

# WILEY

---

"To this must be added": Milton's Advice to Miltonists

Author(s): Barbara K. Lewalski

Source: *Milton Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (DECEMBER 2011), pp. 245-251

Published by: Wiley

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24462047>

Accessed: 19-09-2019 15:40 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Wiley is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Milton Quarterly*

## **“To this must be added”: Milton’s Advice to Miltonists**

BARBARA K. LEWALSKI

My somewhat whimsical title, “‘To this must be added’: Milton’s Advice to Miltonists,” comes, as many will recognize, from Milton’s little treatise on poetics in the Preface to Book 2 of the *Reason of Church-Government* (1642).<sup>1</sup> That title and this essay are prompted by the observation that we are often led by critical fashions and personal ideology into false dichotomies when writing about Milton. Of course we should respond to our “eureka” insights and explore new questions and critical approaches that may lead to new emphases. But in doing so we sometimes tend to ignore or devalue all the rest.

One such dichotomy that has taken different forms over time is a disposition to take Milton’s often-quoted distinction between his poetic right hand and polemic left hand as absolute (1: 808)—as if the two hands were not part of the same body and mind, and the right hand could and did ignore what the left hand was doing or had done. So the old New Critics, especially in England, repudiated the prose of that distasteful republican regicide as irrelevant to his aesthetic accomplishments as a mostly orthodox Christian poet—a stance that persists without that ideological thrust in the insistence of some newer critics on both sides of the pond that after the Restoration Milton retreated to a “Paradise Within,” eschewing or repudiating reformist politics to write high poetry for the ages. In reaction, several major literary historians emphasized the place and importance of Milton’s prose and poetry in his era’s evolving ideas of political and religious liberty and republicanism, a concern later encouraged by new historicist practices. But in reaction to that, some adherents of what is being called the New Formalism set aside or repudiate these concerns for an exclusive focus on Milton’s poetic language, genres, and style. Some studies dealing with the interplay of politics, rhetoric, and poetry do seek to bridge this divide.

Another dichotomy concerns the theology of *Paradise Lost*, long taken to be grounded in Christian orthodoxy until the discovery of the manuscript of his *De Doctrina Christiana* in 1823 forced questions as to how or if the great epic reflects the antitrinitarianism, monism, and other heterodoxies spelled out in the treatise. The discovery led some to use the treatise as a “gloss” on the poem, while others insisted that his late poems downplay heterodoxy in order to speak to the larger Christian community. The desire to reclaim the poem for orthodoxy led at one extreme to a denial that Milton wrote *De Doctrina* (or at least to a claim that its much corrected, unperfected condition means that it is not a reliable guide to his theology). While Milton’s authorship of the treatise is generally accepted again and many critics take account of it when discussing his last poems, questions persist as to whether and how his theology impacts his poetry and his politics. Even critics attentive to how Milton’s heterodoxies—and notably his emphasis on the ongoing revelations of the Spirit in both prose and poetry—can fall into another dichotomy: that Milton’s texts are all about spiritual as opposed to political reading.

Another enduring dichotomy concerns issues of unity and consistency within and among Milton's works. Some, while recognizing that Milton's political and theological views developed and changed over time, see his works as mostly coherent in themselves. Others emphasize inconsistencies—an approach encouraged by deconstruction and what has been termed the New Milton Criticism. But this is another questionable dichotomy, leading sometimes, on the one hand, to interpretive rigidity, and sometimes, on the other, to claims that Milton's texts are undecidable, opening them to any and all interpretations.

I suggest that Milton's "advice" in the passage I reference leads us away from such dichotomies. In it he undertakes to explain why he is taking up the polemic pen though poetry is his true vocation. Promising that at some future time he will produce a great poem, he analyzes the basis of poetic inspiration, first rejecting some supposed sources. Poetry is, he declares,

not to be rays'd from the heat of youth, or the vapours of wine, like that which flows at wast from the pen of some vulgar Amorist, or the trencher fury of a riming parasite, nor to be obtain'd by the Invocation of Dame Memory and her Siren daughters, but by devout prayer to that eternall spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge and sends out his Seraphim with the hallow'd fire of his Altar to touch and purify the lips of whom he pleases.

(1: 820-21)

Many who cite the passage end there, with Milton's affirmation that high poetry is not the product of youthful fire, or Bacchic indulgence, or even of the past poetic models and conventions conveyed by Memory and the Muses, but is rather a divine gift calling the true poet to a kind of prophecy, as the prophet Isaiah was called, purified, and then volunteered for his mission (Isa. 6.1-8). Following this statement immediately, however, is a notable addition, insisting on the necessity for the high poet of much study and knowledge of arts and affairs: "To this must be added industrious and select reading, stedly observation, [and] insight into all seemly and generous arts and affairs" (1: 820-21).

