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Why God, Why? A Defense of the Contradictory God in Paradise

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Essay by Amber Rambharose

"Why God, Why? A Defense of the Contradictory God in Paradise"

I wrote this essay for a class I was terrified to sign up for. It was geared toward fourth and third year students, one of whom I spoke to and who had told me the course was monstrously difficult, culminating in a term paper that would challenge me in every sense of the word. She said that the class would change the way I viewed literature and the way I responded to it. So of course, I went to the Professor and begged her to let me into English 335, a seminar on John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The paper I have submitted is the culmination of an entire semester's worth of research. The assignment was to write a paper surrounding an original paradox driven thesis, which is a monumental task, seeing as scholars have been analyzing the paradoxes in Milton's epic poem for centuries. I had never written a paradox driven thesis before so I formed a vague idea in my mind (Satan as a misunderstood, romantic hero, the Byron of Heaven and Hell) and started out flying by the seat of my pants to the library and checking out all the books I could find on the subject of Satan in *Paradise Lost*. I read most of them too. However, the arguments I found therein were mild and repeated themselves between volumes so I switched mediums and started browsing through internet databases, which is where I found the key to the paradox problem. I relied heavily upon Project Muse and, using its advanced search option, searched every conceivable combination of words like Satan, Hero, God, Tyrant...the list went on and on. By narrowing my searches through the tombs of literary analysis I uncovered a remarkable wealth of information. The academic articles I found had something else that turned out to be exceedingly useful, and, I confess I still turn to today: extensive bibliographies. I returned my first stack of books and checked out (and put in quite a far amount of interlibrary loan requests on) the books which the articles that best supported my arguments had referenced. Using this method I could trace a single idea through generations and reading the works of scholars from so many time periods (I referenced work from the 1940's up until present day) changed the way I viewed literary analysis, *Paradise Lost* and Satan. Having access to so many different academic works helped me find my paradox. My research paper itself is mainly theoretical but my annotated bibliography shows the range of sources and the breadth of the research I completed for the project. Now, I confess, I rush to Project Muse when I have an assignment, because it makes it easy to pinpoint a specific topic and through that process, open the floodgates to other ideas. By the time I turned in my research paper I had done a complete 180 and written a paper that denounced Satan and instead sympathized with Milton's God, who, despite being in the right, is ever a contradiction.

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Final Paper

Why God, Why?

A Defense of the Contradictory God in *Paradise*

Throughout the history of Miltonic studies, scholars have waged war on the subject of God in *Paradise Lost*. One reader might come away from the poem believing that God is a just enforcer of His law and a staunch supporter of Free Will while another may find Him to be a maniacal tyrant. The aura of uncertainty that surrounds God exists because He appears to be a contradictory character. This contradiction is both intentional and necessary. By using conflicting dialect and syntax, Milton presents the reader with two out of innumerable aspects of a being so vast in every sense that He exceeds the realm of our understanding. Without contradictions, Milton would be unable to corporealize the intangible logic of the Divine, and *Paradise Lost* would have no God. As an added layer of genius and complexity, Milton illustrates *Paradise Lost* with two conflicting Gods whom the reader can define in the simplest of terms. God is either the forgiving and nurturing Father or the ruthless tyrant, one of two one dimensional characters. When placed alongside each other these two flat characters present the reader with a single more complex character, closer to the true incomprehensible deity, made clear by clear contradictions.

In Book III of *Paradise Lost*, God rages and muses in his stately palace, at times condemning his creations and gently forgiving their trespasses moments later. He “sits/high throned above all heighth bent down His eye/His own works and their works at once to view” (III, 57-9), and speaking to the angels about the hand that He and the Son will play in the Fall of Man. It is in this speech that God most clearly appears as a contradiction and is presented as two conflicting characters who differ from each other in language and voice . The tyrannical God speaks with contempt for Mankind in a passionate voice. The just God speaks in a much more centered and level headed manner; sounding more like a diplomat than a monarch with His hands full of rebellious creations. The speech starts off in a menacing manner with God speaking of Mankind’s temptation with thinly-veiled disgust. He spits out swift statements with little poetic ornamentation which quickly pick up cadence and intensity until he outright insults mankind. Man Will will/easily transgress the sole command/Sole pledge of his obedience. So will fall/Whose fault?/Whose but his own? Ingrate!” (III, 93-97). Afterwards this passionate diatribe however, God cools his language and lengthens his lines. He calmly explains to the angels with the peaceable and diplomatic language that indicates his switch to the “just monarch” about the Nature of Free Will. This is the first of the two theological lessons that Milton wished to relay to the reader through God’s speech. In the following lines Milton’s God denies the existence of predestination and states with indisputable clarity that Man is responsible for his own Fall:

