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Walker, William. Antiformalist, Unrevolutionary, Illiberal Milton: Political Prose, 1644–1660

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Walker, William.

Antiformalist, Unrevolutionary, Illiberal Milton: Political Prose, 1644–1660. Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2014. Pp. 207. ISBN 978-1-4724-3133-2 (hardcover) \$109.95.

Lively, well-written, provocative, punchy—this book will ruffle feathers. Milton criticism has long been dominated by the three Rs: Radical, Republican, Revolutionary. John Aubrey tells us that Milton “pronounced y^e letter R very hard,” so it is easy to imagine him rattling off the R words as his admirers routinely do, but Walker insists that he never does, at least not in a positive way: “Milton never refers to himself or any of his allies as a ‘republican.’” He does use “revolt,” but all of his instances are pejorative and Walker concludes that he would have frowned on books with titles like *Milton and the English Revolution*. In Milton’s parlance, “revolting” is always bad. Citing numerous instances from the prose, Walker demonstrates that Milton consistently uses “revolt” and “rebel” of his enemies (Royalists, Catholics, Irish rebels): “the verbs ‘to rebel’ and ‘to revolt’ were at this time commonly used to describe action taken not against just any authority, principle, law, institution or establishment, but against an authority, principle, law, institution or establishment that was seen to be just and legitimate. These verbs were thus not badges of courage and honour but terms of criticism and abuse.” Following H. M. Höpfl, Walker is sceptical of “isms” and resists any attempt to appropriate old authors for modern ideological causes. His emphasis throughout the book is on what makes Milton different from us, not on his supposed place in some larger “success story” (Whig or Marxist).

The point is strong, but the argument is vulnerable at two key points. First, Walker places so much importance on words that he diminishes the significance of deeds. He sometimes writes as if Whig and Marxist interpretations of history were completely discredited by the fact that seventeenth-century figures did not use Whig or Marxist terms. In the chapter “Unrevolutionary Milton,” he makes the telling point that Cromwell did not see himself as a revolutionary. Addressing Parliament on the eve of the king’s trial, Cromwell acknowledged that if the act now being contemplated had been proposed by “design,” the proposer should justly be condemned as “the greatest traitor and rebel in the world. But since the Providence of God hath cast this upon us, I cannot but submit to providence.” Walker concludes that the regicides were not

revolting but “*submitting* to a divine [...] command.” The point is fair, but it sits oddly with Walker’s disdain for what he sees as a reifying thrust in Whig and Marxist notions of historical progress as a “thing out there in the world.” For Cromwell, divine providence was itself a “thing out there,” and his own reifying language might lend backhanded support to the Marxist reifications of a historian like Hill, even though Cromwell did not use Hill’s terms. The second vulnerability in Walker’s argument about “revolt” is more damaging to his thesis. He is right to insist that the word is always pejorative in Milton’s lexicon, but he misses the important detail that it has narrowed in meaning since Milton’s time. The English language is rich in words that mean the opposite of themselves, and such words were a site of bitter conflict during the Civil War. “Revolt” was one such word, for the modern sense existed alongside the now obsolete sense of a “return to a former allegiance” (*OED*). Milton in his prose often uses the latter sense for backsliding Presbyterians who *betrayed* the event that we now call “the English Revolution.” In *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* he chides Presbyterians for “revolting” to the Stuart yoke. Having “born armes against thir King, devested him, disannointed him, nay curs’d him all over in their Pulpits and thir Pamphlets [...] beyond what is possible or honest to retreat from,” conservative backsliders now “turne revolters from those principles.” In *The Readie and Easie Way*, published on the eve of the Restoration, Milton again chides Presbyterians for “revolting from the conscience of deeds welldon.” “By thus relapsing,” they “verifie all the bitter predictions of our triumphing enemies.” For Milton, “revolt” is often synonymous with “relapse.” Walker is therefore right to insist that it is not a word Milton ever embraced, but the “revolters” he deplored are often backsliding conservatives, not radicals. In “Sonnet 12” he deplores the Presbyterian detractors of his divorce pamphlets “That bawl for freedom in their senseless mood, / And still revolt when truth would set them free.” It has been argued (and Walker repeats the claim) that this sonnet was written not against the Presbyterians, who (we are told) did not “revolt,” but against the radical sectaries, whose revolution Milton deplored; however, the Presbyterians did revolt, in the old sense of “backslide,” and that is the sense Milton is using here. The point is that Milton may have been a revolutionary in Hill’s sense even though he rejected Hill’s word. Writing long before historians began to talk of “the Puritan Revolution” or “the English Revolution,” Milton uses “revolters” where a modern revolutionary would say “counter revolutionaries.” This one simple semantic change (I suspect the decisive event that changed the word was

the Glorious Revolution of 1688) continues to bedevil interpretation of Milton and other seventeenth-century revolutionaries (in our sense of the word). Walker to his cost misses this change (which has far-reaching implications for his argument), but he is right to be attentive to Milton's words and right to argue that Milton should be read on his own terms. The book as a whole is a breath of fresh air, especially at the present time when so many Miltonists are determined to cast Milton in their own image. That is a mistake Walker never makes, and his book is the better for it. *Antiformalist, Unrevolutionary, Illiberal Milton* is often unpersuasive, but never dull, and Miltonists should be grateful to Walker for forcing us to read the political prose with more finely attuned ears.

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