THE EMBRACE OF THE FIG TREE: SEXUALITY AND CREATIVITY IN MIDRASH AND IN MILTON

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It is by now something of a commonplace to observe that the separate versions of the creation of humanity detailed in books 7 and 8 of *Paradise Lost* reflect John Milton's awareness of and struggle with the apparently distinct accounts reported in Genesis 1.26-31 and 2.7-9, 15-25. The Bible's duplicate narratives of creation have been attributed by biblical source critics to the Priestly, or P text, which is normally aligned with Raphael's grand description within the sequence of the seven days of creation in 7.505-50, and the Yahwist, or J text, which is said to parallel Adam's rendition of his own coming to consciousness in book 8, where his perspective is more fully privileged than in book 7's hexameron. This correlation of sources fails to account, however, for a far more complicated splicing of the P and J texts in book 7 and, more important, for the third version of human creation, Eve's narration of her awakening, which precedes books 7 and 8. Clearly there is more to these varying accounts than a distinction between theocentric and anthropocentric perspectives. By including Eve's story, Milton draws a second distinction, between the masculine and feminine perspectives on coming to self-awareness. Indeed, the presence of Eve's story in book 4 inevitably confounds many recent attempts to recover Milton's misogynist or proto-feminist sympathies. Eve's version of her own creation depends, for biblical precedent, on the brief pronouncement in Genesis 2.22, "and [God] brought her unto the man." Most of the narrative details grow out of the Greek and Roman classics, specifically Ovid's story of Narcissus in the *Metamorphoses*. A poem that constantly negotiates the relative value of its precursor texts, *Paradise Lost* always seems to find the classical sources wanting. As the corrective to these fallen pagan models Milton inevitably posits the Bible. Thus, any representations of characters or figures that draw on these classical sources will necessarily suggest some form of devaluation. The absolute scale upon which Milton's poem seems to place the Bible and classical romance suggests that, even at the level of source-text, *Paradise Lost* subordinates Eve—her creation, her sexuality—to Adam.
*Genesis Rabbah*, a collection of Midrash Aggadah from the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., offers a similar dichotomy, meditating explicitly and—more often—implicitly on the differences between a nascent rabbinic ontology and a Hellenistic (Platonic) one. With notable frequency, these rabbinic encounters between Hebraism and Hellenism occur over matters concerning the body, sexuality (especially, though not exclusively, female sexuality), and human imagination. These thematic parallels between *Paradise Lost* and midrash may account for an ongoing interest in Milton as a Hebraic poet, potentially influenced (directly or indirectly) by the writings of classical and medieval Jewish scholars. Yet, for neither Milton nor the rabbis are the associations of sexuality with paganism or Hellenism entirely consistent. Both *Paradise Lost* and the Midrash stage conflicts between the sacredness of female sexuality, as a version of human creativity and imagination, and its profanity. At the same time, these texts both pit non-biblical, Hellenic influences against Hebraic ones. Despite the temptation to map these tensions onto each other, in neither case do we find a simple textual marking of sexuality as inherently corrupt, or a consistent association of sexuality with the non-biblical or romance genre.

Many commentators on *Paradise Lost*, especially those who have been interested in the epic's Hebraism, attribute some of Milton's less conventionally Christian views on sexuality to his familiarity and sympathy with Jewish thought. Indeed, the very notion of pre-lapsarian *coitus*, unique to Milton among his widely diverse Christian contemporaries and predecessors, is an idea that can be traced to numerous rabbinic sources, including *Genesis Rabbah* (18.6). I shall not argue, as some have, for a rabbinic source to this poetic innovation; rather, I cite it to demonstrate that even in its critical reception, the poem's Hebraism may function to incorporate a more positive version of sexuality, and not merely as an antidote to the corrupt sexuality of the poem's classical forerunners. In more general terms, Milton's monistic refusal to reject the body can be seen as a "Hebraic" element of *Paradise Lost*. The result is a poem that plays on two different kinds of conflicts. First, there is the conflict between sexual libertinism and the ascetic rejection of any form of sexuality documented by James Grantham Turner. Second, there is the conflict between the license of classical (non-biblical) sources and the restrictive control of the biblical source texts. Despite several attempts by critics of the last half-century to coordinate these two seemingly parallel conflicts, I shall argue that they continually resist any possible schematic alignment with one another. By reading both midrash and Milton's poem as dynamic, dialogic texts, I will suggest that
Paradise Lost has as much to teach us about the development of rabbinc attitudes toward sexuality and creativity as midrash has to inform our understanding of Milton’s struggle with these same concepts.

I. THE ANXIETY OF INSPIRATION

In a fascinating reexamination of Genesis 1-11 (the synthetic P-J pre-history of the Hebrews), Ilana Pardes has argued that Eve’s presence in the story of the Tree of Knowledge demands to be read in light of her subsequent activity as mother and—more importantly—as namer. Eve’s first naming-speech occurs immediately after her violation of the injunction against eating from the Tree of Knowledge. She calls her first son Cain (qayin) in Genesis 4.1, explaining the name with the following phrase, qanithi ish eth YHWH, translated by the Authorized Version as “I have gotten a man from the Lord.” Pardes insists that the Hebrew verb q’n’h’ be translated as “create” or “fashion,” and not as it has been subdued by various translators into “gotten” or “bought” or “gained”; furthermore, she argues, this statement should be read as a challenge to YHWH’s exclusive control of the activity of creation. In Genesis 3 Eve sought to acquire the power of divinity by eating from the Tree. With the birth of her first child she seeks again to define herself as (pro)creator, comparable to YHWH. What Eve is really saying—and Pardes argues that the naming is addressed to both Adam and to YHWH—is “It is not you who created woman out of man (with divine help) . . . but it is I who created you—ish—together with YHWH!” The ish (“man”) refers both to Cain and to Adam: “Through the naming of Cain, Eve rewrites Genesis 2 as a subversive comment on Adam’s displacement of the generative power of the female body [when he called her ishah, in 2.23, having come from ish].”

Pardes’s remarkable revision of Eve’s role as creative subject, and not merely object (of desire, of temptation, of impregnation), recovers the biblical text’s denial, in both the P and the J versions, of woman’s role as mother and creator. Both of these accounts work to confirm the validity of patriarchal monotheism, which has been textually formulated as a rejection of pre-monotheistic (often matriarchal) culture. The Yahwistic account presents the astonishing reversal of biological birth, in which woman issues forth from man. But even the supposedly egalitarian Priestly version eventually writes woman out of the process of procreation: the final words of P’s creation in 2.4a, “These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created,” find their complement in P’s later human genealogies in Genesis 5: “This is the book of the generations of Adam.” As the text goes on to list the ten
generations separating Adam and Noah not a single mother or daughter is mentioned: "procreation becomes primarily a male issue once the generic term 'adam' in 5.1-2 turns into the proper name Adam in 5.3, once the relentless listing of ancestors begins." Pardes's recovery of these narrative denials of woman's far more substantive role in procreation is useful not only for its restitution of female subjectivity to the biblical text; the tension between Eve's palpably creative act of motherhood and the patriarchal deity's loud protestations to the contrary underscore an anxiety about man's seemingly trivial participation in the most dramatic instance of human creativity.

From this biblical (male) anxiety to a Miltonic anxiety about creativity would seem to be an easy step. It is one made more complicated, however, by the ambivalent representations of female creativity that pervade the poem. Janet Adelman has characterized the connection between Eve and the female muse as a manifestation of Milton's "concern with the source and end of his own creativity apparently felt as an expression of the female in his own nature and presided over by a female muse." If he were to have responded to this concern in a similar fashion to the biblical accounts, then we might expect Milton to make more of a concerted effort to denigrate or even excise female (pro)creativity from the poem's midst. But the invocations, as well as Milton's other representations of the feminine aspects of creation, reveal a more complex connection between bearing a child and producing a poem. As a number of critics have recently observed, Raphael's account of the creation depends specifically on the dynamics of sexual generation, the periodic birthing of new elements of the universe in an ever-renewing "labor." Similarly, the female muse—mediatory and inspiring—to whom Milton addresses his invocations plays much more than a figurative or conventional role in the poem.

In his first invocation the poet calls to the Spirit who

... from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss,
And madst it pregnant ... 

The imagery here suggests a masculine insemination of the "vast Abyss" by the Spirit or Muse, and by analogy seems to imply that in the quest for inspiration Milton is seeking his own impregnation by the Muse. But this reading of the motif of inspiration positions Milton as a passive receptacle, which in turn guarantees that "the poem is not his own invention: in order to deny the possibility of satanic inspiration, Milton..."
must deny his own authorship.” The poet’s understanding of creation (from the Hebrew *barah*) as an *active* ordering, selecting, and augmenting of pre-existent material argues against the possibility of Milton wishing to disown his poem, attributing it, however archly or defensively, to divine inspiration. In an oft-quoted passage from his posthumously published theological treatise Milton writes:

> In the first place, it is certain that neither the Hebrew verb ברא [*barah*], nor the Greek *Ktizein* [*ctizein*], nor the Latin *creare*, can signify to create out of nothing. On the contrary, these words uniformly signify to create out of matter.

