

REVIEWS

William Walker. *Antiformalist, Unrevolutionary, Illiberal Milton: Political Prose, 1644-1660.* Farnham, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014. vi + 207pp. ISBN 13: 9781472431332. \$109.95 (cloth).

MICHAEL BRYSON

In *Antiformalist, Unrevolutionary, Illiberal Milton*, William Walker's argument is that of a radical conservative—his primary point seems to be that Miltonists misread Milton (a point with which I am in some sympathy). However, the direction of the misreading makes Walker's argument both fascinating and maddening. For Walker, Miltonists misread Milton when they do not see him as a supporter of king, church, and the submission of "inferiors" to their "betters," a position Walker delicately describes as support for "meritocratic principles and their implications" (7). In short, Walker prosecutes moderns and modernity, but reserves his fire primarily for those scholars and readers who fail to understand Milton as a man who was a dead-letter representative of a theological police-state, a supporter of monarchy (a position few in his day would have associated with Milton without some measure of arch irony, eye-rolling incredulity, or outright laughter), and a polemicist unreflective enough to insist on, and actually believe, his own "repeated avowals of orthodoxy" (7) in the face of his increasingly insistent contemporary reception as a "divorcer" and an "atheist" (among other accusations), all while being "unrevolutionary" even as he is writing some of the most powerful prose of the English revolution.

Walker divides his re-writing of Milton into three parts in which he attempts to demonstrate that Milton's prose (from 1644 to 1660) demonstrates that he is 1) antiformalist, 2) unrevolutionary, and 3) illiberal. In support of his first contention, Walker uses the term antiformalism to mean that Milton is not a special advocate for, or opponent of, certain forms of government, in this case, monarchy. Walker argues that Milton actually had no problem with monarchy at all, insisting that "Milton's published prose from 1644 to 1660 does not bear out this view. When, in the later stages of the first civil war, he lays out his basic vision for the education of the young males of the nation, there is little to suggest that he repudiates monarchy, either for England or in principle" (10). In support of this view, Walker writes about Milton's *Of Education*, in which, as Walker describes it, "on the level of school governance, Milton recommends the rule of the one, where the one would be determined on grounds of merit" (10). Perhaps only an academic could extrapolate from the running of a private school to the administration of a country with such ease in suggesting that the principles and structures should be the same. Was Milton such an academic? Walker seems to think so. Walker, still in pursuit of the Milton-as-antiformalist argument, takes on both *Areopagitica* and *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* in an effort to demonstrate that neither work demonstrates anti-monarchical sentiment: "Though *Areopagitica* is often cited to support the case for Milton's republicanism and his radical,

revolutionary aspirations, there is little in this tract to suggest that he repudiates monarchy" (10). Walker writes, insisting that "Milton has in mind not the abolition but the reformation of the English kingdom" (11), and that his generally enthusiastic use of the term "commonwealth" in reference to England "does not mean that he thinks that England is a republic at the time he was writing, or that it ought to have a republican constitution" (11). In dealing with *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Walker argues that Milton was not anti-king so much as he was anti-Charles Stuart, maintaining that while "[d]efending the execution of Charles Stuart, Milton . . . presents himself as one who defends not the killing of kings, and not even the killing of a king, but the killing of a man" (13). In doing so, Walker relies heavily on Milton's argument to the queasy Parliament that in killing Charles, they will not be killing a king, since they had long since withdrawn their allegiance from Charles, effectively dethroning him. He also finds useful Milton's panegyric to Queen Christina of Sweden, quoting Milton's description of her as "such a glorious, such a truly royal defender of my honesty to testify that I had uttered no word against kings, but only against tyrants—the pests and plagues of kings" (15–16).

However, in his subsequent rush to defend the idea of Milton's commitment to meritocracy, Walker undermines his case about Milton's relation to monarchy. In arguing that "Milton asserts that kings and their direct descendants are not the best of men and infers that they have no right to command others" (17), Walker is careful to qualify that by saying "But this of course does nothing to diminish his commitment to the proposition that the 'part' of the best men is to command others" (17). In explaining how these two points fit together, Walker pulls down the entire edifice of (pseudo)logic that has long supported the very idea of monarchy and nobility—the idea of an ontological difference, explained in terms of blood or lineage: "Milton is here objecting to hereditary monarchy on the basis of this commitment and his view that blood is a poor criterion for identifying who the best men are" (17). Even in admitting the point that Milton is objecting to "hereditary" monarchy, Walker undermines his argument for Milton's antiformalism. But more to the point, in "objecting to hereditary monarchy," Milton is objecting to monarchy as the English had conceived of it for centuries, certainly since the days of the Plantagenet kings, and most definitely the way it was conceived of by Charles and his supporters in England. References to Queen Christina will do no good, for Sweden's was a hereditary monarchy (Christina had inherited the throne at the age of five from her father Gustav II); Milton is—even by Walker's own testimony—"objecting to" monarchy as it was conceived and practiced through most of Europe.

