CHAPTER FOUR

MILTON’S ALTERNATIVE PASSION

While Milton draws on the techniques of the early modern Protestant passion, the complexity and subtlety of his representations of the Son set Milton apart from most of his contemporaries. From the range of alternatives available in the gospels and in earlier Reformation treatments of the passion, Milton consistently emphasizes the sonship of Christ, always pointing back to the will of God the Father. To a lesser degree, Milton draws on the traditions of Jesus as teacher or philosopher. This image, which was especially important in early Christian art and patristic literature, recommends itself to a reformed context because it focuses on Jesus before his passion and death. Another alternative that Milton marshals is the Christus Victor theme. Many of the early depictions of the crucifixion conform to this model, in which “Christ’s death on the cross is seen in the light of the resurrection as a dramatic conquest of mortality.”1 Milton’s survey of Christ’s functions in De Doctrina Christiana includes an image of Christ as king that informs Milton’s poetic renderings. His

kingly function means that Christ, having been made a king by God the Father, rules and preserves, principally by internal law and spiritual power, the church which he has bought for himself, and conquers and crushes his enemies. (VI: 435)

Though Milton largely avoids the literal rendering of Christ in battle, this comment supplies an important instruction about his portraits of the Son: it is through an internal and spiritual power that he fulfills his role. He is a ruler, according to Milton, not in a literal sense; rather

he rules the mind and the conscience. He does this, moreover, not by force or by physical weapons, but by those things which, in the opinion of the world, are the weakest of all. (VI: 436)

In Of Reformation Milton refutes the claim that episcopacy is necessary for the health of the monarchy. A brief reference from the passion

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sequence presents readers with the only true king, whose kingdom is not of this world:

> when Pilate heard once our Saviour Christ professing that his Kingdom was not of this world, he thought the man could not stand much in Caesars light, nor much indammage the Roman Empire: for if the life of Christ be hid to this world, much more is his Scepter unoperative, but in spirituall things. (I: 576)

The selection of John 18:36 suits the needs of Milton’s claim in the tract, but it also isolates the kingship of Christ from the rest of the passion drama, much of which carries other associations and symbols. This quick flash on the passion scene, which is inevitable once Pilate’s name is brought in to the sentence, is typical of how Milton approaches the crucifixion in his poetry as well. It is worthwhile to notice also that the true nature of Christ, the story of his life, and his kingship are characterized as hidden.

As these comments imply, Milton’s alternative passion focuses on the Son’s internal qualities and inner battle, not on any outward show of force or physical violence, including even the crucifixion.

Milton may also draw on the early Christian practice of showing Christ in several ways within a single work of art, a precedent that may help to explain intriguing differences between Christ in Paradise Lost and the Son in Paradise Regained:

> Perhaps a polymorphous presentation of Christ was seen as truer than a single static and consistent visual appearance. The texts, after all, suggest that during his life Jesus may have taken on different manifestations, projecting different exterior features, perhaps in response to need, expectation, ability, or even requirements of different viewers.²

Charles Huttar claims that both the imagery of the living, victorious Christ that was dominant before the twelfth century, as well as the more personal, emotional pattern of response that began in the Middle Ages and continued into the seventeenth century were available to Milton. His conclusion, however, that “by accepting too readily the convention that tears were the only proper response, he was prevented, for the time, from tuning in with the more congenial view, that of the

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