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### **Ruin the Sacred Truths: Prophecy, Form, and Nonconformity in Marvell and Milton**

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The Oxford Handbook of Andrew Marvell

*Edited by Martin Dzelzainis and Edward Holberton*

Print Publication Date: Mar 2019

Subject: Literature, Literary Studies - 1500 to 1700, Literary Studies - Poetry and Poets

Online Publication Date: Mar 2019 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198736400.013.39

### **Abstract and Keywords**

This chapter begins by reviewing the relationship between Milton and Marvell, but is devoted more expansively to their literary and intellectual ties. It examines the presence of Milton in Marvell's pastoral poetry of the early 1650s where Marvell engages with the 'Nativity Ode', *Comus*, and 'Lycidas' but avoids reproducing the prophetic quality of Milton's voice, hedging his allusiveness with delicate irony. The chapter also examines Marvell's later engagement with Milton's tolerationist treatises. Like Milton, Marvell is shaped by recent heterodox positions, but steers away from the boldness of the Miltonic vision. Where Milton asks the state to tolerate a variety of fully independent churches and religions, Marvell clings to the more conservative hope that the Church of England will merely include, or 'comprehend', a wider range of beliefs and believers. A political realist and a literary ironist, Marvell distances himself from the political idealism and prophetic literariness of Milton.

Keywords: *Comus*, influence, 'Lycidas', Milton, Marvell, Mr. Smirke, *Paradise Lost*, Socinianism, toleration

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A POLITICAL realist and a literary ironist, Andrew Marvell at once embraces and distances himself from the political idealism and prophetic literariness of the grave older figure he could only see—though at times ironically, and askance—as the 'mighty poet' John Milton. There is good evidence for what we can call a friendship between the two poets and statesmen: we know, for example, of the admiring younger man's cultivation of Milton in 1652, and his help with, and later praise for, Milton's *Second Defense* in 1653 and 1654, to name just a few of the circumstances that brought the two men together.<sup>1</sup> But this chapter will attempt to account less for the personal than the literary and intellectual ties that bind Marvell to Milton. In his pastoral lyrics, Marvell calls our attention to the 'Nativity Ode', *Comus*, and 'Lycidas', as well as other lyrics of the 1645

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edition of Milton's *Poems*; he includes in his 1655 poem on *The First Anniversary* of Cromwell's Protectorate an elaborate conceit crafted in response to a passage in Milton's *Areopagitica*; and he offers Milton his most extravagant literary salute in the 1674 poem 'On Mr. Milton's *Paradise Lost*'. As we will see, the literary traces of Marvell's relation to Milton follow a distinctive pattern. Marvell is often drawn to moments in Milton's poetry and prose that exhibit a grandly speculative, sometimes didactic, quality to which tradition has given the name 'Miltonic'. But in echoing, alluding to, or otherwise engaging with a handful of distinctively Miltonic literary moments, Marvell avoids (p. 672) reproducing the boldly prophetic, even at times sermoniac, cast of Milton's literary voice. He hedges his allusiveness with an irony that manages at once to question the older poet's triumphant certainty and to position Marvell himself as the more appropriately modest, and certainly more charming, critical alternative.

We can begin this examination of Marvell's literary ties to Milton with a passage in one of Marvell's great works of satirical polemical prose, the second part of *The Rehearsal Transpros'd* (1673), Marvell's follow-up to his original public scuffle with the conservative churchman Samuel Parker, whose *Ecclesiastical Politie* (1670) had argued for a doctrinally narrow vision for the Church of England. In his reply to the first part of Marvell's *Rehearsal Transpros'd*, Parker had sought to humiliate Marvell by drawing his readers' attention to the intimacy of Marvell's relation with the notorious advocate of both regicide and the disestablishment of the Church, John Milton.<sup>2</sup> Carefully cataloguing all of the passages in which he is tied to Milton by Parker (as well as by other, anonymous antagonists whom Marvell is happy to identify as Parker), Marvell takes the churchman to task for what Marvell cleverly suggests is a defamation not of himself but of Milton. Addressing the author of *Ecclesiastical Politie*, Marvell writes, referring to Milton as the 'Author J.M.', that

you do three times at least in your *Reproof*, and in your *Transproser Rehears'd* well nigh half the book thorow, run upon an Author J.M. which does not a little offend me. For why should any other mans reputation suffer in a contest betwixt you and me?<sup>3</sup>

Although nowhere has Parker suggested that Milton had helped Marvell write his polemical response to the *Ecclesiastical Politie*, Marvell takes the fact of any reference to the 'Author J.M.' as an invitation to defend himself from the allegation of Milton's influence or assistance:

you resolved to suspect that he [Milton] had an hand in my former book [*The Rehearsal Transpros'd*], wherein, whether you deceive your self or no, you deceive others extreamly. For by chance I had not seen him of two years before; but after I undertook writing, I did more carefully avoid either visiting or sending to him, least I should any way involve him in my consequences.<sup>4</sup>

(p. 673) Marvell suggests that Parker was wrong to have tallied '[Marvell's] simple book to [Milton's] charge' because the old, beleaguered poet does not deserve to be dragged into a controversy of the younger controversialist's making.

