

## “I didn't say it. Milton said it. And he was blind”: Alan Moore, Neil Gaiman and *Paradise Lost*.

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While William Shakespeare's influence on popular culture has been constantly recognised, feted and celebrated, John Milton's has declined considerably since his eighteenth-century peak. Unlike the Shakespeare's works, frequently described as “timeless”, Milton's prose works are irrevocably bound up with their seventeenth-century contexts, while his poetry is so entangled with key Christian stories and psychic locations that it sometimes becomes difficult to distinguish the influence of *Paradise Lost* (1667) from that of *Genesis*, or Milton's Hell from that of Virgil, Dante or Hieronymus Bosch. Despite this, *Paradise Lost* remains influential in many arenas: among other things, the poem is a prototypical work of science-fiction, featuring heroic interstellar voyages and speculations into the workings of the universe. Critical consideration of this influence tends to concentrate on C.S. Lewis's *Space Trilogy* (1938-45) and Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000), and these novels, conveniently enough, mirror a factional divide between Milton scholars. C.S. Lewis's interpretation of the poem, as explicated in his *Preface to Milton*, is orthodoxly Christian. On the other hand, Philip Pullman favours a distinguished critical line which argues that Satan is the poem's secret hero and which includes William Blake, Percy Shelley and William Empson. Aside from these two novels, essays tracing the influence of sophisticated readings of Milton in popular fiction have been few in number.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I will examine how the developing mythos of the DC Comics Universe (or DCU) came to incorporate a distinct and clearly legible line of Miltonic influence.<sup>2</sup> I will begin by identifying those aspects of *Paradise Lost* which present the most parallels with the comic book narrative, notably the War in Heaven as related to Adam and Eve by the Angel Raphael, and which forms the bulk of Books V and VI in *Paradise Lost*. In the second part, I examine how Miltonic material was first incorporated into the DCU in Alan Moore's “Footsteps” and how it proved integral to shaping the recurring character of Lucifer in Neil Gaiman's comic book series *The Sandman* and his short story “Murder Mysteries”. In my final section, I examine the presence of Miltonic themes in the spin-off series *Lucifer* (2000-2006) and *John Constantine: Hellblazer* (1988-2013) and in Grant Morrison's *JLA* (1997-2006), before bringing my narrative up to the present day.

In the epic tradition of *in media res*, to begin at the beginning is to begin in the middle, and it is in the middle of the fifth book of *Paradise Lost* that the angel Raphael descends to Eden from Heaven, and relates to Adam the events of the War in Heaven, a confrontation between the adherents of God and the followers of Satan. This leads to the expulsion of the latter with all his angels from the borders of Heaven. It is the only martial episode in a poem whose central action, notoriously, is the eating of a piece of fruit. Its critical standing has decayed a great deal over the centuries.<sup>3</sup> Joseph Addison, one of Milton's great eighteenth-century popularisers, thought that the War in Heaven was the pinnacle of Milton's sublimity: “that wherever he speaks of it, he rises, if

possible, above himself" (191). His reaction was one of awe and wonder at the scale and spectacle of the epic combat, but superhuman conflict is not to everybody's taste. Later on in the century, in tones of lofty dismissal strikingly similar to the early critical dismissal of the comic book medium, Samuel Johnson would declare that: "The confusion of spirit and matter [...] fills it with incongruity; and the book in which it is related is, I believe, the favourite of children, and gradually neglected, as knowledge is increased" (109). For Johnson, the mechanics of combat between ethereal adversaries are too far removed from real life to interest an adult sensibility.

