Interpreting Death in Paradise Lost

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Interpreting Death in *Paradise Lost*

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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For Steven and Io: I would not have done it without you.

I also offer my sincere gratitude to Dr. Joseph Ortiz, Dr. Brooke Conti, and Dr. Ralph Black.
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Abstract

An understanding of John Milton’s methods of representing death in *Paradise Lost* is crucial to the reader’s understanding of the poem, and to Milton’s defense of God. In the poem, Milton depicts death in two ways: as the subject of representation and as a method of representation. As a subject of representation, Milton presents the idea of death to the reader as part of a potential allegory in Book Two. The choice to represent Death in allegory is historically controversial, and is complicated by the presence of Death’s mother Sin, whose body is the canvas for the horror and mutilation of Death’s hunger. The depiction of Sin’s mutilated maternal body refers to other literary characters such as Edmund Spenser’s Errour and Duessa, Ovid’s Scylla, and Ariosto’s Alcina. Sin’s womb and antecedents as well as Death’s disembodied nature alternately invite and repulse allegorical reading. Sin’s body becomes the grounds for an investigation of the utility of allegory and signification. In turn, the way that Death is depicted on her body as part of a potential allegory creates the idea of death as something which requires interpretation. This sets the stage for the reader’s later encounters with the idea of death as a method of representation. In Books Nine through Twelve, the idea of death is used by the human characters of the poem in order to depict their state of ignorance and feelings of love and despair. However, the ultimate interpretation of death in the poem depends greatly on the earlier preparation of the reader by Milton’s potential allegory. God and other heavenly representatives argue for an interpretation of the body which treats the physical as a metaphor for the spiritual, as well as for the interpretation of death -- both the literary death depicted in the poem as well as the reader’s own experiences -- as a gift of God’s goodness and a remedy for the unhappiness of fallen humanity.
Chapter One

Allegory and Embodiment in *Paradise Lost*

In Book Two of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the reader encounters Death as part of a pair with his mother Sin, and together they are the “formidable shape” (53; 2.649) on either side of the gates of Hell. In order to understand Death as a horror in Book Two, the reader must encounter Sin’s body. For, while Death is described in terms of negation, disembodied and faint, a “shape, / If shape it might be called that shape had none” (54; 2.666-7), Sin is “voluminous and vast,” ringed by her monstrous offspring, her womb raucous with the “hideous peal” of never ceasing bark[ing]” (54; 2.652-660). Death is difficult to imagine based on his description, whereas Sin is abundantly represented with both sounds and images. Sin is large both in the amount of poetry devoted to her description, and large in the physical space that she occupies. Though the bodiless Death cannot completely consume Sin (58; 2.807-08), he continually destroys Sin’s body with his violent lusts and insatiable appetite. Death is hunger without body, and horror without form; as a result of Death’s insubstantial body in the scene, the reader seems compelled to seek Sin’s body. Sin’s body is the way that the reader comes to understand the horribleness of Death-the-character, as well as death-the-experience. Therefore, it is necessary to read Death together with Sin; because the representation of Death is imprinted on Sin’s body, it is impossible to discuss one without the other.

There are several types of “death” which appear in *Paradise Lost*. The first type of death appears as the already-mentioned character “Death” in Book Two. This character is presented as potentially allegorical, and therefore, along with Sin, is a
character whose function is (at least partially) to make explicit the symbolic nature of language. Sin’s body and Sin’s antecedents all affect the idea of allegory as related to Death; in turn, this potential allegory of Death serves as a guide to readers as to how to deal with the idea of death in the latter parts of the poem. In Book Two, Death, represented through Sin’s body, makes the idea of death the object of readers’ interpretation, while the second type of death in the poem is death as a part of figurative speech, such as when Eve uses death as a measure of love (249; 9.832). This organization makes the reader interested in the interpretation of death.

My first section will be a literature review of the idea of allegory as a contested critical term in the discussion of Sin and Death as characters in Paradise Lost. My second section will deal with the way that Death’s character is represented using Sin’s body and how Sin’s body ultimately provides the poem with a way to compel the reader to seek the interpretation of death. My final section will deal with the way that “death” is used as a tool for figurative representation, and how these various moments of figurative speech gather together to shape an interpretation of death both in the poem and in the reader’s own experience.

There is a long-standing disagreement as to whether or not, or to what extent, Milton uses allegory in Paradise Lost. Much of this disagreement focuses on the characters Sin and Death who first appear in Book Two of the poem; much of the disagreement also arises from the fact that allegory is a contested critical term. For many readers, allegory is a genre that allows Milton to deal with the idea of original sin and the location of sin in language and perception. While most readers agree that allegory can be both a type of text and a manner of reading (which is also known as allegoresis), as a
result of the different understandings of allegory and allegoresis, readers will also disagree on the types of knowledge which allegory can produce. The first key issue is whether, or how, allegory can be contained in the form of a text, and what signals would indicate that a text is an allegory. The second key issue is whether the process of allegoresis is violence to a text, even in cases where that text does signal itself as allegory. The third key issue is whether or not allegory can truthfully represent an idea, or if using symbols to represent abstractions is somehow frivolous, deceptive, or unfair to the reader. The fourth key issue is whether allegory can teach a reader new ideas, or if it can only reproduce meaning in readers who already know and agree with the abstractions the allegory represents. The final key issue is, of course, whether or not, or how, Milton uses allegory in *Paradise Lost*, but as I deal with each issue of allegory, I will address how I believe that aspect relates to the poem.

A reader could rightly argue that because all language is symbolic, there is little structural difference between the use of allegory and the use of language. For readers who believe that the nature of allegory is primarily in the process of reading, all texts can be allegorized, particularly since all reading makes use of language which points to meaning that is not inherently contained within words. However, as Judith Anderson points out, though "the claim that all signification is allegorical raises few eyebrows nowadays," it is still useful to identify the unique properties of allegorical texts (7). Though it may be possible to allegorize any type of text (and even though the process of reading itself often elides the division between symbol and signified), there are some texts which seem to lend themselves more easily to allegoresis than others, and in fact may signal to the reader the presence of explicitly symbolic language, or layers of
meaning. Vice versa, some texts which are persistently allegorized may continue be the target of such interpretive attention because certain properties of the text make it amenable to allegoresis. (For the purposes of this essay, it may not be necessary to identify aspects of *Paradise Lost* as being specifically allegorical or not allegorical. But I believe it is useful to acknowledge that many readers do understand it as containing allegory, and useful to discuss how those readers identify allegory within the poem.)

One of the readers who believes that *Paradise Lost* does not contain any allegory at all, and who refuses the identification of Sin and Death as allegorical characters, is also the reader with the most restrictive definition of allegory, and consequently the clearest definition of what sorts of signals cause a reader to read allegory. Gordon Teskey narrowly defines allegory as the opposite of narrative, and distinguishes it from other types of abstracting texts, such as fables of parables, by asserting that allegory “must be incoherent on the narrative level, forcing us to unify the work by imposing meaning on it” (Teskey 5). Allegory, for Teskey, is political rather than representational, useful for identifying the “likeminded few” (1) through the processes of reading and interpretation (4). Just as a narrative is structured by events, Teskey believes that allegory is structured on bodies as a way to “subdue” narrative. For Teskey, the project of allegory creates the ideas of form and substance by dividing anything into two parts: the body, and the meaning of that body. Allegory makes symbols from objects as a way of generating, or imposing, meaning on things such as bodies and narrative. One of the hallmarks of allegorical texts, for Teskey, is that they are not composed of signs used to represent bodies, but instead are composed of bodies used as signs to represent ideas. These allegorized bodies are made into “the material basis of an order of signs” (16) through
mechanisms that he describes as "personification" (the self-referential embodiment of an abstract) and "capture" (a person made into a symbol). Personification is the text's production of a sign from a body which has been joined with a name meant to represent some "ineffable other," while "capture" is the reader's production of a sign from a body in the text which already has a name. Teskey's position is somewhat extreme and not favored by many other readers of *Paradise Lost*, who tend to see some engagement with allegory in Book Two, if not in many other parts of the poem as well. But despite his lone opinion on the binary of allegory and narrative, and though he would not apply his ideas to an analysis of Sin and Death, his discussion of allegory as a tool of force is still useful in terms of *Paradise Lost*. Accepting Teskey's total dismissal of the scene's allegorical potential shuts down any possibility of examining the tension of reading allegory in the scene, even as his arguments have opened the door to questioning the scene's common genre classification. Furthermore, his observation that both personification and capture involve violence to the body-made-sign (16, 29), as well as his argument that allegory itself is violent towards meaning (29), are both significant to a discussion of Milton's engagement with the idea of allegory in the representations of Sin and Death. While Teskey argues that Sin and Death are not allegorical characters, but avatars of the forces of sin and death (5), the violence that Milton uses in the portrayal of Sin's body suggests Milton's engagement with the violence, and the problems, of allegory.

