Milton’s Counter-Revision of Romantic Structure in *Paradise Regained*

Emily Griffiths Jones

**Abstract** In this essay, Emily Griffiths Jones argues for a reevaluation of the critical commonplace that John Milton abandoned romance after 1649 because of the genre’s Royalist overtones. Jones reads *Paradise Regained* against two postwar Royalist romances, Percy Herbert’s *The Princess Cloria* and Margaret Cavendish’s *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*, to illuminate Milton’s commitment to countering a uniquely Restoration-era phenomenon: the Royalist revision of romance into a secular genre in which the hero struggles to navigate the tides of fate. *Paradise Regained* embodies a struggle between this revisionary model, which forms the basis of Satan’s understanding of heroic romance, and Jesus’s equally (or more) romantic Puritan alternative, which rejects Satan’s innovative thematics in favor of a complex romance of providence. **Keywords:** seventeenth-century Royalist romances; teleology and tropes of sacred kingship; Thomas Hobbes; Percy Herbert; Margaret Cavendish

Milton’s **Paradise Regained** opens with an archetypal romantic premise: an unknown hero raised in obscurity suddenly discovers that he is the son of a king and heir to a usurped kingdom, and must then face the personal and practical implications of his identity. The Jesus of book 1 is “the Son of *Joseph* deem’d [. . .] as then obscure, / Unmarkt, unknown [. . .]”1 Having grown to “youths full flowr” (1.67), he learns the truth of his birth from his mother:

> For know, thou art no Son of mortal man,  
> Though men esteem thee low of Parentage,  
> Thy Father is th’ Eternal King, who rules  
> All Heav’n and Earth, Angels and Sons of men.

A messenger from God fore-told [. . .]
Thou shouldst be great and sit on David’s Throne,
And of thy Kingdom there should be no end.
(1.234–38, 240–41)

Over the course of Milton’s brief epic, Jesus withdraws from human society to wander through a desolate landscape, where he encounters and defeats his mortal enemy, and returns to the world confident in his identity and in the positive providential teleology of his life’s story. Milton’s use of romance’s conventional tropes (often termed “memes” by medieval scholars) and of its narrative structure is deliberate and sincere, as I will argue here, but *Paradise Regained*’s relationship to the genre is certainly more complicated than it appears in this cursory sketch of the plot. Jesus’s story may be a romance in itself, but the hero must also resist a satanic presentation of romance that seems equally conventional in its chivalric tropes and its narrative of heroic action in pursuit of a lost paternal inheritance. If the opponents’ struggle is indeed generically charged, why does Milton regard romance as such a ground of contention, and what can we finally conclude about his view of it in *Paradise Regained*?3

I hope to shed some light on Milton’s perspective on romance late in his career, which was once the subject of extensive critical debate. Nearly fifty years ago, Barbara Lewalski described “Jesus’ adventure and conquest over Satan in the Wilderness” in *Paradise Regained* as “the true, fully achieved Romance Quest” in which the hero “anti-types the romance knights” and “achieves . . . the highest romance purposes.”4 Her reading of Milton’s poem as a bold experiment with genre accords with Northrop Frye’s contemporaneous description of the poem as “a parody of a dragon-killing romance, or, more accurately,” as “the reality of which the dragon-killing romance is a

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2. I follow Barbara Lewalski in finding it unproblematic to categorize *Paradise Regained* as both a brief epic and a romance (see, respectively, *Milton’s Brief Epic* [Providence, R.I., 1966] and “Milton: Revaluations of Romance,” in *Four Essays on Romance*, ed. Herschel Baker [Cambridge, Mass., 1971], 55–70). David Quint famously distinguishes the two genres in *Epic and Empire* (Princeton, N.J., 1993), identifying epic by its teleological narrative movement toward a divinely dictated end, and romance by its meandering plot and its resistance to an ending. Patricia Parker offers a similar perspective in *Inescapable Romance* (Princeton, N.J., 1979). But while the hero’s wanderings are an integral part of romance, his or her pursuit of a specific quest or goal is equally important, and his or her eventual success is conventionally guaranteed by some form of providential oversight. Romances often defer their final ends, as is the case in *Paradise Regained*, but the sense of an ending on the narrative horizon continues to propel the story forward, or to inspire the creation of new narratives. For definitions of romance that incorporate this positive teleological thrust, see Northrop Frye’s study *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), and Helen Cooper’s survey of the genre in medieval and early modern England, *The English Romance in Time* (Oxford, 2004).

3. Many scholars have noted that romance is also a contentious genre in *Paradise Lost*. Clare Kinney, for one, has observed that Milton often associates romantic elements with Satan, but that romance cannot therefore be relegated “to the realm of the merely Satanic”: Kinney (embracing Quint’s distinction) suggests that “Adam and Eve’s ‘wandering steps and slow’ at the conclusion of Book XII [might] carry them out of Christian epic and into this most errant of genres.” See *Strategies of Poetic Narrative* (Cambridge, 1992), 129–30.

While these and a small set of other Miltonists have suggested that Milton remained committed throughout his career to romance's godly potential for a Puritan audience, more have concluded that the genre's Royalist associations finally overshadowed his enthusiasm, and that his eventual distaste for it spread into his late poetic work.

The widespread critical portrait of an anti-romantic older Milton roughly correlates with the rise of New Historicism. Scholars who could acknowledge the younger Milton's love for the genre—readily apparent in *Comus*, officially espoused in *An Apology for Smectymnuus*, and reflected in his rhetoric of the sacred quest for Truth in *Of Education, Areopagitica*, and the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*—argued that as the tensions of civil war escalated, and as his political enemies increasingly defined Royalist heroism and history through the tropes and narrative shape of romance, Milton's feelings for the genre rapidly cooled. George Williamson finds that Milton ultimately rejected romance as too Cavalier; Stanley Fish and Regina Schwartz both propose that Milton was politically and religiously motivated to abandon genre altogether in favor of a poetics of divine temporality that resisted conventional narrative shape; and David Loewenstein suggests that the crushing disappointment of the Puritan cause left Milton uneasy about optimistic genres after the Restoration.7 Annabel Patterson's 1983 essay on *Paradise Regained* as Milton's “Last Chance at True Romance” concludes that this last chance ultimately fails to redeem the genre. Patterson argues that romance's usurpation by Charles I’s regime led to Milton's outraged sense in *Eikonoklastes* “that the romantic mode, cultural or political, was irretrievably spoiled,” and that *Paradise Regained* portrays romance's tropes and trappings as satanic temptations to be rejected in favor of a structurally ambiguous “new Christian narrative whose rules are yet to be revealed.”8 Patterson's and Fish's essays both appeared in *Milton Studies* in 1983, and each determined that Milton was politically and religiously motivated to exclude *Paradise Regained* from traditional categories of genre and narrative temporality; their consensus marked the poem's “last chance at true romance” in Milton studies, and twenty years of critical conversation on *Paradise Regained*'s relationship to romance effectively came to an end.