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It is more, though, than simple gallantry that Marvell evinces in the extended discussion of the poet of *Paradise Lost* in the second part of *The Rehearsal Transpros'd*. The fraught sentences of Marvell's long, condensed discussion of Milton veer from the expression of Marvell's dutiful protection of the elderly poet, to Marvell's very different assertion of his own authorial pride in insisting that he needs no literary help from the likes of John Milton, and, finally, to Marvell's guarded praise for Milton's possession of as much 'Learning and Sharpness of wit as any man'.<sup>5</sup> Having thus praised Milton, having established both a filial concern for and an almost condescending independence from him, Marvell then proceeds to yet another aspect of Milton's career and reputation, framing for Parker his understanding of the reasons for which Milton had, some two decades previous, thrown his weight behind the justification of the execution of Charles I. Milton had been one of the regicide's great intellectual supporters less out of principled commitment, Marvell suggests, than out of a jumble of historical contingencies: 'It was [Milton's] misfortune', he writes, 'living in a tumultuous time, to be toss'd on the wrong side, and he writ *Flagrante bello* certain dangerous Treatises'.<sup>6</sup> John Milton, Marvell intimates here, was little more than an accidental revolutionary, his commitment to regicide testifying not so much to a principled dedication to the nation's right to choose the form of its own government than to a simple case of bad historical luck.

Perhaps even more insulting to Milton than this attempt to distance him from his most courageous political cause, Marvell goes on to suggest that the fiercely antimonarchic Milton could not but be grateful for, and chastened by, the magnanimous pardon he received from Charles II: 'at His Majesties happy Return, J.M. did partake, even as you your self did for all your huffing, of his Regal Clemency, and has ever since expiated himself in a retired silence'.<sup>7</sup> Marvell would have known as well as anyone that the then 64-year-old Milton did not feel in need of expiation of any kind, and that, furthermore, he had been far from silent or retired: he had followed his *Paradise Lost* with the uncompromising *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* of 1671.<sup>8</sup> More to the immediate point of Marvell's tussle with Parker in 1673, Milton had just himself written his own contribution to the polemical literature on the matter of church government: as Marvell may well have known, Milton had written *Of True Religion* just months before Marvell began *The Rehearsal Transpros'd: The Second Part* in the summer of 1673. In that final treatise, Milton would produce a work unsparing in its support of a political and ecclesiological position far more politically daring than Marvell's. There Milton would argue fiercely for every gathered church's independence from the doctrinal strictures of a civil magistrate, from its subsumption by a national institution like the Church of England, and, perhaps especially, from the 'benevolent' protection by the Crown, which (p. 674) Marvell himself so problematically appeared to favour in the two parts of *The Rehearsal Transpros'd*.<sup>9</sup>

As this strange, and strained, defence of Milton might suggest, Marvell's relationship with the poet he loved above all others had never been simple or straightforward. As critics have demonstrated, Marvell is an unusually absorptive poet, taking on figures, phrases, and locutions from a wide range of contemporary poetry, first and foremost the contemporary poetry he encountered in Milton's 1645 *Poems*.<sup>10</sup> Marvell's early pastoral

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verse, likely written at Nun Appleton while the poet was in service to the retired Lord General Thomas Fairfax as the tutor of Fairfax's daughter Mary, shows an especially close engagement with Milton's 'Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity', 'L'Allegro', 'Il Penseroso', *Comus*, and 'Lycidas'.<sup>11</sup>

It is Marvell's long country-house poem, 'Upon Appleton House', that reveals what is surely the most characteristic pattern underlying the verbal traces of Marvell's literary entanglement with Milton: an ironically allusive engagement with a solemn moment in the elder's poetry that can reasonably be called *prophetic*. Near the end of the poem, the Marvellian speaker describes his own, and then a personified Sun and Nature's, startled response to the appearance on the landscape of the young Mary Fairfax:

See how loose Nature, in respect  
To her, itself doth recollect;  
And everything so whisht and fine,  
Starts forthwith to its *bonne mine*.  
The sun himself, of her aware,  
Seems to descend with greater care,  
And lest she see him go to bed,  
In blushing clouds conceals his head.

(657-64)

As Judith Scherer Herz rightly notes, Marvell endows his young student with much the same power to shame both sun and nature that Milton had conferred on the infant Christ in the 'Nativity Ode':<sup>12</sup>

Nature in aw to him  
Had doff't her gawdy trim,  
With her great Master so to sympathize:  
(p. 675) It was no season then for her  
To wanton with the Sun her lusty Paramour.  
  
Onely with speeches fair  
She woo's the gentle Air  
To hide her guilty front with innocent Snow,  
And on her naked shame,  
Pollute with sinfull blame,  
The Saintly Vail of Maiden white to throw,  
Confounded, that her Makers eyes  
Should look so neer upon her foul deformities.<sup>13</sup>

Milton's fallen nature, whose depravity is marked by 'her foul deformities', is soon to be chastened by the appearance of the infant Christ. Marvell is clearly drawn to Milton's strikingly anthropomorphic figuration of the response of the natural world—represented by personifications of 'Nature' and the sun—to Christ. He takes Milton's image and applies it to the response by the landscape of General Fairfax's Nun Appleton estate to the young Mary Fairfax, who is shown to outstrip the infant Messiah in her hyperbolic

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capacity to transform, maybe even redeem, a fallen nature.<sup>14</sup> Where Milton piously attributes the shame of sin to the fallen natural world, Marvell attributes a more socially constructed bashfulness to the sun, who, lest the young girl 'see him go to bed, / In blushing clouds conceals his head'. Marvell's primary goal, of course, is to praise his student in these stanzas, an appropriate gesture for a poet like the young Marvell, so fully indebted to his patron. But the other-worldly powers he confers on the girl are so exaggerated that the praise edges closely to the decidedly non-Miltonic tone of self-mockery. Marvell's fragile, and easily startled, poetic persona distances himself from Mary Fairfax's fearsome power much as Marvell, I would like to suggest, distances himself from the high prophetic and apocalyptic mode of the young John Milton.

