

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than one thousand words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

Milton's God

To the Editor:

I must ask leave to reaffirm the basic objection to the position of Joan S. Bennett in *God, Satan, and King Charles: Milton's Royal Portraits* (*PMLA*, 92 [1977], 441–57), as otherwise the case may seem to go by default. No one denies that Milton in *Paradise Lost* wanted to be recognized as a Christian; what is maintained is that he found the case for Satan alarmingly strong and wished to present it fully, if only as a warning.

The rebel angels, she says, have a “mistaken faith in sheer, undefined strength,” so, as God has not yet shown his strength, they willfully suppose him to be an impostor. But their opinions are more specific. Probably they were created by an impersonal mysterious being (they appeared all together, knowing nothing of the past, but one of them, they now think, was quick enough to pretend he had created the others). They grant that a personal creator is conceivable, but such a being must satisfy the conditions of Aquinas, which include absolute omnipotence. (He must be built into the structure of the universe, as no creator can be.) Hence, when they have resisted the power of God for two days of battle, they claim to have proved him an impostor, who has no right to order them about. Defeat in battle is a trivial thing compared to this moral victory. Such is the whole point of the speeches of Satan in the first book.

They ought to have realized that he is the true God, says Bennett, because of “the different quality of his strength.” They had “a vision of divinity,” which removed all *their* strength, as soon as the Son appeared. But the text says that innumerable arrows, like eyes, did it—a paralyzing ray, perhaps. There is no suggestion that it had any moral or spiritual effect on them. What we are told is that God deliberately let the good angels fail for two days so as to make them appreciate the unique power he has given to his Son, and also presumably to encourage the rebels in their delusion. When Satan first rises from the burning lake, the poem says, God releases him from his chains that he may “heap on himself damnation”—and of course on mankind too. When

the guard of angels capture Satan in Paradise, God forces them to release their prisoner so that Satan may continue with the temptation. Necessarily it was God's providence that put into Satan's mind the decisive argument for Eve—that God is not really testing her obedience but her courage and the earnestness of her desire for Heaven. And consider, we know that God could have prevented the revolt at the start by proving that he can create, because Satan actually is convinced when Uriel reports having seen God creating the world. The poem sets out to explain why the world is bursting with sin and misery, and the only reason it can find is that God is tirelessly spiteful. He therefore cannot be the metaphysical God of Aquinas, and the heroic rebels were right on the essential point.

As to the political argument, when God presents the Son to the assembled angels he says that any angel who disobeys the Son in any way will be thrown into utter darkness, without hope of redemption. Maybe God only says this to drive Satan into premature action, but it need hardly be called a lie when Satan tells his followers that the Son intends to issue new laws. Apart from the philosophical argument, the rebels feel it would be shameful to submit to God because he has such a bad character, and what we hear from the loyalist angels does little to offset their opinion.

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Satan and Charles I

To the Editor:

By pointing to a number of similarities between the description of Satan in *Paradise Lost* and King Charles I in *Eikonoclastes*, Joan S. Bennett tries to show that Milton was just as hostile toward Satan as he was toward Charles I. Both Satan and Charles, according to Milton, were ambitious for personal glory and both attempted to establish their power by relying on armed might, rather than on the justice of their cause. A revolutionist like Milton could, therefore, attack the revolt of Satan because, according to Bennett, “A true revolution, like that against Charles I in England, challenges, not the force that upholds the ruling power, but the right; valid revo-