

Stephen B. Dobranski, ed. *Milton in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. xxvi + 523pp. ISBN 13: 978-0-521-51898-7. \$95.00 (cloth).

MICHAEL BRYSON

Milton in Context, a multi-author volume edited by Stephen Dobranski, is a usefully-organized and in-depth introduction to Milton that will benefit advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and even first- (or second-) time instructors who are taking on the task of reading and/or teaching Milton, either in a survey or single-author course. Divided into three sections (the first on Milton's Life and Works, the second on the Critical Legacy, and the third on his Historical and Cultural Contexts), this volume provides a wealth of information on the poet himself (the chapters by Annabel Patterson, Edward Jones, and Stephen Fallon will be especially useful to readers getting to know Milton for the first time), and the critical reaction to his work (see especially the chapters by John Rumrich, P. J. Klemp, and J. Martin Evans). Rumrich's quotation of William Winstanley's 1687 politically-motivated attack on Milton's status as a poet is both hilarious and instructive:

John Milton was one, whose natural parts might deservedly give him a place amongst the principal of our English poets. . . . But his Fame is gone out like a Candle in a Snuff, and his Memory will always stink, which might have ever lived in honorable Repute, had he not been a notorious Traytor, and most impiously and villainously bely'd that blessed Martyr King *Charles* the First. (124)

I must, however, register a minor objection to Klemp's use of the term "anti-Miltonists" (131-33) to describe such critics and scholars as A. J. A. Waldock and William Empson (it seems that William Winstanley is more deserving of such a label than either Waldock or Empson).

The longest and richest portion of the volume, however, is dedicated to various aspects of the world within which Milton lived, moved, and had his poetic

(and political) being (chapters by Stephen Dobranski on “The Book Trade,” Neil Forsyth on “The English Church,” and William Poole on “Theology” were especially interesting to this reviewer). Many of these latter chapters have great potential to be useful to both students and instructors who are taking on specific works. For example, Shigeo Suzuki’s chapter on “Marriage and Divorce” would serve as an excellent starting point for reading and/or teaching *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* as well as other divorce tracts, and possibly contemporary reactions to Milton’s tracts as well—Suzuki, through William Riley Parker, provides the amusing detail that Milton became known as “a ringleader of what would be called the ‘Divorcers’ or ‘Miltonists,’ a group who would supposedly loosen the bonds of marriage in the service of inordinate lust” (383), a sense, I trust, that the label “Miltonist” no longer carries in today’s somewhat more polite academic discussions (though perhaps here, the term “anti-Miltonist” might be fruitful). A consideration of Milton’s *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* and *Eikon Basilike* would be enriched by being paired with David Loewenstein’s chapter on “The Interregnum” (though I might have preferred to see the chapter titled “The Republic and Protectorate”—it seems we are once again living in royalist times). Additionally, a reading of *Paradise Lost* (especially Books 3 and 7—the decrees of heaven and the creation, respectively) might well be enhanced by reviewing William Poole’s chapter on “Theology.” Poole is quite clear, for example, about Milton’s view of the doctrine of the Trinity:

For Milton the Trinity was a late and unscriptural notion, and so sensible was he of the importance of this discussion that he equipped it with its own preface, and the resultant chapter on the Son is easily the longest in the *De Doctrina*. Milton’s Arianism was consistently registered by the earliest readers of *Paradise Lost*, although necessarily its presence in the public poem is “implicit, not effaced.” (478)

Though each of the aforementioned scholars has a distinct point of view, one thing I think is an especially noteworthy strength of this volume is its relative non-directiveness. These chapters are not “readings” per se, of Milton and his works, so much as they are detailed and well-researched introductions to and explications of the issues and experiences with which Milton dealt in his life and work, and the ways in which these issues and experiences can be seen at work in the poetry and prose. As such, I think that general readers, students, and instructors who come to Milton and his seventeenth-century context from differing points of view can all find something valuable in this volume, without necessarily being pressed to adopt a certain reading of either Milton or his works.

That said, I must note one final (and not at all minor) objection: the price. As opposed to the more popularly priced (and thus more widely available) Cambridge Companion series (a quick search for which on the web shows prices generally between 20 and 30 dollars), *Milton in Context* is clearly being priced for libraries and institutional budgets at around a hundred dollars. Given the extremely useful organization scheme, the wide-range of non-directive scholarship, and the relatively short chapters (something I should have listed as among the volume’s assets in the first place), I can see *Milton in Context* being very useful in a classroom setting (whether

undergraduate or graduate). But the prohibitive pricing will likely imprison this book behind library walls—and in the reference section, at that. I fear that, as a result, a very strong and potentially useful collection of essays will remain largely unread by the very readers who could (and would) most benefit from the fine work contained therein.

California State University at Northridge