

Quarulous has won Dame Purecraft through his shrewd worldliness, but Grace's patient reasonableness has also been rewarded by marriage to Winwife, who has remained more detached from the intrigues of the Fair than has his companion. And despite his foolishness, Cokes has won his freedom from Wasp. Like Erasmus, Jonson leaves the audience to assess the play's shifting ironies and to decide for themselves whether (or how) they will be foolish or wise.

It is not just in isolated passages or in individual characterizations, then, that *Bartholomew Fair* resembles *The Praise of Folly*, but also in the complex irony with which it presents both the positive and the negative aspects of wisdom and folly. There are, of course, some differences in emphasis between the two. Erasmus moves gradually from an indulgent satire on harmless foolishness through a more vitriolic attack on the ignorance and pride of the ecclesiastical establishment to a celebration of a transcendent wisdom which is folly only in the eyes of the world. Jonson's play lacks this transcendent dimension, but is more successful in molding its conflicting images of human conduct into an effective comic whole.³⁷ Both works, however, stand out as valuable achievements because they present us with a thoroughgoing anatomy of human absurdity, yet also temper the extreme scorn for the folly of the mob which was the spiritual pitfall of a doctrinaire humanism. The delicate balance between sympathy and judgment which we find in each is difficult to maintain, and neither Erasmus nor Jonson ever achieved it again; yet in both *The Praise of Folly* and *Bartholomew Fair* they have left us memorable, and analogous, commentaries on the human condition.

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37. For a defense of the form of *The Praise of Folly*, see Thompson, *Under Pretext of Praise*, pp. 71-72.

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“Real or Allegoric”: *The Ontology of Sin and Death in Paradise Lost*

IN Book IV of *Paradise Regained* Satan, having repeatedly failed to learn from Christ the nature of his mission on earth, tries to determine the truth of the matter by reading the stars. The heavenly signs are, however, characteristically ambiguous: “A Kingdom they portend thee,” the Devil tells Jesus, “but what Kingdom, / Real or Allegoric I discern not.”¹ The truth, of course, is that Jesus’ kingdom is real but not of this world, a distinction Satan fails to make, because his notions of “reality” are exclusively mundane and literal. At the same time, the phrase “Real or Allegoric” implies a distinction, indeed a contrariety, that Satan makes when he ought not to, namely, that something cannot be real *and* allegoric at the same time.

The Devil’s position is curious indeed, especially considering the very real relationship he “enjoys” with his allegorical daughter Sin in *Paradise Lost*. This paper is a study of that relationship from a twofold perspective. It will argue that Sin and her son Death are consistently real (i.e., physical and historical) throughout Milton’s major epic, their allegorical onomastics notwithstanding; and it will explore certain consequences of their absolute historicity in the area of Miltonic comparative mythology. Specifically, when the poet uses Greek myth to describe the cephalic birth of Sin, he is not merely engaging in literary allusion, or merely criticizing Greek heroism by associating it with Satan, or merely trivializing Greek

1. John Milton, *Paradise Regained* iv.389-90; in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957). All citations of Milton’s poetry will be to this edition. All citations from the prose will be to *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe (New Haven, Conn. 1953-).

"fable" by comparing it with Christian truth, or merely suggesting that classical myth is a diabolical reworking of biblical history.² To be sure, he does all these things; yet in addition, by placing certain Greek myths in their proper primordial context, he demonstrates (often by implication) when, where, how, and precisely to what degree these myths divagate—under diabolic influence—from true cosmic history. In the case of Sin's birth, for the details of which Milton is indebted ultimately to Hesiod's account of the birth of Athena in the *Theogony*, the Christian poet's use and transformation of Hesiodic materials is a systematic critique of Hesiodic cosmogony, as well as a reconstruction which explains how the Greek myth came to be in the first place.

Attributing such hermeneutic complexity to an overt allegory is a tricky business. The exegesis I propose not only insists in its theoretical underpinnings upon the absolute historicity of Sin and Death as creatures begotten by Satan; it also assumes that *Paradise Lost* offers its narrative of these personifications as the definitive account of their origin. However, these assumptions themselves need clarification, since behind them both is a much larger assumption about Milton's epic, one I share with William Kerrigan. In a recent study, Kerrigan claims that the author of *Paradise Lost*, "writing with prophetic inspiration higher than 'those Hebrews of old,' . . . assumes divine authority for every word, every event in the epic that does not appear in Scripture. His prophetic song fills in the hypotactic transitions of Genesis with inspired parataxis, representing the conceptual logic of events missing in the account of Moses. It is a fresh revelation, a Christian fulfillment."³ Kerrigan's thesis is provocative and fruitful; among its implications are the following: that Milton conceives of himself as writing fundamentally in the Mosaic tradition (he invokes the "Heav'nly Muse" who "didst inspire / That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed," *PL* 1.6-8); that he understands both his epics to be inspired elaborations of events (like the birth of Sin) many of which are only hinted at in the Scriptures (such as virtually all of *Paradise Regained*, which consists of

2. See, among many others, Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry* (1932; rev. ed. New York, 1963), pp. 251-97 and passim; Merritt Y. Hughes, "Devils to Adore for Deities," in *Studies in Honor of De Witt T. Starnes*, ed. Thomas F. Harrison et al. (Austin, Texas, 1967), pp. 241-58; and John Steadman, *Milton and the Renaissance Hero* (Oxford, 1967).

3. Among numerous exceptions, perhaps the most "notorious" is Milton's criticism of the Greek myth of Mulciber. After splendidly recapitulating the events surrounding his fall, Milton criticizes the myth's redactors explicitly: "thus they relate, / Erring" (*PL* 1.746-47).

4. William Kerrigan, *The Prophetic Milton* (Charlottesville, Va., 1974), p. 264.

actions "Above Heroic, though in secret done, / And unrecorded left through many an Age," *PR* 1.15-16); and that finally, Milton expects his readers to accept his accounts as the most literal record of cosmic history available, perhaps even as truth itself.

