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The Use of Debates in John Milton's Poems: Rethinking the

Conventions of Scholastic and Humanist Dialectics

Fernando Martinez-Periset

Durham University and Sorbonne University

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Historically, echoes of two main lines of thought persist during Milton's time: Scholasticism and Renaissance humanism. The former could be described as a theological system prominent during the Middle Ages which was largely based on Aristotelian logic; the latter is in essence a pragmatic and anthropocentric reply to the former, which questioned its efficiency and desirability and radically modified some aspects of older philosophy.[1] This paper will explore how Milton's versatility in defending alternative viewpoints allows him to use the university debate format to engage in this wider philosophical and pedagogical discussion. In order to do so, it will be argued that *Lycidas* recycles dialectical tools from the scholastic method, whilst *Comus* borrows dialectical principles from humanist thinking. However, as it will be shown, Milton does not completely respect the conventions of either dialectical system. He instead chooses to outline the tensions and imperfections of these paradigms and distances himself from certain elements of both approaches by nuancing and even subverting some of their characteristics.

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[1] Lorenzo Casini, 'Renaissance Philosophy', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://www.iep.utm.edu/renaissa/#H2> [accessed 31 May 2018].

In *Lycidas* the speaker's central preoccupation concerns one of the fundamental questions in theodicy: the problem of evil, which could be formulated as follows:

> The argument from evil focuses upon the fact that the world appears to contain states of affairs that are bad, or undesirable, or that should have been prevented by any being that could have done so, and it asks how the existence of such states of affairs is to be squared with the existence of God.[2]

Milton's uncouth swain is baffled by two incompatible claims. On the one hand, a belief in divine justice implies that the moral order is sustained by a perfectly fair God. From this he implicitly infers the existence of a principle of justice that would ensure the stability of the moral order so that wrongdoers will be punished and the virtuous people rewarded. The premature passing of Lycidas, however, corresponds to the 'states of affairs that are bad' because it is a disruptive event, since it shows a virtuous young man suffering a violent death, therefore introducing a tension in this way of thinking.[3] This creates a sense of anxiety and impotence in the beginning of the poem. The lines, 'I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude, / And with forced fingers rude, / Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year', suggest a fragmentation of the speaker's voice, which is expressed through sudden rhythmic alterations.[4] This abruptness is displayed in the contrast between the first line of the quotation and the second one, since the former is written in iambic pentameter, whereas the latter is trimeter. In addition, the imagery indicates that the speaker feels insecure and underprepared to face the task before him; Lycidas's death has forced him to make premature use of his poetic potential. This is reflected in the use of the verb 'shatter' which shows the speaker's awareness of the fact that his writing task will temporarily disturb the current stability and serenity of the bushes from which he is plucking the berries, which are in

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[2] Michael Tooley, 'The Problem of Evil', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/evil/> [accessed 20 May 2018].

themselves unripe. All of this sets the speaker in a cognitively limited position. Given

that scholastic dialogues are 'constructed as a discourse between master and pupil,' it

may be instructive to construe the speaker at this stage with the student in a scholastic

disputation, who will be instructed in how to reconcile the coexistence of divine justice

with Lycidas's death through his engagement in a debate.[3] In fact, one of the

pedagogical notions stressed by the scholastic method is its emphasis on the belief that

'it is through conversation, interrogation, indeed disputation that a more accessible

explanation of doctrine can be articulated and achieved'.[4]

     Such a dialogue starts when discussing fame: 'But the fair guerdon when we

hope to find / And think to burst out into sudden blaze / Comes the blind Fury with the

abhorred shears'.[5] In this case, the speaker puts forward a thesis which shows the

fickleness of fame. Fame is presented as a reward, as implied by the noun 'guerdon',

but human projects can be quickly thwarted. Such an idea is transmitted through the

classical image of the violent and immutable Fury, who is about to cut the thread of life.

