

THEOLOGICAL DRAMATICS: TWO CASE STUDIES

by

NATHAN P. GILMOUR

(Under the Direction of Coburn Freer)

ABSTRACT

John Milton and Aemelia Lanyer are poets, social critics, political commentators, and objects of study. They also function, in their narrations of Jesus' Passion, as reflective and creative theologians. Analyzing Lanyer's *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* in terms of contemporary feminist theology and Milton's *Paradise Regained* in terms of historical and contemporary Trinitarian debates, this thesis attempts to locate the art of theological poetry in a larger, dramatic framework. After setting up the investigation in dramatic categories and analyzing the two Jesus-poems, the thesis goes on to investigate literary criticism as a practice and to locate criticism and critics within the larger theological drama.

INDEX WORDS: John Milton, Aemelia Lanyer, Religion and literature, Seventeenth century English poetry, Religion and drama

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DEDICATION

to Mary

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I stopped thinking that multiple page acknowledgment sections were pretentious when I had to limit this one to three pages. The character of human life's dramatic course, scholarly and otherwise, is that no character means much except relative to other (on-stage or off-stage) characters. In this curtain-call-before-the-first-scene-starts, I can only nod to the people who influence me, and only some of them at that. From those unaddressed and those addressed inadequately I can only ask forgiveness.

Each of my committee members, in her or his own way, has proved helpful. Dr. Doyle provided quite a helpful academic introduction to Milton; having been only a hobbyist before, I owe my initiation into the scholarly conversation to him. Dr. Provost stands to offer theological critique of my project, his many years as a Catholic and as a grammarian looming large over my amateurish project and lending it great credibility. Dr. Teague in the classroom allowed me to explore the kinds of large-scale theoretical questions that my theologian's brain and preacher's ambition prefer to tackle, and in my writing she has already provided much help adjusting my theologian's vocabulary and preacher's tendency to polemic so that I might write something and be read in the guild of literary critics. Dr. Freer's help would have been sufficient had he merely invited me to the Fourth International Milton Congress in Pittsburgh; his careful reading through my careless project would have sufficed to make me a better Milton-reader. To list each help would become tedious; suffice it to say that *Dayenu* is a great gift when embodied in a major professor, and I hope to have received it graciously.

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While I toiled on this strange little project, four of us graduate students engaged our own obsessions in hopes that said obsessions would lead to graduate degrees, and once a week, we would bounce ideas off of one another and help each other sharpen our projects. For the hours of hard work and the acres of shared pizza, I owe the thesis group much gratitude. Ben Underwood encouraged me to venture outside my normal style and have some fun with my text and with the poets' (even if "fun" yet remains under-theorized). Casie LeGette brought her considerable background in feminist criticism to bear on my Lanyer chapter, and her formidable intellect has shaped much of the rest of this material. Alex Fitzner in particular has been a friend and confidant these two years at UGA, and our mutual respect and love for Milton made our discussions about agnosticism, Christian theology, and our very different paths even richer. All four of the thesis group members are memorable, but Alex has been singularly unforgettable.

Before I set foot in a college classroom, my parents and brother supplied enough drama to make me realize that our character is not any less than the sum of our relations to other people. Steven and Paula Gilmour insisted that I work my hardest to achieve what I wanted, and before I knew that, they made me work hard anyway. And my little brother Ryan, though he often (rightly) dismisses my impromptu homilies at family gatherings, continues to be a person against whose accomplishments and intellect I define myself. None of you can evade the blame for what I've become, and I lay any laurels accorded to my work at your feet.

Finally, my wife Mary has allowed me to write this humble piece and to pursue the end to which my peculiarities and abilities point. Her financial help is obvious; more important are the conversations, the emotional support, the intimacy, and the sense that she gives me that what I do never occurs in isolation but always has a bearing on the one whom I love most. This thesis, and more importantly this life, owes more to Mary Gilmour than I am capable of articulating now.

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CHAPTER 1: THEOLOGY AS DRAMA

As the rising threat of the Chaldean empire creeps in upon Jerusalem, two prophets begin to speak for YHWH, the God of Judah. The two prophets tell starkly different stories to the people regarding an impending Babylonian invasion. Hannaniah presents the popular message that YHWH will not abandon Mount Zion and thus will keep the people from being conquered; Jeremiah, in retrospect the true prophet, tells the people to prepare for a long exile. Although Jeremiah is right, the people oppose him and eventually, after he and the people flee to Egypt, kill him. Even those who bring the word of YHWH must act as characters in the drama of creation; the Playwright remains hidden (narrators are visible to the post-lapsarian reader or hearer; God is not), only revealing self through messengers and prophets. Every narration involving this invisible God (who also stands as audience and occasionally character) stands to be challenged, and the criteria for a challenge as well as the parties involved are up for debate. Anyone who would speak of God or King or any other reality concerning theology (theology does tend to concern many matters) already stands within a divine-human drama and must deal with other characters.

Whose Theology? Why Drama?

Thus the evil king and the false prophet, both because they stand to use authority to lead people in false paths, are very dangerous characters in the biblical and Protestant traditions. Although God has expectations for speaking and hearing (Jeremiah and Paul and Luther reproach the leaders of their times for threatening to kill a speaker of truth), in the created and fallen world the power of death always leaves evil kings' and prophets' opponents vulnerable. Irrespective of the truth of a prophet's message, that prophet always stands in the way of failure or death because people must believe and usually repent in order to turn away from error and hear the prophet's word. Speaking against such characters can and often does lead to disaster, and, although the coming final judgment and vindication of the faithful does some work negating its sting, the reality nonetheless is that speakers of error often have the power of death over correctors of error.

The category "error" in theology presumes that the people involved in Israel's and the Church's history have some influence over how the tradition moves from place to place and generation to generation. Such influence generates important urgency: although God's grace and power have in the past brought sinful people back from exile, any given generation might be lost if the powers of sin and falsehood secure or retain power. The roles played by a given actor may vary depending on which messenger tells the story, but in the drama of the Church's intellectual life, an antagonist, himself or herself led astray by sins or Sin, teaches doctrines or ways that break the fidelity that God's followers owe to God, and a human intercessor usually has to stop the progression of such unfaithfulness. In geographical metaphors, the once-faithful begin to err from the narrow path that God has lain down. As the movement's momentum increases, a protagonist, whether a defender of the established tradition against heresy or a rebel against the

error that has become tradition, appeals to God's own revelation in order to correct the walk of the erring, to bring them back to the proper path. Thus Jeremiah leads Jerusalem and the Jerusalem exiles from Zionism to ethical Torah-adherence, Jesus leads his contemporary Jews from Pharisaism and violent zealotry to the Way of the Reign of God, and Augustine brings the wandering Pelagians back to the grace of Christ. The story, ever-dynamic, always allows for reform because God's prophets and God the Son appear on earth as reformers; the retelling of the story is the very heart of Israel's and the Church's history.

This wandering and returning action does not go on without its complications; in Jeremiah, the prophet Hannaniah calls Jeremiah a false prophet, and Jeremiah reciprocates. Thus both characters become narrators and messengers even as the narrator of the book of Jeremiah joins the story in the role of the messenger by calling Hannaniah's prophecies false. Because the book takes his name, Jeremiah's prophecy is already more believable to descendent believers, yet in the drama only the clash of Babylon and Jerusalem can decide. In the process of canonization, the faithful, Jew and Christian, had to decide whether this narrator (Jeremiah the book) and its protagonist (Jeremiah the prophet) were true or false messengers, and even in the centuries since, all who have read the book have had to decide how to take the messages and what they might mean at a distance from composition and the events related. Thus even a canonical book, theologically speaking, always speaks with strained authority; the characters involved, the contemporaries and the ancestors and the texts that enter the story in expected and surprising roles, all interact in a shared space; in the interval between Alpha and Omega, all narrators can voice their stories, none of them transcending the larger drama.

Theological discussions often begin with attributive statements and formal creeds. Priests and churches expect adherents to assent to and perhaps repeat verbally certain sentences,

usually concerning the nature of Christ, the Father's character as creator, and the Spirit's presence in the Church. Theologians are the people who explain and sometimes modify the conceptual machinery surrounding the creeds, explaining in the terms of the day what Christ's divinity means or what form or order the Father's creation took. Thus the work of a theologian takes the form of propositions, statements that explain the truth that God reveals.

