How Milton’s Rhythms Work

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Acknowledgments

The person who most influenced the contents of this thesis told me her favorite dedication was John Steinbeck’s at the opening of *East of Eden*. In it, Steinbeck talks of his work as of a small wooden box. He tells his friend Pat that “nearly everything I have is in it, and it is not full.”

This page is to acknowledge two things: first, that the box of this thesis is far from full, no matter how much I have put into it. And second, that much of what has found its way into this box would have fallen astray, were it not for the people who have supported me in various ways, both throughout my life and throughout the past year.

First of all, I owe a special kind of respect and thanks to my advisor, Blair Hoxby. Not only has he read many more pages than appear in this thesis, and not only has he read many more pages than I could have expected even the most engaged advisor to read; he has also done this with a patience and care for which I have a deep, deep gratitude.

I also want to thank Erik Johnson, my graduate mentor, for his part in this project. Theses are like boxes in many ways, but one way in which theses are very different is that they have due dates. Thank you, Erik, for providing valuable feedback, for sharing your considerable expertise with someone who needed it, and, most of all, for keeping me on track.

Third, I want to thank Alice Staveley, who has put in place the support system that has guided me through the process of writing this thesis, and Roland Greene, for signing on as my second reader.

And finally I want to thank my friends and family. First, to my friends, both within the English Honors Cohort and without, both within La Maison Française and without: to the extent that I have managed to keep the bad feelings out of my box – anger, envy, frustration, laziness, fatigue – I have you to thank for your loyalty and emotional support.

And to my family: Nanny Ellie, I remember making a promise sometime back about dedicating the first thing I wrote to you. I don’t know if this should count as a “thing,” but to hell with petty quibbles: this is for you, so you can know I’ve been minding my p’s and q’s.

This is also for you, Mom and Dad and Clancy and Ryan. I love you very much, and I am confident that if any sportive God were to sift through my whole box with the intention of keeping score, he would find as much of you in it as of me.
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Introduction:
What is Prosody, and Why Should We Practice It?

“Why does God permit evil? So that the account can stand correct with goodness. For the good is made known, is made clear, and is exercised by evil.”

-Milton’s Commonplace Book

In 1953, at the beginning of his book Milton’s Art of Prosody, Ernest Sprott lamented the fact that prosodists were always compelled to define and defend their field of study before they could carry out their work. In this regard, nothing has changed. The art of prosody – the art, as The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics puts it, of noticing “measurable structures of sound in language and in poetry” – is still generally regarded as a niche one worthy of deep skepticism, and those who practice it as eccentrics or pedants, but in any case as queer birds with too much time on their hands and an obsessive passion for tallying such trifles as where a stress or a beat falls, or what vowel sounds are syncopated or elided, or whether a section of verse is trochaic or iambic.

Take Paradise Lost, one of these skeptics might say. Isn’t it enough to know that the poem is in blank verse? Why would anyone go any further? Why would any reasonable person focus on such minutiae as syllable stresses when reading a poem that contains some of the most profound meditations on freedom, religion, temptation, justice, and our life as flawed but hopeful creatures of the earth? I do not take these questions as exasperating ones that must be parried before the prosodist’s real work can begin. Rather, I consider the real work of the prosidist to lie

1 John Milton, The Complete Prose Works Volume I (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 362. All future citations to The Complete Prose Works will be made in line, using the abbreviation CPW, and will be to the Yale editions.
precisely in answering these questions. In this thesis, then, I will take *Paradise Lost*, and I will perform a prosodic study of it in an effort to provide the best answers I can.

Studying poetic rhythm can open up countless interpretive avenues in the case of any poet. But in Milton’s case it is most alluring to use a rhythmic analysis in order to investigate the relationship between Milton’s strong poetic style and his equally strong political and religious beliefs. Though some critics, such as T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, have objected to the effects of Milton’s poetry, almost no critic has dared to argue that Milton was not, in some way or other, a master of style. Indeed, most of Milton’s critics cannot find terms exaggerated enough to praise *Paradise Lost*. John Bailey, perhaps forgetting about the pyramids, goes so far as to claim that *Paradise Lost* is, “in several ways, one of the most wonderful of the works of man.” And Matthew Arnold, having compared Milton to Shakespeare, concludes that only Milton had “perfect sureness of hand in his style.”

But Milton’s political and religious convictions are so expansive as to be inextricable even from his poetic style. In his own introduction to the second edition of *Paradise Lost*, published in 1674, Milton explicitly announces that his poetic style and his political beliefs are intimately related to one another when he defends one of his more striking stylistic choices – to write in blank verse - in political terms:

> This neglect then of rhyme so little is to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar readers, that it rather is to be esteemed an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming.

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4 For a good summary of Eliot’s and Ricks’s arguments against Milton, see the beginning of Christopher Ricks’s book *Milton’s Grand Style*.


6 Matthew Arnold, *Passages From the Prose Writings of Matthew Arnold* (London: Smith, Elder, 1880), 35.

7 John Milton, *Paradise Lost* ed. Alastair Fowler (New York (N.Y.): Longman, 1998), 55. All future citations of Paradise Lost will be to this edition, and will be made in line, using the abbreviation *PL*. 
Recall that Milton, an ardent republican who celebrated the execution of King Charles in 1649, had already published several pamphlets in which he had denounced the institution of monarchy, and defended the people’s right to put tyrants to death. In one of these tracts, The Readie and Easie Way, Milton had even used the same metaphor of “bondage” to praise the British Parliament for “turning regal bondage into a free Commonwealth” (CPW VII, 409; emphasis mine).

Because of such similarities between the language of Milton’s political pamphlets and the language of his introduction to Paradise Lost, critics have long been concerned with investigating the precise nature of the relationship between Milton’s poetic style and his political beliefs. Most recently, in his 2007 article “Service is Perfect Freedom,” John Creaser has suggested that Milton’s prosodic style in Paradise Lost gives a “living demonstration” of his republican beliefs. Even Samuel Johnson, a dominant figure in 18th-century criticism who disapproved of Milton’s politics, could appreciate how Milton’s deviations from strict iambic pentameter were part of his political project, “relieving us from the continual tyranny of the same sound.”

Critics have also been concerned with investigating the nature of the relationship between Milton’s poetic style and his religious beliefs. Gordon Teskey best sums up the tension inherent in a Christian epic in the introduction to his book Delirious Milton: this tension arises, he says,
“from an inner conflict between the authority of God the Creator...and the poet’s need to be a creator...in his own right.”\(^\text{11}\) That is to say, a Christian poet has certain religious commitments that he must not violate through his poetic style. Poetic greatness, like anything else, is worth exactly nothing if it does not bring glory to God. Prosody, then, is not just a silly game of syllable-counting. It is one of the best ways to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between Milton’s poetic style and his deepest commitments.

But the most influential prosodists who have studied Milton’s verse – including both Creaser and Johnson – have tended to make some version of the same basic claim: namely, that Milton’s style in some way reflects, represents, demonstrates, or performs his convictions. In this paper, I will first push back against this claim, arguing that Milton’s style does not \textit{represent} his beliefs, but presents certain tasks that work to \textit{train} the reader in the qualities he needs to become an ideal citizen, both in a political sense \textit{and} in a moral/religious sense. In this sense, my thesis is a marriage of Stanley Fish’s reader-response theory and prosody.\(^\text{12}\)

Perhaps it will seem far-fetched to some that poetic style could train political and moral attitudes. But the Socrates of Plato’s \textit{Republic} adheres to a version of this claim that is much stronger than the one I have just presented. To his mind, poetic style not only \textit{can} but inevitably \textit{will not only train} but actually \textit{produce} certain character traits. So, when Socrates is elaborating his views on education to Adeimantus, he says, “You see, a change to a new kind of musical training is something to beware of as wholly dangerous. For one can never change the ways of training people in music without affecting the greatest political laws...it is in musical training that


\(^{12}\) Though Fish goes out of his way, in the first chapter of \textit{Surprised by Sin}, to specify that Milton is “ingtangling” his readers, \textit{not “training”} them, our approaches are similar in that they focus on what kind of activity, or response, the poem requires of the reader.
the guardhouse of our guardians must surely be built.” In Socrates’s hypothetical republic, the guardians (φύλακες) are the enlightened individuals who lead the state. Musical training, then, has such a strong influence on the character of the individuals in the republic that only those who have had a sound musical training should be qualified to serve as heads of state. What’s more, musical training has such a strong influence on the character of the republic as a whole that it would barely be an exaggeration to say that the state goes as its music goes: if musical training changes for the worse, the “greatest political laws” (πολιτικῶν νόμων τῶν μεγίστων) will also change for the worse; and if musical training changes for the better, so will the laws.

Aristotle too – whom Milton classes with the “best of Political writers” in the Tenure of Kings and Magistrates - endorses the idea that a sound musical training is essential to producing good citizens, and, by extension, a good polity (CPW III, 202). In chapter VIII of his Politics, Aristotle inquires into whether music should be included in “education” (παιδέια), or whether it is solely for “amusement” (παιδιάν) and “intellectual enjoyment” (διαγωγή). In the subsequent discussion Aristotle emphatically recommends that music should be a part of education, on the grounds that music has a profound influence on the soul (ἡ ψυχή). Early in his inquiry Aristotle announces that “in listening to such strains our souls [τὴν ψυχὴν] undergo a change.” And in concluding he reiterates that music “has a power of forming the character of the soul [τὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἔθος ἡθος]”. In between these two passages Aristotle explains that different kinds of musical modes can instill different moral qualities in their listeners, and he even argues that music is unique in this regard: “the objects of no other sense,” he says, “such as taste or touch, have any resemblance to moral qualities.” What’s more, Aristotle anticipates and answers an objection that I imagine many of my readers might have: can we say the same things about mere rhythms that

we can say about musical modes? “The same principles apply to rhythms” (“τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ τρόπον ἔχει καὶ τὰ περὶ τούς ῥυθμούς”), Aristotle says.\textsuperscript{14}

In this thesis I will not be arguing, in the exact spirit of Aristotle and Plato, that Milton’s rhythms automatically make the reader into a certain kind of person. But I will be interested in showing how Milton’s rhythms work to create certain tasks and tests that the reader can perform to make himself into a better Christian and republican.

Here, then, is a more detailed roadmap: in chapter one, I will discuss traditional approaches to studying Milton’s verse (especially foot scansion), and I will explain how and why these traditional approaches fail to provide reliable information about Milton’s prosodic style. In effect, I will be arguing here that foot scansion is a square wheel, and that we need a round one.

In chapter two, I will engage deeply with John Creaser’s article “‘Service is Perfect Freedom.” First, I will explain the revolutionary system of scansion Creaser introduces for studying Milton’s style. But then I will critique Creaser’s way of using this new tool, for even the wheel would have been no great innovation if people had set it flat on the ground. Finally, in closing this chapter, I will seek to refute Creaser’s central claim about how Milton’s rhythms demonstrate his political beliefs. Instead, I will argue, Milton’s rhythms create certain tasks that, in turn, train two virtues the reader needs to be Milton’s ideal citizen: the ability to choose and the strenuous spirit necessary to act on those choices.

In chapter three, I will switch from a macroscopic to a microscopic focus. Instead of looking at how Milton’s rhythms work over the course of the entire poem, I will look at how Milton’s rhythms work in one localized passage – namely, Belial’s speech from the infernal

\textsuperscript{14} Aristotle, The Basic Works of Aristotle edited by Richard McKeon (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 1310-1312. Book VIII, sections 1339b-1340b. I have adapted Benjamin Jowett’s translation only in one case (“music ‘has a power of forming the character of the soul’”), in order to bring out the word ψυχῆς, which is important to my argument.
council in Book II. In analyzing this passage, I will show how Milton uses his rhythms to create moral tests (or temptations) for his readers, and I will show that scansion is a valuable weapon to possess in confronting these tests.

Finally, in concluding, I will argue that the rhythms of Paradise Lost work by creating exercises that train various virtues, especially the virtue of resistance. While nobody can force the reader to accept this work, the reader stands to gain the most from his reading experience if he struggles with Milton’s tasks and temptations. For nobody has become great by sequestering himself from toil and evil - or, as Milton himself put it, “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister’d virtue, unexercis’d & unbreath’d, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race...” (CPW II, 515).
Chapter 1: How to Scan Milton?

Before we can study Milton’s rhythms, we must determine the best tool for the job. Almost every prosodist agrees that the main tool for analyzing a poet’s rhythms is “scansion” – or, a system of “identifying the metrical character of the individual syllables” in a line.\(^\text{15}\) But prosodists do not agree on what system of scansion is best. The most dominant system throughout the history of Miltonic prosody has been “foot scansion,” a method whereby the prosodist breaks up lines of iambic pentameter into five segments of two syllables each and marks the stresses in each segment. In this regard, Miltonic prosody is no different from the study of prosody more generally: though certain prosodists have invented their own idiosyncratic systems of scansion, sometimes involving musical notes, foot scansion was the dominant method of scansion for English verse throughout the 18\(^{\text{th}}\) and 19\(^{\text{th}}\) centuries, and throughout the first half of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century as well.\(^\text{16}\) These days, though, foot scansion has begun to lose its overwhelming dominance, in large part due to F. T. Prince’s work in the middle of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century.

In this chapter I will discuss the pros and cons of foot scansion by looking at two Miltonic prosodists – one of whom is Prince - who held polar opposite beliefs about foot scansion’s utility as an analytic tool. In the end, I will seek to show why foot scansion is emphatically not a useful tool for analyzing English rhythms. But I will then argue, contra

\(^\text{15}\) *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, page 1259

\(^\text{16}\) This is not to say that foot scansion went completely out of style after Prince’s study in the middle of the 20th century. It merely lost its overwhelming dominance. One of the most sensitive metrical studies conducted using foot scansion is Paul Fussell’s *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (1965). For more on idiosyncratic systems of scansion, see the first chapter of Richard Bradford’s book *Augustan Measures: Restoration and Eighteenth-century Writings on Prosody and Metre*. See also page 282 of *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (ed. Humphrey House).
Prince, that some system of scansion must still be used in order to provide the reader with information about how a poet’s rhythms should be experienced, and about how a poet is meeting the metrical demands of his form.

