

Milton and the People. Paul Hammond.

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“The people” is an elastic and contested term in early modern political thought. Neutral senses included a nation, a citizenry, or a population. The idea that sovereignty derives from the people promoted a positive sense of the word, as in the Leveller manifesto series *An Agreement of the People*. When “the people” means commoners as distinguished from an elite, the term was often used pejoratively, shading toward rabble or mob. Paul Hammond’s *Milton and the People* examines Milton’s use of the term over the course of his career, along with overlapping and contrasting terms: “nation,” “multitude,” “vulgus,” “plebs.” Since “the people” is mainly a political concept, this book is primarily concerned with the political aspects of Milton’s thought. Its strongest chapters are those on his political prose, English and Latin. But it also sheds light on Milton’s self-image, his sense of vocation, and, more broadly, how he thought of, spoke to, and distinguished himself from his fellow citizens.

From his undergraduate writings on, Hammond shows, Milton saw himself as one separated by his artistic calling from the common herd. “No more now shall I mingle, a figure obscure, with the witless populace [*populo miscebor inerti*], but my footsteps will avoid eyes profane,” he wrote in his early Latin poem *Ad Patrem*. In his polemical prose, Milton’s claims about “the people” modulated according to the needs of his arguments. Arguing against episcopal church government in the early 1640s, Milton affirmed that the common people should have a role in choosing their minister, though, as Hammond observes, “he never quite defined precisely what their role should be” (42–43). The logic of *Areopagitica* (1644) pulled in the same direction: the people should not be infantilized by licensing. When he defended the execution of Charles I, Milton faced a rhetorical problem common to his party: most of the English people were appalled by the regicide, and the purged Parliament that brought it about had only the barest claim to be considered a representative body. So assertions that the revolution had been carried out in the name of “the people” had to be carefully qualified. Milton did so by restricting authority to act on the people’s behalf to “the uprighter sort” — and who decides who these are? Throughout his Interregnum political writings, Milton’s usual strategy was to ground political authority in virtue, rather than mere numbers: a virtuous few has the right to overrule a slavish multitude, by force if persuasion will not serve. After the Restoration swept away his political hopes, his identification with a virtuous minority narrowed into the lone-just-man figures in his late poems: Abdiel, Enoch, Samson, Jesus.

Hammond understands what kind of a political thinker Milton was: rhetorical, not systematic; a polemicist, not a philosopher. Milton “did not, like Hobbes, define his terms closely; in his writings he is often polemical and opportunistic, inspired by principles, certainly, but responding to what he saw as the needs of the moment” (2). So to ask how Milton understood “the people” would be a *question mal posée*; he had no

single such understanding, nor aimed for one. Better to ask, as Hammond does, in what contexts and to what ends Milton deployed the term.

Hammond's book joins the growing body of scholarship that challenges the picture of a radical Milton made familiar by Christopher Hill and others: "The idea that [Milton] was consistently a champion of radical political and religious ideas does not survive close engagement with the rhetoric of his prose writings, where the ideal of the free and godly nation is at odds with the reality that few seem to have the inner resources to bring about this ideal" (249). On the other hand, Hammond observes, "the idea that Milton was an elitist needs to be handled with caution," since Milton "never sought to join a pre-existing elite," academic, ecclesiastical, or political (251). Milton's elitism was not grounded in birth or office, but in talent, industry, and virtue. His disappointment with his fellow citizens emerged from a sense of how far most of them could be expected to fall short of his own strenuous ideals.

Milton and the People is clear and concise enough for students and nonspecialists to consult, and substantive and thought-provoking enough for Miltonists to study closely. This is a significant book, and one that should find an audience.

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