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A darkly bright republic: Milton's poetic logic

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My first section considers Walter J. Ong's influential analyses of the logical method of Peter Ramus, on whose system Milton based his *Art of Logic*. The upshot of Ong's work is that philosophical logic has become a kind monarch over all other discourses, the allegedly timeless and universal method of mapping and diagramming all concepts. To show how Milton nevertheless resists this tyrannical result in his non-*Logic* writings, my second section offers new readings of Milton's poems *Il Penseroso* and Sonnet 16: "On His Blindness", along with his prose epilogue to his elegies (and thereby the entire collection entitled *Poems*). These readings attempt to show (1) the original admixing of philosophy and poetry (under the heading of "thoughtfulness"), (2) the shadow-hidden superiority of poetry in connection to the effeminising disability of blindness, and (3) the potential irony of an apology that arguably suggests poetry's superiority to philosophy. Finally, I rest my case for Milton's rebellion by offering an interpretation of *Paradise Lost* which affirms the character of Satan qua dark, queer, poetic figure of classical republicanism.

The rebel logician – *Art of logic*

The Jesuit priest Walter Ong (1912–2003) was a pioneering scholar of rhetoric who earned his PhD from Harvard under media guru Marshall McLuhan. Most famous for *Orality and Literacy*, Ong's most important book remains his study of the Renaissance logician Peter Ramus, entitled *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Ong 2004). Here, Ong condemns Ramus as the pivotal figure in the transition from ancient/medieval sophisticated discussion, to modernity's oversimplifying diagrammatic reasoning in writing. As Ramus' contemporary, the towering thinker Francis Bacon, put it,

Peter Ramus, I have nothing in common with that hide-out of ignorance, that pestilent bookworm, that begetter of handy manuals. Any facts he gets hold of and begins to squeeze in the rack of his summary method soon lose their truth, which oozes or skips away, leaving him to garner only dry and barren trifles. Aquinas, Scotus, and their followers out of their unrealities created a varied world; Ramus out of the real world made a desert (Bacon 1964, n. 64, in Walton 1971, 289).

I will now briefly summarise Ong's case against Ramus, alongside two other scholars of Ramus sympathetic to Ong's work, before moving to Ong's lengthy introduction to the Yale *Complete Prose Works* edition of Milton's *Art of Logic*.

Ong first characterises Ramus' logic as "a kind of simplified logic which imposed itself by implication on the external world to make this simple, too" (Ong 2004, 4). Despite Ong's contention that Ramus was "himself no real thinker", Ong grants that Ramus' publications were nevertheless enormously popular, with "a total of around 1 100 separate printings of individual works" (5). Ong then invokes Milton and his *Art of Logic* as an example of Ramus's influence, labelling the poet "a Ramist of sorts" (6). And by this, Ong elaborates, he means that "Ramism specialized in dichotomies, in 'distribution' and 'collocation'", "systems", and "in other diagrammatic concepts" (8–9). Because of this widespread influence, Ong claims that Ramus' textbooks are "as important

in the history of the human mind as the monumental Renaissance literature of Shakespeare” or – returning again to our poet – “Milton” (9).

Ong’s critique of Ramus is buttressed by numerous other scholars, of whom I will briefly consider two here. First, John Guillory offers a helpful introduction to Ramus through a reading of the playwright John Marlowe’s treatment of Ramus (Guillory 2014). Guillory characterises Ramus as “undoubtedly the most famous philosopher of his time – a *Gallicus Plato* to some, to

others the most troublesome of philosophasters” (696). More specifically, Guillory observes that Ramus’ “reputation for philosophical arrogance did not need to be compounded by heretical religious views in order to provoke controversy” (698). The reason for this, Guillory explains, was Ramus’ “notorious *unica methodus* by which all of the arts were disposed into propositions that marched in orderly fashion from the most general to the most particular” (715). Guillory later elaborates on the nature of Ramus’ method, saying that

dichotomy gives Ramus his method, the means to order any and every art and thereby to acquire by the simplest and shortest way (*methodus*) the knowledge of an art. The dichotomy organizes the space of the art by identifying the most general concept or definition, the division of that into its constituent parts, and so forth. The result of this process of definition by division is the notional distribution of the terms of an art across the page in the form of a chart or diagram (718).

Later, Guillory also pays tribute to Ong, dubbing him “Ramus’s most brilliant expositor”, and describing Ong’s text on Ramus as “that great adversarial book” (713). As this tone suggests, Guillory concludes his analyses on a somewhat sceptical note, suggesting that one of Ong’s claims, namely that “transmission” as well as “creation” is “the concern of philosophy”, is one that “has not gone unchallenged” (721). In the endnote to that sentence, however, Guillory only names one challenger, and then concedes that even that scholar concludes “in ‘many important respects, therefore, Ong’s influential analysis of Ramism was sound” (Hotson 2007, 292, in Guillory 2014).

My second post-Ong Ramist, Robert Goulding, affirms Ong’s interpretation even more directly. For starters, Goulding notes that, despite Ramus’ famous passion for mathematised methods, he “was no great mathematician himself” (a fact attested to by even his “sympathetic biographer Nicholas Nancel”) (Goulding 2006, 63). Goulding also notes that Ramus follows Plato in identifying the intuition of mathematical truth as divining the mind of God (67). Ramus’ contempt for actual mathematical methods was also illustrated, according to Goulding, by Ramus’ decision to publish an edition of Euclid’s *Elements* without the figures and proofs (in 1544, the same year that he was banned by royal decree from teaching philosophy), which supported Ramus’ own interpretation of mathematics as an immediate intuition free of human history and fabrication (70). Worse still, in the middle of his career, Ramus blamed Euclid for the alleged decay and corruption of ancient Greek mathematics, on the grounds that Euclid’s method violated Ramus’ method. Goulding summarises this as follows:

According to Ramus’s reasoning, if Euclid really had put together the *Elements* according to the natural method, then his work should pass the test of the three “laws of method” which Ramus developed after his return to philosophical publication in 1551. Not surprisingly, Euclid fails miserably as a Ramist logician (75–76).

