

# CEAMAG Journal

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Vietnam

**MELISSA GREEN-MOORE**

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Farmer's Choice

**CHARLES EWERS**

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Wit and Malice in *The Man of Mode*

**GABRIELA VLAHOVICI-JONES**

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The Foolish Professor

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Critical Thinking, Mammalian Learning Rituals,  
and Remedial College Reading:

A Collaborative Response

**KAY WALTER AND KATHY ANDERSON**

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The Psychology of "Samson Agonistes" and  
God's Role in Terrorism

**MELISSA GREEN-MOORE**

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*CEAMAGazine*, the peer-reviewed journal of the College English Association-Middle Atlantic Group, appears once a year and publishes studies based on writing research, discussions of pedagogy, literary criticism, cultural criticism, and personal essays concerned with the teaching of English. We will also consider for publication book reviews and poems and short fiction related to literature or teaching. Submissions, preferably limited to between 3000 and 5000 words (except book reviews, which should be limited to 2500 words or fewer) and prepared in accordance with the most recent MLA style manual, should be emailed as a Word document to David Kaloustian, Department of English and Modern Languages, Bowie State University, at [dkaloustian@bowiestate.edu](mailto:dkaloustian@bowiestate.edu). The annual deadline for submissions for March publication is October 15.

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## Vietnam

by Melissa Green-Moore

“Bad company, and I can’t deny; Bad company, ‘til the day I die”—Bad Company

Nam was my father’s mistress.  
She joined us a lot in the early years,  
    unbeknownst to my mother.

She was our secret,  
    emerging once we anchored,  
    born on the slick, oily, undulations  
    of the incoming tide.

I would watch the memory of her claim him:  
    the vacant stare; the pursed lips; the clenched, pulsing jaw; the  
    trembling hands.

I would let his insufficient, fake smile  
    and reassuring pat on the head be enough  
    to ensure my silence  
    even though I did not understand the words,  
    “It’s just Nam.”

At 6, I awoke suddenly in my bedroom in a severe thunderstorm.  
I could sense that I was not alone.

The flashes of lightning gleamed off the survival knife’s blade,  
    illuminating the wild whites of his eyes.

Something in me recognized this as my father, crouching in the  
    corner.

And I knew why he was there.

I mustered my small voice, “Daddy, Nam is not here. It’s ok.  
    You can sleep.”

The reaction was instantaneous and unexpected.

He was at my bedside, still crouching, covering my mouth with  
    his large, calloused hand,  
    scanning the room wildly.

I continued to try to speak, my voice muffled by his palm, “Nam  
    is not here. I promise.”

## VIETNAM

I touched his hair with my tiny fingers, sliding them down to rest  
on his sweat-covered cheek.

I felt him come back to himself, his body sagging in relief.

The knife disappeared.

He said nothing as he stood up and leaned over to kiss me on the  
forehead.

He left as silently as I imagined he had come.

Nam was not satisfied with flashbacks;

the possessive bitch kept him from truly living.

He would not fly on an airplane.

In an argument once, because he would not fly to Arizona to see  
me, he told me how his entire company had made the initial,  
22-hour flight in the belly of a cargo plane  
in plastic lounge chairs.

I tried to imagine.

He told me, when he finally came home, he knelt and kissed  
American soil,  
and vowed never to fly again.

He kept his promise,  
and I hated her for it.

Nam continued to dominate our lives.

His terrible, uncontrollable rage directed at almost everyone and  
everything—except me.

The odd phone call from him about going to a war movie that  
caused a psychotic break.

His self-inflicted isolation after his failed marriage to my mother.  
His nickname at the local bar, “Don’t touch me Dave.”

There was never any explanation.

For some things, I learned, there are no words.

Nam also haunted his dreams.

He had no respite from her torment, even in sleep.

In my 30’s, I awoke to his screams while he was visiting me.

We spent the rest of the night sitting on the living room floor  
together, drinking Coors Light.

I didn’t ask.

I had long become familiar with the silence that followed.

It surprised me when he spoke.

“You know why I never fly?”

Somehow, I knew not to speak; I merely shook my head.  
The familiar possession came over him, except this one was  
accompanied by tears.  
For the first time, I was afraid of what I didn't know.

He told me the truth that night, how his best friend and he were  
sitting on the plane to fly home, how the plane had taken off,  
and they were talking about having made it out, alive.  
“And then,” his voice broke, “his blood and brains were all over  
me, and he slumped over onto my shoulder.”  
Ground fire had apparently pierced the body of the plane.  
The confession was not finished.  
“He had a family,” Dad said, “a son who was born while he was  
at war whom he never got to meet.”  
“It should have been me,” he said, shaking his head.  
And, to answer my perplexed look,  
“We switched seats because he wanted the inside.”

A few years later, Nam claimed him as well  
when my father shot himself to death.  
His room still cluttered with her memorabilia.  
Her name still on his cold lips.  
It was as if he never left,  
and I had never existed.



## Farmer's Choice

By Charles Ewers

1.

When I go to lunch at Bob Evans, I almost invariably order my favorite breakfast, the Farmer's Choice. Available all day, as are all breakfast items at Bob Evans, this meal is so big that it comes on two plates, and, true to its name, the Farmer's Choice requires the diner to make choices: How do you want your two eggs cooked? (I choose over easy.) Do you want pancakes, waffles, or French toast? (French toast); Bacon or sausage? (sausage); Links or patties? (patties); Hash browns or home fries? (home fries). It's absolutely delicious, and I have no trouble eating it all, to the wonderment of my colleague Ralph, who usually orders the smallest, plainest burger on the menu and still winds up taking half of it home in a box.

Choices have been made even before the menu arrives. One, of course, is to go to Bob Evans at all instead of the nice little Italian-Mexican restaurant on Main Street, or the western-themed place with good pulled pork whose sign promises "Fine Dinning," or maybe the local sports bar with many, many TV's, huge portions, and the world's slowest service. It's another choice to go out for lunch and gorge ourselves at *any* of these restaurants, working as we do at a university in the heart of Appalachia, where some of our neighbors undoubtedly save up for weeks to afford a meal at the all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet.

And as a former farmer and agricultural journalist, for whom animal welfare was and is very important, choosing to go to any of these places can start me on a guilt trip if I let it. The Bob Evans website (just Google "bob," and it's the first choice that pops up) tells us that they "believe in a holistic approach to animal well-being," and they even have an "animal well-being advisory committee" composed of three people with Ph.D.'s. I know it's cynical, but I keep thinking of the scientists hired by tobacco companies to study the effects of cigarette smoking or the ones hired by fossil-fuel producers to study climate change, and, when it comes down to actually choosing to require their

suppliers to use such humane practices as cage-free housing for laying hens or controlled-atmosphere stunning, the Bob Evans folks demur, concluding that “Many important questions remain unexamined and unanswered.” As for me, I have to admit that eating the Farmer’s Choice has consequences for more than my waistline.

2.

Farmers themselves face a lot of choices, ranging from what crops to grow to how to grow and market them, and, on a more basic level, whether or not to farm at all. When my wife and I were newly married, we made the decision to take up farming in Wisconsin. Theo had grown up on a farm but hadn’t really had much to do with running it, and my only agricultural experience was from a summer job as a dollar-an-hour worker at a commercial azalea nursery and a short-lived back-to-the-land fiasco in West Virginia with some college friends just after we graduated. All of my recent work experience was as a high school English teacher. So we needed to learn about real farming literally from the ground up. I read all I could (Gene Logsdon and Ken Kern were the most helpful writers; Wendell Berry and Helen Nearing and, again, Gene Logsdon the most inspirational) and, for all practical purposes, apprenticed myself to our neighbor, dairy farmer Gordon Riddle. I learned a lot from the books, but much more in the few months I hauled manure and disked fields for Mr. Riddle. (He was such a good farmer, and I did so many dumb things as a rank beginner that I could never bring myself to call him “Gordon.”) I learned what some of the choices were for a farmer and, more importantly, the likely consequences of those choices.

On the severely run-down farm that Theo and I bought from its non-resident owner when he apparently became interested in a different hobby, some of the choices were already made for us. We couldn’t do dairy because we didn’t have enough tillable land to grow all of the feed even a small herd would require, and buying feed was out of the question budget-wise. And we couldn’t “just farm” anyway because we had a mortgage and college loans, so both of us needed steady paychecks to make ends meet. But we could still decide what to grow and how, and we chose a combination of beef cattle and semi-organic produce. Running beef cattle was an easy choice

because we had ample pasture land, some of which we rented to our neighbor and good friend Virgil, who never had any money but always had Angus-Holstein cross cattle to pay instead of cash for pasture rent. Even that choice had consequences, though, because it meant I had to rebuild miles of fence that the previous owner had let go to ruin, and, of course, it meant that the animals, after a season of eating our clover and grass, would be sold at auction and hauled off to a feed lot.

Devoting most of our tillable land to produce was a tougher choice. For one, it meant that we immediately lost stature in the community of dairy farmers that surrounded us: even when we had nearly twenty acres in production, those neighbors would ask, “How’s the gardening going?”, the implication being that what we were doing was not *real* farming. And although we were big fans of organic agriculture, our soil tested extremely poor for potash. This is an easy fix for small-scale organic gardeners: you go and buy some greensand, another name for a naturally occurring mineral called glauconite, which is mined in New Jersey. But a little bag of that stuff, the only potash additive recognized as officially “organic,” cost five bucks in 1980, so buying enough greensand to bring our land up to snuff would have been astronomically expensive. We made the choice to use what all our neighbors used—another naturally occurring mineral called sylvinit (0-0-60) that we could buy locally and afford in a quantity large enough to be useful. I never have figured out why the organic police considered sylvinit more evil than glauconite, but I knew that using it meant that I could not sell our produce as organic, even though we used no pesticides at all on our land and maintained soil fertility mostly with careful rotations that included nitrogen-fixing clovers and beans.

Choosing which kinds of produce to grow was another education in consequences. We did fine in our choice of tomatoes (Roma and Celebrity), cantaloupes (Roadside Hybrid), and other crops, but we really messed up with sweet corn. Which corn to raise is a big decision for a farmer, because, unlike, say, spinach and lettuce, corn takes up a lot of acreage if you’re trying to grow enough of it to sell. Coming from Maryland, where the white variety known as Silver Queen was the favorite, we learned that folks in Wisconsin favored a yellow corn called Jubilee. We did not especially like Jubilee, so we figured we’d

grow Silver Queen and delight the locals with its superior taste. We had a bumper crop, too, but when I took it to the farmer's market in the county seat, shopper after shopper would comment on the nice big ears, pull back the husk to look inside, and put it back, saying, "When are you going to have some *yellow* corn?" Bad decision. The next year I still grew a little Silver Queen, some to give away as samples to see if I could grow some demand (I did) but mostly for our own use. My main crop was the yellow variety known as Kandy Korn, which looked just like Jubilee but tasted much better. With Kandy Korn, we had no trouble selling out.