What pleasure I from such obedience paid
 When will and reason, reason also is choice
 Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,

Made passive both, had served necessity,
 Not me? They therefore, as to right belonged,
 So were created, nor can justly accuse
 Their Maker or their making or their fate,
 As if predestination overruled
 Their will disposed by absolute decree
 Or high foreknowledge. They themselves decreed
 Their own revolt, not I. If I foreknew
 Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault
 Which has no less proved certain unforeknown. (III, 107-119)

In this passage God is portrayed as a Creator who would reap no benefit from the blind adoration of his creations. He explicitly states that to do so would be an act of vanity and there would in fact be no point in creating Man at all, if the entirety of the race bent to his every whim. He explains that he has given man the freedom of Free Will but with free will comes the responsibility for actions, and therefore the responsibility for the Fall. God also speaks out against the Calvinist idea of predestination, using language that the just God often employs, making his speeches from this standpoint sound half theological lesson and half historical documentation. Because of the nature of these sections of the speech the word “decree” often arises, implying fact and proclamation as opposed to opinion. The lines “Their will disposed by absolute decree...They themselves decreed their own revolt, not I.” (III, 116-118) leave no doubt in the reader’s mind that God, despite being omnipotent did not cause the Fall and that Man’s bitter fate lay within his own hands. Here He uses analytical and gentle language that can now be associated with

the benevolent God. The just monarch speaks with less passion than God the tyrant and more reason in his voice. He seems to speak of the Fall as historical fact, instead of giving his opinion. He speaks of decrees rather than what He Himself may be experiencing on a level outside of analytical thinking and although He does not allow questioning of His decrees, God sets his words in stone serenely.

In clear and intentional opposition of this calm presence, God the tyrant again appears to curse Mankind and teeter on the edge of depravity. In place of clear explanation as evidence of his omnipotence, He infuses his following section of the speech with wrath, punctuated by impassioned repetition of certain words and violent language, as shown in lines 198-201 of Book III. These four lines are very aggressive and unsettling, includes a slant rhyming couplet that add to the sense of a God unhinged and ranting:

This is my long suff'rance and my day of grace
 They who neglect and scorn shall never taste
 But hard be hardened, blind be blinded more,
 That they may stumble on and deeper fall (III, 98-201)

God is speaking of those among Men who would scorn Him and He speaks of them with great contempt. Although stating that He will offer them salvation, speaking of “my day of grace” (III, 198), He is quick to point out that He will wash His hands of them and let them “stumble and deeper fall” (III, 201) if they should refuse Him. These lines imply that God demands acceptance and forsakes those who act in opposition to him. The grating language and voice used here does not lend itself to a God whose “mercy first and last shall brightest shine” (III, 134). While the syntax does appear to be tighter than that

of the just God, with its rhyming of the words “grace/taste” (III, 98-9) and consistent iambic pentameter, the orderly fashion with which the speech is executed adds to its foreboding nature. This vengeful God is very much unlike the just God in his approach to Mankind’s transgressions. Where the just God looks for ways to bring Mankind back to a prelapsarian state, such as sacrificing His own Son, the tyrant attacks. While the just God forgives, the tyrant condemns.

The reader may reach this end of this oration in a state of puzzlement and frustration at the obvious discrepancies in God’s character and the sense of chaos that accompanies a speech with two clearly conflicting viewpoints. However, what appears to be chaos shifts into order when Milton’s personal, published views on God and His relationship with humanity is closely examined. The master poet believed in a God whose logic surpassed the simplistic, linear logic that Man employs and wrote about it in his *Christian Doctrine*. In order to solve problems, reach conclusions and learn, human beings need to study the process of cause and effect and test theories. Our logic is impeded by our irrevocable tie to emotions. Beings whose choices and opinions are consistently influenced by emotion, are not immediately able to comprehend a being whose vision is clear of this fog of feelings.

Milton’s God is omnipotent and is neither hampered by these methods of discovery or hobbled by the chains of human emotion . He is all knowing: there is nothing for him to discover. There are no gaps or narrow points of learning influenced or slowed by time and methodology when it comes to God’s understanding. His logic is circular, everything is connected to everything else and he can pluck from time and space, at his choosing anything he wishes to know. As temporal, sometimes fickle

creatures, God's intellect, exempt from all of these human flaws exists in a form inconceivable to us. Therefore, it only makes sense for readers to be perplexed by the God that Milton presents. Milton acknowledges this flaw in human understanding in his writing, stating "It is better therefore to contemplate the Deity and to conceive of him, not with reference to human passions, that is, after the manner of men, who are never weary of forming subtle imaginations respecting him" (*Christian Doctrine*).