I. The Dispute About Prosodic Technologies

At the turn of the 20th century, Robert Bridges made a great innovation in the field of Miltonic prosody. He did this not by inventing any new system of scansion, but by thinking to use the old one systematically. In the words of F.T. Prince, the mid-20th prosodist who would spurn Bridges’s methodology, Bridges made the first real attempt “to examine [Milton’s] practice and to define his rules.”17 Since the first two paragraphs of Bridges’s book, Milton’s Prosody, function as both a credo and a statement of purpose for this new tradition of scholarship, it will be worthwhile to examine them in full:

“In this treatise the scheme adopted for the examination of Milton’s matured prosody in the blank verse of Paradise Lost is to assume a normal regular line, and tabulate all the variations as exceptions to that norm.

For this purpose English blank verse may conveniently be regarded as a decasyllabic line on a disyllabic basis and in rising rhythm (i.e. with accents or stresses on the alternate even syllables); and the disyllabic units may be called feet.”18

In effect, Bridges is interested in tracking how Milton deviates from the theoretical norm of iambic pentameter, or how Milton breaks the conventional rules of his meter. Before I discuss the merits and demerits of this methodology, let me briefly explain the method of scansion Bridges uses – “foot scansion” – along with some of its terminology. To do so, I will present an actual line of blank verse, from Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” monologue, and I will show how

foot scansion can be used to show in what ways the line adheres to Bridges’ rules of normalcy, and in what ways it deviates from them. The line is “That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation.”

First, Bridges would scan the line like this:

That flesh / is heir / to, // tis / a con / summa / tion.

According to a foot scansion of this line, there are five metrical “feet,” marked by the five slashes. In each foot, the stress falls on the second syllable, which is distinguished by being in bold. There is also a “caesura,” or a “rhythmic pause,” in the middle of the third foot, after the fifth syllable. The caesura is marked by the double slash.

Since there are only two syllables in each foot of the line, Bridges would claim that the line operates on a “disyllabic basis,” as opposed to the trisyllabic bases on which the following two lines could be shown to operate:

Just for a / handful of / silver he / left us;

and

And the sheen / of their spears / was like stars / on the sea.

Furthermore, since each foot of the line from Hamlet carries a stress on its second syllable, Bridges would call the line in “rising rhythm,” as opposed to the “falling rhythm” of the following line, in which the first syllable of each foot carries the stress:

Should you / ask me, / whence these / stories; 20

20 These three lines are canonical examples from Browning’s The Lost Leader, Byron’s The Destruction of Sennacherib, and Longfellow’s The Song of Hiawatha, respectively. The first line, from Browning’s poem, would be called “dactylic,” meaning each foot is comprised of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables. The second line, from Byron’s, would be called “anapaestic,” meaning each foot is comprised of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable. The third line, from Longfellow’s, would be called trochaic, meaning each foot is comprised of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. See Works Cited for collections of poetry by each author.
According to Bridges’ methodology, then, the line from *Hamlet* is abnormal in only one way: it is a “feminine line,” or a line characterized by having an eleventh, unstressed syllable at the end of the line. Since Bridges conceives of the theoretical, normal blank verse line as being “decasyllabic,” or having ten syllabic slots, he falls into the group of prosodists that considers an eleventh, unstressed syllable, whether it occurs at the end of the line or before the caesura, to be “hypermetrical,” or “extrametrical.”

In *Milton’s Prosody*, Bridges wants to show us all the ways in which Milton’s lines can deviate from the theoretically normal blank verse line. The greatest advantage of this methodology is that it allows Bridges to show just how variable Milton’s stress patterns are: Bridges notes that lines in *Paradise Lost* can have as few as three full stresses, and he goes so far as to argue that “there is no one place in the verse where an accent [a stress] is indispensable.” Later, he shows that every foot in the Miltonic line is, at some point in the poem, subjected to “inversion,” an effect whereby the stress appears on the first syllable of a foot, rather than on the second, as in the first foot of the following line from *Paradise Lost*:

*Rose out of chaos: or if* *Si on hill* (*PL*, 1. 10).21

And finally, Bridges shows that the caesura can appear after any syllable in the Miltonic line (obviously excepting the tenth), a feature by which early readers were particularly “scandalized,” since conventional prosodic wisdom held that the caesura should fall somewhere between the fourth and sixth syllables of any given line.22

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21 All citations from the text of *Paradise Lost* will be made in line, using the abbreviation *PL*. These citations refer to the second edition of Alastair Fowler’s modern-spelling version of the text, published in 1997 by Longman.

22 Bridges, *Milton’s Prosody* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1921), 39-45. With regards to caesura placement: Alexander Pope, in a letter to a friend penned in 1710, says, “Every nice ear must, I believe, have observed that in any smooth English verse of ten syllables, there is naturally
Bridges’ study was enterprising, energetic, and innovative in its methodology. But not every prosodist has seen eye to eye with Bridges. For example, in his book *The Italian Element in Milton’s Verse*, F.T. Prince outright rejects the assumption that there exists such a thing as a theoretically normal line. So, instead of tabulating deviations from an imaginary norm, Prince seeks to characterize Milton’s verse by showing how certain of its positive features help it to achieve the quality of “asprezza,” or “harshness.” The three features Prince lists are:

I. The clogging of the verse by means of accumulated consonants.
II. The conjunction of open vowels, which may be of two kinds, either (a) elided, or (b) unelided.
III. The use of double consonants in the penultimate syllable of the line.

Whereas Bridges concerns himself only with the stress pattern of Milton’s individual lines, Prince does not concern himself with stress pattern at all! In fact, he does not a scan a single line in his chapter on Milton’s prosody. In doing so, Prince eschews the tool that most prosodists consider integral to the performance of their job.

Prince avoids scanning lines with feet because foot scansion is an anachronistic tool, designed for the study of Ancient Greek and Latin poetry. Prince thinks it is a mistake to import this tool into English prosody, for he does not think Milton followed any “system of rules as abstractly rigid as those which scholars conceive to have operated in Greek and Latin poetry.” On the contrary, Prince objects, the only prosodic “rules” that Milton followed in *Paradise Lost* were the following two:

I. The line has a theoretic ten syllables (not eleven, as in Italian).
II. The tenth syllable must always have, or be capable of being given, a stress; one other stress must fall, in any one line, on either the fourth or sixth syllable.

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24 Ibid., 137-143.
Prince is right to reject classical foot scansion as an anachronistic tool that does not function properly in English verse. Let me explain why: since Latin poetry operated on a quantitative basis – meaning that syllables received prominence based on the amount of time that was required to pronounce them - it made sense to scan lines of Latin verse by breaking them up into “feet.” These feet merely specified how much time should be spent on the pronunciation of each rhythmic segment. But English verse does not operate on a quantitative basis. Instead, it operates on an accentual basis, meaning that syllables receive prominence based primarily on the pitch change that is required to pronounce them. In light of this difference between the organizational principles of classical verse and English verse, it becomes apparent why scanning English verse with Classical feet is such a quixotic enterprise: foot scansion is being made to do something it was never meant to do! The practical upshot is that, when applied to English verse, foot scansion can end up doing more harm than good, since it can imply rhythmic features that do not exist. Derek Attridge puts this point poetically when he says that foot scansion “invites some audible manifestation of the ghostly divisions on which it is based, and... [implies] phonetic equivalences which are no more than theoretical.” That is to say: if one were to pause, however slightly, at each foot division when reading the recurring Miltonic line “Thrones, dom / ina / tions, // prince / doms, vir / tues, powers” (PL, V. 601, 772, 840; X. 460), one would butcher its rhythm.

25 As Creaser notes on page 272 of “Service is Perfect Freedom,” in classical verse, “a foot of one long syllable and two short syllables...can be held equivalent to a foot of two long syllables.”
26 The entry on “prominence” in the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics says, “pitch change (not a pitch) is the most reliable indicator of prosodic prominence, occurring in 99 percent of cases of prominent syllables, with loudness and/or length also a factor though not always both.”
28 Later, I will introduce a distinction between pronouncing a poem and experiencing a poem. At this juncture, it will be sufficient to note that feet do not just fail to represent any aspect of the verse that can
Now, prosodists like Bridges do not necessarily think that to scan a line with feet is to represent its rhythm in any straightforward way. So, foot scansion isn’t necessarily bankrupt just because it cannot help us to figure out how a line should be read aloud. What is more damning is that foot prosodists do think feet can be used to show how a poet is meeting or breaking the metrical demands of his form. This too is misguided, because, as Prince observes, English verse does not follow any “rules” as strict as the ones classical verse followed. Here is a simple way to prove that point: if you were to learn that any foot of any line from *The Aeneid* did not start with a long syllable and then end with either another long syllable or two short ones, you would be forced to conclude that the line in question could not count as an acceptable example of dactylic hexameter. But if you were to learn that any “foot” from *Paradise Lost* did not consist of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, you would be rash to conclude that the line could not count as an acceptable example of iambic pentameter. In fact, if you were to adopt this position, you would be forced to conclude that the English language’s two great masters of iambic pentameter - Shakespeare and Milton – wrote unacceptable lines of iambic pentameter about as often as acceptable ones, since both poets deviate so often from the theoretical norm.

So, Prince avoids the kind of anachronistic approach that distorts Milton’s rhythms, and, on top of that, provides misleading information about his metrical tendencies. But Prince’s total renunciation of scansion has ugly consequences, as his lax rules normalize many lines that are egregiously uniambic. Consider just a few I have invented:

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be pronounced; they also fail to represent any aspect of the verse that can be *experienced*. If one does sense a pause at these divisions, it is only because he has been habituated to foot scansion.

\(^{29}\) Unless it was the fifth foot, since it is probably a rule that lines of iambic pentameter have to end with a stressed syllable, provided they are not feminine lines.
1. **What** in the **world** are you **doing** in **there**? (“Normal” because ten syllables, with stresses on the fourth and tenth. But in fact dactylic, not iambic, with four stresses, not five).

2. To **demean** the **disabled** is **gross vice**. (“Normal” because ten syllables, with stresses on the sixth and tenth. But in fact anapaestic, not iambic, with four stresses, not five.)

3. **Falter** in your **slow spin**, and we’ll **all die** (“Normal” because ten syllables, with stresses on the sixth and tenth. But in fact there is no discernible metrical pattern of any sort, and there may be six stresses, depending on how one takes “in.”)

This last line is a particularly instructive example. If it were found in *Paradise Lost*, the astute prosodist would do well to argue that the “faltering,” uniambic rhythm served some apt expressive purpose, given the content of the line. But the prosodist would be hamstrung if the line were considered a perfectly normal instance of Milton’s prosodic practice.

In dismissing scansion entirely, and in making the criteria for a “normal” line so broad, Prince works himself into a position from which all he can say about Milton’s rhythms is, “If I can’t say everything about them, I won’t say anything at all.” Indeed, in declaring that the effects of most prosodic principles are “infinitely various and [can] be left, in the hands of a competent poet, to look after themselves,” Prince comes close to making the same meaningless comment that William Courthope makes about Milton’s verse in Volume III of his *History of English Poetry*: “All these departures from the normal type of the heroic line must be respectfully accepted by the reader in deference to Milton’s supreme genius as a metrical musician, seeking
by different artifices to vary the cadence of the verse.”

If that is the case, then we should all stop writing critical essays about Milton, and start erecting shrines in his honor instead.

In their own ways, both Bridges’ and Prince’s studies testify to the extreme rhythmic variety in Milton’s verse. Indeed, one of the greatest (and most bizarre) testaments to Milton’s prosodic liberty is Bridges’s claim that “[Milton] came to scan his verses one way, and read them another.” The strange tension in this quote reflects both foot scansion’s flaws and Milton’s mastery. Even if Milton did scan his verses exactly as Bridges supposes he did (though we have no conclusive evidence that Milton scanned his verses at all), of course Milton did not read them the same way! For nobody in his right mind would read the line “Thrones, do / mina / tions, // prince / doms, vir / tues, powers” by pausing at the foot breaks! A virtuoso like Milton does not merely and always use alternating stress patterns to create disyllabic, rising rhythm, thereby “obeying” meter, as it were; rather, he manipulates meter, often varying it, and often finding inventive ways to play it off syntax, punctuation, enjambment, and other prosodic features to create the tension that powers his verse.

Once a critic has recognized that Milton takes such rhythmical liberties in his verse, that critic has two legitimate maneuvers available to him: first, he can claim, as Prince does, that Milton’s verse in Paradise Lost passes the breaking point of meter, so that the poem falls out of iambic pentameter. This point of view renders scansion obsolete. Second, the critic can maintain that Paradise Lost is in iambic pentameter, but suggest that rhythmic tension is created by the way Milton constantly upsets our expectations as he creates his various and varied rhythms. Bridges adopts this point of view, to which I am also partial. Unfortunately, Bridges uses a

31 Bridges, Milton’s Prosody (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1921), 35.
system of scansion so anachronistically strict that, in practice, it fails to provide reliable information about how much disruption different deviations cause in English verse.

II. The Conundrum

Now that we have acquired a basic familiarity with the tradition of Miltonic prosody, we are in a better position to appreciate the conundrum that those working in the discipline were compelled to face in the latter half of the twentieth century. In effect, no prosodist had been able to provide readers with reliable information about either of the following two things:

1. How the rhythms of Milton’s verse might be experienced by the reader.
2. Whether or not any individual line should count as an acceptable example of the poem’s meter.

As for the first of these concerns: Prince did try to claim that Milton’s verse should be experienced as being rough or harsh. But his claim did not really address how Milton’s rhythms should be experienced, because rhythm and stress pattern are too intimately related for a critic to be able to comment insightfully on the former without ever mentioning the latter. Bridges, by way of contrast, was somewhat more direct about the shortcomings of his study. His claim that Milton came to scan his verses one way and read them another is a pretty straightforward concession that his method can only provide readers with information about how Milton’s verse might have been composed, but not about how it might be experienced during a reading.

As for the second of these concerns: on the one hand, Bridges did not try to determine what lines might be unacceptable examples of iambic pentameter, unless he would count any line with any deviation as an unacceptable example. This, however, would be an odd stance to take, because it would make Paradise Lost, perhaps the greatest epic poem in the English language, into a poem riddled with unacceptable instances of its meter. Prince, on the other hand, proposed
rules so lax as to let almost anything – anapaests, dactylys, a haphazard kerfuffle of ten sounds - count as an acceptable instance of iambic pentameter.

