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## The Value of Milton

In *The Value of Milton*, leading critic John Leonard explores the writings of John Milton from his early poetry to his major prose. Milton's work includes one of the most difficult and challenging texts in the English literary canon, yet he remains impressively popular with general readers. Leonard demonstrates why Milton has enduring value for our own time, both as a defender of political liberty and as a poet of sublimity and terror who also exhibits moments of genuine humanity and compassion. A poet divided against himself, Milton offers different rewards to different readers. *The Value of Milton* examines not only the significance of his most celebrated verse but the function of biblical allegory, classical culture, and the moods, voice, and language that give Milton's writings their perennial appeal.

**John Leonard** is Professor of English at the University of Western Ontario. His books *Naming in Paradise* and *Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of Paradise Lost, 1667–1970* won the Milton Society of America's James Holly Hanford Award. He became an Honored Scholar of the Milton Society of America in 2014 and Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2015.

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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107664791](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107664791)

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First published 2016

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Leonard, John, 1940– author.

The value of Milton / John Leonard.

New York : Cambridge University Press, 2016. | Series: The value of

LCCN 2015036055 | ISBN 9781107664791 (paperback)

LCSH: Milton, John, 1608–1674 – Criticism and interpretation. | Milton,

John, 1608–1674 – Influence.

LCC PR3588 .L44 2016 | DDC 821/.4–dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015036055>

ISBN 978-1-107-05985-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-66479-1 Paperback

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*For my sister, Lynn Welch*

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## Preface

My love of Milton began when I first read *Paradise Lost* at the age of eighteen in my 'year off' between school and university. That was almost forty years ago and my love of Milton has not abated, though my opinions about this or that scholarly issue have often changed. This book is an attempt to share some of the reasons why I revere Milton and think he has enduring value. It is intended for as wide a readership as possible, so my emphasis is on Milton's own writings rather than on critical interpretations. I have no grand overarching thesis as to 'why Milton matters'. Milton matters to different people for different reasons, some religious (or anti-religious), some political, and some purely literary. All of these approaches are valid and my emphasis in this book is on what can unite us as readers of Milton: the pleasures we can share rather than the political issues that sometimes divide us. Milton does have abiding relevance for political causes (especially free speech, divorce, and political liberty) and I have addressed these issues in my two chapters on the prose, but my primary concern is the joy of reading his poetry. Milton is nevertheless an unsettling author, both in poetry and prose, and I have tried to retain a sense of his nuisance value as well as his value.

I have incurred many debts over the years, as student, teacher, and colleague. As an undergraduate at Cambridge in the late 1970s, I studied for the Tragedy paper under Adrian Poole and Theodore Redpath, whose lectures and supervisions have remained an important influence. My fond memories of Professor Poole's lecture on 'the terrible' in tragedy have proved especially useful to me, even after four decades, when pondering the question of whether Milton's tragedy *Samson Agonistes* should be seen as 'a work in praise of terrorism'. Also at Cambridge, I had the privilege of being supervised (both as undergraduate and doctoral candidate) by Christopher Ricks, whose 1963 book *Milton's Grand Style* I consider the single most valuable

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x Preface

book of Milton criticism ever written. My other debts are legion. I am deeply and personally indebted to the many students, at every level, whom I have taught (and from whom I have often learned) at Western University in Canada since 1987. I also owe much to my fellow Miltonists for insightful discussions at such gatherings as the Canada Milton Seminar, the International Milton Symposium, the Murfreesboro Conference on John Milton, the North East Milton Seminar, and (alas too distant for me to attend frequently) the British Milton Seminar. I owe debts to Colin Burrow, Gordon Campbell, John Carey, Ann Coiro, Tom Corns, John Creaser, Dennis Danielson, Neville Davies, Stephen Dobranski, Robert Fallon, Stephen Fallon, Mimi Fenton, Neil Forsyth, Tobias Gregory, Lynne Greenberg, Dayton Haskin, Blair Hoxby, Edward Jones, Margaret Kean, Maggie Kilgour, Laura Knoppers, Barbara Lewalski, Michael Lieb, David Loewenstein, Tom Luxon, Nicholas von Maltzahn, Catherine Martin, Nicholas McDowell, Feisal Mohamed, John Mulryan, Mary Nyquist, Annabel Patterson, Joanna Picciotto, Carter Revard, the late Stella Revard, Jason Rosenblatt, John Rumrich, Elizabeth Sauer, Loius Schwartz, Regina Schwartz, William Shullenberger, Harold Skulsky, Nigel Smith, Paul Stevens, Richard Strier, Noel Sugimura, Gordon Teskey, Rachel Trubowitz, and Joseph Wittreich. I owe a special debt to Beverley Sherry, who read the entire typescript and gave generous feedback. Responsibility for the views and information set out in this study remains mine alone. Finally, my greatest debt is to my wife, Anne Boyd. While she has never read Milton (and married me only on condition she would never have to), she has put up with him for more than thirty years, which is more than even Milton's three wives had to do.

## Textual note

Quotations from Milton's poetry are taken from John Milton, *The Complete Poems*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 1998). Quotations from the prose are based on John Milton, *Complete Prose Works*, ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols. (Yale University Press, 1953–82) (*CPW*), but since the present book is intended for as wide a readership as possible, I have modernized the spelling while keeping the original punctuation. I have followed the same practice in Chapter 3 when quoting from the anonymous *Answer to a Book, Entitled, The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*.