

Andrew Westholz

EN 335

Prof. Ainsworth

3 May 2018

Weak Leadership and Opening Rationalizations

Abstract: This paper seeks to analyze God and Satan's opening speeches as examples of an inner similarity towards persuasive rationalization away from blame and self-justification for their inaction and actions, respectively; and this analysis is done through the lens of various poetic and rhetorical devices. Furthermore, it will be argued that this innate similarity in characterization between God and Satan serves to fundamentally undermine God's authority as a good, effective leader. Selections from Julia Miller's essay Is God Complicit in the Fall of Man? are used to help bolster this argument.

Throughout *Paradise Lost*, Milton defines his characters through their distinct usages of language and various poetic devices. And yet, in Satan's opening speech in Book 1 and God's initial speech in Book 3, the speaker of *Paradise Lost* creates a striking similarity between the two in regards to their tendency towards rationalization and self-justification. Satan persuasively exploits language and poetic devices in his inaugural speech to rationalize his misguided revolt against God and pledge his eternal commitment against Him; while God commandeers diction and other devices in His introductory speech to rationalize His absence from Original Sin and indict humanity as its root cause. And while Satan's rhetorical mastery and multiple self-justifications might increase his own power and prestige amongst his devilish companions as they burn on the fiery lake, God's opening, declaratory rationalizations serve to introduce the reader to a God that is ultimately not far removed from the characterization of His Arch-

Nemesis. This implicit similarity in characterization to the metaphorical definition of evil serves to ultimately undermine God's authority, and this literary undermining of His authority further reveals that humanity should be weary of those in power who are willing to cast blame onto anyone but themselves instead of accepting and correcting their own faults.

Satan ingeniously begins his speech both by appealing to Beelzebub's former divinity and acknowledging the true misery of their present state in Hell; and by performing this rhetorical feat, aided by various poetic devices, Satan immediately reveals his defining personality trait as a character: his knack for persuasion. As he laments Beelzebub's "fall'n...chang'd" form, Satan presents what can perhaps be read as genuine sympathy for their transformations from angels to devils; and this degradation of their formerly-holy states is duly represented in the truncated forms of the words "fallen" and "changed" (*Paradise Lost* 1:84). Satan's flair for persuasion is further displayed and poetically mirrored when he claims that he and his demonic legion were "Join'd with me once, now misery hath join'd," and the "join'd" nature of their suffering is poetically reinforced in the near-perfect chiasmus of this line (*PL* 1:90). In the first seven lines of his opening speech, Satan makes his skills at the art of persuasion clear and thus fittingly sets up the remainder of his monologue, which is almost exclusively concerned with rationalizing their loss of the war in Heaven.

By commencing the remainder of his speech with the scathingly obvious rhetorical question of "...till then who knew / the force of those dire Arms?," Satan duly signals his oncoming set of rationalizations, which are further reflected and emphasized in the poetic devices of the address (*PL* 1:93-94). He states that he and his legion "shook [God's] throne"; thus, if they at least did that, "What though the field be lost?" (*PL* 1:105). And by employing yet another rhetorical question, Satan attempts to oratorically draw attention away from their

suffering and again emphasizes his talent for persuasion. And yet, the inherent futility of their revolt is reflected in the metaphorical image of their “[shaking God’s] throne” (*PL* 1:105). They do not topple or uproot it, as they (metaphorically) would have done if they had succeeded in usurping God; rather, they merely rattle His throne, thus further poetically illustrating the ultimate ineffectiveness of their rebellion. But, as Satan says, “All is not lost,” and the defiance of this statement is justly reflected with the phrase it is juxtaposed against in the line: “the unconquerable Will” (*PL* 1:106). By showcasing his proficiency at persuasion through his defiant diction and reinforcing his rationalizations through what is, in his mind, effective poetic imagery, Satan further showcases the ulterior, vindicating nature of this opening speech. He then continues his assault of rhetorical rationalizations by referring to Heaven as God’s “Empire,” a word so loaded with seemingly negative connotations that they need not be elaborated upon here (*PL* 1:114). Satan previously had reinforced the negativity of this sentiment by referencing the metaphorical “terror of [God’s] Arm,” as opposed to its innate justice and goodness (*PL* 1:113). By undercutting Heaven and God through loaded diction, ineffective imagery, and negative metaphors, Satan poetically backs up his rationalizations, although in a somewhat blunt, childish manner.

