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Star Spirits

Abstract: This paper explores how the spirit whom Milton repeatedly refers to as Urania could actually be serving as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. In addition to the use of language highly indicative of the Holy Spirit, Milton utilizes Urania's position as the muse of astronomy to better convey his ideas regarding the abstract and expansive nature of the Holy Spirit as well as its function as a spiritual guide, source of inspiration, and messenger of God. Through Adam's contemplation of the mechanics of the universe, he is also able to express the idea that the Holy Spirit is not able to be wholly understood by mankind.

Throughout the twelve books of the epic entitled *Paradise Lost*, poet John Milton repeatedly calls upon the same heavenly spirit for inspiration. This spirit, who receives the name Urania, features similarities to that of the Holy Spirit but, oddly enough, is never directly referred to as such. This is one of the key reasons behind the altercation between those who believe the two spirits are basically equivalent and those who think the obscurity seen within the language surrounding Urania's appearances proves anything but. Given Milton's reputation as a cryptic poet, however, the possibility of him using the Greek muse of astronomy as a metaphor to emphasize the function of the Holy Spirit as a spiritual guide as well as a servant of God while also relating the complexity of the solar system to that of its nature is entirely plausible, for doing so would then aid in the readers' comprehension of the text.

Establishing her place as an agent of God, the spirit Urania is said by Milton to not only have been present during multiple biblical stories but also to have played an active role, from lending a hand in the creation of the Earth to providing Moses with the ten commandments. The first invocation states that the spirit, "...didst inspire / That Sheperd, who first taught the chosen Seed" (Paradise Lost 1: 7-8). This is a reference to the story in which Moses was tasked with delivering the Law of God to the children of Israel. According to the Bible, however, the message the shepherd received atop that mountain is said to have been given by God, though this would not be the first time that Milton has strayed from tradition by having either the Son or the Holy Spirit, or even both, act on God's behalf instead.

In the creation story that Raphael recounts to Adam, the Holy Spirit is present once again to fulfill God's will. He states, "The King of Glory in his powerful Word / And Spirit coming to create new Worlds... / They view'd the vast immeasurable Abyss" (Paradise Lost 7: 209-11). This is a direct parallel to an earlier invocation in which Milton claims Urania, "Wast present... / ...brooding on the vast Abyss / And mad'st it pregnant..." (Paradise Lost 1: 19-22). According to the sets of lines stated above, both Urania and the Holy Spirit are said to have been present in the same moment to perform identical tasks. Though the spirit spoken of in the lines taken from Book 7 could be once again referring to Urania, the possibility of such is low. Knowing Milton's meticulous nature towards seemingly insignificant details, the word choice of "pregnant" is undoubtedly deliberate and foreshadows the role the Holy Spirit will later play in the conception of Jesus, thus furthering the likelihood that Urania in this context is equivalent to the third counterpart of the Trinity.

As an agent of God, the function of the Holy Spirit is to provide a sense of community, guidance, and protection to those faithful and virtuous, commonalities apparent with Urania.

Music regularly plays a central role in the collective worship of the Father, thus establishing a sense of unity among his people. In his invocations, Milton often asks the heavenly spirit to sing and refers to his own writings as verse or song. For instance, he states, "...still govern thou my Song, / *Urania*, and fit audience find, though few" (*Paradise Lost* 7: 30-31). While the audience being searched for here is unclear, the role of the spirit as a messenger has been established, and some clarity may even be found in the lines, "And chiefly Thou O Spirit, that dost Prefer / Before all Temples th' upright heart and pure" (*Paradise Lost* 1: 17-18). The spirit favors those with virtue, assumedly those that live rightly by and for God. Furthermore, *Urania* is explicitly titled, "Celestial Patroness" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 21), which solidifies her place as a divine protector and advisor.

Building upon the representation seen through musical references, symbolism pertaining to the Holy Spirit is consistently present throughout Milton's invocations of *Urania* through bird and light imagery. In Book I of *Paradise Lost*, Milton claims his spirit was present for the creation of the Earth, "...with mighty wings outspread / Dove-like status brooding..." (*Paradise Lost* 1: 20-21). Similarly, in *Paradise Regained* when Jesus is baptised, "Heaven open'd, and in the likeness of a Dove / The Spirit descended..." (*Paradise Regained* 1: 30-31). The parallel between the two dove references is quite glaring, and considering the latter work serves as a sequel to the first, this direct connection between *Urania* and the Holy Spirit had to have been intentional. Furthermore, descriptions of *Urania* frequently feature terminology involving light, such as "Celestial Light" and "Irradiate" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 51-52). The connection to God is expressly mentioned in Book III, stating, "Or of th' Eternal Coeternal beam / ... since God is Light" (*Paradise Lost* 3: 2-3). If the two spirits were not meant to be understood as the same

entity, surely Milton would have been more adamant in differentiating between the two. Instead, he purposely uses vocabulary closely related to the Holy Spirit when calling upon his muse.