These kinds of theological sentences stand as logically and chronologically secondary to a divine drama, the interactions of certain characters on the stages of God's creation and believers' shared imagination. Christian doctrine in particular involves the Hebrew God YHWH interacting with a complex world and all the created characters therein in various manners, most decisively in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and most immediately in the Spirit-informed Church. For Christians living in the centuries after the canonization of Scripture, these data always come in the forms of narratives, and often tradition identifies the narrator, only to rename and problematize those narrators as time wears on. Von Balthasar notes that this interaction brings with it certain qualifications on what a person can say about God:

Thus, by entering into contact with the world theatre, the good which takes place in God's action really is affected by the world's ambiguity and remains a hidden good. This good is something *done*: it cannot be contemplated in pure 'aesthetics' nor proved and demonstrated in pure 'logic.'" (*Theo Drama* vol. 1, 19)

Any theology that denies these ambiguities runs the risk of talking about some god other than YHWH. Thus any theological speech-act (written or otherwise) is simultaneously hermeneutic and poetic, crafting new systems from stories handed down.

Theology sometimes comments on the doctrinal articles of creeds, sometimes narrates reality in terms of doctrine, and sometimes makes changes in the terms of formal doctrine itself.

All of these tasks, to greater or lesser extents, derive their subject matter and authority from a shared set of stories. Stories about the one God and God's interactions with all of creation and with the covenant people particularly make up the raw materials from which theologians build systems. In constructing what became the orthodox Trinitarian formulations, bishops and other theologians used these narrative data as boundaries to limit the possible formulations:

Three regulative principles at least were obviously at work. First, there is the monotheistic principle: there is only one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. Second, there is the principle of historical specificity: the stories of Jesus refer to a genuine human being who was born, lived, and died in a particular place. Third, there is the principle of what may be infelicitously called Christological maximalism: every possible importance is to be ascribed to Jesus that is not inconsistent with the first rules. This last rule, it may be noted, follows from the central Christian conviction that Jesus Christ is the highest possible clue (though an often dim and ambiguous one to creaturely and sinful eyes) within the space-time world of human experience to God, i.e., to what is of maximal importance. (Lindbeck 94)

Within the Church community, intellectuals have been at this work since the community's inception. Their formulations, though tentative in character, do stand subject to meaningful, theological, evaluative criteria. The ancient gospel tradition, the story of God's reign coming to the world in the work and person of Jesus, must influence intelligibly any new formulations. Beyond this, theologians must demonstrate fidelity to the canon of Christian Scriptures and traditions,¹ demonstrating that any apparent deviations from the canon bolster the spirit of the

¹ Even those traditions claiming the Bible as the only normative tradition also claim that sentence as their tradition. The Bible never calls itself the only authority.

book, even if not the letter. Finally, and importantly for my reading of Lanyer and Milton, a new theological move must demonstrate pastoral creativity (in the sense that the poet acts as pastor to readers and hearers), the ability to make livable and intelligible the disparate elements of the Christian tradition: “Which theory is theologically best depends on how well it organizes the data of Scripture and tradition with a view to their use in Christian worship and life” (Lindbeck 106).

Lindbeck’s pragmatic criterion, though not openly stated in the seventeenth century, contributes to my reading of Milton and Lanyer. This rule does not negate the other criteria for good and bad theology: an evaluation of a theological move still must provide some account of why this or that manner of seeing is still good news, and the community of readers and hearers still stands present to judge a theologian’s faithfulness to the shared gospel story and canonical materials. In fact, the very books that became the standard earned such status by virtue of their use in Christian worship in the centuries before the Council of Nicea. Because use in Christian worship demands that a theology passes muster with the community of the faithful, the criteria that otherwise would guide theological evaluation never cease to operate when a reader uses Lindbeck’s pragmatic scheme.

Is Theology Dramatic?

Lanyer and Milton undertake a polyvalent pragmatic task: they narrate a new understanding of divinely created reality by re-shaping the core theological story, the Christ-event. In these works God acts as author of the larger historical story, audience for a particular performed work, inspirer of the text (both invoke the Spirit as Muse), and character, in the *persona* of the Son. Beyond this, each must hold in tension faithfulness to the true tradition handed down by the Spirit and the new word that the Spirit would speak through the poem at hand. Given that each poet holds the grand story above the self and self’s retelling, this narrative

act happens, sometimes with more awareness and openness than at other times, in the context of the larger story that God is writing. As God tells Milton's story, Lanyer tells God's story, and the texts invite the reader beyond the page to contemplate their places in the grand play relative to their fellow players and to the invisible playwright.

Within this complex context, locating one omnipotent (in an aesthetic sense) narrator is nearly impossible. Since the providential God also enters the story as character, and since any mortal playwright is a creature of God even while shaping the character "God" in a text, any possible narrator is also a character written by and alongside God. Since the body of believers hears and interprets stories of their creator that involve them via the Spirit-informed Church, and since the God who sees and hears all also enters into the story that the God is writing, audiences are also characters and writers. Although even drama as a generic category has trouble assimilating all of this action, its complexity relative to the triad of reader/audience, writer, and text often posited when discussing narrative fiction makes it a more suitable metaphor for the enterprise of theological *poesis*. Theater's complex of influences, directors and playwrights, sponsors and groundlings, seems a good metaphor for the dizzying set of relations that come into play when a poet sets pen to paper to write of the Christian God.

The Gospel in a Seventeenth-Century Context

Within such a drama that also acknowledges the canon of Christian Scriptures, the narrator of a project like *Paradise Regained* or *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* becomes a kind of prophet in the larger divine-human story. Since the canonical versions of the stories stand over the new narration, the narrator of a biblical poem becomes either a faithful prophet or a false one, telling stories in ways more or less true to the good news that has become more or less the received tradition. Within the Protestant tradition, such a prophetic role demands that the

reformer appeal to older traditions (specifically canonical Biblical tradition) to counter newer, errant traditions.² Lanyer's and Milton's narrators, as God's messengers to God's erring people, serve to bring primal elements of the tradition back into dialogue with the parts that, in their evaluation, have deviated from the core of what should be the Christian world-picture. Because their opponents have become the establishment, their task is agonistic as well as intellectual, prophetic and hermeneutic and poetic.

Since all who shape the gospel drama are historically contingent creatures, the forces that influence human lives in turn make differences in the ways that people tell the story. Thus Western Christianity, with the help of Augustine, became a neo-Platonic tradition. Later Aquinas merged Augustinian neo-Platonism with Aristotelian philosophy even as the passion and mystery plays altered the face of Christianity among the less literate populace. Reformers from the classically educated Calvin to the bible-quoting Anabaptists attempted to bring older sources to bear on newer even as the Council of Trent reestablished the truth and vitality of medieval Catholic traditions. In the midst of emperors and treatise-writers and bishops, writers of poetry, drama, and prose have used, modified, and invented literary forms in order to modify and to invent theology. Lanyer and Milton, two such poets several decades apart, participate in these scuffles in ways that reward theological readings of their works.

Both Lanyer and Milton are reformers within reform movements. Each poet appropriates traditions to correct errors that remain even after official separation from the Church of Rome. Their well-noted tendencies to bring things into question and to destabilize conventional categories extends to some extent from the impulse to reform, a tendency not only prevalent

² In many cases, Protestant reformers inveigh against particularly Catholic traditions. In the two cases that I explore, the concerns are common to Protestant and Catholic (and presumably Orthodox) Christian theology.

throughout the sacred texts themselves³ but especially evident in the vigorous Protestant debates of the seventeenth century.

In their attempts to lead readers on right paths, both look to the Christ story to prove their points. Although later reformers and intellectuals would attempt systematic assaults on the errors that Milton and Lanyer address, both these poets state their complaints in the context of renarrating the gospels. Neither poet's Jesus actually speaks much to the metacritical issues that this thesis addresses, but in ways that say quite a bit about the ethical significance of Jesus and Jesus' relation to the Father and the Spirit, the messenger-narrators name Jesus, describe the events of the gospel, and develop characters that the canonical gospel neglects to describe or to give many lines.

Finally, both Lanyer and Milton maintain, to different degrees, fidelity to Scripture in order to maintain the rightness of their readings to readers who are becoming more and more aware of the English text of the Bible. Novelty as such is not a virtue towards which traditional theology strives. Although the impulse towards restoration is muted at most in Milton and Lanyer, both very conscientiously demonstrate that their theological differences with mainstream thought come not from any invention of their own but from the stuff of tradition, the written gospels.

