

“That far be from thee”: Divine Evil and Justification in *Paradise Lost*

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When we talk about knowing God, it must be understood in terms of man's limited powers of comprehension. God, as he really is, is far beyond man's imagination, let alone his understanding

—John Milton, *Christian Doctrine* 1.2

I The Father: Divine Evil and Justification

None of Milton's characters, not even his grandiloquent and bellicose Satan, has proven more disturbing for readers than the Father. Both characters read their critics as much as their critics read them. Reveal what you think of Satan and/or the Father, and you reveal something important about yourself.

Although critical discourse on *Paradise Lost* has often focused on the question of Satan and his heroism (or lack thereof), the Father provokes equally dichotomous reactions; curiously, however, there are no clearly identified “Fatherist” or “antiFatherist” camps, no labeling analogous to that which identifies the participants in the long-running debates over Milton's Satan. Empson is not so much anti-Father as he is anti-God (or anti *Christian* God); likewise, C.S. Lewis is not so much a Fatherist as he is a booster for an Anglican concept of the Christian God. Regardless of the religious leanings of the critic, the Father in *Paradise Lost* presents a significant interpretive problem.

A particularly thorny dilemma is why angelic and human characters alike express anxiety regarding the Father's capacity for good and evil.¹ Raphael, the messenger angel whose discourse takes up most of Books 5–8, expresses misgivings about the Father's capacity for evil when he casually mentions the possibility of the Father mixing evil with good during the creation of Earth (8.233–36). To Adam and Eve, who pray that the Father will “be bounteous still / To give us only good” (5.205–06),² the assumption that evil might originate in the Father does not appear to be an unreasonable one, should his bounty and his good one day run out. This nervous prayer follows Adam's apprehensive declaration to Eve that “Evil into the mind of God or Man / May come and go” as long as it is “unapprov'd” (5.117–18)—a disturbingly thin thread upon which to hang the idea that one's creator is wholly good. Adam here is attempting to comfort Eve after a disturbing dream (in which she rehearses the scene of eating from the forbidden tree) given her by Satan, who uses “his Devilish art to reach / The Organs of her Fancy, and with them forge / Illusions as he list, Phantasms and Dreams” (4.801–03). But Satan does what he does at the Father's sufferance, by the “sufferance of supernal Power,” (1.241) and as part of the Father's determination that Satan's attempts at “desperate revenge” will “redound / Upon his own rebellious

head" (3.85–86). In essence, therefore, the evil that comes into the mind of Eve, through the dream suggested by Satan, has its ultimate source and sanction in the Father.

The apprehension expressed by characters in *Paradise Lost* mirrors reader reactions to the Father that have often ranged from anxiety to outright distaste. Alexander Pope provided an early example, blasting Milton in 1737 for writing a scenario in which "God the Father turns a School-divine" (102). Pious critics like Pope have often faulted Milton for portraying the Father as less than spotlessly good and immediately sympathetic, while less pious readers have seen in the Father all manner of criticisms of God or a particular *idea* of God. Blake, in his poem "Milton," describes the Father of *Paradise Lost* as the worst sort of tyrant he could personally imagine, "Urizen [...] in chains of the mind lock'd up" (plate 3, line 6), while Shelley described the Father of *Paradise Lost* in Satanic terms: "one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge on his enemy, not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent of a perseverance in enmity, but with the alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments" (498).

Much twentieth-century criticism has been engaged in a defense of the Father, arguing that the Father is, in fact, the model of kingly deity and government that Milton is recommending to his fit audience. The mid-century critic George Wilson Knight is perhaps typical in this regard, constructing a royalist Milton, arguing that Milton was a defender of constitutional monarchy, and claiming that Milton's attitude, even during the height of the Republican years, was "sympathetic to the idea of royalty" (44). Such present-day critics as Robert Fallon³ and Stevie Davies⁴ construct a Milton who, though not royalist on earth, is certainly royalist regarding heaven. Such readings take as an axiom the idea that the Father's words not only positively express Milton's deepest and most cherished opinions on order and hierarchy, but also delineate the proper moral center of *Paradise Lost*. William Empson, thirty-eight years after publishing *Milton's God*, is still regarded as somehow "anti-Milton" for having suggested otherwise. Empson was insightful; however, Milton is not, as the estimable critic suggested, struggling to use his poem and poetic characterization of the Father to graft a good and just appearance onto an irredeemably wicked God. The Father's words cannot be relied upon as simple statements of truth in the light of which all other utterances must be interpreted. In Book 3 for instance, when after a confrontation by the Son the Father replies "All hast thou spok'n as my thoughts are, all / As my Eternal purpose hath decreed" (171–72), the Father's words cannot be taken literally any more than the words of Satan in the famous Council scenes of Book 2.

Of course, Satan will not do as a model for Milton's fit audience either. As compelling a character as Satan is, he is no more the moral center of *Paradise Lost* than is the Father, and he is ultimately a secondary element in Milton's grand project to "justify the ways of God to men." Satan is a portrait of rebellion gone wrong, but *not* of the wrongs of rebellion. Satan is too conservative in his aims and too blunt in his methods for Milton to have been of his party, knowingly or otherwise: Milton's party, like Blake's, was far more radical than that of Satan, who looks to the very ruler he despises for his model of government. Only the Son offers a thoroughly Miltonic radicalism, a point of view that insists, as Christopher Hill writes, "the true fight is fought first in the hearts of men" (364). Hill describes

the Son's radicalism in compelling terms:

True glory comes from renunciation of glory—a conclusion to which Milton returned in *Paradise Regained*, whose truly heroic theme is 'one man's obedience fully tried', and in *Samson Agonistes*, where Samson achieves true heroism when he stops wanting to be a hero.
(364)

Satan represents an entirely different perspective, one that insists that war is its own glory, and power is its own reward; for Milton, this misses the point entirely. As Hill puts it, war, "so far from being glorious, defeats its own ends because it produces the wrong virtues" (364), virtues that are embodied in Milton's Heaven by the Father (whose concern with "Omnipotence," "Arms," "Deity," and "Empire" [5.722–24] is about as unMiltonic as it is possible to get). In sharing the Father's obsessions with rank and power, Satan reflects the Father's image in a way that the Son ultimately refuses to. Whereas Satan means to overthrow the Father and take him down from a heavenly throne, the Son adopts an end more radical than Satan's (and closer to Milton's) while employing means hitherto unseen in Milton's Heaven: he fights—through reason, self-sacrifice, and self-denial—to overturn heavenly kingship, to refuse thrones both earthly and heavenly, and to abolish kingship itself by reclaiming a Miltonic, internal definition of glory, heroism, and true government.

