



Seventy-Eight Ways of Looking at John Milton

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Modern Philology*, Vol. 109, No. 4 (May 2012), pp. 544-562

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/665254>

Accessed: 28/06/2012 13:34

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Seventy-Eight Ways of Looking at John Milton

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The essay anthologies called “companions” or “handbooks” must count among the successes of British academic publishing in the past two decades. There are the slim, ubiquitous *Cambridge Companions*, a series with 472 titles to date on subjects from Homer to the literature of Los Angeles.¹ There are the bulkier, more comprehensive *Blackwell Companions* and *Oxford Handbooks*. For editors and contributors, these volumes offer an attractive way to put one’s stamp on a field, since they reach a somewhat broader audience than do journal articles or monographs. Students consult them to start a research paper or to prepare for graduate exams; teachers consult them to enrich a lesson plan or to refresh their memory; specialists consult them to track the latest developments and bibliography or to survey an unfamiliar subfield. Libraries purchase them as reference books. They can also be adopted as course texts, which is how a scholarly book can actually turn a profit. New titles keep appearing, so presumably they sell.

These anthologies are now common enough that their molecular unit, the handbook or companion essay, has become a recognizable academic subgenre. In length, it runs usually between five and eight thousand words, like a shorter journal article or a longer reference entry, and shares traits of each. If a reference piece aims to summarize the present state of knowledge on a given subject and an article aims to extend it, the companion essay aims for a graceful overview of its subject, touching on the essential

This essay reviews the following books: Stephen B. Dobranski, ed., *Milton in Context* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. xxv+523; Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Milton* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. xxii+715. These works are cited by page number in parentheses in the text, the former as *MC* and the latter as *OHM*.

1. See http://cco.cambridge.org/collection?current_page=7&id=complete.

background, the latest research, and ongoing debates. The ideal specimen should be accessible to students and nonspecialists, yet grounded in deep learning; informative, but not merely a statement of facts; an expert's personal take, but not unduly partisan or idiosyncratic. In practice, this is a hard mark to hit. Some experts are better at graceful overview than others, and companion essays, like the critical introductions prefixed to novels, often presume a good deal of knowledge about the text or subject they are supposed to introduce, probably just because specialists tend to write for each other by default. The genre's most common drawback is blandness. Several factors contribute: the impulse to be even-handed; the difficulty of presenting a large subject in a short space; the nonargument-based essay format; the tendency to reprise one's previous work. One cannot blame authors for reprising; if asked to write on something you have written about before, why would you not take your previous line, if you still believe in it? Nor can one blame editors, who want to assemble a roster of experts, and expertise is grounded in prior publication. A clever editor can try to minimize rehash by inviting contributors to write on subjects related but not identical to what they have done before, or on subjects pertaining to their work in progress. But the handbook essay is not usually a form in which major new discoveries are presented or new arguments advanced.

The two volumes under review are ambitious examples of their kind. A *Cambridge Companion to Milton* already exists, as does a *Blackwell Companion to Milton* and a *Concise Companion to Milton*. The *Oxford Handbook of Milton* and *Milton in Context* both appear to have been designed to avoid overlap with these other anthologies, or with each other. The *OHM* is geared more to scholars than to students. Its thirty-eight essays tend to the longer side of the handbook norm, with individualized, article-like subjects: not "Milton's English Sonnets" but "The Troubled, Quiet Endings of Milton's English Sonnets"; not "A *Maske*" but "'A thousand fantasies': The Lady and the *Maske*." This format may make *OHM* less suitable than its competitors as a vade mecum for readers coming to Milton for the first time; on the positive side, it contains a higher proportion of original material. The forty essays in *MC* are shorter and more reference-like. There are ten on "Life and Works," six on "Critical Legacy," and twenty-four on "Historical and Cultural Contexts," the latter arranged alphabetically from "Astronomy" and "The Book Trade" to "The Restoration" and "Theology." One could add an implicit "Milton on . . ." or "Milton and . . ." to these titles.

There is much to praise in both volumes. Among the many informative essays in *MC*, Cedric Brown on "Letters, Verse Letters, and Gift-Texts" locates an otherwise dissimilar group of Milton's Latin and English verses within the humanist epistolary tradition. Anthony Welch efficiently describes the

main branches of the epic tradition Milton inherited—classical, chivalric, and biblical—and Milton’s transformative gestures within it. John Creaser, following Derek Attridge’s *The Rhythms of English Poetry*, offers a sophisticated vocabulary for the analysis of Miltonic blank verse. (Creaser has a longer essay on the same subject in *OHM*.) Karen Edwards performs an elegant reading of Satan’s leap over the “verdurous wall” into Paradise. Dennis Danielson gives a lucid account of the Copernican aspects of *Paradise Lost* (1667), a subject on which it is not easy to be lucid. David Loewenstein outlines Milton’s Interregnum career as a government-sponsored polemicist. Catherine Gimelli Martin describes Milton’s lifelong attraction to Italian culture and letters. William Poole provides a useful short introduction to Milton’s theology. Amid all this information, readers will appreciate Wendy Furman-Adams’s richly illustrated chapter on Milton and the visual arts.

