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# Milton's Shakespeare: Imitation and Originality

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### Résumé de l'article

Encouragé par le récent renouvellement d'intérêt pour la relation entre Milton et Shakespeare, cet article s'intéresse à cette relation à la lumière, d'une part, de la tension entre le littéralisme de la sola scriptura dans la religion réformée et, d'autre part, de l'insistance compensatrice sur l'imitation comme voie vers l'originalité et la capacité de l'individu à agir dans les studia humanitatis. Cette tension est essentielle dans la pensée de Milton dans son ensemble : en son centre repose la question « comment concilier la liberté de Dieu avec la nôtre ? ». Alors que la liberté de Dieu est absolue, nous ne sommes rien de plus que des marionnettes agissantes, à moins que nous ne trouvions un moyen de définir notre propre liberté. Milton est enivré par la majesté de la liberté divine, mais tout aussi hanté par la mémoire de notre liberté originelle : « Même le plus ignorant des hommes ne peut être assez stupide pour nier que tout homme naît naturellement libre, étant à l'image et à la ressemblance de Dieu lui-même ». En nous concentrant sur les représentations de Shakespeare dans l'« Épitaphe » de Shakespeare (1632) et l'Eikonoklastes (1649), nous souhaitons non seulement montrer que le lien de Milton avec Shakespeare est continu, mais encore qu'il nous donne un aperçu du désir conflictuel du poète de créer un espace de mise en valeur de la capacité de l'homme à agir et de critiquer la surestimation de celle-ci, en particulier dans l'idéalisation de la vertu politique.

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# Milton's Shakespeare: Imitation and Originality

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*Encouraged by the recent renewal of interest in the relationship between Milton and Shakespeare, this essay focuses on that relationship in the light of the tension between the literalism of sola scriptura in reformed religion, on the one hand, and the countervailing insistence on imitation as the route to originality and individual agency in the studia humanitatis, on the other. This tension is central to all Milton's thinking; at its core is the question, "How are we to reconcile God's freedom with our own?" While God's freedom is absolute, we are nothing more than puppets "in the motions" unless we find a way to define the contingency of our own. Milton is intoxicated with the majesty of God's freedom but equally haunted by the memory of our own original freedom: "No man who knows ought, can be so stupid [as] to deny that all men naturally were borne free, being the image and likeness of God himself." By concentrating on Milton's representation of Shakespeare in his "Epitaph" on Shakespeare (1632) and Eikonoklastes (1649), my argument is that not only is Milton's engagement with Shakespeare ongoing but that it allows us peculiar insight into the poet's conflicted desire both to create enhanced space for human agency and to critique its overestimation, especially in the idealization of political virtù.*

*Encouragé par le récent renouvellement d'intérêt pour la relation entre Milton et Shakespeare, cet article s'intéresse à cette relation à la lumière, d'une part, de la tension entre le littéralisme de la sola scriptura dans la religion réformée et, d'autre part, de l'insistance compensatrice sur l'imitation comme voie vers l'originalité et la capacité de l'individu à agir dans les studia humanitatis. Cette tension est essentielle dans la pensée de Milton dans son ensemble : en son centre repose la question « comment concilier la liberté de Dieu avec la nôtre ? ». Alors que la liberté de Dieu est absolue, nous ne sommes rien de plus que des marionnettes agissantes, à moins que nous ne trouvions un moyen de définir notre propre liberté. Milton est enivré par la majesté de la liberté divine, mais tout aussi hanté par la mémoire de notre liberté originelle : « Même le plus ignorant des hommes ne peut être assez stupide pour nier que tout homme naît naturellement libre, étant à l'image et à la ressemblance de Dieu lui-même ». En nous concentrant sur les représentations de Shakespeare dans l'« Épitaphe » de Shakespeare (1632) et l'Eikonoklastes (1649), nous souhaitons non seulement montrer que le lien de Milton avec Shakespeare est continu, mais encore qu'il nous donne un aperçu du désir conflictuel du poète de créer un espace de mise en valeur de la capacité de l'homme à agir et de critiquer la surestimation de celle-ci, en particulier dans l'idéalisation de la virtù politique.*

## Introduction

Stretching back over almost half a century, Milton's poetry and prose are full of echoes and allusions to Shakespeare. Allusions to *The Tempest*, for instance, appear as early as the "Nativity Ode" in 1629 and as late as *Paradise Regained*

in 1671. Even after his death, his admiration for Shakespeare remains fresh in the memory of his family. According to his widow, Elizabeth Minshull Milton, for instance, Milton's favourite English poets were "Spenser, Shakespeare, and Cowley,"<sup>1</sup> and according to his nephew, Edward Phillips, in his *Theatrum Poetarum* (1675), a work in which Milton may well have had a hand, England's greatest poets were Spenser and Shakespeare—and Shakespeare Phillips describes in terms clearly reminiscent of his uncle's published sentiments:

*William Shakespear*, the Glory of the English Stage [...] from an Actor of Tragedies and Comedies, he became a *Maker*; and such a Maker, that though some others may perhaps pretend to a more exact *Decorum* and *oeconomie*, especially in Tragedy, never any express't a more lofty and Tragical heighth; never any represented nature more purely to the life, and where the polishments of Art are most wanting, as probably his Learning was not extraordinary, he pleaseth with a certain wild and native Elegance.<sup>2</sup>

Over the course of Milton's career, Shakespeare moved to the centre of English cultural life. By the 1640s, according to Heidi Craig, "Shakespeare was the most-printed and most-reprinted dramatist of the preceding fifty years."<sup>3</sup> The celebrity evident in Van Dyck's 1638 portrait of Sir John Suckling reading *Hamlet* re-emerged even more powerfully after the intermittent disapproval of the Interregnum.<sup>4</sup> Even during the Protectorate, Shakespeare benefited from the boom in the search for novel dramatic texts to publish. Milton's publisher, Humphrey Moseley, led the way in pushing previously unpublished plays by Shakespeare (or ascribed to Shakespeare), while others took advantage of plays previously published but made newly fashionable by national events: *Othello*, for instance, was republished to capitalize on England's great naval victory over Moorish slavers at Tunis in 1655, and *The Merchant of Venice* on the negotiations for the readmission of the Jews in 1656.<sup>5</sup> After the Restoration, Milton's former colleague, John Dryden, writing just before the first publication of *Paradise Lost* in 1667, caught the national mood: Shakespeare, he says, is "the

1. French, *Life Records*, 5:123.

2. Phillips, *Theatrum Poetarum*, 194.

3. Craig, "Missing Shakespeare," 127.

4. Cf. Rogers, "Meaning."

5. Craig, "Missing Shakespeare," 129–44.

man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, [has] the largest and most comprehensive soul.”<sup>6</sup>

For all Shakespeare's prestige and Milton's explicit admiration of him, identifying the discontinuities between the two great poets has been a staple of English literary history, their differences, real or imagined, often serving as a register of much larger aesthetic, social, and cultural fissures. In this essay, my principal aim is to reverse the process and focus on the continuities, suggesting how Milton's complex intertextual engagement with Shakespeare was lifelong. Such a move has been helped immeasurably by the scholarship of Nicholas McDowell, Erin Minnear, Anne Baines Coiro, Maggie Kilgour, Jane Kingsley-Smith, John Creaser, and many others. At the same time, it has also been energized by recent archival developments. Although these developments are not my immediate concern, they are important in establishing just how seriously Milton took Shakespeare. The two texts in which Milton refers most directly to Shakespeare are his 1632 “Epitaph” on Shakespeare and his 1649 polemic *Eikonoklastes*, and it is around these works that I wish to structure my argument. In doing so, while the first part of my argument (section I) aims to suggest how Milton's relation to Shakespeare is best understood in terms of Renaissance education's preoccupation with imitation and originality, the second part (sections II–III) aims to show how the apparent censure of Shakespeare in *Eikonoklastes* is undermined by this preoccupation and reveals the ongoing, enabling presence of the playwright in Milton's art.

### I. The “Epitaph” on Shakespeare and its long reach

In 2019, scholars were able to identify the copy of Shakespeare's First Folio at the Free Library of Philadelphia as bearing extensive markings and a number of annotations in Milton's hand. If these are indeed by Milton, and the consensus now feels confident that they are, then Milton read Shakespeare's book with unusual care.<sup>7</sup> According to Claire Bourne, there are 3 annotations, 121 emendations, 2 additions, and 603 marginal bracketings focused on a variety of

6. Dryden, *Essay of Dramatick Poesy*, 247.

7. See Bourne, “*Vide Supplementum*”; “With(out) Milton”; Bourne and Scott-Warren, “Re-Reading Milton.” For a recent overview, see McDowell, “Reading Milton.”

plays, including *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Tempest*.<sup>8</sup> Before the Folio reader was identified as Milton, Bourne felt sure that the markings, especially the references to Tottel and Purchas, “not only suggest [the reader’s] aspiration to study the text alongside other vernacular books but also provide evidence that he did so with an eye to Shakespeare’s methods of appropriation.”<sup>9</sup> Effective appropriation is dependent on skill in imitation, and imitation is at the centre of the *studia humanitatis* or humanist education that both Shakespeare and Milton enjoyed at their respective grammar schools, Shakespeare at King Edward VI’s in Stratford and Milton at St. Paul’s in London.<sup>10</sup>

### *From imitation to originality*

The preoccupation of the Renaissance *studia humanitatis* with imitation ranges from the mundane to the most speculative. At its most mundane, imitation is immediately evident in the grammar school practice of double translation.<sup>11</sup> Drawing on their own experiences, Shakespeare parodied the process in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and Queen Elizabeth’s Lord Burghley famously captured its effectiveness in his memory of Sir John Cheke, the first professor of Greek at Cambridge, so admired by Milton.<sup>12</sup> Cheke, Burghley recalls, would urge his students “to take a peece of Tullie, and to translate it into Englishe, and after, (laying theire books aside,) to translate the same [back] into Latine, and then to compare them with the booke, and to consider which weare don aptelie, or unproperlie; how near Tullie’s phrase was followed in the Latine, and the most sweete and sensible wrytinge in Englishe.”<sup>13</sup> The immediate purpose of double translation was eloquence, improving both the student’s Latin and English for a career in public life. At the same time, in Europe’s republic of letters, imitation had already become the object of considerable speculation, idealized as an aesthetic, transformative or “transumptive” process. The copy should free itself from its source and itself become the original, that is, imitation

8. Bourne, “*Vide Supplementum*,” 198.

9. Bourne, “*Vide Supplementum*,” 224.

10. For the *studia humanitatis*, see Rice, *Foundations*, esp. 77–109. On imitation, see Quint, *Origins and Originality*, and, more recently, Burrow, *Imitating Authors*.

