John Milton’s “Digression” in The History of Britain

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John Milton’s “Digression” in *The History of Britain*
An Online Facsimile Edition of Harvard MS Eng 901

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This edition of Milton’s “Digression” (Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS Eng 901, Lobby XI.2.69) is designed to make widely available a manuscript that has never been produced in facsimile. This omission is all the more lamentable given that the manuscript in its original form—short and highly readable—provides a vital example of the complexity of scribal production in early modern England. Many questions still remain about Milton’s manuscript, and it is hoped that the accessibility of an online facsimile will enable further research.

The “Digression” was designed to be inserted into a section of the third book of Milton’s *History of Britain*, where the text pauses to compare the present state of England to the historical Britain of around 440 CE, when Roman political structures had collapsed, leaving the British people to create a government for themselves. Milton composed the *History of Britain* over a long period, from the unstable years of the civil wars in the late 1640s, through the rule of Oliver Cromwell in the 1650s, until it was finally published in 1670, three years after *Paradise Lost*. The *History* ends with the Norman Conquest and thus falls short of Milton’s stated intention, in 1654, to complete “the history of my country, from the earliest origins even to the present day.”¹ Although Milton’s projected history never reached the seventeenth century, an inquiry into the past’s relation to the present is embedded in the text, so that the third book of the printed *History* opens with the hope that “by comparing seriously . . . that confused Anarchy” with the present state of England, these “two such remarkable turns of State” will “raise a knowledg of ourselves great and weighty.”² Without the excised “Digression,” the printed *History* would not provide this specific comparative analysis to yield such self-knowledge. The “Digression” thus preserves a vital part of the author’s original intentions for the whole, even though it remains to us only in a single manuscript that would (even if multiplied) have reached only a fraction of Milton’s print readership.

Many questions remain about just why the “weighty” digressive passage was excised from the final printed version. It has proved important not only to the author of the *History*, but to posterity: one twentieth-century historian called it “the frankest reflections of the greatest poet of his age on the greatest upheaval of seventeenth-century England.”³ These reflections are preserved in one extant manuscript; a pirated and incomplete version, deriving from another lost manuscript, was printed in 1681 as *Mr John Miltons Character of the Long Parliament and the Assembly of Divines in MDCXL*. 
Several explanations for why the “Digression” was omitted from the *History* have been offered, most having to do with the distance between the time of composition and publication. The second of the “remarkable turns of state” referred to in the opening of the third book of the *History of Britain*, the post–civil war “present” of the late 1640s, we also know to be the period of composition for this section of the *History*. By the Restoration, when some of Milton’s polemical work of the period (*Eikonoklastes* and *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio*) was banned, recalled, and publically burned, and when it had become illegal to write with specificity about the civil war, the “Digression” may not have been considered printable in 1670. The fact that Milton introduces the “Digression” in the opening of the third book suggests that its incomplete removal from the body of the printed text was done in some haste, perhaps with the hope that the excised section would eventually be restored in print or with the knowledge that it would be immediately available in manuscript form, and made available to select readers. There is evidence that booksellers provided manuscript addenda for parts of books that were not allowed into print, and the extant manuscript of the “Digression” shows signs of having been reproduced for the purpose of inclusion: it is the same size as the pages of the book, which allow it to be neatly inserted; it includes instructions for where it should be inserted similar to printed addenda; it has a decorative title produced by a skilled scribe that did not originally include the title to the printed work; and the scribe skipped a line while copying—later restored, it seems, by Milton’s nephew Edward Phillips—in a manner suggestive of hired production.

Did Milton cut the “Digression” himself, and if so, was it before or after censorship? An unusually detailed record of censorship exists for the *History*. Milton’s nephew and editorial assistant Edward Phillips records in his biography that in 1670 Milton “finisht and publisht his History of our Nation till the Conquest, all compleat so far as he went, some Passages only excepted, which, being thought too sharp against the Clergy, could not pass the Hand of the Licencer, were in the Hands of the late Earl of Anglesey while he liv’d; where at present is uncertain.” The Earl of Anglesey had an immense library rich in controversial documents of this sort—and while it seems likely enough that he would have had a copy of the “Digression,” this particular passage does not seem to fit among those described here. Still, the description remains vague enough about the nature of these preserved “Passages” to admit a short twelve-page digressive section into the mix.

The manuscript is especially interesting for the questions that it raises about Milton’s views, about the mechanisms of censorship, and about the use of manuscripts to augment or complete printed texts. As is true of most manuscripts, the “Digression” lacks a date of publication and all the other indications of provenance that would have been furnished in a printed work’s title page. The
fundamental uncertainty about both the moment of composition and the description of the “present” has given rise to an extensive debate. This introduction will accordingly provide a brief description of the text itself, drawing conclusions from the physical state of the manuscript and from the hands that produced the text. These conclusions suggest a date of composition that is nearly contemporaneous with the moment that it describes, which is the late months of 1648, before Pride’s Purge of Parliament in early December.

The Text

Harvard University acquired the “Digression” in 1926 from a bookseller who had obtained it in a sale of the Mostyn library. The manuscript is bound in an eighteenth-century binding, with a Mostyn bookplate and an inscription that includes the date of 1744. It remains unclear whether it was originally sewn, and current curatorial priorities at Houghton do not support unbinding the manuscript from its anachronistic hard covers to see whether the original might have been folded and sewn. The text covers twelve pages on six double-sided sheets of paper, but there is a single blank sheet at the end, suggesting that perhaps there were originally front and back “cover” leaves. The pages measure 6 by 7 1/2 inches, almost exactly the dimensions of the printed History of Britain (6 by 7 11/16 inches), allowing them to fit neatly inside the book. Its title gracefully centers both “The Digression” and the instructions “To come in Lib. 3. page 110. After these words [from one misery to another].” Then, in a different hand, some less artful scribe has written “in Miltons History of England,” a late addition suggesting again that the “Digression” originally accompanied the book.

