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Sufficient to have stood, or supposed to fall? The authority of God's voice in the fall of man in Paradise Lost

Emily Edwards

Milton's decision to anthropomorphise God by portraying him as a character in *Paradise Lost* has caused endless debate amongst critics. Many decry the attempt to humanise and understand the unknowable, but I intend to argue that Milton's efforts allow the reader to engage with a theological position. By giving God the power to speak, Milton opens up the possibility for discussion. This article will challenge the perception of a perfect God in *Paradise Lost* and, incorporating theological and literary criticism, advance the argument that God was guilty of deliberately creating a world that was bound to fall through an investigation of his justified voice.

Theologians have long debated the reasoning behind God's creation of a perfect world destined to fall as realised by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*. It is difficult to accept the logic of such a creation without questioning why an omniscient, omnipotent God would create a situation in which his perfect beings could not possibly withstand temptation. Answers to this paradox suggest themselves; firstly, that God intended man to fall. This can be anticipated and explained by *felix culpa*, the "fortunate fall", or it can lead us (particularly those not bound by faith) to question the purity of God's motives. Milton gives his God a voice, and thus an active role in defending his actions. I intend to engage with God's words to investigate the fall and the extent of his responsibility. God is a being of unlimited power and knowledge, whereas Adam and Eve are constrained by the limitations of their status as mortals. Thus, God's part in their fall may be read as an exercise in power, and his words as an explanation of his motivation.

In *Paradise Lost*, God acts and speaks with a literary voice. Milton's rendering of an unknowable God as a character has been the subject of extensive debate amongst critics. Although many critics have condemned Milton's attempt to humanise and understand God in the past, more recent post-Christian thought has accepted Milton's portrayal of God as wholly fictional. Milton's writing allows the reader to engage critically with the theological position Milton proposes, rather than submitting to unquestioning compliance. In presenting a God who speaks and defends himself, Milton implicitly opens up the possibility for disagreement and discussion. The modern reader can regard God from a purely literary perspective, free from Christian binaries of heresy or orthodoxy.

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Of particular interest to this discussion is God's speech in Book III, in which he presents the notions of free will, pre-destination, and the logic of their coexistence. God defends the creation of his subjects with free will insofar as they can individually choose to elevate themselves to a position of divine election. He anticipates the doubts and questions of a sceptical audience in defence of his actions and decisions. Milton permits God multiple opportunities to defend himself as one of the aims of *Paradise Lost* is to 'justify the ways of God to men'[1]. In presenting a self-justifying God, Milton provides the reader with opportunities for critical debate and reason for doubt. God's attempts to justify himself ask more questions about the absoluteness of his power than they answer.

An understanding of the historical context is vital to an informed reading of *Paradise Lost* and its intricacies. Milton was writing during a period of great theological debate, which centred around the Arminian-Calvinist controversy. John Rumrich eloquently summarises the two schools of thought as follows:

> The Calvinist asserts the unconditional predestination of elect individuals, who receive irresistible grace, and reprobate individuals, to whom this grace is denied […] The Arminian asserts conditional predestination to election and reprobation, contingent upon an individual's choice to accept or reject universal and resistible grace.[2]

Milton's theological position is difficult to categorically identify, as he altered his opinions throughout the course of his life and his writing. His depiction of God's justice, and his perspective regarding free will and predestination, conform principally to the more moderate views as set out in Arminian theories, rather than those of Calvinism. In *Paradise Lost*, however, his theology wavers to incorporate Calvinist ideas of the authority of God. Both Rumrich and Christopher Hill take issue with the passage in God's speech in which he declares: 'Some I have chosen of peculiar grace | Elect above the rest: so is my will'[3]. This, as Hill notes, is an example of 'Calvinist lines […] sandwiched between two unequivocally Arminian passages (l. 111-34, p.185-202)'[4]. Milton's God is inconsistent; initially he proclaims the freedom of man's will 'authors to themselves in all'[5], but within the space of a few lines he has reclaimed the power to predetermine the fates of all to either election or reprobation. Rumrich excuses God's contradiction by focusing on 'the Arminian twofold distinction'[6] that follows. He shows that despite initially declaring, 'the elect are set off

