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Ryan J. Stark

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# PARADISE LOST AS INCOMPLETE ARGUMENT

Ryan J. Stark

What in me is dark  
Illumin, what is low raise and support;  
That to the highth of this great Argument  
I may assert Eternal Providence,  
And justify the wayes of God to men.

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

That Majesty which through thy Work doth Reign  
Draws the devout, deterring the Profane.

—Andrew Marvell, “On *Paradise Lost*”

Merritt Hughes reads the phrase “this great Argument” to mean the overall subject matter of the poem.<sup>1</sup> John Shawcross, Dennis Danielson, and Harold Skulsky take the phrase as a more focused remark about the epic’s disputation strategy, especially the syllogism demonstrating God’s providence.<sup>2</sup> Both interpretations make

<sup>1</sup> Hughes, ed., *The Complete Poems and Major Prose* (Indianapolis: Odyssey Press, 1957), 212 n.24.

<sup>2</sup> Shawcross, “The Poet as Orator,” in Thomas Sloane and Raymond Waddington, eds., *The Rhetoric of Renaissance Poetry from Wyatt to Milton* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 5–36; Danielson, “The Fall and Milton’s Theodicy,” in Danielson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion*

sense, but the latter makes more sense. Milton disputes. He writes a theodicy justifying the ways of God to humanity, but his mode of composition—*furor poeticus*—complicates straightforward readings of the argument.

“*Furor poeticus*” means “poetical fury,” and the idea behind it in a Christian worldview is that God aids speakers in making their arguments, or, in pernicious circumstances, demons get involved. In either case, a mysterious force helps the author to compose.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, *furor* touches the readers or listeners, a point seldom discussed but nonetheless central to this sublime practice of writing. *Furor poeticus* requires *furor lectoris*.<sup>4</sup> Spirits help readers in understanding inspired language, as long as they participate earnestly in the discourse. Milton envisions such a “fit audience” in the third invocation to the Muse, where he calls upon the reader for hermeneutical verve, an inspired reading to complement his inspired writing (7.31). Indeed, he expects believing readers to contribute to the epic, to complete the “great Argument” through spirited exegesis. His method of composition demands it, which is to say that Milton leaves little room in *Paradise Lost*’s argument for the sustainable disposition of the uninspired reader.<sup>5</sup>

### ✱ Furor Poeticus ✱

Cicero explains *furor poeticus* and *furor lectoris* in *De divinatione*, where Quintus talks about how inspired readers experience the same type of fury as seers and prophets: “Men capable of correctly interpreting all these signs of the future seem to approach very near the divine spirit of the gods whose will they interpret, just as scholars do when they interpret the poets.”<sup>6</sup> Scholarship, in other words, is capable of tapping

to Milton, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 144–59; Skulsky, *Milton and the Death of Man: Humanism on Trial in “Paradise Lost”* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> On the origins of Christian *furor poeticus*, see A. C. Lloyd, “Greek Christian Platonism,” in A. H. Armstrong, ed., *The Cambridge History of Early Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 425–31. See also Courtland Baker, “Certain Religious Elements in the English Doctrine of the Inspired Poet During the Renaissance,” *English Literary History* 6 (1939): 300–23.

<sup>4</sup> “*Furor lectoris*” denotes the inspiration of the reader—the *lector*: “*lectoris*” is genitive.

<sup>5</sup> Some material in this article first appeared in my essay entitled “Some Aspects of Christian Mystical Rhetoric, Philosophy, and Poetry,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 41 (2008): 260–77. I thank the Pennsylvania State University Press for permission to draw upon my previous work.

<sup>6</sup> Cicero, *De divinatione*, trans. William Falconer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1938), 226.

into supernatural energy, making the scholars as prophetic as the poets on whom they write. In the second book of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine also discusses the importance of mystical exegesis as a form of prophecy, where the spirited reader undergoes the same type of inspiration as the spirited writer.<sup>7</sup> For Augustine, mystical hermeneutics begins with prayer and ends with revelation. In both accounts of *furor*, Cicero's and Augustine's, the inspired audience and the inspired writer together experience rapture, a divine vision or illumination—*visio dei*—during numinous arguments, which is exactly the type of argument that Milton makes in *Paradise Lost*.

