PART ONE

Defining Milton’s republicanism
CHAPTER I

Milton’s classical republicanism

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I

In *Behemoth, or The Long Parliament*, Thomas Hobbes laid much of the blame for the Civil War at the door of the universities which, he said, ‘have been to this nation, as the wooden horse was to the Trojans’.

This was also a warning because until the universities were reformed they would continue to pose the same threat: ‘The core of rebellion, as you have seen by this . . . are the Universities.’ Their potential for causing rebellion arose from a single source: the prominence of the ancient languages in the curriculum. For Hobbes believed that anyone acquiring a mastery of these languages was in effect being handed the keys to an ideological arsenal.

Two groups especially had exploited the opportunity presented to them. One was the clergy who were able to ‘pretend’ that linguistic expertise endowed them with ‘greater skill in Scriptures than other men have’. This meant they could ‘impose’ their ‘own sense’ of Scripture on their ‘fellow-subjects’ despite the fact that the Bible was available in English. They could also invoke the same ‘skill’ whenever they sought to ‘publish or teach . . . private interpretations’ which brought the king’s authority into question – something which Hobbes regarded as a matter of the utmost consequence since ‘the interpretation of a verse in the Hebrew, Greek, or Latin Bible, is oftentimes the cause of civil war and the deposing and assassinating of God’s anointed’.

The other group armed in this fashion was the gentry – the ‘men of the better sort’, ‘democratical gentlemen’ or simply ‘democraticals’ as

I am greatly indebted to David Armitage and Quentin Skinner for their prompt and perceptive comments on a draft of this essay.

2 Ibid., p. 58.  
3 Ibid., p. 90.  
4 Ibid., p. 53.  
5 Ibid., pp. 55, 144.
Hobbes often called them.⁶ They had gained access to the reserves of classical history and moral philosophy which ‘furnished’ them ‘with arguments for liberty out of the works of Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Seneca, and out of the histories of Rome and Greece, for their disputation against the necessary power of kings’.⁷ The effect on the ‘exceeding great number’ who were ‘so educated’ had been calamitous. It was impossible to persuade those who had ‘acquired the learning of a university’, and ‘especially’ those who had ‘read the glorious histories and the sententious politics of the ancient popular governments’, that they might conceivably lack ‘any ability requisite for the government of a commonwealth’. For once they ‘read the books written by famous men of the ancient Grecian and Roman commonwealths’, in which ‘popular government was extolled by the glorious name of liberty, and monarchy disgraced by the name of tyranny’, they quite simply fell ‘in love with their forms of government’.⁸

Hobbes then clears a path connecting these claims to his account of the fall of the monarchy. When asked to explain how such a seemingly powerful monarch as Charles I could ‘miscarry’, Hobbes replies that this was because the people had been ‘corrupted’. Asked ‘what kind of people were they that could so seduce them?’, he responds by singling out the ‘ministers’ and ‘men of the better sort’.⁹ It was the ‘seditious Presbyterian ministers’ and ‘ambitious ignorant orators’ who between them ‘reduced this government into anarchy’.¹⁰ The former, ‘by a long practised histrionic faculty’, had ‘preached up the rebellion powerfully’, while the latter, ‘by advantage of their eloquence’, had been able to ‘sway’ the Commons.¹¹ As for the origin of the seditious doctrines which these audiences were seduced into embracing, the answer is simple: ‘as the Presbyterians brought with them into their churches their divinity from the universities, so did many of the gentlemen bring their politics from thence into the Parliament’.¹²

While Hobbes does not hide his contempt for these doctrines, he offers little by way of rebuttal. That he was restraining himself primarily out of a sense of literary decorum is shown by his tart response when invited to explicate the concept of transubstantiation: ‘I am now in a narration, not in a disputation; and therefore I would have you consider at this time nothing else, but what effect this doctrine would work upon kings and their subjects.’¹³ Disputation was not the province of the historian, to whom the content of ideas

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mattered less than the uses to which they had been put. *Behemoth* is in fact a history of such usages, written, as Deborah Baumgold puts it, in order ‘to expose ideas as no more than pretenses masking ambition’. Hobbese’s prose is saturated with the language of deceit – ‘design’, ‘end’, ‘trick’, ‘imposture’, ‘show’, ‘fraud’, ‘gull’ and ‘abuse’. In unmasking these deceits, however, Hobbes never claims to be privy to inner counsels like some latter-day Tacitus or Procopius. Still less does he claim to know what went on in individuals’ minds: ‘I cannot enter into other men’s thoughts, farther than I am led by the consideration of human nature.’ What he does attempt is a rational reconstruction of their thinking. Faced with some or other ideological assertion, his response is to follow the ‘rule’ adopted in the concluding chapter of *Leviathan*: when examining ‘Doctrines’, the thing to do is, like Cicero, to ask *cui bono?*

