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0521770327 - Representing Revolution in Milton and his Contemporaries: Religion, Politics, and Polemics in Radical Puritanism

David Loewenstein

Excerpt

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Introduction

In the spring of 1649, a month after the monarchy was abolished, Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers could describe “the old World . . . running up like parchment in the fire, and wearing away.”¹ The exhilaration expressed by that vivid image of an old order rapidly consumed and expiring was also sharply qualified in their visionary writings by a darker sense of the English Revolution’s unresolved contradictions as they perceived new forms of menacing power and vested interests in the Republic. This book examines the ways canonical and noncanonical writers of mid-seventeenth-century England attempted to represent the unsettling, dramatic processes of political, religious, and social revolution. It considers how their literary representations of revolution and rebellion attempted to probe or promote religious ideologies, shape political perceptions, purify and purge the nation, challenge the power of worldly regimes, and contest institutionalized ecclesiastical authorities. And it examines how a wide range of revolutionary and radical Puritan writers struggled with the crises, contradictions, and ambiguities of the English Revolution.

This cross-disciplinary study therefore explores the interactions of literature, polemics, and religious politics in the Revolution and its diverse culture of radical Puritanism. Part I examines polemical and visionary writings by some of Milton’s most notable radical Puritan contemporaries, beginning with John Lilburne and Gerrard Winstanley; as these writers vigorously challenged the authority of the political regimes and the religious and economic institutions of the 1640s and 1650s, they acutely analyzed the ambiguities and contradictions of the English Revolution, including its conservative and counter-revolutionary trends. The studies in Part I often portray a dark, faction-riven, and violent seventeenth-century revolutionary culture whose unresolved religious and political tensions Marvell would attempt to address during the Protectorate (see Chapter 5). In Part II, I turn to Milton’s polemical

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responses during the crises of 1649 as he confronted (along with William Dell, John Goodwin, and other godly republicans) the faction-riven, counter-revolutionary politics of the Presbyterians, as well as the ambiguous politics of the Irish Rebellion, one of the most troubling religious conflicts of the revolutionary years. The book's final three chapters build on previous ones to highlight interconnections between politics and radical Puritan polemics in Milton's great poems. The concluding two chapters thus reconsider the double-edged way in which Milton's political and religious radicalism expressed itself after the Interregnum and during the Restoration. By provocatively juxtaposing his austere spiritual epic, *Paradise Regained*, with his drama of holy revenge, *Samson Agonistes*, Milton was able to present in one poetic volume divergent representations of radical sainthood. The three chapters on Milton's great poems all emphasize intersections between radical Puritan politics and spirituality during both the Revolution and the Restoration, thereby suggesting greater continuities between pre- and post-1660 radical Puritan politics, polemics, and poetry.

The study of writing in the English Revolution has become an increasingly lively and significant field, complicating and enriching our understanding of the politics of literature in early modern England. Valuable recent scholarship is helping to "politicize and historicize" the literature of the English revolutionary period, and "to return to [its] texts the political potency they once possessed."² Such work is particularly welcome because literary historians have continued to devote much more critical attention to reexamining the relations between politics, literary culture, and symbolic representation in the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods. Unlike scholars in the field of history, literary historians are only now beginning to consider many of the political texts of the English Revolution, especially those produced during the Republic and Protectorate, and to find fresh ways of evaluating the interconnections between their aesthetics and politics.³ Nevertheless, we still require more integrated studies which address, rather than ignore, powerful religious ideologies and beliefs in relation to the political literature of the Revolution. More than most recent accounts of politics and aesthetics in the period, this book emphasizes the religious politics of revolutionary radicalism and the remarkable writings it generated. I explore the ways in which these writings represented the Revolution's intense ideological and religious conflicts and the ways in which their authors struggled with its contradictions and inconsistencies.⁴

Regrettably the newer historical criticism has not always adequately

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addressed the complex interactions between religion and politics in early modern England. It has, until recently, too often ignored religion as a major ideological and cultural force; or it has viewed it primarily as a front for power in the public and political spheres.⁵ My study of literature, revolution, and radical Puritan politics stresses the crucial roles of religious discourses and beliefs, especially heterodox ones which alarmed the orthodox godly. Milton the polemicist himself perceived that religious and civil liberty were “two things God hath inseparably knit together” (*CPW* 1:923–24); conversely he observed, in sinister language resembling Winstanley’s, how “the very dark roots” of “Tyranny and fals Religion . . . twine and interweave one another in the Earth” (3:509). After the shattering of the Church, the destruction of the monarchy, and the abolition of the House of Lords – the dramatic overthrow of ungodly forces – Winstanley grimly perceived how clergy and kingly powers, as he called them, were still darkly intertwined in the new Commonwealth and perpetuating sharp class conflicts. This book examines the polemical literary responses of radical Puritan writers to the interactions between religious institutions and civil power during the convulsions of the Revolution.

