

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10182-0 - Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements

William Kolbrener

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

He was in fact . . . of *both* parties.¹

Christopher Hill

On the frontispiece to Richard Bentley's 1732 edition of *Paradise Lost*, beneath the engraving of the young John Milton, stands the Latin epigram, *Nascuntur Poetae, non fiunt* – "poets are born, not made." Notwithstanding this epigrammatic pronouncement (which echoes throughout Bentley's *Paradise Lost*), Bentley's text – with its audacious emendations meant to "correct" Milton's text – bears witness that the author "Milton" has been continually "made" and re-made in history. Indeed, as Bentley's contemporary Lewis Theobald observed, Bentley's Milton wrote in the manner that Bentley thought he "ought to have."²

In the following study, Bentley's *Paradise Lost* not only serves to prove Hans-Georg Gadamer's assertion that literary interpretation is "a productive activity," but to help establish a particular pattern and dynamic to the reception and interpretation of John Milton's texts.³ To be sure, this is to follow a dominant mode in modern Milton scholarship in which, from Thorpe's *Milton Criticism* of 1951 to Tennenhouse and Armstrong's recent *Imaginary Puritan*, the presence of earlier Miltons – the products of previous interpretive undertakings – have pushed critics in the direction of historiography.⁴ The primary historiographical trope of this study is a simple one: that of Milton's "warring angels" – or more particularly, that of angelic and satanic "camps" of critics. This bifurcation among readers of Milton – who have constructed opposing, if not contradictory images of the poet – has long been evident: "Nothing is more obvious in modern Miltonic studies," A. S. P. Woodhouse observed in 1949, "than the emergence of two schools, one of which is so

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10182-0 - Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements

William Kolbrener

Excerpt

[More information](#)

much impressed by Milton's heresies as to lose sight of his fundamental Christianity, while the other, in not unnatural reaction, insists on the traditional character of the poet's religion."⁵

The confrontation between opposing sets of critics (the military metaphor remains apt) continues to this day – though political categories have in many cases supplanted older theological ones. One of the primary aims of this study is to begin to focus a question posed by Steven Marcus and Charles Taylor in relation to Milton: "How and under what conditions do figures of cultural significance acquire dichotomous images?"⁶ The answer begins, I will suggest, in what opposing critics, in fact, *agree upon*: that Milton must conform to either the requisites of satanic heresy *or* angelic orthodoxy. To put it in this way is perhaps only to re-state the question, though it emphasizes that *dispute* has become – and remains – a primary mode of expression for Milton scholars. To explain the power of the trope of dispute in Milton's reception (in an attempt at a more direct answer to the question of Marcus and Taylor) leads to the second historiographical trope of this study – that of "Whig history."

The resilience of opposed readings of Milton – which have had a variety of historical manifestations – presupposes an agreement about the forms and *telos* of history. In its baldest form, the Whig or Enlightenment narrative goes something like this: modernity – reasonable, liberal, and democratic – emerges from out of, indeed in opposition to, a feudal, traditional, if not authoritarian middle ages. By means of the narrative implicit in what Gadamer has called the "conquest of mythos by logos," the subject asserts its independence from authority, transcendence (with other forms of authority) fades, matter becomes independent from spirit, and sacred discourses give way to profane.⁷ In each of these implicit narratives, a new, and related, opposition emerges. Thus Enlightenment historiography and its privileged opposition of "mythos and logos" leads to several corollary antitheses – those between freedom and authority, immanence and transcendence, God and creation, the secular and profane.

Yet where Herbert Butterfield, in 1930, saw in the history of his contemporaries the representation of the "whole course of centuries upon what is really a directing principle of progress," today the literary historian's narratives of Whig optimism have transformed into entropic accounts – no less Whig – of decline.⁸ That is, the paradigm of the Whig historian is no longer, as it was for Butterfield, the scholar who is "Protestant, progressive, and whig, and the very model of the 19th-century

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10182-0 - Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements

William Kolbrener

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

gentleman.”⁹ Thus, Whig optimism – though thriving in the rhetoric of the so-called post-ideological world – has given way, in academic discourses, to a more sober Whig pessimism, which nonetheless preserves the rudiments (the dichotomies) upon which historical *telos* is preserved. For whether historiographical periodizations optimistically embrace the present for its triumph over a darkened feudal (or ideological) past, or turn (in despair at the disjunctions of modern life) towards a utopian past or future, the historical narratives that result all presuppose, as part of their historiographical equipment, the dualistic lexicons of angels and devils – Milton’s warring camps of critics.

