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"Soft *Lydian* Airs" Meet "Anthems clear": Intelligibility in Milton, Handel, and Mark Morris

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In her provocative study *Unediting the Renaissance*, Leah S. Marcus has called for an approach to literary studies that extends and refines both the insights and the criticisms of poststructuralist and historicist readings. "The New Philology," as Marcus dubs it, should insist "upon a wider historical and cultural matrix as constitutive, an integral part" of any text's network of meanings.[1] I want to suggest here ways of reconfiguring—indeed, historicizing—poetic understandings of music, musical representations of poetry, and dance responses to both. The works of John Milton offer excellent opportunities for expanding our historical awareness of cultural matrices and interactions not only in his own time but through the centuries and up to the present. The examples I will consider are seventeenth-century companion poems by Milton, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso"; an eighteenth-century musical setting for those poems, Georg Frideric Handel's choral composition *L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato*; and a late twentieth-century dance piece based upon that setting, Mark Morris's choreographic work of the same name. The original intersection of aesthetics and politics in Milton's texts has been reexamined and reconstituted by the later artists who drew inspiration from them. Audiences for all these works can benefit from a greater understanding of their cultural and political resonances.

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[1]Leah S. Marcus, *Unediting the Renaissance* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 23.

Milton's poetry, as well as his prose works, reflects his participation in England's turbulent political life. It also demonstrates a recurring fascination with music and its purported and actual powers over human imagination. However, suspicion toward music continued throughout his political as well as aesthetic development. Some of the reasons for Milton's ambivalence toward music—his intimacy and antipathy—are cultural and familial. The cultural factors include a competition between artistic media, a rivalry between literature and music;[2] they also include music's own transformation in the Renaissance from one aesthetic to another, just as the political landscape in Europe was changing drastically. Drawing upon these currents, Milton frequently suggests a cultural association between certain musical forms and political absolutism. What he presents as the debilitating and enthralling effects of polyphony are linked to the similar effects of spiritual and political tyranny. The familial factors involved in Milton's uncertainty and attraction toward music center upon the poet's father, John Milton, Sr., whose lifelong avocation as a composer brought him considerable renown. The younger Milton's questioning of parental wishes and desire to fulfill them are reflected in a variety of personal and poetic concerns, including the propriety of holy orders in the Laudian Church of England and the depiction of familial politics at work between the Father and the Son in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's wary fascination is also reflected in a somewhat paradoxical insistence that one both recognize the potent charms of music and resist them vigorously when it is necessary to do so.

Milton's treatment of music specifically illustrates a recurring general tactic throughout his works: co-opting the forms as well as the thematics employed by his political opponents. From a radical revision of the Stuart masque to technically innovative verse paraphrases of the Biblical psalms, from echoes of the language heard in public theatres to evocations of high church anthems, Milton attempts to turn cultural artifacts against the segments of English society most closely associated with them. Later writers and artists have engaged with this Miltonic precedent. Georg Frideric Handel's and Charles Jennens's reworking of the companion poems in the next century employed aesthetic principles and political messages very different from those found in Milton. Some two centuries

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[2]James Anderson Winn, *The Pale of Words* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 27-30.

later, the aesthetics adopted to promote those political messages have been, in turn, reworked through Mark Morris's choreographic designs.

First, however, review is warranted of Milton's own attitudes toward music as expressed in these early companion poems (*c.* 1631), which illustrate by turns the appeals and limitations of two aspects of the human consciousness, presented as complex personifications. "L'Allegro," the lively man, seeks release in festivity and company, while "Il Penseroso," the reflective man, seeks release in contemplation and solitude. Given their names, which both derive from musical terminology, it is no surprise that music has its appeal for both; their tastes apparently differ, but their aims are similar. Both men invoke ideas of transcendent rapture achieved with the aid of music.

L'Allegro desires to hear "soft *Lydian* Airs" (135) that lead "The melting voice through mazes running; / Untwisting all the chains that tie / The hidden soul of harmony" (142-44).[3] In his notes to the poem, Merritt Y. Hughes supports James Hutton's assertion that Milton here ignores "the traditional prejudice against Lydian music as morally enervating."[4] It may be more accurate to say that it is L'Allegro, not the poet, who ignores the association; while the character desires to hear "immortal verse" (137), it is apparently the association with immortality rather than with the actual meaning of the verse that appeals most to him. Milton, like many of his reform-minded contemporaries, argued for the intelligibility of words—the primacy of the text—in vocal music settings, whether of poetry or scripture.[5] L'Allegro's musical preferences dictate the kinds of musical practices that were criticized for obscuring the literal meanings of the words: drawing out syllables to support lengthy melodic lines ("long drawn out") and intricate harmonic interplay ("through mazes running") that can obscure and overpower the text (140-42). L'Allegro seeks an escape not only from worry about death—the "eating Cares" of line 135—but also from death itself: he wants to join Orpheus in hearing the music that could "have quite set free / His

[3]Quotations from Milton's works are taken from *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey, 1957).

