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## ***Moldiwhether's Minutes***

Gwenyth E. Hood

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EDITORIAL AND COMMENTARY

(continued from p. 3 )

literary critic Squidgeboodle. We haven't heard from Squidgeboodle for a while, but apparently he is up to his old tricks. As before, I'm not certain how the drafted minutes of his committee meeting reached my laptop, but in the spirit of giving the devil his due, I print them here, trusting my wise readers to make all necessary allowances for the diabolic viewpoint expressed there.

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## Moldiwhether's Minutes

To: Moldiwhether, Secretary  
From: Squidgeboodle, Director  
Center for Art, Literature and Other  
Pretentious Diversions  
Re: Draft, Minutes of April 1 Steering  
Committee Meeting

Cagily yours,  
Squidgeboodle

#####

My dear Moldiwhether,

Having read your document (with much snickering) I now anticipate weeks of tantalizing rumors about the bribes you will demand from whom to suppress what. Do you actually expect to get something from me? I'm tickled. I can reserve a slot for your blackmail spiel this Monday. Get your notes together, rehearse once or twice, and you may go professional one day.

Sending your draft to the whole committee was a shrewd choice. Should it be leaked before proper redaction, everyone will be a suspect. Not that it would produce a millionth of the infernal *frisson* Beelzebub got when he slipped the minutes of the First Diabolic Congress into John Milton's study and it became Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*. But certain fallen cherubs might gnash their teeth more than usual.

I have added clarifying comments in square brackets and am sending the copy only to you. If it leaks in this form, we will know exactly whom to blame. Or will we?

Dear Diabolic colleagues and members of the Steering Committee, here are the drafted minutes from April 1. It is only a draft. What are your thoughts? Any corrections, emendations, or omissions?  
---Moldiwhether, Secretary

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DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT<sup>2</sup>  
--Minutes – 1 April 2009

Members Present: Allecto, Astaroth, Belial, Legion, Mammom, Moldiwhether (Secretary), Saturnion, Squidgeboodle (Chair).

Guests: Beelzebub, Mephistopheles, Moloch.

The meeting was called to order at midnight. The Chair announced the agenda: "To coordinate the committee's activities with the tactics of the Supreme Infernal

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<sup>2</sup> Per usual procedure, the meeting was recorded; those wishing to review the audio files must request separate passwords from the Chair, the General Infernal Inspector and the Infernal Regency.

Regency during this phase of the Secular Operation.” He introduced our distinguished guests, namely Beelzebub and Moloch, insiders on the Regency council, and their senior staff member, Mephistopheles, who spoke first. “We have come because the Regency fears that your committee’s tactics are not well synchronized with its own.”

The Chair replied, “Of course, at a word from the Supreme Infernal Regency, we would rework our tactics completely.” [If I may so, old Mephisto and I delivered our remarks in the best Infernal deadpan, rather like the recorded voices on automated telephone commercials.]

Beelzebub said, “The Supreme Infernal Regency prefers obedience without instruction.” [He dramatically interrupted his spokesman, to emphasize the gravity of the situation, his tone a classy blend of menace and suavity.— *Squ.*]

“Quite so,” said Squidgeoodle, “and the Regency can dismiss any Chair who is too dull-witted to understand its unstated instructions.” [I aimed midway between obsequiousness and burlesque— *Squ.*]

“Dull-witted or disobedient?” Moloch burst out. [I rolled my eyes a full 360 degrees, but before I could say anything, he rushed on.— *Squ.*] “Why was *Mythic Circle 31* allowed publication?”

Squidgeoodle affected great surprise. [Damned straight, Moldiwhether. I rolled my eyes another 360 degrees.— *Squ.*] “*Mythic Circle 31*?” he said. “Why not? It is a tiny low-budget literary publication, not on the Regency’s proscribed list. In that category, all harassment is determined by random drawing. Even under those limitations, we did arrange some incidents. Would you like to hear--”

“No!” Moloch declared. “Whatever you did, the issue has still appeared. How could you ignore so many complaints of counter-infernal activity?” He gestured to Mephistopheles, who displayed a sheaf of

letters.