William Kerrigan describes Milton's *furor* in some detail in *The Prophetic Milton*, citing the Socrates of the *Phaedrus* as an important classical source, and citing Moses on the mountain and Paul on the road to Damascus as key biblical sources.<sup>8</sup> Kerrigan, however, remains unimpressed:

One of the fine ironies of our literary history is that so many late medieval and renaissance poets labored in utmost seriousness with an essentially barbaric idea of poetic creation. They paid tribute to the residue of a savage and uncivilized past, great gentlemen imitating the manners of a brute. *Furor poeticus* is no urbane notion. Behind the refined beauty of the invocations in *Paradise Lost* lurks the dark vestige of the tribal priest, the demigod possessed, chanting in a frenzy beside the campfire.<sup>9</sup>

While Kerrigan envisions the murky heath as the backdrop for Milton's act of inspired writing, and by implication the fit audience's act of inspired reading, I envision something along the lines of Michelangelo's *Creation of Man*. Maren-Sofie Røstvig and Michael Fixler arrive at similarly edifying conclusions, perceiving in Milton's enchanted mode of authorship the outreaching and reforming passion of love, rather than the barbarous frenzy that Kerrigan discerns.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1958), 75–78.

<sup>8</sup> Kerrigan, *The Prophetic Milton* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1974), 24–30.

<sup>9</sup> Kerrigan, *The Prophetic Milton*, 46.

<sup>10</sup> Røstvig, "The Hidden Sense: Milton and the Neoplatonic Method of Numerical Composition," in *The Hidden Sense and Other Essays* (New York: Humanities Press, 1963), 1–112; Fixler, "Plato's Four *Furors* and the Real Structure of *Paradise Lost*," *PMLA* 92 (1977): 952–62.



Still, the idea of writers and readers seeking communion with the Divine is potentially unsettling. The notion produces concerns about psychosis, possession, and self-erasure. Plato famously expresses such anxiety in *Ion*, for example, where he compares spirited poets to maidens dancing frenetically by the riverside, an episode of bacchic madness that endangers participants and curious onlookers alike. Plato's commentary upon such *furor* is simple: Beware! Beware! Brian Vickers even uses the term "contradiction" to describe *furor poeticus*: "the problem that this concept poses is its contradiction between a theory of divine inspiration and one of rhetorical invention, with all its stress on planning and craftsmanship."<sup>11</sup> Kerrigan makes a similar point: "Milton is both author and amanuensis. He has both everything to do and nothing to do with *Paradise Lost*."<sup>12</sup> These critics emphasize the paradoxical nature of *furor poeticus*, pointing out how mysterious inspiration simultaneously depends upon and erases individual agency, but most mainstream mystical writers do not perceive such a conflict in this mode of composition. In *De genealogia deorum gentilium*, for instance, Boccaccio expresses the more common idea: "However deeply the poetic impulse stirs the mind to which it is granted, it very rarely accomplishes anything commendable if the instruments by which its concepts are to be wrought out are wanting—I mean, for example, the precepts of grammar and rhetoric, an abundant knowledge of which is opportune."<sup>13</sup> Using "abundant knowledge," the poet plays a significant role in mystical writing, as Boccaccio notes, but not the only role. Boccaccio explains *furor poeticus* as a communion with the spiritual world, not a possession by the spiritual world, and certainly not a surrendering of agency or free will. Writers do not get obliterated in moments of inspiration. Rather, writers draw upon Spirit, and together they produce texts. Likewise, fit readers play a key role through mystical hermeneutics, but not the only role. The inspired audience participates in the numinous disputation, but like the inspired poet, the inspired reader does not control the argument alone. A supernatural rhetorical communion occurs. This is precisely the type of communion that

<sup>11</sup> Vickers, "Rhetoric and Poetics," in Charles Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Kessler, and Jill Kraye, eds., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 738.

<sup>12</sup> Kerrigan, *The Prophetic Milton*, 138.

<sup>13</sup> Boccaccio, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, trans. Charles Osgood (New York: Library of Liberal Arts, 1956), 40.

Milton seeks with his readers.<sup>14</sup> Or, put differently, Milton has always been an advocate of reader-response theory, just not the one advanced by Roland Barthes, where “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”<sup>15</sup> Such loss is undesirable and—in the framework of *furor poeticus*—nonsensical.

