WOMEN (RE)WRITING MILTON

Edited by
Mandy Green and Sharihan Al-Akhras
'This is no ordinary collection on Milton and women. The editors have cast their net well beyond the usual scholarly circles and academic subjects. The result is an exciting volume that extends into contemporary issues such as race and gender fluidity (Milton’s Spirits “when they please, can either sex assume, or both”). It also looks at fresh ways into Milton’s female readers, and how their responses are expressed creatively in imaginative writing and visual art and performance. The Milton that emerges from this volume is not the canonical figure of Anglo-American academic study, but a global figure whose poetry reverberates through many cultures’.

Gordon Campbell, Emeritus Professor and Fellow in Renaissance Studies at the University of Leicester

‘Contributors to this present, ground-breaking volume do not speak with one voice. Rather, like the female authors and artists whom they explore, they evince a variety of stances. Bringing new female figures, new subjects, and new approaches to the study of Milton, they foreground appropriation and gender in fresh and provocative ways that warrant further pursuit’.

Laura Knoppers, Professor of English at the University of Notre Dame and editor of *Milton Studies*

‘*Women (Re)Writing Milton* will revitalize the way we think about Milton and gender. The essays in the collection offer a brilliant array of perspectives on the ways in which women writers and artists through centuries and across cultures have re-imagined Milton’s works. Invariably engaging, often unexpected in their subject matter, these essays herald the beginning of a more generous and inclusive approach to Milton’s reception history’.

Karen L. Edwards, Professor of English at the University of Exeter

Scholarly attention to the transnational reception of Milton’s poetry and prose began in earnest at the International Milton Symposium at the University of Exeter in 2015, and is now offered to a broad readership in this lively collection of wide-ranging, thoughtful, and accessible essays. With the publication of this volume, England can no longer claim exclusive ownership of Milton.

Mary Nyquist, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, University of Toronto
This volume of essays reconfigures the reception history of Milton and his works by bringing to the fore women reading, writing, and rewriting Milton, bringing together in conversation a range of voices from diverse historical, cultural, religious, and social contexts across the globe and through the centuries. The book encompasses a rich range of different literary genres, artistic media, and academic disciplines and draws on the research of established Milton scholars and new Miltonists. Like the female authors and artists whom they explore, the contributors take up a variety of standpoints. As well as revisiting the work of established figures, the volume brings new female creative artists, new subjects, and new approaches to the study of Milton.

Mandy Green is Associate Professor of English at Durham University where she teaches courses on Milton, Shakespeare, and Renaissance Literature. Her work on classical presences in English literature has appeared in a number of journals and edited volumes; she has also published a monograph on Milton’s *Ovidian Eve* (2nd edn, 2016).

Sharihan Al-Akhras is a journalist who has worked in a number of media outlets and social networking services in London, including but not limited to: BBC Arabic, Al Jazeera English, and Twitter. Her PhD thesis examined the presence of Judeo-Arabic mythology in *Paradise Lost*. Her interests include Early Modern Literature, Middle-Eastern mythology, the demonic, Arab female authorship, East–West relations, and (social) media.
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Women (Re)Writing Milton
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Women (Re)Writing Milton

Edited by
Mandy Green and Sharihan Al-Akhras
To My Father, Sameer, who left too soon.
I miss you always.
I love you forever.

Sharihan Al-Akhras
To my grandchildren:
Amelia, our ‘lockdown’ baby, and little Freddie;
and my own ‘irrepressible Eve’
Mandy Green
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MANDY GREEN AND SHARIHAN AL-AKHRAS  

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In 1997, *Lives of the Monster Dogs*, a first novel by young American author Kirsten Bakis, offered a fantastical story of creator and creatures, loyalty and rebellion, loneliness and desire in the lineage of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. The narrative, framed by New York University student Cleo Pira, switches back and forth from present-day to recent and distant past, drawing on Cleo’s recollections, diaries of the dogs and of the mad scientist who created them, press clippings, magazine articles, and even a canine-authored libretto.

From these materials we learn that a nineteenth-century Bavarian scientist, Augustus Rank, had labored to create an army of dogs endowed with human intelligence, artificial hands, and mechanical voice boxes for Kaisar Wilhelm II. When the Kaisar loses patience, the scientist and his devoted followers flee Prussia for a remote part of Canada where they continue their project in cult-like secrecy. Rank dies before completing the dogs, but promises to return again; the dogs, having been completed and enslaved by Rank’s followers, ultimately rebel and move to New York City, where they are treated as rich and famous celebrities. One early reviewer acclaimed the book as ‘a clever, compelling *Frankenstein* for the millennium’ (Ingraham 1997: 141). It is also a late twentieth-century American version of *Paradise Lost*.

In the novel, the monster dogs desperately want to be human. The 150 genetically-modified Great Danes, German shepherds, Malamutes, Rottweilers, bull terriers, and Samoyeds who arrive in New York City by chartered plane on a cold November day walk upright, speak heavily accented English, and dress in late-nineteenth-century Prussian finery. They eat extremely cultured food and drink alcohol. They live at the Plaza or in luxurious apartments on the Upper East Side. They ride in limousines rather than taxis. Among them, they are proud to have their own historians, scientists, musicians, and composers. They tour museums and sit for television interviews. And, late in the novel, they build a gigantic, expensive castle in the Lower East Side and throw a Great Gatsby-like party. Their celebrity gives the dogs a place in New York society, but it also keeps them marginalized. And they have a dark secret. Behind closed doors, to their horror, the dogs are experiencing increasingly frequent
bouts of what they term madness, during which they revert to the consciousness and behavior of normal dogs.

Much of the narrative focuses on Cleo’s growing friendship with the dogs, and especially with Ludwig von Sacher, a bespectacled and melancholy German shepherd who is trying to write the history of their race. Ludwig believes that if he can find the purpose of their lives – why their creator made them – it can stop the growing insanity to which the dogs fear they will all succumb. The novel traces Ludwig’s increasing desperation and the measures to which the dogs will go to preserve their own dignity, alongside Cleo’s growing identification with them and concern for their plight.

