

Thomas Kranidas:

Milton and the Rhetoric of Zeal

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If there is any period in English history that is marked by a “rhetoric of zeal” – public discourse delivered in a style of radical excess – it would have to be the great age of Milton (1608-1674), when religious and political turmoil led to a further splintering of churches and the beheading of a king. If there is a similar period, it might be the Sixties and Seventies in America. And if perhaps there is yet another it might be the period through which America, Europe, and the Middle East are living now. Although the second and third hypotheses do not exactly form the basis of Thomas Kranidas’s lively study of Milton’s antiprelatical tracts, they are never far from his arguments. Not only do they provide tangential illustrative materials but they also form the context within which Professor Kranidas claims to have expanded his ideas about Miltonic zeal through the past three decades.

There is, of course, no *theory* of zeal, although zealousness itself is identifiable. Kranidas’s intention, moreover, is to keep his study “within the boundaries of an historicism that values texts over critical or theoretical positions” (p. 46). Thus he proceeds inductively, analyzing arguments in the selected texts and offering along the way not exactly a theory but general observations about the qualities and tactics of zealous prose. A theory might be constructed on the basis of this work. But such is not Kranidas’s purpose. Although he seeks to have us understand the rhetoric of zeal – whose characteristics he nonetheless seems to believe just might be applicable to our contemporary disputatiousness – his stated, and most successful, intention is to shed light on the works of Milton in the period preparatory to the creation of the great poems, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*.

The motives of Miltonic zeal – “inspired truth-telling” (p. x) – are succinctly set forth in a brief preface, where we are informed that Puritanical power is “the energy of a focused belief system that liberated and empowered the individual” (p. xi). Because his faith was liberating, Miltonic man reached for a freedom beyond religious matters. With the biblical text before him and his God-given power of reason, he believed himself the equal of prelates and righteous in questioning the purpose of ecclesiastical hierarchy. And he found his energized zeal extending into a general anti-establishment temper. It is that temper which summons those other decades in which Kranidas claims his study of Miltonic zeal became expanded.

The first chapter, “The Rhetoric of Zeal”, pp. 1-48, is, as Thomas Kranidas puts it, “something of an anthology of Puritan zealous writing” (p. xi). Reviewing an impressive variety of Puritan prose, Kranidas delineates its chief characteristics. Most incisively, he shows that the very stasis of the dispute between the Puritans and their chief antagonist, the Church of England (more proximate and direct an opponent than Rome), lies in two Scriptural passages: Revelation 3:16 (“because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth”), a passage the Puritans had virtually commandeered by the early 1640s, and 1 Corinthians 14:40 (“Let all things be done decently and in order”), a Pauline injunction which defined the Anglican stance, manner, and style. The terms of the dispute became, thus, an abhorrence of “lukewarmness” on the one hand and on the other a valuing of “moderation”. Puritan rage was a

rage against attitudes logically clustered around the very concept of the *via media*, such as decency, tradition, even learned preaching by, as one Puritan writer put it, “cloudy-brain’d Humanists” (p. 37).

The following chapters examine Milton’s antiprelatical tracts almost in the order in which they were published, 1641-1642. Chapter Two, “*Of Reformation: The Politics of Vision*”, pp. 49-71, studies *Of Reformation in England*, which sets Milton’s religious concerns within their historical and political contexts. Further – and this is a quality which is too seldom emphasized by other scholars – from the beginning Milton’s own zealous manner continually reveals “an element of fairness”: Milton was no “mere abuser of his opponents” (p. 52). For all his vehemence, he stood apart from polemicists on both sides in fairly attending to the arguments of his opponents.

Chapter Three, “Words, Words, Words and the Word: *Of Prelatical Episcopacy*”, pp. 72-87, studies Milton’s shortest tract, published a few weeks later than the work examined in the previous chapter. Perhaps the most interesting feature of Kranidas’s study of this somewhat rare tract is his emphasis on Milton’s argument that Truth arises largely from the printed, not the spoken word, that England’s greatest failure is its failure to keep her “eye on the word – and the Word” (p. 81).

The next three chapters, the longest in the book, take up consecutively *Animadversions*, *An Apology*, and *The Reason of Church-Government*. Miltonists will recognize that the pamphlets are taken up not precisely in the order in which they were published, since *Reason* intervened between the first two. Kranidas argues that *Reason* was planned as Milton’s “final statement on the prelatial matter” (p. 89) and thus effectively caps his ongoing argument.