In short, “Ramus concludes that Euclid, although no doubt a fine collector of individually excellent mathematical truths (most of them unearthed by the first human beings), was a dunce when it came to arranging them according to their nature” (76). As with Frege centuries later, actual mathematics refused to be reduced to formal logic, to which the logicians stubbornly reply: so much the worse for mathematics!

Returning to Ong, I turn now to his introduction to Milton’s *Art of Logic*. There, Ong notes that the text “was first published in 1672, when Milton was sixty-four years old and had only two more years to live”, though it is “virtually certain that it was a much earlier composition” (Ong 1982, 144). Since Ramist logic was part of the curriculum at both Milton’s pre-university (St. Paul’s School) and university (Cambridge) institutions, it is unsurprising that Milton used it as the basis for his own *Art*

of *Logic*, which he probably wrote for use as a private tutor in the 1640s (144–145). Though it was thus written decades before his most important poems, I do not mean to suggest that such an interval was necessary for Milton to subvert Ramus's conception of logic. But many important philosophers do go through a phase of youthful imitation before developing more independent insights (examples include Nietzsche's youthful debt to Schopenhauer, and Kant's to Leibniz). As to the content of Milton's textbook, Ong asserts that it "does not deviate in any significant way from the logic of Ramus on which it explicitly structures itself" (147).

Ong then situates Milton's textbook in its historical context, which Ong describes as "toward the end of what we may call the age of logic" (148). Logic had originally "been developed", Ong explains, "by the ancient Greeks out of reflection on discussion or dispute", but Ramus altered its history with the (for Ong) dubious achievement of "definitively separating logic and rhetoric", and thus masking most traces of logic's disputative origins (150). More precisely, Ong continues, Ramus attempted to purge logic of all conflict, probability and uncertainty, and attempted to refashion logic as a completely visualised, spatial, mathematical method of truth (150). In doing so, Ong observes, Ramus "exalted formal logic to a height virtually unknown before", as from now on in Western history "there was only one logic" (158). Finally on this note, Ong concludes that Ramus' new, one true logic "supplanted all the probable logics" and "governed all acceptable mental processes" (158). This is what I referenced earlier in terms of logic-centred philosophy's tendency (via logic) toward monarchy.

Milton initially seems, in the face of Ramus' new tyranny of mathematical logic, to have prostrated himself like an obedient subject. That is, according to Ong, he "reproduces almost all of Ramus's 1572 text" and "uses almost all of Ramus's examples" (184, 186). And yet, Ong also notes that the influence of Milton's Ramist *Art of Logic* on Milton's other prose writings is "scant" (200). Ong's conclusion, then, is that "Milton did not go the whole way with Ramist logic, which in theory and actuality is about as unpropitious for poetry as any noetic theory can be" (203). As to the reason for this, Ong notes that "Milton had more feeling for sound than the typographically styled Ramist noetic and poetic allowed for" (204). That is, Milton's work is still distinctly oral in a way that escapes the visual diagrams of Ramism. Additionally, and of greatest importance, Ong observes that Milton

adds only this comment of his own to close the issue and the [*Art of Logic*]: "But to the orators and poets should be left their own account of method, or at least to those who teach the art of oratory and poetry". This completely overturns the Ramist cart. Ramus had insisted that all method of any kind belonged not to rhetoric or to poetry but to logic and to nothing else. It appears that Milton is not so sure (204).

It is here, I wish to suggest, that one finds a first dark glimmer of Satanic republicanism in Milton. Here, at the end of a text whose very existence valorises Ramus' monarchical logic, Milton unbends the knee, and throws off the shackles in favour of a republic of orators and poets (such as himself) who make their own laws. Along just such lines, in fact, Ong notes that a "good case might be made that Milton's poetry is, by and large, more 'logical' than most of his prose" (200). More specifically, Ong observes that, on the one hand, Milton (a) "treats the core of a poem as a series of propositions rationally connected with one another", (b) in "his three major poems" his "frequent references to 'reasoning' are all to logic", and (c) his "shorter poems reveal equal preoccupation with logical design, especially in the feeling for 'reciprocal relationships'" (including *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*) (200, 201).

Other glimmers of this republican defiance can be found in Milton's prose, and so I will now close this first section with a brief survey thereof. To begin, in his "Of Education", Milton rails against the practice in which teachers "present their young unmatriculated novices, at first coming, with the most intellectual abstractions of logic and metaphysics...to be tossed and turmoiled with their unballasted wits in fathomless and unquiet deeps of controversy" (228). Instead, Milton recommends that logic come last (in a long and complex pre-university educational curriculum), along with rhetoric, and poetry. And poetry, Milton specifies, should be "subsequent, or indeed rather precedent, as being less subtle and fine, but more simple, sensuous and passionate" (233).

This syntax is confusing for present-day English ears, but the editors of the text clarify in their notes Milton's meaning, namely that poetry is "[s]ubsequent in study, but precedent in value" (Milton 1982, 820).

As for what precisely Milton means by this "poetry" that is of greater value than logic and rhetoric, Milton again offers a clarification, writing that he "means not here the prosody of a verse... but that sublime art which in Aristotle's poetics...and others, teaches what the laws are of a true epic poem, what of a dramatic, and what of a lyric" (233). Note the ambiguity here. Is "poetry" here the art which Aristotle articulates in his *Poetics*, or is "poetry" instead the *Poetics* itself? The reference to "simple, sensuous and passionate" would suggest poetry simpliciter, but the "art" which "teaches" suggests Aristotle's theory.

