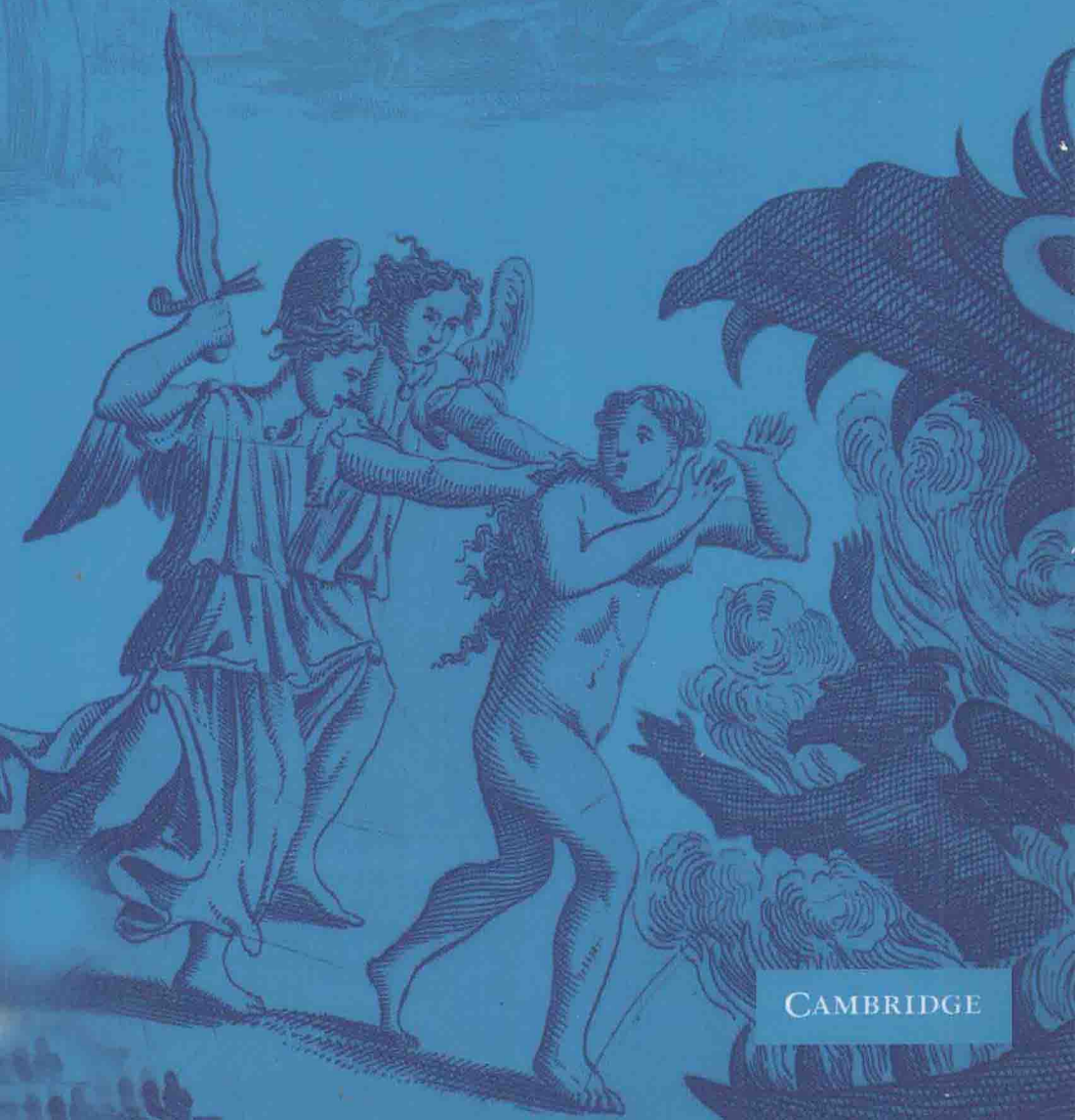
SHARON ACHINSTEIN

Literature and Dissent in Milton's England



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LITERATURE AND DISSENT IN MILTON'S ENGLAND

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To David

The shadow of history
is the ground of faith

A question of overthrowing

Formulae of striking force
Vision and such possession

How could Love not be loved

Susan Howe, *The Nonconformist's Memorial* (1993)

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"Milton's Spectre in the Restoration: Marvell, Dryden, and Literary Enthusiasm," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58,2 (1997), 1–30.

