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The Fallen Rhetorician: Satan's Unjustified Revolution in *Paradise Lost*

Discerning whether or not Satan is justified in his rebellion against the Almighty is one of most important issues to consider when analyzing both God and Satan's characters in *Paradise Lost*. If Milton's God lacks the justifiable authority to rule over Satan and the other angels in Heaven, then surely his authority to rule over mankind falls under similar scrutiny. Additionally, if Satan is right in his attempt to overthrow God, then his temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden takes on an entirely new context—that of righteous retaliation as opposed to embittered revenge. This being said, there is scant evidence in the text to support Satan's revolution as being a justifiable endeavor. While Satan makes seemingly compelling arguments for his rebellion, his rally cries lack substance and appeal only superficially to the ideas of freedom and equality.

The circumstances that incite Satan's original rebellion against God are perhaps the most illuminating insight into his lack of justification for rebelling. Satan begins his rebellion, not after facing some undue punishment or disservice at the hands of God that might render his cause just. Rather, it is God's appointment of the Son to a position of power in Heaven above Satan's own rank that prompts his rebellious machinations. This much is revealed when Satan first convenes his army of angels in heaven, beginning his appeal to his fellow angels by stating, "Another now hath to himself engross't / All power, and us eclips't under the name / Of King anointed [...]" (*Paradise Lost* 5: 775-777). These lines reveal Satan's disdain for the Son's sudden "eclipse" of

his own previously held authority and status in Heaven. He draws the other angels into sharing this feeling of supposed transgression by using unifying pronouns like “our” and “us” throughout his appeal for their support. This rhetorical strategy allows Satan to unify his forces under a shared feeling of mistreatment, even though the other angels are not displaced by the appointment of the Son in the same way Satan is. The angels that Satan commands have likely always been subordinate to Satan, and consequently, to God, whereas Satan has only ever been subordinated in rank to God. The only figure whose power has been “eclipsed” by the Son is Satan himself.

While Satan appeals to the ideas of freedom and equality when addressing his angelic legions, it is clear that he does not believe in true equality between himself and the other angels. It is only a few lines after describing the Son’s newly appointed leadership as a “yoke” that Satan proclaims, “if ye know yourselves / Natives and Sons of Heav’n possest before / By none, and if not equal all, yet free, / Equally free; for Orders and Degrees / Jar not with liberty, but well consist.” (*PL* 5: 789-794). Satan is careful to point out that “Orders and Degrees” do not limit equality. This, he says, presumably to maintain *his* right to possess authority over others, specifically the authority he holds over the angels he has called together to address in his speech. Additionally, he makes sure to point out that although the angels may not all be “equal” (either in rank or power) they were all “equally free” before God introduced his Son. This qualification of the term “equal” demonstrates just how restrictive Satan’s concept of “equality” truly is. In his speech, Satan manages to appeal to the idea of equality while maintaining that occupying different ranks does not constitute inequality. In doing so, he contradicts himself and reveals that his true issue with God and the Son lies not with some encroachment they have made on the liberty of the angels, but instead, lies with his own demotion in rank after God appoints the Son

to a position of power that far exceeds his own. If Satan truly believes, as he tells his fellow angels, that differences in rank do not constitute inequality, then he has no justifiable reason to suggest that the Son's rank poses any threat to his own equality or to the equality of the other angels.

Satan's has a similarly convoluted and contradictory interpretation of "freedom." This is evident from the very beginning of *Paradise Lost* when Satan, speaking to Beelzebub, proclaims:

And what I should be, all but less than hee

Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at last

We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built

Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:

Here we may reign secure, and in my choice

To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:

Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven. (*PL* 1: 258-263)

Here, Satan begins by lamenting that his rank and power fell below God and the Son's whilst in Heaven. He goes on to remark that he and his fellow revolutionaries will be "free" in Hell, not because they enjoy more freedoms in Hell, (they are quite literally *less* free as they've been imprisoned there) but because they are no longer subordinate in rank to a higher power. Satan conflates the idea of "freedom" with "reigning secure" and in doing so, reveals that his concept of "freedom" is not freedom from oppression or bondage. Satan's concept of "freedom" simply entails occupying the highest rank or wielding the most power in a particular place. Satan's repeated use of the qualifying word "here" ("here" referring to Hell) is further evidence to support that his concept of freedom is distorted. He says it is *here* that he and the fallen angels may be free, because it is *here* that they may reign.

Additionally, Satan attempts to characterize his time in Heaven as less free simply because he and the other angels served God in Heaven. Satan leverages the connotation of the word “serve” to imply that service in Heaven is equivalent to bondage or oppression. This seems like a compelling argument at first glance, as words like “serve” and “service” are often associated with an unfair or inequitable distribution of power. However, it is important to note that Satan does not articulate precisely *how* service to God limits his freedom or the freedom of the other angels. It is apparent that the only thing which distinguishes “freedom” from the lack thereof for Satan is the presence of someone who outranks him. This much is made abundantly clear by his insistence that he is freer in Hell than he was in Heaven simply because God and the Son are not present. Satan blatantly disregards the reality that he and the other angels have been imprisoned in Hell, not set free.

