John Milton: Not War, Not Peace, Not Exactly Grotian

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John Milton: Not War, Not Peace, Not Really Grotian

A Thesis

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Foreword

This paper will be of value in answering continuing questions regarding John Milton's position on war and peace, questions which continue and are valid because Milton's works, as considered in the paper, offer support for both pro-war and pro-peace interpretations. The paper also addresses a middle-ground interpretation – that Milton's position can best be understood in light of the legal theories of Hugo Grotius, the Seventeenth-century Dutch scholar who is generally accepted as the father of modern international law.

The works considered include, among others, “The Nativity Ode,” the Sonnets, Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, Samson Agonistes (including post 9/11 controversy involving its alleged endorsement of terrorism), Christian Doctrine, and Milton's infrequently cited History of Britain. No ultimate answers are suggested, except that more than three hundred years of Milton scholarship have left little unexplored regarding Milton's views on war and peace. Milton will always be known for his admiration of soldiers, particularly his employer, Oliver Cromwell, and for his military imagery, particularly in Paradise Lost. He will also be known as a man who lived in a time of constant warfare, and yet who valued and sought individual inner peace.
# Table of Contents

Foreword.................................................................................................................................ii  
Abstract...................................................................................................................................iv  
Introduction.............................................................................................................................1  
Section I: Milton and Peace .................................................................................................2  
Section II: Milton and War .................................................................................................12  
Section III: Milton and Grotius .........................................................................................19  
Section IV: The History of Great Britain ...........................................................................27  
Section V: Paradise Lost .......................................................................................................32  
Section VI: Paradise Regained .............................................................................................41  
Section VII: Samson Agonistes ............................................................................................44  
Section VIII: Christian Doctrine .........................................................................................52  
Conclusion..............................................................................................................................55  
References ..............................................................................................................................56  
Bibliography ...........................................................................................................................59  
Vita...........................................................................................................................................62
Abstract

Critics are divided on whether John Milton should best be considered England's greatest war poet or a consistent advocate of peace. Some scholars urge a middle ground, arguing that Milton's position on war and peace is best understood based on the writings of Hugo Grotius, the Dutch philosopher generally regarded as the father of international law. In this paper, the three interpretations are addressed as they relate to a number of Milton’s works, including “The Nativity Ode,” the Sonnets, *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes, Christian Doctrine*, and *History of Britain*. Each interpretation is found to have some validity, but no one interpretation is found sufficient to explain Milton’s position.

John Milton; Hugo Grotius; war; peace; *Paradise Lost; Samson Agonistes*
Much current scholarship on John Milton fixates on the question of whether the man and his writings promote an agenda of pacifism or warmongering. These scholars interpret his works variously, lining up and digging in on either side of this issue of war and peace as if engaged in a veritable battle themselves. The opposing forces, each seeking a definitive reading, are those who find peace in Milton from “The Nativity Ode” through *Paradise Regained* and those who link Milton to Cromwell and see him delighting in military men and images of war. The problem, however, is that a basis for both views can be found in Milton’s major works; thus no clear victory can be won.

In this thesis, I argue against both interpretations, on the basis both of inconsistencies in Milton’s writings as well as what he chose not to say in his writings. For example, he sees personal inner peace as a goal but never indicates what benefits peace would offer society. I also address what has been suggested as a compromise in the war of scholars, the possibility of reading *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* as arguments in support of the Arminian natural law principles of Hugo Grotius. Milton certainly did know Grotius and probably would have agreed with many of the generalities of Grotius’s *The Rights of War and Peace*, a foundational work in international law. Beyond these links, however, I find too much speculation in a Grotian interpretation of Milton for it to serve as an adequate compromise. Finally, I address a relatively new theory, in no sense a compromise, which places Milton in the pro-war camp by reading *Samson Agonistes* as advocacy of terrorism.

The works considered here are *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, Samson Agonistes, Christian Doctrine*, and Milton’s usually overlooked *History of Britain*. I do not address, except by way of occasional reference, Milton’s pamphlets or other political writings, which are issue-
specific and which generally have not been considered determinative in interpretation of his major works.

Having established that Milton’s commitment to peace is an issue that cannot be resolved, I am left wondering why Milton writes so much about war and so frequently mentions peace without clearly stating his position. I believe there are two possible explanations. First, other issues concern him more, including not only his interpretation of Christianity but also the roles of kings and established churches, divorce, censorship, free will, and the secondary status of women. Alternatively, and more likely, as a man living during the tumultuous English Civil War and its aftermath he could not imagine a world without war and thus could not put his heart into a meaningful advocacy for societal peace. But in order to adequately prepare my argument for victory, it is necessary to inspect the frontlines of this scholarly battle.

I. Milton and Peace

Of the three interpretations considered in this paper, the most popular, by unscientific count, is that Milton was a man of peace and that, despite inconsistencies, he used his works to argue against war.¹ There is no suggestion, however, that Milton was a true pacifist, nor that he had given any thought to the specific tangible societal benefits of peace.

There is certainly a basis for this pro-peace interpretation. It is found in Milton’s own words, beginning with “The Nativity Ode,” which links peace to the coming of Christ, followed by the Sonnets, some of which tie the goal of peace to then-current events, and culminating in Paradise Regained, in which Christ begins his ministry on earth with a rejection of military glory.

In “The Nativity Ode” (“On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity”), “meek-eyed peace” (46) strikes a “universall Peace through Sea and Land” (52), in which “[n]o War, or Battails sound /
Was heard the World around” (53-54). So begins both “the Prince of light / His raign of peace” (62-63) and Milton scholars’ pro-peace readings.

The Sonnets, particularly 8, 15, 16, and 18, as discussed more fully herein, also argue for peace, particularly Sonnet 15, addressed to Lord General Fairfax:

O yet a nobler task awaits thy hand,
In what can Warrs, but endless Warr still breed,
Till Truth and Right from Violence be freed,
And Public Faith cleared from the shameful brand
Of Public Fraud. In vain doth Valuor bleed
While Avarice, and Rapine share the land.” (9-14)

Clearly the narrator is arguing that only the arts of peace can solve the larger problems of vice and scandal that cause wars in the first place. Such an indictment of war begetting still more “endless Warr” is fairly straightforward in the sonnet, and a similar view on the subject of warfare is evident in the other Sonnets indicated.

Finally, in Paradise Regained, Milton, through Christ, endorses glory “Without ambition, war or violence / By deeds of peace, by wisdom eminent / By patience, temperance” (3. 90-92). In answering Satan’s temptations regarding the spoils of military conquest and empire, Christ concludes with a rejection of what can be accomplished in war:

Much ostentation vain of fleshy arms
And fragile arms, much instrument of war
Long in preparing, soon to nothing brought,
Before mine eyes thou hast set; and in my ear
Vented much policy, and projects deep
Of enemies, of aids, battles and leagues,

Plausible to the world, to me worth naught. (3. 386-93)

Again, as in Sonnet 15, the costliness of war in terms of time and resources can be readily seen.

The argument for a pro-peace interpretation of Milton cannot be so simple as a reliance on these and other excerpts. This issue is complicated by Milton’s prose in support of civil war and his service to Cromwell (both of which are generally beyond the scope of this paper); Milton’s acceptance of just war (see section II below); Milton’s failure to define the benefits of peace; recent controversies regarding *Samson Agonistes* as an endorsement of terrorism; and, most importantly, *Paradise Lost*.

Although *Paradise Lost* does contain some anti-war language, such as “warres, wasting the earth” (2. 502), and, arguably at least, is not primarily about war, it is nonetheless regarded by at least one critic, G. Wilson Knight, as a great, if not the greatest, poem about war in the English language.²

These complications have forced pro-peace advocates to adopt highly creative interpretative strategies, offensive and defensive in nature, and not necessarily consistent with one another. The most common strategy is to construct a biographical and historical context in which it would be unlikely that Milton would have anything good to say about war. Campbell and Corns argue that in 1643 when Milton wrote Sonnet 8, “Captain or Colonel,” “the soldier’s trade, at least before the apparent heroism and discipline of the troops of Fairfax and Cromwell, was widely despised. The construction of the stereotype of the whoring, drunken, swearing cavalier ‘damme’ was premised on much older antipathy to the dissoluteness long attributed in popular belief to military men” (156-57). As for the sonnet, which seems to be at least deferential to military values, Campbell and Corns question whether it might be “a joke, in appallingly bad
taste” (156). When examining *Samson Agonistes*, written much later in Milton’s life, Campbell and Corns again look to context: “Milton’s was often a merciless age, and he sometimes shares its most distressing values and assumptions” (362). They add, “Samson’s solution to the Philistine problem has limited significance in identifying Milton’s peace values. Finally, it is our guess that Milton’s ridicule of militarism in *Paradise Regained* was his way of expressing resentment for the mobilization of troops for the Anglo-Dutch War” (365).

On the other hand, James Freeman, one of the leading proponents of the pro-peace interpretation, strongly disagrees with the Campbell and Corns assessment of Milton’s context as anti-military. He believes that Milton was not only arguing against war in *Paradise Lost* and other works, but that he was writing at a time when “human concerns were regrettably mere divergences from the broad highway of Western thought [which] inexorably led to war” (6). Still, such a reading of Milton’s stance on war and peace relies on assumptions about the writer stemming from his historical situation.

Others argue that pro-peace Milton was locked into military solutions when he chose to write an epic. The “epic” argument takes several paths to find a message of peace. John Steadman does not see Milton so much making a choice as struggling to fit his peace message into a mold with which he was uncomfortable. According to Steadman,

> By definition, the heroic poem was devoted to the imitation of heroic action and heroic virtue, and to the praise of “godlike men.” Traditionally, these were men of war – military leaders and princes. Their characteristic virtues were martial valor joined with tactical cunning or strategic prudence; and the actions in which they displayed these qualities were
military enterprises. They belonged to a warlike (and frequently a courtly) culture, and the poetry dedicated to their exploits was often addressed to a similar society – to an aristocratic audience whose favor the poet himself might be dependent for patronage. (6)

Steadman notes further that “the purely martial epic could not, on the whole, cope successfully with the higher virtues since it could not effectively portray the matter in which they could best be illustrated and tried.” (40)

The poor fit of the genre, Steadman argues, is particularly problematic for a poem such as Paradise Lost, for

In the Christian hero, finally, the heroic image itself tended to vanish in an ideal of impossible perfection transcending the powers of the hero and the imitative craft of the poet. Fading away like some ancient soldier, the pattern hero became re-absorbed into the archetype. The heroic image became lost in the divine image; the heroic example was overshadowed by its divine exemplar. In Milton’s hands (as one of his earliest critics surmised) the heroic poem had vanished imperceptibly into the divine poem. (40-41)

Another approach to the “epic” issue is to suggest that Milton was in effect rejecting heroic values and the epic genre and writing a “mock epic.” Stella Purce Revard, one of the most persuasive peace-message advocates, examines in great detail but ultimately dismisses this
approach as merely “one solution to the problem” (19); however Ronald Bedford gives it more weight:

The tonal mode of Milton’s representation of war – both
angelic and human – in Paradise Lost is not only mock heroic
in a generic sense but also essentially ironical: the whole poem,
after all, is structured around a paradox, namely a critique of
the ambitions and valuations of epic poetry itself cast in the form,
for much of its action, of an epic poem, in which Satan is epic
hero whose heroism is diminished and derided. Milton presents
readers with the expected epic warrior, but one whose fraud, guile
and moral cowardice compromise both his own status as soldier-
hero and the paradigm of Renaissance epic itself. (127)

A third path to finding a peace message in Paradise Lost is to demonstrate anti-militarism
by way of Satan’s failures, despite his military virtues and those of his army. This is
accomplished with precision by James Freeman, whose Milton and the Martial Muse has become
a principal modern text for peace-message advocates. Freeman believes that Satan’s demons are
good obedient soldiers. He argues that they work as a team in, for example, erecting
Pandemonium, and that, at least initially, they possess high morale and were trained for battle.
Freeman sees Satan himself as “the very model of a modern major general.³ This does not add up
to success[,] however” (124). Moreover, Freeman interprets the poem as pro-peace propaganda,
for “once Milton demonstrates that only a fallen creature idolizes war, readers can free
themselves from its unwarranted fascination and concentrate upon some ‘better fortitude’” (223).
Based on what Milton wrote and what has been written about him, it is incontestable that there is in his work a message that peace is better than war. But there is absolutely no basis for concluding that he was a pacifist or that in his major poems he ever spoke in any depth about what benefits societal peace might offer. Indeed after domestic peace was restored by the Restoration in 1660, he was still speaking in generalities in *Paradise Regained* and other later work.

