

What Shelley Found in Milton's Satan and God

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Shelley's so-called romantic interpretation of *Paradise Lost* seems to be fairly widely known amongst Miltonic students, but it has never been discussed seriously. For the study of Shelley, however, this interpretation, especially in relation to Milton's treatment of Satan and God, is not only interesting but of great significance. I will first examine this interpretation. Then I will discuss Shelley's opinion of Milton as a poet as well as Milton's own opinion of his aims and achievements.

In his *Defence of Poetry*, Shelley boldly asserts:

. . . Milton's poem contains within itself a philosophical refutation of that system, of which, by a strange and natural antithesis, it has been a chief popular support. Nothing can exceed the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in "Paradise Lost." It is a mistake to suppose that he could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil. . . . Milton's Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God, as One who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture, is to One who in the cold security of 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 deserve new torments.¹

Almost the same argument is seen in another essay of Shelley's, *On the Devil, and Devils* (*Works* vii.90-1,95-6), in which he defends the Devil, or Satan, as well as in his Preface to *Prometheus Unbound*. Shelley found in Milton's Satan a noble characterization of the champion of the oppressed, or mankind, fighting against God, the omnipotent monarch, like his own Prometheus against Jupiter.

In the Fifth Book of *Paradise Lost*, asked by Adam, Raphael tells of Satan's and his fellow angels' revolt. They are described: 'glorious once / And perfect while they stood' (v.567-8)². The cause of this glorious and perfect angel's rebellion against the Supreme Power in heaven is God's sudden appointment of his Son and heir to be the head of all the angels in heaven, whom they have to obey from that day on.

Indignant at this appointment and envious of the newly appointed king, Satan, explaining to

his followers the shame and absurdity of paying the anointed king 'Knee-tribute yet unpaid' (v.782), provokes them to cast off the yoke in order to defend their *liberty* and *equality in freedom* and those *imperial titles* (v.772-802). All but one (Abdiel) follow the proud Satan and share the fate of falling with him.

The fall of Satan and his angels is described in the Sixth Book of the poem, as Raphael's story continued. After the fierce three-day battle Satan's army is defeated and punished. What is to be noted here is that, to save heaven from the danger of ruin, or rather to prove the Son's power (vi.676-8), the almighty Father leaves the third day of the battle to his Son with his *almighty* arms. The Son defeats his enemies with ten thousand thunders in his right hand, driving them thunderstruck, and pursuing 'With terrors and with furies to the bounds / And crystal wall of heaven.' Finally, from this wall they are forced to throw themselves headlong. For nine days and nights they fall, until at last they reach hell (vi.835-77).

Thus far we have seen how Satan fought with the despotic rule of God, who forced the heavenly inhabitants to pay knee-tribute to his newly anointed Son, and how cruelly he and his fellow angels were driven into hell. Shelley may well have thought that the glorious Lucifer (Satan was so called in heaven.), fighter for liberty, was beaten by the infinite power of arms of the omnipotent and merciless ruler. The horrible sight of the *dungeon* and the *miserable* state of the fallen angels are fully described in the First Book of the poem (i.59-74). But the more horrible the dungeon is and the more miserable Satan feels, the greater his wrath and desire for revenge grow, it seems. It is to Beelzebub, next to himself in power and in wickedness, that Satan expresses his resolution to wage eternal war on their 'grand foe' who 'Sole reigning holds the tyranny of heaven' (i.121-4):

What though the field be lost?

All is not lost; the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:
And what is else not to be overcome?
That glory never shall his wrath or might
Extort from me. To bow and sue for grace
With suppliant knee, and deify his power,
Who from the terror of this arm so late
Doubted his empire, that were low indeed,
That were an ignominy and shame beneath
This downfall.