Modern critics have found in Book V elements of the mock-heroic and the farcical and portrayed it as a subversion of the familiar tropes of epic warfare. For instance, on the first day of battle the weapons are the familiar to anyone who has happened to glance into *The Iliad*: sword, shield and spear. By the second day, Satan's angels have excavated metals and minerals from the soil of Heaven, and invented cannon that throw God's host into confusion. Things escalate quickly as Michael and the angelic army regroup and retaliate by throwing mountains at the opposing side - whereupon the whole war becomes a mountain-slinging match. Arnold Stein memorably refers to this as "a giant custard-pie fight" in *Answerable Style* (1967) - yet it is also a tremendously destructive conflict, and it becomes evident that even the empyrean firmament cannot take much more of this kind of punishment. God has a plan, however, and sends in a literal *deus ex machina*, in the arrival of the Son within the Chariot of Paternal Deity. At his command the uprooted hills retire to their places; he routs the rebellious angels and forces them to the very brink of the abyss:

The monstrous sight  
 Strook them with horror backward, but far worse  
 Urged them behind; headlong themselves they threw  
 Down from the verge of heav'n, eternal wrath  
 Burnt after them to the bottomless pit. (VI. 862-6)

At this point the narrative comes back to where the epic began, with the fall of angels into Hell.

As should be evident even from this brief précis, there are certain parallels with the simpler kind of superhero narrative. Both feature a Manichean conflict between a set of heroes and adversaries unable or (in the case of the Son) unwilling to land a death blow. Even when Michael's sword cleaves Satan in twain, the archfiend is only briefly inconvenienced, for "The grinding sword with discontinuous wound / Passed through him, but the ethereal substance closed / Not long divisible" (VI. 329-31). Satan feels pain for the first time in his existence, and is briefly disabled, but soon returns to the fight.

Though the angels possess in an eminent degree the two superhero characteristics of mission and powers, they lack the important distinctions of costume and identity (Coogan, 2006). As the quote above makes clear, they are beings of spirit rather than matter, and do not have the impermeable solidity of Superman or

Wonder Woman; rather they possess fluid abilities of second-stringers such as Metamorpho or Plastic Man. When the angel Raphael descends to visit Adam and Eve in Eden, Adam's curious questioning uncovers the fact that beings of pure spirit can not only eat and drink, but also enjoy a kind of sexual congress: "if Spirits embrace, / Total they mix, union of pure with pure / Desiring; nor restrained conveyance need / As flesh to mix with flesh, or soul with soul" (VIII. 626-9). The physicality of Milton's angels is explicitly worked out, albeit in the kind of detail that DC comics largely leave to fan fiction.<sup>4</sup> They wear material armour to protect their bodies from the pain of division and recombination, but this itself can become a weakness if the armour is crushed upon them.

As in the comic book narratives, War in Heaven is both visually spectacular and horribly destructive but its consequences are easily passed over. Just as Superman's home town of Metropolis appears to be able to absorb and repair spectacular damage in the twinkling of an eye, so the mountains of Heaven return to their former places and leave no trace of the catastrophic conflict that first saw them wrenched from their roots. The Deus ex Machina performs its function of exiling and containing - rather than annihilating - the threat to the status quo. Even though Hell appears to have the same revolving door release policy as Arkham Asylum, the escape-prone institution responsible for incarcerating maniacs in the *Batman* series, Milton at least has the excuse of divine providence to account for Satan's escape from perdition and arrival in Eden. In the examples below, I will show that these similarities were not overlooked by comic book writers.

Hell has become a standard location for DC comics, and everyone from the Justice League to the Secret Six has paid a visit, but when the British Writer Alan Moore brought his hero there in *Saga of the Swamp Thing* #49-50, it was still new territory for the comic book. Those stories draw more on Orphean and Odyssean myth patterns, however, and it isn't until 1987, with Moore's "Footsteps" in *Secret Origins* #10 that the Miltonic War in Heaven first made its appearance.



