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Satan the Son: A Filial Ship

To “ship” two characters is to say they ought to be or really are in a relationship that their story doesn’t ostensibly place them in. Shipping characters, creating “ships,” normally entails imagining romantic relations, but in this essay I’d like to ship two characters as father and son. These two are the Father and Satan, respectively, as they appear in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. I want to focus on Satan’s role in this ship, and what our analysis of it means for our understanding of his character. Satan occupies, as we will see, the familiar roles of rebellious son and jealous brother, and this particular status not only humanizes him, which I think Milton’s poems do for all their biblical characters, but also invites some suggestive comparisons with some other biblical figures. I want to emphasize a comparison with the prodigal son in particular, a comparison which raises an interesting question for our ship and for Milton’s poems in general: Is Satan, this son of the Father, redeemable? I’ll conclude with a discussion of this question; I think that Satan is only damned insofar as he refuses to redeem himself, choosing evil and behaving like an unrepentant prodigal son. Our ship, then, will not only help us flesh Satan out as a jealous, rebellious son, but will also afford us the opportunity to tackle this question of his redeemability. All this, I hope, will help humanize him and help us to work out our understanding of his character—which I think Milton would approve of.

On one level, of course, this father-son ship is obvious. God the Father is *the* Father—and his angels, of whom Satan is (or was) one, recognize him as such. Raphael describes the Father’s “Paternal Glory” (*Paradise Lost* 7: 219) and explicitly calls him “the mighty Father” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 836) and even “th’Omnipotent / Eternal Father” (*Paradise Lost* 7: 516–517); Michael as well explicitly calls him “the Father” (*Paradise Lost* 12: 487 546). Our two most important (unfallen) angels are insistent, then, on referring to the Father paternally, not merely as “Creator” or “God” or “Author,” but as *father*. “Father,” then, we’ll note, is not merely humans’ symbolic title for the Creator. The Father’s angels see him paternally—and in some sense they have even more reason to take his paternity seriously than humans, since they lack biological parents.

The angels, then, can be substantively thought of as the Father’s children, leading us naturally to think of Satan as his son. But Satan is where things get complicated. “The Son of God I also am, or was, / And if I was, I am; relation stands” (*Paradise Regained*, 4: 517–519), he declares, this phrase seeming to give us reason both to believe and to doubt that he considers the Father to be *his* father, like the rest of the angels do. “Relation stands,” he assures us on the one hand—and yet, on the other, this is Satan we’re talking about, aiming specifically in this context to tempt Jesus; we may wonder if he’s being disingenuous. And then consider Satan’s initial slip into “was” instead of “am”; doesn’t this evince an unwillingness to call himself God’s son? While examining Satan’s language, let’s also consider that for all Raphael and Michael repeatedly refer to the Father as “Father” or “Paternal” in *Paradise Lost*, Satan only once in all his speeches and monologues in that epic calls the Father “Father.” This occurs during his argument with Abdiel, and consists only of a jeering hypothetical recognition of God as Father to the Son in particular (*Paradise Lost* 5: 853–855), after which he proceeds to doubt that the Father even created him and his rebels, which of course undermines one of the Father’s main

claims to any sort of paternity (*Paradise Lost* 5: 856–863). In *Paradise Regained* Satan is a little more liberal with paternal terminology, but he still consistently uses it only to refer to the Father as Jesus’s dad in particular. All of these subtleties of language, then, on Satan’s part seem to undermine our ship; Satan seems suspiciously reluctant to think of the Father as his dad.

Yet we can account for this reluctance. Rejecting a father doesn’t remove the fact of his paternity; I do read Satan as deeply reluctant to think or speak of the Father paternally, but I read this not as evidence of what their relationship is but of how Satan feels about it. Satan, in a word, is estranged. That he out of all the angels refuses to acknowledge the Father’s paternity reads to me more than anything as a contrived rebellion against the very fact of it. He’s like a son refusing to call his estranged father “Dad”; his silence only emphasizes his discomfort and speaks loudly to the reality of things. Satan’s filial coldness, then, does not discredit the Father’s paternity, but rather characterizes the sort of son Satan is: one estranged by rebellion. Indeed, this estrangement, this rebellion, and the jealousy which underpin these are the characteristics of Satan’s filiality that I’d most like to emphasize. Satan is, to start, fundamentally a *rebellious* son. His role in the story is that of the archetypal child rejecting their father’s authority and revolting against it. Satan’s relationship with the Father is the sort of strained generational conflict suffusing world literature wherein the son rises up against the father, even unto (attempted) parricide. Satan and his devils are in this respect contrasted sharply with the good siblings, Raphael, Michael, and especially the Son, who function as the loyal, favored children, and who underscore Satan’s filial rebelliousness with their filial submission.

