The Fight Over the Body in *Paradise Lost* Book IV

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Abstract This essay identifies and explores the significance of a common configuration of characters in three intertextually-linked works, beginning with the apprehension of Satan by the good angels over the sleeping Adam and Eve in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, proceeding to a reference to a confrontation between the Archangel Michael and Satan in a single verse in the New Testament *Epistle of Jude*, and concluding with a related scene from Book XVI of Homer's *Iliad* in which Zeus oversees a fight over the body of his son Sarpedon.

Key words John Milton; *Epistle of Jude*; Homer's *Iliad*; pseudepigrapha; the body in literature

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I.

In Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, after much deliberation and connivance, Satan manages to steal into Adam and Eve's bower after they have said their evening prayers and fallen asleep. The angel guard sent to protect the pair discovers Satan, "Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve" (4. 800), dictating to her a dream that she will recount in the next book. One of the angels then demands of Satan:

> Which of those rebel spirits adjudged to hell
> Comest thou, escaped thy prison, and transformed,
> Why sat'st thou like an enemy in wait
> Here watching at the head of these that sleep? (823 – 6)

After arguing for awhile with the angel patrol—and only answering the first of their questions—Satan makes an appeal of sorts:

> If I must contend, said he,

Best with the best, the sender not the sent,
Or all at once; more glory will be won,
Or less be lost (851 – 4).

Thus he is brought before Gabriel, who questions and provokes him until Satan, enraged, prepares to do battle with the entire squadron of angels. The narrator tells us that "dreadful deeds might have ensued" (990 – 1), but instead,

The eternal to prevent such horrid fray
Hung forth in heaven his golden scales (995 – 7).

Gabriel notices the scales and invites Satan to "read thy lot in yon celestial sign" (1011). When he does, and notes "His mounted scale aloft" (1014), Satan leaves off the dispute with the angels and flees. Thus ends both Book IV and the sequence of events that began with him whispering in Eve's ear.

Satan's first encounter on earth foreshadows the major action of the poem. Satan has successfully begun the corruption of Eve which he will complete in Book IX, and he has contended with his rival angels to no result, as he will again in Book VI. Finally, divine intervention puts an end to his threat, as it will later in the War in Heaven. But more important for the purposes of this essay is what we might term the configuration of the concluding scene in Book IV: the angels arguing with Satan over the helpless Adam and Eve, while Milton's God determines the outcome.

II.

One of the shortest books in the Christian New Testament is *The Epistle of Jude*, whose 25 verses were designated a "disputed" book by Eusebius in his early 4th century *Historia Ecclesiastica*[1]. *Jude's* tenuous canonicity in the eyes of some early bishops and later reformers was in part a function of its author's uninspired choice of sources; *Jude* has the distinction, for example, of being the only book in the New Testament to quote directly from the *Book of Enoch*, a text held in high regard in the first and second centuries but eventually classed among the pseudepigrapha[2]. The theme of the epistle concerns the dangers of false teaching and the judgment that awaits those who are led astray; its style is marked by frequent allusion, inelegant and occasionally incoherent metaphors, and a scolding tone.

In the epistle itself, Jude warns his readers to beware of certain "ungodly men" (4) who have denied the true teaching of the apostles and won over many to their error.[3] To lend force to his caution, he offers several illustrations of the fate of the un-

believing, recalling the generation that perished in the wilderness after having been delivered from Egypt and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In a remarkable passage, he then writes:

> Likewise also these filthy dreamers defile the flesh, despise dominion, and speak evil of dignities. Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee (9).

The scene described here in this single verse has as its source a first-century C. E. apocryphal text known as the *Assumption of Moses*, or sometimes rendered as a two-part text, *the Testament of Moses* and the *Assumption of Moses*. These examples of Old Testament pseudepigrapha were lost in the eleventh or twelfth century and partly rediscovered in the latter part of the nineteenth century, but Milton could have encountered a description of the battle over Moses' body from summaries and allusions in Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and other early church authorities.[4] A. R. C. Leaney, in his commentary on *Jude*, offers the following account of the relevant part of the *Assumption of Moses* as it is described by these later writers:

> Moses has died and Michael is sent to take his body. The devil tries to refuse to allow this on the ground that he rules over the material world (of which the body of Moses would be a part), or on the ground that he could accuse Moses (the great function of the devil being to accuse men before God) of having struck the Egyptian (Exod. 2: 11 f.) and so being a murderer. (90)[5]

