REVOLUTIONARY SATAN: A REEVALUATION OF THE DEVIL’S
PLACE IN *PARADISE LOST*

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William H. Lavelle

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Preface

Paradise Lost, as one of the most studied texts of the English language, has been exhaustively analyzed from almost every conceivable angle since its publication nearly 350 years ago. Whether viewed as an attempt from a pious man to rationalize the acts of God or an exploration of free will, Milton’s epic has cycled through diverging, occasionally contradictory, readings that tend to indicate more about the era from which the criticism arrives rather than the text itself—it was not until the Romantic era, for example, that notable authors began to view Milton’s God as an amoral tyrant. Despite this, study of Milton’s work has neither waned nor stagnated; rather, critics, now at the global level, have continued to grapple with Paradise Lost, an indication that the poem, despite the mountain of criticism gradually amassing behind it, is still capable of being read in new ways.

A sizeable portion of the poem’s complexity lies in the manner in which it chooses to depict God, who is split into the characters of The Father and The Son, and the Devil. The most notorious figure in Milton’s ouvre, Milton’s Satan stands apart from former depictions of the Devil in its unapologetic identification with the fallen angel’s goals and desires. This, paired with a God that is noticeably less merciful than is traditionally depicted, gives rise to unsettling questions regarding the nature of Christianity and the mind of a poet who would write such a work in a time when, even amongst growing heterodoxy, certain components of Christian faith were considered unshakable truths. The ambiguities of these two characters have perhaps yielded the most pages of criticism through the years.
Much of the scholarship focused on God and Satan have painstakingly attempted to unify *Paradise Lost* with its source material, the book of Genesis. It is unquestionable from Milton’s other writings, fictitious and not, that he was a devoted Christian who studied the bible extensively. Following this and *Paradise Lost*’s self-proclaimed mission statement (“to justify the ways of God to man”), many scholars have questioned how an obviously devoted man could retell Genesis in such a way that the reader identifies with the source of cosmic evil. How could Milton, for all his religious fervor throughout his life, create a Satan that comes off as more relatable (or even more moral) than God himself?

The route that I have taken to solve this incongruity in the following pages, as some have done before me, is to divorce the text from its source material and view it as something other than just an expression of religious devotion or theological study. Drawing extensively from Milton’s life, historical predicament and political tracts, my reading views the text as an expression of political disillusionment, an examination of the act of revolt from a man who had passionately supported a doomed revolution. Satan, then, is the everyman revolutionary, tired of the system in which he lives and committed to building the world in his own image. The Father, on the other hand, is the monolithic, supremely powerful standing king, who will do everything in his power to maintain his position. The resulting events are an exploration of this dynamic, of why revolutions, regardless of the validity of their grounds, never, in Milton’s mind, seem to succeed in their goals of truly and lastingly transforming society.
Chapter 1 - The Political Context of the English Revolution and its Aftermath

“No man who knows aught can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were born free, being the image and resemblance of God himself, and were, by privilege above all the creatures, born to command and not to obey.” -John Milton, The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates (390)

Uncertain and Unprecedented Times: The English Civil War

If the long-term success of the Reformation allowed for the English people to gradually challenge long-standing cultural institutions such as the monarchy and the Church, the seventeenth century is the period in which these challenges culminated into an attempted societal upheaval. As Perez Zagorin remarks in his seminal A History of Political Thought in the English Revolution, the mid-seventeenth century was an “unprecedented time” for England, in which “the old order was being shaken to its foundations” by a heretofore unheard of influx of political thought, largely in the form of pamphlets and other small published works. This climate allowed for “English political thought” to be “the most advanced in Europe at that time,” so much so that Zagorin refers to this period as maintaining “the highest significance in the history both of English and of European political philosophy” (Zagorin 1).

Unlike in many contemporary revolutions, the English Revolution, as it is called by Christopher Hill and his intellectual descendants, contained multiple disparate factions all vying for slightly different forms of social and political upheaval. Notable amongst these groups were revolutionary activists such as the Levellers, the Diggers, the Ranters, the Fifth-Monarchists and the republicans with whom Milton
could be most closely aligned. I will refer to these groups collectively as the “radical” groups of this time, as these were the groups that were most consistently critical of the English monarchy, its laws and its interconnectedness with religion. While it should be noted that these factions constituted “several stages in the radical response to a rapidly changing context more than actual contemporaneous groups,” that such a large number of self-identifying groups were all interested in obtaining different social and political outcomes speaks to the unpredictability of politics at this time (Caricchio 2).

For the sake of avoiding semantic confusion, I would first like to briefly define the term “radical” and explain how I would like to approach its use in this thesis as a relative term rather than a static ideological descriptor. British historiographer Glenn Burgess, in his essay “A Matter of Context: Radicalism and the English Revolution,” is skeptical (albeit not entirely damning) of use of the term “radical” as anachronistic and therefore not useful in defining the strains of unorthodox political thought that occurred in the seventeenth century. While I agree that there is no historiographically useful definition of a static “radical political philosophy,” I nonetheless assert that an individual or group can still be considered radical relative to the other political outlooks of a given time, a possibility that Burgess himself addresses by referencing Colin Davis’ three point definition of what qualifies a group as radical. Since I find this to be a useful term for my purposes, my definition of what defines a group, individual, or belief as radical is synonymous with that of Davis. Davis’ definition is as follows: to be considered radical, a group, individual or ideology must “(1) de-legitimate an old socio-political order, (2) it must re-legitimate an alternative or new
socio-political order and (3) it must provide a transfer mechanism that will change things from the old to the new” (Burgess 2). This definition can be applied to both religious and governmental reformers, as both sought a transformation of the socio-political order, albeit in disparate (though still highly interconnected) societal institutions.

Most of these radical groups--which generally espoused anti-absolutism in monarchical governance and “anti-clericalism”--were motivated more by what they perceived as defects in religious practice and organization than anything else (Sommerville 200). J.P. Sommerville’s study of the political and religious differences of the pre-Civil War period, *Royalists & Patriots*, unpacks some of the specific issues that motivated these radical groups to participate in politics through writing, and eventually violence. He particularly highlights the anti-clerical nature of these groups, noting that they “resented the claims to wealth, status and power of the clergy” and, perhaps as a result, were subject to “church courts” that “interfer[ed] in their private lives” (Sommerville 200). As for more secular complaints, which would eventually become of greater concern to Milton later in his life, many radicals questioned the absolutist authority of the king, perceiving that Charles I continually “undermine[d] the liberties” supposedly “guaranteed” by the “law” (Sommerville 134). In addition to “freedom from taxation and legislation except with your own consent,” which the crown consistently violated, radicals became increasingly concerned by the public’s dwindling “immunity from arbitrary imprisonment,” as Charles I began jailing those that objected to his exorbitant tax demands in 1627 (Sommerville 134).
While the king’s subversion of liberties identified by positive law contributed significantly to the public outrage that would fester into the English Civil War, some historiographers view the more religiously-motivated clash between anti-clericalists and those that supported a hierarchical state church as inevitable. Jonathan Scott, a political historian who has written extensively on this historical moment, has postulated that the mostly Protestant radical groups that contributed to the events of the English Revolution should be viewed in the greater context of (and as a symptom of) the larger “European Reformation’ and its tensions” (Caricchio 3). Scott’s ultimate point, then, is that these Protestant groups were radicals by necessity. Commitment to their religious beliefs, which valued nominally Presbyterian values such as “peace, charity...equality” and a sola fide doctrine necessarily pitted them against religious and governmental institutions such as the hierarchical Anglican Church--such institutions were considered corrupt by radicals, as they were seen as valuing conformity with an earthly hierarchy over moral equality and personal biblical study (Caricchio 3). More religiously motivated groups, such as the Levellers and the Diggers, then, became unlikely bedfellows with groups such as republicans, who fought for the mostly secular, though related, ideal of a non-monarchical state. As a result, these radicals, which consisted of an intermingled group of Protestants and more secular republicans, became interested in dethroning Charles I as “a fulfillment of Christian moral liberty and of a basic idea of self-government through institutions” (Caricchio 3).
Perhaps most exemplary of the combined religious and secular motivations for revolution are the biblical discussions of monarchy and how, if at all, it should be practiced on Earth. Charles I and his royalist supporters favored a biblically-motivated form of absolutism. While some royalists believed the king to be accountable to already established laws, by the seventeenth century, most royalists supported the view that the king was “accountable to God alone and that he was above all human laws,” thus granting him authority to act however he pleases (Sommerville 10). The anti-absolutists, on the other hand (which, in the early seventeenth century, actually included many of the “earliest defenders of the Church of England,” despite that Church’s recognitions of the king’s authority), were motivated by newfound—or, at least, newly popularized—interpretations of the bible. They argued that “the purpose of the commonwealth was to promote the public welfare and not the interests of private groups or individuals” (Sommerville 68-69). While royalists threatened a societal descent into “anarchy” without a king, radical groups countered that society was worse-off under the “enslave[ment]” of monarchy (Sommerville 69). Due to the inextricable relationship between religion and politics at the time, the repercussions of these differences in Christian belief manifested themselves throughout the political realm. While, especially in the years prior to the Civil War, an opposition to the clergy did not necessitate an opposition to the monarchy, a more republican approach to biblical interpretation in politics was certainly beginning to become more prominent.

By extension, many scholars, including Caricchio and Scott, cite Calvinist religious organization as motivating many members of these radical religious groups
to stop seeing value in a governmental entity organized in the hierarchical nature of oppressive religious establishments such as the Anglican and Catholic churches. On this subject, Sommerville asserts that “the roots of modern democracy” can be traced back to Calvinism (Sommerville 48). Additionally, in his “Radicalism & the English Revolution,” Caricchio credits “a Christian moral aspiration to freedom from oppression” as the “common ground” upon which alliances between various radical religious and political groups were formed (Caricchio 3). As these groups learned in their own religious congregations, which were organized based more upon notions of equality and group rule/participation, an institution of social organization need not be ruled by an autocrat to prevent disorder. In fact, one of the royalists’ primary arguments--the claim that a single, all-powerful ruler is needed to lead society and prevent it from collapsing into complete chaos, a view later explored by Hobbes--likely did not faze members of these groups, as their experience with their congregations proved to them that this was not the case.

For the purposes of my argument, one of the more significant developments that came out of the political culture surrounding the events of the Revolution itself was the creation of a lively political environment, in which writers and speakers of every conceivable background and motivation had enhanced opportunities to openly express their views. This was a significant departure from the ways of the immediate past, in which only those that had the favor (or spoke in favor) of the king and Parliament were permitted to distribute their works due to the regulatory body of the Star Chamber, which was abolished just a few years prior to the Civil War.
Additionally, popular perception regarding congregation of political and religious
groups in public spaces and what types of discourse were allowed to be spoken in
public made more allowances than ever before. These evolutions, in addition to
increasing literacy, allowed “print,” to truly “change the rules” of political discourse in
this time, even as printing presses had existed for more than a century before
(Caricchio 2). The permission to discuss heretofore banned subjects and a greater
access to the means of distribution created “an enlarged space for popular politics and
[movement] towards an incipient democratic culture” (Caricchio 2). Most importantly,
the influx of popular political writings at this time allowed for “conflicting religious
and political views, heterogeneity of printed texts and active manipulation by readers”
(Caricchio 2). This also lead to an important amalgamation of “elite and popular
languages” in said political writings. As Caricchio goes on to say, “all sides [of the
public] participated in the public area of debate: it was neither the privilege of the
parliamentarians nor royalists, of Presbyterians or of ‘Sectaries’ and Levellers, of
conservative or of radicals. It was their sphere of contest through which all of them
contributed to the change in political culture” (Caricchio 3).

Of course, in early modern England, the distinction between “public” and
“private” was quite different from today. There is a debate amongst scholars of this
time period as to whether the English Civil War is the true birthplace of the
Habermasian “public sphere,” or the concept of free, public discourse unimpeded by
censorship or class strata. As the “publicness” of pamphlets at this time is highly
significant to the culture leading up to and surrounding the Civil War (in that they
were read by various sectors of society, rather than just the elite), there is certainly an argument to be made that the public sphere existed at least in its nascent form. The idea that the public sphere contributed significantly to politics around the Civil War is best articulated by Peter Lake and Steve Pincus, who write in a 2006 essay entitled “Rethinking the Public Sphere in Early Modern England” that the idea of the public sphere, with qualifications, “does have real efficacy in discussions of Early Modern England,” even if it cannot be considered its birthplace (Lake & Pincus 270). As with my above discussion of the term “radical,” the public sphere needs only be defined carefully to be useful in thinking about the period of the English Civil War. Lake and Pincus propose a conception of public sphere in this time as “a narrative” around which to frame the events of the Civil War and its aftermath as opposed to an environment that corresponded to Habermas’ “rigid...categories” and definition of historical eras (Lake & Pincus 273). For the purposes of this thesis, then, the mid-seventeenth century marks the beginning of the modern public sphere in England as defined by Lake and Pincus. It was a time in which “there was an unprecedented proliferation of newsprint, polemic, propaganda and petitioning” by individuals with a range of motivations, including “narrow political advantage, economic self-interest, or desire to achieve ideological hegemony” (Lake & Pincus 280). This multitude of texts by laymen, coupled with an increasing rate of literacy and earth-shaking political revelations, certainly mark this period’s literary output as significant and unprecedented.
Amidst this unimaginably fertile literary and political climate, John Milton would eventually rise above the masses, if not necessarily as the foremost political theorist, then as one of the most provocative and oft-considered writers. Zagorin goes on to note that, along “with John Goodwin,” Milton was the most influential and “effective” defender of the Commonwealth and its participants, both before, during and after the Revolution (107). Two of the more impactful aspects of his political writing, as we shall see in even greater detail later in this chapter, are his “lay-pride” and staunch opposition to any sort of hierarchical structuring of a religious body which, as Zagorin notes, form the foundation of Milton’s divergence from his “Presbyterian” contemporaries (109). He scorned what he saw as the arrogance of the clerical class, “who villif[ied] the people as being too low in capacity to search for divine knowledge” (109). This assisted in rallying the many other radical Protestant sects that believed in individual Biblical study and found the existence of a hierarchical clergy to be dangerous, oppressive and redundant. Milton would become one of the main writers who first gave a notable voice to these beliefs in this period.