What we'd experienced as beginning farmers was a classic example of the dialectic process. We had our vision of the way things should be interrupted by the way things really are and, not without some dark thoughts and not without having to sell a lot of Silver Queen corn very cheaply just to get rid of it, we adjusted the vision to bring it in line with reality. And, I think importantly, the way forward that we chose was not all one thing or another; it was some of one thing and some of the other, an example of the virtue of "middleness" that, according to Victor Davis Hanson (*The Other Greeks* 113ff), characterizes the Good Farmer and that for years now has been missing from the American political scene. Every farmer has to adapt, and good farmers do it a lot, sometimes with a flourish, which is probably why Robert Pirsig noted in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (46) that some farmers he saw in their shiny new pickup trucks would be the most likely folks to survive if all technology just ended tomorrow.

Later, when our Wisconsin farm was sold, and we had moved back east, and I was working as a journalist for an agriculture trade publication, I learned from many interviews that some, maybe most, commercial farmers love their land just as much as small organic farmers do and that sometimes their practices, like no-till planting, are actually "greener"—in this case less likely to cause erosion damage—than the more old-fashioned tillage espoused by many organic farmers and that I had used on our land in Wisconsin. Time for me to make another attitude adjustment.

But I also learned that in commercial agriculture, as with any other business subject to the forces in play in a capitalist economy, the need to make money often overshadows all other

considerations. When I was assigned to cover a meeting of tomato growers, I learned that shippability and long shelf life were much more important to these farmers than taste and nutritional value, and when, in denial of pretty clear scientific findings, my publication featured article after article in 1997 claiming that there was no connection between runoff from chicken farms and the fish kills caused by a *Pfiesteria* dinoflagellate outbreak in Maryland's Eastern Shore rivers, I quit. Now that was a fairly easy choice for me because I had started grad school by then and was resuming my teaching career, but lifelong professional farmers have more difficult choices, like whether or not to go further into debt to replace decrepit equipment and whether or not to keep farming at all when a developer wants to buy their fields to throw up a new infestation of McMansions.

### 3.

In my doctoral dissertation, I proposed the paradigm of the Good Farmer as a model for practitioners of environmental rhetoric. Such rhetoric would benefit, I argued, from the farmer's common-sense approach to problem-solving: it would consider the consequences of each possible action, reject simple either-or positions in favor of more nuanced discourse, recognize the likelihood and legitimacy of disagreement between intelligent people of good will on environmental subjects, and seek to find a way forward nonetheless.

Such discourse would follow a process set forth by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca in their seminal work *The New Rhetoric*. The process begins with ascertaining what, if any, common ground is shared by two sides in a dispute and, presuming that at least some little bit of common ground can be found, attempts to build on that common ground by finding more and more things the two sides can agree on, rather than following the pattern of traditional rhetorical argumentation, whose purpose is almost always to prove that one position is right and the other wrong (65ff). In practice, following the Perelman/Olbrechts-Tyteca process requires the participants to admit that their counterparts on the other side are not demons, but rather people like themselves with good intentions who possess valid pieces of the truth. Successful outcomes are obviously not guaranteed by this process, but it can lead to the

recognition that nearly all issues of importance have gray areas that must be acknowledged if any real progress is to be made. Solutions arrived at by this process are unlikely to fully satisfy either side, but they provide a chance for progress by incorporating some of what each side wants—not either this or that, but some of this and some of that—middleness.

The key thing here is that you know and accept from the get-go that you're not going to get everything you want; what you're trying to do is make the best of the situation you're in and get as much of what you want (or believe in) as the situation will allow. Environmental organizations like Ducks Unlimited and The Nature Conservancy have been criticized by enviropurists for working with, instead of against, sporting and industrial interests, but in so doing they have preserved thousands of acres of wildlands that would otherwise have had no protection whatsoever. The Good Farmer does this sort of thing every day: confronted with drought and storm, wildly fluctuating markets and high-interest loan payments, or broken machines and fences, he or she more often than not manages to work out a way to at least survive, and that's damned good news for those of us who need to eat.

#### 4.

For the last twenty years or so I've helped keep food on our table by working as an English professor, and, as I near the end of my full-time teaching career, I need to wonder about what I've actually accomplished for and with my students. I can imagine that my dad asked the same kind of questions when he retired after spending his whole life working for the local telephone company, starting out climbing poles and repairing circuits and advancing to the lower levels of management—as high as he could go since he never finished college—until, in the latter years, he ran the training school that taught new employees how to climb poles and repair circuits. I know that he loved running the school because every day he came home talking about this or that trainee who finally succeeded in learning a new skill—"I didn't think she'd ever get it, but by god today she went right up that pole like a pro and didn't forget her tools. Passed!" He was proud of his students and also proud of the way he had trained them, by making sure they were well informed about the right way to do things and, probably more importantly, by

making sure that they knew the consequences of doing them wrong. He always referred to himself as a “telephone man,” but in those last years he was a teacher.

I’m a teacher, too, and although unlike Dad I didn’t spend my whole life working for the same company, like him I’ve taught at a time when the value of what I’m doing is being questioned by higher-ups in my organization and beyond. Layoffs of the kind of technicians he trained have been common in recent years at the telephone company, to the extent that you now have to wait a week for somebody to come and fix your land-line phone, whereas formerly they guaranteed service within a day. In my case I feel a little guilty retiring because the university where I taught for the last fifteen years has authorized my department to hire only three new professors to replace five of us who have either died, retired, or gone on to other positions. That works out to 60 percent, which in academic terms is a “D.”

English and the other humanities disciplines have been especially devalued in favor of the STEM and business disciplines, in the name of providing the training that students need to succeed in the job market. Never mind that that technology is changing so rapidly that training students only for *specific* in-demand jobs, which as far as I know is what the university is trying to do, is likely to propel them to a dead end; moreover, some of the folks who are teaching these courses have salaries that are much higher than ours in humanities despite a lighter teaching load because “They would be paid more if they worked for industry.” Never mind that many of them, despite their extensive theoretical training, have never actually even *helped* to run a business, high-tech or not. It seems reasonable to me to suggest that every person who dares to teach a trade should have made a living in that trade before he or she is allowed to teach it. It goes without saying that you wouldn’t be allowed to teach surgery to medical students if you had never performed surgery yourself. Why should it be different with business or science?

And although I have taught mostly professional writing courses that serve students in the current flavor-of-the-month STEM disciplines—and, by the way, I *have* run a business, and I *do* have professional experience in the types of writing I teach—I’m especially aware of the embattled situation of my colleagues who teach primarily the higher-level skills that a student obtains

from literature courses. Each of the five years when I was department chair, we requested permission to hire a single new literature person to replace multiple retirees, to no avail. And the number of English majors—literature majors especially—has been dwindling, no doubt because students are being told by somebody that they can't get a job with an English literature degree.

I guess I'm living proof that you can do pretty much anything with an English literature degree. At one time or another I've worked as a high school teacher, a building contractor, a farmer, a software developer, a crewman on a crab boat, a journalist, a hospital chaplain, a youth minister, and a professor. I don't make the mistake of thinking that, to be worthwhile, a college education needs to train you for a *specific* job, but I can state unequivocally that the ways of thinking that I learned by earning a bachelor's degree in English literature prepared me for every one of the jobs I've had. What's more, the comprehensive nature of a rigorous liberal arts program saved me from the curse of specialization—knowing on paper all there is to know about one tiny piece of society or science or the economy, but having not a clue about how all the pieces fit together. People with such narrow training, as Wendell Berry noted years ago, have no choice but to regard *efficiency* as the highest goal, even though what they count as efficiency (often mere cost-cutting) might be diametrically opposed to the harmonious and healthy functioning of all the pieces in a system. These folks are also at a huge disadvantage when, inevitably, the technology or style changes, and their hard-earned specialty becomes obsolete. I would guess that tame industry experts, perhaps through no fault of their own but merely as a result of such training, fall into this category: they cannot fairly consider the benefits of something like humane animal treatment practices because those practices add incremental costs, and, for them, the only significant goal is efficient production that leads to an acceptable profit margin.

Now I don't think there's any chance we're going to stem the STEM tide, nor do I think there's even the slightest likelihood that a university like mine that recently produced a slick promotional video to make sure nobody mistakes us for a liberal arts college is going to all of a sudden decide that studying the humanities has great value. I'm suggesting, though,



that humanities professors and students who remain might consider the example of the Good Farmer and figure out how to make the best of a bad situation.

Perhaps first, we need to recognize that, even though it seems that every organization has petty micromanagers and individuals who promote their own agendas by unceasingly proclaiming their friendship and support while they stab you in the back, for the most part the people who oppose us are not demons. They're administrators and legislators with tight budgets, colleagues in other disciplines fighting as we are for their piece of the pie, and political and industry leaders who honestly view universities as either higher-level vo-tech schools or the educational equivalent of Walmart, where we sell degrees instead of dog food. We may strongly disagree with these notions, believing that the primary mission of the university is to educate the whole person, not just the 9-to-5 *persona*, but I think a realistic appraisal strongly suggests that that ship has sailed, and the amount of money that universities have accepted from corporations precludes calling the ship back to port.

So we need to be the Good Teacher as we search for solutions, and a good place to start might be to carry the agricultural comparison one step further and get a handle on just what it is that we're cultivating. We need to identify what we're giving our students and not in such abstract terms as "critical thinking." Critical thinking about *what*?

I suggest that the most important thing we teach, a tool that is prized just as much in industry as the academy, is the awareness that all human actions, like our choices from the Bob Evans menu, have consequences and connections, some of which can't be undone, and many of which are so far-reaching and intertwined with the actions of other creatures, both human and not, that we can't imagine the complexity of their interconnectedness.

Writers whom we can expose our students to—I'm thinking primarily about nonfiction writers here because that's my field, writers like the aforementioned Wendell Berry and Rachel Carson and Hannah Arendt and Jared Diamond to name a few, but also fiction writers and poets and playwrights and philosophers and historians—all teach the same lesson of consequences and far-reaching interconnectedness, which may well be the most important lesson for any human student to

learn, whether she is planning to be a communications tech or a captain of industry or a park ranger or an artist or an engineer. Our writing courses teach that lesson, too, whether we're explaining that the typo in the first sentence of a job application cover letter can have consequences beyond a poor grade, or we're helping students to creatively express their own connections with the inner and outside world.

