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Urania: Heavenly Spirit or The Heavenly Spirit?

The pillars of Christian religion and Greek mythology intersect more often than some Christians might like to admit, but Milton wasn't afraid to combine the two in *Paradise Lost*. In fact, the cross-over is what allowed what otherwise might have been called "Biblical fan-fiction" to rise to the level of the epic poems of Greece. Considering Milton's academic background, he began penning his poem with a vast knowledge of both religions as well as a proficiency in Latin and Greek. Classic languages have long been useful for creating stylistic embellishments in writing, so it's possible that Milton simply utilized the Greek word *Urania* as a substitute for the English adjective "heavenly" when describing the Christian Holy Spirit. However, to assume anything in *Paradise Lost* is simply an artistic choice and not a purposeful invocation would be a mistake, especially when it pertains to the Holy Trinity as a whole. Although Milton made use of Greek mythology, *Paradise Lost* is too close to the Biblical "canon" story of creation for Milton to allow a celestial being from another doctrine into Christian Heaven, and for that reason I believe Urania is a representation of the Holy Spirit, and functions as a descriptor instead of a character herself.

Milton first invokes his muse in the beginning of the seventh book: "Descend from Heav'n Urania, by that name / If rightly thou art call'd, whose Voice divine" (*Paradise Lost* 7: 1-2). To take each word literally in this introduction, Urania is depicted descending from Heaven, a feat previously accomplished only by the Holy Trinity and Heavenly angels. In previous

writings, such as his 1634 masque *Comus*, the verb “to descend” is used as an indicator that Milton may be alluding to the Holy Spirit. If Urania is not a representation of the Holy Spirit, it would provoke questions about the nature of Heaven as readers know it from the Bible. The suggestion that figures from Greek mythology such as the muses reside alongside God in Heaven or in a different, second Heaven, is blasphemous at worst and nonsensical at best for his story. Additionally, if it were Urania in her Muse form, Milton would be introducing a female goddess into Christian theory, which is not only uncharacteristic of Milton when considering his depiction of female characters in the past, but also undermines the validity of the Christian God as the one true god. Urania, therefore, is not called upon in *Paradise Lost* as a kind of cross-over from Greek mythology, but instead, invoked to describe the function the Holy Spirit will take in this poem. Taking Urania at face value as a goddess or muse additionally would further complicate and confuse Milton’s interpretation of the events of creation, which is why he immediately follows up her descension with a disclaimer of sorts.

Milton seemed to know that calling on Urania would be a cause for questioning, which is why the hasty “If rightly thou art call’d,” is added after her summons (*Paradise Lost* 7:2). In the Bible, God is referred to by dozens of different names, which is why it is interesting to see Milton backpedal on something as arbitrary as a name in this line. The interchangeability and fluidity of a name is something the Holy Spirit has in common with God, going by a host of names, including Holy Ghost, Breath Of The Almighty, and countless others. A common recurrence in the Bible when referencing the Spirit is to employ various markers, such as Spirit of Prophecy (Revelation 19:10) or Spirit of Wisdom (Isaiah 11:2). Urania, therefore, could be a shorthand way of saying Spirit of Astronomy. The names change based on the task the Holy Spirit is undertaking, and in this case, Urania is called upon to describe the story of creation,

which would make her the Spirit of Astronomy. Additionally, the last word in her invocation is “divine,” a descriptor Milton would not hastily bestow upon anyone outside of the Holy Trinity when writing a work so closely aligned with the Bible.

