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Review: *Milton and the Politics of Speech*, Helen Lynch

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like to have read something more about what this approach to the *Dialogus* tells us about Tacitus' works, more broadly, and whether the insights that van den Berg derives from the features of Roman dialogues might shed light on Greek dialogues as well.

As someone who, prior to reading this book, tended to identify Tacitus most closely with a particular speaker (Maternus) and to find a particular argument most (politically) persuasive (again, Maternus), van den Berg has shown me new and fruitful ways of approaching a challenging and important work.² Tacitus remains elusive, but this elusiveness is productive and intentional.

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Helen Lynch, *Milton and the Politics of Public Speech*, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015. 283 pp. ISBN: 14722415205

Historians of rhetoric interested in public-sphere discussions or in the political discourse of the Renaissance may find interesting this sometimes imperfect but nevertheless suggestive study. Lynch demonstrates how the political rhetoric of John Milton (1608-1674) can be better understood in terms of the pre-Socratic *polis* as described by Hannah Arendt than in terms of the Continental Enlightenment as described by Jürgen Habermas. Lynch argues convincingly that "Arendt's position is more in sympathy with that of seventeenth-century classical republicans and encapsulates a key difference between seventeenth- and eighteenth-century perspectives on the public realm" (24-25). Although there have been studies of Milton and rhetoric in the past, longer studies have tended to focus on the major poetry, as for instance Daniel Shore's excellent *Milton and the Art of Rhetoric*. The present text focuses throughout on republican speech in the public arena even as it culminates with a consideration of the dramatic poem *Samson Agonistes*.

In the first chapter—to my mind, the strongest—the author traces image clusters in Milton's political texts that replicate Arendt's distinction between the free Greek citizen speaking in the *polis* as against the repetitive labor performed in the *oikia* or household by disenfranchised women, children, slaves, animals, and—by extension—merchants, who were typically not citizens and could make no contribution to the important, non-repetitive work of the *polis*. Milton explicitly takes on the role of speaker in such a *polis* in his famous *Areopagitica* (1644), subtitled "A Speech . . . for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing." Indeed, Lynch correctly reports that the authors in

² Daniel Kapust, "Between Contumacy and Obsequiousness: Tacitus on Moral Freedom and the Historian's Task," *European Journal of Political Theory* 8 (2009): 293-311.

contemporary pamphlet wars figured themselves as speakers rather than as authors. Throughout the text, Lynch usefully points out the many reversible and polarizing binaries of that period's polemics and especially Milton's tendency to "define the good and evil versions of all observable phenomena" (61).

In chapter 2 of her study, Lynch examines linguistic theories in the period, including various efforts to establish a universal language and also the Royal Society's quest to achieve a one-to-one relation between signifier and signified. Throughout the chapter, Lynch suggests that Milton shared Arendt's concern that political language not be separated from meaning and therefore from action. Chapter 3 examines how rhetoric was gendered in the period, including a delightful discussion of how "embroidery" can refer either to the adornment of masculine speech or to the actual craft activity that was intended to keep women quiet. The issues of the first three chapters—public *polis* vs. private *oikia*, theories of language and action, and gendered rhetoric—help prepare for Lynch's last two chapters on Milton's drama *Samson Agonistes*, the most Greek of his poetic texts. In chapter 4, she locates the redemption of language operating in the drama through various polemical binaries and also aligns Samson's experience with the public-sphere civic-mindedness of Pericles' funeral oration as well as with Arendt's image of light for the public sphere. In chapter 5, Lynch usefully discusses *Samson Agonistes* as a rejection of the romance tradition, particularly in terms of the crime of *recréance*, which can mean not only treachery but also refusal to act. She compares the collapse of meaning occasioned by Samson's Philistine tyrants to how Arendt describes a similar collapse in twentieth-century totalitarian states.

Overall, this study has much to recommend it, but it also has some shortcomings. In her first sentence, Lynch makes the odd claim that "a large part" of her argument is "not historicist" (xiii), though most of it seeks to recapture Milton's performance in terms that would make sense to his contemporaries. She also claims that her aim is "to pose fruitful questions rather than to provide definitive answers" (xv), yet the text is not primarily a series of queries. Other shortcomings include disorganization. Lynch dodges from topic to topic rather than treating similar materials together, so that some points become repetitive while others get lost. Citations are another difficulty. Lynch engages with secondary sources mostly in deep footnotes, explaining, "I wanted my own argument to flow without the reader tripping over other scholars at every sentence" (xvi), but she often elides the rationales for these arguments from other scholars and even sometimes cites a mere page number as proof for her own claim. She also cites several primary texts as quoted by secondary authors, a practice that both prevents easy reference to the originals and suggests that Lynch may have unconsciously followed the biases of secondary sources or even replicated any misquotations.

In addition, Lynch sometimes announces claims more than once before providing supporting evidence, and sometimes her evidence is missing entirely. This evidential shortfall is particularly troubling with Lynch's

claim that “Despite his ambivalence with regard to rhetoric, Milton remained loyal in many respects to the tradition of the rhetoric handbooks, of Wilson, Peacham and Puttenham, on which he and his generation, in educational terms, were raised” (29), a claim repeated in various ways throughout. I can think of no reason whatsoever to assume that Milton depended on English vernacular summaries of classical rhetoric unless it be that Lynch is relying on an outdated narrative about English Renaissance rhetoric. In reality, these English vernacular texts were so meagerly published as to make virtually no contribution to early education; neither were these texts included in any university curricula (Green 74-76). This is not to say that Lynch’s 27-page bibliography does not already include many of the authoritative texts for her discussion, yet other texts are missing, such as recent work on Milton and rhetoric by William Pallister and James Egan or Stephen B. Dobranski’s magisterial summary of earlier *Samson Agonistes* criticism.

But one might work forever to produce the perfect book. In the one that we have here, Lynch makes some original contributions to various conversations. Historians of rhetoric with an interest in her topics or period may well find in her text some new directions for those conversations.

Stephen B. Dobranski, *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton: Volume 3, Samson Agonistes*, intro. Archie Burnett, ed. P. J. Klemp (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009).

James Egan, “Oratory and Animadversion: Rhetorical Signatures in Milton’s Pamphlets of 1649,” *Rhetorica* 27 (2009): 189-217.

James Egan, “Rhetoric and Poetic in Milton’s Polemics of 1659–60,” *Rhetorica* 31 (2013): 73-110.

Lawrence D. Green, “*Grammatica Movet*: Renaissance Grammar Books and *Elocutio*,” in Peter L. Oesterreich and Thomas O. Sloane, eds., *Rhetorica Movet: Studies in Historical and Modern Rhetoric in Honour of Heinrich F. Plett* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 73–115.

William Pallister, *Between Worlds: The Rhetorical Universe of Paradise Lost* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

Daniel Shore, *Milton and the Art of Rhetoric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

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L'écriture des traités de rhétorique des origines à la Renaissance, textes édités par Sophie Conte et Sandrine Dubel, Ausonius, *Scripta Antiqua* 87, Bordeaux 2016, 241 pages. ISBN: 9782356131614

Ce livre, qui rassemble 11 contributions, traite un sujet qui est souvent abordé dans les ouvrages sur la rhétorique de manière indirecte ou marginale : *l'écriture des traités de rhétorique*, c'est-à-dire leur forme et leur style.