Here the speaker's preoccupation is related to 'Edward Kingness', in other words, to the

universal concept of Edward King, which encapsulates the problem of the potential

futility of human sacrifice if the effort put into obtaining fame happened to be

unsuccessful due to an unexpected turn of events.[6] However, these assumptions are

quickly challenged by Phoebus, who interrupts the speaker's meditation in an attempt to

correct him. Phoebus, a much wiser figure than the speaker, would correspond to the

teacher in a scholastic debate since his epistemologically superior status allows him to

present a diametrically opposed perspective:

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[3] Tooley, 'The Problem of Evil' [accessed 20 May 2018].
[4] John Milton, *Selected Poems*, ed. by John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 26.
[5] Alex J. Navikoff, 'Anselm, Dialogue and the Rise of Scholastic Disputation', *Speculum*, 86.2 (2011), 387–418 (p. 414).
[4] Ibid., p. 404.
[5] Milton, *Selected Poems*, p. 28.
[6] Edward Wagenknecht, 'Milton in "Lycidas"', *College English*, 7.7 (1946), 393–97 (p. 395).

'But not the praise',
 Phoebus replied, and touched my trembling ears;
'Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil
 Nor in the glistering foil
 Set off to the world, nor in broad rumour lies,
 But gives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes
 And perfect witness of all-judging Jove.'[7]

The character of Phoebus attempts to introduce a comforting feeling and to alleviate the sense of anguish that the speaker is experiencing; he will contribute to the resolution of the logical problem of evil and the reconciliation of the two antagonistic claims that haunt the swain's mind. The viewpoint he presents correlates with the scholastic 'theory of proof', a procedure often used by teachers to exhibit the conditions under which a given proposition is true or false.[8] In his short but decisive intervention, Phoebus conducts an analysis of the meaning of the word 'fame' and in doing so he denies the speaker's assertion. He corrects the speaker's definition by drawing attention to the true nature of the noun in question and through this process he demonstrates that the assumptions of the speaker's thesis are not supported by the existing state of affairs, in other words, the ontological categories and properties the young speaker had attached to that particular concept are disassociated from the truth-conditions. Whereas the swain had thought that fame was equivalent to earthly praise, Phoebus explains that this is not the case; the kind of fame which really matters is divinely granted and, therefore, the understanding of fame as dependent on earthly praise is misguided and ought to be rejected. This reasoning echoes one of the theses exposed by Boethius in *The Consolation of Philosophy* when the allegorical figure of Lady Philosophy tells Boethius that 'Fortune by her very mutability can't hope to lead to happiness'.[9] The contingency of human circumstances and values puts in jeopardy the durability of the

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[7] Milton, *Selected Poems*, p. 28.
[8] Alan Perreiah, 'Humanistic Critiques of Scholastic Dialectic', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 13. 3 (1982), 3–22 (p. 17).
[9] Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. by Victor Watts (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 31.

bliss found in them, and therefore it is not to be considered as a legitimate source of true glory. It was widely thought that only eternal states of affairs were valuable, whereas anything that was by nature transitory lacked genuine value due to its very temporary status. From this point of view, material considerations, such as seeking external earthly approval, were regarded as worthless. Phoebus gives further evidence in favour of his position through the imagery he uses, which is related to sight. He establishes a dichotomy between the appreciation of the phenomena of the physical world and the capacity to recognise a moral reality. Phoebus characterises the latter as hierarchically more elevated than the former. Physical sight is conveyed through the words 'glistering foil,' whilst the superior type of sight is expressed in words like 'pure' and 'perfect witness'. Since at this stage the swain is solely focused on the inferior kind, he fails to notice that earthly reality does not offer a complete account of what it means to 'see'.

