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Tyrannical Powers: Representations of Tyranny in Milton

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The upheavals of the English Revolution give us remarkable discourses on the subject of political and religious freedom, as well as fresh interpretations of tyranny—its meanings, its genesis, its language, its locations, and its consequences. This essay examines premodern discourses of tyranny that have significant implications for the issue in Milton's England. Writers understood tyranny in multiple and competing ways as perceptions of the issue and its locations evolved, expanded, or shifted. Complex premodern discourses on tyranny intersect and overlap; these include conceptions shaped by Greek culture (including Aristotelian virtue ethics), by republican Rome (when the expulsion of Roman kings leads to *rex* and *tyrannus* becoming synonymous), by the Bible (where we find not only disillusionment with bad kings but the idea that Yahweh is the only lord fit to rule), and by Machiavelli and Hobbes who dismantle premodern discourses of tyranny and the belief in virtuous rule and citizenship as essential foundations of government. I analyse Milton's thinking about the scourge of tyranny and its location in his revolutionary prose and demonstrate how *Paradise Lost* invites readers to rethink the contested issue anew as his early modern epic explores the meanings, ambiguous language, and shifting locations of tyranny.

Keywords: Tyranny, Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Machiavelli, Hobbes

"We live in an age of tyrants," Maurice Latey bluntly observes at the beginning of *Patterns of Tyranny*, his twentieth-century study written in the aftermath of "two of the greatest tyrants the world has ever seen, Hitler and Stalin, and scores of lesser ones" (11). "We have a special interest in diagnosing tyranny," Latey adds, since we live in a modern "age when it has become a matter of life and death to study these great beasts of history, since at any moment one may arise who will have the power of life and death over all of us," given that "universal war and destruction are more likely to be launched by a tyrant unrestricted by law, by custom, or

by public opinion than by any constitutional type of ruler" (11). Latey's observations made in 1969 are prescient with regard to our moment in the twenty-first century as many in the western world struggle to understand how tyranny could once again threaten liberal democracy – this time in the form of a savage war in Ukraine unleashed by an autocrat and nationalist who has brought Europe to its most precarious state since the end of the second World War. If the topic of tyranny has acquired fresh urgency, what might the study of writers from the turbulent political world of Milton's England tell us about the experience, manifestations, and diagnosis of tyranny?

John Milton and many of his contemporary writers certainly believed that they were living "in an age of tyrants," even when they bitterly disagreed over where tyranny was located, how it should be defined, and how it might be diagnosed. The middle of the seventeenth century was marked, after all, by a great national trauma with an outcome virtually unthinkable before 1649: Charles I, the first king in English history to be tried by his subjects for treason against them, was charged with tyranny and executed. The principal lawyer who prosecuted Charles, John Cook, portrayed the king as a latter-day Nimrod, a predator and violent, hard-hearted Lord who had hunted his people "at his pleasure" and shed their blood (*King Charls his Case* 8, 13); the High Court of Justice, Cook asserted, had struck a blow against kings with "an unlimited power, that are not tied to laws" and had "cut off the head of a Tyrant" who had spilled the blood of his own Protestant subjects and had thereby "pronounced sentence not onely against one Tyrant, but Tyranny it selfe" (9, 42). At the end of *Paradise Lost*, in the poem's often harrowing account of postlapsarian history, Milton revisits the story of Nimrod, inviting readers to reconsider the fraught issue of earthly tyrannies both in his own age and throughout human history.

Although literary historians have recently produced valuable studies of tyranny in relation to political thought, arbitrary political rule, and literature in early modern England, there is still much more to consider about the manifold meanings and shifting locations of tyranny in Milton's England in relation to complex premodern discourses of tyranny.[1] This includes the ways early modern concepts interacted with classical and biblical ones. The interpretation of Milton's God in *Paradise Lost* as divine tyrant, inspired by the political interpretations of William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron, has likewise elicited plenty of

[1] See especially Stephen Greenblatt, Greg Walker, and Mary Nyquist.

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controversial commentary, again often without considering premodern discourses of tyranny, competing concepts of tyranny in seventeenth-century England, and Milton's critical engagement with them.[2] Yet consideration of these matters during the turbulent period in which the meaning and location of tyranny were fiercely contested can provide fresh perspectives on the ways Milton invites readers to think about tyranny. Consequently, in this essay I examine premodern discourses of tyranny that have significant implications for the issue in Milton's England before turning to the way Milton thinks about the scourge of tyranny and its location in his revolutionary prose. Then I consider how *Paradise Lost* invites readers to rethink the contested issue as his early modern epic represents the meanings, ambiguous language, and shifting locations of tyranny.

1 Tyranny and the English Revolution

If the upheavals of the English Revolution give us remarkable discourses on the subject of political and religious freedom, they also give us fresh interpretations of tyranny – its meanings, its genesis, its language, its locations, and its consequences. As Derek Hirst observes, "The History of the 1640s and 1650s ... taught Englishmen the many meanings of the word 'tyranny'" (265). This is another politically volatile period in which authors believed themselves to be "writing under tyranny," to borrow Greg Walker's apt titular phrase, including tyranny which had assumed new forms and locations. As political and religious authorities were contested in Milton's England, living and writing under tyranny could also mean different things to different writers. The terms "tyranny" and "tyrant" by no means applied only to powerful and feared ecclesiastical and political figures associated with Charles I (e.g. Archbishop Laud and the Earl of Strafford) or to the king condemned as a tyrant for putting his self-interest above the national interest and for not acting *pro bono publico*.

During this unstable period, writers understood tyranny in multiple and competing ways as perceptions of the issue and its locations evolved, expanded, or shifted. For Leveller writers, who aligned themselves with radical sectarianism, the struggle against the scourge of tyranny meant not only writing against the extreme tyranny of Charles I; it meant contesting the tyranny of the mainstream Puritan clergy, exposing the tyranny of Parliament which seemed to be suppressing new political freedoms and

2 See William Empson's lively and provocative study, with its searing critique of the traditional God of Christianity; and Michael Bryson.

