

# DOMINION UNDESERVED



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*Milton and the Perils of Creation*

ERIC B. SONG

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CPW</i>	<i>Complete Prose Works of John Milton</i>
<i>FQ</i>	The Faerie Queene
<i>PL</i>	<i>Paradise Lost</i>
<i>PN</i>	Richard Hakluyt, <i>The Principal Navigations</i>
<i>PR</i>	<i>Paradise Regained</i>
<i>SA</i>	<i>Samson Agonistes</i>



# DOMINION UNDESERVED



## INTRODUCTION

After the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660, John Milton found himself estranged from his native country.<sup>1</sup> During these evil days, Milton was briefly imprisoned and in some danger of execution for having passionately defended the beheading of the restored king's father. Milton's dire situation occasions a dour etymological joke in his last surviving piece of correspondence, dated August 15, 1666. Milton's friend Peter Heimbach had praised him in writing for his personal and civic virtues. Milton responds by objecting, "One of those Virtues has not so pleasantly repaid to me the charity of hospitality, however, for the one you call *Policy* (and which I would prefer you call *Patriotism*), after having allured me by her lovely name, has almost *expatriated* me, as it were." Milton goes on to remark soberly, "One's *Patria* is wherever it is well with him." Heimbach had addressed his letter to "a most noble and celebrated man, John Milton, Englishman," echoing the signature that Milton had himself used often throughout his career. Milton's response, however, is tersely signed,

“London, August 15, 1666” (*CPW* 8:2–4). Proud national identification gives way to mere facts of time and place.<sup>2</sup>

These difficult lessons anticipate key questions in the great epic that would be published for the first time a year later. In the first book of *Paradise Lost*, Satan grapples with the trauma of exile from his heavenly home:

Farewell happy fields  
Where joy forever dwells: hail horrors, hail  
Infernal world, and thou profoundest hell  
Receive thy new possessor: one who brings  
A mind not to be changed by place or time.  
The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.  
What matter where, if I be still the same.

(1.249–56)<sup>3</sup>

In an effort to cheer his fallen troops (and, most likely, himself as well), Satan gives voice to the author’s sense of expatriation and its potentially salutary consequences. This optimistic position quickly proves untenable. In book 2 the devils reject the option of reigning contentedly in Hell, and Satan assumes the role of explorer. Once Satan alights upon the newly created world, he discovers that the answer to his rhetorical question “What matter where?” remains the same only because he carries Hell within him wherever he goes. Milton’s reader would note this just punishment with satisfaction but for the fact that Satan’s voyage of unhappy self-discovery precipitates the loss of Eden.

Milton’s late writings apply intense intellectual and artistic force to pursue a set of basic questions. What underlying causes lead to the loss of a seemingly happy homeland? What can be done to recuperate or to found a better home, literal or metaphorical? In this book I argue that these investigations confront a fundamental impasse, whereby all forms of creativity are rendered internally divided in Milton’s writings. Any coherent entity—a nation, a poem, or even a new world—must be carved out of and guarded against an original unruliness. Despite being sanctioned by God, this agonistic mode of creativity proves ineffective because it continues to manifest internal rifts rather than overcoming them. To explore the question of original causes, Milton traces the problems that beset creativity to



divine creation itself. His answers become necessarily divided. On the one hand, a pervasive sense of unruly origins serves as motivation to reform the self, the nation, language, and eventually the entire world. On the other hand, the atavistic knowledge that no force has ever fully succeeded in suppressing chaotic beginnings casts doubt on these forward-looking projects. Such ambivalence bears consequences for the practical question of what should be done. Milton consistently prescribes political and religious reform. Yet Milton's later writings give voice to a sobering awareness that reform assumes the preexistence of a form—nationhood, epic poetry, or a divine kingdom—that proves unstable because of its origins.

