

CASA ESSAY

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‘MIGHTY HUNTERS OF MANKIND’: THE INFLUENCE AND SUBVERSION OF THE CLASSICAL HERO ARCHETYPE IN MILTON’S SATAN

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In the form, imagery, and language of *Paradise lost*, Milton makes no effort to conceal the strong influence that Classical literature has upon his work. In fact, at the opening of *Paradise lost*, the speaker calls upon the Holy Spirit as his Muse to assist him ‘That with no middle flight [his song might] soar / Above th’ Aonian mount’ and pursue ‘Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme’ (1.14-16). This daring claim suggests that Milton himself regards his own epic poem as a continuation and indeed a surpassing of the great Classical epics that precede it. Yet during a reading of Milton’s work, it may become apparent that his feelings concerning the Greco-Roman world are greatly complicated by his Christianity. A particularly poignant example of the poet’s ambiguity regarding the Classics may be observed in Milton’s shorter poem, ‘On the morning of Christ’s Nativity’. In a verse depicting the birth of Christ as putting to flight the pagan deities of antiquity, Milton describes with triumph and an undeniable sense of sadness how ‘From haunted spring and dale / [...] the parting Genius is with sighing sent’ (184-186) and ‘With flower-inwov’n tresses torn / The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn’ (186-187). In this way, Milton’s poetry appears to be both lovingly infused with the Classicism of his education, and driven by the need to break away from its pagan origins. In *Paradise lost*, this complex conflict between Classical ideals and Christian morality is most noticeable in Milton’s controversial characterisation of Satan, in whom is portrayed both startling heroism and terrible villainy. To better understand Milton’s aims in creating a Satanic character who initially appears so appealing to the Classically-orientated reader, it is useful to examine closely the ways in which the Satan of *Paradise lost* both exemplifies and subverts the Classical heroic archetype. In order to do this, multiple heroic figures from Classical texts will be considered, focusing mainly, but not exclusively, upon the heroes of the three great Greco-Roman epics: the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*.

Simply by comparing the beginning of Book 1 of *Paradise lost* to the opening lines of the Classical epics named above, it may become evident why a

reader with some previous experience of the Classics is instantly tempted to think of Satan as the work's heroic protagonist. For after the speaker in *Paradise lost* has called upon the Holy Spirit to inspire his poetry, he moves on to ask his Muse to answer 'Who first seduced [Adam and Eve] to that foul revolt?' (1.33), to which the immediate answer is 'Th' infernal Serpent' (34). Having named Satan, the following lines are his first introduction to the reader: 'He it was whose guile / Stirred up with envy and revenge deceived / the mother of mankind' (34-36). Thus, the focus of the poem is directed towards Satan very early in its course and it is he who appears to be the poem's central concern. It is a close echo of Homer's introduction of his own principle characters. The *Iliad* opens in a similar fashion with a plea to the θεά, or goddess, to 'Sing [...] of the devastating wrath of Achilles / [...] which placed countless pains upon the Achaeans' (1.1-2).

As with the attention given to Satan's guile and revenge, the speaker in the *Iliad* wishes to focus upon Achilles' driving emotion: his all-consuming anger, which ultimately leads to catastrophe. It is also interesting to note that the brunt of the suffering caused by Achilles' wrath falls upon his own people, the Achaeans. It is not the righteous violence of a warrior upon his enemy, but the resentment and bitter hurt of an individual who feels he has been insulted by a tyrannical leader. The dispute between Agamemnon, the commander of the Greek forces, and Achilles, who is the foremost warrior of the Greeks, causes immense internal turmoil amongst the Achaeans, in a manner not dissimilar to the consequences of the 'impious war in Heav'n' (1.43) waged against God by his own archangel, Satan. While Achilles' passion-driven actions lead to the death of his 'beloved companion, [Patroclus],' (24.4), Satan's vengeance upon Heaven harms those creations whom he admits his 'thoughts pursue / With wonder and [whom he] could love' (Milton 4.362-363). It should be noted as significant that while the reader's attention is drawn to emotions within Achilles which a Christian perspective would likely name morally questionable, the Classical text offers very little moral judgement. Achilles remains a deeply heroic figure, despite the harm he causes his own people. In this way, the clash of Christian immorality and Classical heroism in the character of Satan begins to reveal itself, as the reader is struck by Satan's favourable resemblance to Achilles, but is simultaneously aware of his inexcusable heresy against the hierarchy of Heaven.