Students have to be taught this stuff. Otherwise they remain blissfully unmindful of the effects of their choices and their own accountability for those choices, like the technological wizards who made the New England cod-fishing industry so efficient that now there are no more cod left to catch, or like a former neighbor of mine, who, when asked at three o'clock in the morning to quiet down the noise of his party, so people who had to work the next day could get some sleep, replied, "This is America, babe! I can do any f-ing thing I want!"

And since we still seem to be the academic community most likely to teach what amounts to the antidote for this kind of behavior, those of us in the humanities have a heavy responsibility laid on us. Just as the Good Farmer has to plant the seed correctly and then cultivate carefully, the Good Teacher has an obligation to grow students who recognize that, along with either-or arguments, simplistic analyses of and solutions to complex problems are almost always bogus, students who reject the notion that purely theoretical, specialized knowledge about a detail or two is somehow more valuable than real-world knowledge of the big picture. We need to carefully cultivate students who know from the get-go that they won't get everything they want, that there's no such thing as *deserving* success, and that every single choice they make will have far-reaching, often wonderfully unpredictable consequences. Humanities professors may be powerless, at least within the scope of today's public university, to do much to save our own profession, but at least we can do right by our students.

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## Wit and Malice in *The Man of Mode*

By Gabriela Vlahovici-Jones

In George Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, wit is at a premium—both as a mark of social competence and as a key personal quality. When Dorimant learns of Harriet's arrival in London and becomes intrigued with the news of the beautiful newcomer, he inquires, "Has she wit?" to which Medley replies, "More than is usual in her sex, and as much malice" (1.1.144–45). The juxtaposition of wit and malice in Medley's remark and the frequency of code-switching in the conversations of real as well as would-be wits raises important questions: What exactly is the relationship between wit and malice in *The Man of Mode*? Can this relationship be illuminated by the French cosmopolitanism that the characters invoke so often? My essay explores these questions at the intersection of three theoretical frameworks—D.R.M. Wilkinson's categories of Restoration wit, Madeleine de Scudéry's theory of wit, and Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman's fundamental notions of semantics and pragmatics—in order to suggest that malice in wit depends on the speaker's approach to discourse reference, maxims of conversation, and persuasive arguments.

D.R.M. Wilkinson's theoretical framework can help clarify the relationship between wit and malice by supporting a breakdown of the discussion according to the types of discourse encompassed by the larger category of Restoration wit. Wilkinson proposes that the comedies of Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve, and Dryden include a type of witty dialogue that can be recognized as Comedy of Manners (497). Wilkinson identifies three subdivisions to this form of wit: railing, dissembling, and plain dealing. According to Wilkinson, *railing* consists of "verbal attempts to establish the superiority, or the superior awareness, of the speaker over against others or in connection with conversational values or institutions" (498); *dissembling* involves "deceiving others to one's own advantage, protecting oneself, or evading problems" (498); and *plain dealing* conveys "honest sentiments in plain language" (499).

Madeleine de Scudéry's theory of wit, on the other hand, can help clarify the relationship between wit and malice by offering a point of reference inside the French sphere of cultural influence. Specifically, Scudéry can serve as the spokesperson for the highly influential cultural phenomenon known as *préciosité*, a phenomenon that drew its energy, to a large extent, from the publications of this exceptionally popular writer. The presence of a connection between Etherege and Scudéry does not represent a new claim. Leslie Martin, for example, addresses the pervasive influence of *préciosité* at the court of Charles I and suggests that characters such as Mrs. Loveit or Lady Woodvill give Etherege the opportunity to satirize fossilized modes of *précieux* discourse. By employing Scudéry as a frame of reference, this essay does not attempt, however, to argue for zones of influence or explore areas of intertextuality. Rather, the essay employs Scudéry's theory of wit—as formulated in the dialogue “De la Raillerie”—as a possible key to decoding the relationship between wit and malice in Etherege's *The Man of Mode*.

Finally, Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman's explanations of fundamental notions of semantics and pragmatics (such as *sense* and *reference*, *maxims of conversation*, *truth value*, or *speech act*) can function as comparison points between the guidelines for wit outlined in “De la Raillerie” and the practice of wit exemplified in *The Man of Mode*. Specifically, the linguistic notions aid in distilling key theoretical points from Scudéry's dialogue, points that can be applied to the analysis of raillery, dissembling, and plain dealing in Etherege's play, for the purpose of identifying discourse features responsible either for generating or for suppressing malice.

### 1. Scudéry on Wit

In “De la Raillerie,” Scudéry's theory of wit emerges from a dialogue among aristocratic friends on a visit to the home of Antigene, an eminent gentleman who lives secluded from the world. The friends' conversation centers on the topic of wit, but opinions diverge. Melinte, who is well-practiced at teasing, proposes that conversation is more pleasant and amusing when it mixes in some agreeable malice. Euridamie, who generally avoids teasing, warns:

Mais ce que je soutiens est . . . que c'est marcher sur des precipices, que de s'accoûter à raillery souvent: & que la plus difficile chose du monde, c'est de le faire à tout à fait bien, sans choquer ny l'amitié, ny la bien-sceance, ny la probité, ny la bonté, ou sans se faire tort a soy-mesme." (550-51)—I maintain that . . . it is like walking on the verge of a precipice to make a habit of teasing: it is the most difficult thing in the world to do quite right, without offending friendship, or decency, or integrity, or goodness, or without harming oneself (my translation).

The friends quip that Melinte has a habit of maliciousness, so Antigene steps in and asks Euridamie for a cure: a set of laws for teasing, which everyone promises to obey. Euridamie therefore proposes that teasing must come from natural talent, that wit should never be confused with satire, that language should always be impeccable, and that the person being teased must be a part of the conversation. Euridamie also stipulates that teasing be surprising and hit the person it addresses where it hurts, with an essential condition: "Mais je ne veux pas que les piqueures en soient profondes; ny qu'elles fassent tout au plus au cœur de ceux qui les ressentent, que ce font les épines à ceux qui cueillent des roses en rêvant" (571)—"But I do not wish the stings to be deep or affect the hearts of those who feel them more than thorns affect those who pick roses while daydreaming" (my translation). After all, Euridamie concludes, it is better to lose an opportunity for wit than lose a friendship.

Antigene intervenes again and offers to entertain the audience with a story originally composed in Arabic by the Patriarch of Libanus and gifted to Antigene by the Consul of Alexandria. The object of praise is Sesostris the Great of Egypt, a prince of exceptional grace, courage, and magnanimity. While Antigene extolls the prince's character and accomplishments, the audience listens with fascination but also with some skepticism regarding the outlandish historical details. The friends' disconcertment turns into delight, however, when they realize they have been tricked: Antigene didn't speak about the mythical Sesostris but about their own king, Louis XIV! Filled with enjoyment, the merry ladies and gentlemen admire Antigene's brilliant wit.

Indeed, Antigene deserves their praise because he performs Euridamie's "laws" of wit with modesty and elegance. In doing so, Antigene hits his listeners where it hurts, but he is not the one who hurts them. Rather, the listeners were hurting already, and Antigene strives to heal them by helping them acquire self-knowledge through a joyful revelation of truth. For example, Clarice had an excessive appetite for the exotic and Melinte for the domestic, and they both learn that the strange and the familiar can teach something important about each other. Also, Melinte had an old habit of immoderate teasing; however, she learns that conversational virtuosity can shine brighter when polished by restraint and mindfulness. Furthermore, Euridamie herself, who knows how to make rules for teasing but not how to practice them, finds out that her "laws" can actually generate beautiful conversation. At the discussion's end, the friends finish the evening stimulated yet peaceful: the prick of wit woke them from daydreaming, and they found the truth more enriching than the illusion.

Scudéry's dialogue thus reveals that only through reflective self-control can malice become correctly "dosed," so that it may act as medicine and not as poison. This dosage can be achieved through self-censoring and the observance of a series of rules, which can be distilled into three key features: wit has sense but no reference (it has meaning but it does not target someone/something not present in the conversation); wit abides by the maxims of conversation (it provides information that is context-appropriate); and wit is a speech act that influences the audience by prompting self-knowledge but not by constructing a persuasive argument. In their distilled form, these features of wit can be imported into Etherege's *The Man of Mode*, so as to help clarify the relationship between malice and the characters' use of raillery, dissembling, and plain dealing.

## 2. Wit, Sense, and Reference

In Scudéry's theoretical model, wit has sense but no reference (or a very weak reference). Fromkin and Rodman explain the distinction between sense and reference based on Gottlob Frege's proposition that *sense* (*Sinn*) represents the meaning of an expression, while *reference* (*Bedeutung*) represents that to which the expression refers. Fromkin and Rodman explain that sentences such as, "The present king of

France is bald” or “By the year 3000, our descendants will have left Earth” have sense but no reference. These sentences can be understood by speakers of English, but they do not refer to an objective reality—France does not currently have a king, and our future descendants do not yet exist (220). Although one could argue against a conception of reference restricted to factual reality, the distinction between sense and reference remains nevertheless useful in understanding the mechanisms of wit and the relationship between wit and malice. For Scudéry, gallant wit has no reference because it *does not* target anything without a physical presence in the immediate context of conversation. In *The Man of Mode*, however, the three subdivisions of wit—raillery, dissembling, and plain dealing—usually *rely* on a reference without a physical presence in the conversation.

Raillery thus usually targets an absent person. For example, when Harriet first appears at the beginning of Act III, she fends off the solicitous Busy—who dares compare Harriet’s inattention to dress to Lady Dapper’s exactitude—by railing Lady Dapper’s unattractiveness: “She is indeed most exact! Nothing is ever wanting to make her ugliness remarkable! . . . Her powdering, painting, and her patching never fail to draw the tongues and eyes of all the men upon her” (3.1.12–14; 15–17). Technically, Harriet’s raillery includes a revelation of truth: unattractive women should not invite ridicule through gross breaches of modesty. However, the absent Lady Dapper cannot possibly profit from Harriet’s harsh stricture: “Women then ought to be no more fond of dressing than fools should be of talking. Hoods and modesty, masks and silence, things that shadow and conceal—they should think of nothing else” (3.1.23–27).

Dissembling similarly depends on a reference, albeit one that is misattributed by the speaker. For example, when Bellinda sets about making Mrs. Loveit jealous, she tells Mrs. Loveit of “a lady masked, in a pretty dishabille, whom Dorimant entertained with more respect than the gallants do a common vizard” (2.2.85–87). The masked lady is real (she is Bellinda herself), but Bellinda deliberately misidentifies her, so as provoke Mrs. Loveit’s anger.

