

MILTON'S ANGELS

The following are some salient characteristics of Milton's angels, whose numbers are chiefly represented by Gabriel, Raphael, Michael, Uriel, Abdiel, and of course Satan. Keep in mind that Milton takes his angels very seriously: their existence was in the seventeenth century as widely accepted as that of clouds, and many people reported seeing them in the skies. It was indeed believed that terrestrial wars were preceded by angelic wars visible from the earth: "The appearance of armed men fighting and encountering one another in the sky [is] most notorious," wrote the seventeenth-century English philosopher Henry More; even Machiavelli did not deny the phenomenon. For the sixteenth century angels had a literal existence conducted just above the plane of human experience but not accessible to it. Note that for Milton's pre-lapsarian humanity angels are perceptible to the human senses.

- o Angels have material bodies. Their substance is the same as that which constitutes the human body, differing from it only in degree. Because angels are placed nearer God, they are however "more refin'd, more spiritous, and pure."
- o Thus angels are second only to God and the Son in substantial purity. They frequently serve as messengers (angelus=messenger) between human beings and the divine. Angels are themselves ordered in a seven-tier hierarchy which from highest to lowest runs as follows: seraphim (purely contemplative), cherubim, thrones, dominions, virtues, powers, principalities, archangels and angels. (No, you do not have to memorize this hierarchy, but be aware of its existence and of the centrality of hierarchy to Milton's cosmic scheme.)
- o Angels are panorganic. That is, their vital organs are evenly dispersed throughout their bodies: "all heart they live, all head, all eye, all ear,/All intellect, all sense" (VI:350). Humans have five senses, each of which receives and transmits a particular kind of stimulus and converts it into a particular sensation which then recombines with other sensations to give a reflection of the world by common sense. By contrast, angels can detect any kind of stimulus with any part of their bodies. At the same time, they are more sensitive to stimuli than human beings. Angels also perceive intuitively--by direct apprehension and immediately. Human knowledge on the other hand is discursive--indirect and sequential. This is true before the fall, and it is even truer after it (V:487-488). The only thing angels can't detect is hypocrisy, which is by nature undetectable.
- o Some angelic tasks in Paradise Lost include seeing, guarding, guiding, bearing messages from God, teaching and defending.