One can see how the republican dogma acquired at university by the ‘democraticals’ might have served to further their ambitions. But who stood to benefit from having the classical texts taught there? How had they come to feature in the curriculum in the first place, or, to extend Hobbes’s simile, how did the Greeks get into this particular Trojan horse? Hobbes’s answer emerges during a discussion which begins when he is asked to explain ‘the Pope’s design in setting up the Universities’. His reply is that the ‘profit [i.e., *bonus*] that the Church of Rome expected from them, and in effect received, was the maintenance of the Pope’s doctrine, and of his authority over kings and their subjects, by school-divines’. The schoolmen met their part of the bargain by creating an ideology which succeeded in and by drawing attention to itself; that is, by fashioning ‘unintelligible distinctions to blind men’s eyes, whilst they encroached upon the right of kings’. In a self-conscious departure from the usual humanist view, Hobbes credits Peter Lombard and Duns Scotus with the deepest cunning even though anyone who did not know ‘it was the design’ would consider them ‘the most egregious blockheads in the world, so obscure and senseless are their writings’.

In contriving these ‘impostures’, the schoolmen turned first to Aristotle precisely because his writings were unrivalled ‘for their

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aptness to puzzle and entangle men with words. But if ‘advantage’ explained how Aristotle’s ‘logic, physics and metaphysics’ had infiltrated the universities, Hobbes admits that the success of his ‘politics’ cannot be accounted for in the same way:

It has, I think, done them no good, though it has done us here much hurt by accident. For men, grown weary at last of the insolence of the priests, and examining the truth of those doctrines that were put upon them, began to search the sense of the Scriptures, as they are in the learned languages; and consequently (studying Greek and Latin) became acquainted with the democratical principles of Aristotle and Cicero, and from the love of their eloquence fell in love with their politics, and that more and more, till it grew into the rebellion we now talk of, without any other advantage to the Roman Church but that it was a weakening to us.

Significantly, Hobbes switches from the language of interests to that of the passions. All he had to do was show how the first generation of classical scholars might have introduced themselves to Aristotle and Cicero, at which point the parties could be left to their own devices. From the scholars’ becoming ‘acquainted’ with their principles it was a short step to ‘love’ of their eloquence and finally infatuation with their politics. Hobbes is thus driven to a surprising conclusion: to the extent that this chain of events – the rediscovery of the ancient texts and their subsequent entrenchment in the curriculum which in turn made possible a recrudescence of classical republicanism – was not anchored in any design or of benefit to anyone, the Civil War could be said to have happened ‘by accident’.

Hobbes sets the seal on this ‘ideological explanation of the war’ with his observations on Milton and Salmasius. His preference for discussing public documents and forms of discourse rather than specific texts makes it all the more striking when he interrupts his narrative to volunteer his opinion of Salmasius’ Defensio Regia (1649) and Milton’s Pro Populo Anglico Defensio (1651):

I have seen them both. They are very good Latin both, and hardly to be judged which is better; and both very ill reasoning, hardly to be judged which is worse; like two declamations, pro and con, made for exercise only in a rhetoric school by one and the same man. So like is a Presbyterian to an Independent.

Hobbes’s lumping together of these bitter rivals was meant to shock.

21 Ibid., pp. 41–2. 22 Ibid., p. 43. 23 The phrase is Baumgold’s, ‘Hobbes’s Political Sensibility’, p. 82. 24 Hobbes, Behemoth, pp. 163–4.
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Where Europe thought it had witnessed the sharpest possible contest of principle between an opponent of regicide on one side and a defender of it on the other, Hobbes saw unwitting collusion between twin offspring of the Reformation (a view subtly underscored by the studied symmetry of Hobbes’s prose at this point). Nor is the remark about the excellence of their Latin offered in mitigation. On the contrary, it is intended to aggravate their offence. Twice before, in his early political works, Hobbes had quoted Sallust’s verdict on Catiline – ‘a man of considerable eloquence but small wisdom’ – by way of illustrating the qualities typical of promoters of sedition. Now, more than twenty years later, Milton and Salmassius are condemned for exhibiting the same lethal combination of attributes: eloquence and ‘ill reasoning’. For all their prestige, they were really modern Catilines and therefore no different from the seditious preachers and ‘haranguers’ who had brought the country to ruin.

II

Hobbes’s verdict on Milton was delivered from a unique perspective. However, there is some evidence that it was accepted by others. John Aubrey’s comment, to the effect that it was Milton’s ‘being so conversant in Livy and the Roman authors, and the greatness he saw donne by the Roman commonwealth, and the vertue of their great Commanders’ which had ‘induc’t’ him to write ‘against Monarchie’, is sometimes quoted as offering independent corroboration of what Hobbes had claimed. In fact, it may only echo conversations about Milton with Hobbes, who was Aubrey’s close friend. Alternatively, it may have been prompted by reading the manuscript of Behemoth, to which Aubrey had access well before it was published.

