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Divine Absence, Divine Presence: The Theological Arguments of Elizabeth Singer Rowe's the History of Joseph

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DIVINE ABSENCE, DIVINE PRESENCE: THE THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS OF
ELIZABETH SINGER ROWE'S *THE HISTORY OF JOSEPH*

by

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ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Singer Rowe's Biblical epic *The History of Joseph* (1736), which dramatizes the events of Genesis 37-45, stands out in her oeuvre not only generically—it is her only long narrative poem—but because of how rarely God appears as an intervening agent or subject of narrative attention. Rather than highlight God's splendor by imbuing Scripture with poetic embellishment, as is her wont, Rowe's language downplays God's hand in a famously Providential story (Genesis 50.20). While God shows up most often as an entity to beseech or a cultural token to reference, pagan deities govern the plot's action; Rowe relishes in extravagant portrayals of them and their haunted lairs; she establishes the thoroughly secular heroine Semiramis as a type of Joseph in a 300-line inset. This thesis—the first work solely dedicated to *The History of Joseph* as a narrative—explores Rowe's curious diminishment of God's power and presence in Joseph's story and considers the theology that this strange poem might construct.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction and Background.....	1
Chapter 2: Typology	11
Chapter 3: Space	15
Chapter 4: Divine Presence.....	20
Chapter 5: Conclusion.....	31
Bibliography	33

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Elizabeth Singer Rowe's brief epic, *The History of Joseph* (1736), brims with political and personal intrigue, supernatural machinations, and domestic drama both familial and romantic. But poetic as it is, its source text is sacred, and to read it without an eye towards the theological is to miss one of its fundamental facets. Educated and devout, Rowe maintained and developed theological investments that characterize her work, but her gender rendered poetry one of few accepted vehicles for disseminating those insights. Though the basic plot of the ten-book poem follows Genesis 30-46—Joseph's enslavement in Egypt, Potiphar's wife's attempt to seduce him, his chaste refusal of her, and his heroic dual salvations of Egypt and his family—Rowe's account of Joseph's story significantly diverges from its Biblical analogue. It avoids the Scripture's thematic focus on God's providence and stops the narrative just short of the phrase which has famously encapsulated the story, "as for you, ye thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good" (Genesis 50:20 KJV). It veils God's intervening presence with oblique language and elides all but one direct description of the Christian God, instead taking up the pagan pantheon as the site of extended poetic portraiture. Though God is embodied and active in much of Rowe's work, in this poem Rowe drains God's presence from the poem and modulates what remains so that it is only available to Joseph through the past retold or the future prophesied, and never in the moment of crises themselves. This important deviation, along with the poem's elaborate typological construction and

meditations on secular space, reveal not only the influence of *Paradise Lost* but also Rowe's deft engagement with her inherited Calvinist dogma in forms both affirming and challenging. It is an "exemplary subversive narrative," not just because of the Nonconformist themes it touts,¹ but because it makes statements about God's nature and behavior in a woman's voice.

Joseph's thematic diversity and expansive plot invite sustained critical analysis of its many religious facets, and this paper aims primarily to offer a reading, however incomplete, of a poem not yet read. I argue that of all Rowe's poetry, *Joseph* seems the most promising place for theological analysis, since its epic form allowed her to depart from the Biblical language and structure of her source text, creating room for her to insert her own theological arguments. Following a brief biography of Rowe and introduction to the scholarship about her, I briefly explore the poem's typological and spatial elements. Then, I turn to Rowe's curious depiction of God's power and presence,² positing that she redistributes and mediates God's presence in order to publish her theological meditations about how God's presence and intervention work in her increasingly modern and secular cultural moment.

¹ Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, 155, traces in the poem the Nonconformist motifs of unpredictability, exile, and personal regeneration, especially in requiring "forgiveness, and therefore redemption" from Joseph, as well as his brothers and individual Egyptians.

² I use "God" throughout to mean the discrete, character-like, entity of the Christian Bible and of Rowe's other poetry, related to but distinct from vague descriptors words like "heav'n" and "divine" and from angels.

Elizabeth Singer Rowe was by all accounts one of the most respected and influential women writers through the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century, a writer whose “importance as a cultural phenomenon can hardly be overstated.”³ The daughter of a middle-class Presbyterian preacher, she began publishing poetry in John Dunton’s *Athenian Mercury* in 1691 at the age of 17, and by 1693 was the magazine’s principle poetry contributor. Dunton published her first collection of poetry in 1696, and she wrote and published consistently until her death in 1737. Despite her Whig and Dissenting connections, she gained the admiration of men and women across religious and political spectrums, including Anne Finch, Isaac Watts, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson, whose praise helped “canonize her, in both senses of the word, as a literary saint.”⁴ Such sacred language is typical of Rowe’s descriptors; her oeuvre, though diverse in form, is primarily religious in content. She wrote hymns; pastorals; a much-anthologized eulogy for her husband; epistolary prose such as *Friendship in Death* (1728) and *Letters Moral and Entertaining* (1729-32), the former of which is her most famous

³ Kathryn R. King, “Elizabeth Singer Rowe’s Tactical Use of Print and Manuscript,” in *Women’s Writing and the Circulation of Ideas: Manuscript Publication in England, 1550-1800*, ed. George L. Justice and Nathan Tinker (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 160. For more on Rowe’s cultural importance, see Madeleine Forell Marshall, *The Poetry of Elizabeth Singer Rowe, 1674-1737*, 1987, 29; Deborah Kennedy, *Poetic Sisters : Early Eighteenth-Century Women Poets* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2013), 59–61; Paula R. Bakscheider, *Elizabeth Singer Rowe and the Development of the English Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). Bakscheider reports that “until at least 1855, Rowe’s poetry was regularly reprinted and anthologized in Great Britain and America,” 6.

