

The Increasing Distance between *De Doctrina Christiana* and Milton's Poetry: An Answer to John K. Hale

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Abstract

In this essay, David V. Urban challenges John K. Hale's assertion that scholars of Milton ought to confidently address the relationship between *De Doctrina Christiana* and Milton's poetry without being concerned by "lingering doubts" regarding Milton's authorship of the theological treatise. The article also responds to Hale's charge that Urban's earlier suggestion that scholars feel free to investigate theological matters in Milton's later poems without deferring to *DDC* is an "extreme" position. It recounts various statements by proponents of Milton's authorship of *DDC* who are cautious regarding the relationship between the treatise and Milton's later poetry and who advise against using the treatise as a theological gloss for that poetry, paying particular attention to the recent work of Jason Kerr. The essay also discusses recent challenges to Milton's authorship of *DDC*, including stylometric challenges offered by James Clawson and Hugh Wilson, that, Urban contends, should both unsettle the dominant Milton scholarly industry's comfortable acceptance of Miltonic provenance and also merit, and indeed demand, that industry's response.

I deeply appreciate John Hale's gracious response to my 2020 *Connotations* essay, including both his kind words regarding my narration of the history of the *De Doctrina Christiana* authorship controversy since 1991 as well as the exception he takes to my suggestion "that *DDC* can rightly be understood as being sufficiently removed from Milton's later poems as to investigate theological matters in the poems themselves without deference to the treatise" ("Revisting" 180). In his penultimate paragraph, Hale affirms that

“the relationship of treatise to poem [...] deserves full attention from the community of scholarship, undeflected by lingering doubts of authorship or imputations of motive,” concluding that *DDC* “belongs in the DNA of *Paradise Lost*” (“Authorship” 34). In my present answer, I will first offer a brief direct response to Hale’s claims that I offer an extreme position in my essay. Next, I will challenge Hale’s assertions regarding the relationship between *DDC* and Milton’s poetry from two bases: First, by recounting earlier as well as more recent statements by proponents of Milton’s authorship of *DDC* who are cautious regarding the relationship between the treatise and Milton’s later poetry and who advise against using the treatise as a theological gloss for that poetry. Second, by addressing recent challenges to *DDC*’s authorship that have appeared both previous to and subsequent to Hale’s response, challenges that Hale has yet to address but which both unsettle the dominant Milton industry’s comfortable acceptance of Miltonic provenance and also merit, and indeed demand, that industry’s response.

Hale’s Charges of Extremism

Despite Hale’s overall graciousness, I will admit that I was rather surprised to see the vehement language with which he describes my belief that scholars should be able to analyze Milton’s later poems’ theology “without deference to” *DDC*. Hale writes: “Urban’s position is extreme rather than moderate!” (33). This response seems to me overstated. For my part, I respect Hale’s belief that a proper use of *DDC* with relation to Milton’s later poems is not to expect “a simple straight-line development” but rather to examine the “cancellations and redefinitions” between treatise and poems, changes that “show us how Milton thinks and went on thinking” (33).¹ But I should clarify that my own position does not negate the possibility of engaging *DDC* while discussing the theology of the later poems. Rather, when I write of “the opportunity to investigate Milton’s theology independent from *DDC*” (179), I do so in the context of not deferring to the assumption that the theology of the later poems should be read through the prism of *DDC*’s assertions. Most specifically, I assert my “desire to investigate the Christol-

ogy of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* apart from the hegemonic influence of the [famously antitrinitarian] book I, chapter 5 (“[On the Son of God]”) of *DDC* and its presentation of a created Son of God” (180). And this is what I did at the June 2022 Conference on John Milton in a paper entitled “Heresy and Orthodoxy in *Paradise Lost*, Book 8: Identifying the ‘Presence Divine’ as the Son, and the Pitfalls of Using *De Doctrina Christiana* as a Theological Gloss for God’s First Conversation with Adam,” in which I argue, over and against the received view of Michael Bauman,² that the “Presence Divine” who tells Adam he has been “alone / From all eternity” (8.405-06) is in fact the eternal Son of God.³

The Longstanding Caution Against Using *DDC* as a Key to Understanding Milton’s Poetry

