

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-89638-2 - Milton and Maternal Mortality
Louis Schwartz
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

MILTON'S POETRY AND THE BURDEN OF FEMALE SUFFERING

This study is an attempt to uncover an aspect of Milton's poetry that has been obscured by the vagaries of history: its part in the dramatic spiritual, intellectual, and psychological struggle that so many men and women of his era had to wage in coming to terms with the suffering and death of women in childbirth. The reproductive imagery of the poetry has, of course, been studied in some detail, especially by feminist critics, who have revealed a good deal about Milton's sometimes vexed relationship with sexual and reproductive life, especially as it was embodied in the women he knew and imagined. It is only very recently, however, that literary scholars have paid much attention to the *material* conditions that Milton would have experienced when it came to childbirth, conditions that over the past twenty years have been explored in some detail by social historians and historians of medicine. Milton was, in fact, deeply concerned with such material conditions. Indeed, during two particularly important periods of his poetic career, his work is marked by a struggle to create a poetic mode capable of offering what he thought of as a theologically and affectively adequate consolation in the face of them. In attempting to do so, Milton was trying to bridge a gap that had opened between literary convention and the highly complex discourses about childbirth that had begun to appear in the medical and religious writings of the era.

Placing Milton in this historical context – one that has only recently been pieced together in enough detail by historians to make it of much use to literary scholars – forces us to rethink a number of the venerable warhorses of Milton criticism. The past twenty years or so of sensitive and searching work on Milton and gender has to some extent laid to rest the old caricature of Milton as a dour misogynist. Most scholars today have a reasonably clear view of what is and what is not “progressive” about Milton in twenty-first-century

terms, and this clarity has allowed us to see where the strangeness and intensity of Milton's poetry often exceeds and overwhelms the unexamined pieties, customs, and prejudices of his age. But it has also allowed us to see more clearly what remains tied to them. Such studies, along with the important work that has been done on Milton's life records since the initial publication of Parker's monumental biography in 1968, have allowed us to make much finer distinctions and judgments than we were able to make before, giving our accounts of Milton's relations with the historical conditions and conflicting ideas of his time more nuance.

A brief anecdote will explain more clearly the sort of nuanced distinction I mean. At a conference a few years ago, I was discussing the implications of a paper I had just given on the reproductive imagery at work in Milton's representation of chaos with a well-known feminist scholar.¹ After musing for a while on what I had argued, she said that she thought it was true that while Milton did not really care about women's *oppression*, he did care about women's *suffering*. I think that this formulation gets it exactly right, and the fine distinction at its heart is of tremendous importance to the argument I mean to present. The "oppression" of women is not a category that would have even occurred to Milton, certainly not in the modern sense of the term. He did, however, as I will demonstrate, have a pained feeling that women bore a greater burden of suffering for original sin than men. He also had an acute and uneasy sense of the seeming injustice of this fact. The curses of Adam and Eve, he realized, were, in important ways, asymmetrical. While they seemed to neatly prescribe two complementary areas of human endeavor (a division of labors, as it were, and hence two equal modes of suffering that dovetailed in a shared mortality), in practical experience they were never quite so "separate but equal." It was true that men suffered in the work that they did, that some died trying to earn bread by the sweat of their brows, and that women suffered – and all too often died – in childbirth, trying to bring new human beings into the world. It was also true, however, that women have never been exempt from productive labor over and above the processes of reproduction, and the domestic labor that followed from it, in a patriarchal society like that of early modern England. Milton himself made sure that his own daughters all learned a productive trade (in this case embroidery), and they all worked at their trade in their adult lives. While it was true that men might, in some circumstances, be called upon to care for children (although this was rare in the seventeenth century), it was also true

¹ This was at the 1999 International Milton Symposium at the University of York, and the scholar in question was Jackie di Salvo. I am deeply grateful to her for the formulation.

that men obviously could not give birth to them, and it was in birth that women met what the culture took to be their most characteristic form of suffering. The only experience that in most circumstances mirrored the gendered exclusivity of childbed suffering was warfare, but in warfare, while soldiers might suffer extravagantly, and while women did not traditionally serve as soldiers, many non-combatants suffered as well. Given the destructiveness that could be unleashed by a group of men set free to loot, burn, rape, and kill in a conquered city, and given the fate of many a woman left behind by a husband or father who died in battle (not to mention the suffering of women who lost children and other relatives), it was clear that women were hardly exempt from the suffering caused by war. The example itself, in fact, suggests a whole host of other ways in which women suffered due to a hierarchy of authority that Milton may not have objected to in principle, but that he knew could be and often was abused. In fact, that hierarchy, ripe for abuse, had also been laid on women as part of their curse, and warfare was not mentioned specifically in God's words to Adam at all.