We see a similar attention to, and corresponding deflation of, Milton's inclination toward oracular solemnity elsewhere in 'Upon Appleton House', when Marvell singles out with a horticultural conceit the sensitivity of the newly retired Fairfax's 'conscience':

For he did, with his utmost skill,  
Ambition weed, but conscience till.  
Conscience, that heaven-nursed plant,  
Which most our earthly gardens want.  
A prickling leaf it bears, and such  
(p. 676) As that which shrinks at every touch;  
But flowers eternal, and divine,  
That in the crowns of saints do shine.

(353-60)

Marvell's specific allusion here to an image from Milton's *Comus* has been noted: Fairfax's prickly conscience bears a striking resemblance to the magical herb singled out by that masque's Attendant Spirit, who praised the 'small unsightly root' whose 'leaf was darkish, and had prickles on it'.<sup>15</sup> Marvell is attempting, on the surface, to praise Fairfax for his military demurrals while under pressure to lead an invasion of Scotland. But with this strange echo of Milton's masque, we can perhaps also hear Marvell's attempt to activate a fuller sense of his age's relation to that crucial abstract substantive, 'conscience'. It was Milton who had so grandly argued for the liberty of conscience, especially in the context of the freedom of religious expression, in his 1644 treatise *Areopagitica*, where he demands 'the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties'.<sup>16</sup> The prickling leaf of conscience in 'Upon Appleton House' awakens the unavoidably politicized contexts through which that seventeenth-century keyword circulated. For a radically dissenting spirit like Milton, the conscience served as the only means by which the believer could establish for himself a spiritual truth. The sanctity of that faculty served as nothing less than the believer's guarantee of the right to make that quest for truth publicly, in whatever church he wishes, without intervention from the civil magistrate.

Such was the burden of Milton's 1646 sonnet 'On the Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament', which takes the Presbyterians to task for daring to 'adjure the civill

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sword / To force our Consciences that Christ set free'.<sup>17</sup> In that sonnet, as well as in the sonnets addressed to Cromwell and Henry Vane, Milton suggests that the Christian redemption brought with it the political accomplishment of radical toleration, the liberation of the religious conscience from compulsion by church or state. It is with a characteristically subtle allusiveness that Marvell invokes Milton's uncompromising liberation of the conscience from civil or clerical oversight. And in doing so, Marvell prepares us to understand his own, more politically cautious, ecclesiological position. For the younger poet, the tender conscience 'shrinks at every touch' in two senses: much like the religious conscience as conceived by Milton, it instinctively withdraws from impingement by an intolerant Church; but quite unlike the Miltonic conscience, it also (p. 677) shrinks away from any opportunity to assert its full liberty in a public space of worship independent of the Church of England.

In the years just ahead, Milton and Marvell would find themselves increasingly at odds on the period's inescapable question of ecclesiastical reform. As Philip Connell argues, Marvell 'remained largely supportive of the attempts by both Oliver and Richard Cromwell to combine a national church establishment with a relatively extensive liberty of conscience for those unwilling to conform to the public profession of faith'.<sup>18</sup> And Milton would resist any such assertion of a national church, the very existence of which, from his perspective, could not help but threaten the free expression of religious conscience. It was likely with Marvell's approval, and much to Milton's dismay, that influential Independent ministers such as the aggressively orthodox Calvinist John Owen pressed for the sanctioning of independent churches only on the condition that the ministers of those churches passed a decidedly non-Miltonic theological litmus test.<sup>19</sup> The Milton of the 1650s could only have opposed attempts by the Council of State or Protectorate to police doctrine with a censorious Commission for Approbation, or to assure that the nation's properly 'godly' ministers pass inspection by an orthodox Puritan commission of 'Triers and Objectors'.<sup>20</sup> As *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton's anti-Trinitarian theological treatise of the same decade, makes clear, the shockingly heterodox Milton would never himself have met with the approbation of the Triers and Objectors whose aims Marvell may have at that time supported. But the direct interactions of the two men were, above all, ambivalent ones. Marvell would write a letter to Milton, dated 2 June 1654, praising the elder's *Second Defense of the English People*, in which Milton, according to Marvell, climbed to the 'Height of the Roman eloquence'.<sup>21</sup> The praise of Milton's style was doubtless sincere, but, as Connell has suggested, Marvell was careful to overlook the ways in which Milton had in that treatise 'openly rejected the ecclesiastical ambitions of the Cromwellian Independents' that he himself supported.<sup>22</sup>

That mixture of literary admiration and ideological disapproval in which Marvell must have held Milton in this period is nowhere so apparent as in his 1655 poem in praise of Cromwell, *The First Anniversary of the Government under O.C.* Consider Marvell's use in that work of one of the key passages of *Areopagitica*, an elaborate conceit in praise of (p. 678) the men who understand that a diversity of religious opinion is necessary 'to make a Church or Kingdom happy'. For Milton, such beleaguered tolerationists

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... are the men cry'd out against for schismatics and sectaries; as if, while the Temple of the Lord was building, some cutting, some squaring the marble, others hewing the cedars, there should be a sort of irrational men who could not consider there must be many schisms and many dissections made in the quarry and in the timber, ere the house of God can be built. And when every stone is laid artfully together, it cannot be united into a continuity, it can but be contiguous in this world; neither can every peece of the building be of one form; nay rather the perfection consists in this, that out of many moderat varieties and brotherly dissimilitudes that are not vastly disproportionall arises the goodly and the gracefull symmetry that commends the whole pile and structure.<sup>23</sup>

The 'Temple of the Lord', for the more liberal Milton, is only truly stable if it is founded on a diversity of fully independent, indeed conflicting, doctrinal positions.