In contrast to Teskey's belief that allegory (as a text) is violent to ideas, Maureen Quilligan only sees violence in allegoresis which is applied to texts that do not signal their intentions to be read as allegories. Quilligan does not find narrative and allegory at
odds with each other. She distinguishes between allegoresis as a subversive activity which be applied to any text and “reading of allegory,” which is reading prompted by a genre that she calls “narrative allegory.” For her, allegoresis “insists on the detachment or disjunction of the word from its referent” (Quilligan 25), and her definition of this type of reading coincides with Teskey’s idea of violent allegory. In Quilligan’s narrative allegory, however, “language is disposed to call attention to its own signifying power, but not in a way that divorces sign from signified” (26). One type of reading (allegoresis) allows the reader to produce meaning “against the text’s manifest intentions” while the other (reading of allegory) allows the reader to produce meaning which “cannot escape the text’s historic intentionality” (26). While Teskey believes that allegorical texts necessitate “continual interpretation” (4) through their narrative incoherence, Quilligan believes that allegory “intends the activity of interpretation” (Quilligan 27), and cues (but does not require) the reader to interpret symbolically rather than mimaetically through genre conventions such as the use of abstract rather than realistic names, or personification. Quilligan does read Sin and Death as being allegorical. She identifies Sin as a revision of Spenser’s Errour and believes that Milton uses Sin to “[signal] the presence of the Spenserian text within his own text” (Quilligan 79). The biform image of Sin’s body that Sin shares with Errour, as well as their abstract names, signal both characters as being allegorical.

The question of what kinds of texts signal allegory is also difficult to separate from the question of whether or not allegory can teach truth. Teskey’s insistence that Sin and Death are not allegorical characters has a stake in the idea that allegory (not just allegoresis) is duplicitous, political, and violent. He argues that the nature of allegory is
violence in dividing a thing from its meaning while simultaneously "[yoking] together heterogeneous things by force of meaning" (2) so that things do not represent themselves but point to other, "ineffable" meanings. Because of this violence and "othering," allegory cannot teach truth. Mindele Ann Treip sees the same doubleness of meaning in allegory that Teskey does, but unlike Teskey, does not find that doubleness to be at odds with truth. Treip also argues that a large portion of Paradise Lost is allegorical, not just Sin and Death (126). She believes that for Milton, "allegory or allegorical reading, when carefully controlled and directed need offer no contradiction to the truth of the literal level" and that Paradise Lost "has two voices, a sustained double language, in many of its components, including much of its plausible surface" (129). Like Treip, Sarah Morrison believes that Milton mixes allegory with narrative as a way of acknowledging his text's fictive elements. She argues that "Milton allows the allegorical elements of Paradise Lost to undercut the central naturalistic narrative because...his highly fictionalized interpretation of sacred history...contains within itself subtle indications of its nature (Morrison 179-180). Morrison also argues that because the gates of Hell must be understood as a figurative location, the characters which guard those gates must also be understood as fictive and symbolic because Milton is concerned with man's "moral condition" (180). The allegorical elements are signs to the reader not to "seek literal truth in his epic but rather to delve beneath the surface for accommodated essential truth" (181). For Morrison, the allegorical elements are signposts to the reader to read for spiritual truth rather than physical facts about the world, and "an allegorical reading has the advantage of not insisting upon [the historical existence of Adam, Eve, and Satan] as the basis of a belief in the spiritual truth contained in the myth of the Fall" (193). The
difference between Treip, Morrison, and Teskey is that while Teskey seems to believe that truth must be unified, Treip and Morrison believe that there are types of truth and that these types of truth do not have to share direct correspondences with each other.

Just as allegory has the potential to teach and to deceive (or distract, or cause wandering), it also has the potential to create either conservative or radical knowledge. Quilligan believes that allegoresis is necessarily conservative, since it is a reading which draws from pre-existing, extra-textual patterns of knowledge. She also believes that it is conservative because it "saves" texts that are in danger of being passed over due to irrelevance. If a text can be made to mean anything, it is always appropriate to the times. (For instance, in order to make Ovid's *Metamorphoses* compatible with Christian morality, medieval allegorizers often divorced the figures and characters of the poem from the plot in order to "discover" Christian meanings in the pagan poetry.) Sayre Greenfield argues that despite the non-linear mental work necessary to read allegory, allegoresis is a conservative process which identifies those who possess the extra-textual knowledge to read "beyond" the literal. Like Quilligan, Greenfield believes that allegoresis inherently preserves a conservative approach to knowledge and provides the reader with the tools necessary to overcome any disruptive fantasy elements or other kinds of "disjunctions" in "morality or cohesiveness" (Greenfield 20). However Greenfield also believes that it is possible to gain radicalizing knowledge when reading allegorical texts. While "the allegorical process cannot attach radical ideas to the treatments of the spirit or of cosmic order, some types of nonallegorical reading -- specifically, reading for examples -- can create radical considerations of war, royal spheres of influence, and sexual morality" (17) that are being represented in an
allegorical episode. For instance, Greenfield believes that in *The Faerie Queene*, Lucifera can be read metaphorically as an allegorical representation of pride as well as exemplatively as a mimetic representation of corrupt monarchy (41). Furthermore, this potential duality is contained in most allegorical episodes because example is hard to escape when constructing allegory, which, according to Greenfield, and in contrast with Teskey, is typically dependent on some type of narrative. Greenfield’s approach is important to my discussion of Sin and Death because many readers do treat the representations of Sin and Death as fantastic (and consequently as allegorical instead of mimetic) in order to accommodate an allegorical meaning, or in order to argue that the text signals its intention to be read as allegory. Judith Browning, for instance, makes her interpretation of Sin as depicting the human condition of sin on the basis that the logic of the passage is allegorical rather than narrative (Browning 144). But I will argue that Milton’s text both invites and repulses allegorical reading through the representations of Death’s non-body as well as Sin’s body, which can be read as mimetic rather than fantastic. In addition to potentially requiring extra-textual knowledge, Milton’s text may also be able to attach new meanings to the ideas of “sin” and “death.”
Chapter Two

Embodiment and the Representation of Sin and Death

According to Teskey’s assertions that the body is “the material of an order of signs” (16), personification results in the embodiment of an abstract concept. Despite having a name that suggests personification, during the first encounter with Death in Book Two, Milton emphasizes the “nothingness” of Death’s form through the use of negations. When compared to Spenser’s similar character Despaire, Milton’s representation of Death seems even more starkly disembodied. Spenser’s “man of hell, that calls himself Despaire” has the undying body of a starving old man, and a lair “Darke, dolefull, drearie, like a greedie graue” (Spenser 154; 1.9.33.4). As Redcrosse Knight approaches Despaire, he encounters a landscape of leafless, fruitless trees and the fresh bleeding “carcases” of suicides. Like Death, Despaire has an effect on the world surrounding him, but Despaire’s effect is demonstrated on the landscape as well as on the bodies of humans. Unlike Milton’s Death, however, Despaire’s hunger is visible in his body. Despaire has “griesie lockes” and “raw-bone cheeks...shronke into his iawes” (Spenser 154; 1.9.35.8-9) where Death is a “grisly terror” which “in shape / So speaking...grew tenfold / More dreadful and deform” (55; 2.704-706). Despaire’s body allows him to be understood as a personification — the embodiment of ever-hungry death.

On the other hand, Death’s substance can best or only be described as a “shape” — a description so vague as to be almost meaningless — and “deform” — not badly formed, but de-formed, un-formed, without form. If personification is a tool to elucidate an abstraction and give it body, then comparing Despaire’s starving body to Death’s insubstantial one shows that there is a problem in using allegory to represent an idea like
death. This is a problem, it seems, that Milton raises deliberately through the choice to use personification (or something that looks like personification) while simultaneously reporting that Death has no form. Death’s lack of body confounds allegoresis -- how can nothing represent anything? Or vice versa, how can nothing be represented by anything? The trouble with representing Death becomes the trouble with coming up with a figure for nothing, like a zero: is it nothing, or is it something?

The second effect of this disembodiment is that the reader’s attention must then turn towards Sin and her body. The scant and negative description of Death’s form repels examination by the reader, while Sin’s body (specifically, her womb and genitalia), amply described in fleshly detail, invites scrutiny from the reader. Though Death threatens Satan with “strange horror” and “pangs unfelt” (55; 2.703), Sin is the character more likely to make the reader cringe as all the visceral horror of Death is displaced onto her body. Sin’s womb is the first site of decay, and her body bears the poem’s first representation of the effects of death on the body. The dramatic weight of this episode relies on the horror elicited by Sin and her body.

