



A COMPANION TO
MILTON

EDITED BY THOMAS N. CORNS

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A Companion to Milton

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Preface

Early in the eighteenth century, Joseph Addison, probably the most influential journalist and cultural commentator of his age, dedicated eighteen issues of *The Spectator*, the journal he co-authored, to guiding a wide readership towards a more informed and enthusiastic appreciation of *Paradise Lost*. He did so knowing that there existed already a substantial readership for Milton and believing that it needed encouragement, education and a kind of aesthetic reassurance. Milton was already the subject of academic enquiry and sustained popularization in the form of annotated editions of his poetry and critical narratives about his life. Addison's project reflected his own political and cultural agenda. A Whig eager to pass over his party's remoter connections with mid-seventeenth-century republicanism, Addison offered to his readers a depoliticized Milton to be appreciated, according to the canons of Augustan neoclassicism, as a vernacular writer who aspired to match classical masters, pre-eminently Virgil and Homer, and who sometimes succeeded in that high ambition.

In sharp contrast, this collection appears at a time when Milton's standing with a wide readership appears altogether more insecure. From colleagues in the United States, I hear frequently rehearsed anxieties about the future of early modern literary studies in universities responsive to students' preferences for a literature that speaks directly to their own experience in the language of today. In the British context, changes in school curricula and increased levels of optionality in first degree programmes make it possible to graduate from many institutions with little familiarity with earlier literature apart from Shakespeare. Yet the academic study of Milton has never been healthier. Historically informed interpretation is refreshed by significant developments in early modern historiography that are recharting the history of the early Stuart church, the origins of the English Civil War, and the informing philosophies of English republicanism. Milton's own theology and its place in radical Protestantism are under investigation with a new precision. Major critical movements of the final quarter of the twentieth century, such as feminist criticism, cultural

materialism and genre theory, remain vital and productive components in an array of methodologies that also reflects ecological awareness, postcolonialism and Habermasian neo-Marxism. There have been four new and important editions of Milton's works since 1997. Academic associations for Milton studies flourish in Japan and Korea, and support programmes of conferences and seminars. The Milton Society of America has well over 500 members. There are thriving and prestigious research seminars in North America and the United Kingdom. The International Milton Symposium will hold its seventh meeting in 2002. The vital signs for Milton studies, at research level, are very encouraging.

The primary objective of this volume is to bring an awareness of that academic vigour to a wider readership and, in so doing, to promote and stimulate the study and enjoyment of a rich, profound, diverse and fascinating oeuvre. But the collection neither simplifies nor ignores the controversial nature of contemporary Milton criticism. Readers will discern that different contributors take rather different views on a number of key issues. For a decade now there has been some dispute about the place of *De Doctrina Christiana*, a Latin exegetical treatise, within the canon of Milton's works. Within this collection, there are those who regard it fairly straightforwardly as Miltonic, and accordingly available as a kind of explicit account of views more obliquely expressed, for example, in *Paradise Lost*. Others treat it more sceptically, regarding its status as genuinely uncertain. Again, the nature of seventeenth-century republicanism, particularly in its intellectual origins and its earliest history in the constitutional crises of the 1620s, emerges as a keenly disputed issue with profound implications for the understanding of Milton's political prose; and sharp disagreements surround the aetiology of his radical Protestantism. Where appropriate, this volume aims to define problems rather than to offer premature syntheses and the facile resolution of issues that in reality remain unresolved.

I have endeavoured to give a platform to some of the most distinctive and influential voices in contemporary Milton studies. Scholars have been asked, not to offer a bland overview of a critical tradition, but to develop readings that express the freshness and originality of their own approaches. The 'companionship' this collection is designed to offer is not one of condescending reassurance but rather an invitation to join in challenging forays to the edge of what is known about early modern literary culture and Milton's place in it. Addison's project sought to equip readers aspiring towards cultural respectability with a unified and confident account of Milton as England's national poet and laureate of Anglican Protestantism. This collection, in its critical pluralism, expresses the controversial, questioning, and vital characteristics of Milton studies in our own age.

I should like to thank Andrew McNeillie, who commissioned this collection and supported and encouraged it throughout, Alison Dunnett, who saw it through to publication with tact and energy, and Gillian Bromley, for her meticulous and constructive work as copy-editor. I am grateful to my contributors for responding promptly and constructively to suggestions and queries. Not for the first time on a major project, my greatest debt is to Linda Jones, research administrator of the

Department of English, University of Wales, Bangor, who has done so much to bring the work to completion.

