

Trans Mayhem in *Samson Agonistes*

In 1949, a twenty-two-year-old trans woman, known in the archives under the pseudonym Lynn or Val Barry, hit an impasse in her search for a physician willing to perform what we now call “gender confirmation surgery.”¹ Even then, seventy years ago, the operation she was after, vaginoplasty, was not exactly experimental: it had been performed on cisgender women for eighty years and trans women for twenty.² In fact, trans patients had been undergoing genital reconstruction since as early as 1906, when Karl Baer received certain surgical interventions at Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexual Inquiry in Berlin. The precise nature of his treatment, unfortunately, remains unknown, as the records were destroyed in a Nazi book-burning in 1933. By the late 1940s, then, there was some reason to think that medical providers would be receptive to Miss Barry’s request. In fact, the previous year, a hospital in her home state of Wisconsin had almost agreed to complete what she called her surgical “conversion.” Unfortunately, at the last minute, they reversed their decision and refused to operate, offering instead, as if by way of a consolation prize, to give her a lobotomy. She declined and, grasping the complexity of the medical systems she hoped to navigate, began to look for an advocate. She reached out, as so many others would, to Dr. Harry Benjamin, an endocrinologist who had rebranded himself as a trans specialist after a notorious career capitalizing on scam cures for tuberculosis and “rejuvenating” vasectomies. Upon receiving Miss Barry’s inquiry, Benjamin redirected her search toward the more liberal medical landscape of San Francisco, where physicians at the Langley Porter Clinic had begun providing the very occasional trans patient with hormone therapy. However, some question remained concerning the legality of this particular procedure, and so, as a preliminary measure, Benjamin, along with his collaborators Karl Bowman and Alfred Kinsey, sent a letter of inquiry to the state attorney and future governor of California, Edmund G. Brown, who responded in his official capacity that any physician who performed such an operation would be liable for prosecution for criminal mayhem.

Although by now it is synonymous with a kind of riotous disorder, the word *mayhem* is in fact cognate with *maim*, and it describes a very specific type of mutilating injury. In its precise legal definition, mayhem entails the intentional disfiguring or disabling of an otherwise comely and vigorous body. Curiously, the object of the debilitating assault is not only, nor even chiefly, the victim whose eyes are gouged out or whose testicles are removed. Rather, in the aftermath of such an attack, it is society itself that suffers a loss of capacity and resilience. Take, for instance, the odd crime scene at issue in *The State of North Carolina v. Bass*, a case in which the defendant was paid \$29 to inject a local anesthetic into a patient's fingers so that he could cut them off at home to collect insurance money.³ In upholding the physician's conviction for mayhem, Justice Moore wrote that "our government is deeply concerned, financially and otherwise, for the health of its citizens and that they not become a public charge."⁴ Debilitating injury robs the state of a productive body, reducing a "healthy" subject into a public burden who drains rather than enhances the viability of the nation. Maiming was not merely a question of labor power, however; it was also about sex. In that historical moment, the government was also deeply concerned with the reproductive health of its citizens, which the state sought to manage and even optimize according to models of social hygiene and racial fitness.⁵ For this reason, mayhem shadowed health centers, prisons, and eugenics boards, a charge levied when the wrong kind of person was forcibly sterilized, someone too rich, too able-bodied, or too white.⁶ Whether directed at fingers or testicles, the cuts that constitute mayhem threaten the well-being of the state, which depends upon its subjects' capacity for labor and for reproduction, their ability to replenish the social body through producing healthy, desirable offspring.⁷ The criminal offense of mayhem marks the point at which someone, often a doctor, interferes with the reproductive futurity of the nation. Although rarely actualized through an indictment, let alone a trial, the threat of mayhem prosecutions serves as a useful index for the shifting form of American biopolitics in the twentieth century, cropping up in controversies about compulsory sterilization; elective vasectomies; abortion; contraception; and, beginning in 1949, trans health care.⁸

Even in the 1940s, however, something about mayhem felt vestigial. The charge struck legal scholars and medical ethicists as curiously out of time, a relic of English common law that no one quite understood how to handle. "Nobody knows whether the old common law offence of mayhem still exists," complained one barrister trying to parse the legal status of contraceptives and bare-knuckle prizefighting in 1956.⁹ Such frustration is everywhere evident in Harry Benjamin's correspondence with attorneys

and sexologists about Miss Barry's case, in which he throws his hands up in frustration at "this medieval state of affairs."¹⁰ The physician writes that "it is difficult to reconcile my common sense with the fact that statutes based on requirements of English kings in the middle ages should still be valid."¹¹ Benjamin means to be dismissive, of course, handwaving these trumped-up "medieval" charges countermanding his expertise as irrelevant to what he understood as a matter of public health. This chapter, however, takes his provocation seriously, reassessing the apparent break between legal assaults on trans medicine in the twentieth century and the pastoral power of care codified in early modern laws against maiming.

Premodern literature, flush with wounding, constitutes an important conceptual reservoir for scholars tracking mayhem's origins and afterlives, as in Graham Hammill's work on consent in *Venus and Adonis*; Ari Friedlander's exploration of poverty, impotence, and biopolitics; and Micah Goodrich's extraordinary essay on "biosalvation" in *Piers Plowman*.¹² This chapter adds to this growing body of critical work by applying a trans analytic to the legal and literary history of mayhem through a reading of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, a text that is uniquely primed to explore the conceptual manifold of trans mayhem. A story that circles around a community thrown into crisis by the holes gouged into a hypermasculine war hero, Milton's closet play frames maiming as a threat to military readiness and national security. The text's account of the perils of debility is also heavily gendered, since Samson's incapacitation is described as a feminizing, castration-adjacent procedure. As characters collect around Samson's exhausted body, they propose various conceptual frameworks to navigate the morass of legal, political, and ethical questions raised by mayhem. Is there a viable social claim on individual bodily capacities? Is gender a resource that can be harvested by the state? Are there limits to the demand that we work ourselves to death for our country or expose ourselves to mutilating injury in war? Who should be blamed and punished when the nation loses access to a given body's powers? What do we collectively owe to those whose bodies have been rendered "useless" in our service?

In many respects, *Samson Agonistes*'s characters float answers to these questions that prefigure the extractive logic employed by mid-century states' attorneys bent on snuffing out the very possibility of trans life. As they assess Samson's defective body, his countrymen take for granted their access to and ownership over his strength and reproductive choices; they deplore the feminizing cut he endured as a collective wound that has degraded and incapacitated them all; and they struggle mightily to find someone to punish for it. Such perspectives dominate the play, a text that is shot through with a fear of the emasculating maim that softens and enervates, a

laceration that can strike a body at peak masculinity and leave it dependent, defenseless, and femme. However, in Milton's hands, Samson's experience also registers the harms that follow from the state's seizure of bodily capacities, the mandate to maintain a lusty and productive body for the benefit of the nation. This chapter argues that within Milton's closet play lies a quiet celebration of trans mayhem, an account of wounding that embraces rather than recoils from vulnerability, one that rejects "usefulness" and "employment" as metrics for assigning value to bodies. In the cut that renders Samson unfit for military duty, Milton floats the possibility that there is a pleasure in weakness that is transformative, liberating, and ethical.

Harry Benjamin was right in identifying mayhem as an artifact of pre-modern jurisprudence. The crime's essential features, its relation to debilitating injury and military service, were outlined in the most influential legal treatises of the thirteenth century, including Henry de Bracton's *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae*, as well as the anonymously authored commentaries *Fleta* and *Britton*.¹³ Despite its medieval origins, however, mayhem's ongoing significance was assured by its early modern career, in particular its appearance in the works of the seventeenth-century jurist Edward Coke, whose importance within Anglo-American jurisprudence is almost impossible to overstate. In the first volume of his *Institutes*, Coke recounts a case he heard on his circuit in 1603, when a man named Wright, whom he describes as "a young strong and lustie rogue," determined to "make himselfe impotent, thereby to have the more colour to begge, or to be relieved without putting himselfe to any labour," and so "caused his companion to strike off his left hand."¹⁴ Both were indicted for mayhem, which, Coke explains, "signifieth a corporall hurt, whereby [a man] loseth a member, by reason whereof he is less able to fight." Relevant injuries include "putting out his eye, beating out his foreteeth, breaking his skull, striking off his arme, hand, or finger, cutting off his legge or foot, or [anything] whereby he loseth the use of any of his said members."¹⁵ The gravity of the crime follows from the precept that "the life and members of every subject are under the safeguard and protection of the king . . . to the end that they may serve the king and their countrie, when occasion shall be offered."¹⁶ One cut in particular would seem to diminish the bodily vigor necessary for those who might be pressed into a fighting corps. Castration was consistently flagged as the most extreme form of the crime imaginable, and thus the law reserved the harshest penalties for those who removed testicles—either their own or another's. Bracton's description of mayhem denounces those who remove or damage the testicles (*virilia abscederit*), either "on account of debauchery or in order to sell [the victim]" (*cum libidinis causa vel commercii*),¹⁷ while William Hawkins's *Pleas of the Crown* (1716) notes that, although "all maim

is felony, it is said, that anciently castration was punished with death, and other maims with the loss of member for member.”¹⁸ Even so, despite the gravity with which the courts dealt with gelding, the gonads occupied a curious position in the physiological map of mayhem. Unlike the feet, teeth, fingers, and bones singled out as necessary for self-defense, the testicles are rarely involved directly in battle. In his fussy and roundabout way, William Blackstone offers something approaching an explanation when he includes in his anatomical chart of mayhem not just fingers and foreteeth but “those parts, the loss of which in all animals abates their courage.”¹⁹ Gender creeps into the legal account of mayhem because of its close connection to military service, which demanded a full complement of intact, and thus fully virilized, soldiers.

In sourcing “animal courage” to the genitals, Blackstone’s does not stray far from early modern models of physiology. In a discussion of Venetian castrati in his *Anthropometamorphosis* (1653), John Bulwer expounds on the Galenic schema that casts the testes as “a Fountaine of heat and strength” that

communicate a certaine aire to the whole Body, by whose mediation virility is reconciled, [and] the body acquires strength and firmnesse, [and] is made more lively . . . which parts being cut away, besides that, men are deprived of the Generative power, they want all these conveniences, [and] the colour and heat grow dead and withered, [and] they are a made beardslesse, and altogether effeminate . . . The *Parthians* used this out of Luxury for the retarding of Age, and the prolongation of life, it having been observed, that castrated Animals in any kind, and *Spadoes* by Art, live longer than they that retaine their virilities, and by this Artifice they retaine a better habit of Body, upon which score those Canibals who live neare the Equator, who hunt after men to eate them, when they have taken any Males of the neighbouring Nations, they many times geld them, and so fat them up for slaughter as we do Capons.²⁰

A soldier needed his stones. Bulwer identifies the testicles as the anatomical repository of the “heat” that infused the body to generate a “firmnesse” of physique coupled with a “certaine aire” of masculinity captured in an aggressive, warlike disposition. Gelding depleted the potential soldier’s heat, rendering him weak, debilitated, and effeminate. Such a creature was of no use to the press gang, a “withered” husk of a man incapable of defending his nation during wartime. Indeed, genital modification thrusts the cut body outside of the fold of the nation altogether according to a racial logic that affiliates “spadoes by Art” with Parthians and equatorial cannibals. Bulwer recoils from “Eunuchisme,” a benighted and suspiciously foreign

method “of degrading men” not only “from their manhood,” but also from their humanity, leaving them little better than capons, livestock, or prey animals (344–45). Even so, he begrudgingly acknowledges that castration comes with “conveniences” of its own: prolonged youth and rejuvenation, extended life span, a pleasing plumpness, a better “habit of body,” and a small and sweet voice. Bulwer was not alone in noting the advantages of emasculation. Indeed, his paragraph closely paraphrases a passage on the apparent longevity of deer from Thomas Browne’s *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), in which Browne remarks that “we sensibly observe an impotencie or totall privation [of testicles] prolongeth life, and they live longest in every kinde that exercise [sex] not at all. And this is true not onely in Eunuches by nature, but spadoes by Art; For castrated animals in every species are longer lived then they which retaine their virilities.”²¹ Whereas Coke denounced mayhem as “*homicidium inchoatum*,” an abortive homicide that falls just short of snuffing out life altogether, Bulwer and Browne understand the allure of castration as a procedure that radically enhances a given body’s vitality.²² Voluntary gelding—which did indeed occur in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England—amounted to a misappropriation of the body’s “generative power,” an essentially selfish hoarding of heat, life, and manhood that properly belonged to the crown.²³

