

which says, rather, that in reprinting the story in 1920 in *The Great Modern American Stories*, Howells “limited” his discussion of it to admiring its “chilling” quality. That he may have responded to the story in other ways as well is quite possible, and the afterword does not deny that possibility.

Dock also distorts a statement she quotes from Ann Lane, who, she implies, incorrectly describes Howells’s 1920 publication as a “collection of horror stories” (59). What Lane in fact says is that Howells reprinted Gilman’s story “as a horror story” (*Gilman Reader* xvii); she makes no comment on the nature of the collection as a whole.

These few examples suggest how easy it is for any critic to err or to overstate to make a case. Dock notes in her article that “[c]ritics must differentiate themselves from earlier readers, not just for self-gratification but also to validate the importance of the find” (60). She herself has not always been immune to this temptation.

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### Reply:

I appreciate Catherine Golden and Elaine Hedges’s careful attention to my article and their clarification of several small matters. They seem, unfortunately, to have misread my argument about critical characterizations of the story’s early reception. If they review the essay, they will see that I quote Hedges’s afterword to align Hedges with Gilman’s contemporaries, who point to the “horror” of the story. The “[p]ioneering feminist critics” whom I introduce in my next paragraph are those who blur the distinction between horror and ghosts by taking on board language that suggests a supernatural reading of the story; there I discuss Ann Lane’s reference to “spectral tales” and Golden’s citation of Lovecraft’s book on the “supernatural” (59). My inference regarding Lane’s characterization of Howells’s 1920 anthology as “a collection of horror stories” arises from Lane’s own text: immediately after remarking that “‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ has often been reprinted as a horror story,” Lane asserts that “its most famous appearance in that genre is in William Dean Howells’s *Great Modern American Stories*” (xvii). I nowhere “charge” Lane, Golden, or Hedges with “wrongfully claim[ing] that the work was initially received as a ghost story.” Rather, I point to how their criticism engenders much cruder interpretations when it is taken up in college anthologies, such as the two I cite

from 1992 and 1993. I do not argue, then, that early feminist critics espoused the ghost-story reading; I offer instead a cautionary example of how the work of critics can be skewed over time until an erroneous reception history becomes enshrined as “fact” and is then handed on to students without question or qualification.

I am pleased to learn that the Feminist Press will issue corrected versions of Hedges’s and Golden’s books, and I am gratified if my article assisted them in rectifying errors. Despite their perception of an “adversarial tone” in the essay, we all seem to agree with my fundamental argument: scholarship on any author must be continually reevaluated as critical trends and interests shift. I am certain—indeed, I hope—that my own research and conclusions will be revisited and challenged; I would like to believe that others are similarly receptive to reexamination of their published work.

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### Milton’s Chaos

To the Editor:

It was with considerable interest that I turned to John Rumrich’s defense of Milton’s indeterminate “power of matter” (to recall William Hunter’s early entry in this ongoing debate) in last October’s *PMLA* (110 [1995]: 1035–46). One cannot but agree that lately there has been a curious silence on the topic of Rumrich’s essay “Milton’s God and the Matter of Chaos,” a contribution that promises to reopen a discussion prematurely foreclosed by Regina Schwartz’s influential treatment of chaos as a region unambiguously “hostile to God.” Because her thesis largely readapts a position more tentatively held by a large number of earlier critics—Chambers, Woodhouse, Curry, and so on—its reexamination has become more urgent given two related recent developments. The first and more general involves a renewed understanding (renewed, since it was already present in the seventeenth-century context) that as a physical aspect of universal dynamics, chaos is not necessarily opposed to order (as N. Katherine Hayles, Ilya Prigogine, and Isabelle Stengers variously demonstrate). The second is the growing awareness within Milton studies that the theodicy of *Paradise Lost* rests on a monistically conceived universal continuum—one that the dualistic intrusion of a “hostile” chaos would inevitably disrupt.