11. See, for instance, Clark, *John Milton*, 170–78.

12. See Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 4.1.8–75; Milton, *Sonnet 11*.

13. Burghley, qtd. in Miller, “Double Translation,” 171.

should lead to originality. This is the way Petrarch puts it: "Take care that what you have gathered does not long remain in its original form inside of you: the bees would not be glorious if they did not convert what they found into something different and something better."<sup>14</sup> Erasmus is even more ambitious in emphasizing the specifically *organic* relation between imitation and originality:

I approve an imitation that is not limited to one model from whose features one does not dare to depart, an imitation that excerpts from all authors, or at any rate from the most eminent, what is excellent in each and most suits one's intellect, and which does not fasten to a discourse whatever beauty it lights upon, but which transfers what it finds into the mind itself, as into the stomach, so that transfused into the veins it appears to be a birth of one's intellect, not something begged and borrowed from elsewhere, and breathes forth the vigor and disposition of one's mind and nature, so that the reader does not recognize an insertion taken from Cicero, but a child born of one's brain, just as they say Pallas was born from Jupiter's, bearing a lively image of its parent, and also so that one's discourse does not appear to be some sort of cento or mosaic, but an image breathing forth one's mind or a river flowing from the fountain of one's heart.<sup>15</sup>

By Milton's time, this notion of originality, recreation, or transumption through imitation had become a commonplace. This is how Humphrey Moseley imagines Milton transuming Spenser as he introduces his edition of Milton's 1645 *Poems*: "Let the event guide it self which way it will, I shall deserve of the age, by bringing into the Light as true a Birth, as the Muses brought forth since our famous *Spencer* wrote; whose Poems in these English ones [by Milton] are as rarely imitated, as sweetly excell'd."<sup>16</sup>

For those rarer spirits, torn between the new learning and the reformed religion, however, there was always the nagging question of how such a claim as Erasmus's to a divine-like originality could be anything but a blasphemous arrogation. For many, Genesis 2:26–27 provided the answer. In his 1579 *Apology for Poetry*, Sidney famously puts it this way:

14. Petrarch, *Epistolae Familiares* 1.8.23, qtd. in Pigman, "Versions of Imitation," 7.

15. Erasmus, *Ciceronianus*, qtd. in Pigman, "Versions of Imitation," 9.

16. Moseley, "Stationer to the Reader," sig. a4r–v.

Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of man's wit with the efficacy of Nature; but rather give right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who having made him in his own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing he showeth so much as in Poetry, when with the force of divine breath he bringeth things forth far surpassing her doings.<sup>17</sup>

For Hobbes, almost a century later, this ability to create a second nature by imitating our Maker is what explains civilization: "Nature (the Art whereby God hath made and governes the World) is by the *Art* of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an Artificial Animal," the most important example of which is "called a Common-wealth, or State (in latine Civitas)."<sup>18</sup> For Milton, who considers Sidney's reasoning in the old *Arcadia* "exquisite,"<sup>19</sup> in nothing do we show ourselves made in the image and likeness of the Creator more than in our own creating. For him, to the degree that our creating functions truly within the analogy of faith, it is the work of God's grace:<sup>20</sup> poetic originality in its fullest sense can only be achieved by "industrious and select reading" and, most importantly, by "devout prayer to that eternall Spirit who can enrich all utterance and knowledge, and sends out his Seraphim with the hallow'd fire of his Altar to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases."<sup>21</sup> In distinguishing his poetry from that of a parodic psalmist like the king, Charles I, Milton insists that it "is not hard for any man, who hath a Bible in his hands, to borrow good words and holy sayings in abundance; but *to make them his own*" (my emphasis), to become a true maker, "is a work of grace from above."<sup>22</sup> Here in *The Reason of Church-Government*, inspired by Scripture as his source text, Milton acts out his own argument as, before our eyes, he does not simply imitate Scripture but reinvents it. Defying Scripture's own climactic injunction against changing the text (Revelations 22:18–19, echoing Deuteronomy 4:2) and authorized by what he assumes is the Holy

17. Sidney, *Apology*, 101.

18. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 81.

19. Milton, *Commonplace Book in Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (hereafter cited as CPW), 1:371.

20. On the "analogy of faith," see Milton on the interpretation of Scripture in *Christian Doctrine* in CPW 6:582–83.

21. Milton, *Reason of Church-Government* in CPW, 1:820–21.

22. Milton, *Eikonoklastes* in CPW, 3:553.

Spirit, he *reimagines* it, combining and transforming Isaiah 6:6 and John 3:8 into something rich and strange.

In this essay, then, I want to focus first on Milton's relationship with Shakespeare in the light of his attempts to reconcile the tension between inspiration and imagination, that is, between the emphasis in Protestantism on the literalism of *sola scriptura* and the countervailing insistence in the *studia humanitatis* on imitation, specifically on imitation as the route to originality and individual agency. This tension is central to all Milton's thinking, and at its core is the question, "How are we to reconcile God's freedom with our own?" While God's freedom is absolute, ours is contingent. But for Milton we are nothing more than puppets "in the motions" unless we find a way to articulate that contingency and define the boundaries of our own freedom.<sup>23</sup> Despite the Fall, he insists, the human face is still "divine" (*PL* 3.44),<sup>24</sup> and while he is intoxicated by the majesty of God's freedom, he is equally haunted by the memory of our own original freedom: "No man who knows ought, can be so stupid [as] to deny that all men naturally were borne free, being the image and likeness of God himself, and were by privilege above all the creatures, born to command and not obey."<sup>25</sup> Let me begin with Milton's first and most explicit imitation of Shakespeare in his "Epitaph," and the range and durability of the poem's impact. In this, I want to suggest something of the way Milton reads, hears, and finally imagines Shakespeare.

### *Reading Shakespeare's book through Spenser*

Milton's first published poem, "An Epitaph on the admirable Dramaticke Poet, W. Shakespeare," announces itself as a response to the experience of reading the 1632 Second Folio of *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*. But it may have been a response to reading the First Folio, since Milton gives its date of composition as 1630 in his 1645 *Poems*. Although it almost certainly started life as a simple imitation of the pseudo-Shakespearean epitaph on "Sir Edward Standly," the poem turns into something highly original.<sup>26</sup> What Milton praises in the poem is "my Shakespeare" (l. 1) and

23. See Milton, *Areopagitica* in *CPW*, 2:527.

24. Milton's poetry is quoted from the 2008 Orgel–Goldberg edition.

25. Milton, *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* in *CPW*, 3:198–99.

26. See Spencer, "Shakespeare and Milton"; Campbell, "Shakespeare."



the power of his imagination to produce a kind of ecstasy—"Then thou our fancy of itself bereaving," says Milton, addressing Shakespeare, "Dost make us marble with too much conceiving" (ll. 13–14). As we lose ourselves in marveling, we become abstracted and appear stone-like, musing in our stillness—our astonishment serving as the outward register of intense inward activity. In our response to his wondrous book, says Milton, Shakespeare effectively builds a "live-long monument" (l. 8) in both our own and our culture's memory. As Nicholas McDowell has recently re-emphasized, a similar impact or process of abstraction is described in Spenser's *Hymn to Heavenly Beauty*, where highly imaginative or "high conceited" spirits are likely to be carried "into an extasy" (ll. 5, 261) by contemplating the face of Wisdom—"Whereof such wondrous pleasures they conceive, / And sweete contentment, that it doth bereave / Their soule of sense" (ll. 256–58)—not rational sense but material, "fleshly sense" (l. 267).<sup>27</sup> In identifying the conceiving-bereaving trope with something like religious ecstasy, the kind of Neoplatonic stillness, forgetting ourselves "to marble" or "holy passion," that Milton imagines in *Il Penseroso* (l. 41), Milton's "Epitaph" appears to be reading Shakespeare through Spenser. The presence of Spenser is announced at the beginning of the poem with the archaic reference to "star-ypointing" pyramids (l. 4), and the affect Milton's Spenserian Shakespeare produces, the "wonder and astonishment" precipitated by his oracular or "Delphic" lines (ll. 7, 12), is one in which the distinction between religious and aesthetic transcendence begins to disappear. In other words, the presence of Spenser suggests something of the peculiarly inventive way the intensely religious Milton imitates Shakespeare. Shakespeare's art is both profoundly enabling and perhaps, as some have felt, equally disabling. The emphasis on "too much" conceiving is very much the key to the poem for those readers committed to Harold Bloom's Romantic theories of influence. But for those who are not, there are numerous other, less anachronistic, ways of interpreting the line.<sup>28</sup> Whatever the case, there is no question of the impact or "deep impression" (l. 12) Shakespeare's revelations made on young Milton, and when read through Spenser, it is easy to see how imitation leads to originality—how in its inventiveness, it opens up unforeseen possibilities.

27. Spenser's poetry is quoted from the 1935 Smith–Selincourt edition. For the importance of the Spenserian allusion, see McDowell, *Poet of Revolution*, esp. 135–38; Stevens, "Subversion and Wonder."

28. See Stevens, "Subversion and Wonder."

Composed at the age of twenty-two, the poem is both an act of public praise and a peculiarly personal expression of the experience. It was republished eleven times before 1645, mostly in reissues of the Second Folio, but also, prominently and probably with permission, in John Benson's 1640 collection of Shakespeare's *Poems*, the edition by which most readers in the seventeenth century came to know Shakespeare's sonnets.<sup>29</sup> The "Epitaph" records the poet's very active process of reading Shakespeare's "unvalued book" (l. 11), and, as Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns point out, it is unique: Shakespeare was "the only English poet to whom Milton paid substantial tribute in his own verse."<sup>30</sup> Milton's active response to Shakespeare was not confined to reading, and similar patterns of learning by imitation can be identified in the way he hears the poet in performance.

### *Overhearing Shakespeare's "warbling" in Paradise*

Milton's admiration for Shakespeare on the stage is made explicit in his 1645 *Poems of Mr. John Milton*. In "L'Allegro," for instance, he dreams of visiting the London theatre, especially, he insists, if Jonson or Shakespeare are on—if "Jonson's learned sock be on, / Or sweetest Shakespeare fancy's child, / Warble his native wood-notes wild" (ll. 132–34).<sup>31</sup> The emphasis here, as Erin Minnear has shown, is on listening to Shakespeare and the sweet-sounding harmony of his verse.<sup>32</sup> The word "warble" is especially important, since far from being dismissive, it suggests the piercing beauty or improvisatory art of birdsong—natural, unfettered, revolving, and resounding. When read back through *Paradise Lost*, the exuberance and sheer fertility of Shakespeare's warbled fancies recall

29. See Shawcross, *Milton*, 5–20; Shrank, "Reading Shakespeare's *Sonnets*," 271–91; Kingsley-Smith, *Afterlife*, esp. 79–86.