With this statement Milton proves that he was very aware of the difference between the logic of Mankind and God. By showing the reader two aspects of God: the vengeful and the merciful; Milton is presenting the reader with a universal character and a God that corrects the wrong opinions the reader may have in respect to His nature. God's contradictory nature is a product of the reader's attempting to fit God into a box that could never contain him, a box in which He must be one character or the other. When reading God's speech in Book III of *Paradise Lost* the reader is viewing two sides of a many sided figure and having been exposed only to limited information cannot accurately form the idea of the shape's figure in his mind. Not only do we only have two pieces of the puzzle that is God, but the pieces do not fit. None-the-less, as humans, we attempt to solve the puzzle in it's entirety and the inevitable result is that we cannot make heads or tails of the full image of God.

Milton addresses this conflict and continues to stress the difference between human logic and the logic of the Divine and the importance of not imposing these flaws onto the concept of God in further passages of *The Christian Doctrine*:

When we speak of knowing God, it must be understood with reference to the imperfect comprehension of man; for to know God as he is really is, far

transcends the powers of man's thoughts much more of his perception. God therefore has made as full a revelation of himself as our minds can conceive or the weakness of our nature bear. ("The Christian Doctrine")

This passage supports the theory that Milton provided readers of *Paradise Lost* with such a starkly contrasting Gods so that they can clearly distinguish between the two and grasp the contradiction. Had Milton given the reader two Gods who behaved and spoke more similarly the contradiction might have become lost in the ambiguous language and his goal of providing the reader with an accurate representation of the truest God that his mind can grasp, would have failed.

While it is important to understand Milton's views on the problem of Man's flawed capacity to understand God, in order to fully appreciate the contradiction that the poet has provided us with, it is important to step away from the text and consider the definition of the word "contradiction", itself. The noun contradiction has two definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary and both of them can be interpreted as supporting the theory that a contradiction can be positive. The first definition of the word contradiction defines the word as a noun: "a combination of statements, ideas, or features of a situation that are opposed to one another" ("contradiction noun" OED). The second is "a person or situation in which inconsistent elements are present" ("contradiction noun" OED). Both of these definitions can be applied to God and His speech in Book III of *Paradise Lost*.

The first definition applies to God's speech instead of God of himself. God is clearly full of "opposing ideas, statements and features" however, the word again remains free of negative connotations and again provides the reader with more than one viewpoint to consider and thus learn from. The second definition can be connected to the idea that

God is capable of being a contradiction; however there is no negative connotation. Instead it focuses on “inconsistency” which is true to Milton’s God. Yes, he is inconsistent, but no, he is not negatively impacted by this inconsistency. Instead it allows readers to see more than one side of the God’s being, expanding their horizons and realizing truths that they might not ordinarily be exposed to. A secondary reason why Milton might present a God that is himself a contradiction is also suited for the second definition of the word. Since God’s logic is in opposition to man’s logic perhaps Milton viewed the only way to accurately define it would be to present it as just that, opposite to man’s logic. A man, while capable of being both just and tyrannical often times favors one or the other. Milton presented a God that is both because it is the opposite of what a man would be, therefore making God and man opposites would most accurately present God’s logic.

Beyond the trenches of the analytical battle regarding God in *Paradise Lost*, some literary scholars over time have accepting the presence of these conflicting Gods. Stanley Fish, an esteemed Milton scholar, argues such a theory in his book Surprised by Sin. In response to the tumult of negative criticism of Milton’s God Fish finds flaws in the reader rather than the deity. He writes:

To God belongs the essence of speech, the completeness, the logical perfection, the perfect accuracy of its perceptions; all else is the reader’s, the harshness, the sense of irritation, the querulousness. If we find it unsatisfactory the fault (quite literally) is ours. (86)

It can be gleaned from this statement that Fish supports the theory that Man’s logic is flawed and therefore our understanding of God is incomplete. His answer to the

contradictory nature of God in *Paradise Lost* rests on the shoulders of the reader but with a focus on the reader's shortcomings rather than our ability to reach an understanding of God through acceptance and understanding of God's contradictory nature.