Plain dealing also appears to consist of discourse with a material reference. In Act V, for instance, Harriet ridicules Mrs. Loveit with probably the harshest example of plain dealing: “A



nunnery is the most fashionable place for such a retreat and has been the fatal consequence of many a *belle passion*” (5.2.392–94). That Harriet refers to an actual nunnery makes this remark particularly cruel: since monasteries no longer existed in England, Mrs. Loveit would literally have to leave the country to retreat from the world in this manner. Essentially, Harriet tells Mrs. Loveit to pack her bags and get lost.

Although wit that targets an absent interlocutor is open to malice, wit that targets a present interlocutor is not necessarily malice-free. When Sir Fopling Flutter enters the stage in Act III, for instance, he is met by a volley of witty jabs: Dorimant, Lady Townley, Emilia, and Medley take turns in mocking Sir Fopling’s appearance, while Fopling experiences only blissful flattery. Sir Fopling is present in the conversation, but he is not a part of this conversation, as he remains unaware of his companions’ raillery. Lisa Berglund explains this difference in conversational competency in terms of exclusion from the common discourse of the libertine fellowship. Berglund suggests that “Any character who attempts to influence, attack, or join the society of the wits, but does not speak its language, cannot possibly succeed because his inarticulateness betrays his ignorance of the code of libertinism, and exposes him to contempt” (371). In Berglund’s framework, Sir Fopling fails to understand his interlocutors’ social dialect. However, Dorimant, Lady Townley, Emilia, and Medley do not aim to be understood, since their wit is not meant for Sir Fopling’s edification but for their own entertainment. In this case, Sir Fopling is not actually their interlocutor but their reference; although physically present, Sir Fopling is in fact absent from the communication process.

### 3. Wit and the Maxims of Conversation

In Scudéry’s dialogue on wit, the anonymous narrator punctuates a series of exchanges on what disqualifies certain kinds of discourse from being considered witty. To questions of inappropriate language or inappropriate reference, the narrator contributes the question of properly gauged amount of information. Neither the narrator nor her conversation partners, however, can specify what this correct amount is since the “measurement” depends on the speaker’s ability to evaluate the situation and respond to it. What is at stake in this case is not so much the presence or absence of malice as the attention of the

audience, who must not become bored, irritated, or frustrated by the quantity or quality of detail.

Fromkin and Rodman discuss the appropriateness of information in the context of discourse cohesion and suggest that this appropriateness is informed by two “maxims of conversation”: the “cooperative principle,” which stipulates that “a speaker’s contribution to the discourse should be as informative as required—neither more, nor less”; and the “maxim of relevance,” which stipulates that the various sentence meanings should be “sensibly connected into discourse meaning, much as the rules of sentence grammar allow word meanings to be sensibly (and grammatically) connected into sentence meaning” (225). The participants in Scudéry’s dialogue seem to agree that, in order to meet the standards of gallantry, witty discourse must include just the right type and amount of information—in other words, discourse must comply both with the cooperative principle and with the maxim of relevance. In Etherege’s *Man of Mode*, the witty characters know either when to respect or when to break these maxims, and the nature of their intentions also seems to determine the degree of malice conveyed by raillery, dissembling, or plain dealing.

Raillery, for example, can deliberately observe conversation conventions or deliberately ignore them. Emilia’s first exchanges with Sir Fopling, for instance, conform perfectly to the maxims of conversation:

SIR FOPLING: A thousand pardons, madam. Some civility’s due of course upon the meeting of a long absent friend. The *éclat* of so much beauty, I confess, ought to have charmed me sooner.

EMILIA: The *brilliant* of so much good language, sir, has much more power than the little beauty I can boast.

SIR FOPLING: I never saw anything prettier than this high work on your *point d’Espagne*—

EMILIA: ’Tis not so rich as *point de Venise*—(3.2.176–84)

The cooperativeness and relevance of Emilia’s conversation become apparent in the length and structure of her replies, which she grafts seamlessly on Sir Fopling’s remarks. Emilia’s most successful strategy is to achieve discourse coherence by matching Sir Fopling’s code-switching. Thus, she uses partial synonyms for the French words flaunted by Sir Fopling (*éclat*—*brilliant*; *point d’Espagne*—*point de Venise*) in exactly the same

position in the sentence. By making a deliberate effort to be relevant to her interlocutor's interests and style, Emilia ensnares Sir Fopling in a verbal play where he becomes the unaware target of ridicule. Nevertheless, Emilia's raillery is only minimally malicious, since it aims to create amusement for the company of wits rather than cause harm to Sir Fopling.

On the other hand, Dorimant's deliberate violation of the maxims of conversation aims to inflict real pain. When Dorimant finds Mrs. Loveit in anguish over his betrayal, he ventures to guess the cause of her misery: "What unlucky accident puts you out of humour? A point ill-washed? Knots spoiled i'the making up? Hair shaded awry? Or some other little mistake in setting you in order?" (2.2.142–45). Dorimant is purposefully uncooperative, as he takes over the conversation rather than let Mrs. Loveit speak; he is also purposefully irrelevant, as he trivializes Loveit's distress by attributing it to beauty mishaps. By ignoring conversation conventions, Dorimant seeks to provoke Mrs. Loveit and increase her pain, so that he will have an easier time breaking up with her. In this case, the breaches of cooperativeness and relevance make Dorimant's raillery intensely malicious.

Dissembling—like raillery—can also either breach or uphold the maxims of conversation. When the breach is deliberate, malice generally ensues. For example, when Bellinda sets out to enflame Mrs. Loveit's jealousy, she appears cooperative, since she carefully answers Mrs. Loveit's inquiries about Dorimant's masked companion. However, Bellinda purposefully violates the maxim of relevance, as her casually unconcerned tone makes a strident dissonance with Mrs. Loveit's emotional suffering: "Fie, fie, your transports are too violent, my dear. This may be but an accidental gallantry, and 'tis likely ended at her coach" (2.2.114–16). On the other hand, when Dorimant dissembles by observing the maxims of conversation, his discourse is not particularly malicious. For example, Dorimant is impeccably cooperative and relevant when he speaks to Lady Woodvill under the assumed identity of a Mr. Courtaige (4.1.8–51). As Courtaige, Dorimant skillfully leads the conversation and echoes Lady Woodvill's chief frustrations with present society: to earn Lady Woodvill's goodwill and gain access to Harriet<sup>1</sup>.

Plain dealing—like raillery and dissembling—seems to include malice to the extent that it violates or respects the maxims of conversation. For example, Harriet’s interaction with Mrs. Loveit at the end of Act V is particularly cruel. After experiencing the brunt of Dorimant’s betrayal, Mrs. Loveit comes to a poignant realization of the callousness of libertine society: “There’s nothing but falsehood and impertinence in this world! All men are villains or fools. Take example from my misfortunes. Bellinda, if thou wouldst be happy, give thyself wholly up to goodness” (5.2.384–87). Harriet immediately interjects: “Mr. Dorimant has been your God almighty long enough. ’Tis time to think of another” (5.2.388–89). Harriet’s intervention is perfectly relevant: her statement is not only true but also highly cohesive. Harriet picks up on Mrs. Loveit’s language of repentance and pursues the same line of thought by urging Mrs. Loveit to worship God instead of Dorimant. Although Harriet’s remark offers salient advice, this intervention is exceptionally malicious, primarily because it deliberately tramples the cooperative principle. Were Harriet even minimally concerned with Mrs. Loveit’s wellbeing or at least with the decorum of gallant wit, she would have said nothing at all. Because totally unneeded, Harriet’s remark resonates as condescending, dismissive, and cruel.

Harriet’s plain dealing is not genuinely cruel, however, when she abides by the maxims of conversation. When Harriet engages Dorimant in Act IV, the “scorn and coldness” she shows Dorimant are not meant to hurt him but rather to disarm him, to strip him of the clichés of conventional love-making and to create the opportunity for real communication.

DORIMANT: . . . That demure curtsy is not amiss in jest, but do not think in earnest that it becomes you.

HARRIET: Affectation is catching, I find; from your grave bow I got it.

DORIMANT: Where had you all that scorn and coldness in your look?

HARRIET: From nature, sir; pardon my want of art. I have not learnt those softnesses and languishings which now in faces are so much in fashion.

DORIMANT: You need ‘em not. You have a sweetness of your own, if you would but calm your frowns and let it settle.

HARRIET: My eyes are wild and wondering like my passions and cannot yet be tied to rules of charming. (4.1.106–18)

In this brief sequence, Harriet demonstrates her remarkable skill at making relevant conversation by creating cohesive ties to her interlocutor's discourse. Here, the cohesive ties consist primarily of contextual synonyms (*curtsy—affection; art—softnesses and languishings—rules of charming; settle—tied*) or contextual antonyms (*demure / grave; nature / art; calm / wild; settle / wondering*) that act as “hooks” keeping the conversation on a direction of Harriet's choosing. Harriet's mastery of cohesion, which complements her outstanding conversational adeptness, thus brings into question her claim to “want of art,” freedom from the “rules of charming,” and faithfulness to “nature.” Rose Zimbardo interprets the distinction between art and nature as one between “empty forms” and “vital spirit.” For Zimbardo, “Harriet is symbolic of nature's power because, like nature, she is the mistress of forms. She can assume many masks and be confined by none” (381). In other words, by refusing “art,” Harriet rejects not conversational skills but the empty forms that Dorimant often manipulates uncritically; similarly, by embracing “nature,” Harriet endorses not ignorance but a style of communication where form serves as a receptacle for substance.

#### 4. Wit and Persuasion

In Scudéry's dialogue, Artamene's demonstration of wit is followed by a walk in Artamene's magnificent garden, through bowers of jasmine and honeysuckle and rows of chestnuts and acacia. As a speech act, Artamene's wit *does* something: it prompts self-awareness, resolves a dispute, and supports social cohesion. What it does *not* do is persuade by means of an argument. In other words, Artamene's discourse does not influence attitudes or prompt actions so as to conform to his pre-determined goals, and he does not provide reasons based on propositions with truth value (Blair 45). In *The Man of Mode*, on the other hand, wit is often (but not always) persuasive. Because persuasive wit deliberately targets attitudes and actions through verbal and/or visual arguments, its degree of malice depends on whether the change desired by the speaker coincides with the interlocutor's interests.