Milton identifies the participatory nature of the epic’s “great Argument” in Book VII’s invocation, paying special attention to Urania’s crucial role in aiding the poet and the fit audience:

Half yet remains unsung, but narrower bound  
 Within the visible Diurnal Sphere;  
 Standing on Earth, not rapt above the Pole,  
 More safe I Sing with mortal voice, unchang’d  
 To hoarse or mute, though fall’n on evil days,  
 On evil days though fall’n, and evil tounge;  
 In darkness, and with dangers compast round,  
 And solitude; yet not alone, while thou  
 Visit’st my slumbers Nightly, or when Morn  
 Purples the East: still govern thou my Song,  
*Urania*, and fit audience find, though few. (7.21–31)

“Half yet remains unsung” cleverly calls attention to the fact that the invocation appears in the middle of the epic, but Milton also makes a deeper claim here. He suggests that the human being is capable only of singing half of the “great Argument,” with the caveat that the Spirit must provide the other half. Half of the epic always remains unsung by the mortal voice. The writer and the readers need God’s intervention. This passage reveals Milton’s understanding of the Spirit’s role in mystical poetry and, too, in numinous hermeneutics. That is, the Muse also finds the fit audience. The Spirit supplies a crucial part of the argument. The Muse must “support” the poet and the reader in the opening invocation, must “plant eyes” capable of seeing things “invisible to mortal sight” in the

<sup>14</sup> As Simone Broders suggests, Milton “does not allow the reader to sit back and await the Horatian *prodesse et delectare*,” but rather he calls upon the reader “to participate actively” in the “theodicy” (“Theodicy and Paradox in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,” in Rudolf Freiburg and Susanne Gruss, eds., *But Vindicate the Ways of God to Men: Literature and Theodicy* [Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2004], 82).

<sup>15</sup> Barthes, “Death of the Author,” in Stephen Heath, ed. and trans., *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill, 1977), 147.

second invocation, must temper the “Empyrean Aire” in the third, and finally must “dictate” a style in the last (1.23, 3.53–55, 7.14, 9.23). At every turn, the mortal voice is capable of supplying only part of what is needed for the argument to work, and so the writer and the readers must hold out faith that the “Heav’nly Muse” will intercede—infusing the epic’s rhetoric with “vital warmth” and “vital virtue” (7.236).

Stanley Fish and Thomas Sloane read this passage differently. Against the idea that the poet and the readers need help from God, Fish argues that the mortal voice protects the poet and audience from the tyranny of Urania’s celestial song: “In a celestial song no one can be said to be doing the singing; rather, everyone is sung by an informing presence whose precedence is endlessly and involuntarily declared.”<sup>16</sup> Fish sees the role of God in the epic as oppressive, even treacherous, trying to circumscribe human agency. But Fish’s argument—that Milton with a mortal voice defends himself against God in the third invocation—simply mischaracterizes the poet’s sermonic motives, not to mention the fit audience’s hermeneutical motives. Milton freely seeks out the Muse, as does the fit audience. The Spirit does not possess the writer and reader in a malevolent way; rather, the Spirit enters into the disputation, introducing into the argument an edifying mystical element: revelatory *furor*. The Spirit communes with humanity, and the harmony of the celestial song, far from being imposed upon humanity, is itself comprised in part by the mortal voice’s expression of freedom in worship of God. The poet and the audience connect with the Spirit. The invocations are therefore interactive, warm, and cooperative, not frigid. Any suggestion that the poet and the audience are “sung by and informing presence” (that is, they lack the freedom to sing or not to sing) is simply inconsistent with Milton’s belief in free will: “Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (3.99).

In the opposite direction, Sloane reads this invocation not as a threat to the poet’s autonomy, but rather as a mere formality further supporting Milton’s heroic ethos, a persona who enjoys a contented sense of the truth: “The appeal to the spirit is formal in a limited sense—*pro forma*, literally, for it is an epic convention—and not urgent; the very joy and confidence of the singer...show that the appeal has been answered.”<sup>17</sup> The invocations

<sup>16</sup> Fish, “With Mortal Voice: Milton Defends against the Muse,” *English Literary History* 62 (1995): 513.

<sup>17</sup> Sloane, *Donne, Milton, and the End of Humanist Rhetoric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 213.

on this reading function as mere scaffolding that uplifts the elected poet, and the Spirit operates like a stage prop of sorts. C. A. Patrides, Shawcross, and others have successfully challenged the idea that the poet is at ease in these invocations, which are full of a human frailty and anxiety balanced only by faith.<sup>18</sup> And this leads to a larger point against critics who cast the poet as a monological deliverer of truth and the invocations as *pro forma* performances, rather than enthymematic engagements. The poet needs the Spirit and the fit audience to participate in the epic at every turn, to supply that sense of heartfelt communion, if the theodicy is to work and is to continue to work. Sloane sets aside these supernatural and dialogic aspects of *Paradise Lost's* argument, which causes him to mischaracterize the significance of the proemiums. The invocations are urgent at every moment, then and now, if the readers are to join the poet in the mystical disputation.<sup>19</sup> The invocations have a participatory quality that makes them recurrently relevant with each new reading of the text, which affords new chances of communion and illumination through supernatural transfers of energy.

