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The Study of Identity and Perception in Paradise Lost

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Abstract: ***For centuries, John Milton's depiction of Satan in Paradise Lost has fallen under two categories of critical analysis. One camp, which over the years included such literary and theologian critics as C.S. Lewis and Stanley Fish, has stated that Milton used Satan as a means to explain God's mysteries to man. Another camp that had equal sway and included poet William Blake and William Empson held that Satan's vivid and empathetic portrayal was evidence of Milton's subconscious alliance with "the devil's camp." Satan's rousing speech during the Devil's council in Book Two gives some weight to this argument. But, whether one agrees or disagrees with these two different interpretations, one cannot argue against the fact that Milton's portrayals of God and Satan are the most vivid of any in the Western canon.***

While one can also examine these portrayals from an historical, biographical, or theological point of view, what I am most interested in is how these two characters hold up as literary creations and how they mirror one another in terms of identity and the perceptual concepts of self-definition.

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INTRODUCTION

Such concepts are commonplace in contemporary literature, but Milton's attention to the interiority of these characters prefigures both the rise of the novel in Western literature and the Modernist movement, which was intrigued with the characterization of the psyche. Milton's intention, just as Lewis and Fish have claimed, to explain God and, for that matter, Satan, involves examining the identities of both these characters.

A facile interpretation of the differences between Milton's God and Satan would be one that follows Christian beliefs: God is the personification of Good; Satan is the personification of Evil. But if one sees Milton's interpretations through this lens, then his portrayal of these two characters might give one pause. The interiority Milton supplies to Satan, his anger, psychological pain, and complexity give him an empathetic edge.

Nineteenth century Romantic poets such as Blake considered him a romantic hero, which makes sense when one compares Milton's Satan with such literary creations as Emily Bronte's Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights. Milton's rendition of God, on the other hand, as noted by such critics as Empson, seems to reveal a contemptuous nature. His God is petty and self-absorbed. In Book 3, when God appears for the first time in the text, he seems more interested in exonerating himself for Satan's rebellion and Man's fall:

As if Predestination over-rul'd
Thir will, dispos'd by absolute Decree
Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed
Thir own revolt, not I: if I foreknew,
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,
Which had no less prov'd certain unforeknown (114-119).

God chooses to hold no responsibility for Satan's descent, which was predicated by his own free will. As with certain Deists who believed that God created the creation and the universe but stepped back from it, Milton's God is likewise uninvolved. Yet, there are similarities between God and Satan that make them fascinating literary creations. What I mean by literary creations is simply that Milton has endowed God and Satan with characteristics that make them both active participants in the plot.
Paradise Lost begins with an act of betrayal: God's exaltation of his Son.

While Milton portrays this as an innocent act that is only perverted in Satan's mind, thus bringing forth Sin and Death into the world with his jealous thoughts, God's act nonetheless sets the story in motion. Milton's choice in beginning his poem in this way is a curious one, since God's exaltation is purely his literary creation. There is no mention of this in the Bible nor other Christian tracts, such as Milton's own

De Doctrina. In fact, "Milton seems to have invented it in order to have an unexplained divine decree leading to the fall of the angels analogous to that which led to the Fall of Man, so as to reinforce the parallel between earth and heaven" (Hill 367). Milton may also have chosen to begin the poem this way to make his character more empathetic, thus providing a villain who carries gravitas in the story's actions.

As John Carey writes in his literary criticism of Milton's work: "A black Satan would raise the question of how God had created him and would, besides, remove the possibility of temptation" (75). A Satan, though wracked with jealousy, paranoia, delusions of grandeur, and who is driven to rebellion, might be more understood if his actions were preceded by an act of betrayal. By understanding, in fact, empathizing with Satan's rejection, the reader is thus able to comprehend why Adam could so easily choose sin, especially since "he had of [God]/All he could have" (Milton 1883). Satan becomes more than an iconographic theological figure but a villain in the true literary sense.

Milton's portrayal of God's "betrayal" and Satan's rebellion somewhat parallels Cain and Abel, in which one son is given God's grace while the other is rejected. Yet, in that parable, it is clear that God's preference is based on merit. There is no such indication in Paradise Lost. While, in Milton's case, merit is based on one's ability to embrace God's glory (and God's Son is described in this way), there is no reason to believe that Satan did not also merit such consideration.

In fact, Satan's descent into Hell is preceded by his jealous thoughts in response to God's exaltation of his Son. This is described in Book 2, when Satan reaches Hell's gates and meets Sin and Death. Sin describes to Satan her birth at the "Assembly" in Heaven, in which Satan and his devils conspire against God. Sin springs forth from Satan's head. An incestuous act between Satan and his daughter thus leads to the birth of Death (Milton 1873). Therefore, Satan's act of rebellion leads to his fall and his calling forth Sin and Death into the world. Yet, this all occurs only after God's first act of "betrayal." One is left to assume then that Satan always had it in him.