The peace movement existed in Milton’s era not only in the efforts of the Quakers, but in a living body of thought that had matured with Erasmus, Thomas More, John Colet (linked to Milton through St. Paul’s school) and Elizabethan statesmen. They rejected even “just war” arguments that had been made by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and which, as discussed herein, were accepted by Grotius and apparently by Milton (see section VIII).

As Colet preached in 1497, peace was a worthy goal,

> Hence we ought to aim as much as possible at goodness, in order to conquer evil; and at peace and forbearance, to overcome war and unjust actions. For it is not by war that war is conquered, but by peace, forbearance, and reliance on God . . . .

> Sooth to say, the Christian warrior’s prowess is his patience, his action in suffering, and his victory, a sure trust in God.

(qtd. in Lowe 157)

William Cecil (Lord Burghly), Elizabeth I’s great minister and certainly no pacifist, saw no glory to be had in war and rejected the reasoning that would be relied on by Milton in *On Education*, as discussed in section II. In Cecil’s estimation,
Neither by mine advice shall you train them [sons] up to wars:

for he that sets up his rest to live by that profession, in mine
opinion, can hardly be an honest man, or a good Christian.

(qtd. in Lowe 300)

While there is every reason to believe that Milton was aware of these arguments and even seems to be alluding to Colet, when Adam says “that suffering for Truths sake is fortitude to highest victorie” (PL 12.569-70), he nonetheless never addressed the substantial arguments for societal rather than personal peace.

In his treatise on war, nominally addressed to Pope Leo X, who succeeded the ever-warring Julius II, Erasmus says not only what is good about war but also what is good about societal peace, arguing:

In time of peace (none otherwise than as if the lusty springtime
and shine in men’s businesses) the fields are tilled, the
gardens and orchards freshly flourish, the beasts pasture
merrily; gay manours in the country are edified, the towns are builded, where as
need is reparations are done, the buildings
are heightened and augmented, riches increase, pleasures are nourished, the laws
are executed, the common wealth flouris-
eth, religion is fervent, right reigneth, gentleness is used,
craftsmen are busily exercised, the poor men’s grain is more
plentiful, the wealthiness of the rich men is more gay and goodly,
the studies of most honest learnings flourish, youth is well
taught, the aged folks have quiet and rest, maidens are luckily married, mothers
are praised for bringing forth of children like
their progenitors, the good men prosper and do well, and the
evil men do less offence.” (26-27)

Similarly, and also presumably known by Milton, Shakespeare in *Henry V*, Act 5, Scene 2 portrays the Duke of Burgundy extolling the benefits of peace to the kings of England and France:

[. . . L]et it not disgrace me,
If I demand, before this royal view,
What rub or what impediment there is,
Why that the naked, poor and mangled Peace,
Dear nurse of arts and joyful births,
Should not in this best garden of the world
Our fertile France, put up her lovely visage?
Alas, she hath from France too long been chased,
And all her husbandry doth lie on heaps,
Corrupting in its own fertility.
Her vine, the merry cheerer of the heart,
Unpruned dies; her hedges even-pleach’d,
Like prisoners wildly overgrown with hair,
Put forth disorder’d twigs; her fallow leas
The darnel, hemlock and rank fumitory
Doth root upon, while that the coulter rusts
That should deracinate such savagery;
The even mead, that erst brought sweetly forth
The freckled cowslip, burnet and green clover,
Wanting the scythe, all uncorrected, rank,
Conceives by idleness and nothing teems
But hateful docks, rough thistles, kecksies, burs,
Losing both beauty and utility.
And as our vineyards, fallows, meads and hedges,
Defective in their natures, grow to wildness,
Even so our houses and ourselves and children
Have lost, or do not learn for want of time,
The sciences that should become our country;
But grow like savages,--as soldiers will
That nothing do but meditate on blood,--
To swearing and stern looks, diffused attire
And every thing that seems unnatural.
Which to reduce into our former favour
You are assembled: and my speech entreats
That I may know the let, why gentle Peace
Should not expel these inconveniences
And bless us with her former qualities. (23-67)

The benefits of peace Erasmus and Shakespeare endorsed are not controversial, nor are they
grounded in any religious or political thinking that would have been foreign to Milton. Milton
could thus have simply reworded and incorporated what they had said at any of the many places
in which he advocated peace, and one can only speculate about the reason he did not do so if he really was committed on the issue.

Another speculative question is why Milton, who had been government bureaucrat under Cromwell, never suggested what government might do with money not being spent on warfare.\(^6\) For example, he might have suggested public works to improve trade, such as harbors, canals or new roads; medical research, particularly regarding plague; social services, such as marital counseling or job training for the deaf or blind; or urban renewal and new building codes in London which might have prevented the Great Fire of 1666. Such ideas were certainly not new, and Milton, who knew Rome, could have looked, without acknowledgment, most likely, to the success of Pope Sixtus V in modernizing Rome.

While Milton apparently did not think about what government could do, he did have a general idea about better uses of public funds, which he addresses in “The Digression” to his History of Britain (see section IV). As in his argument in Sonnet 15, he laments betrayal of “the Public Faith, after infinite sums received, and all the wealth of the church, not better employed but swallowed up into a private gulfe” (444). What he is suggesting is that some government money should be available for public benefit. And yet, although Milton probably thought peace was better than war, he never explains his reasoning, nor does he suggest what benefits peace might offer.

**II. Milton and War**

So much for the issue of Milton’s stance on peace. An equally supportable and equally problematic interpretation of Milton’s works is that they are not anti-war and instead reflect a great admiration for soldiers. Until the late twentieth century, a time in which anti-Vietnam War
sentiment was strong on university campuses, there appears to have been little debate about Milton’s pro-military position despite the pro-peace evidence cited above. Indeed, as discussed earlier, he supported the violent overthrow of a government; he worked for Cromwell, who is historically remembered for his military efficiency as well as brutality in Ireland; he favored just war, whether to topple tyrants or in defense of Heaven; he did not shy away from controversial issues that affected him personally, such as divorce or censorship; and most importantly, he authored not only Paradise Lost but also Samson Agonistes, which since 9/11 has been criticized, wrongfully, I would believe, as an endorsement of both terrorism and Western militarism.

The leading proponent of the pro-military interpretation is Robert T. Fallon, who has written extensively on Milton’s military orientation and who, not surprisingly, is also a significant source for a Grotian “just war” interpretation of Milton, discussed in section III. Fallon’s premise, on entering the war and peace debate with his Captain or Colonel, is that there is no historical basis for Milton doing more than preferring peace (2). From there, Fallon, who claims to have been personally “under fire” in combat, all but joins G. Wilson Knight, who used Milton, particularly Paradise Lost, as Lawrence Oliver used Shakespeare’s Henry V to inspire England in the fight against Nazi Germany, as mentioned below.7 Knight saw Milton as “our greatest poet of war, and the ‘brazen throat of war’ (PL 2.709) is poetically his continual delight” (123).

Similarly, John Wooten suggests that Milton enjoyed describing the violence of war and had an “aggressive, confrontational, often violent temperament” consistent with “stereotypical posturing of the proverbial short man who feels himself confronted with contemptuous or hostile treatment” (133). While this seems overstated, there is indeed a basis in Milton’s work, as well as in his life,8 according to Knight and Wooten, who both also argue that this seeming delight in
bellicose imagery may be a fundamental contextual problem in the pro-peace interpretation by Freeman and Revard, discussed in section I.

Fallon starts by identifying Milton and placing him in context. Milton was deeply religious, and war, particularly from a Puritan perspective, was the result of original sin and “part of God’s inscrutable plan” (28). Revard agrees on this point, noting that “certainly Christians of the seventeenth century would readily have accepted that life was a battle upon earth” (12). Underlying this metaphor, and documented in detail by Freeman, approval of war was based on highly credible Christian writers as well as by Greek and Roman heroic traditions.9

No one, however, would suggest that Milton – who felt a need to say that he preferred peace – fully embraced either religious justification or social acceptance of war as a norm. For Milton, war had to be just to be morally correct. This concept pervades his political writing justifying regicide and is summarized, albeit briefly, in Christian Doctrine (see section VIII). Moreover, to the extent that Milton’s approach can be linked to that of Grotius (see section III), controlling natural law standards for why and how wars should be fought can be found in both men’s works.

To fairly judge Milton on the issue of war and peace, it is necessary to distinguish between what he wrote about war and what he wrote about soldiers. For Milton, war could be glorious. In Paradise Lost, the Son’s defeat of Satan with seismic super-weapons (6. 609-79) and a final chariot charge (6. 746-892) are without equal in the canonical literature of the English language. War could also be less than glorious and is rejected in Paradise Regained, Book 3 as “[m]uch ostentation vain of fleshly arm, / and fragile arms, much instrument of war, / long in preparing, soon to nothing brought” (387-89).
War, that is, could be good or evil. Obviously, Satan’s war was evil, as was the massacre of the Waldensian Protestants by the Duke of Savoy. How strongly Milton really felt about the Waldensians is questionable, to be sure, despite his call for vengeance in the first line of Sonnet 18 (“Avenge O Lord thy slaughter’d saint. . .”). James Holly Hanford believes “Milton shared fully the indignation of his country at this crime . . . and wrote the sonnet . . . in his private capacity as a poet” (85). Nonetheless, it was the party line and, according to Anna Beer, Milton’s poem “suggests at first sight that he was still very much Cromwell’s man” (257), despite whatever differences he may have had with Cromwell on censorship or other issues. Indeed, it was his job as Cromwell’s man to write nine letters on Cromwell’s behalf to European leaders, including France’s Louis XIV, protesting the massacre. Fallon deals with the massacre in great detail, noting Milton’s restraint – consistent with Cromwell’s political position – in ending the sonnet with a pacific turn and asking God not to be vengeful.¹⁰

But, war, or at least abandonment of peace, could certainly be good in Milton’s view, particularly if in furtherance of Cromwell’s objectives. Milton’s “Observation upon the Articles of Peace with the Irish Rebels,” which Hanford believes “prepared the way for the merciless suppression of the rebellion a few months later by Cromwell” (86), contains an implicit endorsement of war. Such writings certainly complicate the arguments of the peace-message advocates.

