John Creaser. *Milton and the Resources of the Line*. **Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 432 pp. ISBN 9780192864253. $125.00 hardback.**

It would be no exaggeration to call *Milton and the Resources of the Line* the summation of a life's work. John Creaser has been writing on (mainly) early modern literature for half a century, but this is his first monograph. It collects the work on Milton and prosody for which he has become best known. Four of the eleven chapters are based on essays first published between 2000 and 2008 (including a fifty-page article in *The Review of English Studies*), and a series of other essays, which first appeared in collections such as *Milton in Context* (2010), *The Oxford Handbook of Milton* (2011), and *The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost* (2014), are, as Creaser puts it, "drawn on from time to time" (xv). There are also pieces which have not previously appeared in print in any form, including a chapter on *Samson Agonistes* comprised of fully sixty pages. *Milton and the Resources of the Line* is thus a large and formidable piece of criticism, the fruit of decades of teaching and writing, and one which demands the constant attention of the reader.

This is how Creaser wants it, for he is an eloquent and unapologetic advocate for the concentration that reading Milton demands. As he puts it in the penultimate sentence of the book: "The verse of *Paradise Lost*, with its continual variety of movement within the line and energies thrusting across many lines, demands unremitting alertness and discrimination" (388). Likewise, Creaser's book is a densely argued and at times highly technical *magnum opus*, which even develops its own

system of prosodic symbols, "based on but somewhat simplifying ["somewhat" does quite a lot of work here] the prosodic insights of Derek Attridge" (389). Creaser takes from Attridge the idea that English prosody should be approached less as a matter of feet than one of stress and beat played off against the natural rhythms of speech. The key insight offered by Attridge's theories of rhythm for Creaser's purposes is that "the pause of the line-turn may itself act as a stressed or unstressed syllable" (49). Once we recognize this, then we can see how, as Creaser writes, "the line-turn has a real presence and function in English verse—in a way incompatible with foot theory. The shaping into lines has not merely a typographic but a rhythmic presence—audible when the poem is read aloud well or perceptible by the silent reader—and blank verse, in particular, cannot be 'verse only to the eye,' as the 'ingenious critic' cited by Johnson in his *Life of Milton* complained" (51).

It is lineation which "establishes the fact of artifice [and] heightens consciousness of the rhythms and sounds of language" (ix): it is what makes a poem poetic, and a true poem engages aural and oral, as well as cognitive, faculties. For Creaser, properly reading poetry like Milton's is (appropriately enough given Milton's late views on the indivisibility of body and soul) a kind of monist experience, in which "mind and body are one". And reading Milton is a full-body experience like no other, Creaser writes, for Milton's "mastery" of the resources of the line, "though it is little discussed," is "unmatched by another poet in English" (ix). Creaser's book thus sets out to establish that mastery in unprecedented detail, focusing on *Paradise Lost* but ranging widely across the Miltonic canon and making illuminating comparisons and contrasts with Milton's contemporaries along the way. There are chapters on 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' as well as *Samson Agonistes*; and although the prose works are relatively undiscussed, the *De Doctrina Christiana* is used to particularly good effect (incidentally showing, at a time when the authorship of the *De Doctrina* is yet again being questioned, how Miltonic that work is). While the focus is on what Milton does with the line in blank verse, the second half of the book is substantially devoted, somewhat unexpectedly, to the use of rhyme across the Miltonic canon. In three immensely detailed chapters, Creaser largely succeeds in his attempt to put to bed once and for all John Dryden's (obviously self-interested but resilient) judgment that "rhyme was not [Milton's] talent".[1] A chapter on "modes of onomatopoeia" comes

[1] John Dryden, "A Discourse…of Satire" (1693) in *Of Dramatic Poesy and other Critical Essays*, ed. George Watson, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1962), 2.84–85.

in between the opening five chapters on lineation and these chapters on rhyme. Chapter 10, based on an influential 2001 essay on "Prosody and Liberty in Milton and Marvell," encompasses Dryden to create a fascinating discussion of the "Interweavings of Prosody and Ideology" in what Creaser calls "Cromwell's Three Great Poets". (One might quibble that Edmund Waller has a better claim than Dryden to being part of this trio based on what was written in the 1650s, although Waller also gets some passing attention.)

The passing reference above to Samuel Johnson's *Life of Milton* is representative of Creaser's ongoing dialogue with the history of Milton criticism—which is, this book reminds us, in effect the history of English literary criticism. F. R. Leavis, T. S. Eliot, William Empson, and Christopher Ricks are the names most often invoked, not so much as authorities but as interlocutors to be challenged and criticized. At the same time, Creaser is up to date with the more important recent scholarship, about which he is generally polite. There is nonetheless a polemical edge to Creaser's advocacy of prosodic criticism, as hinted at by that aside above ("though it is little discussed"). "Most academic criticism ignores the expressive powers of rhythm," he bemoans; this is a world in which "[w]hen reading aloud, many students and some distinguished academics mangle the verse they spend their lives studying" (33). "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" can even "challenge major critics and prosodists, not merely those tone-deaf readers for whom poems are all too literally words on the page" (134). When we are told that the issue of how to respond rhythmically to Milton's lines is "the kind of question that to some readers is trivial and pedantic and to others is at the heart of experience," there isn't exactly any doubt about which category of readers Creaser thinks superior (314).

