THE SAGA OF SAMSON

A Double Bill

Sampson Nazaraios, from the Book of Judges
together with

Milton's Samson Agonistes

Adapted, directed and produced by
Patrick Boyde

St John’s College, Cambridge
Old Divinity School Theatre
7.30 pm

21 and 22 February 2018
Special thanks are due to the following, without whose support the production could not have taken place:

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Nathan MacDonald, Andrew Macintosh and Giles Waller contributed the essays in this programme, which you can enjoy before and after the performance.

Gillian Jondorf composed the surtitles, helped by Mary Emerson.

Mark Harrison gave invaluable assistance and advice concerning technical aspects of the visual display.

Sam Motherwell played his usual indispensable role in editing and tweaking the PowerPoint Presentation.

Daniel Anderson modernised Milton's text and prepared the layout of these pages.

James and Liz Willetts will be creating a DVD of the performance.

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The incidental music consists of a dozen variations taken from *Les folies d'espagne* by Marin Marais (1656–1728).
THE PERFORMERS

Sampson Nazaraios

NARRATOR                    Christos Tsirogiannis
SAMPSON                     Reuben Thomas
MANOA                       Patrick Boyde
DALIDA                      Marianna Marcopoulou
MESSENGER / ANGEL           Anthony Bowen

Other parts are played by members of the cast.

Samson Agonistes

SAMSON                      Reuben Thomas
MANOA                       Patrick Boyde
DALILA                      Tricia Peroni
HARAPHA                     Anthony Bowen
PHILISTINE OFFICER          Giles Waller
HEBREW MESSENGER            Malcolm Underwood
CHORUS                      Geoffrey Kirkness
                             Anthony Bowen

Music Performed by
Jon Fistein

Projection synchroniser
Elena Violaris
The Story of Samson in the Bible: its historical and literary background

The story of Samson is found in the Book of Judges. The judges in question were charismatic leaders whose exploits, originally quite independent of each other, belonged to and were recounted within separate tribal areas. A redactor from the time of David, living under the united Israelite monarchy (tenth century BCE), collected these stories and made them into a single larger work. This text viewed the era of the judges retrospectively — and anachronistically — from the standpoint of the later united nation. A still later redactor, the Deuteronomic historian (fifth century BCE), inserted an interpretative, sequential framework according to which God set foreign enemies to attack the nation as a punishment for its wickedness. The providential rise of judges periodically redressed the situation by heroic force — a pattern understood to repeat at forty-year intervals. Alongside Samson, the best known of these judges included Deborah, Gideon and Jephthah.

The stories of the earlier, tenth-century collection present a realistic picture of settlement by groups of Hebrews who had escaped from Egypt in the exodus. These nomadic people moved into the central hill country of Palestine around the thirteenth or twelfth centuries BCE, and lived alongside elements of the indigenous Canaanite and Phoenician populations. Relations between the different ethnic groups were naturally varied and ranged from harmony and intermarriage to open hostility and warfare. It is within such a context that the judges emerged as local tribal leaders.
The judges’ function was limited but immediate: the defence of their people from the aggressive incursions of their neighbours. Consider for example the Midians, camel-riding desert nomads from the South East whose yearly pillaging of the harvests was particularly damaging to the tribal area of Manasseh. Or the Philistines, seafarers originally from the Greek islands of the Mediterranean, who had managed to gain control of important coastal cities (Tyre, Ashkelon, Gaza) through a monopoly of manufacturing weapons. Their eventual dominance in this region of the Danites (the tribe of Samson) gave to it the name ‘Palestine’. Saul’s ascendency over the Philistines was what made him, not a mere judge, but the first king of the united tribes of Israel. This unification was consolidated around one thousand BCE by King David, who with great strategic skill set up his capital in the little hill city of Jerusalem.