Not everyone agrees with these implications, of course; a generally sympathetic reviewer has noted that Kerrigan's belief that Milton "elaborated the Bible with new inventions, claiming an [historical] authority at least as emphatic as the Old Testament itself" (p. 186) "is . . . one of his major points with which recent critics are apt to disagree."⁵ Actually Milton scholars have been objecting to positions like Kerrigan's for years; and since my own analysis of Sin and Death as an "inspired parataxis" depends upon accepting Milton's narrative as literal, authoritative history, I had best preface that analysis with a brief review of the controversy.

At issue is not the claim of historicity for those portions of *Paradise Lost* which are essentially biblical. To be sure, Milton's poem has been scrutinized by any number of allegorical,⁶ accommodational,⁷ Neoplatonic,⁸ and typological⁹ commentators, the overall tendency of whose figurative

5. See the unsigned review in *Milton Quarterly*, 9 (March 1975), 29.

6. Don Cameron Allen, in *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore, 1970), takes a typically allegorical stance. Citing the *Theatrum poetarum anglicanorum* (1674), in which Edward Phillips describes the epic genre as an "allegory . . . wherein there is a kind of truth even in the midst of fiction. For whatsoever is pertinently said by way of allegory, is morally, though not historically true," Allen remarks, "No better description of the tenor of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* can be found than Phillips' last sentence" (p. 290).

7. Arnold Stein argues that Raphael's cautionary preface to the War in Heaven implies that "the material action of the war does not exist for its literal and independent meaning, but is instead part of a complex metaphor." See *Answerable Style: Essays on "Paradise Lost"* (1953; rpt. Seattle, 1967), p. 17. C. A. Patrides, in "Paradise Lost and the Theory of Accommodation," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 5 (1963-64), argues that accommodation applies to the Godhead as well as to the War in Heaven. He believes, contrary to Milton's denial in *De Doctrina Christiana* 1.2., that "Milton's God is conceived . . . anthropopathically, 'after the manner of men'" (p. 62).

8. See especially Walter Clyde Curry, "Milton's Chaos and Old Night," *Journal of English and German Philology*, 46 (1947), 38-52. Neoplatonic readings of *Paradise Lost* have to reckon with the fact that Adam's and Eve's ability to transcend the limits of this world was contingent upon their remaining obedient (v.493-503). Virginia R. Mollenkott has argued that "it is a mistake to apply Milton's [Neoplatonic] imagery of gradual spiritualization to fallen and unredeemed humanity." See her "Milton's Rejection of the Fortunate Fall," *Milton Quarterly*, 6 (March 1972), 4, n. 5. I am indebted to Professor Roy Flannagan for this reference.

9. William Madsen, in *From Shadowy Types to Truth: Studies in Milton's Symbolism* (New Haven, Conn., 1968), argues that Raphael's narrative of the War in Heaven "is not . . . primarily a . . . description of what happened a long time ago in Heaven. It is a shadow . . . of the Second Coming of Christ" (pp. 110-11).

approaches has been to characterize the narrative as a pure fiction. Yet a growing number of recent critics have steadfastly insisted upon the necessity to read it as literal history. Following the lead of Eric Auerbach, who has shown that the "religious intent" of the biblical stories "involves an absolute claim to historical truth,"¹⁰ and whose classic study "Figura" demonstrates that Old Testament events interpreted as figures or types do not thereby lose their historical reality,¹¹ other critics have stressed the need to take seriously the claims of *Paradise Lost* about its own historicity and that of the Bible.¹² Isabel MacCaffrey has argued that the direct use of myth in a poem such as Milton's, so far from compromising its status as truth, actually supports the notion that the poet is "portraying fact."¹³ Hugh MacCallum has studied Milton's stand on the doctrine of scriptural accommodation, and he has shown that position to be "calculated to encourage the reader to rest in the words and images of Scripture" (and by implication of *Paradise Lost*), rather than to search for a nonliteral, "esoteric doctrine behind the simplicity of scriptural expressions."¹⁴ Anne Ferry has argued that the language of Milton's narrator "insists . . . on the particular historical reality of the people and events in the poem,"¹⁵ while Jon Lawry has hypothesized that "Milton would hold that his great Argu-

10. Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1953; rpt. Princeton, N.J., 1973), p. 14. I am indebted to Professor Maureen Quilligan for this and other references.

11. Eric Auerbach, "Figura" (1944; rpt. in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* [New York, 1959]), pp. 11-76). See also G. W. H. Lampe and K. J. Woolcombe, *Essays on Typology* (Naperville, Ill., 1957), and especially A. C. Charity, *Events and Their Afterlife: The Dialectics of Christian Typology in the Bible and Dante* (Cambridge, Eng., 1966). For Milton's view of typology see *PL* xii.300-06 and *De Doctrina* 1.30.

12. To cite a limiting case, when Milton calls the Garden of Eden a "Spot more delicious than" the "not Mystic" garden "where the Sapient King / Held dalliance with his fair Egyptian Spouse" (*PL* ix.439-43), he deliberately calls Solomon's garden "not Mystic," thereby insisting upon the literal, historical (as opposed to allegorical or mystical) status of the Old Testament *hortus conclusus*. See C. S. Lewis, who writes in *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"* (1941; rpt. New York, 1961), "Not mystic," i.e., not allegorical. Milton is protesting against an exclusively allegorical interpretation of *Camille*. He thinks there were two real human lovers in a real garden" (p. 140). For contrasting views see Douglas Bush, *Mythology*, p. 286, and Jonathan Collett, "Milton's Use of Classical Mythology in *Paradise Lost*," *PMLA*, 85 (1970), 92.

13. Isabel MacCaffrey, "Paradise Lost" as Myth (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), p. 21.

14. H. R. MacCallum, "Milton and Figurative Interpretation of the Bible," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 31 (1962), 403. For Milton's doctrine see *PL* v.563-76, vi.893-96, vii.112-14 and 176-79. See also *De Doctrina* 1.2 and 30.

15. Anne Davidson Ferry, *Milton's Epic Voice: The Narrator in "Paradise Lost"* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 90. I am indebted to Professor Hugh MacCallum for pointing out the relevance of this reference to me.

ment mirrors—and, in a sense, is—reality."¹⁶ The efforts of many of these critics have been consolidated by Leland Ryken, who supports and expands upon their conclusions in a chapter of "Theoretic Considerations."¹⁷ One finds, then (and justifiably so), a consensus in recent criticism that *Paradise Lost* must be read as literal cosmic history in those portions of the poem which are based firmly upon biblical narrative.