Milton’s well-documented disagreement with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, his insistence that God created the world out of preexistent material, is methodologically analogous to the creation that the poet undertakes in the poem generally, and in books 7 and 8 in particular. Just as God selects, distinguishes, defines, and distills pre-existent matter to form the different aspects of the world, congealing diverse essences out of one uniform and continuous substance, so too Milton selects, refines, and reprocesses the preexistent material of the biblical narrative (as well as any classical precursors) into his own augmented account of creation. The marvelous suspension of referent and syntax in book 3’s invocation serves as further indication of the poet’s desire to be both passive and active in the production of his poem:

> Then feed on thoughts, that voluntary move
> Harmonious numbers; as the wakeful bird
> Sings darkling, and in shadiest Covert hid
> Tunès her nocturnal Note.

> (PL, 3.37-40)

The momentary ambiguity generated by the enjambment of “that voluntary move / Harmonious numbers” proposes first that “move” be read intransitively, suggesting an inner activity within the poet as he creates the poem. Coupled with the uncertainty of address in these lines—they are written in the imperative, without an explicit subject—the possibility of non-communion frozen in the end-stop “move” describes a powerful inclination on the part of the poet to turn away from the holy Light, and to compose the poem in isolation. The invocations are thus neither exclusively requests for divine inspiration from some yet-to-be-defined Muse, nor periodic declarations of poetic independence.
The invocation to book 7 attempts to name the Muse for the first time: "Descend from Heav’n Urania" (PL, 7.1) Here, finally, the Muse to whom Milton calls is gendered female and given a classical pedigree. Noam Flinker has argued that the poet here "approximates a psychic stance of a lover courting his beloved," in which case the passive and active roles we saw earlier have been reassigned. But Flinker’s claim that "Milton’s narrator courts Urania in order to transfer the powers of sublimated inspiration from her mythical sources into his poem” fails to recognize the (hardly disguised) antagonism Milton expresses toward this classical Muse. Indeed, the second line of the invocation immediately challenges the propriety of the appellation: “by that name / If rightly thou art call’d” (PL, 7.1-2). Rather than a wholesale embrace of the classical, female Muse, what we find in this invocation is intense ambivalence and apprehension concerning the source of inspiration.

My reading of the presence of images of female (pro)creativity in Paradise Lost, then, has circled back around to the male anxiety that Pardes described in her analysis of Genesis 1-11, with an important difference. For if Eve, through the power of naming, retains some of the power to create that had been denied to her by P and J, then Milton challenges female (pro) creativity and sexuality through this same task of naming, or rather, through an unnaming. Pardes’s reading of Eve’s act of naming Cain seeks to locate (pre-monotheistic) precursors to the biblical text that celebrated the female power to produce. Milton’s collation of classical (polytheistic) sources with biblical ones works to reverse that celebration by associating the dangers he sees in female sexuality with the seductions of classical pre-texts. This association surfaces explicitly as the invocation reaches its climax:

But drive far off the barbarous dissonance
Of Bacchus and his Revellers, the Race
Of that wild Rout that tore the Thracian Bard
In Rhodope, where Woods and Rocks had Ears
To rapture, till savage clamour drown’d
Both Harp and Voice; nor could the Muse defend
Her Son. So fail not thou, who thee implores:
For thou art Heavn’ly, shee an empty dream.

(PL, 7.32-39)

The dangers of female sexuality are embodied in the Bacchante, whose “barbarous dissonance” stands in direct conflict with the Orphic sounds of an inspired (male) poet singing the natural world into lyrical enchantment. Milton poses as Orpheus, whose power to tame the feminine world of nature with his song is eventually usurped as he is
rent asunder by the “wild Rout.” Pronouncing the idea of a female Muse “an empty dream,” Milton condemns the very classical sources from which she is drawn because of her associations with the violence and destruction of female sexuality; classicism becomes the “savage clamour” that threatens to drown out the “Harp and Voice”—which also alludes to David the psalmist, a distinctively Hebraic image—of Milton’s poem.

II. CLASSICAL ROMANCE

Milton’s apparent anxiety concerning female sexuality would thus seem to overlap with his hostile attitude toward his classical precursors. Nevertheless, despite its omnipresent biblical and Christian correctives, which are frequently associated with Milton’s conception of masculine creativity and the control of female sexuality, Paradise Lost is never able to excise the presence of classicism from its midst.24 As a poet, writing in the tradition of “Blind Thamyris, and blind Maeonides, / And Tiresias and Phineus Prophets old” (PL, 3.35-36), and not merely as the latest in the line of “That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed” (PL, 1.8), Milton positions himself between the world of the classics and the world of the Hebrew Bible, just as he occupies a precarious middle-ground between the perceived excesses of female sexuality and the strictures of Christian discipline and asceticism.

The poet’s temptation by—despite his apparent fear of—female sexuality is matched by his troubled inclination toward self-authorship. Satan’s audacious claim to independence remains the poem’s most celebrated instance of autogenesis: “We know no time when we were not as now: / Know none before us, self-begot, self-rais’d / By our own quick’ning power” (PL, 5.859-61). As courageous as these words may sound to our own post-Romantic ears, there can be little doubt that the poem records them in order eventually to condemn them. But this Satanic moment has its prelude in Eve’s own pre-lapsarian narrative of her origins. Adam may begin the description of his first coming to consciousness with the disclaimer, “For Man to tell how human Life began / Is hard; for who himself beginning knew?” (PL, 8.250-51), but what ensues is also poetically inferior to Eve’s marvelous story. Unlike Adam, Eve appears to have little difficulty remembering and recounting her beginnings: “That day I oft remember, when from sleep / I first awak’t, and found myself repos’d” (PL, 4.449-50, my emphasis). Milton’s image of Eve-as-Narcissus admiring her newly discovered reflection in the pond is one of the most compelling—seductive?—in the poem. Occupying the same position as Satan, who overhears Eve tell her story...
to Adam, we stare with the eyes of a voyeur, looking at the looker, who simultaneously reflects (mirrors, ponders) and creates her image.25

It has become almost a critical reflex to juxtapose Adam's and Eve's first waking moments in Paradise Lost to contrast man's upward inclination with woman's downward instinct. Adam looks "Straight toward Heav’n" (PL, 8.257); Eve lays herself "down / On the green bank, to look into the clear/ Smooth Lake" (PL, 4.456-59). Yet, what this comparison neglects is Eve's first set of thoughts, "much wond'ring where / And what I was, whence thither brought, and how" (PL, 4.451-52). This terse catalogue of philosophical and theological inquiries constitutes as comprehensive a summary of Milton's own project in the opening proem as any other moment in the epic. If Eve's first musings concern her physical and existential location, her ontological status, and her relation to any motivating force or primum mobile, then surely they do so in concert with the most basic questions addressed by a poem beginning at "the hight of this great Argument" (PL, 1.24). The much remarked upon "unexperienc't thought" (PL, 4.457) with which Eve approaches the lake necessarily resonates with the poet's characterization of his epic as "unpremeditated Verse" in the invocation to book 9 (line 24). There is a difference, of course. The fallen poet cannot be anything but experienced, especially in the very invocation that prepares the way for the Fall. This difference is key. Critics often condemn Eve for her "unexperienc't thought" even though she is not yet fallen, whereas we read Milton's "unpremeditated Verse" as a sign of its divine origin even though he is fallen. The parallels that Milton draws between his poetic voice and Eve's unselfconscious narrative are nevertheless unmistakable.

In light of Milton's apparent rejection of the romance of classicism, it is tempting to posit Eve's ensuing narration of her creation as the epitome of self-centeredness, verging on self-obsession, and thus as a manifestation of the dangerous, narcissistic sexuality of classical sources. According to this interpretation, the voice that eventually calls Eve away from her reflection is the masculine voice of biblical authority, correcting the inwardness and self-satisfaction inherent in female sexuality and the classical romance tradition. Milton's continuing flirtation with female sexuality and its concomitant creativity, however, will not allow him wholly to dismiss Eve's behavior as inappropriate. Milton wrote with extraordinary power in books 1 and 2, when the Satanic impulse toward self-authorship was at its most compelling. Following the valiant, if not fully successful, attempt at representing the Divine point of view on freedom and responsibility in book 3, however, Milton must reassert a
mode of poetic authority in book 4 that responds to the threat of being overwhelmed by God’s authority as it has been represented in the Celestial Dialogue. The poet must temporarily return to the self-gratification of Lacan’s mirror stage. His representation of Eve is a powerful, if temporary, wresting of creative (and legislative) powers from the Godhead. The poem’s indulgence in Eve’s sexuality, both when she first appears in book 4 and especially in the beautiful passage describing the joys of pre-lapsarian sex at the end of this book, is necessarily tied to a version of the poetic imagination that Milton must preserve.

