

5-2014

## Fleshly Tabernacles: Milton and the Incarnational Poetics of Revolutionary England, by Bryan Hampton Adams

Samuel Smith

Messiah College, ssmith@messiah.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://mosaic.messiah.edu/english\\_ed](https://mosaic.messiah.edu/english_ed)Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)Permanent URL: [https://mosaic.messiah.edu/english\\_ed/1](https://mosaic.messiah.edu/english_ed/1)

### Recommended Citation

Smith, Samuel, "Fleshly Tabernacles: Milton and the Incarnational Poetics of Revolutionary England, by Bryan Hampton Adams" (2014). *English Faculty Scholarship*. 1.[https://mosaic.messiah.edu/english\\_ed/1](https://mosaic.messiah.edu/english_ed/1)

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.

Smith, Samuel. "Fleshly Tabernacles: Milton and the Incarnational Poetics of Revolutionary England." *Modern Philology*, vol. 111, no. 4, May 2014, pp. E419–E422. doi:10.1086/674692.

Fleshly Tabernacles: Milton and the Incarnational Poetics of Revolutionary England. Bryan Adams Hampton. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. Pp. viii+374.

The subtitle of *Fleshly Tabernacles* could have easily substituted "Hermeneutics" for "Poetics," since it becomes clear that for Bryan Adams Hampton the acts of reading and writing are in practice as inseparable as the monist's soul and body or the divine and human natures of the Christ as understood by Christian orthodoxy. But, in fact, this book's primary concern is with reading texts, primarily biblical texts and Milton's texts, and with how virtuous readers incarnate the truths they discern in the texts they read. This instances one of a number of hermeneutical circles, in that readers become virtuous by incarnating what they read, and they incarnate what they read by exercising their virtue. Hampton capably demonstrates how this happens—or, at least, how this should happen—in Milton's major poems.

The book divides into three distinct, even disparate, parts. The first part, "Proclaiming the Word," has two chapters. The first examines the "incarnational aesthetics" of Milton's *Poems* (published in 1645), arguing that Milton's poetry becomes his vehicle of "proclamation" or preaching, not in an overly didactic way but certainly with intent to instruct readers in virtue and virtuous reading. One of the highlights in this chapter is Hampton's argument that the true companion poem to "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" is not "The Passion" but "Lycidas." His discussion of the latter poem's treatment of priests who fail both to preach and to incarnate the Word leads into the second chapter of this section, which analyzes the speeches delivered by the fallen angels in the infernal council in book 2 of *Paradise Lost* (1667) as corrupt sermons (and language games) that attempt to both "say and unsay" (93) the Name of God—to deny God's Godness, or to dis-incarnate virtue from its Source.

The second part of the book is titled "Milton's Incarnate Reader," and it is here that it becomes quite clear that poetics is hermeneutics, which is poetics, which is hermeneutics, and so on. The opening chapter of this part, "The Greatest Metaphor of Our Religion," sharpens the focus on that aspect of Christian doctrine that, as Hampton justly laments, scholars of religion in seventeenth-century England have relatively neglected: the Incarnation. The first half of this chapter reviews the development of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation as narrative in the early church, and the second half reads Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana* (1658–60) as presenting a "low" Christology—that is, a Christology that does not grant Jesus equal membership in the Trinity. For Hampton, Milton's Arianism, combined with his philosophical monism, lends an emphasis to the humanity of Jesus in a way that makes his perfect obedience to God a genuine model for Christian living; the believer who incarnates Christ can exercise the same virtue that merits adoption as a son of God—even to the point of perfect virtue or sinless living. This will prove to be crucial for Hampton's readings of *Samson Agonistes* and *Paradise Regained* (both 1671), which I believe to be the "heart" of this volume.

Before we come to that reading, however, we encounter the second chapter of this second part, which in retrospect feels like a second introduction to our engagement with the poems of 1671 in the next chapter. Here, Milton's extended simile of the "night-founder'd Skiff" in *Paradise Lost*

(bk. 1, lines 192–209) provides a sample text on which to practice virtuous, incarnational hermeneutics, to see precisely what is required of readers who wish to engage texts—which includes reading the world, human history, and current events as texts—without falling for false transcendences in church and state. That would result in readers mistaking such Leviathans for solid ground and perilously anchoring their "skiffs" to that which will destroy them. This also means learning to read in ways that will transform or shape readers into little Christs who know how to identify and resist temptations. Doing so requires discernment and self-government, presumably learned from previous reading (the hermeneutical circle in yet another incarnation), and Hampton introduces the "temperance" or "self-restraint" (166) required to succeed if one is to read texts through "the lens of virtue": "Without the lens of virtue the soul is in a precarious position, at risk of being deceived or swept away by textual forces more powerful than the reader. Potentially, reading is a perilous journey; in this sense, reading is a pilgrimage" (138). All this begs a hermeneutical question: if one reads to develop the lens of virtue that one needs to read in order to develop the life of virtue, how does one navigate texts encountered before and in the process of developing that lens of virtue?