At this point, it’s established that Urania is not a Greek muse, but rather a divine figure. The question then becomes whether or not there is sufficient evidence to link Urania to the Holy Spirit specifically, when her invocation is murky enough to leave room for the possibility that she could be an angel, or any other member of the Holy Trinity. However, angel seems unlikely given that the very premise of *Paradise Lost* is dependent upon the fact that angels are flawed, similar to humans, and are at risk of falling from grace. Satan’s past status as angel created a need for a sort of hierarchy of Heaven, as angels were proven susceptible to failure. This power dynamic is seen in the beginning of the tenth book, when the angels hastily report their inadequacy to God, who replies, "Assembl'd Angels, and ye Powers return'd / From unsuccessful charge" (*Paradise Lost* 7:34-35). This was not the first time angels had failed or been tricked in *Paradise Lost*, and God seems to expect a certain margin for error at this point from his angels. Milton clarifies that Urania, unlike her Greek mythology counterparts, or the angels of heaven, is not prone to such unsuccessful charges, calling upon her with confidence: “So fail not thou, who thee implores: For thou art Heavn'ly, shee an empty dream" (*Paradise Lost* 7:38-39). In these lines, Urania is not only called Heavn’ly, but also infallible, a trait that allows her to function at a level of independence that angels are no longer granted after the fall of Satan. The only infallible beings we see in Milton’s works are the members of the Holy Trinity, leading me to narrow Urania’s possibilities further.

If there are now three possible options, my theory is solidified that Urania is indeed the Holy Spirit, and not another member of the Trinity. This claim is fortified by the description of

Urania Milton provides a few lines later back: "The meaning, not the Name I call: for thou / Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top / 5 Of old Olympus dwell'st, but Heav'nly born," (*Paradise Lost* 7: 5-7). These lines are perhaps the strongest argument for the Holy Spirit and Urania connection, as Milton outright states that he is not referring to the muse as we know her. Instead, Milton is invoking the meaning, leading me again to assume he is invoking the Heavenly Spirit in an astronomy-specific form. Continuing through this passage, Milton confirms Urania in his story isn't one of the muses, nor a member "Of old Olympus," and is instead born of Heaven. While the adjective Heav'nly is slightly more ambiguous than using the specific noun "Heaven" of the Bible, Milton later specifies that Raphael and Urania are indeed ascending "Into the Heav'n of Heav'ns," which can only mean the home of the Christian God (*Paradise Lost* 7:13). Most importantly, however, this passage gives us the key word "born". Born is a particularly useful word choice here, as it effectively rules out the rest of the Holy Trinity. Jesus's birth, as Milton well knew and later recounts in *Paradise Lost*, takes place on Earth, through the Virgin Mary. God himself is not normally depicted as being "born," at all, leaving only the Holy Spirit, who we can infer is "born" of God's will.

While I believe these lines present the strong case for the connection between Urania and the Holy Spirit, as well as proof that Urania is a part of the Holy Trinity and not among the "lowercase g" gods of Greek mythology, it could additionally be interpreted as a sign that there are indeed other sets of celestial beings dwelling in the multiple "Heav'ns". The distinction that the Biblical Heaven is the main Heaven unfortunately also confirms the existence of other Heavens in the process of setting it apart. While it is a common religious phrase to use Heaven of Heavens or refer to Heaven as plural, it makes the identity of Urania as a goddess more realistic if we take it literally. But even if this language is taken at face value, it only goes so far to

disprove the theory of Urania being a representation of the Holy Spirit. Although there may be other Heavens, it is still explicitly clarified that Urania is from *the* highest Heaven, and not one of the others in which she has her mythological roots, and again, is not even Urania in a traditional sense. Yet another question remains after the disapproval of this argument: why then wouldn't Milton simply use the title of the Holy Spirit, instead of producing all this confusion over the use of a muse's name in its place?

As Jared Powell points out in "The Language of the Spirit: An Analysis of Divine Diction in Paradise Lost," Milton has a unique stylistic way of referring to characters with markers other than their Biblical name. Powell's paper focuses on the language Milton uses to denote Satan, particularly in God's dialogue, but his argument can be applied to the Holy Spirit as well. Powell had noted that "when referring to Satan, God rarely uses the actual name, he instead substitutes words that are synonymous with 'opponent.'" (1-2). Milton's proclivity for nicknames and descriptors created opportunities for Milton to further stylize the traditional Biblical characterizations to fit into a traditional epic poem format. Readers already have preconceived notions of what each of these characters should act like when going into Paradise Lost, as well as familiarity with the plot. Therefore, there is no need for Milton to continuously refer to Satan by name, instead, using words like "opponent," gets the point across just as easily while establishing a rivalry between God and Satan and a clear understanding of who is the hero and who is the villain in Milton's rendition.