[4]See Hughes's edition of Milton, p. 71n, citing James Hutton's comment in "Some English Poems in Praise of Music," *English Miscellany* 2 (1951): 46.

[5]Stephen M. Buhler, "Counterpoint and Controversy: Milton and the Critiques of Polyphonic Music," *Milton Studies* 36 (1998): 20-22.

half-regain'd *Eurydice*" (149-50). Such escape, however, is presented in such terms of dissolution as *melting* and *untwisting*.

Il Penseroso too finds in dissolution a consummation devoutly to be wished: he wants sacred music to "Dissolve [him] into ecstasies, / And bring all Heav'n before [his] eyes" (165-66). At first, the companion poems suggest a distinction between L'Allegro's "*Lydian* Airs" on the one hand and Il Penseroso's "Anthems clear" (163) on the other, since *clear* suggests that what Il Penseroso desires to hear offers clarity, even intelligibility, in contrast to the intricacy and obscurity of the songs that L'Allegro imagines. But the very term *Anthems*—which derives from the word *antiphon*—registers a kind of warning, especially within the Laudian context of "Service high": antiphonic or antiphonal singing itself came under sharp censure from the Reformers, and the increased reliance upon trained choirs singing anthems was seen as working against the congregation's full participation in religious services. Il Penseroso is notably passive in his attendance; he is no representative of the priestly people envisioned by Reformers and suggested by 1 Peter 2.9 ("ye are . . . a royal Priesthode," in the Geneva Bible's rendering). The effects of the anthems on him do suggest the kind of polyphony that many found especially pernicious in public worship. It is the sweetness of the musical setting, rather than the solace of scripture, that would so transport the speaker. In this case, *clear* carries its earlier English meaning of "brilliant" (*OED*, adj. I. 1. a.); Milton uses it similarly in *Paradise Lost* 11.840 to describe the newly overpowering sun.

The remedy for such dangers can be found in textual clarity: musical settings that acknowledge the primacy of the Word. A very different invocation of Orpheus and his song figures in Milton's verse epistle *Ad patrem*, which may have been written at the same time as the companion poems. An attempt to justify the ways of John the Younger to John the Elder, it asserts the son's identity as poet—despite his father's apparent plans for his son to take holy orders—by insisting on the centrality of text in making the composition and performance of music fully human enterprises. Without words, he argues, music is empty, *inane*; without words, music suits songbirds warbling their native woodnotes wild but is not suited to the divine gifted Orpheus, whose musical magic compelled audience not only from the birds, but also from their boughs and bowers. Such song imparts consciousness to creatures and objects, and also imparts the pangs of empathy to the shadowy departed (50-55):

> quid vocis modulamen inane iuvabit
> Verborum sensusque vacans, numerique loquacis?
> Silvestres decet iste choros, non Orphea, cantus,
> Qui tenuit fluvios, et quercubus addidit aures,
> Carmine, non cithara, simulacraque functa canendo
> Compulit in lacrymas. . . .
>
> [what delight is there in the inane modulation of the voice without words and meaning and rhythmic eloquence? Such music is good enough for the forest choirs, but not for Orpheus, who by his song—not by his cithara—restrained rivers and gave ears to the oaks; and who by his singing stirred the ghosts of the dead to tears.]

The praise that Orpheus has won through the ages, the young Milton advises, is due to his song, which represents the proper conjunction of words and music, of sense and sensation: "*habet has a carmine laudes* (55).[6] Orphic song here is sharply distinguished from the "*Lydian* Airs" sought by L'Allegro, since it offers deeper understanding and empathy rather than deliverance from cares. While contending in *Ad patrem* that poetry makes it possible for music to fulfill its highest functions, Milton hopes to deflect any disapproval of the recent redirections in his life. For that reason, he emphasizes the necessary role of language in ennobling music's power. In both "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," music threatens to overwhelm language to such an extent that it no longer functions as such: the Word, as well as the speaker, faces dissolution. Milton's arrangement of the companion poems allows not only for mutual acknowledgment of such dissolution's appeal but also for mutual critique of its associations and dangers. Despite their different paths and their anxious insistence on their differences, the speakers share a musical locus and telos.

Such common ground, along with the subtlety it makes possible, nearly disappears in the next century, when Handel came to set passages from the two poems to music. The libretto for *L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il*

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[6]Marc Berley, in *After the Heavenly Tune: English Poetry and the Aspiration to Song* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2000), argues curiously that Milton here distinguishes between heard and unheard song (pp. 149-50), rather than between songs that are or are not grounded in verbal texts.

Moderato, first performed in 1740, largely consists of verse excerpts that are divorced from the structural strategies of Milton's original design and that often in themselves foreground differences rather than similarities. In response to these selections, Handel crafted vocal music that at times participates in the practices that are regarded with suspicion within Milton's poems, thus softening Milton's critique; at other times, however, his music does recognize and replicate in the relationship between the poems' speakers a complexity that his collaborators—note the plural—sought to deny.

