



**NAXOS**  
AudioBooks

POETRY  
UNABRIDGED

**John Milton**  
**Samson**  
**Agonistes**

Performed by **Iain Glen** and cast

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1	Introduction - On a Festival Day	8:55
2	Chorus 1: This, this is he...	3:19
3	Samson: I hear the sound of words...	2:16
4	Chorus 1: Tax not divine disposal, wisest Men...	1:45
5	Samson: That fault I take not on me...	2:03
6	Chorus 1: Thy words to my remembrance bring...	2:33
7	Manoa: Brethren and men of Dan, for such ye seem...	3:11
8	Samson: Appoint not heavenly disposition, Father...	2:56
9	Manoa: I cannot praise thy Marriage choices, Son...	3:36
10	Manoa: With cause this hope relieves thee...	4:22
11	Chorus 1: Desire of wine and all delicious drink...	4:05
12	Samson: O that torment should not be confin'd...	2:45
13	Chorus 3: Many are the sayings of the wise...	3:07
14	Chorus 3: But who is this, what thing of Sea or Land?	1:14
15	Dalila: With doubtful feet and wavering resolution...	2:05
16	Dalila: Yet hear me Samson; not that I endeavour...	6:47
17	Samson: I thought where all thy circling wiles would end...	7:32

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18	Chorus 1: She's gone, a manifest Serpent by her sting...	3:24
19	Samson: Fair days have oft contracted wind and rain.	0:48
20	Harapha: I come not Samson, to condole thy chance...	7:15
21	Samson: Among the Daughters of the Philistines...	3:15
22	Chorus 1: His Giantship is gone somewhat crestfall'n...	3:15
23	Officer: Ebrews, the Pris'ner Samson here I seek.	2:20
24	Chorus 1: Consider, Samson; matters now are strain'd...	2:34
25	Officer: Samson, this second message from our Lords...	3:03
26	Manoa: Peace with you brethren, my inducement hither...	4:09
27	Manoa: I know your friendly minds and – O what noise!	1:56
28	Messenger: O whither shall I run, or which way fly...	4:01
29	Messenger: Occasions drew me early to this City...	4:27
30	Chorus 1: O dearly-bought revenge, yet glorious!	2:22
31	Manoa: Come, come, no time for lamentation now...	4:07
32	End Credits	1:26

**Total time: 1:51:11**

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# **John Milton** Samson Agonistes

Directed by **John Tydeman**

Samson	<b>Iain Glen</b>
Manoa	<b>David de Keyser</b>
Dalila	<b>Samantha Bond</b>
Harapha	<b>Philip Madoc</b>
Public Officer	<b>Matthew Morgan</b>
Messenger	<b>Michael Maloney</b>
Chorus	<b>Tim Bentinck, Simon Treves and Sean Barrett</b>

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# John Milton

## (1608–1674)

# Samson Agonistes

To many, Milton appears to be perhaps the sternest and most forbidding figure in English poetry: a rigorous Puritan obsessed by sin and death, whose great religious epic, *Paradise Lost*, analyses the flaws and suffering of the human condition in a language that is pseudo-classical, cold, heavy and almost impenetrable. They think of his entire poetic achievement as divorced from human emotion, frozen into a kind of ornate heartlessness.

But in fact Milton was a proud, passionate man, all-too-human in his enthusiasms, his mistakes and his misfortunes. The more we know about his life and the more carefully we read his works, the more interesting he becomes. The identification of Milton with Samson, the hero of his last major work, is irresistible. Blind, humiliated, helpless, surrounded by his enemies, all his hopes and beliefs shattered, wondering if his

tragic state means that his God has abandoned him, and wondering whether his life can be redeemed before death claims him – this is Samson in the poem, and it is Milton himself in his final years, living in Restoration London, the holy experiment of the Puritan Commonwealth, to which he had devoted his life, now consigned to dust, and he himself ignored by the godless Philistines who now ruled England.