⁴ King, “Tactical Use,” 160.

work; Biblical paraphrases, including a celebrated version of the Canticles; and devotional poetry, including Devout Soliloquies, a genre she invented.⁵As the nineteenth century progressed, her reputation as a “multidimensional woman and writer of many kinds of poetry and fiction” flattened into that of an “unreadable, eccentric woman”⁶ with a singular, unfashionable attribute: piety. Such an image was incompatible with twentieth-century sensibilities, which favored a history of licentious, transgressive women, and Rowe fell into deep critical neglect. Only in the past two decades has a surge of scholarship about eighteenth-century women writers begun to restore Rowe’s literary reputation. But even in this recovery, scholars are only recently shifting their focus from Rowe’s evolving image to her writing itself.

Of all Rowe’s writing, *Joseph* is unique in form and status, lauded by modern critics as her preeminent work but basically untouched beyond their accolades. Like the Devout Soliloquies, it experiments with generic conventions, but unlike the Soliloquies, it does not identify itself as inventive, and its proportionally small amount of sacred content further sets it apart in Rowe’s corpus. The date of *Joseph*’s composition is unknown, although Rowe probably began the work in her early years and revised it throughout her life. Rowe’s biographers make this claim in a 1739 biography, although it is uncorroborated; Lori Davis Perry suggests that its structural and thematic similarities to

⁵ Paula Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and Their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 135–36 and 168–74. Isaac Watts published a collection of Devout Soliloquies in 1737, after Rowe’s death.

⁶ Backscheider, *Elizabeth Singer Rowe and the Development of the English Novel*. Backscheider traces the “fascinating story” of Rowe’s reputation’s evolution on 26-40.

Daniel Baker's 1697 poem *Joseph* and Rowe's earlier published works indicate that she at least began writing it in the early 1690s or early 1700s.⁷ The first eight books were printed in 1736, a year before Rowe's death, but a letter from Rowe to her close friend the Countess of Hereford in the same year indicates its prior circulation in manuscript form and its popularity at that point. Rowe wrote that "by the partiality of some of my acquaintance, the poem of Joseph has been so often transcribed, and is got into so many hands, that I have been at last flattered, or teized [sic] into a consent to let it be published."⁸ Theophilus Rowe published a second edition, with two books added, in 1739. Notably, *Joseph* is likely her only major poem published under her supervision.⁹

However, *Joseph*'s early popularity did not protect it in posterity and the increased scholarly attention to Rowe in recent decades has not extended to her one epic poem. It has been the sole focus of only one publication, from 1997, which (usefully, if narrowly) dissects Book V, which retells the story of the ancient Assyrian heroine Semiramis and chronicles the differences between it and its historical source material.¹⁰ Most Rowe scholarship only mentions *Joseph* in the rehearsal of her bibliography. Nevertheless, those who do mention it note its irregularity, innovation, and yet untapped

⁷ Lori A. Davis Perry, "The Literary Model for Elizabeth Singer Rowe's 'History of Joseph,'" *Notes and Queries* 52, no. 3 (2005): 349–51, <https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gji318>.

⁸ Elizabeth Singer Rowe, *The Works of Mrs Elizabeth Rowe, in Four Volumes*, vol. IV (London, 1796), 218–19.

⁹ Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, 115.

¹⁰ Alun David, "'The Story of Semiramis': An Oriental Tale in Elizabeth Rowe's The History of Joseph," *Women's Writing* 4, no. 1 (1997): 91–101.

potential. For Madeleine Forrell Marshall, it “stands supreme among Rowe’s works”,¹¹ Alun David, in the afore-mentioned article, calls it “an innovative work [which] does not altogether fit with the image Rowe elsewhere attempted to project [and] challenges the common twentieth century view that her poetry is of negligible interest”,¹² Paula Backscheider enthusiastically finds that it “broke new ground”¹³ and “reveals her mature dramatic and stylistic ability as well as her keen engagement with genres her pious reputation would seem to rule out.”¹⁴ It is, indeed, unlike Rowe’s other work, both in form—it is her only long narrative poem—and content, mingling sacred and secular. In *Joseph*, Rowe married epic narrative to Scriptural source text, which allowed for greater authorial freedom than paraphrase but still provided legitimizing parameters for Rowe’s poetry.

A bevy of literati dwell in *Joseph*’s background, as Rowe was well-read and highly educated by her father. Poets like Abraham Cowley and Matthew Prior had continued in the genre of *Paradise Lost*,¹⁵ and Rowe’s biblical epic bears tonal similarities to theirs. Milton’s poem, of course, haunted *Joseph* more than any other

¹¹ Madeleine Marshall Forell, “Elizabeth Singer Rowe,” in *Eighteenth-Century British Poets, First Series*, ed. John Sitter, vol. 95 (Farmington Hills: Gale, 1990), 248–56.

¹² David, ““Semiramis,”” 92.

¹³ Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, 123.

¹⁴ Backscheider, 152.

