

## Milton's Womb

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### *Abstract*

Milton's Chaos is described at one point as 'the Womb of Nature and perhaps her grave'. Though this phrase translates some words of Lucretius, this essay argues that the link of Chaos with a womb is one of the most original ideas in *Paradise Lost*. The essay explores various ideas of Chaos and uses of the word 'womb' in the poem and in contemporary contexts.

One of the most original ideas in *Paradise Lost* is Chaos. Typically it is a blend of Milton's classical learning with his heterodox theology. It is a region of inchoate matter, constantly warring elements, out of which the Son, acting for God as usual, creates the universe. It is memorably described at one point as 'the Womb of Nature and perhaps her grave' (II: 911).<sup>1</sup> The phrase translates a line in Lucretius's Epicurean poem, *De Rerum Natura* (V: 259), a provocative allusion itself in a Christian context.<sup>2</sup> It implies a lurking and potentially hostile force, monstrous and untamed, not simply an abstract concept.<sup>3</sup> In Milton's theology the ability to control Chaos is a primary sign of God's power and a key political idea: Hobbes had invoked 'the first Chaos of Violence and Civill Warre' in *Leviathan* (1651), precisely to deplore the consequences

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<sup>1</sup> *Paradise Lost* is quoted from *The Riverside Milton*, ed Roy Flannagan. A different version of this essay appeared in 2008 as chapter 21 of my *John Milton: A Biography*.

<sup>2</sup> Sedley shows that creation from matter, rather than from nothing, is mostly a classical rather than Christian concept. The challenging blend of classical and Christian is characteristic of Milton. In his theological treatise Milton calls original matter 'good', but he does not there call it Chaos: in the poem Chaos is linked to 'eternal' and 'unoriginal Night', II: 896, III: 19, X: 477, phrases with potentially heretical meanings. See Leonard at II: 890 and V: 472.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard *ad loc* points out that Milton's Chaos 'seems hostile partly because it continues to exist after the Creation', whereas in Ovid *Metamorphoses* I: 19-20 Chaos is 'all used up'.

of rebellion against the monarch. Milton in fact never refers to his contemporary Hobbes, whom he opposed politically, so there is no real question here of direct allusion, still less of imitation.<sup>4</sup> The looser notion of ‘intertextuality’, however, allows the scholarly footnote to enrich Milton’s meaning: there is often a political subtext even when Milton is writing, as here, about primary matter.

Chaos also appears as an independent being, personified as a cosmic character whom Satan meets on his journey. In this aspect Chaos reactivates the mythical root latent in the biblical *tehom*, the abyss of Genesis and the Book of Revelation.<sup>5</sup> Milton does allude directly to the Chaos of Hesiod and Vergil: in the *Aeneid*, the narrator invokes, even prays to, Chaos and Phlegethon as Aeneas enters the underworld (VI: 265).

There is also a trace of the feminine<sup>6</sup> in that phrase just quoted: Chaos is ‘the Womb of Nature’, the source of all material being. The phrase and its implications may give the lie to Virginia Woolf’s misguided notion that Milton was ‘the first of the masculinists’. Chaos as womb is an idea that is worth following up. It is rich in intratextual meaning.<sup>7</sup> The phrase occurs at the moment in the poem when Satan begins his journey. He pauses on the brink of the abyss. Here Chaos is the hostile space he must cross in order to get from the gates of Hell to Earth. His journey is Milton’s variant of the required odyssey in an epic, and very exciting and dangerous it is. Commentators since the eighteenth century have noticed a particular feature of Milton’s style that is readily accessible in this passage. ‘The Poet Himself seems to be Doing what he Describes, for the Period begins at 910. Then he goes not on Directly, but

<sup>4</sup> Milton’s widow said that the two had never met, but scholars have found many connections. Nicholson argued that Milton the dissident Puritan constantly opposed Hobbes’ philosophy. Her views have been tempered by Fallon, and see also Rosendale.

