



Milton and the Poetics of Freedom (Medieval and Renaissance Literary Studies)

Susanne Woods

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In our contemporary Western culture, "freedom" is a powerful term with elastic meanings and contradictory uses; it has both driven rebellion and justified empire. John Milton's world, like our own, struggled to understand freedom within what was already considered a heritage of political and personal liberty, compounded in the seventeenth century by theological questions of freedom. In this important new study, Susanne Woods reveals Milton's central place in the evolution both of ideas of freedom in English-speaking culture and in creating a poetics that invites readers to enact the freedom Milton defines.

For Milton, we find, freedom is fundamentally about human choice; God gave humankind genuine free will, with reason and the light of conscience to enable choice. True freedom comes from who one is, formed and asserted by the choices one makes. This is true for the reader as well as for the author, Milton believed, and the result is what Woods terms an "invitational poetics." By locating freedom in thoughtful choice, in other words, Milton must offer his reader opportunities to consider alternatives, even to his own well-argued positions.

In six chapters, Woods examines these invitational poetics on several levels: as they develop in Milton's prose and early poetry, in theory as well as practice; as they are expressed within prose sentences and lines of poetry through choices of diction and syntax; and as they inform character, plot, and genre. Chapter 1 connects Milton's most famous statement about his ongoing interest in liberty with debates that preceded him. Chapter 2 shows Milton's Elizabethan predecessors grappling with the possibilities and limits of poetic indirection; Philip Sidney, in particular, provides an underappreciated rhetorical and theoretical foundation on which Milton's invitational poetics could build. These background chapters allow us to see Milton's evolution toward a poetics of choice, followed by their confident manifestation in the great poems. Later chapters consider *Paradise Lost* as Milton's grand disquisition on knowledge, choice, and freedom; and *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* in relation to the ambiguities of choice and vocation. Finally, Milton is situated in relation to the most influential seventeenth century political thinkers, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, and Woods examines the influence of *Areopagitica* on political culture since Milton's time, placing Milton's ideas in a tradition that leads to modern contestations of freedom.

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