Hampton addresses this question at the beginning of the next chapter, which presents Milton's Samson and the Son of *Paradise Regained* as exemplary "true pilots" of their respective "skiffs," although the Son proves the better model of the two for the Christian who is not under Law. Milton's own virtuous man Christianizes Aristotle's virtuous man (*phronimos*), who achieves his virtue in a process that "ultimately works as a hermeneutical circle" (171). The difference between the two lies in Milton's understanding of the *kenosis*, or self-emptying, of the Incarnation as a "self-restraint" or "temperance," which displaces Aristotle's "moderation" or "prudence" as the highest ethical practice (175). When we first meet Milton's Samson, temperance has not been one of his few virtues. But while his final violence makes many readers of *Samson Agonistes* uncomfortable, and perhaps even more so for possibly mirroring the historical violence of the Fifth Monarchists in Restoration England, it is "the ritual means to establish the ascendancy of Samson's new self aligned with the works and laws of the Mosaic covenant" (192). This signals "Samson's renewed temperance, an emptying of the self [*kenosis*] that leads to the reappropriation of the self through the 'texts' of his trials and conversations, permit[ting his] susceptibility to the 'rousing motions'" (192). The regenerate Samson dies for a worthy cause—the "true transcendence of nationhood" under Mosaic Law, a "vision of the state" endorsed by God's revelation (203).

But if Samson is a good model, the Jesus of *Paradise Regained* is better. In his *kenosis*, Milton's Son "transcends a vision of the state": "His temperance allows him to see the difference between the false transcendences that Satan offers and the true transcendence of his own kingdom within" (203). The Son is both Milton's best poetic representation of the Incarnation and his best instance of incarnational hermeneutics at work. The Son balances the paradox of his incarnation as both human and divine: on the one hand, he empties himself of divinity (*kenosis*) and exercises temperance/self-restraint, and, on the other hand, he fills himself with divinity (*pleroma*) in his discerning reading of scripture and models a way of reading sacred text that leads him to exercise perfect obedience to God's will. And the human Son shows that what he does in the wilderness (unlike what he does on the cross) can be performed by any human who begins with faith in God's providence. Hampton deftly shows precisely how Jesus does this at key moments in Milton's brief epic. In my view, this chapter is worth the price of admission to the whole book.

The third and final part of the book, "Revolutionary Incarnations and the Metaphysics of Abundance," reads like a long coda. The shift away from Milton to a select few of his contemporaries (and given the number of his contemporaries who weigh in on the question of the Incarnation, these selections may feel arbitrary) seems intended to provide both a context for Milton's incarnational poetics/hermeneutics and a look at possible roads not taken by Milton but clearly supported by his monist understanding of the Incarnation. The contemporaries selected are John Everard (for his incarnational turn toward allegory as a way of reading and being), Gerrard Winstanley (whose radical acts as a Digger derived from his belief that every man could become a Christ, an incarnate Son), and James Naylor (who reenacted the Christ's entry into Jerusalem by riding a donkey into Bristol). These are all fascinating seventeenth-century instances of incarnating the Incarnation in ways that might have engaged Milton (we do not know whether they did or not). But it is not clear just what they add to the reading of Milton developed in the 220 pages preceding them; certainly the argument Hampton makes about Milton's incarnational poetics and hermeneutics succeeds without them. These chapters sometimes read like a related but separate project.

Nevertheless, anyone interested in Milton will want to engage *Fleshly Tabernacles*. Hampton's scholarship here is certainly worthy of the common accolade offered in each of three back-cover blurbs from eminent Milton scholars (David Loewenstein, John Rumrich, Jeffrey Spencer Shoulson): this book makes an "original" and "important" (or "thought-provoking") contribution to Milton studies. This I affirm and add only that Hampton does this in a lucid prose style that incarnates his superb reading of Milton's texts in a most virtuous fashion.

By Samuel Smith