

Stephen B. Dobranski. *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton*, Vol. 3: *Samson Agonistes*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009. xviii + 502 pp. \$85.00. Review by REUBEN SANCHEZ, SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY.

In the “Preface” to the recently published variorum commentary on *Samson Agonistes*, P.J. Klemp points out that the Columbia University Press Milton Variorum began as early as 1949, with three of the projected six volumes eventually published between 1970 and 1975: one on the Latin, Greek, and Italian poems, one on the minor English poems, and one on *Paradise Regained*. The project was discontinued at about that time due to the deaths of some of the editors associated with it: Merritt Y. Hughes, William Riley Parker, James E. Shaw, and A.S.P. Woodhouse. Except for John Steadman, there was not enough interest from other Miltonists to continue the project. The late Albert Labriola took up the cause and, in 1997, secured “permission” for Duquesne University Press to continue the Milton Variorum, though Klemp does not make clear exactly why permission was required.

Of course, permission could not have been related to copyright concerns regarding the commentary itself, since no press owns the commentary that would appear in a variorum. Klemp seems to suggest that permission had to do with the partial work done on the typescripts, introductions, and annotations to *PL* and *SA* by the Columbia editors, but the current editors would surely want to compose their own introductions and annotations. Besides, “permission” in this regard would only make sense if Duquesne had in mind updates of the three volumes Columbia published (and Duquesne has such updates in mind), so why would permission be required for anything related to *PL* and *SA*? There is nothing in Stephen B. Dobranski’s “A Note on the Annotations” that indicates he is relying on or completing the work of earlier editors. Nor is there anything in this volume that indicates the Milton Variorum is a joint venture between Columbia and Duquesne. In a parenthetical statement, Klemp cites the cutoff date for the variorum commentary on *SA* as 1970 because that was “when the Columbia University Press volumes started to appear” (xiii). Did Labriola therefore receive permission to publish three volumes of the Milton Variorum (and later to update the three existing vol-

umes) *only* if Duquesne adhered to a cutoff date of 1970, the time in which the Columbia volumes began to appear? If in fact that were the condition, the deal should have been immediately rejected. Perhaps on a related note, one can't help but wonder if the 1970 cutoff date was held more manageable by the current editors, instead of, say, a cutoff date closer to the actual date of publication (which clearly would have taken much more time, most likely far exceeding 2009). Did the editors who agreed to participate believe, therefore, that they could complete the project within a reasonable amount of time, and was that their reason for signing on to the project?

Whatever the reason for it, the 1970 cutoff date is a disappointment because it means that this variorum commentary intentionally excludes the last forty years of *SA* scholarship. Milton's poem is at least three-hundred and forty years old; without a doubt, the most useful and interesting *SA* scholarship has been generated over the last forty years. Nor does Klemp's promise that Duquesne will eventually update this volume seem comforting: "After we have completed a *Variorum Commentary* on *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Lost*, we will turn to an even more ambitious project, updating the entire *Variorum Commentary*—on the shorter English poems, Latin and Greek poems, Italian poems, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*—to cover scholarship published from 1970 to 2000" (xv). This means that only after the remaining volumes (both on *PL*), also subject to the 1970 cutoff date, have been published will Duquesne begin to update all six volumes. Even then, the update for each volume will stop at 2000—followed, presumably, by yet another update. Clearly, it will be a very long time before the Milton Variorum will be complete and up to date.

There are Miltonists, however, who not only approve of but also prefer the 1970 cutoff date. In a recent review of the variorum commentary on *SA*, for example, David V. Urban regards the cutoff date as positive, and implies that to have gone beyond 1970 would have been unwise. Indeed, because of the recent post-9-11 reassessments of Samson's actions and motivations, Urban believes that "perhaps the most valuable aspect of Dobranski's volume is its 1970 cutoff point. This gives his audience the opportunity to step back from present controversies and to both examine the issues that were prominent in

