SAMSON AGONISTES AND THE GENEVA BIBLE

SAMSON AGONISTES has been described as the most simple, direct, and powerful, the most finished of Milton's poems; but critics have not always agreed as to its tone, and some have recently challenged the traditional date and the artistic competence of the poem. It has probably been more often admired than understood and genuinely appreciated. Tillyard, who prefers the two epics, finds in the drama complete adequacy of expression, a complete story or fable, and no evidence at all of the relaxing of Milton's grip or the impairment of his mind. But he is distressed by the unamiable qualities of the poem. In the gloating over the destruction of the Philistines he discovers proof of the "settled ferocity" of Milton's mind and character. Tillyard declares that the poem is too austere; there is nothing to mitigate the harshness, the starkness of the story. This criticism, one might say, ignores the Old Testament story. There is certainly no gentleness or amiability in the Biblical tale of Samson. The God of Israel, as Milton knew, was a jealous God who ruthlessly destroyed his enemies. The austerity of the poem is apparently in harmony with the nature of Hebrew religion as revealed in the Old Testament.

This leads to a matter that is very controversial: the definition of the tone of Samson Agonistes. In an essay read before the British Academy in 1908, the classical scholar Sir R. C. Jebb maintained that in language and structure the poem is classical but that in idea and spirit it is Hebraic. Milton's mind, Jebb said, was in the literal and proper sense Hebraic. Milton believed, as did the Hebrews, that God is the personal king and leader of His people, that the Hebrews are His servants, and that from time to time God selects and
inspires those who reveal His will. Sometimes Milton substitutes the English for the Hebrews as God's chosen people; and he almost habitually regards himself as God's prophet and interpreter. It is in this character that Milton discloses himself in *Samson Agonistes*. Jebb also declared that in the poem there is no conflict between man and fate, which is the subject of all Greek tragedy. On the contrary, in the drama God and His servants are contrasted with false gods and their servants. Samson is the champion of the Hebrews and of Jehovah. Therefore, the famous classical scholar concluded that the poem is in spirit and idea essentially Hebraic.

For many years this interpretation stood unchallenged. Finally, Professor W. R. Parker boldly attacked Jebb's evidence and conclusions and offered his own interpretation. Parker admitted that there are Hebraic elements in *Samson Agonistes*, but he insisted that there are also Hebraic elements in Greek tragedy. He confidently asserted that spirit is not a matter of ideas. He declared that we cannot pin spirit down to a specific belief in fate or indeed to any specific belief whatever. Most of our standards are, he says, completely inadequate to measure Milton's artistic sympathy. They are more than inadequate; they are an insult to Milton's genius. Parker then proceeds to consider "in a larger sense" the real meaning of spirit. Spirit is, first, the tone or temper resulting from controlling artistic principles; second, spirit is the tone resulting from dominant ideas "other than artistic"; and, third, spirit is a combination of these two. For Parker tone is expressed by such words as serious, reflective, earnest, didactic, religious, sublime. These qualities are found in Greek tragedy and in *Samson Agonistes*. Therefore, Parker concludes, *Samson Agonistes* is Hellenic in spirit. Parker also insists that there is very little difference between the conception of fate in Greek tragedy and the idea of fate in
the poem. In both the universal law of justice is fate, and fate is also a mysterious divine decree. Therefore, Parker concludes that God and fate are similar or indeed practically identical. He also declares that Samson is a "Hebrew only by accident."

We now see the result of abandoning the idea in the definition of spirit. In this method of special pleading words seems no longer to have any precise meaning: Aeschylus is Hebraic; God is just another name for fate; Samson is a Hebrew only by accident; and so on. But will the intelligent reader of the poem be convinced? Consider briefly the last point: Samson is a "Hebrew only by accident." The plain truth, of course, is that the story of Samson is intensely nationalistic and that Samson is the hero of Judaism.

The glory late of Israel, now the grief;
as the Chorus, which is made up of Samson's Hebrew friends, sings. The reader very well knows that Samson's birth was "from Heaven foretold." He knows that Samson

Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver.

He knows that Samson's shame is Israel's disgrace. He knows that Samson's final act brings honor and freedom to Israel. The reader does not believe that Samson is a Hebrew only by accident. The critical reader realizes that Parker in his zealous effort to prove that the poem is Greek in spirit has ignored or misinterpreted many words and passages.

