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Paradise Lost and the Politics of the Corporation

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In this essay I wish to argue for a broader understanding of the political and constitutional elements of *Paradise Lost*, by introducing into our analysis a key facet of early modern political economy and social organisation: the corporation. The heaven of Milton's epic is more constitutionally innovative than a first glance at its divine monarchy might suggest, but we can only fully appreciate this if we properly understand the mode of collective organisation of the angels, which, by taking on aspects of the early modern corporation, becomes something akin to the "virtuous circle" that Martin Dzelzainis identifies as being the goal of Milton's political organization: "virtue as that which sustained, and was sustained by, the commonwealth."¹ The angels offer an idealistic vision of a community in which virtue is derived from how closely integrated an individual is in the collective. The angelic corporation is therefore a natural extension of Milton's republican thought, since it offers a way to create civic virtue which is not reliant on the establishment or continuance of a specific political order.

In presenting the angels as a body politic unified with, but distinct from, God, *Paradise Lost* thus presents an ideal type of the "virtuous majority", a collective that remains both a unified body and a part of the inclusive government of heaven by the constant exercising of moral virtue and their intellectual capacity to choose – "freely they stood who stood" (3.102). In this way, the angels serve both as a divine ideal for a type of collective organisation, and as a corrective to the failure of the English people to establish a virtuous collective in the wake of the regicide.

Milton also shows, in Satan, the danger inherent in the corporation, or rather the overseas trading corporations which evolved from the more static, civic corporations set up to

govern towns and cities. In the epic similes linking him to the spice trade, Milton gives us a glimpse of the sort of luxury and vice which in his opinion corrupted the English, and prevented good, collective, government. In fact, as I will show, Milton frequently explores moral problems through the lens of the corporate economy, in both the prose and poetry.

Economic and corporate ideas are not usually considered major themes of Milton's works, in either poetry or prose. If indeed there is a centralising idea within Milton's corpus, it is an interest in political organisation, most obviously the questions of monarchy and tyranny. This, though, is not one distinct idea, but rather a motif to which Milton continually returns, although "the principle of consent figures less in Milton's thought than in that of other republicans"² – Milton, in short, did not trust the political education of the people as a whole sufficiently to entrust them with their own liberty. Worden has since returned to this theme, stressing Milton's distrust of popular sovereignty, either as a practical solution to the constitutional crisis of 1649 or as manifested in Parliament and the council of state: "As usual with Milton, virtue lay in the minority"³. Indeed, the conflict inherent in Milton's "wish that the English people be God's elect" and "his increasing recognition that only a few are sufficiently gifted or disciplined to live up to their divine calling" has become a commonplace among scholars of Milton's intellectual development and his republican leanings.⁴

Those who have studied Milton's republicanism have, then, tended to stress his disdain for majorities and his preference for small communities of virtuous men; consequently, Milton's republicanism is best understood not as a desire for a specific type of government (or even an implacable opposition to monarchy), but as the desire for a system which best encourages virtue in its participants. As Rosanna Cox has noted, "Milton's interest lies not in constitutional forms, but in the virtue and liberty of the people and the best way to ensure the conditions in which they may flourish."⁵ Scholars have therefore tended to

examine the political elements of *Paradise Lost* through the lens of the political organisation and structures of revolutionary and interregnum England, though they have not fully considered the role of the corporation in the poem or in Milton's thought more generally.

The questions of political organisation which recur in Milton's work have their parallel in corporate discourse, which often shared the concerns of equitable distribution, collectivism, and the "ingrossing" of power to one or few (monopoly). As the recent work of corporate historians has shown, questions of political organisation have a distinct resonance with the corporate ideals and debates of the mid seventeenth century:

[I]f one of the features of Renaissance modernity was the establishment of 'society' in the vernacular, then another was the retention of company as a conspicuous, even axiomatic term of social description and identification. The increasing prevalence and visibility of both words suggests (among other things) a culture of early modern corporatism that was crucial to many of the social, cultural, economic and political processes associated with early modernity.⁶

Sociability, collectivity, self-determination (at individual and national level), the commonwealth, and the national interest; these were all discussed and considered through the lens of corporate activity. Moreover, the explosion in corporations from the mid sixteenth-century onward, and the economic booms they created, meant that economic language in the early modern period shifted to adjust to the corporate reality. New mechanisms, such as bills of exchange and other forms of credit, rose up to service the needs of international merchants. Overseas territories in New England, India and Africa were established and managed by corporations.