Yet no such consensus exists with respect to places in his epic where Milton, in Kerrigan's words, "elaborated the Bible with new inventions." Especially where Milton is deliberately allegorical, as in the narrative of Sin and Death, and in Satan's journey through the Paradise of Fools, commentators—even those cited in my previous paragraph—have been reluctant to afford these passages the status of creature-history,¹⁸ much less to consider them as verbatim accounts. William J. Grace, who, twenty-five years before Kerrigan, said that "Milton actually believed that he was adding historical details to the Scriptures," nevertheless excluded Sin and Death, whose "allegory . . . belongs to myth [i.e., 'fable']."¹⁹ Douglas Bush calls the narrative an "overt mythological allegory, . . . the one thread of allegory in the poem" (*Mythology*, p. 289). Isabel MacCaffrey finds it "impossible to accept the bridge from Hell [built by Sin and Death] quite as unreservedly as 'real,' as the cosmography" ("*PL*," as *Myth*, p. 199) elsewhere in the poem, while Jackson Cope remarks that "the Father speaks of sin and death conceptually, reducing them from their substantive status to predicates for man's state of being."²⁰ Anne Ferry, who insists that "these creatures do exist" (*Milton's Epic Voice*, p. 132), nevertheless believes that "the improbability of the events" told about them "directs us to read the [ir] story allegorically": "we are not really being asked to believe

16. Jon S. Lawry, *The Shadow of Heaven: Matter and Stance in Milton's Poetry* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1968), p. vi.

17. Leland Ryken, *The Apocalyptic Vision in "Paradise Lost"* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1970), pp. 7-43. I cite only twentieth-century commentators. Joseph Addison was one of the first critics to deny the historicity of Milton's allegories (and therefore to consider them incongruous in an epic poem): "I must only make an exception to the Limbo of Vanity, with his episode of Sin and Death, and some of the imaginary persons in his chaos. These passages are astonishing, but not credible; the reader cannot so far impose upon himself as to see a possibility in them" (*The Spectator*, No. 315, in *Criticisms on "Paradise Lost"*, ed. Albert S. Cook [1892; rpt. New York, 1968], p. 66). For a superb summation of eighteenth-century objections to the allegory of Sin and Death, see Joseph H. Summers, *The Muse's Method: An Introduction to "Paradise Lost"* (1962; rpt. New York, 1968), pp. 32-39. Summers' second chapter (pp. 32-70) corroborates my belief in the historicity of Milton's allegories.

19. William J. Grace, "Orthodoxy and Aesthetic Method in *Paradise Lost* and the *Divine Comedy*," *Comparative Literature*, 1 (1949), 174.

20. Jackson Cope, *The Metaphoric Structure of "Paradise Lost"* (Baltimore, 1962), p. 169.

being an imaginative fiction, Sin is a creature no less than Hell is a creation (it takes a real portress to open real gates).

Her reality is attested to by Satan, who talks with her and sees her, calling her a "Sight more detestable" (l. 745) than any he has seen before (compare the following obviously hyperbolic—and allegorical—apostrophe of the Lady in *A Mask*: "thou unblemish't form of Chastity, / I see ye visibly," ll. 215-16). Although Sin is invisible to mortal sight (on earth she will "up and down unseen / Wing silently," ll. 841-42), her literal, physical status is not thereby compromised (angels and devils are similarly invisible, as God himself is). It is just that Sin is supernatural and, like other supernatural creatures, difficult to discern.

Likewise, Milton's Death is no mere poetic fiction. Admittedly amorphous (the poet calls him the "other shape, / If shape it might be call'd that shape had none / Distinguishable," ll. 666-68), Death nonetheless is, and formidably, if not substantially (l. 669) so. He is so physically powerful that "Hell trembled as he strode" (l. 676); only the Devil refuses to quake before him: "Th' undaunted Fiend what this might be admir'd, / Admir'd, not fear'd; God and his Son except, / Created thing naught valu'd he nor shunn'd" (ll. 677-79). Again, as the structure of the language indicates, Death, like God's Son, is a *created thing*, not merely a psychological state (such as despair) or a moral condition (such as mortal sin) or an accident modifying a substance (such as that which makes a dead body dead). Along with his mother Sin, he is the literal incarnation of his father's words ("*non servium*"), a parody of the Word made flesh.

The insistent physicality of these individuals pressures the reader to regard their generation as a literal fact of cosmic history. The cephalic birth of Sin cannot be dismissed as a Jamesian allegory amplified for poetic or homiletic purposes and conflated with some mythical (i.e., fabulous) details from Hesiod. Although both Sin and the characters in the *Theogony* are personifications, neither Milton nor Hesiod is an exegetical allegorist. Sin's birth, in addition to representing a painful transformation in Satan's psyche, is a literal happening, witnessed by literal angels in literal Heaven, and it causes the Devil real pain, as would any literal parturition. Sin tells her father:

All on a sudden miserable pain
Surpris'd thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum
In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast
Threw forth, till on the left side opening wide,
Likest to thee in shape and countenance bright,

in the physical reality of [e.g., Death], . . . but in the idea it was invented to represent" (pp. 125-28). Robert C. Fox is most explicit and categorical: "In regard to Adam and Eve, Milton was dealing with what he accepted as historical fact; . . . but the incest of Satan and Sin is of a different character; it is a myth, an imaginative embodiment of a moral truth. . . . Milton evidently felt this moral truth to be of extreme importance."²¹

Milton's account of Sin and Death is certainly allegorical: the nomenclature indicates as much; the structure of the sequence is indebted to St. James, whose Epistle (1.15) contains an allegorical version of lust begetting sin and sin begetting death; and Milton's proximate source for the iconography of Sin is the allegorical portrait of Error in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (i.i.14-15). Covertly the narrative is mythological: it depends ultimately upon Ovid (*Metamorphoses* xiv.40-74) for Sin's appearance and upon Hesiod (*Theogony*, ll. 924-26) for the details of her birth. Its fusion of allegory and myth may well be the motive behind recent efforts to dehistoricize it. In any case, my intention is not to scrutinize critics' motives but to insist that the text of *Paradise Lost* will not support their efforts in this area. Taking it for granted that the overall plot of the poem makes a claim to historical truth, I will suggest that the claim extends to virtually all of its personages, places, and images—including Sin and Death.