Where angels and devils disagree on which side of the dualisms to emphasize, they agree powerfully – implicitly – upon the abstract antitheses. Although Milton studies have been recently complicated by more nuanced understandings of Milton’s place in early modernity, Enlightenment versions of history – and their attendant dichotomies – still provide the backdrop for much in contemporary Milton criticism. Thus, notwithstanding the ways in which historians such as Quentin Skinner, J. G. A. Pocock, and Blair Worden have complicated our understanding of the historiography of early modernity in England (not to mention the ways in which these views have come to influence the work of Miltonists as diverse as Thomas Corns, Nigel Smith, and Annabel Patterson), many literary critics have continued to embrace an outmoded set of historiographical suppositions with a remarkable tenacity.

Indeed, though the literary academy is quick – and right – to point to the rhetoricity and contingency of all narrative constructs, literary critics often continue to adopt (and at times unreflectively) an historiographical narrative that presupposes the birth of modernity and the modern individual in the seventeenth century. Although Butterfield’s *Whig Interpretation of History* warned against the moralizing triumphalism of Whig history, many literary critics persist in abiding by historiographical narratives that alternatively extol or deplore – but assume as given – the emergence of the modern individual in the seventeenth century.

Assuming different variations of this narrative, satanic and angelic camps proffer their own alternative images of Milton – pitting, for example, the *bourgeois* individual against the puritan absolutist. Which is to say that devils and angels agree on the terms of war, but line up on different sides of the battlefield. Stanley Fish, for example, the most notable of contemporary angelic critics, constructs an “absolutist” Milton in direct competition with the “liberal” Milton of a previous generation; while Christopher Kendrick, in the most powerful contem-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10182-0 - Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements

William Kolbrener

Excerpt

[More information](#)

porary variation of the satanic argument, transmutes Milton from a liberal to a bourgeois, re-fitting the satanic Milton according to the requisites of post-Marxism. Indeed, an implicit argument of this study is that Fish's angelic reading of Milton – once dominant in the field – sets the terms for a variety of contemporary satanic readings of Milton.¹⁰ This latest set of tensions between Fish and a new generation of neo-Marxist critics realizes a paradigm initiated in the late seventeenth century – where versions of the radical Milton and versions of the orthodox Milton continually vie to supplant one another. Though, to be sure, not every critic will fit neatly into the category of either “devil” or “angel,” the distinction – as this study will suggest – sheds light on the dynamics and tendencies of Milton's reception, from the end of the seventeenth century up until the present.

If “devils and angels” and Whig history are the closely related – if not inter-connected – analytical tropes of this study, then *mediation* is its primary interpretive trope. Which is to emphasize at the outset that if the reader believes this to be *merely* a reception history, she is wrong. The “engagements” of the subtitle of this work refer to those of Milton's critics, as well as Milton's own. Following Fredric Jameson's 1981 essay, this study takes seriously the suggestion that Miltonists need to be aware of “that ‘vanishing mediator’” in Milton's texts which Jameson describes as “the religious instance.” In Jameson's analysis, the relationship between private and public spheres, the realms of “belief” and “politics,” can only be understood through the “concrete mediation” between these spheres: that is, religion.¹¹ The tri-partite form of this study, with the opening section on politics, the closing section on poetics, and a long middle section on Milton's theology, is meant to echo, in formal terms, Jameson's important emphasis. This strategy aims not only to foreground the importance of the religious tract, *De Doctrina Christiana*, in Milton's corpus, but it also attempts to emphasize the confluence between Milton's politics, theology, and poetics.¹² Further, the term “mediation” is meant to suggest that the assumption of the existence of a *bourgeois* public sphere separate from the private sphere, as well as the version of history upon which this separation is founded (not only in Kendrick, but in Catherine Belsey, Francis Barker, Tennenhouse and Armstrong, and many of the contributors to the 1987 *Re-membering Milton*), produces (following an eighteenth-century tendency) an unnecessary bifurcation between Milton the “politician” and Milton the “poet” and “theologian.”

But more than that, I should note that I employ this term more

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10182-0 - Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements

William Kolbrenner

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

generally throughout as a way of demonstrating that Milton remained suspicious of individuation unless it was incorporated within – or *mediated* by – a larger context (whether it be the Christian republic of *Areopagitica* and *The Readie and Easie Way* or, what he calls in *Of Civil Power*, the “common ground” of the scriptures). Thus the parts of this study are focused upon recovering those discourses which *mediate* between what are often now conceived of as contradictory – if not incommensurable – positions. Part I demonstrates how Milton’s Christian republicanism mediates between the competing claims of the individual and the *res publica*; Part II, how the radical textualism of *De Doctrina* mediates between the power of individual interpretations and the “inviolable” truth of scriptures; and Part III, how Milton’s poetics mediate between the claims of a hermeneutic guided by a commitment to contingency (what I call in chapter 7 satanic immanence) and a hermeneutic guided by a commitment to the Absolute (or what I call angelic transcendence).