Unless, that is, one follows Milton's suggestion from the close of his *Art of Logic* that the poems (by Homer, Sophocles, and others) teach Aristotle their own self-legislated poetic laws. In this way, poetry again ever so subtly trumps philosophy, with the *appearance* being a move from philosophy (qua logic) to philosophy (qua Aristotle's *Poetics*), while the *reality* being a move from philosophy's logic to the higher and independent logics of the epic, dramatic, and lyric forms of poetry. Again, therefore, a dark republic (this time, a republic of logics of different disciplines) hides in the shadows of a bright monarchy of philosophy.

Finally in terms of Satanic republican glimmerings in Milton's prose, his autobiographical preface to his *Reason in Church Government* (1642) includes the following concession regarding Milton's decision to publish this first prose work. "Lastly", Milton writes, "I should not choose this manner of writing wherein knowing myself inferior to myself, led by the genial power of nature to another task, I have the use, as I may account it, but of my left hand" (Milton 2008, 168). The word "left" carries the connotation of "sinister" (etymologically, left-handed) – more so in Milton's era than ours – and the meanings of "sinister" include "deceptive", "darkly suspicious" and "dark." Thus, Milton implicitly reverses the analogy of *philosophy is to poetry as light is to darkness*. That is, the prose of philosophy, according to Milton here, is the locus of his darker writings, which implies that his poetic verse is the locus of his light-filled ones. Milton then elaborates on this poetry/prose comparison.

For although a poet soaring in the high region of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him might without apology speak more of himself than I mean to do, yet for me sitting here below in the cool element of prose, a mortal thing among many readers of no empyreal conceit, to venture and divulge unusual things of myself, I shall petition to the gentler sort, it may not be envy to me (Milton 1982, 168–169).

Note that Milton here valorises poetry as higher, holier and more divine than prose, and as full of sun-symbolised warmth. While prose (including philosophy), he lowers to the pedestrian, the earth-bound, and the coolness of dark things. Supporting this reversal, Milton also refers to his "versing" (i.e. poetry) as "likely to live", based on "certain vital signs" in his poetic "style" (169). Again, therefore, Milton presents poetry as more alive than prose.

It seems, therefore, that one cannot simply assume that Milton's *Art of Logic* implies the superiority of logic (and thus philosophy) over poetry. But what exactly is the relationship between philosophy and poetry for him? Taking my cue from his aforementioned claim (in his *Art of Logic*) about poets making their own poetic laws, I now turn in my second section to two of his own poems, *Il Penseroso* and Sonnet 16: "On His Blindness", rounded off with his prose epilogue to the elegies and the *Poems* as a whole.

The poet-philosopher civil warrior – *Poems*

In this section, I will begin with *Il Penseroso*, which (with its companion, *L'Allegro*) originally appeared in Milton's first major publication, *Poems* (first issued in 1645 and reissued in 1673). In brief, I will suggest that, in *Il Penseroso*, Milton presents himself as a poet-philosopher, as opposed to *L'Allegro*'s extroverted libertine. I will then move to how Sonnet 16 (added for the 1673 edition) repurposes Milton's disability as a sign of Satanic nobility, with the speaker of the poem actually elevating his long-suffering patience as superior to the frenzied activity of the angels (which is

thus reminiscent of the opening of *Paradise Lost*, when Satan patiently bides his time in Hell by describing himself as superior to the faithful angels). And finally, I will consider the epilogue, which offers a deceptively insincere apology for Milton's writing poetry at all, along with a broken promise that he been baptised in philosophy's manly fire, having left poetry behind to rot in its prison – like Satan in Hell, or Milton himself imprisoned (and in danger of losing his life) after the Restoration of the English monarchy. In every case, one finds affirmations of the kind of conflict and dialectical complexity that, according to Ong's interpretation of Ramus, should be absent from the one true logical method.

L'Allegro, usually translated as “happy”, is more precisely rendered as “brisk”, which is the meaning it possesses in music (more precisely, that one should play quickly). Accordingly, I will translate it here as “The Manic Man”. Similarly, although the companion poem *Il Penseroso* is usually translated “The Melancholy Man”, the Oxford English Dictionary notes that this is not the primary meaning of the word in Italian; instead, the first three words that it offers for “melancholy” are “meditative, thoughtful, brooding”. Following this lead, I will translate the poem's title as “The Thoughtful Man”.¹ Thus, already at the titular level, Milton again rebels against a presumably rigid dichotomy.

Although Gordon Teskey notes that the dates of composition for the *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* are uncertain, he adds that most “scholars believe they were written after he took his MA degree at Cambridge [the equivalent of today's PhD] and was embarked on some five years of private study” (76). Each of these two titles, as the editors of *The Major Works* explain, “designates a personification or abstraction of the state of mind invoked in the poem” (Milton 1982, 744). The subjects of the poems, more precisely the deities to which they are dedicated, are “Mirth” and “Melancholy,” respectively (76). Terskey notes that one advantage possessed by the female goddess Melancholy is the “extreme antiquity” of her “line, making her fundamental to the metaphysical order of the world: she is ‘higher far descended’” than Mirth (82). Thus, at the level of their subject, as also in their titles, Milton again rebels against a presumed dichotomy, in this case, valorising the superficially pejorative half of the divine pair (Mirth/Melancholy). Moreover, the mere fact they are poems, in dialectical conversation, means that they move beyond the unitary logic of Ramus, as Ong describes.