The longer format of the *OHM* essays allows for more developed arguments. Ann Hughes relates *Areopagitica* (1644) to the emerging divisions among Parliamentary supporters in 1644: though Milton’s tract clearly comes down on the independent side, his rhetoric of “moderat varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes” has less in common with radicals like William Walwyn than with “mainstream independents like Oliver Cromwell, whose commitment to liberty of conscience was founded on the conviction that the godly could reach a common shared truth, though they might travel there by different roads” (*OHM*, 217). Stephen Fallon’s essay on *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) examines the tensions in that tract’s argument due to its difficult task; in supporting the execution of Charles I, Milton was defending a highly unpopular cause, “simultaneously voicing cherished ideals and putting the best face on a bad business. The strain marks the text throughout” (*OHM*, 242). N. H. Keeble on Milton’s later republican tracts rightly notes their “subordination of the political to the religious” (*OHM*, 308). Timothy Raylor describes *Of Education* (1644) as a genuine if overambitious proposal for an English version of the “noble academies” then flourishing in France. Charles Martindale, writing on *Paradise Lost* as epic, unexpectedly but profitably focuses on Addison’s *Spectator* essays on the poem, reminding us of the role they played in the poem’s canonization.

Two of the best pieces in *OHM* concern *Samson Agonistes* (1671). To gain a sense of how the political resonances of Milton’s late poems were understood by their first readers, Laura Knoppers examines a handwritten index to the 1671 volume compiled by an unknown contemporary. The indexer “looks to *Paradise Regain’d* and *Samson Agonistes* for models of faith and patience under persecution, for exposure of ungodly prelates and priests, and for possible violent revenge closely linked with the concerns of dissent and republicanism. As such, Milton’s final two poems complement

as much as contrast with one another, depicting both present and future action" (*OHM*, 584–85). In "Samson Agonistes and 'Single Rebellion,'" R. W. Serjeantson brings a new body of evidence to bear on the current critical debates concerning the moral legitimacy of Samson's violence: early modern commentaries on the book of Judges. Before Milton, commentators such as Pareus, Bucer, and Vermigli considered the legal issue at the heart of the verbal contest between Samson and Harapha: Does Samson fight as a private person (in which case his killing is criminal, as Harapha charges) or as one raised by God to fight on behalf of his nation? Reformed exegetes, well aware of the legal and moral difficulties that the Samson story presents, discussed such questions in detail and found Samson "a hero of legitimate violence for religious ends" (*OHM*, 631). That such was the pre-Miltonic consensus does not prove that Milton shared it, but it does increase the already weighty burden of proof on those who would claim otherwise.

Both volumes are cleanly copy edited and attractively produced. I noted only a few errors of fact. In April 1648, Milton translated Psalms 80–88, not the "penitential Psalms" (*OHM*, 41). The claim that Milton presents God in *Paradise Regained* (1671) as "virtually tongue-tied, speaking but nine words in Satan's memory (i.85), ten in that of Jesus (i.285–6)" (*OHM*, 531) forgets about God's lengthy and interesting speech at 1.130–67, wherein the Eternal Father explains to Gabriel and other angels why the Son is to be tempted in the desert. Line 785 in *Samson Agonistes*, "Let weakness then with weakness come to parle," is spoken by Dalila to Samson, not the other way around (*OHM*, 654). *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* were first printed in 1671, not in "1673, the year before [Milton's] death" (*MC*, 3).

To go by the evidence of these two volumes, one might conclude the following about Milton studies at the present moment. Nobody remains in doubt that Milton wrote *De doctrina Christiana* (ca. 1650–60). Discussion of gender has moved beyond the "Milton: arch-patriarch or proto-feminist?" debate to more nuanced questions. Poststructuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial theory show little if any continued influence. The "How heretical was Milton?" discussion remains in progress, on which more below. Interest in Milton's politics—both in the political prose, and in the implicit or explicit politics of the poetry—remains strong. Interest in Milton's prose remains strong. Milton's passages of autobiographical self-presentation are still treated as important sources—it is hard to imagine that scholars would ever ignore them—but the trend now runs against taking them at face value. Rather, they are being read with a keen, skeptical attention to their rhetorical aims. Attention to genre has become very sophisticated, including consideration of minor genres and of the multiple generic contexts of Milton's major works. No review

could do justice to the full range of issues explored in these seventy-eight essays; in what follows I will focus on a few topics in some greater detail.

MILTON'S LAUDIAN YOUTH?

The *OHM* is the first essay collection to show the influence of Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns's 2008 biography, *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought*. That work's largest revisionary claim concerns the young Milton's religious leanings. It has been widely assumed that Milton was a Puritan from the cradle, and incipient radical tendencies have often been traced in his early writings. Campbell and Corns challenge that assumption, pointing out that we have little evidence that Milton was raised in a Puritan household. To the contrary, they claim that the religious sympathies of the Milton family were in fact Laudian into the 1630s. No doubt the question will be thoroughly reevaluated by Miltonists in the years ahead. My initial reaction, for what it is worth, is to find their skeptical arguments stronger than their positive ones. Campbell and Corns have shifted the burden of proof to those who would maintain the picture of Milton as a young radical; the latter assumption, from now on, needs to be supported or abandoned. I am not yet convinced that the evidence they provide gives much reason to describe the Miltons as "Laudian."

Take, for example, the matter of the Miltons' Hammersmith church. When the family moved to Hammersmith in 1631, they worshipped in a chapel of ease that Bishop Laud had recently consecrated there. For Campbell and Corns, "the timing of the move implies that the attraction of Hammersmith for Milton's father was the opening of a Laudian chapel that accorded with his ecclesiastical preferences."² The detail is picked up by Edward Jones in *OHM* as evidence for "the conservative nature of the Milton family in the early years of Milton's life": "In 1629, William Laud as Bishop of London had consecrated a chapel of ease in Hammersmith, and in negotiations with the parishioners who petitioned for this chapel (named St Paul) on the basis of its inconvenient distance from the mother church in Fulham, Laud disallowed their request to appoint a minister. Extant documents reveal Laud's concern to prevent disruptive preachers and lecturers from securing the living. Attending a Laudian chapel of ease in the early 1630s does not suggest religious subversion was a decisive factor governing the family move" (*OHM*, 14). I am not sure that it suggests much about the Miltons' religion one way or the other. A chapel of ease is a satellite church within a large parish, not a gathered congregation of like-minded souls; that Laud as bishop of London approved one in

2. Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 68.

