

Robert Wilcher. *The Writing of Royalism, 1628-1660*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xii + 403 pp. \$70. Review by ALAN RUDDUM, SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY.

Robert Wilcher's intention "is to offer a more comprehensive survey than has yet been attempted of the range and diversity of the partisan writing that was devised to meet challenges to the authority of Charles I and the institutional integrity of the Church of England, and later to cope with the social, political and psychological consequences of the defeat of the royalist armies, the execution of the King and the abolition of the monarchy." He has adopted a chronological, narrative approach "in an effort to locate each text as precisely as possible within the contexts of its original composition, transmission, and reception" (2). The aim is to determine "what any given text was likely to mean to its audience at the time of its appearance" and to take account of authorial intention, so far as it can be reconstructed (2-3).

These aims might (in my view should) seem so sensible as to be uncontentious, to represent the way any one of us should proceed in seeking to understand a period which those who lived in it experienced as one of "rapid and disorientating change" (3). Yet experience suggests otherwise. A few years ago, at the International Conference at the Centre for Seventeenth-Century Studies, a leading British critic told me firmly that "meanings *are* undecidable." More recently, in a long-running thread on the electronic discussion list, Milton-L, focusing on *Samson Agonistes*, it was necessary to invoke E.D. Hirsch's *The Validity of Interpretation*, and to insist that the thoughts to which a work might give rise may be significant for the reader, but are not *ipso facto* a guide to authorial intention. As to the importance of chronology, one recalls how heavily John Wall, in his reading of Henry Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans*, relied upon *The Mount of Olives* as a basis for interpreting the poems. The latter work, published in 1652, is clearly a response to the Act for the Propagation of the Gospel in Wales, whose writ ran from 1650 to 1653. That is, it began too late to have influenced the 1650 *Silex* and ended long enough before the

1655 *Silex* to make its influence on that volume something to be argued rather than assumed. Mention of Vaughan is apposite here. In spite of a steady stream of essays on the nature of his engagement with the political sphere, most book-length studies of literary reactions to the Civil War have largely ignored his work. Wilcher's is the first overall study of royalist writing in which Vaughan is given due recognition; he provides the epigraph to the volume, and in the Acknowledgements Wilcher writes that the book "stems from a fascination with the work of Henry Vaughan." As this aspect of his work is of special interest to me, I shall, at the risk of imbalance, abandon a "chronological" account and consider it immediately.

In the Introduction Wilcher writes of the emergence of the public sphere created by rising literacy and the availability of cheap print as being among the new developments that writers in the royal cause had to confront. He cites Arthur Marotti's argument that the manuscript system of literary transmission survived because it stood opposed to the more democratizing force of print culture and allowed its participants to feel that they were part of a social as well as an intellectual elite (3). He does not mention possible prudential considerations. Am I wrong in supposing that what distinguishes Vaughan from Rowland Watkyns is not merely the relative quality of their work, but the fact that Vaughan published into the teeth of the storm? Watkyns, whose verse presumably circulated in manuscript during the Interregnum, did not publish until 1662, that is when it was not merely safe but possibly advantageous to do so. There are grounds for supposing that the publication of Vaughan's *Olor Iscanus* (1651) was delayed because the original version contained material which Vaughan's friends or his publisher thought too obviously provocative. Much of what he did publish was provocative enough; a poet such as he would have courted a short lifespan in the more totalitarian twentieth century.

It is not clear, therefore, why the "Jonsonian epistles and translations of Henry Vaughan" are mentioned in the context of "poetic manifestations of royalism [which] had circulated in manu-

script" (254). They may, as Wilcher suggests, have had a "very private readership" in the sense of a small one, but they surely belong to print rather than to manuscript culture. I have remarked elsewhere on the interesting disparity of views of the similarities and differences between the poems of the 1650 *Silex Scintillans* and those added in 1655. Wilcher sees the first volume as dominated by "personal grief and political despair" and the second as contemplating the future "with a renewed sense of political purpose" (336). There may well be a truth expressed here; but the argument for it is not helped by the surely incorrect suggestion that the Master of "The Proffer," a poem packed with imagery referring to the Day of Judgement, is Charles II rather than Christ (337). Wilcher's opposition seems to me too stark. Even if we forget the poem "Cheerfulness," there is enough vitality and exuberance in the 1650 *Silex*, even in its expressions of personal grief, to rule out "despair." Think of "Rules and Lessons," for example. Further, Vaughan's intellectual engagement with Calvinism, evidence that he was thinking hard as well as feeling, is as clear in the 1650 *Silex* as in 1655. His opposition to predestinarian doctrine is expressed in "The Retreat" as it is in "Child-hood." His inclusion of "the creature" in the scheme of salvation is expressed in "And do they so?" as it is in "The Book."