Rather than being stymied, Milton's writings derive artistic and political urgency by operating within and testing the limits of this impasse. Milton thus emerges as a great poet of multiple perspectives, of the *either/or/or* rather than of the *either/or*. His writings exhibit what Gordon Teskey has described as a rarefied form of delirium.<sup>4</sup> Milton's delirium, according to Teskey, results from an oscillation between divine creation (and its concomitant, human creatureliness) and human creativity, between a past that has been conferred on us and a future that we might be able to shape. *Dominion Undeserved* offers a new account of the conflicted impulses that give rise to Milton's writings. The argument traces Milton's artistic, theological, and political energies to a single, shared dilemma. My approach thus responds to readings of Milton that achieve clarity by subordinating political concerns to religious ones. In *How Milton Works*, Stanley Fish accumulates decades of scholarship to present a comprehensive view of Milton's writings. For Fish, Milton's poetry and prose constitute a unified effort to negotiate between perfect and fallen visions of the truth, and thereby to spur the reader to creaturely obedience before the Creator.<sup>5</sup> More recently, David Ainsworth has described Milton's writings as training the reader in a discipline of godly hermeneutics. Although Fish's and Ainsworth's readings register the occasional purposes of Milton's writings, exigent and historically situated concerns become subordinated to a general religious pattern. According to Ainsworth, for example, Milton's reader learns to prioritize "spiritual concerns and sacred truths over worldly philosophy and politics."<sup>6</sup> In this book I locate the unified logic of Milton's major writings and aim to show that spiritual and worldly concerns come into sharper focus through their connections. In the chapters that follow, I discuss various manifestations of Milton's divided view

of creativity: allusions to the barbarism of the so-called Eastern Tartars; Milton's engagements with country house poetry and accounts of the New World; Milton's half-articulated thoughts about Anglo-Irish affairs after the Restoration; questions about how the Son of God seeks to overcome the politics of undeserved dominion. Together, however, these discussions present a totalizing—although by no means exhaustive—view of how Milton works in response to a systemic problem that besets not only sinful humanity but also an entire cosmos governed by an all-powerful deity.<sup>7</sup>

Tracing Milton's convictions to a basic impasse allows us to avoid inaccuracies that hinder our understanding of his writings. It has been possible to describe Milton as simply representing or even harmonizing conflicting possibilities.<sup>8</sup> Milton is the great poet of multiple perspectives, but co-existing perspectives are not mere equivalents.<sup>9</sup> I describe how the force of Milton's artistry lies in turning genuine contradictions into the grounds of focused commentary and critique. At the same time, attending to the basic dilemma that structures Milton's writings makes it unnecessary to reduce Milton's positions in an effort to elucidate them.<sup>10</sup> By making strategic use of theological problems that remain genuinely intractable, Milton's writings avoid both indeterminacy and simplistic one-sidedness.<sup>11</sup> Milton reveals the shortcomings of all projects that seek to tame chaotic forces while, at the same time, describing such power as sanctioned and exemplified by God.

### **Say First What Cause**

*Paradise Lost* explores the loss and recuperation of homelands at the cosmic level of divine creation. The end of history proves clear enough: what God wants is to be "all in all." This future consummation promises a universe that cannot regress or lapse, one in which the fullness of the Father will serve as an eternal home for his perfected creatures. God suggests the implications of his projected wholeness when he declares to the Son, "Then thou thy regal sceptre shalt lay by, / For regal sceptre then no more shall need, / God shall be all in all" (*PL* 3.339–41). Divine plenitude will obviate the need for any dominion. Yet in a poem that investigates beginnings, questions emerge about why God must want and wait to be all in all. The unending border conflict between chaos and God serves as an etiological myth of the forces that unsettle both political stability and the integrity of

the self. Through Milton's monism—a belief in “one first matter all” that nonetheless allows for fraught divisions—questions about the individual, the nation, and language become interconnected rather than analogous.

The force of chaos reverberates throughout Milton's systems of thought, connecting the intimately personal with the mythic and the political. When Milton describes chaos as the womb and the tomb of creation, he participates in a long-standing alignment of matter as feminine and form as masculine.<sup>12</sup> The gendered challenge that chaos poses for Milton's theodicy has been a familiar source of debate. Against readings of Milton's chaos as a morally neutral realm, Regina M. Schwartz argues that the opening description in *Genesis* of the Spirit moving upon the deep (*tehom*) both suppresses and preserves the Babylonian narrative of the god Marduk using the dismembered body of the goddess Tiamat to create the world.<sup>13</sup> The Hebrew Bible's assertion of a single, masculine Creator works to forget the pagan, maternal body that existed before the beginning. According to Schwartz, *Paradise Lost* transforms *tehom* into a realm that proves far more hostile and threatening to God than does Satan. Schwartz opts not to carry out her insights to their logical end, choosing instead to maintain the integrity of Milton's theodicy by turning to a *felix culpa* argument. The problem of chaos becomes the grounds for God's display of benevolent creation. Yet the *felix culpa* is a paradox precisely because it cannot answer in logical fashion why Milton's cosmos should be divided in the first place. John P. Rumrich notes that a primordial matter inclined toward destruction would render Milton's theodicy “absurd.” He thus interprets chaos as an essential aspect of God's creative being, the feminine and maternal aspect of deity.<sup>14</sup> Such an argument leads Rumrich to deny that Milton's concern for limits, purity, and transgressions applies to the prelapsarian world; otherwise a chaos internal to God would render him impure. Divine creation begins, however, with establishing precise boundaries between chaos and God's kingdom. Edenic life, too, manifests the sacredness of boundaries, as Adam and Eve's bower is a place that “beast, bird, insect, or worm durst enter none; / Such was their awe of man” (4.704–5). Only after the Fall does Michael deny the sacredness of place (11.334–54).