Thus, raillery can become incorporated into a persuasive argument aiming to serve its originator. For instance, when Dorimant joins his friends' raillery of Sir Fopling, he works to

build credibility with Sir Fopling and earn goodwill, so as to interject seamlessly the persuasive point concerning Mrs. Loveit: “You cannot pitch on a better for your purpose” (III.iii.241). The reasons Dorimant offers in support of this thesis are propositions with mixed truth values: “A person of quality, and one who has a rest of reputation enough to make the conquest considerable. Besides, I hear she likes you, too!” (III.iii.243-45). Dorimant’s persuasive effort is not devoid of malice, but this malice is not particularly intense, since the worst that could happen to Sir Fopling is to appear ridiculous (which he already does).

Arguments based on dissembling can similarly range from intensely malicious to somewhat innocuous, depending on the intended result. For example, Bellinda’s strategy of insinuating Dorimant’s betrayal aims to cause jealousy and pain; on the other hand, Harriet and Young Bellair’s strategy of feigning love aims only to delay their arranged marriage. Harriet and Young Bellair’s performance of love for their parents’ benefit deserves special attention since the success of their cooperatively constructed argument depends on the audience’s ability to scrutinize the minute details of the visually articulated propositions. Sarah Grace Marsh attributes this emphasis on visuality to a Restoration obsession with vision resulting from improvements in microscope technology. Marsh suggests that the scene between Harriet and Bellair exemplifies “dramaturgical magnification” (43) and that “the clinical, even scientific, detail that Harriet and Bellair use to adjust one another reflects the level of magnification that they are being seen at” (44). Lady Woodvill’s and Old Bellair’s ability to observe and interpret culturally codified visual signs (such as the turning of the body, the movement of the fan, or the roll of the eyes) does not guarantee, however, their ability to determine the truth value of the visual propositions. The fact that Lady Woodvill and Old Bellair are persuaded by dissembling indicates that the visual forms of “the last age” no longer correspond to the same content and that, in spite of intense magnification, visual appearances remain unreliable.

Arguments based on plain dealing, unlike those based on raillery or dissembling, seem quite rare in *The Man of Mode*. One notable example, however, is Harriet’s invitation to Dorimant to visit her in the country. This invitation might not

seem like an argument at all since it appears to discourage Dorimant's pursuit. Harriet tells Dorimant that he will come to a great, rambling, lone house that looks as it were not inhabited, the family's so small. There you'll find my mother, an old lame aunt, and myself, sir, perched up on chairs at a distance in a large parlor, sitting moping like three or four melancholy birds in a spacious volary— Does not this stagger your resolution? (5.2.419–25).

Although Harriet does not appear to build an argument, her skillful deployment of vivid imagery represents Dorimant's visit in the terms of a heroic quest: Harriet and her family are immobile, caged, and sad, waiting for the relief of Dorimant's arrival.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike the scene with Bellair, which invokes microscopic vision, Harriet's depiction of her situation invokes telescopic vision—the kind of vision that might allow someone to focus on a goal. Thus, Harriet appeals to maybe the only thing that could counter Dorimant's dissipation: his need to conquer obstacles and prove himself up for a challenge. Her argument is without malice because it gives Dorimant the freedom to choose between adopting telescopic vision and setting his eyes on a steady target or returning to the microscopic vision of ever-changing micro-goals and meaningless pursuits. The absence of malice, however, creates the very real possibility that, either by deliberate choice or by force of habit, Dorimant will not take up the challenge and will allow Harriet to find herself, like Mrs. Loveit, alone, forgotten, and secluded from the world.

The skill of this argument's construction but also the uncertainty of its success become apparent in the fact that the characters of *The Man of Mode* very rarely act under the influence of a persuasive argument. Rather, they generally act under the impulse of their own emotions, which may (or may not) be channeled by the discourse of an interlocutor. Although Lady Woodvill says of Dorimant, "Oh! He has a tongue, they say, would tempt the angels to a second fall!" (III.iii.121–2), she and Sir Fopling may be the only ones whom Dorimant actually persuades. Those who submit the most to Dorimant's influence, however, do so while being moved by their own violent passions.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, as John Hayman observes, Dorimant himself succumbs to the same passions that he intends to manipulate in others: after pretending to be jealous of Sir

Fopling, he actually becomes jealous; while playing at the game of love with Harriet, he actually becomes in love with her (194–95). Although not particularly successful at controlling others, Dorimant does not easily yield to control either. Maybe that is why Harriet’s argument gives Dorimant such a wide berth of choice: if he will be motivated by anything, it will be by his own desires rather than by her words.

## 5. Conclusion

The frame of reference provided by Madeleine de Scudéry’s “De la Raillerie” indicates that the relationship between wit and malice in Etherege’s *The Man of Mode* depends on the existence of an objective reference, on a deliberate observance or violation of the maxims of conversation, and on the inclusion of a persuasive argument. The presence of these discourse features does not, however, necessarily bring about the presence of malice. Rather, they create a space in the discourse that can be filled with malice to the degree intended by the speaker; thus, they serve as “gauges” for measuring the extent to which wit acts as medicine or poison, as an agent of social cohesion or social division. The comparison between the practice of wit in Scudéry’s dialogue and in Etherege’s play also reveals that wit in *The Man of Mode* includes substantially more malice than allowed by the authentic precepts of *préciosité*. Because malice would most likely have been recognized as such by contemporary audiences—without any need for a theoretical framework—the question remains as to whether its purpose is to put libertine discourse on display or to prompt the kind of detachment that can teach the discernment between virtue and vice.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>R.S. Cox intriguingly attributes Dorimant’s performance as Mr. Courtage to the influence of Richard Flecknoe’s *Treatise on the Sports of Wit*: “Courtage is exactly the persona of Flecknoe in the *Treatise*: deferential, sanctimonious, and banal, ‘a man made up of forms and commonplaces, sucked out of the remaining lees of the last age,’ as Harriet says when she teases her mother for favoring him (IV.1)” (188).



<sup>2</sup>Michael Neill compares this quest to a descent into the underworld, where Harriet as Eurydice waits for her Orpheus while surrounded by chthonic deities (135).

<sup>3</sup>Brian Corman acquits Dorimant as the primary agent of the women's misfortune and suggests that Bellinda and Loveit are comic victims who are responsible for their own fate and who suffer "in proportion to their own folly" (46).

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## The Foolish Professor (A Double Sonnet)

By Albert Kapikian

Now looking up, taking roll, I hear them:

My own two voices (my own forked tongue.)  
Am I taking roll or taking names? Starting to lecture  
I begin to face them down (my two false choices).

I know there is so little I can convey  
yet so much upon which I can insist—  
There is the face that can profess  
(But that face is false, that face I should resist)  
Yet that face is my form of redress  
(Damn all those teachers who taught me what,  
not how, to think—!)

I worked hard to get here. So now *I* get to stress  
what I think is right, what I know is wrong.  
(Let them gorge themselves on what I think)  
Let them learn to memorize my song.

My other face is a face to confess  
that they cannot find (with a map anyway)  
what I cannot tell them how to possess—  
that all I really am  
is my syllabus, my opening words  
to the class, my ability to inspire others  
to the life I have not had—  
that I am here to let them go into the places  
I cannot map because I cannot, because I could not,  
because I did not learn  
how to go—

For now I choose to rule (and play the fool)  
**As a professor there is nothing I do not know.**

## **Critical Thinking, Mammalian Learning Rituals, and Remedial College Reading: A Collaborative Response**

**By Kay Walter and Kathy Anderson**

The University of Arkansas at Monticello (UAM) is an open-admissions, state-supported university in the rural southeastern pine forests that stretch along the Mississippi Delta. Any student with a high school diploma or its equivalent is eligible to apply for admission to the university. Many matriculate with an insufficient grasp of math and English to be productive in college-level classes, so UAM works tirelessly to provide opportunities for students to strengthen basic skills. Two levels of remediation are available in both disciplines to shore up weak learning foundations.

Scores on standardized tests such as the ACT are used to determine areas of remediation needed to ensure student success. But no student can be successful at college without essential reading skills. ACT Composite scores below 15 mandate enrollment in a First-Year Seminar, which is taught gratis by volunteers from among faculty and staff. When the faculty and the staff work together, the collaboration increases student success. What follows is a collaborative conversation in which a faculty member, Dr. Kay Walter, and a member of the library staff, Kathy Anderson, describe their innovative approach to the challenge of helping remedial students succeed.

**Kay Walter:** Kathy Anderson and I both volunteered to teach First-Year Seminar in its inaugural year, and we worked together to develop useful and effective lessons that resulted in a substantial pass rate. ACT Reading Skills scores below an 18 require students to enroll in Critical Reading Skills, a course meant to assist students in developing, in one semester, skills to prepare them to read critically and analytically the assignments that await them in credit-bearing courses.

Students with underdeveloped abilities to think critically struggle to read. The world they grow up in is filled with rapidly moving images and overly stimulating sounds. They are

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conditioned to short attention spans and ignoring a deluge of information, particularly in text. Even if they are good readers, their patience in developing skills at academic reading are challenged as they try to navigate the adjustment to university life and college-level demands of critical thinking, reading, writing, and listening skills. Those who are high-achieving students find their own way, rise to the demands of college life, seek out the support they need from an experienced support network, and succeed as a natural course of life. The others require more attention.

Often reluctant readers have a mastery of basic vocabulary but only in isolation. Their struggle is to identify words prosodically. In order to become fluent readers, “It is not enough for young readers to be able to decode words accurately; they also need to develop their word decoding competencies to an automatic and effortless level so that they can read with good expression and focus their attention on reading for meaning” (Rasinski, “Readers Who Struggle,” 524). A lack of this competency in childhood multiplies if not corrected. Even more than young readers, our students must progress

beyond mere word recognition accuracy, where they can decode the words in text but use up so much cognitive energy that they struggle to comprehend, to word recognition automaticity (fluency), where students have freed up their cognitive resources from word recognition and use them primarily for text comprehension. (Rasinski, “Readers Who Struggle” 524)

As text comprehension automates into reflex, students approach genuine benefit from higher education. Only then do they have a chance to internalize the meaning from their readings that marks true learning and develops them into graduates capable of making genuine civic contributions.

For the low-achieving students, reading with ease is an essential lifeline to their retention. But, for them, reading is very hard work, agonizing physically and emotionally. Their body language betrays their struggles with decoding text, which does not come easily, and creating meaning, which does not come naturally, from reading. They “hunch their bodies, bow their heads, move their faces close to the text, and read in a barely audible voice” (Rasinski, *The Fluent Reader* 23).