Hammersmith does not imply anything “Laudian” about the chapel of ease or its congregation. Even if services at Hammersmith’s St. Paul were in fact ceremonial in style, there is no saying that the Miltons moved to Hammersmith for the sake of the church. If bishop and parishioners had been at odds about the minister, that fact might just as easily point in the other direction: perhaps the Miltons were attracted to Hammersmith in part by the prospect of godly neighbors. They would have known about the new chapel before they moved; once in Hammersmith, they attended the services nearest their house, as one would ordinarily expect. We gather that the Miltons were not the sort who went gadding to sermons outside their parish, at least not at this point—that is all. The parish church at Horton, where the Miltons moved in 1636, had at the time an incumbent with puritan tendencies—does that suggest that the Miltons’ ecclesiastical preferences had changed?

Further research may shed more light on the family’s religion; meanwhile, as we interpret what evidence we have, let us keep in mind that “Laudian” or “puritan” are not the only possible descriptions. The Milton family, while the poet was growing up, may have been cultured, prosperous London Protestants, devout but not especially ideological about their faith; such families were not rare. Milton’s early poems do not demonstrate a strong engagement with the polarizing religious issues of the day. That the seventeen-year-old Milton wrote Latin elegies for the bishops of Winchester and of Ely indicates that he had not yet developed his intense hatred of bishops; on the other hand, nothing in either poem praises either bishop for taking a particular ecclesio-political line. (The bishop of Winchester, of course, was Lancelot Andrewes.) Perhaps these poems show us nothing more than a precocious teenager’s skill at Latin verses; that Milton published them in 1645 (by which point he certainly did hate bishops) with the prefix “anno aetatis 17” suggests that this is how he saw them too. The same may be true of the “epitaph” he wrote in his early twenties for the marchioness of Winchester, a young Roman Catholic noblewoman he probably never met.

It has been assumed that the young Milton was brought up Calvinist, as a good puritan would be, and gradually turned against double predestination on moral and intellectual grounds, overcoming his dislike of “Arminian” churchmen in doing so. If we drop the assumption that Milton was raised Calvinist, this picture of a slow shift becomes unnecessary; perhaps he was an Arminian in the theological sense all along. If that is true, however, then the fierce hostility toward the clergy that blazes forth in Milton’s antiprelatical pamphlets of 1641–42 represents a more dramatic change than was previously thought. What prompted this change? It may suffice to say that Milton, like many others, grew intensely partisan in the lead-up to civil war; there may have also been personal factors that we do not know

about, or do not yet know how to interpret.³ In *The Reason of Church-government* (1642), Milton famously describes himself as having been intended for a career in the Church until he was “Church-outed by the Prelats.”⁴ As Neil Forsyth observes, “In retrospect it may have seemed more like a decisive moment than the longer process it probably was” (*MC*, 296). How Milton became radicalized in his early thirties remains the great underexplained event in his biography.

HETERODOXY AND/OR HERESY

Few experts would now agree with C. S. Lewis that Milton’s theology belongs to the “great central tradition” of Christian thought.⁵ From *De doctrina Christiana* it is clear that Milton arrived at various unconventional opinions: on the Trinity, on the Son of God, on the soul after death, on the creation, on polygamy and divorce. Just how uncommon Milton’s views were, how far outside the seventeenth-century Protestant mainstream they place him, what we take that mainstream to be, how we should describe his abnormal views, how prominently they figure in his poetry, and how much it all matters remain open questions, on which we find maximizing and minimizing positions. Maximizing views stress the radicalism and distinctiveness of Milton’s religious thought; they are happy to describe it as heresy, and see Milton’s heresies as prominent both in *De doctrina* and in the late poems. Minimizing views emphasize the proliferation of eccentric doctrines in Milton’s time and Milton’s broad areas of concord with other Christians; they prefer to speak of “minority opinions” or “heterodoxy” rather than heresy, and see theological differences between *De doctrina* and the poems. Both tendencies are represented in the volumes under review. A sample minimizing statement is this one from Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns: “In this context [i.e., the genre of systematic theology], the theology of *De Doctrina Christiana* is for the most part unexceptionable, but on a few doctrines, some central (e.g. Christology) and some clearly adiaphorous (e.g. mortalism), Milton adopts minority positions” (*OHM*, 429). A sample maximizing statement is this one from Nigel Smith: “*Paradise Lost*, then, is a heresy machine: it produces heresies as we readers make sense of the epic” (*OHM*, 524).

3. Campbell and Corns suggest that the Miltons may have been offended by an episcopal visitation to their church in Horton in 1637, in which the archdeacon noted among nonconforming details that “the two Tombstones in the Chancel in the pavement are laid the wrong way” (*ibid.*, 95–96). One of those tombstones belonged to Milton’s mother, Sara, who had died in April of that year.

4. John Milton, *The Reason of Church-government*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953–82), 1:823. Subsequent quotations from Milton’s prose works refer to this edition, hereafter cited in text as *CPW*.