Marvell, as scholars have noted, offers in his praise of the 'common-wealth' of Cromwell's Protectorship in *The First Anniversary* a self-conscious rewriting of Milton's image of the 'house of God'. For Marvell, though, the institution under construction isn't the 'Temple of the Lord' so much as the house of state itself:

The common-wealth does through their centres all  
Draw the circumf'rence of the public wall;  
The crossest spirits here do take their part,  
Fast'ning the contignation which they thwart;  
And they, whose nature leads them to divide,  
Uphold, this one, and that the other side;  
But the most equal still sustain the height,  
And they as pillars keep the work upright;  
While the resistance of opposed minds,  
The fabric as with arches stronger binds,  
Which on the basis of a senate free,  
Knit by the roof's protecting weight agree.

(87-98)

Marvell takes from *Areopagitica* the use of an architectural metaphor to represent the ideal institution, founded on the tension of opposing forces. But he deploys his version of Milton's elaborate conceit to a distinctive end. The Marvellian Commonwealth is not constructed, as Milton's house of God is, of non-disproportional 'dissimilitudes', its distinct elements permitted to remain merely 'contiguous in the world' rather than 'united into a continuity'. Unlike the ideal Miltonic church, which is identical to the sum of the separable parts of which it is composed, the ideal Protectoral state, seen here as if conjoined with the Church, is for Marvell but the formal structure that houses the separable (p. 679) elements of diverse religious confessions. Marvell's church, with its 'public wall' and the 'pillars [that] keep the work upright', is not to be identified as the conflicting opinions contained, or comprehended, within. For the figural ground of his representation of a tolerant, comprehensive national church, Marvell uses the elements of Milton's almost opposing image of a nation that permits, indeed encourages, the

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unbound, decentred flourishing of a multiplicity of churches, creeds, and modes of worship. Although there never was a time in which Marvell unambivalently echoed his favourite poet, this instance of a Marvellian allusion to Milton is surely one of Marvell's most complexly aggressive. As he had so often before, Marvell finds himself gravitating to one of Milton's exuberantly libertarian visions of a fully disestablished church, a position far bolder, far more politically daring than Marvell's safer investment in an idea of a tolerant church firmly tied to the nation. It is precisely the most radical aspect of Milton's vision—a grand prophetic image of a decentred state whose strength is founded not on unity but diversity—to which Marvell fastens his attention. But Marvell takes the conceit up only to refashion it as the conceptual basis of an ecclesiological vision to which Milton himself could never subscribe.<sup>24</sup>

The reader cannot help but ask what sets of intentions might lie behind a complex literary allusion such as this of Marvell's to Milton. Is the allusion to *Areopagitica* designed to read as a homage to the great poet and fellow ecclesiological controversialist? Is it a well-meaning but nonetheless incisive attempt to correct in his own poem what Marvell took to be the unfortunate error of the beloved older poet? Or is Marvell's version of Milton's architectonics of state-design a more trenchant attempt to level a critique of a compelling voice so insistently and doggedly to the left of Marvell's own? The answer, of course, is all of the above.

It cannot be stressed enough that the differences between Milton and Marvell were not fundamentally doctrinal, or theological, in nature. There were in fact important, even heretical, aspects of Miltonic doctrine with which Marvell would come to agree. What Marvell knew of Milton's specific commitment to the notorious Arian heresy, elaborated at great length in the theological treatise of the 1650s that Milton cautiously withheld from publication, we cannot know. But by 1676, just two years after Milton's death, Marvell would come to join the late poet in a daring assertion of the sufficiency of the Christologically minimalist statement of faith found in the Apostles' Creed. As Nicholas von Maltzahn has explained, Marvell, in the later polemical treatise *Mr. Smirke* (1676), would, as Milton did, deny the magistrate's right to enforce confession to non-scriptural, or post-scriptural, statements of doctrine; it was thus that both men argued against the magistrate's ability to demand loyalty to what was widely viewed to be the central pillar of Christianity, the belief in the Holy Trinity.<sup>25</sup> But it is not the points of (p. 680) doctrinal agreement with Milton that animated Marvell's reading of, and complex literary engagement with, the stern prophetic poet whose instincts were so far from his own. The differences between them were by and large formal ones. Marvell would exhibit his commitment to toleration by arguing that the church, by which he meant the actual institution of the Church of England, should open its doors to as many dissenting opinions as possible. Milton, quite to the contrary, rejected any formalist attempt to preserve the institution of the Church of England, however tolerant it might someday become of theological positions as heretical as his own. Because Milton can only imagine a multiplicity of independent churches, untethered to the public pillars and walls of an actual church, his 'house of God' or 'temple of the Lord' was strictly spiritual in nature,



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or, as he explains in *De Doctrina Christiana*, an 'invisible' as opposed to a 'visible' church.<sup>26</sup>

Such questions about Marvell's attitude toward Milton become impossible to avoid when, in 1674, Marvell pens his extraordinary commendatory poem in honour of the second edition of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Needless to say, that poem, as befitting such prefatory verses, is overwhelmingly a poem of praise. Marvell's laudatory verses bespeak the reverent and even hyperbolic elevation that the genre of commendatory poem requires:

I am now convinced, and none will dare  
Within thy labours to pretend a share.  
Thou hast not missed one thought that could be fit,  
And all that was improper dost omit:  
So that no room is here for writers left,  
But to detect their ignorance or theft.  
That majesty which through thy work doth reign  
Draws the devout, deterring the profane.  
And things divine thou treats of in such state  
As them preserves, and thee, inviolate.

