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**Abiding in the native element: John Milton and feminist
theology**

Parisi, Hope Angela, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1992

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**ABIDING IN THE NATIVE ELEMENT:
JOHN MILTON AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY
by
HOPE A. PARISI**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York**

1992

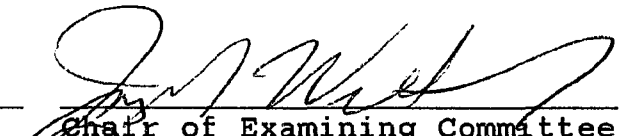
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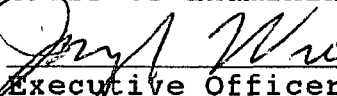
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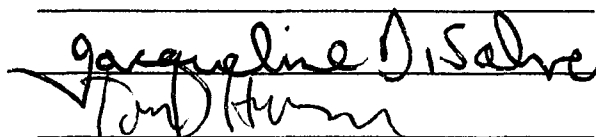
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Abstract

ABIDING IN THE NATIVE ELEMENT:
JOHN MILTON AND FEMINIST THEOLOGY

by

HOPE A. PARISI

Advisor: Professor Joseph Wittreich

This dissertation applies to Milton the questions and methodology of some recent feminist efforts to recover the Bible from patriarchy. It addresses what has been called the "problem of patriarchy,"--the possibility that readers, affected by an immersion in patriarchal discourse, have restricted the parameters of their interpretations. When is patriarchal bias endemic to the text and when it is the result of, in Mieke Bal's words, the "ideological position of the scholar?" Milton's major poems, like the Bible, often may be read against their putative patriarchal grain.

Each of the chapters in this project sets Milton's texts in relation to a different but related aspect of spirituality to which feminist theology speaks. Woman's association with Original Sin has kept her from claiming a share in the imago dei since Augustine. Chapter one on Milton's Muse argues that an ethos of Original Blessing, over Original Sin, drives Paradise Lost. As God's self-revelatory Spirit, she

encompasses the Hebraic understanding of a God immanent in creation who confirms creation's goodness. The second chapter, also on Paradise Lost, centers on a frame of mind subtly urged upon women who seek holiness: the posture of mourning and penitence. But Eve's suicide gesture departs from these conventions of women's heroism (especially current in the Renaissance) and Books 11 and 12 sanction women's self-development. Chapter three shows Paradise Regained to "re-image" redemption so as to include women's agency. The focus moves away from the cross, a single act by a male savior, replacing it with a different pathos: the struggle to receive and discern God's revelations. My reading of Dalila's defense, chapter four, joins Samson's wife to a company of biblical femme fortes, including Judith, Esther, and Jael. Chapter five elucidates the political utopian vision of post-Christian feminist theology as Comus voices it.

The project does not aim to deem either the Bible or Milton feminist. But just as the Bible speaks to the marginalization of women by virtue of what feminist theologians view as its prophetic principle of "full and authentic humanity," so might Milton's readers find the basis of a similar principle within his departures from classical Christian theology.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Throughout this project, I was fortunate to have inspired mentors and sympathetic friends. I owe much to my dissertation director, Joseph Wittreich, for instruction and encouragement; to my readers, Jackie DiSalvo, who was more than generous with references and support, and Tom Hayes, whose course several years ago on Milton and Women no doubt started the wheels of this project turning. Around the Graduate Center, I have enjoyed the fellowship of dear friends, Christina Boufis, Kimberly Flynn, Alicia Carroll and Mark Goldblatt. Thanks to everyone for staying with me.

A move to Fort Worth, Texas, in the early stages of this project found me searching for good library resources. I could not have done better than to enjoy library privileges at Texas Christian University with its bounteous collection on Scripture and theology. The University of Texas at Arlington shared TCU's burden of meeting my needs for books on Milton and seventeenth-century literature.

Lastly, I gladly share the success of my degree with my family: my brother Patrick, and parents Florence and Joseph, "root[s] of wisdom. . .unfailing" and patient waiting. The unyielding support of my husband, Stephen Mulrooney, is written in every line of this book.

A Note on Texts

I have used the John T. Shawcross edition of The Complete English Poetry of John Milton (New York: New York University Press, 1963). References to the prose works are to The Complete Prose Works of John Milton, general editor A.S.P. Woodhouse, 8 volumes (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953-83). I have used the King James Bible for the canonical books and, for the apocrypha, The Anchor Bible, general editors W. Albright and D. Freedman, 46 volumes (New York: Doubleday, 1964-) unless otherwise noted.

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Introduction

To place John Milton in relation to feminist theology may seem a bold, even foolhardy, enterprise. Quite frequently, feminist exegetes who take up the biblical prooftexts for women's inferiority, the creation accounts of Genesis 1-3, cite Milton as the reason why a rereading of those texts is necessary at all.¹ "The most complete poetic treatment of the Eve story as the original precedence foreshadowing future feminine experience, as well as the best example of the sexist slant that the story received, is found in Milton's epic Paradise Lost." With these words, Nehama Aschkenasy begins her chapter on the conventional association of Eve with evil, death, and destructive sexuality. She cites Milton as an example of those who read Genesis by adding to it details that incriminate Eve--details that touch, for instance, Eve's "childish" and "irresponsible" motivations for first eating the fruit and then offering it to Adam (39).

For Aschkenasy, a look to the rabbinic commentaries on Genesis reveals how and where such ideas were first taking root, her point being that tradition, like Milton, can distort the biblical record. Similarly, Carol Meyers, a biblical anthropologist, would get past the "powerful barriers" (73) to our understanding of the Genesis story that are forced upon us by post-Israelite Judeo-Christian tradition. She repeats the

demand that Milton be called to account. In her view, Milton stands in a long line of writers who "endless[ly]" vary "the themes of female sin and inferiority" that become attached to the Genesis story. Even more, Milton's rendering, almost a perfection of these variations, so "develops the Eden tale. . . that many of our present recollections of the biblical story are more faithful to his portrayal of Eve or Satan than to the original Hebrew narrative" (76).

From this sampling, it would appear that Milton and feminist theology have little to say to each other, at least from the latter's standpoint. But the dialogue between the two already has begun. The feminist critique of Milton as it surfaces in feminist theological efforts to rescue the Bible from the damage Milton and his ilk have done to it sees Milton interpreting the Bible according to the very line of tradition from which Milton often struggles to set himself apart. The first feminist critiques of Milton in the 70's and early 80's find their double in feminist theologians' impressions of him today: i.e., the persistent assumption that Milton maintains an undifferentiated, and if anything deepening, relationship to biblical tradition. But perhaps to risk quoting Mary Nyquist against herself (see note 1), just as "it is far too easy to adopt the. . . view that Genesis is a text inaugurating a transhistorically homogeneous patriarchal culture," so it is hasty to assume "the basically direct or at least unproblematically mediated" (101) relationship of

Genesis to Paradise Lost (or of Milton to the Bible). "Reformist" strains of feminist exegesis ask readers of the Bible to consider an issue similar to one surfacing in Milton criticism today: whether readers, affected by their own immersion in patriarchal discourse, have "restrict[ed] . . . the range of interpretive possibilities" (Wittreich 1990:43) of their respective texts.

The same question that feminist theologians put to the Bible applies to a reading of Milton: is "the sexism of [these texts] and [their] interpretation. . . a matter of superficial patriarchal bias or. . . integral to [the texts'] very structure?" In other words, to continue from Patricia Milne's description of the feminist exegetical experiment, where does the "patriarchal stamp of Scripture [and Milton]" (19) belong? Modifying Milne's either/or proposition a bit, we might ask whether in fact there are not at least moments in our reading of these texts in which something other than the familiar patriarchal biases might be heard? Both reformist readings of the Bible and contemporary criticism of Milton deal with the same overarching issue: what feminist exegete Mieke Bal calls the "ideological position of the scholar" (1989:87). For readers both of the Bible and Milton who would rescue their texts from charges of an unrelenting patriarchal bias, the task is to understand the extent to which we read through, rather than against, patriarchal assumptions. Such a practice effectively conceals from us the points at which

the Bible and Milton sometimes separate from patriarchal interpretive tradition.

In the same way feminist exegesis and feminist criticism of Milton raise a common question, they also share a hermeneutics. In many cases, both Biblical reformists and proto-feminist readers of Milton view their texts as an amalgam of often contradictory political positions. Here a scriptural citation or a passage from Milton may register patriarchal attitudes, there feminist ones, but so long as both sentiments keep surfacing, one often is prevented from assuming ideological ascendancy over the other. In the meantime, the contradictions which the text embeds enjoin the reader to negotiate what the juxtapositions might mean. Do they undermine one other? Like Samuel Sandmel's notion of biblical haggada (which will become relevant in my reading of Dalila), do they comment upon each? Or, in other words, as Virginia Mollenkott might suggest, is some underlying "determinate sentence"--of charity, justice, equality, imago dei--also operating to put in force the text's own "internal critique" (1980:24) of patriarchal ideas?

For Joseph Wittreich, it is just this self-critiquing, self-contending dynamic that ultimately saves Milton's Paradise Lost from orthodoxy and its attendant misogyny. Wittreich has been among the first to note the compatibility of method for reading the Bible and Milton from a proto-feminist perspective. "Like the Bible, which exhibits, as

Robert Alter remarks, 'a restless dialectic movement of signification' and communicates through 'a rhetoric of entrapment,' Paradise Lost introduces disharmonies beneath an apparently harmonious surface in order to transport conventional propositions about women into a zone of new and (to the orthodox) unsettling perceptions" (1987:9). To find in Milton a deviation from Scripture (or, as some reformists might say, a return to Scripture's prophetic ethos), one which may be deemed "feminist," does not require readers to lay aside their insights as misguided simply because other, more patriarchal, impressions register in the text along with it. Rather, readers of Milton recognize, as do feminist exegetes in their studies, that the text in question is fundamentally ambiguous. Once made, this recognition allows the text to move beyond its ideological containment. (This is not to say that the reader can escape ideology in his or her critique. But one can broaden the parameters for interpretation.) To pair one passage that seems to speak against patriarchal attitudes against another that appears to reinforce them might implicate the interpretive tradition(s) encompassing both.

The following study conjoins the methodology and concerns of some modern feminist efforts to rehabilitate the Bible and of readers of Milton who discern in his poetry an at least sometimes feminist sensibility. A juxtaposition of Milton and feminist theology seems even more apt when we realize that both seek to correct the mistakes of tradition by going

directly to the Bible in true reformist spirit. A shared interest in sloughing off and renewing the "accumulated" readings of an ideologically-loaded history of reception places feminist exegetes and Milton immediately before the scriptural text. In the same vein, they reveal their similar intent: to disabuse the Bible of its concealment of a potentially revolutionary politics. The Christian Doctrine, for example, takes as its starting point "the impurities of more than thirteen hundred years" (CPW VI,117) of religious tradition. Milton would "distinguish correctly in religion" what were "matters of faith and [only] matters of opinion" (CPW VI,121), thus restoring something of religion's "pure original state" (CPW VI,117). At the same time, the pressures on Milton "the libeller" to leave behind his politics after Cromwell invite his readers to search his later poetry for political content.² Milton's story of origins, the temptations in the desert, even Samson Agonistes--each might be thought to mask Milton's sustained interest in reforming relationships of power.³

In a similar way, feminist theology often seeks to recover what it reads as the fundamental biblical message of full and authentic humanity. As Rosemary Radford Ruether puts it, to "[strip] off the ideological mystifications that have developed in the traditions of Biblical interpretation" is to disclose the text's "liberating content" (1983:31). In a word, the feminist theological project is prophetic; it means

to centralize a submerged scriptural ethos of equality and social justice. Its message seems radical in that it draws conclusions from scriptures that hitherto have not seemed to address the problem of women's subordination specifically. Nonetheless, if only by a "poetics of implication,"⁴ the Bible's prophetic principles are recognized to speak to the marginalization of women. Again we look to Ruether: "The uniqueness of feminist theology is not the critical principle, full humanity, but the fact that women claim this principle for themselves" (1983:19).

Discovering a feminist Milton is as much a matter of drawing out the implications of the prophetic vision that also informs his writing. Readers may contend that Milton, a seventeenth-century libertarian, could not apprehend, much less give himself over to, a theological dispensation that so thoroughly would level the traditional notions of hierarchy. But his revolutionary spirit at least finds him moving in step with a wide range of feminist theological suppositions: the authority of the individual to affect salvation for oneself--man or woman (Paradise Regained); an understanding of how social constraints impinge upon some biblical women whom history later deems "wicked" (Samson Agonistes); and an appreciation, and even desire, for a feminine mediating presence within the divine (Paradise Lost). Feminist theology embraces each of these same notions.

Possibly, in a cautious alignment of Milton and feminist

theology, the efforts of both Biblical reformists and proto-feminist Miltons may be strengthened. In Milton, readers of the Bible can find an example of the counter-cultural religious spirit that has remained alive since the gnostics first opposed orthodoxy's literalizations of the Jesus story in the first to fourth centuries. The gnostics' resistance to literalize resurfaces in the English sectarians and even the Puritans of Milton's day who manifested their own dissatisfactions with the pat explanations of typological gloss (which, in turn, were authorizing the reigning hierarchies of God, Son, and King⁵). Through the years, Milton has been made to bear the reputation of twisting and turning Scripture for his own purposes. But this fact only further unites him with religious writers, past and present, who carry out a reformist project that remains true to a longstanding interest in de-stabilizing the absolutism and "straightforward[ness]"⁶ of religious language and doctrine.

In a less misogynistically-rendered Bible, proto-feminist readers of Milton gain a resource as well. Ruether's suspicion that a prophetic ethos, essentially equalitarian, undergirds the Bible enjoins us to reread the Bible, and then reread Milton. A gap emerges wherein it is conceivable that Milton's relationship to the biases of tradition is neither, again to quote Nyquist, "direct" nor "ideologically uninflected" (1988:101). In order to identify Milton unproblematically with the Bible as a patriarchal source, we

must first be sure it is indeed unredemptively patriarchal and, second, find no interstices in Milton's poetry that suggest the text can be distanced from the common glosses of theologians.

My task in the following pages is twofold: one, following Ruether's efforts, to thresh out of the Bible "alternative possibilities" (1990:141), or under-utilized redemptive frameworks, within both Jewish and early Christian tradition that, when fully fashioned, imply and authorize a share in full humanity for women; and, two, to find ways in which my reading of Milton deviates from orthodoxy long enough to accommodate these frameworks. Admittedly, much of what follows is speculative or experimental, much like feminist theology. Not a feminist theologian, I have attempted on my own to draw out the implications of many of these alternative frameworks. Still, Milton himself has been my best help. Beginning at the source of Milton's own poetic beginnings, his Muse, we discover a writer whose piety would seek to shed, more and more, the constraints of patriarchal ways of relating to the divine--so much so, in fact, that by the time of Samson Agonistes, Milton is able to place Dalila (even if only momentarily) in relationship to Judith, Esther, and Jael, biblical femme fortes. Each of my chapters finds Milton engaging a different but related aspect of spirituality to which, as we shall see, feminist theology speaks. Rather than outlining a set body of feminist theological "tenets" (if such

were to be had) and evaluating its "progress" in each of Milton's major poems, I have decided to read each text afresh, allowing the way in which it most resonantly evokes some common concerns of feminist theology to voice itself.

My first chapter starts with a fundamental principle of feminist theology: the imago dei and feminine possibilities within the divine. Calvinist Christology drew the correspondences between God and humanity in male terms: God, a male, receives his image from the Son, "the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). The Son, in turn, mirrors the elect as "the firstborn of many brothers" (Rom. 8:29). Woman enters into the human-divine relationship only to typify the perversion of the original similitude between God and man, embodying its failed potential. Original Sin, the emphasis in such a scheme, spells disaster for women's spiritual self-esteem. Yet we find Milton, in the fabric of his most important epic, drawn to a feminine Muse who maintains both divine and creation-like qualities. In the Muse, Milton articulates an understanding that femaleness does not expressly embed a corruptible and guilt-infested Nature, a wholly fallen state. Nor does it remain separable from the divine. Milton's Muse represents a convergence of images that sustains a conception of a God immanent in Nature. The invocations to the Muse duplicate the movement of God through creation as the basis of salvation history. The effect is to balance the larger text's picture

of a remote and masculine God.

Also on Paradise Lost, chapter two centers on a frame of mind subtly urged upon women who seek holiness: the posture of mourning and penitence. Religious tradition, in its art and literature, encourages women to accept self-inflicted violence and self-sacrifice as keys to the Kingdom. Despite the efficacy of real-life prototypes--like a Lucretia who incites a nation to overthrow tyranny, or a Cleopatra who, after leading an empire for years, shields it from its last disgrace, Renaissance portraits of these and other heroines often "get stuck" in poses of self-pity and guilt. In doing so, they conform to the expectation that women sacrifice themselves in the interest of preserving their men from shame. At the same time, they fulfill their culture's belief in the weakness of women who face loss or disaster. All the more interesting is Milton's representation of an Eve who flies in the face of women's submission to suicide for these same interests. In Book X of Paradise Lost, Eve's suicide gesture departs from the private settings of her prototypes in literature and art. (Eve rallies as if for a "public" cause.) Through such a vehicle, Paradise Lost confronts directly an ethos of self-abnegation traditionally associated with women's spirituality. Eve is encouraged to hold her hand, heroically raised, from self-murder for the sake of affirming what women's self-sacrifice traditionally repudiates: not (immediate) action, but a self to sacrifice. Books 11 and 12

sanction Eve's self-development as the precondition for meaningful self-sacrifice.

My reading of Paradise Regained, chapter three, continues the first chapter's exploration of the deity's communion with humanity in the Hebraic terms of Wisdom, a tradition that articulates both the life of the prophet and the importance of the discerning life. In Paradise Regained, Milton "re-images" redemption to include the agency of every person, male and female, who would assume an inspired relationship with God. The poem deemphasizes the cross, a "one time only" act by a single male savior, centralizing instead a different pathos: the struggle to discern, in near-gnostic fashion, "the internal significance of events" (Pagels 159) as they reveal themselves in history. Milton redefines the passion in terms of revelation. Satan comes to figure the orthodox who read the Son's life in expectation of the salvific events the Hebrew Scriptures predict for him and the glory and power that the Son's privileged position to deity makes it rightful for him to assume. But time and again, the Son resists identification with Satan's "high christology," instead modelling a close relationship to prophecy, mediated by Lady Wisdom. Mary's soliloquy duplicates the path to salvation that Jesus models; she seeks revelation just as he does. Her pathos recalls her son's. At the same time, the instructive role she assumes in Jesus' early life, as recounted by Jesus, affirms the centrality of discernment for salvation.

In many ways, my fourth chapter, on Dalila, reveals a Milton at his most feminist. Dalila's propensity toward public action joins her to a company of biblical heroines such as Esther, Judith, and Jael. While many critics would read Dalila's self-comparison to Jael parodically, there is evidence in both the biblical record and Milton's text that these two figures, and their prototypes, are meant to be aligned. All move in atmospheres that promise danger for the woman. In each case, the woman uses ploys or sexuality to manipulate her situation. Yet notably, the biblical narrator does not condemn her for taking such action. Neither implicitly nor explicitly are Judith, Esther, or Jael blamed (the action of all three women a close parallel to Delilah's). Nor explicitly is Delilah blamed. Instead, in all four cases, the biblical record seems to criticize the infractious desires of the male antagonists.

Milton's attitude toward Dalila seems to take into account the connections between her story and those of her biblical prototypes. Like her prototypes, she would make her claim to the public sphere. But Samson insists that Dalila subscribe to the conventions of living a private life. In her defense, Dalila uncovers a world dangerous for the self-assertive woman in this private life. Milton centralizes her kinship with her biblical prototypes by showing the strain she experiences existing in relationship to two discourses: that of an ancient near eastern woman's propensity to public action

and a seventeenth-century woman's obligation to accommodate her longings to an often hostile private sphere.

Finally, while my first four chapters show Milton at the center of several feminist theological concerns, my last chapter, on A Mask, deals with a political dimension to feminist theology which Milton does not accommodate, at least insofar as he lets his monster, Comus, voice it. So far, Milton's spiritual temper has sympathized considerably with the feminist theological one. His appreciation for a divine and feminine presence amidst creation; rejection of female guilt and self-sacrifice; emphasis on a less singly- and power-oriented mode of salvation that includes women; and his subtle critique of the prejudices that lead a reader to embrace one biblical heroine but reject another--each of these factors bespeaks Milton's near-feminist theological sensibility. When it comes to A Masque, however, Comus gets to speak the ideas that feminist theology (at least within its most radical strains--what some term "post-Christian" religion) would identify as revolutionary.

Written first among the works studied here, A Mask denotes Milton's theological starting point: Lady Alice's wholly rational piety. Contention everywhere informs it: mind duels with body, heroine duels with monster, the spirit world combats the sensual world of Nature. (Not surprisingly, we will see such contests repeat themselves in Milton's relationship to his Muse.) Comus, on the other hand, does not

fall under the influence of the period's new intellectual approach to spirituality that Alice seems to have internalized. Rather than rape her, Comus seeks to dislodge her from the antagonistic way of relating to the world that her rationalism has bred.

Comus comes last because his rounds and revels, his relationship to what constitutes, in feminist theological terms, a "sacramental universe" (McFague 10), point us to political considerations that, in the course of this study, have been kept at the margins. A politics attaches itself to the spirituality of A Masque much more explicitly than in Milton's other texts, at least according to my treatment of them. Lady Alice's rational piety belies Milton's liberal biases. Not yet thirty, unmarried, and still to grasp what attaining a sense of balance in relationships might mean, Milton cannot allow Alice to understand the world in terms other than those of contention. Comus relates to the world differently--in tune with the connectedness of creation and deity. His worldview implies a kind of socialist feminism, a framework for "social[ly] restructuring. . . both class and gender hierarchies" in the name of the masses (Ruether 1983:42-43). Recognizing the interrelatedness of all being, Comus also is able to acknowledge the network of obligations in which all living things exist. The scene at the castle spins on this point: again, rather than rape her, Comus would try to increase Lady Alice's awareness of such a network

surrounding her and impinging upon her. He challenges her to recognize the fundamental state of indebtedness in which she lives.

In order to attain the fullest picture of feminist theology, the reader must have a clear sense of the direction it ultimately might take us as a society: toward an understanding of ourselves as other-constituted with all the social obligations which that understanding implies. Likewise, in order to grasp the extent of Milton's relationship to feminist theology, we end with Milton's expression of its fullest vision, even if, paradoxically, such expression issues from the starting point of his thinking and gets demonized in Comus.

Notes

1. Some recent feminist rereadings of Genesis 1 and 2-3 detect ideological differences between the two accounts. Genesis 1, the "P" account, seems to have the more feminist outlook, assigning neither the male nor female the privilege of first creation. But Phyllis Tribble looks upon Genesis 2-3, the "J" account, as also having feminist implications. It is the woman's putative "second" creation that differentiates Adam. Before her appearance, Adam is but ha-adam, an ungendered "earth creature." See Tribble, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

Mary Nyquist enters the feminist exegetical discussion with specific reference to Milton. Nyquist basically argues that the discourse of sexuality in Paradise Lost and the prose does not corroborate Tribble's reading of Genesis or other feminist theologians who read Genesis "ahistorically," i.e. outside the context of the patriarchal biases surrounding Genesis. According to Nyquist, Milton exemplifies the fact

that any reading of Genesis inevitably will be "a product of its time." See "The Genesis of Gendered Subjectivity" and "Gynesis, Genesis, Exegesis, and the Formation of Milton's Eve."

My own study, however, does not hazard to separate Milton from the patriarchy of his times to the same extent that Tribble would lift her text from a biblical patriarchal tradition. Nor do I deal with the debate going on among feminist theologians about the different creation accounts. Instead, my interest is in applying to Milton wider theological questions as feminist theology has asked them. For instance, are there places in Scripture that could speak to contemporary feminist concerns? Once we realize that our own immersion in patriarchal thought and culture shapes, even clouds, our readings of scriptural texts, is it possible ever to have or allow a feminist discourse to emerge from scripture? (This is different from presupposing that one can "get outside" ideology. It is more a matter of trying to examine reading biases or read against their grain.) In what ways can redemption be "re-imaged", or re-imagined, to justify for women a larger role in mediation? What is Milton's relationship to such concerns? To what degree does he emerge sympathetic to them?

2. See Feminist Milton, pp. 23-24, 38-39.

3. One can appreciate, along with Masson, the epic poetry as a continuation of Milton's polemicizing in Milton's own statement that accompanied the strategically-timed reappearance of the First Defense in October 1658, the year England loses Cromwell. Milton confesses his intention for "yet greater things"--writings perhaps, that will constitute the "best witness--not only to my own country, to which I have paid the highest I possessed, but even to men of whatever nation, and to the cause of Christendom above all." See Parker 40-41.

4. Wittreich uses the term in reference to Paradise Lost, p. 25.

5. Both Georgia Christopher's study, Milton and the Science of the Saints (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), and Elaine Pagel's chapter, "One God, One Bishop" in Gnostic Gospels have shaped my perspective here.

6. Speaking of the excessive literalism (or "idolatry") of religious language, Sallie McFague cites British theologian Ian T. Ramsey:

Let us always be cautious of talking about God in straightforward language. Let us never talk as if we had privileged access to the diaries of God's private

life. . . so that we may say quite cheerfully why God did what, when and where. (7)
 See Metaphorical Theology, especially chapters one and two.

It is interesting that William Riley Parker, in his essay on Milton's early reputation, points to the contemporary dissatisfaction with Milton's prose as "never touching at" what he really means to say. The Censure of the Rota, for instance, has this to say:

You trade altogether in universals the Region of ~~Deceits~~ and falacie, but never come so near particulars as to let us know which among diuerse things of the same kind you would be at.

Such a charge goes along with those that condemn Milton for "arm[ing]" himself "with anything that lies in your way, right, or wrong, not onely begging, but stealing questions, and taking everything for granted, that will not serve your turn." See Milton's Contemporary Reputation (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1940), pp. 57-58.

Abiding in the "Native Element":

Milton's Invocations and Creation-Centered Spirituality

Any reader of Paradise Lost who appreciates the text's portrait of a God "from whom/ All things proceed, and up to him return" (V.324), i.e. the God who would be all in all, would hardly dispute that Milton's God is a "repairing" God,¹ a God who would restore creation, of both Heaven and Earth, to its perfection. Despite this fact, it is possible to overlook the implications for feminism, within the text and without, of such a creation-centered spirituality. The problem stems in large measure from the way in which classical Christian theology moved people past a confidence in Original Blessing and emphasized instead Original Sin.² Orthodoxy accepts the idea of an original goodness in creation, the imago dei, but only to heighten the disparity between that state and postlapsarian sinfulness. It is the latter to which contrite hearts and minds must turn. What happens is that women, made to bear the burden of figuring the postlapsarian perversion of God's image in man, are excluded from any claim to the imago dei themselves.

Since Paradise Lost is about Original Sin, we almost take for granted its place in mainstream theology. The text's displacement of Eve's sin onto other female types--the

"monstrous serpent wom[a]n" Sin in Book 2, the tempestuous daughters of Cain in Book 11--such as Anna Juhnke notes (50-57), reinforces the framework wherein the imago dei becomes normative of male relationship to God and the female represents its failed potentiality. Thus even Milton's most favorable portraits of Eve can be read to conform to the orthodox line. But if we are willing to recognize the fact that an ethos of imago dei, i.e. a creation-centered spirituality, contradicts Original Sin as a theological starting point, we have a new basis for evaluating Milton's "orthodoxy." To reassert a creation-centered spirituality is one of the primary strategies of feminist theologians who would call Western culture back to the fundamental prophetic message of the Bible. It is this message that allows "women [to] name themselves as subjects of authentic and full humanity" (Ruether 1983:19), an impossibility in religious systems obsessed by Original Sin. If we accept this premise, then, we might also set ourselves the task of determining the extent to which an emphasis in Paradise Lost on original goodness in creation subordinates Eve's sin.

One starting point would be to examine some ways in which Paradise Lost closely follows or adheres to a Hebraic understanding of God's immanence in creation. Conventionally, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is separate from creation. In consequence, this removal encourages humanity's abstraction from creation as well, until it too becomes so

psychologically alienated that it can reconcile itself to its embodiment only through metaphysical postulations. The most familiar and pertinent one in our case is, of course, the whole idea of a "fall" (which transfers the "mishap" to Eve). However, as scholars of the Hebrew Bible remind us, such a bifurcated view of creation and deity, body and spirit, is antithetical to Hebraic thought. Thus to discern a Milton at odds with binary modes of thought pertaining to creation would be to see him struggling with patriarchal attitudes.

Nothing in Paradise Lost epitomizes this crux more fully than Milton's relationship with his Muse. At once a figure predominating over creation, she is also inextricably part of it. Milton vacillates between invoking her as a goddess and keeping her immanent in creation. The Yahwistic strains of Jewish Wisdom thought also kept the deity immanent in creation. For these writers, whose God remained specifically the guiding force of the exodus and exile, wisdom bespoke the voice of Yahweh calling out to humanity from Nature. The God who cried out was "God with us," the one who would see the Israelites through their wanderings. Even Genesis 1-2:4, the "first" creation story (i.e. placed first in the canon but written last), with its accompanying God of booming voice and disembodied essence, belongs to the prophetic context. Likewise, Milton's solicitations of the Muse mean to draw her to creation further. As we see in the invocations to Books 3 and 7 especially, he would have her penetrate the very fiber

of his being. Milton also taps into some noteworthy traditions that allude to the divine presence amidst creation as feminine. All this cannot but imply much for, if not a less misogynous Milton, then at least a Milton who yearns to heal himself of misogyny's alienation.

Who is Milton's Muse? Scholars have spent much time trying to answer this question, but what is generally agreed is that no matter the intended recipient of the various addresses, Milton invokes only manifestations of God's self-revelatory Spirit. From the criticism it appears that the Muse's identity keeps shifting: from the Holy Spirit, to the Logos or Son, to Urania, to Dame Wisdom. But I would argue that this instability is itself purposive; it disenables the critic from extending questions of divine metaphysics in Milton too far. Possibly, Milton is more interested in the activity of God's descent, suggested here, than in issues of what manifestation of God is sent. "The meaning, not the Name I call" (7.50). For Milton's "meaning," we might substitute God's "doing." In other words, Milton's imprecision over the identity of his Muse corresponds to the Hebraic understanding of God's self-revelation as a divine activity or interaction, rather than a particular hypostasis of God on a divine mission from heaven. For the Hebrew Bible, God's descent begins salvation history. It marks the establishment of God's covenant and enables the Israelites' safe passage through the

exodus. Its successive reoccurrences transform human character, renew covenant, and look forward to a time when the whole of God's people, possessing the Spirit, see the age of fulfillment. God's descent, then, is joined fundamentally to eschatology. For the Israelites, God's deigning to bind godself to humanity and/in creation anticipates the time when God will abide with humanity permanently (Lampe 1962:629). The nations wait for a moment akin to the one Milton predicts: when "New Heav'n and Earth shall to the Ages rise,/ Or down from Heav'n descend" (10.647-48).³

Given the preponderance of references in Paradise Lost that anticipate the renewal of creation in the endtime (the majority of which appear in Books 3, 11 and 12), this day of expectation is central to Paradise Lost as well. The text's prophetic tenor emphasizes event or occurrence, over and above agency. We have a hint of this fact in Book 3 when, first divining the trouble to befall humankind, the Father asserts "Man . . . shall find grace" (131) before the Son volunteers to dispense it:

[Satan's regiment] by thir own suggestion fell,
 Self-tempted, self-deprav'd: Man falls deceiv'd
 By the other first: Man therefore shall find grace,
 The other none: in Mercy and Justice both,
 Through Heav'n and Earth, so shall my glorie excel,
 But Mercy first and last shall brightest shine.

(128-133)

The point again takes precedence later in the book just before the Son steps forward. "Man shall not quite be lost, but sav'd who will,/ . . . / . . . once more I will renew/ His lapsed powers" (3. 173-176). The question is then put, "Say Heav'nly Powers, where shall we find such love" (213) to redeem the fallen? The Son is a means, but the Father's vision from the outset is so decisive that even if (impossible to think) the Son did not step forward, some other channel for "prevenient grace" (11.3) would light upon humanity. God's congratulations of the Son, in acceptance of his offer, says that the Son understands best the importance of maintaining the original goodness in Creation. "Wilt thou thy self/ Abolish thy Creation, and unmake,/ For [Satan], what for thy glorie thou hast made?" (3.162-164) To do so would contradict the inherent goodness of God, itself an impossibility, and desecrate the same within creation. No, humanity must be saved, for to abolish it would bring God's own "goodness [i.e. his own image] to naught" (3.158).

The text's preoccupation with the God who descends to creation sets Milton at odds with binary modes of thought which have supported patriarchy. Calling to the Muse, a manifestation of God's self-revelatory spirit, the poet aligns himself with Judaic traditions that predate Western conceptions of a corruptible and guilt-infested Nature. In Scripture, such a typically Judaic perspective manifests itself in a biblical theology of presence. The motifs of this

theology include God's abiding with God's people in some perceptible form, such as glory or light, and images that figure God's deigning to descend, such as visitation, overshadowing, hovering, or covering. A womb-like protection is often implied, with the earliest manifestations of presence in the form of a vessel (e.g. tabernacle and ark). Besides these, God's presence is said to "fill" any space it would occupy.

Presence motifs in Milton's invocations are easily recognizable. All solicit God's descent. The loftiness of God's throne in heaven, its "glorious brightness where [God] sit'st/ . . . inaccessible" (3.376-77) (itself a presence motif throughout the poem) intensifies the speaker's desire that God befriend him in an act of self-revelation. Repeatedly, and in readiness, Milton offers "each" Spirit he invokes a place of habitation. In Book I, it is "th'upright heart and pure" (18); Book 3, "the mind" that would be radiated by her beams (51-53); and Book 7, the "Diurnal Sphere" to which Milton hopes to attract the Muse, now freshly coming to that realm himself (22). By Book 9, the Muse is a familiar visitant of the Night, here needing little inducement. Milton takes her attendance almost for granted, barely soliciting her directly. Presumably, she has come to favor fully the resting places of each of Milton's preceding offers.

Repeatedly, moreover, Milton's Muse is the light that

appears to the believer who aches for God's presence. By this association, she "Illumine[s]" darkness of mind and spirit (1.22-23), warms Milton's eyes alive from their blindness (3.22; 51-55), vitalizes with radiance the stagnate passages of Styx (3. 13-14) and puts the darkened and dangerous powers of evil to rout (7.27-29)--even at night. Images of God's investiture, as in the biblical images that wrap God in a mantle of light and glory, pervade the invocations as well. At the creation, the Spirit with "mighty wings outspread" surcharges the presence of God over "the vast Abyss" (1.20-21). The image presented is a hovering, a still and potent "brooding" (1.21) that denotes at once shelter, impregnation, and a protective overshadowing. Similarly, the picture of a force enveloping "as with a Mantle. . ./The rising world of waters dark and deep" (3.10-11) link the ideas of investiture, divine encompassment, and God's protection. These images also capture God's "fullness." At the same time, God's "shadowing," or hovering relates to his mantle of illumination in that each image rewrites God's intangibility in terms that suggest the pervasive suffusion of something that can be, though qualifiedly, both "seen" and felt.

To trace the evolution of a biblical theology of God's presence is to retrace salvation history, finding God immanent within it. John Shawcross, noting Milton's penchant for a "tabernacling" God ("In a way, I suppose, Milton's poem becomes his temple for God's covenant" [77]), explicates the

invocation to Book I in a way that makes it possible for us to map God's progress from Mount Oreb to the human heart. Essentially, Milton traces the "coming of God" to humanity in terms of place. The "secret top/ Of Horeb, or of Sinai," and "Sion Hill," while denotative of the various offices--prophet, king, and priest--which Milton will strive to imitate in his poem (Shawcross' point), are also landmarks in a biblical theology of God's presence. The "flame of fire" on Mount Horeb (Ex.3:2); the place where Moses receives God in the law, Mount Sinai; and David's temple, the place of permanent protection for the sanctuary for God's wandering presence (the ark of the covenant), map out God's "stopping grounds" towards establishing his abode, once and for all, in "Th'upright heart and pure" (1.18). Shawcross is right, the poem is a kind of Temple, not least of all because it shares a similar history. Like the Temple, the poem starts out with its own "wandering," transversing its own desert-like "void[s] and formless infinite[s]" (3.12). But also like the Temple, it figures forth the expectation that one day God will abide with his people permanently and in his entirety.