Using the Son in this way, Milton concurrently creates a Father who is profoundly disturbing, an illustration of what can and will go wrong with deity imagined in absolutist and monarchical terms. The Father that Milton portrays in *Paradise Lost* reigns through application of a justice code so rigid that to call it draconian would be an insult to the liberality of Draco.⁵ Milton portrays the Father in such a harsh light, *not* to say to his "fit audience [...] though few" that this is how God really *is*, but that this is how God has been *wickedly imagined*. Milton's great poems are in this sense a variation on Meister Eckhart's famous prayer to be able to "for God's sake [...] take leave of god" (204), to abandon a slave's image of God as a military monarch who rules often recalcitrant subjects through force and fear, and to adopt a free man's image of God as one who prefers to "make persuasion do the work of fear" (*Paradise Regained* 1.223).

It must be noted that a cornerstone of literary study is the recognition of a distinction between representation and represented. Poetic characters are not, in any absolute sense, identical with what they represent. In writing a poem, Milton works with *images* of God. The difference between poetry and systematic theology (a form that also works with *images* or *conceptions* of God) is wide enough that responsible readers must be cautious about assuming that poetic representations of God are necessarily intended to be synonymous with whatever "presence" or "absence" is pointed to with the word "God." There may be a wide difference between a poet's representation of the divine and whatever private beliefs about the divine that poet may hold. To wit, Dennis Danielson asks what is perhaps the prototypically orthodox question of modern Milton studies: "Does Milton worship, and present, a good God?" (ix). The unspoken assumption seems to be that the character known as the Father in *Paradise Lost* is somehow the same God that Milton may have worshipped. But "present" and "worship" are not synonymous, and a poetic character is not God. A poetic character is created in the human

imagination; the figures that emerge therefrom cannot be any less human and fallible than their creators. The seemingly instinctive tendency to conflate the character Milton creates with the divine itself should not excuse his readers and critics from considering the legitimate difficulties of that character. Concretizing the metaphor only blinds us to the richness of Milton's work,⁶ leading to readings arguing that any flaws in Milton's poetic portrayal of God necessarily mar the poem itself: "If Milton presents a God who is wicked, or untruthful, or manipulative, or feeble, or unwise, then his epic poem must suffer accordingly" (Danielson ix).

To counter the argument that a "wicked" presentation of God in *Paradise Lost* makes the poem suffer, it is necessary to take a closer look at the words of the Son in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*, words chosen with painstaking care in the face of the highest possible stakes, not only for humankind, but for the Son *and* the Father. In one of the finest and most compelling sections of Milton's entire poem, the Father is presented as "wicked, [...] untruthful, [...] manipulative, [and] unwise," but rather than marring the poem by darkening the Father's character, Milton's presentation raises his work to heights truly "invisible to mortal sight" (3.55) by presenting the emerging glory and heroism of the Son.

Working with carefully constructed images of God, Milton deliberately builds the Son's monologue at 3.144–166 on the twin foundations of Abraham and Moses. The Son's "that far be from thee" is a direct reference to Abraham's ethical challenge to Yahweh at Genesis 18.25 over the planned destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. When the Son pursues this confrontation with the Father, inquiring "wilt thou thyself / Abolish thy Creation" (162–64), his challenge is an echo of Moses at Exodus 32, pleading with a Yahweh determined to destroy his own people.⁷

Casting the Son in the position of Abraham serves to demonstrate clearly how courageous the Son's action is in this situation. Abraham's bargaining is no simple mediatorship, no mere intercession over a metaphysical bargaining table between equals (or near-equals). Abraham is a fantastically puny human being standing toe to toe with Yahweh himself. His action is a challenge that requires astounding courage. Abraham not only asks for mercy for the residents of the cities of the plain, he asks *repeatedly*, bargaining with Yahweh in a way that seems to be testing both the limits of the deity's ability to control his temper and also the extent to which mercy and righteousness can lessen the deity's wrath. Will fifty "righteous" be enough to avoid wholesale slaughter? How about forty-five? Forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten? As it turns out, there are only four (or three, depending on how one takes the story of Lot's wife), and four apparently are not enough. God is not testing Man here; Man is testing God. Similarly, in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*, the Father is not testing the Son; the Son is testing the Father.

Even a veteran reader of the Bible may still experience a moment's shock on re-reading the distressingly numerous accounts of a fast-talking Moses trying desperately to cool off a furious and hotheaded Yahweh. By an informal reckoning, Moses finds himself in this position four different times, while these instances are themselves recounted repeatedly through the rest of the Hebrew scriptures.

Of all of these instances of Mosaic intervention, by far the most interesting is found in Exodus 32. Here, a newly-released people find themselves left to their own devices, far away from any homes they have ever known, while their charismatic—if somewhat bizarre and difficult—leader has gone off to communicate

with the strange new god in whose name and by whose power the leader has brought them out of Egypt. These are people who have never known gods they could not see, gods of whom they could not form images for daily devotion, and so they (understandably) form an image of this strange new god to whom they owe their freedom. Old habits, ingrained through centuries of myth, ritual, religion, and all of the seasonal and social patterns thereof, are not easy to break, and the people backslide, having been insufficiently re-educated into the new ritual and religious order of things; by way of response, this strange new god gets murderously angry.