"*Samson Agonistes* and the Drama of Dissent," *Milton Studies* 33 (1996), 133–58.

"Honey from the Lion's Carcass: Bunyan, Allegory and the Samsonian Moment," in David Gay, James R. Randall, and Arlette Zinck, eds., *Awakening Words: John Bunyan and the Language of Community* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000), 68–80.

"Romance of the Spirit: Female Sexuality and Religious Desire in Early Modern England," *English Literary History* 69 (2002), 913–38.

Abbreviations

All place of publication London unless noted. Citations to Milton's poetry (Hughes, *John Milton*) are to Merritt Hughes, ed., *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose* (Indianapolis, 1957), unless otherwise noted.

BL	British Library
Bodl.	Bodleian Library, Oxford
Bunyan, *MW*	*The Miscellaneous Works of John Bunyan*, gen. ed. Roger Sharrock, 13 vols. in progress (Oxford, 1976–)
Columbia Milton	*The Works of John Milton*, gen. ed. Frank Allen Patterson, 18 vols. in 21 (New York, 1931–38)
CPW	*The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe et al., 8 vols. in 10 (New Haven, 1953–82)
CR	A. G. Matthews, *Calamy Revised: Being a Revision of Edmund Calamy's Account of the Ministers and Others Ejected and Silenced, 1660–2* (Oxford, 1934)
CSPD	*Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series*
DNB	*Dictionary of National Biography*
Dryden, *Works*	*The Works of John Dryden*, gen. eds. Edward Niles Hooker and H. T. Swedenberg, Jr., 20 vols. in progress (Los Angeles, 1956–)
DWL	Dr. Williams' Library, London
Folger	Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC
Greaves, *Deliver*	Richard L. Greaves, *Deliver Us From Evil: The Radical Underground in Britain, 1660–1663* (New York, 1986)
Greaves, *Enemies*	Richard L. Greaves *Enemies Under his Feet: Radicals and Nonconformists in Britain, 1664–1677* (Stanford, 1990)

Henry, *Diary*	Philip Henry, *Diary and Letters of Philip Henry*, ed. Matthew Henry Lee (1882)
Hill, *Bible*	Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (1993)
Hill, *Defeat*	Christopher Hill, *The Experience of Defeat: Milton and Some Contemporaries* (1984)
Keeble, *LC*	N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth-Century England* (Athens, GA, 1987)
Milton, *PL*	John Milton, *Paradise Lost*
Milton, *PR*	John Milton, *Paradise Regain'd*
Milton, *SA*	John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*
Rivers, *RGS*	Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660–1780* (Cambridge, 1991)
Watts, *Dissenters*	Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1999)

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CHAPTER 1

Reading Dissent

Consider the career of Edmund Calamy. A leader of the Presbyterian ministry during the English Revolution, co-author of the anti-episcopal tract, *Smectymnuus*, parliamentary preacher, licenser of the Cromwellian press and called by Anthony à Wood, "a great evangelist of the new way, [who] encouraged the people to rebellion," he had been indicted by Charles I for high treason in 1642.[1] A reluctant Cromwellian, Calamy vigorously opposed Pride's Purge and the trial of the king, and he offered his services to the martyr king on the day of his execution. In the 1650s, still licenser of the press, and now President of Sion College, Calamy urged Oliver Cromwell not to accept the crown. After the death of the Protector, he threw his lot in with his son Richard, but with the suspension of Parliament in 1659, turned to George Monck, whose actions helped to bring about the Stuart Restoration, and whose chaplain Calamy became in 1660. Present at negotiations to bring back the king in a delegation to Charles in Holland in May of that year, Calamy was appointed one of the returning king's chaplains-in-ordinary at the Restoration.

