From *Mirabilis Annus*, 1661, opening illustration. This item is reproduced by permission of
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“To Warn Proud Cities”: a
Topical Reference in Milton’s
“Airy Knights” Simile
(*Paradise Lost* II.531-8)

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Summary: *In Paradise Lost II.531-8 modern editors often see an allusion to Josephus’ account of armies appearing in the sky shortly before the fall of Jerusalem. In fact, reports of spectral soldiers and aerial battles were quite common in seventeenth-century English pamphlets, such as **Mirabilis Annus** and **Five Strange Wonders**. Airy apparitions do not seem to have held much fascination for Milton. But this does not mean that he could not exploit their popular appeal and their political symbolism in *Paradise Lost*.*

Describing the devils’ wargames in Hell, Milton has recourse to an unusual simile:

As when to warn proud cities war appears
Waged in the troubled sky, and armies rush
To battle in the clouds, before each van
Prick forth the airy knights, and couch their spears
Till thickest legions close; with feats of arms
From either end of heaven the welkin burns. (II.531-8)¹

Modern editors see an allusion to Josephus’ account of armies appearing in the sky shortly before the fall of Jerusalem.² Such an allusion is plausible and I shall return to it. But Patrick Hume, the earliest editor of *Paradise Lost*, saw a more topical reference:

These Warlike Apparitions may be well supposed sent to forewarn Proud and Luxurious Cities, they being seldom fancied to appear, but in disastrous Times, and eminent Dangers; our own Stories afford us some of these fighting *Phaenomena* about the time of our Civil Wars.³

Following Hume's hint, I have found reports of airy battles in 1640, 1642-3, 1648, 1659, 1660, 1661 and 1662. By placing Milton's "airy knights" simile in the context of these prodigies, I hope to bring out some of its political resonance.

The apparition of 1640 is distant from *Paradise Lost*, but has a special claim on our attention since it is mentioned by Milton's nephew, Edward Phillips. In his *The Reign of King Charles* (1660), Phillips reports that in "the Sixteenth Year" of the reign of Charles I, "many Sights were seen in the Ayre, as Armies fighting one against the other, all looked on as sad Presages of the ensuing Broyls."⁴ Phillips is writing from a Royalist perspective, but the connection with his uncle is fortified by the preceding paragraph, where he refers to an eclipse of the sun that had occurred on the day of Prince Charles' birth (29 May 1630). Milton may covertly allude to this event in the following simile describing Satan's faded glory:

his form had yet not lost
All her original brightness, nor appeared
Less than archangel ruined, and the excess
Of glory obscured: as when the sun new risen
Looks through the horizontal misty air
Shorn of his beams, or from behind the moon
In dim eclipse disastrous twilight sheds
On half the nations, and with fear of change
Perplexes monarchs. (1.591-99)

John Toland tells us that the royal licenser found "imaginary Treason" in these lines.⁵ He adds that the licenser made several "other frivolous Exceptions" to *Paradise Lost*. Toland does not say what these were, but Phillips' citing of aerial battles alongside the eclipse as "sad Presages" of Civil War opens the possibility that Milton's "airy knights" simile was one of the other objectionable passages.

The apparitions of 1642-3 occurred a few weeks after the battle of Edgehill. They are described in two pamphlets, both published in January 1643. The first bears the gripping title: "A great wonder in Heaven: Shewing the late Apparitions and Prodigious noyses of War and Battails seen on Edge-Hill near Keynton in Northampton-shire."⁶ This pamphlet tells how spectral soldiers had been seen fighting above "the very place" where the Earl of Essex had obtained "a glorious victory over the Cavaliers" (p. 4). The battle of Edgehill (actually a marginal Royalist victory) had been fought on 23 October 1642. The first apparition occurred on the saturday before Christmas, "between twelve and one of the clock in the morning" (p. 4). Certain "Shepherds, and other countrey-men and travellers" were amazed to hear "first the sound

of Drums a far off, and the noyse of Soulders, as it were, giving out their last groanes." Terrified, they turned to flee,

but then on the sudden . . . appeared in the ayre the same incorporeall souldiers that made those clamours, and immediately with Ensignes displayed Drums beating, Musquets going off, Cannons discharged, Horses neyghing, which also to these men were visible, the alarum or entrance to this game of death was strucke up, one Army which gave the first charge, having the Kings colours, and the other the Parliaments . . . and so pell mell to it they went (p. 5).