Who copied the manuscript, and why? Was it done for personal preservation, or for the purposes of circulation? The primary scribe has not been connected to any of the other scribes associated with the blind writer, many of whom have been identified. But the manuscript copy was carefully corrected against an authoritative text, as is evident in a few small corrections, and one added line on page 8. These editorial corrections appear to have been made in the distinctive hand of Milton’s nephew Edward Phillips, who had provided this editorial service for the extant manuscript of Paradise Lost, book 1, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library. In addition to this fair copy of manuscript, presented to the printer, Phillips records that he would visit Milton “for some years, as I went from time to time,” and look over the draft of Paradise Lost as it was being “Written by whatever hand came next,” to add “Correction as to the Orthography and Pointing.” Phillips’ editorial oversight in the “Digression” suggests that he (and, by extension, Milton himself) had a role in commissioning the manuscript. Most of these corrections are small, such as an added “be” (page 8), but they
seem to be in Phillips’s hand, for they contain his characteristic Greek ε. The only epsilons in the manuscript occur in corrected words and added passages: the corrected word “fowlēly” (page 8), and the word “dēvil,” on the same page, where there remain vestiges of a dotted i. The added line “upon their commendations for zealous & as they” appears over a caret toward the top of the page. Since the sentence makes no sense without the line, it appears that the copyist missed a line due to “eye-skip,” because the words were followed in copying, rather than their sense. The omission may thus suggest hired and repeated production.

There are indications that the “Digression” circulated in multiple copies. The Character of the Long Parliament begins exactly on top of the third page of the “Digression,” possibly indicating that the first leaf had been lost, and that copies of the manuscript were nearly the same. Yet the Character also contains a couple of long sentences that were trimmed from the manuscript of the “Digression.” As I have argued previously, these sentences are almost certainly authorial, since they use Miltonic language that the compositors of the Character would have had no reason (or ability) to add.\textsuperscript{14} The omission of these lines from the “Digression” suggests some editing in production, perhaps either by the scribe or by Phillips. Some scribal interference with the original is also in evidence in a cancelled phrase in the “Digression” that is not in the Character, which in this case seems quite un-Miltonic. The cancelled line seems to read: “But all were not such whither all were such as were not, many yet Living can witness, and the things themselves manifest that the more active part of them such[?] were” (9). The gist of the interpolated text seems to be that some Presbyterians were not quite as bad as Milton describes here (as “many yet Living can witness”), suggesting that someone had qualms about how Milton’s indictment might be read by particular Restoration readers. The syntax and the cancellation almost suggest this is a drafted thought that struggled through a few fits and starts but never found proper phrasing and was aborted in the instant it was penned. But it also seems possible, and even probable, given that it is the only phrasing not found in the Character and that it is clearly added in the Restoration, that it was cancelled by the same editor (Phillips) who had made the previous corrections. It would seem strange if a copyist that had been following words but not sense suddenly thought to add something to the copied text; it is more likely that this now somewhat indecipherable phrase too was copied, perhaps from an unclear original where it was added. However we are to read this garbled evidence, it was clearly written here or in an earlier copy by a person who was “yet living,” an older person compelled to look back and comment on the past from around 1670, rather than from the time of the original document.
Date and Context

Here I adduce further evidence to support arguments—including my own—that place the composition of the “Digression” before the Purge of Parliament on 6 December 1648, and most probably after the point at which the Presbyterian MPs sought to make a treaty with Charles in mid-September, an effort that threw the revolutionary effort into considerable uncertainty. While other moments of composition have been suggested—1669–1670 (Blair Worden), 1660 (Austin Woolrych), and 1649 (Nicholas von Maltzahn)—arguments for these dates have not, I believe, shown sufficient evidence that Milton composed the text at these times, nor have they been able to discredit the more extensive and more credible evidence suggesting that Milton composed it in 1648.

In attempting to locate the “Digression” contextually, I have compared words and phrases in the manuscript with the rate and manner of use the same language in Milton’s own work and the work of his contemporaries in the surrounding period. In searching the work of Milton’s contemporaries, I have utilized Early English Books Online (EEBO), a resource largely unavailable for the previous challenges to the 1648 dating. At the time the search was performed, in June 2008, EEBO’s simple search engine contained 118,715 records from the English Short Title Catalogue, and of these 14,949 were fully searchable. At the moment of publication, December 2010, there are 128,153 records, and 25,277 are searchable. While I have not been able to examine closely all of the evidence from these searches, as I did in 2008, I can add the raw numbers, which support my original conclusions. Since this number is increasing, a still more comprehensive statistical analysis will be possible in the future. The date of publication listed in EEBO is not a perfect gauge, not only because texts are reprinted, but also because texts written in late 1648, for example, may not have appeared in print until 1649. I have accounted for these variations by adjusting figures according to George Thomason’s dating and other evidence.

Milton’s “Digression” can be located in the tense months leading to Pride’s Purge in part because of what people were talking about at that period. In 1648 contemporary literature was considerably preoccupied with the issue of the “late war” or “late wars,” given that the second civil war had just ended, and a political stalemate ensued. Milton refers to the wars several times in the “Digression,” even mentioning them as “these lately,” a phrase even more difficult than “late troubles” to place outside of a rather immediate context. “Late” can in some applications mean “the latter,” especially in a comparative history that sets a “late” or recent past against a distant past. Yet the manuscript quickly turns away from the comparative terms, such that the frequent use of such
words as “now” and “of late” seems wholly unnecessary unless they are meant in their usual manner to indicate temporal proximity: “Thus they who but of late were extolld as great deliverers, and had a people wholy at thir devotion, by so discharging thir trust as wee see, did not onely weak’n and unfitt themselves to be dispencers of what libertie they pretented, but unfitted also the people, now grown worse & more disordinate, to receave or to digest any libertie at all” (8, my italics). From a compositional standpoint, these temporal distinctions do not really make sense in 1670, when the “deliverers” Milton is talking about are the military opponents of the king. What happened in late 1648 would not have such a broad influence on the now of 1670; nor do they make sense in 1660. And in 1649, after a painful stalemate in which it seemed the monarchy would be restored, the “liberty” Milton laments here had been achieved. This text uses phrases like “these lately” (3), “new” (4), and “now” (3, 5, 9) too frequently to be written at a distance. One might argue, of course, that seventeenth-century usage might be different from our own, and that while we would never refer to wars that occurred twenty years back as “lately,” this may not have been the case in the seventeenth century. But neither the OED nor English databases—Proquest’s Literature Online or EEBO—attest any such use. Nor do concordances to Milton’s poetry or prose.