On this note of gender, which will figure ever more prominently in my readings below, I will now offer a brief overview of Milton's complex relationship to it, and to sexuality, in general. On the one hand, his life and work is infamously representative of the misogyny and patriarchy that characterised that era in English history (as noted by, among many others, Annabel Patterson 2003). But on the other hand, there are multiple issues that complicate an easy or simplistic conclusion. First, Milton bases his arguments for divorce on the spiritual and intellectual compatibility of men and women, and on the necessity of an egalitarian conversation between them (as also noted in the same article by Patterson 2003, 282). Second, as biographers Campbell and Corns (2010) note, Milton's own sexuality includes a homoerotic dimension (including letters with what they term “playful erotic charge”) with his childhood best friend, as well as a brief withdrawal from Cambridge following Milton's potentially homosexual “offence” against school conduct (31, 39).² Third, Milton puts some of his own religious and political arguments in the mouths of controversial female characters in his narrative poetry (including Eve in *Paradise Lost* and Delilah in *Samson Agonistes*). Michael Schoenfeldt notes, for example, that “Milton allows Eve to cite some of the most compelling arguments of the *Aeropagitica* in defense of her wish to work alone” (Schoenfeldt 2003, 368). Fourth, in *Paradise Lost* Milton claims that angels and other spiritual beings (therefore including Satan) can assume either gender – “or both” genders – at will, based on Milton's view that spiritual substance is merely rarefied matter (which Fallon terms Milton's “animistic materialism” in Fallon 2003, 334–340). Fifth, many disability theorists have pointed out that men with disabilities

1 Buttressing my preferred translations for these two titles are Terskey's own preferences, namely “Lively Man” and “Reflective Man” (Teskey 2010, 76).

2 For example, Campbell and Corns note that Milton's schoolboy nickname was “The Lady” (2010, 60). Also in this vein, Fallon relates how, during the period of Milton's dictation of *Paradise Lost*, in the mornings Milton “would wait impatiently for his amanuensis, complaining that he ‘wanted to be milked’ (Parker 1996, 1090)” like a female animal (Fallon 2003, 341).

are frequently stigmatised as emasculated and dependent, and are thereby effeminised.³ And finally, Walter Ong notes that during “the Renaissance, as during the Middle Ages...vernacular literature tended to be regarded as literature for women, who were mostly denied formal schooling” (Ong 1982, 11). Most of Milton’s most important work was written in the English vernacular, including most of his early poetry, many of his prose tracts, and his three longest and most important poems: *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. In sum, in tension with Milton’s complicity in his era’s injustice to women is his valorisation and respect of women and the feminine, specifically in terms of actual and hypothetical individual human women, strong female and queer characters in his narratives, and the female and feminine dimensions of his own subtly gendered self. With this in mind, I now turn to the poems proper.

Continuing this rebellion against dichotomies are Milton’s opening lines for the twin poems, which feature an analogous structure. “The manic man” begins as follows: “Hence loathèd Melancholy,/Of Cerberus, and blackest Midnight born,” as the speaker commands the goddess Melancholy to “Find out some uncouth cell/Where brooding Darkness spread his jealous wings/And the night-raven sings” (ll. 1–2, 5–6). This is a dense passage, especially for present-day readers, but the *Major Works* editors’ notes are illuminating. First, the state of melancholy was viewed in Milton’s era as “a physiological condition caused by an excess of black bile”, and was “associated with depression as well as genius” (Orgel and Goldberg 2008, 744). Second, Milton invented this genealogy for the goddess, and I would add there is evidence (specifically, a play between “Cerberus” and “Erebus”) that the specific god of darkness he has in mind is the Greek Erebus, personification of darkness and child of Chaos. Third, the word “cell” here refers to a “single-room dwelling; by the seventeenth century, poetic usage for a humble cottage (not applied to prisons until the eighteenth century)”, to which I would add that this might already hint at the dwelling of the cleric/scholar, retiring to the cloister for the work of genius (Orgel and Goldberg 2008, 745).

Though the “The Manic Man” appears on the surface to be simply positive, there are many subtle moments that already hint at a critique masked in praise. First, the goddess Mirth is named the daughter of Bacchus, who as a god of wine and intoxication – viewed in ancient Greece as a troublemaking foreign god of Eastern extraction – is a suspect figure for a devout Christian reader of the poem (line 16). Second, the speaker immediately undermines this genealogy, suggesting that Mirth may instead be the daughter of so trivial a pair of gods as the west wind and the dawn (ll. 17–19). Third, there is a reference to “Wanton wiles” (line 27). Fourth, near the end, the speaker mentions Mirth’s “Lydian Aires”, which Plato in the *Republic* criticises in connection with laziness. Fifth, there is reference to the pejorative-sounding “wanton heed, and giddy cunning” (line 141). And finally, the poem ends with a reference to the head of Orpheus, who not only lost his beloved Eurydice due to his lack of willpower (looking back at her as they left Hades, thus condemning her to return there forever), but who had his body ripped to shreds by the devotees of Bacchus, with only his decapitated head remaining intact (line 145). In sum, there is much, despite all the attendant happiness and joy, to recommend an alternative to Mirth before the “The thoughtful man” takes his turn.

The first description of melancholy in “The Thoughtful Man” is already very different from that of “The Manic Man”. The former begins as follows: “Hail divinest Melancholy,/Whose saintly visage is too bright/To hit the sense of human sight;/And therefore to our weaker view,/O’erlaid with black staid wisdom’s hue” (ll. 11–16). Several things are worthy of note here. First, the editors date the composition of these twin poems to 1631, over two decades before Milton’s complete blindness in 1652, and thirteen years before (as he notes in a letter to a personal physician) he first “noticed [his] sight becoming weak and dim” (Milton 2008, 722). Thus, any connection between this claim and Milton’s own later blindness would have to be either fortuitous or prophetic, but certainly not a defence or rationalisation of his own later disability. Second, Milton depicts Melancholy here as inherently bright, brighter than even the divinities adored by the sunnier “manic” man. The goddess merely *appears* dark, and this is due exclusively to an artificial covering whose purpose is to protect against an inherent human weakness. Readers of *Paradise Lost* may recognise a foreshadowing here

3 See, for example, Leach and Murray (2008).

of the clouds that cover god's throne and make his unbearable brightness darkly visible (to which description I will return below).

