

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Nicholas McDowell, *Poet of Revolution: The Making of John Milton* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020). 485pp. ISBN 978 0 6911 5469 5.**

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This is an important work, possibly the most significant contribution to Milton studies in more than a decade. It is the first volume in an ambitious two-part project, the second of which is likely to be published in 2023. This book charts Milton's writing and intellectual development up to 1642, closing with his marriage and the writing of 'Captain or Colonel, or knight in arms', Milton's first political sonnet and the first political sonnet in English. By that time Milton had composed most of the poems which were to be included in *Poems* (1645), and had established the beginnings of his reputation as a writer of polemical prose. The project as a whole looks to examine the trajectory of a career which took him from being a minor poet to a prose polemicist to the writer of the greatest narrative poem in English. An alternative way of describing that startling career development is set out in the framing device of this book's introductory chapter, which points to the contrast between his being a respectable supplicant for an MA in Cambridge in 1632 and his being named in the 1683 convocation in Oxford (nine years after his death) as a writer of banned books.

Whilst this is a scholarly book, the product of considerable and detailed research, it is also accessible to the general reader: it does not take for granted, for example, that the everyone will be familiar with the concept of Arminianism or the significance of the Gunpowder Plot. Above all, this first volume establishes the need to set Milton and his work in context, and to find the appropriate context for this exercise of placement. Finding false contexts can furnish false conclusions: for example, placing Shakespeare's will out of the context of other wills of the day seems to supply ammunition for Oxfordians to misinterpret it and to claim that the absence of books in the will indicates that Shakespeare was illiterate. Close

examination of other contemporary wills indicates that many other scholars made no reference to their libraries.

What, then, are the proper contexts for the consideration of Milton's writings? Recent work on Milton's life by Barbara K. Lewalski, by Gordon Campbell and Thomas Corns and to a lesser degree by Anna Beer has tended to place Milton squarely in the midst of the religious and political debates of the English Revolution, and to ask such questions as whether he was already a Puritan even before the 1630s.<sup>1</sup> This book builds upon those studies, but takes a different approach, and one which is subtly reflected in its title. In 1642, in *An Apology for Smectymnuus, or An Apology for a Pamphlet*, Milton wrote that 'He who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things ought himself to be a true poem', and this ambition to create a life and a body of work consistent with the values of the great classical poets (and the values of contemporary humanism) is the shaping curve behind this book (p. 402). Indeed, its title might have been *Poem of Revolution*.

The charting of this ambition is by no means a straightforward undertaking. There is an illusion that we know a great deal about Milton, when most of the evidence comes from his own writings about himself, and those are clearly attempts to paint himself in the best possible light. This book goes so far as to suggest that even the friendship with Diodati is to some extent 'self-conscious literariness' (p. 62) — a description of the kind of friendship which a true poet/poem ought to have.

Reading Milton objectively is a complex task: contemporary responses to *Paradise Lost* read the poetry in the light of Milton's political writing, whereas now there is a common tendency to read the early poems in the light of what we know was to come. We may also need the reminders that Milton was not particularly successful as a university poet, even if now we read more of his university verse than that of any other writer from the period, and that 'Miltonist' once meant proponent of divorce. For Professor McDowell, the key context to Milton lies not in denominational labels but in the humanist ideals of learning and culture and in the place of poetry within that culture. He sees Milton as a young man consciously rejecting Ovidian sensuality in order to become an epic poet.

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<sup>1</sup> See Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns, *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Anna Beer, *Milton: Poet, Pamphleteer, and Patriot* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008).

Because we know less about Milton than we think we do, accounts of his life, especially his early education and reading, tend to involve speculation — especially about what he was taught and what he read. This book also has to rely on conjecture, and frequently uses terms like ‘possibly’, ‘likely’, ‘might have been’ and ‘seems’. However, it is not merely speculative: it examines contemporary accounts of the education of others, and the school curriculum of the day. This book sees Milton as an active participant in the cause of humanism against scholasticism, which leads to the assertion that his ‘dedication to the cause of liberty after 1640 was motivated ... by a conviction that *humanitas* ... could only be pursued under religious and civil conditions that enabled freedom of thought and the advancement of learning’. (p. 78)

Early poems, such as ‘L’Allegro’ and ‘Il Penseroso’ are placed in the context of contemporary lyrics, and we are urged to be alert to the poetic conventions of the time. The message of the book is that there are valuable lessons in paying attention to the ways in which contemporary poets, especially Milton’s fellow university students, used the poetic conventions of the time. If we pay heed to these practices we may appreciate, for example, that Milton did not change his mind when writing a prose criticism of Lancelot Andrewes fifteen years after his 1626 elegy to that same bishop: the elegy merely followed convention and should not be construed as a sincere expression of grief. The same methodology of investigating context demonstrates that *Comus* is a much less typical masque than *Arcades*, and raises the pertinent question of whether Milton was present at Ludlow Castle to see his masque performed.

Unsurprisingly, in a book about the shaping of a poet, ‘Lycidas’ features prominently: its significance is recognised in its introductory pages and two of its sixteen chapters are devoted to this short poem. The reader may well wish to start with these illuminating chapters as a guide to the methodology of the book as a whole. They not only include detailed commentary on the poem but also consideration of the context of the other poems in the 1638 anthology in which ‘Lycidas’ was first published, together with suggestions about the likely readership for Milton’s elegy.

This volume makes the case for Milton’s debt to Marlowe at several points: we are promised that the second volume will include discussion of Shakespearean echoes in Milton’s prose, and of Miltonic references to *Macbeth*. Professor McDowell has written on both of these topics before, and we look forward to his fuller treatment of this material.