Yahweh tells Moses to go away and leave him alone while he destroys the people: "let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them" (32.10). Moses, however, will have none of this. He tells Yahweh to watch out that the Egyptians do not get the opportunity to gloat over the destruction of the people: "Wherefore should the Egyptians speak, and say, For mischief did he bring them out, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?" (32.12). This call to remember what the enemy will make of the destruction—by God—of God's people is precisely the call that Milton ascribes to the Son in his confrontation with the Father in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*. Both the Son and Moses are pleading with God not to take an action that will allow the enemy to question and blaspheme "without defense."

What both the Son and Moses are trying to forestall is *divine evil*. Moses, with what will become his characteristic bluntness toward Yahweh, tells the deity outright to "repent of this evil against thy people" (32.12), and Yahweh "repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people" (32.14). The Hebrew word here (translated in the King James Bible as "evil") is *ra*. This word—which can be translated variously as evil, wickedness, displeasure, or wrong—comes from the root *rawah*, which means literally to break to pieces. If, as any Bible reader learns in Genesis 1, creation is literally *good*—from the Hebrew *tov*—then to "Abolish [...] Creation," to break it to pieces, is literally *evil*.⁸

Related to the notion of divine evil is the question of the passibility or impassibility of Milton's God. Can Milton's God be moved emotionally, to anger, joy, rage, even fear, so that he is capable of acting on impulse for good or for evil? Yahweh's capacity for evil is a fact so often emphasized in the Hebrew scriptures as to be almost monotonous, and the concept of Yahweh as the source of *all* things, both of good and of evil, is repeated frequently. Job asks his wife, "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (2.10). Lamentations 3.38 asks, "Out of the mouth of the most High proceedeth not evil and good?" At Isaiah 45.7, Yahweh tells Cyrus "I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things." Each of these instances (as well as numerous others that could be employed in their place) reaffirms the aforementioned synergy between divine good (creation, *tov*) and divine evil (destruction, *rawah*). By placing his character of the Father in an unmistakably Yahwistic role in Book 3, Milton is quite openly presenting the Father both as capable of good *and* evil, and as passible, capable of being moved. Michael Lieb has done notable work in this area, arguing that Milton "not only intensifies the idea of passibility, but bestows upon it a new significance" in his portrait of the Father (225). Lieb concludes, "the figure of God in *Paradise Lost* is portrayed as a fully passible being" (229). Milton creates a passible and morally ambiguous character in the Father, a character with the rich personality of Yahweh as a model.

The possibility of divine evil may explain why an old, blind, disgraced poet would feel it necessary to “assert eternal providence and justify the ways of God to men.” But what exactly does it mean to “justify” God? Curiously, in most editions of Milton, this word—in the midst of a stunningly grandiose statement of ambition—is treated as if its meaning were concrete and self-evident. Editors often give no note whatsoever. Hughes gives no note. Fowler gives no note. Shawcross gives no note. Flanagan gives no note. One of the few editions I have seen that *does* give a note is that of Christopher Ricks. The note he gives is “bear witness to the justice of” (47). Such a comment, while certainly valid as far as it goes, seems to be straining to maintain an “orthodox” reading of Milton. What such a gloss does not mention—in fact, what it seems to be assiduously avoiding in relation to Milton’s phrase—is the theological doctrine of “justification.” Milton’s use of the word “justify” brings with it (and in fact depends on) the theological issues involved in the Protestant reformulation of the justification doctrine. The full implications of this doctrine, when understood in relation to Milton’s phrase, might lead a reader to have to consider—willingly or unwillingly—the possibility that an equally valid gloss might be “explain the injustice of.”

An idea as old as the Bible itself, justification is the process through which fallen mankind is either made or declared righteous in the sight of God. “Protestant” theologies in the traditions of Luther and Calvin interpret justification as God imputing righteousness to mankind through its faith in the sacrifice of Christ. The older Augustinian view held that justification was the process through which God *made* unrighteous humanity righteous. Protestant theologies departed from this view of justification as involving a shift in humanity’s *being*, preferring to define justification as a change in humanity’s *status*. Being *declared* righteous in the sight of God implies that one is not *really* or *ontologically* changed, but that one is merely credited with something one does not actually have. (In this way, justification might be seen as a kind of spiritual line of credit extended to a bankrupt and essentially uncreditworthy humanity.)

However, this view of justification also necessitates a certain legalistic dualism. The imputation of righteousness is at once an *accusation* of unrighteousness and a simultaneous *acquittal* from the same. Milton’s contemporary, the Kidderminster curate Richard Baxter, defines justification in his *Aphorismes of Justification* (1649) as “the acquitting of us from the charge of breaking the Law” (135) and further argues that “Justification implyeth accusation” (135). Milton’s reversal of this definition, therefore, is dramatic: when he declares that he will attempt to justify the ways of God to men, Milton is actually declaring his intent to accuse God in order to acquit God.

In announcing his intention to “justify the ways of God to men,” Milton is appropriating and reversing the process through which Man is reconciled to God.⁹ Rather than reconciling Man to God, Milton is reconciling God to Man.¹⁰ Milton places God in a position similar to that in which “sinful” and “fallen” humanity is put by the theological doctrine of justification, which focuses on the inability of humanity to redeem itself—even to defend itself—without the intercession of Christ. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton turns the tables; for Milton, the Son is the poetic figure through whom the justification of God (the Father) is made possible.

Justification is an idea with roots that can be traced back to the earliest portions of the Hebrew scriptures. The Hebrew word translated as “justice” is *sedaga*,

whose root is *sdq*; this root, according to the historian and theologian Alister McGrath, has as its most likely core meaning “conformity to a norm” (1: 6). *Sedaqa* then, is behavior that conforms to, reinforces, and supports the norm. The *sedaqa* of Yahweh and the *sedaqa* of Israel are each bound up in the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel. For Yahweh to threaten to destroy his people (as he does at Exodus 32.10) is to break *sedaqa*; for the Israelites to forsake Yahweh (as they do repeatedly) is also to break *sedaqa*.

To “justify” in the sense of *sedaqa* is to restore the norm, to restore a covenant relationship, to make things *saddiq*, or as they should be. The need to make things *saddiq* carries the sense that something has been broken, that someone has done wrong, that someone has broken *sedaqa*. One in need of “justification” is one who has failed to conform to the norm, one who has broken a covenant.

