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THE FIERCE EQUATION

A STUDY OF MILTON'S DECORUM

by

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For

HARVEY BRUCE DENSMORE

FOREWORD

Any study of Milton which engages both the poetry and prose in such brief compass is likely to seem naive. In an era of burgeoning special studies and wisely restricted "readings", only a few scholars have made the attempt to read Milton whole or to push their special readings toward a point from which a serious reconsideration of both poetry and prose is possible.

It is partly because of the richness of recent Milton studies, and their sophistication, that I can afford to be naive. The new excitement in historical criticism, the special studies in milieu, the Yale edition of the prose works and what it represents have provided the demonstration of how much Milton is a product of his time and to be read as a seventeenth-century-Puritan-Renaissance-man-under-the-influence-of-the-Italians epic poet of England. At the same time the old new critics have steadily urged attention to the text itself. That cautious and stately non-aggression pact which A. S. P. Woodhouse and Cleanth Brooks announced more than ten years ago has been assiduously violated, but no one very seriously wants it revoked. The success of D. C. Allen's *The Harmonious Vision* and of Kester Svendsen's *Milton and Science*, to take names not involved in the preliminary critical skirmishes, suggests that new and old criticisms are both participating in the rediscovery and reestablishment of Milton.

I should like to claim the double heritage. If I started as an old fashioned new critic reading the text intensively for "paradox, ambiguity, ambivalence, levels of meaning, overtones, and undertones ... archetypal, typological, epiphanic, eschatological, rhetorical and symbolic patterns of imagery, and so forth", items cited

ironically by Professor Barker in his review of Milton criticism¹ it is because I think these still interesting and exciting in themselves, and a good way to begin understanding the ideas of the poem. But as this study proceeded, I tried to relate the poems to Milton's prose works, not as one discrete artifact to another, but as ideas existing in place and time and person. I hope that my study of Milton's prose, especially of the antiprelatical tracts, reflects my concern for Milton in the context of his time. I hope that my first chapter reflects a concern for Milton's poetics in the context of a rhetorical tradition. And I hope my readings in *Paradise Lost* will seem to emerge naturally from the earlier sections of the book and not to be merely juxtaposed to them.

I began this study of Milton's decorum with a somewhat simple expectation of procedure: define the term and then apply it. But the term would not define; and its omnipresence in modern Milton studies was misleading. The importance of decorum was stressed again and again in contemporary criticism, but often the term appeared to be a sponge convenient for absorbing miscalculations in the claims for methodology. Perhaps it remains a sponge in this book, but I have tried, at least, to avoid the impression that decorum is a rule like the agreement of subject and verb.

I have divided my study into three parts. The first chapter draws heavily on standard histories of criticism, though wherever possible the primary sources have been consulted. It attempts to isolate two major faces of decorum and, perhaps a little pugnaciously, to label one "major" and one "minor", or sometimes "rhetorical". The second section examines three groups of Milton's prose writings in an attempt to deduce his concept of decorum. Though I find Milton fully conscious of both faces, and ready to use both, I see a conflict between the two in much of the prose. Milton's use of the larger decorum is sustained and consistent. His rejection of the minor decorum can result in some startling effects.

The last section of this study seeks to apply my conclusions on Milton's decorum, its unity and flexibility, to certain problems in *Paradise Lost*. I am arguing a special point, that what affects us as

¹ "Seven Types of Milton Criticism", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 25 (1955-56), 495.

eccentric or excessive is often only a part of Milton's vision of unity, richer and more comprehensive and subtler and more daring than the one we had assigned him. If my tone becomes strident in Milton's defence it is because I feel, with Milton, that indignation is properly part of critical discourse and because the academic irony of anti-Miltonists (almost a genre in itself) seems to me to represent a kind of failure in the perception of Milton's unity.

This is a partial study. It is partial to Milton and only partially adequate in its treatment of the topic. The claims for "rhetorical" decorum must come from another quarter. I am aware of a serious understatement of those claims here, but I am confident that they will be made soon and fully by someone more sympathetic toward them and more competent to explore that aspect of John Milton's radiant wholeness.

