

Questioning the Value of Prodigies and Wars: Milton and the *Mirabilis Annus* Tracts*

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'I very well remember', said John Gadbury in *Miraculum Signum Coeleste: A Discourse of Those Miraculous Prodigies*, which appeared anonymously in 1658, still under the Protectorate,

That in the year 1649[.] the year in which *Charles* the late King of *England* was *beheaded*, it was generally (I will not, I cannot say truly) *reported*, that he without his *head*, was seen to hover in a very strange manner, over *White Hall* many *nights* together. Nay, I have heard some *affirm*, that he was seen (sometimes) with his *George* on his *Brest*, in the manner as he wore it when he came on the *Scaffold*. And that sometimes he was seen to appear in his *Watchet Wastcoat* onely. Neither of these did I ever see, I confesse, nor can I enjoin anyones faith to believe them therefore.¹

For those who supported the Protectoral regime, the headless body of Charles I hovering in the air was certainly ominous, and something that should be dismissed as a false report. However, as Patrick Curry's entry for Gadbury in *ODNB* summarizes it, this judicial astrologer's 'attitude towards his subject changed radically in close parallel to the transformation in his religious and political opinions'.² After the Restoration, Gadbury claimed that his former work was pirated, and now dedicated the newly entitled *Natura Prodigiorum: Or A Discourse Touching the Nature of Prodigies* (1660) to 'Sir George Monk, Lord General of all His Majestie's Forces'. In it, after repeating the account of

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¹ *Miraculum Signum Coeleste: A Discourse of Those Miraculous Prodigies* (London, 1658), p. 12.

² *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. Gadbury, John, p. 240.

the prodigy of the headless Charles I, Gadbury continues:

Neither of these sights did I ever see, nor can enjoyn anyones faith to believe: However, if the report were true (and I know not what advantage any man can reap by reporting such things as these, if they were not,) it may very well be aspected as a thing prodigious, and remarkable.³

Thus, the credibility and the value of the same prodigy vary before and after the Restoration. Gadbury himself seems to have been conscious of this kind of ideological tendentiousness. Just as he soon moved from his early traditional position on astrology to a markedly more sceptical outlook, so he came to look at prodigies in more natural philosophical terms. For instance, he explains the representation of complex visual images such as armies or animals in the sky by natural causes: they

may be caused naturally, and are so for the most part, viz. when the temper and disposition of the air is sufficiently able to receive the impress or image of those things done on earth. And because the air is apt to receive divers images and shapes in divers parts and places thereof, these monstrous forms, and strange actions, and stories, and characters, &c. proceed from the joyning of divers forms and actions there.⁴

In general, Gadbury's interpretation was providentialist, but, as William E. Burns comments, 'he was completely uninterested in either repentance, as a proper response to a prodigy, or in the apocalypse, discredited for many royalists by its association with Fifth-Monarchist radicals'.⁵ One of those Royalists was Samuel Butler, whose satirical epic *Hudibras* could bitterly mock the apocalyptic belief of the Puritans and parliamentarians by describing the

³ John Gadbury, *Natura Prodigiorum: Or A Discourse Touching the Nature of Prodigies* (London, 1660), p. 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁵ William E. Burns, *An Age of Wonders: Prodigies, Politics and Providence in England 1657-1727* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 41. Burns remarks that John Morton, in his *The Natural History of Northamptonshire* (1712), could assert that 'strange Appearances of Military Skirmishes in the Air' were 'a product of their [i.e., the pamphleteers] own superstitious imagination' (p. 84).

astrologer Sidrophel (often identified with the parliamentarian astrologer William Lilly) as mistaking a kite for a comet, which ‘can no less than the world’s end / Or Nature’s funeral portend’.⁶

