

# “By merit more than birthright”: Election and the Logic of Modernity in *Paradise Lost*

**Peter Goldman**

Even some of John Milton's greatest admirers will admit that *Paradise Lost* is a work beset by contradictions. His decision to make an episode from the Bible, the fall of Adam and Eve, the subject of his epic masterwork was fraught with unintended consequences.<sup>[1]</sup> Imposing the world of epic onto the biblical story is an uneasy marriage at best. Making the biblical Satan into an epic protagonist, for example, creates the well-known Satanist controversy. Likewise, representing the Christian God using conventions from ancient epic is the source of the debate surrounding Milton's God.<sup>[2]</sup> These are real conflicts and difficulties. But I will show how epic and Bible actually need each other in *Paradise Lost*. They complement each other on one level even while they inevitably conflict on other levels. Epic and Bible need each other by the logic of Renaissance aesthetics as theorized by Eric Gans.<sup>[3]</sup>

Gans articulates literary history in terms of the opposition of center and periphery on a scene of representation. The center is the position of power, but it is vulnerable to the resentments of the periphery. Because Oedipus is the tyrant of Thebes (among other reasons), he must suffer the punishment of his fate. The problem for the central figure is maintaining authority. This problem is enacted within the world of the text but also in terms of the readers' relationship with the work. The authority of Milton's God, for example, is called into question by readers as well as by Satan. While Satan's rebellion against God drives the plot quite effectively, readers' resistance to the representation of God can sabotage the success of Milton's work.

The epic cosmos in *Paradise Lost* needs Christianity in a special sense, which will take a few paragraphs to explain. The classical aesthetic is characterized by “fullness” of representation: Achilles is supremely confident in his centrality (Gans, *OT* 133). His confidence reflects the assured value of divine hierarchy in the ancient world. But the Renaissance or neoclassical aesthetic is another story.<sup>[4]</sup> The figures of the sacred center no longer have the authority they once had. Their power stands in need of justification. Why is this? To some extent this is an internal development of literature itself. In general, literature, in contrast to ritual and myth, stages centrality and explores its function in society. But perhaps the most important influence is Christianity, which asserts the equality of all souls before God. Each soul, in effect, is its own center of sacrality. Gans writes,

As soon as we feel ourselves the potential equals in triumph and in suffering of the participants of the agon, we are no longer in the world of the classical aesthetic. Classical decorum is lost; the rivalry of the audience with the central figure reflects a more deeply symmetrical form of resentment than classical form can tolerate. In order to defer the corrosive effect of this internal resentment, the neoclassical aesthetic must abandon the naïveté of the classical and represent the scene itself within the work. (*OT* 148-9)

Modern readers and spectators are becoming more resistant. Authors are aware on some level of this resistance and find ways to counter it, with profound consequences for literary history.

The classical aesthetic focused on the struggles of the central figures, positioning the audience as the periphery of the aesthetic scene, whereas the neoclassical aesthetic stages the periphery and the center, a doubling of the scene of representation. Neoclassical art is self-conscious and self-reflective. The play-within-a-play found commonly in Renaissance drama is one expression of this. Renaissance art finds itself forced to reflect on its own anthropological basis. This development reveals centrality as the function of a scene. The authority of the scenic center cannot be separated from its scenic configuration. The central figure requires explicit support from the periphery.

The notable self-consciousness of so many Renaissance characters, and their internal conflicts, constitutes an exploration of alternative modes of centrality. The private or internal scene emerges as a rival to the public scene, and the protagonist becomes separable from the public center. Hamlet at the margin of his uncle's coronation is emblematic in this regard. In its representation of public scenes, however, the Renaissance aesthetic is still attached to the traditional model of centrality, that is, divine hierarchy, for lack of feasible political alternatives at the time.

Because Christianity undermines the classical aesthetic, an epic narrative in Milton's time typically seeks to reinforce itself, to answer in some way to that challenge. The way that epic finds to defend itself from Christian iconoclasm is by integrating it into itself. Christianity is like the *pharmakos* from "Plato's Pharmacy": the poison that is also the remedy.<sup>[5]</sup> The answer to the problem of authority is drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The neoclassical aesthetic needs Christian ethics as a supplement to the classical scene. The very fact that Milton chooses a biblical subject for his epic suggests the weakness of the classical aesthetic in the Renaissance, despite its nominal revival.<sup>[6]</sup> Legendary subjects did not have the kind of gravitas that Milton sought.

The Christian tradition needs epic in a different sense, because its weakness is unlike that of epic, although derived from the same root: Judeo-Christian iconoclasm. Christianity tends to undermine itself from within. The problems with Christianity for Milton are related to

monotheism, which is not generally hospitable to myth or literature. Monotheism is founded on a critique of idolatry, the rejection of pagan gods and myths, divine hierarchy, and by extension, pagan literature. Its iconoclastic strength is its weakness in literary terms.

It's difficult to tell a story in which the monotheistic God is a character. Anytime something unfortunate happens to a good character, readers ask why God allowed it to happen. The monotheistic God has a tendency to turn into the villain of whatever story in which he is a character. And those who reject his seemingly arbitrary rule appear heroic by contrast.

Bible narrative avoids these pitfalls by making God absolutely transcendent. He is hidden, and He only appears on his own terms. The biblical God is not presented as a narrative character comparable to other characters. Biblical episodes tend to be minimal, "fraught with background," in Erich Auerbach's phrase (12), and not given to narrative dilation. The Genesis story of Adam and Eve is completed in 695 words (KJV), while Milton takes almost 80,000 words.

As Bible scholar T. J. Wray observes, "Pure monotheism is theologically and existentially unstable" (166). For these reasons, the Jewish and Christian traditions tend to resort to pagan or gnostic elaborations, as for example in the non-canonical Book of Enoch. I use the word "gnostic" in a limited sense, such that a pagan cosmos is imposed on the Christian narrative, with multiple gods or god-like figures (mythic or epic heroes) in competition and conflict with each other, in a setting which is mythic, in contrast to the historical setting of the Gospels and Acts.

In sum, Christianity in *Paradise Lost* needs epic to create literature, while Milton's epic needs Christianity as anthropological supplement. The result is more gnostic than Christian, but it succeeds as epic to the extent that it goes against strict monotheism (or rather, to the extent that readers can ignore the problems raised by the premise of monotheism).

A contrasting view on the role of monotheism in *Paradise Lost* is presented by Abraham Stoll in his book on the subject. Stoll recognizes a conflict between monotheism and narrative in *Paradise Lost*, but he conceives of monotheism and the problems it causes in different terms than I do. Whereas Stoll sees Milton's monotheism as tending to abstraction, creating "a God of flickering subjectivity," I argue that the representation of God in *Paradise Lost* contradicts monotheism, serving instead the literary requirements of epic. Stoll's defense of Milton's monotheism often involves special pleading. For example, in the rebellion against God in Book Five, the angels seem unaware of God's status as God; Stoll explains this as an example of "local forgetting" that serves to reinforce monotheism when God reasserts his primacy in the person of the Son (Stoll 151-2). In any other narrative on any other subject, such a blatant contradiction would be recognized as an artistic fault. Stoll waffles on the question of whether the angels, good and bad, recognize God or not. In my reading, it's not a case of the narrative temporarily "forgetting" God's power, but rather, as

we'll see below, that the rebel angels do not recognize God as omnipotent, because they inhabit what is fundamentally a pagan cosmos. Stoll acknowledges that Milton is not consistently faithful to monotheism, but the contradiction of monotheism combined with epic narrative is more radical than Stoll allows. Milton's commitment to epic is finally deeper than his commitment to monotheism, to the detriment of his attempt to justify God. Stoll falls into the camp of those who see the problem of biblical epic largely in terms of literary technique, a technical problem which finds a technical solution, which is more or less successful. But the conflict between monotheism and epic is ultimately an issue of authority and social order that goes to the heart of Modernity, a conflict between hierarchy and egalitarianism, with meritocracy serving to mediate between them.

## 1. Election

In the neoclassical aesthetic, we recall, the central figure becomes subject to resentment because of a new reciprocity between the audience and the protagonist. Traditionally, in the classical period, a "legendary or historical guarantee for centrality" was enough; but now "centrality must be demonstrated as a product of the scene" (Gans, *OT* 149). One way to authorize the protagonist is through "a sign of election," which serves to "distinguish the central figure from the spectator who would otherwise be a rival" (150), thus assuaging the potential for resentment. Election, in various forms, becomes a typical concern for modern literature, replacing the battle for centrality in classical epic.

Falling is a major action in *Paradise Lost*, but rising is given equal weight. There are several scenes of election in *Paradise Lost*, including two just for the Son of God. Both of these scenes take place in heaven and precede his earthly Incarnation. Remember that the Son in *Paradise Lost* is not the prophet and martyr of the Gospels but rather a quasi-epic hero who defeats Satan and his army of rebel angels. In Book Three, a public scene in heaven, God asks for a volunteer to save humanity by suffering the penalty for their sins:

" . . . man disobeying,  
Disloyal breaks his fealty, and sins  
Against the high supremacy of Heav'n,  
Affecting Godhead, and so losing all,  
To expiate his treason hath naught left,  
But to destruction sacred and devote,  
He with his whole posterity must die,  
Die he or Justice must; unless for him  
Some other able, and as willing, pay  
The rigid satisfaction, death for death.  
Say Heav'nly powers, where shall we find such love,  
Which of ye will be mortal to redeem  
Man's mortal crime, and just th' unjust to save,

Dwells in all Heaven charity so dear?" (3.203-16)[\[7\]](#)

At this point Milton inserts a pregnant pause into the action:

He asked, but all the Heav'nly choir stood mute,  
And silence was in Heav'n: on man's behalf  
Patron or intercessor none appeared,  
Much less that durst upon his own head draw  
The deadly forfeiture, and ransom set. (3.217-21)

It looks for a moment like all of humankind might be doomed to eternal punishment, but then the Son volunteers to become human and suffer the penalty for sin demanded by God's justice, although he knows he will be resurrected.

"Behold me then, me for him, life for life  
I offer, on me let thine anger fall." (3.236-7)

His earthly life and death will serve to defeat sin, death, Satan, and the forces of evil. His choosing to do so is the occasion for his heavenly adoration by God and the assembled angels, which is narrated at length. The idea of election traditionally requires an external power for validation, as well as some form of narrative motivation. Although the Son's free choice motivates his election, it comes from outside himself, from God. The Son's election in heaven is framed for us by his dialogue with God and by an audience of heaven's angels. This scene thus exemplifies the two main strategies of neoclassical aesthetics: the sign of election and the doubling of the scene of representation within the work—reinforcements to epic narrative derived from and in response to New Testament influence. The neoclassical aesthetic operates by supplementation. The scene in heaven reinforces the Son's authority for readers and for the angelic audience.

Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection are the paradigmatic signs of election for the medieval and neoclassical periods. For theologians, the Exaltation of Christ generally refers to his Resurrection from the dead and Ascension to heaven. The Son's exaltation in Book Three explicitly anticipates the later exaltation.

Election is the Christian response to the imperatives of iconoclasm, which undermines and subverts all worldly, public images of authority. Election provides a new model of authority not based on divine hierarchy. By election, a carpenter's son, even an executed criminal, can be the Son of God. The Son's election in Book Three, however, seems redundant to the biblical event. Why does Milton include the scene of exaltation in Book Three with only the thinnest of scriptural justification, while neglecting the main event?[\[8\]](#) According to the logic of Modernity, election is a necessary supplement for centrality; but the need for supplementation never ends. Iconoclasm has no logical stopping place. So it follows that election needs to be supplemented with further elections. And in *Paradise Lost*, the

exaltation in Book Three is followed by yet another scene of exaltation in Book Five (though chronologically earlier), and then a brief narration of the Crucifixion and Resurrection in Book Twelve.<sup>[9]</sup> Iconoclasm can lead, ironically, to the replication of images rather than their simple destruction.

The relationship of the Book Three exaltation with the orthodox event is more, however, than simply anticipation and replication. The scene doesn't just reproduce the original, it also critically revises and even replaces it, again according to the imperatives of iconoclasm. After the Son volunteers to save humans in Book Three, God elects him to a new identity that goes beyond biblical models:

“Because thou hast, though throned in highest bliss  
Equal to God, and equally enjoying  
God-like fruition, quitted all to save  
A world from utter loss, and hast been found  
By merit more than birthright Son of God,  
Found worthiest to be so by being good,  
Far more than great or high; because in thee  
Love hath abounded more than glory abounds,  
Therefore thy humiliation shall exalt  
With thee thy manhood also to this throne.” (3.305-314)

For Milton, the Son's virtuous actions practically replace both his Sonship (“By merit more than birthright”) and his suffering on the cross as the source of authority. Does the Son's merit then make the crucifixion unnecessary? Yes and no. Setting aside Milton's Arianism, his atonement theology is conventional, as we saw in God's speech given above: “Die he or justice must.” The Crucifixion is necessary for man's forgiveness. But there are two parts to salvation in Milton's theology: forgiveness and justification. Humans' justification in the eyes of God depends on Christ's just life in heaven and on earth, his total obedience to God's requirement for righteousness. Christ's righteousness is then imputed by God to humans, by faith. The Son's obedience substitutes for Adam's lack thereof. Milton affirmed the necessity of Christ's Crucifixion, but he chose to emphasize his virtue and merit in *Paradise Lost*. We find this emphasis also in his brief epic, *Paradise Regained*, which narrates Christ's temptation in the desert, where his active resistance to Satan's temptations is presented as the ground of human salvation.<sup>[10]</sup> Without that obedience and the resulting merit, the Crucifixion would have been nugatory. In terms of Milton's oeuvre, therefore, we can say that the Son's obedience almost replaces the Passion of the cross.

Milton's position on the Son has affinities with certain heresies, notably Socinianism and Arianism, which were punishable by death in the seventeenth century. Milton had a lofty concept of the Son, but in his theological treatise *Christian Doctrine* he argues at length that the Son is a created being and not of the same essence as the Father, although equal in

other respects. Milton refrained from publishing *Christian Doctrine* almost certainly because he knew his theology was considered heretical, and the manuscript was not discovered until the nineteenth century. Readers have noticed that the portrayal of the Son in *Paradise Lost* seems Arian since its publication.<sup>[11]</sup> And with the publication of *Christian Doctrine*, the evidence now is conclusive that Milton's concept of the Son is Arian.<sup>[12]</sup> The scenes of exaltation in Books Three and Five in particular support an Arian understanding of the Son. A Son co-eternal with God would not likely need a scene of exaltation in heaven prior to his human Incarnation; he would have been exalted from eternity. He wouldn't need promotion, and much less a public announcement. For Trinitarian orthodoxy, it is the *incarnate*, human Son who receives exaltation. The Son of God for Milton is a creature in the literal sense, which is unmistakably a demotion from the orthodox Trinitarian God, no matter how high he is promoted by the Father.<sup>[13]</sup> His identity as creature means that he needs glorification in order to achieve his full potential, just as every creature in the Miltonic cosmos may rise in status through obedience (or fall by disobedience). This could be understood as leveling (see Gregory Chaplin), since the Son is a creature like us, except that he does what all other creatures cannot. Rather it shows one way that Milton's theology supports the politics of meritocracy. The Son's created status in Milton's theology may have been simply a result of his desire to stay strictly faithful to the doctrine of monotheism, but the result, ironically, is to limit God's magnitude (*pace* Chaplin). God is apparently unable to save humans by himself. He needs the Son to accomplish His plans.

God asserts that the Son is "By merit more than birthright Son of God," a shocking claim for Christian orthodoxy. The phrase "By merit more than birthright" might serve as a motto for political Modernity, but it is problematic when applied to the Son of God, whose authority transcends considerations of merit in Trinitarian theology. The main problem is that individual merit is necessarily relative to the merit of others, thus making the Son subject to competition (more on this below). In one sense, merit is another neoclassical supplement to authority, but in this case it also harkens back to the traditional justification of divine hierarchy that the well-born deserve their status by virtue as well as divine sanction. The Son deserves his position by merit *and* birthright. Milton wants it both ways in this case. Milton's representation of the Son places him in the epic tradition, where nobility (in action, character, and birth) and divine favor determine identity; but Milton's Son also fits into political Modernity, where merit begins to replace birthright.

In Milton's late political tracts, he argued for meritocracy, although he expected that the best-bred (by birth and education) would for the most part merit the positions of power.<sup>[14]</sup> In regard to commoners, Milton's Christ asks rhetorically, "what [are] the people but a herd confused, / A miscellaneous rabble, who extol / Things vulgar, and well weighed, scarce worth the praise?" (*Paradise Regained* 3.49-51). Milton recognized, however, that merit does not always coincide with birth, and in such cases, an hereditary king's removal from power was necessary and legitimate.<sup>[15]</sup> If divine hierarchy is the thesis, and egalitarianism is the antithesis, then meritocracy might well be the synthesis: retaining an elite, but one

based on merit rather than birth.

The story of the Son in *Paradise Lost* exemplifies both sides of my thesis. A Trinitarian (and in that sense monotheistic) Son would not be nearly as amenable to epic narrative, since he wouldn't need exaltation or "begatting" in heaven, and he would hardly be seen as a rival by Satan (as in Book Five). The biblical Son requires a gnostic transformation in order to serve effectively as an epic rival to Satan. Because Milton's Son is created, however, he needs the Christian supplement of election, with merit as a characteristically modern basis for status. He *becomes* central during the course of the text; his status is earned and legitimated in narrative terms.

Gregory Chaplin argues that Milton's version of the Atonement in *Paradise Lost* goes "beyond sacrifice" because free choice and obedience are the source of salvation rather than the violence of crucifixion. Milton's Son, for Chaplin, is a positive role model, an ideal of independent action, rather than a spectacle of redemptive suffering. While it's true that in terms of emphasis within Milton's oeuvre (if not his theology), the Atonement depends more on the Son's obedience than his Crucifixion, I disagree that Milton succeeds in going beyond sacrifice in his epic.

We must consider whether Milton's attempt to go beyond sacrifice is actually successful in terms of its reception. Let's step back a moment and review our theoretical framework. Gans's literary history foregrounds the potential of resentment among readers for a literary artwork's central figures. For authors, the problem becomes how to authorize a central figure as worthy of readers' attention. Authority, of course, is a typical concern thematically within narrative and dramatic literature, whether explicitly or implicitly. But Gans calls our attention to the authority of a work's protagonists for the readers.<sup>[16]</sup> Authority involves assuaging the potential for resentment inevitably aroused by centrality. In the most practical terms, a work has to justify the time we spend to read and understand it. The problem of a work's authority is central to literary history, in ways which go well beyond the terms of Aristotle's *Poetics*. An anthropological approach to literature needs to consider the readers' responses and how a work functions in society.

The Son volunteers to save humanity, so he comes off better than God in moral terms. Nevertheless, the Son has not stimulated the intense reactions accorded to Milton's God or Satan, and he hasn't inspired great admiration either. The Son is considered important mainly as Satan's epic rival and in terms of Milton's heterodox theology. There are a very few critics who admire the Son and have devoted considerable attention to him and his role in *Paradise Lost*, but it's fair to say that the Son loses in comparison to the other protagonists.<sup>[17]</sup> In reception at least, the Son is overshadowed by Satan, God, Adam and Eve. In reference works such as *The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost*, separate chapters on Satan, God, and Eve are typically included, but not for the Son. A key difference for the Son's reception is that readers have the New Testament biography as a point of



comparison.

The main problem with the Son in *Paradise Lost* is that Milton neglects the suffering of the Cross, with the result that his Son lacks the pathos of the New Testament portrayal. Milton's heavenly Son knows he will be resurrected, in contrast to Christ, who cries out on the cross that God has abandoned him. The Son perhaps has more depth than Milton's God, but he pales by comparison with the Gospel presentation, not to mention Milton's Satan, who claims an unparalleled psychological depth and interiority. Despite the Son's modern virtues, which Chaplin articulates well, and despite his two major scenes of election in the epic, we must recognize that Milton's Son has considerably less authority than the traditional Christian figure. Milton wrote "to justify the ways of God to man," but this justification has been successful only for readers who are already Christian. Non-Christians are generally confirmed in their disbelief. The election(s) of the Son in *Paradise Lost* is addressed to the problem of authority, but the contrast with the New Testament Christ creates a new problem of significance. Milton's representation of the Son is less than successful, and this lack of success speaks to the problem of authority in neoclassical aesthetics.

## 2. Problems of authority

In the New Testament, the Crucifixion serves effectively to authorize the Resurrection. Christ merits his Resurrection precisely because he did not merit his Crucifixion. In Gans's reading, the apostle Paul is the first to realize (in both senses) the meaning of the Crucifixion, in his revelation on the road to Damascus.<sup>[18]</sup> The one whom he persecutes ("Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"<sup>[19]</sup>) is his God. This is not simply a psychological insight but a datum of experience for believers. The earliest preaching of the Apostles, recorded in Acts, reminded the hearers of their role in Christ's Crucifixion. For those not contemporaneous with Jesus, this recognition is experienced vicariously through the preaching of the Apostles or by reading the Gospels and Acts. From an anthropological perspective, by being part of the crowd persecuting Jesus, one mimetically centralizes him in the imagination and memory, the basic mechanism for sacrifice and sacralization. A personal, imaginative engagement with the event of the Crucifixion can be said to produce faith and the conversion experience. Jews who felt no responsibility for Christ's suffering could not share this experience.