At first it seemed that the King's party would prevail, but "after some three houres fight, that Army which carryed the Kings colours withdrew, or rather appeared to flie; the other remaining, as it were, Masters of the field" (p. 5). Lest we be in doubt as to the vision's meaning, the pamphleteer informs us that the Earl of Essex had been fighting "in the defence of the Kingdomes lawes and libertie" (p. 4). The second pamphlet appeared four days later and is called "The New Yeares Wonder. Being a most certaine and true Relation of the disturbed inhabitants of Kenton."⁷ This pamphlet agrees in almost all details with "A great wonder," but it is even more partisan in its conclusions, expressing the wish that King Charles put aside his "eveill councelares" (p. 8). These pamphlets are unlikely to have exercised a direct influence on *Paradise Lost*, but they did much to set the tone for subsequent prodigies.

Five Strange Wonders in the North and est of England was published in 1659 when Milton was at work on *Paradise Lost*. Two of the five wonders are relevant to Milton's simile. In one vision, two fiery pillars appeared "at Noon-day over *Marston Moor* . . . and between these two Pillars intervened several armed Troops and Companies in Battail array." The two pillars, appearing at opposite ends of the sky, offer a particularly suggestive context for Milton's line: "From either end of heaven the welkin burns." After a doubtful conflict, "the Northern Army vanquished the Southern Army: which being doen, the two Pillars vanquished [sic]."⁸ The anonymous pamphleteer comments:

What this portends, no man can conjecture aright: but it may be supposed, the two Pillars represent his Highness and the Parliament, and the Northern Army the Forces of this Common wealth, vanquishing their Enemy, and maugre the Designs of all Forreign and Popish Confederates. Who need not in the least be feared, if the mutual closings and claspings of redintegrate affections and endearments be insisted upon between the Supream Authority and People, and each member of this Common-wealth, to return to his duty and proper station, and firmly to unite together, for the recovery of our long-lost Liberties, and dear-earn'd Priviledges (p. 5).

The reference to the Lord Protector (“his Highness”) suggests that the pamphlet was written before Richard Cromwell’s abdication in May 1659.⁹ The two armies are of course distinct from the two pillars, which are (or ought to be) supportive of a common cause. But there is a note of warning in the appeal to “redintegrate affections.” The pamphleteer is aware that divisions within the Commonwealth are likely to benefit the Royalist cause.

The note of warning is still stronger in the report of a second combat that took place over Newmarket-Heath. The pamphleteer tells how “many hundred Spectators” heard the “dreadful noise of Drums beating, and Trumpets sounding, though no armies were at first visible.”

Yet no sooner had the sound passed away, but immediately they began to discern several Warlike Troops and Companions, arraying themselves in Battalia; and after some pickering [skirmishing], and vollies presented between several Parties, as it were Forlorn Hopes, the two main Bodies joyned Battel, disputing very puisantly, and with great vigour. During this Engagement, there seemed to be an extraordinary Light, and glittering of Swords, and Men in Armour, which continued for the space of half an hour; and then the one seemed to vanquish the other, taking their pursuit towards the City of *London* (p. 6).

The pamphleteer does not identify the combatants on this occasion, and no Civil War battle had occurred at Newmarket Heath. The place had been in the headlines in June 1647, when Joyce conducted the king from Holmby to his home at Newmarket, and when the army had mustered there before marching on London. But who vanquished whom? Perhaps we shouldn’t expect chronological precision from a writer on apparitions. But it is ominous that London should be threatened. The pamphleteer tells us that the battle was followed by “sundry great Claps” of thunder, “from an Angry God, even like unto an Enemies Warning-Piece” (p. 6). One is reminded of Milton’s words “to warn proud cities.” Between October 1659 and April 1660 Milton offered repeated warnings of his own against the Restoration. After 29 May 1660 the time for such warnings was over. When armies next appeared in the sky they were perceived not as a warning against the Restoration, but as a portent of the punishment that was sure to follow it.

Mirabilis Annus, or The Year of Prodigies and Wonders was published anonymously in 1661. The opening illustration (fig. 1) is representative of the kind of prodigy the pamphlet reports. Blazing stars, inverted steeples, and flying swords are typical fare. The pamphlet also reports many incidents of armies fighting in the sky between 1660 and 1661. The second illustration in

the second column depicts a scene much like that reported in *Five Strange Wonders*: two armies encountering each other between two fiery pillars. An apparition of "two armies" fighting "in the air at *London-bridge*" on 21 March 1660 ought to have prevented the king's return, but didn't, so repeat performances were scheduled for Surrey and Yorkshire in May 1660 and Kent and Cornwall in June 1661. *Mirabilis Annus Secundus; or, The second Year of Prodigies* (1662) added more airy combats in Sussex (July 1662) and Upingham in Rutland (October 1662).¹⁰ *Mirabilis Annus* informs us that such apparitions most often portend "wars and commotions" and "usually for signifie some remarkable *changes and revolutions*." These "bode much misery and calamity to the *prophane* and *wicked* part of the World," but "very much good to the *Sober* and *Religious* part of the World." As an instance of "the *prophane*," the pamphleteer cites Belshazzar. But Belshazzar is a thinly disguised Charles II:

God by a prodigie doth sharply reprove the debauchery of this King and his Concubines, with the rest of his *Associates*, and thereby also declares the sudden period and determination of his *Kingdom*.

