CHAPTER I

Introduction: Milton and the Jews: "A Project never so seasonable, and necessary, as now!"

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> Barring the official pronouncements of the leaders of what were to become the "orthodox" versions of both religions, one could travel, metaphorically, from rabbinic Jew to Christian along a continuum where one hardly would know where one stopped and the other began.
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> Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism.*[1]

Noting references to the Biblical figure of Samson in post-9/11 polemics about terrorism, Feisal G. Mohamed observes: "It should come as no surprise, then, that the current political climate sparks controversy over *Samson Agonistes*, inspiring especially those critics who have always found in Milton's Samson a portrait of blind animosity."[2] Thus, in a move that could have been borrowed from Coleridge's characterization of Iago as a "motiveless malignancy," the figure of Samson – Biblical and Miltonic – is called upon to reduce terrorism to something like an impulsive act, one that discourages us from examining the complex conditions that produce it. For Mohamed, such efforts are typified by a now infamous essay written by John Carey for a special issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* dedicated to the first-year anniversary of 9/11. In that essay, Carey asserts, "The similarities between the Biblical Samson and the hijackers are obvious. Like them he destroys many innocent victims, whose lives, hopes, and loves are all quite unknown to him personally. He is, in effect, a suicide bomber, and like the suicide bombers he believes that his massacre is an expression of God's will."[3] Although Carey subsequently attempts to rescue Milton's portrait of Samson from those critics – most notably Stanley Fish – who would accuse the poet of condoning terrorism, he also contends that readers should refrain from attributing aesthetic value to a work that condones

[1] Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 9.
[2] "Confronting Religious Violence: Milton's *Samson Agonistes*," *PMLA* (120), 2005: 327–40; 327.
[3] "A Work in Praise of Terrorism?" *Times Literary Supplement* 6, September 2002: 15–16; 15. Quoted in Mohamed, p. 328.

Samson's actions: "September 11 has changed *Samson Agonistes*, because it has changed the readings we can derive from it while still celebrating it as an achievement of the human imagination."[4]

The post-9/11 association of *Samson Agonistes* with terrorism may be a significant development in the history of the critical discussion of Milton's work, one that deserves the kind of careful attention Mohamed accords it.[5] Nevertheless, relying on the biblical figure of Samson to express and comment upon contemporary concerns is not of course new at all, and Milton's decision to rethink and retell the biblical material is itself a response in part to comparable attempts in his own time. As Joseph Wittreich observes, "If the Samson story had been decontextualized in order to pave the way for New Testament contextualizations . . . there was during the Renaissance, especially among typologists, a parallel effort to offer recontextualizations from materials that had been repressed by Reformation theologians but that now acquired new importance and relevance, particularly in the world of politics."[6] Thus, any effort to interpret Milton's recasting of the Samson narrative in his historical, cultural, and political moment must acknowledge the extensive hermeneutic tradition that necessarily shaped the early modern reception of the Biblical account from which he was working.

Mohamed rightly locates recent interpretative convergences of *Samson Agonistes* and terrorism within another hermeneutic tradition – often referred to as the "Milton Controversy" – and he touches briefly on three important moments in that tradition. First, there is T. S. Eliot's contention that Milton's poetry compels us to bring our own "theological and political dispositions" to it, preventing us from appreciating it as simply poetry. Next he refers to Ezra Pound's notorious "'disgust' with Milton's 'asinine bigotry, his beastly hebraism, [and] the coarseness of his mentality.'"[7] Lastly, Mohamed offers up Samuel Johnson's depiction of *Samson* as "the tragedy which ignorance has admired, and bigotry applauded."[8] Only Eliot's position hints at the complexities of making Milton our contemporary that have surfaced in recent readings of *Samson*, though the other two positions