Instead of continuing with his rationalizations, Satan ends his speech in a much different place than where he began it: with emphatic declarations against the sovereignty of God. Despite the “ignominy and shame beneath / This downfall,” Satan advises his followers to take heart in the fact that their “Empyrean substance cannot fail,” which thereby makes them effectively immortal, like God (*PL* 1:115-116, 117). In this implicit, metaphorical reference to the immortality of themselves and God, Satan effectively reveals the perverted nature of his aims towards Heaven. Indeed, as he reassures his fellow demons, they “may with more successful

hope resolve / To wage by force or guile eternal War” (*PL* 1:120-121). His usage of the words “successful hope” represents the perversion of these goals, in that not only will they never be successful against God, but also because this “hope” is a hope that is decidedly towards evil ends (*PL* 1:120). Here, yet again, the poetic diction of this passage rears its head and further reinforces the perversion of Satan’s ends. But this peerless, knowingly twisted employment of diction is perhaps perfectly represented in Satan’s closing reference to Heaven as a “Tyranny” (*PL* 1:124). In all, through his rhetorical mastery and clever usage of diction, imagery, and metaphor, Satan manages to both display and reinforce his rationalizations and definitively proclaim a division and separation from God and, by extension, Heaven. However, as will be shown, one can clearly see a veiled similarity in mindset between Satan and God in terms of a characteristic tendency towards rationalization that is showcased in each of their opening speeches.

If Satan relies on persuasion as a prime means of getting his rationalizations across to his fellow fallen angels, then God relies upon a bedrock of declarations and imperatives as a way of at least setting the stage for His coming rationalizations. This proclivity towards imperative diction is evident from the very first line of God’s opening speech in Book 3 when He directs the Son to “seest thou what rage / Transports our adversary” (*PL* 3:80-81). These very first lines of dialogue are neither a polite request nor a persuasive statement; it is a clear demand that He expects His Son to follow, and this demanding tone nicely segues into a more declarative tone for the remainder of the speech. This complex merging of imperative and declarative tones allows for God to more easily present his rationalizations as legitimate statements of fact; as opposed to Satan’s rationalizations, which are more desperate and blanketed in sin and a lack of justice.

God's essential rationalization for the remainder of His speech amounts to the notion that, although He has the foreknowledge to predict that man will fall, He has no desire to impede upon man's free will, and that this free will is necessary for mankind to possess if they are to truly love Him. The soundness of this argument is not for this essay to examine; rather, it is the very fact that this extended assertion plays like a rationalization that is important. The notion that his argument is, at its most basic level, a pure example of rationalization is reinforced in the fact that, like Satan, God employs several, desperate-sounding rhetorical questions to buttress his case, as when he theatrically exclaims "whose fault? / Whose but his own?" (*PL* 3:95-96). This sense of self-justification and self-absolution from wrongdoing is perhaps most perfectly presented poetically in the assertion that man is "Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (*PL* 3:99). In this pithy, somewhat-oxymoronic statement, God both distills the essence of His free will-based argument and showcases His rationalization that He is free from all blame of Original Sin, despite the fact that He knows that Adam and Eve will "easily transgress the sole Command" (*PL* 3:94). In this first half of His speech, God makes clear His ultimate rationalization and definitively declares His innocence in man's committing of Original Sin; and this rationalization is reinforced mainly by God's rhetorical style but also poetically in the form of God's declarative diction and tone.