It would be no exaggeration to say that the economics of the world Milton inhabited were defined in large part by trade, often organized through the corporation. Economic debates centered on corporations, considering how to increase the general trade by encouraging merchants, the need for organization in overseas trade, or their deleterious effects in, for example, exporting bullion or becoming monopolies. Moreover, the corporation acted as a definite link between the economic and political – it existed by royal grant, made payments to the crown and Parliament, lobbied for special privileges and even provided ambassadors and embassies overseas. Indeed, Philip Stern’s work on the East India Company demonstrates the extent to which “the Company was something quite other than a private monopoly merchant”, seeing it instead as “a form of political community and polity” which interacted with a whole host of other political and legal institutions in determining England’s constitutional settlement.⁷

Although Milton inhabited this world, it is likely his first encounter with corporate life came not from their effects on London, but his own household. Milton was exposed to corporate activities from a young age, not least through his father. Scholars have tended to see the impact of Milton’s father, John Milton sr., on the poet’s career in two ways: primarily, as a supporter or patron of his son’s education (no doubt helped by Milton’s own presentation of his father in this light, most notably in *Ad Patrem*); and secondly, as a musical influence – Milton Sr. was a composer and setter of madrigals.⁸ His work as a scrivener, however, has received much less attention. Though frequently noted in biographies, little thought has been given to the ways in which the corporate world in which his father lived and worked might have impacted on Milton’s thought. Campbell and Corns, for example, record that for John Milton Sr “Business was his source of income; his passion, however, was music”, and ask “How did the music of the elder Milton affect his son?”, without asking the same of his business career, or the fact the young poet lived alongside his father’s shop.⁹

Milton's career as a poet was funded by grants from his father's business, and later his ability to live off the interest generated by his inheritance. Indeed, the poet's conscience is pricked in *The Reason of Church-Government* with the realization that his "leisure" came "out of the sweat of other men".¹⁰ Since by "leisure" Milton actually means freedom to offer a "tongue" to the service of the Church, he intertwines his own compulsion to write with the corporate business practices of his father, and others in the scribes' guild, whose emblem of the spread eagle Milton would eventually take as part of his coat of arms. As William Kerrigan has noted, this passage, "thick with financial metaphors," establishes that Milton must use his poetic talent to repay the particular debt owed to his father, and the general debt to corporate-capitalist system from which he continued to derive an income.¹¹

Milton returned to the idea of an economic debt repaid with literary output frequently. *Ad Patrem*, of course, makes this explicit, noting that poetic output is the thing which can "most fittingly repay your gifts to me".¹² Often twinned with the parable of the talents from Matthew, the awareness of the gifts bestowed on him (by his father, God or society), and the anxiety over the proper payment of those debts, was a crucial component of Milton's self-reflexive output. This can be seen most clearly, of course, in Sonnet 16, "When I Consider how my Light is Spent". Here, in lines recalling the third servant of the parable, Milton's anxiety over the use of "that one talent which is death to hide" becomes a reassurance that "God doth not need / Either man's work or his own gifts".¹³ That is, the mechanism of financial exchange ("talent" for "gift") is overcome by the morality of service. I will return to this equivalence between economic debt and non-economic payment or service in my discussion of Satan, below.

Economic ideas thus formed part of Milton's worldview; commercial metaphors and references are scattered throughout the prose tracts, where they tend to reinforce the sense of the "corporate economy". However, rather than focusing on domestic corporations (like

guilds or urban corporations), they instead seem more aligned to the great multinational corporations, focused as they are on international relations and overseas markets. In Tetrachordon he argues that

Neither should we love them that hate the Lord, as the Prophet told Jehosaphat. 2 Chron. 19. And this Apostle himselfe in another place warns us that we be not unequally yoked with Infidels 2 Cor. 6. for that there can be no fellowship, no communion, no concord between such. Outward commerce and civil intercourse cannot perhaps be avoided; but true friendship and familiarity there can be none.¹⁴

Though Milton is clearly skeptical of the civilising benefits of trade (and perhaps even cautious of the dangers of “going native”), he is conscious of its presence at the heart of international relations; commerce is an equal partner with “civil intercourse”, which, though it falls short of “true friendship”, is nevertheless a more stable equilibrium than enmity or warfare. Such a conception of trade was reinforced by corporate discourse throughout the seventeenth century. Companies sometimes sponsored official ambassadors, most famously Sir Thomas Roe, first in India and later the Ottoman Empire; alternatively, merchants carried royal letters of introduction to new territories, for example Richard Chancellor on the first voyage of what would become the Muscovy (Russia) Company in 1551. These international exchanges remained a core defence of corporate activity:

But to live well, to flourish and grow rich, we must finde meanes, by Trade to vent our superfluities; therewith to furnish and adorne us with the Treasure and those necessarie wares, which forreine Nations doe afford.¹⁵

Mun argues, in effect, that the overseas corporation serves the public good by creating a balance of trade in which dangerous superabundance is converted to other, essential, goods, for the benefit of the whole nation, who flourish in the new trades and industries that create employment and further exports. It is, then, no surprise that Milton should consider “commerce” as a state of international relations alongside “war” and “peace”, given its importance to national prosperity and domestic tranquility. In *The Ready and Easie Way* Milton is thus in harmony with other key thinkers of his age (including Hobbes and Harrington) when he makes trade a central focus of his proposed government’s relationships with other states:

In this Grand Council must the sovraintie, not transferrd, but delegated only, and as it were deposited, reside; with this caution they must have the forces by sea and land committed to them for preservation of the common peace and libertie; must raise and manage the public revenue, at least with som inspectors deputed for satisfaction of the people, how it is imploid; must make or propose, as more expressly shall be said anon, civil laws; treat of commerce, peace, or warr with forein nations, and for the carrying on som particular affairs with more secrecie and expedition, must elect, as they have already out of thir own number and others, a Councel of State.¹⁶

Indeed, at the end of the pamphlet, Milton makes an impassioned case against the claim that “nothing but kingship can increase trade”, arguing that “trade flourished nowhere more than in the free commonwealths of Italy, Germany and the Low Countries”.¹⁷ By citing these countries, in which corporate and civic government were intertwined in ways not dissimilar from his proposed Grand Council, Milton reinforces the idea of the corporate economy as a collective social endeavor distinct from monarchy. The link between mercantile and civic or

urban governance was well established, not least by the significant number of company directors who also served in Parliament, as Mayors of London, or in other legal offices such as JPs.