Because religion was so deeply interwoven with politics, some recent historians have suggested that the mid-seventeenth-century crisis was nothing less than “England’s Wars of Religion.”⁶ In an age when a good religious cause was rarely able to “sustaine it selfe upon a temperate dispute” (to quote Sir Thomas Browne), cultural conflicts over ceremonial issues were intense, and we now have a substantial account of their literary implications.⁷ Moreover, there is little doubt that religious contention and the urge for more godly reformation fueled revolution during the 1640s and 1650s. Religion itself was an inflammatory ideological force that helped to impel events in a radical direction: so contemporary commentators as diverse as Baxter, Hobbes, Clarendon, and Hugh Peter recognized.⁸ Explaining the forces which corrupted the people during the 1640s and 1650s in terms of various “seducers,” Hobbes himself deplored radical religious ferment, including the new freedom to interpret scriptural texts, as inciters of revolution: “this license of interpreting the Scripture,” one of the interlocutors famously observed in *Behemoth*, “was the cause of so many sects, as have lain hid till the beginning of the late King’s reign, and did then appear to the disturbance of the commonwealth.”⁹ As Peter the New Model Army chaplain observed at the finest Whitehall debate about freedom of conscience, “you will find that [religion is the cause of] those contests

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that have been in the kingdom”; it had, in the words of another radical preacher, “kindle[d] . . . such unnatural heats, as are now stirring almost every where.”¹⁰ The crisis in Puritan culture and politics during the mid-seventeenth-century in England may have caused separatists and radical sectarians to “subdivide and mince themselves almost into Atomes,” as the conservative Browne observed with playful mockery.¹¹ But it also stimulated some of the period’s richest radical religious writings, and this book studies, especially in Part I, how their visionary and polemical authors fomented revolution, escalated political and religious tensions, and probed the ambiguities of the period’s regimes.

Exciting recent work on mid-seventeenth-century republican literary culture and aesthetics has also reassessed the interconnections between literature and politics.¹² Nevertheless, this important work offers a largely secular account of the period’s literature, including Milton’s anti-monarchical politics and writings, by reconsidering them principally in the context of the classical republican tradition – the sort of intellectual political discourse that would have appealed to a cultured radical like Milton. The aim of the present book is not to dispute the major contributions in this area, for they confirm more thoroughly than ever Aubrey’s observation that Milton’s antimonarchism was sharpened by his “being so conversant in Livy and the Roman authors and the greatnes he saw done by the Roman commonwealth.”¹³ Still, we now need to look for ways to bring together the republican and radical spiritual dimensions of Milton’s writings. The emphasis of this book therefore differs crucially from studies focused primarily on the secular republicanism of Milton and his contemporaries.¹⁴ It considers instead (particularly in the last three chapters) how the religious politics of his great poems contribute to their polemical edge. It also highlights the role of powerful spiritual beliefs and religious ideologies in the polemical struggles of Milton’s radical Puritan contemporaries during the crises of the revolutionary years and their aftermath.

Radical political and religious groups preoccupied Milton’s contemporaries and have often preoccupied historians of early modern England; nevertheless, literary scholars are only now beginning to analyze the texture of their writings in the kind of detail and with the sustained attention traditionally conferred on more canonical literary works.¹⁵ There are, for example, relatively few literary studies concerned with the vast numbers of revolutionary Quaker texts and I have therefore chosen to examine, in a sustained fashion, some of the most powerful millenarian writings by George Fox (see Chapter 4). Remarkably

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prolific writers from the time they emerged as a charismatic sect in the early 1650s, Fox and early Quaker prophets vigorously reinterpreted the apocalyptic myth of the Lamb's War as an allegory of the Revolution's political, religious, and social conflicts. I likewise provide a sustained discussion of the radical religious politics of Winstanley's writings and their figurative qualities (ranging from his early pre-communist works to his final utopian tract, *The Law of Freedom*): their striking, idiosyncratic revisions of scriptural myths represent in vigorous prose the unresolved contradictions of the Commonwealth which failed to ease the grievances of the poor while enabling darker kingly powers to flourish. Radical perspectives on religious toleration, political freedom, and economic and social reform were thus vividly expressed by writers articulating the often unrecorded beliefs and aspirations of ordinary men and women – voices (including the “middling sort”) normally outside the political nation and not part of the dominant culture.¹⁶ Hence I devote considerable attention in Part I to the polemical language, rhetorical density, and powerful myths of the dramatic, intensely disputatious revolutionary writings by radical sectarian authors.

