

Blaine Greteman. *The Poetics and Politics of Youth in Milton's England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. xi + 252 pp. \$95. ISBN: 978-1-107-03808-0.

Blaine Greteman's monograph confessedly builds upon recent revisionist scholarship that argues for the place of a state of childhood in early modern culture. Greteman is interested in the shifting category of childhood in seventeenth-century English culture because the definition of the threshold between childhood and adulthood is profoundly implicated in issues of political obligation and consent, obedience, and independence. The study falls into two halves. The first part explores different approaches to the subject of childish liminality in metatheatrical Jacobean drama, particularly Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*, William Prynne's antitheatrical *Histrio-Mastix* and polemical *Minors No Senators*, and Thomas Hobbes's exposition of patriarchal absolutism and degradation of consent. Part 2 examines Milton's treatment of coming-of-age and finding one's voice in his early poetry, the prose tracts, and *Paradise Lost*.

Part 1's strongest chapters concern Prynne and Hobbes. Prynne fears that boy actors' mimetic nature, compounded with lack of judgment, may become absorbed in the roles they play to the life, and he is disquieted by representation by child parliamentarians "incapable of rational action" whose "very presence demonstrates a collapse of rational consent among the electorate" (63). Prynne would evade all questions of liminality and instead grant representation to "old men" (66). Royalist dismay, echoing Thomas Bayly, that dissenters against Caroline paternalism were but "'monsterous Children . . . who are borne with teeth in their mouthes, bite off the nipple, and starve themselves for lack of sustenance'" (71), bolsters Hobbes's drastic view that preverbal neonates should cede consent and absolute subjection from the earliest stage of infancy. Hobbes's stark, harsh contractarianism understands the earliest model of nurturing between the mother and the child as the maternal right to dominion and conquest and, in turn, the newborn's submission of abject gratitude. This total elision of childhood transforms all humans, almost *ab ovo*, into "mushroom men" or "instant adults" (77).

Hobbes's authoritarian, absolute denial of subjects' choice and voice contrasts strikingly with Milton's treatment of the emergence of voices from infancy as formative of virtue. Milton's works insistently return to this threshold; his heroes

and heroines are pictured negotiating this *limen*. The Lady of a *Mask* gains her voice in “a counterpoint” with Comus (109). Greteman’s close reading appraises how the Lady’s Echo song is generated from and resists Comus’s bacchanals — “Something in the Lady responds to him” (110). A comparative interpretation of pedagogical models from Comenius’s *Orbis Pictus* and Milton’s *Of Education* demonstrates that Milton’s program of study is “heroic work” (127): Comenius’s screening of his students from poetry’s corrupting power opposes Milton’s willingness for his students to sally forth promiscuously, not without dust and heat. Likewise, in *Areopagitica* “personal virtue is not born but made, and it is made through exposure to vice” by “replaying, again and again, the scene of original sin” (128). So too Milton’s unfallen “angels live in differential stages of childish development” (144); satanic philosophy and rhetoric are Hobbesian in insisting that the cosmos is fixed and hierarchical and in repudiating the possibility of developmental fluidity or change. The final chapter examines “Miltonic moments” (J. Martin Evans’s phrase) delineating Adam and Eve’s education, especially Adam at his birth and Eve before her lakeside reflection. Throughout Greteman leavens a densely learned book with good humor. Comus’s snare-hugging *carpe noctem* argument is that “of a Texas oil man hell-bent on squeezing every last drop from the earth” (115), and Satan fawns before deity like “a great company man [who] does not mind abasing himself as long as the rules and rewards are set and his own position is assured” (152).

One concern is that the closing two chapters on Milton’s major verse can be a trifle indigested and inchoate. The argument here is so fervently and breathlessly packed there is a sense of the author sometimes pressed to get it all in. The penultimate chapter, for instance, attempts to treat the *infandum* (unspeakable) death of Virgil’s Pallas, Sin’s hideous birth as it relates to the birth of the English republic in Milton’s *Second Defense*, and the Son’s heroic pattern, all in three pages. Regarding the Son’s exemplarity, a chapter on *Paradise Regained* would have further enriched a study of this sort. What does *Paradise Regained* narrate, if not a youthful rite of passage and the emergence of arguably Milton’s most consummate and authoritative heroic voice? The final paragraph of Greteman’s epilogue is suggestive of this omission. But these are slight objections. Students of early modern literature, intellectual history, political theory, and philosophy will discover much to savor.

RUSSELL M. HILLIER
Providence College