

Bryan Adams Hampton. *Fleshly Tabernacles: Milton and the Incarnational Poetics of Revolutionary England*.

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Recent studies of Milton have uncovered what is perhaps an unsurprising correspondence between the poet whose theology asserts that humanity can be “Improv’d by tract of time” (*Paradise Lost* 5.498), and a poststructuralist philosophy that views experience of any kind as a text. To both, the Johannine notion of the Word made flesh would be a most significant metaphor, and in *Fleshly Tabernacles* Bryan Adams Hampton calls attention to this “neglected cultural episteme” (4) that turns out to be the key to understanding Milton’s unification of aesthetics, theology, and politics.

The Incarnation, characterized by the interplay between kenosis (emptying) and pleroma (abundance), is consistently important for Milton as “aesthetic symbol, theological event, and narrative picture of humanity’s potential” (20). Marshaling considerable research into religious and intellectual history, Hampton presents us with a new vocabulary by which we might think through Milton’s work. *Fleshly Tabernacles* gives most attention to various 1645 *Poems*, two scenes from *Paradise Lost*, and the 1671 volume of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. Hampton’s analyses of these works and the theological treatise *De Doctrina Christiana* comprise the first two parts of his book, and a final section examines Milton’s more politically revolutionary contemporaries.

The first two chapters come under a section titled “Proclaiming the Word,” and focus on the preacher’s almost impossible responsibility to integrate Word and flesh. In this light, the apparent failure of Milton’s “The Passion” actually testifies to its speaker’s “theological and hermeneutical success” (30–31). Because the Crucifixion is for Milton “a distant and alienating text that leads the ego . . . to a kenosis characterized by abandonment or desolation” (33), any poetic rendering of it must necessarily be unsatisfying. Hampton’s interpretation of the infernal council scene in *Paradise Lost* as an essentially groundless language game — amusingly titled “Wittgenstein in Hell” (80) — is both rigorous and fascinating. He concludes that “in an attempt to secure their dissenting freedom,” the rebel angels become faulty metaphysicians and disingenuous preachers who “question [God’s] Presence as the infallible and inscrutable ground of reality . . . and thereby ‘create’ their own language of preaching and a culture of violence severed from transcendence” (93).

The next three chapters explore the nature of the Incarnation by interpreting it within the conceptual vocabulary of poststructuralist theory (particularly Paul Ricoeur’s). The first of these chapters, while the shortest, is central to Hampton’s overall argument. He provides a compelling analysis of Milton’s philosophical monism: an ingenious solution to the mystery of the Incarnation as debated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE, adopting a monist Arian position lets us sidestep the pseudoproblem of whether the Word clothed itself in flesh or whether

a sufficiently virtuous flesh was promoted to Wordhood. In effect, Hampton notes, “Christ’s imputed righteousness is essential for human salvation, and his unique position as the firstborn of creation is the avenue through which salvation takes place” (124). The chapters that follow examine three readers (“the pilot of some small night-founder’d Skiff” from *Paradise Lost*, the imprisoned Samson, and the wandering Jesus of *Paradise Regained*) tasked with deciphering and incarnating the transcendent Word into their own fleshly lives.

The final section examines how certain interregnum revolutionaries employ the language of Incarnation to advance their politics. John Everard’s interpretation of Christ as an example for future incarnate believers “challenges the hermeneutic monopoly held in trust by the professional clergy” (231). Gerrard Winstanley relates the clergy’s exegetical monopoly to “the economic practice of enclosure” (260). James Nayler’s case offers the most extreme example of political Incarnation, with the radical Quaker parading himself through Bristol as Jesus did into Jerusalem.

*Fleshly Tabernacles* is a clearly learned and meticulously researched piece of Milton scholarship, which students of intellectual and cultural history will find extremely useful. As the chapters of his book unfold, however, what I take to be its central claim (to wit, that a dynamic of kenosis and pleroma is the driving force behind Milton’s poetic imagination) occasionally tends to be pushed into the background by his still-persuasive close readings. Nevertheless, Hampton cogently and convincingly argues that something called the Incarnation plays a crucial role in the poet’s imagination of the universe, even if the precise mechanics of how it does so remain shrouded in mystery.

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