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[4] Quoted in Mohamed, p. 328.
[5] Scholarly reliance on Milton's poetry to interpret and comment upon recent crises is not, of course, new. G. Wilson Knight's 1942 book *The Chariot of War: The Message of John Milton to Democracy*, for example, reads *Paradise Lost* in the context of Britain's struggle against Hitler and Nazi Germany. As one reviewer (Geoffrey Tillotson) observed, "Professor Knight is able to give us not only a book of literary criticism but also a war book about Britain and Hitler (power allied to badness)." Quoted in Stanley Fish, "Transmuting the Lump: *Paradise Lost*, 1942–1979" in *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 247–93; 258.
[6] *Interpreting* Samson Agonistes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
[7] Quoted in Mohamed, p. 328.   [8] Quoted in Mohamed, p. 328.

inadvertently suggest how the deeply emotional responses provoked by the work in the past can begin to explain how and why Milton's dramatic poem has figured in recent, understandably emotional responses to 9/11 by some scholars of literature. Nevertheless, in the introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Milton and the Jews*, Pound's attribution of a "beastly hebraism" to the poet as part of an effort to devalue his work demands our attention.

It wasn't always so. Referring to *Samson Agonistes* as "the ripe and mellow fruit" of Milton's literary career, William Wordsworth observed: "When he wrote that his mind was fully Hebraized. Indeed, his genius fed on the writings of the Hebrew prophets. This arose, in some degree from the temper of the times; the Puritans lived in the Old Testament, almost to the exclusion of the New."[9] For Wordsworth, Milton's "hebraism" is to be celebrated, as it constitutes one of the sources of his "genius." However, what seems most noteworthy here is Wordsworth's instinctual, almost naïve desire to historicize the "hebraism" he finds so laudable by tracing it back to "the temper of the times." Later readers of Milton, most notably since the appearance of Louis Ginzberg's seven-volume compendium of rabbinic stories, *The Legends of the Jews* (1909–1938), have sought to expand upon and fulfill this historicizing desire. Interestingly, however, this effort has in part worked to cast doubt upon the extent to which Milton's "hebraism" was his own as well as the extent to which it nourished his "genius."

Depicting what may have motivated Wordsworth's Puritans to "live in the Old Testament," Golda Werman observes, "Of particular interest to the English Puritans were the ancient Jewish explications dealing with religious and public institutions of the Bible because like the Rabbis they believed in reestablishing a religious order and a political system based on Scripture. Both Jews and Puritans maintained that the Bible, if properly understood, contains the answers to all of life's problems, personal and civil, as well as theological."[10] If this was the "temper of the times," then Milton may have been less intellectually suited to it than Wordsworth supposed. According to Werman, "In the perspective of this Protestant theological zeitgeist, Milton's use of rabbinic materials in his prose works is not especially remarkable and does not indicate a profound knowledge of the Semitic languages. . . . the most plausible conclusion is that he consulted the same translations and lexicons that so many other learned Protestants of his day utilized."[11]

[9] Quoted in *The Romantics on Milton*, ed. Joseph Wittreich (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University, 1970), p. 136.
[10] *Milton and Midrash* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995), p. 30
[11] Werman, p. 30.

Subsequently, she states the case against his knowledge of rabbinic texts even more forcefully: "A close inspection of Milton's use of this material, however, demonstrates that he had such a narrow understanding of the principles he cites that it is inconceivable that he read his Jewish sources in the original."[12] So much for Milton's "hebraism," "beastly" or otherwise. Writing after Werman, scholars such as Jason P. Rosenblatt[13] and Jeffrey S. Shoulson[14] have greatly refined our knowledge of how Milton and some of his contemporaries[15] relied on rabbinical texts and the Hebrew Bible to rethink their relationship to Christianity in an age of tremendous theological turmoil.

My goal here is not to enter into the debate over how much Hebrew Milton knew, or how familiar he was with rabbinic texts,[16] a debate that has attracted a number of scholars since Dennis Saurat,[17] Harris F. Fletcher,[18] and Edward C. Baldwin[19] first weighed in on the topic in the early decades of the twentieth century. Nor is there space here to survey in any detail the scholarly contours of that debate. Rather I think it suffices to point out that Milton has proved to be tremendously implosive in terms of collapsing the Hebraic milieu in which he thought and wrote back into him – in Wordsworthian phrasing, from the "temper of the times" to the "genius" that has come to represent and dominate that cultural moment. Paradoxically, this concentration on Milton's handling of his Semitic sources has contributed, Matthew Biberman argues in this volume, "to the erosion of Milton's cultural capital within the larger academic community." Such an erosion, I would suggest, has facilitated the demonization of *Samson Agonistes* as an endorsement of terrorism.