[1] J. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, (ed.) G. Teskey (New York, 2005), Book I, l.26.
[2] J. Rumrich, *Milton and Heresy* (Cambridge, 1998), 94.
[3] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book III, l.183-184.
[4] C. Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London, 1997), 276.
[5] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book III, l.126.
[6] Rumrich, *Milton and Heresy*, 95.

against the "sinful" rest', in reality 'the "rest" turn out not to be the reprobate, but the elect (who choose to accept grace) and the reprobate (who choose not to)'[7]. This analysis, while useful in disentangling what could otherwise be a perplexing contradiction, is by no means absolute. God's paradoxical words also demonstrate his inconsistencies as, anxious to defend himself on all fronts, he incorporates multiple aspects of theology in order to extend his appeal. The fact that we hear God's voice complicates his absolute domination as it permits us to question what we are told. By giving God a voice, Milton provides scope for a paradoxical God whose remaining power lies in the assumed obedience of his followers and their subordination.

Satan believes himself to be a fully Calvinist reprobate, and indeed, God implies this might be the case. In Book IV, Satan shows signs of remorse, in a scene that echoes Faustus' failed repentance in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus.* He asks, 'Is there no place | Left for repentance, none for pardon left?'[8]. Satan wants to be considered for forgiveness, but regards himself as beyond salvation. He also doubts his ability to remain sinless, were he forgiven: 'But say I could repent and could obtain | By act of grace my former state. How soon | Would heighth recall high thoughts?'[9]. If he were a Calvinistic reprobate, he would be unable to avoid falling again; if he were an Arminian one, he would be able to choose.

Empirical evidence further strengthens the case for God's complicity in the fall. God created Satan inherently evil, or in the knowledge that he would rebel against Heaven and pervert Adam and Eve. Despite this, God 'left him at large to his own dark designs'[10]. This negligent action is hastily justified when the narrator explains its purpose: that 'he might | Heap upon himself damnation'[11]. However, this reasoning seems to imply that mankind was sacrificed to teach Satan a lesson, which contradicts mainstream Christian theological doctrine. If the justification is unfounded, it is still unclear why God allowed Satan to wreak havoc. In Book X, the idea of God's negligence reappears when the narrator tells us that he 'hindered not Satan to attempt the mind | Of Man with strength entire and free will armed'[12]. Although this emphasises the failure of Adam and Eve to use their free will correctly, it also points out that God permitted the fall to occur. Such theological oversights contribute to the reader's growing sense of an imperfect God as he creates discord by contradicting himself. In an attempt to explain the existence of Satan, God compromises the supremacy of his power and, by inviting us to consider his motives, sets himself up to be challenged by sceptical readers.

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[7] *Ibid.*, 96.
[8] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book IV, l.79-80.
[9] *Ibid.*, Book IV l. 93-95.
[10] *Ibid.*, Book I, l. 213.
[11] *Ibid.*, Book I, l. 215.
[12] *Ibid.*, Book X, l.8-9.

The primary purpose of God's speech in Book III is to outline Milton's interpretation of the debate between free will and predestination, to defend the world God created. God attempts to answer the fundamental questions Stanley Fish poses: 'how does one reconcile freedom of will with the absolute foreknowledge of the creator? How can actions which were foreseen be free?'[13] God endeavours to explain the delicate balance between creating a world that was 'sufficient to have stood'[14] but equally 'free to fall'[15]. Mankind was, according to God, created perfect, but once life began Adam and Eve were given the freedom to choose whether to follow God or to desert him. For Milton's God, the inclusion of free will is a vital element in the creation of mankind. When prophesising the fall, God defends himself saying: 'He had of Me | All he could have. I made him just and right, | Sufficient to have stood though free to fall'.[16] He is eager to emphasise that he fulfilled his duty, though man is not going to fulfil his. We only have God's word that the initial creation was made perfect, though we are presented with much evidence to the contrary. The fact of the fall is, for many, proof that Adam and Eve were not created strong enough to resist. The problem is that once we have begun to doubt the purity of God's motives, we can no longer accept his words as absolute authority. Rather, the fact that Satan was ascribed with enough unchecked power to bring about the downfall of mankind implies that God did not sufficiently support Adam and Eve, and may indeed have intended their fall, despite his claims to the contrary.