Scholars who specialize in Milton have very likely never read Kirsten Bakis’s *Lives of the Monster Dogs*. And readers of this late twentieth-century fantasy novel would be equally unlikely to make the connection with Milton. Yet Shelley, and Milton behind her, allow us to see deeper resonance in the fairy-tale story of highly intelligent, cultured, and seemingly doomed canines. In his desire to know his Creator and the purpose of his life and his race, Ludwig echoes Milton’s postlapsarian Adam: ‘What is our purpose? If we no longer serve the followers of Rank, what are we here for? To me this is an immediate and urgent question’ (2017: 8). Like Adam, he seeks to know his maker: ‘If only I could understand the man, if I could smell him, if I could love him, I think I could understand the history of my race – I could understand what he meant by creating us, what we are’ (2017: 12). As slaves in isolated Rankstadt, waiting for the return of their god, the dogs ‘knew no other life, but we were also aware that we had been created for a higher purpose’ (2017: 10). Now that purpose is gone: ‘We have scattered into the world. We no longer have anything to wait for, and we don’t know what to do with ourselves, or why we were created’ (2017: 10). Klaue, a Malamute and the autocratic leader of the dogs, more bluntly describes himself as ‘an ugly mistake made by a madman […] We didn’t ask to be made’ (2017: 111). Such words evoke Milton’s despairing Adam: ‘Did I request thee, maker, from my clay / To mould me man? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me[?]’ (10.743–44).

That Miltonic query also serves as the epigraph to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Her agonized Creature asks: ‘Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?’ (1818: 89). Having read *Paradise Lost*, his questions sharpen: ‘Cursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid from its resemblance’ (1818: 91). Lamenting that ‘no Eve soothed my sorrows, or shared my thoughts; I was alone’, the Creature remembers ‘Adam’s supplication to his Creator’, and curses his own Maker, who has abandoned him (1818: 92). He pleads with Frankenstein: ‘Remember that I am thy Creature. I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for
Foreword by Laura L. Knoppers

no misdeed [...] I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous’ (1818: 68).

Bakis’s fantastical rewriting, through Shelley, of *Paradise Lost* evinces the kind of rich and variegated appropriations of Milton by female authors and artists to which this present volume turns. Ranging widely in time, place, person, and genre, *Women (Re)writing Milton* addresses a considerable scholarly lacuna. Milton scholars, unlike Shakespeareans, have until very recently remained resistant to exploring appropriations of his work. At the same time, echoes and adaptations of Milton in a wide range of texts, productions, and artistic works, particularly by women, often go unrecognized, or, if made explicit, unexplored. This volume finds a cohesive center in Milton and gender, a topic that continues to attract considerable attention and debate.

Who are the women rewriting Milton? The women explored in this volume range in class, time, place, profession, and ethnicity. They are poets, novelists, literary critics, translators, visual artists, journalists, activists, film directors, and lay theologians. They write or create in seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century Britain; in post-civil-war and twenty-first century America and England; in 1930s wartime Italy and Britain; in post-war Communist Hungary; in late-nineteenth-century Spain; and in late twentieth-century Australia, Brazil, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. They are scholars and students, gentry, aristocrats, or the daughter of a freed slave. They are Puritans, Catholics, and Muslims. They are Milton’s own literary characters.

What Milton do they rewrite? They rewrite *Paradise Lost*, *Comus*, and Milton’s sonnet on his late wife. They draw on Milton’s advocacy of divorce on the grounds of incompatibility, his arguments for freedom of speech, and his programs of reformation and education. At times it is the radical, visionary prophet-poet of the Romantics who is rewritten. At times, it is the dominating father of historical biography. At other times it is the patriarchal bogey of Virginia Woolf and of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, arguably themselves rewriters of Milton as they strive to forge narratives of women’s literary history. Other rewriters unlock the dramatic potential of Milton’s masque, *Comus*, or of his epic, *Paradise Lost*, itself created in the performative context of the blind poet’s dictation.

How do these women rewrite Milton? They rewrite in image and in text. By translating or commenting on his poetry. By meditating on Genesis, on astronomy, or on nature. By quoting or paraphrasing Milton’s text, or by dropping quotations and replacing them with indirect commentary. By fictionalizing Milton’s life. By creating Eve-figures, Sin-figures, and Adam-figures. By reworking Miltonic themes, characters, and situations in science fiction, devotional poetry, meditative verse epic, fictional biography, and novels. By illustrating *Paradise Lost* in delicate water-color paintings, wood-engravings, or outdoor installation art. By staging productions of Miltonic or Miltonic-derived texts or by hosting all-day marathon readings of *Paradise Lost*. 
Surprisingly, Eve and other characters become Milton’s first rewriters. Essays here trace how Lucy Hutchinson’s Eve breaks out from the strictures of meditation and of Genesis as she laments, co-parents with Adam, and exerts her matriarchal authority by naming her sons; or how, in Beatriz Bracher’s 2015 novel, *Anatomia do Paraíso* (Anatomy of Paradise), Sin and Eve metamorphize first through the graduate student Felix, who uses Milton’s Sin to structure his sexual experience, and then through the defiant single-motherhood of a second Eve-like protagonist, Vanda.

Other Miltonic characters and even his female family members gain new authority in modern-day rewritings. In her 2001 novel, *Angel of Ruin*, Australian writer Kim Wilkins imagines that it is, the ‘good daughter’, Deborah herself, who rewrites *Paradise Lost* to rescue Milton himself from a demonic inspiration of which only she (and not he) is aware. Female directors of two twenty-first century productions of Milton in the Jacobean theatre at London’s Globe show how a ‘proto-feminist’ Milton can emerge when explored theatrically. A 2016–2017 production of *Comus*, directed by Lucy Bailey, presents a Lady who moves away from debates about chastity to become a figure for freedom of will and self-determination. A 2018 staged reading of *Paradise Lost*, rewritten as a five-act play and directed by Farah Karim-Cooper and Emma Whipday, deliberately foregrounds an independent Eve and, in a framing narrative, gives Milton’s daughters a role in the poem’s genesis. A marathon reading of *Paradise Lost* at the University of Southern Mississippi (2019), which brings together faculty, graduate students, undergraduates, community members, and a librarian and follows the principle that Milton teaches people how to read his text aloud, arguably allows Milton to rewrite himself.