Samson was born in the Danite town of Beth-Shemesh on the east side of the coastal plain and in the foothills of the Judean hill country. The Hebrew word שמש Shemesh (cf. Arabic شمس Shams) denotes the sun, and the name of his town may preserve the memory of a temple to the sun there. The hero’s name is derived from the same word; it is שמשון Shimshon in Hebrew, transmitted as Σαμψών in the Septuagint and Samson in the Latin Vulgate. The i-vowel represents one Hebrew tradition of pronunciation, the other has an a-vowel like the Greek and Latin. For this we can compare the two pronunciations in Hebrew of the name: Miriam and Maria(m).

Samson’s birth to a previously barren woman is depicted as miraculous, and his parents were required to bring him up as a Nazirite. This group was devoted (such is the meaning of the term) to the old nomadic, desert ideals of simplicity, honesty and brotherhood. They eschewed all alcoholic drinks and were strict in their dietary habits. The settled Canaanites and Philistines were regarded by them as licentious and corrupted by the settled life of the Sown.

The stories of Samson’s great strength and his exploits need not be recounted in this introductory note. Suffice it to say that there are mythical elements. The secret of his strength, connected to the length of his hair, and his weakness, when it was cut short, has been seen as a personalisation of the sun: its rays long when it is strong at mid-day, and absent when it is low at dawn or dusk. Samson has also been frequently compared with the Greek myths of Heracles/Hercules and his twelve labours. Certainly, the two heroes are credited with killing a lion with their bare hands, and their womanising leads both to their demise. The attachment of fire to foxes’ tails is known to have taken place in the Latin feast of Cerealia; and here we may note that the Philistines’ god, in whose temple Samson was exhibited for the sport of the crowd, was named Dagon — identical to the Hebrew word for ‘corn’.

Andrew Macintosh
Further Reflections on the Historical Background of the Biblical Samson

The Book of Judges contains some of the most surprising and shocking stories in the Bible, which portray the Israelite tribes as a society that is exposed, violent and confused. The period is the antitype of the succeeding United Monarchy, whose kings, David and Solomon, were revered by later generations for establishing an orderly empire. The societal disorder of the pre-monarchic period is attributed by the biblical historians to the people’s neglect of God. The full consequences of the people’s sin are only mitigated by a series of leaders – the judges – whom God periodically raises up to rescue his people Israel. These charismatic individuals bring military victory, but are flawed human beings in one way or another. As the book progresses, these personality flaws seem to become more debilitating, and Israelite society spirals into a vortex of misanthropic suspicion and criminality.

The contrast with the legendary achievements of Israel’s first kings suggests that the history is more than a little schematised. The theological and moral lessons recur throughout the book in a standardised form, forming a cycle of disobedience, punishment by an oppressive nation, the people’s cry to God, and God’s sending of a military saviour. When the judge dies, the cycle begins again. Strip away this theological framework and the book splinters into a number of hero stories localized in various regions from across the southern Levant. The theological framework is no earlier than the sixth century BCE, most of the hero stories, and the traditions behind them, being earlier. Even with the Book of Judges, the story of Samson is something of an outlier. The other stories tell of a single occasion of deliverance, but Samson’s story is told from conception to grave. He leads no army to deliver an oppressed people, instead he kills thousands single-handedly for personal slights. The story occurs towards the end of the book, after the main cycle of deliverer stories has run its course, and may be a rather late addition.

Samson is a Danite, a member of a small tribe settled in the Shephelah, the low-lying hills and valleys that anyone who has ever been driven from Ben Gurion Airport to Jerusalem will have passed through. In ancient times, they sat precariously between the Philistine city states that dominated the coastal plain and the Israelite tribes in the highlands. Readers of the biblical story follow Samson up and down between these two cultural locations. Samson’s prodigious strength – and fatal weakness – comes from his hair. Provided it is not cut he can overpower any human opposition. Samson’s physical vulnerability indexes his moral failing, his weakness for foreign women. The threat of foreign women is an anxiety to many biblical writers, especially those who wrote during the Persian period (538–332 BCE). But the story of Samson communicates its moralistic message in a far from prudish manner. Samson’s stag-party, for example, is a boorish affair. Samson’s riddle ‘Out of the eater came something to eat, out of the strong came something sweet’ is up there with Bilbo’s ‘What’s in my pocket?’ as a solvable riddle, if the answer really is a lion that he killed on one of his journeys; but it requires no mastery of Hebrew to imagine other, more vulgar answers in keeping with a stag-party. And it is not the end of Samson’s crude riddling. When the groomsmen discover the answer from Samson’s betrothed, he accuses them of ‘ploughing with my heifer’. It is this heady mix of violence and the vulgar, of vigour and vulnerability, that makes Samson’s life such a perennial favourite amongst artists, writers and dramatists through the ages.