We can also think of the Crucifixion in terms of Judeo-Christian iconoclasm, the act of destroying an idol. Christ is not an idol of course, but his Crucifixion creatively destroys the conventional idea of God in glory, as Martin Luther recognized in his "theology of the cross." Moreover, Christ on the cross is a literal destruction of what Paul calls "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1.15, KJV). The Crucifixion is a peculiar kind of image, an image that negates itself in the act of signifying.

Self-negation is another, ironic form of supplement, necessary in the modern world due to the imperatives of iconoclasm and the resentment that accompanies individualism—Leopold Bloom, for example, who is humiliated in so many ways before his triumph in the final chapters of Joyce's *Ulysses*; or Prospero, who ritually abnegates himself at the end of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Modern authority is dialectical in respect to the audience.

The Crucifixion, like tragedy, has an anthropological content, derived from their common heritage in ritual sacrifice. In general, sacrificial ritual functions to support the divine hierarchy of ancient societies. But the Passion and ancient tragedy reveal the perspective of the victim, thus problematizing sacrifice. Nevertheless, tragedy in the final analysis justifies the sacrifice of the protagonist. As Aristotle recognized, spectators accept the protagonist's suffering as necessary and experience catharsis. Spectators of the Crucifixion, on the other hand, to the extent that they recognize their complicity, experience faith in the risen Christ and communion with other believers. As the author of the book of Hebrews argues, the Crucifixion is the sacrifice to end all sacrifice (Hebrews 10.10-12). In Book Three, Milton's Son volunteers to suffer for humankind, but during the scene he actually enjoys glorification. Milton may have wanted to authorize the Son but he leaves out the main source of the Son's New Testament authority: the pathos of the cross, which generates the dialectic of conversion. Milton neglects the anthropological heritage of the Crucifixion in ritual sacrifice, the *Aufheben* of which makes possible new forms of authority and social order.

The representation of the Son in *Paradise Lost* may reflect Milton's personal experience of faith. As Stephen Fallon writes,

Where anxious self-examination and conviction of sin is a Protestant norm enforced by Lutheran and Calvinist theology, Milton writes instead of his blamelessness and heroic virtue. . . . Milton's accounts of his youth . . . reveal a boy who is godly and dutiful without benefit of the conversion experience obligatory in Christian autobiography. (21)

Milton didn't have the dramatic conversion from guilt to repentance typical of seventeenth-century Protestants, because apparently he devoted himself to Christian purity from a very young age. He records in his prose tract, *An Apology for Smectymnus*, that he was trained in and followed Christian precepts from a young age, and that he had "a certain reservedness of natural disposition and moral discipline learnt out of the noblest philosophy" (852). As a result, he preserved his chastity in body and mind, and consciously crafted his life as "a true poem, that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honorablest things" (850). I agree with Chaplin that "Milton refuses to internalize the Crucifixion . . . because of his own sense of dignity" (359). His faith was not apparently based on sympathetic communion with the crucified. One might say, with Chaplin, so much the better. But this abandons the anthropological content of the cross, leaving Milton insensitive to the sacrificial implications of representing God and the Son in epic terms.

*Pace* Chaplin, in the end, Milton's version of the Christian narrative is more, not less, sacrificial than traditional Christianity, precisely because he leaves out the Crucifixion. The Crucifixion is the anti-sacrificial model, because the Passion narrative teaches that humans are responsible for sacrificial violence, not God and not the devil. Satan actually becomes the sacrificial victim in *Paradise Lost* instead of the Son. The Romantic glorification of Milton's Satan is an ironic reflection of the biblical Passion.

The Son in *Paradise Lost* doesn't offer an effective model of identity for ordinary readers, who don't share Milton's purity. He doesn't suffer, and he doesn't have pangs of conscience and internal conflicts, in contrast to the Gospel figure, who sweats drops of blood on the night before his Crucifixion. In Milton's *Paradise Regained* the Son fasts for 40 days and never feels any hunger until the last day (2.246). He never feels any temptation to give in to Satan's offers. It's true that his answers to Satan's temptations point to a religion that is private rather than public, but this is mainly a theoretical point, performed only in a limited sense by his withdrawal to the desert to seek inner illumination. In *Paradise Lost*, the great figure of interiority is Satan, and to a lesser extent, the fallen Adam and Eve. Milton's God and Son are essentially too perfect to manifest the internal conflicts which serve to authorize modern protagonists.

### 3. Satan

So far we've been examining mainly the role of the Son in *Paradise Lost*; now we expand our view to include Satan and his role in Milton's justification of God. The fact that God apparently needs justification exemplifies the weakness of monotheism in literary terms: the difficulty of constructing a narrative in which God's role is justified. Milton needs Satan to supplement the literary weakness of any purely monotheistic explanation. At the end of the opening invocation of *Paradise Lost*, the narrator asks the muse,

Say first, for Heav'n hides nothing from thy view  
Nor the deep Tract of Hell, say first what cause  
Moved our grand parents in that happy state,  
Favored of Heav'n so highly, to fall off  
From their Creator, and transgress his Will  
For one restraint, lords of the world besides?  
Who first seduced them to that foul revolt? (1.27-33)

The answer comes immediately: "Th' infernal serpent; he it was" (1.34). It's worth noting that the serpent of Genesis is never identified as Satan in the Hebrew Bible. The Christian understanding of Satan originates in the period between the Old and New Testaments, when the Jews were subject to Seleucid and then Roman rule. It is hypothesized that the identification of Satan with cosmic evil was a way for Jews, under the influence of pagan religions, to make sense of the oppression they suffered by what seemed to be an evil

empire.[\[20\]](#)

The very fact that Milton chooses to implicate Satan in the downfall of humankind and for the origin of evil is significant. It's true, of course, that this is the conventional Christian answer, which is rooted in the New Testament scriptures, and thus inherent to his choice of subject matter. But the convention itself is problematic. Blaming Satan for sin, evil, and human suffering is in tension with the claim that our free choice accounts for evil. Making Satan into the cosmic opponent of God, with humans as his innocent, if not completely helpless, victims, undermines the Christian message of moral reciprocity.

The "problem of evil" is a side effect of the conceptual instability of monotheism. The Hebrew God undergoes certain changes under Greek and Roman influence. The biblical God becomes transformed into the "omni-God," a deity who is omniscient, omnipotent, completely good and just. There are passages in the Bible that support this idea, but the omni-God is essentially a product of theologians, conceived under the pressure of philosophy after the Bible was written. God is reduced to a list of powers and traits. The concept of the omni-God encourages humans to understand God in terms of human qualities like knowledge, power, and morality. But the monotheistic God is primarily a creator: God alone creates a universe by speaking a word, an event with no analog to human experience. According to the Book of Isaiah,

Thus saith the LORD, thy redeemer, and he that formed thee from the womb, I am the LORD that maketh all things; that stretcheth forth the heavens alone; that spreadeth abroad the earth by myself. (44.24, KJV)

The essential but unacknowledged starting point of the problem of evil is the idea: if I were God, I wouldn't allow this or that source of suffering to exist.

The monotheistic God is a God of history. He has a plan for his people, and history therefore has a shape and meaning, which was elucidated by the prophets. But God was not to be subjected to rational questioning. Such, in effect, is God's answer to Job out of the whirlwind in the final chapters of the Book of Job, emphasizing his role as creator. Such was God's answer to Moses at the burning bush, when Moses asks God for His name. God is the primeval "Other," absolutely transcendent, free, and not subject to human judgments. The late-medieval nominalists revive an abstract version of this idea, although it is not very satisfactory to human understanding. Hans Blumenberg argues that the God of nominalism is practically equivalent to the evil demi-urge of the Gnostics (150-203).

Neither the problem of evil nor the character of Satan is essential to Judaism and the story of Adam and Eve, and in some ways they contradict the essential premises of Old Testament monotheism and New Testament morality. To call in Satan to account for the existence of evil is the first step on the path to Manichaeism and Gnosticism.

It might be objected that the New Testament is already gnostic in this sense, in which Satan is the embodiment of evil and God's cosmic opponent. There's some truth to this charge, especially in regard to the Book of Revelation. The Christian understanding of Satan is derived from the New Testament. In the Old Testament, Satan is not the embodiment of evil nor a cosmic opponent of God.<sup>[21]</sup> Christians were able to use only some brief mentions from the Old Testament to fashion the character of Satan, and these passages were used out of context. The most detailed biblical portrayal of Satan comes in the temptation of Jesus in the desert. But even there his character is not developed in any depth. Satan's appearance in the Book of Revelation as "the great dragon" is very powerful but also frankly allegorical, in contrast to Milton's Satan, who has realistic psychological depth and motivation. In an episode from the Gospels, Jesus refers to Satan in the Old Testament sense as the agent of temptation, a role and not a specific person, when he says to Peter, "Get thee behind me, Satan" (Matthew 16.23). Elsewhere the Gospels suggest that Jesus has already defeated Satan and inaugurated the Kingdom of God (Mark 3.26; Luke 10.18). The Sermon on the Mount is devoted to religious morality and does not mention Satan. The preaching of the Apostles as recorded in the Book of Acts makes almost no mention of Satan. The Gospels show humans as responsible for the Crucifixion of Christ, and Satan plays only a minor role by inspiring Judas. Milton's portrayal of Satan is derived mostly from paganism and theological speculation, not the Bible. In terms of Satan's psychological depth, the model is Shakespearean tragedy. The grand role of Satan in *Paradise Lost* is an example of how Milton transforms his biblical theme using epic and dramatic conventions to supplement the literary weakness of strict monotheism. *Paradise Lost* is ostensibly the story "Of man's first disobedience," but without Satan it would be like *Hamlet* without the prince.

William Blake famously wrote that Milton was "of Satan's party without knowing it," and since then controversy has raged over whether Satan is a hero or villain. For Blake, we should note, Satan is really another face of God, of authority equal to or greater than the Son (an "alternative Trinity" to borrow A. D. Nuttall's phrase: Son, Satan, Father). So that the rebellion of Satan is really a justified rebellion against the conventional *concept* of God. Blake is a Romantic heir to Christian iconoclasm, destroying the idolatrous representations of God. Blake actually questions the very terms of the debate sparked by his famous comment. For Blake, God vs. Satan is a false dichotomy, since they are two sides of the same coin. Just as with the ancient Jews and Protestant Christians, the target of Blake's iconoclasm is ultimately the human institutions that derived their power from a particular concept of god.