**III. THE CREATION OF DESIRE**

In order better to understand the complex network of associations between classicism, sexuality (good and bad), and human creativity in Milton’s poem, I suggest that we look back to the earlier Jewish tradition that has been offered as precedent for Milton’s views. This tradition itself was neither monolithic nor unresponsive to historical and cultural change. One of the earliest Hebraic texts, the J text, is also the most distinctively monist in its ontology, characterizing the first man as a “living soul” (Hebrew: nefesh hayyah; Genesis 2:7). By the last several centuries B.C.E., however, most Jewish sects had adopted a more dualist world-view. This dualism took a variety of forms, but in nearly all cases it produced a hierarchy of spirit and body, consigning the body and its accompanying sexuality to a lower (that is, less perfect) realm of being. Some of the oldest post-biblical Jewish texts (from the last two centuries before the common era), including the Book of Jubilees (3.2-6) and the Second Book of Baruch (56.5-6), assumed that the first couple lived in Eden without sexual intercourse, implying that the purity of pre-lapsarian Eden could not sustain the depravity of sexuality. In opposition to an emerging Christian view, which considered all modes of sexuality to be a consequence of Original Sin, however, the rabbis of the Amoraic period (from the end of the third to the beginning of the sixth centuries of the common era) began to assert the importance of pre-lapsarian sexuality. This was an essential aspect of the ongoing efforts by the rabbis to distinguish their Judaism from what they perceived to be its dangerous mutation by Paul and his followers. In his provocative study of sex in talmudic culture, Daniel Boyarin characterizes the advent of rabbinic monism as a direct response to the “increasing threat to the corporeal integrity of the Jewish people from . . . platonizing tendencies within Judaism” and Hellenic dualism’s rejection of the body in favor of the soul. When it came to matters of human agency, these
Amoraic rabbis inherited a tradition that also posited an ethical dualism, a split within the individual between the good and the evil inclinations. In order to adjust this dualist anthropology to their incipient monism, they sought to reformulate the notion of the evil inclination, the yetzer ha-rah, as part of an internal (psychological) dialectic. Genesis Rabbah reports the following rabbinic account of necessary evils:

Nahman in the name of R. Samuel: “Behold it was good,” this is the good inclination [yetzer ha-tov]. “And behold it was very good,” this is the evil inclination [yetzer ha-rah]. How can the evil inclination be very good? Without the evil inclination a man would not build a house, marry a woman, and have children. As Solomon says, “[Again I considered all travail, and every right work,] that for this a man is envied of his neighbor” [Ecc. 4.4].

This oft-quoted statement marks the beginning of an ongoing revision of an earlier, dualistic conceptualization of the evil inclination (as the force opposing the good inclination). The yetzer ha-rah gradually loses the modifier ha-rah, evil, and becomes simply the yetzer, desire, and as such neither essentially evil nor uncomplicatedly good.

Critics who have sought to establish links between the rabbis and Milton have often pointed to this famous passage from the Midrash as a possible source for the celebrated view of vice and virtue put forth by Milton in the Areopagitica:

. . . look how much we thus expell of sin so much we expell of vertue: for the matter of them both is the same; remove that, and ye remove them both alike. This justifies the high providence of God, who though he command us temperance, justice, continence, yet pours out before us ev’n to a profuseness all desireable things, and gives us minds that can wander beyond all limit and satiety.

Whether this idea comes directly or indirectly from the rabbis is probably impossible to determine. I remain skeptical. Ernest Sirluck’s footnote in the Complete Prose Works, which cites Thomas Browne’s Religio Medici as expressing a similar view, suggests that it was an opinion not at all unique to Milton or to those advocating an especially Hebraic perspective.

Rather than offering it as a possible rabbinic source for Milton, I want to connect the rabbinic statement on the benefits of the yetzer ha-rah with Areopagitica’s complex adumbration of the concern with the relation between desire, power, and providence that dominates the epic poem. The word yetzer may indeed properly be translated as “inclina-
tion” or “desire.” But yetzer is also at the root of one of the several biblical and rabbinic Hebrew words meaning creation, yetzirah. In fact, it is specifically this mode of creation—and not b’riah or assiyah, two other verbs used in the Genesis account—that is invoked in Genesis 2.7’s rendition of the creation of Adam: “Vayitzar YHWH elohim et ha-adam” (“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground”). Commenting on the relation between God’s creation and the human yetzer, the rabbis note that the use of this verb indicates that Adam was created with a yetzer, and did not obtain it only as a result of his first transgression. In other words, rabbinic monism’s insistence on prelapsarian sexuality stems from its association of God’s creativity with humanity’s desire.

But human sexuality is also related to humanity’s own ability to create, for there is yet another meaning for the word yetzer: imagination. The Hebrew Bible uses the word yetzer to refer to the imagination for the first time in the story of the Great Flood.34 Genesis 6.5 describes the moral decline of humanity in the following terms: “And YHWH saw the extent of man’s wickedness in the land, for all the imagination [yetzer] of his heart’s thoughts was only evil all day.” Following the flood, when we might expect this moral decline to have been remedied, the Bible reiterates the characterization: “and YHWH said to himself, ‘I will no longer curse the earth on account of man, for the imagination [yetzer] of man’s [adam] heart is evil from his youth” (Gen. 8.21).

Puzzling over this repetition, Genesis Rabbah reports a conversation that explicitly pits Hebraism against Hellenism.

Antoninus asked our Rabbi, “When is the evil inclination [yetzer ha-rah] placed within a man [adam]?” He replied, “From the moment he is formed [notzar].” [Antoninus] said to him, “If this were so, the fetus would immediately dig through the womb and come out. Rather, [the evil inclination is placed in a man] from the moment he exits [the womb].” Rabbi agreed with him, since it concurred with the verse, “For the imagination of a man’s heart is evil from his youth.” R. Yudan added, “It is written ‘from his youth [mi-ne’urav]’ to suggest the moment he awakens [ni’or] to the world.” [Antoninus] further asked, “When is the soul placed within a man?” He replied, “From the moment he leaves his mother’s womb.” [Antoninus] said to him, “If you leave unsalted flesh out for three days, will it not rot? Rather [the soul is placed within a man] from the moment he is conceived [niphad].”56 Rabbi again agreed with him, since it concurred with the verses. “For all the while my soul is in me and the spirit of God is in my nostrils” [Job 27.3], and “Your providence [ph’qudah klah] watched over my spirit” [Job 10.12]. “When did You place my soul within me? From the moment Your providence extended to me [phaqad thani].” (B, 34.10)
These two exchanges are part of a string of accounts scattered throughout midrash and the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds describing an intimate friendship between Rabbi—R. Judah HaNasi, the celebrated redactor of the Mishnah—and the Roman emperor Antoninus. They offer several important clues about the nature of the encounter between Hellenism and Hebraism, especially as it contributes to the fitful and inconsistent transition by the rabbis from a dualist to a monist ontology. First, Rabbi expresses no discomfort in accepting the correction of a Roman on matters with such profound religious and philosophical implications; nor does the Midrash seem troubled by it. While it would not be so surprising to find conversations between a Roman emperor and a Jewish rabbi in which the rabbi time and again taught the Roman a lesson, it is far more surprising to observe a rabbi graciously accepting the correction of a Roman. These stories probably come from a period in Jewish-Roman relations when Jewish authorities did not perceive Rome’s Hellenistic world view as a religious and philosophical threat. Both perceptions would change dramatically, with the advent of a Hellenized Christianity—rabbinic Judaism’s prodigal son—as a national religion serving as the key factor in this shift.

Second, it is not the Jewish reader who advocates a monistic vitalism in this discussion but the Hellenic emperor! This is a reversal that most rabbinic texts work very hard to deny or rewrite in light of the rise of Pauline Christianity’s staunchly dualist vision, as can be seen in what I consider to be a later version of this same debate. In the following account, the possible moments for the advent of the soul are altered:

Antoninus said to Rabbi, “When is the soul placed within a man, at the moment of conception [ph’iqidah] or at the moment of formation [yetzirah]? He replied, “At the moment of formation.” [Antoninus] said to him, “If you leave unsalted flesh out for three days, will it not rot? Rather [the soul is placed within a man] from the moment he is conceived [niphqad].” Rabbi said, “Antoninus has taught me this matter and Scripture agrees with him, ‘Your providence [ph’iqudath khah] watched over my spirit’ [Job 10.12].”

The most radically dualist alternative first offered by Rabbi in Genesis Rabbah—that is, that the soul is not placed in man until the moment of birth—is not even considered here. What is more, in their discussion of the yetzer ha-rah, the question they debate is not when it is placed [nathun] within man, but when it begins its influence [sholet]. All of these differences suggest that the version found in Sanhedrin bears the distinctive markings of a later period in Jewish history, a time when...
monism had become a much more accepted aspect of rabbinic thinking.\textsuperscript{42} With that cosmological monism also came an ethical dialecticism and a revision of the rabbinic understanding of the \textit{yetzer}, the imagination.