On the other hand, lest one wrongly conclude that blackness or darkness is bad in itself for Milton, note also that he claims that wisdom itself is inherently black. In further support of blackness' virtue in "The Thoughtful Man", consider the crucial subsequent lines of the poem: "Black, but such as in esteem,/Prince Memnon's sister might beseem/Or that starred Ethiop queen" (ll. 17–19). Memnon, the editors note, "was an Ethiopian (hence black) king who fought on the Trojan side and was killed by Achilles; in *Od.*, xi. 522 he is a paradigm of manly beauty" (Orgel and Goldberg 2008, 747). Memnon is also the son, allegedly, of a mortal man and the Greek goddess of the dawn, Eos. Thus, this beautiful black man is literally half-rainbow, with the latter's full spectrum of delightful radiance. Finally, the "Ethiopian queen" here is Cassiopeia, the woman (or mother of the woman, depending on which version of the myth one favours) who was beautiful enough to rival and challenge Juno, the queen of the gods. Putting these three points together, for Milton's thoughtful man, both the brightness within, and the blackness without, are superlatively and divinely beautiful.

Returning to the beginning of "The Thoughtful Man", its speaker expresses disdain for the "vain deluding joys" of the "manic" man's life, and "all [Mirth's] toys", which he declares to be a better fit for "some idle brain" (ll. 1, 4, 5). Then, after discussing the goddess Melancholy, he goes on to praise at length, Milton's lifelong Protestantism notwithstanding, a "pensive nun, devout and pure" (l. 31). To this Christian female figure, the speaker then adds to Melancholy's retinue, "the muses in a ring", along with "Leisure,/That in trim gardens takes his pleasure", as well as "first, and chiefest...Guiding the fiery-wheelèd throne,/The cherub Contemplation" (ll. 47, 49–50, 51, 53–54). Descending from this climax, the speaker then invokes Cynthia, "Goddess of the moon", who (as the editors explain) was "similarly represented with a dragon-drawn chariot in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*" (Orgel and Goldberg 2008, 748, n. 27).

Crucially in terms of the present article, "The Thoughtful Man" goes on to invoke both "the spirit of Plato" and also "gorgeous Tragedy" – thus, Milton effectively unites philosophy and poetry under the same dark mantle of the thoughtful man (ll. 89, 97). Perhaps Milton is even suggesting, by this juxtaposition, the little-acknowledged fact of Plato's own poetic career as a tragedian before meeting Socrates, after meeting whom, Plato allegedly burnt all his poetic plays. Diskin Clay cites Diogenes Laertius as follows: "The story runs that, at the age of twenty, Plato planned to enter his plays in the tragic competitions of Athens, but became a pupil of Socrates and burned his plays" (in Clay 2000, 4). Given Milton's extensive formal education in Greek literature, along with the perennial popularity of Diogenes' Laertius' soap opera-like *Lives of the Philosophers* (from which the above narrative is taken), it seems likely that the allusion to Plato's tragedies is intentional. Regardless, though, Milton here reunites what Plato's *Republic* had torn asunder, which would make him a candidate for Socrates' prophecy of a future poet who might prove the imitative poets to be worthy of readmission to the republic, across its censorious walls. I will return to this issue shortly via Milton's epilogue, which claims (or at least appears to claim) that Plato taught Milton to, like himself, abandon poetry.

Returning to the issue of undermining dichotomies, Milton applies his poetic blade next to that of light and darkness. To wit, the speaker of "The Thoughtful Man" expresses disapproval of the time of day "when the sun begins to fling/His flaring beams", and states his strong preference for the "archèd walks of twilight groves/And shadows brown that Sylvan [a Roman forest deity] loves", which forest, finally, "the rude axe with heavèd stroke,/Was never heard the nymphs to daunt" (ll. 131–132, 133–134, 136–137). In other words, the light's intensity, and the destructive activities which require the light, are forces that can inspire fear in divine femininity (represented by the wood nymphs). The speaker then reinforces this point by criticising the "day's garish eye", and celebrating in its stead "some strange mysterious dream" that "Softly on my eyelids laid" (ll. 141, 147, 150). Finally in regard to this forest-shadowed interlude, it ends with the thoughtful man's return to "the studious cloister's pale" and its "dim religious light", where he "may sit and rightly spell,/Of every star that heaven doth show", "Till old experience do attain/To something like prophetic strain" (ll. 156, 160, 170–171, 173–174). In this way, religion blends into the magic deciphering of "spells" about stars only to morph back into religious prophecy. And the reference to stars again prefigures

Satan as Lucifer, the brightest and morning star. In this heady finish to “The Thoughtful Man”, then, one can see Milton’s early harmonious integration of philosophy and poetry, despite their apparent sundering in Ramus’ bifurcating logic.