earlier periods and ponder their significance for more recent critical concerns" (*RES*, Feb. 2010, 145). This seems an odd assertion for, as earlier noted, the best scholarship on *SA* has come about in the last forty years, and even if some of the scholarship since 9-11 is considered controversial, should that justify stepping back from it? I would contend, rather, that such "controversies" make Milton's poem all the more relevant hundreds of years after its composition. But there is another reason why Urban considers the 1970 cutoff date fortuitous, because that marks the period when scholars began to question the argument for regeneration in *SA*. According to Urban, after 1970 there was no longer a consensus on this issue. Perhaps so, but regeneration nonetheless remained relevant after 1970, as evidenced even by those who would argue against it in lieu of some other interpretive line: All the more reason to consider such points of contention in a variorum commentary on *SA*. Yet, we can now "step back" and not have to deal with "controversies" endemic to post-1970 approaches to Milton; anyway, pre-1970 scholarship deals "with matters ostensibly quite different from, but ultimately not removed from, our current controversies" (146). As I take it, this means that pre-1970 scholarship on *SA* does not deal *directly* with the points of contention surrounding such issues as regeneration and 9-11, but does *foreshadow* them. Urban adds that pre-1970 scholarship represents the so-called "traditionalist" approach, challenged in post-1970 scholarship by John Carey's *Milton* (1969), Irene Samuel's "Samson Agonistes as Tragedy" (1970), and Joseph Wittreich's *Interpreting Samson Agonistes* (1986). This is more than a tacit acknowledgment of the significance of such scholarship to our developing, our changing, understanding of Milton's poem. Never mind the critiques of Wittreich's arguments that followed publication of his book; he, along with Carey and Samuel, got Miltonists thinking about and writing about important issues in *SA*.

To that list of influential post-1970 scholarship, we can certainly add Barbara K. Lewalski's "Samson Agonistes and the 'Tragedy' of the Apocalypse" (1970, reference to which is included in this variorum), Balachandra Rajan's *The Prison and the Pinnacle* (1973), Mary Ann Radzinowicz's *Toward "Samson Agonistes"* (1978), Joan S. Bennett's *Reviving Liberty* (1989), Ashraf H.A. Rushdy's *The Empty Garden* (1992), Laura Lunger Knoppers' *Historicizing Milton* (1994), Derek

N.C. Wood's *Exiled from Light* (2001), Stephen M. Fallon's *Peculiar Grace* (2007), Noam Reisner's *Milton and the Ineffable* (2009)—there is simply too much scholarship for the editor of this variorum commentary to have left out. We must consider, as well, that settling on a 1970 cutoff date necessarily precludes from consideration the recent “Why Milton Matters” debate (in conference and in print) between Stanley Fish, Lewalski, and Wittreich—including Wittreich's 2006 book of the same title. While that debate had more to do with what it means to be a humanist these days, some of the issues these scholars debated would be germane to a commentary on *SA*. Finally, we must also consider that in the post-1970 period *Milton Quarterly* and *Milton Studies* became central to the development of the business of studying Milton in general and, for our purposes, *SA* in particular.

Those who do feel that the cutoff date adopted by the editors of the Milton Variorum is appropriate, might nonetheless acknowledge the drawback of not considering post-1970 scholarship in a book published in 2009. A variorum commentary should be useful to the contemporary reader. The primary target audience for this variorum would be scholars who have a personal and professional interest in *SA*, undergraduate and graduate students doing work on the poem, and Ph.D. candidates working on dissertations: An audience that wants to know about commentary reaching back hundreds of years, but also wants to know about recent commentary, for such material becomes part of the developing tradition, and therefore part of the Milton dialogue. Locating one's own contribution in the vast body of work on *SA* becomes problematic if the variorum is not up to date. How can one use a variorum as a way by which to engage tradition if that variorum intentionally stops compiling information four decades before the date of publication?