Moreover, though he hopes and expects to produce poetry "so written to after-times, as they should not willingly let it die" (1: 810), Milton makes clear that he also expects such poetry to impact national affairs, to be "doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation" (1: 815). In *An Apology Against a Pamphlet* (also 1642), he rephrases a commonplace so as to specify the life experiences the high poet must have:

He who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things ought himself to bee a true Poem, that is, a composition, and patterne of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men, or famous Cities, unless he have in himself the experience and the practice of all that which is praise-worthy.

(1: 890)

Much later, in a 1657 letter to Henry de Brass about history-writing, he reaffirms the point: "[H]e who would write worthily of worthy deeds ought to write with no less largeness of spirit and experience of the world than he who did them" (7: 501).

Milton seems to expect the prophetic poet to make his poems out of all his knowledge and life experiences, so that his public activities and roles are not only relevant to high poetry, but must be incorporated in it. Milton's implicit advice to his critics seems to be to take him whole, to remember, whatever our point of entry or emphasis in dealing with his work, that "To this must be added" all the rest.

The caveat, "To this must be added" also bears on the issue of apparent contradictions in Milton's texts. Some such conflicting positions in Milton's polemical prose are to be understood in terms of the often-ignored consideration that he argues as a rhetorician not as an academic scholar, directing particular arguments to particular audiences, usually without flat contradiction but often without working out how or whether one such argument coheres with others. A case in point: in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* Milton develops a radical argument that free people have always the right to change their government and depose a king whenever they wish because sovereignty resides essentially in the people. But he also develops a second argument (citing lots of authorities) justifying revolution and tyrannicide when the ruler is a tyrant—a logically irrelevant (though not really contradictory) argument in the light of the former expansive claim to popular sovereignty. But of course the added argument is addressed to those who may not accept the former one, notably the backsliding Presbyterians—recalling for them justifications for resistance and revolution developed by noted Calvinists like John Knox and Hugh Languet.

More important, Milton often employs the resources of poetic language and story to highlight different aspects of complex concepts, leading to a more profound apprehension of them. The several personifications of Truth that Milton offers in *Areopagitica* afford a pertinent example. There are several poetic images for Truth in that work and elsewhere, but the personifications are especially striking. Most often quoted is the passage describing Truth as an Osiris-like dismembered virgin, needing the constant labors of scholar adventurers to seek out and find her scattered parts, an enterprise never to be completed in this world:

Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine Master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended, and his Apostles after him, were laid asleep, then strait arose a wicked race of deceivers, who as that story goes of the *Aegyptian Typhon*, with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good *Osiris*, took the virgin Truth, hewd her lovely form into a thousand peeces, and scatter'd them to the four winds. From that time ever since, the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the carefull search that *Isis* made for the mangl'd body of *Osiris*, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, Lords and Commons, nor ever shall doe, till her Masters second coming. . . . Suffer not these licencing prohibitions to stand at every place of opportunity forbidding and disturbing those that continue seeking, that continue to do our obsequies to the torn body of our martyr'd Saint. . . .

(2: 549–50)

Only a few pages later, however, Milton offers a personification that seems quite at odds with this one. Truth is an invincible Britomart figure, a warrior always victorious over Falsehood in the "wars of Truth":

© 2011 Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Let her and Falshood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the wors,  
 in a free and open encounter . . . For who knows not that Truth is  
 strong next to the Almighty; she needs no policies, nor strategems,  
 nor licensings to make her victorious; those are the shifts and the  
 defences that error uses against her power.

(2: 561–63)

But this invincible warrior is also described as “beleaguered Truth,” under siege, so that scholarly “pens and heads . . . by their studious lamps” must revolve “new notions and Idea’s” in her defense.

Apparently at odds with all these is the personification of Truth as a Proteus figure—in not one but two senses. First, unlike the Odyssean Proteus who spoke truth only when bound, Milton’s Truth shape shifts *when bound* and may then, like the prophet Micaiah (1 Kings 22.1–36) voice falsehoods in flat denial of her own nature:

Do not bind her when she sleeps, for then she speaks not true, as the  
 old *Proteus* did, who spake oracles only when he was caught &  
 bound, but then rather she turns herself into all shapes except her  
 own, and perhaps tunes her voice according to the time, as *Micaiah*  
 did before *Ahab*, until she be adjur’d into her own likeness.

(2: 563)

But she may also be a Proteus in another sense, taking various forms while remaining essentially herself: “Yet it is not impossible that she may have more shapes than one. What else is all that rank of things indifferent, wherein Truth may be on this side, or on the other, without being unlike her self” (2: 563).