If men abused their authority and women suffered from that, the fault would have seemed to Milton to lay with the men, not with their God-given authority, and he would have expected women to accept male authority properly exercised. Suffering in childbirth, however, had been ordained directly, and the sheer awfulness of such suffering under contemporary conditions caused Milton, along with many other men and women of his age, to think long and hard about how to approach it within the religious frameworks offered by reformed Christianity. Such thought was especially important given the new importance that Protestantism, along with a host of socio-economic changes in English life, had begun to give to marriage, human reproduction, and the inward experiences of the individual believer.

In the chapters that follow, I will explore the implications that such trends in religious thought and social change had for Milton as he set about trying to fit his sense of the seeming injustice of childbed suffering with his vision of a just and good divinity. He would have been committed to the notion that it only *seemed* unjust, that if the right framework could be found, if the right theology could be articulated, God's ways to Eve and her daughters could be shown to be as justifiable as any of his ways to men. The traditional, and traditionally misogynistic, explanations for the disparity between the two fateful curses laid on Eve and Adam were not satisfying to him, as they were not for a small but still surprising number of writers in the period. Most people accepted that God was right to punish Eve more than Adam because her sin was the first, and because she was guilty of seducing him to follow her. But the theological traditions were not univocal on this

matter, many blaming Adam more for having fallen undeceived, while Eve's guilt was, at least to some extent, mitigated by the fact that the serpent had tricked her. As many commentators have noted, on the face of it, nothing in Genesis suggests anything but the sequence of events. She ate the fruit, then she gave some to him, and he also ate. Milton took that sequence and did some remarkable things with it, often making use of traditional sources but also giving his imagination a certain amount of free rein. He refused to make his Eve a deliberate seductress (whatever effect her sexual allure had on Adam is clearly rooted in his responses, not in her behavior). He also has God clearly make the fact that Eve was deceived by Satan the reason for humankind's redeemability (the rebel angels, who were not deceived, are, in contrast, damned eternally), and he gives Eve the crucial role of reconciler. In Book 10 of *Paradise Lost*, she is the first human being to engage in *imitatio Christi*, and it is the self-sacrificial love behind her gesture that causes Adam's heart to relent towards her, making him commiserate with her for the first time since the Fall, and ensuring that there will, in fact, be a human future to be redeemed by the divine act she unconsciously imitates (*PL*, 10.914–46).

The poem contains a good deal of rhetoric in favor of gender hierarchy, some of it in the words of some pretty authoritative figures (including the Son at 10.147–56), but it is also marked by a counter-discourse that complicates any easy characterization of Milton's views on women. As we will see, in the course of constructing his sometimes ambivalent characterization of Eve, and in the way he treats central female figures at several other points in his work, Milton struggled to identify the proper theological function of the suffering many women experienced in childbirth. As we will also see, many of his decisions, not the least of which was making Eve the original human imitator of Christ, were designed to place that suffering in a context that could offer consolation while still giving full recognition to its peculiar intensity, the power such experiences had, in fact, to mark the limitations of conventional religiosity.

MILTON'S PARTICULAR EXPERIENCES

Milton confronted the death in childbirth of women he knew (or knew of) at, at least, three important moments in his career. The first confrontation concerned a somewhat distant event that struck him at the time, and for various reasons, as a good subject for poetry. On the other two occasions, he was intimately involved. In his early years as a poet, after hearing of the death in childbirth of a gentlewoman who was connected in various ways with people he knew at Cambridge, Milton thought he could dictate to both men