Before looking at Jude more closely for what it may tell us about *Paradise Lost*, it is worth pausing to consider what might have drawn Milton to this obscure corner of the New Testament. Three verses prior to Michael's battle with Satan, Jude describes the punishment of the fallen angels thus: "And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chaines under darknesse, unto the judgment of the great day (6)[6]. At least one critic has noted the apparent echo of Jude 6 in Book IV just prior to the appearance of the golden scales, as Gabriel threatens:

> . . . if from this hour
> Within these hallowed limits thou appear,
> Back to the infernal pit I drag thee chained,

And seal thee so, as henceforth not to scorn
The facile gates of hell too slightly barred (963 – 67)[7].

Jude 9 also provides one of only two occurrences in the Bible of the word "archangel."[8] Of particular interest in light of the action of Book IV of *Paradise Lost*, *Jude* 4 warns against deceivers and false teachers: "For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of olde ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the onely Lord God, & our Lord Jesus Christ." The headnote to *Jude* in the Authorized Version summarizes this threat in terms that also recall Satan's first visit to Eden: "Hee exhorteth them to bee constant in the profession of the faith. [...] *False teachers are crept in to seduce them*: for whose damnable doctrine and manners horrible punishment is prepared" (emphasis added). Finally, and more generally, *Jude* 9 pictures Michael and Satan standing over the body of Moses, with Michael looking to God to rebuke his arch-rival. This clash of angelic authorities with its rich dramatic potential and almost iconographic representation of the supernatural is, with the exception of the *Revelation to St. John*, rare in the New Testament.

We should begin our analysis of *Jude* 9 by noting that the dispute between Michael and Satan is essentially verbal. This fits nicely into the logic of *Paradise Lost*, in which, as Abdiel describes it,

he who in debate of truth hath won,
Should win in arms, in both disputes alike
Victor (VI: 122 – 4).

Debate precedes and, indeed, predicts the outcome of physical combat in Milton's reformulation of the rules of epic battles. Similarly, in *Jude*, "contending with the devil" means deciding between making "a railing accusation," or deferring to the divine prerogative. The author of *Jude* lauds Michael for choosing the latter, and the construction of the passage emphasizes as decisive his answer to Satan, "The Lord rebuke thee."

'Rebuke' has a narrow range of meaning but a deep resonance for the angels in *Paradise Lost*. To the angels, a rebuke is a species of correction that assumes and demonstrates the inferiority of the one being rebuked. The word 'rebuke' itself occurs only three times in the whole of the poem, and two of these are in reference to arguments between Satan and a good angel. In the first example, Uriel harangues Satan for molesting the Happy Pair, but Satan chafes against the "grave rebuke" (IV:

844) of his former subordinate. In another scene, this time in Book VI, the battle has paused in good epic fashion for the champions of each side to fight and possibly decide the outcome of the whole battle through single combat. When Michael ends a long, stern, Homeric lecture by smashing Satan's crown, the fallen rebel is carried on shields to his chariot,

> Gnashing for anguish and despite and shame
> To find himself not matchless, and his pride
> Humbled by such rebuke, so far beneath
> His confidence to equal God in power (VI: 340 – 3).

Rebuke is unbearable to Milton's Satan because it denies him the very status and dignity that he claimed as the reasons for his rebellion in the first place. In a sense, his view is consonant with the spirit of *Jude*, where Michael is praised for leaving the rebuking of Satan to God. But Milton chooses not to follow Jude's warnings about reviling angelic authorities, and as a result his good angels do not show deference to Satan. Ithuriel, Zephon, Gabriel, Abdiel, and Michael all do not hesitate to berate the infidel for his betrayal of their "grand Sire." But even in the midst of arguing with them, Satan always maintains that he should not have to, that he should, by right of his prelapsarian place, be above their rebuke.

But Satan soon learns that he is not. The pretender to the heavenly throne is repeatedly stung by the realization that those who were his subordinates are now able to stand before him and accuse him. We see this in his argument with Ithuriel and Zephon in Book IV, where Satan refuses to accept the idea that his "lustre" could be "visibly impaired" (IV: 850). Satan seems to believe, with *Jude*, that it is the Lord who is supposed to be rebuking him, not his angelic peers. However, though Satan aspires to be the rival of God, he can hardly manage to be the rival of his fellow angels, as even lowly Abdiel can stun him, or Ithuriel send him yelping with the touch of a spear.

