

**MILTON'S SAMSON
AGONISTES
AND LYCIDAS**

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Milton's Samson Agonistes and Lycidas by John Hunter

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JOHN HUNTER

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AND

LYCIDAS.

WITH

NUMEROUS ILLUSTRATIVE NOTES

ETC.

ADAPTED FOR USE IN TRAINING COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS.

BY THE

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PREFACE.

THE *Samson Agonistes* was, in all probability, the last poem of any considerable length which Milton wrote; and it seems equally probable that the *Lycidas* was the latest of his juvenile poems. This annotated edition of these works is published as a sequel to the similar editions of *Paradise Lost*, Books I. and II., and *Comus*, *L'Allegro*, and *Il Penseroso*; and will, it is hoped, be as favourably received.

We have elsewhere observed that, on account of the long interval between the composition of Milton's juvenile poems and that of his *Paradise Lost*, he is both an ancient and a modern poet. In the present volume he will be found to manifest each of these characters, *Lycidas* having been written in 1637, and *Samson Agonistes* in 1671.

In our notes on the latter poem, which we have placed first on account of its length, it will be seen that we have given a great amount of grammatical illustration. In this department we have endeavoured to render useful service to those candidates for public examination who may be required to show skill in analysing the grammatical structure of Milton's poetry; for nowhere is the utterance of his muse more involved and elliptical, nowhere does it present

greater difficulty for the application of the principles and rules of English grammar, than in the *Samson Agonistes*. Several passages which on this account, we think, have hitherto been misapprehended, will, it is hoped, be found here correctly interpreted.

REMARKS OF VARIOUS AUTHORS
ON
MILTON'S SAMSON AGONISTES.

'It is required by Aristotle to the perfection of a tragedy, and is equally necessary to every species of regular composition, that it should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. "The beginning," says he, "is that which has nothing necessarily previous, but to which that which follows is naturally consequent; the end, on the contrary, is that which by necessity, or at least according to the common course of things, succeeds something else, but which implies nothing consequent to itself; the middle is connected on one side to something that naturally goes before, and on the other to something that naturally follows it."

'The tragedy of *Samson Agonistes* has been celebrated as the second work of the great author of *Paradise Lost*, and opposed with all the confidence of triumph to the dramatic performances of other nations. It contains, indeed, just sentiments, maxims of wisdom, and oracles of piety, and many passages written with the ancient spirit of choral poetry, in which there is a just and pleasing mixture of Seneca's moral declamation with the wild enthusiasm of the Greek writers. It is therefore worthy of examination, whether a performance, thus illuminated with genius and enriched with learning, is composed according to the indispensable laws of Aristotelian criticism; and, omitting at present all other considerations, whether it exhibits a beginning, a middle, and an end.

'The beginning is undoubtedly beautiful and proper, opening with a graceful abruptness, and proceeding naturally to a mournful recital of facts necessary to be known. The soliloquy of Samson is interrupted by a Chorus, or company of men of his own tribe, who condole his miseries, extenuate his fault, and conclude with a solemn vindication of Divine Justice. So that, at the conclusion of the first act, there is no design laid, no discovery made, nor any disposition formed towards the subsequent event.

'In the second act, Manoah, the father of Samson, comes to seek his son; and, being shown him by the Chorus, breaks out into lamentations of his misery, and comparisons of his present with his former state; representing to him the ignominy which his religion suffers by the festival this day celebrated in honour of Dagon, to whom the idolaters ascribed his overthrow. Samson, touched with the reproach, makes a reply equally penitential and pious, which his father considers as the effusion of prophetic confidence.

'This part of the dialogue, as it might tend to animate or exasperate Samson, cannot, I think, be censured as wholly superfluous; but the succeeding dispute, in which Samson contends to die, and which his father breaks off, that he may go to solicit his release, is only valuable for its own beauties, and has no tendency to introduce any thing that follows it.

'The next event of the drama is the arrival of Dalila, with all her graces, artifices, and allurements. This produces a dialogue, in a very high degree elegant and instructive, from which she retires, after she has exhausted her persuasions, and is no more seen or heard of; nor has her visit any effect but that of raising the character of Samson.

'In the fourth act enters Harapha, the giant of Gath, whose name had never been mentioned before, and who has now no other motive of coming than to see the man whose strength and actions are so loudly celebrated. Samson challenges him to the combat; and, after an interchange of reproaches, elevated by repeated defiance on one side, and embittered by contemptuous insults on the other, Harapha retires; we then hear it determined by Samson and the Chorus that no consequence, good or bad, will proceed from their interview.

'At last, in the fifth act, appears a messenger from the lords assembled at the festival of Dagon, with a summons by which Samson is required to come and entertain them with some proof of his strength. Samson, after a short expostulation, dismisses him with a firm and absolute refusal; but during the absence of the messenger, having a while defended the propriety of his conduct, he at last declares himself moved by a secret impulse to comply, and utters some dark presages of a great event to be brought to pass by his agency, under the direction of Providence. While Samson is conducted off by the messenger, his father returns with hopes of success in his solicitation, upon which he confers with the Chorus till their dialogue is interrupted, first by a shout of triumph, and afterwards by screams of horror and agony. As they stand deliberating where they shall be secure, a man who had been present at the show enters, and relates how Samson, having prevailed on his guide to suffer him to lean against the main pillars of the theatrical edifice, tore down the roof upon the spectators and himself. This is undoubtedly a just and regular catastrophe; and the poem therefore has a beginning and an end which Aristotle himself could not have disapproved; but it must be allowed to want a middle, since nothing passes between the first act and the last, that either hastens or delays the death of Samson. The whole drama, if its superfluities were cut off, would scarcely fill a single act; yet this is the tragedy which ignorance has admired, and bigotry applauded.

'The versification is in the dialogue much more smooth and harmonious than in the parts allotted to the Chorus, which are often so harsh and dissonant, as scarce to preserve, whether the lines end with or without rhymes, any appearance of metrical regularity.'—JOHNSON'S *Rambler*.

'When I remarked that Jonson, in his comedy of *The Fox*, was a close copier of the ancients, it occurred to me to say something upon the celebrated drama of *Samson Agonistes*; which, though less beholden to the Greek poets in its dialogue than the comedy above mentioned, is in all other particulars as complete an imitation of the Ancient Tragedy as the distance of times and the difference of languages will admit of.