

Timothy J. Burberry, *Milton the Dramatist*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2007. 206 pp. \$58.00. Review by ANNA K. NARDO, LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY.

Timothy J. Burberry's *Milton the Dramatist* contests what he cites as "something of a truism"—that "Milton was not a dramatist and his poems are not dramatic" (x). Focusing on *Arades*, *Comus*, the Trinity manuscript plans, and *Samson Agonistes*, Burberry's project complements the many studies of the dramatic qualities of Milton's major epic (e.g. John Demaray, *Milton's Theatrical Epic: The Invention and Design of Paradise Lost* and Barbara Lewalski, *Paradise Lost and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms*) as well as his vision of history (e.g. David Loewenstein, *Milton and the Drama of History: Historical Vision, Iconoclasm, and the Literary Imagination*). But Burberry does not merely claim that "a dramatic quality suffuses all [Milton's] work" (xvi). Rather he attempts to make the case that Milton was, "in addition to being a superb writer of epic and lyric, . . . a dramatist, and a considerable one at that" (x).

Foundational to his case is the evidence that Milton probably saw live theatre in London, as well as Rome. Expanding Gordon Campbell's argument that the "John Milton, gentleman" who was a trustee of the Blackfriars Theater was also the poet's father, Burberry argues that not only may the play-going references in Milton's first elegy and *L'Allegro* refer to actual attendance at plays, but also "the debate between Comus and the Lady, and the entrance of Dalila—are significantly indebted to plays shown in the theater" (23): Ben Jonson's *The Staple of News*, which ran in 1626 during Milton's rustication from Cambridge, and Thomas Randolph's 1630 comedy *The Muses' Looking-Glass*, which is "set in the Blackfriars Theatre, and depicts two Puritans . . . who have come to the theater to condemn the day's performance" (19). Indeed, Burberry reads Milton's call in *The Reason of Church Government* for the current government to stage "paneguries" (or solemn assemblies) as an argument to reform, rather than close, the playhouses, in one of which Milton's family held a financial interest.

After establishing that Milton was a spectator, reader, and editor of drama, Burberry turns to Milton's masques to demonstrate that *Arades* creatively blends the conventions of the *al fresco* entertainment and the court masque, and that *Comus* is more drama than masque, especially in its unusual physical and verbal clashes between main masquers and antimasquers. Whereas "In court masques,

main masquers did not speak at all, nor did they interact in any way with the antimasquers" (48), the complex characterization of the villain and his debate with the Lady make *Comus*, according to Burberry, "a literary achievement that is virtually without precedent" (54). In Milton's revisions for publication in 1645, then in 1673, Burberry agrees with the critical consensus that "Milton was thinking of *A Masque* in terms of poetry when he published it," but he also finds, especially in "the revisions in the stage directions . . . an attempt to provide increased dramatic clarity as well as more compelling poetry" (58).

The subsequent chapter entitled "Problem-Solving in Milton's Biblical Drama Sketches" details how Milton's dramatic ambitions grew beyond commissioned masques to plans for Biblical and historical tragedies, many of which would have required spectacular staging of large-scale disasters that befall the wicked. In these sketches, Burberry finds Milton wrestling with problems of staging: e.g. Adam and Eve's nudity, and Biblical cataclysms too expensive for presentation and too protracted for stage report. Eventually, Milton resolves these problems—first by escaping "from the confines of the stage for the greater scope afforded by the epic" (77), and second by finding in the Samson story "a swift, compact catastrophe" (89) suitable for a messenger's report.

Of course, Samson's cataclysmic destruction of the Philistines is the crux of the post-9/11 controversy over Milton's only drama. Burberry contributes to this debate by arguing that the failure to attend to *Samson Agonistes* as a stage-worthy drama accounts, in part, for the misconception that Samson is guilty of the indiscriminate slaughter of the innocent. Burberry finds in *Samson Agonistes* "an abundance of implicit spectacle" (98). Analyzing the descriptions of Samson's body, Dalila's dress and train, and the Temple of Dagon, Burberry contends that Samson is not a terrorist—nor Dalila, a Philistine heroine.

Although not intended for the stage, Milton's tragedy resembles the neo-classical theatre of Jean Racine, to Burberry's mind, more than the closet dramas of Samuel Daniel or Elizabeth Cary. In order to solidify this claim, Burberry devotes his fifth chapter and appendix to a detailed account of *Samson Agonistes* in performance.

Milton the Dramatist is well researched and tightly reasoned. The chapter on Milton's Trinity manuscript sketches for tragedies is, I believe, the most successful. In his analysis of how experiments and false starts exposed prob-

lems of form that Milton solved in later works, Burbery's close reasoning from probabilities is convincing and enlightening. I find his method less persuasive, however, in his attempts to establish precise sources in plays that Milton may have seen, or to explain physically how Samson's guide could have possibly escaped from the falling pillars of Dagon's temple, or how the generous and civil lords who agreed to a ransom just might have arrived late to the festival, or how the messenger doesn't really mean that "all [Gaza's] sons are fall'n" (*S*All58). The reasoning in these sections depends too heavily on "it may be that . . . might seem . . . is possible . . ." (131-33) to win my full assent.

Nevertheless, theatre historians, as well as Milton scholars, will appreciate Burbery's extensive list of stagings, dramatic readings, and adaptations of *Samson Agonistes* from 1717 to 2003.

John Mulryan and Steven Brown, ed. and trans. *Natale Conti's Mythologiae*. 2 vols. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006. xlvii + 978 pp. + 1 ill. \$110/£89. Review by STELLA REVARO, SOUTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY, EDWARDSVILLE.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century Natale Conti's *Mythologiae* was the most popular myth book for poets, scholars, and general readers alike; in the twentieth century it also long served as an essential book for scholars writing about Renaissance poets and their myth sources. Its Latin was simple and straightforward, its organization helpful, and it came with an index. Now John Mulryan and Steven Brown have made this premier of myth books available for the first time in a complete, modern English translation in a handsome, two-volume edition. The *Mythologiae* passed through twenty-one Latin editions and six French translations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But it was not the only myth book of its time nor was it the only publication of its author Natale Conti (Natalis Comes), who was known as a prolific translator, principally of Greek works into Latin, and also as a poet and imitator of classical poetry in his own right—both in Greek and Latin. His poetic talents were to serve him well in the *Mythologiae* which includes generous examples of Greek poetry translated into Latin.

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