‘Due libertie and proportiond equalitie’: Milton, democracy, and the republican tradition

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John Milton educated himself for his career as a poet, but in the 1640s and 1650s he interrupted this progress to make extensive interventions in the political and religious controversies of the civil war and interregnum periods in polemical prose. His most urgent and directly political contributions came in the immediate aftermath of regicide, and on the immediate eve of restoration, and in the 1650s he served not only the Commonwealth but the Protectorate regimes. He has earned an increasingly significant place in the historiography of English republicanism in the period, but understandings of his republicanism or political thought remain remarkably contested and unstable. The development of the historiography of ‘classical’ republicanism, with its redefinitions of, and challenges to, the very notion of such a republicanism in the early modern period, forms part of the background to the vicissitudes of Milton interpretation. But while other republican authors of the 1650s have been batted back and forth between classical and anti-classical, or Greek, Roman (and Hebrew) republicanism by students of republicanism over the last forty years, many scholars have been hesitant about even placing Milton within the ambit of these debates at all. In this article I locate Milton within classical

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1 The author would like to thank the audiences of papers presented in Reading, Oxford, London and Sussex and the anonymous readers for this journal for their extremely helpful comments. The Leverhulme Trust generously funded a Research Fellowship on ‘Gender, democracy and the republican tradition’, during which initial research for this article was carried out.

republican discourse by turning to the ancient Greek sources and the connections which they made between the ethical and the constitutional, the soul and the city. The foundations of Milton’s political thought were neo-Hellenic, rather than neo-Roman, and his fundamentally Greek emphasis on the soul as the foundation of politics enabled the grafting of Christian thought into his political rhetoric.

Pocock’s *Machiavellian Moment* has shaped the literature on early modern republicanism ever since he set out his trajectory of classical republicanism from the ‘civic humanism’ Baron identified in quattrocento Florence to the thought of the American founders. That republicanism, most obviously as it was expressed by Machiavelli, drew strongly on the history of the Roman republic, but it also rested on ethical presuppositions about the primacy of the common good which went back to Aristotle. Seventeenth-century English republicans were responsible for transmitting republican ideas on across the Atlantic, but Pocock gave the key role to James Harrington, whose debt to Machiavelli was evident and acknowledged, rather than to Milton, who he dismissed rather cursorily as an advocate of an aristocracy of saints.  

Both the nature of the republican thought at issue, and the continuity of Pocock’s republican tradition, have been subject to enormous debate. Paul Rahe has mounted the most extended challenge to the idea that there was a genuinely classical tradition running through these texts, detaching Machiavelli and many of his

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25-42, denies the role of ‘classical models’ or ‘Machiavellian political theory’ (p. 26) but concedes to Milton a more diffuse subversiveness which may qualify him as republican.

successors from a classical concern with education and virtue to align them instead with a distinctively modern republicanism revolving more around interest and suited to a new world of commerce. Milton, however, played no part in this refutation of Pocock, and in his subsequent book on the English republicans Rahe treated Milton in detail only to find him an uncharacteristically ‘classical’ republican, a rare exception who genuinely inherited Greek presuppositions about political and ethical life. Milton was ‘that rarity of rarities in mid-seventeenth-century England: a genuine, fully conscious classical republican’ in a political scene rapidly being overtaken by more modern, Machiavellian, discourses.\(^4\)

These debates about continuity are in part also debates about the nature of republican thought itself. In spite of the Roman adoption of elements of Greek political thought, and the consequent Roman conditioning of early modern perceptions of Greek thought, Greek and Roman sources have been seen as lending early modern republicanism rather divergent concerns. Quentin Skinner’s concern to recover a ‘neo-Roman’ concept of liberty as non-domination places an important emphasis on the relationship of individual citizens to each other and to the institutions of government; a citizen is free if no other citizen or institution is in a position to exercise arbitrary power over him. Liberty may generate virtue and slavery degrade the soul, but liberty itself is seen as having primary importance. Milton’s pervasive language of liberty and slavery is read in these ways by Skinner.

himself and by Martin Dzelzainis. This rather Roman reading of English republicanism has been challenged by Eric Nelson, who identifies a distinctive Greek set of concerns focused on justice rather than liberty, and on a specifically Greek notion of justice as the proper relationship between the parts and the whole, which entails an interest in the redistribution of property. This redistributive model does not accommodate Milton, but the Platonic conception of justice which is so central to Nelson’s account does structure Milton’s thought, and Nelson has also offered a separate but congruent account of a Greek tradition of thought lying behind Milton’s Areopagitica, which I will discuss further below. Nelson’s emphasis on the ethical aspects of the Greek tradition is echoed in interpretations of Milton by other scholars including Rahe, Scott, and Worden, but it also raises the question of the extent to which republicanism can be characterized by its ethical principles rather than by its constitutional commitments.

Some scholars have felt that the label ‘republican’ demands either a clear republican exclusivism – a rejection of monarchy under any circumstances – or a worked-out constitutional scheme. Milton falls foul of both these conditions, at

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6 {Nelson, 2004 #5249}, pp. 8-17, 89-90; {Nelson, 2001 #5270}.


8 Blair Worden, "Republicanism, Regicide and Republic : The English Experience," in Republicanism : A Shared European Heritage : Vol. 1. Republicanism and
least until the eve of the Restoration — and indeed it might be hard to find very many early modern republicans who meet both criteria. Republican traditions of thought can, however, be meaningfully characterized by the ethical thinking which characterizes the ends of the polity and the roles of citizens, and Jonathan Scott’s work has brought out these themes in a way which challenges the centrality of Harrington and his intricate constitutionalism to republicanism in this period. Milton thus emerges as a more central figure within republicanism, but one who stands in contrast to the perhaps more modern, and less classically republican, Harrington.

In this paper I will elaborate on this view of Milton as a genuinely classical republican author who represents a strand of republican thought which was strongly Hellenic in its influences and ethical in its concerns. However, I will argue that this thought in itself has a sometimes submerged constitutional dimension. Some of the most important Greek authors made use of a caricatured notion of extreme democracy which illustrated the political effects of ethical failure among the citizens. Indeed, read through the Platonic analogy of the soul and the city, extreme democracy was a large-scale model of a disordered soul. Milton participated in many of the tropes of this discourse, and reading his work with attention to them enables us to place his thought in both the constitutional and ethical framework of a Greek tradition of republicanism.


Greek sources and the critique of ‘democracy’

Athens is the best known to us of the ancient Greek democratic city-states; its cultural dominance within Greece outlasted its phase of political hegemony in the fifth century, and Plato and Aristotle produced their political philosophy under the renewed democracy of fourth-century Athens. Democracy may have developed before it was ever systematically theorized, but the practice and defence of democracy fostered a set of key concepts which modern historians can detect in Attic oratory; in speeches put in the mouths of characters within histories, plays or philosophical dialogues; and in other evidence of the practice of democracy at Athens. Prime among these democratic concepts were liberty (eleutheria), both personal and at the level of the polity, and a cluster of notions of equality (isotes or to ison; isegoria -‘equality of speech’; and possibly isonomia, a broader notion of equality); the rule of law could also be included within the network of democratic ideas.  

My focus in this paper, however, is a rival set of political ideas which are in many ways more visible and accessible to us in the ancient Greek texts than these democratic notions. While Greeks prided themselves on their resistance to barbarian forms of despotism, a cosmopolitan aristocratic and intellectual elite in the Greek world found democracy, at least in its extreme forms, equally distasteful, and incompatible with deeply-held values of competition and honour. Josiah Ober’s


12 Ober, Political Dissent, pp. 15, 30.
work has charted the response of Athenian intellectuals (including Aristotle, a metic non-citizen living in Athens) to the challenge of democracy, arguing that the tradition of critique which developed became pivotal to Athenian intellectual life by the end of the fifth century BCE.\footnote{Ober, *Political Dissent*, pp. 50-1.} A critical attitude to democracy was thus dominant among the leading thinkers of the period, but was hard to articulate in the strongly democratic culture of Athens. The resulting concessions which critics of democracy made to the terminology and principles of democratic thought resulted in a ‘strange and compelling symbiosis between the democratic body politic and the body of antidemocratic theorizing.’\footnote{J. T. Roberts, *Athens on Trial: The Antidemocratic Tradition in Western Thought* (Princeton, 1994), p. 3.} This uncomfortable critique of democracy was foundational to Greek political thought, and its influence passed, sometimes through Roman sources, to early modern writers. Whether, by the seventeenth century, we are dealing with a continuing tradition, or a more diffuse set of influences which could be refreshed by contact with the classical sources, the ancient critique of democracy was certainly still very present, and is clearly discernible within Milton’s republican writing.