So, the big question prosodists were left to confront at the end of the twentieth century was: if foot scansion does not work, what other system of scansion could best be adopted to study Milton’s rhythms, and what features of that system, if any, would have to be acknowledged so that the system could be put to best use?32

32 Some late-twentieth-century prosodists, like Edward Weismiller (1978), experimented with more nuanced methods of scansion designed to provide readers with more reliable information about how Milton’s verse might be experienced. See Weismiller’s entry in A Milton Encyclopedia, ed. W.B. Hunter, in which he entertains the notion that we should adopt a system of scansion with four levels of syllabic prominence, as opposed to only two.
Chapter 2: A New Tool and a New Claim: Milton’s Rhythms as Moral Training

At the end of the previous chapter, I posed a question: what system of scansion could best be adopted to study Milton’s verse, and what features of that system, if any, would have to be acknowledged so that the system would clarify, rather than obfuscate? John Creaser’s paper “‘Service is Perfect Freedom’” (2007) can be seen as the best answer anyone has yet provided to the first half of that question. But his answer to the second half of that question is insufficient. In this chapter, then, I will discuss the merits of the new system of scansion Creaser proposes, but I will also show how Creaser fails to acknowledge certain of its features that must be acknowledged in order for that system to be put to best use. Finally, I will marshall evidence culled using this new system in order challenge Creaser’s central claim about the political implications of Milton’s poetic style, and to advance a competing claim of my own: namely, that Milton’s rhythms do not represent his political attitudes, but actually create tasks that train the most important skill and the most important character trait the reader needs to become Milton’s ideal citizen.

I. The Conundrum Half Resolved

Like F.T. Prince, John Creaser considers foot-substitution prosody an anachronistic tool that distorts the rhythms of English verse. But instead of abandoning the practice of scanning, Creaser adopts a new system of scansion based on the prosodic theories of Derek Attridge.

Attridge, like Bridges, wants to track deviations from a theoretically normal line. But Attridge nuances the idea of the theoretically normal line by introducing the idea of “beats.” Whereas Bridges’s normal line simply has five stresses, one on each of the even syllables,
Attridge’s normal line has five beats, one on each of the even syllables; and in a perfectly normal line, these five beats are fulfilled by stressed syllables, while the five offbeats are fulfilled by unstressed syllables. So, according to Attridge’s system, a line’s meter is no longer a simple matter of where the stresses fall. Instead, it is a matter of where the beats fall, and how the stresses in the line are used to realize the beats.

This distinction between beats and stresses allows Attridge to make an even more important distinction between “acceptable” deviations and deviations that truly cause a line to fall out of iambic pentameter. Since Attridge and Creaser believe that lines of iambic pentameter can deviate from the theoretical norm without necessarily “breaking the rules” of their meter, they agree with Prince’s notion that English poets did not operate in accordance with any “system of rules as abstractly rigid as those which scholars conceive to have operated in Greek and Latin poetry.”

So, what does it look like for a line to deviate without falling out of iambic pentameter? In an effort to provide readers with more subtle and reliable information about precisely this question, Attridge coins three terms for metrical deviation: promotion, demotion, and pairing. Since I suspect that these terms will be new for many readers, let me briefly explain each one before I show how Creaser uses them to make his central claim about the political implications of Milton’s style.33

Promotion

“Promotion” happens when an unstressed syllable is made to fulfill one of the line’s five beats. According to Attridge, this “happens easily when the syllable in question is the middle one

33 Readers who wish to understand Attridge’s terms in more detail should consult the two books in which Attridge lays out his theory: The Rhythms of English Poetry and Poetic Rhythm: an introduction.
of three successive unstressed syllables” (emphasis in original). Promotion happens so often in Paradise Lost that it would be a fool’s errand to try to pick out special examples, so I will offer two random ones (in each case, beats are represented in bold, and the promoted syllable is in **bolded italics**):

And **justify** the ways of **God** to **men** (PL, I. 21).

At **which** command the **powers** **militant** (VI. 61).

A straightforward promotion occurs in the first line, when the unstressed syllable “-fy” is promoted between the two unstressed syllables “-ti” and “the.” The promotion in the second line is slightly more complex: it occurs between an unstressed syllable and the line-turn. An important nuance of Attridge’s system is that the line-turn can function as an unstressed syllable involved in promotion. This explains a common feature of Milton’s verse that would otherwise seem highly irregular: namely that many of Milton’s lines end with a polysyllabic word, such as “**militant,**” that carries a stress on its antepenultimate syllable. In such cases as these, the final syllable of the line simply undergoes promotion between an unstressed syllable and the line-turn, which acts as an unstressed syllable.³⁵

**Demotion**

The second of Attridge’s three terms - “demotion” – is the opposite of promotion: it occurs when a stressed syllable fulfills an offbeat. Though demotion, as a general rule, produces more tension than promotion, it still happens with relative ease when a stressed syllable occurs between two stressed syllables fulfilling beats. Again, I’ll offer just two examples from Paradise Lost:

³⁴ Derek Attridge, Poetic Rhythm: an introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 74
³⁵ The same effect happens again only twenty-one lines later, at the end of the line “**Bristled with upright beams innumerables**” (VI. 82). Here, the short “e” in “innumerables” is being syncopated before the liquid “r.” Due to this syncopation, “innumerables” counts as only four syllables, so that the antepenultimate syllable “-nu” is stressed, and the final syllable “-ble” is promoted between the unstressed syllable “-mera” and the line-turn.
Lost, this time with beats in bold, *demotions* in unbolded italics, and *promotions* in bolded italics:

His **red right hand** to **plague** us? **What if** **all** (*PL*, II. 174).

*Hung amiable*, Hesperian **fables true** (IV. 248).

The first line, in which Milton famously gives his Christian God the same *rubente dextera* - or “red right hand” - that Horace once gave his pagan god, contains a straightforward example of demotion: the stressed syllable “right” is demoted between the two stressed syllables “red” and “hand.” And the second line shows that, just as the line-turn can function as an unstressed syllable in promotion, it can also, in similar but opposite fashion, function as a stressed syllable in demotion: “hung” is being demoted at the start of the line between the first, stressed syllable of “amiable” and the line-turn, which functions as a stressed syllable.

Syllables are most often demoted between two stressed syllables, but a syllable can be demoted in one other context: when it is being made to serve as part of a “double offbeat.” Consider the line **“Dove-like satst brooding on the vast abyss”** (I. 21), where the double offbeat is comprised of the syllables “-like” and “satst.” It is tempting to see the syllable “-like” as being demoted here. But “-like” only has a partial stress on it, and syllables with a partial stress often function naturally as unstressed syllables. The word “satst,” however, carries a full stress, and it undergoes demotion here so that the double offbeat, situated between the beats fulfilled by “dove” and “brood,” can balance the line’s meter. If “satst” could not be felt as being demoted,

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then the line would have six beats, and this would probably make it an unacceptable example of iambic pentameter.\textsuperscript{37}

**Pairing**

Attridge’s third and final term for metrical deviation – pairing – differs from promotion and demotion in a fundamental way: whereas promotion and demotion do not necessarily require the *beats* in a line to move from the even syllables, pairing does.\textsuperscript{38} According to Attridge, this difference makes pairing the most disruptive of the three types of deviation, and, at least to my mind, it puts pairing in an entirely different echelon from promotion and demotion.

There are two types of pairing. “Stress-final pairing” occurs when two consecutive unstressed syllables fulfilling offbeats are followed by two consecutive stressed syllables fulfilling beats. And “stress-initial pairing” is just the opposite: it occurs when two consecutive stressed syllables fulfilling beats are followed by two consecutive unstressed syllables fulfilling offbeats. Here is one example of each type of effect from Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, with pairings underlined and beats in bold:

1. Beneath *him* with new wonder *now* he views (IV. 203; stress-final pairing).

2. Of nature’s *works, honor* dishonorable (IV. 312; stress-initial pairing. Note that “-nora” in dishonorable counts as just one syllable, since the short vowel “o” is being syncopated before the liquid “r,” as often happens in *PL*).

The greatest merit of Attridge’s system is that it forces us to reckon with aspects of verse that do not necessarily have any physical presence on the page, or even any measurable presence in pronunciation. For the main assumption that underlies Attridge’s system is that English

\textsuperscript{37} The six beats would be fulfilled by “dove,” “satst,” “brood-,” “on,” “vast,” and “yss.”

\textsuperscript{38} Only when demotion occurs as part of a double offbeat does demotion require the beats in a line to move from the even syllables.
speakers will *perceive* promotions and demotions equally well regardless of whether or not they are represented, in pronunciation, by any of the measurable effects known to correlate with syllabic prominence (i.e. pitch change, syllable duration, etc.). This might seem paradoxical, or even nonsensical, but consider the useful analogies of the ticking clock or the clacking shoes: when we hear a clock ticking, we hear “tick, tock, tick,” not “tick, tick, tick.” And when we hear shoes clacking, we hear “click, clack, click,” not “click, click, click.” Neither the clock nor the shoes makes a different sound on the second tick or click, yet we *do* perceive a different one. A similar principle applies in the cases of promotion and demotion: because, as English speakers, we are conditioned by the natural tendencies of our language to expect *alternation of stress*, we tend to perceive the middle of three unstressed syllables as having slightly more stress, and the middle of three stressed syllables as having slightly less stress.

Whether or not line-turns, pairings, promotions, and demotions are marked on the page or in pronunciation, they are all real presences in verse. Attridge’s system demystifies these presences by recognizing them unequivocally, and by explaining the mechanics of their influence. Attridge both revolutionizes and humanizes prosody by focusing on what human beings perceive, not on what instruments can measure (remember that prosody is “traditionally...the study of measurable structures of sound in language and in poetry”). In so doing, Attridge reminds us that poetry is always a dynamic exchange between performer and perceiver, and he liberates the critic to speak to more aspects of any given poem than he can jab his finger at. But with great freedom comes great responsibility, and it is vital that we acknowledge what Attridge’s system can and cannot be made to do.
II. A Critique of Creaser’s Methodology: how to use the new tool

Recall that one of the two biggest problems facing post-Prince prosodists was that nobody had managed to provide readers with accurate information about what lines should count as acceptable examples of iambic pentameter. In “Service is Perfect Freedom,” Creaser attempts to use Attridge’s three terms for metrical deviation to fix this problem. “In essentials,” Creaser writes, “if the rhythm of a line is explicable in terms of Attridge’s three deviation rules, then it will not be felt as aberrant, however far it may diverge from a simple iambic tread” (SIPF, 280).

Creaser does well to adopt Attridge’s system of scansion. But the manner in which Creaser puts that system to use is attractive and objectionable for the same reason: it claims to be pretty nearly objective. Only “one line in 265,” Creaser has calculated, is truly “aberrant” in Paradise Lost, according to the criteria Attridge’s system provides (SIPF, 268). So, Creaser’s argument runs, even though Milton “deviates” often, he does so within specific bounds that he transgresses only .39% of the time. Milton’s poetic style, Creaser concludes, can be said to demonstrate his political belief that liberty must be exercised within strict bounds. This, of course, was one of Milton’s fiercest convictions, and it led him to write one of his most famous lines of poetry: in his sonnet 12, Milton censures the British populace with the scathing one-liner, “License they mean when they cry liberty.” It would, therefore, be neat if Milton’s prosodic tendencies in Paradise Lost could be shown to demonstrate his particularly strict and vigorous brand of republicanism.

Creaser’s claim is attractive, both because Milton did hold the belief Creaser claims his poetry demonstrates, and also because humanities scholars in the west have inherited from

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Aristotle the quixotic determination to pass off subjective inquiries into the nature of poetry as objective studies sealed with the stamp of science, with the result that objectivity is often prized above sensitivity, even in poetic analyses. But Creaser’s claim is also objectionable, because, especially when dealing with such a nuanced poem as *Paradise Lost*, we must stop shying away from the fundamental subjectivity of rhythm if we wish to experience the poem in all its complexity and sensuality, instead of simplifying it until some single aspect becomes solvable.

In short, I do not believe Attridge’s system can or should be used to gather such unqualified statistics. Let me offer an analogy to prove why not.

**The Case**

Let us imagine that we are jurors sitting in a court of literary interpretation. In this case, a line from *Paradise Lost* is on trial, and the prosecution is claiming that “the rhythm of the line will be felt as aberrant.” The line is:

To whom thus Eve, yet sinless. Of the fruit (*PL*, IX. 659).

If this line is prosodically aberrant, then the prosodist/prosecutor will be able to make a compelling argument about *Paradise Lost*: this line, he could argue, which occurs only 120 lines before Eve “falls” from grace, “falls” out of iambic pentameter. So, the single most significant moment in the narrative of *Paradise Lost* - “the fall” - actually occurs right here, in line IX. 659, whose metrical aberrance belies, and thus ironizes, the characterization of Eve as “yet sinless.” Until this claim could be disproved, every critic who wished to speak about the fall would either have to work with this new chronology of the events in Book IX, or else play the stubborn fool who crosses his arms and harrumphs, “I might not be able to prove you wrong, but I don’t buy it anyway.”

But more is at stake here than the interpretation of a single line, no matter how
thematically important it is. If the interpretation presented above is deemed legitimate, then a critical precedent will have been set: any time a critic can show that a line cannot be explained in terms of Attridge’s three rules, that critic will be entitled to consider the line aberrant, and to make strong interpretive claims based on this evidence. At bottom, what is at stake here is what should get to count as evidence in poetic analyses.

Now that the stakes are clear, let us examine the prosecution’s argument, which can be summarized as follows: we have invented a test capable of determining whether the rhythm of any line of iambic pentameter will be felt as aberrant or not. It is called “the Attridge test.” Since *Paradise Lost* is a poem in iambic pentameter, and since this line does not pass the Attridge test, the line should be convicted of aberrance.

As jurors of this case, we would be negligent to convict the line based on this argument. I want to focus on just two of the many reasons why this is true: first, we would not have bothered to find out how subjective the application of the Attridge test can be; and, second, we would not have bothered to find out whether Milton’s lines in *Paradise Lost* always obey the same prosodic rules as lines of generic iambic pentameter.

Let us, therefore, hear out the case at hand.

The prosecution begins the case by providing the following scansion of the line in question, where bold syllables are **beats**; unbolded syllables are offbeats; bold syllables in italics are **promotions**; unbolded syllables in italics are **demotions**; and underlined syllables are **pairings**:

To **whom** thus **Eve** yet **sinless. Of the fruit**

Based on this scansion, the prosecution argues that the line “To whom thus Eve yet sinless. Of the fruit” fails Attridge’s test. The reason for this is simple: the syllable “Eve” is
involved in two demotions (of both “thus” and “yet”), and it is a rule of the Attridge test that no syllable can be involved in more than one deviation without the line being felt as aberrant. Therefore, the syllable “Eve” causes the line to fall out of iambic pentameter, and, by extension, the character “Eve” causes mankind to fall from grace.

