BOOK REVIEW


Figuring out how to apply the term “youth” to early modern England is no mean feat. The field of early modern youth studies has been growing slowly over the past few decades, as social historians and literary scholars grapple with what youth and childhood meant in early modern England: how were these terms contested; who defined them; and to what end? Blaine Greteman’s The Poetics and Politics of Youth in Milton’s England is a welcome and necessary addition to this ongoing conversation. Greteman deftly weaves together various strands of early modern scholarship—social history, literary studies, and political theory—and then productively brings this work to bear on Milton, a figure whose engagement with ideas about youth has long been acknowledged, but, as this book convincingly argues, needs much more critical attention.

The book’s first half develops an historical context for the second. Chapter 1 focuses on the transition between childhood and adulthood in Jacobean drama, taking Ben Jonson’s Epicoene as a representative example. Though the “boy” actors of the Blackfriars “were physically and sometimes even legally capable of adult behavior, they [also] remained children in important legal and cultural senses” (24), and Greteman explains that the contested nature of their liminal age was thematically important to their plays. The controversy over how, or if, a child might speak added a transgressive edge to their plays that augmented, or, Greteman suggests, even outweighed the homoerotic charge of the performances. This question of how to understand the voices of children governs Chapter 2 as well, but this time in the context of literature and political consent. William Prynne’s critique of the stage took place within a larger cultural argument about the dangers and benefits of teaching the young through poesy. Prynne’s concern was not simply that the stage would corrupt the young, but that it would also make adult spectators more childlike. This two-pronged argument parallels his opposition to young MPs who were not legally adults: first, the mimetic nature of children would make these young parliamentarians likely to be corrupted by, and thus parrot, nefarious political and religious influences (such as royalists and Jesuits); and second, to allow young voices in this political body would risk undercutting the “new authority based on rational consent” (55) that was necessary to a sovereign Parliament. In other words, it might replace Parliament’s mature authority with the impotence of a child.

Chapter 3 (the final chapter of Part I) contrasts Prynne’s political understanding of children with Thomas Hobbes’s. Both writers realized how the contested transition between childhood and adulthood troubled the issue of how and when adult authority might be cordoned off from childish submission. Hobbes’s solution was to frame the infant child’s submission to his parents as the contractual foundation of the adult’s submission to the monarch. The “diminutive child[’s] ... absolute subjection” is what “Hobbes explicitly calls ... consent” and what he most desires, through education, to “replicate ... in the larger social body” (80).

Having set up a political and cultural framework in the book’s first half, Greteman applies it to his primary subject, John Milton, in the second. Part II begins with an extended version of one of the most insightful articles on Comus from the past few
decades. Key to Greteman’s reading is an understanding of the developmental nature of the Orphic voice in *Ad Patrem*, a voice that “cannot merely mimic parental authority, or any other authority, but must ... create its own authority, answerable only to the divine. The Orphic voice is where poetry and prophecy meet, where the poet must transform the raw material of youth into world-shaking speech” (104). The Egerton children dramatize the challenges of this transitional moment, as they (the Lady especially) display “the childish capacity to enter and respond to a world of shadowy poetic allurement without falling prey to its darker impulses” (112). Greteman sees their partial success as natural to their age; a full, independent victory would not be appropriate for children still under their father’s authority. But more importantly, he argues that their youthful achievement of “mastering the self” both corresponds to their youth, and gestures beyond it—as for Milton, the “process of growing up ... is never quite complete” (118). Greteman develops this idea more fully in Chapter 5, where he argues that Milton’s insistence “on plunging the student into an unadulterated reading experience” (120) sharply contrasts with the different proscriptions Pryne and Hobbes would place on the education of the young. Most importantly, this education does not separate the child from the adult, for the young are simply at the beginning of an endless learning, growing, and testing process to find truth. Thus Milton reframes education not as a youthful way-station on the road to stable and complete adulthood, but as the ongoing business of adulthood itself: “education is not some preparation for later heroic work; it is that work. Milton’s pedagogy shifts the ground of heroic battle from the obviously adult realm of civic or military conflict to the childish realm of becoming” (127).

We are now well-positioned for the analysis in Chapter 6 of *Paradise Lost*, which begins not with the more familiar ground of the education and childlike curiosity of Adam and Eve, but with the largely ignored question of how we might understand the various ages of the angels. Here, Satan’s claim to having begotten and raised himself echoes Hobbes’s reliance on the notion of infants with the contractual sophistication of adults—“mushroom men” who spring up fully formed (145). Satan’s insistence on retaining a privileged position within a rigid hierarchy corresponds to his decline, physically represented “as a process of accelerated aging” (146). The unfallen angels, in contrast, understand themselves able to develop and grow, just as Adam and Eve. And this development is at the heart of Chapter 7, where Greteman argues that the decisions Adam and Eve make, for good or ill, are best understood through Milton’s particular ideas of education and childish growth: “God’s pedagogy can be firm, but its greatest innovation is the way it indulges the capacity for childish play and error to facilitate genuinely free choice” (169). This ongoing development doesn’t end in the Garden, but both Adam and Eve retain a capability for childlike growth as they wander, hand in hand, into history; even more importantly, for Milton this capability to “remain childish in a way that accords with ... free and mature age” (184) is part of humanity’s inheritance, just as much as original sin.

It is difficult to find fault with this lovely book; my only wish was for Greteman to pair his persuasive and illuminating readings of texts such as *Comus* and *Paradise Lost* with some of Milton’s later work. *Paradise Regained* is largely relegated to the final paragraph of the epilogue, and as the Son’s liminal youthful status has such topical relevance both to the poem and to Greteman’s thesis, this seems a missed opportunity. Samson’s ruminative process in *Samson Agonistes*, weighing and countering the arguments of his various visitors before his final act, also should be brought to bear on Greteman’s argument that Milton finds the learning and growing first apparent in youth to be crucial later in life as well, that the “coming of age is an ongoing, even recursive project” (187). But this critique comes from the strength of the book overall; the quality of Greteman’s work makes one wish for more. This sharp and well-written text is an indispensable addition both to Milton studies and
to the evolving field of early modern youth studies. A book like this has long been needed, and its insights—for Miltonists especially—have been worth the wait.

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