Introduction

5

and women, in elegant poetic form, the theological sense he found he could make of such an experience. However, in later life, after the deaths of his first two wives due to complications arising in childbirth, he found he needed to approach the subject in a humbler, more inconclusive manner. Although this is essentially a book about the poetry he produced in the wake of these events, and although the questions I will be asking and trying to answer are essentially literary ones, it is also a book centrally concerned with the suffering of these three women: Lady Jane Paulet, Mary Powell, and Katherine Woodcock. The first was an aristocrat from a prominent Catholic family close to royal circles. She made an advantageous marriage with Lord John Paulet, fifth Marquis of Winchester, in 1622, and died about nine years later while giving birth to her second son. Milton was among about a half-dozen poets (they included Ben Jonson and William Davenant) who were motivated to compose elegies for her. The other two women were Milton's first and second wives. They were both members of downwardly mobile families of the lower gentry (both married Milton, perhaps, at least in part, to help their families' social and economic standings), and both died due to complications in childbirth, Mary three days after giving birth to her fourth child, and Katherine of a consumption probably contracted in the childbed about three months after giving birth to her first. In both cases, about one month later, a child died (John Jr., Mary's one-year-old son, in the first case, and the newborn infant named for her mother in the second). Milton probably wrote Sonnet 23 sometime shortly after Katherine's death, but as many have felt, and as I will argue, the poem reflects the impact of both deaths.

These three women wrote no poetry themselves (at least nothing survives – there is some evidence that Lady Jane did write); they also left no diaries or letters, and our grasp on their specific historical circumstances is relatively weak. Only the smallest scattering of documentary evidence exists to attest to their ever having lived and breathed at all. Bits of their personalities and bits of the texture of their everyday lives emerge here and there, but it is often hard to tell fact from conventional idealization or, in the case of Mary, from the negative implications of circumstances we only imperfectly grasp. However, because among the documents that survive are the two poems I have already mentioned, as well as a broadly distributed set of puzzling and deeply moving passages in Milton's works, whose pattern can be traced from the early 1630s until at least the late 1660s, these three women have inhabited – with varying degrees of vividness – the minds of Milton's readers for more than three-and-a-half centuries.

Some of these poems and passages have been studied in detail, but they have never been given the systematic attention they deserve as a set. The

three women have also never been thought of together in terms of what their experiences and fates might have meant to the poet whose works and biography links them. I have therefore attempted to gain access, imaginatively and intellectually, to the childbirth experiences of these three women, and those of any number of women like them in the early years of the seventeenth century, providing for the first time a comprehensive and historically informed gloss on Milton's scattered but purposeful allusions to childbed suffering, and demonstrating the impact that such suffering had on his imagination.

I will argue that the deaths of Katherine, Mary, and to a lesser extent Lady Jane need to be counted among the constellation of causes, not only for the sonnet and "An Epitaph on the Marchioness of Winchester" (hereafter "An Epitaph"), but for *Paradise Lost* itself, which some biographers believe Milton began writing in earnest just after or around the time of the deaths of Katherine and her infant daughter. In other words, at a key moment in his life as a poet, Milton found himself engaged in two struggles: one with the composition of an epic, the other with a personal loss that painfully echoed both an earlier loss and an earlier artistic achievement. The two struggles dovetailed, the latter being among the forces driving the former, and they marked the poem he finally produced with a strange and unconventional network of figures.

MILTON AND THE POETRY OF CHILDBED SUFFERING

The fact that Milton wrote as he did about death in childbirth is a stranger thing than might at first appear. Women of the upper and middle classes in the rapidly growing cities and towns of the era, especially in London, were dying in childbed at a rate approaching one in every forty births – that is, at a rate some 300 times higher than is common today in the industrialized West, about four or five times higher than is common today in the developing world, and about twice the rate estimated for most of rural England at the time. Poets of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, however, who were for the most part from the middling and upper classes, and most of whom were either native to London or spent the majority of their professional lives in or around it, did not by and large concern themselves with this suffering in their work, at least not directly, and certainly not systematically. They had no large storehouse of conventional figures for the description of death in childbirth; the genres of funereal verse were not regularly and conventionally adapted to its occasion. With a few striking exceptions, poets did not see it as their task to provide readers with a way of alleviating

Introduction

7

the particular anxieties that such deaths inspired (anxieties that, as we shall see, most people in the period lived with as a matter of course). Few poets even tried, tending instead to ignore the subject even when writing occasional verse about women who did die as a consequence of childbirth.