¹⁵ Rowe wrote an entire poem in praise of Prior’s *Solomon on the Vanity of the World* called, creatively, “*To Mr. Prior, on his ‘Solomon.’*”

work.¹⁶ The counsel of pagan Gods with which *Joseph* begins clearly echoes the first book of *Paradise Lost*; Joseph's heroism is domestic—his chaste refusal of Potipher's wife and prevention of fraternal famine—and thus resonant with Milton's hero, "tested . . . in the performance of familial duties" because "the real sphere of action is internalized."¹⁷ More generally, Milton paved the way for Rowe and other eighteenth-century poets to engage with the epic genre, first by "keeping [it] alive,"¹⁸ and then by setting a precedent of appropriating Biblical narrative to the epic form. As Griffin points out, "Christian religious epic seemed in some ways to offer more opportunities"¹⁹ than mythological or political variants. However, Rowe and other religious epic poets face concerns from early modern critics who worried about using Scripture besides the first chapter of Genesis, which was nearly mythological (and thus appropriate for fictionalization) but already poeticized. Shaftesbury worried that "Should [the poet] venture farther, into the lives and characters of the Patriarchs . . . should he employ the sacred Machine, the Exhibitions and Interventions of Divinity . . . he wou'd soon

¹⁶ Sharon Achinstein, "'Pleasure by Description': Elizabeth Singer Rowe's Enlightened Milton," in *Milton and the Grounds of Contention*, ed. Mark R. Kelley, Michael Lieb, and John T. Shawcross (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne UP, 2003), 68. Achinstein traces Milton's influence on Rowe and identifies him as one of her primary sources.

¹⁷ Dustin H. Griffin, *Regaining Paradise: Milton and the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 51. Griffin's thorough discussion on the post-Milton epic provides deeper context for Rowe's poem.

¹⁸ Griffin, 52.

¹⁹ Griffin, 49.

prove . . . how little those Divine Patterns were capable of human Imitation.”²⁰ Those dual manifestations of Divinity—exhibitions and interventions—are exactly the two elements of *Joseph* that this essay explores, and Shaftesbury’s identification of their problematic nature does not anticipate the way that Rowe would exploit them for her own theological discussions. But even as Milton lurks in the background of *Joseph*, sixteenth-century Tasso may have been even more influential. Rowe knew and admired *Jerusalem Delivered*; her Tasso appeared in Tonson’s 1704 *Poetical Miscellanies: the Fifth Part* and then later in her own *Letters Moral and Entertaining*. And Tasso, much more than Milton, contains a God who moves and acts, whose interventions continue to incite extended critical conversation.²¹ Tasso’s influence helps account for God’s immediacy and agency in the rest of Rowe’s poetry, but makes the absence of those characteristics in *Joseph* even more stark.

To fully read *Joseph*, or any of Rowe’s writing, requires careful attention not only (or even primarily) to her influences, but also to the religious themes that undergirded her life and work, especially in light of the fact that she lived in a world uninclined to take female intellect seriously, and certainly to publish it in scholarly forms. For women such as Rowe, impelled toward theological inquiry, poetry became one of few available arenas for staking hermeneutical claims.²² Rowe was a progenitor of the “tactical moves and

²⁰ *Characteristics*, 5th edn (London, 1732), I, 358-59.

²¹ Tobias Gregory, “Tasso’s God: Divine Action in ‘Gerusalemme Liberata,’” *Renaissance Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2002): 561, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1262318>.

²² Natasha Duquette, *Veiled Intent: Dissenting Women’s Aesthetic Approach to Biblical Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 2. Duquette’s chapters engage Anna

countermoves” that later women would use to disseminate and preserve “their scriptural exegesis and theological analysis.”²³ Appropriating Biblical text seems a move made for Rowe, whose writing evinces level of learnedness and theological savvy that matched male peers.²⁴ Yet Jessica Clement is the only scholar who has begun the important work of integrating Rowe’s complex theological views with analysis of her poetry and provided a compelling exploration of doctrinal nuance therein, although she does not address *Joseph* directly. As Clement points out, Rowe’s theology drew on all manner of Protestant thought and challenged the idea that Dissenting poetry was “merely an exercise in piety.”²⁵ Rather, Clement argues, the form of poetry “as a medium for rigorous theological discussion” allowed Rowe to “issue challenges to, and identify inconsistencies in, the Calvinist creed” that informed the Dissenting tradition of which Rowe was a part, so that her poems “demonstrate that Reformed belief stretched beyond the dogma of Calvin and exhibit her willingness to engage with multiple philosophies and

Barbault, Phyllis Wheatley, Helen Maria Williams, Joanna Ballie and Felicia Hemens, and Mary Anne Schimmelpennick, but her argument holds for poets of Rowe’s generation, especially because in *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, 108 and 116, Backscheider places many of Duquette’s poets in a tradition which Rowe originates or at least develops.

²³ Duquette, 2.

²⁴ Helen Hughes, “Elizabeth Rowe and the Countess of Hertford,” *PMLA* 59, no. 3 (1944): 726–46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/459382>.

²⁵ Jessica Clement, “‘My Bright Love Shall All This Blackness Chase’: The Theological Poetry of Elizabeth Singer Rowe,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, no. 2 (2018): 289–301, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1754-0208.12535>.

theological beliefs.”²⁶ Poetic form invites musing without firm conclusion, experimentation without ultimate conviction, and is thus especially hospitable to an author like Rowe, with her various theological perspectives.²⁷

²⁶ Clement, 290–91.

²⁷ Clement, 292.

CHAPTER 2

TYPOLOGY

Perhaps the most straightforward religious aspect of *Joseph* is its typology. Not only is Semiramis (the Assyrian heroine to whose narrative the entirety of Book V is devoted) a type of Joseph,²⁸ but Joseph, importantly, is a type of Christ. The Christological narrative famously maps onto Joseph's storyline: despised and rejected by his own people but loved by his father, sold for silver, condemned with two other criminals, made ruler, his suffering repurposed for the good of the world. However, assuming her audience's preexisting familiarity with the figural reading of Joseph's narrative, Rowe focuses her typological energy on connecting Joseph to Christ through his physical body. The first mention of Joseph in Book I is when pagan king Moloch shudders at the thought of "divine presages [that] *in his face* appear" (1.169, my italics); when Joseph arrives in Egypt, his "*aspect* something spoke divinely great" (4.49, my italics); later, "Celestial virtue sparkl[ed] *in his look*" (6.174, my italics); and even later, "His graceful person was charming *to the sight*" (9.45, my italics). Perhaps the most explicit connection of Joseph's body to Christ is the reference to Joseph as "the wounded

²⁸ David, "'Semiramis.'" Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets*, 154, agrees with Alun that "Rowe has constructed a sophisticated examples of typological poetry, a major, learned tradition of religious writing, that makes Semiramis a type of Joseph," even though Sabrina is "moved by the story of Semiramis in the wrong way."