I aim to show here that the matter has not been settled, and that a more complete historicist consideration of post-Restoration contexts can in fact strengthen Lewalski's and Frye's earlier assessments about the poem's genre. Scholars who argue for Milton's

break with romance overwhelmingly cite its cosmetic and thematic associations with Royalist ideology—such as the erotic love and chivalric combat often glorified in Cavalier writing, or the frequent orientation of romance plots toward monarchist triumphalism—as his primary reason for rejecting it. However, we must keep in mind that even the young Milton never defined romance by its externalities alone. Defending his youthful reading habits in the Apology for Smectymnuus, Milton claims that chivalric narratives of knighthood taught him “that every free and gentle spirit, without that oath, ought to be born a knight, nor needed to expect the gilt spur, or the laying of a sword upon his shoulder to stir him up both by his counsel and his arms, to secure and protect the weakness of any attempted chastity.” In other words, Miltonic romance belongs to the “free and gentle” elect soul, whose heroic vocation is to stand in defense of godliness, regardless of the presence or absence of other chivalric tropes. I argue that Milton never abandoned this idea, and that he actually found romance more ideologically useful, not less, after 1660. Rather than trusting the polemical Eikonoklastes to contain Milton’s final word on genre, we might look to his final poetic work: 11 romance as an anti-Royalist Puritan literary mode is very much alive in Paradise Regained, despite aspects of the text that appear anti-romantic.

Milton’s last poem features both positive and negative gestures toward romance not because of Milton’s ambivalence, but because it embodies a struggle between romance as a secular, implicitly Royalist genre and an equally (or more) romantic Puritan alternative. Critically, Paradise Regained is concerned not so much with the pre-Interregnum Caroline appropriations of romance that Patterson cites as with the more recent postwar romances and semi-historical romans à clef of the 1650s and 1660s. While these later Royalist texts retain many of the genre’s recurring tropes by featuring the errant adventures and hardships of dispossessed aristocratic characters, they make significant revisions to the basis of its narrative structure, and particularly to its didactic and religious components. Although the restoration of Charles II seemed to align history with romance’s common theme of royal loss and recovery, the king’s supporters were disturbed enough by the social and philosophical upheaval of the Interregnum that their treatment of the genre was irrevocably altered. As a brief consideration of two exemplary postwar romances will reveal, it is chiefly in response to the Royalists’ aggressive revision that Milton makes his own final assertion of Puritan romance.

Royalist Romances of Pragmatic Providence

The unique structural characteristics of postwar Royalist romance have been well characterized by Paul Salzman, whose analysis uncovers a great deal about the most

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11. The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates offers an apt lesson about drawing conclusions from emotional source material. Milton declines to interpret David’s cry in Psalm 51, “Against thee onely have I sinn’d,” as evidence that kings are beholden only to God: “any wise men will see that the pathetical words of a Psalme can be no certaine decision to a poynt that hath abundantly more certain rules to goe by” (Selected Prose, ed. Patrides, 258–59).
immediate textual backdrop to Milton's 1671 poem. Salzman argues that the Royalist narratives that reacted to the demise of Charles I and the eventual restoration of Charles II fundamentally revise several assumptions about the narrative structure and didactic goals of the genre. Postwar Royalist romances thrive on ambiguity instead of absolutes, offering their readers “questions rather than answers” about the nature of providence and of moral virtue. Their dispossessed and disillusioned characters wonder about the extent of God’s role in human events and hence about their own responsibilities, unsure whether to interpret the tempest of history as a divinely structured plot or a series of contingencies dependent on the interaction of individual agency with uncontrollable fortune. As Nigel Smith, Victoria Kahn, and others have noted, such romances must contend with the anti-romantic political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, who warns in *Leviathan* of the “fictions of the mind” produced by “reading of romances,” as “when a man imagines himself a Hercules or an Alexander.” Hobbes objects to romance as a mode that encourages its readers to believe that they are beings composed of passions rather than matter, and that their lives and histories operate according to literary rather than mechanistic order. But instead of shunning romance altogether, some Royalist writers set out to attempt a quasi-Hobbesian variant on the genre, one that set romance’s prescribed themes within a universe resistant to prescription, and that defined heroism partly as the ability to limit natural disorder by superimposing sociopolitical order, as the absolute monarch of *Leviathan* must do. Before returning to Milton’s perspectives on romance, I would like to illustrate these concerns at work in Percy Herbert’s and Margaret Cavendish’s romances, which exemplify the Royalist community’s generic anxieties and innovations.

Sir Percy Herbert’s *The Princess Cloria*, a coded roman à clef begun in exile during the 1650s and printed in England after the Restoration, epitomizes the Royalist revision of romance in its self-conscious anxiety over heroic conduct and providential structure. As Salzman has noted, the protagonists of *Cloria* are not atheists, but they do, in the words of Cloria’s page, continually question “whether [divine] power have any consideration or regard to our actions, otherwise then to maintain a succession and increase upon earth . . . as it fareth with Birds, Beasts, Plants and the like.” The royal Arethusius (Herbert’s figure for Charles II) finds himself so stymied by the political machinations of religious zealots that he at times doubts the value and purpose of religion: “scarcely can it be believed, there are any Gods in Heaven, or at the most that minde our actions upon earth” (463). Euarchus (the figure for Charles I) is similarly

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14. Smith also notes that “Cloria provides reactions rather than answers” to the problems of history and to the decline of sincere and straightforward Royalist romance (*Literature and Revolution*, 237).
15. Percy Herbert, *The Princess Cloria, or, The Royal Romance* (London, 1661), 361. Further references to this work are given in the text.
confounded by his crumbling relationship with his subjects and by the apparent failure of moral logic that it represents: “what assurances (said the King) have we . . . when every one pretends to be in the right, both in his belief and proceedings[?]” (319). Throughout the narrative, character after character verges on the conclusion that “either [the Gods’] Justice or [their] Power” must be lacking (555).

Herbert does introduce other sympathetic characters who attempt to offer pious consolation, such as the priest Hephhestion, who counsels Euarchus that ignorant humans must “observe in a manner continually, both a perfect charity, and an entire patience” (320). “Perfect charity” and “entire patience” have the sound of Milton’s favorite virtues, but unlike most of Milton’s heroes, the denizens of Cloria fear that they may be practicing them in a spiritual vacuum, valuing patience for its own sake rather than in expectation of the fulfillment of providential order. “Perfect charity” and “entire patience” are tools for survival in a world without assurances; they seem more like the armor of resignation than the weapons of faith. Indeed, Herbert’s characters express unresolvable doubt and discomfort about how providence ought to be understood and defined. Locrinus conflates divine providence with an impersonal “predominate fate” that has used “some strange period” of civil strife as an instrument “for the punishing of wickedness” (539–40). And when Arethusius has the chance to trust that providence will reward the righteousness of the just rather than punish evil indiscriminately, he instead grounds his hope that he may one day return to his throne in “the instability of things,” which “would of necessity at last bring him to his Rights” (445). Not God, but his subjects, awash in cosmic uncertainty, will ultimately depend upon a mortal monarch to restore (or impose) order, just as Hobbes’s political philosophy finds fit. Salzman notes that Arethusius’s eventual triumph and return to power are made retroactively “inevitable” by the historical fact of Charles II’s restoration and are then “gladly embraced by fiction”—that is, history happens to have conformed to romance’s conventional shape—but the king’s happy ending is not obviously the work of any providential power internal to his story.16