But amongst the *Hellish* rout of prophane and ungodly men, let *especially* the *Oppressors and Persecutors of the True Church* look to themselves, when the hand of the Lord in strange Signes and Wonders is lifted up among them; for *then* let them know assuredly *that the day of their Calamity is at hand* (sig A4^v).

This kind of talk naturally drew the attention of King Charles' censor, Roger L'Estrange.¹¹ L'Estrange methodically tracked down those responsible for printing *Mirabilis Annus*, though its authorship remained a mystery. Giles Calvert, Thomas Creak, and George Thresher (already in prison for earlier publications) were implicated in the printing, as was Francis Smith, who was arrested "with copies of *Mirabilis Annus* under his cloak."¹² Elizabeth Calvert, who saw the book through the press, was apprehended in October 1661. Richard Greaves conjectures that the Congregationalist George Cockayne and the Particular Baptist Henry Danvers were the likeliest authors. L'Estrange did not soon forget *Mirabilis Annus*. In *Considerations and Proposals in Order to the Regulation of the Press* (1663), he cites the above-quoted paragraph alongside the title page of Milton's *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* as examples of the kind of outrage that had to be suppressed.

All of this may seem to have brought us a long way from the allusion to Josephus noted by Milton's modern editors. But *Mirabilis Annus* repeatedly cites Josephus and draws an explicit parallel between Jerusalem and London. Immediately after describing an aerial combat at Smitham's Bottom, near

Croydon, in which “two distinct Armies” were seen “engaging and pushing one against the other,” the author comments:

Prodigies like to this have at several times happened in many places, and the Events have been alwayes very signal and remarkable.

Thus did God forewarn the Jewes of the destruction of themselves, their City and Temple which was effected not long after by Titus Vespasian (p. 16).

Since L'Estrange's role as censor brought him into contact with both Milton and *Mirabilis Annus*, I cite his translation of Josephus:

on the twenty first of the month *Artemissius*, there appear'd a Vision so uncommon, that I should not dare to relate it, were there not several Eye-witnesses yet alive that can attest the truth of it. A little before the Sun went down, there were seen here and there up and down in the Air, Chariots and Men in Armour that spread all over the Country, and hover'd in the Clouds round about the City.¹³

For the author of *Mirabilis Annus*, this precedent implies a parallel between the Jews who rejected Christ and the English who rejected liberty. But the radical pamphleteer is not content to take bitter satisfaction in the implied condemnation of English backsliders. He goes on to cite other cases where such apparitions signalled a divine call to arms. Apparently, “*Armies were often seen in the Heavens*” in the Netherlands in 1568, shortly before the Prince of Orange intervened on behalf of the Protestants. Aerial battles similarly foretold two Swedish victories in the Thirty Years War. The pamphleteer also mentions the apparition of 1640, citing Phillips directly. Finally, he gives another example from 1648 — this time presaging Cromwell's defeat of the Duke of Hamilton:

The coming in and the total defeating of Duke Hambletons Army, Anno 1648. was clearly portended by the appearance in the Heavens of a Southern and Nortern Army in Yorkshire, and the Nortern Armies being beaten by the other. The Truth whereof many yet live can testify (p. 16).

This tradition of cloudy combat as a prelude to earthly tumults gives *Mirabilis Annus* a radical rather than a resigned tone. *Mirabilis Annus Secundus* cites Josephus with hope as well as dread:

The Jews (says he further in the close of the same chap.) interpreted some of the Signs as they pleased, and at others they laughed, till by the ruin of their Country, and their own woful overthrow, their iniquity appeared. So, if we seriously reflect upon the present humour and temper of the generality of the

People in England at this day, how little credit and regard is given by them to the Signs of the Time . . . we have sufficient ground to expect, that our fear is coming as Desolation, and our Destruction as a Whirlwind.

(sig A2v)

L'Estrange might answer that the wish was father to the thought.