<sup>5</sup> I described the literary career of this figure, the opponent of the gods in Babylonian, biblical and classical myth in *The Old Enemy*.

<sup>6</sup> Rumrich thoroughly explores this concept.

<sup>7</sup> I offer this term to add to Genette’s list. With a long work like *Paradise Lost*, or *Ulysses*, it is indispensable to describe this as one of the ways in which the poem means (see my Introduction to this issue).

Lingers; giving an Idea of *Chaos* before he Enters into it' (Richardson in 1734, quoted in Ricks 79). The unpredictability of rhythm and syntax takes us into Satan's energies and struggles. Here is the passage.

Into this wilde Abyss,  
The Womb of nature and perhaps her Grave,  
Of neither Sea, nor Shore, nor Air, nor Fire,  
But all these in thir pregnant causes mixt  
Confus'dly, and which thus must ever fight,  
Unless th'Almighty Maker them ordain  
His dark materials to create more Worlds,  
Into this wild Abyss the warie fiend  
Stood on the brink of Hell and look'd a while,  
Pondering his Voyage. (II: 910-19)

We share the experience of 'the wary fiend' in his anxious hesitation on the very brink of Hell. The syntax stalls for line after line while the nature of chaos is explored in subordinate clauses heaped together 'confusedly' (914), until at last the opening phrase returns, 'into this wild Abyss', as in a musical composition, and the narrative resumes. Even then there is a mild surprise since Satan still does not complete the movement implied by 'into'; rather he 'Stood' (as Bentley irascibly pointed out in 1732; Leonard *ad loc*). The next verb completes the syntax properly (he looked into the abyss) but still doesn't give us the jump we've been waiting for.

That jump doesn't actually come until line 929, where the long wait is stressed by the phrase that opens the sentence:

At last his Sail-broad Vannes  
He spreads for flight, and in the surging smook  
Uplifted spurns the ground. (II: 927-29)

Even then we may blink momentarily before we see that 'spurns the ground' means 'jumped'. This whole passage exhibits that close relationship between form and meaning which readers have often felt to be one of the desirable, if not definitive, characteristics of poetic language. 'Milton can be said to be making the form *significant*' (Furniss and Bath 55). The particular significance it takes on here is that it brings the Satanic hesitation directly into the narrative, and makes it textual. The reader cannot but experience it as Satan does. We too teeter on the edge of Chaos.

Just as pygmy devils, or Galileo's telescope, deliberately introduced early into the narrative, disturb our sense of perspective or proportion, so the noise of Chaos that Satan now hears performs the same function for the ear. Blasting noise immediately assaults Satan's ear like the seige of a city in time of war—repeating the recent trauma of civil war for the first readers of the poem.

Nor was his eare less peal'd  
With noises loud and ruinous (to compare  
Great things with small) than when *Bellona* storms,  
With all her battering Engines bent to rase  
Som Capital City; or less than if this frame  
Of Heav'n were falling, and these Elements  
In mutinie had from her Axle torn  
The stedfast Earth. (II: 920-27)

It is with a sense of relief (and gratitude) that one reaches that fine phrase 'the stedfast Earth'. Such resting places stud the narrative of the Chaos-journey, but one must, like Satan, earn them. The noise of Chaos here is first compared to the war Milton's readers knew at firsthand (the *Bellona* reference) before it is magnified to become the disruption of the earth's 'Axle', the *axis mundi* of countless myths.