At the Restoration, however, at least in its initial stages, Royalists could, and did, celebrate the king’s return as a simultaneous return to the proper order of things. It is not surprising that many of the now-defeated Puritans welcomed the *Mirabilis Annus* tracts (1661, 1662), a trilogy of pamphlets issued as sectarian propaganda that envisioned through a number of (alleged) prodigies a violent overthrow of Restoration order.⁷ The millenarian and Fifth-Monarchist fellow-traveller Henry Jessey was arrested for the authorship of the first *Mirabilis Annus*, but because Jessey was in prison when *Mirabilis Annus Secundus* appeared in 1662, a more likely author was the Congregationalist George Cokayne or the Fifth-Monarchist Henry Danvers.⁸ The *Mirabilis Annus* tracts provided the dissidents such as Edmund Ludlow, the republican and runaway commonwealth revolutionary, with comforting evidence that the cause was still God’s, and that ‘the Lord witnesseth against this sort of men [i.e. Royalists]’ by ‘his continued prodigies’.⁹ The events recorded in the pamphlets include many ‘remarkable Judgements befalling divers persons’, especially those ‘receding from [their] former Principles’, such as ‘One Mr. *White* Minister of *Ruffham* in *Suffolk*, a man of Parts and one that did pretend very much zeal for the Reformation of religion in the Presbyterian way, [but who] upon the late change did write in vindication of Episcopacy, &c’.¹⁰

Critics have often detected in *Paradise Lost* Milton’s political allusions in which he attacks the time-servers who have betrayed their former ideals after the Restoration. For example, in Book 11, Milton arguably alludes to the ‘wicked ways’ (line 812) of the courtiers of Charles II, and foretells God’s ‘wrath

⁶ Samuel Butler, *Hudibras*, ed. John Wilders (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 165.

⁷ *Eniantos Terastios, Mirabilis Annus, or the Year of Prodigies and Wonders* (London, 1661); *Mirabilis Annus Secundus; or, the Second Year of Prodigies* ([London], 1662); *Mirabilis Annus Secundus or the Second Part of the Second Year’s Prodigies* ([London], 1662).

⁸ Richard L. Greaves, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Radical Underground in Britain, 1660-1663* (Oxford: OUP, 1986), p. 213.

⁹ Edmund Ludlow, *A Voyage from the Watch Tower*, ed. A. B. Worden (London: Camden Society, 1978), pp. 292-294.

¹⁰ *Eniantos Terastios, Mirabilis Annus, or the Year of Prodigies and Wonders*, p. 62.

to come' (line 815), which stands for the second revolution.¹¹ In *Samson Agonistes*, the hero believes in 'God's proposed deliverance' (line 292), and, following Samson's prediction of this, Manoa, his father, says 'these words / I as a prophecy receive: for God, / Nothing more certain, will not long defer / To vindicate the glory of his name / Against all competition, nor will long / Endure it, doubtful whether God be Lord, / Or Dagon' (lines 473-478).¹² From this viewpoint, Milton would have agreed with the view of the radical prodigy pamphlets which appeared successively in 1661 and 1662.

In particular, the most threatening events recounted in these *Mirabilis Annus* tracts were those that suggested a revival of the recent Civil War. For instance, a report of drums and guns heard in the air in various parts of England was followed by the statement: 'It is generally known that these kinds of Noises were often heard in the Air in several parts of England, *not long before the unhappy breaking out of our Civil Wars*'. Not only strange and terrifying noises but also apparitions seen in the heavens are often interpreted as those of armies engaged in fighting against each other: for example,

Several credible persons, Inhabitants of *Horsham* in *Sussex*, coming towards *London* very early in the Morning, as they were riding throw *Smithans bottom* near *Croyden*, on a sudden saw a very great Light, and the Hill on their left hand appeared as it had been all on a Flame: in a little time that great light divided it self into two distinct lights, wherein seemed to them to be two distinct Armies engaging and pushing one against the other; they beheld them in this posture a very considerable space of time, till at last there fell an exceeding thick Fog which made it very dark, and the smell of the Fog was as the smell of Gunpowder.¹³

¹¹ See, for example, *Paradise Lost 1668-1968: Three Centuries of Commentary*, ed. Earl Miner et al. (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2004), p. 390. All quotations from Milton's *Paradise Lost* are taken from John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (1968; rpt. Harlow: Longman, 1986).

