

HEAVEN AND ITS DISCONTENTS: MILTON'S CHARACTERS IN *PARADISE LOST*

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Introduction

Paradise Lost has a double revenge plot. The precipitating event is the elevation of the Son to be King of the angels. The enraged Satan rebels, is defeated, and is cast into Hell by an equally enraged God. The epic opens in medias res, with Satan and his cohorts rousing themselves after having been chained to a burning lake for nine days. The first two books depict the fallen angels' hatred of God and their efforts to find a way to cope with what has happened to them. They declare evil to be their good and hope to strike back at God by disrupting his plan to replace them with human beings. The second book concludes with Satan heading for Eden, "full fraught with mischievous revenge" (2.1054). Once there, he seduces Eve, who then gets Adam to disobey also. God punishes Adam and Eve by expelling them from Eden, condemning them to die, and showing them the horrors of the human condition and human history that will follow from their fall. He punishes Satan by demeaning him further and assuring his ultimate doom. The pattern of the poem is that of a feud: each side is outraged at having been injured by the other, each injury provokes retaliation,

and each retaliation intensifies the craving for revenge. Adam and Eve and their human progeny are pawns in the struggle between God and Satan.

Given God's omnipotence, the struggle could have ended once Satan and his followers had been confined in "Adamantine Chains and penal Fire" (1.48); but God frees Satan so that he can further incriminate himself. He could not have risen from the burning lake

but that the will

And high permission of all-ruling Heaven

Left him at large to his own dark designs,

That with reiterated crimes he might

Heap on himself damnation . . . (1.211-15)

God wants an "enrag'd" Satan to see

How all his malice serv'd but to bring forth

Infinite goodness, grace and mercy shown

On Man by him seduc't, but on himself

Treble confusion, wrath and vengeance pour'd. (1.217-20)

God allows Satan to pursue his dark designs so as to display his mercy and justify additional punishment. Not only does he free Satan from the burning lake, he also gives the keys of Hell to Sin, Satan's daughter, with instructions that she should let no one out. Sin's loyalty to her father instead of to him is something God must have foreseen. Satan seduces Eve to disconcert God, but God gives him access in order to fuel his vendetta, which he pursues despite its cost to humanity.

I must confess that I am shocked by God's conduct. However, it is not my

objective to attack or defend Milton's characters, or to determine his attitudes toward them, but to try to understand their personalities and their relationships. Whatever we think of God and Satan, Milton's psychological portraits of them are admirable, as are those of Adam and Eve; and they give rise to questions that can be answered in motivational terms. Why does God anoint the Son King, and why is Satan so disturbed by this act that he foments a rebellion? Why is God so enraged by Satan's revolt that he is not satisfied with consigning him to Hell but frees him so that Satan can bring further retribution on himself? How does Satan deal with his defeat and try to salvage his situation? Similar queries arise at each stage of the contest, including questions about the behavior of both Satan and God toward the inhabitants of Paradise and about the behavior of Adam and Eve. Why is Satan so full of turmoil after he arrives in Eden? Why is Eve so easily seduced, and why does Adam choose to die with her? Is God's combination of vengeance and mercy in his treatment of humans an indication that he has inner conflicts?

God and Satan have similarities not only in their pursuit of revenge but also in their craving for power and glory. The ambitious Satan wants more than he already has, but what accounts for the voracity of God's appetite? Does the fact that each threatens the status of the other help to explain the intensity of their hatred and rage? Is their vindictiveness a response to being threatened, an effort to repair the injury they feel they've sustained? This seems to be the case for Satan, but must not God also have felt deeply hurt to have such a powerful need for vengeance? If so, why is the Almighty so vulnerable? And why is he so hard on Adam and Eve and the rest of humankind?

I am aware that it may seem inappropriate to raise such questions—and there are many more--about supernatural beings in a theme-driven theodicy with scenes set in Heaven and Hell and Paradise. God and Satan are not characters in a realistic novel, after all. Indeed, just what kind of characters are they, and how should they be understood?