We first see these personifications sitting "Before the Gates" of Hell, "On either side a formidable shape" (ll.648-49). The Gates themselves have already been carefully described: "three folds were Brass, / Three Iron, three of Adamantine Rock, / Impenetrable, impal'd with circling fire, / Yet unconsum'd" (ll. 645-48). These impressive obstacles form the perimeter of a quite real and literal Hell, "A Universe of death, which God by curse / Created evil, for evil only good" (ll. 622-23). The Gates, no less real than the Hell they encircle, require the prodigious strength of Sin to be opened. She lifts the "Portcullis . . . / Which but herself not all the *Stygian* powers / Could once have mov'd" (ll. 874-76): here the very structure of Milton's language implies that Sin is ontologically as real and historical as the fallen angels (she is included among "the *Stygian* powers"). As "the Portress of Hell Gate" (l. 746) she holds a "fatal Key" (l. 871), with which she noisily opens "Th' infernal doors, [which] on their hinges grate / Harsh Thunder, that the lowest bottom shook / Of *Erebus*" (ll. 881-83). These details illustrate that Milton intends to suggest ontological continuity between Sin and the rest of the diabolical cosmos. So far from

21. Robert C. Fox, "The Allegory of Sin and Death in *Paradise Lost*," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 24 (1963), 362.

'Then shining heav'nly fair, a Goddess arm'd
Out of thy head I sprung. (II.752-58)

That this passage must be taken literally becomes clearer by noting the figurative (i.e., allegorical) use of its conceptual content elsewhere. Sin will be born in Adam when he eats the forbidden fruit, but not as a literal incarnation: "Death is the penalty impos'd, beware, / And govern well thy appetite, lest sin / Surprise thee, and her black attendant Death" (VII. 545-47). Although Raphael's warning hints at Sin's and Death's creature-existence by identifying her sex and his color ("her black attendant"), the general tenor of his remarks is figurative. As the angel predicts, Adam is surprised and pained at the appearance of sin in Eve (IX.890-91), and both become mortal when Adam eats the Fruit (IX.1003-04; hence the phrase "mortal sin"), yet these alterations are moral and psychological rather than physical or ontological.

Of course Sin and Death do literally enter the human cosmos after the Fall. They traverse Chaos on a real bridge made of "aggregated Soil" (X.293) and "Asphaltic slime" (I.298). Milton describes their entrance in a way designed to distinguish it from their prior nonphysical presence there:

Meanwhile in Paradise the hellish pair
Too soon arriv'd, Sin there in power before,
Once actual, now in body, and to dwell
Habital habitant; behind her Death
Close following pace for pace, not mounted yet
On his pale Horse. (X.385-90; italics in l. 387 mine)

This passage shows that even such apparently figurative Miltonic references as to the "Fruit . . . whose mortal taste / Brought Death into the World" (I.1-3) often have literal, physical concomitants. The passage also shows how Sin was figuratively in the Garden before she literally arrived there. She occupies the place in three distinct ways: "in power" (i.e., potentially, before the Fall, because of Adam's and Eve's fallibility); "actual[ly]" (i.e., spiritually, upon the completion of the original sin, which in Adam's case was also an actual sin²²); and "in body" (i.e., physically, when she and Death bodily arrive there). These distinctions are unintelligible unless one admits Sin's literal ontology.

This is not to deny her allegorical nature. When Don Cameron Allen writes that "Sin and Death, who are realities in Hell, ascend to the new world . . . as clear allegorical personifications" (*Mysteriously Meant*, p. 299),

22. For further clarification of these distinctions, see *De Doctrina* I.11.

he introduces a distinction that would be valid if it did not deny the continuing reality of Satan's children. Unquestionably they become more allegorical as the epic proceeds. Indeed they *always* have a figurative level. The entire encounter between Satan and Sin and Death is easily translated into moral categories: Satan's failure to recognize his daughter at the Gates of Hell (II.737-45) "stands for" the psychological tendency of the sinner to forget (i.e., rationalize) his sin; Sin's observation that "Death from Sin no power can separate" (X.251) and Death's refusal to "devour" his mother because "he knows / His end with [hers] involv'd" (II.805-07) illustrate the Christian commonplace that death is the wages of sin; the initial reaction of Satan's cohorts to the newborn appearance of Sin (they "call'd me Sin, and for a Sign / Portentous held me" [II.760-61]) indicates how primordial is the tendency to read her allegorically; and the onomastics of "Sin" and "Death" constitute obvious allegorical signposts. Indeed, no better summary of their activities exists than James's allegorical "When Iust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin; and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death" (I.15).

Milton deliberately cloths the real children of Satan in allegorical vesture. He needs to personify them in order to be true to his biblical source. Moreover, as Anne Ferry has observed, the allegorical style in which they are immersed, by inviting the reader to separate fact and meaning, serves as a structural metaphor of the schizophrenia which is at the heart of evil (*Milton's Epic Voice*, pp. 116-46). That dividedness, which relentlessly drives Satan to allegorical being,²³ becomes ever more obvious in his children, who deteriorate from complex characters into transparent personifications towards the end of *Paradise Lost*. Just as Satan's "form" is gradually degraded until it has lost "All [its] Original brightness" (I.591-92) and he becomes "A monstrous Serpent on his Belly prone" (X.514), Sin and Death likewise lose their original "splendor": like father, like son (and daughter and grandson).²⁴

23. The point is made by Arnold Stein, *Answerable Style*, p. 157.

24. Coincidentally, the best description I have found of how Sin and Death can degenerate into ever more transparent personifications without losing their absolute historicity is given by A. C. Charity in *Eveus and Their Afterlife*. Charity is talking about the state of the damned in Dante's *Inferno*, but what he says is equally true of Sin and Death (and of Milton's Satan): "The situation of the soul is . . . recognizable as a translation into objective terms of the *habitus* and leading propensity of the soul in its earthly life: there, this *habitus* was hidden; here, it is revealed. There, the judgements and decisions of earthly existence became, through their repetition, the formative habits of their human subject, through which he committed himself to his personal kind of existence—his *habitus* becoming the invisible axis of his self-