5. C. S. Lewis, *A Preface to “Paradise Lost”* (Oxford University Press, 1942), 91.

Campbell and Corns's essay "*De doctrina Christiana: An England that Might Have Been*" summarizes findings of their recent book on that text.⁶ *De doctrina* was left unfinished, abandoned most likely around 1660; Milton composed it in fascicules, each chapter a separately stitched booklet that could be revised or augmented on its own. The genre of systematics to which it belongs is one in which heterodox ideas were not uncommon: "Many systematic theologians, respected in their own age and subsequently for their Protestant orthodoxy, also accommodate within their own treatises ideas which reflect their own new thinking or else the challenging views of a minority. After all, if a theologian had nothing new to add, no original perspectives and interpretations, then there was scant motivation to add another tome to the pile" (*OHM*, 434–35). Their subtitle "An England that Might Have Been" refers to the political conditions under which Milton composed the treatise. The manuscript as we have it reflects Milton's state of mind in the late 1650s, when he optimistically hoped for an English nation willing to tolerate a wide range of speculative Protestant thought. When the monarchy was restored in 1660, those hopes were dashed, and Milton put his treatise aside, permanently as it turned out.

If *De doctrina* contains significantly heterodox opinions, does the same go for *Paradise Lost*? Maximizing scholars see epic and treatise as theologically congruent, with heresy prominent in both. Minimizing scholars counter that if we did not have *De doctrina*, the heterodoxy of *Paradise Lost* would barely register. The question is hypothetical for us, but since *De doctrina* went undiscovered until the 1820s, the first 150 years of the epic's reception history can serve as a test case. Some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers found *Paradise Lost* theologically suspicious, and many did not. If Milton's poem were as bristling with heresy as some of its modern expositors suggest, it becomes harder to explain how it could have enjoyed the measure of success that it did in Restoration and eighteenth-century England, not only among Dissenters. One could say that an admiring critic such as Addison, promoting *Paradise Lost* as a modern classic to polite society in the reign of Queen Anne, found the poem's heterodoxies little to his purpose and so ignored them; but had the poem's heterodoxies been too obtrusive to ignore, Addison would not have chosen to promote it in the first place.

The question of barely visible heterodoxy is taken up by John Rogers in one of *OHM*'s most ambitious essays, "*Paradise Regained* and the Memory of *Paradise Lost*." In both poems, Rogers argues, we have to look hard to find a clear statement of identity between the Son of God who wins the war in heaven and the incarnate Jesus who redeems mankind. When Michael reveals the future to Adam in the last two books of *Paradise Lost*,

6. Gordon Campbell, Thomas N. Corns, John K. Hale, and Fiona J. Tweedie, *Milton and the Manuscript of "De doctrina Christiana"* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

he never definitively identifies the Messiah who is prophesied to overcome Satan, Sin, and Death with the Son of God of whom Adam has learned from Raphael. It is only at the end of Michael's narrative, when he speaks of the Son returning to heaven to "resume / His seat at God's right hand" (*Paradise Lost* 12.456–57) that the identification is made, and for such a presumably important point it receives little emphasis, from angel, Adam, or narrator: "What should be . . . an explosive moment of anagnorisis is shockingly easy to miss" (*OHM*, 602).⁷ At the outset of *Paradise Regained*, Jesus understands himself to be the Messiah predicted in Hebrew Scripture ("of whom they spake / I am" [1.262–63]). But if he knows who he will be, the Son of God does not seem to know who he was: his incarnation appears to have wiped clean any memory of the events described in *Paradise Lost*. Nor does the poem make any such connection explicit until the end, where angels hymn his praise:

him long of old
Thou didst debase, and down from Heaven cast
Supplanted Adam, and by vanquishing
Temptation, hast regained lost Paradise.

(*Paradise Regained* 4.604–8)

This, Rogers points out, is not only the poem's first reference to the War in Heaven, but "the first and only instance in which the poem acknowledges the Miltonic theological truth that the Son had a pre-existence in Heaven at all" (*OHM*, 608). *De doctrina Christiana* presents a detailed argument against orthodox Trinitarian Christology in favor of the Arian view that the Son was created by the Father in time. In the two *Paradise* poems, however, Milton never argues against Trinitarian Christology in the way that he does in *De doctrina*, or in the way that he has God argue against double predestination in *Paradise Lost*; he dispenses with Trinitarian orthodoxy by pretending it does not exist. To the obvious question, if this is what Milton was doing, why have readers almost universally failed to notice? Rogers's answer is twofold: Milton may have underestimated the guiding force of Trinitarian assumptions, which have colored reader response to the poems ever since, or he may have left the matter obscure on purpose, to be teased out by future generations. Whether or not one accepts all parts of Rogers's account, his essay does salutary defamiliarizing work; it reminds us how difficult it is to read a Christian poem without presupposing the most familiar versions of core Christian beliefs.