My doubts as to the validity of Parker's interpretation have recently been in part confirmed by Mr. F. Michael Krouse, who has argued that Milton's relationship to Greek tragedy can be precisely determined only by the study of the Greek plays in the forms or edition in which Milton and his age knew them. Parker read Greek tragedy in twentieth-century
versions; Milton did not. Only when we know how Greek drama was interpreted in the commentaries of Renaissance editions can we be prepared to understand how Milton understood these tragedies. The clash between Parker and Jebb over the interpretation of the spirit of *Samson Agonistes* is explained as a phase of the much wider conflict of two schools of Miltonic criticism: the older school emphasizes the Christian and the Puritan spirit of the grim, stern poet; the younger school, zealously revaluing and reinterpreting, stresses almost exclusively his humanism and Hellenism. The reaction against the traditional view was inevitable and perhaps desirable; it has certainly brought to light values that are significant. But in the case of *Samson Agonistes* the revaluation has undoubtedly gone too far; for it denies or minimizes the religious and Hebraic spirit which pervades the poem as it does the Scriptural story of Samson. When Milton’s indebtedness to the Renaissance is exclusively studied and emphasized, his place in the Reformation and his fundamental religious character are disregarded.

Returning to the religious ideas of the poem, without losing sight of the fact that it is an imitation of tragedy “as it was antiently compos’d,” we realize that Mr. Parker’s attempt to isolate spirit from idea results in a vague abstraction which is almost or quite meaningless. Objectively or precisely defined, as we understand it in the poem, the spirit of *Samson Agonistes* seems to be, as Jebb explained, clearly Hebraic. Moreover, the poem is, I believe, clearly Protestant and Puritan in spirit. The story is developed and the character interpreted in a way that is, I think, demonstrably Protestant and Puritan. Proof of this statement may be found by comparing the poem with the annotations on the story in the Geneva Bible. This Bible, convenient in form, terse and
vigorous in style, sound in scholarship, was essentially a Protestant book, which deserved and enjoyed great popularity. Through numerous reprints after its first publication, in 1560, it exercised a profound influence upon the devout for many years. It has been called “the household Bible of the English-speaking nations.” Although not officially approved for use in English churches, the Geneva Bible was widely used; it was indeed the household Bible of the English people. The annotations particularly express Protestant and Puritan ideas, some of which occur as keynotes or themes in Samson Agonistes.

We should first ask whether Milton was acquainted with the Geneva Version. It is known that the family Bible was the Authorized or King James Version. Some may conclude that Milton did not use the Geneva Version. However, it seems to me entirely probable that Milton knew the Geneva Bible, the Protestant Bible, which continued to be read for many years after the Authorised Version appeared, in Milton’s infancy, and which in its notes expressed ideas of which Milton certainly approved. Although there is no external proof, there is, I think, an inherent probability that the Puritan poet knew this famous Bible.

As understood in this inquiry, Puritanism does not indicate a group interested in church reform or in philosophy, metaphysics, and theocracy. In this study Puritanism implies a theology or religion “that brought every man to a direct experience of the spirit and removed intermediaries between himself and the Deity,” between the individual and the Word of God. Puritans believed in the direct revelation of the divine will and purpose to the individual and in man’s voluntary collaboration with God. Having a keen sense of his individual responsibility, the believer was supported in
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his faith that nothing in the world is due to chance or blind fate. With fear and trembling each individual should work out his salvation in obedience to the divine will. This seems to express the essential belief or fundamental faith of Puritanism.

In this sense, Samson Agonistes is unmistakably Protestant and Puritan. In the Geneva Bible the annotations on the story of Samson emphasize God's purpose and indicate an intimate spiritual relationship between Samson and the Lord. This relationship does not appear in the Biblical text. But in the notes Samson is the conscious and voluntary, though fallible, agent of the Deity. In both the Geneva Bible and Samson Agonistes Samson is presented as an individual acting in relation to a God and within a scheme of religious values that are recognizably Protestant and Puritan. In origin a "lusty folk-hero," Samson becomes in commentary and poem one of the elect, a saint, not perfect but distinguished by his faith.