Thus far, Milton has been consistently using elements of Scholasticism in this debate, but this is subverted in the following lines of *Lycidas*. Milton disrespects one of the most prominent conventions of scholastic dialectics, given that the representation of the speaker is contrary to the 'obligation format'. Such an approach is defined as an oral disputation system in which the student's duty is to reply to a series of statements pronounced by the master in such a way that the pupil's analysis never contradicts the statement which started the conversation.[10] This principle encourages the pupil to continue the discussion with a second intervention and so on. The objective of the 'obligation format' was to achieve absolute consistency in the student's discourse. Nevertheless, in *Lycidas*, the speaker refuses to continue the discussion altogether and does not even offer a reply to Phoebus's comment, hence showing a clear lack of interaction with the opponent. This is a way of rejecting the main premise at the heart of

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[10] Perreiah, 'Humanistic Critiques of Scholastic Dialectic', p. 18.

the very dictates that a commitment to the 'obligation format' would have imposed

upon him. Instead of expressing agreement or disagreement with Phoebus, he suddenly

changes the subject of the discussion, referring to another figure: 'O fountain

Arethuse.'[11] With regards to this attitude, Friedman acknowledges:

> … the responses […] are actually ignored by the questioner. He seems to
> be neither informed nor reassured, but merely determined to go on with
> his frustrating pursuit of resolution […], the struggle is not carried on
> forensically; the inspired arguments are not refuted; the lamenting
> shepherd simply sweeps them away, urging himself on through the
> disordered countries of the mind...[12]

Indeed, the mere fact that the rest of the dialectical interchange is missing seems to

indicate that the speaker has lost interest in carrying on the conversation. Even more

strikingly, he does not address Phoebus ever again in the poem. So, paradoxically,

Milton's speaker is someone who resembles a student and initially engages in a

conversation which should grant him knowledge and clarity but who immediately

refuses to be taught by his teacher. By the time Phoebus finishes his speech, he has

become a kind of anti-student. The brief scholastic exchange with Phoebus has failed to

provide him with any type of certainty and so he looks for answers elsewhere.

It is worth noting that such a critical attitude towards the 'obligation format'

might reflect Milton's own hostility to the scholastic approach of his education at

Cambridge, which was, to an extent, influenced by the scholastic principles. This

dissatisfaction is apparent in his prolusions: 'I saw more left than I had got through

reading, how often have I wished that I had been set to clean out the Augean stables

rather than having this foolishness forced upon me'.[13] Analogously to Milton's attack

on Scholasticism, many humanist thinkers expressed a great degree of discrepancy with

that medieval system: 'the scholastic logic, being so technical and scientific, separated

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[11] Milton, *Selected Poems*, p. 29.
[12] Donald M. Friedman, 'The Swain's Paideia', *Milton Studies*, 3 (1971), 3–34 (p. 5).
[13] Milton, *The Riverside Milton*, ed. by Roy Flannagan (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), p. 852.

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from grammar and rhetoric and lacking any practical utility, must, according to the humanists, give way to the persuasive virtue of eloquence'.[14] Precisely because of the medieval tendency to defend alternative viewpoints, some Renaissance thinkers wondered whether the students of the medieval system could actually remain faithful to a particular position, in other words, they feared that the versatility of the scholastic debating techniques could erode the individual's capacity to consolidate their own opinions. Petrarch, for instance, objected to Scholasticism by questioning the way scholastic philosophers had interpreted Aristotle: 'From Aristotle's ways they swerve, taking eloquence to be an obstacle and a disgrace to philosophy, while he considered it a mighty adornment and tried to combine it with philosophy, "prevailed upon," it is asserted, "by the fame of the orator Isocrates."'[15] The strength of these attacks intensified after the establishment of the first printing house at the Sorbonne, whose installer, Guillaume Fichet, repeatedly challenged Scholasticism, calling for a return to classical eloquence.[16] This mindset led other humanist thinkers like Vives to even satirise the method, claiming that it made people 'confused by new feats of verbal legerdemain'.[17] The title of the book that contains this severe criticism is in itself surprisingly revealing and worthy of mention: *Against the Pseudodialecticians*. On the whole, despite the fundamentally different philosophical commitments held by these thinkers, they all understood that the cold logical tools of Scholasticism were neglecting the role of natural intuition.[18] Like other European intellectuals before him, Milton is

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[14] Manuel Mañas Núñez, 'Antecedentes y desarrollo de la dialéctica humanista: de Aristóteles al Brocense', *Florentia iliberritana: Revista de estudios de la antigüedad clásica*, 8 (1997), 275–99 (p. 283). All translations from Spanish to English are my own.