In response, the defense conceded that “Eve” and “sin-” are stressed syllables, but it contests the other relevant syllables. Take “whom” and “thus,” it says. These two words frequently appear together in *Paradise Lost* in the set phrase “to whom thus [character x]”: But twenty-five out of the twenty-six times the phrase “To whom thus...” occurs in *Paradise Lost*, it is followed by a stressed syllable. This matters because it makes it difficult to determine if “whom,” “thus,” or both “whom” and “thus” should be considered stressed syllables. According to Attridge’s system, the phrase would be metrically acceptable in any of these three scenarios: first, if “whom” is stressed but “thus” is not, then the phrase is completely normal:

To *whom* thus *Eve*

Second, if “whom” is unstressed and “thus” is stressed, then the phrase constitutes an acceptable, stress-final pairing:

To *whom* thus *Eve*

And finally, if “whom” and “thus” are both stressed, then “thus” is demoted acceptably between “whom” and whatever stressed syllable begins character x’s name:

To *whom* thus *Eve*

Let us imagine that, having found this argument compelling, we as jurors request more information from both sides about which of these syllables should be felt as stressed. In support

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40 This phrase is a direct translation of the Latin “*cui sic* [Character X],” which can be translated as, “To whom [Character X] spoke in these words.” The Latin word *sic*, which can be translated as “thusly,” or “in this manner,” was used so often with verbs of saying (*aio, for*, etc.) that eventually the verb of saying could be elided completely, and *sic* alone would carry the force of the elided verb of saying.
of its claim that “whom” and “thus” both function as stressed syllables in *Paradise Lost*, the prosecution presents the following line:

> So spake the **Prince** of **angels**; to **whom thus**” (*PL*, VI. 281). 41

Here, the two successive unstressed syllables “-gels” and “to” must be balanced by two successive stressed syllables. Therefore, “whom” and “thus” must both be functioning as stressed syllables in a stress-final pairing.

This evidence seems pretty damning, and the defense even concedes that “whom” and “thus” are both functioning as stressed syllables in the line presented by the prosecution. But, the defense argues, this does not guarantee that “whom” and “thus” will be functioning as stressed syllables in the line in question. There are two reasons for this: first of all, some syllables carry a partial stress that allows them to function either as a stressed syllable or as an unstressed syllable, depending on the context. Second, and more importantly, the context in which a word appears can cause its stress to shift position, even if the word does not carry a partial stress.

As evidence for its claim that syllables with a partial-stress can act as unstressed syllables, the defense presents the line “**Dove-like satst brooding on the vast abyss**,” where “-like” functions naturally as an unstressed syllable, despite its partial stress. And as evidence for its claim that a word’s context might cause its stress to shift positions entirely, the defense presents the following passage from the beginning of Belial’s speech in the diabolical council:

> “I should be much for open war, O peers,  
> As not behind in hate; if what was urged  
> Main reason to persuade immediate war,  
> Did not dissuade me most” (*PL*, II. 119-122).

As a general rule, the word “dissuade” carries a full stress on its second syllable. But in these lines, “dissuade” carries a stress on its *first* syllable, to bring out the contrast between persuade

41 This is the only one of the 26 lines that doesn’t have a stressed syllable after it.
and dissuade. These two examples show how unreasonable it is to argue that a stress will be felt a certain way in one line just because it is felt a certain way in another line, even if that other line comes from the same poem. Indeed, these examples show how unreasonable it is to argue that a stress will be felt a certain way in one line just because it is felt a certain way in every other line in the whole history of poetry! We must always examine a word in its own context when we are trying to determine if or where it carries a stress.

Now, all of this debate has flared and raged without either side even considering, yet, the third syllable in question. But at this point it seems futile to hear arguments about how “yet” functions in other lines of *Paradise Lost*. We must simply attend to the line in question, trying to be as sensitive as possible to its unique prosodic dynamics. So, let us retire to pass judgment on the metricality of the line “To whom thus Eve, yet sinless. Of the fruit.”

To sum up, our options for scanning the line are as follows, in roughly ascending order of metrical tension:

1. “yet” and “thus” are unstressed, but “whom” is stressed. This would make the line completely normal (excepting the promotion of “of” later in the line, which isn’t relevant to the case):

   To **whom** thus **Eve** yet **sinless. Of** the **fruit**.

2a. “whom” and “thus” are stressed, but “yet” is unstressed. This would make the line acceptably deviant, because “thus” would be demoted:

   To **whom** **thus** **Eve** yet **sinless. Of** the **fruit**.

2b. “whom” and “yet” are stressed, but “thus” is unstressed. This would make the line acceptable, because “yet” would be demoted:

   To **whom** **thus** **Eve** yet **sinless. Of** the **fruit**.

4. “whom and “thus” are unstressed, but “yet” is stressed. This would make the line acceptable,
because “whom” would be promoted and “yet” would be demoted:

To whom thus Eve yet sinless. Of the fruit.

5. “whom” and “yet” are unstressed, but “thus” is stressed. This would make the line acceptable, because there would be a stress-final pairing across the syllables “to whom thus Eve,” and “yet” would simply be unstressed:

To whom thus Eve yet sinless. Of the fruit.

6. “yet” and “thus” are stressed, but “whom” is unstressed. This would make the line aberrant, since “Eve” would have to be part of both a stress-final pairing and a demotion:

To whom thus Eve yet sinless. Of the fruit.

7. “whom,” “thus,” and “yet” are all stressed. This would make the line aberrant, since “Eve” would have to be a part of two demotions:

To whom thus Eve yet sinless. Of the fruit.

I am deeply skeptical that, in the face of such a multiplicity of options, most of which are easy to defend, we could come to any definitive conclusion about whether or not this line passes the Attridge test. But, were I forced to make a decision about how this line’s meter works, I would describe the line in the following way: first, “whom” is probably functioning as a stressed syllable, because there is a slight contrast between “whom” and “Eve,” and syllables involved in a contrast receive extra stress. This same principle explains why “whom” is not stressed in the line “From me, whom he created what I was” (PL, IV. 43; there is a slight contrast here between “me” and “he”). I also take “yet” to be functioning as an unstressed syllable, according to the rule that syllables with a partial stress can function naturally as unstressed syllables when fulfilling an offbeat.

Already these two choices mean that, at most, I believe the line is being disrupted by the
demotion of “thus.” But, though I do think “thus” generally serves as a stressed syllable in *Paradise Lost*, I do not think its “demotion” creates any disruption in this particular line. Or, to be more precise, I do not think “thus” is properly being “demoted” in this line. Recall that “thus” appears twenty-five times in this exact phrase over the course of *Paradise Lost*. Consider, moreover, that “thus” has already been demoted ten times in this exact phrase by the time we encounter it in line 659 of Book IX. At this point, I would argue, “thus” is not properly felt as being “demoted.” Instead, the set phrase “To whom thus [stress]” works naturally to fulfill two beats and two offbeats. So, the term “demotion” doesn’t properly apply to what is happening prosodically at the beginning of this line.

To my mind, then, a line some might have wished to call aberrant, based on Creaser’s methodology, is barely even deviant. As a result, the interpretation that Eve falls in line 659 of Book IX is unjustifiable, and, more significantly, a precedent is set that literary critics cannot simply use a line’s failure to pass the Attridge test as evidence of that line’s aberrance.

**What This Case Can Tell Us About How Attridge’s System Should be Used**

Earlier I raised two questions about the “objective” methodology that underlies Creaser’s statistics: how subjective is the application of Attridge’s rules, and to what extent can the Miltonic line be conflated with the theoretical line of “iambic pentameter?” I hope that my analysis of the line “To whom thus Eve, yet sinless. Of the fruit” has put me in position to better address both of these questions.

Though it may have seemed obnoxious of me to have listed all seven possible readings of the line, there was a method to my madness: this list should prove, with a finality as emphatic as the procedure was tedious, just how subjective the application of Attridge’s system can be, especially when applied to such a prosodically sophisticated poem as *Paradise Lost*. Above all,
my discussion should prove how difficult it can be to determine which syllables carry a stress in any given context. Since any number of things – from emphasis to contrast to partial stresses to repetition of words or phrases – can affect not only the stress on any given word, but also the way we might experience that stress, the prosodist can often do no better than to suggest a scansion that reflects his experience of the line. Perhaps some readers will disagree with my scansion of the line presented above. I would welcome this disagreement, as it would only bolster my claim about how subjective the application of Attridge’s system can be. For my main point is not that this one line must be scanned as I scanned it; rather, it is that Creaser’s system is much too subjective to support the kind of unqualified statistics he offers in his paper.

Now, I should concede that many lines in Paradise Lost can only reasonably be scanned in one way. There is such a thing as a wrong scansion. But it would be a mistake to dismiss the line we scrutinized as an anomaly. Milton was, as one critic notes, “everywhere concerned with the act of choosing,” and this is true even at the level of meter. Lines like the one above are not rare in Paradise Lost, and in fact “unscannable” lines become quite common if we count lines whose meter might not be contestable, in the end, but not apparent at first glance either. Consider just two lines whose full metrical effect a single scansion cannot convey, even if that scansion is almost certainly the “right” one:

1. Of what he was, what is, and what must be (PL, IV. 25).

and

2. Their deities to assert; who, while they feel (VI. 157).

Taken out of context, this first line seems as if it would scan like so: “Of what he was, what is, and what must be,” with just the one demotion at “must.” But when the line is seen in its

proper context, it looks much different:

...Now conscience wakes despair  
That slumbered, wakes the bitter memory  
Of what he was, what is, and what must be  
Worse; of worse deeds worse sufferings must ensue” (PL, IV. 23-26).

In context, it becomes clear that “be” is not stressed, because it is actually part of the expression “what must be worse,” instead of the expression “what he was, what is, and what must be.” But consider all the things that would lead a reader to feel “be” as carrying a stress: not only does it seem to be a part of the expression “what he was, what is, and what must be,” where the sequence of tenses is complete (past, present, future); not only does it fill the last syllabic slot in the line, which almost always receives a stress in Paradise Lost; but it also seems to rhyme with “memory”! Normally, readers can “see around the line-turn” without any real disruption. But in this case, a number of coincidences make the line seem end-stopped when in fact it is strongly enjambed. As a result, “be” is felt as carrying a stress, until one reads around the line-turn. In light of this analysis, it becomes clear why marking “be” as an unstressed syllable does not capture the full metrical effect of this line, even if “be” must be functioning as a stressed syllable in the “correct” scansion of this line. But if we endorse the assumption that Creaser and Attridge both endorse – namely, that scansion is meant to provide information about how someone might experience certain lines, not about how someone might perform them - then we should not really consider it “correct” to scan this line simply by marking “be” as a stressed syllable. Or, we should consider it “correct” in a sense so theoretical as to be practically meaningless.

Other lines can be complicated not by a line-turn but by internal effects, such as elision and/or syncopation. For example, when we first encounter the line “Their deities to assert; who, while they feel” (PL, VI. 157), we should be aware that “deities” might be syncopated, and that “to assert” might elide. But, since these metrical ambiguities occur in succession, it is especially
difficult to sense, right away, what combination of syncopation and/or elision is actually at play. Ultimately, if we study the line, it becomes clear that “deities” is being syncopated to two syllables, while “to assert” is left unelided: “Their deities to assert; who, while they feel.” But, once again, this final explanation does not really cover what a reader experiences when he encounters this line! Certainly some tension is being created by the line-initial demotion of “their,” and by the promotions of “to” and “while.” But it would be a mistake not to remark the additional tension – perhaps even the greater degree of tension! - created by the fact that we must deal with consecutive ambiguities before we even hit the caesura.

Attridge’s system only works neatly if we scan lines in one way, sweeping every trace of metrical ambiguity under the rug. But to treat lines like this is to simplify the poem by ignoring the tension that arises when two or more potential readings of a single line come into competition with one another, as they do on so many occasions in Paradise Lost. Remember that one of the greatest merits of Attridge’s system is that it recognizes unequivocally the real presence of unobservable features of verse. It would be a pretty ironic mistake, then, to use his system while ignoring the presence of the metrical options we are forced to grapple with as we scan lines. What’s more, once one has noticed the tension created by these presences, one would be mistaken to ignore the thought that naturally follows: if Attridge’s system is, in effect, designed to tell us when a line contains too much tension to be felt as normal, does that system, or the user of that system, have an obligation at least to try to account for the tension created by a multiplicity of metrical options? I do not have a definitive answer to this question. But the very fact of its existence should make us wary of the idea that Attridge’s rules alone can tell us all we need to know about how we will “feel” a line.

I also hope that my analysis has allowed me to show that, in discussing how much
disruption will be felt in any given line, one must account for the line’s context in a real poem. One feature of Attridge’s system that must be acknowledged is: it treats lines as examples of iambic pentameter simpliciter, not as examples of the particular brand of iambic pentameter that any particular author practices. Attridge’s system can, therefore, provide us with extremely accurate information about how much disruption certain deviations would cause in a theoretical line of iambic pentameter without any context and without any author. But this information gets less accurate when we apply the same system to a real line from a real section of a real poem that has a real author who had real tendencies. For, as we observed in “the case” presented earlier, a poet might have certain idiosyncratic tendencies, or allow himself certain prosodic liberties, with the result that, in the context of his poetry, certain features that would seem disruptive in a theoretical line of iambic pentameter can come to seem normal. And of course the opposite is true as well: a poet might impose on himself certain supererogatory restrictions, with the result that, in the context of his poetry, certain features that would seem normal in a theoretical line of iambic pentameter can come to seem disruptive.

Since we have already seen an example of Milton allowing himself a narrow prosodic liberty, let me offer one example of a more sweeping, supererogatory restriction: if we assume that the rules of iambic pentameter stipulate that each line must end with a beat, then one supererogatory restriction Milton seems to have imposed on himself is that his lines must, as a general rule, end with an offbeat followed by a beat. To offer statistics from a random sample: of the first two-hundred lines in Book VI of Paradise Lost, only six (3%) do not end with an offbeat followed by a beat. In light of this statistic, I invite readers to consider the following question: if a line of Paradise Lost can be explained by Attridge’s rules, but only if that explanation

43 For the sake of this statistic, I have not counted line 115, which has only nine syllables.
involves a stress-final pairing across the final four syllables of the line (so that the line ends in two successive beats), should the line be considered an acceptable instance of Milton’s particular brand of iambic pentameter in Paradise Lost?