This ancient critique of democracy developed into a discourse with distinctive tropes, which I will use as a way in to Milton’s political writing. These shared tropes could sometimes be used to dismiss something simply and pejoratively labelled as ‘democracy’. However, that should not lead us to over-assimilate the Greek authors to each other or to over-simplify the thought of individual authors. Aristotle classified ‘democracies’ into several types, on criteria which in his account
bore some relation to the historical development of a polity and its social
composition, as well as its constitutional arrangements; he imported many
democratic concepts and assumptions into his political theory and he suggested that
democracy formed a key part of the make-up of his projected ideal constitution. At
the same time, he tendentiously rejected the term ‘democracy’ as a label for the
legitimate version of a constitution of the many, reserving it for the illegitimate
version.\(^\text{15}\) While Plato’s ideal city had little room for democracy, his writing too
displayed a subtler range of engagements with democracy, and some suggestions in
his more pragmatic \textit{Laws} may have influenced Aristotle’s views.\(^\text{16}\) Isocrates, also
writing in the mid-fourth century BCE as a more immediate intervention in Athenian
politics, had good reason to formulate his argument not as one against ‘democracy’
but as one in favour of an older, more moderate, and better form of ‘democracy’,
though he was aware that his contemporaries would accuse him of proposing
oligarchy.\(^\text{17}\) Thus while recognizable argumentative tropes run through works by
these authors, sometimes clearly associated with the tag of ‘democracy’, there is also
considerable flexibility in their discussion of what ‘democracy’ meant and
sometimes they restricted their critiques to more extreme versions of democracy.
There is no single or simple answer to the question of what made a democracy
extreme, or which polities might have been considered as examples of this by
ancient authors or early modern readers. But Aristotle suggested that an extreme

\(^{15}\) Aristotle, \textit{Politics}, 4.4, 1291b30-1292a38; 4.8-9, 1293b31-1294b41; 3.7, 1279a30-1279b10.

\{Rawson, 1969 #5273\}, p. 69; the influence on Aristotle may have been directly
from Plato as a teacher rather than through a version of the text of the posthumously-
published \textit{Laws} \{Harvey, 1965 #5274\}, p. 113.

\(^{17}\) Isocrates (London, 1929: Loeb Classical Library), trans. G. Norlin, vol. 2,
democracy was the rule of men and not laws, and certainly extreme democracy came to be seen as a kind of tyranny as dangerous as that of a single person.\textsuperscript{18}

**Milton and the Greek tradition**

Milton’s distinctly humanist education by tutors and at St Paul’s School was followed by less satisfactory (because more scholastic) experiences at Christ’s College, Cambridge; in the succeeding years Milton remedied Cambridge’s perceived defects with a strenuous programme of reading undertaken in preparation for his work as a poet.\textsuperscript{19} By the time civil war and eventually the service of the republic and protectorate broke in on his studies, he was prodigiously learned in Latin and Greek and familiar with biblical Hebrew and modern languages. Milton had never intended to write political prose, but he made it clear repeatedly that in his

\textsuperscript{18} Aristotle, *Politics* 4.4, 1292a4-37; a different characterization of extreme democracy at 5.9, 1310a25-38; R. Tuck, ‘Hobbes and Democracy’, in A. Brett, J. Tully and H. Hamilton-Bleakley eds., *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 176-183, emphasizes the criterion of legislative sovereignty by the popular assembly and says that Aristotle saw this problem as having been remedied at Athens post-403 BCE; republican Rome was one possible exemplar of an extreme democracy in some early modern views. See Kinch Hoekstra, ‘A lion in the house: Hobbes and democracy’, in A. Brett, J. Tully and H. Hamilton-Bleakley eds., *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, (Cambridge, 2006), p. 199-200 and footnotes on whether the Athens of Aristotle’s day exemplified his ‘extreme’ democracy. However, Vettori’s commentary on one of the Aristotelian passages (discussing the expansion of participation by the poor associated with pay for attendance at the assembly) confirms that early modern readers might well conclude that Aristotle was referring to contemporary Athens as an extreme democracy: *Aristotelis Politicorum libri octo. Ex Dion. Lambini & P. Victorij interpretationib*. (1582), p. 362.

own estimation, an extensive and rigorous humanist education such as his own was the only sound basis for political judgement.

The very pervasiveness of Milton’s classical reading in his political writings can make it hard to trace the specific sources of his thought. In contrast with his treatment of many of the other topics he covered, Milton failed to list appropriate authors for the study of politics in *Of Education*. His conception of politics was conventionally Aristotelian – the student of politics should seek ‘to know the beginning, end, and reasons of political societies’ – and he ranked Aristotle with ‘the best of Political writers’. Politics was essentially a part of ethics, and the study of politics flowed on from the study of the ‘personal duty’ of ethics and the household affairs of ‘Economics’. Both ethics and politics were directed towards securing ‘happines’, whether for one man or for the state. This highly conventional understanding of the place of politics within the disciplines of knowledge must have been cemented at Cambridge, where it seems that Aristotle continued to structure the

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22 *CPW* 2.396-8.

23 *CPW* 1.348-9 for the editor’s comments on Milton’s scheme of ‘Ethical’, ‘Economic’ and ‘Political’ indexes; *CPW* 1.572.
Aristotle’s ethical theory, and particularly the importance of moral choice, clearly continued to influence Milton’s thought, and this extended into his thought on politics. Plato was less central to early modern education, but still featured relatively strongly in university education, and was one of the authors Milton prescribed for the teaching of ethics, along with Xenophon, Plutarch and Cicero. Elements of Plato’s lofty fusion of ethical and intellectual knowledge resonate strongly with Milton’s christianized ideal of wisdom. Xenophon, too, may have conveyed elements of the ancient critique of democracy to Milton, as may the forthright Constitution of the Athenians, a work which had been wrongly included among Xenophon’s works since antiquity.

In the case of one of the ancient critics of democracy, Isocrates, we know that Milton was likely to have encountered his
works relatively early, as a key part of his study of Athenian orators at school.\textsuperscript{27} Moreover, the work which exemplified Isocrates’ critique of extreme democracy was his \textit{Areopagiticus}, to which Milton paid tribute in his own \textit{Areopagitica}.

In the discourse which these authors developed in critique of democracy, extreme democracy came to be characterized as a mechanism for the fulfilment of the unruly desires of the mob. Unlimited liberty and equality served this end and removed any effective ethical or rational oversight of the objectives of the polity and its citizens. Consequently, liberty and equality, as well as the character of democratic citizens, were key targets of the anti-democratic discourse; but the matrix of democratic political assumptions was not easy to break out of, and the critics of democracy did not want to dismiss liberty and equality completely. Rather, they chose to modify their usage of those terms, even though, as Ober comments, they had become ‘so strongly marked by their use in democratic contexts that it required great effort for dissidents to redefine them for use in nondemocratic discourse.’\textsuperscript{28}

For this reason, the discourse of the anti-democratic tradition tended to have an argumentative, corrective quality. The accusation was that the democrats had built their political system on a false set of values, and disguised this by the systematic misuse of words. According to Plato in Book VIII of the \textit{Republic} democrats found ‘flattering names’ for the worst qualities of the democratic character: ‘Insolence \textit{[hubris]} becomes sophistication, anarchy freedom,


\textsuperscript{28}Ober, \textit{Political Dissent}, p. 40.
extravagance generosity, and shamelessness courage.\textsuperscript{29} According to Isocrates’ \textit{Areopagiticus}, some citizens under the extreme democracy ‘looked upon insolence [\textit{akolasia}] as democracy, lawlessness as liberty, impudence of speech [\textit{parrhesia}] as equality [\textit{isonomia}], and licence to do what they pleased as happiness’.\textsuperscript{30} Aristotle more subtly made the same point, pointing out democratic misconceptions about the meaning of terms like justice, equality, and freedom: ‘Men think that what is just is equal; and that equality is the supremacy of the popular will; and that freedom means doing what one likes.’\textsuperscript{31}

One way to fight back against democratic misconceptions was to delineate true rather than false versions of the democrats’ supposed ideals. True liberty, true equality, and even true democracy were fielded against the (extreme) democrats’ own versions. In this article I will take Milton’s participation in such tropes as a starting-point for placing his political thought in relation to the anti-democratic tradition and the strongly ethical Greek philosophy of political life.

