


RESEARCH ARTICLE

1823: A Year in the Afterlife of Shakespeare and Milton

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Abstract

In 1823, the first edition of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the manuscript of John Milton's theological work *De Doctrina Christiana* (*On Christian Doctrine*) were both discovered after having been lost to history for centuries. These literary discoveries were subsequently published in 1825, challenging the established perspectives of them: the one as the one as the infallible magician of the stage, and the other as the juggernaut Christian poet. These two documents reshaped how scholars thought about them and their legacies. Shakespeare became a man at work, trafficking in a messy theater and printing culture. Milton became a theological outlaw, increasingly resembling to some his epic's grand antagonist.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *Hamlet*; Milton; *Paradise Lost*; heresy; doctrine; literary discovery; 1823

In 1823, the first edition of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the Latin manuscript of John Milton's theological treatise *De Doctrina Christiana* (*On Christian Doctrine*) were discovered after having been lost to history for centuries.¹ Both were published in 1825, challenging established perspectives of them – revealing a mortal Shakespeare behind the immortal plays, and threatening to transform Milton from the chief Christian poet into an arch-heretic.²

1. Literary icons

Undergraduate students customarily study the second edition of *Hamlet* (Q2 1604), and staged or filmed productions rely on a text that combines the second edition and the slightly different version from the first folio of Shakespeare's complete works (1623). *Hamlet* – the second edition – helped to create “Shakespeare” as a cultural icon after his death.³ An early editor of the plays (1733) spoke for many, rhapsodizing, “In how many Points of Light must

¹ Shakespeare's play was registered by James Roberts and entered into the Stationer's Register 26 July 1602 as “A booke called the Revenge of Hamlett Prince of Denmarke as yt was latelie Acted by the Lo: Chamberleyne his servantes.” Milton's nephew Edward Phillips describes having taken dictation for a theological work during the time that Milton was his schoolmaster; see Darbishire 1932, 49–82; quote from 61.

² Milton 1825; Shakespeare 1825.

³ See Taylor 1989.

we be oblig'd to gaze at this great Poet! In how many Branches of Excellence ... admire him!"⁴ The essayist William Hazlitt quoted Shakespeare more than 2400 times, and *Hamlet* occupied more than 20 percent of those, the play singularly demonstrating Shakespeare's "magnanimity of genius."⁵ Hazlitt's contemporary, the poet John Keats, quoted *Hamlet* more often than any Shakespeare play in his 250 letters. Shakespearean phrases were sewn into the English cultural imagination, and *Hamlet* became the central pattern in the fabric.⁶ Editors, writers, and actors created a cult of genius, even as some plays were revised to satisfy popular taste, most notably Nahum Tate's happier-ending *King Lear* which dominated productions from 1681 to 1838.

For many, Shakespeare's major rival was John Milton, author of *Paradise Lost* (1667), an epic poem retelling the biblical story of the creation of all things and the ruin of Adam and Eve by the serpent's deception. While the Genesis writer sparsely conveys the narrative, Milton's poem powerfully fills the imaginative gaps. In 1711 Joseph Addison's popular daily magazine pronounced that Milton earned "first Place among our *English* poets," and he explained why in issues throughout 1712. Milton was to England what Homer or Virgil were to the Greeks and Romans.⁷

A few early readers of *Paradise Lost* were unsettled by some passages. The novelist Daniel Defoe castigated Milton's unscriptural juxtaposition of Christ's exaltation and Satan's rebellion as potential heresy in Book 5, and in 1732 the editor Richard Bentley attempted to scrub Book 7 clean of any potential theological error regarding Creation.⁸ The vast majority of readers assumed the traditionalism of his reimagination of Genesis 1–3. The most prominent man of letters, Dr. Samuel Johnson – abhorring Milton's politics and lack of church affiliation – affirmed that Milton "had full conviction of the truth of Christianity" and was "untainted by any heretical peculiarity of opinion."⁹ Milton's biographer (1806) Rev. Charles Symmons also acknowledged Milton's political radicalism but seconded his orthodoxy.¹⁰ The epic enshrined Milton as the premier English Christian poet.