Squidgeoodle chuckled. “That doesn’t look like an unusual number for a small literary magazine. Unfortunately, most such publications provide opportunities for growth in literacy, in facility with words, in various styles and modes, along with possibilities for camaraderie. They even inspire acquaintance with poems, stories and fables of enduring value. And none of it motivated by greed.” He nodded to Mammon, who wept and gnashed his teeth. “But as your chief staffer, the honorable Mephistopheles pointed out in the latest *Annual Zeitgeist*, this is generally balanced out by other factors. While some artists, having honed their skills, deplorably go on to rewarding careers, and some whose talents happen to be unfashionable, gain some measure of happiness and fulfillment in sharing their gifts with a small group, some talented people remain content with such small outlets and never go further—which is often to Hell’s advantage. Even better for us, we find that publication, even in these small venues, inspires artists to indulge in celebrity behavior quite as obnoxious and self-destructive as anything a Hollywood star could do, and at a much lower cost to the Regency.”

“Glib answers,” said Moloch.

“If the number of complaints is not unusual,” Mephistopheles intoned censoriously, “perhaps your rating system needs tweaking. *Mythic Circle 31* contains a poem by Joe Christopher, a man published in Mythopoeic circles long enough to have a reputation of his own. He titles his poem ‘A Suburb of the City of Dis,’ and it evokes C. S. Lewis’s *Great Divorce* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in a few short lines. To make matters worse, it is written in *terza rima*. If all that didn’t set off a quintuple alarm, there’s something wrong with your algorithm. Young people might be inspired to study and imitate older poetic forms which,

at the very least, would absorb their minds and distract them from lust and violence. Worse, they might read Lewis and Dante.”

Squidgeboodle shrugged. “Given the Regency’s successful interventions in American education, such effects will not be statistically significant. To be sure, if you wish to audit our algo--”

“Forget it. Christopher has another piece in the issue. A collaboration, in fact.”

“You mean ‘Eggzactly,’ written with his friend Donald Hinkle? The pastiche of *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, featuring the return of Humpty Dumpty? That can’t have caused all the fuss, surely. We have posthumously reduced Lewis Carroll’s counter-infernal qualities by making him a laughing-stock. Thanks to us, mainstream opinion now holds that grown men can have no uncontroversial attachments to children not their own.”

“You forget that the fragrance—or the stench—of long term friendship is itself counter-infernal.”

“My friend Mephistopheles, knowing your talent, I don’t doubt that you could expand the list of counter-infernal qualities indefinitely, but much can be said on the other side as well. Belial can report on that, if you want specifics.”

[Mephistopheles fell silent and Moloch glared ruddily, but Beelzebub intervened with calm like the eye of a hurricane— *§qu.*] “Let Belial, do so, then,” said Beelzebub.

Belial said, “Some stories and poems in this issue celebrate pagan pantheons.”

“What of it?” Mephistopheles scoffed. “As the *Zeitgeist* says, we have little interest in pagan pantheons for their own sake just now. It’s too much like what Tolkien did. Besides, multiples in one issue undoes any favorable effect. They help us no more than fairy-tales or allegories about moral qualities. Take JA Howe’s story, ‘The Lord of All He Surveyed.’ So Athena, the goddess of wisdom, is wise, but her allure is balanced

by the treachery of Poseidon, and the story contains a message, memorably expressed, which people are all too likely to heed, to beware of hidden costs.”

“You ably argue the negative. But consider Dag Rossman’s story, ‘Brekka.’ Monsters and hags triumph with their overwhelming power. Terror of the supernatural will increase.”

“Hardly, when the protagonist survives and still remembers his love.”

“Love? The main character is a troublemaker who always needs help and gets rescued by the generous sacrifice of someone else. If only the story inspires emulation. That more than makes up for any demerits.”

“As always, my friend Belial, you make the best possible case, but it isn’t good enough. The protagonist, Dag Ormseeker, is only weak as humans must be among immortals. Perhaps he represents, better than an invincible hero could, the position of modern humanity, in the midst of irresistibly expanding knowledge and technology. Yet where he chooses, he chooses counter-infernally. He values his love above all things, and honors great deeds done by others. He doesn’t despair, and he doesn’t seek to fill his empty life with gold, jewels and material possessions, tendencies which were well pronounced in the original Northern mythology (we saw to that) which Rossman adapts. Why didn’t you send someone to nudge Rossman closer to his material? Mammon I see, is gnashing his teeth again.”