\textbf{Equality}

Athenian democrats appear to have upheld equality as a fundamental aim and working principle of their polity: all free, citizen males, whatever their economic or


\textsuperscript{30} Isocrates, volume 2, pp. 115-17.

educational status, were politically and legally equal, could speak in the Assembly, and might be drawn on to perform those offices and services determined by lot. Democratic equality thus seemed to assume some fundamental equality in political capacity (or at least a widely-shared minimum level of competence, as Protagoras may have argued), and 'equality' as a widespread democratic slogan may have carried that assumption.\footnote{K. Raaflaub, ‘Equalities and inequalities in Athenian democracy’, and I. Morris, ‘The strong principle of equality and the archaic origins of Greek democracy’, both in J. Ober and C. W. Hedrick, Demokratia : A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern (Princeton, 1996); Hansen and Crook, The Athenian Democracy, pp. 73-85, queries the centrality and extent of the democrats' ideas of equality.} This was an assumption which the Greek critics of democracy attacked very consistently, with a neat argument which allowed them to pay lip-service to equality while undermining its democratic force entirely. They rejected simple numerical equality in favour of ‘proportionate’ or ‘geometrical’ equality, complaining that under (extreme) democracy people who were not equal demanded to be treated equally.\footnote{Harvey, 1965 #5274} Plato, for example, characterized democrats as anarchically ‘granting equality of a sort to equals and unequals alike’.\footnote{Plato, Republic, 558c; translation, p. 270.} By appealing to an idea of proportionate rather than absolute equality, a notion further developed by Aristotle in his account of distributive justice,\footnote{Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, V.3; Aristotle mentions political applications of the principle in this chapter.} the anti-democratic
writers staked their claim to the moral power of the concept of equality, while qualifying the best kind of equality as proportional equality.

This very specific line of argument is easily traced in Milton. In his *Readie & Easie Way*, in 1660, Milton called free commonwealths ‘the noblest, the manliest, the equallest, the justest government’. But in calling them the ‘equallest’ form of government, he was not endorsing an ideal of absolute equality, as the next phrase showed: such governments were ‘the most agreeable to all due libertie and proportiond equalitie’. The pairing of the two carefully qualified democratic slogans (‘due libertie and proportiond equalitie’) could not signal more clearly the presence of the tropes of the anti-democratic tradition. The technical language of the Greek critique of democratic equality is thus visible in this late political tract; but Milton’s commitment to the principle of proportionate equality ran through much of his work, prose and verse, early and late. Proportionate equality as a critique of democratic norms implied that democrats had false views about who was meaningfully equal, and signalled a belief in a significant hierarchy of merit even among free adult males. However, it was a principle of broader application, simply requiring that relative merit, however understood, should determine the extent of participation in government. For both Aristotle and Milton, appropriate forms of government for a given polity at a given time depended on the empirical question of the distribution of merit in the population.37

36 *Readie & Easie Way*, CPW 7.358.

This principle was most famously embodied in Aristotle’s argument that monarchy was the best form of government if (and only if) the monarch far outstripped the rest of the population in virtue.\(^{38}\) This was a proposition which Milton assented to and referred to more than once, and although it meant that he could not rule out kingship, he generally used it in critique of the kingship of the unworthy.\(^{39}\) Thus in his (first) *Defence of the People of England* in 1651, Milton cited Aristotle’s dictum against monarchy, following Aristotle in arguing that ‘When many men are equal, as the majority are in every state, I think that power should be granted on an equal basis and to all in turn’.\(^{40}\) However, this faith in the equality of the many (or their equality at an adequate level of virtue to conduct affairs of state) was not constant; Milton’s perception of the gradient of any moral and political hierarchy famously varied according to time and circumstance.\(^{41}\) At moments when it seemed that the English people were incapable of valuing their liberty, Milton used the principle of proportionate equality against the democratic extreme, rather than (or as well as) the monarchical one. Thus in defending Cromwell’s supremacy in the *Second Defence* – though his faith in Cromwell’s ‘unexcelled virtue’ may have been rather desperate – Milton argued that none objected to Cromwell’s

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elevation to Lord Protector except ‘such as seek equal honors, though inferior themselves’. The Latin text pointedly juxtaposed the equal and the unequal in the manner of the anti-democratic trope: ‘nisi qui aut aequales inaequalis ipse honores sibi quaeirt’.  

When Milton was drawn to the view that the bulk of the people were a mere rabble whose desires could never be allowed to dominate political life – and he hinted at this from 1649 onwards, although perhaps the conviction grew more constant over the decade – he often expressed it in the language of proportionate equality. His disparagement of mere ‘numbers’ in comparison with ‘weight’ or with ‘virtue’ may be tortuous, but it is frequent:

...nothing is more natural, nothing more just, nothing more useful or more advantageous to the human race than that the lesser obey the greater, not the lesser number the greater number, but the lesser virtue the greater virtue, the lesser wisdom the greater wisdom.  

Both Aristotle and Plutarch had expressed the ancient doctrine of proportionate equality by disparaging mere ‘number’ in comparison with virtue or worth. In the Readie and Easie Way, Milton exploited this argument to urge the right of minorities, especially godly or worthy ones, to decide the fate of the nation: some ‘chosen Patriots …might be more in weight, then the others in number; there being in number little vertue, but by weight and measure wisdom working all things’.

Indeed Milton said outright that ‘most voices ought not alwaies to prevail where

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43 Second Defence, CPW 4.636.

44 {Harvey, 1965 #5274}, pp. 119-122.
main matters are in question'.

While Milton may have hoped that an increase of virtue would allow wider participation in government, it was a distinctly aristocratic republic of virtue which should determine the constitution and fate of the nation. As we will see in the next section, Milton's belief in this Aristotelian principle of 'differential moral and political rationality' permeated his thought about political liberty, too, rendering it anything but democratic in its implications.

Liberty

The second key democratic rallying-cry which was cut down and carefully qualified by the critics of democracy was 'liberty'. Anti-democratic authors fell over themselves to offer an account of the pernicious democratic usage of the term. While the neat linguistic pairing of 'liberty' and 'license' derives immediately from Latin, and is common in Latin literature, the essential idea that (extreme) democrats misrepresented the nature of liberty to their own advantage was also to be found in the Greek anti-democratic sources. There was no one consistent linguistic expression in Greek which could be contrasted with liberty (eleutheria), but the false, democratic, excessive notion of liberty did have certain contents: it was simply about 'doing what one likes'; this brought in the subordinate notions of anarchy and

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46 Rahe, Against Throne and Altar, p. 104.
lawlessness.\textsuperscript{47} The Latin ‘licentia’ has Greek parallels in terms such as ‘akolasia’ (licentiousness, indulgence, ill-discipline), which also crop up in anti-democratic discourse, although not in direct opposition to \textit{eleutheria}. What, in the Greek view, constituted true liberty is perhaps harder to say; the castigation of democratic liberty as license was not matched by a similar concern to define the content of true liberty, at least in Plato and Aristotle’s most important political works.\textsuperscript{48} Critics of extreme democracy might resort simply to suggesting that true liberty was found at a mean between tyranny and anarchy, with obedience to good laws and good magistrates.\textsuperscript{49}

For Milton, too, the opposition between liberty and license, or license and discipline, was an abiding concern. But he also insisted on a rather fuller conception of ‘true liberty’ as against the false liberty of license. True to the anti-democratic trope, he associated false notions of liberty with the undiscerning mob, although he was not always ready to condemn the English populace as being deluded in this way. Even within one work – the \textit{Second Defence} of 1654 – he oscillated between condemning those opponents of Charles I who ‘shout and boast about liberty’, though motivated by ‘pride and base desires’ rather than by ‘the love of true

\textsuperscript{47} Doing what one likes: Plato, \textit{Republic} 557b5-6: ‘exousia... poiein hoti tis bouletai’; notes 19-21 above.