To return to a key term from Coke’s judgment against Wright, Bulwer frames castration as a maim that interferes with its victim’s “lustiness,” a term that denoted a general sense of health or wellness, as when Shakespeare has Bullingbrook profess himself to be “Not sick” but “lusty, young, and cheerily drawing breath,” or when Paulina reports that Hermione has given birth to “a goodly babe, / Lusty and like to live.”²⁴ In a more general way, lustiness signaled the lively energies and unique abilities possessed by both human and nonhuman actors. Robust vegetable growth or especially fertile soil could be described as “lusty,” which might also name the potency possessed by an “inanimate agency” like “fire, wine, poison, [or] a disease.”²⁵ Coke’s outrage at Wright’s self-inflicted injury, surely a scheme to avoid holding down a steady job, stems from his perception of lustiness as a positive and quantifiable social good, something necessary for national security and economic stability. At the same time, Wright’s “lustiness” was equipped with a sinister edge, an uncomfortable proximity to the appetites that emerged sharply when paired with his alleged roguishness. To draw upon Ari Friedlander’s groundbreaking work on early modern rogues as a population requiring biopolitical management, Wright’s case was not only about the idleness and criminality of the poor, but also about their “sexual delinquency” and “prodigious fertility,” a profligacy that threatens the very survival of the body politic.²⁶ A “lustie rogue” abuses his natural capacities,

levying his energies and craftiness for socially destructive ends like drinking, whoring, and begging. From this angle, the cut of the axe rendered Wright impotent in the doubled senses of the term, leaving him both incapable of manual labor and unable to bridle his lascivious urges.²⁷ A petty criminal and breeder of bastards fully dependent upon parish support to scratch out a meager living, such a rogue can only drain valuable resources from the communities in which he is parasitically embedded. After his voluntary amputation, then, Wright joined the mass of unproductive bodies denounced by the Calvinist preacher Thomas Taylor as the “idle, lustie, and wandering beggars, who ought not to eate.”²⁸

Laws against maiming may have been cloaked in the language of care and safeguarding—life and limb are in the hand of the king, and so forth—but in reality they were a vehicle for extraction. The grave penalties attached to wounding were never intended to preserve bodily autonomy but to protect government property: the labor power and reproductive capabilities of its citizenry. Note how mayhem merges or even confuses subject and sovereign at a physiological level, remapping the body according to its ability to inflict and sustain violence, or to fortify the nation by performing honest labor. As such, whether the cut is consensual or not is irrelevant because the individual’s powers of self-defense are not fully his own. From the opening made by mayhem, sovereign power slithers into the body, lingering over areas rich in capacity, arrogating to its own use the teeth, digits, limbs, sinews, and sense and sex organs that constitute the country’s muscle. At the same time, mayhem law turns on the tenderness of these appendages, their fragility in the face of digging thumbs and grinding boots and arrant axes. This vulnerability becomes an opportunity for the state to broaden what in an anticipatory way we might call its police powers by invoking the language of protection to exercise punitive force against its own citizenry. Common-law mayhem, as elaborated by early modern jurists, becomes a vehicle by which, in time, the state will assume what Jasbir Puar calls the “right to maim,” the unilateral authority to inflict debility on “undesirable” populations at home and abroad, measures justified through the language of self-defense.²⁹

As would later be said of sodomy, mayhem proved to be “an utterly confused category” that hopelessly blurs the distinctions between victim and perpetrator, morbidity and vitality, consensual surgery and involuntary injury, and individual liberty and sovereign prerogative.³⁰ Maiming simultaneously enhances and depletes its victim’s lustiness, leaving him an unsuitable farmhand but an industrious beggar, thief, brawler, and philanderer. The jurists, for their part, were not particularly invested in identifying, much less resolving, any of these incongruities. Unspooling

the contradictions that animate the confused category of mayhem entails pivoting from legal archives to a literary account of wounding that folds together debilitating injury and forced feminization: Milton's *Samson Agonistes*. Milton's closet play is uniquely primed to explore the conceptual manifold of trans mayhem, most obviously because it is about a disabled soldier whose injury simultaneously incapacitates and feminizes him. It is also a text that, like the law of maims itself, inquires after the origins and ends of bodily capacitation. Along with the assembled Israelites of the Chorus, the play's readers cluster around Samson's prone body to, in Harapha's chilling words, "survey . . . each limb," measuring and assessing his remaining strength.³¹ Within Milton's corpus, "surveying" could mean a lively assessment of a body's abilities, as when Adam describes his initial experience of awakening: "Myself I then perused, and limb by limb / Surveyed, and sometimes went, and sometimes ran / With supple joints, as lively vigor led" (8.267–69). For Milton's first man, surveying amounts to a vibrant, vital process of discovery, an ecstatic exploration of his physical energies that leads to increasing freedom, self-direction, and relationality. Testing his abilities and flexing his supple joints sets him in motion, moving him around the newly created world and pressing him to find his place in it.³² If Adam's experience on his first day of life is energizing and invigorating, the surveying that Samson undergoes over the course of his final day is enervating and objectifying. Rather than integrating his new members into a coherent whole, the evaluation to which the imprisoned Samson is subjected plucks him apart, limb by limb. Here, surveying cleaves more closely to its function within property law. In appraising Samson's condition, the host of characters who descend upon the imprisoned hero assert their claims over his strength, his sexual favors, his attention, and his energies. That is to say, *Samson Agonistes* circles around the fundamental questions raised by common-law mayhem: what is a body for? To whom do our abilities belong? What happens when a body cannot fulfill its appointed purpose?

One line of thought pursued by the play to answer these questions is profoundly natalist. From this point of view, the place of Samson's extraordinary energies within his nation's destiny was fixed not only from birth but from the moment of his conception, which the Book of Judges describes this way: "There once was a man of Zorah, of a Danite family, Manoah by name; his wife was barren and had had no children. An angel appeared to the woman and said to her, 'Behold, you are barren and childless, but you shall conceive and bear a son . . . He will be the one who will begin to save Israel from the hands of the Philistines'" (Judg. 13:2–5).

Samson's story has always turned on the question of reproductive sexu-

ality. The promise of deliverance packaged in Samson's muscular frame was not just the sole purpose of his own birth; it was the very condition of his mother's fertility. As such, the denuded and enslaved hero begins his self-inventory by questioning the significance of his own birth. In his opening reflections, tracing the paths he has followed through capacitation and debility, Samson asks:

O wherefore was my birth from Heaven foretold
 Twice by an angel, who at last in sight
 Of both my parents all in flames ascended
 From off the altar, where an off'ring burned,
 As in a fiery column charioting
 His godlike presence, and from some great act
 Or benefit revealed to Abraham's race?
 Why was my breeding ordered and prescribed
 As of a person separate to God
 Designed for great exploits . . .
 With this Heav'n-gifted strength? O glorious strength,
 Put to the labor of a beast, debased
 Lower than bondslave! Promise was that I
 Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver. (23–39)

Heaven itself arranged Samson's birth announcement, deputizing angels equipped with explosions and columns of fire to stage something resembling a Biblical gender-reveal party announcing that Samson was to be assigned *hero* at birth. As with all other forms of birth assignment, this means that the child entered this world with a place already carved out for him. The angel explained that Samson would be ordained as a Nazirite, with the terms of his service stipulated well in advance of his appearance on the scene: his "vow of strictest purity" was made for him by his mother; his dietary restrictions were specified by an angelic messenger; and his bodily comportment, down to the length of his hair, was dictated by divine mandate. While Milton erases Samson's mother from her son's tragic narrative, he unfolds the natalist biopolitics attending Samson's birth into a full educational program.³³ From infancy onward, the chosen child's "breeding" was tightly "ordered and prescribed" to maximize and control his abilities as part of an education that subjected him to extraordinary social, familial, and religious pressures designed to shape him into the deliverer "promised" to his nation. This pedagogy took as its special object his vital energies, fine-tuning the biological rhythms of his growth, nourishment, and libido, including failed efforts to redirect his substantial sex drive toward

the “daughters of [his] own Tribe” and “Nation” (876–77). When Manoa claims that the angel had “Ordained [Samson’s] nurture holy, as of a plant” (362), he indicates that his paternal role entailed overseeing the proper ordering of Samson’s vegetative energies, his virtues and capacities. To take up the language of Wright’s case, then, Manoa’s charge was to cultivate Samson’s “lustiness,” optimizing his son’s powers while also containing them within acceptable boundaries.

To frame matters in Arendtian terms, Samson’s birth is all nativity and no natality. For Hannah Arendt, the possibility of worldbuilding and creative action depends upon “the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers,” little bundles of potential that can be actualized in any number of unpredictable ways.³⁴ No one has ever arrived in the world less a stranger than Samson, a promised deliverer ordained by God, a messianic prototype whose story was written for him in advance. The fantasy of conquest announced at Samson’s conception only impoverishes the political imagination and shuts down every avenue for envisioning collective well-being except war, settlement, and genocide. Devising other uses for his abilities, different pathways for his judgeship, or new forms of relationality with the people he was sent to slaughter does not fall within the compass of his charge. Paradoxically, then, the “consecrated gift of strength” that is Samson’s birthright diminishes rather than enhances his experience of freedom, as he feelingly understands when he laments that he has always lived “in power of others, never in my own” (78). Insuperable powers do not translate to liberty and agency. So much is riding on Samson’s explosive strength: should he somehow mishandle or diminish his “gift,” say, through poor marriage choices or inadvisable gossiping, his entire nation will be condemned to “bondage” and “servitude” (269–70). From the perspective of his countrymen, their chosen deliverer is a poor steward of his lusty energies, his sexuality in particular. Samson’s strength must be protected *from Samson*, the unpredictable, impulsive instrument of divine will. The hero’s “lustiness” cries out for governance, management, and intervention, so that he might fulfill his divinely appointed task: to do his country some service, when occasion shall be offered.

That is to say, Samson’s physical gifts were not given to him so that he could actualize himself or pursue his own ends. Rather, they mark a debt that that was in arrears before he was even born, a deficit that must be repaid through constant, unending labor on behalf of his country. It is rarely remarked that *Samson Agonistes* is a text that is relentlessly obsessed with work. The play is comprised of a cascade of speeches that lament the derailing of “the work to which I was divinely called”; “the work from Heav’n imposed”; “the work for which thou wast foretold,” since “thou, [Samson,

were] solemnly elected / With gifts and graces, eminently adorned / To some great work" (226, 565, 1661, 678–80). They wonder whether God will "use him further yet in some great service" or "To what can [he] be useful, wherein serve" or whether he must "sit idle with so great a gift / Useless about him" and "at home lie bed-rid . . . idle, / Inglorious, unemployed" (1499–1501, 564, 579–80). What interferes with this imperative for productivity is an assault that constitutes criminal mayhem to the letter: the Philistines set about "cutting off, disabling, [and] weakening"³⁵ Samson's muscular body by "putting out his eye" and "violently depriving [him] of the use of [his] members" in order to render him "less able to fight" and "defend himself."³⁶ This problem isn't just Samson's, of course, because his boundless reserves of "Heaven-gifted strength" are not truly his own but are earmarked for the Israelites. This arrangement has complicated repercussions for Samson's bodily integrity. When Manoa thinks about his son, he does not imagine a single, unified subject. Instead, Manoa sees a full complement of soldiers packed into one convenient container, as his gaze lingers over "his hair / Garrisoned round about him like a camp / Of faithful soldiery," while "on his shoulders wav[e] down those locks, / That of a nation armed the strength contained" (1496–98, 1493–94). Manoa's blazoning eye fully elides the interiority and psychological complexity everywhere on display in Samson's own reckoning with his experience. Instead, this Leviathan-like image of corporate personhood absorbs the entire Israelite nation into Samson's body, which stores their collective stockpiles of military strength. In Kevin Curran's analysis, this model of personhood does not entail consciousness, selfhood, or psychological depth. Rather, the Hobbesian person is a "relational" structure, an object through which various transactions are accomplished.³⁷ In this case, Samson is the product and instrument of a covenantal transaction between God and the Israelites, an object through which they are to achieve their domination over the Levant. That means, as the Chorus never tires of reminding him, that Samson's strength does not belong to him. He may have been born with it, it may be "lodged" within him, he may feel it "diffused . . . through all my sinews, joints and bones" (1141–42). It doesn't matter—Samson does not own but merely mortgages his extraordinary abilities, which arrive heavily entailed.