Charting the course of the Spirit's passage from Sion to the human heart, the invocation to Book 1 establishes the exodus as central to the poem and anticipates its successful completion. However, as I want to show, Milton broadens the vision of God's providence beyond the exodus in ways that complement a creation-centered spirituality--a spirituality

that, as I have suggested, speaks against the traditional emphasis on Original Sin and ultimately validates the inclusion of the feminine within divinity.

For Milton, salvation history does not necessarily begin with the Israelite's departure from Egypt. Paradise Lost starts at the convergence of two moments: the exodus as well as the world's first stirrings out of Chaos. As already noted, Milton links his Muse to a gesture of self-investment by God at the creation. "Thou from the first/ Wast Present, and with mighty wings outspread" (1.19-20) overshadowed primeval matter in a moment of both fertility and protection. Book 3 also attests to the Spirit's inextricability from world-inception in the "Mantle" that envelopes, as if protectively, the "rising world of waters" (3.10-11). Figuring God's protective action in terms of "investment" ("as with a Mantle [thou] didst invest" [3.10]) relates God's extreme identification with the matter God would shape. The image connotes both descent into and envelopment or protection of. It also anticipates another extreme joining of God to humanity, the Incarnation. In the announcement of Gabriel to Mary, the Spirit is foreseen to "cover [humanity] with its shadow" (Luke 1:35 [Mollenkott 1988: 39]). Beyond the primary meaning of the Greek episkiaszo, "to cast a shadow upon," the word also connotes "envelope in a haze of brilliancy," or more figuratively, to "invest with preternatural brilliancy."⁴ The very concept of Incarnation refers back to the tradition of

God's investiture of presence at the creation. In the same way, John 1:14 announces God's "[becoming] flesh and dwel[ling] among us." The Greek eskenosen, meaning "tabernacled," (Strong 4636) makes the parallels between God's self-disclosure and God's self-investiture in creation.

It is within this Hebraic complex that we might interpret the imagined "stopover" of Milton's Muse to "Siloa's Brook" in Book I (11). "Fast [flowing] by the Oracle of God" (11-12), i.e. the Temple, Siloa's Brook comes as the next manifestation in a series, here duplicated by Milton, of God's evolving presence in creation. The reference is to the one sent (siloah, sent out) by the Father. But the sense of the reference's source, John 9:1-7, seems to place just as much emphasis on God's sending activity. The rabbis have put to Jesus a question of agency: "who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" (9:2) Jesus answers, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God might be made manifest in him" (9:3). Notably, one of tradition's prooftexts for establishing Jesus' preternatural divinity links him with imperfect humanity; following with the statement, "While I am in this world, I am the light of the world," Jesus identifies with the blind man insofar as he too is a channel for divine activity. Just as God invested himself in primordial matter, God's manifestations continue--here in both Jesus and the blind man. The light runs through both of them as if through a tunnel

like the brook of Siloam itself (Cf. 2 Kings 20:20). Jesus' response to the rabbis glosses the Son's prediction to Satan in the text that will culminate the emergent theology of these invocations: Paradise Regained. The revelatory action of the "inward Oracle" whom God sends is "henceforth to dwell" (PR 1.464,63) in everyone. Creation's perfection and salvation history reach completion according to the same movement of God's immanence in human nature.

In still another way, Milton founds his poem on the enjambment of two seemingly separable elements of biblical tradition, exodus and creation. Milton's very first address to the Muse calls the Spirit "that on the secret top/ of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire/ That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,/ In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth" were created (6-9). Not only does Milton juxtapose two conventionally independent theological events; he conflates two potentially contradictory conceptions of deity: a universal and creative God, modelled on the Near Eastern god El; and Yahweh, the god promised to preserve a chosen people. To identify the two gods, one with the other, extends salvation history back to the world's beginnings. By reminding us that the great mediator of the Exodus, Moses, also wrote the creation accounts, Milton suggests that Moses' insight was to reveal the Israelites' liberator-God as the creator-God. Presumably, the Israelites' plight could be better lived and understood by this recognition. The

conflation allows God to justify the covenant with the Israelites via the imago dei which becomes, in turn, the guarantee that the divine goodness pervading creation, and now history, must be upheld.

For women who expect religion to validate their share in imago dei, the combination of the two Gods has even larger implications on two levels. One we have already hinted: the Yahweh of the exodus experience has been thought to evolve apart from the biblical creation stories. The idea of a universal God, interested in the well-being of all, is incongruous with the concept of a God who singles out one people for special protection. (As I will explain, the prophets recognized this as a problem.) To see these two gods as the same God suggests that a principle of both order and dignity inheres in creation--for all creation, men and women. Potentially, the concept works to de-authorize sexist acts and theologies.

Relatedly, Milton's bold assimilation aligns the poet with prophetic tradition and modern feminist efforts to radicalize it. Notably, the supposed incompatibility of the Israelite and universal deities is first recognized and treated by Jeremiah and Deutero-Isaiah (Saggs 43). Post-exilic prophets, in contact with an increasingly diverse population, have trouble justifying to their communities a God whose special interest in Israel appears to exclude other peoples. So they make the theological claim that the

Israelite God is the same one who formed the heavens and the earth. The universal and all-powerful god El, for a long time synonymous with pre-Exodus conceptions of God, comes to share his particular agencies with Yahweh, whose powers until now are comparatively circumscribed. El and Yahweh, together, become God of the nations. As H.W.F. Saggs explains it:

[now] God's care for Israel, as represented in the doctrine of Salvation History . . . [becomes] a particular aspect of God's care for the world which stemmed from his activity as cosmic creator. With the two doctrines so connected, the election of Israel and the settlement in the promised land could be presented as an end towards which creation was directed (49).

Prophetic tradition thus represents a turning point wherein the Israelites conceive and proclaim a God who cares for all people. Yahweh merits praise for creating the universe and giving it guidance. Israel's election is reconceptualized as well. It serves as:

a covenant of the people,
a light of the Gentiles;
To open the blind eyes,
to bring out the prisoners from the prison,
and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.

(Isaiah 42: 6-7 [51])

Genesis 1-2:4 is written to confirm God's new persona. At this moment, the biblical proof-text for man and woman's equal

creation in the eyes of God enters theology. Prophecy and imago dei link up historically (49). Returning the God of the exodus to the creation (as Milton's first invocations do) carries prophetic import for any persons who would claim the principle of "full and authentic humanity" (Ruether 1983:19).

From here, it is not difficult to imagine how attractive such a convergence of divine images would be to feminist and liberation theologies. To find in history a God who attends his people, at the same time recommitting himself to them as their creator, is indeed empowering. The message intensifies even further when one realizes that, fundamentally, the principle of imago dei motivates God's saving action. God would restore all people to a level of dignity that ushered in their very creation. Hence, theologies that ordain hierarchies become insupportable. Feminist theologians hold that women need this message with a special urgency because as a group today they represent "the oppressed of the oppressed" (Ruether 1983: 32). Both prophetic and creation-centered frameworks drive home the point that women may claim the imago dei as part of their spiritual heritage. That Milton assimilates the creation to the Exodus aligns him theologically with feminist religious writers who seek to call Western culture back to the Bible's prophetic message.

Thus adjoining the Gods of both the Exodus and the "first" creation story in his earliest invocations, Milton inscribes their linkage, traceable to the sixth century B.C., within the

poem's very basis for beginning. Each of the invocations' successive references to the Exodus experience throws the reader back in memory to the promise, not merely of election, but of eventual eschatological renewal. Genesis 1-2:4 implies the promise as does the prophetic tradition of which it is a product. Sion, a keystone in the establishment of presence among God's wandering people, reappears in Book 3. It is "chief[ly]" there that Milton seeks for his Muse. Keeping with the exodus theme, Milton in Book 7 solicits the Muse in expectation of protection from surrounding evils. He sings:

though fall'n on evil dayes,
On evil dayes though fall'n, and evil tongues;
In darkness, and with dangers compast round,
And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
Visit'st my slumbers Nightly,

(7.2529)

The feeling that one was besieged by one's enemies motivates much of the great petitioning of the Exodus period. Importantly, the perception of the petitioner is that he or she is surrounded by a company of evildoers. Hear Psalm 22:

Many bulls have compassed me; strong bulls of
Bashan have beset me round. . . .as a ravening and a
roaring lion. . . .

For dogs have compassed me; the assembly of the
wicked have inclosed me. . . .they look and stare upon
me (Ps. 22: 12-17).

Likewise, Psalm 31:

For I have heard the slander of many: fear was on every side: while they took counsel together against me, they devised to take away my life (13).

It is no small point for Milton that the fear links up with the psalmists' role as prophet. Psalm 41 reiterates this fear: "All who hate me. . . devise my hurt" (7), as does Psalm 118: "They compassed me about; yea, they compassed me about" (11). Milton's fear of remaining too long in the underworld of Books 1 and 2 aligns him with a tradition of prophetic apprehension. His "venture down/ The dark descent" to "the Stygian Pool," "Chaos and Eternal Night" (3. 19-20;18), parallels the prophet's experience:

I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing:

I am come into deep waters, Where the floods overflow ■
(Psalm 69:2).

Newly come from Hell, well might Milton also say:

The sorrows of death compassed me, and the floods of ungodly men made me afraid; The sorrows of hell compassed me about: the snares of death prevented me
(Psalm 18:4-5).⁵

But in many ways, these laments are forms that call God to account for abandoning the faithful. Could Milton be cautioning the Muse against doing the same? Such is the confidence, characteristic of the psalmists, that Yahweh will bear out the saving action promised them against foreign and

hostile forces, and bring nearer the day God comes permanently to reside with God's people.

Insofar as he submits the Exodus God to the promise of the creation--or Universal--God, Milton superimposes a creation-centered spirituality over a repressive Calvinist piety obsessed by Original Sin. To light upon the former in Paradise Lost extends Milton's role as a prophet. We find him at the junction where the very framework for feminist and liberation theologies begins. The rest of the text carries through much of what the invocations, in their prophetic context, imply. Matthew Fox, describing creation-centered spirituality, cannot but enumerate Paradise Lost's familiar themes. The list is long: "cosmic grace and humanity's divinization," "delight in the holiness of all being," "panentheism--God in us and us in God," "a microcosmic/macrocosmic synchronicity with the universe," "passions as a blessing," and "compassion not as an ethical duty or as a feeling-pity-for, but as justice--'compassion means justice'" (100). To elaborate on even just a few of the ways in which these themes manifest themselves in the text would be to repeat points all ready well-rehearsed. What the criticism has found less obvious, I propose, is that these themes now surface as a group, under cover of a certain discourse, creation theology, which contradicts that discourse by which Milton's "Puritan epic" traditionally has been read.

One motif which Fox enumerates in his essay on creation-

spirituality, however, does merit special elaboration here: humility--specifically, humility as "befriend[ing] our earthiness." Fox takes the significance of the idea from humility's etymology: humus, "earth" (100). On the one hand, the point re-emphasizes the inherent goodness of creation and disapproves the impulse to abstract oneself psychologically from one's origins, one's being--an idea fundamentally relevant to creation-spirituality. But when placed in the larger context of God's participation in creation and salvation history, the notion also comments on that phenomenon which grounds both processes at their roots: God's humility which Hebraic tradition recognizes in God's moments of descent.

Raphael, as the friendly angel, embodies the phenomenon literally. He combines his mission to forewarn the couple of impending danger with an important lesson to them about the goodness of human desires and needs. The first words of his greeting to Adam affirm Paradise as a realm attractive to angel spirits: "nor art thou such/ Created, or such place hast here to dwell,/ as may not oft invite, though Spirits of Heav'n" (5. 372-74). This is a point the "propitious guest" will repeat: the pleasures of the spiritual, or the disembodied, state are only elevations of what Adam and Eve experience. "Whatever pure in the body enjoy'st/ (And pure thou wert created) we enjoy/ In eminence" (9.622-24) The table which Eve and Adam prepare for Raphael, though offered

tentatively ("unsavourie food perhaps/ To spiritual Natures" [5.401-402) is accepted gratefully: "what [the giver] gives/ . . . to man in part/ Spiritual, may of purest Spirits be found/ no ingrateful food" (404-407). Just as he is later to stress in his noble explanation of angelic sex, angels also partake in activities of sustenance: "food alike those pure/ Intelligential substances require/ As doth your Rational. . . / . . . / For know, whatever was created, needs/ To be sustained and fed" (V. 407-409; 414-15, emphasis mine). As Raphael points out, such a fact manifests itself throughout all creation. But he does not leave aside the aspect of pleasure: "yet God hath here/ Varied his bounty so with new delights, /As may compare with Heav'n; and to taste/ Think not that I shall be nice." The narrator continues Raphael's sentiment:

So down they sat,
And to thir viands fell, nor seemingly
The Angel, nor in mist, the common gloss
Of Theologians.

(430-36)

Likewise, the angels' "mix[ing]" (9.616) is expressed as a kind of sustenance: "Let it suffice thee that thou know'st/ Us happie, and without Love no happiness" (9.620-21).

Broadening his divine mission to "advise" Adam and Eve of their happiness, Raphael includes a lesson on the inherent goodness of life in nature. His visit is, quite literally, a

goodness of life in nature. His visit is, quite literally, a befriending in the mutual contexts of salvation history and creation spirituality. Like the visits which God bestows upon the Israelites, Raphael's descent betokens guidance. According to Philip Gallagher, it initiates the regenerative process and corroborates Anthony Low's observation (about Samson) that "secretly guiding and shaping the action is the hidden providence of God" (132; Low 63). Through Raphael, God's presence emerges in the stirrings of Adam's and Eve's own exodus from sin. But like the descent of God's spirit at the world's first rising, the angel's visit also figures the divine investiture in creation. Raphael signals God's identification with God's craftings in the same way the angel affirms human and non-human Nature. Milton uses the angel to personify what the invocations typify: a God whose wish to move the chosen people to safety stems from having intended their perfect creation.

Like the invocations, then, Raphael presents a God of dual intentions: to secure humanity's safety and bring them into congruence with the blessedness of their creation. We have seen how prophetic tradition aligns these purposes. Jewish Wisdom tradition works the same effect. Given that at least one of Milton's invocations mentions Wisdom in connection with the Muse outright, it may be possible to deepen our detection of a creation-spirituality in Milton by turning now to a related Wisdom tradition.

Perhaps more than any other Jewish tradition, Wisdom invokes the connection of deity and humanity. Later (Greek-influenced) scriptures in the Hebrew Bible personify Wisdom as a separable divine attribute, removing her original lodging to the skies. She is a figure of descent in the sense that she seeks out a resting place among the righteous. But while these aspects of the tradition are important for appreciating the ways in which first-century Palestine first understood Jesus (a point that will obtain in our reading of Paradise Regained), they do not answer directly to the Exodus tradition of a God who instills both laws and presence within creation and earthbound experience. The phenomenon around which Yahwist conceptions of wisdom develop is God's descent to and in creation. That is, her manifestations, the many forms of creation, embed--like the ark and Temple--God's special residence within the nation he would guide. Creation contains within itself the secrets of God's divine activity. Wisdom is both witness to and representative of God's act of infusing creation with godly knowledge. Her ability to witness is related to her firstness: "Ever the earth was," God "declared it," "prepared it" and "searched it out" (Prov. 8:23; Job 28:27):

The Lord by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens (Prov. 3.19).

Her firstness, in turn, dispenses with the notion that she

could be other than a created being. In other words, Wisdom is the principle of divine order that every aspect of creation reflects. Wisdom is createdness; who would grasp the secrets of wisdom, of God, must search her out, as she calls one to do, through creation. "This 'wisdom,' this 'understanding,' signif[ies] something like the 'meaning' implanted by God in creation," a "wise orderliness" directly related to God's providential care (von Rad 148;162).

Once more, we find the Hebrew scriptures referring not to divine agency but divine activity. What makes Wisdom quintessentially Hebraic is its linkage to divine occurrence. Through creation, i.e. through its wisdom, God instills a source of knowledge meant to guide human history. Both Proverbs and Sirach cite her as a woman who calls humanity to find her:

Doth not wisdom cry? and understanding put forth
her voice....

Unto you, O men, I call; and my voice is to the
sons of man. . . .

For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall
obtain favour of the Lord (Proverbs 8:1,4,35).

Its principle, like the immanent God of the Exodus, is guidance. Only here, the believer must submit him or herself to attending to God's instructions as they manifest themselves in the primeval order (162).

Nearly each of Milton's invocations alludes to a figure

like Wisdom. Insofar as Wisdom is the Holy Spirit in creation, each of Milton's references to the Spirit recall her. "Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first/ Wast present" (1.19-2). The lines that follow, as we know, refer to God's creative activity ("and with mighty wings outspread/ Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast Abyss/ And mad'st it pregnant:"). On this basis one might suppose a clear distinction between the created Wisdom and the creator God. But that Milton conjoins their associations is precisely the point. Milton may recount God's creative activity, but he does so to authorize the spirit's power to provide accurate witness: "Say first, for Heav'n hides nothing from thy view" (1.27). As we also know, it is the power of wisdom to offer witness that makes her, like Milton's Spirit, invaluable to those who would seek her. (How much moreso to the prophet?) The juxtaposition purposefully duplicates the entangled and interdependent relationship between creator and created. It shows Milton's difficulty, or inability, to separate completely the deity from creation.

Likewise, the invocation to Book 3 conjures wisdom as a source of knowledge by continuing the invitational emphasis on the witness enabled by creation's firstness:

Hail holy Light, offspring of Heav'n first-born,

.

before the Sun,

Before the Heav'ns thou wert, and at the voice

Of God, as with a Mantle didst invest

The rising world of waters dark and deep. . .

(3.1; 8-11).

Again, the text juxtaposes creative activity and first creation. William Hunter has explicated the first several lines of this passage to assert Light as an embodiment of the Son. Light emanates from the Sun just as the Son emanates from the Father. As light, the Muse embodies attributes of God, most notably, "his power (potentia) and virtue (virtue) which according to Milton may be called the Spirit of God. . . , " a perception Hunter looks to the Christian Doctrine to confirm (155).⁶ Milton's Muse figures the Son as a derivation of "God's 'effectual might' [PL 6.703] in the universe, recipient of the Father's unlimited Virtue" (156).⁷

I would argue, however, that here Milton is not nearly so metaphysical with reference to being. In a manner that complements the way in which light, in presence tradition, connotes God's self-revelation, light for Milton retains its tie to a God in/of creation:

Let there be Light, said God, quintessence pure
 Sprung from the Deep, and from her Native East
 To journeie through the airie gloom began,
 Sphear'd in a radiant Cloud, for yet the Sun
 Was not

(7.243-47)

Light is also creation. And her firstness links her to

divinity. She shares the metaphors of God's presence: "shee in a cloudie Tabernacle/ Sojourn'd the while." Later, to make the Sun, God "Tranplanted [her] from her cloudie Shrine" (7.360). A godlike but created presence fills the Sun, much like God's immanence is to fill the Tabernacle; light is "plac'd"

In the Suns Orb, made porous to receive
And drink the liquid Light, firm to retain
Her gather'd beams, great Palace now of Light.

(7.360-63)

In such a description (in combination with 7.243-46, just cited), we hear Sirach's wisdom text:

"From the mouth of the Most High I came forth,
and mistlike covered the earth.
In the heights of heaven I dwelt,
my throne on a pillar of cloud.
The vault of heaven I compassed alone [because first?]
through the deep abyss I took my course.

(24:3-6)

The wisdom which Milton would solicit from his Muse stems in large part from the inextricability from creation she connotes.

But it is the invocation to Book 7 that aligns Wisdom with the Muse outright. Here Milton calls to a "Goddess," "Heav'nlie born" (7.40;7). Nonetheless, the motif of Wisdom's firstness in creation is still present:

Before the Hills appeard, or Fountains flow'd,
 Thou with Eternal Wisdom didst convers,
 Wisdom thy Sister, and with her didst play
 In the presence of th'Almightie Father, pleas'd
 With thy Celestial Song.

(7.7-12)

Milton criticism has not neglected the relationship of Milton's Muse of Book 7 to biblical wisdom, especially the figure of Proverbs 8: 22-31. Her tie to creation in this wisdom scripture still obtains:

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way,
 before his works of old.

I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning,
 or ever the earth was.

When there were no depths, I was brought forth;
 when there were no fountains abounding with water.

Before the mountains were settled, before the
 hills was I brought forth:

While as yet he had not made the earth, not the
 fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world.

When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he
 set a compass upon the face of the depth:

When he established the clouds above: when he
 strengthened the fountains of the deep:

When he gave to the sea his decree, that the
 waters should not pass his commandments: when he

appointed the foundations of the earth:

Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and
I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him
(Prov. 8: 22-30).

The Hebrew ganah of line 22 means "create" (with connotations of "owning," "procuring" or "redeeming " [Strong 7069]). Similarly, the nacak ("set up") of line 23 and the chuw ("brought forth") of lines 24 and 25 convey the sense of image-making--pouring, casting, twisting, or whirling, i.e. conjuring into being (Strong 5258; 2342). Certainly, the dance among the "sisters" connotes a creation-like "mirroring" in several of these senses. Once more, to assert the Muse's privileged access to divine truth authorizes his prophecy. Wisdom tradition ties such access to a witness, a wisdom, emanating from the world's first moments. The point is doubly pertinent since this invocation prepares Milton to recount the creation story itself.

Dependency upon God's "wise orderliness" (von Rad 162) in creation grounds much of Paradise Lost. Adam and Eve call upon the witness creation can offer in their many hymns. For Adam, creation is a source of knowledge about God; it spurs him to voice one of his first recognitions. Delighting in its goodness, he discerns:

needs must the ample Power

That made us, and for us this ample World

Be infinitely good, and of his good

As liberal and free as infinite

(4.412-415; emphasis mine)

Creation as witness also is capable of telling him something about himself. At his awakening, he inquires:

Thou Sun, said I, fair Light,
And thou enlight'n'd Earth, so fresh and gay,
Ye Hills and Dales, ye Rivers, Woods, and Plains,
And ye that live and move, fair Creatures, tell,
Tell, if ye saw, how came I thus, how here?

.

Tell me, how may I know him, how adore,
From whom I have that thus I move and live,
And feel that I am happier than I know.

8.273-82

Creation's closeness to God, concealing his ways, would render creation vocal in praise of God. In Paradise Lost, creation, silent of speech but for the serpent, finds a voice in Adam and Eve:

These are they glorious works, Parent of good,
Almightie, thine this universal Frame,
Thus wondrous fair; thy self how wondrous then!
Unspeakable, who sitst above these Heav'ns
To us invisible or dimly seen
In these thy lowest works, yet these declare
Thy goodness beyond thought, and Power Divine:
Speak yee who best can tell, ye Sons of Light. . .

.
 On Earth joyn all ye Creatures to extoll

Him first, him last, him midst, and without end.

(5.152-64)

"Speak yee who best can tell": the planets, the stars, Sun, fountains, winds, birds, and plants are in the best position to sing God's praises because it is within them that God's wisdom, as self-revelation, is hid. The first couple's hymn attests to the knowledge of the creator that all of them possess. It reinforces the insight of wisdom tradition that accredits creation with special understanding. In it, "the world proclaims itself before God as a created thing" (von Rad 162).

However, the difference between hymns and wisdom is that the former would speak to God; the latter would instruct humanity. For a prophet, the idea that a source of revelation obtains in creation is not without its conflicts. On a certain level, wisdom in creation competes with the prophet: Now "revelatory experience happens to men not through a specific irreversible sign of salvation in history, but which, rather, emanates from the power of order which is held to be self-sufficient. It is this power and not, therefore, priests, prophets or actualized traditions of the saving history that is the great mediator" (von Rad 175). We saw how prophetic tradition fundamentally joins the creation and exodus-exile experiences. But wisdom tradition, while it

likewise attests to creation's goodness and Yahweh's guidance, engages Nature as a self-contained and independent revelatory force.

I have hitherto alluded to one possibility for the anxiety Milton expresses over his role as prophet in the invocations: an identification with the prophet of Psalms whom God abandons to his enemies during the exile. Now, in the framework of wisdom's self-sufficiency, one might better define these enemies as a contending psychological force: specifically, Milton reacts against league with a frightening female self-sufficiency.

Thus far we have made little of the fact that the self-revelatory element in creation, in both later wisdom tradition, and in Milton's invocations, is gendered female. Milton criticism already recognizes God's descents into creation and his taking up a special residence there as a motif in Paradise Lost. But not much has been made of the connection between it and the traditional Hebraic rendering of these images in feminine terms. Michael Lieb especially has threshed out the extent to which Milton's concern with a "God who dwells" in Israel permeates the entire text. Elaborating on a broad spectrum of presence categories--light and glory, tabernacle and temple, smoke and fire--Lieb articulates the contradiction in Jewish patterns of thought on presence between God's self-revelation and God's hiddenness. "Such are the characteristics of the theophany: at once dazzling and

hidden in darkness, awesome and radiant, characterized by fire and cloud, communicating itself only to the initiate, who speaks with it and is transformed by it." From his description of presence, it is easy to appreciate, along with Lieb, the "idea of the Holy" as a sometimes frightening realm of awe, mystery, and reverence (218). It is also a realm predominantly masculine. If we translate Lieb's insights to the Muse, we near Shawcross' "spirit (anima) of God as [a] dynamic, creative, fiery male force" (76). Likewise, William Hunter's essay on the Muse cited above shapes the critical understanding of it as male.

Despite these readings, such masculine characterizations of presence run counter to the Hebraic notion of God's descent as a feminine phenomenon and to the ways in which Milton's invocations to the Muse reflect it as such. Paradoxically, Shawcross comes closest to this understanding by sharing my emphasis on the process of inspiration. "The infusion of God as male force on the dormant and womb-like abyss is the cosmic parallel of the besought infusion of God on the receptive poet" (79). Herein the activity embeds both feminine and masculine dimensions. In a similar vein, Lieb mentions the embodiment of God's presence in the Shekinah of rabbinical mysticism, which takes on for the first time, he says, a feminine quality (222). Milton undergoes a feminizing experience but the encounter involves no less a seemingly self-sufficient female force.

Virginia Mollenkott, a reader of the "egalitarian implications" (1978: 35) of both Milton's Muse and biblical traditions of presence, makes the point relevant to Shawcross: to emphasize the "fiery male force" of Milton's Muse ignores the persona's dove-like qualities. Meanwhile, her book on divine feminine imagery might answer Lieb. "The word Shekinah does not appear in the Bible, but the concept certainly does" (1988: 37). Her essay goes on to elucidate the instances of presence, already familiar to us (cloud, glory, covering, heavenly visitant), in light of their feminine root, shkn, "to dwell." Some research into the manifestations of shkn in the Hebrew Bible confirms Mollenkott's observations. According to W.A. Vangemeren, it appears "not only in the verb ('dwell') but also in the noun miskan ('dwelling place,' 'tabernacle') and in the name 'Shecaniah' ('Yahweh dwells'; e.g. 1 Ch.3:21f.)" (466). The root appears in some of the most important scriptures of Exodus tradition: "And I will dwell among the children of Israel and be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them" (Ex. 29: 45-46). The ark is the abode of the Shekinah: "And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them" (Ex. 25:8). When the ark is completed, God's "glory-cloud" descends upon it. Light "fills" the tabernacle in attestation of God's presence within it (Ex. 40:34). Further along the course of God's residence with the faithful, Solomon dedicates the

Temple in terms of the shekinah: "The Lord said that he would dwell in the thick of darkness. I have surely built thee an house to dwell in, a settled place for thee to abide in for ever" (1Kings 8:12-13). Following, the Incarnation continues the tradition of God's light and presence in feminine terms. The term for overshadow or cover with a shadow in Luke 1:35 ("The Holy Spirit will come upon you. . . and the power of the Most High will cover you with its shadow") appears first in the Septuagint to indicate "Yahweh's Shekinah glory in the Tabernacle" (Mollenkott 1988:39).⁸ To trace salvation history in terms of God's presence is also to discover history's witness to the feminine shekinah.

The more we realize the extent to which Milton taps into traditions of presence and inspiration with both masculine and feminine dimensions, the more we can appreciate the complexity of Milton's relationship to his Muse. Mollenkott hints at the problem: the recognition of both feminine and masculine aspects to the Muse and the experience of encountering the Muse sees a virtual field-day for Freudian, Jungian, and gender psychologists who would have a hand at contextualizing Milton's anxieties. As both Mollenkott and Jackie DiSalvo argue, Milton finds himself in the throes of an encounter with something or someone feminine. Mollenkott offers the Jungian anima, a feminine element of the unconscious. She turns to Emma Jung to explain:

When a man discovers his anima and has come to terms

with it, he has to take up something which previously seemed inferior to him. . . . As a result, when a man enters into relationship with his anima he has to descend from a height, to overcome a resistance--that is, his pride--by acknowledging that she is the "Sovereign Lady" (1978: 33)⁹

For DiSalvo, Milton confronts both a force and prospect no less intimidating. In his desire to "soar/ Above" (1.14-15) the limits of human knowledge, Milton faces the danger of dispensing with stable ego boundaries. As a figure of flight, the Muse makes no promises of safety. Milton, despite himself, hands himself over to a, literally, bewitching Muse. He becomes prey for the maenad-like clutches of Inspiration.

The awfulness of a self-sufficiency in Nature, rendered female, likewise characterizes Adam's ambivalent attitudes toward Eve. Confessing to Raphael his first attraction to Eve, Adam also belies his feeling of being led by her in "awe" (8.559) of her self-sufficiency:

yet when I approach

Her loveliness, so absolute she seems
 And in her self compleat, so well to know
 Her own, that what she wills to do or say,
 Seems wisest, vertuousest, discreetest, best;
 All higher knowledge in her presence falls
 Degraded. . .

.

Authority and Reason on her wait. . .

(8.546-54)

Her creatureliness is the source of Adam's fascination. Inasmuch as her creation is the first such act he witnesses, though asleep, she is first creation, signaling divine mystery.

Under [God's] forming hands a Creature grew,
Manlike, but different sex, so lovely fair,
That what seemd fair in all the World, seemd now
Mean, or in her summ'd up in her containd

(8.470-73)

She impresses him "As one intended first, not after made/ Occasionally; and to consummate all" (8.555-56), a Wisdom-like creation, "Nature her self" (8.505) who embodies "what all Earth and Heaven could bestow" (483). Like the 1645 Annotations cited by Mary Nyquist, Paradise Lost contains its own critique of the period's "hierarchically ordered notions of secondariness" (Nyquist 1988:110), so often drawn out in reference to (inferior, because secondary) Eve.¹⁰

The connection between Eve's and Wisdom's "firstness" is strengthened by the language with which Adam describes his first attempts to win Eve's notice. Both here and in Book 4, the reconcilment of Eve to Adam mirrors the search for Wisdom by Wisdom's devotees. Perfect in her createdness, "she turn[s];/ [Adam] follow[s] her" (8.507-508). Adam's wish to attain Eve in these first moments embeds Milton's struggle

with the Muse who, like Eve,
 would be woo'd, and not unsought be won,
 Not obvious, not obtrusive, but retir'd,
 The more desirable. . .

(8.502-505)

In consequence, Adam's encounter with Eve registers similar fears: "Shee disappeerd, and left me dark, I wak't/ To find her, or for ever to deplore/ Her loss, and other pleasures all abjure" (8.478-80). How resonantly do we hear Milton's invocations to Books 3 and 7 which find Milton hastening after his Muse through "the Muses haunt/ Cleer Spring, or shadie Grove, or Sunnie Hill./ Smit with. . . love" (3.27-29) of what she promises, and "implor[ing]" her to "fail not" (7.38) the devotee who would grasp her. Solomon likewise pursued Wisdom "from [his] youth," "enamored of her beauty" (Wisdom 8:2) "Determined to take her to live with [him]" (8:9), he goes "about seeking to take her for [his] own." (8:18). In turn, Solomon directs us back to Eve as Adam perceives her:

For in her is a spirit intelligent and holy,
 unique of its kind yet manifold, subtle,
 agile, lucid, unsullied,. . .
 She is an exhalation from the power of God,
 a pure effluence from the glory of the Almighty;
 therefore nothing tainted insinuates itself into
 her.
 She is an effulgence of everlasting light,

an unblemished mirror of the active power of God,
and an image of his goodness.

Though but one she can do everything,
and abiding in herself she renews all things. . . .

(Wisdom 7:22b;25-27a)

These words follow Solomon's acknowledgment, close to Adam's, that Wisdom is God's gift to him ("I could not otherwise possess her except God gave it--and this, too, was prudence, to know whose is the gift--"). Therefore, Wisdom, like Eve, must be beseeched of God ("I went to the Lord and besought him, and [supplicated] with all my heart." 8:21). But remember Wisdom's self-sufficiency which Eve's own "compleat[ness]" (8.548) echoes. In still another way, Adam's discourse qualifies the idea of Eve's "contingency" that is argued in some feminist readings of the scene, i.e. the notion that Eve is created second to Adam for Adam, presented to him like a gift.

Ultimately, however, Milton cannot not allow himself to go this far with a created being, especially a female. Raphael reprimands Adam for conceiving Eve in such ways. "For what admir'st thou, what transports thee so,/ An outside?" (8.567-68) the angel asks. But certainly, it was precisely this power of creation, a part of Eve, that mystifies Adam, compels him, which he intended to define. Still, even Raphael's dismissal of Adam's anxiety as over "all her shows" (8.575) cannot discount Adam's perceptions of the weight of

Nature to disclose an inherent goodness in things created.

Notably, the power of that goodness, here "foreshadowed" female, will reemerge in Michael's prophecies predicting, time and again, the restoration of creation through creation in "woman's seed." The Incarnation, rendered by tradition as a feminine coming of God, will ultimately end God's repeated descents and reascents. God "a promise shall" fulfill "Irrevocable, that his Regal Throne/ For ever shall endure" (12.323-24) amidst the desert wanderers, absenting itself no more. God's covenant comes "in the womans seed renewd" (11.116): "so God with man unites" (12.382). Milton's plea to the Muse in Book 7 for "Return. . . to my Native Element" (16), denoting the poet's anxiety, finds added resonance here: it is deity who returns to Milton's "Native Element" in the Incarnation, simultaneously restoring it in yet another, and final, act of descent.

The task, then, for Milton is to come to terms with a dependency upon the feminizing aspects of inspiration, his own embodiedness, and the power of creation to move him. The something "out there" which he addresses inextricably ties together both deity and creation. The problem is in recognizing the extent to which its powers obtain "within" as well. Von Rad's description of wisdom lays out what Milton must realize: "Wisdom can withdraw herself from a man who does not heed her. . . Horror, terror, distress" will come to man. "Men [will be] thrown back upon themselves" (161).

Reason has no claim on her. "If there was, somewhere in Israel, a surrender, verging on the mystical, of man to the glory of existence, then it is to be found" (168) in creation (bespoken by Wisdom). "Something remarkable happens to reason as it starts out in search of knowledge of the world. It encounters an opposite." Milton must submit, again despite himself, to the "voice of the divine, primeval order."

The invocations of Paradise Lost inscribe Milton's acknowledgment that creation and deity do not and must not abide separately. Revelation issues from both salvific event and creation as it is the same God who overshadows each. To make good the promise of safe passage through the desert, Milton's God cannot revoke the divine tie to Nature. Rather the fulfillment of the promise consists in their strengthening. Milton's appeals to the Muse evince a double movement. From one to the other, the poet travels along in his desert journey, while within nearly each one, he encapsulates the movement, from Oreb to Siloa to the human heart, of the whole of salvation history. Whether transversing the horizontal or vertical line, Milton would have us begin and end, respectively, with creation and the promise of its renewal.