A more radical account of *Paradise Lost*'s theology is expressed in passing by Stuart Curran in his essay on Milton's God: "C. S. Lewis, though

7. Quotations from Milton's poetry, hereafter in text, refer to *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Random House, 2007).

overly dismissive in tone of those who had forgotten their Anglican catechism, is surely right in his famous declaration that those who don't like Milton's God simply don't like God, not because Milton's God is a traditional Anglican deity (far from it) but because he is the intentional embodiment of all the paradoxes, which is to say seeming contradictions, of many centuries of Judaeo-Christian thought" (*OHM*, 526). The key word here is "intentional." Without it, Curran would be taking a version of the Empsonian line that Milton could not justify God because the Judaeo-Christian God cannot be justified. As it stands, however, Curran is saying something very different: that Milton made his God paradoxical on purpose. There may be a major qualification of his position in Curran's choice of the word "paradox": Is he saying that Milton meant his God to embody only seeming contradictions, which the fit reader would come to realize are not contradictions after all? That would move Curran further from Empson and closer to Stanley Fish. Either way, on such an important question, we would want evidence for Milton's intentions. The existence of *De doctrina Christiana* counts strongly against the paradoxical-on-purpose view of Milton's God; nobody would compose a treatise of systematic theology unless deeply committed to trying to make Christian doctrine make sense. To save the phenomena here you would have to read Milton's epic and his treatise as theologically very far apart indeed. You would also have to understand the poem's declared aim to justify the ways of God to men as an ironic ruse, and you would have to say something similar about the poem's long passages of apparently earnest theological explanation. Implausible as the paradoxical-on-purpose hypothesis may seem, Curran is not alone in proposing it; I am never sure how seriously its proponents intend it, or how fully they have thought through its implications.

Nomenclature remains a disputed matter. As is usual in such debates, it is less controversial to say what Milton's position is not than to say what it is. It is agreed that Milton's Christology is not conventionally Trinitarian; it is contested whether it should be called Arian. It is agreed that Milton's soteriology is not Calvinist; it is contested whether it should be called Arminian. Such discussions get complicated not just because we cannot assume that Milton's views remained consistent throughout his career, but because the terms in question were all variously used in the seventeenth century. "Arian" is particularly unstable because, like "atheist," the term was usually employed as a stick to beat somebody else; since it is hard to find self-described Arians, it is hard to establish a firm basis for comparison with Milton.⁸ And what general description should we apply to Mil-

8. The most thorough study of the subject, Michael Bauman's *Milton's Arianism* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1987), handles the basis-of-comparison problem thus: "If what was condemned at the council of Nicea was Arianism, then John Milton was an Arian" (2).

ton's less conventional views? Heresy? Heterodoxy? Minority opinions? Those who prefer "heresy" often point to Milton's own usage of the term. Thus, Nigel Smith: "In *Of Education* and *Areopagitica* Milton had already made a forceful plea for a return to the original meaning of 'heresy' in Greek philosophy: choice, from Greek *proairesis*. Rather than the Augustinian understanding of heresy as that which is forbidden and to be expunged from believers, making them if need be the object of persecution, heresy becomes a fundamental part of a Christian's life of faith: to choose good from evil and to make a trial of virtue in an active life as opposed to a withdrawn, contemplative one" (*OHM*, 510). This is mostly true but requires an important qualification. Milton argued, urgently and repeatedly, that every Christian has the right, even the obligation, to interpret Scripture by the light of his own conscience. In making this argument, Milton was defending what more traditionalist religious thinkers have often understood as an essential feature of heresy: the conscious choice to set one's own understanding in religious matters above that of received authority. In his individualism, Milton went further than most midcentury English Protestants, even his fellow independents, were willing to go.⁹ But Milton's defense of what seemed heresy to others does not involve an embrace of the term itself.¹⁰ Although he did believe that choosing good from evil was a fundamental part of a Christian's life of faith, he never says that heresy is a fundamental part of a Christian's life of faith. Nor would one expect him to. "Heresy" and "heretic" were powerful smears in mid-seventeenth-century England, to which independents like Milton were frequently subjected; heresy was also in theory a capital crime, however rarely prosecuted.

Milton's discussions of heresy are defensive efforts, intended to protect against the charge. His tactics vary. In *De doctrina Christiana* and in *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes* (1659), Milton reminds readers of the word's neutral Greek etymology, in the attempt to soften its negative force.¹¹ Elsewhere, Milton redefines "heresy" in an idiosyncratically sub-

9. For the spectrum of mid-seventeenth-century Puritan views on the subject, see John Coffey, "A Ticklish Business: Defining Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Puritan Revolution," in *Heresy, Literature, and Politics in Early Modern English Culture*, ed. David Loewenstein and John Marshall (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 108–36.

10. For contrasting views, see Janel Mueller, "Milton on Heresy," in *Milton and Heresy*, ed. Stephen B. Dobranski and John Rumrich (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 21–38; Benjamin Myers, "'Following the Way Which Is Called Heresy': Milton and the Heretical Imperative," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69 (2008): 375–93. For a more extensive treatment of this subject, see Tobias Gregory, "How Milton Defined Heresy and Why," *Religion and Literature*, forthcoming.

11. "But we shall not carrie it thus; another Greek apparition stands in our way, *heresie* and *heretic*; in like manner also rail'd at to the people as in a tongue unknown. They should first interpret to them, that heresie, by what it signifies in that language, is no word of evil note;

jective sense, which suits his purpose in arguing for religious toleration among Protestants. The point of the famous “a man may be a heretic in the truth” passage in *Areopagitica* is not that heresy is really a good thing, but that heresy isn’t what you think it is: for Milton, it consists not of false belief, but of untested belief, accepted on another’s guidance without the considered assent of one’s own conscience. Milton’s fullest treatment of the subject can be found in the late tract *Of True Religion, Haeresie, Schism, and Toleration* (1673), which argues for broad intra-Protestant toleration. His general tactic there is to emphasize the need for Protestant unity against the Catholic common enemy, and to that end he defines “heresy” so as to include none but papists while permitting the widest possible latitude on the Protestant side: “Heresie therefore is a Religion taken up and believ’d from the traditions of men and additions to the word of God. Whence also it follows clearly, that of all known Sects or pretended Religions at this day in Christendom, Popery is the only or the greatest Here-sie: and he who is so forward to brand all others for Hereticks, the obstinate Papist, the only Heretick” (CPW, 8:421). Milton did not, then, consider himself a heretic, nor did he think of heresy in a positive light. But he knew his own religious views to fall outside the mainstream in significant ways, knew that they had the potential to alarm, and was much concerned with clearing space for them. This concern is evident in the introductory epistle to *De doctrina*, in which he urges readers to hear him out with their minds and Bibles open. It is evident in his repeated arguments for religious freedom for all Protestants, and it was the strongest motivating force behind his politics.

