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Williams, David.

The Communion of the Book: Milton and the Humanist Revolution in Reading. Studies in the History of Ideas 86. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022. Pp. xii, 502 + 2 ill. ISBN 978-0-2280-1469-0 (hardcover) \$140.

David Williams's massive final book in his four-volume history of media change addresses key shifts in print culture, literacy, reading habits, and ideologies of reading in early modern Europe. As a Media Studies specialist (and Miltonist), Williams traces the various contributors to humanism and Protestantism, arguing that they collectively paved the way for a Europe rewired by textuality, the new nation-making sacrament. Examining in turn the work and influence of Desiderius Erasmus, John Foxe, John Lilburne, Edmund Ludlow, and others, Williams argues for these figures' various effects on John Milton's works, especially *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. But Williams focuses not so much on Milton as on a fundamental shift in the European mind, towards a communion of textuality, a sacrament of the word, that he sees generating "a new and revolutionary culture of religious choice and doctrinal freedom" (440).

This study of the legal, exegetical, hagiographical, and linguistic turning of the word into a new Eucharistic art is impressively vast in scope. It ranges from early Babylonian histories to Arabic paper-making technologies; from the spiritual metaphors of vellum to Laud's use of the Star Chamber; from correspondence between Calvin and Zwingli over the real presence to fourteenth-century Italian historiographers; from ancient Greek drama's use of the chorus to errata in Milton's editions. Relentlessly thorough in its sources and scholarship, Williams's work can only impress with its sheer scale and drive.

Of course, as a meta-print-culture history juxtaposed with literary criticism, *The Communion of the Book* takes certain risks, most notably (and of necessity) relying quite heavily on the more focused scholarship of others (John King on Foxe; Stephen Dobranski on Milton's editions; and so on). Any one of Williams's chapters could be a book-length study (Erasmus, humanism, printing, and *sola scriptura*; Foxe and new Protestant hagiographies). Williams's care and attention to these sources and his own broad reading is impressive, but inevitably, he frequently has to lean on others' findings.

Perhaps equally unsurprising, *The Communion of the Book* is also sometimes reiterative. Foxe's influence on Milton's *Paradise Regained* (perhaps the most original insight here for literary scholars) features in multiple chapters,

as does *Samson Agonistes* in others. This suggests perhaps that the chapters were written independently—or are designed to be read independently.

The repetitions become somewhat more problematic in the book's core thesis, which relies on and reiterates Joseph Henrich's broad argument that Lutheranism rewired the European brain to make it Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (Henrich's acronym is WEIRD). Williams is making more historically specific arguments about the flesh made word here. He does, however, frequently repeat Henrich's claim that the Protestant Reformation fundamentally enabled an actual shift in neurological functions that generated new cultural modalities and social opportunities.

There are some difficulties with this deference to Henrich. First, for early modernists (if we ignore its pseudo-neurology), this claim is in some senses not new at all; it is an often-critiqued truism that Protestantism was a religion of the word (versus Catholicism, a religion of materiality, ritual, and image). Williams does add to that confessional history by taking seriously the nature of Protestant literacy, especially extending others' readings of the Reformation's newly sacramental understanding of language. Williams interrogates this concept in suggestive ways: How does Milton's Jesus in *Paradise Regained* read scripture (codex or scroll)? How do Foxe's martyrs perform exegesis? How does Erasmus refigure the meaning of text itself? How do Lilburn's textual readings of the law allow for resistance to church-based authority? These to me are the most interesting contributions of this work, especially as Williams links Foxe and Erasmus with Milton.

Williams's adherence to Henrich risks, however, quite a lot. It is of course impossible to prove an actual "rewiring" of the Protestant brain in the sixteenth century; Williams doesn't try, but he trusts such a dubious claim because it enables his narrative. Any reading of social change based on Protestant Europe also has the same difficulty that Max Weber's *Spirit of Capitalism* had: How do we then account for the much earlier growing literacy of Catholic Europe? Petrarch, for instance, to whom Williams frequently and fruitfully returns, is writing in a new vernacular *as* a Catholic. Historians of late-medieval Catholicism note how common were vernacular psalters, breviaries, devotionals, and mass-books for Catholic worshippers. The growth of European universities predated Luther. Was the Catholic brain then being rewired as well? And to what effect? To his credit, Williams ranges far beyond Protestants for his history of sacred textualism, and in some senses the value of the book lies outside of its use of

Henrich's tendentious schema. In that sense, this work would be better off leaning on its own more specific claims.

For the temptation of the broad intellectual paradigm is perhaps not too surprising in a book on the history of ideas, but there is a lot elided here. Milton's Cromwell suppressed democracy for the people in favour of propertied men, brutally oppressed the Irish, and ruled through a military coup. The East India Company, Dutch Protestant slaughters of Pacific Islanders, and British slave-trading monopolies were all initiated in this same century. Williams occasionally acknowledges such issues, and he has elsewhere in his *oeuvre*. It is not, of course, necessary for Williams to address these trends here alongside the ones he is (as a Media Studies scholar) interested in, *except* when the book claims that Northern Europe and England are trending towards democracy, choice, and freedom through literacy. We then have the right to ask: Choice for whom? Democracy for whom? Freedom for whom? I hope, given Williams's obvious intellectual energy, rigour, and capacity, that he will write more to answer these questions, as the emergent technology of the book is clearly a major factor in the complex political cultures of early modern Europe, and Williams has here suggested some fascinating alliances and trends in its development.

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