\textsuperscript{48} References to ‘freedom’ in Aristotle’s \textit{Politics} and Plato’s \textit{Republic} are extremely limited except in discussions of personal freedom vs. slavery, or of democratic concepts.

liberty',\textsuperscript{50} and defending the English people from the charge of seeking false liberty. In spite of the fact that they were a large mass of people,

The English people were not driven to unbridled licence by scorn for laws or desecration of them. They were not inflamed with the empty name of liberty by a false notion of virtue and glory, or senseless emulation of the ancients. It was their purity of life and their blameless character which showed them the one direct road to true liberty, ...\textsuperscript{51}

In spite of the complications of this passage – exactly what are the dangerous ‘ancient’ notions condemned here?\textsuperscript{52} – it is clear that Milton was associating license and false ideas of liberty with the characteristic actions of large bodies of people. In spite of being a large populace, the English people in their struggle for liberty had not taken the ‘democratic’ line on liberty that self-interested mobs would be likely to take, instead following the true liberty which might be expected only in an elite few.

But again, this argument, rhetorically convenient in this work, could be turned on its head in another. In \textit{Eikonoklastes} the ‘Image-doting rabble’ and their apparent enthusiasm for the cult of the dead king had to be explained away. Thus those who

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Second Defence, CPW} 4.683.

\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Second Defence, CPW} 4.552.

\textsuperscript{52} Fixler, \textit{Milton and the Kingdoms of God} (London, 1964), pp. 183-4, suggests that Milton is here denigrating ‘classical republican’ ancient models of liberty in comparison with a higher ‘true’ liberty. The association with ‘glory’ may suggest that the ideals attacked as too shallow are Roman: cf. Nelson, \textit{Greek Tradition}, pp. 30-31.
desired the return of a Stuart king were ‘not fitt for that liberty which they cri’d out
and bellow’d for, but fitter to be led back again into thir old servitude, like a sort of
clamouring and fighting brutes, broke loos [from thir copyholds,] that know not how
to use or possess the liberty which they fought for’.\textsuperscript{53} For Milton it is not surprising
that mobs cry up liberty, but in his republican psychology, those who bay for a
democratic kind of liberty, seeing in it a license for their own desires, will ultimately
lay themselves open to tyranny again. This, as we will see later, is also a feature of
the ancient hostile accounts of democracy.

False ideas of liberty were thus associated with mobs, and true liberty with
an elite. But what was the content of the ‘true liberty’ which Milton often spoke of?
This is a particularly important question when reading Milton in the context of
classical republican traditions which have sometimes been characterized by their
notions of political and personal liberty. Here I want to suggest that Milton’s
answers mesh well with the ethical underpinnings of a certain classical republican
tradition rooted ultimately in Greek philosophy, but that they do so partly by
systematically refusing to take political and interpersonal liberty as primary. In the
\textit{Second Defence} Milton argued that ‘true and substantial liberty... must be sought,
not without, but within, and ... is best achieved, not by the sword, but by a life
rightly undertaken and rightly conducted.\textsuperscript{54} ‘Within’ means within the individual,
within the soul. Liberty \textit{within} the soul, for Milton, drew on at least two related
concepts: the difficult notion of ‘christian liberty’ (which might have little relation to
outer liberty, and arguably in Milton’s later thought did indeed become divorced

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{CPW} 3.601, 581.

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Second Defence}, \textit{CPW}4.624.
from it\(^{55}\), and the moral theory of proairesis – moral choice depending on free will – which was central to Milton’s thought.\(^{56}\) The two concepts were linked in Milton’s thought through his Arminian theology which emphasized free will; Milton believed that the reprobate were damned by their own stubbornness.\(^{57}\)

As often in Milton, it is hard to pick apart secular from Christian virtue in his comments on liberty; he often seems to invoke a neo-Platonic fusion of the two. But it is clear that this virtue, however conceived, was essential to the achievement of true, inner liberty. In the Second Defence he insisted that ‘nothing can be more efficacious than education in moulding the minds of men to virtue (whence arises true and internal liberty)’.\(^ {58}\) This link between virtue and inner liberty was then extended to the realm of outer, interpersonal and political liberty. Thus ‘none can love freedom heartily, but good men; the rest love not freedom, but licence’.\(^ {59}\) In Sonnet XII, Milton speaks of

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casting pearl to hogs
That bawl for freedom in their senseless mood,
And still revolt when truth would set them free.
Licence they mean when they cry liberty;
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\(^{55}\) Worden, ‘Milton’s republicanism and the tyranny of heaven’, p. 245.


\(^{58}\) Second Defence, CPW 4.625.

\(^{59}\) CPW 3.190.
For who loves that must first be wise and good;….  

Here, again, goodness seems to be a prerequisite for appreciating outer (perhaps domestic, given the context of the divorce tracts) as well as inner liberty. Inner liberty does seem to have some intrinsic link with outer, political liberty. Neo-Roman liberty, defined by the absence of subjection to the will of another, cannot constitute Milton’s true liberty, which exists within the individual soul. Nonetheless, lack of dependence on the will of another was clearly essential to the exercise of moral choice by good men; the full expression of inner liberty relied on liberty in the household and the polity.  

The importance of political liberty to Milton is therefore unsurprising, but it may well be asked whether he genuinely thought that all men needed to live under conditions of neo-Roman liberty, or whether bad men who would only exercise it to satisfy their ‘pride and base desires’ would actually do better under the government of the good. One obvious answer would be that both good and bad men could live in conditions of moral choice under good laws which would discipline the bad.


61 Milton did sometimes describe this inner liberty in neo-Roman terms as a relationship between homunculi within the soul – reason enjoying freedom from the domination of the passions. [SEE BELOW OR SEE REF???] This is clearly a translation of an interpersonal model of liberty into the soul [DOES THIS SUGGEST INTERPERSONAL IS PRIOR??], and does not serve to explain why reason, rather than the passions, is to enjoy this liberty. It therefore cannot pin down what Milton means by inner liberty, although he found it a useful way of dramatizing the ancient Greek conception of the proper relationship of elements within the soul. THE PRESENCE OF THE NEO-ROMAN LIBERTY OF THE PASSIONS IN THE SOUL WOULD NOT GUARANTEE TRUE INNER LIBERTY; THE PRESENCE OF THE NEO-ROMAN LIBERTY OF REASON DOES GUARANTEE THAT. IT IS NOT THE STRUCTURE OF NEO-ROMAN LIBERTY ITSELF WHICH IS SUFFICIENT HERE.
However, Milton came dangerously close to arguing that these men driven by their base desires were not fit to be liberated because they were not motivated by ‘the love of true liberty’.\textsuperscript{62} In the first Defence Milton cited Aristotle and Cicero on the fitness for servitude of Eastern peoples, and concluded ‘that only a few people want their own freedom or are able to make use of it, a few who are wise indeed and great souled’; those who were not needed fair masters.\textsuperscript{63} In the ‘Digression’ to his History of Britain, Milton commented that ‘libertie hath a sharp and double edge fitt onelie to be handled by just and vertuous men’; to the dissolute liberty was positively harmful.\textsuperscript{64} Even in his thought on liberty and slavery Milton betrayed a hierarchical view of human capacities in a way which we would not expect if Milton prized ‘neo-Roman’ liberty as an end in itself. The moral status of slavery, for Milton, appears to be relative.

Slavery was thus always a horrible fate for a good man, but ‘slavery to an inferior’ was the worst fate of all – a fate suffered by men unable to divorce their wives, and by tyrants subject not only to their own lusts but to those of their flatterers and hangers-on.\textsuperscript{65} This was not merely a rhetorical flourish designed to arouse horror at the thought of slavery: it was a principle which permeated Milton’s discussion of both liberty and slavery. Domination by an equal or an inferior was unjustified, and that formed part of Milton’s denunciation of kingship on the

\textsuperscript{62} Second Defence, CPW 4.683.

\textsuperscript{63} Milton, ‘Defence’, p. 80.

\textsuperscript{64} CPW 5.449.