“Well said, Mephisto, though beyond the grasp of most human readers without your prompting. But what about the William Wandless story, ‘The Third Mercy’? The Mayawari give up the wise child Amaya, gift of the Earth, in order to keep a sort of drug addiction. They prefer to appease a vengeful god rather than keep faith with a generous and loving one. Choices much to

be encouraged.”

“You read it that way? The loving earth might just as well have called Amaya away to find her some more appreciative companions. She seemed happy enough to go.

“You can’t explain away the vigor, charm and wit of Tim Callahan’s illustrations, bringing the material to life and providing windows into other times?”

“They might cause people to forget their appointments.”

“They might just as well distract them from their misdeeds.”

“Very well. We could go on like this forever, balancing pro-Infernal and counter-Infernal aspects. That is what our Chair said. Need I go further?”

Silence fell. Beelzebub and Moloch dithered.

At last Mephistopheles said, “What do you make of the Ryder Miller piece, ‘A Tear in the Sky’?”

“Another mixture. Deplorable in a way. Likeable characters, courageous warriors fighting for their people. Patience, resourcefulness and self-sacrifice under pressure. Unfortunately, a happy ending. But some mitigating factors: Emper smokes the Burrely weed, and he announces the coming rescuers. Readers might think they can smoke something to get true visions.”

“You’re grasping at smoke—I mean, straws. The rescuers come; they’re not a vision. And what rescuers! The members of the New York City Fire Department, lost when they came to the rescue of the terrorists’ victims on September 11, 2001, still traveling through eddies in time, continuing their errand of mercy forever!”

“So? Humans tell many such tales, special units of the company of Saints, continuing with the work of the One we never name willingly. Why such alarm at this one?”

Silence again.

[Mephistopheles doodled a pit bull with a vivid case of mange. — *Squ.*]

Astaroth, who had grown increasingly excited, burst out. “You don’t mean-- You’re not saying-- It couldn’t *be* that there actually *is* a contingent of the heroic lost New York Fire Department, still moving through the currents and eddies of time, helping the unfortunate, putting out fires, disrupting Satan’s plans?”

Beelzebub put away his cell phone. “That’s classified!” he growled.

Squidgeoodle chuckled. “Classified? Then how were we to know?”

“What does it matter if *you* know?” Moloch spat and started a hurricane in the gulf of Mexico. “Why are humans allowed to imagine such things?”

Squidgeoodle coughed. “In this phase of the Secular Conflict, as the latest *Zeitgeist* explains, we tolerate such stories. Saints gathered in heaven, waiting under the divine altar before the one whose name we hate, crying ‘How long, o lord, how long?’ as they wait for the final battle.”

“*Revelation 6:10*,” said Astaroth helpfully.

Squidgeoodle continued. “At first, I know, the Infernal Regency tried to suppress *that* tale utterly and destroy every scroll and leaf on which it was written. But though the details are, I think, classified, the Infernal Regency apparently couldn’t—I mean, the Regency issued milder commands. Is the phase changing?”

Beelzebub stroked his chin thoughtfully. Moloch turned his back. Belial bit his fingernails. “So, Moloch, have you got your way at last?” he said. “Has Satan adopted the plan you urged at the First Demonic Congress, to make open war on Heaven again? Does he now hope, like you, that Heaven’s hateful tyrant will annihilate us completely, and end our sufferings, as you see it?”

Moloch turned. “Do you still think this

degraded, existence is worth dragging on?”

Unexpectedly, Mephistopheles spoke. “I hold with Belial. ‘[F]or who would lose/ Though full of pain, this intellectual being, / These thoughts that wander through eternity . . . ?’ A very fine sentiment, brought to human ears in *Paradise Lost*, Book 2, lines 146-148. If the demonic records were not classified, I’d quote them instead of Milton.

“Of course, Lord Moloch, your speech was also grand. Our great leader, Satan, won us over with his counter-proposal to corrupt Adam and Eve and bring the human world under our sway. We still taste the benefits of his victory.”