POLITICS

Milton’s politics remain a major emphasis, in both volumes and in the field at large. An enhanced understanding of Milton’s political writings has been one of the achievements of our currently prevalent historicism, and this scholarship is well represented in *OHM* by Nigel Smith on the anti-episcopal tracts, Ann Hughes on *Areopagitica*, Stephen Fallon on *Tenure*, Joad Raymond on the Latin *Defenses*, N. H. Keeble on *Of Civil Power and Hirelings*, and in *MC* by David Loewenstein on the Interregnum, Keeble on “Pamphlet wars,” and Raymond on the Restoration. Paul Stevens’s wide-ranging essay “Milton and National Identity” (*OHM*, chap. 19) complicates the familiar story of Milton’s high hopes for and later disappoint-

meaning only the choice or following of any opinion good or bad in religion or any other learning; and thus not only in heathen authors, but in the New testament it self without censure or blame” (*A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*, in CPW, 7:247).

ment with the English nation. “Despite England’s innumerable failures and Milton’s other-worldly concerns,” Stevens argues, “the ‘nation’ remains a central category through which he continues to think and feel right up to the end of his life” (*OHM*, 345). England remained an important idea to Milton less for what he thought it was than for what he imagined it could be: a people educated to deserve their freedom. Milton was never committed to popular sovereignty. In *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, he sketches a consent theory of government whereby the people have the right to throw off a king who has become a tyrant; this bit of theorizing should be understood as a rhetorical means of justifying the regicide, which Milton knew had no widespread popular support. By the early 1650s, Milton had dropped even rhetorical gestures toward the idea that the English nation as it currently stood was ready to govern itself, but he hoped that it could be brought along by a strong and godly hand such as Cromwell’s.

Stevens connects Milton’s praise of Cromwell in *Defensio secunda* (1654) with the Son’s offered self-sacrifice in *Paradise Lost* 3. Both involve the Machiavellian principle of reduction, the “frequent need to reduce the polity to first grounds or first principles (*ridurre ai principii*) in order to maintain or restore it. In terms of the individual it means self-abnegation, and reduction to first principles in governance is often brought about by individual acts of self-abnegation” (*OHM*, 359). The Son offers to reduce himself to redeem humankind and expresses his faith in his Father’s justice even as he challenges God not to abandon fallen humanity: “That be from thee far, / That far be from thee, Father, who art judge / Of all things made, and judgest only right” (*Paradise Lost* 3.153–55). In *Defensio secunda*, Milton praises Cromwell for liberating the nation without taking the title of king: “You have suffered and allowed yourself, not indeed to be borne aloft, but to come down so many degrees from the heights and be forced into a definite rank, so to speak, for the public good” without becoming “captivated by the title which as a private citizen you were able to send under the yoke and reduce to nothing” (*CPW*, 4:672, quoted in *OHM*, 360).

In challenging the Father, Stevens claims, the Son demonstrates the well-instructed Christian liberty that Milton places at the heart of his national ideal, and so the passage “suggests how much of Milton’s deepest thought as it appears in a text like *Paradise Lost*, a poem that apparently transcends any form of nationalism, has been conceived in the service of perpetuating the nation’s defining value” (*OHM*, 361). Perhaps, but the connection is not a direct one. What the two passages have in common, it seems to me, is not so much Machiavellian reduction or Miltonic nationalism as something more basic: both are examples of strategic flattery, or praising the boss for doing what you hope he will do. Any experienced

courtier knows a dozen rhetorical methods of strategic praise; any experienced prince knows how to read them. “That be from thee far” can be heard whenever a professor rises at a faculty meeting to praise the provost for the commitment she has so consistently demonstrated over the years to excellence in the humanities, a commitment she surely would not wish to jeopardize by implementing the proposed budget cuts. Milton uses the tactic often, as here in the opening paragraph of *Of Civil Power* (1659): “And if the governors of this commonwealth since the rooting out of prelates have made least use of force in religion, and most have favored Christian liberty of any in this Iland before them since the first preaching of the gospel, for which we are not to forget our thanks to God, and their due praise, they may, I doubt not, in this treatise finde that which not only will confirm them to defend still the Christian liberty which we enjoy, but will incite them also to enlarge it, if in aught they yet straiten it” (*CPW*, 7:241).

Reading Milton’s politics into his late poems is a tricky business. Take the parliamentary maneuvering in the Great Consult of devils in *Paradise Lost* 2; what, if any, are its topical resonances? Should Satan, who manipulates the council from “High on a throne of royal state” (2.1), remind us of Charles? Of Cromwell? Of a corrupt version of a parliamentary Speaker? Does that assembly suggest the Lords? The Commons? All or none of the above? And what if anything should we make politically of the enthroned monarch Milton introduces in the poem’s next book, God the Father, and the hierarchical, courtlike society that is Milton’s heaven? It is hard for a critic interested in Milton’s politics (and that is most of us, these days) to resist such questions, but they may not admit of definite answers.