Radical religion and sectarianism were closely linked by orthodox contemporaries and conservative Puritans with political and social revolution, especially as the authority of church and Scripture were replaced by the authority of the inner light or impulses of the Spirit, and as freedom of individual conscience became a major issue (particularly during the Interregnum). The subversive religious, political, and social implications of “submitting unto that light which is lighted in us by [God's] Spirit” is the subject of a number of this book's chapters.¹⁷ Many radical Puritans believed that the age of the Spirit was at hand: the powers of Antichrist would imminently fall and King Jesus would reign. Part I therefore considers compelling examples of the literature of the “Spirit within,” when some men and women chose to follow their own individual consciences rather than the dictates of churches and ministers; and when some exalted the light of the indwelling God above the written word of Scripture itself. Hence I emphasize the radical spiritualism infusing Winstanley's communist agrarian writings, the fierce millenarianism of early Quaker discourse and its ideology of the light within, and the radical spiritual visions of Ranter and Fifth Monarchist prophets who sharply challenged political conservatism and religious orthodoxies during the Republic and Protectorate. Moreover, later in the book, I examine how profoundly the radical religious politics of the Spirit inform Milton's 1671 poems through the spiritual inwardness and sharp

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polemical responses of Jesus in the wilderness and through the holy violence and militant apocalypticism of Samson in the temple of Dagon.

The religious politics of the Spirit alarmed the orthodox godly, fueling their polemical war against the growth of sectarianism. Deeply anxious about religious division, the frenetic heresiographer Thomas Edwards passionately upheld social and constitutional conservatism, envisioning radical sectarianism as a massive gangrene plaguing the body politic. In the third part of *Gangraena* (December 1646) he specifically linked sectarianism with political revolution as he warned of the anarchic dangers of sectarian writing and preaching, including the emergence of Leveller politics and books, in an unstable age that was witnessing the frightening disintegration of Puritanism and the Church of England:

The Reader shall find in this Booke the Sectaries Designe and Practise, not to be only corrupting Religion . . . but to be against Magistracy and Civill Government, their designe of opposing settled Government, and bringing an Anarchy and confusion into Church and State . . . they have in *Terminis* in divers Pamphlets and some Sermons declared against Monarchie and Aristocracie, and for Democracie they have expressed themselves in such a manner concerning that, that they make it noe other then an Anarchie, making all alike, confounding of all rancks and order, reducing all to Adams time and condition.¹⁸

Revolution was thus stimulated by sectarian ferment and was additionally fueled by the radical development of Protestant eschatology during the 1640s and 1650s, when millenarian enthusiasm, including popular manifestations, was especially widespread in the writings and beliefs of the age.¹⁹ Religion in the form of zealous Protestantism not only incited civil war due to fears of popish innovations, counter-reforming policies, and the menacing Irish Rebellion; in its more radical manifestations, it stimulated the deposition and execution of the king, as well as the belief that he would be succeeded by King Jesus and the rule of the saints on earth. Sectarian excesses and millenarian fervor fed increasing anxieties about religious division; thus the moderate Puritan minister Richard Baxter yearned for the day when religious factions would “be swallowed up in Unity.”²⁰ Even Cromwell, a man often torn between conservative social and radical Puritan impulses, was anxious about the “many” in the Interregnum who had “apostatized” and justified themselves “under the notion of Liberty,” and “instead of contending for the Faith, . . . contended against Magistracy, against *Ministry*, against *Scriptures*, and against *Ordinances*.”²¹

Anxiety about rebellion was acute in these unsettled decades; godliness, particularly if it smacked of sectarianism, was often seen as “a