On a certain level, the invocations' motif of descent duplicates the movement through salvation history, begun at creation, that the rest of the poem inscribes. By the invocation to Book 9, God's permanent abiding is near at hand.

Milton is oddly at peace with the Night visitant who attends him as a matter of course. "Answerable style" comes "Of [his] Celestial Patroness. . ./. . .unimplor'd" (21-22). She infuses his consciousness "to me slumb'ring or inspires/ Easie my unpremeditated Verse" (23-24). What has happened to the poet who would contend against her influence? A reconciliation--with nature? with deity? with their convergence?--seems to have taken place. Indeed something beyond him, suggestively beyond reason, affects him: "higher Argument/ Remains" enough "to raise/ That name," "sufficient of it self" (42-44, emphasis mine). Here Milton's case for a Christian epic asserts its subject while also alluding to the means that makes that message possible: God's "deign[ing]" (21) to visit him, a phenomenon inherently linked to the story he would relate.

Thus as a way to preface his account of the fall, Milton precedes Michael in presenting an image of unification between humanity, deity, and creation. As we see her one last time, Milton's Muse has done what has been asked of her in Book 7; she has returned Milton to his "native element." Only now, she remains comfortably at rest with him, presaging humanity's own eventual fulfillment amidst a quelled (and feminine) abiding presence.

Notes

1. Thank you to Toni Craven of Brite Divinity School for sharing with me her concept of the God of the Genesis fall story, which I here apply to Milton's God.
2. According to Elaine Pagels, the early Christian belief in a birthright of liberty supported many of the underclass in their struggle against the Roman order. The gospel news had the power to level social hierarchies. By the time of the fourth-century, however, the new religion had become appropriated by an emerging church hierarchy with government ties. Persecution against the Christians had abated. Augustine now began writing. Freedom was "the freedom to do wickedness," he asserted, drawing on the case of Adam. The message was right for a church seeking to establish a base of authority. Later writings which reinforced Augustine's ideas--by Aquinas, Luther, Barth--shape "classic" theological tradition. See Adam, Eve, and the Serpent (New York: Random House, 1988), especially chapters 2 and 5; also Ruether, Sexism and God-talk, pp.94-99.
3. However, a fundamental difference in eschatological thought stands between Milton and the Hebrew writers of the exodus and exile: i.e. the metaphysics of a Heaven and Hell come much latter in biblical thought. See Wilfred L. Knox, St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939). especially pp.66-67.
4. Strong's Comprehensive Concordance of the Bible, ed. John Strong (Iowa Falls: Riverside Book and Bible House, n.d.), entry 1982. Subsequent concordance references will be cited in the text.
5. On the psalmist and "the horde of the violent" (91), see Raymund Schwager, Must There Be Scapegoats: Violence and Redemption in the Bible (New York: Harper and Row, 1978; 1987), 91-109.
6. (CD 14; 359, 363, 365). According to the Christian Doctrine, "The Spirit signifies a divine impulse, or light, or voice, or word, transmitted from above either through Christ, who is the Word of God, or by some other channel" (14: 367 [Hunter 156]).
7. Hunter's reference is Christian Doctrine 15: 261.
8. Cf. Exodus 40:35 cited above.
9. Jung, "On the Nature of the Animus," in Women and Analysis, ed. Jean Strouse (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 213-15.

10. Nyquist offers the Annotations as the example Milton could have followed but did not. She cites from it the following: Not at once, or in one person, but severally; that is though [God] united them in participation of his image, he distinguished them into two sexes, male and female, for the increase of their kinde. . . . [But] the image of God is equally communicated to them both, and Eve was so like to Adam (except the difference of sex which is no part of the divine image) in the particulars fore-mentioned, that in them, as she was made after the image of Adam, she was also made after the image of God: as if one measure be made according to the standard, an hundred made according to that, agree with the standard as well as it. (110).

The full title of Nyquist's source is Annotations Upon All the Books of the Old and New Testaments.

"something more sublime/ And excellent":

Eve's Suicide Gesture and the Critique of Self-Sacrifice
in Paradise Lost

Eve's argument for suicide in Book X seems an unlikely focus for identifying a critique of women's self-sacrifice in Paradise Lost. By and large feminist readings of the scene see in it little redemptive potential. For Marcia Landy, Eve's suicide gesture bespeaks the supplicatory posture to which Eve submits throughout Paradise Lost. "It seems appropriate that Eve should be the one to [solicit death]" in the way she does ("Let us seek Death, or he not found, supply/ With our own hands his Office on ourselves. . . . " [X.958-59]), Landy writes, decrying as well the scene's implicit reference to myths of women as both life-givers and destroyers (22). Diane McColley similarly criticizes its "contemptus mundi" ethos, another kind of "step backwards" (32) in delimiting women's sphere of agency.

To reveal and extirpate the societal pressures prompting women to accept self-inflicted violence, mental or physical, is at the very heart of feminist criticism, especially within critiques of orthodox theologies that validate women's self-abnegation. In disapproving Eve's actions as they do, Landy and McColley censure the age-old association between women and

self-destructiveness--an association often used to present self-sacrifice as an effective channel for mediation by women. However, when read in line with other Renaissance representations of women's self-murder, Eve's interest in suicide contrasts the why's and how's of women in art and literature who were driven to consider the same end. In spirit, Eve's gesture radically departs from the guilt-affected piety of her Renaissance prototypes. In its rally for a "public" cause, the gesture turns from the private settings of other suicides by women. Just as important, Eve's hand is held from suicide. Possibly, the text suggests, there is more to redemptive mediation by women than simply passive self-sacrifice. Something else, beside the will for self-abandonment, must invest the sacrificial act with meaning. Paradise Lost addresses this possibility within its last books especially, affirming what conventional schemes of women's self-sacrifice generally repudiate: women's self-assertion.

A long history normalizing images of woman as petitioner underlies the "artistic rightness" (Garrard 213)¹ of her role as self-sacrificing mediator. Each strand of that history ties her identity to her part in Original Sin. The early church fathers' readings of the fall, for instance, implied that women made the best supplicants because they were most at fault. In his recommendations for women's "meanness" of

apparel, Tertullian insists that women must walk "about as Eve mourning and repentant, in order that by every garb of penitence she might the more fully expiate that which she derives from Eve, --the ignominy. .. of the first sin and the odium of human perdition." Guilt consumes her:

You are the devil's gateway. . . you are the first deserter of the divine law; you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack.

You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert--that is, death--even the Son of God had to die (14,19).²

During the Middle Ages, women were offered images of the sinful female penitent after which to model their pleas for pardon and renewal. The period saw an intensity of devotion to the quintessential woman petitioner, Mary Magdalene--in direct proportion, and perhaps response, to Virgin Mary's increasing idealization.³ Medieval iconography often placed Magdalene at the foot of the cross. Watering Jesus' feet with her tears, she repeated the posture of penitence widely accredited to her in the gospel--her bathing Jesus' feet in request for forgiveness (Luke 7:37-38). Medieval tradition also depicted the Virgin sorrowing. The fourteenth-century Meditations on the Life of Christ presents Mary sharing Christ's passion:

She hung with her son on the cross and wished to die with him rather than live any longer. . . she was in

anguish like his . . . and the Son prayed to the Father for her and silently said, "My Father, see how afflicted my mother is. I ought to be crucified, not she, but she is with me on the cross. (335)

The Mater Dolorosa was central to affective tradition. But the range of emotions which the Magdalene could evoke was much wider (Miles 81). The Virgin Mary's tears could empathize but only Magdalene's could repent, prompting her onlooker also to grieve for his or her own sinfulness.⁴

Despite the Virgin's lack of sin, through her the affective devotion of the Middle Ages reinforced the correspondence between women, guilt, and tears. It became "natural" for women to wield grief in order to affect mediation for others. In this respect (and with their sexuality accounted for), mothers had greatest privilege. Like Mary, Saint Monica embodied this power of the sorrowing female petitioner. In the Confessions, Augustine attributes his conversion to his mother's weeping for him. "My mother, your faithful servant," he tells God, "wept to you for me, shedding more tears for my spiritual death than other mothers shed for the bodily death of a son" (3.11) For him, her tears were like the waters of baptism and the wine of the Eucharist, affecting sacramental grace.⁵

Reformation female piety continued the medieval emphasis on the rightness of women's weeping. One form of popular meditation was the allegory. It reaffirmed for women their

place in the domestic hierarchy by drawing on various filial relationships ("mother, daughter, syster, wife") to Christ. Elizabeth Melville's allegory, "Ane Godlie Dream," is filled with guilt-inflected sentiment. The speaker's call for Jesus to "Mak haist" (31) to sooth her misery is accompanied by tears Elaine Beilin calls "emblematic" (108). The speaker can hardly bear the weight of her own sinfulness:

Nathing on earth my sorrow could asswage!
 I felt my sin maist stranglie to increse;
 I grefit my Spreit than wont to be my pledge;
 My saull was drownit into maist deip distres.

(13-16)

Her "saull" also "drownit" in "teares abundantlie [running] down" (25) her face. She laments her unworthiness to the point of flight, in this case sleep, wherein "Ane Angell brichte" (92) appears to her, identifying himself as "the way. . . , the treuth, and lyfe, /. . . thy spous that brings thee store of grace" (129-30). As Susanne Woods notes, after the journey on which Christ leads her through visions of both heaven and hell, Melville's pilgrim persona can stand fast in her faith, "preach[ing] and exhort[ing] others. . . unapologetically" (9). Unfortunately, the advice only is to "Suffer ane quhyle" (403), and choosing this course, to know to "Chainge not your mynde, for ye have chosen the best" (347). The tears which first threw the speaker into her vision, though now covered by Christ, bear little impact upon

the world other than to reinforce the rightness of woman's patiently accepting her burden and acknowledging the vast disparity between her worthiness and God's charity.⁶

Likewise, with excruciating sensitivity to the distance she knows to exist between herself and God, Anne Lok laments:

For lo, in sinne, Lord, I begotten was,
With sede and shape my sinne I toke also,
Sine is my nature and my kinde alas,
In sinne my mother me conceived.⁷

The laboring woman becomes a metaphor for the sinner suing for grace. "I cannot but lament, mourn, and crie for helpe, as dooth a woman, whose time draweth neere to be delivered of hir burthen," Ann Wheathill wrote (103-103v).⁸ Original Sin, finding its embodiment in women, finds also a voice. Having borne Sin himself, she is the rightful shedder of tears.

The weight of the guilt that women carried encouraged women to accept self-inflicted violence and self-sacrifice as a means of redeeming themselves and others. As the Middle Ages move into the Renaissance, acts of self-murder by guiltless (but public) women eventually get recast in terms of the woman's rightful self-punishment. Lucretia and Cleopatra, because of the broadness of historical range in their stories' transmissions, constitute two interesting and related cases. As a Roman prototype, Lucretia exemplified a sense of civic duty. Having survived, under threat of death and further shame, the rape of her husband's kinsman Tarquin, Lucretia

gathers her husband, father, and two of their friends together the next day to tell them what happened. Her announcement means as much to indict Tarquin as it does to relieve any burden of secrecy. As classical historians tell it,⁹ little suggests a woman wallowing in despair for chastity betrayed. Rather, she couches her defense of suicide in terms of public duty. Lest other adulterers, disrespecting her involuntary part, cite her story as precedence for pardon, she kills herself--publicly and ceremonially (Garrard 215). This act in turn incites her family to take up arms against the Tarquins, a tyrannous regime, and drive them from Rome.

But into the later Middle Ages, Lucretia becomes an emblem for women's atonement of their sexuality. Artistic representations shift her story from public scenes of men gathered around the dead Lucretia, rallying for revenge, to private contexts: Lucretia alone and sorrowing at the moment of self-murder. Not surprisingly, these representations sexualize her suicide. The dagger's point aims at her breasts. She poses seductively, semi-dressed, gazing at the viewer sympathetically in her despair.¹⁰ The seventeenth-century, despite its injunctions against self-murder, furthers the trend, moving Lucretia to the bedchamber and intensifying the subject's emotional theatrics (Garrard 224-28).¹¹

Likewise, Cleopatra's publicly-minded suicide carries women far outside the range of domestic duty that better defined Renaissance female heroism. But whereas Lucretia's

self-sacrifice ennobled her memory, Cleopatra's suicide fails to redeem her. Artistic tradition remembers her as the most notorious of women lovers who, by some turn of poetic justice, dies by the same lethality of her powers over men. History cannot help but relish her suicide. Cleopatra, unlike Lucretia, played a pivotal role in her country's destiny. She came last in a long line of Egyptian queens that had ruled for nearly three centuries (Garrard 265). Her links with first Caesar, then Antony, were inseparable from her primary political interests.

When defeat at the Battle of Actium moves Antony to suicide, he dies in the Roman spirit of refusing to cower in the face of public shame. Under prospect of being dragged to Rome as Octavius' trophy, Cleopatra attempts suicide in the same vein. No less, Cleopatra's story is fated to a privatization similar to Lucretia's. During the Middle Ages, Cleopatra retains a remnant of her public identity, committing self-murder often in synchrony with Antony. Catalogs of worthy women admit her if only for her strength of mind and purpose (Garrard 215). By the Renaissance, however, all memory of Cleopatra's heroism fades. Traditions about her draw on her last moments, finding her alone, nude or semi-nude, sexually posed, in dark and heavily-draped chambers (247-250).

The lack of approbation in Milton criticism for Eve's suicide gesture is understandable in light of the long history

that makes the association of women and victimization seem "almost archetypal" (Garrard 213). As the above summaries of the transmissions of Lucretia's and Cleopatra's stories suggest, however, the way really to confront the issue of women's self-sacrifice, and Eve's, is through the related issue of women's self-assertion. Diana's prototypes have always maintained a strong connection to the male world of militancy, independence, and virtue. Yet as tradition bears upon women's lives, women's independence moves closer and closer to militancy against the self, especially the feeling, sensual, physical self. In literature, women warriors crop their hair, forsake luxurious dress, and take on the appearance of men. Amazons severe their right breast in order to draw back their bows without interference (Warner 152,204). Likewise, in accounts of the Danish raids upon the nunneries in the early Middle Ages, priests exhort women to cut off their noses, lacerate their lips, and perform other horrors in order to disgust and repel their attackers. (Whether they are killed is not as important as whether they meet the bridegroom as virgins [Schulenburg 46-50]) Within the church, theories grow up that deem Eve's sin as one of self-assertion: pride and love of pleasure. Society comes to authorize the notion that it is women's independence, their sexuality and selfhood, that must be militated against.

It would seem that Paradise Lost contains two factors by which to differentiate Eve as the virtuous self-sacrificer

from the traditions that make it "appropriate," to use Landy's term, for Eve to solicit death at all. One, there is the suicide gesture itself. The case Eve presents for suicide sharply contrasts the private settings of her prototypes' suicides. She speaks in the interest of a public cause. At the same time, her argument bypasses the issues common to traditional representations of women's suicide in the Renaissance: women's sacrifice to atone for a crime of sexuality committed against them (the guilt of which they must bear), and the expectation that women cannot but show weakness in the face of loss or disaster. The spirit of Eve's gesture conflicts with each of these concerns.

And two, there is the gesture's larger context of self-assertion. Feminist theologians who decry women's self-sacrifice as a tenable means for women to affect salvation, their own or others, challenge the idea that "pride" or self-assertion commonly pertains to women's experience. In most situations, they say, women's failings owe to not having developed sufficiently a sense of self at all. Society shares her "sins" by often keeping such responsibility from her. According to Judith Plaskow, the very way in which theology conceives of sin, in terms of an excessiveness of ego, pertains more to male experience wherein self-assertion is seen to conflict with the interest of others. Typically female patterns of socialization, by contrast, do not allow others' needs to slide into the background. Women are taught to keep

the people around them foremost in mind often to the exclusion of recognizing their own desires for self-actualization (86-90). To find in Paradise Lost validation for Eve's self-assertiveness, and/or for the preconditions that would contribute to it, would be to interrogate conventional sanctions for women's passive self-sacrifice.

While Eve's suicide gesture generally disappoints its readers, the act prefacing it, Eve's supplication of Adam, tends to favorably impress: Eve "at [Adam's] feet/ Fell humble, and imbracing them, besought/ His peace, and . . . proceeded in her plaint" (10. 909-913). For many critics, the significant event in Book 10 is the reconciliation that these lines mark as its beginning. Eve receives credit for initiating the process in that she models the penitential pose of mourning and tears taken up again, in the last lines of the book, in petition of God's forgiveness. "Forthwith to the place/. . . to where [God] judg'd them" they "repair," where they most humbly confess in unison, "tears/ Watering the ground, and with thir sighs the Air/ Frequenting, sent from hearts contrite, in sign/ Of sorrow unfeign'd and humiliation meek" (1098-1104). As the text makes clear, Eve's falling humbly at Adam's feet, beseeching his forgiveness, bespeaks renovation in several ways. First, it moves Adam to pity her, as well as to recognize his own fault. Second, it occasions an importantly symbolic kenotic gesture: Eve's "rise," directed by Adam. ("But rise," he tells her, "let us no more

contend" [10.958])). Here her figurative ascent predicts the first couple's eventual literal ascent to God's embrace in the endtime "Up hither, under long obedience tri'd" (7.159). She enacts the first human instance of meek remorse that looks forward to conversion. As Philip Gallagher notes, in Eve God bears out his promise to "soften [men's] stony hearts" toward prayer and repentance (3.189-90 [127])). Figuring Christ's descents and ascents, Eve shares with the Son an important relationship to mediation.

But in fact, Eve's likeness to Christ subsumes and obscures the problem of penitence and mourning as a specifically feminine pose. Even though correspondences exist between Eve and Christ, Milton's rendering of Christian heroism reestablishes the distance between the two. Milton's point is to "substantiate heroism" (Steadman 17) by reassigning the contention among epic's virtues and vices to Christ and Satan, and ultimately, to the Christian self. Christ, while the feminine analogue to the Father, circumvents effeminacy by always projecting "God's masculine perfection" (Thickstun 85). (Think of the battle in heaven.) Rather than affecting the fullest correspondence between Christ and Eve, Milton points up the disparity in their relationship to power. Paradise Lost exempts Christ from a supplicatory posture. As Puritanism too readily recognized, when it comes to the soul singularly suppliant before its Lord, nearly always that soul must be feminine. The moment guilt and penitence must be

manifested, Eve merits their first and prototypical expression.

To blanketly approve Eve's supplication without considering the traditions behind it, normalizing woman as petitioner, stands to diminish the gesture's magnitude, if simultaneously Eve's heroism, still emerging in Book 10, is not considered as well. Eve's suicide gesture, different from that of her prototypes, does not represent for Eve a regression as much as it marks the spirit of independence with which she will accept her part in fulfilling the prophecies set out by Michael in the last two books. Critics of Paradise Lost need the gesture to keep Eve's petition of Adam from merging with Renaissance notions of women's rightful weepiness and the "evacuation of self" which it implies. At the same time, through its departures from tradition, the gesture de-authorizes the causes (e.g. defense of chastity, domestic loyalty) that the conventions of women's self-sacrifice commonly serve.

Eve's tearful solicitation of Adam's forgiveness comes to encompass two related and radical proposals. Concerned with their part in their progeny's fortunes ("miserable it is/To be to others cause of misery,/ Our own begotten, and of our Loins to bring/ Into this curs'd World a woful Race" [981-984]), Eve argues chastity or suicide:

in thy power

It lies, yet ere Conception, to prevent

The Race unblest, to being yet unbegot.
 Childless thou art, Childless remain: so Death
 Shall be deceav'd his glut, and with us two
 Be forc'd to satisfie his Rav'nous Maw.
 But if thou judge it hard and difficult,
 Conversing, looking, loving, to abstain
 From Love's due Rites, Nuptial imbraces sweet,
 And with desire to languish without hope,
 Before the present object languishing
 With like desire, which would be miserie
 And torment less than none of what we dread,
 Then both our selves and Seed at once to free
 From what we fear for both, let us make short;
 Let us seek Death, or, he not found, supply
 With our own hands his Office on our selves.
 Why stand we longer shivering under feares,
 That shew no end but Death, and have the power,
 Of many ways to die the shortest choosing,
 Destruction with destruction to destroy.

(986-1006)

Perhaps intuiting the lack of efficiency in Adam's own solicitation of Death earlier, Eve, "With [their] own hands" would "supply/ . . . [Death's] office on ourselves" (1000-1001). She asks, "Why stand we longer shivering" (1002). Right off, Eve exits the world of darkened chambers and grief-stricken love. Rather, this has been Adam's realm. Akin to

the Renaissance conventions of women's heroism, Adam "lament[s] loud/ Through the still Night" (X. 845-46), "hid[ing] in gloomiest shade,/ To sorrow abandon'd. . . / And in a troubl'd Sea of passion tost" (717-18). The atmosphere closes him in. "Changes in the Heav'ns" cause to rage "sideral blast,/ Vapour, and Mist, and Exhalation hot" (642-43) and other contentions among the elements so that he experiences, even in retreat, the night's "black Air/ . . . [and] damps and dreadful gloom" (847-48). For Adam, to continue in this life is a question of enduring irrecoverable loss, i.e., braving the "Abyss of fears/ and horrors" into which his "Conscience [has been]. . . /. . . / from deep to deeper plung'd!" (842-44). Such a prospect is unthinkable for Adam but certainly not a fit reason for suicide as a Renaissance audience would see it. Conventionally, it is women who have the problem enduring loss or disaster. They rail, they weep, they faint--with remarkably "heroic" finesse.

According to Renaissance standards, ennoblement through death is possible if the act speaks hope, steadfastness, or simply a sense of injured merit (Faber 35). Adam's sentiments show a dramatic departure from all of these. Even the decisiveness with which he follows Eve in eating the fruit in Book IX exemplifies at least a Julietesque nobility. What suicidologists identify as the suicide victim's imagined "after-death reputation" (Faber 45)--his or her living favorably on in others' minds--will profit nothing from it.

By contrast, Eve's proposal means to offset the "public" tragedy both she and Adam foresee. Anticipating the repercussions of their lives passed down through history, Eve would change the course of history right now. In this respect, she recalls Lucretia who was resolved not to change state precedents, and Cleopatra, ashamed for the complete defeat of her empire that Octavius' parading of her (if he should bring her back to Rome alive) would represent. That Eve frames her proposal in the second person plural further removes women's suicide from the private sphere in that it recalls medieval renderings of Antony's and Cleopatra's suicide as a joint act.

The proposal first to chastity plays on traditional notions of female heroism as well. Several factors in Eve's speech differentiate her self-abnegating pose from those of her Renaissance prototypes (and which I have suggested are repeated by Adam). Her pitch for chastity invokes a heroic individualism expressed by the female saints of the early Church and the nuns of the Middle Ages. As a kind of death (and literally, death for progeny), chastity summons up, through history and convention, the woman's heroic defiance of what would be forced upon her. Again, in a society where vehicles for female heroism are circumscribed, chastity opens a channel for heroic action by women, even if the object militated against is the woman herself. "Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind" (A Mask 664), Lady Alice warns Comus.

Presumably, she is willing to bear the ordeal Lucretia was made to. But the fact that the nunneries of the Middle Ages were so heavily isolated against the threats, both real and imagined, that raged in the outside world indicates the extent to which the culture bound sanctity and preservation to the female body. Among the letters of the bishops who wrote to these nuns under siege, there is evidence to suggest that injunctions to women to resist defilement actually belie the culture's fear of being overtaken politically (Schulenburg 46-50).

By the time of Paradise Lost, Milton's female saint is different from Lady Alice. The chastity Eve would embrace does not fit into Alice's idealized notions of it: i.e. chastity as the means to maintain a close connection to virtue wherein integrity, (both holi- and wholeness) depends upon physicality. Instead Eve's bid for chastity looks to impact the public realm directly--by reneging a part in providing a public realm at all. Not unlike medieval conceptions of the Atonement figuring Jesus as Satan's bait, Eve would wish to fulfill Death's appetite on her and Adam's body alone. Such satisfaction would bring Death's simultaneous defeat. Contrary to myths and practices that take chastity as valor's metaphor, Eve actually would put hers to use.

What is more, in arguing chastity, Eve recognizes the toll abstinence might take on her and Adam. Once again, Milton's heroine departs from the traditional heroic posture.

As we have seen, women's martyrdom typically enacted a woman's atonement for her own rape, proof of domestic loyalty, or a defense of chastity. In any of these cases, the woman chastened herself for crimes committed or impending against her. Here Eve assumes guilt (perhaps too well) that is hers but in a spirit that flies in the face of the usual self-denigration by women for their sexuality. Most notably, the "languishing" she postulates in lines 993-998 is not for guilt over sex but for want of sex: "misery and torment less than none we dread" (998). The traditional "die-she-or-her-reputation-must" paradigm of female heroism gets inverted. Her proposal of chastity over suicide itself rejects the usual choice: suicide in defense of chastity. But more radical, upon second thought, she suggests suicide over chastity. Unlike Sabrina, the question is not one of throwing oneself into the Severne or forgoing innocence, but of throwing oneself into the Severne (so to speak) because of not being able to enjoy sexuality at all. Clearly, Milton has removed Eve from the scheme of women heroines who, in passive endurance or heroic self-murder, would give up all for the sake of abiding by society's constraints on female sexuality. Eve's attitude toward sexuality differs from that of medieval saint. Chastity as a sacrifice is too hard to bear.

As her bid for chastity modulates into a case for suicide, Eve exhibits the same radically inflamed spirit of the early Christian martyrs. In doing so, she responds to the

emphasis in the Reformation on reinvesting Christianity with a heroic dimension. It is in this interest that martyrdom becomes useful to the reformers as a model of Christian action.¹² G.W.H. Lampe identifies a number of different martyrological stances taken by the early Christians. Martyrs who identified with the person of Christ "put on" Christ as "invincible athlete" to reenact his passion. These same or other Christians might have claimed their self-sacrifice for kinship with the prophets, imagining that the Holy Spirit likewise directed their own acts and testimonies. Both these orientations could inspire the Renaissance Christian who sought to live out the period's renewed principles of "witness."¹³ But the stance most pertinent to Eve is one that Lampe identifies as belonging to "demonology." On a fundamental level, a martyr waged combat against no less daunting a figure than the devil himself. "Just as the real object of the persecutor's attack is not primarily their individual victims but the faith that they profess and, ultimately, the God in whom they trust, so the opponent against whom the Christian "athletes" contend is really the devil" (1981:118-122). Such a perspective vaulted mere humans who would participate in Christ's victory over Satan into the cosmic hemisphere where the battle between good and evil began.¹⁴

All along, Eve puts her readiness for death in terms of combat: "in [their] power/ It lies" to resist defeat. She

names her opponent: personified Death; and the objective: to "[deceive] his glut" and "satisfie" once and for all, his "Rav'nous Maw." Self-murder, in her view, figures an engagement with a primeval force she conceives as evil: it will tyrannize all her progeny and make havoc of liberty.

Then both our selves and Seed at once to free
 From what we fear for both, let us make short,
 Let us seek Death, or he not found, supply
 With our own hands his Office on our selves;

 Destruction with destruction to destroy.

(999-1002, 1006)

This world-infecting Death is Sin itself, and Eve contends against it. Only the "best" of women's martyrdom goes this far as to take on Sin to the ends of the universe. As an analogue of the Christian martyr, she proves Robert Kolb's summation:

Thus, the martyrs of the church represented more than merely triumph over physical pain, more than almost unfathomable heroism: They represented "a dialogue with and a triumph over unjust power." (2)

Eve calls up her power to engage the world directly, even as it encompasses the eternal combat between good and evil, life and death. Her would-be Christian heroism is of epic proportion.

While generally considered an extension of her

submissiveness, Eve's case for suicide works an effect of its own, different from supplication. The gesture demonstrates that Milton cannot hand over "masculine stance[s] of heroic defiance" for "feminine postures of supplication" (Quilligan 174,242) pure and simple. Its ethic of moral choice, reminiscent of the martyrs, draws on the early Christian emphasis on the goodness of God and creation that authorizes the Christian to choose and act. In this way, Eve enforces, even in her "suicide," Paradise Lost's focus on moral choice in a rationally knowable universe.

In consequence, Adam gleans from Eve's speech the spirit of liberty that will inform their decisions from there on. Adam does not dismiss her sentiments. He improves upon them to conform with Reformation conceptions of martyrdom centered on witness and confession. Insofar as both Eve's speech and Protestant ideas about martyrdom draw upon an early Christian understanding of "the connection between the holy and heroic" (Kolb 4), Eve's defiant stance inspires Adam to remember what Christian martyrdom can and must mean. Marking the quality of her argument, Adam perceives in it "something more sublime/ And excellent" (1014-15) than just her words. That "something" is pivotal for bringing Adam in line with reformed notions of Christian piety with its renewed focus on verbal feats of witness and remembrance.¹⁵

All the more, it is Eve who prepares the ground for Adam's recollection of Word. Tapping into the treasury of

Christian heroism (though anachronistically), she brings about Adam's Protestant, verbal, heroism. Only by criticizing her argument does Adam come to the protoevangelium:

. Then let us seek
 Som safer resolution, which methinks
 I have in view, calling to mind with heed
 Part of our Sentence, that thy Seed shall bruise
 The Serpents head--

(1028-1032)

Thanks to Eve's example, Adam now possesses a grasp on the active role he and his wife are meant to play in bringing about both their own fulfillment and Satan's demise. This role, then, leads to and consists in the confession of the book's closing lines and first practiced by Adam here. The body of his response to Eve's suicide gesture is a discourse of remembrance and witness. Remember God's promise to crush the serpent's head, Adam says. Remember "Satan, who in the Serpent hath contrived/ Against us this deceit" (1034-35). Remember the "punishment ordain'd [for him]" (1039) and that prescribed to us. "Remember with what mild/ And gracious temper [God] both heard and judg'd,/ Without wrauth or reviling" (1046-47) and what "timely care/ [God] Hath, unbesought, provided, and his hands/ Cloath'd us unworthie, pitying while he judged" (1057-59). Just as the early Christians' deaths remember Christ and his death, Adam's reformed version of martyrdom serves a like remembrance.

These points go beside the fact that Eve argues for suicide in terms with which Milton's whole life dealt-- authority, duty, and killing in the name of freedom. This complex of themes touches in some respect each of Milton's major works: from Sabrina's self-destructive escape from her stepdame in A Mask, to Satan's last temptation of the Son in Paradise Regained, to Samson's "rousing motions" between the pillars of the temple. In each their own way, however (as it is one point of this study to show), the texts also suggest alternatives to self-implosion as the definitive means to a salvific end. Sabrina's attendance upon the Lady constitutes the kind of reciprocity between females her stepdame contradicted. Satan's vault from the precipice, his own "self-murder," results from his inability to understand the Son's deemphasis on cataclysmic event within the salvation scheme. And as for Samson, the Danite is keyed toward the redemptive potential of implosive events from the beginning: "Designed for great exploits," he bemoans the "Promise . . . that [he]/ Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver." With his eyes consistently pinned on event, he makes sure that his fate encompasses one dramatic enough to cover the more humble interstices of a disdained inaction. ("Put to the labour of a Beast," he feels "debas't/ Lower than bondslave!" [SA 36-39]) But as Samson Agonistes' companion piece might tell us, it is precisely those interstices of "inaction" that hold the most potential for growth toward God's mind. The patience to

inhabit them, turning inward, is the only guarantee for eventually affecting right action. Milton's major works seem to abjure implosive endpoints, favoring instead the cultivation of God's heart within the self as the best means to moral action.

While Eve may be saved from suicide for marriage and Protestantism, the notion of an anti-apocalyptic ethos suggests something more. Anna Nardo, in reference to the sonnets, observes the same quality in Milton's poetry: in her words, "creative waiting" (48). Eve's redemptive role is charged with the injunction to learn, grow, and understand. Given access to the whole of salvation history in Books 11 and 12, Eve emerges from Eden with a sense of responsibility: "but now lead on;/ In mee is no delay." As Eve explains:

with thee to goe,
Is to stay here; without thee here to stay,
Is to go hence unwillingly; thou to mee
Art all things under Heav'n, all places thou,
Who for my wilful crime art banisht hence.
This further consolation yet secure
I carry hence; though all by mee is lost,
Such favour I unworthie am voutsaft,
By mee the Promis'd Seed shall all restore.

(12.614-23)

Do these parting sentiments merely reiterate Eve's inclination toward self-sacrifice, revealing--in comparison

with the high drama of her suicide speech--a spirit finally made malleable to Adam and God's cause? I would say not. In the dreams through which God has "advise[d]" her, Eve has been allowed to authenticate the act of self-sacrifice by attaining first a self to sacrifice. At this point, she most fully inhabits a role, an identity: "though all by mee is lost,/ . . /By mee the Promis'd Seed shall all restore." It is these words, giving the impression that Eve finally possesses a role inimitably her own, that allow her to say without self-diminishment, "Such favour I unworthie am voutsaft" (621-23). Eve already has been restored.

This critique of women's self-abnegation shows up earlier in a passage from Book 11 that anticipates the sonnet of Book 12:

Ill worthie I such title [Mother of all Mankind] should
 belong
 To me transgressour, who for thee ordaind
 A help, became thy snare; to mee reproach
 Rather belongs, distrust and all dispraise:
 But infinite in pardon was my Judge,
 That I who first brought Daeth on all, am grac't
 The sourse of life. . .

(11.163-169)

These words do not demean Eve because the extent to which she is exalted by her "Judge," and by Adam in the lines immediately preceding these ("Hail to thee,/ Eve rightly

call'd, Mother of all Mankind,/ Mother of all things living,
 since by thee/ Man is to live, and all things live for Man"
 [11.158-161]), authenticates her, gives her a sense of self,
 a "style" as Marshall Grossman would say (159), by which she
 is able to return (or sacrifice) to the larger compasses which
 legitimate her a degree of authenticity, a measure of self.

Regarding self-sacrifice, Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "It
 is all very fine to be forgetful of self, but still one must
 know for whom, for what" (451).¹⁶ While theology tends
 unilaterally to commend self-sacrifice and decry selfishness,
 ego, or pride, the feminist critique of such a perspective
 suggests that the distinction between selflessness and sin
 does not speak sufficiently to women's experience. "Before a
 sacrifice can be meaningful either to a self or other, the
 self must already have a certain strength and integrity,"
 Plaskow writes. Whether one recognizes such a dimension of
 self to exist within or without the range of socially-
 constituted desires, the bottom line is the same: there must
 first be a self, some self, in order for the concept of self-
 sacrifice to have meaning.

As the epic draws to a close, the impact of Eve's name,
 "Mother of Mankind" plays heavier and heavier upon her psyche.
 Adam is too good to her, Eve implies, to "highly thus. . .
 entitle [her]/ Farr other name deserving" (11.171-172). Yet,
 as Eve's sense of triumph and renewed integrity in Book 12
 bears out, she clings to that designation as if for her life.

It empowers her. Adam's forgiveness of her in Book 11 already sees her mobilized:

But the Field
 To labour calls us now with sweat impos'd,
 Though after sleepless Night; for see the Morn,
 All unconcern'd with our unrest, begins
 Her rosie progress smiling; let us forth. . .

(11.171-175, emphasis mine)

Eve embraces the Son's oracle regarding the life of labor their changed relationship to knowledge and evil anticipates. Even more, she would share that fate with Adam fully, not content to bear her own burdens but also the "sweat" meant for Adam. In line with such determination, Eve's "But the Field" rings of "To the field"--the day dawns, the troops once again must stir. Her enablement--that which allows her to give of self--owes to her having received a self: Eve, "the source of life" (11.169).