A certain opposing or explosive movement can recently be discerned in critical approaches to Milton's engagement with the Bible and rabbinical texts. Arguably, however, this trend began in the context of Shakespeare, and has subsequently found its way into Milton studies. Rosenblatt astutely

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[12] Ibid, p. 31.   [13] *Torah and Law in* Paradise Lost (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[14] *Milton and the Rabbis: Hebraism, Hellenism, and Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

[15] The most notable of these contemporaries is, of course, John Selden. See Rosenblatt's recent book, *Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi: John Selden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), for a study of Selden's Hebrew scholarship and its impact on seventeenth-century writers and intellectuals.

[16] See my essay – "'Ill Matching Words and Deeds Long Past': Englished Hebrew and 'the Readmission of the Jews' in *Paradise Lost.*" *Philological Quarterly* (2003): 53–80 – for an effort to examine Milton's "hebraism" without getting bogged down in this debate.

[17] *Milton: Man and Thinker* (New York: Arms Press, Inc, 1925).

[18] *Milton's Semitic Studies* (Chicago: Gordian, 1926).

[19] "Some Extra-Biblical Semitic Influences upon Milton's Story of the Fall of Man," *JEGP* 28 (1929): 366–401.

describes the origins of this movement even as he seeks to shift the scholarly conversation from Milton to John Selden:

Acting on the belief that the stories we tell about others reveal even more about ourselves, recent and well-regarded studies of England and the Jews, during a period that includes Selden's lifetime, have demonstrated that a culture's representation of "otherness" has important consequences for its own self-imagining. The often vile racist stereotypes unearthed by James Shapiro in *Shakespeare and the Jews*[20] can only have meaning if our fantasies about others reveal our deepest fears about ourselves. The fear and loathing of Jews as child abductors, murderers, and cannibals can help explain the confused struggles among the English in the early modern era to develop a religious and national identity in a turbulent time. Judaism as a race, nation, and religion is defined as different in every way from the English Protestantism that it threatened to contaminate.[21]

In light of the uses to which Jews were put in early modern England – and beyond – it is easy to understand why Rosenblatt would want to focus on the work of a writer such as Selden, "whose rabbinic researches," he observes, "are free of Judeophobia."[22] Nevertheless, it will be helpful to tarry here briefly on the threat of "contamination" the Jews represented – in an important sense, were compelled to represent – in England's project to construct a post-reformation Christian identity for itself. To do so, I believe, enables the reader to begin to see the importance of this collection's contribution to our understanding of that project and the role Milton played in it. This double focus, I want to suggest, is at the heart of the present volume because its primary scholarly objective is to have it both ways, as it were: to elucidate the impact of Jews and Jewish texts on Milton's work and to locate Milton in "the times" that enabled Jews and Jewish texts to have such a powerful impact on the poet who wrote those works.

Long persecuted for being the descendants of Christ's killers and allegedly practicing demonic rituals such as murdering Christian boys during the Easter holiday in order to obtain blood for baking Passover matzos, Jews were finally exiled from England in 1290 during the reign of Edward I. As such, for late Medieval and Renaissance England Jews had largely become figments of the collective English imagination, where they figured chiefly as ciphers for all that was improper and un-Christian. As Shapiro has amply

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[20] New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
[21] "John Selden's *De Jure Naturali . . . Juxta Disciplinam* and Religious Toleration," in *Hebraica Veritas? Christian Hebraists and the Study of Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Allison P. Coudert and Jeffrey S. Shoulson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), pp. 102–24; 103.
[22] Rosenblatt, "John Selden's," p. 104.

demonstrated, this strategy of negating Jews in order to strengthen Christian self-definition became even more vital during Shakespeare's lifetime, when the English Reformation – implemented spasmodically over the second half of the sixteenth century – greatly complicated what it meant to be a Christian. What is perhaps most significant about this long and complex period in the history of England's interaction with Jews is that English attitudes were shaped mainly by religious concerns, though some primitive racialist notions of Jewish difference figured in late sixteenth-century English efforts to construct nationalist myths about England's pure Anglo-Saxon origins.

