
MILTON: OF THE DEVIL'S PARTY?

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IN THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL

William Blake claims that Milton, in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, was “of the Devil’s party without knowing it.” The eighteenth century visionary poet states that Milton wrote at liberty “of Devils & Hell” because he was “a true poet” who regarded that kind of Energy “call’d Evil” as the “only life”. He considers Energy to be opposed to Reason, the force which, in the poet’s view,¹ restrains desire. Blake’s position appears to be that of the Romantic. The life of the passions, which Satan represents in this poem, is given precedence over that of Reason. Blake appears to suggest the view that the true poet should exalt passionate life and this is what must have led him to believe that Milton was unconsciously on Satan’s side.

Blake’s belief that Milton was “of the Devil’s party without knowing it” is shared by others, though the germ of the idea lies in Dryden. The nineteenth century gave rise to the ‘Satanist School’ that comprised some of the leading exponents of Romantic poetry, Shelley being foremost. They regarded Satan as being the only really convincing character in the poem, an infinitely finer conception than that of the wily fiend who attempts to seduce Christ in *Paradise Regained*.

The Satan of *Paradise Lost* is explored in greater psychological depth than the devils appearing in earlier literature. Dante, for instance, represents Satan as a huge monster with three heads crunching three poor sinners in his three mouths. Equally grotesque were the devils in the medieval Miracle Plays.

The Satan depicted by Milton in the first two books of *Paradise Lost* is indeed a magnificent figure. He dominates these opening episodes, towering above the other fallen angels like a colossus. We read about “His mighty stature.” (Bk.II). He is depicted as a great leader and an extremely courageous warrior. His courage is manifest throughout Book IV as he is the only one from a multitude of demons who dares enter the forbidden territory. In the first two books, he shows great eloquence as an orator and succeeds in rallying the fallen angels, binding them to a common cause.

Moreover, Satan appears to have the makings of a Byronic hero. The idea of subjugation is totally obnoxious to him: “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven” (Bk. I, ll. 262). In his apostrophe to the Sun (Bk. IV), Satan discloses that any submission on his part can only be “feigned”. A rebel, he is ready to shake his fist at the establishment and engage in a confrontation against adversi-

1. The Voice of the Devil in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The lines read as follows: “Note: The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of angels and God and at liberty when of Devils and Hell is because he was a true poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it.”

ty. There is tendency for the reader or audience at a play to side with the underdog. This natural feeling predisposes the reader to commiserate with the fate of a fallen angel who reveals the courage to attempt to defy overwhelming, nay impossible, odds. Satan therefore arouses sympathy and the 'anti-establishment' spirit which he imparts as he rallies his battered troops may have appealed to the likes of Milton and fellow Cromwellians who, very much like Satan, sought to overthrow the existing order.

Milton also endows Satan with several redeeming qualities which continue to arouse the reader's sympathies. Satan shows a great sense of responsibility and does not shirk the duty of self-sacrifice which is incumbent on him as a leader: "For the general safety, he despised his own" (Bk. II, 1-481). He therefore takes it upon himself to travel through Chaos and enter Paradise. In Book One, he sheds tears, feeling remorse for the fallen angels whom he has reduced to a sorry state. He is guilty of having "seduced" them, as he admits in Book IV:

Among the Spirits beneath, whom I seduced
With other promises and other vaunts
Than to submit, boasting I could subdue
The Omnipotent." (IV, ll.83-88).

Elsewhere in this book, Satan twice feels compassion for Adam and Eve, whom he views in all their harmless innocence:

And should I at your harmless innocence
Melt, as I do, yet public reason just,
Honour and empire, with revenge enlarged
By conquering this new world, compels me now
To do what else, though damned, I should abhor. (IV, ll.388-392).

Blake must have considered Milton guilty of having afforded his anti-hero many virtues. In so doing, he enabled Satan to arouse the kind of sympathy normally reserved for the hero. At a particular stage in Book IV, Satan is shown eavesdropping inside the bower. He is stirred with envy at the sight of two noble creatures engaged in innocent sexuality. One immediately senses the anguish of a figure yearning for a similar experience, knowing only too painfully that Love is a feeling he can never share. It is a value which runs contrary to the interests and perverted ideals of the Satanic realm.

There are instances in Book IV, precisely in his invocation to the Sun, where Satan reveals elements of the tragic hero. He is torn by conflict: "Horror and doubt distract/His troubled thoughts" (IV ll. 18-19). He appears to be fully aware of his predicament and there is pathos and a tragic intensity in the lines:

Me miserable! Which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?
Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
And, in the lowest deep, a lower deep
Still threatening to devour me, opens wide,
To which the Hell I suffer seems a heaven. (IV, ll. 73-78).