In a certain respect, Books 11 and 12 fulfill the "prerequisite" for a woman's self-sacrifice to have meaning: self-constitution, which comes through recognition by others and the woman's own understanding of what her life entails (so long as she experiences and accepts that understanding as somehow "authentic," or "intrinsic" to her being¹⁷). By the end of Book 12, Eve knows both the "for whom" and the "for what" of the rest of her days. Enabling this recognition has been the space of withdrawal, so important in identity

formation, that Adam's seemingly privileged access to Michael affords her. While Adam may be responding to his own anxieties, or biases, in urging Eve's "retirement" at Michael's approach ("With reverence I must meet [him], and thou retire" [236-37]), Eve's "dismissal" by Michael is purposed differently. Michael seems quite sure about preparing Eve and Adam properly for what is to follow. He directs Adam:

Ascend

This Hill; let Eve (for I have drencht her eyes)
Here sleep below, while thou to foresight wak'st,
As once thou slepst, while Shee to life was formd.

(11.366-69)

As Michael says, Eve's "drencht eyes" recall Adam's sleep at Eve's creation, in which--as Joseph Wittreich notes (1990:39)--Adam too had visions: "Mine eyes [God] clos'd, but op'n left the Cell/ Of Fancie my internal sight, by which/ Abstract as in a transe methought I saw, /Though sleeping" (8.460-63). Given the certainty of vision with which Eve awakens, Adam's "Fancie[s]" pale in comparison. Of Eve's wondrous birth, Adam says "methought I saw" it, imploring Raphael to confirm for him supposedly godly insights that, for Eve in Book 12, need no further confirmation.

The sleep from which Eve emerges, contrasted to Adam's, comments on the depth of interior experience Eve finally is allowed. The couple's separation in Books 11 and 12 blatantly

speaks against the "lesson" Eve extracts from the fall: "I never from thy side henceforth to stray" (11.176). Eve must go off alone, again, to engage her own spiritual resources. The success of her experience confirms separateness, and differentiation, as an ideal important for women as individuals and their relationships. Eve is absent but it is a productive absence, one that in some way reconstitutes her. Her withdrawal contradicts the expectation (paradoxical in Lacanian schemes) that women as caregivers be a consistent "presence." In fact, readers might wonder who has the fuller visionary experience--Eve or Adam. By the time of Nimrod, Michael anticipates "[Adam's] mortal sight to fail." Now Adam must agree to "give due audience" to Michael's words, instead of seeing their truthfulness, since "objects divine/ Must needs impair and wearie human sense" (12.9-12). The fullness of Eve's visionary experience one can only guess. But judging from the unexpectedness with which Eve announces to Adam "Whence thou returnst, and whither wentst, I know" (12.610), one might surmise that the extent to which Eve "knows" is more than Michael himself, a few lines earlier to Adam ("go, waken Eve. . . ." [12.594-601]), properly could predict. Whereas Adam's and Eve's relationship begins with a merger that was perhaps too hasty for Eve's taste, it culminates in a separation that is necessary for both persons to come together for a healthy reciprocity. If Eve's vow never to stray from Adam and her separate visionary experience are in fact

contradictory, one can read the juxtaposition to sanction Eve's continued withdrawals for the future.

The reader even might go so far as to say that what happens to Eve in Book 4 has been the mistake, allegorized by the fall, that the epic has been trying to correct all along. A quick look into Paradise Lost's history of reception shows late seventeenth and eighteenth-century rewritings of Milton's epic imputing to Eve both pride and vanity. Eve's nativity scene in Book 4 feeds these prejudices. John Dryden, in his rendering of Paradise Lost, uses the scene to expose Eve's narcissism. Her image strikes her "fair, yet false! ah, being formed to cheat,/ By seeming kindness, mixt with deep deceit!" She is made to incriminate herself. (But only "next [her] self," can Eve "admire and love [Adam] best" [II,ii,26-27;45].) For Dryden, Eve's thoughts of sovereignty over Adam and jealousy are issues before the fall. Putting a mirror to woman's beauty, her "sinful" vanity, Dryden, like many of his contemporaries, attests that women cannot be trusted. The pool scene makes it easy to deem Milton's Eve the same proud and "treach'rous Woman" (Gould 12) of Eden in the pamphlet debates.

Systematic theology conventionally cites self-sacrifice as a kind of antidote to pride. But as I have mentioned, the sin of pride obtains most for those persons who already have achieved a relatively high level of self-differentiation. In 1960, Valerie Saiving Goldstein articulated the problem that

today still ranges within feminist critiques of systematic theology. "For the temptations of woman as woman are not the same as the temptations of man as man." According to Goldstein, one may identify "the specifically feminine forms of sin--'feminine' not because they are confined to women or because women are incapable of sinning in other ways, but because they are outgrowths of the basic feminine character structure" (a structure, Goldstein assures us, resulting from a different cultural conditioning). Based on her reflections, she argues that these sins "have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as 'pride' and 'will-to-power.' They are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness," among others.

Nearing the insights of gender psychology, we have a way by which to interrogate the charges of pride that so ruthlessly have been levelled against the first woman, especially as Milton's Eve has been thought to typify her. Rather than finding at the pool an Eve "innocent of patriarchal indoctrination," that is, "a still autonomous Eve" (Froula 327,328), we find not much of an Eve at all. Eve at this point has yet to receive an identity. One might imagine her lingering amidst her self-reflection as the beginning of the process of identity formation. Who can guess the Eve who might emerge if she were left a while? How would that "Shape within the watry gleam"[4.461], another woman, speak to her, confirm her? But Eve--like Goldstein's women--is

"distract[ed]" (109). The duality between Eve and her image, as inevitable, is interrupted.

Still, rather than appropriate the scene for Lacanian formations of self-hood too quickly, we must recognize the critique of such formations that the scene embeds. Again to recall Goldstein, the "sin" of woman actually pertains to the way in which society "distracts" her from achieving self-differentiation (and then requiring her self-sacrifice anyway). If, according to Lacanian theory, the terms "distraction" and "self-differentiation" seem to repeat each other, woman faces the dilemma of double distraction. The male, once effectively loosed from the mother-child dyad, goes on to to devise plans and pursue goals. His engagement with the world of "culture-making" (commonly defined in masculinist terms of building bridges, paving roads, lighting upon new territories, etc.) is consistent with that first act of separation. In a certain respect, that first act never completes itself. It keeps going. But for the woman, an identity is harder to stabilize. Often it doesn't "take" in the same way. The configuration of its "realization" is different. Instead of a line there are stops and starts. Therefore, to characterize, as Goldstein does, woman's "sin" as, or resulting from, "underdevelopment" or self-"negation" (factors that actually impel her self-sacrifice) is not naively to disregard the only way, according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the self becomes constituted, i.e. by means of

a social framework. Rather, it suggests that the moment the female enters that social framework, she will be treated differently, over and over de-stabilized despite her drive for stability.

Eve's nativity may illustrate, in Christine Froula's terms, "the conversion of Eve to orthodoxy" (326), or simply, her initiation into the symbolic order. But just as much, it typifies the "distractibility and diffuseness [of experience]" (Goldstein 109) to which woman is subject, thereby uncovering the basis of Eve's "sin." My reading of the scene approaches Mary Nyquist's summation of it: that it ascribes to Eve an important "interiority," "the very [one] that Adam's need for an other self articulates" later in Book 8. According to Nyquist, this "space. . . is dilatory, erotic, and, significantly, almost quintessentially, 'private,'" (1987: 193) a brand of subjectivity uniquely Eve's. But as I see it, Nyquist's deeper characterization of Eve's "sphere" as an apparently "autonomous and self-sustaining" (1988: 120) one rings of Froula's similarly uninhabited realm of the (as yet) autonomous female self. Despite Nyquist's point that an autonomous subjectivity for Eve is illusory, her reading still seems to attach to Eve an interiority at too early a point. (It "offer[s] itself up for correction and reorientation" 1988:121].) While perhaps implying Eve's bent toward interiority, it does not prove it. Instead the scene centralizes the issue of Eve's distraction from self, i.e. the

self that would be there, as an essentially female dilemma.

In truth, Paradise Lost draws attention to the problem of separate spaces for Eve. Moments of separateness find Eve most in danger because she is most unsupervised. It is well noted, for instance, that Eve sleeps soundly while Adam's rest is "Aerie light" (V.4). Given the connection between spaces of withdrawal and the formation of identity the text seems to draw, this fact makes sense. (One also might remember that God, possessing the most stable of identities, does not sleep at all.) Be it by Adam or the disturbance of her own dreams, Eve must constantly awaken unnaturally or unexpectedly. Nor does her sleep as a separate sphere go unoccupied by others. Satan overtakes Eve's "first" full sleep in Books 4 and 5; he "Assays. . . to reach" the innermost regions "of her Fancie" (4. 801-2). Adam also has a turn at infiltrating her sleep, interpreting her imaginings as God did at the pool.

Notably, the dream Eve recounts finds her, once more, rousing from sleep: "methought/ Close at mine ear one call'd me forth to walk/ with gentle voice, I thought it thine; it said,/ Why sleepest thou Eve?" (5.35-37). Suggesting the naturalness of her response to distraction (and the danger it forebodes), Eve "rose as at [Adam's] call" (5.48). Interestingly, danger ensues in Eve's dream as she sets out to find Adam. ("To find thee I directed then my walk" [5.48].) In Book 9, the fall issues from a walk Eve takes in order to attain some distance from him. Both lead to sin (the former

potentially, the latter actually), implying the transgressiveness not only of eating the fruit but of the space of separateness that the walk constitutes.

The separation scene in Book 9 is the text's most obvious instance of Eve's desire to recuperate a measure of solitary space. It seems hard to find fault with Eve's initial argument for separation: "work under [their] labour grows," and unless they eliminate one another as distractions from the tasks at hand, their "dayes work [will be] brought to little, though begun/ Early, and th'hour of Supper [will] come unearn'd" (10.208,224-25). But to Adam's mind, Eve cannot really be bothered by the interplay "Of looks and smiles" that frequently take them from their work. "Yet not so strictly hath our Lord impos'd/ Labour, as to debarr us when we need/ Refreshment" (10.239,235-37). He insists on reconstructing her argument: Eve is "satiated" of conversation. As the dialogue continues, he imagines another, more dangerous, motive: the desire to try temptation alone. While either of Adam's reasons would suffice to reveal Eve's desire for differentiation, Eve already has stated her case quite simply, but in terms Adam cannot understand.

Adam misunderstands, even twists, Eve's desire for retreat. But the fall is its ultimate devaluation. Once more, what separate space Eve would attain is imploded. In the guise of the serpent, Eve again meets distraction. This time, however, the traditional sanction against women finding

inviolable spaces will bear down upon her with full force. "Would thou hadst heark'n'd to my words, and stai'd/ With me, as I besought thee, when that strange/ Desire of wandring this unhappie Morn, /I know not whence possess'd thee," Adam reproves her, "we had then/ Remain'd still happie, not as now, despoild/ Of all our good, sham'd, naked, miserable" (9.1134-39). On a certain level, the fall is really a lapse into the misperception that separate spaces for women in which to develop are somehow wrong. Just as Plaskow and Goldstein contend, the idea of inviolable spaces for women automatically attaches itself to women's "sin or the temptation to sin" (Goldstein 35). Impelled toward these spaces, women are thought proud or vain, like Eve at the pool. One of Adam's most strident charges against Eve is telling: "confidence . . . bore thee on" (9.1175).

Confidence bears Eve on in the suicide scene as well. But as Milton suggests, to rally for action, especially self-sacrificial action, without first attaining a self to sacrifice, promises only a fraction of the effect compared to the mediation of a savior figure who is fully developed. By the end of Book 12, Eve exudes "confidence." "Lead on" (12.614), she tells Adam, issuing the epic's last directive. Having finally validated her wish for separate space, and filling it graciously with revelation, Milton has granted her the chance for self-differentiation which has eluded her all along. In this respect, she moves in line with Mary and the

Son of Paradise Regained who also know the importance of prefacing acts of self-sacrifice with quietly confident interiors.

Notes

1. Garrard uses the term in discussing women and self-destruction.

2. Cf. Katharine Rogers, The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), pp.14-15.

3. As Marina Warner suggests, because Mary of Jesus was so abstracted from the sin of Eve, a new model of female sin needed apotheosis. See Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary (New York: Knopf, 1978), chapter five.

4. Cf. Miles, 75-81.

5. During a visit to a bishop, Monica had confided her grief over Augustine's as-yet unregenerate state. The bishop dismissed her saying, "It cannot be that the son of these tears should be lost" ([3.12] Atkinson 142-43). This term, "son of tears," permeated the religious consciousness of the age, prompting women to assume Monica's sorrowing, mediational stance.

At least one early Renaissance sermonist names outright the connection he sees between Monica and Magdalene. The stories of mother-saints Birgitta and Margery Kempe, during the early modern period, similarly accredit the power of a mother's prayers and tears to "purchasesyth [the sinner's] disposicion to contricion" and yield God's grace. See Revelations of St. Birgitta, W.P. Cumming, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp.117-118 (source of quote) and Atkinson, pp.145-47.

6. The Bible's figurative language, often expressing Israel, the church or other objects of God's love in female terms, could encourage women's self-castigation. In The Monument of Matrones' "Second Lampe," Thomas Bentley warned his readers to look to the female Jerusalem of Lamentations, a mother lamenting her "sinnes, unfaithfulness, and rebellion." The

persona of this woman connotes that of the wailing woman of Jeremiah: both are mothers in distress. But while the Hebrew poets of both books adopted the voice of a woman in anguish to express the supreme grief for a distraught and alienated Israel, her children, this Protestant writer coopted it to emphasize that woman's pain proceeds from woman's sin. Lamentations contained a useful store of analogies: "Behold, O Lord; for I am in distress: my bowels are troubled; mine heart is turned within me; for I have grievously rebelled. . . Mine eyes do fail with tears, my bowels are troubled" (1:20; 2:11).

(See The Monument of Matrones: conteining seven severall Lamps of Virginitie, or distinct treatises, London, 1582), and Beilin, p.66.

While tears characterized the piety of the Middle Ages for both sexes (they being "accounted" at this time "a grace rather than a disgrace"), by the Renaissance, the terms that describe affective piety become feminized. Some Calvinists, noting for example, George Herbert's "heart-work," or the "slubbering all over with his pious hands" the Preces Privatae of Andrewes, called Puritan devotion of this kind "the cultivation of a soft-life of feeling" (See Gordon Wakefield, ed., The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1983, p. 132). Nonetheless, it was permissible, and appropriate, for women to continue in the affective strain inasmuch as their devotions could bespeak the despair and anxiety many Calvinists felt.

7. Woods 6, no line numbers given.

8. Cf. Beilin 54. Ann Juhnke argues that Milton's allegory of Sin draws on a history of "womb-gnawing" images. Perhaps the tradition meant to reinforce the appropriateness of the punishment ascribed to woman in Genesis 16. See her article.

9. Among them are Livy, Ar Urbe Condita, 1.57.6-1.60.4; Ovid, Fasti, 2.721-852; and Dio Cassius, Roman History, 2.13-20. My source is Garrard.

10. One writer characterizes a sixteenth-century rendering by Joos van Cleve as showing Lucretia "in the throes of orgasm." See Garrard, p.224.

11. Her eyes turned heavenward for succor, she "melt[s]" in erotic anguish. See Garrard, p. 228.

12. Protestant reformers looked to the fervor of the early Christian martyrs in order to revitalize medieval piety. In the reformers' view, the reliance upon saints for succor and favor in everyday life had sapped from the saints' stories the sense of defiant and direct encounter with the world's demonic forces. The Church had "dehistoricized" holiness' heroism.

The reformers, in writing their own martyrologies, sought to reforge the connection between the two (Kolb 2-4).

13. "Witness" is the original meaning of the Greek word "martyr." It is only when the word and its cognates meet a separate strain of fervor for "putting on" the literal death of Christ that the term departs from this sense in the second century (Lampe 1981:120).

14. The first two stances in my paragraph Lampe describes as martyrdom's "christology" and "pneumatology." He mentions other orientations ("soteriological" and "anthropological") as well.

15. Even where the martyr embraced death in thought of Jesus' own, the larger social conflict centered on his or her resisting the temptation to renounce Jesus in favor of Caesar. More than this, martyrdom meant touting Jesus loudly, defiantly, heroically. One's willingness to witness was also compulsion to publish. The martyr's death served this end insofar as it comprised the material for stories that would circulate through the culture and thereby "propagandize" Christianity to greater advantage (Kolb 122,119).

16. Cf. Plaskow, p. 87.

17. In using these terms ("authentic" and "intrinsic"), I am not forgetting the immense body of literature on Lacanian self-constitution. Rather I am trying to describe the experience from the perspective of the subject who remains unaware of the ways in which the Other constitutes the self.

Prophetic Entry:

The Re-Imaging of Redemption and the Mistakes of Tradition
in Paradise Regained

In 1971, Stanley Fish identified what was then already a commonplace for talking about the main tension in Paradise Regained: "the relationship between God and man" (27). The "identity motif" isolates this tension within Christ's struggle to understand the intersection of human and divine within himself. As Barbara Lewalski notes, the ambiguities are set up early on in the poem (134), catalyzed by Satan's confusion (feigned or not) over his own nature in light of the baptism. The temptations feed on Satan's sense of sleight; as he later articulates it:

The Son of God I also am, or was,
And if I was, I am; relation stands;
All men are Sons of God. . .

(4.518-20)

Toward this end, Satan connives a course to answer: "In what degree or meaning [Jesus is] call'd/ The Son of God" (4.516-17).¹

Through the years, Fish and others have taught readers of Milton to be suspicious of interpreting the world and godhead the way Satan does. In the case of Paradise Regained, the way Satan struggles with Jesus' identity would provide the model against which to correct or improve our own readings of Jesus

(the caution being perhaps to inform, and eventually limit, our hermeneutics with faith). Thereby Satan is indispensable for infusing drama into the reader's own struggle to read and learn. But it is not only the individual whose readings are prone to error but also those of religious tradition--an issue to which Milton, through Satan, would wish to alert our caution as well.

Articulating the "logic" as he does of the misguided or struggling reader, Satan in Paradise Regained also typifies the dilemma of many seventeenth-century believers compelled to confront their own relationship to sonship under the daunting ethos of Calvinist election. While he provides the impetus for Christ to discern his divine-human nature, Satan also ranges within his own turmoil of identity, confronting what seems to be the unreconcilable idea of lost or unattainable status. My particular concern is the double bind of women, then and now, who seek for signs of their sonship. Satan can be put to double duty: standing in, if you will, for women excluded from the salvation machine, he also typifies what Milton himself names in Christian Doctrine as the reading mistakes of tradition which install that exclusion to begin with, i.e. the sanctions for reading Jesus too literally as an overspiritualized Son of God. I will argue that the text exposes, through Satan's misreadings and his own excluded self, the basis of women's exclusion from religious tradition--the incursion of doctrine and high christology before which

the feminine was admissible to religious experience.

The issue of election always has figured strongly in humanity's experience of divine love and approbation. Christian tradition culminates and crystalizes its importance by presenting one man, Christ, as the epitome of obedience and God's favor. However, as the believer is encouraged to think about salvation in terms of a quest already perfectly completed,² the concept is accompanied by its own spiritual backlash of anxiety. The ways in which one might achieve or graciously win salvation focus on a life already perfectly lived out by one individual. Spiritual self-confidence languishes beneath an awesome standard of perfection. God's emphatic recognition of Christ at the baptism ("This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased"³) encourages the believer's identification with the Son in his or her yearnings to attain similar favor but at the same time, it forces the realization that Christ is the epitome of the elect, the example against which all imitation falls short. Focussing on limited redemption, Calvinism often aggravated the tension between one's desires for redemption and its uncertain achievement.⁴

While one certainly cannot claim for Satan in Paradise Regained a share in the Calvinist anxiety over election, he does at least seem taken with what he perceives as the inequities of the salvation machine. The contradictory nature

of election as Satan understands it--the problem of being simultaneously son and not-son of God--finds something of a near analogue in women's relationship to election in Milton's day. Given Galatians 3:28 as a current scripture,⁵ women indeed had claim to redemption. But salvation being a scarce commodity, an undercurrent of women's preclusion from it could partly ameliorate the anxiety that dogged the "undeserving" believer.

One need only recall common seventeenth-century, and chiefly Pauline, metaphors for the family's organization: for example, man is the "head" of the household, woman the body, the one owing allegiance to the other. Women were excepted from salvation according to other precepts and practices as well. Their claim to full humanity in God was tenuous and, if achieved, derivative. Men overtook midwifery⁶ and officiated baptisms, thereby reinforcing the notion that prerogative over offspring, like Calvinist election, rested in male-mediated institutions. A woman's power to mediate in her own salvation rested in biology: only through the pain of childbirth could women redeem their part in Eve's sin.⁷ Contemporary Christology clinched women's exclusion from election. It drew on Christian and Hebrew scriptures that described the divine image in terms of correspondent and exclusively filial bonds: God receives his image from the Son, "the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). The Son, in turn, mirrors the elect as "the firstborn of many brothers"

(Rom. 8:29). Adam also shared in the relationship in "the direct imaging of God by all men" (Gen. 1:26).

Before the Reformation, the most compelling sanction for female mediation was the Virgin Mary. But the Reformation's preoccupation with the sinfulness of humanity and the futility of its "winning" grace through good works made irrelevant the natura pura--the capacity for human perfectibility--that Mary had come to represent. In addition, the period's disregard for celibacy did away with the need for a psychological spokesperson for monastic piety. Mary's disappearance removed the support for a female independence subtly implied by both her life and doctrines about her. Her agency fell victim to a chain-link scheme that nearly identified God with Christ and maleness. "Protestantism strengthen[ed] the dichotomy between the transcendent masculinity of God, who alone possesses all initiative and power" and a fallen humanity. "Christ alone represent[ed] transcendent grace, the dispenser of justice to a sinful humanity" (Ruether 1975: 56; 55).⁸ The deity had been abstracted from creation to a male and Christocentric heaven.

Thus, on a certain level, Satan figures the exclusion of seventeenth-century women from the salvation scheme. Like them, Satan stands removed from participation in the divine, left to ponder his once and rightful claim to privilege. But Milton's artistry adds a twist to the connection. Not only does Satan figure the problem of women but, once it is

identified, he serves up its explanation: the theological equation of Christ with God that simultaneously subordinates Christ's human dimension and human struggle. That is, Satan reads Jesus in line with the Church Father's high christology, full of expectation that this Jesus is the Messiah long-anticipated by the prophets and ready to usher in the kingdom simply by "cataclysmic event."⁹ So abstracting Jesus from the human tasks of discernment that must preface the Kingdom (isn't this the reason for the desert retreat to begin with?), Satan typifies orthodoxy's tendency to read Jesus apart from any context to which women, as human beings, may relate.

Milton's regaining of paradise through the desert temptations instead of through the cross has invoked a body of ambivalent responses. They range from the effort to parallel closely the two events, a move that implicitly diffuses what one might read as Milton's heterodox reaction to the Atonement, to the outright rebuking of Milton for the substitution.¹⁰ It would seem that affinities toward both of these commentaries are implied when critics explain Milton's choice of subject in terms of Renaissance typology. Though the desert temptations were largely neglected in Renaissance iconography, both the fall and the cross came to dominate their presentations (Wittreich 1975:126-27).¹¹ The period drew the comparisons: Just as "The first Adam tempted by Sathan, was driven from Paradise to the wilderness, . . . the second Adam by suffering himselfe to be tempted to Sathan,

brings home the first againe from the wildernes into Paradise" (Cowper 123).¹² For Renaissance exegetes, the desert temptations figure the cross. Jesus' trial corrects Adam's at the same time it defines and elaborates the conflicts Christ again will meet at Calvary.¹³

Reading the events of a life in terms of a death is as typological a move as any one that features Adam. As such, it bears its own attendant dangers. Just as many readers of the Hebrew Bible aver the provisional cast that typology gives to its history and traditions, readers of the New Testament are coming to determine and reevaluate the effects of interpreting or even altogether missing the life of Christ in the drive to foreground his redemptive death. Until recently, scholarship on the different strands of New Testament christology in the early church and pre-gospel communities has remained separate from modern efforts to present the relevance of who Jesus is for believers today. The research shows that within the earliest pre-gospel sources the identification of Jesus with the Father, theologically enabled by the cross, was not a readily drawn conclusion among his followers. There is speculation even on the extent to which Jesus ever makes the identification himself. Instead it is later New Testament tradition, reading Christ's life backwards of his death and John's proclamation work, that Jesus becomes the Christ. Chalcedon culminates the progression of Jesus further and further into the abstraction of preordinance and preexistence.

The cross' containment of Jesus' life work occupies a central place in the attention of feminist and liberation theology. The metaphor of the cross identifies Jesus as fulfillment only as it holds together two otherwise contradictory realities: God and human being. Doctrinal tradition, however, eventually flattens the tensiveness that the metaphor is meant to sustain. At the point at which Jesus and God are equated, the ability of the cross as metaphor to indicate two seemingly divergent realities--the divine and human, the one within the other--is gravely weakened. Jesus is seen as a simple manifestation of God. His humanness gives way to a seemingly more authentic identity connoting preexistent order and power. Moving from metaphor to univocal symbol, the cross loses its "'bifocal' or 'twinned' vision"--its ability to "actively entertain similarity within dissimilarity," to hold in opposition the secular and the profane (McFague 39).¹⁴ A literal-mindedness related to the salvation story comes to vanquish the rightful purpose of religious language: to allow one to find within the scriptures reflections of oneself or one's own life experience. Women become excluded on two counts: they are distanced, like men, from a real participation in redemption, preempted by Christ; and suffer the additional disadvantage of imaging the face of that redeemer differently as women.

Fortunately, Milton's poetic vision is too broad, and theologically revolutionary, for the closure that typology

requires. As Joseph Wittreich shows, the stratum of Milton criticism (carried forth by the eighteenth-century) that does not insist on making Paradise Regained a sequel to Paradise Lost leads to a Milton who would "wring" Scripture of its "false conclusions" (CPW VI, 225 [1975:138]). Milton moves away from the cross long enough for his readers to recognize, one, in his words, the "none effect" (l,824 [144]) of its rendering by the priests of England and, two, today's related diminishment of personal agency bred by many fundamentalist schemes.

Replacing the crucifixion with a dilemma to which all humans can relate, Milton anticipates the modern theological concern for "avoid[ing] abstractionism, and the attendant danger of manipulating the Christ event" (Sobrinho 27),¹⁵ the cross, into an inimitable act, one that ultimately alienates by virtue of the irreparable gulf between God and humanity which it implies. The temptations of Paradise Regained, especially those to glory, kingdoms, and arms, may be read as temptations to read the cross as a single act of suffering that redeems in and of itself, a lone act of heroism that authorizes power. Certainly this is the temptation to which Satan himself succumbs. Milton's Jesus, however, refuses to predominate as the apocalyptic Savior of the cross. Paradise Regained vindicates prophetic tradition by emphasizing, through both Jesus' teaching and life (i.e. his ontological stance) and the teaching's sheer force. It is after all the

stance) and the teaching's sheer force. It is after all the truth of revelation, finally grasped by Satan, that precipitates his fall. Such revelation Milton locates not in apocalypse but in a prophet-of-wisdom's life of reflection and revelation, i.e. a life, by implication, imitable by all.¹⁶ My discussion of Milton's text will traverse three routes: (1) Satan's forcing of the Son's "singleness," (2) the Son's countering self-identification as a son in wisdom tradition, and (3) the implications of a salvation scheme constructed without reference to the Atonement for women who, like Mary, would take up such an alternative model.

The question of Jesus' identity has problematized the gospels throughout the history of their interpretation. For the apostles, true discipleship meant recognizing Jesus as the suffering Messiah. But their frequent misunderstandings of Jesus' identity first had to do with their own blindness to the life of revelation and prophecy that, given the culture, was the occasion of suffering. Attempts that Jesus makes in the gospels to clarify this point find him referring to himself as "Son of Man," often in order to modify the disciples' more grandiose perceptions of him in the face of his impending death:

And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after

three days rise again. And he spake that saying openly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But when he had turned about and looked on his disciples, he rebuked Peter, saying, Get thee behind me Satan: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men. (Mark 8:31-33)

The Bible's predictions of the passion, such as this one, see the first starts of christology; the disciples ask Jesus who he is. Time and again, Jesus explains in terms of a suffering owing to the world's skewed standards of vindication:

Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so it shall not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister. And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45)

No less, the disciples remain confused. Eventually, tradition puts the issue of Jesus' suffering Messiahship to rest by stabilizing his divinity in doctrine, engendering the seventeenth-century to ask even were it possible for a divine being to have truly felt suffering at all.

Satan becomes the voice of the orthodox who view the Son in relation to a preordained order of events. Each of Satan's seductions presumes the Son's rightfulness to claims of

preexistent power and prestige. The temptations to wealth, glory, rule, and arms offer Jesus especially strong challenges to take his place in christologies of eminence. Satan tries to point up the disparity between Jesus as he presents himself and the apocalyptic role he has yet to fulfill:

Thou art unknown, unfriended, low of birth,
 A Carpenter thy Father known, thy self
 Bred up in poverty and streights at home;
 Lost in a Desert here and hunger-bit:
 Which way or from what hope dost thou aspire
 To greatness? whence Authority deriv'st,
 What Followers, what Retinue canst thou gain,

.

Money brings Honour, Friends, Conquest, and Realms....

(2.412-18; 422)

In short, "To a Kingdom thou art born, ordain'd/ To sit upon thy Father David's Throne/ . . . / Reign then" (3.152-53; 180; emphasis mine). Or, in other words, "Assume the christological part Church tradition would have you play." Satan cannot understand or admit that the worldly manifestations of glory antithesize Jesus' values. But glory's trappings as Satan names them also recall many high church formulations of Jesus that come to predominate Christian art and ritual.

Reading Satan's life backwards of his demise, we see the

problems Satan has had with recognizing the Son's prophetic role all along. To be fair, he enters midstream an important scriptural progression. The text follows the close order of events in Q and the somewhat looser order in Matthew and Luke: the Baptist's preaching of repentance and the announcement of the Coming One, the baptism of the Spirit, and Jesus' temptation in the desert. In both biblical text and source, the spirit's descent upon Jesus, impelling him to the desert, initiates his teaching career; they lead to his presentation on the Mount. These events therefore precipitate and embody the work of discernment to which Jesus' teaching mission will challenge his listeners and followers from generations hence. Ironically, Milton's first divergence from tradition has Satan overhear God's blessing upon the Son, forcing Satan's powers of discernment. From the start, he betrays his hermeneutic disadvantage. For one, he arrives on the scene late. "[R]oving still/ About the world" (1.33-34) at the time of the Baptism, he turns his attention to it only at God's proclamation:

That heard the Adversary, who. . .
 . . . at that assembly fam'd
 Would not be last. . . .

(1.33-35)

The implication of course is that Satan is last. He has missed much. God's words about the Son already have been separated from the person in Satan's experience. His

perception is bifurcated into what he has heard and who he sees, conjuring separate sources of confusion. Satan's starting point for understanding Jesus lacks integration. He therefore will deflate what I hope to explain as the prophetic richness of Jesus' designation "beloved Son" of God (1. 32). For him it connotes election, exclusion, but most of all, particularity. Anticipating the "something sudden" (1.94) of apocalypse, he can see only the Christ of the impending parousia, the "exalted man" (36).

The narrator, however, already has relativized Jesus carefully in the opening lines. Somehow in God's scheme, the "one man" of the Garden and the obedient man are equatable, or at least exchangeable:

I who e're while the happy Garden sung,
By one mans disobedience lost, now sing
Recover'd Paradise to all mankind,
By one man's firm obedience fully tri'd. . .

(1.1-4)

Already the text bears a hint of the interrogation of unsubstitutional particularity, the essence of atonement theories, that it will carry out later.

The Jesus who emerges from Baptist's waters is a figure of regionality and genealogy: "From Nazareth the Son of Joseph deem'd" (1.23). The "Regions round" in fact accompany Jesus to the Jordan (1.22); Jesus springs from them and thus from the commonness of their traditions and experience. But

Satan misses Jesus' walk out of the crowds to the Jordan. Emblematically, he also misses the theological walk of christology, the one Jesus gradually takes from Jewish prophetic history to Christian apocalyptic figurations of him as the Final One. For Satan, Jesus is already the God of endpoints. He taunts him to act: "Now at full age, fulness of time, thy season,/ When Prophecies of thee are best fulfilled" (4.379-80). Similarly, the troops are urged to take charge "E're in the head of Nations he appear/ [The people's] King, their Leader, and Supream on Earth" (1.99). Such a warning bespeaks high christological formulations of Jesus as Christ and King. Jesus is tempted to claim such formulations for himself repeatedly. For example:

Hast thou not right to all Created things,
Owe not all Creatures by just right to thee
Duty and Service, nor to stay till bid.
But tender all their power?

(2.324-327)

In each instance, Satan gives back to Jesus the hearsay that characterizes his understanding of the Son of God. So ill-equipped for understanding anything that jars with his contorted view of divine privilege and power, he is consigned to sort out what for him are effectively rumors. Satan lives out a secondary relationship to prophecy, marked by his garbled understanding of it, since the Son first announced Satan's punishment in the garden of Paradise Lost. The report

he takes back to the angels exemplifies his ineptness as a reader:

True is, mee also [the Son] . . .hath judg'd, or rather
 Mee not, but the brute serpent in whose shape
 Man I deceav'd: that which to mee belongs,
 Is enmity, which he will put between
 Mee and Mankind; I am to bruise his heel;
 His Seed, when is not set, shall bruise my head:
 A World who would not purchase with a bruise,
 Or much more grievous pain?

(10.494-501)

The biggest mistake Satan makes in interpreting his own fate is literalizing it: "A world who would not purchase with a bruise?" By the beginning of Paradise Regained, the adversary understands that bruise to be "fatal" (1.53), but still his expectations of the Son will never reach much beyond a literal level, played out along the lines of definitive and power-rendering historical events. Satan only overhears the pronouncement against him in Book X because the Son conjoins it with prophecy and, on his own account, Satan will not have any part in a communion with the divine that prophecy evokes. The ironic consequence of Satan's secondary relationship to the prophecies of Book X is his vanquishment through directly encountering them now in the brief epic.

The text reinforces Satan as a prototype of orthodox ways of reading Jesus as the Christ by including a picture of the

disciples upon whose testimonies, as Elaine Pagels tells us, orthodoxy relied for establishing Church authority. It seems that the line of direct witness emanating from the disciples, especially concerning Jesus' death and resurrection, allowed their descendents, the Church Fathers, with unifying belief in terms of Christ's singleness: his persecution, crucifixion, death, and burial (118). Eventually shoring up these events in doctrine, the Church perpetuated itself by promoting an imitative "blood witness" (122), martyrdom. Pagel's point is that a counterinfluence within the Church, the gnostics, disagreed with the emphasis on reducing Jesus to his historical particularity. For them, his life and message were not consigned to event but to the revelation he spurred each Christian to pursue internally. Like the Jesus figure of Mark cited earlier, the heterodox encouraged Christians to conceive of the Son in ways that would empower them to embrace a life of prophecy. Before rushing headlong into one's own death or glorifying Christ's, the believer might search the inner recesses of his or her heart long enough to let the Spirit transform it for understanding.

Through the "Plain fishermen" (2.27), Milton once more presents impatience or unwillingness to discern as an impediment to realizing the Kingdom. Observe the fretful picture of the disciples. Missing the Son a while, they bemoan:

Alas, from what high hope to what relapse

Unlook'd for are we fall'n; our eyes beheld
 Messiah certainly now come, so long
 Expected of our Fathers. . .

(2.30-33)

For them as well, Jesus is the Messiah of typology, the one who, in the words of Satan, can restore "David's royal seat" as "his true Successour" (3.373). Deliverance is an event to be had and, imagined "at hand," the fishermen predict that "The Kingdom shall to Israel be restor'd" (2.35-36). Their prayer to God similarly reiterates their trust in the Kingdom's coming in terms of a single event:

Send thy Messiah forth, the time is come;
 Behold the Kings of th'Earth how they oppress
 Thy chosen, to what highth thir pow'r unjust
 They have exalted, and behind them cast
 All fear of thee, arise and vindicate
 Thy Glory, free thy people from thir yoke. . .

