
The centrality of oaths in Restoration politics has long been recognized, with such religious and political groupings as Dissenters and Nonjurors in part created by this means of coercion. Already in the English Revolution, some defining attempts to enforce allegiance or unity—the Solemn League and Covenant, for example, or the Engagement Oath—played an important role, and have as a result found close scrutiny by historians. In his innovative study, Alex Garganigo takes up the literary consequences of oath-taking in the works of Samuel Butler, Andrew Marvell, and John Milton. He focuses on loyalty oaths in particular, with special reference to their part in contests “over religious and political pluralism” (xi). The critical implications for a literature often enough engaged with such promises are here framed by a rich sense of the longer prehistory of oaths. But Garganigo is most curious about how these operate in the Restoration: he goes far to show in his chosen authors how a proliferation of oaths, especially of office, resulted in serious literary reflection on such compulsion. Sometimes, as in Butler, the prevalence of oaths in the period informs literature more obviously, with Garganigo showing the complex results as Butler differentiates between oaths reviled and those more welcome. Sometimes, as in Marvell, oaths play a less obvious but still substantial part, not least in his insistent “secularization of the oath” early and late (xiii). In Milton’s late works, the issues arise at a higher level of interpretation, as might be expected, with the complex intersection of vows and obligations in *Samson Agonistes* a fruitful area for Garganigo’s inquiry, with more daring inferences to be drawn on this account from selected passages in *Paradise Lost*. *Samson’s Cords* makes new even some canonical texts. Garganigo restraints himself from addressing the present topicality of these writers’ responses to the polarizing consequence of such oaths, but time and again his study speaks to present-day concerns, even where oath-taking may be less pressing but where questions of collective identity and toleration remain insistent. His writing is lucid and to the point, with a quiet
wit further enlivening his pages.

Garganigo begins with an introductory overview of critical issues arising from the history of oaths in the period, with the proliferation of state oaths early in the Restoration a phenomenon, even in what might already have been an oath-weary nation. What might swearing mean? In brief, the very seriousness of oaths, and the compromises they forced on those seeking to evade their power, might contribute to a reckless readiness to swear, and also to much anxiety about that recklessness. The censure of idle profanation followed readily from biblical injunctions against swearing. Excuse might soon enough be made, however, for the promissory oaths intended to reinforce political, social, and legal obligations (however muddled the distinctions between oaths of assertion and of promise might prove in practice). And against such coercion, what subtleties in equivocation might yet prevent outright perjury? Garganigo shows some theoretical awareness of the stakes here, but the embedded social function of oaths justifies his historically driven account of them in his chosen authors.

With Butler, Garganigo’s reading of Hudibras is a revelation, amply rewarding his historicist approach. Satire on the Solemn League and Covenant plays an obvious part in that mock-epic, but he also shows Butler’s curiosity about such compulsion finding better application, notably in the contemporary Clarendon Code. The suggestive intersection between oaths and conjuring in Hudibras—conjuring to be understood both with the connotation of magic (cóñuring) and of what is sworn together (conjuring)—discloses Butler’s complex reaction to the Covenant on one hand and to the Clarendon oaths of the early 1660s on the other. If there is inconsistency on this point, it seems to drive the poet’s quixotic narrative, which at once laments the coercive and hypocritical qualities of the Covenant while affirming the social and political bonds effected by the latter oaths. This is to offer an unusually dynamic reading of the ways in which Butler’s mock-epic argues with itself. Nor is this all high politics, much as Hudibras does address in outline the national narrative of the previous decades. Garganigo goes far to show more immediate motivation energizing Butler’s “homely” poetics, not least in the poet’s regard for the right performance of local officialdom.
Garganigo’s understanding of like issues a decade later animates his take on Marvell’s *Rehearsal Transposed*, both parts of which prove more centrally concerned with oaths than hitherto observed. How charged even less direct discussion of oaths might become is amply documented in Garganigo’s close readings here. His is a productive comparison of the different operation of these successive volumes of prose satire, written on either side of the revocation of the Declaration of Indulgence and passage of the Test Act (1673). He shows that is consistent with Marvell’s later prose works of the 1670s—not surprising, though Garganigo’s observations are instructive—but consistent also with Marvell’s poetry of twenty or more years before, in a suggestive reading of “An Horatian Ode.” The chapter on this poem follows Conal Condren’s lead in improving on John Wallace’s argument of 50 years ago that it is closely wound into the Engagement controversy. Garganigo reads it as a “secular” ode marking the transition from one age to another, but also secular in its unspoken disavowal of confessional authority, in a fuller separation of church and state, as if in a fully tolerant Independency. It thus becomes something of an “Horatian Oath” (94) committing to an adequately tolerant *de facto* power. This reading, it may be added, invites consideration also of that poem’s not-quite-publication in Marvell’s posthumous *Miscellaneous Poems* (1681).