Because of Charles Jennens's authorship of the text for the "Il Moderato" section (and because of other collaborations with Handel, to be noted below), it has long seemed that Jennens—a Warwickshire squire who befriended and patronized several artists and writers—might have instigated the work. Over recent years, however, it has been determined that the idea of bringing Handel and Milton together in this instance was not Charles Jennens's own.[7] Instead, Jennens's and Handel's mutual acquaintance James "Hermes" Harris was the first to propose that sections from Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" be rearranged and set to music. Harris's striking sobriquet derives from the title of his best known work in the philosophy of language, *Hermes, or a Philosophical Inquiry concerning Universal Grammar*, first published in 1751; the work draws upon Harris' long interest in the underlying principles of speech and language. In Harris's examples illustrating his theories, Milton is employed more than any other English writer and, from the rest of the Western tradition, only Virgil's works are represented more frequently than Milton's. Harris draws from "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" only twice in his treatise, but the significances he attaches to these passages are instructive. Harris first remarks that "When *Milton* says in the character of his *Allegro, Haste thee, Nymph, and bring with thee / Jest and youthful Jolity* ," this is an imperative sentence "founded on the passion" of love. The emotional tenor of the statement is most important to him. From "Il Penseroso," Harris quotes the lines "Till old Experience do attain / To something like Prophetic Strain" (173-74) in the context of a common-sense understanding of how human beings grasp the notion of future time. Harris distinguishes L'Allegro and Il Penseroso, in effect, as

[7]Donald Burrows, "Handel Oratorios (and *L'Allegro*)," *Early Music* 28.2 (May 2000): 309.

embodiments of passion and reason.[8] In his original libretto for Handel, Harris seems to have organized his selections of alternating passages from Milton's companion poems along these lines of distinction; contrast, rather than complicity, would be the basis for understanding the poems and for composing appropriate settings.

The contrast was, apparently, deemed insufficient. By 1740, Charles Jennens took over Harris's initial reorganization of the Miltonic source, as Handel began to set the remaining passages to choral music. Both L'Allegro and Il Penseroso were now presented as emotional extremes; rationality was to be represented by a third character, Il Moderato, for whom Jennens would supply new poetry. Jennens had previously helped to initiate Handel's shift toward biblical oratorio by contributing the libretto for *Saul* in 1738; their later collaborations would include *Messiah* and *Belshazzar*. Between the latter two works, there would be some kind of disagreement before an uneasy reconciliation. Ruth Smith, the present-day scholar most attuned to Jennens's role in Handel's career, quotes letters by Jennens in which he obliquely explains his willingness to face frustration yet again: "the truth is, I had a farther view in it," he says of their last project; and of Handel he writes, "I must take him as I find him, and make the best use I can of him."[9] His motives in making use of Handel, Smith argues, involve Jennens's abiding preoccupations both with Protestant Christianity and with the twice-deposed royal House of Stuart. These preoccupations further informed his continuing rearrangements of Harris's Miltonic selections and verse he contributed to the project.

Jennens was a nonjuror, one of a sizable group of English citizens who refused the oaths abjuring loyalty to the Stuarts and swearing allegiance to the Protestant succession established by Parliament in 1701. These individuals, through such refusal, excluded themselves from all political and ecclesiastical office. Although he personally avoided direct involvement in the Opposition's schemes on behalf of the Pretender,

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[8]James Harris, *Hermes, or a Philosophical Inquiry concerning Univeral Grammar* (London, 1765; rpt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1976), pp. 14, 122.

[9]Ruth Smith, "Making Use of Handel: Charles Jennens (1700-73)," *Proceedings of the 14th Congress of the International Musicological Society: Transmission and Reception of the Forms of Musical Culture* (Turin: Edizioni di Torino, 1990), vol. 3, p. 222.

Jennens financially supported friends who were overt Jacobites. Among the many signs of his devotion to the Stuart dynasty, Smith points out his collection of portraits of that family's members, his incorporating a piece of Charles the Second's oak tree into the communion table of his mansion's chapel, and the figure of Charles the First's head on his seal.[10] It is this context that makes remarkable the fact that Jennens should concur with Harris's selection of John Milton, a fierce apologist for the execution—by beheading, no less—of Charles the First, to be a posthumous collaborator in a text for one of Handel's choral works. Jennens's attraction to Handel, longtime employee of the Hanoverian court, as a frequent musical collaborator also deserves notice.

