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Power in the Poetry: The Poetic Differences Between God and Satan's Speech

*Abstract: This essay explores the power dynamic between God and Satan through Milton's poetic detail. Although God and Satan are paralleled in Books 2 and 3, the poetics of their language reveal the power disparity between them; furthermore, this disparity elucidates Milton's challenge against the conventional protagonist and antagonist to reveal that God has no counterpart.*

When first reading *Paradise Lost*, readers bend the binding and find God, the king of Heaven, and Satan, the self-proclaimed king of Hell, in similar positions of power in their war over the new creation of man. Milton depicts Satan and God in parallel thrones in the first few books of *Paradise Lost*. Since each claims the highest position in his hierarchy, one anticipates that each would hold the same amount of power, but despite the reflection of God at the Council of Heaven to Satan at the Council of Hell, Milton argues against his own poetic structure. Although Milton parallels the structure of God and Satan's speeches in the first few books of *Paradise Lost*, he suggests through poetic detail the disparity of power between them. The initial similarities in structure set up an interesting leveled power dynamic, but a closer look at the poetic elements of their words reveals subtle yet distinct differences between the two characters and exposes the false equality between them. Milton structures his epic poem to create an illusion of equality between God and Satan in order to mimic the opposition of a protagonist and an antagonist, but differences in his poetic details such as word choice and punctuation elucidate

the true hierarchy of God, the king of Heaven, above Satan, a fallen angel, which suggests that there is no protagonist versus antagonist battle between God and Satan.

In Books 2 and 3 of *Paradise Lost*, Milton mirrors the council in Hell to that of the council in Heaven to provoke a sense of similarity between those at the head of the discussions: Satan and God. The structure of each begins with a discussion with Satan and God on the throne of their council and ends with a self-sacrificing volunteer. They both discuss the creation of man and Satan's intent to corrupt them. By paralleling the structure and overall content of God and Satan's dialogue, Milton implies that the two characters are paralleled as well. This suggestion aligns with the idea that Satan and God are equals in power; however, while Milton sets up his reader to believe this, he contrasts this idea by revealing their differences through the details of his poetry.

When delving deeper into their speech, Milton alters the poetics of each character's language to distinguish God above Satan. Milton's word choice sets the tone in each character's speech and communicates a sense of the character's personality and placement among his subjects. After Beelzebub's proposal to destroy God's new creation, Satan rose to sacrifice himself as the one who must travel to Eden and corrupt mankind. His 36 lines of speech that span from line 430 to 466 in Book 2 are charged with negativity and self-praise. Satan describes his upcoming journey by repeating "hard," "danger," and "hazard" twice each along with more negatively charged words such as "fire," "devour," "burning," and "abortive" among others, which emphasizes the hardship that he is bravely willing to endure for his cause (*Paradise Lost* 2:430-466). By painting the travel as treacherous and obsessing over it as he does, Satan elicits praise from the other devils in a self-serving manner. Satan's need to be recognized for his sacrifice emphasizes his underlying desire to be ranked higher than the rest of his peers. In order

to prove that he deserves to reign over Hell, Satan must highlight his courage to brave chaos in order to establish himself at the peak of Hell's hierarchy and only then do the devils "extol him equal to the highest in Heav'n" (*Paradise Lost* 2:243).

Meanwhile in Book 3, God is already established in his rule, and "thron'd above all highth," he speaks in neutral wording without the need to incite his audience (*Paradise Lost* 3:58). Throughout God's speech to his Son, God's diction remains level (*Paradise Lost* 3:80-134). While he explains that man will fall and a sacrifice must be made, God does not need to sacrifice himself to gain power among the angels. He has his Son to sacrifice, and regardless of his lack of self-sacrifice, he remains at the top of Heaven's hierarchy. This distinct discrepancy between the two characters establishes that there is no parallel between them. While Satan has to do the work himself, God has his Son to do the work for him. Though the sacrifice scene appears to be a parallel between God and Satan, the nature of the self-sacrifice reveals that it is not. God's authority situates him in a place of power so great that he has no need to sacrifice himself. So, while Satan uses charged words to gain praise from the devils, such devices are unnecessary for God since his angels already extol him above all other things. Furthermore, Satan's act of sacrificing himself to show off portrays his lack of power in comparison to God, who has the Son to sacrifice himself for God. The difference in the sacrifice is that God has a follower devoted enough to sacrifice himself while Satan still has to establish his power through a self-sacrifice. With the word choice for each character, Milton compares the intrinsic nature of God's power in contrast to Satan's desperate attempt to convince others of his authority.

Just as Satan evokes praise from his followers to gain power using words, he must be manipulative with the detailing of his rhetoric as well, even down to the punctuation. By altering the implications of the punctuation used between Satan and God, Milton elucidates God's

established throne and Satan's lack of such power. Within lines 430 and 466 of Book 2, one out of seven of Satan's sentences ends in a question mark. The question imposes recognition of his place on Hell's throne and how it deems him most worthy of the journey to Eden (*Paradise Lost* 2:450-456). Satan essentially asks, "how can I reign if I do not accept as much danger as I do honor?" The answer is clear: it is his duty as the king of Hell to traverse chaos. With this question, Satan directly establishes himself as the highest honored in Hell, and by setting it up as if it is his duty to go, his peers become his subjects. Now, not only do the devils praise him for his self-sacrifice to tempt mankind, but they recognize him by the title of king, which he has given himself. Satan's single question reflects his self-interest and further demonstrates his need to convince others of his power.