Even though Hobbes and Aubrey are hostile witnesses, they do raise an important question. If to be a republican at all was to be a classical republican, then what exactly was the classical element in Milton’s republicanism? The standard answer to this question is that supplied by Zera S. Fink in The Classical Republicans. In the chapter he

devotes to the development of Milton’s political thought, Fink (as he does throughout the book as a whole) gives pride of place to Polybius, the Greek historian who was more responsible than any other ancient writer for popularizing the theory that the only stable and therefore durable form of constitution was one consisting of a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. 28 As Fink points out, Milton rehearsed this theory – explicitly citing Polybius – in the very first prose work he published, Of Reformation (May 1641). 29 But Fink also goes on to argue that the Polybian theory of the mixed state remained a constant and unchanging feature in Milton’s thinking between 1641 and 1660. 30 No matter how the political landscape altered during the Civil War and Interregnum, Milton always sought to discern in it the contours of the mixed state. All regimes were to be assessed first and foremost in terms of how they instantiated the requisite mixture of monarchical, aristocratic and democratic elements. Thus whenever it was that Milton finally made the ‘transition to republicanism’, Fink maintains, it was solely because he now thought that a republic was ‘superior to a monarchy as a means of realizing the ideal of a mixed state’. 31

My contention is that Fink has misrepresented the sources and, as a result, the nature of Milton’s classical republicanism. Fink’s inflated claim on behalf of Polybius is prima facie implausible, given that Milton cites a panoply of classical sources in his published work of the 1640s and 1650s while only mentioning Polybius twice. 32 To insist on the theoretical primacy at all times of the mixed state in Milton’s thinking is also to obscure the direct nature of his engagement with the failings of monarchy and the merits of a republic. It is also mistaken in point of fact. As we shall see, the arguments which Milton advanced on behalf of a republic and against monarchy, especially in 1649, are almost impossible to reconcile with the notion of a mixed constitution (in which, by definition, an element of monarchy subsists), except at the cost of some violence to the texts in which they are presented. In a less polemical and more constructive vein, I shall seek to demonstrate that it is instead Aristotle, Sallust and, above all, Cicero who must be regarded as the main authorities from whom Milton derived his republican principles. Hobbes was right to this

29 See Fink, Classical Republicans, pp. 95–6; CPW, i, 599.
30 See Fink, Classical Republicans, pp. 97, 109, 120, 122.
31 Fink, Classical Republicans, p. 103 and n.
32 See CPW, ivi, 439 for his second citation.
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extent at least: when examining the political consequences of a classical education, one should cast the net as widely as possible.

III

The best place to begin therefore is where Hobbes suggested: the universities. As it happens, Milton too thought that they were the fons et origo of a pernicious ideology and therefore in need of reform. However, his critique of their failings was based on altogether different assumptions from those of Hobbes, and it issued in a diametrically opposed set of prescriptions.

When the bishops came under attack in the early stages of the Long Parliament, one argument used in their defence was that they were indispensable by virtue of their importance as patrons of learning. As a committed Presbyterian, who regarded episcopacy as ‘a natural tyrant in religion, & in state the agent & minister of tyranny’, Milton poured scorn on this claim.35 Far from promoting learning, ‘learning could not readily be at a worse passe in the Universities then it was now under their government’.34 Institutions which ‘should be fountains of learning and knowledge’ had actually been ‘poysontʼd and choakʼd’ by the system of patronage. Holding out the prospect of ‘honour and preferment’ only attracted the wrong type of student and was ‘the root of all our mischiefe’. Accordingly, Milton urged, ‘that which they allage for the incouragement of their studies, should be cut away forthwith as the very bait of pride and ambition’.35

The idea that the universities were forcing-houses of Presbyterianism and classical republicanism would have struck Milton (rightly) as absurd. On the contrary, their greatest service to the Anglican hierarchy was to stifle such initiatives. The clergy had little or no linguistic expertise. Their Latin was ‘barbarous’ and their literary taste – ‘preferring the gay ranknesse of Apuleius, Arnobius, or any moderne fustianist, before the native Latinisms of Cicero’ – even worse. Most failed to grasp the rudiments of Greek and therefore lacked ‘any sound proficiency in those Attick maisters of morall wisdome and eloquence’. As for Hebrew, Milton declared, ‘their lips are utterly uncircumcisidʼ.36 The same could be said of ‘many of the Gentry’. Being ‘honest and ingenious’, they naturally assumed that by ‘comming to the Universities’ they would ‘store themselves with good

