

## Forum

*Forum Policy:* Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than one thousand words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

### Neruda's "Galope muerto"

To the Editor:

In "Translating Pablo Neruda's 'Galope muerto'" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 185–95), John Felstiner tells us that "nouns normally serve to identify things in space, verbs to release them in time" and adds that "this truism can be likened to Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle, which says we cannot at the same time determine both the position of an electron and its momentum: each measurement precludes the other" (p. 190).

Is the statement about nouns true? It is true of some concrete nouns, for they refer to "things in space" (e.g., *Thomas Jefferson*, *Vermont*, *Niagara Falls*). The things to which these nouns refer are spatial particulars. Some concrete nouns, however, are general terms and, instead of identifying things, merely classify them (e.g., *pencil*, *bridge*, *cat*). Moreover, no abstract noun, whether particular or general, can identify anything in space (e.g., *two*, *triangularity*, *number*, *color*, *virtue*). Accordingly, Felstiner's first statement is false.

The second part of his statement fares no better. Although it is valid for temporal verbs (e.g., a person *runs* fast, *eats* slowly, or *writes* for an hour), there are other kinds of verbs for which it is not (e.g., one person *knows* another, tells him that six *is* a perfect number, *learns* that a variable *ranges* over the members of a set, *wins* a chess game, or *arrives* late for dinner). Felstiner's account of nouns and verbs is not even true, much less a truism.

Nor, were it true, would it have anything to do with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, as Felstiner believes it does. Replying to Jane Somerville's well-taken objections to his putative analogy, he asserts that "The crux of Heisenberg's principle is uncertainty. . . . Neruda's opening images suppose the full complexity and uncertainty of the perceptual task" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 1006). But the uncertainty relevant to the principle is not perceptual; it is physical. It is a consequence of the fact that any measurement of a small particle, such as an electron, disturbs the particle, so that the measurement must be imprecise. The principle affirms that the *exact*

location and the *exact* momentum of a particle cannot both be known at the same time and that the more precisely one of them is determined, the less accurate must be our measurement of the other. The principle applies also to other conjugate physical quantities, such as time and energy: if the lifetime of an atom in an excited state is very short, then there is a great uncertainty in its energy level. The relevant phenomena indicate an indefiniteness in nature itself, not a deficiency in our instruments or our perceptual makeup. The indefiniteness, of course, is not significant in large systems (because of the small magnitude of Planck's constant).

Replying to Somerville, Felstiner says that in "Galope muerto" Neruda writes "as if trying to work through and then beyond his uncertainty about whether things can be apprehended perfectly. . . . The poet finally comes to imagine dynamic form . . . by having shared at first in the implications of the uncertainty principle." But Neruda's poetic world is macroscopic and perceptual. That "Galope muerto" moves from ashes and formlessness to swelling fullness is a matter of the affirmation that Neruda wants to express, not of his having shared some unspecified implications of Heisenberg's principle. Felstiner should restrict himself to translation and genuine literary criticism, for disanalogizing misunderstood science to poetic images abuses the literature it purports to interpret.

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### Milton's Bogey

To the Editor:

Sandra M. Gilbert's "Patriarchal Poetry and Women Readers: Reflections on Milton's Bogey" (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 368–82) errs when, under the subterfuge of describing an interesting succession of feminine misreadings of *Paradise Lost*, Gilbert resurrects and authorizes numerous misconceptions that it has been the business of Milton scholars for the last quarter century to lay to rest. Her method is to shift from carefully contextualized statements

like “for [Virginia Woolf], as for most other women writers, both [Milton] and the creatures of his imagination constitute the misogynistic essence of . . . ‘patriarchal poetry’” to apodictic references to the “institutionalized . . . misogyny Milton’s epic expresses” (p. 368; see also p. 370). The shift is mediated by enclosing the word “misreading” in quotation marks, thereby implying it to be a misnomer; by describing misreadings approvingly as “revisionary critiques” (p. 369; see also p. 375); and by transforming feminine misreadings into an inventory of esoteric but “real” features of *Paradise Lost*. Finally, by arbitrarily distinguishing “the latent” from “the manifest content” of the epic, Gilbert can speak confidently, even casually, of “Milton’s well-known misogyny” (p. 374; see also p. 371).

By such procedural metamorphoses, at least four categories of specious readings are promoted.