There is a danger here of lapsing into jeremiad, and it is a danger to which Miltonists are perhaps particularly prone given that the trope of the "one just man" became so favored by Milton himself in his late works. Fortunately, this irritable tone remains subdued by Creaser's compelling fascination with the most intricate effects of Milton's verse. Yet it is worth thinking a bit harder about why prosodic analysis, and indeed stylistic analysis more generally, has declined as a critical method, beyond a mere general descent into philistinism. In the opening of the second chapter on "Paradox and Prosodic Style in *Paradise Lost*," Creaser quotes Ricks in *Milton's Grand Style* (1963) observing that the "danger" of prosodic criticism "is that it is more

entangled with the merely subjective than any other kind of criticism".[2] Creaser is impatient with this anxiety, quickly appealing to the practical proposition that "one must find a way of doing some justice to verse rhythm," and then getting on with doing so for the next 400 pages (33). But perhaps it is the inherent subjectivity of prosodic criticism, which Creaser does not really deny, that is the reason for its relative decline: perhaps, as the world of literary scholarship became increasingly professionalized in the latter half of the twentieth century and the number of people doing it greatly expanded, the authority of prosodic interpretations which finally so heavily rely on individual conviction—or what art historians call connoisseurship—became harder to accept, no matter how learned and ingenious the reader. A doctoral student can prove their scholarship more demonstrably through the excavation of a new historical, cultural, or political context for a writer and their work than through assertions about how to pronounce lines of verse properly.

The problem of being "merely subjective" is more obviously on display in matters of scansion than in other critical methods. (Creaser at one point even disagrees with his former self about how to scan a line in *Paradise Regained* (82 n. 122)). Take a line in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*: "On Lemnos the Ægæan Isle: thus they relate" (l. 746). Creaser cites this as an instance of how "[v]ery occasionally an eleven-syllable line without the easy expansion at the caesura does occur . . . [the line] has eleven syllables even taking into account the elision 'th' marked in the manuscript and early editions" (66). But this makes for an awkward pronunciation of "th'Æ-ge-an" if the word is three syllables and stressed, as usual, on "ge," as well as producing two successive unstressed syllables: "On **Lem** | nos th'*Æ*-**gæ** | -an **Ile**: | thus **they** | re**late**. Could "*Æ*gean" rather be made two syllables, so creating a regular pentameter ("On **Lem** | nos **th'Æg** | -ean **Ile**: | thus **they** | re**late**")? This looks less far-fetched if we compare *Paradise Regained*, 4. 238, where a two-syllable "Aégean" also makes a regular pentameter, assuming "the" is elided to "th'" in pronunciation: "Where **on** | the *Æg* | -ean **shore** | a **Cit** | -y **stands**". Creaser would likely object that this is to persist, to some extent, with a scansion based on feet ("foot-thinking") that he, following Attridge, does away with. Yet the line raises further problems—did Milton or the compositors elide the "e" in "the"? In this case the manuscript of Book 1 and the first printed texts agree, but the degree of divergence between manuscript and print,

[2] Christopher Ricks, *Milton's Grand Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 24–26

especially in capitalization, means it must remain open to question how much of the printed text of *Paradise Lost*, whether 1667 or 1674, is a record of Miltonic, as opposed to compositorial, practice. Creaser has had his say on these problems long ago (in essays on "Editorial Problems in Milton" published in *The Review of English Studies* in 1983-4) and here relegates the thorny problem of whether the punctuation was overseen by the blind Milton to a footnote, in which he declares rather breezily that the punctuation of *Paradise Lost* is "essentially" Milton's own and all the "relatively few changes" between manuscript and print "might well have been approved by the poet" (121 n. 42).

Such debates are probably irresolvable without further archival discoveries—not a completely outlandish notion, given the amazing recent identification of Milton's copy of the Shakespeare First Folio. What most readers will likely take away from *Milton and the Resources of the Line* is not the metrical reading of any specific line or even passage, of which some are more persuasive and illuminating than others, so much as the powerful central argument for what we might call the ethical basis of poetic form. It is not news that "Milton is a poet of open-ended and unorthodox forms" (30-31); but what Creaser shows with unmatched force of detail is how the "firmness of structure realised with incessant modulation of movement embodies what is best in Milton's aspirations: his reliance on fundamental certainties but rejection of a closed mind, fearful of change" (31). The epistemological experience that Creaser attributes to the line-turn is apparent from the very beginning of the epic, when the reader expects the "fruit" to be the metaphorical consequence of "that disobedience," not suddenly materialized as the apple itself: "Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste / Brought death into the world" (1. 1-3). It is in the line that the verse embodies (literally, in its proper pronunciation) the ethical ideals of Milton at his most optimistic in *Areopagitica*, for example: the "awareness that at any point one of the innumerable enjambments may vary the perspective of the passage, make[s] reading Milton an act of unending revelation" (31). It is at such moments that *Milton and the Resources of the Line* offers a thrilling apology for Miltonic difficulty that should inspire anybody who wants to see the reading and teaching of poetry survive in hard times for the humanities.

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