Nathan MacDonald
A note on the images projected during the performances

Most of the images used to illustrate Milton’s tragedy are taken, uncontroversially, from the art of his own time, with pride of place going to the paintings of Rembrandt.

It has proved impossible to find a single source of illustrations that would match the totally different world of the Book of Judges. But the page reproduced below (from a fifteenth-century re-telling of the story (based on Chaucer’s Monk’s Tale), in John Lydgate’s The Fall of Princes, captures to perfection the naïvety and directness of the biblical narrative.
Samson Through the Ages

In the centuries since the Septuagint translation of Judges, Samson has played many parts: a ‘type’ of Christ, a wily hero undone by his unchastity, an archetypal sufferer, a liberating national hero, a model tragic protagonist, a Nazirite paragon of piety, and a wayward but redeemed penitent. Milton’s drama draws on all these types and traditions in the presentation of its central character, as becomes apparent in Samson’s rumination on his misdeeds, his victories and mistreatments.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, he appears among the figures of outstanding faith, ‘Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, … David and Samuel and the prophets — who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight’ (11:32-34), nearly all of which might be claimed by Samson himself. For the first-century Jewish historian Josephus, Samson was a devout spiritual exemplar; and this interpretation was developed by the Church Fathers and used as an admonishment to chastity (given his undoing by Delilah), or in allegorical readings in which he is a ‘type’ or prefiguration of Christ. St Augustine (De Civitate Dei XVIII.19) notes the parallel with the great classical lion-slayer Hercules.

After Boccaccio’s De casibus virorum illustrium, Samson becomes, as he was to be for Milton, a biblical model for tragedy. Most notably in Chaucer’s ‘Monk’s Prologue and Tale’, Samson appears as a unifying figure, a perfect tragic protagonist. In the Prologue, the tragic hero is one who has

...yfallen out of heigh degree
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.

while in the Tale, Samson’s fate is lamented with the words

Now maystow wepen with thyne eyen blynde,
Sith thou fro wele art falle in wrecchednesse!

In George Herbert’s ‘Sunday’, Sampson appears again as a type of Christ, mightily bearing away the Philistine ‘doores’ as

Christ’s hands, though nail’d, wrought our salvation,
And did unhinge that day.

A playful reference, perhaps, to the open gate of heaven in the fifth stanza of Herbert’s poem, and an even more playful Samsonite allusion to the load-bearing pillars of the Philistine temple, which in the fourth stanza stand for the boundaries of the weekly cycle of activity:

Sundaies the pillars are,
On which heav’ns palace arched lies

No English treatment was to match Milton’s, however, and Samson was not a figure for major literary reflection again until D.H. Lawrence’s ‘Samson and Delilah’.

Giles Waller
Chaucer, ‘The Monk's Tale’, lines 127-206

Loo Sampson / which that was Annuciat
By Angel / longe er his Natiuitee
And was / to god almyghty consecrat
And stood in noblesse / whil he myghte see

Was neuere / swich another as was hee
To spoke of strengthe / and ther-with hardynesse
But to his wyues / toolde he his secree
Thurgh which / he slow hym self / for wrecchednesse
Sampson / this noble almyghty Champion
With-outen wepene / saue his handes tweyne
Toward his weddyng walkynge by the weye
His false wyf / koude hym so plese and preye
Vn-to hise foos / his consel gian bivreye
And hym forsook. and took another newe
Thre hundred foxes / took Sampson for Ire
And alle hir tayles / he togydre bond
And sette the foxes tayles / alle on fire
ffor he / on euery tayl / had knyt a brond

