

PARADISE LOST AND THE LANGUAGE OF EPIC REBELLION

Kalina Slaska-Sapala (The Australian National University)

John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, considered the greatest achievement in English epic, is a poem which seeks to do the impossible: to provide an account of the book of Genesis through the medium of epic, a genre depicting, among other things, the religious practices and theological imperatives of the Ancient Greeks and Romans. For all that we know about Milton's classical education, his early training in ancient languages and later mastery of classical genres, many mysteries, nevertheless, remain. None perhaps looms as large as the question of Milton's political and religious affiliations in England in the turbulent seventeenth century, where issues of Church, State, were at the forefront of religious and political debate. Questions surrounding Milton's classicism, his theology, and his politics have traditionally been considered as separate areas of inquiry. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton's magnum opus, however, these debates arise together in the context of the genre he chooses, and the history of its reception in the ancient world, chiefly in the development of Greek thought. The Neoplatonist philosopher Hermias remarked that 'mythology is a kind of theology', recognizing the role of stories in reflecting the history of religious thought in the Greek world, from Homer and Hesiod up until the early Christian period.¹

At the same time, questions relating to a chiefly Christian theology cannot justifiably be ignored in discussing the work of a poet who unequivocally claimed divine inspiration in his undertaking to 'justify the ways of God to men' (*PL*.1.26). Milton's account of nightly visitations of the Holy Spirit may sound ridiculous to the modern reader, a self-aggrandizement best left aside from serious Miltonic criticism and textual analysis. The attempt to avoid these questions has resulted in attempts to read the poem as a political allegory by a poet who, by the Restoration, had found an uneasy peace in a 'Horatian' retirement from the politics of the royal court.² In their search for epic allegory, modern scholars of Milton are not so different from Homer's earliest commentators³, as they put forward the case that Milton, an erstwhile supporter of Oliver Cromwell, is making a veiled political statement beneath the theological imperatives of his epic agenda.⁴

In Milton's own post-Reformation context, the epic theology of *Paradise Lost* provides a stark contrast to that of Dante's epic account of the hero's 'spiritual

¹ Hermias, *In Phaedrum*, 73.18, cited in Lamberton (1989) 31.

² Radzinowicz (1987) 204-230, challenges the idea that Milton composed *Paradise Lost* either to escape politics or to write an allegorical protest against the monarchy in the form of his epic.

³ The history of allegorical interpretations of the Homeric epics could be dated as early as the 6th century BC, and have been identified with the figure of Theagenes of Rhegium. Robert Lamberton cites a Porphyrian scholion, in particular, identifying Theaganes as one of the predecessors for allegorical readings of Homer. See Porphyry, *Quaest. Hom.* 1.241.10-11 (Schrader), cited in Lamberton (1989) 32. More generally, Lamberton makes the case that allegory, whether 'physical' or 'moral' can be traced back to the first Pythagoreans.

⁴ In her 2003 biography of Milton, Barbara Lewalski argues that even the arrangement of the poem itself, whether into ten books, recalling the structure of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, rather than twelve, which recalls the *Aeneid*, is, in itself, a hidden political statement: 'The poem's form makes its first overt political statement as, in the 1667 version, Milton eschewed Virgil's twelve-book epic format with its Roman imperialist and royalist associations for the ten-book model of the republican Lucan': Lewalski (2003) 460. Radzinowicz (1987) 205-6 argues for neither 'political disengagement' or 'political encryption', but rather 'in line with Milton's humanistic understanding of the nature and function of heroic poetry, *Paradise Lost* has a public role to play in the poet's own day.'

pilgrimage', with its poetic account of Roman Catholic hell, purgatory and heaven producing a humanized landscape colored by the experience of the individual.⁵ The Protestant notion of direct access to the divine, apart from setting *Paradise Lost* in a different thematic sphere to Dante, however, also ties in with the fashioning of Milton himself as epic poet, long before the notion of poetic persona was a commonplace phrase of literary criticism. By claiming a personal relationship with the divine, Milton is also placing himself in the line of ancient poets, for whom divine inspiration was part of a formulaic convention with which the poet began his act of composition. It has been well-noted that Milton's self-portrayal as a 'blind bard' is deliberately allusive.⁶ The act of composing *Paradise Lost* by dictation, moreover, recalls the original notion of epic as performance. But in claiming inspiration from both the Holy Spirit and the epic muse, Milton sets up a unique rivalry between the pagan and the Christian traditions of divine inspiration. By invoking the Holy Spirit as one who 'from the first/ Wast present' (*PL*.1.19-20), the poet of *Paradise Lost* is dating his poem to be more precursory than that of Homer himself, who invokes the Muses in the Catalogue of Ships, as 'goddesses' who 'are present and know all things' (ὄψεϊς γὰρ θεαί ἔστε πάρεστε τε ἴστε τε πάντα, *Il.* 2.485). But in performing a formulaic invocation of the epic muse, Milton is also laying his account open to all the issues surrounding poetic accounts of the ancient gods, with their self-confessed tendency for lying, as we read in Hesiod's *Theogony*.⁷