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freedom of the press, and exposing the tyranny of the Army and its officers who brought about the experimental republic by means of a *coup d'état* that "purged" the Long Parliament to prevent it from reaching a settlement with Charles I. For royalist writers, who perceived Parliament as an instrument of lawless tyranny destroying the ancient government of monarchy, it meant that living and writing in the new republic was, in one paradoxical formulation, living and writing under "Democratical Tyranny" (*A Mournfull Elegy* 1), since a new age of popular tyranny begun during the 1640s had turned England into a "distracted Nation with unheard of tyrannie, and miserable oppression" (*The English Tyrants* 2). For the godly republican Lucy Hutchinson living under tyranny could mean resisting (as her stalwart husband, Colonel Hutchinson, tried to do) the seemingly unchecked power of a Machiavellian Oliver Cromwell pursuing "ambitious designs" and using "dissimulations" (240),[3] a military and political leader likewise viewed by Leveller writers as a tyrant who had betrayed the revolution and had himself become a "mighty . . . hunting *Nimrod*" (Lilburne 16). For the anonymous author of *Tyranipocrit, Discovered with his wiles*, a radical tract published in 1649 diagnosing the close relation between tyranny and hypocrisy – an issue Milton invites readers to consider in *Paradise Lost* – tyrannical power, having assumed "other formes and fashions," could now be associated with a wide array of names, vocations, and authorities: "if tyrants must make us slaves, what doe wee care what names they have, call them Kings, Bishops, Senators, Souldiers, &c. Tyrants, if they will exercise tyrannicall power, it makes no matter what names they have" (35).

In Milton's England, moreover, complex premodern discourses on tyranny intersect and overlap. These include conceptions shaped by Greek culture (including Aristotelian virtue ethics), by republican Rome (when the expulsion of Roman kings leads to *rex* and *tyrannus* becoming synonymous), by the Bible (where we find not only disillusionment with bad kings but also the idea that Yahweh is the only lord fit to rule), and by Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas Hobbes who dismantle premodern discourses of tyranny and the belief in virtuous rule and citizenship as essential foundations of government. Furthermore, in Milton's culture deep fears of Catholicism interact with and intensify tyranny discourses: tyranny identified with Archbishop Laud's ultra-ceremonialist church; tyranny associated with Charles I's authoritarianism, his contempt of parliaments, and hatred of Puritans; anxieties about unrestrained tyranny

[3] See also Hutchinson 239, 249–251, 252, 255, 256–257, 259, 260–261.

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fuelled by the Irish Rebellion of the 1640s and suspicions that an untrustworthy king and English papists had a hand in it; and absolute tyranny and arbitrary rule linked with so-called popery. Tyranny is thus often interwoven in the minds of Milton and his Puritan contemporaries, both orthodox and more radical ones, with acute religious anxieties. The apocalyptic and millenarian imagination could also intensify a sense of existential crisis posed by the threat of extreme tyrannies in church and state. Milton himself identified the Beast of Revelation 13 (13:2), who receives from the Dragon "*his power, his seate, and great authority*" (*Complete Prose Works* 3:210, 1:616),[4] with "the tyrannical powers and Kingdoms of the earth," envisioning at his most heady moments during the English Revolution that the imminent return of Christ would finally "put an end to all Earthly *Tyrannies*" (1:616).

The political, religious, and social crises of the middle of the seventeenth century thus arguably generate a turning point, a time of great religious and political instability when both older and newer conceptions of tyranny intersect and when conceptions of tyranny become more multifaceted. The upheavals of the English Revolution generate discourses of tyranny that re-engage but also revise and sometimes challenge Greek, Roman, biblical, and Renaissance discourses and theories. One aim of this essay, then, is to assess the complex afterlife of these discourses and theories in Milton's England.

By the time of seventeenth-century England the humanist discourse of tyranny, with its focus on the personal morality of the ruler indebted to classical moralists and Christian followers,[5] had already been challenged and, to a notable degree, dismantled by Machiavelli whose controversial handbook on princely power, written in 1513 and published in 1532, rethinks in bold and shocking ways the boundaries between the new prince and a tyrant. It is not that Machiavelli dismisses all the traditional virtues of the prince. He does want a prince who devotes himself to the common good and thus voices reservations about the vulgar tyrant – as in the case of the king of ancient Syracuse, Agathocles – known for vicious cruelty and wickedness instead of *virtù* in the sense of ingenuity, ability, and skill

4 The abbreviation *CPW* is used for subsequent references.

5 A notable example of the humanist discourse of tyranny written close to the time of Machiavelli's *Prince* is Erasmus's *Education of a Christian Prince* (1516). Erasmus stressed the importance of education in shaping the conduct of a good prince and fortifying him from becoming a ruthless authoritarian ruler.

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(discussed in chapter VIII of *The Prince*).[6] Rather, it is that Machiavelli's new prince engages in behaviour – the strategic use of cruelty, violence, deception, and miserliness – associated more with tyrannical rule, at the same time that he needs to seize and maintain his power by means of fear more than love since human nature, in Machiavelli's dark view, tends to be fickle, ungrateful, and selfish, as he argues in chapter XVII of *The Prince*.[7] Nor does Machiavelli's prince need to concern himself with Christian piety since the prince's appearing to be religious is precisely that: an artful appearance – a carefully projected image – that he can quickly alter as the political occasion requires. The flexible prince may therefore seem to possess moral virtues without truly having or exercising them (as Machiavelli explains in chapter XVIII).[8] And in a provocative move that defies the humanist identification of virtue with good rulership, Machiavelli refuses to employ the term "tyrant" to describe his new prince or *principe nuovo*, itself a euphemism.[9]

By blurring the boundaries between princes and tyrants and refusing to mould a humanistic prince, Machiavelli's text raised disturbing questions about tyranny during the English Revolution. As the judge presiding over Charles I's trial, Cook regarded Machiavelli's handbook as the primary text for teaching the artful and cunning tactics employed by tyrants. Observing that kings study Machiavelli's handbook "more then Scripture," Cook stressed that from Machiavelli they learn that they need not keep their word to the people; and they also learn "to be able to faine and dissemble thoroughly," including virtuous behaviour (*Monarchy No*

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6 About Agathocles Machiavelli comments: "It cannot be called virtue to kill one's fellow-citizens, to betray one's friends, to be treacherous, merciless and irreligious; power may be gained by acting in such ways, but not glory" (31).

