

2007

## Review of Milton in Popular Culture by Laura Lunger Knoppers and Gregory M Colón

Brooke Conti

Cleveland State University, [b.conti@csuohio.edu](mailto:b.conti@csuohio.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng\\_facpub](https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub)

 Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

**How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!**

*Publisher's Statement*

Copyright © 2007 Cambridge University Press. This article first appeared in the *Journal of British Studies*, Volume 46, Issue 4, 2007, 922-924.

### Recommended Citation

Conti, Brooke, "Review of Milton in Popular Culture by Laura Lunger Knoppers and Gregory M Colón" (2007). *English Faculty Publications*. 73.

[https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng\\_facpub/73](https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/cleng_facpub/73)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the English Department at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact [library.es@csuohio.edu](mailto:library.es@csuohio.edu).

---

Review

Author(s): Brooke Conti

Review by: Brooke Conti

Source: *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (October 2007), pp. 922-924

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#) on behalf of [North American Conference on British Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/522709>

Accessed: 02-10-2015 16:18 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*North American Conference on British Studies* and *Cambridge University Press* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of British Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

and a quantity of lead weights in a bedroom in his house? Not just individual eccentricities, but broader patterns are amply evidenced in his volume. Based upon her forays into the records of cabinetmakers, pattern books, and household accounts, Ponsonby argues that provincial consumers were concerned with good value and appropriate furnishing—not with copying the latest London styles. Although metropolitan fashions would by the mid-nineteenth century intrude upon regional furnishings, Ponsonby warns that we should not assume a straightforward pattern of emulation. Scrupulously attentive herself to the factors of region, locale, gender, generation, marital status, and class that shaped what people had in their houses, she indicates how particular manners and mores should be deduced from material possessions. To take one example: inventories from Chichester in the 1840s indicate that even well-to-do spinsters and widows lacked a designated dining room. Independent women, Ponsonby thus surmises, were unlikely to have hosted formal dinner parties in the early nineteenth century. The quantity of china ware stored in front parlors and drawing rooms suggests instead that their entertaining took the form of tea parties.

So conscious is Ponsonby of the immense variety of middling homes that her book often seems kaleidoscopic: each detail eye-catching, but the whole picture still fragmentary. Historians of Britain more generally may wish that Ponsonby had done more to link her research findings to the larger narratives of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century history. Ponsonby's subject is the middling sort at precisely the point in which the middle class was ostensibly made. Material goods undoubtedly played a significant part both in cementing group affiliation and in distinguishing middle-class Britons from each other. However, because Ponsonby does not engage debates about the making of the middle classes, we miss an opportunity to learn how objects functioned in that process. In this regard, it would be helpful to know more about the meanings that Ponsonby's subjects ascribed to their belongings. Though autobiographical and diary accounts of furnishing are admittedly rarer for her period than they became in the late nineteenth century, Ponsonby relies upon them less extensively than she might. Such sources can be read for general attitudes toward possessions, as Margot Finn has done, and for their absences as well as their descriptions of furnishing. My own sense is that belongings in this period generally carried less "selfhood" (73) than later generations would impose upon them. Ponsonby hints at this dimension, which she explains as a function of the insecurities of life: "emotions were therefore channeled into a minority of possessions that were retained in all but the direst of circumstances" (11). However, given that economic insecurity was a persistent feature of the nineteenth century and that Victorians were notoriously attached to their things, I wonder whether it was the conception of the self, rather than the durability of ownership, that changed.

Ponsonby has written a book from which historians of the domestic interior will greatly profit. *Stories from Home* signals a worthy new direction in the history of design.

*Deborah Cohen*, Brown University

Laura LUNGER KNOPPERS and GREGORY M. COLÓN SEMENZA, eds. *Milton in Popular Culture*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Pp. xii+260. \$69.95 (cloth).

While nearly every year brings a nominally Shakespearean teen comedy to suburban multiplexes, the influence of Milton's works on popular culture is far less obvious; indeed, even most Miltonists would be hard-pressed to come up with more than a couple of examples of recent Miltonic adaptations. As Laura Lunger Knoppers and Gregory M. Colón Semenza's *Milton in Popular Culture* shows, however, Milton's creations—espe-

cially *Paradise Lost* and even more especially Milton's Satan—have a surprising hold on the popular imagination.

With seventeen essays that consider the influence of Milton's works in some unexpected places, the editors and contributors have produced a remarkably wide-ranging collection. The volume is organized according to the genre, media, or social context of the works considered. Five essays are devoted to Milton's influence on fantasy or science-fiction literature (Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, C. S. Lewis's *Perelandra*, Steven Brust's *To Reign in Hell*, and Margaret Hodges's picture book *Comus*); three on horror films (*Something Wicked This Way Comes*, *The Devil's Advocate*, and *The Bride of Frankenstein*); four on comedic film (*The Lady Eve*, *Sabrina*, and *National Lampoon's Animal House*); three on Milton and social justice (references to Milton in post-9/11 political commentary, Milton's influence on Helen Keller's social activism, and Malcolm X's reading of *Paradise Lost*); and a final two essays on Milton and new technologies (Simon Bigg's digital video *Pandaeonium* and Thomas Luxon's online *Milton Reading Room*). An afterword by Stanley Fish rounds out the volume.

While all of the essays present the reader with interesting new contexts in which to consider Milton's works, the quality of the contributions is decidedly uneven, and not all of the essays succeed in proving that a Miltonic allusion is actually present or intended in the pop cultural work being examined (a moment that a contributor identifies as a reworking of *Paradise Lost*, for example, may only be a reworking of Genesis—and surely not all references to or depictions of hell on the screen and the page are indebted to Milton in any meaningful way); in other cases, the Miltonic influence is clear, but relatively minimal, and the essay's author fails to mount a strong argument for its importance.

