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# Scatology and the Sacred in Milton's Paradise Lost

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Scatology and the Sacred in Milton's *Paradise Lost*

As Allan Gilbert observed over fifty years ago, Milton's prose pamphlets articulate an extended defense of obscenity.<sup>1</sup> According to Milton, indecorous speech is not only permissible but actually imperative when writing about folly and sin. As Milton advises one of his opponents: "He who describes you and your villainies must speak obscenely" (IV, 744).<sup>2</sup> To license his own scatological polemic, Milton points to profane passages in the works of the prophets of the Hebrew tradition, the "gravest authors" of classical antiquity, the "ancient fathers of the church," and the Christian humanists of contemporary Europe (IV, 744-45). Of these figures, Milton exclaims:

They have always thought that words unchaste and plain thrust out with indignation signify not obscenity, but the vehemence of gravest censure. . . . If you deny that they, at different times, intermix words more than unchaste and matters plentifully foul with matters grave, you make it sufficiently clear that you are not versed in those authors. (IV, 744)

But Milton finds an even more authoritatively obscene example than that of Moses or Thomas More. Indecent utterances are sanctioned by none other than the Savior. As Milton announces: "Christ himselfe speaking of unsavory traditions, scruples not to name the Dunghill and the Jakes" (I, 895).

Milton's carefully constructed defense of obscenity, however, has failed to enthuse most contemporary scholars. Manifesting a scrupulousness surpassing that of Milton's Christ, most of Milton's readers have been reluctant to recognize the presence of "the Dunghill and the Jakes" in the sacred subject matter of his epic verse. Trying to restrict Milton's excremental rhetoric to his virulent prose, we have largely ignored its presence in his poetry.<sup>3</sup> But Milton's conviction that the description of evil necessarily entails obscenity does not allow for this generic distinction. Like his Lord, Milton does not hesitate to speak of the unspeakable. As he explores the elevated themes central to *Paradise Lost*, Milton insistently enlists the scatological.

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<sup>1</sup> Allan H. Gilbert, "Milton's Defense of Bawdry," in *SAMLA Studies in Milton*, ed. J. Max Patrick (Gainesville, 1953), pp. 54-71. An abbreviated version of this paper was presented at the Eighth International Milton Symposium in Grenoble, France. I am grateful to those present who interrogated and encouraged my thinking.

<sup>2</sup> References to Milton's prose are taken from *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, gen. ed. Don M. Wolfe (New Haven, 1953-1982).

<sup>3</sup> The notable exceptions are Michael Lieb, *The Dialectics of Creation* (Amherst, 1970); Peter McCluskey, "Milton and the Winds of Folly," in *Arenas of Conflict: Milton and the Unfettered Mind*, ed. Kristin Pruitt McColgan and Charles W. Durham (Selinsgrove, PA, 1997), pp. 227-38; and Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, Eng., 1999). Each has greatly influenced my own work.

Milton's excremental imagery most often aims at the devil, capitalizing on medieval conventions associating the adversary with elimination. As V. A. Kolve notes, an "anal orientation" toward Satan and his kingdom pervades medieval cycle plays, "where devils frequently made their exits farting, sometimes propelled by firecrackers exploding in their breeches."<sup>4</sup> Kolve presents as typical in this regard the "Fall of Man" play from the N-Town cycle, which calls for the devil's exit to coincide with a breech-breaking blast:

I falle down here a fowle freke;  
 For þis falle I gynne to qweke.  
 With a fart my brech I breke!  
 My sorwe comyth ful sone.<sup>5</sup>

Another farting devil figures into the conclusion of the cycle's "Temptation of Christ" play. Unable to determine if Christ is indeed divine, the Satan-figure reveals his despair with a burst of intestinal gas:

Whethyr god or man what þat he be  
 I kannot telle in no degré.  
 For sorwe I lete a crakke.<sup>6</sup>

According to Kolve, bawdy moments such as these—ubiquitous not only in the dramatic but also in the visual and poetic arts of the era—taught viewers and listeners "to locate obscenity within a metaphysical framework authorized by God himself."<sup>7</sup>

Adopting a similarly scatological approach, Milton repeatedly connects his epic demons to digestive waste. The infernal environment in which they are confined, for instance, is an unmistakably flatulential realm. Reeking of "ever-burning Sulphur," Milton's hell is a windy wasteland where Satan and the fallen angels are eternally buffeted by "Whirlwinds of tempestuous fire" (I, 69, 77).<sup>8</sup> Hell's excremental features are foregrounded from the very beginning of Book I, where the narrator describes the landscape to be the work of subterranean winds erupting from the earth's "combustible / And fewel'd entrals" in such a way as to leave behind "a singed bottom all invol'd / With stench and smoak" (I, 233-34, 236-37). The relentless puns and the transparent metaphors employed here and elsewhere in the epic's descriptions of hell suggest the degree to which Milton follows his medieval predecessors in

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<sup>4</sup> V. A. Kolve, "Chaucer's Wheel of False Religion: Theology and Obscenity in The Summoner's Tale," in *The Centre and its Compass*, ed. Robert A. Taylor et al. (Kalamazoo, MI, 1993), pp. 268-70.

<sup>5</sup> Qtd in Kolve, p. 270.

<sup>6</sup> Qtd in Kolve, p. 270.

<sup>7</sup> Kolve, p. 268.

