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## Leadership in Paradise Lost

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Perhaps the most epic characteristic of John Milton's Paradise Lost can be found in the linked characters of Satan and the Father. Each one cultivates what John Keegan calls the "mask of command." Keegan explains that: "the leader... in warfare can show himself to his followers only through a mask, a mask that he must make for himself, but a mask made in such form as will mark him to men of his time and place as the leader they want and need."<sup>1</sup> Satan and the Father each construct such a mask and it is through the examination of that mask, as well as those instances where the mask is discarded, that each character can be best comprehended. Satan is clearly part of what Keegan and others identify as the heroic tradition of leadership; he follows the imperatives of kinship, of prescription, of sanction, of action, and of example that Keegan explains in The Mask of Command<sup>2</sup>, while the Father does not. By analyzing the leadership and decision making styles of these two leaders, as well as their relationships with their subordinates, important truths about Paradise Lost can be uncovered. Central to that discussion will be an evaluation of what is probably the central paradox of Paradise Lost: the appeal of Satan.

### **The importance of Satan and the Father as characters**

To acknowledge the appeal of Satan is not to denigrate the accomplishment of Milton, nor to blaspheme it. Indeed, few of the most insightful and distinguished critics of Milton have accepted the doctrine that there is nothing to be admired in his character. It was always integral to the story of the war in Heaven that the third part of Heaven's sons be drawn into the devil's allegiance (II, 692). Indeed, it would be a mean accomplishment to "justify the ways of God to men"<sup>3</sup> – as Milton aspires to achieve – if those ways were readily comprehensible and justifiable. Also, a consensus exists, among those historians and scholars who have studied leadership itself, that "leadership is

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<sup>1</sup> Keegan, John. The Mask of Command. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1987. p.11

<sup>2</sup> Keegan, John. The Mask of Command. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1987. p.315-339.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from Paradise Lost taken from Milton, John. "Paradise Lost." The Complete Poems. Ed. John Leonard. Penguin Books, London. 1998.

highly situational and contextual.”<sup>4</sup> To apply post-lapsarian expectations about the nature of leadership to the Father and Satan is a flawed and inappropriate method of critiquing Milton’s theodicy. As characters in literature, Satan and the Father can nonetheless be analyzed using the tools by which we comprehend both history and the contemporary world. Regardless of whether Milton’s central conjectures are correct, that analysis has the potential to uncover truths about the text in relation to our social, political, and historical milieu.

It bears remembering, also, that while our conception of leadership is post-lapsarian, Milton’s was as well. While an analysis of his personal views of leadership, extraneous from Paradise Lost, is beyond the mandate of this examination, it seems reasonable to at least consider the possibility that Paradise Lost can be read partly as a challenge to the heroic tradition of leadership. In The Mask of Command, Keegan himself asserts that the heroic tradition, including all of the imperatives we associate most automatically with leadership, was viable only for a restricted space of time and must now be re-evaluated. Exposed as he was to warfare, Milton may have been making similar considerations. In any event, the presentation of these two styles of leadership is an important facet of Paradise Lost given the vital importance of the theme of obedience. To examine leadership is to uncover the mechanisms by which obedience is fostered and maintained, both among the loyal and rebel angels. In “Milton’s Satan” John Carey explains that Milton had considerable leeway in writing the character of Satan, given the relative absence of description of Satan in the Bible.<sup>5</sup> Naturally, he was obliged to conform to the basic concept of the devil as presented in the Bible, just as he had to conform to the basic presentation of the Father. The choice to present each as he has done – with Satan as an active and inspiring leader and the Father as a

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<sup>4</sup> Cronin, Thomas. “Thinking and Learning about Leadership.” Taylor, Robert and Rosenbach, William ed. Military Leadership: Second Edition. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Carey, John. “Milton’s Satan.” Danielson, Dennis ed. The Cambridge Companion to Milton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

debater and a delegater – represents a conscious choice to place each grand figure within a different leadership tradition. The means and consequences of that portrayal are relevant both to Paradise Lost internally and to the message that Milton was trying to convey to its fallen readers.