Book IX implies Adam and Eve were made with a tendency towards weakness, not 'sufficient' at all; Eve easily convinces Adam that they should separate and, soon after, Satan tempts Eve without excessive difficulty, as Milton notes, 'his words […] | Into her heart too easy entrance won'[17]. If God is omnipotent and omniscient, how could he have created humans with these frailties? God declares that mankind will 'easily transgress the sole command, | Sole pledge of his obedience'[18] as if it is their fault for being so wilfully subversive. On the contrary, with the knowledge that this one command would be broken so certainly, God could have altered his expectations to give Adam and Eve other chances to prove their love. He depends upon a negative system of proving allegiance, rather than positively rewarding declarations of faith. William Empson criticises God's parenting as 'neurotic, if nothing worse'[19]. In this instance, God exonerates himself of responsibility. His failure to alter Adam and Eve and make them more capable of resisting Satan adds to a

[13] S. Fish, *Surprised By Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost,* 2nd edn. (London, 1997), 209.
[14] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book III, l.99.
[15] *Ibid*.
[16] *Ibid.*, Book III, l.97-99.
[17] *Ibid.*, Book IX, l.733-734.
[18] *Ibid.*, Book III, l.94-95.
[19] W. Empson, *Milton's God* (London, 1961), 116.

growing sense that God desired Adam and Eve's fall. By refusing to interfere, God guarantees their downfall.

In *The Argument* of Book V, Milton states that God's warnings 'render man inexcusable'[20], but does not acknowledge that he is simultaneously excusing himself. God's tone is almost resentful when he tells Raphael, 'This let him know | Lest wilfully transgressing he pretend | Surprisal unadmonished, unforewarned'[21] A.J.A. Waldock notes the 'nervousness, insecurity and doubt' that he charitably attributes to 'an immaculate character on the defensive'[22]. For Empson, on the other hand, Milton's God is 'somehow embarrassing'[23], his speech in Book III betraying an 'uneasy conscience'[24]. Rumrich finds him 'aesthetically problematic and perhaps tyrannical'[25]. Fish, however, claims that the speech is 'not the defensive exclamation of an angry parent disclaiming responsibility for the sins of his offspring, but a logically necessary inquiry if the fact (of the fall) is to be placed in the context of total reality'[26]. He sidesteps the tonal flaws of the speech with his claim of its necessity, and if we subscribe to his reading of *Paradise Lost* as a morally instructive text, then God's speech does have its place. If we do not completely agree with him, the speech can be taken and criticised at face value. God protests too much for a completely innocent character; he anticipates the accusations before they have even been conceived, which merely serves to encourage reader criticism.

One of the many reasons why God speaks in Book III is to assert his power and ensure that he is attributed with the respect he believes he deserves. Milton sets the tone in his opening address, 'God is light'[27], before passing the power of speech to God to affirm his own strength and virtue. God admits he wants mankind to fall so that they too can acknowledge his power: 'to me owe | All his deliverance, and to none but me'[28]. This is an Old Testament God who wishes to frighten his subjects and give them a taste of the 'dark opprobrious den of shame, | The prison of His tyranny'[29] to ensure their constant allegiance in the future. For those in thrall to Biblical teachings, such a declaration is in keeping with the notion that God deserves to be worshipped. On the other hand, other readers may react like Satan, defying the pressure

[20] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book V, l.150.
[21] *Ibid.*, Book V l.243-245.
[22] A.J.A. Waldock, *Paradise Lost and Its Critics,* 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1959), 102.
[23] Empson, *Milton's God*, 9.
[24] *Ibid.*, 116.
[25] J. Rumrich, *Milton Unbound* (Cambridge, 1996), 68.
[26] Fish, *Surprised By Sin*, 65.
[27] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book III, l.3.
[28] *Ibid.*, Book III, l.181-182.
[29] *Ibid.*, Book III, l.58-59.

to 'bow and sue for grace | With suppliant knee'[30]. We are forced to 'stare God full in the face'[31], and few like what they see. We see justification for William Blake's famous claim that Milton was 'of the Devil's party'[32] as God comes across as an egotistical tyrant, bitterly setting up his creations for a fall so they will return to him begging for forgiveness and acknowledging his power. In order to crush future rebellion, God wants mankind to be aware of its frailty and its properly subordinated place within the religious universe.