Why do these women rewrite Milton? Some take an oppositional stance toward Milton, challenging and correcting a masculinist ethos. Essays in this volume explore how recent feminist revisions of Jungian theory can find ‘feminine’ qualities of *Paradise Lost* not as inferior but as part of the important union of opposites but equals; or how queer Eve provides an opening into the text for women who feel excluded by its patriarchal ethos. In the late seventeenth century, Samuel Hartlib’s editorial interventions when publishing the correspondence between Dorothy Moore Dury, John Dury, and Katherine Jones, Lady Ranelagh, revises Miltonic ideas of conversation to open up more space for educated women. Writing in the religious and social context of late nineteenth-century Spain, literary critic Emilia Pardo Bazán is admittedly unsympathetic to what she sees as Milton’s intolerant Puritanism and gender strictures drawn from his own unhappy marriage; but Pardo Bazán nonetheless places Milton alongside the Catholic Dante, Tasso, and other epic writers as part of an emerging world literature canon.

Other women enlist Milton as an ally, suggesting that Milton was a true poet and of Eve’s party without knowing it. Victorian botanical illustrator Jane Elizabeth Giraud discovers in Milton a feminine ethics
of care through her delicate water-color paintings of the flowers of *Paradise Lost*. In translating Milton’s sonnet on his late espoused saint, mid-twentieth-century Hungarian poet Ágnes Nemes Nagy, silenced by the Communist regime, shows a passionate, private female voice at odds with her published poetry and frames her own terminal illness and approaching death. Mary Shelley contrasts the overreaching and solipsistic Victor Frankenstein to Milton’s Adam, critiquing the individualism of male Romantic writers by showing how Victor thwarts Elizabeth as a confidante and true companion.

Other women rewrite or stage Milton to render the radical implications of his text more visible. Three eighteenth-century women poets, Elizabeth Singer Rowe, Elizabeth Carter, and Anna Letitia Barbauld, adapt and modernize Milton’s description of the heavens, rewriting the devotional sublime as a way of asserting poetic authority from within the private sphere. American artist Carlotta Petrina’s drawings and English artist Mary Elizabeth Groom’s wood engravings of key scenes in *Paradise Lost* rival Henry Fuseli and William Blake in their revisionary power.

Translation and fictional rewritings of Miltonic characters allow female authors to comment indirectly on present-day social, cultural, and political issues. Petrina, working in Italy in the mid-1930s under the shadow of Hitler and Mussolini, brings out scenes of existentialist terror and sadness. Groom, illustrating Milton in war-time England, offers a strong and mutually supportive Adam and Eve and an androgynous merciful God. A number of modern-day female Arab writers redefine the feminine in general and Eve in particular. In her novel *Innocence of the Devil*, Egyptian writer Nawal El-Saadawi critiques the widespread association of the feminine and the demonic, drawn from the story of the fall; Joumana Haddad, Lebanese poet, journalist, feminist author, and activist, fictionalizes and celebrates the rebellion of Lilith; in *Dancing on Arrowheads*, Saudi writer Rehab Abuzaid creates an Eve figure (the protagonist Al-Batool), who echoes and rewrites Milton’s Eve as she embarks on a journey toward independence, enabling Abuzaid to address sensitive political and social concerns.

As women rewrite Milton, they appropriate his cultural status to fashion themselves and their own literary or artistic authority. Some do so by recreating the experience of Milton’s poetry. In her 1991 installation art, *Snake Pit*, Alexis Smith creates not an image or series of images but a literal journey through the campus of the University of California, San Diego. Some use Milton to fashion others. African-American writer Josephine Brown deploys indirect allusion to Milton to show the epic poet as secondary in stature to her father, William Wells Brown, fugitive, self-educated slave and prominent antislavery spokesman, in the cause of liberty.

In rewriting Shelley, Kirsten Bakis rewrites Milton, and her *Lives of the Monster Dogs* reaches back to some of the most influential aspects of *Paradise Lost*. The monster dogs crave human society, but they are
inevitably cut off. Theirs is a late twentieth-century version of Satan’s
damnation in a world in which there is no hell. Like Satan (and like Mary
Shelley’s Creature), they can see the Garden of Eden: they can even live
there, but each is ultimately isolated and alone. The mad and sadistic
scientist, Augustus Rank, emotionally stunted by a miserable childhood,
the early loss of his mother, the indifference of his father, and rejection by
the woman he loves, turns to create a race of dogs who will uncondition-
ally love him alone. Indeed, Rank evokes Shelley’s lonely misfit Creature
as much as Victor Frankenstein, himself a shifting double for Milton’s
Adam, God, and, eventually, Satan. Rank calls attention to Frankenstein
as a dark double of the Creature he rejects and condemns. Does the dou-
bling also call attention to doubling between Milton’s God and Lucifer/
Satan?

As with some of the writers and artists discussed in this volume, Bakis
foregrounds Miltonic domesticity, loneliness, sympathy, and connectivity;
the novel brings the reader to question and doubt the nature, wisdom, and
justice of the creator and to empathize with the outcast. As for Ludwig, he
desperately tries to find a connection with his maker, to piece together the
spirit that might help the dogs retain their human consciousness. Ludwig
rejects despair for a philosophy of connectivity and tries to reach out to
Cleo, the human friend with whom he has fallen in love. His quest to
forge a connection with his maker and to find a companion to remedy his
loneliness is deeply Adamic, evincing the humanity that even Cleo does
not fully recognize.

Contributors to this present, groundbreaking volume do not speak
with one voice. Rather, like the female authors and artists whom they
explore, they evince a variety of stances. Bringing new female figures, new
subjects, and new approaches to the study of Milton, they foreground
appropriation and gender in fresh and provocative ways that warrant fur-
ther pursuit. Will scholars of Milton someday attend not only to Homer,
Virgil, Dante, Lucan, and Spenser, but also to adaptations by Beatrice
Bracht, Elizabeth Rowe, Josephine Brown, Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Emilia
Pardo Bazán, Rehab Abuzaid, and Kim Wilkins? The present volume
holds out the promise that it might well be possible to teach old dogs
new tricks. Speaking of which, as to whether or not the German shep-
herd, Ludwig, ever finds his soulmate—or his god—in Bakis’s Lives of the
Monster Dogs, you will just have to read the novel to find out.