Once again, I do not have a definitive answer to the question I have posed. I only wish to show that we should be wary of the statistics Creaser produces by applying to one particular poem a highly subjective system of scansion designed to appraise a theoretical line of generic iambic pentameter. Attridge’s system is designed for use by people who want to become more sensitive to what they are experiencing when they read poetry. As such, it seeks to provide readers with information about what they might be likely to feel when reading a certain kind of effect. Such a system cannot be used to tell readers what they will feel 99.61% of the time.

To sum up my critique of Creaser’s methodology with a little more pith than one can reasonably hope to achieve when using words like “supererogatory”: Attridge’s system of scansion is so much more sensitive than its forebears, and any scholar who wishes to address a poem’s rhythms would be remiss to ignore it. But, if one is to use Attridge’s system with a maximum of care and precision, one must acknowledge certain of its features that Creaser never does. To be more specific, one must acknowledge that Attridge’s system operates, as any theoretical system must, under the assumption that all other things are equal. But, of course, in practice, “all other things” are often a good way off from “equal.” It would, therefore, be a mistake to lend credence to unqualified statistics founded upon such a strong rule as, “In essentials, if the rhythm of a line is explicable in terms of Attridge’s three deviation rules, then it will not be felt as aberrant, however far it may diverge from a simple iambic tread.” And if we cannot trust Creaser’s statistics, we cannot trust his claim, no matter how plausible it is. For a claim cannot lend plausibility to the evidence that supports it. Evidence can only lend plausibility
to a claim.

III. Milton’s Rhythms As Moral Training

At this point, I want to make a competing claim about the connections between Milton’s poetic style and his broader political and moral agendas. I will do this by calling attention to two features of Milton’s verse that should have become apparent during my critique of Creaser: first, it is often not immediately clear how Milton’s lines should be scanned; and, second, Milton’s lines are characterized by frequent deviations from the theoretical norm. Superficially, these features might seem unrelated to one another. But they are similar in one fundamental respect: they are both forms of rhythmic conflict, and, as such, they both require readers to actively work to achieve some resolution. In the case of ambiguous lines, the reader is forced to choose between several plausible metrical options. And in the case of deviant lines, the reader must grapple, on a less conscious level, with the tension that arises between the line’s actual rhythm and the underlying iambic norm.

It is my argument that Milton’s poetic style does not represent his political beliefs, but creates tasks that train the most important skill and the most important character trait his readers need to become ideal moral and political citizens: Milton’s metrical ambiguities can be seen to train the art of choice, while Milton’s metrical deviations can be seen to cultivate a strenuous disposition. In the closing pages of this chapter, I will explain how Milton’s verse trains the reader in these ways, and why this training makes the reader capable of becoming Milton’s ideal

44 Creaser is more convincing, in SIPF, in his argument that Milton’s verse is characterized by frequent deviations even relative to his contemporaries.
45 Note that this claim is different from Fish’s famous claim about how Paradise Lost presents certain explicitly moral tests, or how PL “intangles” its readers. For now, I am merely arguing that the properties of Milton’s verse train certain qualities that might then be useful in moral scenarios. Later, in chapter three, I will engage more thoroughly with Fish’s ideas, when I make an argument about how Milton’s rhythms are used to create moral tests.
moral and political citizen.

In the case of metrical ambiguity, it is more obvious how the reader is trained in the art of choice: the reader must make a conscious decision about how the line should be scanned. But what does this have to do with becoming the ideal citizen - or at least acquiring the capacities that could allow one to become the ideal citizen? Throughout his prose works, Milton harps on the importance of the ability to “choose,” or to “discern.” But Milton probably provides his most lucid and compelling explanation of why this ability is so important in Areopagitica. In this pamphlet, Milton famously argues against censorship on the grounds that, when Adam and Eve fell, “good” and “evil” became “two twins cleaving together.” In the fallen world of man, then, there is no such thing as good without evil, or evil without good – no such thing as a book that can only help you, or only hurt you. Good and evil always appear together. So, Milton asks rhetorically, “what wisdome can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evil?” (CPW II, 514). Because there is evil in everything, man cannot passively receive pure “goodness” from any external source. Whatever “good” he does get, he must get it by actively choosing it.

This line of thinking leads Milton to make one of his most famous claims - “reason is but choosing” (CPW II, 527) - which God echoes in Paradise Lost when he says, “reason is also

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46 So, for example, the very first lines of The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates read: “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 discerne better, what it is to favour and uphold the Tyrant of a Nation” (CPW III, 190). And again, in Of Education, Milton emphasizes the importance of “that act of reason which in ethics is called proairesis: that [students] may with some judgment contemplate upon good and evil” (CPW II, 396). Proairesis is a Greek noun that factors prominently in Aristotle’s Nichomachean Ethics, and translates literally as “the act of choosing one thing before another.” Even in the Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce Milton harps on the importance of choice, arguing that conjugal discontent arises, at least in part, from a poor choice of wife: it may, Milton insists, even “befall a discreet man to be mistak'n in his choice,” for “who knowes not that the bashfull mutenes of a virgin may oft-times hide all the unlivelines and naturall sloth which is really unfit for conversation; nor is there that freedom of accesse granted or presum'd, as may suffice to a perfect discerning till too late” (CPW II, 249).
choice” (PL, III. 108). The “choice” Milton and God are talking about in these passages is not the choice between whether to eat strawberries or blueberries for lunch, or whether to take the left path or the right path on one’s afternoon stroll. There is no “reason” involved in such choices, just pleasant whim. The choice they are talking about is the harsher, harder choice that only became a “choice” when man ate from the Tree of Knowledge. To Milton’s mind, now that evil exists on earth, inextricably bound up with good, the only way man can ensure he will lead a life of goodness is to cultivate the faculty he gained when he fell – the faculty of reason, or of choice.

Milton’s metrical ambiguities do not train readers merely to notice elisions, or syncopations, or logical structures that influence stress; rather, they cultivate in their readers the single most important faculty Milton thinks a man can have in the fallen world. To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that the scansion of any one line of poetry is a matter of good and evil. I only mean to say that, if one accepts the task of scanning Milton’s lines, he can strengthen his faculty of choice, so that he might better apply that faculty to moral dilemmas as well as metrical ones. This idea is similar to one Milton voices in his commonplace book, when he says that good and evil are mixed together “[so] that reason and intelligence may have the opportunity to exercise themselves by choosing the things that are good” (CPW I, 363). Though Milton’s metrical ambiguities do not ask a reader to choose “good” from “evil,” they do ask readers to confront deep ambiguities, and this confrontation is an “exercise” in choice.

While Milton’s metrical ambiguities train his readers in the art of choice, his frequent metrical deviations cultivate in his readers the kind of strenuous temperament that is required to actually act on the choices they make. Unlike the Socrates of Plato’s Gorgias, who rejects the notion that he who wishes to do good must also “provide himself with some power or art, since
unless he has got such learning or training (ἀσκέω) he will do wrong,” Milton emphatically does not believe that to know the good is to do the good.  

Perhaps this is evidenced best by the opening lines of his *Apology Against a Pamphlet*, in which he bemoans the consequences of “our sinfull neglect of practising that which we know to be undoubtedly true and good” (*CPW* I, 868). Milton believes ardently in the very idea Socrates rejects: that each man must vigorously train himself (ἀσκέω) not only to choose what is good, but also to *act* on what he has chosen. So, in *Of Education*, Milton writes that students must be trained in “the exact use of their weapon,” because this “is also the likeliest means...to inspire them with a gallant and fearless courage, which being temper’d with seasonable Lectures and Precepts to them of true Fortitude and Patience, will turn into a native and heroick valour, and make them hate the cowardise of doing wrong” (*CPW* II, 409; emphasis mine).

“Cowardise” here has two senses: people might do wrong because they are *afraid* to do right, and people might do wrong because they are *too lazy* to do right. In *Eikonoklastes*, Milton accuses King Charles of the first kind of cowardice for wavering about whether to sign the bill for The Earl of Strafford’s execution. It was not Strafford’s loyal support of the king that made Charles waver, Milton writes, but “feare, and nothing els, which made him faine before both the scruple and the satisfaction of his conscience” (*CPW* III, 373). That is, despite knowing what was right all along, Charles did what he thought best for himself at every juncture. Never did he have the “fortitude,” the “patience,” or the “valour” to act on what his conscience told him was right.

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“Cowardise” can manifest itself as fear, but it can also manifest itself as a kind of laziness. In this sense, “cowardise” means something closer to the Latin *ignavia*, which Lewis & Short defines as “inactivity, laziness, idleness, sloth, listlessness, cowardice...”\(^{48}\) For Milton, *doing* wrong is, paradoxically, often a *passive* phenomenon. Often a person does wrong because he is listless, not because he is wicked. In order to do right, then, one must train himself to be the opposite of *ignavius*. One must train himself to be *strenuus*.\(^{49}\) Only when one has acquired such a strenuous temperament will he have it in him to prefer “Hard liberty before the easy yoke / Of servile pomp” (*PL*, II. 256-257).

Strenuousness was a crucial virtue for anyone, but especially for a good republican. Like their classical republican forebears, the neo-Roman republicans of 17\(^{th}\)-century England, Milton included, took the metaphor of independence seriously, and accepted its more arduous implications. As Sallust, Seneca, and Tacitus all note, living under a monarch makes one “obnoxius,” or, literally, *dependent*.\(^{50}\) In such a condition, the subject must metaphorically “lean upon” the tyrant. When, therefore, one dares to acquire liberty, he must also dare to hurl aside his tyrannical prop and stand on his own, *independent*. According to this line of thinking, liberty is actually a more strenuous condition than slavery. It is precisely this conviction (along with the even less savory one that women are weak) that leads Sallust to blame creeping effeminacy for

\(^{48}\) Lewis and Short. "*ignavia.*" *Greek Word Study Tool*. Entry I. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=ignavia&la=la#lexicon

\(^{49}\) The *usus generalis* definition of *ignavia* in the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* includes “parum strenuus” – literally, “too little strenuous,” or “not strenuous enough.” The webpage can be found here: http://www.degruyter.com/view/TLL/7-1-02/7_1_2_ignavia_v2007.xml?pi=0&moduleId=tll-entries&dbJumpTo=igna.

See bibliography for full citation.

the downfall of the Roman republic in his *Bellum Catilinae*. 51 And it is a similar conviction leads Adam and Michael to blame “the tenor of Man’s woe” on “Man’s effeminate slackness” (*PL, XI. 632-634*) in *Paradise Lost*.

A strenuous temperament was a necessity for the ideal moral and political citizen, and Milton’s frequent metrical deviations in *Paradise Lost* work to cultivate in his readers precisely this kind of temperament. When a line of *Paradise Lost* deviates from the theoretical iambic norm, its rhythm comes into conflict with the rhythm of that norm. The reader, then, must do some perceptual work to “normalize” the line: for to “normalize” a line is to resolve the tension between actual instance and theoretical norm. Poets who deviate rarely and conservatively create little perceptual work for their readers. But poets like Milton, who deviate often and boldly, require their readers to remain perceptually active.

But poetry is not just a perceptual activity. Every experience of reading poetry is also a physical experience – perhaps not as vigorous as the boxing or sword-fighting Milton discusses in *Of Education*, but a physical experience nonetheless. To the extent that critics have discussed poetry as a physiological phenomenon, they have tended to focus narrowly on our sense of audition. Aristoxenus, the first of the Greek musical theorists, claimed that melody (μέλος) engaged two main faculties: the hearing (τὴν ἀκοήν) and the intellect (τὴν διάνοιαν). 52 This bipartite understanding of music has continued to influence musical theorists and prosodists alike, so that even those who show a particular interest in non-rational aspects of poetry tend to

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51 From chapter eleven of the *Bellum Catilinae*: “Avaritia pecuniae studium habet, quam nemo sapiens concupivit; ea, quasi venenis malis imbuta, corpus animumque virilem effeminat; semper infinita, insatiabilis est, neque copia neque inopia minuitur” (Greed, which no wise man has desired, includes a zeal for money; this greed, just as if imbued with evil poisons, makes womanly the body and the manly spirit; it is always unbounded, always insatiable, and it is diminished neither by supply nor by want). My translation. See Works Cited for full citation.

speak mostly about audition. For instance, John Hollander, a 20th-century prosodist and poet, claimed that poetry appealed to two main faculties: “the eye” and “the ear,” where “the ear responds to the dimension of natural experience, the eye to that of convention.” Both Aristoxenus and Hollander consider rhythm a physiological activity, but only in the sense that it reaches us through our sense of audition.

Poetry is “experienced,” as Hollander puts it, but it is not only experienced by the ear and the intellect. Recall the language Attridge uses to discuss promotions and demotions: these effects are “felt.” This one verb reveals a fundamental truth about how rhythm works: rhythm creates expectations about how upcoming stresses will be experienced in the whole body, not just how they will be “understood” or “heard.” When we read poetry, we do not immediately understand its rhythms. That is, we do not say to ourselves, “There was a disruption in that line because Milton used a stress-final pairing.” Rather, we experience a disruption physically – we are, as it were, “thrown off.” Our first task is to work to regain equilibrium. Only afterwards do we return to the line to try to understand, in more intellectual terms, why we might have experienced what we did.

Audition, unlike “understanding,” is an important part of the physical experience of poetry. But it is only one part. This claim is further evidenced by the most basic terms we use to talk about meter and rhythm: at least when scanning lines of iambic pentameter, we mark “stressed” and “unstressed” syllables, because the organizing principle of this type of poetry is how certain stresses relate to one another, not how certain sounds do. Attridge’s system, in

54 There are, obviously, exceptions: certain Old English verse forms operate, at least in part, on alliterative principles; and certain Eastern forms, like the Haiku, are organized by the number of syllables in each line, not the pattern of stresses.
which each line is thought to have five beats, makes it even more explicit that poetry is felt in
our body, not just heard in our ears.\textsuperscript{55}

Thinking of poetry as a perceptual and somatic activity calls attention to the fact – too
often overlooked – that the reader of poetry is not just a passive recipient of pleasant sounds. In
turn, the notion that the reader is actively engaged in the experience of poetry helps to dispel the
idea, put forth by Socrates in the \textit{Republic}, that music cultivates a “softness” (\textit{μαλακία}) of soul
while physical exercise cultivates a “hardness” (\textit{σκληρότης}).\textsuperscript{56} Each different poetical or musical
style constitutes a different kind of activity that calls for a different kind of engagement from its
reader. Poetry that rarely requires its reader to resolve perceptual and physical tension might be
said to cultivate a certain “softness” of soul, or softness of disposition. But poetry like Milton’s
can be said to cultivate a certain “hardness,” or robustness. Of course too much hardness is
inadvisable, as the Pharaoh from Exodus can attest.\textsuperscript{57} But an appropriate amount of hardness will
allow a person to emulate one of the most perfect moral \textit{exempla} in any of Milton’s works: the
Jesus who resists Satan’s temptations \textit{Paradise Regained}. That is, an appropriate amount of
hardness will allow a person to confront the most extreme moral tests and choose to follow the
right path, even and especially when it is the more difficult one.