Lewes Roberts, who was part of the Merchant Adventurers, Levant and East India Companies, went even further by advocating merchants as ideal civic rulers, since they are improved by overseas experience:

by his wisdom, travell, and experience abroad, to be able oftentimes to sit at the stern of the Cities government, punishing the vicious, rewarding the vertuous; and herein he performs the part of a Senator and Counsellor: neither yet is he wanting in many other particulars, to perform the duty of a good patriote and citizen, (not comprized within any of these aforesaid limits;) for his traffique is seen to improve the Countries commodities, to set the poore and needy on worke, to invent new fabriques, stufes and the like; to plant forraigne colonies, to settle peace and amity amongst Princes.¹⁸

Roberts and Milton, therefore, share a conception of the common good based on raising revenue, preserving domestic peace (including rewarding and punishing), and managing foreign affairs. Their confluence emphasises the way in which political and economic discourse overlapped through the century, and, as Joyce Appleby has demonstrated, spilled out into other spheres: “The imaginative reconstruction of economic relations by seventeenth-century thinkers created new truths, suggested possible activities, imposed moral lessons and contributed analogies to the other areas of social thinking.”¹⁹ As economically-oriented scholars of Milton such as Robert Markely or Blair Hoxby have demonstrated, he was deeply embedded in a system of “religious, political and economic reforms [which] were calculated

to reinforce one another and to create a public sphere in which autonomous individuals might freely exercise their skill and diligence in the vent and purchase of ideas, skills and commodities.”²⁰ I fundamentally agree with Hoxby’s analysis of Milton’s broad economic ideas and ambitions, but wish to extend it here by considering the corporation, a form of social organization which combines politics, religion and economics, and yet is under-examined in existing work on Milton’s thought. Recent work in corporate history has focused on the ontology of corporations, revealing the way in which these bodies can either seek a physical emulation of the state, or, conversely, exist as a “conceptual ground” of idea-generation, ‘supplemented by fictions of a literary, rather than a legal type.’²¹ It is this latter genus of corporations, as a focus and model for ideological development, with which I am concerned here, because it is, I suggest, the mode of corporate being with which Milton was most engaged.

For Milton, it was usually the moral lessons of the political economy which engaged his imagination. As I will show, the corporate economy functions in two distinct, but connected, ways in *Paradise Lost*. Firstly, economic metaphors and corporate activity help shape the character of Satan, but are also used more broadly in the poem to signify and examine changes (usually declines) in social cohesion or moral status. Secondly, I will demonstrate the more positive use of corporate imagery within the poem, as a motif for a mutually beneficial angelic collective. Using the corporation as an organizational theme allows Milton to explore the rights and duties of civil and spiritual society in a manner which transcends purely political organization.

The Economics of Paradise Lost

A number of the moral dimensions of *Paradise Lost* are expressed in the economic terms of bargains, agreements and debts. Notably, these are usually postlapsarian; this is most visible in the ways in which Adam and Eve's conception of the covenant with God shifts before and after they break it. Before the Fall, they express this as a "command" (9.652), an "easy charge" or "easy prohibition" (4.21 and 4.31).²² Once the fruit has been plucked, however, mercantile terminology comes to dominate the human sense of the covenant, as Adam bewails the "fleeting joys / Of Paradise, dear bought with lasting woes" (10.741-2). The conception of the Fall as a purchase or debt had been pre-empted by Messiah's plea for "Indebted and undone" (3.235) humanity, who, once Fallen, have no offering to give to God.

In fact, in *Tetrachordon* Milton includes commerce in the ill effects of the "hardness of heart" caused by the Fall and subsequent isolation from God:

He suffer'd his own People to waste and spoil and slay by War, to lead captives, to be some masters, some servants, some to be Princes, others to be Subjects; he suffered propriety to divide all things by several possession, trade and commerce, not without usury; in his commonwealth some to be undeservedly rich, others to be undeservedly poor.²³

Here, commerce is division, individuality and, through usury, the preying of man upon man; naturally, this economic order leads to unfairness and produces social divisions. Perhaps for this reason Satan makes his triumphant announcement that the Fall has been achieved in economic terms:

Him by fraud I have seduced

From his creator, and the more to increase

Your wonder, with an apple

.....

I am to bruise his heel;

His seed, when is not set, will bruise my head

A world who would not purchase with a bruise,

Or much more grievous pain?