By the time Milton was writing many of the works that have come to be the focus of scholarly efforts to determine his debt to Semitic sources, Jews were on the verge of becoming more than just figments of the English imagination. Indeed, those who participated in the Whitehall Conference of 1655 acknowledged what must have begun to be somewhat apparent to at least some of Milton's intellectual contemporaries: "There is no Law that forbids the Jews' return into *England*."[23] Accordingly, as Biberman – following Shapiro – observes, the "cultural poetics of the Anglo-heritage industry" has positioned Milton "quite precisely as the sign of the end of Shakespeare's England, that Jew-less, lost paradise." It is this transitional moment in England's history, one in which the conflation of imaginary Jews and "real" Jews suddenly becomes possible, that preoccupies a number of the scholars in this volume. Nevertheless, one could argue that such an endeavor represents a kind of back-to-the-futurism, inasmuch as there is something like an important precedent for it within one of the earliest efforts to write a history of English Jewry.

In his *Anglia Judaica: or the History and Antiquities of the Jews in England* (1738), D'Blossiers Tovey begins his analysis of the events leading up to the decision to readmit the Jews to England – after nearly four centuries of exile – with a brief historical overview of English attitudes toward the Jews between the reign of Henry VII and the middle decades of the seventeenth century: "Not one of those good natur'd Ministers of our succeeding Princes . . . gave any Encouragement to the Jews to attempt a Return into that Country, from whence they had so solemnly been banish'd by Parliament, at the request of all the people."[24] Subsequently, in Tovey's account, the ministers experienced a rather striking change of heart: "But when once they observ'd the Fulness of Time was come, when England was to be

[23] Quoted in David S. Katz, *Philosemitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England* 1603–1655 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 243.
[24] New York: Burt Franklin, 1967, p. 259.

punish'd for all her Transgressions . . . They thought that then, if ever, was the proper Time to endeavour their [the Jews'] REESTABLISHMENT."[25] Regarding this abrupt reversal, Katz observes, "The initiative for the return of the Jews to England came from the English themselves and not from the Sephardic Jews who made up the tiny Marrano community in London."[26] However, if England was finally ready for the Jews, Tovey also indicates that the Jews were equally ready to return: "And accordingly we find, that as soon as King Charles was murther'd, the Jews Petition'd the Council of War to endeavour a Repeal of that Act of Parliament which had been made against them. Upon which, one Official remarked, 'A Project never so seasonable, and necessary, as now!'"[27] Having expelled its Jews in 1290, suddenly England had decided it wanted them back. The Jews were only too happy to oblige. Simple enough. Nevertheless, an examination of political, legal, cultural, religious, literary, and imaginary encounters between seventeenth-century England and Jews suggests that the situation was far more complicated than Tovey would have his readers believe. The case of Anne Curtyn, for example, hints at the complexity.

In 1649, the year Charles I was deposed and executed, Curtyn was sent to New Prison at Clerkenwell "for being a professed Jew and causing children to be circumcised."[28] The charges, apparently brought against her for emulating Old Testament rituals, were subsequently dropped because it turned out that she was a Christian, albeit a follower of the radical Puritan John Traske. Seven years before Oliver Cromwell presided over the Whitehall Conference, Curtyn's troubles pointed to something of an identity crisis that Shakespeare's Portia might have expressed as, "which is the Christian here, and which the Jew?" Indeed, the presence of what Inge Leimberg has called "the Jewish remnant"[29] in England during the first half of the seventeenth century was so strongly felt that the term "REESTABLISHMENT" hardly does justice to the moment when the participants in the Whitehall Conference began to contemplate the possibility that Jews might soon occupy the same space as their legacy. Furthermore, it seems clear that the symbolic systems relied upon to distinguish religious, cultural, and national identity were not fully legible. In the particular case of Anglo-Jewish relations, the ability to make such distinctions was greatly complicated by the