By August 1662, however, Calamy was preaching his farewell sermon at St. Mary Aldermanbury, the congregation he had served since 1639, and by January 1663 he was in prison. Calamy was the first nonconformist to be subject to the penalty of the Act of Uniformity, committed to Newgate under the Lord Mayor's warrant on 6 January 1663 for having preached illegally on 29 December. To many he was a saint testing the government's strength of commitment to Uniformity and the king's resolve; to Clarendon he was seditious. Outside Newgate prison, the street was blocked by the coaches of his visitors, and he was apparently visited by one of the king's mistresses. A cause célèbre for tolerationists, as Richard Baxter reported, "many daily flocking to visit him," Calamy attracted contemporary public comment in the press, with the proceedings of the trial recounted in a pamphlet.[2] There was a printed rebuttal by an Anglican minister who accused Calamy and others of conspiring to "inflame and engage the people

unto rebellion."[3] Much comment and poetry appeared as a result of the affair.[4] Calamy's preaching was taken as part of a broad conspiracy of nonconformists to topple the government.[5] An anonymous satire was published under the name *Hudibras*, the title of Samuel Butler's enormously successful mock-heroic poem caricaturing Presbyterians and sectaries. The would-be *Hudibras* complained that "'Tis He who taught the *Pulpit* and the *Press* To mask *Rebellion* in a *Gospel-dress*."[6] A competing poem praising Calamy was written by the Presbyterian Robert Wild, perhaps the most widely read topical Dissenting poet, his works repeatedly attracting satirical response and also surviving in commonplace books of verse miscellanies of the period.[7] Wryly noting that the figure of the unjustly incarcerated was now a cliché, still Wild had sympathy for the victim:

> *Newgate* or *Hell* were *Heav'n*, if Christ were there,
> He made the Stable so, and Sepulcher.
> Indeed the place did for your presence call;
> Prisons do want perfuming most of all.
> Thanks to the Bishop, and his good Lord Mayor,
> Who turn'd the Den of Thieves into a House of Prayer:
> And may some Thief by you converted be,
> Like him who suffer'd in Christs company.[8]

On Calamy's behalf, Baxter interceded with the king to obtain a release, which was granted on 13 January 1663 on the grounds that Calamy had preached "with the privity of several lords of the Council, and not in contempt of law."[9] The news journal *Mercurius Publicus* was outraged "to see so high an affront" to king and Parliament offered such clemency. The Commons on 19 February referred it to a committee to inquire further, and addressed the king against toleration.[10] The new Surveyor of the Press, Sir Roger L'Estrange, castigated Calamy's sermon as highly objectionable.[11] In October 1663, however, there was a neighborhood movement to reinstate Calamy to the pulpit at Aldermanbury, "the good people thire very much desiring him."[12] Calamy never regained an official ministerial post, though he preached every Sunday evening from his house. He was buried in the fire ruins of his beloved St. Mary Aldermanbury in 1666.

Whether he was considered a dangerous rebel or a sober Protestant martyr, the Restoration Dissenter was caught between two opposing representations. Yet Calamy's case shows the complexity of reducing religious positions to political factions. Royalist yet willing to test his king, Calamy remained true to his convictions regarding church ceremony in times when differing political leaders made varying political demands; he was willing

to go to gaol for his beliefs. Writers took up Calamy's case as a means to discuss the nature and scope of community; through him they represented powerful conflicts within the polity over how to accept religious difference. A symbol of political energies which were dangerous to unity, Calamy embodied a threat to the social order. An emblem of the steadfast nature of the godly, Calamy was a martyr in the dissident press; as one commentator remarked on his case, "But precious in the sight of the Lord, is the Blood of his holy ones."[13] Blood was, after all, recently washed from the battlefields of the English civil war. Although there was no actual blood in Calamy's imprisonment, the stakes seemed just as high.