As a character in a formulaic narrative that nevertheless acknowledges no clear providential structure, the romantic hero Arethusius ironically arrives at a personal philosophy that embraces many of Hobbes’s most anti-romantic principles. He finally finds comfort in his stoical avowal that “man was a world within him self, being not to be deprived of an inward felicity by any power or tyranny, if he proved not the destroyer thereof by his own passions” (416). Much as “perfect charity” and “entire patience” resemble Miltonic virtues but prove distinct in their lack of a zealous origin and end, Arethusius’s “world within him self” might sound like Milton’s “Paradise within” (PL 12.587), but it is not. In Cloria’s universe, which might be ruled by a cold providence or by “predominate fate” or by atomistic chance—or by some vague combination of the three—Arethusius must weather the tempest of history through clear-eyed self-reliance, not through faith in the unseen. He turns inward not for divine guidance and inspiration, but because his only certain reference is himself, and his

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own judgment leads him to a pragmatic philosophy in which one’s outward actions may not match one’s inner constancy: in order to be an effective ruler, Arethusius resolves, “sometimes we must dissemble towards people . . . I cannot deny it” (392). He comes to the Hobbesian conclusion that while his duty as king compels him to act for the good of his kingdom and its people, he has no external “assurances” about the right course of action, and so the nature of that public good, and the substance of that individual action, must be his to determine as well as he can.

Margaret Cavendish’s romantic style, while less melancholy than Herbert’s *Cloria* and less overtly historicized, features a similar wariness about crediting a narrative plan to divine providence and hence a similar emphasis on politic pragmatism and self-reliance. Cavendish deeply mistrusts any human claim to know the mind of God, associating such assertions with Puritans such as Milton.17 In her philosophical writing, she derides those who claim to hold “the Key of Divine Providence”: “setting aside Pride and Presumption, Sense and Reason may easily perceive, that Man . . . is not made with such infinite Excellence, as to pierce into the least secrets of God; Wherefore I am in a maze when I hear of such men, which pretend to know so much.”18 She strips all dangerously devout presumptions from her definition of providence, in *The World’s Olio*, as the distinctly human ability “to observe the Effect of Things, and to compare the past with the present, as to guess, and so to provide for the Future.”19 Disdaining the “mystical” element of the Puritans’ view of history as a narrative of the godly authored by God’s providence, and condemning them for “telling Romansical Falshoods for Historical Truths” by comparing their leaders “to Moses, and . . . to all the great and most famous Heroes,” Cavendish holds even her fanciful narratives to the standards of natural philosophy.20 Her romances reformulate the genre’s conventional reliance on providential plot. Cavendish’s pragmatic providence signifies not God’s design for human affairs, but the individual’s potential to provide for herself; in so doing, she reasons and acts in order to chart her own future, rather than attempting to discern a divine plan that might explain her movement through time and space.

In Cavendish’s 1656 *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*, both heroine and narrator regard pragmatic providence as their guiding principle. The romance’s nameless heroine, hereafter known by one of her assumed names, Travellia, enters the narrative when an unscrupulous guardian abandons her “to Chance, Time, and Fortune.”21 The lady set adrift on fortune’s tide is, of course, a common meme in early modern, medieval, and classical romance, but her destiny usually proves to be secure in the hands of

17. Anna Battigelli has also noted that Cavendish uses scientific skepticism to undermine the religious dogmatism that she blamed for the civil wars, replacing prophets with scientists. See “Political Thought / Political Action: Margaret Cavendish’s Hobbesian Dilemma,” in *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition*, ed. Hilda Smith (Cambridge, 1998), 40–55.
21. Margaret Cavendish, *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*, in *Natures Pictures Drawn by Fancies Pencil to the Life* (London, 1656), Ff2v. Further references to this work are given in the text.
providential forces. Travellia, however, must provide for her own destiny. Like *The Princess Cloria, Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* is not an atheistic romance: its characters acknowledge the Greco-Roman pantheon, and Travellia’s adoptive father goes so far as to pronounce on his deathbed that the gods “will reward [her] Vertue” (Ll4v). Crucially, though, the heroes presume no knowledge of how the gods direct the trajectories of their lives, apart from their belief that heaven helps those who help themselves. For instance, upon “considering” her “dangerous condition” at finding her virginity for sale in a brothel, Travellia reflects “that the Gods would not hear her, if she lasily called for help and watch’d for Miracles neglecting Naturall means; Whereupon she thought the best ways was secretly to convey herself out of that place, and trust herself againe to chance; by reason there could not be more danger than where she was in” (Ff3r). While Travellia never rejects outright the potential for miracles to occur, she determines that there is neither sense nor virtue in expecting one to save her now. Divine providence, in her experience, functions through pragmatic providence, and so she turns to “Naturall means” and judges future “chance” less dangerous than the certainties of the present.

Yet, while she often acknowledges the roles of chance and fortune in aiding or frustrating mortal endeavors, Travellia leaves as little as possible at their disposal. Most notably, she acquires a pistol by exploiting the romantic imagination of her captor’s maidservant, concocting a parodic story about the prophecy of a “wise Wizard” to justify her request for the gun, which she conceals in anticipation of need and eventually uses to shoot her would-be rapist (Ff3v). Although she deceives the “simple Wench” by pretending that the pistol can perform a supernatural charm to protect her from evil and ensure her happiness, the weapon’s purpose in Cavendish’s rational narrative—as opposed to Travellia’s opportunistically fanciful one—is almost comically natural (Ff3v). Metaphysical forces arrange for neither the pistol nor the successful escape; she provides both for herself. Moreover, while she harbors a Hobbesian disdain for romances as full of “impossibilities . . . ridiculous to reason” (despite inhabiting one herself), she is well aware of the genre’s power to manipulate the passions of others—a power that she exploits to further her own rational romance (Ff4v).

At the height of her narrative, Travellia becomes an evangelist on behalf of pragmatic providence. Shipwrecked and held by natives who plan to sacrifice her to their gods, she patiently observes her captors until the ideal opportunity, then astounds them with a learned sermon on how “[their] ignorance hath lead [them] wrong wayes” despite their well-meaning piety (Hh3v). She persuades the natives to forsake their superstitious zeal and thus to become “a civilized people” (Hh4v) by explaining that while the gods of nature certainly “governe all their Works,” they do so in a surprising manner:

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22. Kahn argues that Cavendish “uses the concerns of romance to counter the Hobbesian response” to England’s political crisis; however, she also acknowledges that Cavendish’s decision to employ rather than dismiss romance is sometimes “less a simple rebuttal of Hobbes . . . than an adaptation of [his] arguments concerning the power of self-interest” (*Wayward Contracts*, 172, 192).
the Gods made [Chance] by their providence when they made man, for
man hath no more knowledge of the transitory things of the world than
what chance gives them, who is an unjust distributer, For all externall
gifts comes from her hand. . . . none have perfect knowledge, for the
Gods mix mans nature with such an aspiring ambition; that if they had a
perfect knowledge . . . of the first cause; and the effects produced there
from, they would have warr’d with the Gods, and strove to usurp their
authority, so busie and vain-glorious hath the Gods made the minds of
men. Wherefore the Gods governe the world by ignorance. (Hh3v)

Throughout Cavendish’s works, “providence” refers almost always to human prudence; here, Travellia employs it once in a metaphysical sense. This divine providence has a single design for creation: to order it by creating disorder in the form of “Chance.” It protects human affairs not by guiding them toward a sacred end but by frustrating such a teleology and any mortal claim to know it, since if man could truly perceive divine order, the result would be spiritual chaos. The function of divine providence, Travellia concludes, is to necessitate human providence. For despite chance’s regency in the material world, “it hath not the power to rule [the soul]: For the Soul is a kind of God in it self, to direct and guide those things that are inferior to it; to perceive and descry into those things that are far above it, to create by invention, to delight in contemplations” (Hh3v–Hh4r). While divine providence makes the world subject to contingency, human providence allows reason and pragmatism to contend with chance. Travellia assumes that randomness is intrinsic to the universe, and arrives at a happy ending through her ability to “provide for the Future” by analyzing and making the best of contingency. Rather than inhabiting a predestined sacred narrative, she creates her own narrative out of apparent chaos. Much as Herbert’s Aræthius becomes convinced by his romantic trials of the necessity of acting as roi absolu, Travellia steps in to perform as moi absolue, to use Catherine Gallagher’s coinage, “a kind of God in [her] self.”

