

Deryl Davis, *Robert Pollock's The Course of Time and Literary Theodicy in the Romantic Age: The Rise and Fall of a Christian Epic*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2024. Pp. 239. £38.99. ISBN 97810325213101.

This book has the sort of title to which, in these days when findability rules, editors are greatly addicted. Milton's presence looms large in this book and, taken together, the title and subtitle might alarm the contemporary stall-reader as much as *Tetrachordon* did the seventeenth-century version that Milton censured in Sonnet XI. But the title reflects the fact that this book packs in a great deal.

Davis's work is of note, in the first instance, because it is the first book-length treatment of the Scottish poet Robert Pollock and his epic poem, *The Course of Time*. Neither Pollock or his poem have received a great deal of critical attention, and any work of criticism that endeavours to put this text back on the radar of literary critics is to be welcomed. In fact, Davis does rather more than simply flag the importance of *The Course of Time*, though his Introduction does that very effectively. The opening chapters go on to offer a very helpful contextualisation of the poem as one of a number of efforts in 'Miltonic theodicy in the romantic age', reminding us of the importance of the 'Milton cult' in Romantic poetry, and placing Pollock's work in conversation with Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth, but especially Byron.

The Introduction is followed by an examination of Pollock's use of Milton. This chapter includes the interesting fact that, not uniquely among his contemporaries, Pollock claimed that Milton had appeared to him in a dream and (a more idiosyncratic assertion) that they had engaged in conversation about *Comus* (having pedantically insisted that my students refer to that work as *A Masque*, it pleased me immoderately to note that dream-Milton did not recognise *Comus* as a title). Davis makes a convincing case for Milton's importance, not just as an intertextual source, but as something of a guiding light for Pollock and helpfully nuances earlier critical assumptions about what, precisely, Pollock was doing with Milton.

The next chapter broadens the search for influences upon Pollock. Byron makes another appearance, this time as the author of 'Darkness', a poem to which Pollock reacted by writing a thousand words on the resurrection (62), which would eventually form part of *The Course of Time*. Davis also discusses John Dick, who had taught Pollock divinity, and whose model of the 'polemical divine' and defence of evangelical orthodoxy left their impress on his student. Finally, Davis considers the impact of Edward Irving. Irving was, by turns, a Scottish clergyman, a celebrity preacher, a proponent of sign gifts, and condemned heretic. Irving is a colourful character who adds interest and excitement to any chapter in which he appears. In this chapter, he is significant for his nine-part polemic *The Oracles of God: Four Orations for Judgement to Come*, and for his premillennial eschatology.

Chapter Four addresses 'religion and moral portraiture' in the poem, examining how it goes about achieving its homiletical and parenetic purpose. Davis unpacks Pollock's treatment of the essentials of religion, and especially his treatment of hell and his defence of the reality of eternal punishment, a live issue in Pollock's intellectual and religious context. Equally current was the issue of biblical authority, and it is to this area that Davis moves next, before moving to address Pollock's role as 'moral bard' and its expression in range of personifications and moral portraits.

'Sharpening weapons at the forge of Byron', the next chapter, discusses *The Course of Time* as a Romantic poem. There is a useful, if brief, discussion of the wider critical debate about the relationship between Romanticism and evangelical expression in the period, before Davis focuses specifically on the poem, highlighting the features that might be described as its Romantic credential, including, its treatment of the self, nature reverie, and the poem's apocalypticism.

The title of final chapter of the book echoes its subtitle and summarises the reception

history of the poem. This is more than a postscript—Davis’s discussion of the poem’s initial popularity and its precipitous and almost total fall into obscurity provides a fascinating insight into the changes of literary and critical taste: ‘if the religiosity of *The Course of Time* was a primary reason for its success, it was also central to the poem’s undoing’ (187). While it seems unlikely that the poem will ever recover a wide readership, it is to be hoped that this valuable volume will at least ensure that it receives due attention from literary scholarship.

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