

6-12-2017

Secular Chains: Poetry and the Politics of Religion from Milton to Pope / Philip Connell

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Recommended Citation

Doug DePalma (2017) "Secular Chains: Poetry and the Politics of Religion from Milton to Pope / Philip Connell," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 12 , Article 21.

Available at: <http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol12/iss1/21>

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Philip Connell. *Secular Chains: Poetry and the Politics of Religion from Milton to Pope*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016. 300pp.

Reviewed by DOUG DEPALMA

The concept of the long-18th century as signaling a distinct discursive departure from the religious enthusiasm and political polemic of the English Commonwealth is increasingly questioned by critics of authors on both sides of the 1660 divide. Shakespeare in the Restoration is a field on the rise, earning workshops and exhibits at the Folger and Newberry Libraries in the last two years, and Theobald's *Double Falsehood* (1727) was only just granted the Arden Shakespeare seal of approval in 2010. Several articles have similarly popped up in Milton journals and panels on the legacy of Milton's national poetry in the era of national reinvention and crisis in the late Stuart and early Hanoverian eras. Into this critical environment enters Philip Connell's timely *Secular Chains*, which provides an essential vocabulary for continuing this move to find tendrils of "conflict and continuity" (7) between Milton's era and the era of Dryden and Pope. Connell's achievement is not merely to buttress this critical development, but rather to populate and diversify emergent readings seeking to dissolve the hard distinction between Commonwealth and Enlightenment. Connell matches readings of Milton, Hobbes, Dryden, and Pope with readings of Toland, Dennis, Shaftesbury, and Thomson. Connecting Whig politics and New Model Army polemics for Connell is the endurance of "the . . . centrality of ecclesiastical controversy within English political life" (159) before and after the Restoration, and "the study of poetry not just as a medium of nuanced commentary and reflection, but as a contested discursive category in its own right" (7). Thus, the texts engaged in *Secular Chains* catalyzed and not merely reflected the continuation of religious controversy in the Restoration, and this is Connell's key contribution and revision of 20th century renderings of the relationship between "poetry and religion in an age of political conflict and intellectual change" (19).

Connell's reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regain'd*, and *Samson Agonistes* that constitutes the first half of *Secular Chains* importantly emphasizes Milton's continued civic engagement even after his near execution. Connell convincingly makes the case that Milton's late poetry is not only in dialogue with Commonwealth theorists like Harrington and Vane, but also the contemporary issue of dissenting Protestants relenting to Monarchical unity platforms during the reign of Charles II. Connell argues that far from detached and defeated at the end of his life, Milton played a central role in the development of Whiggism, the major concern of the second half of the book, and which "could not occur in advance of puritan disillusionment with Charles godly magistracy, a conclusion . . . Milton urged, with some prescience, in his final major poems" (97). Highlighting Milton's continued civic engagement is Connell's way of connecting Milton to early Whigs and eventually Pope, and he argues that the conflict of Harringtonian Hebraic Law

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and Milton and Vane's "Christian virtue" (58) "finds more subtle creative expression in his great Christian epic" (59). The vocabulary of religious division outlined in the first three sections of *Secular Chains* allows Connell to find stable thematic congruences between Milton's prose and late poetry, a historically vexing task for Milton critics.

Yet that historical vexation is not without reason, and Connell's reading of *Paradise Regain'd* and *Samson Agonistes* could benefit from a greater interaction with the contemporary move in Milton studies to highlight the centrality of nation in these last poetic works. Connell alludes to the fact that *The History of Britain* was released with *Paradise Regain'd* and *Samson* (82), but does not register this any further in his important reading of *Samson's* critique of "those dissenters who looked to a royal dispensation that would absolve them" (95). Indeed, the "distinction between secular and divine authority" was a "central preoccupation of Milton's thought for decades," (97) but this distinction manifests itself in *Paradise Regain'd* and *Samson* in ways deeply in dialogue with Milton's notion of history and nation as Elizabeth Sauer and Linda Gregerson recently argued in *Milton, Toleration, and Nationhood* and "Milton and the Tragedy of Nations," respectively. Religious division served as a catalyst for Milton's contemplations on failed nations in his late works, and Connell's deft readings of Milton's interaction with Harrington, Vane, and contemporary Restoration dissenters in *Paradise Regain'd* and *Samson* represents a ripe area for further contribution in this established debate in Milton studies.

Connell's revision of J.G.A. Pocock's argument for a conservative Enlightenment and Machiavellian Renaissance in England represents one of the several key contributions of the second half of *Secular Chains*. Contrasted to Pocock's rendering of the Restoration and Hanoverian period as the "slow but steady transformation of Anglicanism into a civil religion," (136), Connell cogently argues that "the most striking feature of that Church in the following decades was not the cooling of religious passions but the rage of religious party" (137). Connell tracks the literary Whig confrontation with Milton from a dissenting tyrannicide in early Restoration romps like Butler's *Hudibras*, to a moderate Whig figure by John Dennis, to the recuperation of Milton's dissent against a centralized church by Anthony Cooper, early of Shaftesbury. Critically, Connell does not reduce Dennis and Shaftesbury to agents of Miltonic literary shadow—a potential pitfall in studies of literary influence in the Restoration. Connell expertly accounts for a culture in which poetry actively articulated and contributed to a religiously divided society, which creates a populated and diverse Restoration era. This leads to a reading of Pope's *Dunciad* that is a significant contribution to both Milton and Pope studies. In his navigation of the developing debate between high and low church, Pope vacillates from one edition to another, between a hegemonic critique of Whig free thinkers and a critique of Anglican high church politics—a debate Connell effectively situates as originating in Commonwealth debates over Orphean Hebraic law and Christian virtue.

Secular Chains makes a compelling case for the endurance of religious division through the Restoration and the central role of literary cultures in not only the reflection but the development of political faction in 18th century England.

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Beyond Milton and Pope, Connell finds important figures that actively played a part in the production of Miltonic legacy and the dissemination, gentrification, and continuation of the religious strife of the Commonwealth. While questions on the relationship between nationhood and religious division that so concerned Milton appear only on the periphery of Connell's argument, his ultimate reading of *The Dunciad* textured with Dennis, Shaftesbury, Newton, Thomson, and Milton is remarkably nuanced and essential for Milton, Pope, and Restoration scholars. In this respect, Connell is successful in his project to "trace the complex transition from Milton's revolutionary moment to the very different literary culture of Pope and his contemporaries" (244). In between "the good old cause" and "whatever is, is right," Connell finds and articulates a culture of vigorous political and religious division, informed by lost revolutionary figures, and deeply devoted to reforming them to contemporary literary and political projects. In this synthesis is Pope's great achievement in *The Dunciad* for Connell: "the creative transcendence of the conditions of modernity through an act of historical sympathy" (247).

Doug DePalma is a PhD student in Renaissance Studies at Northern Illinois University. His research revolves around the literature of civil wars in England and America and the influence of continental religious warfare on English writers from Sidney and Donne to Milton.