<sup>8</sup> References to *Paradise Lost* are taken from *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston, 1998).

using obscenity to disparage the devil.<sup>9</sup> As Peter McCluskey observes, “Milton’s Hell is the fundament of the firmament, where sinners wallow in excremental filth, and humiliation is part of their punishment.”<sup>10</sup>

Milton’s scatological imagery, however, is not limited to hell. It permeates the poem and can be found in Edenic as well as celestial contexts. Thus, when Raphael describes the war in heaven “by lik’ning spiritual to corporal forms, / As may express them best,” he represents the rebellion as a gastronomic event, namely the onset of unwholesome intestinal gas (V, 573-74). Satan’s uprising introduces a noxious element into the pure empyrean of heaven and initiates what Raphael pointedly calls “Intestine War” (VI, 259). This intestinal conflict reaches its breaking point when the adversary invents artillery by harnessing the “spiritous and fierie spume” that is produced by the concoction of “materials dark and crude” deep within the “Entrails” of heaven (VI, 478-79, 517). In essence, Satan mines the digestive tract of heaven for intestinal gas and uses this volatile substance to create explosions that can be trained on the armies of God.

The detonation of these devilish cannons signals the full deployment of the epic’s scatological imagery, for the operation of the artillery is quite obviously allied with the forceful evacuation of the bowels. The rebel angels foully disgorge an excremental excess, or “devilish glut,” by applying fire to the “vent” of their long, rectal tubes:

Sudden all at once thir Reeds  
[They] put forth, and to a narrow vent appli’d  
With nicest touch. Immediate in a flame,  
But soon obscur’d with smoak, all Heav’n appeerd,  
From those deep-throated Engins belcht, whose roar  
Emboweld with outragious noise the Air,  
And all her entrails tore, disgorging foule  
Thir devilish glut. (VI, 582-89)

The *OED* clarifies the scatological suggestiveness of this passage by pointing out that “vent” denotes both “the hole or channel in the breech of a cannon” as well as “the anus, anal, or excretory opening.” Drawing upon the evacuative resonances of “vent” and other words with

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<sup>9</sup> Although the *OED*’s earliest example of “bottom” in the sense of “buttocks” or “posterior” comes from 1794, both Eric Partridge and Gail Paster contend that this meaning is available much earlier. Partridge claims that Shakespeare’s bawdy use of “bottom-grass” in *Venus and Adonis* is based on the word’s ability to signify the human posterior. See Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare’s Bawdy* (London, 2001), p. 87. Paster also argues from Shakespearean texts, demonstrating that Shakespeare plays on the bottom/buttocks pun throughout *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, encoding scatology in the character of Bottom. See Gail Paster, *The Body Embarrassed* (Ithaca, 1993), pp. 125-27.

<sup>10</sup> McCluskey, p. 232. While Peter McCluskey teases out the excremental aspects of Milton’s hell, Michael Lieb clarifies the scatological attributes of both chaos and limbo (Lieb, pp. 28-34). Taken together, their work compellingly confirms Milton’s interest in obscenely figuring all of the spaces within which Satan lives and moves.

scatological significance (“deep-throated,” “belcht,” “emboweld,” “entrails,” “disgorging,” “glut”), Milton maps Satan’s weaponry onto the lower bodily stratum.<sup>11</sup>

Even as these explosive anal cannons threaten to reduce heaven to waste, however, the Son intervenes in the conflict. He rides forth in a fiery chariot that hisses and rumbles so threateningly as to cause the rebels to fearfully flee before him. When they near one of the walls circumscribing heaven, it unexpectedly dilates. Through this “mural breach” the insurrectionists hurl themselves, effecting what is termed the “disburd’n[ing]” of heaven (VI, 878-79). Significantly, Satan and his armies are not expelled through the gate by which the faithful angels enter and exit. Rather, they are jettisoned with “unsufferable noise” through heaven’s breach/breech (VI, 867). They are, in effect, voided from heaven: “Hurld headlong flaming from th’ Ethereal Skie / With hideous ruine and combustion down / To bottomless perdition” (I, 45-47). Too filthy for the Father’s kingdom, the rebellious angels are cast out and consigned to an excremental existence in hell.

Their scatological suffering, documented in Books I and II, comes to a climax in Book X when Satan returns from Eden. After crowing to his cohorts about his success in corrupting God’s new world, Satan expects to hear “universal shout and high applause.” He is taken aback, however,

when contrary he hears  
On all sides, from innumerable tongues  
A dismal universal hiss, the sound  
Of public scorn. (X, 505-09)

The hissing, of course, comes from the demonic audience, each of whom has been coerced into the shape of a snake. Soon Satan is similarly transformed and finds himself incapable of speech:

He would have spoke,  
But hiss for hiss returnd with forked tongue  
To forked tongue, for now were all transform’d  
Alike, to Serpents all. (X, 517-20)

In an attempt to escape “the din / Of hissing,” the serpentine devils rush out of Pandemonium, only to discover that all of the other devils have been similarly imbruted (X, 521-22). The narrator wryly notes that outside the assembly hall “the dire hiss renew’d” as “th’ applause they meant, / [Was] turnd to exploding hiss” (X, 543, 545-46).

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<sup>11</sup> Milton’s anally inflected account of the devil’s artillery is not without antecedents. The conventions of medieval drama not only connect Satan to the discovery and use of gunpowder but also associate this discovery with scatological explosions. The opening stage directions of the morality play *The Castle of Perverseance*, for instance, instruct that Belial should “haue gunnepowdyr brennynge In pypys in hys handys and in hys erys and in hys ars whanne he gothe to batayl.” See Karl Wentersdorf, “The Symbolic Significance of *Figurae Scatologicae* in Gothic Manuscripts,” in *Word, Picture, and Spectacle*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo, MI, 1984), p. 8.

