

and discovers in them, and in Adam and Eve's prayers, the outward performance of the poet's self-imposed and sacred office: "to pray efficaciously on behalf of others through poetry" (211). Reisner's final statement not only ends his own fine essay, but also reflects the theme of this excellent book: "The public poet [Milton] presents to the world always stands within our line of vision, like the blind Samson in the Philistine theatre, "as one who prayed,/ Or some great matter in his mind revolved" (*Samson Agonistes*, 1637–38).

Paul Hammond. *Milton's Complex Words: Essays on the Conceptual Structure of Paradise Lost*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xviii + 479 pp. \$88.00. Review by JOHN MULRYAN, ST. BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY.

This book is a beautifully written essay on Milton's use of language, but it is not without its flaws. It seems to me, for example, that one cannot discuss Milton's use (and mastery) of words without making some comparisons with other wordsmiths. How did, say, Spenser, Donne, Lancelot Andrewes, or George Herbert handle complex words?

Perhaps it would be best to begin with a listing of the "complex words" and then explore their significance. There are 30 "words," although some of those listed are not words at all. For the most part, single nouns have been chosen, but there are also adjectives, punctuation marks, doublets and triplets, antithetical nouns and adjectives, a single prefix and a single pronoun: complex indeed! Here is the list: 1. Alone. 2. Art. 3. Chance, Fate, *and* Providence. 4. Change. 5. Choice. 6. Dark *and* Light. 7. Desire. 8. Ease. 9. Envy. 10. Equal. 11. Evil. 12. Fall. 13. Fancy *and* Reason. 14. Free. 15. God. 16. Grace. 17. Hope. 18. I. 19. Idol *and* Image. 20. If *and* Perhaps. 21. Knowledge *and* Wisdom. 22. Love. 23. Naked. 24. New *and* Old. 25. Not. 26. Re-. 27. See *and* Seem. 28. Self-. 29. Within. 30. ?

It is now fashionable to gloss Milton through writers and thinkers he could not have known and was probably not in sympathy with. Or as Hammond puts it: "in attempting to explicate theological concepts I have drawn eclectically on the Christian tradition, often citing works which Milton would not have known—nor approved if

he had known them—if they seemed to me to provide illuminating reflections on the questions which the poem raises” (vii). I find this ahistorical approach to be indefensible, for its real purpose, I feel, is to impose current critical theory on earlier writers; often the theory takes precedence over the writings of the author and is of dubious value toward real engagement with the author’s own work.

Hammond seems to feel that Milton can do no wrong and the rebel angels can do no right. There is not a hint of criticism of anything Milton ever wrote or said, sometimes to the point of absurdity. In a very oxymoron-ic fashion, the distinguished minority of English men are allowed to “force” the sullen majority to be free: “To Milton, it seemed that the majority of the English people had turned their backs on true freedom, preferring tyranny. As a consequence, the minority who wish to embrace liberty have the right, and perhaps even the duty, to compel the slothful majority to be free” (202). Two writers whom Milton could not have known, Karl Marx, and Lenin, would certainly have approved of this sentiment!

The Christian message is assumed to be right, and the rebel angels are held accountable for the precepts of a religion that does not yet exist, in all of its manifestations, including the Pauline interpretation of scripture. Here Milton is caught in an anachronistic time warp, which, at the very least, confuses the reader.

While Hammond freely admits that *Paradise Lost* is one of the most carefully conceived works of art in the language (16), he also supports Milton’s view that art (especially Satanic art) is diabolical, although Milton’s own art is exempted from scrutiny because it is inspired by the muse Urania (16).

I wish to conclude with an analysis of some of the thirty terms or marks that Hammond has selected for discussion, according to their meaning and complexity. First, single and related terms: Love, and Desire. Second, doublets, one of antithetical terms (New and Old) and the other of terms that are closely related (Idol and Image). Third, the one and only triplet employed by Hammond (Chance, Fate, and Providence).