The challenge of relating divine subjects to a human audience, a challenge present in the epic endeavors of Homer, Hesiod and their epic successors, is recalled by Milton, or rather, by the angel Raphael. In Book 5 the war in heaven is narrated to a curious, though still innocent Adam by a divine eyewitness: no account, it would seem, could be closer to the truth.⁸ And yet, the archangel himself is not exempt from the laws of literary representation: he must make his narration to a human listener, even if it is Adam before the Fall. It is a '[s]ad task and hard' to convey divine matters to humans:

High matter thou enjoinst me, O prime of men,
Sad task and hard, for how shall I relate
To human sense the invisible exploits
Of warring spirits; how without remorse
The ruin of so many glorious once
And perfect while they stood; how last unfold
The secrets of another world, perhaps

⁵ In his 1944 *Preface to Paradise Lost*, C.S. Lewis distinguished between Dante's *Divina Commedia* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, describing the former as 'the story of a spiritual pilgrimage', and the latter as 'the story of the universe itself': Lewis (1944) 128. Lewis goes on to distinguish between the idea of a 'religious' poem, and a 'theological' one, a distinction that, I believe, is at the core of ancient ideas about epic theology in the Greek world.

⁶ Charles Martindale devotes an entire section of his 'Homer' chapter on the question of Milton's physical blindness, arguing that '[i]t is reasonable to speculate that Milton's blindness may have brought him closer to Homer': Martindale (1986) 64-72.

⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony* 27-28. This passage has been associated with Plato's criticism of Homer and Hesiod as representative of the tendency of poets to give false accounts (Plato, *Resp.* 2.376-83). Elizabeth Belfiore has argued that there is a 'specific verbal echo' between *Th.* 27 and *Resp.* 282d.2-3: see Belfiore (1985) 47 n.1.

⁸ In the *Timaeus*, Plato provides a reluctant (and, according to Elizabeth Belfiore, an ironic) acknowledgement of the relative 'truth value' of statements made by the gods, in accounts of their origins: '...we have to trust those who have spoken in former times, since they are the offspring of the gods, as they claim, and doubtless know well their own ancestors. It is not possible to disbelieve the children of the gods (...), since they claim to report their own affairs': *Timaeus* 40d-e, cited in Belfiore (1985) 53.

Not lawful to reveal? Yet for thy good
 This is dispensed, and what surmounts the reach
 Of human sense, I shall delineate so,
 By likening spiritual to corporal forms,
 As may express them best, though what if earth
 Be but the shadow of heav'n, and things therein
 Each to other like, more than on earth is thought? (PL.5.561-76)

Raphael's conundrum recalls the problems facing Neoplatonist critics of Homer. The task of 'likening spiritual to corporal forms' is the way in which they interpreted the role of the epic poet – and excused their various failings in depicting the follies of gods and men.⁹ Critics as early as Xenophanes, however, already noted the tendency towards anthropomorphism of the divine in epic, necessitated by the limitations of the human imagination.¹⁰ This reliance of the muse for poetic inspiration in divine matters, coupled with the poet's acknowledgement of the necessity of translating these matters to a human sensibility, a sensibility that the poet himself is subject to, is a paradox acknowledged by Milton in his address to the poetic muse:¹¹

...What in me is dark
 Illumine, what is low raise and support,
 That to the heighth of this great argument
 I may assert the Eternal Providence
 And justify the ways of God to men. (PL.1.22-25)

Milton sets out to justify the ways of God to *men*, not angels. What is unexpected in this aspect of Miltonic theology, however, is that Raphael's account is given to man in a state of innocence. Adam has not yet eaten the apple and committed a sin, and yet he receives the didactic version of the story, ending with a warning to 'take heed [of the fate of the fallen angels] and fear to transgress'. Moral edification, it seems, was necessary even in a pre-lapsarian world.