The terms of this debate should be redefined by understanding Milton's chaos as abject in the sense that Julia Kristeva has theorized. Abjection precedes good and evil; its more elemental nature threatens basic divisions such as inside and outside that make moral distinctions possible. Kristeva

bases her theory in a mode of thought deeply compatible with Milton's, one that links the gendered cosmology of Plato's *Timaeus*, Hebraic notions of holiness, and the body's role in language. Abjection, in other words, names ideas and sentiments deeply familiar to Milton; Kristeva and Milton share central concerns, including purity versus abominable mixtures, the maternal body, and prohibited food. Abjection registers the force of chaos in a monotheistic world as a threat to personal and cultural boundaries.

The abject is fundamentally that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."<sup>15</sup> Although abject objects include excrement and menstrual blood, abjection is primarily an oral phenomenon. Revulsion in the presence of unclean objects—especially food—harkens back to the infantile process of weaning from the maternal body and thereby gaining a discrete identity as a linguistic subject. Abjection maintains not only an individual body but also the boundaries of a holy nation. By following dietary prohibitions, Israel separates itself from neighboring fertility cults and prepares itself for the divine Law. Even for a reader skeptical of Kristeva's psychoanalytic thought, her reading illuminates the ordering of codes in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth books of Leviticus, which rapidly transition from dietary prohibitions to laws of purity regulating childbirth to methods of dealing with unclean lesions.<sup>16</sup> After establishing the boundaries of the self at the mouth and from the womb, prescriptions against abjection define the contours of the healthy body within a holy nation.

The oral nature of abjection is not limited to diet but also manifests itself in language. Abjection calls into question the closure of the process that leads to a discrete, unified subject. The nonsignifying elements of speech—the rhythmic, the guttural, the euphonic—bear witness to the corporeal remainders within language. For Kristeva, the transition from Judaism to Christianity marks a drastic change in the relationship between the self and the abject. Abjection is no longer excluded from but rather located within the subject. Christ declares that food cannot defile because it merely enters and exits the belly; it is rather that "which cometh out of the man, that defileth" (Mark 7:20)<sup>17</sup>. Sin, writes Kristeva, is "subjectified abjection."<sup>18</sup> Christianity thus integrates abjection more fully within speech. Repeated acts of confession give voice to sin but transform it into the possibility of grace, and this new mode of speech—replete with bodily impulses—accommodates the beauty of Christian poetry.

Abjection conditions Milton's central problem: pointing back to the original confrontation between chaos and divine order, abjection locates mythic and cultural meaning in the quotidian experiences of food, language, and sex. Abjection thereby locates gender as an elemental fault line. Responding to the limitations of psychoanalytic readings, Rumrich has attempted to redirect our attention to Milton's relationship with his mother.<sup>19</sup> This is a necessary corrective, yet biographical evidence of Milton's attachment to his mother remains scant. Attending to the abject logic of Milton's writings allows us to register the more diffuse force of maternity. While abjection tests the limits even of divine creativity, the injunction to be holy as God is holy compels the Christian poet and his nation to separate themselves from chaos.

Reading Milton's cosmology as abject acknowledges his suspicion of unbridled feminized matter.<sup>20</sup> Chaos menaces as the eternally suffocating maternal realm endangering the integrity of the self.<sup>21</sup> Satan describes chaos as an "abortive gulf" that threatens anyone who enters with "utter loss of being" (*PL* 2.440–41). Kristeva provides an apt gloss on Satan's description when she calls abjection the place where "the vacillating, fascinating, threatening, and dangerous object is silhouetted as non-being—as the abjection into which the speaking being is permanently engulfed."<sup>22</sup> Later Satan will encounter Chaos, who allegorizes abjection's threat to the speaking subject: the anarch responds to Satan "with faltering speech and visage incomposed" (2.989). At the same time, reading chaos as abject shows how rigorously Milton calls into question the efficacy and fairness of the very patriarchal logic he sets forth. The Miltonic dilemma ensures that no simple prescriptions about gender obtain. Taming the indistinguished space of the chaotic womb remains the fundamental mode of creation, but Milton literally gives Chaos a voice to ask how this should be so.