(i.105-16)

Satan's unwavering intention and his undaunted and aggressive will to fight to the last against the tyrant ruling the heavenly empire, these are indeed what Shelley had in mind when he

mentioned ‘the energy and magnificence of the character of Satan as expressed in “Paradise Lost”’, or ‘One who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture’. In the same way, the image of God, described in the First (e.g.i.123-4) and the Sixth Books (vi.710-18, 835-77) of the poem, could easily make Shelley pronounce that Milton’s God, as a moral being, is much inferior to his Satan and ‘One who in cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy’. And even his Son who, after successfully completing the task entrusted to him, triumphantly rides ‘through mid heaven’(vi.889) ‘sung victorious king, / Son, heir, and Lord, to him dominion given’(vi.886-7), must have been interpreted by Shelley as a *slave to a tyrant* rather than a *merciful Saviour* of mankind.

Here the second stage of Satan’s rebellion begins. His revenge is based firmly on his unchanging mind, which can make a paradise even out of hell. When he has made up his mind to live in the infernal world he defiantly proclaims his intention:

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

. . .

Here we may reign secure, and in my choice
To reign is worth ambition though in hell:
Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven.

(i.254-63)

Believing that in the recent battle they were ‘In arms not worse, in foresight much advanced’ (i.119), but were only defeated by thunder (cf.i.258), Satan now thinks he had better not rely on arms but on some other strategy, and the above-quoted lines suggest he does not need recovery of his former place in heaven. And as early as when he was still in the fiery waves his bold defiance is thus shown:

To do aught good never will be our task,
But ever to do ill our sole delight,
As being the contrary to his high will
Whom we resist.

(i.159-62)

This will be further explained, later in the Second Book, through the lips of Beelzebub: that the wisest possible revenge is not to go up to heaven to fight there, which is very dangerous, but to seduce the ‘new race called Man’(ii.348) more favoured by ‘him who rules above’(ii.351) than themselves, in other words:

. . . to confound the race
 Of mankind in one root, and earth with hell
 To mingle and involve, done all to spite
 The great creator.

(ii. 382-5)

Now that the aim of their second revenge is decided, what is interesting for the reader is how it is carried out: for I would suggest that our protagonist, Satan, plays the part of the Pope in the Holy See.

First of all, Satan's temple-like palace is constructed in an hour, its architecture not to be matched by any building in Babylon or Memphis, either in scale or grandeur. All made of gold, it is constructed under the leadership of Mammon: 'by him first / Men also, and by his suggestion taught, / Ransacked the centre, and with impious hands / Rifled the bowels of their mother earth / For treasures better hid.'(i.684-8) This high capital of Satan and his peers, called Pandaemonium, is:

Built like a temple, where *pilasters round*
 Were set, and Doric pillars overlaid
 With *golden* architrave; nor did there want
 Cornice or frieze, with bossy sculptures graven,
 The roof was fretted *gold*.

(my italics)(i.713-7)

Though the architect of this building is named Mulciber, Greek Hephaestus, the terms used in the text are not genuine Greek or Doric: the italicized parts are not Greek but Italian or Baroque, reminding us at once of the Pantheon and St Peter's Basilica. Each part of the structure is variously discussed, but for the purpose of the present discussion, in which I maintain that Satan is playing the part of a Roman Pope, I suggest that Pandaemonium's similarity to St Peter's Basilica should be emphasized.³ Miss R.W. Smith's suggestion that Pandaemonium may be modelled on St Peter's at Rome, which is examined by Fowler, brings our Satan closer to a Roman Pope: 'The pilasters, the carved roof, the gilding, the brazen doors and the adjacent council chamber: all these details fit. Even the bee simile[i.768-75] is appropriate, for bees appeared in the arms of the Barberini Pope Urban viii. The *Doric pillars* (i.714), however, would appear to be an insuperable obstacle to this interpretation. Unless, that is, M.'s allusion extends to Alexander vii, Pope from 1655 to 1667, who was famous for his patronage of Bernini's colonnade in the piazza of St Peter's, the gigantic columns of which are modified Doric.' (Fowler, p.85) We can easily picture the scene of the piazza of St Peter's, embraced by the two arms of magnificent colonnade of four-rowed columns, full of thousands of the Pope's adorers from all over the world, when we read the scene of the summons of Satan's

worshippers:

. . . their summons called
 From every band and squared regiment
 By place or choice the worthiest; they anon
 With hundreds and with thousands trooping came
 Attended.

