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The Arch-Fiend in Charles I or Cromwell:

How Milton's Politics may Illuminate *Paradise Lost*

Milton's seminal account of the fall of man, *Paradise Lost*, details in twelve books Satan's successful attempt to incite revenge against God by tempting the Creator's new, perfect race of divine resemblance to sin. Satan may be the world's most notorious villain, but his status as such in *Paradise Lost* has long been the subject of heated debate among readers of the poem. In 1793, William Blake made a bold assertion: "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (353). Blake was and is not alone in this opinion; many see Satan, not God, as the true hero of the epic because Milton has portrayed him sympathetically. Sufficient evidence to support the argument both for Satan's heroism and for God's can be found in the confines of the twelve books alone. Though the interpretation of the text is highly subjective and this debate can never be properly settled, Milton's political prose offers a view of Milton's intentions behind the text. In particular, his pamphlets *Eikonoklastes* and *Defensio Secunda* show that Milton's political beliefs likely influenced his portrayal of God and Satan in *Paradise Lost*.

In her essay "God, Satan, and King Charles: Milton's Royal Portraits," Joan S. Bennett explains that it was common among Romantic critics of *Paradise Lost* to "link Milton's God with Charles I as monarchs and Satan with Cromwell and Milton as revolutionaries" (441). Arguing against this claim, Bennett proposes instead that it is not the revolutionary Cromwell that Satan represents, but the despot Charles I. Most of her evidence is correlative, though it is fairly convincing. She repeatedly links Satan's actions and character with the king's, or at least with Milton's depiction of him, claiming that "the King Charles of the prose pamphlets was Milton's own literary creation" (441). The picture that Milton paints of Charles in *Eikonoklastes*, his iconic condemnation of the King, is concrete: Charles was a despot, an unfair ruler "who hath offered at more cunning fetches to undermine our liberties, and put tyranny into an art, than any British king before him" (*Eikonoklastes* 1063). Little else about Milton's political influence

on *Paradise Lost* is so certain; regardless of which character, if any, Milton meant to represent Charles in the epic, he would certainly have represented the king in a negative light.

To understand Milton's politics and subsequently their effect on *Paradise Lost* requires an examination of the historical context under which he formed his opinions, the impetus behind *Eikonoklastes*, and his relationship with Oliver Cromwell. Why did Milton hold such contempt for the king? Charles was, by most accounts, a bad leader: he believed in the divine right of Kings, the idea that it was his God-given right to rule with absolutism, and "he thought that any means was justified to win the war and regain his absolute authority" (Fraser 231). The war to which Fraser refers in her *Lives of the Kings & Queens of England* is the second civil war of Charles's reign, waged by Parliament against the king. Throughout his rule, Charles became increasingly unpopular with Parliament, especially among the House of Commons, in which officials are elected by the people and for the people. Unsuccessful in his war efforts, Charles woefully mismanaged the country's finances, attempting to raise money through suspicious means such as "forced loans, the billeting of soldiers," and "the imprisonment of subjects without cause shown" (226). As Charles and his government continued to dissolve Parliaments and enact such poor attempts at financial restoration, "the whole of the House of Commons, consisting of country gentlemen, lawyers and merchants, were alienated from the King's government which they considered to be acting unconstitutionally" (226). In fact, his constant battle with Parliament in part led them to pass an act in 1641 "which forbade the dissolution of the parliament without its own consent" (Worden 256). The king only became less popular among the Commons. During the second civil war, after Thomas Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell's army captured Charles, the two men attempted to broker a peace deal with the king by getting him to agree to a constitutional monarchy, but Charles refused (Fraser 231). In Winston Churchill's *History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, he announces that by this point, "King Charles's moral position was at its worst. He had plumbed the depths of personal failure" (177). Charles was tried and executed, disrupting the English monarchy during the eleven-year period of the British commonwealth.