### ✱ Mysterious Enthymemes ✱

In ancient logic and rhetoric, arguments that require a participatory audience to fill in gaps are commonly referred to as "enthymemes," an idea familiar to Milton. He first mentions the enthymeme in *An Apology for Smectymnuus* (1642), where he complains about a prelate who "wreaths an enthymemea with maistrous dexterity" in order to confuse an audience.<sup>20</sup> In this instance, Milton critiques the disingenuous use of logic, rather than the idea of the enthymeme itself. That is, he complains about sophists who use enthymemes to obfuscate ideas. Milton returns to the concept of the

<sup>18</sup> C. A. Patrides, *Milton and the Christian Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 187–219; Shawcross, *With Mortal Voice: The Creation of "Paradise Lost"* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1982), 12–20. See also Joseph Wittreich, "Reading Milton," *Milton Studies* 38 (2000): 10–46.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Johnson seems not to appreciate the urgency of the invocations, except perhaps the first one: "The short digressions at the beginning of the third, seventh, and ninth books might doubtless be spared; but superfluities so beautiful who would take away?" ("Life of Milton," in George Birkbeck Hill, ed., *Lives of the English Poets*, 3 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905], 1:175).

<sup>20</sup> Milton, *An Apology for Smectymnuus* (London, 1642), 5.

enthymeme in an “Appendix” to the *Art of Logic* (1672), where he provides a straightforward definition indebted to Boethius: “if any part of a syllogism is lacking this is called an enthymeme.”<sup>21</sup> In enthymematic modes of argument stemming from Boethius, the disputer presents part of a syllogism, and the audience must furnish the missing elements. Milton provides a simple example: “Themistocles was allowed to leave the city, therefore I am allowed to do so.”<sup>22</sup> In order to agree to the argument, the audience must supply the idea that what is allowable for Themistocles is also allowable for the narrator. The audience must make an inferential leap, and importantly they must consent. Successful enthymeming depends upon the right disposition in the audience, a willingness to search for truth with the writer. As a structure, the enthymeme presupposes an active reader in a way that transcends constricted and dispassionate forms of reasoning. The audience, in other words, plays a genuinely dialogic and rhetorical role in enthymemes; they participate in the construction of arguments.

More sophisticated examples of enthymeming involve elements such as irony and humor. Irony is always touched by an enthymematic structure, in that the audience must supply the real but silent premise behind the ironic proposition. If a shy person is characterized as too gregarious, for instance, or if a brutally honest diatribe is met with the response, “please tell me how you really feel,” then we must enthymeme the truths behind the statements. Or, when the demonically defiant Macbeth lashes out at the cosmos, the audience must enthymeme the deeper reality behind the sound and fury speech. Macbeth’s anti-wisdom—that life is a tale signifying nothing—must be recognized as such, or the tragic irony is lost and a perversion of instinct occurs: anti-wisdom becomes wisdom for those who do not enthymeme. Comedy in argumentation works in a similarly enthymematic way. If an audience

<sup>21</sup> Milton, *A Fuller Course in the Art of Logic*, in Douglas Bush et al., *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958–82), 6:386. Boethius and Milton’s shared definition of the enthymeme (*De topicis differentiis*, trans. Eleanor Stump [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978], 45) departs from Aristotle’s (*Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts [New York: Modern Library, 1984], 1355a–1357a). Boethius takes Aristotle to speak about the structure of an argument (a truncated syllogism), not the content (an argument with probable premises), which is what Aristotle intends, at least in some places. These rival ideas, however, share a crucial assumption about the need for audience participation, and in this sense they have substantial overlap. On competing definitions of the enthymeme, see Thomas Conley, “The Enthymeme in Perspective,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 168–87.