Milton is thus no more consistent about war than he is about peace. To expect consistency, however, would be unrealistic. It is reasonable to assume that Milton, like most people, changed his opinions based on new knowledge and personal experience. It is also reasonable to assume that because he was losing his eyesight and thus some measure of
independence Milton would have been extremely reluctant to express anti-war or anti-military opinions Cromwell might have found offensive.

Although Milton might have been inconsistent about war and peace, there is no evidence to suggest that he ever lacked respect for the military profession. Even Freeman concedes that Milton’s essay “On Education” “suggests the establishment of a Renaissance Sandhurst” with the disclaimer that Milton’s “major interest is in a thoroughly rounded course of study” (48). Parker, in his exhaustive biography, suggests a different interpretation of the young Milton as a teacher as well as his proposed curriculum:

> It is likely that he taught fencing to his young charges when they were old enough to handle their weapons. He himself carried a sword whenever he walked abroad, and he was skilled in using it. He thought that all young men should know the exact use of their weapon, to guard and strike safely with edge or point; this will keep them healthy, nimble, strong and well in breath, and is also the likeliest means to make them grow large and tall and inspire them with a gallant and fearless courage. (252)

Regardless of what he might have thought or written about military training, Milton did not see himself as a soldier, despite qualities he boasted of, again somewhat inconsistently, during later life. “Girded with my sword,” Milton writes, “as I generally was, I thought myself equal to anyone, though he was far more sturdy, and I was fearless of any injury that man could inflict on another” (qtd. in Freeman 62).
Milton thus found himself with a conflict to resolve, and, if qualified for military service, he rejected the call. In Sonnet 8, “Captain or Colonel,” he says to the unknown soldier that he, as a poet, “can spred thy Name o’re Land and Seas” (7) if the soldier acts in honor and spares the poet’s domicile, implying that poet and soldier are both honorable missions, a sentiment consistent with what he later wrote in *Defensio Secunda*, in which he expressed a more moderated assessment of his military skills:

I exchanged the toils of war, in which any stout trooper might 
outdo me, for those labors which I better understood. . . . I 
concluded that if God wished those men to achieve much noble deeds, he also wished that there be other men by whom these deeds, once done, might be worthily quoted and extolled. (qtd. in Fallon 62)\(^\text{11}\)

As a mature man who chose not to fight but respected the military profession, Milton wrote sonnets, in addition to Sonnet 8, that reflect his feelings about soldiers. Sonnet 15, “To General Fairfax,” can be read both as Milton’s recognition of the “nobler task” (9) awaiting Fairfax and as an expression of belief that a military man “whose name in armes through Europe rings” (1) is altogether praiseworthy and the right man to root out public corruption. Sonnet 16, “To Cromwell,” has the same message of praise and recognition of work to be done, in this instance fighting off the threat of Catholicism. Again, as with the Fairfax sonnet, there is no suggestion that Milton thought that a soldier was not the right man for the job.

The Milton-Cromwell link is obviously more complicated than might be suggested in Sonnet 16 and has been addressed in detail many times over many years.\(^\text{12}\) For the purposes of this thesis, however, a few facts that bear on Milton’s approach to soldiers are beyond debate.
First, Milton deeply admired Cromwell’s New Model Army, which won battles against Royalist forces while other Parliamentary armies faltered. Fallon believes that the New Model Army “was perhaps the single most important factor in the political and spiritual life of the English Republic” and that “[i]t had a profound effect on Milton’s perception of war and the men who fought it” (73).

Second, as noted by Beer, “Milton did not need to work for Cromwell’s government; it seems he chose to do so” (264). This is an important conclusion, because, although Milton’s autonomy and scope of duties are debatable, he voluntarily aligned himself with what became a military dictatorship.

Third, there is no evidence that, whatever his responsibilities, Milton was a disgruntled employee. He did not write minority reports on military issues, and based on his willingness to dissent from prevailing opinions, such as divorce or censorship (*Aeropagitica*), inferences can be drawn that he approved the military’s role under Cromwell.

Finally, Cromwell is not Satan in *Paradise Lost*. If he is, God must be Charles II, and no one has ever seriously argued that Milton favored the Restoration that resulted in his imprisonment. I do not mean to suggest, of course, that as generals Cromwell and Satan have nothing in common. Fallon argues that Milton saw similar traits of courage and decisiveness in all great leaders.

Unlike his views on war and peace, there is no inconsistency in Milton’s depiction of soldiers. Instead, his estimation of military men is nuanced, likely resulting from his real life working with soldiers in the Cromwell government. Good soldiers, such as Satan’s troops, can have bad generals, as noted by Freeman (79-99) and discussed above. Good soldiers are also
both obedient and capable of independent thought and action, as exemplified by Abdiel in *Paradise Lost*. There can also be bad soldiers whose personal shortcomings correspond to the evil of their cause. Moloch is a foolish warmonger in *Paradise Lost*, and Harapha the Gath in *Samson Agonistes* is a cowardly bully who is too fearful to prove his military prowess even by fighting a blind man.

In sum, it is just as difficult to place Milton squarely in the war camp as it is to paint him as a pacifist. It is abundantly clear that he understood and respected the military profession and that his nuanced judgments are reflected in the Sonnets as well as in *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. It is also clear that he enjoyed writing about combat, as he did in *Paradise Lost*, and that even in situations in which military matters were not involved, such as in “The Nativity Ode,” he favors military imagery. Such musings and stylistic choices, however, do not add up to an endorsement of war as the best means to resolve conflicts. If that had been Milton’s goal, he could have written an Arthurian epic or, contrarian personality permitting, added something only slightly different to then-popular war literature. Also, and most important, he would not have written Paradise Regained or felt a need to sprinkle his writing with pleas for peace which he does not fully define.

### III. Milton and Grotius

If one believes – as I do not – that Milton’s works can be read as a cohesive comment on war and peace, an interpretive theory outside of routine Milton scholarship is extremely helpful to reconcile or at least smooth out inconsistencies. The theory discussed in this section, developed largely by Elizabeth Oldman in her 2003 dissertation at New York University and in articles on the War in Heaven and on Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes, is that Milton
was influenced in virtually everything he wrote by the writings of Hugo Grotius, most specifically by Grotius’ monumental treatise *The Rights of War and Peace*.

Oldman’s theory is not without problems. First, although Milton cites Grotius as a source of ideas in some of his early prose work,\(^{15}\) Grotius cannot be conclusively linked to *Paradise Lost* or *Samson Agonistes* by more than the fact that Grotius too wrote literary works using biblical subject matter. Second, Milton had access to an extraordinary number of sources,\(^ {16}\) and like any great writer, he mixed and matched images and ideas in a creative process that involved more spontaneity than double-checking. It can also be assumed that his spontaneity increased as a blind man composing in his head, in the dark, for later dictation. He thus may or may not have been thinking about Grotius when he composed *Paradise Lost*. Most probable, however, is that Milton and Grotius shared so much in common that it would be inevitable that they would focus on similar issues and resolve them in similar ways without direct influence. As discussed more fully in this section, both Milton and Grotius were Arminian Protestants at a time when rejection of predestination and emphasis on man’s free will were far from the norm. Both were also biblical and classical scholars who felt compelled to systemize their thoughts, as Milton did in *Christian Doctrine* and Grotius did in *The Rights of War and Peace*. Finally, to whatever extent what people do in life dictates what they think and write, it is significant that Milton and Grotius share more career parallels than divergences. Both received early recognition of their minds and talents, although Grotius was even more of a prodigy than Milton. Both were at odds with their government – Milton with that of James I and Charles II and Grotius with the Counter-Remonstrants, who sent him to prison. Both, though renowned, ended their careers in political
limbo – Milton far from the mainstream after the Restoration, and Grotius, a Dutchman, in exile and in Paris as a former ambassador for Sweden’s Queen Christina.

Although it is certain that a link between the two exists, both intellectual and personal, there is only speculation about how Milton might have come under the influence of Grotius, who was twenty-five years Milton’s senior. According to Oldman, Milton would have known of Grotius as a result of Grotius’ diplomatic trip to England in 1613, in which he unsuccessfully attempted to interest James I in a theological league with continental Protestants (Milton, Grotius 103). Later, in the 1630s, Grotius was, as Oldman contends, the father figure of the Great Tew Circle, a group of young intellectuals who met to discuss their frustration with the “narrow-mindedness of the Laudian regime” (Milton, Grotius 107-09). Further, “The Dutch scholar’s focus on the supremacy of human rationality attracted [Milton to Grotius] more than to any other philosopher. His logic formed a common ground upon which its individual members could meet and solidify their own theories of knowledge and religion” (Milton, Grotius 111). While Grotius was obviously influential upon young thinkers of the time, claiming him as an inspiration for all of Milton’s writings is merely conjecture.

At any rate, assuming, as is likely, that Grotius’ connections with England, coupled with the availability of his works such as Rights of War and Peace (1625) would have prompted Milton’s interest, it makes sense that he would have wanted to meet him personally when Milton went to Paris in 1638. They did meet, and much has been written about the meeting’s substance, all of which is speculation. Fulton claims that “it seems extremely unlikely that [Milton] would not have known [Grotius’] work before seeking him out in Paris in 1638” (62). Parker, in his Milton biography, goes further, asserting that
Grotius was an international figure, ‘of prime note among learned men’ as a jurist, theologian, philologist, and historian. Milton was conducted into the presence of an eminent Dutchman by several of Scudamore’s retinue. Actually engaging him in conversation was an early fulfillment of one of Milton’s ideals of travel, and a glowing augury of adventures to come. What they talked about, we do not know. Perhaps the servile condition of learning on the Continent, and the ‘philosophic freedom’ of England; perhaps international law, or Grotius’s scheme for uniting Protestant churches; perhaps Dr. Theodore Diodati, who had been a fellow student with Grotius at Leyden. The notion is seductive but it is too much to suppose that their talk turned to the great man’s youthful tragedy, *Adamus Exul*, although this experience may later have led Milton to read the work. (170)

Joining in the speculation, Beer asserts that “it may well have been an inspirational meeting” (92), and Campbell and Corns add that the meeting made more of an impression on Milton than on Grotius (106).

In any event, Milton was sufficiently impressed to describe Grotius in *Tetrachordan* as “one of prime note among learned men” (qtd. in Campbell and Corns 106) and to cite him as a source for the early works, as indicated above. The question of how much Grotius influenced Milton’s later works, however, remains open.
Oldman is convinced that Milton owned Grotius’s works in his personal library and “likely consulted” them in writing *Paradise Lost* (Dissertation, 7 and 125). Fulton, however, claims that “Milton’s physical library is something we have almost no evidence of” (1).