(25–34)

Milton's biblical epic is at once majestic, Marvell tells us, and deeply pious, 'draw[ing] the devout, deterring the profane'. In lavishing this praise, Marvell cleverly echoes the poem that Milton himself had written decades before in praise of Shakespeare on the occasion of the second folio of Shakespeare's plays, published in 1632. The bard's literary fecundity had robbed Milton of his 'fancy', or imagination: 'Then thou our fancy of itself bereaving, / Dost make us Marble with too much conceaving'.<sup>27</sup> Whether Shakespeare (p. 681) was guilty of 'too much conceaving', or whether the younger poet himself had tried too hard to conceive literarily in Shakespeare's intimidating wake, the effect was one of paralysis, figured by Milton as the younger poet's marmorealization: 'thou ... mak[st] us Marble'. Marvell wittily suggests that Milton has had a related effect on his admiring readers. 'No room is here for writers left, / But to detect their ignorance or theft', he writes, in sly acknowledgement perhaps of his own 'theft' of Milton's conceit in the poem on Shakespeare.

But, just as we would expect from this writer for whom so many assertions are circumscribed by doubt, the praise that Marvell heaps on the poet of *Paradise Lost* is by no means unambivalent. Strangely and strikingly, Marvell focuses less on the soaring imagination on display in Milton's epic than on the much narrower topic of the propriety of Milton's subject matter and mode of expression: 'Thou hast not missed one thought that could be fit, / And all that was improper dost omit'. In fact, the entire poem is consumed with the question of what ecclesiological, or theological, victory Marvell feared, and perhaps still fears, that Milton has actually accomplished in *Paradise Lost*. Upon first perusing the 'Arguments', or plot summaries, that Milton had added to the epic's new edition, Marvell, we learn in the commendatory poem, was initially concerned that Milton might exhibit his customary polemical instincts, perhaps even that same fiery

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drive that had fuelled those uncompromising pamphlets on the questions of toleration and the effective disestablishment of the Church of England. 'The Argument' of Milton's poem, Marvell tells us,

Held me a while misdoubting his intent,  
That he would ruin (for I saw him strong)  
The sacred truths to fable and old song  
(So Sampson groap'd the Temple's post in spite)  
The World o'rewhelming to revenge his Sight.

(6-10)

Surely there is nothing ambivalent in this expression of Marvell's anxiety concerning Milton's capacity and willingness to spare nothing in denouncing the corruption of his enemies and the ironic weak-mindedness of his friends. Marvell, like so many readers after him, reports experiencing Milton in *Paradise Lost* as 'strong', his instinct for denunciatory prophecy as powerful as the muscular grip with which the biblical Samson tugged and shook the pillars of the temple of the heathen god Dagon.

What though of Marvell's suggestion that the poet's strength in *Paradise Lost* extended to his ability to 'ruin ... / The sacred truths to fable and old song'? That fear of Milton's prophetic power, I want to suggest, is precisely the one that had motivated Marvell's complex engagements with Milton from 'Upon Appleton House' in the early 1650s to the present moment in 1674. This passage in the poem on *Paradise Lost* is one of unusual complexity, even for Marvell, in that he is alluding to two distinct, and unquestionably arresting, moments in Milton's epic. With the phrase 'fable and old song', Marvell points to that startling line at the beginning of book 11 in which Milton appears to suggest that (p. 682) our first parents, Adam and Eve, might be just as fabulous, or mythical, as the Deucalion and Pyrrha of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Adam and Eve comported themselves in their dignified prayers of repentance as nobly as 'th'ancient Pair/In Fables old, less ancient yet then these'.<sup>28</sup> With the qualifying 'less ancient yet then these', Milton is likely suggesting that Deucalion and Pyrrha are not as ancient as the first couple; but generations of astute readers, from Dr Bentley to William Empson, having taken Milton's phrase to intimate that the biblical narratives Milton is relying on for the story of his epic are themselves 'Fables old'.<sup>29</sup> In that reading, one that the poem's syntax unquestionably sanctions, Milton all but acknowledges ruining the sacred truth of the Pentateuch by demoting Genesis to the status of fable.

But that merely witty intertextual moment is but the first, and slightest, of the allusions to *Paradise Lost* with which Marvell expresses his concern that Milton might use the occasion of the poem to 'ruin the sacred truths'. The other of Marvell's tangles with Milton's poem will not be surprising, for Marvell leaps to the long, excoriating passage in the epic's final book, in which Milton permits himself to tackle head-on the hot-button issues of toleration and ecclesiology that consumed both writers in the early 1670s. Marvell here is engaging with that aspect of Milton about which he was so conflicted: the older poet's unwavering commitment not to 'comprehension', the tolerant inclusion of

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dissenting views within the circumference of the public wall of the Church of England, favoured by Marvell, but to a full 'toleration', the granting of an independent status to dissenting churches whose members seek to worship freely, and legally, *outside* the walled circle of a national Church. In book 12 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton concludes his presentation of the archangel Michael's lesson in Christian history with a scorching characterization of the distortion of scriptural truth that arises from the use of civil power to enforce doctrine. After the death of the apostles, Michael explains, in what is surely the most openly vitriolic passage in the entire epic poem, the 'sacred mysteries of Heav'n' would be distorted—we can say *ruined*—by the greed of their clerical successors and by the ambition of the civil magistrates who would come to support and distort those clerics:

in thir room, as they forewarne,  
Wolves shall succeed for teachers, grievous Wolves,  
Who all the sacred mysteries of Heav'n  
To thir own vile advantages shall turne  
Of lucre and ambition, and the truth  
With superstitions and traditions taint,  
Left onely in those written Records pure,  
Though not but by the Spirit understood.  
Then shall they seek to avail themselves of names,  
(p. 683) Places and titles, and with these to join  
Secular power, though feigning still to act  
By spiritual, to themselves appropriating  
The Spirit of God, promis'd alike and giv'n  
To all Beleevers; and from that pretense,  
Spiritual Laws by carnal power shall force  
On every conscience; Laws which none shall find  
Left them inrould, or what the Spirit within  
Shall on the heart engrave. What will they then  
But force the Spirit of Grace it self, and bind  
His consort Libertie; what, but unbuild  
His living Temples, built by Faith to stand,  
Thir own Faith not anothers.<sup>30</sup>

