MILTON’S LATE POEMS

Upending conventional scholarship on Milton and modernity, Lee Morrissey recasts *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* as narrating three alternative responses to a world in upheaval: adjustment, avoidance, and antagonism. Through incisive engagement with narrative, form, and genre, Morrissey shows how each work, considered specifically as a fiction, grapples with the vicissitudes of a modern world characterized more by paradoxes, ambiguities, subversions, and shifting temporalities than by any rigid historical periodization. The interpretations made possible by this book are as invaluable as they are counterintuitive, opening new definitions and stimulating avenues of research for Milton students and specialists, as well as for those working in the broader field of early modern studies. Morrissey invites us to rethink where Milton stands in relation to the greatest products of modernity, and in particular to that most modern of genres, the novel.

Lee Morrissey is Alumni Distinguished Professor of English at Clemson University, USA. He is the author of *The Constitution of Literature: Literacy, Democracy, and Early English Literary Criticism* (2008) and *From the Temple to the Castle: An Architectural History of English Literature, 1660–1760* (1999), and is a co-author of *English Literature in Context* (2008, rev. 2nd ed. 2017).
MILTON’S LATE POEMS

Forms of Modernity

LEE MORRISSEY

Clemson University
## Contents

*Preface*  
Preface: Forms of Modernity  

1. “Sense Variously Drawn”: On Reading *Paradise Lost*  
2. The Reformation of *Paradise Lost*: Moderating Modernity with Measurement  
3. *Paradise Regained*: An Aesthetic for a New Ascetic  

Conclusion: “The Modern Paradox”: Temporal Forms of Modernity  

*Acknowledgments*  

*Bibliography*  

*Index*
Preface

In Milton’s Late Poems: Forms of Modernity, I consider Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, and Samson Agonistes as typologies of different responses to modernity: adjusting, avoiding, and antagonizing. Although contrasting, these responses can overlap at the same time, as they do in the single volume in which Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes were published, thereby raising important questions about periodization (including the periodization of modernity itself). In each case, the poems’ typology hinges on the very ending of the poem: Adam and Eve through Eden “with wandering steps and slow” (xii.648), adjusting to the new conditions; the Son of God “Home to his mother’s house private returned” (iv.639), stepping away from the temptations associated with the new conditions; and Samson “calm of mind all passion spent” (1758), having obliterated the nobles of the ethnic Other that represented modernity. Across his late poetry we can see Milton imagining his way into a set of patterns, older patterns, which unfolded in his time.

In 1649, Charles Stuart, King of England, Scotland, and Ireland, placed his neck on a chopping block outside the Banqueting Hall in Whitehall, London and awaited the executioner’s axe. Moments later, the executioner picked up the severed head of the monarch and showed it to the crowd, an event with no parallel in English history. Never since has an English monarch been executed, and it would be nearly a century and a half before a French monarch would be executed. Such an extraordinary event affected the course not only of English history, but also of English historiography. Eleven years later, in 1660, Charles Stuart, son of Charles I, landed at Dover and made his way to London, where he and thereby the Stuarts were restored to the throne as kings of Scotland, England, and Ireland. Nine of those involved in the execution of his father were themselves executed. The bodies of several prominent figures from the eleven-year Interregnum were disinterred and decapitated – including that of Oliver Cromwell, who had led the Parliamentary army against Charles I and had
Preface

run the English government for all but two years of the Interregnum. It is a reversal without parallel in English history, so much so that the name of the event also names the historical period: the Restoration. It would be more than a century and a half before the extended French Revolution would experience its own Restoration, the 1814 return of a Bourbon to the French throne.

Within little more than a decade, that is, England went from executing one Stuart monarch to restoring his son. Between the execution of one king and the restoration of his son, it would seem that England underwent a profound change and a profound reversal. As a result, the historiography of seventeenth-century English politics is among the richest – and most complicated – in British political history. For some, democracy carried the day and defused the religio-political crises of the seventeenth century. (We might call this the Whig position.) For some, the Interregnum is a profound disruption, a destabilizing break in the order of things, multiplying in the seventeenth century the religio-political crises of the sixteenth century. (We might call this the Tory position.) Both sides are right, although in ways that confuse the usual distinctions: Democracy is not necessarily pacifying, progressive, or secular; and, from the execution of Charles I to the Restoration of Charles II, it is not clear how disruptive the execution of the monarch proves to be.

John Milton was a public participant in the extraordinary events during the middle of the seventeenth century in England (e.g., defending the execution of Charles I, working for the Cromwell government during the Interregnum, and arguing against the Restoration in 1660). In part as a consequence, the reception of Milton’s late poetry has a deeply literary-biographical bent. Taking what Sharon Achinstein calls “an unabashedly ‘intentionalist’ approach,” scholars speculate about Milton’s intentions, assume that his intentions differ with each of the three poems, and tend to presume in practice that Milton’s intentions can be determined with ever greater attention to the circumstances of each poem’s drafting, publishing, revising, and even republishing. ¹ Usually, Milton’s three late poems are read biographically, as evidence of his increasing resignation and frustration in the years following the Restoration. In such readings, Milton, out of power in Restoration England, laments, for example, a possible Paradise, lost; or, embittered by the solidifying gains of the Stuart administration, Milton imagines a violent revenge in the figure of Samson, the blind captive with underestimated strength. Such a combination of shifts in personal outlook over a single decade (and a decade late in life at that) is most unlikely, although the presumption continues to inform scholarship.
Preface