This study grew out of a dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty of the University of Washington. I am grateful to the reading committee, Professors James Hall, A. C. Hamilton, and Arnold Stein for their advice and encouragement.

My interest in Milton's decorum began in Professor Stein's graduate seminar, an ideal starting place for a study which seeks to harmonize Milton's magnificence with his violence and humor. Professor Stein's critical example has functioned steadily as a guide to this work. I am deeply grateful for his personal interest, suggestions, and encouragement throughout the writing of this book.

I have many other debts and my footnotes can not fully represent them. The brilliant intensity of Milton studies in our time has been a chief factor in the pleasure and strenuousness of writing. In addition to Professor Stein's books, the work of D. C. Allen, Arthur Barker, Douglas Bush, C. S. Lewis, Kester Svendsen, Rosamund Tuve and A. S. P. Woodhouse has represented an important part of the preparation for this work. Professors Jackson I. Cope and Howard Schultz offered suggestions on parts of the earlier version of this study that helped greatly to focus some of these perceptions.

My most personal debts are to the friends and associates who have offered aid, encouragement and advice; to my friend John Haislip of Oregon State University, who offered some valuable

preliminary bibliography; to my colleagues Milton Miller and Stanley Stewart, who have read parts of the manuscript; to my students, who have afforded many of these ideas a critical hearing; to Mrs. Jane Elsdon and Miss RoseAnn Marie Morgan, who have typed this manuscript; to my mother-in-law, Mrs. Myrtle Collins, who proof-read an earlier version; to the Research Committee of the University of California at Riverside, who helped make the final stages of this manuscript possible.

My wife, Kathleen, deserves thanks for all the above reasons and more. She has inspired, criticized, supported – in short, made possible – the whole process of writing this book.

Two sections of this book, in slightly different form, have appeared in American periodicals. “Adam and Eve in the Garden: *Paradise Lost*, Book V” appeared in *Studies in English Literature*, Winter 1964; “‘Decorum’ and the Style of Milton’s Antiprelatical Tracts” appeared in *Studies in Philology*, April 1965.

CONTENTS

Foreword	7
I. The Background of Milton's Decorum	13
II. Decorum from the Prose	49
A. The Poet as true Poem	49
B. Our Manhood in Grace	71
C. The Defences: The Warfare of Peace	82
D. That Sublime Art.	95
III. Decorum in the Verse	105
A. Decorum in Milton's Verse	105
B. The Eccentric Equation	107
C. Satan: Fardest from him is best	119
D. God: Who can extenuate Thee?	130
E. Adam and Eve in the Garden: A happy rural seat of various view	137
Afterword	155
List of works cited	159
Index	163

I. THE BACKGROUNDS OF MILTON'S DECORUM

I

The concept of decorum is as old as criticism; it may indeed be the first criticism. Soon after the first stirrings of Western philosophy, Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras among others accuse Homer of impropriety in depiction of the gods.¹ Pindar shows that the accusation touched the poet when he says in the "First Olympian Ode":

It is better for a man to speak well of the gods; he is less to blame.²

The blame comes when the rational ideal of godliness is violated by local mythic and dramatic details of ungodly stealing, murder and adultery. Decorum manifests an early concern for consistency of character; and it manifests an early concern for the relation of poetry to the total culture.

It is this latter aspect which Aristophanes emphasizes, even over the first. When, in *The Frogs*, he attacks Euripides for indecorousness in his portrayal of women, it is just after he has referred to Zeus as "the thrashed one",³ and presented Bacchus with something less than dignity. It is not simple inconsistency of character with

¹ Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin, 1922), I, 59-60. See also J. W. H. Atkins, *Literary Criticism in Antiquity* (London, 1952), I, 14. Milton is aware of this tradition of Homer's impropriety. See his comment in *An Apology Against A Pamphlet ... in Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (New Haven, 1953), I, 891.