(i.757-61)

And when we consider that the construction of the modified Doric colonnade was progressing at almost precisely the same time as Milton was composing *Paradise Lost* (1655-65?), then it is plausible to believe that in his mind Milton had amalgamated grand view of Doric pillars, which he could imagine, with the exciting view of the cathedral as he had seen it during his stay in Italy (1638-9). Then, just as the Pope calls a meeting of the College of Cardinals to decide matters of importance, so Satan holds a secret conclave in a closed recess, far within the palace.

Towards the end of the conclave a problem presents itself which is difficult for all the members there, except for Satan himself. Even the wise Beelzebub, who strongly supported Satan's plan of seducing man for their second revenge (ii.345-78), now asks the 'Synod of gods' (ii.391)(so he calls the assembly) whom to send as their representative, who is able enough to carry out the adventure in the new world, in view of the known and unknown dangers and difficulties (ii.402-16). No one among the choice assembly can offer or utter a word until at last, taking advantage of this occasion, 'Satan, whom now transcendent glory raised / Above his fellows,' (ii.427-8) after insisting on the fury of the infernal fire, the difficulty of passing through the adamantine gates and the wide-gaping abortive gulf to be crossed even after the gates of hell have been passed, says:

But I should ill become this throne, O peers,
 And this imperial sovereignty, adorned
 With splendour, armed with power, if aught proposed
 And judged of public moment, in the shape
 Of difficulty or danger could deter
 Me from attempting.

(ii.445-50)

Sent out of his kingdom with highest respect and awe, like a god, Satan finally alights on top of Mount Niphates, close to Eden, after a long adventurous journey. With the Garden of Eden in view, and just before embarking on his bold mission to tempt mankind,

. . . horror and doubt distract

His troubled thoughts, and from the bottom stir
 The hell within him, for within him hell
 He brings, and round about him, nor from hell
 One step no more than from himself can fly
 By change of place.

(iv.18-23)

The 'full-blazing sun' (iv.29) above, looking down 'like the God / Of this new world'(iv.33-4) wakes his slumbering conscience and despair, and makes him repent of his rebellion, drawing him back to wonder why he did not praise God and thank him for his mercy. Before making his final decision to take revenge for the second time he is now in the depths of agony, torn between his conscience and his pretended glory. His conscience suggests submission as the only way to get out of his own hell, which, however, 'Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame / Among the spirits beneath, whom I seduced'(iv.82-3) 'boasting I could subdue / The omnipotent' (iv.85-6). He groans:

Ay me, they little know
 How dearly I abide that boast so vain,
 Under what torments inwardly I groan;
 While they adore me on the throne of hell,
 With diadem and sceptre high advanced
 The lower still I fall, only supreme
 In misery; such joy ambition finds.

(iv.86-92)

But even in this desperate state of mind Satan gradually realizes the impossibility of true reconciliation with the king of heaven, as his hate and ambition are too strong to suppress. So for him all hope of peace is excluded and his conclusion is:

So farewell hope, and with hope farewell fear,
 Farewell remorse: all good to me is lost;
 Evil be thou my good; by thee at least
 Divided empire with heaven's king I hold
 By thee, and more than half perhaps will reign[*sic.*].

(iv.108-12)

Thus he decides by his own will to play the part of the king of his fellow spirits and to play the part of Pope, the messenger between hell and earth, and between earth and heaven.

The way in which he gets into Eden is worthy of note. He does not go in through the proper

entrance on the east side but 'At one slight bound high over leaped all bound' (iv.181) of steep hill or 'highest wall' (iv.182), like a prowling wolf or like a thief:

As when a prowling wolf,
Whom hunger drives to seek new haunt for prey,
Watching where shepherds pen their flocks at eve
In hurdled cotes amid the field secure,
Leaps o'er the fence with ease into the fold:
Or as a thief bent to unhoard the cash
Of some rich burgher, whose substantial doors,
Cross-barred and bolted fast, fear no assault,
In at the window climbs, or o'er the tiles;
So clomb this first grand thief into God's fold:
So since into his church lewd hirelings climb.