He speaks of the reader's "harshness...sense of irritation...querulousness" (86). All of these are emotional faults, as opposed to innate intellectual limitations. Fish believes that the reader cannot reach an understanding of God at all, and is bound to a level of misunderstanding from which there is no escape. However, Stanley Fish also acknowledges Milton's attempt to express the nature of God in the clearest possible sense, recognizing that the poet would have to reach outside of the realm of a one-dimensional character. He does not explicitly mention the use of contradiction but he gives a nod to the skill with which Milton presents God to the reader:

Only by forcing upon his reader an awareness of his limited perspective can Milton provide even a negative intuition of what another would be like; it is a brilliant solution to the impossible demands of his subject (38)

Fish acknowledges Milton's willingness to admit that he does not know everything about God and that he has allowed the reader to be aware of his own limitations. He also speaks of Milton's way of presenting an opposite of Man's logic to explain God's logic. This statement both supports the theory of the importance of contradiction in order to supplement man's flawed logic and the master poet's willingness to create a form in which the reader could understand God.

If Milton had woven a God into his poem that could be viewed in more than two ways, the entire structure of his intentional opposition could have collapsed. Instead of being more clearly relatable to the reader, God would seem scattered, the very opposite of

the focused God that Milton believed in. Removing one of the aspects of God's personality would serve the poet and the reader poorly, leaving both with a flat, one-dimensional character and another inaccurate representation of the character. Milton picked two aspects of God's character that were vital to the overall understanding of the poem and of God's role in the Fall of Man and did not touch upon others to maintain the highest level of clarity.

A God without contradictions would not be a God at all. He would be an all powerful man sitting on a throne in Heaven, separated from Adam only by several thousand feet of elevation. Without contradictions, Milton's God would be confined to the flat plane of intellect and understanding upon which Mankind is bound and God, by His very nature, transcends.

Works Cited

"contradiction noun" The Oxford Dictionary of English (revised edition). Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford U P, 2005. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford UP. Hollins University. 3 December 2010. www.oxfordreference.com/fintel.roanoke.edu.

Fish, Stanley E. Surprised by Sin. New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1967.

Hamilton Gary D. "Milton's Defensive God: A Reappraisal" Studies in Philology 69. 1 (1972): 87-100.

Milton, John. "Christian Doctrine" Complete Prose Works of John Milton, Ed. Hughes, Merritt. New York: Macmillian P, 1957.

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Ed. Teskey, Gordon. New York: Norton, 2005.

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 Annotated Bibliography

Corruption in the Monarchy of Heaven

For this term paper I am going to focus my research on the problem of God in *Paradise Lost*. Is God a tyrant modeled after the monarchs to whom Milton was so vehemently opposed or is He an all-knowing merciful entity whose wisdom cannot be fathomed by humans in our postlapsarian condition? Two factions of scholars have developed over the centuries since *Paradise Lost*, those who find fault in the reader and those who find fault in God. I am of the opinion that God is a reflection of Milton's faith as well as his political ideals and as a result the character of God in *Paradise Lost* is neither completely flawless nor completely flawed.

Annotated Bibliography

Armstrong, Wilma G. "Punishment, Surveillance, and Discipline in *Paradise Lost*." *Studies in English Literature* 32.1 (1992): 91-109.

This article approaches the God as a tyrant/Satan as a hero situation from an interesting and enlightening perspective. It does not discuss right or wrong but rather explores crime and punishment and how both are enforced and carried out in *Paradise Lost*, not only pertaining to God and Satan but also Adam, Eve and the angels as well. It discusses Milton's religious views and also those of other historical figures such as the philosopher Michael Foucault. This source is particularly useful in my research because it's approach is based in history and philosophy rather than just the text and criticism of *Paradise Lost*.

Berek, Peter. "Plain and Ornate Styles and the Structure of "Paradise Lost." *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 85.2 (1970): 237-246.

A large part of defining who God is as a character comes from analyzing the language used in *Paradise Lost*. It is a common misconception that because his speeches are not as poetic as those of other characters he is a removed and disinterested monarch. This article has been cited many times in other works on *Paradise Lost* that I have encountered and discusses the issue of God's language as well as that of other important figures in *Paradise Lost*. Because it is written in support of God and does not view his lack of poetic speech as a negative, it is vital to include it as a main source of my research in the defense of God.

Bennett, Joan S. "God, Satan and King Charles: Milton's Royal Portraits" *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 92.3 (1977): 441-457.

This article discusses the correlation between the monarchy of King Charles and the behaviors of God in *Paradise Lost*. It supports the theory that God is a tyrant by focusing on the Milton's political standpoints and supports the argument that God is a tyrant.