¹² All quotations from Milton's verse except *Paradise Lost* are taken from John Milton, *Complete Shorter Poems*, ed. John Carey (1968; rpt. Harlow: Longman, 1984).

¹³ *Eniantos Terastios, Mirabilis Annus, or the Year of Prodigies and Wonders*, pp. 16, 11.

And the author adds the 'Paralel', which '*in the ears of many*' who oppose this pamphlet will '*trumpet out nothing less than Sedition and Rebellion*':¹⁴

*We our selves also in England have of late times known this kind of apparition, and by too sad experience felt the meaning of it. It is fresh in the memory of many, that in Anno 1640[,] not long before our unhappy civil Wars, Armies were seen in the Heavens divers times and in divers places by many discreet persons of quality, which, sayes an Author, were looked upon as sad presages of the ensuing broils.*¹⁵

Interestingly enough, Milton in *Paradise Lost* seems to have responded to a controversial prodigy of this kind by describing the war in the sky in Book 2:

As when to warn proud cities war appears
Waged in the troubled sky, and armies rush
To battle in the clouds, before each van
Prick forth the airy knights, and couch their spears
Till thickest legions close; with feats of arms
From either end of heaven the welkin burns.

(Book 2, lines 533-538)

Here, as elsewhere, Satan and his rebel host may be assumed to be usurping and manipulating the rhetoric and ideology of political resistance and skillfully simulating the role of radical revolutionaries. Given that these 'feats of arms' are performed after their defeat in the war in heaven by Satan's followers in hell, Milton seems to reject the interpretation of the apparition of the war in the sky as God's prodigy, thus disputing the claim of the revolutionaries based on this sign. Rather, Milton's lines indicate that he would have agreed with John Spencer. In *A Discourse concerning Prodiges* (1663), Spencer cautioned the reader not to regard 'any strange effect' as a divine miracle because '*We understand not fully how far the power and dominion of the Prince of the powers of the Ayr extends, and how far he is able*

¹⁴ *Mirabilis Annus Secundus; or, the Second Year of Prodigies*, sig. [A4r].

¹⁵ *Eniantos Terastios, Mirabilis Annus, or the Year of Prodigies and Wonders*, p. 12.

to ape a Miracle by those wonderfull impressions, he can make upon natural bodies'. And in the corrected and enlarged second edition (1665), Spencer stated that 'Strange Sight in the Air, proved no Divine Signs'. Milton, whose devils found and mingled scientifically 'sulphurous and nitrous foam', 'with subtle art, / Concocted . . . adusted [and] reduced [them] / To blackest grain' (Book 6, lines 512-515), would likewise have agreed with Spencer's reasoning that 'the force and powers of a little black dust', i.e., gunpowder, showed that what was considered 'the great power of God' in one age '(two or three hundred years agoe)' could be common-place in another.¹⁶ Of course, the providential theory of prodigies dies hard. One may even argue that the fallen angels' battle in the sky in *Paradise Lost* represents the republican Milton's camouflaged insistence that the second Puritan Revolution should break out. But there were also those, like John Gadbury, who wished to, or would, reduce prodigies and signs to natural phenomena, and Sir Edward Coke's daughter would not have won Milton's ready consent when she sought to dissuade Roger Williams from admiring him: 'You should have taken notice off God's judgment upon him who stroke him with blindness.'¹⁷

Already by 1640, Hobbes could say that 'the signs are but *conjectural*': 'according as they have often or seldom failed, so their *assurance* is more or less; but *never full* and *evident* ... *experience concludeth nothing universally*'.¹⁸ And it is not difficult to suppose that through their use by all sides during the Civil War and the Interregnum, prodigies as political signs had exponentially fallen into disrepute. In Book 8 of *Paradise Lost*, even when Raphael said to Adam:

¹⁶ John Spencer, *A Discourse concerning Prodiges: Wherein the Vanity of Presages by Them Is Reprehended, and Their True and Proper Ends Asserted and Vindicated* (Cambridge, 1663), pp. 66-67. See also p. 9: 'as the knowledge of the natural causes of Earthquakes, Eclipses, Lightnings, Meteors, & c. obtained amongst the Gentiles of old, so all their ominous fears, their *libri fulgurales*, interpretations of prodigies, fell into contempt and disrepute'. Second Edition (London, 1665), p. 206. Cf. Meric Casaubon, *Credulity and Incredulity in Things Natural, Civil, and Divine* (London, 1668), p. 133, says that 'many things happen *supernaturally*, which are above the sphere and activity of the believed, and beloved *atomes*, and can be referred to no other cause, but the operations of *Dæmons*, or evil *spirits*'.

¹⁷ William Lamont, *Puritanism and the English Revolution*, Volume II, *Godly Rule: Politics and Religion, 1603-1660* (1969; rpt. Aldershot: Gregg Revivals, 1991), p. 122.

¹⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature*, IV. 10, quoted in Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference* (1975; rpt. Cambridge: CUP, 1978), p. 48.

To ask or search I blame thee not, for heaven
 Is as the book of God before thee set,
 Wherein to read his wondrous works, and learn
 His seasons, hours, or days, or months, or years

(lines 66-69),

he seems tacitly to forbid Adam to learn God's 'signs'. For Milton silently omits them, though otherwise virtually quoting Genesis 1:14, where the 'lights in the firmament' are 'for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and for years'. And it should be noted that only after the Fall did 'nature *first* [give] signs, impressed / On bird, beast, air' (Book 11, lines 182-183, my emphasis), and 'these mute signs in nature' (*ibid.*, line 194) began to cause Adam and Eve anxiety: 'how long, and what till then our life, / Who knows' (*ibid.*, lines 198-199). In other words, there was no need for signs in the prelapsarian Eden because they could talk directly with God. Christ himself declared repeatedly that 'An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign' (Matthew 12:39; 16:4; Mark 8:12; Luke 11:29). And in Book 12 of *Paradise Lost*, it is Pharaoh, 'the lawless tyrant' (line 173), that 'Must be compelled by signs and judgments dire' (line 175).

The way in which Milton treats the prodigy of the war in the sky indicates not only his uneasiness about signs of God's will, which the spiritual determinism of the wild-eyed Puritan enthusiasts had been interpreting in their favour, but also his negative view on war. Milton's early conviction was that the champions of truth will always ultimately be rewarded. In his commonplace book, he wrote that 'Victory is based, not on strength or military experience, but on whether he who begins the war has God on his side'.¹⁹ Correspondingly, in *Paradise Lost*, the angel Abdiel says 'nor is it aught but just, / That he who in debate of truth hath won, / Should win in arms, in both disputes alike / Victor' (Book 6, lines 121-124). However, commenting on lines 246-248 of the same book — 'Satan, who that day / Prodigious power had shown, and met in arms / No equals' — Fowler points out that 'Abdiel's advantage was only a temporary one. Of course it is *just* "That he who in

¹⁹ John Milton, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1953-82), i. 498. See also iii. 194.

debate of truth hath won, / Should win in arms" also (vi 122f). Often, however, as M[ilton] knew as well as anyone, it does not happen that way.²⁰ Similarly, Boyd M. Berry observes that 'we may thirst for brilliant personal victories, clear-cut and decisive, but that is not the sort of life the creatures lead in *Paradise Lost*.²¹ In this regard, *Paradise Lost* belongs to the category of what Francis Bacon called 'true history', which 'propoundeth the successes and issues of actions not so agreeable to the merits of virtue and vice' as opposed to 'Feigned History', or 'poesy', which 'feigns them more just in retribution, and more according to revealed providence'.²² Perhaps the lowest point of Milton's faith in victory as God's favour, and as the basis of de facto power, is marked by the passage in *Defensio Secunda*: 'A cause is neither proved good by success, nor shown to be evil'.²³