One of the most enduring debates surrounding *Paradise Lost* revolves around the compelling depiction of Milton's Satan, in contrast to what has been read as a far less sympathetic depiction of God, a depiction that prompted the Romantic poet William Blake to famously announce that Milton was 'of the devil's party without knowing it'.¹² Setting the question of Milton's religious partisanship aside, it becomes clear that at the core of Blake's sentiment is the fact that *Paradise Lost*, like the *Iliad*, is concerned with pushing the boundaries of epic morality: not in the neoclassical sense, where Odysseus is imagined by George Chapman as a Stoic philosopher, or, as we saw above, in Raphael's didactic narrative. Rather, it is bound to the manner in which

⁹ For example, Plotinus of Homer in his *Enneads* 5.5.8; see Lamberton (1986) 96.

¹⁰ In his 1961 *Preface to Paradise Lost*, C.S. Lewis argued that the reason Milton's Satan has been considered a more sympathetic character (by critics such as Blake) is not because of any conscious or even unconscious intention in Milton's account, or an underlying theological truth, but rather due to our own fallen nature. Just as for Xenophanes, people relate to the gods as they are themselves, so too Lewis, two millennia later, notes that 'a fallen man is very like a fallen angel': see Lewis (1961) 98. I am currently working on arguing the case that the history of criticism of *Paradise Lost*, particularly the so-called 'Satan debate', can be situated in the ancient tradition of epic criticism of anthropomorphized gods, dating back to the earliest commentators on the Homeric poems.

¹¹ 'The Bard endeavors to practice the Christian heroism his poem explores as he daringly attempts to soar 'Above the Aonian Mount' despite his fallenness, and willingly embraces the paradoxical challenge of creating a poem that both is not, and is, his own': Lewalski (2003) 461.

¹² Compare this with Empson's idea that 'God is on trial', in *Paradise Lost*, due to the cultural demands of an epic poem dealing with Western philosophical and theological subject matter: 'Understanding that other people are different is one of the bases of civilization, and this use for a story is as much a culture -conquest as the idea of a God. Milton therefore could not have made God automatically good in the epic; God is on trial': Empson (1965) 94.

the laws of epic operate, specifically in the relationship between gods and men, questions surrounding human autonomy, and how far epic characters can transgress the boundaries assigned to them by the genre itself (laws which I argue, even the gods themselves are not exempt from). These questions were at the forefront of philosophical and theological criticism of epic by the Greeks. But whereas some Homeric scholars have attempted to read the *Iliad* without the gods, imagining them as peripheral characters, this is impossible in *Paradise Lost*. God, Satan, and the Son, figures known from Scripture and commentaries, from councils, heresies, and the Christian liturgy are obliged to make an appearance alongside Adam and Eve. They bring with them all the theological implications of transposing the Christian God - in all three persons – unto the epic genre, making them not only humanlike characters, but characters within the world of epic, and subject to its laws.

When we meet Milton's Satan, his rebellion and punishment have already taken place, and yet, both are constantly being relived and 'reiterated' (a charged term in Milton). Milton redefines the notion of temptation in depicting Satan as struggling against a desire to 'repent' - of his rebellion, no less - and to re-submit to the authority of God.¹³ Satan frames and reframes his own rebellion against God in specifically allusive language, recalling mythological and epic accounts of divine conflict. In a passage recalling the fall of the Titans and the punishment of Prometheus, Milton narrates the sufferings of Satan. These suffering could, however, be described as psychological rather than physical: Satan is tortured by the memory of what he lost, and knowledge that he cannot regain it:

So stretched out huge in length the arch-fiend lay
 Chained on the burning lake, nor ever thence
 Had risen or heaved his head, but that the will
 And high permission of all-ruling heaven
 Left him at large to his own dark designs,
 That with reiterated crimes he might
 Heap on himself damnation, while he sought
 Evil to others, and enraged might see
 How all his malice served but to bring forth
 Infinite goodness, grace and mercy shown
 On man by him seduced, but on himself
 Treble confusion, wrath and vengeance poured. (*PL* 1.210-20)

It could, and has been argued that this passage recalls Augustine's statement about God as *malarum iustissimus ordinator* (*De Civitate Dei* XI.17), in that he uses the fall of Satan for the eventual redemption of mankind, creating the idea of *felix culpa*, the happy guilt.¹⁴ For Satan, however, the idea of *felix culpa* – one that results in Christ's sacrifice for the eventual redemption of mankind – is reversed. Countless numbers of fallen angels suffer for Satan's one transgression: 'Millions of spirits for his fault amerced / Of heaven, and from eternal splendour flung / For his revolt.' (*PL* 1.609-11)

Complaints against the injustice of the gods in giving too harsh punishments to both mortals and other gods are common in Greek epic and mythology, particularly against Zeus himself. In Book 1 of the *Odyssey*, Telemachos excuses the singer for depicting grievous themes of war and upsetting his mother: he says to Penelope that it

¹³ It could be argued that Satan he is the supreme tempter, in that tempts himself to abandon his rebellion just as he tempts Christ to sin in *Paradise Regained*, Milton's retelling of the New Testament account of Christ's temptation in the desert.