In contrast, the *Odyssey* begins by asking its Muse for the story of Odysseus, 'the man of many ways, who wandered much, / After he sacked the sacred city of Troy' (1.1-2). Here, the violence of the protagonist is more straightforward, as it is directed towards his combatants rather than his comrades. However, once again, the Classical epic introduces its hero within a context of violence and war that is not only acceptable in its terms, but fundamentally honourable. Interestingly, the city of Troy is described with the Greek word ἱερὸς,

an adjective generally associated with Greek religion, particularly used of temples and sacrificial victims. From this, the reader is aware that Odysseus is the sacker of a sacred city, which was entered with his own cunning deception, by means of the wooden horse. Satan enters Eden, likewise *ἱερός* in its unblemished closeness to God, and does this through a 'borrowed visage' (Milton 4.116). To the Classical mind, 'guile and valour are not always contradictory qualities' (Steadman 1957:81-82) and again the reader may find themselves conflicted concerning Satan, who in Classical terms does nothing to strip him of his heroic position, while to the Christian mind he is confirmed as the malignant 'Artificer of fraud' (4.121).

Finally, upon first inspection it may seem that the introduction of the hero Aeneas in Vergil's *Aeneid* is the least comparable with Satan's in *Paradise lost*. If Homer offers compact introductory descriptions of the epics he is about to narrate, Vergil is positively telegraphic. In elegantly condensed Latin, the opening phrase of the *Aeneid* states: 'arma virumque cano' (1.1). The element of war is still at the heart of the hero's introduction, but the central focus after the *arma* is Aeneas' quest from the ruins of Troy to the new kingdom he is to establish in Latium. Here lies the real similarity between Aeneas at the onset of the *Aeneid* and Satan in Book 1 of *Paradise lost*: both are exiles from their respective homelands and both are princes of a defeated party. Furthermore, Satan and Aeneas give very similar speeches early in their individual epics, which echo each other closely enough to suggest a conscious allusion on Milton's part. Firstly, in a moment of weakness during a squall on the open sea, Aeneas wishes aloud that he had died at Troy with the great heroes of his people. He mourns that the 'river Simois snatches away so many shields and helmets / Beneath its waters, and rolls over so many strong bodies!' (1.100-101), using imagery that is highly comparable to that of the fallen angels who 'Lay entranced / Thick as autumnal leaves that strew the brooks / In Vallombrosia' (1.301-303) upon 'the tossing of [...] fiery waves' (1.184). However, once the Trojan exiles have found anchorage on the Libyan shoreline, Aeneas feels it necessary to raise the morale of his men, and he does so 'With such a voice [...], and pained by great cares / he feigned hope in his face, he repressed deep grief in his heart' (1.208-209). Just so is Satan described, in rousing his fallen legions: 'So spake th' Apostate Angel, though in pain, / Vaunting aloud, but racked with deep despair' (1.125-126). The tone of the speeches are also similar. Aeneas orders his men to 'Summon up [their] courage again, and send away [their] grief and fear' (1.202), very much as Satan demands his comrades 'Arise, or be for ever fall'n' (1.330).

Interestingly, despite Satan's resemblance to the heroes of the two Greek epics, it may be argued that he most closely imitates Aeneas, whom Calloway names 'the most Christian of all pagan heroes' (88). For example, Satan admits to

himself in Book 4 that while he will attempt to build a new kingdom of his own, to 'make a Heaven of Hell' (1.255), his utmost wish is to 'obtain / By act of grace [his] former state' (4.92-93). This desire seems to echo strongly Aeneas' plea to Dido regarding his fortunes, as he explains how his first instinct is to 'Tend to the city of Troy' and 'restore by hand the tower of Pergamum' (4.342-344). In this way, both are caught in an uncertain position of dispossession, Aeneas because of the constant uprooting of his insatiable destiny, and Satan because of his crippling self-doubt, which Milton compares to an 'engine [which] back recoils upon himself' (4.16-17). Aeneas himself is similarly wracked emotionally by the 'Horror, [...] doubt [and] troubled thoughts' (4.18-19) that Satan experiences at the beginning of Book 4. For upon leaving Carthage, he is assailed by Dido, who has been driven mad with the pain of his betrayal, and Vergil describes both his emotional suffering and his ultimate resolve to continue regardless.