Thomas N. Corns
University of Wales, Bangor
August 2000

Acknowledgements, Abbreviations and a Note on Editions Used

Unless otherwise stated, all biblical references are to the Authorized Version (AV); all references to Milton's vernacular prose are to the *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, edited by Don M. Wolfe et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82) (CPW); all references to his poetry are either to the second edition of *Complete Shorter Poems*, edited by John Carey (London and New York: Longman, 1997) (CSP), or to the second edition of *Paradise Lost*, edited by Alastair Fowler (London and New York: Longman, 1998) (PL). Milton's Latin prose is sometimes cited from *The Works of John Milton*, edited by Frank Allen Patterson et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–8) (WJM). The author and publisher are grateful for permission to reproduce copyright material from these editions.

The principal texts considered within each chapter are listed under 'Writings', followed by a list of suggested 'References for Further Reading'.

The Contributors

Sharon Achinstein teaches at the University of Maryland. She has edited *Gender, Literature and the English Revolution* (*Women's Studies* 24 [1994]), and authored *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* (1994). Her *Zion's Ashes: Poetics of Dissent in Restoration England* is forthcoming.

Amy Boesky is Associate Professor of English at Boston College. She is the author of *Founding Fictions: Utopias in Early Modern England* (1996) and of various articles on Milton in journals, among them *Modern Philology* and *Milton Studies*. She is currently writing a book on time and representation in early modern England.

Cedric C. Brown is Professor of English at the University of Reading, Co-Director of the Renaissance Texts Research Centre at Reading, and Dean of the Faculty. His major research interests at the moment concern the social transmission and various appropriations of poetry texts in the seventeenth century. Recent publications include *John Milton: A Literary Life* (1995) and the co-edited volume *Texts and Cultural Change in Early Modern England* (1997, with Arthur F. Marotti).

Gordon Campbell is Professor of Renaissance Literature at the University of Leicester. In recent years his work on Milton has concentrated on issues arising from manuscripts associated with Milton. He is the editor of the Everyman edition of Milton's poems and co-editor and translator of the poems of Edward King, Milton's Lycidas. He has published *A Milton Chronology* (1997) and a revised edition of W. R. Parker's biography of Milton (2 vols, 1996) and, within the group (led by Thomas Corns) investigating the provenance of *De Doctrina Christiana*, has been responsible for the archival research. He is General Editor of *Review of English Studies* and is at present writing *The Oxford Companion to the Renaissance*.

Thomas N. Corns is Professor of English and Head of the School of Arts and Humanities at the University of Wales, Bangor. His principal publications include *The Development of Milton's Prose Style* (1982), *Milton's Language* (1990), *Uncloistered Virtue: English Political Literature 1640–1660* (1992), *Regaining 'Paradise Lost'* (1994), and the Twayne guide to Milton's prose (1998). He edited *The Cambridge Companion to English Poetry, Donne to Marvell* (1993) and *The Royal Image: Representations of Charles I* (1999). With Ann Hughes and David Loewenstein he is editing the complete works of Gerrard Winstanley, and he is the lead researcher of a group considering the provenance of *De Doctrina Christiana*.

Martin Dzelzainis is Reader in Renaissance Literature and Thought at Royal Holloway, University of London. He has edited *John Milton: Political Writings* (1991) for Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, and, with Warren Chernaik, *Marvell and Liberty* (1999). He is currently editing both parts of *The Rehearsal Transpros'd* for the forthcoming Yale *Prose Works of Andrew Marvell*, under the general editorship of Annabel Patterson, and is also working on a study of Restoration censorship.

Stephen M. Fallon teaches at Notre Dame University. He is author of *Milton among the Philosophers* (1991) and winner of the Milton Society of America's Hanford Award, and has published articles on Milton and on the Renaissance in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, *English Literary Renaissance*, *PMLA* and multi-contributor volumes. Twice the recipient of NEH Fellowships, he is writing a book on self-representation, intention and authority in Milton. He co-founded a course in literary and philosophical classics at the Center for the Homeless in South Bend, Indiana.

Achshah Guibbory is Professor of English, and affiliated with the Religious Studies Program, at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She is the author of *The Map of Time: Seventeenth-Century English Literature and Ideas of Pattern in History* (1986), *Ceremony and Community from Herbert to Milton: Literature, Religion and Cultural Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England* (1998), and numerous articles on seventeenth-century literature and culture. Her essay on Donne's *Elegies* published in *ELH* (1990) was winner of the award from the John Donne Society for Distinguished Publication.