In the way that our other senses compensate when we lose one, Milton's susceptibility to loud noise had been enhanced since going blind (Davies 129): this is the converse of his delicate and highly wrought atunement to the harmonies of music and poetry. The materials of Chaos are not only 'dark' but 'loud'.<sup>8</sup> We are reminded of the 'barbarous dissonance' (VII: 32) or 'savage clamour' (36), of the Restoration court, like the lawless fury that impelled the Maenads to destroy Orpheus. Again, these inter- and intratextual links reinforce and complicate the meaning of Milton's Chaos. And the allusion to Orpheus, recurrent in Milton's poetry, dramatizes the dangers that surround not only Satan on his journey but also the narrator on his. The four elements, God's 'dark

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<sup>8</sup> Line 916 gives the title of Philip Pullman's remarkable trilogy of fantasy novels, *His Dark Materials*. Pullman should be read intertextually, with Milton (and Blake) in mind.

materials', are doomed to fight each other continually, and yet are somehow, in keeping with the womb idea, 'pregnant in their causes'.

So Satan flies off and into the frightening 'womb of nature'. This is not the first time we have heard about a womb in the poem. In the opening part of the poem, the devils set out to build a new palace for themselves, to be called Pandemonium (the word means 'all the demons' and is Milton's invention). They go looking for materials and the text continues with the following passage:

There stood a Hill not far whose grisly top  
Belch'd fire and rowling smoak; the rest entire  
Shon with a glossie scurff, undoubted sign  
That in his womb was hid metallic Ore,  
The work of Sulphur. Thither wing'd with speed  
A numerous Brigad hasten'd. (l: 670-75).

What are we to make of that very odd phrase—'his womb'? For Christopher Ricks, the phrase emphasizes the 'perverted body-landscape of Hell'.<sup>9</sup> It looks as if the phrase is one among many references to the mixed genders of Hell.

But—and it is a big but—we should note that, by now (1667) in the development of the English language the pronoun *his* had largely been replaced by *its* for the neuter gender. Shakespeare regularly uses *his*, but *its* was a recent innovation; *his* did not reflect the human/nonhuman distinction found elsewhere in the pronoun system (as in *what/who*). An expert on the history of the language says '*its* obviously fitted the system ideally, as can be deduced from its rapid spread in the first half of the seventeenth century' (Görlach 86). So is Milton just lagging behind the times? Perhaps he is, since there are only two uses of *its* in *Paradise Lost*, and not many elsewhere. So 'his womb' may really be just the way Milton would say 'its womb'. That kind of intertextual extension, however, moving beyond the poem to the dictionary, in this case at least makes the phrase very disappointing. No gender confusion at all.

Nonetheless, we might well ask what a hill is doing with a *womb*. This could be just the looser use of 'womb' as stomach, current till the

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<sup>9</sup> In his first edition, Alastair Fowler *ad loc* also writes about the confusion, though he dropped the reference for the second.

nineteenth century, and yet surely in this loaded context the phrase must bear more weight. Like most great writers, Milton can exploit, even without consciously realizing it, the state of the language in his time. In Milton's poetry words can retain their older meanings, often Latinate, while they also suggest their more modern sense. Milton's language reflects a period of rapidly changing usages (especially enhanced by the civil war and everything that went with it), so that we often find words in which an older and a more modern meaning are both available. From that point of view, 'his womb' may be more than simply an archaic usage. It may be a deliberate oddity.

Once we begin to think along those lines, we will want to connect this womb with 'the womb of Nature', the source of all creation, but also with that other very striking metaphor which soon follows, in which these mining angels

Rifl'd the bowels of thir mother Earth  
 For treasures better hid. Soon had his crew  
 Op'nd into the Hill a spacious wound  
 And dig'd out ribs of Gold. Let none admire  
 That riches grow in Hell; that soyle may best  
 Deserve the precious bane. (I: 687-92)

The hill is now seen as part of 'mother Earth'—and has a wound rather than a womb (Milton often plays with sound). There is a conventional example of this widespread idea in Fletcher's *Purple Island* of 1633, a poem Milton read and raided:

O hungry metal, false deceitful ray,  
 Well laidst thou dark, pressed in the earth's hidden womb,  
 Yet through our mother's entrails cutting way,  
 We drag thy buried corse from hellish tomb. (VIII: 27-30)

The physiology of Milton's passage may seem a little odd, since the miners find treasures in the earth's *bowels*. Perhaps this is an instance of the common psychoanalytic equation of money and faeces that goes under the wonderful generic title of 'Filthy Lucre' (Brown 292-304). 'Bowels', though, is commonly extended to mean all of one's internal organs, equivalent to Fletcher's 'entrails', and was frequently and famously so used by D. H. Lawrence, especially in more intense

passages. But what is really interesting about this female earth, be it noted, is that it has *ribs*.