\textsuperscript{65} Second Defence, CPW 4.625, 563. The Latin makes the gender issue absolutely clear - ‘servitutem viro indignissimam, inferiori etiam servit.’
Aristotelian principle of a hierarchy of merit: ‘who does not think that it is quite
unworthy for all to be slaves to their equal, or to one who is quite often their
inferior’.\footnote{Milton ‘Defence’, p. 99.} Conversely, service to a superior was \textit{not} slavery; perhaps it even was, or was compatible with, liberty. In \textit{Paradise Lost}, indeed, one of the fatal flaws in Satan’s reasoning is his failure to recognize this relativity in servitude and liberty, as Abdiel explains:

\begin{quote}
Unjustly thou depriv’st it with the name
Of servitude, to serve whom God ordains,
Or nature: God and nature bid the same,
When he who rules is worthiest, and excels
Them whom he governs. This is servitude –
To serve the unwise, or him who hath rebelled
Against his worthier, as thine now serve thee,
\end{quote}

It is emphatically not, as Satan had claimed in Book 1, ‘Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven.’\footnote{Paradise Lost, 1.261; Abdiel refers back to this line in the continuation of his speech in Book 6, saying ‘Reign thou in hell…; let me serve/ In heaven God ever blest’.} And the fact that Satan thinks it is better to reign in hell is presumably a sign or a corollary of his own internal unfreedom: ‘to thyself entralled.’
The opening of the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, with its lofty discussion of virtue and liberty, opposed to license and tyranny, also replicated this hierarchical conception of the rightness of rule, in an intriguing phrase overlooked by those who have interpreted this passage as a straightforwardly Roman depiction of the benefits of a free state. Milton wrote: ‘Hence is it that Tyrants are not oft offended, nor stand much in doubt of bad men, as being all naturally servile; but in whom vertue and true worth most is eminent, them they feare in earnest, as by right thir Maisters, against them lies all their hatred and suspicion.’

It has been pointed out that this sentence is ‘almost... a translation’ of a comment in Sallust — a comment which directly precedes Sallust’s famous statement of the incredible growth of Rome once it had achieved its liberty. That Milton did have Sallust’s sentence in mind is further suggested by the fact that that very sentence was placed as an epigraph on the title-page of *Eikonoklastes*. But Milton interjected a phrase all of his own, not in the Sallust, which seriously complicates any account of this as an invocation of neo-Roman individual liberty in opposition to all political slavery:

69 *CPW* 3.190.

70 Skinner, ‘John Milton and the politics of slavery’, p. 303; Milton, *Political Writings*, ed. Dzelzainis, p. 3 note; *CPW* 3.190n. notes that the sentiment is originally Aristotelian and gives Aquinas and Lipsius as other sources. Sallust, *De coniuratione Catilinae* 7: ‘Nam regibus boni quam mali suspectiores sunt, semperque iis aliena virtus formidulosa est. Sed civitas incredibile memoratu est, adepta libertate, quantum brevi creverit; tanta cupidio gloriae incesserat.’ For more on Milton’s debt to Sallust, see Dzelzainis ‘Milton’s classical republicanism’, pp. 22-4; and further material cited in Skinner.
tyrants fear good men ‘as by right thir Maisters’. It was hard to give ‘slavery’ a positive valence – though Martin Dzelzainis has argued that Milton did not condemn the institution, accepting it as part of fallen nature – but mastery was simply the other side of the same relationship, and here Milton had no such rhetorical qualms. The mastery of one man over another might be quite justified, depending on their relative virtue, just as Aristotle had argued. Even in the Tenure – arguably Milton’s most populist text – Milton did not demand that all men should live in a condition of neo-Roman liberty.

Political psychology

The anti-democratic repudiation of democratic conceptions of liberty and equality may seem like a mere sleight of hand, used in convenient denigration of a constitutional form which was viscerally threatening to elitist or aristocratic writers. But the critique of democracy, in the works of Plato and Aristotle in particular, formed part of a much richer and more theoretical account of the nature of politics and its place in human life. While the differences between the two thinkers should not be underestimated, both treated politics as a field of ethics, and considered which political arrangements – whether real or ideal – might best tend to the intellectual and ethical fulfilment of at least some of their citizens. Consequently, psychological accounts of the roots of virtue or of moral weakness were often applied to political

\[71\] {Dzelzainis, 2009 #5280, pp. 555-559; his discussion acknowledges the apparent tension between Aristotelian and neo-Roman conceptions of liberty and slavery.}
as well as strictly ethical phenomena, and politics had to deal with the souls of citizens if their outer life was to be rightly ordered.

Broadly speaking, a virtuous disposition depended on the proper governance of the passions by reason within the soul. According to Plato’s anti-democratic satire in the Republic, the democratic citizen’s soul was blind to the merits or vices of different desires and pleasures, and the democratic man consequently followed his whims without any rational or ethical direction. Milton too showed an immensely consistent concern with the proper state of the soul, expressed in the government of the passions by reason which was necessary for true virtue. Of course, this view of what made an upright and virtuous soul was entirely conventional. Nonetheless, its sheer prominence throughout Milton’s work is striking. It crops up in his earliest work, in an academic exposition of the relation between intellect, the will, and virtue in one of his early Prolusions, runs through the political texts, and forms a major theme in his poetry. Although Milton’s systematic exposition of ethics in Book 2 of De Doctrina Christiana was heavily indebted to his direct source, Wollebius, it too reveals the emphasis on control over the passions which ultimately derived from ancient ethical writing on the virtues.

This alone, of course, does not align Milton specifically with the Greek critics of democracy: it is a highly conventional and general account of proper psychology. However Milton also followed the Greek political theorists in tying that

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72 Plato, Republic, 560b-561d.

73 CPW 1.293.

74 De Doctrina Christiana, CPW 6.719-20.
psychological story closely to political life, as in the resounding opening passage of the *Tenure*:

If men within themselves would be govern’d by reason, and not generally give up thir understanding to a double tyrannie, of Custom from without, and blind affections within, they would discern better, what it is to favour and uphold the Tyrant of a Nation. But being slaves within doors, no wonder that they strive so much to have the public State conformably govern’d to the inward vitious rule, by which they govern themselves.\(^{75}\)

We have already seen that liberty has inner (psychological and ethical) manifestations as well as outer (domestic and political) ones, and we have sketched a possible link between true inner liberty and political liberty. In this passage, Milton suggests a more organic link between the psychology of liberty and its political manifestation. Those whose souls are enslaved (partly to their own passions) will embrace political servility too. It would take a soul ruled by reason to subject its own passions and to welcome the rigorous rule of reason and virtue in the state. In this passage, of course, servile souls embrace the outer rule of tyrants rather than agitating for a democracy, but for the anti-democratic writers the line between democracy and tyranny was a fine one, as we will see. Both, among other things, were characterized by the licence they offered to the worst citizens, those with the most disordered souls.

The playing-out of anti-democratic accounts of psychology was most evident when the city and the soul were directly compared. Clearly, the emphasis on

\(^{75}\) *CPW* 3.190
reason and virtue in the soul implied that those should rule who most evidently possessed these qualities (in line with the arguments from proportional equality already discussed). But if they did rule, that meant that the city became almost a large scale-model for a virtuous soul, with reason and virtue, in the form of the best citizens, ruling over the passions, in the form of the worst citizens, the fickle and irrational mob most swayed by their own passions. Indeed, the whole political structure constructed in Plato’s Republic is presented as an analogy which will help Socrates and his interlocutors to examine order and disorder in the soul. Not only does the democratic city mirror a disordered soul, but the democratic soul (in Plato’s description of the democratic man) is also described in terms of the democratic city: ‘Putting all his pleasures on an equal footing, he grants power over himself to the pleasure of the moment, as if it were a magistrate chosen by lot.’

Milton followed Plato in analysing a whole polity as if it were a soul with its own reason and its own desires, a thought perhaps already implicit in the parallels drawn in the opening passage of the Tenure, cited above. In the peroration of the Second Defence, Milton discussed the psychology not of individual citizens, but of the whole polity: ‘a nation which cannot rule and govern itself, but has delivered itself into slavery to its own lusts, is enslaved also to other masters whom it does not choose, and serves not only voluntarily but also against its will.’ This analysis mirrors the discussion in the same text of the tyrant’s servility, not just voluntarily, to his own desires, but also against his will, to those of his own hangers-on. And

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76 Plato, Republic, 561b2-4; translation, p. 273.

77 Second Defence, CPW 4.684.

78 CPW 4.563.
yet, the state depicted as a tyrannical soul may itself be democratic, as it is enslaved to its own lusts; on Plato’s analogy, these are the overly passionate individuals who make up the mass of the people.