Proponents of a post-revolutionary date—1649 (von Maltzahn), 1660 (Woolrych), or around 1670 (Worden)—have all relied on a retrospective testimony concerning the date of the History provided by Milton himself. (In his later article on the issue, however, Woolrych defends the 1648 dating for the History). As I have previously argued, this 1654 account in Defensio Secunda is negated by the rhetorical function it plays in that text and by its own ambiguity. And we have more concrete testimonial evidence for a date of composition: the private report of a disinterested contemporary (Theodore Haak to Samuel Hartlib), taken at the actual time rather than in a retrospective account. The record in Hartlib’s journal is July 1648, that “Milton is . . . writing a Univ. History of Engl.” While we cannot say how much Milton had written or even if this is absolutely accurate, it nonetheless records more than simply an intention to write.

The three scholars’ arguments for a later date deserve close consideration. Von Maltzahn’s argument is straightforward and elegant in its simplicity: why not trust Milton’s word in 1654 that the first four books of the History of Britain were written in early 1649—the “Digression” cannot, if this is the case, have been written earlier, and since it seems integral to the History, it would also have been composed at this moment. Von Maltzahn convincingly shows that the “Digression” is integral to a larger portion of the History written in the late 1640s, yet that integral composition of Book III should be seen as occurring about three months prior to the execution of the king, rather than a month after. The manuscript’s lament at England’s incapacity to free itself makes no sense in an immediately
post-revolutionary moment, and the 1654 account does not seem in itself a sound piece of evidence. This construction still allows the events described in the manuscript to be from the recent past rather than the present, a point von Maltzahn rightly stresses, and which would set the composition after the end of the wars in the summer of 1648. But for von Maltzahn, the execution of the king was an enabling moment for the author, who would have been “ready” after the execution to “turn to writing a national history.” Soon after this, as von Maltzahn argued in his original analysis, “if a constant rate of composition be assumed for the History, Milton would have turned to the “Digression” in late February. Von Maltzahn originally saw a change of tone at this point in the composition of the third book of the History, which he first explained by suggesting that “the freedom at the beginning of the of the interregnum” is “soon eroded by the lack of true progress in the revolution.” He subsequently backed down from this view of Milton’s motive, but in doing so he also had to change his interpretation of the text. This occurred during a debate with Woolrych, who showed that there was not cause in this period for Milton to think that the Presbyterian hegemony would reestablish itself. But once Milton’s motive for despair becomes uncertain, the argument for 1649 seems all the more tenuous: why then would Milton have lamented, as he argued, “the English lack of statecraft”? The “Digression” would not then be using the recent history of Long Parliament to critique the present administration, as he formerly argued. Rather, in the revised claim for 1649, Milton is pronouncing “a final judgement on the Long Parliament.” It is not then “a tone of utter defeat” but “a final verdict of failure” on “the backsliding government that the Purge brought to an end.” Von Maltzahn therefore argues that we can find a distinction in the “Digression” between the politically impotent who were subsequently purged and the victorious post-Purge party in the midst of this screed against the Long Parliament: “Milton assumes the failure of ‘these who swayed most in the late troubles,’ but he clearly differentiates between ‘these’ and their ‘armies, leaders and successes.’” But the passage in question makes no such differentiation:

Of these who swayd most in the late troubles few words as to this point may suffice, they had armies, leaders and successes to thir wish; but to make use of so great advantages was not thir skill. To other causes therefore and not to want of force, or warlike manhood in the Brittans both those and these lately, wee must impute the ill husbanding of those faire opportunities, which might seeme to have put libertie, so long desir’d, like a brid[le] into thir hands. (3)

This passage, however, only concerns one “they”: they have military successes, but are bad at embracing the liberty—the military “successes” here are seriously qualified by the lack of skill to make use of these “great advantages,” and this is a theme stressed throughout the “Digression.” The British
people are not lacking in military prowess, just—as he argues throughout the text—the strength and self-regard necessary to maintain a free state. The manuscript’s pessimism about the failure of England to embrace a republic goes far beyond putting something to rest in a vigorous process of construction. The “purchase” of liberty, once within England’s grasp, “having such a smooth occasion to free themselves as ages have not afforded,” passed like “cordial medicin through a dying man without the least effect of sense or natural vigor” (1). England had an occasion and had lost the reins. This therefore cannot be the Milton who had just written *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*.

In spite of whatever unpublished misgivings Milton may have felt in the months after the execution, England had been transformed into a republic on a fundamental level, thus making his lament in the “Digression” about England’s inability to achieve this quite inappropriate in this context. That Milton would have had little time in 1649 for such a major undertaking as *The History of Britain* is almost beside the point. The England that Milton laments in this digressive history no longer existed in 1649—though they would exist again in the Restoration. Although there might have been misgivings in late February or early March, these register only slightly if at all in Milton’s published tracts in the post-Purge period—such as an acknowledgment of political compromise in the exordium of *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio*. But if misgivings were to have been expressed in 1649, they would not have been as fatalistic and damning in tone, and they would have taken a different form. In 1649, people were no longer writing with intensity about the corruptions of the Long Parliament, or even the “late” civil wars, the wasted expense, or the bloodshed: the issue now was the overthrow of government and its legitimacy. Milton introduces the problem of the wars in the opening to the third book of the history describing the civil wars as the “late civil broils” and he continues to refer to the “late troubles” (3) and the “late commotions” (1–2) several times. These precise phrases are not found in the EEBO database, but the phrase “late war” (in variant spellings) produces an interesting conceptual index to the discourse of the period. “Late war” appears in a large cluster of over 30 hits in 17 records in 1648, and none in 1649—the five instances that appear in works published in that year either belong to things written and printed just before. In 2010, this figure has risen to 69 hits in 25 records in 1648, adjusted to at least 74 hits in 30 records, with a handful occurring in 1649, though these may (as was the case after careful scrutiny in 2008) have actually been written in 1648 or before.