Notes

1 See the case set out in Laura L. Knoppers and Gregory M. Colón Semenza,
Milton in Popular Culture (2006). Some of the most innovative approaches to
adaptations of Milton have come within the past five or so years. See Reginald
A. Wilburn, Preaching the Gospel of Black Revolt: Appropriations of Milton
in Early American African Literature (2014); Eric C. Brown, Milton on Film
(2015); David Currell and François-Xavier Gleyson (eds), Reading Milton


3 On Milton and gender, see Catherine Gimelli Martin (ed.), Milton and Gender (2004); and Laura L. Knoppers, ‘Gender and the Public Sphere in Habermas and Milton: New Critical Directions’ (2014).

Acknowledgments

First, we would like to offer our grateful thanks to Laura Knoppers and Mary Nyquist who have both generously supported this project, offering advice and encouragement, and to Laura, especially, for contributing such a lively and genuinely illuminating Foreword, seeing so well the shape and structure of the book. We would also like to express heartfelt thanks to Mary Nyquist and Julie Crane for their attentive and close reading of the entire manuscript in draft and their thoughtful recommendations. Our warm thanks, too, go to Mark Sandy, a colleague at Durham University, who was ever ready to share his considerable experience in editing volumes of collected essays.

Lastly, we would like to thank our contributors who, despite the many difficulties that beset them this year (2020), worked together to make this volume possible. Given the scale and severity of the pandemic that touched all our lives, we were struck that a group of individuals with widely differing viewpoints, separated by space and time zones, came together as a community of readers and writers. As editors, we have been closely involved in the process of ‘rewriting’ that these essays have inevitably undergone in readiness for print. This said, we would like to make it clear that, although the views expressed by our contributors do not always coincide with our own, we are fully appreciative of the way each voice included here has enriched the conversation.

Mandy Green and Sharihan Al-Akhras

I would like to thank my father, Dr. Sameer Al-Akhras, for always believing in me. He was a man who valued education like no other. Had it not been for him, this book would not have come to light. He would have been so proud.

I would also like to thank my husband, Dr. Alexander Webb. He is a physicist who does not know much about Milton, but he, nonetheless, always would lend a listening ear.

Sharihan Al-Akhras
A Note on the Text

The text of *Paradise Lost* used throughout this volume of essays is taken from the Oxford World’s Classics edition, edited by Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (reissued 2008). All quotations from the poem will be noted parenthetically in the text.

Unless otherwise indicated, all other references to Milton’s poetry and prose are taken from the *Riverside Milton* (1998), edited by Roy Flannagan, abbreviated as *R* and noted parenthetically in the text.
Introduction
A Life Beyond Life: Milton’s Afterlives

Mandy Green and Sharihan Al-Akhras

I
In the *Areopagitica*, Milton defined ‘a good Booke’ as ‘the pretious life-blood of a master spirit, imbalmd and treasur’d up on purpose to a life beyond life’ (R 999). The afterlife of Milton was assured by the continuing survival of his literary corpus, animated by his own powerful authorial presence. But ‘a life beyond life’ is pre-eminently the legacy of Milton’s masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*, which has caught, held, and sustained the imagination of generations of readers and has been reimagined in countless works of creative artists over the past three centuries. It is with *Paradise Lost* that Milton most fully realised his life’s ambition, outlined over twenty-five years before the publication of his great epic. The preface to the second book of *Reason of Church Government* (1642) was, in effect, a literary manifesto in which Milton publicly announced his intention to produce for his own nation a work to stand the test of time: ‘so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die’ (R 922). Milton determined to write a work in English that he trusted his own nation would keep alive, though in so doing, he had to reconcile himself to restricting his reputation to his native land, resolving to rest content with a more limited sphere of influence than writing in Latin would have offered at that time: ‘not caring to be once nam’d abroad, though perhaps I could attaine to that, but content with these British Ilands as my world’ (R 923). The wistful concessive clause underwrites Milton’s belief that by writing in English he would forego the opportunity to reach an international audience. Today, *Paradise Lost* reaches an impressively wide general readership, as well as an academic audience, within and beyond the Anglosphere, on a scale that Milton himself could never have envisaged after resigning himself to a ‘fit audience … though few’ (7.31).²

Our critical collection of essays testifies to Milton’s global reach.³ Rather than a ‘monument to dead ideas’ (Raleigh 1900: 89), *Paradise Lost* is instead alive to urgent and vital issues that engage its present-day readers: from preserving personal and political liberty to the work–life balance, from the boundless cosmic space that surrounds us to our relationship with our own planet. *Paradise Lost* represents love, conversation, and companionship as the highest good and encapsulates the possibility of relationships that are not limited by gender, where partners
‘Can either sex assume or both’ (1.424). It should come as no surprise that the author of Areopagitica composed a poem which promotes a plurality of perspectives. As recent criticism has come to recognise, Milton’s plural and inclusive vision assigns to its readers responsibility for making interpretative choices that arise out of, as Annabel Patterson put it, ‘a welter of conflicting textual directions’ (1993: 272).

Over the last fifty years or so, one of the liveliest debates in Milton studies has centred upon Milton’s attitude to women. The first marriage naturally formed the disputed territory on which to mount an attack or defend Milton against the charge of misogyny, or, at least, of what has often been held to be an offensively patriarchal rendering of gender difference. There is no denying the ‘stridently masculinist’ tone that Mary Nyquist detected in the lines that notoriously proclaim the placing of the first man and woman in a hierarchical relationship of greater and lesser, superior and inferior (1988: 107). This observation had been adumbrated by assumptions harboured about Milton the man: the enduring impression of Milton’s daughters, constrained against their will either to read aloud to their blind father in languages they did not understand or take dictation from him, stubbornly persists.

Much critical ink has been spilled on Milton’s attitude to women, but what about Milton’s female readers – how do they respond to Milton? One of the most famous and evocative meetings between Milton and a female reader is intriguingly fleeting: in a passage of accumulating conditional clauses, Virginia Woolf takes notice of Milton as a figure who must be overlooked in order that the female writer, a free-spirited and sinuously androgynous creature who is ‘Shakespeare’s sister’, can finally emerge:

if we live another century or so [...] if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room [...] if we look past Milton’s bogey, for no human being should shut out the view; if we face the fact [...] that there is no arm to cling to [...] then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare’s sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born.