Chaos persists to challenge the stability not just of creation but even of divine being. What ultimately needs to be justified is not God's goodness or his ways to man but his primacy as a divine Father. According to the angel Raphael, when God first commissions the Son to create, he blurs the distinction between inside and outside, the divine and the chaotic:

ride forth, and bid the deep  
Within appointed bounds be heaven and earth,  
Boundless the deep, because I am who fill

Infinitude, nor vacuous the space.  
 Though I uncircumscribed myself retire,  
 And put not forth my goodness, which is free  
 To act or not, necessity and chance  
 Approach not me, and what I will is fate.

(PL 7.166–73)

God's logic in this passage is famously slippery. He seems to explain that the boundlessness of the deep derives from (is "because" of) his own infinite spatial extension. God renders the scope of *tehom* dependent on him, and he exercises his freedom to absent his goodness from it. As Raphael explains, matter proceeds toward divine perfection only if it is "not depraved from good" (5.471). Yet this volitional withdrawal is apparently not sufficient to hold the deep of chaos at bay. A more troubling possibility thus emerges: perhaps the Son must set bounds because *tehom* is coextensive with God's boundlessness even though he retracts his goodness from it. God must actively prove that no competing maternal realm compromises his complete and eternal autonomy.<sup>23</sup> God finds the ideal agent for this work in a Son who is begotten as the perfect reflection of his sole parent and serves as the Father's word, wisdom, and "effectual might" (3.170).

Yet abject dregs unsettle the grounds of creation. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton argues that primordial matter was merely disordered rather than hostile to God, and that it "could only have been derived from the source of all substance" (CPW 6.308). Read against *Paradise Lost*, such a declaration proves more of a defensive mandate than a stable truth. According to Raphael, even after the Son uses golden compasses to demarcate the boundaries between creation and chaos, God's Spirit must downward purge "black tartareous cold infernal dregs / Adverse to life" (7.238–39). Defecation serves at once as an infantile fantasy of giving birth and as a begrudging acknowledgment of the abject traces of a maternal body.<sup>24</sup> Purging the dregs of chaos allows God's Spirit to assume an unrivaled agency in creation; the Spirit seeks to arrogate to itself both female and male roles by "brooding" and infusing "vital virtue" (7.235–36). God's abjection of chaos is thus an act of pre-creation, the all-important clearing of his throat that allows him to speak the newest outpost of creation into existence with his omnific word.

God actively invites Adam—and, by extension, the fallen reader—to investigate the integrity of his divine being. In book 8 of *Paradise Lost*, Adam recounts to Raphael his earliest exchange with God. When Adam requests a mate, God asks,

What thinks thou then of me, and this my state,  
Seem I to thee sufficiently possessed  
Of happiness, or not? Who am alone  
From all eternity, for none I know  
Second to me or like, equal much less.

(8.403–7)

The enjambment at the end of line 404 leads us to believe that what is at stake is not merely God's "happiness" but his very wholeness. Before the next line adds "of happiness," God seems to be asking Adam, "Don't I seem composed and put-together to you?" God's account of his solitary condition openly contradicts other moments in the epic. In the Son, for example, God surely knows one who is both second to him and like him. The context of God's question makes it difficult to account for such inconsistencies. God later reveals that he has merely been testing Adam; God's claims may be more rhetorically motivated than precise. Or perhaps inconsistencies should be attributed to Adam's memory of his colloquy rather than to God.

At stake in this interpretive problem is the way that man's innate desire for a mate—his profound sense of "single imperfection"—conditions his interactions with and knowledge of his Creator (*PL* 8.423).<sup>25</sup> The diction of God's rhetorical question to Adam registers one consequence of a chaotic realm that can be neither repelled nor incorporated comfortably. As a state where "chance governs all," chaos imperils the authority of a divine will that should be wholly free of contingency (2.910). David Quint points out how "Milton emphasizes the 'hap' in happiness: the element of fortune, chance, and contingency."<sup>26</sup> When asked about divine happiness, Adam affirms that God must be "possessed / Of happiness." This syntactically jarring conclusion registers the contamination of divine will by chaotic chance. Thinking alongside Adam, the fallen reader acknowledges and works to deny the intolerable possibility that God is possessed by happiness as much as he is its possessor.