Lost in all this are Dobranski's annotations. He expertly presents a good selection of *SA* commentary, and while he also includes a “Works Cited” section, this variorum would have benefitted from the inclusion of a substantial index, or better yet, substantial indices. An excellent model to have followed in this regard would have been the Donne Variorum. Most scholars and students use a variorum as they would an encyclopedia or a dictionary: Consulting it for information from time to time as a research tool. Indices would make those ef-

forts a bit more manageable. As we know, the editor of a variorum must make choices about what to include or exclude as regards annotations. Dobranski's choices are fair and relevant, the manner in which he presents his annotations clear and effective. But in his essay, "Interpreting the Variorum," Fish argued years ago that it isn't *what* the editor presents, necessarily, but rather that the editor presents a fair selection of different interpretations. Fish cautioned us to keep in mind that the interpretive disagreements are "problems that apparently cannot be solved, at least not by the methods traditionally brought to bear on them. What I would like to argue is that they are not *meant* to be solved, but to be experienced (they signify), and that consequently any procedure that attempts to determine which of a number of readings is correct will necessarily fail" ("Interpreting," 465). By those standards, Dobranski succeeds in the manner in which he presents his annotations. But by those same standards, Archie Burnett fails in the manner in which he presents his introduction to this variorum: He attempts to present his own *correct readings*, while designating other readings with which he disagrees as *incorrect*. In doing so, he doesn't prepare the reader for the annotations; furthermore, he raises issues related to the problem of the 1970 cutoff date. Hence, I should like to take a closer look at Burnett's "Introduction" (1-46), which is neither objective nor neutral, as he readily admits in what seems a disclaimer: "This introduction aims to give an outline of the principal critical debates, and, rather than merely summarize the contents of everything published on the poem up to this volume's cutoff date of 1970, to do so selectively and critically, highlighting key developments, weighing up evidence, and forming judgments" (1). But since this is a variorum, and since there *are* judgments to be made, they should be made by the reader; in other words, the annotations should speak for themselves.

In the section "Characters" (14-32), Burnett not only disagrees with but also dismisses the regeneration line of argument (28-30). But because the anti-regeneration line of argument is more characteristic of post-1970 scholarship, one must question the decision to raise this point of contention in the first place (since it cannot be addressed in the annotations). He then defends Dr. Johnson, who was rightly confronted by twentieth-century scholars for declaring that *SA* "must

be allowed to want a Middle, since nothing passes between the first Act and the last that either hastens or delays the Death of *Samson*" (quoted in Burnett's introduction, 31). Burnett criticizes those who disagree with Johnson, and cites those who defend him, among them Christopher Ricks (from a work published in 1970). But the quote from Ricks that Burnett presents is far too long and left to stand on its own—intentionally so, as he declares, parenthetically, that Ricks "has not been answered" (32). Wouldn't that be a conclusion, one must ask, that the reader of this variorum should make *after* consideration of the relevant (post-1970) commentary? I believe Ricks, Johnson, and, by extension, Burnett have been answered—if not directly by name, then indirectly by issue—in post-1970 scholarship.

On the issue of whether Milton is Samson, Burnett summarizes both sides in "Interpretation" (39-45): Yes, Milton and Samson are alike; no, they are not alike because *SA* is a work of art. Burnett clearly prefers the latter, but such a stand does not seem necessary to a variorum introduction—particularly if that variorum does not consider the time period in which scholars have most forcefully addressed issues Burnett raises. In this same section, further, Burnett attacks twentieth-century critics who argue that the poem can be read as political allegory (41-42). Of course, this might be directed at critics working in the early to mid-twentieth-century, critics who are too dependant on a psychological interpretation to explain "events in the poem" (42). But if Burnett also infers critics working in the last thirty years of the twentieth-century, one can thus offer William Kerrigan's *The Sacred Complex* (perhaps the only book-length study of Milton, and of *Paradise Lost* in particular, that strongly relies on the psychoanalytic approach) as a counter to Burnett's dismissal of the psychological interpretation. As with Wittreich, it doesn't matter if one agrees with Kerrigan: Rather, his provocative arguments should be taken seriously and confronted. Of the psychological approach, Burnett concludes: "Prevaricating, vacillating, and disclaiming feature tellingly in the conjectural interpretations.... And yet such interpretations, so hedged or not, emerge as overdefined and overconfidently asserted" (43). Surely, such labored assaults in an introduction to a variorum commentary are indecorous.