First, with respect to Milton himself, Gilbert asserts (a) that “the epic voice of *Paradise Lost* often sounds censorious and ‘masculinist’” (p. 375), whereas, in fact, Adam is censured much more severely than Eve, not only by Milton (ix.997–99) but by God (x.145–56) and Michael (xi.634–36) as well; (b) that Milton “offers at least lip service to the institution of matrimony” (p. 374), whereas he repeatedly celebrates the union of Adam and Eve (e.g., iv.288–324) and especially their sexual union (in the memorable epithalamion “Hail wedded Love” [iv.750–75]); (c) that “the intelligence of heaven is made up exclusively of ‘Spirits Masculine’” (p. 373), whereas in fact Milton’s angels are bisexual (i.423–31) and only misogynistic Adam thinks otherwise (x.888–90); (d) that Milton “calls upon subservient female muses for the assistance that is his due” (p. 380), whereas he actually petitions his muse with increasingly humble entreaties (vii.1–39 and esp. ix.1–47); and (e) that Milton “wars upon women with a barrage of angry words” (p. 380), whereas it is only fallen Adam, as I shall show momentarily, who is chauvinistically bellicose.

Second, with respect to Satan, Gilbert says that he espouses “aristocratic egalitarianism, manifested in his war against the heavenly system of primogeniture that has unjustly elevated God’s ‘Son’ [!] above even the highest angels” (p. 375), but Satan is a tyrant (passim); moreover, the exaltation of the Son is just (as Abdiel argues in v.809–48), not based on primogeniture: all power is transferred to Messiah because of his “Merit,” not his “birth-right” (iii.310).

Third, with respect to Adam, Gilbert claims (a)

that he “falls . . . out of a self-sacrificing love for Eve” (p. 372), but it is only fallen Eve who thinks Adam so motivated (ix.961–93); he is in fact consumed with self-love (ii. 896–916), and Milton repudiates his fall as the “bad” (l. 994) deed of a man “fondly [i.e., foolishly] overcome with Female charm” (l. 999); and (b) that “Adam’s fall is fortunate, . . . his punishment seem[ing] almost like a reward” (p. 373, citing x.1053–55), but Adam is only trying to make a virtue of necessity by suggesting that it is better to be fallen and busy than fallen and idle (best of all would have been to be *unfallen* and busy, as Adam and Eve were in their original state [iv.327–31, 436–39, esp. 616–22; see also xi.88–89]).

Fourth and last, with respect to Eve, it is asserted (a) that she is a “divine afterthought, an almost superfluous and mostly material being created from Adam’s ‘supernumerary’ rib” (pp. 371–72), but while this is true of Genesis (ii.18–25), in *Paradise Lost* Eve was always part of God’s design (vii.443–50); her alleged redundancy is the bias of fallen, guilty, and self-extenuating Adam (x.883–88); (b) that “Eve is a secondary and contingent creation” (p. 373), but so are all creatures, as God himself declares (viii.403–07); (c) that Eve was created a “‘fair defect / Of Nature’ (x.891–92)” (p. 373) and “is from the first curiously hollow, as if somehow created corrupt” (p. 371, citing viii.538–39), whereas this opinion is expressed only by Adam, who, having been corrected by Raphael (viii.561), later insists that “God towards [Eve] hath done his part” (ix.375); (d) that Eve’s dream “seems to reveal her true feelings” about the issue of docility, “its fantasy of a Satanic flight of escape from the garden and its oppressions” constituting “a redefined prospect of happy knowledge” (p. 375), whereas Eve instinctively repudiates the dream (v.92–93), as does her husband (v.120–21); (e) that Eve’s rebellion is “necessary” (p. 775), whereas “necessity” is, in Milton’s view, “the Tyrant’s plea” (iv.393–94) and “the mind / Of Man” was “with strength entire, and free will arm’d” (x.8–9); (f) that “Eve falls for exactly the same reason that Satan does” (p. 372), whereas God declares that the devils “by their own suggestion fell,” while “Man falls deceiv’d / By th’ other first” (iii.129–31); (g) that “Eve is gradually reduced from an angelic being to a monstrous and serpentine creature” (p. 372), whereas it is only Satan who falsely speaks of her as an angel (v.74) and it is only fallen and misogynistic Adam who speciously calls her a “Serpent” (x.867); (h) that fallen “Eve is humbled by becoming a slave” (p. 373), whereas

God declares only that “to thy Husband’s will / Thine shall submit” (x.195–96), a situation Eve accepts not slavishly but willingly (xii.614–19); and (i) that fallen Eve’s obedience to Adam is equivalent to Sin’s “moving but blasphemous pledge of allegiance to Satan” (p. 373, citing ii.864–66), but Eve says to her husband, “Thou to me / Art all things *under Heav’n*” (xii.617–18; emphasis added), while Sin’s “obedience” to her father entails disobedience of “[God’s] commands above / Who hates me” (ii.856–57).

