

REVIEWS

speare on Film ideal for classroom purposes. But particularly on the grounds of its ambition to unite modern theory and film studies, the book should also be recommended to researchers. Few Shakespeareans writing on film will be able safely to cross the theoretical highway without consulting Robert Shaughnessy's *Shakespeare on Film*.

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The Miltonic Moment. By J. MARTIN EVANS. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky. 1998. xii + 175 pp. Price: US\$32.95.

'The Miltonic Moment', in this excellent book, is not, so to speak, 'Milton's moment in history', but rather a specific authorial (i.e. Miltonic) sense of the importance of certain moments as transitional; in the accurate words of the blurb, Evans's thesis is that 'Milton's poems invariably depict the decisive instant in a story, a moment of crisis that takes place just before the action undergoes a dramatic change of course ... The works illuminated here [primarily *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*, *Comus*, and *Lycidas*, but also *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*] are all about transition from one form to another: from paganism to Christianity, from youthful inexperience to moral maturity, and from pastoral retirement to heroic engagement. This transformation is often ideological as well as historical or biographical.' While one might instinctively object that surely much of literature is concerned with important transitions of one kind or another, Evans shows convincingly that Milton does focus on them in an individualistic way as crucial in his vision of art and the world, and he discusses the nature of the various 'moments' superbly: with a judicious mixture of acute (but never perverse or ostentatious) critical insight and huge (but never pompous or irrelevant) learning.

The almost complete absence of *Paradise Lost* does not prevent Evans from unfolding his vision of Milton's poetic development in its entirety, and the unusually intense analysis of the shorter works shows not only their intrinsic significance and fascination, but also that they are themselves important 'moments' in Milton's career. I found myself the more impressed by this book because Evans managed to maintain, throughout, my interest in supposedly 'minor' works despite the fact that the picture of Milton which he offers – though thoroughly persuasive – is in some respects quite unattractive to me. Thus, for example, Evans demonstrates that *Samson Agonistes* has 'a sense of closure, the decisive action, that was only foreshadowed in the final lines of all his previous poems' (p. 132) which is prompted by Milton's view that the execution of Charles I was justified: Samson was right to kill 'his country's tyrants' (p. 128). The hard-line Puritanical Milton with whom we are confronted throughout the book is not a person I would care to live with, much though I admire his poetry. I don't derive much comfort from learning that the *Nativity Ode* would have me believe that as an heir of Adam and Eve I 'can do no more

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than glimpse the coming age of gold, and then only as a privation of evil' (p. 37). *Comus*, Evans reveals, advocates the ideal of virginity as 'perhaps the closest practical metaphor one could find for the kind of virtue Milton believed to be attainable: the virtue of privation' (p. 70). No more appealingly, *Lycidas* – brilliantly and excitingly analysed – shows Milton leaving behind 'chastity, retirement, and poetry, in order to pursue the open-ended future of heroic and erotic engagement that the verse form has invoked' (p. 116).

The 30-year period of Milton's 'heroic and erotic engagement' preceding the appearance of *Paradise Lost* was, we know, in many ways a disaster and a loss to culture. It is a sign of the richness of Milton's personality, and of the quality of Evans's book, that one is happy to learn so much, from these pages, about Miltonic qualities that, by themselves, one finds oneself recoiling from.

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The Triumph of Augustan Poetics: English Literary Culture from Butler to Johnson. By BLANFORD PARKER. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1998. ix + 262 pp. Price: £37.50/ \$59.95.

This is a complex, closely-argued and learned book: one which requires considerable effort on the part of its reader who will, however, find that his exertions ultimately are rewarded, or, at least, have not been in vain. Parker's ambition is to undermine and eventually to destroy common cultural assumptions about the nature of what traditionally is termed 'Augustan humanism'. Received critical opinion postulates what George Saintsbury long ago memorably phrased the 'peace of the Augustans', a tranquillity which, he and subsequent critics have argued, derived from the period of relative calm which reigned in England following the turbulent religious and political turmoil of the seventeenth century, which had found echoes in the elaborate conceits and fanciful metaphors of metaphysical poetry. These rhetorical extravagances could be discarded by early-eighteenth century writers, whose work reflected a period of civil calm, social prosperity and religious tolerance, reflected in prose of a near scientific simplicity modelled on Sprat's prescription for the written proceedings of the burgeoning Royal Society and Locke's *Essay*.

Parker, on the other hand, considers Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* as a seminal work which profoundly influenced successive writers in its nihilistic disregard for authority of any kind, with general satire aimed equally at all religions and at the poetic traditions which once had supported them. Whereas Baroque poetics had accorded an iconic value to animals and to nature as revelatory, symbolic imagery through which God's providence might be observed, the disappearance of such analogies can be marked from the Restoration onwards. Butler's work, taking its lead from radical reinterpretations of human nature propagated by Bacon, Burton and Hobbes, promoted the demolition of the symbolical and the faithful elements of Christian humanistic discourse, paving