Local disagreements aside, it must be said that *The Writing of Royalism* is a welcome, impressive and important book. Each phase of the history, from "the halcyon days" to "coping with defeat and waiting for the King," is deftly sketched in and the royalist response recorded. Wilcher makes it clear that the idea of halcyon days, nostalgia for which was exploited by writers of the 1640s, was a conscious construction of court propagandists before during the period of personal rule. His account of the Bishops' Wars is a stark reminder that Charles I, in his determination to impose uniformity in religion, reverted in effect to the kind of folly from which the death of Buckingham should have released him for good and all. The literary responses recorded range from that of George Daniel of Beswick, a masque-like performance that does not end on a masque-like note of triumph and harmony, through Edmund Waller's ostrich performance in his poetic welcome to the inopport-

tune arrival of Marie de Medici, to Henry Valentine's sermon *God Save the King*. Waller and Cowley are shown as more concerned for the fate of Falkland than they were for the religious or political issues at stake, Waller absorbing Falkland "into the realms of masque and myth," Cowley conveying "the texture of the existential moment." Cowley is among those sensitively and intelligently treated in Wilcher's tracing of "the journeys of individual writers." Anonymous comment on the penultimate list of contents of the *Broadview Anthology* taught me that some specialists in this period still regard Cowley with disdain, so I was grateful for the exposition of the real interest of the *Poems* of 1656, prepared during Cowley's imprisonment. Inevitably, in dealing with such a range of writers, Wilcher draws heavily upon recent specialist criticism, but he knows how to winnow out the chaff, as for example in the carefully considered section on *Cooper's Hill*. Readers who have been engaged on related projects might wish for more extended discussion in some cases, Herrick and Lovelace perhaps. One of the book's intelligent features is its manageable length, so it is perhaps perverse to wish for more detail. The account of "the finest of all literary treatments of Strafford's death" is generally excellent, but for the bare notation that it was "probably [by] John Cleveland." The evidence, published in Peter Davison's *Poetry and Revolution* (1998), that "Here lies Wise and Valiant Dust" was written by Strafford's chaplain, Clement Paman, should be acknowledged. I found myself wishing too for an account of the symbolism of Charles I's coronation, and, in the discussion of Waller's panegyric, "Upon His Majesty's Repairing of Paul's," and for some mention of the negative aspects of a work no doubt undertaken in support of the beauty of holiness, the way in which, as Whinney and Millar pointed out in 1975, it "contributed materially to public discontent, and so ultimately to rebellion."

Whatever reservations one might have on a few points of detail, it has to be said that few literary scholars, even among those who profess historical criticism, have so close a command of the historical record, or could, in discussion of the literature, tie it at so many points to relevant manuscript and printed sources. I found

myself wishing disconcertingly often that it had been to hand while the *Broadview Anthology* was in preparation. Mastery of material, remarkable narrative skill, and an eye for the telling detail, makes for enjoyable as well as essential reading, the frequent pleasure of “something understood,” which Herbert so rightly saw as the culmination of the passionate engagement that is prayer. Wilcher is passionately engaged in his project as scholar, not as polemicist. Some historical criticism of this period reminds one of those anniversary advertisements which used to appear, perhaps still do, in *The Times*, commemorating Charles I as Martyr, or honoring—or execrating—Cromwell. Wilcher’s concern is not to fight, on either side, the war of words and ideas over again, but to understand it. The clarity of his exposition makes it accessible to ambitious undergraduates, and the details he has uncovered, or set in a fresh light, will engage historians and literary scholars alike. This is an important book, and its author deserves our congratulations and gratitude.

John T. Shawcross. *The Uncertain World of Samson Agonistes*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001. ix + 158 pp. Review by WILLIAM B. HUNTER, MILTON SOCIETY.

Students of Milton begin the new millennium with this major study of *Samson Agonistes*. In no sense thesis driven, it unifies and evaluates the criticism of the past half century and more to open the poem to its readers as the great achievement that it is, not subject, as some would limit it, to feminist, political, or ethnic interpretation. As the author observes of his work, he did “not have an agenda overriding what I read as the substance of the poem, or even a thesis that I seek to ‘prove’ through that reading” (ix).

Especially welcome is its author’s grounding as one of our best bibliographers in the fundamental question of the reliability of the text which only the original edition offered in 1671. An early work? Or, more likely, an early work with some later revi-