

Introduction

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For the last four decades Milton studies has produced historicist criticism of the highest quality. Christopher Hill's pathbreaking, Marxian study, *Milton and the English Revolution*, in the 1970s and the Foucauldian emphasis on the episteme in the 1980s helped ignite scholarly interest in reading Milton's poetry and prose in relationship to specific Civil War events, institutions, and policies. Rather than deconstruction and other modes of critical theory, which reigned supreme elsewhere in the profession in the 1990s, many Miltonists endorsed J. L. Austin's speech-act theory and Cambridge School historiography, which emphasize period-specific rhetorical practices and intellectual contexts. While Greenblattian New Historicism became de rigueur in Shakespeare studies, contextualist historicism as practiced especially by Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock triumphed as the governing interpretive paradigm in Milton studies.

Miltonist commitment to historical specificity sparked substantive reconsideration of traditional modes of literary periodizations. Eschewing a belletristic sense of a literary period as the "age" of Shakespeare, Milton, or Dryden, Milton scholars were determined to put the history back in literary history. If in the past Milton's writings had been taken to encapsulate a "spirit of the age"—a particularly nebulous concept in his case, as the contributors to this issue show—now they were studied as historically concrete speech acts. As material recuperations of English Revolutionary or Civil War discourse and debates, Milton's poetry and prose were very much *of*—and not *above*—their

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historical moment. When in the early 2000s Milton's prose works began to equal or even surpass his poetry in scholarly attention, a Cambridge School historiographical understanding of literary periods came fully into its own.

Over the last ten years, however, many Miltonists have pushed back against a strict focus on the literature of ever briefer temporal intervals, such as the 1640s and other decades or half decades. Some have newly endorsed a long view of literary-historical periods like "the long eighteenth century" and "the long Restoration." Milton's writings gesture toward a different kind of "long" periodization—the eschatological sort, as the grand dyadic "lost-regained" time scheme of his epic and brief epic exemplifies. As James Nohrnberg observes in his contribution to this issue, "With Adam's help, Raphael retails . . . Genesis 1–2 with its unbiblical prequel in heaven, while Michael foretells . . . the rest of the Bible, history's six ages, and its sequel in Revelation." In the *Nativity Ode*, as Andrew Hui argues, Milton not only meditates on the temporal reverberations—past, present, and future—of eschatological periodization but also provides a "soundscape" for these resounding period changes: a "dissonant matrix of sonic signifiers." The contributors to this issue contend that contextual specificity cannot account fully for the poet's expansive view of history, which crosses temporal intervals and recognizes providentially significant convergences among past, present, and future. Milton's writings create uneven synchronicities among sometimes incompatible histories, including mythical, providential, cosmic, topical, and typological. The temporality of *Paradise Lost* possesses a "discontinuous multiplicity," as Lee Morrissey puts it so well. As Nohrnberg observes, Milton also often attempts "autobiographical periodization"; in *Paradise Regained* (to take just one example) he "antithetically mirrors" his own career in Jesus's ministry.

Increasing frustration with the orthodoxies of historicist interpretation also has inspired new trends in literary scholarship, including the "new formalism," the "new materialism," the new "turn to religion," and a "new Milton criticism." The rise of "big data" has further exposed the limitations of traditional archives (among them the exclusive rare book collections at elite libraries), on which the specificity of historicist interpretation was grounded. Thick descriptions of events, institutions, and "speech acts" fail to account for the striking overlaps among periods,

nor, short of some grand historical narrative, can they explain how one period transitions (smoothly or disruptively) into another. By contrast, as Marissa Greenberg argues, both *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* grasp revolution as an immediate or live experience with uncompromised potential.