(1942: 171–72)

The sweeping sentence presses on, caught up in, and energised by, its own gathering sense of hopeful possibility for future times. The only named authors within its ambit are Shakespeare and Milton. Shakespeare is invoked, as he is in the work throughout, as a generously nurturing presence with whose imagination Woolf can engage, but with Milton it is otherwise. Milton is a haunting and oppressive ‘bogey’, a threatening spectre who would stand between Woolf and us and that enticing panorama of
possibility. Indeed, the sideward glance to Milton impedes the very flow of Woolf’s passage: that aside, ‘for no human being should shut out the view’, acts as an awkward interruption to its own forward momentum. But, awkward as Woolf’s phrasing is, it has proved an enduring image to which female critics especially have repeatedly returned.\(^9\)

Our volume opens up crucially different perspectives on Milton and his works by foregrounding how they are seen by a community of female readers and writers. From this vantage point, Milton is no longer a figure to skirt past with trepidation or unease, but to be met with on different ground, so that the encounter may be more confrontational or conversational. Though not exclusively so, it is Milton as a more enabling figure rather than a deterring spectre that many of the chapters in our critical collection are concerned to address. Our collection takes the reader on a journey of discovery and recovery which permits a richer, more complex grasp of the reception history of Milton’s literary bequest, his poetry and prose, and *Paradise Lost* in particular. Unsurprisingly, many of the writers and artists represented here return to *Paradise Lost*, and especially to the figure of Eve, who speaks some of Milton’s loveliest lines and utters some of the epic’s most compelling arguments, and who has, in recent times, supplanted Satan as the focus of readers’ interests. This shift in critical focus has halted the obsessive concentration on the role of Satan, which has persisted since the Romantic period. Now recognised to be the most protean and complex character, Eve has finally come into her own as Milton’s true epic hero.

Our volume consists of fifteen essays that fall naturally into identifiable categories: the chapters in each of these three parts are discrete, but thematically as well as chronologically interrelated. Part I focuses on early responses to Milton’s writing by English women authors. Taking up wider questions of Milton’s reception, the two subsections that comprise Part II range in time from the eighteenth century to the present, and radiate outward from England to Europe, and then beyond to encompass responses from African-American and Australian women writers, alongside reactions from North and South America and the Arab world. Part III is similarly comprised of two subsections. The first section offers insights into Milton through a series of feminist re-readings of the author and his writings which have shaped the work of three female academics, two of whom are writing within Milton studies while the third has evolved an interdisciplinary approach, deploying a Jungian-inflected psychoanalytic reading to open up a fresh perspective on the presentation of Eve. The final section focuses on female practitioners and adopts an intermedial perspective on twentieth and twenty-first century re-appropriations of Milton’s early modern epic. Of interest here is how Milton’s *Paradise Lost* has especially influenced women working in a range of media and performance activities, including an all-day reading of the poem, the visual arts, and theatre, contextualised in terms of current feminist criticism.
II

The first two chapters in Part I uncover notable instances of women’s literary endeavours that lacked visibility and failed to gain recognition in early modern England. The first example is Milton’s contemporary, Lucy Hutchinson, who can arguably claim the distinction of having composed the first epic poem written by a woman in English. Yet not only were the first five cantos of *Order and Disorder* published anonymously in 1679, just twelve years after *Paradise Lost*, they continued to be attributed to her brother Allen Apsley until late into the last century. In contrast with Milton’s narrative epic, Lucy Hutchinson’s *Order and Disorder* is written in the meditative genre. In ‘Lucy Hutchinson’s Irrepressible Eve’, the first chapter of this volume, Allan Drew shows how this generic positioning moulds Hutchinson’s creation of Eve’s character. For Hutchinson, Drew explains, Eve is an emblematic figure from whom she can launch relevant meditations, and, as such, demands a much more static and biblically authentic character. Indeed, Hutchinson explicitly eschews the sort of poetic invention undertaken by Milton; it is her intention not to deviate from God’s biblical word. However, as Drew effectively demonstrates, Hutchinson’s act of building Eve as a static emblem has the contrasting effect of complicating and enriching Eve’s character. As the meditation unfolds, the character of Eve proves irrepressible in a poem intended by its author to constrain her.

While the limited education afforded to Milton’s daughters persists as a notorious feature of Milton’s ‘legend’ (see Chapters 7 and 10), Hutchinson’s translation of Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* (‘On the nature of things’), the first authorised rendering of the complete poem into English, as well as her poetic accomplishments, reveals a high level of educational provision for at least some women during Milton’s lifetime, and in the century that followed, as the next chapter testifies. In Chapter 2, ‘“Soaring in the high reason of her fancies”: The Female Poet and the Cosmic Voyage’, Thomas R. Tyrrell recovers a female literary succession that spans the eighteenth century in the works of three English women poets, Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1674–1737), Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806) and Anna Letitia Barbauld (1743–1825), with each poet aware of, and building on, the achievement of the last. Tyrrell traces these poetic engagements with the sublime cosmography of John Milton’s poetry and analyses the way they lay claim to Milton’s universe, expanding and revising it to suit each female poet’s own devotional needs, as well as accommodating the emergence of Newtonian physics. Although, as John Leonard has complained, ‘Generations of critics […] impoverished Milton’s stellar universe by making it fit a Ptolemaic model that was long out of date by the time *Paradise Lost* was written’ (2016: 66), this chapter demonstrates how these three early readers understood Milton’s cosmology to be more forward-looking than many Milton critics in the twentieth century have realised. By revisiting their writings, Tyrrell reveals how Milton had a
liberating influence on their work: their poems draw from *Paradise Lost* a way of surveying God’s works and asserting the poet’s authority from within the confines of the private sphere.