In an 1819 letter, Keats expressed that "Shakspeare and the *Paradise lost* every day become greater wonders to me. I look upon fine phrases like a lover."¹¹ Prior to 1823, most saw Shakespeare as a genius who rarely failed in his poetic and dramatic art, and Milton as a poet-theologian whose epic *Paradise Lost* seamlessly shared his Christian orthodoxy. Those views were about to change.

2. "*Hamlet* by Dogberry"

1823 was a year for breaking boundaries. Edmund Kean delivered incendiary performances of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Shylock* that departed from the restrained techniques of the previous century. Richard Brinsely Peake's stage adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* – part gothic, part song and dance, part pantomime – was a box office smash. Mary Anning discovered a fully

⁴ Theobald 1733, ii.

⁵ Bate 1984, 26; Hazlitt 1818, 116.

⁶ Taylor 1989, 103–15.

⁷ Addison and Steele 1711, 1749, Quote from 4:48, no. 262. See also Anonymous 1712.

⁸ Bentley 1732; Defoe 1726. On the scope of Bentley's emendations, see Harper 2016, 27–32; Walsh 1997, 53–93. On the quirkiness of Bentley's emendations for logic, scansion, and taste, see Hale 1991, 58–74.

⁹ Johnson 1779–1781, 1805; quote from 130.

¹⁰ Symmons 1810, 589–91.

¹¹ Keats 1895, 363–4; quote on 364.

articulated *plesiosaurus* fossil when every discipline of science was dominated by men. And Captain James Weddell's seal oil expedition to Antarctica marked the furthest point south that anyone had dared since Captain Cook half a century earlier.

Meanwhile, a new edition of *Hamlet* was found in the library closet of Sir Henry Bunbury's newly inherited house at Great Barton, Suffolk. The first edition of *Hamlet* was gathered among 12 other rare Shakespeare quartos (small books printed on sheets of paper folded into quarters), "ill-bound" and "barbarously cropped."¹² He speculated that his grandfather, Sir William, had bought the bundle of quartos, but neither Sir William nor Sir Henry realized the significance of the purchase. Sir Henry exchanged it for £180 of books from Payne and Foss, the booksellers who published the edition of 1825. Bunbury's quarto was missing the last page of the play. A second copy of what scholars now call Q1 of *Hamlet* turned up in 1856 when M.W. Rooney obtained it from a bookseller who had bought it from a student at Trinity College, Dublin. It lacked the title page that Bunbury's quarto provided, but Rooney's quarto preserved the last leaf, thereby giving us a full copy of Q1.

The play is half as long as the revered second edition. The character of Hamlet in Q1 is less pensive, and several passages establish him to be *much* younger than the thirty-year-old prince in Q2. The revenge plot moves at a steadier clip. The faster pacing toward the bloody resolution spurred one recent actor to describe that first edition as "*Hamlet* with the brakes off" – "an express train that roars out of the station."¹³ Most remarkably, the poetry in Q1 strikes many as pedestrian: "To be, or not to be – ay, there's the point" (scene 7.115) (Shakespeare 2006).

It is a "poor version" of this most famous speech, declared an anonymous reviewer in the *London Literary Gazette* in 1825. The discovery yielded "various new readings, of infinite interest ... which greatly alter several of the characters," but the writer expressed disdain for this "garbled copy" of *Hamlet*. Perhaps this distorted copy derived from someone who "picked out [the play] by hearing it performed, and getting speeches ... from some of the actors."¹⁴ This speculation morphed into a dominant theory about textual transmission called memorial reconstruction.

The writer for *The Gentleman's Magazine* noted the quarto's "strange peculiarities" but approvingly pointed to the absence of "offensive speeches" (i.e., sexually suggestive) made by Hamlet to Ophelia or his mother that are found in the 1604 second edition. This was confirmation that much of the "ribaldry" and "indecent ... stupid jokes" in the plays were to be attributed to vulgar actors.¹⁵ For the writer in the *Gazette*, the new quarto's lapses belonged to the interferences of others besides Shakespeare; for the writer in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, Shakespeare the poetic genius could not simultaneously be the source of gutter jibes and raunchy puns.

