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God-Like, or Ungodly?: An Analysis of The Pluto and Proserpine Marriage in Chaucer's Merchant's Tale

Abdiel: Milton's "Servant of God"

by

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God-Like or Ungodly?: An Analysis of the Pluto and Proserpine Marriage in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*

Abstract

Chaucer deviated from his pear-tree fabliau analogues by employing a married intervening couple (Pluto and Proserpine). This union is essential to an understanding of the constituent marriage topoi which synthesize the tale as a whole.
GOD-LIKE, OR UNGODLY?: AN ANALYSIS OF

THE PLUTO AND PROSERPINE MARRIAGE IN

CHAUCER’S MERCHANT’S TALE

by Randy Boone

One of the liveliest topics of critical concern regarding Chaucer's Merchant's Tale has centered around the justification of the intervention by, and argument between, the pagan gods Pluto and Proserpine. The intervention is not only vital to the fabliaux plot; it also furthers the whole theme of monogamous (and not-so-monogamous) marriage relationships. Unfortunately, most critics remain content to diminish the dramatic presence of Pluto and Proserpine by regarding their interference as a division or subdivision—an "episode"—in a tale as apparently divisible as the Canterbury Tales themselves. Kittredge believed the incidence of the pagan deities intrusive,¹ and others have condemned it for its redundancy and lack of necessity which fail to justify any redeeming comic intent.² Since 1963, however, Robert M. Jordan has been heralded (and persecuted)
most fervently for his outspokenness on the disunity created within the *Merchant's Tale* by the intrusion of "The squabble between Pluto and Proserpine," which he labels "a self-contained episode...of delightfully humorous character." Jordan undercuts his justification of the episode's presence in the tale ("the relevance of its subject matter") however, by demonstrating that only "A minimal relevance to the tale as a whole is...assured." Ultimately, "The fairy section is more damaging to a unitary hypothesis" of the tale due to the very "dramatic vitality of the scene," which "readily engages our interest at the same time that it must dismay the reader intent upon continuity and consistency." A later critic understands the gods' presence as a sort of self-reflexive intervention to "remind us of who we are" as if such a metaphoric self-association is crucial for us "to see in that pear tree what we might have been." As absurd as such blatantly correspondent theories might initially appear, critics were quick to acknowledge the textual economy and practicality they implied. The authorial word became at least functional, if not essential, to the story being told. Many readers have since attempted to justify the episode's relevance as a free-standing division, and a few have actually ventured into aspects of relational associations. Still, I believe no satisfyingly comprehensive account has yet been presented which convincingly verifies the "episode's" unifying and
universalizing dimensions. Thus, contrary to Jordan's hypothesis, I will contend that the Pluto and Proserpine scene is not only not "damaging to a unitary hypothesis," but is in fact the very core of the "work as a whole." Further, I will represent the accusation of the scene's antifeminism as, if not downright unjust, at the least thoroughly debatable.\(^6\)

The characters of Pluto and Proserpine are unique to Chaucer, and it must therefore be assumed, significantly so. Basically, the "intervening couple" in other "pear tree" fabliaux differ in two respects: first, they are generally Christian figures, and second, they are not wed.

In most of the closest analogues, the "intervening couple" consists of St. Peter and a supreme Christian figurehead (e.g., Christ, God, the Lord, etc.). Pluto and Proserpine are inserted by Chaucer not to completely replace the Christian topos, but rather to dishevel it. Tatlock notes in the Merchant's Tale "the combination of Christian language and ceremonial with pagan mythology," and I believe "combination" is an apt term.\(^7\) The two religions are juxtaposed, yet also thematically interwoven. For example, "the hooly sacrement" (1702)\(^8\) of marriage bestowed upon January and May seems much more of a Venusian formality than any Christian blessing. The ensuing feast assumes also a Bacchanalian quality, and "the victorious, dancing entry of Venus" exorcises any notions of solemn, Christian
The poet interjects that even the god of marriage would be more concerned with the merriment of the occasion (or at least of January) rather than with the sacrament or the union itself. There is nothing spiritual about this marriage. Ironically, in Claudian it is Proserpine who is entranced by Venus, but in Chaucer it is January: "This Januarie...ravysshed in a traunce / At every tyme he looked on [May's] face" (1750-51). If January's Venusian trance appears initially debilitating, however, his Plutonian designs are much more (inter)active:

But in his herte he gan hire to manace
That he that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne
Harder than evere Parys dide Eleyne.

(1752-54)

It is Venusian lust which drives January to concoct and consume every aphrodisiac "Swiche as the cursed monk, daun Constantyn, / Hath writen in his book De Coitu" (1809-10). He feeds his satyr-like lust with the mixtures in order to (over-)consummate the Christian union. Ironically, however, even his excess desire and abundance of aphrodisiacs fail to fulfill May. There is, she learns, no substitute for natural youth.

Unlike January and May, who are ritualistically bound by the Christian marriage sacrament, Pluto and Proserpine are apparently free from the shackles of dogmatism. The term "marriage" can only be applied to their relationship quite denotatively—that is, as they exist in a state of being united as husband and wife—whereas in the case of January and May, the term's institutional connotations seep in at every level. Despite the absence of any priestly sacramental, however, it is still difficult for the reader to accept the gods' marriage on anything but Christian terms. Marcia Dalbey finds "the constant juxtaposition of Christian and classical materials, set within a framework so strongly Christian that we are forced to interpret the classical references within their Christian context."
Although Dalbey limits "framework" here to the Merchant's Tale, noting "the explicitly moral standard of the tale, against which the actions of the main characters are measured," the entire collection of Canterbury tales would serve much the same function. After all, the pilgrimage is itself ostensibly Christian, and the Parson's Tale—which is particularly acknowledged by the Host as the last—is considered most effectively and convincingly as a summarial tractate on Christian morality and penance. The final tale therefore serves as an invaluable yardstick by which to measure every pilgrim and every person's moral astuteness. Thus judged, January, May, and Damyan are all guilty of the deadly sin of lechery, as is Pluto who "ravysshed [Proserpine] out of [Ethna]" (2230). Yet to condemn Pluto—a creation of pre-Christian Greek mythology—by Christian standards seems initially absurd. Could the poet have intentionally created this "anachronistic" incongruity to emphasize the mootness of applying any temporal relativism to any strictly-followed Christian code of morality? Could one who lives by the Parson's code of conduct justifiably be persecuted on moral grounds in any epoch?

Similarly, a crux develops when we consider Dalbey's contention that "[May's] adultery is...inexcusable in Christian terms." In purely Christian terms, no doubt, it is. Yet Dalbey herself points out that "the garden truly belongs to Pluto and Proserpine," and further, that "Venus
is, in a sense, the controlling deity of the entire story."

Perhaps as readers, then, we are anxious to judge May (and the rest of the characters) in Christian terms only when it is most convenient to do so. Despite the Merchant's mention of Grisildis in his prologue, we tend not to view May in light of the injustices heaped upon her by January (for example, his forcing her to marry an old dotard, his lecherous behavior on the wedding night, etc.), but instead by the singular act most easily labeled as absolutely "wrong"-- marital (hence, sacramental) infidelity.

But the garden-- the domain of the adulterous act-- is ruled not by Christian figures, such as Jesus, God, or St. Peter. It is instead presided over by the pagan gods-- the gods of the underworld, no less. And even these "classical divinities [are] here reduced to a more appropriate role as king and queen of 'Fayerye."

Their deification is reduced to a comic level, especially diminished by the Wife of Bath's earlier reference to "fayerye," of which she must "speke of manye hundred yeres ago," for "now kan no man se none elves mo" (III, 863-4). Further, the extinction of the fairies is attributed by the Wife to zealous Christian clerics. Pluto and Proserpina are not only plucked from their reign in the classical underworld and comically misplaced in an Edenic (yet also unmistakably Celtic--for we see the "kyng of Fairye...adoun hym sette / Upon a bench of turves, fressh and grene" [IV, 2234-35]) fairyland. The
comedy itself arises from the fact that the couple's existence (let alone their omnipotence) has been nullified by Christians not merely geographically (or spatially), but philosophically."

The credibility of the garden as a Christian site of reckoning is, ironically, further diminished by its associations with Eden. It is, in fact, almost an Eden turned upside-down; for, how else can we account for Chaucer's isolationist garden and fruit tree ruled over by the pagan gods of the underworld? The poet says that,

Priapus ne myghte nat suffise,
Though he be god of gardyns, for to telle
The beautee of the gardyn...

(2034-36)

It is almost surprising that Chaucer did not have Priapus in fact describe the haven as "Edenic." The garden is also not exclusively the dominion of god (or the gods), for it is owned-- in the mercantile sense-- by January, whose very name and function of gatekeeper associate him very directly with the pagan god Janus. Yet it is nearly impossible not to associate January with the Christian (and 'human) Adam-figure as well. The analogous "pattern" of "the lord and lady in a paradisaic garden, the traitor in the fruit-tree, and an action which states that by the 'plucking of the
fruit' the eyes of the husband [shall be] opened," between the Edenic Fall and the fall in January's garden readily facilitate such an interpretation. Ironically, however, it is not the wife who passes the fruit from the tempter to the husband, but the husband who, in encouraging his wife to hastily pluck the fruit, helped herself up to her tempter, where she herself will be "plucked." Thus, January's "paradise" becomes his hell, either as a product of May's willing seduction, or by virtue of all three human actors submitting to the devil (Pluto) and his consort. Also, the Christian Genesis recounts the creation of Adam (and therefore of mankind) by God in His own image, thus establishing a positive genealogical link between the Edenic inhabitant and his deity. In the Merchant's Tale, no such "empirical" evidence exists, and any associations the reader can make between January and Pluto are fostered only by the author's designs and are at best "proper" speculation. Further, due to the Christian allusions and themes of the tale (and the Tales) it may not be irresponsible to consider January as a "son of Adam"--as a human being by Christian definition--and therefore as genealogically linked to God the ultimate Father while accepting Pluto and Proserpine as January's divine rulers.