Victoria Kahn has described postwar Royalist romance as “a crisis of genre”: after the execution of Charles I, and despite the eventual restoration of his son, the Royalists had to revise romance in order to sustain it as a genre suitable for their community after the Interregnum. It became a genre that could account for subjective individual morality and for the harsh vicissitudes of history while emphasizing the need for pragmatic personal rule over the self and others. This “crisis” manifests itself through romances that retain their conventional narrative arc—from loss through wandering trials to eventual renewal—but take nothing else for granted. While Herbert laments the loss of naive providential romance, and Cavendish is more cheerfully ironic in her embrace of new perspectives on character and narrative, both writers feel compelled to raise similar questions. Is the structure of plot—whether historical or fanciful—

guided by providence, by fate, by random chance, by human agency, or by a combination thereof? Can mortals distinguish between these forces? What constitutes heroism amid such structural and moral ambiguity? Herbert’s and Cavendish’s responses are likewise similar: creation is barred from knowledge of divine providence, if such a thing exists; politic self-reliance is essential, since the “world within” is an individual’s only constant reference amid external turmoil; and because events occur apparently at random, a successful figure of authority must act to impose order, while a character’s successful search for narrative order requires an authorial control over his or her persona and an active ownership of the plot’s progression. Patience is often rewarded in these romances, but it is not the Miltonic version of the virtue: for Herbert and Cavendish, it signifies either resignation or a calculated compromise, a waiting for a better chance, not for the providential “fullness of time.” The result, in Kahn’s words, is “an ironic self-consciousness about literary convention and genre,” a worldly “detachment from the conventions of romance” that coexists with the Royalist reliance on romance’s political utility as a narrative of tribulation and restoration.25

Paradise Regained: A New “Chance at True Romance”

If we take The Princess Cloria and Assaulted and Pursued Chastity to be representative models of the latest variations on seventeenth-century romance, Milton’s knotty approach to the genre in Paradise Regained becomes considerably easier to untangle. The new Royalist paradigm of the pragmatic, individualistic hero struggling to make sense of the vicissitudes of fortune—treated with seriousness and skill by writers such as Herbert and Cavendish—appears from a Miltonic perspective as something far more sinister. This model forms the basis of Satan’s understanding of the romance genre, and of the narrative shape of history itself; throughout the poem, his temptations strive to mold Jesus into the hero of a romance like the new Royalist ones, bound to its formulaic heroic tropes but also to its revisionary themes and structure. Jesus’s trials, however, lead him to reject both the inessential cosmetics and the innovative thematics of the new romance, thereby exposing the pattern and purpose of Miltonic romance in its purest form. Our attention to postwar Royalist romance should help us rethink the prevailing scholarly wisdom that Paradise Regained is responding to, or even enacting, Milton’s political crisis of genre. Stanley Fish, for instance, has identified the poem’s primary challenge for both its hero and its reader as a “literary temptation,”26 arguing that Satan makes a “continual effort . . . to persuade the Son of God that the Son himself is a character in a plot, in a narrative where every change of scene brings new opportunities and new risks,” and that “what defeats Satan finally is the Son’s inability or unwillingness . . . to recognize the fact that there is a plot at all.”27 The audience, in turn, must acknowledge and renounce its “taste for ‘fallen’ literary

27. Fish, “The Temptation of Plot,” 166.
and intellectual heroics.”²⁸ Annabel Patterson, Stuart Curran, and Regina Schwartz have likewise characterized the poem as resistant to narrative forms, romance included, which impose worldly expectations and temporalities on an inscrutable divine story.²⁹ A more thorough consideration of *Paradise Regained*’s immediate cultural contexts, however, reveals that the poem does not abandon outworn genre to escape its temptations; rather, it counters the new Royalist romance by assigning its innovative Hobbesian characteristics to Satan and by combating it with a Puritan alternative. After the turmoil of the Interregnum and the Restoration, the Royalists required a romance that allowed for doubt about moral and supernatural order, counseled pragmatic patience and self-reliance, and celebrated the stability of monarchy; Milton responds with a romance that insists on a providential plot even in the midst of doubt and disappointment, extols the expectation of divine teleology, and denounces worldly kingship as an artificial usurpation of God’s authority. Satan’s temptation in *Paradise Regained* is indeed literary, but Jesus’s resistance and his triumph are no less literary: while Satan’s self-conscious assumptions and uncertainties about heroic narrative bear all the hallmarks of the Royalist crisis, Jesus becomes progressively more assured that providentially guided romance is the genre of human history and that his own role within it is clear. If anything, Milton displays a heightened literary self-consciousness compared with Herbert or Cavendish, since one of the forces that the hero of his “dragon-killing romance” must overcome is a rival form of the genre itself.³⁰

*Paradise Regained* begins as Jesus “One day forth walk’d alone, the Spirit leading” into the wilderness, armed only with his tentative new knowledge of his identity and purpose and “Musing and much revolving in his brest, / How best the mighty work he might begin / Of Saviour to mankind” (1.185–89). Having retreated from the public world into the indeterminate landscape of romance, he soon encounters another of the genre’s well-known figures: “an aged man in Rural weeds” who offers the wandering hero his assistance (1.314).³¹ Jesus sees through his enemy’s disguise immediately, and his romantic and meta-romantic battle with Satan thus begins. Once we have identified the distinctive features of postwar Royalist romance—deliberate murkiness about ordered or predestined narrative, valorization of self-reliance and strength of will, and a thematic blend of fatalism and pragmatism—the prevalence of these features in Satan’s approach to heroic narrative is striking, even uncanny. His anxiety over Jesus’s

²⁸. Fish, “Inaction and Silence,” 47.
³⁰. I am grateful to John Rogers for this observation.
³¹. Like many romances, *The Princess Cloria* also opens with an errant protagonist (Cassianus) wandering through an unfamiliar country and encountering a (legitimately) hospitable stranger. Scholars have long noted the resemblance of Milton’s seemingly innocuous old shepherd to Spenser’s Archimago, the cunningly deceitful villain of *The Faerie Queene*; unlike Spenser’s Redcrosse Knight (another hero traversing the wilderness on a mission of holiness), Jesus easily recognizes his foe.
uncertain future and his urgent sense that the dethroned heir must form a plan for regaining his father’s kingdom bear a marked resemblance to the concern throughout Cloria and other Royalist romans à clef about the proper course(s) of action for the deposed prince: should the royal exile fight, wait, plot, or do all these things at the times he deems best? The ensuing temptations are accordingly varied, as Satan alternately exhorts Jesus to rely on martial force, on pragmatic patience, and on his wits. This new heroic narrative offers many paths to triumph, as long as its protagonist, like Cavendish’s Travellia, does anything other than wait for a divine sign (such as those found in passé romances that are “ridiculous to reason”) and acts to further his own ends.