Andrew Hadfield is Professor of English at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. He is the author of a number of books on Renaissance literature and culture, most recently *Literature, Travel and Colonial Writing in the English Renaissance, 1545–1625* (1998) and *The English Renaissance, 1500–1620* (2000). He is currently working on a book provisionally entitled *Shakespeare and Political Culture*. For 2001–4 he has been awarded a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship to work on Shakespeare and republicanism.

John K. Hale is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Otago. His publications include *Milton's Languages: The Impact of Multilingualism on Style* (1997), *John Milton: Latin Writings, A Selection* (1998, editor and translator), *The Shakespeare of the Comedies: A Multiple Approach* (1996) and *Sonnets of Four Centuries, 1500–1900* (1992, editor). He has written numerous essays on Milton, with some further concentration on Aristotle, Dante and Shakespeare.

Margaret Kean is Fellow and Tutor in English at St Hilda's College, Oxford. She is currently completing a study of creativity and image production in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

N. H. Keeble is a Professor and currently Head of the Department of English Studies at the University of Stirling. He has published studies of *Richard Baxter: Puritan Man of Letters* (1982) and *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England* (1987); a two-volume *Calendar of the Correspondence of Richard Baxter* (1991, with Geoffrey F. Nuttall); an edited collection of tercentenary essays, *John Bunyan: Conventicle and Parnassus* (1988); an anthology illustrating *The Cultural Identity of Seventeenth-Century Woman* (1994); and editions of texts by Richard Baxter, John Bunyan and Lucy Hutchinson. He is currently editing a tract for the Yale edition of the *Prose Works of Andrew Marvell* and completing a study of the 1660s.

Peter J. Kitson is Professor of English at the University of Dundee. He is the editor of *Romantic Criticism 1800–1825* (1989), *Coleridge and the Armoury of the Human Mind: Essays on His Prose Writings* (1991, with Thomas N. Corns), *Coleridge, Keats and Shelley* (1996), *Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* (1999, with Debbie Lee), *Romanticism and Colonialism* (1998, with Tim Fulford) and *Travels, Explorations and Empires* (2001, with Tim Fulford). He was Editor of *The Year's Work in English Studies* from 1995 to 2001.

Laura Lunger Knoppers is Associate Professor of English at Pennsylvania State University. She is author of *Historicizing Milton: Spectacle, Power, and Poetry in Restoration England* (1994) and of *Constructing Cromwell: Ceremony, Portrait, and Print, 1645–1661* (2000). Her essays on Milton's poetry and prose, on Shakespeare, on representations of Oliver Cromwell and on Charles I have appeared in various scholarly journals and book collections. She is currently working on a book-length study of Charles I and Henrietta Maria.

John Leonard teaches at the University of Western Ontario. He has published *Naming in Paradise* (1990, co-winner of the Milton Society of America's James Holly Hanford Award), the Penguin edition of *Milton's Complete Poems* (1998) and related edition of *Paradise Lost* (2000), and many articles on Milton.

Barbara Kiefer Lewalski is William R. Kenan Professor of History and Literature and of English Literature at Harvard University. She has just published *The Life of*

John Milton: A Critical Biography (2000). Other books include *Writing Women in Jacobean England, 1603–1625* (1993), *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms* (1985), *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (1979), *Donne's Anniversaries and the Poetry of Praise* (1973) and *Milton's Brief Epic: The Genre, Meaning, and Art of Paradise Regained* (1966).

David Loewenstein is Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His publications include *Milton and the Drama of History: Historical Vision, Iconoclasm, and the Literary Imagination* (1990), *Politics, Poetics, and Hermeneutics in Milton's Prose* (1990), *Milton: Paradise Lost* (1993) and *Representing Revolution in Milton and His Contemporaries: Religion, Politics, and Polemics in Radical Puritanism* (2001). With Ann Hughes and Thomas Corns, he is co-editing the complete works of Gerrard Winstanley.

Diane Kelsey McColley teaches British Literature and the Literature of Nature at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, Camden College of Arts and Sciences. She is the author of *Milton's Eve* (1983), *A Gust for Paradise: Milton's Eden and the Visual Arts* (1993), and *Poetry and Music in Seventeenth-Century England* (1997). She became an Honored Scholar of the Milton Society of America in 1999. Research for her essay was aided by a Mellon Fellowship at the Huntington Library.