John Milton (1608–1674) grew up in a wealthy and cultured London household, surrounded by music and private tutors. He was taught French, Italian, Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and was reportedly composing poetry at the age of ten. He went up to Cambridge in 1625, but two years later his proud, uncompromising temperament led to his being rusticated, although he did return to take his degree. This was an age when it was still possible

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to build a poetic reputation privately, and his early work was sufficiently admired for him to be invited to submit a poem on Shakespeare for publication in the Second Folio of the plays in 1632. Leaving Cambridge, he adopted no profession, but travelled in 1638–40 in France and Italy, mingling with learned men of all kinds, including Galileo. He returned on hearing the news of impending Civil War in England, explaining: 'I thought it base that I should travel abroad at my ease for the cultivation of my mind while my fellow citizens were fighting for liberty.'

For the next twenty years, poetry was relegated to second place in his life, and he became a polemical writer on Church and State, and on intellectual and moral issues. Some of these polemics were personal, but many others were written in the service of the Puritan Commonwealth headed by Cromwell, which employed Milton as a secretary and 'ideas man'. During this time, his private life was often in disarray. In 1642 he made a disastrous marriage with seventeen-year-old Mary Powell, who left him after only a few weeks. The true story of what

happened between them we can only guess at, but it must have been a case of total incompatibility. In response to this personal trauma, Milton wrote several tracts demanding the reform of England's divorce laws. Mary did eventually return to him in 1645, and bore him four children, three daughters, and one son who died. Mary herself died in 1652. He re-married in 1656, but his second wife and her infant also died. Meanwhile he had published tracts on government, arguing that it was lawful for a nation to depose and kill a tyrannical king, and tracts in favour of the publication of books free of state censorship.

The severest trial of these years however was his loss of sight. It had been failing for some years, and by 1652 he was irrecoverably blind. With iron willpower he continued his writing with the aid of amanuenses, among them his daughters, to whom this duty became a cause for rebellion and estrangement. It was in the late 1650s that he began to dictate *Paradise Lost*. He would compose in his mind perhaps as much as forty lines, often in the quiet of the night, then dictate

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them when day broke, revising them as they were read back to him. In spite of the crumbling of the Commonwealth, in 1659 and even in early 1660, he was still publishing tracts advocating the ideal of an anti-monarchical Puritan state, thereby placing himself in great danger. At the Restoration in May 1660, he went into hiding, but was arrested and briefly imprisoned in the Tower. He was probably fortunate to be pardoned, thanks partly to the support of other writers, including Andrew Marvell. In 1663 he was married for the third time, to Elizabeth Minshull, aged 24, who would outlive him by 50 years.

*Paradise Lost* grew steadily, and he had inserted into Book 7 the sombre words:

*More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged  
To hoarse or mute, though fallen on evil days,  
On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues,  
In darkness and with dangers compassed round.*

This epic poem is a vast meditation on divine providence and human freedom, with the avowed aim of ‘justifying the

ways of God to man’. Just as Adam had been expelled from Eden into a harsh and hostile world, so Milton and his kind had experienced the destruction of the godly republic, and were left facing a desolate future, having only the faith that a new order would one day arise to wipe out the sins and failures of the past. *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667, and it soon attracted the attention of the literary world for its sublime seriousness and the majestic beauty of its language. ‘Into the heaven of heavens I have presumed /An earthly guest,’ wrote Milton, and indeed once the ear had become accustomed to his idiom, it did come to resemble an unearthly music. One early reader, the poet Sir John Denham, is said to have declared it ‘the noblest poem that ever was wrote in any language or in any age’. By 1680 it had come to be regarded as the English national epic, rivalling Homer, Virgil and Dante.

While sharing something of this sublimity, *Samson Agonistes* is in many ways his most personal poem, as personal as the sonnet *On His Blindness*. ‘Agonistes’ means a competitor, wrestler,

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or athlete, and Samson, once mighty in physical strength, must now wrestle with the spiritual anguish of knowing that he was destroyed through his own sin and weakness, and must seek some means of redemption. The poem is modelled strictly on a Greek tragedy, although it is scarcely intended for stage production. It is concentrated in time and place, occupying only a few hours, and features a chorus which comments on the action. A succession of people visit Samson to mock him or commiserate with him, including his treacherous wife, Dalila. Through his colloquies with these people, Samson gives voice to his suffering, his contrition, and his sense of desolation, yet at the same time the revelation dawns on his mind that he may find redemption through one last heroic act, which must claim his own life too.

To the modern reader the poem is troubling in its misogyny, for Dalila here is cast almost in the role that Satan played in *Paradise Lost*, and Milton states openly that this is nature of woman – to debase man. Still more disturbing is the glorification of violence and killing in the service of God.