This thesis will attempt neither to gauge the degree to which either poet has influenced latter times' theology nor trace the origins of their theological moves. Instead, my focus will be the resistance to one particular political error, the subjugation of women, and one particular

³ Without attempting to be exhaustive, the prophetic books, Jesus himself, Saint Paul, and the biblical Apocalypse all appeal to traditions in the endeavor to shape a better future. In Jesus' day the Dead Sea Scrolls community, the Pharisees, and the Christians were three rival Jewish reform movements, and in Milton's day the Lutherans, Anabaptists, Puritans, Church of England, and other Protestant groups all sought reform against one another as well as against the Catholics.

doctrinal error, the dogmatic insistence on Nicene formulations of the Trinity, in two poetic works, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* and *Paradise Regained*. For this reason, I will table questions of each poet's place along spectra labeled Orthodox and Heretical. More interesting here are the interplay and debate⁴ that constitute the vital theological project in which these poets engage.

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* makes the following claim about traditions: "Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict. Indeed when a tradition becomes Burkean, it is always dying or dead" (222). Milton's and Lanyer's contributions to theological traditions include, if nothing else, keeping such conflict lively and articulate.

CHAPTER 2: ORIGINAL SIN RELOCATED

When Christians theorize about ordering society, we often start either with an attempt to generalize and form rules extending from Jesus' or Scriptural writers' sayings or from a general conception that seems to be at the center of the gospel, often love or justice. Regarding women, Christian ethics at the beginning of the seventeenth century generally combined a classical understanding of gender⁵ with particular Pauline teachings about women in the church⁶ and generally misogynistic readings of Genesis chapters two and three. As discussed above, these readings and interpretations of sacred texts were not the territory exclusively or even primarily of the academy; liturgical and other ecclesial uses of these traditions directed people's relations to one another to the extent that subordination of women was not only the norm but seemed to accord with the very ordering of the heavens and earth.

Biblical texts, open to the educated in more significant ways since the publication of the Geneva Bible (1598) and Bishops' Bible (1568) in English, remained complex enough that a skillful reader could find counter-currents to the imposed misogynistic norm, and Aemelia Lanyer was just such a skillful reader. Lanyer's book centers around an unconventional reading of the Adam and Eve story in Genesis 2-3, borrows its power from an oft-ignored section of Matthew's gospel, and invokes several biblical women as exemplars once the passion poem is over. Although her conclusions oppose the prevailing treatment and theories of women, her

⁵ This seems in most cases to have been a Platonic preference for the intellectual (male) over the carnal (female) combined with an Aristotelian conception of women as less than rational. Lanyer's treatments of both moves happen in the context of "Eves Aplogie."

⁶ In particular 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15. Twenty-first century New Testament scholars think that the latter is pseudonymous, but that consideration was hardly an issue in 1613.

method draws almost exclusively from the Bible, whose texts stand nearly invincible in Protestant theological debate and whose narrative is familiar to all whose liturgy includes lectionary Scripture readings in the vernacular. Her peers would not have been unable to critique Lanyer's project, but they did so at the risk of debasing the very texts that their churches held sacred.

In terms of messengers and messages, Lanyer stands as an ethical reformer, drawing from the gospel of Matthew's narrative and in particular Pilate's wife's intervention on behalf of Jesus to argue pictures of women both as significantly moral agents and as seekers of wisdom rather than only creatures of fleshly desire. Rather than mount a systematic argument against the reigning interpretive framework, Lanyer returns to sacred texts, focusing on particular details that her opponents' readings overlook. Even when she deviates from the shape of the narrative itself, she only does so in that she makes Pilate's wife familiar with Genesis 2-3 and casts the Roman governor's wife as a careful enough reader of those texts to find the discrepancies that misogynistic readings ignore. Presenting the Eve story nested in the story of Christ nested in Lanyer's book of poetry nested in the larger theological conversation, Lanyer sets herself up as an observer of error and reformer of errant traditions.

***Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*: "Eves Apologie"**

Aemelia Lanyer's entire *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* is a study in such nested narratives: the best known section, the apology for Eve, is in the center of a passion narrative, which is in turn embedded within laudatory poetry about Margaret Clifford, and the longer poem rests between dedicatory poems and a country-house poem. Beginning from the center, a look at the successive layers reveals the complexity of the clearly stated politics expressed in the apology. For the purpose of this chapter, the focus will remain on that central section, the apology for Eve,

and work its way outward only to the beginnings and endings of the actual passion poem. Barbara Lewalski claims of the poem, "*Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum*, for all its diversity of subject matter, is governed by certain unifying themes and concerns. It is set forth as a comprehensive 'Book of Good Women,' fusing religious devotion and feminism so as to assert the essential harmony of those two impulses" (207). This brief analysis of the central poem will attempt to note how Lanyer's theological moves within the poem situate her as a messenger in the theological drama.

Lanyer lays out the apology itself in terms that range from legal to psychological, laying out reason after reason for acquitting Eve and for giving women back their prelapsarian status, defined by Lanyer as "Libertie," free from men's "Sov'raintie" (*Salve Deus* 825-26). Although Lanyer lists "Eves Apologie" as simply another item in the book, the second item listed on the title page (Lanyer 3), the other items in the poem center around and draw their meanings from central rhetorical act. The argument opens with "Till now your indiscretion sets us free,/ And makes our former fault much lesse appeare" (761-62), referring to the great sin of the male sex, namely the condemnation and execution of Christ. Janel Mueller points out that, in contrast to the strong providential emphasis that characterizes many passion stories, this account of the crucifixion is very clear that Jesus dies primarily because of men's wickedness and secondarily if at all because of overarching divine providence (211). With this move Lanyer begins to narrate the crucifixion in a manner quite different from other passion plays, seeking to articulate the role of men's thirst for power and fear of others in Jesus' death while remaining faithful to the text of the gospel of Matthew.⁷

⁷ Interestingly, in light of recent cinematic events and consequent controversies, Jesus' killers in *Salve Deus* most significantly are male; their Jewishness hardly seems to make a difference. Her choice of focus likely flows both from the poem's larger agenda and from Lanyer's own *converso* family background. See Woods, *Lanyer: A Renaissance Women's Poet*.

The launching point for Lanyer's most concentrated and obviously contentious defense of women's Libertie stems not from an examination of Eve's story in isolation but one placed in the mouth of Pilate's wife when Pilate decrees that Jesus should die (Matthew 27:19 ff.). She tells her husband that should he kill Jesus, the world should no longer look to the eating of forbidden fruit but to the killing of Christ if they wish to blame one sex for the world's sins. At that point, the male sex in general, and Pilate in particular, would become the new sin-bringer. Because these feminist leanings are generated from the narrative of the crucifixion itself, Michael Schoenfeldt asserts that the feminist thrust of the book ought not be separated from the religious content:

By aligning the forced subjection of women to men with the willed and redemptive subjection of Christ to earthly powers, and by using a language of religious devotion which borrows heavily from the erotic, Lanyer discovers a place of spiritual and moral privilege for women amid the very discursive structures repeatedly deployed to defend female subjugation... Lanyer's religious subject is not merely window-dressing for the profeminist polemic but essential to her understanding of the central place of women in the world. (211-212)

The story of Jesus' execution remains the story of salvation for humanity, but in addition to that level of meaning Lanyer asserts that the shape of the biblical story itself (embellished relatively little compared to Milton's story of Adam and Eve) leads to ethical conclusions that run counter to the gender-political assumptions of her surroundings.

Pilate and Adam act with much baser motives than Eve when they instigate the two falls. Calling on the superior status of reason over appetite in classic philosophy, Lanyer points out that Eve's motive was the acquisition of knowledge, an intellectual pursuit, while Adam merely

ate because the fruit was pleasing to his eye, demonstrating that the male sex, not the female, began as a slave to the appetites (793-98). Even when Lanyer gives women the least room for error, she says that Eve's sin results from weakness. On the contrary, Pilate, the priests, and all those who conspire against Christ act from malice (815-16). Women's actions, though indirectly resulting in harm, never intended anything but the betterment of themselves and their counterparts (744). So much cannot be said for men's crimes against Christ; the gospels witness that they are not only unlawful and unjust but also intentional, cruel, and premeditated.

