In Thousand Liveries Dight:

Contemplating Landscape in Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*

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English

L'Allegro and *Il Penseroso* present two ostensibly juxtaposed visions of the poetic imagination. The poetic imagination of *L'Allegro* seems frivolous, agrarian, and unrefined. *Il Penseroso*, by contrast, presents a poetic imagination marked by contemplation, solitude, and learned reference. Recent scholars agree, however, that despite these apparent differences between and within the poems, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* come closer to a reconciliation than readily apparent after a cursory reading.[1] Peter C. Herman, in his *Milton and the Muse-Haters*, argues that both speakers conflate a poetic and an antipoetic position into one ambiguous position.[2] W. Scott Howard concurs, but focuses his investigation on the interdependent ontology between mirth and melancholy.[3] This reconciliation indicates that Milton viewed mirth and melancholy, the poetic and antipoetic, and the material and speculative (all major thematic elements of the pieces) as somehow necessarily dependent on one another. This interdependency manifests itself in the landscapes presented in the poem as well. The speakers of each poem travel at various times to rural areas, villages/towns, and cities. The presence of each of these landscapes in both *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* illustrate Milton's cognizance of the interdependent economic relationships developing during the early seventeenth century. Milton does not equally distribute these landscapes in the two poems, though. The speaker of *L'Allegro* lacks the ability to travel freely between landscapes, while the speaker of *Il Penseroso* moves from place to place with relative ease. This freedom of movement and access seems to indicate a

class distinction between the speakers of the poems. Other elements of the landscapes, when juxtaposed across poems, however, indicate the type of interdependence posited by Herman and Howard. In the argument that follows, I show how the landscapes, and elements of the landscapes, in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* seemingly support an interdependent reading of mirth and melancholy, but then, turning my attention to the historical developments of the period, I hope to ask the question of whether a true reconciliation of the speakers would be possible or even desirable given the social hierarchy embedded in the landscapes themselves.

Understanding the complexity of the interplay between the Companion Poems requires understanding how the poems function formally. Barbara K. Lewalski and John Creaser have provided studies of the personae and personalities of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso.* Lewalski writes, "L'Allegro and Il Penseroso are the named personae-speakers of their respective poems, through whom Milton tries on the lifestyles associated with two kinds of poets…"[4] She goes on to explain that L'Allegro's lifestyle mirrors that of the pastoral poet, while Il Penseroso's lifestyle represents the refined British poet.[5] Through a scan of both poem's formal features, Creaser comes to a similar conclusion; concerning the Companion Poems, he writes, "Milton is playing here with ideas of imaginative and spiritual aspiration which biographically were of real importance to him at the time."[6] I resist the belief that Milton uses the Companion Poems simply to "try on" or "play with" different modes of poetic production. Given the detail of the landscapes presented in each piece, it is more likely that Milton embodied these personae in order to describe the world through the eyes of each poet. Through the eyes of L'Allegro, Milton sees a bright landscape, marked by labor but also festivities. Il Penseroso sees a dimly lit landscape, and "he portrays himself as a scholar-errant roaming in a gothic landscape replete with a nightingale 'most musicall, most Melancholy,' an antique bellman, twilight groves, and a

'high lonely Towr'…" Seeing the poems as a tour of the world as seen by another allows Milton

to direct his reader's attention to those features of the landscape that he sees as most important.

Viewing the poems as a glimpse into another's world confirms Creaser's opinion that the

Companion Poems "present a sensibility, not a statement."[7] The sensibility presented by

L'Allegro and *Il Penseroso* is metapoetic; through the landscapes presented in the Companion

Poems, the reader sees the divergent elements of poetry important to each persona, which add up

to a cohesive imagining of poetry by Milton.

Both poems begin by banishing the other's central emotion to the confines of the other

poem.[8] "Hence loathed Melancholy," begins *L'Allegro*. To which *Il Penseroso* responds, "Hence

vain deluding joyes." This word "hence," according to Howard, contains implications of both

time and space.[9] Because Milton would have known both meanings of the word "hence,"

Howard claims that both the personified Mirth and Melancholy encounter one another within the

space of each other's poems. Particularly when *Il Penseroso* sits in "som high lonely Towr" (86)

and when *L'Allegro* describes "Towers, and battlements… / Boosom'd high in tufted Trees" (77-

78), Howard highlights how the two poems have entered into a dialogue reminiscent of