Clearly, spectral visions were very much "in the air" when Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*. But what was Milton's attitude to them? *The Readie & Easie Way* shows no interest in portents of constitutional change — but it would hardly have served Milton's interests to draw attention to such prodigies on the eve of the Restoration that he was trying to avert. In *The History of Britain* Milton notes that "fiery Dragons, with other impressions in the air" were "judg'd to foresignifie" the Danish invasions.¹⁴ The comment is nevertheless perfunctory and Milton offers no opinion of his own on the likelihood of such events. In *Of Reformation* he had been frankly dismissive:

Let the Astrologer be dismay'd at the portentous blaze of comets, and impressions in the aire as foretelling troubles and changes to states: I shall beleieve there cannot be a more illboding signe to a Nation (*God* turne the Omen from us) then when the Inhabitants, to avoid insufferable grievances at home, are inforc'd by heaps to forsake their native Country.¹⁵

All things considered, airy apparitions do not seem to have held much fascination for Milton. But this does not mean that he could not exploit popular interest in them when writing *Paradise Lost*. A contemporary reader familiar with pamphlets such as *Mirabilis Annus* and *Five Strange Wonders* would have easily recognized in Milton's "airy knights" a glancing allusion to the Civil Wars and the Restoration. The simile implies Milton's pride in the English Revolution and his bitterness at those who had betrayed it. The implied parallel between the backsliding peoples of London and Jerusalem would not have been lost on L'Estrange and his fellow licensors. Years later, when the Revolution of 1688 caused a reversal in L'Estrange's own fortunes, he was forced to support himself by translating Josephus. When he came to that passage about airy combatants appearing over the cities of Judaea, L'Estrange most likely remembered *Mirabilis Annus* and *Mirabilis Annus Secundus*. It is tempting to think that he may also have recalled Milton's subversive simile and its implied hope that the disillusioned subjects of the Stuart kings might happen to move new broils.

Notes

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1. *The Poems of John Milton*, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longmans, 1968). All quotations of Milton's poetry are from this edition.
2. Flavius Josephus, *Bellum Iudaicum* 6.5.3.
3. P[atrack] H[ume], *Annotations on Milton's Paradise Lost* (1695), p. 70.
4. Sir Richard Baker, *A Chronicle of the Kings of England, From the time of the Romans Governement Unto the Death of King James. Whereunto is now added in this Third Edition, the Reign of King Charles, I* (London, 1660). *The Reign of King Charles* (pp. 457-506) is by Edward Phillips (see pp. 493-4).
5. Helen Darbishire, ed., *The Early Lives of Milton* (London, 1932), 180. In the context of treason, "imaginary" meant more than just "fancied." "Imaginary treason" was a legal term in which "imagine" preserved the sense it had in Law French: "plot" or "scheme." Thus the Statute of Treasons defines treason as "quant homme fait compasser ou ymaginer la mort nostre seigneur le roi, ma dame, sa compaignie, ou de lour fitz primer et heir" (25 Edward III, st. 5, c. 2). This Statute has never been repealed. For further discussion of Milton's eclipse simile, see B. A. Wright's letter to the *TLS*, 20 June 1929. See also Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (London: Faber, 1977), p. 405 and John Leonard, *Naming in Paradise* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), pp. 111-15.
6. B.M. Thomason Tracts. E.85 (41). Published 23 January 1643 (New Style). See also the chapter "Of Apparitions" in Peter Young, *Edgehill 1642: the Campaign and the Battle* (Kineton: Roundwood Press, 1967), pp. 162-6.
7. B.M. Thomason Tracts. E.86 (23). 27 January 1643.
8. "The Five Strange Wonders in the North and West of England" (London, 1659), p. 5.
9. This dating is uncertain, however, since the title-page of *Five Strange Wonders* refers to "this present summer." There were several abortive Royalist risings in England in August 1659. That of Sir George Booth was crushed by Lambert near Northwich on August 19.
10. *Mirabilis Annus* 14-15, 25, 38. *Mirabilis Annus Secundus*, 3, 24-5.
11. L'Estrange was not the same licenser who later objected to *Paradise Lost*. William Riley Parker identifies that licenser as Thomas Tomkyns. See *Milton: A Biography*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 1.600. L'Estrange's experience with *Mirabilis Annus* may nevertheless have made Tomkyns especially suspicious of prodigies and wonders in *Paradise Lost*. L'Estrange had recently answered the first edition of Milton's *Readie & Easie Way* (February 1660) with *No Blinde Guides* (April 1660).

12. Richard Greaves, *Deliver us from Evil: the Radical Underground in Britain, 1660-1663* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 213.
13. Roger L'Estrange, *The Wars of the Jews* (London, 1702; 3rd edn. 1717), p. 153.
14. *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. Don M. Wolfe et. al., 8 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1953-82), vol. 5, part 1, p. 244.
15. *Complete Prose Works*, 1. 585.