¹⁴ See Fowler (2007) 73, *ad* lines 209-13. Fowler cites C. S. Lewis and William Empson as proponents of this view.

is not the singer's, but Zeus' fault that human life is full of suffering - and so too his tales (*Od.* 1.345-52). But humans aren't the only ones who are resentful. In Book 1 of the *Iliad* Hephaistos complains about Zeus' punishment for his disobedience by casting him down from Olympos (*Il.* 1.589ff., again recalling the motif of the fall), a scene that was radically reinterpreted by the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus into an elaborate allegory.¹⁵ Though far from Proclus' absurd rewriting of the scene, a modern reader may nevertheless be convinced that Zeus here is a metaphor for fate, with its random allocation of trials and blessings. Yet the strength of this scene lies in the realistically human situation of Hephaistos blaming his father for his ugly appearance and lack of success in life.

These are the same charges laid, from late seventeenth century onwards, against Milton's God: firstly, that he is too harsh on Adam and Eve (and Satan himself), and secondly, that God himself has provided the means for the Satan and man to fall by creating his nature frail, much like Hephaistos' club foot. Milton's God defends himself, stating that the angels and men have been given a free will, '[s]ufficient to have stood, though free to fall' (*PL* 3.99).¹⁶

In the *Odyssey*, Zeus too attributes at least a portion of human sufferings to their own choice. They do make life harder for themselves, he seems to lament:

ὦ πόποι, οἷον δὴ νῦν θεοὺς βροτοὶ αἰτιώωνται:
 ἐξ ἡμέων γάρ φασι κάκ' ἔμμεναι, οἱ δὲ καὶ αὐτοὶ
 σφῆσιν ἀτασθαλίησιν ὑπὲρ μόρον ἄλγε' ἔχουσιν ... (*Od.* 1.32-34)

Ah! How mortal men now lay blame upon the gods:

For they say that it is the gods who are the source of ills, and yet they themselves
 still suffer above and beyond their share of sorrows, through their own reckless folly...¹⁷

Zeus uses the phrase ὑπὲρ μόρον, meaning more than their share. 'Fate' here refers to 'what is allotted to you'.¹⁸

Humans characters in epic, however, are capable of making some choices in light (not in spite) of their fate. In fact, it could be argued that ancient epic is all about making impossible choices. For Homeric heroes, the choice is between life and death, fame and obscurity, is played out against the relentless backdrop of war. This sense of being trapped in their human condition, in which immortality can only be achieved through death on the battlefield and subsequent celebration in heroic song is contrasted with the condition of the gods, who, 'ageless and immortal', are exempt from these troubles.

But the story of the *Iliad* is not only about this heroic choice: it sets out to depict the wrath of Achilles, as the first lines of the poem tell us. It is the wrath he experiences after he is slighted by Agamemnon in the redistribution of spoils – a tangible lessening of his honour (his τιμή) amongst the Greeks, which leads him to question his choice in coming to fight and die at Troy. Milton links Satan to this, the oldest of epic reasons for a crisis of heroic values, when he describes Satan's 'sense of injured merit' at not receiving the same honour as that given by God to the Son. The

¹⁵ See Lamberton's analysis of Proclus' creation of a 'table of equivalents' in his reinterpretation of the Homeric passage: Lamberton (1986) 204-5.

¹⁶ Augustine again is a useful source for the doctrine of free will, in that the nature is uncorrupted, but that the will can choose evil (*De Civitate Dei* XII.1): Lewis notes Milton's reliance on this account of Augustine by distinguishing nature from will in the character of Satan. I argue that the language of Satan's rebellion follows this theorem: it is the conflict of the will and a turning away from his nature (from the Latin *pervorto*). See Lewis (1944) 66.

¹⁷ All translations are by the author.

