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REVIEW

Review of Alex Garganigo, *Samson's Cords: Imposing Oaths in Milton, Marvell, and Butler*

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Alex Garganigo, *Samson's Cords: Imposing Oaths in Milton, Marvell, and Butler*. Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2018. Pp. xv + 332; Hardback \$85 (£57.99)

The subject of oath-swearing tends to occupy historians of the seventeenth-century rather than literary scholars. Studies by Edward Vallance, David Martin Jones, and John Walter have examined how oaths were debated, administered, sworn and performed, the ways in which oaths were used to secure the loyalty of citizens and safeguard Protestant religion, and why both parliamentary and popular politics could be integral to their creation.¹ In *Samson's Cords*, Garganigo takes an innovative tack, picking up the central threads about debates on oaths to explore the ways John Milton, Andrew Marvell and Samuel Butler discussed oaths in their writing. Oaths, he argues, were a proxy for much larger disputes over religious and political pluralism; what Milton, Marvell and Butler had to say about oaths offers a valuable prism through which to trace their religious and political views.

¹ Edward Vallance, *Revolutionary England and the National Covenant: State Oaths, Protestantism and the Political Nation, 1553–1682* (Woodbridge; Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press, 2005); David Martin Jones, *Conscience and Allegiance in Seventeenth Century England: The Political Significance of Oaths and Engagements* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 1999); and John Walter, *Covenanting Citizens: The Protestation Oath and Popular Political Culture in the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Samson's Cords begins with an overview, describing the 'continuum of oath swearing practices' (3), their histories and the significance of speech-act theory. This opening chapter comprises a number of sometimes loosely linked sections that combine historicist, linguistic, and anthropological approaches: 'State mandated Loyalty Oaths in Britain (1534–1702)', 'What Oaths Do', 'Further Extensions of Speech Act Theory: Derrida, Agamben and Schmitt', 'Performance Theory', 'The Restoration and the History of Oath Swearing' and 'The Restoration of Oaths'. Chapter 1 examines Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* and argues that, though Butler adopted an 'antijurist' position while in service to the Duke of Buckingham, *Hudibras* is not hostile to all oaths, but 'argues for a better enforcement of the Clarendon Code's Oaths' (26). Chapter 2 looks at Andrew Marvell's opposition to uniformity oaths and the Test Act (1673) in *Rehearsal Transpros'd* and the *Second Part*, concluding that 'Marvell did not wish to abolish all oaths ... just oaths that did not assume a separation of church and state' (52). Chapter 3 reads Marvell's 'An Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland' as a secular poem, which Garganigo takes to mean religiously tolerant, occupying a position that 'deemphasizes religion in the public sphere while not banishing it entirely' (95). On this view Marvell was a tolerationist as interested in the separation of Church and State in the 1650s as he was in the Restoration. Chapter 4 assesses the imposition of oaths in John Milton's *Eikonoklastes* and *Samson Agonistes* and the consequences both of resisting oaths and being reluctantly bound by their terms. Chapter 5 focuses on the coronation of the Son (lines 600–615) in Book 5 of *Paradise Lost*. By crowning the Son through an oath that God swears 'alone', Garganigo argues that the 'coercive and monopolistic' (135) nature of the coronation gave Milton a platform to call for reforms of the constitution and coronation oaths. Chapter 6 extends the discussion to *Paradise Lost*, making the case that the kind of 'fealty' sworn in the coronation ceremony has wider significance for our understanding of Eve: 'the prohibition against eating the apple functions very much like an imposed oath such as the Oath of Allegiance ... or the Clarendon Subscriptions, themselves clear demonstrations of fealty' (165). By eating the apple, Eve 'can and does withdraw her fealty from God, however unwittingly' (186), and therefore, in Garganigo's view, Milton 'grants her the status of full political subject' (165).

This is an extremely hardworking, wide-ranging study. It covers a great deal of scholarly ground, from the Classical, Hebraic, and Biblical origins of oath swearing to individual cases of enforcement by local government officials. Garganigo has read widely in the primary materials, and a virtue of this study is that it provides a wealth of information about seventeenth-century opinions on the imposition of oaths and their importance, drawn from an impressive array of contemporary writers. And Garganigo is right that oaths have been peculiarly neglected by literary scholars. That the seventeenth-century was the 'age of oaths' has long been a historiographical truism, yet literary criticism has been slow to catch up. One of the merits of studying of oaths is that it incorporates many different types of history: it can be a means to trace an individual's intellectual development and can provide insights into social, political, and religious change. Garganigo's book widens the existing scope to include literary developments in the Restoration, and will surely open up a new line of debate.