Turning to the Romantic Period and its championing of the subjective and private sphere, the final chapter of this section, “‘Two Great Sexes Animate the World’”:¹⁰ Looking Past “Milton’s Bogey” in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* turns from lesser-known figures to a celebrated novelist. In Chapter 3, Mandy Green, one of the editors of this volume, re-examines Mary Shelley’s modern myth, one of the most famous readings of *Paradise Lost* to issue from the Romantic Period, though it is worth remembering that even *Frankenstein*, her most acclaimed novel, was initially presumed to be by her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley when it was first published anonymously in 1818. Taking issue with the incandescently provocative essay by Sandra Gilbert (originally published in 1978), which found it difficult to look past ‘Milton’s Bogey’, Mandy Green argues that the foregrounding of conversation, together with the establishment of the domestic sphere as the vital stage of human activity in Milton’s epic, allows for a more richly complex insight into its place at the heart of Mary Shelley’s novel. Shelley emerges here as a more critically responsive reader of *Paradise Lost* than had been recognised: by evoking repressed alternatives through a controlled use of Miltonic allusion, Shelley, like Milton, offers the reader insights into how things could and should have been.¹¹ While Mary Shelley generously acknowledged her husband’s collaborative support for her own literary endeavours in the Introduction to the 1831 edition, she also carefully established the limits of their literary partnership and unequivocally claimed her authorship of the novel.

The two subsections of Part II chart the way an appreciation of Milton and his works reached beyond ‘the British Isles’ — which he had presumed would be the limit of his influence — as his poetry begins to take root and flourish in different cultural and geographic terrains. Chapter 5, ‘The Return of William Wells Brown: A Heroic Black Miltonist in Elizabeth Josephine Brown’s Miltonic Biography of Her Father’ institutes a transglobal project of recovery by Reginald A. Wilburn in which he introduces readers to works by two black writers, father and daughter, which, prior to this collection, had not been seen to engage with England’s Christian and epic poet of liberty, John Milton. The chapter concentrates on Josephine Brown’s biography of her father, William Wells Brown, the famous fugitive slave, self-taught antislavery orator, and novelist, whose travel narrative contained numerous references and allusions to Milton. Having studied and taught in Europe, Elizabeth Josephine Brown returned to the United States to discover that both of her father’s autobiographies were no longer in print. Determined that her father’s name and his own heroic stand for liberty should be preserved for the future, she skilfully spliced together portions of her father’s slave narrative, *Narrative of William W. Brown* (1847) and his travel narrative, *Three Years in Europe* (1852), into a single biographical work. In 1856, the fruits of her voluntary labour were
published as Biography of an American Bondman, by His Daughter, and, in a radically revisionary gesture, her biography concludes with an address by Wendell Phillips, an early advocate for women’s rights and staunch abolitionist, which goes so far as to praise Wells Brown’s heroism at Milton’s expense.

In Chapter 5, Angelica Duran focuses on The Christian Epics (Los epopeyas cristianos, 1879) and The Christian Epic Poets (Los poetas épicos cristianos, c. 1895) by the Spanish woman of letters Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851–1921), who views Milton with a similarly independent spirit. Pardo Bazán was herself a Catholic and the collections of essays chronicle important ways that Spanish elite readers, including at least one woman, engaged with the epic as a genre and Milton within their specific religious and social contexts. Duran draws attention to the way, especially in her latter work, Pardo Bazán asserts the liveliness of the author-reader relationship, a dynamic enhanced by access to author biographies. Yet Duran detects a certain ambivalence running through Pardo Bazán’s response: on the one hand, Pardo Bazán highly values the epic genre, including Milton’s Paradise Lost, at a time when its popularity was waning; on the other hand, she openly admits to finding Paradise Lost’s appeal limited by a lack of universality. As Duran demonstrates, this is a personal assessment based on Pardo Bazán’s own close readings, comparisons to other works in the evolving canon of world literature, and selections from the literary criticism of the transnational republic of letters in which she situates herself and Spanish letters.

Translation has played a key role in Milton’s transnational and global reception. The final chapter in this section sheds light on the work of the female Hungarian poet and literary translator, Ágnes Nemes Nagy (1922–1991), who challenged three centuries of male-dominated reception of Milton in Hungary with her translation of Milton’s Sonnet 23, ‘Methought I saw my late espoused saint’, the most intensely personal of all his sonnets. Nagy was one of the leading figures of the Újhold (New Moon) circle, a semi-formal post-war group of poets and writers who were sometimes forced to resort to literary translation as the only possible creative activity under the oppressive cultural policy of state socialism. In Chapter 6, “I Am Not ‘Masculine’ I Am Weak”: Ágnes Nemes Nagy’s Translation of Sonnet 23’, Miklós Péti delineates the excessively masculinist tendencies in the Hungarian reception of Milton, in order to consider the importance of Milton’s work in the context of Nemes Nagy’s career as a poet and a translator, and to contextualise his close analysis of her translation of Sonnet 23. Péti explores how this woman poet negotiated her way through the long tradition of ‘serious and masculine’ readings of Milton’s works and considers whether her socio-cultural background, writing during a communist dictatorship, influenced the text of her translation. Péti also reflects on the way Sonnet 23 remained an enduring presence in her own life and poetry: he points out how the undated poem Én láttam ezt (‘This I have seen …’) reads as
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if it were recording the visitation described in Milton’s sonnet from the deceased wife’s perspective, and also how the poem entitled A távozó (‘The departing one’; in George Szirtes’s translation, ‘When she looked back …’) registers a fleeting vision of a ‘departing one’, not this time in a dream vision, but in the speaker’s awaking to the reality of terminal illness, after seeing an X-ray photograph.

The second section of Part III maintains a global focus, but begins by looking at more contemporary re-appropriations of Milton’s life and work in popular fiction. One of the most iconic scenes from Milton’s life is the blind poet dictating Paradise Lost. Most paintings representing the moment when his spoken words are transformed to written script show one of Milton’s daughters dutifully acting as his amanuensis, either head bent as she busily transcribes his words, or head up, alert and attentive, looking towards her father with her pen poised to write. In Chapter 7, ‘Milton’s Domestic Life and Tempered Female Ambition in Kim Wilkins’ Angel of Ruin’, Larisa Kocic-Zámbó revisits the fascination of male artists and female novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the genesis of Paradise Lost within a household full of women. Drawing upon historiographical biographies and biographical fiction, Kocic-Zámbó establishes how Milton’s youngest daughter Deborah came to be memorialised as the sister who took the principal role in reading to and writing for their father, and also raises the issue of barely credited female labour and subjugation to male literary enterprise. Unlike the passive, admiring recipient of her father’s words shown in the paintings, Deborah becomes troubled by the Satanic tendencies of the poem and determines to interpolate her own phrasing to ensure the epic keeps to her father’s avowed intention of ‘justifying the ways of God to man’. Unbeknown to Milton himself, the epic becomes a collaborative venture with his youngest daughter as silent partner. Framed as a narrative within a narrative, in acknowledgment of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, the most famous female retelling of Paradise Lost within the novel genre (see Chapter 3), Kocic-Zámbó presents this biographical novel as a contemporary contribution to the cultural history of rewriting Milton’s life, an intriguing claim to female authorship and a contemporary metaphor for its continuous, persistent relegation to partial invisibility and silence.

