

The Complete Works of John Milton: Volume III: The Shorter Poems. John Milton. Ed. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski and Estelle Haan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. clxxvi + 632 pp. \$250.

This book comes with quite a story. After Oxford released *The Complete Works of John Milton: Volume III* in 2012, Paul Hammond reviewed it for *The Seventeenth Century*, and what he found did not make him happy. The book was “a mess” (Paul Hammond, “Review: *The Complete Works of John Milton: Volume III*,” *The Seventeenth Century* 28.2 [2013]: 240). Individual poems were not listed in the table of contents, and the index entry for each item was “simply a string of undifferentiated page numbers” (Hammond, 239); the annotations at the back were not keyed to the text; Lewalski’s notes for the English poems, mainly explaining allusions and repeating “glosses taken from the OED” (Hammond, 239), were more aimed at beginners and did not show much effort (for instance, of the twenty-nine comments on page 405, twenty-one are OED citations; of the eighteen on page 413, nine are from the OED); the transcriptions were riddled with errors; and the volume generally was not at all user-friendly. For example, anyone wishing to compare the transcripts of the Bridgewater and Trinity manuscript versions of *A Mask* with the final version had to “keep a finger in three different pages” (Hammond, 239; four if you also wanted to look at the notes) since they were not printed facing each other. At the end of his review, Hammond urged OUP to “withdraw, correct, and reissue” the book, which they did. The press quietly withdrew the volume. In 2014, Oxford published a “Corrected Impression,” the volume currently under review.

Did Lewalski, Haan, and Oxford University Press fix the problems? The answer is largely yes. While the original, unhelpful index remains, OUP added indexes of titles and first lines, so one no longer has to struggle to find individual poems. The commentary is

now keyed to page numbers, and that's helpful. Most importantly, while we still do not know who exactly was responsible for the transcription of the Trinity manuscript version of *A Maske* (Lewalski disclaims responsibility on page xx), the editors and/or OUP have gone through all the vernacular poems and cleaned up the errors.

I checked a sampling of the glitches Hammond found, and in each case, they had been amended. I then spot-checked the transcription of *Lycidas* with the Scholar Press facsimile edition of the Trinity manuscript, and found only trivial differences. Now that the book is more or less in the shape it should have been when originally published, is this volume indeed the "definitive edition of all of Milton's shorter poems," as the publisher's blurb has it?

There are two great advantages here. First, Estelle Haan gives us fresh translations of Milton's Latin poems and a magnificent introduction. "The present work," Haan writes, "moves beyond previous editions by closely addressing and citing in its commentary both the classical and Neo-Latin intertexts with which Milton's Latin poetry engages" (lxxii–lxxiii).

The volume also gives us real insights into Milton's creative process. By transcribing all the crossings out, revisions, and marginal passages in the Trinity and Bridgewater manuscripts of *A Maske* and *Lycidas*, we can actually see Milton working things out as he went along. For example, in the Attendant Spirit's final song in the 1645 *Poems*, he says that he will return now to Hesperus and his daughters "That sing about the golden tree" (102). Milton evidently had trouble with this line, first writing it as "Where grows the right borne gold upon his native tree," which obviously doesn't fit the rhythm. Milton then crossed it out, and inserted on top the final, rhythmically correct, version of the line (330). Milton also revised the opening lines of *Lycidas* to make them shorter, punchier, and far more effective. Originally, Milton wrote, "I come to pluck yo^r berries harsh and crude / before the mellowing yeare / and crop yo^r young [leaves]" (532). He then crosses out "the mellowing yeare" along with "and crop yo^r young," replacing these phrases with "and wth forc't fingers rude" and "shatter yo^r leaves before y^e mellowing yeare" (532). "The mellowing year" thus moves from the first part of the sentence to the end, and Milton replaces "crop" with the infinitely more effective "shatter."