Romance’s sometime eroticism plays only a minor role in postwar Royalist narratives, and so Satan wastes little time in confirming that Jesus is immune to the sensual charms of women modeled on the ladies of archaic Arthurian texts, “Fairer then feign’d of old, or fab’d since / Of Fairy Damsels met in Forest wide / By Knights of Logres, or of Lyones, / Lancelot or Pelleas, or Pellenore” (2.358–61).33 Instead, he turns to romantic allures that are less obviously frivolous and that feature more prominently in postwar heroic texts: the temptations of combat and of politics. He begins by warning Jesus that his “years are ripe, and over-ripe” (3.31) for the martial display with which the untried young hero of chivalric romance conventionally proves his mettle to the world, and for which Arethusius’s younger brother in Cloria (Herbert’s figure for James II) particularly yearns. Such is Jesus’s “skill,” Satan suggests, that were he “sought to deeds / That might require th’ array of war [. . .] all the world / Could not sustain [his] Prowess”:

These God-like Vertues wherefore dost thou hide?
Affecting private life, or more obscure
In savage Wilderness, wherefore deprive
All Earth her wonder at thy acts, thy self
The fame and glory, glory the reward
That sole excites to high attempts the flame
Of most erected Spirits[?]

(3.16–27)

Jesus responds by denying the value of the conventional quest for personal renown, which he scorns as “false glory, attributed / To things not glorious, men not worthy of fame” (3.69–70). Moreover, he rejects martial action as a means of demonstrating one’s heroic virtue:

32. For a detailed discussion of this problem in Royalist prose romance, see Kahn, “Wise Compliance,” Wayward Contracts, 227–33.

33. Satan scoffs at Belial’s suggestion that the devils entrap Jesus with “Amorous Nets,” arguing that many great men “[make] small account / Of beauty and her lures [. . .] / on worthier things intent,” but he tries the tactic anyway, just to be sure (2.162, 193–95).
They err who count it glorious to subdue
By Conquest far and wide, to over-run
Large Countries, and in field great Battels win,
Great Cities by assault: what do these Worthies,
But rob and spoil, burn, slaughter, and enslave
Peaceable Nations[?]

(3.71–76)

Conquest and victory in battle, the chivalric hero’s badges of honor, are exposed by Jesus as excuses for wanton destruction and, what is more, as the cornerstones of tyranny. The conquering champion’s only motive and reward, he argues, is to become the unlawful king of an unconsenting people.34

After linking martial chivalry to the corruption of absolute monarchy, Jesus counters that any earthly glory must be “attain’d / Without ambition, war, or violence; / By deeds of peace, by wisdom eminent, / By patience, temperance” (3.89–92). Yet even peace and patience are not without their perils: in Cloria, an inclination toward peaceful prudence rather than glorious violence distinguishes Arethusius from his bellicose brother, but as we have seen, Arethusius’s cautiousness works in tandem with his ambition for advancement and political success.35 Lewalski has pointed out that Milton regards the entire premise of heroic ambition as mistaken in his later work: in Paradise Lost, Eve “assumes the faulty heroism of a knight-errant looking for adventures to prove her unaided virtue” when the trials of romance will “come unsought” (9.366), while Jesus, who functions in Paradise Regained as the antitype not only of Adam but also of Eve, instead accepts the trials that God has ordained, crucially seeking not his own glory, “but his / Who sent me” (3.106–7).36 True patience, for Milton, can never be politic in the self-seeking sense; Jesus is waiting not for the right time to exercise his own pragmatic providence, as Arethusius and Travellia continually do, but for divine providence “To exercise him,” as it is now doing “in the Wilderness” (1.156).

When his attempt to move Jesus to action by encouraging him to go out in search of adventure to prove his merit and win glory ends in failure, Satan turns instead to a more specific quest, one that constitutes the plot of countless heroic romances, including Cloria and, of course, the historical trajectory of Charles II. As the unrecognized heir to a kingdom, he insists, Jesus must surely answer the clear call of narrative destiny:

34. The archangel Michael denounces martial valor to Adam in similar terms in Paradise Lost (11.689–99).
35. In Paradise Lost, Arethusius’s position is echoed by Belial’s proposal that the fallen angels rely on sufferance and pragmatic patience until they discover “what chance, what change” might be “worth waiting”; Milton’s narrator reminds us that Belial is really advocating “ignoble ease, and peaceful sloath” (2.197–200, 222–23).
Of glory as thou wilt, said he, so deem,
Worth or not worth the seeking, let it pass:
But to a Kingdom thou art born, ordain’d
To sit upon thy Father David’s Throne;
By Mothers side thy Father, though thy right
Be now in powerful hands, that will not part
Easily from possession won with arms;

...[...] and think’st thou to regain
Thy right by sitting still or thus retiring?

(3.150–56, 163–64)

Now knowing Jesus’s hatred of monarchical oppression, Satan reminds him that his father’s throne has been wrongfully usurped by the Romans, who have ruled the realm as tyrants and “violated” its sacred Temple “with foul affronts, / Abominations rather” (3.160–62): if Jesus is truly the long-lost heir of David, as the rumor runs, then the obvious task before him as a romantic hero is to reclaim his royal right, end the usurpers’ tyranny, and establish a reign of virtue. And having found Jesus to be unmoved by power or worldly possessions, Satan appeals to the hero’s most righteous impulses, invoking

Zeal of thy Fathers house, Duty to free
Thy Country from her Heathen servitude;
So shalt thou best fullfil, best verifie
The Prophets old, who sung thy endless raign,
The happier raign the sooner it begins,
Raign then; what canst thou better do the while?

(3.175–80)

According to Satan, Jesus is bound by all the obligations of royal romance, which Satan describes in vivid generic terms: he has a “monster” (as Satan terms Tiberius) to “expel,” an ancestral right to reclaim, a people to liberate, a prophecy to fulfill (4.100). And in addition to mobilizing romance’s conventional imagery in support of his argument, Satan incorporates the revised Royalist theme of politic calculation, proposing to his adversary that “Zeal and Duty are not slow; / But on Occasions forelock watchful wait. / They themselves rather are occasion best” (3.172–74). In other words, the dispossessed hero remains passive and patient only in anticipation of the right opportunity, which his own “Zeal and Duty” can easily bring about. Critically, these virtues “are occasion” in “themselves”; the right time for action in Royalist romance is dictated not by providence, but by the hero’s internal political barometer. Jesus refuses to adopt this revisionary rhetoric, insisting that “All things are best fulfil’d in their due time, / Which “The Father in his purpose hath decreed, / He in whose hand all times and seasons roul” (3.182, 186–87). Providential temporality, not royal birthright, political
contingency, or secular self-reliance, determines the proper “occasions” for the hero’s struggles and his eventual victory.