God reiterates several times that despite his foreknowledge, there are limitations to the extent of his omnipotence. In reference to Satan's rebellion in Heaven, he remarks that 'They themselves decreed | Their own revolt, not I'[33]. In this he emphasises the idea of personal responsibility, demonstrating that obedience is a matter of choice. He continues; 'If I foreknew | Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault | Which had no less proved certain unforeknown'[34]. In the case of the fallen angels, God was more at fault than with Adam and Eve; it was God's nepotism in promoting his Son that angered the angels, 'fraught | With envy'[35], into rebellion. He disassociates his foreknowledge from events that occur with no evidence to support his claim other than his word. In the Bible, the word of God is the absolute truth; in a work of fiction such as *Paradise Lost*, it is merely the utterance of one character. Fish takes issue with such a reading, believing that the reader, like Adam and Eve, has the option to accept or reject the Bible as truth, as understanding the poem as 'ultimately a choice between the word of God and the structures reared (self-defensively) by the reader's reason'[36]. He is countering God's argument of the importance of individual reason when it works against God's word. How were Adam and Eve supposed to understand such complex thought still debated by modern critics?

Within his speech in Book III, God takes pains to shift the onus of responsibility away from himself; he accepts the glory of perfect creation, but does not believe himself liable for the tragic outcome. This is particularly evident in the following lines: 'the high decree | Unchangeable, eternal, which ordained | Their freedom: they themselves ordained their Fall'[37]. God congratulates himself upon the creation of man's freedom while locating the blame for the fall completely with the fallen themselves. The repetition of 'ordained' also has

[30] *Ibid.*, Book III, l.111-112.
[31] Waldock, *Paradise Lost and Its Critics*, 99.
[32] Blake, W., 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' in (ed.) Teskey, G., *Paradise Lost*, (New York, 2005), 389.
[33] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book III, l.106-107.
[34] *Ibid.*, Book III, l.181-182.
[35] *Ibid.*, Book V, l.661.
[36] Fish, *Surprised By Sin*, 216.
[37] Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book III, l.126-128.

implications of destiny as Milton suggests a paradox of an inescapable fate and the unexercised power of God to stop the fall from happening.

Milton briefly hints at the doctrine of *felix culpa* in God's speech of Book III. Man is created likely to fall so he can benefit from learning to repent and to choose good and evil. God asks his listeners, 'Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere | Of true allegiance, constant faith or love | Where only what they needs must do appeared, | Not what they would?'[38]. He allowed the fallen angels (and Adam and Eve) the freedom to choose their allegiances, and they fell. In this way God is challenging accusations of tyranny, for if his subjects freely choose to worship him, there can be no doubt of the purity of their intentions. In permitting his subjects to know evil, they can consciously choose the path of righteousness. God continues to bemoan the tediousness of unintelligent subjects: 'What pleasure I from such obedience paid | When will and reason […] made passive both, had served necessity'[39]. 'Necessity' is key as God emphasises the importance of faith as an active choice, rather than a compulsory duty.

In his speech in Book III, God declares that the fall will ensure his subjects 'pray, repent, and bring obedience due'[40]. He admits that the fall is intentional, thereby subscribing to the notion of *felix culpa*, but directly contradicts his previous claims that the fall is completely mankind's 'own'[41] fault. By emphasising the importance of his rules and the consequences of breaking them, God does two things: theologically, he paves the way for his punishments which will be executed in the name of disobedience, while simultaneously warning humans of their limitations to prevent them from 'vent'ring higher than [their] lot'[42]. Thus God establishes dramatic tension. The reader has both been told and already knows that the fall will occur; God simply reiterates the consequences that will occur once it has happened. God's voice has become more than just a theological authority; he also takes on a narrative power. For Albin Lesky, destiny has 'an accountable power which […] has produced in dramatic art the kind of tragedy of fate'[43]. Knowing the consequences of the fall, we can do nothing but observe with dread as Adam and Eve bite into the forbidden apple.

Burton Hatlen, by contrast, defends and commends the struggle between good and evil: 'Without Satan, God's universe remains static, immobile- and, from a human perspective, intolerably dull. What sort of God would want to sit around for eternity as His angels sing

[38] *Ibid.*, Book III, l.103-106.
[39] *Ibid.*, Book III, l.107-110.
[40] *Ibid.*, Book III, l.190.
[41] *Ibid.*, Book III, l. 97.
[42] *Ibid.*, Book IX, l. 690.
[43] A. Lesky, *Greek Tragedy* (London, 1965), 114.

hymns in His praise?'[44]. This notion recalls God's words, 'What pleasure I from such obedience paid?'[45]. Apparently, it is not only mortals who are susceptible to boredom. Taken together, these ideas support the notion that God permitted the existence of Satan in the knowledge that he would create an opportunity for dramatic and moral tension.

