

1978

Divine Permission

Mary Christopher Pecheux O.S.U.
The College of New Rochelle

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.cnr.edu/pecheux>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pecheux, M. C. (1978). Divine Permission. In *A Milton Encyclopedia*. Vol II. Cranbury, NJ: Bucknell University Press.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Works of CNR Ursulines at Digital Commons @ CNR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Works of Sister Mary Christopher Pecheux by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CNR. For more information, please contact lfazzino@cnr.edu.

to men, Milton faces it early in *PL*, pointing out (1.210ff.) that Satan could not have risen from the burning lake without God's concurrence, which is given in view of the ultimate triumph of good. For the average reader, the difficulty looms largest in the account of the War in Heaven*, a three-day conflict that might seem pointless, since God could have ended it at any time, had he not chosen to sit "Consulting on the sum of things, foreseen / This tumult, and permitted all, advis'd" (6.673-74). Many readers from Dr. Johnson* on have argued cogently that this part of the poem is a failure; others accept an explanation along the line of Madsen's (*Publications of the Modern Languages Association* 75: 519-26): God gives both men and angels* an opportunity to prove their loyalty; men must fight as though everything depended on us, knowing and trusting that ultimately everything depends on God.

The limits on Satan's activities are emphasized again in *PR*. Christ's serenity rests in part on the knowledge of those limitations: "do as thou find'st / Permission from above; thou canst not more," he says to the Tempter (1.495-96); and again: "But I endure the time, till which expir'd, / Thou hast permission on me" (4.174-75; see also 3.251, and 4.394-95). When Satan's power does expire, he falls.

Ultimately the mystery of the divine permission of evil lies in the fact that God always brings good out of evil. Though the end that a sinner (or Satan, for that matter) has in view is something evil, from it God always produces a good and just result, "thus as it were creating light out of darkness" (*CD* 15:77). The structure of *PL*, as Summers and others have shown, rests on this contrast, creation succeeding destruction. Adam's famous "felix culpa" speech (*PL* 12.469-78), echoing the long tradition that Lovejoy traces, makes the same point.

Besides permitting the evil of sin, God permits the physical evil of suffering. This may fall on good and wicked alike. Its effect on the former is to induce greater

DIVINE PERMISSION. The problem of divine permission is best approached through two questions: Why does God permit moral evil* (and specifically, Why does he not restrain Satan?)? and Why does he permit suffering? The answers are bound up with the issues of free will* and predestination*, which exercised so many seventeenth-century minds. Milton affirms that although God could not and did not create evil, he is concerned with the production of it in one of two ways: "either, first, he permits its existence by throwing no impediment in the way of natural causes and free agents . . . ; or, secondly, he causes evil by the infliction of judgments, which is called the evil of punishment" (*CD* 15:67).

Since the problem is crucial for an epic written to justify the ways of God

self-knowledge (or the suffering may be a punishment for some former sin), while it may persuade the latter to forsake his sins (*CD* 15 : 77). The utility of such suffering is brought out in the last two books of *PL*: through it man learns true patience; moreover, the force of one man's example can show others how to suffer (see especially 12.360-61). The Christ of *PR* is a special case of this, since the poem revolves around his exemplary function; in the wilderness he lays down the rudiments of his great warfare (l. 156-58). Samson, too, is one whom patience finally must crown (*SA* 1296).

Milton sees both the apparent triumph of evil and the consequent suffering of the just as part of a larger plan, to the exposition of which he devoted his talents. His purpose as an inspired poet was to celebrate "what [God] works, and what he suffers to be wrought with high providence in his Church, to sing the victorious agonies of Martyrs and Saints" (*RCG* 3: 238). Sin and Death, triumphantly let loose on earth by Satan, are God's hellhounds, his means of purifying the earth (cf. *PL* 10. 629-39). Man, "delivered from sin and death by God the Father through Jesus Christ, is raised to a far more excellent state of grace and glory than that from which he had fallen" (*CD* 15 : 251). The interplay between man's free will and God's grace gains for man entrance to the paradise within. [MCP]