**Timeline of a Radical: A Brief Overview of Milton’s Political Development from Idealism to Disillusionment**

As the first rumblings of political unrest were heard in the late 1630s, Milton was just one voice amongst many writing on the state of the monarchy. Barbara Lewalski’s 2002 critical biography of Milton notes that he returned to England from a stint in Italy in 1639 to find the nation of his birth in a state of “precarious peace” (Lewalski 120). Reflecting on this time in his life in 1654’s *Second Defense of the*
English People, Milton seems to have seen his decision to enter the realm of political writing as a “duty” rather than a conscious career choice (Lewalski 121). Writing of the same time in the poet’s life, Gordon Campbell emphasizes that Milton’s decision to return to England was motivated directly by the kingdom’s involvement in the two Bishops’ Wars in Scotland, two conflicts that stemmed from Charles I’s insistence on instituting a Book of Common Prayer that would bring the predominantly Presbyterian Scotland closer to the king’s Anglican Church (Campbell 131-132). Despite the apparently “‘blissful’” time Milton was having pursuing his studies in Italy, the king’s exploits in Scotland constituted a “crisis moment” for the young writer, in which he was “led by a strong sense of duty to God, truth” and “the common good” to attempt to affect change in the political realm (Lewalski 121).

Amongst what are now considered his lesser works, Milton’s first five tracts primarily demonstrate his commitment to typically Presbyterian values as opposed to those represented by the Anglican Church, which, in its hierarchical structure and connection to the state, was perceived as dysfunctional and possibly illegitimate by republicans such as Milton. These first five tracts—Of Reformation, Of Prelatical Episcopacy, Animadversions, The Reason of Church-Government Urged Against Prelaty and Apology for Smectymnuus—are typically dubbed the “antiprelatical tracts” by scholars, and for good reason, as each aims primarily to “defame the bishops by every rhetorical means, so as to eradicate them ‘root and branch’ from both civil and ecclesiastical offices, along with their ‘popish’ liturgy, canons, courts, privileges, property and wealth” (Lewalski 121).
In both their relative thematic and compositional simplicity, the antiprelatical tracts are understandably not amongst Milton’s most analyzed works. Even for my purposes, they are important more in how they signify Milton’s development as a writer and thinker than as works in and of themselves. As Lewalski notes, the tracts are largely significant for the manner in which Milton embodies “several roles, varying the mix as genre and rhetorical purpose dictate: scholar, humanist critic, rhetorician, teacher, patriot, satirist, reformist poet, prophet and bard” (Lewalski 121). Campbell, on the other hand, emphasizes how the antiprelatical tracts set the stage for Milton’s later engagement with Presbyterian and anti-monarchical issues, as “the debate about prelacy was merely one element in a complex collision of ideologies” (Campbell 140). While Milton’s defense of religious minorities became ever more “incisive, vivid violent and vindictive” over the course of the antiprelatical tracts, the issues about which he was writing “were...running out of steam” by 1641, as both King Charles I and those that opposed him on the Book of Common Prayer deescalated their rhetoric (Campbell 143-144).

By 1642, Milton’s interest in the monarchy’s control over religion began to expand outward toward other, more secular concerns over Charles I’s power. Though understandably skeptical of his claim, Lewalski again cites Milton’s reflections on his early political writings from 1654’s Second Defense, in which he states that all of his political tracts were part of an “overarching, preconceived plan,” as evincing a change in Milton’s approach (Lewalski 154). In the section she cites, Milton asserts that there are, to him, “three varieties of liberty without which civilized life is scarcely possible,
namely ecclesiastical liberty, domestic or personal liberty, and civil liberty.”

Recounting his transition from the antiprelatical tracts to the more politically-minded (though still religiously informed) tracts written during the 1642-1645 period, he goes on to claim that since he “had already written about the first [variety of liberty],” he decided to tackle the “second or domestic kind” (Lewalski 154). While there is of course no way to prove whether or not the young Milton conceived these tracts to unfold according to this overarching plan, I nonetheless find it a useful, concise way of viewing the development of his political writing, as he moved from the first to the second to the third type of liberty as time went on.

One of the most substantial works of Milton’s incredibly fertile 1641-1645 period, The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, was published in 1643. The First Civil War had been underway for some months, so far “with success and failure evenly distributed between the sides” (Campbell 158). Reeling from a personal experience with failed marriage, the Divorce tract is addressed to the English Parliament and was written with the express goal of changing England’s then stringent divorce laws, which were based on a tradition of Biblical interpretation. Campbell stresses the unorthodox nature of Milton’s expectation that civilian writing could affect change in Parliament, noting that “his decision to attempt to change canon laws on divorce through public debate...seemed at best overly optimistic and at worse crassly naive.” He stipulates, however, that such optimism “reflected the mood among puritan activists confident that they, not the bishops, were in control of the conduct of religious observance in England” (Campbell 158). While still dealing with a relatively
minor political/religious issue (compared to freedom of expression, the press and religion), then, Milton still wrote in the context of a political/religious radical who attempted to change laws he felt unjust by whatever means he could. Though thematically slight compared to his later prose writings, *On Divorce* certainly marked a significant transformation for Milton, who was becoming sharper in his rhetoric and bolder in his politics.

If *On Divorce* marked the beginning of Milton’s most prolific political period, then *Areopagitica*, published a year later, signified its apex. Lewalski asserts that it marks a “transform[ation]” of the “Renaissance genre of ‘Advice to Princes’ into a republican advice to a council or senate” (Lewalski 190). *Areopagitica*, along with *Of Education*, published the same year, and *Tetrachordon*, another divorce tract published in 1645, mark an expansion on Milton’s earlier tracts in that they serve as direct, public arguments to the members of Parliament regarding a specific law or policy and, typically, a thorough explanation of how and why said law or policy should change. This expansion of earlier techniques, along with a noticeably greater sense of passion, tenacity and reasoning, ensures that *Areopagitica* is the culmination of Milton’s early radical period.

By this point, Milton had amassed a body of work substantial enough that much of his political ideology could be surmised by reading his bibliography. Glenn Burgess, writing more generally on radicalism in and around the English Civil War, refers to what he calls a “neo-Roman theory of liberty” in describing the republican radicals of the Revolution, drawing a parallel between the republican stirrings of this
time and the ideological tenets of the Roman Republic (Burgess 2). At various points in his article, Burgess describes those that subscribed to the neo-Roman theory of liberty as skeptical of “orthodoxy or conformity,” having a belief in “collective political and individual moral self-government” and as holding the “view that a man [is] not free but a slave unless free from the will of others” (Burgess 2). While this descriptor discounts the significant religious differences that played into the conflict, I find it a useful term in describing the general political ideology of Milton (a famed student of the Classics) and his republican compatriots. From this point forward, then, I will define the “neo-Roman theory of liberty” in this paper as the ideological resurgence of classical republicanism in and around the English Civil War that valued the possibilities of elected government and individual freedom over the protection of a monarchy and ideological homogeny.

Lewalski affirms Burgess’ evaluation in her assessment that Milton attempts to “import the ethos of Athenian democracy,” hinting that London had become a new Athens, “a center of vibrant political and cultural life” (Lewalski 191). In fact, Milton seems quite certain in this tract and others from this period that he was living and writing in a significant cultural moment, in which the fetters of monarchy and hierarchical churches could finally be cast off. Andrew Escobedo, in his Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England, postulates that the rapidly changing political and religious context of the Civil War--especially “the revolution against, and eventual replacement of, the centuries-old prelatical system”--led Milton to see his historical moment as “a violent break from the past that complicat[ed] [his] sense of
England’s place in time,” perhaps even leading to a belief that the newly revolutionary England would “continue to reform, purifying itself until it bec[ame] nearly continuous with the paradise Christ may bring to Earth” in the future (Escobedo 210, 232).

This newly developed confidence in his historical moment became even more pronounced in the second phase of Milton’s political thinking, in which he participated in various positions in the newly established Protectorate under Cromwell. His significant writing of this time, which includes *Eikonoklastes*, a defense of the execution of Charles I, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, an anti-monarchical tract and the two *Defenses of the English People*, which defend the Protectorate from its many critics, are brash and patriotic where his earlier works were biting and subversive. *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* was the first of these to be published, and serves as the clearest connection between Milton as an early radical and Milton as part of Cromwell’s regime. *Tenure* was published in February of 1649, just before the Parliamentary forces claimed victory in the Civil War, “killing the king, asserting the sovereignty and supremacy of the House of Commons and abolishing the monarchy and the House of Lords,” and is thus one of Milton’s most overtly political works by context alone (Campbell 203). This is of course additionally due to the text itself, which, instead of analyzing a particular political issue, rails against the king’s specific failures and more broadly against monarchy itself.

The greatest chronological gap in Milton’s output as a political thinker and as a writer in general occurred during the Protectorate’s reign. Campbell notes that from
1654 to 1658, he published only “two major works, both of them Latin polemics,” in the form of the two *Defenses of the English People*, which largely sought to defend Cromwell’s regime (as well as Milton’s own actions) and favorably compare the Protectorate to living under the yoke of a monarch (Campbell 250). Milton’s staunch defense of the new government, which seemed to lack the fiery rhetoric of his former attacks on the monarchy, can be traced to his favorable position within the Protectorate. Milton “accomodat[ed] himself to Cromwell’s ever-more-powerful control” and held a multitude of posts during his reign, which allowed him the time and resources to “strengthen his social ties,” “complete a number of short poems of considerable distinction” and “pursue major research projects in systematic theology, in British history and in classical lexicography” (Campbell 250). If his literary output is any indication, then, the period during which Milton served under Cromwell seems to have been Milton at his most politically satisfied, though there is no indication as to whether this resulted from Milton’s support of the Protectorate, a satisfaction with being treated so well by the governing regime, his encroaching blindness (which was worsening considerably during this time), or even a fear of speaking too strongly against Cromwell, as the Protectorate would eventually mutate into a modified monarchy.

By the collapse of the Protectorate and the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, Milton’s support of the Protectorate became less apparent, as “the English people showed increasing dissatisfaction with Puritan rule, and the royalists gained strength” (Lewalski 357). In the first stages of the Restoration, Milton refused to back down in
his rhetoric, openly espousing the significance of “religious freedom” in a
contemporary state and challenging monarchy again in The Ready and Easy Way to
Establish a Free Commonwealth (Lewalski 357). Shortly after he published this work,
however, his political agitation abruptly ceased. If his discretion in 1660 and after
arose from a fear of the new monarchy’s response to his previous anti-loyalist claims,
he was justified in his paranoia. Lewalski points out that “[i]n the years after the
Restoration, Milton’s worst political fears were realized,” as “[s]everal of his closest
associates were brutally executed and others imprisoned.” Additionally, “Anglicanism
triumphed and religious dissent of all sorts was harshly repressed” (Lewalski 398). By
1660, then, the aging Milton was placed in the uncompromising position of being an
enemy of the state of which he used to be a part, living in “fear of his life” and being
“imprisoned for some weeks” that very year (Lewalski 398).

It was during and after this period of the Restoration in which Milton
underwent the final--and, for the purposes of his fictional output, most important--political transformation of his life: from staunch supporter of a new state to
disillusioned radical. Cromwell’s government, which, to him, was a radical
government that was exemplary of his era’s exciting new calls for liberty and religious
heterogeneity, was an unqualified failure. Its demise and the public’s strong reaction
against it dishearteningly proved to Milton that England, as he viewed it, was not fully
ready to shake off the fetters of the monarchy he had spent much of his life railing
against. Primary information on his political thought in this final period of his life is
scant, as he remained largely “inconspicuous” through the early- to mid-1660s and
focused on his personal life up until the completion of *Paradise Lost*, which “may well have been ready for the press no later than February 1665” (Campbell 320, 324).