This sense of wrongdoing is carried over into the Greek verb *dikaion*, which the translators of the Septuagint used to render the Hebrew *hasdiq*, a term meaning “to make right,” or “to restore *sedaqa*.” According to McGrath, *dikaion* “in its classical usage [...] with a *personal* object almost invariably seems to be applied to someone whose cause is *unjust*” (1: 12). In this usage *dikaion* takes on a punitive aspect—to do justice to. However, in the Septuagint, *dikaion* takes on a completely different character. Still used in the context of someone whose cause is *unjust*, *dikaion* takes on a positive aspect—to justify, to acquit, to declare to be in the right. When Israel is invited to confess her sins at Isaiah 43.26, it is “in order that she may be acquitted of them” (McGrath 1: 13).

The idea of justification moves then, from a bedrock sense of justice as conformity to a norm, of behavior that reinforces and supports a covenant relationship, to a sense of the *injustice* of the breaker(s) of that norm or relationship and the concomitant necessity of rapprochement.

By the time of the Vulgate, in which *dikaion* is rendered as *iustificare*, another important shift has occurred. Most Latin-speaking theologians followed Augustine in interpreting *iustificare* as *iustum facere* (making just or making righteous). The idea of justification has shifted from “declaring to be in the right” to “making right.” The emphasis of justification has shifted from a sense of restoring an abandoned conformity to a norm and returning to a covenantal relationship in which that norm is embodied, to an ontological change in the one who is “justified.” The Hebrew and Greek senses of justification emphasize *status*, while the Latin (Augustinian) sense of justification emphasizes *being*. The difference is explained by McGrath as one between a “Greek verb [that] has the primary sense of being *considered* or *estimated* as righteous,” and a “Latin verb [that] denotes *being* righteous” (1: 15). It is the Latin sense of justification as being *made righteous* that is dominant in “orthodox” theology from the time of Augustine until the Reformation; after the Reformation the earlier sense—the sense inherent in the Hebrew *hasdiq* and the Greek *dikaion*—is once again asserted.

Luther, by way of illustration, who insisted that man was entirely passive in the face of divine justification, regarded justification as a “healing process which permits God to overlook the remaining sin on account of its pending eradication” (McGrath 2: 15). Overlooking sin *pending eradication* is not *making righteous*; overlooking sin is closer to the sense of *dikaion* (declaring just or righteous) than to *iustificare* (according to Augustine, making just or righteous). Fallen man, in Luther’s formulation, is considered as if he were just, as if he were righteous, when he is in fact no such thing. The sense is not of making man sinless, but of

returning man and God to a covenant relationship, restoring *sedāqa*. It is justification in Luther's sense that enables man—whose cause is essentially *unjust*—to be “declared to be in the right,” to be “acquitted.”

In raising the issue of justification in his famous declaration of intent, Milton is not working with the Augustinian sense, but with the earlier Septuagintal and Hebrew sense of justification—restoring *sedāqa* between God and man. But in declaring that the “ways of God” are the object of justification, Milton is declaring that the “ways of God” stand in the place of that object of *dikaionn* whose cause is *unjust*. What the narrator wishes to “justify” is not God, but the “ways of God.” It is the “ways of God” that are unjust; those “ways of God” stand in need of being “declared to be in the right,” of being “acquitted,” even of being forgiven.

It is important to keep in mind the difference between the formulations of justification as either *declaring* or *making* righteous when analyzing the implications of Milton's appropriation and reversal of the justification doctrine. What Milton says he will “justify” is not God itself—God as an ontological essence—but the “ways of God”: the observable, conceivable, categorizable aspects and actions of God in the world. Milton is not trying to *make* God righteous, but to *declare* God righteous. In essence, Milton is turning justification around in the only way possible for a mere mortal: not by changing God's *being*, but by changing God's *status*, changing the way in which God is conceived of by human beings.¹¹

Ultimately, for Milton, God desperately needs a defense attorney. Milton serves as God's advocate by setting in motion a poetic process of justification through accusation and acquittal that uses the Son as its main instrument. Milton at once accuses and acquits the Father by putting the Son in the position of patient, quiet, yet firm petitioner before the Father. In so doing, Milton provides a model of confrontation with the Father that serves as a poetic negative image of the confrontations of Satan. Both Satan and the Son reject a model of arbitrary and unquestioned rule by the Father; however, each chooses a radically different style of confrontation. Satan's attempt—military conquest—fails. The Son's challenge to the Father, by contrast, succeeds so dramatically that the Father claims that the bold words of the Son were, in fact, merely an expression of the Father's already-established purpose. Where Satan chooses to use military might against a heavenly king who commands a vast angelic military, thus in a real sense *adopting the tactics of the very ruler he rejects*, the Son instead uses language, diplomacy, persuasion, and argument to confront the Father, thus adopting the tactics of Milton the poet and pamphleteer.

In Book 3, the Father has just finished a lengthy monologue on the subject of just who is to blame for the human fall, a tragedy that—in human time—has not yet happened. After focusing on such noteworthy things as the freedom to stand or fall of those who fell, his lack of pleasure in any obedience that is one iota less than entirely freely willed, his desire that his creature serve him rather than “necessity,” his defensive insistence that he cannot be “justly accuse[d],” and his ever-present concern with his “glory,” the Father at last comes around to a mention of mercy for the as-yet unfallen first human pair, saying “Mercy first and last shall brightest shine” (134). After several lines from the narrator about how wonderful this monologue was, and how joyful were the “blessed Spirits elect” (136) to hear the Father's legalistic self-defense, the Son responds. What is especially interesting about the Son's response is that he completely ignores the

Father's legalistic arguments, vitriol, and self-defense, choosing instead to focus on, and attempt to reinforce, the Father's afterthought of mercy: "O Father, gracious was that word which clos'd / Thy sovran sentence, that Man should find grace" (144–45).¹²