² Richmond Lattimore, *The Odes of Pindar* (Chicago, 1945), pp. 1 and 2. Miss Kathleen Freeman suggests that this Ode is directly influenced by Xenophanes. See her *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1946), p. 93.

³ Aristophanes, *Comedies* (New York, 1931), II, 222.

which Aristophanes charges the tragedian; it is that Euripides does not submit his ethos, that of the play, to a higher one, that of Athens. He has rejected the responsibility of the poet toward a larger context:

AESCHYLUS: So answer me: what is it in a poet one admires?

EURIPIDES: Wise counsels, which make the citizens better.

AESCHYLUS: And if you have failed in this duty, if out of honest and pure-minded men you have made rogues, what punishment do you think is your meet?

DIONYSUS: Death. I will answer for him.⁴

Aristophanes rejects the limited sense of decorum, surface consistency of character in gods or men, and substitutes the decorum of artistic responsibility to a large philosophical or religious context.

The characteristic Greek ambivalence toward art is well established when Plato issues his decree of banishment against the poet. His general regard for art is shown in the doctrine of discourse as a living organism⁵ and in his testimonies to the power and beauty of language and myth.⁶ So the insistence on the proper portrayal of the gods has in many places a distinctly literary bias; most often however decorum is an ethical or religious problem rather than a literary one.

A poet ought always to represent the divine nature as it really is. And the truth is that that nature is good and must be described as such.⁷

As the *Republic* develops, Plato repudiates any representation of evil in god or man:

So these charges of ours ... will not be allowed to enact the part of a woman, old or young, railing against her husband, or boasting of a happiness which she imagines can rival the gods', or overwhelmed with grief and misfortune ... Knowledge they must have of baseness and insanity both in men and women, but not reproduce such behaviour in life or in art.⁸

⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 234.

⁵ Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, transl. by Benjamin Jowett, 4th ed. (Oxford, 1953), III, 172-173.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 178-180. See also Ludwig Edelstein, "The Function of the Myth in Plato's Philosophy", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, X (Oct. 1949), 463-480.

⁷ *The Republic of Plato*, transl. and ed. by Francis MacDonald Cornford (New York, 1954), p. 71.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

The distrust of versatility is related to the concept of proper function which lies at the heart of the *Republic*:

Ἀρετή ("virtue") is that quality in an agent in virtue of which it does its particular work well; there is no other virtue than that.⁹

This idea pervades the work.

The Platonic system of ethics is rooted in the concept of efficiency. The moral terms themselves—ἀρετή, ἀγαθός, σοφία; virtue, good (the adjective), wisdom – have reference to trained intelligence or skill.¹⁰ The prime qualification for trained intelligence is to aim at "limit" or "measure" and, having attained it, to be satisfied.¹¹

This idea of a limit, up to which you try to go, is that of a standard of perfection or of rightness which you try to hit off exactly. It appears, then, that in all arts the mark of skill and understanding is that the man who has them (the σοφός or ἐπιστήμων) knows when that wisdom is reached. He does not, Plato says, go beyond another person who understands his art; or, as we should rather say, he does not go beyond what he knows to be the principle of his art.¹²

The classical concept of limit is crucial to this study. Between us and Milton, between us and the Greeks, lies a body of thinking which abhors the idea of limit. At least partly, our ideas of limit and decorum reflect this thinking:

There is one total misunderstanding of this idea [limit: πέρας elsewhere measure: μέτρον] which we must avoid. The modern associations of the word "limit", and sometimes those of the word "measure", are the exact opposite of those which these words had for Plato. The word limit certainly suggests to us something that stops progress, and prevents us reaching perfection in anything. The Greek association of the words, at least in the idea of limit, is that of something on the attainment of which perfection is attained; it is not that which puts a stop to progress, but that without which progress would be a meaningless process *ad infinitum*.¹³

Decorum, τὸ πρέπον, is for the Greek world of Plato, the offspring of the idea of the proper functioning of parts in a whole. Every thing has its function, dictated by its natural limits. These

⁹ Richard Nettleship, *Lectures on the Republic of Plato* (London, 1951), p. 35.