The grim story Milton relates here is the ancient one of early Christian corruption, the assumption of power over the church by the world's civil magistrates, the grievous wolves of 'carnal power'. But in telling this story of the contamination of the spirit perpetuated by the early Church, Milton is also pressing his poem to participate in the ecclesiological debates of the Restoration, in which Marvell was such an active participant. Alas, for Marvell, it was his position of 'comprehension', the dream of an inclusive but non-disintegrated Church of England, that would be among the options implicitly targeted in the angel Michael's screed against any institution of worship tied to the civil magistrate. What is lost in this catastrophic historical decline is the truth of the 'sacred mysteries of Heaven', which are ruined the moment that the state forces falsely derived 'Spiritual Laws ... / On every conscience'. It is difficult to imagine how much more devastatingly Milton's poem could have laid low the temple posts of the Church of England, even the tolerant, inclusive national Church envisioned by an advocate of comprehension. If

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Marvell first opened the pages of *Paradise Lost* in a state of fear that Mr. Milton may have sought the occasion of his epic to ruin a 'sacred truth' like that of Marvell's own passionately held ecclesiology, his fear would most certainly have been borne out the moment he encountered in the poem's final pages Milton's unswervingly stern angel Michael.<sup>31</sup>

Marvell shows throughout his writing career an uncanny knack for singling out, in his own exquisite verse, those passages of Miltonic poetry and prose that work to expose the ideological, even spiritual, distance between the mighty poet and himself. As we have seen, Marvell tells us in the poem on *Paradise Lost* that his initial fears that Milton would 'ruin the sacred truths' were unfounded; but the very passages in the epic from which Marvell borrows to build that magnificent phrase work if anything to confirm the reason behind Marvell's original anxiety. If one of Marvell's central goals in the early 1670s was to shore up support for a sacred truth like the value of the Church of England's (p. 684) comprehension, or containment, of dissenters, then it is possible to see that that value, or truth, was one that the mighty Milton felt compelled to ruin. For Milton, in the passage in book 12 we have examined, while the 'sacred truth' can reside nowhere but in 'those written Records pure' of scripture, that truth doesn't lie passively in the Bible, easily mined by the careful reader, for it is 'not but by the Spirit understood'. Each individual believer must arrive at the truth, or 'truth', himself, in conjunction either with the Heavenly, or perhaps merely his own, 'Spirit'.

Marvell concludes his poem on *Paradise Lost* with a stunningly clever differentiation of the more conventional rhymed couplets of his own poetic practice from Milton's bolder liberation of iambic pentameter from its constraint by the conventional world of rhymed verse:

Well mightst thou scorn thy readers to allure  
With tinkling rhyme, of thine own sense secure;  
While the town-Bayes writes all the while and spells,  
And like a pack-horse tires without his bells:  
Their fancies like our bushy points appear,  
The poets tag them, we for fashion wear.  
I too transported by the mode offend,  
And while I meant to praise thee must commend.  
The verse created like thy theme sublime,  
In number, weight, and measure, needs not rhyme.

(45-54)

Marvell rightly assesses Milton's proud defence of 'why the poem rhymes not' as one of scorn: secure of the prophetic gravity of the 'sense' of his poem, Milton does indeed arrogantly suggest that poets such as the 'Town-Bayes' Dryden, and implicitly Marvell himself, are willing to sacrifice meaning—perhaps even 'sacred truth'—to a literary trend as superficial as the ornamental tassels, or 'bushy points', a fashionable gentleman might wear to attach his doublet to his hose. Marvell counters Milton's high-handed scorn for his fellow poets with the charming conceit that Marvell is himself guilty of being

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'transported by the mode' of rhyme, constrained to avoid using the preferred word 'praise' in this very poem, because its synonym 'commend' more satisfyingly chimes with the 'offend' that concludes the previous line.

As John W. Creaser has explained of the differences between Milton and Marvell on the specific question of poetic form, 'Milton stands for freedom of form, and is always a conspicuous innovator as a prosodist', while 'Marvell's chief innovation is to make the octosyllabic octave of four tetrameter couplets his own, a stanza of conspicuous symmetry'.<sup>32</sup> What Marvell is able to accomplish in the neat, symmetrical stanzas of his greatest poem, 'Upon Appleton House', Milton would never want, or be able, to accomplish. It is the almost obsessively regular, symmetrical stanzaic form in which Marvell writes (p. 685) the country-house poem that gives shape to, and underwrites, the unbridled play of perspective and tone that sets that poem apart from almost any other work of the seventeenth century. When, for example, Marvell playfully tells us that Fairfax 'did, with his utmost Skill, / Ambition weed, but Conscience till', the precision and the predictability of the rhymed tetrameter enhance the interplay of positions and counterpositions at the heart of Marvell's delicately ironic mode. Is Marvell praising Fairfax within the confines of his tidy stanzas? Is he criticizing him? Marvell, of course, is doing both, allowing the stanza to contain, or *comprehend*, conflicting positions in the way that the version of the Restoration Church of England Marvell would come to idealize would permit within its walls a diversity of doctrinal positions. What form is to the poem, the outward appearance of conformity to the norms of a national church is to the practice of religion: a poem, like a church, and like the state authorizing and authorized by that church, requires a stable foundation.