This is a book about Milton's England, that is, about the cultural, religious, and political currents in England that gave rise to Milton's great, lasting works of poetry, *Paradise Lost*, *Samson Agonistes*, and *Paradise Regain'd*, all published in the Restoration when Milton was a political outcast. I use the title *Milton's* England rather than *Restoration* England or *Dryden's* England, in order to challenge how we perceive this period in literary history, and to bring Dissent (with its English Revolutionary past) to the fore. The book shows how Milton's England was also Calamy's England; how through works of literature, the defeated and excluded produced a vibrant culture, made sense of their experience of loss, and how their literature was embedded in significant social action. For many Dissenters, Calamy and Milton included, the prime challenge was to maintain commitment to God despite persecution. In Dissenting literature, these outcasts constructed shared memories, a powerful force in the service of this task of faith. We will see Dissenting ministers' funerals as sites for the performances of survival of an endangered community; hymns as a means of sharing in social practice; and poetry as a means to reconcile self and world.

This book has two central aims. First, it observes how, as a community and a political concept, dissent was created through cultural forms arising from an experience of social exclusion. Beyond "The Age of Dryden," it will be shown, the period 1660–1700 encompassed a range of writing that has been largely, and unjustly, neglected. Dissenters' literary and cultural legacies helped to assure the vitality and coherence of their invented tradition.[14] Milton, it will be shown, was no mere holdover from the Renaissance. Rather, his preoccupations were absolutely in tune with his contemporary Dissenting writers. Their distinctive, Dissenting cultural contribution challenges the current periodization's conceptions of literary history, aesthetic value, and the relation between literature and politics. The literary historian Neil Keeble has investigated how "literary creativity, composition and reading were vital not merely to the survival of nonconformity

but to its very nature."[15] For Dissenters, writing was a critical means to withstand the pressures of oppression, to communicate across time and space, especially since public, communicative roles – speaking, assembling, officiating, ministering, teaching – had been denied them. Whether they whispered private lyrics to God, their souls pierced with the tones of the lamentations of Jeremiah; imitated the great divine lyricist George Herbert; staved off despair; composed hymns to be sung aloud by a chorus of their fellow-sufferers; presented theological truths; challenged the contemporary libertine modes; or created a political legacy through eulogy and epic, reading and writing were central activities in defining, and defending, Dissent. The construction of a literary legacy of Dissent, moreover, compels us to observe the political stakes in the writing of literary history, as we perceive how the binary opposition – the uncivil radical against the polite man of letters – serves a persecuting interest. The stakes of these partisan, binary views are worth investigating, since they underpin the broader story of which this study is a part: the process of how more people became participants in political culture, whether through overt means such as toleration or through implicit means such as literacy, media access, and the wider social bases for cultural activity as well as political and religious decisions.

Second, the book observes the changing nature of religious radicalism on the eve of the Enlightenment, specifically with respect to religiously motivated violence. I ask how Dissenting Christian and biblical vocations to violence might intersect with religious conceptions of human voluntarism and divine impulsion. I seek answers in the dominant discourse through which early modern people thought through this matter: theology. Across the early modern period, theological explanations of divine and human action were undergoing change and revision, and there would be consequences for conceptions of rationality, the relations between church and state, and toleration. Recent scholarship has often emphasized ecclesiology at the expense of real theological difference. In the period 1660–1700, both from within the Dissenting tradition, as well as outside it, however, disputes over the doctrine and practice of religion were concerned slowly, and sporadically, with the disentanglement of saving souls from the business of politics – an accomplishment that permitted domestic concord and limited toleration (Catholics and Jews were ever excluded) at home and an end to confessional conflict abroad. Since Dissenting literature from the later seventeenth century leaves many testaments of violence – vindications against injustice; revenge for persecutors; liberation or punishment of the godly through divine destruction – it is a good place to observe the complicated ways this change took place. Milton's drama *Samson Agonistes*

poses the question of divinely inspired violence. How did other Dissenters understand such impulses? How did they understand the annunciation to violence in relation to their political radicalism? Were their violent imaginings strictly imaginary? Or were they blueprints for continued radical action? These tensions between literal violence and figural violence, between active and passive disobedience, involved questions of how the self could act autonomously, how it could mediate God's presence, and how God's will could be read. The book tells a story of change over time, changes in deep structures of thinking about the relation between action and expression, knowledge and performance. If a central story about modernity is the withdrawal of God-centered arguments from politics, the subjects under investigation here supply a complex instance through which to explore the psychic, cultural, and social stakes of that transformation.

