Introduction: the author John Milton

> Even Milton and Shakespeare could not publish their own works.
> William Blake[1]

In *The Age of Shakespeare*, the second volume of *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, D. F. McKenzie has titled his contribution "Printing in England from Caxton to Milton."[2] The first to print a book in English with moveable type, Caxton deserves mention in any discussion of the history of the book trade: he worked as a translator, editor, printer, and bookseller, and participated in all aspects of production, even taking care to read over printed books and correct mistakes by hand.[3] By disseminating and preserving inexpensive texts, Caxton helped to construct, as McKenzie observes, the canon of English literature. Caxton produced definitive editions of Chaucer, for example, as well as a version of Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* that remained the authoritative text until W. F. Oakeshott discovered the Winchester Manuscript in 1934.

That McKenzie concludes his essay with John Milton may seem a less obvious choice, but as the author of *Areopagitica* (1644), a landmark argument against censorship, Milton merits inclusion in McKenzie's historical survey. Milton recognized the essential role that the printing press would come to play in promoting change and demonstrated the utility of this new technology for the English people. As McKenzie notes, Milton's was "the first eloquent voice" in the "parliament without walls" that the press had begun creating in 1644; in *Areopagitica*, Milton foresaw the "modernity" and "naturally understood rightness" of the printing process ("Printing in England," p. 225).

By describing the progress of the printing press from a technological innovation to a recognized agency of political change,

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McKenzie's essay implies more than a temporal continuum ''from Caxton to Milton.'' The alliance of these two men also suggests the transformation of a trade dominated by its enterprising Stationers to a business challenged by the emergence of the modern author.[4] On the one hand, Caxton was England's pioneer typographer whose work anticipates the formation of the Stationers' Company and the authority its charter granted printers and booksellers; on the other hand, Milton is one of the great English authors who, we imagine, supervised the production of his texts.

Unfortunately, this perception of Milton as a modern author has prevented scholars from analyzing his relationship to the material process of textual production. Despite McKenzie's efforts in this and other essays presenting the seventeenth-century book trade as a valuable source of cultural history, scholars have for the most part ignored the material circumstances of Milton's writing and publishing. Not many of us would deny the collaborative nature of authorship today: we rely on readers' reports, editors' suggestions, and the advice of friends and colleagues. Yet because we often assume that Milton presided over all stages of his texts' creation – from the subtlest nuances of language to the layout of the title pages – relatively little has been said about his cooperation with other people for creating his books. Though lacking a cape and secret identity, Milton has become a literary super hero, able to leap his historical circumstances, if not in a single bound, at least in several bound volumes.

A bibliographical analysis of Milton's publications reveals, on the contrary, a social writer who depended on others – especially printers and booksellers – to construct the perception of his autonomy. This near paradox of collaboration and self-promotion is one of this book's central themes. Milton as author represents an individual according to the original meaning of the word: throughout the seventeenth century, as Raymond Williams observes, '' 'individual' was rarely used without explicit relation to the group of which it was, so to say, the ultimate indivisible division.''[5] Ironically, Milton's construction of his individual identity, while requiring his participation within a community of printers and booksellers, has obscured the conditions that enabled and thus belie it. Recent works by William Kolbrener, Mary Ann Radzinowicz, and John Rumrich suggest the widespread ramifications of this dialectic for Milton's politics and psychology.[6] I contend that it lies at the core

of Milton's authorial practice and that its significance can best be appreciated through a bibliographic analysis.

A few scholars such as McKenzie have considered the material conditions of Milton's authorship: K. A. Coleridge, Helen Darbishire, Harris Francis Fletcher, John Shawcross, and S. E. Sprott have provided indispensable, bibliographical accounts of Milton's publications, orthography, and a few of his printers.[7] More recently, Peter Lindenbaum, Leah S. Marcus, and R. G. Moyles have offered thoughtful, textual analyses of *Paradise Lost* and the 1645 *Poems*.[8] In an effort to enlarge and complement the work of these scholars, this book examines the circumstances of Milton's writing, with particular attention to the material process of creation. Rather than assume, as many critics have, that Milton transcended the typical business relationships among authors, printers, and booksellers, I attempt to reconstruct such relationships based on his publications and personal letters, as well as documentary evidence about the book trade. Primarily, I am concerned with three questions: what role did Milton play in the production of his texts? What can we learn about the author by examining his practices of writing and publishing? How does the material creation of Milton's books affect their meaning?