Let us now examine the evidence.

The tone of the commentary in the Geneva Bible is indicated by the note that accompanies the following text: "Then there was a man in Zorah of the familie of the Danites, named Manoah, whose wife was baren, and bare not." The note reads: "Signifying that their deliverance came onely of God and not by mans power." This statement of the divine interest and direct intervention prepares us to understand the part that God played in the life of Samson. In the commentary of the Geneva Bible the Lord takes a direct and abiding interest in Samson from his birth to his death. In turn Samson recognizes the divine purpose and his obligation. This idea is reinforced by the note on the text: "For loe, thou shalt conceive and beare a sonne, and no rasor
shall come on his head: for the childe shalbe a Nazarite unto God from his birth: . . .” The Note on “Nazarite” is: “Meaning, he should be separate from the world and dedicate to God.” This seems to express the ideal of sincere and devout Puritans. In Samson Agonistes Samson asks, somewhat querulously,

Why was my breeding order’d and prescrib’d  
As of a person separate to God,  
Design’d for great exploits . . . (ll. 30-32)

Both the Geneva Bible and the poem emphasize Samson’s separation from the world and his dedication to God. Both stress the divine calling and mission of Samson. By God’s will Samson was separated from the world and dedicated to the service of his country and God. The notes explicitly state this idea. The devout and sincere Puritan would have recognized in Samson a kindred spirit.

The willingness of man to obey God’s will is asserted in the note on the text: “Then Manoah prayed to the Lorde . . .” The note reads: “He sheweth him seIfe ready to obey Gods will, and therefore desireth to knowe farther.” Characteristically Protestant and Puritan, Manoah is ready to obey God’s will. In the text “Then Manoah tooke a kid with a meat offering, & offred it upon a stone unto the Lord: and the Angel did wonderously,” the phrase “did wonderously” carries this note: “God sent fire from heauen to consume their sacrifice, to confirme their faith in his promise.” The statement of God’s purpose, the confirming of their faith, is important. Note also the comment on the Lord’s accepting the burnt offering: “These graces that we haue receiued of God, & his accepting of our obedience, are sure tokens of his loue toward us, so that nothing can hurt us.” Perhaps no statement could reveal more forcefully the unique relationship
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between man and God, as previously explained.

In the Geneva Bible the commentary on the first part of the story states explicitly the active interest and participation of the Lord. This assurance of God's grace and favor seems to envelope the story. The notes present a religious or theological idea for which the text supplies only a slender basis. This tone is, I believe, reflected in Samson Agonistes.

At this point there is one discrepancy that should be mentioned. Where the text reads "And Manoah arose & went after his wife, & came to the man, and said unto him...," the note explains: "He calleth him man, because he so seemed, but he was Christ the eternall word, which at his time appointed became man." Milton does not say that the angel or man of God was Christ. If he had read this note, he ignored it or decided not to use it.

When Samson asked his parents to obtain for him as wife the woman of Timnath, they replied: "Is there never a wife among the daughters of thy brethren, & among all thy people, that thou must goe take a wife of the uncircumcised Philistims?" The Geneva Version presents this note: "Though his parents did justly reprove him, yet it appeareth that this was the secret worke of the Lord." In Samson Agonistes Samson's parents did not know but he knew that what he "motion'd was of God":

From intimate impulse, and therefore urg'd
The Marriage on; that by occasion hence
I might begin Israel's Deliverance
The work to which I was divinely call'd; (ll. 223-226)

Opposite the text "that hee should seeke an occasion agaynst the Philistims" stands this note: "To fight against them for the deliuerance of Israel." This note seems to appear in Milton's line,

