

Rhetoric, Slander and Violence in Salmasius' *Ad Johannem Miltonum responsio*

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Theodor Matham, engraving, portrait of Claudius Salmasius, circa 1640;
Robert White, engraving, portrait of John Milton, from the 1688 edition of *Paradise Lost*.

In his own time, Claude Saumaise (1588-1653) might have claimed to be the greatest classicist in all Europe. His enormous body of work encompasses diverse textual commentary, linguistic history, theology and botany, efforts recognised by his appointment to the chair once held by Scaliger at Leiden. Yet today he is best known through his apologia for absolute monarchy, the *Defensio regia* (1649), and its collision with one whose fame would outstrip his entirely – the poet-propagandist John Milton. Milton's state-commissioned response, the *Defensio pro populo Anglicano* (1651), was wrought by such a strength of nationalistic fervour and rhetorical bombast that it spawned an oft-repeated rumour that it had struck Salmasius dead upon reading it.

As this talk will discuss, this was, unsurprisingly, not the case. It is true that Salmasius' posthumous reply to Milton crept into print only by 1660, after the Stuart Restoration, by which time the positions it demands had already become political reality. This is likely why the *Ad Johannem Miltonum responsio* has largely attracted attention only from the most exhaustive of Milton's biographers. Yet this talk will argue for the value of Salmasius' *Responsio* to not only a greater understanding of Milton's revolutionary style, but of neo-Latin controversialist strategy in general. Through a tour of Salmasius' most pungent invective and his rhetoric at its most extreme, it will be shown that existing treatments elide the ambition and vitality of Salmasius' tract, conspiratorially reinforcing Milton's smearing of his opponent as mere 'grammarian'. In this way, Salmasius' contemporary status as titanic rhetorical adversary may be reconciled with more modern critical sensibilities.

When: 22nd October 2025 – 6pm

Where: Seminarraum 2 – Ágnes-Heller-Haus – Innrain 52a