¹⁰ Cornford, *The Republic*, p. 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹² Nettleship, *Lectures*, p. 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

natural limits result in internal harmony and prepare the thing for its proper function in a larger harmony. Professor Jaeger has sketched this harmony in its broad applications:

This harmony was expressed in the relation of parts to the whole. But behind that harmony lay the mathematical conception of proportion, which, the Greeks believed, could be visually presented by geometrical figures. The harmony of the world is a complex idea: it means both musical harmony, in the sense of a beautiful concord between different sounds, and harmonious mathematical structure on rigid geometrical rules. The subsequent influence of the conception of harmony on all aspects of Greek life was immeasurably great. It affected not only sculpture and architecture, but poetry and rhetoric, religion and morality; all Greece came to realize that whatever a man made or did was governed by a severe rule, which like the rule of justice could not be transgressed with impunity – the rule of fitness or propriety (πρέπον, ἁρμόττον). Unless we trace the boundless working of this law in all spheres of Greek thought throughout classical and post-classical times, we cannot realize the powerful educative influence of the discovery of harmony.¹⁴

While Plato most certainly cares about the consistency, even the rigid consistency, of character, his most important contribution to the idea of decorum is the harmony of ideally realized parts in an ideally realized whole. There is a double pressure, then, on each part; it must be “achieved” in itself, but not beyond its function in a larger whole. The two pressures translate themselves into two views of decorum which persist throughout Western literature. One view will stress consistency of the individual part, often with heavy emphasis on the value society has already placed upon that part, and be proscriptive; the other will stress the total harmony and be resonant.

Plato and Isocrates had suggested the theory of styles when they claimed that all utterance should be suited to the hearer and when they stressed the need for propriety or fitness to both subject and occasion.¹⁵ But it is Aristotle who made concern with decorum overtly “a means of rendering statements more plausible, and hearers (or readers) more readily convinced of their truth”. In a sense Aris-

¹⁴ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, transl. by Gilbert Highet (New York, 1943), I, 163-164.

¹⁵ Plato, *Dialogues*, III, 179-180; R. C. Jebb, *The Attic Orators from Antiphon to Isaeus* (London, 1876), II, 101, 129, 132.

totle distils and makes available and usable a Platonic concept with which he agrees; or to use Milton's phrase, the Peripatetics "doe rather distinguish then deny"¹⁶ Platonic concepts.

The brilliance of Aristotle's precepts and the extraordinary freshness of his practical advice in the two literary handbooks perhaps obscure some of the larger issues. Aristotle is a classifier of enormous skill, moving from his initial distinguishing of three classes of rhetoric¹⁷ to those remarkable portraits of the Young Man, the Old Man, the Man in his Prime.¹⁸ The precepts will often become quite specific:

The use of Maxims is appropriate only to elderly men, and in handling subjects in which the speaker is experienced. For a young man to use them is – like telling stories – unbecoming...¹⁹

Aristotle distinguishes between poetry and prose,²⁰ and of course, in the *Poetics*, between genres. But he works from a basic definition of style:

Style to be good must be clear, as is proved by the fact that speech which fails to convey a plain meaning will fail to do just what speech has to do. It must also be appropriate...²¹

In the passage often cited as the birthplace of the concept of Decorum, in Chapter 7 of Book III of the *Rhetoric*, we find this definition of τὸ πρέπον:

Your language will be *appropriate* if it expresses emotion and character and if it corresponds to its subject. 'Correspondence to subject' means that we must neither speak casually about weighty matters, nor solemnly about trivial ones...

This aptness of language is one thing that makes people believe in the truth of your story; their minds draw the false conclusion that you are to be trusted from the fact that others behave as you do when things are as you describe them...

Each class of men, each type of disposition, will have its own appropri-

¹⁶ *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. by several hands (New Haven 1953-), II, 314. Hereafter cited as *Yale Prose*, with volume and page number.

¹⁷ *The Rhetoric and Poetics of Aristotle*, ed. by Friedrich Solmsen (New York, 1954), pp. 31-32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-126.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 167.