Though if Urania and the Holy Spirit are indeed one and the same, the question then lies with the reasoning behind the obscurity: Why would Milton not invoke the spirit directly by name? Perhaps, he is using the Greek muse of astronomy as a metaphor to highlight the Holy Spirit's role as a heavenly guide. After all, this would not be the first instance in which Milton has drawn upon theology from other religions and their well-known figures for expressive purposes. His audience at the time was likely already familiar with these stories and heroines, meaning his message would have then translated more smoothly over to his Christian doctrine. He even states that, "The meaning, not the Name I call: for thou Nor of the Muses nine, nor on the top / Of old Olympus dwell'st, but Heav'nly born" (Paradise Lost 7: 5-7). If interpreting this literally, one could come to the conclusion that Milton is referring to the meaning behind the name itself; Urania, or "Ourania" in Greek translates to "heavens" or "heavenly" in English.

In conjunction with such translation, Urania the muse is attributed to astronomy, the field of which serves as a central theme throughout the epic. Adam, for instance, often pondered the mechanics of the universe, particularly the solar system. As he admired the stars, he was struck with wonder, inspired to ask the question, "Why?" Milton is inspired in a similar way when he claims, "Her nightly visitation unimplor'd / And dictates to me slumb'ring, or inspires / Easy my unpremeditated Verse" (Paradise Lost 9: 22-24). While asleep, Urania provides Milton with the stimulus and encouragement he needs to complete his work. The muse of astronomy does not preside solely over inspiration, however, for the stars are also a tool of navigation. In Book 12, as Michael foretells the birth of Jesus, he states, "...yet at his Birth a Star / Unseen before in Heav'n proclaims him come, / And guides the Eastern Sages..." (Paradise Lost Book 12: 360-62). This

initial appearance of the North Star not only sent the message that the son of God had come to Earth but also guided the wise men to the manger where baby Jesus lay. Though the heavenly spirit Milton invokes is not leading him to a physical location as the North Star had in the lines above, she is presumed to be presiding over the composition of his epic. By repurposing the muse's provincial rule over the stars, Milton is better able to represent the Holy Spirit's role as a spiritual guide.

Taking an even closer look at Milton's language and his creative choices in this section of the work, Urania as a metaphor extends beyond its role as a guide and messenger into the obscure nature of the Holy Spirit. In his paper "*Paradise Lost* and Human Nature", Tim Derrington delves into the particulars of Adam's language when he is contemplating the origins and purpose of the vast universe in which he resides. Derrington states, "Adam's abstractions of God's presence, as displayed on lines 89-90, show his understanding of God's complete and overarching rule over Adam's universe, while being unable to truly comprehend the nature of it" (2). In a similar vein to astronomy and space exploration, no matter how much knowledge is gained, questions that only the creator of the universe can answer will always remain. By veiling the identity of the Spirit behind the guise of a Greek muse, the idea that the Spirit is not meant to be - and cannot be - fully comprehended by mankind is better expressed. Its actions are far less visible than those of the Son, whose life is quite literally an open-book, and as a result, limited knowledge regarding what the Spirit truly is and its full range of power is available.

Reinforcing the idea that the Holy Spirit is too intricate for human comprehension is the manner in which Urania is characterized, as it is similar to that of other beings who are of neither human nor angelic origins but rather the personifications of concepts. Derrington speculates that, "Chaos, Night and the other godly entities are given a rank that is above human comprehension,

forcing us to accept them as static beings, when they seemingly are not when looked at from God's perch" (6). If this same notion were to be applied to Urania - and, consequently, the Holy Spirit - then Milton may be suggesting that the Spirit is not fixed, but fluid, in form. After all, the Spirit has taken the shape of birds, light, wind, music, and so on - whatever works best to serve God on a case-by-case basis. The lines, "...the ambient air wide interfus'd / imbracing round this florid Earth" (Paradise Lost 7: 89-90) demonstrate this expansive quality of the Spirit, which assumably aids in God's ability to be ever-present. The Spirit's abstract form is further seen in Milton's second invocation of Urania, stating, "But cloud instead, and ever-during dark / Surrounds me..." (Paradise Lost 3: 51-52). While Milton is blind and therefore shrouded in darkness, he still seems to feel the presence of God through the Holy Spirit around him, despite there not being a physical being.

The language Milton chooses to use when invoking Urania is also highly indicative of the Holy Spirit, which is no coincidence; the poet's precision and attention to detail would never allow for such. While there may be room for doubt concerning the unification between Urania and the Holy Spirit, there is enough evidence to support the belief that the two spirits are to be considered the same entity. Milton is taking advantage of the flexibility the poetic genre provides to creatively convey the function of the Holy Spirit as a spiritual guide and source of inspiration.