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The Urania Connection: The Christian Muse Excised from the Classics

Abstract: *Milton employs the holy muse Urania as the internal inspiration for Paradise Lost, but her presence in the poem is at best ambiguous and at worst confusing. What does Urania represent? In this essay, I argue that Urania is a reflection of the Holy Spirit and a further reflection of the trinitarian belief system that Milton may or may not have supported.*

In Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, the fall of Adam and Eve from paradise is beautifully illustrated as a story of colorful and fallacious characters. Satan deceives Eve, and Adam sides with her in eating the fruit, directly mimicking the Biblical story of Genesis; ultimately, the two characters are banished from Eden, and are forced to live out their days in the wilderness. In the poem, Milton contemplates many facets of this origin story and some of the deeper lore behind Christianity; one of his central ideas concerns the Holy Trinity. What exactly is the Trinity? The Father and the Son are clear enough, but the concept of the Holy Spirit mystifies Milton. What exactly is the Holy Spirit meant to be? Throughout his epic poem (and especially in books I, III, and VII), Milton, as the narrator, invokes the classical muse Urania, who was one of the muses concerned with astronomy and the study of celestial movements. This muse gives the reader one of the clearest indications on Milton's view of what the Holy Spirit *should* be. Portrayed as the navigator and key inspiration for the poem itself, Urania bears many features that would closely align her with the concept of the Holy Spirit; additionally, much of the language

her invocations are nested in and speaks to the Trinity itself, giving her a context that is undeniably trinitarian and quintessentially sublime.

In the first book, Milton begins with an invocation to the muse (then unnamed), which is set in imagery also invoking the Trinity. Milton, in invoking the Muse, also connects the idea of the Father subsequently, with: “Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top / Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire / That Shepherd, / who first taught the chosen Seed, / In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth / Rose out of Chaos” (*Paradise Lost* 1*:* 6-10). He is directly addressing the muse in the opening, yet he also connects her with the story of the Father giving the laws to Moses on Mt. Sinai. As Milton here is referring to an Old Testament anecdote, there is no concept of Trinity at this point, and so Milton must be referring to the Father in this situation. Milton then seamlessly transitions to a description that conversely must refer to the Son and not the Father: “Or if Sion Hill / Delight thee more, and Siloa's Brook that flow’d / Fast by the Oracle of God; I thence / Invoke thy aid to my adventrous Song” (*Paradise Lost* 1*:* 10-13)” Another geographical reference, Milton here mentions Sion, which is directly associated with Jerusalem and was the pinnacle of the ministry of Jesus, the Son. Likewise Siloa is also a direct geographical allusion to the story of the healing of the blind man by Jesus. In John 9:1-7, Jesus tells the blind man to put moistened clay over his eyes and to “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.” Not only is this a direct connection to the Son, but it is also a coy reference to Milton’s own blindness too. In this short passage, from lines 6 to 13, Milton has set his heavenly muse together with the Son and the Father; it is not a substantial leap in logic to see a connection between his muse and the Holy Spirit, based simply on the structure of the invocation. In fact, a running structural theme Milton employs throughout this work is the use of the simple structure of the poem itself to illustrate his

ideas. By juxtaposing the invocation of the muse with descriptions of the Son and the Father, he implicitly is linking Urania with the third member of the holy triumvirate, the Holy Spirit.

Immediately after this first triune invocation, Milton foreshadows the identity of his muse with the phrase "Aonian Mount" (*Paradise Lost* 1*:* 14), which alludes specifically to a mountain in Aonia called Mt. Helicon, which in classical mythology was the sacred home of the nine muses; later, Milton reveals the name of his muse as Urania, linking her directly to the heavens, and this passage gives the reader an early hint at her identity. By selecting specifically the muse that is linked to the heavens as opposed to any of the other eight muses, Milton intends to directly tie his muse to the concept of heaven, which is classically connected with the literal heavens; it is a clever device that provides another hint at how Milton intends for his reader to interpret Urania herself. Following this, Milton transitions with the connective *and* into a more direct description of the Holy Spirit at line 17: "And chiefly Thou O Spirit, that dost prefer / Before all Temples th' upright heart and pure, / Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first / Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread / Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss / And mad'st it pregnant" (*Paradise Lost* 1: 17-22). In comparing this short passage to the description of the Father and the Son earlier, we see locations mentioned ("heart" and "Abyss"), but these are dramatically more abstract and internal. This passage also contains a direct link to Corinthians 3:16, which states that the human body is the "temple of the Spirit," the Spirit being clearly the third aspect of the Trinity. This invocation at the beginning of the first book seems to have a symmetric quality; Milton begins with the muse, then considers the Father and the Son, and finishes with a more abstract description of the Holy Spirit, as understood following the Father and the Son themselves. On either side of the more concrete descriptions of the Father and the Son,

we have an invocation to a hazy and unnamed muse and a description and even hazier description of another holy power that resides in the heart. This is yet another instance of Milton sculpting the structure itself to serve his poetic ends in describing the Spirit.