Moreover, contrary to Hale’s above statement, my current scholarship with the later poems ought not be deemed extreme because, as I note in my 2020 *Connotations* article, a large sweep of Milton scholars, including those who affirm Miltonic authorship of *DDC*, have urged caution regarding using *DDC* as a guide to understanding Milton’s poetry. These scholars include Michael Lieb, who in his 2006 book *Theological Milton*, despite calling himself “a firm believer in Miltonic authorship” (4), nonetheless emphasizes that *DDC* should not “in any sense be construed as a ‘gloss’ on [Milton’s] poetry” (2). Similarly, the landmark 2007 study *Milton and the Manuscript of De Doctrina Christiana*, written by Gordon Campbell, Thomas Corns, Hale, and Fiona Tweedie, despite arguing for Miltonic authorship, adds that *DDC*’s “value as guide to the interpretation of [*Paradise Lost*] is limited” (161). More recently, Jason Kerr, whose approach to *DDC* and its relation to the rest of Milton’s canon Hale specifically commends (Hale, “Authorship” 33),⁴ asserts in his 2019 *Connotations* response to Falcone that *DDC*—a treatise which Kerr maintains has various internal discontinuities—“has a life of its own independent of *Paradise Lost*,” cautioning against “hold[ing] *Paradise Lost* firmly to [*DDC*’s] theological standard” and postulating that Milton’s epic “might simply represent a further change in [Milton’s] mind” (131). And even in his own 2021 *Connotations* response, Hale himself writes against “the over-enthusiastic or one-for-one glossing of *PL* from *DDC*”

practiced by Maurice Kelley and others (33).⁵ In this, I dare say that Hale and I are in agreement.

I should add that Kerr's continuing scholarship on *DDC* is particularly germane to my own statements against deferring to *DDC* on matters of the theology of Milton's later poems. Indeed, at the aforementioned June 2022 Conference on John Milton, in an award-winning paper entitled "Milton and Theology: Reflections on *De Doctrina* and *Paradise Lost*," Kerr, having quoted at some length my resolution to study the theology of Milton's later poems largely independent of *DDC* (Urban, "Revisiting" 181), emphasized that *DDC*, in light of the labyrinth of complexities evident in its manuscript, should be understood as "not a repository of Milton's theological thought, but an artifact of his theological thinking" ("Milton and Theology").⁶ In other words, what Milton has written throughout *DDC* reflects his thought—perhaps his experimental thought—at the particular time of his writing, but it should not be viewed as his final conviction on any particular topic. I believe that the combination of these scholarly voices, even amid their affirmation of Miltonic authorship, allow for, and indeed themselves help carve out, ample space for doing the kind of theological analysis of the later poems for which I am advocating.

More Recent Significant Challenges Regarding *DDC*'s Authorship

I also think it necessary to specifically challenge Hale's previously quoted statement that the relationship between *DDC* and *Paradise Lost* should be studied by Milton scholars in a manner that is "undeflected by lingering doubts of authorship." In fact, I will go so far as to suggest that the notion that scholars should not harbor "lingering doubts" regarding Milton's authorship is at this present time not only increasingly problematic but even professionally irresponsible, although I write those final phrases not to criticize Hale but to highlight the significance of recent developments in *DDC* scholarship that postdate Hale's article, developments that I shall address in the next paragraph. But even before Hale's article appeared, Falcone, in his 2010, 2018, and 2020 challenges to Miltonic authorship offered cogent arguments concerning significant differences between presentations of the Mosaic Law in *Paradise Lost* and *DDC*, as well as matters concerning the

overall theological consistency of Milton's undisputed canon in contrast to the anomalies that appear in *DDC*. It is noteworthy that nowhere in his 2021 article does Hale address any of Falcone's concerns or even mention Falcone, whose objections to Miltonic authorship, I contend, give ample reasons for readers to have "lingering doubts" concerning Miltonic provenance. And moving beyond Hale, I find it disconcerting that, aside from Kerr, not a single scholar advocating Miltonic authorship has seen fit to respond to Falcone's objections. In all fairness, Falcone's 2010 article was published in an Italian journal and no doubt escaped the notice of most scholars, but nonetheless I dare say that, by and large, the dominant scholarly response to lingering challenges to Miltonic authorship has simply been to ignore those challenges, a response—or non-response—that, aided by the paucity of published challenges besides those of Falcone, has effectively relegated the minority position toward *DDC*'s authorship into scholarly oblivion.⁷

