

John T. Shawcross. *The Arms of the Family: The Significance of John Milton's Relatives and Associates*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004. vii + 304 pp. \$45.00. Review by CLINTON BRAND, UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS.

Family matters matter, argues John Shawcross, because families matter, even for a figure so redoubtable, so fiercely independent as John Milton. Though Milton may have been “a sect of one” in his religious and political opinions and in his literary originality, he could not claim the radical autonomy boasted of Satan, “self-begot, self-rai's'd / By our own quick'ning power.” Rather, Milton lived his life, pursued his poetic ambitions, and forged his political and religious views within a complex network of personal associations that crossed and confounded simple or tidy ideological boundaries and that informed the writer's self-understanding in rich and various ways. In this study of Milton's extended family, Shawcross draws on his impressive expertise and his vast knowledge of seventeenth-century history and literary culture to expand our sense of Milton's life records and to complement, even to correct, the standard biographies by William Riley Parker and Barbara Lewalski, not to mention Shawcross' own *John Milton: The Self and the World* (1993). Through painstaking and pioneering archival research, Shawcross significantly revises scholarly assessments of Milton's family relationships, particularly with his nephew John Phillips and his brother-in-law Thomas Agar. Much of the book is dense with closely reasoned inferences from obscure and dusty documents, and hence is likely to appeal mainly to specialists. But Shawcross also offers lucid formulations and edifying insights that will be valued by more general readers and all students and teachers of Milton. He casts new and arresting light on what we might call the “literary Milton,” complicating facile assumptions about his presumed “Puritanism” and “Republicanism,” while also offering an appreciation of familial archetypes in Milton's dramatic and religious imagination.

The Arms of the Family investigates the “significance” of Milton's relatives and associates by exploring three different but inter-related ways in which familial relationships signify important meanings for and about Milton and his work. First, there is the original biographical

research, going beyond Masson and Parker, to give us a new and corrected appreciation of Milton's brother Christopher, his brother-in-law Thomas Agar, and his nephews Edward and John Phillips. Second, Shawcross seeks then to assess how this evidence might contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the development of Milton's political identity and the evolution of his religious position. Third, in the last chapter and the Afterword, the book limns the patterns of familial relationships in the major poems and in Milton's "genogram," a schematic and heuristic mapping of his extended network of kinfolk.

Some of the most intriguing and certainly the most tantalizing material in the study concerns Milton's relationship with his brother Christopher, the Royalist and Roman Catholic. Admitting that very little has been added to our knowledge of Christopher since Masson's *Life of Milton*, Shawcross expertly synthesizes all the available evidence and sorts out the remaining gaps and questions that make it difficult to draw many assured conclusions. We do not know when exactly Christopher reverted to his grandfather's Catholicism, but his Royalist loyalties were pronounced and consistent from the 1640s on. There seems little doubt that John's relationship with his brother was severely strained over political and religious differences, but their involvement was nonetheless sustained, up to and including Christopher's dubious participation in John's nuncupative will. While Shawcross raises questions about Christopher's honesty and integrity, he also suggests that the brother may have had a role in John escaping prosecution under the Act of Indemnity of 1660. Christopher was certainly not alone among the committed Royalists who shared a close association with the putatively Republican poet.

Among these figures, Shawcross devotes considerable attention to Thomas Agar, the ardent Royalist who was the second husband of Milton's sister Anne. Quite aside from the complex and labored exposition of Agar's own family, Shawcross effectively seizes on this neglected figure to illustrate a chief contention of the study—that well beyond the 1630s John Milton not only kept company with avowed Royalists, but also his own milieu was in important respects defined and characterized by the ethos and values of Royalist and aristocratic culture. Thus Shawcross repeatedly rebukes the tendency to exaggerate the cleavage

between what we have become accustomed to characterize as Milton's middle-class Puritanism and the wealthy, aristocratic society in which he moved and made his way. The book further analyses how Milton's extended family often crossed and ignored the cultural divisions of the times, as families often and perhaps inevitably tend to do. In his discussion of Milton's nephews, Shawcross corrects a number of misleading and biased characterizations of Edward and John Phillips. The spirited defense of John Phillips against his detractors among Milton's biographers, Parker particularly, involves a virtuoso performance of scholarly acumen; Shawcross effortlessly combines a deft sifting of historical evidence, telling archival discoveries, and detailed textual criticism with close stylistic analysis of Phillips' (and Milton's own) propensity for scurrilous satire to refute baseless suppositions of the strained relationship between Milton and his nephew: "the story of John and his uncle has been a flagrant example of the main point of this book: time present has simply taken over the foundationless and prejudiced assertions of time past, superannuating them, and ignoring or misreading whatever evidence there has been that would lead to at least defensible opposed judgments" (133).

Coupling thus revisionist bravado with exacting scholarship, Shawcross proceeds then in Part II of the book to synthesize the biographical evidence of the first part with his own lifetime study of Milton to offer a subtler characterization of Milton's politics and religion than the blunt labels "Republican" and "Puritan" manage to convey. In so doing, however, Shawcross finds himself inevitably stumbling in the overgrown lexical field of reified categories that are never quite adequate either to the paucity of evidence available or to the quicksilver stream of Milton's mind living out his politics and his theology in what Cowley called "a warlike, various and tragicall age." Chapter 5 effectively argues against the facile labeling of Milton as an "anti-monarchist," "anti-royalist," or "Republican"; rather, concludes Shawcross, Milton is better designated as a consistent "Parliamentarian" with strong and abiding "Royalist connections." Chapter 6 is only a little less assured and not quite as convincing in trying, more briefly, to pin down Milton's religious position. Reluctant to engage quarrels about Milton's alleged "heresies," Shawcross argues against calling Milton an "Arian" or even an "antitrinitarian," preferring instead to

paint him as a “subordinationist” with solidly “Protestant” credentials. Milton, we are told—not very helpfully—is somewhat of a “calvinist” (small c) without quite being a “Calvinist” (big C); “he was a Puritan, but perhaps more outwardly than truly” (180). Even though one could complain that there is both too much and too little precision in such efforts to ascertain the poet’s religion and his politics, this section is likely to be found more engaging to the general reader than the densely argued biographical analysis of the first four chapters.

In its closing pages, *The Arms of the Family* turns from archival research and biography to a more impressionistic discussion of a number of family archetypes in *Paradise Lost* and the other major poems. Shawcross writes, for instance, “I do not wish to imply any conscious equation between the rebellious Satan and the conflictual Christopher in their relationships with the Father or with the father, but vestiges of such familial disruption do seem to lie psychologically for Milton underneath the change of Lucifer (the light-bearer) to Satan (the adversary)” (184). Developing thus Jung’s idea of Satan as the parallel and rival of the Son and as a concealed quaternity in the orthodox dogma of the Trinity, Shawcross picks up and runs with Northrop Frye’s similar suggestion of a kind of “sibling rivalry” between Satan and the Son of God. One need not see Milton’s relationship to his brother dimly encoded in *Paradise Lost* nor does one have to follow such old-school psychologizing to share Shawcross’s essential point that patterns of family relationships—fathers and sons, brothers, husbands and wives, parents and children—matter immensely in our interpretation of literature as well as life and that accurate knowledge of Milton’s family enriches our appreciation of the poet and his poetry. John Shawcross has given us yet another important and provocative study and one that richly crowns a most impressive career. Perhaps there is some irony in thus contextualizing Milton, setting him securely “in the arms of the family,” for at the end of the book he stands out more clearly than ever in all his defiant, inexplicable singularity.