[15] Petrarch, 'On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others', in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. by Ernst Cassirer, and others (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 521.

[16] Michel Zink, *Introduction à la littérature française du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1990), p. 146.

[17] Juan Luis Vives, *Against the Pseudodialecticians*, ed. by Rita Guerlac (Boston: Reidel, 1979), pp. 57–59.

[18] Alain de Libera, *La philosophie médiévale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989), p. 47.

committed to the view that the scholastic methods are obsolete. The inefficacy of

scholastic logic prompted the humanists to develop a new variety of dialectical norms

and to rethink the objectives of philosophy, leading to the dawn of Renaissance

humanism.

Comus shows an in-depth engagement with the humanistic dialectical principles.

During the scene in the lair, Comus and the Lady take part in a debate concerning two

different understandings of nature. Comus declares:

> List Lady be not coy, and be not cozened
> With that same vaunted name Virginity;
> Beauty is Nature's coin, must not be hoarded,
> But must be current, and the good thereof
> Consists in mutual partaken bliss.[19]

By establishing this consumerist relationship between beauty and money, Comus

displays a hedonistic interpretation of human nature according to which the purpose of

one's physical attractiveness is fulfilled when one makes use of it. Comus instigates the

Lady to do so in such a way that it multiplies the collective amount of sexual

satisfaction. This carries the implication that if the possessor of these natural gifts were

to retain them, she would be adopting a selfish attitude. In his view, chastity is a failure

to unleash these desires, and so it constitutes a denial of a part of human experience.

This suggests that Comus is advocating the predominance of the bodily needs over the

mental ones. This attitude has been visually represented in certain performances of the

masque. In a 2002 adaptation, Comus used a hoop strung with ribbons to immobilise the

Lady and tie her to a throne. The function of this directorial choice was to symbolise the

presence of a sadomasochistic, erotic interplay between Comus and the Lady hidden

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[19] Milton, *Selected Poems*, p. 53.

beneath the apparent inefficiency of these imprisonment tools.[20] This also reminded the audience that Comus is exclusively concerned with controlling the Lady's body.

However, Comus's position is regarded as a misrepresentation of nature and the Lady immediately dismisses it as such by presenting an antithetical viewpoint:

> Impostor, do not charge most innocent Nature
> As if she would her children should be riotous
> With her abundance; she good cateress
> Means her provision only to the good
> That live according to her sober laws,
> And holy dictate of spare Temperance.[21]

Milton, who was well acquainted with the philosophy of Petrus Ramus, echoes one of the principles of the Ramist method in this passage.[22] Ramus, who wished to reform medieval logic in order to make it more useful for the humanities, developed a method that placed a significant amount of emphasis on the role of nature as a cognitive tool by arguing that man 'has within himself the natural power to recognize everything'.[23] As a central element of this system, he thought that what is more general with regards to nature has a methodological priority over what is more particular.[24] The Lady's intuitive capacity to see through Comus's argument fits the Ramist method in so far as her inborn capability to identify the true value of nature, which is an abstract concept, enables her to apply her knowledge to the particular, therefore noticing that Comus's premises in this case are erroneous. She insists that the scope of nature has an ethical purpose that extends beyond the material world. The Lady associates what she