In a final effort to motivate Jesus to yield to the pressures of his artificial narrative and meet his enemies in combat, Satan shows him the battling armies of Parthia and Scythia, which Milton’s narrator links to the chivalric Roland cycle:

Such forces met not, nor so wide a camp,
When Agrican with all his Northern powers
Besieg’d Albracca, as Romances tell;
The City of Gallaphrone, from thence to win
The fairest of her Sex Angelica
His daughter, sought by many Prowest Knights,
Both Paynim, and the Peers of Charlemane.
Such and so numerous was thir Chivalrie;
At sight whereof the Fiend yet more presum’d,
And to our Saviour thus his words renew’d.37

(3.337–46)

Apparently inspired by the impressive visual trappings of “Chivalrie,” Satan claims that he has shown Jesus this spectacle not to test his virtue but to spur him along his destined course: he will never regain his “foretold” kingdom, Satan warns, “unless [he] / Endeavour[s], as [his] Father David did” (3.351–53). He attempts simultaneously to attach Jesus to earthly hereditary succession by offering him his royal ancestor as a model of political virtue—as Herbert’s Euarchus functions for Arethusius, and the historical Charles I for his son and his subjects—and to persuade him that a providential plan for his heroic story is indeterminate at best, and perhaps nonexistent. Fate and prophecy may interact with chance, mass contingency, and individual agency in some nebulous fashion, but no outcome can be guaranteed: “prediction still / In all things, and all men, supposes means, / Without means us’d, what it predicts revokes” (3.354–56). Here again we find a dependence on pragmatic providence that parallels Cavendish’s conviction that the gods are most helpful to those who act instead of waiting on divine aid. Satan thus rests his case in accordance with the postwar Royalist stance that the plot of romance is founded on the uneasy collaboration of uncertain fortune or fate and opportunistic heroism. Within this model, the hero may either “on Occasions forelock watchful wait” or “Endeavour” to reclaim his right; both options require politic judgment and self-generated authority, since faith in providence alone answers no questions and ensures no victory.

Earlier in the poem, Jesus has privately acknowledged that he once found the royal romance of usurpation and restoration compelling. Prior to his discovery of his identity from Mary and his pursuit of that identity in the wilderness, the young hero aspired to just the sort of active political virtue to which Satan tempts him:

37. This lengthy metaphor is reminiscent of Paradise Lost 1.579–87, in which the battalions of fallen angels are compared to the troops of King Arthur.
victorious deeds
Flam’d in my heart, heroic acts, one while
To rescue Israel from the Roman yoke,
Then to subdue and quell o’er all the earth
Brute violence and proud Tyrannick pow’r,
Till truth were freed, and equity restor’d.[

(1.215–20)

However, as he comes to understand his own sacred nature and the sacred nature of his quest, his perspective on romance matures, and he exposes Satan’s entire heroic narrative as a perverse veneer overlaying and obscuring the true divine plot. In Jesus’s rereading, it is Satan, not Tiberius and the Romans, who has “usurp’t” the earthly kingdom and must be overcome, and who “first made” all “brutish monster[s]” in need of expulsion (4.127–29, 183). As for the enslaved Israelites, their suffering under Roman rule is their own divinely ordained trial, and an apt punishment for their idolatry; moreover, their deliverance will come without any need for good fortune, politic “occasion,” or monarchical might, since God “at length, time to himself best known [...] May bring them back repentant and sincere” in accordance with his divine “providence” (3.433–35, 440). The time for action belongs to God to determine. In response to Satan’s insistence that he fill an authoritative void by acting as roi absolu of his people and as moi absolu of his narrative, Jesus rebuffs these false absolutes as the desperate skeptic’s substitutes for the one true absolute, which will prevail even if it remains concealed by political disaster or disappointment.

Finally, he rejects Satan’s assumption that his mission to reclaim his kingdom is identical to that of the worldly romantic hero and must therefore be accomplished by worldly means:

Know therefore when my season comes to sit
On David’s Throne, it shall be like a tree
Spreading and over-shadowing all the Earth,
Or as a stone that shall to pieces dash
All Monarchies besides throughout the world,
And of my Kingdom there shall be no end:
Means there shall be to this, but what the means,
Is not for thee to know, nor me to tell.

(4.146–53)

Jesus’s declaration that his romance of inheritance is explicitly anti-Royalist, opposed to “All Monarchies besides,” settles the matter of his narrative’s ideology while refusing to answer any questions about its practical progress or its temporal telos. Regina Schwartz rejects such questions as fundamentally misguided, arguing that the satanic urge “to possess [the] entire story, to ‘know’ [the] future rather than to determine it . . .
is, in Stanley Fish's phrase, the 'temptation of plot.'”38 But in Fish's reading (to which Schwartz subscribes), to succumb to the temptation of plot is to mistake timeless non-narrative for human narrative; what Jesus learns to do over the course of his errant quest is to accept that sacred time is a still-unfolding narrative, one that he, called to obey God and to trust in his authorial providence, has only limited power to “determine.” Unlike the heroes of postwar Royalist romance (and Satan), who do strive to determine their own destinies in the absence of providential certainty, the hero of Milton's Puritan romance demonstrates his heroism by living in willing accordance within the plot predestined by God.39 The urge to leap to the end of the romance while bypassing the tortuous experience of the middle—to possess the full story at once while elevated to a god's-eye view without embracing the intra-narrative human perspective—is the temptation of non-plot. While Satan falls to this temptation and presses his adversary to do the same, Jesus comes to an understanding that the long and hard middle of the romance must precede the sure but distant end; historical time must precede apocalyptic timelessness, and only divine narrative can lead into divine non-narrative.

A counter-revision of romance is thus essential for Milton as a literary mode that can mediate between the historical disappointments of the godly, including the Restoration of 1660, and the promise of their distant but certain triumph. Even as Jesus dismisses martial chivalry and monarchist politics as elements of his narrative, he stresses his romance's temporal reality and the thematic conventionality of its inevitable conclusion. The final victory is both indefinitely forestalled and absolutely assured: contrary to the claim that he must resist the temptation of teleological plot, Jesus reiterates that his "season" will come, that his story's glorious ending is guaranteed by divine will, and that this ending does, in fact, involve the forceful conquest of enemies and the recovery of a kingdom.40 Satan has been right about the most basic tropes of the romance of sacred kingship, which are unalterable, but entirely wrong about their packaging and about the means that govern their progress. That progress is certain, but Satan—despite his insistence on fixed generic rules for heroic success—is too committed to his own revision of Jesus's romance to believe in authentic narrative certainty and therefore cannot conceive of the middle of the story that ensures the transcendent end.

Satan's temptations of Jesus to substitute an inferior revision for the divinely ordained romance may be deceitful, but they correspond to Satan's own willfully faulty

39. Mary Beth Rose has discussed Milton's passive heroism (particularly as gendered feminine) in Gender and Heroism in Early Modern English Literature (Chicago, 2002), 85–99. Miltonic heroism is indeed often passive and implicitly feminized, though the potential for active heroism in the providentially correct moment always stands as a critical aspect of the hero's calling.
understanding of the genre. Being “compos’d of lies / From the beginning,” Satan tells the same lies about the nature of romantic narrative to himself (1.407–8). His suggestions that Jesus’s success hinges upon the collaboration of fortune and politic action mirror his speech to his demonic followers in book 1, wherein he proposes that they take urgent measures to “learn” Jesus’s true identity in order to assess their “danger,” which stands “on the utmost edge / Of hazard” (1.91–95). Satan’s use of the terminology of gambling here suggests a Cavendish-esque belief that chance and agency together govern affairs; accordingly, he imagines that he may yet “subvert” God’s plan for his Son if he acts swiftly (1.124).