Leah S. Marcus is Edwin Mims Professor of English at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of *Childhood and Cultural Despair* (1978), *The Politics of Mirth* (1986), *Puzzling Shakespeare* (1988) and *Unediting the Renaissance* (1996), and, along with Janel Mueller and Mary Beth Rose, edited *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* (2000).

Graham Parry is Professor of English at the University of York. His most recent book is *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (1995). He is currently writing a book on the arts of the Church in the time of Archbishop Laud. He was the organizer of the Sixth International Milton Symposium at York in 1999.

Annabel Patterson is the Karl Young Professor of English at Yale University. Among her books are *Early Modern Liberalism* (1997), which has much to say about Milton, and *John Milton*, a Longman Critical Reader (1992). She is currently Editor-in-Chief of the Yale edition of the *Prose Works of Andrew Marvell*, and has just finished a short book subtitled *A New Whig Interpretation of History*.

Joad Raymond is a Lecturer in English Literature at the University of East Anglia. He is the editor of *Making the News: An Anthology of the Newsbooks of Revolutionary England, 1641–1660* (1993) and of *News, Newspapers, and Society in Early Modern Britain* (1999), and the author of *The Invention of the Newspaper: English Newsbooks, 1641–1649* (1996) and of articles on literature and politics in the mid-seventeenth

century. He is presently completing a study of pamphlets and pamphleteering between 1588 and 1688.

Stella P. Revard is Professor Emerita from Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville. She is currently President of the International Association for Neo-Latin Studies. She is an Honored Scholar of the Milton Society of America and has published numerous articles and two books on Milton – *The War in Heaven* (1980) and *Milton and the Tangles of Neaera's Hair* (1997) – both of which were awarded the Hanford Prize from the Milton Society of America. A forthcoming book is entitled *Pindar and the Renaissance Hymn-Ode: 1450–1700*.

John Rumrich is Professor of English at the University of Texas, Austin. He is the author of *Matter of Glory: A New Preface to Paradise Lost* (1987) and *Milton Unbound* (1996), and editor of *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*.

Michael Schoenfeldt is Professor of English and Director of the Program in Medieval and Early Modern Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He is the author of *Prayer and Power: George Herbert and Renaissance Courtship* (1991), *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (1999), and articles on Herbert, Donne, Spenser, Amelia Lanyer, Herrick, Shakespeare, Jonson and Milton.

Regina Schwartz is Professor of English and Religion at Northwestern University. She is the author of *Remembering and Repeating: On Milton's Theology and Poetics* (winner of the James Holly Hanford Book Award in 1989) and *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (1997). She is editor of *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory* (1990), and co-editor of *Desire in the Renaissance: Psychoanalysis and Literature* (1994, with Valeria Finucci). Her essays on Milton appear in *Representations, Milton Studies, English Literary History, PMLA* and *Religion and Literature*. She was President of the Milton Society of America in 1999 and is co-chair of the Newberry Milton Seminar. She is currently writing on English Reformation poetics.

Kay Gilliland Stevenson is Senior Lecturer in Literature at the University of Essex. She is co-author, with Clive Hart, of *Heaven and the Flesh: Imagery of Desire from the Renaissance to the Rococo* (1995) and, with Margaret Seares, of *Paradise Lost in Short: Smith, Stillingfleet and the Transformation of Epic* (1998). Her most recent book is a period volume in Palgrave's 'transitions' series, *Milton to Pope: 1650–1720* (2001).

Elizabeth Skerpan Wheeler is Professor of English at Southwest Texas State University, where she teaches seventeenth-century and modern literature and rhetoric. The author of *The Rhetoric of Politics in the English Revolution, 1642–1660* (1992), she is completing a book on Milton's poetics and seventeenth-century language theory, and working on a CD-ROM edition of *Eikon Basilike*.

PART I
The Cultural Context

1 Genre

Barbara K. Lewalski

Milton shows a constant concern with form, with genre, to a degree remarkable even in his genre-conscious era. Among the first questions to ask about any of his poems are what conventions he embraced and what freight of shared cultural significances he took on by casting a poem in a particular genre. In poem after poem he achieves high art from the tension between his immense imaginative energy and the discipline of form. Yet he is never a mere follower of convention and neoclassical rules: his poems gain much of their power from his daring mixtures of generic elements and from radical transformations that disrupt and challenge reader expectation.