In emphasizing the tension between Milton's autonomy and dependence, I am revisiting some of the theoretical ground covered in Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, where he describes the relationship in terms of having "shaping powers" over one's life and "being fashioned by cultural institutions."[9] This book focuses on the cultural institution of the seventeenth-century printing trade; even as it shaped Milton and his works, he struggled to construct a life within his literary texts, intruding into his poems and pamphlets to insist on his isolation, most notably within *Paradise Lost*'s invocations. Richard Helgerson has contextualized this urge as characteristic of a generation of Renaissance poets who, aspiring to be laureates, attempted to "maintain an ethically normative and unchanging self."[10] Roger Chartier, on the other hand, traces a shift in the ideology of the author from the traditional figure of the aloof aristocrat who disdained print to the persona of a "creative and disinterested genius."[11] With the demise of patronage and the rise of a market system that rewarded literary compositions as labor, the originality and thus value of a work was predicated on the existence of a visible author.

The arc of Milton's career roughly follows this trajectory:

although he is "visible" in most of his works, his early publications tend to depict an isolated gentleman poet while his later books create the perception of an independent professional writer. Many modern critics, however, have become so distracted by these images of a solitary figure – whether aloof gentleman or isolated professional – that they have ignored the complex origin of Milton's writings. Milton studies has tended to privilege the image of the poet from *Il Penseroso* where he imagines himself alone, either in "some still removèd place" or "at midnight hour, / ... in some high lonely Tow'r" (lines 78, 85–6). But we also need to acknowledge Milton's complementary belief that writing constitutes a social act: in *L'Allegro*, the poet visits "the well-trod stage" (line 131) and cavorts with Mirth's motley company.

Bibliographers of Shakespeare, in contrast to Milton scholars, have assiduously studied, compared, and debated the several quarto and folio versions of his plays and have hypothesized about textual differences in the source texts, printed texts, working papers, and prompt books. They also acknowledge the influence of patrons, actors, and book-keepers and have sought to identify the preferences of various compositors. Ongoing controversies about John Fletcher's contribution to *Henry VIII*, for example, and the extent of Shakespeare's authorship of *Pericles*, also imply that a dramatist's texts emerged from a dynamic, collaborative process.[12] Although these studies still focus on the writer William Shakespeare, scholars have at least included within their peripheral vision the contributions of various other people. Perhaps because we associate Shakespeare's plays with the protean world of the theater as opposed to the solitude of the poet's study, we have been more interested in reconstructing their transmission and more willing to recognize the complexity of their origins.

With few exceptions, Milton scholars have resisted examining his writings within a similar collaborative context. Coming across drafts of Milton's minor poems, for example, Charles Lamb recoiled in horror:

I wish they had thrown them in the Cam, or sent them after the latter Cantos of Spenser into the Irish Channel. How it staggered me to see the fine things in their ore! interlined, corrected! as if their words were mortal, alterable, displaceable, at pleasure! as if they might have been otherwise and just as good! as if inspiration were made up of parts, and these fluctuating, successive, indifferent![13]

We may be tempted to ascribe Lamb's dismay to the outdated excessiveness of a Romantic writer, but a similar assumption of autonomy informs modern studies of Milton which fail to recognize the social conditions of authorship and the author's many collaborators. When William Blake wrote in 1793 that "Even Milton and Shakespeare could not publish their own works," he was taking pride in having controlled the "means to propagate" his poems and taking satisfaction that, as opposed to other great authors, he need not rely on printers and booksellers.[14] In exploring Milton's greatness, modern critics have, unlike Blake, lost sight of Milton's reliance on material agents of production. He has mistakenly become a one-man show.