*Paradise Lost*, then, is the product of a period in which Milton felt less secure than ever in directly addressing his radical beliefs to the public. While certainly disillusioned by the failure of the Protectorate and the caprice of the English people, Milton nonetheless maintained his anti-monarchical and anti-clerical positions throughout the writing of this work. As will be explored in later chapters, Milton’s defining poem marks a transition in how Milton packaged his beliefs rather than in the beliefs themselves. Certainly fearful for his own well being, Milton covertly imbued these fictional works with the political furor of his earlier prose tracts, the scope and complexity of which extend far beyond the capabilities of political prose.

**A Brief Analysis of Three of Milton’s Radical Prose Tracts**

Before moving directly to my target text of *Paradise Lost*, I would like to briefly examine a few of Milton’s most prominent political tracts in order to provide my reader with a background in his approach to writing about political issues prior to 1660. The three tracts I will be examining--*Areopagitica*, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* and *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth*--each have sections that depict Milton’s political development and engagement as I have outlined above. Additionally, in allowing Milton’s works to speak for themselves, I aim to highlight the areas in which his opposition to monarchy, his support of republicanism and his espousal of policies considered radical for the time correspond to the actions of politically motivated characters such as Satan and the Father in
Paradise Lost. In establishing these connections, I argue that Paradise Lost serves as a culmination of Milton’s political development.

The first treatise I will be examining is perhaps Milton’s most famous, Areopagitica. As noted above, Areopagitica was written and published during the First Civil War in 1644 and is typically considered Milton’s greatest early prose tract, if not his definitive best. Ostensibly an attack on the English government’s Licensing Order of 1643, Areopagitica more broadly explores many of the defining aspects of Milton’s neo-Roman theory of liberty and therefore can be seen as the foremost example of the young Milton’s mind and ideas as the Revolution changed the political arena around him.

In a paper reviewing the scholarly response to Areopagitica and its general influence over the centuries, Thomas Fulton emphasizes that the “political arguments” of the treatise differ “significantly from the methodology of political thought of the early Stuart period” and before (Fulton 48). He even goes so far as to argue that Areopagitica, along with Hobbes’ Leviathan, is a “crucial part” in the development of what would become liberalism due to its emphasis on “the process by which humans obtain knowledge” and “irreducible laws of human nature” over “the accuracy of truth claims” (Fulton 48). While the impact of Milton on later centuries is not my charge here, Fulton homes in on a defining aspect of both the text and Milton as an author that sets him apart from the crowd. Areopagitica, aside from its expressed purpose of ending licensing, a position Milton would eventually undermine by becoming a licenser himself under Cromwell, feels radical for its time because it uses new terms
and conceptions to think about the relationship between ruler and subject, government and citizen.

Unlike many of Milton’s other treatises, which rely heavily on Scripture, *Areopagitica* draws largely on its author’s understanding of the process of history, particularly Classical times. From these references, Milton extrapolates what he seems to believe are liberties necessary to human nature. In defending individual liberty to choose what and what not to read, Milton asserts that God intentionally “left arbitrary the dieting and repasting of [humans’] minds, as wherein every mature man might have to exercise his own leading capacity” (Milton 349). He goes on to argue that historical evidence suggests that God (or Nature) does not aim “to captivate” humanity “under a perpetual childhood of prescription, but trusts him with the gift of reason to be his own chooser” (Milton 349).

There is also a sense throughout the text that Milton holds one value in particular--knowledge--as being essential to the cultivation of a strong and enviable society. For Milton in *Areopagitica*, universal access to knowledge--in the form of a free press--must essentially be provided for England to be a properly free country. “Truth and understanding are not such wares as to be monopolized as to be traded in by tickets and statutes and standards,” he writes (Milton 361). He later compares the licensing law to a form of bondage, invoking a Biblical rule of the Philistines which prevented the Hebrews “from sharpening of [their] own axes and coulters,” forcing them to be dependent on their oppressors to continue working.
In novelly espousing radical values such as universal access to knowledge, this treatise can be seen as the culmination of Milton’s radicalism prior to his role in the Protectorate. Like Hobbes a few years after him (though Milton comes to wildly different conclusions), Milton bases his arguments in fundamental observations on human nature, usually framed in terms of God’s intentions regarding creating and limiting humanity. He does not draw his authority from Classical or Abrahamic texts, though he does reference them to make his case. Rather, his claims are based in an assumed historical continuity and the constant of human nature, from which he derives fundamental laws or rights that determine how an individual can function in a civil society. This approach to argument is essential in understanding Milton’s political outlook at this time, as his radicalism is dependent on these theories of inextricable human rights. Without his beliefs in these rights and their nature, his arguments on licensing, divorce, the monarchy, etc. would have been far less influential and far less effective.

By 1649, the year *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* was published, Milton saw the rights for which he argued in *Areopagitica* and his other early tracts on the verge of being realized. Charles I had been executed, and it at once seemed possible that England could move forward without the monarchy and its limitations. Written not long before participating in Cromwell’s government, *Tenure* finds Milton perhaps at his most brashly republican, as various lines from this tract are quoted as influencing later Enlightenment thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson and John Locke (Rosenblatt 382). It also finds Milton at his most sectarian, endorsing violence and
aggression as the primary means of changing a government. Thus, it is most exemplary of Milton’s changing political mindset as he became part of the Protectorate.

The shift in tone is apparent as soon as one begins *Tenure*. Milton begins by harshly decrying the royalists (among others, including many Presbyterians) that opposed Charles I’s execution, calling them “slaves” that are unable to function without the “vicious rule” that keeps them “comfortable” (Milton 385). He goes on to assert that “none can love freedom heartily but good men.” “The rest,” he says, “love not freedom but license,” implying that freedom can only truly exist when the individual is wholly free from tyranny; put another way, there can be no freedom within oppression (Milton 385). As in *Areopagitica*, he invokes God’s will in his defense of Charles I’s death, claiming God gave “victory” to the anti-royalists and that the impending “alteration of laws, change of government” and “downfall of princes with their families” are ordained as well (Milton 386). This, by extension, leads to an eventually violent rejection of the divine right of kings in the text, as Milton clearly sees monarchy as an affront to God rather than an extension of his will.

While these assertions on Milton’s part are well-argued and prescient of the way Western society would eventually develop, his fiery and at times aggressive rhetoric in this tract likely speaks to his zeal for the new government in which he would eventually participate. He claims that tyrants, a term which seems to include both monarchs and those who support them, are counter to the will of God and therefore dangerous, asserting that they “fear none more than the true church and
saints of God as the dangerous enemies and subverters of monarchy” (Milton 399).

Though not necessarily defensive of the Charles I’s death, he staunchly defends the kings deposition, viewing the charge of regicide as absurd. Interestingly, Milton defends against the claim of regicide by invoking, in what can be seen as an early iteration of the social contract the idea of public consent to leadership. Thus, he says, “a king must be killed while he is a king” for regicide to be legitimate; since the king loses authority the moment his subjects no longer agree to his rule, he is no longer a “king” if the subjects decide to kill him afterwards (Milton 408). Continuing, he argues that by “deposing and waging war against [Charles]”, which aside from endangering his life, “set him in the farthest opposite point from any vital function as a king” (Milton 408). He goes on to say that Charles I’s imprisonment and treatment up until his death were essential in his deposition, in that it “brought him to the lowest degradement and incapacity of the regal name” (Milton 408). By 1649, then, Milton did not have far to go ideologically in becoming a member of Cromwell’s government. His opposition to the monarchy and its actions seems to have curdled into a hatred not just of monarchy, but of monarchs and nobles themselves.

Throughout the Protectorate’s reign, Milton seems to have become much less prolific as a published writer. This changed at the decade’s end, as Cromwell died in 1658 and the Protectorate began to decline rapidly. Whatever his exact feelings on the Protectorate and its exact successes and failures as an alternative to monarchy, Milton makes quite clear in his 1660 treatise *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* that, for him, there was virtually no distinction between monarchy and
tyranny. A sort of final attempt at convincing those around him to avoid the reestablishment of a monarchy, *Ready and Easy Way* sees Milton recapitulating many of the points of his earlier anti-monarchical tract, this time with an added air of defiance and even weariness. Despite impassioned arguments such as *Ready and Easy Way*, however, Milton’s fears certainly did come true, as the monarchy was restored shortly after the publication of the treatise’s second edition. As will be seen, it does not require much of a mental leap to connect the last-ditch idealism of *Ready and Easy Way* with the disillusioned, somewhat cynical poet that authored *Paradise Lost* a few years later.

The second edition of the treatise, the better known and fierier of the two, begins with a sense of urgency only hinted at in Milton’s earlier political tracts. He warns of the “noxious humor of returning to bondage” being “instilled...among too many people” by royalist “deceivers,” fearing supporters of the crown would manipulate the public into returning to monarchy (Milton 422). Throughout much of the text, Milton tasks himself with countering the claims of these “deceivers” by discussing the potential implications for the populace if a king were reestablished. In addition to what Milton describes as the “detested thralldom of kingship,” in which those that overthrew the monarchy would be forced to become “slanderers of our own just and religious deeds,” he also advises that returning to such a state would simply necessitate another revolt down the line. In a claim eerily similar to one uttered by Satan in the later *Paradise Lost*, Milton asserts, “if we return to kingship and soon repent...we may be forced perhaps to fight over again all that we have fought” (Milton
426-427). In what may have been an attempt to sway non-republicans, as republicanism was not a particularly popular theory, Milton spends much of this treatises second half proposing specific institutions within his vision of a republican commonwealth, highlighting how specific laws--particularly civil rights--are better enforced without a monarchy. Most telling of Milton’s evolving political consciousness is the tract’s concluding paragraph, in which Milton seems to acknowledge the impending failure of seventeenth century republicanism. He refers to the “deluge of...epidemic madness” within the multitude and compares the many commoners clamoring for a new king to Israelites choosing to reenter Egyptian slavery (Milton 446-447).

*Ready and Easy Way* makes it quite apparent, then, that Milton’s primary concern in what would become the buildup to the restoration of the monarchy, was the problem of convincing the large segment of the English population that still supported the monarchy of the benefits of republicanism. In the treatise, he laments the “nation” for so “basely and besottedly” running back to the “yoke” that they had previously “broken” (Milton 430). Ultimately, it seems that he faults these people, who would, in Milton’s mind, prefer the comfort of servitude to the uncertainty of self-reliance, with the failure of the Protectorate and other potential forms of republicanism in his time. Interestingly, Milton does not seem to acknowledge the many failings and monarchical parallels of the Protectorate, though this does not mean he was deluded or unaware--it seems that, despite specific failings, any system *established as a republic* would be preferable to an overt monarchy. For all its attempts at changing the course
of history, *Ready and Easy Way* can best be thought of as a laundry list of Milton’s preoccupations with what was quickly becoming the imminent restoration of the monarchy. Despite his best efforts at convincing the reading public of the merits of republicanism, he acknowledges that the less-educated multitude could not easily be swayed from the security provided by a strong ruler. *Ready and Easy Way* is the true beginning of Milton’s disillusionment with the political process, revolutionary or otherwise.

Milton’s development as a political thinker, as indicated by his biographical information and the above sampling of his political writings as he aged, can be seen as transpiring in a fairly linear fashion. Upon witnessing and hearing of what he saw as unjust actions by his government, Milton, a passionate, tenacious man privileged enough to feel as though he could enact the changes he wished to see himself, began to support republicanism and radical freedom of religion, culminating in his participation in the deposition of the king and the establishment of the Protectorate. After a decade of mostly quiet work as a friend of Cromwell’s regime, he witnessed the downfall of the Protectorate and the eventual restoration of the monarchy, rendering what he saw as a truly revolutionary moment in English history a decade-long footnote. Though the monarchy had faced unprecedented opposition, Milton saw how it is easier for many to live within the security of an oppressive regime than to fight for greater liberty. Saddened by a squandering of what he saw as the chief triumph of his generation’s historical moment, Milton’s youthful idealism curdled into disillusionment as he entered the period of his life in which he wrote his *magnum opus*. 
Chapter 2 - The Adversary

“The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.” - John Milton, (Paradise Lost I, 254-255)

Milton’s Satan as a Necessarily Flawed Portrait of Freedom

By the time Milton completed his seminal poem, he had already developed a shrewd political mind and a keen sense of England’s culture and history. He had also experienced more than a lifetime’s worth of political triumphs and failures, from his prestigious position in the Protectorate to the persecution and eventual jailing he suffered under the restored monarchy. Paradise Lost, then, is infinitely more complex than any of Milton’s previous output, political or otherwise, attempting to unify a retelling of Genesis, Classical epic heroism, English history and politics, theological musings on humanity’s future and purpose, and, my focus, Milton’s own ideas on the state, the individual, freedom, bondage, virtue and the nature of evil. A significant portion of scholarship in the centuries since Paradise Lost’s publication has rightfully focused on the character of Satan, as the poem’s treatment of Christianity’s professed Enemy is morally conflicted at its most judgmental and near heretical at its most sympathetic. Across the centuries, many scholars have strained attempting to reconcile Milton’s Satan with the rest of his writerly output, leading to many twentieth century critics’ conclusions that Satan is meant to function as little more than his traditional role as God’s antithesis, an emotionally complicated, though ultimately selfish, force of destruction that ruins humanity’s privileged relationship with Heaven and destroys himself in the process. This interpretation certainly simplifies the poem’s already
layered thematic implications and allows for a more streamlined analysis of the poem’s other themes, but cannot properly reconcile the morally conflicted depictions of God and Satan with their biblical counterparts. Falling more in line with the nineteenth century Romantic critics and a new twenty-first century generation of Miltonists, my reading investigates these ambiguities and attempts to unify them with his substantial political output.