30. Campbell and Corns, *John Milton*, 54.

31. Milton's familiarity with the London theatre should come as no surprise since he grew up on Bread Street, a short distance from the ferry to the Globe in one direction, and from the Mermaid Tavern, Shakespeare and Jonson's haunt, in the other. Milton was himself a friend of the court composer Henry Lawes, and his father a good friend of Thomas Morley. In 1620, Milton senior became a trustee of the Blackfriars Playhouse, the home of Shakespeare's company, the King's Men. See Berry, "Miltons and the Blackfriars"; Campbell, "Shakespeare."

32. See Minnear, *Reverberating Song*, esp. 169–83, to whose fine analyses I am very much indebted in this section.

the wanton growth of the unfallen garden. Shakespeare's fancies tend to be wild and will need to be restrained or cultivated if they are to realize their full potential.<sup>33</sup> But that potential, the energizing range of possibility Shakespeare affords, is resonant in "L'Allegro." In particular, the poem reverberates with the sounds of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Oberon's exhortation to the fairies to sing and "dance it trippingly" (*MND* 5.1.387), for instance, is remembered in Milton's call to "Come, and trip it as you go / On the light fantastic toe" ("L'Allegro," ll. 33–34). Titania responds to Oberon with her own call to the fairies: "First, rehearse your song by rote, / To each word a warbling note." And so, hand in hand "with fairy grace / We will sing and bless this place" (*MND* 5.1.388–92). Words and warbling combine to affect a kind of grace. In *Paradise Lost* itself, as Alastair Fowler notes, the sound of Shakespeare's warbling is equally resonant.<sup>34</sup>

In the 1668 issue of *Paradise Lost*, Milton's opening note on the verse emphasizes musicality as the aim of his prosody. He begins his defense of blank verse by invoking the authority of, among others, precisely those English dramatists with whom he grew up, that is, the prosody of Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare in "our best English tragedies" (*PL* "The Verse"). He is perfectly aware of the worst, but he is confident that what he calls the "English heroic verse" of the best will prove liberating. There is no indication here that either Jonson or Shakespeare has been repudiated or expelled, and his thoughts on "true musical delight" recall the thoughts Shakespeare's warbling wood-notes arouse in "L'Allegro." The aesthetic power of verse, he says in the note, "consists only in apt numbers, fit quantity of syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from one verse to another." Rhyme's "jingling sound of like endings" would only disrupt the transcendent effect of those airs Milton idealizes in "L'Allegro"—notes that "with many a winding bout / Of linked sweetness long drawn out" untwist "all the chains that tie / The hidden soul of harmony" (ll. 139–44). These airs, it needs to be emphasized, are not simply sounds but sounds "Married to immortal verse" (l. 137). Words and music combine to "pierce" the "meeting soul" with a new kind of grace (l. 138).<sup>35</sup> Over and again in *Paradise*

33. Cf. Milton, *PL* 5.294–97, 9.209–12.

34. Fowler, *Paradise Lost*, 24. On the distinctiveness of the blank verse in Milton and Shakespeare, see also Creaser, "Verse and Rhyme," esp. 110–11.

35. Cf. how Milton compliments Henry Lawes, "whose tuneful and well-measured song / First taught our English music how to span / Words with just note and accent, not scan / With Midas ears, committing

*Lost*, Milton draws attention to the musical fluency of his own blank verse and the exhilarating ease with which he now writes. Although he imagines his “unpremeditated verse” (*PL* 9.24) as the gift of God’s grace, his “harmonious numbers” (*PL* 3.38) also recall the writerly grace with which Shakespeare’s oracular lines or “easy numbers flow”—to the “shame of slow-endeavoring art” (“Epitaph,” ll. 10, 11). In the same way that he hears Shakespeare warble, so, most importantly, he hears Scripture sing. As early as his 1624 paraphrase of Psalm 136, Milton urges us to “warble forth” God’s majesty (l. 89), and here in *Paradise Lost*, nightly, so he says, he visits Mount Sion “and the flowery brooks beneath / That wash thy hallowed feet, and warbling flow” (*PL* 3.29–31). The warbling of Sion’s brooks is an inspiration because in sacred song, especially the Psalms, divine words and music are fully integrated. Mammon may despise heaven’s “warbled hymns” (*PL* 2.242), but Adam and Eve live for them. For Mammon, the words mean nothing, for Adam and Eve, everything—they are active, inventive, and, most importantly, eucharistic.

In their morning prayers, Adam and Eve take communion, that is, they join the celestial voices they hear at night “singing their great creator”—solitary or dialogic, “responsive each to other’s note” (*PL* 4.679–88). In these prayers they will dispel the evils of this particular night. Their morning orisons are not a repetitive recitation or rote imitation but a creative act in which they reveal their extraordinary, preternatural poetic skills. That is, they imitate God’s artifice by recreating it in

Various style, for neither various style  
Nor holy rapture wanted they to praise  
Their maker, in fit strains pronounced or sung  
Unmeditated, such prompt eloquence  
Flowed from their lips, in prose or numerous verse.  
(*PL* 5.146–50)

As they proceed to reinvent their experience of the world through such Psalms as 19 and 147, they hear the joy of Shakespeare’s lark ascending, the bird who in Sonnet 29 “at break of day arising / From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate.” As the speaker in Shakespeare’s sonnet escapes the most

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short and long” (Sonnet 13).

terrible night-thoughts in the lark's joy, so do Adam and Eve. "Fountains and ye, that warble, as ye flow, / Melodious numbers, warbling, tune [God's] praise," they command, trying to forget Eve's Satanic dream: "Join voices all ye living souls," they pray, especially "ye birds, / That singing up to heaven gate ascend" (*PL* 5.195–99). The joy of Milton's paradise is caught in the piercing melodies of Shakespeare's lark ascending to heaven's gate. Milton would have read Shakespeare's sonnet in Benson's 1640 edition, the book in which his own "Epitaph" on Shakespeare so prominently appears. My point is not only does Shakespeare live on in Milton's memory exactly as he claimed it would in the "Epitaph," but that God's grace, as evidenced in the original way Adam and Eve recreate the Psalms through Shakespeare, is being imagined as something intensely reciprocal or dialogic.

*Imagining Shakespeare's dialogism as grace*

While Milton was reading and listening to Shakespeare, he was also clearly trying to come to terms with the fertility of Shakespeare's inventiveness or imagination, what Jonson calls his "excellent phantasy, brave notions and gentle expressions."<sup>36</sup> Of all the commendatory verses to both the First and Second Folios, only those by Milton emphasize the close relation between Shakespeare and the imagination. In the early 1980s, John Guillory and I suggested, quite independently of each other, that Shakespeare functioned for Milton as a kind of metonym for fancy or imagination, these terms being of course simply the Greek and Latin words for the same faculty in the seventeenth century.<sup>37</sup> But while Guillory felt that Milton saw only the dangers of imagination and its sweetest child, Shakespeare, I urged something different. At a time when critique, subversion, and the identification of discontinuities were at a premium, Guillory felt that Milton epitomized an *aporia* and consequently a "hiatus" in the history of poetic authority.<sup>38</sup> While rejecting imagination, Milton, he argued, clung stubbornly to an increasingly obsolete notion of inspiration. Paradoxically, over the course of the eighteenth century, this defiant stand against imagination was forgotten, and Milton's insistence on inspiration was

36. Jonson, *Timber*, 665.

37. See Guillory, *Poetic Authority*, 71; Stevens, *Imagination*, 3–8. On the lack of difference between fancy and imagination in the seventeenth century, see, for instance, Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 87–94.

38. Guillory, *Poetic Authority*, x.

co-opted and made to contribute to the Romantic “remystification” of a faculty the Puritan poet actually despised.<sup>39</sup> The persuasiveness of Guillory’s theory depends on the evidence for Milton’s antipathy to imagination—that, in fact, imagination was the antithesis of inspiration. Of this, Guillory is quite sure: it is “a fact that both Spenser and Milton polemicize against imagination,” and neither poet “tracks his poetic origins to the door of Phantastes’ chamber.”<sup>40</sup> There are two problems with this argument. First, Milton never polemicizes against imagination per se, but only against the faculty when it is either divorced from reason, as it is, for instance, with “mimic fancy” in Adam’s explanation of Eve’s dream (*PL* 5.102–13), or when it has been deployed to challenge the analogy of faith, as it is, for instance, with Satan in the poet’s explanation of Eve’s dream (*PL* 4.800–9). Second, and more importantly here, Milton routinely associates inspiration with imagination, not only implicitly through the protocols of imitation and originality but explicitly through the invocation of what he calls “high-raised fantasy.” Both points are evident in the “Epitaph” on Shakespeare, but let me offer two further examples, one from an early poem like “At a Solemn Music” and one from Raphael’s discourse in *Paradise Lost*. In these examples, it becomes clear that Milton sees the educated or inspired imagination not only as a power whose agency is inventive but also “responsive,” “answering,” fundamentally interactive or dialogic.

In his 1642 *Reason of Church-Government*, Milton’s understanding of inspiration mentioned above is explicitly represented as an act of imagination. Isaiah’s seraphim touching the lips of whomsoever the Word pleases<sup>41</sup> is articulated as the climactic moment of “a Poet soaring in the high region of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him.”<sup>42</sup> The process is represented even more clearly in his 1634 poem “At a Solemn Music.”<sup>43</sup> In that poem, as the speaker urges voice and verse to wed their “divine” sounds in such “mixed power” as they may “[d]ead things with inbreathed sense [...] pierce” (ll. 3–4), he hopes to visualize the music and experience something close to ecstasy. Like Spenser’s “high conceited” spirits, he hopes to see a vision

39. Guillory, *Poetic Authority*, ix.

40. Guillory, *Poetic Authority*, ix.

41. Milton, *CPW*, 1:820–21.

42. Milton, *CPW*, 1:808.

43. For the date, see Shawcross, *Milton*, 7–8.

of heavenly beauty. The vision is scriptural: it is of the uniquely unmediated “appearance” of God in Scripture (Ezekiel 1:22–28, in contradiction to the prohibition in Exodus 33:20), but, most importantly here, the vision is apprehended or seen in “our high-raised fantasy” (l. 5). Imagination, when sufficiently “high-raised,” then, is understood as the piercing instrument of inspiration, and in that particular phrase Milton invokes a long tradition of Renaissance literary criticism, most immediately Tasso’s idealization of Dante’s *alta fantasia*.<sup>44</sup> It is this tradition that ironically prepares the way for the secular apotheosis of imagination in Romanticism. The vision in “At a Solemn Music” is not, however, an end in itself but the means by which God’s freedom initiates our freedom. Our freedom or agency consists in the possibility of answering God’s music in our own peculiar way. That is, we are offered a vision of Yahweh’s “sapphire-coloured throne” and the “saintly shout” of heaven’s “solemn jubilee” precisely so that “we on earth with undiscording voice / May rightly answer that melodious noise” now and in our own way—as once we did before the Fall (ll. 6–18). Just as the Lady does in her echo song in Milton’s *Mask*, so we in our own singing can give “resounding grace to all heaven’s harmonies” (l. 244). This particular insight is one Erin Minnear associates with Milton’s experience of Shakespeare: “he perceives the way [Shakespeare’s] memories of music come to life and refuse to remain in the past,” she says, Shakespeare figuring “these musical memories and imaginings as resonating in the words used to recall them.”<sup>45</sup> For Milton, our agency lies in the specific words we choose to recall or resound those memories. The critical point is that in these musical analogies God’s grace is itself already being reimagined in terms of the dialogism inherent in the humanist protocols of imitation and originality, including the dramatic art of Shakespeare. The dialogue between the Father and the Son in book 3 of *Paradise Lost* is a critically important case in point.