<sup>22</sup> Milton, *A Fuller Course in the Art of Logic*, 6:386.

fails to laugh at the right time during a demonstration, then the argument will more than likely suffer. Few things are more rhetorically ineffective than lobbing a lead balloon. In comedic scenarios, laughing functions as a form of transferring pathos enthymematically. For instance, *Tristram Shandy's* argument about the mind's often idiosyncratic and nonlinear associations of ideas is funny or unfunny to the degree that we play along with the book's whimsical structures. Laurence Sterne expects a lot from his readers, perhaps too much at times, and if readers are unwilling to struggle to make sense of various episodes (for example, the ringing of the dinner bell, the marble page), then some of the humor proves dreadfully inchoate. The same should be said of Jonathan Swift's intricate irony, or of Martinus Scriblerus's peculiar allusions. *Paradise Lost's* "great Argument" requires this more complex type of audience response. But instead of depending upon readers for ironic supplement or appropriate laughter, Milton depends upon readers for hermeneutical *furor*, all the while relying upon God for revelatory *furor*. *Paradise Lost* is no ordinary argument; rather, it is a mystical enthymeme.

In most instances of enthymeming, disputers do not share the missing premise, but they know it. Or, at least they know where they want to try to guide the audience. Although such a maneuver is dialogic, there is no deep mystery in the argument. Disputers have grasped the entire syllogism, and they invite readers to participate in grasping it as well. In the case of *Paradise Lost's* argument, however, neither writer nor reader possesses the missing premise that allows for an apprehension of God's eternal providence. They both lack the element that makes the epic's theodicy work. This is a remarkable circumstance, and one that requires intervention from a third source: Spirit. God bridges the ontological gap, the metaphysical *lacunae*, between mortal understanding and God's ways. The Spirit provides revelatory *furor*, allowing for inspired writing and reading. This *furor* is missing from the explicitly stated components of Milton's argument, rather than a particular proposition or a specific bit of ordinary knowledge. It would be a mistake, for instance, to discuss the incompleteness of *Paradise Lost* in simple logical terms, to describe missing propositions, hidden exigencies, and so forth.<sup>23</sup> Such conventional approaches to the epic's logic are

<sup>23</sup> The distinction between *what* is said or heard and *how* something is said or heard is worth recalling here, because the *how* is key. The proposition by itself is not enough. The lover, for example, reads the love letter differently than the non-lover.

of little help.<sup>24</sup> The truth that the Muse supplies is not cold knowledge alone, the dispassionate logos of modern rationalism. Rather, the Muse supplies an “upheaval of thought,” to borrow a phrase from Martha Nussbaum, a logical-ethical-mystical apprehension of love and purpose, where pathos functions as the core epistemological medium.<sup>25</sup> If the “great Argument” of *Paradise Lost* feels right, then it feels right in the heart, at the very crux of being (that is, the “*thymos*”), which is where God enters into the epic’s rhetoric.<sup>26</sup>

Admittedly, the idea of mystical enthymeming is unusual by most contemporary standards of argumentation, but it is certainly not without precedent. Christopher Marlowe alludes to a version of it in *Faustus*, a drama that illustrates the effect of communing with perfidious spirits, which is the dire alternative to edifying forms of *furor poeticus*. Dr. Faustus says with nefarious delight that he has with “shadows” and “concise syllogisms / Gravelled the pastors of the German church, / And made the flowering pride of Wittenberg / Swarm” to him like the “infernal spirits” swarmed to Cornelius “Agrippa” (1.112–18). The not-so-good doctor’s concise or truncated syllogisms are enthymemes. While searching for a way to characterize preternatural disputation, Marlowe finds the enthymeme. Through *Faustus*, however, he explores the nature of demonic enthymeming, where the speaker depends upon

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Dennis Burden, *The Logical Epic: A Study of the Argument of “Paradise Lost”* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967). Phrases like “occult logic” and “occult rhetoric” are invaluable in this case, where the Spirit plays a crucial role, and a decidedly positive role. I am certainly arguing against apophatic approaches to the epic’s theology, for the simple reason that Milton’s vision of God is that of an accessible and engaging deity—one who responds to heartfelt enthymemes. For more on Milton’s numinous ideas about logic and rhetoric, see Walter Ong, “Logic & the Epic Muse,” in Michael Leib and John Shawcross, eds., *Achievements of the Left Hand: Essays on the Prose of John Milton* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974), 239–68; Ong, “Introduction,” in Ong and Charles J. Ermatinger, eds. and trans., *A Fuller Course in the Art of Logic*, in *Complete Prose Works of Milton*, 8 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 8:139–205; Peter Fisher, “Milton’s Logic,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22 (1962): 37–60.

