

that the deeper wisdom demonstrated herein is that we can and should both historicize and poeticize. Many of the contributors to this volume do so, and their fascination for the concrete circumstances of consciousness and creativity, for the inevitably social context of poetry, for irrepressible *jouissance*, and for the tension between sometimes precise and other times uncontrollable signification mark key affinities even with the critics that they are supposed to be at war with. There are real differences in emphasis and approach between those who historicize and those who poeticize, but each approach can substantially enhance, enrich, correct, and perhaps complete the other. *Green Thoughts, Green Shades* activates thoughts about meditative gardens and annihilations, but also deeper Marvellian inflections about causes too good to go to war over and the prospect of world enough and time to forge a higher criticism that will satisfy poets and historicists, the outlines of which are sketched very impressively in this important volume.

Joseph Wittreich. *Shifting Contexts: Reinterpreting Samson Agonistes*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2002. xxxii + 352 pp.+ 5 illus. \$60.00. Review by WILLIAM B. HUNTER, GREENSBORO, N.C.

The 1758 lines of *Samson Agonistes* may have elicited in the past few years more critical discussion than that occasioned by any other work of equivalent length. Besides numerous notes and articles there are three fulllength books by Harold Skulsky (1995), John Shawcross, and Derek Wood (both 2001), plus collections of essays edited by George Maclean (1995) and by Mark Kelley and Joseph Wittreich (2002). Earlier books on *Samson* by Mary Ann Radzinowicz (1978) and Wittreich (1986) won the Milton Society's

James Holly Hanford Award for the most distinguished work of the year.

Now Wittreich continues with a second exemplary study of the play (or dramatic poem as Milton called it). In it he sees Milton as a spokesman for radical Puritanism, a thesis founded to a considerable extent upon his responsibility for the divergences from orthodoxy in *De Doctrina Christiana*. Early in the first chapter Wittreich points out that facing the title page of the first edition, which *Samson* shared with *Paradise Regained*, is the official licensing of the book, exceptional in Milton's works printed after 1670. But lacking is any ecclesiastical imprimatur because of the "disturbing theology" of the poem, he believes, and of the "seemingly terrorist agenda" of the play (15). In his eyes Milton is a puritan extremist even though the brief epic closely follows the account in Luke (and in part the Anglican baptismal formula), and the evidence for the terrorist agenda is primarily based on the omission of twenty lines of text that Stephen Dobranski characterized as "the poem's most urgent and violent images for the revitalization of the Good Old Cause." Unfortunately for this argument, the text printed these lines as *omissa*, actually calling attention to them but without raising any censoring objections.

Many of the most interesting insights that Wittreich explores are these provided by analysis of the work in light of earlier plays on similar religious subjects: Gregory Nazianzen's *Christ Suffering* as Milton stated in the Preface (recognized today as *Christos Paschon*, of uncertain date and authorship), Grotius's *Christus Patiens* and *Sophompaneas*, Buchanan's *Jephthes* and *Baptistes*, and Joost van den Vondel's *Samson*. Illuminating details show how Milton was engaged

with this large body of dramatic material as well as the use he made of classical models, Euripides and Seneca.

His major source, of course, was the Bible. Everyone knows Samson's story as narrated in Judges 13:16. Elsewhere he is named only once, rather unexpectedly in Hebrews 11:32 as one of those who were saved by faith: "What more shall I say [of such leaders, six having been named]? For time would fail to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah" and others—a passage that evidently approves of Samson. But several biblical scholars of Milton's day thought otherwise. Wittreich follows up their citation of Genesis 49 in which the elderly Jacob characterized the future of the tribes descended from his twelve sons. At verses 16:17 he reaches Samson's group, Dan, who "shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent in the way, a viper by the path, that bites the horses' heels so that his rider falls backward." Samson was the most famous member of that tribe, and so by something of a stretch several of Milton's contemporaries interpreted him as evil, bordering on the Satanic as "a serpent in the way, a viper by the path." To support such a reading these scholars turned to the list of the tribes that were saved according to the narrator of Revelation. There in chapter 7, twelve thousand out of each tribe received the "seal of the living God." In that roll call the tribe of Manasseh replaces that of Dan—proof enough for these commentators to minimize the praise in Hebrews: instead one should recognize a serpentine Samson who with his Danite relatives perished because of the evils foreseen by Jacob. Here too is the source of the strange "evening Dragon" that appears near the end of the play, dragons and serpents being nearly synonymous (252).