The humiliating hissing to which Satan and his followers are reduced on this occasion (and annually thereafter) serves to expose the inadequacy of their anal parody of divine power. Throughout the poem, Satan's attempts to equal the Father exploit the fact that the operations of the lower bodily stratum—involving loud noises, voluble explosions, and overwhelming smells—give off the impression of power. The anal cannons that the fiend trains on the good angels, for instance, detonate with such noise and violence as to seem similar to the Father's thunder. Although the resemblance is entirely superficial, the sound and fury of Satan's booming artillery provide him with an illusory equality. When he is reduced to a dismal hissing, however, Satan is denied those outward shows that have allowed him to pretend to power. Stripped of the ear-shattering anality that masquerades as might, the adversary is permitted only a pitiful passing of gas. Impotently hissing rather than thunderously farting, Satan's annual transformation forces him to contemplate the truth behind his scatological charade. As he loses control of his excremental operations, Satan and his minions become the subject of scorn. The hosts of hell are "plagu'd" by their "long and ceaseless hiss" because this hiss deprives them of the delusions of power normally afforded them by the superficially powerful eruptions of the excremental tract (X, 572-73).

Insofar as Satan's degradation is demonstrated by his connection to the lower bodily stratum, *Paradise Lost* might be seen to be configuring the cosmic opposition between Satan and God in terms of the contrasting corporeal canons described in Mikhail Bakhtin's famous account of Renaissance culture. In such a reading, Milton's scatological Satan would stand in for the Bakhtinian grotesque body, while Milton's God would play the part of the ideal classical body.

Consonant with Bakhtin's conceptualization of the grotesque, Milton's Satan is associated throughout the epic with acts of consumption, copulation, and evacuation that transgress proper limits and bring about hierarchical reversals and reorderings. Satan incessantly attempts to abase all that is exalted and does so by bringing it down to the level of the material bodily stratum. The anal cannons that defile heaven by "disgorging foule / Thir devilish glut" are but one example among many. In all of its expressions, though, Satan's debauchery displays both the creativity and the destructiveness that Bakhtin attributes to the lower bodily stratum. Satan's startling fecundity, for instance, fully expresses this ambivalence. Although Satan sires several generations in rapid succession, the life that he begets is also Death. Like the maternity of the pregnant hags that Bakhtin uses to illustrate the idea of the grotesque, his paternity commingles life and death, mixing "decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life" (25-26).<sup>12</sup> Like Bakhtin's description of the grotesque, Milton's depiction of the demonic jumbles everything into the excessive, unruly realm of the lower bodily stratum.

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<sup>12</sup> This and subsequent references to the text are taken from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, tr. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, 1984).

Satan's character and actions continually confuse the erotic with the scatological, the reproductive with the digestive, and the constructive with the destructive.<sup>13</sup>

This diabolical confusion often takes the form of a profane parody of celestial conditions or configurations. Through blasphemy, mockery, and travesty, Satan brings into being an inside-out alternative to the ordered hierarchy of the Father's "official" culture. This demonic world closely parallels the extra-official "second world" that Bakhtin connects with the carnivalesque. As the quintessential lord of misrule, Milton's Satan presides over this inverted kingdom in such a way as to illustrate the power, playfulness, and perversion of the ever unfinished, entirely unregulated grotesque.

As the antithesis to Satan, Milton's God can be seen to exemplify the static, dogmatic hierarchy that Bakhtin sets in opposition to the grotesque world. Milton's God imposes on the entire epic the "tone of icy petrified seriousness" that Bakhtin equates with official culture (73). So commanding is the Father's control that the universal laughter characteristic of the carnivalesque is not heard even once over the course of the epic. To be sure, Satan invites his followers to participate in a popular-festive moment of hilarity, but the summons is instantly suppressed by an act of divine intervention. This aborted invitation to laughter follows Satan's return from Eden. After jubilantly relating his success in persuading the human pair to prize (of all things!) an apple above their God, Satan revels in the far funnier fact that God has become so offended (for the sake of an apple!) that he has damned the entire race of humans. The whole situation, Satan assures the assembly of devils, is "worth your laughter" (X, 488).

If we are to credit Bakhtin's analysis, the ordered universe of the Father is in great peril at this moment, for the carnivalesque laughter that appears imminent is capable of overwhelming dogmatic commands and authoritarian edicts in such a way as to topple official culture. Laughter, Bakhtin writes, works "the defeat of divine and human power." It spells the end "of authoritarian commandments and prohibitions, of death and punishment after death, [of] hell and all that is more terrifying than the earth itself" (90-91). The Father, however, does not permit such laughter. Instead, he instantly turns the devils into dismally hissing serpents. The transformation cuts short the carnivalesque celebration in hell and thereby preserves the mirthlessly intolerant attitude of seriousness that emanates from Milton's God.

Indeed, the only laughter to be heard in *Paradise Lost* proceeds from the Father himself. In Book V, for example, he feigns fear and derisively laughs when apprised of Satan's impending insurrection. The act prompts the Son to proclaim:

Mightie Father, thou thy foes  
Justly hast in derision, and secure  
Laugh'st at thir vain designs and tumults vain. (V, 735-37)

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Lieb analyzes this phenomenon at length in his foundational study, *The Dialectics of Creation*.

Here, and elsewhere in the epic, God's laughter is humorless, hollow, and merciless. According to Bakhtin, laughter of this sort is not really laughter at all: it is mere rhetoric (51). Like Milton's God, this non-laughter starkly opposes the all-inclusive merriment and misrule of the grotesque mode of life.

To the extent that Milton's God opposes Satan's grotesque excesses and unflinchingly upholds the epic's official order, he might be expected to perfectly embody the principles of the classical corporeal canon. Adam advances just such an understanding of the divine when debating his need for a mate with God. Rehearsing the differences between himself and his creator, Adam attributes to God the self-sufficiency, singularity, and completeness that are central to the classical bodily canon:

Thou in thy self art perfect, and in thee  
Is no deficiency found. . . .  
.....  
..... No need that thou  
Shouldst propagate, already infinite;  
And through all numbers absolute, though One.  
.....  
Thou in thy secresie, although alone,  
Best with thy self accompanied, seek'st not  
Social communication (VIII, 415-16, 419-21, 427-29)

Almost as if following a Bakhtinian formula, Adam gives us a God who fully inhabits the role of "the finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were, of all the scoriae of birth and development" (25).