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[20] Catherine Thomas, 'Chaste Bodies and Poisonous Desires in Milton's Mask', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900, Tudor and Stuart Drama*, 46.2 (Houston: Rice University, 2006), 435–59 (p. 437).
[21] Milton, *Selected Poems,* p. 54.
[22] Elizabeth Skerpan-Wheeler, 'The Logic Poetics of *Paradise Regained*', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 76.1 (2013), 35–58 (p. 37).
[23] Pierre de la Ramée, *Dialectique de Pierre de la Ramée* (Paris: André Wechel, 1555), p. 69. All translations from French to English are my own.
[24] Erland Sellberg, 'Petrus Ramus', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), ed. by Edward N. Zalta <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/ramus/> [accessed 28 January 2018].

understands to be a good life with controlling one's urges and respecting the established

moral order. The function of nature is to be treated with moderation as an extension of

ourselves.[25] Comus's position, however, being merely concerned with material

circumstances and the lower human desires, is too reductive and so it ignores both the

ethical dimension of nature and the ways in which human beings transcend the physical

realm.

Nonetheless, the masque also shows a reluctance to abide by the totality of the

precepts of humanist dialectics and consequently challenges one of Ramus's maxims.

For Ramus, there is a distinction between logic and oratory. Logic (which in Ramus's

account is the same doctrine as dialectics) is defined as 'the art of reasoning well,'

whereas oratory (or Grammar) is the 'art of speaking well'.[26] Ramus believed that the

former was concerned with the mind, whilst the latter was related to speech and

therefore to the body.[27] Milton's masque counterexamples this split. The Lady is overtly

an advocate of the primacy of mind over body, given that she states: 'Thou canst not

touch the freedom of my mind'.[28] According to Ramus, it should follow from this that

her debating strengths lie in logic, yet this cannot be the case in Milton's masque since

the Lady's reasoning falters. At one point the Lady claims: 'none / But such as are good

men can give good things,'.[29] In relation to this, Carrithiers observes: 'This apparent

converse of the Pauline notion that the good man from the good treasures of his heart

brings forth the good, this endorsement of integrity is formally invalid as logic'.[30] The

Lady's reasoning is unreliable as well as empirically false, since, from the fact that

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[25] Stephen Orgel, 'The Case for Comus', *Representations*, 81.1 (2003), 31–45 (p. 37).

[26] De la Ramée, *Dialectique de Pierre de la Ramée*, p. 4.

[27] Laura Adrián Lara, 'Petrus Ramus y el ocaso de la retórica cívica', *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana*, 13.43 (2008), 11–31 (p. 26).

[28] Milton, *Selected Poems*, p. 51.

[29] Ibid., p. 52.

[30] Gale H. Carrithers Jr, 'Milton's Ludlow Mask: From Chaos to Community', *ELH*, 33.1 (1966), 23–42 (p. 36).

someone is a good person, it does not follow that he/she would be the only individual to bring forth the good. The Lady is not taking into consideration a series of possible scenarios where good people fail to bring forth the good or those involving bad people who might also bring forth the good, albeit accidentally.

Instead, the Lady's supremacy lies in the untainted power of the unsaid: 'should I try, the uncontrolled wroth / Of this pure cause would kindle my rapt spirits / To such a flame of sacred vehemence, / That dumb things would be moved to sympathise'.[31] She replies to Comus by referring to an unfathomable force, which is in itself unused and hence, like the purity of virginity, unrevealed to other people. She threatens her adversary by compellingly relating the consequences of this potential, should she decide to use it. To this end the images of fire, expressed in the words 'kindle' and 'a flame of sacred vehemence', encapsulate a duality in the Lady's speech. Fire at that time was conceived as a means of consumption and, simultaneously, regeneration.[32] This relationship implies that the material realm can be exposed to violence and ultimately to obliteration, but the immaterial domain will be purified in the process. Given that Comus, as it has been argued, is essentially devoted to the material world, the possibility of absolute power terrifies him: 'I feel that I do fear / Her words set off by some superior power'.[33] Yet the very fact that this power is unarticulated also makes it is unanalysable through the laws of rational argumentation. The claims made by the Lady are impossible to verify in any way that depends on the logical principles used in this world. This point could be related to Stanley Fish's idea that Milton keeps reminding his readers of the fact that we inhabit a postlapsarian universe and so the nature of our epistemic tools is in itself restricted. As Fish puts it: 'Milton's purpose is