God continues rationalizing into the second half of His monologue and, again, this sense of almost desperate rationalization is reinforced mainly in God's diction and overall commandingly declarative tone. In this second half, God repeatedly claims His innocence and emphasizes man's fault, as when He states that man cannot accuse "Thir maker, or thir making, or thir Fate" (*PL* 3:113). Besides being a metrically perfect line of iambic pentameter (thus representing God's perfection), the line also serves to emphasize God's innocence and man's

fault by way of God's use of repetition. By repeating the archaic word "thir," God drives home the point that man, "not I," is at fault for Original Sin (*PL* 3:113, 117). God then proceeds to again rhetorically express his innocence with the conditional sentiment of "if I foreknew, / Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault," and he again showcases his declarative diction by decisively stating that man "themselves ordain'd thir [own] fall" (*PL* 3:117-118, 128). As God says, they are "Self-tempted, self-depraved," yet, ultimately, "Mercy first and last shall brightest shine" (*PL* 3:130, 134). So although God and Satan may be similar in their tendencies to rationalize and in their penchant for rhetorical techniques, God determinately attempts to drive a wedge between further similarities simply due to the fact that God's ultimate oratorical goals are to explain (to the Son, to His audience of angels in Heaven, and to the reader) His form of justice and ultimate absolution from Original Sin, while Satan's ulterior goals are to persuade Hell's other inhabitants both to "Make a Heav'n of Hell" and to recommit to their revolt against God (*PL* 1:255).

Although God and Satan's fundamental goals in these opening speeches might be different (in that God seeks to attempt to explain his innocence, while Satan seeks to rouse his followers to action), this veiled similarity in characterization through rationalizing mindsets serves to ultimately undermine God's omnipotent authority. For if God thinks like Satan, how can those under His rule be expected to trust in His Word? And how can humanity be solely to blame for Original Sin if God foreknew our fall yet did nothing to prevent it? Julia Miller shares sympathies with humanity in regards to the latter question when she states that the "evidence...strongly supports the belief that God should share in the responsibility of the fall" (1). God's lack of personal acceptance of responsibility ultimately paints him as a weak leader; and this conception of God as weak leader is reinforced when He allows the Son to redeem

humanity in His place (*PL* 3:236-241). Miller fundamentally reinforces this point by way of her ulterior thesis, which is that God sought for Original Sin to occur in a selfish attempt to increase His own glory among men and angels (1). Men and angels must, as God says, “Adore the Son, and honor him as mee” (*PL* 3:343). In the sacrifice of His only Son, God “denies His son the opportunity to be praised alone without shamelessly mentioning Himself” (Miller 4). Like Satan, God seems to revel in the glory and adulation of those who follow Him and trust in His Word; however, how can anyone learn to trust in the words of a leader who refuses to take responsibility for his own mistakes?

Any leader in the real world who consistently passes blame onto others and seeks to lounge in power rather than proactively correcting mistakes has, throughout history, been labelled weak and ineffective. As these judgements can be passed in reality without hesitation, so should readers extend these judgements to the God of *Paradise Lost*, who, like Satan, definitively attempts to blame humanity as the true cause for Original Sin. And furthermore, it should be noted that Milton invites this undermining of God’s authority by opening *Paradise Lost* with Satan, not God. As readers, we still have this initial illustration of Satan and his rationalizations in our minds; and this opening depiction of Satan negatively informs and influences readers’ interpretations of God and His opening speech.

God and Satan’s opening speeches thus seek mainly to justify themselves and their decisions in both the past and the future—God seeks to proclaim his just innocence, while Satan seeks to rally his troops to fight another day. Ultimately, God and Satan, through a variety of rhetorical and poetic devices, showcase a characteristic similarity in mindset in the form of their mutual tendency towards rationalization and self-justification in their opening speeches. This similarity further implicitly casts judgment on God as a weak leader, which is both inherently

reinforced by His implicit connection with Satan in terms of characterization and also by Satan's emphatic opening status in Book 1. In the end, Milton seems to be saying that, not only is He a weak leader, but perhaps the God of *Paradise Lost* truly is no better than Satan.