\textsuperscript{55} To be sure, what we “hear” is an important part of our experience of poetry – otherwise we could not
account for effects like consonance, assonance, sibilance, etc. – but what we “feel” is just as important, if
not more.
\textsuperscript{56} Plato, \textit{Republic} translated by C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 94. Book III, section
410d.
\textsuperscript{57} Exodus 9:12: “\textit{ἐσκλήρυνεν δὲ κύριος τὴν καρδίαν Φαραώ}” (The Lord hardened the Pharaoh’s heart).
My translation.
Conclusion

In the first chapter of this thesis, we saw F.T. Prince argue that Milton’s verse should be characterized by a certain *asprezza* – or harshness/difficulty – because of its consonantal clusters. In this chapter, I have sought to use Derek Attridge’s new system of scansion to show that Milton’s verse can also be characterized by a certain *asprezza* because of the tension created by its metrical deviations. Whereas Prince argues that Milton’s verse is difficult because of the sounds the reader hears, I believe Milton’s verse is difficult because of the tension the reader feels. So, to my mind, Milton’s verse can still be characterized by *asprezza*, but that *asprezza* should be located primarily in its rhythms.

But we should not simply say what qualities Milton’s rhythms have, or what qualities they represent. Rather, we should try to determine what effects these rhythms might have on the reader, should he choose to engage fully with the poetry. For once we see poetry as an experience crafted by the poet for the reader, we can begin to notice not only how different poets operate, but also how different readers are asked to engage with different works, and how these different modes of engagement train different skills, dispositions, temperaments, virtues, etc.

Sharon Achinstein has already argued that, even in his poetry, Milton was interested in “fashioning his audience as a valuable participant in political discussion.”58 But Achinstein argues that Milton does this through the content of *Paradise Lost*, not through its rhythms. Once again, then, my claim is different: whereas Achinstein argues that the content of *Paradise Lost* fashions the reader into a valuable participant in political discussion, I argue that the rhythms of *Paradise Lost* create tasks that train the reader in the main skill and the main quality of spirit

necessary to become Milton’s ideal citizen.\(^5^9\)

So far I have shown how certain sweeping rhythmic features of *Paradise Lost* allow readers to exercise skills or qualities that they can *then* apply to moral tests. In my final chapter, I will turn my attention to Belial’s speech from Book II, which is a moral test in and of itself. In performing a close reading of this speech, I will show how rhythmic deviations can serve an important expressive purpose in a localized passage, and I will argue that Milton lends some of his most persuasive rhythms to the devils themselves, with the result that readers are faced with the challenge of resisting persuasion, even when the speaker’s “tongue / Dropped manna” (*PL*, II. 112-113).

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\(^5^9\) Note that I do not consider myself part of that class of critics which assumes, like Paolo Beni, that “the real end of poetry is utility through moral instruction and that pleasure is ancillary to this end.” I am not making claims about the relationship between pleasure and instruction in poetry. I am only making the claim that part of the effect of Milton’s rhythms is to train/instruct the reader. For the quote about Beni, see page 343 of Bernard Weinberg’s *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*. 

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Chapter 3: Scansion as a Means of Confronting Milton’s Moral Tests: A Close Reading of Belial’s Speech

In the previous chapter, I showed how scansion can be used to analyze what effects a poet’s stylistic tendencies might have over the course of an entire poem. But scansion is even more useful in analyzing the effects of a localized passage. In this chapter, I will seek to demonstrate the usefulness of scansion in performing a close reading of the devil Belial’s speech in the infernal council. Whereas in chapter two I was interested in showing how scansion can help us to understand Milton’s broader rhythmic project, in this chapter I will show why scansion is a valuable weapon for confronting the moral challenges – or “temptations” - we face while reading Paradise Lost.

Both the infernal council at large and Belial’s speech in particular have drawn much commentary, especially from those critics interested in how Milton crafts moral tests for his readers. In the first chapter of Surprised by Sin, Stanley Fish uses Belial’s speech as a “case in point” for his argument that Milton inserts moral tests into his poem. But Fish doesn’t provide much evidence about how Belial’s speech becomes so persuasive, or so tempting. He relies primarily on the claim that Belial’s speech must be the most persuasive because it is the “only speech that merits an introduction...the intensity of the warning indicates the extent of the danger.”\(^6\) And when Fish does look at Belial’s actual speech, he focuses solely on its content, without dealing with any of the rhythmic, sonic, syntactic, or structural effects that make it so persuasive. In fact, Fish seems to think that to focus too closely on the merits of Belial’s speech would be to succumb to temptation, to read impiously: “[Belial’s] ploys are effective, and since

in the attempt to measure the relative merits of the two devils [Belial and Moloch] we forget that their entire counsel is baseless, the return of the epic voice yields one more slight shock at this new evidence of our susceptibility.”

In this chapter, I will be explicitly interested in measuring the formal merits of Belial’s speech, in particular the sonic and rhythmic merits which have been largely ignored. My reasons for this approach are two-fold: first, measuring the merits of Belial’s speech more precisely will allow me to better gauge the difficulty of the moral test facing the reader: for if the moral test is to remain unpersuaded by Belial – which Fish agrees it is – then the difficulty of this moral test will scale with the persuasiveness of Belial’s speech. Second, noticing the merits of Belial’s speech will not be a satanic enterprise, but will actually be the only real way for the reader to confront the moral test facing him. For Fish himself acknowledges that “logic is a safeguard against a rhetorical effect only after the effect has been noted.” If, as Bernard Weinberg puts it, “poetry rapidly becomes a form of rhetoric,” then scansion will rapidly become a crucial tool for noting unnoticed rhetorical effects in Belial’s speech, and, therefore, for helping the reader to resist Belial’s persuasive effort.

I. The Context of Belial’s Speech

In Book II of Paradise Lost, the fallen angels hold a council to debate what they should do now that they have been damned to hell. Satan, who presides over this council, opens the debate by reminding his peers that their purpose is to invent ways “to claim [their] just inheritance of old” (PL, II. 38). Satan thinks there are only two viable courses of action: “open

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61 Ibid., 16.
war or covert guile” (II. 41). Either the fallen angels will resolve to attack heaven openly, or they will devise some treachery, some Trojan horse.

Four other devils then offer their opinions. The first to speak is Moloch, a headstrong brute whose speech is motivated by an inborn aggression that has only been exacerbated by the hopelessness of his present circumstances: “My sentence is for open war,” he says. “Of wiles, / More unexpert, I boast not...” (PL, II. 51-52). Though Moloch knows how difficult it will be to defeat God in open battle, he still thinks this most extreme course of action must be dared, because the devils have nothing to lose: “What can be worse / Than to dwell here?” (II. 85-86) he asks. The next two speakers, Belial and Mammon, disagree with Moloch. In their different ways, they both advocate for inaction, for peace. And finally there steps to the podium Beelzebub, who is so deep in Satan’s pocket that Satan actually “devised” his speech for him (PL, II. 379). Beelzebub suggests a kind of middle course, neither war with God nor peaceful stagnation in hell: he wants to scout out a new land God is said to have built (paradise), in order to see if the devils might be able to wreak some havoc there. Given that the title of the poem is Paradise Lost, it comes as no great shock when the devils adopt this final proposal.

Fish has already noted that Belial’s speech is unique in that it is the only one in Paradise Lost that merits a warning from the narrator. This alone would make it worthy of a closer read. But Belial’s speech is also unique in a broader context: the literary topos of the infernal council. Similar “infernal councils” occur frequently in 16th- and 17th-century Christian epics, and it has been shown that Milton drew heavily upon these sources in crafting his own council.64 But Milton’s council is unique in that it includes arguments for peace. Typically infernal councils are a mess of violent, anarchic energy, all vitriol and hatred. In Tasso’s Gerusalemme Liberata and

in Vida’s *Christiad*, Satan alone screams for renewed war, and then all hell breaks loose behind him to seek vengeance against God. In Cowley’s *Davideis* and in Fletcher’s *Locustae*, Satan’s initial speech is followed by one other - in the *Davideis* Envy speaks, and in the *Locustae* Aequivocatus speaks - but in both cases the second speaker also calls for some swift, violent action. In the *Davideis* Envy resolves,

> I’ll soon dissolve this Peace; were Sauls new Love (But Saul we know) great as my hate shall prove, Before their Sun twice more be gone about, I, and my faithful Snakes would rive it out.

And in the *Locustae* Aequivocatus promises, “Soon, having carried out immense evil and immense slaughter, / I will return” (*Mox scelere ingenti atque ingenti caede peracta / Regrediar*). But in *Paradise Lost* Belial makes what seems to be a plea for peace: he does not want to go back to war with God.

This broader context helps to explain the narrator’s cautionary word after Belial’s speech: Belial, he warns us, has “Counseled ignoble ease and peaceful sloth, / Not peace” (*PL*, II. 227-228). Lest the reader be left to wonder how to take this unprecedented speech, or how to view this unprecedented speaker, the narrator announces that Belial is every bit as corrupt as any other infernal councilor, either from *Paradise Lost* or from the rest of literary history. But the moral challenge here is not simply to accept that Belial is a corrupt orator; it is to understand why Belial is a corrupt orator. For persuasion, like poetry, insinuates itself into the listener, so that a


person cannot help but feel it, even when he knows he should not. In order to dispel this feeling of conviction, then, we must notice how Belial’s rhetorical effects produce it in us.

II. Belial’s Speech or The Measuring of a Moral Challenge

Belial’s speech can be broken up into five main sections, according to the classical model of rhetoric: the *exordium*, or the introduction of his argument; the *narratio*, or the narration of events; the *confirmatio*, or the proof; the *refutatio*, or the refutation; and, finally, the *peroratio*, or the conclusion. I will perform a close reading of each of these five sections, in each case using scansion, among other interpretive tools, to show how Belial achieves his rhetorical goals as much through style as through content.

**Exordium** (II. 119-128)

According to the classical model of rhetoric, every speech should begin with an exordium, which Cicero defines as “a speech that suitably prepares the minds of the audience for the rest of the oration” (“exordium est oratio animum auditoris idonee comparans ad reliquam dictionem”). The exordium does not succeed to the extent that it presents a coherent argument, but to the extent that it works upon the audience member’s disposition, making it “kindly, attentive, and tractable” (“benivolum, attentum, docilem”). A key element of a successful exordium is the *captatio benevolentiae* - the bit of flattery, praise, or even just respectful recognition at the beginning of the speech. No matter how the orator actually executes this maneuver, Cicero insists that “it will behoove him to secure the audience’s goodwill” (“benivolentiam captare oportebit”).

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Belial’s *exordium* is short, understated, more concessive than Moloch’s, more humble than Satan’s, and, for all that, devastatingly deft:

I should be much for open war, O peers,
As not behind in hate; if what was urged
Main reason to persuade immediate war
Did not dissuade me most, and seem to cast
Ominous conjecture on the whole success:
When he who most excels in fact of arms,
In what he counsels and in what excels
Mistrustful, grounds his courage on despair
And utter dissolution, as the scope
Of all his aim, after some dire revenge. (*PL*, II. 119-128)

Whereas Moloch eschews the *captatio benevolentiae* entirely, Belial begins his speech by allying himself, in a way, with everyone in his audience, including those who might have been persuaded by Moloch’s speech. That is to say, Belial does not retort, in the confrontational tone Moloch might have used, “Well, *my* sentence is for covert guile.” Instead, he begins his speech in the subjunctive mood, in a sophisticated counter-factual clause: he *would* be for open war, he says (the implication being that he has nothing against anyone who *is* for open war), but there is something nagging at his conscience. In the course of this counter-factual, which is itself working as a *captatio benevolentiae*, Belial incorporates the democratic address, “O peers.” This address of the audience in the vocative, which Moloch also eschews, was all but a requirement of classical oratory: Demosthenes and Lysias always address their audience in the first lines of their speeches (*ὁ ἄνδρες δικασταί, ὦ ἄνδρες, ὦ βουλή*), and Cicero almost always does (*iudices, Quirites, pontifices*).[^69]

[^69]: For Demosthenes’ speeches, see *Demosthenes, Selected Private Speeches*, edited by C. Carey and R.A. Reid. For Lysias’ speeches see *Lysias, Selected Speeches*, edited by C. Carey. For Cicero’s speeches see the entry for Cicero on *The Latin Library*: http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/cic.html.
On the one hand, Moloch ignores, insults, and then dismisses those audience members who might have been inclined to disagree with him: “Let those / Contrive who need, or when they need, not now” (*PL*, II. 52-53). On the other hand, Belial addresses every devil as his equal. Indeed, he even assures his opponents that he would be willing to stew in hatred with them, if it weren’t for one small thing: the sense of “despair” that so obviously motivated and supported Moloch’s argument seems to Belial actually to *undermine* Moloch’s argument! This is a devastating pivot. But note that, even as Belial launches what could have been a ruthless *ad hominem* attack, he makes sure to act the gentleman. Moloch is not, in Belial’s speech, a bloodthirsty beast or a hapless dope. On the contrary, Moloch is the one “who most excels in fact of arms.” Both in his syntax and in his sentiments, Belial displays a sophistication that Moloch lacks.

Belial’s exordium would be effective enough because of its content, but it is made so much more effective by its rhythms. The first three lines of Belial’s speech conform almost perfectly to the theoretical norm of iambic pentameter, with all of the beats falling on the even syllables, and with the only deviations being the line-initial demotion of “Main” and the promotion of “of” in line 121 (remember that *beats* are bolded, *offbeats* are unbolded, *promotions* are bolded and italicized, *demotions* are unbolded and italicized, and *pairings* are underlined):

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I should be much for open war, O peers,
As not behind in hate; if what was urged
Main reason to persuade immediate war...
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In their lack of tension, these lines constitute something of a rhythmic *captatio benevolentiae*. That is, before he begins to introduce more complex, disruptive deviations, Belial lets his audience settle in.
But when Belial pivots and strikes in the fourth line of his speech, he shifts a beat off the even syllables for the first time in his speech:

...if what was urged
Main reason to persuade immediate war
Did not dissuade me most, and seem to cast...