Renaissance poetic traditions.[10] He too believes that the dialectic of mirth versus melancholy

manifests itself in the landscape and concludes, "the contiguity between these first tower images

and contexts in each poem suggests that both texts' personae are simultaneously present in each

landscape, each speaker voiced within and against the other's tenor."[11] Howard posits that this

dialogic relationship into which the poems enter necessarily signifies a uniquely Miltonic

understanding of history. He states, "the contiguous and contrary interinvolvement of the poems

on formal and thematic levels reveals Milton's idea of history as a process neither strictly linear

nor cyclical, but an open-ended dialectic resembling the structure of a helix that might

accommodate both cycles of repetition and contingent transgressions against the patterns of time."[12] That Milton understood history as such is confirmed by Luke Taylor, who opines that for Milton, after the fall of man, "human history ever since has repeated the false starts, turnings backs, and pointless circles of that first transgression."[13] While I do not dispute Howard's understanding that the Companion Poems announce a Miltonic understanding of the historic, I find that the simultaneous contiguity and contrariety of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* actually indicate a Miltonic poetics more so than a Miltonic historiography.

The Companion Poems announce a Miltonic poetics by showing the contrariety and contiguity present between two different types of poetry. The speakers of each poem manifest these differences within the landscapes of their respective pieces. *L'Allegro* illustrates, with its sweeping descriptions and intricate detail, the concern the poet must have for the physical world. L'Allegro (the persona) provides a 30-line description of the landscape; he describes a world in which:

> The clouds in thousand Liveries dight,
> While the plowman neer at hand
> Whistles o're the Furrow'd Land,
> And the Milkmaid singeth blithe
> And the Mower whets his sithe,
> And every shepherd tells his tale
> Under the Hawthorn in the dale (62-68)

Beginning this movement in the poem with the difficult image of clouds robed in "thousand Liveries," L'Allegro challenges the reader's aesthetic imagination by asking him or her to produce an atypical mental image and, in doing so, announces his own poetics. Milton's usage of the word "dight" situates the reader in the poetic mindset. He could have used any number of words implying the same meaning: clothed, robed, adorned, etc. Milton's "dight" signifies in this case both the literal meaning (dressed in) but also implies the Latin roots of the word: dictare, to

dictate or *compose*. L'Allegro's poetry produces effects on the reader by invoking difficult

images of the material world. L'Allegro announces this fact within the poem with the image of

the cock "Som time walking not unseen (57)." Shawcross footnotes his edition by equating "not

unseen" with "out in the open."[14] L'Allegro's emphasis on the physical, out in the open, features

of the landscape contrasts to those abstract concerns of Il Penseroso that "walk *unseen*/On the

dry smooth-shaven Green" (emphasis mine) (65-66).

The Il Penseroso persona argues for the advantages of an abstract poetics using, in

Shawcross' terms, a "strong Platonic element."[15] From the beginning of the poem, Il Penseroso

announces his concern for the abstract in his personification melancholy:

> But hail thou goddess, sage and holy
> Hail divinest melancholy
> Whose Saintly visage is too bright
> To hit the Sense of human sight;
> And therefore to our weaker view
> O're laid with black staid Wisdoms hue. (11-16)

Wisdom for Il Penseroso lies in the aspects of human life that one cannot discern through the

sense of sight. His poetics depend not on the ability of the reader to produce difficult aesthetic

images, but rather his poem challenges the reader's analytic imagination to contemplate the

underlying meanings behind physical appearance. His poem announces this intention when it

calls upon Melancholy to bring with her "Him that yon soars on golden wing,/ Guiding the fiery-

wheeled throne,/the Cherub Contemplation" (52-54). One might say that contemplation

personified here as a cherub provides a difficult physical image, but Il Penseroso, in his concern

for the unseen, undoubtedly calls the reader to consider the underlying characteristics of the

Cherub. As Shawcross footnotes for these lines, and as easily discernable elsewhere in the

Milton corpus, "the cherubim had the faculty of knowledge and contemplation of divine things."

[16] Il Penseroso understands the divine as Plato's world of forms, and invites the reader to think

about the divine as such when he sits alone in his "high lonely Towr" (86) and hopes to

encounter:

> The spirit of *Plato* to unfold
> What Worlds, or what vast regions hold
> Th'immortal mind that hath forsook
> Her mansion in this fleshly nook: (88-91)

Just as Il Penseroso hopes to read books that force contemplation beyond the "fleshly nook,"

these lines confirm his poem's own intentions: to produce effects beyond the material world.

From the two ostensibly juxtaposed poetic visions of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, one may

discern Milton's own complementary poetics.