It should be emphasized that the war in the sky in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost* is engaged *after* the war in heaven, which has not been concluded by Christ's victory, but merely by excluding Satan and his legions from heaven. In fact, the latter chooses to fall: 'headlong themselves they threw / Down from the verge of heaven' (Book 6, lines 864-865). And 'in perpetual fight', as God has predicted, both the good and the bad 'needs must last / Endless, and no solution will be found' (lines 693-694). The war in heaven breeds another war on earth. Satan and his compatriots now become invisible terrorists, and consequently, followed by the Fall of Adam and Eve, 'Discord first / Daughter of Sin, among the irrational, / Death introduced through fierce antipathy: / Beast now with beast gan war, and fowl with fowl, / And fish with fish' (Book 10, lines 707-711). Incidentally, at the end of his film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), Michael Moore reads a quotation from George Orwell's *1984* regarding waging war: 'when [the war] is [real], victory is not possible. The war is not meant to be won, but it is meant to be continuous'. Milton seems to have had a similar view when he said to the Lord General Fairfax 'what can war, but endless war still breed' ('On the Lord General Fairfax at the siege of Colchester', line 10). Ideally, justice will prevail, but practically the value of real, violent war must

²⁰ *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, p. 322.

²¹ Boyd M. Berry, 'Puritan Soldiers in *Paradise Lost*', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 35 (1974), p. 393.

²² Francis Bacon, *The Philosophical Works*, ed. John M. Robertson (London: Routledge, 1905), p. 88.

²³ *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, iv. Part 1, 652.

be questioned.²⁴

According to John Aubrey, Milton began work on *Paradise Lost* in 1658 and finished it by 1663.²⁵ Milton was engaged in foreign affairs as Latin secretary to Cromwell during the Commonwealth, but by the time of his composing *Paradise Lost*, as many critics such as David Armitage have claimed, 'he had already thrown in his lot with the republican opposition to Cromwell' and he was 'critical of the kind of policies pursued by the Protectorate in the later 1650s'.²⁶ Milton in fact showed considerable unease about the Dutch war.²⁷ And Cromwell involved England in what was actually a century-long struggle between two great powers, France and Spain, and his decision to make the alliance with France was extremely controversial. Furthermore, personal experiences of wars must have helped many of Milton's

²⁴ Cf. In *Observations upon the Articles of Peace* (1649), Milton remarks that to extirpate 'Popery and Prelacy, ... Heresy, Schism, and prophaness, and whatever shall be found contrary to sound Doctrin and the power of godliness' 'can be no work of the Civil sword, but of the spiritual which is the Word of God' (*Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, iii. 324). Discussing 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' (1629), Esther Gilman Richey, in *The Politics of Revelation in the English Renaissance* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998), argues that while James and Charles spread the myth of the 'golden age restored' by highlighting peace as an accomplished fact, Milton's angels are 'Bright-harnessed' (line 244), 'suggesting the militant, often contestatory nature of the messages they carry' (p. 139). In *Of Education* (1644), too, Milton's curriculum includes 'military motions' (*Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ii. 411). And critics seem to have agreed that in the early 1640s Milton was 'imbued with the fervor of what he considered to be a just war undertaken in a righteous cause'. See, for example, James Loxley, 'The civil wars', in *Milton in Context*, ed. Stephen B. Dobransky (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), p. 261.

²⁵ John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. Richard Barber (Woodbridge: First Person Singular, 2004), p. 204: 'He began about two years before the king came in, and finished about three years after the king's restoration.'

²⁶ David Armitage, 'John Milton: Poet against Empire', in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed. David Armitage, Armand Himy and Quentin Skinner (1995; Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p. 215. See also Catherine Gimelli Martin, 'Rewriting the Revolution: Milton, Bacon, and the Royal Society Rhetoricians', in *Science, Literature and Rhetoric in Early Modern England*, ed. Juliet Cummins and David Burchell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 114: 'After delivering a fulsome but highly qualified tribute to Cromwell in his sonnet "To the Lord General Cromwell" and his *Defensio Secunda* in 1652 and 1654 respectively, Milton never again mentions his name. He offered no tribute to the Protector's later military and naval exploits nor any lament for his death. Only four months after Richard Cromwell's protectorate fell, his *Readie and Easie Way* refers to the reign as a dark "night of interruption."