<sup>25</sup> Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> Such a conception of enthymematic transfer as a kind of *furor* goes to the core of the enthymeme’s nature in logic and rhetoric. “*Thymos*” is the root of enthymeme, which means in Greek “soul” or “heart,” the seat of emotions, desires, and core ideals that drive human agency, as Arthur Miller and John Bee demonstrate (“Body and Soul,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 5 [1972]: 201–14). Perhaps Blaise Pascal had this idea in mind when he said, “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing” (*Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer [New York: Penguin, 1995], 127).

shadows to participate in his argument, which is why the German pastors remain “gravelled”—refusing to enter into John of Wittenberg’s profane inferences. Abraham Cowley, Milton’s contemporary and the sometimes spokesperson for the new science, also alludes to mysterious enthymeming. He describes how the prophet “Isaiah” passes “from one thing to another with almost invisible connexions,” adding that these types of ancient mystical styles recall “disputing in enthymemes, where half is left out to be supplied by the Hearer.”<sup>27</sup> Cowley uses the idea of the enthymeme to characterize the nature of prophetic utterances, noting in particular how Isaiah’s *furor poeticus* requires active inferences on the parts of knowing readers. That is, audiences respond enthymematically, and also with the aid of the Spirit, given the context of biblical hermeneutics. Contrarily, Cowley suggests in a far more positive tone that the new philosophers’ plain way of writing is “like disputing in [complete] syllogisms, where all that is meant is expressed,” an argument that celebrates the new science’s rejection of all things mysterious and dappled, and one that anticipates the Royal Society’s apotheosis of rhetorical transparency a few years later.<sup>28</sup> In order to express the nature of numinous disputation, Marlowe and Cowley refer to the enthymeme. In doing so, they provide a fine clue for how Milton’s argument operates.

### \* The Great Enthymeme \*

The “great Argument” of *Paradise Lost* proceeds as follows: humanity falls because of disobedience and brings profound suffering into the world. God redeems the world through Jesus Christ, to the greater glory of both God and humanity. Therefore, God is provident. Adam, in fact, marvels at how God uses human failure to create an even more sublime reality through salvation, making the fall a fortunate one—*felix culpa*:

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!  
That all this good of evil shall produce,  
And evil turn to good; more wonderful

<sup>27</sup> Cowley, *Poems*, A. R. Waller, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), 214.

<sup>28</sup> Cowley, *Poems*, 214.



Than that which by creation first brought forth  
 Light out of darkness! (12.470–74)

There are other subplots embedded in the argument. Leon Howard, for example, shows that the fall was due to all four types of causes in Aristotelian philosophy, while John Diekhoff argues that Adam's uxoriousness ultimately brings about his collapse.<sup>29</sup> More recently, Virginia Mollenkott and Catherine Martin rightly emphasize that God's grace is the fortunate part of the fall, not sin itself, which was also Arthur Lovejoy's position.<sup>30</sup> All of these accounts provide valuable insights into Milton's perception of the fall and the problem of evil, but they do very little to convince any type of audience that God is provident. A gap remains. Adam and Eve's disobedience brings into the cosmos what appears to be a disproportionate amount of anguish. If applying the classical concept of *kairos*—right timing and proper measure—to the consequences of eating the fruit, then we are hard-pressed to apprehend the timing (all of history) and the measure (mortal death for everyone) of God's response, a point that Walter Raleigh advances when he describes *Paradise Lost* as "a monument to dead ideas," where the doctrine of *felix culpa* figures prominently among them.<sup>31</sup> Raleigh's point is that the "great Argument" in *Paradise Lost* will never sound compelling in the context of worldly disputation, and by such standards will never justify God's ways to humanity. He is right. Otherworldly disputation is needed.

C. S. Lewis makes a similar case, suggesting that readers must start by accepting providence as a matter of trust, just as one accepts the midnight prohibition in Cinderella, in order to comprehend the narra-

<sup>29</sup> Leon Howard, "A Study in the Logic of God's Ways to Men," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 9 (1946): 149–73; John Diekhoff, *A Commentary Upon the Argument* (New York: Humanities Press, 1946).

<sup>30</sup> Virginia Mollenkott, "Milton's Rejection of the Fortunate Fall," *Milton Quarterly* 6 (1972): 1–5; Catherine Martin, "The Sources of Milton's Sin Reconsidered," *Milton Quarterly* 35 (2001): 1–8; Lovejoy, "Milton and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall," *English Literary History* 4 (1937): 161–79.