The theater has been kinder, first staging Q1 in 1881, but many scholars remained biased against Q1.¹⁶ The quarto's less than inspired poetry caused some enthusiasts and academics to assume that Shakespeare could not have written it. A recent critic characterized Q1 as "*Hamlet* by Dogberry," the bumbling Master Constable of Messina in *Much Ado About Nothing* who

¹² Bunbury 1838, 80. For more on the early history of Q1, see Lesser 2015, 1–71.

¹³ Bryan Loughrey quoting Peter Guinness 1992, 123–36; quote from 128.

¹⁴ Anonymous 1825a.

¹⁵ Anonymous 1825c.

¹⁶ A concise stage history of Q1 is provided by Irace 1998, 20–7. On scholarly prejudice, see for example the early tone set by Lloyd 1905, 2:14, 24; and Pollard 1917, 103–4; Pollard more forcefully characterizes Q1 as a "botched text" in the 1920 edition, published by Cambridge University Press.

abuses the English language by his misspeaking.¹⁷ Q1 was a literary heresy, but its discovery perfectly accorded with the boundary-breaking of Kean, Brinsely Peake, Anning, and Weddell.

3. “Harrowing to the feelings”

In his introductory epistle to *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton declares the work to be “his best and most precious possession.”¹⁸ Yet it was never published in his lifetime. After Milton’s death in 1674, Cambridge student Daniel Skinner presented the manuscript of the treatise, along with some of Milton’s State Papers when he worked for the new government, to the Dutch publisher, Daniel Elzevier. How Skinner attained these documents is unclear. Elzevier was advised against publishing the treatise because of its heresies, and he corresponded with Sir Joseph Williamson, English Secretary of State for the Northern Department, who viewed Milton as a traitor to his country. Elzevier assured Williamson that he would not publish Milton’s papers or the manuscript, wrapped them in brown paper, and mailed them to Skinner’s wealthy merchant father, who then deposited the sheaf in a cupboard in Whitehall at the State Paper Office, to be discovered in November 1823 by Robert Lemon, the Deputy Keeper of His Majesty’s State Papers.¹⁹ Milton’s villainous State Papers that had concerned Secretary Williamson in 1676 were straightaway eclipsed by the provocative theological treatise. House Secretary Robert Peel affirmed that it “would shortly be printed, under the auspices of his majesty.”²⁰ The man who once had defended the killing of his king in 1649 was now given leave to speak again by another king.

Milton’s doctrine is at once mainline and predictable, rigorously literal for a poet, and by turns quirky and radical. Echoes of the most dangerous *may be* discernible in *Paradise Lost* if the poem is read alongside the treatise: Christ is divine but not eternal because he did not exist with the Father before time (*PL*, 3.1–6); the Creation was fashioned from pre-existing, but not self-existing, matter (7.218–242); the human soul is not immortal and dies with the body until their joint Resurrection (10.775–789) (Milton 1957). Of note in the treatise, but not occurring in the poem: divorce is permitted where mutual love and companionship are lost – what we would term “irreconcilable differences.”

A reviewer in 1825 implied that Milton’s heresy had never occurred to him before reading the treatise. The reviewer reveled in “some passages of transcendent energy and pathos,” but he confessed that it was “harrowing to the feelings to learn” that Milton had subscribed to so many troubling beliefs. Milton’s “extreme heterodoxy ... must forever annihilate him as a theological authority,” and the reviewer lamented that the once-celebrated Christian poet was “an abettor of almost every error which has infested the Church of God.”²¹ The treatise wrecked the poet’s reputation among religiously conservative readers who became critical of Milton after its publication. On the other hand, the Unitarians – those who denied the doctrine of the Trinity – championed him as one of their own.²² Across the theological spectrum, people received the treatise in the spirit of their own beliefs.