### **Leadership style**

That Satan is wonderfully endowed with bravery and determination is undeniable. The sheer audacity of Satan simply cannot be comprehended by Raphael who, according to Empson, “presumes that Satan would not dare to come [out of Hell] without knowledge that God had let him.”<sup>6</sup> What can be derided as sinful pride can also be admired as a resolute tenacity with regards to one’s beliefs. Shelley’s startling praise of Satan, at the expense of the Father, is largely based upon the ideal of total commitment as part of the image of the heroic leader:

Milton’s Devil as a moral being is far superior to God, as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent, in spite of adversity and torture, is to one in the cold security and undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy, not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent of a perseverance in enmity, but with the alleged design of exasperating him to new torments.<sup>7</sup>

Satan conforms to the image of an excellent human leader, so it is unsurprising that he evokes loyalty from human readers. Though devices such as Satan’s soliloquy outside Eden (IV, 32-113), the reader is given a glimpse behind Satan’s mask of command. The intimacy created through that revelation is never matched in Milton’s portrayal of the Father, who is never shown in the absence of an entourage, nor in any sort of pain or discomfort. As Uriel’s belated recognition of Satan’s true identity confirms, it is passion – and even tormented passion – that is most noticeable in a character. Discussing the degree to which leaders ought to be “actors,” General S.L.A. Marshall explains that “naturalness ha[s] much to do with [a leader’s] hold on other men.”<sup>8</sup> In powerful contrast to the calm self-assuredness of an all-knowing God, Satan is in a near-constant state of drama and turmoil

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<sup>6</sup> Empson, William. Milton’s God. Chatto and Windus, London. 1961. p.111

<sup>7</sup> Empson, William. Milton’s God. Chatto and Windus, London. 1961. p.20-21

<sup>8</sup> Empson, William. Milton’s God. Chatto and Windus, London. 1961.. p.39

as he responds in an authentic way to new developments. That dynamism contrasts appealingly with the placidity of the Father. Indeed, in his discussion of Satan's enlightening soliloquy, Carey explains that this passage "reveals [Satan] as a creature of dynamic tensions, such as the other characters of the poem notably lack."<sup>9</sup>

### **Decision making**

At first glance, the Father seems to use power in a bewildering way. He chains Satan to the lake of fire in Hell only to release him; he lets the gates of Hell be guarded by those who, at the first opportunity, will open them; he sends forth troops of angels impotent to prevent Satan's passage to guard those gates, as well as the walls of Eden; he ends the confrontation between Satan and Gabriel (IV, 996-1015) in such a way that Satan can still go on to seduce mankind. According to William Empson: "Milton steadily drives home that the inmost council of God was the Fortunate Fall of man; however wicked Satan's plan may be, it is God's plan too."<sup>10</sup> All of the impediments presented to Satan after his departure from the burning lake are readily, if often craftily, circumvented. While Satan's motivations are straightforward: escape Hell and corrupt mankind in an act of vengeance, those of the Father must be far more complex and difficult to comprehend in order to justify such elaborate machinations. Whereas the choices made by Satan are active and direct, often carried out personally, those of the Father are often delegated and justified by means of complex and legalistic argumentation.

Examining one key decision of each actor serves to elucidate key differences in both the style that decisions are made by each and, perhaps more importantly, the manner in which those decisions are obeyed. Satan chooses to seek out "another World, the happy seat / Of some new race

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<sup>9</sup> Carey, John. "Milton's Satan." Danielson, Dennis ed. The Cambridge Companion to Milton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. p.163

<sup>10</sup> Empson, William. Milton's God. Chatto and Windus, London. 1961. p.39

called *Man*”<sup>11</sup> (II, 347) and to “seduce them to [the devils’] party” (II, 368). The key decision on the part of the Father in Paradise Lost is to beget the Son and to “proclaim him Messiah” (V, 661). Both decisions are made privately and the reasoning behind those decisions is not revealed; the difference arises in the manner by which the decisions are presented. Satan chooses to convene an elaborate meeting, which takes place in an intricate hall and includes speeches by numerous parties with differing views. While decision making power is not actually vested in that body (as evidenced by their growing approval for each new plan and Satan’s rapid departure following the proposal of his scheme by Beelzebub) (II, 466), elaborate methods to create a false sense of democracy are employed. On one hand, that façade reflects how the captain of a band of rebels must be unusually wary of dissent, particularly after a major setback. On another, it represents both an awareness of the importance of tact and the willingness to employ politics to maintain morale and cohesion. On a related note, Satan also displays considerable creativity: he is able to construct an elaborate fictitious account of the serpent’s eating of the fruit in order to seduce Eve (IX, 568-605). He also has the creativity necessary to tell Sin, Death, and Chaos what they need to hear in order to aid him. Carey explains how, for an author such as Milton, endowing Satan with storytelling power and imagination is “impressive” and represents a kind of kinship.<sup>12</sup>

