Irene Montori. 2020. *Milton, The Sublime and Dramas of Choice. Figures of Heroic and Literary Virtue.* Roma: Edizioni Studium

Jonathan P. A. Sell
Universidad de Alcalá, Spain

Irene Montori's *Milton, the Sublime and Dramas of Choice* is a contribution to the rapidly growing body of critical writing on the early modern sublime. In particular, though based on a doctoral thesis completed in 2015, the book's focus on Milton's self-inscriptions or fictions of sublime authorship is very much in the line of Cheney (2018), one of several works carrying a great amount of weight in its argument. Montori sets out her grand theme in the Introduction: "the sublime for Milton, among its various declinations, is also a key poetics for the formation of the subject's virtuous agency […] the sublime turns into a poetics of elevation and a deliberate, revolutionary practice of virtuous heroism for the character, the reader and the author alike. Milton's model of sublimity […] needs to be valued not only for its aesthetic import but also for its ethical, political, theological, philosophical, and social implications for all the subjects involved in the sublime experience" (16). Montori's emphasis on the sublime as experience is welcome, so, too, on its engagement not only of the characters in a fiction, but also of their author and whoever reads of their exploits. A general conclusion giving due consideration to all those alleged "implications" would have been welcome; as things are, "revolutionary" seems too strong a term for the "virtuous agency" as presented here.

The first two sections of Chapter 1 make the case for a reassessment of Milton's achievement in the light of the newly instated early modern sublime. According to Montori, Milton's is an essentially Longinian sublime supplemented with the requisite of chaste, Protestant authorship: England's self-appointed poet-prophet was obliged to combine literary and moral virtuosity if he was to earn literary fame and personal salvation, and if his works were to be exemplary. The greatest strength of Montori's book is the way it captures Milton's anxieties over agency, whether couched in the

doctrinal terms of providence/predestination/grace *versus* human responsibility/freedom, or in the literary terms of emulation/divine inspiration *versus* originality.

The mutual fertilization of doctrinal and poetic hang-ups is encapsulated in the parable of the talents, which, in Chapter 2, Montori argues is central to Milton's notion of self-authorship, not only because it broaches the issue of agency in its implicit contrast of God-given gifts with human hard graft but also because in "When I consider how my life is spent" Milton cast himself in the role of the third son, reprehended by his father for preferring patience to action. Patience, according to Montori, is the salient virtue of Milton's authorial sublime, offering a pretext for his slow-developing poetic career and paralleled in his dramatic heroes, who undergo the sort of trial favored in early modern reformation tragedy (dealt with in Chapter 4). Chapter 2 also discusses the skeptical and therefore dialectical nature of early modern tragedy, articulated, as many critics have claimed, around moral dilemmas with no secure basis for decision-making and portraying its heroes' incapacity to make the right choice and therefore achieve that progression, celebrated by William Blake, which in Milton's educational thinking accrues on the successful negotiation of contraries.

Dialectical tragedy is one of the main planks of Montori's argument; the other is the identification of Milton (and, perforce, his readers) with the two heroes she discusses. The first of these is the Lady in *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle*, who in Chapter 3 is argued to represent Milton, himself nicknamed "Lady" at Cambridge and obsessed with his own chastity. That identification is somewhat arbitrary or partial, for aspects of Milton have also been found in the shepherd lad and the elder brother (Kerrigan 1983, 38; qtd. 124n56), while Montori herself sees some in Comus. Montori's argument needs the work to be a tragedy about the Lady's trial with masque elements tacked on, but it is not. The Lady has no moral qualms, nor in the central debate does she muster sufficient virtuous heroism to entirely parry Comus's attempts to sweet-talk her into turning her comely talents to his advantage. Only half-rescued by her inept brothers, she relies for full deliverance on Sabrina, who is the real heroine of the piece and, as Montori seems to realize (136–137), its genuine agent of sublimity. Furthermore, it is a moot point whether Milton intended to champion chastity—either militant or defensive—or the less heroic

compromise of Protestant marriage, while it is by no means inconceivable that the work's original participants positively reveled in the impious frolics of Comus and his crew. The chapter ends with a discussion of the work's dense weave of Shakespearean and Spenserian allusions in the light of the Longinian intertextual sublime. Here Montori is on firmer ground and her closing remark on Milton rewriting Spenser offers much food for thought.

Chapter 4 wheels backwards to reconsider tragedy, noting Milton's fascination with the form and examining reformation re-conceptions. Chapter 5 turns to Milton's closet drama, *Samson Agonistes* which, coming alongside *Paradise Regained* towards the end of the poet's career, Montori takes as his final and culminating statement on sublime authorship and virtuous action. *Samson Agonistes* has all the ingredients Montori's argument requires: the hero's dilemma over submission to providence or autonomous agency, the dialectical confrontations with his father, Manoa, and Delilah, and the sublime climax of the destruction of the temple of Dagon. Montori notes ingeniously how by pushing the pillars apart Samson performs sublimity as the supporting arch—architectural cognate of the lintel (*limen*) contained morphologically in the "sub*lime*"—comes crashing to the ground. However, her overall argument is damaged once again by her unconvincing identification of Milton with his tragic hero. There can be no certainty—and only little likelihood—that the poet conceived of himself as the highly ambivalent Samson, whose character owes more to medieval tradition than biblical text, whose culminating act of heroism is the morally dubious massacre of the Philistines, and who rages at the blindness which Milton accepted graciously as a sign of vatic appointment. It is not even clear whether Samson abandons his virtuously heroic patience to such calamitous effect for the Philistines entirely of his own accord or after prayerful communion with God. Montori comments puzzlingly, "Milton may have possibly decided to omit Samson's prayer [from Judges] to emphasise man's freedom to act heroically when receiving inner revelation" (180). But what is the nature and source of that "inner revelation"? If Samson is its beneficiary, who or what is the benefactor?

Montori's book amasses a wealth of interesting material on Milton's thoughts about education, drama and his own vocation and raises many issues that others, or Montori herself, might explore with

profit: the tensions between the complementary Longinian ideas of originality and emulation/intertextuality and their Protestant doctrinal counterparts of freedom and predestination/providence/ grace; the aesthetic-doctrinal significance of Milton's own intertextual practice. Nonetheless, *Milton, the Sublime and Dramas of Choice* failed to convince this reader of its central thesis. Given what might be called the book's "ethical turn," the absence of any reference to recent Kantian postulations of a moral source of the sublime is somewhat surprising. More importantly, the argument is sometimes repetitive, sometimes awkwardly expressed—more thorough proof-reading is sorely missed. In places it rests on skewed readings, misprisions or both at the same time, a case in point being Montori's transmutation of the amphitheatrical architecture of Dagon's temple into that of a theatre, which building is then supposed erroneously to be the Longinian master-metaphor for the world. In fact, it was John Hall, Longinus's first English translator (1652), who put the "stage" into *Peri hupsous*. Moreover, much of Montori's argument is derivative. In respect of *A Maske*, she leans heavily, for example, on Shullenberger (2008), in respect of *Samson Agonistes,* on Urban (2018) and Fallon (2012). Indeed, one occasionally has the feeling that Montori's book does little more than apply to previously bottled critical insights the recently ratified label of early modern sublimity. Except that, as Montori states on the very first page, that label has been sticking to the poet of *Paradise Lost* ever since John Dennis and Joseph Addison helped to found the British discourse of the sublime less than three decades after Milton had ceased to invest his poetic talents.

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Author's contact: jonathan.sell@uah.es

Postal address: Facultad de Educación, 4ª planta, 24 – Universidad de Alcalá – Calle Madrid 1 –19001 Guadalajara, Spain