The restoration of January's sight by Pluto--the god of death, who by abducting Proserpine brought about the cyclical death of Nature (through the origination of
seasons) just as Adam's uxoriousness brought about the mortality of man--mimics the image of "Christ-the-healer."

Much like Chauntecleer in the Nun's Priest's Tale, however, January denies the confidence of his own vision to appease his wife. January thus ends up leaving the symbolic "Tree of Knowledge" with a happy naivete bought at the expense of truth (i.e., knowledge).

The gods themselves are not immune to dissension within the confines of the garden. They too are susceptible to marital strife--they too are, in a sense, "human." The fact that Pluto and Proserpine are deviations from the analogous "pear tree" story deities illustrates that Chaucer consciously selected the couple to enhance a theme already present in the previous versions of the story; and, since the most striking deviation manifested in Chaucer's intervening couple is their matrimonial union, we can quite confidently assume that the poet desired to emphasize the entire theme of marriage. Pluto and Proserpine's marriage was no doubt at least as analogous to those of Chaucer's contemporaries as was the union between January and May. The fact that a marriage bond exists between the intervening couple might allow that couple to serve as an ideal; yet, this effect is only possible because the notion of marriage itself serves to anthropomorphize the deities "down" to a level where emulation and imitation are not merely desirable, but also possible. A message emanating from the
tale, then, might be that although some degree of strife is inevitable at any level, real resolution is divine.

The notion of the married intervening couple was, as stated above, original with Chaucer (or at the very least, a conscious deviation from the "pear tree" fabliaux norm). Chaucer introduces the couple into the action by restating the circumstances of their "marriage":

Pluto, that is kyng of Fayerye,  

.

Folwynge his wyf, the queene Proserpyna,  
Which that he ravysshed out of [Ethona]  
Whil that she gadered floures in the mede--  
In Claudyan ye may the stories rede,  
How in his grisely carte he hire fette--  

(2227-33)

The reference to Claudian's De raptu Proserpinae assumes the audience's familiarity with the work and we can therefore justifiably suppose the listeners' syntheses of the "many parallels between Claudian's poem and the Merchant's Tale." Most notable is the fact that "Pluto, like Januarie, is old, long wifeless, and eager to marry." Each marries against the will of his betrothed, and it is only at this point where Chaucer begins once again to deviate, even from his acknowledged "Claudyan" source. When January is cuckolded,
he seemingly no longer follows the Plutonian prototype. But even Chaucer's Pluto is strikingly dissimilar from what one encounters in Claudian. Claudian's Pluto is domineering, and his role is highly active (as abductor). This Pluto only negotiates when force will not produce, and he accepts the ramifications of Jupiter's decision as though it constituted a "gentleman's agreement." Chaucer's Pluto, on the other hand, is barely active. His "heroic" abduction is assumed, his bickering is overmatched, and his only act of power is overpowered (by his wife). His appearance in the classic Celtic fairyland of January's garden should not be oversimplified by citing similar deitific presences in works such as Sir Orfeo, particularly since Chaucer deliberately places Pluto "Folwynge his wyf." Is Chaucer's Pluto so pathetic that he cannot endure his seasons apart from Proserpine, and must instead follow her to the very earth which is intended to be her sanctuary? Is the god of the underworld actually subservient to--or at least overmatched by--his wife on the earthly level? The effectual impotence of his only deitific action might imply such a relationship. If we consider the fairyland of the Merchant's Tale as analogous to that of Sir Orfeo (particularly based upon the presiding deities), I believe we must also consider the "abandoned kingdom" motif. For, in Sir Orfeo we see Orfeo leave his kingdom and meet the king of the fairies in his own domain-- where he is also the god of a literal
"underworld," and the caretaker of departed souls. Chaucer's Pluto, however, is never seen in any subterranean kingdom; his realm is the land of Proserpine's refuge. And though we are told that Orfeo retains his holdings (and his thanes), we can never be so assured that Chaucer's deity has not utterly and totally sacrificed the underworld he once dominated so forcefully in Claudian. In light of this view of Chaucer's Pluto, we can reconsider the gist of the marriage "encomium" at the beginning of the tale, which states "That womman is for mannes helpe ywroghte" (1324). If the Merchant is being sarcastic, so too is Chaucer; for, Chaucer's women in the tale--May and Proserpine--emerge as anything but helpful and dependent. If their actions are infidelitous and playful (or lustful), they also demonstrate independence, capability, resourcefulness, authority, self-assertion, and self-actualization. Both women begin their marriages as "persecuted maidens," yet both ultimately exhibit qualities of individuality and even dominance. In Chaucer's tale, the marriage between old man and young maiden is allowed to endure in the realm of the gods. Pluto and Proserpine appear to exist on fairly equal marital "ground." Yet on earth, such a union between young and old automatically and invariably proves a dysfunctional match. This topos of youth marrying age is once again unique from the "pear tree" analogues for in no other likely source material is the age differential between husband and wife so
broad, or even mentioned so explicitly. Once again, the deviation forces the reader to acknowledge the marriage between January and May, and to anticipate the problems the difference in age infers. A similar situation occurs in the Miller's Tale (which is more ostensibly structured around the senex amans topos) when John weds Alison, only to be cuckolded as well by his own lodger. Certainly, January has a much more immediate source of warning in his brother Justinus, who admonishes the old man against taking a lusty young wife:

Avyseth yow-- ye been a man of age--
How that ye entren into mariage,
And namely with a yong wyf and a fair.
...Trusteth me,
Ye shul nat plesen hire fully yeres thre--
This is to seyn, to doon hire ful plesaunce.
A wyf axeth ful many an observaunce.
I prey yow that ye be nat yvele apayd.

(1555-57, 1561-65)

But, of course, any old man who attaches himself to a young, playful wife is more than fair game for any "yvele apayd." There is an element of poetic justice involved in the dotard's cuckoldry. A rather convincing analogy can be drawn between Pluto and January as rapists (the latter
fitting the description at least in terms of the Parson's definition), or in any event, as abductors. Following this analogy, May's rendezvous with Damyan can be seen as a justifiable "escape" of sorts. She is claiming what is rightfully hers--the opportunity to sport with a lover her own age--while simultaneously conniving January out of her marital debt, which should never have been his to claim in the first place. She transforms January into a victimizer victimized.

Chaucer's use of a married "intervening couple" also adds considerable fuel to the fire of whether or not the Merchant's Tale is intently antifeminist in nature. Just how much antifeminism can be ascribed to "the conventional misogyny of the Middle Ages" can never be clearly defined. We can, however, pretty safely assume that the traditional pear tree fabliaux would hardly serve to further the cause of womankind. In a sense, May becomes a living exemplum to Justinus' discourse on wicked wives. Chaucer's audience might have been amused by the stealth and cunning May employs to beguile her mate, though probably few would assess her actions as admirable. The married intervening couple thus assumes a rather profound significance. On one level, Proserpine and May automatically assume a type of wifely sisterhood. Further, "Even those unfamiliar with Claudian could hardly fail to recognize the pattern of violently dominant male and helplessly passive female."
Both Proserpine and May are basically "hented" from their normal lives to appease the loneliness and heirlessness of a dominant male. This theme is heightened when the tale is viewed in succession to the Clerk's Tale of Walter and Grisildis. Grisildis's patience and meekness might epitomize a virtuous ideal, yet this ultimately seems as blamable as it is admirable. She is the "helplessly passive female"--the "persecuted maiden"--par excellence, accepting and willingly subjugating herself to even the most vile wrongs imposed by Walter.

But the Clerk tells us in his song to the Wife of Bath that, "Grisilde is deed, and eek hire pacience" (1177). And this generality is quickly particularized by the newly-wedded Merchant, who confesses,

\begin{verbatim}
Ther is a long and large difference
Bitwix Grisildis grete pacience
And of my wyf the passyng crueltee.
\end{verbatim}

(1223-25)

But for the wife to lack the patience of Grisildis at once implies a lack of the naivete or ignorance with which Grisildis hastily pledged her constraint to Walter. Patience and humility are indisputably virtuous qualities, particularly in Chaucer's Christian world; yet, they are also quite clearly the basis of at the very least an
unnecessarily harsh wifely subjugation. And for May to passively accept the miserly hold with which January clutches her would appear far more pathetic than noble, particularly to an audience that has just heard the tale of Grisildis's absurdly long periods of suffering. The Clerk tells us that his

...storie is seyd nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
For it were inportable, though they wolde,
But for that every wight, in his degree,
Sholde be constant in adversitee
As was Grisilde...

(1142-47)

The "moral" of the Clerk's Tale is one of constancy, and not of humility. The teller acknowledges the faults of excess by implying that if Walter was overly harsh, Grisildis was likewise overly humble. Conversely, in the Merchant's Tale, when May recognizes (or acknowledges) the "inportable" extreme of January's imprisoning, she acts. There exists a definite liberation in May's concrete act of defiant self-actualization, vulgar though the act itself may be, and this seems to be what Proserpine values and defends in May. I believe Robert Edwards misses the mark when he contends that "the [Pluto and Proserpine] episode reinforces the tale's
misogyny. Pluto's attack on women is overt, while Proserpine's solidarity with May only confirms the gender stereotype of dissembling women."\(^{22}\) Pluto's misogynistic assault is not merely overt; it is strikingly clichéd, and it unnecessarily repeats the arguments which were "proven" to be wrong by the Wife of Bath. Pluto's attack is hardly more convincing than Jankin's tales of wicked wives, and the deity expresses himself with a similar tone of "sour grapes" at heart. Further, I believe that "Proserpine's solidarity with May" may not at all confirm a gender stereotype so much as justify it. Proserpine does not argue that patience, humility, and constancy are not virtuous qualities in a wife (or a spouse). She simply realizes that there is a time and a place for everything. Not every husband is a Walter, worthy of wifely subjugation to appease his every whim—particularly not the old dotard January, whose most notable physical features are blindness, and "The slakke skyn aboute his nekke" (1849). Edwards asserts that "Proserpine's spirited, if wrongheaded, defense of May's infidelity reminds many of the Wife of Bath and the Wife's exegetical tactics in refuting all antifeminine authority."\(^{23}\) Yet this assessment seems faulty, for it is comparing a concrete instance with an abstract principle. Proserpine's defense of May is not simply a defense of the infidelitous act itself, and to assume so is to ignore the true camaraderie which is created through the universality of shared personal
experience (in this case, an abduction by a domineering "husband"). Instead, Proserpine's defense is likewise a refutation of "all antifeminine authority"; it is a defense of principle, and not merely of action. The universality of her intent is confirmed by the fact that not only will May find a sufficient answer, but so will "alle wommen after" (2267).