The all-consuming work imposed upon Samson, so important that it overrides any claim he might have to self-determination or bodily autonomy, is ethnic cleansing. Samson's great task is to clear a coastal strip of the Levant for settlement by the Tribe of Dan, a project that Milton explicitly frames in the language of racial conflict that pits "Abraham's race" or "the unforeskinned race" against their "inhuman foes" (29, 1100, 109). In treating the Philistines as a cipher for racial difference, Milton did not in-

novate: Christian theologians had associated the Philistines with a defiling foreign presence as early as the Septuagint and pre-Vulgate translations of the Bible, which rendered the Hebrew *p'lishtim* as *allophyloi* and *alienigenae*, “those of alien stock” or “the foreign-born.”³⁸ Beginning as early as the Crusades, the vague ethnic difference of the Philistines began to narrow, as Christian propagandists increasingly cast Muslims as the “New Philistines,” an equivalence brokered by the two groups’ allegedly shared weakness for idolatry, luxury, despotism, and effeminacy.³⁹ The transformation of Philistines into Muslims routinely shaped visual representations of the Samson cycle in early modernity.⁴⁰ Paintings of Samson’s shaving or his destruction of the temple of Dagon sometimes clothe his Philistine assailants in Persian and Ottoman garb, as in Gerrit van Honthorst’s painting of Dalila sporting a turban as she starts to operate on Samson’s unconscious, vulnerable body.⁴¹ Mattias Stom sets a semi-nude Dalila on the left as a figure of Orientalized seduction, and in submitting to her Samson has exposed himself to the violence bearing down on him from the right side of the frame. In Jan Steen’s *Simson en Delila* (1668), Samson reclines on a Persian rug next to the remains of a recent feast. He is already separated from his sword, which lies limply on the floor next to a feathered turban that he appears to have recently doffed. As he slumbers, Dalila passes locks of Samson’s snipped hair back to a turbaned man who stands in a group that includes a Black Philistine. Giving in to the luxurious, gluttonous pleasures flagged as “eastern” prepare Samson for a cutting that traffics his vital energies to his people’s enemies, here marked as both non-Christian and nonwhite. In the figure of the quasi-Muslim Philistine, confessional divisions bleed into racial difference, a taxonomical distinction between kinds that turns on the biomarker of circumcision.⁴² Seeding *Samson Agonistes* with the potent admixture of anxieties condensed into the biblical Philistine, then, participates in what Walter Lim calls Milton’s “political Orientalism,” a “solipsistic ethnic vision” that maps “Israel’s exceptionalism” as God’s chosen people onto the English nation.⁴³ Casting Samson as the torchbearer of the “new Israel” of the English republic both whitens and Christianizes the hero with whom Milton identifies while racializing his “faithless” and “inhuman” enemies according to a dynamic that, as Benedict Robinson notes, speaks to “the etiology of race in republicanism.”⁴⁴

In the minds of medieval and early modern exegetes, the Philistines’ essential foreignness was not fully captured by surface-level variances in complexion or the idiosyncrasies of their religious practice. Understanding the full extent of their embodied difference meant reaching below the belt to examine the arrangement and use of their genitalia. The nonbelievers’ enigmatic and perverse corporeality emerges most sharply in the events

narrated in 1 Samuel: 5–6, when the captive Ark of the Covenant shatters the sea-god’s idol on the threshold of his own temple. The *Geneva Bible* (1560) translates the battle between the graven images and its scorched-earth fallout this way:

The Philistims toke the Arke of God, and broght it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon. And when they of Ashdod rose the next day in the morning . . . beholde, Dagon was falle[n] vpon his face on the grounde before the Arke of the Lord, and the head of Dagon and the two palmes of his hands *were* cut of vpon the thresholde: onely the stumpe of Dagon was left to him. Therefore the Priests of Dagon, and all that come into Dagon’s house treade not on the thresholde of Dagon in Ashdod, vnto this day. But the hand of the Lord was heavy vpo[n] Ashdod, and destroyed them . . . [and] was against the citie with a very great destruction, and he smote the men of the citie bothe small and great, & they had emerods in their secret partes.⁴⁵

The first casualty of the theomachy is Dagon himself, dismembered and skinned until only a twisted stump remains to his followers. When their false god’s abjection fails to chasten the Philistines, who respond by inventing an exciting new superstition that involves jumping over the temple’s threshold, the Lord escalates the situation, dealing out a series of devastating punishments that begins with an infestation of mice, and then afflicts the Philistines with a confusing plague of “emerods.” At this point in the narrative, the Philistines send the Ark from city to city, from Ashdod to Gath to Ekron, which merely spreads the plague, with the captive Ark as a vector of contagion. The Philistines then go to their “Priests & the soothsayers” and ask how to put an end to their suffering, and their priests tell them that they should “giue vnto [the Ark] a sinne offering: then shal ye be healed. [Make] fieve golden emerods and fieve golden mice . . . ye shal make the similitudes of your emerods, and the similitudes of your mice that destroy the la[n]d.”

They had emerods in their secret parts. The punishment for idolatry, for pitting the Ark against the graven image of Dagon, is that the entire nation is stricken with what, in the English, was rendered as “emerods”—that is, hemorrhoids. These translations loosely follow Jerome’s Latin, which does not give a specific name to the Philistines’ embarrassing condition, which, he says, causes their “entrails to project and putrefy”; he says only that God “*percussit eos in secretiori parte natium*,” he struck them in the very hidden, or maybe recessed, parts of the buttocks. Jerome later specifies which secret parts he meant when he indicates that the five sin offerings were fashioned

as “*quinque aureos anos*,” five golden anuses. If hemorrhoids offer a neat explanation for the humiliating affliction lodged in the recesses of the rump, neither the precise nature of the plague nor its location—anal or genital—have ever been entirely straightforward. The shape of the golden “emerods” fashioned in recompense for the Ark’s theft struck some commentators as profoundly phallic, suggesting some sort of genital affliction ranging from impotence to castration. The symptoms of this plague have been variously glossed as tumors, ulcers, abscesses, plague boils, syphilis, prolapsed intestines, “an affliction of the Philistines’ *membra virile*.”⁴⁶ Other, more visceral explanations were also proposed. In the *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus claims that the Philistines experienced “a grievous malady . . . inflicting most rapid dissolution,” such that “they brought up their entrails all consumed and in every way corrupted by the disease.”⁴⁷ Some commentators tethered the plague of emerods to the infestation of mice that seems to have accompanied it, as in the bracing explanation offered by Rashi, who writes that the Philistines endured a “plague of the rectum,” in which “mice would enter their recta, disembowel them, and crawl out.”⁴⁸

These complexities are only compounded by the Hebrew, which specifies that the Philistines were stricken with *ophalim* (עפלים), a term that seems to mean swelling. That sense would be straightforward enough, except for the fact the term *ophalim* was marked off for *qere-ketiv*, a ritual reading practice according to which the text was written one way and read aloud differently, as in the case of the tetragrammaton, which is traditionally pronounced as Adonai.⁴⁹ This special instance aside, such replacements were largely a matter of textual clarification or updating archaic linguistic forms. The Philistines’ plagued genitals, however, were an unusual case, part of a very limited set of euphemistic substitutions made for the sake of propriety.⁵⁰ In 1 Samuel, the apparently indelicate term *ophalim* was to be read aloud as *techorim* (טחורים), which meant hemorrhoids or abscesses. Commentators are often puzzled by this substitution, since abscesses are not in any obvious way less disgusting than swellings. The effect here is not one of clarification, but rather of multiplication, an accretion of plaguey symptoms that proliferate in new and ever more confusing forms the closer you look. The Philistines had *ophalim* layered with *techorim*, or maybe they had *techorim* out loud and *ophalim* silently. As it happens, *ophalim* appear at only one other point in the Hebrew Bible, in the catalogue of curses in *Ki Tavo* outlining the punishments that would be visited upon the Israelites should they revert to idolatry. Among the “extraordinary plagues,” the “strange and lasting plagues” that would discipline the straying people were the *mitzrayim ophalim* (מצרים עפלים), the Egyptian inflammation (Deut. 28: 59, 27). It is as if a temporal and spatial anomaly opens up in the groins af-

flicted with *ophalim* / *techorim*, a mark of backsliding, a sign inscribed in the flesh that signals a movement away from monotheism and back to the old gods, away from covenantal obligation and back to disobedience, away from the Promised Land and back to Egypt.

What is happening with the bodies of the Philistines? In Robert Mills's handling of the episode, the plague of emerods amounts to a divine judgment on the Philistines' sodomitical tendencies, a sin that solicits an illness that "eat[s] the sinner up from the inside" and makes visible their internal contamination.⁵¹ The insult suffered by the Ark of the Covenant, its mere proximity to the polluted and promiscuous cult of Dagon, is repaid by a pandemic engineered for sexual humiliation, a disease that targets the groin, genitals, or rectum. And indeed, the affiliation between the Philistines and sexual deviance only strengthened over time, finding one afterlife in sexology. As it happens, the outbreak of emerods was a perennial favorite in the medical literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, within the transcendently strange genre of retrospective diagnosis. In this body of critical writing, physicians and psychologists with apparently nothing better to do attempted to perform differential diagnoses on historical, mythological, and Biblical maladies. Any number of potential diseases were suggested for the Philistines' affliction: dysentery and bubonic plague rose to the top of the list, but other contenders were typhus, proctitis, bilharziasis caused by parasitic worms, or hemorrhoids caused by inflammation subsequent to anal sex. Indeed, as one physician working in this arena caustically explained, "emerods" were simply a convenient shorthand for tumors, shriveled testicles, and "the endless ills of the *pathici*."⁵² As Mitchell Hart notes, the outbreak of emerods in particular and Philistine degeneracy more broadly cropped up in work by medical experts pursuing the "connection between prostitution, venereal disease, and social and political disorder."⁵³ These medical studies offered a secularized version of the premodern account, submitting that the maladies endured by the Philistines were their natural punishment for the biological sin of sodomy rather than the religious sin of idolatry. At the same time, recognizing that the emerods serve as a commentary on the Philistines' sexual practices should not occlude the fact that the disease also refashions their gender. In the queer body of the stricken idolator, interior and exterior bleed together into an anatomical configuration that blurs any obvious distinction between male and female. Their innards extrude and genitals wither, and all the while lesions multiply into yawning, vaginal fissures. Ultimately these contemptible creatures resort to the prosthesis of golden phalloi in a pathetic bid to be made whole again. The obscure gender of the Philistines, unmanned and infinitely permeable, handmade and defective, marks their exclusion from

the covenant: the curses catalogued in *Ki Tavo* threatens the Israelites with enslavement and *ophalim*, “the Egyptian inflammation,” should they break the commandments (Deut. 28:27). In this sense, the racialized dimensions of Philistine heresy emanated from their “secret partes”—swollen, corpuscular, and unrecognizable. The perplexing, even incendiary nature of the Philistines’ gender is both a symptom of idolatry and a punishment for it, a mark of difference that invites further violence from those whose chosen status manifests in their physical integrity and legible genitalia.

In the temple at Ashdod, we get a taste of how the Lord exercises his disciplinary power. In a roundabout fashion, the emerod pandemic constitutes mayhem, and not only because it throws the Philistine social order into confusion and disarray. The swelling, burrowing affliction also handily accomplished what the law of maims attributes to castration: it targeted the genitals to debilitate and feminize its victims, leaving them vulnerable, impotent, and helpless. The pestilence attacked men at the height of their military strength, fresh from an apparently definitive victory over the Israelites, reversing their conquest and compelling them to return the Ark they were holding hostage as an emblem of their domination. If the infliction of emerods amounted to mayhem in a general sense, the assault on Dagon constitutes maiming according to the letter of the law. Indeed, this is precisely how Milton characterizes the chastening endured by “that twice-batter’d god of *Palestine*”⁵⁴ when he visits Dagon in hell, calling him “one

Who mourned in earnest, when the captive ark
Maimed his brute image, head and hands lopped off
In his own temple, on the grunsel edge,
Where he fell flat, and shamed his worshippers.” (1.457–61)

“Maim” is not a word that Milton favored, and in applying it to the bruising suffered by Dagon’s “image” he employs it in the technical sense used by the common law: the repeatedly “battered” body has not merely experienced an assault, but an amputation that immobilized and defanged him. For his hubris, Dagon’s limbs were plucked off one by one until the “brute” icon was a mute and recumbent stump, unable to rise and defend himself against his divine assailant. Milton’s attention lingers on the communal context of Dagon’s wounding as its affective charge radiates outward to “shame” his worshippers who stand frozen at the threshold littered with the fragments of their shattered idol. In *Paradise Lost* no less than in Coke’s *Institutes*, mayhem terminates in a collective injury that disarms and devastates the social body as a whole.

For Milton, then, Dagon’s abjection offered a point of entry into the po-

litical questions raised by debilitating violence, which explains its presence in *Samson Agonistes*, a play set prior to the events of 1 Samuel. This premonition of the idol's fall, which Manoa "as a prophecy receive[s]," foreshadows Samson's own demolition of the Temple of Dagon and aligns Samson's self-immolating assault as both an echo and anticipation of the mayhem generated at Ashdod (473). As such, the curious, temporally disjointed appearance of Dagon's stump within the narrative of *Samson Agonistes* offers one framework for understanding the origins and ends of Samson's extraordinary abilities: he was born to maim. Samson grimly predicts a near future in which the "God of Abraham"

Will not connive, or linger, thus provoked,
But will arise and his great name assert:
Dagon must stoop, and shall ere long receive,
Such a discomfit, as shall quite despoil him
Of all these boasted Trophies won on me,
And with confusion blank his Worshippers. (465–71)

Here, in place of emerods and mice, the divine violence rained down upon the "idolatrous rout" takes the curious verbal shape of "blanking." To "blank" most directly means to amaze or terrify into a state of nonresponsive silence, as when Adam hears of the "fatal trespass done by Eve" and, "amazed, / Astonied stood and blank, while horror chill / Ran through his veins" (*Paradise Lost* 9.889–91). In a showstopping reading of this passage as a scene of "petrification" and idolatry, Sharon Achinstein argues that the blanked Adam undergoes a transformation that involves "a recalibration of the human into something other—something much, much weaker."⁵⁵ To experience blankness is to feel the suffusion of a paralytic fear that arrests action and clouds thought while sharpening sensation. Feeling "blank" also describes the somatic texture of weakness. As John Baret explains in his *Aluearie, or, Triple Dictionary*, "to be Blanke" most closely carries the sense of the Latin *labascere*, the inchoative form of *labo*, meaning to totter, waver, or yield.⁵⁶ They who are blank, Baret continues, are lazy, unwell, and faint (*segnes sunt, la[n]guidi, et remissi*); their spirits are broken (*animo concidere, frangi*). To gloss the term, Baret offers a line from Terence's *Eunuchus*: "These fellows be blanke, or out of harte and courage." Inhabiting a state of blankness means to be defeated, both mentally and physically, to be unable to muster the energy to fight back. Inflicting blankness is a tactic in psychological warfare, as when Samson's assault on the Temple of Dagon mires Gaza "in confusion" when, with his final feat of strength, he "execute[s] / His errand on the wicked, who surprised / Lose their defense, distracted

and amazed" (1593, 1284–86). Slackening and going limp, frozen in a shock response, the blank body hovers on the cusp of yielding. In other words, *Samson Agonistes* frames blankness as the catastrophic end product of mayhem, the corporeal experience of "losing one's defense."