Throughout this argument, Walker appears to be resting his case on a Milton who is the most egregious kind of hair-splitter, a Clintonian debater who chooses to base his disputes on what the definition of "is" is. For instance, in addressing Milton's frequent use of the Hebrew Scriptures and their discussions of monarchy, Walker claims that "Milton does not cite these Old Testament passages to justify the view that the act of establishing monarchy constitutes the sin of idolatry and that this form of government is therefore always illegitimate" (22). Walker's "always" suggests the kind of qualification that is central to his claims, seen again in his remarks on Milton's concerning Deuteronomy 17 and 1 Samuel: "Milton may appear to affirm exclusivism when he writes that 'it is a form of idolatry to ask for a king who demands that he be worshipped and granted honors like those of a god. Indeed he who sets an earthly master over him and above all the laws is near to establishing a strange god for himself'" (22–23). For Walker, however, those appearances are deceiving. For the reality, as Walker argues, is that

“Milton here asserts only that those who establish a certain kind of single person as their ruler—one who claims to be above the law and demands to be adored as a god—are idolaters” (23), and thus only a king who actually requires worship is illegitimate. Except that, once again, even Walker has already conceded the point that “hereditary monarchy”—monarchy as actually practiced in England—falls afoul of Milton’s principles and arguments. So at this point of the argument for the way Walker defines Milton’s antiformalism, we seem to be in mere damage-control mode.

In pursuit of his second argument, Milton as unrevolutionary, Walker relies on a series of so-called revisionist historians of the early Stuart period whose work, as Glenn Burgess notes, “began as a reaction against Marxist, structural and sociological attempts to write the social history of politics [and has insisted that histories of the period] be appropriate to a stable, aristocratic *ancien régime* society” (“On Revisionism: An Analysis of Early Stuart Historiography in the 1970s and 1980s,” *The Historical Journal* 33.3 [1990]: 612). Such work, which Burgess further describes as “opposed above all to the teleology of whiggism” (614) and the idea that “[i]f the English Revolution produced bourgeois society, then the English revolutionaries must have intended to produce that effect” (615), informs Walker’s insistence that Milton did not intend revolution, and did not see himself as a revolutionary. Much of the argument revolves around vocabulary and terminology, for example, when Walker cites Conal Condren’s assertion in *The Language of Politics in Seventeenth-Century England* (1994) that “virtually no seventeenth-century English author called himself a ‘radical,’ and that this term, along with ‘moderate’ and ‘conservative,’ became part of the western political lexicon only after the French Revolution” (57), while in Milton’s England, the “overwhelmingly dominant [political] rhetoric was one of conservation and tradition, with notions such as reformation, renovation, return . . . being presented as variants upon a theme” (57).

This is the kind of argument—familiar enough in its structure—that attempts to portray certain thoughts as having been “unthinkable” in the past due to the lack of what Lucien Febvre called the *mentalité* necessary to formulate the concept (*The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb [Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985]). In their readings of Milton as a revolutionary, Walker (again, following Condren) accuses moderns of “discover[ing] ideology underlying political discourse in the seventeenth century and so covertly translat[ing] into our own terms,” and in so doing, “misdrecrib[ing] and misunderstand[ing] it” (57). Walker’s revisionist argument against seeing Milton as revolutionary relies on the idea of a radical disjunction between past and present—an idea used by Febvre in arguing the impossibility of atheism in the early modern period, and used by Paul Zumthor in arguing what he calls the “vast and unbridgeable gap between us and the Middle Ages,” which renders us unable to truly understand a “medieval poetry [which] belongs to a universe that is no longer familiar to us” (*Toward a Medieval Poetics*, trans. Philip Bennet [Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992], 3). This kind of argument requires readers to assent to the notion that there is an absolute ontological and epistemological chasm between whatever *now* the critic writes from, and whatever *then* the critic writes about. Once this point is ceded, the critic controls the argument with the reader, who has been made both properly compliant, and receptive to whatever assertions the critic wishes to make about a past defined as incomprehensible without the critic’s wise and wholly disinterested guidance. But all this argument does, frankly, is demonstrate one of the inherent structural hazards of literary criticism and historical analysis—the tendency of the critic to see exactly and only