[25] Tovey, *Anglia*, p. 259. Typographic emphasis in original.
[26] *The Jews in the History of England 1485–1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 108.
[27] Tovey, *Anglia*, p. 259.
[28] Quoted in James Shapiro, *Shakespeare and the Jews*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 25. Shapiro suggestively argues that questions concerning Jewish identity in early modern England serve as the matrix for larger issues of race, gender, and nationalism in the period.
[29] "The Letter Lost in George Herbert's 'The Jews,'" *Studies in Philology 90* (1993): 298–321; 298.

fact that, as Katz notes, "The only Jews of most people's acquaintance were biblical figures, literary characters, and entirely imaginary, and it may be that this lack of personal contact with such an extraordinary people facilitated their readmission."[30]

In this cultural context, Milton's literary, polemical, and political writings may be viewed as a substantial and intensive effort to identify and define oppositionally what it was to be English and Protestant – and to do so with reference to some rather complex biblical, historical, and imaginary constructions of Israel, Jews, and Judaism. Indeed, as Elizabeth Sauer argues in her essay here, "England achieved its literary embodiment in the imaginatively constructed nations of Spenser and Shakespeare. The nation's main prophet, however, was Milton, whose writings best exhibit the early modern preoccupation with the intersecting identities of ancient Israel and early modern England."[31] Furthermore, given what Katz refers to as "the highly biblical wash over the language of the period" and "the frequency with which the Jews intruded into discussions of all varieties,"[32] Milton's work demands that we consider it in light of those discussions to which he so powerfully contributed. Such a consideration is the primary objective of *Milton and the Jews*, and the contributors to this collection explore nearly every significant phase of Milton's prolific career, with essays ranging in their focus from *Paradise Lost* to *Samson Agonistes*, from the *Aeropagitica* to his translations of the Psalms. Moreover, this collection not only aims to participate in the scholarly conversation about Milton's poetry and prose, but also to investigate the cultural/historical moment in which they were written.

Before offering an overview of the essays that follow, I want to pause for a moment to consider a question germane to this volume and the larger scholarly project to which it hopes to contribute: Given the apparent hostility to Jews and Judaism in Milton's writings, why are so many scholars who have worked on Milton – including some of the contributors to this collection and its editor – Jewish? Matthew Biberman, a Jewish Miltonist who has written a monograph that examines the prominence of anti-Semitism in early modern English literature,[33] briefly touches on this issue. Referring to Robert Adams's critical project to negate the impact of Jewish scholarship on a Milton who, he worries, is "in danger of being forever cast into

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[30] Katz, *Jews*, p. 108.   [31] "Milton's Peculiar Nation," Ch. 3, pp. 37–8.

[32] *Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England 1603–1655* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 8.

[33] *Masculinity, Anti-Semitism and Early Modern English Literature: From the Satanic to the Effeminate Jew* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004).

an 'imbecilic role' as a thinker under 'rabbinic influence,' trafficking in the 'elaborate mass of mumbo jumbo' and 'puerile legends' found in such Judaic texts as the *Zohar*," Biberman sees in such scholarship "a striking impression of Anglo-American academic culture at mid-century as it reacts to the burgeoning influx of Jews."[34] Referring to the same moment in the Anglo-American academy, Stanley Fish asks, "How do postwar changes in the size and constitution of student populations put pressure on literary studies in general and Milton studies in particular?"[35] By way of an answer, Fish observes:

Here one might profitably focus on the extraordinarily large number of Jewish scholars who begin to populate Renaissance studies. For many Miltonists writing before 1945 the problem was to reconcile one's assumed Christianity with the thesis of poetic autonomy; but for many Jewish academics Christianity was an object of study like any other, and consequently they were not about to be made uneasy, as Samuel Johnson was, by the mingling of poetic fictions with "the most awful and sacred truths."[36]

A Jewish Miltonist himself, Fish intimates that a certain lack of emotional attachment and a correlative potential for objectivity was possible for Jewish academics who took up Milton after the war. He does not address the question raised earlier about why such academics would be drawn to a poet who may be portrayed as largely unsympathetic to Jewish issues in his day, especially so soon after the Holocaust. Rather, he asks an alternative question about them, a question he declines to answer: "What influence did the influx of this group and of others hitherto excluded from the academy, either by finances or by visible and invisible quotas, have on the study of *Paradise Lost*?"[37] One answer to Fish's query, which inadvertently invites us to consider the earlier one, can be gleaned from the preoccupation with Milton's thinking about Jews and Judaism in the works of many of these scholars, as well as the work of more recent Jewish Miltonists such as Golda Werman, Jeffrey Shoulson, Jason Rosenblatt, and some of the contributors to this collection. Perhaps a facile explanation for the interest in Milton by Jewish academics can be traced to what Sander Gilman identifies as "the hidden language of the Jews," a kind of Jewish anti-Semitism or Jewish self-hatred."[38] In closing, I want to offer an alternative response, one that I think is borne out by the essays that follow. Regardless of Milton's stance on the Jews, their history, their religion, and their texts, it is clear that he

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[34] "T. S. Eliot, Anti-Semitism, and the Milton Controversy," pp. 118–19.   [35] "Transmuting," p. 289.
[36] Ibid.   [37] Ibid.
[38] *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

thought powerfully about them and took them seriously. Consequently, his work deserves to be treated in a comparable fashion. Offering such a treatment is the primary objective of *Milton and the Jews*.

OVERVIEW

The first three essays introduce many of the central themes of this collection inasmuch as they examine seventeenth-century England's real and imagined encounters with Jews, as well as Milton's position in these encounters. The book begins with an essay by Achsah Guibbory, "England, Israel, and the Jews in Milton's Prose, 1649–1660," that scrutinizes Milton's curious silence on the issue of the readmission of the Jews to England and his failure to speak on their behalf. Looking closely at Milton's polemical prose during the 1640s and 1650s, when the "Jewish question" received a great deal of attention, Guibbory finds that Milton was neither a supporter of the Jews' readmission nor optimistic about their conversion. In her essay, "Milton's Peculiar Nation," Elizabeth Sauer takes up Milton's preoccupation with the role of Israel/England in the drama of Reformation history and his negotiation of the "Hebraism-Judaism" divide in *Paradise Lost*. This analysis enables Sauer to demonstrate how Milton's texts chart an irregular but consistent movement from his attraction to the notion of England as Regnum Christi to his disillusion with the destined heirs of the kingdom. In "Making Use of the Jews: Milton and Philo-Semitism," Nicholas von Maltzahn sees Milton's life and work as a point of intersection between philo-Semitism and anti-Semitism in seventeenth-century England. Examining new biographical details, including Milton's usury, the anti-Semitism of his brother-in-law, Richard Powel, and the poet's friendship with the philo-Semite, Samuel Hartlib, in the context of English Christian literary efforts to appropriate the Hebrew God, von Maltzahn finds important similarities between anti-Semitic and philo-Semitic discourses of the period. These similarities, he contends, have literary consequences, especially for some of Milton's late works such as *Samson Agonistes*, *Paradise Regain'd*, and the Psalm translations published in 1673.

In his essay, "Milton and Solomonic Education," Douglas Trevor studies Milton's heavy reliance on the Hebrew Bible to legitimate his claims, noting that among figures from Hebrew Scripture, few are invoked more frequently by Milton or his contemporaries than the third and last king of united Israel, Solomon. Trevor contends that throughout the multitude of prose works Milton writes during his public career – beginning with his antiprelatical tracts of the early 1640s and continuing through those