Although Milton was not a member of parliament and was therefore not as directly affected by Charles's tyranny Cromwell, he showed a strong commitment "to the parliamentary cause" (Dzelzainis 71). Shortly after Charles's execution, the "wildly popular *Eikon Basilike*" was published, in which "Charles presents himself . . . as a saint and martyr" (Kerrigan et al., 1058). For obvious reasons, as a proponent of the Commonwealth, Milton staunchly disagreed with this portrayal of the late king, so he responded to the publication with one of his own, his *Eikonoklastes*, in which he "answers the *Eikon Basilike* point for point, ridiculing Charles's pretensions to piety and love for his subjects" (1066). Milton claims that his impetus was to refute the lies found in the *Eikon Basilike*, and to stop the spread of misinformation to the public. Milton condemns Charles's attempt to sway the public posthumously in his favor:

. . . the king, instead of that repentance which was in reason and in conscience to be expected from him, without which we could not lawfully readmit him, persists here to maintain and justify the most apparent of his evil doings, and washes over with a court-fucus the worst and foulest of his actions, disables and uncreates the Parliament itself, with all our laws and native liberties that ask not his leave, dishonors and attaints all Protestant churches not prelatial, and what they piously reformed, with the slander of rebellion, sacrilege, and hypocrisy." (*Eikonoklastes* 1065)

Milton's words are harsh and his hatred is clear. As Milton criticizes Charles's tyranny several times in the preface alone, the thematic connection between *Eikonoklastes* and *Paradise Lost* is evident.

Based solely on his ideology, it is unclear which character is meant to represent which historical figure in *Paradise Lost*. What, then, was Milton's intent? What ideals did he try to imbue in his epic poem? Based on *Eikonoklastes*, he likely set out to denounce tyranny, promoting liberty of the people. Many of Charles's despotic traits, Bennett argues, can be found in Satan and his "claim to a divine right of power" (442). She finds several compelling connections between the two tyrants, but their usurpation of God's power is at the heart of her argument. She cites *Eikonoklastes* as a defense of this assertion: "Whereas seventeenth-century royalists argued that the English king was a representative of God's power,

Milton argued that the man Charles was, like Satan, a usurper of that power” (442). Bennett offers examples of Charles’s religious despotism and quotes Milton’s *Eikonoklastes*:

“He [King Charles] calls the conscience *Gods sovranitie*, why then doth he contest with God about that supreme title . . . usurping over spiritual things, as *Lucifer* beyond his sphere”

(*Eikonoklastes*, pp. 501-02). Though Charles had not possessed the full strength of Satan, the king had been in Milton’s view a servant of the arch-rebel. (442)

This evidence certainly bolsters the argument that Satan represents Charles in the epic, but surely Milton, a seventeenth-century Puritan, would never favor Satan in his nonfiction, political prose. A further extension of the question of Milton’s intent is the consideration of how Milton intended audiences to receive Satan’s character. In his essay “Milton’s Satan,” John Carey separates these audiences into two categories: “pro-Satanists”--those who read Satan as the hero of the epic--and “anti-Satanists”--those who read him as the villain (161-62). The significance of Milton’s reference to Lucifer in this quotation becomes questionable when reading *Paradise Lost* through a pro-Satanist lens. Though Milton himself was against Satan, the character can easily be read as the flawed hero of the epic.

Reading Satan as such flips Bennett’s well-formed argument on its head. The author alludes to a passage from Book 2 to support her assertion that “Charles was, in Milton’s portrait of him, the ‘unteachable man’ and Satan the unteachable angel” (445). The moment on which Bennett bases this argument occurs at the beginning of Book 2, prefacing the Council in Hell: “. . . Satan exalted sat, by merit raised / To that bad eminence; and from despair / Thus high uplifted beyond hope, aspires / Beyond thus high, insatiate to pursue / Vain war with Heav’n, and by success untaught / His proud imaginations thus displayed” (4.5-10). Bennett’s claim that Satan is “unteachable” does not quite align with his being “untaught” by his failure in his first attempt to wage war in Heaven. In the context of the passage, the adjective “untaught” refers to a specific desire of Satan’s, but “unteachable” implies that Satan never learns from his mistakes, never realizes the extent of how badly he has messed up, just as Charles never learns to accept “reason and good advice” (*Eikonoklastes*, qtd. in Bennett 445). However, Satan does understand what he has done and why it is so bad, as his opening soliloquy in Book 4 attests:

O Sun, to tell the how I hate thy beams
 That bring to my remembrance from what state
 I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere;
 Till pride and worse ambition threw me down
 Warring in Heav'n against Heav'n's matchless King." (4.37-41)