As we shall see, there were many reasons for this. Why Milton, however, should have been one of the few to ignore those reasons and to treat the subject both directly and systematically is a question worth examining in some detail. He was certainly not the only writer to have had experience, both personal and otherwise, with the deaths of women in childbirth. Like other men in the period, he read some of the medical literature concerned with human reproduction; he attended sermons preached on the occasions of churchings, baptisms, and at the funerals of women who had died giving birth. He heard the murmured prayers of the women surrounding his own birth. He heard the murmured prayers of the women surrounding his mother and his older sister. In all probability, although he never records it, he prayed along with them from outside the chamber for the safe delivery of these women and for the lives and the health of their infants. He certainly came across prayers composed for such occasions. They commonly appeared in the many works of theology, devotion, and exegesis he studied and used in his work. When he was a young man, however, he had no particular reason to find the subject of specifically *poetic* interest. No more than any other ambitious young poet might. But his attention was, in fact, directed toward the subject, and toward the theological and psychological difficulties it presented, from very early on.

The anomaly of Milton's concern, and the nature of the ambitions it inspired, is worthy of study, in part because it reveals a great deal about why most poets did not concern themselves with the problems of maternal suffering and mortality. This is not to say that the culture at large was silent in the face of such suffering. Indeed, the seventeenth century saw a veritable explosion of writing on the subject, and as I will show later, Milton was certainly familiar with a wide range of these materials, as well as with some of the small number of poems that had, in fact, attempted to engage the subject. Bringing the context of childbirth lore and practice to a study of Milton's poetry allows us, in fact, to explain the way certain literary forms and conventions operating in particular historical circumstances imposed limitations on the ability of poets to engage certain subjects. It also allows us to explore how these limitations could sometimes be overcome for the accomplishment of ends that were in some ways alien to the ostensible purposes of the forms and conventions themselves. It is one of my larger arguments that the striking originality of *Paradise Lost* was to some extent

inspired by an attempt to overcome conventional limitations in the face of the particular subject matter of childbed suffering. That attempt is certainly responsible for much of what remains uncanny and fascinating about the poem for modern readers.

At first, in the epitaph for Lady Jane, Milton confronted death in child-birth as an ambitious artist with a clear theological and vocational mandate. He attempted to explain this kind of suffering and to offer consolation by wrestling with the conventions of the funeral elegy until they could address the specific occasion. At the same time, he used images derived from such suffering to heighten the drama of his own self-representation within the poem, the way he represented his own struggle to imagine and compose it. Throughout his early work, he tended to think of that process, in line with conventional Renaissance medicine and psychology, as itself reproductive and fraught with danger. He might, he thought, give birth to monsters, or his aspirations might be aborted; his imagination might prove sterile, or its processes might kill the poems it struggled to bring to birth. Indeed, it is in terms of birth that he struggled – in poems like “On Shakespear” and “On the Morning of Christs Nativity” – with his own developing sense of visionary vocation. In *A Mask*, he tried to find decorous ways of making childbed suffering a part of what he imagined his young female protagonist would face as she passed through puberty and into adult married life. This habit of mind followed him into his later years. However, after his own personal, marital experiences with childbed suffering, he came to approach the subject in less conclusive and confident ways. In his later works, he paid more attention to the physical details of birth. He also came to see the representation of such details as a theological and aesthetic challenge to which he would have to rise in a new way (and with, as we will see, equivocal results).

Theologically, it required a confrontation with passages in Genesis 3 and with questions of divine justice that would ultimately become central to his epic poem. Aesthetically, it continued to force him to mix and alter genres in order to find ways in which they might be made to handle these theological questions more adequately. It also forced him, within the requirements of rhetorical decorum, to find ways of representing the kind of frighteningly grotesque and painful physical experiences that readers of his age (including himself) would have found impossible to deal with mimetically in any direct way. Most importantly, childbed suffering gave a particular shape to both the sense of lost innocence and the search for restoration that pervade *Paradise Lost*. He came to place birth at the heart of his ideal vision of what humanity lost with Eden, and, perhaps even more

painfully, at the heart of the only process he believed would allow humanity to return to that paradise. For Milton, human reproduction became both the sword and gate at the entrance to Eden. It stood between the fallen world and what it had lost, suggesting, too, what it might regain, how it might do so, and just how difficult that process could be.