(10.485-501)

Here Satan's role as the "artificer of fraud" takes on an economic, as well as moral dimension. There are two bargains discussed here: mankind's surrender of innocence for the apple, and Satan's exchange of a "bruise" in return for seducing Eve. Satan's momentary jubilation relies on his misunderstanding of these terms as literal goods (an apple and a bruise contrasted to a high-value "world") available for exchange; by reducing the high-value symbolism of the apple to the low-value object, Satan is revealed as thoroughly mercantile, rather like the merchants of Areopagitica who deal only with worldly things:

A wealthy man addicted to his pleasure and to his profits, finds Religion to be a traffick so entangl'd, and of so many piddling accounts, that of all mysteries he cannot skill to keep a stock going upon that trade. What should he doe? fain he would have the name to be religious, fain he would bear up with his neighbours in that. What does he therefore, but resolves to give overtoyling, and to find himself out som factor, to whose care and credit he may commit the whole managing of his religious affairs; som Divine of note and estimation that must be.²⁴

Like the busy merchant, Satan cannot “value right” (4.200), seeing only the physical things involved in the trade, without comprehending their theological semiotics.

In this context, the transmutation of his voyage to Earth into the spice traders heading to the East Indies makes perfect sense. However much Satan presents his voyage as a conquest, winning Eden “to range in, and to dwell, and over man / To rule” (10.492-3), the metaphors that bookend his actual voyage reveal the impossibility of that conquest. Tellingly, it is the spice trade, which was a response to the impracticality of the colonial project in the east, to which Satan’s voyage is compared. His journey from Hell to Earth begins with a comparison with a trading fleet:

As when far off at sea a fleet descried
Hangs in the clouds, by equinoctial winds
Close sailing from Bengala, or the isles
Of Ternate and Tidore, whence merchants bring
Their spicy drugs: they on the trading flood
Through the wide Ethiopian to the Cape
Ply stemming nightly toward the pole. So seemed
Far off the flying fiend (PL 2.636-43).

Markley reads this passage as a direct attack on England’s trading rivals, especially the Dutch, noting that Ternate and Tidore “had appealed to James I for protection from the monopolistic practices of the VOC”.²⁵ This metaphor, though, should be read within the broader context of corporate trade. The comparison of Satan to a trade fleet casts him as a merchant adventurer, figuring his voyage as one of discovery rather than conquest.

The conceit of the profit-seeking European explorers, coupled with the deliberate naming of two islands heavily contested by those European powers, blends the two stated objectives of Satan's mission. Satan admits to the Council of Hell that he does not know where the Earth (notably figured as "the happy isle" at 2.410) is, and he must search through the abyss for "whatever world, or unknown region" (2.442-3) he can find. Earth is, according to "ancient and prophetic fame", a "happy seat" which Satan believes to be especially favoured by God (2. 346-51). This echoes the early European beliefs about the wealth of the East, and the perceived value of their voyages of exploration.

The theme is reprised at the end of his voyage, as Satan arrives at the walls of Eden. The "native perfumes" (4.157) of Paradise are as pleasing to Satan as the scent of spices to weary sailors:

As when to them who sail
Beyond the Cape of Hope, and now are past
Mozámbic, off at sea north-east winds blow
Sabean odours from the spicy shore
Of Arabie the blest, with such delay
Well pleased they slack their course, and many a league
Cheered with the grateful smell old Ocean smiles.

(4.159-65)

For the traders, the odour of spice is an indicator of the success of their mission, both geographically (as they, like Satan, approach their destination) and commercially. This scent, though, is clearly figured as exotic, in contrast to the "native" scents of Eden; it is only available in the lands beyond the Cape (Mozambique, Sheba, Arabia), which remained a

difficult and expensive voyage. The danger is emphasised in the narrative of Tobias which immediately follows this simile:

So entertained these odorous sweets the fiend
Who came their bane, though with them better pleased
Than Asmodeus with the fishy fume,
That drove him, though enamoured, from the spouse
Of Tobit's son, and with a vengeance sent
From Media post to Ægypt, there fast bound.

(4.166-71)

Satan is twice reported as being “pleased” or “entertained” with the “odorous sweets” of Eden; these descriptors provide parallels between Satan’s entrance to Eden and the traders of the previous narrative, since both are “pleased” by the “sabean odours” or “odorous sweets”. The introduction of the narrative of Tobias (“Tobit’s son”) allows for a typological reading to be added to the contextual metaphor.²⁶ Tobias justifies his marriage to Sara by comparison with Adam, since God “madest Adam, and gavest him Eve his wife for an helper & stay”.²⁷ Tobit’s ability to drive off “Asmodai / the fleshliest incubus” (PR 2.151-2) by creating a foul smell offers a typological “vengeance” for Satan’s “bane” to Eden (and therefore Adam and Eve).²⁸ Even the “odorous sweets” of Eden, then, however pleasing they may be to Satan at the moment of his entry, prefigure his eventual defeat. This juxtaposition of the readily available native perfumes of Eden with the difficult to obtain spices of our fallen world, coupled with the metaphor of dangerous smells that immediately follows it, serves to introduce peril to Satan’s mission at the very point when it appears most successful.