The sexes do not cooperate equally in the two falls. When Eve eats of the fruit, instead of reproaching her disobedience, Adam takes the fruit and eats some himself, not objecting in the slightest (804-5). Eve is not prevented or even reproached for taking, and she has no power to prevent Adam from taking the fruit when his appetite leads him into the fall (799-800). On the other hand, when Pilate is about to condemn Jesus, his wife objects; thus the female sex never "gave consent" to the awful crime that males committed against God embodied. Against the objections that have no parallel in the fall-blamed-on-women, men decide, deliberately and against the counsel of their counterparts, to commit the most heinous crime imaginable.

Thus the subjection of women to men makes little sense. Even if they had not killed Christ, men would be guilty for the great suffering that they cause women simply from the act of coming into the world. Why, Lanyer asks, should men, who have already caused suffering in their infancy, increase the suffering of women by unjust laws (827-30)? Even without the specific, anti-Christ crime that rests on the male sex, this pain that results from men's birth and stands unrevenged ought to move men to gratitude, not violence.

Still dealing with contemporary assumptions about the sexes, Pilate's wife, inspired with the prophet Lanyer's particular acumen, mocks those men who will subjugate women based on

men's greater knowledge: "Yet Men will boast of Knowledge, which he tooke/ From *Eves* faire hand, as from a learned Booke" (807-8). Not wishing to assert complete autonomy from male sources, Lanyer immediately concedes that one important thing does come from man to woman: "If any Evill did in her remaine,/ Beeing made of him, he was the ground of all" (809-10). In four short lines Lanyer makes light of two very important metaphysical assertions about women in relation to men, namely that carnal nature is feminine in source and that rational nature is masculine. The light tone gives the impression that they are not even worth addressing in a serious manner, and Lanyer certainly does not. With a wave of her hand, she dismisses both as silliness.

This lightness of tone pervades her defense. Taking the story that has buttressed men's social superiority for so long, she picks the central assumptions apart with so little effort one wonders why anyone would ever believe such silliness. In a few moments, most notably when Pilate's malice comes up, the immediacy and intensity of the poem increase, but in most of the apology, Lanyer seems to consider the reasons for women's suffering non-reasons. Beyond this, since in the narrative these arguments come from a woman, convention seems to require that she deliver them in a mocking, even silly manner. Only when the poem shifts from a woman's argument to the messiah's torment can the indictment take on a more serious tone. The passion itself and the sections praising virtuous women are notably graver, and Lanyer seems to imply that these people's evil against the Christ and the events surrounding and including the crucifixion demand more attention than do the silly arguments against women's freedom.

The Passion

This apology for women, as stated above, occurs in the midst of a passion narrative, locating the defense within an explicitly theological framework. The lightness of the defense

itself is offset by heart-wrenching details of the trial of Jesus. Though the gender politics of the day do not challenge her to the point of seriousness, the death of the Christ, the central event of history, comes through in her descriptions as urgent, horrifying, and of ultimate worth. As Jesus is held up as the supreme example of human life and as the center of the divine event, Lanyer narrates his death in ways that more seriously call into question the categories and practices that make men dominant over women.

The tools that keep women subordinate are the same ones that destroy Jesus. Lanyer is seldom more descriptive than when she narrates the physical cruelty of the men upon Christ: “. . . spightfull men with torments did oppresse / Th'afflicted body of this innocent Dove” (993-94). A few lines later, when women on the scene protest, they do so “In pitie and compassion to forbear / Their whipping, spurning, tearing of his haire” (999-1000). But the legitimating of this violence does not escape Lanyer either. Perhaps with the laws that kept women in violent marriages in mind, Lanyer notes the power of the falsely powerful: “Here Falshood beares the shew of formall Right,/ Base Treacherie hath gote a guard of men” (569-70). Becoming the victim both of men’s physical battering and their justifications for the same, Jesus joins all women, lifting for all to see what men everywhere have done and continue to do to “the least of these.” The men who perform these awful deeds have no idea whom they torment. Janel Mueller points out that in the passion scene, only women characters perceive Christ properly (215). In this act of right perception women gain the privilege and duty of redefining the ethically good life.

Official brutality cannot go unchallenged in the Christ-event; “In the aftermath of Christ’s Crucifixion read as history, culture must look to a morally cognizant (and to that extent a feminized) nature for moral refounding” (Mueller 229). Lanyer’s light tone in the defense

itself might be read, in the context of the brutality of the Christ-story, as a mockery of those who will not now see the rightness of women's Libertie. In the defense the lightly mocking tone of the Proverbs talking of the foolish addresses the obvious logical inadequacy of those who would defend women's subjugation. In the crucifixion story the foolish become the wicked, and their sins are on display for any who have eyes to read. In the meantime, the women in the story and Jesus, with his virtues drawn from women's repertoires, are the moral exemplars in both defense and passion.

When Lanyer goes on to praise the highest of human good in Jesus, her litany of virtues is interesting in this light. A look at the whole stanza reveals a strong novelty in human ethics, flowing from the character of the crucified:

Here faire Obedience shined in his breast,
And did suppress all feare of future paine;
Love was his Leader unto this unrest,
Whil'st Righteousnesse doth carry up his Traine;
Mercy made way to make us highly blest,
When Patience beat downe Sorrow, Feare and Paine:
Justice sate looking with an angry brow,
On blessed misery appeering now. (529-36)

None of these is a new observation about Christ on the way to the cross, but the priority of Obedience, Love, Righteousnesse, and Patience, the intentional displacement of Courage as the primary virtue for a heroic figure, marks an awareness that among the other things Jesus does, not unimportantly he reassigns the importance of the human virtues, making the characteristics of a good wife the virtues that all people ought to emulate. The virtues that were once the

“private” domain of women now work salvation in a very public realm (Mueller 227). Setting Obedience at the beginning of the stanza, Lanyer makes it the first to be noticed, begging the question why only women have been expected to make it primary in human relations. In the stanza following, Lanyer makes the highest heroic action not conquest but “t’indure the doome of Heaven and Earth” (544). So the priorities for admirable character are not rooted out and destroyed but reordered, so loving relation to God and neighbor, not heroic striving and mastery over constructed orders, dictates the shape of properly ethical behavior. Although these sorts of attributions do not begin with Lanyer’s poem, set within the Passion narrative and against the particularly masculine brutality of Jesus’ torturers, the attributions take on an ethical weight that goes beyond any iconic value of abstract righteousness or patience. These Christian virtues do not happen in any kind of vacuum but stand resisting the kind of “virtues” that kill the Christ.

Within the narrative, Jesus achieves what he does in actions that seem passive, in strength that seems weak. Again the metaphors of relation to other people that define the conventionally good woman now find rest in the most important hero figure for women and men both. Faced with the kind of system that always threatens violence against women and now threatens God incarnate, Lanyer points out that not military strength but “meekenesse overcame their might” (507). In other places in the narrative Jesus favors the feminine, notably when, after remaining silent before his accusers, he speaks words of prophecy to the women standing at the cross (977-84). Finally, commenting on the misery that ambitious kings and their hierarchy of virtues bring to the people of the land, Lanyer lifts up Jesus as the greatest ruler precisely because he seeks the kind of peace that a good mother would wish:

And that Imperiall Crowne of Thornes he wore,
Was much more pretious than the Diadem

Of any King that ever liv'd before,
Or since his time, their honour's but a dreame
To his eternall glory, beeing so poore,
To make a purchasse of that heavenly Realme;
Where God with all his Angels lives in peace,
No griefes, nor sorrowes, but all joyes increase. (897-904).

The highest good for the kingdom is neither expansion nor the power to destroy enemies but the peace that seeks to increase joys. Again, this concept is not unique in Lanyer's poem; certain Christian just war traditions had held for centuries that warfare was a tragic necessity in a creation that desires peace, but conflicting classical and Germanic traditions of the wayfaring and warfaring knight-hero had fused with Christian vocabularies to form ideals that, against Lanyer's motherly Christ, seem to lead to terribly corrupted anti-Christ.