\textbf{IV. THE EMBRACE OF THE FIG TREE}

It is by this meaning of \textit{yetzer} as imagination that we come to a fascinating parallel between Milton's collation of classical and biblical source texts in his creation accounts and the midrashic understanding of these events. For if the imagination of \textit{Paradise Lost} resides at least partly in its \textit{creatio ex materia}, in its reformation of preexistent textual matter, then a similar dynamic may be said to function for the rabbis. Among their many speculations concerning man's first disobedience, the rabbis wonder about the exact species of the Tree of Knowledge. \textit{Genesis Rabbah} reports a debate between R. Meir, who said it was a stalk of wheat as tall as the cedars of Lebanon, R. Judah b. Ilai, who said it was a grape vine, R. Abba of Acre, who said it was the \textit{etrog}, or citron tree, and R. Yose, who said it was a fig tree.\textsuperscript{43} The Midrash goes on to give R. Yose's reasoning:

\begin{quote}
It may be compared to a prince who corrupted himself with one of his maidservants. When the king heard about it he threw him out of the palace. The prince tried to return to the doors of the maidservants, but they did not receive him. However, the one with whom he corrupted himself opened her door and received him. Similarly, when Adam ate from the Tree, he was thrown out of the Garden of Eden. When he approached each tree [for shelter] they did not receive him . . . But since it was from the fruit of the fig tree that he ate, the tree opened her doors and embraced him, as it is written, "and they sewed fig leaves together" [Gen. 3.7]. (B, 15.7)
\end{quote}

The \textit{mashal}, or parable, actually rearranges the order of the biblical narrative, in which the fig leaves are donned by Adam and Eve \emph{before} they are exiled from the Garden. As a revision of the Bible's own account, it functions much like Milton's insertion of Eve's creation before Raphael's hexameron and Adam's account. Not only do both examples constitute narrative reworkings of Scripture, they both deploy these revisions via the insertion of non-biblical, Hellenistic material: in the case of \textit{Paradise Lost}, Ovid's Narcissus story, and in this midrash, a story that scholars have traced to earlier Hellenistic sources.\textsuperscript{44} What is more, the association of divine wisdom and the fig tree is probably Gnostic in origin.\textsuperscript{45} Apparently, R. Yose could not resist the seduction of
this secular romance in his reconstruction of the narrative of Creation and Fall. The mashal was so effective that R. Yose was willing to sacrifice the scriptural sequence to the parable’s narrative trajectory. That this imaginative disruption of the biblical narrative via the use of a non-biblical romance or fable occurs in a discussion of the precise nature of the Fall suggests an uncanny awareness of the fallen aspect of this homily, even as it develops its own powerful interpretation of Scripture.

A further parallel between Milton’s Ovidian story of Eve and the midrashic insertion of a Hellenistic story can be seen in their shared interest in sexuality: the offense committed by the prince is specifically sexual. While the prince’s self-corruption through sexuality prompts the king to expel his beloved son, that corruption is movingly redeemed by the embrace of the fig tree. The very site of corruption becomes the site of restitution and healing. If sexuality is the form in which the rabbinic Fall occurs, then sexuality—specifically female sexuality as allegorized in the fig tree—is also the specific form in which we may look to “repair the ruins of our first parents.” I say female sexuality because the parable elides Eve’s culpability in the Fall, or subsumes it within the seduction of the tree itself. Now while it is certainly possible to read this omission of Eve as evidence of the rabbinic dismissal of female agency—all that really matters is that Adam sinned and that Adam will be restored—it is equally important to see how this non-biblical parable allows the rabbis to restore female sexuality without dwelling on it as a contributing factor in humanity’s Fall.

The midrashic “embrace of the fig tree” stands both as a figure for sexuality and as a figure for the interpolation of the secular romance into the reading of the biblical account of the Fall. As a way of gauging this phenomenon of rabbinic cultural response it is worth looking to an earlier Hebraic identification of the Tree of Knowledge with the fig tree. The apocryphal text, the Apocalypse of Moses, also known as the Greek version of the Life of Adam and Eve, was composed from a consistently non-Philonian approach to biblical interpretation, with no trace of allegorization or symbolic treatment of biblical figures, that has led scholars to compare it with midrash: “the form is that of Midrash and the theology is that of Pharisaic Judaism.” Yet, unlike later rabbinic texts the Apocalypse of Moses is consistent in its dualism. The narrative describes Adam’s soul being taken to the third heaven (chap. 37), while his body is buried in the ground (chap. 40); similarly, God first converses with Adam’s soul in chapter 39 and not until chapter 41 does God call to Adam’s body. Before it narrates the aftermath of Adam’s death, however,
it offers two versions of humanity’s fall, the first told by Adam and the second told by Eve. Eve’s version addresses the matter of post-lapsarian nakedness:

And at that very moment my eyes were opened and I knew that I was naked of the righteousness with which I had been clothed. And I wept saying ‘Why have you done this to me, that I have been estranged from my glory with which I was clothed?’ . . . But [the serpent] came down from the tree and vanished. I looked for leaves in my region so that I might cover my shame, but I did not find (any) from the trees of Paradise, since while I ate, the leaves of all the trees of my portion fell, except (those) of the fig tree only. And I took its leaves and made for myself skirts; they were from the same plants of which I ate.

Despite the basic structural affinities between this apocryphal narrative and the story told in the midrash—the abandonment of the other trees and the return to the source of corruption for rudimentary covering—there are two crucial variations that make all the difference in the world. First, unlike the midrash, the *Apocalypse of Moses* does not interpolate a secondary narrative in order to suggest the connection between the Tree of Knowledge and the fig tree. Rather than invoking the force—seductiveness—of the charming romance fable to establish the identity of the Tree, the apocryphal texts relies on sheer assertion to make the point. Thus, although the accepted view of the *Apocalypse of Moses* assumes its basic resemblance to midrash aggadah, we have discovered one important divergence, a divergence that may in fact make this text more Hebraic in its narrative construction than the Hellenistically inflected *Genesis Rabbah*.

Second, whereas in *Genesis Rabbah* the mashal elides Eve’s participation in the story of the Fall (both to her benefit and detriment), in this apocryphal account, the entire story told by Eve occurs even before she has convinced Adam to eat of the fruit. If the mashal diminishes Eve’s culpability—and by extension, the inherent corruption of sexuality, female or male—then the *Apocalypse of Moses* embellishes her role in the Fall, condemning it as explicitly sexual, having only further corrupting effects on any notion of sexuality. God’s words of punishment to Eve in chapter 25 of the *Apocalypse* speak of the pains of childbirth and further imagine Eve’s words during labor: “and you shall confess and say, ‘Lord, Lord, save me and I will never again turn to the sin of the flesh.’”

These are differences that make sense historically. The assumed date of composition for the *Apocalypse of Moses* is the first century C.E.,
whereas much of the material within *Genesis Rabbah* (redacted in the late fourth or early fifth centuries) comes from a later period in the cultural history of Palestinian Jewry. The years between the composition of the *Apocalypse of Moses* and the redaction of *Genesis Rabbah* marked a period of intense encounter between Jews and the Hellenized Christian culture by which they found themselves surrounded and assaulted.50 In their efforts to distinguish rabbinic Judaism from these outside cultural influences—perceived to be especially threatening in light of Christianity’s claim to be the true or new Israel—many midrashists emphasized a different view of the body, of sexuality, and of gender. Yet if the rabbinic restitution of sexuality reflects a cultural response to the forces of Hellenistic dualism within Judaism, then how might we account for what looks to be, in this particular midrash, a Hellenistic inspiration for the regenerative possibilities of sexuality? If rabbinic Judaism presents a more positive version of the *yetzer*, of desire, in response to Hellenism’s rejection of the body, how are we to understand the Midrash’s embrace of the Hellenized fig tree?

V. “MOTHER OF THE HUMAN RACE”

To address this complexity, I turn back to Milton’s poem, specifically the fraught relation between the poet and his textual formulation of Eve. That we first observe unfallen Adam and Eve in book 4 through Satan’s eyes, that we hear Eve’s version of her creation through Satan’s ears, does not mitigate the audacity of Milton’s assertion of sexuality’s redemptive qualities. Eve figures simultaneously the glory of self-reflection and the grace of authorial subordination. Indeed, the envy that Satan expresses as he observes the couple at 4.358-65 includes a surprising reference to their creator:

> O Hell! what do mine eyes with grief behold,  
> Into our room of bliss thus high advanc’t  
> Creatures of other mould, earth-born perhaps,  
> Not Spirits, yet to heav’nly Spirits bright  
> Little inferior; whom my thoughts pursue  
> With wonder, and could love, so lively shines  
> In them Divine resemblance, and such grace  
> The hand that form’d them on their shape hath pour’d.