Even so, his stance on the nature of fate vacillates throughout the poem, reflecting conflicted Royalist perspectives on the powers of personal agency, impersonal fortune, random contingency, and providence. Both Jesus and Milton’s narrator are unequivocal that God’s providence is the driving force behind the narrative of history—Jesus reproves the Greek philosophers, and by implication Herbert’s forlorn characters, for “accus[ing] [God] under usual names, / Fortune and Fate, as one regardless quite / Of mortal things” (4.316–18), while the narrator reminds us that Satan, “unweeting” and “contrary” to his own perceived purpose, “fulfill’d / The purpos’d Counsel pre-ordain’d and fixt / Of the most High” (1.126–28). But Satan can neither allow such certainty nor fully shake it. Despite his suggestion to himself and his crew that they may act to influence their fate, he admits elsewhere that he despairs of altering God’s judgment: “all hope is lost / Of my reception into grace; what worse? / For where no hope is left, is left no fear” (3.204–6). Like the heroes of Cloria, Satan finds it easier to conceive of divinity as the inexorable punisher of wickedness than as the assured ally of virtue. His hopeless courage thus serves only to inspire further fruitless action, and with it, further delusional hope; the circularity of Satan’s belief and behavior locks him into an anti-teleological pattern entirely opposed to the trajectory of heroic romance, despite his apparent affinity for recent Royalist treatments of the genre. In the absence of any sincere attempt at mediation between an errant middle and a teleological end, this endless romance is not really romance at all: Milton reveals that Satan, using the Royalist model, is doing it wrong. Maureen Quilligan has said of Milton’s devils that “their story is over” before it begins: “Having already fallen . . . they have been hardened in their hearts; they are no longer free to choose the one thing that would give their story a plot—a developing climactic chronology. All they can do is repeat their mistakes.”41 Ironically, while Satan does indeed attempt to convince Jesus that he is a character in a certain kind of chivalric text, as Fish suggests, Jesus is already aware that he is a character in the ultimate providential plot, and Satan is finally defeated by his own “inability or unwillingness . . . to recognize” that such a plot exists.42 Having rejected a legitimately developing narrative for himself, Satan finds himself unable to believe that his adversary could possess one without relying on illusory “hazard” to direct its progress.

41. Quilligan, Milton’s Spenser, 108.
42. Fish, “The Temptation of Plot,” 166.
Satan’s inability or refusal to grasp the full sense of an ending to God’s or his own narrative impacts his most seemingly candid speech in the poem, throwing it into sharp relief. When Jesus demands to know the reason for his solicitous concern—“Know’st thou not that my rising is thy fall, / And my promotion will be thy destruction?” (3.201–2)—Satan replies that he has grown weary of waiting to learn the exact nature and extent of his defeat, since he is already certain of his doom:

If there be worse, the expectation more
Of worse torments me then the feeling can.
I would be at the worst; worst is my Port,
My harbour and my ultimate repose,
The end I would attain, my final good.

(3.207–11)

Claiming to be eager for the conclusion of the divine narrative, he inexplicably justifies his attempts to provoke Jesus into alleviating his uncertainty by claiming that he feels simultaneous despair and suspense over the end of his story. With his characteristic terseness, Jesus declines to sympathize with Satan’s suffering and cuts through the Gordian knot of his illogic:

My time I told thee (and that time for thee
Were better farthest off) is not yet come;
When that comes think not thou to find me slack
On my part aught endeavouring, or to need
Thy politic maxims, or that cumbersome
Luggage of war there shewn me, argument
Of human weakness rather then of strength.

(3.396–402)

Beyond banishing “politic maxims” and the “Luggage of war” from his romantic narrative as signs of secular “weakness,” Jesus speaks only of that narrative’s certain progress toward its actively heroic climax and gestures parenthetically toward his enemy’s willful ignorance. Satan is granted no insight into the divine plot because he refuses to believe that any such insight is really possible or that any such immutable plot really exists. And he cannot in fact conceive of the story’s conclusion; if he could, he would have no desire to hasten it. Satan pleads for relief from the suffering caused by the narrative’s illusory suspense; Jesus ominously informs him that if he understood and accepted the narrative’s providential structure, he would be in no suspense at all.

The effect of Jesus’s words is often to frustrate not only his adversary but also the audience. *Paradise Regained* is notoriously a difficult, narratively unconventional poem about indeterminacy, negation, inaction, and silence. Fish, Patterson, and Schwartz all broadly agree that Satan’s goal is to press Jesus into making certain state-
ments about his divinity and taking actions that confirm it, and that Jesus resists him by refusing to provide answers that would violate the ambiguity of the sacred (or give the reader any satisfying information). This argument is sensible from a very specific angle, but we must be careful about how we understand satanic “certainty” as opposed to divine “ambiguity.” Satan, committed to a romantic discourse like that of the Royalists, actually harps on ambiguity and uncertainty as absolute facts before he grasps at their opposites. Just as it is he who experiences the real difficulty in thinking of himself as a hero within a teleological plot, it is he who keeps insisting upon narrative ambiguity and its attendant vexations, as in his warning that prophecy does not entail predestination (3.354–56), his willful claim that the title “Son of God […] bears no single sence” (4.517), and his final tirade before setting Jesus on the pinnacle of the Temple:

if I read aught in Heav’n,
Or Heav’n write aught of Fate, by what the Stars
Voluminous, or single characters,
In their conjunction met, give me to spell,
Sorrows, and labours, opposition, hate,
Attends thee, scorns, reproaches, injuries,
Violence and stripes, and lastly cruel death.
A Kingdom they portend thee, but what Kingdom,
Real or Allegoric I discern not,
Now when, eternal sure, as without end,
Without beginning: for no date prefixt
Directs me in the Starry Rubric set.

(4.382–93)

With this last gasp of malicious frustration, Satan articulates all the confusions of his revised romance at once: is he reading the text of heaven or of fate? Can a hero’s defeat really be a meaningful and necessary harbinger of his triumph? Is Jesus’s kingship “Real,” or only a metaphor? Finally, his confusion leads him to proclaim that, because he cannot discern its pattern, the narrative itself must be inherently unstructured and meaningless: there are no ends, no beginnings, no coherent middles. He is obsessed not with seeking answers to his questions, but with endlessly repeating the questions that he has already decided have no answers. Patterson holds that Satan is “driven by the need to know the truth” about Jesus’s identity and his mission, but as the eternal enemy of all Milton’s elect heroes who seek out and defend Truth, Satan is repelled by the truth about anything. He has spent the entire poem insisting to Jesus that truth is relative, that a nebulous providence cannot allow one to know anything

43. David Gay also interprets Satan’s reading of Jesus’s horoscope in the “Starry Rubric” as his mistaken reliance on both empty external icons and irreligious fatalism. See “Astrology and Iconoclasm in Milton’s ‘Paradise Regained,’” SEL 41, no. 1 (2001): 175–90.
44. Patterson, “A Last Chance at True Romance,” 202.
for sure, and that the only path to power and security is through one’s own interior standards and politic self-determination. Imitating many postwar Royalist heroes, Satan attempts to create his own order out of what looks to him like a disorderly universe by turning to a “world within him self” for guidance, as Arethusius does. But within Milton’s narrative cosmology, this profoundly individualistic self-reliance is doomed. Instead of finding a “Paradise within” himself, Satan instead discovers, in his most famous phrase, “Which way I flie is Hell; my self am Hell” (PL 12.587, 4.75).