(2.43-48)

Jesus' followers commit Satan's error. Instead of trying to discern for themselves the nature of Jesus' sonship, they look past themselves into history and hearsay.

The Son's move into the desert, which so frustrates the disciples, signals the poet's understanding that their perception of the Kingdom's coming is simplistic. Not unlike Satan's, the fishermen's expectations are confounded: "our joy is turn'd/ Into perplexity and new amaze" (2.37-38). As we

remark Satan's responses to the Son's refusals of him, we notice the same amazement. For Jesus' mode of contending with Satan is intellectual. The text presents the combat between them, traditionally played out on the cross, in terms of grasping the truth of revelation. While it is possible to read Satan's desire to know Jesus as another manipulative ploy, the Son's words have a redounding effect upon him from the beginning. At his first experience of "the voice divine," he is "Nigh Thunder-struck" (1.35-36). His remembrance of Heaven's last words prescribed to him echo both this mental and physical disorientation. As if to escape a fearsome closeness to the "inflict[ion] by the Seed of Eve/ Upon [his] head" (1.54-55), i.e. vindication of the Word, Satan remains in flight, "not rest[ing]" (1.39), even in speaking to his company:

And now too soon for us the circling hours
 This dreaded time have compast, wherein we
 Must bide the stroke of that long threat'n'd wound,
 At least if so we can. . .

(1.57-60)

His head already spinning with fear, wonder, and time's encircling nearness, Satan's body spins with it. Both head and mind are dizzy. And they remain so throughout the text in relation to Jesus' words. Paradoxically, Jesus repeatedly is shown to impact upon Satan's consciousness in terms of physical blows. He is "inly stung" (1.463) at Jesus'

affirmation of the "inward Oracle" (1.465), "mute confounded" (3.2) at the son's wisdom on riches, and "struck/ With guilt" (3.145-47) at the teacher's devaluation of worldly glory. Satan's reactions are multiplied in his rabble who, like him, typify "amazement" (1.107), "Distract[ion] and surpriz[e]" (1.108).

Reading Jesus through Chalcedon as it were, Satan is unable to come to terms with the human being that stands before him proffering instruction while engaged in the thinking life. For him, the equation between Jesus and God already has happened. Each of his temptations proposes that Jesus contain himself in high Christian tradition. Jesus, however, cannot accede to Satan's expectations. For him, who he is is whence he is. "I seek not [my glory], but his/ Who sent me, and thereby witness whence I am" (3.106-7). Right from the start, the Son anticipates the connection between Satan's picture of him and the "Delusions" of the nations. "For God hath justly giv'n the Nations up/ To [them]; justly, since they fell/ Idolatrous" (1.442-44). As feminist theologians would recognize, the analogy the text draws here between Satan's misperceptions of Jesus and the idolatry of the Israelites helps to identify the issue at hand as a theological, indeed christological, one. In the same context in which Milton in his Christian Doctrine stresses the difference between Father and Son, he refers to 1 Cor. 8:4-6:

we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that

there is none other God but one: for though there be that are called Gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be many Gods and many Lords), nevertheless for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things are, and through whom we are (216).¹⁷

Given that Milton's topic, different from Corinthians', is not pagan idols but Jesus as God's revealer, the text presses the reader to deem Jesus as one of Paul's "many Gods" (8:5). For "Scripture calls him God, but not him that is the true God; why do we not do the same?" (248).¹⁸ By suggesting that Jesus partake in glory like the Father, Satan speaks to the very reason Milton gives for writing the Christian Doctrine: redressing the "misconstructions of Scripture."

Satan's lateness to the Baptism is thus a latecoming to tradition. Counting on the fulfillment of typology, he enters from the high christological, Johannine, end. In consequence, throughout the temptations, Satan's conceptions of Jesus retain the quality of what latecomers must necessarily resort to: second-hand reports. Satan prejudges the Son in the best patristic hermeneutic style. It is as if the devil has read doctrine. If not the early Church fathers, he has at least read Hebrews, a text that forcefully names Jesus as the Christ; this Jesus is definitively "[God's] Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (1:2 [emphasis King James version]).¹⁹ Proclaiming Jesus' "sovereignty" and "superiority,"²⁰ Hebrews cites him as the

"author and finisher of our faith" (12:2 [first emphasis mine]).

If this is so, what share of the work of salvation is left for human beings, not to say women? Today liberation theologies call believers to recognize Jesus as part of a still continuing redemptive process. Rosemary Ruether states the problem:

We must question the linear model of history that sees it moving either in an evolutionary or revolutionary manner, to some final static end-point of salvation. This concept of a final salvific end-point of history is intrinsically contrary to created experience and leads to several contradictions. Either this end-point escapes outside history altogether and ceases to provide any hope, reducing all human history to 'one damn thing after another'. Or else it leads to the mythical pursuit of a revolution that can never come. If this final salvation is identified with any particular social revolution, it tends to absolutize this revolution and hence make it totalitarian (1981: 68).

Ruether and her contemporaries suggest alternate models of redemption which, in turn, re-image the redeemer. "We must abandon our static notion of Jesus Christ as finality and fulfillment," writes Jacquelyn Grant, "and replace it with proleptic and anticipatory notions" (139). Subsequently, deflecting attention from fulfillment allows for returning the

focus of christology to soteriology, i.e. Christ's saving work and the model for living it provides. Sobrino defines this shift as "the hermeneutic principle that enables us to draw closer to the totality of Christ both in terms of knowledge and in terms of real-life praxis." It is within the history of the church, the accumulation of doctrine about Jesus, that the undue attention to Christ's person, in Sobrino's words, potentially "jeopardize[s] the very essence of the Christian faith" (27).²¹ In such a way, liberation theologies often point the believer away from Chalcedon and high christology, back to earlier Palestinian reflections about Jesus. They relativize him historically as a player in salvation history's continuation.

An appreciation of liberation theologies so conceived would not be beyond a seventeenth-century revolutionary who had to thresh out for himself the significance of actions that had failed. If Paradise Lost, written during or after the civil war years, frames the revolution in terms of achieving an ethos of full humanity in government, Paradise Regained extends the truth of that principle, already implicit in the Books 11 and 12, to preparing its ground on the individual level. In both cases, faith in world-shattering events, mediated by forces beyond the self, wanes. The first epic bypasses the definitive Christian paradigm of such event, the Atonement, by assuming the naturalness of imago dei within God's intentions for humanity. Humanity moves into realizing

this intention by growing into a true understanding of it (thus Michael's part). The second epic makes the substitution of event for self (and God)-discovery even more dramatic, taking the title Paradise Regained while leaving the Atonement aside. Figuring the orthodox understanding of Jesus as the Christ in Satan, and refiguring it in the disciples, leaves us to wonder about the place of Christ's single-handed heroism even more. Milton's point, perhaps as a result of his own life's lessons, is to show real pathos as something both preceding and beyond event. Meanwhile, the believer's relationship to ongoing prophecy and revelation reaffirms a God whose faithfulness manifests itself in a renewal that is initiated in every generation.

Milton's Jesus struggles with his identity insofar as Christian tradition constrains him to particularize himself against an older tradition that would keep him relative. As Barbara Lewalski notes, Jesus is familiar with the role that Christian tradition readies for him; he grasps it through his mother's understanding that "Thy Father is th'Eternal King, who rules/ All Heav'n and Earth" (1.236-37), the magi's homage to him, Simeon's and Anna's prophecies (ambiguously interpretable), and John's recognition of him as "whose Harbinger he was" (1.277). "Revol[ving]/ the Law and Prophets" (1.259-60). Jesus is capable of reading himself typologically. But the fact that his christic eminence remains hearsay for him, much like Satan's remove from knowing

Jesus perfectly, is the very basis for exposing Satan's presumption.²² The recognition of himself as the cosmic Christ of doctrine also filters his self-perceptions through second-hand sources. Therefore, the text implies, such a notion must be weighed and scrutinized. While the impulse to accede to the typologizing of his own life is present early on (he bespeaks the typologist's affinity for masking new with old by suggesting that "our Scribes/ [Knew only] partly" the Messiah's story [1.261-62]; "soon [I] found of whom they spake/ I am" [1.262-63]), the extent to which Jesus identifies himself as the Final One is left open. Milton keeps Jesus relative by linking him "chiefly" to a shared prophetic fate. Finding himself in the scriptures, Jesus finds Wisdom's long line of persecuted righteous ones as well:

. . . this chiefly, that my way must lie
 Through many a hard assay ev'n to the death,
 E're I the promis'd Kingdom can attain. . . .

(1.263-65).

By aptly following these words with a "high" Johannine self-representation by Jesus ("Or work Redemption for mankind, whose sins/ Full weight must be transferr'd upon my head" [1.266-67]), Milton seems to apprehend New Testament christology as a product of tradition's layerings. At the same time, as Lewalski notes, the supernatural means by which to realize this self have been placed outside the scope of the poem. Jesus may be the atoning savior of mankind. But the

degree to which Milton allows a competing Hebrew tradition of prophecy to inform his Jesus qualifies his orthodoxy significantly, pointing his readers to a more humanly-mediated path to salvation.

The very essence of prophetic faith is continuance--of history and of memory. The prophet by definition maintains a people's connection to their past and rightly redirects their future. Personified Wisdom of the Bible typifies the experience best. It is generational and cyclical: Wisdom seeks for men and women to speak for her in successive ages. "Generation by generation she enters into holy souls and renders them friends of God and prophets" (Wisd. 7:27). Her effort to recall Israel to its promise renews itself through the periodic election of holy men and women. Guiding the varied fates of the patriarchs, she appears again and again within the context of changing circumstances. In the Wisdom of Solomon especially (a book which seems to inform Milton's imagination not here only but in his representation of his Muse in Paradise Lost²³), she is celebrated as the preserving force in the stories of Adam, Cain, and the patriarchs (Engelsman 93). Just as she led Jacob "on the straight path; and showed him the kingdom of God" (10:10), she "entered the soul of the servant [Moses]. . . and with signs and wonders withstood dread kings" (Wisd. 10:16). Wisdom "guided [her people] on a wondrous journey, and became a covering for them by day and a blaze of stars by night" (10: 17). Likewise did

she preserve and guide the kings. Wisdom performs and constitutes God's commitment to restore each passing age.

The prophetic experience is also recollective: Wisdom "knows the past and infers the future" (8:8). As a close "initiate in the knowledge of God and a chooser of his works" (8:4),²⁴ she contains the "storehouses" (Baruch 3:15²⁵) of history, and memories "from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was" (Prov. 8:23). It may seem that Wisdom's store of knowledge ties her too closely to God much like "high" formulations of Jesus as the Christ. But Wisdom's incarnational theology guarantees her connection to humanity. Moreover, her descents are repeated, each one marking a moment of salvation history in which God shares.²⁶

The Jesus of Paradise Regained bespeaks the nonlinearity of prophetic tradition. He recognizes himself as one among prophets, "searching what was writ" (1.260) among them. His answer to Satan's first temptation illumines most clearly his relation to the tradition:

[I]n the Mount

Moses was forty days, nor eat nor drank,

And forty days Elijah without food

Wander'd this barren waste; the same I now. . .

(1.351-54)

Here Milton recalls the biblical parallel among three figures spanning the generations. Like Jesus, Moses and Elijah both transgress wilderness domains. Elijah moves twice to the

wilderness. The second time, his sojourn brings him to the same realm as that of Moses, Mount Horeb (Sinai). No less, the similarity here drawn among the prophets surpasses place: each wilderness experience is linked, like Jesus', to divine commission. Moses receives the laws that are to lead the people safely to Canaan. Elijah on Mount Horeb learns how to reestablish the covenant by installing the kings and prophets who, in turn, ensure that the work of renewal will continue into the next generation.

This comparison is noteworthy for what it suggests about the import of divine immanence. In the past, Milton criticism of Paradise Regained has privatized Jesus' desert journey, detecting within it a meditative quietness thought to prepare Jesus for his later work. But if we are to follow the pattern Milton establishes of the prophet who mediates an act of community renewal, initiated by God, then we must be prepared to find in the Son's retreat more than an experience that applies only to Jesus. Keeping the comparison between him and his prototypes, we realize that the Son, "Into himself descend[ing]" (2.111), really marks another moment of God's descent into history. In the tradition of Moses and Elijah, his desert activity both summons and signals God's self-revelation amidst his community. Slightly paraphrasing Wittreich, all former descents by God into history are suggested by the Son's descent into himself (1975:115). Seeing the Son as personifying that presence's "visitation,"

we are encouraged to consider his life of discernment Hebraically--as a legitimate and alternative way to reinstall the covenant within our own communities successively throughout history. Such a paradigm of repeated or recursive renewal, mediated by humans, contradicts "high" orthodox christologies that move salvation in a straight line toward the cross, ascribing its perfection to one (male) being only.

Toward this point, Milton offers the reader of Paradise Regained access to an important Judaic tradition that qualifies the idea of Jesus' singleness: the Son of God scriptures of wisdom literature. Herein the envoys of wisdom may be recognized by the fact of their shared life patterns. Again, personified Wisdom is the definitive prototype of the prophetic experience. She descends to humanity in search of "those who are worthy of her;. . . with gracious will she appears to them on their path" (Wisd. 6:16). Within her community she seeks a resting place among those who would hear her teachings. Yet Wisdom is rejected time and again.²⁷ The writings of the Q community, contemporary with Jesus and the pre-gospel period, bring the wisdom ethos to the synoptics. Luke 11:49-51 and its parallel, Matthew 23:34-36, bespeak the bereaved and rejected prophet. These scriptures lament "the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world."²⁸ As they persist in the work of bringing truth to humanity, Wisdom's emissaries share her rejection. Their fate now and in the future will repeat her own: "I will

send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and persecute. The blood of all the prophets. . . may be required of this generation; From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, . . . verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation." Moses' memory is a part of this scheme: "The castaway whom formerly during the exposure of infants they had scornfully disowned, they came in the event to admire" (Wisd. 11:14).²⁹ Elijah, in confronting the prophet-murdering Jezebel, is the very heart of the mourning Wisdom.³⁰

To recognize the Son as prophet in Paradise Regained enjoins the reader to reevaluate the place of pathos in the poem's framework. Suffering enters into wisdom theology in a way that interrogates the cataclysmic and salvific proportions that, aligned with a single agent, it takes on in Christian faith. In the prophets and wisdom literature, the just person suffers as a result of being tested by adversaries.

Let us entrap the just man, for his presence is
 inconvenient to us,
 and he opposes our actions;
 he reproaches us for our lawlessness,
 and charges us with falseness to our training.

.

Let us see if his statements are true,
 and make trial of what will happen to him in the end;
 for if the just man is God's son, he will assist him

and rescue him from the clutches of his opponents.

Let us afflict him with outrage and torment him,
so that we may gauge the measure of his reasonableness
and assay his forbearance of evil.

(Wisd. 2:12; 17-18)³¹

This scripture speaks Satan's motives to try the Son: "Who this is we must learn" (1.91). Solomon's testimony of the experience of the prophetic Everyman profoundly typifies Jesus' desert experience. A prime objective, for both Satan and the prophet's adversaries, seems to be to dislodge the prophet from his relationship to revelation. The prophet will prevail in truth, his teachings will be vindicated, "if the just man is God's son" (2:17). Satan may inwardly know that the man whom John baptizes, "this new-declar'd,/ This man of men" (1.121-22) is whom the Voice declared, but that identity is only as good as the privileged position he maintains to revelation. Satan's temptations, each in succession, will challenge the Son to align himself with historical event or action. But to do so would contradict the source of identity the prophet claims for him or herself: a relationship to prophetic truth. For the prophet's adversaries, the prophet "professes a knowledge of God, and styles himself child of the Lord. . . he pronounces the final lot of the just happy and boasts that God is his father" (2.13;16). What spurs the adversaries against the prophet are his or her claims to prophetic intimacy with God. Wisdom

literature defines the righteous one as that person who "professes" this relationship (2.13). In prophetic terms, this is the meaning of sonship.

In such a context, suffering loses its salvific dimension when it is seen as the necessary consequence of finding and living Wisdom's revelations most fully. Remarking on the Q document's lack of a passion narrative (the precedence for Matthew's and Luke's own lack of one), H.E. Todt writes: "the passion and resurrection were not what had to be preached but what had enabled [the Q community] to preach. The events of Jesus' being executed, laid under the curse of the cross and turned out of Israel could not fail to cast doubt upon the authority of his teaching." The resurrection thereby offered proof that Jesus taught rightly. The Q group read the resurrection in a way for which "the gift of salvation did not lie in [its] events, but had been validated by them" (250-51).³² Under this orientation, Jesus' vindication lies in the ultimate indisputability of his teachings, the proper reward for the pathos of remaining attendant to Wisdom's words.

Paradise Regained dramatizes, more than anything else, Jesus' privileged relationship to revelation. The way in which the angels define Jesus' triumph is enough to signal that the conquest the Son is to accomplish exceeds the atonement:

Victory and Triumph to the Son of God

Now entring his great duel, not of arms,
 But to vanquish by wisdom hellish wiles.
 The Father knows the Son; therefore secure
 Ventures his filial Vertue, though untri'd,
 Against whate're may tempt. . . .

(1.173-78, emphasis mine)

Milton draws on wisdom tradition as it manifests itself in both Testaments. It is the failure of the Israelite people to acknowledge the prophets as the bearers of Wisdom's revelations that, in turn, leads to trial by their enemies. Likewise, Jesus repeatedly answers the apostles' christological queries in terms of a fate shared by the prophets. For Milton, the angels in their "Celestial measures" (1.170) predict victory by wisdom tradition's "measure" of vindication: recognition of truthful teaching. The angels' insight prefigures the very grounds on which Jesus' victory over Satan will be won.

The above passage also instances the prophet's intimacy with God. Following the "strong motion" (1.290) of "the Spirit leading" (1.189), the Son leaves aside concern for a sure knowledge of the Spirit's "intent" (291); he holds to the confidence that "what concerns my knowledge God reveals" (293). Jesus' words refer us back to the angels' song and further back--again--to prophetic tradition. In Luke and Matthew, one finds the scripture:

All things are delivered to me of my Father; and no man

knoweth who the Son is, but the Father; and who the Father is, but the son, and he to whom the Son will reveal him.

(Luke 10:22; Matthew 11:27)³³

Proceeding from the wisdom sayings in Q, this scripture harkens to the very essence of wisdom tradition: wisdom's inaccessibility.³⁴ The elect are those righteous ones who find reciprocity with God and his special Knowledge; Israel is privileged because it can participate in this mutuality. "Blessed are we, O Israel: for what pleases God is known to us!" (Baruch 4:4).

Thus in returning the Son to prophetic tradition, Milton comments on Calvinist election and its exclusionary ethos. Jesus' placement in a pre-Christian context of election departicularizes him at least to the extent that the principles engendering his election extend to his followers as well. Ivan Havener, remarking on the Matthean/Lukan passage above as derived from Q, curiously illumines the theology of Paradise Regained and some implications:

This passage proclaims that Jesus is God's son and that only by accepting the Son as the revealer of God the Father can God be known. Thus only with this knowledge can one enter the kingdom of God. This is the very heart of Q's understanding of the way of salvation. Jesus himself is the very means of salvation, but it is not through his redeeming death, which is nowhere

mentioned in Q, rather, in his revealing of God's reign and of the way to share in that kingdom. In other words, the Son reveals the Father to others, and those, to whom the Son chooses to reveal the Father also know the father like the Son. In this sense they become real "sons [and daughters] of God" themselves (71).

De-particularizing the savior ultimately disperses the Spirit's powers of discernment. Herein we find Milton engaging orthodoxy again. Jesus, in speaking the range of prophetic forms (proverbs, beatitudes, proclamations and announcements, judgments and warnings, law sayings and community rules³⁵), claims Wisdom's perfect counsels for his own. But different from what tradition does in later strains of the gospel,³⁶ Milton would not hoard Providence within the Son by having the Son wholly appropriate Wisdom's agency. Instead he would see it shared:

God hath now sent his living Oracle
 Into the World, to teach his final [but repeated] will,
 And sends his Spirit of Truth henceforth to dwell
 In pious Hearts, an inward Oracle
 To all truth requisite for men to know.

(1.460-64)

Milton reconstitutes the incarnational ethos of wisdom theology. Rather than manifest it in a single figure, Milton moves in line with the Hebraic concept of Wisdom's repeated

descents, allowing the Spirit to be received by many and varied followers and ensuring God's entry into every age.

Once again, an alignment of Milton and feminist theology obtains. Paradise Regained answers feminist objections to the exclusionary ethos of the atonement by establishing a theological climate for returning salvation to a realm of human mediation while defining that mediation in light of an activity that encompasses women. Remarkably, the role of Mary typifies the Son's experience. Exhibiting a close relationship to prophecy, she evokes the figure of Wisdom and follows Milton's redefinition of the pathos in terms of the tortuous discerning life. But this is not all. Given the biblical evidence for prophecy as an engagement with God's feminine presence, Mary doubly speaks to prophetic experience as both its prototype and source.

Dayton Haskin has illumined Milton's Mary as a figure unique for her powers of discernment. As Haskin indicates, an age-old tradition aligning her with Luke makes more of her meditative capacity than what we get in the other gospel writers, and it is this tradition that Milton emphasizes unprecedentedly. Rather than minimize Mary's natural inquisitiveness over the angel's "troubl[ing]" (1:29) words, the magi's report, and other events, Milton appropriates her reaction as the germ of the inspired life. Much is to be made of Luke's witness, reiterated by Milton, that Mary "kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (2:19). Haskin

writes, "because she did not understand everything that was going on, more than mere retention is meant." The biblical text "hints that she 'combined' what she saw and heard and remembered in her heart into the coherent collection of narratives that Luke later recorded" (177). Mary on a fundamental level models for Jesus the process of reading scripture "conferentially," i.e. "conferring place with place."

For this critic, Mary's discerning activity places her beyond mere modelling (though not "mere" at all), locating her in relation to a theological dispensation which, as I hope I have shown, presents the reader with an alternate route to--and role in--salvation. Paradise Regained redefines the passion in terms of the trials that the prophet undertakes in order to live a life of revelation. As prophet, one must journey to the depths of the innerself where the voice of God speaks (for Jesus, the wilderness) and be ready to endure not only the castigation of others in the community who rail against the messenger (here, the devil), but also the delays inherent in receiving and rightly interpreting God's word. While Mary does not confront Satan, she does experience the contention of finding one's own truth that Satan in part represents. Her troubledness of mind, a mark of her narrative in Luke, characterizes her in Milton. At her Son's "delay" ("But where delays he now?" [2.95]), she overturns "Within her brest, though calm; her brest though pure,/Motherly cares and

fears. . . rais[ing]/Some troubl'd thoughts" (2.63-65). The unease clearly is related to Haskin's "more than mere retention" or observation of event as it recalls that with which she first accepted the angel's greeting. "O what avails me now that honour high/ To have conceiv'd of God, or that salute,/ Hail highly favour'd, among women blest" (2.66-68). Just as the angel's words could not be met without interpretation, Mary's overturning of the event's significance, so Mary cannot dismiss the Son's unexplained absence. Given her accompanying "sighs" (2.65) and "While I to sorrows" (2.69), i.e. expressions of exasperation, readers assume her to say something like, "of what use is it to me--the angel's greeting?" But there is more to this "what use": Mary is restating the principle that has seen her through precisely the list of experiences she goes on to recount. She suggests that at every point she has asked the same question, different perhaps only in tone: not "of what use" but "to what use?" In other words, amidst Mary's worry we find her in authentic relationship to revelation. She could as well be asking what might one important past experience concerning her Son have to tell her about this present one (Haskin's "conferring")? To what advantage might the course of God's self-disclosures in her life be put in the present context?

Milton glimpses the depth of Mary's ability to participate in redemption, her own and others by showing her commitment to thresh out on a personal level the meaning of

God's repeated interventions within her life. By contrast to Satan, she is unwilling to take intersections of divine and human realities as she finds them any way but symbolically. She assumes these moments resound in meaning that is personally and providentially relevant. That Mary's response conjoins the prophetic effort and pathos is precisely the point--in fact the same point of Jesus cited in Mark earlier and of Milton who renders the same convergence by opposing the Son-as-prophet/teacher to a devil who would try him. The prophet's fate and life work are inextricable. Pathos is endemic to the discerning life. In Mary, Milton reemphasizes such a redefinition of the pathos everywhere informing Paradise Regained. Mary's sighings and sorrows weave themselves amidst her quanderies:

O what avails me now that honor high
 To have conceiv'd of God, or that salute,

 While I to sorrows am no less advanc't,
 And fears as eminent, above the lot
 Of other women, by the birth I bore,
 In such a season born when scarce a Shed. . . .

(2.66-71)

Reliving the birth, flight to Egypt, Jesus' young years, and the most recent baptism, Mary keeps her heavy heart before the reader. Each instance gives us to understand that her anxieties issue from the pendency of event, i.e. those moments

in which experiences are yet bare of interpretation.

The necessity to wait that enjoins the prophet is what the literally-minded orthodox cannot endure. For them, the paradigms have been laid out, the typology set up, and the events foretold, each replete with ready significance. Any delay in drawing conclusions mounts frustration. But those who would discern the working of the spirit in their lives must take up a different posture. They do not predetermine God's self-disclosures. They wait in readiness. Notice Mary's troubled "though calm" heart. Despite her uncertainties, a sureness encompasses her waiting, an attentive expectancy that will enable insight the moment that the Spirit's first promptings are felt.

Insofar as Satan demonstrates an expectancy of sorts, his frustrate relationship to interpretation colors that expectancy with doom. Warned by the Son that God's rising is his fall, he says:

Let that [endtime] come when it comes;. . .

.

I would be at the worst; worst is my Port,
My harbor and my ultimate repose,
The end I would attain, my final good.

.

If I then to the worst that can be hast,
Why move thy feet so slow. . .

(3.204;209-11;223-34)

Such agony has its basis in an overinvested "faith" in events in and of themselves. Just as the orthodox attribute to Christ's death and resurrection all measure of redemption, so Satan structures the event as constitutive of his doom. This aggrandized notion of event, predetermined in interpretation, comments on Samson's suicide and even Eve's gesture toward self-murder in Paradise Lost. To the former, the hero cannot but posit salvation in terms other than cataclysm--this despite, or perhaps in response to, the tortuousness of "restless thoughts" that "swarm" like "deadly. . . / . . . Hornets arm'd," "rush[ing] upon [him] thronging" (19-21). How differently in tone does Samson recount his own annunciation story, perhaps meant to contrast Mary's:

O wherefore was my birth from Heav'n foretold
 Twice by an Angel, who at last in sight
 Of both my Parents all in flames ascended
 From off the Altar, where an Off'ring burn'd,
 As in a fiery column charioting
 His godlike presence, and from such great act
 Or benefit reveal'd to Abraham's race?

(23-29)

Samson's heart, though troubled, is far from calm. In the midst of his search for personally relevant answers exemplified here, where is his "conferring place with place?" Instead he keeps his eyes pinned on event from the beginning: "Designed for great exploits" (32), his "glorious

strength/[is] Put to the labour of a Beast, debas't/ Lower than bondslave!" Again, the remedy is in acting: "Promise was that I/ Should Israel from Philistian yoke deliver" (36-39). As we see, he has been and remains keyed to prefabricated interpretations of his actions, his events, which ironically, as his predicament suggests, have allowed him to act providentially not at all.

Eve, likewise in her "suicide", overinvests endterm and generically-interpreted event. She assumes that Satan's demise is equivalent to salvation.

miserable it is

To be to others cause of misery,
Our own begotten, and of our Loins to bring
Into this cursed World a woful Race,
That after wretched Life must be at last
Food for so foul a Monster. . . .

.

Then both our selves and Seed at once to free
From what we fear for both, let us make short. . . .

(10.981-86;999-1000, emphasis mine)

Why wait? Mary could tell her: to preserve herself for a life of self-discovery prompted by God's own self-disclosures. Mary in her soliloquy makes apparent that each of God's interventions complete themselves only through careful discernment. Eve would cut herself off from a self (and other)-saving opportunity. In the waiting is the saving.

The interstices of active discernment that must follow God's visitations engage human beings in godlike powers to move themselves along providential lines.

Ultimately, the prophetic framework offers the believer a revised notion of atonement. The interweave of prophecy and affliction is so tight that the factor hitherto driving Jesus' death in orthodox schemes of atonement, a kind of divine bloodthirst, loses relevance. Where she recounts Simeon's prophecy, Mary's soliloquy attests to this point:

I look't for some great change; to Honor? no,
 But trouble, as old Simeon plain foretold,
 That to the fall and rising he should be
 Of many in Israel, and to a sign
 Spoken against, that through my very Soul
 A sword shall pierce; this is my favor'd lot,
 My Exaltation to Afflictions high. . .

(2.86-92)

Simeon's words present the young Jesus' future as a prophet: Mary's son will be "A light to lighten the Gentiles" and "a sign which shall be spoken against" (Luke 2:32,34). She is implicated in this future: "(Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (2:35). Not only is she subject to affliction as a mother who feels for the suffering of her child but to the pathos of undertaking the same prophetic quest. Simeon perhaps tells her, "And neither are you, Mary, exempt from a

relationship to revelation." Pain must accompany the effort to understand the Spirit's workings in her life. "This is my favor'd lot,/ My Exaltation to Afflictions high" (2.91-92). On a certain level, Milton seems to suggest, Simeon and his understanding of prophecy sanctions Mary's comparison of her own suffering, her own pathos, to Jesus'.

Apropos the recursive, recollective, nature of prophecy, Mary returns us to the prototype of the suffering prophet, Wisdom. Most times, scriptures that testify to Wisdom's trials, like Jesus' rejection, ascribe her fate to a shortsightedness within the community. A pathos for Wisdom herself derives from factors outside herself, rather than a receptivity to God now only coming to perfection. (But remember wisdom literature's emphasis on the emotionally-intense "search."³⁷) By placing the Son's interior journey in relation to God's self-revelations through the prophets, Milton makes the connection: the pathos that the would-be visionary undertakes and his or her rejection by the community are analogies of each other. Mary's "pondering oft" (2.105) centralizes this point. "While her Son tracing the Desert wild" (2.109) goes off to wrestle with both demons of the prophetic experience, Mary bespeaks the central issue of receptivity and understanding conjoining both problems.

Even with Mary's primary relationship to an alternate vision of redemption, noteworthy in itself, Milton adds something extra. It is not enough that Mary typifies the

prophetic experience of the suffering Wisdom; as her son's predecessor, nurturer, and teacher, she also determines it, embodying Wisdom herself. The reader glimpses Jesus' growth into self-understanding through Mary's wisdom as its window. Mary anticipates the thoughts "revolv[ing]" (2.259) in Jesus' breast. As her son contemplates a host of issues, from the Law of God to his own consideration of "heroic acts" (1.216) versus teaching, Mary "These growing thoughts. . . soon perceiv[es]" (1.227) and responds to them by increasing his sense of personal history. As a human mother, Mary cannot recapture the whole of creation and salvation history unless she, too, recalls the scriptures. But the sureness with which she recounts for Jesus her own memories and prophecies spoken to her does align her with a Wisdom who "knows the past and infers the future" (Wisdom 8:8). Certainly, she taps wisdom's "storehouses" (Baruch 3:15) of memory as if "from the beginning" (Prov. 8:23). The reader can appreciate the Son's sense of his mother as the source of knowledge that antedates him, close in relationship to God's purposes; the annunciation, the magi's reports, the prophecies spoken at the Temple--all mutually feature in Mary's soliloquy later on but, as far as the Son perceives, Mary recalls these events to mind untroubledly. His picture is one that assumes Mary's dispensation toward understanding.

In truth, the portrait we get of Mary through Jesus engages an age-old association of the Virgin Mother with

Wisdom that in turn goes back to ancient near eastern and Greek figurings of the Mother Goddess. The many-faceted nature of this ancient figure, her reputation for being "the one of many names," shames the unidimensionality with which society since then has gendered attributes into passive and active, nurturing and threatening, ad infinitum. Not surprisingly, Wisdom's uniqueness in Christian theology finds a figure, gendered female, who survives to unite these splits. On the one hand, Milton uses Mary to credit the Son's wisdom with a feminine origin. Although Wisdom is not reducible to modern-day constructions of motherhood, many of her gifts and qualities betoken the mother: "Motherhoodlike she will meet him" (Ecclesiasticus 15:2). Says Proverbs: "Do not desert her, she will keep you safe, love her, she will watch over you" (4:6). Of course, Wisdom maintains domesticity:

Happy the person who meditates on wisdom,

.

Pursuing her like a scout

and watching her entryways;

Who peeps through her window,

and listens at her doors;

Who encamps near her house

and fastens his tent pegs next to her walls;

Who pitches his tent beside her

and lives as her welcome neighbor;

.

Who takes refuge from the heat in her shade
and dwells in her home.

(Ecclesiasticus 14:20, 22-27)

But to the extent that Milton allows Mary an ability which upsets the otherwise passive scheme of femininity, he ascribes to her the shaping hand of history and salvation--whether as the prophet or the prophet's teacher. Jesus' return from the desert to his mother's house (certainly a pursuit of "refuge. . . from the heat") affirms the basis of his (and Mary's) prophetic self-conceptions.

In consequence, Paradise Regained vindicates the Son in the terms that wisdom literature does so for the prophet: by means of recognition. Wisdom seeks: she would be recognized. As God's presence, she remains with an alienated Israel (Ruether 1977:24).³⁸ Reunion then involves remembrance, or recognition, of her. But insofar as Wisdom often typifies the prophet's own experience, the prophet shares her vindication. Just as Moses' revilers "in the end of events, . . . marveled at him" (11:14b), so the just man gains "authority over his masters" because Wisdom "give[s] the lie to those who found fault with him," i.e. who found him false. (Wis. 10:14c). Similarly, we remember the point of the parable of the obstinate children in Q 16, Matthew 11 and Luke 35: "Yet [W]isdom is justified [i.e. recognized] of her children."

It is just such a form of prophetic vindication that Milton promises outside the context of the atonement. Just as

the prophet receives vindication by his adversaries' recognition of truths rightly found and taught, Job is vindicated for his growth in learning:

This is true glory and renown, when God
 Looking on th'Earth, with approbation marks
 The just man, and divulges him through Heav'n
 To all his Angels, who with true applause
 Recount his praises; thus he did to Job . . .

(3.60-64)

Job's trials were part of God's plan to "extend his fame through Heav'n and Earth" (65), despite human beings' faulty standards of glory. Job is the one who "by deeds of peace, by wisdom eminent,/ By patience, temperance. . . / . . . /[was] Made famous in a Land and times obscure" (3.91-94). Jesus speaks of Job's recognition as triumph: "Who names not now with honour patient Job?" (3.95). Pushed further, the son reveals wisdom's inextricable link to glory: the word. Glory is a product of one's ascription to the word, "since [God's] word all things produc'd" (3.122). The close relationship of Wisdom to the creative word of God, her access to his "hidden counsels" at the world's beginnings, thematizes much of wisdom literature. Those who seek after and attain the word seem to engage in a self-substantiative model of redemption.

But most dramatic of all, it is Satan's demise that has the last word on the power of truth recognized to vindicate those who would ascribe to the prophetic life. It follows

that at the moment when Jesus asserts perhaps the ultimate truth of wisdom tradition that Satan's sense of imbalance, mental and physical, finally knocks him off the precipice. In response to the temptation to suicide, Jesus says "Tempt not the Lord thy God" (4.561). Jesus may or may not be equating himself with God here. If he is, however, he is simultaneously pointing to God the Father in a way that recalls the moment in which Job's repeated solicitations of his tormenter, Satan--yes--but ultimately the reticent God, are finally silenced as well. In the final chapters of Job's story, God has been thundering at Job in a similar way. At one point he says: "Shall he that contendeth with the Almighty instruct him? he that reproveth God, let him answer it" (40:2). With this Job makes his first affirmation of God's majesty by spurning himself: "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth" (40:4). Job has been tempted but himself tempts in pressing God for answers. Job pushes God to the precipice of God's own limits--on human knowledge. This then is the ultimate wisdom: to know that God, finally, is beyond human knowledge and probing; he is both more terrible and magnificent than can be revealed. Satan's realization of this truth concurs with, indeed constitutes, the definitive blow against him. Satan "smitten with amazement fell" (4.562). The redemptive power of the Word forces Satan's recognition of Jesus as a prophetic bearer of truth.