#### 4. Epic poet

The important question is what kind of cosmos does Milton create such that Satan's rebellion is possible. Milton's intention to "justify the ways of God to man" is no doubt quite serious, but his epic ambitions are even greater. In an autobiographical passage from *The Reason of Church Government*, he states his goal, that

by labor and intent study (which I take to be my portion in this life) joined with the strong propensity of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die. (840)

In Milton's time, it was agreed that such an ambition could be accomplished only by writing a great epic. The opening of *Paradise Lost* clearly establishes Milton's epic aims. He invokes the muses both classical and biblical to aid what he calls,

. . . my advent'rous Song,  
That with no middle flight intends to soar  
Above th' Aonian Mount, while it pursues  
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme. (1.13-16)

Milton here throws down the gauntlet to all past, present, and future epic poets, serving notice that he intends to compete with them on the battlefield of epic poetry. Milton proclaims his ambition to write the epic of epics, and in fact, his poem ends up being the epic to end all epics, since it is the last great traditional epic in the English language. His essential concept of Satan in *Paradise Lost* is an epic, tragic protagonist. His portrayal of Satan and his trials is arguably the most powerful part of his epic. Adam and Eve are compelling characters too, but their story, by itself, is less than epic.

In the opening to Book Nine, the narrator attempts to qualify and revise conventional ideas of epic, calling the story of the fall of Adam and Eve "Not less but more heroic than the wrath / Of stern Achilles" (9.13-15). He also rejects

Wars, hitherto the only argument  
Heroic deemed, chief mast'ry to dissect  
With long and tedious havoc fabled knights  
In battles feigned; the better fortitude  
Of patience and heroic martyrdom  
Unsung. (9.28-33)

There is no doubt about the magnitude of his accomplishment in retelling the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden, but we can certainly question whether their representation is "more heroic" than Achilles' wrath, not to mention Satan's rebellion and fall. Arguably Milton's most important innovation in *Paradise Lost* was to give Satan a realistic psychology and depth of character. Despite his acknowledged debt to Edmund Spenser, he rejected the allegorical mode for a psychological realism indebted largely to Shakespearean tragedy. This entailed the need for situations in which a character's motivations could be understood as persuasive: an imperative which, as we will see, ends up conflicting with the premise of monotheism. Milton's mastery of all elements of literary construction was unparalleled, but even he could not reconcile his epic ambitions with biblical monotheism without contradiction.

## 5. Hierarchy

In his errand to Adam “to beware / He swerve not too secure” (5.237-8), the angel Raphael tells the story of Satan’s rebellion, which begins with a public assembly of the angels in heaven:

“ . . . on a day  
(For time, though in eternity, applied  
To motion, measures all things durable  
By present, past, and future,) on such day  
As Heav’n’s great year brings forth, th’ empyreal host  
Of angels by imperial summons called,  
Innumerable before th’ Almighty’s throne  
Forthwith from all the ends of Heav’n appeared  
Under their hierarchs in orders bright;  
Ten thousand thousand ensigns high advanced,  
Standards, and gonfalons twixt van and rear  
Stream in the air, and for distinction serve  
Of hierarchies, of orders, and degrees;  
Or in their glittering tissues bear emblazed  
Holy memorials, acts of zeal and love  
Recorded eminent.” (5.579-94)

Chronologically, this is the very first moment in the epic. The heavenly assembly is explicitly organized by hierarchies, orders, and degrees. We need to consider at some length the role of hierarchy in the Miltonic cosmos, since hierarchy and its associated conflicts are distinguishing features of epic. Achilles’ wrath, in Homer’s *Iliad*, is addressed to what he perceives as a slight to his hierarchical status, just as with Satan in *Paradise Lost*. Why does *Paradise Lost* need hierarchy, and to what extent does divine hierarchy conflict with the biblical story of Adam and Eve, Milton’s ostensible subject matter?

The titles of the angelic orders feature prominently in *Paradise Lost*—“Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers” (5.601). The titles are derived from the New Testament and repeated (with variations) several times; by God, the narrator, Satan, and Abdiel. Individual angels are often given titles. Milton does not, however, follow the angelic ranking system created by the medieval author known now as Pseudo-Dionysius, and the titles are not used in any consistent manner.

While the names of the orders are derived from the Bible, there is little biblical support for the idea that the angels are arranged into an epic hierarchy such as Milton describes. Medieval and Renaissance theologians, however, were fascinated by the idea of angelic hierarchy, and speculation on the subject was widespread. Milton resists the guesswork of

most theologians about the overall arrangement of individual orders, refusing to assign certainty where there is only speculation, but there is no doubt that the angelic community in *Paradise Lost* is arranged hierarchically. The narrator often comments on the relative hierarchical status of the angels and how this affects their interactions. For example, Satan, disguised as a “stripling Cherub” (3.636), gives thanks to the Archangel Uriel, one of the “sev’n Spirits that stand / In sight of God’s high throne, gloriously bright” (3.654-55):

. . . Satan bowing low,  
As to superior Spirits is wont in Heaven,  
Where honor due and reverence none neglects. (3.736-738)

Several angels, including Satan, are expressly designated as elevated by rank above others.

Some critics have suggested that it is only the fallen angels who have hierarchy, not heaven.<sup>[22]</sup> It’s true that assemblies in hell are ordered by rank, but so is the rest of the cosmos. The narrative of Uriel’s encounter with Satan and other episodes clearly note that there are privileges that accord to rank, that the lower angels conventionally honor the higher ones.

Milton gives us a clue to his views on earthly political hierarchy in the Archangel Michael’s account to Adam of the biblical Nimrod. In ancient times, humans

“Shall spend their days in joy unblamed, and dwell  
Long time in peace by families and tribes  
Under paternal rule; till one shall rise  
Of proud ambitious heart, who not content  
With fair equality, fraternal state,  
Will arrogate dominion undeserved  
Over his brethren, and quite dispossess  
Concord and law of nature from the Earth;  
Hunting (and men not beasts shall be his game)  
With war, and hostile snare, such as refuse  
Subjection to his empire tyrannous.” (12.22-34)

Michael condemns Nimrod for acting “in despite of Heav’n,” usurping the proper leadership of God for humanity. For humans in ancient times, at least, Milton sees the ideal social order as one of fraternal equality with “paternal” and divine leadership. It’s not apparent how this ideal can be reconciled with his vision of heaven, with its military orders and ranks.

When the angels assemble in heaven, they don’t form a random crowd but a strict, seemingly-military order. Milton uses words with military associations such as “host” (archaic for “army”), “imperial,” and “ensigns . . . / Standards, and gonfalons.” As Empson notes, the angelic assembly in Book Five is “weirdly political” (138) and, I would add, quasi-



military, even before Satan's rebellion introduces the concept of battle to them. In the dialogue between Gabriel and Satan in the Garden of Eden, Gabriel accuses Satan of having betrayed "military obedience, to dissolve / Allegiance to th' acknowledged power supreme" (4.955-6). The hierarchy of angels in *Paradise Lost* is largely pagan and gnostic with only faint support from the Bible.

Satan's rebellion is based on what he perceives as an infringement of his rightful place in the heavenly hierarchy. He sees himself as equal to the Son, who is elevated over him. Refuting Satan's claim to equality with the Son, the loyal angel Abdiel maintains that they were created in ranks:

Equal to him begotten Son? by whom  
As by his Word the mighty Father made  
All things, ev'n thee, and all the spirits of Heav'n  
By him created in their bright degrees,  
Crowned them with glory, and to their glory named  
Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers,  
Essential Powers. (5.835-41)

The idea that angels are "created in their bright degrees" finds support by the example of Adam, who is created higher than Eve but lower than the angels.

But Abdiel doesn't mention any connection of rank with merit, except for the Son. The idea of creation by God implies perfection. By the tenets of monotheism, each creature is created perfect. Adam and Eve are created perfect for the conditions of their existence. Yet, according to Raphael, they are capable of improvement and progress. He explains to Adam, in reference to the angels' need for food:

"O Adam, one Almighty is, from whom  
All things proceed, and up to him return,  
If not depraved from good, created all  
Such to perfection, one first matter all,  
Endued with various forms, various degrees  
Of substance, and in things that live of life;  
But more refined, more spiritous, and pure,  
As nearer to him placed or nearer tending  
Each in their several active spheres assigned,  
Till body up to spirit work, in bounds  
Proportioned to each kind. So from the root  
Springs lighter the green stalk, from thence the leaves  
More airy, last the bright consummate flow'r  
Spirits odorous breathes: flow'rs and their fruit

Man's nourishment, by gradual scale sublimed  
To vital spirits aspire, to animal,  
To intellectual, give both life and sense,  
Fancy and understanding, whence the soul  
Reason receives, and reason is her being,  
Discursive, or intuitive; discourse  
Is ofttest yours, the latter most is ours,  
Differing but in degree, of kind the same.  
Wonder not then, what God for you saw good  
If I refuse not, but convert, as you  
To proper substance; time may come when men  
With angels may participate, and find  
No inconvenient diet, nor too light fare:  
And from these corporal nutriments perhaps  
Your bodies may at last turn all to spirit,  
Improved by tract of time, and winged ascend  
Ethereal, as we, or may at choice  
Here or in Heav'nly paradises dwell  
If ye be found obedient, and retain  
Unalterably firm his love entire  
Whose progeny you are." (5.469-503)

Raphael confirms Abdiel's claim that everything is created perfect and in ranks, "more spiritous, and pure, / As nearer to him placed." Every creature and substance is implicitly ranked by its distance from God, as evidenced by its refinement and purity. Everything created is substantial and physical according to Milton's material monism ("one first material all"), yet the creatures closer to God are more spiritual and pure, just as the scent of a flower is more refined than the dirt clinging to the flower's root, yet still physical. Furthermore, the flower transforms dirt (along with air, water, and sunshine) first into roots, then into stem, leaves, flower and its scent. The seeds and fruit can be eaten by humans and further transformed by the process of digestion into spirit and reason. The creature's proper motion is to return closer to God. Different species are limited, however, in how far they can progress: "their several active spheres assigned, / Till body up to spirit work, in bounds / Proportioned to each kind." Each creature is assigned its own sphere of activity, which is bounded by its "kind" or God-given nature. Raphael promises that humans are capable of progressing as far as the angels in their proximity to God.

