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Stephen B. Dobranski
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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Milton*

John Milton is one of the most important and influential writers in English literary history. The goal of this book is to make Milton's works more accessible and enjoyable by providing a comprehensive overview of the author's life, times, and writings. It describes essential details from Milton's biography, explains some of the cultural and historical contexts in which he wrote, offers fresh analyses of his major pamphlets and poems – including *Lycidas*, *Areopagitica*, and *Paradise Lost* – and describes in depth traditional and recent responses to his reputation and writings. Separate sections focus on important concepts or key passages from his major works to illustrate how readers can interpret – and get excited about – Milton's writings. This detailed and engaging introduction to Milton will help readers not only to understand better the author's life and works but also to appreciate why Milton matters.

STEPHEN B. DOBRANSKI is Professor of early modern literature and textual studies at Georgia State University.

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for Shannon and Audrey

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Illustration acknowledgements

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Preface

John Milton often intimidates today's readers – and with good reason. He is one of the most important and imposing writers in British literary history. Introducing a selection of Milton's works, the editors of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* coolly observe that “in his time” he “likely” “read just about everything of importance written in English, Latin, Greek, and Italian,” adding parenthetically that “of course, he had the Bible by heart.” The grand yet subtle style of Milton's individual works can seem especially daunting. Much of his poetry and prose addresses subjects that students find remote and explores or alludes to a historical period with which students are not conversant. Milton also wrote in unfamiliar genres – epic, ode, and pastoral, for example – and his works contain classical and biblical allusions that seem increasingly obscure to today's readers.

The goal of this book is to make Milton's works more accessible and enjoyable by providing an overview of the author's life, times, and writings. It describes essential details from Milton's biography, explains some of the cultural and historical contexts in which he wrote, offers suggestions for how to read his major pamphlets and poems – including *Lycidas*, *Areopagitica*, and *Paradise Lost* – and describes in clear language influential critical interpretations of Milton's works.

In each of these discussions, the book emphasizes Milton's social practices of writing. While Milton has traditionally been depicted as an isolated genius holding exclusive conversation with Homer, Virgil, and God, this introduction will demonstrate that, on the contrary, he was more engaged with his contemporaries than his classical forebears. Each of the first four chapters accordingly begins with one of Milton's literal conversations. These exchanges represent a crucial part of his process of writing, as Milton described it in *Areopagitica*, and also seem to have influenced the structure of his poetry and prose, both of which often depend on a dialogic form. The book's thesis is that Milton – from his interaction with early modern thinkers and writers, to the social genesis of his prose and occasional poetry, to his collaborations with members of the book trade – was not an isolated artist. This book

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will help readers better understand his works by illustrating how and why he wrote them and by explaining how various personal relationships affected his thinking. This inclusive approach to Milton's authorship should also help to make his individual works less daunting. As an instructor, I have found that students gain new confidence and take more risks with their own interpretations once they realize that Milton's texts are not the sudden inspiration of a solitary genius but instead consist of choices made by a human being who, like themselves, cooperated in a process of writing.

Another notable feature of this book is its practical focus on how to read Milton's prose and poetry. If the emphasis on Milton's writing practices helps to humanize him as an author, the book's close readings and detailed summaries should make the meanings of his individual pamphlets and poems more accessible. Sometimes set off from the rest of the text in shaded boxes with separate titles, these sections focus on important concepts or key passages from his major works to illustrate how readers can interpret – and get excited about – Milton's writings. Each of the separate analyses is supplemented by a discussion of the work's larger themes and structure so that readers can then apply the interpretive strategies used in these sections to an understanding of the work as a whole.

The book comprises five chapters: Life, Contexts, Prose, Poetry, and Afterlife. Following a list of Milton's significant dates, Chapter 1 presents an overview of the author's biography with an emphasis on how his experiences directly and indirectly shaped his writings. This first chapter also addresses Milton's engagement with specific historical events such as the controversy over church hierarchy during the 1640s and the creation of a new English government in 1649. Chapter 2 then provides a fuller treatment of some significant cultural and historical contexts. This chapter examines how Milton was influenced by – and how he influenced – the seventeenth century's literary, political, and theological climate.

