

Compare what she says concerning the gender of chaos (her third paragraph) with this excerpt from my essay:

If the gender of chaos seems problematic, so too is the gender of light, which is identified with God. . . . [Y]et the light emitted by the sun, despite having masculine-sounding abilities to “pierce” and “plant,” is represented as female in Raphael’s report of its presolar existence: “*shee* in a cloudie Tabernacle / Sojourn the while” ( . . . 7.248–49; my italics). . . . The evidence concerning the relation of light to the paternal deity in Milton’s epic does not yield conclusions, but it is clear at least that Milton’s God is essentially affiliated with feminine as well as masculine creative power. (1045n14)

My claim that Milton’s God “acquiesces in his own feminine otherness” is not meant to exclude the masculine from chaos; such actively willed passivity is also a kind of presence, allegorically represented in the epic by the anarch Chaos. According to my reading of this allegory, chaos is the material potency of a hermaphroditic deity, a wild state of being that exists unchecked until God chooses to create order out of himself. At the conclusion of the essay, I appeal to Keats’s conception of “negative identity” to indicate that the paternal deity’s volitional abstention from chaos—an abstention personified in the allegorical anarch—is a precondition of divine poesis: “For Milton nothing can exist without indeterminacy, certainly not a sovereign deity who creates beings with free will” (1044).

Martin complains that my argument imperceptibly shifts from its original emphasis on complex indeterminacy, including indeterminacy of gender, to a “simpler binary” or merely a “benign perspective” on chaos. On the contrary, my essay is centrally concerned with the relation of chaos to the edgy moral order of *Paradise Lost*: “Without the indeterminacy, the potential for otherness, that chaos constitutes, Satan could not tempt humankind or even conceive of success” (1043). While it is true that I refer to chaos as God’s womb (wombs, too, are hermaphroditic in Milton’s epic), my argument concedes the hostile aspect of chaos. Hence it details Satan’s violation of various womblike spaces, most notably chaos, and his perverse actualization of their destructive power, as in his invention of gunpowder and artillery (1042). But it rejects the tendency of Milton scholarship to characterize “relations between the disorder of chaos and the order of God exclusively as adversarial” (1039). I thus attempt to bring out the erotic and productive associations of chaos. Despite this emphasis on the neglected positive side of chaos, my essay explicitly observes that the potential for evil as well as good pervades chaos and that such unstable potency is the material corollary of free will: “the psychological correlative of the potential

for otherness that underlies created order is freedom of will, the foundation of Milton’s ethical beliefs” (1043).

At least some of Martin’s criticisms apparently stem from misreading or curiously selective reading of my essay, prompting me in this reply to quote myself more often than I would like. There may well be points concerning Milton’s God and chaos about which we differ; it is difficult to know from Martin’s letter. In any case, I have no wish to play the role of precursor in relation to her scholarly efforts, and insofar as we agree, I readily concede that she and I have arrived independently at similar insights concerning the role of chaos in Milton’s epic. Yet it disturbs me that Martin distinguishes her work from my own by asserting that mine reflects the form and pressure of political correctness and panders to feminism. I am not sure just what *political correctness* denotes here, but in current rhetorical practice it tends to indicate a substitute for thoughtful analysis and accurate, thorough reading. Much of my published work over the last several years, most recently *Milton Unbound*, analyzes ways in which professional and political interests and affiliations have skewed interpretation of seventeenth-century texts. My political agenda, such as it is, runs contrary to such distortion. Feminist writings in philosophy, theology, and mythography have unquestionably helped me to perceive in a different light certain customary assumptions of modern Milton scholarship. But I believe that such influence has made my scholarship more rather than less honest.

JOHN RUMRICH  
University of Texas, Austin

## Birth of the Cyberqueer

To the Editor:

I write in defense of William B. Hunter’s objection (Forum, 111 [1996]: 133) to Donald Morton’s recent *PMLA* article (“Birth of the Cyberqueer” 110 [1995]: 369–81). I, too, tried to read that article and found that it firmly resisted my efforts, despite my experience as a reader of both literature and theory (I hold a PhD from Columbia and produced my dissertation under the mentorship of Jonathan Arac and Jean Howard). Morton’s prose style effectively bars all readers other than those who have read what he has read and think as he thinks from appreciating his essay.