I might begin Israel's Deliverance.
At this point there is in the Geneva Bible no support for Milton's idea that from intimate impulse Samson knew God's purpose. But this thought is stated in a later note. After Samson had slaughtered the Philistines, he was very thirsty and he called upon the Lord. Here the commentary runs: "Whereby appeareth, that he did these things in faith, and so with a true zeal to glorifie God and deliuer his country." Faith and zeal for the divinely appointed work characterize the young and heroic Samson. It is important to recall this glorious Samson, the zealous and faithful servant of the Lord. In reading the poem we should not fix our attention only upon the blinded and wretched slave who has fallen into shame and misery. The reader must recall that Samson was once the faithful agent of the Lord. In the text there is little foundation for this interpretation. But the commentary in the Geneva Version may account for this remodeling of Samson's character. This seems to be the most important difference between the Biblical text, on the one hand, and the commentary and the poem, on the other. The idea that Samson was the conscious and faithful servant of the Lord is traced to Protestant and even Catholic tradition. As Mr. Krouse has said, many writers "in the patristic period called attention to the fact that Samson was impelled and strengthened throughout his career by the Holy Spirit." Indeed Samson was often regarded as a saint, who "believed and was resplendent in faith."

The marriage to the woman of Timnath affords no further evidence, but in the following episode there seems to be positive proof of relationship between the commentary and the poem. After Samson had smitten the Philistines with a great slaughter, he withdrew to the rock Etam, in Judah; and the Philistines pursued him for revenge. Then the men
of Judah came to bind Samson and deliver him to his foes, saying, "Knowest thou not that the Philistims are rulers over us?" This abject surrender of their champion is emphatically condemned in the Geneva Version. A note in the commentary reads: "Such was their grosse ignorance, that they judged Gods great benefite to be a plague unto them." The reader of this Bible would also condemn the men of Judah. Another note is equally outspoken in its condemnation: "Thus they had rather betray their brother, then use the means that God had giuen for their deliuerance." Almost precisely the same opinion is expressed in Samson's reply to the Chorus's reminder that

Yet Israel still serves with all his Sons. (l. 240)

Samson indignantly replies:

That fault I take not on me, but transfer
On Israel's Governours, and Heads of Tribes,
Who seeing those great acts which God had done
Singly by me against their Conquerours
Acknowlèd'd not, or not at all consider'd
Deliverance offered: .................(ll. 241-246)

Declaring that his own people had basely betrayed him to the Philistines and thus had forfeited their chance and hope of freedom, Samson goes on to say that political bondage is the inevitable result of vice and that nations grown corrupt often despise, envy, or suspect him

Whom God hath of his special favour rais'd
As thir Deliverer; ......................

Doubtless these lines apply to Milton and the other men of the Commonwealth, who, as they thought, were champions of liberty and who were repudiated at the Restoration. But the idea seems to be a restatement and elaboration of two notes in the Genevan commentary: the men of Judah, grossly
ignorant, failed to recognize in Samson the champion of God; and they betrayed their brother, who was the means that God had given for their deliverance. If he read them, it is difficult to believe that Milton was not influenced by these notes.

We come now to Samson's greatest folly and his most grievous sin, his infatuation for Delilah and his revelation of the secret of his strength. Since it profaned the mystery of God, this action brought about his ruin and it deserved the most severe punishment. Milton was scarcely more vigorous in condemning Samson's infatuation than were the authors of the annotations in the Geneva Bible. After the failure of her first attempt to learn the secret of Samson's strength, Delilah persists, saying, "See, thou hast mocked me and told me lies. I pray thee nowe, tell me wherewith thou mightest be bound." Here is the commentary: "Though her falshode tended to make him lose his life, yet his affection so blinded him, that he could not beware." In the poem Samson perceives the design of Delilah, but he is so bewitched that he cannot resist her importunity. With a grain of manhood he might have shaken off her snares,

But foul effeminacy held me yok't
Her Bond-slave; O indignity, O blot
To Honour and Religion! servil mind
Rewarded well with servil punishment! (ll. 410-413)

Even his present humiliating servitude, Samson exclaims, is not so base or so ignominious as was his former enslavement; and that blindness was worse than this,

That saw not how degenerately I serv'd.