During his encounters with the good angels Satan learns that he will probably never have the power to confront the Father directly. Indeed, by Book IX, he has become afraid even of human Adam:

> of courage haughty, and of limb
> Heroic built, though of terrestrial mould,
> Foe not informidable, exempt from wound,
> I not; so much hath hell debased, and pain

> Enfeebled me, to what I was in heaven (IX: 484 – 8).

But when he is arguing with the angels in Book IV, he still is flushed with pride and unwilling to let a rebuke stand uncontested.

If this is Milton's relation to Scripture, what, then, does *Jude* 9 have to offer him? First, as I mentioned above and will discuss in detail below, it provides a glimpse at supernatural conflict, a narrative version of a biblical principle never far from Milton's poetics:

> For wee wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darknes of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places (Ephesians 6:12).

Furthermore, it presents the possibility of play in the affairs of the absolute and suggests, in however brief a form, a partial solution to the narratological problems posed by the doctrine of predestination. *Jude* 9 demonstrates with canon authority that there is room for contention, for appeals to heaven, for a fight over a body. In fact, to later readers who lacked access to the *Assumption of Moses*, the verse is radically open. It does not explain how or if the angelic dispute was resolved, whether Michael's prayer/invocation was effectual, or the fate of Moses' body. Unless God is to be the only responsible agent in the epic, Milton must place him above and outside of the action of the poem. *Jude* 9 shows a dispute that God is presumed to have an important stake in, yet he remains absent until Michael calls upon him, and even then he seems to be located somewhere above the action of the scene. Jude's Michael asks God to rebuke Satan because God has given him agency in the conflict, an agency which he in turn resubmits to God.

III.

In the sixteenth book of the *Iliad*, Patroclus convinces Achilles to allow him to wear his divinely-crafted armor into battle to drive the advancing Trojans back from the Myrmidon ships. Clad in Achilles' armor, he leads a slaughter of the Trojans that culminates in the death of Sarpedon, the leader of the Lycians and a son of Zeus. After Sarpedon's death, his companion Glaucus prays to Apollo over the body of his fallen leader:

> And the best of men has perished, Sarpedon, the son of Zeus; and he does not protect even his own son. But you, lord, at least heal me of this terrible wound,

> and lull my pains, and give me might so that I may call to my comrades, the Lycians, and urge them to fight, and myself do battle about the body of him who has fallen in death (521 – 6).[9]

His prayer is briefly answered, and a bloody fight ensues over Sarpedon's body, until Zeus finally intervenes on behalf of Sarpedon's enemies:

> In Hector first of all he roused cowardly rout, and leapt on his chariot and turned to flight, and called on the rest of the Trojans to flee; for he recognized the holy scales of Zeus. (655 – 58)[10]

The convention of Zeus weighing human fates in his balance or golden scales has several other instances in the Iliad, but none fits the context of our passage in *Paradise Lost* so well as this. In Milton's scene, when the eternal "hung forth his golden scales " (IV: 997), Gabriel points out the sign to Satan who "knew his mounted scales aloft" (IV: 1013 – 4) and so flees. Alastair Fowler notes that the use of the balance in *Paradise Lost* "shows God has decided against there being any fight at all" (253 note l. 996). He then proceeds to gloss the passage with two references to the *Iliad* in which Zeus sets out his scales to decide the fate of a battle. Although elements of these other scenes appear in Milton's presentation of the scales, the context of Book IV more clearly evokes *Iliad* XVI. Only here is the balance perceptible to the warrior (as it is to Satan), and only here does the balance prevent a conflict instead of deciding its outcome, by prompting the ill-fated one to flee.

The first implication of a connection between *Iliad* XVI and *Paradise Lost* IV involves the role of traditional epic conventions and motifs in Milton's poem. The scene in question demarcates the dramatic space of the poem—the realm in which the conflict will be decided—as epic space. The first direct confrontation between good and evil in the poem occurs when Ithuriel and Zephon apprehend Satan in Adam and Eve's bower. In the scheme that I have proposed, this scene and the later hearing before Gabriel make up a dramatic configuration with Satan on one side and the good angels on the other, contending over the sleeping Adam and Eve while God looks down from heaven. This is analogous both to *Jude* 9, as I argue above, and to *Iliad* XVI, where Patroclus and Hector fight over the body of the fallen Sarpedon, and