I turn now to Sonnet 16, subtitled (posthumously, in the eighteenth century) “On His Blindness”, and composed much later than “The Thoughtful Man” (Orgel and Goldberg 2008, 783). It opens as follows: “When I consider how my light is spent/Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,/And that one talent which is death to hide/Lodged with me useless” (ll. 1–4). Note here the combination of mathematical and economic calculations (i.e. half his days and an unused talent). Milton places the emphasis, not on his suffering or disability, but rather on his fear of being punished – despite that suffering and disability – for not repaying god for his invested power. Milton then puts it as a question: “Doth God exact day-labour, light denied,/I fondly ask”, only to reply immediately that “who best/Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best, his state/Is kingly” (ll. 7–8, 10–12). Note the potential irony here, given the ambiguous referent of “his state/is kingly”. Though this “his” is usually interpreted as referring to god, the syntax allows that it may also apply to an individual disabled servant. In the latter case, the person who is failing to directly and actively serve his king (in this case, god) is nevertheless himself “kingly”. This too suggests the republican vision of a nation governed by a group of “kings”.

Textual support for this interpretation can be found in the three repetitions of the adjective “kingly” in *Paradise Lost*, none of which refer to god. Moreover, one refers to Satan (Book II, 671), and another – the only one in which the phrase “kingly state” is repeated verbatim – refers to the archangel Raphael (Book XI: 249). Since both Satan and Raphael are elite beings, but not the king of Heaven, these usages further suggest a republican vision. Most explicit, though, is the only appearance of “kingly” in *Paradise Regained*. “To know, and knowing worship God aright,/Is yet more Kingly, this attracts the Soul./Governs the inner man, the nobler part,/That other o’er the body only reigns,/And oft by force” (Book II, 475–479). Thus, as was already implicit in interpreting the disabled servant in Sonnet 16 as “kingly”, Milton elevates a virtuous, figurative/internal kingship above that of a vicious, literal/external tyrant.

This latter point also foreshadows Satan’s famous claim, “better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven”. This Satanic connection is then immediately strengthened by the sonnet’s subsequent contrast between (a) Milton’s passive waiting and (b) the “Thousands” who “at [god’s] bidding speed”, since (as the editors note) the “thousands” here refer to the angels. That is, Milton is a kind of lone Satanic figure who (despite his alleged willingness) does not actively serve the divine king (Orgel and Goldberg 2008, 783). Moreover, given the verb “speed” here, in contrast to Milton’s thoughtfulness, one can hear an echo of the criticisms of the “manic” man in “The Thoughtful Man”. And in both “The Thoughtful Man” and Sonnet 16, I wish to emphasise that Milton celebrates what is negative, dark, feminine, and passive as ultimately superior – though this superiority is only visible if one has learned to “see” past the obscurities involved in literal sight. Put in terms of Ramus’ logic, Sonnet 16 violates its perfectly defined, diagrammable hierarchy of concepts, by allowing the figure of the disabled servant to rise far above his lowly, default station below (temporarily) able-bodied men, kings, the angels, and god.

To conclude this second section of the present article, I now turn to the prose “Epilogue” to both the elegies and both editions of Milton’s *Poems*. As this epilogue is both short and crucial, I will reproduce it here in its entirety.

These vain trophies of my idleness I once set up in foolish mood and with supine endeavour. Injurious error, truly, led me astray, and untutored youth was a bad teacher; until the shady Academy offered its Socratic streams, and freed me from the yoke to which I had submitted. At once these flames were extinguished, and thenceforth my breast has been stiff with encircling ice, whence Cupid has feared a frost for his arrows, and Venus fears my Diomedean strength (Orgel and Goldberg 2008, 123).

The “trophies” refers to, at least, the elegies, and possibly by extension the entire collection of the *Poems*. Thus, the first possible irony of this brief conclusion to Milton’s first major publication is that the epilogue was again appended, unaltered, to the second edition of the *Poems* almost thirty

years after the first edition. It seems possible, then, that Milton might have felt some ambivalence along with this shame and embarrassment. Put as a question, is there a chance he did not see these poems as merely a work of green youth, with no other redeeming value or potential?

A second irony from the epilogue is that Milton attributes his education to Western history's first and greatest ironist, Socrates, who also (as I noted above) allegedly turned his disciple Plato away from a career in poetry. I say "allegedly" here, and speak of irony rather than tragedy, because Plato did not turn away from a career in poetry after all, insofar as the dialogues can be read as a kind of prose dramatic poetry (comparable to Shakespeare's iambic pentameter). In at least one dialogue, *The Laws*, Plato even has the lead interlocutor (the Athenian Stranger) refer to himself and his fellow interlocutors as tragic poets, in their imaginative creation of the most just possible regime (Plato 1988).⁴ In short, just like his hero Plato, who merely turned from one kind of poetry (tragedy) to another (dramatic), Milton similarly turned from lyric to epic poetry. This is not to say, however, that there is one unified Miltonic self, a poetic self who vanquished the Ramist self without remainder. As Foucault reminds us, the authorial self is arguably but a fabricated site, an imaginary locus within the production of textual discourse.⁵ Instead, I am merely cautioning us against putting so much faith in the "epilogue-Milton" authorial self that we too hastily conclude that nothing of the "elegy-Milton" survives in the later works such as *Paradise Lost*.

These two significant connections to irony, I would argue, suggest the possibility that the entire epilogue could be read ironically. One additional piece of evidence for this ironic interpretation of the epilogue is its harsh and conflicted rhetoric for the transformation, into the "ice" of full manhood, of "Lady" Milton's "maidenly" youth and its poetic "flames" (with the gendered qualifiers implied, in part, by Milton's "supine" submission to pleasure). That is, ice is suggestive of death, while flames are warm and suggestive of life, which as I noted above Milton elsewhere affirms of his poetry as a mark of its superiority to his prose. These associations further undermine a non-ironic reading of the epilogue, according to which the effeminate poetic self is simply inferior to the masculine philosophical self. On the contrary, the non-ironic reading suggests the possibility that a superior self has perished. On the ironic reading, however, as in Milton's actual life and work, the poetry lives on, and perhaps even outshines the philosophical prose. Needless to say, for Ramus' logic this would be an outrage. And on this note of outraged orthodoxy, I turn to *Paradise Lost*.