<sup>31</sup> Raleigh, *Milton* (London: E. Arnold, 1900), 70. On *kairos*, see Paul Tillich, "Logos and Kairos," in N. A. Rasetzki and Elsa Talmay, trans., *The Interpretation of History* (New York: Scribner's, 1936), 123–75; Laurie Zwicky, "Kairos in *Paradise Regained*: The Divine Plan," *English Literary History* 31 (1964): 271–77; James Kinneavy, "Kairos: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric," in Jean Dietz Moss, ed., *Rhetoric and Praxis: The Contribution of Classical Rhetoric to Practical Reasoning* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1986), 79–105.

tive's machinery.<sup>32</sup> The principle at work here is an ancient one, expressed by Augustine in a memorable antimetabole: "For understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that thou may understand."<sup>33</sup> Milton believes, and he also expects his audience to believe, not as a concluding realization, but as a starting point—the first step toward understanding. Even then, even with belief, only God can open the mortal heart to the actuality of eternal providence. God must intervene. Neither human will nor the cogency of a logical formula by itself can yield the mystery of *felix culpa*, despite how elegant the logic is (for example, Gottfried Leibniz's theodicy).<sup>34</sup> This explanation will more than likely prove unsatisfying to the dissenting reader of Milton's disputation, and it is difficult to know how to respond to such a complaint, except to reiterate the enthymematic nature of the argument: Milton asks God and the fit audience to complete the theodicy. He is not invested in satisfying all possible objections to his argument, or even most objections. He writes a justification of God's ways for those who desire mystical communion, not for skeptics, cynics, and agnostics. Sharon Achinstein makes a related claim about the nature of Milton's fit readers, suggesting that he addresses a completely partisan political audience.<sup>35</sup> Achinstein is on the right track, though her thesis is too provincial. Milton's interest in the fit audience extends far beyond the confines of Restoration politics and into the realm of numinous theology. The idea of the fit reader is not as historically specific as Achinstein contends; rather, it is elastic, encompassing and anticipating sympathetic readers throughout subsequent ages.

In addition to the mystery of *felix culpa*, readers of Milton's theodicy confront another conundrum of sorts, at least as numerous critics have suggested, and this is the problem of Satan's alluring ethos. William Blake and Percy Shelly most famously take the Devil's side in the argument. Blake accuses Milton of being "of the Devil's party without knowing it."<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Lewis, *A Preface to "Paradise Lost"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 70.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, trans. John Rettig, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994): 29.6.

<sup>34</sup> Gottfried Leibniz, *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrer, trans. E. M. Huggard (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952). While Leibniz's theodicy is rationalistic and deductive (the best of all possible worlds), Milton's theodicy is thoroughly mystical; it requires spirited reading.

<sup>35</sup> Achinstein, *Milton and the Revolutionary Reader* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 179.

<sup>36</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, with an Introduction and Commentary by Geoffrey Keynes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), xvii.

Shelly exalts the Satan of *Paradise Lost*, characterizing him as “a moral being...far superior to his God.”<sup>37</sup> These poets elevate Milton’s Devil to the status of epic hero. Through this line of reasoning, Milton suffers the worst kind of ironic reversal, unwittingly promoting the exact opposite of what he aims to prove, not a justification of God’s ways, but a justification of the Devil’s rebellion. More recently, and with more postmodern indecisiveness, Fish, John Carey, and Simone Broders identify ambivalence in Milton’s Satan, rather than uncomplicated heroism. Fish discovers in Satan an often sympathetic and kindred spirit.<sup>38</sup> Broders describes a Devil who “oscillates” between “tragic hero” and “vice figure,” thus creating an irresolvable “logical tension” in the epic.<sup>39</sup> Carey contends that the poem “is insolubly ambivalent, insofar as the reading of Satan’s character is concerned.”<sup>40</sup> This line of criticism frustrates the hope for a stable theodicy (a stable enthymeme) in *Paradise Lost*, because it fundamentally muddles the difference between good and evil, if the claim of ambivalent Satanism is to be taken seriously. Should it be?

The idea that Milton leaves room in *Paradise Lost* for an ambiguous attitude toward the Devil—the embodiment of evil, the Prince of Lies—is the fantasy of dissenting readers. It is a consequence of fallacious enthymeming. Such ambivalence is not native to Milton’s sensibility, and neither does the evidence support it. From the start, Satan appears as a grandiloquent figure, void of any real concern for others and incapable of engaging in genuine conversation. His eloquence is best suited for self-important courtly displays, not for enlivening transfers of pathos. Longinus has a word for this sort of overstuffed rhetoric: *psychrotita* (ψυχρότητα), which often translates as “failed sublimity” or “false wit.”<sup>41</sup> The word

<sup>37</sup> Bysshe Shelley, “On the Devil, and Devils,” in Harry Buxton Forman, ed., *Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 8 vols. (London: Reeves and Turner, 1880), 5:388–89.

