Preaching the Gospel of Black Revolt: Appropriating Milton in Early African American Literature. Reginald A. Wilburn.
Medieval and Renaissance Literary Studies. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2014. xiii + 392 pp. $58.

Preaching the Gospel of Black Revolt by Reginald A. Wilburn places itself into a current "void" (2) in Milton studies by charting the influence of *Paradise Lost* upon a surprising number of early African American authors from the time of slavery through the end of the Reconstruction era. Through this book, Wilburn makes a major contribution to both Milton scholarship and African American studies by framing his argument on early African American writers' use of Satan's fallen journey through books 1 and 2 of *Paradise Lost* in order to proclaim a messianic message of racial uplift. Early African American writers found themselves in existential situations that were more easily identifiable with Satan's hell than with an Edenic land of political freedom and human rights. Each early African American author seeks to "complet[e] and complicat[e] Milton on demonic grounds of contention" (3).

Wilburn shows that these writers were attracted to Milton to prove their advanced English literacy, for his canonical authority, and for his reputation as England's poet of freedom. *Preaching the Gospel of Black Revolt* deals at length with the work of three early African American writers Milton scholars are likely to recognize — Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Frederick Douglass. Where Wilburn's study adds interest and credibility to his thesis is through the variety of lesser-known figures included in the text:

an unidentified black writer known simply as "Othello," the Reverend Lemuel B. Haynes, the Reverend Peter Williams Jr., William Hamilton, David Walker, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Anna Julia Cooper, and Sutton E. Griggs. The epilogue extends Milton's afterlife beyond the nineteenth century to glance at the "infernal readings of *Paradise Lost*" by Malcolm X in his *Autobiography* and speeches (327). I realized through reading this book how much could be gained by reading Milton across "the literary color line," as Wilburn terms it (6).

Among the poems, speeches, essays, and novels discussed, two very important discoveries warrant being highlighted here: Phillis Wheatley's epyllion "Goliath of Gath" and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's epic *Moses: A Story of the Nile*. At a little over 200 lines, Wheatley's "Goliath of Gath" does not come near the scope of Milton's epic, but she clearly engages echoic phrasing and generic adaptations from her precursor's major poetry (62). Harper's poem more narrowly follows the generic adaptation of *Paradise Regained* and the brief epic, and Wilburn's section on "maternal heroism" is particularly insightful (217). "Goliath of Gath" bears a reading alongside *Samson Agonistes*, even more than *Paradise Lost*, and Harper's *Moses* would be a welcome complement to *Paradise Regained* in any undergraduate or graduate class on Milton.

My main criticism of *Preaching the Gospel of Black Revolt* is that at times Wilburn seems to manifest an overall lack of familiarity with *Paradise Lost* as a whole, seeming reluctant to steer much beyond the Miltonic proems to books 3 and 7, when not citing Satan's journey through hell in books 1 and 2. At times I also wondered if greater depth in the minor poetry — particularly *Lycidas* — may have helped to build his case for the predominate trope of a hellish fallen state turned into a messianic message of racial uplift, particularly in the elegies of Wheatley.

BRADLEY P. SPAULDING, *Indiana Wesleyan University*