Now of course one wants to explain that the ribs are a metaphor for the veins of gold in the rocks. But if we start making connections, we soon realize that the image is carefully chosen, and not only because it extends the anatomical language of the whole passage. An eighteenth century critic, not Richardson this time but Pearce, commented that this phrase 'alludes to the formation of Eve' recounted later by Adam at VIII: 462-3: he there tells how God 'op'nd my left side, and took/ From thence a Rib, . . . wide was the wound'. A very great critic, William Empson, picked up this splendid perception ('I call this a profound piece of criticism', 176), and made the connection between Eve as universal mother and the concept 'mother Earth'. One editor, Fowler, agrees with the Pearce-Empson connection. He omits, however, the further connection between Eve's birth and that of Sin, born from 'the left side op'ning wide' (II: 755) of Satan's head. Thus in fact the passage brings together the poem's three main female figures—Eve, mother Earth, Sin—all implicated in the image of this strange birth. Strange indeed, and yet none of the commentators takes the next logical step and points out that, though the parallel with Eve's birth is indeed close in the language of these scenes, she is 'born', in the story Milton found in Genesis and elaborates, not from a woman but from Adam. His is the womb, or the wide wound, from which she is taken. The 'normal' function of the sexes, if the word *normal* can have any meaning in this context, is reversed. Surely this parallel, in which Mammon is seen to reproduce, roughly speaking, the creative movement of God in opening a wide wound in the hill's womb, argues for the deliberate placing of the phrase 'his womb' at this point.

Many cultures in fact have what anthropologists call 'male birth myths' like this, but Milton won't let us ignore (unless we are not attending) the half-submerged ideas. Here, as in Genesis, though sanitized and adapted to the idea of an all powerful God, a divine 'mid-husband' reaches in with his bare hands and brings out the material of life. What Milton does, if we take seriously the implication of 'his womb', is to align these various passages we have been accumulating with the ambivalent sexuality that pervades the poem, beginning with the very recreation in the opening lines of the cosmogonic myth itself. There the spirit of God sits dove-like brooding on the vast abyss (the first

appearance of what later becomes Chaos) and makes it pregnant, giving both male and female functions to this cosmic bird-god (I: 21-2)—but making the abyss, if we think about it, a cosmic egg and definitely female. So here in Hell it is mother earth who has productive ribs of gold within her, whereas in the parallel passage for the birth of Eve, the productive innards are Adam's.

The point will be even clearer by contrast. The poem does contain a few more or less proper wombs. Sin has her womb with its growing burden (II: 767), even though what is growing there is Death, the result of her impregnation by her father Satan. The whole scene is painful and perverse, self-love replacing mutual love, but the genders are not bent. A healthier variant occurs in the first words the angel Raphael addresses to Eve: 'Hail Mother of Mankind, whose fruitful Womb/ Shall fill the World' (V: 388-89). And a few lines before, mother earth has an unexceptionable womb in the midst of a remarkable passage of poetry. As the angel makes his approach to the garden, he passes through

A Wilderness of sweets; for Nature here  
Wantond as in her prime, and plaid at will  
Her Virgin Fancies, pouring forth more sweet,  
Wilde above rule or art, enormous bliss. (V: 294-7)

The language gets even more erotic as Adam sees him coming at noon,

While now the mounted Sun  
Shot down direct his fervid Raies to warme  
Earths inmost womb, more warmth than Adam needs.