Even more interesting than what the Son does *not* respond to is what the Son *does* respond to. In urging mercy, the Son responds to something that has only been *directly* uttered, not by the Father, but by Satan. The Son asks, "shall the Adversary thus obtain / His end, and frustrate thine, shall he fulfill / His malice, and thy goodness bring to naught / [...] and to Hell / Draw after him the whole Race of mankind, / By him corrupted?" (156–59, 162). In Book 2, it is Satan who proposes the attempt to "seduce" Adam and Eve "to our Party, that thir God / May prove thir foe, and with repenting hand / Abolish his own works" (368–70). It is in reference to this destructive—hence, *evil*—aim of *Satan* that the Son directs his "that far be from thee" in Book 3 (154). In essence, the Son is pleading with the Father to be as far from evil as he can manage to be. "That far be from thee" to fulfill the ambitions of Satan: "That far be from thee" to lose control of yourself to such an extent that you become Satan's accomplice.¹³

Despite the parallels, there are important differences between the accounts of Yahweh in Genesis 18 and Exodus 32 and that of the Father in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*. The Father never, for instance, threatens to destroy his people—but he doesn't have to, because his own messenger makes the threat for him (however obliquely). Raphael, in relating to Adam the story of the war in heaven and the creation of Earth, refers to having served sentry duty against the new inhabitants of Hell while the Earth was in production. The sentries were "To see that none thence issu'd forth a spy, / Or enemy, while God was in his work, / Lest hee incenst at such eruption bold, / Destruction with Creation might have mixt" (8.233–36). For the Father to mix destruction with creation, to literally mix *evil* with *good*, is not considered unusual enough as a possibility to even merit an ironically raised eyebrow from the garrulous messenger. Adam himself intuited this possibility of evil in the Father when he told Eve—in reference to her Satan-inspired dream—that "Evil into the mind of God or Man / May come and go, so unapprov'd, and leave / No spot or blame behind" (5.117–19). The key phrase in Adam's speech, however, is "so unapprov'd." Evil may come into the mind of God or Man and leave no spot *only if that evil is not acted upon*. Eve does eventually act on evil that comes into her mind, and Raphael seems to take for granted that the Father is also quite capable of acting on such evil.

II The Father of Lies

There is another important difference between the Yahweh of Exodus 32 and the Father of *Paradise Lost*: Yahweh *repents*. Yahweh does not simply claim, after having been justly and courageously confronted by Moses, that he was planning to be merciful all along and only exterminate *some* of the Israelites over the matter of the golden calf. In *Paradise Lost*, the Father, having been confronted by the Son, claims that the Son was merely speaking aloud what he, the Father, had in mind the whole time. The Son is *cajoling* the Father, saying, in effect, "you can't destroy Man utterly, or else the adversary will have defeated you." The Father vac-

illates between mercy and wrath; one minute he declares that “Mercy first and last shall brightest shine” (3.134), and the next minute he reverts to rage and bluster, announcing that Man “with his whole posterity must die” (3.209). The Son pleads consistently for mercy; nowhere does he entertain the thought that destroying mankind would be a good idea. After this intercession by the Son, for the Father to come back and say, “All hast thou spok’n as my thoughts are, all / As my Eternal purpose hath decreed” is a deliberately jarring note played against the carefully composed background that Milton provides for the Son’s action. *The Father has been caught out*, and he has had neither the courage nor the honesty to admit it. The Father, in short, *lies*.¹⁴

A God who lies is not a comforting prospect. The easy response would be to reject the notion altogether. After all, received wisdom, along with a literal interpretation of John 8.44, tells us that it is Satan who is “the father of the lie.” Milton writes in *Paradise Lost* of the fallen angels corrupting “the greatest part / Of mankind” by “falsities and lies” (1.367–68). Milton also has the Father speak in the future tense of Satan’s “glozing lies” (3.93), lies that will contribute to the Fall. Gabriel refers to Satan as a “liar traced” in their confrontation at 4.949. The Father tells Raphael that Satan plans to assault the first human pair with “deceit and lies” (5.243). Raphael then tells Adam of the “lies” of Satan in heaven (5.709). The Father again, at the beginning of Book 10, speaks of Satan’s “lies / Against his Maker” (42–43).

Plainly, Milton is at great pains to create a portrait of Satan as a liar. This is a truism as banal as it is well known. This truism, however, does not necessarily preclude the possibility that the Father may also lie. In carefully constructing his Father/Son dialogue in Book 3 on the twin pillars of Abraham and Moses, Milton bases his poetic character on an unmistakable model—Yahweh.

Yahweh, though he is described at Numbers 23.19 as “not a man, that he should lie,” *does* lie. The story of the “lying spirit” at 1 Kings 22.20–23 paints a portrait of a deity who is not at all adverse to generating lies and then punishing others for the lies generated. “The Lord hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets, and the Lord hath spoken evil concerning thee.”

The “lying spirit” sent forth in 1 Kings 22.20–23 is the *malak* of Yahweh. If, rather than being translated as “messenger,” *malak* is here understood—as Jeffrey Burton Russell suggests—as “the voice of the God, the spirit of the God, the God himself” (198), then it is Yahweh *himself* who lies in order to achieve his ends. Yahweh, the model upon which Milton bases so much of the Father, can and does lie, both directly, and through the words and actions of his servants. Examples of Yahweh’s lies, half-truths, and manipulations abound in the scriptures. It is Yahweh who, at 2 Samuel 24.1 “moved David” to take a census of the people of Israel, and it is Yahweh who savagely punishes David and Israel for this census by “a pestilence” that kills “seventy thousand men” (2 Samuel 24.15). Yahweh serves as his own “lying spirit” here, moving David to take the very action for which Yahweh will inflict horrible punishment. It is also Yahweh whose “hand shall be upon the prophets that see vanity, and that divine lies,” or, in the translation of the NRSV, “If a prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I, the Lord, have deceived that prophet, and will stretch out my hand against him” (Ezekiel 13.9).

The curious story of the lying prophet in 1 Kings 13 brings the *malak* of Yahweh into the arena of lies and deception once again. It is the “word of the

Lord” delivered by the lying prophet that causes another prophet to break his oath and to be killed and eaten by a lion as punishment. No mention is made of the lying prophet being punished for his role in this grotesque affair; therefore, despite the fact that 13.18 says that “he lied unto him,” it is by no means clear that the lie was not, in fact, instigated by Yahweh himself.