**Kathy Anderson:** Some of the students would read very fast to finish quickly, while others would read in such a low voice you could barely hear them.

**Kay Walter:** Specialists in the teaching of reading to young children tell us, “Children who read this way do not think much of themselves as learners,” but these students are not young children (Rasinski, *The Fluent Reader* 23). They are scholars who have already proven themselves capable of secondary-level educational efforts. Their coping skills are strong, even if they are challenged by adjustment to university studies.

Most of them are capable of developing success strategies, but as they often come from first-generation college backgrounds, their support network is less practiced at helping them believe in themselves or in the availability of support from strangers. Teaching them to trust enough to ask for help is a good first step, but another necessary element is enabling them to envision reading as an enjoyable task. As Rasinski claims, “To achieve success in reading, students need to experience success in their reading. Students who struggle in reading do not enjoy much success” (“Readers Who Struggle” 522). Indeed, reluctant readers are unlikely to enjoy much success in any aspect of higher education until they can see reading as a worthwhile endeavor that can be undertaken without excruciating effort.

There are never enough skilled and experienced remedial instructors to meet the needs of incoming students. Last fall when my dean was desperate to find instructors who could assure student retention and academic progress, I remembered successful collaboration with Kathy and suggested he hire our librarian to teach the reading course.

**Kathy Anderson:** I welcomed the opportunity to teach the Critical Reading Skills course. As a librarian, I saw many of the students in remedial courses almost daily at the reference desk, so I had a preexisting connection to the students who would enroll in the course.

**Kay Walter:** It seemed a natural progression of thought to me that an expert with books and other sources of information could be successful in instructing low-achieving students in developing reading skills. I was glad to learn later that he had hired Kathy to teach a section of the course in part because I

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knew she would be eager to talk over ideas for collaboration between our classes and help me with a project I had planned for my upperclassmen.

I am the British Literature specialist at UAM, and the students in my Shakespeare course are required to develop an experiential project as a major element of their final course grade. Undeniably, Shakespeare is the most famous author in the English-language canon for good reason. The Bard is a master of stylistic characterization, dramatic progress in plot, and universal human response, but his early-modern English is still very Elizabethan. In class I can help my students negotiate understanding and navigate the difficulty of reading his plays, but outside of the classroom my students must learn to understand and internalize the message alone. Many of them will soon be English teachers in public schools in my area, and how comfortable they become with reading Shakespeare determines how well they can teach their students to read his plays.

Their foundation determines how prepared to read the next generation of students will be when they matriculate into my university classrooms. In order to help my upperclassmen prepare to present Shakespeare as lessons to the teenagers who will pupil their future classes, I wanted them to experience presenting drama to less-successful readers than themselves, readers such as the remedial students in Kathy's class. So two challenges presented themselves simultaneously: my students needed a service-learning project, and Kathy's students needed help developing an internal voice that could articulate reading with clarity and precision.

**Kathy Anderson:** At the beginning of the course, I asked students to tell me some of the issues they had with reading and reading aloud. The most common responses were, "I have trouble pronouncing the words" and "I am not sure of the meanings of some words." I asked them to pull out their cell phones and told them about the Pronounce App and the Merriam Webster App that I use almost daily. I explained to them that everyone needs help and that there are tools to assist in learning.

**Kay Walter:** But Kathy and I decided to intervene even more directly. As an experiment, we decided my students would help her reluctant and underprepared readers learn to read effectively by unpacking the intricacies of a particularly

troublesome form of reading—drama. Effective reading always requires more than word recognition. It demands critical thinking to force meaning from ink on paper. Critical reading moves even beyond skills of comprehending meaning into internalizing a message and subsequent changing perspective, belief, or behavior in response. Because drama is written to be a performance art, it can be especially demanding to read. Drama is the genre of literature most in need of an audience. Drama multiplies the opportunity to demonstrate voices present in all reading. Because it has dialogue, there is a chorus of voices that can be represented by a group of readers.

Shakespeare in particular requires sophisticated skills of even practiced readers. Kathy's remedial students were not ready to read Shakespeare effectively, but my students had to develop a means of presenting Shakespeare to her students in order to receive credit for their service-learning project. They first met with Kathy to find an appropriate text for their idea of a reader's theatre because, as Rasinski insists, "Oral reading can make reading instruction more varied, more interesting, and more powerful" (*The Fluent Reader* 36). We want all our students to have the intimacy with reading we know when decoding words becomes a varied, interesting, and powerful experience.

**Kathy Anderson:** I met with Mark, Dr. Walter's student in her Shakespeare course, to discuss what play would be performed for my students. He was very excited about this opportunity to show other students how reading and performing could be fun. He also wanted an opportunity to invite them to join the Theatre Club on campus. I wanted to make sure the play could be read ahead of time by my students. It had to be long enough for Dr. Walter's students to adequately showcase a reader's theatre but short enough that my students' attention span would not waiver. I also wanted my students to get a "feel" of the characters they are reading before seeing it acted out.

Their assignment was to write about their experience afterward and talk about whether or not what they read coincided with what was performed in front of the class. Mark and I did some research in our library collection and found a book containing some short plays. He suggested a Halloween play because of the season. We also added the Shakespeare play *Avon Calling* to show my students the different variety of plays.



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I told Mark that I planned to introduce his group to my students and then let the group lead the class that day. I wanted Mark's group to model what I hope my students may do in one of their classes in the future.

Mark provided me a copy to give to my students to read before class. Before the presentation, I asked my class if any of them ever attended a play or reader's theatre, and only one raised a hand. Overall, the class was a little reluctant at first about reading the play, but reading a small part and discussing it helped a lot. I asked my class to imagine themselves as one of the characters in the play. What would your voice sound like? How would you dress for the part? What types of facial expressions would you have in certain parts of the play? What are the feelings of the characters (mad, happy, sad, or fearful)? These are some questions I asked my students to keep in mind while they were reading.

Once they saw that it was fairly easy to read and comprehend, almost every student had read the play beforehand. I considered that in itself a success because it had been somewhat difficult before this assignment to get majority participation. Dr. Walter's students did a wonderful job. My class seemed in awe of how the students changed their voices and mannerisms right before their eyes. Some read along with the printed text, while others just focused on the performance. In their writing assignments, the students mainly talked about how watching the performance made what they read more interesting. One student stated that she could picture herself responding as some of the characters were with the same voice and facial expressions. I believe seeing these upperclassmen perform motivated my freshman students to participate more and get involved on campus. Some were even interested in joining the Theatre Club. I was very pleased with the outcome of this collaboration and hope to do more in the future.

**Kay Walter:** We based our approach to these challenges on the natural rituals present in mammalian learning. Biomimicry teaches us that we are most likely to succeed if our attempts are informed by nature. The rituals of instinctual training of young mammals work for inexperienced students as readily as they do for puppies, kittens, or any other mammal struggling to learn. Another name for common sense is "mother wit" because it is the training a mother animal gives her young,

and she employs the same rituals of learning we determined to use.

As a guide for our adventure, we employed the four ways mammals learn: trial-and-error, repetition, modeling, and play. The trial-and-error ritual arose mostly in our response to recognizing the difficulty the students faced. We knew the students struggled with comprehension. They lacked an audible internal voice to read with the fluent rhythm that yields both understanding and the pleasure of correctly accentuating syntactical nuances. This pleasure enhances the revelation of “meaning [that] lies in a text’s phrases and not in its individual words” (Rasinski, *The Fluent Reader* 33). As Peter Schreiber explains, “Some children experience considerable difficulty in learning to acquire oral reading fluency, which can be characterized as smooth, expressive production with appropriate phrasing or chunking in accordance with the syntactic structure of the [reading] material” (158). These struggling children grow into the reluctant readers of Kathy’s course.

The remedial students also seemed to lack an appreciation for the joy of discovering new words and clever uses of language, “work[ing] out the meaning of words, discovering their sound, hue, and taste” (Wilmer). Experienced readers particularly value “the recognition of taste—or what the word feels like in [the reader’s] mouth” (Wilmer). We searched for a means of helping them develop the skills experienced readers take for granted, and we experimented with their lessons by trial-and-error. Our first attempts will be followed by improvements.

**Kathy Anderson:** The students were very reluctant to read out loud in the beginning, but after I read out loud from our textbook to them, they gradually warmed up to the idea.

**Kay Walter:** We experimented with a solution because reading specialists insist that “Oral reading leads to better silent reading” (Rasinski, *The Fluent Reader* 8). In response, we got positive feedback, but we also are able to identify weaknesses in our approach. Devising a better solution is an ongoing challenge. Already we are discussing improvements to our experiment for the fall, and we are open to further ideas and suggestions. Our plan is again to pair the same two classes, but they will interact in a different way. We will incorporate innovations in our approach that result in an oral reading by the

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less-developed readers, coached by the Shakespeare students, and the repetition of our experiment will correct some of the less successful elements of the first effort.

Repetition is the second ritual of mammalian learning, a means of practicing and enjoying emergent mastery. Thus, the Shakespeare class met repeatedly to rehearse their reading before presenting it to the remedial students. The reluctant readers, too, practiced repetition, though their enjoyment of the task is necessarily less developed. Some of them considered the initial lesson reading in class as sufficient preparation for the lesson and its assigned response. They have yet to internalize the truth that repetition is a natural ritual that mammals employ in using critical thinking to assist mastery. They need help with repetition. They read the play once aloud with their teacher and once along with the Shakespeare students. The growing familiarity that repetition brings encouraged their active participation in the assignments. The homework assignment was attempted by nearly every student enrolled in the remedial course.

In other activities of and readings for the course, students were reluctant to embrace the homework assignments, seeing them as more voluntary busywork than as academic exercises designed to assess development of essential skills. This assignment found them engaged and eager to respond in writing to the modeling provided by the more experienced readers. The Shakespeare students had more practice reading academic assignments and more exposure to drama. Their demonstration of successful reading of the plays served as a model for successfully developed internal vocalization of reading with fluency and comprehension.

Reading specialists assert that "Listening to an expressive and meaning-filled voice can draw students into the magic of reading," and that magic is the necessary catalyst for student success, which leads to retention, progress, and graduation from our university (Rasinski, *The Fluent Reader* 19). The practiced readers demonstrated the efficacy of the third ritual of mammalian learning: modeling. The missing step that might have followed was to turn the less experienced students' listening exercise into an effort to repeat the modeled fluent reading. This is one improvement we plan to include next time. Modeling provides a successful example for the novice to follow

and shapes behavior into mastery. As familiarity grows, the actions of reading become less stressful, and fun begins to emerge.