Moreover, when Milton refashions Dagon's demise as a matter of "blanking," he infuses *Samson Agonistes* with the racial animus that had accrued to the scene through centuries of Christian exegesis. After all, "blank" is a skin word with a place in the early modern racial imaginary. As Urvashi Chakravarty argues in a transformative essay on *King Lear*, the term contains an "explicit allusion to whiteness, not only in its proximity to the Spanish 'blanco' but also in its invocation of the spectre of the blank page as 'a white paper,' as Thomas Blount renders the term in *Glossographia*."⁵⁷ In tracking the word's racial undertones, Chakravarty invokes the presumably ironic name of John Blanke, a Black Anglo-Spanish trumpeter in the court of Henry VIII. For Imtiaz Habib, imposing this name upon the musician "bleached out all signs of an African identity" through the "sedimentary acculturation of Anglo-European assimilation."⁵⁸ Attending to the complex resonances of the blank lends a queasy clarity to the "great exploits" for which Samson was "designed." Samson's task is to blank the land of darkness, restoring it to the pristine whiteness of the empty page by blanching out any inky remnant. The same logic that casts Philistines as pseudo-Muslims afflicted with deformed genitalia bleeds into *Samson Agonistes*'s account of capacitation, of what a body is for: the appointed ends of Samson's God-given lustiness are ethnic violence and territorial acquisition. The same biopolitical rationale that measures, quantifies, and maximizes Samson's "gifts" commandeers these powers to prosecute a campaign of racial terror.

The annexation he pursues is not achieved just through indiscriminate killing, although clearly a great deal of that was required. Rather, Samson's unique talent was his ability to maim, a capacity that Milton amplifies in his rendition of Samson's military victories. The Chorus recalls that "Irresistible Samson," whom

unarmed

No strength of man, or fiercest wild beast could withstand,
[Who] ran on embattled armies clad in iron,
And weaponless himself,
Made arms ridiculous, useless the forgery
Of brazen shield and spear, the hammered cuirass,
Chalybean tempered steel, and frock of mail
Adamantean proof;

But safest he who stood aloof,
When insupportably his foot advanced
In scorn of their proud arms and warlike tools . . .
Old warriors turned
Their plated backs under his heel;
Or grov'ling soiled their crested helmets in the dust.
Then, with what trivial weapon came to hand,
The jaw of a dead ass, his sword of bone,
A thousand foreskins fell, the flower of Palestine. (142-44)

Here, in the most cherished memories of his countrymen, we discover how it is that Samson applied the “gifts and graces” with which he was “eminently adorned / to some great work,” his “people’s safety” (679–81). Unable to slaughter all of his opponents, he wounds them so deeply and so spectacularly that they lose the ability to defend themselves. Samson is what the police call a “compliance weapon,” a device for making a belligerent opponent tractable and receptive to direction. “Safest he who stood aloof”; the jawbone is a pedagogical tool that delivers a stern lesson to soldiers and men of military age, instructing the Philistine populace that the condition of survival is absolute, unqualified submission.

What the Chorus describes is asymmetrical warfare that turns on the uneven distribution of manpower between the Philistines and the Israelites, a differential capacitation that emerges in the sharp contrast between Samson's extreme nudity and his opponents' lavishly described but ultimately useless armor. This is not the last time that the Israelites "disparage glorious arms / Which greatest heroes have in battle worn" as ineffectual and craven (1130–31). Indeed, the play is strangely, consistently dismissive of armor, as in Samson's challenge to the boastful Harapha to face him "single and unarmed":

Put on all thy gorgeous arms, thy helmet
And brigandine of brass, thy broad habergeon,
Vantbrace and greaves, and gauntlet, add thy spear
A weaver's beam, and seven-times-folded shield,
I only with an oaken staff will meet thee,
And raise such outcries on thy clattered iron
Which long shall not withhold me from thy head
That in a little time while breath remains thee
Thou oft shalt wish thyself at Gath to boast
Again in safety what thou wouldst have done
To Samson, but shalt never see Gath more. (1111-29)

What Samson denigrates when he mocks Harapha's embellished, overly complicated armor is the Philistines' relationship to embodiment. Hiding behind prettified gear is not only worthy of scorn because such apparel is "proud," "gorgeous," and "ornamental" and thus betrays a decidedly effeminate fondness for artifice and surface-level accoutrement, even on the ultramasculine space of the battlefield. It also smacks of idolatry, a disordered and inappropriate relationship to the object world.⁵⁹ Just as the worshippers of Dagon stricken with *ophalim* manufactured golden emerods to supplement their anatomical deficiencies, so too do the Philistine warriors attempt to augment their naturally weak and woundable bodies with a metal exoskeleton. The man who "weaponless / Ran on embattled armies clad in iron" acts out of an unshakable faith and the sure knowledge of divine protection, while the "idolatrous rout" places their trust in the products of human technology: tempered steel, folded hide, and mail frocks.⁶⁰ As Richard Godden argues in work on *Gawain and the Green Knight*, the protective gear of chain mail and hammered steel serves as a prosthesis, a second skin that covers over the knight's susceptibility to harm even as it evokes a "fantasy of a body that is whole, unpenetrated, [and] complete."⁶¹ Samson and his "trivial weapon" explode that fantasy of physical intactness, making the "forgery" of arms "useless," even "ridiculous." There is an unsettling moral distinction being drawn here between Samson's bare-chested brawn and the Philistines' cowardly retreat to the prosthetics of armor. Samson's divine election bequeathed him an unwoundable body that required no modification to fulfill its destined ends, while the sinful and aberrant Philistines possess what Jeremy Citrome memorably calls "bodies that splatter."⁶² The Chorus seems to think that the perfect integrity of Samson's body confirms the righteousness of his cause. By contrast, the Philistines' recourse to the assistive technology of armor speaks to their spiritual inadequacy, their exclusion from the covenant, and their alien status in the lands they have inhabited for generations.

Just as, in a few years' time, God would punish the Philistines with a disease that afflicted their loins, so too does Samson's "irresistible" assault culminate in an attack on his enemies' genitals, scattering "a thousand foreskins" across the field of battle. It is possible, and certainly more tasteful, to imagine the foreskin collection recounted by the Chorus as an uncomfortably vivid synecdoche that, in Gordon Teskey's words, substitutes a "heap of the dead" with a "pile of foreskins."⁶³ And yet, a literal reading of the line fits smoothly into the text's broader inquiry into the political, religious, and sexual valences of debilitating injury. As Michael Lieb notes, there is some Biblical warrant for Milton's staging of this "surgery" that would account for his impulse to "transform the ritual of circumcision into an act of

war.”⁶⁴ There is no mention of a foreskin harvest in the Book of Judges, so Milton has conflated the episode with two other Biblical passages that blur together tribal hostilities and failed intermarriage. The first of these intertexts is a gruesome scene in 1 Samuel in which David presents two hundred Philistine foreskins to Saul as a bride-price for his daughter Michal, a cross-class union that would conclude in her abandonment.⁶⁵ Samson’s transcendent performance in the theater of war also hearkens back to the rape of Dinah, Jacob’s only daughter, an episode that so interested Milton that he drew up a sketch for a tragedy based on the event.⁶⁶ The story is this: after “defiling” Dinah,⁶⁷ Shechem, the son of a Canaanite prince, dispatches an overture of marriage to her father: “The soule of my sonne Shechem longeth for your daughter: giue her him to wife . . . And ye shal dwel with vs, and the land shal be before you: dwel, and do your busines in it, and haue your possessions therein” (Gen. 34: 8–10). Dinah’s brothers respond that they will agree to the match on one condition: “if ye wil be as we are,” that is, circumcised, “then wil we giue our daughters to you, and we wil take your daughters to vs, and wil dwel with you, and be one people” (Gen. 34: 15–16). All the men of Shechem consent to circumcision, and the Geneva Bible translates what happens next this way: “And on the third day [after circumcision] (when thei were sore) two of the sonnes of Iaakob, Simeon and Leui, Dinahs brethren toke ether of them his sworde & went into the citie boldely, and slewe euerie male. Thei slewe also Hamor and Shechem his sonne with the edge of the sworde, & toke Dinah out of Shechems house, and went their way. *Again* the *other* sonnes of Iaakob came vpon the dead, and spoiled the citie, because they had defiled their sister” (Gen. 34: 25–27).

Within the literary culture of the Reformation, this passage was received as a commentary on the impossibility of intimacy and sociality across lines of ethnic difference. The Geneva Bible’s marginal notes align the resistance felt by the sons of Jacob to their sister’s betrothal to an uncircumcised man to the “abomination [of] them that are baptized to ioine with infidels.”⁶⁸ The fate of the Shechemites served as a stark reminder that those within the covenant and those outside it can never become “one people.” In the hands of Jacob’s sons, the rite of circumcision does not usher in conversion, integration, and commonality, but marks a prelude to slaughter, rape, and enslavement. Figurative or otherwise, the knife rite Samson performs on the field of battle likewise perverts the covenantal and communal ends of the ritual. As Julia Reinhard Lupton argues, “Under Samson’s hands, the violent stroke of circumcision, its act of physical de-completion, overtakes its symbolically integrative function as a rite of conversion and naturalization.”⁶⁹ The rough trimming applied by Samson simultaneously removes

the physiological marker of difference that separates the Philistines from their Israelite neighbors while also doubling down on that distinction, reducing the “inhuman” Canaanites to the little piece of flesh that marks them as “idolatrous, uncircumcised, unclean” (1364).

Stripped of its social and ritual functions, the nonconsensual circumcision Samson inflicts on the Philistine soldiers only weakens and humiliates them, sapping their reserves of strength. In this too, Milton affiliates Samson’s tactical strike with the incision applied to the Shechemites, whose cutting served a biological rather than religious purpose, as Calvin remarks in his *Commentarie on Genesis*:

For [Jacob’s sons] being rather beastlike then manlike angrie, sought to ouerrunne the whole citie: but being not able to bring their mischievous purpose to passe against so many people, they deuise a newe platte, that when they were made weake with woundes, they might soudenly come uppon them . . . For they care not for circumcision: but onely seeke howe to make the miserable men weake and unapte to resiste them in the slaughter.⁷⁰

For Calvin, Jacob’s sons cover their violent intentions under a vanishingly thin veneer of religious devotion, a pretended piety that serves a convenient pretext for a maiming that will leave the Shechemites “weake with woundes” and “unapte to resiste” the “beastlike” incursion that will consume their city and scatter their people. In layering Samson’s feats of might with the slaughter of the Shechemites, Milton frames “the work from heaven imposed” as mayhem, a strategic assault that diminishes their “faithless enemies” capacity to mount resistance to the ongoing process of settlement. For Samson no less than for Jacob’s violent sons, circumcision is a weapon of war, a wounding that temporarily debilitates the enemy as the first stage of a strike that will annihilate their people. Gender dynamics are at play in the mayhem Samson wreaks, with his bone-sword cropping the uncut blossom of their youth. The enforced carving of the Canaanites redounds on their gender, as the fleshy, overly literal “cutting off” edges uncomfortably close to what Milton describes elsewhere as an “amerement of their whole virility.”⁷¹ The passage is nakedly, unnervingly erotic; Jonathan Goldberg calls the slaughter a “defloration.”⁷² The verdant imagery of the thousand falling foreskins recalls the traumatic weddings of the episode’s source material: Milton sets Samson to gathering a bouquet of foreskins in a consummation that bequeaths Philistia to Israel. The “great exploits” portended at Samson’s nativity involve his talent for wounding his enemies in a way that simultaneously unmans and debilitates them. In concert with Bracton, Coke, and

Blackstone, then, Milton localizes those lusty powers of self-defense in the genitals, the soft flesh of the groin where “the flower of Palestine” grows.

The assembled members of the Chorus can barely contain their blood-thirsty satisfaction at the carnage Samson wrought in their name, self-soothing with memories of how he coupled hardcore violence with sexual humiliation, grinning at the memory of the “bold Ascalonite” cut down to size and the “old warriors” who “turned their backs,” “soiling” themselves as they “groveled” in the dust. It is not so clear, however, that Samson shares their enthusiasm for his former deeds. Such butchery may have been pleasurable to watch from the sidelines, but it makes for a deeply unappealing workload. When the Chorus eulogizes the feats accomplished by “that renowned Samson,” they do not describe heroism in the Homeric mode, single combat between well-matched, beautiful men (125). Samson’s opponents are wildly overpowered and anonymous. Killing them requires no particular skill. In visual representations of Samson in battle, his Philistine victims are almost indistinguishable from one another, as if the same face had been pasted onto dozens of lifeless bodies. Generic corpses pile up around Samson’s outsized and nearly nude frame, as though an assembly line were spitting out endless copies of the same nameless soldier for him to bludgeon to death. What Samson does on the battlefield is labor: tedious and uncreative, dramatic only in its aggregative effects, impressive only in how long he can keep exhaustion at bay. Samson is not an Achilles but a drone pilot, a middleman who deploys the massive killing capacity of a greater power against enemies of the state.