Towards the end of the passion narrative, the poet directly addresses Mary, mother of Jesus, offering consolation but acknowledging that the magnitude of her sorrow is simply beyond comfort. Included in this address are some curious praises. Lanyer assigns an ambiguous genitive to her status in relation to the men who have killed her son: "Farre from desire of any man thou art,/ Knowing not one, thou art from all men free" (1077-78). Mary, free from any desire that a woman might feel as well as from the kinds of desires that men have for women, remains free from the bonds that the men Lanyer knows bind tightly around women. Thus Mary, through unique grace, is the first woman freed by Christ and one of the types for the virtuous woman in the Christian era. Although her motherhood as motherhood is virtuous and even saving, Lanyer holds the gender politics that surround her in such contempt that Mary's exception from them allows her a righteousness that such a system must necessarily corrupt.

Lanyer the Theologian

Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum stands in submission to the canonical texts more importantly than it stands alongside them. Like the systematic theologians that come before her and write in her time, Lanyer relies on the canonical and divine weight of the gospel texts to lend her conclusions weight that a less-divine, more-human enterprise like poetry cannot offer. Because the Scriptures bear the weight of the argument, and because her imagined opponents also have interpretations ready to deploy, the poem simultaneously wields the Bible as a weapon and moves its authority into shared territory. Since both sides bring the Bible to the fight, neither side can claim that Bible as an inherent advantage; the arguments on both sides now show themselves as human endeavors to interpret the divine word rather than human opinion attempting to exert itself over against divine truth.

Once the field becomes level, the fight is hardly fair. Lanyer the messenger is wittier, brighter, and more committed to the details of the narrative than her misogynistic counterparts can hope to be. Disarming in “Eves Apologie” and thundering in the “Salve Deus” section itself, Lanyer devastates the system that oppresses women and the philosophies that give legitimacy to that system. Lanyer the poet lends the narrator of “Salve Deus” and the poem’s central speaking character such powers of argument that they expose those who claim divine authority as human and, more importantly, as false prophets who would deny holy liberty to those to whom Christ gives.

CHAPTER 3: MILTON'S DRAMATIC TRINITY

Disputes concerning the nature of God and Christ are hardly esoteric exercises for the few. When Trinitarian controversies in the Roman empire were at their height, Gregory of Nyssa made note that the disputes generated interest not only among the educated bishops but among a much broader population; when Gregory entered a barbershop and asked for a shave, the barber promptly responded that the Father and the Son are of one nature! Religion had become far more private a matter even by the time scholars discovered Milton's *De Doctrina Christiana*, so similar disputes concerning Milton's Christology and Trinitarian doctrine would more likely occur in a graduate seminar than a barbershop. Nevertheless, Milton's activity as a theologian, specifically in *Paradise Regained*, warrants examination here because like Lanyer he renarrates an event from the gospels in pursuit of intellectual change, but unlike Lanyer, this change seems, on the surface, to be more esoteric. But given that orthodoxy and heterodoxy always live their life at least partly in *doxa*--the Church's direction of its praise towards a God who can be fixed in a formulated phrase but not seen--Milton's *Paradise Regained* stands to reach both into popular and academic theological practices.

So What Was He?

In the centuries since his death, debates concerning Milton's relation to the Trinity have focused mainly on particles within his works that seem to imply doctrinal statements. For this reason, *De Doctrina Christiana* has been a crucial part of the puzzle since its discovery. Scholars who disagree wildly still assume that Milton's true beliefs are accessible and make most sense as agreements or disagreements with basically Nicene categories. Patrides focuses on

Milton's Augustinian word choice for describing the various persons of the Trinity, translating and transliterating various theological terms such as *hypostaseis* (*essentiae*, *personae*) from the epics and treatises in order to demonstrate that Milton's vocabulary falls within classical Trinitarian categories (15-18). In response to this and other defenders of Milton's orthodoxy, Rumrich notes that even before *de Doctrina*'s discovery such critics as Daniel Dafoe and John Dennis had accused *Paradise Lost* of Arianism (76), a heresy best understood as a deviation from Nicene two-nature Christology.⁸ Later he cites propositions from *de Doctrina* that spell out a clear antipathy to the classical formulations of Trinity.

This pattern seems to hold in other Milton studies as well. Lewalski prefaces her discussion of *Paradise Regained* with definitions of Nestorianism, Arianism, and trinity, borrowing from the documents of ecumenical councils and Milton's own discussions of these terms in *de Doctrina* in order to compare how their declarative assertions compare (136-60). She concludes that Milton was orthodox only to the extent that he asserted that the Father and the Son are mysteriously one. What he would not attempt was to speculate on "the *mode* of the union between the two persons" (153). This refusal, because it seems a useful metaphor for how Milton talks about Jesus in *Paradise Regained*, will be the point of departure for this chapter.

The previously cited books and other studies, in engaging one another, demonstrate that the question of Milton's Christology has to be engaged on several levels. Three of these (as I hope to demonstrate, not the only three) are what Milton considered his own relation to the tradition of Nicene Trinitarian theology, what Milton's peers had to say, and what the continuing scholarly conversation seems to contribute. To this set of considerations I hope to add this: what specifically does Milton add to the conversation by setting the debate in dramatic terms?

⁸ This formulation, which became the norm for orthodox Eastern and Western Christianity, holds that the one person Christ has both a divine and a human nature.

Paradise Regained does Christological theology in a dramatic rather than propositional mode, differing from creed language without necessarily assenting to or dissenting from it. The manner in which *Paradise Regained* differs is such that only describing his dramatic project will allow discussion of the difference.

Milton's dealings with the traditional persons of the Trinity value relationship to the other persons over metaphysical assertions about any one person. Milton accomplishes this relational trinity by renarrating one part of the gospel tradition, stating his primary theology within and by means of that narrative. Thus he takes on a reformer's role similar to Lanyer's, calling doctrinal formulations into question by the same means that Lanyer corrects social and ethical practices. Both rely on the power of the narrative itself and the theological poets' ability to explicate through added dialogue and descriptive nuance as they decry intellectual and resulting ethical abuses among those who would follow the one God.

Since the primary materials for various Christological debates in various centuries are historically embodied events narrated in traditional, handed-down texts, definitions of Trinity begin as interpretations of these canonical texts. Secondary theological work, whether following from interpretations or against which new interpretations position themselves, comment on some level on the gospel texts, but the separations eventually obscure the canonical narrative. By Milton's time, christologies did not necessarily have to acknowledge the text of Mark or John or anybody's readings thereof but could simply define themselves (but more often they defined their opponents) as Trinitarian, Arian, Nestorian, Monophysite, or other secondary titles. Milton's brief epic, because it is a recasting of the narrative itself rather than a commentary on the subsequent systems, operates in the context of these debates without aligning itself explicitly with any of the combatants. Because claims that Milton is Orthodox or might tempt a reading

away from the particular shape of *Paradise Regained* and towards simple pigeonholing, I will refrain from such naming, or questions about such naming, until Milton's own Christological project is established.

The Three Persons

Before the landed story begins, the Father in *Paradise Regained* speaks one speech in Book One, only to disappear from the action. When he does speak, the diction is similar to his speech in Book Three of *Paradise Lost* in that its narration is straightforward and not obviously artful. This speech is likely another of Milton's inquiries in the tradition of philosophical, uncorrupted language, its apparent flatness a product of logical discourse rather than rhetoric (Fish, *Surprised by Sin* 65). Within this speech he relates the calling and baptism of Jesus just as the narrator and the devil have already laid out, but in this case He tells the story as the agent of the action. This agency does not end when the speech does but continues through Jesus as he becomes the Son.

Although the Father as a character disappears after His speech, the submission of Son to Father remains one of the controlling motifs of the epic. When Satan tempts Jesus, the appeal is preeminently a temptation to self-assertion—"save thyself" (I, 344); "if at great things thou wouldst arrive" (II, 426); "These Godlike Virtues wherefore dost thou hide?" (III, 21); "Aim therefore at no less than all the world" (IV, 105); "So let extend thy mind o'er all the world" (IV, 223)—and in relation to it, not doing anything is the most positive of actions. (Fish, *How Milton Works* 336)

Although Jesus is the character on the stage, all actions, if Jesus is successful, ultimately point to the Father. In Milton's terms, if one has seen the Son, one has seen the Father. With regard to titles, Book One sees the Matthean metonymy "Heaven" applied to the Kingdom (I.20) and

decrees (I.55) of the Father early, but these drop off rather quickly. In Satan's and Jesus' dialogues, "Father" and "King" are the primary names for this person of the Trinity.