And they brende / alle the cornes in that lond
And alle hire Olyueres / and vynes eke
A thousand men / he slow eek with his hond
And hadde no wepene / but an Asses cheke

When they were slayn / so thursted hym / that he
Was wel ny lorn / for which he gan to preye
That god wolde / on his peyne han som pitee
And sende hym drynke / or elles moste he deye
And of this asses cheke / that was dreye
Out of a wang tooth / sprang anon a welle
Of which he drank anon / shortly to seye
Thus heelpe hym god / as Iudicum can telle

By verray force / at Gazan / on a nyght
Maugree Philistiens of that Citee
The gates of the toun / he hath vp plyght
And on his bak. ycaryed hem hath hee

Hye on an hill / þat men myghte hem see
O noble almyghty Sampson / lief and deere
Had thou nat toold / to wommen thy secree
In all this world / ne hadde been thy peere

This Sampson / neuere Ciser drank ne wyn
Ne on his heed / cam rasour noon ne sheere
By precept of the Messager diuyn
ffor alle hise strengths / in his heeres weere

And fully twenty wynter yeer by yeere
He / hadde of Israel the governance
But soone / shal he wepe many a teere
ffor wommen / shal hym bryngen to meschance

Vn-to his lemmans Dalida he tolde
That in hise heiris / al his strengthe lay
And falsly to hise foomen / she hym solde
And slepyng in hir barm / vp-on a day

She made to clippe / or shere / his heres away
And made hise foomen / al this craft espyen
And when þat they / hym fould in this array
They bounde hym faste / and putten out his eyen

But er his heer/ were clipped or yshaue
Ther was no boond / with which men myghte him
bynde
But now is he / in prison in a Caue
Where as they made hym / at the Queerne grynde

O noble Sampson / strongest of mankynde
O whilom / Iuge in glorie and in richesse
Now maystow wepen / with thyne eyen blynde
Sith thou fro wele / art falle in wrecchednesse

The ende of this caytyf was as I shal seye
Hise foomen / made a feeste vp on a day
And made hym as a fool / biforn hem pleye
And this was / in a temple of greet array

But atte laste / he made a foul affray
ffor he / the pilers shook / and made hem falle
And doun fil Temple and al / and ther it lay
And slow hym self / and eek his foomen alle

This is to seyn the Prynces euerichoon
And eek / thre thousand bodyes were ther slayn
With fallynge / of the grete Temple of stoon
Of Sampson / now wol I na moore sayn

Beth war / by this ensample oold and playn
That no men / telle hir conseil til hir wyues
Of swich thynge as they wolde han secre eayn
If þat it touche / hir lymes or hir lyues.
Who’s who?

Anthony Bowen is a former Orator of the University and Emeritus Fellow of Jesus College. He has been busy with Greek plays since his schooldays; and he took the role of Satan in the dramatisation in this theatre of Milton’s *Paradise Regained* in 2016.

Patrick Boyde, Emeritus Professor of Italian, has had the pleasure of semi-staging a series of dramatic poems (or episodes from epics) in English, French, Latin and Greek from 2002 to 2017.

Jon Fistein (cello) read medicine at Jesus College, and then held an Imperial scholarship at the Royal College of Music. He is much in demand as a chamber and session musician. You can read more about him here: www.jonfisteincellist.com

Gillian Jondorf is a modern linguist who has composed the surtitles for all the Ancient Greek semi-staged productions in this theatre.

Geoffrey Kirkeness read English at Fitzwilliam College and has acted in *Agamemnon* and *The Frogs* in the Triennial Greek Plays at the Arts Theatre. He is currently finishing a non-academic work ‘The Fanatic, or a study in terrorism’.

Marianna Marcopoulou grew up in Athens and is in her first year reading Classics at Homerton, finding a particular affinity with classical philosophy.

Sam Motherwell has drawn the images for many previous productions in this theatre. He is past President of the Cambridge Drawing Society and works in pen and ink, collage and linocut, often on Mill Road subjects.
Tricia PERONI studied literature and librarianship in Aberystwyth, drama in Manchester, and later for an MA in Contemporary Theatre at Lancaster. She has performed the role of Electra in *The Flies*, has acted in many major productions both classical and modern, and directed others.