In his arrangement of parallel passages from "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," Jennens allowed Handel to score a series of effective contrasts of mood. The stylized exorcisms which begin the poem, by which each speaker attempts to demonize and banish his counterpart, are thrown into sharp juxtaposition; so too are the successive invocations of each speaker's respective muse, Mirth for "L'Allegro" and Melancholy for "Il Penseroso." What in Milton is an exploration of interrelated perspectives, which despite their strenuous efforts to be distinct actually implicate each other, becomes in Jennens's version a presentation of attractive but dangerous polarities. Part One is dominated by L'Allegro and ends with that poem's depiction of "a sunshine holiday" in the English countryside. Part Two, though, is dominated by Il Penseroso and allows that poem's celebration of religiously-informed "experience" to rebut, fairly successfully, L'Allegro's somewhat trivial delights. Thus far, the work's organization retains noticeable traces of Harris's original plan. In Jennens's libretto, however, Penseroso's victory is short-lived and deservedly so.

What follows is the concluding section, "Il Moderato," which not surprisingly offers a moderate path that avoids the excesses of the newly constituted "extremes." Handel may well have been the originator of the third section: letters from Jennens suggest that he dared contribute poetry that hopes to improve upon Milton only on Handel's request.[11]

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[10]Ruth Smith, "The Achievements of Charles Jennens," *Music and Letters* 70.2 (May 1989): 173.

[11]Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 61.

Whoever was responsible for the idea, Jennens threw himself into the task with energy. For the introduction, he combines both the banishment of the polarities and the invocation of temperate ideals.

> Hence, boast not, ye profane,
> Of vainly-fancy'd, little-tasted pleasure,
> Pursu'd beyond all measure,
> And by its own excess transform'd to pain.
> Come, with native lustre shine,
> Moderation, grace divine,
> Whom the wise God of nature gave,
> Mad mortals from themselves to save.
> Keep as of old the middle way,
> Nor deeply sad, nor idly gay
> But still the same in look and gait,
> Easy, cheerful and sedate.
> Sweet Temp'rance in thy right hand bear,
> With her let rosy Health appear,
> And in thy left Contentment true,
> Whom headlong Passion never knew;
> Frugality by Bounty's side,
> Fast friends, though oft as foes belied;
> Chaste Love, by Reason led secure,
> With joys sincere, and pleasures pure;
> Happy Life from Heav'n descending,
> Crowds of smiling years attending:
> All this company serene,
> Join to fill thy beauteous train.[12]

Imitating Milton's tetrameter couplets, Jennens shows himself to be a shrewd reader of the original poems. He attempts to reconcile L'Allegro's fear of growing old under the burden of "wrinkled Care" with Il Penseroso's eagerness to reach "weary age": here we have "Crowds of smiling years attending" the Moderate muse. There may also be an acknowledgment of how he has reconfigured Milton's own sense of

[12]Charles Jennens, "Il Moderato," in Georg Frideric Handel, *L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato*, ed. James S. Hall and Martin V. Hall, *Hallische Händel-Ausgabe* 1:16 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1965), pp. 153-61 (cited below as Handel).

Mirth and Melancholy in the line about bounty and frugality being "Fast friends, though oft as foes belied."

But it is in "Keep, as of old, the middle way" that Jennens takes strongest issue with the Milton of the Good Old Cause—the tutelary spirit of the Whigs, if not the patron saint. Along with resonances of an Aristotelian "golden mean" (which he later invokes more directly), Jennens's phrase introduces his own religious and political ideal—the *via media* of Stuart Anglicanism. The religious ideal involves the church of Hooker and Laud, steering its temperate course between the decadence of Rome and the austerity of Geneva. Against such foreign influences, the Anglican church shines "with native lustre," as does Jennens's Moderation. The political ideal involves the dynasty that oversaw that church's development: Jennens saw the Stuarts as preserving, "as of old," the English Constitutional Monarchy against the threats and claims both of continental absolutism and of parliamentary factionalism.

The next passage of Jennens's verse calls upon the moderate muse both to prevent excess and to inspire obedience. The political resonances of such terms as *restrain*, *court*, *extreme*, *rules*, and *obey* add a distinctive topicality to the moral calculus at work in these verses:

> Come, with gentle hand restrain
> Those who fondly court their bane,
> One extreme with caution shunning,
> To another blindly running.
> Kindly teach how blest are they,
> Who nature's equal rules obey;
> Who safely steer two rocks between,
> And prudent keep the golden mean.[13]

John Eliot Gardiner, in the notes for his 1980 recording of the complete work (the very first, incidentally), describes Jennens as offering "a temperate, rational, and characteristically 18th-century-English reconciliation" of extremes.[14] One characteristic of eighteenth-century English culture that is sometimes overlooked is its fractious political climate, in which all manner of artifacts and performances were read in

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[13]Handel, pp. 163-64.

[14]John Eliot Gardiner, *Handel: L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato*; Erato CD 2292-45377-2 (1981/1993), p. 14.

terms of partisan alliances. Jennens's moderate muse both participates in such debates and offers a way out of them.