After the sea-change that occurred between 6 December 1648 and the execution at the end of January 1649, Milton would not have been caught up in excoriating the Long Parliament’s extraordinary inability to act or the hegemony of the Presbyterians—these problems belong on the other
side of the revolution in government. Milton would have had no reason to write about the present through the lens of the very recent past, especially when such a major change in government had occurred since. In addition, if it were true that Milton wrote the “Digression” about the very government he supports in the four tracts written in this period, three of which were commissioned by that government, then there would be such a tremendous gap between public and private discourse as to challenge deeply our present interpretive purchase on these printed works. Our sense of the distance between Milton’s private sentiments and his public persona would need to be amplified many times over, to suggest an almost incredible level of disingenuousness.

Woolrych’s argument for a 1660 date for the “Digression” stems in part from these latter concerns regarding the 1649 dating. The History does belong to 1648, he maintains, but the “Digression” cannot have been written in 1648 or 1649, because Milton would not have felt this level of despair. Rather it was written at the next opportunity for such despair: the imminent restoration of the Stuart monarchy. Problematically, he dismisses the idea of the “Digression” as an integral part of the History, and calls it “an afterthought,” and a much later one at that. Yet his textual evidence for this is that the first sentence following the paragraph after the inserted “Digression” contains a “therefore” which much more likely pertains to the material in the original printed History, as if no editorial efforts would have been made in preparing the work for press. He also argues inconsistently that “the interesting question is when he began Book III, partly because of the allusion to contemporary events in its introduction, and partly because he intended the Digression to be inserted early in that book”—suggesting that the “Digression” is not an afterthought after all. The “allusion to contemporary events” Woolrych refers to here lies in Milton’s words “change of government,” which Milton uses to describe the Britons in the fifth century. That Milton could not have conceived of the phrase “change of Government” until after Pride’s Purge is untrue: he had been writing of “conversions of commonwealths” in his Commonplace Book from the early 1640s.

Woolrych is never able to explain why Milton introduces a comparison to the “late civil broils” nor indeed does he explain why Milton used language that suggests a very recent past, a problem also with Worden’s 1670 dating: “And now besides the sweetness of bribery” (5–6), “most of whom they saw now to have preach’t thir own bellies,” “now growne worse & more disordinate” (9), “resounded with nothing els but new impositions, taxes, excises, yearlie, monthlie, weeklie” (4). For Woolrych, Milton is looking over a much larger swath of political failure—the whole interregnum from 1640 to 1660, though without actually touching on the Cromwellian administrations, or even the king’s death, nor indeed on the nature of the impending transformation of government back to
a monarchy. The powerful criticism of the Presbyterians is explained by their impending return to power in the years before the Restoration; yet Milton would not write in 1660 that Presbyterian contemporaries “taught compulsion without convincement (which not long before they so much complained of as executed unchristianlie against themselves)” (7–8). These are the precise concerns of the 1640s: “not long before” refers to their treatment under the Prelates in the early to mid-1640s; but this would have to be, in Woolrych’s account, almost twenty years before. Woolrych even argues that the two Miltonic passages criticizing Presbyterians that are in the Character but not in the “Digression” cannot be authentic because they would not be appropriate “after Pride’s Purge”—so who then would have cleverly impersonated a Milton writing prior to the Purge when preparing the Character for press in 1681, with no purpose in that context?

We would have to imagine the blind Milton writing this—perhaps between producing the two editions of The Readie and Easie Way, as is suggested—at a time when he would be separated by blindness, time, and intellectual commitment from the third book of his History, Gildas, and the details of post-Roman Britain—all of which were clearly part of his thinking in composing The Tenure, though not part of The Readie and Easie Way. Milton refers to Gildas and to that crucial year in which Rome left Britain on its own in The Tenure and the first and second Defences, but never in the cluster of polemics written at the Restoration. We would also have to imagine that Milton would have expressed his deep concern about 1660 and the failures of the Protectorate both in terms of England’s inability to wriggle out of the stalemate or “ridiculous frustration” it was in after “much blood-shed, & vast expence” (3)—terms which closely defined the discourse and conditions after the wars, but much less so the failures of Cromwellian England. The “Digression” is constantly concerned with wars and battles, not with political compromise: “they had armies, leaders and [military] successes at their wish; but to make use of so great advantages was not thir skill” (3). In contrast to 1649, when the civil wars seem temporarily forgotten in wake of the parliamentary overthrow and the king’s death, the keywords “late war” in EEBO produce several hits in 1660—some 24 hits in 13 records. The moment before the Restoration is strikingly reflective, and one in which people are engaged in writing about the past twenty years. But the reflections on the war in this period are not, like Milton’s, a rueful account of what it means to engage in an endless war with little or no political pay-off, they fall rather into four very different categories: 1) army members appealing for protection because they “engaged in the late war against the King”; 2) Royalists who want to restore the nation as it was “before the late war between the King and Parliament”; 3) more dispassionate references of republican theorists; and 4) reprints of pertinent material written in the 1640s.
about the civil war, such as Edward Chamberlain’s *The Late Warre Parallel’d*, originally published in 1647 (when it was titled *The Present Warre Parallel’d*), which is a comparative history between the seventeenth-century wars and the civil wars during the reign of Henry III. This indeed has much in common with Milton’s digressive comparison, and while it is not unimportant that it is published again in 1660, it was not written then.

Perhaps the most concrete argument in Woolrych’s reconstruction concerns a topical reference to the proceeds from the sale of church lands. Woolrych points out that “all the wealth of the church” had not yet happened in 1648, that though the sale of bishops’ lands had been launched by a series of ordinances beginning in October 1646, but although more than two-thirds of those lands had been sold or contracted, not all the wealth had been dispersed. Milton should, in other words, have written “most” rather than “all.” This points to what I would take to be a mild inaccuracy from a writer who may simply not have access to the facts about the immediate proceeds of these governmental sales. Woolrych therefore argues that “to talk of ‘huckstering the commonwealth’ in 1648 would have been extravagant hyperbole,” and also that Milton’s use of “commonwealth” would be inappropriate before Cromwell, but this is belied by several instances of Milton’s usage.