Play forms the basis of this shaping process. Play is the fourth ritual of mammalian learning. The Shakespeare students were able to approach the dramatic reading as play because they were working with a less complex text to read than the Shakespeare plays they were encountering in class. Nevertheless, the material they had already mastered served as a solid basis for the reading because they understood the elements, the challenges, and the purposes of the dramatic genre. Because they were in the position of more experienced models of success, they played at expertise in the same way children play at being grownups, navigating their perspective of adult challenges.

The remedial students too were busily at play, critiquing the presentation of the more experienced readers in a performance review. As the audience, they had an essential role to play. Drama is a performance art, and it requires a live and interactive audience in a way that no other genre of literature does. My students needed someone to read to who could benefit from the reading in a way that would warrant credit for a service-learning assignment. Kathy's students got to play a purposeful role in helping them complete their work and successfully earn their grade.

**Kathy Anderson:** Before the readers' theatre experience, attendance was fairly poor, but attendance the day of the performance was nearly 100%.

**Kay Walter:** Because we understood the needs of our learners and employed biomimicry, we could make use of four rituals of mammalian learning to achieve success. We employed trial-and-error to determine an intervention strategy. We devised the idea of pairing the two classes as a benefit to the reluctant readers, to the Shakespeare students, and to our work as their teachers. We let them choose a reading selection to share, and both groups of students were necessary to the success of the experiment. The advanced readers were necessary as the performers, and the less-experienced readers were necessary as the audience. The responsibilities of each group to the other formed a temporary learning community that gave the freshmen a sense of belonging to the university, encouraging continued effort when academic goals seem elusive.

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At such times, repetition of difficult or tedious tasks brings familiarity. The repeated presentation of their reading assignment in different voices led to a familiarity with the text and the variety of voices necessary to create meaning from a dramatic text. The dramatic reading offered by the Shakespeare students modeled the internal chorus of voices necessary to reading fluency, and the presence of an audience of reluctant readers preparing a performance review inspired the upperclassmen's reading. The practice at helping underdeveloped readers infuse sense into an oral reading models successful teaching skills for the scholars who represent the next generation of English teachers. It sharpened their awareness of elements necessary to the successful presentation of the genre of drama as a form of literature, and it clarified their understanding of the challenges a reader of drama faces in preparation for making sense from Shakespeare.

The greatest success of the experience, though, was instruction through play. The students, both freshmen and upperclassmen, genuinely enjoyed playing their parts in the experience. They achieved an innate sense of pride at their accomplishment of their assignments and satisfaction at the contribution they made to the other class's work. Biomimicry inspired us to utilize the strategic rituals of mammalian learning: trial-and-error, repetition, modeling, and play. Incorporating these rituals into our approach to pair our classes honed their critical thinking skills. Our students had a chance to problem-solve in ways that heightened their sense of belonging to the university community, taking responsibility for the image they portray to less practiced learners and succeeding at the challenges a true scholar faces. Their success at this initial challenge predicts other academic successes in their futures, and their enthusiastic engagement in the lesson was our reward for employing biomimicry in designing their assignments.

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## The Psychology of "Samson Agonistes" and God's Role in Terrorism

By Melissa Green-Moore

Despite its proliferation in today's social media, terrorism is not a new concept. Its origins can be traced back to the advent of civilization as soon as there was something worth killing for, be it land, political power, or religious beliefs. Milton's "Samson Agonistes" is one such tale of religious fanaticism advanced to a terroristic end. Samson's final act is predetermined by his need to prove that he is God's devoted servant. His unswerving faith in his own egomaniacal position as an agent of God's wrath justifies his final act and, ultimately, placates the God he serves.

In a flashback at the beginning of the poem, Samson contemplates the reason he was born and how his being captured and enslaved by the Philistines has disgraced the legacy of his God. His belief that he was created to be God's chosen avenger tortures him in his present captive state. He bemoans:

Why was my breeding ordered and prescribed . . .  
Designed for Great exploits, If I must die  
Betrayed captive, and both my eyes put out,  
Made of my enemies the scorn and gaze;  
To grind in brazen fetters under the task  
With this Heav'n gifted strength?  
. . . 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;  
Yet stay, let me not rashly call in doubt  
Divine prediction; what if all foretold  
Had been fulfilled but through mine own default. (Milton 30–  
36, 38–45)

This moment of contemplation allows insight into Samson's psyche where he describes the reason for his God-given strength; he has "promised or been promised" (38) to deliver Israel from Philistine dominion. Promise is a powerful word that hinges on personal honor as well as the repayment of a verbal debt. As is

typical in Milton, the line can be read at least two separate ways: one, that God promised his chosen people that Samson would deliver them from the Philistines, or, two, that Samson promised God that he would use his gift of strength to deliver his people. Based on the rest of the speech and his sense of personal accountability, Samson sees his role as an obligation that must be repaid to God. This sense of duty drives all his thoughts and actions throughout the poem. Despite his current situation at the time of this reflection, he still holds out hope at the end of this speech of being able to perform his God-given task. Although he feels that he has failed in God's mission, he cannot allow himself to doubt "Divine prediction" (44), and so he chooses to think that he might still find a way to serve God's agenda despite the mistake he made in confiding his secret to Dalila.

Samson forsakes his God-given gift by entrusting his secret to a woman, effectively placing his relationship with his wife before his relationship with God. Thus, the resulting imprisonment he finds himself in is all of his creation. He feels he must atone for his disobedience to God. He muses:

Nothing of all these evils hath befall'n me  
But justly; I myself have brought them on  
Sole author I, sole cause: if aught seem vile, . . .  
The mystery of God giv'n me under pledge  
Of vow, and have betrayed it to a woman[.]  
(Milton 374–79)

This reflection reveals that the source of Samson's strength was made as a pact between him and God and that Samson "pledged a vow" (378–79) to God that he would not reveal its source. By confiding in Dalila, he breaks his covenant with God and views his enslavement and torture as a direct result of this breach of contract. Forsaken as he feels in this passage, Samson owns the responsibility of his choices, blaming himself, not God, for his failures. It is important to understand that Samson is still looking for a means of reconciliation and a way to atone for his disgrace in betraying God. The ownership of his sins in this passage foreshadows the desperation of his final act.

Weighing heavily on Samson's mind is not only his shirked responsibility to God but also his unmet responsibility to his people, the Israelites. He believes that he has not only failed and dishonored God but, in so doing, also failed and dishonored the nation of Israel. This fall from Grace not only affects him



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and his people, but, because of his failure, the praises of another, rival God are being sung by heathens. Samson's Christian God is then doubly disgraced: first, by his intended champion's failure and, second, by the elevation of a heathen God above himself.

Samson shows his remorse:

I acknowledge and confess  
That I this honour, I this pomp have brought  
To Dagon, and advanced his praises high  
Among the heathen round; to God have brought  
Dishonor, obloquy, and oped the mouths  
Of idolists, and atheists; have brought scandal  
To Israel, diffidence of God, and doubt  
In feeble hearts, propense enough before  
To waver, or fall off and join with idols;  
Which is my chief affliction, shame and sorrow  
The anguish of my soul . . . (Milton 448-58)

He fears that his failure will cause the faith of other Israelites to falter, "wave and fall off" (457) or even worse "join with idols" (457) and begin worshipping a false, heathen God. Samson recognizes the larger danger of his failure in this passage that his demoralized people are in a vulnerable position of potentially falling into worshipping an empty God. This sense of added responsibility weighs heavily on a heart that is already overburdened by its own failures. The larger scale, potential religious dismay of his people becomes "his chief affliction" (458) and prompts the "anguish of his soul" (458). Here the subconscious motivator for revenge is born.

The need for revenge is sanctioned and picked up on by the Chorus who immediately seize on an opportunity to illustrate to Samson how he may yet keep his word to God. In Milton's poem, the Philistine Aristocrats are throwing a celebration in honor of their god, Dagon, and wish to exploit Samson's strength for their entertainment and amusement. Initially, Samson refuses to accompany the messenger to the temple but is quickly convinced by the Chorus that, by going along and pretending to accommodate his jailors' whims, he might thereby discover a way to serve his God's purpose. The Chorus prompts him, "Where the heart joins not, outward acts defile not" (1368), suggesting that, since Samson does not feel at one with their beliefs in his heart, nothing he outwardly does matters in terms of his devotion to his own God. Samson still argues that he would be complicit in their celebration since he was not

physically forced to attend and that by attending he would incite the jealousy of an already angry God who would never forgive his trespasses. Samson states:

But who constrains me to the temple of Dagon,  
Not dragging, the Philistian lords command.  
Commands are no constraints. If I obey them  
I do it freely; venturing to displease  
God for fear of man, and man prefer,  
Set God behind: which in his jealousy  
Shall never, unrepented, find forgiveness.  
Yet that he may dispense with me or thee  
Present in temples at idolatrous rites  
For some important cause, thou need'st not doubt . . .  
Be of good courage, I begin to feel  
Some rousing motions in me which is dispose  
To something extraordinary my thoughts.  
(Milton 1369–79, 1381–83).

By the end of the passage, however, “some rousing motions” (1378) cause “something extraordinary” (1379) to come into Samson’s “thoughts” (1379). This is the pivotal moment in the poem, and the origin of the passionate “rousings” (1378) becomes important in determining whose will Samson ultimately serves, his own or God’s. The Chorus plants the seed of destruction by suggesting that Samson may yet find a way to serve his God’s agenda by obeying the commands of the enemy. Samson, however, comes to the “extraordinary” (1379) thought through these “rousing motions” (1378) on his own and keeps that thought to himself. The question becomes from where the “rousing motions” (1378) originate. Are they promptings from his God, reawakening his passion to serve in one, final devotional act? Or, are they the culmination of the feverish thoughts of a mind that has long been searching for an opportunity to seek revenge on both the woman who betrayed him and the people who enslaved him?

Milton does not definitively answer the question, but he has provided his reader with Samson’s history, which provides a useful clue. When Samson told Dalila that his strength was in his hair, his hair was shorn off as soon as he fell asleep, rendering him no stronger than an ordinary man upon waking. This is confirmed in the Old Testament in the Book of Judges where Samson finally tells Delilah the truth about the source of his strength. He states:

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There hath not come a razor upon mine head; for I *have been* a Nazarite unto God from my mother's womb: if I be shaven, then my strength will go from me, and I shall become weak, and be like any *other* man. (*King James Bible Online*, Judges 16:17)

It is because of his loss of super-human strength, then, that he is able to be chained and have his eyes plucked out. Therefore, since his great power had been eclipsed and his will bowed to their servitude, it seems the Philistine Aristocrats wished to call him to their celebration to perform acts of strength so that they could taunt his current weakness, further illustrating their triumph over a great soldier and previously frightening adversary. The "rousing motions" (1378) then become synonymous with the voice of God, stirring in Samson and pushing him to attempt one final act of strength in order to redeem himself, his people, and, most importantly, his God. The chorus supports his mindset and eggs him on, proclaiming, "Go and the Holy One/Of Israel be thy guide/To what may serve his glory best, and spread his name/Great among the heathen round" (Milton 1427–30).