Empson, William. *Milton's God*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1965

William Empson is brought up whenever an article discusses God as a tyrant, whether that article supports the theory or is attempting to disprove it, as a fervent believer. I believe that Empson's argument that God is a tyrant is the strongest and most eloquent in current publication.

Fish, Stanley E. Surprised by Sin. New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1967

Stanley Fish could be viewed as the opposing force against William Empson. He is a Milton Scholar who believes that the Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* with in intention of recreating the Fall in the readers mind. He is of the opinion that Milton made Satan tempting so that we could lose our faith in God and metaphorically fall, which is possible because we are already fallen. This book is particularly useful because Fish is such a highly esteemed scholar and I feel that this book is the quintessential argument against God as a tyrant. I will build most of my argument in support of God from the concepts and examples he discusses in this book.

Fixler, Michael. Milton and the kingdoms of Heaven. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964

This book discusses the monarchy of Heaven as a whole, not just on God's actions. It is a useful source because it draws on historical and religious sources and does not have a strongly biased single opinion on the problem I am researching.

Hamilton, Gary D. "Milton's Defensive God: A Reappraisal" Studies in Philology 69.1 (1972): 87-100

This article specifically discusses God in Book III of *Paradise Lost* and is helpful because it is focuses on a single section of the poem while still discussing the larger issue of whether or not Milton intended for God to be wise or wicked. It provides historical evidence, particularly information on Calvinism to support the argument that Milton intended God to be a just character. It is specific and yet can be applied to the entirety of the problem I am investigating.

Herman, Peter C. Destabilizing Milton: "Paradise Lost" and the Poetics of Incertitude. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillian, 2005

This book contains essays written about various issues within *Paradise Lost*. All of this essays (save the very last two) focus on the politics in *Paradise Lost* and in Milton's own life. I have found Peter Herman's view on God's role as monarch to be one of the least biased.

Lewis, Clive Staples. A preface to Paradise lost, being the Ballard Matthews lectures, delivered at University College, North Wales, 1941. NY, New York: Oxford University Press: 1943

I had been interested in C.S Lewis's opinion on God in *Paradise Lost* because it is so often referred to in other the other works I have encountered. This book contains the preface that is often cited in other articles and books. Although it discusses *Paradise Lost* as a whole and does not specifically focus on God's role it is a source that can be used in support of the goodness of God.

Revard, Stella Pruce. The War in Heaven: *Paradise Lost* and the Tradition of Satan's Rebellion. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980

This book focuses, as the title suggests more on Satan's role in *Paradise Lost* as opposed to that of God. However it is vital to have at least one source that focuses mainly on Satan in order to prove my point about the role of God.

McMahon, Robert. The Two Poets of *Paradise Lost*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1998.

This book provides support for both sides of the argument about God's role in *Paradise Lost*. It's structure is easy to follow and gives the reader several different versions of what role God might play. It is especially useful because it supports my theory that Milton was conflicted about how to depict God when he was writing *Paradise Lost*.

Other Sources

Danielson, Dennis Richard. Milton's good God: a study in literacy theodicy. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

This book is one that supports the theory of God as a just ruler.

Davies, Stevie. Images of kingship in *Paradise Lost*: Milton's politics and Christian liberty. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983.

This book discussed both politics within *Paradise Lost* and how it connected to a theme within Christianity, a view that I feel will be helpful to have an understanding of.

Frye, Roland Mushat. God, man and Satan; patterns of Christian thought and life in *Paradise Lost*, Pilgri's progress and the great theologians. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960

I do not want my paper to be solely based on scholarly opinions about God and Satan. This book branches out into the Christian religion and I feel that the broadness of its information would help keep my research from being too opinion based.

Lewalski, Barbara Kiefer. "Paradise Lost and Milton's Politics." John Milton: Twentieth-Century Perspectives, Volume 4: *Paradise Lost*. Ed. J. Martin Evans. New York: Routledge, 2003. 213-40.

Many of the articles I have read have cited this essay and I know Barbara Lewalski to be an esteemed Milton scholar so this article will undoubtedly provide more strong analysis for my paper.

Stein, Arnold Sidney. Answerable Style: Essays on *Paradise Lost*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1953.

This book of essays has appeared numerous times in the bibliographies of the books I have read on *Paradise Lost* and I believe that some of the main concepts regarding God's role in the poem stem directly from the essay in this book. Therefore I believe it will play a key role in my research.

Worden, Blair. "Milton's Republicanism and the Tyranny of Heaven," Machiavelli and Republicanism. Ed. Bock, Gisela. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. 226-243.

Because this essay comes from a book that is not focused on *Paradise Lost* I feel that the information will be extremely useful in examining the politics in Heaven.