This dramatic revelation, which is made visible like Adam’s inspired dream of Eve to “fancy my internal sight” (*PL* 8.461; cf. *PL* 3.51–55), is also imagined very carefully as an echo song. In this great debate, the Son constantly repeats, resounds, or echoes the Father’s words, but turns them incrementally, interpreting and challenging them to the point where the emphasis in the

44. See Stevens, *Imagination*, 46–57.

45. Minnear, *Reverberating Song*, 194.

dialogue shifts from justice to mercy.<sup>46</sup> Milton's God as he appears in the poem is neither the Father nor the Son *alone*, but the relation between the two, that is, the transformative dialogue between the two.<sup>47</sup> Although Milton might feel that this does not constitute the abrogation of *sola scriptura*—for Scripture's "written records pure," Michael assures Adam, can only be understood by the Spirit (*PL* 12.513–14)—it remains highly problematic. The inspired rewriting of the relation between the Father and the Son in the form of the heavenly debates drawn from classical and contemporary literature, especially the epics of Homer and Virgil, indeed the very act of rewriting the Bible in the form of a classical epic itself, suggests not only the pervasive influence of the *studia humanitatis* but also just how difficult it was to sustain the doctrine of *sola scriptura* in its purity.

A similar version of the dialogic process in the heavenly debate is evident in the angelic education of Adam and Eve, and this brings us back more directly to Shakespeare. In book 5 of *Paradise Lost*, as Adam and Eve's prayer is answered, the particular seraph imagined inspiring the poet in *The Reason of Church-Government* turns out to be Raphael. Once he has alighted in paradise, the "seraph winged" (*PL* 5.276) proceeds like Hermes, "Maia's son" (*PL* 5.285), to disclose heaven's secrets. As his discourse offers revelation, it also offers "true musical delight" (*PL* "The Verse"), its rhythms more enchanting than the nightly songs of the Cherubim (*PL* 5.544–48). But as their conversation continues, Raphael struggles to understand exactly how he might "relate / To human sense the invisible exploits / Of warring spirits" (*PL* 5.564–66). The answer is, of course, imagination, that is, analogies presented to Adam and Eve's high-raised fancy: "what surmounts the reach / Of human sense, I shall delineate so, / By likening spiritual to corporal forms" (*PL* 5.571–73). But most importantly for my argument, as Raphael approaches the problem of depicting the war in heaven itself, the agent of grace (*PL* 3.228–29) begins to sound increasingly like Shakespeare's Chorus in *Henry V*.<sup>48</sup> Both Raphael and the Chorus are tasked to

46. See Stevens, *Imagination*, 145–77.

47. Cf. Milton in *Christian Doctrine*: "How, then, are [the Father and Son] one? The Son alone can tell us this and he does. Firstly, they are one in that they speak and act as one. [...] Secondly, [the Son] declares that he and the Father are one in the same way that we are one with him: that is, not in essence but in love, in communion, in agreement, in charity, in spirit, and finally in glory" (*CPW*, 6:220). And, we might add, in dialogue.

48. See Stevens, *Imagination*, 6–7.



present war on an epic scale, both have read Chapman's Homer, and both have specific problems to resolve—the Chorus the practical limitations of the stage, and Raphael the epistemological ineffability of the divine—what he calls the “Unspeakable” (*PL* 6.296–97).<sup>49</sup> Both appeal to imagination. The Chorus cries out for a muse of fire that “would ascend / The brightest heaven of invention” and urges its audience to work on their “imaginary forces” (*H5* 1 Prologue 1–2, 18). Raphael returns to high-raised fancy and considers how exactly he might “lift / Human imagination to such height / Of godlike power” (*PL* 6.299–301). Both feel overwhelmed by the epic nature of what they are to represent—the Chorus by the clash of “two mighty monarchies” (*H5* 1 Prologue 20–21) and Raphael by the contest that will “decide the empire of great heaven” (*PL* 6.303). Both are galvanized by expectation—the tension is electrifying. For the Chorus, “expectation sits in the air / And hides a sword” full of worldly promise (*H5* 2 Prologue 8–9). For Raphael, “expectation stood / In horror” while both hosts “waved their fiery swords, and in the air / Made horrid circles” (*PL* 6.304–7). Just as in the “Epitaph,” where Milton reads Shakespeare through Spenser, so here, at this particular moment in his greatest poem, he reads Scripture through Shakespeare. That is, in imagining the divine, in forming “a mental image” of the divine “as [God] wishes us to form,”<sup>50</sup> Scripture is being enabled by Shakespeare—as it will be by numerous other secular texts.

The climax of the war in heaven is a version of the same vision the poet saw in “At a Solemn Music”—Ezekiel's chariot of fire morphs into Messiah's “chariot of paternal deity” (*PL* 6.750), but now jubilee becomes terror. Adam and Eve are astonished; like the reader in the “Epitaph” on Shakespeare, they are

filled  
 With admiration and deep muse to hear  
 Of things so high and strange, things to their thought  
 So unimaginable.

(*PL* 7.51–54)

With their fancy bereft of itself, one might argue, they sit in silence with too much conceiving. But most importantly, their wonder does not lead to

49. For Shakespeare's knowledge of Chapman's translation of Homer, see Gary Taylor in *Henry V*, 52–58, and for Milton's, see Merritt Hughes in *CPW*, 3:345–46.

50. Milton, *Christine Doctrine* in *CPW*, 6:133.

paralysis; it leads to action—to dialogue, to questions, to Raphael's great story of the world's creation, and to Adam's own story of Eve's creation, a story she prefers Adam to relate directly to her in their private dialogue.

### *Perpetual aspiration*

What I am suggesting, then, is not only that Milton was deeply influenced by Shakespeare and his valorization of imagination but also by dialogic patterns of representation that encouraged a much more dynamic understanding of grace, one in which human agency is allowed a much more pronounced role. In this, while Milton's immediate response to Shakespeare may have been to co-opt him and turn his secular imagination to the advantage of religion, to subordinate human freedom to a much more overt celebration of God's freedom, the playwright's extraordinary fertility of invention helps push Milton in the opposite direction. John Creaser's thinking on the blank verse of Milton and Shakespeare epitomizes the general direction of my argument. "Shakespeare, the supreme master of blank verse before Milton," he says, "created a medium appropriate for drama, free to the point of licentiousness." Milton capitalizes on Shakespeare's wood-notes wild and "develops an unprecedented mode at once disciplined and unpredictably open-ended of what was, outside drama, a very rare prosody."<sup>51</sup> But it is in the open-endedness that we see what Creaser calls the poet's "perpetual aspiration" and feel the pressure of Shakespeare driving Milton to realize his own deep-rooted desire for originality, liberty, or individual agency—a desire he has learned from so many other cultural sources, not least a lifetime's grounding in the habits and practices of the *studia humanitatis*. This leads us to this essay's central question.

If the continuities between Shakespeare and Milton are as seamless or complementary as I am suggesting, why is there so much resistance? Or, to be more precise, why historically has there been so much emphasis on the differences or discontinuities between the two poets, considerable as they often admittedly are? There are innumerable answers, but the obvious place to begin any inquiry into this issue is the legacy of the English Civil War. In the immediate aftermath of the Interregnum, while Shakespeare increasingly enjoyed national approval, Milton remained a controversial figure. For many, he would remain hateful, a "criminal and obsolete person," a latter-day Polyphemus, in

51. Creaser, "Verse and Rhyme," 110–11.

Virgil's words—"a monster horrendous, hideous and vast, deprived of sight."<sup>52</sup> The monstrosity of Milton is a recurrent theme; it is the reverse side of his sublimity, and it routinely manifests itself in responses not only to his politics but also to his poetry, including criticism of such horrors as *Paradise Lost*'s excessive learning (Addison), its Latinity (Jonathan Richardson), its sublime but intensely centripetal egotism (Coleridge), its artificiality (Eliot), its lack of vitality (Wilson Knight), its peculiar un-Englishness (Leavis), and so on. The antithesis is always Shakespeare, and the dichotomy between the two is reproduced most strikingly in popular novels like Robert Graves's *Wife to Mr. Milton* (1942), where Graves reads Milton's life through Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, with "monstrous Milton" appearing as the upstart Malvolio and Mary Powell as the genteel Viola.<sup>53</sup> The texts most immediately responsible for this tradition are, as Nicholas McDowell has made clear, Milton's regicide tracts, especially his 1649 *Eikonoklastes*, where Milton appears to make Shakespeare complicit in the king's crimes.

## II. *Eikonoklastes* and the republican censure of Shakespeare

*Eikonoklastes*, it needs to be emphasized, is not a disinterested inquiry but a polemical tract with a very specific political purpose. Milton sees himself as Spenser's Talus and his speech-act as a flail to break the very positive image of the king in his immensely popular memoir, *Eikon Basilike*. But Milton *Iconoclastes*, Milton the self-styled "image-breaker," despite Thomas Corns's ingenious argument to the contrary, failed. By 1660 the monarchy had been restored and the king's book had gone through sixty-four editions.<sup>54</sup> If the overall polemical direction of *Eikonoklastes* is clear, its representation of Shakespeare is anything but. It is, in fact, so ambiguous that it can be read in diametrically opposite ways. On the one hand, Milton's book identifies Shakespeare with the king's evil counsellors as the "Closet Companion of these his solitudes."<sup>55</sup> On the other, it reveals just how much Milton himself remains in fee to Shakespeare. That is, how not only at moments of intense poetic invention but at moments of

52. See von Maltzahn, "First Reception," 490; McDowell, "General Introduction," 80.

53. See Stevens, "Reading Graves Misreading Milton."

54. Corns feels that if we lift our gaze from the Restoration of 1660 to the Glorious Revolution of 1689, Milton's book was a success (Corns, *Uncloistered Virtue*, 219–20).