Adam's idealizing description, however, appears to be at odds with the portrayal of God encountered elsewhere in the epic. Whereas Adam (and the classical bodily canon) extols a condition of completeness predicated upon a repudiation of the processes of birth and growth, Milton's epic repeatedly celebrates the generative nature of God, describing his fecundity in ways that directly contradict the classical impulse to keep conception, pregnancy, and childbirth hidden from view. Thus, the epic's account of the origins of the universe is replete with reproductive imagery:

Darkness profound  
Cover'd th' Abyss: but on the watrie calme  
His brooding wings the Spirit of God outspred,  
And vital vertue infus'd, and vital warmth  
Throughout the fluid Mass. (VII, 233-37)

Simultaneously "brooding" over the abyss and "infus[ing]" the fluid mass with "vital vertue," God plays the part of both gestational mother and inseminatory father.

But God's actions in this tale of universal genesis are not only sexual. They are also scatological:

His brooding wings the Spirit of God outspred,  
 And vital vertue infus'd, and vital warmth  
 Throughout the fluid Mass, but downward purg'd  
 The black tartareous cold Infernal dregs  
 Adverse to life. (VII, 235-39)

As John Rogers points out, the passage deliberately courts a digestive and evacuative interpretation, for “that which is excreted in the purgative step of this process—tartar and dregs—are the standard names in the period’s natural philosophy for the inassimilable elements purged from the system in the process of digestion.”<sup>14</sup> The birth of the cosmos, then, involves an instance of divine defecation. Rather than suppressing the offices of the lower bodily stratum in his representation of God, Milton frequently foregrounds them, elaborating an idea of divinity that owes as much to the grotesque as it does to the classical.

In this manner, Milton’s rendering of God lends credence to Michael Schoenfeldt’s claim that Bakhtin’s reading of Renaissance culture has been too influential, instantiating an opposition between the unregulated grotesque body and the enclosed classical body that is fundamentally at odds with Renaissance understandings of health and sickness. As Schoenfeldt contends, the ideal of impermeability that Bakhtin attributes to the classical body finds little accommodation within the humoral framework of Renaissance physiology:

Under the Galenic regime of the humors, which imagines all illness as an imbalance among the four nutritive fluids produced by digestion, soundness of mind and body is achieved not by immuring bodily fluids but rather by carefully manipulating them. . . . This physiology demands not the seamless corporeal enclosure that Bakhtin identifies with the classical body but rather the routine excretory processes that he displaces onto lower-class festivity.<sup>15</sup>

To show the privileged position that expulsion occupies in humoral systems, Schoenfeldt refers to Thomas Venner’s treatise of 1650:

As Thomas Venner remarks in *Via Recta ad Vitam Longam*, “they that have their belly naturally loose and open . . . are not easily affected with sickness: whereas of the contrary, they that have the same bound up, . . . have for the most part, often conflicts with sickness.” This is because “the keeping of those ordinary and daily excrements, is very offensive to the body by reason of the noysome fumes that ascend from them, which of all other parts do chiefly annoy the head, causing dimnesse of the sight, dulnesse, heavinesse, head-ach, inflammation of the head; and not these only of the head; but the mind it selfe is oftentimes hereby disturbed, and malancholikly [*sic*] affected.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution* (Ithaca, 1996), p. 133.

<sup>15</sup> Schoenfeldt, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Schoenfeldt, p. 14.

The early modern emphasis on evacuation is such that therapies and treatments are evaluated almost exclusively on the basis of the kind and quantity of excrement they cause the patient to expel. Lucinda McCray Beier comes to this conclusion after examining the diary of Ralph Josselin, an Englishman living in Essex from 1616-1683:

Josselin and his contemporaries expected a medicine to show its strength by producing an immediate result—usually in the form of multiple stools or vomits. Thus a remedy could “work” without curing the patient. This was the case when Mary Josselin, five days before her death, was given a clyster (enema) which “wrought very well.”<sup>17</sup>

In the Galenic system, purgation is a necessary operation that ought to be facilitated and, in times of sickness, intensified. Insofar as unimpeded evacuation constitutes the ideal bodily condition, health is demonstrated by the ease with which one discharges one’s waste.

It is within this framework—rather than the Bakhtinian model of the classical body—that we should situate the defecatory moment wherein God creates the cosmos by voiding downward the “black tartareous cold Infernal dregs” and the flatulential episode in which he disburdens heaven by expelling Satan and his offending forces from out of heaven’s breach/breech. In *Paradise Lost*, the excremental is not restricted to the character of Satan; it also appears in the character of God. Although Milton’s scatology frequently aims at the increasing debasement of the adversary and his underlings, it is not always pejorative. In the case of God and his angels, allusions to the evacuative functions of the body serve to confirm rather than contradict their exalted condition.

Milton’s willingness to address ingestion and evacuation from a celebratory rather than a condemnatory perspective is clearly communicated by Raphael’s response to the Edenic invitation to eat. Raphael assuages Adam’s anxiety about offering food to his divine visitor by explaining that digestive operations are not at odds with the angelic disposition. Raphael advises Adam that all things in God’s universe participate in the processes of alimentation and elimination:

For know, whatever was created, needs  
To be sustaind and fed; of Elements  
The grosser feeds the purer, Earth the Sea,  
Earth and the Sea feed Air, the Air those Fires  
Ethereal, and as lowest first the Moon;  
Whence in her visage round those spots, unpurg’d  
Vapours not yet into her substance turnd.  
Nor doth the Moon no nourishment exhale  
From her moist Continent to higher Orbes.  
The Sun that light imparts to all, receives

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<sup>17</sup> Lucinda McCray Beier, “In sickness and in health: A seventeenth century family’s experience,” in *Patients and Practitioners*, ed. Roy Porter (Cambridge, Eng., 1985), p. 119.