THE SCOPE AND STRUCTURE OF THIS STUDY

The bulk of this study is a detailed examination of “An Epitaph,” “On Shakespear,” *A Mask*, Sonnet 23, and *Paradise Lost*, but it begins with a sketch of the social history of childbirth in the period. This sketch, which makes up the three chapters of Part I, pays particular attention to what we know and what we do not know about maternal mortality and its larger cultural effects. It also closely examines the role religious discourses played in the management of obstetric anxieties, and concludes with a discussion of what Milton is likely to have known, suggesting where his work fits into the wide array of materials and ideas covered in the section as a whole. Part II of the study then looks at Milton’s work in the 1630s, beginning with a discussion of the strange reproductive imagery of his early poem for Shakespeare, moving through an extended discussion of “An Epitaph” and ending with a discussion of *A Mask*. The discussion of “An Epitaph” reads the poem against the backdrop of elegiac conventions in general, while also showing how Milton adapted motifs he may have encountered in childbed prayers, marriage sermons, and a little known elegy by Michael Drayton, which may have been his primary model. The section also discusses how other poets approached the subject (when they paid attention to it at all), why so few of them ventured to do so, and what might have motivated Milton to write about it so elaborately and ambitiously. The concluding section on *A Mask* discusses the network of reproductive images that Milton wove into his text, and how the implications of these images are summed up in the allegorical tableau that he created for the conclusion of its printed version. This tableau strikingly alludes to the conclusion of the epitaph for Lady Jane Paulet, and suggests the importance of married reproductive life in Milton’s imagination of Lady Alice Egerton’s future.

Part III of the book is devoted to Milton’s later poetic work. The first chapter (Chapter 7) offers an extended reading of Sonnet 23 that suggests a new way of understanding both the poem’s allusive structure and its complicated relationship to biographical context. I discuss the significance of the poem’s allusion to the Churching of Women, a popular Anglican rite that celebrated a woman’s survival of childbirth and welcomed her back into

the community of worshipers, suggesting a reconsideration of Parker's argument that the poem concerns Mary Powell rather than Katherine Woodcock. The poem, I argue, uses images derived from churching, as well as from mythology and the Bible, as signs of the speaker's complex of mourning and guilt over the deaths of *both* of his late wives in circumstances related to childbirth. Its allusive structure, in some ways a reworking of the one Milton employed in the epitaph for Lady Jane, is remarkable, not only for its attempt to provide an aesthetic conciliation with maternal mortality, but also for its guilt-ridden concentration on men's exemption from the risks women took each time they had sexual intercourse.

The poem's fall back into darkness at its end suggests, however, an ambivalence that Milton felt could not be resolved in fourteen lines. At the end of the chapter, I discuss the fact that Milton echoes the first and last lines of the sonnet in Adam's description of the "birth" of Eve (*PL*, 8.452–90) as well as the fact that this description includes details derived from contemporary medical descriptions of obstetric surgery, as well as iconographic traditions associated with childbirth and caesarian section. The "birth" of Eve is a central moment in the epic, a central marker of Milton's personal investment in the poem, and part of a network of images of reproductive suffering and consolation that Milton distributed throughout its structure. His purpose in doing so, I argue, is to use the machinery of his epic theodicy to resolve the deep ambivalence that he and his culture as a whole felt about childbirth, given the nature of contemporary conditions.

The second chapter of Part III (Chapter 8) extends my analysis of this network to the allegory of Sin and Death (*PL*, 2.629–889), showing how Milton deliberately constructed the episode to emphasize figures of pregnancy, birth, disfigurement, and specifically female states of physical vulnerability. Sin's account of her transforming and torturous births closely follows what most educated Londoners knew about birth from medical and midwifery texts, as well as what they themselves would have frequently experienced or witnessed, not only as fathers or as male obstetric practitioners, but as gossips, midwives, sisters, and especially as mothers themselves. This leads me to revise certain commonly held notions about the function of Milton's allegory, suggesting that it provides a set of positions from which both men and women could contemplate childbed suffering as a figure for the fallen condition itself.

The chapter concludes with a reading of the last three books of the epic, in which I show that Milton found himself in a difficult rhetorical situation, having to set the consoling figure of the Nativity against the mounting reasons to despair offered by Michael's prophetic vision of the history of the