Given what we can only imagine to be Marvell's earnest objections to so many aspects of Milton's wide-ranging political and religious projects, why, we can ask now in conclusion, does Marvell devote so much attention over so many years to the work of the older poet? We have seen several ways in which Marvell alludes to or permits himself to parry with a variety of figures and conceits identifiable as Milton's. More often than not, the Miltonic passages that Marvell takes up and makes his own bespeak the seriousness with which the older poet takes the art of poetry, an art that Milton would so often elevate to the status of the yet more solemn gift of prophecy. Very possibly, the first work of Milton's that Marvell ever read was the anti-prelatical tract *The Reason of Church Government*, published in 1642. There Milton had promised his readers that they would soon find him writing no ordinary, merely conventional, poetry, but a poem achieved 'by devout prayer to that eternall Spirit who can enrich with all utterance and knowledge'.<sup>33</sup> Such divine inspiration, Milton suggested in that early work, was only bestowed on 'a Poet singing in the high region of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him'.<sup>34</sup> Marvell would within a decade recall Milton's self-portrait as a vatic singer when he painted a hilarious image of himself as the would-be prophetic poet of the Fairfax estate. Conscious that Milton's high-minded gown would never suit him personally, Marvell wrapped himself not in Milton's 'singing robes' but Fairfax's humbler 'Oak-Leaves', garlanded not by Apollonian laurel but curled and clasped instead by the ivy growing on the estate: 'Under this *antick Cope* I move / Like some great *Prelate of the Grove*' (591-2). 'Out of

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these scattered Sibyls Leaves', Marvell tells his reader, in a charming send-up both of himself and of the self-important figure of the grand Miltonic prophet, 'Strange Prophecies my Fancy weaves' (577–8).

The energy that animates Marvell's repeated engagements with Milton's prophetic mode attest, certainly, to a distaste for bold and public postures of self-aggrandizing piety. But they attest as well to a fascination with, and possibly even reverence for, the literary and spiritual confidence subtending Milton's unabashed assertions of power and (p. 686) purity. Amidst the powerful wit with which Marvell portrays both himself and Milton in the poem on *Paradise Lost*, Marvell permits himself four lines of praise untainted by any of his customary gestures of ironic hedging:

Where couldst thou words of such a compass find?  
Whence furnish such a vast expense of mind?  
Just heaven thee like Tiresias to requite,  
Rewards with prophecy thy loss of sight.

(41–4)

These lines may be alone in Marvell's poetry and prose for their unalloyed expression of appreciation for the exalted grandeur of Milton's self-proclaimed ambition and achievement. Marvell even goes so far as to grant the truth of one of Milton's most outrageous assertions in *Paradise Lost*: the claim in the invocation to book 3 that God had requited the Tiresius-like poet's blindness with the prophetic ability to 'see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight'.<sup>35</sup> It was the wide compass of the linguistic and rhetorical universe of his poetry, his vast and unconstrained 'expense of mind', that enabled Milton to ruin the sacred truths of conventional Protestantism, conventional poetry, and conventional political wisdom. Marvell was himself a daring poet and polemicist, known to be committed to ruining more than a few sacred truths himself. But it was the mantle of irony, one fashioned from an antithetical engagement with the spirit and reputation of the far soberer Milton, that constituted the singing robes in which Marvell performed his elusive, and allusive, literary art.

### Notes:

(<sup>1</sup>) See Nigel Smith's biography, *Andrew Marvell: The Chameleon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). Other valuable examinations of the relation of Marvell and Milton include John McWilliams, 'Marvell and Milton's Literary Friendship Reconsidered', *SEL*, 46 (2006): 155–77; and Christopher Hill, 'Milton and Marvell', in *Approaches to Marvell: The York Tercentenary Lectures*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Routledge, 1978), 1–30.

(<sup>2</sup>) Samuel Parker, *A Reproof to the Rehearsal Transposed, in a Discourse to its Author by the Author of the Ecclesiastical Politie* (London, 1673), 212, likens Marvell to Milton with this withering characterization of the tension between Marvell's coyly ironic speaker and the often politically bold positions he attributes to Marvell on questions of

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government: 'if we take away some simpering phrases, and timorous introductions, your Collection will afford as good Precedents for Rebellion and King-killing, as any we meet with in the writings of J. M. in defence of the Rebellion and the Murther of the King'. Matthew C. Augustine suggestively argues that Parker and Marvell's other antagonists 'chase Marvell from the advantageous political and rhetorical ground he had staked for himself and write him into the more easily assailable territory of regicide and radicalism—the territory, that is, of an unrepentant Milton'. Matthew C. Augustine, 'The Chameleon or the Sponge? Marvell, Milton, and the Politics of Literary History', *SP*, 111 (2014): 143.

(<sup>3</sup>) *PW*, 1.417.

(<sup>4</sup>) *PW*, 1.417.

(<sup>5</sup>) *PW*, 1.417.

(<sup>6</sup>) *PW*, 1.417–18.

(<sup>7</sup>) *PW*, 1.418.

(<sup>8</sup>) *PW*, 1.418–19n.

(<sup>9</sup>) Patterson, in *PW*, 2.4, usefully distinguishes 'religious toleration or the removal of penalties for those who could not join the national church' from 'comprehension within [the church] of as many Protestants as possible by stressing what they had in common rather than the ceremonial points that divided them'.

(<sup>10</sup>) J. B. Leishman, *The Art of Marvell's Poetry* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), offers a comprehensive tracking of Marvell's echoes of his poetic contemporaries, and Judith Scherer Herz examines in depth Marvell's particular literary ties to Milton, in 'Milton and Marvell: The Poet as Fit Reader', *MLQ*, 39 (1978): 239–63.