Figure 1. Elements of symmetry. "Footsteps"

The *Secret Origins* series was created to recount the well-worn tales of how each superhero came to be, but the origin and purpose of this issue's star, the Phantom Stranger, deliberately shrouded in mystery from his first appearance. The editors decided to preserve that mystery by commissioning four competing origin stories

that share the same comic book. “Footsteps”, the third of these stories, takes up only ten pages. The first eight pages are divided between two narratives: firstly, the contemporary tale of an unnamed man, torn between the Subway Angels and the Sewer Survivalists; secondly, a version of the War in Heaven from the point of view of an angel who refuses to commit himself to either side. This is followed by a two-page contemporary epilogue. Some of the elements of artistic and thematic symmetry between the two narratives anticipate Moore’s later work with these elements in *The Killing Joke* (1988) and the *Watchmen* (1987) issue “Fearful Symmetry”, particularly in the first two pages. Here, the story’s title and motif of “Footsteps” is made explicit as the first panel of both pages opens with an image of feet. On the first page, these are the shoed feet of the Phantom Stranger, with the figures of Otis and the unnamed main character visible in the background. On the second page are two pairs of bare feet belonging to the Stranger and the angel Etrigan, who are talking with each other before the Fall. In both pages, another three panels are devoted to a conversation between two characters. Then there is a larger lower panel depicting, in the first page, the Phantom Stranger about to descend into the subway, and in the second, the Stranger and Etrigan about to soar into the skies of Heaven. The Phantom Stranger’s narration, like Satan’s soliloquies in *Paradise Lost*, is solitary and tormented by introspection, and the framing of the conversation between the man and Otis emphasizes the sympathy and community he has lost.

In the empyreal narrative, Moore avoids Milton’s contentious use of the Son as the catalyst for the War in Heaven and makes Satan’s rebellion proceed from “Yahweh’s dangerous scheme to make the clay sit up and talk” (4). The Fall of these angels seems due to superior angelic force rather than the direct interference of the Son as *Deus ex Machina*. On Earth, we also hear a paraphrased version of the one line of Milton everybody knows, “Better to rule in Hell than serve in Heaven” (l. 263) when Otis says “You think about that man. You’re spending your life sweepin’ the trash up above when it’s better to rule down here” (3) emphasising the parallels between the grungy urban narrative and the epic of the fall from the Heaven. The unnamed character’s story parallels that of the Phantom Stranger, caught between the icy righteousness of the angels and the savagery of the fallen. This explores a folk element missing from Milton’s work: the story of those who neither stood nor fell but simply sat on the fence, and were denied a home either in Heaven or Hell. In some folk-tale “origin stories”, these become fairies; in Moore’s work this is a solitary and unnamed angel who, by the time of the second narrative, has become the Phantom Stranger.

The comic closes with Josh’s banishment and the Stranger’s loneliness relieved in some measure, as they walk together through the streets of the city, the claustrophobic panels re-opening to a wide closing image of the city at night. The Stranger remarks:

Lonely inside our separate skins, we cannot know each other’s pain and must bear our own in solitude. For my part, I have found that walking soothes it, and that, given luck, sometimes we find someone to walk beside us... at least for a little way (10).

The tentative hopefulness of the conclusion parallels the upward note on which Milton concludes his epic, after Adam and Eve have been banished from the earthly Paradise and everything has changed utterly:

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon,

The world was all before them, where to choose

Their place of rest, and providence their guide,

They hand in hand, *with wandering steps and slow*

Through Eden took their solitary way. (XII. 645-9, emphasis mine)

For both writers, human companionship eases the pain of banishment into exile, but Moore's brief tale stands apart from the conventional narrative in its concern for those who take no part in the Manichean conflict and find themselves isolated, victimised and alone in consequence. In this it anticipates some of the alterations to the Miltonic myth pattern and comic book narrative that we will see in the works of Neil Gaiman.

Running for seventy-six issues from 1989 to 1996, Gaiman's *The Sandman* operated from within the same fictional universe as the DC superheroes whilst rarely using the characters or the usual conventions of storytelling. Also unusually, it came to a definite and final conclusion, disposing of the central character rather than preserving him for a different creative team. Asked to sum up the story of his seven-year run of *The Sandman* in a single sentence, Gaiman opted for "The Lord of Dreams learns that one must change or die, and makes his choice". (Gaiman, 1996) Throughout the series, Dream, one of the seven Endless, is bound by his changeless sense of duty. This reaches its height in the collection *Season of Mists*, where having been convinced by his fellow Endless that he was unjust in sentencing Nada, the girl who jilted him, to Hell for all eternity, he immediately goes to rescue her despite considerable ill-timing and personal risk.