It is not only Milton's politics which are transformed in the musical setting and in the poetic additions. Milton's surviving texts are also transformed—first by Jennens's and Handel's rearrangements, which can be drastic. L'Allegro's invocation of "The Mountain Nymph, sweet Liberty" (36), for example, is removed from its immediate context and attached instead to a reprise of the opening exorcism of "loathed Melancholy" (1). Milton's texts are still more drastically altered by the composition's overriding stress on affective impact itself. Jennens saw in the poems an opportunity for Handel to be the orchestrator of emotion in the singers' roles and in audience response. Intelligibility of the language is sacrificed, when deemed necessary, for the sake of clarifying and reinforcing what the librettist and composer saw as the dominant feeling in each passage and for each role. Much of the time, they ironically narrowed the range of Milton's emotional palette: listeners no longer have access to the full text, with its mixture of stances toward the temperaments being depicted, and what remains is framed by interpretive practices that Milton himself viewed with concern. These include techniques we have already seen suggested directly by the text, such as the extension of syllables and the repetition of phrases; other devices that might distract from the literal meaning of the text, such as the use of imitative music,[15] are also evident.

Sometimes these techniques are combined, as in Handel's almost irresistibly jocund setting for the "Haste thee, nymph" passage drawn from Milton's "L'Allegro." In the libretto, the list of Mirth's attendants ends not with "sweet Liberty," but with "Sport that wrinkled Care derides, / And Laughter holding both his sides" (lines 31 and 32 in Milton's poem). In Handel's score, a tenor soloist repeats the last line twice, each time expanding the syllables of *laughter* and transforming the initial sound of the word *holding* into laughter itself: "ho-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho." Then the assembled chorus echoes and embellishes the soloist's (and, of course, the composer's) skillful fun.[16] In the Philomel passage taken from Milton's "Il Penseroso" (56ff.), a soprano singer performs a

[15]Sandra Cookson, "'Linkéd sweetness': Milton, Handel and the Companion Poems," *Milton Quarterly* 30.3 (October 1996), p. 137.

[16]Handel, pp. 16-21.

duet with a flute that imitates the song of the nightingale. The beginning of the line "I woo to hear thy Even-Song" allows the vocalist to join in the imitation, with "I woo, I woo."[17] Similar effects are achieved in the evocation of "Populous cities"—adapted from Milton's "Tow'red Cities" (117)—that appeal to L'Allegro after nightfall; the full choral setting for these lines comprises some of Handel's most skilled vocal counterpoint, with "the busy hum of men" (118) repeated as a four-part round.[18] There is, however, an inevitable overshadowing of sense by sound in such passages. One may certainly enjoy and admire Handel's musical achievement in this work (as I do) and still bear in mind that Milton associated such musical strategies with what he saw as the enervating effects of monarchy upon society. In their revision of his companion poems, Jennens and Handel consistently reinforce surviving principles of a Royalist aesthetic that Milton had critiqued and shunned.

We have already seen Milton's suspicions reflected in L'Allegro's wish to hear music that draws out the language of song "With wanton heed, and giddy cunning" (141) so that the meaning may be lost altogether. For Milton, following in the wake both of *la nuova musica* and of Reformed attitudes toward the arts, music's appeal to the senses must be balanced by language's appeal to the rational soul. When the meaning of the words being sung is lost, only the melody and harmony of the music remain to seize hold of the auditors. An inheritor of the new music's principles as codified in Italian opera, Handel does not employ polyphonic intricacies directly within the passages from "L'Allegro" that describe them. Instead, he reserves them for the succeeding Chorus that directly addresses L'Allegro's muse: "These delights if thou canst give, / Mirth, with thee *we* mean to live."[19] The shift from Milton's *I* to the plural permits a polyvocal setting; the emphasis on experienced delights allows Handel to provide them musically without being tied to specific musical practices of the previous century. In these decisions and several others, Jennens usually deferred to Handel's judgment, since the composer's musical skill was itself a powerful message, not merely the medium to convey what Jennens wanted to express. To Jennens's

[17]Handel, p. 46.
[18]Handel, pp. 95-97.
[19]Handel, pp. 129-38.

thinking, "Everything that has been united with Handel's music becomes sacred by such a union."[20]

These examples have focused on the tensions between Milton's aesthetics and those of Handel and Jennens, but there is also evidence of tensions between the composer and his principal librettist. Anthony Hicks has analyzed the combined admiration and combativeness that could characterize their collaboration and is evident in the autograph manuscript for *Saul*.[21] The tension in their *L'Allegro* is perhaps most evident in Handel's musical contextualization for what Jennens clearly intended as the apotheosis of Moderation, the passage that leads to the concluding address to that deity (in language borrowed from Milton's companion poems): "Thy pleasures, Moderation, give, / In them alone we truly live."[22] Jennens's couplet reverses the conditionality of Milton's endings, in which the two speakers will agree to live with their respective muses only as a consequence of their desires being fulfilled. Jennens, instead, suggests that "our" desires need to be better attuned to the laws of Moderation: we must change in order to receive her pleasures, but such pleasures are assured. The confidence rests upon the preceding passage:

> As steals the morn upon the night,
> And melts the shades away:
> So truth does Fancy's charm dissolve,
> And rising reason puts to flight
> The fumes that did the mind involve,
> Restoring intellectual day.[23]

Jennens's verse unequivocally presents the victory of moderation as inevitable as the sunrise. Handel's setting, however, transforms the passage into a duet—and in the duality of the soprano and tenor voices, Handel suggests that moderation itself is less the product of a golden mean or even a heady conflation of opposites than it is a subtle dance of

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[20]Quoted from one of Jennens's letters in Smith, "Achievements," p. 164.