(<sup>11</sup>) Herz, 'Milton and Marvell', *passim*.

(<sup>12</sup>) Herz, 'Milton and Marvell', 251–2.

(<sup>13</sup>) *The Complete Poetry of John Milton*, ed. John T. Shawcross, rev. edn (New York: Anchor, 1971), 64–5 (ll. 32–44).

(<sup>14</sup>) Marvell may well be indebted, additionally, to Donne's representation of the response of the world to the young girl Elizabeth Drury in Donne's magnificent paean to exaggeration, the 'First Anniversary'. For a reading of that poem's influence on Marvell, see Barbara Lewalski, *Donne's Anniversaries and the Poetry of Praise* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), 367. For an alternative reading of Marvell's attribution of power to Mary Fairfax, see my *Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1996), 78–86.

(<sup>15</sup>) *Complete Poetry of John Milton*, 141 (ll. 628–31). George deF. Lord identifies Marvell's borrowing in his edition *Andrew Marvell, Complete Poetry* (London: Dent 1984),

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74n. Other treatments of this allusion to *Comus* include Rogers, *Matter of Revolution*, 89–92; and Catherine Gimelli Martin, ‘The Non-Puritan Ethics, Metaphysics, and Aesthetics of Milton’s Spenserian Masque’, *Milton Quarterly*, 37 (2003): 225.

(<sup>16</sup>) *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don. M. Wolfe, 8 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82), 2.560. I am indebted to Amy L. Gais for this connection of Marvell’s and Milton’s mentions of ‘conscience’.

(<sup>17</sup>) *Complete Poetry of John Milton*, 211 (ll. 5–6).

(<sup>18</sup>) Philip Connell, ‘Marvell, Milton and the Protectoral Church Settlement’, *RES*, 62 (2011): 563–4. See also his chapter in this volume, 128, and Nigel Smith, ‘The Boomerang Theology of Andrew Marvell’, *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme*, 25 (2001): 139–55.

(<sup>19</sup>) See *The Humble Proposals of Mr. Owen, Mr. Tho. Goodwin, Mr. Nye, Mr. Sympson, and Other Ministers* (London, 1652).

(<sup>20</sup>) The controversial question of the nature of Milton’s relation to Cromwell is explored, with different outcomes, by Martin Dzelzainis, ‘Milton and the Protectorate’, in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. David Armitage, Armand Himy, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 181–205; Robert Thomas Fallon, ‘A *Second Defense*: Milton’s Critique of Cromwell?’, *Milton Studies*, 39 (2000): 167–83; Joad Raymond, ‘The Rhetoric of Milton’s Defenses’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, ed. Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 283; and Tobias Gregory, ‘Milton and Cromwell: Another Look at the Evidence’, *JBS*, 54 (2015): 44–62.

(<sup>21</sup>) *P&L*, 2.306.

(<sup>22</sup>) Connell, ‘Marvell, Milton, and the Protectoral Church Settlement’, 576.

(<sup>23</sup>) *Complete Prose Works*, ed. Wolfe, 2.555.

(<sup>24</sup>) See Connell’s fine account of this Miltonic allusion, ‘Marvell, Milton, and the Protectoral Church Settlement’, 578; see too Seok Min Yun, ‘Conscience, Authority, and Andrew Marvell’s *The First Anniversary*’, *Trans-Humanities*, 6 (2013): 176–7.

(<sup>25</sup>) See Nicholas von Maltzahn, ‘Milton, Marvell and Toleration’, in *Milton and Toleration*, ed. Sharon Achinstein and Elizabeth Sauer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 88–9, 96, who cites *Mr. Smirke*, in *PW*, 2.67 and 74. As von Maltzahn points out, Marvell in *Mr. Smirke* goes no further than mandating the sparest of creeds, ‘that Jesus Christ is the Son of God’, thus envisioning a Church that includes, comprehends, Trinitarians and Socinians, as well as Arians like Milton.

(<sup>26</sup>) See ch. 29, ‘On the Visible Church’, in the first book of Milton’s *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. John Hale and J. Donald Cullington, vol. 8 of *The Complete Works of John Milton*, gen. eds. G. Campbell and T. N. Corns, 11 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012–), 770–93. Milton’s complex understanding of the ‘invisible church’ is the subject of



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Stephen R. Honeygosky's *Milton's House of God: The Invisible and Visible Church* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1993).

(<sup>27</sup>) *Complete Poetry of John Milton*, 94 (ll. 13-14).

(<sup>28</sup>) *Complete Poetry of John Milton*, 479 (11.10-11).

(<sup>29</sup>) William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935), 179-80, discusses the editor Dr Richard Bentley's notorious question concerning this passage: 'Is Adam and Eve's History an Old Fable too?'

(<sup>30</sup>) *Complete Poetry of John Milton*, 514 (12.507-28).

(<sup>31</sup>) See von Maltzahn, 'Milton, Marvell and Toleration', 88-9, on the 'relation of Milton's publication of *Paradise Lost* to the politics of 1667, both his bringing it to the press, probably in January or early February in a season of penitence after the calamities of plague, fire, war, and economic recession, and then the epic appearing in print just as renewed calls for toleration greeted the meeting of Parliament in October 1667'.

(<sup>32</sup>) John Creaser, 'Prosodic Style and Conceptions of Liberty in Milton and Marvell', *Milton Quarterly*, 34 (2000): 1-2.

(<sup>33</sup>) *Complete Prose Works*, 1.820.

(<sup>34</sup>) *Complete Prose Works*, 1.808.

(<sup>35</sup>) *Complete Poetry of John Milton*, 300 (3.54-5).

### John Rogers

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