> Nor did Zeus ever turn his gleaming eyes from the mighty combat, but ever looked down on them, and considered in his heart, debating much about the slaying of Patroclus... (644 – 6)

In all three versions of this scene, the opposing forces meet in the middle of the configuration. In *Paradise Lost*, this middle field is somewhere above the earth and beneath the throne of heaven—that is, in the realm of angels. It is here that Milton creates the poem's epic space. At each of the poles there is concord, between Father and Son or Adam and Eve, but in between the angels—unlikely inheritors of various heroic epic conventions—send out armed patrols, engage in games, and fight with each other. The creation of this space begins with the fight over Adam and Eve and its echoes of the battle over Sarpedon's body in Milton's archetypal epic model.

By making the angels the bearers of epic convention in his poem, Milton is reassessing traditional epic values, as he states in a familiar passage:

> Wars, hitherto the only argument
> Heroic deemed, chief mastery to dissect
> With long and tedious havoc fabled knights
> In battles feigned...
> Not that which justly gives heroic name
> To person or to poem (IX: 28 – 31, 40 – 1).

One of the implicit premises of *Paradise Lost* is the importance of humankind to God. In the first step toward the temptation and fall of man, Beelzebub brings this to Satan's attention in Book II, when he speaks to the infernal council,

> Of some new race called Man, about this time
> To be created like to us, though less
> In power and excellence, but favoured more
> Of him who rules above (348 – 51).

Beelzebub's rumor is confirmed both in the poem and the experience of Milton's reader: humans are the future. And so, as the angels are obsolesced by the creation of humankind, so the elements of heroic epic that they personify are also relegated to the past. Furthermore, even though the epic space seems to be where decisive action occurs, Milton makes this claim hollow by showing heaven's complete control of the outcome of the angelic conflicts.

To return to the fight over the body in *Iliad* XVI and *Paradise Lost* IV, we must consider the epic convention of the fight over the body of a slain warrior. In fact, the battle over Sarpedon's body begins a series of three such encounters that extends into

Book XVII of the *Iliad*. After Sarpedon's body has been stripped of its armor by the Achaeans and carried off by Apollo for burial, Hector's charioteer Cebriones falls to Patroclus. Hector and Patroclus then fight over his body, and the Greeks are able to strip the armor from his corpse. But the Trojans do not have to wait long for revenge. A few lines later Zeus decides that Patroclus' time has come and so sends Apollo to knock the borrowed armor from his back. As a result, Patroclos falls in battle. But no sooner does he finish his death speech than a battle for his own body begins.

In these scenes in the *Iliad*, the body functions as a locus for combat. Both the length of the poem and the length of the war necessitate the introduction of localized, personal conflicts with smaller stakes than the fate of Troy. To this end, the fallen body of a comrade or foe (and often his armor) becomes something, literally, to fight over. Homer, however, notes with some irony that once the conflict begins, the reason for fighting becomes somewhat obscured:

> No longer could a man, even a knowing one, have made out the godlike Sarpedon, since he was piled from head to ends of feet under a mass of weapons, the blood and the dust, while others about him kept forever swarming over his dead body (XVI: 637 – 41).

In *Paradise Lost*, the place of the body is occupied by the sleeping Adam and Eve. Ithuriel and Zephon are sent to the bower to protect them, and when they find Satan already there, they prevent him from further molesting Eve. The scene emphasizes human helplessness and vulnerability, especially when we consider that this is when Eve's temptation begins—while she is sleeping. Soon after the good angels begin questioning Satan, however, their focus shifts from Satan's designs on Adam and Eve to the possibility of an impending brawl. Thus the original concern—whether it is Moses' body, Sarpedon's body, or Adam and Eve—is forgotten when the dispute begins.

This lack of concern for Adam and Eve as such is in keeping with Satan's larger purposes in venturing to earth. For a few weak moments he lustfully considers human Eve "divinely fair, fit love for gods" (IX: 489), but then steels himself to his task of leading her to ruin. For him, the human couple offers a means of obstructing the divine will, of attacking the honor of his foe. In the fight over a body, those being fought over become mere symbols, place markers, questions of honor to spur on the conflict. Thus, in the same way that the body of Sarpedon provides the Trojans and Achaians with something to fight over, Adam and Eve are the grounds for the dispute between Satan and Gabriel and the others; they are, at once, objects for the good an-

gels to protect and Satan to corrupt, the locus of verbal combat, and the stakes in Milton's reluctantly heroic epic.