But this assumption inevitably leads to God's own foreknowledge. If God created Satan, and gave him the free will to choose sin, then God must have foreseen Satan's reaction when he exalted his Son. In Milton's interpretation, God very much resembles King Lear. Like Lear, who conveys his ultimate loyalty to whichever daughter who expresses her flattery to him, God exalts his Son, whose later sacrifice to save Man after his fall from grace is as flattering an act a son can offer to his father.

Lear's act leads to tragedy, and thus the same follows in Paradise Lost. The tragedy, the fall of Adam and Eve, is brought about by the thoughtless parent. If God's love is unconditional, then Milton's choice in having God exalt his Son makes no sense theologically, but makes perfect sense as a literary device. God's act forces Satan to action, which, in turn, leads to Satan giving "birth" to Sin and Death and the downfall of Man.

Milton provides both Satan and God with mirror traits that thrust the plot forward on its inevitable course. Both use revenge as a means to settle debts with one another. Satan's use of revenge is, nonetheless, self-serving, while God's form of revenge is based on morality. Yet, neither are willing to compromise or come to any understanding of hurt feelings that are brought up by God's thoughtless and Satan's treasonous acts. They are very much within the tradition of literary characters whose traits form the tension that is necessary to create story. Milton, drawing that tension between Good and Evil, makes it impossible for either of his characters to bridge the gap.

The relationship between Satan and God is therefore differentiated from the relationship between God and Man, who, although earns God's punishment, is still open for redemption (Milton 131-132). While Man is created in God's likeness, perhaps God and Satan are too close in similarity for any promise of redemption to occur. Carey writes, "Vindictiveness, anger, and a passion for self-aggrandizement are three characteristics that bind Milton's God to his Satan. Heaven's morality is one of vengeance as well as Hell's" (82).

Both characters are aware of or obsessed with their own self-importance. God's response to Satan's treason and Man's fall are less about the actual sins themselves but about how the sin reflects on him. This is revealed in God's need to exonerate himself for their faults. As with most Christian beliefs, as well as in Milton's Paradise Lost, God created all "Ethereal Powers and Spirits" with the will to choose grace or sin.

Yet, Milton's God cannot find "pleasure" from any obedience owed him by his creations unless it serves no other purpose but him (Milton 100-111). Therefore, Satan's actions, as equally self-aggrandizing, are treasonous because they challenge God's own sense of self. Since God is the personification of Good, then he very well cannot inspire the kind of evil Satan represents. God's punishment of Satan and Man act a means to differentiate them from God's own self-image.

Likewise, Satan's descent into Hell challenges his own sense of self-importance: "what can be worse/Than to dwell here, driv'n out from bliss, condemn'd/In this abhorred deep to utter woe;" (Milton Book 2: 85-87). It is interesting to note here that Satan's chief complaint is to be "driv'n out from bliss, condemn'd" by God for his actions. While Satan's treasonous act deserved some response

from God, Satan speaks out from an utter lack of awareness about the seriousness of his own actions.

He seems more surprised that God should respond in such a manner. Satan sounds more like a prodigal child who is nonetheless shocked by its parents' lack of love. In this case, bliss is defined by God's grace and love. Now, that Satan is driven from "bliss," and condemned to "this abhorred deep to utter woe," he is lacking any real identity except one that has been forced on him by God. And yet, Satan's fall becomes the means for Satan to develop a sense of identity that is his own creation. As with any child, Satan needs God for self- identification and importance. As he states to his daughter Sin:

But what owe I to his commands above
Who hates me, and hath hither trust me down
Into this gloom of Tartarus profound,
To sit in hateful Office here confin'd,
Inhabitant of Heav'n, and heav'nly-born,
Here in perpetual agony and pain... (Book 2: 856-861).

Satan's self-identification with being an "Inhabitant of Heav'n" and "heav'nly born" offers a glimpse into his own psychic turmoil at being invalidated by God's punishment. In other words, because Satan's actions were undeserving of his perch in Heaven, he now must dwell in an environment that suits his true nature, and yet it is the very banishment that causes Satan's crisis of identity. His need for God's love and validation, evidenced in his jealousy over God's exaltation of his son, is as much a self-identifying factor as God's need for his creation's obedience.

Satan can only be obedient to God if God returns with an unconditional love that molds Satan's own sense of self. Without it, a rejected Satan embraces a new identity predicated on becoming God's opposite: the personification of Evil. And yet, Satan's new identity could only have come into being by God's own need for self-aggrandisement, his own desire for his "glory to excel."

CONCLUSION

Another aspect in which these mirror images become apparent is how both Satan and God form a trinity. God, Son, and the Holy Ghost is a well-known iconography in Christianity. But Milton creates a trinity of evil which revolves around Satan, Sin, and Death. It is through their help that Satan is able to escape from Hell and travel to Earth where he intends to dwell with his minions. This trinity, again, identifies Satan as evil, and differentiates him from God. And, yet, ironically, Sin and Death spring to life only through Satan's jealousy. Milton suggests that the first sin is jealousy (or, in this case, lack of faith in God's love), but in many Christian tracts, God is described as a jealous God, one whose wrath knows no bounds when he is rejected.

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