The best taxonomy of characterization I know of is the one set forth by Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg in The Nature of Narrative (1966), where they differentiate between aesthetic, illustrative, and mimetic characterization. Aesthetic characters must be understood primarily in terms of their technical functions and formal and dramatic effects. All characters have some aesthetic functions. Illustrative characters are “concepts in anthropoid shape or fragments of the human psyche parading as whole human beings” (88). We try to understand “the principle they illustrate through their actions in a narrative framework.” Behind realistic literature there is a strong “psychological impulse” that “tends toward the presentation of highly individualized figures who resist abstraction and generalization”(101). When we encounter fully drawn mimetic characters, “we are justified in asking questions about [their] motivation based on our knowledge of the ways in which real people are motivated” (87). Mimetic characters usually play aesthetic and illustrative roles; but numerous details have been called forth by the author’s desire to make them lifelike, complex, and inwardly intelligible; and these will go unnoticed if we confine ourselves to their formal and thematic functions.

Mimetic characters vary in the degree of their verisimilitude, and I am not suggesting that the main characters in Paradise Lost are consistently lifelike.

Milton's epic is an unusual combination of the fabulous and the realistic. Satan and God and Adam and Eve are all in highly unreal situations, and they are all more illustrative than mimetic at times. The usual approach is to explain their behavior thematically, in theological terms. This is appropriate, of course, but I contend that often it is also appropriate to try to understand their feelings and actions in the way we understand those of real people. Their portraits have many mimetic features, with the supernatural beings behaving much as humans with similar personalities would do if they possessed their powers and occupied their positions. I think the psychological complexity of these characters makes a significant contribution to the continuing controversies in Milton criticism and the enduring interest of Paradise Lost.

When we understand mimetic characters in motivational terms, we find that while they are part of the fictional world in which they exist, they are also autonomous beings with an inner logic of their own. They are the product of a character-creating impulse that tends to go its own way as authors become absorbed in imagining fictional beings and their relationships. They say, do, think, and feel things that belong to the portrayal of their psyches but that may have no other function. As W. J. Harvey observes, the mark of mimetic characterization is "a surplus margin of gratuitous life, a sheer excess of material, a fecundity of detail and invention" that "often overflows the strict necessities of form" (1965, 188). This excess of material is not only unnecessary for the authors'

formal and thematic purposes, it is often in conflict with them. There are almost always disparities between what the great mimetic characters are supposed to illustrate and the detailed portrayal of their inner life and behavior.

E. M. Forster's discussion of "round" characters in Aspects of the Novel provides an excellent account of the tensions that often arise between form, theme, and mimesis. "The novelist," says Forster, "has a very mixed lot of ingredients to handle" (1949, 64). There is the story with its plot and its themes. The story is about people; and the characters "arrive when evoked, but full of the spirit of mutiny." They are mischievous. They have "numerous parallels with people like ourselves, they try to live their own lives and are consequently often engaged in treason against the main scheme of the book. They 'run away,' they 'get out of hand': they are creations inside a creation" who are "often inharmonious" toward the larger whole of which they are a part. "If they are given complete freedom, they kick the book to pieces, and if they are kept too sternly in check, they revenge themselves by dying, and destroy it by intestinal decay."

Milton is not a novelist, of course; but as A. J. A. Waldock observes, "it is not absurd to mention the novel in connection with Paradise Lost, for the problems of such a poem and the characteristic problems of the novel have elements in common" (1961, 18). (For discussions of Paradise Lost in relation to the novel, see Belsey 1988, Damrosch 1988, Forsyth 2003, Kermode 1960, McKeon 1988, and Wittreich 1988.) Waldock speaks of the clash in Milton's poem between "demonstration or exhibition" on the one hand and "allegation or commentary" on the other (1961, 78) and attributes it to Milton's having presented his main

characters in so much detail. E. M. W. Tillyard speaks of Satan as “this insubordinate creature of Milton’s imagination” (1930, 289); C. S. Lewis says that Milton lacked “poetical prudence” in his portrayal of God, whom he should have made more “awful, mysterious, and vague” (1942, 126); and Waldock notes that “Adam cannot speak twenty lines or move an inch without turning into something different from Milton’s conception of him” (1961, 144). Milton’s God, he goes on, “can hardly utter twelve consecutive lines without antagonizing us.” That is not what Milton meant to happen, of course. Numerous critics have been antagonized by Milton’s deity and have found Adam and Eve to be more sympathetic than is compatible with their roles as sinners who are the source of humanity’s woes. And some critics have followed Shelley in seeing Satan as a figure of heroic energy who is morally superior to Milton’s God.