Because dissuade is being contrasted with persuade, it carries an unnatural stress on its first syllable, so that it becomes part of a stress-initial pairing. This stress-initial pairing (the single most disruptive deviation according to Attridge) should jar the audience. This effect is apt, since Belial is transitioning away from his captatio benevolentiae and into his attack on Moloch. Here, rhythm, sound, and sense all come together: as Belial goes on the offensive for the first time, he unsettles his audience rhythmically, and he does so while using the prefix “dis,” which appears throughout Paradise Lost in contexts that are supposed to disturb the reader. See, for example, the beginning of Book IX, where Milton presages the fall in these words:

...I now must change
These notes to tragic; foul distrust, and breach
Disloyal on the part of man, revolt,
And disobedience: on the part of heaven
Now alienated, distance and distaste (PL, IX. 5-9).

Belial’s goal, in unsettling his audience members at this juncture, is nothing other than to frighten them. Since Moloch’s argument hinged on the idea that the devils had nothing to fear (“What fear we then?” (II. 94)), Belial’s success is contingent on his ability to convince his audience members that they do, in fact, have quite a bit to fear.

It is a strong and effective persuasive maneuver, then, when Belial begins the fifth line of his speech with the phrase “Ominous conjecture.” These words, so crucial to his persuasive agenda, receive an added force by virtue of their appearing at the head of the line. What’s more,
they receive a *startling* force by virtue of the fact that this is the first line in Belial’s speech that carries a beat on its first syllable:

**Ominous conjecture on the whole success** (where “Ominous” is being syncopated to two syllables, as often happens when a word contains a short syllable before a nasal).

Note that this analysis would not only be impossible without scansion; it would also be impossible without a system of scansion that differentiates between stresses and beats, because the stressed syllable “Main” begins the third line of Belial’s speech. But when one uses Attridge’s system of scansion, it becomes easy to show that “Main” and “O-” do *not* function in the same way, rhythmically speaking. This, in turn, makes it possible to show how the rhythms of Belial’s exordium further his persuasive purposes.

**Narratio** (II. 129-186)

After Belial reminds his audience of Moloch’s promise that they will get “revenge” on God (*PL*, II. 105), he shifts abruptly into his *narratio*: “First, what revenge?” (II. 129). This curt, rhetorical question is effective as a way to puncture whatever grandiose fantasies might have been swelling in the imaginations of his audience. But it is also an effective structural device: unlike Moloch, whose speech has almost no narrative elements, Belial knows that every good speech must tell a story. So, Belial is not merely deploying a rhetorical question. He is also transitioning into his *narratio* by signaling that he will begin his story at the beginning.

In the beginning of his *narratio*, Belial sets out to prove that Heaven will defeat any kind of attack the devils could mount. Heaven’s “armèd watch,” he says, would spot any covert attack long before it could be sprung; and even if, by some miracle, the devils could “break [their] way / By force,” God would remain “incorruptible” and “unpolluted” (*PL*, II. 134-139) on his throne. Once again, we can get a good idea of Belial’s persuasive goals by looking at line-initial words
and beats. Two line-initial words in this section of Belial’s narratio - “impregnable” (II. 131) and “victorious” (143) - have extra prominence, because they are followed by a rhythmic pause. These words alone sketch the whole story of this section of the narratio: Heaven is impregnable, God will be victorious.

But Belial doesn’t just want to tell his story. He wants to unsettle his audience in the telling. Other than locating words like “impregnable” and “victorious” at the heads of lines, the main way Belial achieves this goal is by deploying two rhythmic deviations. First, in the middle of his narratio, Belial pulls the same trick he did in the middle of his exordium: he starts the line whose content is most disturbing with a beat. Heaven, he says, has scouts that fly

...far and wide into the realm of night,
Scorning surprise... (PL, II. 133-134).

“Scorn” might not seem like the most disturbing prospect in Belial’s speech. But remember that Belial is speaking to an audience of the greatest egotists in the universe. The absolute last thing the devils want is to be “scorned,” for to be scorned is to be mocked, ridiculed, looked down upon, despised. Remember too that Moloch told the devils nothing could be worse than their current state, not even defeat. Here, Belial is showing the devils what could be worse than their current state, what could be worse even than defeat: scorn. Sure, the devils might not mind losing to God in a hard-fought battle. But it would torture them to hear the walls of Heaven ringing with laughter at their desperate wiles. Belial knows his audience well, and he uses this line-initial beat on “Scorning” – the first line-initial beat since the one on “Ominous” ten lines ago – to strike into his audience the fear of being mocked.

The second major expressive deviation in Belial’s narratio comes only lines later, when Belial insists that, even if all hell should rise up
...to confound

Heaven’s purest light, yet our great enemy,
All incorruptible would on his throne
Sit unpolluted... (PL, II. 136-139).

Here, Belial pairs the stresses “great” and “e-” to make God seem that more intimidating.

Because stresses can lend a section of verse more weight and impact, pairing can be used effectively, as it is here, to drum up fear or awe. Of course pairing is not only and always used to achieve this effect, but it seems that Belial is partial to this particular use of pairing: note that he resorts to it again just twelve lines later, in the second part of his narratio, when he threatens that the devils could be “swallowed up and lost / In the wide womb of uncreated night” (II. 149-150).

The second part of Belial’s narratio, in which he tells the devils what could happen to them after their defeat, comprises the majority of his speech. But I want to focus on just one moment, in an effort to show how a pair of promotions serves an important expressive purpose in what Fish calls the “strongest point” in Belial’s speech, though without explaining why this is so:

And that must end us, that must be our cure,
To be no more; sad cure; for who would lose,
Though full of pain, this intellectual being,
Those thoughts that wander through eternity,
To perish rather, swallowed up and lost
In the wide womb of uncreated night (PL, II. 145-150).

This passage, in which Belial seeks to terrify the devils with the prospect of annihilation, might be the best answer anyone has ever given Hamlet. But I want to show why its most poignant line – “Those thoughts that wander through eternity” – would not be nearly so effective were it not for a number of rhythmic “coincidences.” To my mind, the rhythms of this entire

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70 Stanley Fish, Surprised by Sin (2nd ed. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997), 16.
passage are designed to make this one line maximally effective, and this line will be effective to
the extent that the process of thinking seems like a free and enjoyable process of wandering,
rather than a hellish, arduous, maddening process of tug-of-war and toil.

To achieve his intended effect, Belial first sets up the line in question. Consider that, over
the course of the three lines that precede it, there occur five commas and two semicolons. These
lines would be choppy in most poetic contexts, but they are even more disruptive in the dual
context of Belial’s speech and Milton’s verse, both of which tend to be marked by frequent
enjambments and long, flowing periods. But these choppy lines serve a purpose: relative to them,
the line “Those thoughts that wander through eternity,” with its weak caesura and lack of
punctuation, seems all the more free and easy.

The rhythm of the line itself also contributes to this effect. In addition to virtually
eschewing a caesura, Belial also uses two promotions to create a light, quick line:

Those thoughts that wander through eternity...

Some readers might object to my using such figurative language as “light” and “quick” to
describe the “feel” of a poem. But I am really using the terms “light” and “quick” in their literal
senses. By “light,” I mean that, in tapping out the beat of a line of poetry, one would probably
bring one’s foot or hand down more lightly, or gently, at a beat fulfilled by a promoted syllable
than at a beat fulfilled by a stressed syllable. And by “quick,” I mean that a section of verse
marked by frequent promotions usually can be read more quickly, because unstressed syllables
tend to take less time to pronounce than stressed syllables.71

To sum up, this line succeeds for three reasons: first, Belial sets it up with three choppy
lines; second, the line has no marks of punctuation, and the caesura after “wander” is extremely

71 See SIPF, 275, where Creaser discusses findings from Ada F. Snell’s “An Objective Study of Syllabic
Quantity in English Verse.”
weak; and, third, Belial uses two promotions in a single line. All of these rhythmic features come together to make the process of thinking seem free and easy, which, in turn, makes the line maximally effective. Fish is right that this passage is one of the strongest points in Belial’s speech. But the passage derives its strength at least as much from its rhythms as from its content.

**Confirmatio** (II. 187-193)

Having issued a number of threats in the second part of his *narratio*, not the least of which are annihilation and eternal, hopeless torment, Belial moves into his *confirmatio*. Here, he reiterates, “War, therefore, open or concealed, alike / My voice dissuades” (*PL*, II. 187-188), before launching into some sonic pyrotechnics that will continue not only throughout his brief *confirmatio*, but also through his *refutatio* and *peroratio*. Though *Paradise Lost* is an unrhymed poem, and Belial’s speech an unrhymed speech, Belial nearly rhymes every line of his *confirmatio*: the end words are, in order, “alike, guile, eye, height, derides, might, wiles.” Through this series of off-rhymes, Belial remakes all of the most important points he made during his *narratio*: because God looks out from on high, he will deride – literally, laugh at! – any attempt at “covert guile,” as Satan put it in his opening speech. But God is also “almighty” (II. 192), and therefore capable of resisting the devils’ might. As if all these sonic acrobatics were not enough, Belial finishes his *confirmatio* with a little flourish: in the last line, “Than wise to frustrate all our plots and wiles,” Belial takes up Moloch’s word “wiles,” off-rhymes it with “might” from the preceding line, and internally off-rhymes it with “wise.” This is more than Belial needs to do to reiterate his point. This is grandstanding.

But even as Belial appeals to his audience’s ears, he fashions some extremely disruptive rhythms. Nowhere in his speech does Belial deviate from the iambic norm more drastically than in the final two lines from the following passage:
...for what can force or guile
With him, or who deceive his mind, whose eye
Views all things at one view? He from heaven’s height
All these our motions vain sees and derides

The first of these two lines could be scanned in two ways:

*Views all things at one view? He from heaven’s height*

or

*Views all things at one view? He from heaven’s height*

And the second should be scanned like so:

*All these our motions vain sees and derides*

If we accept the first scansion of the first line, then the line would count as “aberrant” based on Attridge’s test. But, since I don’t put much stock in this test’s ability to tell us what lines really are felt as aberrant, let me describe what makes the line so disruptive: some moderate degree of disruption is caused by the fact that there are two demotions (of “views” and “view”). But the real disruption is caused by the fact that the double offbeat “things at” is not balanced by two successive beats. As a result, the line remains unbalanced until the two consecutive beats “heaven’s height” at the end of the line.

If we accept the second scansion of this line, the line would not count as “aberrant” based on Attridge’s test. But, in practice, it would be just as disruptive, because it is extremely rare for two pairings to occur in the same line, or for a line of Milton’s verse to carry its beats on syllables 2, 5, 6, 9, and 10.72

72 Belial’s speech contains a couple of lines that would fail Attridge’s test, but that are not nearly as disruptive as this line, however you scan it. This is just more evidence to help prove why you shouldn’t put too much stock in Attridge’s test. The lines are: II. 131: *Impregnable; oft on the bordering deep* (where the syllable “-ble” is part of a promotion and a pairing).
Finally, the second line contains a demotion and a stress-initial pairing, making it less disruptive than the preceding line, but nonetheless an unusually deviant line.

It is no coincidence that Belial introduces extreme tension into his verse when he is making the threat that underlies his entire argument: God is always watching. The fact that God’s constant gaze can function as a threat reveals so much about the devils. A good Christian would have a healthy fear of God, but he would also take solace in the idea that God was watching over him. The devils, though, guilty and conniving, feel nothing but fear at the idea that God “views all things at one view.” In introducing extreme tension into his verse at this precise moment, Belial both reveals his character and, by stoking his audience’s fear, furthers his rhetorical goals.

Refutatio (II. 194-208)

Belial begins his refutatio in the most direct fashion possible: he anticipates his opponents’ retort. But, lest his speech seem to be lacking a transition, Belial links his refutatio to his confirmatio sonically, through the word “vile,” which off-rhymes with “wiles” at the end of the preceding line and assonates with “wise:”

Than wise to frustrate all our plots and wiles.
Shall we then live thus vile, the race of heaven
Thus trampled, thus expelled to suffer here
Chains and these torments? Better these than worse
By my advice; (PL, II. 193-197).

Here Belial insists, once again, that the devils have no chance against God. But then he goes one step further, implying that some of his peers are not prepared to face the consequences of defeat.

Once again Belial subjects these peers to ridicule, derision:

II. 138: All incorruptible would on his throne (where the syllable “would” is part of two promitions, of “-ble” and “on”).
I laugh, when those who at the spear are bold
And vent’rous, if that fail them, shrink and fear
What yet they know must follow, to endure
Exile, or ignominy, or bonds, or pain, (II. 204-207).

Predictably, Belial introduces the most tension into the last of these lines, where he lists off the evils the devils would face were they to lose. This time, the rhythmic tension comes not from a deviant stress pattern, but from an irresolvable ambiguity. Since the line appears to have eleven syllables, it is clear that some syllable must drop out of the line, either through elision or syncopation. The only two plausible options are: the second “i” in ignominy could be syncopated before the nasal “n,” or “ignominy” and the second “or” could elide across a comma.

The second of these two options would create a high degree of tension. The reason for this is intuitive: a mark of punctuation asks the reader to pause, but elision calls for the reader to glide quickly across what appear to be two syllables, making them into one. This kind of effect, where the reader is asked to perform two contradictory movements, creates tension.

Syncopating the second “i” in “ignominy” would also create more tension than, for example, syncopating the “i” in “Ominous conjecture.” Here’s why: normally when a vowel gets syncopated, the following syllable functions as an offbeat, as “minous” does in “Ominous conjecture.” But if “ignominy” were to be syncopated in this line, the syllable “miny” would be promoted to function as a beat:

Exile, or ignominy, or bonds, or pain.

