

Michael Bryson. *The Tyranny of Heaven: Milton's Rejection of God as King*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004. 208 pp. \$43.50. Review by SUSANNAH B. MINTZ, SKIDMORE COLLEGE.

Michael Bryson's *The Tyranny of Heaven* is a smart and lively provocation of established readings of the God of *Paradise Lost*. The book begins with two important distinctions. First, Bryson insists that the poetical deity not be conflated with Milton's own God; too many readers, he suggests, have mistakenly addressed the epic's Father as an "absolute representation" (24) of the God of heaven, thereby turning "Milton *studies*. . . into Milton *ministries*" (23; italics in original). Second, the Father is to be understood not as a textual manifestation of God in some essential sense, but rather as the depiction of a certain *image* of God—an authoritarian and violent monarch—that prevailed in seventeenth-century England, and that obstructed, Milton believed, his nation's ability to free themselves from tyrannical rule. Bryson's insistence that the Father is a poetic character, and not the God of heaven, allows him to disentangle the Father and the Son as separate entities and thus to make his book's central claim: that it is the Son who embodies Milton's most cherished ideal of non-hierarchical, private, and rational connection with the divine.

Though he is not, of course, the first to broach head-on the contentious issue of how to square an obviously monarchical God with Milton the regicide, Bryson does deliver here a refreshingly risky discussion of a figure he calls deliberately "off-putting," *Paradise Lost's* "manipulative, defensive, alternately rhetorically incoherent and evasive" Father (24-25). His assertion is that Milton "creates a Father who is profoundly disturbing" on purpose, in order to illustrate "what can and will go wrong with deity imagined in absolutist and monarchical terms" (115). This argument hinges on the idea that Milton rejects *all* forms of monarchy: not just earthly tyrants who debased a heavenly ideal, but the very notion of a pure and paradigmatic kingly reign in heaven. In this, Bryson writes against the many scholars who have attempted to defend the epic's God as both equivalent to Milton's personal God

and prototypically 'royalist.' Bryson's convincing and detailed dismantling of the Father as the "proper moral center of *Paradise Lost* (114) suggests, quite to the contrary, that the Father is precisely the sort of ruler that English Protestant revolutionaries had fought to overthrow, a "top-down leader inclined to dictatorial pronouncements, war, and destruction" (83).

According to Bryson, the question that propels Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and much of Milton's later prose, is how to know God "aright." To dramatize the urgency of the matter and the potentially disastrous results of answering that question wrongly, Milton stages a tripartite debate between the Father, the Son, and Satan as representations of conflicting expressions of deity and connection to the divine. In the middle three chapters of his study, Bryson works through a careful demonstration of how fundamentally similar the Father is to Satan—two versions, he proposes, of the same problematic image: "*the idea of God as a king* (62). Against these paired tyrants, both of whom deploy fear and force in their campaigns to compel obedience, the Son stands as Milton's exemplar of properly conceived faith, not a power-wielding king but an "inward oracle." The persuasiveness of this reading depends not only on aligning the Father and Satan as militaristic leaders immersed in patterns of dominance and hatred, but more significantly, on disentangling the Father and Son as "*different and separate entities*" (66), a point Bryson acknowledges may make some Milton scholars balk. In defense of this position, Bryson relies primarily on the resonance between Book 3's Son and Abraham, like Abraham challenging "the often irascible Yahweh" (67), he argues, the Son "speaks] back to power *in his own voice*" (70). Deny him "an active and crucial agency," Bryson goes on, and we render the Son "a figure merely ridiculous and sycophantic."

The emphatic assertion of Bryson's book—that Milton refuses not simply local and historical kings but the very principle of kingship altogether—is also potentially its sticking point. The fact that Milton beheld earthly kings as a punishment imposed on humanity after the Fall does not inevitably correlate with a belief that heavenly monarchy is equally "deplorable" (44), since one can al-

ways contend (as indeed many previous scholars have) that human habits simply fall short of the prime example. Bryson's strategy is repeatedly to stress the incoherence created by *Paradise Lost's* presentation of God in terms of the exact political structures Milton abhorred—rank, hierarchy, spectacle, autocratic rule—and to argue that faith in a fear-mongering, untruthful, unrepentant God obstructs the ability to re-envision the operations of government, and thus to challenge oppression. Bryson proposes that Milton distinguished his "fit" audience from a population wearily acquiescent, even in their notions of God, to "the yoke of kingship" (111), and that he hoped the fit few would recognize in the Son of *Paradise Regained* a "lamp to guide their footsteps" (74): a model of truth defined as reasoned, internal, and private.

It is similarly risky to make the case that "kingly" (the word Milton uses to describe God's state in Sonnet 19) can be understood to mean "nobility, dignity passion governed by wisdom, justice tempered by mercy, confidence without arrogance, intellectual weight, empathy, and patience" (73)—not because these qualities don't rightly pertain to God as Milton imagined him, but because the possibility of a "Kingly" *character* threatens to throw into some doubt the strenuous eschewal of all things kingly that Bryson is claiming for Milton. If the word remains a viable descriptor, would it not be possible to argue for some version of a heavenly monarchy, one that is of a higher order than corrupt, human kingship? Bryson's approach here is to insist on "kingly" as a spiritual rather than political designation, a mark of "noble and virtuous character" and not power (75). His more potent offense, however, is simply the book's overarching thesis: that at no point does Milton actually present "God" as *both* monarchical and noble. It is finally the private, quietly obedient, inwardly divine Son of *Paradise Regained* who is "yet more kingly."

Though occasionally repetitive (reading at times like an extended essay), the book's methodical quality is also one of its most successful tactics, in that Bryson anticipates and steadily addresses potential objections to his claims. He has an impressive command not simply of contemporary Milton studies but also the necessary

biblical, historical, and theological references that buttress his position. Bryson's style is appealingly witty and accessible; this book would work well in both graduate and advanced undergraduate courses. In the manner of such fellow *provocateurs* of established readings as William Empson, Joseph Wittreich, John Rumrich, and John Rogers, Bryson offers in *The Tyranny of Heaven* a learned, stimulating, and welcome intervention into one of the most controversial arenas of Milton scholarship.