
Various Interpretations of Heroes' Figure in Milton's Work

Milton's exploration of heroism in *Paradise Lost* has been the focus of much debate and controversy since the poem was first published. Critical attention has shifted through the years from Satanism to feminism, from the exultation of Adam to the Anti-Satanist redemption of the character of Christ. So many extremely opposing theories are only possible because of Milton's manipulation of the epic genre, and of his readers' expectations: at different times he both utilizes and parodies the classical image of the military hero in the character of Satan; he draws upon the Biblical ideal of humility in his depiction of Eve; and includes in Adam many of those qualities typical of the tragic hero. Milton's purpose in this is not simply to challenge the previously accepted forms of literary heroism, but to illuminate those same qualities found intensified and complete in Christ. To this end, Christ embodies Adam's failed martyrdom, embraces Eve's humility without having sinned and follows through with Satan's repeated empty threat of domination.

The first and perhaps most prominent heroic figure we encounter in *Paradise Lost* is Satan. Milton intentionally draws a series of parallels between the introduction to Satan's character with the opening of previous epics. The story begins typically *in medias res*, with a dramatic retelling of Satan and the other fallen angels' descent into Hell. This is reminiscent of the opening of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Like Aeneas, Satan is stranded, exiled, defeated; he too must rally his followers and attempt to rebuild what hope they had of victory. Like Aeneas' epic journey onward to Troy, Satan will soon embark on a journey of proportions that far exceed this, travelling to and beyond the periphery of Hell, through Chaos and through space to find the newly created Earth. Setting him up as the first character to be seen in a leadership role invites the reader to accept Satan's account and perspective on the heavenly dispute, as his self-justifying interpretation is all we know. Satan's heroism is largely depicted throughout *Paradise Lost* by references to his militaristic achievements and abilities. However, in him is also displayed the different between stepping forward and standing ground.

Satan's acts of courage in the first few books of the poem attract the reader to his apparent heroism. Having suffered a great defeat, the reader sympathises with Satan and his followers, as we do not yet have the context of their punishment. The persistence of positivity in this situation is an admirable quality, as he rallies his followers by saying that the mind 'Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n' (I.255). This way of thinking is a universally heroic trait, as it empowers the fallen angels to seek their own new victory, despite their pain and fall from grace. Satan's courage is epitomised in his moment of volunteering to journey through 'The dark unbottomed infinite abyss' (II.405). It's said that on whoever is willing to take on this task rests the 'last hope' (II.416) of all the angels in Hell. The emphasis on 'hope' and danger in this

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moment, rather than revenge, raises Satan from the role of destroyer to saviour. This is a quality emulated again in Christ in book III, when, as in Hell, the question is asked in Heaven: who is willing to sacrifice themselves? When this question was posed in Hell, 'all sat mute' (II.420); a phrase echoed at the moment of Christ's sacrifice, as 'all the Heav'nly choir stood mute' (III.217). The repetition of the word 'mute' implies a sense of paralysis – not only a lack of courage, the angels in either realm are physically unable to offer themselves. While at first, Satan's offer seems heroic, comparison with Christ shows up his selfishness, and through this Milton is causing the reader to rethink the generic idea of the epic hero. Stanley Fish proposed that because Satan's 'courage is never denied... while his virtue and goodness are... the reader is led to revise his idea of what a true hero is' (Fish, 12). Although I would contend that Satan's courage *is* denied by his repeated backing down from combat later in *Paradise Lost*, in these early stages Fish's theory definitely applies. This repeated scene of the 'hero' being the only one willing to step forward when all else are 'mute' clearly portrays the classic heroic quality of courage and leadership, but the contrast in motivation and intent between each character serves to both deny Satan's heroism, and elevate Christ above the conventional hero. Satan's primary reason to volunteer himself to go to Earth is for revenge – to gain power. In total contrast with this, Christ offers himself as a blameless sacrifice for man, saying 'me for him, life for life / I offer' (III.236-7). This is an act of complete selflessness and, more importantly, obedience to God. Rather than showing the epic hero as merely the strongest or most willing character, or the highest powered, Milton is adjusting the definition of hero to be one of submission to the good.