A notorious puzzle for literary audiences and critics since the poem’s publication, Milton’s Satan is an intentionally contradictory character that, despite a few incomplete precedents, is wholly unique in Christian and epic literature. He is alternatingly sympathetic and destructive, seductive in his self-assuredness but reckless in his behavior, qualities that add to the mystery and ultimate efficacy of the narrative, but have the frustrating side-effect of obscuring what seem to be poem’s central themes and arguments (i.e. chiefly that disobedience to God is the source of all suffering). This has been particularly true for critics interested in Milton’s approach to theology and Christian tradition, as the poem’s view of Satan breaks from orthodoxy nearly from the onset.

In terms of the character’s socio-political functions, the exact implications of Satan in the narrative are equally difficult to specify. He revolts against God as a means of freeing himself and other angels from what he perceives as tyranny, but becomes the unequivocal leader of his own state shortly after. He ends up regretting his rebellion and its results, but is equally certain that reconciliation with God would only lead to further sedition. He suffers immense pain and anguish as a result of his
expulsion from Heaven, yet commits himself to causing further pain and anguish amongst God’s less-suspecting creations. Seemingly paradoxical in his motivations in that he loathes his damned state yet ensures its permanence by warring with God, he is defined and motivated by the tragic flaws that lead to his ultimate failure: pride, self-determination and boldness.

What, then, is a reader supposed to do when the professed villain of a narrative that ostensibly deals with a cosmic battle between good and evil is noticeably more human (i.e. relatable, in that he is flawed, driven by conflicting motivations and desires and has deep emotional reactions to the events around him) than the heroes or even the narrative’s actually human characters? Is the reader meant to sympathize with Satan more than God or the Son? If so, what does that say about Milton, or his exhaustive commitment to theology and biblical interpretation? Did he secretly value the possibility of revolution and change more than glorifying God? Or, to put it more directly, did Milton find Satan more interesting, more desirable than God or the Son?

The answer to that final question, by nearly all accounts, is “no.” Given the time and place in which Milton lived, in addition to his extremely thorough writings on Christianity and politics detailed in the preceding chapter, it seems impossible that Milton himself would have valued Satan’s perceived contributions to human history over God’s or Christ’s—a universe in which God is not the most valuable being would have been logically and morally unacceptable. What, then, to do with Paradise Lost’s Satan, given his Biblical inspiration? As I will detail below, my reading is one that discounts many of the narrative’s theological associations, which are implicit from the
poem’s source material, rather than the narrative’s explicit focus, as it often diverges wildly from the Bible, and focuses on Satan’s very human, multifaceted portrayal. Far from representing quintessential evil, Satan is by and large the poem’s most recognizably human character, as he grapples with emotions from each end of the moral spectrum. His rebellion against God is strangely comprehensible (why *would* anyone want to spend eternity singing praises of a divine king?), yet his anguish at having lost the comfort and prestige of Heaven motivates him to lash out at innocents such as Adam and Eve and to perpetuate a destructive rivalry with his former ruler. In his pride and his idealism, his bravery and his brashness, Milton’s Satan is a portrait of a rebel or political dissenter in all of his flawed glory. Seemingly drawing from his own experiences as a polemicist, a rebel and a political enemy of a monarch, Milton imbued Satan with a rebel’s spirit, perhaps in an attempt to dramatize (and/or publicize) his own experiences as a rebel without drawing undesired attention from the Restored monarchy. Far from a glorification, Satan as a revolutionary is more of an indictment of idealist subversion from the older, disillusioned Milton that lived after the Protectorate, demonstrating that, despite his near-heroic motivations to establish a freer kingdom, God’s Enemy becomes a tyrant in his own right and ends up destroying more than he creates.

**Sympathy for the Devil: The Romantic View of Satan**

The most famous critiques to champion Milton’s Satan as more than a well-sketched villain came from late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Romanticism. In Satan, many Romantic writers saw a being driven by passion and conviction to
rebel against God, the ultimate source of oppressive and arbitrary order. This viewpoint is most explicitly established in Shelley’s “A Defence of Poetry” (1821). In the essay’s section on Milton, Shelley mostly lauds the character of Satan as a unique creation that transcends the Manichean understanding of morality from which he arose. He begins, quite clearly, “It is a mistake to suppose that [Milton’s Satan] could ever have been intended for the popular personification of evil” (Shelley 394). As one would expect from a Romantic account of *Paradise Lost*, Shelley interprets Milton’s Satan as *more* moral than God the monarch or any of the poem’s Heavenly actors:

Milton’s Devil as a moral being is as far superior to his God as one who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture, is to one who in the cold security of undoubted triumph inflicts the most horrible revenge upon his enemy, not from any mistaken notion of inducing him to repent of a perseverance in enmity, but with the alleged design of exasperating him to deserve new torments (Shelley 394).

Satan, then, by Shelley’s account, is something like a political enemy of a tyrannical state; Satan, though misguided in his efforts, is simply trying to create what he views as a better universe for all, whereas God, though guaranteed victory due to his position, torments Satan endlessly, despite the impossibility of reconciliation or rehabilitation. Shelley emphasizes how Milton’s God exhibits “implacable hate, patient cunning, and a sleepless refinement of device to inflict the extremest anguish on an enemy” in his dealings with Satan. These aspects, while “venial in a slave” such as Satan (for he surely exhibits some if not all of said traits as well), “are not to be forgiven in a tyrant” (Shelley 394). Perhaps the epitomical Romantic interpretation of Satan, Shelley’s account is an essential inversion of Christianity’s traditional understanding of Satan as the Manichean Enemy, elevating his commitment to
individual liberty over the supposed harmony provided within the Father’s cosmic framework.

William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (written earlier, in 1793), itself a complex reevaluation of the traditional understanding of Christianity’s Heaven and Hell, affords Satan an even greater position in cosmic history which simultaneously complicates the Romantic moral inversion of Heaven and Hell. Far more heretical than *Paradise Lost* or even Shelley’s view of Satan, Blake’s work envisions Heaven and Hell as complementary and necessary aspects of the moral universe, and asserts that both Heaven (in its capacity for reason and order) and Hell (in its unrestrained energy and desire) are both essential to the moral progress of humanity. In “The Voice of the Devil,” a section within *Heaven and Hell*, Blake proffers that Satan, as depicted in *Paradise Lost* and *The Book of Job*, is the true biblical “Messiah,” meaning “Reason” (Blake 389). By Blake’s account, Satan, representing Reason, “fell, & formed a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss,” eventually becoming “Jehovah” (“no other than he who dwells in flaming fire”) “after Christ’s death” (Blake 389). Satan, or Reason, for Blake, is humanity’s salvation. Unlike Shelley, however, Blake does not view God or Milton’s the Father as immoral, but as inconsequential compared to Satan. Returning to Milton’s description of the Heavenly Wars, Blake suggests that “In Milton, the Father is Destiny, the Son, a Ratio of the five senses, & the Holy-ghost, Vacuum!” (Blake 389). While Satan is the Messiah, then, the Holy Trinity is reduced to non-actors; God exists only to enact the ultimate destiny of Satan and humanity, the Son is God’s actor in ensuring said destiny
and the Holy Spirit is the immaterial abyss. By this conception, then, the sole function of Heaven is to ensure Satan’s destiny and status as the Messiah, or savior of humanity through reason coupled with desire. It is for this reason that Blake quite famously writes in the end of this section:

Note: the reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true poet and of the Devil’s party without knowing it (Blake 389).

Last amongst the notable Romantic critics of Milton is Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who, never having published a formal critique of Milton, nonetheless mentions Paradise Lost passingly in certain works and in lecture notes published since his death. Though far less substantial than the interpretations of Blake and Shelley, Coleridge’s analysis of Satan as an exemplar of human pride in all of its triumph and peril is most in line with my own views of the character’s complicated nature. In a collection of lecture notes on Paradise Lost, Coleridge describes Satan as “pride and self-indulgence, finding in self the sole motive of action” (Coleridge 391). Satan is the moral equivalent of all “the mighty hunters of mankind from Nimrod to Napoleon.” He is the motivation that allows individuals to create great things, as well as an explanation of how “the alcohol of egoism” can create suffering in the world, a portrait of “ruined splendor” (Coleridge 391). Interestingly, Coleridge addresses Paradise Lost again in a 1833 table talk entitled “Milton’s Egoism,” asserting that, rather than only a moral narrative, Paradise Lost is a literary self-portrait from Milton meant to explain his own morality and experiences rather than truly reinterpreting Genesis, He remarks, “In Paradise Lost...it is Milton himself whom you see; his Satan,
his Adam, his Raphael, almost his Eve—are all John Milton” (Coleridge 392). This, combined with Coleridge’s reading of Satan as an all-encompassing portrait of egoism, creates the implicit viewpoint that Milton’s Satan, in his egoism and his idealism, is a portrait of Milton himself, perhaps even a portrait of himself as a revolutionary. While it is not my charge to establish Satan as a Milton-surrogate per se, this viewpoint of Coleridge’s does lay the groundwork for my own views on how Milton came to view tyranny and the act of revolting.

**Further Sympathy: Milton’s Satan in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries**

While the Romantic era is notable for the sheer number of critics that viewed Milton’s Satan as more than his traditional biblical role, a few scholars arose in the twentieth century to echo the same sentiments, even amid the growing number of critics that valued the Father’s moral supremacy to Satan. The most successful of these “pro-Satan” scholars was William Empson, who wrote extensively—though perhaps most notably in 1961’s *Milton’s God*—on the “very barbaric picture of God” presented in *Paradise Lost* (Haffenden 137). Unlike in more radical interpretations such as Blake’s, however, Empson does not attempt to claim that Milton sought to degrade God or elevate Satan in a theological sense. Rather, Empson argues that Milton “seriously believed that he was justifying God,” but that he had “come to think God extremely hard to justify” over the course of his life (Haffenden 137). By Empson’s reading, however, a God imbued with “harshness and unreasonableness” is not necessarily a less powerful or even less moral God (Haffenden 137). He admits that
the “theology” of the poem is “eerie” and “inherently nerve-racking,” but, for Empson, these are simply the results of an attempt to rationalize a figure as massive as God.

While many would like to view God as a peaceful being that attempts to protect his creations at all costs, Empson’s reading of Milton’s God is defined by his strength and infallible leadership.

Barring a few other exceptions, notably Marxist critics such as Christopher Hill, who were often too bogged down by political motives to offer truly insightful analysis, the notion that Milton would ever have created Satan as morally superior or equal to God was all but abandoned after Empson. Fortunately, however, there has been a strain of recent scholarship in this young century that has attempted to parse out other possible motivations and interpretations of Milton’s Satan. The work of Yaakov A. Maschetti, whose recent essay “Satanic Individualism” inspired many of my own views on the character, takes the view that God and Satan, as represented in the poem, say more about the political debates of seventeenth century England than the Manichean good/evil duality of their biblical counterparts. To Mascetti, *Paradise Lost* is “rooted in the acknowledgment of both sectarianism and monarchic absolutism, of both Satan’s extreme individualism and God’s omnipotent absolutism” (Maschetti 1). By this approximation, then, *Paradise Lost* plays out as a struggle between an all-powerful King and a rebellious yet elite subject with his own ideas on how things should be run.

Maschetti’s work, then, combines the Romantic championing of Satan’s subversion with what we know of Milton biographically and his historical moment--
the war between God and Satan becomes only a war between an established monarchy and anti-monarchical subversives. Mascetti sees the poem as a fully-functioning allegorical system, in which God espouses monarchy and Satan supports individualism, a view I find supremely elucidating but not all-encompassing, as it discounts many religious and moral (i.e. not political or historical) themes throughout the poem. Focusing much of his analysis of the poem’s fleeting mentions of “chaos” and “the void,” Mascetti posits a third existential realm between Heaven and Hell (and thus encompassing Earth and the universe as humans perceive it) as representing the uncertainty underlying the poem’s allegorical depiction of seventeenth century England (Mascetti 3). Mascetti posits that the poem’s intentional ambiguity is itself an allegory for political and moral uncertainty, as the narrative is defined by scenes in which “the text presents the reader with one perspective only to undo it, and present the opposite view” (Mascetti 2). Rather than examining the contradictions of specific scenes and gleaming meaning from the paradoxes, then, Mascetti takes the poem’s ambiguity at face value--it represents ambiguity because it is ambiguous. While this argument is tempting in its ambivalence towards Satan and the Father as rulers, it is so rooted in Milton’s politics that it glosses over their significance as divine beings. Such a reading does not take into account, for example, Milton’s own devotion to Christianity or how he may have viewed the implications of degrading God’s cosmic supremacy. Additionally, Mascetti’s argument hinges too heavily upon a relatively inconsequential aspect of the work (“chaos” or “the void” are only mentioned a handful of times in the entire text). By my understanding, Milton, the shrewd poet that
he was, would have dealt more extensively with Chaos if it were truly so important to
the poem’s ultimate significance, and would have downplayed the less-allegorical
aspects of characters like Satan.