That 'inmost womb' is comfortably surrounded by two instances of 'warm': here Milton's love of play with sound is quite gratuitous, since there was no reason to add how much warmth Adam did not need. The implied sex here is quite 'normal', though the origins of these sexualized myths is not in Christian but in pagan tradition: a sun shoots its rays into the receiving womb of earth. We may perhaps wonder why, in the midst of all this fertility, Nature is oddly described as having 'Virgin Fancies'. But in any case, the erotic implications of 'wantond' enhance the conventional gender equations. There is no blurring, of the kind we found in the Hellish passage, and that may be a reason for the contrast.

Gender confusion is not infrequent in Milton. Sometimes it can be explained on purely linguistic grounds, as with 'his womb'. Thus in



*Areopagitica* (558) England is 'a noble and puissant Nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep and shaking her invincible locks'. In this case the Latin word behind 'Nation' is feminine, so when she rouses *herself*, we hear only Milton's (and his century's) familiarity with Latin. But the second time, the pronoun 'her' follows immediately that 'strong man', and 'his' would have been more appropriate. Such usages have been attributed to Milton's own confused sexuality, but they can be explained as we have seen on linguistic as well as literary grounds.

Just as 'his womb' might be understood as the vestige of older usages no longer current in modern English, but where a more modern meaning is equally valid, so, in the narrator's immediate warning about the riches of Hell (in the passage quoted earlier, 'Let none admire / That riches grow in Hell, I 690-1), the word 'admire' clearly retains its Latin sense (*admirari*) of 'wonder' (even if the word was often used in this sense in Early Modern English). This sense is what requires the conjunction *that* immediately afterwards: 'Let none admire / That riches grow in Hell' (I: 690-1). On the other hand, and just as clearly, the word is developing the modern sense in which one stands in admiration before something remarkable. It is this sense, even more than the older one, which leads to the warning not to do it: 'Let none admire'. The phrase comes at the end of the line, and by a characteristic use of double syntax, we first read it in its modern sense before, with the word 'That' at the beginning of the next line, we correct and supply the older meaning. First we hear a warning, appropriate enough here in Hell, not to admire the gold or the mining or the opening of the spacious wound, before we adjust to the meaning 'wonder'. And the warning extends to the famous oxymoron 'precious bane' in the next line. Once again we find Milton exploiting for his own purposes the state of the language in his time.

The angel who led this 'Brigad' to their mining activities was Mammon (appropriately enough, since his name is a generic term in biblical Aramaic for worldly riches). About him we have just heard the following extraordinary information, extraordinary at least if we imagine that the poem always distinguishes carefully between Heaven and Hell. Mammon is called

the least erected Spirit that fell  
From heav'n, for ev'n in heav'n his looks and thoughts  
Were always downward bent, admiring more  
The riches of Heav'ns pavement, trod'n Gold,

Then aught divine or holy else enjoy'd  
In vision beatific; by him first  
Men also, and by his suggestion taught,  
Ransack'd the center, and with impious hands  
Rifl'd the bowels of thir mother Earth. (I: 679-87)

Not only was Mammon ripe for the fall, then, but he seems already to have been 'fallen' even in heaven! Jesus was right, no doubt, about the fallen world of the Roman empire, when he averred that 'Ye cannot serve both God and Mammon' (Matt 6.24, Luke 16.13), but Milton's bold decision to invent for his (equally invented) Mammon a prelapsarian existence leads to real difficulties. One is that Mammon here guides men to do roughly what the anthropomorphic God of Genesis and of Milton does: he reaches into the body and brings forth *living* riches. Another is that Mammon sees little difference between Heaven and Hell, as he tells us in his speech during the Parliament in Book II.

As [God] our darkness, cannot we his Light  
Imitate when we please? This Desart soile  
Wants not her hidden lustre, Gemms and Gold;  
Nor want we skill or art, from whence to raise  
Magnificence; and what can Heav'n show more? (II: 262-70)

The answer to Mammon's splendidly perverse question should probably be 'Nothing', but then Heaven is not so exclusively concerned with *show* as Mammon. Mammon is another of several figures in Milton who look and cannot see.