Hebrew” (8.158). Over and over the linguistic shadows of Christ—divine, celestial, graceful—make Joseph’s supernatural substance evident in his physical body.

Typology’s centrality in *Joseph* anchors Rowe to the Calvinist tradition, since typology occupied a “central” and “precisely defined place” in Calvin’s exegesis; he often modeled a typological treatment of scripture, including the identification of Joseph as a type of Christ.²⁹ However, Rowe’s images of Joseph prioritize his physical body alongside his spiritual character, making typological ties to Christ not only with narrative but bodily comparisons. Rowe gives Joseph’s divine nature another bold development: auxiliary characters, especially Pharaoh, emphatically refer to Joseph in terms reserved for God, conflating Joseph and God rather than making Joseph represent God. Joseph’s brothers, as well as his steward and even Potiphar, persistently refer to him as “lord.”³⁰ Desperately grateful for the salvation from famine that Joseph’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream provides, Pharaoh lavishes Joseph with power and presents, ultimately declaring him “Our guardian God, and great preserver thou!” (8.131). The narrative voice reiterates the sentiment as Joseph’s agricultural acumen staves off ruin and prompts “Egypt [to] name him her guardian god,” (9.54) echoing Pharaoh’s early impression of his guest as “some favorable God” (4.92). Rather than imagining the particulars of God’s

²⁹ Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), 118, writes that for Calvin, “Joseph’s imprisonment and restoration figure the death and resurrection of Christ and all believers.” The fourth chapter of Lewalski’s book provides useful background for the Biblical symbolic mode and typology, albeit with a focus on religious lyric.

³⁰ Of the 12 instances of the word “lord” in the poem, 10 refer to Joseph; the other two refer to Pharaoh.

presence and interventions, as she does in other poems, Rowe drains God from the text,³¹ instead plastering divine appellatives on human agents.

Poetry here allows Rowe to explore and present alternatives to her Calvinist theology, especially the Calvinist belief that “soul and body are utterly depraved,” unable to be redeemed or positively catalyzed.³² If Joseph’s body so strongly bears marks of divine approbation and even possession, how can it be thoroughly corrupt? At the same time, the incredibly close connection between Joseph and God could be read as a theological statement about divine presence: though not present as his own entity, God’s presence manifests through chosen Hebrew people. Rather than emphasize God’s actions as separate from Joseph’s, as the Biblical text does, the poem emphasizes Joseph’s capacity to intervene on God’s behalf, shrinking the difference between them. Warrant for such a reading comes in part from the second line of a striking couplet in the poem’s introduction: “The sacred lays a mystic sense infold, / And things divine in human types were told” (1.35-6). In a poem where “things divine” do not proceed directly from God, “human types” may be reliably trusted to deliver them instead. Where God displays little immediate agency, humans may function as his agents. The poem legitimizes human

³¹ The corresponding biblical text, once again, highlights God’s activity: “And the LORD was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the LORD made all that he did to prosper in his hand” (Genesis 39:2-3 KJV).

³² Clement, 290. According to Clement, Rowe “rejects the idea that body and soul, terms Calvin often conflates with the physical body and the rational mind, are merely ‘seeds of vice’” and seeks to “honor her inherited Dissenting beliefs while also accommodating reason.”

bodies and voices as vehicles for divinity, offering shades of nuance to the doctrine of total depravity.

CHAPTER 3

SPACE

One of the most striking religious facets of *The History of Joseph* is the physical space in which Rowe carefully grounds the narrative's events. The poem references a number of real locations, using a mix of ancient and modern names. The majority of the places are identified as pagan or secular, and setting is one of the primary ways that Rowe expresses the absence of God's presence, especially spaces like Moloch's temple, Egypt, and Asana, a mythical underworld. Lairs of pagan powers are enumerated in language more physical than spiritual, located in a particular geographic realm, making it clear that Rowe has departed from the realm of paraphrase. These descriptions highlight borders and limits, contrasting with the expansive spaces of heaven.

The first sustained image of the poem describes the temple of Moloch, which acts as background to the initial convocation of "the pagan terrors" (1.80). It stands "in Himmon's vale," where "uninterrupted night" reigns:

Pale tapers hung around in equal rows,
The mansion of the sullen king disclose;
Seven brazen gates its horrid entrance guard;
Within the cries of human ghosts were heard;
On seven high alters rise polluted fires,
While human victims feed the ruddy spires.
The place, Gehenna call'd resembled well

The native gloom and dismal vaults of hell

'Twas night, and goblins in the darkness danc'd,

The priests in frantick visions lay entranc'd' (1.66-79)

While some of the deities from *Paradise Lost* reprise their appearance in this scene,³³ Satan is notably absent. His exclusion underlines the autonomy of the named gods and the poem's polytheistic reality; the introduction of extra-Biblical goblins and ghosts draws the reader into this world, neither fully fictional nor fully faithful to Scripture. It thus destabilizes a Christian narrative in which the symmetrical, if not equal, forces of God and Satan battle (each backed by their respective angelic armies), a narrative in which God is guaranteed victory.