In the last few years, commentators have pointed out that Samson's actions and his self-justification are those of a suicide bomber, prepared to die so long as he can take his enemies – who are also God's enemies – with him. Yet who can fail to be moved by his suffering, and his tragic lines:

*O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,  
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse,  
Without all hope of day!*

A revered classic for two centuries and more, by the early twentieth century Milton was falling from favour with many readers and critics, and his work was being described as a magnificent monument to dead ideas. Milton was proud, sensitive and rebellious, but profoundly religious and passionately committed to Christian culture and classical culture. His poetry unites intensity of faith with classical, formal powers of expression, like a baroque cathedral. To our radically different age, his cultural and spiritual allegiances offer a profound challenge, but his achievement, his extraordinary mind



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and his majestic language, will always endure as long as English literature is read and valued. We can never forget that at the heart of Milton's work we sense his personal, anguished self-doubt. Was he, like Adam and like Samson, responsible for his own desolate condition? Had God turned his back on him? If so why? And when would that desolation end?

**Notes by Peter Whitfield**



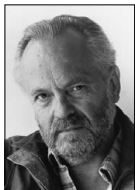
**Iain Glen**'s television credits include *Downton Abbey*, *Spooks*, *Game of Thrones*, *Dr Who* and *Law and Order*. He has also worked extensively in film and is known for his roles in *The Iron Lady*, *Resident Evil: II & III*, *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. He won the Silver Bear for Best Actor for his role in *Silent Screams* and was nominated for an Olivier Award for his performance in the play *The Blue Room* opposite Nicole Kidman. Other theatre appearances include *Uncle Vanya*, *The Crucible*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Henry V*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Edward II*.



**David de Keyser**'s television appearances include *Rome*, *Holby City*, *Island at War*, *The Last Detective* and *Waking the Dead*. His theatre work includes *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Designated Mourner*, *She Loves Me* and *Hysteria*. He can be seen in the films *A Dry White Season*, *Red King*, *White Knight* and *King David*.



**Samantha Bond** is one of Britain's best-known actresses. She trained at the Bristol Old Vic and has since been active in theatre, television and film. Theatre credits include *Rubinstein's Kiss* at the Hampstead Theatre, *Amy's View* at the National Theatre, West End and Broadway, and *A Woman of No Importance* at the Haymarket Theatre. For television, she has appeared in the period dramas *Mansfield Park*, *Fanny Hill* and *Downton Abbey*, as well as the comedy series *Outnumbered*. She also starred as Miss Moneybags in several James Bond films.



**Philip Madoc's** extensive theatre work includes the roles of Othello and Iago, Faust and Macbeth and, with the RSC, the Duke in *Measure for Measure* and Professor Raat in *The Blue Angel*. TV roles include Lloyd George, Magua in *The Last of the Mohicans*, and the defence lawyer in Brookside. He also starred in his own detective series, *A Mind to Kill*. He also read *The Death of Arthur*, *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Arabian Nights* for Naxos AudioBooks.



**Matthew Morgan** has appeared in more than 350 radio productions for the BBC, as well as numerous radio dramas for France and the USA. He played Steve Oakley in *The Archers* and was nominated for a Radio Times Best Newcomer Award for his performance as the eponymous hero of *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*. He also directed an audio production of the award winning stage play *Children of the Wolf*. His film and TV credits include *Hollyoaks*, *The Bill*, *Casualty*, *Eastenders*, *The Brittas Empire*, *Jacob's Ladder* and *London Lights* (as co-writer). He also voiced all six series of the internationally successful wild-life documentaries *Built for the Kill*.



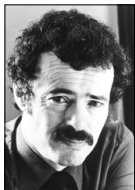
**Michael Maloney** has worked extensively for the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Royal National Theatre and in the West End, taking leading roles such as Romeo, Prince Hal in *Henry IV Parts 1 & 2*, *Peer Gynt* and *Hamlet*. He is also active in film, and is known for his roles in Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet*, *Henry V* and *In the Bleak Midwinter*. He can also be seen in the films *Iron Lady*, *Young Victoria*, *Babel* and *Notes on a Scandal*. Recent television work includes *By Any Means*, *Fleming*, *The White Queen*, *The Accused* and *New Worlds*. He is currently working on Kudos' *Utopia*.