**Gendered psychology**

One surprising contribution that this analysis of Milton’s psychological and political thought can make to our understanding of his texts is in explaining some of the strongly gendered language which he uses in discussing political questions. Milton’s complex treatment of matters of gender, and of the female figures in his writings, has been the subject of enormous scholarly attention and contention. On the subject of women’s status and capacities, his work displays an almost systematic oscillation between an affirmation of those human capacities which women have in common with men, and an insistence on gendered hierarchy which strips women of the highest human capacities, or blocks the possibility of women’s autonomous exercise
of them. As he himself put it, there was between the sexes a ‘most resembling unlikenesses, and most unlike resemblance’.

In spite of that complexity, an ideal of manliness and masculine citizenship lies at the heart of Milton’s republican rhetoric. Indeed, both the likeness and the unlikeness of which Milton spoke had their origins in ancient Greek thought about psychology, the household, and the polis. Aristotle’s tripartite classification of the relationships which constitute households (husband-wife, father-child, master-slave), and his corresponding hierarchy of the capacity for a psychology ordered by reason, leaves strong traces in Milton’s thought. As Gina Hausknecht has argued, gender in Milton’s thought cannot be reduced to the modern binary of the sexes. Virtuous citizenship is consistently, indeed insistently, gendered as masculine, but this masculinity is played off against immaturity, servility, bestiality, or even plain unmanliness, as much as it is specifically against women or femininity. The gradations in this hierarchy of comparisons or relationships were insisted on by Aristotle – to roll up women and slaves into a single category was an error fit for barbarians, not Greeks – and they enable some of the switching between black-and-


80 CPW 2.597: Tetrachordon.

white contrast (unlikeness) and more subtle gradation (likeness) seen in Milton’s thought on male and female capacities.

Nonetheless, whether manliness was placed at the top of a hierarchy, or placed in more simple contrast with a female, servile, or childlike status, Milton’s masculine citizenship resonates with the Greek anti-democratic discourse. The ancient critics of democracy drew on entirely conventional ideas about the weakness of reason in women, slaves, and children, and hence the disorderliness of their passions, to associate democracy with effeminacy, servility, or immaturity. In spite of the narrow band of free Athenian males who were full citizens under the Athenian democracy, the anti-democratic writers were insistent that democracy allowed great license to women and to slaves, and appealed to feminine or immature tastes. Part of the explanation for such surprising assertions is surely to be found in their understanding of democratic psychology. For them, the unruly anarchy of popular desires which democracy exists to satisfy mirrored the unruly female soul, in which Aristotle said, reason was ‘lacking authority’, and therefore unreasonable desires would dominate; the child’s soul, whose reason was not yet mature; or even worse, the servile soul, where reason was barely present at all.

82 Plato, Republic, 557c; 562b-c; Ps-Xenophon, The Constitution of the Athenians, ed. Frisch (Copenhagen, 1942), pp. 16-17 (on slaves and metics); Ober, Political Dissent, pp. 18-19, 43, 160-1.

Milton’s account of the proper control of reason over the passions, and the corresponding classical assumptions about the weakness of reason in those who were not mature free men, lay behind many of his discussions of gender and status, in domestic and political contexts. In general, Milton assumed that there was some stable inequality between men and women on these grounds. Thus his project in the divorce tracts of expounding the nature of ‘domestic liberty’ was a prerequisite of politics too, because ‘in vain does he prattle about liberty in assembly and marketplace who at home endures the slavery most unworthy of men, slavery to an inferior.’

But the grounding of female inferiority in particular characteristics meant that Milton, like Plato, was capable of conceding that there were some women who would surpass some men: ‘Not but that particular exceptions may have place, if she exceed her husband in prudence and dexterity, and he contentedly yeeld, for then a superior and more naturall law comes in, that the wiser should govern the lesse wise, whether male or female.’

The positive traits associated with manliness were similarly normative, rather than universal. One major use of the language of gender or manliness was thus to encourage properly manly behaviour in men, and castigate them when they failed to display it. Thus in *Samson Agonistes* it is clear that Samson is capable of being ‘effeminately vanquished’ by Dalilah precisely because his soul has already become effeminate and servile, lacking the true direction of wisdom.

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84 *Second Defence, CPW* 4.625.

85 *CPW* 2.589.

This positive valuation of the (potential) rationality of free adult males, and their consequent capacity for real self-directed virtue, was a conventional one. However, its great importance to Milton can be seen in the way in which he restructured the ideal of masculinity around it. Milton’s account of manliness was often self-consciously subversive of received ideas. One manifestation of this was his early and striking advocacy of an ideal of male chastity.\(^87\) Defending himself in a rhetorical composition against charges of effeminacy from his fellow students (he was nicknamed the ‘Lady of Christ’s’), he suggested that their ‘brothelling’ showed only one type of virility; in another early work he argued (again in an implicitly subversive way) that unchastity was a greater scandal in a man than a woman.\(^88\) Milton’s instinct was to reject the attribution of masculinity to behaviour that seemed licentious and uncontrolled rather than temperate and disciplined. For Milton, to be truly masculine, behaviour needed to be virtuous and under the control of reason. Hausknecht has even suggested that ‘manliness’ itself became a virtue in Milton.\(^89\)

It is very striking how often, for Milton, the context demanding this proper masculine behaviour was political. The possibility of rational self-government by individuals opened up the possibility of successful government in a free commonwealth: in some sense, whatever its constitutional niceties, a collective form


\(^88\) CPW 1.283-4 (Prolusion); CPW 1.890ff.

\(^89\) Indeed, Hausknecht, ‘The Gender of Civic Virtue’, argues that for Milton ‘manliness’ becomes a virtue itself.
of self-government. Milton linked manliness with that proper political self-government when he asserted that the wise had always considered a free commonwealth to be ‘the noblest, the manliest, the equallest, the justest government’.\(^9^0\) By contrast, the lamentable weakness of those who were incapable of republican self-government was seen as unmanly, and could be pointed up by comparing them with women, children, or slaves. Milton lamented the weakness of those who might ideally be governed by:

> a full and free Council of their own electing, where no single person, but reason only swayes. And what madness is it, for them who might manage nobly their own affairs themselves, sluggishly and weakly to devolve all on a single person; and more like boyes under age then men, to committ all to his patronage and disposal... how unmanly must it needs be, ... to hang all our felicitie on him, all our safety, our well-being, for which if we were aught els but sluggards or babies, we need depend on none but God and our own counsels, our own active vertue and industrie.\(^9^1\)

Republican citizenship, unlike democratic citizenship a bulwark against tyranny rather than a slippery slope into it, was defined by the ‘active vertue’ of the manly.

The exact content of that masculine ‘active vertue’ is in some ways unexpected. The masculine colouring of ideas of citizenship in the republican tradition is well known, but has often been seen as determined by its emphasis on the

\(^9^0\) Readie & Easie Way, CPW 7.358.

\(^9^1\) Readie & Easie Way, CPW, 7.362
martial qualities of citizen-soldiers.\textsuperscript{92} For Milton, however, this type of masculinity was only ever secondary to the true masculinity of reason and self-disciplined virtue, a point which is emphasized by Milton’s self-consciously challenging account of the virtue of fortitude or courage. If ‘virtue’ in general was etymologically male in its associations, courage (‘andreia’, literally ‘manliness’, in Greek) was the archetypal male virtue; these gendered associations were made explicit in both classical and Renaissance discussions of the virtues.\textsuperscript{93} In his revisionist account of the virtue of fortitude, Milton turned the emphasis away from the battlefield (on which the preconditions for a renewal of English liberty had been won in the 1640s) and onto the exercise of republican discipline and virtue in the politics of the new regime which followed the regicide.

Aristotle’s problematic account of courage did include moral and intellectual elements; these, indeed, underpinned his claim that women and slaves could not display courage. However, he narrowed down the circumstances in which it could be genuinely exercised to facing death on the battlefield. Milton consistently challenged this view of the proper arena of courage, arguing at the beginning of the \textit{Second Defence} that ‘it is not in warfare and arms alone that courage shines forth’.\textsuperscript{94}

\textsuperscript{92} R. C. Snyder, \textit{Citizen-soldiers and manly warriors: military service and gender in the civic republican tradition} (Lanham, MD, 1999).