There have been many ways of approaching Paradise Lost and of accounting for the controversies it has generated. Echoing Blake’s famous statement that Milton was of the Devil’s party without knowing it, Tillyard (1930) distinguishes between conscious and unconscious meanings and says that the poem betrays what Milton will not admit and does not realize he feels. Lewis (1942) contends that the poem is harmonious if we grasp Milton’s meaning. According to him, disputes have arisen not only because Milton lacked poetical prudence in his depiction of God, but also because many later readers have rejected the hierarchical principle on which the poem’s value system is based. Waldock (1962) feels that there are disparities between presentation and commentary as a result of Milton’s having expanded the story of the Fall to such an extent and maintains that in literature

demonstration always carries the day against authorial interpretation. John Peter (1970) takes a similar view of what he describes as discrepancies between the poet's reactions to characters and events and those of many readers. For Stanley Fish (1997), the conflict between the poem's themes and readers' responses is part of Milton's design, which is to lead readers into error and then provide a redemptive experience by correcting them.

In recent years, there has been a reaction against Fish's position that has been well-articulated by John Rumrich (2006) and Peter Herman (2005). Rumrich regards the didactic poet of mainstream criticism as an invented Milton. His Milton is a poet of indeterminacy who sees himself as participating in a progressive search for truth conducted by imperfect creatures in an unfinished world. Herman's Milton develops a poetics of incertitude as a result of the failure of the English Revolution. Instead of being corrected by the narrators, the reader is induced to adopt a skeptical attitude toward them. A close scrutiny of the poem shows the Muse, God, Adam, and the narrating angels to be unreliable. Like Fish, Herman sees the discrepancies and inconsistencies in the poem as there by design.

In a reversal of D. H. Lawrence's injunction to believe not the author but the book, Fish (1997) says that the genre of Paradise Lost requires us to judge the characters by the interpretations of authoritative narrators, not the interpretations by our immediate responses to the concrete details. This makes the epic harmonious but at the cost of dismissing the complexity and rambunctiousness of the characters and depriving us of some of the poem's greatest pleasures. Like Fish, Rumrich and Herman are looking for a way to make the poem "work." Their

solution is to account for dissonances by seeing them as intentional. They have perceptive things to say about the characters, but their readings are focused on Milton's stance as a poet of "indeterminacy" or "incertitude."

Michael Bryson has developed another way of explaining the dissonances in the poem. Milton's portrayal of God is disturbing, he says, "because it brings to light all of the normally hidden ugliness of a monarchial conception" of the deity (2004, 25). Paradise Lost presents "a God who is obsessed with his own power and glory." "Manipulative, defensive, alternately rhetorically incoherent and evasive," he is "nearly indistinguishable from Satan." This is not a defect, however, because Milton's objective is to "demonstrate that kingship, both on earth and in heaven, is part of the larger problem of how God has been misconceived" (29; author's emphasis). He is not showing how God really is, but how he has been "wickedly imagined" (author's emphasis, 115). Through his portrayal of the Son, especially in Paradise Regained, Milton is showing what must be put in place of the misguided "model of heavenly kingship" (27). As in his political activity on behalf of the English revolution, Milton is attacking monarchial absolutism. The God of Paradise Lost is "off-putting to many readers because he is supposed to be off-putting" (24; author's emphasis).

Rumrich, Herman, and Bryson are part of what Joseph Wittreich describes, in Why Milton Matters, as a "new Milton criticism" (2006, xxii). This is a criticism that engages with the stresses, ambiguities, and inconsistencies "bardolators" have suppressed and that finds the poetry to be enriched rather than "marred" by them. Like Rumrich and Herman, Wittreich rejects the conventional image of Milton as a

didactic poet with rigid beliefs, arguing instead that his poems are marked by contradictions that have their counterparts in “the scriptural texts and hermeneutic traditions on which they are based.” A reflection of the “discontinuities and disjunctions” of their age, they are “a field of contending forces and competing paradigms” (xix). The last poems “may not settle, but they do bring and keep under scrutiny the nagging questions, the thorny issues of theology and politics” (xxiii). They shock “us into the recognition that poems sometimes deliver messages at odds with those with which they are credited.”