These metaphors come into play furiously when Satan attempts to tempt Jesus to apostasy. When confronted with Satan's suggestion that he bow and worship Satan, Jesus, in the words of Luke 4:8, utters the command, "Thou shalt worship/ The Lord thy God" (IV.177) recalling the Hebrew Name of God before calling the Father "King of Kings" (IV.185) and "God over all supreme" (186). Jesus repeats and intensifies the regal metaphors directly after he ridicules Satan's command of the kingdoms as usurped rather than inherited. The paternal metaphor does not disappear (Jesus refers to himself as Son of God early in this refutation), but the power of the God-King looms large in this rebuke.

Jesus and Satan both use the paternal metaphor for the Father; even in distinguishing between persons that metaphor is necessary throughout their interactions. The two refer without hesitation to "my Father" or "thy Father," and until the fourth book little reflection on God-as-Father occurs. When it does, Satan asks a logical question, what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God. Addressing Jesus as "Son of *David*, Virgin-born" Satan for the first time casts doubt on the "Son of God" title. After privileging "Messiah" over "Son" (which will be discussed later), the Fiend asserts that "The Son of God, which bears no single sence [sic]" is a title fraught with ambiguity in a world entirely created by one God. Though Satan intends the temptation to mislead, Jesus still answers the question by the mode of becoming Son of God: relative to the Father, Jesus submits most perfectly and thus assumes in the drama an ethical identity with the Father.

The Spirit receives even less treatment than the Father, but its narrative incidents and its influence on the entire epic certainly make it important. The Spirit receives mention only in book one and appears in the narrative itself only as the dove at Jesus' baptism. In turn the narrator, Satan, and Jesus recount this scene, but after that, nobody mentions the Spirit. Moreover, aside from the early (1.8) reference to the Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness, no account is given regarding what Matthew (4:1), Luke (4:1), or Mark (1:12) might have meant when they said that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. The Father, Satan, and Jesus himself do provide additional commentary. The three tellings deal more with the implications of the Spirit's appearance, however, rather than the metaphysical nature of the Spirit itself or its motivation for bringing Jesus to the wilderness. Again, the working assumption is that if the Spirit is operating, the Father's desires must not differ from its movements.

Milton does, however, attribute this short epic to the inspiration of the Spirit. In a move similar to the invocation of *Paradise Lost* but perhaps bolder theologically, Milton attributes the inspiration of this short epic to the third person of the trinity. The identity of this spirit is questionable, largely because Milton does not assign a name beyond what the gospels assign. Thus the spirit is not the Holy Spirit or the third Person or anything but the Spirit (Matthew 4:1, Mark 1:12, Luke 4:1). Even so, Milton's address to "Thou Spirit" (*PR* 1.7) and the general singularity of the Spirit in the gospel narratives hint that, even in absence of Nicene formulations, Milton would consider this the same Spirit that drives the action of Luke's gospel.

The Son is the (anti-?) hero of the epic, and Milton's treatment of Jesus really defines what Milton thinks of God. As with the Spirit, Milton remains largely within the logic and vocabulary of Scripture when telling Jesus' story. Thus interpreting the work as Arian or Trinitarian is difficult and must involve either reference to other works and biographical

information or the systematizing of rather un-systematic material. Although a combination of the two is convincing, the systematic character of such a combination would still ignore how this epic in particular does its own particular christology.

The Son's responses to Satan's temptations reveal that his character is always dependent on the Father. According to Fish, "Every time the Son declines the opportunity to redress a wrong or meet a need, he refuses to claim for himself an efficacy apart from God" (*How Milton Works* 336). Later, echoing the gospel of John, Jesus relativizes his growing hunger by claiming that he lives "not by bread only, but each Word / Proceeding from the mouth of God" and that he will not relieve his hunger without knowing that the Father has declared it time to do so. Thus, although Milton never asserts the inseparability of the Father and Son as a propositional statement, the character of Jesus' responses indicates that his actions, if they be called such, are not due the agency of a mere human or a person understandable as divine in isolation, but a member of a body that includes the Father (and possibly the Spirit, but the narrative here does not lend itself to incorporating the Holy Spirit as much as, say, a retelling of Acts would have).

Thus the identity of the Jesus as God the Son becomes final in a moment of self-negation. Fish calls this paradox a cancellation of the non-God self: "He is God to the extent that *he*, as a consciousness distinguishable from God, is no more" (*How Milton Works* 344). In the gospel of Mark, in which Jesus is deemed the Son of God at a discrete moment in time, Jesus is Christ, the anointed one (messiah) chosen from among the people. In John, Jesus stands as the pre-incarnate *logos* before any real narrative starts. Milton takes his cues from both gospel texts, casting the baptism and temptation as the realization of a potential status. *Paradise Regained* is neither a tautological exercise in scriptural exegesis (if John, which does not even bother with a temptation story, were privileged) nor a narrative moment in which Jesus is adopted as Son of

God like a king of Israel (if the Mark story were privileged). The only person who attempts to play his status as messiah against his role as Son of God is Satan. Jesus, who is part of the Father in a real way before the story starts, does not discretely become the Son or merely remain the Son but *proves* himself the Son in this story.

With regard to titles for Jesus, Milton again uses primarily Scriptural designations. As the action moves along, Milton generally uses the Lukan “Our Saviour” or the phrase “Son of God,” common to all four gospels. Only the meter and sound of the line seem to determine which of these two names come into play. In other places Jesus receives other titles, either scripture-derived—“True Image of the Father” (4.596); “*Israel’s* true King” (3.441)—or indicative of the narrative—“glorious Eremite” (1.8 when he first enters the desert, Gk. *erem*); “Son own’d from Heaven by his Father’s voice” (2.85 as Mary recounts Jesus’ life). These situational titles advance the narrative, indicating that Jesus is indeed moving within a particular world and thus revealing what this God is like by his way of living. Only after Jesus has proved himself so do the Angels sing him “True Image of the Father” (4.596).

The closing lines of the poem remind the reader that the work of defining Father, Son, and Spirit is not yet finished in the story of the Incarnation and the Church. Jesus, now without reservation the “Son of God our Saviour meek” (4.636), returns “unobserv’d” (4.638) to his mother’s house, presumably to rest. Although his status has been declared and secured, the rest of the gospel story remains to be told. Like the endings of the gospels themselves, the ending of *Paradise Regained* does not terminate the story but enters, in the person of the Spirit, into the reader’s world. The persons who have been actors in the subdued struggle against Sin and Satan venture from the page into the world of the reader, offering redemption from the world of the Devil and strength to resist further temptations.

No Father without a Son

As is evident in the difficulty of separating the discussions of Father and Son, Milton's narration of the two persons of the Trinity makes their identities so intertwined that, even though the Father seems to be the superior of the two characters, any discussion of one must include discussion of the other. In being proved the Son of God, Jesus at the same time redefines who the Father is. Thus, although Milton does not spend any time in his short epic asserting or refuting Nicene or even Latin Trinitarian formulae, the shape of the story supports its own formulation of the Trinity: The Spirit inspires the grand story of the Father's restoration of the world through identity with and the agency of the Son. The Father becomes the redeemer of all humankind in the same story that Jesus becomes a part of humankind.

George Lindbeck holds that the Christological formulations of Nicea and Chalcedon initially asked less for assent to a metaphysics and more for an agreement "to speak in a certain way" (94). Trinitarian formulations represented not a glimpse into the character of the ineffable God of the Bible but "the product of systematic reflection on the confused multiplicity of presystematic symbols, titles, and predicates applied to God and Jesus Christ" (*ibid.*). Looking at Milton's short epic through this kind of lens reveals a narrative that does similar work to the ancient creeds. Milton does not create a new canonical yardstick against which one might test this or that theological system but rather makes new moves within the gospel narratives themselves, setting traditional Christological phrases within a particular shared story line.