In the same way, Rowe's Egypt is a place where spatial and spiritual realms converge under the domain of extra-Biblical powers: silver turrets were erected "by pow'rful magick, and secur'd by spells" (4.18); confined inside those turrets, Egyptian wizards "converse with Hell, and practice rites impure" (4.19). Pyramids shade the surrounding fields, "their compass sacred to the dead remain / Within eternal night and silence reign" (4.29-30). Rowe delivers extended poetic exploration of these Egyptian spaces, littered by corpses, inhabited by ghosts, hulking over the city and astonishing Joseph. Asana, where "In hellish banquets and obscene delights, / The curst assembly here consume the nights" (6.89-90) amplifies the unsettling atmosphere.³⁴ The thirty-five line description of Asana is curious because it does not further the action, but seems

³³ Moloch appears in *PL* at 1.392; Astarte at 1.439; Rimmon at 1.467; Osiris at 1.478.

³⁴ When Joseph spurns Potiphar's wife, she sends her nurse, Iphicle to Asana to retrieve a love potion.

primarily meant to revive the haunted tone of Book I's vignette and reiterate the embodiment of these deities in both space and time, because Asana is a spatial point at which "black fiends" congregate:

From earth, from air, and from the briny deep
The come, and here nocturnal revels keep.
From gloomy *Acherusia*, and the fen
Of *Serbon*, and the forest of *Birdene*;
From *Ophiodes*, the serpent isle, they come,
And *Syrtes*, where fantastick spectres roam;
From *Chabnus*, and the wild *Psebarian* peak,
Whose hoary cliffs the clouds long order break.³⁵

In one particularly vivid stanza of the sketch, the Necromancer—or more precisely, the Necromancer's abode—comes into view, enmeshed in spatial terms:

In his echoing cells,
And winding vaults, the Necromancer dwells:
Passing from room to room, the brazen doors
Resound (6.95-98)

³⁵ *Acherusia* is a Greek name for the underworld; the *Serbon* is a bog in Egypt; *Ophiodes* is an ancient name for Cyprus; *Syrtes* is an ancient Phoenician city. *Serbon* and *Syrtes* appears in *Paradise Lost*; *Chabnus* and *Psebarian* may have been invented for this poem,

In Asana and Moloch's temple, the spatial terms are terms of enclosure and limits. Trees bound both spaces.³⁶ Moloch's temple features "seven brazen gates" and is described as a "vault." Asana also features the Necromancer's vault, as well as his rooms, cells, and doors.

These passages work on a few levels. First, they cater to proto-Gothic literary sensibilities increasingly eager for sensation and shock, flexing Rowe's particular gift for appealing to popular tastes without compromising her morality. Second, they increase the contrast of the binary between good and evil—the "uninterrupted night" and revenants of human sacrifices dispel any question about the morality of Moloch and his crew. They recall the descriptions of hell so popular in seventeenth-century homiletics, but are not hell, only like it: "the place [Moloch's temple], Gehenna call'd, *resembled* well / The native gloom and dismal vaults of hell" (1.76-77, my italics). Third, they force the reader to imagine evil embodied, not flying about in some ethereal realm. The narrative's lingering on the trees rising in the valley, shading a candlelit mansion, make the earth itself a site dominated by evil; the particular place names and architectural details in the description of Asana bring an edge of realism to a mythical scene. Finally, the narrative voice works through these scenes without so much as hinting at a sovereign Christian God who will light the eternal darkness or redeem the haunted spaces. The spaces are brazenly, completely Godless.

³⁶ Of the Temple: "Around it rose a consecrated wood; / Whose mingled shades excluded noon-day light" (1.67-68). Of Asana: "Harpinus there an uncouth dwelling own'd, / planted with yew and mournful Cyprus round" (6.75-76).

The descriptions of heavenly spaces, on the other hand, defy limits and are markedly less spatial. While in *Friendship in Death* (1728), Rowe's characters "reveal heaven to our senses—its peoples, its geography, its architecture,"³⁷ heaven as a space here is much more obscure, just as the God it houses is more obscured than he is elsewhere in Rowe's work. Gabriel announces that he's come "from the unclouded realms of day above / from endless pleasures and unbounded love, / from painted fields decked with immortal flowers" (7.24-26). The heavenly space seems expansive and distant, setting the scene for the expansive prophetic vision which follows. That prophetic vision includes a vision of the theophany at Mt. Sinai, where God, for the first and only time, enters human space.

³⁷ Peter Walmsley, "Whigs in Heaven: Elizabeth Rowe's *Friendship in Death*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 44, no. 3 (2011): 319.

CHAPTER 4

DIVINE PRESENCE

Any epic based on a Biblical story invites comparison between the original text and the artistic rendering, but especially one written by Rowe, an indubitably reverent and careful reader of Scripture whose corpus reflects paraphrasing prowess, and whose deviation from the original text must have been intentional.³⁸ Joseph's history as told in the Biblical text insists on God's absolute and unwavering presence through its protagonist's progressions, an insistence which underlines God's apparent absence from the poem. For example, when Joseph arrives in Egypt, the Biblical text reads: "the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand" (39:2-3). Two sentences later, we learn that "the Lord blessed the Egyptian house for Joseph's sake" (39:5). After Potiphar's wife attempts to seduce Joseph and Potiphar throws him in prison, "the Lord was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour the Lord was with him, and that which he did, the Lord made to prosper" (39:21-23). In each of these instances, and others throughout the text, God is a present entity who acts

³⁸ Backscheider details conventions of the eighteenth-century paraphrase and gives a full account of Rowe's engagement with the tradition, including an analysis of several poetic paraphrases, in *Eighteenth Century Women Poets*, pp. 126-137.