Chapter 8 presents a further intriguing transposition of elements from Milton’s biography and his epic, Paradise Lost, this time into a modern-day tropical paradise, Copacabana. The novel, Anatomia do Paraíso (‘Anatomy of Paradise’, 2015) by the Brazilian author Beatriz Bracher, focuses on Felix, a postgraduate student who is working on Paradise Lost as his research topic. His efforts to reach a full understanding of Milton’s epic are hampered by an epileptic seizure, which renders him temporarily blind. At this point, Felix’s role as protagonist is supplanted by Vanda and her younger sister, Maria Joana (‘Jojo’); the reader begins to see Milton through a female gaze as Felix now relies on the young Jojo to read the poem aloud to him. Listening to the poem powerfully
transforms Felix’s experience of the poetry; with her voice to guide him he is led from Hell to Paradise. However, Jojo finds encoded in the poem a message of female submission and compliance and turns away from the poem towards contemporary poetry, while Vanda herself breaks free from societal constraints and overturns Felix’s reductive attitude to women. Renata Meints Adail’s reading of this novel traces how, against the backdrop of a patriarchal society, the everyday lives of these three main characters become interwoven with the life of Milton and the text of his epic. A vertiginous and dramatic narrative unfolds, drawing in some of the main thematic preoccupations of *Paradise Lost* – sex, violence, sin, guilt, betrayal, death, and redemption – and offering the informed reader a deepened understanding of these characters’ lives.

In the final chapter of this section, ‘Milton and Arab Female Authorship in the Age of Social Media’, Sharihan Al-Akhras, the other editor of this volume, sheds light on a neglected, yet intriguing aspect of Milton studies in the Arab world. Much has been said about Milton’s reception in the Arab world, since his influence on male Egyptian authors in what is acknowledged to be ‘the golden years of the Arab Renaissance’ in twentieth-century Arabic literature is undeniable. However, no attention has been given to the role of female authorship in reading, writing, or rewriting in response to Milton. This chapter provides the first account of female engagement with Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in several Arab countries. This engagement includes teaching Milton, rewriting Milton, or writing in response to Arab male authors who ‘rewrote’ Milton. It also provides the first personal account given – in Milton studies – by Dr. Mona Prince, an Egyptian female academic, of the consequences she faced after teaching the text. The chapter then examines the way other female authors remodelled ‘Eve’ either in response to male authors echoing Milton, or to reconceive – and at times erase – the ‘first Woman’, in a way that enables them to resist and redefine the role of gender in religion, society, and politics across a wide geopolitical landscape in the Levant and the Gulf during the age of social media.

The first section in the final part of this volume, Part III, brings together three female academics who have each taken a different theoretical approach to Milton and education. As mentioned earlier, the previous chapter investigated the harassment experienced by a female academic after lecturing on *Paradise Lost* in Egypt, and at a time rife with attempts to impede the free flow of ideas – whether by suppressing texts for study and silencing speakers or demonising dissent as unpatriotic in a time of crisis – it is vital to remember Milton’s advocacy in *Areopagitica* for the free circulation of ideas as vital for ensuring educative progress and avoiding cultural stagnation. This said, female readers have often felt that Milton has not always extended the same freedoms to women as to men, education for women being an obvious area of contention. While it is tempting to invoke the divorce tracts and their celebration of ‘cheerful conversation’ or Adam’s dependence on Eve’s ‘sweet converse’ (9.919) as evidence of Milton’s high estimation of companionship in marriage,
John Leonard asks that we should reconsider exactly ‘what kind of conversation Milton values in women’ (2017: II.704). He recognises that ‘Milton is capable of having a divided mind on this question. He both does and does not want his help meet to be an equal. He wants a marriage of true minds, but he also wants women to offer men relief from strenuous intellectual pursuits’ (ibid.). On the one hand we have his own daughters, taught no Latin and probably resentful of their role as readers in languages they did not understand; on the other we have Milton’s own intellectual circle which contained some of the most educated women of the time. Shannon Miller’s chapter, ‘Beyond Milton’s Daughters: Dorothy Dury, Lady Ranelagh, and the Question of Female Education’, explores the connections between Milton and members of the Samuel Hartlib Circle, including Dorothy Dury, John Dury’s wife, and Katherine Jones, Lady Ranelagh to engage this important question. Miller establishes how the theme of marital ‘conversation’ dominates Milton’s *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643), and demonstrates how Milton’s own arguments that a husband and wife must be able to have an intellectual, not just a physical, ‘conversation’ also features in the letters of John and Dorothy Dury during this period. At exactly the same time that Milton introduces the notion of marital ‘conversation’ into a debate about divorce, Hartlib will edit and publish the Durys’ letters to model this central tenet within the decision to marry. As a consequence, Hartlib highlights the issue of female education within marriage that remains unstated, though implicit, in Milton’s writing on companionate marriage, but does so by ‘re-writing’ Dorothy Dury’s own letters.