Howard reminds us, "neither text can do without the other even as either strives for

autonomy."[17] A Miltonic poetics, then, according to the Companion Poems requires an

understanding of both the physical world and the philosophical meaning underwriting lived

experience. One might expect any poet to concur with Milton on this point, but Milton embeds in

the poems an image that makes a bolder poetic claim: the moon. As Il Penseroso wanders across

a rural landscape he hopes:

> To behold the wandering moon
> Riding neer her highest noon,
> Like one that had bin led astray
> Through the Heav'ns wide pathless way;

In Il Penseroso's understanding of the divine (*supra)*, one that has been led astray implies one

that has stopped or become confused in contemplating the nature of the divine. Because

reflection is the moon's primary function, signifying the existence of the sun, one may interpret

the moon's wandering as L'Allegro's presence in the other poem. This existence of L'Allegro in

Il Penseroso complicates the Miltonic poetics announced by the poems separately by

interrogating the ontology of the aesthetic imagination versus the analytic imagination. Rather than simply announcing that poems require two different types of imagination, the Companion Poems, through the image of the moon, posit that the two different types of imagination rely on the ontology of the other. Where Howard believe that this ontology implies a Miltonic understanding of history *qua* "a helix that might accommodate both cycles of repetition and contingent transgressions against the patterns of time," I feel these examples show that this complementary ontology illustrates a Miltonic understanding of poetics as a matrix of images (signifiers) and abstractions (signifieds) that simultaneously depend upon one another for existence and strive to exist without the other as divine revelations of truth.

While I believe that the Companion Poems illustrate a Miltonic understanding of poetics more so than a Miltonic historiography, Milton embedded the Companion Poems with several historically relevant images that complicate a reconciliation between the two speakers. Concerning Milton's project in *Paradise Lost*, Luke Taylor writes, "He aspires to the entirety of the Christian world plot, as he tried to in the Nativity ode, but without escaping – as in *Il Penseroso* or *L'Allegro* – into an ahistorical space of pure art."[18] The Companion Poems may address questions of "pure art," as Taylor states and as illustrated above, but *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* do not enter into the ahistoric; in their illustrations of festivals, economic status, and literacy, the Companion Poems retain a distinctly seventeenth-century British tone. In the broadest sense, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* visit the three broad landscapes into which scholars J.A. Sharpe and Keith Wrightson artificially, yet crucially, divide Britain to study seventeenth-century history: the rural, the village/town, and the city. *L'Allegro* follows the "Cock with lively din" (49-80) across a rural landscape, until moving "hard by" to a cottage and the "up-land Hamlets" (81-116), before visiting "towered cities" in a dream sequence (117-152). *Il Penseroso,*

between lines 65 and 146, visits all the same landscapes – from "the dry smooth-shaven Green" (66) to "som high lonely Towr" (86). In visiting these landscapes through the personae of L'Allegro and Il Penseroso, Milton demonstrates a cognizance of the emerging socioeconomic landscape. His understanding of the social developments of seventeenth-century Britain accentuates the mutual ontology argument surrounding his poetics, yet the classist hierarchy implied by these developments complicates the reconciliation between the two speakers. I would like to turn presently to the works of Sharpe and Wrightson and then return with a renewed historical understanding to the landscapes of the Companion Poems.

Like the Companion Poems, social developments in seventeenth-century Britain exhibited signs of both contiguity and change. The fact remained that "for most of the population, earning a living meant hard work and at times unremitting physical labor."[19] A modern reader might expect as much in reading *L'Allegro*, but he or she might not know that "English peasant society had always been stratified, but during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries steady population growth and the gradual impact of agrarian capitalism meant that village society became increasingly polarized."[20] Towns and villages were no longer the isolated, egalitarian societies that one could imagine characteristic of the 1600s. Both the rural and provincial landscapes of Britain became incorporated into the capitalist system as the Early Modern Era progressed. Wrightson claims that a spike in the population and an accompanying specialization of labor led to the integration of local economies into regional economies, which focused around urban centers.[21] This integration of economies led to a reconsideration of ethics and familial ties. Wrightson writes, "In these instances we see revealed the fundamental contradiction between the realities of an individualistic agrarian capitalism and the ethics of traditional social obligations… the maintenance of the ideological underpinning of the relations

between superior and inferior assumed particular importance."[22] The relation of superior to inferior was one of client and patron, which varied depending on the transaction, and so much like the poetics of the Companion Poems, the ontology of the superior depended upon the ontology of the inferior as transactions required a quid pro quo existence. The picture one ought to have of the rural/provincial seventeenth-century village or town, then is,

> a picture of local communities which were subject to a considerable degree of
> population mobility and which were held together less by dense ties of kinship
> than by relationships of neighbourliness between effective equals, and ties of
> patronage and clientage between persons of differing status, wealth and power,[23]

rather than the image of an isolated or underdeveloped patriarchal community.