The Father’s decision to beget and anoint the Son, by contrast, involves all the tact of a bulldozer. Not only are the existing angels to see themselves reduced in relative power, but they are expected to accept the difficult doctrine that this seemingly newly created being is, in turn, their creator. The Father pays no heed to the logic behind Keegan’s assertion that a leader needs to address the needs of their followers. Indeed, the Father demands loyalty – under threat of grave punishment – despite his unwillingness to conform himself to the needs of his followers. It is the

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<sup>11</sup> Milton’s emphasis

<sup>12</sup> Carey, John. “Milton’s Satan.” Danielson, Dennis ed. The Cambridge Companion to Milton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. p.170

very nature of piety to submit to God in the absence of argument or example on the part of the deity: an argument made at several points during the course of Paradise Lost. The fact that the Father expects loyalty and does little to cultivate it alienates readers of Paradise Lost who expect to be won over to loyalty.

In an ironic way, Satan possesses considerable moral fortitude. A number of his decisions are made on points of honour. When he is discovered by Ithuriel and Zephon in the bower of Adam and Eve (IV, 819), he does not choose to engage the two angels who 'arrest' him but challenges the entire troop he is led to. Empson interprets this behaviour as representing Satan's willingness to fight only with his equals.<sup>13</sup> Satan's own justification is identical - though he is also interested in the greater glory involved in defeating many angels - (IV, 851-4), though interpreted as simple fearfulness by Zephon (IV, 854-6). While such a decision can be regarded as a mark of excessive pride and hubris on the part of Satan, many conceptions of the judicious use of physical force, such as Saint Augustine's just war doctrine, forbid the use of force in a disproportionate way. The same moral imperative underlies the revulsion generally felt when a powerful individual does violence to a weak one, even in self defence. The point is that Satan's moral code is neither completely unfounded nor obviously self serving, given how his chances of victory or escape would surely be greater against fewer rather than more angels. While it cannot be denied that the character of Satan becomes less rational, less grand, and less admirable as the epic progresses, it must be recalled that his diminishment is induced by the Father. Whether that withering is deserved or not, the fact that Satan is capable of evolving, even in a negative way, when the Father is not adds to the degree to which he is interesting.

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<sup>13</sup> Empson, William. Milton's God. Chatto and Windus, London. 1961. p.60

## Followership

In their collection of essays on military leadership, Robert Taylor and William Rosenbach stress the degree to which leadership exists as a complex interrelationship not only between leader and led, but between the conception of leadership and followership within the individual leader. They explain: “The mature leader not only must have known the travail of the follower; he must here and now incorporate within himself all that a follower is.”<sup>14</sup> As a rebel, one might expect Satan to be an utter failure in practising this sort of “leadership by followership.” The two essential elements of this sort of leadership, however, are of compassion and comprehension – both of which Satan practices more visible than the Father. Satan’s very vulnerability gives him the capability to share in the pain of his followers – conforming to the imperative of example as described by Keegan.<sup>15</sup> Keegan explains that “those who impose risk must be seen to share it”<sup>16</sup> and brings up the example of Carton de Wiart – “one-armed, one-eyed, seven times wounded on separate Sundays”<sup>17</sup> – to demonstrate how such people can inspire bravery and loyalty in their followers by virtue of “their own past contempt of danger.” To have received the first blow struck during the war in Heaven does something to justify the leadership of Satan. His vulnerability also gives him the necessary incentive to comprehend his own forces and make appropriate use of them, a behaviour oddly neglected by the Father. Also, which such declarations can be taken to be ironic, on several occasions, notably when struck with love at the sight of Eve (IV, 362-4), Satan seems to feel some compassion for human beings.