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Cloak for Rebellion, and Religion a pretence for Treason.”²² Milton’s contemporaries, after all, were constantly reminded of the importance of obedience and social hierarchy since they had been sanctioned by nature and God, custom and tradition. In making their case against resistance (even against bad kings) and the disruption of order and subordination, orthodox writers regularly cited scriptural texts such as Romans 13:1–2 and I Peter 2:13, and echoed well-known Tudor homilies on *Obedience* (1547) and *Rebellion* (1571), while Anglican catechisms likewise stressed the importance of obedience and reminded subjects that rebellion was the worst of all sins and the epitome of all evils.²³ Even William Prynne, viciously punished by Laudian authorities for seditious writing against the king, queen, and Arminian clergy, would later defend the rights of the king, the Lords, and the Presbyterian church by citing and elaborating upon Paul’s serious admonition, “Let every soul be subject to the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth . . . the power, resisteth (oppugneth, abolisheth) THE ORDINANCE OF GOD: and they that resist . . . shall receive to themselves DAMNATION.”²⁴ Such crucial biblical texts became the subject of intense hermeneutic debate in the period, so that Milton himself would carefully scrutinize these scriptural supports for political submission in *The Tenure* and elsewhere, stressing instead (regarding I Peter 2) that the “Kingdom and Magistracy, whether supreme or subordinat, is . . . call’d a *human ordinance*” which we are to submit to “*as free men*” (CPW 3:209–10; echoing I Peter 2:16).²⁵ In Milton’s view, it was a matter of “every kind of human ordinance which can legitimately be obeyed,” so that “we are freed from the judgments of men, and especially from coercion and legislation in religious matters” (*De Doctrina Christiana*, CPW 6:800, 537–38). Since “any civil power unaccountable” was no more than “an Ordinance of man,” then “how can we submit,” Milton wondered in *The Tenure*, “as free men?” With little faith in human ordinances, this radical Puritan’s aim was to shake the authority of orthodox political and religious interpretations of such frequently cited scriptural texts.

Despite the profound fears of rebellion and subversion in the culture of early modern England and the yearning to maintain social order, many well-known institutions and landmarks of the old order collapsed during the revolutionary decades, stimulating the fragmentation of zealous Protestant culture and the proliferation of radical sects and movements. In less than a decade there occurred the breakdown of the traditional bulwarks of church and state, including the hated prerogative

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institutions that supported their power: the Star Chamber, the Court of High Commission, the Councils of Wales and the North were abolished before the end of 1641; episcopacy and ecclesiastical courts were abolished in 1646; the House of Lords was abolished three years later; the Earl of Strafford (1641) and Archbishop Laud (1645) were impeached, tried, and executed; the king was tried and executed in 1649 and the monarchy abolished, so that many people believed that these were the upheavals prophesied in Scripture to herald the world's transformation or end. The battle for a comprehensive (though reformed) national church was lost; and the vision of an ordered, unified, godly community was challenged by sectarian and radical groups who generated fears of moral chaos and confusion. Indeed, Puritanism itself harbored contradictory impulses: its tendencies towards liberty of conscience and towards discipline, towards spiritual individualism and towards building a godly community.²⁶ During the upheavals of the English Revolution, radical Puritanism, social hierarchy, and moderate constitutionalism often proved incompatible, fueling dangerous political and religious tensions expressed in the polemical writings of the age (one of the themes of Chapter 5).

During the Interregnum, radical religious writings poured forth from the presses and continued to threaten social hierarchies, order, and customs, while also challenging the authority of its experimental regimes that governed for, but not necessarily by the will of, the people.²⁷ Some of the most radical writers (e.g. Lilburne and Winstanley) acutely perceived an unresolved conflict between political and social revolution after the coup d'état of 1648–49 resulted in “a Commonwealth and Free State” (May 1649) dedicated to the notion that all just power derives from the people and was to be exercised by their chosen representatives.²⁸ This book examines how radical visionary writers exposed ambivalent trends within the Revolution, including tensions between political conservatism and religious radicalism, and between radical social change and a society organized along traditional lines. Such tensions stimulated their literary creativity as they produced their daring polemical and religious writings. The discussion of Marvell, immediately following the chapters on radical religious writers in Part I, examines how this most skillful of polemical poets attempted to confront the fierce sectarian challenges during the Protectorate when radical saints gave apocalyptic discourse a dangerously militant edge by contesting the authority of an experimental regime uneasily combining godly rule with a quasi-regal style. I thus consider how Marvell attempts to negotiate the

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unresolved tension between radical millenarian Puritanism and moderate godly reform.