The darkly bright Satanic republican

On my reading, *Paradise Lost* is a dramatisation in support of republican regicide. This interpretation is based in part on the scholarly consensus that Satan functions in the epic, at least in part, as a mouthpiece of Milton's own views to that effect.⁶ The fulcrum of my reading will be Milton's rebellion against a Ramist dichotomy between light and darkness, and I will therefore preface my reading with two darkness-relevant moments from the secondary literature on the poem.

First, recalling Milton's distinction between physical and mental blindness, Stephen Fallon observes that a kind of mental blindness is also operative in *Paradise Lost*. When the archangel Michael conducts Adam's "education", Fallon writes, this education

begins with vision, made possible because Michael removes from [Adam's] eyes the "film" left by sin (XI. 412) and instils in them drops from the "well of life", which "pierced/Even to the inmost seat of mental sight" (XI. 416–418) (Fallon 2003, 344).

Most provocatively, as Fallon observes, Milton is here "claiming to see 'things invisible to mortal sight' (III. 55) without benefit of Michael's eye-drops (XI. 414–415)", from which Fallon concludes that Milton must be "either greatly blessed or damnably presumptuous" (Fallon 2003, 344). Again, therefore, the question of Milton's virtue and divinity arises.

4 Addressing the hypothetical poets from other cities, the Stranger suggests the following: "'Best of strangers', we should say, 'we ourselves are poets, who have to the best of our ability created a tragedy that is the most beautiful and the best; at any rate, our whole political regime is constructed as the imitation of the most beautiful and best way of life, which we at least assert to be really the truest tragedy'" (Plato 817b, 208).

5 See, for example, Foucault (1972). I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this reminder.

6 For a sympathetic account, see Lejosne (1998).

A second observation regarding darkness and blindness in *Paradise Lost* is found in Amy Boesky's chapter in the (same) Blackwell *Companion to Milton*, as follows:

For the unfallen, change is experienced as pleasure. The fluctuations of light and dark create a cycle that Raphael locates “fast by” the throne of God, as if such mutability were intrinsically associated with godhood itself:

There is a cave
 Within the mount of God, fast by his throne,
 Where light and darkness in perpetual round
 Lodge and dislodge by turns, which makes through heaven
 Grateful vicissitude, like day and night (VI. 4–8).

Not only does Milton's heaven know darkness (as his hell knows light), this fluctuating darkness is an essential part of heaven's dynamics and its beauty (Boesky 2003, 384–385).

Thus, on Boesky's analysis, darkness is so far from being essentially bad for Milton that it is actually a good thing, necessary even for heaven itself, as part of what one might term heaven's divine logic of flux. Moreover, as Fallon noted regarding the “film of sin”, in the current passage, too, Boesky appears to imply that Milton knows (unaided) what Adam only knew with divine assistance. Again, therefore, there would appear to be something divine at work in Milton, perhaps the aforementioned epistemological superiority granted by his blindness as “shade of angels' wings”. For both scholars, then, attending to the powers of darkness entails a rebellion against the human/divine dichotomy, which in Milton's republican context bears directly on the right of the people to overthrow their (divinely appointed?) king in favour of self-rule in pursuit of the common good.

Turning, almost, to the poem proper, I begin with one of Milton's prefatory prose sections, inserted before the poetry, specifically the section entitled “The Verse” (as in a prose commentary on the metrical structure of the poem). Here, Milton both implicitly compares himself to Homer and Virgil, and also defends his decision to eschew rhyme in *Paradise Lost*, against the populist equation of poetry with rhyme. What I wish to emphasise here is that this amounts, yet again, to Milton rebelling against the prose/poetry dichotomy that he articulated in the *Art of Logic* and the prose epigraph to the *Poems*, but that (as I have explored above) he also challenges in “The Thoughtful Man”, Sonnet 16, and in the last words of the *Art of Logic*, as well as an entire epilogue.

Book I's first stanza continues this pattern of undermining dichotomies, by introducing the first of many complex treatments of light and darkness. I will analyse these using the musical figure of a theme and variations, and I will call this theme Milton's “spectral” theme, as in a spectrum or continuum of light and darkness, rather than a simple dichotomy. In what is, in this sense, its first variation on that theme, Milton implores yet another powerful female god, referred to vaguely as “heavenly muse” to, “what is in me dark / Illumine” (Il. 6, 22–23). In addition to the apparent meaning of this line, namely that the goddess can illuminate what is dark in Milton, its unconventional word order here suggests an additional interpretive possibility, namely that the goddess might “darkly illuminate” him. The legitimacy of the latter is supported by a similar idea in the second stanza, which also constitutes the second variation on this spectral theme.

Here, Milton describes hell's flames as producing “darkness visible” which nevertheless “Served” to “discover sights of woe,/Regions of sorrow, doleful shades” (Il. 63, 64–65). Note, therefore, that Milton both attributes visibility – and thus, a degree of light, physically speaking – to darkness, and also attributes to darkness the power to grant visibility or illumination. This discussion of flames also recalls another parallel between hell and Milton's life, in that many of his books were burned by the state during the Restoration period.