(iv.183-93)

Just as it is stated in the Holy Scriptures (John x.1-5), a faithful shepherd, or a minister entering church, comes through the gate, but the one who climbs 'some other way' is 'a thief and a robber'. And the sheep can distinguish a true shepherd from a thief. The image of Satan seen above as the 'first grand thief' (iv.192) that sat on the highest tree in the garden 'like a cormorant' (iv.196) implies 'the first degraded Pope'. So ever since, even in the Church of England, greedy 'lewd hirelings climb' (iv.193). Like the degraded and greedy Pope, who sits on the highest throne situated in the centre of the Christian world, Satan 'on the tree of life / The middle tree and highest there that grew, / Sat like a cormorant,'(iv.194-6) using that tree 'For prospect', that is, as a place from which to look over Eden. He abused the sacred tree by using it as a tool to seduce man for his own profit.

Prelacy and episcopacy were what Milton hated more than anything else. Of bishops he writes: 'They are not *Bishops*, God and all *good Men* know they are not, that have fill'd this Land with late confusion and violence; but a Tyrannicall crew and Corporation of Impostors, that have blinded and abus'd the World so long under that Name' (*Of Reformation*).⁴ Later on in the Twelfth Book of *Paradise Lost* Milton reveals precisely the process which led to the degradation and decline of the Church (xii.508-37).

By Satan's seduction of mankind to eat the forbidden fruit, man committed *original sin*, which is not only a legacy for all mankind from generation to generation but also comprehensive of all sorts of sins and crimes because of *transgression*.⁵ For our present discussion the fall of man by transgression means that man has got *carnal desire* and is doomed to Sin and Death: *carnal* desire has a double meaning, intercourse of the *flesh* and *worldly* pleasure in all vices. For Satan, this change in man means that Satan has free passage between earth and hell, through Sin and Death, and between earth and heaven, with himself

playing the part of Pope. Thus we see the fatal error on the part of mankind and the seemingly magnificent achievement of Satan's arrogant and greedy plan. No wonder if Earth should tremble and Nature groan (cf. ix.782-4, 1000-4).

Next, the manner in which Sin and Death accomplish the great construction work in memory of Satan's recent achievement is worthy of note. Immediately after man's fall these two keepers of the gates of hell build 'a bridge of wondrous length / From hell continued reaching the utmost orb / Of this frail world' (ii.1028-30) over the dark abyss, the boiling gulf (ii.1027), so that the wicked spirits may 'With easy intercourse pass to and fro / To tempt or punish mortals'(ii.1031-2). And further this work is closely planned to make an easy passage between heaven, earth and hell:

. . . and now in little space
 The confines met of empyrean heaven
 And of this world, and on the left hand hell
 With long reach interposed; three several ways
 In sight, to each of these three places led.

(x.320-4)

Just as 'Xerxes, the liberty of Greece to yoke'(x.307) 'over Hellespont / Bridging his way, Europe with Asia joined'(x.309-10) against the providence of God, so now have they accomplished the work of constructing free passages between heaven, earth and hell, 'following the track / Of Satan'(x.314-5) against God, 'by wondrous art / Pontifical'(x.312-3). At root, the word *pontifical* means *bridge-making* but it is more usually employed in the sense of *episcopal*, which may have been the more dominant idea in Milton's mind. So here again is a picture of the degraded Church, in which Satan and his followers, as prelates, open up passages between earth and heaven and hell, abusing the names of Faith and Flock, to sell apparent happiness at a price or to punish worshippers if they disobey their laws.

In *The Christian Doctrine* I.xxx, Milton denies that the Church or the civil magistracy have the power to impose any interpretations of religious matters on people: 'It is not . . . within the province of any visible church, much less of the civil magistrate, to impose their own interpretations on us as laws, or as binding on the conscience; in other words, as matter of implicit faith' (Columbia xvi.267).