The arc of the book is roughly chronological. I begin with that emblematic moment for the invention of a Dissenting tradition, the exclusion of nonconforming ministers from their pulpits; visit them in prison and hear their mournful lyrics; try to understand the complicated ways their social experience of denial led to a revaluation of action, performance, and violence; investigate some major Dissenting authors; understand their literary values as challenging the dominant modes; and close with the progress of Dissent into the eighteenth century. I hope to introduce some unjustly neglected authors, such as Mary Mollineux and Elizabeth Rowe, and to shed light on some familiar ones, Richard Baxter, John Bunyan, and John Milton, whose precise relation to Dissenting culture demands further attention.

Since the Act of Toleration of 1689 has rightly been taken as a celebrated landmark in the history of human rights, early modern England is a good place to think about the social experiences of religious minorities. My ongoing interest in dissident cultures and the ethics and politics of toleration has led me to investigate writing under the name of Dissent. I have long wondered about the necessary ground for a liberal state, and was led to the Dissenters out of sympathy for their plight as an excluded minority. Though they suffered for their beliefs, however, Dissenters were not good at supplying the theological ground for an ethics of toleration. Their otherworldliness; their commitment to a "true religion"; their notions of political agency: all these elements of belief made many of them particularly incapable of extending tolerance to others quite unlike themselves, whether to other Protestants, Jews, Catholics, New World natives, "Turks," or African slaves. Further, their commitment to doctrines of the Holy Spirit approved religiously motivated violence. My interest in this past moment arises from hindsight, sparked by an ethical attachment, and

has been driven by my observing intolerance and religious fundamentalism restored around the globe today. I began this book well before the dramatic events of September 2001, and yet its completion I hope might shed some light on a quite different cultural moment where religious violence was both feared and welcomed.

In the United States, the country of my birth, I have long worried over the degree to which religious arguments undergird political life, seeking to understand the origins of the possible violent subtext of some theocratic world views in England's Puritan past. On the one hand, I see the noble tradition of conscientious religious activism in the United States, its importance in struggles to confirm the rights of oppressed minorities when civil laws were unjust; on the other hand, I have also worried about the violent antinomian or "enthusiastic" elements of an outlook that prizes the hereafter rather than the worldly here and now, its tendency towards intolerance in the name of Truth. Seventeenth-century Dissenters make a powerful case for the workings of the spirit in the world and speak most sympathetically for a higher justice. Just so, the Enlightenment confrontation with Enthusiasm is an important legacy to recover in order to understand the dangers and benefits of the intertwining of religious authority with political action.

POLITICAL MEANINGS

Restoration Dissent came into existence by an act of state, though not with the return of the monarchy. Many nonconformists, like Edmund Calamy, were heart-felt royalists, and it is a mistake simply to equate anti-royalism with Dissent. Although Charles' installation as monarch after the English Revolution had brought hopes for wider latitude for religious practices, these were undermined by the Anglican royalist Parliaments, which pursued instead a policy of religious persecution in order to secure their goal of uniformity of religious belief and worship. Beginning in 1662, with the Act of Uniformity Parliament legislated a strict penal code, and followed this with other legislation of increasing severity over the next decade. The Book of Common Prayer, in abeyance during the Cromwellian era, was reinstated, and repressive laws passed in the 1660s and 1670s defined those who provided or attended services outside established churches as nonconformists and therefore criminals.

Persecution of Dissent, moreover, was discontinuous across the period. There were several bursts of punitive activity: at the beginning of Charles' reign; following the passage of the Second Conventicle Act in 1670; during