[21]Anthony Hicks, "Handel, Jennens, and *Saul*: aspects of a collaboration," in *Music and Theatre: Essays in Honour of Winton Dean*, ed. Nigel Fortune (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), esp. pp. 212-16.

[22]Handel, pp. 179-84.

[23]Handel, pp. 169-76.

interdependent forces. In perhaps the most powerful and delicately poignant of all the movements in the "Il Moderato" section, Handel reaches back to the dynamics at work in Milton's original poems. After the work's first performances and despite its success, Handel would return to Milton even more decisively by excising Jennens's verses altogether and switching the order of the remaining passages so that L'Allegro would have the last word.[24]

Mark Morris, in his modern dance piece for Handel's music, goes still further in its recuperation of Miltonic dynamics—and revives them in association with Milton's own words, not just with those written by Jennens. Morris's own *L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato* was first presented in 1989 at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels, and has been regularly revived by his dance company; there have been over a hundred performances, a remarkable number for a work that demands a large dance ensemble, a live orchestra, and vocal soloists (Morris refuses to use recordings for this piece—a rarity in the present-day economics of dance). Aptly enough, Morris has served as a companion to his artistic forebears by appropriating an element of Handel's art, as well as Handel's music, in order to bring greater attention to Milton's original poetry. Throughout the dance, Morris uses imitative techniques in movement to counter the sometimes distracting and flattening effects of Jennens's and Handel's reorganizations and affective strategies. Morris's drive to render Milton's—and even some of Jennens's—language more intelligible makes its own contribution to an ongoing series of co-optive maneuvers.

In so doing, Morris is not only reacting to Milton and his adapters, but also to the traditions of ballet and modern dance. He has explained his relation to ballet in Reformation language. Ballet, as it had developed in the 20th Century, became "like organized religion":

> everybody means the best, everybody means to love one another and everything, and everyone thinks they've found the true God. Except that by empty ceremony and ridiculous rules, the God part goes away. . . . I think that people are drawn to ballet . . . because of the physical artifice and that it

[24]Burrows, "Handel Oratorios," p. 309.

> has nothing to do with people communicating things to other people.[25]

As Joan Acocella has observed, for Morris ballet "is the Church of Rome, dazzling and corrupt," while modern dance "is Protestantism—pure in heart, vernacular in tongue—seeking to restore the spiritual values that the Church has forsaken."[26] The partly-perceived, partly-admitted Puritanism of modern dance finds cultural analogues in the clarity of pre-Romantic music—Morris has, for example, also choreographed a dance version of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*—and in the ideal of intelligibility expressed through Miltonic verse and aesthetics. Morris finds in Milton a principle of direct, if sometimes challenging and daunting, communication that resonates politically as well as artistically.

Throughout his career, Morris has been especially interested in the politics of sexuality. Many of his works deal thematically with questions of gender identity (including his own star turn in the role of Dido), sexual identification in popular culture (as in *Lucky Charms* and his subversion of Tchaikovsky, *A Hard Nut*), and sexual violence (as in *One Charming Night*). Nearly all of his works destabilize ideas of sexual orientation through the use of same-sex combinations of dancers. Heterosexuality and homosexuality are celebrated—and their sometimes arbitrary distinctions are scrutinized—throughout Morris's *L'Allegro*. In physicalizing the conclusion of Handel's Parte Prima, Morris deliberately reframes a standard move from ballet, in which a male dancer cradles a female dancer in his arms. In an interview, Morris has registered his disgust with the conventional gesture's symbolism: "You carry them around like you're protecting them or something? . . . she's an adult, leave her alone."[27] For the passage taken from the end of Milton's "Sunshine Holiday," Morris shows the villagers not only heading for bed—where they will be "By whispering Winds soon lull'd asleep" (116)—but actually carrying each other on the way. First the women carry the men and then the men are allowed to reciprocate the gesture. The sequence in Morris's

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[25]Quoted by Joan Acocella, *Mark Morris* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1993), p. 119.

[26]*Ibid.*

[27]Richard Covington, "The Salon Interview: Mark Morris," *Salon* magazine, 9 September 1999, online version p. 2.

piece known as "The Stupid Men's Dance" hilariously pits competing and conflicted notions of male behavior against each other: as the men dance together in pairs, and in interlocking circles, they alternate between slapping each other's faces and exchanging air kisses; as the pairs separate and the male ensemble forms interlocking circles, the men take turns paddling other dancers' behinds. It's a wonderfully ambiguous moment: is this "acceptable" locker-room-style behavior or is it a form of punitive or erotic chastisement?