As he winds down “Interpretation,” Burnett declares: “[T]he range of partialities, inconclusiveness, and kaleidoscopic transmutations of the autobiographical, allegorical, and political, and the psychological interpretations may be seen as indicating that Milton’s own experience is not so much reflected in *SA* as refracted through it; that the poet’s life, circumstances, and outlook can yield no more than flitting adumbrations of the poem” (43). Burnett’s relegation of the interpretations with which he disagrees to, among other things, “flitting adumbrations” is unreasonable and inaccurate, for such interpretations actually comprise substantial theories and methodologies that have helped invigorate Milton studies over the last forty years—perhaps even rescued Milton studies from the type of scholarship that characterized early- to mid-twentieth-century approaches to Milton. The new criticism and the history of ideas, after all, resulted in such texts as Hughes’ *The Complete Poetry and Major Prose of John Milton*, a text that at one time may have seemed an example of cutting-edge commentary, but now may serve more as a way by which to gauge how much literary theory and literary analysis have changed, a text that nonetheless has somehow remained in print, though it is difficult to believe any Miltonist still actually uses a classroom text originally published in 1957, then revised and reissued in 1962. How far Milton studies has come since 1962 is perhaps one of the foremost reasons the 1970 cutoff date is so troublesome.

Burnett’s introduction calls attention to itself for the wrong reasons, and it thereby detracts from Dobranski’s fine annotations: Despite Burnett’s disclaimer, his introduction does not prepare the reader for what a variorum commentary aims to accomplish, and it raises issues significantly addressed after the cutoff date. But even if one feels that the writer of an introduction to a variorum commentary can and should argue, can and should take sides, can and should call those with whom he disagrees prevaricators, vacillators, and disclaimers, one might nonetheless concede that Burnett does not give those whom he derides their due, because by the very nature of his introduction (broken down into several short sections) he does not have the time nor the space to be equitable to those with whom he disagrees.

Since this review has primarily concerned itself with that which is extra-textual to Dobranski's annotations, it might be apropos to conclude with yet another reference to a variorum review. In a Review Essay on the Donne Variorum, W. Speed Hill suggests that the goal of a variorum should be "accuracy, completeness, and consistency" (*HLQ*, 62.3 & 4, 450). He suggests, further, that the work in a variorum should not have to be done again (451). And like Fish, Hill believes that the uncritical character of a variorum results in uncertainty because different readings are presented. However, Hill seems to infer that, because of the uncertainty, the more up-to-date the variorum, the more confusing for the reader: "But chronology, the default principle of its [a variorum commentary's] ordering, confounds intellectual coherence: the closer we come to the present, the further away from 'truth' we seem to be, and to extrapolate where the future might lie ... from a plot of the current date points is a chimera" (453-54). I suspect that Hill, and Fish, would rather be further from the truth than closer. This is why, in a variorum commentary, we should try to get as close to the "present" as possible.

Louis Schwartz. *Milton and Maternal Mortality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xi + 269 pp. \$90. Review by KATHRYN R. MCPHERSON, UTAH VALLEY UNIVERSITY.

Louis Schwartz's *Milton and Maternal Mortality*, a study of John Milton's poetic exploration of the material, cultural, and gendered dimensions of childbed in the early modern period, carefully reads both the major and minor poems to reveal how "Milton struggled to identify the proper theological function of the suffering many women experienced in childbirth" (4). Its wide survey of Milton's works, contextualized anew through maternal suffering, offers scholars and students fresh insights into the struggles underlying great poetry and how they might resemble those experienced by "great-bellied" women. Focusing on balanced socio-historical research, Schwartz offers detailed readings of "An Epitaph on the Marchioness of Winchester," "On Shakespear," *A Mask [Comus]*, Sonnet 23, and *Paradise Lost*. *Milton and Maternal Mortality* thus builds a convincing case that the blind regi-