decisively—blessing Joseph, making him prosper.³⁹ It is important that these affirmations of God’s presence come from the narrative voice rather than a character’s voice, because the validity that the narrative voice supplies allows for comparison between the reality articulated in the Biblical text and the reality articulated in Rowe’s poem (rather than the perspectives of the texts’ respective characters, who in both texts make plentiful references to the Hebrew God). *Joseph* elides the vast majority of these declarations of God’s presence and agency. Not only are there fewer mentions of God’s existence at all (especially in proportion to the amount of extra-Biblical content that Rowe adds) but most references to God become broad gestures that use God-adjacent words: “celestial,” “divine,” and most frequently, “heav’n” or “heav’nly.” These words evacuate subjectivity from God, transform God from a character into a place or attribute. Weakening their potency even further is the fact that they are never capitalized, as they are in coeval texts, and that once Rowe assigns “heav’nly”, unqualified, to Egyptian priests in Book VIII, who “search their heav’nly schemes” (8.71) to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams.

A facile explanation for Rowe’s evasive language for God might find it indicative of some overdeveloped reverence that precludes putting human words to sacred subjects. But Rowe wrote extensively in the genre of Biblical paraphrase, and from these we can ascertain the outer boundaries of her comfort with writing directly about, to, even as, God. Rowe displays no hesitance to explore God’s human or heavenly forms in poetic

³⁹ God’s presence and action characterize the Biblical Joseph story to such an extent that the brief recounting of it in the New Testament book of Acts reads: “but God was with him,¹⁰ and delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Acts 7:9-10).

language. Her paraphrases glimmer with bold invocations and descriptions of God. For example: each of the three stanzas of her paraphrase of Job 19:25 end with a declaration of anticipated human-divine intimacy: “I shall behold my God.”⁴⁰ Elsewhere she is unafraid to imagine the particulars of God’s manifestation and connect it to the human body of his incarnation: “They see him Born and hear him Weep, / To aggravate their Wonder; / Whose Awful Voice had shook the Deep, / And Breath’d his Will in Thunder / That Awful Voice, chang’d to an Infant’s cry” (11-17).⁴¹ She does not shy away from appellation, directly naming God in a singular stanza of PARAPHRASE as “God,” “Lord of all the Heavenly Hosts,” “The Only Blest,” “The All-sufficient” and “The Protector.” As a poet, Rowe “aspires to be enveloped in the boundlessness of divine presence”⁴²; she clearly delights in linguistic descriptions of God; her abstinence from those descriptions in the *Joseph* have some other explanation. Even more evidence for this point is the first sentence of the poem, in the argument: “An Invocation of the Divine Spirit.” The definite article indicates that the divine spirit to which Rowe refers is the Holy Spirit, a member of the Trinity. She expects that God will “grace” her “song” (1.42), establishing a clear expectation for divine presence, which the content of the following story does not appear, at least at first, to meet.

⁴⁰ Rowe Singer, “And, Though after My Skin, Worms Destroy This Body, yet in My Flesh Shall I See God, Job 19. 26.,” Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive, accessed April 9, 2019, <https://www.eighteenthcenturypoetry.org/works/oar96-w0080.shtml>.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Singer Rowe, “PARAPHRASE,” Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive, accessed April 9, 2019, <https://www.eighteenthcenturypoetry.org/works/oar96-w0050.shtml>.

⁴² Sharon Achinstein, “Romance of the Spirit: Female Sexuality and Religious Desire in Early Modern England,” *ELH* 69, no. 2 (2002): 425.

As opposed to the Biblical account, in which God's presence is persistent and which does not mention supernatural enemies, spiritual action in Rowe's poem fragments onto two primary planes: pagan and Christian. The pagan gods take up the majority of the poem's attention to supernatural entities. They are the object of Rowe's most flamboyant poetic description; they exercise the most influence over the events of the Joseph narrative; and they act exclusively in the present segment of the timeline, not in past or future. The Christian God and his angelic deputies interrupt this pagan preeminence infrequently (two theophanies and one brief angelic encounter where God does not manifest) and with less fanfare. In the two theophanies—one towards the poem's beginning, in the retelling of the patriarchs' past, and once towards its end, when an angelic visitation prompts prophetic vision of God's descent on Mt. Sinai—God's presence is mediated by temporal distance and by an intermediary storyteller (his family, retelling their history, in the first instance; an angel in the second). For long stretches of the poem, and especially in Joseph's moments of crisis, the pagan powers seem to run unfettered and unopposed by the Christian God. But God is eventually present in the poem, and Rowe's reconfiguration of that presence has stylistic and theological implications.

From the poem's beginning, the striking presence of pagan gods attracts attention to God's comparative inaction. After an extended invocation to Rowe's "Gentler," "propitious" (1.31) muse, an arresting and evocative description of the pagan council interrupts. In the first sustained image of the poem, Moloch's temple features crying "infant ghosts" (1.73), human sacrifice, dancing goblins, and "the Pagan terrors" who "in solemn council and mature debate" (1.80-1) sat:

Th' apostate princes with resentment fir'd,
Anxious and bent on black designs, conspire'd
To find out schemes successful to efface
Great Heber's name and crush the sacred race. (1.83-86)

These gods are immediate, material, bent on action. They are the first characters in the poem with specific description, with dialogue. They have a goal—to destroy the Israelites, to prevent Christ's eventual coming—and in the following stanzas attempt, decisively and repeatedly, to achieve that vision. The Christian side offers no response, just human actors who profess the Christian God but are subject to the whims of Moloch and the rest. The early books of the poem, especially, establish the aggressive presence of these antagonistic gods, out for Joseph's ruin.