We might expect Satan to feel jealousy toward these new creatures who appear to have replaced him and his fallen compatriots. But the quality that seems to move Satan to wonderment and, almost, to love (that most divine of attributes) is the manner in which the first couple display the grace that signifies their resemblance to their creator. Satan recognizes
the image of the Author in Adam and Eve, which he has already denied in himself by claiming to be “self-begot.”

Any critical attempt to align Satan’s self-authorship with Eve’s self-reflection founders on what Satan perceives to be the quintessential attribute of Adam and Eve: willing submission. The notorious description of the First Couple having been formed “Hee for God only, shee for God in him” (PL, 4.299) is of course an articulation of gender hierarchy, but one in which the two first humans both occupy positions of subordination. The warning voice—biblical, masculine—holds out to Eve, as a fit replacement for her reflected image, “hee / Whose image thou art” (PL, 4.471-72). The compensation offered within this economy of reflection can only make sense, can only be worthwhile to Eve—“what could I do, / But follow straight, invisibly thus led?” (PL, 4.475-76)—if she recognizes the value of resemblance despite, or even because of, its implicit subordination. That she initially flees the image, “Less winning soft, less amiably mild” (PL, 4.480), suggests an analogous poetic disappointment that ever threatens to turn Milton’s image, his poem, into one wholly dominated by masculine/biblical authority—in other words, into a mere repetition of the divinely-authored creation narrative in Genesis 1-3.

Eve’s scene in book 4, as delightful as it is, plays out the virtually irresolvable conflict between two divergent sides of Milton’s creative and interpretive inclinations. As she reflects on her image in the pool, Eve stands as the figure for imagination, and hence self-generated thought. But the warning voice, never fully identified, represents divine inspiration reinscribing sexuality—specifically female sexuality—within a larger authoritative framework of biblical stricture. Milton has the opportunity to pose simultaneously as the playful, imaginative spectator, having his origins in the feminized classical texts of Ovid, and as the authoritative, inspired law-giver, whose antecedents are to be found in the biblical text. It is the case, after all, that the only aspect of Eve’s story that has a basis in the biblical narrative occurs in lines 467-83:

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots & \text{a voice thus warn’d me, What thou seest,} \\
& \text{What there thou seest fair Creature is thyself,} \\
& \text{With thee it came and goes: but follow me,} \\
& \text{And I will bring thee where no shadow stays} \\
& \text{Thy coming, and thy soft embraces, hee} \\
& \text{Whose image thou art, him thou shall enjoy} \\
& \text{Inseparably thine, to him shalt bear} \\
& \text{Multitudes like thyself, and thence be call’d} \\
& \text{Mother of the human Race: what could I do,} \\
& \text{But follow straight, invisibly thus led?}
\end{align*}
\]
Till I esp’ld thee, fair indeed and tall,
Under a Platan, yet methought less fair,
Less winning soft, less amiably mild,
Than that smooth wa’ry image; back I turn’d,
Thou following cri’dst aloud, Return fair Eve . . .

These lines stand as an expanded rendition of the terse biblical
pronouncement in Genesis 2.22, “and brought her unto the man,” along
with an allusion to Adam’s naming of Eve, which in the Bible occurs
after the Fall: “And Adam called his wife’s name Eve; because she was
the mother of all living” (Gen. 3.20). Milton’s staging of the conflict
between female creativity and masculine creativity (as represented by
Divine edict) thus comprehends an early articulation of the conflict
between the classics and the Bible, which in turn sets the stage for the
proem to book 7. Alastair Fowler has suggested that the transposition
of Eve’s naming from post-lapsarian time to this pre-lapsarian moment
may serve as a typically Miltonic “correction of conventional chronology,
to enhance the status of sexuality and motherhood.”

Nevertheless, the connection between Eve’s procreative powers and her name has been
partially severed: the Warning Voice calls her “Mother of the human
race,” while Adam calls her Eve.

John Leonard has argued that Adam’s naming of Eve in book 4
confers on Eve an identity, “exactly what Eve had lacked when encoun-
tering her reflection in the pool.” As a masculine conferral of female
identity, however, it is hard to read it as a “free and spontaneous act
which proves to be [Adam’s] most persuasive argument in winning Eve’s
love.” Indeed, if, as Pardes has shown, the activity of naming in the
Genesis account constitutes a reclaiming of (pro)creative powers, then
this instance of naming serves to dissociate Eve’s name from her power
to create. The conflict between different forms of creativity represented
in Eve’s story—between female (pro)creativity and male pronounce-
ment, between imagination and inspiration, between the Greek and
Roman classics and the Bible—sets the terms for its subsequent
representation in books 7 and 8. Adam’s narration of his first day, and
especially his “creation” of Eve through discussion with God, follows on
the subtle but pointed denigration of Eve’s (pro)creativity in the
separation of her name and her role as mother.

Milton does not follow the opinion expressed by R. Yose that the Tree
of Knowledge was a fig tree. Like the biblical text that serves as its
source (Gen. 3.7), Paradise Lost only reports on the presence of the fig
tree after the Fall. This later account of the fig tree portrays it as an
alternative mother figure to the ambivalent maternity of Eve.
Adam and Eve become aware of their nakedness after their first experience with post-lapsarian sexuality they seek some means by which to cover “The Parts of each other, that seem most / To shame obnoxious, and unseemliest seen” (PL, 9.1093-94):

. . . both together went
Into the thickest Wood, there soon they chose
The Figtree, not that kind for Fruit renown’d,
But such as at this day to Indians known
In Malabar or Decan spreads her Arms
Branching so broad and long, that in the ground
The bended Twigs take root, and Daughters grow
About the Mother Tree, a Pillar’d shade
High overarch’d, and echoing Walks between;
There oft the Indian Herdsman shunning heat
Shelters in cool, and tends his pasturing Herds
At Loopholes, cut through thickest shade: Those Leaves
They gather’d, broad as Amazonian Targe,
And with what skill they had, together sew’d,
To gird thir waist, vain Covering if to hide
Thir guilt and dreaded shame; O how unlike
To that first naked Glory.

(PL, 9.1099-1115)

The provenance of this passage has been the subject of some discussion among Milton’s editors and annotators. John Gerard’s *Herball* is frequently offered as the most immediate source for some of Milton’s images. Gerard describes the manner in which the arched Indian fig tree sends down branches that in turn reroot themselves, “by meanes whereof, it cometh to passe that one tree is made a great wood, or desart of trees . . . ; the first or mother of this wood or desart of trees, is hard to be knowne from the children.” Milton’s description of the fig tree clearly echoes many of the details of Gerard’s account. Yet Kester Svendsen provides a longer list of the possible sources for the Indian fig tree in his study of Milton and science, largely to demonstrate the impossibility of determining with any real certainty the most immediate influence on the poet.

Ralegh’s *History of the World*, one of the many sources cited by Svendsen, is a candidate deserving of special consideration, however, for, in his discussion of the “the chiefe Trees in the Garden of Paradise,” Ralegh raises the possible connection between the Tree of Knowledge and the fig tree of Genesis 3.7 in some detail. Ralegh cites the Jesuit theologian and exegete Martinus Becanus (1550-1624) and the Syrian Bishop Moses Bar Kepha (813-903)—from whom, Ralegh claims,
Becanus shamelessly plagiarized—as having identified the Tree of Knowledge as the *Ficus Indica*. He writes:

> when *Adam* and *Eve* found themselves naked, they made them breeches of Fig-leaves; which proveth (indeed) that either the tree it selfe was a Fig-tree, or that a Fig-tree grew near it: because *Adam* being possest with shame did not runne vp and downe the garden to seeke out leaves to cover him, but found them in the place it selfe . . .

The connection between the two trees is one that Milton very deliberately eschews—Milton mostly relies on the generic "Fruit"; when he does become more specific, the fruit he names is, of course, the apple. Ralegh himself goes on to minimize the significance of Becanus’s identification of the Tree of Knowledge with the fig tree because he holds, like most of his contemporaries (and Milton) that the genus of the Tree of Knowledge was unimportant. What mattered was the fact of the prohibition; the tree was merely the site for the proving of Man’s obedience or disobedience. Milton writes in *De Doctrina Christiana*,

> Adam was not required to perform any works; he was merely forbidden to do one thing. It was necessary that one thing at least should be either forbidden or commanded, and above all something which was in itself neither good nor evil, so that man’s obedience might in this way be made evident.
> 
> . . . The tree of knowledge of good and evil . . . was a kind of pledge or memorial of obedience.

C. A. Patrides has demonstrated the prevalence of this view of the Tree of Knowledge as a thing in itself “indifferent,” identifying this perspective with Augustine. This theological agreement seems to suggest an even stronger affinity between Ralegh and Milton.