Because Milton studies has prospered so much from its fruitful investment in historicist criticism, it provides a peculiarly vivid reflection of the turbulence of early modern literary studies more generally, after the Cambridge School and Greenblattian varieties of New Historicism. The contributors to this special issue shed light not only on Milton studies in the present but on its broader implications for defining a literary period in the twenty-first century. The so-called politics of periodization prompts a series of questions. Where does Milton fit into the current landscape of the profession and of higher education? How might today's dispiriting "America-first" politics affect the future not only of Milton studies but of literary studies in general? Will Milton—and early modern English literature with the exception of Shakespeare—disappear from the college classroom and the Modern Language Association (MLA) Job Information List? As John D. Staines observes, ads for Shakespeare specialists have continued to outpace those for scholars who focus on Milton and other non-Shakespeare or nondramatic early modern English writers, especially early modern women writers. "Shakespeare," the brand, threatens to become a marketable substitute for underselling courses not only in early modern English literature but in British literature on the whole.¹ Although unlikely, it is also not impossible that, in the face of ever-shrinking enrollments, some English departments will be forced to reduce their offerings to "Shakespeare."

Although I am fully aware that topical observations have notoriously short shelf lives, I wish to risk one here. As I write this introduction, Duquesne University Press, which turns ninety this year, has announced

¹ "A cumulative result of these disparate factors has been a reduction in the 'must-have' (or 'must-know') list of authors. Homer, Virgil, Spenser, Pope, Milton, Wordsworth, Dickens, Joyce, and both of the canonical Eliots (George and T. S.) are often cultural *references* rather than familiar bodies of *work* to modern readers. But one figure stands out as an exception to this trend, a figure who, at least in the United States, has increasingly come to be substituted for *literature* or *literary culture*: the figure of Shakespeare" (Garber 2012: 75).

that it will shut down before the end of 2017. The decision has inspired considerable pushback from scholars, including Elizabeth Sauer (2017), current president of the Milton Society of America (MSA), in a compelling letter of protest endorsed by the MSA's Executive Committee and signed by an impressive number of MSA members and other literary scholars. I hope that the protest wins the day: shutting down Duquesne University Press would have a terribly damaging impact on Milton studies. Perhaps more than any other university press, it has been steadfast in its support for book-length studies of Milton. Many of its books have launched the careers of junior Miltonists, who face increasingly difficult obstacles to tenure, especially now as threats to academic freedom intensify. Duquesne also publishes *Milton Studies*, the premier journal for Miltonists, nationally and internationally.

This is not the first time Milton's place in literary history and university bookstores has been imperiled. In the 1950s Pelican Books (an imprint of Penguin, which was discontinued in 1984) responded to T. S. Eliot's influential disdain for Milton's poetry by omitting his name from the titles in its series *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, which first appeared as an "alternative" to traditional literary history. The first four volumes, published in 1954–57, at the height of the Cold War and McCarthyism, are *Medieval Literature Part One: Chaucer and the Alliterative Tradition*; *The Age of Shakespeare*; *From Donne to Marvell*; and *From Dryden to Johnson*. That "Milton is the greatest English revolutionary who is also a poet, the greatest poet who is also a revolutionary," as Hill (1978: 5) writes, played no small role in the politically conservative Eliot's assessment of Milton's poetry and in Pelican-Penguin's subsequent act of oblivion. Responding to these efforts to dismiss Milton, Hill revitalized the poet as a political activist and a radical thinker—the "greatest English" poet to respond powerfully in verse and prose to the events of the English Revolution.

The next generations of Miltonists followed Hill's lead while adding refinements and adjustments, setting the historical record straight with ever greater contextual precision. The historicist scholarship of the last four decades remains vital and compelling as we deliberate how to move beyond historicism, if that is even wholly possible or desirable. Indeed, by paying fresh attention to history and literary history in this issue, David Quint makes a remarkable discovery: Milton's Eden is shaped by the

poet's "point-by-point refutation" of Edmund Waller's tribute to Charles II for his purported reclamation of Paradise in *On St. James's Park*. As *lately improved by his Majesty* (1661).