Jesus, on the other hand, appears to become increasingly vague in his responses to Satan even as he becomes increasingly sure—at least, sure enough—of his heroic identity and of his quest. Whatever insights his wandering trials have granted him, however, would be meaningless to Satan, who is always already convinced that providential illumination cannot be real or trustworthy. To Satan, divine certainty and self-assuredness look indistinguishable from extreme ambiguity, as is the case with Jesus’s riddling “Think not but that I know these things, or think / I know them not; not therefore am I short / Of knowing what I ought” (4.286–88). We, the audience, are also not fully privy to what Jesus knows about himself and his destiny; but, like the poem’s hero, we know all that we need to at present. It would be a grave mistake for us to assume along with Satan that what we do not know does not exist to be known and that the poem’s last word on teleological narrative is silence—in Regina Schwartz’s words, that “there is no ‘there’ there.”45 A “there” that is not here, as Jesus warns his adversary, is hardly the same as a there that will never be anywhere.

The critical impulse to reduce Paradise Regained to anti-narrative silence is perhaps linked to the urge to de-romanticize its imagery. For instance, Patterson proposes that the answer to whether the Son’s kingdom is “Real or Allegoric” is “neither,” but we would do much better to accept the full weight of the generic trope and say that it is both.46 The kingdom of God that would “to pieces dash / All monarchies besides” may have been a powerful symbol in the hearts and minds of those who passively resisted the restoration of Royalism, but Milton and his fellow Puritan republicans would have insisted that its immateriality was temporary, just as Jesus does. Milton’s Christian narrative, as “the reality of which the dragon-killing romance is a parody,” features a real hero destined to overcome a real foe in real time and finally for all time. Even though (as Michael warns Adam) the Son’s battle with Satan remains deferred and never takes the form of a martial “Duel” (PL 12.387), the fact and the providentially ordained outcome of their combat still stand as traditional bulwarks against Satan’s innovative ambiguity. When Jesus stands on the pinnacle of the Temple, he stands in opposition to his enemy’s attempts to strip all absolute meaning from identity, heroic conduct, and narrative temporality and to locate the self as the only absolute power. Undaunted by all temptations to value romance’s surface over its structure, to choose politic calculation over faithful patience, and to create a new story to suit his own heroism in his own time, Jesus takes his place within the story that has already been written and waits for

its next adventure. He becomes so possessed with the certainty of his heroic identity, his narrative, and its providential structure that Satan flees before that certainty, “smitten with amazement,” unable to withstand what he refuses to understand (4.562).

In that moment, the romantic plot within Paradise Regained has reached its predestined climax: Jesus has “vanquish[ed] / Temptation” and “regain’d lost Paradise” (4.607–8). Yet the challenges of Milton’s poem do not disappear. Jesus may have attained the knowledge he needs, but the audience has heard few revelations and seen little action. And as countless readers have noted, the larger story does not end with Jesus’s descent from the pinnacle. He can only now “on [his] glorious work / […] enter, and begin to save mankind,” and the horizon of the romance landscape remains wide open as he returns “Home to his Mothers house” (4.634–35, 639). When one romantic episode concludes, another begins. Just as the fight with Satan will not resemble a human duel, its temporal location resists easy placement within human history. But the divine romance of Paradise Regained is neither endless nor aimless. J. Martin Evans has argued that Milton regards contemplation as a predecessor to action rather than a replacement for it, and that Paradise Regained signals the continuation of the Christian story rather than the dissolution of narrative: “Although the final lines return Christ to his mother’s house, Milton has made it clear that the ‘Queller of Satan’ (4.634) is only on the brink of his divine mission. The real action is just about to begin.”47 The poem does continually promise “real” romantic heroism in an indefinite future—but given those promises, why does Milton return Jesus to Mary’s house at all? Why do the last lines of the poem gesture toward further patience and quiet contemplation rather than action?

To begin to answer this question, it may help us to remember two moments in Milton’s other works that we might regard as poetic “types” of Paradise Regained. In book 11 of Paradise Lost, the archangel Michael presents Adam with a vision of the entire arc of human history from the peak of “a Hill / Of Paradise the highest,” which the narrator compares to the summit “Whereon for different cause the Tempter set / Our second Adam in the Wilderness, / To shew him all Earths Kingdomes and thir Glory” (11.377–84). Both Adam and Jesus are granted private insight into the nature of sacred narrative as they stand on great heights, but Adam’s “mortal sight” is too weak for a complete understanding of providential history, and he descends from his momentary prospect above his story only imperfectly enlightened, returning with mixed faith and doubt to the “lower World” where individual and historical narrative unfolds within time (12.9, 11.283). Unlike Adam, Jesus does not lose his grasp on the divine insights he has received. When he comes down from his mountain or his pinnacle, his descent is only physical. In effect, Jesus remains in his visionary moment even after it has passed: he finds it down on the ground, whether at the banquet that the angels provide in the wilderness or in Mary’s house, in the midst of everyday life. From that time on, his place of universal vision and his private home are one and the same.

Paradise Regained’s concluding evocation of Jesus at home with his mother also recalls the final stanza of Milton’s much earlier Nativity Ode, which finds the “Courtly

Stable” full of angels waiting with the “Virgin blest” in “order serviceable,” peacefully anticipating her baby’s remote heroic future (237–44). When he returns from the wilderness of his first romantic quest, Jesus reenters this domestic space as an adult who can consciously participate in the experience of standing “serviceable” to God’s will, simultaneously aware of the complete arc of sacred narrative and of his present place within its meandering course. He sees the story at once from a divine, authorial height and from the humble perspective of a human character like Mary. Stuart Curran has proposed that by the end of the poem Jesus “lives without time,” “liberated from the constraints of . . . history”; in a sense, this is so, but the extent of Jesus’s heroic accomplishment (and of Milton’s generic accomplishment) is only apparent if we recognize that he also lives within time, dedicated to the occluded demands of historical narrative as they arise and make themselves known.48 Both Jesus and Milton remain committed to providential romance as a genre ideally suited to the tempest of time, and of the post-Restoration Puritan moment in particular, in that it embodies the tension between the doubts and disappointments of the present and the triumphant promise of the future, using that tension to drive the story of the chosen people onward through its political vicissitudes and toward its final vanishing point. While Satan’s Royalist-inflected romance attempts to shed an artificial light on the darkness of history, Milton’s chance at true romance depends both upon the hero’s providential illumination and on his willingness to venture, or to stand and wait, in a temporally bound world of obscured vision.

**EMILY GRIFFITHS JONES** is a doctoral candidate at Boston University, where she is completing her dissertation, “Romance, Providential Time, and Elect Community in Seventeenth-Century England.” Her essay on the marriage of amorous romance and pragmatic historiography in Margaret Cavendish’s *Life of William Cavendish* is published in *English Studies*.