During the “confusions and revolutions” of the mid-seventeenth century,²⁹ moreover, Milton’s radical Puritan contemporaries were beginning to register a more modern political sense of revolution as a dramatic, violent break in historical continuity. The term “revolution” was poised between older and newer meanings: it could refer to the original astronomical sense of a circular movement in space or time, but it was acquiring the more modern sense of a radical alteration and unidirectional political change involving a “revolt” against an established order, regime, or the social structure.³⁰ Preaching before the House of Commons in October 1648, just before the Revolution’s most traumatic events, Matthew Barker spoke of “the great *revolutions* of States and Kingdoms” as “but Answers to the prayers of Saints” and then observed “the Lord knows what revolutions and changes we may see before your next monthly Fast.”³¹ The Fifth Monarchist Christopher Feake recalled the older sense, while gesturing toward the new, when he told saintly readers of Mary Cary’s *The Little Horns Doom* (1651), a rich apocalyptic account of the upheavals, that they “shalt in due time, behold, with a mixture of joy and wonder, those other grand Mutations, and extraordinary Revolutions, which are even at the door, and ready to break in upon the *Princes* and upon the *People* of the whole earth.”³² Cromwell himself brought together the old and new senses when, in his fiery millenarian speech to the Nominated Parliament (4 July 1653), he referred to Pride’s Purge, the downfall of the king and the Lords, and the establishment of the Commonwealth as “this revolution of affairs.”³³ In language that equated revolution with a traumatic political overturning and a vital transformation of society, the Quaker prophet Edward Burrough could write that “many memorable revolutions hath come to pass in this last age, even in cutting down one power and authority of oppressions after another, till many great mountains [are] removed, and the Nations levelled.”³⁴ Indeed, contemporaries could use intensely dramatic language to express their sense of living through an age of unprecedented upheaval, as well as the exultation and fears it produced: people were now witnessing “great and mighty *Changes*” wrought by God; this was an age of “dreadfull *providentiall alterations*” in which the coming of Christ would be attended “with the most astonishing . . . desolations,” so that nations which had “given their power to the *Dragon* and the *Beast*” would be “broken, translated, and turned off their old foundations”; these were “*shaking and trying times*” in which the godly would need to be “firme

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and resolved” or they would “scarce be able to stand.”³⁵ A number of chapters in this book explore how such dramatic language was reinvigorated in the apocalyptic revolutionary writings of Milton’s radical Puritan contemporaries, and how it then found particularly powerful, disturbing literary expression in the dreadful holy destruction dramatized in *Samson Agonistes*.

In attempting to illuminate the variety and literary complexity of revolutionary Puritan writers, this study emphasizes their distinctive polemical voices as they struggled with the unresolved conflicts of the mid-seventeenth century.³⁶ Thus, for example, Winstanley’s social and spiritual radicalism clearly differs in important ways from Lilburne’s (who, unlike the Digger, links “liberty and propriety”), and this has significant implications for their differing literary responses to the ambiguities of the Revolution and the Republic. Yet for all their differences, some of the writers considered in this book do share notable connections or perspectives through radical religious culture: Milton himself was closely connected with the Quakers in the early Restoration (though he never joined a gathered church); Lilburne converted to Quakerism at the end of his career; the communist visionary Winstanley, whose prophecies of social levelling are prompted by the Spirit, also probably converted to Quakerism in the Restoration; the Ranter Coppe distinguished his ecstatic levelling rhetoric from “digging-levelling” (and, conversely, the Digger writer rejected the antinomian excesses of Ranterism), yet his daring communist social vision is at times close to Winstanley’s. Milton was obviously not a social radical in the sense that Winstanley, Coppe, or Fox were; moreover, the exceptional range of his learning and literary references clearly distinguishes him from them and accounts for the recent tendency to situate his politics after the early 1640s in the context of classical republican thought.³⁷ Still, his spiritual radicalism, I will argue, deserves comparison with these and other religious radical writers and helps to explain the daring partisan and polemical dimensions of his great poems.

Yet while his connections with the Quakers are indisputable and deserve more thorough consideration (an issue addressed in Chapter 8), Milton, at moments of acute political and religious tension, tends not to mention by name radical groups and sectarians and invoke them as authorities in his writings – a strategy whereby he maintains his own polemical authority and independence as a writer.³⁸ To be sure, there are exceptions to this observation: in the antiprelatical prose he deplores the “mist of names” applied to the proliferating sects and, in a provocative