Other essays, however, acknowledge the sometimes problematic relationship between a given pop cultural work and the Miltonic original, and these make for some of the collection's most rewarding reading. Knoppers's "Miltonic Loneliness and Monstrous Desire from *Paradise Lost* to *Bride of Frankenstein*" argues that, while James Whale's 1935 film in some ways "seems a parody of all things Miltonic" (100), in its emphasis on the Creature's loneliness, desire for a mate, and final refusal to live without that mate, the movie is, in at least one important sense, "distinctively Miltonic" (101, 108). Another excellent essay on Milton and horror film is Ryan Netzley's examination of Taylor Hackford's *The Devil's Advocate*, which features Al Pacino as Satan incarnated as a lawyer named John Milton—but which otherwise contains only a single, unattributed quotation from *Paradise Lost* (115); with such limited, but seemingly important allusions, what does it mean to regard this film as an adaptation or interpretation of *Paradise Lost*?

Semenza's "Adapating Milton for Children" also does a fine job of considering the problems of adapting Milton—not merely for children, but for any popular audience. In examining Margaret Hodges's picture book *Comus*, and especially its curious claim that the major source for Milton's *Masque* was the medieval ballad *Childe Rowland*, Semenza argues that dehistoricizing Milton (as Hodges does by minimizing Milton's role and inventing a mythological, fairy-tale past for the story of *Comus*) is perhaps the only way to make his works accessible to a wider audience (80–81). Other pleasures in the collection include the differing interpretations of Milton's *Masque* that Catherine Gimelli Martin and Julie H. Kim trace through Samuel Taylor's play, *Sabrina Fair*; Billy Wilder's film adaptation, *Sabrina*; and Sydney Pollack's later remake; as well as Luxon's considerations of what it means to read Milton in an online rather than a print edition. Although Luxon does not believe that the experience of reading a hyperlinked edition of *Paradise Lost* is fundamentally different from reading a printed text, he makes a compelling case for the ways in which an online edition can make Milton's works more accessible to students and better introduce them to "research in the service of reading and interpretation" (225).

Although one could wish that the collection as a whole were as good as its best parts, there is still plenty here to inspire scholars and teachers. This book may be the first, but it

seems unlikely to be the last to consider Milton's place in popular culture—and for starting that conversation, its editors and all its contributors deserve our thanks.

*Brooke Conti*, State University of New York at Brockport

STEVE MENTZ. *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England: The Rise of Prose Fiction*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006. Pp. 261. \$89.95 (cloth).

When the second edition of Heliodorus's *An Æthiopian Historie* (1569; 1577) went to press, the English translator of the forgotten late classical romance, Thomas Underdowne, added a "Letter to the Gentle Reader." In it, he confesses to being of "riper yeeres" and "crave[s] pardon" for his earlier "boldness" of translating Heliodorus. As he says, "I am not ignorant that the stationers shops are to full fraughted with bookes of small price . . . and that the losenesse of these dayes rather requireth grave exhortations to vertue, then wanton allurements to leudnesse, that it were meter to publish notable examples of godly Christian life, then the most honest (as I take this to be) historie of love" (Heliodorus 1577 sig. Aiii<sup>r-v</sup>). Underdowne's keen awareness of the stationer's shops brisk business in romance—stories rife with allurements to "leudnesse"—fuels his urgency to justify how Heliodorus's "most honest" history of love models "examples of godly Christian life." The letter's simultaneous self-conscious recognition of romance's commercial value as well as its dubious morality poses the dilemma that encapsulates Steve Mentz's axis of argument in *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England: The Rise of Prose Fiction*.

Tracing the winding development of that elusive early modern literary form—romance—Mentz draws from print culture history, genre studies, and Reformation scholarship in order to posit romance (so often books of "small price") as a middle genre, one that rides uneasily between the "moral anarchy" of chivalric romance and the "amoral cynicism" of the Italian novella, a genre self-consciously marketed to what he terms a "middlebrow" audience, one neither exclusively courtly nor solely popular. By studying the imagined, diverse reading practices as revealed by peritextual materials, *Romance for Sale* contends that the economic viability and hybrid readership of prose romance profoundly affected new habits of reading and writing, contributing to the emergence of what Mentz labels "the Author in Print."

Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*, whose popularity peaked in the 1580s and early 1590s, is crucial to Mentz's narrative. Its emphasis on "conspiring with fate," a strategic passivity combined with active dissembling, Mentz contends, makes its plot more sympathetic to basic tenets of English Protestantism. Because Greek romance demands greater faith, patience, and reliance on providence compared to the epic martialism of chivalric romance, it might (as Underdowne himself suggests) retain the genre's appeal yet provide example for the "godly." By honing in on narrative motifs of shipwreck, for instance, Mentz portrays how Sir Philip Sidney in *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* weighs the relative merits of reason and faith in human experience. He recounts how Musidorus's insistence on active, reasonable reactions to disaster makes it difficult for him to accept supernatural control. Pyrocles, by contrast, exemplifies interpretive élan. The image of him atop the mast of a sinking ship, energetically waving his sword to attract rescue, reveals him to be a new model romance hero with his patient, yet active, endurance.

After Sidney, later Elizabethan prose fiction authors make strategic generic choices, Mentz proposes, based on complicated relationships to professional, commercial, and religious pressure. Robert Greene, whose populist career provides a radical alternative to Sidney, also follows a Heliodoran model. His heroes and heroines also emphasize human helplessness. Together, the work of Sidney and Greene reveal an antiepic turn in English narrative, while other writers such as John Lyly in *Euphues* and George Gascoigne in the *Adventures of*