As the overarching narrative of *The Sandman* develops, it becomes clear that Lucifer is the dark shadow of Dream; beginning as his implacable adversary, he comes to represent the possibilities that Dream's sense of guilt and responsibility will not allow him to consider. He successfully abandons his set role, shirks his responsibilities and reinvents himself as a free agent, and the series closes with him amusing himself by managing a Los Angeles nightclub. The multiple new opportunities ahead of him are explored in Mike Carey's spin-off series, *Lucifer*. In the afterword to the final issues, collected as *Lucifer: Evensong*, Mike Carey provides a striking description of his brief: to furnish "the next instalment of his story, after the chapters already told in the Bible, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and Neil Gaiman's THE SANDMAN" (Carey, 2007). Would anyone consider such a striking mixture of texts in this way but a writer of comic books, long apprenticed to the art of maintaining the continuity and integrity of an on-going character, often across several different series, while artists and writers come and go? The author here is not in anxious Oedipal conflict with his

predecessors, or inheriting their work through a notion of familial descent, but curating the development of an on-going character, and this sense of curation is vital to Gaiman's use of Milton's materials.

When Dream first visits the abode of the damned in *The Sandman #4: A Hope in Hell* (collected in *Preludes and Nocturnes*), Lucifer seems a conventional, if not to say rather colourless, portrayal of the Devil. In despite of the fact that the rulers of Hell are now a triumvirate (a change foisted upon Gaiman by the editors at DC) there's little doubt where the true power lies. There is an abstract sense too, of a grudge held against Dream for not supporting him in the War in Heaven. But overall, Lucifer is surprisingly helpful and rather detached from Dream's struggle to reclaim his helmet. The final attempt to trap him in Hell, together with the oath that 'One day, my brothers... one day I shall destroy him' seem oddly weak. But in Chapter One of the later story, *Season of Mists*, something revolutionary happens. Lucifer quotes Milton: not in the paraphrase we hear in Alan Moore, but literally. 'Still, "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven". And he follows up with an attribution. "We didn't say it. Milton said it. And he was blind" (58).



Figure 2. Lucifer makes an attribution. *The Sandman: Season of Mists*

The quotation Lucifer so despises comes from the speech Satan makes after escaping from the Lake of Fire and viewing his surroundings for the first time. At greater length, the quote runs: "in my choice / To reign is worth ambition though in Hell: / Better to rule in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (l. 261-3). By displacing these lines onto Milton rather than accepting them as his own, Lucifer tries to dismiss the "blindness" of Satan, who could only perceive the binary choice of ruling or serving.<sup>5</sup>

Influence here is not only between authors but between literary characters. Even down in Hell, Lucifer has taken the time to read Milton. Despite being the premier scholar of influence, Harold Bloom is not the first critic one would spring to when writing a defence of the comic book medium; however, there is a passage in *The Anatomy of Influence* (2011) that goes a great way towards explaining the significance of a pivotal moment in the story. Bloom compares the soliloquies of Hamlet with those of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, and observes that the two characters are similar in that we neither see what Hamlet was before the crisis of his father's death, nor Lucifer,

who in Milton's epic is Satan's unfallen self, before his name was blotted from the Book of Life. According to Bloom:

what is missing [from *Paradise Lost*] is an actual representation of the Shakespearean moment of soliloquy in which Lucifer overhears himself and through that shock changes into Satan... what is lacking is the *moment of change*, a Shakespearean invention from which Milton shies. (120)