In asserting a prophetic Jesus, in working against the Son's particularity and overspiritualization, Milton finds himself corroborating "proleptic and anticipatory notions" (Grant 139) of the mediator found in liberation and feminist theologies. Paradise Regained does not present the "one act/one agent" Victor of the Crucifixion, the Vanquisher Satan would have Jesus be. Rather Milton eschews consolidating Jesus' lifework within the cross, instead relocating the passion to the trials of a prophetic life. As Milton shows, redemption cannot be made into an icon; it resists embodiment within a single static moment. Rather it is a process open to all human beings, impelling even the Redeemer toward ongoing struggle. The digression from orthodoxy has implications for women. Nearing the end of his oeuvre, Milton meets the starting point of feminist and liberation theologies: the paradigmatic Jesus. Christian sonship, misconstrued masculine, is superseded by the essence of Jesus' Christness, his ability to move in concert with the heart of God. Such a domain is neither male nor female. As Milton's portrait of Mary must suggest, an explicit equation of Jesus with the cosmic Christ must diminish humanity's perception of its own part in the salvation scheme. Instead, the poet-theologian would install difference in the relationship, thereby affording his readers, male and female, an empowering share in the space between them.

Notes

1. Lewalski's point, in citing the same lines as I do here, is that Satan is crucial to setting in motion the identity motif. See pages 134-135.

2. Margaret Olofson Thickstun reads the spiritual quest as feminized because the penitent must submit to a pre-existent order. She notes that the mediation of Christ himself is feminine in this way. The pattern of following a pre-ordained divine will characterizes much female mediation in Puritan literature. See her book.

3. Matthew 3:17; cf. Luke 3:22. All biblical citations refer to the King James Bible unless otherwise noted.

4. On the evidence of sermons and spiritual autobiographies, believers often found it safest in a way, to deem themselves the basest of sinners and grope for signs of election from the depths of their despair. See Thickstun p. 50 and passim. In her reading of Dimmesdale especially, one finds a literary analogue of the anxiety-ridden penitent.

5. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are one in Christ Jesus."

6. See Hobby, p. 183, and Antonia Fraser, The Weaker Vessel (New York: Random House, 1984), chapter 22.

7. See Thickstun, especially chapter one whose ideas inform my own on Protestant anxiety over election and its displacement onto women.

8. For the effect of Reformation christology on mariological doctrine, see Ruether 1975, chapter 2.

9. Elaine Pagels uses the term to describe the expectations of the orthodox in the early Church. See p. 155.

10. For an example of the former tendency, see Charles Huttar, "The Passion of Christ in Paradise Regained," English Language Notes 19 (1982): 236-60, which also provides a summary of various critical reactions to Milton's bypass of the cross. See also Joseph Wittreich, Angel of Apocalypse, p. 125-29.

11. Wittreich also notes the Baptism as often a part of the scheme.

12. Cf. Lewalski p. 176.

13. The tripartite equation is manifest in analogies such as that of the "tree": "Adam . . . did eat of the forbidden Tree" just as Christ was similarly to be tempted by its worldly fruits in the desert and later hung on it. Exegetes of the period could even extend the correspondences between Adam and the wilderness Christ to decide that their temptations were in fact identical; summing up the whole of Christ's life (as in the cross), they were: "the Flesh, the World, and the Devil" (See Lewalski, p 177). The "duel" analogy also connects the Eden, desert, and Calvary events. See the variorum, Book I, line 11.

14. McFague delineates the loss of religious language's metaphoricity as the problem of theology today. See her book.

15. Cf. Grant, p. 81.

16. In Milton's Brief Epic, Barbara Lewalski lucidly articulates Jesus as prophet but mainly within the context of the first temptation and not at all in light of wisdom literature. I wish to emphasize Jesus' prophetic role throughout the poem and the potentially radical aspects of the wisdom tradition that surrounds it.

17. Further along the same passage, Milton asserts that the "from whom" (Christ) is "clearly distinguished" from "through whom" (God). Again, another way in which Milton delineates the Son's mediational role (216).

18. Further, Milton writes "where the Father and the Son are mentioned together, the name, and attributes, and works of the Deity, as well as divine honours, are always assigned to the one and only God the Father. . . whenever the same properties are assigned to the Son, it is in such a manner as to make it easily intelligible that they ought all primarily and properly to be attributed to the Father alone (233).

19. The Merritt Hughes edition notes the Hebrews scripture as the parallel to II. 324-27.

20. The Nelson edition of the King James Bible notes these as the chief concerns of the first two sections of the letter respectively (1:1-2:18; 3:1-10:18).

21. Cf. Grant, p. 81.

22. "[H]e has no consciousness of himself as the 'first-begot' or any pre-existent state in heaven. Indeed he displays his merely human, limited understanding in his statement that he is led into the desert, 'to what intent/ I

learn not yet; perhaps I need not know' (I.291-92)" (Lewalski 135).

23. Merritt Hughes cites the Wisdom of Solomon as one of Milton's sources for Wisdom's presence with God at the Creation in the invocation to Book VII of Paradise Lost. See the note to line nine in his edition, Complete Poems and Major Prose (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957).

24. Editor's note: "Our author is saying in effect that Wisdom is essentially synonymous with the Divine Mind, and thus represents the creative agency of the Deity."

25. Revised Standard Edition.

26. M. Jack Sugg's study, Wisdom, Christology, and Law in Matthew's Gospel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), has been enormously helpful to my understanding of Wisdom themes and concerns. Here I am drawing upon some of the many quotes Suggs uses for explication; cf. pp. 21, 28, 40-41 especially. My text for the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus is the Anchor Bible.

27. According to James M. Robinson, Enoch 42:1-2 contains the "locus classicus" for Wisdom:

Wisdom found no place where she might dwell;
Then a dwelling-place was assigned her in the heavens.
Wisdom went forth to make her dwelling among the
 children of men,
And found no dwelling-place:
Wisdom returned to her place,
And took her seat among angels.

See "Jesus as Sophos and Sophia: Wisdom Tradition and the Gospels" in Aspects of Wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity, Robert L. Wilken, ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), pp. 1-16.

28. Cf. Suggs 24-29.

29. Suggs, *ibid*.

30. Cf. Wisd. 5:1-2:

The just man will take his stand with poised
 confidence
to outface his oppressors
 and those who made light of his sufferings.
At the sight of him they will be shaken with fearful
 terror,
and will be astounded at the unexpectedness of his
 deliverance.

See also chapter five as a whole.

31. Cf. Suggs 92.

32. Also Suggs 94.

33. Because of the intimacy of knowledge between Jesus and the Father in this passage, many scholars argue that an equation between Jesus and Wisdom has already been made. However, it is generally agreed that the identification is a late development within the Q community. (It is made only de facto in the passage here.) Until this time, Jesus is simply the most important of Sophia's representatives. See Suggs, and also James M. Robinson, especially pages 8-10. This is also the very first scripture which Milton quotes in Book I, Chapter I of the Christian Doctrine.

34. For "Whence . . . cometh wisdom? and where is the place of understanding? There is a path which no fowl knoweth, and which the vulture's eye hath not seen. . . .Seeing it is hid from the eyes of all living" (Job 20; 7; 21).

35. For an elaboration on these forms as elements in Q, see Havener, pp. 29-40.

36. Cf. note 37 above.

37. Cf. Wisdom 7:7; 8:2,18.

38. Cf. Ex. 40:34-38 and Num. 9:15-23 (Ruether's references, p.94).

Women's Heroism and the Bible:

Dalila "Double-Mouthed"

Recent studies presenting a Milton who often stands apart from centuries of misogynistic literary and artistic tradition have done wonders to rescue Eve.¹ Yet Dalila by and large remains unredeemed by critical standards. At best she emerges as a means to Samson's regeneration, a thorn for purgation. Readings that portray Dalila as more than purifying fire (ones by John Ulreich and Heather Asals)² still read her in terms of opportunity for Samson--only here the recognition is that Samson casts off the moment to his spiritual detriment. Truthfully, I find it difficult to escape this duality since the question of Samson's regeneration or lack of such returns again and again as the bottom line. But even in joining the fray, first I would argue for Dalila's reconceptualization by suggesting that the same perspicuity which McColley, Gallagher, Wittreich and others accredit to Milton's reading of the fall, apart from tradition, might in fact extend to his reading of the Judges' narrative, and thus to Dalila's case. Besides what feminist criticism lately has done for our understanding of how Milton read Genesis 1-3, feminist exegesis provides another rich resource for reevaluating Milton's, and the Bible's, supposed patriarchal biases. Both projects enable the reader to set Dalila at a distance from

what has been read as her primary transgression--her boldness of betrayal which, as topos, may be recognized as merely another example of reading scripture in an unexamined relationship to the history of its reception.

Continuing to beset discussions of Dalila as hero is critics' ever-mindfulness of a distinction between Renaissance heroism, a self-determined and public brand of action, and mediation, agency that points to others, and others' projects, rather than to oneself.³ Yet inasmuch as Dalila's prototypes are biblical women whose lives conjoined public and private duties, I want to argue that Samson Agonistes interrogates this distinction from an uncannily feminist perspective. Conventionally, Dalila's "wavering" arguments cinch her guilt. But as I hope to show, they also point up an important disparity between the agency of biblical women and seventeenth-century norms for women's movement in the public realm. Her defense does more than provide inch upon inch of rope for her to hang herself until, as the chorus declares, her treacherous nature is "discover'd in the end" (997). As a careful reader of the Bible, Milton would instruct us in reading as well. In "discovering" only what it has already predetermined, the chorus bespeaks a reading practice that we are cautioned against--what Frank Kermode describes as "supplementing back" (1979:84)⁴ or reading narrative through the lens of end-points, a strategy particularly apt for sustaining, rather than interrogating, received

interpretation. If Milton can be held to be playing against this impulse, then Dalila's words no longer serve as just another of the play's textual footstools upon which criticism may rest its cases for Samson's superior moral understanding. The larger context of women's public agency in biblical times complicates her representation.

Some of the richest new reconsiderations of biblical women are grounded in Kermode's awareness about reading, now applied to biblical history. More and more, women readers of the Bible are questioning the assumption that ancient Israel was patriarchal in the same sense that modern-day feminists define the term. It is possible that the twentieth-century has created a "problem of patriarchy" (Meyers 24), the erroneous assumption that modern gender asymmetry is merely a continuation of women's oppression in biblical culture, one that blockades the same venues for women's agency and accords to the same scale.

In fact, evidence suggests ancient Near Eastern culture blurred the boundaries between heroism and mediation for women. As Carol Meyers notes in an important synthesis of both ancient Israelite archaeology and pre-industrial sociology, the political and economic mechanisms that bifurcate a culture into public and private realms were not in place until well into the monarchy. While wider scale units of familial organization existed, the tribe and clan, the everyday

Israelite lived a life starkly lacking in centralization. Investigation of early Iron I rural sites reveal no public arenas for exchanging goods or sharing resources--no granaries, temples, markets, stables, or even water systems (140). Instead subsistence was tied to the level of the household: an alliance of related persons (though often including captives, servants, and sojourners) who lived in linked residential units architecturally joined to a common courtyard and diverse workshop facilities (130-133). Excavations of these domestic sites evince uniformity in their subsistence wares: most households contained such items as fragments of sickle blades for harvesting grain; querns and mortars for grinding grain into flour; ovens and pottery for food's cooking, storage, and serving. The layout of the Israelite home demonstrates the large extent to which each household repeated the same range of subsistence tasks endemic to village life. Meyers quotes a description of an abode popular in the Israelite highlands, a "pillared house," named for its support of a second floor on pillars or piers:

first and foremost [it was] a successful adaptation to farm life: the ground floor had space allocated for food processing, small craft production, stabling, and storage; the second floor ('aliyyah) was suitable for dining, sleeping and other activities. . . . (144)⁵

Lest it be overlooked, even stabling was domestic. Animal bones have been found scattered throughout living areas.

Animals lodged in the small rooms off to the sides of these areas. To confirm the archaeological evidence, Meyers cites 1 Sam 28:24 to note one woman's slaughtering a fatted calf that came from "in the house" (143).

Reconstructing the context of "Everywoman Eve" (11) this way compels one to realize that a household so closely tied to providing for the fundamentals of its existence could not withstand the luxury of absenting any portion of its workforce for the sake of leisure, status, idealization, or social control. The point holds even more true for a culture, like that of pre-monarchic Israel, which endured an uncertain political atmosphere. Tasks one might ordinarily deem extraneous to subsistence--socialization, education, and religious ritual--likewise embed the struggle for survival as Israel looks toward its growth into a nation. Women per force integrally shared in these household functions. Not surprisingly, childbearing least of all antithesized the idea of socially valuable contributions by women. Such a context may seem to place us far from the urban and masculinist elitism that comes to pervade the Bible after and during the monarchy; nonetheless, rural tradition and culture persist for much of Israel throughout the Bible's composition, and thereby validate its stories of women's independent action.⁶

The transition toward a larger public life for men during the monarchy finds a vivid analogue in the decreased productivity of the Renaissance English home. Whether one

were of the lower or ruling classes, subsistence depended upon certain activities common to all households; spinning, dressmaking, small-scale gardening and farming, baking and brewing were basic "Oeconomy and Household Managery" (The Ladies Calling).⁷ Many households also undertook pickling, cheese- and candlemaking, candying, smoking, distilling, even the preparation of medical remedies. The larger and more affluent the household, the grander its scope of activities, often including the paid services of trained laundresses, seamstresses, starchers, midwives, and nurses (Greer 1-2). Invariably, women had charge of managing much household production alongside their husbands. Slowly, however, the realm of domestic labor moved outside the home into the hands of wage laborers, mostly men. Channels for everyday productive activity by women narrowed. The godly wife whose life and means prevented her from taking up the period's newer, more leisured and "accomplished," female activities (embroidery, music, handwriting, languages, and other refinements) was left to tend a domestic realm that became void of social esteem.⁸

To speak of women's heroism in pre-monarchic Israel and then in seventeenth-century England thereby implies a shift in terms. Very simply, women's heroism in Milton's day depended upon humility, chastity, and obedience. Embodying these virtues, a woman fulfilled her role to uphold the family structure, i.e. to clear and maintain the channels for

achievement by men in the public realm. Part of her new status in marriage owed to her role and privilege of fostering the "little church" (Hamilton 54) environment of her Protestant home; she mediated as a domestic minister. Ruth Kelso has suggested that the secularization of male activity required a repository for the spiritual values not easily transportable into civic life (25,26).⁹ Women's previously productive function in the household workshop gave way to managing and representing the new social values to which the domestic realm became attached (Guillory 109-110).¹⁰

One of the ways in which the seventeenth-century emphasized women's harmonizing role was by referring to Old Testament heroines, aka putative prototypes of womanly virtue.¹¹ Communicating these stories as allegories was often complicated and frequently entailed two related projects: ambiguating the morality of these women and/or covering over details which attested to women's public agency in biblical times. Catalogues of worthy women--both in literature and art--often included Judith, Jael, and Esther. However, it is only Esther, because of her chastity and wifely decorum, who escapes relatively unscathed from the ambivalence with which her more violence-prone counterparts are represented (Russell 33). Like Esther, Judith and Jael lead campaigns to rescue their people. Judith and her maid enter an Assyrian camp, proffering to betray some of the Israelites' valuable secrets. Once received by her host Holofernes,

Judith brutally slays him. Similarly, Jael takes part in battle by driving a tent peg into the temple of Sisera, the commander of Jabin's Canaanite army. Among Renaissance depictions of Judith that seem to bear fewer traces of misogyny, Judith stands for truth or justice--concepts that drive the focus away from the literary personage and toward the object of some nationalist interest: perhaps a king or a besieged city. In other, even less favorable, portrayals, Judith's sexuality is the focus, the true weapon she wielded.

Likewise, Jael regularly appears in catalogues of worthy women simultaneous to featuring in print series denoting the power of women. According to the caption to one Renaissance print of the Jael story, "Nothing is as evil as a woman's malice."¹²

As an overplayed element in these stories' rehearsals, female sexuality diverted attention away from the fact that women of the Old Testament had a greater share in public agency than Protestant guidelines for household government could sanction. In ancient Israel especially, the threshold did not demarcate a woman's sphere of influence. Repeatedly, the Bible depicts the woman venturing out into the public realm or inviting its dignitaries into her abode. In instances in which the woman is solicited by men for help, the course of her activity is often left to her device.¹³ Moments in which women initiate saving action themselves, as with Judith and Deborah, argue the case for women's public

agency even more strongly.

Despite the ploys the women use to make contact with their victims, the biblical narrator does not condemn them for furthering their actions with their sexuality. As Nehama Aschkenasy notes of Judith and Jael, these stories point to the infractious desires of their male antagonists. Ahasuerus sent Vashti to death when he could not fetishize her publicly. Holofernes plays the fool in his undue attention to Judith's beauty (172). And Sisera no sooner gains a polite intimacy with Jael, denoted by his initially respectful demeanor once inside her tent, than he oversteps his boundaries by commanding her in a masterly voice. ("Stand in the door of the tent." Judg. 4:20¹⁴ [171]) In each story, the narratological perspective assures us that God is on the woman's side. Esther's story contains no less than three injunctions to rejoice. Her prayer, rendered fully, evinces God's favor since what she asks for ("Frustrate their plot and make an example of him who started it all" [C: 22]) comes to embed the tale's irony and names the cause of celebration. In the Judith text, the agent of focalization (as I will describe it later) is clearly the woman herself: it is she who sees, who speaks, and who acts.¹⁵ The reader is assured that she shall prevail as God's heroine and that Holofernes is meant to suffer. The frequent verbal ironies of the story spoken by Judith are another factor working to draw the reader into sympathy with her (Merideth 75). In the case of Jael, her

conquest is celebrated within the victory ode of Deborah, perhaps unambiguously the most celebrated heroine ever.

Studies such as Meyers' inspire and support feminist exegetes who seek to reappropriate the Scriptures from a long history of patriarchal interpretation. Accepting the notion of biblical authority, these readers focus their attention on the history of texts' reception. This is not to ignore the Bible as a patriarchal text, determined by male priorities of the public realm.¹⁶ Rather it is to suggest, as does Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, that there are "[individual] texts and interpretive models that transcend critically their patriarchal frameworks and allow for a vision of [biblical] women as historical actors and theological subjects" (30).¹⁷ That is, it is not only texts by themselves, but also ways of reading them, which allow revelation to happen relevant to women. Along with archeological and sociological insights, biblical hermeneutics and narrative theory contribute to feminist reading strategies. Pertinent observations include the premise that the Bible contains its own internal critique. As Virginia Mollenkott concludes, the "determinate sentence" of Scripture, once identified, provides a means by which to measure the revelatory truth-value of some scriptures and to interrogate others (1980:24). Texts that imply patriarchal biases often are later reinvoked and redressed.

Samuel Sandmel identifies an inverse variant of this phenomenon: what he calls "haggada," or midrash, within

scripture. He argues that the retellings of stories in scripture do not represent contradictions, nor necessarily do they reflect varying source material. Rather, one version comments upon the other through accretion of details. The way he describes it, haggada implies a patriarchal bias in that these retellings neutralize texts that cast the men in a questionable light (for example, as in Abraham's passing off Sarah as his sister). However, when coupled with Mollenkott's idea of "internal critique," Sandmel's haggada holds import for reformists in several ways. First, it encourages readers to examine texts and their variants more sensitively in terms of possible "source" and haggada, and then to ask "What about this particular episode required neutralization later?" This approach yields the insight that at least part of the Bible's sexism stems from recasting, a project that continues into the history of scripture's reception. Second, Sandmel's insights authorize readers to postulate feminist haggada by themselves comparing scripture with scripture.¹⁸ How does one text internally interrogate the other?

Attuned to the Bible's literary dynamics, feminist exegesis urges readers to "uncover ideology not only in biblical narrative, but perhaps even more in the commentaries and traditional interpretations which so shape our readings of these texts" (Merideth 62). Betsy Merideth, writing on betrayal by biblical women, points to Jonathan Culler and Wolfgang Iser for the possibility that any interpretation of

a text is more a reading of the reader than of the text itself. "How do our readings and received interpretations reflect and then replicate cultural values and norms?" (65). The treacherous woman as a topos in the Bible develops only when readers presume the narrator to be cuing identification with the man (72). As I have noted, even unambiguously heroic figures, such as Judith and Jael, solicit scorn in that their moves past the bounds of acceptable female behavior cancel their actions' redemptive value. To cite another example, when Renaissance artists were not representing Judith as a hag, they often figured her handmaiden, Abra, as wretched instead (298). At the same time, these artists were particularly adept in depicting graphically the pain in Holofernes' face at the moment of decapitation, but leaving Judith expressionless or, perhaps more accurately, "cool[y] deliberat[e]" (Garrard 291) in the act. Such representations demonstrate that it was easier for male artists to identify with the man's state, no matter how much the "victim" deserved his anguish.

Fortunately, iconographic history allows us to locate the solidarity of male artist to male subject within convention and only more ambiguously within the biblical text. In her reading of Judges 16, Merideth resists ascribing to the biblical narrator consistent identification with Samson. Proceeding from Mieke Bal's narratology, Merideth asserts that a deeper level of identification is embedded within the

narrator's point of view: that of the focalizer, or perceptive agency--separable from the narrator--through whom the events of the story are seen. For example, when Delilah first chides Samson in 16.10-12 for circumventing her question about his secret, she says, "Behold, thou hast mocked me and told me lies." Here "mocked" and "lies" connote a strong sympathy with Delilah since these words could only be selected from her perspective (especially since what Delilah says is true). Texts that identify the focalizing agent without question, as in the case of Judith, clarify for which character the redactor would wish to invoke the reader's sympathies. In narratives where the focalizer shifts from one main character to another, the reader is constrained to resist siding with either or any of them. This is the case with the Samson story. Frequently, Delilah emerges as focalizer. Evidence includes the preponderance of active verbs that stem from Delilah's agency (seeing, sending, calling for, making Samson sleep, having him shaved, among others); the steady progression with which Delilah acts on her own terms, undirected by the Philistines; and not least of all, the candor of Delilah's speech. Delilah has made her purposes clear to Samson all along: "Tell me, I pray thee, wherein thy great strength lieth, and wherewith thou mightest be bound to afflict thee" (16:6 [Merideth 69-76]).¹⁹

Quite plausibly, then, the interaction between Samson and Delilah may foreground, not betrayal, but the extent to which

Samson (like Holofernes and Sisera) would pridefully push the limits of his invulnerability (Merideth 73). This foolishness parodically defines Samson's heroism (indeed male heroism in general).²⁰ The Harapha episode seems to provide little other purpose than to present a Samson ever-willing to put himself at risk. By contrast Dalila's arguments, emerging from a woman's perspective, subtend an awareness of endangering circumstance and the behaviors necessary to survive them. Herein, I will argue, lie the most critical parallels between her and her biblical prototypes.

Considering how subtly yet thoroughly both prejudice and presumption have judged Delilah, readers of Milton's Dalila should take caution not to reinforce tradition's likely misunderstandings, especially since the opportunity Milton gives Dalila to present her case leaves open the question whether he commits the same misreadings. Milton's text encourages one to read Dalila in relation to two sets of prototypes: Old Testament women and their skewed renderings in seventeenth-century literature and iconography. An ancient Near Eastern intercessor for her people, Dalila mediates in a way that conflicts with the domestic "strategies" proper to seventeenth-century women. By setting Dalila's "crime" within the public-private split ("Being once a wife, for me thou wast to leave/ Parents and countrey" [885-86]), Samson would force a choice from which worthy women of the Bible were often exempt; biblical women constituted their identity as wives and

nationalists simultaneously. In fact it is in such a context that these women mediated. Mordecai tells Esther that it is perhaps because of her Jewishness that Providence obtained for her the opportunity of marrying a king. Likewise, Judith, Jael and Deborah all save while existing in some relationship to marriage. Although a widow, Judith arrays herself in the style "when her husband Manasseh was alive" (10:3), and thus resurrects her identity as a wife. Following her lead, the widows Tamar and Ruth deceive father figures in the interest of perpetuating their husbands' line of descent, an inherently national interest. Instead of merely being subsumed by a husband's identity, female mediators in the Bible often could assume his public strength.

Critics unsympathetic to Dalila have used the "wavering" and disparate quality of her arguments to support notions of her culpability.²¹ I want to suggest that the impression of disparateness surfaces only when another competing and pre-determined structure of interpretation offsets the possibility of conjoining those arguments coherently. According to Mieke Bal, coherence is "[something] which readers desire much more than texts exhibit." What Milton criticism traditionally has read as the self-incriminating nature of Dalila's discourse finds an analogue in the prejudicial readings characterizing the Book of Judges in both popular and scholarly opinion. Bal writes, "The book is taken as a whole, its topic is determined, and the individual stories are subordinated to

it." The topic? The "illustrious men" who answered God's call (1988: 11,12).

In much the same way, readers of Samson Agonistes subordinate Dalila's defense to Samson's claims to be God's viceregent. Arguments against Dalila work only if the reader has first forged a whole out of the equally fragmentary bits of evidence that now discredit or now support Samson's relation to divine commission. Dalila's guilt emerges not so much from deduction as from a deliberative act of presupposition.²² Protecting the coherence of Samson's heroism, our theories mimic the members of the chorus, who throughout the play psychologically contend against disparateness of explanation themselves. Overhearing "hideous noise" (1509) from the arena, the chorus once again is challenged to discern coherence. For them, Manoah threatens it: "Of ruin indeed methought I heard the noise,/ Oh it continues, they have slain my Son." They restore it: "Thy Son is rather slaying them" (1515-17). The warning they issue to impede each other's hasty investigation of the event alerts us to our own predilection for closure on Samson's probity: "Best keep together here, lest running thither/ We unawares run into dangers mouth" (1521-22). To be "safe," we are to keep reading Samson's regeneration coherently.

That the reader might reconceive Dalila's self-defense, I suggest allowing the chorus to implicate us as misguided hermeneuts. Their mistakes of reading Samson mirror our own in

reading both Samson Agonistes and its biblical source. The chorus provides a model of reading to be avoided: not that of rendering coherence, which is unavoidable, but rendering it unself-consciously. Bal reminds her audience that coherence is imposed upon, rather than discovered within, a text; it is "a readerly act" (1988:254n2).

Again, one is urged to recognize the suppositions that drive interpretation. Locating these premises is often a question of scrutinizing not one's beginnings but one's conclusions. Samson Agonistes ends in an exhaustion bred from the psychic struggle to make disparate events submit to Providence or, in the present case, archetypal Story.

Chorus. All is best, though oft we doubt,
 What th'unsearchable dispose
 Of highest wisdom brings about,
 And ever best found in the close.

(1745-48)

In their closing thus, the chorus underscores the hermeneutic weight that, for them at least, endings bear upon interpretation; their conclusion, "All is best," shows the chorus reading Samson's life backwards of his (questionably) heroic death. For the Danites, Samson's felling of the temple and himself occasions a perspective by which to interpret events. The hero's endpoint, as endpoint, finally forces the creative fury of lines 1660-1707 wherein the events of the Samson fabula can fall into story (more on this distinction

later).²³ The presupposition, running throughout their speeches, is God's "highest wisdom" and a faith in endings themselves. This focus makes operative a kind of novelistic thinking, one that bespeaks a hermeneutic "confidence in the figural relation of the new event to the old, in continuities of sense ever to be renewed and re-established, and in the expectation, however qualified, that the end must cast its potent shadow over all that precedes it."²⁴ As Kermode describes it, such confidence is a simplification of how narrative functions. By deriving meaning mainly from endings, the chorus discloses its reading bias: the "simple hermeneutic expectation that [the Samson story] will work out" (1979:89;64). In its remarkable sweep of all the evidence (lines 1660-1707), the chorus has relied upon the naive presumption that every detail must be "hermeneutically relevant." Mirroring Kermode's deceived readers of detective fiction, the chorus wants to find "almost every clue. . . [finally] caught up into a satisfactory pattern"; all should "fit in" (1983: 56-58). Samson must emerge as God's "faithful Champion" (1751) because their understanding of narrative allows for only a sequential ordering of meaning. All is tolled (and told) in the final act.

Just as Bal notes that conventional readings of the Judges' narrative presuppose the protagonist's reciprocal relationship to divine favor, so critics of Samson Agonistes proceed backwards from a history of received masculinist

readings of the Judges' Samson: the overdetermined suppression of Samson's prayer, and the chorus' implicit trust in it, serve as fulcrums that jettison the critic back and back, forcing the apprehension of beginning and intermediate events in terms of what Kermode would call "overfamiliar" and "deadened" endings (1983:65).²⁵ Arguably, Milton plays against this reading practice in his treatment of Dalila precisely by so blatantly entering into another aspect of narrative it forces into being: characterization, traditionally Dalila's bane.

Reading events through the lens of endings is a manifestation of reading them through that of character, and vice versa. In an increasingly self-consciously psychological age, ascribing actions to a person's motivations (and to that person's internal make-up corroborating those motivations) has become natural. We call such fit between action and person "characterization." However both literary and biblical narratologists, including Kermode, Merideth, and Bal, question the primacy assigned to characterization, asserting instead the events themselves. The difference between action and character becomes relevant on the plane of fabula versus story. Akin to her separation of focalizer from narrator, Bal distinguishes between "a series of logically and chronologically related events" involving actors (but not always the connotatively more autonomous "agents") and the way in which specific characteristics and qualities accrue to

those actors (1985:5). These accretions transform fabula into story.²⁶

Haggada locates accretions within the biblical narrative itself. The phenomenon continues within, indeed comprises, received interpretation. Motivations are loaded into character which function to delineate movements in a plot to finer and finer degrees. This ascription of motivation to explain existing narrative has the seemingly contradictory effect of generating in turn more narrative to account for those motivations. According to a survey of interpretations of Judges 16, commentators introduce explanations of Delilah's motives, all much related, at the same diegetical moments without precedence from the biblical text. Not incidentally, each time motivation is ascribed, it happens in relation to Delilah's character: she is deemed beautiful to account for Samson's falling in love with her and obstreperous and greedy to explain Samson's fall into Philistine hands (1987: 39). Delilah, it is assumed, predictably "betrayed" Samson for the sake of the money offered her. Not only beautiful, she is treacherous and greedy; each trait reinforces the other. Yet the biblical narrator does not state such conclusions. Instead the reader draws upon premises existing elsewhere: beautiful women cannot be trusted. First comes event: Samson (as predetermined hero) unjustly falls. Then comes reason: Delilah betrayed him. Reason owes to character: Delilah was typically beautiful and selfish. History works backwards of

an alignment of character and endpoint.

Perhaps for this reason, it is a bold alteration of tradition that makes Dalila's motives seemingly disparate at first glance. Milton would denaturalize the impulse to assign Dalila's actions straightforward motivation. Instead we are forced to see through Dalila as a character to hear the constraints bearing down upon the words and person themselves. Dalila's characterization does not consist of a simple agenda: she cannot be construed as a simple Proppian "function."²⁷ Her motives impress one as untenable for good reason; their slipperiness in fact reinvents a strategic biblical silence. Presented with many reasons, we cannot take any one as the true reason. Indeed if Dalila's temper did not inflame when it did, more reasons might ensue. Thus Milton restores the underlying tension that the ascription of character in narrative strives to contain: a potentially inexhaustible enigmata related to event. Almost uncannily, Kermode discusses character in relation to our own topic of biblical betrayal--of Jesus by Judas. Again, thinking about scriptures (here the varying passion accounts) in terms of haggada yields for us a relevant insight: "The traitor is the necessity of a logic of narrative that has to solve an impossible problem" (1983: 155n18). In her speaking a multitude of motives for action, Dalila represents the actor delimited from characterization in the sense we have described it. She paints larger the world of motive. In doing so, she implies

that Samson's improbity could belong to that world as well.

So far, I have tried to define an ambit for taking Dalila's arguments seriously. Attending to them requires us to appreciate that she speaks as nearly as important a point as what she says. Dalila's return is perhaps Milton's chief emendation of the Judges' narrative, not to mention the most centralized event of the play. But her grand entrance alone is enough to suggest to the chorus, and others who would eye her for blind Samson as they do, what seems plain: her words will not merit listening to. The chorus "surcharg[es]" our perspectives with bias against her, typifying her as the conventionally supplicating women (lines 726-731), the veiled and sweetly penitent Magdalene. Yet why so many words for Dalila? Did Milton need all that speech to "manifest" her as masked serpent? Certainly if by a prolonged visit Dalila has "debase[d]" (999) Samson, the hero might now in fact be in a lesser state of receptivity to divine promptings. To keep Samson regenerate with certainty, a shorter visit might have been better.

Esther Fuchs notes that biblical women who "deceive" for the Kingdom usually are not asked or allowed to explain their motivation. She charges that this silence incriminates women insofar as male deceivers get to speak their cases. This judgment presupposes, of course, that the reader is to hold the men's explanations as true and sincere rather than as self-incriminations. To assure their sincerity would require

further comment by the narrator, then comment upon that, and so on.²⁸ As even Fuchs must acknowledge, the gaps which the biblical redactor has left in the text are purposive. The bias she identifies may in fact work to the woman's advantage. Gaps not only permit speculation but cue it. In the case of women's motivations left silent, reticence warrants an examination of their actions. At the same time, by precluding closure, reticence builds into biblical narrative a space for ensuring that defense's repetition, elaboration, and reevaluation at future points.

Given the tradition of reticence that Milton engages, how much more keenly should we notice that Dalila speaks. One finds the poet enthusiastically responding to an opportunity the redactor has preserved for him. Yes, Dalila's actions warrant explanation. But in providing such, should Milton be imagined as parodying or belittling the redactor's challenge to fill the gaps of scripture? Just as important, in allowing Dalila to explain herself, Milton places her alongside the putative privileged (because more loquacious) actors in salvation history.

Even more, Dalila speaks in drama. Here the problematic task of identifying the focalizing agent in narrative is eased. As we have seen, at any given moment, narrative embeds at least two interpretive perspectives--that of the narrator and the perceptive agent whose experiences the narrator reports. Narratology holds that since the

perceptions that the narrator inhabits originate beyond him or her, they remain at a partial remove. While "it is possible," Bal says, "both in fiction and in reality, for one person to express the vision of another" (1985:101), the former cannot completely collapse or subsume the latter's perspective. Again, gaps surface and require interpretation. A degree of closeness to the focalizer's experience is attainable but only if the reader is able to resist imposing what he or she takes to be the narrator's (standard or traditional) view of such experience. Within drama, focalizers reveal themselves. Rather than pierce through the layers of a given moment to determine its perspectival source of control, the observer or reader of drama is asked to give each speaking agent credit for being the ultimate authority (at least momentarily) on his or her picture of the world. At this stage, it is not even necessary to suggest that Milton's giving Dalila a point of view requires the reader to reconsider completely Samson's regeneration. Rather if we consider shifting focalization as a common aspect of biblical narrative, our obligation, at least for now, is simply to give Dalila due consideration for the interval of speaking Milton has granted her.

Dalila's rescue is warranted in that Milton criticism has not adequately separated Milton's reading of the Judges story from its masculinist history of reception. Milton takes account of the scriptural ambiguities that oftentimes favor Delilah to a degree we have not yet acknowledged. As Joseph

Wittreich writes: "[c]riticism of Samson Agonistes is still perpetuating interpretations whose credibility is rendered dubious by disfiguring representations of the Judges narrative. In consequence, the confusions of the critic about Milton's sourcebook become our confusions" (1988:57).