The charge of antifeminism leveled against the tale is weakened even further by the very character of Proserpine herself. The point has been made that Proserpine seems "to be a woman drawn largely from the conventional stock of quarrelsome wives but supplied with better sense and clearer arguments than most." In essence, as opposed to the "conventional stock," Proserpine is individualized by Chaucer; and, her individualizing attributes—her "better sense and clearer arguments"—are not simply distinguishing, for they are ennobling as well. She is ultimately neither Claudian's Proserpine, nor the stereotypical "wicked wife." She is a woman, but just as important, she is herself. Thus, Proserpine's Promethean deliverance of May and of all womankind might be merely incidental to her desire to achieve sovereignty (at least in this one argument) over Pluto. And in this case, she does just that. It can therefore be assumed that Chaucer intended us to see the goddess on at least an equal intellectual plane with her husband. Her argument is at least as valid as her
husband's, and although she may not prove victorious in every debate, she is at least as capable of so doing as he is. It is ultimately her wits—not her femininity or masculinity—which prove crucial to her "victory."

If Proserpine's arguments demonstrate her capabilities on a theoretical level, then the outcome of the events in the garden is a practical manifestation. The deities determine the actions of the human actors. Pluto declares, "I wolde graunten [January] his sighte ageyn," (2313) and there is no free will or choice involved for January when "To Januarie [Pluto] gaf agayn his sighte, / And made hym se as wel as evere he myghte" (2355-6). Likewise, Proserpine vows, "Hir answere shal [May] have, I undertake" (2317)—and once again, the work is "undertaken" by the deity while the human functions as a passive agent. What is most important to keep in mind is that the outcome of this earthly event is manufactured dually. Pluto and Proserpine both quite literally "have a say" in the actual machinations of the worldly life; yet, Proserpine anticipates something which Pluto neglects by her inclusion of "alle wommen after"—the future. By placing her foot in posterity, Proserpine attains a much more concrete, blanket victory over Pluto. He gives up his antifeminist attack for the sake of the moment, and she rewards all women eternally.

If we consider Proserpine as a savior, it is an injustice to do so typically in reference to the Promethean
or Christian archetypes, for May's appeal is distinctly feminine:


I moste han of the peres that I see,
Or I moot dye,...
Help, for hir love that is of hevene queene!
I telle yow wel, a womman in my plit
May han to fruyt so greet an appetit
That she may dyen but she of it have.

(2331-37)

The reference to "hevene queene" is ironic, of course, because the appeal is being heard not by the queen of heaven, but by the queen of the underworld. Yet this queen is the same who classically restores life to Nature in the Spring, so this appeal for vitality may not be as inappropriate as it initially appears. The "hevene queene" reference also reminds us that Christ was not the initial human actor in the Christian scheme--for without Mary, the immaculate conception, and the virgin birth, there could have been no ascension or Christian salvation. May's appeal also cuts to the heart of the "constancy" issue. She has endured January's dominance long enough; she will not be another Grisildis. Still, she cannot cuckold her husband without some sort of divine assurance, whether from Fate, Mary, or Proserpine.

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Proserpine's "victory" is tainted, however, by the notion that she is in fact supplying May with an excuse to commit a sin not only against her husband, but against God as well. Ironically, at the very moment that May is being saved by the pagan goddess, she is also being damned by the Parson's God. And though Chaucer's pilgrims might have been able to accept the feminist implications of Proserpine's wifely superiority, the un-Christian nature of the argument's "resolution" would be hard to swallow as a full-blown "victory." The fact is that Proserpine merely justifies a lie to cover up an adulterous affair. Such veiling character vaguenesses hardly allow any of the actors to uncontestedly be labeled heroic or even exclusively protagonistic. Our sympathies (if any), therefore, must be meted out very carefully for no single character--divine or human--seemingly deserves our undivided compassion. If January is to be pitied for his cuckoldry, we must remember that he paid for the act himself (and we are constantly reminded of this) by choosing a young, lusty wife, by constraining her to the world directly within the reach of his own lecherous arm. If any pity is derived for May from this selfish subjection into an unwelcomed marriage, it is quickly annihilated not only by the nature of the adulterous act itself, but by the apparent indiscrimination with which she chooses a lover as well. Unlike even the Miller's Alison, May is motivated not so much by a "lust for" any
particular bachelor, but rather by the fulfillment of lust as an end in itself. The fact that she ultimately cuckolds her husband by coupling with his own servant (who is, incidentally, never even once graced with the epithet "hende") serves as much to her own discredit as to that of her husband.

Damyan is one of the lowest characters in the tale; he is little more than a puppet "third lover." Chaucer deviates from all of the known analogues, however, by ascribing to Damyan a specific duty within the old knight's household. Damyan is "a squyer... / which carf biforn the knyght ful many a day" (1772-3). This introduction immediately establishes the lover as a social inferior not only to January, but to his wife as well. Further, the almost unnoticeable "ful many a day" apparently indicates some abstract length of service, throughout which Damyan was afforded the opportunity to form some semblance of "bondage" with his lord. Ultimately, the Chaucerian alteration seems to have a twofold effect. First, Chaucer establishes Damyan as a lively character. Chaucer loved to characterize, particularly with characters who were conventionally "stock." The poet's "third lovers" are especially personalized— for example, "hende" Nicholas, Absolon, Aurelius— as opposed to the traditional (non-)development. More importantly though we must remember that one form of adultery was considered iniquitous beyond all others in
medieval society, and that was the betrayal of a lord by his own vassal.\textsuperscript{25} Even Pluto understands the disloyalty inherent in Damyan's act. The god sympathizes with the old dotard because "His owene man shal make hym cokewold" \textsuperscript{(2256)}, and it is primarily for this reason that he declares, "Now wol I graunten,... / That he shal have ayen his eyen syght" \textsuperscript{(2258, 2260)}. By making Damyan subservient to January then, Chaucer at once magnifies the wrongness of both Damyan's and May's role in the affair (since May is ironically "stooping" to someone considerably "beneath" her socially for gratification), while simultaneously emphasizing the ignorance of January, who is not just cuckolded, but cuckolded by a man from within his own household. This causes us to marvel even more at the ultimate accord reached by the human actors, for apparently the answer provided by Proserpine is sufficient not only to appease January's anger toward May, but also to shame or humiliate January such that he never even considers revenge toward Damyan. Pluto and more especially Proserpine thus exit as at least prophetic enough--or perhaps experienced enough--to take heed that their interventions do not facilitate or encourage needlessly prolonged earthly marital strife.

To accept that the enduring message of the \textit{Merchant's Tale} may be much less feminist or antifeminist, than simply anti-marriage\textsuperscript{26} seems to degrade unequivocally all of the
tale's passages of marital optimism (for example, January's pre-nuptial view of married life, and the marriage "encomium") as ridiculous in themselves, regardless of who is uttering them. Chaucer's audience—at least to some extent—must still have acknowledged marriage as a solemn, sanctified, and desirable Christian communion. Otherwise, the whole function of Chaucer's brief and undetailed account of the marriage sacrament would not seem so ironically satirical when compared to the detailed, lengthy accounts of the wedding feast and wedding night.

Moreover, if the Merchant's Tale is ultimately considered as an anti-marriage tale, the resolution between Pluto and Proserpine's argument is downplayed to a "role" of apparent insignificance:

"Dame," quod this Pluto, "be no lenger wrooth; I yeve it up! but sith I swoor myn ooth That I wolde graunten hym his sighte ageyn, My word shal stonde, I warne yow certeyn. I am a kyng, it sit me noght to lye."

"And I," quod she, "a queene of Fayerye! Hir answere shal she have, I undertake. Lat us namoore wordes heerof make; For sothe, I wol no lenger yow contrarie. (2311-19)
Resolutions between married couples appear far too infrequently in Chaucer's works to be belittled, or ignored. In this case between Pluto and Proserpine, the theme is sovereignty, although not the same type of marital sovereignty which we see in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale*, or in the *Clerk's Tale*. The sovereignty dispute between Pluto and Proserpine only incidentally and indirectly includes spousal control. Instead, they fight for sovereignty over the actions in the "anima humana"—the paradisaic garden which is reduced to little more than a medieval checker board in the hands of the gods.

Initially Pluto's concession—"I yeve it up!"—seems quite farcical. The poet's intent, however, may not be toward such a singularly humorous bent. By conceding the argument—which, to the gods is but over a triviality, anyway—Pluto hopes above all to preserve marital peace. And, at the expense of at most perhaps a little pride, he gets it. The argument, which consists of seventy-three lines of verse, is resolved in just nine. The Merchant's (or Chaucer's) intention, therefore, seems not to be to put down marriage, but to condemn marital discord as too often motivated by trivialities, and sustained by Pride (another deadly sin). A relationship which can therefore transcend senseless bickering is not only desirable, but entirely possible as well.