The point is obvious enough. Far from attempting an Aristotelian, or Scholastic, or Baconian definition of truth, poet Milton understands and renders aspects of Truth as particular images and stories present her in various circumstances and from different perspectives. One emphasizes her fragmentary and helpless condition, requiring the continual efforts of searchers to find out her parts or to defend her under attack. But from another perspective Milton (like most of us) has some kind of faith that Truth will finally win out (though we, and he later, might qualify—in the long run, and to “fit audience[s]”). Milton’s shape-shifting Proteus and lying prophet Micaiah evoke the sadly enduring phenomenon of deception or forced confessions under duress, but the Proteus figure also registers the common recognition that different moral or religious formulas may yet convey the same fundamental understanding. These very different personifications point toward Milton’s practice of exploring aspects of and different perspectives on divine or human truths that cannot be grasped whole.

This Miltonic advice proves especially helpful in considering problems of interpretation and apparent contradictions in Milton’s great epic. God, for example, is represented in *Paradise Lost* in multiple and seemingly contradictory characterizations, but in ways that accord with Milton’s radical version of accommodation in *De Doctrina Christiana*. Thus while God is understood to be omniscient, the poem indicates that he can be perceived and represented only as some of his aspects are imagined metaphorically, filtered through the consciousness of several characters from their particular vantage points and circumstances. So he appears now (in an angelic

hymn) as a mystical figure whose skirts are “dark with excessive bright” (3.380), now as forensic orator and debater with his Son, now as loving Father, now as Socratic educator with Adam, now as deliverer of arbitrary commands carrying fearsome penalties, now as a monarch ensconced on a glorious throne, now as a general overseeing the battle in heaven, now as a potent male creative force inseminating great mother earth and beginning a vibrant and on-going creative process in Raphael’s account of creation. Milton emphasizes the limited knowledge even of the Son, who does not know in Book 3 what God’s pronouncements regarding man’s Fall may mean or his own role in man’s redemption, until he works that out in dialogue with God. Nor does he know when and how the battle in heaven will end until God commissions and empowers him to end it.

As well, Milton emphasizes the limited knowledge and particular vantage points of the several speakers who describe God’s ways to humankind—Raphael, Michael, and the Bard—emphasizing by their limitations that more must always be added. Cast in the role of marriage counselor to Adam in Book 8, Raphael depreciates the human sexuality the Bard celebrates so ecstatically in Book 4—an apparent inconsistency. But Raphael knows nothing about human companionship and sexuality—angelic experience in this area being very different—nor, he states, was he present at Adam’s creation and debate with God about his need for companionship. Also, in narrating the war in heaven to Adam he makes clear that his account is not literal, but is his best attempt to relate “th’invisible exploits / Of warring Spirits” to human sense, by “lik’ning spiritual to corporeal forms” (5. 565–66, 573). His literary strategy involves inventing a martial epic with topics and kinds of warfare Adam does not yet know about but is assumed to be capable of understanding—since his progeny will engage in them. Yet Raphael also indicates that the little epic he devises reflects, even if it does not exactly render, the true events, since the monistic universe he has earlier described dictates an affirmative answer to his question “what if Earth / Be but the shaddow of Heav’n” and more like it “then on earth is thought” (5.574–76).

Responding to Adam’s questions, Raphael describes the creation to Adam and Eve in a hexaemeron but much expanding Genesis 1 and 2. In this case, however, he insists strongly that his account is in no sense literal. The acts of God in themselves are immediate, “more swift / Then time or motion” but cannot be related to human ears save by “process of speech” (7.176–78). Moreover, neither “words nor tongue of Seraph” nor “heart of man” can comprehend or express God’s works—some of which are “To none communicable in Earth or Heaven” (7.113–24). His Genesis-based account is an imaginative fiction that conveys some essential values. Moreover, to reinforce the way particular perspectives affect what can be known, the poem incorporates another, quite different, creation story. Uriel, located in the sun, tells Satan disguised as a “stripling Cherub” what he observed of the creation from the empyreal heavens—namely, the creation of the planets; he says nothing whatever about creation on earth (3.705–21).

In Book 8 Raphael presents in apparent contradiction arguments for both a Ptolemaic and a Copernican cosmos. But Raphael, noting that Adam assumes a geocentric, Ptolemaic, universe, ascribes that to his earth-bound vantage point: “so it seem / To thee who hast thy dwelling here on Earth” (8.117–18). Refusing to confirm a Ptolemaic cosmos (though he does affirm some of its values) he strongly suggests that to angels who fly about among the planets the cosmos seems heliocentric, Copernican, and may indeed require explanation by much more advanced

cosmic theories that he summarizes, one after the other, in a series of daring “what if” proposals. The effect is to remove cosmological questions from the domain of revelation, to deny both biblical literalism and simple empiricism, to call attention to the limits of any single perspective on complex matters, and in doing this to avoid fixing scientific or theological speculation where it is at Adam’s (or Milton’s) given historical moment. Though he allows human speculation about planetary motion—“To ask or search I blame thee not” (8.66)—Raphael again affirms that God has wisely concealed some matters about the cosmos “From Man or Angel” (8.72).