The final three chapters ask a further level of critical inference with a series of Milton’s major writings, first *Eikonoklastes* and *Samson Agonistes*, and then *Paradise Lost*. Again, Garganigo finds impressive material for his purpose, with Milton’s reflections on oaths and obligations usefully summarized in his *De Doctrina Christiana* but here discerned in one Miltonic work after another—the range of reference on this point is most effective. Milton acknowledges the significance of oaths in important civil matters, though opposed to “stiff vows” meant “To force our consciences” (99). Garganigo investigates the common seventeenth-century application of the story of Samson breaking his cords to the oath-taker seeking freedom from constraint. This figurative usage explains the title of this monograph more fully; it also enlarges our sense of *Samson Agonistes* as a dramatization of the operation of conscience. Milton’s version proves revealingly to yield a more vow-driven narrative than Judges, with the present analysis
offering a telling list of such episodes (117–118). Garganigo shows the poet subjecting vow-taking to complex consideration in the closet-drama, with the Restoration Milton now having still more ample cause to think through the matter poetically. It is an impressive reading.

On this basis, Garganigo's further inferences about *Paradise Lost* gain weight. He argues that Milton emphasizes God's "swearing by himself" in order to insist on the binding force of the coronation oath on a monarch—this with reference especially to *Paradise Lost*, Book 5, lines 607–8, where God discloses He has "sworn" all knees in heaven shall bow to the Son (130ff.). The biblical sanction for describing God as making vows had attracted much commentary. Milton is also curious about the implications. Garganigo seems strangely reluctant to concede the exceptional—indeed ontologically distinct—status of divine monarchy (135, 162–3). But his argument is instructive about the Restoration application of Milton's insistence on a coronation oath's lasting constraint on the Crown. As for subject (or citizen?), the test of fealty in the "forbidden fruit" proves in Garganigo's handling strangely analogous to the renewed Oaths of Allegiance and Supremacy in the 1660s. The question whether women too might be enjoined by such oath-taking enlarges his frame of reference, with his finding Milton's Eve independently under this obligation, as if a corrective insisting on women's civic role (179). More might be allowed to Milton's sharper distinction of pre- and postlapsarian roles and the terms of the judgements against serpent, Adam, and Eve. Even so, the commentary is animated by shrewd critical insights about Eve's autonomy as declared in considerable part by her capacity "to take and break state oaths of allegiance" (187). On this point too Garganigo substantiates his claim that *Paradise Lost* makes both timeless claims and claims very much of its time, notably concerning women as citizens in the Restoration. An important dimension has been added to our understanding of *Paradise Lost*.

In the close, a useful appendix sets straight an anomaly in the text of Marvell's letters, where an eighteen-century printing mistakes as "Book-Houses" where the original letter (now lost) had "Both Houses" (of parliament); it may be noted that Marvell's hand-writing in a like case can confirm Garganigo's persuasive conjecture.