Conversely, four of God's eleven sentences are rhetorical questions and each exemplifies God's goodness without him deliberately setting himself up for praise (*Paradise Lost* 3:80-134). As he explains man's fall, he asks "whose fault? / Whose but his own?" (*Paradise Lost* 3:96-97). At the chance to blame Satan for creating evil and corrupting his newest creation, God does not condemn him, but rather remains just and sees the fault in his own creation. By assigning the fault to his creation rather than blaming Satan, God portrays justice, a respectable trait. Furthermore, not blaming Satan for the fall of man demonstrates how God rarely labels Satan as evil. Though God repetitively calls Satan "rebellious," he never outright calls him evil, which revokes the notion that Satan is God's enemy or antagonist (*Paradise Lost* 3:86, 6:50, and 7:140). Next, he asks "what praise could they receive?" when justifying his reasons for giving his creations free will (*Paradise Lost* 3:106). This particular question defends his decision to give his creations free will because if they had no choice but to obey God, then there would be no need for praise, and God wants to praise his creations. While God is omniscient and had

known that giving his creation free will would lead them to fall to temptation, he still believed they deserved the choice. If he had stripped mankind of choice, then their worship would make God appear indulgent and self-obsessed; however, being willing to give them the choice to be disobedient demonstrates God's dedication to fairness over vanity. God's questions in his speech hint to his grace, but Satan's question allows him to shamelessly promote himself.

Along with the ending punctuation, Milton reveals differences between God and Satan through the amount of enjambment and end-stopping in each of their dialogue. Looking at the same lines previously mentioned from each character, the majority of Satan's lines are enjambed, and the majority of God's lines are end-stopped. Because of this, Satan's lines have a tendency to be read quickly since there is less punctuation at the end of each line to slow down the reader; in contrast, God's end-stopped lines slow the reading of his lines, which gives his speech a calmer tone while Satan's tone feels rushed. God's calmer tone confirms his familiarity with being in power. His self-assurance that he is the highest of all allows him to preside over everything gracefully. On the other hand, Satan's need to establish himself in a position of power distorts his speech and results in a hurried tone, which indicates his inexperience and inferiority. So, even the speed at which Milton intends his reader to read God and Satan's dialogue impacts their characterization and distinguishes their power disparities.

By setting up a parallel between God and Satan, Milton reflects the common binary of a protagonist fighting against an antagonist or good versus evil; however, by challenging his own dualistic structure, Milton reveals that there is no opposition between two powerful forces. Rather, Satan is merely a tool of God. Establishing God above Satan through poetic elements elucidates that Satan has no agency against God, which makes him unable to be an antagonist. In his essay "The Language of the Spirit: An Analysis of Divine Diction in *Paradise Lost*," Jared

Powell explains this imbalance of power and challenge against this protagonist and antagonist binary in terms of good and evil. Powell suggests that since God never directly calls Satan evil, God is either the evil one and Satan is the hero, or Satan is just a pawn in God's masterplan. Perhaps Milton's decision to have God refrain from calling Satan evil illuminates that God is the evil one, but perhaps God does not call Satan evil because Satan is a tool in God's plan and calling Satan evil would make God himself evil for allowing Satan to be evil. Powell demonstrates this by commenting on God's omnipotence: "If God does not wish to undo Satan's actions..., then it can be assumed that God is pleased with the actions" (6). Powell goes on to explain that this means that Satan becomes a "tool for God as the protagonist" rather than being an antagonist (6). Furthermore, if Satan is God's pawn or tool then God cannot call Satan evil because it would suggest that God were evil for allowing evil to exist and for controlling, or not controlling, the evil.

While Powell presents an interesting argument, perhaps the binary between good and evil is not an opposition just as Milton suggests that the assumed binary of protagonist and antagonist does not exist in the epic. Just how Milton's use of poetic details expresses the disparities between God and Satan's power, which exposes that there is no battle between a salient protagonist and antagonist, the details of Milton's poetry display the same lack of duality in good and evil. Rather than God as good and Satan as evil, there is only God and good, and Satan is the straying from good. Without evil, there is no opposite to God. Milton has Satan describe himself as evil such as when he states "[f]arewell Remorse: all Good to me is lost; / Evil be thou my Good" to exemplify Satan's genuine belief that he is now the counterpart to God, which he interprets as being evil (Paradise Lost 4:109-110). God, on the other hand, never describes Satan as evil. If God does not address Satan as evil, it may be because he does not want to call a

creation of his evil and by association be labeled a creator of evil, or it may be because the concept of evil is nonexistent. Just as Milton divulges God's inherent power over Satan, he also reveals God's inability to be matched in power through the diction that God and Satan use to describe Satan.

Although God and Satan hold similar positions on their side of the war, they do not hold the same power. Even though Milton presents the council in Hell and the council in Heaven structurally similar to mirror Satan and God on their thrones, he buries the truth in the lines of his poetry. Through word choice, question marks, and enjambment or end-stopping, Milton utilizes the details to display how God is superior to his opponent Satan, who is more of a pawn than an equal competitor. By revealing God as the protagonist and Satan without enough agency to be the antagonist, Milton establishes that God and Satan are not in a battle of good versus evil. Rather, God's goodness is without evil, and though Satan lacks goodness, he is not evil. Therefore, since there is only straying from goodness and no one is capable of evil, there is not counterpart to God. Satan may believe he is an opponent of God and goodness, but he is just a cog in God's machine. Though Satan wins the battle over mankind in *Paradise Lost*, God wins the war, and Milton makes this clear through his poetry.

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