Later, the angel Michael, who reveals aspects of biblical history to Adam, knows these future things only as God progressively reveals them to him—“As I shall thee enlighten” (11.115). But Michael does not allow his promise to Adam of a “paradise within thee, happier farr” (12.587) than Eden to validate retreat from the world (reflecting as some suggest, Milton’s retreat from political concerns). Rather, before offering that promise Michael notes what must be added to Adam’s new knowledge and faith: “onely add / Deeds to thy knowledge answerable” (12.181–82).

Readers are also expected to recognize what must be added to correct some obviously illogical arguments and positions adopted by some characters—cases where the viewpoint cannot be accepted as is, without correction. One such case is Satan’s application of Milton’s arguments from *Tenure* about human government to God’s monarchy in heaven, ignoring the difference in kind between creator and creature. Another is Eve’s supposition (prompted by Satan) that the forbidden fruit has magical power to raise humans to angelic state, forgetting Raphael’s promise in Book 5 that in due course Adam and Eve may rise to angelic state eating (as he does) their ordinary human food. Or when Satan illogically concludes that his inability to remember his originary moment indicates that he was “self-begot, self-raised” (5.860)—denying all debt or derivation.

The Bard also seeks what needs to be added to produce his poem, and from not one but two sources, the Spirit of God and the heavenly muse Urania, known as muse of sacred poetry since Du Bartas so renamed the classical muse of astronomy in his *Uranie* (1564). In the proem to Book 1, Milton asks God’s Spirit under the aspect of creator to instruct him about first things and also to re-create him—raising his lowness and enlightening his darkness. In the proem to Book 3, he implores the “Celestial Light” of God to recompense his loss of the wisdom obtained from earthly sight by “planting eyes” within, so he “may see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight.” In the proem to Book 7 he defines Urania’s essential nature by inventing a myth based on Proverbs 8 that portrays her as the “Heav’nlie borne” sister of “Eternal Wisdom” whose “Celestial Song” delighted God from the beginning. She can then bring the specific poetic resources he needs—not only from the sacred mountains of Sinai and Sion where, as he noted in the proem to Book 1, she inspired the divine poets Moses and David—but from heavenly song itself. He also implores her, as embodiment of those resources, to protect him and his poem from the Restoration maenads who might destroy him and his poem, and to find for that poem “fit audience.” In the proem to Book 9 he voices his hope to overcome his human limitations since Urania, now designated his “Celestial Patroness,” reliably “dictates to me slumbring, or inspires / Easie my unpremeditated Verse,” prompting it seems his nocturnal imaginative conceptions. He also seeks from her an additional poetic resource, an “answerable style” befitting those conceptions.

Milton’s emphasis in prose and poetry on what must be added to come closer to a true apprehension, and his poetic representation of characters’ limited

knowledge and multiple perspectives is not to say that his texts encourage perpetual deferral of judgment and choice or a relativism prompted by undecidability. To the contrary, in *Areopagitica* and elsewhere Milton insists that conclusions be drawn and choices made on the best evidence available—"For reason is but choosing" (2: 527). But his texts also foster a readiness to make continued additions, adjustments, and revisions to what we know as we learn and understand more: "The light which we have gain'd, was giv'n us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge" (2: 550). And they encourage Milton's readers and critics to remember, as they follow out particular approaches to his works that, always, "To this must be added."

We might also ponder the implications of this insight for Milton's 1671 volume, in which the first poem portrays Jesus as a hero who eschews warfare, overcoming his and humankind's enemy by moral and intellectual struggle, and then a poem with a martial hero, Samson, whose final catastrophic act destroys God's and Israel's enemies. Critics often invite us to regard the two poems and their heroes as another dichotomy, with the model presented by Jesus intended to repudiate the warfare and violence exhibited by Samson (reflecting Milton's repudiation of the rebellion he formerly espoused). We do not know of course whether Milton or his publisher was responsible for the title page of the 1671 volume, but its near echo of the Miltonic phrase we have been examining may prompt rejection of that easy dichotomy. Rather, it may invite recognition that different perspectives and circumstances allow for different responses to conditions of religious and political repression: *Paradise Regained. To which is added, Samson Agonistes.*

Harvard University

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Milton's prose are to volume and page in the *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, Gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols. in 10 (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1953-82). All quotations from *Paradise Lost* are to *John Milton, Paradise Lost*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).