

# Comparing female figures in samson agonistes and the aeneid



In the political hierarchy depicted by Milton and Virgil, power rightly belongs in the hands of a man, not a woman. During the times when men are the sole leaders of the nation, a woman's possession of power and influence is viewed as unnatural and dangerous to the well-being of a nation. Women, as portrayed in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* and Virgil's *The Aeneid* are regarded as temptresses, deceitful creatures cunning in their ways to beguile men. Milton's text quotes, "Therefore God's universal Law / Gave to the man despotic power / Over his female in due awe" (SA 1053-5). By exposing women's vulnerability to their whims and irrational passions, Milton and Virgil represent their female figures as a source of man's destruction and as wicked temptations that man must resist in order to build an uncorrupt and great nation. Dalila is the epitome of the deceitful woman in *Samson Agonistes*, as she abets the downfall of the text's hero, her husband Samson. Samson introduces her as a deceitful Concubine who shone like a tame Wether, all my precious fleece, Then turn'd me out ridiculous, despoil'd, Shav'n, and disarm'd among my enemies. (537-40) In this metaphor, Samson is a helpless lamb subject to the mercilessness of Dalila, who strips Samson of his strength and feeds him to his enemies once she learns his secret. As a consequence, Israel remains oppressed by the Philistines while Samson is captive under the Philistines because of Dalila. For this betrayal, Dalila earns the vindictive epithets, "specious monster" and "pois'nous bosom snake." A woman's abuse of her power over a man in his hour of weakness is mirrored in Dalila as she is shown taking advantage of Samson's loss of his strength. Once a woman makes a man succumb to her, she feels empowered to try her tricks again. Evidence to this claim is Dalila's cunning strategies to once again bewitch Samson. Dalila appeals to Samson as she persistently tempts

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him with different excuses. First, she attempts to neutralize her sins by highlighting Samson's weakness as the main cause for his current abject state. As a rhetorical question, she asks him, " Was it not weakness also to make known...Wherein consisted all thy strength and safety?" (778-80), and follows with, " To what I did thou show'dst me first the way" (781) as an indirect accusation of Samson. On this ground, Dalila tries to equalize herself with Samson, showing that they both acted on their own weaknesses.

Playing different roles also allows Dalila to weave her tricks into Samson. She plays the vulnerable wife needy for her husband when she explains that her reason for stripping Samson of his strength was to prevent him from leaving her as he left his first wife at Timna. When that excuse fails, Dalila then plays the virtuous woman doing her duty to her people and to Dagon. She justifies her betrayal as a rescue mission to save her people from the " dishonourer of Dagon" (861), for Samson slaughtered thousands of Philistine men. An attempted role reversal occurs as Dalila makes Samson the oppressor and attempts to act as the liberator, for she preaches, " to the public good / Private respects must yield" (867-8). Finally, she plays the caring wife, whose " conjugal affection" (739) prompts her to call him again to her. This final temptation, however, Samson resists, for he is more perceptive now than before of her tactics: " How cunningly the sorceress displays / Her own transgressions, to upbraid me mine!" (819-20). Despite the numerous temptations that a woman like Dalila presents, it is the duty of a man like Samson to obstinately see through the multiplicity of her guiles and avoid her traps. Through Samson's constant resistance of Dalila, Milton proves that man gains true freedom once he thwarts woman's spell-binding oppressions.

To be ruled by a woman, as represented in the text, is a sign of weakness  
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and a result of woman's tricks. To support this claim, the chorus tells Samson, "Tax not divine disposal, wisest Men / Have err'd, and by bad Women been deceived; / And shall again, pretend they ne'er so wise" (210-3). The text further emphasizes the degraded state of man under a woman's power by comparing Samson's previous glory with his current bondage. Referring to the days before Samson's marriage to Dalila, the chorus describes Samson as "That heroic, that Renown'd / Irresistible Samson? whom unarm'd / No strength of man, or fiercest wild beast could withstand" (125-7). Now, Samson resides in an extremely opposite state; he is the slave of his enemies, the Philistines, Dalila's people, for he previously could not escape Dalila's spells: "But foul effeminacy held me yoked / Her bond-slave" (410-1). Samson admits this as a weakness when he accepts responsibility for the outcome of his actions. He concedes, "Of what I now suffer / She was not the prime cause, but I myself, Who vanquish'd with a peal of words (O weakness!) / Gave up my fort of silence to a Woman. (233-6) But when the chorus blames Dalila instead and calls this "her stain not his" (325), the text broaches the concept of original sin. Because Eve's consumption of the forbidden fruit consequently cursed women to bear the original sin, the blame is wholly bestowed upon Dalila. The text uses Dalila to symbolize women as tools of destruction. Upon Dalila's entrance, the chorus exclaims, "But who is this, what thing of Sea or Land? / Female of sex it seems" (710-1). By describing Dalila as an excessively adorned ship, this metaphor presents the landing ship as a symbol of the state's destruction. She is dressed ornately as if for war, "With all her bravery on, and tackle trim" (717), and her "Amber scent of odorous perfume" (720) conceal the stench of her crime-ridden trail. Characterizing this ship as female implies woman's natural