Thinking about "Milton and the politics of periodization" prompts the following questions. What motivates today's attempts, conservative and liberal, at forgetting or remembering Milton (or "re-membering Milton" [Nyquist and Ferguson 1987], as one of the most important volumes of literary criticism on the poet had it)? How does the current posthistoricist vantage point shape understandings of what constitutes a literary period? To which literary period, old or new, short or long, does Milton belong? The contributors to this special issue present wide-ranging responses to these questions and many others, meditating on the future not only of Milton studies but also of literary studies in general at this pivotal twenty-first-century moment.

Morrissey's opening essay frames the "politics of periodization" with an illuminating twist: the "periodization of politics." Morrissey laments what he calls "Dryidentification," or historical contextualization in recent scholarship on Restoration literature, which "risks unnecessarily linking Milton's poems to their times." Morrissey correlates historicism with the disciplinary push in the 1980s and 1990s (when the influence of postmodernism peaked) to revise the "English Renaissance" into the "early modern" period. Historicism depends on tight parameters drawn around historical periods to ensure that each period remains distinct and intact, unblemished by anachronism and presentism. The emphasis on the "modern" in the early modern period similarly insists on a clean break and a categorical opposition between past and present, ancients and moderns. For Morrissey, this chronological and conceptual apartheid "speaks to what is at stake in the politics of periodization. It also speaks to why I have reversed the terms and am interested in what I have called the 'periodization of politics.'" Morrissey prefers "English Renaissance" to "early modern" because, rather than polarize ancient and modern, the former term underscores generative interactions between them. Instead of upholding one definitive conception of modernity, as "early modern" does, "English Renaissance" inspires multiple ancient-modern mixtures with shifting political and generic implications. For Morrissey, Milton takes precisely this kind of dynamic, non-period-specific, multidirectional view of modernity in his three late long poems: "Confounding though it may be to his readers, Milton is as

interested in the tragic modernity of *Samson Agonistes* as he is in the progressive modernity of *Paradise Lost* and the calm turning away from modernity in *Paradise Regained*.”

Nohrnberg shares many of Morrissey’s concerns with the multiple temporalities intertwined in Milton’s poetry, but with an emphasis on the history of sympathy. For Nohrnberg, Milton positions his Eden at the hinge where a *mundus* “organized by metaphysical principles like sympathy, antipathy, analogy, emulation, intrinsic signatures, the bond of love, attraction of likes, repulsion of unlikes, ‘seminal reasons,’ astral influence, providential pneumatic operators, ‘soulified matter,’ and the intelligences or music of the planetary spheres” confronts the clockwork universe that obeys “the ineluctable laws of physics, chemistry, mechanics, materials science, iatrochemistry, fluid dynamics, electro- (vs. animal) magnetism, and the periodic table.” Rather than oppose the ancient World-Soul to the modern cosmic machine, Milton translates the old philosophy’s cosmic correspondences into two simultaneous but opposing new phenomena. First are the demonic sympathies at a distance that bind Sin and Death to Satan and that result in the building of the “stupendous bridge” (10.351) connecting Hell to Earth after the Fall. Second is the compassion mutually exchanged by the fallen Adam and Eve (also in book 10) that repairs their broken marital partnership: “Company transforms misery into commiseration, passion into compassion, and need into care.” Anticipated in Adam and Eve’s redemptive compassion are the social sympathy, fellow feeling, and *fraternité* that ignite the American and French Revolutions, both of which pay homage to the English Revolution as revived in *Paradise Lost*: “In the critical narrative juncture [of book 10], the poet has it both ways.”

In his essay on the *Nativity Ode* Hui similarly focuses on Milton’s intersecting ancient-modern temporalities; however, Hui also explores how the poet literally orchestrates them: “The young poet stages the event of the Redeemer’s birth as an acoustic one, orchestrating a hubbub of the dying gods, a sonic pandemonium, an early modern *Götterdämmerung*.” Hui especially relates to periodization the politics of noise in Milton’s ode. Drawing on twentieth- and twenty-first-century information theory, Hui argues that noise in the *Nativity Ode* represents “the static between the two ‘world systems’ of paganism, the sender, and Christianity, the recipient.” This world-historical static noise simultaneously provides the sound track for Milton’s self-periodization; Milton

associates his birth as a poet in the *Nativity Ode* with the “acoustic mayhem” generated by the two clashing world systems.