A parallel question also lingers beyond Milton’s access to Grotius’s works and use of his ideas, namely whether Milton was specifically influenced by Grotius’s nonfiction poetic works in determining the content and style of *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*. Hanford addresses in detail the similarities between Grotius’s *Adamus Exul* (1601) and *Paradise Lost* and finds, among many other parallels, “the geographical description of Eden, Satan’s contrast of his own misery with the bliss of Adam and Eve . . . and the angel’s story of Lucifer’s rebellion and of creation” (213). Significantly, however, for the purposes of this paper, no similarities are noted between Milton’s and Grotius’s approaches to war and peace. *Samson Agonistes* may also have a touch of Grotius’s *Christus Patiens* (1608), particularly its dramatic structure. Again, however, there is no link applicable to war and peace.

To go beyond the connections discussed thus far, which involve measures of both coincidence and speculation, the only reliable approach is to first identify what is distinctive and more or less novel in Grotius and then to determine which of these distinctive or novel elements can and cannot be identified in Milton’s work and which cannot be. This approach is different from that taken by Oldman, who focuses on common beliefs, such as “sociability.”

I will not for the purpose of comparison address all distinctive themes in Grotius’s many works of fiction and nonfiction, or even all of the themes addressed in *The Rights of War and Peace*. Grotius, like Milton, was interested in the rights of a people to violently overthrow their government. This issue, which indeed involves many similarities noted by Oldman, is too large for the scope of this paper. Similarly, I will not address the generalities of natural law, Arminian
free will, or religious toleration or divorce, on which Milton and Grotius can generally be found to be in agreement. I also will not address Grotius’s distinctive views – whether or not shared by Milton – on such matters as slavery or the rights of Native Americans, because these issues are not relevant to war and peace. What remains by my reading of The Rights of War and Peace are ten distinctive Grotian themes that may or may not be found in Milton’s work.

First, and apparently of greatest significance to Oldman, is Grotius’s identification of “sociability” as a starting point in natural law. Grotius stated in Prolegomena 6 to The Rights of War and Peace that “amongst the things peculiar to man in his desire of society, that is a certain inclination to live with those of his own kind, not in any manner whatever, but peacefully and in a community regulated according to the best of his understanding” (I.1.6.1). This “sociability” for Grotius is ingrained and different from a social contract, which might later be formed voluntarily, for self-preservation. Also distinctive, Grotian sociability reflects an optimism rarely present in the selfishness which is a starting point for Hobbes.19

Oldman sees Milton embracing Grotian sociability throughout Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, and Samson Agonistes. She cannot be proven right or wrong, because although Milton does not cite Grotius except in other matters as noted above, and nowhere paraphrases Prolegomena 6 as his own insight, there is nothing Milton wrote that is demonstrably inconsistent with Grotian sociability.

Second, and as controversial as anything Grotius wrote, is Prolegomena 11, with its assertion that his ideas regarding natural law would be valid even if “there is no God, or that he takes care of human affairs” (I.1.11.1), Grotius admits that his hypothesis is antithetical to his personal beliefs as a devout Christian but nonetheless makes his argument. Such a rhetorical maneuver simply does not seem to be something Milton would have done, either as a young man
writing “The Nativity Ode,” as Cromwell’s employee, or as the author of Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, or Samson Agonistes, all of which simply presume God’s existence in connection with natural law.

Third, Grotius identifies a tension between the rights of individuals and those of states in matters such as revenge, which directly relates to a distinction Grotius makes between what is good and Christian and what is permissible under law. There is no way of knowing whether Samson Agonistes reflects Grotian consideration on the issue. Nonetheless, it seems significant that Milton deviated from his biblical source to diminish Samson’s motive of revenge. In doing so, Milton’s Samson is more Grotian than his prototype in Judges.

Fourth, Grotius wrestled with finding a way to involve moral values in international law, which he is generally regarded to have founded. He was by training a lawyer and by experience a man who knew that assertion of moral values such as those of Arminianism could result in prison and exile. He thus sought practical accommodations that verged on relativism and made unprecedented distinctions between in bello (during war) and ad bellum (cause of war) decision-making. If Milton thought about such distinctions, he might or might not have been in a position to express his ideas under Cromwell, who fought “just” wars, but who was notorious for brutality in bello. Otherwise, Milton was not involved in international relations. Nonetheless, both Samson’s and Delilah’s speeches in Samson Agonistes might be interpreted as addressing the related Grotian issues.

Fifth, according to Mark Rigstad, Grotius believed in the right to punish wrongdoers, even if the punishers were not victims of the wrong. He saw this right as inherent in man, even before the formation of civil society. Rigstad differentiates Milton’s position, based on Milton’s interpretation of natural law in The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates, but there is nothing, except
in Milton’s political writings, to suggest that he considered this Grotian issue.

Sixth, Grotius was definitely not a pacifist, although he offers due deference in Prolegomena 30 to the views of his countryman, Erasmus. Milton, however, simply did not think much about what societal peace meant. As Oldman contends, “peace for Milton was not a state of being, but a goal toward which to strive,” or put another way, a “desired state of repose” (Milton, Grotius 9).

Seventh, peace, for Grotius, does not necessarily relate to justice or to just wars. It was desirable in itself and required moral compromise to avoid endless war for good causes (645). There is absolutely nothing in Milton’s writings or résumé to suggest that he was ever so close to real decision-making to address such an issue in seventeenth-century international affairs. Moreover, if Satan in Paradise Lost is considered merely as someone “not of the true religion” (827), negotiated peace would have been possible for Grotius, although almost certainly not for Milton.

Eighth, Grotius suggests disputes among nations could be resolved without war by negotiation, by arbitration, or even by lot. In Paradise Lost, Milton seems to acknowledge the value of negotiation but stops there in evoking Grotian solutions.

Ninth, while the ad bellum/in bello distinction had been recognized before Grotius, he focuses not only on just causes of war (ad bellum) but also on rules for how wars should be fought (in bello), independent of whether wars were just. This issue is relevant to Samson’s own treatment as a prisoner and the killing of all Philistines in Samson Agonistes, as well as Heaven’s use of a geological super-weapon in Book 6 of Paradise Lost. Milton does not, however, raise Grotian questions.
Tenth, in Prolegomena 36, Grotius distinguishes what may be done among nations with “bare impunity” and what is truly “blameless” (1.1.36.1); in other words, there is a higher standard to be sought. This kind of thinking is foreign to Milton and nowhere in his works does a reader have to decide against doing what is lawful and thus permissible when a better, more Christian course might be possible.

In summary, there are definitely links between Milton and Grotius, and in Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained, and Samson Agonistes Milton may have been inspired by Grotius, as Oldman suggests. Nonetheless, Grotius was a major thinker in international law, and Milton simply wasn’t, at least in his poetical works. Milton might have chosen that role for himself, but he did not; and thus the issues of war and peace were of limited relevance and interest to him.

IV. The History of Great Britain

One could reasonably expect that in recounting more than a thousand years of England’s war-ravaged history, Milton would consistently work in any opposition to be had to militarism, and that in the many instances when it would be appropriate, he would raise Grotian questions about the causes and conduct of war.

Milton overlooks altogether the ad bellum and in bello issues Grotius addressed in The Rights of War and Peace, discussed in section III above. He does, however, express two or perhaps three sentiments, examined below, which could be considered pacifist but greatly limits their persuasiveness by burying them in his narrative of the military accomplishments of England’s kings and conquerors. Even in “The Digression,” which is pure commentary, he advocates peace but offers a disclaimer for the reason his countrymen cannot achieve its benefits:
For Britain (to speake a truth not oft spok’n) as it is a land
Fruitful enough of men stout and couragious in war, so it is
naturallie not over fertil of men able to govern justlie &
prudently in peace; trusting onelie on thir Mother-witt, as
most doo, & consider not that civilitie, prudence, love of
the public more then of money or vaine honour are to this
soile in a manner outlandish; grow not here but in minds well
implanted with solid & elaborate breeding; too impolitic els
and too crude, if not headstrong and intractable to the industrie
and virtue either of executing or understanding true civil
government: Valiant indeed and prosperous to winn a field, but
to know the end and reason of winning, unjudicious and unwise,
in good and bad success alike unteachable. (451)

According to Milton, the British, though abundantly sturdy for battle, are unfit to govern peacefully. Moreover, throughout *The History* he gives peace and militarism far less weight than his opinions on such less integral issues as the role of women in government, ecclesiastical corruption and parallels between biblical and current events.

The anti-military nuggets are there: In Book 2, ostensibly about the Roman conquest, Milton begins by judging the conquerors, writing,

‘Tis true that in obscurest times, by shallow and unskilfull Writers,
the indistinct noise of many Battels, and devastations, of many
Kingdoms over-run and lost, hath come to our Eares. For what
wonder, if in all Ages, Ambition, and the love of rapine hath stirr’d
up greedy and violent men to bold attempts in wasting and ruining Warrs, which to posterity have left the work of Wild Beasts and Destroyers, rather then the Deeds and Monuments of men and Conquerors. But he whose just and true valour uses the necessity of Warr and Dominion, not to destroy but to prevent destruction, to bring in liberty against Tyrants, Law and Civility among barbarous Nations, knowing that when he Conquers all things else, he cannot Conquer Time, or Detraction, wisely conscious of this his want as well as of his worth not to be forgott’n or conceal’d, honours and hath recourse to the aid of Eloquence, his friendliest and best supply; by whose immortal Record his noble deeds, which else were transitory, becoming fixt and durable against the force of Yeares and Generations, he fails not to continue through all Posterity, over Envy, Death, and Time, also victorious. (40)

Clearly Milton distinguishes between the nobleness of just war and the atrocity of unfounded aggression. He has as much to say about Alfred in Book 5 as he says about any English king, but strangely – presumably because it did not seem important – he does not praise Alfred for accomplishing peace or providing his people the benefits that peace made possible.

But then, in Book 6, which is generally thought to have been written many years after The History’s earlier books, Milton passes a stern judgment on Seward (perhaps a contemporary of Scottish Macbeth) because of his bellicose nature:
For much disdaining to die in bed by a disease, not in the field 
fighting with his enemies, he caus’d himself completely arm’d, 
and weapon’d with battel-ax and shield to be set in a chair, 
whether to fight with death, if he could be so vain, or to meet 
him (when far other weapons and preparations were needful) in 
a Martial bravery; but true fortitude glories not in the feats of 
War, as they are such, but as they serve to end War soonest by a victorious Peace. 

(385)

Milton may also be striking an anti-war note when he observes, “For Souldiers most commonly 
are as thir Commanders, without much odds of valour in one Nation or other, only as they are more 
or less wisely disciplin’d and conducted” (History 337). In this passage, military men of any stripe 
appear incapable of heroism.

Other than these three quotes, and not particularly consistent with them, The History reads 
as an often bare-boned chronicle of English rulers who, consistent with The Diversion cited above, 
are continuously at war.