The Tobias metaphor also serves a contemporary purpose. Although both Adam and Tobias are warned against their foe by Raphael, the pleasing ‘sweets’ of Eden do not drive Satan away, as the “fishy fume” does Asmodeus.²⁹ The scents of Paradise, collapsed into the spicy odours of seventeenth-century exploration, become dangerously enticing for those, like Satan, seek to possess or despoil them. The Tobias story thus also serves as a warning against the too-alluring mercantilism of our fallen world. James I, in his anti-smoking tract of 1604, attacked the “inconsiderate and childish affectation of novelty” which prompted the attribution of many beneficial properties to the newly-available tobacco plant.³⁰ James attacks the grandiose claims made by tobacco merchants, culminating in a deployment of the Tobias narrative:

And if it could by the smoke thereof chase out devils, as the smoke of Tobias fish did (which I am sure could smell no stronger) it would serve for a precious relic, both for the superstitious Priests, and the insolent Puritans, to cast out devils withal.

(sig.C3r)

This ironic attack also conflates a seemingly beneficial smell with the foul odour of Tobias’s fish. This movement serves to undermine the proponents of tobacco, reducing the smoke to a proverbially foul smell, and simultaneously removing the only benefit of “Tobias fish”, the power to drive away demons. By suggesting this confusion, James’s text privileges biblical truth against the unsubstantiated claims of the advocates for tobacco.

Milton modulates this attack on merchants (who he places alongside the clergy as “dispensers of treasures inestimable without price”) in the Reason of Church-Government, suggesting they place worldly profit above the commonweal:

And that which aggravates the burden more is, that having received amongst his allotted parcels certain precious truths of such an orient lustre as no Diamond can equal, which never the less he has in charge to put off at any cheap rate, yea for nothing to them that will, the great Merchants of this world seeing that this course would soon discover, and disgrace the false glitter of their deceitful wares wherewith they abuse the people, like poor Indians with beads and glasses, practice by all means how they may suppress the venting of such rarities and such a cheapness as would undo them, and turn their trash upon their hands.³¹

The comparison of “precious truth” with the “diamonds” it outshines reveals the line of Milton’s attack: truth should be given freely (“for nothing to them that will”), yet the practice of trade (and the increased consumerism it necessitates) means the people are given “trash” and “false glitter” instead. As Blair Hoxby has observed, for Milton and his contemporaries economic language offered a way of “thinking systematically about the conditions of intellectual exchange that were likeliest to generate truth without bound.”³² It is not surprising, then, that the same comparison between truth and trade is made in *Areopagitica*: “Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopolized and traded in by tickets and statutes [...] like our broad cloth and our wool packs.”³³ Just as for James, the practice of trade itself is not deleterious (truth is described as having an exotically “orient lustre”), except if the focus on the trade removes attention (either from producer or consumer) from the search for truth. It is, of course, precisely this kind of false lustre which Milton believed had corrupted the minds of his countrymen away from the ideals (or rather, the potential) of the English commonwealth.

This kind of discourse offers further nuance to Satan’s positioning as a trader. He is simply “entertained” by the ‘sweets’ of Eden, without realising their true importance: God

has created the plants for Adam and Eve to nurture (“to tend plant, herb and flower, / Our pleasant task enjoined” [9.205-6]), not simply to enjoy. A few lines later, after leaping over the wall, Satan perches on the tree of life:

Sat like a cormorant: yet not true life
Thereby regained, but sat devising death
To them that lived; nor on the virtue thought
Of that life-giving plant, but only used
For prospect, what well used had been the pledge
Of immortality. So little knows
Any, but God alone, to value right
The good before him

(4.196-202)

Satan, like the misguided merchants, simply does not understand how to “value right” the possessions of the New World he would claim – just as he will not value right the apple and bruise later on. The narrator makes clear here what was implicit in the image of the spice trader: Satan, like the “poor Indians”, is distracted by outward appearance. This metaphor thus reverses his colonial mission, casting Satan as the naïve figure unable to understand true value.

Questions of value and economics thus recur throughout Satan’s thought, and, like Adam and Eve, he re-conceives his relationship to God in terms of bargains, purchases and exchanges:

I sdeigned subjection, and thought one step higher

Would set me highest, and in a moment quit
The debt immense of endless gratitude,
So burdensome, still paying, still to owe;
Forgetful what from him I still received,
And understood not that a grateful mind
By owing owes not, but still pays, at once
Indebted and discharged; what burden then?

(4.50-7)

Though Satan begins this thought in the language of ambition (“higher”), he soon turns to an economic metaphor of a debt; however, as with the scents of Eden, this creates a problem of comprehension, so “Satan refuses to pay his debt because he fails to understand it.”³⁴ Unlike Milton, whose understanding of debt (the talents) allows a repayment through freely-given service, Satan can only conceptualize of God’s gifts as requiring “endless gratitude”, establishing an unrepayable burden on His creation. Even the apparent understanding, in line with the parable of the talents, that gratitude and service would discharge him from this burden is illusory, since Satan ultimately resolves that God’s grace would only provoke him to make the same choices again (“how soon / Would height recall high thoughts” [4.94-6]). Carl Wennerlind has recently shown the role played by debt, particularly transferable debt, in the growth of the English economy. The market in credit and debt stimulated a shift in political economy, too, as “commercial and moneyed interests acquired a greater political influence through the public debt”, at the expense of the landed elite.³⁵ The transformative effect of debt on English society, and the associated changes to trust networks and social cohesion allow Satan to attempt a modulation of ambition into something else, akin to independence.