The second development makes the long-standing critical objections to Milton’s chaos recapitulated by

Schwartz far from trivial. Simply assenting to them as casual readers often all too carelessly do delivers the epic into the hands of critics eager to imagine (usually for their own ideological reasons) a poet even more monologically and secretly self-divided than Blake, Eliot, or Empson might have feared. Yet unfortunately this central objection is not resolved merely by inverting it, that is, by imagining chaos as simply and universally benign. In this respect Rumrich not only disappoints but in fact seems wholly to misunderstand the primary principle of modern chaos theory: that as a physical force, chaos (the function inherent in the anarch's allegorical realm) must be dialogically self-divided to be benign, a point that Milton's epic episode elegantly emphasizes in its own distinctively seventeenth-century vocabulary.

For that reason and related ones, I am discouraged to find that vocabulary appropriated by a critic who, with the best will in the world, nevertheless erases much of chaos's "duality" (as R. A. Shoaf would term it) in favor of more currently fashionable, politically correct dualisms. However reader-friendly it might seem to make Milton relate "Chaos . . . to God as Eve is to Adam" so that God can "acquiesce . . . in his own feminine otherness" (1044), this reading is not poet- or poem-friendly. If Milton is a protofeminist (as in many ways he demonstrably is), his conception of this "otherness" is far less unilateral than Rumrich implies. Not only is the realm of chaos more hermaphroditic than feminine (having both an anarch and anarchess, a Chaos and a Night, that is, both a mothering-womb or Venus function and a warlike-tomb or Mars aspect), but in these respects it resembles all the poem's physical functions, including that of light itself. Here especially Rumrich's case will not hold; though he would delimit it, light, which begins where chaos ends, is clearly linked both to the male Son or sun of book 3 and to the feminine tabernacle of book 7. To portray these double-gendered forces as single-gendered even though "benignly" feminine needlessly deprives them of their richly dynamic ambiguity and their fundamental alterability.

A detailed discussion of all my objections to Rumrich's essay would take at least another of my own—which in fact I have written (*Milton Studies*, 1997), making me a somewhat less than ideally objective appraiser of the one in question. Nevertheless, on its own terms Rumrich's essay possesses a number of troubling inconsistencies that I feel constrained to point out. First, Rumrich elliptically transposes his initial and quite exemplary emphasis on Chaos's essential indeterminacy (a hallmark, as he notes, of Milton's politics and aesthetics) into the much simpler, binary though benign perspective that subliminally replaces it. This substitution then un-

dermines other epic indeterminacies: if chaos is no longer both masculine and feminine, positive and negative, no longer both tomb and womb, Eve too ceases to have any choice, either for good or evil, because of her implicit associations with this realm. In fact, in imagining Eve as merely a benign womb that, once imaginatively "violated" by Satan, will be completely tainted as soon as he "reaches the 'sweet recess of *Eve*' and accomplishes his mission," Rumrich overlooks approximately three hundred lines of vital debate between Satan and Eve. The result is a reversed though equally monological dualism, in which benign feminine wombs like Chaos and Eve ultimately triumph over masculine tombs like Satan and Death (1042).

These polarizations fail to satisfy, since Chaos and Eve are clearly in league not only with God but also with Sin and Death, all of which meet in that ultimate poetic indeterminacy, a Chaos linked to its God primarily through atomistically random yet ironically ineluctable choice. In other words, Rumrich has not really refuted Schwartz but merely created the mirror image of her argument. In the end all that remains is a friendly chaos with no explanation of the hostile imagery that Schwartz quite rightly finds, much less of how current chaos theory (though frequently cited) can explain why this amorphous, chaotic realm cannot be both fully consistent and neither incoherent nor misleadingly hostile, an either/or that not only quantum theory but also Gödel and Derrida (see David Wayne Thomas's essay in the March 1995 issue of *PMLA*) should long since have foreclosed. Freedom and necessity, good and evil, all are reconcilable—but only if chaotic generation is allowed to emerge from within the indeterminate "noise" and the "black tartareous dregs" without which it would not be Milton's or any other chaos at all. For as Dennis Danielson and others have shown, in Milton's theodicy there is room for only one being who is omnisciently and incomprehensibly good, and that being is Milton's anomalous but scarcely anarchic or truly amorphous God.

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### Reply:

Catherine Gimelli Martin and I largely agree on the significance of chaos in *Paradise Lost*, indeed to a greater degree than she registers. Her letter begins with an approving summary of the premises of my argument and proceeds to points of disapproval and disagreement. Yet even in dissent she takes positions that I endorse.