Morris's choreography uses directly imitative gestures in "The Hunt," based on the sequence that Handel and Jennens adapted from L'Allegro's desire to hear "how the Hounds and horn / Cheerly rouse the slumb'ring morn" (53-54). The full ensemble enacts the hunt, as dancers become elements of the full setting: bushes and trees, riders and horses, the quarry and the pack of hounds (one of which marks, in canine fashion, one of the shrubs). The movement, fittingly enough for L'Allegro, has a happy ending, at least for present-day audiences, as the objectives of the hunt successfully elude their pursuers. A different kind of pursuit operates in "Basilica," which presents Il Penseroso's longing for transcendent "ecstasies" within cloister and church. Here, Morris's dancers enact the roles of visitors to a massive cathedral (deftly suggested, as are all the scenes, by Adrianne Lobel's abstract screens and James F. Ingalls's subtle lighting designs). They initially appear to be tourists, simply gazing upward at the structure's ceiling, the "high-embowed Roof / With antic Pillars massy proof" that Il Penseroso loves (157-58), but it soon becomes clear that like Milton's speaker they are searching for more. The dancers never interact, never share what they have seen with each other or with the audience; in fact, they all face upstage. At the organ solo passages in Handel's score, the dancers stop and remain motionless until the full orchestra again joins in. They become rapt, as Il Penseroso longs to be, at the sound of Milton's and Handel's "pealing Organ" (161). They also gesture (literally) back to a passage heard previously in the performance, Penseroso's description of Melancholy first walking "With ev'n step" and with "looks commercing with the skies," then later with "rapt soul" remaining "held in holy passion still" (38-40). In the earlier treatment of the first part of this text, dancers had kept each other in their gaze as they walked by with even step. Here, they fully forget themselves to Marble, expressing Il Penseroso's hope to identify utterly with his ideal, his muse.

The full title of the dance piece is *L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato*, and Morris does actually restore some of Jennens's contributions to the musical composition. The "As steals the morn upon the night" passage, in which Handel's music so thoroughly complicates the text by Jennens (see above), recovers much of its confidence in creative rationality through the use of simple geometric designs which become animate and interactive. Joan Acocella's account of the sequence, which is called "Walking Duet," in its earliest performances at Monnaie, Belgium's royal theater, deftly captures the effect:

> Morris creates a Thracian line dance, in which the twenty-four dancers form two lines and march toward, away from, and into one another in patterns that seem to multiply endlessly. Each time the two lines meet, center stage, a new surprise is born. Thus Reason, though steady, is no school-marm.[28]

Another passage based on Jennens's text is called "Each Action." In Handel's original score, it immediately preceded "As steals the morn"; in Morris's rearrangement, it appears immediately after a decidedly risqué take on the tale that L'Allegro's shepherd tells "Under the Hawthorn in the dale" (68). To counterbalance and then to contextualize grandly this suggestiveness, Morris inserts Handel's stately music and Jennens's invocation of cosmic order as a reflection and consequence of moderation:

> Each action will derive new grace
> From order, measure, time and place;
> Till Life, the goodly structure, rise
> In due proportion to the skies.[29]

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[28]Joan Acocella, "L'Allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato," *Ballet Review*, Summer 1989; quoted in *Mark Morris' "l'allegro, il penseroso, ed il moderato": a Celebration*; ed. Jeffrey Escoffier and Matthew Lore (New York: Marlowe, 2001), p. 101.

[29]Handel, pp. 165-67.

To Jennens's "order, measure, time, and place," Morris adds gestures and movements suggesting the four primal elements of earth, water, air, and fire. Throughout the piece, as Alastair Macauley has observed, an "upper arm-movement becomes 'fire' itself"; that gesture recurs in "Each Action" and is joined by earth, when "dancers crouch with hands on the ground"; by air, when they "blow with puffed cheeks and fanning hands"; and by water, "as they lean from one side to the other . . . [with] rippling hands, as if tracing the surface of the sea."[30] Morris adds commentary as well as clarity to the passage, connecting it to the already fading cosmological schemes from which writers and artists in the eighteenth century could still draw inspiration.

