

March 24, 2004

The New York Review
1755 Broadway
5th floor
New York, NY 10019-3780

To the Editors:

James Fenton's insightful, balanced, and instructive article on Shakespeare ("Shakespeare, Stage or Page?"—*NYR*, April 8) ends, it seems to me, on a false note: a serious injustice to John Milton. Mr. Fenton cites, and endorses, a charge made against Milton by John Gross, in his anthology *After Shakespeare: Writing Inspired by the World's Greatest Author*. The charge is based upon a passage in Milton's *Eikonoklastes*. This was an elaborate composition, written to discredit the *Eikon Basilikes*, a tract published immediately upon the execution of Charles I, containing writings purportedly by that monarch and displaying him as a man of deep piety.

In the passage in question (but I shall cite a little more of the context than is given by Mr. Fenton), Milton says in effect that pretensions to piety prove nothing—that indeed they are the stock in trade of tyrants: "... the deepest policy of a tyrant hath been ever to counterfeit religious." He remarks that "Aristotle in his *Politics* hath mentioned that special craft among twelve other tyrannical sophisms." He mentions a Byzantine emperor, "a most cruel tyrant," who is reported to have been "a most constant reader of Saint Paul's epistles." He says that "From stories of this nature both ancient and modern which abound, the poets also, and some English, have been in this point so mindful of decorum, as to put never more pious words in the mouth of any person, than of a tyrant."

At this point come the words quoted in Mr. Fenton's article, beginning: "I shall not instance an abstruse author, wherein the King might be less conversant, but one whom [*sic!*] we well know was the closet companion of these his solitudes, William Shakespeare; who introduces the person of Richard the Third, speaking in as high a strain of piety, and mortification, as is uttered in any passage in [*Eikon Basilikes*]" ; going on to cite a passage of conspicuous hypocrisy by Richard; and concluding: "Other stuff of this sort may be read throughout the whole tragedy, *wherein the poet used not much license in departing from the truth of history, which delivers him a deep dissembler, not of his affections only, but of religion.*" (The passage that I have put in italics is not included in Mr. Fenton's piece.)

John Gross, Mr. Fenton tells us, cites this as "a positively sinister gloss put by Milton on Charles's love of Shakespeare ... a far cry from 'What needs my Shakespeare for his honoured bones' or the 'sweetest Shakespeare fancy's child' of *L'Allegro*"; and Mr. Fenton himself concludes: "True: Milton comes across here as a particularly dangerous sort of hypocrite."

This is by no means a new charge: I have seen, for instance, a similar attack on Milton, based upon the same passage, attributed to Sir Walter Scott; but to me, the construction it puts upon the passage is simply astounding. Let me first

comment on the words I have italicized at the end of the quotation from Milton, which, as I have said, are not included by Mr. Fenton. A careless reading might see in these words a vile accusation by Milton against Shakespeare. But one has to use care in construing seventeenth-century syntax, and perhaps Milton's especially, which tends to be rather knotty. Reflection surely shows that the antecedent of the pronoun "him"—the person who is "deliver[ed] a deep dissembler [etc.]"—is, not "the poet," but "Richard," whose name appears some lines earlier: "The like saith Richard, Act II, Scene 1" (and then the lines Milton quotes from the play). This is evident, first of all, from the fact that Milton had just said that the poet *has not much departed from the truth of history* in his depiction of Richard; how could this make him a "dissembler" of *anything*? It is evident, secondly, from the fact that the passage itself represents *Richard* dissembling his affections and religion; Milton says that this is also the "deliverance" of history.

I have discussed the words *not* cited by Mr. Fenton, because they might be taken to support his charge, and yet can be seen, on close scrutiny, not only not to support it, but to contribute to its refutation. Shakespeare is cited by Milton both as an exemplary case of "the poets [who] have been so mindful of decorum"—that is, of *propriety*—"as to put ... pious words in the mouth ... of a tyrant," and as a poet familiar to and loved by Charles, so that Charles *could* have learned the practice of what Shakespeare himself might have called a "Machiavel" from this play. Shakespeare is certainly *not* cited by Milton as a *wicked teacher* of "Machiavellism" (any more than, in the part of the passage I have described as coming before that given by Mr. Fenton, Milton can be said to be accusing *Aristotle* of that offence!). After all, even if we did not have evidence of Milton's own admiration for Shakespeare—but of course just this evidence is what leads to the charge, here, of "sinister" or "particularly dangerous" hypocrisy on Milton's part—we surely know that Milton was not a stupid man. And he himself says that he is not citing an "abstruse" author: Shakespeare's works were rather well known. But no one who has read or seen *Richard III* could suppose that that play was *recommending* Richard's practice as a model for subsequent kings! If Milton's readers had taken him to be implying this, it would only have discredited him.

In short, Milton has cited Shakespeare for his accurate portrait of a hypocritical tyrant; has ascribed hypocritical tyranny to Charles; and has suggested that Charles may have learned how to disguise his tyranny by studying that portrait. The point of *this*—I mean, the *rhetorical* point, in Milton's propaganda piece—is simply to associate Charles with so well-known a specimen of royal villainy as Richard III. It can be argued that Milton was, in this, unjust to Charles; it can be argued that Milton and Shakespeare (really, Shakespeare's sources) were unjust to Richard; but the claim that Milton has made a vicious attack upon Shakespeare is itself unjust to Milton! (The one offense I cannot, alas acquit Milton of in the passage discussed is the shockingly ungrammatical use of the word "whom"—this from so learned a man, and so learned a *grammarian*, as John Milton!)

Howard Stein
(Professor Emeritus of Philosophy
The University of Chicago)