Emerson Brown, Jr. has posed the question, "If
Proserpine can so embitter and subdue once mighty Pluto, what can mere mortal men expect of their wives?" Although I do not agree that Pluto could be considered "embittered," nor that he is subdued by anything other than his own sense of propriety, I believe the approach toward a universal application is noteworthy. We need not ask what mortal men can expect of their wives, for by the time the tale is concluded we have heard first-hand accounts by the Merchant and the Host, and have seen the rise and fall of January and May. A more appropriate question might be this: Now that we have seen what men can expect from their wives, how will these husbands choose to handle their own marriages? Have men learned anything from Pluto? For if the Merchant's Tale presumes that wives will be wicked--that is, argumentative, shrewish, and nagging--it also presumes that husbands will deal with the wickedness in a prideful manner. They too will argue for the sake of argument, when in reality they could "buy" resolution at a very small price--a price which is nothing but apparent anyway.

Ultimately, Pluto does concede the argument, though not unconditionally. "My word shal stonde," he says, and the sentiment is echoed when Proserpine declares, "Hir answere shal she have." Thus, although Pluto is willing to surrender to Proserpine, and she is willing to give up the argument for its own sake, neither will renege on his or her pledged trothe. And neither expects nor encourages the
other to do so. In a sense, then, the condensed resolution becomes a sort of *demande*. Who is nobler: Pluto, who loses the argument, but stays true to his word, knowing that January will see his own cuckolding and still be duped? or Proserpine, who wins the argument, wins the "human chess match," but adds a lie to the already deadly sin of Lechery committed by May? The circumstances are almost an ironic reversal of the ending of the *Franklin's Tale*, where the Franklin asks of Arveragus, Aurelius, and the magician, "Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?" (V, 1622). In the *Franklin's Tale*, the characters really were "fre"—that is, generous, or noble— but in the *Merchant's Tale*, "fre"-ness is not so easily ascribed without reservation. Perhaps the gods Pluto and Proserpine therefore emerge as a bit more "human" than even Chaucer's worldly exemplars, for our final identification is with the deities, in the realm of the spiritual. Yet, the garden gate is always open to us. We are liable and susceptible to "fall" at any time if we let ourselves become Januaries and Mays. And although the gods are "above" the worldly realm, "they engage in a domestic quarrel which strips them of any glamour or sensuous appeal they might otherwise have had." It is this argument which anthropomorphizes Pluto and Proserpine, for their seemingly senseless or playful bickering typifies everyday human relations—especially marital relations—all too clearly. Apparently the gods have nothing better to do than rehash
and meddle in the disputes of the mortals. Yet this approach to the "episode" seems to diminish Chaucer's intent in utilizing a married couple at all. It is quite obvious that the author wanted to include the notion, at whatever level, that marital concord (if not bliss) is not merely a pipe dream. Robert Edwards has stated that the pagan gods "demonstrate the possibility of mature, companionable resolution in a fallen world...for [their] conduct is an affirmation of sorts." This "affirmation," I believe, goes beyond the mere "possibility" of resolution into the domain of "plausibility." The tale concludes in affable resolution in both the worldly and celestial (or "fayerye") realms. If the final note is dissonant, it is not sharply discordant. Both couples reach a truly compromising sort of agreement—Proserpine may "win" the argument, yet Pluto's desire to see the fruition of his specific designs is still fulfilled; similarly, January may win back May's attentions, but only after her youthful desires have been sated.

Regarding the actual extent of Pluto and Proserpine's influence over the characters in the garden, two camps of criticism have emerged. One is epitomized by the contention that "Although the human characters continue to think they are acting freely, they have become puppets, committed to spiritual destruction." The earthly characters do not possess free will and are doomed to a "life" of playing out the flippant fancies of the gods. Their worldly existence
is the manifestation of some sort of arbitrary fate (though not necessarily that of Fate). The human actors are functionally diminished to playthings in the hands of the gods, who in a way intentionally condemn the characters to satisfy their own whimsical desires. The other camp entrusts the human actors with a whole lot more free will. Accordingly, the gods will (or can) in no way engineer an "original" sin, and man is ultimately responsible to make his own choices. Thus, the gods' actions are either merely responsive or precautionary (and anticipatory) and their influence on January and May is incidental to the humans' own earthly decisions. Once man has selected one path over the others, however, the gods can freely exploit any consequences which may ensue for their own purposes.

We should keep in mind that Pluto and Proserpine's intervention is prompted basically by selfish interest. They meddle in the affairs in the garden not simply for entertainment's sake, but more importantly because the scenario affords them the opportunity to match their wits empirically, and not just theoretically. And when the gods withdraw their influence, it is because their own argument has been resolved, and not on any account of January, May, or Damyan. Ironically, the peace which the gods preserve in their own marriage should sow discord into the marriage of January and May, since January actually witnesses the affair; yet, even this dilemma is solved, albeit through
January's absolute ignorance. Proserpine provides May with an answer, but the goddess in no way necessitates or preordains the old dotard's acceptance of it. The "rationalization" is January's own, without any divine tutelage. But in this one case, January's adulterous ignorance becomes his marital bliss. In a sense, the gods have restored happiness to January and May's marriage, and although the resolution may be inferior to that of their own argument—or perhaps less satisfying "intellectually" to us as readers and critics—it offers at least a starting point. By arguing on even intellectual "ground," and by humbly and earnestly admitting defeat, the gods illustrate a model for humans to follow which relies not on any perverse extremity such as divine intervention as a means to resolve domestic disputes, but which is rather based upon thoughtfulness and humility—virtues which are attainable by any earnest human being.

Although the prologue to the Merchant's Tale does not appear in all of the Chaucer manuscripts, the manuscripts which include the link are generally accepted as late authorial versions. Regardless of our ideas concerning the poet's intent, it is quite evident that the prologue was meant to serve as a deliberate transition between the two tales it connects. The Merchant's opening line of, "Wepyng and waylyng, care and oother sorwe / I knowe ynogh, ..." (1213-14) echoes the Clerk's, "And lat hym care, and wepe,
and wrynge, and waille" (1212) too closely to be passed over (regardless of the placement of the Clerk's line). Also, the Merchant's specific reference to "Grisildis" (1224) serves as a positive link. Although no explicit mention is made by the Merchant of the tale he will tell until he actually begins, it is difficult to ignore the implications of his prefatorial marriage comments.

The Merchant's Prologue is far from irrelevant to a thorough understanding of his tale. The key lies in the tale's epilogue. Like the Merchant's prologue, the epilogue serves both textually and thematically as an antecedent. The Host refers to "swich a wyf" (2420) as May, and even specifically to "this Marchauntes tale" (2425). He speaks of his own wife, and asserts, "Me reweth soore I am unto hire teyd" (2432). This echoes not only in an ironic manner the theme of May's bondage to January, and the sacrament of the marriage union, but also the Merchant's own words regarding his own marital situation: "Were I unbounden, also moot I thee, / I wolde nevere eft comen in the snare" (1226-7). Ironically, it is the wives in the tale who have been ensnared--May and Proserpine. And whereas May is permitted to escape her snare for the duration of the affair with Damyan, Proserpine is classically allowed two seasons out of every four to elude the very world of her husband. Likewise, even the disillusioned husbands of the "real world"--the Merchant and the Host--(and their wives) are
permitted the vernal asylum of the Canterbury pilgrimage.

The Merchant's Prologue and Epilogue appear to be related in other ways as well. The Merchant swears to his wife's cursedness:

Assaye whoso wole, and he shal fynde
That I seye sooth, by Seint Thomas of Ynde,
As for the moore part--I sey nat alle.

(1229-31)

Similarly, the Host's wife "...hath an heep of vices mo; /
Therof no fors! Lat alle swiche thynges go" (2429-30). Both wives have more vices than their husbands will bother to share with the pilgrims, and both seemingly come to an end in discussing their marital misfortunes. Yet both continue. Finally, the Merchant concludes that he

...ne koude in no manere
Tellen so muchel sorwe as I nowheere
Koude tellen of my wyves cursednesse!

(1237-39)

The Host likewise concludes his diatribe on Goodelief by acknowledging that her wretchedness defies explanation: "And eek my wit suffiseth nat therto / To tellen al; wherfore my tale is do" (2439-40).
The Epilogue to the Merchant's Tale thus provides a thematic and rhetorical (structural) balance to the tale as a whole. At the fulcrum of these two wretched marriages lies the marriage of Pluto and Proserpine. The principal complaint the Merchant expresses of his wife is that

\[\text{Ther is a long and large difference} \]
\[\text{Bitwix Grisildis grete pacience} \]
\[\text{And of my wyf the passyng crueltee.} \]
\[(1223-25)\]

Classically, patience is the very unifying factor which keeps Pluto and Proserpine together--Proserpine's patience to dwell with Pluto for a season until she can be free, and Pluto's patience to await the season until he can reclaim his wife.

The Host thinks worst of Goodelief because "though that she povre be, / But of hir tonge, a labbyng shrewe is she" (2427-28). He, too, could learn a lesson from the gods, for it is only after Pluto (at least apparently) humbles himself before his wife, that she pledges to cease her bickering.

Ultimately, we have to wonder why the Merchant would include Pluto and Proserpine (specifically) in his tale. Perhaps he sees them as an opportunity to define his own marriage as normal, or even divine. Pluto and Proserpine's bickering may seem senseless; but, it is also very matter of
fact, which makes it appear quite normal. Further, the accord they finally achieve allows us to dismiss their arguing as rather harmless and even perhaps productive. When the tale is through and the Host complains about his wife, he may simply be jumping on the bandwagon so as to assert the "normality" of his own marriage.

Perhaps the tale's first "argument" comes in the form of Justinus' and Placebo's marriage debate. After January reveals his intentions to marry, "Ther fil a stryf bitwixe his bretheren two" (1475). Their strife, however, is argued not in strictly rational terms of one side versus another. Placebo, in fact, does not "argue" at all, but merely flatters January by telling him exactly what he desires to hear. Justinus' "argument" is in a sense perverted, then, not only by the bias inherent (and instilled) in January, but also by the foreknowledge that January will automatically spurn his counsel. By the time Justinus gets to speak, January's mind is already made up—there is no need for "argument" at all. January would perhaps best wait and listen to Prudence's advice in the Tale of Melibee, for she could at least instruct him on granting counsel and eschewing flattery. What in fact happens in January's case is exactly what Prudence warns Melibeus to avoid. January is ruined by accepting the flattery and self-aggrandizing rhetoric of Placebo, who at least momentarily gains a sort of power by telling January exactly what he wants to hear.