Ralegh goes on to cite with greater approbation Becanus’s "allegorizing of the Storie of his Ficus Indica." What Ralegh admires here is how the growth of the tree—its bending downward—mirrors or adumbrates humanity’s moral and physical decline after the Fall and how the lack of fruit is analogous to the rarity of virtue. Whether this is also a view shared by Milton remains to be seen. Ralegh’s reading of Becanus does seem to have exercised an important influence—wittingly or unwittingly—on Alastair Fowler’s annotation of the Milton passage, since he reads it as a poignant contrast with the pre-lapsarian nuptial bower.

> The Indian herdsman is put in because he is primitive and pagan, and perhaps also because his work is connected with fallen man’s non-vegetarian diet. Similarly the Amazonian targe is carried over from

*The Embrace of the Fig Tree*
Gerard because before the Fall man never thought of fighting, let alone woman. The proliferating tree is a tree of error: it is an objective correlative of the proliferating sin that will ramify through Adam’s and Eve’s descendants.61

As the language of simile suggests, Milton doubtless meant for some kind of contrast to be drawn between the “primitive” Indians and the post-lapsarian couple, but whether this contrast reveals more in the similarities between the two or in their differences depends both on an extra-textual view of the non-Western shepherds and a theological view of the first couple in the first hours after their fall. As we should know by the time we reach book 9, Milton’s epic similes very often fold back on themselves, undermining the very comparisons they offer. We should not necessarily assume—as Fowler seems to imply—that the Indian herdsman embodies an uncivilized, even barbaric existence. Neither, however, should we regard this passage as purely condemnatory in its depiction of Adam and Eve. That is, Milton’s fig tree may offer its pastoral dalliance with a false surmise not exclusively to underscore the loss experienced by Adam and Eve, but to combine that awareness with a resolute (and hopeful) projection forward to a regaining of paradise, to a restitution of the pastoral world now lost. Even at the moment when the first couple are made most acutely aware of their loss of innocence by the need to invent the institution of clothing, even at the moment when they recognize that the joyous sexuality they enjoyed before the Fall is no longer available to them, they look to the “Loopholes” in God’s—the Father’s—judgment, to the mother tree that offers the possibility of a restored and (re)generative sexuality.

Svendsen’s reading of the passage suggests something like this possibility of restoration. He sees the image of the fig tree as pulling in two directions. On the one hand, we are quickly distanced from the pastoral world of the protective mother tree by space and time. On the other hand, the mother tree nevertheless offers hope in its fecundity and especially in its embodiment of the teleology of the poem itself: “The twigs still bound to their mother fall to earth, root themselves, and rise again as daughters, one more among a hundred images of rhythmic fall and rise, rise and fall.”62 As in the rabbinic legend of the fig tree, then, Milton’s embrace of the fig tree stands, for Svendsen, as the possibility for—even the promise of—redemption, a redemption specifically figured as female and generative.

More recently, several critics have identified further tensions in the Miltonic fig tree. John Guillory picks up on the contrast to which

Jeffrey S. Shoulson
Svendsen alludes between pre- and post-lapsarian existence in his own suggestive reading of this passage.

All that is left of Eden is this tree, a mother tree to set against the father's tree of prohibition. That matrilineal proliferation of this tree makes a little world, or another world in which labor itself is leisure, a suspending of the consequences of the fall hinted by the passage's slight evocation of Renaissance pastoral. 63

The consequence of the father's judgment was sexual difference as embodied in the institution of clothing. Guillory reads the fig tree as posing the possibility—one that finally proves to be "an empty dream"—of a loophole in the father's decree. The shields of the Amazons to which the fig leaves are compared rehearses the ambivalence toward the mother in book 7's invocation. The mother (tree) is thus necessarily a version of the savage Amazon: "The mother's care is implicitly repudiated as an illusion, a fantasy," Guillory concludes. "[T]here never was a mother." 64

The rabbinic fig tree, while revealing the cultural tensions between a distinctly Hebraic perspective and one inflected by Hellenism, presents a view of (female) sexuality as regenerative and positive. Milton's fig tree embodies the various tensions concerning female procreativity and sexuality we have encountered thus far, associating them with the specifically non-Christian worlds of the East and the New World. We would be mistaken to take this difference between midrash and Paradise Lost as an indication of the rabbis' greater ease with the nexus of sexuality and female creativity. I have noted that the second chapter of Genesis, with its more anthropocentric narrative, describes God's creation of Adam with the verb vayitzar, thereby occasioning in the Midrash an associative chain connecting God's creativity, Adam's sexual desire, and human imagination. If we look to this same chapter's notorious depiction of Eve's creation from Adam's tzela, usually translated as "rib," we discover, quite remarkably, that the text eschews vayitzar in favor of yet another mode of divine creation, vayiven: "And the Lord God built the rib that he had taken from Adam into a woman" (2.22). Genesis Rabbah (18.1) reports the comments of R. Yose b. Zimra, who reads vayiven as a play on the Hebrew word for understanding, havanah. Since vayiven implies that greater understanding was given to woman than to man, R. Yose (not the R. Yose who embraced the fig tree) connects the advent of female sexuality with reason rather than with imagination; in so doing he reverses the more prevalent association—in both the rabbis and in Milton—of masculinity with the
authority of biblical reasoning and femininity with the libertine romance of imagination. While we may wish to read this comment as further evidence of an anti-misogynist strain within midrash, we must also attend to what the Bible and its rabbinic readers refuse to Eve in the use of vayitzen instead of vayitzar yetzer, desire (both proper and improper) and its concomitant, imagination. Just as Milton’s poem plays out the tensions inherent in tying female sexuality to poetic creativity, so too the rabbis depict the redemptive aspect of sexuality only to delimit it by interrupting its associations with imagination.

These parallel textual-sexual histories in the rabbis and in Milton are in and of themselves noteworthy. What makes them of even greater interest is that they suggest a very different reading of the presence of Hebraic and rabbinic influences on the seventeenth-century English poet than is usually offered. Rather than seeing these influences as assertions of control, infusions of biblical authority, or embodiments of law (versus the Pauline spirit), we must view them as part of a more complex dynamic. The Hebraic (and possibly rabbinic) elements of the poem may partly serve to reign in the potentially corrupting influences of classical poetry; but they also function as a necessary complement to the redemptive sexuality itself found within classical motifs and images. The reaffirmation of sexuality—both pre- and post-lapsarian—is therefore a preservation of dialogical textuality. The dialectical possibilities inherent in sexuality, potentially both redemptive and corrupting, are also there in the plurivocal text. From a literary- and religious-historical perspective, these genealogies suggest further that the rabbis’ radical revision of post-biblical Judaism is analogous to Milton’s own innovative refashioning of post-Reformation Christianity.

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NOTES

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Jeffrey S. Shoulson

2 This and all subsequent passages from the Bible have been quoted from the Authorized (King James) Version (1611). Where I have varied from this translation I have so indicated in the body of the essay.


3 The best account of Milton’s use of Ovid is Richard DuRocher, Milton and Ovid (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985). In describing his own version of this source-text subordination DuRocher writes: “Classical matter has its place in Paradise Lost when it points to a spiritual correlative that makes it true” (83).

4 Heather James has provided a fascinating analysis of the mirroring that occurs between the biblical epic Adam and the classical romance Eve. James argues that “Eve becomes the narcissistic reflection of Adam. . . . God thus leads Eve out of the pagan discourse of narcissism to the threshold of the Biblical discourse of marriage which fulfills the Ovidian poetics” (“Milton’s Eve, the Romance Genre, and Ovid,” Comparative Literature 45.2 [1993]: 121-44).

5 Midrash Aggadah consists of longer and shorter narratives and textual amplifications that do not have direct bearing on prescribed normative behavior, but which do concern themselves with finding ways to apply the lessons of Scripture to contemporary life. In contrast to the other major sub-genre, Midrash Halakhah, Midrash Aggadah allows for a greater play of possibilities, contradictions, and fancies.


7 See, especially, Rosenblatt, chap. 2. Cheryl Fresch, in her “The Hebraic Influence upon the Creation of Eve in Paradise Lost” (Milton Studies 13 [1979]: 181-99), writes of the “humanizing effect” (182) that stems from the “psychological bond between man and woman [which is] seldom to be found in the remarks of any Christian theologians” (189). As I shall argue, Fresch and others who have written on the matter tend to view Hebraic influence as something monolithic and static, rather than diverse and fluid. Even more problematic for Fresch’s own essay, however, is that though her analysis is meant to discuss Eve’s creation her remarks focus exclusively on Adam’s account of this creation in book 8, without any reference to the first version of it in book 4.


9 Given the Bible’s ubiquitous concern with male lineage and inheritance, it is of more than passing significance that the task of naming the child often falls to the mother (or surrogate mother).