Applying this logic to Urania, she makes for a perfect synonym for the Holy Spirit, given that her name literally translates to "heavenly" or "of heaven". The adjective heavenly works two-fold, as it establishes Urania as a celestial being from God's heaven, as well as the nature of her Spirit as specialized in heavenly subjects such as astronomy and the creation of the galaxy.

Using simply “The Holy Spirit” brings almost nothing to the table in Milton’s rendition, as many people, Milton included, aren’t necessarily going into this work with a clear understanding of how the Holy Spirit works, nor any idea of how to picture it as it appears in *Paradise Lost*. The Holy Spirit appears in the likeness of the dove and a few other identifiable forms in the Bible, but when introducing the Holy Spirit as a character into an epic poem like *Paradise Lost*, Urania provides a clear image that readers can draw upon when imaging her. As Milton himself expressed previous doubts about the Holy Spirit, using Urania as a stand-in also allows him to slightly blur the lines of his story in some areas to avoid criticism of his depiction and promote creative freedom.

Throughout the Bible, we learn that physical manifestations of God and other celestial beings can be hard or even impossible to look upon. In Exodus 33:20, the Lord says, “you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” It is impossible for the human mind to comprehend the image of God, and by extension, the Holy Spirit. Urania offers a representation of the Holy Spirit that gives Milton creative freedom while simultaneously presenting a contained image that both Adam and readers can truly picture. This image of Urania as the Holy Spirit came to Milton “while thou / Visit’st my slumbers Nightly,” the image of the Holy Spirit consolidated as Urania for human interaction. (*Paradise Lost* 7: 28-29). The picture and invocation of Urania is chosen in place of the title for characterization purposes as well as to provide a physical embodiment of the supernatural Holy Spirit.

As for the actual role of Urania, beyond mere aesthetics and stylization, she functions in a similar way to how we have seen the Holy Spirit work in both canon and in Milton’s works. Urania possess a knowledge of “Great things, and full of wonder in our ears, / Far differing from this World, thou hast reveal’d / Divine Interpreter, by favor sent / Down from the Empyrean to

forewarn” (*Paradise Lost* 7:70-73). Urania’s otherworldly knowledge of creation rivals only God’s intimate knowledge of how the universe was created. A few lines later, Raphael refers to God with another of his many names, “Only Omniscient”, raising the question of how exactly Urania could know such intimate details about creation if God is the only omnipotent being in this universe (*Paradise Lost* 7:123)? The only answer that doesn’t leave a plot hole in Milton’s hierarchy of celestial beings is to conclude that Urania is not only functioning at God’s will, but also as an extension of it. Urania was sent down from Heaven to Raphael “by favor,” serving as a manifestation of God’s goodwill towards Raphael and Adam and taking on tasks only as God sees fit. This duality of omnipotence and service is previously seen only in God’s trinitarian counterparts, the Son and the Holy Spirit. To give knowledge of the universe before creation to some random muse/spirit, or even to a “Godlike Angel” like Raphael would create a dangerous precedent in *Paradise Lost* where canon and the established hierarchy of Heaven begins to crumble and Milton’s interpretation starts to blur the lines a little too much (*Paradise Lost* 7:110).

Therefore, to stay within both Biblical and epic poem traditions, Milton uses the invocation of Urania not as a literal name for a character, but instead a description of the Holy Spirit as it appears before Milton and the characters of the poem. This fusion of classical mythology appearances and Christian characterizations creates a new genre of epic poem that pays homage to Greek traditions, while still maintaining the religious integrity that is so important to many Christians. Much of *Paradise Lost* is open to interpretation, in the traditional Greek way, but the link between Urania and the Holy Spirit is proven indisputable through the clear language choices and unique functions and capabilities Milton assigns to the Spirit throughout the poem.

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