Satan demonstrates one level of understanding in this passage: he understands how good his life was in Heaven and how much he has lost now that he resides in Hell, as well as recognizing his own personal failures that led to his defeat. He later continues in this vein, lamenting, "yet all his good proved ill in me, / And wrought but malice; lifted up so high / I 'sdained subjection, and thought one step higher / Would set me highest (48-51). In this passage, Satan shows a deeper level of understanding the consequences of his actions, recognizing exactly what he did to deserve his punishment and why he deserved it. These thoughts do not belong to someone who cannot be taught, as Satan clearly demonstrates that he has learned from his mistakes. In *Eikonoklastes*, Charles is unteachable because he is "invincible" to advice, unable even to recognize it (qtd. in Bennett 445). Applying the same adjective to Satan assumes that Satan sought to clash with God because he did not learn from his mistakes, that his mind is similarly invincible to reason. But Satan seeks revenge against God not because he is unteachable: he does so because it is his "last hope" to be reinstated in Heaven (2.416). Though his decision to exact the destruction of man is far from laudable, it is an informed decision, calculated carefully toward the end of his soliloquy. He wonders, "But say I could repent and could obtain / By act of grace my former state; how soon / Would height recall high thoughts" (4.93-95). Because he realizes that he would "recant" his vow to serve God, he decides to continue with the plan he has already set in motion (4.96). Satan's depth of understanding and calculated decision-making in this passage show a distinct difference between himself and the Charles described in *Eikonoklastes*, whom Milton illustrates as an incompetent, evil tyrant.

Satan's soliloquy is one of his most sympathetic moments, inviting readers to side with him. Moreover, it is an insight into Satan's genuine thoughts unlike any insight into God's. A likely reason that critics often argue about Satan's heroism in *Paradise Lost* is the extent to which the poem focuses on

Satan's actions rather than God's. It reads not unlike a villain's origin story, the intent of which is to create sympathy for seemingly evil characters, to give the backstory that answers the question, "What made them evil?" Such a story starts from an innocent beginning and charts the circumstances that made the character villainous. For Satan, his innocent beginning was his time in Heaven, when, as he explains in his soliloquy, he was living gloriously. Though his jealousy is what led him to revolt against God, his eternal damnation is arguably the impetus behind his evil, his decision to bring about the fall of man. Further, origin stories typically align the audience against the typical hero, who is perhaps more objectively good but who is also the enemy of the protagonistic villain. When sympathizing with Satan, the audience is aligned against God, Satan's enemy, whom Satan blames for his own suffering. *Paradise Lost* includes many elements of a villain's origin story, in which Satan would be the hero. Although Satan's evil is undeniable, many of his speeches present him sympathetically. Why, then, would Milton use Satan to represent Charles, for whom Milton clearly holds no sympathy?

If Satan does not represent Charles, does he in fact represent the revolutionary Cromwell? A reading of Satan as Cromwell relies in part on a pro-Satanist reading of the epic, and in part on the idea that Milton was a staunch supporter of Cromwell, as his sonnet to Cromwell attests. In Sonnet 16, Milton honors Cromwell's accomplishments and character, citing his "matchless fortitude" (3). Milton shifts to a tone of warning in the sestet, urging Cromwell, "yet much remains / To conquer still; peace hath her victories / No less renowned than war, new foes arise / Threatening to bind our souls with secular chains" (9-12). The tonal shift is not condescending. In fact, the final couplet reads as a plea to Cromwell: "Help us to save free conscience from the paw / Of hireling wolves whose gospel is their maw" (13-14). Here, Milton places his hope and trust in Cromwell.

However, some read this poem as a quiet rebuke of Cromwell's parliamentary accomplishments. Blair Worden notices that "Milton . . . dwells only on Cromwell's military exploits, not on his performance in parliament. That performance troubled Milton. Not least, it dissatisfied him on the subject of liberty of conscience" (246). It is commonly acknowledged that Milton was politically radical, and Worden posits that "Cromwell's reforming ambitions . . . were limited in scope," a fact which bothered

Milton (246). Giuseppina Iacono Lobo notes that “Cromwell’s dismissal of an elected body and his assumption of power seem to conflict with Milton’s championing of religious and civil liberty” (776). However, both Lobo and Worden seem to believe that any issues that Milton had with Cromwell were minor, and that Milton did respect Cromwell. Milton’s *Second Defense of the English People*, Worden argues, “lauded Cromwell. . . Milton looked now to one man for the nation’s salvation” (257). Arguably the way in which Milton places his faith in Cromwell as the only person who can save the liberty of the country is reminiscent of the pressure that the fallen angels place on Satan in Book 2, as their fate lies in Satan’s perfect execution of their plan. However, this evidence seems slim.