31 CPW, 1, 853. 34 Ibid., 945–6. 35 Ibid., 718. 36 Ibid., 934.
and solid learning’. But since their intellectual diet consisted solely of ‘monkish and miserable sophistry’ and ‘metaphysical gargarisms’ they were ‘sent home’ without having read any ‘true and generous philosophy’.37 This was true even of the parliamentarians who are the subject of Milton’s panegyric in An Apology against a Pamphlet (April 1642). Indeed Milton can think of no greater testament to their ‘mature wisdome, deliberat virtue, and deere affection to the publick good’ than their having overcome the setback of attending university. The experience of being ‘sent to those places, which were intended to be the seed plots of piety and the Liberall Arts, but were become the nurseries of superstition, and empty speculation’ would have proved the undoing of lesser men.38

This irony soon recoiled upon Milton. Once the parliamentary armies had failed to secure a breakthrough at the start of the war, the military situation deteriorated. Defeat was only narrowly staved off in 1643, while Parliament saw its armies decimated in 1644. The leadership’s solution was to enter into an alliance with the Scots, enshrined in the Solemn League and Covenant of September 1643, whereby the Scots agreed to commit their forces in return for an undertaking that the English would introduce a Presbyterian form of church government. Milton’s response to the mismanagement of the war and also, by this time, to the prospect of an imposed Presbyterian church (his views on divorce had been denounced by Presbyterian ministers), was to revise his complacent assessment of the parliamentary leadership. It now appeared that they had not after all succeeded in ‘correcting’ their ‘mis-instruction’ at university.39

This reassessment bore fruit in Milton’s Of Education, a pamphlet addressed to Samuel Hartlib and published in June 1644. Although the exordium rehearses the topos of a reluctance to write, there is no doubting the urgency and importance of the subject for Milton. When he told Hartlib that his ‘minde’ was ‘for the present halfe diverted in the persuance of some other assertions’, it was no exaggeration.40 He had just seen the much-enlarged second edition of The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce through the press in February, was almost certainly at work on The Judgement of Martin Bucer, Concerning Divorce which appeared in August and may already have been contemplating his Areopagitica (November). Nevertheless he put all this to one side. Behind the diffident pose – Milton hopes Hartlib

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'can accept of these few observations which have flowr'd off'\textsuperscript{41} – lay a deep anxiety about the malaise afflicting the parliamentary cause and a conviction that the only cure for it was, in effect, a New Model education.

As a 'demonstration of what we should not do', Milton then mounts a renewed assault on the universities.\textsuperscript{42} Once again, he roundly criticizes them for failing to give students a proper grounding in the classical languages. This is not simply a matter of 'words and lexicons', important though Milton thinks these are – witness his own manual, \textit{Accession Commenc't Grammar} (1669), and the vast Latin Thesaurus left incomplete at his death.\textsuperscript{43} Since a 'language is but the instrument conveying to us things usefull to be known', what really counts is the reading which it makes accessible. But the students never get this far. No sooner have they left the 'Grammatick flats & shallows' than they are plunged into the 'most intellective abstractions of Logick & Metaphysicks'. The result is to instill them with a 'hatred and contempt of learning'.\textsuperscript{44} Far from handing over the keys to the arsenal, the universities were confiscating them.

One of Milton's arguments for divorce in 1643 had been that to deny this form of relief to those who were unhappily married was to render them 'unserviceable and spiritles to the Common-wealth' – or, as he was to put it more trenchantly still in \textit{Tetrachordon} (1645), 'unactive to all public service, dead to the Common-wealth'.\textsuperscript{45} This expresses precisely the burden of the charge that he now levels against the graduates of his day. When choosing their careers, he alleges, they are motivated solely by personal gain. Those who enter the church do so because they are 'ambitious and mercenary'. Those going in for the 'trade of Law' are enticed by 'pleasing thoughts' of 'flowing fees'. While those who 'betake them to State affairs' do so 'with souls so unprincipl'd in vertue, and true generous breeding, that flattery, and court shifts and tyrannous aphorismes appear to them the highest points of wisdom; instilling their barren hearts with a conscientious slavery'. In view of the alternatives, Milton is even prepared to concede that those 'of a more delicious and airie spirit' who simply 'retire' and devote themselves 'to the enjoyments of ease and luxury'

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 366. \textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 376.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 369. For the date of \textit{Accession Commenc't Grammar}, see CPW, viii, 32–6; for what is known of the Latin Thesaurus, see Helen Darbishire, \textit{The Early Lives of Milton} (London, 1932), pp. 4, 29, 45–6, 47, 72, 166, 192, 339–40, and especially the prefatory note to \textit{Linguae Romanae Diccionarium Luculentum Novum} (Cambridge, 1693), sig. A2'. See further below, p. 200 n. 93.
\textsuperscript{44} CPW, ii, 369, 374–5. \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 347, 632.