This quality of Milton’s history is described with particular eloquence by Dora Niell 
Raymond, who argues that

It was Milton’s wish to present the truth naked, though “as lean 
as a plain journal.” Actually, he selects and interprets facts 
according to his taste. He tells of kings and warriors and wicked women. Nothing 
there is of the joys and struggles of ploughmen, merchants and ship builders, of 
those whose lives twined into the warp and woof of England so sturdily that it 
could bear the overlay of gold embroidery that was the court. He was content to
take his facts from chronicles and, in their histories, the monks were often courtiers. Milton’s style is stately but simple withal. He writes as some recluse whose interest has been wholly of the past, some student toiling in chaste poverty and lusting after the crimes and glories of moldered kings and queens. (270)

Another explanation for Milton’s interest in warring royalty is that in writing his History he was pursuing an alternative to writing an Arthurian epic, an idea suggested in Hanford’s A Milton Handbook.

Neither Milton’s narrow focus in The History nor scholarly speculation about his motivation explains why so little is included in some areas of normal historical interest. For example, he rarely includes dates, preferring instead general references, such as that to Macbeth mentioned above, and also usually omits the exact places where events occurred. One explanation could be Milton’s stylistic preferences (he preferred Roman historians, such as Sallust and his perceived relationship between oratorical style and history). Another explanation might be that he simply was not satisfied with the reliability of other historians who were his sources, a reservation he mentions numerous times in The History; he thus was omitting their speculation. Most likely, however, is that, as a part-time historian in The History’s earlier books and as an isolated blind man in the later books, he was in no position to work with a full range of primary document sources or to involve himself in archaeological research to whatever extent it might have been possible. Nonetheless, there are some who praise The History. Campbell and Corns, for example, laud it as “a work of verve, wit, and playfulness [and] a spirited rehearsal of Miltonian themes and values and a cardinal text in his ideas about history and about government” (356).
I respectfully disagree with this assessment, particularly regarding both government and military matters. Milton, had he been sufficiently interested, could have well used Grotian analysis of the causes and conduct of war and could have said much more about the subject than is captured in the few passages quoted regarding the role of the military. As for government, Milton says very little that would have been relevant to his times, except perhaps in “The Digression,” and absolutely nothing about what government might do in times of peace. This issue is addressed more fully in section I.

V. Paradise Lost

The question of Milton’s stance on war or peace, as considered in this thesis, must be resolved in Paradise Lost, because it is with Paradise Lost that Milton is primarily identified, both by scholars and by the fit but few who read Milton. All else that Milton wrote becomes, fairly or not, consistent or inconsistent, supplemental or divergent.

War, however, is only the backstory in Paradise Lost. According to Revard, war in the work is “often thought of as a digression” (16), suffering from what Samuel Johnson, in Lives of English Poets, deemed “incongruity” caused primarily by a confusion of spirit and matter. Moreover, Milton never defines peace as more than a possible state of mind that might be achieved by Adam and Eve (Paradise Lost 12. 587).

Also, as discussed in this section, Milton does not make a statement on peace even as definite as that in Paradise Regained or other works and thereby makes possible the conflicting interpretation of pro-peace advocates like Freeman and Revard, pro-military critics like Fallon, and exclusively Grotian interpretations such as that of Elizabeth Oldman.
To the extent that any statement at all on the nature of war and peace can be found, it also must be qualified by the necessity of including elements of heroic literature. It would have been impossible to write an epic without war, even if a “mock epic” was intended. It can also be considered a necessity that Milton remained true to his own style. He delighted in military imagery, even where it is irrelevant, as early as in “The Nativity Ode,” where the “spangled host keeps watch in squadrons bright” (20).

A mechanical, fact-oriented review of the text reveals how little war is addressed. Book 1 includes a description of Satan’s army that Milton obviously enjoyed writing but is primarily about Satan in Hell and his rationalization that he “[c]an make Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n” (255) and that it is “better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven” (263). Book 1 thus serves to introduce a character whose mental state could possibly have resulted just as well from a sin other than fighting and losing a war.

In Book 2, the great consult addresses ad bellum alternatives, and only to the extent that “open war” is urged by Moloch (2. 43-104) is war an issue. Belial counsels a sort of subdued placidity for the time being, an “ignoble ease and peaceful sloathe, / not peace” (2.227-28), in order to lessen Heaven’s terrible wrath, but neither the demon nor Milton discuss the nature of such a peace or its constituents. This other possible course of action for Satan and his generals, along with the subversion of Eden, do not have a military aspect, except to the extent that they are considered in a council of war. Satan’s personal scouting mission also seems military in character, but it is not in reality. Commanding generals lead armies, as the Son will do; they generally do not jeopardize themselves and their cause by unnecessarily taking risks. Moreover, the story of Sin and Death, although memorable, does not relate to war or peace in any direct way.
Book 3 contains no commentary on war or peace. Its function is instead to develop the characters of the Father and the Son and, by inference, to contrast the real sacrifice of the Son as a volunteer with the cheap theatrics of Satan’s decision to go alone on his scouting mission.

Likewise, Books 4 and 5 only address the issue marginally. Book 4 is not about war or peace, except for segments of the exchange between Satan and Gabriel regarding the duties of soldiers and their leaders (4.797-1015). Peace, in human terms, is not addressed apart from its relationship to unashamed nakedness and sex. Animals, including lions, tigers, and bears in happy relation with humans, represent peace symbolically (4.340-57), as they sometimes do in the Bible. The significance of Book 5 to the war and peace issue is only the introduction of Abdiel, the model soldier obedient to God, and a brief description of Satan’s tactic of deception in the movement of his troops.

Book 6 describes the war in heaven in such detail that it becomes the focus of the poem for those who find pro-peace, pro-military, or Grotian themes. As a backstory, however, it does not advance the plot, although it adds to character development and gives depth to themes such as God’s justification or the freewill of men and angels. Subsequently, the military theme in the epic is dropped, except for its continuing presence in military imagery.

The next three books supply no information to the question of Milton’s views on war and peace. Books 7 and 8 provide an account of the world’s creation, and Book 9 recounts the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve. Here, the inherent weakness of Eve as a woman and Adam’s uxoriousness become near-dominant subthemes, overshadowing Satan and war. If Milton enjoyed describing military actions, he seems to have equally enjoyed creating the rhetoric of exchanges between flawed women and flawed, albeit powerful male figures – as he did later in *Samson Agonistes*. The dialogue between Satan and Eve (9. 532-779) is so clever and
effective that the fact that Satan happens to be a general can be forgotten as irrelevant, because as an upright, talking snake, he is even more memorable.

Similarly, the last three books shed little insight on the issue of Milton’s opinion of war or peace. Book 10 does return Satan to his military role, but because he is rejected and hissed, he is no different from any other failed leader. Books 11 and 12 contain no military aspects, apart from the conclusion of the epic, in which Adam and Eve are escorted from Eden by the angel Michael in soldier’s dress, accompanied by a terrible angelic cohort (12. 610-49). Also the couple realizes that they may yet have peace within themselves (12. 598). Yet neither of these facts has been awarded great significance in the various interpretations of Milton’s take on the question of war or peace.

Despite the fact that Paradise Lost contains relatively little commentary on war or peace, it does provide just enough from which to draw inferences. Fallon’s approach is heavily reliant on parallels between the war in Heaven and the English Civil War, as it involved Milton. Milton’s presumed intentions may indeed be important to understanding Sonnets 8, 15, 16, and 18; but to Paradise Lost, where his purpose is stated in lines 1-26 of Book I, they are irrelevant. More specifically, sonnets written before the Restoration can reasonably be read in light of Milton’s political situation. Paradise Lost, however, despite possible allusion to seventeenth-century events, was written to justify God’s ways to man.

What is relevant, however, because Paradise Lost involves religion directly, is that Milton’s inclusion of a holy war is consistent with generally held Puritan views. Also relevant is the distinction discussed above in section II between Milton’s approach to war and the feelings he expressed about soldiers in Paradise Lost.

Christ is obviously a good soldier who volunteers to give his life in 3. 217-65 and wins the
war in Heaven with his chariot charge in 6. 746-92. Indeed, the fact that he may be seen as “winning his spurs” is troubling to peace message advocates such as Revard.  

Abdiel is also portrayed as a good soldier acknowledged by God, when

From midst a Golden Cloud [a voice] thus milde was heard.
Servant of God, well done, well hast thou fought
The better fight, who single hast maintaingd
Against revolted multitudes the Cause
Of Truth, in word mightier then they in Armes;
And for the testimonie of Truth hast born
Universal reproach, far worse to beare
Then violence: for this was all thy care
To stand approv'd in sight of God. (6. 28-36)

And he even justifies holy war in the speech of Abdiel of his coming combat with Satan:

His puissance, trusting in th' Almighty's aide,
I mean to try, whose Reason I have tri'd
Unsound and false; nor is it aught but just,
That he who in debate of Truth hath won,
Should win in Arms, in both disputes alike
Victor; though brutish that contest and foule,
When Reason hath to deal with force, yet so
Most reason is that Reason overcome. (6. 119-26)

Nonetheless, Abdiel’s argument is not without problems. First, as noted by Wooten, a certain irony can be found in Abdiel’s expectation that God’s angels can win. In fact, the most they
accomplish is a standoff until the Son directly intervenes (5). Also, there is a question as to whether it is appropriate for a soldier, such as Abdiel, to execute independent judgment and disobey his immediate superior, Satan. Shifting alliances were indeed commonplace in the Civil War and Restoration era, as in the case of General Monck, but in most military contexts a line soldier like Abdiel could expect court martial.

Finally, in regard to Michael with his sword and military garb in Books 11 and 12, Milton had absolutely no need to cast him in a martial role when Adam and Eve are contemplating inner peace. Thus, unless something good is being said about soldiers, or Milton is commenting on God’s severity, Michael could have appeared in the same form as sociable Raphael in Book 5.

If a peace message is to be found in Paradise Lost, it must also be primarily based on inference. Specifically, the war in Heaven must be read as a mock epic or a comment on popular war literature. Satan, in such readings, becomes all that can be bad in a general.

The mock epic argument begins with the conclusion that Milton knew that the epic form does not work well in depicting Christian values, and he thus chose the form to say something negative about the militant attitudes inevitably found in epics. Both Revard and Bedford, who pair the events of Paradise Lost with documented military mishaps of the English Civil War, discuss this approach in detail. Freeman places Milton in a context in which most popular war literature was positive and has Milton subtly undermining militarism at every juncture in Paradise Lost. J. B. Broadbent finds anti-militarism at a poetical level, arguing that Milton “seems to mock less at war’s immorality than at its inefficiency” (220). Similarly, Stanley Fish finds that nothing is accomplished by militarism in Paradise Lost, claiming, “If Satan is unable to assault Heaven, Gabriel is unable to bar him from Paradise” (171).
Although all of these interpretations find support in the text, none of them addresses what is missing and essential to their respective validations. If *Paradise Lost* is to be read as anti-military, why does it not end with a spokesman for Heaven other than militant Michael? Also, shouldn’t Adam and Eve be looking ahead to a societal peace on Earth such as Milton seems to have envisioned in “The Nativity Ode” rather than internal good feelings? Even worse for those looking for a peace message, why don’t they have a motive for life on Earth other than revenge against Satan (10. 1036)? Such motivations, as Grotius observed and as discussed herein, are frequently the cause of wars.

Elizabeth Oldman offers a comprehensive interpretation of *Paradise Lost* based on her belief that Milton was directly influenced by the writings of Grotius, but, as discussed above in section III, her interpretation is made problematic by the absence of so many ideas and arguments for which Grotius is known. Nonetheless, the epic does contain much possibly derived from Grotian influences, particularly if Milton is credited with favoring just war, which he endorses in *Christian Doctrine* (see section VIII) and emphasizing free-will.