55. Milton, *Eikonoklastes* in CPW, 3:361.

high stress, his mind frequently turns to Shakespeare. If Shakespeare enables the king to practise his deceits, then he also enables Milton to see through them. In this historic period, one of the most emotionally demanding in Milton's political life, a period in which through a series of high-profile speech-acts he made himself party to the killing of a king, he routinely turns to Shakespeare's history plays—to *Macbeth* and *Richard II* in the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, and to *Julius Caesar* and, most importantly, *Richard III* in *Eikonoklastes*.<sup>56</sup>

The strategy Milton adopts in *Eikonoklastes* is determined by the rhetorical singularity of *Eikon Basilike*. Because *The Pourtraicture of His Sacred Majestie in his Solitudes and Sufferings* presents itself as a deeply religious, meditative exercise, Milton has to tread carefully. He has to hold himself to a higher strain of religious observance than the king. Or at least appear to do so. *Eikon Basilike*, which had already gone through twenty-two editions by the time Milton was tasked to respond to it in March 1649, is a series of twenty-eight meditations on recent events, each followed by a prayer. It is now generally accepted that it was not written by the king himself but by the future bishop John Gauden, working from notes and memoranda provided by the king.<sup>57</sup> Milton suspects something like this but chooses to maintain the fiction that the king is the sole author. The book's tone is resolute but not combative; it is deeply reflective, resigned, and in many ways conciliatory. The king imagines himself as the Psalmist and his style often seems literary: "I [began] to think that the Book might perhaps be intended [as] a peece of Poetrie," says Milton in *Eikonoklastes*. "The words are good, the fiction smooth and [clean]; there wanted only Rime."<sup>58</sup> The reference to rhyme is full of scorn, and Milton has no doubt about the subversive intentions of this particular piece of poetry. Its polished but intimate "Soliloquies," for instance, encourage the reader to enter the king's interior life, as they will Satan's in *Paradise Lost*, and so succumb to the kind of empathy that might "corrupt and disorder the mindes of weaker men."<sup>59</sup> Milton is fully aware of the persuasive power of dramatic soliloquy—the extraordinary ability of characters to reflect on and reconceive themselves in public-facing private thought produces an almost irresistible sense of authenticity. Like his 1641 *Animadversions*, Milton's response in *Eikonoklastes* takes the form of a

56. See McDowell, "General Introduction," esp. 33–36, 72–75.

57. See Corns, *Uncloistered Virtue*, 80–81.

58. Milton, *CPW*, 3:406.

59. Milton, *CPW*, 3:346, 338.

point-by-point rebuttal—but here, unlike the earlier tract, he pursues his argument with “a determined politeness,”<sup>60</sup> the kind of sober and restrained demeanor as befits a gravely serious debate. Even so, there are numerous moments when Milton loses control and his anger gets the better of him. Within his general rebuttal, as Corns’s astute analysis points out, Milton aims to demonstrate that the king’s private meditations are anything but authentic, disinterested, or above the fray—that they are, in fact, disingenuous, cunning, and deeply political. The author, whether the king or some “secret *Coadjutor*,”<sup>61</sup> is a very clever rhetorician, and Milton’s strategy aims to establish two key points: first, that the book’s purpose is not resignation and reconciliation but a reversal of fortune; and second, that its pious tone is an *act*, quite literally the theatrical performance of an accomplished player, one here not easily hissed “off the stage.”<sup>62</sup> Both moves lead us back to Shakespeare.

By representing England’s most popular dramatist as the king’s “Closet Companion,” Milton is able to trade on the intensely anti-theatrical, indeed anti-literary, prejudices of his primary audience, or what we would call his “base”—people like the government’s solicitor-general, John Cook. Anticipating Milton earlier in the year, Cook himself had pointed out that “had [the king] but studied Scripture half so much as *Ben: Johnson* or *Shakespear*,” he might have better understood his obligations to the nation.<sup>63</sup> *Sola scriptura* might have been proved a better guide than literary imitation, inspiration than imagination. Seen in this context, Milton sounds a lot like Guillory’s version of the poet, but this is, of course, a public performance with Milton playing a specific role every bit as much as the king. Indeed, Blair Worden sees the criticisms of Milton and Cook as part of a larger pattern of republican propaganda, one pursued most vigorously by Marchamont Nedham and aimed at associating Shakespeare with what republican journalism represented as poetry at its most trivial, including the dissolute, dishonest, and escapist theatre so loved by royalists.<sup>64</sup> For Milton’s Puritan persona, the iconography of *Eikon Basilike*’s frontispiece gives him his opening. The highly theatrical image of

60. Corns, *Uncloistered Virtue*, 205.

61. Milton, *CPW*, 3:346.

62. Milton, *CPW*, 3:355.

63. John Cook, qtd. in Corns, *Uncloistered Virtue*, 216.

64. See Worden, *Literature and Politics*, esp. 51–53.

the king losing his earthly crown, embracing a crown of thorns, and, most importantly, fixing his eyes firmly on "That heav'nlie Crown, already mine"<sup>65</sup> is seen as a demonic parody of the sacred. Its fanciful attempt to imitate Christ's exaltation through humiliation is an act of arrogation that Milton immediately associates with "Masking" scenes, decadent court musicals whose tawdry artificiality is registered in the "quaint Emblems and devices begg'd from the old Pageantry of some Twelf-nights entertainment at *Whitehall*."<sup>66</sup> Throughout *Eikonoklastes* Milton routinely expresses contempt for poets and, as he warms to his task, he even turns on what sounds like his own ideal of "high-raised fantasy" itself. The king's attempts to imagine "the high and secret judgments of God" on the fate of Sir John Hotham, for instance, are dismissed as "petty glosses and conceits"—for we cannot know the mind of God, and he certainly "judges not by human fanny" or what imagination *alone* makes available to us.<sup>67</sup> As Worden suggests, Milton's polemic might be taken for "a repudiation of the literary imagination" itself.<sup>68</sup> Sidney's *Arcadia*, a work Milton dearly loved, is here famously dismissed as a "vain amatorious Poem."<sup>69</sup> In this heated but very deliberate rhetorical game, the representation of Shakespeare as one of the king's counsellors enables Milton to suggest exactly how his plays, when read superficially, corrupt the king and help realize *Eikon Basilike*'s subversive design. They offer very specific dramatic scripts to be imitated—*Julius Caesar* a compelling model of reversal, how a tyrant or his party might turn defeat into victory, and *Richard III* an equally arresting model of political bravura, how a tyrant might learn to play the pious fraud to murderous effect.

According to Milton, the king's desire for political reversal is made explicit in the final words of *Eikon Basilike*: "Vota dabunt, quae bella negarunt."<sup>70</sup> Intimating, says Milton (translating somewhat freely), "That what [the king] could not compass by Warr, he should atcheive by his Meditations."<sup>71</sup> The obvious Shakespearean example of such a reversal is "the last will of *Caesar*"

65. *Eikon Basilike* (hereafter cited as *EB*), 27.

66. Milton, *CPW*, 3:342–43.

67. Milton, *CPW*, 3:430.

68. Worden, *Literature and Politics*, 51.

69. Milton, *CPW*, 3:362.

70. *EB*, 204.

71. Milton, *CPW*, 3:342.

and how on “being read to the people, and *what bounteous Legacies hee had bequeath’ d them*, [it] wrought more in that Vulgar audience to the avenging his death, then all the art he could ever use, to win thir favor in his life-time” (my emphasis).<sup>72</sup> Milton’s classical sources may have been Suetonius and Plutarch, but no one uses Caesar’s will with such skill and to such effect as Shakespeare’s Mark Antony, whose words Milton actually echoes: only let them hear the will, says Antony, and the commons would “kiss dead Caesar’s wounds,” beg a hair for remembrance, and “dying, *mention it within their wills, bequeathing it as a rich legacy*” (JC 3.2.130–39, my emphasis). So here the king and his allies drive towards the same end of “stirring up the people to bring him that honor, that affection, and by consequence, that revenge to his dead Corps,” as he could never gain in life.<sup>73</sup> If the king’s closing epigram triggers the memory of Antony in *Julius Caesar*, so his opening section brings to mind the blasphemous duplicity of the tyrant in *Richard III*. Charles’s pained tone, his pious humility, is no more to be taken seriously than Richard’s, who is routinely found “speaking in as high a strain of pietie, and mortification, as is uttered in any passage of this Book.”<sup>74</sup> Indeed, a reader like Cook might argue that the king has been personally schooled by Shakespeare in his brazen hypocrisy. When Milton reads the king’s blatantly false affirmation of friendship to all—“*I intended, saith he, not onely to oblige my Freinds but my enemies*”—he hears and quotes Shakespeare’s Richard at his most outrageous:

*I do not know that Englishman alive  
With whom my soule is any jott at odds  
More then the Infant that is borne to night;  
I thank my god for my humilitie.*<sup>75</sup>

For all their clever disguises, the king and his pander Shakespeare are no better than Richard in their “naked villainy” and bold-faced ability to “play the devil” (R3 1.3.336, 338).

72. Milton, CPW, 3:342.

73. Milton, CPW, 3:342.

74. Milton, CPW, 3:361.

75. Shakespeare, R3 2.1.68–71, qtd. in Milton, CPW, 3:361.

If we read the text this way, it becomes increasingly difficult to separate Shakespeare from the corruption of his characters, and in the larger context of republican propaganda, this is precisely what Milton's audience is being encouraged to do—that is, to believe that Shakespeare and the theatre world he represents is dangerously flawed, not just trivial but actively enabling the king to be as duplicitous as Antony and as demonic as Richard. But this is, of course, not the only way to read such a complex and structurally uneven text. Despite his best partisan efforts and moments of genuine rage, Milton is no simple ideologue or propagandist. Despite his sustained attack on poets, Milton the poet always re-emerges. What he says of Plato in *Areopagitica* applies equally to himself: the philosopher was such a fertile poetic maker—the Socratic discourses being themselves such a great act of imagination—that when he expelled the poets from his “fancied republic,” his own “airy burgomasters” should have expelled him first.<sup>76</sup> Milton is, then, neither Cook nor Nedham, and only if you take his polemic at face value are you likely to claim that in *Eikonoklastes* Milton is beginning a process as programmatic and un-nuanced as the “expulsion” of Shakespeare.<sup>77</sup> For in the very text that he appears to be censuring Shakespeare, Milton is simultaneously drawing on him to create his most famous character. As he reads the king's book through Shakespeare's *Richard III*, quite explicitly the close companion of his own iconoclastic animadversions, Milton begins the process not simply of imagining Satan but of imagining him as a contemporary—a political character whose *virtù* might “set the murd'rous Machiavel to school” (3H6 3.2.193).