In Gaiman's story we see that Shakespearean invention in effect. Lucifer is no longer a mere collection of conventional diabolical poses. There is a vivid contrast between the slightly fey ruler of Hell he appeared to be in his first appearance and his commanding appearance in these panels, and one which cannot be laid entirely at the feet of the artist. Lucifer has become a character who exists independently. He no longer derives from Milton's Satan; it becomes plain that he has watched the world beyond Hell, read and absorbed Milton's portrayal of him, and is now prepared to supplant him. For the first time, perhaps, since his soliloquy to the sun at the beginning of Book Four of *Paradise Lost*, the Adversary breaks the mould and does something radically different. Both Milton and Gaiman, within their very different media, have succeeded in restoring a sense of character and animation to a supernatural being whose role often seems static.

Dream enters Hell expecting a fight: one of the visually spectacular Manichean clashes familiar from the Justice League comics. Instead, he finds Hell empty and unguarded; Nada, the woman he has come in search of, is gone. Hovering in the centre of Hell, he tries to force a final, possibly fatal confrontation with Lucifer, who deflates the whole scenario with the opening line: "Hello, Dream. Take off that silly helmet and we'll talk" (72). As their conversation unfolds, it becomes evident that Lucifer has resigned from the monarchy of Hell and emptied his realm. As Dream and Lucifer wander through Hell together, sealing all its doorways, he begins to discuss his motives. And again, we return to the time before the fall:

I cared so deeply back then, in the cold at the beginning of all things. In the Silver City. I suppose that was why everything began to go wrong. You know... I still wonder how much of it was planned. How much of it He knew in advance. I thought I was rebelling. I thought I was defying His rule. No... I was merely fulfilling another tiny segment of His great and powerful plan. If I had not rebelled, another would have, in my stead. Raguel, perhaps. Or Sandalphon. (79)

The three-panel flashback which follows, uniquely, shows Satan falling alone and arriving in Hell alone, a moment that slips between the cracks of *Paradise Lost*, where the opening found the devils already chained on the fiery lake, and Raphael's retelling only takes us up to the eviction of Satan and his angels from Heaven. The moment of despair which Milton delayed until the famous soliloquy on Mount Niphates at the beginning of Book IV occurs visually here, dramatising the moment Lucifer realises he can never regain what he has lost.

The suspicion which Lucifer directs towards God may also have its roots in Milton. At the opening of *Paradise Lost*, the poem announces its lofty purpose to "assert eternal providence / And justify the ways of God

to Man" (l. 25-6), but critics have often been puzzled why, given this stated goal, Milton's God is such an unsympathetic character. Milton dared much dramatically in getting the Almighty to speak *in propria persona*, because such an act necessarily makes the reader suspicious of God's foreknowledge. It seems strange to many that God, knowing of the Fall before it happens, will still let Satan escape from Hell, wing his way through Chaos and enter Eden relatively unhindered. The complex interactions in the poem between free will, foreknowledge and fate have left many readers and critics baffled or frustrated.

It scarcely seems surprising that when the Devils in Hell come to reason "high / Of providence, foreknowledge, will and fate, / Fixed fate, free will, foreknowledge absolute" they find 'no end, in wandering mazes lost" (ll. 558-61). William Empson is the Miltonist critic most hostile to the divinity; his book *Milton's God* (1951) finds the poem a success for the same reason many other critics judged it a failure - its portrayal of God. Dividing the early twentieth-century critics into those "attackers who find it bad because it makes God bad and defenders who find it all right because it leaves God tolerable, even though Milton is tactless about him" (13), Empson attempts to rehabilitate the Romantic position of Blake and Shelley, most pithily expressed in Blake's famous comment that "the reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of angels and God, and at liberty when of devils and Hell, is because he was a true poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (75). In short, Empson lifts the weight of moral culpability from the shoulders of Satan, Eve and Adam, and assigns it in large measure to Milton's God: a character he does not find quite as grizzly as the traditional God of the Scriptures, but quite objectionable enough. He argues that the poem is good because it makes God bad, and is not afraid of the ramifications of this conclusion.