As the commentary explains, Samson was so blinded by his affections that he could not beware."
When Samson does not rebuke or chide Delilah for her continued solicitations, the Genevan Version utters this clear warning: “It is impossible, if we give place to our wicked affections, but at length we shall be destroyed.” Finally, when Samson tells Delilah the secret of his strength, a note offers this pertinent comment: “Thus his immoderate affections toward a wicked woman, caused him to lose God’s excellent gifts, and become slave unto them, whom he should have ruled.” Incidentally, this, it may be noted, is another phase of the fundamental theme of *Paradise Lost*: the surrender to passion, the failure to obey reason and God. Samson’s sin is punished by the loss of his strength, which was the gift of God. When his locks are cut off and his strength departs from him, the commentary informs us that he lost his strength “Not for the loss of his hear but for the contempt of the ordinance of God, which was the cause that God departed from him.” In the poem Samson exclaims,

*O impotence of mind, in body strong!*

His physical suffering, though severe, is light as compared with his mental anguish, which springs from his realization that he has been the fool of a deceitful woman and that he has brought dishonor upon Israel and God, whose peculiar servant he was. Although the Chorus may presume to question God’s providence and to suggest that He sometimes abandons the elect,

*With gifts and graces eminently adorn’d,*

Samson blames only himself for the loss of God’s gifts and favor. He concludes that only death can release him from his miseries,

*So many, and so huge, that each apart
Would ask a life to wail, ............*
But almost insupportable as are his miseries, they are not in fact out of proportion to his sin, which, as both Milton and the commentary in the Geneva Bible explain, was his surrender to passion and his contempt for the ordinance of God. To say, as Parker does, that Samson suffered far more than he deserved is quite misleading. Such a statement indicates a complete misconception of the God of the Hebrews and of Protestant and Puritan theology, which required severe punishment of those who sinned and disobeyed the Lord. By this standard Samson was not unjustly punished. And he was not, as Parker says, the victim of fate. He was the victim of his own lust and blindness, which brought the loss of God's favor. This seems to be the plain truth, which cannot be concealed by fluent disquisitions on the Greek spirit. As interpreted in the Geneva Bible and in *Samson Agonistes*, Samson's life illustrates the providence of God and the fortune of the Lord's dedicated but fallible servant.

Incidentally, Samson's fall may have been partly due to his pride. As Josephus suggested, he was "more elate . . . then he ought to have been." Milton's Samson condemns his own folly. He was strong in body but impotent in mind. He was proudly secure. But he blames no one so much as himself:

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of what now I suffer
  She was not the prime cause, but I my self,
                      ...................... (II. 233-234)
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Moreover, Samson is profoundly distressed because by his folly and sin he has brought honor and fame to Dagon but dishonor and obloquy to God. As Manoah says, Dagon is magnified, but God

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Besides whom is no God, compar'd with Idols,
Disgraci'd, blaspem'd and had in scorn
By th' Idolatrous rout amidst thir wine; (II. 441-443)
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The realization of this sad fact is his chief diction, which has brought shame and sorrow and anguish to his soul. But whatever happens to himself Samson is sure that Dagon must stoop. He is confident that the Lord will arise and destroy His enemies. This strong affirmation of Samson's faith, which occurs rather early in the poem, must be duly noted. Manoah accepts Samson's statement as a prophecy. Manoah is confident that God will not long defer to vindicate the glory of his name.

Samson's lot is apparently hopeless, but the close of his life is not without its triumph. We must carefully consider the reason for this triumph. Jebb declared that Samson's will is the agent of the catastrophe. But we should not make the mistake of ignoring Samson's dependence upon God's will and grace. To die as a Christian Samson must regain the favor and the grace of God. This key to the last hours of Samson's life is given by some notes in the Geneva Version. Opposite the text "And the heare of his head beganne to grow againe after that it was shauen" stands the following comment: "Yet had he not his strength againe, til he had called upon God, and reconciled himselfe." In Samson Agonistes it is, I think, implied that Samson was reconciled to God. When Samson is on the point of leaving to obey the command of the lords of the Philistines, he has regained some degree of confidence and self-respect. He will do nothing dishonorable, nothing to discredit himself or God. In fact he has some rousing notions that he will do something extraordinary. He will acquit himself with honor. He will not stain his vow of Nazarite. This hopeful and assured state of mind could hardly have been achieved without Samson's consciousness that God is with him.