But these benefits do not overcome the volume's deficits, starting with a lack of graciousness. While I have no doubt that OUP and the editors do not want to call attention to the recalled first impression, I would have expected some acknowledgment of Hammond's part in calling attention to the errors so they could be corrected. Instead, silence. I would also have expected OUP to inform libraries that the original impression had been recalled and to send a new copy for free, which did not happen in at least my library's case. My acquisitions librarian was told that if "we want a 'corrected impression' copy, we would have to order and pay for another copy and check to see if it had the 'corrected impression' statement in it" (private email).

The book itself remains inexcusably difficult to use. Hundreds of pages separate the introductions and the explanatory notes from the poems. If a reader wants to compare the 1645 version of *Lycidas* with the manuscript drafts, one has to go back and forth

between page 50 (where the poem begins) to page 532, where the manuscript versions start. Sandwiched in between are the explanatory notes that start on page 384. Right now, I have a pen, a scrap of paper, and my phone marking all the different places in the book where one needs to go to study *Lycidas*. Similarly, *A Maske* starts on page 64, but you have to go to page 300 for the Trinity manuscript and page 332 for the Bridgewater (the commentary starts on page 361). Also, it would have been better to print the explanatory notes at the bottom of the page rather than textual variants, which, truth be told, do not tell us anything momentous. Is it genuinely significant that “requitall” is spelled without an extra “l” in a later printing, or that “leather’n” becomes “leathern” (88)? Such details should not be ignored, but neither should they displace information that will help readers better understand the poems.

Lewalski’s introductions also disappoint. Instead of a single introductory essay, Lewalski gives us two, “Occasions and Circumstances” (xx–xlix) and “The Vernacular Poems and Their Genres” (l–lxxx). But the essays often overlap, and Lewalski sometimes uses almost identical topic sentences, giving this reader at least an odd sense of *déjà vu*. For example, in “Occasions,” Lewalski writes, “While Milton was writing Latin poems at school or college he may also have produced his skillful English translation of Horace’s Latin Ode *Ad Pyrrham*” (xxii); in “Vernacular Poems” we find almost the same sentence: “While Milton was writing his Latin poems at school or college he may also have produced his very skillful English translation of Horace’s *Ad Pyrrham*” (l).

More problematically, Lewalski smoothes out the poetry’s rougher edges so that there’s nothing problematic, troubling, or unconventional here. Lewalski does not give us Milton the experimental, doubting poet, but Milton “turgidulus.” You would not know from Lewalski’s introductions that *L’Allegro/Il Penseroso* upends expectation by leaving the choice between these two suspended. Similarly, Lewalski sees nothing unusual about the infamously puzzling ending of *Lycidas*. The deceased, writes Lewalski, occupies “the office of ‘Genius of the shore,’ [and] guides wanderers in the ‘perilous flood’ of life” (lxi). But the poem says nothing of “life”; instead, *Lycidas* is supposed to “be good / To all that wander in that perilous flood” (lines. 184–85), i.e., the Irish Sea, the one he drowned in because not even the Muse could save him.

Then there’s the price (something reviewers should talk about much more often): \$250, which puts the book out of reach for most scholars, and, given declining budgets, probably many libraries too. Which raises the question: how can an edition be “definitive” if only a privileged few have access to it?

As I struggled with this book, I kept comparing my experience to how *The Holinshed Project* allows us to view the 1577 and 1587 editions in parallel columns, and wondering if going digital might have been the better option. Imagine clicking on a line from *A Maske* and instantly comparing the different versions. Imagine that instead of jumping hundreds of pages to get from the poem to the explanatory notes, the reader clicks on a hyperlink to an online version of the source or analogue. Or, since Lewalski is so fond of the *OED*, the word could be linked to the online *OED*, allowing readers to explore the

full range of a word's meanings rather than being confined to the sole definition or usage that Lewalski chose to privilege.

It's hard to escape the feeling that this edition is something of a misfire. The book is too expensive for most to own, too expensive for many libraries, and too awkward to use. Far from the "definitive scholarly edition," this volume makes me wonder if the bulky print scholarly edition aimed at presenting a "perfect" text is a thing of the past for reasons technical, practical, and economic. Tomorrow to fresh digital woods and online pastures new?

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