Love and Desire. While Milton extols sexual love in the Love chapter, it seems to me that Milton the Puritan remained uncomfortable

with physical sexuality. We must, according to Milton, move toward heavenly love, and not remain “sunk in carnal pleasure” (*Paradise Lost* 8.593 [327]). Somehow Adam is permitted to enjoy Eve’s physical beauty but as he does so, he remains on the brink of poisonous passion: “If Adam is fixated upon Eve’s physical beauty he risks drinking the sorceress’ intoxicating potion rather than the charming cup of virtue; he thus becomes a slave to passion rather than love, degrades wisdom and higher knowledge to a subordinate position, and degrades himself too from his proper rung in the divine and natural order” (332). Similarly, desire is seen as spiritual (good) or physical (bad): “is desire an intellectual and spiritual quest for enlightenment, or is it a passion over which the reason has no control?” (63). Again, after eating the forbidden fruit, desire has become synonymous with lust: “Now that both have eaten of the fruit, sexual desire, which has previously been celebrated as a proper element of married love, has metamorphosed into mere ‘Carnal desire’ which enflames and burns; ‘desire’ has narrowed to become synonymous with ‘Lust’” (70).

New and Old. Although these are antithetical terms, Milton does not employ them antithetically. There seems to be a predisposition toward the old, but the new covenant, which closes the poem, is obviously an improvement on the old. The narrator praises the old and Satan the new, but, as mentioned above, that order is reversed in the closing lines of the poem. “There is, however, an evocation by the narrator of a deep antiquity in creation” (352), and “Satan resents the begetting of the Son as an offensive novelty, and this proves to be the occasion for his revolt because he regards it as imposing new laws on the angels and exacting new reverence and submission” (354). “But long before that, in mundane time and in the time scheme of the poem, man seeks for novelty in a way which brings disaster, and the connotations of the word ‘new’ metamorphose into darker and darker shades” (359). In the end, however, Adam tells Eve to expect “New Laws to be observ’d,” and the new dispensation is signaled when he sees a rain “Betok’ning peace from God, and Cov’nant new” (360).

Idol and Image. Hammond is not very clear on the distinction between idol and image, save that the former is bad and the latter

good. Of course the Protestant reformers who destroyed priceless works of art were in fact “iconoclasts” or “image smashers.” “And so the religious upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were often manifested in the breaking, repairing, and breaking again of those works which had been crafted to turn men’s minds to devotion, but which seemed to the reformers to be nothing but idols” (272). To belabor the obvious, most Protestants thought almost all images were idols, although they had difficulty with the notion that the human being is the image of God.

Chance, Fate, and Providence. We conclude with a triplet. Hammond tends to mix up the three terms, but I’ll try to keep them separate.

Chance can refer to fortuitous circumstances that can accidentally change the natural course of events, or help us to succeed without actual merit. So says Belial and Satan, but “Mammon is clear that chance is not going to unthroned God” (18).

As for Fate, after the Fall, Eve assumes that she and Adam will remain in Paradise,

but Fate

Subscrib’d not; Nature first gave Signs, imprest
On Bird, Beast, Aire, Aire suddenly eclips’d
After short blush of Morn (*Paradise Lost* 11.181-84).

“Fate here seems to be the will of God acting through nature, which begins to show the signs that death has entered the world; and death we know is another of the meanings of ‘fate’” (23). And in glossing *Paradise Lost* 12.646–7, Hammond fudges on the term Providence, turning it into a synonym for God: “Here in the world which opens up outside Eden—which is the world as we know it—‘Providence’ seems primarily a synonym for God himself, God acknowledged and experienced as a beneficent guide” (25).

To be fair to Hammon, aside from a few linking terms like “and” and “but,” every word in *Paradise Lost* is complex, and selecting terms to discuss from the enormous vocabulary Milton employs in the poem is an almost impossible task. But Hammond has made an interesting selection, enriched by trenchant analysis and eloquent prose. This is a seminal work, worthy of attention by any and all Milton scholars.