Certainly then, it is tempting to name Satan an epic hero of the Classical model with some confidence, due to the strong similarities between himself and the likes of Aeneas, Odysseus and Achilles. However, it is possible to discern the foremost distinction which must be made between Satan and these Classical protagonists: his all-consuming impiety. In contrast, Aeneas' most lauded attribute is his *pietas*, which translates to something broadly encompassing dutifulness or piety to one's family, ancestral heritage and gods. With respect to this, he is repeatedly referred to by his best-known sobriquet, *pious* Aeneas. On the orders of his divine mother, Venus, Aeneas unwillingly abandons his beloved *patria* to the Greek forces and sets out on his voyage to found a new Troy. Similarly, having discovered a safe haven with Dido in Carthage, Aeneas once again must regard his own desires as secondary to the will of a deity when Jupiter himself demands he leave Libya for Sicily. He explains his position to Dido movingly, although she is too incensed to try to understand, by stating with utmost simplicity that 'Italiam non sponte sequor' (4.361). He does not seek Italy of his own accord, but because his *pietas* outweighs all else. When Dido does not accept his explanation, Aeneas finds himself unable to comfort her for he is 'held motionless by Jove's council' (331) and can only 'carry out the divine command' (394). Clearly, Aeneas shows nothing of the blatant disdain for godly authority that so defines Satan's character.

Turning one's attention to Odysseus, the same lack of Satan's defining impiety may be quickly confirmed in his own character. Since it has been previously noted that Odysseus' major shared characteristic with Satan is that of deception, the circumstances under which both resort to this must be examined. Satan changes his form to that of 'a stripling cherub' (3.636) in order to enter Eden undetected by the angels who yet serve God. Some of his most pernicious lies are those he tells to Eve about the forbidden fruit with the intention of corrupting God's newest

creation to spite Him. In both of these cases, it is clear that Satan's dishonesty is used to further a vengeful agenda against God. In contrast, the context of Odysseus' falsehoods appears far more morally acceptable, as his are almost all deemed necessary for his survival. Whether he is lying to the man-eating cyclops, Polyphemus, about his name, or disguising himself as a beggar in order to spy upon his wife's dangerous suitors, Odysseus always appears to have only self-preservation in mind, completely devoid of heretical schemes.

In fact, many of Odysseus' deceptions are not only condoned, but aided by a divine figure: his patron goddess, Athene. A noteworthy incident concerning this divine abetting of Odysseus' penchant for deviousness occurs in Book 13 of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus has arrived at last in Ithaca and is met by Athene in disguise, to whom he lies about his identity. In turn she reveals her true form to him and accuses him thus: 'You hard-hearted man, so full of wiles, [...] you did not intend to give up your cunning words and frauds, / not even here in your own land' (293-295). The reader may expect this to be followed by a rebuke, but Athene seems to find Odysseus' enthusiasm for deceit amusing, merely saying: 'But come, let us say no more about it, since I know that you are the best of all mortals at [...] story-telling, / And I myself am famed among the gods for my wisdom and cunning' (296-299).

After this, Athene herself helps to disguise Odysseus as a beggar. It is interesting to compare this instance with Satan's discovery by lesser angels, while in disguise in Eden. Like Odysseus, Satan is caught out in his deception, but in this instance the figure who has made the discovery gives 'grave rebuke / Severe' (4.844-845) and Milton describes how Satan 'Abashed [...] stood / And felt how awful goodness is, [...] saw and pined / His loss' (846-849). Here it is possible to note that, since he is ashamed of his actions, Satan is deeply aware of their sinfulness, an awareness which is completely foreign to both Athene and Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. This is a fine example of the subversion of the model Classical hero by the addition of a Christian sense of morality and self-inspection. By this addition, a trait which is excusable in Odysseus is suddenly inexcusable in Satan, for the latter knows that his actions are fundamentally wrong and continues to perform them.

In continuing to consider Satan's capacity for self-inspection, it may occur to the reader that far more dangerous than the lies that Satan tells Eve are those which he tells himself. For Satan is guilty of self-deception, an error of character that is significantly missing in the heroes of the Classical epics. The most incriminating falsehoods that Satan convinces himself of concern the so-called 'tyranny of Heav'n' (1.124), and his own creation, independent from God. These two deceptions are what ultimately drive him to rebel against Heaven and bring 'death into the world and all [mankind's] woe' (1.3). It is in this regard that even

the wrathful Achilles breaks away from Milton's Satan. While Achilles is not so noticeably *pious* as Aeneas, or so divinely supported in his actions as Odysseus, he devotes his life to the attainment of *kleos*, a Greek notion of fame or glory with strong religious roots, since 'such *kleos* is the only thing that really is *aphthiton*, or imperishable; the only meaningful form of immortality' (Edmonds 2015:555). Thus, all of his actions are directed with an intent which may be named pious to an extent. However, the real difference between Satan and Achilles becomes apparent when considering Odysseus' encounter with the spirit of Achilles during his visit to the underworld in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*. Upon seeing him, Odysseus tries to comfort Achilles with the great authority which he commanded in life, and now holds over the other spirits of the dead. Achilles is not heartened and openly admits that he would rather be 'a slave to another man, without land or means, / Than be a lord over the dead' (489-491). This comment is in stark contrast with one of Satan's great self-deceptions, in which he claims to feel that it is 'Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven' (1.263). In this way, Satan's Classical heroism is sharply subverted, since he does not pay heed to a foremost principle of Ancient Greek religion, that of γνῶθι σεαυτόν.