In 1642, in the preface to the Second Book of *The Reason of Church-Government*, Milton provided his most extended comment on poetry and poetics. Among other topics, he points to some of the literary genres he hopes to attempt, offering an important insight into his ideas about and ways with genre:

Time servs not now, and perhaps I might seem too profuse to give any certain account of what the mind at home in the spacious circuits of her musing hath liberty to propose to her self, though of highest hope, and hardest attempting, whether that Epick form whereof the two poems of *Homer*, and those other two of *Virgil* and *Tasso* are a diffuse, and the book of *Job* a brief model: or whether the rules of *Aristotle* herein are strictly to be kept, or nature to be follow'd . . . Or whether those Dramatick constitutions, wherein *Sophocles* and *Euripides* raigne shall be found more doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation, the Scripture also affords us a divine pastoral Drama in the Song of *Salomon* consisting of two persons and a double *Chorus*, as *Origen* rightly judges. And the Apocalyps of Saint *John* is the majestick image of a high and stately Tragedy, shutting up and intermingling her solemn Scenes and Acts with a sevenfold *Chorus* of halleluja's and harping symphonies: . . . Or if occasion shall lead to imitat those magnifick Odes and Hymns wherein *Pindarus* and *Callimachus* are in most things worthy, some others in their frame judicious, in their matter most an end faulty: But those frequent songs throughout the law and prophets beyond all these, not in their divine argument alone, but in the very

critical art of composition may be easily made appear over all the kinds of Lyrick poesie, to be incomparable. (CPW I: 812–16)

Much as the Renaissance Italian critic Minturno did (Minturno 1559: 3), Milton thought in terms of three general categories or ‘parts’ of poetry – epic, dramatic, lyric – and within each of these categories he identified certain historical genres or ‘kinds’ (the Renaissance term). Here he mentions ‘diffuse’ and ‘brief’ epic, pastoral dramas and tragedies, odes and hymns. Renaissance theorists and poets also recognized many other kinds, identified by a mix of formal and thematic elements, conventions and topics: metre, structure, size, scale, subject, values, occasion, style and more (Fowler 1982: 1–74). Milton’s reference to ‘pastoral’ drama in the passage quoted calls attention to the category of literary modes – what Sidney in *The Defence of Poesie* called ‘species’ and defined chiefly by tone, topics and affect: e.g. pastoral, satiric, comedic, heroic, elegiac (Sidney 1595, sigs C2^f, E3^v–F1^f). These modes may govern works or parts of works in several kinds: we might have a pastoral comedy, or pastoral eclogue, or pastoral song; or a satiric verse epistle, or epigram, or novel. Also, Milton links biblical with classical models – Homer and Job for epic, Sophocles and the Apocalypse for tragedy, Pindar and the Psalms for the high lyric – indicating his sense of the Bible as a compendium of literary genres and poetic art. His final comment privileging biblical lyric over all other lyric poetry not only for truth but also for art assumes a Platonic union of truth and beauty.

Renaissance poets and critics often repeated the Horatian formula for the purpose of poetry, to teach and delight, and Sidney added to these aims the function of rhetoric, to move. Milton was thinking in these terms as he debated with himself whether epic or tragedy might be more ‘doctrinal and exemplary’ to the nation. But Milton’s poetic teaching is not a matter of urging a message or doctrine: it involves representing human life and human values in all their complexity, in a richly imagined poetic universe. Genre is a major element in that representation, for genres afford, in Rosalie Colie’s terms, a series of frames or fixes upon the world (Colie 1973: vii), transmitting the culture’s shared imaginative experience. By his virtuoso use of the literary genre system, and especially by his characteristic mixture of generic elements in most of his poems, Milton can invite his readers to weigh and consider the values the several kinds have come to embody, and to make discriminating choices (Lewalski 1985: 17–24).

During Milton’s earlier career, genres associated with and promoted by the Caroline court took on special political and cultural import. Court masques and pastoral dramas mystified the virtue, power and benevolence of Charles I and Henrietta Maria. Cavalier poets associated with the court wrote witty, sophisticated, playful love lyrics imbued with the fashionable neoplatonism and pastoralism or treated *carpe diem* themes with a light-hearted licentiousness. Other common royalist kinds were panegyrics on members of the royal family and their celebratory occasions, and religious poems treating the ‘high church’ rituals, feasts, ceremonies and arts promoted by Archbishop Laud. During the period of the Commonwealth and Protectorate (1649–60), royalists in