Even more recently, however, two essays by James Clawson and Hugh Wilson have appeared that challenge Miltonic authorship of *DDC* on, among other things, stylometric grounds.⁸ The first article, published in *Renaissance and Reformation* in a special issue on *Digital Approaches to John Milton*, having asserted that the treatise "contradicts the theology of Milton" (Clawson and Wilson 168) and noting "many incongruities" between *DDC* and Milton's undoubted canon that "have to be explained away" (186), examines the treatise by employing stylometric analytical methods that are more thorough and up-to-date than those offered in *Milton and the Manuscript of De Doctrina Christiana* (see 177-85). Clawson and Wilson conclude that a considerable majority of *DDC* after book 1, chapter 4—including a major part of the aforementioned explicitly antitrinitarian book 1, chapter 5—does not appear to be Miltonic in its provenance (see 194-97), and they suggest that *DDC* should either be considered as "a text of patchwork provenances compiled by some unknown person" (197), or that the German Socinian Jeremias Felbinger, whose "style is the only one registering across the length of the treatise," should be "high on the list of candidates" (197).

A second essay, which lists Wilson as the lead author and appears in a 2022 volume co-edited by Hale, continues this discussion, averring to dispel several longstanding "myths" regarding Miltonic authorship (Wilson

and Clawson 354-61) and directly critiquing the stylometry used by Campbell et al. in *Milton and the Manuscript of De Doctrina Christiana*, thus challenging “another enduring myth”: “that stylometry has proved Milton’s authorship of the text beyond doubt” (Wilson and Clawson 361; see also 361-69). Having pointed out the irony that the old stylometry actually suggests more connection between *DDC* and the writings of Augustine and Bernard than those of Milton’s canon (369), Wilson and Clawson put forth various newer stylometric tests (369-76), asserting that “stylometry casts doubt on evidence of Milton’s hand in the bulk of *De Doctrina Christiana*” (376). Wilson and Clawson then offer historical (376-81) and stylometric (381-89) analysis to examine the possibility that Felbinger is a better candidate for the treatise’s authorship, asserting that while the “style” of the treatise “resembles that of Milton’s only rarely,” “in all three independent tests, Felbinger’s works more closely and more consistently match the style and grammar patterns of the disputed work” (389). Although Wilson and Clawson are not ready to unequivocally assert Felbinger’s authorship of *DDC*, they do conclude both that “[T]he theology and supposed chronology of *De Doctrina Christiana* contradict the public avowals and the typical *modus operandi* of John Milton” and that “several varieties of computational analysis suggest that the style of *De Doctrina Christiana* does not resemble Milton’s,” postulating instead that the treatise “could be an orphaned work by someone else” (390).

While I urge readers to examine Clawson and Wilson’s articles for themselves, I can state emphatically that their presentations are powerful enough to suggest that no one who seriously examines their evidence should confidently assert that *DDC* ought to be studied without the “lingering doubts” that Hale dismisses. Rather, in light of Clawson and Wilson’s studies, doubts concerning *DDC*’s provenance seem entirely appropriate and indeed professionally responsible. It remains to be seen how the larger field of Milton scholarship will react to—or if they will simply ignore—Clawson and Wilson’s discoveries, but I believe the challenges their articles pose to the status quo merits a thorough and thoughtful response and indeed an overall change in disposition toward the treatise in relation to the undisputed Miltonic canon.

Final Reflections

For myself, I find my views on the relationship between *DDC* and Milton's poetry increasingly influenced by Clawson and Wilson's articles as well as Falcone's and Kerr's contributions. And specifically pertaining to my own work on Milton's theology in the later poems, I find myself pondering the theological ramifications of Milton's likely being author of merely—or perhaps not even—the earliest portions of chapter 5. Should these portions then rightly be regarded as merely the aborted musings of Arian speculations that Milton chose not to further pursue? Put another way, if the opening part of chapter 5 is in fact Milton's writing, then perhaps it should most accurately be regarded, to use Kerr's recent phrase, as “an artifact of [Milton's] theological thinking”—and indeed his *speculative* thinking—something that can in no way be regarded as a more trustworthy declaration of this theological convictions than his explicit Trinitarian affirmations in the *Nativity Ode* (1629), *Of Reformation* (1641), and, I believe, in *Of True Religion* (see Falcone, “Irreconcilable” 92-93, 98-100, and 102n15). With these ponderings in mind, I do intend to make some limited use of *DDC* in the manner that Hale advocates for in his response: that one might consider the “cancellations and redefinitions” between treatise and poems, changes that “show us how Milton thinks and went on thinking” (33), even as I continue to move away from my 2015 suggestion that “Milton's striking emphasis upon the Son's whole-life obedience” appears to be “rooted in the heterodoxy of his Arian Christology” (Urban, “John Milton” 836). But in any case, my future use of *DDC*, as I stated in my 2020 article, will be non-deferential and highly cautious, a caution that has only grown in recent months in light of both Clawson and Wilson's stylometric analyses regarding the highly limited nature of Miltonic provenance within chapter 5, and Kerr's memorable June 2022 statements contending that *DDC*'s theological assertions cannot be definitively regarded as Milton's final position.