Morris employs several other gestures as motifs that recur in the work. "Come" is the word that occurs most frequently in Jennens's libretto and Morris's dancers regularly speak it silently in a gesture closely related to the sign used for the word in American Sign Language. A pose evocative of both conception and birthing appears first in "Sage and Holy," the passage from "Il Penseroso" that introduces Melancholy on her own terms. She is described as the daughter that "bright-hair'd *Vesta* long of yore, / To solitary *Saturn* bore" (23-24) and as these lines are sung, three women dancers (who visually echo the three graces from the corresponding lines in "L'Allegro") fall back onto the stage, each with one knee bent, spreading their legs. The same pose reappears when pairs of dancers adopt it to accompany the phrase, "Forget thyself to marble" (42). A variation occurs later in what members of Morris's company call "Gorgeous Tragedy," corresponding to the aria Handel composed for the opening of his Parte Seconda, the return of Melancholy. The dancer here remains upright, but still adopts a pose with legs and arms wide apart. Near the end of the piece, at the "Weary Age" section drawn from Il Penseroso's hope for "something like Prophetic strain" (174), the supine variety of this pose coalesces with a more somber version of a rollicking, roly-poly move associated with Mirth. In all these cases, the gesture suggests a readiness for divine "raptus," not only of inspiration from above (as Il Penseroso seeks to "unsphere / The spirit of *Plato*" in lines 88-89 and later be transported by the tragic muse) but also of penetration and possession from greater powers.

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[30]Alastair Macaulay, "Creation Myth," in *Mark Morris' "l'allegro,"* ed. Escoffier and Lore, p. 130.

Ruth Davidson—now Ruth Davidson Hahn—portrayed "Gorgeous Tragedy" in all of the dance's first one hundred or so performances. She has since left the Mark Morris Dance Group to establish her own company, but over the years with Morris she came to participate in more and more of the work's set-pieces, including and "Sage and Holy" and "Weary Age." A close interrelation between text and gesture and the enrichment of meaning through repetition have been hallmarks of the piece from the beginning; the opportunity to embody that process of enrichment personally has made a profound impression on her. The recognizability of the recurring gestures adds to the intelligibility of Milton's words, as "come" is reinforced by an increasingly familiar movement and as the different variations on being "rapt" are physicalized in similar ways. At the same time, the shifting contexts—from a process of definition in "Sage and Holy," to a return to theatricality in "Gorgeous Tragedy," to the acceptance of mortality in "Weary Age"—restore much of the original richness to the verbal text.[31]

Davidson Hahn notes, however, that not all the gestures work as effectively as Morris intended, even with such a skilled (and repeated) observer as Joan Acocella, who seriously misreads one pose in the passage presenting Peace, Quiet, and Fast as members of Melancholy's retinue. As Acocella describes it: "the three women at a certain point open their mouths wide, in silent vocalization." She goes on to say that the gesture is textually justifiable, since the song of muses is supposed to be heard by Melancholy and her followers. Acocella adds, however, "their mouths don't seem to be singing; they look as though they're screaming."[32] The "silent scream" interpretation results from a kind of textual interference and slippage: as Davidson Hahn describes it, the gesture is supposed to accompany the line "Spare Fast, that oft with gods doth diet," which immediately precedes the one about hearing "the Muses in a ring" ("Il Penseroso," 46-47). The open mouths are supposed to indicate eating, if sparely; the whole sequence is known within Morris's company as "The Diet Dances."

Morris himself is both insistent on the centrality of Milton's text and aware of the problems that an Early Modern text presents even to sophisticated audiences. At the inception of the dance piece, he has

[31]Ruth Davidson Hahn, personal interview, 23 August 2001.

[32]Joan Acocella, "A Silvered World," in Escoffier and Lore, p. 18.

asserted, the full text of the companion poems informed his choreographic decisions and collaborations with members of his ensemble.[33] With each revival of the work, his dancers are grounded in the language even before they begin work with Handel's music. The libretto is made available to audience members in the programs for each performance—but such efforts can go only so far. Morris has brilliantly countered much of Handel's impact on Milton, while still conveying Handel's own brilliance to new audiences; his divided loyalties (it was a recording of Handel that first inspired him) understandably and perhaps rightly limit the degree to which he can achieve the Miltonic goal of a text-dominated performance in music and dance, rather than simply a text-centered one.

Milton's aesthetics—specifically those involving music and the "musicality" of verse—reflect not only his own developing political sensibilities but also the broader tendency of his age to see politics, aesthetics, and what we term as culture more generally as implicating each other. The aesthetics of Handel and his collaborators and of Morris and his performances both function and register similarly. Until some decades ago, however, there had been in academic culture a tendency to overlook that interrelation. For example, Winton Dean's magisterial study of Handel's oratorios scrupulously avoids their political contexts, even as he must make reference to politics in a source work like Milton's *Samson Agonistes*.[34] Scholarship such as that advanced by Ruth Smith attempts to fill in those gaps, although the complexities of eighteenth-century British politics—and indeed of politics in any time and place—make the task a daunting one. But if we do wish to widen "the historical and cultural matrix" in which any creative work is studied, the broader range should continue to include the political realm. Examining later

[33]Mark Morris, panel discussion with contributors to Escoffier and Lore, at Union Square Barnes and Noble Bookstore, New York City, 24 March 2001.

[34]Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Oratorios and Masques* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 266-67.

artists' engagements with Miltonic materials can help in our appreciating that realm's perennial significance.[35]

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