Oddly, my primary point of contention with Mascetti’s analysis, put broadly, is
similar to my primary concern with older evaluations of Satan and God: it does not
account for the complexity and ambiguity of the characters. While Mascetti makes a
convincing argument that Satan is only the rebel to God’s tyrant, it seems
irreconcilable with the text—and with Milton as a man—that readers are meant to see
Satan as only a triumphant hero fighting against an oppressive regime. The text is
quite clear, both explicitly and implicitly, that Satan is certainly evil and immoral at
least to an extent, whereas God, despite his unyielding laws and hierarchy, certainly
acts as only a benevolent God could in his interactions with humanity. These two
complementary characters, by my reading, then, serve as complicated and realistic
(rather than idealized) conceptions of the political concepts scholars like Mascetti
ascribe to them. Satan does represent the individual and his struggle to govern himself
in a chaotic world, but he also serves to highlight the individualist’s faults: he is
selfish, uncaring and manipulative towards others and racked by constant frustration
and anxiety regarding his place in the universe. God, on the other hand, is surely
depicted as a tyrannical and unyielding monarch in various parts of the poem,
particularly in his treatment of Satan and other rebels, but he does all he can to assist
Adam and Eve without defying his own laws and is even willing to sacrifice the Son,
his heir, so that humanity can live and have free will. Free will, in fact, seems to be the
poem’s focus in toto. When taken to its extreme, as with Satan, a free individual can have the fortitude to rebel against a state in which he has no voice, though it also inhibits his ability to see beyond himself. God, representing complete obedience to a ruler, is generally benevolent and protective, but is also swift to punish harshly for disloyalty. The paradox of individual freedom, then, is presented in all of its complexity in the characters of God and Satan, as each contains elements of both good and evil, utility and destruction.

Interestingly, there is evidence that the moral complexity of these two characters results from the agency they are afforded as characters relative to the traditional, strictly allegorical depictions of Scripture and other works prior to Paradise Lost—these are characters that make selfish decisions based on personal calculations that, at face value, have little to do with grand concepts such as freedom, loyalty or self-reliance. Andrew Escobedo, whose work I touched upon briefly in my first chapter, takes the viewpoint that Milton’s depiction of Satan stands out due to the character’s immediate sense of agency compared to the more allegorical understanding of God and Satan that existed at the time Milton was writing. Whereas more typical representations of God and the Devil in the Christian world existed to neatly embody a certain aspect of an author’s worldview or argument, Milton’s proto-novelistic Satan is unable to maintain such a thematic “stasis” (Escobedo 787).

Allegorical characters certainly have their place—and do in Paradise Lost—but interpreting strong-willed characters as such can lead to misreading and reductivism, rendering personification “a mechanical artifice” that can “only parody actual human
volition,” an error that certain scholars have made with Milton’s Satan (Escobedo 787). The mistake of former critics who viewed Satan only as depraved or Mascetti and the Romantics, who view Satan as only a revolutionary, is to reduce him to solely an allegory. I, instead, echo Escobedo’s assertion that Satan is “a decidedly non-allegorical figure” whose absolute volition is his defining characteristic (Escobedo 789). He may have been born into an allegorical structure, where angels, as subjects, are expected to reify God’s supremacy via worship, but Satan’s rebellion, as depicted in the poem, is an outright rejection of being crammed into a prefabricated narrative. Satan is his own being; every aspect of his character, from his overtly rebellious behavior to his guilt-wracked thoughts, places him in opposition to conformity.

Almost paradoxically, then, Satan becomes a representation of individualism and outright agency by resisting the typical trappings of an allegorical character. Though Satan’s “psychological depth and dramatic autonomy” preclude him from fitting Escobedo’s description of a strictly allegorical character, it is difficult to argue that such free will is not his most significant--if not defining--aspect (Escobedo 787). The machinations of the entire poem hinge upon the Enemy’s choices to defy God--the ultimate source of order and understanding in the Early Modern world--when no one else would dare. By the poem’s approximations, the universal order, including humanity’s Original Sin and the existence of evil, all stem from Satan’s bold decision. Though reasons can be ascribed to Satan’s revolt--chiefly pride and dissatisfaction with his current position--it seems that the act of rebellion itself is the character’s
defining trait. The most significant aspect of Satan, to Milton, seems to be his strong will alone.

In “Allegorical Agency,” Escobedo revealingly compares the depiction of Satan in *Paradise Lost* to the same in the lesser-known, but near-contemporary *Lucifer* by Joost van den Vondel as a means of demonstrating how radically Milton’s Satan breaks from traditional depictions, even in works that attempted to give Satan a greater role. He stresses that while *Lucifer*, at this point unequivocally the lesser work, makes a series of “dramatic choices” in giving Lucifer agency by providing “several compelling reasons for angelic discontentment,” it ultimately undermines its condemnation of Satan’s actions by making God an imperfect ruler to the angels (Escobedo 793). Aside from a few sparing references to envy regarding the place of the Son and humans in God’s kingdom relative to the angels, the audience of Milton’s Satan are given no such rationalizations. Whereas Vondel’s seeming justifications for Lucifer’s actions provide a neatness to the narrative that is certainly not present in *Paradise Lost*, they also undermine the complexity of a story meant to explain the origin of evil and suffering. Milton’s Satan, though making a similar point that blind obedience to an all-powerful regime is not necessarily in the best interest of all involved, communicates this meaning more implicitly. The reader is only able to gleam Satan’s near perpetual discontent from his speeches and dialogues, which reference far more than petty quibbles with God over specific and non-Biblical heavenly policies. *Paradise Lost*, then, makes no attempts to seriously interrogate Satan’s exact motivations for rebelling other than that he does not want to live under
God’s rule. As a result, the reader is compelled to find motivation in Satan’s character rather than in plot contrivances. Satan rebels because he is prideful and does not want to be ruled over by a superior, not because of a petty squabble over how God runs his kingdom. It is ultimately choices such as this that make Paradise Lost the more compelling work. By eschewing easy answers, it moves closer to the heart of why Satan rebelled or why anyone rebels at all—a desire for self-reliance and self-actualization predicated on an innate sense of pride.

In His Own Words: Satan in the Text

In terms of the text itself, most indicative of the Satanic condition in Paradise Lost is the character’s extended speech as he arrives to Earth from Hell in his plan to ruin humanity, God’s new favorite creation, in Book IV. Of course, much of this speech is spent lamenting Satan’s Fallen condition. He recalls his formerly “glorious” state and wonders “wherefore” he rebelled against God, who “deserved no such return” (Milton 4.39-42). He even questions his former qualm with lacking agency in glorifying God in Heaven, admitting that glorification is a small price to pay for eternal peace and security. As such, this speech has provided plenty of fuel for those who view this poem as a detailed account of Satan’s malevolence—in his guilt, he acknowledges that being the subject of a perfect ruler is far superior to governing oneself in a godless (hence chaotic and indifferent) world.

While these acknowledgments from Satan complicate a neat rebel/tyrant dynamic in acknowledging the despair and aimlessness total freedom can provide, they certainly do not compromise, nor even undermine, the speech’s most revealing
components. In fact, the speech seems most concerned with detailing Satan’s primary
affliction: “ambition.” The term appears three times in the speech, and is always
linked to a complementary emotion. The ugly flipside to liberty, ambition is the
Achilles heel of the Miltonic Satan and thus the individual with absolute volition. In
the word’s first appearance in Satan’s speech, the Enemy links ambition to the more
connotatively insidious pride, lamenting that “Pride and worse ambition threw me
down, / warring in Heav’n against Heav’n’s matchless King” (Milton 4.40-41). Most
interestingly, as my emphasis indicates, Satan describes ambition, the premeditated
realization of a proud mind, as worse than pride itself. Put differently, Satan’s
rebellion may have been predicated on pride, but it was his ambition that motivated
him to realize it. Ambition, then, is pride in action, the outlining of a plan to realize
Satan’s perceived superiority.

In the next mention of ambition, around the speech’s midpoint, Satan, even
more iconoclastic here, connects ambition with hope, an emotion that is typically
depicted as falling on the “good” end of the Manichean duality. Attempting to
reconstruct the events of his time in Heaven with more desirable results, Satan
dismisses the idea that he may have been less inclined to rebel if he had a lower
position in God’s regime. In this hypothetical series of events, “unbounded hope” of
advancement or increased power would not have “raised ambition,” though, given the
series of events that actually take place in the poem, it is quite clear that hope did raise
ambition (Milton 4.60-61). Ambition, by this construction, then, is the necessary result
of hope, which itself can only exist in a free mindset, i.e. one that sees the subject as
unbound from God, whose perfect ordering of the universe would preclude hope for advancement in a more loyal subject. In a world without free will, everything would be ordered (see: preordained) so stringently as to eliminate hope altogether. Anyone in the lower tier of such a society could never “hope” for advancement, which itself is an increase in personal power, as they are socially immobile. Ambition, then, as the product of hope, both of which are the result of pride, is the unique burden of the free individual, or at least of one that believes himself to be free. Lucifer was a Heavenly aberration in that he was audacious enough to hope for a more superior place in God’s kingdom. What set him apart from the angels who exercised their “free will” to defend Heaven against the rebellion was a lack of satisfaction with the status quo. In this way, hope too is predicated upon pride, Satan’s chief sin. To hope for a better future for oneself is an acknowledgment that one deserves it, perhaps over others. Satan could never simply exist in God’s kingdom without being God himself. To him, obedience is “submission” and therefore “shame”, an acknowledgment that another being is somehow superior (Milton 4.81).

Though Satan laments his “miserable” present condition in the speech’s final third, he also acknowledges the impossibility of reconciliation with God (Milton 4.73). This is the rhetorical setting of the speech’s final use of “ambition,” as Satan sighs, “Such joy ambition finds” (Milton 4.92). The most telling use of the word in the entire speech is also the easiest to misconstrue. It is most apparently an ironic invocation of self-pity and regret for having rebelled at all; for being ambitious Satan can now experience the “joy” of spending eternity alone and unloved by God. Further
consideration of this line in the rhetorical context surrounding it, however, reframes his regret. In the lines surrounding the reference, Satan explains the misery of his condition despite his status as an essential king, saying “With diadem and scepter high advanced / the lower still I fall, only supreme / in misery” (Book IV 90-92). Not only does he realize that he has become a ruler quite similar to the one from which he freed himself, he sees that he is still inferior to his rival. Though he desires to be “supreme” in all areas, he is only such in “misery.” After cursing ambition, he goes on to consider what would happen if he reconciled with God. Satan is self-aware enough to realize that even if he came begging to God to end the war, any submission on his part would be “feigned” and would eventually lead to “a worse relapse / And heavier fall” (Milton 4.96-101). Satan knows his pride and inherent belief in his own abilities will never allow for him to be an obedient subject to a ruler other than himself. Therefore, due to the rivalry he has created between himself and God, the only possible choice allowed for Satan by his ambition is to become God’s mirror image. Thus, “the Hell” Satan “suffer[s]” can “seem a Heav’n.” and evil can become good (Milton 4.78). In his ambition to defeat and supercede God, he has become quite like his rival, ruling single-handedly over a kingdom and devoting oneself to unyielding moral laws. As such, ambition finds “joy,” meaning misery.

This leads to an odd in moment in the speech’s end in which Satan bids farewell to “hope,” which, as I have described above in the word’s earlier appearance in the speech, is linked to Satan’s defining pride (Milton 4.105). “So farewell hope and with hope farewell fear / Farewell remorse!” Satan says, as these three emotions
(“hope,” “fear” and “remorse”), interconnected as they are, have become useless in achieving the ends of a being with Satan’s ambition (Milton 4.107). Seemingly contradictory to the “hope” that birthed his ambition, the “hope” described here is more in line with the term’s traditional connotation. How, then, can the two be reconciled? The solution, for the purposes of my argument, comes from the evolving nature of Satan in the poem, which can be linked to the disillusionment of the revolutionary. While still too prideful to reconcile with God, Satan begins to transform from rebel to tyrant here, negating the prospect of significantly improving his position; he is settling for becoming the less powerful of two kings. Still, despite what Satan says, there is a sense of hope in his newly professed plan to gain control over God’s now “divided empire” and perhaps supercede him in glory (Milton 4.110). As the poem evolves, then, so does Satan’s pride, and therefore his hopes and ambition. First aiming to dethrone God and then to reconcile with him, Satan resolves from this speech forward to best God, to capture “more than half” of God’s universe and “reign” over it, thus becoming a new, more powerful god (or, at least, having power over a greater area than God) than the One he rebelled against (Milton 4.111). Satan is evil, then, in that he is counter to the more empathetic and less destructive God. But, it is through a misdirection of his defining characteristics--characteristics that are present in all humans--that he becomes so. All humans experience hope (and therefore ambition, pride and even a desire for societal advancement), but the trick to morality as presented in this poem is in directing it towards unifying with God rather than railing against him. By this construction, Satan becomes much more than simply the
ideal revolutionary railing against a tyrant; he is a photorealistic portrait of a rebel. He has ideas about freedom from bondage and forced reverence, but they are ultimately more self-serving than he realizes. He may be counter to the One that represents pure order and obedience, but the conflict is much too personal and knotty to be a solely principled stance. Like many real-life revolutionaries before and after him, what Satan truly desires is a vindication of his power and abilities as a ruler; he wants to be right.

