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*Milton’s Messiah* marks a new phase in the decades-long campaign to suppress the religious heterodoxy of John Milton. The traditional strategy for insulating Milton from his own religious beliefs focused on minimizing the relevance of *De Doctrina Christiana* (ca. 1656–60) to *Paradise Lost* (1667), which culminated in William B. Hunter’s failed attempt to have the theological treatise excluded from the Milton canon. Russell M. Hillier reverses course and uses *De Doctrina* to refashion Milton into a religiously orthodox poet who places Christ’s humiliation and crucifixion at the imaginative center of his faith and epics. Rather than being the problem, the treatise has suddenly become the solution. This sudden shift leaves Hillier at odds with his scholarly forebears, such as Hunter and Gordon Campbell. Although Hillier embraces their views on *Paradise Lost*, he must distance himself from their earlier appraisals of *De Doctrina*. So while his fourth chapter offers a reprise of Hunter’s argument that the War in Heaven is an allegory of the Passion, Hillier dismisses the authorship challenge to *De Doctrina* without acknowledging Hunter’s role in instigating it.

Hillier’s study depends on contesting the enduring identification of Milton as an Arian and establishing that the poet maintains a “high Christology” (34) and an orthodox forensic soteriology—the conventional Protestant theory of salvation stemming from Luther. Following Michael Lieb, Hillier seeks to protect Milton from Arianism by doing away with the concept.¹ It is difficult to “define what historical Arianism stood for,” Hillier


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insists, because we have so little access to what Arius actually believed and subsequent polemical abuse of the term has rendered it meaningless (10). Michael Bauman deftly dispatched the former objection in his definitive Milton’s Arianism by identifying Milton as a Nicene Arian: “Defining ‘Arianism’ as those tenets specifically anathematized at the council of Nicaea is neither arbitrary nor unimportant; not arbitrary because, historically, the creeds, not the heretics, have defined the precincts of orthodoxy and heresy; not unimportant because it is, I think, an unassailable definition.”

Hillier tries to bypass Bauman by defining Arianism so narrowly—the views that the persecuted Arius actually held—that the archetypal heresy of the Christian tradition effectively disappears. In doing so, however, he never disputes the fact that Milton holds the position anathematized at Nicaea. The objection about the validity of term carries little weight because Milton himself uses “Arian” as a meaningful, descriptive term in Of True Religion (1673), where he is clearly sympathetic to Arius and Socinian criticism of the Athanasian Trinity. As Barbara Lewalski reminds us, Arianism is the “preferred term to describe anti-Trinitarian heresy” in the seventeenth century, and “the term has specific appropriateness for Milton.”

Rejecting Arianism as an “infelicitous and misleading” term that “obscures rather than illuminates” (9, 13), Hillier crafts his own description of Milton’s Son. Drawing selectively on De Doctrina, he stresses that the “Son enjoys ‘omnipresence’ […] ; ‘omniscience’ […] ; ‘authority’ over Heaven and Earth […] ; ‘omnipotence’” and a host of other seemingly godlike properties (17). But he fails to note “that the Son admits that he possesses whatever measure of Deity is attributed to him, by virtue of the peculiar gift and kindness of the Father” (CPW, 6:223). He maintains that “Milton’s epic universe impl[ies] a Christology where the Son is ‘Both God and Man, Son both of God and Man’” (3.316)” (22). But he omits that the term “God,” when applied to the Son, is an honorific title bestowed “by the will and permission of God the Father” (CPW, 6:233), which Milton typically makes clear:

Here shalt thou sit incarnate, here shalt reign
Both God and man, Son both of God and man,

2. Michael Bauman, Milton’s Arianism (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987), 7.


4. Barbara K. Lewalski, The Life of John Milton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 424. To build his case, Hillier cites Lewalski’s earlier concerns that Milton’s monist ontology may undermine the Arian label. But he overlooks her recent clarification of the issue in her biography, even though he cites her biography at other points in his study.
Anointed universal King; all power
I give thee.  

Hillier draws freely from the Heavenly Council in book 3 of Paradise Lost, but he never addresses the passage in which the Angelic choir clarifies the fundamental difference between the Father and the Son: “Thee Father first they sung omnipotent, / Immutable, immortal, infinite, / Eternal King; thee Author of all being” (CP, 3.372–74); “Thee next they sang of all creation first, / Begotten Son, divine similitude” (CP, 3.383–84). Hillier’s real problem with Arianism, one suspects, is not that it is too vague. Rather, it is too specific and illuminating; it highlights precisely those aspects of Milton’s Christology that undermine Hillier’s argument.