In the Twelfth Book of *Paradise Lost*, the epic drama in which Milton seeks to unmask the contemporary Church, he shows how the Fall leads inevitably to future catastrophe. The archangel Michael predicts to Adam that after the Apostles' death:

Wolves shall succeed for teachers, grievous wolves,
 Who all the sacred mysteries of heaven
 To their own vile advantages shall turn

Of lucre and ambition, and the truth
 With superstitions and traditions taint,
 Left only in those written records pure,
 Though not but by the Spirit understood.

(xii.508-14)

These *teachers* who are in fact hireling prelates, shall abuse their places and titles, and even their secular (though they pretend they are spiritual) powers, in order to appropriate for themselves the Spirit of God, which is promised and given to all believers (cf.xii.515-20). And, further they,

. . . from that pretence,
 Spiritual laws by *carnal power* shall force
 On every conscience; laws which none shall find
 Left them enrolled, or what the Spirit within
 Shall on the heart engrave.

(my italics)(xii.520-4)

Then is mentioned the violation of *the spirit of grace* and its consort *liberty* and the destruction of its *living temple* in each worshipper's mind (cf.xii.524-8). Then the *infallibility* of the Pope or the Prelacy is denied: '. . . on earth / Who against faith and conscience can be heard / Infallible?' (xii.528-30) Many will be bold enough to play the part of God himself on earth and inflict heavy persecution on those few who *persevere* in the worship of *spirit* and *truth* while the rest, the far greater number of worshippers, will be satisfied with a religion contained 'in outward rites and specious forms' (xii.534); 'truth shall retire / Bestuck with slanderous darts,' (xii.535-6) and genuine faith will be rare, as Michael predicts.

Milton hated so-called 'hirelings'. He despised them as wolves: 'to exact or bargain for tithes or other stipendiary payments under the gospel, to extort them from the flock under the alleged authority of civil edicts, or to have recourse to civil actions and legal processes for the recovery of allowances purely ecclesiastical, is the part of wolves rather than of ministers of the gospel,' quoting Paul's prediction from Acts xx.29 (*The Christian Doctrine* I.xxxi, Columbia xvi.301). As for worship itself, Milton insists that what is important is *the Scriptures* and *the Spirit* and *one's own conscience*, as he writes in *The Doctrine* I.xxx: 'Every believer has a right to interpret the Scriptures for himself, inasmuch as he has the Spirit for his guide, and the mind of Christ is in him; nay, the expositions of the public interpreter can be of no use to him, except so far as they are confirmed by his own conscience' (ibid.265)⁶ As for infallibility (xii.530), Milton has in mind first that of the Pope who 'assumes to himself this infallibilitie over both the conscience and the scripture,' and then of other prelates as well (*Of Civil Power*, Columbia vi.8).

Now we have seen Satan's well-contrived avenging drama, with himself cast in the role of

Pope. On the throne in St Peter's Palace, higher than God himself, reigning over his earthly empire by keeping the flock under his power, and opening passages to heaven and hell, he now boasts of ruling over all the world from heaven to hell, even over God himself, as well as over mankind. (On Pope's presumption, compare *Of Civil Power*, *ibid.*)

Let us check now the several points of Shelley's proposition with Milton's writings.

We can see in Satan's two bold movements, his revolt and his revenge, not only Satan's *perseverance* in *purpose* but also Milton's *strong refutation* of the Church, especially of the episcopacy. As for God's *cold character*, capable of inflicting the most horrible revenge upon his enemy for the purpose of new torments, we can see this in the scene of the horrible dungeon of fallen angels (cf. i.53-4, 211-20). We can also see what Shelley calls God's *weak and merciless character* in his revenge on Shelley's favourite serpent (*P.L.* x.177-8) as well as on the serpent and woman, which takes the form of enmity between them and between their respective seeds (cf. *P.L.* x.179-81). Shelley may well have found *pathetic* (*Works* vii.96) the scene of the epic in which God curses the serpent (x.163-81), and when he curses the serpent and the Devil, where the beings in Pandaemonium are changed into all sorts of monstrous serpents, and their chief into the greatest dragon (x.511-47). We the readers, may feel the same, when we think of the noble deed of Aesclepius, who saved Rome from a deadly pestilence in the shape of a serpent.⁷

Concerning Milton's treatment of the Devil, Shelley states that 'he [=the Devil] owes everything to Milton' (*On the Devil*, *Works* vii.92). Unlike Dante or Tasso, Milton 'clothes him with the sublime grandeur of a graceful but tremendous spirit' (*ibid.*). As we have seen, Milton is the first to explain the reasons for Satan's insurrection. These are not found in the early mythological writers (*ibid.*90). So we can go so far as to say that Milton added to traditional Christian mythology.