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In the process, Justinus, and his wise advice—which is there all along for January to accept—are shunned and forgotten.

The Justinus and Placebo episode ultimately becomes an example of what rational argument can become if not mediated, or tempered, by common sense. Its effects prove to be tragic, for not only does January's marriage devolve into something considerably less than his paradisaic ideal, but he is cuckolded to boot. The inclusion of Pluto and Proserpine conversely illustrates what can become of a rational argument unhindered by ulterior selfish motives—that is, a peaceful resolution. The gods may be merely "playing" during their argument, but the key is that they both play fairly. Hence, they are dually rewarded since neither loses at the other's profit. Further, even the very instruments—the human actors—at the core of their dispute are each in his or her own way rewarded, though not so unconditionally.

The Justinus and Placebo "debate" is also reverberated in a perverted form in the Nun's Priest's Tale. In the Merchant's Tale, Placebo convinces January to rely on his own uxoriousness, and it is this selfish lust which causes January not only to spurn Justinus' advice, but also to actually marry and "possess" the young May, which ultimately leads to his "Fall." In the Nun's Priest's Tale, Chauntecleer spurns his own good sense and argumentative
effort and likewise gives in uxoriously to Pertelote's contentions, which lead him too to an Adamic "Fall." In both cases, reason and common sense are abandoned for lust, which rarely wins anything from Chaucer save scorn or recrimination.

To dwell on analogous associations between Pluto and Proserpine and various other characters within the Merchant's Tale in particular, and the Canterbury Tales in general, is to diminish the value of the "episode" as it stands on its own. On its most basic level, the episode presents to the tale a marital argument which does get resolved. Marital concord is not only possible, but it is not so difficult, either. Tatlock believes "the last impression of the Merchant's Tale is not repugnant. Cold makes us aware of warmth, and something purely acrid heightens the worth of his prevailing clemency." In other words, the Merchant's Tale becomes a sort of black spot by which to judge the whiteness of the rest of the tales. I believe the Pluto and Proserpine scene can be applied in much the same manner microcosmically. The "whiteness" of their marriage may not be perfectly free from grayish tints, but compared to the muddy mess depicted by the Merchant and the Host, and illustrated by January and May, with a little cooperative effort, it can be made to shine quite brightly.

Perhaps instead of seeking the worldly "advice" of Justinus and Placebo, January should have consulted the gods
initially, for they appear most able to advise objectively and experientially on both the goods and ills of marital life. After all, the Canterbury pilgrimage is ostensibly a religious pilgrimage. The fleshly pilgrims march to the domain of the spiritual saint of healing, for forgiveness, as well as for future support. They are renouncing the ways of the world—at least for a time—for the ways of the heavens. Perhaps they will succeed where January has failed.

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2. See especially Bertrand H. Bronson, "Afterthoughts on the *Merchant's Tale,*" *SP* 58 (1961): 595—"There needed no spirits from the Otherworld to bring us these illuminations! Is it too vitiated to find this farcical interlude amusing, or must we deny that its author composed it *con bravura e con gusto?"


5. Most notably among these is Mary C. Schroeder, "Fantasy in the 'Merchant's Tale,'" *Criticism* 12 (1970): 177: "No matter how ingeniously one tries to integrate Pluto and Proserpine thematically or symbolically into the *Merchant's Tale,* the significant fact remains that their presence requires explanation." Two facts, however, disserve Schroeder's apparent purpose: first, she never provides a substantial "explanation;" and second, she tries to justify the scene's relevance by simultaneously writing it off as merely "an excrescence, an interlude which is not in line with the rest of the tale." See also Karl P. Wentersdorf, "Theme and


8. All quotations from Chaucer are from The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston, 1987).

9. Dalbey (note 5), 412-13, where the author further states that, "Venus is, of course, luxuria, lust rather than love, and it is this lust for earthly delight which causes the downfall of January, May, and Damyan just as it enabled Pluto to seize Proserpine into hell."


13. I believe it is this same point which elicits the comedic effect of the "lymytours and othere hooly freres" (III, 866) at the beginning of the Wife of Bath's Tale. The Wife represents the clerics as nomadic bumbler who will bless anything they bump into. The blessings, therefore, are founded simply in materialism, and are in no sense spiritual.

14. Robert P. Miller, " Allegory in The Canterbury Tales," Companion to Chaucer Studies, ed. Beryl Rowland (New York, 1979), 283. See also Wentersdorf (note 5), 527, where the critic argues that "The legend of Pluto constitutes a kind of pagan Fall: just as, according to the Biblical story, death came into the world because of specific sinful acts by Adam and Eve, so, in the classical legend, the death of nature in the winter of each year is the result of an original wrongdoing-- Pluto's ravishment of Ceres' daughter."

15. For a more detailed explanation of the former opinion, see Wentersdorf (note 5), 526; for the latter, see Dalbey (note 5), 415.


19. Jill Mann offers an interesting interpretation of the relationship between Pluto and Proserpine in Geoffrey Chaucer (Atlantic Highlands, NJ, 1991), in which she goes so far as to label Pluto a "henpecked rapist." See especially pp. 59-70.


27. Brown, Jr. (note 18), 401.


30. Dalbey (note 5), 415.

31. See particularly Tatlock (note 7), 372--"January and May have their divine counterparts in Pluto and Proserpine," although he fails to develop the idea. Wentersdorf (note 5), 525, picks up the notion, and specifically links the two couples by their common motifs of youth marrying age, and the rapturous marriage. In both accounts, the critic remarks, the ultimate justice lies in the theme of the abandoned, or beguiled raptor: "just as Proserpine gladly leaves the dark realm of her elderly spouse every year, to return if only for
a while to the brightness and freshness of the upper world, so
May...leaves the unwelcome embraces of old January, whose very
name spells winter, and turns avidly to the arms of youthful
Damyan." Such an analysis leads Wentersdorf to divide the
tale neatly into two "sub"-tales: that of May's abduction, and
of May's revenge.

Tatlock (note 7), 203, also draws an association between
Pluto and Proserpine and the Wife of Bath and her fifth
husband, Jankin. Tatlock concentrates on the argument between
Pluto and Proserpine as his grounds for comparison: "just as
Pluto's talk is suggestive of Jankin's, Proserpine's is a
curious reminiscence of the Wife of Bath's; women, she says,
shall never lack the power of facing out their offences, and
she flouts the authority of Solomon."

32. Tatlock (note 7), p.381.
Abdiel: Milton's "Servant of God"

Abstract

Abdiel is used as a device by Milton to personify a "positive," defiant force against Satan both ideologically (in the realm of discourse) and actually (in the physical battle).
Although *Paradise Lost* is a masterfully crafted and highly creative poetical work, much critical discourse regarding the poem is apparently concerned with re-establishing and re-affirming analogous associations between the primary, Biblical source of the "story," or plot, and a Miltonic piece which is even authorially acknowledged as an intentional and overt derivative. It seems most significant, therefore, to expend our efforts analyzing the Miltonic deviations from the source material, rather than to point out each particular nuance the poet employed in re-telling the established text. Perhaps the most substantial Miltonic deviation, and one which has attracted disappointingly sparse commentary, is the creation of the angel Abdiel. Abdiel is not a Biblical character, and the angel exists in *Paradise Lost*, no doubt, primarily due to the Hebrew significance of his name which translates as "Servant of God."

It has been fifty years since the point was first raised that, in so far as plot itself is concerned, the character of Abdiel is in no way indispensable:
If the story of Abdiel had been omitted, the quality of the poem would be lower, but the plot would not appear in any sense lacking. His action changes the course of events in no way. He does not influence any of Satan's followers; even his intention, of giving warning to the Almighty, is anticipated by the divine wisdom.²

Yet it is my belief that Abdiel's appearances are significant. As the "Servant of God," the angel is employed as a device by Milton to "personify" a positive, defiant force against Satan (etymologically, the "Adversary") both ideologically and actually. The purpose of this paper is to justify Abdiel as a character crucial to Milton's work by focusing on the physical confrontation between God and Satan in Heaven as necessary empirical proof of the righteousness of Abdiel's vocal defiance of Satan in the North.

One of the poem's most poignant incidents is the Satanic seduction of one-third of the Heavenly angels for the purpose of joining Satan in his withdrawal to the far North. Although the contempt and envy behind Satan's ploy are obvious to the reader, who is instructed of "the suggested cause" which is "cast between / Ambiguous words and jealousies, to sound / Or taint integrity" (V, 702-04),³ Satan's band of angelic followers is unaware of his true intentions. Satan was obviously powerful in Heaven, or at least high enough to feel slighted by the exaltation of the Son over himself. Satan was

... of the first,
If not the first Arch-Angel, great in Power,  
In favor and preeminence, yet fraught  
With envy against the Son of God, that day  
Honor'd by his great Father, and proclaim'd  
Messiah King anointed, could not bear  
Through pride that sight, and thought himself impair'd.  