Reuben THOMAS was a chorister, volunteer, choral scholar and lay clerk in the Chapel choir between 1982 and 2003. He is now a lay clerk at Westminster Cathedral, and devotes his spare time to miscellaneous techno-musico-literary pursuits.

Christos TSIROGIANNIS took his PhD from Hughes Hall. He is a Greek forensic archaeologist specialising in the research and repatriation of illicit antiquities.

Malcolm UNDERWOOD is a historian and biographer of Lady Margaret Beaufort. He was College Archivist from 1974 to 2012. He appeared in several principal acting roles in amateur theatre in the 1990s and 2000s.

Elena VIOLARIS is studying for an MPhil in English at St John's College. She is particularly interested in ideas of infinity and superlatives in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*.

Giles WALLER is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Faculty of Divinity. His first degree was in Theology at Peterhouse. His doctoral thesis was on theology and the tragic, and he is currently writing a book on ‘tragic theology’.

James WILLETTS used to be Principal Teacher of Classics at Ardrossan Academy and is now a documentary film maker. He will be filming the performance.

Liz WILLETTS is a writer. She has a PhD in English Literature. She assists with the photography and filming.
‘Old men should be explorers’

These performances of the *Saga of Samson* are the latest in a series of semi-staged productions which have kept me busy since my retirement. I have had to learn a lot in the past fifteen years – how to understand and pronounce Ancient Greek; how to use, creatively, the high-tech resources; how to coach and inspire actors; how to persuade audiences to come along to a reading aloud of dense and complex texts in four different languages (none of them Italian). But I have of course been re-deploying my previous knowledge and skills (acquired through the teaching of Dante and Italian Narrative Art); and there are some ‘red strands’ running the whole length of the ‘cable’.

The plays are all abridgements of rarely performed verse-dramas or dramatisations of episodes in classical epics or books of the Bible. All have been enhanced by live music and illuminated by appropriate images. The meaning has always been made crystal-clear by specially composed surtitles, or (as tonight), by the projection of the English words.

In every case the focus has been on the language of a major text that is to be enjoyed on its own terms and for its own sake, just like a symphony. Every directorial choice is intended to heighten the impact of the Word, to rouse it from its hibernation on the page, to bring it from potency to act. There are two underlying obsessions; first, my conviction – shared with Dante – that the essence of poetry lies in its verbal music (armonia, or dolcezza), which is why it does not survive translation: and, second, that a good reading depends on deep understanding and conveys a loving interpretation – which it does more effectively than any written commentary. (And, yes, there is also a thin ‘black thread’ of muted protest against the cult of the Director in the modern theatre and against the dominance of Theory in the teaching of literature at our universities.)

**Patrick Boyde**

**Alphabetical table of the principal works semi-staged between 2002 and 2017**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Achilles: The End of his Wrath</em></td>
<td>Homer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Aeneas I: Troiae Tutamen</em></td>
<td>Homer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Aeneas II: Teucrorum Spes</em></td>
<td>Virgil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ajax</em></td>
<td>Sophocles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Anticleia, Calypso, Circe, Nausicaea</em></td>
<td>Homer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Apocalypse</em></td>
<td>New Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Borderers, The</em></td>
<td>Wordsworth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Job: Trial by Ordeal</em></td>
<td>Book of Job (Septuagint)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Manfrèd</em></td>
<td>Byron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gospel of Mark, The</em></td>
<td>New Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Oedipus at Colonus</em></td>
<td>Sophocles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Paradise Regained</em></td>
<td>Milton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Penelope</em></td>
<td>Homer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Persephone and Demeter</em></td>
<td>Homeric Hymn and Ovid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Prometheus Bound</em></td>
<td>Aeschylus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Prometheus Unbound</em></td>
<td>Shelley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pulchérie</em></td>
<td>Corneille</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Two Kinsmen from Lycia</em></td>
<td>Homer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Two Kinsmen from Thebes</em></td>
<td>Shakespeare</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>