Both the creeds and the epics locate themselves within a Scriptural tradition that begins with narratives. As if following the creeds, Milton seems to minimize the narrative flux of the Old Testament's YHWH while taking the gospels seriously as narrating the truly human life of the man Jesus. Milton's Father does not seem to be part of this tendency to dramatize divine characters; his essence is unchanging. For instance, Milton makes much in *Paradise Regained* of Jesus going through a narrated process of becoming fully the Son of God but holds, against the apparent action of some Old Testament stories,⁹ that the Father's character is still that of the immutable, eternal, neo-Platonic God. If Milton makes an aesthetic departure from his Western theological predecessors, it lies in his move even further towards dramatic literalism in the story of Jesus. Thus Jesus' words and actions as recorded in the gospels, more than neo-Platonic categories such as emanation or *hypostasis*, determine what Milton will say about the Son. Sources earlier than the Roman imperial Christological debates generate his theological vocabulary, so Nicea, whose creed is the product of translation into Byzantine rather than British idiom, faces opposition but not recognition. Within *Paradise Regained* there is no talk of substance, essence, or a *filioque* clause. Rather, the titles and attributes assigned to Jesus in the text of the New Testament come together in one epic narration of one scene drawn from the synoptic gospels and reflecting the philosophical and theological problems that Milton, not Athanasius, deems important.

The historic Christian tradition primarily witnesses to the life of Christ in the forms of narratives that deal with Jesus' life and the meaning of discipleship in specific, Greco-Roman contexts. Milton, holding fast to biblical primacy and exhibiting the reformer's spirit in his willingness to judge and even discard older traditions, still must deal with the scriptures' own

⁹ For instance, in the story of King Ahab and the deceiving spirit (1 Kings 22; *PR* 1.371-75), Milton moves the agency to the spirit itself (though at the behest of God) and identifies the spirit with Satan.

difficulties with the nature of Jesus.¹⁰ Rather than assuming that disputes over the nature of divinity are best handled in the realm of syllogistic premises, Milton re-sets the questions of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a story, and the story happens in the Holy Land.

Unlike the Nicene Creed, which begins with “We believe” and ends with an “Amen” to static intellectual propositions,¹¹ Milton’s story begins with a promise to sing and ends with a return home, a promise of rest and further help. The persons of the Trinity are not points of teaching for recitation but characters in a story that does not end but extends into the reader’s world. The three persons of the Trinity, only comprehensible as interrelated, become one in the story and offer that oneness to the reader in the end. Thus Milton the theologian begins with questions that had at best been put to rest centuries ago and at worst became reasons to exclude, villainize, or even kill intellectual opponents. Acting as pastor to his readers, remaining faithful to the shape of the gospel narratives so not to become a false prophet, he not only presents the ultimate exemplum of a human in submission to God but allows the persons of the Trinity to become real, dramatic, dynamic characters in the imagination of any one reader and opens up the possibility that these divine persons might inhabit the readers’ world in new ways.

¹⁰ The gospel of John puts the sentence “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30, NRSV) in Jesus’ mouth only two chapters after he says, “it is not I alone who judge but I and the Father who sent me” (John 8:11, NRSV). As John Howard Yoder writes, the historical development of Trinitarian language means “that language must be found and definitions created so that Christians, who believe in only one God, can affirm that God is most adequately and bindingly known in Jesus” (99).

¹¹ The creeds themselves assume and present a kind of narrative, but the historical use of creeds is helpfully different from Milton’s use of the same biblical material.

CHAPTER 4: LITERARY CRITICISM AS THEOLOGY

This thesis is not in the business of allowing observers and narrators to stand outside the drama. Even as the messenger-character poets hold forth on the character-author-audience God, our guild of literary critics stands in a corner of the stage, commenting on the other stage actors' lines and noticing the manners in which invisible and visible interact. So that we might embody dramatic irony, some of us fail to recognize that we too stand within the play. In this chapter we critics will join the ranks of the self-aware characters. To begin this process I will explain why we sometimes forget where we stand.

Time and Difference

John Milbank calls into question why theology as a discipline surrenders as social theory seizes the privilege of narrating reality:

The pathos of modern theology is its false humility. For theology, this must be a fatal disease, because once theology surrenders its claim to be a metadiscourse, it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy. If theology no longer seeks to position, qualify or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology... (1)

Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* goes on to engage political philosophy, dialecticians, and eventually Nietzsche and his genealogical disciples, demonstrating the claim of theology to construct a "metanarrative" (a word borrowed from Lyotard), which situates other discourses and

academic endeavors. Because this thesis is both theology and literary criticism at times but neither consistently, the project as a whole and this chapter in particular often drift between detached analysis (which Milbank reads as fatal capitulation) and my own engagement on the stage with the poets and my readers as characters (which does not seem valid in literary critical writing). Historicism, both literary new historicism and Milbank's theological historicism, stands as the most helpful tool in sorting out the two disciplines' claims and to think about the relationships between academic and ecclesial communities.

Milbank attempts to position secular discourses in the form of "archaeological" investigation rather than a close reading of philosophies as they stand:

However, these attempts can only carry conviction if I succeed in demonstrating the questionability of the assumptions upon which secular social theory rests. To this end I have adopted an "archaeological approach and traced the genesis of the main forms of secular reason, in such a fashion as to unearth the arbitrary moments in the construction of their logic. (3)

My own brief reflection on literary criticism will focus on one apparently arbitrary distinction that we literary critics take for granted: that between theological poetry and commentary on that poetry. Because this particular distinction does not lend itself easily to genetic explanation, the investigation will begin assuming the presence of the break rather than explaining its origin.

Using Milbank's "positioning" metaphor, still acknowledging that not all literary criticism is theological *per se*, this chapter will attempt to position critics' readings within a metadiscourse that does not consider our relation to the holy incidental. My attempt to retell the story of theological literature and its relation to literary criticism will happen in a mode more similar to New Historical criticism than to anything else that comes to mind. Returning to my

metaphors from the opening chapter, my reading of our practice will situate all players, God and human, writer and reader, critic and student, in relation to one another in an overarching dramatic relationship. Before launching that project, I should make some qualifiers and draw a tentative shape for “theology.”

The discipline of theology claims the Church, in some manner, as authority.¹² Thus beyond the kind of community that a scholarly guild constitutes, something outside the university’s sphere of influence exerts a nebulous but nonetheless intelligible pull on the practice of theology. Allegiance to larger community is no stranger to literary critics; Edward Said was famous for his support of Palestinian causes, and several feminist critics have become involved outside the academy working for women’s issues. Theology’s connection differs in that the link to Church is integral rather than incidental. Just as the Christ-event is for theology primary while written gospels and theological sentences are secondary and tertiary,¹³ the academic discipline of theology is secondary to the practice of the Church, an ordered reflection on an already-incarnate way of life. Milton and Lanyer’s poems mean something to poetry lovers in general, but another level of meaning takes shape when their Christ-poems stand next to the Bible-as-Scripture and within the Church-as-tradition-informed-community.

Within theology-as-metanarrative, theologians and critics assume that their positions relative to texts are relative as well to a community outside the “discipline.” While theology’s end often involves education, the field of study envelops the theologian, exposing the critic himself to his own kind of scrutiny.¹⁴ For instance, a theological commentary on the first chapter

¹² This is not in all cases true, but the branch of theology with which I align holds this claim central.

¹³ I draw here on Karl Barth’s distinction between the *kerygma*, the most basic narrative of Christ’s redeeming work, and *dogma*, the actual historical shape that the *kerygma* has taken. This is only to note that even the gospel texts are in a sense secondary to something even more primal.

¹⁴ Cf. Matthew 7:1-2.

of the epistle of James attempts to describe historically the content of the epistle, but when the commentator writes as theologian, he must imagine not only what the text says but also what the text says to and about the critic herself. In engaging a text or a story that the faith community holds as authoritative, the text places the critic under judgment even as the critic shapes the manner in which the sacred text speaks about the critic. Because the biblical text is canon, the text absorbs the critic even as the critic puts old text in a new context.

Once more, the recursive character of all these endeavors cancels out any player's attempt to fill only one space in the drama. Within theology-as-dramatic-metanarrative, a secular critic of Milton plays a judge (a character) passing judgment on Milton's oracles, in many current contexts deeming the content of Milton's theology *adiaphora*, rather than helpful or harmful. Methodologies that would locate critics exclusively in the audience make the assumption that theological claims do not only disagree with the academic's secular status but stand as incommensurable with those claims. So theological claims about the practice of literary criticism, within secular frameworks, are not wrong as much as meaningless or perhaps missing the point of the exercise.