From all his alimetal recompence  
In humid exhalations, and at Even  
Supps with the Ocean. (V, 414-26)

As Michael Schoenfeldt remarks, Raphael's lecture effectively transforms the Great Chain of Being into a "Great Chain of Digestion and Secretion."<sup>18</sup> The alteration bears witness to the aggressive materiality of Milton's epic, a poem that never lets us forget that its pivotal event is an act of eating. Orienting itself around this all-important moment of consumption and concoction, *Paradise Lost* fully espouses an "alimetal vision" (to use Schoenfeldt's phrase) in which ingestion, digestion, and elimination operate as master tropes.<sup>19</sup> If we are to comprehend fully the function of these master tropes, however, we must recognize that the processes of the lower bodily stratum are not always pejorative. Although Adam's postlapsarian sinfulness is obscenely figured in the "unkindly fumes" of gastric distress that disturb him after he eats the forbidden fruit (IX, 1050), his unfallen uprightness is also intestinally evident, expressed in the "temperat vapors bland" produced by the "pure digestion" of his prelapsarian state (V, 4-5). In the marriage of morality and metabolism performed throughout *Paradise Lost*, excretory imagery works positively as well as negatively.

This connection between gastronomy and goodness underwrites Milton's Book V account of angelic ingestion. Upon visiting Adam and Eve in that book, Raphael eagerly consumes the dinner furnished by Eve. In opposition to all earlier angelologists, Milton asserts that the food eaten by his angel will be digested in the same manner as the food eaten by mortal beings. Raphael, Milton insists, will use "concoctive heate / To transubstantiate" his Edenic meal (V, 437-38). Moreover, Milton carries this unprecedented act of angelic concoction through to its even more unprecedented conclusion: an act of angelic excretion. Milton avows that the angel will effortlessly void the indigestible remainder, for "what redounds, transpires / Through Spirits with ease" (V, 438-39).<sup>20</sup> Assuredly, this physiological performance is not intended to diminish our understanding of Raphael's celestial goodness but rather to enhance it. Milton's excreting angel, in sum, models in favorable fashion the prudent self-management and humoral well-being of the ideal Galenic subject. Because Renaissance regimes of health identify

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<sup>18</sup> Schoenfeldt, p. 140.

<sup>19</sup> The phrase "alimetal vision" comes from the title of Schoenfeldt's chapter on Milton: "Temperance and Temptation: The Alimetal Vision in *Paradise Lost*." The chapter brilliantly illuminates the topological centrality of gastrointestinal processes in Milton's poem (Schoenfeldt, pp. 131-68).

<sup>20</sup> Of the many definitions supplied by the *OED* for the verb "redound," two seem clearly applicable to Milton's usage in this passage: "to be in excess or superfluous," (1c) and "to be redundant in some respect" (3b). The "redounding" matter from Raphael's repast is the nutritive material that remains unassimilated, unnecessary, and extra. For the purposes of this essay, it is also telling to note that the action of "redounding" can be both positive and pejorative. To redound is "to bring credit or honour to something" (6c) as well as "to turn to one's . . . disgrace" (6b). The lexical ambivalence perfectly matches the uncertain part redundant matter plays in Milton's poem. The material that redounds from digestion can either turn to honor (in the case of the angels) or turn to disgrace (in the case of the devils).

obstruction and impermeability with illness and imbalance, Milton credits his angels with abundant and effortless evacuation.

The easy transpiration of Milton's angels intersects interestingly with another angelic attribute: their pleasant fragrance. On a number of occasions, *Paradise Lost* aligns angels with agreeable aromas. When Raphael enters Eden, for instance, his arrival is advertised by his celestial scent:

Like *Maia's* son he stood,  
And shook his Plumes, that Heav'nly fragrance filld  
The circuit wide. Strait knew him all the Bands  
Of Angels under his watch. (V, 285-88)

In his footnote to this passage, Roy Flannagan speculates that "the fragrance here may have something to do with the other angels' recognition of Raphael: they know him by his heavenly smell."<sup>21</sup> Whether or not Milton goes so far as to ascribe to each angel an individual scent, it is evident that Milton's thoughts concerning angels and aromas are more than a little unorthodox. David Reid's wide-ranging survey failed to turn up any sources from which Milton might have borrowed the idea of a perfumed angel, and his ensuing plea for assistance has gone unanswered.<sup>22</sup> The concept appears to be unique to Milton. As such, it is perhaps productive to correlate Milton's idiosyncratic ideas about angelic fragrance with his idiosyncratic ideas about angelic elimination. Nobody else appears to endow angels with eliminative functions, and nobody else appears to give angels such aromatic identities. The convergence of these angelological oddities implies that Raphael's pleasant odor might be related to the manner by which he easily transpires his digestive excess. In short, Raphael's scent may be the perfume of transpired byproducts—his agreeable odor is the heavenly result of gastrointestinal processes.

This inference illuminates other moments in the epic when fragrant excrement is held forth as an emblem or indicator of celestial status. When Raphael, for example, tries to help Adam imagine the hierarchical order of the Father's universe and its ascension from lesser to greater degrees of perfection, he uses a flower to illustrate the most exalted state of being. For Raphael, the best image for the divine nature of God and his angels is that of a perfumed blossom. His gloss on godliness is an aromatically effusive plant: "the bright consummate floure [that] / Spirits odorous breathes" (V, 481-82).