Satan's apparent understanding of his rebellion, away from the devils for whom he must perform, is of debt relief – not a desire to rule, but rather a desire not to be forced to pay gratitude endlessly. Like most of Satan's words, this is directly contradicted by other speeches, and deeds, but it is nonetheless a curious moment of self-justification in his most self-conscious soliloquy. The metaphor of a debt allows Satan to conceptualise his relationship to and with God in subtler and more complex ways than the "ambition" that animates the first few books of the poem. Even his conception of what an unfallen Satan ought to have felt is filtered through the economic metaphor, so that true gratitude becomes a perpetual discharging of a perpetual debt. Satan, like all fallen creatures, can no longer fully perceive the divine mystery, and must approximate it in fallen terms.

The heavenly corporation

Angels are in many ways central to *Paradise Lost*. They carry God's messages, impart visions, give important information and warnings to Adam and Eve, and, of course, the fallen angels provide the impulse for humanity's Fall. They are also important, though, as a political motif. Milton significantly expands the biblical evidence for the war in heaven, and this gives him time to explore the ways in which angelic society is organized, offering an imaginative ideal for social organisation on Earth. As Joad Raymond's work has shown, the civil wars "created an intellectual and soteriological environment in which angels had a powerful valence, as metaphors and a means of analysing and redescribing society."³⁶ The angels of *Paradise Lost* are no different; their collective examines and reflects contemporary social organisation – as a military and spiritual union, certainly, but with a number of striking similarities to the early modern corporation.

Primarily, given the subject of the epic, the angels are described in military terms. As Raymond points out, this evokes a more complex set of imagery than the merely martial:

Milton's heaven and his angels appear at times to be organized along military lines. [...] However, far from being heterodox, this picks out and elaborates a prevalent theme in theology: as ministering spirits they resemble an army, and like an army they pitch their tents in their watchfulness.³⁷

However, such a collective organisation also brings to mind the orderliness and public face of a corporation, similarly designed to bring together individuals for a collective, and often charitable (at least in part), benefit. The connection between the church and the corporation would not have been unusual to Milton's readers, with contemporary sermons comparing spiritual life to fellowship in a company. James Duport, a poet, translator, Cambridge Professor of Greek and an ejected prebend, was invited to preach at St Paul's in 1660 to mark the Restoration. He took the opportunity of the sermon to draw comparisons between the rights and duties of citizens on earth and in heaven:

Ye are (as S. Paul said of himself) citizens of no mean citie [...] remember withall that ye are citizens too of a far nobler and better citie, viz. the Church of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, the citie which is from above. Members ye are and freemen, at least ye profess your selves to be free of this corporation, of this company [...] for the Gospel of Christ that is your grand Charter, by which you hold all your spiritual priviledges, rights, and immunities.³⁸

Duport's understanding of the heavenly city comes through contemporary terminology of corporate governance; the faithful take their place as freemen, with rights guaranteed and enumerated by a charter, so long as they obey the terms of that charter (as the ominous "at least ye profess your selves to be free" subtly reminds us). Terms such as "members" and "freemen" emphasise the equality inherent in the image, which suggests a collective citizenship sharing the same privileges.

The loyal angels of *Paradise Lost* privilege precisely this sort of equitable collective, with each member sublimating himself to and for the whole – hence Abdiel's immediate return to the angelic ranks upon his return from Satan's palace: "Already known what he for news had thought / To have reported: gladly then he mixt" (6.20-1). As Stanley Fish has shown, the "gladness" of Abdiel is in the instinctive "los[ing] himself in a host already composed" without any sense of grievance at the lack of personal aggrandisement, or even the realisation that he should or could be aggrieved.³⁹

Such angelic unanimity is stressed throughout the epic. Indeed, the loyal angels of *Paradise Lost* repeatedly stress their freedom as members of a collective. Similarly, sermons reminded their auditors that to be part of a spiritual collective required service, and drew out the nuances involved in terms such as "freedom" and "freemen":

to do what we would is not Freedom, but servitude; to do what God would, is the Freedom that belongs to the Citizens of the Heavenly corporation, the City of God, the Church of God; ⁴⁰

The loyal angels likewise understand that independence from God is to be "to thy self enthralled" (6.181). They serve not because it is a duty, but one of their spiritual privileges. In the council of heaven, there is "No voice exempt, no voice but well could join / Melodious

part, such concord is in Heaven” (3.370-1). Similarly, the angels which had participated ‘so oft in festivals of joy and love / Unanimous, as sons of one great Sire” (6.94-5) put aside their joy for warfare. Both the harmony and concord of the singing, and the fraternity of the soldiers, indicate a kind of equality under the “great Sire” of God (and Messiah) which echoes the corporate desire to “live as fellow Cittizens freely together”.⁴¹