### III. *Eikonoklastes* and Shakespeare's critique of *virtù*

Milton's diffidence about *Eikonoklastes*'s censure of Shakespeare is immediately apparent in the way the playwright is not dismissed as categorically as Sidney or poets in general. There is no accusation, as there is with Sidney's *Arcadia*, for instance, that “among religious thoughts, and duties” his poetry is “not worthy to be nam'd.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, the reverse is true. As I have suggested above, while Shakespeare's plays may assist the king in his deceits, they also help Milton

76. Milton, CPW, 2:522–23.

77. See Smith, *Literature and Revolution*, esp. 16–17.

78. Milton, CPW, 3:362.



and his audience to see through them. In this, Milton's Shakespeare is clearly identified with Aristotle and the Byzantine historian Nicetas as a moral authority. In the same way that Nicetas foregrounds the constant reading by which the Byzantine tyrant Andronicus Comnenus was able to simulate the very "phrase and style" of Saint Paul, so, says Milton, the less "abstruse" and more pointed Shakespeare foregrounds the methods by which the English tyrant falsifies the testimony of Scripture.<sup>79</sup> After he has aroused the great nobles' appetite for revenge against the Queen's party, for instance, Richard, whose signature apostrophe is "by Saint Paul" (R3 1.2.39), reflects on his technique. "I sigh," he happily explains to us, and "with a piece of scripture / Tell them that God bids us do good for evil. / And thus," he confesses gleefully, "I clothe my naked villainy / With old odd ends stol'n out of holy writ, / And seem a saint when most I play the devil" (R3 1.3.334–38). This, Milton assures us, is Charles I's playbook. In *Eikon Basilike*, the king is routinely to be found claiming to return "good for evil"<sup>80</sup> and stitching together his false prayers out of the odds and ends of Scripture—according to Milton, they are no better than "the lip-work of every Prelatical Liturgist, clapt together, and quilted out of Scripture phrase."<sup>81</sup> Shakespeare's witness to the truth, Milton insists, is invaluable: "Other stuff of this sort may be read throughout the whole Tragedie, wherein the Poet us'd not much licence in departing from the truth of History, which delivers [the king] a deep dissembler, not of his affections only, but of Religion."<sup>82</sup> It is significant that Milton refers to *Richard III* not as an entertainment or even a play but much more respectfully as a "Tragedie"—the dramatic genre he later calls "the gravest, moralist, and most profitable of all other poems."<sup>83</sup> More important than this, however, if the king is learning his duplicitous style from Richard, Milton is learning how to interiorize evil from Shakespeare. Not only this, but he is also learning how to come to a better understanding of *virtù*.

As Shakespeare created *Richard III*'s central character, so Milton is creating *Eikonoklastes*'s, and in his deep dissembling, highly theatrical, *virtù*-driven

79. Milton, *CPW*, 3:361.

80. Milton, *CPW*, 3:543.

81. Milton, *CPW*, 3:360.

82. Milton, *CPW*, 3:362.

83. Note on tragedy in *Samson Agonistes* (1671). It is true that Milton's thinking primarily of ancient tragedies here, but in the note on "The Verse" in *Paradise Lost* (1668), he is clearly willing to extend it to "our best English tragedies"—as indeed he is in *Il Penseroso* (ll. 97–102) and numerous other places.

Charles I, it is possible to see the genesis of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Despite Milton's claim to the contrary, his Charles I is to a large extent a literary fiction, his villain built on Shakespeare's, and both anticipating Satan. All three characters—Satan somewhat surprisingly so—are represented as contemporary political leaders, and their narratives follow a similar trajectory: they begin in frustration or defeat; then, as they reassert themselves and continue their struggle, they reveal the enormity of their solipsism; and at last, even when finally defeated, they offer nothing but a kind of mindless defiance. The self-destructive quality of their Machiavellian *virtù* is, then, distinguished by three elements: first, a radical overestimation of human agency; second, a solipsism that seems compelled to articulate itself in masculinist images of incest; and third, an intransigence that precipitates the annihilation of despair in nihilism.

*Perplexed by new risen suns: sovereignty and the struggle for agency*

What most immediately binds Shakespeare's Richard III and Milton's Charles I to each other, and indeed to Milton himself, is the intense individualism that the cultural force of the *studia humanitatis* does so much to encourage and legitimize.<sup>84</sup> This takes the particular form here of the two kings' *virtù*, the "exceptional prowess" or manliness Machiavelli considers necessary for the successful prince.<sup>85</sup> For Machiavelli, according to James Hankins, this concept is deeply paradoxical, for while *virtù* is rooted in humanism, its success requires the ability to suspend humanism's moral principles. Hankins puts it this way: "Educated by humanists, the prince already knows how to be good; now he must learn from Machiavelli how *not* to be good." That is, when "necessity dictates, he must be willing to act with sudden violence and cruelty; he will lie, commit fraud, use trickery of the lowest kind, violate any and all laws."<sup>86</sup> "Necessity" is a key word. For Machiavelli, conscience may be salved and the concept justified by appealing to the good of the state: the prince "should not deviate from what is good, *if that is possible*," he says, "but he should know how to do evil, *if that is*

84. Cf. the still valuable account in Burckhardt, *Civilization*, 98–119. Cf. also Rice, *Foundations*, 77–109; Hankins, *Virtue Politics*, 449–75; and the important qualification in Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual*, esp. 334–37.

85. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 19.

86. Hankins, *Virtue Politics*, 452.

necessary” (my emphasis).<sup>87</sup> For Milton, however, certainly as he has learned it from Shakespeare, political prowess cannot be separated from personal virtue, and Machiavellian *virtù* always leads to self-defeating tyranny, for its driving force is never really good governance but identity and agency for the sake of agency. In this case, its driving force is the desire for “sovereignty.” But by sovereignty—what Richard would gain and Charles recover—the two kings mean something more than constitutional or political power. They mean the personal freedom that allows them as individuals to feel an authentic sense of being in the world, a sense of being that allows them to escape the overwhelming, concomitant fear of humiliation or exclusion. As Shakespeare’s later play *Richard II* makes clear, the king’s “two bodies,” the institutional and the individual, are inseparable. Being “unkinged by Bolingbroke,” says Richard II, means “[I] straight am nothing” (*R2* 5.5.37–38). The unique recurrence of Shakespeare’s equally unique word “unkinged” in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*<sup>88</sup> suggests the degree to which this particular line had an impact on Milton.<sup>89</sup> As they “dream on sovereignty” (*3H6* 3.2.134), both Shakespeare’s Richard and Milton’s Charles unsurprisingly imagine the existential relation between office and identity in terms of the primacy of the sun.<sup>90</sup>

If, as he reads the king’s book through Shakespeare’s play, Milton finds the two kings’ duplicity inescapable, he also notices what he calls their “inward fears” or common insecurities.<sup>91</sup> Both characters begin their stories perplexed or frustrated—threatened, diminished, and overshadowed by new risen suns, Charles by Parliament and Richard by his brother and his court.<sup>92</sup> Nowhere is this clearer with Charles than in his agitated memory of Parliament’s *Nineteen Propositions* of June 1642,<sup>93</sup> the proposals that would effectively strip his office of its executive power. While Milton sneers at the king’s fears—“that which he cal[s] heer, [Parliament’s] *making Warr upon his soul*”<sup>94</sup>—the king angrily rehearses his original argument that Parliament can no more act without the

87. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 57.

88. See Milton, *CPW*, 3:225.

89. See Mathole, “Milton’s Use”; McDowell, “General Introduction,” 35.

90. Cf. Bennett, “God, Satan, and King Charles.”

91. Milton, *CPW*, 3:45.

92. Cf. Milton, *PL* 1.594–600, where Satan appears as the new risen sun who perplexes monarchs.

93. See *EB*, 93–101.

94. Milton, *CPW*, 3:457.

Crown than nature without the sun: it cannot “beget, or bring forth any one complete or authoritative Act of political wisdom” without the experience and “Reason” of the Crown—just “as the Sun’s influence is necessary in all nature’s productions.”<sup>95</sup> As he relives the episode in his book, the king sees Parliament’s proposals not only as a political act but as a direct assault on his personal identity. He feels Parliament’s pressure as the insolence, inexperience, and tumultuousness of his enemies’ youth. These upstarts, these “young Statesmen,” would take his place and “exclude My self.” In denuding him of “that part to Act, that Trust to discharge,” and “that Estate and Honor to preserve,” indeed all the agency that rightly belongs “to My self,”<sup>96</sup> these “feral birds”<sup>97</sup> would obscure his glory and make him nothing. In their unlawful attempt to usurp his sovereignty, “to ascend the throne of Supremacy” and steal the reins of power, they would render him obnoxious, vulnerable or naked to the world, and at the same time reveal their own pretentious inauthenticity, their arrogance disclosing them as a false sun, “more of *Phaeton* than of *Phoebus*.”<sup>98</sup> In Shakespeare’s play, Richard feels the same kind of existential threat—he feels excluded and overshadowed by the lascivious court of his brother, Edward IV, “this sun of York.” Taking no delight in “this weak-piping time of peace,” wanting love’s “majesty,” and lacking a world of war to bustle in, he is left with nothing but “to spy my shadow in the sun / And descant on mine own deformity” (R3 1.1.1–31). Both Richard and Charles are, however, made of sterner stuff: they immediately move to reverse their misfortunes and reassert themselves—the one in conspiratorial plots, and the other, from Milton’s perspective, in a conspiratorial book.

Having set the plot against Clarence in motion, Richard’s first move is to seduce his cousin, Lady Anne Neville, the daughter of the Earl of Warwick and the wife of Edward, Prince of Wales, both of whom have already been murdered by Richard. It is not clear why this move is so important politically, because we are never told what his “secret close intent” is (R3 1.1.157). What is clear, however, is Richard’s sense of triumph, of risk-taking exhilaration and renewed agency, in bending Anne to his will: “Was ever woman in this humour wooed? / Was ever woman in this humour won?” (R3 1.2.213–14). This rhetorical *tour de force* ameliorates his opening sense of exclusion. It has

95. *EB*, 99.

96. *EB*, 99.

97. *EB*, 128.

98. *EB*, 96.

the effect, to Anne at least, of transforming his physical deformity and gives him a place in the sun: "Shine out, fair sun," he cries in joy, "till I have bought a glass / That I may see my shadow as I pass" (*R3* 1.3.247–48). As Milton is keenly aware,<sup>99</sup> something similar happens to Charles in *Eikon Basilike* as he refights the war in memory. Even though he has been defeated in the war, he now reasserts himself in a self-consoling act of imagination. The fullness of being he hopes to recover through his book he represents as the sun re-emerging in all its sovereign splendor: "For Mine Honour, I am well assured, that as Mine Innocency is clear before God," he says, "[...] so My reputation shall like the Sun (after owls and bats have had their freedom in the night and darker times) rise and recover it self to such a degree of splendour, as those feral birds shall be grieved to behold, and unable to bear."<sup>100</sup> In addressing their sense of exclusion and moving to assert themselves, both characters experience a new-found sense of mastery: as Richard now "scorns the sun," turning "the sun to shade" (*R3* 1.3.265–66), so Charles re-emerges as the sun itself, its splendour dazzling the eyes of his enemies. At the same time, however, they are made to reveal something more disturbing about their inner states, Richard by his author, Shakespeare, and Charles by his adversary, Milton.