A rational creature can perceive his or her status in the divine hierarchy and seek to become closer to God through obedience, as Raphael notes. Raphael doesn't imply that advancement involves any competition. Ideally, one seeks advancement with no reference to the relative status of others. One should look to the goal, God, not how far or fast others are progressing in comparison to oneself. But as we'll see with the conflict between Satan and

the Son, rewarding merit makes competition inevitable. The very fact of rankings creates resentment. J.M. Evans, among others, has shown that Satan's successful temptation of Eve depends on creating the perception that her inferior status as woman is unfair, and that she can remedy this injustice by gaining knowledge of good and evil, and becoming like an angel—bypassing the process of obedience and overcoming the limitations of divine hierarchy (283-4).

In his account of the heavenly assembly that occasions Satan's fall, Raphael says that the angelic "orders" bear "ensigns, . . . Holy memorials, acts of zeal and love / Recorded eminent," which serve for "distinction." Angels are distinguished and rewarded for their "acts of zeal and love." Previously, Raphael suggested to Adam that his and Eve's advancement in status was a function of time and obedience, yet "acts of zeal" suggest more than mere obedience (in the case of Adam and Eve, not eating the forbidden fruit); such acts are rewarded with ensigns or banners which are associated with rank, just as a scout's rank in the Boy Scouts of America reflects his number of merit badges.

Abdiel, however, in his refutation of Satan (see above), suggests that on one level heavenly status is fixed and non-negotiable, deriving from God's creation. Satan's rebellion, according to Abdiel, contradicts their created nature. God created the angels and at the same time "Crowned them with glory, and to their glory named / Thrones," etc. If we consider Raphael's speech to Adam along with Abdiel's speech, we may reasonably conclude that there are different "species" of angels, each with its own title and "active sphere assigned" along with "bounds" or limits "Proportioned to each kind." Milton's representation of angelic hierarchy suggests that some angelic orders have more noble or distinguished "spheres of activity" than others. The "glory" of their created status presumably reflects the nobility of their sphere of activity, yet there is no reason given for why some angels are created lower or higher.

The angelic hierarchy in *Paradise Lost* bears a close resemblance to a typical aristocratic hierarchy. One's rank and social role are determined by birth. (But the angels all have one parent, God; and there doesn't seem to be any angelic equivalent to commoners.) The nobility can earn distinction in the performance of their role. In Renaissance England, one could be rewarded by the monarch with a new title and rank. Originally, as in Homer's Greece, aristocratic hierarchy was largely military, but in Milton's England it had lost much of its military orientation and was based mainly on property, wealth, and political power.

There doesn't seem to be any personal property in the Miltonic cosmos, in heaven or earth; neither are there any battles to be fought before Satan's rebellion. Raphael explicitly mentions that the battle with Satan's army is a novelty for all concerned. Apart from creation, the basis for the hierarchy in heaven is ambiguous at best. Why do they even need a hierarchy, and what tasks are the angels obliged to perform before Satan's rebellion? What possible opportunity for heroism could there be? What are these "acts of zeal and

love” in an unfallen heaven? What does it mean to be a “stripling Cherub,” since apparently the angels do not reproduce? Hierarchy is a plot necessity for epic, but it creates contradictions when combined with a monotheistic cosmos. The biblical cosmos tends to be leveling in political terms (although still patriarchal), but it accepts election as a basis for centrality. Glory, however, is generally restricted to God. Satan and his rebellion belong to the ancient world of class hierarchy, and he is demonized on that basis. Yet his identity is largely a function of the cosmos which he inhabits. His stature, and the success of Milton’s epic, depend on a pagan cosmos which makes his rebellion not only possible but almost inevitable. We know that Milton was an elitist, but his was an elitism based on merit and education, not birth. His recourse to an epic cosmos in Heaven is essentially a supplement to the biblical story, and it leads to the mixed messages for which his epic is famous.

## 6. **Begotten**

Continuing now with our reading of the Son’s exaltation in Book Five: After calling all the angels together before His throne, God, though invisible, speaks directly to them:

“ . . . Thus when in orbs  
|Of circuit inexpressible they stood,  
Orb within orb, the Father infinite,  
By whom in bliss embosomed sat the Son,  
Amidst as from a flaming mount, whose top  
Brightness had made invisible, thus spake.  
‘Hear all ye angels, progeny of light,  
Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers,  
Hear my decree, which unrevoked shall stand.  
This day I have begot whom I declare  
My only Son, and on this holy hill  
Him have anointed, whom ye now behold  
At my right hand; your head I him appoint;  
And by myself have sworn to him shall bow  
All knees in Heav’n, and shall confess him Lord:  
Under his great vicegerent reign abide  
United as one individual soul,  
Forever happy: Him who disobeys  
Me disobeys, breaks union, and that day  
Cast out from God and blessed vision, falls  
Into utter darkness, deep engulfed, his place  
Ordained without redemption, without end.’ ” (5.594-615)

The theology behind this passage is rather complicated and requires some explanation. We’ll look first at Christian orthodoxy and then Milton’s heterodox theology. Most readers

will recognize lines 603-4 as a paraphrase of Psalms 2.7, "Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee" (KJV), a passage which some New Testament writers interpreted as a prophetic reference to Christ in his role as Savior: the Incarnation and especially the Resurrection (Acts 13.33; Hebrews 1.5-6, 5.5). The author of the Book of Hebrews interpreted the Psalms' "begotten" in a metaphorical sense as "exalted" or "glorified":

So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, today have I begotten thee. (Hebrews 5.5, KJV)

The New Testament usage of "begotten" supported the doctrine of Christ's Sonship, although it seemed to contradict his status as a member of the Trinity and therefore eternal. The orthodox solution was to give "begotten" a special sense, such that Christ was "begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father," according to the Nicene Creed. The Son is begotten from eternity. But if there is no event in time, why use the term "begotten," aside from the fact that they had to reconcile Trinitarian doctrine with biblical usage? The answer given is that "begotten" describes the unique ("only-begotten") Father-Son relationship of God to Christ, who is "of one substance with the Father." For Christian orthodoxy, therefore, "begotten" has a dual reference: to the Son's unique relationship to the Father from eternity; and to the Son's exaltation, which occurs at the Resurrection. Furthermore, in accordance with Trinitarian theology, begotten-as-exalted has a dual sense, such that the Son is also eternally exalted, as a function of his eternal begetting and his role as creator God.[\[23\]](#)

Milton devised his own interpretation of the relevant biblical passages. First of all, as an anti-Trinitarian, he interpreted the begetting literally as referring to an event in time. The problem of the Book Five scene above is that God says, "This day I have begot whom I declare / My only Son," but *Paradise Lost* makes clear that the Son is already literally begotten before this scene. Both *Paradise Lost* and *Christian Doctrine* affirm that the Son was the first creation of God, and the Son then created everything else, including heaven and the angels. In his *Christian Doctrine*, Milton writes,

In scripture there are two senses in which the Father is said to have begotten the Son: one literal, with reference to production; the other metaphorical, with reference to exaltation. (1172)

Clearly, then, the Son is actually exalted in Book Five and only metaphorically begotten. The Son, apparently, was not exalted over the angels at his literal begetting because the angels did not yet exist. After the Son creates the angels, he is still not yet exalted over them, since this action, evidently, can be performed only by the Father. The New Testament emphasizes in several places that the Son does not glorify himself; the Father glorifies him, at least in regard to his earthly career. The Son's heavenly exaltation in Book Five has no support in orthodox theology but is made possible, if not necessary, by Milton's Arianism. Since the

Son is not eternal, there is no begetting or exaltation from eternity. The Bible does mention that the Son is set over the angels as king, but in reference to his triumph as Savior (Hebrews 1.5-6; 1 Peter 3.22). It's not clear exactly how Milton would justify the Book Five scene in theological terms, but precisely this lack of justification within the text makes an important point about God's freedom, as Fowler comments in his footnote to the passage (more on this below). The Book Five exaltation, we should note, is explicitly a political event, raising the Son to kingship in heaven.

Significantly, the narrator does not associate the Book Five exaltation with the Son's earthly Incarnation, although readers have found analogies.<sup>[24]</sup> Raphael's narration makes no reference to the Son's role as Savior in this scene. Raphael does refer to the Son as "Honored by his great Father, and proclaimed / Messiah King anointed" (5.663-4). Corns notes that the usage of "Messiah" here denotes his kingship rather than his role as Savior:

The word 'Messiah' derives from the Hebrew word meaning anointed, and the Bible explicitly speaks of God anointing Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost [Acts 10.38]. Priests and kings of Israel were anointed at the initiation of their office, as were kings of England. (46)

I agree with Stella Revard (78) that God's announcement and Satan's reaction in Book Five have no connection to the Son's earthly life. Perhaps confusingly, Milton's Son is exalted thrice: in heaven in Book Five, again in anticipation of his saving work for humans (Book Three), and yet again at his Resurrection.<sup>[25]</sup> For our purposes what is important in the Book Five scene is that Milton's Son is a created being newly raised to kingship, which is precisely as all the angels perceive it.

We've seen how election works as a typical supplement for centrality in Modernity. Election is usually carefully justified in narrative terms, which often constitutes the plot of a literary work: how and why the protagonist earns centrality, establishing his or her identity as a worthy hero. But election is inherently ambivalent. In the New Testament, Christ did not want to be crucified, nor did Paul choose to be an Apostle to the Gentiles. Their election comes from without, and not by choice, although the narrative prepares readers for the event. Dante's election to his status as prophetic seer involves a harrowing journey through hell. Classical literature, especially tragedy, warns that centrality is an ambivalent curse-blessing. Christianity makes the curse of sinfulness into the blessing of redemption, but recognition of the curse is still necessary as the first stage of election. This tradition continues in Reformation conversion narratives, which include a necessary transformation from sinner to repentant Christian. The "internalization" of the crucifixion by Protestant authors serves to authorize identity for self and others on the psychological level. A protagonist must earn authority by various ordeals. As Gans notes, a "legendary or historical guarantee for centrality" is no longer adequate in the modern period (OT 49).

Satan also finds his election in Book Five, election to a new identity as the cosmic opponent of God. Satan, however, unlike the Son, elects himself. He wills his new role independently of any external sanction. Satan's authority, as such, is a demonic reversal of Christianity, harkening back to paganism, and looking forward to Romanticism.

The Book Three election lacks the trials which are essential for authorizing centrality, but it does grant the Son merit as the basis for his election. The scandal of the Book Five election is that God gives no reason for it. Revard claims that God's purpose is the unification of the angels "For ever happy" (57). It's true that God *commands* the angels to "abide / United, . . . / For ever happy," but He doesn't explicitly state this as his purpose, nor is there any hint that the angels were not united and happy before this event. God simply commands the angels to worship the Son, abide united, or suffer the consequences. In the event, the announcement does not unite the angels but provokes the opposite response, which not only God but readers could anticipate.