7 Since it is difficult to be both loved and feared, Machiavelli concludes, "it is much safer to be feared than loved . . . For this may be said of men generally: they are ungrateful, fickle, feigners and dissemblers, avoiders of danger, eager for gain" (59). Cf. Erasmus: "The tyrant strives to be feared, the king to be loved" (28).

8 "I shall be so bold as to say that having and always cultivating them [moral virtues] is harmful, whereas seeming to have them is useful; for instance, to seem merciful, trustworthy, humane, upright and devout, and also to be so. But if it becomes necessary to refrain, you must be prepared to act in the opposite way, and be capable of doing it" (Machiavelli, 62).

9 On Machiavelli's anti-humanist terminology in *The Prince*, see Gabriele Pedulla. On the critique of humanist political theory in *The Prince* in relation to Machiavelli's political thought, see Victoria Kahn, ch. 1.

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Creature of Gods making 119–121).[10] In a post-Machiavellian political world, in which the distinction between a good prince and tyrant and between tyranny and civic virtue had been unsettled by Machiavelli himself, the charge and nature of tyranny urgently needed to be reconsidered.

And then there is Hobbes who does address – directly and sceptically – the terms "tyranny" and "tyrant." In *Leviathan* (1651) Hobbes makes a bold move by dismissing the authority of Greek and Roman literature, especially the passages that discuss tyrants, because they equate kings with tyrants, thereby making it "lawfull" and "laudable" for "any man" to kill their kings (369–370). Sceptical about what he derisively calls "*Tyrannophobia*" (370) – a term he coined[11] – he observes that "they that are discontented under *Monarchy*, call it *Tyranny*" (240), and thus he concludes that "the name of Tyranny, signifieth nothing more, nor lesse, than the name of Soveraignty, be it in one, or many men, saving that they that use the former word, are understood to bee angry with them they call Tyrants" (722). Hobbes offers an acute observation about terminology and the way "tyrant," as an emotionally charged term, has become a term of abuse for political leaders who threaten our interests. This is also an observation with unsettling implications not only for judging tyrants of the past but for considering what constitutes tyranny in our modern world: in Hobbes's view, one cannot make a moral or even a legal distinction between tyranny and sovereignty, and the charge of tyranny is basically a subjective one, a perception held by some people but not by others.[12] Commenting on "Hobbes's deep distrust of the whole Western tradition of political thought," Hannah Arendt was struck by the audaciousness of his intellectual justification of tyranny: "That the Leviathan actually amounts to a permanent government of tyranny, Hobbes is proud to admit," she observes in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (144).

The mid-century revolution in England thus marks a new struggle over the nature of tyranny, including over how to define it, where to locate it, and how to characterise its ethical and moral dangers. Just as

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10 Cook quotes extensively from *The Prince*, including chapter XVIII where Machiavelli stresses the Prince's need to be flexible and to *seem* to possess moral virtues; on Charles and Machiavellianism: "all the subtilty, treachery, deep dissimulation, abominable projects, an dishonorable shifts" (*King Charls his Case* 39; see also 14, 20). In his depiction of Charles in relation to tyranny and Machiavellianism, Cook also compares "the cruelty of *Richard* the third" (39), as does Milton in *Eikonoklastes* (*CPW* 3:361–362).

11 See *OED* s.v. "tyranno-, *comb.form*."

12 "One man's tyrant is another man's hero" (Latey 13); see also Waller R. Newell (3).

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writers and readers were, to quote Milton's *Areopagitica*, "revolving new notions" and "many opinions" about the idea of freedom, so they were voicing "many opinions" about the presence of tyranny in their age (*CPW* 2:554). Milton the controversialist and poet is right in the middle of this struggle over the nature and locations of tyranny, itself a terrain of conflict subject to competing interpretations.

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2 Milton's Polemical Writings on Tyranny

Milton can think about tyranny in his own independent-minded way, although his understandings of the issue occur in relation to a number of its complex premodern and early modern discourses (including biblical, Greek, Roman, and Machiavellian ones) and in relation to the religious politics of his age. Milton draws upon and reshapes the discourses of tyranny he inherits so that tyranny becomes a more multifaceted concept including not only regal tyranny and tyranny of ecclesiastical institutions, but also tyranny over the private realm, especially over consciences and freedom of thought, with the latter comprising intellectual and mental tyranny that involves (in his words) "abandon[ing] our selvs to serv under the tyranny of usurpt opinions" (*CPW* 2:343).

Milton directly confronts the dangers of tyranny in formulations that draw upon earlier concepts, while also rethinking them. Thus during the early 1640s Milton encountered the definition of a tyrant in Thomas Smith's *Common-wealth of England* and recorded it in his Commonplace Book; there Milton was struck by the definition of a tyrant as a ruler who defies the will of the people, completely disregards established laws, and remakes them solely for the purpose of advancing his personal interests: "by force [he] commeth to the monarchy against the will of the people, breaketh lawes alreadie made, at his pleasure, maketh other[s] without the aduise and consent of the people, and regardeth not the wealth of his Commons, but the aduancement of himselfe, his faction, and his kin[d]red" (Smith 6; *The Complete Works of John Milton* 11:217).[13] This is close to Aristotle's sense of tyrants as those leaders who rule countries as if they were their private households to be governed for their personal pleasure (1295a16–22, 1311a1–5). By the end of the 1640s, Milton both reinforces this concept of the tyrant and rethinks it. In *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, written during the unprecedented trial of Charles

[13] Quotations from Milton's Commonplace Book are taken from this edition and subsequent references will be abbreviated as *CWJM*.

I, Milton at first defines the tyrant in a well-established, Aristotelian sense by drawing upon (as Milton does in his Commonplace Book (*CWJM* 11:228–229, n.316)) Basil 'the Great' who paraphrases Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (bk. 8, ch. 10):[14] "A Tyrant . . . is he who regarding neither Law nor the common good, reigns onely for himself and his faction . . . And because his power is great, his will boundless and exorbitant," he can create massive "desolation" and "oppressions of the people" (*CPW* 3:212). Prompted by the acute national crisis, Milton argues like a polemical humanist and proceeds *ad fontes* as he invokes the authority of the Old Testament on tyrant killing: the God-inspired Ehud slaying Eglon the Moabite king "in his own house" in Judges 3:14–26; the prophet Samuel hewing to pieces the Amalekite king Agag in 1 Samuel 15:33; and Jehu as reformer, instrument of God, and "a subject" (as Milton is careful to remind readers) slaying the tyrant-king Jehoram in 2 Kings 9:24 (*CPW* 3:213, 215–216). Simultaneously, Milton invokes Greek and Roman authorities, including Aristotle's *Politics* on "Monarchy unaccountable" as "the worst sort of Tyranny," Euripides, Cassius Dio, and Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, the latter to glorify tyrannicide since Hercules was the tamer of tyrants (3:204–206, 212–213).