A glance at the literature of the period reveals a language of betrayal employed by Royalists and radicals alike. In a poem by Abraham Cowley, *The Foure Ages of England* (1648), Cowley writes of the “Bankerupt Citizens” in much the same way that Milton does, even hitting on Parliament’s corrupt betrayal of the “public faith”:

The wealthy Citizens, whose glut’rous eye
Gaz’d on the publique faith, that Lotterie,
Though they for feare or shame were loth to do it,
They’d cut down Boughs, and cry Hosanna to it:
They brought their plate and money to this Bank,
Hoping for Prizes, but draw forth a Blank.
Themselves reserve the Prizes, and this stands
Still gaping, like the bottomlesse Quicksands.
You might track plate, like beasts, to th’ Lyons den,
How much went in, but none came out agen? (34)

Cowley’s sardonic poem resonates with Milton’s view in the “Digression” that the “Public faith” is “swallowed up into a private gulfe,” and the state was “not ere long asham’d to confess bankrupt” (5). Milton uses the phrase “public faith” in only one other place in his career, in the poem to Fairfax on his siege of Colchester on August 27, 1648, stating that “Public Faith” must be “clear’d from shame-
ful brand / Of Public Fraud.” While it is true that this poem shows more optimism than the “Di-
gression,” that does not negate an argument that the historical manuscript might have been written
six or ten weeks later, when Milton’s hope of the political outcome from this battle would have been
crushed by negotiations with the king. Instead, Milton’s despondent reuse of this phrase would
precisely follow from that shift in events. The word “ruin” used to describe the commonwealth in
Milton and in the contemporaries is hardly a hyperbole here either: as Cowley writes, “And ’cause
divided Kingdomes cannot stand, / Our Land will be the ruine of our Land” (27), or “yet all’s but
to bring / Their owne designes about: they’l ruine all, / That they may rise, though the whole King-
dome fall” (30). Woolrych’s sense that people did not have much to despair about in 1648 is simply
unsubstantiated. There was indeed much to complain of in 1648, and the very nature of the Purge
itself, a daring and illegal overthrow, could only to be undertaken as a very last resort. Even more
pressingly, the question remains: why would Milton focus his despair on the Long Parliament and
the Presbyterians of the 1640s if he is looking back in anger in 1660? Ten years have gone by full of
many more failures and pressures, and he would risk little in criticizing Cromwell here.

Worden’s argument is based in part on the recognition that Woolrych cannot be right that the
“Digression” is simply an afterthought, since it is integral to the History both textually and con-
textually. There are indications in the History of the very comparison Milton ends up making, and
much in the “Digression” that suggests a Milton comfortably immersed in the issues of post-Roman
Britain, with Gildas, whom he cites twice, fresh in his mind. Worden rightly looks carefully at the
mechanics of book production in thinking this dating through, and recognizes that material evi-
dence suggests that the “Digression” was either an integral part of the composition process—that is,
back in the late 1640s—or part of the revision process, as the History was prepared for press in 1670.
Worden chooses the latter. Milton and his helpers would assuredly have made revisions (some, in
the form of verb tense changes, are obvious), and Worden’s idea is that he added the “Digression”
and then withdrew it late in the process. This argument has many genuinely valuable attributes,
one of them being that texts should never be assumed to be static, especially not until set in print,
a reality that has been much ignored by previous commentators. This kind of final revision process
would make sense around 1669 or 1670.

Worden also finds impossible Woolrych’s argument that Milton criticizes the recent failures in
1660, and therefore he argues that it is not about the precise present or even the very recent past.
Rather, this is Milton, late in life, a sage historical analyst and an improved political thinker, looking
back from a distance on one of the most important moments in the revolutionary period in terms of
lost potential: “the ‘Digression’ is an indictment of past moments,” and in particular, the moment some twenty-one or twenty-two years back, before Pride’s Purge.

The problem here, in part, is that the History itself is an indictment of past moments; the point of the “Digression” is to compare the present or at least the very near present (“this interreign”) to the past. A work written long after the event would be unlikely to complain of Parliament’s “new impositions, taxes, excises”—not only in the sense that these are new, that is, historically proximate to the moment of 1648—but also in the sense that these fresh concerns would not preoccupy a critic looking back in 1660 or 1670. They are not just “new impositions,” but “nothing els but new impositions, taxes, excises, yearlie, monthlie, weeklie” (4). We must wonder whether one would look back and hurl an emphatic complaint at the foolish “weekly” taxation of an administration that had died twenty-odd years back, with several others in between. It was not uncommon for writers of the period—as Worden points out—to write of the “late” civil wars at some distance, though the numbers of hits on the EEBO database are certainly not as extensive as those of the earlier period—as opposed to the large cluster of hits in 1647 and 1648, 25 and 26 respectively (adjusted to over 30), there are merely 2 hits in 2 records in 1669, and 4 hits in 3 records in 1670. While these numbers are not conclusive, Milton’s own “late,” “lately” and “of late” does not come from language “written from a remote distance, too remote to have been produced during the revolution” (419). Although there are occasionally “remote” sentiments—and one of particular interest—most of these, I would argue, result from the strange genre of a history of the present (or very recent past): an attempt at objectivity (and at maintaining tone) within a larger analysis of the British people. This distant tone is, however, far outweighed by the intense sense of injustice at the problems of the Long Parliament and the Presbyterians in the 1640s, infused with a sentiment of betrayal that is unlikely to have lasted two decades. One passage, however, yields a very different impression, and it is indeed the best piece of evidence for a late dating. It is an excised but still legible phrase “many yet Living can witness” (9), which Worden rightly argues must have been written by one looking back from a substantial distance. As Worden relates, the manuscript “contains a passage which appears to show that Milton, at a time when he still expected the ‘Digression’ to be published, did think, with its publication in mind, of modifying his assault on Presbyterianism, albeit only slightly. The passage, at which he seems to have made a series of attempts, was scored out and is hard to read. But he evidently wrote that while ‘the more active’ of the Presbyterian clergy were guilty of the evils he describes, ‘all were not such,’ as ‘many yet living can witness’” (418).
A close examination of the manuscript reveals several problems with Worden’s reconstruction, reinforcing the value of the material features of a text to our interpretation. First, Milton would not in this proposed period have still expected the “Digression” to be published, since the manuscript as it is originally constructed supplies the page number of the printed History (see page 1 of the MS). Second, this manuscript is not a witness to Milton’s writing in many senses; of course Worden means “writing” metaphorically, but that Milton is blind is important to bear in mind, since the physical evidence of his “writing” would have a different form. If this scribe were taking dictation, Milton’s cancelled words would appear from a change of mind during oral composition. But this is not an amanuensis taking dictation, but a copyist working from another manuscript. We know this for several reasons. The writing is far too neat to be the product of dictation, and where there are mistakes, these are the errors of a copyist (besides this admittedly puzzling interpolation). That there are Miltonic passages in the printed witness to this text, the Character of the Long Parliament, also shows that this is not the original, as Worden suggests, but a copy. Both the fact that the phrase in question is cancelled, and that it does not appear in the Character, further support its status as a later interpolation.