Like Death, Sin can also be compared to several other literary characters. Sin’s complicated relationship to allegory can be discussed in terms of her relationship to other gendered and often allegorized figures in literature such as Ovid’s Scylla and Spencer’s Errour, because of the biform nature of their bodies, as well as Ariosto’s Alcina and Spencer’s Duessa/Fidessa, because these characters have deceitful exteriors and are understood as figures instructive of allegoresis (Gough 43). Through comparisons to each of these characters, Milton’s Sin demonstrates an oscillation between inviting and repulsing allegorical reading.
Despite the psychological realism of Ovid’s Scylla episode (with characters motivated by lust, jealousy, or fear, and fantasy elements provided within the logic of Ovidian magic), Scylla has numerous allegorical associations. Fulgentius, a Christian mythographer, reads her as an emblem of lust by completely dispensing with the plot of the episode (in which Scylla flees into the water to escape a suitor -- if anything, the opposite of lust!) and instead bases his explication on the logic that when Scylla enters the pool “her lustful groin must be filled with dogs and wolves...because she cannot satisfy her private parts with inroads of any other kind” (74). Fantastic aspects of the story are made into symbols that contradict the narrative through a suppression of the ongoing Ovidian logic of metamorphoses. On the other hand, Sergio Casali points out that Ovid does not depict Scylla’s second transformation, from deformed woman to rock, as a “sly means of alluding to the fact that in reality no metamorphosis ever took place, neither of maiden into monster nor monster into rock. The only thing that happened is a poetic personification” (Casali 152). Along the same lines, Syrithe Pugh points out that with the Scylla episode Ovid takes “the dangerous monster shunned by Virgil’s epic hero and turns her back into an innocent victim and attractive girl” (Pugh 71). While moralizers understand Scylla as an emblem of lust, Ovid seems to have deliberately made a figure that will draw the sympathy of the reader. Judith Browning sees Scylla as a sympathetic character and identifies Scylla as a powerless victim of Circe’s magic, though she also identifies a Renaissance tradition of understanding Ovid’s Scylla as contaminated by Circe’s sensuality, and her dual-bodied nature as being representative of “the archetypal conflict between reason and appetite dwelling within the individual” (Browning 139).
Milton's reference to Scylla brings all these complicated associations to his depictions of Sin. Browning argues that just as Scylla is contaminated by Circe through no fault of her own, Sin in Book Two is also depicted as powerless (130) in order to show how post-lapsarian humans will also be helpless to the condition of Sin (143). Sin is also like Scylla in that she is first depicted as a horrid monster by the narrator (Milton 53; 2.650-665), but interjects her own description of an unnaturally violent pregnancy, birth, rape, and mutilation (57; 2.776-810), which makes her a more sympathetic character. However, while Sin and Scylla share the experiences of transformation by someone else, their experiences of metamorphosis are vastly different. Scylla’s awareness of the transformation of her lower half comes from her seeing the dogs and trying to escape them. She does not know that part of body has been changed until she sees the dogs beneath the surface of the water and tries to feel for her body with her hands (Ovid 475). This indicates that Scylla’s consciousness of her body begins with sight and touch rather than an internal awareness of all parts of her body. Furthermore, the transformation that changes her lower half happens beneath the surface of the water which gives a shadowy look to the dogs that replace Scylla’s legs. This is different from Sin’s transformation because it is with “fear and pain” (Milton 57; 2.783) that Sin experiences the changing of her body. Scylla’s divided awareness of herself allows her to be a potential emblem, since she is divided from perceiving herself by the veil of the poisoned water’s surface. Sin, on the other hand, both directly experiences her transformation and can see, without shadow, the distortion of her nether regions. Rather than experiencing a magical transformation that happens outside of her consciousness, Sin experiences a naturalistic transformation. While her association with the often-allegorized Scylla seems to invite
an allegorical reading (for instance, if the “far less abhorred” [53; 2.659] dogs of Scylla represent lust and sensuality, then what devours Sin must somehow be worse than lust and sensuality), Sin’s unity of experience seems to distinguish her from Scylla and complicate an interpretation of her as an emblem. Scylla, who sees her transformed body, must then interpret it as being part of herself when she tries to flee it and cannot (Ovid 475). Scylla’s lower half has turned into dogs, which are completely and utterly different from her body, whereas Sin’s lower half is distorted, distended, and deformed, and the dogs that vex her are the product of her own reproductive processes rather than magic. Unlike Scylla, who has a definitely divided consciousness of herself and her body, Sin’s unified consciousness (and her deformity which extends from her own body, rather than the grafting on of another body) means that she cannot represent, for instance, the struggle of “reason and appetite” (Browning 139) in one body. Sin is a unity, and since Ovid’s Scylla becomes subject to allegorical reading in part because of her disunity, Sin’s unity defies an allegorical reader to understand her as allegory. While Sin might seem to be a moralized Scylla figure, it seems that Milton has also improved on the narrative characteristics that made Scylla vulnerable to allegorization by replacing magical transformation with the process of giving birth, and by replacing a divided consciousness with a unified one.

The other biform allegorical figure that Milton engages with is Spencer’s character Errour. Maureen Quilligan believes that Milton engages with the problem of allegory and interpretation by revising Errour in the character of Sin as a way to signal to the reader the pitfalls of fictional representation and to cause the reader to confront the fallen imaginations ability to read correctly. Just as Errour is meant to elicit both an
interpretation of the episode and the reader's own self-reflexive interpretations of his or her process of reading, Sin, too, must teach the readers to doubt their own common-sense allegoresis. The allegorical nature of Hell, Sin, and Death is crucial to Quilligan's argument that Milton's hell is fictive, and must be, in order for Milton to wrestle with the troubles of representation and division of signifier from signified, as well as the problem of representing truth.

Errour, unlike Scylla, is not situated in a narrative of psychological realism. She is a character who seems to invite the interpretive attention of allegory. Errou has several characteristics which mark her as being more allegorical than Sin. Like Sin, Errou is introduced as a biform monster, "Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide, / but the other half a woman's shape did retaine, / Most loathsome, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine" (Spenser 44; 1.1.14.7-9). The word "retaine" suggests that she is a being in mid-transformation, from woman to monster. Sin's own "scaly fold[s]" (Milton 53; 2.651) recall Errou's "huge long tail...all overspread" (Spenser 44; 1.1.15.1-2), and just as Sin's hellhounds "creep...into her womb" (Milton 53; 2.656), Errou's "thousand yong ones" sometimes go into her mouth (Spenser 44; 1.1.15.5, 9), vanishing from sight. Sin and Errou share motherhood as the vector through which the narrator reveals their awfulness. But while Errou is a fictive mother, a half-woman, half-serpent monster, Sin's body is far less fantastic. Though the narrator of Paradise Lost describes Sin as a serpent, Sin, in telling the story of her own origins seems to argue with the narrator. Sin doesn't describe herself as having a serpent lower half; instead, she says that Death "breaking violent way / Tore through my entrails, that with fear and pain / Distorted, all my nether shape thus grew / Transformed" (Milton 57; 2.782-785). The violent birth is
what distorts her lower half. There seems no reason, from Sin’s version of the narrative, to think that she is actually half-serpent. Perhaps, as the narrator suggests, she is half-serpent; it’s equally possible that the narrator is taking poetic liberties in describing her as half-serpent. The conflict between the two descriptions of Sin’s body reflects a self-conscious awareness of the slipperiness of perspective. As a result, there is ambiguity about whether Sin’s representation is imaginary or mimetic which does not exist in the representation of Errour. Further example of how Errour’s scene is literary rather than realistic comes when Redcrosse Knight defeats Errour: she is devoured by her offspring, who promptly explode with the imaginary gore of ink (black blood) and books. The images of the ink and books temper the images of “bellies swolne” and “bowels gushing forth” (Spenser 47; 1.1.26.5-6). These bodies are represented in a decidedly non-realistic way, and this imaginative disjunction is one of the things that marks the episode as being allegorical. In order to account for the ink-as-blood, the reader is invited to read the passage allegorically rather than naturalistically. The other significant difference between Errour and Sin is the way that Errour cannot speak or make signs. Even though she vomits up books and ink, these are images rather than language because they are illegible, unread, or quickly devoured as food for her hungry brood. On the other hand, Sin’s ability to speak, narrate, and recount her own origins means that her speech to Satan offers an alternate interpretation to the one offered by the narrator. She is able to argue with both the narrator and Satan’s assessment of her and resist the meaning that others might ascribe to her. Her complaints disrupt her potential to be an image or emblem in the same way that Errour is an emblem. Because Sin shares several qualities with Errour (namely, that both are evil mothers cannibalistically devoured by their offspring), the
differences between the two characters cast into sharp relief the way that Sin is fairly realistically portrayed as well as the way that Sin has voice and subjectivity.