So, whether the line includes an elision across a mark of punctuation or a syncopation before a beat, the line includes a rare and awkward metrical effect that creates a high degree of tension. It is probably not necessary to say more about why Belial would want his audience to feel uncomfortable while he lists off, “Exile, or ignominy, or bonds, or pain.”
Peroratio (II. 208-225)

Like any good orator, Belial finishes his speech with a display of unprecedented rhetorical excellence. Earlier, in discussing Belial’s confirmatio, I noted that he sets off some sonic pyrotechnics that continue throughout the refutatio and peroratio. Whereas the sonic effects in the confirmatio have to do with final vowels, the sonic effects in the refutatio and peroratio have to do with both final vowels and final consonants. In the course of the thirty-two lines that comprise the refutatio and peroratio, it happens six times that the final syllables of two consecutive lines begin with the same consonant sound (such as “foe” and “fall” at the ends of lines II. 202-203). By way of comparison, this effect happens only five times in the first seventy-four lines of Belial’s speech, and only sixteen times in the first hundred lines from Books One and Three combined. So, this effect occurs 2.77 times more often in the last thirty-two lines of Belial’s speech than in the first seventy-four, and 2.34 times more often than in the 200 total lines sampled from Books I and III. Though this is not rhyme, it is the kind of “jingling sound of like endings” to which some audience members might fall prey, and against which Milton inveighs in his introduction to Paradise Lost.

Belial continues with his jingling off-rhymes as well. In the lines we already examined from the refutatio, he includes the rhyme words “spear” and “fear” in consecutive lines: “I laugh, when those who at the spear are bold / And vent’rous, if that fail them, shrink and fear...” (PL, II. 204-205). What’s more, the word “pain” at the end of line 207 jingles with the word “sustain” in the middle of line 209; “remit” and “removed” jingle at the ends of lines 210-211; and “satisfied” and “fires” off-rhyme at the ends of lines 212-213.

While Belial keeps up his sonic effects throughout the refutatio and peroratio, he saves his most masterful sonic and rhythmic performance for the very end of his peroratio. In these
final lines of his speech, he suggests that one day the devils’ essences, having been “conformed” to hell,

...will receive
Familiar the fierce heat, and void of pain;
This horror will grow mild, this darkness light,
Besides what hope the never-ending flight
Of future days may bring, what chance, what change
Worth waiting, since our present lot appears
For happy though but ill, for ill not worst,
If we procure not to ourselves more woe (PL, II. 218-225).

Belial first suggests that his audience will acclimate to hell, so that one day it will not seem like such a horrible place. But then he goes a step further, tempting his audience with the possibility of “hope” – a false possibility, of course, since at the very beginning of Paradise Lost the narrator describes hell as a place where “hope never comes / That comes to all” (I. 66-67).

Because Belial is making a false promise, he must make his argument more through his rhythms than through his reason. Consider that, even as Belial promises the devils they will acclimate to hell, he deploys the exact same deviation in the exact same spot in two consecutive lines, so that his audience members can experience the very process of acclimatization he is speaking about:

Familiar the **fierce heat**, and **void** of **pain**;
This **horror** will **grow mild**, this **darkness** **light** (PL, II. 219-220).

In each of these lines, whose stress patterns are completely identical, a stress-final pairing occurs across syllables 3-6. In the first line, the pairing creates a high degree of rhythmic disruption, as pairing generally does. But in the second line, after we have just encountered it, the pairing seems “rhythmic” in the most literal sense of the word (“rhythm” is derived from the Greek
ῥυθµός, which Lewis & Short defines as “any regular recurring motion”). When Belial tells his audience that “this horror will grow mild,” he lets them feel the truth of this claim with his rhythms.

As a quick point of comparison, consider that Mammon effectively cribs this bit about acclimatization from Belial, but without any apt rhythmic effect:

> Our torments also may in length of time<br>  Become our elements, these piercing fires<br>  As soft as now severe, our temper changed<br>  Into their temper: which must needs remove<br>  The sensible of pain. All things invite (PL, II. 274-278).

To be sure, Mammon does include some sonic niceties in this passage: “torments” acquires a different beginning and transforms into “elements,” and “severe” acquires a different ending and transforms into “soft.” But, as far as I can tell, Mammon’s rhythmic deviations serve no apt expressive purpose. Now, it would be unfair to accuse Mammon of rhythmic incompetence just because his rhythms are not apt in one five-line passage. Often deviations enhance a section of verse simply by infusing rhythmic variety into it, without necessarily serving any special, apt purpose. What is more damning is that Mammon fails to capitalize on the expressive possibilities of the emphatic contrast between “our temper” and “their temper.” Indeed, “their” is not even used as a beat! Instead, it is forced into a position where it must be demoted, in order to serve as part of the double offbeat between “Into” and “temper.” Mammon does not just show a lack of rhythmic dexterity. He actually shows a rhythmic clumsiness, a failure to position his emphatic

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73 Lewis and Short, "ῥυθµός," Greek Word Study Tool. Entry A.
http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/morph?l=axilleus&la=greek#lexicon

74 I have marked “into” with a stress on its first syllable, because this is how the OED marks it. But Milton often seems to have used “into” such that it can take a stress on either syllable. What’s more, it used to take a stress on its second syllable in Old English verse, so it is possible that the stress was in flux at the time Milton was using the word, and that it would have felt natural for the syllable to take a stress on either syllable. But even if “into” takes a stress on its second syllable here, “their” is still demoted between two stressed syllables.
words where they will do the most damage. It is all the more damning that he shows a rhythmic clumsiness in his version of the passage in which Belial is at his rhythmic best. Belial does not only look good in comparison with Moloch; he also looks good in comparison with Mammon.

After Belial tempts the devils with the idea of acclimatization, he proceeds to tempt them with the hope of better, more blissful days. Here, naturally, he delivers four consecutive lines of almost perfectly normal iambic pentameter, with every beat on the even syllables and, at the very most, only two promotions and one demotion:

- Besides what hope the never-ending flight
- Of future days may bring, what change, what change
- Worth waiting, since our present lot appears
- For happy though but ill, for ill not worst...

These four lines create as little tension as any four in *Paradise Lost*. Not only does every beat occur on an even syllable, but no elisions or syncopations occur. What’s more, jingling sonic effects combine with mild rhythms to produce a maximum of immediate pleasure. Recall that Belial has made a game of off-rhyme throughout his speech: in addition to the several off-rhymes that occur during the *confirmatio* alone, all of the following off-rhymes also appear at various points in his speech: throne/mould; exasperate/rage; knows/Foe; sure/ire. But here—finally! - Belial gratifies his listener with his first perfect rhyme (light/flight). Once again, Belial seeks to persuade his audience of his point – i.e. that hell could even be pleasant - through his rhythms and his sounds, not through sound argumentation.

Finally, after Belial has sung his audience into bliss, he frightens them once more in the last line of his speech: everything will be all right, he assures them, “If we procure not to ourselves more woe.” In issuing this final threat, Belial disrupts his four near-perfect lines of

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There is almost certainly a partial stress on “en-” in never-ending, so that there is actually just one proper promotion. But, for the sake of the argument, I have made my count conservatively.
iambic pentameter with a single line that displays every kind of deviation: promotion, demotion, and pairing. Since Belial’s primary rhetorical goal is to convince his audience that they have something to fear, he wants to leave his audience with an embodied sense of “what could be worse” - hence the several deviations, and also the sonic similarity of “worse” to “woe,” the last word of the speech. Like any good orator, Belial concludes by jolting his audience. Normally this jolt is meant to cause the audience to leap to action. But in this case, it is meant to cause the audience to freeze, paralyzed by fear, in inaction.

If rhetorical ability (ἡ ῥητορικὴ δύναμις) is, as Aristotle puts it, the “faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion [πιθανόν],” then Belial’s speech is a true rhetorical masterpiece, in large part because of its rhythms. Milton, then, has set his readers the extremely difficult task of resisting Belial’s attempts at persuasion.

III. How Belial’s Test Works and How We Can Confront It

In Milton’s works, tests generally take the form of temptations: in Paradise Lost, Satan tempts Adam and Eve with the fruit; in Samson Agonistes, Delilah tempts Samson with her sexual allure; and, in Paradise Regained, Satan tempts Jesus with just about everything. Belial’s speech is no exception to this rule. The two questions we must ask, then, in order to better understand how Belial’s test works, are “How does temptation work in Milton’s poetry?” and “How do we resist it?”

In How Milton Works, Stanley Fish defines temptation, as it appears in Milton’s poetry, as anything that might lead the reader to value something other than obedience to God: to Milton’s mind, Fish writes, “there is only one value – the value of obedience – and not only is it

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a mistake to grant independence to values other than the value of obedience, it is a temptation.\footnote{77 Stanley Fish, \textit{How Milton Works} (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 53.}

I agree with Fish’s basic claim that Milton’s moral universe is a monistic one, with some form of obedience or piety being the sole real virtue. But I want to define more thoroughly how “obedience” and “temptation” work in \textit{Paradise Lost}, so that we can understand better how the rhythms of Milton’s poetry work on us, and how the text calls for us to respond to their workings.

\textit{Paradise Lost} is rife with spatial metaphors, not the least of which is its central metaphor: that of “standing” with God vs. “falling” away from Him. It makes sense, then, that spatial metaphors can be used both to define obedience and to conceptualize how temptation works. To my mind, “obedience” should be defined as bringing one’s will into line with God’s will, and, on top of that, bringing one’s behavior into line with one’s will. This spatial conceptualization of obedience makes even more sense in light of God’s declaration that whoever “disobeys” him “breaks union” (\textit{PL}, 5. 611-612; emphasis mine). One way to think of obedience is as a three-fold union of one’s behavior and one’s will and God’s will. But in any case, whether \textit{Paradise Lost} defines obedience to God as maintaining a “union” with him, or as remaining “upright” (\textit{PL}, I. 18, III. 693, \textit{et alia}), or as “standing” instead of “falling,” the text is at all times concerned with man’s metaphorical position in relation to God. It therefore seems best to me to explain temptation on the text’s terms – that is, in spatial terms - as “Anything that works to move the reader away from God, or to cause him to fall out of union with Him.”

If we adopt this spatial model of temptation, then Belial’s speech must be the greatest temptation the reader faces in \textit{Paradise Lost}. For Belial’s speech is a masterpiece of both poetry and rhetoric, the two forms of communication that have perennially been deemed capable of
moving their listeners most. As the 16th-century Italian poet and humanist Giovanni Pontano put it, “The job of both the orator and the poet is to move [*movere*] and to turn the listener” (“Utriusque etiam, oratoris ac poetae officium est movere at flectere auditorem”). So, if rhythms and rhetoric move a listener most, and if temptation is “anything that works to move the reader away from God,” then Belial, the greatest of the satanic orator-poets, must be the greatest tempter of all: for he will be the one who exerts the greatest force on the reader in the direction opposite from God.

While Belial’s job is to tempt us, or to exert a satanic force on us, the text makes it clear that it is our job to *resist* this force, or to “stand.” Even Satan, during his soliloquy at the beginning of Book IV, comes painfully close to recognizing that the proper response to temptation is to “stand”:

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..But other Powers as great
Fell not, but stand unshaken, from within
Or from without, to all temptations armed.
Hadst thou the same free will and Power to stand?
Thou hadst. Whom hast thou then or what to accuse,
But Heaven’s free love dealt equally to all? (Pl, IV. 63-68).
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Here Satan explicitly links the action of “standing” and the action of “resisting.” In so doing, he draws out the latent etymological link between the two English verbs: “resist” is derived from the Latin compound verb *resisto*, which is made up of the prefix “re” and the verb *sisto*, to “stand.” To “stand,” in *Paradise Lost*, is to be strong enough to *resist*, to be strong enough to *withstand* temptation and to *stand with* God.

Recall Fish’s idea that “logic is a safeguard against a rhetorical effect only after the effect has been noted.” Another way of putting that quote, in light of our new understanding of how

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temptation works, is “we can only use logic to resist the force of temptation after we note the
effects that are producing that force.” In the case of Belial’s speech, rhythms are often the effects
producing the satanic force. The only real way to resist this force, then, will be to use scansion to
note, and thereby neutralize, these rhythmic effects. Scansion is so much more than just a
frivolous analytic tool: it is the only way to resist fully the satanic forces at play in *Paradise
Lost*. 
Conclusion: How Milton’s Rhythms Work

Most critics agree that Milton was deeply interested in fashioning a republican, Christian audience. What critics do not agree on is how Milton went about doing this fashioning. In this thesis, I have sought to show not only *that* Milton’s rhythms work to do this fashioning, but also *how* they do it. In effect, I have argued that Milton’s rhythms test and train the reader both on a broad scale and in localized passages. In chapter two, I showed how Milton’s rhythms train the art of choice and the quality of strenuousness, two necessary virtues for the ideal citizen. Then, in chapter three, I showed how Milton’s localized rhythms often create moral tests in which the reader can attempt to demonstrate, in practice, the virtues that Milton’s sweeping rhythms train: for what is resisting temptation if not choosing to align one’s will with God’s, and then having the strenuous disposition necessary to act on one’s/God’s will? Remember that these tests and tasks do not *automatically* make the reader into Milton’s ideal citizen. But they do provide a training ground on which the reader can, if he engages properly with the text, practice the moral skills he needs to become that citizen.

Before I conclude, I want to emphasize that every line in *Paradise Lost* is not a temptation. Many – if not most – of Milton’s rhythms exert a force on the reader that should move him closer to God. But Milton’s project is not simply to move his reader closer to God, and then leave him there, helpless to resist the forces of the fallen world that are always threatening move him away again. Milton’s project is to cultivate in his readers the virtues necessary to resist temptation, so that those readers can remain close to God even after the reading experience is over. This aspect of Milton’s project requires him to exert on his readers the strongest version of the satanic forces they might encounter in life. Milton does this largely through his rhythms, creating for his readers a moral resistance program analogous to the resistance programs we use
in physical training. Some of Milton’s readers – none more famously than William Blake, who accused Milton of being “of the Devil’s party without knowing it” - have mistaken these satanic forces in *Paradise Lost* for evidence of Milton’s own satanic bent. Such readers are ignoring the central metaphor of the text, which makes it clear that “standing” – or “resisting” - is both the greatest virtue a person can have, and also the proper response to the tests presented by the text.

Milton’s rhythms work by making us work. Sometimes that work is intellectual, sometimes it is perceptual, sometimes it is physical, and sometimes it is explicitly moral. Of course Milton’s rhythms are not necessarily unique in this regard, since no poet gets all his work done through his meanings alone. But Milton’s rhythms are exceptional because of the degree to which they make us work, and the degree to which they test us. It is probably not possible to pass Milton’s tests as perfectly as Jesus passes Satan’s in *Paradise Regained*. But this is beside the point. To avoid work is to let the soul atrophy, and to shrink from temptation is to shrink from the heat in which human virtue is forged. Only to the extent that readers actively confront Milton’s tasks and tests – only, that is, to the extent that they let themselves sense every last poetic effect – will they strengthen those greatest political and religious virtues: reason, strenuousness, and, above all, resistance.

Works Cited


