

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than one thousand words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

Milton's God

To the Editor:

I must ask leave to reaffirm the basic objection to the position of Joan S. Bennett in *God, Satan, and King Charles: Milton's Royal Portraits* (*PMLA*, 92 [1977], 441–57), as otherwise the case may seem to go by default. No one denies that Milton in *Paradise Lost* wanted to be recognized as a Christian; what is maintained is that he found the case for Satan alarmingly strong and wished to present it fully, if only as a warning.

The rebel angels, she says, have a “mistaken faith in sheer, undefined strength,” so, as God has not yet shown his strength, they willfully suppose him to be an impostor. But their opinions are more specific. Probably they were created by an impersonal mysterious being (they appeared all together, knowing nothing of the past, but one of them, they now think, was quick enough to pretend he had created the others). They grant that a personal creator is conceivable, but such a being must satisfy the conditions of Aquinas, which include absolute omnipotence. (He must be built into the structure of the universe, as no creator can be.) Hence, when they have resisted the power of God for two days of battle, they claim to have proved him an impostor, who has no right to order them about. Defeat in battle is a trivial thing compared to this moral victory. Such is the whole point of the speeches of Satan in the first book.

They ought to have realized that he is the true God, says Bennett, because of “the different quality of his strength.” They had “a vision of divinity,” which removed all *their* strength, as soon as the Son appeared. But the text says that innumerable arrows, like eyes, did it—a paralyzing ray, perhaps. There is no suggestion that it had any moral or spiritual effect on them. What we are told is that God deliberately let the good angels fail for two days so as to make them appreciate the unique power he has given to his Son, and also presumably to encourage the rebels in their delusion. When Satan first rises from the burning lake, the poem says, God releases him from his chains that he may “heap on himself damnation”—and of course on mankind too. When

the guard of angels capture Satan in Paradise, God forces them to release their prisoner so that Satan may continue with the temptation. Necessarily it was God's providence that put into Satan's mind the decisive argument for Eve—that God is not really testing her obedience but her courage and the earnestness of her desire for Heaven. And consider, we know that God could have prevented the revolt at the start by proving that he can create, because Satan actually is convinced when Uriel reports having seen God creating the world. The poem sets out to explain why the world is bursting with sin and misery, and the only reason it can find is that God is tirelessly spiteful. He therefore cannot be the metaphysical God of Aquinas, and the heroic rebels were right on the essential point.

As to the political argument, when God presents the Son to the assembled angels he says that any angel who disobeys the Son in any way will be thrown into utter darkness, without hope of redemption. Maybe God only says this to drive Satan into premature action, but it need hardly be called a lie when Satan tells his followers that the Son intends to issue new laws. Apart from the philosophical argument, the rebels feel it would be shameful to submit to God because he has such a bad character, and what we hear from the loyalist angels does little to offset their opinion.

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Satan and Charles I

To the Editor:

By pointing to a number of similarities between the description of Satan in *Paradise Lost* and King Charles I in *Eikonoclastes*, Joan S. Bennett tries to show that Milton was just as hostile toward Satan as he was toward Charles I. Both Satan and Charles, according to Milton, were ambitious for personal glory and both attempted to establish their power by relying on armed might, rather than on the justice of their cause. A revolutionist like Milton could, therefore, attack the revolt of Satan because, according to Bennett, “A true revolution, like that against Charles I in England, challenges, not the force that upholds the ruling power, but the right; valid revo-

lution tests whether supremacy is accountable to law, which alone has the power to liberate and which Satan's rebellion defies" (p. 450).

The first and obvious objection to this argument is that, even if we grant the similarities between Charles I and Satan, we would still not erase the more obvious similarities, pointed out by many readers, between Milton and Satan and between God and Charles I. For, if Satan does indeed often boast of his "puissant legions," he also challenges the justice and reasonableness of God's ways. When, for example, Satan tries to convince Eve that God would punish mankind for trying to achieve "What might lead / To happier life," Satan argues that "God cannot hurt ye, and be just; / Not just, not God; not feared then, nor obeyed" (ix.700–02). When Milton questions the legitimacy of King Charles, he also argues that we should obey no power that does not represent right reason, ". . . nothing contrary to the laws of God or to reason can be considered law, any more than a tyrant can be considered a king . . ." (quoted by Bennett, p. 451).

But my purpose is not to identify Satan with Milton; for that would be as serious an error as Bennett's attempt to identify Satan with Charles I. Nor do I believe that Bennett, along with the scores of other Miltonists who have tried to prove that Satan is the villain of the poem, is not responsive to the heroic qualities of Satan or fails to see how much of Milton there is in him. The very fact that Bennett goes to such lengths to uncover the evil lurking behind his outward glory indicates that she too is aware of Satan's attraction. But she, again like so many other Miltonists, is disturbed by the fact that the villain seems so much more attractive than God, and, consequently, she must diminish his force to give the poem coherence. Otherwise, they believe, the poem would be divided against itself and fall apart—to be remembered only for purple passages or as a monument to dead ideas.

What these critics do not realize is that the coherence they are looking for belongs to prose tracts, not to great poems or novels, and that the contradictory feelings that they try so hard to straighten out are precisely what gives the poem its power. As William Empson pointed out, "The more life Milton could put into our feelings about Satan the better" (*Some Versions of Pastoral*, 1935). And one of the important contributions of modern criticism, from the contextualists, to the structuralists, to the psychoanalytic critics, to the deconstructionists, is to make us aware of how the language of literature prevents us from arriving at clear meanings. "Confusion at the deep level where it is

required" (Empson), irony, ambivalence, duplicity, indeterminacy, the "violence that enables [the text] to exceed the laws that a society, an ideology, a philosophy establish for themselves" (Roland Barthes), these and other terms, although used by different critics for different purposes, all are directed to that aspect of literature that disturbs our normal assumptions about language and forces us to accept our contradictory feelings.

Thus, to dissolve the contradictions in our response to Satan and to God, as Bennett tries to do when she portrays Satan as a tyrant like King Charles, would reduce *Paradise Lost* to a political tract in blank verse. What makes Satan live as one of the great characters in our literature is that he represents Charles and Milton, that Milton's great lines prevent us from responding to Satan in the poem as we respond to him in *Of Christian Doctrine* or as we are invited to respond to Charles in *Eikonoclastes*. What Murray Krieger has said recently about all great literature has a particular relevance to *Paradise Lost*: "It is not that the poem [my emphasis] engages in contradictions; instead it engages its subject with dramatic fullness . . . that keeps the arguments open and the poetic object closed. The contradictions are the critic's as he grapples with the conflicting propositions that language has imposed upon his work" (*Theory of Criticism*, 1976). To do justice to Milton's Satan we must, I believe, keep him open to our admiration as well as to our hostility.

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Ms. Bennett replies:

Both Hyman's and Empson's comments offer me an opportunity to clarify my article, for which I am grateful. Hyman's summary of my position is somewhat misleading, as I was not concerned with proving that Milton was "hostile toward Satan" and believed my essay to be emphasizing, rather than "diminishing," Satan's force as a literary character of complexity and power. I actually concur with the "basic objection" offered by Empson: Milton "found the case for Satan alarmingly strong and wished to present it fully." For Milton a full presentation entailed not only effective dramatization of Satan's attractiveness, tempered by the narrator's commentary, but also ample dramatic evidence of the corruption at the core of Satan's energies. Much of this last kind of evidence is illuminated for us by an awareness of the seventeenth-century political parallels that my article points out. In demonstrating parallels, I did not want to "identify Satan with