Greenberg’s essay further questions whether or not “salutary rupture” best describes the relationship between old and new temporalities in Milton’s poetry. Focusing on revolution—a key term for understanding Milton and the politics of periodization—Greenberg argues that what Milton means by *revolution* differs from the modern understanding of *Revolution* with a capital *R*. In *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* revolution is no capital event but an inconclusive, unsettling, “much revolving” personal experience, at once physical and emotional: it “animate[s] what periodizing change feels like, in real time, as a lived experience.”

In this respect, the revolutionary returns home that conclude both poems acquire special significance. Adam and Eve’s departure from Paradise is a “Homeward returning” (12.632), a literally pedestrian experience made by “wand’ring steps and slow” (12.648). In turning toward an unknowable future with only rare typological insights into Providence as their guide, Adam and Eve quietly instantiate revolution. Not dissimilarly, at the end of *Paradise Regained* Jesus quietly returns home on foot “to his Mother’s house private” (4.639) to set in motion the next chapter of Christian history: “What appears self-effacing retirement—after all, ‘our Savior meek’ returns ‘unobserv’d’ (4.636, 638)—is actually a bold revision.” Literary periods are customarily associated with monumental events—in Milton’s case, the closing of the theaters, the trial and execution of Charles I, and the Restoration. But in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* “commonplace movements are equally significant”—and equally revolutionary.

Staines takes the closing of the theaters in 1642, or “the day the English Renaissance died,” as his point of departure. As Staines observes, Milton straddles the pre-1642/post-1642 divide: he wrote significant poems before 1642; during much of the closure he wrote controversialist prose; after the reopening of the theaters he wrote his three great final poems. The conventional focus on the late poetry inherently envisions Milton “as the reaction against the Age of Shakespeare and Renaissance drama,” despite the historical distortions of this demarcation. Although its inadequacies are indisputable, this periodization (dramatic vs. non-dramatic; Shakespeare vs. Milton) governs not only the forum structure of the MLA but also the way our profession teaches and researches

sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature. It also comes with at least two ingrained political and aesthetic prejudices: theater, subsumed under Shakespeare, is royalist, verbally playful, and sexually or intellectually evocative; nondramatic literature, epitomized by Milton, reflects the Puritans' plain-styled fundamentalism, which helped spark republicanism and civil war. Staines recommends updating outmoded ideas about periodization by recognizing the theatricality of Milton's verse and the centrality of poetry to Shakespeare's career.

Quint's essay closes this special issue by demonstrating that fresh attention to literary history and authorial intention can renew governing contextual interpretations. Scholars generally agree that in his late poetry Milton obviates the normative values of his time by remaining self-consciously out of step with the culture of the Restoration. Milton makes no explicit reference to contemporary figures, save Galileo, or events in his epic. Quint complicates this undoubted fact by arguing that, in the last two books of *Paradise Lost*, Milton directly engages with Waller's *On St. James's Park*: "Milton is answering and contesting Waller's panegyric, which thus had a real, determining influence on *Paradise Lost*." Rather than remain strategically above the fray, Milton targets Charles II through "a point-by-point refutation of Waller's skillful propaganda for the restored king." Milton not only aims to establish his poetic supremacy to Waller but also, against the odds, seeks to become the representative voice of the English nation in the 1660s. While contesting the prevailing historicist interpretations of *Paradise Lost*, Quint compellingly refreshes our understanding of literary history.

Taken as a whole, these essays provide multiple but intertwining approaches to "Milton and the politics of periodization." My hope is to begin a conversation that extends well beyond the confines of this special issue.

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