His argument proved simple and influential enough for inclusion in the introductions to many editions of Milton and it is possible Gaiman was aware of Empson's interpretation when he was reading the epic. Certainly Gaiman's use of the Miltonic material has something akin to Empson's conclusion that the towering strength of *Paradise Lost* is Milton's ability to "accept and express a downright horrible conception of God and yet keep somehow alive, underneath it, all the breadth and generosity, the welcome to every noble pleasure, which had been prominent in European history before this time" (276-7). This 'breadth and generosity' is seen in *The Sandman* after the grizzly scenes in Hell, when the action switches to Dream's palace and the genre to high comedy as embassies from various squabbling pantheons and entities seek ownership of Hell, now left in Dream's keeping. However, this lighter note overlays the bitter moral dilemma pondered by Dream in his solitariness. To whom will he grant the key to this ultimate abomination? He is half-tempted to leave the place empty, as it serves no good purpose, but the competing bribes and threats of the various opposing factions leave him torn with indecision.

Dream's dilemma is resolved by the angels Duma and Remiel, who originally descend from the Silver City purely as observers, but towards the close of the negotiations deliver a message directly from the Creator:



There must be a Hell. There must be a place for the demons; a place for the damned. Hell is Heaven's reflection. It is Heaven's shadow. They define each other. Reward and Punishment; hope and despair. There must be a Hell, for without Hell, Heaven has no meaning. (176)

The Creator assigns Remiel and Duma to rule Hell as his representatives: something which even Remiel, whose first concern is for himself and his purity, recognises to be wrong, and which brings him almost to the brink of rebellion before he realises that if he rebels, he has nowhere else to go. He is forced both to rule Hell *and* serve Heaven, forced into the Lucifer's role without the consolations of his autonomy and freedom of action.

In *Paradise Lost*, Milton dismisses Satan in Book X, when he returns to Hell to address an exultant parliament of demons about his successful temptation of Adam and Eve and the new road just built from Hell to Earth. Instead of the plaudits he expects, however, he is surprised to be greeted by a loud hissing. In vengeance for their misdeeds, God has turned all the inhabitants of Hell into serpents and condemned them annually to take that shape and chew on ashy, bitter fruits, thus wounding them in their most sensitive part - their pride. It is the kind of heavy-handed Miltonic humour that critics mostly dislike, and tend to ignore for the sublimities of the earlier books - except for Empson, who avouches it as further evidence that Satan's character does not degrade over the course of the book, but that God degrades him by manipulating him into a series of humiliating positions and impossible dilemmas.

The poem itself closes two books later with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, in a scene that is more touching than tragic. Gaiman's blackly ironic ending to *Season of Mists* has far more in common with Book X's humiliations than Book XII's consolations. Here Remiel, soaring above the demons and tortured souls, considers his new realm and what he can do with it:

The flames of Hell, Remiel muses, have become refining fires, burning away the dross, leaving purity and repentance and good. Remiel hears the screams, and it smiles. Perhaps, it thinks, it judged too hastily. After all, this is part of the plan, is it not? Then how could it *not* be for the best, in this, the best of all possible worlds... Perhaps events have ended happily, after all. Happily. Ever after. In Hell. (217)

The note of Voltairean satire here is palpable, mixed perhaps with the Empson's horrified rejection of Aquinas's notion that the inhabitants of Heaven delight in divine justice, and therefore rejoice at the tortures of the damned. Gaiman retains the conception of Hell as a place of torture and torment, whilst showing his scepticism of any cosmology that exhibits cruelty on such a scale.