Since the other angels know nothing of Satan's envy at this point, they at least respect him according to his angelic station. Thus, the angels leave Heaven in obeisance to

The wonted signal, and superior voice  
Of thir great Potentate; for great indeed  
His name, and high was his degree in Heav'n  

The angels' readiness to unquestioningly respond to Satan's call subtly reaffirms the superiority inherent in his station. Milton also emphasizes the trust and devotion of the followers by affirming their own naivete, particularly in contrast to Satan's own deceitful engines:

[Satan's] count'nance, as the Morning Star that guides  
The starry flock, allur'd them, and with lies  
Drew after him the third part of Heav'n's Host  

The "lies" with which Satan "allur'd them" are later explicated:

For thither he assembl'd all his Train,  
Pretending so commanded to consult  

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Satan's motives, then, are apparently noble, and if so many angels are deceived, it cannot be explained by any fault or susceptibility within themselves, but must simply and singularly be attributed to the guilefulness of Satan. Ironically, the most steadfast and virtuous angels would apparently be most inclined toward fulfilling Satan's pretended purpose. The fact that Satan is capable of seducing so many angels would seem to confirm Satan's dexterity as a rhetorician—a dexterity that is further demonstrated when he later convinces the others to rebel. The angels are lured deviously "away from" God to the North (a geographical location associated with the devil even in medieval literature), the region of Satan's "Heavenly" throne and most commanding influence. If the angels are "as a mass deceived," it is imperative to make the distinction that they represent a collective "mass," and not merely a singular "mass." Although they proceed as a group they do so conjointly, the decisions so to do having been necessarily individual. Somewhere within this throng is Abdiel, who remains passive (not to mention anonymous and even undistinguished) until Satan's intentions become more discernable.

Satan accepts the exaltation itself as a legitimate,
reasonable act of God. It is rather precisely whom God has exalted which seems arbitrary or wrong or unfair to Satan. Satan's professed disapproval is that "Another now hath to himself ingross't / All power" (V, 775-76), and already Satan's propagandistic mis-portrayal of the Son is evident. Satan depicts the Son as an active usurper, when in reality, the Son's role is totally passive. When Satan speaks of the Son's "power" and of how the exaltation has left the remainder of the angels "eclipst under the name / Of King anointed" (V, 776-77), he is not so much confirming any power or control inherent in the exaltation as he is inventing it in order to rouse suspicion. Raphael tells Adam of the exaltation that Satan "could not bear / Through pride that sight, and thought himself impair'd" (V, 664-65). Satan's shattered pride indicates that he is upset solely because he was not the one chosen to be exalted. He feels that his own power or domination has been subsumed. Hence, Satan portrays the Son not as an arm of God, but as another God, a second sovereign. In this way, Satan does "establish" an arbitrariness to God's rule, for he depicts God as an arbitrary benefactor of sovereignty. Satan professes that by exalting the Son, God is intentionally subjecting the angels to a role of dual servitude and to a subservience "Too much to one, but double how endur'd" (V, 782), and it is to this double subscription that Satan seemingly objects. He professes that the angels' freedom in
Heaven will be diminished; yet, it is all too evident that the angels' "freedom" is merely a deceptive euphemism for Satan's own "power;" for, Satan repeatedly equates the two concepts with each other—freedom is power to Satan, and power, freedom. Thus, when Satan speaks to the departed angels of "those Imperial Titles which assert / Our being ordain'd to govern, not to serve" (V, 801-02), his concern is exclusively for power. He no doubt recognizes that if the angels do choose to follow one new ruler instead of the "two" presiding in Heaven, it is he amongst the entire third of Heaven who is highest in imperial degree. Satan's argument should be recognized by the other angels as implicitly absurd; for although Satan speaks collectively, his argument serves to empower only himself.

In order to assuage his own hurt "pride," Satan attempts to generate and establish his own "acceptance" among the departed angels. Satan knows that it is crucial for him to dupe the other angels into supposing that he is in fact their "elected" leader. However, the premises on which they accept Satan as their leader are either blatant deceptions or outright lies. Even the "Imperial Titles" which the angels possess in Heaven are apparently meaningless, until Satan associates the idea of power with position.

When Abdiel recognizes Satan's implicit intent (i.e., to "exalt" himself), he rebukes Satan's argument as "blasphemous, false and proud!" (V, 809). We immediately
accept the charges of blasphemy and falseness based on our evidence of Satan's deception, and the charge of pride is sustained by Raphael's "earlier" authoritative account of Satan's response to the exaltation. Abdiel proceeds to condemn Satan as an "ingrate, / In place thyself so high above thy Peers" (V, 812). There is apparently a contradiction in the angel's words between a position "above" and "Peers." Satan's Heavenly "position" has not been merely granted; and, this is the root of his pride. He does not feel unlucky, but genuinely slighted. Thus, his contention that the "Imperial Titles" themselves implicitly assert a right to govern is seemingly irrational and desperate. The Heavenly titles represent humble obedience, although not necessarily any hierarchy; they are the fruits of servitude, but not the means of governance. For Satan to designate any hierarchical semblance of power or control to the stations is to pervert their true significance.

Abdiel goes on to justify God's actions and power, primarily by arguing that by precedent the angels should recognize that all that God has done is good. (Satan attempts to refute this assertion by questioning the exaltation. He contends that "good" can no longer be defined strictly through divine association.) Further, Abdiel asserts that they have no right to dispute their own creator. This last consideration becomes the crux of the argument, for if Satan does not outrightly deny God as his
creator, he at least raises the question of self-creation:

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

(V, 859-61)

Satan sums up the gist of his argument and intentions when he tells Abdiel,

Our puissance is our own, our own right hand
Shall teach us highest deeds, by proof to try
Who is our equal

(V, 864-66)

Apart from the obvious allusion to the Son's position in relation to God, the "right hand" implies a method or means of attainment. The manifestation of this "right hand" for Satan would apparently be the band of rebel angels. Satan's assertion that the rebel band's intentions will be carried out exclusively via their own puissance justifies their own failure. Abdiel "wins" due to his faith in entrusting God's will within himself and his own actions. His "puissance" is humbly attributed not to himself, but to God. Conversely, Satan can in no way claim God's will as justification for his endeavors. He is not only fighting against God, but by asserting his theory of self-creation he is even renouncing his faith in God as an absolute representation of goodness, omnipotence, benevolence, and so on. The "proof" to which
Satan alludes is no longer spiritual, or based on faith; rather, it must be empirically and concretely tested before it can be affirmed. Further, this "proof" will be assessed in Satanic terms (presumably as "equal," or not), and it is this type of harsh and utter self-reliance which justifies Abdiel's charges of blasphemy.

Abdiel's response to Satan's argument is apparently prophetic, for the remainder of Abdiel's discourse revolves about the singular conjecture, "I see thy fall / Determin'd" (V, 878-79). Perhaps the angel is so vehement because he recognizes his cause as good, true, and right, or more directly, as the side favored by God.

One critic has mused that Abdiel raises the question of whether or not it is "proper" to fight against God. This question, however, seems rhetorical, for the reader of Paradise Lost knows Milton's answer due to the work's epic structure. In Books One and Two we have already been shown the results of Satan's actions. The epic structure is in fact what makes the poem such a valuable, didactic "lesson."

Since we initially know that Satan (and Adam) did fall, our awareness is redirected from whether or not he fell, to exactly how and why he fell. Knowing Satan's fate, we can analyze him and his actions as justifiably negative examples. When Abdiel speaks of "That Golden Sceptre which thou didst reject" (V, 886), we are instantly reminded of the bruised and broken devils we saw coming to their senses.
in their new domain at the beginning of the work. The "Iron Rod," Abdiel tells us, is to "bruise and break / [Satan's] disobedience" (V, 887-88), and apparently nothing more at this point. Abdiel's argument, therefore, is ultimately unselfish; he is arguing for the good of God, and not for himself.

If we accept the fact that we foreknow Satan's fate, we must question just what it is that makes the confrontation between Abdiel and Satan in the North so compelling. Apparently, there is no element of surprise in terms of action, so the appeal must be somewhat more philosophical. The episode has been dubbed "a dramatic illustration of the angelic freedom of the will," and despite the vagueness of the statement, it is obviously valid. The fact that the two angels (Satan and Abdiel) contend at all is a confirmation of their free will, particularly within the context of the situation; for Satan is contending against God--the purported author of divine Providence--while Abdiel is dissenting amongst a band of angels who think they are even out of ear-shot of the steadfast angel's Protector. In a sense, Abdiel and Satan represent the two extremes of free will pertinent to the characters in Paradise Lost--the freedom to absolutely obey, versus the freedom to absolutely rebel.

We must keep in mind that in the philosophical battle in the North, Satan is as powerful as Abdiel, though not
necessarily more so. The angels are similarly "powerful" during the argument, since they have an equal (unlimited) amount of free will; thus, any control derived as a result of the argument would be totally consequential. Of the two claims, Abdiel's is perhaps the more difficult to justify (particularly to a twentieth century reader) since it is founded on abstract principles such as God, faith, and love. Satan's evidence, on the other hand, seems irrefutable, for his appeal is empirical. He seems to say, "Look at me; I am here and God is not." Thomas Merrill maintains that both sides of the debate actually "reflect exemplary values," and that it is only within the context of *Paradise Lost* as a whole that we can recognize Abdiel's argument as the more noble. He states that Abdiel argues with a "logic of obedience," while Satan's contentions are supported much more concretely. Yet if Abdiel's logic is accepted as being "of obedience" we cannot forget that he has free will, and therefore, that he is obeying by choice and not strictly by command. On a grander scale, Merrill notes that the obvious argument between Satan and Abdiel is actually undermined by a more subtle debate over "what validates a truth claim"—empirical evidence, or faith. In this light, Satan is simply a proponent of scientific skepticism. Thus Merrill accounts for Satan's fall by noting a philosophical shift from a "logic of obedience" to a "logic of empiricism." I do believe that Satan's argument could be quite compelling.
when taken out of context (as Merrill contends); but, I believe the critic overlooks an important point which aids in the reader's acceptance of Abdiel's stance. This is that Satan's whole "empirical" argument is based upon a negative assumption. His evidence is really not empirical at all, but merely a repudiation of Abdiel's claim. Abdiel in effect says, "God is the creator," to which Satan replies, "No He is not. Since I did not witness Him create me, I can only be self-created." Satan's "evidence" is really a lack of evidence, at least in the palpable sense. The absurdity of Satan's claim is evident to the reader because the reader does in fact "empirically" know that God has created not only Satan, but All. Furthermore, Satan's argument appears illogical due to the fact that he has rebelled precisely because God did create the concept of a Son-as-intermediary.