Another connection to the Holy Spirit is the simile of the dove. In the four gospels, a dove descended during the baptism of Jesus, and is directly associated with the Holy Spirit itself. This dove imagery is also mirrored in the beginning of Genesis (as the Spirit "moved upon the face of the waters"), which Milton also describes with "Dove-like sadst brooding on the vast Abyss / And mad'st it pregnant" (*Paradise Lost* 1: 21-22). These two lines are packed with important imagery; Milton directly ties the Spirit with the idea of the dove, but he also provides us with conflicting gendered descriptions here. The classical muses are female and the Trinity is generally seen as male (however, one could make the argument that the Holy Spirit has no gender), the question of the gender seen in the passage naturally comes up. Milton avoids this problem, addressing his listener in the invocation as "Thou," and then he blends imagery that invokes both male and female creation. Specifically, "Dove-like… brooding" and "mad'st it pregnant" integrates both male and female characteristics. Milton combines both genders into this passage, possibly as a means of subtly connecting the Holy Spirit to his holy muse. By conflating the genders together here, Milton's intention may be to address the Holy Spirit as more of a concept than as a single entity. Since Milton does not assign a direct gender to the Holy Spirit here and chooses rather to keep it vague, he may be alluding to his own belief that the Holy Spirit cannot really be described as a person but more of a feeling. This combination of genders also may be a demonstration of the fact that while the Son and the Father have a clear gender, the Holy Spirit resides in ambiguity.

Another invocation of the muse appears at the beginning of Book III, and again this invocation follows the three-part pattern that the invocation in part one had. The beginning lines of the book are a call namely to the Son, with references to the Father:

Hail holy light, ofspring of Heav'n first-born,

Or of th' Eternal Coeternal beam

May I express thee unblam'd? since God is light,

And never but in unapproached light

Dwelt from Eternitie, dwelt then in thee,

Bright effluence of bright essence increate.

Or hear'st thou rather pure Ethereal stream,

Whose Fountain who shall tell? (*Paradise Lost* 3: 1-8).

In this passage, Milton is contemplating two different origins of the Son. With "ofspring of Heav'n first-born," he considers the idea that the Son was begotten by the Father following the creation; contrarily, Milton also considers the Son "Or of th' Eternal Coeternal beam," which implies that the Son was also there from the beginning and was not truly born. Regardless, we see the presence of both the Father and the Son in this passage, as Milton considers the origins of the Son. The passage considers both of them together directly with near-musical literary devices ("bright effluence of bright essence increate"), but the focus remains mostly on the Son; given the content of Book III, where the Son offers himself as a ransom for man's faults, it makes sense that the narrator sings his praises effusively at the beginning of the book. Following this invocation of the Son and the Father together, the muse Urania follows immediately after, mirroring the structure Milton uses in Book I, where Milton first invokes the Father, then the Son, then the Holy Spirit. From this pattern, Milton seems to be tying Urania conceptually to the Holy

Spirit using the structure of the poem itself, a running theme we see in the poem's scaffolding time and time again.

Finally in Book VII, the muse Urania is named and receives her own true invocation as Milton considers the source of his own poetic inspiration. The invocation starts with "Descend from Heav'n *Urania*, by that name / If rightly thou art call'd" (*Paradise Lost* 7: 1-2), which draws upon the same imagery as the dove of the Holy Spirit descending from Heaven in the baptism of Jesus, another tie between Urania and the Holy Spirit. Milton is undoubtedly crafting an equivalence between the Holy Spirit and this semi-fictional muse Urania. The most telling about this invocation is the line "The meaning, not the Name I call" (*Paradise Lost* 7: 5). Urania was the muse of astronomy from the classical Greco-Roman Pantheon; in this line, Milton is asking his reader to disassociate his Urania from the classical, pagan Urania from mythology. It is very likely that Milton makes this distinction to prevent the reference to paganism from staining the connection he is drawing between this muse and the Holy Spirit. In fact, Milton emphasizes this difference even further, with: "for thou / Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top / Of old *Olympus* dwell'st, but Heav'nlie borne" (*Paradise Lost* 7: 5-7). Milton explicitly states that this is not the same muse from Olympus, but that this is a similar muse created in Judeo-Christian heaven. Milton is evoking the meaning of the heavenly muse, but not the muse herself, as she is outside the Christian tradition. Of course, that Urania is chosen over the other muses is also significant; in selecting the muse that is inextricably tied to the heavens, he further reinforces the connection between his muse and the Holy Spirit.