This quality of submission is better personified in the character of Eve, although at times she challenges this. When Satan first observes her and Adam in the garden of Eden, Eve is described as yielding to Adam 'with coy submission, modest pride, / And sweet reluctant amorous delay' (IV.310-1). Her reluctance and coyness here are presented to give depth to her character, and to show that she and Adam are living in partnership; however, she still lives in obedience to him. The first time she goes against his wishes, in Book IX, to work alone in the garden, is also when Satan comes to convince her to eat the forbidden fruit – thus illuminating the value of submission and obedience. This is then more positively portrayed in the redemption of humanity, as it is also Eve's humility that enables humanity to once more gain favour with God. Having both sinned, Adam and Eve were, to begin with, 'neither self-condemning' (IX.1188). This phrase serves to describe their refusal to accept blame upon themselves, and also suggests that they continue to condemn one another. In a newly fallen world, this aggression and separation is a sign of disobedience – not only to God, but to one another. It is Eve's willingness to humble herself which saves them from this state. While Adam turns away from her in disgust, Eve is 'not so repulsed' (X.910) and seeks his peace. Though this may not be a heroic virtue according to the epic genre, humility and repentance are important Christian values. In the Beatitudes, Jesus says 'Blessed are the poor in spirit' and 'Blessed are the peacemakers' (Matthew 5:3,9) – both qualities which Eve displays in this moment. Because

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she leads Adam back to love, as opposed to anger, and convinces him to beg God's mercy, she arguably wins redemption, or at least the hope of redemption, for the whole human race. Again, however, Christ is set apart and above this glimpse of heroism, as he possesses the same kind of humility, but without having committed any wrongdoing, as Eve has. He submits himself entirely to God's will, saying 'Account me man' (II.238). He, like Eve, accepts punishment and asks mercy, but having done no wrong, this virtue in him exceeds hers.

Aside from the Biblical and the epic conventions that make Satan and Eve appear heroic, Milton also arguably includes the generic qualities of the tragic hero in Adam. Despite the deeper spiritual affirmation of God's greater plan and the revelation of eventual redemption of the human race, there is still a pervading sense of humanity to the reader, as Adam's lifetime alone is broken by the fall. On a personal, individual level, *Paradise Lost* is a tragedy as implied by its title – Adam begins, not as a member of nobility but with strong affiliation with God himself, and by the end of the narrative he has been cast out, has learned pain, and has lost all that he previously cared for. This line of narrative follows the traditional tragic hero. Furthermore, in many ways, Adam would have been the character with whom most of Milton's contemporary readers would relate to. As the only human male, he bore most similarity to the reader, as women generally would not have been expected to read such a complex text, and the other male characters (Satan, Christ, Raphael etc.) are inhuman, evil, perfect or simply impossibly good. Adam is flawed; he fails; he loves; his one attempted act of heroism is misguided, but we are deeply sympathetic to him for it. Upon discovering that Eve has eaten the forbidden fruit, and is destined to die, Adam's first words are to call her the 'fairest of Creation' (IX.896)– evoking his pain that she has fallen, and showing his deep love for her, as his opinion of her is not yet marred by her transgression. He then resolves to die with his wife, saying How can I live without thee, how forgo Thy sweet converse and love so dearly joined, To live again in these wild woods forlorn? Should God create another Eve, and I Another rib afford, yet loss of thee Would never from my heart; no no, I feel The link of nature draw me: flesh of flesh, Bone of my bone thou art, and from thy state Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe. (IX.908-916) This is dialogue filled with pain, passion, and an overwhelming loyalty to the wife that has betrayed his God. Loyalty and love are clearly admirable qualities, and as readers we are inclined to sympathise with his agony. Eve falls because of vanity, whereas Adam is tempted by love for his wife. In this way, Adam is playing the role of the tragic hero. Again, this is seen more perfectly in Christ, as he too sacrifices his life for love. However, instead of descending to the sin of humanity, as Adam lowers himself for Eve, Christ joins humanity through love and commitment to them, in order to raise them. He similarly stands to lose his closeness with God, as he leaves his Heavenly Father's side to be incarnated on Earth.

In each of these other characters, Milton provides a form of standard for the idea of 'hero' in *Paradise Lost*. These examples are then used in parallel with the character of Christ, who exceeds every quality in each of them. While Satan and Christ performed similar acts, with

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different intent, Adam and Christ share a positive motivation, but act very differently upon this. Christ and Eve both humble themselves, but only Eve had reason to. Christ is continually and progressively exalted above the imperfections of angels and humans alike, showing him to be the most heroic character of the poem. Milton plays with genre in order to depict this fully: using epic, the Bible and tragedy in turn, to show a full, rounded picture of his perfection. In “*Paradise Lost: The Double-Standard*”, Miller explores this more fully, explaining Milton’s partial denial of every previous form of heroism and his redefinition of the concept. Through the explication of other, minor heroes in the story, the Messiah is made ‘above heroic’.

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