In fact, Samson does not spend a single moment wallowing in nostalgia for his glory days. After all, his unusual abilities locked him into a lifetime of compulsory military service, the dehumanizing and morally degrading labor of slaughtering the very people he persists in marrying. Moreover, in language I am tempted to describe as dysphoric, he also complains that his strength felt “vast, unwieldy, [and] burdensome,” as if the brawn he was born with made his body too large, too muscular, too clumsy to inhabit comfortably (54). Far from expressing regret about the maim that cost him his “glorious” gift, then, Samson asserts instead that “to me strength is my bane, / And proves the source of all my miseries, / So many, and so huge, that each apart / Would ask a life to wail” (63–66). It seems to me that Milton makes a point that has, by and large, been missed: Samson’s limitless strength was not an enviable condition, but an unendurable affliction. In his burnout and exhaustion, Samson itemizes the costs that come with living in a body after the nation has declared eminent domain on it.

If Samson’s undeniable lustiness is the source of his servitude, it also offers him a pathway out. Her name is Dalila. What transpires between the

man charged with Israel's deliverance and his "Infidel" bride appears to Samson's friends and the play's critics as an unfathomable mystery. Stanley Fish, for one, calls Samson's divulgence of the secret source of his power an action "apparently without cause."⁷³ Surely Samson must have been operating under some delusion or compulsion, or perhaps he was the unwitting victim of feminine deception by Dalila, "the worst of all possible wives."⁷⁴ And yet, Samson will admit no such thing:

Well I knew, nor was at all surprised
 But warned by oft experience: did not she
 Of Timna first betray me, and reveal
 The secret wrested from me in her highth
 Of nuptial love professed, carrying it straight
 To them who had corrupted her, my spies,
 And rivals? In this other was there found
 More faith? . . .
 Thrice she assayed with flattering prayers and sighs,
 And amorous reproaches to win from me
 My capital secret, in what part my strength
 Lay stored, in what part summed, that she might know:
 Thrice I deluded her, and turned to sport
 Her importunity, each time perceiving
 How openly, and with what impudence
 She purposed to betray me, and (which was worse
 Than undissembled hate) with what contempt
 She sought to make me traitor to myself.
 Yet the fourth time, when must'ring all her wiles,
 With blandished parleys, feminine assaults,
 Tongue-batteries, she surcease not day nor night
 To storm me over-watched, and wearied out.
 At times when men seek most repose and rest,
 I yielded, and unlocked her all my heart,
 Who with a grain of manhood well resolved
 Might easily have shook off all her snares:
 But foul effeminacy held me yoked
 Her bond-slave. O indignity, O blot
 To honor and religion! Servile mind
 Rewarded well with servile punishment! (381–413)

Although Samson adopts the position shared by his father, the Chorus, and Miltonists alike, that Dalila was the aggressor, his framing of the event blurs

any easy distinction between victim and perpetrator. Samson could not be more clear: he did not just know that Dalila meant to deprive him of the secret source of his power, he knew *well*. After all, they had roleplayed the scenario three times in advance of the real event. Dalila had made no secret of her intentions, and she employed no craft or “skill.” Instead, she asked directly where his strength was stored and then “impudently” attempted to carve it out of his body like a tumor. Everything in Samson’s experience pointed toward the inevitable outcome of disclosure, beginning with his relationship with the endlessly maligned Woman of Timna, a marriage that barely outlasted the wedding party. In accounting for his revelation to Dalila, Samson invokes his first wife, who pressed him for sensitive information and then gossiped about his response, a betrayal that prompted the bridegroom to murder all her bridal attendants. As Samson readily admits, the risks of revealing his secret were apparent, even obvious. He could have resisted—or rather, anyone “with a grain of manhood” might have “easily” extricated himself from the situation and preserved himself intact.

There is also the little matter of pleasure. If Samson takes no joy in the hypermasculine pursuits of war, if “walking about admired of all and dreaded” left him uncomfortable and arrogant, then in his salacious recollections of married life we get a taste, for the first time, of what Samson actually enjoys: giving up power (530). What the invulnerable supersoldier really wants is to be bound, silenced, and dommed by a gorgeous, high-femme partner. In particular, he expresses a preference for scenes in which verbal domination bleeds into bondage and physical humiliation. The ritual always begins the same way: interminable, exhausting debate. Pleasure flows from frustrating Samson’s usual rhetorical prowess, his maddening ability to find a too-clever answer for any question put to him.⁷⁵ The rapid-fire dialogue builds an erotic charge laced with aggression as Dalila subjects her partner to a sequence of “tongue-batteries,” “feminine assaults,” and “blandished parleys” that stop his mouth and press him into states of physical ecstasy and mental depletion. Idle, prone, and limp, Samson is not merely attended to, but “over-watched,” the object of such vigorous exertions that he is “wearied out.” Surrendering to sleep, he instructs Dalila to bind him with “seuen greene cordes that were neuer dried,” or with “newe ropes,” or to plait “seuen lockes of mine head with the threades of the woufe” and “fasten it with a pinne” to the wall (Judg. 16: 7–14). Asleep and unconscious, bound in increasingly baroque arrangements, the “irresistible” Samson allows himself to experience vulnerability and dependence, becoming just as “weake” as “an other man” (Judg. 16:7). For once, the judge can give up control, a pillow princess reclining in submissive silence and physical immobility while someone else spends all their energies, at-

tentions, and labors on him. “Softened with pleasure and voluptuous life,” Samson timidly allows himself to enjoy the experience of being disarmed, weakened, and conquered (536). By the time Dalila is finished, Samson is emptied out, a hollow container with no capacity for thought or resistance, a “servile mind” well-deserving of a “servile punishment,” a “reward” that consists of binding, submission, and finally erotic release.

The erotics of this power exchange touch on the sensitive matter of Samson’s gender, draining his virility until not a single “grain of manhood” remains. Under Dalila’s direction, the impenetrable Samson softens and slackens, “yielding” and “unlocking” not just a “secret,” but also an “effeminacy” that he experiences as both an external “yoke” and an internal condition. The feminizing effects of the couple’s sex life turn their “sport” into an erotic experiment that would feel perfectly at home within the contemporary pornographic subgenre of sissification. This particular kink involves forcibly feminizing a submissive partner (often but not always a cisgender man) who is dolled up in pink, instructed to apply makeup, pressed into compromising postures, aggressively topped, and “brainwashed” or “hypnotized” into letting their inner sissy emerge. Andrea Long Chu argues that forced feminization transforms the fetish from a defense against the loss of the phallus to a guarantee of castration.⁷⁶ This, indeed, is the precise outcome of the elaborately choreographed sexual encounters between Samson and Dalila. Trusting Delila costs him his “tender ball[s]”—that is, his eyes—when she “shore me / Like a tame wether,” or castrated ram (94, 538). The attack that incapacitates Samson also operates on his gender, actualizing the “foul effeminacy” and “impotence of mind” to which he attributes his many shortcomings (52).

If we take Samson’s own description of his experience seriously, then, at least one possible explanation for his disclosure arises: that he opted out, that he was glad to be rid of a strength he never asked for in the first place. In trusting Dalila, Samson made an affirmative choice for a weakness that is also, as his wife reminds him, an experience of femininity. Upon encountering his former bride for the first time since his assault, Samson is understandably eager to disavow his participation in the collaborative scene of his divestiture. The snarls of misogynistic commonplaces with which Samson hails Dalila group her with “every woman false like thee,” conjuring up a universal conspiracy of women who “break all faith, all vows, deceive, [and] betray” their duped but ultimately blameless husbands (749–50). Confronted with the instrument of his abjection, Samson loses all capacity for nuance, retreating to well-worn sexist tropes to paint himself as a victim, an innocent “beguiled” by a cunning and crafty opponent (759). In her rebuttal, Dalila softens the walls that separate masculine “weakness” and

feminine “craft,” transforming the “weakness” that he invokes as evidence of his own naïveté into a mark of his complicity in his own disarming:

First granting, as I do, it was a weakness
 In me, but incident to all our sex,
 Curiosity, inquisitive, importune
 Of secrets, then with like infirmity
 To publish them, both common female faults:
 Was it not weakness also to make known
 For importunity, that is for naught,
 Wherein consisted all thy strength and safety?
 To what I did thou show’dst me first the way.
 But I to enemies revealed, and should not.
 Ere I to thee, thou to thyself wast cruel.
 Let weakness then with weakness come to parle,
 So near related, or the same of kind. (773–85)

Samson does not disagree: “Bitter reproach, but true” (823). Refusing to separate the pair’s intellect, psyches, and communicative styles according to the unbridgeable division marked by sex scuttles the rhetorical edifice of Samson’s flimsy defense: she was guilty of nothing except understanding Samson’s desires, which she put into effect only after he had “shown [her] first the way.” There is a capaciousness to the model of womanhood at work when Dalila invokes the “common female faults” she shares with Samson, and when she confesses to the faults of “*our sex*” the phrase is roomy enough to house both herself and her former husband. What both members of the couple share is a weakness that is characteristic of feminine experience, an “infirmity” that leads one to inquire and the other to tell secrets, apparently just for the pleasure of sharing. On one point, everyone agrees: there was “naught” to be gained from revealing the source of that “wherein consisted all thy strength and safety” except for weakness and effeminacy. What is implied, both in Dalila’s self-defense and Samson’s reminiscences about their sex life, is that the actual outcome was the intended outcome: pleasure and relief follow from voluntarily submitting to a powerlessness that is “so near related” to womanhood that it is, perhaps, indistinguishable from it.

What I am proposing here is that Samson, lacking any meaningful bodily autonomy or compass for action, turned to his people’s “faithless enemies” for the support he never received from his countrymen (380). In this, Milton’s Samson and Dalila bear more than a passing resemblance to that “lustie rogue” Wright and his anonymous coconspirator, two pairs that collaborated on a procedure that rendered one partner useless for the

war machine. That is, in liberating Samson from a strength and virility he maligns as “burdensome,” the shaving is not an assault, but a scene of care, what Hil Malatino describes as an action that “facilitates . . . emergence into a radically recalibrated experience of both bodymind and the world it encounters.”⁷⁷ To be sure, walking away from his powers rewired Samson’s bodymind, but it might also have transformed the world he inhabits, inserting him into relations of affinity and interdependence with the people he was appointed to slaughter. From this perspective, Dalila does not violate Samson’s trust when she shaves and incapacitates him. The true betrayal, the unforgiveable betrayal, is what comes after, when she exploits his “intensified vulnerability” to hand him over to be tortured, enslaved, and incarcerated.⁷⁸ In doing so, she snuffs out the queer possibility embedded in the mayhem she wreaks with (and upon) Samson, who can no longer imagine any use for his remaining energies other than the mass murder his countrymen so eagerly desire, a conclusion that both satisfies their bloodlust and relieves them of any responsibility of caring for their debilitated deliverer.

The scene of trans mayhem that plays out in Samson’s bridal chamber is a matter not only of gender but of racialized gender. Samson’s lust—unmanageable, out of control, impotent, nonreproductive—terminates in a wounding that emasculates and debilitates him, while also blurring the bright-line boundary that separates the Israelites from their racialized enemies. In illustrating Samson’s violation as a matter of being “subdued” by the “barber’s razor,” Milton helpfully fills out Blackstone’s definition of mayhem, giving a plain name to that “part, the loss of which in all animals abates their courage”: it is the *hair* (1167). This substitution isn’t as strange as it might seem at first blush. As Patricia Parker and Greta LaFleur have argued, the cultural milieu of the seventeenth century associated forcible shaving of the beard and head with the fate endured by English sailors who fell into the hands of Ottoman pirates.⁷⁹ To be subjected to the razor compromised what Will Fisher calls “the ideology of bearded masculinity,” flagging both the prisoner’s enslaved status as well as his availability for sodomitical use.⁸⁰ The shaved head also portended conversion to Islam or “turning Turk,” thus serving as a physical marker of a difference that was both religious and racial. Barbering, then, tended to precede the slits of circumcision (necessary for conversion) and castration (which transformed white captives into valuable eunuchs). *Samson Agonistes* builds out the racialized narrative of trans history that associates whiteness with cisness by adding another term to the mix: disability. At this point, a caveat is in order: the claim here is not that Samson is *transgender*, if we take that to mean that he identifies as a woman. Rather, what *Samson Agonistes* clarifies is that

criminal mayhem is legal device that folds together racialization, transition, and physical impairment into the figure of a defiling cut that constitutes a threat to the nation-state.