11 Pardes suggests that many of the “countertraditions” that she has recovered in her analysis of the Hebrew Bible are in fact traces of matriarchal polytheistic societies rejected by the innovation of Hebraic patriarchal monotheism: “Eve’s naming-speech may be perceived as a trace from an earlier mythological phase in which mother goddesses were very much involved in the process of creation” (43).

12 Pardes, 56.

13 Janet Adelman, “Creation and the Place of the Poet,” in The Author in his Work: Essays on a Problem in Criticism, ed. Louis L. Martz and Aubrey Williams (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978), 64. John P. Rumrich, citing William Kerrigan, The Sacred Complex: On the Psychogenesis of Paradise Lost (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), describes Milton’s sense of his blindness as a castration that makes him female and hence capable of being impregnated by inspiration to produce the poem. See Rumrich, Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 100-1. Kerrigan and Rumrich both offer psychoanalytic models to account for Milton’s creative impulses, suggesting that Milton’s writings are charged with the anxieties that stem from his relations to his father (Kerrigan) or his mother (Rumrich).


16 John Shawcross, in his “The Metaphor of Inspiration in Paradise Lost” (in Th’Upright Heart and Pure: Essays on John Milton Commemorating the Tercentenary of the Publication of Paradise Lost, ed. Amadeus P. Fiore [Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1967], 75-85), has written persuasively about the sexual connotations implicit in the metaphor of inspiration. Shawcross has recognized the crossing of gender roles in this model of sexual intercourse, but sees it as producing anxiety about poetic incompleteness, and not the process of anxiety and creativity itself: “The creational relationship between the Spirit of God (as male force but presented as female inspirer) and the poet (as female factor but presented in terms of dream psychology as male) [convey] . . . anxiety . . . for the poet himself, lest he not be inspired further by the Spirit” (81).

17 Adelman, 55. See also Kerrigan, The Prophetic Milton (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1974), which argues that the poem that issues forth from the invocations is itself “the divine spectacle . . . between the prophet and his source of inspiration. We watch the inspiring” (141).

where it is not from pure nothingness, but rather something new out of preexistent material, it is made by the distinguished, eminent, splendid, magnificent, and singular strength and power of God, and brought forth into light [my translation]). It is noteworthy that the definition of *barah* is one of the very rare occasions in which Milton explicitly disagrees with Fagius who, along with John Selden and Hugo Grotius, was probably one of the primary sources of Milton’s knowledge of the Hebraic tradition. My analysis of Milton’s poetic expectations assumes that this disagreement owes as much to the poet’s understanding of literary creativity as it does to any specifically theological doctrines he holds.

19 John Guillory writes of these lines that “the subject has disappeared altogether . . . and Milton no longer needs to specify what mind is feeding upon what thoughts. Merely to have hesitated at this crossing . . . permits the influx of power that turns the invocation around” (*Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983], 126). Guillory’s reading of this enjambment as the key moment of transition in the invocation is a suggestive one, but I am inclined to read it as a resistance to resolution rather than as an initiation of closure.


21 Flinker, 97.

22 Michael Fishbane has described the Elohist’s (and, later, Priestly) elimination of the panerotic and pandivine ontology inherent in the worship of pre-biblical Mesopotamian mother goddesses. See Fishbane’s “Israel and the ‘Mothers,’” in his *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1989), 49-63.


24 Virginia Woolf’s characteristically enigmatic pronouncement on Milton, that he had “a dash too much of the male in [him],” comes to mind (*A Room of One’s Own* [1929; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989], 103). “Too much of the male” seems to refer to the subordination of the “suggestive power” (102) of the classics to the “self-assertive virility” (102) of the Bible.

25 For an important analysis of the poem’s various instances of self-authorship in light of the science and politics of Milton’s age, see Rogers, chap. 4. Rogers regards the ambivalent treatment of this theme as a sign of Milton’s own ambivalence concerning the proper mode of government, especially in the wake of the Restoration.

27 Jason Rosenblatt has shown that the lyric epithalamium at 4.748-65 draws on pagan (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.468), Hebraic (Gen. 1.28), and Christian (Eph. 5.31-32; Heb. 13.4) sources (135).

28 See Claus Westermann’s comments on this phrase in *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 18-19. Although Harold Bloom insists that this monism originates with J—it is, he thinks, one of “her” greatest innovations—Michael Fishbane’s comparison of Elohim and the mother goddesses suggests that this monism was actually characteristic of most Middle Eastern cults that presumed a divine immanence. Compare Bloom, *The Book of J* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990), 176 with Fishbane, 50-51.

29 In his useful study, Gary Anderson demonstrates that Jubilees’s depiction of prelapsarian sex specifically occurs before Adam and Eve are brought into the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had to wait forty and eighty days respectively before they could enter the Garden. These numbers reflect the Levitical procedure for purification following childbirth; they suggest that despite its assertion of sexuality before the expulsion from Eden, the Book of Jubilees nevertheless understood sex to be impure and corrupting. See Anderson, “The Garden of Eden and Sexuality in Early Judaism,” in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (New York: State Univ. of New York Press, 1992), 47-68.


31 *Bereshit Rabba* ([Genesis Rabbah], ed. J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, 2d ed. (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965), 9.7. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by chapter and section numbers and abbreviated B. All translations from the Hebrew and Aramaic are my own unless otherwise noted. Because the rabbis frequently depend on word-plays that are impossible to translate, I have included transliterations of key Hebrew words in brackets to illustrate the nature of the puns.


33 Golda Werman’s discussion of *Genesis Rabbah* 9.7 makes the common mistake of de-historicizing the Midrash, reading it as emblematic of the rabbinic viewpoint at all times and in all places. See Werman, 143-44.

34 With the exception of the verb forms in the creation account and the noun forms in the story of the flood, words built out of the *y*’*tz*’r*’* stem are almost non-existent in the Pentateuch. They occur most frequently in the prophets, especially Isaiah, where they usually describe some notion of imagination or desire, rather than creation.

35 There is some discussion among medieval exegetes concerning the meaning of *phiqdah*. Rashi suggests that it is the moment when an angel identifies a drop of semen to be brought before God in order to determine what kind of life will be produced from it. He cites a passage from Babylonian Tractate Niddah 16b that names this angel *Laylah* (also the Hebrew word for night): “He raises the drop [of sperm], brings it before the Holy One Blessed be He, and says, ‘Master of the Universe, what will become of this drop? Will it be strong or weak, wise or stupid, rich or poor?’ He does not ask whether it will be wicked or good, as R. Haninah has said, ‘Everything is in Heaven’s hands, with the exception of the fear of Heaven.’ This moment is distinct from formation [*yetzirah*], which marks the development of bones, sinews, and flesh, and gives the fetus an identifiably human shape. For brevity’s sake I have referred to this moment as conception, although the rabbinic understanding of sexual reproduction and ontogeny was certainly not as comprehensive as our own.

Luitpold Wallach’s extensive discussion of these encounters in “The Colloquy of Marcus Aurelius with the Patriarch Judah I” is surprisingly unaware of the biblical precedents of Joseph, Mordechai, and Daniel, three Israelite figures who play precisely this role of advisor to a pagan king. He writes that the motif of the non-Jewish king who asks questions of a Jewish sage “cannot be looked upon as essentially Jewish; it is rather typical of Hellenistic literature” (*Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s., 31 [1940/1]: 261). Based on this erroneous assumption, along with several other assertions concerning the parallels between these colloquies and the issues raised in Stoic literature, Wallach concludes that the author of this portion of the Midrash, “in all probability a Hellenistic Jew capable of reading both Poseidonius and Marcus Aurelius, must have been stimulated by the record of the latter” (281). Wallach’s far too rigid distinction between Hellenism and Hebraism is an example of precisely the kind of dichotomy that has led so many Milton scholars to jump to conclusions regarding competing Hebraic, Christian, and Hellenistic influences.

Jill Robbins discusses some of the hermeneutic implications of this fraught encounter in her fascinating *Prodigal Son / Elder Brother: Interpretation and Alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka, Levinas* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991). This dialogue’s position at a transitional moment is also evidenced by the inconsistency between the two conclusions reached: though the creation of the soul must be simultaneous with conception (a distinctively monist ontology), the evil inclination is not placed within an individual until birth (a more dualist anthropology).

Ephraim E. Urbach, in his influential *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, notes that “the dualist anthropological view was prevalent at the end of the Second-Temple epoch, before the time of R. Judah the Patriarch” (trans. Israel Abrahams [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975], 223). Urbach goes on to downplay the full extent of this rabbinic dualism, suggesting that “even those Sages who maintained the dualism ‘body-soul’ did not draw extremist inferences from it. Fundamentally, Talmud Judaism retained . . . the concept of the unity of body and soul” (250). While Urbach may be correct to see rabbinic dualism as less extreme than strict Platonism—and its heir, Pauline Christianity—I think he does not take sufficient note of the degree to which the rabbis altered their dualist views in response to the advent of a politically empowered Christianity.