This well-wishing speech contains the essence of the problem of Samson's final, destructive act. If the Chorus is to be believed and if Samson can be said to be dutifully following its advice, then the God of Israel "guides" (1428) Samson in the commission of an action that will "serve his glory best and spread his name" (1429–30) in a profound, awesome fashion "among the heathens" (1430). Thus, if Samson's vengeance was guided by God and intended to serve and spread the word of his God, then there is no escaping the idea that God not only supports Samson's terrorist act, but God, acting through Samson, causes the act itself to be perpetrated. Samson alone does not have the strength any longer; he must call upon God for assistance with this labor.

For further evidence of God's role in the destruction, the Biblical story of Samson and Delilah offers clarification. At the moment prior to toppling the pillars of the temple of Dagon, Samson prays to God:

And Samson called unto the Lord, and said, O Lord God, remember me, I pray thee, and strengthen me, I pray thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes. And Samson took hold of the two

middle pillars upon which the house stood, and on which it was borne up, of the one with his right hand, and of the other with his left. And Samson said, Let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with *all his* might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that *were* therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than *they* which he slew in his life. (Judges 16:28)

He specifically asks God to “strengthen me . . . only this once . . . that I may be at once avenged” (Judges 16:28). The biggest difference between the two texts is not that the power for the final act comes from God himself, but the reason that Samson seeks this vengeance. In the King James Bible, Samson asks for vengeance for the loss of both his eyes (Judges 16:28). In Milton’s “Samson Agonistes,” Samson seeks vengeance primarily for the sake of his people and for his own sense of religious devotion. Milton focuses primarily on the psychological suffering of Samson, making the story much more humanistic and helping to illustrate why God would condone such an action. Samson is predetermined to be God’s champion, and, in his moment of greatest need, God hears his plea and forgives him, supplying him with the strength to “smite” their mutual enemy.

In the Miltonic version, prior to his final act, Samson pauses in deep consideration “with his head a while inclined, / and eyes fast fixed he stood, as one who prayed, / Or some great matter in his mind revolved” (1636–38). Milton takes pains here to remove God directly from the equation. The account comes secondhand from a messenger who is observing Samson just prior to the toppling of the temple. In this manner, Milton avoids a direct implication of God by having the messenger interpret Samson’s actions rather than having Samson explain his thought process firsthand. And what is reported is ambiguous as to the role of God—the messenger cannot distinguish whether Samson is resting, “praying” (1637), or resolving his will to what he is about to do. The agency here is given to Samson, and, when he does speak, he claims the sole authority for his action. Samson states:

Hitherto lords, what your commands imposed  
I have performed, as reason was, obeying . . .  
Now of my own accord such other trial  
I mean to show you of my strength yet greater,  
As with amaze shall strike all who behold . . .

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Samson with these immixed, inevitably  
Pulled down the same destruction on himself.  
(Milton 1640–41, 1643–45, 1656–57)

His powerful statement, "now of my own accord" (1642), seems to challenge the Biblical account where he obviously serves God's will. It is unclear in the Miltonic version where Samson finds the strength to commit his final act, but Milton makes it clear that the way in which Samson chose to use his power was his own choice and that his intent was to leave a legacy of personal glory that would "amaze" (1644) those few who survived to give the account. Because Samson's action results in his suicide, it would be unlikely that a religious man like Milton would have endorsed the concept of voluntary self-sacrifice since it is viewed as a sin. Samson's choice begs the question if suicide is allowable/acceptable if it occurs in the service of God. As an influential writer of his time, especially considering the precarious political position of England at this juncture, Milton would not have wanted to endorse suicide particularly since he is often equated with Samson because of his own blindness.

The Semichorus also adds their interpretation of the act with a short speech that seems to offer a moral. It states, "So fond are mortal men / Fall'n into wrath divine, / As their own ruin on themselves to invite, / Insensate left, or sense reprobate, / And with blindness internal struck" (Milton 1682–86). Since the men being referred to in this passage are the Philistines, the Semichorus calls these mortal men foolish who find themselves the objects of divine wrath, for they invite upon themselves their own destruction by lacking sympathy and compassion for Samson, and being themselves not of the elect and, therefore, headed to damnation, they are struck with internal blindness, a blindness that does not allow them to see the workings of God's wrath in other men (Milton 1682–86). It is implied that mortal blindness results from hubris and a misinterpretation of the power of one God over another. The Philistines enjoy punishing the champion of the Israelite God and use his power to entertain their god, Dagon. In losing their perspective and compassion for another living soul, they simultaneously incur the wrath of the Christian God who seeks to redeem his chosen. Thus, mankind "invites his own ruin" (1684) because it fails to understand the subservient nature of its position. Gods are not to be trifled with and to assume the superiority of one God over another is the

greatest folly of man. The Semichorus is implying that all Gods, if not one, at least play by the same rules, and man's inability to fathom this concept results in his proverbial blindness. Thus, Divine wrath becomes the only way to make people see the errors of their ways.

The final speech of the Chorus, which is the final speech of the poem, illustrates that the Christian God does indeed support terrorist acts when mankind needs to be taught a lesson and put back into its respective place in the power hierarchy. 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.  
 Of he seems to hide his face,  
 But unexpectedly returns  
 And to his faithful champion hath in place  
 Bore witness gloriously; whence Gaza mourns  
 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. (Milton 1745–58)

The speech begins with the Chorus explaining that “all is best, though we oft doubt, / What th' unsearchable dispose / Of highest wisdom brings about, / And ever best found in the close” (1745–48). In other words, what happens is the best/right course of action even if we do not understand the divine reasoning behind it. Humans cannot trace the “unsearchable dispose” (1746) back to God, and, even if we could, we would not be able to understand the “highest wisdom” (1747) that is found in the end. These lines invite trust in the workings of the divine and faith in that which we cannot understand. In the next set of lines, the chorus reminds us that we often operate without witnessing the presence of God in our lives, “Oft he seems to hide his face, / But unexpectedly returns” (Milton 1748–49). Milton seems to want to reinforce that the workings of God are not within our mortal power to understand, and yet we must always be prepared for the moment of His return or for an awareness that we are suddenly under the microscope of God's all-seeing eye. This section relates to the rest of “Samson Agonistes” as a whole

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because, for much of the poem, Samson assumes he is forsaken by God and has all but given up the hope of any type of reconciliation between the two of them. But the Chorus lets the reader know that, in the final moment of Samson's self-sacrifice, [God] unexpectedly returns / And to his faithful champion [Samson] hath in place / Bore witness gloriously" (Milton 1750–52).

Despite the earlier qualification that divine punishment is sometimes deserved and necessary, this is still a troubling revelation. Assuming that the Chorus is correct, Samson has been without the compassion of God throughout most of his suffering, but as soon as he chooses to become an agent of destruction in the name of God, God returns and bears "glorious witness" to the wrath that his chosen unleashes. Milton qualifies the previous statement by extending it with a semicolon so that there is no doubt that God rejoices in the suffering of the Philistines. He adds, "Whence Gaza mourns / And all that band them to resist / His uncontrollable intent" (1752–54). What becomes increasingly difficult to separate in this section however, is who the pronoun "His" refers to. Is it God? Is it Samson? Is it God acting through Samson? The Philistines have banded together in order to "resist" (1753) the teachings of the Israeli God, but their union is ultimately worthless as God's intent, carried out through Samson, overpowers them all. If the "His" (1754) corresponds to God in this line, then the wrath that Samson unleashed on Gaza was ordained and sanctioned by God. This makes God, at the very least, complicit in terrorism.

The final four lines are a grammatical challenge. If the multiple inversions are removed, they read more like this: "His servants, he hath dismissed with peace and consolation, after newly acquiring true experience from this great event that calms the mind and allows all passion to be spent" (Milton 1755–58). Assuming that the "His" (1755) refers to God and that his servants are the faithful of Israel—Samson, the Chorus, and his father, Manoa—then this catastrophic event "calm[s the] mind" (1758) of God and allows "all [his] passion [to be] spent" (1758) so that he can release his servants with peace and consolation. By inference, the people of Israel would also be calmed and vindicated by Samson's success and, thus, the tumultuous relationship between them and the Philistines would be calmed for a time. The "His" (1755) here cannot literally pertain to

Samson because he does not have servants, and, although he experiences passionate “rousing motions” (Milton 1382) earlier in the poem that may have resulted in this act, the implication is, once again, that God is acting through Samson. Perhaps then Samson’s belief that he is the chosen agent of God is correct. His strength is used to make an impression that will not soon be forgotten by either side, and, if the passion is attributed to him in the commission of his final act, it can be inferred that he is at peace after his action despite causing his own death.

The notion that Milton, through the filter of the Chorus, has God support terrorism is an uncomfortable one, but one that is derived from the Old Testament where God furnishes Samson with the power to create destruction. The issue still ends in a matter of perspective depending on from which side the act is viewed. In Samson’s case, the Israelites view him as a hero and celebrate his loyalty to God and their people; to the Philistines, the same man is labeled a terrorist who is singularly responsible for the largest death toll among their people. Who is right? And, more importantly, where does God stand in the division and, even more problematically, if all Gods are really one, what does terrorism suggest about the nature of that God? If God’s nature feeds on the violence of man, then there will never be peace. The best humanity can hope for are ebbs in the perpetual tide of violence.

Milton’s “Samson Agonistes” leaves the reader in consternation as to where Milton ultimately stands on God’s role in terrorism and forces the reader to try to determine the answer for him- or herself. The agony of Samson becomes the agony of us all as we try to deduce God’s will in matters of conflicting religious belief. Does the divine choose earthly champions and provide those individuals with the super-human capacity of self-sacrifice in the name of devout service, thus sanctioning a form of suicide and murder as long as it is committed in the name of God? Or is terrorism ultimately an individual or group perversion of God’s will fed by religious fanaticism and sustained by blatant hubris and scriptural misinterpretation? One thing is certain: regardless of God’s role in the commission of this terrorist act, he is indisputably pleased with the result of the action, which suggests that he overtly or covertly supports terrorism that serves His own agenda.



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