Partly, it seems, to maintain suspense, the full reconcilia-
tion does not take place until the very moment of catastrophe. This reconciliation is expressly stated in the Geneva Bible. Opposite the text "Then Samson called upon the Lord, and said, O Lord God, I pray thee, thinke upon me: O God, I beseeche thee, strengthen me at this time onely, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistimes for my two eyes" the margin carries this significant note: "According to my vocation, which is to execute Gods judgements upon the wicked." This note implies that throughout his life (except, of course, when he was infatuated with Delilah) Samson was aware of his vocation. Accordingly his last prayer was granted. He was reconciled to God. This is the Christian explanation of his triumph. Samson's final act is not one of mere revenge. His deed is the execution of God's judgment upon the wicked idolators, who are the enemies of Israel and the Lord.

Manoah's remarks after Samson's death emphasize this point. Manoah takes pride in the heroic death of his son, in his crushing revenge upon his enemies, and in the opportunity of freedom thus offered to Israel. But most of all Manoah rejoices because the Lord was not parted from Samson, as was feared,

But favouring and assisting to the end.

This is why Manoah does not deeply grieve for his son's death. Manoah knows that Samson's final act was not a mere display of physical strength. He knows that Samson's spiritual regeneration preceded and accounted for this demonstration of physical prowess. He knows that Samson was able to revenge himself upon his enemies and to execute God's purpose because his faith had been renewed. As the Chorus says, God, who had seemed to hide His face, unexpectedly returned and bore witness to His glorious champion.

If we avert our gaze from the wretched, blinded slave at
the opening of the poem and if we recall the entire course of Samson's life, we shall recognize, I believe, a character, a pattern of life, and an attitude towards God that is essentially Protestant and Puritan. Unlike the crude creature of Hebraic folk-lore, the Samson of the Geneva Version and of Samson Agonistes is, on the whole, the servant of God, conscious of his divine calling, animated by faith and zeal, disgraced and ruined by his folly and his disobedience, but in the end victorious through his reconciliation with God. Hence, not Samson's will, but his faith and his obedience to God seem to be the keynotes of his character and the proof that he is, in spite of his faults, one of the elect.

Therefore, except in form Samson Agonistes cannot be called Greek. It is, of course, written after the ancient manner, avoids comic stuff (this has recently been denied), observes the unities, and illustrates Aristotle's definition of the purpose of tragedy. But all this is mainly a matter of form, of externals; and the chorus is not purely Greek but a blending of Greek and Italian Renaissance patterns. The form of the drama does not greatly affect the essential meaning and spirit. Although ingeniously argued, the theory that Samson Agonistes is Greek in spirit is unsubstantiated. It ignores the essential ideas of the poem, which is an impressive expression of Milton's deeply religious nature, a strikingly individual and imaginative synthesis of Hebrew legend and Christian tradition by a poet who was both a true humanist and a genuine, if independent, Puritan. I should add that nothing in this inquiry is intended to deny or minimize Milton's extraordinary linguistic abilities, which enabled him to read Scripture in the original languages. Authorities agree that he had thorough training in Biblical Hebrew, that he was accurate in translating Hebrew, and that his ideas depended, not
upon rabbinical exegesis, but upon diligent study of the Scriptural text. That all this is true is here tacitly taken for granted. But this fidelity to the text does not wholly account for the Protestant (or Puritan) tone or spirit of the poem. If the present inquiry is valid, Samson Agonistes is not Greek but Hebraic and Puritan in spirit; and this spirit, besides being founded upon “a rational Puritan interpretation of the plain sense of Scripture,” is clearly indebted to the Protestant thinking of the famous commentary in the Geneva Version. I believe that this commentary directly or indirectly influenced Milton’s interpretation of the Scriptural story. I conclude therefore that Samson is a hero “of Geneva print.”

GEORGE W. WHITING

NOTES

13. For a thorough and comprehensive discussion of the Christian tradition the student will, of course, consult Krouse. See especially pp. 38 ff., where Mr. Krouse reviews the various explanations of Samson's fall. Many commentators followed Jerome in attributing Samson's fall to his "lust after woman-kind."
15. It need hardly be said that in this inquiry I have excluded the gloomy view of life, the contempt for beauty, the occasional hypocrisy, the stereotyped otherworldliness, etc., which some historians regard as proof that medieval orthodoxy and the Puritanism of the Reformation are basically similar. See G. G. Coulton, "The High Ancestry of Puritanism," *Ten Medieval Studies* (1930), pp. 58-71.