One issue remains concerning the manuscript’s physical features, and that is the idea that this scribe, in copying from Milton’s original, preserved Milton’s idiosyncratic orthography, such as chil-dern, els, thir, lland, and his penchant for contractions: enobl’d, call’d, handl’d, stick’d, entangl’d, oppress’d, resembl’d, and the like, all of which are “corrected” in the edition printed in the Restoration. The Miltonic spelling was remarked on by Helen Darbishire and reinforced by Fogle, Shawcross, and von Maltzahn. If this were true, of course, it suggests that the original text would have been written before 1651 or 1652, when Milton stops writing by hand, but the issue is hard to settle with certainty, since Milton seems to have trained his amanuenses and scribes in his own spelling habits even after he went blind.

In sum, while there remain two areas in which more work could still be done, especially as library technologies become stronger—spelling and chronological keyword analysis—this seems unnecessary for these purposes. There is a small mountain of evidence that tips the balance back toward a pre-Purge dating of the original text of the “Digression.” Both semantically and conceptually, the language of the text mirrors that of Milton and his contemporaries in 1648 far more than that of any later date, and there remain no credible pieces of evidence that would lead us to suspect that he would have composed it in any of the other proposed times. We should, however, agree with Worden that what we have now—a manuscript that dates after 1670 and a printed text from
1681—cannot be exactly like the “original,” whenever it was composed. The manuscript we have, like the History itself, may well have been partially revised in the late 1660s before the decision was made not to include it in publication, with verb tenses slightly modified, for example, to situate the near present more firmly in the past. It may also have undergone changes as a separate entity, the small aberration in the cancelled passage being perhaps but one of other alterations to the text that remained. Since the two witnesses to the text have only a few substantial differences in wording—a couple of Miltonic phrases in the Character are missing from the “Digression,” and this strange excised comment on the “yet living” is missing from the Character—we may be somewhat encouraged in thinking that the authorial text has some integrity, but this is far from certain.

Notes


11. The manuscript was folded between its creation and the early eighteenth-century binding; I previously suggested erroneously that it might have been folded to fit in the book, having been misled by trimmed copies of the History. Fulton, “Edward Phillips,” 100.


15. These are discussed in Fulton, Historical Milton, 115–42. See also Barbara Lewalski, The Life of John Milton (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 212–16. See also Norbrook, Writing the English Republic, 188–91.


17. Manuscript page 3; further citations to the manuscript are given parenthetically in the text.

18. See Woolrych, “Dating Milton’s History,” 930–31. It is hard to pin down the argument about the date of the History in Woolrych’s original essay, which makes the case that “there is no reason to doubt [Milton’s] word that he had finished the four [books] by mid-March” (228).


23. Ibid.


27. CPW 5:129.

28. The actual figure for the 1648 search was 26 hits in 12 records, but the correct figure is 31 hits in 17 records, because five of the hits printed in 1649 were actually written in 1648; see next note. The raw figure is 5 hits in 5 records, and the adjusted figure is 0 hits in 0 records. There are several hits here that come from things composed in 1648 instead of 1649; one is in a volume taken from King Charles’s supposed Eikon Basilike, in a book called Apophthegmata Aurea, Regia, Carolina Apophthegms (1649), and another is in George
Gillespie’s *A Treatise of Miscellany Questions*, which we know not to be from 1649 as Gillespie died in 1648. He writes “that the late warre against the Popish and Prelaticall party, in defence of our Religion and Liberties, was lawfull” (244). Another hit from Gillespie refers to another war. Another hit is from a letter written during a “commotion” in Kent in 1648, Roger L'Estrange, *L'Estrange his vindication from the calumnies of a malitious party in Kent (relating to a commotion there in May, 1648)* which hee addresses to the authours and promoters of them (1649), and another is William Prynne, *The substance of a speech made in the House of Commons by Wil. Prynn of Lincoln's-Inn, Esquire, on Monday the fourth of December, 1648 touching the Kings answer* (1649), where the 9 is crossed out by Thomason and the date Jan: 25 1648 is supplied (E.539.11). The last is James Howell, *A Trance: or, Newes from Hell*, which is dated by Thomason 11 December 1648.

29. There are 11 hits in 11 records for 1649 in a 2010 search, but at least 5 of these must be adjusted to 1648 (as I have done, according to the 2008 adjustment), and further research would probably show that these too were written in 1648 or before.


32. Woolrych, “Date of the Digression,” 228.

33. CPW 1:420.

34. Woolrych, “Date of the Digression,” 220.

35. Ibid., 242.

36. For von Maltzahn’s argument against this, see “Dating the Digression,” 946n6, and for further analysis of these passages see Fulton, “Edward Phillips,” 99–100.


39. *No King but the Old Kings Son* (1660), broadsheet, title; see also John Dauncey, *The History of His Sacred Majesty Charles the II* (1660).


41. Woolrych, “Date of the Digression,” 236; see also “Dating Milton’s *History*,” 942.

42. Woolrych, “Date of the Digression,” 238.


45. For Woolrych’s very different argument about this juxtaposition, see “Date of the Digression,” 223–24.

46. Von Maltzahn cites several sources from 1647 and 1648 (as well as 1649) that use the same language as Milton. These are Clement Walker, *The Mysteries of the Two Junto’s, Presbyterian and Independent* (1647), 7 [=5], also 13; and *The History of Independency* (1st ed., 1648), 70–71; Nedham, *Mercurius Pragmaticus*, no. 6. (19–26 October 1647), 48. Von Maltzahn, “Dating the Digression,” 954n22–23.