It is in light of the Son, indeed, that Satan’s filial character is best understood, for it is the Son who best brings out Satan’s *jealousy*. This is the jealousy that motivates him to rebel; the very event which spurs Satan to action is, after all, the Father’s favoring of the Son as “*Messiah*

King anointed,” which prompts Satan to “envy against the Son of God” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 662–664). This jealousy fleshes out Satan’s archetypal role, framing him as the son who rebels because his sibling is favored. He is the slighted, offended, less-beloved child who in his envy revolts and, we may even venture to say, lashes out in his emotional pain. This interpretation of Satan as conflicted, tortured son certainly explains Milton’s presentation of him as brooding and mentally tormented. This bitterness and angst seem less appropriate of a subordinate’s lust for power than of a disfavored son’s tormented spite and bitterness, the anger and agony of a disowned child whose sibling is, according to their Father, his “only Son” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 604)—even despite Satan’s preeminence as “the first Arch-Angel” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 659–660). *Paradise Regained* furnishes us with further instances of Satan’s filial envy, featuring a Satan nearly obsessed with the fact that Jesus is “declared” “In some respect far higher [Son of God]” (4: 521). Satan is desperate to know here *how* Jesus is more Son of God than he is; he says so himself, declaring how he “watch’d [Jesus’s] footsteps” because he was “higher so declared” (*Paradise Regained* 4: 522, 521). Indeed, it is “with envy fraught” that Satan flees from the Father’s declaration of Jesus as “his beloved Son, in whom alone / He was well pleas’d” (*Paradise Regained* 1: 38, 285–286). Satan is a jealous son, and is still consumed by envy by the time of *Paradise Regained*.

To ship and read Satan as this jealous, rebellious son is to make his motives more understandable, and therefore to humanize him. Envy and frustration, especially in family matters, are more comprehensible to the ordinary mortal reader than the theological principles behind a Prince of Darkness or even the political ambition motivating a revolutionary. To ship Satan like this is to make him more humanly comprehensible, and therefore, I think, to accomplish a big part of Milton’s poems’ mission, the elucidation of “the ways of God to men”

(*Paradise Lost* 1: 26). Humanizing cosmic figures like Satan gives us the emotional currency we “men” need to get a mental toehold in the Bible’s “ways.” It may not provide final answers, but to think of Satan as a rebellious son is certainly, I think, a helpful step on the path to coming to some understanding—and justification—of “the ways of God,” in which Satan’s role looms large. Our ship gives us intellectual and emotional capital with which we are better able to tackle the questions of the Bible and Milton’s poems. I’d like now to turn to one such question in particular, a question about Satan which has a lot to do with our newly humanized reading of him as the Father’s son. Is this son redeemable? Our ship supplies us with some scaffolding from which to access this question in the form of comparisons. Satan as jealous and rebellious son has a lot in common with certain other biblical figures, and in particular with the prodigal son. This comparison raises the question of Satan’s redeemability more strongly than ever and helps inform how I want to respond to it. So let’s examine it.

Of course, our filial rebel Satan is comparable with many biblical characters, some of whom are explicitly referenced in *Paradise Lost* (e.g., Cain, Nimrod, and Ham), which is deeply suggestive. But no comparison is as interesting to me as that of the prodigal son, as featured in Luke 15:11–32. In Jesus’s parable we have two sons available for comparison. To compare Satan with the older, slighted, jealous son—and by proxy to place the Son as the favored younger son—would indeed be fascinating, and not inarguable, but I think that the more pertinent comparison is with the prodigal son himself. This is the younger, rebellious son who wanders away from his father, revolting and misusing his father’s gifts for evil: the parallels with rebellious, estranged-son Satan are obvious. What is new and deeply suggestive about this comparison is that it places Satan in a position to receive forgiveness, to be redeemed, if only he returned to his father and repented like the prodigal son. This, if it is tenable, is a pinnacle of

these poems' humanization of Satan, and a major inroad toward the reader's coming to understand him as an empathetic, and therefore sensible character—sensible in that we can make sense of his fate. But is this tenable? Is Satan the son redeemable, reconcilable to his father?

Satan himself says so at least once, reflecting that “by submission” he may indeed win “Repentance” and “Pardon” (*Paradise Lost* 4: 80–81). And to be sure, our comparison with the prodigal son is not necessary to reach this conclusion, as is evidenced in Jared Powell's “The Language of the Spirit,” wherein Powell explicitly deduces from the Father's word choice regarding Satan that the fallen angel still numbers among the “loved” in the Father's works (Powell 3). This sounds like the sort of Satan with a path open to return to God—and aren't Milton's epics on the whole a story of God's mercy and willingness to offer redemption even in the face of outright rebellion? Aren't *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* together about the redemption of God's children? It would be strange, I think, knowing the arcs of Milton's works, and how they demonstrate the Father's willingness to offer redemption to rebellious children like Adam and Eve—this Father, we'll note, who is characterized by “Mercy and Grace” and “to pity inclined” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 401–402), this Christian God of a faith preaching the forgiveness of sins—to assume that Satan doesn't have some path available toward redemption.