Although the new Milton critics engage with the poet’s inconsistencies more readily than their predecessors, they too have a tendency to subsume them into a unifying design. Influenced perhaps by Bakhtin, Wittreich celebrates the multiplicity of voices in Milton’s poetry without attempting to resolve them into a harmonious vision. He sees Milton as continually in dialogue with himself. (For my perspective on Bakhtin, see Paris 2008a). Like Wittreich, I believe that there are genuine dissonances in Paradise Lost, that they are not there by design, and that they contribute to the greatness of the poem. Whereas Wittreich focuses on where Milton stands on a variety of thematic issues, and on his “changing . . . mind” (2006, xxii), I shall focus on his psychological portraits of his major characters.

I think that many of the controversies surrounding the poem derive from the fact that God and Satan and Adam and Eve have mimetic characteristics that conflict with their aesthetic and illustrative roles. This generates the disparities between representation and interpretation of which Waldock and Peter complain and that

they attribute to Milton's mismanagement of his material. If we see the characters primarily in doctrinal terms, we shall be missing the psychological portraits that are among the glories of the poem; but if we respond to the details of these portraits, the characters become creations inside a creation that threaten to subvert the formal and thematic schemes within which they exist.

Would more poetical prudence, to use C. S. Lewis's phrase, have made Paradise Lost a greater work? As Forster points out, creators of round characters face a dilemma. If they allow them to come alive, the characters kick the book to pieces; but if they keep them under too tight a rein, they revenge themselves by dying. The greatest writers permit their characters to live their own lives, and their works are usually flawed as a consequence, in much the same way as Paradise Lost.

To be more poetically prudent, Milton would have had to make his characters purely illustrative, as are figures in allegorical works or philosophic tales—or, in the case of God, more vague and mysterious. That would have made Paradise Lost more harmonious; but it would not have made it a better work, any more than The Brothers Karamazov (another attempt to justify God's ways) would have been a better novel if Ivan and Alyosha had not escaped their illustrative roles (see Paris 2008a). The brilliance of their mimetic portraiture produces flaws in both works; but they are greater with such flaws than they would have been without them if avoiding the flaws meant that their characters would have to be ill-defined or one-dimensional instead of inwardly motivated, densely imagined beings.

I cannot agree with Dennis Danielson's contention that because Milton sets out to justify the ways of God to man, his poem would be undermined if he presented "a God who is wicked, or untruthful, or manipulative, or feeble, or unwise" (1982, ix). I think Milton does present such a God and that although this problematizes his theodicy, it makes his poem much more fascinating.

I believe, then, that despite their fabular and illustrative qualities, the major figures in Paradise Lost are depicted with such specificity that we can comprehend much of their behavior in motivational terms and that doing so helps to explain why the poem has given rise to so much debate. As has been often shown before, Paradise Lost is a heavily rhetorical work in which Milton employs a variety of devices in an effort to shape our attitudes and judgments, sympathies and antipathies, and our understanding of his characters. The clashes between his rhetoric and his concrete portrayals of his main characters have led some to feel that he made artistic mistakes, or to distinguish between conscious and unconscious meanings, or to see him as a poet of indeterminacy. As Empson has observed, the presence of "elaborate detail" enables "us to use our judgement about the characters" (1965, 94); and this can lead us to conclusions that differ from the author's. Fish argues, of course, that Milton wants us to make faulty judgments so that he can then correct them. Some other critics try to show that Milton's judgments have been misunderstood and that they really concur with theirs.

My purpose here is not to focus on critical controversies or Milton's thematic intentions, but to try to understand the principal characters in such a way as to

answer the kinds of questions I raised earlier about these characters and their dealings with each other. Most critics treat Milton's characters as coded messages from the author, but their mimetic features interfere with the process of decoding. Instead of looking through the characters to the author, I shall look at Milton's characters as objects of interest in themselves, as creations inside a creation who are embodiments of his psychological intuitions.

The appeal of Milton's characters continues because they have recognizable inner lives and relationships and are drawn with such depth that they transcend all ideologies, including Milton's own. Our sense of the truth about experience changes with the times and from culture to culture, but mimetic truth, truth to experience, endures. Despite the mythic and doctrinal aspects of Paradise Lost, there is a great deal of mimetic truth in the poem that deserves more attention than it has been given and that is, to use Wittreich's phrase, one of the reasons Milton matters.

Let us begin with the tensions in Heaven before God's elevation of the Son and Satan's reaction to that transformative event.