Chapters 3 and 4, dealing respectively with Milton's prose and poetry, address his works' imagery, themes, and genres. These chapters also describe the genesis of his major works, Milton's revisions to his works after they were published, and the implications of his works' printed design and layout. In addition, both chapters incorporate separate sections of close readings to show students how to read Milton and to explain clearly what makes his writing so powerful.

Finally, Chapter 5 on Milton's critical reception should help readers understand the author's place within English literary history. This chapter describes both traditional and recent responses to Milton and illustrates how scholars have illuminated the meanings of Milton's works. Complementing this last

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chapter is a guide to additional readings for students who wish to pursue some of the subjects addressed in the preceding sections. Students should consult this list in combination with the works cited in the notes. The book's overarching goal is to provide a detailed and engaging introduction to John Milton so that readers not only will better understand his life and writings but also will be inspired to do further reading and research.

For their astute insights on individual chapters, I am indebted to John Rumrich, Dennis Danielson, Stephen Fallon, Laura Lunger Knoppers, and David Loewenstein. Their detailed suggestions and corrections helped me to improve matters, both large and small. For reading and commenting on the entire manuscript, I am especially grateful to my wife, Shannon. Her support during the researching and writing of this book was once again indefatigable. This book is also dedicated to our daughter Audrey, without whom it would have been written in half the time – and with half the joy. The mistakes that remain are my own.

Chronology

1608	Milton born in Cheapside, London (9 December at 6:30 a.m.)
1611	Amelia Lanyer's <i>Salve Deus rex Judaeorum</i> published
1616	Ben Jonson's <i>Works</i> published
1618	Thirty Years War begins
1620	Enters St. Paul's School, London
1621	Robert Burton's <i>The Anatomy of Melancholy</i> published
1623	William Shakespeare's First Folio published
1625	Admitted to Christ's College, Cambridge
	King Charles I crowned
1628	First poem printed (probably <i>De Idea Platonica</i>)
1629	Takes BA degree (January)
	Charles I disbands Parliament, marking the beginning of the King's Personal Rule (March)
	"On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" composed
1632	Takes MA degree, <i>cum laude</i> (July)
	"An Epitaph on the admirable Dramaticke Poet W. Shakespeare" published in Shakespeare's second folio
	Takes up residence with his family in Hammersmith
1633	John Donne's <i>Poems</i> published
	George Herbert's <i>The Temple</i> published
1634	<i>A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle</i> performed (29 September)
1635	Takes up residence with family at Horton
1637	Milton's mother dies (April)
	<i>A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle</i> published
1638	<i>Lycidas</i> published in <i>Justa Edouardo King</i>
	Leaves England for a Continental journey (May)
	Charles Diodati dies
1639	Returns to England (July)
1640	<i>Epitaphium Damonis</i> published

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Chronology xv

- Moves to his own house in Aldersgate and begins teaching his first two pupils, his nephews John and Edward Phillips
 Thomas Carew's *Poems* published
 The assembly of the Long Parliament
 Archbishop William Laud impeached
 The civil wars begin
- 1641 *Of Reformation Touching Church-Discipline in England* published (May)
Of Prelatical Episcopacy published (June or July)
Animadversions upon the Remonstrants Defence published (July)
- 1642 *The Reason of Church-Government Urg'd against Prelaty* published (January or February)
An Apology against a Pamphlet Called A Modest Confutation published (April)
 Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* published
 Parliament closes the theaters
 Marries Mary Powell, who returns home to her family roughly one month later
- 1643 *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* published (August)
- 1644 Revised second edition of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* published (February)
Of Education published (June)
The Judgement of Martin Bucer published (August)
Areopagitica published (November)
- 1645 *Colasterion* and *Tetrachordon* published (March)
Poems of Mr. John Milton, both English and Latin, Compos'd at Several Times registered (published January 1646)
 Mary Powell Milton returns to her husband
- 1646 Daughter Anne born (July)
- 1647 Milton's father dies (March)
- 1648 Daughter Mary born (November)
 Robert Herrick's *Hesperides* and *Noble Numbers* published
- 1649 King Charles I executed (January)
The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates published (February)
 Appointed Secretary for Foreign Tongues (March)
Observations on the Articles of Peace published (May)
Eikonoklastes published (October)
- 1650 Revised second edition of *Eikonoklastes* published (after 19 June)