Morton’s defense of his prose derives from the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson. To paraphrase Jameson, clear prose helps to reproduce bourgeois ideology; therefore,

critics should avoid such prose at all costs. The denser the prose, the harder readers must work at understanding it and thus the less likely they are to be unconsciously converted to any particular ideology. Stubbing readers' toes on the ideologies imbedded in dense prose struck me as a specious defense of bad writing when Jameson first proposed it, and Morton doesn't make it sound any better.

As any editor knows, the burden of clarity is on the writer, not the reader. But Morton derides Hunter as a poor reader, an unsophisticated reader, and—worst of all—an “anxious” reader. Anxiety in this context summons to mind not Harold Bloom so much as D. A. Miller—in particular, Miller's discussion in *The Novel and the Police* of those (unconsciously) erotic texts of nineteenth-century England that made their (male) readers so anxious. Those readers felt both guilty and titillated, aroused and repressed, homophobic and homosexual. They thought they were reading one thing, but they were really responding to something else: a subtext. Is Morton's subtext an indictment of Hunter as a homophobe and therefore as a potential homosexual (as homophobes so often are beneath the strai(gh)t laces, according to queer theorists of Morton's ilk)?

I think the answer to this question must be yes, given the intriguing twist in Morton's response to Hunter's letter. Morton suddenly shifts from the initial site of contestation—his murky prose—to an entirely different locus: sexual harassment. He suddenly introduces into the discussion the case of a Syracuse professor accused of sexual harassment last spring. Some observers defended the professor on the grounds that his accuser had “poor writing skills” (and therefore “deserved” the harassment). Clearly, this is a ridiculous defense in that situation. However, Morton's mention of poor writing skills recalls Hunter's initial complaint about Morton, but with an added reference. By linking an accusation of poor writing skills to sexual harassment, Morton casts Hunter's objection in a different light. Morton seems to be saying that it isn't really his prose that is under attack but his cyberqueer theories. Thus, concludes Morton, he is not simply being chastised as a poor writer; he is being sexually harassed.

This reasoning reminds me why intellectuals have grown fearful of criticizing the work of those who identify themselves as members of politically marginalized groups. As Morton proves, even a criticism leveled at a seemingly unrelated topic—grammar, syntax, style—can be twisted into a criticism of sexual preference.

But still, no matter how he (b)utters it, I can't swallow Donald Morton's defense of obscure prose. I can only hope that *PMLA* will pay more attention to the “concise and readable” snippet of its editorial statement in the fu-

ture and solicit works that manage to display both original, intelligent thought and clear, sparkling prose.

SUSAN BALEE  
Beaver College

To the Editor:

Reading the Donald Morton–William Hunter exchange, I felt as if I were on the merry-go-round of “repressive tolerance.” I'm referring to Marcuse's notion that the institutions that maintain the status quo are tolerant, even glad, of “radical activities” that don't impede the smooth functioning of the state's bureaucracy. For those who missed the exchange, Morton and Hunter traded quips on what was putatively an issue of professional cant and of praxis-oriented criticism. Morton had minted a heady essay on queer politics and electronic media, and Hunter refused to grapple with the essay because he felt that the first sentence, dense, prolix, and multiply nuanced as it was, excluded him. Morton's stinging reply (“It's politics, stupid”) to Hunter's equally acerbic dismissal (“It's nonsense, stupid”) gives the impression that something important has transpired, namely, a contentious issue. The academy, as everyone knows, has identified contention, problematics, and failure (e.g., subjects' failure to resist or the dominant discourses' failure to impress) as the only signs of intellectual rigor and political vitality (see Marshall Brown, *Forum*, 111 [1996]: 134), but too often I think academics surmise that anytime they dispute an interpretation, deconstruct a metaphor, or unmask an ideology, they have done something radical and not simply enabling. Too often, I believe, their motives are masked by a zeal that could be put to better use. I sense both bad faith and bad habits at work behind many academic projects and careers.

For instance, if Hunter is really perturbed only by Morton's style and not by Morton's subject (position), why doesn't Hunter suggest a keener way of presenting the one sentence he did read?

Morton, like any good avant-gardist, claims that his arguments cannot be otherwise than how they are. He suggests (illogically) that if he were to address his topic in the “oppressor's language,” I suppose with the oppressor's fealty to stylistic clarity and public effectiveness, he would leave the dominant ideologies intact, regardless of how scathing his critique. But isn't this just a lot of posturing? Would Morton so blithely recommend that Hunter go read up to understand the oracle if Hunter were an undergraduate student? What if the undergraduate student were from a blue-collar home and had a profound