As in her readings of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, Oldman begins her interpretation of *Paradise Lost* by pointing out that both Milton and Grotius believed in natural law and an Arminian free will, an assertion that is unquestionably accurate. The existence of natural law, with variations irrelevant to war and peace, was a dominant belief in the Christian world, based on the teachings of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. However, a belief in Arminian free will, far less universal, with its rejection of Calvinistic predestination, had sent Grotius to prison. And such a belief is clearly enunciated in *Paradise Lost*, Book 3:

Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.

Not free, what proof could they have givn sincere
Of true allegiance, constant Faith or Love,
Where onely what they needs must do, appeard,
Not what they would? what praise could they receive?
What pleasure I from such obedience paid,
When Will and Reason (Reason also is choice)
Useless and vain, of freedom both despoild,
Made passive both, had servd necessitie,
Not mee. They therefore as to right belongd,
So were created, nor can justly accuse
Thir maker, or thir making, or thir Fate,
As if predestination over-rul'd
Thir will . . . . (3. 102-15)

Oldman sees free will perverted in the great consult in Hell: “Ignoring the input of his compatriots – eradicating the distinctness of their identities according to the laws of nature, as Grotius would see it, [Satan] attempts to perpetuate an amorphous social whole founded on his misgovernment” (“Against” 154). While this interpretation seems valid, it does not suggest what is missing. If Milton truly was following Grotius, it is reasonable to expect that here, more so than any other place in Paradise Lost, he would find an opportunity for one of the demons to unsuccessfully advocate for the benefits of Grotian peace, which he simply does not do. It might be suggested, of course, that peace being good could have been addressed in the parallel consult in Heaven in Book 3. The problem is that while the demons were flexible in considering alternatives, neither God nor the Son could have granted Satanic demands or dealt with the demons as equals for the purpose of bargaining.
Oldman focuses on Satan as well as Abdiel as Grotian characters. She sees Satan’s wrongful justification of his war – protesting God’s recognition of his Son – as an intentional parody of Grotian principles of rightful ownership (“Against” 151) and, in this interpretation, is supported by Freeman, who otherwise finds little Grotian thought in *Paradise Lost* (Freeman 146-49). The Grotian principle involved, though not stressed by Oldman, is that there is often a distinction between motive and justifying reason (Grotius II.22.1.2). Here, Satan is motivated by envy, pride, and an emotional need for empire. Grotius cites similar situations involving Alexander and Darius.

Abdiel, Oldman suggests, “exemplifies the natural law of God as defined by Grotius” (“Against” 156) when he attempts to reason with Satan in *Paradise Lost*, 5. 809-48. Oldman interprets his efforts as consistent with suggested Grotian approaches to resolving conflicts without war (“Milton, Grotius” 177). On this point, I disagree with Oldman, because Abdiel, however praiseworthy he might be, clearly had no authority to negotiate peace. Milton would have known this based on his work in the Cromwell bureaucracy. The Son would have had necessary authority (see *Paradise Lost*, 6. 702-09) but not until *Paradise Regained* would he be positioned to match wits with Satan. The better interpretation, I believe, is that Milton delighted in writing such verbal exchanges – like those between Satan and Eve in *Paradise Lost* 9. 532-779, and between Adam and Eve in 10. 845-1105 – and that Abdiel, rather than the Son, happened to be at the right place in the storyline of *Paradise Lost*.

Finally, Oldman takes an opportunity to respond to the peace message arguments discussed above. She argues that, unlike most critics who “include the War in Heaven in order to indict battle or to prove its evil,” Milton rather “is not merely interested in exhausting the potential of Satan’s ill-intention in this portrayal. In keeping with Grotius, this celestial warfare takes place
as an occasion to promote order, a chance to attain recovery or restoration.” Oldman also stands
apart from the majority of scholars by correctly identifying “two types of war – criminal warfare
initiated by Satan, and God’s justified defensive battle in response” (“Against” 159). More
specifically, she distinguishes insightfully between Satan’s evil invention of artillery and how it
is overcome by God.

VI. Paradise Regained

The perhaps determinative issue for the purpose of this thesis is whether Paradise Regained
should be read as a comment on war and peace. There are valid arguments, pro and con. Against this approach is that military glory is only one of several temptations rejected by
Christ; that peace, as a goal, is never defined; and that, as discussed throughout this paper,
Milton’s life and work do not reflect as much interest in this issue as in others. In favor of either
a war or peace reading is that most Milton scholars think it appropriate to link Paradise
Regained to both Paradise Lost and Samson Agonistes, in which warriors and their decision-
making are more prominent. Paradise Regained, if read in this context or even as a diptych with
Samson Agonistes, can then become Milton’s ultimate statement on the issue.

Having posed the question of how Paradise Regained can be fairly read, I must answer it. My
reading is that war and peace is a theme, identifiable and distinct from others, within the
four corners of the text. As such, it can be addressed, regardless of speculation about whether it
is Milton’s ultimate comment on the issue. Grotian influence may also be present, but, as
discussed, not necessarily to the extent Oldman believes.

It is easy to read Paradise Regained as an argument against war, in which the Savior
debunks “[l]uggage of war there shewn me, [as an] argument/ Of human weakness rather than
strength” (3. 400-02). There are, however, other possible approaches. Fallon, who can be counted on to find in Milton a pro-war perspective, notes correctly that “this is Christ of the New Testament speaking, the son of God whose kingdom is not of this world; and his words are entirely appropriate to such a figure” (195). In other words, Christ’s position and Milton’s are not necessarily the same.

Beyond this argument, which allows for the possibility that Milton is not saying anything new about war, the only other possibility for dismissing the pro-peace message of Paradise Regained is to return to a distinction, discussed in section II. It is that although Milton might be against war, he admired military men and delighted in military images. Beginning in 1.9, we learn that the poem takes Jesus “into the desert, his victorious field / against the spiritual foe” (9-10) to “lay down the rudiments / of his great warfare, ere [God] send him forth / to conquer sin and death, his two great foes” (157-59) and to gain “[v]ictory and triumph to the Son of God / Now entring his great duel, not of arms, / But to vanquish by wisdom hellish wiles” (173-75). These lines obviously do not constitute an argument in favor of war, but it is an exercise in military description that culminates in 3. 299-345, a description of the Partheans who fought great battles against imperial Rome. It was not necessary for Milton to include a description of a Parthian army maneuvering. It is certainly not in the New Testament descriptions of the Temptation in Luke 4: 1-14, Matthew 4: 1-11, and Mark 1:12-13, and, in the context of a relatively short poem, is not essential. What remains is only the very plausible explanation that Milton really enjoyed writing such descriptions as “cuirassiers all in steel for standing fight; / Chariots or Elephants endorsed with Towers” (3. 328-29) as well as the creation of all of the other war imagery that is in the war in Heaven.
On the other hand, selectively reading Milton for anti-war sentiments produces gold in *Paradise Regained*. In *Milton and the Quakers*, Steven Marx argues that “*Paradise Regained’s* affirmation of Quaker pacifist principles seems unmistakable” (14). G. Wilson Knight, who looks to Milton to support England against the Nazis, asserts, apparently as a disclaimer, that “a possible way of understanding Jesus is to liken his philosophy to the instructive pacifism of Great Britain and her will to international morality in contradiction to the more outspoken militarisms and Machiavellian statecraft of contemporary (1942) Europe” (105). I do not agree that Milton has shown his true colors late in life or that he has tacitly endorsed Quakerism without ever defining what peace meant to him. Nonetheless, an abundance of anti-war sentiments are expressed in the poem.

In addition to 3. 400-02, quoted above, Jesus muses in 1. 220 after contemplating heroic acts “to rescue Israel from the Roman yoke,” Jesus “[y]et held it mere humane, more heavenly, first / By winning words to conquer willing hearts” (222-23) and then in 3. 88-91, thinking of Job, he considers “if there be in glory aught of good, / It may by means far different be attain’d / Without ambition, war, or violence; / By deeds of peace, by wisdom eminent.” Finally, just before dismissing war as relating to weakness rather than strength, Jesus sums up what Satan has offered as “Much ostentation vain of fleshy arm,/ And fragile arms, much instrument of war / Long in preparing, soon to nothing brought” (3. 387-89).

From these passages, read out of context, it is possible to conclude that *Paradise Regained* is Milton’s anti-war epic. I do not agree for several reasons. First, there are temptations other than military powers that Milton more fully develops. Second, other themes, such as misogyny, receive almost as much weight as anti-militarism (see, for example, 2. 225 and 4. 142). Finally, an interpretation of overarching anti-militarism would require Milton to have moved farther from
his biblical sources than he did in *Paradise Lost* or *Samson Agonistes*. The New Testament shows Jesus quickly (in forty days) rejecting Satan’s worldly temptation and, knowing himself better, moving on to his ministry. This, not war and peace, is what *Paradise Regained* is really about.

Oldman, the Grotian theorist, finds Grotius seemingly everywhere in *Paradise Regained*. I believe that she is trying too hard. Indeed, there is at least one place in *Paradise Regained* where old, blind Milton shows himself to be quite different from the youthful Grotius who wrote *The Rights of War and Peace*. While arguing against seeking wealth and the praise of the masses through conquest, Jesus dismisses public opinion as of “people, but a herd confused, / a miscellaneous rabble who extol / things vulgar” (3. 49-51) This is simply not something Grotius would have written, because nothing in his writings suggests that the issue of the shallowness of public opinion concerned him. Oldman also believes that *Paradise Regained* is consistent with the Grotian belief that war, which was inevitable, could be just and kept within “reasonable juristic limits” (“Milton, Grotius” 345) and cites 1. 222-23, advocating peaceful persuasion. Military restraint is simply not an issue in what Jesus says about war, as quoted above, and it is a stretch to assume that Milton in Book 3 had in mind a “corrupt war scenario” (“Milton, Grotius” 357) in discussing the Scythians in Sogdiana. Oldman does, however, suggest a plausible natural law framework for analyzing the relationship between Jesus and Satan. While this makes sense, it is not directly related to war and peace.

**VII. Samson Agonistes**

Milton could not possibly have imagined that a twentieth-century coincidence would have allowed *Samson Agonistes* to be read by some Milton scholars as his most salient comment on
war and peace. The coincidence is, of course, the relationship between Samson pulling down the Philistine theater (generally referred to as a temple) and the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York. Both attacks were motivated by religious sentiment; both were conducted by other than regular militias; and both resulted in structures collapsing contrary to architectural common sense, killing not only the attackers but also large numbers of non-combatant civilians. Finally, both involved an unending conflict in the Middle East. To the extent that a new war and peace reading of *Samson Agonistes* arises from this coincidence, it becomes a fourth possible interpretation.