Animadversions, the subject of Chapter Four, “Style and Rectitude: Hall, Smectymnuus and Milton’s *Animadversions*,” pp. 88-121, besides marking Milton’s clear entry into the “Smectymnuan” controversy, also argues from certain positions on Truth – such as its clear Revelation and later fragmentation – and on the reading of books, argumentative premises that will appear later in his momentous *Areopagitica* of 1644. Again, Kranidas argues that however vehemently Milton treats the text of his opponent, Bishop Hall, he does so with more accuracy than the other polemicists. Here, too, some of the tactics of the rhetoric of zeal are spelled out, such as “[p]assionate vision and clever, sometimes vulgar *ad hominem*” (p. 108).

Of all the tracts, *An Apology*, published in May 1642, the subject of Chapter Five, “‘Sanctifi’d Bitterness’: *A Modest Confutation and An Apology Against a Pamphlet*”, pp. 122-162, offers Milton’s most specific ideas about communicative strategies. Kranidas’s aim in exploring these tracts lies primarily in uncovering what he calls Milton’s “kerygmatic authority”, a complex ethical position involving the use of a proclaiming or prophecy voice. By contrast, Bishop Hall, Milton charged, used a rhetoric that was “speciously humble and self-aggrandizing” (p. 124). Continually Milton’s stance toward his reader was marked by a kind of openness, and his stance toward Truth was that its demonstration would be self-evident. In pursuing the latter, Kranidas is (dare I say it?) refreshingly free of any mention of Ramism.

In treating *The Reason of Church-Government* in Chapter Six, “Kerygmatic Authority in *The Reason of Church-Government*”, pp. 163-203, Kranidas most fully characterizes “kerygmatic authority” as the significant achievement of Milton’s rhetoric of zeal. It might be described as a Gospel-based *ethos* by means of which one gains credence as a proclaimer of Truth. This brief description, however, does not do justice to such matters as pridefulness, decorum, *dispositio*, or, for that matter, Kranidas’s own careful exfoliation of his book’s central theme. He concludes that one can only claim ‘Kerygmatic authority’ as a kind of a gift, “the gift of prophetic utterance” (p. 181). It is a voice that Milton “will carry into the great poems” (pp. 191). Its careful, well documented, and cumulative exposition is a major achievement of Kranidas’s work.

The final chapter is offered as a “coda”. Its title is “Rhetoric and Revolution: The Eccentric Equation”, pp. 204-214, and the chapter returns to a motif recurrent in this book: the apparent parallels between Milton’s time and our own, stretching from the turbulent Sixties to the present. Kranidas will even call these parallels “equations”. Such ideas make for interesting reading and, for those of us who were in cultural and political hot-spots during the past four decades, at least a few nostalgia-trips. But as arguments they don’t work. Any effort to claim or hint at cultural, political, and religious parallels, let alone “equations”, in complex times deserve more extensive treatment, as Kranidas himself acknowledges (p. 209).

The work is, in sum and intentionally, more illuminative of Milton than it is in positing or for that matter suggesting anything like a general theory of a rhetoric of zeal. If Kranidas’s recurrent drawing of parallels spurs a revival of Milton, particularly in attracting the interests of young students, then I would strongly applaud his effort. If his characterizations of a rhetoric of zeal cause further investigation, particularly into the kerygma of our modern zealots, then again I would applaud his effort. Both possibilities make the book worthy of study. As it stands, however, the book is mainly worthy of study for what it says about the specifically *Miltonic* rhetoric of zeal, about the vehement prose which pervaded the pamphleteering religious wars in the seventeenth century and out of which proceeded the powerful voice of Milton’s great poems. That alone is a notable accomplishment.

I must also point out that the book, which culminates a distinguished scholarly career, has not been written for a general audience, or – alas – even for the modern undergraduate. The reader must enter this book knowing something not only about Milton’s great poems but also about such religious/political matters as who “Smectymnuus” was, or Bishop Hall, the issues at stake in Strafford’s trial, what *via media* or apostolic succession is, etc. It would also help if that reader knows some Milton scholarship, particularly the writings of Stanley Fish, with whom Kranidas disagrees on several matters – and who at one point is badly misquoted (p. 165). This is a book designed, finally, for advanced students of literature, although students of rhetoric, history, even popular culture may find within it stimulating ideas for their own work.

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