To fully understand Satan’s motivations and the basis of his quarrel with God before examining his failures as a ruler, a brief analysis of Raphael’s retelling of the war in Heaven is in order. Perhaps more pertinent than the battle in Heaven itself is the events leading up to it. As is in line with Christian tradition, Raphael describes pre-revolt Satan as, “If not the first archangel great in pow’r, / in favor and preeminence” (Milton 5.659-660). He was God’s foremost general and, if only by Satan’s perception, second in command behind God. The breaking point for the archangel that became Satan seems to be the creation of the Son as God’s heir, as Satan became “fraught / with envy” upon learning of the Son’s existence (Book V 660-661). Again, “pride” seems to be the source of Satan’s anger, as it “impair[s]” his “sight and thought” and leads to “deep malice thence conceiving disdain” in the former archangel (665-666). While many scholars, after reading these lines, come to the reasonable conclusion that, more than anything, Satan’s desire to rebel arises from the realization that the Son will be God’s heir rather than himself, deeper analysis indicates that his motivations are more complicated. Speaking to an “associate” while calculating his rebellion, Satan decries “new laws” unilaterally imposed by the Father, as well as
God’s new desire to “raise” “new minds” to perhaps replace the angels and a lack of “debate,” as “it is not safe” to “utter” dissent in Heaven (679-683). Since these lines are delivered by Satan to a potential recruit, it is possible to attribute these quarrels to manipulation on Satan’s part. When these complaints are weighed against the political structure of Hell, however, it becomes clear that the manner in which Satan runs his own state after the rebels’ fall, while certainly imperfect, seems to indicate that Satan truly desires a new power structure for the angels that does not solely serve the will of one being.

Of Hell’s mostly indistinguishable mass of subjects, Sin and Death, the only overtly allegorical characters to appear in the text, stand out in their specificity and relation to Satan. While I have already established that the poem’s most significant characters are carefully constructed to avoid simply allegorical interpretation, Sin and Death are quite traditional in their depiction, directly representing the concept indicated by their respective names. More importantly, Milton clearly saw it as essential that these two characters be connected to Satan in some way, as he is the father to both. As described in the text, Sin is born out of Satan’s body as he decides to enact his revolt in Heaven, much to the “amazement” amongst the “host of Heav’n,” as Sin is the first being to be created by someone other than God (Milton 2.758-759). An odd mirror image of the relationship between God and the Son, Satan is so smitten by Sin’s appearance (largely because she looks so similar to his own “perfect image”) that he rapes her almost immediately, leading to the conception and eventual birth of
Death (Milton 2.764). Sin and death as conceptual realities, then, only come into being through Satan’s rebellion, which, as established above, is predicated on pride.

Though it is connotatively associated with immorality and debauchery, “sin,” within the traditional Christian context and Paradise Lost, can be more accurately construed as simply “disobedience,” or a willful disloyalty towards God, typically in the form of breaking one of his established laws. Sin the character, then, is born necessarily out of the first true act of disobedience in time--Satan’s rebellion. Once Sin is born (or, once Satan decides to go through with defying God), Satan becomes so enamored with disobedience--or the idea that he can transform Heaven so that obedience to God is not required--and pride that he compounds the truly original Sin by waging full-out war against Heaven. As she appears to Satan in Hell, Sin is described as constantly giving birth to monsters that claw and bite at her womb, perhaps representing the near constant pain and strife associated with disobedience to an all-powerful ruler. Sin, as presented here, is the allegorical embodiment of the cycle of suffering endured by Satan since his revolt.

Death, Satan’s second child, is given far fewer lines of description than Sin and never speaks, but is equally important in articulating Satan’s condition as a revolutionary. He, as described above, is born as the product of Satan and Sin, or revolt and disobedience. As with humanity, which, in its prelapsarian state, is largely analogous to the angelic condition, death is presented as a consequence of disobedience--Adam and Eve are told that Death will be their punishment if they eat the forbidden fruit. Death the character, then, exists as the fate that is potentially, or
even inevitably, met by those who sin, or disobey--God created everything in the universe, and if one of his creations displeases him, he can remove the condition for its existence. This conception of Death corresponds with the way in which he is briefly presented in the text. Unlike Sin, whose condition is grotesque but pitiable, Death is presented as an ominous, intimidating figure designed to instill fear in those that see him. He is made of “shadow” and is “fierce as ten Furies,” and seems to even frighten Satan as he contemplates Death’s shape (Milton 2.669-671). Most importantly, Death is described as having “the likeness of a kingly crown” on his “head” (Milton 2.672-673). Though Death of course has no claims to sovereign rulership relative to the Father or even Satan, he can be seen as ruling postlapsarian Earth through the inevitability of his presence, thus serving as an ultimate reminder of the consequences for Satan’s first disobedience, which establishes the conditions for humanity’s Fall. It is quite clear by these characters’ conceptions that they serve to indict Satan--his coupling with Sin, who resembles him, is an overt condemnation of his pride. If this is the case, then pride, the very quality that allowed Satan to revolt in the first place, is also the quality that sets into motion his eventual failure. It allows for the conditions of revolt while simultaneously setting into motion Satan’s rivalry with the Father, as trying to assert oneself over a ruler (particularly an all-powerful one) inevitably leads to a power struggle.
The Infernal Politicians: Hell’s Speeches as a Representation of England’s Politics

Thus far, my analysis of Satan as political subversive has remained in a temporal vacuum, certainly an outlet for Milton’s frustration over the process of revolution, but generally removed from contemporary political references. While *Paradise Lost* certainly aspires to transcend history and speak to universal human themes rather than only a particular historical moment, there is evidence to indicate that certain scenes within the text have analogues to particular political and cultural figures/institutions from Milton’s own time. Most scholars are already quite aware that the Infernal Speeches of Book II, in which various figures--essentially politicians--debate how best to move forward in the war with Heaven, satirize political discourse as performed in Milton’s time, but Diana Trevino Benet, writing in 1994 essay entitled “Hell, Satan and the New Politician,” suggests that the historical bases for these speeches are more concrete than most have realized.

One of the present-day Miltonists that helped shift scholarship away from the “strong bias against Satan” of the twentieth century, Benet’s analysis downplays the typical scholarly comparison between the blatantly flawed first three speeches given in Hell and the more reasonable political discourse that occurs in Heaven in Book III (Benet 91). Rather, she draws from the many political pamphlets circulating in mid-to-late-seventeenth century London that used Satanic imagery, suggesting ultimately that Satan, as portrayed in these political pamphlets and eventually *Paradise Lost*, represents a new understanding of politics and politicians burgeoning in Milton’s time.
According to Benet, of the many pamphlets circulating at a time of such political turmoil, many used Satan as a means of representing a chief opponent. “Some pamphleteers,” however, took the association further, adding “political realism to the popular image of Lucifer, casting him as a challenged leader,” a weary politician bickering with underlings (Benet 92). Building upon what had become an overused image, Benet suggests that Milton took the “political realism” of these pamphlets to an extreme, using a realistic Satan in Book II to discuss a new, “recognizable figure emerging in the contemporary scene: the leader who owes his preeminence entirely to his own capacities, and who must struggle to maintain his position” (Benet 92). To Benet, then, Satan is not a unilateral tyrant here, superseding the suggestions of his four lower officials to selfishly take the burden of war upon himself, as some have suggested. He is “a more complex figure than an evil tyrant;” he is “the able leader of sinful followers,” an exploration of “the political process as it operates without a hereditary ruler” (Benet 92).

The Infernal Speeches, as a result, thus become a representation—even a satire--of how politics are meant to function in a non-monarchical state. Perhaps drawing from his own experience in the Protectorate, Milton sows the seeds of Satan’s eventual failure as a rebel in this scene and communicates the potential difficulties of running a state without an all-powerful ruler such as God or a king. The speeches from Moloch, Belial and Mammon are certainly flawed and would not have yielded particularly satisfactory results for Hell’s armies. Moloch advocates “open war” with Heaven, an obviously self-destructive suggest despite its zeal, as it is clearly indicated throughout
the text (as well as Christian tradition) that victory over an all-powerful being such as God is impossible (Milton 2.51). Belial, though not quite as foolish, offers an equally fruitless plan nonetheless, advocating idleness over war for fear that “so Great a foe” will punish them further if they continue in their rebellion (Milton 2.202). To Belial, who can be seen as even more selfish than Satan, ignominious defeat is better than the risk of enduring further suffering. Mammon, the third to speak, offers a more reasonable suggestion, one which meets the most support amongst Pandemonium’s citizens. Mammon, aware that immediate action one way or another could be perilous for Hell’s armies, suggests that Hell’s citizens work to match Heaven in strength and in grandeur before attacking again. While this plan receives the most support of the three most flawed speeches, Mammon’s is still not an acceptable solution, as matching Heaven in power would be an arduous if not impossible task, particularly if the enemy Ruler is omniscient. Additionally, as indicated by the narrator, Hell’s subjects are supportive of avoiding immediate battle as a result of their fear of Heaven’s army: “They dreaded worse than Hell, so much the fear / Of thunder and the sword of Michael” (Milton 2.293-294). Aware that failure in battle could lead to a worse condition than Hell, the infernal subjects, craving security, prefer to emulate Heaven “[b]y policy and long process of time” rather than through battle (Milton 2.296).

By the time Beelzebub rises to speak, then, Milton has already highlighted the potential downfalls of a non-autocratic system. While the citizens (or, at least the officials) in Hell are afforded the freedom to offer ideas, which does not seem to be the case in Heaven, the majority of the ideas presented are not useful to advancing the
society’s ends, and occasionally border on incompetence. And Mammon, while certainly more reasonable than Moloch or Belial, receives undue support for his plan, since it gives the illusion of progress while maintaining Hell’s current status quo. These three officials certainly represent the downfalls of a freer system of governance, and Beelzebub, despite the merits of his speech and its eventual acceptance by those in Hell, does not fare much better. While on the surface it appears that Beelzebub’s plan to corrupt the new world of Earth and its inhabitants as a means of securing territory and minor victory over God is an indication of the fruitfulness of quasi-democratic discussion, it quickly becomes clear that Beelzebub’s speech was “devised” by Satan himself (Milton 2.380). The only effective plan established in this scene, then, despite hundreds of lines of debate and propositions is the one put forth by the supreme ruler himself. Despite Hell’s comparatively freer system of governance, useful change cannot be affected unless the ruler himself plants it within the quasi-democratic discourse. Nearly from Hell’s inception as a society, it only operates under the illusion of freedom. Satan, despite his commitment (ambition) to creating and living in a less tyrannical world than Heaven is already having to make compromises with his ideals in order to promote his society’s cause. The seeds of his failure as a revolutionary, then, are sowed from the onset.

Satan, then, exist as a realistic, almost proto-novelistic, depiction of a revolutionary’s struggles against a much more powerful and more politically competent regime. Satan’s charge, which is, if it is impossible to conquer Heaven, to wrest at least more than half of the universe from the Father by properly influencing
the humans on Earth, seems nearly impossible to complete without compromising Satan’s professed ideals. As can be seen from the evidence above, Satan, if viewed as a revolutionary raging against what he views as an oppressive and unequal regime, serves as a demonstration of the hardships or near-impossibility of revolution as seen by Milton himself in the Protectorate. Inevitably, this poem seems to say, the revolutionary will become a tyrant.
Chapter 3 - God & Man

“What if Earth / Be but the shadow of Heaven and things therein / Each to other like more than on Earth is thought?” - John Milton (Paradise Lost V, 574-576)

The All-Seeing King

Before moving forward, I would like to clarify a distinction between “revolution” and “revolt.” For the purposes of my writing, a “revolution” is the partial or complete destruction of a former society and the building-up of a new one in its place. A “revolt,” on the other hand, refers to an active attack by a segment of the population against a ruler or ruling class. Satan’s initial assault on Heaven, then, can be referred to, as it is in the text itself, as a “revolt” (Milton 3.117). Satan’s ultimate goal, on the other hand, is revolution, an even partial undoing of God’s control in favor of creating a new, ostensibly freer or more equal society. Revolt is simply a step of revolution, a process that Satan undertakes throughout the course of the poem.