The most contentious implication of this discussion is perhaps also the most intriguing: the notion that God, the 'author of all'[46] is just that; an author. If we accept Fish's thesis that Milton intends the reader, as 'a participant in the action'[47], to identify with Adam, Eve and Satan, by logical extension this means that Milton, as author and creator, is synonymous with God. Both are omnipotent creators of their worlds yet, despite foreknowledge, both are powerless to alter the events that will unfold. God claims to be unable to interfere because he has allowed his protagonists the freedom of choice, whilst Milton cannot change the outcome of the well-known story. If both God and Milton are authors, their intentions transcend categorisation of good or evil. They wish to create a dramatic work, to justify the paradoxical creation of a perfect world bound to fall. God exercises his authority to ensure the outcome is dramatically and emotionally fulfilling.

The notion that God searches for 'pleasure'[48] is expounded in the following lines: 'Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled | Made passive both, had served necessity'[49]. He begrudges the banal passivity of any beings that would simply follow his orders out of necessity rather than their free choice. Although we are warned not to think 'that Heav'n would want spectators, God want praise'[50], there is too much evidence to dismiss the idea. Once the notion of God's perfection has been called into question, the scope for subversion and intrigue becomes apparent. If God is prone to boredom and craves entertainment that will give him pleasure, his purpose for creating Adam and Eve not quite 'sufficient'[51] takes on a new dimension. God created man not just because he wanted to prove the moral hierarchy of religion and truth, but also because he wished to create a scenario that would unfold dramatically.

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[44] B. Hatlen, 'Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, a Challenge to the Fantasies of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, with an Epilogue on Pullman's Neo-Romantic Reading of *Paradise Lost*' in (eds.) M. Lenz & C. Scott, *His Dark Materials Illuminated* (Detroit, 2005), 89.
[45] *Paradise Lost*, Book III, l.374.
[46] *Ibid.*, Book III, l.374.
[47] Fish, *Surprised By Sin*, lxxii.
[48] *Paradise Lost*, Book III, l. 107.
[49] *Ibid.*, Book III, l.109-110.
[50] *Ibid.*, Book VI, l.676.
[51] *Ibid.*, Book III, l.99.

Many critics take issue with Milton's attempt to portray God at all; Waldock notes that Milton was bound to make errors in his depiction of God because 'perfection, quite strictly, is unportrayable' [52]. Part of the lasting entertainment of the poem, however, is rooted in the character of God, because we are able to engage with and criticise him. Indeed, Empson refers to Blake and Shelley, 'who said that the reason why the poem is so good is that it makes God so bad'[53]. For critics who desire more than just a retelling of the Bible, Milton provides an opportunity for debate and intrigue.

That it is now possible to consider God as a character and dramatic force, rather than a deity, signals the fundamental shift that literary appreciation has experienced in the last century. We now operate in a principally post-Christian society, which means that critics now have the freedom to discuss God rationally rather than being forced to conform to accepted notions of doctrinal theology. God's function as creator in the poem shifts the focus of his actions away from a debate over inherent virtue or evil and more towards a rational discussion of exercised authority. He may not have used his power purely to bring about evil, but God does not pursue good either. The crux is that the situation was crafted so it was highly likely Adam and Eve would fall to create the drama necessary for *Paradise Lost*.

God either permitted the fall to occur because he foresaw the fortunate outcome and believed mankind would benefit more from salvation, or because of malicious intent. The doctrine of *felix culpa* is a labyrinthine argument with which to justify God's actions and defend the paradoxical creation of a world that was certain to fall. Although it may be theologically comforting to believe that God's love for humanity lies at the roots of his plans, *Paradise Lost* does not show this to be entirely the case. Liberated from the shackles of religious imperatives, the suggestion that God's intentions are anything other than pure are not as reprehensible as it would have been in Milton's era. The reasoning behind the fall is much easier to comprehend if it is attributed to egotism: God wanted to exert his power over his subjects.

[52] Waldock, *Paradise Lost and its Critics*, 97.
[53] Empson, *Milton's God*, 68.

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