But they never cease to be real, physical, historical creatures: Death is "not mounted yet / On his pale Horse" (x.589-90; my italics), but he will be someday. Although Milton often used allegory for homiletic purposes, it was not for him a legitimate mode of exegesis: he believed in the absolute historicity of the Bible and of his own poem. Even when most mystical—as when he says of the steps leading up to Heaven, "Each Stair mysteriously was meant" (iii.516)—or most transcendent—as when he describes the Gate of Heaven as "inimitable on Earth / By Model, or by shading Pencil drawn" (iii.508-09)—Milton never compromises the historicity of the mysterious or the inimitable. Nor does he try to pluck out mystery's heart by ingenious figurative interpretations. All we know of the mysterious Stairs to Heaven—all we need to know—is that they are let down either to tempt or aggravate Satan (ll. 523-25).²⁵

Certainly not every passage in Milton can be read literally (e.g., the invocation to *Paradise Regained*, which speaks of "Eden rais'd in the waste Wilderness" [l.7], meaning a paradise within). Certainly Milton was aware of the danger of excessive literalness; he knew that "the letter killeth," and he relegates to a literal Paradise of Fools those "who to be sure of Paradise / Dying put on the weeds of *Dominic*, / Or in *Franciscan* think to pass disguis'd" (iii.478-80). This is to be not literal but literal-minded: Milton is mocking foolish deathbed "converts" who think to sneak into Heaven, hidden by their newly acquired "weeds" from "the Eye / Of God All-seeing" (x.5-6). Yet his scornful repudiation of their literal-mindedness (they act as if clothes literally "made the man") is not an attack on the idea that the literal level of a text should be accepted *prima facie* as history. The man who described poetry "as being less subtle and fine, but more simple, sensuous and passionate" than logic and rhetoric (*Of Education*, II, 403), and who pauses to note that Raphael really does eat a meal with Adam, not "seemingly / . . . nor in mist, the common gloss / Of Theologians"

hood around which all his actions and sayings revolved. Here, in the soul's eschatological situation, on the other hand, the *axial habitus* has become visible, and its speech and actions can now more easily reveal their relationship to it. The soul's context provides a clue that was not accessible in life, and in its light we . . . may be able to see . . . a degree of self-revelation which approaches self-definition" (pp. 192-93).

25. Our relationship to the Stairs parallels that of Adam and Eve to the enigmatic curse put on the Serpent. Of the apparent injustice of the curse, and of their ignorance of its meaning, Milton writes (deliberately begging the question): "more to know / Concern'd the first Man (since he no further knew)" (x.169-70). Here the parenthesis subverts the logical progress of the larger unit in which it occurs, forcing the reader (and the biblical exegete) to accept the curse for what Genesis implies it to be: an inexplicable (but divine and therefore just) fiat.

(v.434-36), and whose angels engage in sexual intercourse (viii.622-29) would hardly think of Sin and Death as mere imaginative embodiments of a moral truth.

Instead, Milton enfleshes an allegorical skeleton in ways that imply the relative inadequacy of James's New Testament account. To assist him he turns not only to Ovid, but also to Hesiod, in whose *Theogony* "Zeus himself gave birth from his own head to bright-eyed Tritogeneia [i.e., Athena], the awful, the strife-stirring, the host-leader, the unwearrying, the queen, who delights in tumults and wars and battles."²⁶ The Greek poet provides Milton with some crucial, nonbiblical information about the birth of Sin, namely, that it is cephalic. In addition to presenting his own narrative as the absolutely authoritative version of the incident, Milton reconstructs the major steps by which the Greek distortion of it came to be, so that *Paradise Lost* includes a complete *apparatus criticus* for a Christian Renaissance reading of Athena. It is to that reconstruction that I now turn.

II

When, at the beginning of his account of the War in Heaven, Raphael describes the motives of Satan's rebellion, his language suggests that the envy and pride which possess the Devil are sexually generative. As a direct consequence of their influence we find him "*conceiving*" "Deep malice . . . and disdain" (v.666; my italics). The Devil conceives privately, parthenogenetically, and quite literally; he gives birth to Sin a short while later, though the details of her birth are given not by Raphael, but by Sin herself in Book II.

When Satan meets Sin and Death at the Gates of Hell, he does not recognize them as his own offspring, so Sin refreshes his memory:

Hast thou forgot me then, and do I seem
Now in thine eye so foul, once deem'd so fair
In Heav'n, when at th' Assembly, and in sight
Of all the Seraphim with thee combin'd
In bold conspiracy against Heav'n's King,
All on a sudden miserably pain
Surpris'd thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum
In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast
Threw forth, till on the left side opening wide,
Likest to thee in shape and countenance bright,

26. Hesiod, *The Theogony*, ll. 924-26; in Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns, and Homeric Hymns*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (1914; rpt. Cambridge, Mass., 1970). All citations of Hesiod's poetry will be to this edition.

Then shining heav'nly fair, a Goddess arm'd
 Out of thy head I sprung: amazement seiz'd
 All th' Host of Heav'n; back they recoil'd afraid
 At first, and call'd me *Sim*, and for a Sign
 Portentous held me; but familiar grown,
 I pleas'd, and with attractive graces won
 The most averse, thee chiefly. . . . (ll. 747-63)

These lines describe the only cephalic birth in cosmic history²⁷ and (literally) incarnate a moral truth without which Milton's theodicy would dissolve in mist: the fallen angels "by their own suggestion fell, / Self-tempted, self-deprav'd" (ll. 129-30); the *parthenogenetic* birth of Sin from the head of Satan supports the paradoxical doctrine concretely. Milton represents the happening imaginatively by alluding to the myth of the birth of Athena from the head of Zeus in Hesiod's *Theogony*.