¹⁷ Vickers 1993, 5–6.

¹⁸ Milton 2012. The *De Doctrina Christiana* is published as volume 8 in two separate parts, edited by John K. Hale and J. Donald Cullington; quote from 8:1.7.

¹⁹ See Campbell et al. 2005, 5–38.

²⁰ On the House of Commons conversation, see Hansard 1824, 1465–6.

²¹ Anonymous 1825b, 506–7; quotes from 507.

²² Channing 1826.

4. “A life of its own”

The discovery of Q1 *Hamlet* fueled renewed interest in the intermingling relationships between Playwrights, Actors, Printers, Readers, and Booksellers, and a culture shifting toward considering plays as high “literary” texts.²³ For some, the earliest text of *Hamlet* generated new questions about the nuts and bolts of early modern performance under those theater conditions.²⁴ Other scholars, including me, are interested in the possibility that the quarto represents young Shakespeare’s earliest playwriting, dating from the late 1580s, a position adjacent to Charles Knight’s 1865 assertion that Q1 was “a vigorous sapling” that grew into the “monarch of the forest.”²⁵ For most, the quarto stands alone from the second edition, “different instead of debased.”²⁶

Milton’s treatise was comfortably read as an interpretive “gloss” on the poem, but notable scholars have cast reasoned doubt on how much – if any – Milton contributed to the manuscript.²⁷ More recently, some scholars have observed the generic differences between poem and treatise and what they “do”: an “open” or “outward-looking” theology in the epic poem that tolerates ambiguity, and a “closed” or “inward-looking” theology in the treatise which attempts to avoid that tendency.²⁸ Others have argued that because of those differences, we ought to treat *De Doctrina Christiana* as having “a life of its own independent of *Paradise Lost*.”²⁹

In *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve fall by and into interpretation. And *Hamlet* dramatizes the ambiguity of appearances and the desire for interpretive certainty from the first line: “Who’s there?” (Shakespeare 2006). In the century before 1823, readers, editors, and writers applied that question to the twin titans of English literature, thereby immortalizing Shakespeare and Milton by setting their carved images upon a pedestal: the one as the infallible magician of the stage, and the other as the juggernaut Christian poet. The literary discoveries of 1823, however, revealed troublesome veins in the marble. Shakespeare became a man at work, trafficking in a messy theater and printing culture. Milton became a theological outlaw, increasingly resembling his epic’s grand antagonist. As the ghosts of Shakespeare and Milton whispered again in 1823, uttering what many did not expect, they turned that same question – “Who’s there?” – upon us, interrogating the cultural forces that sought and continue to shape constructions of literary authority and certitude.

Bryan Adams Hampton teaches at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He is finishing the manuscript *Honest Ghosts: How the Literary Discoveries of 1823 Reshaped Shakespeare and Milton*.

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²³ Erne 2003, 2013.

²⁴ Menzer 2008.

²⁵ See Bourus 2014; Jolly 2014; Knight 1867, 361.

²⁶ Marcus 1991, 168–78; quote from 168.

²⁷ On the treatise as a gloss on the poem see Kelley 1941. The debate was spurred by Hunter 1992, 129–42. The ensuing “Forum: Milton’s Christian Doctrine” appeared in the same issue with counterarguments from Barbara Kiefer Lewalski and John T. Shawcross, followed by a response from Hunter. Interested readers about attribution will find useful summaries of the authorship debate occurring in Stephen Dobranski’s introduction in Dobranski and Rumrich 1998, 1–17, and most recently Clawson and Wilson 2021, 151–98; summary on 153–61.

²⁸ On the classification of open or closed theology, see Patrides 1971, 165–78. See also Hale 2019, 103–22. Hale addresses and partially affirms Patrides’s distinction.

²⁹ On the separateness of their status, see Kerr 2019, 128–40; 131. Kerr’s most recent book addresses how the treatise can be read as a literary work and not just a systematic theology, and productively demonstrates moments of theological alignment and misalignment with the epic poem; see Kerr 2023.

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