

Forum

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Milton's Homer

To the Editor:

In the final note to his "From Allegory to Dialectic: Imagining Error in Spenser and Milton" (101 [1986]: 9–23) Gordon Teskey lets fall in passing a judgment that implicitly challenges a point of Milton scholarship on which there has been virtual unanimity of opinion for over twenty years. Asserting that Milton used the annotated edition of Homer prepared by Iohannes Spondanus (perhaps better known today as the poet Jean de Sponde), Teskey confidently proclaims that Milton's use of this edition was "established" by H. F. Fletcher in his 1939 *JEGP* article, "Milton's Homer." Knowledgeable Miltonists, if they do not dismiss this upholding of Fletcher's position as merely uninformed, will certainly be intrigued by it.

Fletcher's claim that Milton used Sponde's Homer is clearly and explicitly founded on his belief, common at the time, that the marginalia in a copy of the 1620 Sau-mur edition of Pindar now in the Houghton Library at Harvard are in fact in Milton's hand. These marginalia, which had been printed as Milton's in the still standard Columbia edition of his *Works*, contain two references to Sponde's Homer annotations with page numbers that, according to Fletcher, match those of the 1583 edition of that book. It was on this basis and no other that Fletcher made the claim now endorsed by Teskey.

In a well-known 1964 article, however, Maurice Kelley and Samuel D. Atkins advanced strong grounds against the ascription of the Pindar marginalia to Milton ("Milton and the Harvard Pindar," *Studies in Bibliography* 17: 77–82). Their conclusions were widely accepted in the scholarly community—for instance, by William Riley Parker (*Milton: A Biography* 2: 749n13; unreservedly) and by Douglas Bush (*A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton* 1: 255n1; with only a slight note of caution); today they constitute orthodoxy. That the marginalia in the so-called Harvard Pindar are not Milton's is current dogma: witness, for example, the treatment given this volume by John T. Shawcross, an acknowledged expert on Milton's handwriting, in his *Milton Encyclopedia* article on Milton's marginalia (5: 74).

As Kelley and Atkins themselves may be thought to have shown, the questioning of orthodox belief can prove to be a salutary exercise. Various conclusions drawn by Fletcher and by his student, Nathan Dane II, which depended on the ascription of these marginalia to Milton, have been discounted as lacking foundation; further studies based on those conclusions have been abandoned

as unprofitable, given the present state of our knowledge. But if Teskey's opinion is correct, not only Sponde's Homer (which informed Chapman's translation and which also offers a text of the *Frigii Daretis Ylias* of the twelfth-century poet Joseph of Exeter, whom Milton praises very highly in his *History of Britain*) but also many other sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century works cited in the Pindar marginalia may be considered as definitely belonging to Milton's scholarly armament. This is a pleasing prospect, but for such progress to take place Teskey's own challenge to the orthodoxy now represented by Kelley and Atkins will have to be conveyed in a form more convincing than a single sentence buried in a footnote.

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Reply:

I acknowledge as incorrect my use of the word *established* in connection with H. F. Fletcher's claim regarding the Spondanus edition of Homer and am grateful for the opportunity to quell suspicions I might have inadvertently raised of withholding new evidence concerning the copy of Pindar once thought to be Milton's. It is a scholar's duty to correct anything that might mislead others; and John Dillon has rightly closed the door on an Aleian field of conjecture where knowledgeable Miltonists no longer wander.

Having said this, I should like to forestall inferences I believe he does not intend. The argument supported by the final note of my essay can hardly be judged as without foundation because some other studies—depending, as Dillon describes them, solely on the ascription to Milton of the Pindar marginalia—have been so judged. On the contrary, that note places undue emphasis on the Greek text of the Spondanus edition, as I discovered while examining numerous Renaissance editions of Homer in the Bodleian and Cambridge University libraries. None of these editions (including the second Aldine of 1517 and the Stephanus recension of 1566) testifies to an alternative reading for *Iliad* 2.485, and the Venetian scholia, which do, were not published until the eighteenth century. Therefore the possibility of Milton's having seen the verse in any form but that which appears in Spondanus is negligible. It was important to my argument that Milton