First, however, it is necessary to identify Samson as Milton envisioned him. He is not only an Old Testament figure, already fully fleshed out in Judges 13-16, but also a hero of faith based on Hebrews 11. Milton felt free to add to Bible stories, as he did in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, and to make deletions, as he did in omitting Samson’s prayer for vengeance in Judges 16:28. There are no identifiable instances, however, in which he as a Christian rejected the Bible’s truth as he understood it. Thus, when he wrote *Samson Agonistes*, he was locked into a Bible story and a character so well known that they could be cited without reference in Andrew Marvell’s prefatory poem to *Paradise Lost.*

The story, as told by Milton, nonetheless, is not approached from God’s perspective. The reader, as well as Milton the writer, cannot persuasively claim to know what God thought or what he specifically told Samson to do. Thus, reliance must be places on Samson. The play opens with Samson, already “eyeless in Gaza” (41) and held captive by the Philistine enemies of the Hebrew people and their God. It then moves forward through approximately 1,500 lines of dialogue mostly invented by Milton, in which Samson wrestles with temptations including sex,
hubris, and despair. In the end, Samson places his trust in God (1426) and is taken to the Philistines’ “spacious Theater” (1605), which he pulls down when the opportunity presents itself.

Once 9/11 occurred and the United States began its military response, Milton scholars wasted little time in making themselves relevant to current events. John Carey was first to propose a relationship between Samson and the events of 9/11 in his much quoted 2002 anniversary article in the *Times Literary Supplement*:

> The similarities between the biblical Samson and the hijackers are obvious. Like them, he destroys many innocent victims, whose lives, hopes and loves are all quite unknown to him personally. He is in effect a suicide bomber, and like the suicide bombers, he believes that his massacre is an expression of God’s will. (7)

Carey does not go so far as to embrace the notion that Milton in *Samson Agonistes* fully endorses Samson’s actions, a position he attributes – not quite fairly, I think – to Stanley Fish in *How Milton Works*. Going further, and still blaming Fish, he says that if *Samson Agonistes* is read as Milton’s “license for any fanatic to commit atrocities, should not [Samson Agonistes] be withdrawn from schools and colleges, and indeed, banned more generally as an incitement to terrorism?” (8)

Joseph Wittreich, who also makes his living as a Milton scholar, would not want to ban *Samson Agonistes*, although he does interpret it as approving terrorist violence. In the Kerrigan *Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, the current undergraduate portal to Milton, it is Wittreich who is cited as opening a new chapter in *Samson Agonistes* criticism by arguing that “destruction of the temple is no better than vengeful mass murder” (703). This is the same
argument he makes in his book *Interpreting Samson Agonistes* in 1986, which is now extended to include 9/11 in his 2006 book *Why Milton Matters*. Wittreich, like Carey, favors rhetorical questions and asks, “Is Milton’s poem a manual for killing? Is it a polemic on behalf of war? Is the history it reports a record of servitude or freedom or history repeated and renewed and transformed? And does Samson’s life distill into a resume of a terrorist?” (145). To the latter question, Wittreich answers in the affirmative, which makes Milton’s Samson evil, and then the critic proceeds to link him to Margaret Thatcher, of whose world view he disapproves. Going further, he links Samson to the United States, asserting, “The good news (for Thatcher) is that America is a modern day Samson, a superpower eager to practice the politics of retaliation. The bad news (for us) is that America is still naïve about the avenging hatred such power arouses” (143-44). Having so thoroughly indicted Samson, the only way Wittreich can save himself as an expert on something worth studying is to argue that Milton disapproved of Samson. He argues that Milton had somehow “outgrown” Samson (169) and wants readers to do the same. In this view, the United States was somehow at fault in the events of 9/11, and Americans should now read *Samson Agonistes* as a warning.

Feisal Mohammad is even more aggressively anti-American than Wittreich. In his often-cited 2005 article, “Confronting Religious Violence: Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*,” he concludes that the text

seems to endorse religious violence, and scholars

should be examining the implications of that conclusion.

What has changed after 9/11 – now that the university

finds itself in the precarious position of being deemed a

threat to national security, now that religious violence no
longer takes its toll in distant corners of the world, and now above all that the world’s most powerful nation has a newfound sense of victimhood – is the difficulty and also the vital necessity of scrutinizing Western ideology and seeing how frequently even cherished artifacts of tradition (*Samson Agonistes*) show evidence of the very brand of thought that the politically dominant vilifies in the other [presumably the Arab] world. (338)

Having addressed the terrorism question at some length, I believe that a short answer is all that it deserves. First, there is obviously a problem for modern readers in accepting the violence of Judges as consistent with Christian values. However, for Milton’s seventeenth-century reader, Old Testament violence probably did not seem any more or less shocking than what had occurred in the Thirty Years War. It is thus fallacious presentism to pass negative judgment on Milton for retelling a well-known Bible story. Moreover, based on a reading of all of Milton’s major works, as discussed herein, there is no grounds for concluding that in later life, long past the Gunpowder Plot, he had any more interest in terrorism than he had in defining the benefits of peace.

There must be a caveat, however, to the conclusion that terrorism, however defined, is unworthy of consideration – a caveat that arises from Milton’s conscious change in the Bible story in order to downplay personal vengeance as Samson’s motive. By having Samson act (or believe he is acting) as a soldier of a sovereign state, and not fighting a “private” war (1211), he is allowing for the possibility of an international law defense that he might have thought
appropriate. If that is the case, his sensitivities may well be attributed to his knowledge of Grotius, as discussed below.

Oldman believes that a Grotian reading of *Samson Agonistes*, as with *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, allows for a coherent interpretation that smoothes out ambiguities in Milton’s approach to war and peace. She reads *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* as a diptych “juxtaposing Jesus’ pacifism with Samson’s martial vigor” (*Milton, Grotius* 254). The two figures share certain parallels, of course, such as both protagonists gaining self-knowledge through temptation. However, a major difference between them also exists, which bears directly on any Grotian interpretation of the issues. Jesus, the son of God from the outset of *Paradise Regained*, is only toying with temptation, and as Milton and all of his readers knew, he would then proceed to his ministry. In contrast, only when Samson, late in *Samson Agonistes*, places himself in God’s hands, does he become the Christian hero worthy of recognition in the New Testament. Thus, there is no reason to give equal weight, as Oldman does, to what Samson does or says before and after his defining moment.

Oldman’s Grotian-influenced reading is that *Samson Agonistes* addresses sociability (Prolegomera 6) as well as a range of *ad bellum* issues. The sociability she finds “envisions a bond between Israelites” (*Milton, Grotius* 260). The problem in finding the Grotian concern is that except for Samson’s father, who does not understand that his son has acted other than out of revenge (1591, 1712) and to further Israel’s military position, there are no other Israelites, except perhaps the chorus, who play a role in *Samson Agonistes*. Moreover, even Oldman recognizes a problematic issue regarding whether Samson did in fact regenerate the Israelite community.

Oldman also finds Grotius in Samson’s exchange with Delilah, a woman on whom “outward ornament / Was lavished . . . [so] that inward gifts / Were left for haste unfinished”
(1026-27). Samson addresses Delilah’s relationship with the Philistines:

\[
\ldots \text{I}f \ aught \ against \ my \ life \\
Thy countrey sought of thee, it sought unjustly, \\
Against the law of nature, law of nations, \\
No more thy countrey, but an impious crew \\
Of men conspiring to uphold thir state \\
By worse then hostile deeds, violating the ends \\
For which our countrey is a name so dear. (888-94)
\]

Reference to “the law of nature, law of nations” certainly seems more Grotian than Samsonic and reflects an analysis of legal issues such as might be undertaken by a legal scholar.

Nonetheless, there is no reason to think that Grotius would dismiss the Philistines as “an impious crew” (891), or discount Delilah’s argument that she was acting on her nation’s behalf. Grotius, throughout *The Rights of War and Peace*, recognized that there are extremely complicated questions involved in determining exactly when a sovereign power is entitled under his system to take military action. Grotius does mention Samson several times in *The Rights of War and Peace*, and familiar with the Philistines as he is, at least through the Old Testament, he does not suggest a legal opinion regarding the Philistines’ status. Oldman may be quite right that Milton has here raised a Grotian issue regarding national sovereignty, but if so, his simplistic effort suggests a parody of Grotius, which is most unlikely. Rather, Milton probably simply manifests a lack of interest in the issue’s subtleties.

The next Grotian issue to be considered in *Samson Agonistes* is whether Samson is fighting a private war to avenge his blindness or whether he is acting on behalf of Israel. Here it really does seem that Milton is attempting to accommodate Grotius, who notes that the biblical
Samson was acting in accordance with natural law when he injured those who had injured him first (II.20.8.3). Natural law, however, is only a starting point for Grotius, who overlays it with *jus gentium* (“law among nations”), which would have justice done by an appropriate authority, as well as higher Christian principles which condemn revenge.

Oldman recognizes this problem and says that Samson “refuses to acknowledge that he acted privately and therefore without authority.” In other words, for a Grotian reading, we must dismiss what Grotius said about biblical Samson avenging himself in accordance with natural law and agree with Miltonic Samson’s characterization of what motivates him.

Finally, there is the question, not raised by Oldman, of whether Grotius would have approved anyone’s killing of a large number of civilians who happened to be at a public event unless directly ordered to do so by God. The answer is “no,” which tends to undermine an overall Grotian interpretation. According to Grotius,

> As to Persons who are killed accidentally, and not on purpose, we are to remember what we said above, that is not for Justice, yet for Pity, we must not attempt any Thing which may prove Destruction of Innocents, unless for some extraordinary Reasons, and for the Safety of many. Polybius is of the same Opinion, who, in his first Book, thus speaks, “It is the Part of a good Man not to prosecute a War to the utmost, against those that are wicked, but only so far, till they have made Satisfaction for, and amended their Crimes, and not promiscuously to involve the Innocent in the Punishment of the Guilty, but, for the Sake of those innocents, even to pardon the Guilty.” (III.11.8.1)
Fallon, the most prominent of the pro-military Milton scholars, proposes a third interpretation that is only possible based on knowledge of Milton’s biography. For Fallon, Samson is Milton, a blind man who is politically stranded and who is looking within himself (235). Also, Samson is an “ideal warrior,” a “soldier of God,” whom he “invested with the same qualities he admired in Cromwell” (241). To Fallon, Samson is thus extremely positive and made even more so by contrasting him to Harapha, “a cousin of Satan,” who cannot be a true soldier because he serves a false god (246).

This reading makes sense only by making assumptions about Milton’s pro-military intent. Without such assumptions, an anti-military interpretation is more plausible. Military might does not win the day; suicide does. Samson is not leading the army of Israel. He has been sold out and may even be fighting a private war to avenge his blindness. Finally, there is Harapha, who, Steadman notes, is not a real hero but a “cowardly braggart” who is made to resemble “the contemporary aristocratic warrior writ large, an inflation (or conflation) of conventional models of secular heroism” (242). Milton can thus be read as making an anti-military statement.

In summary, I have considered four possible interpretations of Samson Agonistes that cannot be reconciled. Milton’s message of reliance on God is clear, as is his contempt for Delilah. On these matters, the text allows little latitude for interpretation. And Milton simply makes no definite statement on war and peace.