That Urania converses with her "sister" Wisdom is also significant: "Wisdom thy Sister, and with her didst play / In presence of th' Almightie Father, pleas'd / With thy Celestial Song" (*Paradise Lost* 7: 10-12). Wisdom and Urania are tied to the Father here, in a structure again

similar to Books I and III. In Proverbs, Wisdom is said to have been the offspring of the Father who delighted in creation and accompanied him throughout; from this, we can roughly compare Wisdom to the Son, and in this passage then we see a harmonious family scenario between the Father, Urania, and Wisdom. Again, when the muse Urania is mentioned, so is the Father and the Son; it is therefore difficult to not associate Urania with the Holy Spirit.

The question of the interface between the Father and the Son naturally arises, as does the question of how the Holy Spirit or the muse interact with both. In Buchholz's essay "Fighting for Dependence," it is argued that the Son is wholly dependent upon the Father for most of his actions. In contrasting the difference in motivations and actions between Jesus and Satan, Buchholz notes that the Son "rely[ies] upon his faith and God's omniscient and omnipotent power where Satan contrastingly puts his faith in himself" (Buchholz 1). This interpretation lends itself cleanly to a triune interpretation of the three entities. At its core, Milton is portraying the trinity as an upright triangle: the Father resides at the peak, with the Son and the Holy Spirit residing at the other two point below this peak. This translates naturally into the fact that both the Son and the Holy Spirit are ultimately reliant on the Father, which aligns with how Milton writes. Buccholz argues that the Son demonstrates that dependence on faith in the Father alone is vastly superior to the independent action shown by Satan. Likewise, the muse Urania, who is a plausible candidate for a reflection of the Holy Spirit, inspires Milton, the poet, to sing the praises of the Son and the Father. This holy muse ultimately inspires Paradise Lost, and one can even see parallels between the subservience of Jesus to God in his self-sacrifice and the subservience of Urania to God in her inspiring of this epic poem. The trinity is a succinct method of describing the interrelations between the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the Father at the pinnacle, and it is supported by the roles of the the Son and Urania throughout the poem.

Of course, it is possible that Milton did not intend for Urania to be construed as an image of the Holy Spirit. In his (potential) work *Christian Doctrine,* Milton seems to argue that the Holy Spirit is a strongly internal manifestation of the resonance between faith in God and a person's soul. If that is the case, creating the muse Urania as an external manifestation of this entity seems somewhat counterintuitive. While some of the imagery does reflect this internal idea (such as the "temple of the body" in Book 1), much of it does not; harkening then to an external muse and receiving inspiration from her seems to more closely reflect the pagan concept of classical muses rather than illustrating the idea of the Holy Spirit. However, in a poetic sense, developing the muse as an external phenomenon and utilizing the idea of her as more of a symbol does make sense. Especially since it is not obvious whether or not the muse Urania is real or a figment of Milton's poetic reverie, one does not get a direct resolution of this issue. She could be a purely internal element made external in writing. The issue of gendering also arises, naturally; while the Holy Spirit is neutral in gender, the Son is not, and demarcating an equivalence between the Son and the sister Wisdom can be seen as a stretch.

However, there is no doubt that the poem's overall structure lends itself to viewing Urania as a Holy-Spirit-like figure. Given that each time she is invoked, Milton takes care to also include references to the Father and the Son as well, it is hard to dispute that she is not at all connected to the trinity. Her role in the poem, as a source of inspiration and a veritable lamplight for the story, also directly connect her to the Holy Spirit, who has been described in a similar manner. While all of this may not be *conclusive* evidence, it does strongly suggest that Milton's intention was to group Urania, the Son, and the Father together. It is only natural, then, to think of the Trinity.