In *Christian Doctrine*, Milton argues that the Son's begetting must be God's free action: "it did not arise from natural necessity, as is usually maintained, but was just as much a result of the Father's decree and will as the Son's priesthood, kingship, and resurrection from the dead" (1174). The doctrine of the Trinity makes the begetting of the Son a "natural necessity," that is, a function of the Triune God's eternal nature. But in Book Five, the begetting is completely separate from "the Son's priesthood, [earthly] kingship, and resurrection from the dead," leaving only "the Father's decree and will" to justify his elevation to kingship.

The election of the Son in Book Five is initially justified by nothing else but God's freedom as absolutely transcendent. On one level, the Son's election expresses radical monotheism. If the Son's election in Book Three lacks the dialectic of conversion, Book Five doubles down on this lack, leaving out any merit or reason whatsoever. From Satan's perspective (which Raphael's narrative seems to follow), the exaltation is "justified" merely by the threat of punishment. God's power is asserted and then tested by the following rebellion. Again, the fundamental question here is the nature of the Miltonic cosmos. Assuming we resist, temporarily, Satan's reading of the Son's election, how could the scene be justified on the premise of monotheism?

God's demand to worship the Son in heaven can be understood by analogy to the demand of Christianity that we worship the Son on earth. Introducing his narration, Raphael asks rhetorically, "what if Earth / Be but the shadow of Heav'n, and things therein / Each to other like, more than on Earth is thought?" (5.574-6).

In heaven, God is invisible but the angels hear his word. The same is true for earth if the preaching of the Bible is accepted as God's word. While we cannot see God, Jesus has appeared to humans. The angels likewise see the Son. But Jesus appears just like any

human, hence the scandal of his claim to divinity. Raphael does not describe how the Son appears to the assembled angels at his begetting, but it seems that he appears as another angel—none of the angels question or even mention his appearance. If the Son looks like them, this would help explain Satan’s claim to equality. Abdiel likewise asserts the kinship of the Son to the angels (more on this below).

The epistemological situation of the angels is essentially the same as that of humans. Christianity requires humans to have faith, the “assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11.1, ASV). The same applies for the assembled angels in Milton’s heaven. God is more or less hidden and inscrutable, both in heaven and on earth. The requirement for faith is fundamental to religion in general, and especially for the Judeo-Christian tradition, which asserts the transcendence of God.

Satan’s rejection of God’s demand for worship can be understood by analogy with the situation of humans. Just as Satan feels justified in rejecting the Son’s claim to special divinity, so too do many humans.

In the Gospel of Matthew, drawing on Psalms, God publicly announces at Christ’s baptism, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (3.17, KJV). The elevation of the Son in heaven parallels the Epiphany of the Son on earth. The Son’s election to heaven’s kingship is rejected by the rebel angels, which replicates the rejection of Jesus by humanity during his earthly career. And Jesus promises punishment for those who reject him, just as does God in Book Five. To sum up, if Christianity is justified in asking for human faith in the incarnate Son, then Milton’s God is justified in asking the angels for faith (as obedience) in the heavenly Son. This seems to be the reasoning behind God’s demands at the Son’s elevation in Book Five.

## 7. Rebellion

The New Testament never introduces Satan’s response to the earthly Epiphany of Christ with any detail or psychological depth. This is where the analogy to the Son’s earthly life breaks down. A close examination of Satan’s response to the Son’s begetting in *Paradise Lost* reveals a cosmos more epic than monotheistic. Following God’s announcement, the angels spend the night sleeping or singing hymns:

“ . . . but not so waked  
Satan, so call him now, his former name  
Is heard no more in Heav’n; he of the first,  
If not the first Archangel, great in power,  
In favor and in pre-eminence, yet fraught  
With envy against the Son of God, that day  
Honored by his great Father, and proclaimed  
Messiah King anointed, could not bear



Through pride that sight, and thought himself impaired.  
 Deep malice thence conceiving and disdain,  
 Soon as midnight brought on the dusky hour  
 Friendliest to sleep and silence, he resolved  
 With all his legions to dislodge, and leave  
 Unworshipped, unbeyed the throne supreme  
 Contemptuous, and his next subordinate  
 Awak'ning, thus to him in secret spake.  
 'Sleep'st thou companion dear, what sleep can close  
 Thy eyelids? And remember'st what decree  
 Of yesterday, so late hath passed the lips  
 Of Heav'n's Almighty. Thou to me thy thoughts  
 Wast wont, I mine to thee was wont to impart;  
 Both waking we were one; how then can now  
 Thy sleep dissent? New laws thou seest imposed;  
 New laws from him who reigns, new minds may raise  
 In us who serve, new counsels, to debate  
 What doubtful may ensue, . . . '  
 So spake the false Archangel, and infused  
 Bad influence into th' unwary breast  
 Of his associate . . . ." (5.657-82; 694-96)

The immediate problem here is how Satan could have thought that rebelling successfully against God was even possible. When the fallen angels wake up in hell, the repeated refrain is "who knew / The force of those dire arms?" (1.93-4). Satan poses the rhetorical question:

". . . what power of mind  
 Foreseeing or presaging, from the depth  
 Of knowledge past or present, could have feared,  
 How such united force of gods, how such  
 As stood like these, could ever know repulse?" (1.626-630)

Satan even claims that God deliberately "his strength concealed, / Which tempted our attempt, and wrought our fall" (1.637-642).

In his monologue on Earth later, Satan admits to himself that God did not deserve his rebellion (4.32-112). But even in his soliloquy, he doesn't acknowledge God as God but at best a benevolent tyrant. As throughout *Paradise Lost*, Milton wants (and needs) to have it both ways: to give Satan realistic motivation in order to create a compelling narrative, but also justify God's punishment of Satan and his followers, by implying they should have known that God is God.

The underlying problem of the Book Five exaltation is that Milton's narrative is working on two levels simultaneously, epic and monotheism, which need each other but contradict each other at every point. *Paradise Lost* is the new wine of monotheism poured into the old bottle of pagan epic, with the predictable result that the bottle is bursting at every seam. The Miltonic universe is actually epic, and the power of the scene depends upon its epic underpinnings; the plot is driven by the conflict between the god-like beings in heaven, such as we find in Homer's epics and pagan mythology.

We could try to harmonize these two perspectives (epic and biblical) by observing that Satan's psychology is completely human, which means that he has different levels of knowledge and desire. The Apostle Paul and Augustine teach us that it is possible for humans to act contrary to their better knowledge (as we see also with Milton's Adam), while convincing themselves that their action is necessary or justified. But as we shall see, the dramatic situation in heaven implies a pagan cosmos, not a monotheistic one. Milton's dual purpose, to write a great epic, and to justify the ways of God to man, inevitably contradict each other.

We have to grant that on one level at least Satan initially believes that he is capable of defeating God in battle.<sup>[26]</sup> Confirming this hypothesis is the fact that his associates think so also. When Abdiel leaves Satan's camp to inform God of Satan's rebellion, he doesn't account for the fact that God is omniscient and therefore doesn't need his information. Furthermore, the loyal angels think it necessary to try to put down the rebellion, even though their efforts prove fruitless and destructive. So if even the loyal angels are not quite clear on the concept of the monotheistic God, then the conclusion is inescapable that the rebel angels do not recognize God as God. Raphael calls them "the atheist crew" (6.370), which Fowler glosses as "impious" in his edition of *Paradise Lost*, but Milton would not elide the main definition of "atheist." On one level, they don't really believe in God as such. The rebel angels conceive of God as an arbitrary ruler, "upheld by strength, or chance, or fate" (1.133) And in fact, the account of the rebellion and defeat of the angels is given almost purely in terms of power, not just by the rebel angels but also by Raphael and the narrator (Strier 30-1). The devils' observation in hell that God is more powerful is true, although it is not a mere happenstance as they think. We might say, in defense of Milton's account, that there are many humans who don't recognize God as such either. But in this case, they simply don't believe in God, even if they still believe in magic (the situation for Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*). The rebel angels articulate their cause as a rejection of God, not just the Son (*pace* Revard). So the analogy to the human situation in light of the Son's Incarnation just doesn't hold. The dramatic situation in heaven cannot be justified by recourse to any human situation or cultural tradition except polytheism. Milton's heaven is a *de facto* polytheistic cosmos.

Suppose we compare Milton's God to an earthly ruler whose authority is conventional, and who is really just another human. When this scenario is transposed to heaven, the result is

Gnosticism. The monotheistic God must be recognized as God or not at all. To see him as simply a powerful ruler comparable to oneself is not possible within the biblical, monotheistic tradition. The New Testament revises and complicates the monotheistic understanding of God, but Trinitarian theology reasserts it.

In purely psychological terms, Milton's narrative is wholly convincing. All of us are familiar with the situation of a person in authority whose position is not merited, whose rule is arbitrary and incompetent, and who is obeyed simply because of a position of power. Or we have experienced the emotions engendered by the promotion of one less worthy than ourselves. As an epic narrative, in these terms, the story of Satan's rebellion works well. We can sympathize with Satan's pride, which is not necessarily a bad thing. As Raphael says to Adam,

" . . . Oft-times nothing profits more  
Than self-esteem, grounded on just and right  
Well managed." (8.571-3)

Satan's pride is sinful only in relation to God, whom Satan does not recognize as such, and whose status in the poem is equivocal.

Satan's ignorance could be justified in terms of the limits of knowledge in monotheism, according to which our comprehension of God is always, at best, incomplete and provisional. But originally those limits are asserted in situations where it is not possible to question God's authority: Moses at the burning bush, or God's answer to Job out of the whirlwind. The rebel angels know that God exists, and they choose to reject him, a situation that implies polytheism.

The strategic withholding and revealing of information is one way an author motivates characters and creates plot tension. What Milton has done in this scene is transform the limits of knowledge in monotheism (traditionally a limit only for humans, not for angels) into the tactical withholding of information in narrative to make possible Satan's rebellion and motivate it. We might call this a brilliant adaptation of biblical theology to epic genre, but in fact it contradicts the central premise of biblical narrative, that God is God. If we can forget the biblical context and read it simply as a modern epic, then the narrative works, but this involves ignoring the premise of monotheism in *Paradise Lost*. This is essentially the Satanic reading. Milton needs the epic supplement (although it ends by being more than a supplement) of a pagan cosmos to create literature from the biblical story.

