

Samson Agonistes

(John Milton)

It's a holiday for the Philistines when our poem opens, and this means that their Hebrew prisoner, Samson, gets a day off from the grueling labor he's usually forced to do. But he just can't relax. Instead, he obsesses over the various mistakes he's made in his life that have gotten him to this low point. Also, we learn that he's blind and that he feels he's betrayed his religion and his people.

Well, we're off to a good start!

In comes the Chorus, a group of his Hebrew friends. They try to be helpful, but they don't really have the lingo down and Samson seems to become more and more miserable. Then Manoa, Samson's father, shows up. He wants to negotiate with the Philistine authorities to secure Samson's release, but no dice. Samson feels that he deserves to be in prison. Hey, you can't stop a dad from trying—and off he goes to do just that.

Shortly after his dad departs, Samson's infamous Philistine ex-wife Dalila pays a visit. We learn that she's the reason Samson is in prison: she betrayed the secret that his amazing strength depends on his having a flowing, luscious locks. She told her people, they cut his hair, arrested him, blinded him... and here he is in prison. But she's here to apologize and explain.

Obviously, Samson is completely uninterested in hearing her excuses and says lots of insulting things to her. She leaves in a fury, with this parting shot: she's now a hero among her people.

Last but definitely not least is the Philistine giant Harapha, who says he's just come by to check out this famous Samson. He also says that he wishes Samson were in better physical condition so they could fight it out and see who's strongest. Samson is totally down, but Harapha won't fight a blind guy. They trash-talk for a while, and then Harapha leaves in a huff. Harumph!

Just then, a messenger arrives with the order for Samson to come perform in a Philistine festival. Uh, no thanks, Samson says—and then thinks better of it, saying he has had this vague but powerful feeling that he's meant to go and perform some great deed. Off he trots, just missing his father, who's back with good news that he successfully bribed some Philistine leaders and can now take Samson home.

Uh-oh. We're starting to get a bad feeling about this—and we're right. Just as the Chorus is about to celebrate this good news, they hear a horrible shriek. Another messenger runs in and reports that Samson has killed both himself and the entire Philistine elite by toppling the roof of the theater. The Chorus and Manoa alternate between being super sad over the death of Samson and super happy that their enemy has been defeated. In the end, they go off to look for Samson's body and Manoa promises he's going to build Samson an awesome tomb. And thus ends Samson.