The third variation on Milton's spectral theme is ensconced in an analogous additional challenge to dichotomous sex/gender. In regard to the sex/gender of spiritual beings in heaven, Milton writes that, “spirits when they please/Can either sex assume, or both; so soft/And uncompounded is their essence pure”, and “in what shape they choose/Dilated or condensed, bright or obscure,/Can execute their airy purposes” (Il. 423–425, 428–430). Since this claim, in its universality, includes fallen spirits or angels, it also applies to Satan, and thus supports my prior claim that Satan's gender is

queered in regard to the Gnostics' Lucifer/Sophia connection. And since the claim also includes, by the same logic, unfallen angels as well, this means that Milton's heaven is literally a queer paradise. As for the spectral theme, it is implied by the phrase "bright or obscure". Other instances of a gender queering of dichotomous logic in the poem include the question, "what God after better worse would build?" which implicitly valorises the female Eve above the male Adam (l. 102).⁷

The fourth variation on this theme is among the most famous in the entire epic, with its magisterial description of Satan poised before his army of the damned. Satan's form, Milton begins, "had yet not lost/All her original brightness" (ll. 591–592). Note, recalling the prior passage about queer angelic gender, that Milton uses a female pronoun here to describe Satan's "form", even though the Greek basis for the word, *eidōs*, is grammatically neuter. Milton then continues by comparing the brightness of his feminised Satanic form to the way that "the sun new risen/Looks through the horizontal misty air/Shorn of his beams, or from behind the moon/In dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds/On half the nations, and with fear of change/Perplexes monarchs" (ll. 594–599). Satan's form, Milton concludes, though it was "Darkened so, yet shone/Above them all" (ll. 599–600).

In addition to bending the form of Satan's gender back to the (presumptive) masculine, this part of Milton's description also offers two counterexamples to a simple light/dark dichotomy (the complex light of sunrise and a solar eclipse), and then ends on a note which is strongly suggestive of scholarly readings of Milton as a classical republican.⁸ In other words, through the imperfect beauty of the rebellious Satanic revolutionary, Milton offers a darkly illuminating contrast to the tyrannical and non-divinely appointed monarch's illegitimate light.

Returning to the variations on Milton's spectral theme, and finally from Book I, Milton deploys its fifth variation in a description of the palace constructed by the fallen angel Mammon to house the parliamentary debate in Hell. This architecture, Milton writes, includes, "by subtle magic many a row/Of starry lamps and blazing cressets" (ll. 727–728). These artificial sources of illumination, Milton continues, "fed/With naphtha and asphaltus yielded light/As from a sky" (ll. 728–730). In Milton's world therefore, it is not only night, but even hell itself which can, through the artifice of fallen angels, create light equal even to the light of heaven. There are also significant variations on this spectral theme in the rest of the first half of the poem, but I will skip over these, for reasons of space, to Book III, which boasts the most intense variation on this spectral theme, with its justly famous description of god on the heavenly throne:

Fountain of light, thyself invisible
Amidst the glorious brightness where thou sit'st
Throned inaccessible, but when thou shad'st
The full blaze of thy beams, and through a cloud
Drawn round about thee like a radiant shrine,
Dark with excessive bright thy skirts appear,
Yet dazzle heaven, that brightest seraphim
Approach not, but with both wings veil their eyes (ll. 375–382).

Having begun Book III with the claim that "God is light" (l. 3), Milton now renders god as, instead, (a) essentially invisible, and (b) only indirectly visible through (c) a translucent filter that (d) allows this indirect light to shine, but only (e) at the cost of the light's appearing as a kind of darkness, which (f) darkness is nevertheless so bright that it dazzles the viewer, which (g) thus requires the shade of angels' wings. More briefly, god is not light, but shines with a dark brightness that makes him visible only to those divine beings who can shield themselves from that dark brightness. Finally, in regard to this passage, the shade of angel wings is an image Milton uses in his *Second Defence of the English People* as a metaphor for his blindness (qua divine gift). When the angel wings from

⁷ I am indebted for the latter example to an anonymous reviewer of the present article.

⁸ See, for example, Armitage, Himy and Skinner (1995), Rahe (2004), and Foxley (2013). Armitage, Himy and Skinner marshal considerable concrete archival and textual evidence for situating Milton in that anti-monarchical, anti-democratic political philosophical tradition. Rahe points to Milton's rejection of Machiavelli in favour of Aristotle and Cicero's classical republican ideas (243). Foxley argues that Milton is a classical republican in a "neo-Hellenic" rather than a "neo-Roman" vein, in that "his fundamentally Greek emphasis on the soul as the foundation of politics enabled the grafting of Christian thought into his political rhetoric" (615).

that metaphor is interpreted in the light of the angel wings before god's throne, Milton is implicitly elevated yet again to the station of angels, more precisely the angels of the highest order that are the seraphim, which thus puts him in the same region, yet again, as the archangel Satan. A more complete undermining of Ramus' sacred-flavoured hierarchy of dichotomous concepts is difficult to imagine.

Conclusion

Although Milton published, in the *Art of Logic*, a textbook that was a modified form of Ramist logic (which, as Ong notes, reduces all thought to dichotomous bifurcations), the rest of Milton's work consists largely of subtle but pervasive rebellions against that logic. To begin, the early poems *Il Penseroso* and Sonnet 16: "On His Blindness" intermix light with darkness and philosophy with poetry, and elevate the more pejorative halves to a superior status, before a potentially ironic epilogue suggests a similarly rebellious spirit beneath Milton's apparent deference to orthodoxy. Finally, Milton powerfully dramatises this rebellion against these dichotomies by rendering Satan a charismatic protagonist and linking him repeatedly to darkness, blindness, femininity, virtue, and republicanism. In sum, the rigid dichotomies forced by Ramist logic, and taken up in Milton's *Art of Logic*, ultimately obscure the more complex, spectral relationships between the terms involved therein, as well as underestimating the virtuous power of the historically pejorative halves of those dichotomies. And thus Milton, if read closely, can be seen labouring to liberate those pejorative terms from their historically disempowering orthodox position, in a warm poetic hell beneath heaven's cold logic, to shine anew in all their dark brightness.

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