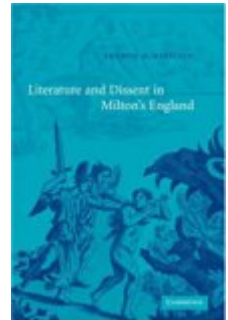


Sharon Achinstein. *Literature and Dissent in Milton's England*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xii + 302 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-81804-9.



Reviewed by Joad Raymond

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Neil Keeble's adventurous and now widely influential 1987 book, *The Literary Culture of Non-conformity in Later-Seventeenth-Century England*, sought to place nonconformist writing in the social, political, and, importantly, printing contexts of the Restoration and to recover for our view the interests and merits of writers who seemed marginal to the canon of polite, literary writing from the period. Sharon Achinstein's new book develops a more complicated map of the literary landscape of the 1660s through the 1680s. Two approaches feed into this map. First, Achinstein considers the community of dissent, itself riven by political and theological difference. It may be wrong to speak of this in terms of internal divides, as it is the hindsight of the historian or critic that enables her to posit the unity; but Achinstein looks both for the shared characteristics of dissenters, and the issues that divided them, and for various relations with the Anglican community. It is through the last that dissenters ultimately found what appeared to be a unity, a boundary that separated them from the polite, communicative norms that defined both Restoration society and much of its literary output. Yet, Achinstein

takes pains to remind us, dissent and Anglicanism were not simple binary opposites, and to take them as such is ultimately to reinscribe the position of the conformist center in critical and historical analysis, to privilege the interests of the persecutors.

Secondly, Achinstein reconstructs the intellectual impulses and some of the aesthetics of dissenting writing. Here there are, again, two aspects to her analysis, the first concerning the relationship between writing and action, the second concerning poetics. Dissenting writing, insofar as it has been considered at all within the remits of traditional literary analysis, has been associated with defeat and internalization, a spiritual retreat into an interiority that provides consolation and justifies disengagement from a world that is hostile and unrelenting. This is how Bunyan's aesthetic is positioned, how the increasingly quietist Quaker religion and writings are understood, and, at least until recently, the basis for reading Milton's late work. *Paradise Lost* is read as an allegory of loss that supports a long-distant promise of a paradise within in return for good works and

spiritual perseverance, *Paradise Regained* as an account of spiritual action as resistance to temptation, and, perhaps, the resistance to action, display, even learning. Yet images of splendid violence and political terror inhabit much of this writing, not least Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, and the figure of the biblical judge Samson is a recurrent one in dissenting writing. Violence is the most spectacular form of resistance, and therefore represents an extreme form of action. How do the idea of violence and images of it relate, Achinstein asks, to the forms of writing that dissenters use to express their dissent? How does the register of violent action, of the Samson figure, stand within a mode of writing that frequently expressly disavows terror? Is it a return of the consciously suppressed or even a form of encoded threat? In the language of violence Achinstein finds a work of memory: it is an accounting for action that both looks back to the recent revolutionary past, finding even within the trauma of 1660 some limited signs of success, but also looks forward to the future. In these literary works of dissenters the energies of the revolutionary moment survive, and in them too dissenting writers endeavor to imagine a way out of the present moment. Memory marks the boundaries of communities, recalls deceased worthies, anticipates a transformed future. *Samson Agonistes* is just such a work of memory: more than an analysis of political oppression, it asserts that there is a future embedded in the readiness of those who wait for God's command. In Milton the account of liberty is one guaranteed less by liberal politics than by apocalyptic faith.