Another set of characters it may be useful to discuss in conjunction with Sin are Ludovico Ariosto’s Alcina, from his ironic epic Orlando Furioso, and Spenser’s Duessa. Duessa is a clear descendent of Alcina, as both are witches who deceive men with the projected images of their falsely beautiful bodies. Melinda Gough notes that “the enchantress herself has a long literary history, one in which erotic pleasures and dangers frequently stand, in part, for the pleasures and dangers or representation itself” (41). Gough also points out a schism in the way that Catholicism and Protestantism approached the reading of allegory. She argues that in Orlando Furioso, Ariosto has engaged with the Augustinian ideal of reading scripture allegorically because “to rest at the level of the letter is to enjoy signs which should instead be used” (Gough 43). For Gough, Rogero and Astolfo are deceived by Alcina through the “cupidinous misreading” (43) of enjoying the signs, and are set on the path to right by seeing Alcina’s true form and understanding the “correct” reading, which would be allegorical (43). On the other hand, because many Protestant thinkers found allegory to be a suspect genre and method of scriptural interpretation (47), Gough argues that Spenser refers to Alcina in his character of Duessa, in order to “save allegoresis for Protestantism” (47). Gough argues that the unmasking of Duessa’s body becomes a particular figure for allegory’s potentially dangerous “interpretive gap” (53).

Though Gough argues that Alcina is instructive to the reader as to how to read appropriately, the writer is also implicated in this episode. Through her magical skill, Alcina “dispossess[es]” any other love Rogero may have felt, “and in his bosom, there
alone to dwell, / The image of her love, and self impressed” (Ariosto 55-56; 7.18.4-6). Alcina’s use of magic is a reflexive moment portraying a writer’s use of imagery and other types of poetic artifice including allegory. Just as Alcina’s magic is so powerful, and her image so beautiful that the narrator thinks “Rogero sure some grace deserves / If from his faith his frail affection swerves” (Ariosto 55-56; 7.18.7-8), it seems that the reader can’t be blamed too much for being entranced by beautiful language or poetry. It seems the fault is with the writer who has beguiled the reader with beautiful words. Even if an author successfully uses allegory to moralize a reader, the use of that veil means that in a way, the reader has been coerced or deceived into belief.

Alcina is like Sin in the sense that both characters are potential emblems of allegory because of their bodies. It is Alcina’s body which makes her a potential emblem of allegory, because her body is the basis of her deception. The narrator delves into the description of Alcina’s deceptively beautiful body and uses both poetic convention as well as imagery which makes explicit the idea that Alcina’s image is artifice. Alcina’s “shape is of such perfect symmetry, / As best to feign the industrious painter knows” (55; 7.11.1-2), meaning that her artificial beauty is so great that artists would try to imitate it in a case of art imitating art. Her mouth is described as having a “vermeil tint” (55; 7.13.2) which simultaneously suggests both the artifice of cosmetic paint and the artlessness of natural coloring. Furthermore, each aspect of her body is described with the ridiculous metaphors and similes of the blazon, which fragment the parts of Alcina’s body and compare them to such things as snow, milk, ivory, gold, suns, arches, apples – all things which women are not composed of. This is a perfectly suited method for describing Alcina’s body since that body is made up of poetic artifice after all. Since her
youthful image is embodied through poetic conventions she is, like Spenser's Errour, very much an image. Alcina's true form is eventually revealed to Rogero when he wears the magic ring the good witch Melissa gives him. Through the use of the ring, Alcina is revealed to be "Pale, lean, and wrinkled was the face, and white, / And thinly clothed with hair Alcina's head; / ... every tooth was gone; for she had led / A longer life than ever mortal wight" (61; 7.73.1-5). While Alcina's image is that of a beautiful young woman, Alcina's substance is that of an old woman fading from life. Though the narrator says that there is not a "hag so old and hideous" (61; 7.72.8) anywhere else in the world, there isn't much horror in Alcina's body, except perhaps from the shock of seeing an old woman without the attractions of youth.

Alcina herself becomes something of a disappointment after comparison to her descendents, and her descendents seem in comparison much more horrible. Duessa's horrible body is first suggested in a Scylla-like moment in Book One, Canto Two. There, Fradubio describes seeing Duessa as she stands in a pool of water, bathing, and revealing herself as "A filthy foule old woman" (Spenser 65; 1.2.40.8), whose "nether parts misshapen, monstrous, / Were hidd in water, that I could not see, / But they did seeme more foule and hideous / Than woman's shape man would beleue to be" (Spenser 65; 1.2.41.1-4). Later encounters with Duessa's horrible body reveal it as far more disgusting than Alcina's, and very different from Sin's. Where Alcina has thinning hair, a wrinkled face, no teeth and a shortened height, Duessa is "altogether bald ... [her head] was ouergrowne with scurf and filthy scald; / Her teeth out of her rotten gummes were feld... / Her dry dugs, like bladders lacking wind, / Hong downe... and at her rompe she was growing had behind / A foxes tail, with dong all fowly dight" (Spenser 144-145;
1.8.47-48). It's as if Spenser takes the natural changes of age displayed on Alcina and improves upon that ugliness. While Alcina is aged, Duessa is decaying. Her skin isn't just wrinkled, it's covered in debris; not only are her teeth missing, but her gums are rotten. Alcina is short, but Duessa's breasts are visible and deflated. Duessa has a fox's tail covered in feces, and nothing Alcina has can top that in causing revulsion. Though Alcina's aged appearance is probably an unattractive shock compared to her beautiful young projection, her ugly body is asexual. On the other hand, Duessa's body is blatantly and unavoidably disgusting according to all parts of her body, including the parts associated with her sexuality. Duessa's body is an example of how hyperbole can produce disgust. The intensity of the disgust Duessa's body generates is shared by the intensity of disgust that Sin's body has the potential to generate -- much more so than the intensity of disgust that Alcina's, or even Errour's body might produce. However, while there is an element of sexual disgust surrounding Duessa, and while the excrement on the fox's tail suggests a repulsive sexuality, Duessa's repulsiveness is also a jarringly hyperbolic image of limits. Everything is just about as disgusting as can be. So when Sin is compared to these two characters, she produces a far different response in the reader. Sin is neither beautiful, nor blazoned. The narrator describes her as a "woman to the waist, and fair" (Milton 53; 2.650), but that is it. When the narrator describes Sin as horrible, that horror is not at first ascribed to any explicit part of her body, such as eyes, arms, lips, or breast. Sin, while initially described by the narrator, is most embodied through her experiences. She is not an image of poetic artifice the way Alcina is. Furthermore, Sin is not a deceptive beauty whose horror is revealed at the pulling away of an image. Duessa, when read with Sin, seems like a reminder of what allegory looks
like because her exaggerated body, which creates disgust, suggests allegorical reading through the very disgust and exaggeration that embodies her. When compared with the characters of Alcina and Duessa, Sin suggests that Milton is engaging with a different idea of sign: Milton is not merely dealing with poetic artifice, but the artifice of language itself.

Like Death, Sin’s abstract name also suggests she is an allegorical character and a personification. As she recounts her birth from Satan’s head, she recalls that she received her name because she was a “sign / Portentous” (2.760-61). The placement of the line break emphasizes the word “sign” which the rebellious angels use to name Sin. Because she portends, or predicts, she represents something which has not happened yet, which is apparently beyond the knowledge of the host who see and name her. As the soon-to-be-fallen host assigns her birth a meaning outside of itself, they practice the first sign-making (naming Sin) and allegoresis (interpreting the meaning of Sin’s existence rather than the meaning of her name). Two things can be inferred from this portent. First, ignorance goes hand in hand with allegory, because without ignorance, without the border of knowledge and the border of what can be known, there is no need for signs or interpretations. Second, as Sin seems to be the first “sign” to appear in Heaven, she is the first thing or creature whose meaning is incomplete in itself, but points to something other and outside of itself, something which is unknown. She becomes the first rupture in perfect language, or the first kind of language, the first potential image, and because she points to a gap in knowledge, or some kind of knowledge which is difficult to express, she also becomes the first potential allegory. (Of course, if Milton will have any allegory in his poem, it must be the first allegory.) With this, she brings the first possibility for
misinterpretation or deception. Her sign-ness is tied up with ignorance and otherness, which is why she portends rather than simply exists or directly represents. If things can only mean what they are, there is no potential for deception; but if things can mean something other than what they are, if they can point to some “Other,” then lies, misrepresentation, and confusion are all possible. Sin-as-sign marks the disruption of the perfection of heaven. Sin-as-sign also most closely represents representation, the way that humans communicate indirectly rather than perfectly, and the way that Milton must resign himself to making signs -- writing -- as an imperfect method of communication. The act of signifying then becomes the essential nature of Sin.

Sin’s potential to be a sign is directly linked to her status and an embodied and gendered creature because, in addition to being the first sign to appear in heaven, Sin is also the first creature to be identified explicitly with her gender and her body. Teskey’s description of the way bodies are subjected to violence in order to make them mean something other than self (18-20) makes Sin’s experience of violence and embodiment seem like an example of personification. The violence of her embodiment makes her a canvas for death and points to the meaning of death, which seems to be decay. The violence of her embodiment makes her mean something other than self.