Despite economic relationships between the classes, education and access to literacy remained stratified. While it is true that "by the 1630s, a more substantial proportion of the population than ever before was in receipt of higher education, while schooling of all kinds was available to an extent which had never before been experienced,"[24] the types of education available remained decidedly unequal. During this explosion of literacy, the upper class retained its control over the dominant professions; clergymen and lawyers came from exclusively the upper social classes. Reading and writing became available to apprentices at various trades, but masters viewed their literacy as beneficial only insomuch as it helped with financial accounting. As education of all levels expanded, even the rural farmer could learn to read and write, and he would certainly desire to do so, but for him writing was considered a luxury rather than a necessity.[25] Mechanisms existed, however, that masked the degree to which seventeenth-century British society remained stratified. Lower class people viewed public festivals as ceremonial redistributions of wealth. "Moreover," according to Wrightson, "they helped defuse social

tensions not only between individuals but between social groups, not simply through common participation, but also by virtue of the fact that some festivities included elements of ritual reversal of the structure of rank and authority."[26] While these public festivals, in addition to other informal recreations, built a strong sense of community between and among members of the lower classes, a stratification of knowledge underwrote seventeenth-century British life.

As an educated elite, Milton would have been, consciously or unconsciously, aware of the social changes happening around him,[27] and by including images of literacy and public festival in the Companion Poems, Milton invites the reader to consider how social rank manifests itself in each poem. Rank distinctions in both poems begin with what Howard calls each poem's renunciation of "the other in order to secure its own proper place and state of being."[28] *L'Allegro* begins, "Hence loathed Melancholy/Of *Cerberus,* and blackest midnight born" (1-2). In the simplest terms, the L'Allegro persona must banish melancholy to invite mirth. *Il Penseroso* starts, "Hence vain deluding joys/ … Dwell in some idle brain" (1-5). These opening lines present a power dynamic that tilts heavily in Il Penseroso's favor. The Allegro persona must banish melancholy to experience "Jest and youthful Jollity." Il Penseroso, on the other hand, has the luxury to choose melancholy over mirth. Herman thinks that "otium is convention of the pastoral tradition, and its presence signals L'Allegro's class superiority,"[29] but he confuses the otium experienced during L'Allegro's "Sunshine Holyday" (97) for characteristic of the persona's lifestyle. The opening lines of the poem indicate, however, that L'Allegro must remove the obstacle of melancholy – most likely indicating the physical labor that most lower rank British people experienced as elaborated by Sharpe – to experience the otium written about in the poem, written about as a temporary holiday. Milton depicts Il Penseroso, by contrast, as a "scholar-errant roaming in a gothic landscape…"[30] Il Penseroso truly has more free time – as he

can spend midnights in his lonely tower (86-87) or his days napping by a river (139-149) – but

his reputation as a "scholar-errant" marks his true class superiority.

The stratification of knowledge characteristic of seventeenth-century British life appears

in the Companion Poems in the form of the literacy encountered by both personae. L'Allegro's

affinity for public theatre marks his lower rank, while an ability to read "Gorgeous Tragedy" (97)

indicates Il Penseroso's elevated status. Herman concludes that viewing Shakespeare's or

Jonson's plays means that "L'Allegro's desire to attend the public theatre, like his affection for

chivalric romance, associates him with what some at least considered an abuse of the

imagination."[31] This statement is misguided because of a crucial difference between how

L'Allegro and Il Penseroso experience their respective texts. L'Allegro's only access to

Shakespeare and Jonson comes within a dream (i.e., twice removed from the text). His

experience of the plays comes not from his own imagination but from the imagination of the

directors and actors who put on the staged play. Il Penseroso, on the other hand, may experience

"Gorgeous Tragedy" (line 97) or the "tale of Troy divine" (line 100) while still alone in the "high

lonely Towr" (line 86). Herman concludes that "As for L'Allegro, [Il Penseroso] goes against

expectation by privileging tragedy over comedy, and his taste in dramatists (Jonson and

Shakespeare) is clearly refined, again, like Il Penseroso's."[32] Herman structures his argument

around *what* the personae read rather than *how* they experience a text. The literate Il Penseroso

may directly experience a text, while the illiterate L'Allegro may experience only a telling of the

text. In this reading, Il Penseroso is clearly the one of superior class. If this reading is combined

with Wrightson's understanding that festivals provided a chance for the reconciliation of class

divides, a reader can see how another might confuse the overlaps in content between the

Companion Poems as a reconciliation or a type of symbiosis.