Samson's Cords is sometimes unbalanced by Garganigo's patchy engagement with recent and not-so-recent scholarship. Chapter 3 hinges on John Wallace's 1968 claim that the Engagement Oath is an essential context of 'An Horatian Ode', yet Garganigo himself offers little close reading of the poem to support this; Garganigo seems to imply that Wallace is right because of what is not said in the poem rather than what is (93–94). Chapter 5 sidesteps Roger Lejosne's influential 1995 essay, 'Milton, Satan, Salmasius, Abdiel'. In it, Lejosne makes clear the distinction Milton drew between the politics of Heaven and Earth in *Paradise Lost*. Because 'on earth, no man could rightly claim divine honours' Milton therefore renders the 'universal hierarchy irrelevant to human politics'.² Garganigo's discussion of coronation oaths in *Paradise Lost* needs us to accept that, notwithstanding this 'notion of Divine Exception', parallels between God's monarchy and human monarchy remain. Rather than take a Lejosne-type view that the circumstances of God's crowning the Son in Heaven apply only to Heaven, Garganigo thinks dismay at God's arbitrarily handing

² Roger Lejosne, 'Milton, Satan, Salmasius, Abdiel', in *Milton and Republicanism*, ed David Armitage, Armand Himy, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 117.

power to the Son was designed to cause Republicans to worry about the transfer of supreme power on Earth (163). His sparse rationale that Milton 'puts pressure on the Divine Exception, allowing a sense that this is all unfair to bleed over temporarily into our consideration of Heaven' (135) may not convince all Miltonists.

Another disconcerting feature of *Samson's Cords* is imprecision about toleration. There is small sense here of the ecclesiological differences that existed between tolerationists, nor any reference to the work by John Marshall, Ethan Shagan, and John Coffey on toleration. Coffey in particular has identified four distinct 'tolerationist' positions.³ Garganigo's assertions about Marvell's advocacy of Church and State separation may incur criticism for similar reasons. Garganigo overlooks a central feature of early modern ecclesiological debate: the royal supremacy. The king's position as the lay head of the Church of England merged the civil (temporal) and ecclesiastical (spiritual), leaving the extent of Church autonomy and role of bishops in the ecclesiastical polity uncertain. Where the royal supremacy generated conflict between bishops and the king—was the authority of bishops sanctioned by temporal authority or the product of divine law and therefore exempt from royal prerogative or statute law?—Marvell argued (in *Mr. Smirke*) that the monarch had full jurisdiction in Church governance and could appoint or remove clergymen and bishops 'with the same power as he did his other Lay Officers',⁴ and (in *Rehearsall Transpros'd: the Second Part*) that Christ had passed his authority to kings ('by the Gospel gave Law to Princes') not the episcopacy. And where the royal supremacy provoked debate about whether the supremacy of the Church was vested in the king, or the king in Parliament, Marvell responded (in *An Account*) that it was Parliament: 'the House of Commons ... are more particularly Impowered by them [the people] to transact concerning the Religion, Lives, Liberties, and the Propriety of the Nation'.⁵ Marvell's consistent argument that the Church was subject to civil authority sits uneasily with Garganigo's claims that Marvell was 'non-Erastian' (91) and, after 1673, suspicious

³ John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England* (Harlow: Pearson, Education, 2000), 12.

⁴ Andrew Marvell, *Mr. Smirke; or, the Divine in Mode* (London, 1676), 64.

⁵ Marvell, *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government* (London, 1677), 74.

of any 'state intervention in religion' (91). Marvell may have wanted the episcopacy removed from civil apparatus, but this does not constitute a policy of Church-State separation. Jacqueline Rose has addressed the royal supremacy and Marvell's views on it in *Godly Kingship in Restoration England: The Politics of the Royal Supremacy, 1660–1688* (2011) and it might have been of benefit here.

Nevertheless, this is a very lively, provocative study that effects an unexpected alignment between a trio of Restoration literary heavyweights. Garganigo's approach offers both an entirely fresh take on writing by Milton, Marvell, and Butler and an original perspective from which scholars might think about Restoration literature in future.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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