

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



David V. Urban, *Milton and the Parables of Jesus: Self-Representation and the Bible in John Milton's Writings* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018). xii+316 pp. ISBN 9780271080994.

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David V. Urban's lucid and well-researched monograph, *Milton and the Parables of Jesus*, examines the profound interplay between John Milton's writing and his engagement with the parables of the New Testament. Building upon the prominent works of Stephen Fallon on Milton's poetic self-representation in *Milton's Peculiar Grace* and Dayton Haskin's analysis of Milton's parabolic interpretation in *Milton's Burden of Interpretation*,¹ Urban ventures further to delve into the deep connections between Milton's personal and poetic preoccupations across his early and late writings and four of Jesus's parables from the Gospel of Matthew. The book comprises an introduction and three distinct parts, each organized chronologically and by parable. Part 1 of the book explores Milton's engagement with the parable of the talents (Matt. 25.14-30) across his poetry and prose. It sheds light on 'Milton's problematic lifelong identification with the unprofitable servant of the parable of the talents,' and calls attention to 'his regular practice of trying to mitigate this identification by laying claim to the grace offered to the last-called laborers in the parable of the laborers (Matt. 20.1-16)' (p. 25). Part 2 probes into Milton's equally pervasive relationship to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins (Matt. 25:1-13) and Part 3 examines Milton's identification with the parable of the householder (Matt. 13:52). It is worth noting that the volume is structured in such a way that each section includes Milton's three late major poems — *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*.

The efficient introduction to the volume provides important historical and conceptual clarification on the parable genre and seventeenth-century interpretative practice, which Milton partly incorporated. As with numerous Reformed and Puritan commentators, including John Calvin, Matthew Poole, Thomas Shepard, and Andrew Bromhall, among others, Milton employed the figures of Jesus's parables 'to reflect larger classes of persons' (p. 16). This interpretative framework identifies what present-day biblical

¹ Stephen Fallon, *Milton's Peculiar Grace: Self-Representation and Authority* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); Dayton Haskin, *Milton's Burden of Interpretation* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994).

scholars call ‘the restrained allegorical approach to parable interpretation’ (p. 2), as opposed to a ‘single-main-point’ approach (p. 9), the anti-allegorical reading of Jesus’s message in its original form. At the same time, Milton went beyond such post-Reformation standard practices, incorporating the larger ideals and meanings he found in the parables as an opportunity to inspire his imaginative efforts throughout his poetry and prose. As Urban cautions in the introduction, he mainly focuses on Milton’s self-referential use and repurposing of the parables in order to fashion his artistic personality and experience. The result is a rich and provocative survey of Milton’s identification with certain parabolic figures, whether explicitly or implicitly, in his early, middle, and late works. This also elucidates why Urban’s informative overview of the history of parable interpretation does not outline standard early modern expositions of the parables in the introduction as well as in the chapters. Nor does the introduction address the fact that the four chosen parables are all drawn from Matthew. This is probably because Urban’s methodology is less focused on providing a reception history of the source texts; rather, it aims to illustrate Milton’s intertextual appropriation of the parables as a hermeneutic key to reconfigure both his self-representation and his art.

The book’s ten chapters are sensibly organized into three parts, each relating to a single or a pair of parables in connection with Milton’s works through direct textual reference, allusions, or more nuanced manifestations of parabolic figures. The initial three chapters in Part 1 open Urban’s extended examination of Milton’s relationship to Jesus’s parabolic characters by addressing the poet’s enduring connections with the parable of the talents and the parable of the laborers. Chapter 1 examines how Milton explicitly represents himself as a faithful last-called laborer in his youthful Sonnet 7 (‘How sooth hath time’) and its companion letter ‘To a Friend’ (1632) to mitigate his scruples of conscience for being judged as the unprofitable servant of God. The influence of the parable of the talents is also evident in his Latin verse epistle, *Ad Patrem* (1634?), and in the preface to Book 2 of *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642). In the latter, however, Milton’s self-identification with the parable of the talents is devoid of any softening effects of the parable of the laborers. Sonnet 19 marks a maturing in Milton’s relationship to the parable of the laborers. Whereas, in his early writings, it served to mitigate the tension between external and personal expectations, in Sonnet 19 the parable offers a divine perspective on Milton’s career as a vehicle of grace to relief from past failures and present despair and blindness. The parables’ concerns with productiveness, punishment, and timely contribution in relation to Miltonic tension are applied to *Samson Agonistes* in Chapter 2. Echoing the diction of Matt. 20:3, 6, Samson disdains ‘to sit idle’ (l. 566) since this kind of resting aligns him with the unprofitable servant. By resisting temptation, Samson develops a proper understanding of rest and sitting still before God. Urban proposes a regenerative reading of Samson’s progress by reintroducing the despair and the hopeful attitude of patient waiting in Sonnet 19: ‘patience enables him to hear the final divine command to act, to complete the call he has been given’ and with the patience needed to fulfil the parable of the laborers Samson concurrently fulfils ‘the parable of the talents with his final act of strength’ (p. 72). In Chapter 3, Urban explores how more idealized representations of Milton’s relationship with the parable of the talents and the parable of

the laborers are epitomized in the loyal angel Abdiel with his rebukes of Satan in books 5 and 6 of *Paradise Lost* and the Son's patient heroism in *Paradise Regained*. The active waiting of the Son depicts the perfect service before God, which ideally melds the good and faithful servant in the parable of the talents and the patient last-called worker in the parable of the laborers.