If coherency is a metaphor for structuration, a writerly and productive activity, it becomes possible to structure Dalila's defense coherently as well. In doing so, I simultaneously wish to apply my lesson from Milton's offer of the chorus as (bad) hermeneutic example: I want to read her argument "'not merely [as] the projection on a flat surface of a series of events' but . . . in addition, [to] '[rebuild] these as it were spatially.'" What are the points of signification that align themselves along the "vertical rather than the horizontal axis" (Kermode 1983:63,66) of meaning?

The reading I wish to offer of Dalila's arguments corroborates John Ulreich's inclination to see Dalila's intentions as sincere. She approaches Samson according to her stated cause: to seek forgiveness and reunion (187). What happens in the course of this effort, and how it gets spoken, however, are different matters. Dalila is constrained to speak two different discourses, thus seeming inconsistent to many. Still the ambiguities lodged in her speech need not be read misogynistically as an indictment against her sincerity as much as an indication of the difficulty of having to accommodate competing worldviews and values within the

speaking subject. Rather than evince an incriminating disparateness, Dalila's arguments progress, quite coherently, along the lines of a seventeenth-century woman in conflict with cultural constraints against her movement in the public realm.

To repeat: the complexity of Dalila's arguments do not support a character that merely typifies a narrative function (i.e. to explain Samson's fall). On the contrary, her speech embeds the very factors that characterization, like endpoints, are meant to smooth over: problematic circumstance and event. Dalila's motions, right from the beginning, bear the strains of an ancient Near Eastern woman's effort to accommodate herself to the repressive family structure of Milton's day. More than psychological, her speech is situational.²⁹

Had she prepared her speech, she might have had assistance from women's detractors in the period's pamphlet debates: She attributes her part in Samson's fall to "womans frailty" (783). Her womanhood renders her "weakness/. . . incident to all our sex" (773-74) and opens her to:

Curiosity, inquisitive, importune

Of secrets, then with like infirmity

To publish them, both common female faults:

(775-777)

These admissions, however, align her with conventions Renaissance women necessarily invoked to gain a semblance of authority to speak at all. Various studies on the

preconditions for women's foray into the public world of notoreity contextualize Dalila's slew of apologetics.³⁰ The Renaissance prohibition against a woman's speech embedded all the other injunctions against a woman's public agency: The learned woman who entered debate, the woman writer, the female partaker in rhetorical "intercourse"--each stepped forward from the charge to remain invisible. Woman was to keep "unseen, unheard, untouched, unknown," i.e. "public[ly] [in]accessibl[e]" (Jones 79,78). Behaviors that invoked a woman's notoreity, whether rhetorical or sexual, were equally transgressive. "[T]he greatest virtue in a woman is to be known of none but her husband. . . the praise of a woman in a strange mouth is nothing else but a secret blame" (Robert Greene, 1601).³¹ No wonder Dalila approaches Samson with "doubtful feet," "wavering resolution" and "timerous doubt," "dreading [his] displeasure" (732-33,740). She knows she is incurring ignominy by transgressing the protocol for woman's silence. Her speaking can only call up the association, as old as Proverbs, between woman's sexuality and that "glibbery" detractor of honor, the tongue.³² Women who spoke out or published ruined their reputations. The repercussions ranged from public decries of their actions to booksellers' sensationalism: women could find their work published (and themselves scandalized) without consent as easily as their names appended to bawdy broadsides written by men. It is the idea of woman's "infirmary/ To publish" infractious speech

from which Dalila must retreat.

To initiate her case, Dalila employs the strategies that women writers and speakers, from the early Renaissance on, used to lessen the impression of their audacity. Women would preface their rhetoric by admitting to unworthiness and anxiety over breaking with their private roles. Each mode of women's expression has its examples of women textualizing their own self-diminution. One dedicatory epistle to a volume on women's preaching reads:

Weakness is entailed upon my sex in general, and for myself in particular, I am a despised worm, a woman full of natural and sinful infirmities, the chiefest of sinners, and least of Saints (Susanna Parr, 1659).³³

Women petitioners of the civil war years acknowledged their "frail Condition" and attested that they were speaking "not out of any Self-Conceit or Pride of Heart, as seeking to equal ourselves with Men, either in Authority or Wisdom" ("True Diurnall Occurrences, Harleian Miscellany, 568-9).³⁴ That women made reference to a female weakness self-consciously may be judged by an implicit male approval of women's special ways of pleading: the husbands of these women knew the power of "a soliciting temper" where it concerned, say, their release from prison or getting a sequestration order lifted. A friend writes one woman's husband to assure him: "it would not be amiss if [your wife] can bring her spirit to [such a temper] and can tell how to use the juice of an onion sometimes to

soften hard hearts." (The husband responds by saying that the gravity of the circumstances alone is enough to produce the tears.) Apparently, the friend's advice reflected the practice of "sages" who so "instruct [their] wi[ves]" (Verney Memoirs, II, 239-40).³⁵ Women's dissembling had the power to affect important transactions. Men were primed for it, and women responded. Women lyricists did likewise: often working from male sources to begin with, they textualized their relationship with male mentors, putatively their literary superiors, in epistles, prefaces, and the lyrics themselves. Their work brings them to confess their guilt about writing, downplay their talent, or simply emphasize that their main interests remained firmly rooted in the home. Insofar as women could progress as public persons only within male-mediated conventions, we have a new context for interpreting Dalila's words: "To what I did thou shewdst me [i.e. prepared for me] first the way" (781). Indeed both Dalila's excessive femininity here and her earlier act of "treacherous" publishing ascribe to the Samson-like bifurcated vision of women.

While a timorous speaking voice colors much of Dalila's argument, its conventions collect within her opening words especially. Dalila's first approach to Samson bespeaks a tentativeness akin to that with which even the boldest of women writers and speakers would have proceeded:

With doubtful feet and wavering resolution

I came, still dreading thy displeasure, Samson.
 Which to have merited, without excuse,
 I cannot but acknowledge; yet if tears
 May expiate . . .

.

My penance hath not slack'n'd, though my pardon
 No way assur'd. But conjugal affection
 Prevailing over fear, and timerous doubt
 Hath led me on desirous to behold
 Once more thy face. . .

(732-742)

These lines share with women's rhetorical efforts of the period common ways of beginning one's speech: deference to a male audience's anticipated reactions, the woman's willingness to assume guilt, her request for pardon, and the claim that something working almost in opposition to modesty forces her to speak. At the same time, the text communicates the conventions of femininity with which Dalila might offset the bold masculine nature of her approach. Her deference recalls less her biblical namesake, who requests Samson's secret directly, and more the bride of Timna who "wept before him" (Judges 14:16) continually. By the contrast, Milton enables his readers to better recognize the independent spirit of Dalila once it eventually surfaces. For now, she accedes to the politics of deference, first with hopes to reconcile with Samson and then to solicit the Philistines for his

release (920-921).

My reading does not intend to undermine the sincerity of what she means to say: Samson, I am sorry. Rather I want only to underscore the preconditions to which a Renaissance woman was subject in order to get her message safely voiced.

Remembering Milton's antagonistic relationship to convention, however, we can anticipate that her arguments to follow will soon erode Dalila's reliance on, for the most part, querelle de femme tropes of female behavior. What next feels like a shift in Dalila's argument is really an intensification of the subtext Milton has introduced in her initial words (lines 732-747) and "First granting" speech (lines 766-789): a climate dangerous for women's speaking. Of the years surrounding the events of the mid and late 1640's, women assumed the most liberty to speak during the years of the wars themselves. But with the court of Charles II, the public initiative that women earlier had taken in pamphleteering and petitioning was checked by a male backlash of anger. Libertine literature and art burgeoned unprecedently. Bolstering the phenomenon was the now uncertain political milieu in which men found themselves. As theorists on pornography attest, one of a society's symptoms of (and coping strategies for) political tension is a preponderance of aggression toward those groups with the least defenses. Receiving their cues, women curtailed their political writing and sought their notoriety and efficacy by

another channel. Writing about romance, women who were still intent on negotiating power relations between men and women could continue such work within the private context of love (Hobby 85-88).

Dalila, then, must write a love story: "And what if Love, which thou interpret'st hate,/. . . /Caus'd what I did. . ?" (790-93). As before, her speech incorporates the cliches of femininity while subtending an awareness of a climate dangerous to women's speaking. But paradoxical to what feels like a softened approach, Dalila moves closer to her biblical prototypes' role as mediator in the public realm. The subtext of violence toward women intensifies. Outright mention of the woman of Timna, a victim of murder, comes in the midst of this domestic sweet-talk:

. . . . I saw thee mutable
Of fancy, feared lest one day thou wouldst leave me
As her at Timna, sought by all means therefore
How to endear, and hold thee to me firmest:

(793-95)

Wittreich asserts that Milton retains the Timna event for narrative "secrecy" (1988:65), the backgrounded element(s) of the text so "hostile to [the] sequentiality," or "clearness and effect," that readers desire (Kermode 1983:137-138). Reading with an awareness of subtended material works against the impulse to over-organize provided information (but only what is provided)--a habit Kermode calls "underreading" (138).

While Milton may "push [Timna] to the basement of his poem" (Wittreich 1986:65), that basement is not dug so deep as to be inaccessible. The Timna event encapsulates the concern over women's safety present in Dalila's speech from the beginning. Here it occasions, for the first time, Dalila to admit her anxiety outright. "As her at Timna" may not mean simply "as you left her at Timna" but also "as in the same (vulnerable) state in which you left her," that is, a state of susceptibility toward male anger, retribution and violence. The fear that Samson would be "mutable/ Of fancy," while it ennobles Dalila's possessiveness as lover and belies her fear of desertion, suggests even more the danger of Samson's impassioned return. It was Samson's return to the woman of Timna that incited backlash upon backlash, leading to her and her father's murders. Dalila's desire to "hold thee to me firmest" denotes "jealousie of Love" (791), yes, but it also signals her intention to circumvent Timna's regrettable outcome. The case Dalila makes for her former "importun[ity]" likewise takes on added resonance. "No better way I saw than [this]/ To learn thy secrets, get into my power/ Thy key of strength and safety" (797-9, emphasis mine). The syntax of these lines obscures whether the object of Dalila's concern is safety for Samson or herself, intimating her unease with both indefinites.

Rereading Dalila's "discourse on love," one notes the profusion of words and ideas related to safekeeping,

specifically within domesticity. Dalila wants assurance (800) from "cares and fears" within "loves [safe prison]" (808), i.e. the home. The three-part context of safety in love and at home points up the disparity between a domesticity meant to shield one from the hostility of the outside world and the hostility inherent within home life for women. One might compare Jael's "inhospitable guile" (989) with Judith's treacherous sexuality: both emblemize in their own way "Matrimonial treason" (959) in that they pervert the contract upon women to provide domestic ease and comfort.³⁶ In popular imagination, Delilah likewise violates the contract to love rightly. In response, Dalila aligns herself with Jael, but only after building a co-text that connotes the sanctuary of the home environment, real and psychological, as violent for women as well.

Time and again, Milton fudges for Dalila the opportunity to contextualize her "publishing" of Samson's secret in terms of motivation. Having related her fear of desertion, she says:

thou wilt say,
 Why then reveal'd? I was assur'd by those
 Who tempted me, that nothing was designed
 Against thee but safe custody, and hold. . .

(799-802)

At the moment commentaries typically pin Dalila with various negative attributes such as "greedy" or "traitorous," Milton

reminds us that Dalila opposes a male-mediated context of authority, one determined by male incentives and priorities. The text firmly fastens her to circumstance and event:

Hear what assaults I had, what snares besides,
What sieges girt me round, e're I consented;
Which might have aw'd the best resolv'd of men

(845-847)

Try as she might, "vertue" and "duty" are not easily "enjoyn[ed]" (870) in either patriarchal contexts or impossible circumstances. The elders commanded the woman of Timna as well: "Entice thy husband that he may declare unto us the riddle, lest we burn thee and thy father's house with fire: Have ye called us to take that we have? is it not so?" (Judges 14:15).³⁷ Timna's fate imposes itself upon her from both ends of her decision-making. She accommodates the Philistines; yet she and her father are burned anyway. One might imagine Timna weighing her options much like Dalila, "combat[ing] in silence all . . . reasons/ with hard contest" (864). But to what degree are reasons separable from "sollicit[at]ions, command[ments], threat[s], [and] urg[ings]" (852), the one redefining the other? Characterization as a way to deal with motivation loses its authority in contexts where actions from without the persona impinge so heavily as to disrupt the possibility, and credibility, of psychological self-direction. Again, the chorus best exemplifies the impulse to underread narrative by overreading character:

Is it for that such outward ornament
 Was lavish't on thir Sex, that inward gifts
 Were left for hast unfinish't judgment scant,
 Capacity not rais'd to apprehend
 Or value what is best
 In choice but ofttest to affect [i.e. prefer³⁸] the
 wrong?

(1025-1030, emphasis mine)

They wish to substitute one set of traits for another, to exchange uprightness and probity (and perhaps an honest share of plainness) for "self-love" and "[in]constancy" (1031-32). For them, motivations rage and originate "under [the woman's] virgin veil" (1035). A woman's actions remain apart from cultural acts of definition, even though these constraints are used to read her. She is "a thorn/ Intestin" (1037-38) to man because first she is an inward menace to herself.

If irony foregrounds points that would otherwise remain in recess, we must underscore the irony of Samson's reactions to Dalila's use of female conventions in light of similar practices by biblical heroines. As I have already indicated, women of the Bible repeatedly use their sexuality to gain politically-conscious advantage. But instead of condemning them, Scripture seems to contextualize these ploys in light of the measure of the threat weighing against them as women. If Esther is to thwart Haman's murder of her people, she first must approach the king without invoking his anger. So she

thoughtfully lays aside "the clothing of a suppliant, and dress[es] herself in splendid attire" (D:1) in a spirit reminiscent of her and the harem members' earlier efforts to be chosen as queen. Once in Ahasuerus' presence, she modifies her defiant posture by "stumbl[ing], turn[ing] pale and fainting, keeling over on the maid who went before her" (D: 7).³⁹ She gains closer and closer access to Haman by continuing to evoke conventions of female sexuality. Taking on the role of the nurturant woman, she devises a series of banquets to which she invites both him and the king. Ultimately, Esther's means of attracting Ahasuerus turn his rage (ironically once potentially endangering Esther) against Haman.⁴⁰

Much the same, Judith knows that to approach Holofernes is to put her life in danger. The way in which she readies herself to meet the enemy parallels Esther's process: notably, the text acknowledges her attractiveness as a manufactured transformation. (As the elders notice, "her face was so transformed and her clothes so different." [10: 6-8]) Once inside the camp, the woman must demonstrate deference. Judging from Holofernes' response, perhaps Judith does more than prostrate herself before him (10: 23): "Courage, woman! Don't be afraid. For I have never hurt anyone who chose to serve Nebuchadnezzar, king of the whole world" (11: 1). The text leaves the reader to imagine Judith playing up a self-diminutive fear. Once more, the decisive moment of the

enemy's downfall follows a banquet at which (since she occasions it) the woman presides. In turn, the story of Jael foregrounds Providence working both through and against conventions of female behavior. Deborah forewarns Barak that the day will belong to a woman (4:9). (Did he perhaps anticipate diminishing Deborah's role in battle and taking the credit?) She also knows enough that Sisera, when driven from his chariot, will head right toward Jael's tent. Jael "complies": "Turn in, my lord, turn in to me" (4:18). She follows up with some sensualized comforts of domestic safety: here warmth, covering, and a propos the banquet theme, curds "in a lordly dish" and drink (5:25). Jael surpasses the standards of feminine hospitality by offering Sisera not just water, which he asked for, but milk. Besides acceding to Sisera's expectations, Jael's actions moderate his warrior status--a posture that implies his potential to harm her as Ahasuerus could Esther, or Holofernes, Judith. Again, the biblical narrator does not judge the woman. Instead he compells the reader to notice the male antagonist for his misguided attention to conventional feminine assets. The narrator's lack of condemnation is a way to underscore the man's own self-destructive behavior.

On one level, the Renaissance conflation of biblical heroines with Delilah functions as Sandmel's "neutralizing" haggada: Judith and Jael save the Israelites, yes, but inasmuch as their fabulae match Delilah's, they communicate

identical messages: a woman's love or care cannot be trusted. (Considering the threat that the household now posed to the ideal of vocation, how much nearer the psychological surface of Renaissance art and literature would such a fear emerge.) On another level, their mutual histories of reception have invited the closer look I have taken to their texts. Delilah's story becomes clearer in light of her prototypes'. And seemingly for contradictory reasons: the public agency of Old Testament women has not been able to be written out. Where it has been silenced, the circumstances surrounding that suppression speaks for it, showing the women acting still, though under different constraints. Ultimately, haggada provides Delilah's defense.

The arguments that Milton allows Dalila, with their sub- or co-text of violence, sanction her (and Delilah's) positive identification with biblical heroines all the more. It is the chorus that presents women as wily. Samson's excessive blame of Dalila condones their view. But again, Dalila's speaking of feminine conventions is grounded by inferences in a world of dangerous male anger. Had Samson and the chorus their sway, her own cliches would incriminate her. Yet there is not the chance: Dalila's discourse, with its sub- or co-text of violence, mirrors her biblical prototypes' acting out of these conventions to the same effect: the return of implication to the male antagonist himself.

Samson Agonistes makes such a reading of Dalila possible

by changing the demographics of scripture's interpretative focal points--from end to middle. By centralizing the encounter between Samson and Dalila, Milton impels readers of the Samson saga to forestall reading backwards of misogynist biases and even typology, another mode of "supplementing back." We receive an opportunity to glimpse a moment scripture has repressed, the psychologically intricate moment preceding Dalila's action. While its expression is couched in seventeenth-century circumstance, it clues us into the kind of mood, similarly hostile, in which Delilah must have mediated as well. Milton's effort is a diligent one temporarily to leave extraneous material outside the story's frame, specifically the text's storm of intrusive endpoints, everywhere predetermining that moment's interpretation.

The analogy to art is not incidental. When drawn out, it reveals not only a validated Dalila but a heroic one. In his presentation of Dalila, Milton models the contemporary shift in Renaissance art from "epic narrative"--the practice of invoking a broad range of narrative--to concentration upon climatic events, usually set within heavily psychologized interiors. The case of Judith typifies this shift. Representations turn from her heroically bearing the head of Holofernes in a populous public forum, usually outdoors, to the private and precise moment of Holofernes' undoing. This focus on Judith's act of decapitation indicates the period's growing concern over role models like Judith who had the

potential to counteract the now changing norms for women's behavior (Garrard 282). Most of the time, as we have seen, artists could use the increased interiority of the Judith story to identify with Holofernes and/or to show Judith as the heartless wretch she really was.

The compression, however, could work to the opposite effect. Artemesia Gentileschi, a woman artist, produced perhaps the most horrifically bloody renderings of Holofernes' murder of the period but this time developing in each depiction the psychological depth of the woman. Not merely femme fatales, innocents, or hags, Gentileschi's Judiths underscore the conditions that move women to commit such actions in the first place. For example, in the Detroit Judith, the subject's beautiful apparel and diaphanously-covered bosom contrast the heavy boots under the dress Holofernes does not see; Judith, unconventionally plain (yet thoughtful) of face, has constructed her appearance in keeping with the only aspects of identity Holofernes' limited vision of women could recognize. Like that of the biblical Judith, her finery is strategy. In the Florence Judith, the blood splashing across her bodice dramatizes women's elegance as convention. I suggest that Milton treats Dalila analogously. Adopting the one-to-one encounter of biblical woman and antagonist, Milton would put off the "whole sweep of the story and its public conclusion" (Garrard 282) encompassed by epic narrative art. His text halts our impulse to read Dalila

through the conclusions about her which history has drawn. Like the interiors of Gentileschi's Judiths, he creates a psychologically expressive "mise-en-scene" (Garrard 8) that illumines not just Dalila but the darkened timbre of the forces she confronts.

That Dalila, like Gentileschi's Judith, perceives her vulnerability yet acts despite it (both in "betraying" Samson and soliciting his forgiveness), defines her heroism. This is much unlike Samson who, as we see with Harapha, still cannot appreciate the fact that he has been vulnerable all along. For Samson, the "endangering" factor inheres in matrimony: woman herself. By the time Dalila leaves and Harapha comes, Samson still has not realized his impetuosity--i.e. his easy anger, quickly-ignited passion, and a drive to provocation. His interaction with Harapha demonstrates these qualities all over again. He reacts against Harapha's fixing of him as a curio piece, preferring instead to be put to action: "The way to know were not to see but taste" (1091). Harapha has been clear on his intentions for the visit before his arrival. His refusal of Samson can only demonstrate restraint. "O Baal-zebub! can my ears unus'd/ Hear these dishonours and not render death?" (1231-32). Samson, on the other hand, at a moment's notice, can conjure a host of options for acting:

Go baffl'd coward, lest I run upon thee,
Though in these chains, . . .

And with one buffet lay thy structure low,
 Or swing thee in the Air, then dash thee down
 To th'hazard of they brains and shattered sides.

(1237-1241)

Harapha, like Dalila, is warned to leave before Samson does something rash. Contention rules Samson. His impulse to concede to impulse marks him as a combatant to himself.

Mary Garrard draws the pertinent distinction:

Unlike the male hero, whose power, and blindness to vulnerability are both the qualities of his greatness and the cause of his downfall (the concept of hubris is relevant to male heroes only), the female hero is by social decree perpetually aware of her essential vulnerability. It is her obligation to adapt imaginatively to alien and repressive environments, and her ability, not to control, but to transform such environments constitutes her heroism.

The thought of a woman's winning out does not obtain: "it is only in patriarchal myth that the underdog hero wins; in the world of women the underdog's triumph is self-realization" (336). The latter is all with which Dalila leaves. She knows where she stands. To some degree, as her self-diminutives have implied, she has known all along.

By the time of her departure, Dalila is ready to disclose her true "concernments" (969), those behind her more forceful

identity as ancient Near Eastern woman. "Why do I humble thus myself, . . . suing/ For peace" [965-966, emphasis mine]. From the beginning, Dalila has gestured and spoken in ways that anticipate violent reaction against her. It has been no use. Samson's rage finally threatens "to tear thee joint by joint" (953). Spurred and spurned, Dalila claims outright her right to vindication in the public realm.

My name perhaps among the Circumcis'd
 In Dan, in Judah, and the bordering Tribes,
 To all posterity may stand defam'd,
 With malediction mention'd, and the blot
 Of falsehood most unconjugal traduc't.
 But in my own countrey where I most desire,

 I shall be named among the famousest
 Of Women. . .

(975-983).

Seventeenth-century injunctions against a woman's notoriety no longer claim her. Neither does the noble charge of accommodation. In the end, Dalila's scriptural prototypes require her to stand outside the gendered heroisms of the seventeenth-century. As haggada, the biblical femme forte contextualizes both Dalila's and Delilah's heroism. The history of their reception, together with Milton's critique, converge in Dalila's own words:

Fame, if not double-fac't is double-mouth'd,

And with contrary blast proclaims most deeds,
 On both his wings, one black, the other white,
 Bears greatest names in his wild aerie flight.

(971-974)

Only the last reason she offers, her compulsion toward public action, does justice to the biblical spirit of female heroism that informs her representation.

Notes

1. See, e.g. Diane McColley, Milton's Eve, Joseph Wittreich Feminist Milton, Philip Gallagher, Milton, the Bible, and Misogyny. Anna Juhnke argues that "remnants of misogyny in Paradise Lost" nonetheless remain. See her article of the same title.

2. "'Incident to All Our Sex': The Tragedy of Dalila"; "In Defense of Dalila: Samson Agonistes and the Reformation Theology of the Word," Journal of English and Germanic Philology 74 (1975).

3. Criticism has framed the problem of Dalila's heroism in terms of the public-private split. See Joan Bennett, "A Person Rais'd: Public and Private Cause in Samson Agonistes," Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 18 (1987): 155-68; "Dalila's House: Samson Agonistes and the Sexual Division of Labor," in Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe, Margaret W. Ferguson, ed., et. al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986): 106-22. For Dalila as agent of regeneration, see Heather Asals, "In Defense of Dalila: Samson Agonistes and the Reformation Theology of the Word," JEGP 74 (1975): 183-94. Stella P. Revard tries to rescue Dalila from the public-private distinction in terms of Euripides. See "Dalila as Euripidean Heroine," Papers on Language and Literature, v23, n3 (1987): 290-302.

4. He takes the term from J. Jeremias, The Eucharistic Words of Jesus, translated by Norman Perrin, London, 1966, p.96.

5. From L.A. Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 260, p. 17.

6. See also Jo Ann Hackett, "In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel" in Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality, C. Atkinson, ed. et al. (Crucible Press, 1985); Leonie J. Archer, "The Virgin and the Harlot in the Writings of Formative Judaism," History Workshop Journal 1988: 1-16; Theodore Friedman, "The Shifting Role of Women, From the Bible to Talmud," Judaism 36 (1987): 479-487.

7. 1673; Cf. Greer p.2.

8. See Guillory, especially pages 106-107 and notes 3 and 4.

9. Cf. Jones 74-75 and Guillory below.

10. Cf. p. 341n.9. However noble the nature of their charge, women were no more than living the allegories of the Middle Ages wherein consolatio figures, such as Beatrice and Lady Philosophy, entered and egressed only according to a male protagonist's need of them. As personifications of the divine numen, such prototypes were idealized, respected for the spiritual truths that stirred repentance. Women's new privilege was in fact carefully qualified by the guilt of Eve. In the final analysis, the responsibility to promote reconciliation, between man and God or man and family, could modify women's resistance to being edged out of the public realm.

Despite their roles as mediators, seventeenth-century women would never be idealized in the same ways. For instance, they were not recognized for the reasoning skills of a Beatrice or Lady Philosophy. The best that could be done was to deem specific women "prophets," a category that ultimately implied irrationality and fleeting inspiration. See Phyllis Mack, "Women as Prophets During the English Civil War," FS, v8, n1 (1982): 19-45; "The Prophet and Her Audience: Gender and Knowledge in The World Turned Upside Down," in Reviving the English Revolution: Reflections and Elaboration on the Work of Christopher Hill, G. Eley and W. Hunt, eds. (New York: Verso, 1988): 139-152.

11. It was in part within an effort to prevent women from considering female contemporaries as role models, such as Joanna of Sicily or Elizabeth Stuart of Bohemia, that Renaissance artists and writers turned to biblical women. Their historical remove facilitated their own mythologizing as

larger than life and inimitable.

12. Such representations were contemporary to figurings of her as a predecessor of the Virgin Mary (Russell 155).

13. See Esther; Samuel 25:17; 2 Samuel 20:16-22. As for Delilah's agency, a reader may argue that more than following the Philistines' directives, she creates some of her own. The scenes in which Delilah persists in learning Samson's secret show the text growing increasingly ambiguous as to whose promptings she is following; the Philistines, at first "lying in wait in the chamber" (16:8) become more and more removed from sight. The notion of Delilah as a mediator who finds her own autonomy offers her as a composite of two kinds of biblical women who act. See Merideth, p. 71.

14. King James Version. My source for the apocryphal Judith and Greek additions to Esther (denoted by letter) is the Anchor Bible. W. Albright and D. Freedman, gen. eds. (NY: Doubleday, 1964).

15. The criteria for determining the focalizing agent of biblical texts, as well as the narrative concept of focalization itself, are found in Mieke Bal's narratology. See below.

16. Patricia Milne summarizes the contention between "reformist" versus "revolutionary" biblical feminists, arguing the latter's case, in "The Patriarchal Stamp of Scripture."

17. For a perceptive critique of this quote, see Carol P. Christ, "Embodied Thinking: Reflections on Feminist Theological Method," JFSR 5n1 (1989): 7-16.

18. This has been Bal's approach in reading the murderess women of Judges as reacting to the plights of the book's victimized women, and Phyllis Trible's in juxtaposing the repressive garden of Eden with the less repressive garden of Solomon's bride and bridegroom. See Death and Dissymetry and God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978)

19. The Hebrew anah for "afflict" carries connotations, among others, of depressing, humbling, or weakening. The Revised Standard Version (Merideth's source) renders it "subdue."

20. For the distinction between male and female heroism, I draw from Mary Garrard's insights, which I will quote later in full.

21. See for example Thomas Kranidas, "Dalila's Role in Samson Agonistes," SEL 6 (1966): 125-37.

22. Just as Bal asserts that coherence is extrinsic to the text, an operation performed upon it rather than an inherent quality, cognitive psychology has argued that meaning-making is likewise deliberative; all that the perceiver has to work with are shards and fragments of data. Meaning happens according to the judgments that the perceiver assesses to be pertinent. But the standards that decide what criteria to consider in order to make those judgments are always contestable and shifting. To help with these judgments, the perceiver necessarily brings to his or her perceptions a more or less ready-made scheme of organization.

23. See Merideth 68-69 and below.

24. One might argue that the chorus has been interpreting in the vein of God's Providence all along, although they have not been able to bear it out precisely before Samson's finale. To this, I would offer Kermode's notion of "foreunderstanding," the precept that all readers and listeners harbor the ability to understand a communication before its ending. There is nothing to say that this ability likewise is not shaped by our own culturally-informed biases. See pages 70-72 especially.

25. See Wittreich, Interpreting Samson Agonistes, p. 66.

26. Cf. Merideth 68-69.

27. On Propp, see Kermode 1979: 80-81.

28. Alter seems to veer toward this insight in reference to David's explanations to Saul and Saul's intermediaries. See The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981), p119.

29. Jones applies the term to women's strategies for speaking in the seventeenth-century. See her essay.

30. See Jones, Hobby, and Greer.

31. Cf. Jones 79.

32. "To enter into much discourse. . . with strangers argues lightness or indiscretion: what is said of maids may properly be applied to all women: They should be seen and not heard. . . . women's tongues are held their defensive armor, but in no particular detract they more from their honor than by giving too much scope to that glibbery member" (Robert Braithwaite, The English Gentlewoman, 1631; cf. Jones 78).

Also, Proverbs 5: 3-5: "For the lips of a strange woman

drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil: But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell." Cf. Nancy Tischler (Legacy of Eve: Women of the Bible. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977) pages 71-72.

33. Susanna's Apologie Against the Elders. Cf. Hobby 44.

34. Cf. Patricia Higgins, "The Reactions of Women with Special Reference to Women Petitioners" in Politics, Religion, and the English Civil War, Brian Manning, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 210-13.

35. Cf. Antonia Fraser, The Weaker Vessel (New York: Vintage, 1985), 214-216.

36. Esther figures as a transgressor of the domestic code as well in that the repeated banquets she arranges for Ahasuerus include Haman, whom she eventually has executed.

37. Cf. Tischler 73ff.

38. Editor's note.

39. Although these actions feature only in the Greek additions, Renaissance art shows familiarity with them. See Garrard, p.76.

40. Of course, the fate of Ahasuerus' first wife, Vashti, has provided Esther with a stark warning to approach her marriage role differently than her predecessor did.

Spirit "Immanacl'd":

Rational Piety and Milton's Feminism in A Mask

Feminist criticism of Milton, in one way or another, often judges female autonomy with reference to the woman's capacity to reason. Just as often, her ability to act morally comes under scrutiny in the same arguments: had Eve considered more fully her choices in the separation scene, she would have acceded to the correctness of Adam's reason. Similarly, indictments against Dalila derive from the "wavering" quality of her arguments; first her defense lights on one excuse, then another.¹ Critics often remark on Lady Alice's probity in a similar vein. Applauding her reason, they implicitly or explicitly commend her morality. No doubt behind this association is Milton's own regard for reason as the humanizing factor. Possessing it, the Lady Alice has a dignity, an authority, a fierce quality of self-possession. The classicized virtue of chastity, undergirding her reason, only reinforces what many see as admirable militancy against a threatened chaos of mind. Reason points to virtue and virtue to a psychological integritas, a wholly impenetrable core. "I had not thought to have unlockt my lips/ In this unhallow'd air" (756-58), she protests, self-affirmed; "Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind" (663).

Readings of A Mask variously emphasize the moral or

instructive agenda that informs the court drama. What kind of edification did its performance mean for the audience at Ludlow Castle? Whatever the implied message--be it concerning a rape victims' culpability (was there "mental assent"? [Marcus 20]), the proper relationship between recreation and duty, the value of self-governance versus institutional governance²--one learned, above all, to value one's powers of reason. Yet there are those who will argue that the masque draws the line between reason and its opposite, passion, only imperfectly. Richard Halpern suggests that the source of Alice's strength derives at least in part from the mythology that contextualizes her ordeal: the Circe myth wherein sexual magic threatens men rather than women. Given that Bacchus' maenads touted chastity themselves, the "ostensible opposition" between Comus and Alice gets "undercut" (92). The mythological excess of the masque inspires Kathleen Wall's recent reading of the masque as well. As Wall notes, a second framework obtains by which to read the duo's debate: Comus's connection to the Goddess. Through ritual, the monster holds out for Alice the prospect of a psychological independence as fierce as any intellectual one that Alice might achieve through reason. It is in fact Comus's appreciation for Alice's "sober and self-certain" chastity that attracts him to her, not any virgin-like (purely physical) vulnerability (56).

Going the route of Halpern and Wall, it seems A Mask's instructiveness is not contained by its contemporary political

context. Other lessons obtain perhaps not intended by Milton or the current events (e.g. Michaelmas, the Castlehaven scandal, Bridgewater's political appointment) that surround the masque, lessons, perhaps, that the ready teacher of A Mask, Lady Alice, needs to learn herself about reason. My plan is to help A Mask uncover the biases by which a connection between intellectualism and morality gets drawn and attached to the Lady to begin with. Despite what mythological excesses inhere in the text, the main perspective by which we read Lady Alice corroborates Milton's more conscious perception of her, i.e. she is moral because reasonable (and vice versa). However, Lady Alice's presentation underscores the association of reason with virtue as a cultural bias deeply rooted in reformed theology and an attendant liberalism, both of which Alice voices. Placed in this framework, Alice's rationalism prompts Comus to take on a different visage: he can be thought less like a thoroughly profligate monster, a banishable aristocrat or wanton country dancer, and simply more like one who understands what stands to be lost when the Puritans' religious project of acculturation is completed.

In reading A Mask, critics might recognize Comus's monstrosity as a cover for Milton's liberal biases and question the liberal association of intellect and morality that becomes so much a part of the reformation effort to shape a new religious sensibility. As feminist theology tells us,

the intellect as a channel for healing both personal and social rifts in spirituality is not enough. If modern theology continues the Western philosophical legacy of keeping mind and body apart, the spirit so sought after by Milton later in both his epics will remain bound to its pattern of retreat.

What are the ways in which the intellect came to bear on changing conceptions of redemption in Milton's day? Christina Lerner, writing on what she calls "the age of faith," cites religion's move to the mental sphere as the distinguishing development of the Reformation. The process involved a shift from religious observances to religious doctrine and a complementary intellectual strategy for that doctrine's dissemination. Protestantism's early history among the populace shows its intense concern with learned principles and doctrine. The rise of the printed book threatened to place the Bible into more and more peasant hands. Its polysemous character compelled the Church to construct a body of doctrine through which people could understand the Bible without endangering established authority. Protestantism was a battle for minds. Bible-reading, sermonizing, credos, recitations--all worked to engage the believer's mentality in his or her quest for union.³

The charge of blasphemy testifies to the problem of acculturating the underclass. In one case, Alexander

Dumfriesshire, a thinking peasant,. . . . was alleged to have said in 1656 that he knew no god but salt, oatmeal, and water.

