

ironic counterpart to the trial and punishment of James Nayler. Taken together, the two events demonstrate the polarity of cultural and political images Milton responds to in his major poems" (75-76).

This is a beautifully written book filled with interesting insights about Milton's great poetry. Unfortunately, those scattered insights do not cohere into a defensible thesis. In this respect, *Milton's Scriptural Society* imitates the discontinuous structure that Gay attributes both to the Bible and to *Areopagitica*.

Derek N. C. Wood. *Exiled from Light: Divine Law, Morality and Violence in Milton's "Samson Agonistes."* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001. xxii + 247 pp. \$ 55.00. Review by STEPHEN M. BUHLER, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA-LINCOLN.

To a great extent, this book has been commandeered by recent history. Just two months after its initial publication, the multiple assaults on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and an unknown target of yet another hijacked jet brought the reality of political violence home to North Americans in ways they had not yet experienced. In such a context, Derek Wood's *Exiled from Light* and its call to reconsider triumphalist readings of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* resonates profoundly—if in ways the author could not have foreseen.

Wood endeavors to rescue Milton's tragedy (for so the author himself categorized it) from interpretations—largely influenced by strains in Christian doctrine, it must be noted—that unequivocally celebrate the devastation that Samson visits upon the Philistines. He offers, instead, a sense of the text as deeply ambiguous and ambivalent; not only does the inability of the Israelites to take advantage of Samson's victory come into question, but so too does Samson's perhaps desperate attempt to redeem himself and the Israelite cause. As Wood rightly notes, Samson had unwisely presumed on divine sanction before, with Dalila. Milton's text sur-

rounds its hero's resolve and his "rousing motions" with what may be sacred mystery and what may be plain uncertainty.

The case for *Samson Agonistes* as an indeterminate text is made, fairly convincingly, from two historical points of reference: genre and exegesis. Renaissance tragedy readily accommodated deeply flawed—and far more flawed than Wood at first insists upon for Samson—tragic heroes. In this, Wood argues, early modern dramatists and theorists were closer to Aristotelian precept and ancient practice than their successors (for whom a misreading of *hamartia* was the fatal Cleopatra) ever could be. Milton, following in this tradition, crafted a hero that was neither completely vindicated by victory over his adversaries, nor utterly culpable in his own destruction. Christian attitudes toward Old Testament figures could also be, as the paradoxical phrase goes, decidedly mixed: lacking the full benefits either of revelation or of subsequent sacred history, Samson could be seen as a "hero of faith" (87) and "yet be an exemplum of understanding that is flawed and behaviour that is from far admirable or deserving of imitation" (90).

Wood shrewdly contextualizes and undermines earlier commentaries that proclaim Milton's Samson to be a problematic figure before his defining act, while an undoubted hero in bringing death and destruction upon others and himself. He then endeavors to counterbalance such over-optimistic and over-simplistic readings. Unfortunately, the strategies that he employs in this effort often tend to undermine his own important message that Milton's text is ambiguous, ambivalent.

His chief strategy can only be described as "Samson-bashing." Every exchange with Dalila is presented as a rhetorical and moral victory for her. Harapha, too, is presented in a virtuous light, simply a younger warrior curious about an aged veteran past his prime: "Mohammad [sic] Ali meeting Joe Louis" (154), in Wood's strangely cross-generational analogue. The result is that his examples insist on a particularity that Wood's overall argument rejects. Samson must be unrighteously indignant with Dalila; he must be driven, Antony-like, by aging pride with Harapha; he must be (but how can we know this?) physically immobile through most of the drama.

Wood suggests some interesting consequences from such interpretive choices, but their status as choices fades in the heat of insistence, along with the openness of the Miltonic text.

A secondary strategy is equally problematic. Milton's tracts are frequently quoted to assess the author's attitudes toward the use of violence for political purposes, even though Wood cautions us against conflating polemical practice with poetic exploration of scripture. Responding to David Loewenstein's invocation of *Eikonoklastes* at one point, Wood asks, "But how do we know that Milton approved of the iconoclasm, rage, and violence of Samson in 1671?" (17). Elsewhere, however (as on 95), Wood cites Milton's *A Treatise of Civil Power* to assert the poet's rejection of force. In so doing, Wood elides a crucial difference: over and over, Milton clearly rejects the use of state violence—the utmost of civil power—to enforce conformity in spiritual matters; it is less clear that he ever completely rejects the use of violence in opposition to unjust state authority. That is the dilemma we face in *Samson Agonistes*. The Philistines seek to compel Samson's participation in their rites; as many have noted, the parallel with Laudian demands and, later, Restoration pressures for Puritan capitulation to more involved ceremony in worship is unmistakable. The degree to which seventeenth-century Reformers continued to identify with their admittedly "incomplete" Old Testament types further intensifies the ethical problem presented by Samson's example: seeing themselves as the fully realized successors to the Chosen People, threatened by misbelieving gentiles, many Puritans in England and North America could well be tempted to take grim (or ecstatic) satisfaction in the downfall of Dagon's temple and its latter-day counterparts, however engineered.

If, too often, his counter-arguments to the triumphant view of Samson simply veer to the other extreme, it must be acknowledged that Wood's argument is an important one. Given the poet's frequently stated preferences for "peace [which] hath her victories / No less renowned than war" (as he avers in his sonnet to Cromwell), Milton may have indeed questioned all violent means toward liberation. *Samson Agonistes*, as Wood demonstrates, dramatizes the

questioning as well as the violence. We in the United States may have found it too easy, given our Puritan heritage, to identify with the Israelites in our readings of Milton's text and of the Book of Judges; Wood reminds all of us what it can mean if we recognize ourselves in the Philistines.

Graham Parry and Joad Raymond, eds. *Milton and the Terms of Liberty*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002. xvi + 218 pp. \$60.00. Review by JAMES EGAN, THE UNIVERSITY OF AKRON.

This collection includes twelve essays originally presented as papers at the Sixth International Milton Symposium, held at York in July 1999. The essays touch on Marvell, Milton, and the Millennium, though the focus is, in fact, the political Milton, linkages between literary form and ideas in the expression of his political concerns, and occasionally the language of political engagement practiced by his contemporaries.

Quentin Skinner's "John Milton and the Politics of Slavery" locates the essence of Milton's theory of free government in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, *Eikonoklastes*, and *Pro populo Anglicano defensio*. Milton appears to share the view of Henry Parker and other defenders of Parliament from 1628 through 1642, namely that a legitimate government entails a ruler morally accountable to his subjects, and subjects who accept the "strenuous" social and ethical challenges of a life of freedom (21). Like Henry Parker's, Milton's views generally align with those of Roman law, but Milton also extends the positions of classical authorities by multiplying the liabilities of monarchical rule. In "Milton before Lycidas," Thomas N. Corns questions much of the evidence currently invoked to support claims of Milton's youthful radicalism, particularly the notions that Milton's relationship with Alexander Gill urged him toward Puritanism, that the Earl of Bridgewater admired Milton's radical ideology, and that the religious poems of the 1645 collection embed the same radical ideology. *Comus*, Corns argues, celebrates the beauty of holiness characteristic of the *via media* so