**Tim Bentinck** trained at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and won the Carleton Hobbs radio award and joined the BBC Radio Rep. His acting career has a solid base as a successful voice-over artist, together with regional, fringe and West End theatre, and forays into TV stardom – Tom Lacey in *By the Sword Divided*, Nigel Barrington in *Square Deal*, Steve Nicholson in *Made in Heaven* and Wng Cmdr Raikes in *Strike Force*. Episodes of *Casualty* and *The Bill* and Chris Barrie's business manager, Mark Fitzherbert, in the sitcom *Prince Among Men*, the U-boat Commander in *Enigma*, the voice of Chow Yung Fat in the English version of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and the voice of James Bond in the computer game of *The World Is Not Enough*.



**Simon Treves'** theatre appearances include *The Magistrate*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard III*, *Charley's Aunt*, *A Man For All Seasons*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *A View From The Bridge*. On television he has been seen in *Red Dwarf X*, *Boon* and *By the Sword Divided*. He has made over 150 radio appearances for the BBC, including *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, *In the Native State* and *15-Minute Hamlet*.



**Sean Barrett** started acting as a boy on BBC children's television in the days before colour, when it went out live. He grew up through *Z Cars*, *Armchair Theatre*, *Minder* and *Father Ted*. His theatre credits include *Peter Pan* at the old Scala Theatre and Noël Coward's *Suite in 3 Keys* in the West End. Films include *War & Peace*, *Dunkirk* and *A Cry from the Streets*. He was a member of the BBC Radio Drama Company. He also features in *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, *The Voice of the Buddha* and *Canterbury Tales III* and read the part of Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot* and Nakata in *Kafka on the Shore* for Naxos AudioBooks.



**John Tydeman** played a key role in BBC radio drama for nearly four decades, as producer, Assistant Head and then Head of Radio Drama. During that time he directed most of the major plays in the classical repertory, from Greek drama to Shakespeare, Chekhov and Shaw. He was also active in contemporary theatre, directing works by Osborne, Stoppard, Albee, Pinter and many others. Directing for television and the stage has been a regular feature throughout his busy career. He has worked with Paul Scofield on many occasions, including radio productions of *Macbeth* and *Othello*. For Naxos AudioBooks he has also directed *King Lear* and *Just So Stories*.

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## Credits

Directed by John Tydeman  
Engineered by Malcolm Blackmoor  
Produced by Nicolas Soames

This production was first broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 14 December 2008

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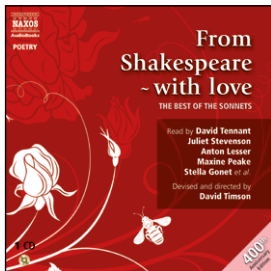
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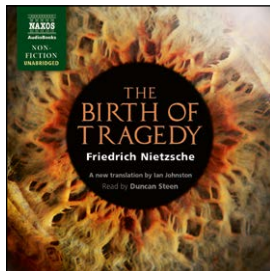
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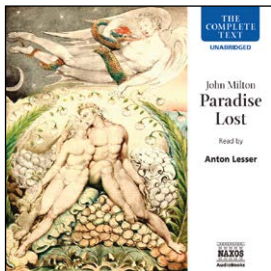
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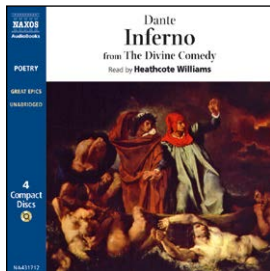
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# John Milton

## Samson Agonistes

Performed by **Iain Glen** and cast

*Samson Agonistes*, the 'dramatic poem' by John Milton, was published in 1671, three years before the poet's death. Written in the form of a Greek tragedy, with the Chorus commenting on the action, it follows the biblical story of the blind Samson as he wreaks his revenge on the Philistines who have imprisoned him. A powerful subject, with a personal resonance for the blind Milton, it is a perfect work for the medium of audiobook where poetry and drama can be balanced equally.

Directed by **John Tydeman**

Samson	<b>Iain Glen</b>
Manoa	<b>David de Keyser</b>
Dalila	<b>Samantha Bond</b>
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