¹⁸ Cunliffe (1985).

etymology of the term ‘merit’, recalling the Latin verb *merere*, conveys that same mercenary dimension present in Homeric τιμή:

... into what pit thou seest
 From what height fallen, so much the stronger proved
 He with his thunder: and till then who knew
 The force of those dire arms?
 Yet not for those
 Nor what the potent victor in his rage
 Can else inflict, do I repent or change
 Though changed in outward lustre, that fixed mind
 And high disdain, from sense of injured merit. (*PL* 1.91-98)

The Son, moreover, is said to receive honour not by birthright but by merit.¹⁹ It seems that Milton has replaced monarchy with meritocracy in heaven, while confusing and conflating centuries of debates about the nature of the Trinity. Moreover, Satan does not so far choose evil, insofar as evil is the only option available to him if he is to rule, to be ‘[e]stablished in a safe unenvied throne’ (*PL* 2.23). Thus it seems that the conditions of peaceful rule can only be achieved in hell!²⁰

At this point we find the famous lines, which are perhaps the clearest indication that Milton is setting up a direct epic link with Homer. Satan’s proclamation ‘Better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven’ (*PL* 1.263) echoes those of the ghost of Achilles, whom Odysseus encounters in the underworld in book 11 of the *Odyssey*. There he tells Achilles of his renown and reverence amongst the Greeks:

... σεῖο δ', Ἀχιλλεῦ,
 οὐ τις ἀνὴρ προπάροιθε μακάρτατος οὔτ' ἄρ' ὀπίσσω.
 πρὶν μὲν γάρ σε ζῶν ἐτίομεν ἴσα θεοῖσιν
 Ἄργεῖοι, νῦν αὖτε μέγα κρατέεις νεκύεσσιν
 ἐνθάδ' ἑών: τῷ μὴ τι θανῶν ἀκαχίζεω, Ἀχιλλεῦ. (*Od.* 11.482-86)

... For no man,
 whether in time gone by or in time to come, is happier than you are, Achilles.
 For in the past, while you lived, we Argives gave you honour in value equal to the gods,
 and now again, dwelling in this place, you command great authority over the dead:
 so do not grieve at all that you are dead, Achilles.

Thus the hero of the *Iliad* has already been transformed into a tradition, and is celebrated in epic song. It would seem that poetic fame has vindicated Achilles’ choice of κλέος over a long life. His response to Odysseus, however, is both astonishing and deeply tragic:

μηδὲ μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεῦ.
 βουλοίμην κ' ἐπάρουρος ἑών θητευέμεν ἄλλω,
 ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀκλήρω, ᾧ μὴ βίωτος πολὺς εἴη,
 ἢ πᾶσι νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν. (*Od.* 11.488-91)

Do not offer me comfort about death, brilliant Odysseus.
 I would more willingly serve as a hired laborer for another,

¹⁹ Fowler points out that ‘Unlike Achilles, Satan’s merit has not in fact been injured’: Fowler (2007) 67, *ad* lines 98-99.

²⁰ More recently, in the twentieth century, C.S. Lewis argued that by giving tangible honour to the Son, God removes himself from exercising personal power. Is the elevation of the Son, therefore, a heightening, or a diminishing of the Father’s omnipotence? In this sense, the political and theological collide. At the same time Milton creates a clear link between God the Father and Homer’s Zeus, whose formulaic epithet in the *Iliad* is the ‘one who hurls thunder’ (see, for example, *Il.* 1.419: Διὶ τερπικεραύνῳ).

for a man who has no land and little means,
than to lord over all the perished dead.

Despite the fantastical setting, the sentiment expressed conveys a truth common to human experience: having ventured into the underworld, experienced death and posthumous fame, Achilles asserts that life is more valuable than the heroic values which so governed his actions at Troy. Thus all his status, his achievements, and his fame amount to nothing in the face of his death. Alastair Fowler, Milton's prolific modern commentator, also notes another source for Satan's proclamation: the words of *Psalms* 89: 'I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked'.²¹ Here communion with the divine is elevated beyond pride and status, a sentiment, which Satan, of course, denies. But the element missing here is that of life itself, of which a mere parallel with the Psalm alone does not convey. Satan is a fallen angel, but still immortal: Achilles' dilemma between fame and being short lived is foreign to him. And yet the tragedy of Satan is greater, in that his sufferings are played out in relentless eternity of the Milton's Hell, a hell not limited to the physical boundaries of Milton's divine and human universe, but in the mind itself, which, in *Paradise Lost*, is eternal: the victory of Renaissance humanism is not without its ironies.

Thus we see that Milton uses – and abuses – both epic and biblical precedents in his depiction of Satan's rebellion, allowing a collision of Homeric ancient ideas of the afterlife with the Christian heaven and hell. In Homer, it is life itself that proves to be the highest value. In Milton, life is redefined in the eternity of the divine cosmos. Thus, by transforming Christian theology and epic themes raises the stakes in epic in allowing his Satan to the triumph of the individual over happiness - and life itself. But it is a triumph and an existence that has been emptied of meaning.

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²¹ Fowler (2007) 76, *ad* line 263.