Samson Agonistes sources this fear of trans cutting to deeply disturbing attachments to the purity, integrity, and generative capacities of the Israelites. Samson's trimming does not simply sap the collective resilience necessary for his country's survival but reroutes his God-given vitality to the enemy nation through a program of convict labor. A disoriented Manoah asks his son whether he will voluntarily "serve the Philistines with that gift / Which was expressly given thee to annoy them" (577–78). He will, claiming that the Philistines receive "the advantage of my labours, / the work of many hands" from his "servile toil" at the mill, where his exertions feed and fortify, rather than annoy and diminish, his "country's enemies" (1259–60, 5, 238). The "advantage" absorbed by the Philistines works at a biological level, parasitically leeching Samson's virility to enhance their nutritive and maybe even reproductive strength. "Grinding" was a sex word, as Milton knew. *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* describes bad sex in a loveless marriage as "grinding in the mill of an undelighted and servile copulation."⁸¹ In affiliating Samson's labor with the wrong kind of sex, Milton builds out a reading of Judges that the Palestinian Talmud glosses this way: "Grinding always refers to [sexual] transgression," as when Job says, "'Let my wife grind after another.' This comes to teach us that every Philistine would bring his wife to [Samson] in the prison-house so that she might be impregnated by him."⁸² Jeffrey Shoulson understands this as a "condemnation of Samson's sexual prowess as a contributing factor to the once and future oppression of the Israelites by a physically strengthened pagan world," a threat that comes by way of what he calls an "amusing" proposition that Samson would "populate the Philistine nation with numerous infant supermen." As is often the case in the Samson cycle, the surface-level humor of his story twists into something darker: here, enslavement becomes sexual exploitation feeding anxieties about the Israelites' ethnic purity.

Now that he has outlived his purpose, the matter of Samson's continued existence confronts his friends, family, and jailers with complicated questions about care, a subject central to work in disability studies and activism.⁸³ The accommodations afforded him during his imprisonment intentionally fall short of meeting his biological needs: Harapha cuttingly reminds his captive opponent that he "hast need of much washing to be touched" (1107). The combination of carceral neglect, physical restraint, and disability have left Samson unable to clean himself, exposing him to a form of dependence normally associated with early childhood and senescence. Jackie DiSalvo points to Samson's "blindness," his "hairlessness," and

his “soiled weeds” as evidence of an “almost infantile contingency and vulnerability” in the aftermath of his assault.⁸⁴ In associating Samson’s fouled clothes with a childlike incapacity to control his bodily functions, the play subscribes to the “expectation that all people beyond a certain age will perform their own bodily hygiene”—an expectation that Tobin Siebers associates with lethal forms of marginalization.⁸⁵ So too in *Samson Agonistes*: in Harapha’s mind, the stench radiating from Samson’s fouled clothes serves as a material signifier of his exclusion from personhood along with the “slaves and asses thy comrades” (1162).⁸⁶ In his current condition, Samson is utterly unsuitable as an opponent in honorable combat, making “no worthy match / For valour to assail, nor by the sword / Of noble Warriour, so to stain his honour” (1164–65). It is as if Samson’s bodily defect is contagious, threatening to “stain” and diminish any “noble” in his proximity, while also inviting further depredations from his enemies who make it their “daily practice to afflict [him] more” (114).

In short, Samson is in desperate, urgent need of care. When the assorted members of Samson’s community arrive on the scene, they encounter a man in extreme distress, someone mired in suicidal ideation as he struggles to navigate a debilitating injury, the sudden loss of his social-support network, and a prison sentence he is not meant to survive for long. While the “holy” nurturance afforded to the young Samson had been tailored to ready him for a life of military service, the support he requires in his current condition is radically different. Tending to him promises no “great act” or “benefit” to “Abraham’s race” (28–29). As Jennifer Terry argues, the spectacle of a disabled soldier’s “woundscape” becomes the locus for thorny conversations about obligation, a chance to assess what is owed to those who have sacrificed their bodily integrity on behalf of the nation.⁸⁷ Gathering around Samson’s “carelessly diffused” and “languished” body to survey his injuries might have prompted the Chorus to reflect on the kinds of care, support, and companionship they could extend to their friend, who is at once a debilitated warrior; a husband who suffered an unimaginable betrayal by his partner; and a prisoner trying to survive an abusive, dehumanizing incarceration (118–19). Samson’s kin and compatriots might have asked him directly what he needs and wants, or how he imagines moving forward to build a meaningful life on his own terms. Instead, they whisper together about how soon he can get back to work. It is not that the “friends and equals of his tribe” are entirely without empathy, just that productivity is the only metric they have for assigning value to bodies. Incidentally, this metric is also how Samson understands his own worth, as he confesses to Harapha: “I was to do my part from Heav’n assigned, / And had performed it, if my known offense / Had not disabled me” (1217–19).

Two possible caregiving arrangements are floated as stopgaps to meet Samson's immediate needs by securing his release from prison and housing him in more humane accommodations. One is offered by Manoa, who holds out hope that in time, his son will make a full recovery:

It shall be my delight to tend his eyes,
 And view him sitting in the house, ennobled
 With all those high exploits by him achieved,
 And on his shoulders waving down those locks,
 That of a nation armed the strength contained:
 And I persuade me God had not permitted
 His strength again to grow up with his hair
 Garrisoned round about him like a camp
 Of faithful soldiery, were not his purpose
 To use him further yet in some great service,
 Not to sit idle with so great a gift
 Useless, and thence ridiculous about him.
 And since his strength with eyesight was not lost,
 God will restore him eyesight to his strength. (1490–1503)

Careful noting of Samson's bodily comportment, particularly the length of his hair, makes way for a fantasy that Samson's powers, including his eyesight, will be restored. In other words, Manoa places his faith in cure, an "ideology" that, Eli Clare reminds us, "rides on the back of *normal* and *natural*" in its quest to eradicate defective bodies and minds from the social landscape.⁸⁸ Twitches of such eliminationist rhetoric punctuate Manoa's fatherly offer of care, as his initial, heady assertion that he will "delight" to "tend" to Samson gives way to something more selfish. This wounded Samson does not have inherent value. Disgust seeps into Manoa's imagined homelife with a son whose "useless" and "ridiculous" body sits "idle," the sheen of ennoblement flowing from the increasingly distant memories of those "high exploits" achieved in his prime fading rapidly and failing to add up to something like dignity. For Manoa, care is only a pathway to cure, a temporary interlude that will restore him to full health, rehabilitating both his strength and his eyesight so that his body can once again inhabit a pristine, unviolated condition.

Where Manoa assumes that cure is inevitable, Dalila banks on its impossibility. If the patriarch wants to shove Samson back onto the battlefield at the earliest possible opportunity, Dalila hopes instead for a future in which her former husband remains permanently, irreversibly housebound:

amplify and exacerbate his infirmity, toying with him until she loses interest and then shrugging off her responsibility and leaving him “neglected” and abandoned. What Dalila presents as an exciting opportunity to live a life of leisure as a kept man begins to sound rather like another job. For his tenuous access to care and lodging, Samson will be expected to perform sexual and emotional labor for the woman who, in recent memory, engineered a scene that subjected him to world-shattering abuse. The offer of security, shelter, and erotic pleasure require him to set aside that trauma, to put it out of his mind and “bear not too sensibly . . . what remains past cure” (912–13).

“What remains past cure” might be the central question of *Samson Agonistes*. What is left after a wounding that makes it impossible for a body to fulfill its appointed purpose? Where should punishment be assigned when a virile man whose energies are needed to defend the nation submits to an emasculating and debilitating incision? One line of thought pursued by the play depends on the seizure of bodily capacities that infuses the legal logic of criminal mayhem. From this perspective, just as Samson’s strength belonged to his community, so too does his violation. It is Samson who has endured the cut, but the Chorus participates vicariously in his injury, hovering over his abused body and stewing in an unbearable emotional admixture compounded from shame, terror, anger, and impotence. Samson’s bodily impairments generate a structure of feeling that justifies extraordinary retaliation against the outsiders who are assigned blame for the Israelites’ collective discomfort. Thus, in the play’s offstage conclusion, the genocidal demolition of the Temple of Dagon that extirpates “the choice nobility and flower” of “each Philistian city” repeats Samson’s wounding at scale, raining down “blood, death, and deathful deeds” upon “the whole inhabitation” (1654–55, 1512–13). The communal sense of wholeness lost to Samson’s wounds is restored through a program of incapacitation that bequeaths “years of mourning / And lamentation to the sons of Caphtor” (1712–13). Just as the maimed Dagon “mourned in earnest” after he lost his limbs in a catastrophic assault, so too will the Canaanites endure a durational, open-ended period of suffering, loss, and lamentation. In this respect, Samson’s suicide attack on the temple in Gaza resembles the war in Afghanistan more than it resembles September 11.⁹⁰ This widespread maiming of the enemy people successfully restores a sense of robustness, manliness, and vitality to the Israelites who, like the phoenix, “From out her ashy womb now teemed, / Revived, reflourishes, then vigorous most, / When most unactive deemed” (1703–5). This ending neatly solves the Israelites’ two problems: the Philistines and a debilitated, emasculated Samson. Once their hero has outlived his immediate usefulness, this best of all pos-

sible outcomes is for him to be destroyed in a way that materially damages the enemies of the state. Now that his community is no longer burdened with any responsibility for his care, Samson can be resurrected as a symbol, a “monument” environed by “laurel ever green, and branching palm, / With all his trophies hung, and acts enrolled / In copious legend, or sweet lyric song” (1734–37). In place of a living, breathing son with embarrassing bodily needs and complicated opinions, the Israelites will have something better: a graven image, a silent and bloodless statue that arrives heavily annotated according to the ideological platform of its maker. Henceforth, Manoah imagines, “Thither shall all the valiant youth resort” to “inflare their breasts” with the memory of Samson’s “matchless valor,” while the “virgins also” will “visit his tomb with flowers” to “bewail” his “lot unfortunate in nuptial choice” (1738–43). In death, Samson’s complexity vanishes: no trace of the reservations about his military career or his tortuous relationship with effeminacy can be found in the “copious” *legenda* affixed to the monument. Instead, Samson can be reduced to a convenient pedagogical device for managing the lusty energies of his country’s youth according to a strictly binary gender schema, prompting the boys to march off to war and the girls to spend their sexual favors on men of their own nation.

Taken at face value, this triumphal conclusion opens onto the grim biopolitical afterlives of mayhem, in which collective feelings of vulnerability legitimate perpetual war and the state’s unlimited right to maim. From this vantage, when the common law awards the state guardianship over its subjects’ physical powers, it gives shape to a mode of sovereignty that needs defending from bodies that are transitional or impaired. The maimed body, multiply cut, unsexed and debilitated, becomes a collective wound that must be eliminated so that the nation-state can thrive. In this, Milton offers an answer to Harry Benjamin’s exasperated question about why the ancient rights of English kings should be invoked to embargo trans surgeries in the twentieth century: it is because modernity has not replaced the form of governance in which the subject’s capacities exist for the instrumental use of the nation, but radically and catastrophically expanded it. If Samson’s unusual abilities made him exceptional, Heaven’s own “nursling” and “choice delight,” the collective claim on his vital energies are no longer reserved for elected deliverers (633). Today it is the “essential worker” who is the “hero,” who owes every ounce of strength she possesses to the nation, to the economy, to Amazon. Such labor is always exhausting and, for those who are most vulnerable and marginalized, it is often debilitating, with no expectation of care waiting on the other side.⁹¹ This seizure of bodily capacities and the elimination of care is perfectly in line with legislatures blocking the right to bodily autonomy and medical treatment necessary for gender transition.

Such policies have lethal consequences, particularly for the most vulnerable trans people, those who are not protected by whiteness and capital.

From its seventeenth-century origins onward, common-law mayhem has offered the state a way of penalizing, outlawing, and disallowing both trans and disabled life. For this reason alone, mayhem offers a compelling reason to think intersectionally about trans and disabled forms of embodiment. We could stop here, but it may be that Milton opens up another avenue for thinking through what Cameron Awkward-Rich calls “trans/crip conjunctions” that works in a reparative rather than critical mode.⁹² In short, it is not so clear that *Samson Agonistes* imagines that mass slaughter is the only available way to handle those bodies deemed “most unactive” or “ingloriously unemployed.” The keyword here might be *use*. The entire action of the play, to the extent that anything happens at all, is comprised of frantic attempts to find some kind of occupation for the weakened, blinded, and unmanned Samson. His father wants to push him back to the front lines after a little R & R; Harapha wants him for a punching bag; Delila wants to keep him like a pet or a sex toy. Samson rejects all of these potential pathways back into community and relationality, including the possibility of ransom. In fact, Samson only ever states a single, unambiguous desire. It comes in the first line of the play:

A little onward lend thy guiding hand
To these dark steps, a little further on;
For yonder bank hath choice of sun or shade,
There I am wont to sit, when any chance
Relieves me from my task of servile toil,
Daily in the common prison else enjoined me,
Where I a prisoner chained, scarce freely draw
The air imprisoned also, close and damp,
Unwholesome draft: but here I feel amends,
The breath of heav’n fresh-blowing, pure and sweet,
With day-spring born; here leave me to respire. (1–11)

What Samson wants, what he explicitly requests, is not another job, but space to breathe. Plagued by a “deadly swarm” of “restless thoughts,” he hopes to yield his conscious awareness to the minimal, involuntary somatic rhythms that support life. As a tactic for surviving his social death or “half-life,” the time of his greatest debilitation, Samson turns to what Jean-Thomas Tremblay calls “feminist breathing,” a “set of respiratory practices” outlined in women-of-color feminism that “supply strategies for moving through depletion.”⁹³ Samson’s breath has been stolen twice, first by the

brutal environs of incarceration, where even the air is imprisoned, and then a second time by the rotating cast of friends, relatives, enemy combatants, messengers, and an estranged wife, all of whom demand his attention and engagement. They want to rehearse his birth story, inventory his erotic inclinations, and go over his history of sex partners; they want elaborate explanations for various choices he's made; they want displays of self-loathing and abjection; one wants to wrestle, until suddenly he doesn't. Before Samson marches off to the Temple, the Chorus remarks that "This idol's day hath been to thee no day of rest, / Labouring thy mind / More than the working day thy hands" (1297–99). Indeed it has not been a day of rest—the relentless needling inquiries aimed at finding Samson some task that would relieve him from the shame of being a "burdenous drone . . . robustious to no purpose," foreclose the only positive desire he's expressed: a solitary moment with choice of sun or shade, a tranquil pause with leave to respire (567–69).