Until the end of Book II, the spiritual landscape of the poem seems Godforsaken—the main narrative action has been a digression about a brutal rape. Then, the first theophany, narrated by Joseph's father Jacob but set three generations earlier, offers glimpse of past mercy and goodness: just after an angel “warded from [Abram's] hand the fatal stroke” (2.228) which would have killed Isaac, “a voice streams downward from above, / Breathing divine beneficence and love” (2.229). The voice, ostensibly God's but unidentified as such, swears to “bless [Abram's] race / With endless favour and peculiar grace” (2.231-32), and then in a simple couplet prophesies Hebrew rule over Eastern kings. The phrase “peculiar grace” repeats twice more throughout the poem and makes meaning on three levels. First, it draws attention to the specificity of God's identity, his provision, and his interactions. Second, it harkens to Book III of *Paradise Lost*, where God speaks these words about his economy of salvation. Third, and most

importantly, it aligns the poem from the beginning with Rowe's Calvinist background, because Calvin coined the phrase, which would later become known as "common grace."⁴³ There Jacob abruptly returns to his tent and the audience with God ends. The language of the interaction is surprisingly unornamented, understated, underpunctuated, particularly in comparison with the grandiose descriptions of pagan deities in Book I. The episode's brevity, the paucity of textual markers, and the lack of human reaction make it easy to overlook the divinity of the lines' speaker. But these short lines—a retrospective promise of future fulfillment—directly precede the commencement of Joseph's storyline in Book III. There, the book's first stanza establishes the pagan deities' unmediated intervention in the human world. In the "mean time" of the present tense, the pagan deities move and act. They "attempt" (3.3) to foment friction in the Hebrew community; Moloch "already had provok'd strife" (3.5) and "kindl[ed] mischief" (3.6) in hopes of destroying Joseph. Rowe provides no such report about God.

An angelic encounter soon after, the first of the poem's two, helps to clarify the function of the oft-referenced "heav'n" and to establish a pattern in the poem about how angels will function in relation to God's manifestation. The next stanza formally introduces Joseph, the "lovely youth" whose "blooming grace" connects him to God's promised "peculiar grace," even if Joseph's grace is not fully realized. As Joseph faces his brothers' hostility, the narrator notes that "heav'n alone his ruin can prevent" (3.42). The amorphous, impersonal agent "heav'n"—who can, but may not, prevent his ruin—

⁴³ Stuart C. Weir, *The Good Work of Non-Christians, Empowerment, and the New Creation: The Efficacy of the Holy Spirit's Empowering for Ordinary Work* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 119.

appears a lightweight match for Joseph's embodied brothers and the vivid pagan deities who oppose Joseph. "Heav'n" cannot function as a firmly reliable reference until the poem connects it to a clearly articulated referent; before that point, it at best stands in as a diluted, imprecise gesture at a vague and unstable God. And indeed, "heav'n" does not immediately save Joseph, whose brothers trap him in a pit while they design his demise, a design for which the "fiends below" (3.55) take full credit. From the pit, Joseph sends "to God's high throne" a prayer. For Joseph, God is not "heav'n," but a concrete entity grounded in physical space, although that entity has yet to appear in the poem. The prayer deploys not God but the angel Gabriel, who gives Joseph a stanza-long summary of what's to come: he will leave Israel, go to Egypt, and resist sexual temptation. "This," the narrative voice tells us, "heav'n enjoins" (3.85). "Heav'n," must mean more broadly than God, means angelic agents too, at least. This angelic encounter establishes a rule that the rest of the poem will follow: angels reveal past and future manifestations of God's presence and power; they serve as mediators and translators, rendering temporal barriers temporarily null and strengthening Joseph's resolve to live morally. Present in ways that God is not, angels enable atemporal understandings of God even as they, embodied, enter and exit the physical spaces that Joseph inhabits.

The second angelic encounter is more extensive than the first and contains the poem's sole episode of God's manifest presence and intervention. The angel Gabriel appears while Joseph serves prison time for sexual misconduct towards Potiphar's wife, a crime he did not commit. The encounter is interesting because while it does contain a very vivid depiction of God as physically present, an angelic mediator and a chronological gap still mediate Joseph's experience of that presence. Rowe again skips

over God's immediate presence, so prominent in the Biblical text: "But the Lord was with Joseph and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour . . . the Lord was with him, and that which he did, the Lord made it to prosper" (Genesis 39:21, 29). Having endured his brothers' hatred, a torturous kidnapping, a vertiginous rise to and then fall from power, all without the sustenance of God's presence, Joseph is finally granted a supernatural experience that holds up to the pagan narratives. With incredible ornamentation and flourish, gliding seamlessly through the future, Gabriel moves from images of Jacob's prospering progeny to the plagues to the exodus from Egypt.

This prophetic segment of the timeline reproduces the phenomena of God's presence that Rowe constructed in Joseph's narrative, and its condensed nature in the prophetic segment makes it more apparent to the reader. At the beginning of the prophecy's events, God is a figure only obliquely present: "Heav'n" hears the Israelite cry; it is "the prophet [Moses]'s word," not God's, that "converts [the lakes and rivers] to reeking blood." Until the murder of first-born Egyptian sons, glossed as "strokes of pow'r confessed divine," Pharaoh "the God [does not] revere, / Whom every element obsequious fears"—God is named here, at least, but is hardly active as a character in the narrative. Moses leads the Hebrews through the "mighty waves," and until at "heav'n's command the watry chain dissolves," Moses, "their glorious chief," appears to lead the Israelites through the Red Sea without much divine intervention, even though the Biblical text specifically attributes the action to God.⁴⁴ Only after the Israelites survive their

⁴⁴ Exodus 14:21: "And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the dry sea land, and the waters were divided."

harrowing escape and arrive in the safe if lackluster desert does God appear, present to the point of having human features and recognizable form:

While from th' ethereal summit God descends,

Beneath his feet the starry convex bends

His radiant form majestic darkness hides

While on a tempest rapid wings he rides.