Even by the time of the Pauline epistles, the Hebrew god had not lost this reputation for using deception to accomplish his purposes. Although he is universalized as *theos*, or “God,” the figure of whom Paul writes to the Thessalonians acts much like the Yahweh of Job, working hand in hand with Satan to ensure that the “Wicked” shall be revealed: “And for this cause God shall send them a strong delusion, that they should believe a lie” (2 Thessalonians 2.11). A god pictured as a liar, as a punisher of actions he has initiated, as an oracular figure who puts false words in the mouths of prophets and then punishes both the prophets and those unfortunates who believe in them, is a portrait of divine evil, even if that god—in a Machiavellian ends-justify-the-means manner—seems to act for good purposes. Such a god is a figure found in the books of Job, Lamentations, and Isaiah, a capricious and unpredictable deity from whom people expect evil. Milton is keen to reject such a conception of the divine. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, he affirms that “God’s will is the first cause of everything” (Yale 6: 163), but he is at great pains to prevent God from being portrayed as “the cause and author of sin” (Yale 6: 166). In prose, Milton defends God from such a charge by arguing against its verity, by arguing forcefully against Calvinist notions of predestination that insist that “all future events must happen by necessity because God has foreknown them” (Yale 6: 165). In poetry, however, Milton takes a different tack, inventing a “long argument to prove that God is not the Devil” (Yale 6: 166), by embodying the concept of God he wishes to undermine in a poetic character. In so doing, Milton is able to illustrate into what kinds of “error” those who “do not hesitate to assert that God is, in himself, the case and author of sin” (Yale 6: 166) are falling.

In order to see clearly how Milton subtly weaves Yahweh’s manipulations, half-truths, and “divine lies” into the whole cloth of the Father, a reader must take a closer look at the narrator’s descriptions. The Father is described at 3.77–78 as “beholding from his prospect high, / Wherein past, present, future he beholds.” This seems to make it impossible for the Father to be “lying” at 3.171–72, since it seems that he knew in advance what the Son was going to say. However, one of a reader’s primary sources of information that the Father sees “past, present, future” is the fact that the narrator says so. The verity of this assertion should not simply be taken for granted. Milton criticism, by and large, is suspicious of those descriptions of the Father emerging from the mouths of “Satanic” forces. In fact, the assumption that Satan’s words must be viewed with unceasing suspicion is a severely overworked commonplace of Milton criticism—what Empson once referred to as “the modern duty of catching Satan out wherever possible” (74). However, an equally overworked commonplace seems to be the tendency to take the words of heaven, and the presumably pro-heaven narrator, as always and completely truthful and accurate. The assumption that the narrator, after the trepidation expressed in his invocation to Book 3, is always in possession of a complete and perfect understanding of the events being narrated, is questionable. The narrator is not always entirely reliable; an example of this unreliability is the matter of ire.

Uriel, having initially failed to recognize Satan at the end of Book 3, finally does recognize him in Book 4. Uriel is able to recognize Satan because of the latter's emotional state: Satan's "borrow'd visage" was "marr'd" by "pale, ire, envy, and despair." The narrator then goes on to assure the reader that "heav'nly minds from such distempers foul / Are ever clear" (115–19), but this turns out to be not quite true. "Ire" is quite at home in "heav'nly minds." The "ire" of the Son (presumably a character in possession of a "heav'nly mind") is referred to by Raphael at 6.843. The "just avenging ire" of the Almighty is celebrated by the unfallen angels at 7.184. Michael speaks of how "willingly God doth remit his Ire" at 9.885. The "ire" of the Father is spoken of numerous times by the infernal forces, and this, perhaps, is one time when they just might be trusted after all.

The issue is not whether or not the Father's ire is justified (a point many will no doubt wish to argue), but just how much reliance can be placed on the descriptions of a narrator who cannot seem to keep his "heav'nly" and not-so-"heav'nly" minds straight. A narrator wrong about ire might be wrong about other things. In eagerly assigning every moral negative to Satan, while excusing the Father from every appearance of similar moral negatives, the narrator of *Paradise Lost* functions as a type of orthodox apologist, carrying all of the ideological baggage that such apologism brings. Additionally, though the narrator does not always fully understand the nature of what he is describing—this is made clear by the tentative quality of the invocation to Book 3—he is nonetheless quite wrong about the issue of ire and "heav'nly minds." Given this error on the part of the narrator, readers may legitimately hold some doubt about the narrative contention that the Father "past, present, [and] future [...] beholds." The Father may not have known exactly what the Son was going to say. The Father may very well be lying—or, at the very least, quickly shifting his rhetorical position—when he says to the Son, "All hast thou spok'n as my thoughts are, all / As my Eternal purpose hath decreed." The Father has been taken aback.

With this picture in mind of the Father and Satan, both of whom resort to lies and shifting rhetorical stances when pressed, it becomes clear that such a similarity between the Father and Satan is what seems to worry the Son so much in Book 3.¹⁵ Michael Lieb has argued along similar lines, outlining a list of questions that the Son seems to be asking the Father, among which are the following:

1. Shall Satan triumph?
2. Will you allow your goodness to be undermined?
3. Will you abolish your creation?

Lieb writes of a warning from the Son to the Father, "a warning that if the answer is indeed 'yes' (the very real possibility is implied here) then God's 'goodness and [...] greatness both' would be justifiably 'questioned'" (229). Lieb goes on to write, "One senses in the challenge that the Son himself would be the foremost among the reprobate in excoriating the Father, should the Father fail to heed the Son's warning" (229).

With divine evil, divine lies, and divine passibility all at work, Milton is not establishing anything like an orthodox scenario that insists on the impassibility and absolute goodness of the Father. Were Milton insisting on such a scenario, one that he notoriously fails or refuses to create, then his use of the Father in his attempt to "justify the ways of God to men" would be an abject failure.