47. “As Guildas reportes them,” and “those ancient complaints of Gildas” (2, 3).

Milton, history is in M. 231

It first appeared in 1647 being published first
and published separately from a one and later
been joined when in volume.

And not contain the first two pages
beginning along with the matter of the 2d
page + there are other variations.

As it has been reprinted in later
editions from Angely's publication
the first two pages have never been
print.
205 MILTON (John), The Digression [in Milton's History of Britain, Book 3]. Manuscript of the XVIIth century, clearly written upon 6 leaves of paper. Sm. 4to, russia gilt, £63.

A MOST IMPORTANT CONTEMPORARY MANUSCRIPT of this Digression, which reveals the fact that this passage, which was omitted by order of the censor from the early editions of Milton's History of Britain, HAS NEVER BEEN PUBLISHED IN ITS ENTIRETY, all the printed versions in the later editions of Milton having followed the separate issue by Lord Anglesey in 1681, which actually begins imperfectly in the middle of a sentence. Beside the two opening pages, which APPARENTLY HAVE NEVER BEEN PRINTED, this manuscript contains other variations from the printed text.


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But because gaming or keeping of libertio is ye greatest change to better or to worse that may befall a nation under civil government, and so discovers, as nothing more, what degree of understanding, or capacitie, what disposition to justice and civilitie there is amongst them, I suppose it will too many ways profitable to resume awhile the whole discourse of what happened in this Island Soone after ye Romans going out: and to consider it might by ye reason, why, seeing other nations both ancient and modern with extreme hazard and danger have strove for libertio as a thing invaluable, why ye purchase thereof has so ennobled their Spirits, as from obscure and small to grow eminent and glorious commonwealths, why ye Britains having such a smooth occasion given to free themselves as ages have not afforded, such a manumission as never Subjects had before, should let it pass through them as a cordial medicine through a dying man without ye least effort of force or natural vigor. And no less to purpose if not more usefully to us it may withall be enquired into, god of his 12 ages and more had drawn so near a particle lest between this state and ours in the late com-
commotions, why they who had y' chief managament thor
in having attained, though not so easy, to a condition
which had set before them civil government in all for-
formes, and given them to be masters of their own
choice, were not found able; after so many years
doing and proceeding to hit so much as into any
good and laudable way that might show us hopes
of a just and well amended common-wealth to come.
For those our ancestors it is alledged, that this youth
and chief Strength was carried over seas to for-
y' empires, that y' Scots and Picts and Saxons lay
Sore upon y' without reposas. And yet we heard
that Romans telling them y' th' enimies were
not stronger than they; when as one legion drove
y' twixt out of y' first encounter. Nor could
y' Britains be so ignorant of war whome y' Romans
had then newly instructed; or if they were so foolish
a like worse th' enimies, rude and naked barbarians.
But y' they were so timorous and without heart, as
shas reported them, is no way credible; for y' fame
how reported of those whom y' Romans testified to
have found valiant, who of these also gave not
y' least proof, when a lord of them, and those in the
greatest weakness taking courage, not defended
themselves only against the Scots and Picts,
but repulsed them with valor shown.

of.
of those who swayed most in my late troubles for words which to this point may suffice; they had armadas, leaders, and surges to their wish, but to make use of so great advantages was not their skill. So other causes therefor, and not to want of forces or warlike manhood in the Britains both theirs and those lately, nor must impu-
yll handing of these faire opportunities, it might seem to have put liberto, so long deferd, like a bird into this hands of which other causes equally belonging both to ruler, priest, and people above hath bin robbed which as they brought those antient natives to misfere and ruin by libertis which rightly we might have made them happier, so brought they harms of late afar:
many labours, much blood-shed, a tall expence, to
vicious frustration, in whom y like defects, y
like mislabries notoriouslie appeared, with vises not left hateful or mortuyable; nor left infaring who
sooner shall write this storie, to pour out those antions complaints of Gildas as deforby on those lately
as on those his times. For a parliament being call'd
and as was thought many things to redres'y people
with great courage & expectation to be new set of what
discontented them chose to this behoof in parliament
such as they thought well affected to y public good, &
some indeed men of mynded and integritie.
The rest and to be sure, the greatest part whom wealth and ample possessions of God, and active ambition rational, then in them had commanded by example, in such a way that their now magistratic word could speak in them; strait, every one betook himself to getting common-wealth be kinds, and his private ends before, to do as his own profit or ambition led him. Then was justice destroyed. Soon after enemy, spile, and favor determined all honest faction; then treachery both at home and abroad, every wrong oppression, fault, and dishonest things committed secretly, or maintained in secret, or in open. Some who had been called from shops to war, houses without other merit to sit in supreme council committee, as the breeding was, fell to hurt the common-wealth; others did the other as men could. So they only that could give most, or under cover of hypocrisical coat in private basset enjoyed, worthy lie y. rewards of learning and nobility, or escaped punishment of his crimes and misdeeds. This base and unworthy men would should have contami’d repudiating of bad laws y. immediate constitution of better, reconfirmed with nothing ells but new impositions, taxes, excise, yearly, monthly, weekly, not to rot ky offices, gifts, and perfumes, bestowed and shared among themselves. They by means, while who were ove faithfully to their cause, and
freely aided in person, or with the substance when they shall not content either. Slighted none after and quite removed of this just debts by greedy squabbling, now to set up and down after miserable alteration, from one committee to another, with petitions in their hands, yet either misled obtaining of this suit, or if it were at length granted by these orders, more than a reason of kings extorting from them at least a show of sufficient, yet by these squabbling & subcommittee abroad, men for most part of mischievous hands, and more disloyal, these orders were commoners disposed, which for certaine must not have bin, without some complaint of not compact with some superiors, also to board them out. Thus were their friends certa 
in thier omniies, while they forgot their dobitions to the State as they called it, but indeed to the nation offense of memorable theses m onsets, yet were withall no less burdens in all extraordinaries of imposts and oppressions than whom they but to be disafflicted, no more was happen creditors to the State then to them who were squabbling as ye States omniies, for that faith which ought to be kept as satiated and inviolable as any thing holy, the public faith, after mischievous persons restored, all the wealth of the church, not better employ, but swalloned up into a private gulfs, was not so longe ashand to confest bankrupt. And now befor the
The sweetness of bribery and other gains with the
love of rule, this same guiltiness and the broadening
of just account which the people had long cried for
discovered plainer to that there were of their own num-
bers who so very contended and fomented these troubles
and combustions in the land which they set to
remedy, & would continually find such works,
as should keep them from ever being brought
to a terrible stand of laying down their authorities
for lack of new grievances, or not drawing it out to
any length of time though upon y noble and di-
rum of a whole nation. And if the state now in
this plight, religion was not in much better:
to
reform which a certain number of divines were
called, nor how chosen by any rule or customs ortho-
astical, nor eminent for either piety or knowledge
above others left out; one as each member of
parlament in his private fantasie thought fit,
so elected one by one. The most of them were such
as had preathed and cried downe with great show
of God y' avoite & pluralities of bishops and
protestors, y' one cure of soules was a full employ
for one Spiritual pastor how able sober, if not a
charge rather above human strength.