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NOTES

¹This is Hale's approach in his recent "The View from *De Doctrina*."

²In *Milton's Arianism*, Bauman, grounding his position in Book I, chapter 5 of *DDC*, argues: "Plainly Milton intends this person [the "presence divine"] to be the Father" (264), a position Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon follow in their edition of Milton (see note at *Paradise Lost* 8.405-07) and which Dobranski also follows in his recent edition of *Paradise Lost* (see note at 8.405-06). See also Quiring 189.

³See also my recent article that affirms, by virtue of his repeated "I am" statements, the deity of the Son in *Paradise Regained* (Urban, "Metagenre" 403 and 406), although this article lacks any discussion of the controversies surrounding *DDC* and instead analyzes *Paradise Regained* independently of *DDC* (cf. Urban, *Milton and the Parables* 215-17). One may contrast my approach to *Paradise Regained* to that of Stephen B. Dobranski, who in his 2022 biography of Milton grounds his discussion of Milton's brief epic upon the Arianism of *DDC*, as revealed by his statement, "Because Milton took the heretical position that the Son was not God, the challenges that Jesus faces in the poem seem a genuine test of his virtue and wisdom" (*Reading* 200). Of course, by virtue of the Son's kenosis and the doctrine of the Son's peccability, one may instead recognize that the Son may be both true deity *and* a human being developing in wisdom and virtue amid his genuine resistance to sinful temptation.

⁴Hale references Kerr's earlier publications on *DDC* but not his 2019 *Connotations* response to Falcone.

⁵The practice that Hale warns against remains current within Milton studies. See, for example, Stephen B. Dobranski's new edition of *Paradise Lost*, a volume Dobranski says he has "designed [...] with an eye toward first-time readers" (Introduction xxviii). Dobranski announces that a prime goal of this particular edition is "to clarify Milton's religious beliefs with cross-references to his heterodox theological treatise, *On Christian Doctrine*" (xxviii). See also my discussions of Dobranski in n2 and n3 above.

⁶Kerr reinforces this point within the Introduction to his forthcoming book, *Milton's Theological Process*. Kerr's paper at the June 2022 Conference on John Milton was awarded the Charles W. Durham Award for the best paper at the conference. I thank Kerr for reading an earlier draft of this paper to ensure that I referred to his presentation accurately.

⁷It merits notice that the recent discussions of *DDC*'s provenance, including Clawson and Wilson's groundbreaking 2021 article, have taken place outside of the scholarly venues that dominated the earlier discussions regarding *DDC*'s authorship: *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, *Milton Studies*, and *Milton Quarterly*, each of which seems to have moved beyond participation in any such debates after the publication of *Milton and the Manuscript of De Doctrina Christiana* and especially after John Rogers's celebratory review of this book declared the debate regarding *DDC*'s authorship to be "authoritatively resolved" in favor of Miltonic provenance (66). It also bears mentioning that, as of 1 April 2023, *Milton Quarterly*, which regularly abstracts numerous recent articles on Milton published in other venues, has not abstracted any of the articles written by Falcone or Kerr that appear in the *Connotations* debate that began with Falcone's 2018

essay, although *Milton Quarterly* has abstracted my and Hale's 2020 and 2021 *Connotations* articles. Similarly, Falcone's 2010 essay was never abstracted in *Milton Quarterly*.

⁸Clawson and Wilson's article is officially part of the summer 2021 issue of *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, but it did not appear until late January of 2022. Both Kerr and I had read this article prior to our respective presentations at the 2022 Conference on John Milton, which each took place during the same session.

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