Such a view makes possible an entirely new understanding of Milton's Samson with concomitant revaluations of the entire play in its shifting contexts that Wittreich investigates and invites his readers to share. As he summarizes,

If Dan is the tribe of idolatry and, for some, the tribe from which Antichrist will arise, Samson, no less than Dan, was thought to be the serpent in the way, the adder in the path, blocking the way into Jerusalem and representing a false form of salvation through destruction that would be swallowed up in the creative salvation represented by Christ. (245)

Whether this view of the play (and of Milton's beliefs) will prevail will be up to each reader. We certainly have here a book that Miltonists cannot ignore.

Such an interpretation places Milton among the dissidents unreconciled to the restoration of crown and church in 1660. Much of the support for such dissension derives from the heterodoxies of *De Doctrina Christiana*. But as its author Milton surprisingly has no interest whatsoever in Samson. The three chapters of Judges are cited only for texts to prove that God is wonderful and incomprehensible, that the Hebrew word for angel has several different meanings, and so on. Most surprising of all, the verse in Hebrews asserting Samson's salvation by faith is ignored in the chapter on "Saving Faith" (I, xx). Indeed, Hebrews 11:32 is quoted once elsewhere to illustrate fortitude and then names from it only Gideon. Wittreich recognizes these facts as well as the omission of Samson from the treatise's list of Israel's judges and against such apparent inconsistency argues (205) that Milton in a canonical work, *Paradise Regained*, likewise omits Samson but names Gideon and Jephthah as "those who from lowliest plight 'attain'd / . . . to highest deeds' (2.43738)." But Manoa and his family did not live in "lowliest plight" and so Samson could not have been cited here. The existence of the play proves that its author was deeply concerned with the character just as the total indifference of the treatise proves

that its author was not. Perhaps we are reading the works of two different authors.

David Gay. *The Endless Kingdom: Milton's Scriptural Society*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002. 220 pp. \$43.00. Review by JOHN MULRYAN, ST. BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY.

Gay's *Endless Kingdom* challenges the idea that after the Restoration, Milton withdrew from politics and wrote his three great poems (*Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*) without specific reference to the Royalist regime. For Gay, Milton sought a connection between the social world of England and the textual world of the Bible. When the Restoration broke that connection, Milton proclaimed the kingdom of God within the context of his poetry: "In 1644, when Milton published *Areopagitica*, the dynamic correspondence of textual and social vitality seemed almost possible to achieve. The Restoration of 1660 destroyed this correspondence for Milton, and so he chose to proclaim the endless kingdom primarily in the textual and critical space of the poetry he bequeathed to future generations" (31). The three major poems are, according to Gay, "radically counterhistorical in their critical engagement with, and opposition to" the Royalist discourses that connect the Restoration with providential statements in the Bible (12).

Gay also claims that "the Bible is initially a broken and incomplete text. Its texture is aphoristic, consisting of sayings, precepts, and isolated teachings" (10) that generate wisdom. Gay finds a similar "structure" in *Areopagitica*: "The pieces of its scattered body are verbal units comprised of maxims and aphorisms, or short, pithy, and memorable phrases that strike the reader as forms of wisdom . . . The writer's task of linking these aphorisms in prose provides a model for the reader's interpretive task of gathering up the scattered body of truth" (36). Wisdom is the common thread that binds together Gay's interpretation of the three great poems: as perception in *Paradise Lost* (chapter 2), as opposi-