Satan's speech in the rebel camp in heaven illustrates the pagan context for his rebellion:

" . . . [Satan] with calumnious art  
Of counterfeited truth thus held their ears.  
'Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers,

If these magnificent titles yet remain  
Not merely titular, since by decree  
Another now hath to himself engrossed  
All power, and us eclipsed under the name  
Of King anointed, for whom all this haste  
Of midnight march, and hurried meeting here,  
This only to consult how we may best,  
With what may be devised of honors new  
Receive him coming to receive from us  
Knee-tribute yet unpaid, prostration vile,  
Too much to one, but double how endured,  
To one, and to his image now proclaimed?  
But what if better counsels might erect  
Our minds, and teach us to cast off this yoke?  
Will ye submit your necks, and choose to bend  
The supple knee? Ye will not, if I trust  
To know ye right, or if ye know yourselves  
Natives and sons of Heav'n possessed before  
By none, and if not equal all, yet free,  
Equally free; for orders and degrees  
Jar not with liberty, but well consist.  
Who can in reason then or right assume  
Monarchy over such as live by right  
His equals, if in power and splendor less,  
In freedom equal? Or can introduce  
Law and edict on us, who without law  
Err not? much less for this to be our Lord,  
And look for adoration to th' abuse  
Of those imperial titles which assert  
Our being ordained to govern, not to serve.' " (5.770-802)

Critics have often attempted to deconstruct Satan's speech, and Raphael accuses Satan of calumny and counterfeit. But Satan appears to be truthful and sincere within the limits of his knowledge. He asserts that the angels of heaven were "Possessed before / by none," and that they lived "without law," yet erred not. Before the exaltation of the Son, therefore, he claims that the angels were not required to serve anyone by law. There's no evidence to contradict this claim. It was their custom to serve God, but their service was voluntary, not enforced with any threat of punishment. The exaltation of the Son is completely new, an event the likes of which has never before been seen in heaven. No one questions that the command to worship and obey the Son as king is a novelty in heaven.

Before the begetting of the Son, the angels were in the same situation as Adam and Eve in

the Garden but without the forbidden fruit. Apart from that prohibition, Adam notes, “the rest, we live / Law to ourselves; our reason is our law” (9.653-4). And elsewhere, he observes, “what obeys / Reason, is free” (9.351-2). Adam and Eve worship God solely out of free and spontaneous gratitude. Likewise, the angels were previously free; there was no compulsion or threat of punishment for disobedience. In this sense, there is no contradiction with Satan’s own position of command among the angels. He does not threaten them with punishment, nor did God before this announcement. Satan’s followers are free to obey him or not: “they durst dislike [God’s] reign, and me preferring” (1.102). His claim, “orders and degrees / Jar not with liberty, but well consist,” is true given that there is no law requiring obedience. We don’t know what privileges accord to status in pre-fallen heaven, but they don’t give the power to compel other angels.

Satan claims,

“Who can in reason then or right assume  
Monarchy over such as live by right  
His equals, if in power and splendor less,  
In freedom equal?”

Satan admits that they may be “in power and splendor less” than God but are nevertheless His equal in freedom. What does it mean to be “In freedom equal”? It’s not clear exactly what freedom the angels have before the fall. Presumably they don’t have permission to sin, which Satan’s claim that they “err not” implies (in other words, he knows what sin [erring] is and knows that he has not sinned). But they were not apparently given laws which would be the occasion for disobedience. Paul writes, “I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet” (Romans 7.7, KJV). There’s no reason to doubt Satan’s claim that they all have equal rights and freedoms if not equal “power and splendor.”

What reason or right does God’s Son have to rule over them, is a relevant question, even if posed rhetorically. For reason is precisely what is lacking from God’s announcement, nor does God actually assert his or the Son’s right. The Son’s authority, such as it is, derives from his anointing and depends upon God’s bare proclamation and the threat of punishment. That the angels will be happy obeying God is a claim which Satan never tests because he never accepts it; the promise that they will be happy does not, by itself, justify God’s demand.

The Book Five begetting is necessary for Milton’s purpose to make an epic narrative with characters with realistic motivations and an interesting plot. Milton was not a Satanist as such, but his epic ambitions necessitate that Satan be given compelling motivation. Raphael’s account virtually confirms Satan’s claim that God deliberately “his strength concealed, / Which tempted our attempt, and wrought our fall.” Milton’s biblical story needs

the rivalry between heroic figures. The typical critical excuse for Milton on this point is that all these epic supplements are represented as evil; but they are more than simply Satan's fantasy; they are intrinsic to the Miltonic cosmos.

Abdiel responds to Satan,

“Oh argument blasphemous, false and proud!  
Words which no ear ever to hear in Heav'n  
Expected, least of all from thee, ingrate,  
In place thyself so high above thy peers.  
Canst thou with impious obloquy condemn  
The just decree of God, pronounced and sworn,  
That to his only Son by right endued  
With regal scepter, every soul in Heav'n  
Shall bend the knee, and in that honor due  
Confess him rightful King? Unjust thou sayest,  
Flatly unjust, to bind with laws the free,  
And equal over equals to let reign,  
One over all with unsucceeded power.  
Shalt thou give law to God? shalt thou dispute  
With him the points of liberty, who made  
Thee what thou art, and formed the pow'rs of Heav'n  
Such as he pleased, and circumscribed their being?  
Yet, by experience taught we know how good,  
And of our good, and of our dignity  
How provident he is, how far from thought  
To make us less, bent rather to exalt  
Our happy state under one head more near  
United. But to grant it thee unjust,  
That equal over equals monarch reign:  
Thyself though great and glorious dost thou count,  
Or all angelic nature joined in one,  
Equal to him begotten Son, by whom  
As by his Word the Mighty Father made  
All things, ev'n thee; and all the Spirits of Heav'n  
By him created in their bright degrees,  
Crowned them with glory, and to their glory named  
Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers,  
Essential Powers, nor by his reign obscured,  
But more illustrious made; since he the head  
One of our number thus reduced becomes,  
His laws our laws; all honor to him done

Returns our own. Cease then this impious rage,  
And tempt not these; but hasten to appease  
Th' incensèd Father, and th' incensèd Son,  
While pardon may be found in time besought." (5.809-48)

Let us examine Abdiel's argument in detail. Abdiel calls Satan an "ingrate / In place thyself so high above his peers." It's not immediately clear why Satan's high place makes his rebellion ungrateful, but Abdiel and Raphael acknowledge that Satan is a ruler of sorts in heaven, which sets up a pagan scenario of god against god in heaven. In Book Two, the narrator in fact identifies the rebel angels with the pagan gods of biblical history. (The Bible usually denies the reality of pagan gods, as in the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal [*I Kings*, Ch. 18].) As I discussed previously, Abdiel's claim that creation determines status conflicts with the meritocracy we find elsewhere in *Paradise Lost*. If one's place is purely a gift, it's not clear how it would entail any glory. Winning the lottery gives riches but not glory. Even though Satan's high status in heaven may be related to his creation, presumably he has merited his place by glorious deeds of one kind or another, "acts of zeal and love." If he merits his position, then strictly speaking the charge of ingratitude does not apply.

The next point that Abdiel makes is the classic monotheistic move of asserting God's status as creator, by means of the Son, a claim which Raphael clearly supports. But Satan responds to Abdiel:

"That we were formed then say'st thou? And the work  
Of secondary hands, by task transferred  
From Father to his Son? Strange point and new!  
Doctrine which we would know whence learnt: who saw  
When this creation was? Remember'st thou  
Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?  
We know no time when we were not as now;  
Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised  
By our own quick'ning power, when fatal course  
Had circled his full orb, the birth mature  
Of this our native Heav'n, ethereal sons.  
Our puissance is our own, our own right hand  
Shall teach us highest deeds, by proof to try  
Who is our equal: then thou shalt behold  
Whether by supplication we intend  
Address, and to begirt th' Almighty throne  
Beseeching or besieging. This report,  
These tidings carry to th' anointed King;  
And fly, ere evil intercept thy flight." (5.853-71)

We must grant Satan some honesty, since the other angels do not dispute Satan's claims, and they find Satan more convincing than Abdiel. Satan, in essence, asserts his freedom and merit, which are independent of the conditions of his origin. Satan finds his origin in "nature" not God. Many humans deny God as their creator, so we shouldn't deny the same possibility to Satan, who shares the same epistemological situation.

Abdiel serves to demonstrate the Miltonic point that individuals always have the ability to choose what is right, despite all external circumstances, thus justifying God and his punishment of those who disobey Him. But this point is undercut by the fact that Abdiel has knowledge that is not immediately available to the other angels.

Abdiel proclaims, "by experience taught, we know how good /And of our good and of our dignity / How provident he is." In other words, Satan should know from experience that God wants what is good for them, and that God provides the same. But what is "good" is precisely the kind of thing that rational, well-intentioned creatures can disagree about. And for some, freedom, even to disobey, may be the highest value; as Satan argues in hell, worth the sacrifice of heaven if God's command is enforced merely by superior power: "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (1.263). From the perspective of monotheism, of course, there are problems with the rebel angels' "freedom," but the example of Prometheus, in a pagan cosmos, provides a different perspective, whereby defying the supreme god can be heroic.

Satan has asserted the injustice of one set up to rule them who is their equal, the Son. Furthermore, Satan believes that the Son's exaltation had "impaired" his own glory, since he becomes lesser in comparison. Abdiel, on the other hand, affirms the authority of the Son to rule since he is greater than any angel, having created them, and by authority of the Father's "begetting." But the whole plot hinges on the fact that both Satan and the Son are created beings. The Son's worth, therefore, is relative not absolute. From both Satan and the reader's perspective, the Son's exaltation appears arbitrary, because the Son has not yet proven his merit, thus making Satan's resistance plausible and reasonable (the Book Three exaltation by merit is chronologically later, though earlier in narrative terms).

Perhaps the most dubious part of Abdiel's argument is the claim that the exaltation of the Son actually exalts the angels too, by association: the angels are

" . . . nor by his Reign obscur'd,  
But more illustrious made, since he the Head  
One of our number thus reduced becomes,  
His Laws our Laws, all honour to him done  
Returns our own." (5.841-45)

This passage is a more than a little ambiguous. The phrase, "he the Head / One of our number thus reduced becomes," is usually interpreted to mean that the Son is "reduced" to



being an angel, that is, newly revealed in angelic form by his begetting, having previously been hidden in God's bosom ("embosomed" [5.597]).<sup>[27]</sup> In this reading, since one being, the Son, becomes an angel (or takes on angelic form) and is exalted, then all angels are glorified by association; just as humans are glorified by the Incarnation according to theologians. According to Abdiel, when they honor the Son they are honoring themselves. I agree that Abdiel is claiming that the angels are exalted by the Son's begetting, but there are problems with the mechanism identified by Labriola and others.