Yet, of course, other evidence makes this seem impossible. Does the Father not explicitly declare, “Man therefore shall find grace, / The other [the devils] none” (*Paradise Lost* 3: 131–132), and, “him who disobeys [the Son] / Mee disobeys, breaks union, and that day / Cast out from God... Ordain'd without redemption, without end” (*Paradise Lost* 5: 610–615)? Does Jesus not name Satan “That Evil one, Satan for ever damn'd” (*Paradise Regained* 4: 194)? Indeed, does Satan himself not lament that he is “lost / To be belov'd of God,” without “hope... Of reception into grace” (*Paradise Regained* 1: 379, 3: 204–205)? These things are, of course, all

said, and I would be foolish to pretend that the evidence is unilaterally in support of a redeemable reading of Satan. (Is anything unilateral in Milton?) We can, though, scrutinize these statements, and perhaps see that Satan, our Father's son, is more redeemable than we may think.

We may start with the Father's and Jesus's statements. Generally, it is difficult with these poems to take anything anyone says, Father and Jesus included, as absolute, immutable, or even well-informed. Not only is each of them characterized as so intensely human as to make us wonder at their potential flaws in thinking and in speech, we even have specific reasons to wonder at the absoluteness of what they say. Consider that toward the end of *Paradise Lost* the Son acts as an intercessor on Adam's and Eve's behalf to petition the Father for mercy, a petition which he accepts (*Paradise Lost* 11: 46–47). The Father's will, then, seems here to be very mutable, even and perhaps especially on questions of mercy and grace. So how categorically and eternally can we take his apparent damnations of Satan? Couldn't they be words spoken in wrath, but not perhaps meant literally? This is the sort of implication I read in an essay like Powell's, incidentally, which emphasizes just how little the Father says about Satan at all, and especially what Powell sees as the "absence of any renunciation of Satan" (Powell 6). And just as the Father's language may not be so damning, then, so too might Jesus's declaration that Satan is "forever damn'd" leave us room to wonder. Consider how intensely humbly—even to the extent of not seeming like the Son—Jesus is portrayed in *Paradise Regained*, especially in matters of knowledge of the divine and the cosmological scheme of things. We after all have a whole monologue from him about his having to find out for himself by run-of-the-mill study and discernment what his supposedly divine destiny might entail (*Paradise Regained* 1: 196–293). This does not sound like somebody who entirely knows how the cosmological terrain lies, so to speak, so for him to declare Satan "forever damn'd" might be another example of words spoken

in wrath or exasperation (or triumph, or insult), and more something Jesus has heard or learned about Satan which he here repeats, rather than a divine injunction from the mouth of the Son.

There's one more thing to note about the Father's and Jesus's declarations of Satan's irredeemability. "[W]ithout end" and "for ever" certainly seem damningly eternal, and yet I am interested as well in the Father's usage of the phrase "that day" to describe the rebels' expulsion. There an emphasis on instantaneity here, which I think supports the reading I take on the very nature of Satan's damnation and redeemability, a reading that has to do with Satan's own self-declarations of irredeemability, and one which I find summed up well in Jeremy Lindlan's essay "The Will and the Good," in which he writes, "it is Satan who *perpetually bars himself* from the possibility of redemption through his *chosen state*" (Lindlan 9), a "chosen state" which Lindlan characterizes as a "perpetual *mode of being*" (Lindlan 8). The reading is this, then: Satan is damned and irredeemable insofar as he chooses to be so. His damnation lies precisely in his choice to be evil (a commitment well established in his various *Paradise Lost* monologues), a choice that catapults him instantaneously, automatically (in a sense) into the mode of being of damnation. Satan, of course, a self-declared lover of evil, knows this, and constantly chooses this damnation for himself. He delights in declaring himself "lost" and "hope[less]"; he explicitly declares that "worst... is my ultimate repose, / The end I would attain, my final good" (*Paradise Regained* 4: 209, 211). Satan is willfully remaining damned, and delighting in it, hence his own self-damning declarations. This casts the Father's and Jesus's statements as well in a different light, making them seem more like *predictions* than normative declarations. They say Satan is "for ever" damned because they know him, they know what he's going to keep on choosing. Satan is irredeemable in the sense that he refuses to redeem himself. This notion of self-damnation returns us to our original comparison with the prodigal son. Satan is a prodigal son

who vows never to return to his father, rejecting redemption. His filiality is so apparent here: this is the psychology and behavior not of a calculating revolutionary but a character—a person—with a serious personal grudge against the Father. This spite and resentment, bordering on the suicidal, complement our ship of Satan as a deeply jealous, personally-motivated rebel.

It seems, then, that shipping Satan as this rebellious, jealous son allows us not only to better understand his motivations and character on a human level, but even to tackle a central question for his character and a central theme of Milton's poetry generally: redeemability. Our prodigal son comparison helps us understand Satan's redeemability and his filiality, and, hopefully, this comparison and our conclusions about Satan's self-damnation and general motives help to humanize the figure, that is, to make him more accessible and comprehensible to us mortal readers. This humanization, I hope, gives us a grasp on Satan as a tragic, conflicted, and interiorally rich character. It helps us make sense of "the ways of God" in our own way, and affords us an avenue to tackle some of the Bible's and Milton's biggest burning questions.

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