Satan knows that he can be served by Grace but this would imply submission or "feigned submission" since he shows enough consciousness to admit that there cannot be reconciliation where "wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep." He also senses the inevitability of damnation since all hope to him is lost: "So

farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear." (IV l. 108). And there are other considerations involved. He has to save face in front of the many fallen angels to whom he promised victory. However, one ought to remember that Pride in itself is not a virtue, being the chiefest of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Several aspects of Satan's character may therefore suggest that Milton was of the Devil's party. However, one must consider other elements in the poem which reveal the contrary. It ought to be stated that Milton and Blake were not likely to view Satan in the same way. Revenge, rebellion, anguish, pride and all the other traits which Satan exhibits point to a life of the passions. And one ought to reiterate that this is an aspect of character which appealed to the Romantics, of whom Blake was a precursor. The Romantics exalted passion and energy. However the Renaissance view of Man, which Milton shared, was a totally different one. Right Reason or *Recta Ratio* was considered to be the prime virtue. Therefore all those elements in Satan's character which appealed to Blake and the Satanists may not have appealed to a purely classical writer like Milton to whom Passion appeared as a means of unseating the intellect.

As for redeeming features, it ought to be remembered that positive traits are also to be found in the character of such Shakespearean villains as Shylock, Lady Macbeth and Richard III, to name but three. They would scarcely be human otherwise. This does not imply that Shakespeare was of the villain's party without knowing it even though one may argue that a great poet must penetrate the world of his great characters and therefore feel at one with them. And it is for this very reason that some of Shakespeare's villains speak the best poetry in their respective play. The same can be said of Milton's epic where the most exalted poetry is spoken by Satan. The long apostrophe to the Sun, already referred to, constitutes an excellent example. Bearing this in mind, one may argue that great writers like Shakespeare and Milton are, to a certain extent, of their villain's party.

However, there are many other elements which continue to suggest the contrary. As D. Daiches points out in his *Milton* (London, 1966) there are several instances which show that Satan is the embodiment of all that may delude. And it would be foolish to believe that Milton favours delusion. In Book One, Satan and the fallen angels are revealed "stretched out huge in length" on the flood. Milton relates this image to that of the pilot who anchors on a huge sea-beast and mistakes it for an island. The pilot is deluded, and so are we. In the building of Pandemonium in the same book, Milton makes use of an inflated language which suggests profusion and vain ambition. The scene has biblical overtones as we are reminded of the Tower of Babel, an image which reinforces the idea that the fallen angels are associated with all that is delusory. The pagan deities are also presented in Book One as instruments of delusion and the fact that they are considered by the poet to be the natural offspring of the Fallen Angels tends to strengthen the link between the devils and all that deludes.

In Book Four, Satan continues to reveal himself as a master of delusion. He admits to having "seduced" his followers with vain promises. Having gained useful information "From their own mouths", Satan excites the mind of innocent Eve, "our credulous mother." Squatting like a toad, he whispers illusions of grandeur: "Assaying by his devilish art to reach/ The organs of her fancy, and with them forge/ Illusions as he list, phantasms and dreams" (IV ll. 801 - 803).

As with all delusions, failure rather than glory is the inevitable outcome:

... Hence I will excite their minds
 With more desire to know, and to reject
 Envious commands, invented with design
 To keep them low, whom knowledge might exalt
 Equal with Gods; aspiring to be such,
 They taste and die: what likelier can ensue? (IV, ll. 522 – 527).

Satan's rhetorical assertions provide the delusion. Satan states that he suffers from a sense of "injur'd merit" and one may feel inclined to ask whether something was unjustly denied him. One may note the barrenness and negative quality of such lines as "And study of revenge, immortal hate" (Bk. 1) or the banality of "yet public reason just/ Honour and Empire with revenge enlarged" (IV, ll. 389 – 390). This is rhetoric and nothing more and, in its emptiness, quite delusory.

While Milton is not likely to favour delusory figures, he is less likely to be on the side of a character or characters he transforms into such debasing creatures as toads, serpents, "barbaric hordes", locusts and pigmies or into such symbols of perversion and cruelty as Moloch, the "grim idol". The animal imagery, very much in evidence throughout Book IV, progressively gets worse and we notice the subtle but continuous debasing of Satan from the first book to the anti-climax in Book X.

In the first two books, Satan is magnificently portrayed. However, in the opening lines of Book IV, he is presented as a dragon: "Then when the Dragon, put to second rout/Came furious down to be revenged on men." (IV ll. 3 – 4). Later, the guardians of Eden discover him inside the bower, "Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve." Satan's soliloquy in Book Four, the product of a tortured soul, also helps to reduce him from the sublime figure of the opening two books to that of a dissembler and a tempter. Satan is no longer a colossus but "a prowling wolf" seeking "new haunt for prey" or a thief "bent to unhoard the cash/of some rich burgher" – "So clomb this first grand Thief into God's fold."