Themes from *Paradise Lost* arise once again in Gaiman's short story "Murder Mysteries" which has also appeared as a radio play and in the inevitable comic book adaptation.<sup>6</sup> There is nothing to formally bind this story into *The Sandman* canon as no DC trademarked characters appear, and the comic book version was published by rival company Dark Horse, but they share identical conceptions of Heaven as a Silver City, and the portrayal of Lucifer is consistent with what we see of the character in *The Sandman*. Structurally, the short story is similar to

*Paradise Lost* in that its central section is a narrative of events in Heaven before the Creation of the World, told by an angel to a mortal. However, Gaiman's frame story begins in Los Angeles in December in the 1980s, not in Eden before the Fall, and while Milton harnessed the power of Homer and Virgil to write of an epic War in Heaven, Gaiman writes a murder mystery set before Lucifer's revolt. The number one suspect - and, of course, the biggest red herring - is Lucifer himself.

The epigraph to the short story is not Miltonic, but from the Chester cycle of medieval mystery plays.

*The Fourth Angel says:*

Of this order I am made one

From Mankind to guard this place

That through their Guilt they have foregone

For they have forfeited His Grace;

Therefore all this must they shun

Or else my Sword they shall embrace

And myself shall be their Foe

To flame them in the Face. (339)

Though this play actually deals with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden rather than the time before Creation, the epigraph is appropriate in more ways than one. It adumbrates the method of execution used by Raguel, angel of Vengeance and narrator of the central story, who kills the guilty angel Saraquael by burning him until not even ash remains. It also foreshadows the essentially dramatic nature of the crime and its arrangement.

Milton's early notes preserved in the Trinity Manuscript at Cambridge inform us that *Paradise Lost* began life as a play or a closet drama. Indeed, Satan's great soliloquy at the beginning of Book IV has often been marked as belonging to this stage of composition, before the author turned towards the epic. "Murder Mysteries" a work which has also gone through some transposition of genres from short story to radio play to graphic novel, sets itself up in response to Milton's self-assigned task of justifying God's ways to man, and questions God's culpability in the Fall of Lucifer. As Raguel says in "Murder Mysteries", "nothing occurs without reason; and all the reasons are Yours" (366). Despite the confusion of leads, motives and red herrings as the story progresses, it is self-evident that in any murder before the creation of the world, before the Fall of Adam and even before the Fall of Lucifer, the reason must, at some remove, lie with God.

The deity who emerges from behind the curtain at the tale's conclusion, however, is not quite the bitter divinity with the mocking laughter that Empson finds in *Paradise Lost*. His choice to disguise himself as Zephiel,

one of the senior designers of the Universe hints at a kind of humility never shown by the proud patriarchal deity of *Paradise Lost*, who is enthroned in glory upon a panoptic mound in the very centre of Heaven. Milton never dares to describe his God in concrete terms, whereas Gaiman's Deity is tired, with "old, old eyes" (366). When He condescends to explain a small aspect of his plan to Raguel, He speaks "gently, almost teasingly, as an adult would pretend to make conversation with a tiny child" (366). He acknowledges the sacrifices involved in his machinations, and shows signs of pity for his instruments:

Lucifer must brood on the unfairness of Saraquael's destruction. And that - among other things - will precipitate him into certain actions. Poor sweet Lucifer. His way will be the hardest of all my children; for there is a part he must play in the drama that is to come, and it is a grand role. (366)

God's plan here takes the form of a drama, a play arranged for unknown purposes. While hope for free will remains - God acknowledges that "The problem with creating things is that they perform so much better than one had ever planned" - the plan itself remains a mystery beyond the ability of the angelic protagonist to decipher. (366) Raguel, like Milton's readers, hopes for a final justification of God's ways. But here, as in the epic, they are left obscure. As Raguel leaves "I hoped He would call me back, explain every detail of His plan to me, somehow make it better. But He said nothing, and I left His presence without looking back" (367). The Creator may be more sympathetic here than in the Epic, but his ways are still mysterious - and to many, cruel or unfair.