The book is held together by these recurrent themes: memory and action. Memory suggests one account of the coherence of dissenting writing, even that writing which seeks to orient the future. It celebrates individuals, recalls the identity and continuity of communities, and confronts the collective experience of defeat, perhaps even snatching from loss a renewed sense of purpose. We find this memory-work being undertaken in

funerals, which combined ritual and reflective literary texts with the physical gesture of collectively gathering and bearing witness. Achinstein's sophisticated approach to literary form illuminates funerals and funeral sermons, both their literary coherence and the implicit political alignments of the mode. Funerals can be viewed, she demonstrates, as a dissenting literary genre in the 1660s. It is likewise with hymns, dull enough on the surface, but charged with meaning and with political significance because of their role in bringing together dissenting voices in worship and testifying to an ongoing community, rather than for gestures of resistance we might find in the words. Thus in funerals and in hymns, writing, memory, and action converge. This is important to Achinstein because it enables her to discover the survival of the energies of the revolution in dissenting writing. Writing becomes a deep repository, of memories and actions, of a dissenting culture that has been occluded by subsequent historical developments. Violence is important here, in part, because of what it says about the potential for human action. The liberal enlightenment which did so much to effect the disappearance of the dissenters' resistance eradicated Milton's apocalyptic account of human action. God was removed from the center of human agency at least as far as to allow another generation, John Locke among them, room to devise a new account of human voluntarism without this semantically charged, apocalyptic violence.

The second dimension of the dissenting aesthetic analyzed here concerns poetics. How does, Achinstein asks, an allegedly anti-sensualist theology result in a poetics? She is explicitly ambivalent about the traditional literary merits of some of the texts about which she writes and is surprisingly reluctant to tease virtue out of some clumsy writings or to proselytize on behalf of some of her authors. Though she does not offer a sustained poetics, a number of themes recur. One is the popular plain-style, the "play-book" style, for which the prose opponents of Andrew Marvell condemned

nonconformists. This is, no doubt, in part the language of the Dissenting Academies, not the idealized transparent language of the Royal Society, but a workmanlike, clear language, sometimes studiously unself-conscious, irregularly rhythmic, written and spoken with as little as possible recourse to Latin grammar. At the same time critics of nonconformists accused this same language of darkness and obscurity. This was because it emerged out of religious enthusiasm, betraying the zeal and impoliteness of its speaker. How the same language is both popularly plain and dark is unclear. The picture is further complicated by the role of prophetic speech. This was, Achinstein argues, exploited to assert individual inspiration and distinctness from Anglican orthodoxy, but it also created a dark code, a literary space from which the orthodox were at least partly excluded. It was therefore a space reserved for the zealous godly, a place of resistance, in which difference could be asserted and threats spoken. Such obscurity is somehow related to the homely Biblicism of the plain style: but it is not clear just how. Memory plays another intriguing role in the use of the lyric: Achinstein shows how important a presence George Herbert is in dissenting poetry, which constructed a devotional voice by reaching back to pre-civil war poetry, despite the theological and institutional tensions that such gestures might create. Finally, there is the sublime. The figure of elevation is tied to dissenters' lyric mode as well as to Milton's epic, and it recurs through Achinstein's book. It is the sublime, perhaps, that justifies dissenters seeking to articulate thoughts and feelings in the fleshy voice of poetry. At one point Achinstein suggests that the poetry of the Welsh Baptist Vavasor Powell eschews poetic affect in favor of artlessness; this is a measure of his directness in calling for action. Is this so very far from what Samuel Butler suggested in *Hudibras*, in representing dissent as a violent and confused, transparent and obscure, simple-minded and disingenuous? Achinstein's work suggests that in order to appreciate dissenting writing we might want to

listen hard to the intricacies of Butler's calumnies. While not offering a comprehensive manual of dissenting poetics, Achinstein does navigate a path through the complex literary and political terrains of Restoration England, showing how dissenting religion and writing, and conforming religion and writing mutually defined themselves and each other. Sometimes suggesting that we need a more tolerant aesthetic, sometimes stating the merits of relatively obscure writings on traditional grounds, and consistently bringing a diversity of approaches to thought, action, and aesthetics, *Literature and Dissent in Milton's England* offers a new and more nuanced and complicated, if fragmentary, account of the value of dissenting literature.

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