Such an orthodox defense, however, is not part of Milton's scheme. Milton has the Father and Son play out long-familiar roles, not of mere *mediation*, but of open and high-stakes *confrontation* between a developing nation and its likewise-developing God, in order to accuse the Father. God, in order to have his ways "justified," is depicted by Milton in two aspects: Father and Son. Milton *accuses* God in the image of the Father so that he may then *acquit* God in the image of the Son. This combination of accusation and acquittal is part of a larger scheme of movement by Milton away from the model of divinity inhabited by the Father (a heavenly *dux bellorum*, leader of angelic troops and occupant of a heavenly throne) and toward an alternate model of divinity, embodied by Milton in the form of the Son (a heavenly—and later earthly—destroyer of kings and kingship, both on earth and in heaven).

It is in this tension between two images of God, Father and Son, that Milton's search for a "fit audience [...] though few" resides. The Father of *Paradise Lost* is not synonymous with God in any absolute or ontological sense. The Father may therefore be portrayed (and analyzed) without finally submitting such portrayal (and analysis) to the demands of theological orthodoxy. As is clear from the context of the Father-Son dialogue in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*, the Father is plainly based on another famous character who also is not synonymous with God in any absolute or ontological sense—Yahweh as he is presented in the Hebrew scriptures. Just as Yahweh is passible, so the Father is passible. Just as Yahweh lies, so the Father also lies. Just as Yahweh must be dissuaded from evil, so must the Father be dissuaded from evil.

With Yahweh firmly entrenched as part of his character, the Father is, in a sense, trapped in the role of a divine military tyrant, unable to escape from it, or lay down the power and trappings of his heavenly throne. However, the Father is aware of his position, and his plans for the Son indicate his desire to relinquish power. As Empson observed, "Milton did expect God to abdicate" (130). Empson makes an interesting point when he compares Oliver Cromwell to the Father. In describing Cromwell's "admitted and genuine bother" as being a desire to "find some way of establishing a Parliament under which he could feel himself justified in stopping being a dictator" (144), Empson has anticipated an important part of the point this essay is trying to drive home. Milton's dilemma is how to create a poetic God who is a dictator, but who can "feel himself justified in stopping being a dictator."

Milton effects this transformation by having the Father hand over power to the Son, for all intents and purposes stepping down from the heavenly throne. In so doing, however, Milton puts a strongly antimonarchical and antihierarchical spin on the scriptural source from which he borrows his language. Milton *deliberately* muddies the clear water of 1 Corinthians 15.28 in his descriptions of the Son's assumption and subsequent renunciation of power. 1 Corinthians clearly spells out that the Son shall "himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all." This is hardly a rejection of monarchy or an erasing of hierarchical distinctions in an ecstatic union of all creation with God. Milton's rendering of this passage into his poetic speech of the Father to the Son is all of those things: "All Power / I give thee, reign forever [...] / Then thou thy regal Sceptre shalt lay by, / For regal Sceptre then no more shall need, / God shall be All in All" (3.317–18, 339–41). The Father relinquishes power to the Son. Then, the Son, annointed as "Universal King," lays by the "regal Sceptre,"

because it will never be needed again. The Son is to abolish the image of divinity as kingship, and there is no mention of a resumption of submission by the Son in relation to the Father. God (no longer conceived of as Father *or* Son) is simply All in All.

Given Milton's use of the Son, those passages in which the Father claims that the Son has anticipated his own thoughts or expressed his own will are somewhat misleading. The Father's claim (after the Son has just finished pleading for mercy to be shown to mankind in Book 3) that the Son has "spok'n as my thoughts are" is true, but only in the sense that it is the Son who will show such mercy, because the Son is the one to whom and through whom the "Tyranny of heav'n" will be given and finally eliminated. The Son is to be what the Father could not be: a divinity imagined in non-monarchical terms. Furthermore, although the narrator of *Paradise Lost* describes the Son as if he were somehow an *expression* of the Father ("the Son of God [...] in [whom] all his Father shown / Substantially express'd" [3.139–40]), the Son is much more than that: the Son is a character instrumental in the *development* of the Father. The Son challenges the Father to be better, more merciful, and less destructively violent than he has been.¹⁶ The Son's challenges allow a poetic character, the Father, to escape from the immutability into which a theological concept, God, is often confined. The Son is both Milton's critique of the monarchical Father and the Father's avenue for growth and change. The monarchical Father cannot become the God who "shall be All in All" (3.341) except through means of the Son.

Just as the Father should not be mistaken for God, neither should the character of the Son be mistaken for God in an absolute or ontological sense. The Son is also merely an image of God. The Son's challenges to the Father in *Paradise Lost* are cornerstones of Milton's extended poetic attempt to destroy the no-longer-tenable image of God as an arbitrary figure of military might and monarchical power. Milton's great epic comprises a poetic *Eikonoklastes* in response to an *Eikon Theios* (God as a military king) that had made the English people "worthie [...] to be for ever slaves" (Yale 7.428). In replacing this disastrous image, Milton offers the Son, a figure through whom the process of justification—in its full theological sense—begins in *Paradise Lost* and eventually is completed in *Paradise Regained*.

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NOTES

¹ Gary D. Hamilton, who grounds Milton's portrayal of God in the Arminian-Calvinist controversies of the seventeenth century, argues that "Milton reflects in God's defense of himself [in Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*] the restlessness of an age that had come to have doubts about the goodness of its Calvinist God. In Book 3 God is defending himself against Calvinism [...]" (89).

² All quotations of Milton's poetry are from Merritt Hughes' edition of the *Complete Poems and Major Prose*. All quotations of Milton's prose are from Don Wolfe, et. al.'s edition of the *Complete Prose Works*. Such quotations are cited par-

enthetically as “Yale” with volume and page number.

³ Fallon suggests that Milton actually has no problem with kingship at all. What Milton does detest, according to Fallon, is the Stuart monarchy. Fallon argues from the fact that Milton had nothing to say about “Philip IV of Spain, Louis XIV of France, John IV of Portugal, Charles X of Sweden, and Frederick III of Denmark” (32), not to mention other absolute rulers with whose regimes Milton would have had at least a passing familiarity in his role as Latin Secretary. Somewhat surprisingly, given the evidence of Milton’s prose writings, Fallon maintains that “Milton did not reject all kings but reserved his condemnation for those who used their power tyrannically” (33). In support of his contention, Fallon declares (on the basis of a few isolated quotations in which Milton allows for the relative justice of rare human monarchs who avoid tyranny to the best of their limited abilities) that the evidence of Milton’s prose is “questionable” (32) as a basis for evaluating his attitudes toward monarchy.