The trembling earth his awful presence owns. (7.115-119)

Nearly 20 more lines of grand description ensue, but just as the “pious nation” attends to the “solemn voice of God,” “the angel shifts the scene and leaves the rest / Inimitable all, and not to be expressed.” Nevertheless, God has manifested as an embodied being, a being whose mere appearance causes all manner of nature to “flame,” “groan,” “call,” “fall,” “sink,” “shrink,” “hide,” and “quake” (120-129). No longer couched in the opaque language of “heav’n” and “divine,” God has become present and effected real change in the natural world. It is interesting to note that despite the chronological distance which hinders Joseph’s full access to God’s presence in this prophetic vision, Gabriel relays the encounter with present tense verbs, collapsing the distance linguistically. All the descriptions of pagan gods are in the present, and present tense verbs dominate their descriptions, so to also describe God in these terms lends God a sense of immediacy and suggests that God’s presence is not fully confined to chronological constraints. While the Biblical story reminds readers of God’s interventions throughout, Rowe’s God waits until the most intense moments of tension pass before he appears. Joseph is privy to that presence, though separated from it in time and narration. The effects of that mediated presence materialize soon after, with Joseph’s confident declaration that his fellow

prisoner's dream "from God was sent" (7.183). Though the dream's source comes from Joseph and not from the narrative voice, the assertion of God's intervention is still the most direct yet.

God's presence, though, has not dispelled pagan preeminence. When Pharaoh's nightmares begin shortly thereafter, Rowe spends 26 flashy lines narrating the throngs of "planetary priests" who come to interpret, who wear varied vestments decorated with "a treble twist of serpents" (serpents, of course, symbolizing sin), "monstrous ornaments" and "all the monstrous progeny of the Nile" (8.61). The repetition of "monstrous" recalls the "monstrous crimes" (8.27) of lust that Potiphar's wife confessed 30 lines earlier and the "monstrous crimes" of apparently killing Joseph to which his brothers would confess in book nine — "monstrous" signals the epitome of immorality, godlessness, evil. Like the pagan gods of earlier books, these priests are plural, and grounded in present time and place. They take up lines and lines of narrative space, attract linguistic and imagistic attention to themselves. But they ultimately fail to produce meaning—"their stars were mute, the meaning flies / In trackless darkness and obscure disguise" (8.72-73).

In the face of this interpretive failure, the manifestation of God's future presence enables Joseph to articulate God as an entity currently present and active, and subsequently to elucidate previously disguised meaning. Pharaoh has "for meaning ev'ry God addressed" (8.105), but Joseph announces that "The Almighty God, o'er earth and skies supreme / . . . has sent this dream" (8.105). Joseph has linguistically embodied God in the poem's present tense frame, newly confident about God's subjectivity and agency. Empowered now with the intervening presence of not "heav'n" but "The Almighty God," Joseph deftly assembles meaning from obscurity: "with one intent the sacred vision

came, / Of both the hidden meaning is the same” (8.110-11). This correct interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream catalyzes Joseph’s release, the restoration and increase of his power, and his rescue of Egypt and Israel.

Rather than following the Biblical pattern, wherein the presence and intervention of God is a familiar refrain, Rowe recalibrates the concentration and the timing of that intervening presence. She plays up the depravity of the present and consolidates divine presence in a few key moments, unleashing it all at once, trading constant divine presence for one that rewards faithfulness and obedience when God seems absent. On a formal level, this move heightens the poem’s dramatic energy, and on a theological level, it provides a model of Christian experience in which past and future manifestations of God’s presence sustain faith in the midst of trial. It’s important also that in Rowe’s reconstruction of the story, God is most present after the trial passes, not during it, as he is in the Biblical text. The Israelites experience God’s presence once they’ve endured oppression and exodus; Joseph experiences divine comfort, in the form of an angel, after he’s withstood temptation and imprisonment.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Rowe's considerations of space, typology, time, and mediation all build towards a picture of God's presence that is markedly different from the Biblical account, molded by and to Rowe's eighteenth-century world of Enlightenment and Dissent. Though she certainly drew on Milton and Tasso, the theological insights embedded in the poem are her own; though veiled in poetry, they intervene in conversations about human depravity, divine intervention, and faith in a world increasingly hostile to it. The poem's stretches of Godless time, punctuated by glimpses of God still rendered partially inaccessible by chronological distance and human mediators perhaps register anxiety about a modern world where God's presence seemed less like a given, but insist that God is still present—perhaps less often, or less fully, or less accessibly than before, in a culture that increasingly privileged reason over mystical experience, but present nonetheless. *Joseph* speaks to concerns beyond theology too. Most immediately ripe for exploration: the Semiramis digression and the Sabrina storyline, which presents complex discussions about female subjectivity; Rowe's use of sentimentality and affect throughout, which play on and complicate generic conventions; the orientalism and exoticism present in descriptions of Egypt, which dovetail with a wealth of current scholarship about the Oriental tale; and the power dynamics between Pharaoh, Potiphar, and Joseph and the tension around the relationship between church and state, which connect to Rowe's

political contexts. *The History of Joseph* deserves to be read, deserves sustained scholarly attention, deserves a prominent place in a revised corpus of eighteenth-century poetry which excavates and embraces a diversity of previously muted voices.

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