“But not forever,” Moloch warned. “Another battle looms. We have the same choices as before.”

“Lord Moloch’s methods have produced remarkable success in the last years,” Beelzebub mused. “He has brought us the suicide bombers who think it a joy to annihilate themselves, if only they can destroy many others too. And we read in a recent book that the Heavenly tyrant will grant their wish. Those impudent writers, Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, published another book this year, which they dare to call *Escape from Hell*. It seems that some do escape from Hell. Some go to a better place, some are reduced to nothing. If that is what they really wish.”

“They don’t wish it,” said someone. “No one does. Moloch will change his mind like all the rest, when the time comes. Any bets? I’ll take odds.”

[No one saw the speaker or heard quite where the voice came from. It sounded something like Beelzebub mimicking Astaroth, or Astaroth parroting Mephistopheles, or perhaps Mephistophiles aping Belial. — *Squ.*]

“Who said that? Who’s making bets?” Moloch glared up and down into every corner of the room.

Keypads clicked as committee members

texted bets to one another.

Mephistopheles spoke diplomatically. “Moloch and Belial are, I am sure, the least likely of us to change their minds about annihilation, the one seeking and the other fleeing it, but each has a little of the other’s opinion, enough to torture him with inner strife, as our tyrant in Heaven decrees.

Astaroth spoke. “Here I have an article claiming that a spirit who has once existed can never fully become as if it had not been. It may shrink to near nothingness, as the detestable C. S. Lewis wrote in the *Great Divorce*, but the closer it comes, the more what is left strives with a desperate will to reverse its course. And though the Heavenly tyrant counsels us to ‘abandon hope,’ in the words written on the gates of Hell, no one ever does; everyone keeps enough to struggle forever, with inner torment like a fiery lake.”

“Indeed. Who published that one?” Beelzebub asked.

Squidgeboodle smiled. “No one, Lord Beelzebub. We arranged an unfortunate accident for the author. When it comes to the proscribed list, you will find us quite efficient.”

“Not efficient enough,” Moloch said. “We must have more of this.”

“Does Moloch speak for the Infernal Regency?” Squidgeboodle asked. “Is the committee to understand that Secular Conflict has changed to open war?”

Silence.

“No,” said Beelzebub.

Moloch sneered, “Then what do you intend to do? What is your plan?”

Astaroth answered. “We must continue what the First Demonic Congress began. Given a situation which allows no real victory, we must invent actions which we will (Humpty Dumpty-like) call victory, carry them out and pretend that we have won. As our supreme leader has said (quoted by Milton in *Paradise Lost*), ‘The mind is its

own place, and in itself / Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven' (1.254-255).”

Squidgeoodle said, “It has been one of our notable successes to induce most of the American and European academics to take this approach, not to mention the politicians.”

Moloch suddenly roared. “Who can

listen to this counter-infernal nonsense?”

He threw himself upon Astaroth, who ran toward the door with a shriek. The rest of the committee followed, texting bets to each other on their cell phones.

The cock crowed, the committee dispersed, and the meeting was adjourned.

--END--

## **Ravana Questions Hanuman**

by

Randy Hoyt

Vibishana hurried to Ravana’s throne room after he heard the destruction of the Asoka Vana. What could have caused this? Had the Gods launched an attack on Lanka? Vibishana had to push his way through the gathering crowd.

“And who sent you?!” he heard Ravana shout angrily, though he could not yet see at whom.

“Rama, the Holy One who has been sent to earth to destroy you,” came the soft reply of the creature. It was not a human or a rakshasa voice, he could tell.

“Rama! So he can find no one to help

him in his war against me but monkeys!” He burst out laughing hysterically, and the entire mob joined in his laughter. So it was a monkey that Vibishana had heard. That sent a cold chill down his spine. Why was that? He searched his mind for some reference to monkeys ... and then he realized: Nandi had cursed Ravana, saying that his end would come through a monkey.

“You can laugh all you want at me and at my lord Rama, but you will be destroyed if you do not hand over Sita to me. She is the Holy One’s eternal bride.”

More laughter erupted throughout the