Although Satan is not particularly astute as an observer of divine attributes, he manages to make the connection between divine beings and easy and odiferous transpiration. When he insinuates himself into Eve's sleep in the form of an angel, he makes sure to put forth perfume. Eve recounts that the dream visitor who invites her to eat the forbidden fruit exudes a wonderful fragrance. "His dewie locks," she remembers, "distill'd / *Ambrosia*" (V, 56-57). This satanic attempt to emulate angelic transpiration confirms the significance of emanations and

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<sup>21</sup> Roy Flannagan, ed., *The Riverside Milton* (Boston, 1998), p. 484.

<sup>22</sup> David Reid, "Spirits Odorous," *Milton Quarterly* 25 (1991), p. 142.

excretions in Milton's epic. In *Paradise Lost*, divinity is to some degree defined by elimination. The rarefied condition of the angels is suggested not only by the ease with which they "transpire" but also by the pleasing manner in which they do so.

The positive value given to exhalation and elimination also relates to the ceaseless singing of Milton's angels. According to Adam, the angels never stop hymning their celestial king. The inhabitants of heaven, he declares, "with songs / And choral symphonies, Day without Night, / Circle his Throne rejoicing" (V, 161-63). Raphael confirms Adam's claim, making mention of the angelic night shift—"those who in thir course / Melodious Hymns about the sovran Throne / Alternate all night long" (V, 655-57). The angels continue to sing even when they find themselves in Eden, distant from the subject of their song:

how often from the steep  
Of echoing Hill or Thicket have we heard  
Celestial voices to the midnight air,  
Sole, or responsive each to others note  
Singing thir great Creator: oft in bands  
While they keep watch, or nightly rounding walk  
With Heav'nly touch of instrumental sounds  
In full harmonic number joind, thir songs  
Divide the night, and lift our thoughts to Heaven. (IV, 680-88)

The incessant singing of the angels is such that Satan sees it as a source of ridicule, contemptuously referring to the righteous angels as "the Minstrelsie of Heav'n" (VI, 168).

Although I have proposed that the odors emanating from angels are a kind of celestial excrement, I do not wish to make the same claim for the musical airs issuing from their mouths. Nevertheless, the devotional declarations sung by the angels do derive a certain degree of meaning from Galenic ideas about evacuation. To be sure, hymns and prayers are not alimentary residue that needs to be vented, but these forms of praise can be considered the byproducts of other processes that sustain celestial life. Faith and piety are modes of existence in heaven just as ingestion and elimination are modes of life in a humoral universe. Thus, the workings of faith within the angelic host produce declarations of love and devotion that the angels vent at every opportunity. As a devotional byproduct or excess that rightly should be externalized, prayers and hymns correspond on a certain level to the alimentary byproducts discussed above.

This overlap between excretion and adoration is indicated by the fact that in *Paradise Lost* both possess the same smell. As Mammon heaps scorn upon the "servile offerings" tendered to the Father by his fawning subjects, he associates angelic devotion with the ambrosial perfume said to emanate from angelic bodies elsewhere in the epic. According to Mammon, God's altar is so suffused with expressions of love and faith that it "breathes / Ambrosial Odours and Ambrosial Flowers" (II, 244-45). The situation in Eden is apposite, for the garden acts as a second sweet-smelling, effluent altar to God. Underlining the connection

between aromas, excrement, and adoration, the narrator explains that all the creatures in Eden exhale as a matter of course what amounts to an airy form of worship:

all things that breathe,  
From the earth's great altar send up silent praise  
To the creator, and his nostrils fill  
With grateful smell (IX, 194-97).

In earth, as in heaven, ambrosial devotion transpires easily and organically from those who righteously follow God.

Mammon, however, is unwilling to take part in this kind of fragrant exhalation. He refuses to worship God, explaining that “Forc’t Halleluiahs” are the only kind of praise that would ever issue from him (II, 243). As he describes this devotional disability, Mammon unwittingly acknowledges his diseased and fallen state. The devil reveals that he is so obstructed by sin as to be permanently prevented from disburdening his soul in songs of praise. He is afflicted to the point that he cannot participate in those processes that proportion health and ease to the celestial host. Mammon’s inability to express or exhale adoration unless it is “forc’t” calls to mind the correctives and purgative aids commonly prescribed by Galenic physicians. In short, Mammon’s spiritual sickness demands expulsive aids analogous to emetics or enemas. His debilitated body requires powerful remedies if it is to be cleared of its damning obstructions and return to celestial health.

Mammon’s self-diagnosis shows the way in which Galenic physiology influences Milton’s account of celestial existence. Drawing upon bodily models that aim at unimpeded evacuation, Milton implies that worship, like waste, should issue freely from healthy beings. The ease with which each emerges from any individual attests to his or her respective well-being. In direct contrast to Mammon’s “Forc’t Halleluiahs,” the hymns and prayers of the righteous angels do not need to be provoked or even solicited; they flow freely and naturally. We witness a typically spontaneous celestial celebration in Book III, immediately after the Father declares his merciful intentions toward fallen humanity:

No sooner had th’ Almighty ceas’t, but all  
The multitude of Angels with a shout  
Loud as from numbers without number, sweet  
As from blest voices, uttering joy, Heav’n rung  
With Jubilee, and loud Hosanna’s filld  
Th’ eternal Regions. (III, 344-49)

This—and every other unforced expression of adoration—bespeaks the health of the celestial host, an inner harmony verified by the participation of every angel: “No voice exempt, no voice but well could joine / Melodious part, such concord is in Heav’n” (III, 370-71). Insofar as song is something that well-governed angels vent as a matter of course, it is noteworthy from a humoral perspective that heavenly music issues without coercion or discomfort.