A critical flaw in Bennett’s essay is her failure to acknowledge the potential--perhaps even inherent--tyranny of an omnipotent God. A pro-Satanist reading of *Paradise Lost* gives credence to Satan’s denunciations of God, whom he views as a tyrant. If we sympathize and side with Satan, we must also accept that when Satan refers to God as “the Thunderer,” when Moloch calls him “the Torturer” who has forced the fallen angels into “the prison of his tyranny,” there must be some reasonable justification for their misgivings (2.28, 59, 64). In arguing a connection between the image of the sun and the power of rulers, Bennett contrasts Satan, originally Heaven’s “brightest star” while he still obeyed God, with his transformation: “when he defied divine law, which his personal abilities were created to execute, and claimed instead a right to ‘sole Dominion,’ Satan removed the grounds for a genuine sun/ruler analogy and substituted instead Charles’s royalist basis for comparison, in which the ruler is like a god” (444). The very idea that obedience of God’s law is the reason for which Satan and his fellow angels were created portrays God as a power-hungry dictator; further, the fact that any defiance of God’s law is unquestionably unforgivable shows God’s power to be unforgiving and self-centered. Should citizens--be they the people of England or the Angels in Heaven--not be allowed to revolt against an unfair ruler? Surely the fact that Satan was able to persuade one third of his fellow angels to join his revolution means that there was at least some justification behind his actions. Bennett dismisses “the royalists’ belief in the king’s absolute power,” as it believed “God’s omnipotence to be his primary attribute, to which his justice must be mysteriously reconciled. Milton claimed, on the contrary, that God’s primary attribute is

goodness, which demands that all other attributes, including strength, be reconciled to it” (448). Perhaps Milton’s supposed emphasis on God’s goodness and justice over his omnipotence is why God so readily and knowingly allows Satan to begin his plan to destroy humanity with the bite of an apple. However, this hierarchy of attributes in the name of justice and free will does not account for God’s desire for obedience from his creations, or his decision to inflict eternal pain and suffering in Hell upon the angels who dared to revolt.

Bennett builds part of her argument on another correlation between Charles and Satan: their “rebellions against the power of God” in search of their own power (448). She explains:

Milton held the divine right argument to be false not only when it compared rulers’ natural rights to govern but also when it compared the way an absolute monarch may govern with the way God governs--which is not absolutely, by arbitrary will, but justly, by subjecting both himself and the governed to law. (448)

Much of Milton’s contempt for Charles’ *Eikon Basilike* was that it “attempted to picture Charles as a Christlike martyr-king,” claiming Charles’s God-given right to rule over other men (441). Another flaw in the argument that Charles must be represented by Satan instead of God, and that Satan definitively does not represent Cromwell is that in debating who represents whom, Bennett dismisses God’s potential tyranny based on his divinity. When using Milton’s political pamphlets as a way to understand Milton’s intent behind *Paradise Lost*, God must be treated as a character in the text and not as the divine Creator on a moral high ground. Obviously, neither Cromwell’s nor Charles’s actions can be excused because of a divinity that sets one above the other, above criticism. The distinction between the Biblical God and the God in *Paradise Lost* is crucial to the argument that Milton’s hatred of Charles is actually channeled into his portrayal of God as a tyrant instead of Satan as a power-seeking failure. God does not, as Bennett words it, subject himself to his own law, and is by that definition a tyrant.

The question of precisely how Milton’s politics influenced *Paradise Lost* is unanswerable. There are too many subjective factors to answer this question definitively. The correlations that Bennett draws between Milton’s depiction of Charles in *Eikonoklastes* and Satan in *Paradise Lost* are too numerous and

well-defended to dismiss, though her argument relies on an “anti-Satanist” reading of the poem, as Carey would put it (161-62). Shifting to a pro-Satanist viewpoint, this argument becomes weaker. Admittedly, though the argument that Satan represents Cromwell has some basis, the evidence seems far too slim. Quite possibly, Cromwell is not represented in the poem at all--and the same may be true for Charles. Perhaps Milton meant only to represent his ideals. Milton undeniably condemns tyranny, whether we read Satan or God as the tyrant. He also promotes liberty, as every character, even God, is an advocate for free will--Satan’s mission is out of his desire to be freed from Hell; Eve bites the apple because it is the one thing she does not have the freedom to do. Milton’s political prose writings may not provide the tools for one definitive reading of *Paradise Lost*, but they give an insight into his central beliefs, thus providing a crucial step toward understanding the epic poem.

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