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tendency to bear destruction like she does children. Pronouns in the metaphor calling Dalila a “ thing” and “ it” are derogatory and convey the text’s negative view of the female sex. Samson also categorizes Dalila with all women as untrue when he snaps, “ Out, out Hyaena; these are thy wonted arts, / And arts of every woman false like thee, / To break all faith, all vows, deceive, betray” (738-50). Samson further attests to the claim that woman’s purpose on earth is to destroy man by stating, “ God sent her to debase me” (999). This defies the Biblical teaching, “ Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands” (King James Bible, 1 Pet. 3. 1), which stresses that a good wife is gentle, submissive, and respectful to her husband. The Bible also teaches husbands to give “ honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel” (King James Bible, 1 Pet. 3. 7), and thus acknowledges women as the weaker sex. Women who strive to defy this hierarchy are thus portrayed as created to naturally deceive and to destroy. The Aeneid exhibits a similar view by demonstrating the tendency of its female characters to hinder the male protagonist, Aeneas, from reaching Latium to establish the destined future walls of Rome. Juno is one of Aeneas’s main obstacles in his path to follow his fate. Her hatred towards the Trojans combined with her powers as a goddess allow her to continually delay Aeneas. She requests Aeolus to send the winds to scatter the crew of Aeneas along the sea and she sends Allecto to incite war between the Trojans and the Latins. Allecto also exemplifies the destructive female; she is a creature from Hell hated by her father and her sisters, for she is associated with malice. Juno summons her for this main reason, “ You have the power: when brothers love each other / You know the way to arm them, set them fighting” (Book VII, 352-3). Queen Amata’s infection by Allecto spurs her to a

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mad frenzy, in which she rounds the Latin women against Lavinia's fated betrothal to Aeneas. Here, Queen Amata transforms into a wild beast, "her eyes are stained and bloodshot" (Book VII, 426), and now the women praise Mars instead of Bacchus. These actions, all involving female figures, prevent Aeneas from attaining his destiny with ease. Throughout *The Aeneid*, there lies the motif in which a woman is the cause of war. In addition to the supernatural aids of war by such figures as Juno, *The Aeneid* mentions women who, although they did not actively assist in fanning the flames of war, are fated to cause destruction. Lavinia, for example, "would be glorious, / They said, in fame and fortune, but the people / were doomed, on her account, to war" (Book VII, 75-7). This likens Lavinia to Helen, who was the cause of the Trojan War. Though Lavinia and Helen can be considered as innocent bystanders, they symbolize the traps that man can fall into when he is not careful in his involvement with a woman. A key female figure is Dido, who represents the temptress, the female threat to Aeneas's destiny, and the unfortunate leader overcome by a dangerous irrational passion. Book I introduces Dido as a powerful, strong woman through the Homeric simile that compares her to the goddess Diana. "She came to the temple / With a great train, all majesty, all beauty, / As . . . Diana leads her bands of dancers" (521-5). *The Aeneid* begins its depiction of Dido as a just leader: "She took her throne, a giver of law and justice, / A fair partitioner of toil and duty" (Book I, 523-4). Yet through a close inspection of the line narrating when the Tyrians "Went sailing, with a woman for a captain" (Book I, 380), we sense a condescending voice. The addition of "with a woman for a captain" to the statement adds a sense of uneasiness, as if it is unusual for a woman to lead, and therefore this is a detail which must not be omitted. This <https://assignbuster.com/comparing-female-figures-in-samson-agonistes-and-the-aeneid/>

reveals the doubts that people held against women in power. Book IV then transforms Dido into one consumed by the fire of irrational passion for Aeneas, the fire that is synonymous with the fire of war and destruction. The beginning of Book IV is rife with images of fire, such as Dido's "burning heart" and the "flame" of passion. Fire destroys Dido's rationale and her ability to think clearly, just as the fires of war ravage towns, causing great nations to crumble to ashes. Similarly, Dido poses a threat to the building of the Roman Empire as she tempts and begs Aeneas to stay with her. The wounded deer and Maenad similes convey Dido's vulnerability, as a woman, to these dangerous passions, for "Dido is unconcerned with fame, with reputation. / With how it [marriage] seems to others" (Book IV, 165-6). Mercury must appear to Aeneas twice to remind him to leave. He warns, "Shove off, be gone! A shifty, fickle object / is woman, always" (601-2). Unlike Dido, Aeneas is made to yield not to his whims, but to Fate. "Pius Aeneas," the fundamental epithet in the Latin text of *The Aeneid*, portrays loyalty, beauty, duty, and obedience to destiny. This is evident in Aeneas's yielding to fate at the end of Book II where he declares, "I gave it up" (816). Aeneas must be obstinate in his path, no matter what the cost, in order to build a great empire. When Dido appeals to him, Jupiter deliberately implants adamancy in the will of Aeneas. "And still - the gods give orders, he obeys them" (Book IV, 423). Aeneas and King Latinus are described by the similes of a deep-rooted tree and a steadfast sea-rock, respectively, for both must be unmoving amidst the crisis and madness that overcomes the women. The gods make the kingly figures in the text hard, contrary to the fickleness and susceptibility intended for the female figures. Although women are portrayed as the inferior sex, they play key roles in the development of the plots and of <https://assignbuster.com/comparing-female-figures-in-samson-agonistes-and-the-aeneid/>

the heroes of the texts. They serve as obstacles to the success of the male protagonists through their use of any power allotted to them. The disorder that arises when women attempt dominion is evident in the actions of Dalila, Juno, and Dido; they exemplify the cause of a disrupted hierarchy of male dominance. Dalila's exposure of Samson's weakness, Juno's fate-delaying tactics, and Dido's tempting offers all test the strengths and values of men. By creating a victory out of resisting woman's temptations for the male protagonists, *Samson Agonistes* and *The Aeneid* depict women as forces that must not be in control, but rather forces that must be controlled.