Because Galenic models privilege regular purgation and because the songs of the angels represent a superabundant substance that should not be retained within, silence constitutes an unhealthy stoppage or obstruction. Consequently, heaven is rarely quiet. Although the angels are instructed to rest on the Sabbath, they continue to give expression to their pious feelings. Raphael relates that when God returned from creating the universe, he refrained from labor

As resting on that day from all his work,  
But not in silence holy kept; the Harp  
Had work and rested not, the solemn Pipe,  
And Dulcimer, all Organs of sweet stop,  
All sounds on Fret by String or Golden Wire  
Temper'd soft Tunings, intermixt with Voice  
Choral or Unison. . . .

.....

So sung they, and the Empyrean rung,  
With *Halleluiahs*: Thus was Sabbath kept. (VII, 593-99, 633-34)

In *Paradise Lost*, the empyrean is always ringing. Halleluiahs are never held within but are instantly exhaled.

The emphasis on unimpeded evacuation that informs Milton's portrayal of angelic odors and angelic song also colors his account of their heavenly home. Although heaven is circled about with walls, descriptions of the celestial kingdom emphasize its openness. Raphael, for instance, adverts that heaven is continually ventilated with pleasant breezes (V, 655). The angels circulate as easily as these cooling winds, for heaven's gate, effortlessly swinging open on golden hinges, does not bar entry but instead encourages ingress and egress (VII, 205-09). Heaven's permeability is perfectly illustrated by the steady stream of traffic that Satan spies ascending and descending the ladder of heaven. Freely and frequently passing through its borders, these ambulatory angels attest to the easy congress characterizing Milton's heaven.

Eden is similarly open, as is witnessed by the ease with which Satan overleaps its walls. Although it is tempting to lament the garden's less-than-effective limits, Jeffrey Theis demonstrates that Eden's penetrability is a defining feature of all the divine places in the poem. Theis's survey of the architectural principles of *Paradise Lost* establishes that the difference between heavenly and hellish structures is precisely the degree to which they allow for exchange between inside and outside. Satanic architecture, Theis explains, always displays a "tendency toward rigidity and stasis" that is driven by the damnable desire to completely enclose or seal off spaces, isolating them from their environment. "Milton's ideal architectural forms," on the other hand, "create permeable boundaries that facilitate a dynamic interplay between enclosed and open spaces."<sup>23</sup> While Theis describes this admirable openness as an anticipation of modern architectural values, I would suggest that Milton's sensibilities have more to do with Renaissance physiology than with modern aesthetics: they look back to Galen

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<sup>23</sup> Jeffrey S. Theis, "Milton's Principles of Architecture," *ELR* 35 (2005), pp. 110, 103.

as much as they look ahead to Frank Lloyd Wright. To be sure, the value that Milton places on permeability is a thoroughly humoral ideal. In keeping with this humoral understanding, *Paradise Lost* associates structural perfection—both of bodies and of buildings—with openness. It is for this reason that God’s involvement in the operations of elimination and evacuation do not occasion disgust but rather incite adulation. Milton corroborates the goodness of God not by distancing him from the eliminative functions of the lower bodily stratum but rather by asserting the ease with which he participates in them.

Within *Paradise Lost*, then, the evacuative operations simultaneously serve to establish the sublimity of the divine as well as the degeneracy of the demonic. Although the excretory is often utilized to evince embarrassment, it is also employed to evoke admiration. This signifying complexity can be seen to correspond with Bakhtin’s claims concerning the lower bodily stratum: “The images of feces and urine,” Bakhtin alleges, “are ambivalent, as are all the images of the material bodily lower stratum; they debase, destroy, regenerate, and renew simultaneously. They are blessing and humiliating at the same time” (151). But the ambivalence of the lower bodily stratum in Milton’s epic also attests to what several scholars have identified as a growing tension in the early modern period between medical and cultural regimes of bodily comportment.

Norbert Elias has shown that the socio-cultural changes taking place during the Renaissance usher in an entirely new approach to the practices and postures of the body. Unlike the medieval period, when social control over bodily behavior was scant, the Renaissance witnesses the rise of an unprecedented interest in bodily self-government. Elias links this emergent idea of “manners” or “decorum” to the end of feudalism and the resultant restructuring of society. According to Elias, the category of manners comes into being in part as a means of preserving the social distinctions that are imperiled by the rise of mercantilism during the early modern period. As the traditional distinctions between those of differing status dissolve, ideas of delicacy and decorum develop as a means of marking off the upper ranks from the lower: a heightened sensitivity to the shamefulness of the body and its byproducts comes to signal a heightened social standing. Because those with lower status in the social hierarchy quickly take up and imitate these evolving aristocratic ideals, however, those with higher status are compelled to develop further degrees of refinement in order to continue distinguishing themselves from their social inferiors. This process, Elias proposes, gradually lowers the societal threshold of shame and produces an increasing disgust in regard to the functions of the lower bodily stratum.<sup>24</sup>

Even as socio-cultural systems grow more disdainful of the body’s material operations, though, early modern medical models continue to extol the excretory. Physicians and caregivers persist in prescribing purgatives, mandating a diet designed to facilitate evacuation, and conducting quantitative and qualitative analyses of stools and urine. Gail Paster has perceptively pointed out that the rise of manners in the Renaissance continually butts up against humoral

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<sup>24</sup> Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners*, tr. Edmund Jephcott (New York, 1978), pp. 51-129.

programs that privilege purgation, causing considerable conflict concerning the evacuative operations. At once desirable and disgusting, acts of excretion assume an intense ambivalence. This state of affairs is illustrated by the instability of elimination in *Paradise Lost*. The epic's ambivalence typifies the kinds of contradiction that Paster associates with the early modern period and that she attributes to the dissonance between "a popular medical practice authorizing experiences of somatic uncontrol in the form of humoral evacuation and an emergent ideology of bodily refinement and exquisite self-mastery"<sup>25</sup> Suspended between competing corporeal canons, Milton's epic presents evacuation as a sign of utter debasement as well as a marker of absolute exaltation. Its shifting significance disallows easy distinctions between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the carnal.