Empson makes much of the degree to which the Father knowingly squanders his own forces. When Raphael describes the angelic watch sent to patrol while the Father was effecting Creation (VIII, 230), he himself acknowledges that pointlessness of that venture, given that any

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<sup>14</sup> Taylor, Robert and Rosenbach, William ed. Military Leadership: Second Edition. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992. p.84

<sup>15</sup> Keegan, John. The Mask of Command. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1987. p.329

<sup>16</sup> Keegan, John. The Mask of Command. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1987. p.329

<sup>17</sup> Keegan, John. The Mask of Command. London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1987. p.329



“spy” they might intercept could not have “issued forth... without [the Father’s] leave.” The Father has his force of loyal angels (twice the size of that of the rebels) prosecute cacophonous war in Heaven for two days before bringing about the foregone conclusion of its termination by the Son. In a similar vein, the Father uses the device of the scales in the sky to prevent a battle wherein his loyal angels might actually succeed in their task of protecting Eden (IV, 994). Rather than allowing Satan and Gabriel come to blows, the Father creates the conditions necessary for Satan to escape and, ultimately, corrupt mankind. Likewise, the Father’s first address to the angels in Book X who have failed to prevent Satan’s entry into Eden underlines the pointlessness of their guard. He explains that these events “[their] sincerest care could not prevent, / Foretold so lately what would come to pass” (X, 35).

The myriad failure of the angels to do anything productive – the loyal angels fail to defeat the rebel army, adequately warn Adam and Eve about the danger posed by Satan, or guard Satan – leads to the question of what purpose their elaborate hierarchy serves. Two possible explanations are that the Father creates this system of hierarchy in order to give purpose to an otherwise purposeless mass of angels – a mechanism somewhat equivalent to Satan’s false debate – or the hierarchy is simply a manifestation of the value assigned to order by both Milton himself and the character of the Father. In either of these scenarios, there is reason to question the legitimacy of the hierarchy, as indeed Satan does explicitly by “defy[ing] th’ Omnipotent to arms” (I, 49).

The confrontations between Satan and Abdiel in books V and VI deeply involve questions of leadership and followership. Like Satan himself, Abdiel chooses to dissent, despite personal danger and the conformity of opinion of those around him. While Satan, by argument that Milton presents as false and flawed, was able to seduce one third of the angels, Abdiel’s “zeal / None seconded” (V, 849-50). By presenting Satan’s argument as the weaker of the two, yet the one more followed, Milton separates the capacity to produce convincing argument from the possession of

virtue. The debate between Satan and Abdiel can be interpreted as a stinging condemnation of the rousing yet illogical method of persuasion practised by Satan and other heroic leaders, both in fiction and in history.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

The logical error that seems most common in analyses of both Satan and the Father is the equality that is often implicitly or explicitly established between the degree to which each conforms to our conception of good leadership and the degree to which their moral case stands or falls. The rush to pass judgement on these two characters can prevent the development of a sufficiently subtle understanding of their actions, justifications, and motivations; also, it obscured the fundamental ambivalence present, at least, in Milton's portrayal of Satan. The temptation to judge and simplify is discussed by Carey, who explains that Paradise Lost is "essentially ambivalent, insofar as the reading of Satan's character is concerned."<sup>19</sup> What is not ambivalent is the degree to which Satan plays the role, or wears the mask, of the heroic leader far more than the Father does. Irrespective of questions of his goodness or the legitimacy of his claim to dominion, there is little in the character or actions of the Father to inspire loyalty among those who understand leadership in the way that human beings generally do. That the instigator of the fall of man operates using tactics similar in content and motivation to the military and political leaders known, and possibly admired, by readers of Paradise Lost is yet another way in which Milton reminds the reader that we are approaching the epic from a post-lapsarian perspective.

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<sup>18</sup> One need only think of Henry V's "once more into the breach" and "Crispin's Day" speeches for additional examples of speeches with powerful motivational power but dubious a dubious logical grounding.

<sup>19</sup> Carey, John. "Milton's Satan." Danielson, Dennis ed. The Cambridge Companion to Milton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. p.161

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<sup>20</sup> All citations written according to the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers: Fifth Edition by Joseph Gibaldi. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2001.