*Look on me: solipsism and its deformities*

So extreme is Richard III's desire for agency that Shakespeare represents his individualism as solipsism, and that solipsism in terms of incest. In words that anticipate Satan's cry, "Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell" (*PL* 4.75), Richard appears equally self-consumed: "Then fly. –What, from myself?" (*R3* 5.4.164). This occurs at the end of the play just before the Battle of Bosworth, when he subjects himself to a nightmare catechism:

What do I fear? Myself? There's none else by.

Richard loves Richard; that is, I and I.

Is there a murderer here? No. –Yes, I am.

Then fly. –What, from myself? [...]

Alack, I love myself."

(*R3* 5.4.16–66)

99. See Milton, *CPW*, 3:502.

100. *EB*, 128.

In order to register the enormity of this solipsism, Shakespeare emphasizes its narcissistic, recklessly incestuous nature. In seducing his young cousin, Anne, for instance, Richard would “become her husband and her father” (*R3* 1.2.155).<sup>101</sup> But more than this, at the moment of his rhetorical triumph with Anne, he sees in her perception of himself—a perception his wooing itself has constructed—his perfect image. As Satan sees himself in the countenance of his daughter-paramour, Sin—“Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing,” she says (*PL* 2.764)—so Richard sees himself in the gaze of his daughter-wife, Anne—“Myself to be a marv’lous proper man,” he says (*R3* 1.2.239). That is, Richard sees in Anne’s gaze a reflection of himself as he, the thoroughly skeptical Richard, would hope against hope to be. In that gaze, his imperfections fall away, he seeks a looking glass, and newly affirmed he pursues his headlong, tyrannical course with emboldened exuberance. As Milton responds to Charles I’s moment of imagined triumph in *Eikon Basilike*, he implies a similar pattern of incestuous solipsism in the king.

Seizing on the sun metaphor, Milton goes out of his way to represent the king’s “caprice” or solipsism, the degree to which his “self opinion or fals principles delude and transport him,”<sup>102</sup> as evidence of incestuous inclinations every bit as revealing as those of Richard. In the solipsistic nature of his individualism, so Milton claims, the king characteristically betrays his inability to see Parliament as anything but a woman to be subjected to his masculinist desire. The critically important idea of evil as something essentially incestuous in its narcissism or self-consumption—the highly gendered images of Satan copulating with his daughter, Death raping his mother, and the Serpent seducing Eve as the dissembling, snake-like Jove did the mothers of Scipio Africanus and Alexander the Great in *Paradise Lost*—is anticipated here in what Milton calls the tyrant-king’s “dream of copulation with his Mother.”<sup>103</sup> According to Milton, the inner logic of the king’s sun metaphor reveals his Richard-like deformity, swollen like an incestuous Caligula. If it is true, Milton argues, that Parliament cannot “beget” without the king’s “procreative reason,” as the earth cannot without the sun, then Parliament must be considered female. But if female and

101. At the end of the play, Richard tries to repeat the process, intending to marry his daughter-in-law, Elizabeth, by seducing her mother, the Queen (Shakespeare, *R3* 4.4.186–348).

102. Milton, *CPW*, 3:467.

103. Milton, *CPW*, 3:467. Cf. Milton, *PL* 2.761–67, 2.781–802, 9.503–10.

the creator of the king's sovereignty, then Parliament should be considered his mother, and so his desire for congress with Parliament can only be considered incestuous. In this, the king reveals the roots of his tyranny. Since dreams of incest are "a presaging signe of a future Tyrant," their waking reality brings us face to face with the fullness of tyranny's horror: "What other notions but these, or such like [incestuous fantasies of masculine coition with one's mother], could swell up *Caligula* to think himself a God."<sup>104</sup> Although Milton's conceit is far-fetched and indeed may have started as a scurrilous joke, it betrays the need to contest the king's self-aggrandizing assertions by drawing him into the penumbra of tyranny's relation to incest, Charles's "palpable faults" and "deformities"<sup>105</sup> serving as a constant reminder of Richard "crookback" (3H6 1.4.75).

The irony is, of course, that the various feelings of being diminished, threatened, or overshadowed, which Shakespeare reveals in Richard and Milton detects in the king, are also very much Milton's own. It takes one to know one. He is the "image-breaker," and his own sense of *virtù* or "exceptional prowess" is displaced into a fantasy of Justice's violence: "in her very essence [Justice] is all strength and activity; and hath a Sword put into her hand, to use against all violence and oppression on the earth. Shee it is most truly, who accepts no Person, and exempts none from the severity of her stroke."<sup>106</sup> As he reads *Eikon Basilike*, he clearly takes it personally. Because his own sense of self is challenged by the king's acts of self-assertion, Milton's critique, despite its rhetorical need for restraint, is in turn equally self-assertive. Part of the problem is that the king's book is so well-written: "We have heer, I must confess, a neat and well-couch'd invective against Tumults [...] so handsomely composed and so feelingly," he says, before containing the admission by quickly turning it into a joke.<sup>107</sup> What is emotionally much harder to contain is the extraordinary success of an adversary Milton considers so intellectually inferior, an adversary as "weak and puny" as this particular Stuart king.<sup>108</sup> Charles's soliloquizing style is, however, formidable. As mentioned above, it opens up his inner life and recurrently asks his readers to empathize—to "look on me."

104. Milton, *CPW*, 3:467.

105. Milton, *CPW*, 3:341.

106. Milton, *CPW*, 3:584. On Milton's "sacred vehemence" or violent rhetoric, see Stevens, "Intolerance."

107. Milton, *CPW*, 3:382.

108. Milton, *CPW*, 3:338.

The power of this rhetorical mode is evident in the extraordinary success of both Richard, Milton's embryonic model for Charles, in asking Lady Anne to look on him and, of course, Satan, Milton's great creation, in asking Eve the same question. At the crisis of the Fall of humankind, when first offered the forbidden fruit, Eve defends herself by quoting Scripture: "Ye shall not eat / Thereof, nor shall ye touch it, lest ye die," she says to Satan (*PL* 9.663–64, quoting Genesis 2:17). Undismayed, the serpent urges her to forget the evidence of things not seen and trust in what she sees—not simply in his appearance but in the way his words transform that appearance, sexualizing it and occluding his reptilian deformities. Satan begins his demonic catechism as an assurance of things hoped for:

ye shall not die:  
How should ye? By the fruit? It gives you life  
To knowledge: by the threatener? *Look on me*,  
*Me* who have touched and tasted, yet both live.  
(*PL* 9.685–88, my emphasis)<sup>109</sup>

Satan's temptation of Eve is anticipated in and deeply influenced by Richard's temptation of Anne. At the climax of Richard's temptation, as Anne struggles to know his heart, he invites her to look on his words, for his heart is "figured in my tongue" (*R3* 1.2.179), and, as he has already said, "My proud heart sues and prompts my tongue to speak" (*R3* 1.2.156). As he reflects on his success, what galvanizes him is the degree to which his heart-revealing words transform her perception of his appearance. Who would believe that she would prefer "me" to her murdered husband, he asks exultingly, that she would

debase her eyes *on me*,  
That cropped the golden prime of this sweet prince  
And made her widow to a woeful bed,  
*On me*, whose all not equals Edward's moiety,  
*On me*, that halt, and am unshapen thus?  
(*R3* 1.2.231–35, my emphasis).

109. Fish's analysis of this passage is, of course, one of the great moments of *Surprised by Sin*, esp. 245–61.



What in fact excites Richard and Satan is not so much the transformation of how they are perceived itself as the power to effect that transformation. What they can do with words, their ability to arouse infatuation, the viral intensity or contagion of their solipsism, is precisely what most threatens Milton in *Eikonoklastes*—not simply the solipsism itself but its radically destabilizing political force and the way we are all drawn into it. In what feels like bewildered rage, he refers to the king's admiring readers as "they who from the first beginning, or but now of late, *by what unhappines I know not*," are "so much affatuated, not with his person onely, but with his palpable faults" that they "dote upon his deformities" (my emphasis).<sup>110</sup> They are in fact a lot like Lady Anne who, as her "woman's heart / Grossly grew captive to his honey words," comes to dote on Richard's deformities (*R3* 4.1.74–75). Essential to their attractiveness, to the extreme individualism or *virtù* of Shakespeare's Richard and Milton's Charles, is their refusal to repent, the remorselessness of their defiance. And this brings us to Satan's soliloquy on Mount Niphates.

*Farewell, remorse: defiance and the limits of freedom*

Although in his solipsism Milton's Devil is clearly indebted to Augustine's account of evil, he is, of course, so much more than the personification of a theological principle.<sup>111</sup> Satan is an extraordinarily powerful dramatic character, tragic in his complexity and arresting in the way he is imagined as a contemporary political leader. Augustinian solipsism morphs into Machiavellian *virtù*. In the same way that Machiavelli represents figures like Cesar Borgia as models of *virtù*, so Satan salves his conscience and justifies his cruelty by appealing to the good of the state.<sup>112</sup> In the soliloquy that follows his private meditation on Mount Niphates, Satan imagines himself speaking to Adam and Eve:

And should I at your harmless innocence  
Melt, as I do, yet public reason just,  
Honour and empire with revenge enlarged,  
By conquering this new world, compels me now

110. Milton, *CPW*, 3:341.

111. Cf. Lewis, *Preface*, 66–72.

112. Cf. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 53–56.

To do what else though damned I should abhor.

(*PL* 4.388–92)

Just as Milton ridicules Charles I's routine appeal to "*the necessity of [the] times*" in *Eikonoklastes*,<sup>113</sup> so here Milton's narrator dismisses Satan's appeal to the good of the state as Machiavellian hypocrisy, as "necessity, / The tyrant's plea" (*PL* 4.393–94). We know this to be hypocrisy, because as Milton makes clear in this soliloquy, and Shakespeare in Richard III's opening soliloquy, the ideal of *virtù*, the Machiavellian paradox of suspending personal virtue in pursuit of public duty, is unsustainable. Suspending the one will always undermine the other and lead to corruption.