Although the convergence of scatology and spirituality in Milton's epic might be viewed as a violation of epic decorum, such a stance is completely harmonious with Milton's theological and philosophical convictions. In the *Christian Doctrine*, for instance, Milton refuses to acknowledge a division between the body and the spirit, steadfastly denying that the corporeal is separable from the spiritual: "The idea that the spirit of man is separate from his body, so that it may exist somewhere in isolation, complete and intelligent, is nowhere to be found in scripture, and is plainly at odds with nature and reason" (VI, 319). Embracing a materialist monism, Milton affirms that both scripture and reason establish that "man is a living being, intrinsically and properly one and individual." "He is not," Milton avers, "double or separable: not, as is commonly thought, produced from and composed of two different and distinct elements, soul and body. On the contrary, the whole man is the soul, and the soul the man: a body, in other words, or individual substance, animated, sensitive, and rational" (VI, 318). This Miltonic notion of the "whole man" undergirds the structure of somatic imagery everywhere apparent in *Paradise Lost*. In keeping with his materialist convictions, Milton fuses the corporeal and the spiritual, projecting digestive and evacuative bodily processes onto the divine as well as the demonic. In so doing, he articulates a compellingly comprehensive vision of life and being. As Milton tropes the gastrointestinal tract over the course of his epic, he memorably makes his words flesh.

What we might call Milton's "corporeal poetics" both extend and extenuate the work of cultural historians interested in overturning the idea that pre- and early modern Christianities are driven by a metaphysical dualism. This revisionist project began almost twenty-five years ago with the writings of Leo Steinberg, Caroline Bynum, and Peter Brown. Approaching European Christianity from a number of different disciplines, each of these scholars rejected the notion that medieval and early modern piety subordinates body to spirit and continually seeks to deny or escape the flesh. Rather, these critics contended that the body is central to pre-modern Christianities as both a site and signifier of religious meaning.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Paster, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (New York, 1983); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley, 1987); and Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York, 1988).

Capitalizing on this “re-discovery” of the devotional body, Richard Rambuss has recently demonstrated the astonishing degree to which Renaissance religious verse makes use of the body and its passions in expressing and amplifying devotion. Rambuss, however, is quick to exclude Milton from this somatically-centered tradition. He argues that Milton’s early poems on the nativity, the circumcision, and the passion empty these events of all the carnal energy they exhibit in the works of other Renaissance authors. When Donne, Herbert, and Crashaw imagine the principal points of Christ’s earthly career, Rambuss observes, they are prompted to express “intense and visceral displays of devotional affect.” When Milton envisions these same events, on the other hand, he not only “drains them of much of their potential for erotic cathexis” but he also “strikingly *de-corporealizes* them.”<sup>27</sup>

For Rambuss, Milton’s *oeuvre* serves as an ending point. It attests to the exhaustion of the kind of carnality prominent in the poems of earlier authors:

In Milton’s devotional corpus Christ appears hardly to have a body at all. Coincident with that absence, Milton himself hardly seems like a devotional poet. Indeed, his poem on *The Passion*, the generative site for so much of the affective and amorous devotion we have considered here, goes unfinished and, what is more, is published by Milton as such—as though it were to be the final lyric on a literally abandoned topic.<sup>28</sup>

Although Rambuss is right to read a certain amount of restraint into Milton’s early lyrics, I would contend that the detachment he describes does not denote a rejection of corporeality so much as it does a resistance to Roman Catholicism. Milton’s relatively reserved lyrics, in other words, are the result of the difficulty he encounters as an iconoclastic Protestant poet attempting to write with originality and feeling about the seminal events in Christ’s life when those events have been overdetermined by Catholic acts of representation. The incompleteness of his poem on the passion is produced not so much by an unwillingness to imagine the body of Christ as it is an unwillingness to imagine the body of Christ as it has been shaped by the artistic and aesthetic traditions of Roman Catholicism.

Milton’s mature poetry—as is evident in the prominence of the gastrointestinal tract in *Paradise Lost*—does not shy away from the physical. The epic is both grounded in and shaped by somatic experience. Rambuss, in other words, is wrong to dismiss Milton’s poetry as “*de-corporealized*.” But Rambuss is even more right than he thinks concerning the centrality of the body to religious writing in the Renaissance. Milton is not the terminus to his argument but is instead another witness in its favor. The corporeality of Milton’s mature poetry corroborates Rambuss’s contention that the physical body constitutes “the very core of pre- and early modern religious expression.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Richard Rambuss, *Closet Devotions* (Durham, N.C., 1998), p. 134.

<sup>28</sup> Rambuss, p. 134.

<sup>29</sup> Rambuss, p. 2.

Indeed, rather than foreclosing or abjuring the signifying power of the physical body, *Paradise Lost* amplifies its importance by making meaning out of the body's scatological modalities as well as its sexual ones. While many of Milton's predecessors draw upon the body's sexual desires to describe or incite religious feeling, Milton makes similar connections by way of the body's evacuative experiences. Whereas Donne, Herbert, and Crashaw accentuate the erotic, Milton extends the body's imagistic arena by mapping devotion onto the gastrointestinal. For Milton, even the guts can be godly.

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