Daniel Boyarin has argued that Paul’s dualism, though it does favor the spirit above the flesh, does not completely denigrate the body since it is only through Christ’s incarnation that redemption is achieved. Christ’s body nevertheless does not partake of all aspects of the flesh, especially sexuality. See Boyarin’s *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1994), 59 and following. Most of
the early Church Fathers, however, did not follow this nuanced dualism, adopting instead a more severe version.

41 Babylonian Tractate Sanhedrin 91b. David Winston has recently argued that the distinction between rabbinitic monism and Hellenic dualism is not as clear as has been suggested by Boyarin and others. Indeed, Winston perceives a correlation between the rabbinitic body-soul synergy and Platonic conceptions of the daemon, particularly as detailed in the writings of Philo. See David Winston, “Philo and the Rabbis on Sex and the Body,” Poetics Today 19 (1998): 41-62. Though Winston’s cavils deserve further consideration, I do not think they completely elide the differences between the rabbis, for whom the body is open and grotesque, and the Platonists, for whom the body is closed and inviolate.

42 There is no fail-safe method for determining which of two alternative versions of the same rabbinitic legend is the older one. The fact that this second version appears in the Babylonian Talmud, which was redacted at the end of the fifth and beginning of the sixth centuries, a century after the redaction of Genesis Rabbah, would seem to support my conclusion. As I have suggested, however, I think that the nature of the changes is more compelling evidence than the location of the two versions.

43 R. Meir’s answer is based upon a play on the words hitah (wheat) and het (sin). R. Judah’s is perhaps the oldest opinion, based largely upon the mythological idea that wine was the drink of the gods, and hence forbidden to humanity. And R. Abba of Acre’s is based upon yet another play on words, the etrog being derived from ragag (he desired).

44 See Yonah Frankel’s discussion of this parable in his Darkhei ha-Aggadah veha-Midrash [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad LeTalmud Press, 1991), 342-45. David Stern’s analysis of the mashal le-melech (the parable of the king) portrays this exegetical form as an important textual residue of rabbinitic Judaism’s encounter with Greek and Roman political authorities. See his Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991). Even if the specific story of the prince’s self-corruption is not Greek in origin, the use of the mashal le-melech nevertheless marks this interpretive moment as one informed by the encounter between Hebraism and Hellenism. As I was preparing this essay for press, I was delighted to discover that in his most recent work, David Stern has arrived at conclusions very similar to my own. In an essay published as part of a two-part special issue of Poetics Today devoted to “Hellenism and Hebraism Reconsidered: The Poetics of Cultural Exchange,” Stern discusses the influence of the Greco-Roman romance narrative on rabbinitic literature. Coining the term “deep Hellenization,” Stern identifies the rabbinitic erotic narrative as “a kind of myth or foundational story that helped explain [the Rabbis’] place in the pagan world and their uneasy relationship to that world; indeed, in its transformed shape, this narrative became for the Rabbis one through which they represented their culture’s influence itself.” See Stern’s fascinating discussion of how the rabbinitic opposition to Hellenization was often articulated via an assimilation of precisely that culture in his “The Captive Woman: Hellenization, Greco-Roman Erotic Narrative, and Rabbinic Literature,” Poetics Today 19 (1998): 91-127.


46 Milton, “Of Education” (1644), in Complete Prose Works, 2:366-67. Jason Rosenblatt has reminded me of a Christian version of this restoration in the belief that the Cross (the instrument of salvation) was made from the wood of the Tree of Knowledge (the vehicle of corruption).

48 Chapters 12-17 of the Latin text also offer one of the earliest accounts of Satan’s rebellion and subsequent expulsion from Heaven. Some Milton scholars have offered the Vita as a source for many of the narrative details in Paradise Lost.

49 “Life of Adam and Eve,” chap. 20, in The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, 2:28; my emphasis. Eve specifically notes that “the leaves of all the trees of all the trees of my portion fell” because the narrative had described earlier how Adam and Eve were each allotted portions (or domains) of plants and trees.

50 Jacob Neusner has argued at great length that Judaism took its fullest and most comprehensive expression only in response to the rise of Christianity as Rome’s state religion following the conversion of Constantine and the accession of Theodosus II in 383. See especially Neusner’s Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine: History, Messiah, Israel and the Initial Confrontation (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987) and Judaism in the Matrix of Christianity (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991). Virginia R. Mollenkott suggested almost twenty years ago that the Apocryphal texts (which she distinguishes from the Pseudepigrapha, of which the Apocalypse of Moses is a part), should be given greater attention as possible analogs to Milton’s writings for their “union of Greek and Hebrew thought” (“The Pervasive Influence of the Apocrypha in Milton’s Thought and Art,” in Milton and the Art of Sacred Song, ed. J. Max Patrick and Roger H. Sundell [Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1979]). Her own analysis, however, persists in the dichotomies that I am seeking to break down: “Milton is more careful than many Renaissance Christian humanists to distinguish between Hellenism and Hebraism, knowledge and wisdom/virtue, reason and faith” (35-36).

51 See Nyquist, “Gynesis, Genesis, Exegesis,” 147-208, for a fascinating argument that ultimately identifies this voice as a secondary or derivative one issuing from heaven, equivalent to the Hebrew bat kol, literally translated as “daughter of the voice.”


55 Kester Svendsen, Milton and Science (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1956), 31-32. Henry Todd’s expansive annotations on Milton’s poem include a charming quotation from one of his own acquaintances, a learned and ingenious Traveller, well-known to the literary world, Eyles Irwin, Esq.: “A more poetical or just description of the Bluur or Banian tree cannot be imagined, than what had come from the pencil of the sublime bard. But, from the Portuguese name of this tree, he would seem to have been led into a mistake, and to confound it with the plantain, which, in all probability, from the magnitude and flexibility of its leaves, was applied by our first parents to the same purpose, as the Puliar cast now use it on the coast of Malabar. From the fruit, which resembles a fig in appearance, though not eatable, the first discoverers of India called the tree the Figo; as the service to which it is usually consecrated, induced the English to give it the appellation of Banian, or sacred. Its leaves are the smallest of the forest-kind, and not broad as Amazonian targe. While it becomes the duty of a traveller to
correct the descriptive passages of poetry, the true lovers of the divine art will agree
with him, that it would have been an irreparable loss to their world, if the fancy of
Milton in the picture of the Bhur, had been restrained by the local knowledge of his
annotator” (quoted in *The Poetical Works of John Milton with Notes of Various Authors*,
botanical observation offers salutary advice to Milton’s future readers. The analysis that
follows seeks to uncover some of the less explicit ways in which the “fancy of Milton”
might have been “restrained”—“guided” may be a more appropriate term—by his own
literary and cultural milieu.

56 In his monumental collection, Ginzb erg writes that among the Church Fathers,
only Tertullian appears to have suggested the fig tree; compare *Adversus Marcionem*,
2.2. See Ginzb erg, 5:97 n.70. Despite its wealth of erudition, Ginzb erg’s collection is
often too synthetic in its representation of rabbinitic lore. Since Ginzb erg was frequently
the source for many early critics interested in Milton’s Hebraisms, their failure to
discern differing and evolving strains in rabbinitic Judaism probably originated at least
partly in his work. Ginzb erg was either unaware of or uninterested in the non-Patristic
Christian tradition of identifying the fig tree as the Tree of Knowledge. As we have
already seen, Bar Cephas was not the originator of this identification either. It is very
likely he discovered it in the *Apocalypse of Moses*. After Bar Cephas and before
Becanus, Peter Abelard (*Expositio in Genesim*) and Gregorius Barhebraeus (*Scholia on
the Old Testament*) also identified the Tree of Knowledge as a fig tree. See Sister Mary
Irma Corcoran, *Milton’s Paradise with Reference to the Hexameral Background* (1945;

57 Sir Walter Ralegh, *The History of the World* (1614), ed. C. A. Patrides (Philadel-

58 Corcoran identifies the apple as the most popular choice among English writers,
citing Cornelius a Lapide who, in his *Commentaria in Pentateucham Mosis*, claimed this
choice originated in the mistranslation of the generic term, *malum*. See Corcoran, 24
n.28.


60 C. A. Patrides, “The Tree of Knowledge in the Christian Tradition,” *Studia

61 Fowler, 502a.

62 Svendsen, 135.

63 Guillory, “From the Superfluous to the Supernumerary: Reading Gender into
*Paradise Lost*,“ in Soliciting Interpretation: Literary Theory and Seventeenth-Century

64 Guillory, 77. See also Elizabeth Sauer, *Barbarous Dissonance and Images of Voice
in the Milton’s Epics* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Univ. Press, 1996), who writes that this
passage functions to import “the language of corruption and shame from the feminized
East and the New World” (122-23). For an extended discussion of the colonial aspects
of this and other passages, see J. Martin Evans, *Milton’s Imperial Epic* (Ithaca: Cornell
Univ. Press, 1995), especially chap. 4.

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