Mammon is faulted, as Stanley Fish noted in a brilliant piece of criticism,

not for admiring Heaven's riches but for admiring them in and for themselves and not as signs of the power ("divine or holy else") that made them. In his eyes they are riches that just happened to be in Heaven rather than *Heaven's* riches. It is their "lustre" (II 271) not their source that impresses him, and that is why he is so pleased to find that same lustre in the "gems and gold" of Hell's soil. "What can Heav'n show more?" (273), he asks, making it as plain as could be that "show" names the limit of his perception even as it names his desire. (XV-XVI)

At the same time, I suggest, Mammon has lost the older sense of the word *admire*—wonder. That is a sign of his problem: he simply admires riches, in a wholly modern way.

This brings me to my last example of Miltonic intertextuality in this fertile context, and like the references to Lucretius or Virgil a further example of Renaissance Imitation. The narrator of Book I, describing Mammon for the first time, while he was still in Heaven, is thinking of the Book of Revelation (21.21) where the City of God has streets of pure gold, but the result of Milton's reframing of the idea is that we see none of us know very well how to distinguish the riches of heaven's pavement, trodden gold, from the gems and gold to be dugged up from the Hell hill's womb. We need the warning not to admire. The paradox, then, in which these words issue, is entirely appropriate: 'that soyle may best/ Deserve the precious bane' (I: 691-2). Like another famously hellish oxymoron, 'darkness visible' (I: 63), and partly for the same reason (imitation of heaven), 'precious bane' describes the attractive ambivalence of hell.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* I: 125-42 is the *locus classicus* for the idea that digging for golden wealth hid underground among 'Stygian shades' initiates the corrupt iron age of modernity. The relevant part reads:

*Nec tantum segetes alimentaue debita dives  
poscebatur humus, sed itum est in viscera terrae:  
quasque recondiderat Stygiisque admoverat umbris,  
effodiuntur opes, invitamenta malorum.*

Nor was it only corn and their due nourishment that men demanded of the rich earth: they explored its very bowels, and dug out the wealth which it had hidden away, close to the Stygian shades; and this wealth was a further incitement to wickedness. (tr. Innes 32)

One of Ovid's many clever adaptations of Virgil's underworld realm of Hades, the idea was soon widespread, and reiterated often in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. But Milton's language bears closer attention, for it is not a tired reiteration of a commonplace. It is a deliberate allusion in which Milton expects, I imagine, that his readers will note the imitation, and the variation—exactly what Renaissance schoolboys were taught. Unlike Fletcher's imitation quoted above, with its conventional rhyme of 'womb' and 'tomb', Milton's phrase makes a new metaphor. Riches *grow* in Hell. Hell thus imitates the natural world, though for many in the period this function of usury was still regarded as a

perversion appropriate only for Jews. It is one of the contentious issues between Shylock and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*. Milton, however, was the son of a money-lender. He lived on the proceeds, and had met his first wife while collecting a debt. He feels called upon to defend usury in his theological treatise, the *De Doctrina Christiana* (1676). Thus not only does the word 'admire' point backward and forward at once, but the image of riches growing in Hell, in a male hill with a womb, both looks back to the Ovidian original and also suggests something about Milton's own life.

There is no more than a hint in Ovid's *viscera* for Milton's word *grow*. That word now reaches out both intra- and intertextually to all these other creative places, all the other images of fertility and invention, linked through the one word *womb*. The place of poetic 'making' thus shrinks to a 'spacious wound' or expands to be the equivalent of the whole of 'Chaos', the source of those 'dark materials'. Chaos was a rich intertextual concept in the Early Modern period, ripe for Imitation: but it is only Milton, through his *variatio*, who makes it a womb.

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