In the *Theogony* the account of her birth initiates a long catalogue celebrating the august and manifold sexual activities of Zeus, by which the god finally stabilizes the cosmos and actualizes its potentialities. Metis is the first of his consorts, and Athena is the child of their union. There are two phases to her genesis:

Now Zeus, king of the gods, made Metis his wife first, and she was wisest among gods and mortal men. But when she was about to bring forth the goddess bright-eyed Athena, Zeus craftily deceived her with cunning words and put her in his own belly, as Gaia and starry Ouranos advised. For they advised him so, to the end that no other should hold royal sway over the eternal gods in place of Zeus; for very wise children were destined to be born of her, first the maiden bright-eyed Tritogeneia [Athena], equal to her father in strength and in wise understanding; but afterwards she was to bear a son of overbearing spirit, king of the gods and men. But Zeus put her into his own belly first, that the goddess might devise for him both good and evil. (ll. 886-900)

And again:

But Zeus himself gave birth from his own head to bright-eyed Tritogeneia, the awful, the strife-stirring, the host leader, the unwearied, the queen, who delights in tumults and wars and battles. . . . But Zeus lay with the fair-cheeked daughter of Okeanos and Tethys apart from Hera, . . . deceiving Metis although she was full wise. But he seized her with his hands and put her in his belly, for fear that she might bring forth something stronger than his thunderbolt: therefore did Zeus, who sits on high and dwells in the aether, swallow her down suddenly. But she straightaway conceived Pallas Athena: and the father of men and gods gave her birth by way of his head on the banks of the river Triton. And she remained hidden beneath the inward parts of Zeus, even Metis, Athena's mother,

²⁷ Although theologians imagined the begetting of the Son as the procession of the Word of God by way of the intellect (and therefore as in some sense cephalic), Milton is silent in *Paradise Lost* about the Son's literal generation.

worker of righteousness, who was wiser than gods and mortal men. There [Athena] re-ceived that whereby she excelled in strength all the deathless ones who dwell in Olympus. (ll. 924-26; 929e-929f)

These passages express mythically the final consolidation of Zeus's autonomy in the divine cosmos. The first offspring of the god's first consort was destined to equal her father in strength and wisdom; even worse from Zeus's perspective, Metis was to bear a second child, a son who would one day overthrow his father's monarchy. By swallowing (i.e., assimilating) Metis (counsel) Zeus obviates any possibility of these events' coming to pass. No rebellion can occur once he has gained firm control over both Metis and Athena. Further, by swallowing his consort, Zeus dramatically confirms the principle of patriarchy, which Hesiod cherishes almost obsessively: the act enables him to give birth to Athena, the goddess of wisdom and war, out of his head; that is, wisdom and military might are established decisively as male prerogatives.

From Hesiod's point of view, one ought not to recoil with horror at the violence with which Zeus seizes and swallows Metis. The use of force in this connection is creative, for it allows the god to release cosmic energy while at the same time harnessing it so as to prevent the offspring of his own creativity from rebounding upon himself. "Proliferation is a natural law" in Hesiod, writes Norman O. Brown, and Zeus "proliferates . . . with unparalleled fecundity. His mates include not only goddesses of his own generation, born of Kronos and Rhea, but also goddesses of the older generation: Metis, Themis, Mnemosyne, Eurynome, Leto—the potentialities of the cosmos remain latent until Zeus actualizes them."²⁸

Such, at any rate, is Hesiod's view of the birth of Athena from the head of Zeus. Milton, of course, does not accept this view. His mature opinion of Greek myth resembles that of Justin Martyr and numerous other Christian apologists from late antiquity to the Renaissance who believed heathen mythology to have originated in demonic distortions of Scripture. Writing in the early patristic period, Justin tries to demonstrate that the myths "have been uttered by the influence of the wicked demons, to deceive and lead astray the human race."²⁹ His successor, Athenagoras, admits that the Greek narratives often have a ring of truth about them: "and if something

²⁸ Norman O. Brown, trans., *Hesiod's "Theogony"* (New York, 1953), p. 23.

²⁹ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, gen. eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, American Reprint of the Edinburgh Edition (Buffalo, 1884-86), I, 181. Hereafter this compendium will be referred to as ANF.

has been said by the poets, . . . be not surprised at this: worldly wisdom and divine differ as much from each other as truth and plausibility: the one is of heaven and the other of earth: and indeed, according to the prince of matter,—we know we oft speak lies that look like truths.’³⁰

Athenagoras focuses on the pernicious plausibility of Greek myth, attributing it to Satan, “the prince of matter” (and the father of lies). The view is absolutely commonplace, and I cite Athenagoras only because his proof-text is the *Theogony*, in which the Heliconian Muses, daughters of Zeus, teach the shepherd Hesiod glorious songs. Hesiod claims the Muses to have said “Shepherds of the wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bellies, we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things” (ll. 26–28). Athenagoras claims, however, that Satan, not the Muses, inspired Hesiod, and he implies that the *Theogony* illustrates the Devil’s capacity to tell lies that sound like the truth (but not the truth: Athenagoras carefully omits Hesiod’s “we know, when we will, to utter true things” [l. 28] from his argument).

Milton substantially agrees with the patristic repudiation of Hesiod. Christ’s rejection of Greek oracles in *Paradise Regained*—he says that Satan’s “craft” is always “By mixing somewhat true to vent more lies” (l. 432–33)—exactly parallels Athenagoras’ notion of plausibility, and Milton frequently alludes in *Paradise Lost* to the diabolical authorship of the Greek myths. He would argue with his predecessors only in their interpretation of particulars, including their reading of Zeus’s unparalleled sexual fecundity.

Justin, for example, believes that many of the Greek hierogamies were written by devils who eavesdropped on the prophets and invented the myths to discredit Christ. Especially with respect to the begetting of god-men like Bacchus and Heracles, Justin interprets these narratives as diabolic parodies of prophecies concerning the divine paternity of Jesus.³¹ Milton probably accepted this reading as far as it goes (Heracles is a “type” of Christ in the “Nativity Ode,” “The Passion,” and *Paradise Regained*), but, as we shall see, he does not interpret the conception and birth of Athena Christologically. Justin does, although he sees the myth as looking back to the creation of the world rather than ahead to the Incarnation. In the *First Apology* he writes, “[the devils] craftily feigned that Minerva [Athena] was the daughter of Jupiter, not by sexual union, but knowing that God

30. Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians*, ANF, II, 142.

31. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ANF, I, 233.

conceived and made the world by the Word, they say that Minerva is the first conception; which we consider to be very absurd, bringing forward the form of the conception in a female shape” (ANF, I, 185). Justin traces the origin of Hesiod’s account to a deliberate diabolic distortion of the conception of the world by the Word of God, and he repudiates that account by pointing to the absurdity of drawing a parallel between the *male* Word and the *female* Athena. To the patristic exegete, Hesiod’s essential error is transvestism!

Like Justin, Milton repudiates Hesiod, but not on account of Athena’s sex. For him the myth has a quite different origin from what Justin suggests. He does not believe Hesiod’s account to have arisen in the first place as a distortion of the conception of the world by the Word. Milton alludes to it in a context which *preceded* the creation of the cosmos. In fact Milton does not believe the myth to have arisen as a distortion of anything in Scripture. By using it to describe an event (the birth of Sin) alluded to only in St. James (and there only cryptically), Milton implies the nonbiblical origin of the myth: Hesiod could not have been aware of the Jamesian allegory, since he wrote long before the New Testament.

Milton does believe Hesiod’s account to be a distortion of the actual conception and birth of Sin, which Milton narrates authoritatively in *Paradise Lost*. Hesiod is telling a *true* story; but under the influence of Satan (his Muse) he has gotten the details confused. In *Paradise Lost*, Satan refuses to worship the newly exalted Son of God, thereby arrogating divine prerogatives to himself (“swallowing” wisdom) and conceiving Sin. These facts he transforms into Hesiod’s account of the seizure of Metis (divine counsel) and the conception and birth of Athena (wisdom). The Devil’s motives are not difficult to figure: wishing to enhance his own image among the Gentiles, he transforms the account of his own rebellion into a veritable hierogamy. He becomes God (Zeus), Sin becomes wisdom (Athena), and a blasphemous but plausible myth emerges. Justin Martyr recognized the blasphemy but was wrong about its origin. He should have followed the lead provided by St. James, whose allegory of lust, sin, and death is quite close to a Miltonic reading of the myth. Perhaps James had derived his allegory from Hesiod (guided, of course, by the Holy Spirit), thus initiating a process of myth reconstruction, a process brought up to date by Milton (likewise under the illumination of the Spirit).

The most significant corollary to this reading is that Hesiod had access, albeit distorted access, to the history of a highly significant cosmic event about which the Old Testament is silent. Nor could Hesiod have derived

his narrative of Athena from an Adamic oral tradition about the birth of Sin. If one assumes Milton's account to be authoritative, Adam knows nothing about Sin's cephalic parthenogenesis. Raphael hints at it (stating that Satan conceived malice and disdain), yet the angel did not witness the birth, and his narrative of the War in Heaven suggests his ignorance of the details. According to Raphael, "Satan first knew pain" (vi.327) when "the sword / of Michael" (ll. 320-21) smote him on the first day of battle. According to Sin, however, "All on a sudden miserable pain / Surpris'd" (ii.752-53) her father at her birth, which clearly antedated the War in Heaven. Had Raphael been acquainted with the natal facts, he would not have spoken otherwise.³²

Raphael's ignorance of the painful birth of Sin establishes the satanic authorship of Athena's birth in the *Theogony*. Hesiod's redaction therefore becomes a persuasive illustration of how selected Greek myths constitute the Devil's (prevaricated) autobiography. In the present instance not only has Satan passed himself off as a deity; also, by inspiring Hesiod to substitute the word "Athena" where "Sin" belongs, he has foisted on the heathen an account the horrifying implication of which is that *to beget* (i.e., commit) *sin is not sin but wisdom*.

Equally important, Hesiod's account errs by ignoring the Christian belief that the wages of sin is chaos and death. Whereas the birth of Sin precedes the chaotic War in Heaven, occasions Sin's incestuous union with Satan (ii.763-67), and issues finally in the birth of Death (ll. 777-89), the birth of Athena follows the Titanomachia, generates peace and stability, and produces no offspring, incestuous or otherwise. Hesiod never mentions a subsequent assignation between Athena (i.e., Sin) and Zeus (i.e., Satan). The Greek goddess of wisdom and war is a virgin, and it is not hard to see why. By making her a virgin, Satan denies, in effect, that Death exists in the cosmos as the inescapable consequence of moral turpitude. (In the *Theogony* Chaos sires Night [l. 123] who sires Death [l. 212]; in Hesiod Death operates as a natural law, not as a consequence of sin.) This denial notwithstanding, the true Christian relationship between Sin and Death is stated when Sin tells her son: "Death from Sin no power can

32. I am aware of an alternate reading of this inconsistency between Raphael's and Sin's accounts (i.e., Sin is lying). Yet Satan's headache undoubtedly preceded his battle wound: were Sin wont to lie about the details of her own birth, she would have better served her progenitor (and therefore herself) by omitting the detail about his parturitional agony, which is after all "miserable" rather than glorious. (Sin's veracity is further attested when she bears witness against her father by characterizing his defeat in the War in Heaven as a complete "rou" [ii.767-71].)

separate" (PL x.251). Of this profound truth the Greeks were (to their eternal sorrow) unaware.