Moreover, because of his doubts about citizens too easily disposed to shut "thir eyes to think they see best with other mens" (3:212), Milton offers a more unusual perspective on a tyrant. He invites readers to rethink what it means to be a lawless tyrant in terms of "distance of place," English identity, and foreignness:

> He therfore that keeps peace with me, neer or remote, of whatsoever Nation, is to mee as farr as all civil and human offices an Englishman and a neighbour: but if an Englishman forgetting all Laws, human, civil and religious, offend against life and liberty . . . though born in the same womb, he is no better then a Turk, a Sarasin, a Heathen. This is Gospel, and this was ever Law among equals; how much rather then in force against any King whatever, who in respect of the people is confessd inferior and not equal: to distinguish therfore of a Tyrant by outlandish, or domestic is a weak evasion. (3:215)

One of Milton's points is that in this moment of national crisis being an "Englishman" – indeed, the very definition of English identity – has little to do with nearness of place or with national boundaries, a point Milton neatly underscores with his use of chiasmus just before the passage I have

[14] Milton also cites the passage from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (*CWJM* 11:217) and again in his *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio* of 1651 (*CPW* 4:521).

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quoted above: "Nor is it distance of place that makes enmitie, but enmity that makes distance" (3:215). Thus, Charles I, who has failed to behave in a neighbourly way, has forfeited the fellowship of national community – the king of England himself is no Englishman in Milton's eyes but rather a savage foreign tyrant.

Moreover, as Milton's concluding assertion suggests, "to distinguish of" (i.e. to make distinctions with regard to) a tyrant on the basis of his being "outlandish" (i.e. belonging to a foreign country) rather than his being "domestic" is an evasive and weak argument. To be sure, the Hebrew Bible often imagines tyranny in terms of foreignness, as in the case of Deuteronomy 17:15 ("thou mayest not set a stranger over thee").[15] Milton, we know, can draw upon stereotypes of foreign tyranny when it serves his purpose: the Englishman who forgets "all Laws, human, civil and religious,", and offends "against life and liberty" is "no better then a Turk, a Sarasin, a Heathen."[16] But ultimately the issue in *The Tenure* is not whether a bad king or tyrant is genuinely foreign as Milton invites readers to reconsider the location of tyranny: physical distance whether "neer or remote, of whatsoever Nation" is not really the crucial issue. It is rather the nature of "enmitie," notably the extreme hatred and violence against one's own people to whom a king is "inferior and not equal."

One manifestation of such enmity, which enables wide-spread violence, involves the complete dehumanising of a people by a tyrannical ruler so that "a whole Nation of men his Brethren" are "no more then so many beasts, or vermin under his Feet . . . to be trod on" (3:204). Such extreme dehumanising, Milton suggests, had resulted in blood guilt, the greatest manifestation of enmity by a ruler who had traumatised his nation. Charles I had shed the blood of his very own people – indeed God's chosen people – during the civil wars so that he was "lad'n with all the innocent blood spilt in three Kingdoms" (3:197), resulting in "many thousand Christians destroy'd . . . polluting with their slaughtred carcasses all the Land over" (3:214). Both Cook and Milton would remind their contemporaries in 1649 of "bloodguiltiness" as the most severe manifestation of tyranny by citing the Old Testament, especially Numbers 35:31 with its call for revenge: "*the Land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shedd therein*, but by the blood of him that shed it" (*King Charls his Case*, 36; *CPW* 3:533, 586). By representing the king as "a man of blood" and a

[15] As Jennie Grillo observes, post-exilic Jewish writers drew upon Greek stereotypes of the Persian king as a way of writing about bad kings (33–34).

[16] See also *Eikonoklastes* for passages associating Charles I with Turkish tyranny (*CPW* 3:448, 453, 574–575).

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limb of Antichrist, Milton and religious radicals stripped away any aura of sanctity around the king.[17] For Milton, moreover, the crisis of the king's trial and the regicide became an occasion to rethink both the meaning and the location of tyranny, including in relation to Englishness.

The question of how to diagnose the nature and location of tyranny, including its origins, is likewise central to *Paradise Lost*, a poem whose "chief design," according to Milton's early biographer John Toland, is to "display the different Effects of Liberty and Tyranny" (182). There Milton's representations of hell and heaven, as well as the poem's account of earthly tyrannies in fallen human history, invite readers to reconsider, from diverse perspectives, the problem of tyranny – the subject of fierce contention in Milton's England – and the language and artifice employed to maintain it.

3 Rethinking Tyranny in *Paradise Lost*

Paradise Lost prompts readers not only to rethink the issue of tyranny, but to scrutinise the incendiary charge of tyranny itself. Learning to recognise the characteristics of tyranny, moreover, requires strenuous and constant discernment by readers. Milton's poem invites its "fit audience" (*Paradise Lost* 7.31) to reassess the multifaceted nature of tyranny as the poet represents its allure, its psychological power, its narcissism, its aggression and violence, its rhetoric and artifice, and its generation of servility, including servility among followers of a charismatic leader.[18]

Thus Milton's Satan presents himself as a revolutionary freedom fighter and political liberator scornful of courtly ritual and gestures – refusing "To bow and sue for grace / With suppliant knee" (1.111–112) – while representing God as an arbitrary "punisher" (4.103) whose tyrannical realm thrives on "servitude inglorious" (9.141). Satan's shifting

[17] Edmund Ludlow also cites Old Testament texts in support of revenge (132–133); for the sobriquet "man of blood," see Ludlow 141–42, 181, 246; and Patricia Crawford.

