

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-

cide wrestled with the literary and cultural dimensions of catastrophic childbirth throughout his poetic career. Blending the biographical (i.e., the deaths of Milton's wives Mary Powell and Katherine Woodcock from complications following the births of their children) with the literary, Schwartz sets out to "gain access, imaginatively and intellectually, to the childbirth experiences of . . . women like them in the early years of the seventeenth century, providing for the first time a comprehensive and historically informed gloss on Milton's scattered but purposeful allusions to childbed suffering, and demonstrating the impact that such suffering had on his imagination" (6). Arguing from a nuanced understanding of feminism, Milton studies, and cultural history, Schwartz's study offers a lively treatment of how Milton's poetic evolution, one marked by awareness of the "conscious terrors" (259) of creativity, mirrors women's fraught birthing experiences.

In the book's first section, Schwartz contextualizes early modern childbirth, particularly detailing reproductive trauma in the middle decades of the seventeenth century. Drawing on a wide-ranging set of examples from early modern women's diaries, memoirs, and prayers, as well as male-authored devotional texts of the period and twentieth-century studies of early modern obstetrics (particularly David Cressy and Adrian Wilson), Schwartz outlines how women worked inside a divinely ordained framework of fear, pain, and grace in order to transform a potentially terrifying experience, one inextricably linked to Eve's sin. He asserts childbirth became construed as "a chance for women, in imitation of Christ, to redeem some small part of the world by exposing herself to pain and death in the name of her child, of human posterity as a whole, and especially in fulfillment of God's command" (71). His analysis claims that each birth "was nothing less than a key event in the ongoing maintenance of the cosmic and social fabric of creation, commonwealth, and family" (71). Schwartz's conclusions about maternity hold together well, grounded in his comprehensive survey of the social and theological underpinnings of the period.

Following this sensitively construed historical context, Schwartz illustrates the extent of Milton's poetic exploration of female suffering, a suffering that became allied with Milton's own generative process of writing. For instance, the brief and sometimes over-wrought discus-

sion of “On Shakespear” reveals how Milton interprets Shakespeare’s works as “impregnat[ing] the imaginations of his readers, but also caus[ing] the deaths of their imaginations, making them give birth—in the Platonic sense—to so many progeny. . .that ‘fancy’ itself ultimately dies in the process” (79). When Schwartz comes to a more grounded analysis of Milton’s use of the funeral elegy, however, he shows how the poet powerfully, although incompletely, adapts the genre as used by Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton in order to find ways of recuperating what most poets simply elided: women’s suffering and death while giving life.

Schwartz’s most fascinating arguments appear in the lengthy Chapter 7, “‘The wide wound and the veil’: Sonnet 23 and the ‘birth’ of Eve in *Paradise Lost*,” which links the complexities of Sonnet 23 with the thematic and poetic achievements of Milton’s magnum opus. By questioning “the problem of ‘which wife’” (157) and debates over the Churching of Women in “Methought I saw my late espoused Saint,” Schwartz carefully surveys debates about the “nexus of autobiography, theology and poesis” (169) in the poem. His cogent conclusion asserts that the sonnet’s ambiguous consolation points towards the intertwined narratives of Eve’s creation, believably connected with the particulars of early modern childbirth, in Books Four and Eight of *Paradise Lost*. He claims that the uncertain comfort provided by the sonnet ultimately indicates the epic’s own “peculiar blend of hopefulness and sorrow” (210).

Schwartz elaborates on these themes by plausibly connecting them with the concept of *imitatio Christi* that pervades much of *Paradise Lost*. For example, Chapter 8 compellingly explores Sin’s terrifying narrative of Death’s tortuous birth, showing the gendered suffering (both male and female) inherent in childbirth and how Milton “recognizes the centrality of childbirth in working out the consoling plan of providence” (234). The book’s final chapter also succeeds, although less fully, to argue the overarching recurrence of maternal imagery in Milton’s overall cosmology, including God’s generative creation, the violent birth of Pandaemonium, and the descriptions of Chaos as a reproductive space.

On the whole, *Milton and Maternal Mortality* imaginatively fuses disparate discourses to reveal how John Milton’s career-long allusion

to childbed suffering “invites us to see the suffering that attends the process of reproduction in the wake of original sin as a circumscribed, through terrifying, realm of disorder over which God gave the human mind and spirit dominion” (260). In addition to being a formidable scholarly study that every academic library should purchase, *Milton and Maternal Mortality*, featuring Schwartz’s personable voice, makes suitable reading for advanced undergraduates interested in women’s studies, early modern studies, or Milton’s poetry. Feminists and Miltonists (and especially those of us who are both) should welcome his sweeping survey of how Milton the man lived and Milton the poet created in a world quietly suffused with respect for women’s sacrifice.

Kevin Curran. *Marriage, Performance, and Politics at the Jacobean Court*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009. ix + 187 pp. \$99.95. Review by M. L. STAPLETON, INDIANA UNIVERSITY-PURDUE UNIVERSITY, FORT WAYNE.

This study analyzes the six wedding masques written by Jonson, Campion, Chapman, and Beaumont and performed at court during the first decade of the reign of James I. This somewhat new genre flourished as a type of Jacobean royal entertainment as it had not during Elizabeth’s time because marriage was, for her, an uncomfortable subject for somewhat obvious reasons, as it would not be for her successor for causes less apparent to us. The king was at some times happily married to his Danish queen, Anna, and thus clearly not opposed to the institution itself. He also saw that such masques were a medium through which he could express the idea of union, political as well as social and marital. Curran contends that since these pageants were hardly dull, insipid affairs and seem to have enacted some of the very conflicts that must have riled the court, they should “encourage us to think about monarchical rhetoric as a system of representation that was changeable, invented, and very often contested, not as something static, inherited, and reproduced” (5). Here, his focus is on “verbal rhetoric,” an exploration of the diction and ideas embedded in the texts that can be linked to concrete political ideas, in opposition to new historicist readings of ideologies allegedly underlying them.