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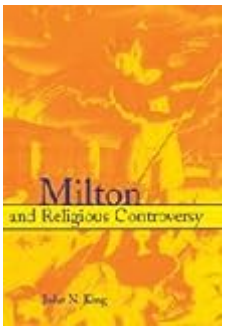

John N. King. *Milton and Religious Controversy: Satire and Polemic in Paradise Lost.* New York and Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xx + 227 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-77198-6.

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"Controversial Merriment" in *Paradise Lost*

Anyone who has read extensively in the works of John Milton is aware of a seeming bifurcation in the character of his writings. On the one side are his polemical tracts, which are full of satire, sarcasm, and what Samuel Johnson described as "controversial merriment." On the other side is the sublime achievement of *Paradise Lost*, which seems concerned with grand, universal themes and distant from the religious and political conflicts of seventeenth-century England.

In *Milton and Religious Controversy*, John N. King sets out to show that this split between the satirical and the sublime is not as complete as previous critics have allowed. King's reading of Milton leads him to conclude that "*Paradise Lost* demonstrates a deep engagement with religious complaint and satire, one that is fundamental to the interplay among the poem's many literary genres and modes" (p. 191). Satirical passages, such as Satan's encounter with Sin and Death and the Paradise of Fools, are "an essential component of the poem" (p. 193). In this, King reverses the opinion of eighteenth-century readers of Milton, such as Addison and Johnson, who applied neoclassical standards of taste to *Paradise Lost* and found these passages wanting.

King examines the wider social and religious context of *Paradise Lost* in some detail. He pays particular attention to the polemic vocabulary and iconography of Commonwealth and Restoration England, and draws parallels with certain themes in Milton's epic. Milton's own works provide the first level of context.[1] King is able to find similarities between Milton's polemical tracts and *Paradise Lost*, especially in Milton's attacks on religious formalism – both that of the Roman Catholic Church and that of the established Church of England. A wider context is provided by the long tradition of religious satire in England, from Piers Plowman and Chaucer to Spenser, who was one of Milton's acknowledged influences. In addition, King takes into account contemporary visual polemic and the ways in which it reinforced and even influenced written works.

King begins with a reading of Milton's poem, *Lycidas*, and its Spenserian antecedents, primarily the latter poet's May Eclogue. *Lycidas* is important because it clearly demonstrates that Milton was not above inserting satire and polemic into an otherwise "serious" piece. It also shows that in poetry, as well as in his prose tracts, Milton was deeply engaged with the religious issues of his day. In the case of *Lycidas*, his concern was with unworthy priests, whether Laudian reformers in England or Roman Catholics abroad. For King, *Lycidas* "anticipates the more subtle instances of anticlerical attack in *Paradise*

Lost" (p. 23).

The remainder of *Milton and Religious Controversy* involves a close reading of selected passages from *Paradise Lost*. King's aim in these chapters is to tie Milton's epic to seventeenth-century political and religious polemic, primarily by drawing parallels between the specific vocabulary Milton uses in the poem and that of his – and his contemporaries' – prose works.

King first addresses the demonic "conclave" that meets in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*. Here, the parallels with papal conclaves are obvious, but King reminds us that Milton's anti-papal satire can also be read as a concealed attack on the Restoration monarchy and Church, or on formalist tendencies in the Church of England as a whole. The publishers of the 1688 edition of *Paradise Lost* apparently chose to concentrate on the later possibility when they included illustrations showing Satan with the face of James II in one instance and Charles II in another.

King finds similar coded attacks on ecclesiastical disorder and empty formalism in the allegory of Sin and Death in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, and The Paradise of Fools in Book 4. The War in Heaven in Book 6 carries with it echoes of the Gunpowder Plot and subsequent Fifth of November celebrations. King concludes with an extended discussion of how the events surrounding the Fall reflect Milton's ideas of true and false religion. The simple meal shared in Eden between Adam and Raphael becomes a type of the egalitarian Protestant communion service, whereas Eve's idolatry and Adam's postlapsarian concern with altars and ceremony foreshadow the rituals and – from a Protestant perspective – idolatry of the Roman Catholic Church.

There are some minor problems with *Milton and Religious Controversy*. King uses boldface to indicate emphasis, which takes some getting used to, and not all of the emphasized words appear in the index (for example, "bull" on p. 9). The index itself seems incomplete and is occasionally inaccurate. But these are, indeed, minor cavils. On the whole, this book constitutes a necessary correction to the general understanding of the place of satire in *Paradise Lost*, and it succeeds in "complicating and enriching our understanding of an encyclopedic poem" (p. 13).

Note

[1]. King's use of one text ascribed to Milton, *De Doctrina Christiana*, is problematic. Milton's authorship of this work has been called into question, something which King acknowledges in passing (p. 10, n. 31). King, however, was unable to address a recent, substantial work on the topic: William Hunter, *Vision Unimplor'd: Milton and the Authorship of* De Doctrina Christiana (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998). Whether or not Milton wrote *De Doctrina Christiana* is not of central importance to King's arguments, but any future editions of *Milton and Religious Controversy* should probably address the debate over its authorship in greater detail.

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