[18] I refer to the poem's "fit" and discerning audience in this essay, comparable to the "discreet and judicious" readers Milton appeals to in *Areopagitica* (*CPW* 2:512), in contrast to the uncultivated, indiscriminate "vulgar Readers" Milton scornfully condemns in his note on "The Verse" in *Paradise Lost* and in his controversial prose (e.g. "the blockish vulgar" or "the vulgar" who admire "Pomp and ostentation of reading": *CPW* 3:339, 7:272). See also Sharon Achinstein, esp. ch. 5, on Milton urging readers to engage in strenuous reading and become adept at reading between the lines.

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political rhetoric, including his use of republican language, is, however, far from stable, as I have argued elsewhere (*Representing Revolution*, ch. 7). On the one hand, he repudiates the idea of a throne upheld by "old repute" and "custom" (*Paradise Lost* 1.639–640): he rejects the idea of thinking submission ("For who can think Submission?" (1.661)), he calls Hell itself the "Dungeon of our Tyrant" (10.466) from which he hopes to liberate his compatriots, and he scorns the subservient posture of the fallen angels – "in this abject posture have ye sworn / To adore the Conqueror?" (1.322–323) – as if he were echoing Milton's own complaint, on the eve of the Restoration, about the "perpetual bowings and cringings of an abject people" under monarchy (*CPW* 7:426). Yet elsewhere Satan's language and actions contradict this revolutionary self-presentation. In addressing the fallen angels Satan also asserts, much like the leader of a royalist government in exile, their right to "return / To claim [their] just inheritance of old" (*Paradise Lost* 2.37–38). The claim for authority based upon "just inheritance of old" would have seemed especially resonant for godly republicans remembering the English Revolution and prerogative rule: writing as an exile during the Restoration, Edmund Ludlow recalled that when Charles I, "a tyrant" in Ludlow's eyes, came before the High Court of Justice to be tried in early 1649, he insisted "that the kingdome was his by inheritance . . . that being the originall of his title" (131).

Satan's bold assertion that God "Sole reigning holds the Tyranny of Heav'n" (*Paradise Lost* 1.124) reminds us, then, that in Milton's England the charge of tyranny was made by opposing political sides and from often opposing points of view as the issue of tyranny was sharply contested. The meaning of the term 'tyranny' was unstable and to some degree, as Hobbes suggests, the accusation of tyranny was a subjective one. As Milton's contemporaries struggled with the meaning of tyranny and its multiple locations, there was intense dispute over not only who was a tyrant but over who or what institution embodied the most dangerous form of lawless tyranny. Was it Charles I and his popish, evil counsellors? Cromwell and fears about his single person rule during the Interregnum?[19] Parliament during the English Revolution? One does not have to interpret *Paradise Lost* in terms of topical identification of historical personages and events – should we identify Satan with Cromwell and his supposed political and religious hypocrisy? – to recognise that the poem invites its readers to weigh carefully the problematical issue of

[19] On acute concerns about Cromwell and single rule during the Interregnum, see Blair Worden, 289, 295–296, 300–302, 310.

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tyranny in terms of how and where it operates, and the language that sustains it.[20] And to reconsider the volatile charge of tyranny itself.

Paradise Lost thus prompts readers to remain alert to the unstable language that can support the accusation of tyranny and the ambiguous or contradictory political behaviour that reinforces it. Milton observes in one of his early tracts that tyranny, "growne an ambiguous monster" and "guarded with superstition" has "no small power to captivate the minds of men" (*CPW* 1:924) – and the minds of angels too, as *Paradise Lost* reveals. Thus Satan seduces the rebel angels before the war in Heaven and "with calumnious Art / Of counterfeited truth . . . held thir ears" (*Paradise Lost* 5.770–771) as he speaks with "a double contradictory sense" (*CPW* 3:195), like the equivocal Presbyterian divines Milton condemned at the height of the English Revolution (Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution*, 180–190, 207–208). Satan can appeal to the authority of "Imperial Titles" with regard to the right to govern in the very same speech in which he employs the vocabulary of a revolutionary urging his followers to abhor image worshipping, reject "prostration vile," and prepare themselves mentally to cast off the yoke that he claims is endangering their freedom in the tyrannical realm: "But what if better counsels might erect / Our minds and teach us to cast off this Yoke? / Will ye submit your necks, and choose to bend / The supple knee?" (*Paradise Lost* 5.801, 782, 785–788). Spoken by a charismatic leader, this is captivating political language, even in a speech marked by glaring contradictions and "Ambiguous words" of provocation (5.703).

Paradise Lost likewise represents the ways political language and inflammatory accusations, including those of tyranny, are employed in equivocal ways. It is Satan, after all, who calls Abdiel "seditious Angel" (6.152) for refusing to fall in line and follow a third of the angels revolting against God: this is the one time in the poem that that inflammatory word, employed against dissenters in Milton's England, is used (Loewen-

[20] For scepticism about the Satan-Cromwell identification, see Loewenstein, *Representing Revolution* 209. Although Milton's *Defensio Secunda* includes plenty of warning to Cromwell and the English people about the dangers during the Protectorate of succumbing to royalist excesses and becoming self-enslaved, there is no evidence that Milton ever came to see Cromwell himself as an opportunistic tyrant and "false dissembler" (3.681) operating under the guise of godliness.

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stein, *Treacherous Faith*, 306–307).[21] This is rather like calling a dissident an "extremist" in today's language. And it is used as the war in Heaven is about to erupt and in the same speech that Satan, sounding like a republican, accuses the angels loyal to God of inglorious servility (*Paradise Lost* 6.165–170), which in turn prompts Abdiel's vehement redefinition of servitude and its location: "This is servitude, / To serve th' unwise, or him who hath rebell'd / Against his worthier, as thine now serve thee, / Thyself not free, but to thyself enthrall'd" (6.178–181). The tense confrontation between Satan and Abdiel at this point in the poem dramatises a contest over key concepts and terminology: what constitutes "seditious" behaviour and what is "servitude" – and where is the latter located? In his *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, Milton had warned that "the falsifi'd names of *Loyalty*, and *Obedience*" can "colour over . . . base compliances" (*CPW* 3:191) to uphold tyrannical power. Milton the controversialist was acutely aware of the ways these terms could be appropriated and manipulated, and in *Paradise Lost* he invites readers to consider the ways concepts like servitude and obedience can become contested and marshalled by different sides.