In examining what Shelley says about Milton's epic, I have tried to present the possible images of the characters of Satan and God which Shelley was attempting to interpret.

But since there are so many ambiguous expressions and implications in Milton's poem, it is hard to decide what Milton's real intention is. These ambiguities are what Shelley construes as 'the mask and mantle' of disguise which protected the poet from persecution (*Defence* and *On the Devil*, *Works* vii.129,91). Shelley praises his 'bold neglect of a direct moral purpose' as 'the most decisive proof of the supremacy of Milton's genius' (*Defence*, *ibid.*130). His great work of art, where elements of human nature are carefully mingled according to the laws of *epic truth*, has continued 'to excite the sympathy of succeeding generations of mankind,' as he says (*ibid.*).

In a further discussion of great poets from ancient to modern times, Shelley places Homer first, as the greatest of all epic poets, Dante the second and Milton the third: Homer probably as the one who established the epic form and spirit; Dante and Milton, as he says, because 'Divina Commedia and Paradise Lost have conferred upon modern mythology a systematic form' (*ibid.*).

What would Milton say of this judgement of Shelley's? Milton himself thought his epic not inferior to, or even better than, Homer's, it seems. For in the four invocations in *Paradise Lost*

(i.1-49, iii.1-55, vii.1-39 and ix.1-47), his ambition is clearly stated. While showing strong interest in Homer and other classical authors, he declares ‘to soar / Above the Aonian mount’ (i.14-5) to sing of sober truth of mankind and universe, that is, ‘the better fortitude / Of patience and heroic martyrdom’ (ix.31-2), which hasn’t been sung. He rejects wars or games, subjects of traditional epics, or those elaborate descriptions of the world of chivalry as seen in Boiardo, Ariosto, Tasso or Spenser. Though he is now old and blind he believes that, like the blind Maeonides—a reference to Homer—or Tiresias, he can see the sober truth all the better. By composing *Paradise Lost*, Milton tried to be the greatest, or at least one of the greatest of all epic poets. And I would add that his *Areopagitica* is, as it were, Milton’s *Defence of Poetry* and *Defence of Lucifer* (Columbia iv.291-354).

[I wish to thank Claire C. Davison, author of the forthcoming *Pheidias: the Sculptures and the Written Sources*, who carefully checked my English, for her useful suggestions.]

Notes

¹ *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* ed. R. Ingpen and W. E. Peck in Ten Volumes, Benn, 1965 (Hereafter cited as *Works.*), vii.129.

² Quotations from *Paradise Lost* are from Fowler’s edition: John Milton, *Paradise Lost* ed. Alastair Fowler, Longman, 1976. (Hereafter cited as Fowler.)

³ See Fowler, pp.84-5. And Marjorie Hope Nicolson: *John Milton: A reader’s guide to his poetry*, Thames and Hudson, 1970, pp.196-8. She suggested to me the similarity of Pandaemonium and St Peter’s Cathedral. And also Douglas Bush: *John Milton: A Sketch of His Life and Writings*, the Macmillan Company, 1964, pp.67-8.

⁴ *Of Reformation in England, The Works of John Milton*, Columbia U.P. 1931 (Hereafter cited as Columbia.), Volume iii.Part(i),p.12.

⁵ For further discussion on original sin and transgression, see *P.L.* ix.997ff.; *The Christian Doctrine* I.xi, Columbia xv.178-201; Gen. iii; 1 John iii.8; John viii.44; and Jude 6.

⁶ See also *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*, Columbia vi.7.

⁷ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* xv.626-744, Loeb Classical Library *Met.* ii, 408-17.

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