The spin-off series that developed from the works of Moore and Gaiman preserve each author's take on the Miltonic cosmogony. Developing a character introduced in *Saga of the Swamp Thing*, *John Constantine: Hellblazer* ran from 1988 to 2013. A running theme was the struggle of the eponymous antihero, caught between the malice of the demons and the rigid purity of the militant angels. Running from 2000 to 2006, Mike Carey's *Lucifer* took the newly independent adversary of Gaiman's conception to its furthest extremes, depicting a new Edenic story in a permissive Satanic universe, and concluding with a new War in Heaven where God abdicates and Elaine, the daughter of the angel Michael, becomes the new deity.

Meanwhile, the Miltonic myth structures Moore and Gaiman had introduced to the DCU were being capitalised upon in the mainstream superhero narrative, such as Grant Morrison's mid-nineties *JLA* run and Mark Millar's spin off series, *JLA: Paradise Lost*. *JLA* #6-7 saw the introduction of the angel Zauriel, who aided the Justice League in combat against the rogue angel Asmodel (in the Lucifer role) before becoming a full member of the League in later issues. The machinery and the spectacle of Milton's epic are present, but God is sidelined, as are complicated issues of free will, predestination and the goodness of God.<sup>7</sup> These issues mark the point where the epic machinery of *Paradise Lost* made its mark on the pivotal figures of the DCU, but it's hard not to conclude Morrison's true interests lay elsewhere. Indeed, in recent years the Judeo-Christian narrative of origins has been largely displaced by the metafictional origin story of the Multiversal Monitors and the Overvoid which Morrison developed in *Final Crisis* (2008) and the ongoing *Multiversity* series (2015-).

Heaven and Hell remain actual locations within the DCU (the latter more visited than the former) but the Miltonic elements in their portrayal are now negligible. The end of the *John Constantine: Hellblazer* run in 2013 and the reincorporation of a younger version of the character into the DCU at large has largely spelt the end of the distinctive cosmology the series developed. A recent nadir was achieved when Constantine visited the borders of Heaven in a *Justice League Dark* comic, where the *Vox Dei* (or Voice of God) was portrayed as a small Scottie dog.

At the time of writing, then, it might seem the ideas which *Paradise Lost* brought to the DCU have been mined and exhausted. On the other hand, the fabric of the fictional universe is distinctly richer for the Miltonic element interwoven with the melange of legendary, alternate-historical, science-fictional, fantastical, original and derivative elements that form a part of the overall continuity. Four centuries of scholarship have shown that the questions Milton posed are far from being definitively answered. The opportunity remains open for a new writer to take up where Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman leave off in re-examining the seductive charisma of Satan and the arbitrary righteousness of God, the place of the human in this immortal drama, and whether it remains in any sense possible to justify the ways of God to man.

## Notes

1. See *Milton and Popular Culture* (2006) for a range of recent readings.
2. I explore the literary element of the comic book rather than the artistic element, but this essay might profitably be read in conjunction with Lisa Beaven's "Someone to Watch Over Me: The Guardian Angel as Superhero in Seicento Rome" in *Super/heroes: From Hercules to Superman*. 252-62.
3. For a more detailed overview of this critical heritage, see John Leonard's *Faithful Labourers: A Reception History of Paradise Lost, 1667-1970* (2013) 266-325.
4. Larry Niven's 1969 article "Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex" looks into the problems of Superman's dating life. The splash page of *Metamorpho* and the android Indigo caught *en flagrante* in *The Outsiders* #20 is probably the closest DC comics have come to addressing the subject.
5. Cf. Ryan Netzley's "'Better to Reign in Hell than Serve in Heaven, is that it?' Ethics, Apocalypticism and Allusion in *The Devil's Advocate*" in *Milton and Popular Culture* (2006) where a more flippant Satan is confronted with this quotation.
6. The references throughout are to the version of the short story collected in *Smoke and Mirrors* (2013). The graphic novel stays extremely close to the original text.
7. The rogue angels sent in pursuit of Zauriel are beings of spirit, adapted to the vibrational physics of the DC universe but modelled upon Milton's own semi-permeable angels, and the scene when Superman wrestles with Asmodel has something of Milton's epic combat.

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