Textual critics such as Helen Darbishire and B. A. Wright, for example, have suggested that Milton labored over his books' subtle details, developing a complex system of pointing and orthography to enhance pronunciation and create deliberate prosodic effects.[15] The cumbersome set of rules that these critics have generated to account for *Paradise Lost*'s many inconsistencies is unprecedented in English literature. Yet, despite such painstaking efforts to portray Milton as preternaturally vigilant, the fact is that we still cannot distinguish his spellings and pointings from his compositors'. There is insufficient evidence, as has been repeatedly shown, to support the idea that Milton tried to control any of the minor variants in any of his printed works.[16]

Commonly, as with the biographer William Riley Parker, scholars have posited an antagonistic relationship between Milton and his publishers. Parker deserves considerable praise for having chronicled the social dimension of Milton's writings: Parker's biography – particularly the second volume of commentary – abounds with references to Milton's acquaintances, contemporaries, friends, and relatives, and in writing this book, I have frequently relied on his excellent index. But Parker assumed that Milton would have deigned to associate with members of the book trade only out of necessity. "Booksellers were the bane of his existence," according to Parker, because they corrupted his works and tampered with his personal orthography.[17] Parker also believed that Milton hand-picked the printers and booksellers with whom he worked: whenever they were unable to meet his demands for an error-free text, he would switch publishers, the way a dissatisfied customer today might change auto mechanics.[18] Parker suggests, for example, that Milton refused to

have the second edition (1644) of his *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*
reprinted, and consequently the printer Matthew Simmons "had to
twiddle his thumbs until his brilliant but erratic author brought him
something new to print" ("Above All Liberties," p. 45). In fact, the
year after the second edition was published, Simmons entered
thirteen items in the Stationers' *Register* – the most that he ever had
registered during a single year – and in 1645 and 1646 was involved
in the printing and distribution of some ninety items, one of the most
productive periods of his career.[19]

More recently, the controversy over *de doctrina Christiana* has
betrayed how little attention critics have devoted to Milton's colla-
borative practice of writing. Although a full discussion of Milton's
relationship to the treatise lies outside my present intentions,
arguments for and against attributing the work to Milton have
sometimes been impaired by too strict adherence to a post-Romantic
conception of the author.[20] The report by the committee that was
formed to investigate the matter, for example, seems to justify
continued uncertainty about the treatise's provenance – although, as
the report acknowledges, "much of the manuscript probably consti-
tutes a Miltonic appropriation and transformation."[21] Because
Milton may not have produced every word of *de doctrina* – because its
"authorial genesis" seems "much more complex" than his other
works ("The Provenance of *De Doctrina Christiana*," p. 108) – the
report concludes that the treatise's "relationship . . . to the Milton
oeuvre must remain uncertain" (110).

Putting aside reservations about the report's stylometric method-
ology, we ought not to hedge on the question of Milton's authorship.
Of course Milton did not write all of *de doctrina* – but to hold any of
his writings to such a standard, as this book will show, is to
misunderstand seventeenth-century practices of authorship in
general and Milton's method of writing in particular. In the pre-
fatory epistle, which the committee has verified as unmistakably
Miltonic, the author writes, "I . . . have striven to cram my pages
even to overflowing, with quotations drawn from all parts of the
Bible and to leave as little space as possible for my own words, even
when they arise from the putting together of actual scriptural texts"
(*CP* VI: 122).

Because *de doctrina* is incomplete, the committee further reasons,
"we cannot know what other changes, especially what deletions of
doctrines to which he did not subscribe, Milton would have made"

("The Provenance of *De Doctrina Christiana*," p. 110). Milton, however, rarely considered any of his works complete and instead continued revising many of them, sometimes substantially, even after they appeared in print. If Milton had published the treatise, we would also have to account for a new set of participants (printers, compositors, correctors) who could have influenced its meaning. Would we attribute the deletion of some heretical doctrines to Milton or to the exigencies of licensing and publishing? Mesmerized by the persona of the autonomous author that Milton's texts conjure, we fail to realize that all of his works – including *de doctrina Christiana* – emerged from what the committee calls a "complex authorial genesis" (p. 108).