The invocation "Evil be thou my good!" is reminiscent of similar lines spoken by the self-confessed dissemblers of Elizabethan drama. All this may serve to show that, contrary to what Blake's statement implies ("... without knowing it"), Milton was fully conscious of the effect he was creating in the first two books – Satan's magnificence served to render his degradation even more pronounced.

All vestiges of heroism are done away with when Milton makes Satan avoid a direct confrontation with the Almighty and employ his wiles against an innocent third party instead. Adam and Eve are easy prey for a supernatural being as Beelzebub acknowledges: "What if we find/ some easier enterprise?" (Bk. II). Eve is the target of Satan's attack and her innocence, naivety and comparative weakness are strongly emphasized in Book IV, particularly in her account of her experiences immediately following her creation – she almost falls in love with her own reflection in a lake. Satan's act is therefore anything but noble and uncharacteristic of a character said to be imbued with 'heroic energy'.

Throughout the poem, God is not presented as an arbitrary dictator but as the source of natural order, at the heart of the Chain of Being. A reference to this hierarchy, stretching from God down to the least creature on earth, may be found in Book Four: "He for God only, she for God in him" (l. 299). Satan's defiance of God is a defiance of natural order and so it is far from being a heroic action.² Moreover, the invocation "Evil be thou my good!" indicates that Satan harbours perverted values.

Although Milton is likely to have much in common with a rebel, he is unlikely to be on the side of a figure he uses as an instrument to denounce all those aspects of life to which he is averse. Many episodes involving Satan appear chivalric in conception. And yet the lines "all who since, Baptiz'd or Infidel/jousted in Aspramont or Montalban" seem to suggest that the fanciful elements constituting the code of chivalry are common to both Christian and pagan. Milton must have regarded Chivalry as something decorative, decadent and unreal, and therefore typical of an exhibitionist like Satan.

Moreover, Satan's exhibitionism also serves as a means whereby Milton satirizes the world of politics with its accent on grandiloquence and rabble-rousing. Satan reveals these qualities in such lines as: "Warr then, Warr Open or understood must be resolv'd" (Bk. 1). Earlier in the first book, Satan exhorts his fellow devils to "Awake, arise or be forever fail'n." The irony is that they are forever fallen in a deeper sense than the arch-fiend realizes. When questioned by Gabriel, Satan haughtily replies:

"Know ye not mee? Ye knew me once no mate
For you, there sitting where ye durst not soar.
Not to know *me* argues yourselves unknow'n." (IV, ll. 828-830).

This reply sounds strained and theatrical, once again typical of an exhibitionist. Satan's language is that of the politician. It is full of absurdities and contradictions. Nevertheless, it deludes the listening crowd by appealing to the emotions. David Daiches explains that this is what the Nazis did in Germany and he goes so far as to compare the great debate in Hell with the Nuremberg Rally.

Grandiloquence and Chivalry are therefore two of the qualities Milton appears to be repudiating in *Paradise Lost*. And the fact that Satan reveals these qualities indicates that Milton was not of the Devil's party after all.

If all admiration for Satan is gradually destroyed by Milton, one would feel inclined to ask whether the poet did manage to create a hero for *Paradise Lost*. If one were to take into account the sequel which Milton wrote for this poem (*Paradise Regained*), then it may be asserted that Christ is the real hero of the two poems. However *Paradise Lost* is a complete poem in itself and the alternatives to Satan as hero in this work would be either God or Adam. God hardly ever arouses our sympathy or admiration. Adam is of particular interest but the character does not dominate the poem. He is easy prey for supernatural elements.

2. The beauty and harmony of Eden, vividly described in Book IV, serve to emphasize the sense of order felt throughout the prelapsarian earth. We are confronted by a harmonious conception of Nature, a well ordered Renaissance landscape pregnant with classical imagery. It is this sense of harmony and order which is to be lost after the Fall.

Nevertheless, he does have his nobler points. Like Eve, he is no ordinary being and stands peerless among other creatures.

Two of far nobler shape erect and tall,
Godlike erect, with native honour clad.
In naked majesty seemed lords of all, (IV, 288 – 300)

Adam's motive in sinning also has its nobler aspect. Adam would rather suffer death with Eve than live without her if she were to be destroyed by God. Eve's motives are different. She enables Adam to partake of her sin only because she does not want to risk being killed, leaving him to some other woman: "Then I shall be no more,/ And Adam wedded to another Eve/ Shall live with her enjoying, I extinct:/ A death to think." (IX, ll. 827 – 30)

Finally, the fall of Adam appears to be inevitable. Mere idling about in Eden would not render a character worthy of being afforded heroic treatment. Heroes belong to a world characterized by suffering and endurance in the face of adversity. This is the world facing the banished couple at the end of the poem: "The world was all before them" (XII, l. 646).