Unlike his theological views, Milton’s revolutionary politics were always well known, and scandalous to many. At his death, he was probably more famous as an apologist for regicide than as the author of *Paradise Lost*. For the next century or so, until the Romantics reclaimed him as a scourge of tyrants, the most common perception of Milton was rather like that of Ezra Pound today: an undeniably major poet, and the less said about his politics the better. The question was whether one could enjoy the poetry despite the prose. Thus, Thomas Yalden:

We own the poet worthy to rehearse
Heaven’s lasting triumphs in immortal verse.
But when thy impious, mercenary pen
Insults the best of princes, best of men
Our admiration turns to just disdain
And we revoke the fond applause again.¹²

12. Thomas Yalden, “On the Reprinting Milton’s Prose Works with His Poems” (ca. 1698), quoted in *MC*, 125.

In admiring Milton for *Paradise Lost* while disdaining him for *Tenure and Eikonoklastes* (1649), Yalden assumes that Milton's poetry is not political. That assumption appears to have been widely shared, but not universally. The anonymous early reader's index studied by Laura Knoppers includes an entry for *Samson Agonistes* labeled "Englands Case."

EDITING

Stephen Dobranski's "Editing Milton: The Case against Modernization" (*OHM*, chap. 26) concedes that we have no reason to believe that the spelling and punctuation in Milton's printed works are authorial, but argues that modern editors should preserve them nonetheless. To modernize, Dobranski claims, is to lose nuances like the idiosyncratic spelling of "misst" at *Paradise Lost* 9.857, where Eve tells Adam upon returning from the forbidden tree "Thee I have misst." Elsewhere in the poem the past participle of "miss" is spelled "miss'd" or "misssd"; this spelling, Dobranski claims, "punningly associates Eve with the rank, 'rising Mist' that Satan uses to re-enter Paradise (ix.75)" (*OHM*, 480). Does it? To consider this a pun, you have to believe that the blind poet, when he dictated the line, paused to instruct his amanuensis to spell "misst" just so and for that reason, and moreover that his instructions were then followed to the letter in the printing house. Otherwise, the punning association exists only in the critic's mind. Dobranski is aware, as he admits in his next sentence, that "the specific form 'misst' could merely reflect the vagaries of seventeenth-century orthography" (*OHM*, 480). He does not acknowledge how much this likelihood weakens his case against modernization, which relies less on positive claims that Milton's original spelling and punctuation matter than on suggestions that every so often perhaps they possibly might. This kind of reasoning is the target of a recent salvo from Gordon Teskey: "When will we admit that Milton did not care how we spell a word, so long as we get it right in the meter? When will we recall that Milton was an eagle, not a mole, and did not care where we place a comma or a colon, so long as we follow his syntax, which is difficult but almost never ambiguous, at least never intentionally so? (Most claims for enriched meaning due to ambiguous syntax are frivolous.)"¹³ Old-spelling advocates might respond that modernizing changes like "adventrous" to "adventurous" (*Paradise Lost* 1.13) do affect the meter; and one can always treat spelling and punctuation as separate issues, as does Alastair Fowler's fine Longman edition of *Paradise Lost*, which preserves the 1667 punctuation while modernizing the spelling. But Teskey's final point, I am afraid, receives unwitting sup-

13. Gordon Teskey, "Recent Studies in the English Renaissance," *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 50 (2010): 241–42.

port from Dobranski's own example of enriched meaning due to ambiguous syntax. Dobranski juxtaposes two versions of *Paradise Lost* 1.6–10, the 1674 second edition and a modernized text edited by David Kastan:

Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top	Sing heavenly muse, that on the secret top
Of <i>Oreb</i> , or of <i>Sinai</i> , didst inspire	Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,	That shepherd who first taught the chosen seed
In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth	In the beginning how the heavens and earth
Rose out of <i>Chaos</i>	Rose out of chaos
(<i>Paradise Lost</i> 1.6–10 [1674])	(<i>Paradise Lost</i> 1.6–10, ed. Kastan [2005])

Kastan's edition eliminates the two commas in line 8, after "shepherd" and "seed." Removing the commas, Dobranski claims, "closes off the fleeting possibility that 'In the beginning' modifies when the muse 'didst inspire / That shepherd,' whereas in the modernized text it only describes what 'That shepherd' told 'the chosen seed.' Perhaps Milton intended the momentary temporal conflation to reinforce the muse's comprehensiveness" (*OHM*, 493). But when the passage is spoken aloud, as Milton composed it, there is no question that "who first taught the chosen seed" modifies "shepherd" and not "muse." Since the shepherd is Moses, and the chosen seed Israel, the idea that the prepositional phrase "in the beginning" might refer to the time when the muse inspired the shepherd rather than what the shepherd taught the chosen seed makes little sense; Dobranski's description of this reading as a "fleeting possibility" suggests that he scarcely believes in it himself. As with "misst," the idea requires you to suppose that the blind poet had his scribe insert those commas just so, in this case for the obscure purpose of temporarily muddying the syntactic waters. In fact, the two commas in line 8 of the 1674 text indicate light pauses for breath rather than a logical division within the sentence, as is common in seventeenth-century usage. Kastan's punctuation makes the syntax clearer to a reader accustomed to modern comma usage, at the cost of leaving out the breath suggestions in the original. No differences in meaning are at stake here.