yet
Yet those conscientious minds, on any part of the west, for which they came together, and that on the public salary, wanted not impudence to ignominiously and scandalously of this pastor, like profusion, especially of this boasted reformation, to force into their hands or not unwillingly to accept (besides one sometimes two or more of the best livings) collegiate master-ships in y universitie, with fortunes in y city, sale to all wonder, it might blow gaines into their constant benefices. By which means these great nobles of notoriety among we may distant curates were not ashamed to be seen so quicklie pluralists and nonresidents themselves, so a fearful condemnation doubtles by their owne mouths. And yet y main doctrine for which they took such pay, and insisted upon with more shadowe then gospel, was but to toll us in effect y this doctrine was worth nothing and y spiritual power of this ministrie less available then bodily compulsion, persuading y magistrate to use it as a stronger means to subdue us, bring in consciente then evangelic persuation. But while they taught compulsion without conviciement (which not long before they so much complained of as executed unchristianly)
against themselves their intents were close to no other than to have set up a spiritual tyranny by a secular power to y advantaging of his own authority above y magistrates, and well did y disciples manifest themselves to be no better principled than thom teachers, trustees with committships and other gainfull offices. Lord not to form them godlie men, but overslaving thom places more like children of the devil, and faithfully, unjustly, unwarrantly, and where not corruptly, stupidly. So yt between them y teachers and these y disciples, there hath not been a more ignominious and mortall wound to faith, to piety, nor more cause of blasphemying given to y enimies of god and of truth since y first preaching of reformation, which needed most to have begun in y forwardest reformers themselves. The people therefore looking one while on y statistis, whom they beheld without constraint on sinners labouring doubtfully beneath y weight of thom own too high undertakings, busiest in pottish things, triffling in y mains, deluded so quite alienated expressed divers ways this dissatisfaction, some despising whom before they honoured, some deserting, some reviling some conspiring against thom. Then looking on thom
Churchmen most of whom they saw now to have proach'd this own colleges, rather than the gospel, many illiterate, persecutors more than lovers of the truth, covetous, worldlies, to whom not godliness with contentment sound'd great gain, but godliness with gain sound'd great contentment; like in many things whereof they array'd this prodigious. But all would not so, neither did not every one; some met with many yet living as virtuous, and those things themselves manifestly: these were at two parts of them such as looking on all this folly, which had bin kept waxing arithile by affection, of the pulpits, after a false head became more cold, & durate then before, some turning to learn'd men to flat atheism, put to side this old religion, & wholly scandal'd in what they expected, should be now. Thus they who but of late worst extol'd as great deliverers, and had a people wholly at their devotion, by so discharging their trust as well for, did not only weaken and unfit themselves to be dispensers of what libertie they pretended, but unfitted all the people, now grown worse & more disorder'd, to receive in to digest any libertie at all. How Stories teach us that libertie sought out of season, in a corrupt and degenerate age brought some self into further slaveries. for libertie hath
a sharp and doublé edge full onโต to be handled by
just and virtuous men, to bad and dissolute it becomes
a mischief unwieldi in their own hands. nor is it
compлементaire giv'n, but by them who have the happy
skill to know what is growsome and unjust to a
people; and how to remove it wisely, that good men
may enjoy the freedom which they merit and you
had the curb which they need. But to do this and
to know these exquisit propositions, ye need wisdom
which is required suennumted for the principles
of narrow politicians; what wonder then if they
Sunk as those unfortunate Britains before their
ontangled and oppressed with things too hard and
gonorous above the strain and tempor. For
Britain (to speak a truth not oft spok'n) as it
is a land fruitful enough of men stou and
 Courageous in war, fo is it not naturally
not over fortís of men able to govern justly & prudently
in peace, trusting ontily on this Mother-will, as most
do, to consider not y civilities, prudent, love of the
public more than of money or fame honour and to
this soil in a manner outlandish, grow not here
but in minds well implanted with solid & elaborate
breeding, too impolite obs and too rude, if not
headstrong.
headstrong and intractable to the industry and purpose of executing or understanding true civil government: valiant indeed and prosperous to win a field, but to know the end and reason of winning, unjustious and unwisely, in good or bad success alike untoathable. For the sum, which was want ripens with as well as fruits; and as wines and oyle are imported to us from abroad, so must ripens understanding and many civil virtues be imported into our minds from foreign writings and examples of best ages; we shall also miscarry still and corn short in the attempt of any great enterprize. Hence did this pittoricke prove as fruitles as this lesly dangerous, and left them still conquering under ye same grieuousness men Suffolk conquered, which was indeed unlikely to get otherwise unless, men more than vulgar, bred up as few of them were, in ye knowledge of Antient and illustrious deeds, invincible against money, and vain titles, impartial to friendships and relations had consulled this affaires. But then from the Chapman to the rotator many whose ignorant was more audacious than ye least, more admitt of all this Sordid rudiments to board no man sway among them both in church and
and State. From y confluence of all these ekkons, my chiefs, & my roamers, what in y eyes of man could be exprest but what befol those antient inhabitants whom they so much resemble, confusion in y end.

But on these things and this parallel having anough insisted, I returns back to y Storie which gos u matter of this digression.
HARVARD COLLEGE
LIBRARY

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