Sin is consistently identified with her gender. While Raphael tells Adam in Book Eight (221; 8.620-630) that the host has no gender, Sin is labeled as a female. The narrator describes her as “a woman to the waist” (53; 2.650), while Sin describes herself as “a goddess arm’d” with both “shape” and “count’nance” (56; 2.757). The narrator seems to make external what should be internal in describing the “hell hounds” which “kennel” in Sin’s “womb...unseen” (53; 2.654-57), so that although Sin’s womb is
"unseen," it must be imagined by the reader. Sin also identifies herself as possessing a productive "womb" while she recounts an encounter that may be inferred as a sex act with her father Satan: "such joy thou took'st / With me in secret, that my womb conceiv'd / A growing burden" (54; 2.765-767).

Sin and Death report the experience of "engenderment" and embodiment (or disembodiment, in Death's case) very differently. Sin repeatedly says "I," and "my," in describing her pains with the hell hounds. She complains that "when they list into the womb / That bred them they return, and howl and gnaw / My bowels, their repast; then bursting forth / Afresh with conscious terrors vex me round" (57-58; 2.795-801). In describing her labor, Sin simultaneously identifies the experience of pain as localized to her womb as well as being experienced by her whole self. She recounts, "Pensive here I sat / Alone, but long I sat not, till my womb, / Pregnant by thee, and now excessive grown / Prodigious motion felt and rueful throes" (57; 2.776-779). That is, the "Prodigious motion felt" might be felt by her "womb" (in which case she seems to identify and split her "self" apart from that gendered organ) or by her "I" (in which case she identifies herself with her womb). She also describes her womb as "the womb / That bred [the hell hounds]" rather than "my womb," though she does identify her bowels as her own. In some way, Sin has two identities, the identity of self, and the identity of gender, and which of the two is her "I" is ambiguous.

On the other hand, while Death is given the pronoun "he," he is assiduously disembodied, identified as barely a shape rather than as a man (54; 2.668). Furthermore, the closest thing to a parallel reproductive organ of Death's would be the "dart" he waves threateningly (54, 57, 312; 2.672, 2.786, 11.491). In order to understand that dart as a
phallus, the reader would have to understand that dart as a metaphoric representation of a phallus. This is the exact opposite of the way that Sin’s womb is directly represented and potentially a metaphoric representation of other meaning. When the reader does eventually (in Book Ten) encounter the hint of Death’s body, Sin’s body does recede from view and Death’s hunger becomes the focus. This focus on Death’s hunger causes Death to gain substance. Just as monstrous childbirth brought Sin’s body into the reader’s view, Death’s experience of hunger as well as his ability to smell and taste lends shape to the “meager shadow” (269; 10.264). Death declares that “such a scent I draw / Of carnage, prey innumerable, and taste / The savor of death from all things there that live” (269; 10.267-269). This ability to sense and interpret is corroborated by the narrator, who describes Death’s “nostril wide” (269; 10.280) and tells the reader that Death, “with delight…snuffed the smell of mortal change” (269; X.272-273), going on to colorfully depict Death’s ability to sense through a comparison with carrion birds “....lured / With scent of living carcasses designed / For death, the following day, in bloody fight” (269; X276-278). Unlike Sin’s womb, it is Death’s ungendered organ of scent, the “nostril wide” (269; 10.280) that he uses to track his “quarry” (269; 10.281), as well as his “maw,” the organ of consumption (269; 10.601) that gives Death any body. Neither organ is linked to the idea of gender. Death also does not share the same grammatical ambiguity in describing his experiences of hunger that Sin uses to describe her birth pains. While some aspect of Sin “felt” the labor pangs, Death describes his hunger almost as a fellow traveler, and his maw and disembodied corpse as a separate entity: “To me, who with eternal famine pine, / Alike is Hell, or Paradise, or Heaven… Which here, though plenteous, all too little seems / To stuff this maw, this vast unhidebound corpse” (280;
While Death’s “me” appears at the beginning of the verse, grammatically, that “me” is little more than a modifier to the main idea that “Alike is Hell, or Paradise.” Though Death “pines” with hunger, Milton makes the sentence so circuitous and indirect that it seems Death could not experience that hunger as vividly or acutely as Sin experiences her “conscious terrors.”

Finally, it is not simply that Sin has a body that Death destroys; instead, Sin’s body is made palpable to the reader through the reproductive experience of pregnancy and birth. Death destroys Sin’s body through these same gendered experiences which make her body known to the reader as female. Death wrecks his ravages on Sin’s body as she gives birth to him: “At last this odious offspring...Tore through my entrails, that with fear and pain / Distorted, all my nether shape thus grew / Transformed: but he my inbred enemy / Forth issued” (57; 2.781-85). That Sin possesses entrails is confirmed by their destruction. The reader cannot imagine these entrails in their unbroken state. Death continues to destroy Sin’s body as, immediately upon being born, he pursues her to rape her and, inevitably, impregnate her with “these yelling monsters... hourly conceived / And hourly born, with sorrow infinite” (57; 2.795-797). These experiences of pregnancy, rape, and subsequent birth reveal Sin’s womb as concurrent with its deformation. Because the reader’s first encounter with fleshy bodies is simultaneously with the destroyed female body of Sin, and the destroying, disembodied, ostensibly male force of Death, Sin’s gender is what seems to create the body -- not only Sin’s specific body, but the idea of the body, its functions, and especially its gendered functions of pregnancy and birth -- as the canvas for Death.
While Sin's abstract name suggests that she is an allegorical character, the
gendered effects of death on her body make it exceedingly difficult to extract allegorical
meaning from her character. The same embodiment that suggests personification into
allegorical meaning also strains against allegorical reading because Sin tells the story of
her own embodiment in a way that disrupts the narrator's attempts to "capture" her body
into allegory. The substance of the episode presents Sin's body not as (or not only as) an
artifact of allegory, but as a mimetic representation of physical horror available to the
reader's experience. Sin's description of pregnancy, birth, and her encounter with her
offspring cannot be easily dismissed as phantasmagoria, gruesome as images such as
"tore through my entrails" (57; 2.783) or "yelling monsters that with ceaseless cry" (57;
2.795) may seem. In fact, these descriptions resemble what may have been the
experience of childbirth for women in Milton's time. Louis Schwartz investigates the
ramifications of treating Milton's descriptions of birth as naturalistic representations
rather than poetic devices and suggests that Milton created his description of Sin's
experience using contemporary beliefs about the process of childbirth as well as new
obstetric texts. Schwartz notes that the birth of Death, while an "unnaturally violent
and ... grotesque exaggeration ... follows the same basic and familiar etiology" (69) in
which the infant, rather than the mother, was believed to be the "agent of birth," forcing
its way out into the world because it was hungry (68, 69). Birth was understood to be
violent and painful, and genital deformity, far from being unusual to Sin's experience,
was a common result of contemporary obstetric surgical practices (70) Schwartz also
goes on to point out that just as Sin experiences an endless cycle of pregnancy and birth,
so did many London women who became pregnant at approximately twenty-three month
intervals and "[including] mid- and late-term miscarriages...often gave birth between ten and fifteen times if they survived their own fertility" (72) -- and many did not, as about one in four women died in childbirth (73).

Though the scene of Sin and Death is ostensibly a story of the origins of these troubles, Schwartz's research suggests that there is an invasion of "real life" into the fiction of potential allegory. Sin's "nether shape" becomes "distorted" (Milton 57; 2.784) because women's wombs and genitalia really did become distorted due to ordinary tearing during birth or through contemporary surgical practices such as episiotomy. Death comes into the world hungry and fighting at least in part because, for Milton, all infants came into the world hungry and fighting. The hellhounds cry without end because after ten to fifteen pregnancies, if even half of them resulted in live births, it might give the feeling of "ceaseless cry" to the mother. Milton's representation of all the terrors that Death wreaks on Sin's body, including the terrors of childbirth, were far more likely to elicit in contemporary readers what Schwartz refers to as "obstetric anxiety" (64). The effect of this invasion is that Death's horrors are very palpable to the readers, both male and female, and could be understood as truthful representations of how things do happen, rather than as complete fictions.

Sin's name cues readers to understand that it is not the character Sin herself who is the wellspring of their own experiences of horror, but the idea of "sin" which is ostensibly being represented or personified by her body. In this regard, she seems to function as an allegory. Schwartz understands Sin as the "allegory of a particular theological condition" (79) and argues that Sin's subjectivity is a way to communicate that human beings are mired in a distorted subjectivity. Schwartz also argues that readers
can see Sin’s own subjectivity as an entrance for understanding their own involvement in sin. He believes that Milton is trying to represent the distorted gaze of sin from a subjective position so that readers become aware of their own distorted gazes. The allegory makes visible the “ripples or distortions in the glass” (79) of perception and allegory and allows men and women to perceive their role in “sin” (78).