Satan's credentials for inspiring such lies as vitiate Hesiod's myth of Athena are formidable indeed. With respect to his metamorphosis of his own Sin into Zeus's Wisdom, the Greeks were by no means the first humans to be so deceived. *Paradise Lost* depicts Eve as the victim of a similar distortion. When the Devil first hears of the injunction not to eat the Fruit, he deliberately misinterprets the prohibition as a repressive instrument designed to keep Adam and Eve ignorant (iv.512-27). By taking the nomenclature of the Tree of Knowledge literally, he is led to ask (with mock incredulity): "can it be sin to know, / Can it be death?" (ll. 517-18). On this "foundation" (l. 521) he builds the ruin of Eve, first by claiming to have gotten wise himself by eating the Fruit (ix.571-612), then by calling the Tree a "Sacred, Wise, and Wisdom-giving Plant, / Mother of Science" (ll. 679-80), and finally by telling Eve that the day she and Adam eat of the Tree "ye shall be as Gods / Knowing both Good and Evil" (ll. 708-09). In a word, the Devil transforms sin into wisdom—as, incidentally, does Comus when he urges the lady to "Be wise, and taste" (*A Mask*, l. 813). Eve readily accepts what is after all a very persuasive argument. When she speaks of the Tree as bearing "Fruit Divine" (l. 776) "Of virtue to make wise" (l. 778), thus acknowledging her conviction that sin is not sin but wisdom, she consummates the paradigmatic deception in reiterating which Satan will later likewise deceive the Greeks. The temptation and fall of Eve become, as it were, the "trying out" of the onomastics of "Athena." (Indeed, when Hesiod's myth is thus contextualized, it becomes obvious that the detail in the *Theogony* about Zeus's attainment of wisdom by swallowing Metis has as its prototype the eating of the forbidden Fruit.) And finally, the Greek poet's failure to link Athena (i.e., Sin) with Death is explained as an implicit reiteration of Satan's exhortation to Eve: "Queen of this Universe, do not believe / Those rigid threats of Death; ye shall not Die" (ix.684-85).

It must be apparent by now that Milton's expropriation of Hesiodic material, so far from being a mere literary debt, constitutes rather an *ap-puratus criticus* for a Christian Renaissance reading of Greek myth. In this instance, by putting Hesiod's Zeus and Athena back into their primordial context, in which they have not "yet among the Sons of *Eve* / Got them new Names" (i.364-65), the poet is able to recount a mythic incident without any of the pejorative epithets that so often accompany his use of classical materials. The falsehood in Hesiod is revealed only by the context

in which Milton uses him. It is one more instance of God's bringing good (*Paradise Lost*) out of evil (the *Theogony*). Hesiodic mythology thus serves as an important auxiliary to the articulation of the Christian cosmos.

III

As a young poet Milton was probably not very seriously interested in Hesiod's cosmogony,³³ and there is evidence that he was first attracted to Athena as an allegory of chastity rather than as the daughter of Satan-Zeus. By way of emphasizing the power of chastity, the elder brother of Milton's *Mask* offers an allegorical exegesis of Minerva (Athena) and her shield:

What was that snakey-headed Gorgon shield
That wise *Minerva* wore, unconquer'd Virgin,
Wherewith she freez'd her foes to congeal'd stone,
But rigid looks of Chaste austerity
And noble grace that dash't brute violence
With sudden adoration and blank awe? (ll. 447-52)

There is a certain irony in the brother's vehemence, since later his quite chaste sister will herself be restrained by "an enchanted Chair" and threatened with being transformed to alabaster by the power of Comus' wand (ll. 659-62); nevertheless, the lady does indeed dash the brute violence of Comus (ll. 244-65) by her mere presence, and she expands and refines her brother's analysis of Minerva's shield when she points out that Comus can "not touch the freedom of [her] mind" (l. 663), thus suggesting the "true" allegorical interpretation of the myth.

The poet of *Paradise Lost* rejected allegoresis, however, insisting instead upon the absolute (though distorted) historicity of the Greek myths. At the same time, as Kerrigan points out in *The Prophetic Milton*, he claimed for himself a "higher inspiration than Moses," and he intended his epic "to be a document superior to a portion of Holy Scripture" (p. 129). He was never cavalier in the enterprise of expanding the Bible; when he is not cer-

33. Milton alludes frequently—but only in jest—to Hesiod's cosmogony in his first prologue, "Whether Day or Night Is the More Excellent." He mentions Hesiod—but in noncosmological terms—in prologue seven, "Learning Makes Men Happier Than Ignorance." The syllabus for his proposed academy in *Of Education* includes Hesiod—but the ethical *Works and Days* rather than the *Theogony*. Milton's earliest apparent repudiation of Hesiod's cosmological pretensions (and therefore the earliest indication of his taking those pretensions seriously) may be in *The Reason of Church Government*. In the Introduction to Book II, Milton rejects Hesiod's Mnemosyne and her daughters, the nine Muses, preferring of course the Holy Spirit.

tain whether his elaborations are authoritative, he admits as much. Thus in *Paradise Regained* he says of Christ's fast:

Full forty days he pass'd, whether on hill
Sometimes, anon in shady vale, each night
Under the covert of some ancient Oak,
Or Cedar, to defend him from the dew,
Or harbor'd in one Cave, is not reveal'd. (l. 303-07)

Similarly, in *Paradise Lost*, Raphael refuses to resolve the Ptolemaic-Copernican controversy (viii.66-178). Milton is uncertain about whether Eurynome is really a pagan distortion of Eve (x.578-84), and he refuses to say whether the major alterations in the physical cosmos after the Fall are effected by tilting the earth's axis or by changing the course of the sun (x.668-78). Since Milton's characteristic practice is to provide (without comment) numerous details "not reveal'd" in the Bible, his hesitancy in the four places just cited can only mean that in *these instances* his Muse has not settled speculative questions for him. In *these instances* he has been left to his own imagination and therefore cannot speak authoritatively. In other instances he can and does.

Milton's rejection of allegoresis and his dependence upon inspiration encouraged him boldly to appropriate Greek myths and to place them in new contexts with a precision not always recognized. The birth of Sin is one of a number of events in *Paradise Lost* which not only criticize Greek myths but also show how the myths came to be written. Milton uses several Hesiodic motifs in ways not unlike his use of Athena. These include the narrative of Epimetheus and Pandora, the Titanomachia, the Promethean theft of fire (in Hesiod and in Aeschylus), and the myth of divine succession in the *Theogony*.³⁴ Milton seems to have been particularly interested in the poet who—perhaps more than any other Greek—knew how to tell lies that sounded like the truth. His narrative of Sin and Death attests to that interest. It also attests to the historicity of these personifications, who are—to end with the words of Satan with which I began—both real and allegoric.³⁵

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34. For a study of these motifs see my "Paradise Lost and the Promethean Tradition," Diss. University of Massachusetts, 1972.

35. In addition to others already mentioned, I wish to thank for their valued assistance my colleagues Halden Braddy and Robert Bledsoe; and I am especially grateful to Professor John James Teunissen, who taught me much of what I know about Milton.