

Gregory Machacek. *Milton and Homer: "Written to Aftertimes."*

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Despite its title, *Milton and Homer* is better described as a study of the problems attendant upon critical discourses of allusion and intertextuality than as a study of one interpoetic relationship. The first third of the book (the introduction and chapter 1, "By Allusion Called") are devoted almost exclusively to the terminological problems that have arisen in the last several decades as critics have labored to describe and distinguish the various mechanisms of literary influence and adaptation — echo, borrowing, allusion, *furta*, and above all intertextuality. One problem with any study of Homer's influence upon Milton, as Machacek illustrates, is that his poems are "saturated . . . by phrases from the entire preceding literary tradition," including Homer's many classical and early modern imitators (25). But the elaborate taxonomy of the critical idiom of intertext provided in the first forty pages of this book does solve the problem that Homeric allusions in *Paradise Lost* are difficult to distinguish from, say, Virgilian ones. Indeed, when analyzing *PL* 9.888–95, the scene in which Adam responds in horror to Eve's return by dropping his garland, Machacek puzzles over the two possible Virgilian analogues (*Aen.* 1.92 and 12.950), as well as several possible analogues in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus's knees are described as going slack, but he does not mention *Iliad* 22.466–70, where Andromache drops her veil in horror as she spies Hector's corpse dragged around the walls of Troy. The omission is striking, for not only does the Homeric allusion have a more powerful connection to the Miltonic scene — both concern, in different ways, the special grief of losing a spouse — but it also proves some of Machacek's own suspicions concerning the study of allusion, such as the problem that the endeavor can easily become "mire[d] . . . in irresolvable issues of intentionality" (37). We cannot know whether Milton is imitating all of these passages or just one of them; nor can we know whether the echo constitutes the

involuntary reflex of an extraordinarily skilled reader of classical literature or a deliberate attempt at poetic self-fashioning.

Milton and Homer promises to examine the “institutional and discursive mechanisms of canonization” (8) that inform Milton’s borrowings but devotes itself almost exclusively to the latter category until the final chapter. That final chapter (6, “Instruct Me”) is concerned with Milton’s decision to write *Paradise Lost* as an epic rather than a tragedy, a decision that turns out to have virtually nothing to do with Homer and much more to do with the fate of the public stage during the English Civil War. The strongest chapters of this book are those that come closest to delivering on its titular promise: chapter 2 (“Dire Example”) focuses on Milton’s War in Heaven, while chapter 5 (“Above th’Aonian Mount”) argues that Milton’s deliberate cultivation of sublime effects constitutes a debt to Homer in light of emergent literary-critical discourses of the sublime. But the book’s overly brief and disjointed chapters, which contain sadly few close readings, give the reader little insight into Milton’s well-documented veneration for the Greek poet: a mere half-page is devoted to Milton’s ingenious transformations of Homeric similes; there is no substantive consideration of Milton’s reliance on Homeric counterfactuals; the invocation to *PL* 9, with its indictment of “Neptune’s ire,” is discussed only in passing and without any nuance; there is no examination whatsoever of the theological, cosmological, or political questions that might have attracted Milton to Homer (or to the seventeenth-century idea of Homer) in the first place. *Milton and Homer* identifies itself with a historicist enterprise when it promises to “consider *Paradise Lost* in connection with Homer’s epics as they were understood in Milton’s day” (41). Yet the book’s methods belie this claim: the Homeric epics are cited in a modern English translation (rather than in the Greek or Greek-Latin editions mostly likely used by Milton), the author hardly ever refers to Homeric paratexts or commentaries, and he does not take into account the attitudes of Homer’s early modern readers as reflected in marginalia or commonplace books. *Milton and Homer* confirms the validity of studying Milton’s debts to Homer and at times paves a useful pathway for doing such work, but it ultimately provides us with little sense of how to explain those debts in light of Milton’s poetic, political, ethical, or theological beliefs.

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