Schwartz argues that Milton is not trying to “lure us into ... guilt-laden identification with Sin” (76) or otherwise trick the reader, but is instead trying to accommodate subjectivity into allegorical figuration. He believes Milton is trying to compassionately provide a place for female readers to see themselves as “living allegory of the consequences of original sin” while male readers must find themselves in “the ultimately destructive role of Death or the originally responsible role of Satan” (80). When redemptive childbirth is later introduced in the poem, it too becomes part of the way that readers should see the possibilities of their own existence. For Schwartz, the naturalistic representation of birth allows the text to reach into the reader’s life and capture that person into allegory. Readers are invited to see themselves as allegory and their ultimate meaning as human beings pointing to an outside moral meaning. This is the point where I diverge from Schwartz’s reading. I agree that Sin’s experience makes her a potential representation of the specific fear, grief and terror surrounding the perils of being a childbearing woman in that age. However, unlike Schwartz, I believe that her potential role as an allegory is complicated because of the naturalistic way her experience is represented. Beyond Sin’s name, there’s no indication to read her as a moral horror. Her experiences of death are bodily and physical and accessible to the reader. That horror does not need moral meaning to become horrible; in fact, it seems that the physical
experiences of horror create the ideas that "Death" and "Sin" are horrible, rather than the other way around. Even if the characters of Sin and Death were not called Sin and Death, the scene would still be cringe-inducing. So it is the physical circumstances of Sin's pregnancy, birth, and mutilation which create the idea that sin is horrible; it is not the idea of "sin" which teaches the reader that being torn apart is awful, because that is obvious.

What is partially under question here is how strong the signposts for reading Sin (and Death) as allegories are, or need to be. The abstract names "Sin" and "Death" seem to be the only indications that urge the reader to read the scene allegorically, and consequently to understand and agree that death enters the world through sin. If Sin and Death are, because of their names, understood as allegorical, then the reader should interpret experiences of bodily horror as pointing to moral horror. While Schwartz accepts that Sin and Death are easily allegorical, and suggests that in an allegorical reading, the readers are invited to understand Sin's condition as their own, I argue that because of Sin's name, if the reader reads the episode allegorically, there seems to be no real choice. Either the reader must accept the logic of the allegory, which is that Sin's experience is an experience of a morally loaded horror, or the reader must choose to read directly against the instruction of Sin's name. (To read this way would seem to be choosing a "wrong" and distorted subjectivity, as suggested by Sin's name.) By extension, the reader can only choose to understand his or her own participation in the contemporary experiences of painful birth as living allegories of spiritual death or other moral horror, rather than, for instance, the result of some contemporary obstetric surgical practices. This mechanism of reading does not allow the reader a choice, but is a violent capture of life into allegory, a suppression of the narrative meaning of life.
This potential violence of allegorical reading may explain why this scene at times seems to oscillate between suggesting allegory and repulsing it. By capturing the reader into allegory, Sin and Death function in this scene both as representatives the ideas of “sin” and “death,” and mechanisms to create the idea of death as something interpretable. It is not “Death” which is an allegory for “death,” but the way these characters function makes the physical experiences of “death” a potential allegory for something else. This is why Sin’s body is so necessary to the way that Death’s forces are represented. Rather than having death’s forces depicted in the body of Death, death must be projected onto, or marked onto, the body of Sin and marked in such a way as to be recognizable as a life aspect of Milton’s readers. The violence this does to the reader’s ability to choose can only be tempered by self-conscious discomfort with the ideas of sign and allegory as tools. Because it is Sin whose body necessitates death’s interpretation, her association with the idea of untrustworthy sign conveys slipperiness to this potential allegory. Her association with untrustworthiness and distortion makes it seem dangerous to declare, “This is the meaning of ‘Sin,’” and, by extension, “This is the meaning of ‘Death,’” or to declare that death can only be understood in the context of sin. While this episode develops the idea of death as something to be explained and interpreted, it does not require that death be interpreted as an aspect of sin. Furthermore, it allows the reader to defer the interpretation of death to some later point in the poem.
Chapter Three

Figurative Death as a Map of the Fall

While "Death" in Book Two creates death as an idea necessitating interpretation, in later parts of the poem, the idea of death is frequently used to represent not death itself, but other abstractions. This use of death makes explicit the failure of fallen language. Death functions as the gap in communication between idea and the way that idea is expressed. This is illustrated by the way that Satan compares death and valor, Eve uses death as a trope to measure love, and Adam explains the unity of flesh he feels with Eve, as well as Adam and Eve's continued reliance on death as a figure for their despair. The entrance of sin and death into the poem's fictive world can be tracked through the use of death as an emblem. Death enters Paradise as an emblem before death enters the world as bodily decay and discord.

At first, it seems that things are going well when, in Book Four, Adam makes the idea of death a way to represent the goodness of God. He declares it the "only" sign of his and Eve's loving and voluntarily obedient relationship to God. Adam tells Eve that God must be infinitely good because he requires only

"this easy charge...not to takes that only Tree
Of Knowledge, planted by the Tree of Life...
So near grows death to life, whate'er death is
Some dreadful thing no doubt; for well thou know'st
God hath pronounced it death to taste that tree
The only sign of our obedience left
Among so many signs of power and rule

Conferred upon us.... (105; 4.423-429)"

Though Adam and Eve are ignorant of the nature of death, they “well...[know]” God’s command not to taste the tree of knowledge. Two things seem to happen in this passage: ignorance is described as a significant part of obedience, and death is at the border of knowledge and ignorance. Adam and Eve know of death but remain ignorant of what death is. Their innocence is what makes death the sign of their subordination to God, as well as a limit to their power on and over the earth. As long as Adam and Eve remain innocent of death, they remain obedient. While an oblique connection is made between death and obedience, death is not a precise figure for obedience. It is the innocence of death which is a figure for obedience. This is a significant distinction because the entrance of death into the world of the poem can be mapped in the way that the serpent, Adam and Eve each use the idea of death as a figure for some other abstraction.

Satan in the guise of the serpent relies on Eve’s innocence of the nature of death in order to use the idea of death as the linch-pin of his deception of Eve. He argues that the prohibited fruit will not cause Eve’s death, but give her “life / To knowledge” (244-245; 9.686-687) and mimics (whether sincerely or not) Adam’s earlier ignorance of death by saying that God will praise Eve’s “dauntless virtue, whom the pain of death / Denounced, whatever thing death be” (245; 9.694-695). The serpent acknowledges ignorance and dismisses death as something which cannot be known in order to make his deception seem more sincere. Death, according to the serpent, is a sign of bravery and commitment, something to be heroically and virtuously disregarded in the quest for knowledge and happiness -- something which is a measure of the valor in the individual
who does not fear it. Where Adam declares that ignorance of death is a sign of obedience to God, the serpent makes ignorance of death the motivation for disobedience to God.

Eve borrows the serpent’s pattern of thinking about death as something to be heroically defied when she brings the fruit to Adam. Worrying that she will be separated from Adam, that she will cease to exist, and that Adam will continue in happiness with a replacement Eve, she declares, “Confirmed then I resolve, / Adam shall share with me in bliss or woe; / So dear I love him, that with him all deaths / I could endure, without him live no life” (249; 9.830-834). As Eve determines that Adam shall share her state, no matter what it is, she makes death the proof of her love for him, and his love for her. Eve’s concern, from the perspective of the reader, also seems as though it might be misplaced. She fears being replaced more than she fears annihilation. As a consequence Eve imagines the potential annihilation of death as an experience which could be endured, while the lack of Adam -- or an Adam who lives on happily with a substitute Eve -- becomes a state which is too horrible to be imagined (“a death to think” [249; 9.830]). Death is simultaneously a figure for horror and for love at this moment of the Fall. Furthermore, Eve has been contaminated by the serpent’s logic of death as a measure of valor which he used to goad her into eating the fruit. She conveys the idea of death as a unit of measurement to Adam when she exclaims, “O glorious trial of exceeding love...rather than death or aught than death more dread / Shall separate us, linked in love so dear” (253; 9.961, 969-970). She believes that Adam proves his love for her by fearing the reflection of her own fear: he fears loss of Eve more than threat of death. Eve’s reasoning shares similarity with many classic love vows, such as the wedding vow of “In richer or poorer, sickness or health,” or the declarations of lovers that death is
preferable to separation. This resemblance suggests that the hyperbole readers encounter in love poetry or in everyday life is, in fact, the same fallen thinking about love which has its origins in Eve’s decision to share the fruit with Adam.

Adam, in turn makes death the measure of the unity of flesh that he feels with Eve. Adam declares that death can be the same as life to him because he and Eve are “one flesh.” The bodily circumstances of Eve’s creation from his rib seem to necessitate Adam’s comparison between the equally abstract ideas of death and life when he says to Eve, “if death / Consort with thee, death is to me as life; / So forcible within my heart I feel / The bond of nature draw me to my own...we are one / One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself” (252-253; 9.953-959). In this passage, Adam yokes together the ideas of death and life as well as his idea of self and Eve’s existence. Adam calls the “link of nature” the state of her being “flesh of [his] flesh / bone of [his] bone” (251; IX.914-915) and believes this link joins him to Eve. Adam does not know what death is, and in fact, does not try to interpret death as having meaning. He says “certain is my resolution to die” (251; IX.907) without pondering what death is because the substance, meaning, or nature of death is irrelevant to him at that moment. Adam’s deliberate heedlessness of death’s nature emphasizes his feeling of bodily connection to Eve. As both Adam and the reader will later learn, death will destroy the very body that leads Adam to feel this connection. What Adam does in this passage is the very thing the reader must not do: the reader must not be heedless of the meaning or nature of death. The reader must, in fact, be very interested in the nature or meaning of death, as has already been signaled by the appearance of Death in Book Two. Furthermore, the differences between the uses of
“Death” in Book Two and the uses of “death” by Adam and Eve in Book Nine encourage the reader to wonder and question what death is.