As many readers have noticed, Satan's opening soliloquy on Niphates (*PL* 4.33–113) bears an uncanny resemblance to Richard's opening soliloquy at Westminster (*R3* 1.1–40). Both villains unpack their hearts and explain their motivation in an extravagant burst of praise for the sun. As Richard praises the way "this sun of York" has transformed "the winter of our discontent" into "glorious summer," he almost immediately rejects his brother's sunshine world of "fair well-spoken days." He does so because, as we have seen, he feels diminished or excluded. But what excludes him most is not so much his physical deformities as his loss of agency, specifically the daring and exhilarating pleasures of risk-taking, made possible in a political world at war.<sup>114</sup> This is the state of act and action from which he has fallen. His nostalgia for "stern alarms," "dreadful marches," "mounting barbed steeds / To fright the souls of fearful adversaries" (*R3* 1.1.7–11) is palpable. His fearsome role in the late war, as he warns the Queen, makes perfectly clear exactly "what I have been, *and what I am*" (*R3* 1.3.133, my emphasis). This is what terrifies the court. When he returns to war at the end of the play, far from self-disintegration, there is a new sense of resolution and self-realization, even elation: "A thousand hearts are great within my bosom," he cries in joy (*R3* 5.5.76). He shrugs off his stage-villain despair and in his remorseless, warlike *virtù*, he appears, to Catesby at least, as the marvellous proper man Lady Anne once saw in him:

113. Milton, *CPW*, 3:373.

114. For the complexity of Richard III's deformities from a disability studies perspective, see Katherine Williams's fine article, "Enabling Richard."

The King enacts more wonders than a man,  
 Daring an opposite to every danger.  
 His horse is slain, and all on foot he fights,  
 Seeking for Richmond in the throat of death.

(R3 5.6.2–5)

The king's acts are marvellous because in his unconditional pursuit of agency they struggle to go beyond what is humanly possible. He sees no boundaries to human freedom. In this, the wonders he enacts realize both the heroism and absolute wickedness of his *virtù*, precisely the same defiance of all civil and moral norms that Richard promises at the beginning of the play—hating “the idle pleasures” of these peaceful days, “I am determined to prove a villain,” and so he does (R3 1.1.30–31).

If Satan's soliloquy on Niphates follows the form of Richard's, imitation soon leads to originality. While Satan reproduces Richard in his defiance, he also transumes him in terms of introspection. Satan is every bit as much a deep dissembler as Shakespeare's Richard or Milton's Charles, but in his soliloquizing, he is more forthcoming than Richard and more honest than Milton's Charles. He follows the same sequence of praise, exclusion, and defiance, but he does so in a way that is much more complex and self-reflective, much closer, ironically, to what we might expect of a Shakespearean tragic hero. As he praises the sun of “this new world” (PL 4.33), he rejects its dominion for the same reasons that Richard rejects “this sun of York” and Charles the false Phaeton-like sun of Parliament. As the stars hide “their diminished heads,” so the sun reminds Satan of his own diminished status or exclusion—it brings to mind “from what state / I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere [I was]” (PL 4.34–39). But unlike Richard or Charles, he then begins a brutally honest self-interrogation or inquiry into the causes of his exclusion. At first it sounds like a stage-villain's confession or yet another catechism of despair, but it quickly turns into something more demanding, an existential search that foregrounds the central tension between the rival imperatives of the *studia humanitatis* and *sola scriptura*, that is, between the relative freedom of creature and creator. Terms like “pride” and “ambition” seem inadequate to articulate the complexity of the problem Satan seeks to understand. As I have argued elsewhere, Satan's sense of agency or being means freeing himself from all constraints or dependency; it suggests the creature's existential need to free its making from that of its

Maker, the poet's need to free originality from imitation.<sup>115</sup> What prevents this is not the civil or moral norms that constrain Shakespeare's Richard or Milton's Charles, but God's freedom as it is expressed in the *caritas* or grace that animates the world. When Satan says to the sun, "I hate thy beams" (*PL* 4.37), he means he hates God's grace, and he does so because, as it enables, it disables. It creates subjection, dependency, a kind of imprisonment in the "debt immense of endless gratitude, / So burdensome still paying, still to owe" (*PL* 4.52–53). Satan fully understands the counter-argument—that "a grateful mind / By owing owes not, but still pays, at once / Indebted and discharged" (*PL* 4.55–57)—but he cannot feel it or believe it. To accept God's grace is to prolong his confinement in the debtor's prison of God's endless charity. There appears to be no exit. And from God's perspective, there is not. Even Satan's climactic act of defiance, his final attempt at independent agency, is doomed because his words are anything but original—they are, in fact, not his own but God's. When he declares, "Evil, be thou my good" (*PL* 4.110), he is merely echoing and so fulfilling his own condemnation in Scripture: "Woe to them that call evil good, and good evil," says Isaiah (Isaiah 5:20). From Satan's perspective, however, much is still possible.

If what Milton learns from Shakespeare—what Satan when read through *Richard III* reveals—is the tragedy of the quest for unbound human agency, then what *Eikonoklastes*'s critique of *Eikon Basilike* reveals is the terror of that quest when seen from the perspective of its victims. It is true that Satan's soliloquy is indebted to Marlowe's *Faustus*, but the political dimension, specifically the resilient commitment to Machiavellian *virtù*, belongs to *Eikonoklastes* and *Richard III*: "So farewell hope and with hope, farewell fear," says Satan. He is remorseless:

Farewell remorse: since all good to me is lost;  
 Evil, be thou my good; by thee at least  
 Divided empire with heaven's king I hold.  
 (*PL* 4.108–11)

And then, suddenly, paradoxically, in this act of defiance, hope returns—for humankind may indeed fall and empire grow (*PL* 4.112–13). In this state of mind, Milton assures us, "Satan, now first inflamed with rage, came down,"

115. See Stevens, "Obnoxious Satan."

determined to begin “his dire attempt” and “wreak on innocent frail man his loss” (*PL* 4.9–15). In Shakespeare’s play, when the court beholds this same remorseless tenacity in Richard, they cannot conceal their terror. The oncoming ground-beat of his ruthless energy is terrifying. The boar has raised his helm, says Hastings (*R3* 3.4.87); he is the “hell-hound that will hunt us all to death,” says Margaret of Anjou (*R3* 4.4.45); “Ay me,” says the Queen on her brother’s incarceration,

The tiger has now seized the gentle hind,  
 Insulting tyranny begins to jet  
 Upon the innocent and awless throne.  
 Welcome destruction, death, and massacre.  
 (*R3* 2.4.52–56)

This is what Milton fears in *Eikonoklastes*: the return of a man, even after death, accomplished in “so many violences and mischeifs, dipt from head to foot and stained over with the blood of thousands that were his faithfull subjects.”<sup>116</sup> Accordingly, he frames the king’s book itself as an act of defiance, a threatening speech-act of “bitter vehemence against his *Judges and accusers*.”<sup>117</sup> In the 1650 edition of the tract, Milton emphasizes the degree to which the king shows nothing of the repentance we might “in reason and conscience” expect of him.<sup>118</sup> He is remorseless in the way he “persists heer” in maintaining and justifying “the most apparent of his evil doings, and washes over with a Court-focus the worst and foulest of his actions, [and so] disables and uncreates the Parlament itself, with all our laws and Native liberties.”<sup>119</sup> He may be dead, but his *virtù* lives on in this book, “these popular institutes of Tyranny.”<sup>120</sup>

In his representation of Charles I in *Eikonoklastes* and Satan, his antitype or fulfillment, in *Paradise Lost*, Milton mounts an extensive critique of the individualism inherent in the *studia humanitatis*, the way of being in the world that meant so much to him. Descartes’s *cogito* may be parodied in Satan’s conviction that the “mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heaven of

116. Milton, *CPW*, 3:595.

117. Milton, *CPW*, 3:597.

118. Milton, *CPW*, 3:347.

119. Milton, *CPW*, 3:347.

120. Milton, *CPW*, 3:601.

hell, a hell of heaven" (*PL* 1.254–55), but it is already implicit in Richard's own determination to make a heaven of hell, that is, to "make my heaven to dream upon the crown," while "I live t'account this world but hell" (*3H6* 3.2.168–69). Both Satan and Richard are in hell, but through the power of their imaginations, their own human agency, they can create heaven. My argument here is that Shakespeare's *Richard III*, far from being dismissed or expelled, plays a central role in generating Milton's critique of the temptation to unfettered human agency. Shakespeare's tragedy as it is mediated through Milton's *Eikonoklastes* helps explain the political complexity, the power, and Machiavellian *virtù* at the heart of Milton's Devil.

### Conclusion

The single most important literary influence on Milton was, of course, Scripture. He makes this point explicit in numerous places, not least in *Paradise Regained* (*PR* 4.331–64). In this poem, in his rewriting of the Gospels' account of Jesus's temptations in the desert, he affords precedence to Scripture over the classics and their "ill-imitated" attempt to reproduce the truths of Scripture. Because of the nature of the fiction, Milton's Jesus has nothing to say about English literature. But in the overall body of Milton's written work, the poet has much to say about the English. His relationship with Shakespeare, whom many of his contemporaries already considered the greatest of English poets, was complex. While the continuities between the two great makers are, as I have been trying to suggest, far-reaching, they are also deeply agonistic. The fault line, however, so it seems to me, is not so much personal as cultural. It has less to do with the Oedipal anxiety of influence than the ideological collision between two distinct but interrelated discursive formations, the protocols of the *studia humanitatis* and the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, that is, between rival demands of human freedom and divine freedom. The fault line is immediately evident in such locutions as Milton's famous explanation of education. On the one hand, since the "end of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright," education grants agency to human endeavour, most importantly, in overcoming the catastrophe of our original Fall, and acknowledges the gathering force of the *studia humanitatis* in the ideals of *paideia* and the pursuit of originality through imitation. On the other hand, this endeavour "being united

to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection.”<sup>121</sup> The problem with this attempted reconciliation is that God’s freedom in the form of grace feels as though it is being dragged in as an afterthought. Because Milton says different things at different times to different audiences, this particular imbalance is not always the case. Sometimes, as indeed in *Paradise Regained*, the emphasis on God’s freedom seems absolute. Neither set of imperatives is, however, monolithic, and even when Milton seeks to emphasize the primacy or purity of *sola scriptura*, it is complicated by the role he increasingly grants the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture. Because we can never be sure whether or not the “rousing motions” (*Samson Agonistes*, l. 1382) we experience actually do come from the Holy Spirit, this approach inadvertently allows renewed scope for the individual’s idealization of his or her own agency.

The problem of agency is at the heart of Milton’s relationship with Shakespeare, and over the course of his career Milton works through it in radically different ways. If his engagement with *Richard III* in *Eikonoklastes* and *Paradise Lost* is a critique of *virtù*, that is, the radical overestimation of human agency and its potential, then the presence of such characters as Hamlet in *Paradise Lost*, Cleopatra in *Samson Agonistes*, and Prospero in *Paradise Regained* suggest other possibilities.

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