what the critic wants to see. If the text speaks of red, but the critic is committed to blue, the critic will manage to find that all of the text's references to red are actually coded references to blue. If the critic is dedicated to the idea, for example, that all early modern English political discourse is overwhelmingly conservative, that critic will find a way to take a text that appears to describe a radical point of view and demonstrate that it has actually been conservative and traditional all along, then go on to explain how mistaken we had all been ever to have thought otherwise. Thus, in Walker's view "Milton is not condoning rebellion" (61), and in fact "Milton was party to a movement [that aimed] to conserve the social hierarchy" (62)—though how that would square with the "hereditary monarchy" Walker reluctantly acknowledges that Milton objects to is a matter left unclear.

In support of his third contention, that Milton was illiberal, Walker constructs a Milton who is opposed to the idea that "all humans are equal, equal in the sense of bearing the same set of inalienable rights and having the same degree of worth and dignity" (108), despite the fact that he admits that "there are indeed some stirring assertions to this effect in Milton's major political prose" (108). Because for Walker, Milton's *real* opinion is that "some humans and groups of humans are by nature inferior in crucial respects to other individuals and groups" (109), a point Walker supports by emphasizing passages he can turn to that purpose, while basically dismissing in a single paragraph those aforementioned "stirring assertions" of human dignity. For example, as Walker argues "Milton usually sees women . . . as being by nature inferior to men [and] even when he is speaking only of men, Milton often asserts . . . that some are by nature inferior to others" (109). This is a crucially different argument than the one Walker follows with, that "even amongst those men who are by nature equal, many debase themselves or are debased by others, with the result that they become inferior to other men in essential respects" (109). Thus, we have, in Walker's view, two different forms of illiberalism in Milton: the first, rather the milder form, insists that human behavior can ennoble or debase human character; the second, which Walker supports by quoting Milton from *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* on "the people of Asia" and the "Jews and Syrians," who "readily endure slavery," and are "born to it," respectively (111), is the far more problematic—and here Walker has his target dead to rights. Milton is not a twenty-first-century member of a liberal/left political and social movement dedicated to the equality and nurturance of all. Walker is absolutely right, for example, to point out that Milton was contemptuous of the stupid, the deliberately ignorant, and those who would cede their judgment to the authoritative pronouncements of so-called authorities, especially over (as Walker quotes from the *Second Defence*) "the deep-rooted prejudice (or rather it should be called superstition) of the mob, and their fondness for the name of 'king'" (112). Walker is also absolutely correct to point out that while "Milton's prose discourse is determined to a significant extent by polemical objectives, [it is] also powerfully driven by his passion and conviction" (182). But it is brilliantly perverse of Walker to argue that Milton's passion is for *less* freedom, rather than more, even to the point of arguing that *Areopagitica* is a tract that "endorses state-imposed restrictions on the liberty of unlicensed printing" (120), while at the same time adopting Stanley Fish's construction of Milton as a man "strangely indifferent to the success of his efforts to convince his readers of the truth" (157). But such quirks abound in this book. The Milton that Walker finally admits is powerfully opposed to hereditary monarchy (a recognizably *liberal* position) is so opposed because he is, as Walker terms it, *illiberal*. Walker's Milton is a deeply contradictory and conflicted man who "consistently endorses state persecution" (137), and believes in "granting civil liberties to some and

denying them to others” (138). But he endorses these aspects of a tyrant’s “necessitie” because he *opposes* tyranny, and wishes very much that it would perish from the earth. And no matter how hard Milton works to make it do so, and no matter how crushing is his final failure, Walker (following Fish) would finally have us believe that Milton is “strangely indifferent” to that failure. Walker’s is a fascinating, though odd, picture of a John Milton who often seems at cross-purposes with himself.

William Walker’s book is a useful reminder of how easy it is for all of us to see our own face in a glass when we read Milton. In finding the image of Milton in the concerns of historians determined to portray a period of upheaval and civil war as one of “conservation and tradition,” Walker has produced a book, that may, through its own often maddening excesses and contradictions, serve as a corrective to the excesses of those readers who see in Milton the radical, even revolutionary spirit they often most admire. This is a book that should be read, argued for and against, regardless of the pre-existing commitments (those ways of seeing that are also ways of not seeing) of its readers.

California State University, Northridge