From these points, it is possible to understand that Satan's character diverges from that of the heroes of Classical epic most crucially because Satan is possibly 'the classical hero as he would be if he acted wholly of his own volition, with no deference to a higher authority' (Calloway 2005:82). However, I would argue that Satan's impiety does not alienate him from the Classical hero archetype entirely. Rather, in challenging the omnipotence of God, Satan often resembles certain characters from Greek tragedy.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Jocasta attempts to calm Oedipus' fears regarding the oracles made about himself and the previous king of Thebes, stating firmly that 'Chance rules mortal lives, / And nothing of the future is clear' (977-978), blatantly denying the sole authority of the gods over the affairs of mortals. It is likely that claims like these would have been almost as shocking to Sophocles' original audience as Milton's 'long and horrible Blasphemyes in the Mouth of Satan' (Beale 1992:181) were to his own. In *Oedipus Rex*, this dismay is depicted in the Chorus' alarmed response, as in the following stasimon they break into a rush of short, agitated syllables. The Chorus mourns for the ruin of τὰ θεῖα, the fading of all things sacred that such impiety as Jocasta's brings about, and remark that her 'Royalty begets hubris' (872), a line which closely resembles Satan's telling question of 'How soon / Would height recall high thoughts?' (4.94-95).

A second figure from Greek tragedy who rejects the power of a deity is yet another *tyrannos* of Thebes. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, Pentheus denies the godhood of Dionysus, who has come to Thebes to claim his right to be worshipped. Speaking with the god, who is in disguise as a priest of Dionysus, Pentheus mocks

the idea of his divinity, despite Dionysus' assurances that this 'new god' is 'right beside [him]. But [Pentheus] cannot see him for [his] impiety' (502). Like Satan, Pentheus' impiety is seen as closely connected to self-deception. For as he is being chained and imprisoned, Dionysus cries out to Pentheus that his great error is that he does 'not know what [he] lives for, [he] cannot see it, nor who [he is]' (506).

Interestingly, in the Choral ode which follows this interaction, the Chorus of Dionysus' followers ask Pentheus on behalf of Dionysus, 'Why do you renounce me? Why do you flinch from me?' (533) and go on to call Pentheus 'off-spring of the serpent' (539), claiming that 'like a murderous giant / He comes to challenge the gods' (543-544).

Once again, caution must be urged in finding these figures of Greek tragedy too similar to Satan. For one must recognise that their forms of impiety belong to drastically different concepts of morality. In regards to Greek tragedy, the *hamartia* is not the same as the Christian concept of sin. For the *hamartia* relies upon the Classical concept of a behavioural scale incorporating extremes of both negligent inaction and outrageous excess of action or emotion, as well as the perfect median between the two. Thus, those who display hubris have 'missed the mark' in terms of how it is best to act. In contrast, Satan's impiety lies within the Christian binary of good and evil, and the ability to differentiate between the two. Satan has not simply 'missed the mark', he has done remorselessly what he knows to be evil and called upon 'Evil [to] be [his] good' (4.110).

In conclusion, it seems difficult for a reader who has come to view the Classical heroes with stirring admiration not to feel similar emotions when first introduced to Satan in *Paradise lost*. For on the surface, Milton models Satan very closely on the heroes of Greco-Roman literature. Keats describes the Romantic attachment to Satan in this way: 'We do read with pleasure of the ravages of a beast of prey, [...] namely from the sense of power abstracted from the sense of good' (Keats 2008:360). He also makes the connection between this sense and the Classical heroes, remarking how 'it is the same principle that makes us read with admiration [...] of the mighty Hunters of mankind, who come to stope the shepherd's Pipe [...] and sweep away his listening flock' (360). Indeed, it is pleasurable to read of Satan's power abstracted from the good, just as the power of the Classical epic hero is separated from the concept of moral goodness, but it is likewise necessary to keep in mind that Milton's intention is to give Satan an acute, Christian awareness of 'how awful goodness is' (4.848) and thus subvert the pleasure of immoral power.¹

¹ All translations from Greek and Latin are my own.

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