Perhaps the most ironic interpretation for the invalidity of Satan's argument is expressed by John Diekhoff, who contends that Abdiel's argument "is so telling that Satan can only defend his rebellion . . . by denying the fact of creation, by means of the sophistic argument from lack of memory." Abdiel asked Satan,

...shalt thou dispute
With him the points of libertie, who made
Thee what thou art,...

(V, 822-24)

to which Satan replied,
Satan does not refute or deny the theory that a creator possesses an inherent right to rule his creature. In fact, he continues his argument by professing that the angels need answer only to themselves specifically because they are "self-begot, self-rais'd / By our own quick'ning power" (V, 859-60). Actually, then, Satan does not deny creation per se, nor the right of a creator to govern his creatures; he simply makes himself self-reliant by professing a literal self-actualization. Satan's "lack of memory" seems to be much more of an anecdotal escape than any semblance of evidential proof. His whole system of argument based upon empirical evidence seems suddenly undermined because he cannot even justify his own existence.

The debate inevitably degenerates into the matter of "human" experience versus spiritual faith. When Satan asks, "Who saw / When this creation was?" (V, 856-57), the appeal is directly sensual. Thus, Satan is seemingly making an appeal to the lesser angelic essence which is, to the best of our human understanding, some sort of divine physicality. As human beings, we can trace our parentage easily enough; however, the task of identifying "forefathers" in terms of sensual, physical proof is quite
dubious for a pre-terrestrial angel.

Ironically, it is only through an affirmation of Abdiel's argumentative premises that Satan can later get free from Hell, an event that occurs chronologically after the episode with Abdiel. Sin tells Satan that she will open the gates of Hell for him expressly because

Thou art my Father, thou my Author, thou
My being gav'st me; whom should I obey
But thee, whom follow?

(II, 864-66)

If Sin does not affirm God as her Father, she at least affirms the logic and rationality of Abdiel's argument. She strengthens or justifies Abdiel's argument by arguing in terms and logic which directly echo the angel's rhetoric. If Satan does not accept Sin's argument, he at least does not try to refute it, nor does he rebuke or correct her for remembering him as her creator. Sin's argument must sting his ears, for he has only so recently felt the punishment of the Iron Rod (as Abdiel had prophesied) for his proud and blatant disobedience.

To say that freedom itself is the central issue of Satan and Abdiel's debate, that is, to distinguish a "freedom to" (Abdiel) versus a "freedom from" (Satan),\(^{12}\) is to diminish Milton's whole concept of freedom. The product of Abdiel's "freedom to" obey God is the only real freedom in the poem, for when one (e.g., Satan, Adam, Eve) professes a "freedom
from" obeisance, his or her "freedom" becomes a punishment that serves only to imply or confirm God's omnipotence. The rebellious brand of "freedom from" inherently implies a hubristic "better" power than that existing—a power that is not justified by any concept of a "highest truth" but is rather justified through the individual's own pride. Any "freedom" in Paradise Lost, then, is essentially a freedom to, or not to, obey God, and not simply the more empirical retributive "control" factors derived thereby.

One incidental effect of Abdiel's defiance toward Satan is a passive reaffirmation of Satan's new "power." When Abdiel rebukes Satan, Raphael recounts that "his zeal / None seconded, as out of season judg'd, / Or singular and rash" (V, 849-51). The angels in the North are afforded an immediate choice by Abdiel's overt defiance; yet, none choose to support him. Abdiel does not lose hope at once however, for when he makes his closing remark, he addresses Satan singularly: "O alienate from God, O spirit accurst" (V, 877). By ascribing Satan as the lone "alienate," Abdiel in no way rebukes the mass of angels, perhaps hoping that some will yet recognize his just obedience. It is soon obvious, however, that Abdiel is "Among the faithless, faithful only hee;" (V, 897). Abdiel's "faith" distinguishes him at this point, which implies that Satan actually has won over a third of the angels in Heaven with his philosophy of scientific skepticism. As Abdiel
individually passes the "Long way through hostile scorn" (V, 904), we see the first active manifestation of the other angels' individual decisions to rebuke God. If the "hostile scorn" is collective, it is also the individual expression of each angel's free will. Abdiel emerges from the band as the sole counter-revolutionary, undaunted, and infused with the grace of God.

Abdiel reaffirms God's justice not only in his verbal diatribe, but also by the very fact that he possesses enough free will to defy the entire throng in the North. In a sense, God is made greater because so many do not follow Abdiel; thus, Abdiel represents the ultimate individuality of free will. God is not afraid to give His creatures free will, and all He asks is obedience in return. God allows His creatures to be subjected to antagonistic temptations, and in the process their obedience to God and the goodness they derive thereby are magnificently bettered. Further, God is made all the more noble in proportion to the amount of free will His creatures possess. When we realize that this free will is absolute, we also realize that (at least in earthly terms) every situation is undetermined. This should then offer us a sense of the heroics Abdiel undergoes in scorning the entire band of falling angels for his God who is presumably so "far" away.

Perhaps the most important function of Abdiel in the debate episode is as an element of justification for
condemning the mass of angels who fall with Satan: "Abdiel is necessary, since he alone proves that the rest of Satan's followers were free not to fall." This idea would seem to support the necessity of Abdiel's obscurity among the band up until his moment of glory. Abdiel is not Michael, or Raphael, or Uriel; he is not even identified or identifiable until the confrontation begins. He is simply a lesser angel who rises from the mass.

What Milton's Abdiel represents in Paradise Lost is akin to the poem's whole theme of pride and humility, and especially the type of humility inherent in renouncing one's "self" in willing supplication to a divine figure-head. Abdiel begins as an obscure figure who, due to his moral virtue, becomes heroic or at least distinguished. Abdiel is merely one of the third part of Heaven until he actively defies the rebel group. Milton exploits "Abdiel's" obscurity to emphasize that "the Christian world of Paradise Lost [even] allows heroism to the lowest of the angels because he is faithful to God." Faith, then, is an "act," at least in Abdiel's case. An element of humility is also exalted in the example of Abdiel. Abdiel shows not only that the low can be raised, but that they can (and must) do so via their individual actions and obedience. He elects (of his own free will) the right and good, acts thereon, and is exalted therefore.

Abdiel represents everything that is most virtuous to
Christians: obedience to God, faith, devotion through thought and deed, and humility. If Milton's Satan is the evil embodiment of pride, Abdiel is likewise Satan's adversary in this regard as well, for Abdiel is a character as much against pride as he is for humility. The angel shows us that to overcome pride is not enough, for Abdiel could have simply slipped away from Satan without putting himself at risk by defiantly defending his own faith. Yet, Abdiel further illustrates the virtue of obedience—-not necessarily any virtue of servitude, but a virtue gained by suppressing one's egotism. Thus, if humility is generally perceived as a diminishing or lessening virtue, Abdiel demonstrates that it is exactly not that; for, by proclaiming his own inferiority to God Almighty, he is at once confirming his association to the greater unity of the entire Heavenly host, which is held together by none other than the Son of God.

Abdiel must make the point to Satan that obedience does not necessarily imply servitude, particularly when the supreme is unquestionably so. In the angels' case, their goodness is assured by their obedience; but, the reverse is not always true, for they must always choose to be obedient. But Satan, who is by this point more concerned with power than with happiness, fails to act on Abdiel's "logical" advice. Satan still chooses to shun God and in this way asserts and manifests his own freedom of will.
Just before Abdiel leaves the North, he utters his prophetic words to Satan, perhaps in a final effort to save any of the other angels:

...soon expect to feel
His Thunder on thy head, devouring fire.
Then who created thee lamenting learn,
When who can uncreate thee thou shalt know
(V, 892-95)

This final outburst "justifies" the truth in Abdiel's arguments. The reader knows the prophecy to be accurate (from the state of the fallen angels in Book One). Although Satan may never be utterly "uncreated," he is at least relegated to an image other than the angelic one he was created into. Abdiel grounds his "vision" on the crux of their whole debate by asserting that God will and can ruin Satan precisely because he has created him. Abdiel refutes Satan's logic by professing that Satan will fall on his own terms, or by virtue of his own argument. By positing the notion of "uncreation," the faithful angel implies that Satan is actually justifying his own punishment; for, if Satan is truly "self-begot," then presumably he can only be self-destroyed. What Satan fails to come to terms with is the fact that the power which he so inherently attaches to the position of the exalted is nothing but an arbitrary ascription on his own part. God may have created the Son as King, but it is Satan who subscribes himself to the
subservience from which he is driven to rebel.

An interesting consequence of Satan and Abdiel's discourse is that in Abdiel's resistant complaint, the angel diverts the focus of the story--however temporarily--away from Satan. Satan is the protagonist of *Paradise Lost* at least in the sense that the story opens with the documentation of his fall. The story is presented in terms of Satan, and the plot unfolds in reference to his character just as the classical epics begin with the introduction of a hero's dilemma and proceed to unravel his tale. In a way, since we are first introduced to Satan and his predicament, the poem can be said to be viewed in terms of him as an epic (anti-)hero. Yet, when Abdiel stands up to Satan in Book Five we cannot help but recognize him as an utterly good being. Abdiel's arguments and protestations jar Satan from the offensive to the defensive, and in this way, Abdiel steals Satan's spotlight. When Abdiel first rebukes Satan, it is Abdiel who is acting as antagonist, since it is he who initiates the discursive argument. Yet by the time the debate is concluded, we identify Abdiel as a truly virtuous character, and Satan as somewhat of an empty or shallow trickster. At this point, it becomes difficult to accept Satan as a hero (or perhaps even as a protagonist) any longer, for Abdiel has stripped him of much of his glamour and apparently retained it as his own. It may be no coincidence, then, that Abdiel's and Satan's "heroism" are
definable in many of the same terms (e.g., defiant, fearless, rebellious, determined, self-reliant), for Abdiel has undoubtedly derived much of his own directly at Satan's expense.