In Chapter 11, ‘Queer Opening’: Eve’s Readers and Writers’, Stephanie Spoto offers a personal perspective on being a woman reader of Milton’s epic poem. In the seventies and eighties, feminist scholars critiquing Milton brought attention to the role of the woman reader, exploring the ways in which many women readers have experiences in reading *Paradise Lost* that differ significantly from those of men. The patriarchal backlash against these different perspectives demonstrated what is at stake when we examine Eve: the acknowledgement of women’s experiences and subjectivities. Spoto re-examines the approaches of feminist scholars Christine Froula and Sandra Gilbert, as well as the derisive responses from Philip Gallagher and Edward Pechter, and remodels the debate by framing it within twenty-first century queer studies of Milton’s epic. In this reading, Eve, rather than existing merely as a symbol of patriarchal oppression in such a way that alienates women readers, becomes instead a point of entry into the Miltonic epic that has become destabilised by the application of queer perspectives. Here, Eve is a figure of identification for the Othered and structurally marginalised readers, as they identify with her struggles for knowledge and independence.

In the spirit of the previous chapter, Roula-Maria Dib revisits *Paradise Lost* from a more positive revisionary perspective, looking at Eve and her relationship with Adam from a psychoanalytic standpoint by adopting
Mandy Green and Sharihan Al-Akhras

a neo-Jungian lens. In Chapter 9, “Paradise Within”: A Post-Jungian Revisiting of the Feminine in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Dib argues that recent feminist revisions of Jung’s gender theories by Susan Rowland and other theorists can be helpfully applied to the first marriage. Revising the concepts of the anima and animus in such a way as to highlight their complementary roles, the positive qualities of the anima are seen as important as those of the animus and their union essential for successfully completing the process of individuation in both genders. Dib demonstrates how this new reading, which situates *Paradise Lost* within the framework of another feminist revision – that of Jung and gender – is in keeping with more recent developments in Milton studies that have stressed Eve’s positive role in the epic. Viewed as wise, self-sacrificing, redemptive, and forgiving, Eve’s qualities enable the possibility of attaining to a ‘paradise within … happier far’ (12.587).

The second section of Part III maintains a broadly feminist approach while turning from theory to practice, looking at responses to Milton in digital media, the visual arts, and performance. Today, *Paradise Lost* is primarily read by academics, yet despite its being one of the most challenging texts in the English literary canon, it remains surprisingly popular with a wide general audience. During the spring semester of 2019, Jameela Lares, Charles W. Moorman Distinguished Professor of the Humanities (2017–2019), hosted a reading of selected scenes from *Paradise Lost* at the University of Southern Mississippi, an event which expanded that reading beyond the academy by extending an invitation to the wider community. Chapter 13, ‘Gendered Reflections on an All-Day Reading of *Paradise Lost*’, takes responses to Milton into the digital world with a digital text of the epic projected on a screen for the use of participants in the event. Although the reading was not a particularly gendered space, the majority of attendees were women. Afterwards, Kayla Schreiber circulated to audience members a digital questionnaire to gauge their responses to key gendered issues in the scenes selected for reading; such topics included: Satan’s possible rape of Sin; her rape by Death; Eve’s creation as recounted by Eve versus Adam’s account; and the degree of sympathy elicited by Satan, Sin, Adam, and Eve. Lares and Schreiber concluded that technology allowed those of diverse backgrounds, interests, and generations more access to Milton’s writings, and that live-streaming would make it possible for readers in other locations across the globe to ‘attend’. Indeed, it became evident that this might be the only way to make such a reading experience possible, a conclusion which became even more telling afterwards in the wake of the 2020 Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, when social distancing and distance-learning protocols became mandatory.

Since the first illustrated edition of *Paradise Lost* (1668), more than 150 artists have attempted to bring its invisible worlds to visible life. All but a handful of these visual interpreters have been men: from John Baptiste Medina to Edward Burney, from William Blake to John Martin and Gustav Doré. Chapter 14, ‘Other Eyes: Women Artists Reading
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Paradise Lost, alerts us to the ways in which four remarkable women, all less known than their male counterparts, have created some of the most insightful visual readings of Milton’s text, each revealing new aspects of the poet’s vision. The first, Jane Giraud, published her Flowers of Milton anonymously in 1846, when botanical painting was regarded as an appropriate art form for ladies. Ninety years later, between 1935 and 1937, Carlotta Petrina and Mary Elizabeth Groom produced two illustrated editions of the poem that rival William Blake’s in their visionary power. And in 1991, through her Snake Path project at the University of California, San Diego, Alexis Smith turned the poem inside out – in a gigantic installation that is neither an image nor a series of images, but a physical journey. Wendy Furman-Adams points out that Jane Giraud was the first woman to make a visual response to Milton’s epic in hand-coloured flower paintings attributable to the artist only by a handwritten dedication to Queen Victoria or, in some copies, to the artist’s brother. She observes how Mary Groom and Carlotta Petrina, far freer to pursue their art, produced full and dramatically different feminist readings of Milton’s epic. For Petrina, Furman-Adams perceptively argues, that reading is grounded in an utterly abject Eve, an image that stands in for all twelve of her drawings to express the desolation of history, as Hitler and Mussolini moved the world towards an apocalypse that would fall most heavily, Petrina believed, on women. Furman-Adams observes how, uniquely uninterested in the moment of choice so central to other illustrators, Petrina focuses instead on the poem’s deep sadness and terror, as seen in her Mussolini-like deity and terrifying Expulsion. Finally, Furman-Adams explores the way Alexis Smith’s truly postmodern Milton turns the very idea of textual illustration inside-out, by turning Paradise Lost into ten-foot-high granite volume, complete with appropriate shelf number. As well as examining these illustrations of Milton’s Paradise Lost, Furman-Adams ensures that the individual female voices behind them are distinctly heard and that the ‘conversation’ enriching such artistic works is fully explored.

The final chapter in this section attends to the staging of two of Milton’s works in the archetypal indoor Jacobean theatre constructed in 2014 at Shakespeare’s Globe, both performances providing a feminist reception of Milton’s poetry. In Chapter 15, ‘Women Directing Milton: Feminist Stagings of Miltonic Seduction’, Farah Karim-Cooper’s primary focus is on the ways in which Miltonic seduction is interpreted by female directors in twenty-first century theatre. Her chapter opens with a discussion of architectural poetics to suggest how Milton’s art naturally delights in the fluency and poetic utility of performative and dramatic material, observing how these qualities were put to use when telling what the poet felt was humankind’s most important story. The chapter first explores the role of performance and theatricality in Milton’s writing and then conducts an analysis of two performances of his work in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse: Comus, staged in the winter season of