

Eric B. Song, *Dominion Undeserved: Milton and the Perils of Creation*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013. xi + 216 pp. \$49.95. ISBN: 978-0-8014-5185-0.

What constitutes the act of creation for John Milton, that most self-conscious of poets? What are the theological, political, and poetic difficulties that emerge from carving form out of chaos, from establishing a nation out of divergent individuals, from writing epic poetry out of an unruly tradition? These are the questions that Eric Song intelligently and poignantly addresses in his book *Dominion Undeserved*. Song argues that Milton views all forms of creation as internally divided, and thus all forms of authority as tenuous, due to their chaotic origins; because of these unruly beginnings, these creations, be it Eden, England or Englishness, or the epic poem, are in need of forceful reformation that can never fully succeed in banishing the barbarous dregs out of which they began. Starting from the originating moment of God's creation of the world out of Chaos, Song insightfully and often brilliantly teases out the complex but crucial ways that this troubled view of creation redounds upon Milton's views on English expansionism, on rural and colonial sovereignty, on marriage, on the Irish question, and finally on the perils of Christian universalism.

Song begins in chapter 1 by linking God's expansion into Chaos at the creation of the world to English nationalism and expansionism. Song contextualizes Milton's reference to the "tartareous dregs" of Chaos with early modern representations of the Tartars, showing how this barbarous nation allowed Milton to think through the problems he associated with England's own primitive origins as well as its avaricious mercantilist ventures with its Eastern neighbors. Ultimately, not only does the continued presence of these dregs after creation remind us of the "instability of the divine kingdom" (40), they also serve to foreground the persistence of barbarism amid the English nation and the problematic need for its never fully successful subjugation both at home and abroad. The chapter closes with a somewhat strained reading of

Milton's "Note on Rhyme" as a retroactive admission of failure, a failure Song bases on the continued presence mainly of poetic effects (not rhyme) in Milton's epic.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus our attention on Milton's Eden and the implications of its pastoral and sexual politics. The former takes up Milton's engagement with the country-house poem through his representation of Adam and Eve's "rural happy seat" in *Paradise Lost*. Song argues that Milton's rural world, with its emphasis on daily labor, unsuccessful and unjust surveillance, and the failure of patriarchal authority occasioned by the Fall, critiques the imagined aristocratic order and dynastic succession envisioned in the country-house tradition. At the end of this chapter, Song attempts to connect this critique to a broader questioning of English colonial ambitions. Chapter 3 reads the sexual politics of Adam and Eve's marriage as a fragmentary political allegory of England's fraught relationship with Ireland post-1660. While the barbarous and Catholic Irish continued to arouse suspicion from Milton, his doubts over all sovereignty after the Fall caused him to offer a poetic fantasy of gracious reconciliation between Adam and Eve, England and Ireland.

In the final chapter, Song moves to Milton's final two poems, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, to explore the tension between the lived experience of the individual and the Christian promise of universalism as it is very literally embodied in Jesus and Samson. In these poems, Milton reveals a sensitivity to a distinctly non-Christian, Hebraic tradition that draws attention to his simultaneous desire for "all-encompassing unity" (150) and awareness of the dangers of such desires.

Throughout, Song provides acute and remarkably nuanced readings of Milton's writings that will prove enlightening for experienced and inexperienced Miltonists alike. Indeed, he often seems so attuned to the allusive potentials of Milton's poetry that the text is made to do too much work, to bear the possibility of too arcane, or too many, meanings. His approach, which he represents in chapter 3 as an excavation of latent possibilities within the text, often takes us far from what seem to be the most pressing concerns of the moment. As we explore, for example, the specifics of Irish politics post-1660, a politics, as Song admits, that Milton ignored in his published writings, we might at times feel the immediacy of Milton's vision fade. Nonetheless, the novel insights that Song provides through his readings, the ways that his book helps us to become attuned to Milton's far-reaching and careful thoughts about sovereignty and difference, easily justify his deep readings.

Dominion Undeserved is an excellent, theoretically sophisticated study of Milton's late poetry, one that Milton scholars and students will find vital for its elucidation of how this poetry engages, in often surprising or unexpected ways, with a range of early modern political concerns. Perhaps more importantly, in its careful attention to Milton's theories on the perils of authority, Song's book reveals to us a Milton that continues to speak to the pressing concerns of our current moment.

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