For Abdiel's speech, Milton apparently drew on the Book of Hebrews, chapters one and two, which also argues the superiority of the Son to the angels—thus assuming that the Son *can* be compared to the angels, which is the premise of Satan's rebellion (and of Milton's Arianism). As he often does, Milton extrapolates from scripture for the purposes of his story, suggesting rather obliquely that the Son indeed takes the form of an angel in heaven. But God's proclamation mentions nothing about the Son becoming one of the number of angels, or that he is thereby reduced. God says the angels will "abide / United as one individual soul" *under* the Son's reign, not united together as one *with* the Son. Milton needs to distinguish the Son from the rest of the angels but also make him comparable, in order to make Satan's rebellion conceivable. The fact that the Son takes on angelic form is very important, since it plays into a pagan conception of heaven, and this is the reason why it's not clearly stated in *Paradise Lost*, although made necessary by the plot. The important question remaining is whether the Son was known to the angels before his "begetting," or whether the Son was newly revealed.

Abdiel claims the angels are exalted (not impaired, as Satan claims) because "he the Head / One of our number thus reduced becomes." We can separate this out into two statements. Clearly, "he the Head . . . becomes." The Son is set up as head of the angels. No question about that. The other part is "One of our number thus reduced," which critics interpret as "he is reduced to [being] one of our number." In this case the complete statement could be paraphrased: "The Son becomes our head and is thus reduced to being one of us," which is an obvious *non sequitur*. Critics assume the phrase "Thus reduced" (5.843) refers back to the Son as "the Head" (5.842). But the syntax of the passage actually suggests a different and more satisfactory reading. The more grammatically correct and intuitive reading is that "thus reduced" refers back to "our number," the more immediate antecedent, so that "our number is reduced." In this case, Abdiel's statement could be paraphrased: "the Son becomes our head," and "our number [is] thus reduced"; that is, when the Son is promoted to kingship, the number of angels is reduced, just as when one of an earthly King's subjects (say a Prince) becomes King, there is one less "subject" for the new King to rule. My reading suggests that the Son is already known to the angels as one of them, which makes sense because no one expresses any surprise at the existence of the Son, only his exaltation. Satan refers to the Son as "his [God's] image now proclaimed" (5.784). His status as the image of God has been proclaimed, not his existence. Abdiel's point is that an angel has been promoted to king, and while he is no longer (just another) angel, as such, the fact of his

promotion glorifies them all by association.

But there is a further problem with this passage, which is that Abdiel's main point is strained, to say the least. By analogy, if one human being is exalted to kingship, no matter the sacrifice or merit involved, why would I or anyone feel exalted simply because I happen to be a human being also? I suppose this argument might work for family members, but the gathering in heaven is explicitly political and threatening, which doesn't harmonize with a reading of the angels as all one big family.

If the Son is really glorified in his heavenly exaltation, then logically he is not "reduced"; just as Milton argued that if the Son is really God's Son then logically he is not God. If Milton had wanted to make the surprising point that the Son's heavenly exaltation was also a humiliating descent into angelhood, then he would have emphasized it and stated it more clearly. If the Son was known already in heaven, as an angel, and not publically exalted, it clarifies Satan's scandalized reaction, and it shows how the conflict between the Son and Satan is in effect a rivalry between pagan gods or epic heroes.

## **Conclusion**

The problem of Renaissance aesthetics, at the most fundamental level, is iconoclasm. The Mosaic revelation fosters a new and critical attitude toward the figures of the sacred center, a skepticism which leads eventually to a recognition of the sacrality of the internal scene of representation, a sacred to which no one has a more privileged relationship than another. With Christianity, in its Protestant development, the personal relationship with God is the locus of the sacred, while the public, ritual scene becomes vulnerable to accusations of idolatry. The Protestant Reformation gives full expression to the iconoclastic potential of the New Testament. To some extent, this is the story of Milton's Satan, who iconoclastically rejects God on the basis of his internal sense of divinity, although still within a hierarchical framework. Satan believes their worship of God is mere idolatry.

But it is also the story of the reader's relationship to epic protagonists during the Renaissance. Modern readers feel themselves, in principle, equal in significance to the literary protagonist. For a successful narrative, their potential resentment must be ameliorated, which can be accomplished in various ways. The narrative authorization of the protagonist becomes a major subject matter for literature. This is not just a narrow literary problem but connected to the larger issue of how authority figures are legitimated within a society in which divine hierarchy is in the process of disintegration.

By staging the scene of representation within the work, the author distinguishes the protagonist by his fictional audience and from his readers. Furthermore, by means of his self-consciousness, the protagonist, in effect, serves as his own audience. The election of the central figure serves to authorize the protagonist, an election which often involves trials, temptations, and suffering; which humble him and demonstrate his commonality with

readers. The protagonist's internal conflicts, the so-called internalization of the crucifixion, serve to authorize a character just as with the military conflicts in epic.

The characters in *Paradise Lost* who best fulfill the requirements of the modern protagonist are Eve and Adam. Their story, however, by itself, did not have the epic scope that Milton needed to compete with Homer and Virgil. It was Milton's pride and ambition that made for the flaws of *Paradise Lost* as well as its greatness.

The heavenly rivalry between Satan and the Son (before the creation of the world) is not a biblical topic, but rather a revision of the Christian narrative under pagan influence. Milton did not invent their rivalry, but his development of this topos is still startlingly original. The Archangel Michael, narrating to Adam the final defeat of Satan by the Son in his earthly career, warns Adam not to think of their battle in military terms, but rather in terms of Christ's obedience to God's law and his suffering on the cross (12.386-435). But Milton, despite his own warning, does exactly this in books Five and Six of his epic: describing their conflict in epic and military terms.

Because Satan is portrayed in epic and tragic terms, Milton needed to counterweight his appeal with the representation of the Son, who enjoys two extended scenes of election, first in Book Three, and then again in Book Five. The Book Three election is based on the Son's volunteering to suffer the penalty for human sin, and God declares that he is "by merit more than birthright Son of God." But the mere fact of being willing to suffer is not the same as actually enduring the Crucifixion, so that his election seems more or less gratuitous. He doesn't suffer the humiliations and internal conflicts that are represented in depth by the New Testament, and his election fails in its intended purpose. The Son's Book Five election is justified by nothing more than God's freedom as the monotheistic God, but the fact that the Son is a created being means that he is comparable to Satan and thus subject to competition and heavenly conflict. The epic battle in heaven between the loyal and the rebel angels is made possible on the premise that the angels don't recognize God as God, so that their conflict takes place in a de facto pagan cosmos. Milton's predicament, then, is that he needs a pagan cosmos to make possible the great epic drama of Satan's rebellion, but he also needs the premise of monotheism in accordance with his biblical source. Milton tries to finesse this problem by limiting the knowledge available to creatures at crucial junctions. But without that knowledge, God's judgment of them becomes questionable.

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## Notes

[1] For a biographical account of Milton's decision to base his epic on the Genesis story, see Grant McColley, pp. 269-293. Full bibliographic details on all footnote references can be found in the "Works Cited" at the end of this article, above the end notes.

[2] On the conflict between epic and Bible, the classic and still valuable account is *A Preface to Paradise Lost* by C. S. Lewis. For the literary context of epic and Bible in *Paradise Lost*, see Burton Kurth's *Milton and Christian Heroism: Biblical Epic Themes and Forms in Seventeenth-Century England*.

[3] For Gans's aesthetic history, see his *Originary Thinking*, pp. 117-219; and "The Esthetic in History."

[4] Following Gans's practice, "neoclassical" and "Renaissance" are used synonymously here.

[5] See Jacques Derrida's analysis of the *pharmakos* in Plato's *Phaedrus* in his book *Dissemination*.

[6] To clarify, classical literature as such retains its aesthetic power, but attempts to revive it require a Christian supplement.

[7] All Milton quotations are from *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose*, edited by Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon, unless otherwise noted.

[8] Philippians 2.5-10 and Hebrews 1.2-6 provide the biblical basis for the Son's heavenly Exaltation, which is usually taken to follow, not precede, his earthly Incarnation. See McColley, pp. 25-33, 316-7.

[9] See McColley for an account of the double exaltation in terms of the vagaries of the process of composition, pp. 316-7.

[10] By the same token, in his *Christian Doctrine*, Milton held that good works, "the works of faith," are required for salvation, in addition to faith alone (1265).

[11] See Kerrigan, et. al., Introduction to *Paradise Lost*, p. 262.

[12] There's some debate about how we should define Arianism, but there is general agreement that Milton's Son is created by and subordinate to the Father. I take Michael Bauman's *Milton's Arianism* as definitive on this question.

[13] See Kerrigan, et. al., Introduction to *Paradise Lost*, p. 261.

[14] In *The Ready and Easy Way*, Milton calls for “the civil rights and advancements of every person according to his merit.” But he also allowed “the nobility and chief gentry” considerable local governing authority (1133).

[15] On this point, see Milton’s *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*.

[16] This problem of aesthetic response is symptomatic of the Early Modern crisis of authority, whereby the traditional divine sanction for class and position was losing its power, a crisis which found expression in the English Revolution, in which Milton was an active and passionate participant.

[17] In addition to Chaplin, see Russell Hillier, *Milton’s Messiah*.

[18] See Gans, *Science and Faith*, pp. 106-7, and passim.

[19] Acts 9.4 (Today’s English Version).

[20] See Forsyth, “The Origin of ‘Evil’: Classical or Judeo-Christian?” (26); and Forsyth’s history of Satan in *The Satanic Epic* (24-76, and esp. 37-38).

[21] See Forsyth, *The Satanic Epic*, 37-38.

[22] See, for example, Joad Raymond, “Milton’s Angels.” The basic counterargument to angelic hierarchy in *Paradise Lost* is that the titles are simply descriptive “job” titles rather than evaluative rankings. While angelic titles may relate to the nature and duties of angels, some “jobs” are clearly more noble and distinguished than others.

[23] For a useful summary of the main theories of the origin and development of the doctrine of the Trinity, see chap. 1 of *The Birth of the Trinity* by Matthew W. Bates.

[24] On this issue, see Edmund Creeth, William B. Hunter, and Richard S. Ide.

[25] One could add to this list the Son’s exaltation after his victory over the rebel angels in Book Six, although the post-victory exaltation is perhaps better seen as a confirmation of the initial Book Five exaltation.

[26] Empson argues this point at length in his *Milton’s God*, pp. 36-44.

[27] See for example, Albert C. Labriola, “‘Thy Humiliation Shall Exalt’: The Christology of *Paradise Lost*.” Kerrigan, in his footnote on this passage, mentions A. W. Verity giving this interpretation in his 1921 edition of *Paradise Lost*.