In part, these literary-biographical approaches stem from the fact that periodization has long been a problem for Milton’s work. When Milton was born, Shakespeare was still writing; when Milton died, John Dryden was the poet laureate, and prose fiction was gaining in popularity. In between, Milton lived through, participated in, and responded to the Civil Wars of the 1640s, the Interregnum of the 1650s, and the Restoration of 1660. To which period should we say his work belongs: The Age of Shakespeare? The Civil Wars? The War of Four Kingdoms? The Restoration? The seventeenth century? Milton’s major poems were all published late in his life, after the Restoration, between 1667 and 1674, but this has never sufficed to make him a Restoration poet. Instead, Milton scholarship often sees his later work through the lens of the earlier decades, understandably, given his various and well-documented political commitments in those decades and his reporting early his intention “to fix all the industry and art I could unite to the adorning of my native tongue … but to be an interpreter & relater of the best and sagest things.” Such looking homeward to his earlier life and work risks turning his late poems into self-referential, Whitmanian exercises in self-examination, though, and creates the impression that the poems matter because Milton matters. Moreover, Milton “periodizes” his major works at, variously, the dawn of time, a moment in the ancient history of Israel, and early in the life of Jesus. In this way, Milton’s late poetry confounds periodization even as his earlier prose invites it.

In *Forms of Modernity*, by contrast, I ask: what if we did not read *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* as poems about Milton (or Milton and his time)? The intentionalist approach to the late poem’s narratives assumes that in the four years between the first editions of *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Samson Agonistes* (1671) Milton is – sequentially – learning how to live with the consequences of an earth-shaking decision (as Adam and Eve do at the end of *Paradise Lost*), is then ready to go off to his own private world away from the modern (as the Son does at the end of *Paradise Regained*), and then is interested in pushing it all down (as Samson does at the end of *Samson Agonistes*). Furthermore, to this way of thinking, in the last three years of his life, Milton revises all that thinking, leading to the new, twelve-book edition of *Paradise Lost* (1674). In “Cloudless Thunder: Milton in History” (2008), Achinstein wonders if “perhaps the release from the grip of intention-bound criticism could open up Milton studies to new ideas and new resources of creativity.” The key to that intriguing approach would be to think about Milton historically without assuming that his major poems represented his (nearly) last attempts to convey for posterity his intentions about his own time period. In other words, getting
the context right is important for getting Milton and our sense of the past right, too, but care must be taken not to turn all he wrote into writing about himself – and his specific times. After the Restoration, I argue here, Milton is thinking about how people react to apparently epochal changes. Milton’s late poems offer representations not only of an unanticipated convulsive event, but also of differing reactions to it.

With *Forms of Modernity*, then, I consider tensions between the poems, not to reconcile them, nor to link them to Milton’s times and moods, but instead to consider how they represent larger patterns of differences. What Milton lived through – the precise biographical context about which scholarship has revealed so much over the last few decades – will never happen again. However, the patterns – the forms – he sees in his times, and reconstructs for us out of literary history in his late poetry, do recur. “At the end of modernity reappear the unresolved problems of its beginnings,” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri contend in *Multitude*. The antagonistic relationships between *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* highlight the unresolved problems of the modernity to which Hardt and Negri refer, its seventeenth-century genesis, so to speak – tensions over representative democracy, the role of scientific method, and new distinctions between public and private. Actually, Milton traces such unresolved problems to the beginning of human history – indeed, before humans came into being.

Building on my previous two monographs, *From the Temple to the Castle* (1999) and *The Constitution of Literature* (2008), both of which begin with Milton, *Forms of Modernity* combines the earlier attention to form and the politics of literacy into the current consideration of different forms of modernity across Milton’s late poems. Less visible, but also scaffolding the present book, is my experience as a student and a teacher of Milton’s works. From the divided Boston of Bibles, Brahmins, and bosses I moved to a much more multicultural, arts-rich New York City, before relocating to teach at Clemson University in the rural foothills of the South Carolina Blue Ridge mountains. Just by moving down the eastern seaboard of the United States, from undergraduate education in Boston, to postgraduate studies in New York City, to teaching, nearly annually, a semester-long course on John Milton in Clemson, South Carolina, I experienced multiple, even conflicting, contemporaneous forms of modernity. These experiences inform my reading of Milton’s three late poems.

After the attack on the Capitol of the United States, the Insurrection of January 6, 2021, it has become easier to convey the disjunctions implied by my geographically separated experiences. Sometimes, as Balachandra Rajan reminds us, “poems are read by events as well as by readers.” On
that day, with the rollout of a new type of mRNA vaccine underway (a vaccine made possible by so many advances in science), with millions trying to stay safe by keeping their distance at home, and with the US Capitol being attacked by a mob (some members of which were dressed in animal skins), the terms of Milton’s three late poems played out together in real time, practically in the same place, just as I believe he realized they had done in his life: the experiment in Paradise Lost, the withdrawal from the world in Paradise Regained, and the use of the primitive tools (amidst the columns) in Samson Agonistes.

In her “Afterword” to Feisal Mohamed and Patrick Fadely’s Milton’s Modernities (2017), Achinstein asks two related questions: “How can a reading of Milton contribute to an understanding of modernity? And how can a reading of modernity contribute to a reading of Milton?” My own sense is that the conflicting forms of modernity (and conflicts between them) recently on display illustrate the need for a more nuanced vision of modernity, one toward which Milton’s three late poems, together, push us. Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, and Samson Agonistes can help us understand these recent events, and recent conflictual events can help us understand Milton’s three poems. While I cannot help but think, with Wordsworth, “Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour,” I also believe that Milton’s three late poems and their accompanying prefatory instructions to future readers – us – mean that he can live with us now.7 Maybe he does.

Notes
