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Review Of "Milton And The Death Of Man: Humanism On Trial In 'Paradise Lost'" By H. Skulsky

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Review

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possibilities as actually entirely “contained,” effectively nullified in sixteenth-century texts. Baker also takes issue with Mary Thomas Crane’s *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self and Society in Sixteenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1993). Crane emphasizes schools as the locus of English Humanism; Baker rightly sees a Humanist “emphasis on printed divulgation” (11) also. Crane sees Humanist teachers as gearing their students towards careers of upward mobility; for her and other recent scholars, Humanists contemplated less the displacement of social hierarchy than revision of the existing one to allow the rise of those with Humanistic training. Baker wants to give Humanism a more radical shading, but his case here is sometimes questionable. In fact, the possibility of a communist social order is indeed raised only to be disowned by many of the writers he cites, from Elyot through Morison, Cheke, and it would seem Spenser, who instead valorize a society in which men of talent can gain more rewards and higher social station than others. Baker might have conceded the strength of this line more systematically without fatally disabling his argument that Humanism had some radical potential. Finally, his book invites comparison with David Norbrook’s *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (Routledge, 1984), where the sense of Humanists’ “radicalism” is less nuanced, at times better grounded.

Baker has chapters on Erasmus, More, Elyot, the mid-century translations of *The Praise of Folly* by Chaloner and *Utopia* by Robinson, and Spenser. He writes gracefully, and his analysis of Humanist discourse is subtle and rich. There are other strengths and weaknesses and questions to be asked of this original, provocative book, but it has seemed most important to sketch and contextualize its main argument, particularly its way of connecting Humanists’ relations to social radicalism and to the world of print.

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Harold Skulsky. *Milton and the Death of Man: Humanism on Trial in Paradise Lost*

Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2000. 262 pp. \$44.50. ISBN: 0-87413-719-5.

Professor Skulsky’s schema for *Paradise Lost* casts the speaker Milton as “the Advocate,” God as his “Client,” and Satan, or any other who might think God evil or tyrannical, as “the Adversary.” The epic itself, as this terminology suggests, is defined as a forensic narrative making the case for the justice of “God’s ways to men.” The “Advocate” deserves praise both for his acceptance of the challenges inherent in the source narrative, and for his “libertarian” willingness to risk including in the narrative all of the adversary’s best arguments. The larger case Skulsky wishes to argue, however, is for Milton as perhaps the last voice speaking for a “humanist theodicy,” or a “Christian materialism,” that grants man genuine personhood. At the moment in history when ideas of man typified by Hobbes’s theories emerged as precursors of the modernist “death of man” reduced to a bundle of impulses or helplessly propelled by external forces, Milton’s poem “has some

claim to being an imaginative vindication of the humanistic idea that persons and their values are at least as much a part of the basic structure of reality as elementary particles and their powers" (227).

Personhood, however, can only be defended at the expense of the justification of God's ways. Man deserves punishment for the Fall because he had the power to do otherwise (as Skulsky argues in his defense of free will), but the nature of the punishment "vindicates God's justice by impugning his love. It clears the Judge by convicting the Creator" (212). Skulsky dismisses as "Mickey Mouse" any arguments that would somehow turn the resulting horrors of human history into some sort of good, thus effectively denying the transforming powers of faith as represented in Milton's notion of the "paradise within." What is left, then, is a universe in which the fall is classically tragic. God himself, faced with a contradiction between justice and love that he cannot resolve, becomes the "supreme adult called on to make his peace with an ambiguous reality" (224). He cannot transform history, but Skulsky suggests, rescues his love by entering into the tragedy as man himself through the Son. Sliding entirely over the complications of the relation of Father to Son in *Paradise Lost*, Skulsky sees God himself join his creation as a human victim of that "indeterminacy without which there can be no love. "At the end of the day," the epic offers "a magnificence unavailable to comedy, no matter how divine" (227). In the tradition of all those who praise the decision to fall as both necessary and positive for man, we "watch Adam and Ever newly ripened to adulthood and to a tragic vision they share with God" (227).

The Son's compassionate incarnation nonetheless does appear to decide "the Advocate's case as he explicitly defines it." But the question of whether or not the ways of God have been vindicated, Skulsky further concludes, is not the critics "to decide alone." In a curious abdication of that humanistic agency he seems so to value, Skulsky declares that it is for the "jury . . . acting in concert," presumably humankind as a whole, to decide, and "the jury is still out" (227).

This account of Skulsky's argument, I fear, may be inaccurate, since that argument is by no means easy to follow. It is clogged with analyses pursued at length only to be repudiated at equal length. Veering from quite technical philosophical arguments to such colloquial conclusions as "with enemies like Erasmus, Luther doesn't need friends," the style makes it difficult to know on what level one should read the text. Too often, in referring to the admirably wide range of biblical, patristic and philosophical sources intended to locate the "Advocate" in intellectual history, Skulsky jumps from one source to another without giving any indication in his own text. In what seems to be a discussion of *The Christian Doctrine*, for instance, quotations from Aquinas are slipped in and detectable (unless one has either or both texts fully in memory) only by reference to the footnotes at the back of the book. Though he never argues the case, or refers to others' arguments about it, he appears to assume that Milton was not actually the author of *The Christian Doctrine*, "though it seems to have been written by his favorite theologian (let's call him 'the theologian' for short)"(91).

A further catalogue of the irritations and contradictions in the book's style and argument would require more space than this review permits. Although I found insight and stimulation in moments such as the analysis of Milton's discomfort with the biblical curse on the serpent and of the "maternal" aspects of God's work in creation, the book as a whole is disappointing. Rather than being, as Skulsky claims, a "contribution to the literary and intellectual history of early modern Europe," *Milton and the Death of Man* is an intensely personal quarrel with Milton's God, Milton's poem, and a loosely defined idea of modernity.

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