Milton's "Il Penseroso" ll. 17, 18

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MILTON'S 'IL PENSEROSO' ll. 17, 18.

Black, but such as in esteem
 Prince Memnon's sister might beseem.

Most editors of *Il Penseroso* have ascribed the invention of this lady to Milton. As Professor Osgood says in his *Classical Mythology of Milton's English Poems*: 'Commentators have said that Memnon's sister is not mentioned in the classics, but that Milton argues her beauty from that of her brother. Verity cites Trench to the effect that Himera, or Hemera, was the sister of Memnon. In the *History of the Trojan War* ascribed to Dictys Cretensis we are told that she was named after her mother, but her beauty is not mentioned.'

I have not been able to find Mr Verity's citation of Trench: in his edition of *Il Penseroso* he says: 'Milton argues that if Memnon was beautiful, his sister (but we are not told that he had any) must have been equally, or even more, so.' But the name occurs in Dictys himself: 'Himera, quam nonnulli materno nomine Hemeram appellabant, soror Memnonis,' etc. The legend told of her by Dictys is repeated in the romances based on his work, and if Milton had required authority for her beauty he could have found it in Guido delle Colonne, *Hystoria Destructionis Troiae*, Bk. 8; the passage is as follows:

Nunc presens narrat hystoria quod predictus rex menon quandam mire pulcritudinis suam sororem habebat que manifeste venit coram omnibus ad menonis monumentum illud aperiri mandavit ossa menonis extraxit ab ipso et ea in quodam aureo vase reposuit conseruanda que statim cum predicto vase de medio astancium ab oculis sic prorsus euanuit velud vmbra quod nunquam in loco ipso postea visa fuit. Hanc nonnulli dixerunt fuisse deam vel dee filiam vel vnam ex illis quas gentes fatas appellant.

The *Hystoria Destructionis Troiae* was accessible in many editions of the fifteenth century, both in Latin and in Italian translations, which may well have come into Milton's hands. Guido's immediate source, Benoit de Sainte More, said (ll. 29363-5):

Une seror ot belle assez
 Et halte dame et honorée
 Qui Helainne esteit apelée.

But in Milton's time this was still unprinted; the same reason makes it improbable that he knew of the *Alliterative Troy Book*:

This Menon the mighty hade a mayn suster,
 The fairest on fold that any folke knew.
 (ll. 13788-9).

He could not have derived the information from the more accessible

Caxton, or his original, Raoul le Fevre, neither of whom mentions her beauty, though the Englishman states that she was 'moche rychely arayed.' Nor did he use a variant form of the legend, found only, as far as I know, in Lydgate and the Scotch *Troy Book* fragments attributed to Barbour. Here the story is related, not of the sister of Memnon, but of his wife, who, according to the Scottish poet, was thought by the people to be

A werde sistere—I wait neur how.
(l. 2818).

Lydgate in his *Troy Book* departs from all other versions of the story by definitely making his heroine a supernatural being. It was printed in 1513 and 1555; the following is the passage in the latter edition:

The noble quene of this kynge Menon
After the tyme longe and many day
That she was deade and grauen vnder claye
At the tounge heuenly gan appere
All beset with bryght sterres clere
Whose symylytude for to reken all
Was lyke a thyng that were immortall
That no man myght vtterly sustene
To beholde of loke she was so shene
Downe descendyng fro the fyrmament
Full many man beyng there present
Clade in a mantell ful celestyall
And of hir porte passyngly royall
With swetnesse fresshe as any rose...
Some affermyng as by lyklynesse
She was other aungell or goodesse
The soule or fate of the same kynge
I can nat deme in suche heuenly thyng. (Bk v).

Perhaps it is not too fanciful to suggest that Milton, though following the old authorities which made Hemera Memnon's *sister*, gives us here a reminiscence in his 'Goddess sage and holy,' with her countenance 'too bright To hit the sense of human sight,' her majestic raiment, her 'even step and musing gait,' and her heavenly dwelling-place, which he derived, consciously or unconsciously, from his reading of Lydgate's poem.

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LONDON.

'TOSEANS.'

At page 1315 of vol. III of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, anno 1581. is a detailed description of the decorations of the new banqueting house erected at Westminster in that year. The following passage in it contains a word hitherto unexplained, 'toseans.'