<sup>38</sup> Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in “Paradise Lost”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 12.

<sup>39</sup> Broders, “Theodicy and Paradox,” 82.

<sup>40</sup> Carey, “Milton’s Satan,” in Dennis Danielson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 131–46.

<sup>41</sup> James Arieti and John Crossett translate “psychrotita” as “false wit,” but they clarify the term in their annotations upon *On the Sublime*: “Literally, the word means ‘coldness,’ and is applied to snow, air, and dead things; by extension it is applied to a cold-hearted person, and then to one who is flat, lifeless, insipid” (*On the Sublime*, James Arieti and John Crossett, eds. and trans [New York: Mellon Press, 1985], 25). For more on the Devil’s frigid rhetoric, see my article on the subject, “Cold Styles: On Milton’s Critiques of Frigid Rhetoric in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Quarterly* 37 (2003): 21–30.

literally means "frigidity," and in Greek rhetoric it connotes the cold conveyances of grandiose speakers. The Devil represents the apex of frigidity in *Paradise Lost*, and so Milton rightly creates for Satan the most deadening type of eloquence imaginable, unable to produce warmth and instead designed to evacuate life itself from the audience. Satan's rhetoric is vampiric; it leaves readers cold, which is to say that Milton's Devil does not bring insoluble logical ambivalence to *Paradise Lost's* theodicy.

Milton assumes a believing reader, and he proceeds from this assumption. To encourage belief, therefore, is not the aim of the argument. The purpose instead is to facilitate understanding, which arrives after belief and exclusively by way of the Spirit's intervention, not by the poet's explanation. Belief is the precondition, opening the readers' hearts to the possibility of understanding through a supernatural transfer of energy (*furor*), which takes the form of a mystical enthymeme. *Paradise Lost's* theodicy justifies providence, but only for those believers who participate in it. Or, in other words, Marvell's description of the "great Argument" is apt: it draws the devout and deters the profane.

### \* Conclusion \*

Mystical enthymeming faded in many mainstream academic circles with the onset of deism (for example, John Toland's *Christianity not Mysterious*) and modern skepticism (for example, David Hume's "Of Miracles"), but it certainly did not disappear, as is evidenced by Kierkegaard's provocative reference to the enthymeme in his explanation of the leap of faith: "In the final analysis, what I call a transition of pathos [in God's response to the leap of faith]" might also be "called an enthymeme."<sup>42</sup> The structure of the Kierkegaardian leap is enthymematic, in that the leaper needs an intervention from God in order to complete the act of leaping. God enters into the communication and uplifts the leaper by supplying the grace that allows for faith. God responds. Similarly, Milton solicits such intervention from the Spirit, and he also expects audiences to solicit such intervention. Put differently, Milton builds a *deus ex machina* clause into the epic's argument, a "God of the gaps" idea, which must not be read as cold or formulaic, as *deus ex machina* structures sometimes function in medieval

<sup>42</sup> Kierkegaard, "Papers," in *Journals and Papers*, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, eds. and trans., 7 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1967-78), 3:33.

drama. In this case, the Muse's intervention operates in a personal, loving, and entymematic way, and in a necessary way. Without God's involvement, the poet of *Paradise Lost* would fail to justify God's ways. The writer would plummet, and without Divine intervention, the reader would plummet as well, or, to use a phrase from George Herbert's "Easter Wings," the reader would become "Most poore."<sup>43</sup>

Milton calls upon the Spirit of God for inspiration. He also calls upon the fit audience to complete the "great Argument" by imbuing the epic with hermeneutical heartfeltness. Milton writes a numinous proof, making *Paradise Lost* a site of sublime communion for the writer, the reader, and the Spirit, and also making the composition inscrutable to ordinary rationality, like all other texts that participate earnestly in the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of the Christian cosmos. In such a supernatural ontology, the writer and the reader must first believe in order to understand, or, more appropriate to Milton's mystical sensibility, they must first move (leap!) in order to know.

<sup>43</sup> George Herbert, *The Temple* (Cambridge, 1633), 35.