Milton himself provides a good starting point to discuss the role of reading within that larger ecclesial/civic/dramatic context:

He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her baits and seeming pleasures,
and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is
the true warfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue,
unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but
slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without
dust and heat. Assuredly we bring not innocence into the world, we bring

impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. (*Aereopagitica* 728)

Milton's commitment to reading pagan authors has received much and appropriate attention. The assumptions that underlie this commitment will serve as a launching point for the situation of the critic. Milton's advocacy for such books lies not in the assumption of their ultimate harmlessness but in the right readers' capacities to tell the good from the evil. Milton does not dismiss these authors' stories or philosophies as objects for study that have no capacity to mislead, but rather accepts them as challenges for a reader to face. For Milton, any reading is in a sense theological reading; the question to be asked is how well the theology stands trial.

An Even More Complex Situation

To say that literary criticism is like Milton's and Lanyer's theology is not to say that every critic, or even any critic, considers herself or himself a theologian. Such a reductive statement would do no justice to the vast variety of critical schools, careers, and techniques. Moreover it would be a disservice to the academic discipline called theology; their vocabularies and aims differ too much simply to identify the two. The two departments' mutual misunderstanding becomes particularly evident when theologians invoke literary texts and when literary critics deal with Jewish or Christian writers.¹⁵ Theologians do not serve interdisciplinary scholarship by pretending that this or that text is simply another theological treatise; likewise, a purely descriptive, anthropological approach to theological poetry does not account for the poets' roles as pastoral¹⁶ figures. Beyond interdisciplinary matters, the context of the university itself puts in

¹⁵ Of course, these extremes do not find embodiment, only approximation. For instance, Willimon's *Reading with Deeper Eyes* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998) sets Homer, Dostoyevsky, and Updike up primarily as parables for Willimon to exegete but still pays attention to literary critical matters. On the other hand, most critical work on Milton will at least acknowledge that Milton is attempting to speak in serious manners to humanity including critics. My primary concern is the methodological agnosticism that I discuss below.

¹⁶ Again, I mean as a minister, not as a shepherd.

place certain parameters that Milton and Lanyer might not find helpful if they could even imagine them.

Theological poets speak of people and things and gods¹⁷ that seem rather strained if the poetry stands only as a source of entertainment or object of analysis; the subject matters. Although many critics have voiced convictions regarding divine things, such matters more often than not fall outside the categories that constitute academic writing. This is neither to say that the academy somehow discriminates against religious views nor to say that nothing is out of place in scholarly conversation; distaste for ad hominem attacks certainly makes the scholarly realm a more polite place. This said, various feminist and Marxist critics¹⁸ have written on the academic's own role as teacher and as critic within gender and economic categories, but with regards to the specifically theological in Milton's *Paradise Regained*, detachment still seems to be the dominant trend.¹⁹ When poets renarrate events of cosmic import, the entire cosmos, critics included, have at least to acknowledge the claims on their self-narrations.

The critic of theological poetry, by virtue of talking about talk about God, in some manner enters the larger theological drama, albeit indirectly. Literary criticism, engaging in theological talk, engages both in ironic and serious fiction. Milbank uses King Henry V to illustrate the conventional differences:

For example: the king declaiming before me is not supported by a stage or framed by a screen; the preceding train of events that have brought me to France have in

¹⁷ Of course, in Milton's and Lanyer's texts, there is one God.

¹⁸ I'm afraid I lack the background to speak intelligently about deconstructionist and psychoanalytic theories, but my hunch is that these same trends might emerge. As I note below, theological and literary historicism seems to be the best bridging point between the camps.

no way indicated that I am merely a part of a play, pageant, or tournament-- where, for example, are the spectators? --I conclude, sadly, that this *is* Agincourt, and this *is* King Henry V. Yet at another level, of course, the real Henry V is and can only be a player-king, part of a human fiction. The illusion of a surplus reference arises because we forget that usually, since primordial times, we have been deadly serious about our rituals, and only relatively recently has a wider and wider space of "secondary" fiction opened up, where authors and actors reflectively distance themselves from the masks they wear. All that we now dub fiction, ought rather to be called "fiction governed by the trope of irony". (265)

Milbank uses the distinction between serious and ironic fiction to note the fictive character of political office and human roles; I use the same tool to note that literary fiction is a species of ironic fiction, in turn a species within fiction generally. The moves that literary critics make talking about such fictive acts remain valid, but seeing the acts of the critics and the acts of the poets and the acts of God all within the larger category, "fiction," can be instructive when considering the critic's role.

Even critics such as Stanley Fish, who insists that he is only a literary critic and not a theologian,²⁰ participate in a kind of methodological theology. By claiming that one can talk about God-poetry without becoming engaged in the practice of theology, one implies that literary criticism as a discipline stands far enough from serious God-talk²¹ that theology's claims have no bearing on the practice. Beyond this, talking about Milton's god-language in only descriptive

¹⁹ With regards to this, I acknowledge that my familiarity with the entire corpus of Milton scholarship is insufficient to make this claim in any definitive manner. My thesis, however, is more about proposing a way of reading than claiming that I invented that manner of reading.

²⁰ I have in mind his address to the 2004 International Milton Congress, but his *Professional Correctness* might also fit this claim.

²¹ I mean serious in the sense discussed above.

manners implies that the literary construct “God” does not connect at all with any metaphysical reality. If a prophet is one who speaks on behalf of God to people, Milton’s and Lanyer’s prophetic roles function only on the level of ironic fiction, never as serious fiction. At the very least a poet’s prophetic function is part of a fiction that the guild of critics keeps harmless by means of irony. Although the characters on that stage believe themselves to be speaking for God, the critics do what they do as if the statements were neither true nor false but simply objects for study in themselves. Thus the literary critic’s only serious role is that of a guild member; the content of Milton’s theology or that of his critics’ prose is basically unimportant so long as it stays within the conventions of the guild. I have not the theological acuity to say what kind of notice the Father might take of the Fish; nonetheless one need not listen too carefully to hear the Fish sliding out from under the judgment of the Father.

Critics’ approaches are, like Milton’s and Lanyer’s recastings of sacred texts, both hermeneutic and poetic. If a critic treats Lanyer with Fish’s sort of secular detachment, she or he by methodology treats Lanyer’s claims as museum pieces. If indeed the poet seeks to speak to somebody, literary criticism constructs the character as “audience” or “reader” and sits back in order that the scholarly community can observe the conversation without any participants making claims on the chronologically detached observers. The community of scholars imagines the conversation about these writers happening somehow offstage, or at least far enough away from the primary scene that the observers do not run the risk of taking the theology too seriously. The discourses of the secular academy thus frame and position the discourses of the theological poets.

Bridging Disciplines: Towards a Theology of Literary Criticism

None of this is to say that literary critics ought to do literary criticism after Milton-approved models. I much more humbly claim that doing the recursive theological work, wondering what Milton's poetry does in an ecclesial context and what Milton criticism does in a larger theological framework, stands to be rewarding. Naming the contexts out of which critics write allows for a level of complexity that stands ignored if the critics are not on stage with the messengers. Saying that Lanyer is reordering gender politics and criticizing inadequate and dishonest gender theory within my own worship community makes for a different reading than saying that she speaks to a place and a time alien from my own. Milton's dramatization of Trinitarian categories generates even more interest when he stands to inform the manner in which we worship the Trinity today than when he simply has a place in a catalogue of quarrelers over tired and dead dogma. Not every critic should engage in this kind of work, and Milton and Lanyer criticism would be poorer if every scholar were concerned primarily with such matters. Nonetheless, these kinds of voices might well add interesting discussions to the field, and the mutual critique that feminist, Marxist, and other schools add to one another would benefit from another careful school of thought.²² Systematic theology, aware in its own way of our ever-dramatic relations and interrelations, has the tradition and the rigor to take a place and serve well at Lanyer's table.

Questioning the break between serious and ironic theological fiction as well brings Milton's trial of the reader to bear on criticism in interesting ways. If Milton's own contention that books can inspire good and evil comes into contact with a discipline that does different kinds of reflections on ethics from either Lacanians or post-colonials, the process can only become

²² Theology is one school of thought only in the sense that Marxism is one school of thought—the family resemblances are significant enough to see that while we have common parents, we still fight like siblings.

more purifying as the struggles become more intense. We characters on the shared stage of human existence, poets and critics and gods and kings, could do worse than to listen to proto-feminist prophets, anti-Nicene poets, and the strange Polonian rabble of literary scholars who follow them in our common struggle for meaning.

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