After their logic of death makes legible the thought processes that lead Adam and Eve to commit the transgressions of the Fall, both continue to use the idea of death to represent their feelings of despair and sorrow. Eve in particular cries out upon hearing of their banishment from Eden, “O unexpected stroke, worse than Death! / Must I thus leave thee Paradise” (305; 11.268-269)? Just as Eve earlier expressed that being separated from Adam would be “a death to think,” she now circumscribes her feelings at being expelled from Paradise with the idea of death. In each case, death has been a border of horror, or the limit of a hated idea. In order to express how something is awful, Eve compares it to death, which to her is still unknown in its full awfulness. Because the reader’s experiences of death are almost certainly fuller and more comprehensive than Eve’s, it can make the reader wonder: Is being expelled from Paradise worse than death? It seems impossible to know. Though the expulsion of Paradise is on a continuum with the entrance of death into the world, Eve does not yet know what death is and the reader does not know what living in Paradise is like, and so here, death becomes another of border of ignorance. Adam also uses the idea of death as a figure of his despair. Upon seeing “Death introduc’d through fierce antipathy” (284; 10.709) he declares that the “voice once heard / Delightfully, increase and multiply, / Now death to hear! For what can I increase / Or multiply, but curses on my head” (285; 10.729-732)? When he characterizes hearing God’s voice as “death,” the unknown and untold awfulness of death seems to make it a perfect image for expressing Adam’s feelings of despair and anger. Adam uses death as this image of despair because the blessing to increase and multiply
has been perverted into an endless multiplication of sorrow for Adam’s descendents. Adam and Eve are able to use “death” as this figure for sorrow because their ignorance of the nature of death makes it the most awful thing either of them can imagine. While the pre-lapsarian Adam and Eve were able to fully express and know the goodness of Paradise and the goodness of God, the nature of death and evil was shut off from their perception. Their earlier ignorance of death seems to be what causes them to use death as a grammatical intensifier. After the Fall, death becomes a way to say “this is the worst thing ever because it is worse than the worst thing that I don’t know.”

One heavenly counterpoint to the use of death as a symbolic gap of knowledge or as an intensifier to express badness comes in Book Three, where God uses the idea of death to describe the limits of justice in Book Three. God, unlike Adam, does not employ an idea of death as a simile, and does not make death a figure for justice in the way that Eve uses death as a measure of love. Instead, death, for God, is part of a chain of cause and effect. God announces to the heavenly host that when Adam and Eve disobey, they and their whole “posterity must die... or else justice must” (74; 3.209-210), unless a volunteer for substitute death can be found to “pay the rigid satisfaction, death for death” (74; 3.211). Though death is not used as a figure in this passage, God does use figurative language. Economic imagery pervades this heavenly discussion of death, justice and love. God declares the need for a substitute payment of “death for death” (74; 3.212) and asks the host “where shall we find such love”? (74; 3.213). The narrator notes that no “Patron” appears (74; 3.219), and that the host fears “forfeiture” or to have the “ransom set” upon their own heads (74; 3.221). Finally, the Son asks to be “Account[ed]” as man (75; 3.238), and describes his future sacrifice as a “debt paid” (75; 3.246). Justice
necessitates payment, and when God first describes this situation in 3.210-211, there is no grammatical indication as to who must be paid. God does not portray himself as the demanding creditor; neither is justice personified as a creditor. Instead, death-as-payment must be made (to someone, but who?), and either humanity or justice will fall victim to death. It isn’t until nearly fifty lines later that the answer seems to come. The Son declares, “Thou hast giv’n me to possess / Life in myself...Though now to Death I yield, and am his due” (75; 3.244-245). Justice demands that death be paid... to Death? While God uses figurative language, he does not use death as part of that figurative language. Instead, he uses other types of figuration to refer to death. The point of personifying Death at this moment in the poem seems to be to make that force of death more palpable to the reader -- as palpable as God -- and to suggest the idea that Death is God’s opponent as well as man’s, rather than something that God has inflicted on hapless humanity.

Compared to the encounters with Sin and Death, this passage is also starkly disembodied. Neither death nor justice is embodied. Because the purpose of death is to balance the equation of justice whether from the side of humanity or the side of justice, this passage establishes death as something that can interact both with human beings as well as with abstractions such as justice. As a result, death links justice and humanity as compatible kinds of ideas. Humanity appears as Adam’s “posterity,” rather than as embodied creatures. In light of the gesture toward personifying Death and embodying death in Sin’s body, the lack of embodiment or personification of “justice” establishes justice as something ineffable. Pairing “posterity” and “justice” around the idea of death also creates the notion that some part of humanity is as ineffable as justice. The Son has
little or no body in this episode as well, despite the fact that his incarnation and subsequent death is what will qualify him to become “Universal King” (77; 3.321). The only body in this passage belongs to a character that previously had no body: Death is suddenly embodied during the Son’s speech about his future victory. Death can receive a “wound” and will become a “carcass” to “glut the grave” (75; 3.258-259). Rather than an embodied representation of death this passage introduces the idea that death is transactional through the use of economic imagery.
Chapter Four

Death’s Remedies

Outside of Sin’s initial horrific encounter with death and Adam’s vision of future history in Book Eleven, the poem actually does not dwell too much on the embodied descriptions of death. For instance, when the Son brings judgment to Adam and Eve, he describes death not as a mark on the body, but as the total transformation and annihilation of the body as a form: “Out of the ground wast taken, know thy Birth / For dust thou art, and shalt to dust return” (267; 10.206-207). This description of death shows very little of the body beyond the mention that what Adam knows as the body is just a shape that has been put on dust. The body as a form is transient and impermanent while dust remains the fundamental first substance. This conception of death is not the same as the idea that death is a mark or marring of the body, which, though deformed, seems permanent, as in Sin’s case.

The episode which shows death’s “first shape on man” (311; 11.466), which is violence on the body, and murder, deals with a dual nature of death. This episode refers to change and decay of the body as well as an idea of spiritual death that is more difficult to represent. Adam’s heavenly vision Cain’s murder of Abel is one episode which expresses the tensions between this double-natured death. In Adam’s first encounter with the vision of death, the narrator’s use of ambiguous pronouns suggests that there may be different types of death which are difficult to represent separately. First of all, neither man is named, but referred to as “the first” and “the second” before the narrative devolves into a series of “he”s which could refer to either man:
Whereat he inly raged, and as they talked,
Smote him into the midriff with a stone
That beat out life; he fell, and deadly pale
Groaned out his soul with gushing blood effused (310; 11.444-447)

The reader can easily interpret this passage to mean that one man “inly raged” and hits the other with a rock, killing him. Adam must be seeing the blood spilling from the body of the second man. (This interpretation comes most easily to a reader familiar with the Biblical story of Cain and Abel.) But the narrator withholds the names of the men, and because the narrator refers to both men as “he,” the reader can simultaneously understand “he fell, and deadly pale / Groaned out his soul” as referring to either man. In one instance it is a physical situation: the second man literally falls to the ground. The phrase “groaned out his soul with gushing blood” is a way to describe life leaving that body. The word “soul” functions metaphorically to describe the essence of life. On the other hand, “fell” also puns on the idea of the Fall. This line might also refer to the idea that the first man, the murderer, is “falling” in sin. Describing the man as “deadly pale” echoes the earlier moment where Eve’s cheeks are “dyed...with pale” because “so much of death her thoughts / Had entertained” (293; 10.1008-1009) and suggests that paleness can be both a physiological state caused by loss of blood as well as an outward display of an inward spiritual state. The soul that groans out could be the murderer’s as he sees his victim’s blood running out into the dirt. There is no metaphor in that understanding, or if there is, it is that the cessation of life is a metaphor for the loss of the soul. In either case the body functions as the tool for depicting and imagining the ineffable soul. This episode does not separate bodily from spiritual death; instead, it collapses the two types of death, refusing to separate one from the other. Furthermore, the potential to
understand spiritual meaning in the passage does not come from the passage being allegorical. The spiritual component is not superimposed over the bodily meaning. Instead, it is a companion to the bodily meaning.