IV.

In a famous autobiographical digression that prefaces Book II of "The Reason of Church Government," the thirty-two year old John Milton reflects on his gifts as a writer and his industry as a reader, and determines to "leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die" (108). Interestingly, Milton's ambition marries his sense of a religious vocation with a nationalistic desire to give his "mother dialect" (108) a work worthy of its people:

> That what the greatest and choycest wits of Athens, Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for their country, I in my proportion with this over and above of being a Christian, might doe for mine (108).

Even in the midst of his self-appointed literary apprenticeship, more than seventeen years before he composed the lines that declared his intention of soaring "above the Aonian mount" and thereby transcending the achievement of the Greeks and Romans, Milton's canon makes no distinction between secular and sacred. Like Spenser before him, Milton's mythopoesis is characterized by an insatiable and indiscriminate appetite for literary raw material and new combinations of ideas. And also like Spenser, Milton remains untroubled by the need to reconcile fundamental differences in the philosophical and religious underpinnings of the works of the epic poets he draws upon.

In *The Return of Eden*, Northrop Frye observes that Milton's "ambition as a poet is to join the tradition of inspired prophetic speech that began with the great commission to Isaiah" (8) – a claim in keeping with Milton's own description of his project. But Frye goes on to argue that Milton eventually decided that his prophetic contribution should take the form of "the encyclopedic poem [...] a shape derived ultimately from the shape of the Bible" (9). Frye's ingenious generic argument is that the epic poem as Milton saw it spanned from the beginning to the end of time, with the Bible's journey from the creation in *Genesis* to the Last Judgment in *Revelation* as the great model. If we modulate from Frye's universal argument to the particular instance of intertextuality in the fight over the body examined above, we may observe the precise way in which the scope of Milton's project encompasses not only the 'length' of time involved between the imagined dawn and sunset of human culture, but its 'breadth' across cultures as well. That is, Milton's weaving of New Testament

teaching and Homeric plot and imagery in a work marked by seriousness of religious purpose—his making seamless what later writers could only render as pastiche -- is itself among the boldest of all of his apologetic claims.

【Notes】

1. On the canonical and textual history of *Jude*, see the summaries provided in Leaney 81 – 82 and Cranfield 145 – 48.

2. On the early authority of the *Book of Enoch*, see Charles 163 – 64.

3. Biblical passages are quoted from a facsimile edition of the Authorized Version of 1611, *The Holy Bible*, *King James Version*: *A Reprint of the Edition of 1611*. On the evidence that the Authorized Version was the Bible Milton "most frequently used and had most indelibly in his mind" (5), see Sims 4 – 6.

4. For an introduction to the *Assumption of Moses* and a translation of the surviving fragment (that unfortunately does not include the scene cited in *Jude*), see Charles 407 – 24. For a discussion of the relation of the fragment to the *Epistle of Jude*, see Charles 412 – 13, and Kelly 264 – 6.

5. My mentor James Nohrnberg might observe here that Milton's rewriting of *Genesis* and his claim to prophetic preeminence might constitute the poet's own fight over the body of Moses—in the sense of superseding the body of his work in the Pentateuch and usurping his place as the interlocutor between humankind and Yahweh.

6. The similarity between this verse and 2 Peter 2:4 —"For if God spared not the Angels that sinned, but cast them downe to hell, and delivered them into chains of darknesse, to be reserved unto judgement..." — has led many New Testament scholars to conclude that one book was the source for the other. See Leaney 77 – 88.

7. See Sims 263, citing Merritt Hughes.

8. The other is 1 *Thessalonians* 4:16. See Leaney 91.

9. Unless otherwise indicated, the *Iliad* is quoted from the Loeb Classical Library edition, translated by A. T. Murray.

10. Compare Richmond Lattimore's translation and its amplification of the message that the scale sends: "In Hektor first of all he put a temper that was without strength. He climbed to his chariot and turned to flight, and called to the other Trojans to run, *for he saw the way of Zeus' sacred balance* (655 – 8, emphasis added).

11. Even the War in Heaven belongs to the past and must be narrated to Adam by Raphael because it took place before he was created.

12. Insightful commentary on this passage from *The Reason of Church Government* can be found in Fisch 179 – 82.

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