In *De Doctrina Christiana* Milton wrote: ‘The greatest example of fortitude is our Savior Jesus Christ. He displayed fortitude throughout the whole of his life and in his death.’\(^95\) In the Ethical Index of his commonplace book, Milton noted in his own words ideas derived from his reading of Lactantius: ‘A man’s courage depends, not upon his body, but upon his reason, which is man’s strongest protection and defense.’\(^96\) *Samson Agonistes* dramatized the theme. Samson’s past actions have been a proof that strength without wisdom does not constitute the virtue of fortitude, and indeed, may be simply disastrous; Samson realizes that his bodily strength was ‘not made to rule/ But to subserve where wisdom bears command’.\(^97\) In the *Second Defence*, by contrast, Milton praised Cromwell for his mental qualities, which displayed true virtue and true courage. Cromwell’s fortitude lay not in his victories in the field, but in his control over himself: ‘he was a soldier well-versed in self-knowledge, and whatever enemy lay within – vain hopes, fears, desires – he had either previously destroyed within himself or had long since reduced to subjection. Commander first over himself, victor over himself, he had learned to achieve over himself the most effective triumph.’\(^98\) If military victories might well follow from

\(^95\) *CPW* 6.739.

\(^96\) *CPW* 1.373.


this virtue, so, too, might the more important acts of political courage which the nation required.

Milton’s insistence on a ‘better fortitude’ than the crude martial or imperial type recalled the revisionist framing of concepts such as liberty or equality by the critics of democracy, and rested on the same privileging of reason and of those who were deemed capable of it. However, in rethinking fortitude Milton drew on Roman reinterpretations of courage rather than on the Greek anti-democratic tradition. Cicero had smuggled the notion of ‘magnitudo animi’ (greatness of mind, the Greek virtue megalopsuchia) under the umbrella of ‘fortitudo’, the Roman virtue usually characterized by ‘physical and mental toughness’. ‘Magnanimity’ brought with it, as Malcolm Schofield shows, connotations both of the hellenistic Stoicism of Panaetius and of the austere republican virtue of Cato. Indeed, much of Milton’s revisionist tone in his characterization of fortitude may be borrowed from Cicero himself, who used the concepts of ‘fortitudo’ and ‘magnitudo animi’ to reorient the Roman ideal of glory away from war and towards other actions in defence of the republic.  

These other modes of defending a republic were central to Milton’s concerns, and it is here that the link with anti-democratic critique returns. As Martin Dzelzainis has shown, Milton drew closely on Cicero’s arguments in De Officiis in the second edition of his Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, in a passage where he made it clear that such ‘fortitude’ and ‘magnanimity’ were best expressed in

resisting popular clamour in order to cleave to what was right. True fortitude, the virtue of manliness, now assimilated by Cicero and Milton to magnanimity, was specifically directed against the unruly political pressures of the mob and those who represented politically the interests of that mob ('the boisterous Tribunes'). Such fortitude was apparently only to be expected in a few, and it was necessary to keep the proper rule of reason and virtue in the state, resisting the more volatile and self-interested demands of the many.

Democracy and constitutional thought

Returning, then, to politics and the question of Milton’s problematic classical republicanism, we need to ask how far these ideas in Milton’s writing cohered into any constitutional preference. The trail of positive clues is sparse, running from Milton’s endorsement of mixed monarchy in his earliest prose work, via his refusal to condemn kingship outright in the regicide tracts and his ambivalent panegyric of Oliver Cromwell in the Second Defence, to his last-ditch attempt to find possible constitutional forms to prevent the return of monarchy in 1660. Much of his political writing made no explicit comment at all on constitutional matters. The only constitutional terms he used with any great frequency were ‘tyrant’ and its variants, in condemnation; and in sometimes uneasy counterpoint, ‘king’. Kings, even if


101 CPW 2.314-5; see Dzelzainis, ‘Milton’s Politics’, for discussion.
permissible, were not to be the sole element of the constitutional structure, but little hint is given of what that architecture would be, and what the other constitutional forms might contribute to it.

Nonetheless, it is, I think, possible to make a serious case both for Milton as a republican, and for Milton as a participant in the anti-democratic discourse of the ancient authors. Indeed, these two features of his thought seem to be connected. In the *Readie & Easie Way*, Milton credited a ‘free Commonwealth’ with all the qualities valued in the anti-democratic tradition: ‘due libertie and proportiond equalitie’, as well as the masculine citizen qualities he admired (this form of state was the ‘manliest’). This passage thus makes explicit the connection between the ancient anti-democratic tropes and a broadly republican politics. This dates from 1660, but a similar connection is made for a much earlier stage of Milton’s career by Eric Nelson, who, in a brilliant reading of the significance of Milton’s use of Isocrates’ *Areopagiticus* in his own *Areopagitica*, has suggested that Isocrates’ work was read in the early modern period as a republican account of true as opposed to false liberty, and that Milton’s *Areopagitica* thus carries coded within it – already in 1644 – a specifically republican message. What Nelson does not do is put Isocrates’ work, and hence Milton’s, into the broader context of the anti-democratic tradition, but it is a key and characteristic text in its use of the tropes of that tradition. Thus, towards both ends of Milton’s career in political prose, we see Milton presenting republican ideals through anti-democratic tropes.

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102 *CPW* 7.358.

103 Nelson, “‘True Liberty’”, p. 203
It may seem surprising that republicans would make use of anti-democratic ideas, rather than drawing on ancient democracy as a more positive source for modes of participatory self-government. But there are several things to bear in mind here. ‘Democracy’ was almost universally a pejorative term in this period, except where it denoted only the safely limited and balanced democratic element within a mixed polity. It was not only republicans who exploited the arguments of anti-democrats. In a context where democracy was often a scare-word, those who advocated participatory government against more limited or monarchical alternatives might be particularly likely to find themselves accused of seeking a licentious and unruly democracy. Republicans in turn might defend themselves from that charge by adopting the critiques of democracy offered by the ancient writers, and distancing their own approved systems of participatory government from the disorders of democracy.

This was viable partly because it was, in some ways, very consonant with the agenda of the ancient critics of democracy. Aristotle retained the possibility of ‘polity’ as a good form of the government of the many even while he condemned ‘democracy’ as the bad form, and he outlined an ideal state with elements of rule by the few and the many. Plato’s politeia was adopted into Latin and then English as a ‘republic’, with a form of multiple (aristocratic) rule, and he made even more concessions to the rule of the many in his Laws. Isocrates and others directed their scorn at ‘extreme’ democracy and presented themselves as favourers of an older, purer and more moderate form of democracy.

In that light, it is less surprising to find, as we do on a few occasions, Milton using the term ‘democracy’ in an apparently positive sense. If we look closer, we find that the ancient critique of extreme democracy is still embedded in many of
these references, with only one apparent endorsement of democracy.\textsuperscript{104} By 1659, the ferment of republican debate about the nature of the ‘Good Old Cause’ had led other republicans into more positive and confident uses of the term ‘democracy’. In response to this Milton assured his reader in his October 1659 ‘Letter to a friend’ that the constitutional arrangements he was proposing would have ‘the resemblance & effects of a perfect democracie.’\textsuperscript{105} Typically, however, this was a rather defensive statement, which glossed Milton’s proposal to give power to the Rump or to a Council of State, simply depending on which would comply with his minimal principles against monarchy and for freedom of conscience. For Milton at this point, ‘perpetuall Aristocracy’ or ‘annuall democracy’ were interchangeable, although he

\textsuperscript{104} In the \textit{Second Defence} Milton replied to the charge that equality was a doctrine of Anabaptists by saying that it was in fact ‘democracy, a much more ancient thing’ – an odd defence (if it was one) given that democracy had a reputation little better than anabaptism: \textit{CPW} 4.633.

\textsuperscript{105} \textit{CPW} 7.331. The ‘friend’ Milton addressed has not been identified: Campbell and Corns, \textit{John Milton}, pp. 290-291. The reference to ‘annuall democracy’ as an alternative to perpetual aristocracy may suggest Marchamont Nedham, who was still close to Milton: Worden, \textit{Literature and Politics}, pp. 347-352. Worden’s account gives Nedham himself a possible role in drafting the rebuttal of his earlier populist republican arguments in Milton’s \textit{Readie and Easie Way}, but it is surely more likely that this was Milton himself continuing an argument with his friend. Harringtonians had also partially embraced the language of ‘democracy’ by 1659 and may be one target of Milton’s argument.
was soon to determine in favour of a senate of life members.\textsuperscript{106} We may guess that Milton wished to secure some of the benefits and ‘effects’ republicans were promising for their own (often less than extreme) forms of ‘democracy’ (stability, liberty, and so on), but without stooping to a democratic form of government.