If Satan’s machinations against God are the plans of an idealistic yet troubled revolutionary, the Father himself must by extension exist as a king or tyrant, an extremely powerful, unyielding force that expects total loyalty from those that want to enjoy the benefits of his kingdom. The monarchical nature of Heaven’s political structure is apparent from the poem’s onset, as indicated early on by Satan’s jealousy over the Son as God’s successor. It becomes clearer as the narrative progresses, however, that the Father is not the power-mad tyrant to Satan’s troubled revolutionary. In fact, it seems that the Father is meant to exist as the ideal (in that he is simultaneously benevolent and all-powerful) tyrant, an ultimately benevolent,
consistent force of justice that represents the obstacles faced by a revolutionary such as Satan at their most insurmountable—he is everything safe and comfortable about living under a single ruler. His judgments, while based in unyielding laws, never contradict or overstep the his own already-established rules—since the Father is omniscient, he cannot contradict himself. If Satan is a verisimilar portrait of a revolutionary’s struggles, then, the Father represents the near-insurmountable obstacle of tearing down an ancient regime that already benefits many subjects. Rather than having the depth of Satan, the Father is defined by his consistency and lack of contradictions. The Father and the Son, his heir apparent and essential extension of him, can be seen most clearly as veteran rulers who overpower and outsmart Satan at every turn, a demonstration of what Milton may have seen as the near impossibility of satisfactory completing the revolutionary act. Just as he may have seen England’s mid-century Revolution as doomed by the persistence of the monarchical system and even society’s refusal to accept an alternative, the Heavenly kingdom in Paradise Lost can be seen as an attempt by Milton to investigate why monarchy was so preferred by so many.

Before moving into the meat of the text itself, I also feel the need to elaborate my view of the Son’s role in God’s kingdom. There has been extensive discussion—particularly recently—of the manner in which what many scholars view as Milton’s Arianism\(^1\) is manifested in the text. While many of these discussions focus on

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\(^1\) A debate has existed for some time amongst Miltonists as to whether Milton’s views on the Holy Trinity could be described as part of the “Arian Heresy,” or a belief of a few Christians that the Trinity is comprised of three necessarily separate beings rather than three manifestations of the same God. Most of the debate stems from the proper definition of Arianism, with scholars such as Maurice Kelley arguing for Milton’s Arianism and those such as C.A. Patrides arguing against. As stated above, for the purposes of this paper, I will only be considering the manner in which the Father and the Son are depicted in Paradise Lost.
Milton’s theology rather than the political or historical implications of the poem, it is clear through his writing that his unorthodox view of the Father’s relationship to the Son influenced the manner in which he constructed Heaven in *Paradise Lost*. For the purposes of my argument, the primary implication of Milton’s supposed Arianism is that it allows him to depict Heaven as an essential monarchy, in which the Father is the all-powerful and unquestioned ruler and the Son is his agent and eventual successor.

From a purely narrative (rather than theological or thematic) standpoint, Milton’s decision to split God into two characters can be seen as a means of providing characters that fulfill two disparate yet not mutually exclusive purposes. Firstly, the Son seems to exist in his biblical role as “God in action.” He acts on God’s behalf—he defeats Satan during his initial revolt, volunteers to endure mortality to save humanity and informs Adam and Eve of their transgression and punishment on God’s behalf. Secondly, and more importantly, the Son’s role is quite tied up in that of a prince or eventual successor to the Father’s throne. As such, he is afforded the same respect as the Father, but is not ultimately responsible for decision making as he is. The Son is therefore “throned in highest bliss / equal to God and equally enjoying / God-like fruition,” yet it is ultimately the Father who decides how Heaven will act, with the Son primarily serving to enact his Father’s decrees (Milton 3.305-306). In both of these roles, then, the Son can be seen as an extension of the Father himself, a second character with the Father’s attributes that exists mostly for Heaven’s monarchical framework and to make the Father’s inner-machinations external.
The most pertinent information regarding the Father and the Son occurs in Book III, in which the conversation between the two concerning how to outmatch Satan takes place. While this Book is certainly not the only part of the poem to explore the roles the Father and the Son take in Milton’s retelling of Genesis, it does contain the most pertinent information regarding God’s approach as a ruler as well as his and the Son’s motivations. Viewed by many scholars as an intentional analogue to the Infernal Speeches of Book II, the conversation between the Father and the Son in Book III pits royal counsel against (quasi-)democratic discourse. Rather than viewing this as evidence of Satan as manipulative or bent on autocracy from the onset, however, I see these two scenes as demonstrating the Father’s clear advantage over Satan. Whereas Satan must satisfy Hell’s citizenry amidst several self-defeating yet popular plans, God and the Son need only satisfy God himself and his already established laws.

The angels, quite unlike the citizenry in Hell, who are at least present and willing to comment upon political proceedings, have virtually no active political role in Heaven. The angels are loyal and certainly willing to assist the Father at any moment, but they typically only act on their ruler’s command. Despite this, it is clear that, compared to the pain and uncertainty of Hell, the non-rebellious angels are quite content in Heaven, as they are free from strife and under the constant protection of their creator. Ittzes Gabor, writing in a 2004 essay on the nature of angels in *Paradise Lost*, describes “a noteworthy analogy between the angelic and the human condition ‘in the beginning’” (Gabor 7). Angels, then, despite the differences in physical and
spiritual composition, essentially function in the same way humanity does before the
Fall--they are God’s citizens, afforded eternal comfort and contentedness given that
that they obey and revere he who gives it to them. Thus, the security of the Father’s
kingdom, such as the power of God’s army and occasional “foreknowledge,” which
provides knowledge of the kingdom’s enemies before they can strike “are given” only
“on the condition of obedience (Gabor 6). If the Father is to be seen as an ideal tyrant,
the loyal angels, as his citizens, exemplify the success of his model. Because of the
security he can provide them through his power, the angels have no reason to resent or
question the Father, as they know that their comfort and general contentedness is
wholly the Father’s doing and can, as happened with Satan and the rebellious angels,
be undone. This is not to say the angels are only loyal to God out of self-preservation,
but simply that most of them never conceive of disloyalty due to the security of their
position.

By far the most positive aspect of the Father’s portrayal and the primary
characteristic that sets him apart from a malicious or selfish tyrant is his insistence on
legal consistency and avoiding contradiction. While a more typical tyrant may have
thwarted Satan’s plan to corrupt humanity by changing his restrictions on the Tree or
changing the moral composition of Adam and Eve, he chooses instead to honor his
erlier word that humanity should be “sufficient to have stood though free to fall”
(Milton 3.99). He insists that humans, as “all th’ ethereal powers” have the ability to
choose between loyalty and disloyalty--loyalty and reverence would be pointless
otherwise (Milton 3.100). To both the Father and the Son, going back on a rule or decree is simply impossible. Considering this, the Father himself says,

I formed them free and free they must remain
Till they en thrall themselves. I else must change
Their nature and revoke the high decree,
Unchangeable, eternal, which ordained
Their freedom: they themselves ordained their Fall (Milton 3.125-128).

The Father practices a particular kind of benevolence, then, in that he values his subjects’ *freedom to choose* between loyalty and disloyalty. Beyond this, however, he fulfills the more typical role of a tyrant or king, as disloyalty to him yields either eternal damnation, death or both. It is for this reason that the Father’s *freedom to choose* is distinct from the outright freedom Satan aspires to achieve from God, in which disloyalty to God is not met with existence-negating punishments. The Father is benevolent in that he is forthcoming with his laws—he informs Adam and Eve of Eden’s one restriction from the onset of their existence, and even warns them of Satan’s impending temptation—yet, as any tyrant, he will never excuse disobedience. He could quite easily excuse Adam and Eve for their transgression and allow them to live in Eden under guard of his angels, but he does not. Or, if God cannot contradict himself, he could not have initially threatened Adam and Eve with punishment, as his foreknowledge would have allowed him to anticipate Satan’s temptation. Due to both his more benevolent qualities (his insistence on enforcing his laws unilaterally and without exception) and those more associated with traditional tyranny (his desire to punish the “ingrate[s]” that dared to defy him), the Father exists in the poem as representing everything benevolent and comfortable about tyranny. He is fair,
protective, lacking in malice and strict. Existing at the confluence of order and paternalistic love, the Father and the Son, his heir, ensure the longevity of their kingdom by rewarding those that are loyal and severely punishing those who are not.

Interestingly, despite the Father’s appearance as the best possible tyrant in *Paradise Lost*, there are nonetheless a few aspects of his rule within the text that are more befitting of an earthly king. This has been apparent across the centuries since the poem was published and has caused some distress in those that want to see the text as a straight dramatization of Genesis. C.S. Lewis, writing in 1942, noted what many viewed as the “unsatisfactory” presentation of the Father (Lewis 437). Though defensive of the religious implications of Milton’s God, Lewis goes on to argue that Milton’s chief religious failure was that he did not “disentangle himself from the bad tradition...of trying to make Heaven too like Olympus” (Lewis 437). To Lewis, it is only the “anthropomorphic details” of the depiction that “make the Divine laughter sound merely spiteful and the Divine rebukes querulous” (Lewis 437-438). While Lewis’ quarrels come mainly from the Christian implications of Milton’s God, his outlining of the Father’s negative (tyrannical or “anthropomorphic”) aspects is useful for my purpose. By my reading, what Lewis describes as the Father’s “anthropomorphic” or human-like qualities are those that are irreducible for a tyrant. It seems, if Milton truly did attempt to paint the Father as a benevolent tyrant to Satan’s faltering revolutionary, he did not seek to remove what he may have seen as defining aspects of tyranny: chiefly, an obsession with loyalty and reverence, a tendency to punish too severely and pronounced egomania. Though the Father may be the ideal
tyrant, he is a tyrant nonetheless and Milton, republican that he was, could not shy away from pointing out the negatives of tyranny, even in the best tyrannical system.

The most troubling of the indications of the Father as tyrant in Book III occur as he explains his own motivations in the Heavenly plan to restore humanity and the plan’s potential implications. He describes how the chain of events following from the Fall will ensure devout loyalty from humanity in the future,

Man shall not quite be lost but saved who will,  
Yet not of will in him but grace in me  
Freely vouchsafed. Once more I will renew  
His lapsed pow’rs though forfeit and enthralled  
By sin to foul exorbitant desires.  
Upheld by me, yet once more he shall stand  
On even ground against his mortal foe,  
By me upheld that he may know how frail  
His fall’n condition is and to me owe  
All his deliv’rance, and to none but me (Milton 3.173-182).

As is explicitly apparent in the italicized lines, the Father’s motivations for restoring humanity diverge wildly from most Christian orthodoxy, where God saves humanity out of mercy and good will. As presented here, humanity’s Fall, by the Father’s approximations, will further enthrall the race to him, as their Fallen condition will be so “frail” that their only means of “deliv’rance” is to revere God eternally. Far from an act of pure grace, as presented in these lines, Milton’s “anthropomorphized” God plans humanity’s Fall not as a means of salvaging the inherent evil of humans, but as a punishment that will teach humanity not to incur his wrath again.

There is also a hint of egomania in these lines, as the Father is insistent that humanity’s “deliv’rance” is owed to him and “none but” him. This is also apparent a
few lines later, in which the Father describes how punishment is inevitable for any who disobey him, saying,

This my long suff’rance and my day of grace
They who neglect and scorn shall never taste
But hard be hardened, blind be blinded more,
That they may stumble on and deeper fall:
And none but such from mercy I exclude!
But yet all is not done: Man disobeying
Disloyal breaks his fealty and sins
Against the high supremacy of Heav’n,
Affecting godhead, and so, losing all,
To expiate his treason hath naught left
But to destruction sacred and devote
He with his whole posterity must die (Milton 3.198-209).

While the Son, representing the more benevolent side of the godhead, talks the Father down from his final pronouncement that humanity must be exterminated, the Father’s insistence on punishment for disloyalty is troubling. Like the tale of the Passover, in which God intentionally “harden[s] Pharoah’s heart” so that his actions will be callous enough to merit punishment, the Father here seems intent on ensuring that those that are disloyal to him once are permanently excluded from the benefits of his kingdom (King James Bible, Exodus 7:3). “Mercy,” typically construed as God’s defining aspect, is here barred from those that “neglect” or “scorn” the Father and his laws. This is an odd point, since mercy typically necessitates transgression or disloyalty on the part of the perpetrator. Yet, the Father bars mercy from anyone who is disloyal, so he seems to be saying, “I am only merciless towards those who defy me,” a sentiment that seems to go against Christian orthodoxy’s emphasis on God’s forgiveness.

The Father’s presumption to power, in addition to his fierce expectation of loyalty and reverence from his created subjects, all seem to come down to an
expectation of gratitude; the angels and humanity should be grateful to God for being allowed to exist at all, as their creation would be impossible without him.