Mediation – the means through which Milton joins, *without reconciling*, apparently contradictory positions – serves in the readings which follow to move past the oppositions hypostatized in various competing readings of Milton. This entails neither a polemic against polemic (an attempt at a grand historical reconciliation), nor is it an attempt to employ “devils and angels” as a formalist dichotomy with Milton waiting as the mysterious light at the end of the tunnel. Rather, I want to suggest that the discourses present in Milton’s work are unassimilable to certain interpretive paradigms of modernity. To historicize Milton in this fashion is not so much to claim him as occupying a mystical space before modernity (there is no ur-Milton in these pages), or embracing what T. S. Eliot might have called a unified sensibility, but rather to understand Milton as articulating his thought in lexicons which remain at least partly untranslatable into Enlightenment paradigms.

The oppositions that characterize Enlightenment habits of thought may be in accord with – and indeed constitute the reality of the contemporary world – yet they, with the narratives of history upon which they are founded, violate the meanings of Milton’s texts. That is, notwithstanding the continuing contemporary debate on the relationship of, for example, reason and authority, and Habermas’s trenchant critique of Gadamerian tradition,¹³ the unconditional opposition between these two terms, *for Milton*, simply did not exist. This, like the other oppositions which parallel it, were, for Milton, as for Gadamer, in a basically *ambivalent* relation. Because of the fundamental ambivalence implicit in the style and structure of Milton’s thought (in both his

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10182-0 - Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements

William Kolbrener

Excerpt

[More information](#)

poetry and prose) Milton at once lends himself to, but strongly and *finally* resists, the antinomies that so preoccupy the “warring angels” of this study.

In the argument that follows, I suggest that devils and angels produce different kinds of “Whig” readings of Milton. If the complexities and paradoxes of Miltonic discourse lead to what Herbert Butterfield has identified as the necessity of “abridgement,” then progressive and conservative “abridgements” are equally whiggish: in the reading offered in chapter 1, the authoritarian and angelic *Areopagitica* in which reason and difference are denied is no less whiggish – no less polemical – than the libertarian and satanic one in which they are celebrated.¹⁴ As Butterfield’s student, J. G. A. Pocock, has pointed out, the “varieties of Whiggism” include not only “the complacent progressivism” that Butterfield “anatomized,” but also the “complacent traditionalism” which he “admired” in his later work.¹⁵ For Pocock, the “varieties of Whiggism,” therefore, include a conservative variety which coincides in Milton studies, as I shall argue in chapter 6, with angelic attempts (as in Bentley and Stanley Fish) to correct earlier satanic versions of Milton.

While the methodology of this study may bear some resemblance to that of Thomas N. Corns, whose investigation into “the plurality of Miltonic ideology” has led him (following the historiographical impulse) to affirm that the “multiplicity of Miltons” is “reflective” of “the cultural and political assumptions” of its various interpreters, there are important differences between Corns’s assumptions and my own.¹⁶ Though I will not go so far as to agree with Stanley Fish that “there is only one true interpretation of *Paradise Lost*,”¹⁷ the current sets of readings, ultimately intentionalist (and thus more like Fish’s than either Corns’s or Jameson’s), argues for a Milton who produced texts, not “internally contradictory,” as in Corns’s reading, but *polyvalent*. Where Corns argues for various distinct versions of Milton, each bearing its own aspect of “unity,” I am arguing for a unified *reading* of Milton which – to echo the primary metaphor of mediation in the seventeenth century, *discordia concors* – has multiple aspects. In Corns’s reading, Milton’s critics have extrapolated unified readings from Milton’s “convoluted” text; in my reading, it is the critics who have made Milton “convoluted” by insisting upon monolithic readings of his works. This is not, however, to argue an ahistorical or metacritical reading of Milton, but rather to assert that the complex unity of Milton’s texts has been occluded by powerful and persistent interpretive paradigms within Milton studies.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10182-0 - Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements

William Kolbrener

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

The Milton invoked here, like Fish's, may be singular, though made possible by what Gadamer calls, citing Vico, "copia, the abundance of viewpoints."¹⁸ There may be many ways of historicizing *this* study, though the narrative which I would choose to emphasize now is personal: the polyvalent yet singular Milton constructed here, is built on my own *sensus communis* – the various Miltonists with whom I have been privileged to study and work. Despite their critical differences, they have shown me, in their generosity and in their common Miltonic desire to "close truth to truth," that the "war in heaven" may not be the most appropriate paradigm for interpreters of Milton's works.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10182-0 - Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements

William Kolbrener

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

Politics

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10182-0 - Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements

William Kolbrener

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

"Plainly partiall": the liberal Areopagitica

In considering the "spiritual architecture" of an England overflowing with "schismatics and sectaries," Milton in the *Areopagitica* compares the "great reformation" of a nation to the building of Solomon's temple: "And when every stone is laid artfully together, it cannot be united into a continuity, it can but be contiguous in this world . . . (II 555).¹ There may be "many dissections in the quarry," many "schisms" and differences "among men . . . ere the house of God can be built," Milton writes. But he continues, paradoxically, "the perfection consists in this": "Out of the many moderat varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes . . . arises the goodly and gracefull symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure" (II 555). From out of the contiguity and particularity intrinsic to the fallen world, Milton perceives at least the possibility of "continuity," a "perfection" organizing and ordering difference.

Milton's temple trope, like the totality about which T. W. Adorno writes in his *Aesthetic Theory*, preserves particulars even "in their diffuse, divergent and contradictory condition." For Adorno, the demand for "unity" does not merely assimilate particularity, but it also, crucially, preserves "the individual moment." Within the context of Adorno's negative dialectics, as in Milton's *Areopagitica*, the concrete maintains its own integrity, though it also reveals "the ever-elusive entirety in itself . . . in line with a pre-established disharmony rather than a pre-established harmony."² As Edward Taylor writes, by both stressing "juxtaposition" and moving "toward identity," Milton's temple trope balances the tensions of "differences" maintained "in agreement."³ Milton's reformed England, therefore, establishes its "goodly and graceful symmetry" through "brotherly dissimilitudes," at once mediating *and* preserving the differences it must acknowledge.

Unmediated particularity – the experience of an untranscendable "contiguity" – remains for Milton, as for Thomas Hobbes, a synecdoche for civil war, where the lack of any form of mediation – "no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters" – drives

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10182-0 - Milton's Warring Angels: A Study of Critical Engagements

William Kolbrener

Excerpt

[More information](#)

opposing forces “in mutual opposition to nothing.” For Hobbes, a disunited multitude is shunned in the way that Hegel was to shun “bad infinity”; difference is only recognized – not to say legitimated – in so far that it is capable of assimilation through public mediation. For Hobbes, the subject’s ability to “*personate* ... to *act* ... to represent *himself*” is at once the precondition *and* result of the Leviathan’s accession to power. Through the Leviathan’s authority, “given him,” writes Hobbes, “by every particular man in the commonwealth, he hath the use of so much power and strength conferred on him, that . . . he is able to form the wills of them all.” The private “Actor,” “Author,” and “Authority” can only come into being *with* the commonwealth. Individuality, and hence agency, thus only exists for Hobbes when the “commonwealth” – a “plurality of voices” in “one will” – confers subjectivity, a “*persona*,” upon its constituents.⁴

“Hobbes,” as David Quint writes, “could be the name” for that which all of Milton’s “various political strategies . . . converge to resist”;⁵ nevertheless, for both Hobbes and Milton, the individual is understood only in relation to the constraints imposed by varying forms of public mediation. Although Hobbes’s statist politics differ drastically from the civic republicanism of *Areopagitica*, Milton’s own self-constitution as one who wishes to “promote” his “Countries liberty” (II 487) occurs only within the context of the public realm (which he helped to define) where individual agency is at once independent *and* mediated.⁶ For Milton, individual differences, what he describes as “contiguities,” are like “the confused seeds” imposed upon Psyche in *Areopagitica*. They threaten, unless the “many cunning resemblances” between them are “discerned” (II 514), to transform into what Hobbes most feared – a disunited and warring multitude.

The notion, in Hiram Haydn’s phrase, that the seventeenth century saw “the ultimate desertion of the universal for the particular” through “the decentralizing individuation of the nominalist” continues to persist as part of an historiographical tradition that dates back at least to Dr. Johnson.⁷ Johnson’s celebrated – though peremptory – discussion of *discordia concors* transforms the world-view of the metaphysicals into a quaint and antiquated trope. The most significant aspect of Johnson’s notorious formulation of the poetics of Cowley and his school – “the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together” – may well be the adverbial phrase. By “violence” their “slender conceits” created only “dissimilar images,” thus asserting that heterogeneity – “exility of particulars” – lay beneath the veneer of metaphysical wit. In Johnson’s