⁴ Davies offers a curious description of Milton and his project: “England’s defender of the regicide, whose epic concerns a rebellion against the monarchy of Heaven together with a defense of that monarchy” (3). To resolve the apparent opposition between the political Milton and the theological Milton, and to answer the question of why Milton would impute to his poetic Father the very royal image that he found so repugnant in non-poetic “real life,” Davies elaborates upon a distinction between “oriental” and “feudal” monarchies. The final implication of her arguments (not entirely surprisingly, given the history of Milton scholarship since the mid-twentieth century) is that Satan’s monarchy, depicted in terms of “oriental” despotism, is tyrannical, while the Father’s “western” monarchy is ideal.

⁵ Draco’s seventh-century BCE law code was an attempt at a transition from a kind of “frontier” justice in which Athenian families settled accounts by violence against those with whom they were at odds. To enforce his laws, and to gain acceptance for them as surer remedies than were already provided under the existing ad hoc system, Draco instituted severe punishments, usually death, for even the most minor infractions.

⁶ Regina Schwartz has argued in *The Curse of Cain* that characterizations in biblical narratives are not synonymous with the divine. Schwartz critiques those who serve political agendas by willfully confusing the divine with representations (see especially the introduction on this point). This distinction is made with added force in her “Questioning Narratives of God.”

⁷ These parallels have been pointed out previously, notably in Gordon Campbell’s “Popular Traditions of God in the Renaissance.”

⁸ Regina Schwartz has previously discussed the relationship between evil and creation in Genesis and *Paradise Lost* in the first chapter of her work *Remembering and Repeating: On Milton’s Theology and Poetics*.

⁹ A. D. Nuttall writes at some length about Milton’s theodicy in *Paradise Lost*. He

refers to the “turning inside-out of ‘justify’” (90) in Milton’s great epic, and also argues that the justifying of God in the poem is Milton’s attempt to defend God against a Calvinist notion of predestination that cast God in the position of the author of evil. Nuttall’s analysis supports my own to the extent that our arguments share a concern with Milton’s attempt to defend God; however, I would like to take my argument a bit further, insisting that the implication of “justifying” God is a two-edged sword: as justification is at once an accusation and an acquittal, so Milton’s justifying of God is an accusation of wickedness and a poetic acquittal from the same. This standing in judgment of God is the real “audacity of Milton justifying God” (105).

¹⁰ Milton, in his invocation to Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*, reinterprets the fundamental tenet of the Reformers’ doctrines of justification and grace. Calvin vehemently disallows the possibility that there could be any such thing as an “upright heart and pure” (*Paradise Lost* 1.18), arguing that fallen man is incapable of possessing an upright or pure heart: “In order that we may rightly examine ourselves, our consciences must necessarily be called before God’s judgment seat. For there is need to strip entirely bare in its light the secret places of our depravity, which otherwise are too deeply hidden” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1: 759). Rather than bringing before God a pure and upright heart, Calvin insists that fallen man brings before God the “secret places of [his] depravity.” Milton suggests that an “upright heart and pure” is a real possibility; such a heart can legitimately be the Spirit’s “Temple,” and the possessor of such a “Temple” can legitimately attempt to “justify the ways of God to men.”

¹¹ Richard Strier argues that the “aim and mark of the whole discourse” of Herbert’s “Sepulchre” is “the contrast between God’s treatment of man and man’s treatment of God” (17). Here, Strier has neatly expressed a dynamic that the theologically- and biblically-informed poetry of Herbert and Milton share. However, Strier has also deftly delineated a crucial difference between the two poets, a difference that illustrates just how radical is Milton’s appropriation of the justification doctrine. Strier argues that an examination of “Sion” allows us to “distinguish Herbert’s from Milton’s sense of what it means for God to choose the heart as His special dwelling, for in Herbert we shall see that God does not choose the heart ‘before all Temples’ because it is ‘upright’ or ‘pure’” (179).

¹² Hamilton argues that the Son’s speech “should not be labeled ‘suasive,’ as if he has to work on God to prevent him from changing his mind and delivering a sterner sentence,” and further contends, “The Father’s future course of action has already been firmly declared, and the Son now seeks to spell out the significance of this declaration in the context of other less praiseworthy alternatives” (95–96).

¹³ Irene Samuel has forcefully contended that the Son is arguing with the Father in this scene: “the Son *argues* [...] In Milton’s Heaven the independent being speaks his own mind, not what he thinks another would like to hear” (604).

¹⁴ While stopping short of arguing for a lying Father, Irene Samuel does argue that the Father changes his point of view after the Son’s speech: “he immediately sanctions and adopts the view presented by the Son, incorporating it into his new

statement and modifying the first" (606).

¹⁵ Irene Samuel refers to the Father as "the monarch Satan thought to emulate" (606). The issue facing the Son (and the rest of Heaven and Earth) in this scene is to what extent (if any) Satan's emulation is in error.

¹⁶ Milton opens up a space in both *Paradise Lost* and *De Doctrina Christiana* for a consideration of the Son as not merely subordinate to, but ontologically separate from the Father: "the Son is a different person from the Father" (Yale 6: 205); "It does not follow, however, that the Son is of the same essence as the Father. For a real son is not of the same age as his father, still less of the same numerical essence: otherwise father and son would be one person" (Yale 6: 209). In *Paradise Lost*, Milton clearly presents the Father and Son as separate persons. The demands of dramatic structure and dialogue require such a presentation, but the separation is more profound than that necessitated by simple dramatic exigency; the Son acts both as an expression of the Father's ire in Book 6, and a check on the Father's ire in Book 3. In short, the Son (like Abraham, Moses, and Israel standing before Yahweh) *struggles* with the Father.

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