The parable of the wise and foolish virgins takes up the central and strongest section of the book, which explores Milton's ongoing connection with the ideal of the wise virgin in Sonnet 9 ('Lady that in the prime of earliest youth'), *A Mask*, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. The four solid chapters of Part 2 consider the ideals of 'sexual purity' and 'true wisdom,' in contrast to 'sexual immorality' and 'foolishness' (p. 110), as an integral aspect of the maturity which enables Milton's characters to resist temptation and actively pursue their ultimate calling. Chapter 4 engages in a lively and in-depth analysis of the 'Lady' of Sonnet 9 as both Milton's first wife, Mary Powell, and the poet himself, whose sobriquet at Cambridge — 'The Lady of Christ's College' — originated from his fair appearance and, most importantly, his decision not to indulge in sexual pursuits (pp. 91-92). The chapter extends the Lady's preservation of chastity and virtue in Sonnet 9, reflecting the autobiographical Milton and, in turn, the wise virgins of the parable, to the Lady of *A Mask*, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, and *Paradise Lost*. Chapter 5 focuses on the Lady of *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle*, which Urban interprets as 'the ideal of the unmarried wise virgin who looks forward to chaste marriage (both allegorically with Christ and literally with an appropriate future husband)' (p. 110). Like the virgins of the parable, she awaits the divine bridegroom with whom she, representing both the faithful individual Christian and the faithful church, will unite in eternal matrimony. But in her journey, she encounters the mischievous tempter Comus, who challenges her virtue by appealing to her natural and sexual nature. The Lady's dedication to virginity is weak without outside deliverance, which in the masque is represented by the intervention of Sabrina, embodying God's grace in Christ. The parable of the wise and foolish virgins is not explicitly mentioned in *Paradise Lost*. Still, Chapter 6 demonstrates that the principle of being committed to chastity of mind and body is an ideal applicable not only to the single unmarried person — as in *A Mask* — but also to married couples, like the unfallen Adam and Eve. In this chapter, Urban offers a more complex depiction of the ideal of the wise virgin within the bond of chaste marriage and, in doing so, he indicates that the term 'virgin' is a belief in wisdom and chastity that is not limited by gender or sexual experience. In *Paradise Lost*, wise virginity is lost twice: first, when Satan entertains Eve with self-idolatrous knowledge in a dream, whose danger Adam is unable to recognize; secondly, the couple's unwise separation leads to Satan's seduction. Wisdom and virginity can only be recovered through 'the sacrificial act of the ultimate Wise Virgin, Jesus Christ' (p. 170), while a partial recovery is hinted at with the final image of Adam and Eve hand in hand. Chapter 7 is relatively concise in examining the theme of wise virginity in the two characters of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. The Son is 'the apex of wise virginity' (p. 174) when, for instance, he turns down Satan's 'implicit homosexual and heterosexual temptations represented by the banquet's servers' (p. 175), described in Book 2 of *Paradise Regained*. Samson, in

contrast to the ideal wise virgin of the Son, seeks to attain wisdom by rejecting the sexual foolishness that has enslaved him. Samson's progression toward the wisdom of sexual purity is displayed in his interaction with 'Dalila's false rhetoric of love' (p. 182) and the sensuality in which she tries to entrap him.

The final and shortest section turns to Milton's self-identification 'with the spiritually enlightened and scripturally astute scribe/householder of the parable of the householder' to reaffirm his status of moral purity, 'a status no doubt challenged by his marital failures and his unorthodox insistence upon the biblical rightness of divorce for reasons of incompatibility' (p. 188). Of particular interest is how Urban connects Parts 2 and 3. Milton's self-representation of the ideal of the wise virgin as a revelation of his moral purity in Part 2 paves the way to his identification with the prophetic gift of spiritual inspiration identified by the parable of the householder in Part 3. In Chapter 8, Urban examines the prominent use of the parable of the householder in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* — whose verse is on the title page of the 1644 tract — and in *De Doctrina Christiana* to transcend the corruption of both church traditions and external scriptures, and to recapture the pure, original meaning of the scriptures themselves, bringing out "'new" treasures' out of the 'old' (p. 200). Milton implicitly continues his identification with the parable in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, as Urban argues in Chapter 9. The 'autobiographical' Miltonic epic narrator of *Paradise Lost* deploys the idea of the parabolic householder 'who brings forth treasures new and old' (p. 202) to place the poet in the position of a divinely called biblical exegete standing on the side of the true meaning of the scripture. As with *Paradise Lost*, the characteristics of the parabolic householder are manifested in Milton's narrator in *Paradise Regained* and in his self-referential characters, the Son and Mary, 'whose chastity and purity are most above reproach' (p. 190). Urban interestingly reads Mary as a mediator of God's word, whose example influences 'the Son's reception of and interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures' (p. 213). Finally, Chapter 10 analyzes how Milton's self-referential protagonist in *Samson Agonistes* reflects the role of the parabolic householder in his recommitment to Mosaic law and his resultant ability to patiently listen and, therefore, discern the motions of the Spirit. Significantly, Samson's rejection of Dalila's sensual temptation and his commitment to moral purity as a repentant wise virgin, demonstrated in Chapter 7, lay the foundation for his re-engagement with the written law and his consequent spiritual discernment, inspired by the parabolic householder. In this sense, Urban interestingly reads Samson's tragedy as a striking example of the connection between the parable of the wise virgin and the parable of the householder.

Particularly impressive is Urban's engagement with Milton studies through a generous and thought-provoking apparatus of 61-page endnotes that frames his thesis within the context of current scholarship. With his insightful close readings and his rich response to Milton criticism, Urban offers an engaging and coherent argument for assuming Jesus's parables as a hermeneutic key to understand Milton's personal and poetic vision, which will be a useful addition to Milton studies and to those interested in the relation between Christianity and English literature.