Interestingly, this expectation can easily be grafted onto a tyrant or monarch who expects loyalty for running the kingdom and allowing the kingdom to exist in the first place. There has been little scholarly work on the expectation of gratitude in *Paradise Lost* or even in orthodox Christianity, though Peter Medine’s aptly titled “Gratitude and *Paradise Lost*” seems to be the nearest signpost. While Medine does little to question why the Father expects gratitude and to what end he expects it, some of his definitions are useful. He describes gratitude to God as fulfilling “a universal debt, and the perfection of the universe depends on [gratitude’s] expression in hymns and thanks of praise” (Medine 117). What Medine seems to imply here is a sort of social contract in which God’s subjects owe him an eternal debt for his creation of them, though they certainly did not ask to be created.

**Tracing the Fall: God’s Morality and Humanity’s Purpose**

Of course, the Father can only be seen as fulfilling the role of a monarch in so far as he can be considered a character in the same way Adam, Eve, Satan and Abdiel are. Stanley Fish, a highly influential twentieth century Miltonist, offers a compelling argument in his *How Milton Works* that the Father cannot be viewed as an agent making moral decisions with personal consequences in the same way the poem’s other characters are. Rather, according with Milton’s stated mission to “justify the ways of God to man,” Fish takes the viewpoint that Milton’s God, like his biblical counterpart,
cannot be judged against his own creations, as he is the font from which the entire universe--and therefore virtue--flows (Milton 1.26). In his own words,

If God is God and not merely the name of some regional warlord whose surveillance one might hope to evade--if God is the creator and sustainer of life and value--the obligation to obey him, to testify always to his centrality is overriding and is not to be relaxed in favor of some other value that presents itself as competing. That is to say, the wrongness of disobedience is not a relative wrongness to be balanced against the relative rightness of the form an act of disobedience might take; the wrongness of disobedience is simply, and without any qualifications, wrong, and no reason for engaging in disobedience can be good (Fish 51-52).

Following this argument, it would be impossible to judge God as a moral being; he is always perfect and never errs, as errance would undermine his permanent position as the “creator and sustainer of life and value.” Fish’s argument is particularly compelling when considered against Milton’s lifelong devotion to theology and study of the bible, as it would be sensible to assume that such a thoughtful Christian would aspire to representing God in all of his biblical infallibility. What kind of Christian would portray him in any other way?

Milton, despite--or perhaps because of--his obsessive biblical study, was not the most orthodox Christian. Besides his so-called Arianism, which is manifested explicitly in Paradise Lost, he worked for reform of Church laws that were considered unquestionable, such as prohibitions on divorce and religious tolerance. While unquestionably devoted to Christianity’s central tenets, his interpretation of the bible occasionally led him to wildly different conclusions than his contemporaries. All of which is to say that, by my reading of his works and life, it is not out of the question to consider that Milton would have portrayed God differently in his own poem than how
he appears in the bible. Fish’s above argument is dependent on its first clause: “If God is God and not merely the name of some regional warlord…” Just as the events of *Paradise Lost* heavily embellish the biblical account of humanity’s Fall, one cannot assume that Milton’s Father and Son must correspond directly to their biblical counterparts.

What C.S. Lewis refers to as Milton’s “anthropomorphized God” in fact has notable characteristics of a “warlord” despite his cosmic position. William Empson, one of the primary critics to whom Fish was responding, prefigured Fish’s claim regarding God’s supremacy and offers various textual incidents and other arguments to prove the incongruity between Milton’s God and the bible’s. Many of his arguments rightly focus on what can be viewed as God’s disproportionate punishment of Satan for his revolt. Regarding this, Empson writes,

> The initial error of Satan is that he doubts the credentials of God, and I, like Grierson, naturally think of a Professor doubting the credentials of his Vice-Chancellor; such a man would not be pursued with infinite malignity into eternal torture, but given evidence which put the credentials beyond doubt (Empson 95).

Even if one assumes the viewpoint that the Father expels Satan from Heaven because he knows that Satan will continue to rebel, the exact manner in which he punishes his enemy is more according with a warlord than the supreme moral being, essentially throwing Satan into a dungeon and promising to bring about misery for the rest of his existence. Instead of using his supreme power, as Empson offers, to demonstrate Satan’s error to him or, barring that, simply cancelling Satan’s existence, the Father elects to transfer Satan to Hell (from which he is easily able to escape) and
set into motion the events that bring about the Fall. While this scheme can be explained by the Fortunate Fall interpretation, which I will briefly explore at this chapter’s end, it nonetheless becomes quite difficult to see the Father as a supreme moral being when he treats even one of his creations in such a way.

Writing for the *Times* in 1958, Empson’s other most compelling argument regarding God’s fallibility explores the scene of the battle in Heaven after Satan’s revolt. In this short letter, Empson asserts that Milton’s “defence of the Christian God,” due to his insistence on attempting to rationally justify his ways, “turned out as practically a satire” on him (Haffenden 137). For Empson, Milton is keenly aware of the difficulties in reconciling the words of God and Christ with their deeds as portrayed in the bible and throughout history. In attempting to fashion his God into a recognizable character with motivations that his audience could understand, he ended up creating a “very barbaric picture of God” that would not be easily recognizable by those that value him (Haffenden 137). The crux of Empson’s argument here—and what I believe to be the best textual example of God’s fallibility—is God’s decision to drop the scales from Heaven to end the battle between his army and Satan’s as described in Book IV. These scales, which weigh the benefits of “parting” and “of fight,” are shown as coming down on the side of ending the battle (Milton 4.1003). It is Gabriel who sees this, and he who convinces Satan to end the fight as a result. To Empson, God here is “cheating his own troops to make certain of the Fall of Man” (Haffenden 137). Since “God has already told all the good angels that man will fall” by this point in the poem, “he cannot allow [his army] to prevent it” (Haffenden 137). Rather than
simply desiring to stop the fighting then, by Empson’s reading, the Father stopped the battle to allow Satan to escape.

If, as I have discussed in the preceding chapters, God and Satan are engaged in a struggle over humanity’s ultimate fate as a means of proving which ruler (and therefore which political model) is superior, the Father proves his efficacy as a ruler, if not his supreme morality, with the choice to show Gabriel the scales. Aware as he is that the problem of disobedience may not necessarily be limited to Satan and the rebellious angels, he concocts a scheme by which he is able to ensure humanity’s eternal loyalty to him. Rather than simply destroying Satan and his army, the Father allows him to flee to Hell. Instead, as Empson points out, of keeping Satan in chains in Hell, which would have prevented his corruption of humanity, the Father frees him. He warns Adam of Satan’s plan, but does not prevent the serpent from entering the garden. Truly, “all the successes of Satan are unflinchingly described as due to God’s direct choice” (Haffenden 137). He only makes it into Eden because it is what the Father desired all along.

What I have described above is what is typically referred to as the Fortunate Fall interpretation of these events. Whether theological or critical, proponents of the Fortunate Fall assert that God planned humanity’s Fall from the moment he created them. Typically, the primary reason for such a scheme is that Christ’s sacrifice is the necessary and ultimate fulfillment of God’s love for humanity, which would have been rendered impossible without Original Sin. The Fortunate Fall doctrine does not propose that humanity’s prelapsarian state in Eden was imperfect or unfulfilling.
Rather, advocates of this idea view the narrative of human history and the eventual mingling of Heaven and Earth on Judgement Day, its finale, as a fuller expression of God’s love for humans than never having allowed them to err in the first place. To these critics and theologians, God loves and supports humanity so much that he thinks it better for them to come to an understanding of virtue and godliness on their own instead of having it imposed upon them unilaterally.

There are other possible implications of the Fortunate Fall, however. It is possible, for instance, that Christ’s sacrifice can be seen as shifting the burden of salvation from humanity as a collective to individuals. Once cosmic redemption and entrance into Heaven for dead humans is made possible, each individual human must be judged by God for his or her loyalty before being permitted to enter his kingdom. Surely such a conceit would ensure loyalty from a large portion of humanity, who would rather follow God’s laws while on Earth than suffer the relative torment of an eternity in Hell. While the Fortunate Fall as it appears in *Paradise Lost* can be interpreted in both ways, the above quoted lines from Book III in which the Father predicts that humanity will be “by me upheld that he may know how frail / his fall’n condition is and to me owe / all his deliv’rance, and to none but me” seem to indicate that the Father desires more than simply humanity’s salvation (Milton 3.180-182). In order to demonstrate to humanity the supremacy of his system and the futility of defying it, he constructs a series of events in which humanity is born into a perfect world thanks to God, loses it all due (by God’s ordination) to Satan’s manipulation and, thanks to God again, is presented with the opportunity to win it all back if they
are loyal to God during each of their individual lives. The Father, then, supreme in his power and ability to manipulate his own creations, is victorious over Satan, proving, for Milton, that a supremely powerful regime led by a ruthless, though not necessarily cruel, ruler will always defeat a radical rebel, despite the legitimacy of his claims.
Conclusion

If *Paradise Lost* is an examination of the revolutionary act and the potential inevitability of its failure, then, what are its ultimate implications? If Satan is the passionate yet flawed rebel to God’s decisive monarch, why, for Milton, did Satan fail? Perhaps God’s power is ultimately unconquerable, the established state’s resources always outweighing those of the rebels. Or, following Satan’s unwitting creation of Sin and Death, maybe the revolutionary act is too underpinned by pride and ambition on the part of its leaders (rather than the desire to create a genuinely better world) for them to successfully attain their goal. One could even attribute Satan’s failure to his general lack of progeny, a dearth of beings that can attribute their existence and well being to him, unlike the Father and his angels or even the Father and humanity, an indication that the revolutionary tends to lack enough loyal subjects who can attribute their well being to him to overthrow the monarch.

Milton’s own life, just as indicative of the challenges of revolution as the text itself, can be seen as following a similar trajectory to Satan’s tragedy. After identifying what he saw as glaring problems with the nature of the government into which he was born, he began to question and criticize the legitimacy of his ruler and even the nature of the system of government itself. After amassing (or, in Milton’s case, publically supporting) an army of like-minded rebels, the original revolutionary is able to craft or participate in a system of government of his own making and continue to battle against his tyrannical enemy. Despite this, his government is ultimately faulty and bears similar flaws to the tyrant’s system. The revolutionary,
becoming increasingly desperate in attempting to maintain and legitimize his power, begins to make more and more compromises, to the point that his system becomes nearly indistinguishable from the one that came before it. Sensing this, the original tyrant is able to win over the public through his power and ability to protect or punish, leaving the revolutionary to, at best, live as the lesser of two kings. Milton, though he did not personally rule or possess any significant power within Cromwell’s government, described his disillusionment at the reestablishment of the monarchy. In these writings, explored more thoroughly in Chapter 1, he alternately blamed the English people for choosing the comfort of tyranny to the labor of freedom and the monarchy itself for being too pervasive in English history to be overcome.

The way Milton chose to depict God in *Paradise Lost*, however, indicates that he saw some aspects of monarchy as, at the very least, inherently more secure than Satan’s attempted model, if not inevitably more powerful. Even viewed at its most optimistic, the infernal speeches in *Paradise Lost*’s Book II are pitiable in their empty rhetoric and callous manipulation compared to Heaven, in which the Father and the Son--two beings infinitely well versed in the nature of beings and the trajectory of history--deliberate amongst themselves. As described in Chapter 3, the Father of *Paradise Lost* exists as the ideal tyrant, the most perfect possible form of what an autocratic government can achieve. Where the Father falters morally, then, it is due to a flaw inherent in the system under which he operates rather than a blemish in his divine character. Though the Father is the morally best king possible, he nonetheless finds it necessary to torture his enemy and enthrall an entire race to him under threat
of punishment. Inevitably, though, it is the Father’s system that prevails, perhaps most simply because it can provide for the beings under its dominance as long as they are loyal.

The root of Satan’s failure may be this straightforward. God prevails because he is powerful and can provide for his subjects in ways Satan never could. The text as a whole, then, would argue that the already powerful tend to maintain their power, if only because the powerful are needed to protect and provide for those that would die without them. Or, Satan’s failure is more personal, not representative of the system he aims to establish but of the flaws inherent in a revolutionary leader. He aspires to the level of the Father, though he despises him. It seems to inevitably follow that, in attempting to rise to the level of the Father, he must emulate him in some respects, thus becoming what he hates and perpetuating the system he aimed to destroy. Or, following Milton’s own writings on his disappointment in the populace of England for not supporting the Protectorate once it came to power, it is the subjects who are flawed rather than the rulers, motivated more by fear of punishment and suffering than a desire to reconstitute the world’s power relations. That Satan fails in his revolutionary mission is, in the end, beside the point. The point may be that, despite his ultimate failure, Satan is able to change the fabric of the universe through his initial act of revolt. Without this, humanity may never have acknowledged its capacity for free will and would have remained in ignorance, the Son would never have fulfilled his role as the Father’s successor and the entirety of cosmic and earthly history would never have started. By *Paradise Lost’s* telling, human history only exists because of Satan’s initial
act. Perhaps Satan is successful, then, and revolutions are not doomed to fail. Maybe all that is needed is a single act of disloyalty to change everything.
Works Cited


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