Dobranski is quite right that "good editing, like a musical accompaniment, ought to enhance without overpowering" (*OHM*, 495). Editorial enhancement takes many forms, including prefatory matter, illustrations, appendices, bibliography, textual apparatus, glosses, and notes. These features will necessarily produce a "material text" vastly different from the early editions, even if spelling and punctuation are scrupulously replicated as they happened once to emerge from a seventeenth-century printing press. In terms of shaping meaning, editors exercise much more influ-

ence through their notes than through their handling of accidentals. The nonsemantic features of modern editions, too, affect how we read them: layout, typeface, paper quality, volume size, binding, and bulk. A heavy-weight single-volume collected works, such as the editions of Hughes, of Flannagan, or of Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon, gives us a Milton packaged for university courses, with a semester's worth of required reading between two covers; once the course is over, the book goes back on the shelf or back to the campus bookstore. The solid slate-blue volumes of the Yale *Complete Prose Works* announce even before they are opened, "Reading Milton is a serious business. Let none but those dedicated to Historical Scholarship enter here." For reading on the subway or in the park, you are better off, say, with F. T. Prince's edition of *Samson Agonistes* (Oxford, 1957), which can be slipped into a coat pocket, as could the first edition of 1671. Now a new multivolume *Complete Works* is in preparation by Oxford University Press; once we have used it for a generation or so, we can look back and consider how it has affected our scholarship and our reading habits.

CONCLUSION

Milton is to be understood in context. This is a truth universally acknowledged. It is proclaimed in the opening pages of books and articles, at conferences and on syllabi; it justifies grant applications, symposia, and anthologies of essays. As a principle, it is unobjectionable but vague. Which of the following count as contexts for *Paradise Lost*: Genesis? Mid-seventeenth-century sermons and commentaries on Genesis? *Adamus exul*? "Adam unparadiz'd"? The Westminster Confession? *De doctrina Christiana*? Pepys's Diary? Cromwellian diplomatic correspondence? *Gondibert*? The Clarendon Code? *The Aeneid*? It depends, of course, on which questions we ask. Where the emphasis falls in *MC* can be inferred by its editor's description of the volume as "building on the efforts of recent scholars who have successfully uncovered relevant, local contexts for reading Milton's poetry and prose" (*MC*, xxii). This emphasis on the local and the topical applies most readily to the prose. The *OHM* contains sixteen essays on Milton's prose to eighteen on his poetry, and this ratio is not a peculiarity of the collection. As McDowell and Smith put it in their preface, "the rise in critical interest in Milton's political and religious prose is perhaps the most striking aspect of Milton studies in recent times, a consequence in great part of the increasingly fluid relations between literary and historical disciplines" (*OHM*, v). When I was in graduate school in the 1990s, one often heard calls for more interchange between literary and historical disciplines. We now have it, in Milton studies and in early modern scholarship generally. As these two collections demonstrate, Miltonists have learned much from recent work in

religious, intellectual, and social history, as well as in theology, philosophy, legal, and political thought. Scholars trained in these neighboring fields have also made their own contributions to Milton studies—see, for example, the excellent essays by historians Hughes and Serjeantson in *OHM*.

In the early modernist wing of literary studies, at least, there is no longer much point in calling oneself a historicist (old or new—that distinction has long ceased to look important). Historicism is what we do these days. When Miltonists encounter a line like “And what the Swede intends, and what the French,” we study up on what the Swede intended circa 1655 and what the French, what Milton knew about it, and what the politicians he was working for at the time thought about it. Thanks to such work we know more, and knowing more would hardly wish to know less. Anyone who makes her way through the seventy-eight essays in these two volumes will appreciate how much learning is brought to bear on and around Milton nowadays. Yet as we recognize the advantages of “increasingly fluid relations between literary and historical disciplines,” we may also ask what remains distinctively literary about early modern literary studies in its current high historicist phase. Has it become, for the time being, a subfield of intellectual or cultural history? Close reading, if that is a distinctively literary skill, is alive and well; the essays in these volumes are full of detailed, perceptive textual analyses. What has fallen into abeyance, in these volumes and the field more broadly, is the willingness to express intellectual, aesthetic, and moral judgment, as the most ambitious scholar-critics felt free to do a couple of generations ago. Here, for example, is Empson:

Milton’s own political record, as I understand, cannot be found contemptible; he backed Cromwell and his Independents in the army against the Presbyterians in Parliament because he wanted religious freedom, but always remained capable of saying where he thought Cromwell had gone wrong; for example, in refusing to disestablish the Church. However, on one point Cromwell was impeccable, and appears to have been unique among dictators: his admitted and genuine bother, for a number of years, was to find some way of establishing a Parliament under which he could feel himself justified in stopping being dictator. When Milton made God the Father plan for his eventual abdication, he ascribed to him in the high tradition of Plutarch the noblest sentiment that could be found in an absolute ruler; and could reflect with pride that he had himself seen it in operation, though with a tragic end.¹⁴

As will be clear from this passage, Empson was very much interested in the political contexts central to today’s criticism, and for all that subsequent historical scholarship has provided further details, his outline of Milton’s position remains accurate. Empson took it for granted that the effort to

14. William Empson, *Milton’s God* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), 144–45.

understand an author will involve all the historical knowledge and imagination a critic can bring to bear.¹⁵ For Empson, that effort is an essential part of the critical enterprise, but not the whole of it: "A critic ought to use his own moral judgement, for what it is worth, as well as try to understand the author's, and that is the only way he can arrive at a 'total reaction.'"¹⁶ The "total reaction" remains a worthy goal for critics today.

15. For development of the point that Empson's critical practice is neither ahistorical nor antihistoricist, see Richard Strier, *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 13–26.

16. Empson, *Milton's God*, 204–5.