The real danger in the above litany of misreadings (and the list could be extended) is that the generalist reader of *PMLA* may accept Gilbert’s assertions uncritically, and in that event both he and *Paradise Lost* will have been victimized. The poem will, of course, survive the assault, but the innocent reader will have been encouraged to miss the success with which Milton justifies the ways of God to women. Sandra Gilbert is herself such an innocent victim: the protean shadow of Milton’s bogey darkens the page as she writes.

PHILIP J. GALLAGHER  
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*Ms. Gilbert replies:*

Although Philip Gallagher is obviously unfriendly toward my essay “Milton’s Bogey,” his letter is a useful addendum to the piece. First, by significantly “misreading” both me and Milton, Gallagher shows how easy it is for even sophisticated critics to “misread” texts. Second, he shows how valuable the Bloomian concept of “misreading” really is, especially for understanding the dynamics of literary history. Third, and most important, in attempting to prove “the success with which Milton justifies the ways of God to women,” he dramatically demonstrates that male and female readers often react quite differently to *Paradise Lost*.

Gallagher’s major misreading of my essay consists, of course, in his refusal to accept my own formulation of my theme. My title, my abstract, and my opening paragraphs all plainly state that my interest is not primarily in Milton and Milton’s (finally unknowable) intentions but in “Milton’s bogey,” a phrase used by one woman writer but useful for understanding others. In note 8, moreover, I distinguish my work from that of Landy and Lewalski, declaring that my special interest is in “the implications of Milton’s ideas for women.”

To be sure, I do myself believe Milton’s epic expresses “institutionalized and often elaborately

metaphorical misogyny.” Such an assertion may be “apodictic,” as Gallagher says, but my references to Frye, Graves, Blake, and Wittreich, together with my discussions of Brontë, Wollstonecraft, and other women writers, suggest that it is justified. Both Frye (n. 22) and Brontë (p. 371), moreover, are just as “apodictic” as I am, and it hardly seems radical to place Milton’s poetry in the long tradition of literary misogyny documented by (among others) Beauvoir (n. 17) and Katharine Rogers (*The Troublesome Helpmate*).

I must confess, however, that Gallagher’s peculiar readings of *Paradise Lost* distress me more than his misreadings of my essay. To my suggestion that the poem’s epic voice often sounds censorious and “masculinist,” he replies that Milton’s God censures Adam more than Eve, adducing a passage in which God tells Adam that Eve’s endowments were “Unseemly to bear rule, *which was thy part / And person . . .*” (italics mine). But if “God’s” assessment of the relative abilities of his male and female creatures isn’t “masculinist,” then I can’t imagine what Woolf meant by the word. Even more peculiarly, Gallagher cites, as another instance of Milton’s nonmasculinist stance, Michael’s statement that human woe “From Man’s effeminate slackness . . . begins, / . . . who should better hold his place / By wisdom and superior gifts received” (xi.634–36). But I cannot suppose it would have cheered either Brontë or Woolf to reflect that all woe began with somebody’s *effeminate* slackness; nor would it comfort most women readers to consider that Adam owed his preeminence to “superior gifts.”

Surprisingly, such misconstructions of Milton (and women) are not isolated fallacies in Gallagher’s letter; rather, they seem representative of this critic’s thinking. Given my limited space, I cannot definitively demonstrate this here, for Gallagher’s comments bristle with curt citations like some massively annotated Bible. But I would urge interested readers to examine the passages he mentions; I have found that time and again, as he combs through my essay and Milton’s poem in an attempt to disprove what he misreads as my thesis, Gallagher misreads or ignores the implications of *Paradise Lost*.

Here are a few more instances. Arguing that “Milton’s angels are bisexual,” Gallagher refers to the lines “Spirits when they please / Can either Sex assume, or both . . .” (i.423–24). But surely it signifies that no important spirit in *Paradise Lost* ever “pleases” to assume the female gender. Again, in citing “Hail wedded Love,” Gallagher ignores Milton’s assertion that through wedded love “all the Charities / Of Father, Son, and Brother first were