Throughout his opening chapter, Hillier reinvents the Son as “an exceptional figure that exceeds the Arian classification” (18). Arians draw a clear distinction between the Creator and all of his creatures. But according to Hillier, Milton grants the Son an elevated ontological status distinct from the rest of Creation and posits a mystical and mysterious union between the Father and the Son that erases their essential difference. There are problems with both positions. The first depends upon “a consubstantiality [with the Father] that sublimates [the Son] above Creation” (18). But Milton’s monistic Deity is consubstantial with all of Creation (“one first matter all” [CP, 5.472]). The second position depends upon using the one mysterious union of two essences that Milton does allow—the Incarnation—as a pretext for ascribing to him the mysterious union between the Father and the Son that he explicitly rejects in De Doctrina. Nonetheless, this “high Christology” enables Hillier to treat the Son throughout the rest of his study as if he were a self-existent God and free-flowing source of divinity, rather than an elevated creature. Thus, Hillier draws on the works of numerous orthodox Trinitarian figures—the poems of George Herbert, for instance, and Anselm’s theory of atonement—to contextualize Milton without acknowledging the crucial difference: Milton does not believe that the figure who suffered and died on the cross was God. This practice effaces many of Milton’s most distinctive characteristics. For example, Milton’s God famously declares that the Son “hast been found / By merit more than birthright Son of God” (CP, 3.308–9). The Son is exalted because of his voluntary obedience to the will of God more than because of his ontological status as the


first created being. But Hillier emphasizes the Son’s “intrinsic merit” (121; also see “Christ’s intrinsic worthiness” [42]), a notion that collapses Milton’s important distinction and inverts the meaning of “merit” as Milton actually uses it.

On the issue of soteriology, Hillier stresses that the Son “perform[s] an objective atonement that is worlds apart from the exemplarist, subjective atonement of the Socinian and semi-Pelagian positions” (25). But it is hard to see how any meaningful discussion of the issue can proceed without addressing Milton’s largely Arminian view of salvation. God explains it during the Heavenly Council in book 3 (CP, 3.168–202), another crucial passage that Hillier overlooks. The Arminian view of Christ’s atonement is so objective and universal that it restores a degree of human agency and rational self-governance antithetical to most reformed theologies. “Once more I will renew / His lapsed powers,” the grace-giving Father announces, “Upheld by me, yet once more he shall stand / On even ground against his mortal foe” (CP, 3.175–76, 178–79). More than his Arian Christology, it is Milton’s Arminian soteriology that has prompted critics to explore his affinities with exemplarist models of atonement. It also enables Milton to engage in a sincere theodicy (to “justify the ways of God to men” [CP, 1.26]), a project that reformers like Luther and Calvin would have found blasphemous.

In his second chapter, however, Hillier argues that Milton is using “justify” primarily in its specialized Reformation sense (as in “justification by faith”) rather than in its rationalistic one (the Oxford English Dictionary cites this use by Milton to illustrate the rationalistic definition). This claim is grammatically untenable, since the active subject of the verb is Milton’s narrator (“that...Im may...justify”). More significantly, it is not clear why the nearly Lutheran Milton that Hillier constructs would ever have written an epic theodicy predicated on free will. Hillier skirts the issue, suggesting that the poem is primarily a “fideist...theodicy” (38), an idea that verges on the oxymoronic.

The remaining chapters of Milton’s Messiah provide exhaustive close readings that seek to demonstrate that “the supernatural phenomenon of the cross,” which is “outside humanity’s moral and epistemological frame of reference,” remains the constant focus of Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained (29). In chapter 3, for example, Hillier argues that both the Heavenly Council of book 3 and Milton’s universe as a whole are “Christocentric” (56, 64). Raphael gives “one first matter all” a “Christological figuration” (64), and even in Chaos, “the Son’s present absence” is palpable (69). Subsequent chapters employ different techniques to the same end. The underlying issue, of course, is that readers have long noted the relative absence of the Passion in Milton’s later poems. After his early poems, most notably his incomplete “The Passion” and “Upon the Circumcision,” Milton seems to turn away from the subject. When presented with the opportu-
nity—indeed, almost the obligation—to focus on Christ’s humiliation and suffering on the cross in *Paradise Lost*, Milton is noticeably brief (*CP*, 3.235–50; 3.294–99; 12.411–21), and surprisingly, given its title, the subject of *Paradise Regained* (1671) is Christ’s temptation in the wilderness and not the Passion.

Even if one were to accept a number of Hillier’s readings, key questions remain unanswered. If he is as preoccupied with the subject as Hillier suggests, why does Milton treat Christ’s humiliation and suffering so indirectly? Furthermore, in an era in which visual and poetic depictions of Christ on the cross are so nuanced and ideologically loaded, what specific image of the crucified Christ stands behind Milton’s “subtle and indirect” practice (179)? Hillier’s sophisticated readings often uncover a “suffering Christ” at odds with the heroic Son that Milton overtly depicts in *Paradise Lost*.

The overriding goal of this study is certainly not, as Hillier claims, to demonstrate “why Milton’s distinctive theology matters” (1). Through its highly selective use of *De Doctrina*, it seeks to render Milton’s heterodox theology so indistinct and conventional that he can be transformed into another George Herbert, a poet whose fusion of faith and poetics is fundamentally different from Milton’s. Hillier concludes that “readers inclined to discount or diminish the importance of the cross in Milton’s poetics or mistake the form that Milton’s imaginative treatment of the redemption takes may find themselves, like Milton’s fallen angels, philosophically disoriented or imprisoned in epistemological obscurity, in wandering mazes lost” (229). After discovering that “the importance of the cross” is the premise and conclusion of every chapter of *Milton’s Messiah*, readers may rightly conclude that Hillier has lost sight of Milton’s distinctive theology and poetics—especially Milton’s insistence that “the ultimate object of faith is not Christ, the Mediator, but God the Father” (*CPW*, 6:475)—and has trapped himself in a hermeneutic loop.

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