But if scholars continue to overemphasize Milton's agency in discussing the creation of his texts, the blame lies at least in part with Milton. Whereas we know relatively little about the author Shakespeare, Milton forged an authorial persona in print, as if inviting readers to organize his poems and pamphlets biographically. He offers provocative, autobiographical digressions in *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642), *An Apology against a Pamphlet* (1642), and *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio Secunda* (1654), and he constructs a narrative of his poetic progress in other works such as the *Poems* (1645, 1673), *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674), and *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio* (1651). In the latter pamphlet, Milton notes that his "precarious health" impeded his writing but that he is well-prepared for the task "because indeed from early youth I eagerly pursued studies which impelled me to celebrate, if not to perform, the loftiest actions" (*CP* IV: 305, 307). In *Defensio Secunda*, Milton suggests that he planned his achievements: he explains that he wanted to write about the three types of liberty – ecclesiastical, civil, and domestic – and he neatly divides this last category into marriage, education, and freedom of expression, claiming that he intended to address each one (*CP* IV: 624).

Milton even foretells his fame. Early in his career, he boldly resolves "to be an interpreter & relater of the best and sagest things among mine own Citizens throughout this Iland in the mother dialect" (*CP* I: 811–12). He envisions himself as his country's spokesperson, well before he earned that official status during the Commonwealth as Secretary for Foreign Languages and the author of *Eikonoklastes* (1649). In 1642, he already hoped to "leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die" (*CP* I:

810). Nine years later he more audaciously promises Salmasius that future readers will "hurl to oblivion" him and his "worthless works," but boasts that Salmasius's "royal defence will draw some life from my reply, and will be read again after long-neglected obsolescence" (*CP* IV: 324).

In part because of his reply to Salmasius, Milton became an international celebrity: people came to England expressly to meet the famous defender of regicide, and some "out of pure devotion" walked down Bread Street "to see the house and chamber where he was born" (Darbishire, p. 48). That eight biographies of Milton were written within sixty years of his death not only demonstrates the poet's popularity during the first half of the eighteenth century, but also points to the growing tendency to treat him as a category of one within English literary history. Because most of these biographies were published with editions of his works, readers became accustomed to interpreting his writings biographically.[22] Milton still had his detractors – William Winstanley in his biographical dictionary of English poets, for example, dismissed Milton as "a notorious Traytor" who had "most impiously and villanously bely'd that blessed Martyr, King *Charles* the First" – but such attacks further encouraged readers to approach his works as a function of his identity.[23] As Samuel Johnson complained, the "blaze" of Milton's reputation was preventing people from examining his poetry objectively.[24] Johnson accepted the image of Milton as a solitary creator, but he attributed the poet's isolation to egotism and surliness: "there is in his writings nothing by which the pride of other authors might be gratified or favor gained, no exchange of praise or solicitation of support" (*Lives of the English Poets*, p. 194).

Romantic writers exaggerated Milton's isolation even more so. But what Johnson had criticized as the poet's aloofness, they glorified as heroic individualism. Shelley praised the poet for having "stood alone illuminating an age unworthy of him," and Wordsworth similarly imagined a lone, undaunted champion of virtue, "uttering odious truth, / Darkness before and danger's voice behind."[25] Milton came to represent, as Joseph Wittreich has observed, the quintessence of Romantic ideals – "a rebel, a republican, an iconoclast, a mighty poet, a lofty thinker."[26] These writers conflated the poet's personality with his poetry and equated the greatness of his verse with the greatness of his character; Milton, they inferred, was of their party without knowing it. When Coleridge wrote that