xvi	<i>Chronology</i>
1651	<i>Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio</i> published (February) Son John born (March)
1652	Becomes completely blind Formally questioned regarding the licensing of <i>The Racovian Catechism</i> (also known as <i>Catechesis Ecclesiarum quae in Regno Poloniae</i>) Daughter Deborah born (May) Mary Powell Milton dies (May) Son John dies (June) Anglo-Dutch War begins (1652–54)
1653	Oliver Cromwell established as Lord Protector (December)
1654	<i>Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio Secunda</i> published (May)
1655	<i>Pro Se Defensio</i> published (August)
1656	Marries second wife, Katherine Woodcock (November)
1657	Daughter Katherine born (October)
1658	Katherine Woodcock Milton dies (February) Daughter Katherine dies (March) Oliver Cromwell dies; his son Richard is installed as successor (September) Revised second edition of <i>Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio</i> published (October)
1659	<i>A Treatise of Civil Power</i> published (February) <i>Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings</i> published (August) <i>Letter to a Friend Concerning the Ruptures of the Commonwealth</i> written (October) (first published in 1698) <i>Proposalls of Certaine Expedients</i> written (November) (first published in 1938)
1660	<i>The Readie and Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth</i> published (February) (the revised second edition published in April) <i>The Present Means ... of a Free Commonwealth</i> written (March) (first published 1698) <i>Brief Notes upon a Late Sermon</i> published (April) Charles II returns to London and monarchy restored in England (May) Briefly imprisoned and fined Royal Society founded
1663	Marries third wife, Elizabeth Minshull (February)
1665	Outbreak of the Great Plague

- 1666 Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* published
 Great Fire (September)
- 1667 *Paradise Lost* published (October)
- 1669 *Accedence Commenc't Grammar* published (June)
- 1670 *The History of Britain* published (November)
- 1671 *Paradise Regained ... Samson Agonistes* published
- 1672 *Artis Logicae* published
- 1673 *Of True Religion, Heresie, Schism, Toleration* published (before May)
Poems, &c. upon Several Occasions with *Of Education* published
 (before November)
- 1674 Revised second edition of *Paradise Lost* published
 Milton's translation of *A Declaration, or Letters Patent* published
 (July)
 Milton dies at age sixty-five (8 or 9 November) and is buried in
 St. Giles Church in Cripplegate (12 November)
Epistolarum Familiarium published (May)
- 1676 *Litterae Pseudo-Senatus Anglicani* (Letters of State) published
- 1681 *The Character of the Long Parliament* published
- 1682 *A Brief History of Moscovia* published
- 1694 *Letters of State* (English translation) published, including Milton's
 previously unpublished sonnets to Oliver Cromwell, Thomas
 Fairfax, and Cyriack Skinner
- 1823 Manuscript of *De Doctrina Christiana* discovered in the State Papers
 Office (published 1825)
- 1874 Milton's commonplace book is discovered at Netherby Hall,
 Cumberland (published 1876)

Abbreviations

- CPEP* *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007).
- CPMP* *Complete Poetry and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Macmillan, 1957).
- CPW* *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82).
- EL* *The Early Lives of Milton*, ed. Helen Darbishire (London: Constable, 1932).
- LR* *The Life Records of John Milton*, ed. J. Milton French, 5 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1949–58).
- OED* *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn.
- WJM* *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank Allen Patterson, 18 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–38).

Citations and line numbers for Milton's poetry, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *CPEP*. Citations to classical works are to the Loeb editions published by Harvard University Press; citations to the Bible are taken from the King James Version.