Paradise Lost likewise invites readers to consider the challenge of discerning tyranny in relation to religion as well as hypocrisy, an issue that troubled Milton and his radical contemporaries during the English Revolution.[22] Thus *Tyranipocrit* aimed to illuminate the interconnection between tyranny and hypocrisy and their relation to religious appearances since "the devil did himselfe a notable piece of service, when hee joyned them in one" (34–35); its anonymous author warned its readers that tyrants "cloake [their tyranny] with a simulated sanctity" and that Antichristian tyranny flourishes in both politics and religion because the "tyrannicall, hypocriticall, impious white devil" is "so full of deceit, and hee hath so many evasions, and so much sophistry to maintaine his impious prac-

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21 For example, the Second Conventicle Act or *An Act to Prevent and Suppress Seditious Sectaries*, which I touch on at the end of this essay, warns "against the growing and dangerous practices of Seditious Sectaries, and other Disloyal Persons, who under pretence of tender Consciences . . . Contrive Insurrections" (3). See also Milton's attack on the royalist divine, Matthew Griffith, for the equivocal way he had used the inflammatory word "seditious" in his sermon *Fear of God and the King*: *Brief Notes upon a Late Sermon* (1660), *CPW* 7:469–470, 471.

22 And not only radical writers: one royalist claimed that the ambitious tyranny of Parliament was masked "under the specious pretences *of fighting for Religion and Liberty,* and . . . under this vaile of Hypocrisie, and under the glosse and notion of Reformation" (*The English Tyrants* 7).

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tices" (26, 18). In *Eikonoklastes* Milton likewise observes "that the deepest policy of a Tyrant hath bin ever to counterfet Religious," citing Aristotle's *Politics* (bk. 5, ch. 11) on "that special craft" (*CPW* 3:361) cultivated by tyrants.[23] There Milton also points to Shakespeare's cunning Richard III, constantly acting a part, as a warning for how a tyrant, much like Charles I, may operate as "a deep dissembler, not of his affections onely, but of Religion," as Milton aims to reveal how "Tyranny and fals Religion," which have "very dark roots," may "twine and interweave one another" (3:362, 509).

Paradise Lost aims to discover and represent the "dark roots" of these interconnections as it associates Satan with dissembling, hypocrisy, "simulated sanctity," and reasoning associated with tyrants. The poet first associates Satan with both dissembling and hypocrisy when he beguiles Uriel, "The sharpest-sighted Spirit of all in Heav'n" (3.691), with a cunning resemblance as he appears in the disguise of a cherub: "So spake the false dissembler unperceiv'd; / For neither Man nor Angel can discern / Hypocrisy, the only evil that walks / Invisible, except to God alone" (681–684). The poet then unmasks Satan as "counterfeit" after his first soliloquy, which enables readers to observe the workings of his tormented mind, and prompts them instead to regard Satan as the "Artificer of fraud" and "the first / That practis'd falsehood under saintly show, / Deep malice to conceal, couch't with revenge" (4.117, 121–123). Corresponding to the poet's unmasking of Satan at the beginning of Book 4 is the angel Gabriel's analysis of Satan's equivocation after the angels guarding Paradise find Satan at the ear of Eve; this is the second time a version of the word "hypocrite" appears in the poem as Gabriel scornfully exposes Satan's posture as a liberator, a pose designed to mask more aggressive designs, concealed in heaven by his obsequious courtly behaviour:

> And thou sly hypocrite, who now wouldst seem
> Patron of liberty, who more than thou
> Once fawn'd, and cring'd, and servilely ador'd
> Heav'n's awful Monarch? wherefore but in hope
> To dispossess him, and thyself to reign? (4.957–961)

The poet's response to Satan's second soliloquy in Book 4, delivered before this tense confrontation between Gabriel and Satan, explicitly associates Satan with the language of tyranny as the poem weaves together is-

[23] See Aristotle: "[a tyrant] should appear to be particularly earnest in the service of the gods; for if men think that a ruler is religious and has a reverence for the gods, they are less afraid of suffering injustice at his hands" (1324b40–1315a1).

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sues of hypocrisy, simulated sanctity, and tyranny. Satan's justification of his imperial aggressiveness in that soliloquy can also be understood in relation to Machiavelli and the behaviour of the tyrant. Machiavelli, as we noted, had blurred the boundaries between a prince, who needs to be ruthless at times, and a tyrant: the prince can embody both good and more disturbing qualities, appearing to display moral virtues when the political occasion calls for it. Full of ambiguities underscored by his contradictory uses of political language, Satan too can blend conflicting qualities as a leader who claims that his aggression – "conquering this new World" – is being executed on behalf of the exiled rebel angels whom he seeks to deliver from their misery and infernal prison. He thus claims to pursue the public good and to be driven in this pursuit at least in part by "public reason just" – that is, reason of state that includes a sense of civic responsibility to the community of the citizens of Hell. Stunned by the paradisal delights he sees in Eden and by the beauty of our original parents, Satan nevertheless quells any sense of pity he might feel for Adam and Eve and observes:

> And should I at your harmless innocence
> Melt, as I do, yet public reason just,
> Honor and Empire with revenge enlarg'd,
> By conquering this new World, compels me now
> To do what else though damn'd I should abhor. (4.388–392)

Bent on humankind's destruction, Satan is driven by the desire for imperial conquest, as well as hatred and revenge, and it is the poet who, after the soliloquy concludes, concisely exposes the way Satan has justified his aggression (combining force and fraud) to himself: "So spake the Fiend, and with necessity, / The Tyrant's plea, excus'd his devilish deeds" (393–394). Here we can also regard the poet's comment as a response to Machiavelli who is careful to avoid the label or term "tyrant" in his depiction of the new prince who may use reason of state to excuse certain vices as pragmatically necessary for maintaining power. The poet of *Paradise Lost*, however, differs in this respect: he is more interested in identifying the equivocal or contradictory language, reasoning, and excuses of a tyrant – and inviting the reader to do the same – by calling attention to Satan's dubious argument based on reason of state.[24]

[24] On Milton's Satan as Machiavel, although without attention to Satan's soliloquy and the poet's response, see Kahn 209–214.

