take a closer look at the spectacle around us, we are struck again with pity—and with Terror! We tremble at the Gate—aware, that but for a "y," there remain worlds of differences between "yours" and "ours." We recall the many witnesses brought to bear. Now added to them is heard the voice of that most heroic Sailor of old who, arrived long ago at these straits, urged his men on to "Consider your origin—you were not created to live like brutes but to seek virtue..." (*Inferno*). Now is our time to dig into our roots—dig in our heels. Should those straits loom high for us, shall we waver—look back—and thus lose our prize? Or at

that breach, shall we enjoin all hands—"imitate . . . stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, disguise fair nature..." (*Henry V*) and forge!—and not be deflected, in any way, from our course—mindful, as ever, that there's another side to every story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mila Cason was born in Boston, and grew up in an orphanage. Following an autodidact's education, she earned degrees in art history and library science. She has traveled extensively; worked for some time in the European countries of Germany and Norway; and has three times fallen in love. She presently resides in Weston, Mass., and has been spending time re-reading the ten volumes of Romain Rolland's Jean-Christophe.

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