Satan further pollutes the concept of equality among the fallen angels in Hell when he convenes his legions in Pandemonium. The debate that takes place among the demons appears democratic at first, but Satan reveals his intent to occupy the highest seat of power from the very beginning of the assembly when he states:

Mee though just right and the fixt Laws of Heav'n
 Did first create your Leader, next, free choice,
 With what besides, in Counsel or in Fight,
 Hath been achiev'd of merit, yet this loss
 Thus far at least recover'd, hath much more
 Establisht in a safe unenvied Throne
 Yielded with full consent. (*PL* 2: 18-26)

Satan's assertion that his position of power has been freely yielded to him in Hell is made without first consulting any of the demons in the assembly. He simply claims that they have yielded to him an "unenvied throne" by "full consent" without any evidence that the other demons have deliberated on the matter. Satan begins this portion of his address by first stating an obvious truth (that he was placed in charge of this group of angels while in Heaven) to lend credibility to his assertion, then segues into assertions that have not yet been ratified (that the demons have freely yielded the throne of Hell to him). In doing so, he relies on the authority he previously held in Heaven to strengthen his claim to leadership in Hell. He says that "just right" and the "fixt laws of Heav'n" are what originally sanctioned his leadership. By separating the idea of his "just right" from the "laws of Heaven" he divorces his right to rule from Godly ordinance, instead suggesting that his leadership is derived from "full consent" which upholds his "just right."

Satan also uses this speech to devalue the throne of Hell in the eyes of his fellow fallen angels. He does this presumably in an attempt to secure the throne for himself without contest. He humbles himself to the assembly when he admits that the only "achievement" of merit that might secure his position of leadership is their loss in battle. In saying this, he sneakily implies that the throne of Hell cannot be contested through comparisons of leadership or merit in battle and makes the throne seem less appealing to the other fallen angels who might wish to claim it.

He further devalues the idea of authority in Hell when he states, "for none sure will claim in Hell / Precedence, none, whose portion is so small / Of present pain, that with ambitious mind / will covet more" (*PL* 2: 32-35). Following up his assertion of his own kingship with a statement that clearly characterizes leadership in Hell as painful is an excellent rhetorical strategy Satan employs to ensure that his rule is not challenged. By making the throne seem an undesirable and

burdensome, he discourages the other demons from attempting to claim it. Additionally, this makes it seem as though Satan is doing the fallen angels a favor by bearing the “burden” of the crown.

Conversely, Milton’s God does not attempt to characterize his own leadership in Heaven as a burden. In fact, he refuses to exert any unnecessary influence over the thoughts and actions of mankind or the angels. Westholz explains in his essay “Weak Leadership and Opening Rationalizations” that God and Satan use similar diction during their opening statements to justify their behavior (Satan his revolution and God his lack of intervention to prevent the fall). He writes, “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.” (Westholz pp. 1). Though Satan and God make similar use of assertive language and matter-of-fact statements, God’s oration reveals his desire not to exert control over any of his creations ways which might impede their free will. He says as much explicitly when he explains to the Son, “I form’d them free, and free they must remain” (*PL* 3:124). This is the key distinction between the hierarchical power structure God maintains, and the new “revolutionized” power structure which Satan seeks to implement by rebelling. As discussed above, Satan is incredibly meticulous when it comes to exerting influence and control over his fellow angels. He employs duplicitous rhetorical tactics to ensure that his secure reign is not challenged, and uses those same tactics to influence Eve when he makes his way into Paradise. Whereas God, whose reign has already proven unchallengeable, uses assertive language in his speeches to justify *not* exerting control or influence over the thoughts and actions of his creations. In Short, God’s primary focus while he occupies the

highest seat of power is to *preserve* the freedoms afforded to his subordinates, not to limit or influence their behavior in the way Satan attempts to.

The truth of Satan's intentions becomes astoundingly clear when Satan delivers his soliloquy to the sun in book four. Satan admits in this speech that his service to God was not difficult. He also admits, albeit it privately to himself, that his own ambition and want for power are what prompted his rebellion. He says:

how glorious once above thy Sphere;
 Till Pride and worse Ambition threw me down
 Warring in Heav'n against Heav'n's matchless King:
 Ah wherefore! He deserv'd no such return
 From me in that bright eminence, and with his good
 Upbraided none; nor was his service hard." (PL 4: 39-45)

Satan's admission here proves beyond doubt that his rebellion against the Almighty was unjustified. Satan's use of the word "deserv'd" illustrates awareness of his own unjustified behavior towards the Almighty. He knows God did nothing to *deserve* being rebelled against, and that it was his own "Pride and Worse ambition" that led to his downfall.

In this speech, Satan also admits to seducing the other fallen angels to his cause. After considering a path of repentance, Satan resolves that his disdain for submission prevents him from attempting to right things with God. He also admits a fear of shame upon facing the other fallen angels whom he worked so diligently to convince. He laments:

Is there no place
 Left for Repentance, none for Pardon left?
 None left but by submission; and that word

Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame
 Among the Spirits beneath, whom I seduc'd
 With other promises and other vaunts
 Than to submit, boasting I could subdue
 Th' Omnipotent.” (*PL* 4: 79-86)

Satan’s own use of the word “seduc’d” is evidence that he employed deceptive rhetorical strategies to convince his fellow revolutionaries to partake in his rebellion. He knows that his rebellion was founded only on his own pride and ambition, and thus had to *seduce* the other angels to his cause. A revolutionary fighting for a “just” cause would hardly have reason to deceive or seduce his own coconspirators, unless, of course, he knows his cause to be unjust.

Satan, though appearing in many instances to appeal to democratic ideals of freedom and equality to justify his revolution, never articulates a truly honest or compelling reason for rebelling against God. Instead, he uses deceptive and sneaky rhetorical strategies to justify both his rebellion and his leadership. The “freedom” and “equality” which Satan attempts to procure through his revolution are perverted and fundamentally different versions of the ideals which might have otherwise justified his rebellion. Additionally, it is clear that Satan’s primary goal is not to share equal power with the other fallen angels, but rather, to assert his own power and authority over them. Satan’s prideful want for power, authority, and rank are what drive his rebellion, *not* some infringement of the angels’ freedom or equality at the hands of God.

Works Cited

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