The liberty-through-service of both corporate citizens and the inhabitants of the City of God was a recurring theme of early modern sermons. The preacher, and chaplain to Archbishop George Abbott, Daniel Featley, had made the connection between heavenly and social organisation while stressing the corporate nature of the city:

As in Cities and societies on earth, men have communion and society one with another, the less have interest in the greater, and the greater in the less, and all have interest one in another: the inferiours receive from the superiours, protection and provision, and the superiours, receive from the inferiours, subjection and submission. So it is in this heavenly Corporation, in this spiritual Jerusalem: Jerusalem is a City at unitie in it self;⁴²

Featley was known to Milton, having included his “tractate of Divorce, in which the bonds of marriage are let loose to inordinate lust” as one of the heresies against which he railed in his 1645 pamphlet, *The Dippers Dipt*.⁴³ Though there is no direct evidence that Milton read *Threinokos*, he had responded in *Tetrachordon* to Featley’s oblique criticism of his divorce tracts, and so it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that he would have read *Threinokos* as part of preparing his counter-argument. The language of a “heavenly Corporation” is telling – Featley clearly means by it a hierarchical system, as he qualifies the ‘subjection and

submission” of inferiors as a return for “protection and provision”. However, this is a mutually beneficial system, with both greater and lesser sharing “interest” in the system. The angels” own reflections on their status reinforce this conception of a symbiotic system. Abdiel notes that Messiah makes the angels “Under one head more near / United” (5.830-1), and the heavenly army is “Under their Head imbodyed all in one” (6.779). The image recurs throughout his rhetoric:

and all the Spirits of Heaven

By him created in their bright degrees,
Crowned them with glory, and to their glory named
Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers,
Essential Powers; nor by his reign obscured,
But more illustrious made, since he the Head
One of our number thus reduced becomes,
His laws our laws, all honour to him done
Returns our own.

(PL 5.838-45)

Abdiel’s conception of the divine unity is not that of an identity-eliding subsumation, but rather a symbiotic partnership which benefits and augments both parties. The existence of a system of angelic orders, with God as its head, is mutually affirming; Though Abdiel’s self-conception is bound up in divine service (“none with more zeal adored / the Deity, and divine commands obeyed” [5.805-6]), that service does not result in abnegation, but in a more secure sense of self, in which adoration is at once both a divine echo and, paradoxically, a method by which an identity can be established. The very fact of the angelic degrees enables

a sense of angelic identity that is combined with God (“one of our number”), yet also allows the individualised response suggested by “our own” honour without the separation from God that characterises the fallen world.

Though this conception of a united body politic under a single head cannot but bring to mind the Hobbesian understanding of the state, famously displayed in the frontispiece to *Leviathan*, it is also the way in which the early modern corporation was defined:

Corporation (corporatio) is a permanent thing, that may have succession; it is an Assembly and joyning together of many into one fellowship, brotherhood and minde, whereof one is Head and cheif, the rest are the body.⁴⁴

This interpretation is given greater strength by Abdiel’s use of the word “imbodied”, suggestive of “incorporation” in the sense of “one body” or “bodies joined together”.

It is perhaps suggestive that the first image that springs to Gabriel’s mind when analysing devilish society is a continuation of this image. After hearing Satan’s varied reasons for leaving Hell, Gabriel asks to whom Satan is loyal, if not God:

Oh sacred name of faithfulness profaned!

Faithful to whom? To thy rebellious crew?

Army of fiends, fit body to fit head;

(4.951-3)

Gabriel’s attack on Satan works as one of misguided loyalty (loyalty downwards, to other rebels, instead of up to God), but also reveals how instinctive the idea of corporate organisation is to the angels. Notably, Gabriel does not conceive of Satan as separated or

excluded from the devils (except in the terms of his solitary mission), although Satan himself often stresses his isolation and difference. Gabriel's imagery reminds Satan that even though he claims to have hard-won liberty, he is still part of a collective - he may prefer, or pretend to prefer, his duties as a leader rather than a follower, but he is nonetheless bound by the organisational structures of Heaven which have been reproduced (if travestied) in Hell.

Placing Milton's work within the intellectual currents generated by the expansion of early modern corporate life thus enables us to reconsider the way in which he engages with questions of morality, godliness and collectivity. Though Milton clearly had a skeptical view of economic activity, he also saw, as his contemporaries did, the opportunities it offered for moral and intellectual development, even if he felt they were rarely taken. Similarly, though he was clearly disappointed by the failures of the people of England, *Paradise Lost* offered an opportunity to offer as a kind of corrective an ideal community of virtuous individuals sublimating themselves in the service of a greater good. In doing so, we can perhaps imagine a Milton less pessimistic about the majority – as with the search for truth, a virtuous majority might not have been created yet, and might never be created on earth, but as it can be imagined, it can be strived for.