"in every one of his poems – it is Milton himself whom you see; his Satan, his Adam, his Raphael, almost his Eve – are all John Milton," he was not finding fault with Milton's "intense egotism," but instead celebrating his "revelation of spirit."[27]

In its most recent and extreme form, this image of Milton as an autonomous author has mutated into the caricature of an overbearing despot. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have criticized Milton and his writings as the "misogynistic essence of what Gertrude Stein called 'patriarchal poetry' "; they find evidence of Milton's god complex in his decision to write a theodicy, his portrayal of Eve and Sin, and in his epic's Latinate syntax.[28] Modern scholars, as John Rumrich observes, often misconstrue Milton's authority in *Paradise Lost* as an almost sadistic glee in successively trapping and punishing his masochistic readers.[29] Rumors about Milton's domestic life also call up the dubious but compelling image of a brilliant, blind man bullying his frightened daughters for the sake of his art. Even the seventeenth-century term "Puritan," co-opted by American political culture, evokes self-righteousness and dour conservatism rather than, as historians define it, sincere religious zeal.

Milton's enduring status as an autonomous author thus has skewed our understanding of the poet and his publications; his strong authorial voice has virtually drowned out the contributions of his various collaborators. To remedy this misapprehension, we need to approach Milton as a working writer and examine his historical situation as it came to bear on his life and publications. Milton depended on amanuenses, acquaintances, printers, distributors, and retailers – often in dramatic ways. The persona of the independent author that Milton implies in many of his texts paradoxically required a collaboration among these various people.

Throughout this book, I describe the complex genesis of Milton's writings as a "collaboration," by which I mean a *co*-laboring or working together. Milton benefited from the advice and assistance of acquaintances both during the imaginative creation of his works and during the practical process of putting his writing into print. In the former case, I am arguing for the social-orientation of Milton's writings and against the tradition of the poet as an isolated genius; in the latter case, I am arguing for the specific, often significant contributions that members of the book trade made to the texts that they produced. These arguments are closely related, for imaginative

and material creation were not always distinct enterprises during the
seventeenth century: the decisions made by printers and publishers
affected not only the appearance but also the meaning of books. Any
attempt to establish a strict correspondence of author to meaning
and physical text to material agent falsely simplifies the dynamic
process of authorship out of which Milton's publications emerged.

In recognizing Milton's dependence and constraints, I am not
attempting to diminish his literary accomplishments or efface his
uniqueness as a writer. But instead of approaching Milton's publica-
tions as a function of his identity, I am working from the opposite
direction: bibliography provides a window into his biography. We
gain new insights into Milton and his writings by reconstructing
what Jerome McGann has called the "necessary and integral
historical environment of great complexity" in which the "initia-
tion" of an author's work occurs.[30] Knowledge of the conditions of
authorship helps us answer questions not only of textual editing but
also of literary interpretation. By examining how the seventeenth-
century book trade influenced the meaning of Milton's publications,
I am attempting to heal the rift between these two disciplines.

This book offers a series of case studies of Milton's collaborative
relations. The first chapter provides an overview of seventeenth-
century writing and publishing, and briefly examines Milton's
method of composition within that context. Beginning with a
general description of early modern publication practices leads to a
discussion of the style of seventeenth-century books: how a printed
text came to be is manifested symbolically in its layout and
typography. The chapter concludes with a discussion of *Paradise Lost*
(1667), which demonstrates that Milton, like other participants in the
book trade, shared responsibility for writing and printing even his
most famous work.

Chapter 2 turns to the most striking case study of Milton's
participation within the collaborative process of textual production.
Paradise Regain'd . . . Samson Agonistes (1671) illustrates how an under-
standing of a book's material creation can influence its meaning.
Scholars have traditionally overlooked the ten lines of text missing
from the first edition of *Samson Agonistes* and printed at the end of the
poem under the unique heading *Omissa*. Beginning with a bibliogra-
phical examination of the book, this chapter maintains that the
missing ten lines could not have occurred through a compositor's