The other representations of bodily death in the poem seem like placeholders for the reader’s experiences of death in the world. For instance, when Adam expresses his horror at the first death and first murder, Michael explains that “many shapes / Of Death, and many are the ways that lead / To his grim cave, all dismal” (311; 11.468-469). He then shows Adam the “lazar house” (311; 11.479) of humanity decaying from “Convulsions, epilepsies, fierce catarrhs...Demoniac frenzy, moping melancholy...Marasmus” seems to be a display of embodied death (311-312; 11.483-460). The afflictions Adam witnesses are all illnesses of the body (except for “demoniac frenzy” and “moon-struck madness” which might or might not have bodily origins). However, none of these illnesses are palpable or embodied the way that the Sin’s experience is. These illnesses are named without elaboration on the specific effects of each illness on the body. This may be because while Adam “sees” these illnesses with heavenly sight, human readers are already familiar with illness. While violence embodied and engendered Sin for the reader, it does not embody Adam and Eve, and it does not make visible the bodies of the individuals in the lazar house. If anything, it reduces each person, collapsing the body inward until all that is left is the name of the ailment. The decay of illness and death on the body seems to destroy self until there is nothing left but decay. The meaning of death is not in its embodied forms; instead, it is in this annihilation of self. In a similar vein, when Michael continues the vision to show Adam war and violence, that war and violence is bounded by the words
“violence...oppression...and sword-law” (317; 11.671-672). Adam sees “rape,” and “prostituting” (318; 11.717-718), and the eventual flood of “Depopulation” (319; 11.756). All these words are abstractions to describe bodily events. None of these instances is accompanied by a bodily description of death as vivid as accompanied Sin’s experience or the first murder. Because Sin’s experience of death has already created “death” as an interpretable idea, it seems only necessary for Milton to mention all these different forms of death in order for the reader to see that these deaths too, need interpretation.

The poem shows the characters seeking remedies for the problem of death. Eve suggests that since their children will be “devoured / By Death at last,” (292; 10.980-981), she and Adam should abstain “so Death / Shall be deceived his glut, and with us two / Be forced to satisfy his ravenous maw” (292; 10.989-991), or commit suicide: “Let us seek Death, or he not found, supply / With our own hands his office on ourselves...Of many ways to die the shortest choosing, / Destruction with destruction to destroy” (293; 10.1001-1006). Eve, in this passage, refers to the personified figure of Death, who she has never met, rather than to the abstract idea of death. Eve understands Death as an opponent rather than as an impersonal force, event, or state. Her solution to death is to die as quickly as possible and to somehow starve Death out by refusing to provide offspring for his consumption. Thinking of death in personified terms is the only way that her suggestion makes sense. It’s impossible to fight against a force, but it seems possible to “starve” Death. Eve’s idea seems good, but Adam dissuades her by pointing out that trying to escape the punishment meted out by the Almighty might be repeating the sort of decision that got them into trouble in the first place (293; 10.1020-1030).
Michael offers the opposite suggestion to Adam: "Live in temperance and "all
taste of pleasure forgo" (313; 11.541) and "like ripe fruit thou drop / Into thy mother’s
lap, or be with ease / Gathered” (313; 11.535-536). Rather than dying as quickly as
possible, Michael suggests that it is possible and desirable to live long enough to die of
old age. Old age is barely a condolence prize since it means refraining from what is
exciting as well as experiencing diminished senses. It is also only a deferral of the
inevitable. However, to live temperately and die of old age is the only mitigation for
many of the sufferings that Adam witnesses in the lazar house.

God offers the final remedy for death, but the paradox is that it is not a remedy for
death; rather, death is the remedy. God explains, “I at first with two fair gifts / Created
him endowed, with happiness / And immortality; that fondly lost, / This other served but
to eternize woe: / Till I provided death: so death becomes / His final remedy” (298;
11.57-62). From God’s perspective, death is not a punishment but a solution. Death is
the first remedy for sickness. (Adam saw the people in the lazar-house begging for relief
through death [312; 11.490-495].) From the heavenly perspective, to speak of death as a
remedy is not a metaphor, but the original, and physical sickness is an echo, metaphor, or
imitation of the original spiritual sickness of sin.

This interpretation of the body as a metaphor of the spiritual recurs in the final
book of Paradise Lost as Michael tells Adam about the future redemption of the human
race through the virgin birth and incarnation of the Son. Adam rejoices and exclaims,
“Needs must the Serpent now his capital bruise / Expect with mortal pain: say where and
when / Their fight, what stroke shall bruise the Victors heel” (336; 12.383-385), but
Michael corrects him and instructs him to “Dream not of their fight, / As of a Duel, or the
local wounds / Of head or heel... he, who comes thy Saviour, shall recure [deaths wound], / Not by destroying Satan, but his works / In thee and in thy Seed” (336; 12.386-395). Michael instructs Adam not to focus on the limited and bodily but to understand the spiritual message behind the Son’s pronouncement to the Serpent: “Her Seed shall bruise thy head, thou bruise his heel” (266; 10.181). Michael explicates this statement for Adam, explaining that the Son will accomplish human redemption by becoming embodied and fulfilling the “Obedience to the Law of God” that Adam failed to do, and by suffering death by crucifixion.

As Michael foretells the Passion to Adam he does so in peculiarly disembodied terms, considering that he is describing the Son’s incarnation and death (“He shall endure by coming in the flesh / To a reproachful life and cursed death” [337; 12.405-406]). For instance, rather than dwelling on the embodied messiah’s physical experience of crucifixion, Michael explains that the Christ will be “nailed to the Cross...slain for bringing life” (337; 12.413-414) and in turn “to the Cross he nails thy enemies, / The law that is against thee, and the sins / Of all mankind, with him there crucified” (337; 12.415-417). Even without being compared to the episode of Sin and Death, or to Adam’s vision of the “lazar-house” of humanity (311-312; 11.478-499), there is a startling absence of bodily images. Instead, the crucifixion, itself a gory event, quickly seems to function as a figure of speech for the redemption that the Son will provide to human beings. Along with the physical crucifixion of the Son, there will be a companion and simultaneous crucifixion of “thy enemies, / The law ... and the sins / Of all mankind.” Or, the physical circumstances of crucifixion might be understood as a bodily representation of the spiritual truth that Michael is explaining. That is, the crucifixion is itself a “figure of
speech,” and is treated as a figure because, by withholding corporal details, the narrator makes the bodily subservient to the spiritual.

Paradoxically, however, Michael continues to use bodily metaphors in explaining that the bruise on Satan’s head is not literal:

   this godlike act
   Annuls thy doom, the death thou shouldst have died,
   In sin forever lost from life; this act
   Shall bruise the head of Satan, crush his strength
   Defeating Sin and Death, his two main arms,
   And fix far deeper in his head their stings
   Than temporal death shall bruise the Victor’s heel,
   Of theirs whom he redeems, a death like sleep.
   A gentle wafting to immortal life (338; 12.427-435)

At the moment when Michael attempts to explain something spiritual and eternal rather than something momentary and physical, he still relies on physical metaphors as well as the personified figures of Sin and Death. Heads, arms, heels, stings and strength all play a part in the representation of redemption and the destruction of spiritual death. Because the Son dies “the death thou shouldst have died” but is not constrained by it, this somehow transforms what might have been permanent death into temporal death. The bridge between these two types of death as well as the use of bodies to represent the spiritual suggests that the body is a useful tool to make metaphors for the unseen. But it also suggests that the unseen is the true meaning of the physical. At this interpretation, Adam praises God’s goodness and ultimately concludes that “to the faithful Death [is] the
Gate of Life” (341; 12.571). In this sentence, the last sentence to mention death in the poem, death is subordinated as an image to the idea of life. Death once again becomes part of an image of God’s goodness, echoing Adam’s earlier pre-lapsarian pronouncements in Paradise. This seems to be the ultimate interpretation of death. In this passage, Michael serves as an exegete, demonstrating the heavenly (and markedly allegorical) understanding of previously mysterious passages for Adam. Though it seems that language is a barrier of imperfection between human and divine knowledge, or that language cannot represent God, only death and sin, in Milton’s poem this seems not to be the case. Instead Milton gestures towards being able to use not only language, but bodies and death itself, as a way to represent God’s goodness.

Milton must to engage with the representation of death on the body because his epic is etiological, and the reality of bodily death is something he has to explain for his readers. Readers of Paradise Lost will encounter death in real life not only as the ravages of childbirth, but also the sickness of the lazar-house, the depredations of illness -- physical, mental, and spiritual -- and the decay of age. Milton is able to develop the meaning and function of death for his reader without being limited by the reader’s own experiences which would tell them that death is horrible. Milton doesn’t have to convince the reader that death is horrible, nor does he need to represent death -- instead his work is to convince the reader that death isn’t horrible, that it is in fact just, useful, and a “final remedy” (298; 11.61-62) or “gate to life” (341; 12.571). Through the potential allegory of Sin and Death, Milton first draws death (and readers’ experiences of death) into the poem and makes bodily death an interpretable literary experience. Through this process of interpretation, the bodily decay and distortion known to readers
and shown to Adam can be a revelation of God’s goodness rather than a shadow to obscure it.
Works Cited