Using the corporation as a lens thus reveals something of the way in which Milton thought about civic virtue, and in particular the ways in which virtue could be developed away from fixed political forms. Much work has been done on his proposed educational strategy for inculcating virtue, and I suggest the less-considered corporate form can be seen as a companion, an ongoing project for ensuring a contribution to, and participation in society: in short, ensuring the virtuous remain virtuous.

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Notes

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¹ Martin Dzelzainis, "Milton's Classical Republicanism," in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. David Armitage, Armand Himy, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), p. 21.

² Blair Worden, "Milton's Republicanism and the Tyranny of Heaven," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), p. 233.

³ *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England: John Milton, Andrew Marvell, Marchamont Nedham* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), p. 201.

⁴ Paul Hammond, *Milton and the People* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), p. 15.

⁵ Rosanna Cox, "John Milton's Politics, Republicanism and the Terms of Liberty," *Literature Compass* 4, no. 6 (2007): 1567.

⁶ Phil Withington, *Society in Early Modern England: The Vernacular Origins of Some Powerful Ideas* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), p. 105.

⁷ Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty & the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), p. 50, 10.

⁸ The most notable and thorough study of Milton Sr. remains Ernest Brennecke, *John Milton the Elder and His Music* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1938).

⁹ Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 9-11.

¹⁰ Don M. Wolfe, ed. *Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1953-82), 1.804.

¹¹ William Kerrigan, *The Sacred Complex: On the Psychogenesis of Paradise Lost* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), p. 65.

¹² John Milton, *The Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey, rev. 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2007), 'Ad Patrem', p.158.

¹³ Milton, *Complete Shorter Poems*, 'Sonnet 16', lines 3, 9-10.

¹⁴ Wolfe, CPW, 2.682.

¹⁵ Thomas Mun, *A Discourse of Trade* (London: John Piper, 1621), 50.

¹⁶ Wolfe, CPW, 7.433.

¹⁷ Wolfe, CPW, 7.461.

¹⁸ Lewes Roberts, *The Merchants Map of Commerce* (London, 1638), p. 20.

¹⁹ Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Economic Thought and Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), p. 22.

²⁰ Blair Hoxby, *Mammon's Music: Literature and Economics in the Age of Milton* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2002), 52.

²¹ Henry S. Turner, *The Corporate Commonwealth: Pluralism and Political Fictions in England 1516-1651* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2016), chap. 1.

²² References to *Paradise Lost* are taken from *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2007). Further references are given in the text.

²³ Wolfe, CPW, 2.661.

²⁴ Wolfe, CPW, 2.544.

²⁵ Robert Markley, *The Far East and the English Imagination, 1600-1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), p. 83.

²⁶ The book of Tobit was treated as apocryphal in the Protestant tradition, and dismissed as unscriptural by commentators such as Hugh Broughton. It was, however, included in the Apocrypha in the 1611 Authorized Version.

²⁷ The Holy Bible, Containing the Old Testament and the New. Newly Translated out of the Original Tongues, (London: Robert Barker, 1611), Tobit 8:6.

²⁸ Milton, *Complete Shorter Poems*, *Paradise Regained* 2.151-2.

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- ²⁹ The Tobias story is reintroduced when Raphael is sent by God to warn Adam about Satan (5.221-3).
- ³⁰ James Stuart, *A Counterblast to Tobacco* (London: R.B., 1604), sig. B1v. The tract remained relevant throughout the seventeenth century, and was reprinted with commentary and further material by John Hancock as *The Touchstone, or Trial of Tobacco* (1676). Further references are taken from the 1604 edition, and given in the text.
- ³¹ Wolfe, CPW, 1.801-2.
- ³² Hoxby, *Mammon's Music*, p. 26.
- ³³ Wolfe, CPW, 2.535-6.
- ³⁴ David Hawkes, "Milton and Usury," *English Literary Renaissance* 41, no. 3 (2011): 517.
- ³⁵ Carl Wennerlind, *Casualties of Credit: The English Financial Revolution, 1620-1720* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011), p. 177.
- ³⁶ Joad Raymond, *Milton's Angels: The Early-Modern Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), p.89-90.
- ³⁷ Raymond, *Milton's Angels*, p. 79.
- ³⁸ James Duport, *Evangelical Politie* (Cambridge: John Field, 1660), p. 13.
- ³⁹ Stanley Eugene Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), p. 303.
- ⁴⁰ J. Votier, *Vox Dei & Hominis. God's Call from Heaven Echoed by Mans Answer from Earth.* (London: T. C. for Nathanael Webb, and William Grantham, 1658), p. 37.
- ⁴¹ Anon, *The Hollanders Declaration of the Affairs of the East Indies* (Amsterdam: s.n., 1622), p. 10.
- ⁴² Daniel Featley, *Threnoikos the House of Mourning Furnished with Directions for the Hour of Death* (London: G. Dawson, 1640), p. 197.
- ⁴³ *The Dippers Dipt* (London: Nicholas Bourne and Richard Royston, 1645), p. xiv; See William Riley Parker, *Milton's Contemporary Reputation* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1940), p. 20.
- ⁴⁴ Thomas Blount, *Glossographia* (London: Tho. Newcombe for George Sawbridge, 1661), "Corporation".