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[31] Milton, *Selected Poems*, p. 55.
[32] Lucinda Cole, 'Scientific Revolution II', in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Science*, ed. by Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 449–62 (p. 454).
[33] Milton, *Selected Poems*, p. 55.

to educate the reader to an awareness of his position and responsibilities as a fallen man, and to a sense of distance which separates him from the innocence once his'.[34] There are aspects of reality that the common human being is unable to make sense of precisely due to the confines of human reason. Language in itself is fallible and incapable of accounting for this metaphysical experience; the reader is faced with vague and abstract descriptions which he/she can never come close to understanding or accessing, such as the mention of a 'superior power'. It is impossible to determine the characteristics of this revelation, it stands beyond the reader's frame of reference. The arrival at this status makes the Lady stand in complete communion with the mind, in other words, she transcends the cognitive limitations which are bound up with the facticity of the human condition; however, this in turn also means that it cannot be tested deductively or empirically, for it cannot be compared to any existing state of affairs available to other human beings. She reaches a state of spiritual superiority, yet her leap of faith requires a suspension of reason. Milton's protagonist thus embodies the superiority of mind over reason and in doing so defies the humanistic, directly proportional relationship between these concepts. Despite the insistence of the Western intellectual community to value reason as the ultimate key to knowledge, Milton suggests that a higher realm of power, only accessible through divine revelation, stands beyond the confines of human logic. This entails the recognition that humanist logic cannot be of much help in the Miltonic universe because there is a whole series of phenomena that stands beyond the boundaries of logical explanation, as Raphael repeatedly insists throughout *Paradise Lost*: 'if else thou seek'st / aught, not surpassing human measure, say'.[35] The necessary precondition for knowledge is based on an acknowledgment of the limitations of the human subject after the fall of man, which include the potential sacrifice of man-made

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[34] Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 1.
[35] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 639–40.

logic. It is this leap of faith that helps the Lady defeat Comus, and it is also what helps Milton defeat the staunch believers in the idea that human reason is good enough to explain the totality of the world, such as humanist thinkers.

To conclude, as a defender of freedom of speech and autonomous thinking, Milton wants to avoid becoming a 'heretic in the truth,' which echoes the famous Socratic dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living.[36] For Milton, merely assuming a pile of imposed ideas, even if they are correct, is an intellectual suicide. Thinking critically, by contrast, even if one is later shown to be wrong, is preferable to a passive regurgitation of unexamined ideas.

Even if four years elapsed between the composition of *Comus* and that of *Lycidas,* both texts are working with similar ideas. They share the use of a debating format to participate in a historical discussion about the art of debating in itself. Seen in relation to the wider historical context of the period, it can be claimed that Milton is systematically inscribing himself in and distancing himself from the debating traditions that dominated the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Even if one dislikes a particular system which has played a role in one's education, the system will still have an influence upon the worldview of that person, who will still have acquired some valuable methodological knowledge and skills from the very experience of being involved in and eventually disliking that system. Milton cannot help using dialectical techniques against dialectics themselves. Yet disliking a system is in itself an enriching experience. With this in mind, although Milton understands some of the virtues of Scholasticism and Ramism, his poems also express a certain feeling of scepticism with regards to the validity of both methods. Milton is capable of perceiving the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. The latter are represented by the satirical ways in which he questions

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[36] Miltton, *Areopagitica: a Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, to the Parliament of England* (London: R. Blamire, 1792), p. 45.

Scholasticism in *Lycidas* and Renaissance dialectics in *Comus*, yet the beauty of these dialectical traditions is the fact that his engagement with them has allowed him to write two remarkable poems. His works conduct a critical and transversal evaluation of different dialectical traditions by the very presence of debates.

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