Satan's angels should by this point recognize the truth, reason, and goodness of Abdiel; yet, they do not. Abdiel demonstrates the free will available to each of the angels who may elect or reject Satan. Satan has definitely and obviously defied God, but the rest of the angels, until none follow Abdiel's lead, are merely naive dupes deceived by Satan. It is not until the fallen angels express their defiance of Abdiel's steadfast obedience, therefore, that we can actually define them as evil. By rejecting Abdiel the angels are, in a sense, empirically "proven" (to the reader at least) wrong, for they should have recognized Abdiel as a positive example.

When Abdiel returns to Heaven to report the ensuing confrontation, he is welcomed with the information that the other angels already share his "news." Initially, this seems to diminish the heroic quality of Abdiel's night-long flight, yet ultimately it may have a paradoxical effect. By making Abdiel's trek appear pointless, or futile, Milton perhaps derives even more pathos for the angel. Abdiel's steadfastness, however, is not totally ignored. He is received and entertained as a hero by the Host of angels for being "Among the faithless, faithful only hee" (V, 897), and
is commended by God directly, not so much for his defiance as for his strict sense of obedience:

...for this was all thy care
To stand approv'd in sight of God, though Worlds
Judg'd thee perverse

(VI, 34-36)

Abdiel is rewarded (at least in some sense) not for rebuking Satan, but for steadfastly and faithfully asserting himself as a "Servant of God."

The War in Heaven is undoubtedly the most theatrical episode of the poem. However, due to Abdiel's argument with Satan, and his deliverance of the prophetic message regarding the militaristic revolt, the physical battle itself seems to be little more than an inevitable "climax" to the earlier confrontation. The actual warfare even seems to be a rather intentionally direct dramatization of the verbal contention between Satan and Abdiel—a clash between obedience and disobedience. God's first words to Abdiel when the angel returns to the Heavenly Host from the North are:

Servant of God, well done, well hast thou fought
The better fight, who single hast maintain'd
Against revolted multitudes the Cause
Of Truth, in word mightier than they in Arms

(VI, 29-32, my italics)
The military references (in italics) all point ahead to the physical confrontation, while linking the anticipated battle definitely to Abdiel's verbal and philosophical defiance. God's militaristic praise of Abdiel's vocalization also confirms that the "physical" is really not all that important or essential, for Abdiel's pacifistic form of defiance is already regarded as a victory. Abdiel has defeated Satan on God's terms (the "better fight" for "Truth"), and it is left to God to defeat Satan even on his own (i.e., via physical "Arms"). Thus, to the Heavenly Host, the combat is nothing more than a token victory. Since the angels (including Satan and the rebel angels) are immortal, there is no threat of "death" in human terms; what is to be won or lost individually is only spiritual. The angels cannot "lose their lives" defending their cause; but, by selecting the "wrong" cause (i.e., disobedience to God, or unfaithfulness), they can suffer eternal punishment.

Although we foreknow the outcome of the War (via the fallen angels in Book One, which is perhaps enhanced by Abdiel's prophecy in Book Five), the action itself is still quite interesting since Milton has roused our interests by emphasizing the philosophical over the physical. In God's praise of Abdiel, He repeatedly exalts the verbal and contemplative aspects of victory over those of brute force. God calls the physical battle "the easier conquest" (VI, 37) probably because for the angels there is less of an element
of free will (and therefore, temptation) involved. The "conquest" is divinely ordained, and the angels in a sense must simply play out their roles in order to win, so long as they remain faithful and obedient in the process. Further, since the angels are spiritual and not physical beings, the battle may be "easier" because although their resolutions are fixed, their "bodies" are apparently not indefatigable. In essence, to win Satan back to the side of God would be much more difficult than to simply repel him to Pandemonium.

The philosophy of Heaven in terms of the War is set forth by God, when He sends the angelic Host to Battle:

...subdue
By force, who reason for thir Law refuse,
Right reason for thir Law, and for thir King
Messiah, who by right of merit reigns
(VI, 40-43)

God's motivation for employing force, then, is twofold. First, God confirms that the rebel angels have rejected "reason" as the basic premise for their law; presumably this "reason" has been overtaken by false pride. Second, God condemns the rebel angels for refusing the Son, but more specifically God denounces them for questioning the "merit" system of ennoblement. To prove His point, God establishes "reason" as the War's deciding factor, and the victory itself substantiates the merit of the angels' obedient performance. It seems ironic that God wishes to prove
reason by force, for the two concepts appear antithetical; yet, God wishes to affirm the Truth of reason and merit indisputably, which includes "beating Satan at his own game" (i.e., in "Arms"). If the whole War seems an absurd justification of a philosophical doctrine, we must remember that the outcome was never in question. God was not winning for the principles of right and reason; He was confirming them by making their side victorious.

When Abdiel actually confronts Satan in battle, he asserts himself boldly and directly, not in any deceitful or guileful fashion:

...from his armed Peers
Forth stepping opposite, half way he met
His daring foe, at this prevention more
Incenst, and thus securely him defi'd
(VI, 127-30)

By having Abdiel seek out and accost Satan, Milton reaffirms Abdiel's heroism. Abdiel is not the defensive protagonist, but an antagonist to the established antagonist. He defies the defiant much as he did vocally in the North. Once again, the champion's obedience and humility overcome the ostentatious facade of power displayed by Satan. Ultimately, the angels are victorious because they renounce their power to the greater strength of the Son, while Satan's forces fall because they hubristically continue to assert their supposed might against the divine will. God may fight the
War on Satan's terms (by utilizing force), but He clearly wins on his own. Abdiel confirms God's philosophy when he considers the nature of the physical warfare:

...though brutish that contest and foul,
When Reason hath to deal with force, yet so
Most reason is that Reason overcome
(VI, 123-25)

The war is necessary not only to prove Satan's inferiority to God, but also to prove war itself as inferior (or perhaps subservient) to Reason in attaining or justifying Truth.

Abdiel may be most important thematically as an example of virtue which is affirmed or exalted through trial. God tells Abdiel (in a clearly Miltonic assessment),

...well hast thou fought
The better fight, who single hast maintain'd
Against revolted multitudes the Cause
Of Truth...
(VI, 29-32)

"The better fight" could refer here to Abdiel's steadfast counter-revolt in the North. However, it could also infer a "better" state of virtue Abdiel has achieved (as opposed to those complacent angels who remained in Heaven-proper) by actually going to the North and having his virtue tested (or at least exposing it to vulnerability), and more particularly by withstanding such tremendously hostile opposing forces and conditions. Further, the angel speaks
not only with words but with actions as well; if his example is philosophical, it is also physical, or concrete. He shows that it is not only possible to withstand temptation, but the consequences of his actions even illustrate a necessity to endure temptation. Had he not arisen singularly and defiantly, he too would have fallen. "Temptation" itself helps to define our free will by implying choices between right and wrong "sides." In the poem, the characters who fall do so not because of temptation, but because of their own free will and their individual pride. If temptation is an impetus to elect one side over another, it is certainly not the decision or the deciding factor itself. What the character of Abdiel shows us is that every being's temptations must be faced alone; and, that obedience is strictly and necessarily a personal decision. Abdiel speaks to Satan of "How few sometimes may know, when thousands err" (VI, 148), and the sentiment of solicitude is echoed when Adam speaks to Raphael of Noah's virtue:

Far less I now lament for one whole World Of wicked Sons destroy'd, than I rejoice For one Man found so perfet and so just (XI, 874-76)

Adam implies that Noah is the human essence of Godly obedience. Thus, in very marked ways, Noah offers an earthly analogy to Abdiel's celestial example as one "Among
the faithless, faithful only hee" (V, 897). Adam recognizes in Noah a hero who triumphs alone despite great trials due to a steadfast faith in, and a humble obedience to, one more supreme than himself. The results of overcoming temptation, however, can offer communion. By defending God's Truth, Abdiel is brought closer to God spiritually, but he is also very literally brought closer to God by the Host of faithful angels who welcome him back from the North. The greeting is a reunion or communion of sorts. On the other hand, those characters who fall end up in some sort of figurative and/or literal isolation from God; Satan is thrust from Heaven, and Adam and Eve are both ejected from Paradise. Disobedience has an alienating aspect to it, including the implicit alienation from the perfect unity manifested in the Son.

Ultimately, Abdiel recognizes God as his creator and defies Satan's guile and arms in God's name. The angel emerges not as a representative of one side over (or versus) another, but as a paragon of absolute and, more importantly, individual virtue or Truth. Though he is subservient to God, he acts in a Godly manner, and as an example emulates an ideal which any Christian could not confound. His function within the work is not to glamorize defiance; it is rather to glorify and justify affirmation.
1. For a fuller explanation of Abdiel's etymology, see William B. Hunter, Jr., *A Milton Encyclopedia* (Bucknell UP, 1978), Volume 1 (Ab - By), pp. 11-12. Hunter notes specifically that, "Abdiel appears in 1 Chronicles 5:15 as the name of a man, but nowhere in the Bible as the name of an angel. As the name of an angel, it does appear in a cabalistic conjuring book, the *Sepher Raziel*, not printed before 1701. Most likely it derives from a Hebrew noun meaning "Servant of God," words by which God addresses Abdiel and which St. Peter applies to himself (Titus 1:1), a fact that Milton may have in mind."


5. See Mary Ann Radzinowicz, *Milton's Epics and the Book of Psalms* (Princeton UP, 1989), p.156, where the critic notes a historical thematic relevance in the notion "that God the King is an arbitrary tyrant."


9. Ibid., p.97.

11. For a more thorough explanation of the essence(s) of Milton's celestial beings, see Hughes, *John Milton*, pp.192-94, where the editor discusses *Milton's Ontology*.


15. The whole idea of obedience as not necessarily implying servitude is the basis for Milton's distinction between an ideal monarch, and a tyrant.
Bibliography: "God-like or Ungodly?"


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