To whom has he voiced this request? Whose "guiding hand" is it that leads him to "yonder bank?" It may be God—it does sound like the Psalms—in which case Samson is terribly alone, abandoned and unmoored.⁹⁴ But perhaps he has an actual guide, an image drawn from Greek tragedy that folds together disability and transition. Entering led by the hand affiliates Samson most obviously with Oedipus, but also with Tiresias, whose blindness was inextricably linked to an experience of multiple genders. If there is an affirmative biopolitics of mayhem to be found in *Samson Agonistes*, it is here, in this quiet moment before the narrative momentum will push Samson toward his final, genocidal destination. The hero whose bodily integrity was so complete that he never needed any assistive device asks for and is given support freely, for he has nothing to offer, a hand that guides him to a space where there is no call for him to be useful or labor or serve, where there is nothing to do but breathe.

Review 4, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 49–64. For a sharp elaboration of the racial politics at work in this sermon, see Ryan Campagna, “The Interanimation of Race in John Donne’s Creature Colonialism,” in “White World-Making in Early Modern England: Ideological and Phenomenological Constructions of Racial Whiteness from Shakespeare to Milton” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, anticipated 2024).

85. Patricia Springborg argues that Donne’s sermon served as a template for Hobbes’s accounts of no-man’s land in *Leviathan* in the context of Anglo-Dutch rivalry in “Hobbes, Donne and the Virginia Company: *Terra Nullius* and ‘The Bulimia of Dominion,’” *History of Political Thought* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 113–64.

86. On the politics behind Donne’s theological argument for the penal colony, see Thomas Festa, “The Metaphysics of Labor in John Donne’s Sermon to the Virginia Company,” *Studies in Philology* 106, no. 1 (2009): 76–99.

87. Susan Myra Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1933), 243.

88. Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81, at 68.

89. C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 12.

90. Melissa Sanchez, “Transdevotion: Race, Gender, and Christian Universalism,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (Fall 2019): 94–115, at 107.

91. Marquis Bey, “Black Fugitivity Un/Gendered,” *Black Scholar* 49, no. 1 (2019): 55–62, at 56.

92. For Donne’s poetic obscurity as resistant to the psychiatric management of trans subjectivity, written with an optimism I can no longer muster, see my essay “The Sign You Must Not Touch: Lyric Obscurity and Trans Confession,” *postmedieval* 11, no. 2 (2020): 195–203.

93. On the medical model of transness as a feature of the “expressive” theory of consciousness, see Grace Lavery, “The King’s Two Anuses: Trans Feminism and Free Speech,” *differences* 30, no. 3 (2019): 119–51.

CHAPTER FOUR

1. My deepest thanks to Beans Velocci for sharing their notes on Val from the Kinsey Institute’s archives, which were closed because of the pandemic at the time of this chapter’s composition.

2. The earliest records of attempts to construct vaginal canals in cisgender women born without them, a condition known today as vaginal atresia or agenesis, date back to the fifth century BCE, with Hippocrates’s *On the Nature of Women*, which recommends that a passage be opened with a pessary saturated in resin, ground copper, and honey. On this prehistory of vaginoplasty, see Robert M. Goldwyn, “History of Attempts to Form a Vagina,” *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 59, no. 3 (March 1977): 319–29. The first known transgender woman to undergo the procedure was Dora Richter, who received a vaginoplasty in 1931.

3. *The State of North Carolina v. Bass*, 120 S.E.2d 580 (1961).

4. *State of North Carolina v. Bass*, 120 S.E.2d, 586.

5. These projects were also, of course, profoundly and violently ableist. On these histories, see Nancy Ordovery, *American Eugenics: Race, Queer Anatomy, and the Science of Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Wendy Kline, *Building a Better Race: Gender, Sexuality, and Eugenics from the Turn of the Century to the Baby Boom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016); and Adam Cohen, *Imbeciles: The Supreme Court, American Eugenics, and the Sterilization of Carrie Buck* (New York: Penguin Press, 2016).

6. Wendy Kline discusses the case of Ann Cooper Hewitt, the heiress who (unsuccessfully) brought mayhem charges against her mother for sterilizing her as a way of preventing her from inheriting her father's fortune (*Building a Better Race*, 108–18).

7. On the convergences between eugenics and transphobia, see Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Kadji Amin, "Glands, Eugenics, and Rejuvenation in *Man into Woman*: A Biopolitical Genealogy of Transsexuality," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2018): 589–605; and Ezra Horbury and Christine "Xine" Yao, "Empire and Eugenics: Trans Studies in the United Kingdom," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (August 2020): 445–54.

8. On abortion and mayhem, see Justin Miller and Gordon Dean, "Liability of Physicians for Sterilization Operations," *American Bar Association Journal* 16, no. 3 (March 1930): 159; John Keown, *Abortion, Doctors and the Law: Some Aspects of the Legal Regulation of Abortion in England from 1803–1982* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 14–15.

9. Leonard le Marchant Minty, "Unlawful Wounding; Will Consent Make It Legal?" *Medico-Legal Journal* 24, no. 2 (1956): 54–62, at 58.

10. Harry Benjamin to Alfred Kinsey, October 4, 1950, series IIC, box 3, Harry Benjamin Collection, Kinsey Institute, Bloomington, IN (hereafter HBC).

11. Harry Benjamin to Edmund Brown, November 22, 1949, series IIC, box 3, HBC.

12. Graham Hammill, "Epilogue: The Solecism of Power," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 58, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 193–204; Ari Friedlander, *Impotence: Disability, Sex, and Labor in Early Modern England* (in progress); Micah Goodrich, "Maimed Limbs and Biosalvation: Rehabilitation Politics in *Piers Plowman*," in *Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern*, eds. Greta LaFleur, Masha Raskolnikov, and Anna Klosowska (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021).

13. Henry de Bracton, *Bracton on the Laws and Customs of England*, trans. Samuel E. Thorne (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1968), 409–10; *Fleta*, vol. 2, eds. and trans. G. O. Sayles and H. G. Richardson (London: B. Quaritch, 1955), 1.38; and *Britton*, vol. 1, trans. Francis Morgan Nichols (Cambridge: Clarendon Press, 1865), 123–24.

14. Edward Coke, *The First Part of the Institutes of the Laws of England; Or, a Commentary upon Littleton*, vol. 1 (London: Printed for J. and W. T. Clarke, 1832), 127b.

15. Edward Coke, *The First Part of the Institutes of the Laws of England; Or, a Commentary upon Littleton*, vol. 2 (London: Printed for E. and R. Brooke, Bell-Yard, 1794), 288a.

16. Coke, *Institutes*, vol. 1, 127a.

17. Henri de Bracton, *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae* (London: Miles Flesher and Robert Young, 1640), 408. Unlike later legal treatises, which were concerned exclusively with men's capacity to fight, Bracton also indicates that "anyone who forcibly interferes with a woman's internal organs in order to produce abortion" is liable for mayhem (*Item si quis mulieris visceribus vim intulerit quo partum abegerit, tenetur*, 408).

18. William Hawkins, *Treatise of the Pleas of the Crown*, vol. 1, ed. John Curwood (London: Printed for S. Sweet, 1824), 107. William Blackstone likewise writes that "the offence of mayhem by castration" was a crime that "all our old writers held to be felony" on the pain of capital punishment, permanent banishment, or the forfeiture of all property, "and this, although the mayhem was committed upon the highest provocation" (*Commentaries on the Laws of England*, vol. 4 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], 15.1).

19. Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4.15.I.

20. John Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis: Man Transform'd, or the Artificial Changeling* (London: Printed by William Hunt, 1653), 355–56.

21. Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, vol. 1, ed. Robin Robbins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 3.9.28–34. No one has a better handle on the complexities of testicularity than Jordan Windholz, who addresses the matter in "The Queer Testimonies of Male Chastity in *All's Well That Ends Well*," *Modern Philology* 116, no. 4 (2019): 322–49.

22. Edward Coke, *Institutes*, vol. 3 (London: Printed for W. Clarke, 1809), 118.

23. For accounts of this practice, see Alanna Skuse, "'One Stroak of His Razor': Tales of Self-Gelding in Early Modern England," *Social History of Medicine* 33, no. 2 (2020): 377–93.

24. William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, 1.3.65–66, and *The Winter's Tale*, 2.2.24–25, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

25. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Lusty, adj.," accessed December 1, 2020, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/lusty_adj?tab=meaning_and_use#38742909.

26. Ari Friedlander, *Rogue Sexuality in Early Modern English Literature: Desire, Status, Biopolitics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022). For an argument about the sexual regulation of the poor and, in particular, the "instrumentalization and exploitation" of trans feminine people "for the benefit of the state" in the pamphlets of Henry Neville, see Madison Wolfert, "The Racial Biopolitics of Sex in the Work of Henry Neville," forthcoming in *English Literary Renaissance* (Fall 2024).

27. On biopolitics and the crip philology of impotence, see Ari Friedlander's dazzling essay "Impotence," forthcoming in *Logomotives: The Words That Changed Early Modern Culture*, eds. Marjorie Rubright and Stephen Spiess (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2024).

28. Thomas Taylor, *A Commentarie vpon the Epistle of S. Paul Written to Titus* (Cambridge: Printed by Cantrell Legge, 1612), 1.15.

29. Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

30. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 101.

31. John Milton, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, eds. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 1089. All references to Milton are from this volume.

32. As Timothy Harrison notes, Adam “feels drawn into the world” by his “life processes,” what we might call his virtues, capacities, or lusty energies (“Adamic Awakening and the Feeling of Being Alive in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Studies* 54 (2013), 29–57, at 42).

33. On the absence of Samson’s mother, see Amy Boesky, “Samson and Surrogacy,” in *Milton and Gender*, ed. Catherine Gimelli Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 153–66.

34. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 9.

35. Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, 4.15.1.

36. Coke, *Institutes*, 3.12, 288a.

37. Kevin Curran, “What Was Personhood?,” in *Renaissance Personhood: Materiality, Taxonomy, Process*, ed. Kevin Curran (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 3.

38. Klaus Reinhardt, “The Texts of the ‘Bible of Saint Louis,’” in *The Bible of Saint Louis*, vol. 2, ed. Ramon Gonzalez Ruiz (Barcelona: M. Moleiro, 2004), 288. Use of the Biblical Philistines as a byword for foreignness as such persisted into the twentieth century, as did the false etymology holding that the term “Philistine” meant “wanderer” or “immigrant” (see Carl Theophilus Odhner, *Correspondences of Canaan: A Study of the Spiritual Geography and History of the Land and Nations of the World* [Bryn Athyn, PA: Academy Book Room, 1911], 95).

39. On the Crusading trope that pitted Christian warriors against Muslim “new Philistines,” see Penny Cole, “‘O God, the Heathen Have Come into Your Inheritance’ (Ps. 78.1): The Theme of Religious Pollution in Crusade Documents, 1095–1188,” in *Crusaders and Muslims in Twelfth-Century Syria*, ed. Maya Shatzmiller (New York: Brill, 1993), 106–7. On the racial logic behind casting Muslim nations as the “new Philistines,” see Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 171–72. Innocent III, organizer of the Fourth Crusade, denounced the Muslim armies defending Jerusalem as “barbarian battle-lines of Philistines” and “battle-lines of Saracens” (quoted in Giulio Cipollone, “From Intolerance to Tolerance: The Humanitarian Way, 1187–1216,” in *Tolerance and Intolerance: Social Conflict in the Age of the Crusades*, eds. Michael Gervers and James M. Powell [Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001], 350). Marcus Bull notes that Andrew of Fleury’s *Miracles of St. Benedict* calls the “Spanish ‘Saracens’” of the Caliphate of Cordoba “new Philistines” because they, like their scriptural referents, were “simultaneously effeminate and aggressive, blindly trusting in their large numbers to bring about [their] military success” (“Muslims and Jerusalem in Miracle Stories,” in *The Experience of Crusading*, eds. Marcus Graham Bull, Norman Housely, P. W. Edbury, and Jonathan Phillips [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 36).

40. Charlotte Colding Smith notes that the twelve tyrants of the Old Testament, including the Philistine champion Goliath, were routinely portrayed in the “exotic”

costume of “the Ottoman Turk” (*Images of Islam, 1435–1600: Turks in Germany and Central Europe* [New York: Routledge, 2014], 86).

41. On the pleasures and anxieties mapped onto Muslim-coded clothing in this period, see Barbara Fuchs, *Exotic Nation: Maurophilia and the Construction of Early Modern Spain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); and Javier Irigoyen-Garcia, *Moors Dressed as Moors: Clothing, Social Distinction and Ethnicity in Early Modern Iberia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017).