Denying the tenets that "Christ was God, that the Holy Ghost existed, that a man has a soul or that there is a heaven or a hell, or that the scriptures are the word of God" (116), he was executed by the British military authorities during Cromwell's regime. In the same age, Jeremy Taylor said of the Irish peasantry, "[they can] give no account of their religion what it is: only they believe as their priest bids them, and go to mass which they understand not" (Whole Works, vi, 175)⁴. William Pemble wrote, in 1635, that even in the case of regular church-goers, "there be many a hundred. . . who come to church and hear much, haply a hundred and fifty sermons in a year: yet at year's end are as much the better for all as the pillars of the church against which they lean, or the pews wherein they sit" (Workes, 559).⁵ Rather than false belief, blasphemy often signalled simply unbelief. Such skepticism often indicated Protestantism's irrelevance to the daily challenges among the masses who needed rather prayers for sun and rain.

By contrast, much pre-reformation religion suited the rhythms and priorities of the countryside. More than likely, illiterate or peasant workers found God through their labors with Nature or in the community. Abstract reflection and formulaic articulations of the faith stood against religious

activity:

Inevitably, that religious experience for the worker on the land was based not on internal commitment to a complex pattern of belief--belief, after all which the learned themselves quite cheerfully categorized as "mysteries"--but on certain performances. Religious instruction was given through drama, procession, the celebration of feast days and other visual aids (Larner 119).

One enacted the faith rather than professed it, through "works, observances, [and] ritual" (118). Even passive attendance of a church service, presided over by a professional, could comply with the church-goers' greater interest in the cycles of Nature and their material impact on people's lives. The conflict arose in getting the folk to attest that they believed what (and how) the university churchmen believed.⁶

Perhaps the pressing concern among reformers was undoing the commoner's belief in a Nature that was alive and in one's ordinary powers to summon its life forces for personal or communal benefit. For example, while the sacraments could complement the peasantry's desires to mark life's moments of passage, reformers shot down the "ungodly" notion that these rites could actually secure safety or other material blessings. Popular belief held that the traditions within baptism and confirmation ceremonies could ward off harmful

spirits; a bride's wedding ring could strengthen her alliance; extreme unction made possible an increased chance for recovery. Set forms of prayer, repeated in set patterns, said in designated places, at designated times; the worship of relics, the wearing of talismans; pilgrimages to holy sites; sacred fountains for magic cures--all implied belief in a deity who was throughout Nature and accessible through human practices. Perambulations, or "charming the fields" as Henry Barrow called it, persisted in some cases until the nineteenth-century (Thomas 65).

What Larner calls the transition from "belief" to "faith" shows up clearly in the period's contention over prayer. Reformers drove at weakening the believer's confidence in the power of petitioning. They meant to create a distinction between intercession and coercive ritual.⁷ Most importantly, the faithful should ever keep in mind words' meaning in prayer, not their presumed power. Getting one's request granted was really beside the point. Believers were warned to make their hearts (that is, their minds) truly labor in prayer, and to recognize the words themselves as "being most angelical comfort" (Thomas 61).⁸

The way in which Protestant ministers helped the populace to approach the deity subtly communicated, as much as any doctrine, what holiness must be all about. In short, divinity rested in all things rational. Protestantism extended this message by emphasizing the ability of believers to mediate in

their own salvation intellectually. Given the necessary theological background, one had a fair chance of steering one's life in the direction of God's favor. Doctrines of sin and guilt assured the faithful's independence, while knowing that God's will was unbound could cover for the deity when the just person's petitioning failed. Literally, one met God in one's mind, in one's thinking.

Orthodox Christianity and liberalism have been taken to be distinct ideologies, but by similarly supporting self-abnegation and dualistic thinking, they each contributed to emerging notions of the isolated individual self. Very simply, a person achieved selfhood to the degree that he or she emerged triumphant within relationships that both preachers and polemicists were portraying as antagonistic. Whether one confronted village witches, political tyrants, or the psychomachia of the soul, the prototype for both the virtuous Christian and the free citizen was that individual who dealt nobly with outward and inward contention.

Meanwhile, the increased emphasis on guilt in Reformation piety impelled spirituality's move to the mind even more. Christ's self-sacrifice, a glorified honoring of the Father, promoted the image of a deity pleased by the body's punishment. Reformers who now emphasized the Atonement as a single, unsubstitutional and inimitable event legitimized schemes of subordination and self-denial. Their message enforced hierarchical ways of relating to God, self, and

neighbor.⁹ In doing so, they advanced the penitent toward psychological isolation. Desire would return to the penitent in the form of an intellectual substitute: hope. The body, unauthorized to receive and give pleasure, engaged the mind as its only sanctioned resident. Christians could conceive of pleasure only in contemplating the next world since it was there, if anywhere, that pleasure resided.¹⁰ Spirituality becomes something conceptual:

This [disembodied] faith. . . functions as a state of mind, a cosmology, and as a way of interpreting daily events and historical movement (Harrison 154).

Faith is pleasure's intellectualization. Believers learn to bear pain by, literally, reasoning it out, by anticipating its end in the next world. The danger lies in their movement further and further away from the earthly one and subsequently from union with others.

Under this orientation, divine communion becomes possible only when the mind has lost awareness of material reality. It is then that the purity of mind can meet with Mind. By way of example, mystic union is the perfected and final step in the believer's mental progression. In one way or another, pain is integral to the religious ascetic's achievement of it. Elaine Scarry asserts that, rather than ultimately denying the body, affliction asserts it by making it impossible to feel or perceive anything outside it. The pained body directs the subject's consciousness back upon itself. The world

disintegrates and the body's sensibilities enlarge. "Thus the centers of the world are canceled and the path is clear for the entry of an unworldly, contentless force" (34). The mystic apprehends an other-worldly reality. But the problem of denying the physical sphere, of nullifying this world, remains. Imbibing the subtle messages of the Atonement, the believer closes the self off from the very contexts in which it materialistically exists.

Although mysticism usually bears reference to Catholicism and its saints (often for whom mysticism paradoxically figures an escape into sexuality--with its panoply of sensual images), Lady Alice moves toward a rational mysticism, one that points to Protestantism's forced emphasis on intellect. Emblematic of her mental state, her physical detachment from her brothers forebodes the stark psychological isolation which she comes gradually to inhabit. Since her brothers were also her guides, she loses contact with those who are closest to her personally and locally. Her disintegrating powers of perception begin early on as well. Coupled with her impulse to identify reason as the constitutive element of her being, her senses' flight signals the start of a process that resembles the mystic's search for union. The search begins on the level of aurality. "This way the noise was, if mine ear be true" (170). Visual perception having left first, sounds resonate within her psyche. In failing consciousness, the ear is often the last perceptive channel to fail. Aurality

signifies a union between reason (words) and sense perception (sound), thereby constituting a breaking point, a window from one state of being to another. Expectedly for the Lady Alice, the revelers' words and music are indistinct. "Riot" and loud "tumult" play out aurally the tangible meld of random properties in chaos (172,202). Dissolution threatens. The Lady Alice prepares for flight.¹¹

Alice's prayer experience in the woods likewise signals Protestantism's enforced rationality. Finding "nought but single darkness" (205),

A thousand fantasies
Begin to throng into my memory,
Of calling shapes and beckning shadows dire,
And airy tongues that syllable mens names
On sands and shoars and desert wildernesses.

(205-209)

In the face of an onrush of images that have come naturally, through sensory deprivation, she calls upon her inner resources to elicit a countering set of images. Her reason might thereby protect her:

These thoughts may startle well, but not astound
The vertuous mind, that ever walks attended
By a strong siding champion conscience--
O welcom pure-ey'd Faith, white-handed Hope,
Thou flittering Angel girt with golden wings,
And thou unblemish't form of Chastity,

I see ye visibly, and now beleeve. . . .

(210-16; emphasis mine)

Importantly, she begins by reciting a precept, a theory. Alice's "These thoughts may startle well" bears the a quality of rote learning. Reminding us that catechizing played a vital role in disseminating the Word among the literate and the ungodly, she calls the precept to mind with the same readiness that one of the "ignorant and indocible" (Collinson 233,234) might whip out a copy of the doctrinal summaries from a pocket.¹² An instructed, more than inspired, wisdom prefaces her prayer and enables her vision. The stichomythia between herself and Comus reinforces the text's suggestion of her learning process: the dialogue consists of the Lady's answers to Comus's questions. The fact that catechisms were often used in the case of children and converts offers two other interesting parallels. Concerning the later, Alice's responses are prerequisite to the conversion action Comus will later attempt. At the very least, they imitate--perhaps parodically--a common Puritan practice often preceding fellowship and/or communion in private homes (264-65). In an "age of faith," the Lady emerges as the student of faith.

Before long, Alice's subjection to a mentalized spirituality incites her to take up its path in flight. As her senses dim and dangers begin to loom, Alice takes off for the more bearable realm of hopefulness. She imagines "a glistring guardian" (219) to defend her. Here the reader

catches Alice in just one of several uncomfortable moments which, in her rational piety, she "fill[s] with intense anticipation of pleasure [the absence of pain] that is yet to come." For the faithful, the persistent bent toward "eschatological promise" (Harrison 154), as a way to deal with pain, is typical. The Lady later betrays her hopefulness to Comus when she articulates her vision of the good life:

If every just man that now pines with want
 Had but a moderate and beseeming share
 Of that which lewdly-pamper'd Luxury
 Now heaps upon som few with vast excess,
 Natures full blessings would be well dispens't
 In unsuperfluous eev'n proportion. . .

(768-773)

In contrast, when Comus presents his idea of the good life, it is already here; he describes what is good that already is. Comus's sensibility abstracts the promise from what he sees before him: "nature [did] powr her bounties forth/ With such a full and unwithdrawing hand" so that now "no corner" is "vacant of her plenty" (710;717-18). But Alice's rational dispensation toward divinity prevents her from discerning the possibility of the sacred in the here and now. Her piety literally absents her: "thou art worthy that thou shouldst not know/ More happines than this thy present lot" (788-89). But doesn't Alice presently share Comus's lot? She does if she is there with him.¹³ Yet she seems to say, "You're here

but I'm not." Then where is she? Inasmuch as Comus cannot "apprehend/ . . . sublime notion[s], and high mystery" (784-85), presumably these very thoughts absorb her at this very moment. Since her mysteries concern the "Sun-clad power of Chastity" (782), such power marks the realm she occupies. By her admittance, it is a saintly, Sun[ny] one--literally, above the regions of earth and moon.

In good measure, it is Lady Alice's rationality that locks her into Comus's power to begin with. Throughout her encounter with Comus, Alice places great stock in words and the ear's "attendance" to them. She overtrusts in the period's new emphasis on the worthy man's integrity in matters of speech.¹⁴ She demands no further guarantee of Comus's words other than the words themselves. "Shepherd I take thy word" (322). Had she asked him to swear by all his holy faeries, things might have turned out differently. She could have played on Comus's vitalism, his belief in the power that informs all creation, and evoked in Comus a fear of supernatural sanction, thereby thwarting her own entrapment.

Alice has not the vision to perceive Nature or relationships--divine or human--in Comus's terms. For her, power is a property of the individual, independent of social context. It is a force one possesses rather than one which can be shared. As such, its metaphors denote encapsulation, enclosure, and isolation--the enabling principles for possession itself. Let us revisit the two brothers: they

speak to each other about Alice almost exclusively in terms of ownership. The Second Brother remarks on the "folded flocks pen'd in thir watled cotes" (344), the miser's guarding of his "unsun'd heaps" (398-99), and the dragon's defense of "the fair Hesperian Tree/ Laden with blooming gold" (393-5). The Elder Brother, in turn, refers to wisdom's "retired solitude" (376), the "light within [a man's] own cleer breast" (381), and the virgin's "compleat steel" cladding (421); he presents image after image of the self in sure possession of strengthening virtues that begin and end within. Together the brothers make the connections between owning goods and owning oneself. Eventually the "unowned" (407) virgin's independence falls flat. But the "thousand liveried angels" (455) at the ready receive only passing acknowledgment at this point (and by only one of the brothers), and never sufficiently from Alice. The gift-like, or contingent, nature of the Lady's ascribed strengths is perceived as if of her own doing; her internal properties are conceptually bound within an economy of individualism, autonomy, possession: even "if Heav'n gave [them], [they] may be term'd her own" (419).

The brothers' interchange allows the reader to search the liberal basis behind Lady Alice's spirituality. Identity under liberalism presumes a separation and/or control over materiality and other individuals rather than integration with them. The same relationship applies to circumstance. Since reason is the human principle from which all other ennobling

characteristics derive, one is free to the extent that one can rationally control one's destiny. In short, liberalism hangs on non-interference. No one must constrain an individual in what are conceived of as fundamentally humanizing choices: the abilities to define "the good life" for oneself, decide the best means of attaining it, enter into contracts, and attain a portion of presumably limited material resources. Ironically, however, the Lady's freedom from constraint leads to her own endangerment and isolation. Ultimately her predicament forces her to confront an alternate way of relating to reality such as Comus presents.

Thus it is the liberal tradition that ultimately contextualizes the Lady's self-possession. From her first efforts to stave off "a thousand fantasies" (205) from crowding her psyche, reason is the Lady's "land-pilot" (309). Alice trusts Comus's words, ultimately to a fault, yet she agrees to follow him after reasoning impending harm away: "In a place/ Less warranted then this or less secure/ I cannot be, that I should fear to change it" (326-28). She weighs two potential dangers--of staying or going--one against the other. She chooses to go. In liberal terms, she enters into contract, a sign of freedom, and thereby reaffirms her powers of rational autonomy. Similarly, while immobilized, the Lady reminds Comus that, although he has "immanacl'd" her "corporal rind" (665, 664), he has not restrained "the freedom of [her] mind" (663). In doing so, she voices the dualism implicit in

liberal theories of selfhood: what is constitutive of humanity is the power to reason. Comus has not imprisoned Alice, for she exists wholly within the mental sphere, self-consigned there. In particular, her body's immovability lends greater depth and emphasis to her voice (again rationality's audible sign), allowing it greater range and power.

Once enthroned, the Lady Alice throws off the weight, the burden, of her body altogether. She climbs to mystic heights through reasoning out her predicament. Finally, her intellect is free to achieve an enlarged mindfulness, an ecstatic experience. It is words, rationality, that has brought her to the brink. Now hurling moral precepts like millstones, she asks "Shall I go on?/ Or have I said enough?" (780-81) The threat is clear. To continue would ignite a "flame of sacred vehemence" (795) wherein all of Nature would quake in her rapturous loquacious vision.

Alice's prototypes are of the saints' lives that owe their motifs to classical mythology and medieval romance. Whether as the amazon of the woods, the woman warrior in disguise, or the androgyne, the virtuous woman of literature traditionally has kept close ties with the male world of militancy and independence.¹⁵ As tradition progresses, however, woman's independence wages closer and closer to militancy against the self, specifically the feeling, sensual, physical self. Unlike Eve, who partially is relieved of the extremes facing women who would achieve a measure of heroism

(either renounce sexuality or remain ineffective), Alice is bound to the patterns predetermining women's agency. From her wandering in the woods, where she takes along (like Diana's arms) the lion-taming, bolt-deflecting, foe-freezing and violence-dashing "arms of Chastity" (443;445;449;451;440), to her modulation into warrior reasoner under Comus's capture, Alice duplicates the ontogeny of orthodox Christianity as it has pertained to women.

One might read the incompleteness of Milton's feminism, the shortsightedness of his spirituality, in A Masque through two lenses no less pertinent to critiques of patriarchal religion: political philosophers' critiques of the liberal tradition and the contention between liberal and socialist feminisms. Having suppressed the fact of the individual's dependence on a social collectivity, liberalism assumes antagonism to be the fabric of self-definition; in the battle to contain interference, one's needs and interests must necessarily be in frequent conflict with the needs and interests of other individuals. Under these conditions, it becomes impossible to arrive at a perception of the self as socially constituted or to talk about one's desires, one's conceptions of "freedom," as part of a social context of validation. Political philosophy returns again to the problem of "egoistic conceptions of rationality" (Jaggar 45). Following feminists who retain the same liberal assumptions of their forefathers leads us to similar dilemmas. They engage

"a theoretical model that does not allow us even to formulate the question whether or not [certain] values [such as non-interference and independence] should be a part of our conception of the public good" (45-46) at all. The problem stems from question-asking. Liberals want to know, "What are the circumstances in which essentially solitary individuals might agree to come together in civil society, what would justify them in doing so and how might conflict be prevented when they do?" (40) Social feminists, however, realize that without "interference," there could be no person at all. So instead they make a different inquiry: Given the commonality of all persons' interests, and the demands of human biology, what do people need?¹⁶

Simply stated, the liberal outlook blocks society members from recognizing and fulfilling obligations¹⁷--to women, to Nature, to society. It impedes thinking in terms of obligations at all. Lady Alice is not in danger, not only because she mentally has reinforced herself against physical danger, but because she psychologically refutes the fact of her biological indebtedness to Comus's Nature and to the social collectivity which he represents.¹⁸ As some recent moral philosophers have pointed out, the human penchant for repayment is the enabling condition of group solidarity, the starting point for human relations. Tension arises when the need to relieve one's debt towards others is rejected or made impossible.¹⁹ Danger is indebtedness, suspended obligation.

But the liberal notion of the individual, abstract from society, precludes the very idea of repayment.

In the face of so much criticism that demonizes Comus's spirituality, it is ironic that his relationship to Nature actually addresses some of liberalism's bugbears, promising the potential for a less isolationist way of conceiving one's relationship to the divine. As a world view, paganism acknowledges the web of obligations in which all living things exist. Connectedness is, in fact, the essence of most pagan spiritualities, whether ancient or modern:

This is not, of course, religion as many people in our society know it. It is a visionary style of knowledge, not a theological one; its proper language is myth and ritual; its foundation is rapture, not faith and doctrine; and its experience of nature is one of living communion. (Adler 28)

It has been called more an "attitude" than a religion, a "climate" or "atmosphere" by which to appreciate the world's plurality and vitalism. Fundamentally, the connecting force is the Deity or deities themselves. Divinity runs throughout Nature and all its processes. Pagans reintroduce religion to its etymology: to "relink", to "connect." Despite the variety of pagans, past and present--differing in their rites, practices, and gods, just about all of them emphasize the multiple connections between human and non-human Nature. Destructive dichotomies and hierarchies--mind over body, God

over humanity, sacredness over secularity--lose their relevance. "We cooperate with nature. . . its deep forces [and one another] on the basis of reverence and exchange" (Ellwood 152). Marx's "universality of needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc." (Grundrisse, qtd. Jaggar 59) finds an enabling spirituality in paganism. What is more, in recognizing the interests all people share, and their mutually biological interdependence, it provides the spiritual grounding for radical material change.

If A Mask contains a hint of Milton's potential for a feminist vision, I suggest that it inheres not in Lady Alice's reasoning ability but in Comus's spirituality. Celebrant of a protean and spirit-filled Nature, he apprehends the revolutionary potential of a God that is both everywhere and everywhere changing. He lives in communion with Nature: changing as it changes, sporting as it sports, "rounding" as it rounds in its celestial and earthly patterns and rhythms. Opportunities to perceive and celebrate one's connectedness abound: in the stars' rhythms, the porpoises' Morris movement, the wood-nymphs' "merry wakes and pastimes" (113-16, 120-21). These natural forces affect the equilibrium of the fading evening and thus draw Comus into his imitative dance. The ideal of free contractual action loses its potency in the face of an ecological web; one force weighs upon the other, and all are changed. "To know the secrets of nature is to know the works of God," a "spirit or power . . . causing motion and

growth," Winstanley wrote. Comus's is a worldview that threatens reigning ideologies. Like Winstanley, the left sectarians knew the political potency of such an outlook. Religious and political structures could destabilize more quickly if the populace assumed the world's mutability. It is little wonder that, in the 1650's, Paracelsian, alchemical, and natural philosophies and their related arts fed much of the revolutionaries' spirit.²⁰

Considering also the period tension against enclosure, fen-draining and other political moves to declaim commonality as a social value, what else might Comus tell us? Certainly, in his rites, Comus centralizes the importance of commonality. For him, spirituality is a corporate activity. His rites are not performed alone. The idea of pursuing, much less contemplating, the deity in isolation would be unfathomable for him. His rounds point up the connection between rite and rhythm itself: repetitive, and thereby common, experience.

We perform [rites] to remind ourselves and one another that we are not alone, that we sing in chorus. We [both human and non-human nature] are historical, and what has happened to us [birth, death, sunrises, sunsets, all natural processes] is not an isolated instance (Broner 235).

Through the "microcosm" of ritual, Comus and his rabble understand and take their place in the world.

Relatedly, Comus's rites are meant to have an impact.

Inasmuch as Comus understands nature as perpetually recreating itself, his observances would assist the process. "We that are of purer fire/ Imitate the starry quire,/ Who in thir nightly watchfull sphears/ Lead in swift round the months and years./ . . . / Com, knit hands, and beat the ground,/ In a light fantastick round" (111-14, 143-44). In this way, his practices remind one of the problem inherent in separating religion from magic; in the Reformation's perception of it, the latter was always a coercive act. To understand the difference, Comus needs doctrine and formulae. However, Milton's readers today might run into the same problem differentiating the two. Insofar as in many pagan perceptions of it, magic is merely a conscious modification of reality, religious ritual is magic. It either reaffirms existing social relations of power or enables the vision of new ones.

Even more, had he not broken off his rites at the sound of Alice's "chast footing" (146), Comus no doubt would have danced himself into an ecstatic frenzy to rival the Lady Alice's intellectual one. However, judging from their different dispensations, Comus's ecstasy would not preclude him from an awareness of his surroundings. Rather he would prove that the high point of ritual within a pagan sensibility connects the individual to the group. (Even though Sabrina's rites enforce this point for Alice, it is questionable whether Alice understands it.)

Anthropologies of ritual point out that rites

encapsulate a world view which a particular culture needs in order to survive. They are "special vehicle[s] for communication" (Broner 228).²¹ If we were to try to translate what Comus's rounds bespeak, the message might communicate the simple fact, not graspable by Alice, of humanity's persistent state of relatedness and indebtedness and its need for reciprocity. In Comus's world, selves have unstable boundaries and belong to tenuous categories. Nature, personhood, and animality readily exchange properties. Similarly, it becomes impossible to polarize the elements of contention. Comus lives in communion with a Nature neither wholly malevolent nor benign, and in company with creatures who resist the categories of human or non-human, mortal or immortal, monster or deity. They both transform and are transformed. Life and death forces range together in a divine chaos, engendering and re-engendering life.

Likewise, Comus's understanding of indebtedness runs deep. One will recall that Alice's separation from her brothers springs from her need for refreshment:

My Brothers when they saw me wearied out
 With this long way, resolving heer to lodge
 Under the spreading favour of these pines,
 Stept, as they sed to the next thicket side
 To bring me berries, or such cooling fruit
 As the hospitable Woods provide.

(182-87)

Her entire progression to Comus's palace may be read as her resistance to recognizing herself as in need of replenishment by others. Comus addresses himself to this very issue:

. . . all mortal frailty must subsist [by]
 Refreshment after toil, ease after pain,
 That have bin tir'd all day without repast,
 And timely rest have wanted. . . .

(686-689)

Easily attachable to the sports controversy, this passage also can be placed in the framework of Comus and reciprocity. The change that the Lady Alice fears concerns not her chastity solely but the hold on her singleness, her identity, which it represents. Comus's potion will "restore all soon" (690), perhaps to the point at which she is no different from the lowly rabble that so offends her sensibilities. She is afraid of losing her difference. Thus she protests against what most betrays her commonality with the rout, the truth of her most basic needs.

In fact, the whole of Comus's speech to Alice attempts to convince her of one reality: obligatory relationships perpetuate both Nature and society.

Why should you be so cruel to your self,
 And to those dainty limms which nature lent
 For gentle usage and soft delicacy?
 But you invert the cov'nants of her trust,
 And harshly deal like an ill borrower. . .

(679-83)

Although critics may argue about the "use" he intends, Comus wants to jar the Lady into an awareness of herself as "other-constituted," not self-possessed. For a character deemed so devilish in the criticism, his continual reference to creative sources outside himself is remarkable. If only Alice and other potential initiates could recognize these sources rightly: "O foolishness of men!", those folks who "Prais[e] the lean and sallow abstinence" (706, 709) instead of looking to Nature. The one gives little for which to be thankful--pulse and frieze; the other innumerable gifts. Thanksgiving thematizes both Comus's speech and Alice's reply. Comus asserts "if all the world" lived in temperance, "Th'all-giver would be unthank't. . . / Not half his riches known" (720, 723-34). Essentially, Comus poses the question, "To what extent can you acknowledge your indebtedness?" Or, "How much do you owe?" By drawing attention to the "unwithdrawing hand" (711) of Nature, Comus points to a related predicament for would-be thanks-givers: Many people, in privileged positions especially, accrue an allotment that cannot be paid back entirely, given what are disproportionate means of distributing goods and opportunities. For someone of the Lady's privileged and Puritan background, such an admittance could be painful. Like many liberalists who conceive themselves as "self-possessed," Lady Alice cannot acknowledge the idea of such indebtedness, and instead interprets Comus's

advances as an offense against her liberal rights of choice in action.

Again, the issue is one of thanksgiving. The "budge doctors" of both "stoick furr" and "cynick tub" (707-8) conceivably would have an easier time of it; having less, they owe less. Owing less, they own themselves more. Alice taps into their psychology in her point about "every just man. . . pin[ing] with want" (768). Notably, she resolves the conflict by drawing upon the Protestant ethics of just desserts. The assumption goes: just men deserve their allotments. And they really owe thanks to themselves for being just men. Again, could they manage to attain a portion of the world's limited resources as they merited them, the world would be truly just. Instead thanksgiving in her scheme resembles personal satisfaction for work well done. It is hard to be grateful when one receives what is simply one's fair share.

Not surprisingly, the Marxist notion of obligatory referentiality informs Comus's outlook. "Beauty is natures coyn, must not be hoorded,/ But must be currant" (739-40). Here Comus credits Nature with a life-generating circularity. The laborer's transformation of Nature is sanctioned insofar as that transformation replenishes him or her. During worktime, the laboring body becomes depleted--of water, of nutrients, of energy. Nature has an obligation to the worker to return him or her to the condition in which he or she existed prior to the work itself. This principle founds the

basis of determining value: a tablecloth, a woodcarving, a piece of pottery is valuable in proportion to the amount of time that the worker spent in shaping it and thus in its potential to restore its maker to health. Ideally, the transformation of Nature into an object leads quickly back to Nature (the laborer) again. A problem inheres when that object's potential for replenishment gets "stuck." The object (really, Nature) commodifies. Enclosing its value within itself, it petrifies. The primary and obligatory relationship between humanity and Nature becomes distorted. Divorced from the immediacy of their proper exchange, both Nature (in its transformed state) and humanity become objects themselves.²² Lady Alice, in refuting her biological indebtedness, progresses toward her own petrification. Her immobilized body best emblemizes her isolation once more.

If physicality pervades the whole of Comus's paganism, certainly it does no less so in the palace scene. It is here that Comus articulates a spirituality of the physical with notable depth. Indeed modern paganists and radical and socialist feminists might find lines in his speech to commend. But what is one to make of its implicitly sexual bent? Such a subtext need not be removed from the context of spirituality. Sexuality as both a practice and a value would reaffirm every pagan principle that I have asserted Comus embodies. It achieves transcendence for the believer with a fervor to match the transportive rationality of the mystic.

As transcendence, it provides one with "the power to cross over from self to other." It enables "the act of making connections to one another, to the rest of creation, . . . to the source of our creative power in relation," and points one toward "the wellspring of religious intuition and spiritual resourcefulness" (Harrison 166). Through it, one might grasp the reality of humanity's mutual entanglement and dependence and understand each person's potential to mediate in material ways for one another. Comus and what some identify as a "post-Christian" feminist theology would seem to speak to each other:

The goal is to feel our need for one another [and Nature], to perceive human alienation as a violation of human possibility, a betrayal of who we can be (165).

Sexuality potentially breaks unproductive progressions of higher and higher rational self-distancings. Comus would bring the Lady down to earth.

Comus in A Mask speaks for materiality's inclusion in relationships to the divine. His attempted seduction of the Lady Alice is really a case for a new kind of interaction with the godhead, one that eschews the traditional positions of high and low, heaven and earthly, self and other. Alice's challenge is to break her agonistic patterns of relating to the world that spirituality's "move to the mind" has bred. Within these tensions, Milton betrays the fact of his

extraordinary insight into, and even sympathy for, a spirituality which his liberal biases as yet constrain him to reject.

Paradoxically, Alice gets assigned the position that Milton eventually will ascribe to Satan as the voice of orthodoxy in Paradise Regained--when the poet's theologically revisionist impulses are at their height. Of course Milton does not mean to undermine Alice. It is probably quite the opposite. But in mapping the course to Milton's departures from religious orthodoxy, we cannot but notice that where Milton would demonize orthodoxy's perversion in *Comus*, he moves much further along to castigating orthodoxy itself by the time of the brief epic.

Notes

1. See respectively, Joan Bennett, Reviving Liberty: Radical Christian Humanism in Milton's Great Poems (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), chapter four, and Thomas Kranidas, "Dalila's Role in Samson Agonistes," SEL 6 (1966): 125-37.

2. See Marcus' article, "The Earl of Bridgewater's Legal Life," as well as her essay on A Mask in The Politics of Mirth (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 169-212; also Maryann McGuire, Milton's Puritan Masque (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983) and the special issue of Milton Quarterly, v21, n4 (1987).

3. See especially Larner's chapter, "Pre-Industrial Europe: The Age of Faith," pp. 113-126.

4. Cf. Thomas 76-77. Collinson gives account of the substantial complaint literature that arose in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to this effect. See his chapter five. Also Thomas, especially chapter six.

5. Cf. Thomas 163-64.

6. Jean Delumeau calls the problem "Christianization." He refers to the three or four hundred year process of acculturating land workers and peasants in the values of the cities and universities. See Delumeau, Catholicism Between Luther and Voltaire (London, 1977), pp. 155-172, and Lerner. The latter argues that an ideological motive inheres in Christianization. The break-up of medieval kinship structures necessitated another way in which to unify society. Thus the energy with which Christian doctrine was enforced. The witch hunts were symptomatic of the fervor. They subsided when a new ideology emerged: liberalism.

7. For reformers, the essential difference between prayer and "conjuring" lay in the pray-er's very perception of the activity. If one prayed expecting immediate intervention, then it was conjuring. However, if one prayed with the understanding that God need not heed the petition, immediately or ever, then it was legitimate prayer. See Thomas, p. 61.

8. "If a man beg of God riches, honour, health, liberty and such like, and he receiveth them not, but instead thereof hath God's grace and providence to sustain him, he receiveth therein from God much more than he asked." T. Tymme, The Chariot of Devotion (London, 1618). Cf. Thomas, 116.

9. The Atonement encodes most succinctly Christianity's bias toward antagonism, strengthened during the Reformation. From the earliest times, Nature's observers have felt the need to ameliorate the painful perception of life and/or the deity as alternately malevolent or benevolent. By creating a pantheon of gods, a culture could separate the contradictions into different deities whose behavior, whether benign or malevolent, could become predictable. Embedding its own pantheon of Father, Son, and devil, the Atonement responded to a similar anxiety. The devil's appearance in Christian orthodoxy mitigated the possibility that the world's malevolence equalled its good, or that somehow both resided in the same deity. Instead an adversary had captivated God's people. Now the problem was how to free the faithful. The traditional Jewish paradigm of salvation, God's rescue of Israel from hostile forces, prepared the ground for Christian schemes of a legalistic redemption. "If a slave is freed by an act of violence he is not rightfully manumitted, even if the initial act of enslaving were unjust. So God acts reasonably or lawfully, in such a way that the devil has no

claim against him. He is offered a fair redemption price" (Forsyth 377). The doctrine of the Atonement perfected the evolution of a wholly benevolent deity. But as developed by Anselm, it accorded Satan too much power over humanity (and by extension, over God).

Through the years, the exchange between Satan and God modulated into the more objective need to requite Justice. Medieval theologians emphasized Christ's volunteerism and God's loving acceptance of his offer. Christ's sacrifice set a model for the Christian's similar acts of selfless generosity. But reformers intensified the identification between Christ and believer as sinner. "Whatever sins you or I or all of us have committed and shall commit, they are as much Christ's as though he had committed them himself" (Luther, Works, XL, [Weimar ed.]). With Luther and Calvin, the loving transaction between Father and Son developed along the lines of the patriarchal family and its householders' obsessions with obedience and authority. The theology could effectively increase feelings of personal responsibility within the family, strengthening its structure, by developing notions of sin and guilt. Christians, now made painfully aware of their role in Christ's death, saw self-abnegation and denial as the most fitting memorial to his sacrifice. Unlike the generally loving God of the medievalists, a wrathful Father demanded filial submission from every son and daughter.

On the Atonement, see Neil Forsyth, The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987) and William J. Rewak, "Book III of Paradise Lost: Milton's Satisfaction Theory of the Redemption," Milton Quarterly 11 (1977): 97-102.

For an interesting discussion of the period's emphasis on the father's control (with important implications for the Atonement), see DiSalvo, War of Titans: Blake's Critique of Milton and the Politics of Religion (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1983), especially chapter nine.

10. In these paragraphs, I am historicizing a problem which, as Harrison and Heyward write about it, pertains today in female religious psychology. See their essay.

11. Curiously, Milton might seem to appreciate the Lady's penchant for psychological "flight" (though not necessarily in relation to mysticism or rational piety). See DiSalvo, "Fear of Flying."

12. My quotes from Collinson include the words of Francis Inman, "A light unto the learned: Or, the principles. . . of yong and ignorant persons (1622), Epistle"; and Richard Bernard, "Two twinnes: Or two parts of. . .the ministers maintenance" (1613).

13. Alice implies the separatism of identity: if Comus is to attain knowledge, he will have to do it on his own merits. In this individualist scheme, "the attainment of knowledge [is] a project for each individual on his or her own" (Jaggar 355).

Her momentum toward reticence perfects her self-distancing. "Shall I go on?/ Or have I said enough?" "Enjoy your dear Wit and gay Rhetoric," she protests. "Thou art not fit to hear thyself convinc't" (779-80, 790, 792). At this point, near rapture, Alice sufficiently has wrested herself from her "corporeal rind. . . immanacl'd" (664-65): communication has little further purpose for her. A tension inheres in the fact that it is the power of words that impels her toward silence.

14. See Thomas on oath-taking, especially pp. 67-68.

15. Marina Warner has written on this point in terms of Joan of Arc. See her book of the same title.

16. For women, there is a point at which the connections between liberalism and true equality break down even further. Undergirding liberal freedoms is the concept of privacy. Seventeenth-century England constructed the private realm in order to ensure its opposite: a public arena in which such rational exercises might take place. But it is women's social confinement to the private sphere that enables free intellectual enterprise at all. Barred from activity in "rational" spaces, they exist literally in an economy of dependency. Simply put, they stand for the very property of human existence which liberal notions of selfhood must deny.

17. Jaggar points out that political philosophy has had some problem in accounting for supposedly gratuitous acts under liberalism. See pp. 30-31.

18. Etymologically, the word danger once referred to the condition of being dependent on one's lord or master. Dan honorifically addressed a lord, and to owe a dan his due was literally to be "in danger." See John Wikse, About Possession: The Self as Private Property (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), p. 20.

19. See Wikse on Mauss, Polanyi, and Nietzsche, pp. 16-26 especially.

20. Eventually, ideologies affirming an essentially despirited, inert Nature would win out, together with a renewed respect for law and order. Emerging scientists would censor dialectical logic from their own theories. A campaign against "enthusiasm" of all kinds would take place. The Royal Society members would enforce the scientific method even as they

admitted its potential to diminish the "danger of a Civil War." See David Kubrin, "Newton's Inside Out! Magic, Class Struggle, and the Rise of Mechanism in the west," The Analytic Spirit: Essays in the History of Science, Harry Woolf, ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 96-121; also Carolyn Merchant, The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution (New York: Harper and Row, 1980).

21. Broner writes about ritual in relation to contemporary feminist ones. She draws on Evon Vogt, Mircea Eliade, and Victor Turner.

22. See Scarry on Marx, especially pp. 256-277.

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