In the final lines of both poems wherein one might discover a way of overcoming the apparent status distinctions, Milton further complicates how a reader could come to understand *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* as in dialogue. *L'Allegro* ends on an ambiguous note: "These delights, if thou canst give,/Mirth with thee I mean to live." The unspecified "thou" might refer to melancholy, but not necessarily as Il Penseroso understands melancholy. Given the historical circumstances of early seventeenth-century British life and the class inferiority of L'Allegro, the poem could refer to lower-status melancholy – physical labor, etc. If one reads these lines in terms of a Miltonic poetics, then one notices a direct refutation of L'Allegro's conclusion at the end of *Il Penseroso*. Il Penseroso states, "These pleasures *Melancholy* give,/And I with thee will choose to live." These lines highlight Il Penseroso's rank superiority yet again; he has the choice to live with *Melancholy*, and he makes a resolute decision. L'Allegro, by contrast, only "means" to live with mirth, and lacking status might not be able to actualize his intent. Because of this difference in status, Il Penseroso's conceptualization of Melancholy must necessarily be different from L'Allegro's. For L'Allegro melancholy signifies lower class struggles, including physical labor and the incorporation into an economic system that favors the economic elite. For Il Penseroso, on the other hand, melancholy signifies the freedom to contemplate toward "something like prophetic strain" (174).

These differences in class epistemology complicate the extent to which one may truly reconcile the speakers of the Companion Poems. Even if we accept that the two poems combined announce a Miltonic poetics, then we ignore the fact that the person transcribing the voices of the two poetic personae (i.e., Milton) was most likely a Penseroso himself. I unequivocally agree with the scholars cited herein that the Companion Poems show Milton's adeptness at creating poetic personae, demonstrate a Miltonic historiography, and provide a glimpse into the

concurrent debate surrounding the usefulness of poetry. The predilections of the personae, however, seem too divergent, on the level of status or class, to say that they can ever announce a unanimous stance. If they cannot, I wonder, are we performing the same ceremonious functions of the seventeenth-century festival and masking status distinctions by repeatedly attempting to resolve the differences between the poems? Should we come to understand the personae as Milton wrote them: separately?

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[1] See Howard, W. Scott. *Milton's 'Hence': Dialogue & the Shape of History in 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso'* In Heitsch and Vallee "Printed Voices: The Renaissance Culture of Dialogue." University of Toroto Press: Toronto, 2004. Print.
And Lewalski, Barbara K. *Milton on Authorship: Personae and Poet-Characters.* Milton Quarterly: Vol. 49.3, 2015. Web.

[2] Herman, Peter C. Milton and the Muse-Haters: Ad Patrem, L'Allegro/Il Penseroso, and the Ambivalences of Poetry. Criticism: Vol. 37.1, 1995. Web.

[3] Howard, 157-174.

[4] Lewalski, 167.

[5] Ibid., 167-168.

[6] Creaser, John. *'Through Mazes Running': Rhythmic Verve in Milton's* L'Allegro *and* Il Penseroso. The Review of English Studies: Vol. 52.207, 2001., 409.

[7] Creaser, 410.

[8] Howard, 165-166.

[9] Ibid., p. 166.

[10] Ibid., p. 160-162.

[11] Ibid., p. 168.

[12] Ibid., pg 160.

[13] Taylor, Luke. *Milton and the Romance of History*. Milton Studies: Vol. 56, 2015., 303.

[14] Shawcross, John T. "The Complete Poetry of John Milton." Doubleday Publishing: New York, 1971., 108. (All transcriptions of poem also from this source.)

[15] Ibid., p. 106.

[16] Ibid., 112.

[17] Howard, 160.

[18] Taylor, 310.

[19] Sharpe, J.A. "Early Modern England: A Social History 1550-1760." Arnold Publishing: London, 1997. Print., 213.

[20] Ibid., 92.

[21] Wrightson, Keith. "English Society: 1580-1680." Routledge Publishing: New Brunswick, 2003. Print., 133-138.

[22] Ibid., 68.

[23] Ibid., 69.

[24] Ibid., 194.

[25] Ibid., 196.

[26] Ibid., 71.

[27] Gordon Campbell, "Milton, John (1608–1674)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*:
Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition, Jan 2009.

[28] Howard, 166.

[29] Herman, Web.

[30] Lewalski, 168.

[31] Herman, Web.

[32] Ibid.