²⁷ See David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627-1660* (1999; rpt. Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 296-297.

readers to conjure up the 'mutual slaughter' (Book 6, line 506) of, as A. W. Verity noted, the Civil War.²⁸ Satan, in his revolt in heaven, is not merely the inventor of gunpowder and cannon, but, causing 'war in heaven / Among the angelic powers' (Book 6, lines 897-898), the inventor of intestine war. As James A. Freeman has noted, 'contrary to almost every code promulgated by theorists as diverse as Augustine, Aquinas, Suarez, Belli, Gentili, Ayala, and Grotius, Satan does not secure his king's permission to fight (civil war is commonly said to be the most reprehensible)'.²⁹ And in *Eikonoklastes*, Milton compares the Civil War to the Israelites' wandering in the desert: 'a second wandering over that horrid Wilderness of distraction and civil slaughter'.³⁰

It is difficult to know the exact date at which Milton described the war in the sky in Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, but it is highly probable that he responded to the controversial prodigy around the year 1660. Writing *Paradise Lost*, perhaps Milton can no longer see Samson in the Old Testament as a hero: in *Samson Agonistes*, he claims that 'force with force / Is well ejected when the conquered can' (lines 1206-1207), and because of this confrontational relationship, he can be called by his opponents such as Harapha 'Baal-Zebub' (line 1231). In *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes the first speaker in the Parliament of hell, the fierce and blunt Moloch, as motivated especially by a desire for revenge after infamous defeat in the celestial civil war, and his aggressive warrior ethic recalls Satan's drive for revenge as well as the outmoded heroic ideology of classical epic which sanctioned revenge. Superimposing the image of his contemporary revolutionaries over that of Satan and other fallen angels, Milton, 'Not sedulous by nature to indite / Wars' (Book 9, 27-28), seems to question the value of wars just as the archangel Michael in Book 11 describes the human nature in the postlapsarian world:

²⁸ *Milton: Paradise Lost*, ed. A. W. Verity, 2 vols. (Cambridge: CUP, 1929), p. 520: 'Probably M. is thinking of the Civil War. Descriptions of civil strife and its incidents must have appealed with the force of personal experience to many of his readers.'

²⁹ James A. Freeman, *Milton and the Martial Muse: Paradise Lost and European Traditions of War* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), p. 155.

³⁰ *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, iii. 580.

... in those days might only shall be admired,
And valour and heroic virtue called;
To overcome in battle, and subdue
Nations, and bring home spoils with infinite
Manslaughter, shall be held the highest pitch
Of human glory, and for glory done
Of triumph, to be styled great conquerors,
Patrons of mankind, gods, and sons of gods,
Destroyers rightlier called and plagues of men.

(lines 689-697)

And, superimposing the image of contemporary revolutionaries over that of Satan and his followers, Milton seems to be anticipating Christ in *Paradise Regained*. In Book 4, using 'So many terrors, voices, prodigies', Satan tempts Christ to assume power under his auspices. The Son of God, however, masters the Adversary's agitation: 'though noising loud / And threat'ning night; what they can do as signs / Betokening, or ill-boding, I contemn / As false portents, not sent from God, but thee' (Book 4, lines 488-401). After the Restoration, the godly republican writer of the English Revolution may never have renounced his daring political convictions and ideals,³¹ but, through his placing a high value on 'the better fortitude / Of patience and heroic martyrdom' (Book 9, lines 31-32) and 'A paradise within' (Book 12, line 587), the means to achieve it seems to be much more interiorized.

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³¹ David Loewenstein, in 'The Radical Religious Politics of *Paradise Lost*' in *A Companion to Milton*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 348-362, for example, argues that, as is supported by the second edition of *The Readie and Easie Way* (1660), his famous anti-Restoration political tract, in *Paradise Lost* Milton's radical nonconformist voice remains unchanged after the Restoration.