VIII. Christian Doctrine

Finally, I will address The Christian Doctrine. \(^{35}\) Milton’s treatment of war and peace in this treatise is extraordinary, at least by Milton’s standards.
First, it is short – a few hundred words buried at the end of a lengthy and extremely scholarly work. Brevity, however, does not reflect precise insight. Instead, what Milton offers is strangely superficial, because he had let pass an opportunity to address war and peace issues at the heart of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*. Second, Milton chose to cherry pick and thus inevitably to misstate what the Old Testament says about war, a point discussed in detail in this section. Finally, the brief section on war in *The Christian Doctrine* has been read as support for a position that Milton would seem to have no interest in supporting. Specifically, Milton concludes that neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament absolutely prohibits war. While his conclusion is valid and obvious, a question remains as to why Milton would say such a thing if peace was what his later works ultimately advocated. Also, if Milton valued the views of Grotius, it seems strange indeed that he did not even allude to the hundreds of matters concerning war found in the Old or New Testaments, which Grotius discusses in detail in *The Rights of War and Peace*.

What Milton gives readers first is a recognition that peace – not defined – is good and that it imposes a duty to make treaties. All he says about treaties is that the Old Testament identifies a few treaties as lawful beyond question and many others that were bad because they were with non-believers, a view which is not very substantial, considering that Milton had a meaningful perspective on treaties based on his work for Cromwell and because here he had an opportunity to draw on other scholarship, particularly that of Grotius, which addresses moral values, implicit in treaty making.

As for war, Milton again provides a list of Old Testament citations, but for reasons unknowable, argues that the Old Testament favors moderation. For example, he cites Deuteronomy 20:20 as support for sparing trees, not mentioning what happens to people and even animals. The
Old Testament, however, as Milton certainly knows, is not at all moderate concerning warfare. To name but a few examples of the Old Testament’s bellicose nature, in Numbers 31 Moses is angry because the army has not killed enough Midianites. He orders death to all male children and women no longer virgins. The virgins, more fortunate, are to be kept alive for the amusement of the troops. Even worse, in Deuteronomy 2: 34-36, everyone is killed, including the female children, with the livestock allowed to live as plunder. Livestock also survive Joshua’s attack on Ai in Joshua 8, but no men or women remained alive. Similarly, everyone is killed in the towns Joshua conquers in Joshua 10. Although Joshua’s wartime justice seems harsh, it is more lenient than what is called for in Deuteronomy 20. The people of towns that surrendered became forced labor. Towns that did not surrender lost all of their men, unless the town happened to be nearby, in which case nothing that breathed was left alive. Despite Milton’s suggestion that the Old Testament God spared trees, only fruit trees survived; the others were cut down for siege works.

Milton’s summary point is that “[t]here is no reason why war should be any less lawful now than it was in the time of Jesus,”39 nor – for the writer of Paradise Lost, whose aim was to justify God’s actions at the beginning of the Old Testament to man – by extension, should it be any less justified in the Biblical times before Christ’s birth. Beyond the fact that it makes no sense for the author of Paradise Regained, a work which, as noted in Section VI, features the character of Jesus refusing the allure of military glory, to make such a point, there is also a question of whether lawfulness is the appropriate standard in a work on Christian doctrine rather than natural law. Even in natural law scholarship, as Milton knew, Grotius never hesitated to point out that what was lawfully permissible was not necessarily consistent with the values of peace advanced by Jesus in the New Testament.40 Milton could have at least acknowledged this tension, but he simply did not.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have documented that the question of Milton’s commitment to societal peace cannot be solved by his major works. Milton repeatedly endorses peace, but for him peace never goes beyond an individual state of mind. It is thus not understood as a relationship among nations that produces benefits only possible when resources are not committed to war.

I have also shown that there is no basis for concluding that Milton endorses war as an appropriate means of conflict resolution. However, he does acknowledge the possibility of just war and glorifies all wars to the extent that he delights in military imagery and the good qualities of soldiers.

There is thus a contradiction that cannot be resolved. No clear answer is possible, even if the values of other great thinkers, such as Grotius, are ascribed to Milton. Instead, it now makes sense to move ahead in Milton scholarship, acknowledging that war and peace have been adequately addressed and that other issues concerned Milton more and are more central to the interpretation of his major works.
End Notes

1. *The Milton Encyclopedia*, in a lengthy entry by James Freeman, “War, Milton’s Views On,” begins with Sonnet 2, which is read as a confirmation that Milton “abhorred the waste of wealth and loss of blood” (151). It then says that literary, historical, and psychological forces “attacked his wish for peace and left their traces in his work” (Vol. 8, pg. 19). Elizabeth Oldman, the most prominent proponent of Grotian influences, suggests that most critics of *Paradise Lost* contend that the war in Heaven was included “to indict battle or prove its evil” (Oldman, “Against” 159).

2. See, for example, G. Wilson Knight’s *Chariot of Wrath: The Message of John Milton to Democracy at War*.

3. Freeman mentions this in a reference to Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Pirates of Penzance*.

4. There is a weak link between Milton and the Quaker Thomas Ellwood, who edited George Fox’s journals and who worked as a young man as a reader for Milton. Ellwood claimed to have suggested to Milton that *Paradise Regained* arguably contains Quaker positions on peace. See Stephen Marx.

5. See page 167 in Lowe’s *Imagining Peace*: “To Erasmus and his like-minded humanists, the hollowness of just war rhetoric was self-evident, and it was merely their task now to hold it up to deserved ridicule,” and page 162: “Colet and his colleagues continued to castigate the just war throughout their various anti-war writings. Their cynicism over weary excuses for selfish conquest and bloodlust evolved from earlier critiques made by their medieval forbears even if they were loath to acknowledge it.”

6. It is possible that Milton thought government should do nothing. Robert Fallon suggests that Milton believed that it was government’s “function to provide political and judicial order so that men, with the aid of scripture, could wrestle with the fallen nature, and find their own way to salvation” (Fallon, *Milton on Grotius*, p 197).

7. See page 286 of Gerald Mast’s *A Short History of the Movies*, in which Henry V is cited for its “propagandistic appeal to the Englishmen’s traditional sense of courage.”

8. See page 8 of Fallon’s *Captain or Colonel*, in which he notes that while biographical criticism is out of fashion, he will “proceed on the premise that life can be a valuable key to a reading of the art.”

9. See pages 16-62 of Freeman’s *Martial Muse*.

10. See pages 140-51 in Fallon’s *Milton in Government*.

11. See also page 125 of Bedford’s *Milton’s Military Heaven*.

12. See, for example, Oliver’s Secretary (1932) and Raymond and Fallon’s more recent *Milton in Government* (1993).
13. See Beer’s essay and pages 345-411 in Parker.

14. See respectively Oldman’s dissertation “Milton, Grotius, and the Law of War: A Reading of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*” and her article “‘Against such Hellish Mischief Fit to Oppose’: A Grotian Reading of Milton’s *War in Heaven*.”

15. Milton cites Grotius in “The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce” (1643) as well as in “The Judgment of Martin Bucer” (1644) and “Tetrachordan” (1645).

16. For example, there is no doubt that Milton knew Roger Williams (see John M. Barry’s *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul* [New York: Viking, 2012]) and, directly or indirectly, many of the great thinkers of his time. It has even been suggested, based on Milton’s commonplace book, that he regarded Machiavelli as a valued resource (Fulton 38).

17. See also page 170 in Parker’s *Biography* and page 39 of Broadbent’s *Some Graver Subject*.

18. See Russell Hillier’s essay “Grotius’s Christus Patiens and Milton’s Samson Agonistes.”

19. This is not to suggest that there are no similarities between Grotius and Hobbes. See page 27 of Tuck’s Introduction.


22. See page 13 of Ben Lowe’s *Imagining Peace*.

23. *The History of Britain*, published in 1670, was written over many years, beginning in the 1640s when Milton had time available. It chronicles events and personalities that Milton considered important from Old Testament times up to the Norman Conquest in 1066.

24. “The Digression (On the Character of the Long Parliament and Assembly of Divines),” which relates history to the then-current, was published in 1681.

25. Campbell and Corns judge *The History* to be “probably Milton’s most misogynistic work” (357).

26. See Fogle’s Introduction to *The History*, page xlii.

27. See Steadman’s *Milton and the Paradoxes of Renaissance Heroism*.

28. See also *Paradise Lost* 6. 320 and 12. 247.

29. Bedford, in “Milton’s Military Heaven Revisited,” goes further than Fallon in matching tactics, particularly those involving successful and unsuccessful uses of artillery.
30. See page 25 in Revard’s *The War in Heaven*.

31. See generally Steadman’s *Milton and the Paradoxes of Renaissance Heroism*.

32. See also II.23.7-9 in Grotius’ *The Rights of War and Peace*, in which he suggests three alternatives: conference, arbitration, and lot.

33. See the prefatory poem to the second edition of *Paradise Lost*, “On Mr. Milton’s *Paradise Lost,*” in which Marvell did not anticipate Milton’s deletion of Judges 16:28 and has Samson pulling down the temple “to revenge his sight.”

34. See pages 282-84 of Oldman’s “Milton, Grotius.”

35. *The Christian Doctrine* is Milton’s great work of systematic theology. It is generally thought to have been completed in Latin in about 1660 and then lost. It was discovered in 1823, translated, and published in 1825.


37. See, for example, Milton’s 1649 observation in *The Articles of Peace* negotiated by the Royalist Earl of Ormond and Irish rebels.

38. See Book 2, chapters 14 and 15 of *The Rights of War and Peace*.


40. As discussed above in section III, the higher values of Christianity were particularly important to Grotius, who in Book 2, chapter 24 exhorts Christians not to engage in war rashly, even for just reasons.
Works Cited


Vita

William T. Abbott returned to the study of literature and art in 2011 after forty years practicing entertainment and intellectual property law. He is expected to receive an MA in English from the University of New Orleans in 2015.

Abbott’s resume reflects two parallel journeys. As a lawyer (Tulane J.D. 1970; admitted to practice in Louisiana in 1970 and in New York in 1976) Abbott began his career as an Assistant U.S. Attorney in New Orleans. He moved to New York in 1972 and served in the law department of the National Broadcasting Company. His highest profile work at NBC involved television sports blackouts and *Saturday Night Live*. Abbott returned to New Orleans in 1983 and until his retirement represented local governments (cable television regulation), the Louisiana Lottery, the Louisiana State Museum, advertising agencies, painters and photographers, radio evangelists, and owners of music copyrights. His best known case involved the rights of the buyer of a valuable painting that had been misidentified by an auction house.

The second branch of Abbott’s parallel journey was as a journalist, teacher, and visual artist. After receiving a B.A. from Tulane in English in 1967, he worked as a newspaper and television reporter. He won a Press Club of New Orleans award for investigative reporting in 1971 (Black Panther breakfast programs) and thirty-two years later, received a second Press Club award for a Louisiana Bar Journal story on legal issues involving Mardi Gras. Recent projects have included articles for an encyclopedia on food law, an unpublished work on golf law, and the psychology of government corruption.

Over the years, Abbott has taught adjunct at Loyola University and Xavier University (journalism law); Tulane Law School (entertainment law); and the University of New Orleans (arts administration law). He has also lectured frequently at continuing legal education programs for lawyers.

Abbott has been and is a visual artist. He studied photography at the International Center of Photography in New York and and has exhibited and sold his work. Now, despite limited eyesight, he is creating sculpture and studying painting.