42. The place of Islamophobia within the histories of white supremacy and anti-blackness has been the subject of decades worth of crucial, foundational scholarship in early modern studies, including work by Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Nabil I. Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558–1685* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Dennis Britton, *Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Benedict Robinson, *Islam and Early Modern English Literature: The Politics of Romance from Spenser to Milton* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Ambereen Dadabhoi, “Two Faced: The Problem of Othello’s Visage,” in *Othello: The State of Play*, ed. Lena Cowen Orlin (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 121–47; and Nedda Mehdizadeh, “The Petrification of Rostam: Thomas Herbert’s Revision of Persia in *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaille*,” in *Remapping Travel Narratives, 1000–1700: To the East and Back Again*, ed. Montserrat Piera (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2018), 111–28.

43. Walter S. H. Lim, “John Milton, Orientalism, and the Empires of the East in *Paradise Lost*,” in *The English Renaissance, Orientalism, and the Idea of Asia*, eds. Debra Johanyak and Walter S. H. Lim (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 224.

44. This conceptual move is especially insidious since, as Rachel Trubowitz argues, it elides distinctions between Israelites and Philistines to demonize both groups according to a rationale that is both Islamophobic and anti-Semitic. Samson appropriates for England “the sacred space of difference that the biblical Israel once occupied, but which it voluntarily gave up when it gave in to the natural inclination to slavery that makes Hebrews into Asians—and all fallen peoples into Judeo-Orientals.” See “‘The People of Asia and with Them the Jews’: Israel, Asia, and England in Milton’s Writings,” in *Milton and the Jews*, ed. Douglas A. Brooks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 172.

45. 1 Samuel 5: 4–9. All Biblical quotations are from *Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*, ed. Lloyd E. Berry (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

46. Aren Maeir draws on archaeological evidence to argue that 1 Sam. 5:6 should be translated “as ‘Strike them in their penises’” (“A New Interpretation of the Term *‘opalim* (עפלים) in the Light of Recent Archaeological Finds from Philistia,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 32, no. 1 [2007], 23, 32).

47. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, vol. 2, trans. H. Thackeray and Ralph Marcus (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 6.1.

48. Rashi, *The Book of Shmuel I*, ed. Avraham Davis (Lakewood, NJ: Metsudah Publications, 1999).

49. On *qere-ketiv*, see Yosef Ofer, *The Masora on Scripture and Its Methods* (Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter, 2019). For help with the Hebrew and guidance concerning *qere-ketiv*, my thanks to Rabbi Becky Silverstein.
50. Megilla 25b.15. “The Sages taught in a *baraita*: All of the verses that are written in the Torah in a coarse manner are read in a refined manner. For example, the term ‘shall lie with her [*yishgalena*]’ (Deuteronomy 28:30) is read as though it said *yishkavena*, which is a more refined term. The term ‘with hemorrhoids [*bafolim*]’ (Deuteronomy 28:27) is read *batehorim*. The term ‘doves’ dung [*hiryonim*]’ (II Kings 6:25) is read *divyonim*. The phrase ‘to eat their own excrement [*horeihem*] and drink their own urine [*meimei shineihem*]’ (II Kings 18:27) is read with more delicate terms: To eat their own excrement [*tzo’atam*] and drink their own urine [*meimei ragleihem*].”
51. Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 70, 73.
52. J. Compton Burnett, *The Medicinal Treatment of Diseases of the Veins* (London: Homeopathic Publishing Company, 1881), 134.
53. Mitchell Hart, “‘They Dedicated Themselves to the Abominable Idol’: Ancient Hebrew Sexuality and Modern Medical Diagnosis,” *Jewish Social Studies* 21, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2016): 72–90, at 78.
54. John Milton, “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1957), 199.
55. Sharon Achinstein, “Milton’s Political Ontology of the Human,” *ELH* 84, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 591–616, at 592.
56. John Baret, *An Aluearie, or, Triple Dictionary in Englishe, Latin, and French* (London: Henry Denham, 1574), B719.
57. Urvashi Chakravarty, “Race, Labour, and the Future of the Past: *King Lear*’s ‘True Blank,’” *postmedieval* 11, nos. 2–3 (2020): 204–11, at 206. For the complex interplay between the technologies of writing and racialization, see especially Miles P. Grier, “Inkface: The Slave Stigma in England’s Early Imperial Imagination,” in *Scripturalizing the Human: The Written as the Political*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (New York: Routledge, 2015), 193–220. On the connection between “blanks” and the material history of the book, see Peter Stallybrass, “‘Little Jobs’: Broad-sides and the Printing Revolution,” in *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*, eds. Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Lindquist, and Eleanor F. Shevlin (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 315–41; and Derek Dunne, “Filling in the Blanks in Early Modern Drama,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 259–87.
58. Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 60.
59. On idolatry and armor, see Nicolette Zeeman, “Theory Transposed: Idols, Knights and Identity,” in *What Is an Image in Medieval and Early Modern England?*, eds. Antoinina Bevan Zlatar and Olga Timofeeva (Tubingen: Naar Francke Attempto Verlag, 2017), 39–80.
60. On artifice and idolatry within a framework of media studies that is altogether aligned with the account of prosthesis at work here, see Jennifer Waldron, “Dead Likenesses and Sex Machines: Shakespearean Media Theory,” in *The Oxford Handbook of*

Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race, ed. Valerie Traub (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 611–27.

61. Richard Godden, “Prosthetic Ecologies: Vulnerable Bodies and the Dismodern Subject in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *Textual Practice* 30, no. 7 (2016): 1273–90, at 1274.

62. Jeremy J. Citrome, “Bodies that Splatter: Surgery, Chivalry, and the Body in the Practica of John Arderne,” *Exemplaria* 13, no. 1 (2001): 137–72.

63. Gordon Teskey, *Delirious Milton: The Fate of the Poet in Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 195. Jonathan Goldberg discusses Miltonists’ collective discomfort with these falling foreskins and the temptation to retreat to figurality in “Samson Uncircumcised,” in *Political Theology and Early Modernity*, eds. Graham Hammill and Julia Reinhard Lupton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 282–98.

64. Michael Lieb, “‘A Thousand Fore-Skins’: Circumcision, Violence, and Selfhood in Milton,” *Milton Studies* 38 (2000): 198–219, at 210.

65. “And Saul said, This wise shal ye say to Dauid, The king desireth no dowrie, but an hu[n]dreth foreskinnes of the Philistims, to be auenged of the Kings enemies: for Saul thoght to make Dauid fall into the hands of the Philistims . . . Afterwarde Dauid arose with his men, and went and slewe of the Philistims two hundreth men: and David broght their foreskinnes, and the gaue them wholly to the King that he might be the Kings sonne in lawe: therefore Saul gaue him Michal his daughter to wife. Then Saul sawe, & vnderstode that the Lord *was* with Dauid.” (1 Sam. 18:25–28)

66. In the Trinity College manuscript, Milton listed Dinah as a possible subject for a tragedy, along with “Sodom,” going so far as to draw up a *dramatis personae*. On this manuscript, see William Poole, “Milton, Dinah, and Theodotus,” *Milton Quarterly* 47, no. 2 (May 2013): 65–71. Recently, Alex Lewis has ingeniously argued that Milton did in fact retell the Dinah story in *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle*, “Comus in Canaan: Milton’s Masque and the Rape of Dinah,” *Milton Studies* 63, no. 2 (2021): 157–87.

67. What exactly is meant by “defiling” has been the matter of considerable debate: it might mean rape, or it might refer to an exogamous sexual encounter. On the question of consent in the Dinah narrative, see especially Lyn M. Bechtel, “What if Dinah Is Not Raped? (Genesis 34),” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 19, no. 62 (1994): 19–36.

68. Calvin also understands the passage as a warning against intermarriage, since “at this day also, our baptisme doth separate us from unbeleeueers, insomuch that he bringeth shame and reproche to him selfe, which ioyneth with them.” See *A Commentarie of Iohn Caluine, vpon the First Booke of Moses called Genesis* (London: [By Henry Middleton] for Iohn Harison and George Bishop, 1578), 698.

69. Julia Reinhard Lupton, *Citizen-Saints: Shakespeare and Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 190.

70. Calvin, *Commentarie*, 697.

71. John Milton, “A Treatise on Civil Power,” in *Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Hughes, 845–46.

72. Goldberg, “Samson Uncircumcised,” 284.

73. Stanley Fish, “Question and Answer in *Samson Agonistes*,” *Critical Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1969): 237–65, at 242.

74. Mary S. Weinkauff, “Dalila: The Worst of All Possible Wives,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 13, no. 1 (1973): 135–47, at 147. For psychoanalytic explanations of Samson’s disclosure, see Jackie DiSalvo, “Intestine Thorn: Samson’s Struggle with the Woman Within,” in *Milton and the Idea of Woman*, ed. Julia M. Walker (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 211–29; and John Guillory, “Dalila’s House: *Samson Agonistes* and the Sexual Division of Labor,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 106–22. John Shawcross also suspects that Samson is simply oversexed, and that he “revealed his secret only for sexual intercourse”; see *The Uncertain World of Samson Agonistes* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 115.

75. On Milton rehabilitating Samson’s intelligence, see John Mulryan, “The Heroic Tradition of Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*,” *Milton Studies* 18 (1983): 217–34.

76. Andrea Long Chu, *Females: A Concern* (New York: Verso, 2019), 78.

77. Hil Malatino, *Trans Care* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 3.

78. Malatino, *Trans Care*, 3.

79. Patricia Parker, “Barbers and Barbary: Early Modern Cultural Semantics,” *Renaissance Drama* 33 (2004): 201–44; and Greta LaFleur, *The Natural History of Sexuality* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 63–102.

80. Will Fisher, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 87.

81. John Milton, “The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce,” in *Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Hughes, 712.

82. Quoted in Jeffrey Shoulson, *Milton and the Rabbis: Hebraism, Hellenism, and Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 254.

83. For work on care in disability studies from an explicitly queer or trans perspective, see Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018); Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

84. DiSalvo, “Intestine Thorn,” 217.

85. Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 65–66.

86. Lisa Marie Cacho addresses how racialized disability serves as a metric to determine which populations are “ineligible for personhood” (6) in “Beyond Ethical Obligation,” ch. 2 of *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 61–69.

87. Jennifer Terry, *Attachments to War: Biomedical Logics and Violence in Twenty-First-Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 25.

88. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 14.

89. On the complexities of the amputee-devotee relation, see Alison Kafer, “Desire and Disgust: My Ambivalent Adventures in Devoteism,” in *Sex and Disability*, eds. Robert McRuer and Anna Mollow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 331–54.

90. A significant body of scholarly work reframes *Samson Agonistes* in light of September 11. See, among others, John Carey, “A Work in Praise of Terrorism? September 11 and *Samson Agonistes*,” *Times Literary Supplement*, September 6, 2002, 15–16; Feisal G. Mohamed, “Confronting Religious Violence: Milton’s ‘Samson Agonistes,’” *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (March 2005): 327–40; and the essays collected in *Milton in the Age of Fish: Essays on Authorship, Text, and Terrorism*, eds. Michael Lieb and Albert C. Labriola (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2006).

91. On this dynamic, see, among many others, Precarity Lab, ed., *Technoprecarious* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2020).

92. Cameron Awkward-Rich, “‘She of the Pants and No Voice:’ Jack Bee Garland’s Disability Drag,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 1 (February 2020): 20–36, at 22.

93. Jean-Thomas Tremblay, “Feminist Breathing,” *differences* 30, no. 3 (2019): 92–117, at 94.

94. For this line as an echo of Psalm 43, see Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Toward Samson Agonistes: The Growth of Milton’s Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 209.

EPILOGUE

1. North Dakota House Bill 1476 (January 2021).

2. See, for instance, the Ninth Circuit decision *Edmo v. Corizon, Inc.*, which held that refusing to provide a prisoner with gender-affirming surgery was a violation of her Eighth Amendment protections against cruel and unusual punishment. The court cited the endorsement of transitional care by “the American Medical Association, the American Medical Student Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Family Practice Association, the Endocrine Society, the National Association of Social Workers, the American Academy of Plastic Surgeons, the American College of Surgeons, Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ Equality, the HIV Medicine Association, the Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgender Physician Assistant Caucus, and Mental Health America.” *Edmo v. Corizon, Inc.*, 935 F.3d 757 (9th Cir. 2019), 769.

3. On the transphobia of self-professed “freethinkers,” see Kathryn Lofton, “The Pulpit of Performative Reason,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (August 2022): 443–59.

4. West Virginia House Bill 2976 (2023). Notably, this bill uses language identical to the North Dakota anti-trans bill, including its definition of “secular humanism” as a “faith-based worldview.”

5. Jules Gill-Peterson, “The Anti-Trans Lobby’s Real Agenda,” *Jewish Currents*, April 21, 2021.

6. Just this year, North Dakota has passed measures that ban trans people from using public bathrooms, showers, and changing rooms (House Bill 1473 [2023]); not one but two bills banning trans students from participating in school sports (HB 1249 and HB 1489 [2023]); two bills prohibiting name and gender marker changes on birth certificates (HB 1139 [2023] and HB 1297 [2023]); a ban on drag performance, where “drag” is defined broadly enough to include trans people simply existing in public space (HB 1333 [2023]); a bill prohibiting government entities from adopting policies that penalize