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4 Tyranny and the Tragic World of Postlapsarian Human History

The last books of the poem struggle with the problem of tyranny and the challenges of interpreting it from a different perspective: the tragic world of postlapsarian human history since, as Milton observes in his *Defensio Secunda* (1654), "a tyrant is not our enemy alone, but the public enemy of virtually the entire human race" (*CPW* 4:658). These books raise a key question: What kind of human agency will there be in "a World perverse" (*Paradise Lost* 11.701) plagued by a succession of earthly, sometimes brutal tyrannies? And in a poem concerned with probing causes and origins, they address another crucial question: was the first man, with the "Dominion absolute" (12.68) granted by God, the first king with absolute power over those of his own species?

The angel Michael's narrative account of Nimrod at the outset of Book 12, which expands and politicises the terse description in Genesis 10:8–10, exposes Adam in detail to the ruthless operation of human tyranny in the fallen world.[25] Adam learns about the predatory nature of tyranny manifested by an aggressive ruler whose "proud ambitious heart" disparages "fair equality" and "fraternal state" as Nimrod defies God's "law" in Deuteronomy 17:19–20 (i.e. that a king should not lift up his heart "above his brethren") by assuming "Dominion undeserv'd / Over his brethren" (12.25–28); as he claims "from Heav'n . . . second Sovranty" (35) or divine right (much like Stuart monarchs who claimed "to be Gods on Earth");[26] and as he shows prowess in hunting by hunting men rather than beasts as "his game" (12.30) in his pursuit of "Subjection to his Empire tyrannous" (12.32). Further, to achieve his ends, he employs – much like Machiavelli's prince or like Satan or the Charles I of Milton's republican writings – both force and cunning: "War and hostile snare" (12.31). Milton thus uses Michael's account to tell the tragic story of the origins of inequality and the destruction of fraternity since, as Milton observes in *Eikonoklastes*, "the Kings of this World" have always considered "two things to them so dreadful, Liberty and Equality" (*CPW*

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25 For a suggestive but different reading of the Nimrod episode (including Adam's response) in terms of Milton's critique of Aristotle's defense of natural slavery in *Politics* (1256b), see Nyquist 138–147, esp. 138–139.

26 For Cook, Charles I "hath deported himself as a God, been depended upon, and adored as God" (*King Charles his Case*, 37; see also 8); James I suggested that kings "are justly called Gods" (529, see also 500); on divine right theory in the reign of Charles I, the anonymous author of *Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiasticall* writes "The most High and Sacred order of Kings is of Divine Right, being the ordinance of God himself" (B4v).

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3:509). Like Satan, moreover, Nimrod engages in rebellion ("from Rebellion shall derive his name"),[27] "Though of Rebellion others he accuse" (*CWJM* 12.36–37). The parallel with our contemporary world is the fascist who inverts reality and accuses others of being fascists.

The Nimrod episode illustrates how *Paradise Lost* can be both provocative and oblique when it comes to polemical and topical politics, leaving much to the discretion of its readers. Milton the controversialist and his radical Puritan contemporaries, as we have seen in the case of Cook, invoked Nimrod during the English Revolution to comment on the origins of kingly power and convey the menace of Stuart tyranny (although, as we have also seen, Nimrod could be invoked to suggest Cromwell's tyranny).[28] Nonetheless, the biblical narrative of Nimrod in *Paradise Lost* contains no explicit reference to Charles I and his age: Nimrod here may be regarded as a type of Satan, Antichrist, and Charles I; however, it is left to the poem's discerning readers to make any topical connection to Milton's England as an age of tyrants.

Adam's response with regard to both Nimrod and the question of dominion reveals that our original father was given no monarchical power over other men since he understands, without Michael having to correct him, something fundamental about the extent of his absolute dominion. Adam expresses natural republican instincts as he promptly condemns Nimrod, the first violent, usurping lord in human history, and conveys the limitations of power and sovereign authority, including "Dominion absolute," the "donation" given to humankind by God according to Genesis 1:28:

> O execrable Son so to aspire
> Above his Brethren, to himself assuming
> Authority usurpt, from God not giv'n:
> He gave us only over Beast, Fish, Fowl
> Dominion absolute; that right we hold
> By his donation; but Man over men
> He made not Lord; such title to himself
> Reserving, human left from human free. (12.64–71)

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27 Milton draws upon a false etymology that links Nimrod's name to the Hebrew verb "rebel" (*marad*).

28 Besides Cook's *King Charls his Case* and *Monarchy No Creature of Gods making* (6), see e.g., William Erbery, where Nimrod is described "as our kings […] hunting the saints up and down all the land over" (33); Edward Harrison writes that Nimrod was "the first that brought men into *subjection* by *force* and *violence*" (8).

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In giving Adam this speech, Milton is engaging with the divisive seventeenth-century political debate over how to interpret the origins of absolute political power. Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* (pub. 1680, though composed earlier) argued that Adam was the first king whose command was "as large and as ample as the Absolutest Dominion of any Monarch which hath been since the Creation" (13),[29] whereas John Locke challenged this interpretation by going back to Scripture, including Genesis, and arguing that God, while granting Adam rule over other species, "gave *Adam* no Monarchical Power over those of his own Species" (161).[30] Indeed, Charles I's prosecutor, Cook, took a position similar to Locke's: Adam "had an absolute supremacie over the Creatures, but neither Adam (nor Noah who was his heire of the new world) ever challenged to be Kings" (*Monarchy No Creature of Gods making*, 5–6).

Milton's poem engages dramatically with this controversial issue by imagining our original father responding vehemently to the story about Nimrod and his aggressive pursuit of power. Adam may be no theoretically sophisticated republican; yet his instincts align with the position of Milton who could hardly fathom "how any man who hath the true principles of justice and religion in him, can presume or take upon him to be a king and lord over his brethren" (*CPW* 7:429). And Adam seems to understand – perhaps after having undergone Raphael's earlier education in such issues as political rebellion, the language of tyranny, and the war in Heaven – that the title "Lord" God reserves to himself: the idea that, as both Scripture and *Paradise Lost* suggest, Yahweh is ultimately the only lord or king fit to reign, a point Milton the controversialist had likewise made in his prose by means of his interpretation of 1 Samuel 8 and the elders of Israel's demand for a king (*CPW* 3:202–203, 207, 236, 580).[31]

Michael's response, which confirms that Adam is discriminating this time in his vehement judgment ("Justly thou abhorr'st / That Son" (*Paradise Lost* 12.79–80), the angel says to Adam), suggests that tyranny in the fallen world is both an internal and external process, with tyranny within the private realm enabling its outward manifestations. In *The Tenure*

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29 Filmer's *Observations concerning the Originall of Government* includes an attack on Milton's republican ideas of kingship, tyranny, and the people.