By the time Milton wrote the second edition of the \textit{Readie and Easie Way} in March 1660, he had to contend both with the near-universal clamour for the return of monarchy, and with the objections of republicans to his last-ditch constitutional expedient of a standing Grand Council. In both cases, he replied to these criticisms by using the language of moderate as against extreme democracy. Rejecting the charge that those who rejected their king were ‘hence concluded to live in lawless anarchie’, Milton qualified democracy as ‘a frugal and self-governing democratic or Commonwealth’. True democracy, in fact, would set an example to ‘imprudent and ungoverned men’ in its industriousness and wisdom.\textsuperscript{107} Like Aristotle or Isocrates, Milton could countenance ‘frugal’ democracy while implicitly rejecting any extreme version of democracy. That he did share the ancient conception of a dangerously uncontrolled extreme democracy is clear from his reply to his republican critics, who felt his proposed Grand Council was too exclusively aristocratic:

\begin{quote}
It will be objected, that in those places were they had perpetual Senats, they had also popular remedies against thir growing too imperious: as in \textit{Athens}, besides \textit{Areopagus}, another Senat of four or five hundred [sic]; in \textit{Sparta}, the \textit{Ephori}; in \textit{Rome}, the Tribunes of the people. But the event tels us, that these remedies either little availd
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{106} \textit{CPW} 7.336; 7.369-70.

\textsuperscript{107} \textquote{Readie and Easie Way}, second edition, \textit{CPW} 7.427
the people, or brought them to such a licentious and unbridl’d
democratic, as in fine ruin’d themselves with thir own excessive
power. So that the main reason urg’d why popular assemblies are to
be trusted with the peoples libertie, rather then a Senat of principal
men, because great men will be still endeavouring to inlarge thir
power, but the common sort will be contented to maintain thir own
libertie, is by experience found false; none being more immoderat and
ambitious to amplifie thir power, then such popularities,¹⁰⁸

Milton rejected outright the claim of popular assemblies to moderate the power of
great men, on the grounds that this would lead to ‘licentious and unbridl’d
democratic’. Indeed, so far was Milton from countenancing such a type of mass
democratic rule that his discussion of Athens placed the blame for this licence on the
deliberative council, without even mentioning the (presumably even more
threatening) power of the citizen Assembly itself. In the spring and summer of 1659,
other commonwealthmen had disputed whether a senate should replace the
Cromwellian Other House, and if so whether it should be elected, or a selected life
senate.¹⁰⁹ In contrast, by the time Milton ventured into print on these questions in
1660, he took the senate for granted, wished it to be for life, and asked the reverse

Aylmer, ed., The Interregnum: The Quest for Settlement, 1646-1660 (London,
question — whether it was advisable to add popular representation alongside the
senate — concluding that it was not.\footnote{\textsuperscript{110}} Henry Vane did, as Milton was to do, proceed from a core requirement for a senate of the godly and well-affected, but argued that the senate needed to be balanced by a popular assembly which it would summon, so that the senate did not monopolize legislative as well as executive power.\footnote{\textsuperscript{111}} Perhaps Milton’s position would have been closer to Vane’s in 1659, but by 1660, circumstances had pushed him to take his moderation or rejection of democracy to an extreme.

The ‘licentious’ democracy which Milton condemned in early 1660 conformed to the ancient type of extreme democracy not only in its intrinsic qualities, but in the danger which it posed to political stability and ultimately liberty: the democrats ‘in fine ruind themselves with thir own excessive power’. It is a paradox of the ancient critique of democracy that natural democrats become natural slaves, betrayed into slavery by their excessive and uncontrolled desires. Thus democracy tended to tip over into tyranny, when a leader appeared who was prepared to bribe and flatter the mob to secure his own power. Indeed, democracy and tyranny were similar, in the ancient view: both were more hostile to good men than bad and offered license to the servile. As Milton argued at the beginning of the

\footnote{\textsuperscript{110}} Note, however, that Milton’s Grand Council or Senate would have been shaped out of the existing Rump or new Convention Parliament, making it in one sense a continuation of the lower rather than the upper House: Woolrych, ‘Last quests’, p. 203.

\footnote{\textsuperscript{111}} [Sir Henry Vane], \textit{A Needful Corrective or Balance in Popular Government} (London, 1659?; Wing V72), pp. 5, 8, 10.
Tenure, 'licenc... never hath more scope or more indulgence then under
Tyrants.'\textsuperscript{112} The tyrant himself, in the ancient view, was indeed merely a democratic citizen writ large – entirely subject to his own base desires and whims. The fundamental moral and psychological servility of the tyrant was, again, a belief shared by Plato and Milton: 'to the degree that he is the greatest of all tyrants, to that same degree is he the meanest of all and most a slave.'\textsuperscript{113}

The increasingly urgent contexts of Milton's thought chimed with the ancient fears of democracy tipping over into demagoguery and then tyranny: Milton was well justified in claiming that the mass of the people, if given their own desires, would wish for a king again. Milton's most negative views about the political capacity of the people as a whole emerged when he considered the rabble idolising the dead king in \textit{Eikonoklastes}, and when he confronted the likelihood of a popular restoration of the Stuart, or possibly an alternative, monarchy. Milton's constitutional thought seems to have been driven largely by his hatred of tyranny, a perverted constitution which by its very nature worked against the ability of good men to live reasoned and virtuous lives. Extreme democracy not only exemplified the abandonment of such ideals in favour of the whims of individuals and the fickle masses, but was also likely to be a short cut to the introduction of such a tyranny.

Conclusion

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{CPW} 3.190.

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Second Defence, CPW} 4.561.
Milton’s strenuously corrective, oppositional rhetoric was apparent throughout his career. His contemporaries were not wrong to value liberty, manliness or fortitude. But they should value ‘due’ or ‘true’ or ‘real and substantial’ liberty, true manliness, ‘better’ fortitude.\(^{114}\) In part, these reorientations of value were those required by true religion. In part, too, they reflected a Platonic outlook, melded with the Christian: mere outward appearances, not based on true knowledge and the virtuous ordering of the soul under reason, were merely the shadows on the wall of the Cave. But, as I have suggested here, the ethical and psychological aspects of Milton’s hellenizing thought also underpinned his invocations of a more specific ancient Greek tradition: the ancient critique of (extreme) democracy. It was from this tradition that he drew his pairing of ‘due libertie and proportiond equalitie’.

The critique of democracy might be thought an odd component of classical republican argument. In the first year or so after the regicide Milton emphasized not only the origins of political power in the people, but their right to continue judging the appropriate constitutional form and location for that power. These arguments were radical, but they followed in a clear lineage from the parliamentarian and Leveller arguments of the 1640s, which had rarely been articulated in terms of classical texts and constitutional models. They might have a ‘democratic’ tone (although by definition they could not determine a democratic constitutional form, as

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that decision was always open to the people), but, in Milton as in the writing of the 1640s, they were rarely argued through intensive use of the classical materials.

When he wrote the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* in the crisis of 1648-1649, he asserted that the people, ‘as oft as they shall judge it for the best’, could choose or change their government, ‘meerly by the liberty and right of free born Men, to be govern’d as seems to them best.’ He based this argument squarely on the origins of political power in the people, just as the Levellers had done, with little reliance on classical citation. But this argument only emerged several pages into the work. In contrast, the lofty exordium of the tract, setting out the relationship between inner and outer liberty, is a perfect web of classical republican themes. This recognizable classical republican language, however, led directly into a world in which a few ‘Worthies’ must struggle to achieve liberty ‘amidst the throng and noises of Vulgar and irrational men.’ The tract moves between two intellectual worlds: the exclusive classical republicanism which led Milton towards an aristocracy of virtue, and the contractarian and natural law thinking which underpinned his assertions of the right of the people to determine the form of their own state. The ancient texts which transmitted Greek notions of democracy to early modern readers offered Milton not the democratic vision feared by Hobbes, but an alternative tradition which defined itself against the moral and intellectual flaws of

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116 CPW 3.192.
democracy. Consequently, Milton was at his most ‘democratic’ when he was least classically republican.