30 For Locke's fuller arguments against Filmer, see 141–171.

31 This chapter from 1 Samuel was of course one of the most contested scriptural passages during the mid-century revolution since for republicans it could be used to support anti-tyranny arguments, while for royalists it seemed to support a divinely ordained monarchy: see Christopher Hill 107–108, 193; Warren Chernaik 94–96; Nyquist 132–137. For comments on "those foolish *Israelites*, who depos'd God and *Samuel* to set up a King," see *CPW* 7:449–450.

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Milton had complained about "a double tyrannie, of Custom from without, and blind affections within" (*CPW* 3:190), and elsewhere in his prose Milton warned his contemporaries that tyranny within can be especially hard to conquer and control. Michael too speaks soberly to Adam about "a double tyrannie": enthrallment "from without to violent Lords" (*CWJM* 12.93), with Nimrod as their archetype, and enthrallment to "blind affections within," so that tyrants and those made servile by them are enslaved by their own passions, losing inward liberty as "upstart Passions catch the Government / From Reason, and to servitude reduce / Man till then free" (12.88–90). Indeed, Michael's lesson here anticipates the end of the poem where he teaches Adam that warfare is not only outward but inward – destroying Satan's "works / In thee and in thy Seed" (12.394–395) – where it operates in a more psychological, subtle, and spiritual way. Yet is tyranny, both outward and inward, simply imposed upon human beings who lose all agency in the process of becoming servile? The language of Michael's sober passage about the curse of tyranny after the Fall suggests that there's still an element of choice, since man "*permits* / Within himself unworthy Powers to reign / Over free Reason" (12.90–92; emphasis added). In *Eikonoklastes* Milton had suggested that servility was not "the natural disposition of an English-man," and he concluded by commenting on the people's "*voluntary* and beloved baseness" (emphasis added) so that he might still hope that some citizens, not wholly seduced by the "Sorcery" of a king who had "putt Tyranny into an Art," might "find the grace and good guidance to bethink themselves, and recover" (*CPW* 3:344, 601). Even in that text diagnosing the relations between tyranny, mental servility, and the power of representation, Milton suggests that "voluntary" human choice among citizens plays a role.

There is nevertheless a tough realism about the poem's vision of earthly tyrannies in human history, as Michael tells Adam: "Tyranny must be, / Though to the Tyrant thereby no excuse" (*Paradise Lost* 12.95–96). As Michael describes how "Nations will decline so low / From virtue" (12.97–98) in the history of humankind under Satan-Nimrod, the poem reminds readers of the precarious nature of virtuous rule in the face of ruthless tyrannical power. However resilient and hopeful some human beings may be after the Fall – Adam and Eve at the very end of *Paradise Lost* provide a model of hope mixed with sadness in the aftermath of great loss – acute challenges lie ahead for humankind in terms of religious and political life in relation to human freedom. Earthly tyrannies, with profound implications for both political and religious life, follow after

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Adam's "original lapse" (12.83) so that God, during dark periods of history when the scourge of tyranny is most pronounced, will "withdraw / His presence" and "avert / His holy Eyes" (12.107–109), leaving those nations that have utterly abandoned "virtue" to practice "thir own polluted ways" (12.98, 110).

As Milton's poem suggests, the problem of tyranny will remain one of the most acute challenges in human history, and among humankind's greatest causes of misery. "Put[ting] an end to all Earthly *Tyrannies*" (*CPW* 1:616), as Milton envisioned in the most heady passages of his millenarian prose of the English Revolution, seems increasingly remote. The poem's historical prophecy in its final books highlights a tension between some glimmer of hope that rare individuals in history – individuals of faith like Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses – may stand out at moments to combat earthly tyrannies and a more pessimistic view that the forces of political and religious darkness will often prevail.

Tyranny with regard to religion and inward, private spirituality will prove to be especially severe: Michael explains how secular and carnal power will attempt to force "every conscience" and "force the Spirit of Grace itself, and bind / His consort Liberty" in a conformist religious culture in which "far greater part, / Will deem in outward Rites and specious forms / Religion satisfi'd" (*CWJM* 12.521–535). The prophecy of "heavy persecution" arising "On all who in the worship persevere / Of Spirit and Truth" (12.531–533) may evoke not only the grim persecution of the godly in Marian England but the sharp religious conflicts fuelled by the Restoration settlement that included a series of vindictive measures intended to enforce religious uniformity. One of the most severe was the second Conventicle Act (1670) – "the Quintessence of arbitrary Malice" Andrew Marvell called it (2:314). This Act, which filled the prisons with dissenters, exemplified "the *Spirit of Persecution*" in the eyes of Milton's Quaker pupil and friend, since it required no trial by juries and involved concealed informers using "deep Dissimulation" to penetrate the assembles of sectaries so as to initiate prosecutions against dissenters (Ellwood 284–285).[32] Near the end of *Paradise Lost*, Milton's depiction of Truth withdrawing in the midst of a world perverse, without any reform-

[32] Thomas Ellwood describes the informers sent forth among the sectaries "with Instructions to thrust themselves into all Societies … *Proteous*-like change their Shapes, and transform themselves from one Religious Appearance to another, as occasion should require" so "that they might (if possible) ruin all, at least many" (285). For the harsh impact of the Act on Protestant nonconformity, see also Hutton 274.

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ing individuals to counter the forcing of religious practices, conveys a sense of the traumatic impact of unchecked religious and spiritual tyranny: "Truth shall retire / Bestuck with sland'rous darts, and works of Faith / Rarely be found: so shall the World go on, / To good malignant, to bad men benign" (12.535–538). Consequently, as Milton's poem offers one of our most imaginative yet sober engagements with the origins and nature of tyranny, it highlights the need for readers to remain ever vigilant about the rise of different forms of tyranny that can imperil political, religious, and individual liberty. In doing so, *Paradise Lost* reminds us just how precarious and fragile our struggle for human freedom remains.

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