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## Milton's Christian Hero

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## Milton's Christian Hero

*Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*, two of Milton's most widely acclaimed works, each begin with a character that has fallen from the grace of God. Samson's loss of the physical prowess that defined his life and Godly mission is arguably equally as dramatic as Satan's fall from the very height of Milton's divine hierarchy to the pits of Hell. However, Samson's ability to relinquish his pride and physically-based values in favor of devotion to God contrasts sharply with the continued descent of Satan after his initial fall. This disparity exemplifies the major differences between the Pagan Hero of Classical mythology and the Christian Hero developed by Milton in several of his works. Although Samson successfully undergoes the change from the former to the latter, he retains some satanic qualities that prevent him from becoming the true Christian hero as Milton envisions him, which is only fully realized in Adam's complete understanding of Christian virtue at the end of *Paradise Lost*.

Perhaps the most controversial figure in *Paradise Lost* or any of Milton's other writings is Satan. His individualism and courage to battle the most powerful being in the universe, coupled with the moral dilemmas that he faces,

make him a more dynamic and attractive figure than a one-dimensional character like Milton's God. Criticism varies widely on his place in the heroic context of *Paradise Lost*. Support for Satan's heroism spans across centuries, from William Blake's radical pro-Satanic assertions in the 18th and 19th centuries to Neil Forsyth's in the 21st. Others see a downward spiral in his morality throughout the play, perceiving him as 'sufficient to have stood' but ultimately 'self lost.' To understand who Milton's heroes really are, however, we must understand how he defined his ideal hero.

One of the primary reasons for Milton to have written *Paradise Lost* was to "justify the ways of God to men" (Milton Paradise I, 26), largely in an attempt to explain why evil is present in the world. Many people, even devout Christians, were struggling with this question during Milton's lifetime. For this end to be accomplished, Milton's hero simply couldn't be the Pagan hero of the Classical tragedies. The violent nature of heroes such as Odysseus and Heracles provide endless examples of the inexplicable presence of evil in the world. Milton refuses to place value in the ability "to indite/Wars, hitherto the only Argument/

Heroic deem'd" (*Milton Paradise IX*, 27-29).

Milton's hero had to be a man who not only shunned the infliction of harm on others, but could also endure the suffering of life with a determined faith in the goodness that will eventually come of evil. A.B. Chambers calls this patient endurance "sapientia et fortitudo," or "wisdom and fortitude," (Chambers 315). Under this definition, the physical fortitude of the original Epic Hero is transformed into what Milton calls "heroic fortitude of mind" (Chambers 315). Chambers' view accurately perceives the shift from a focus on aggressive courage to a wise and patient courage. William Herman expands on this idea, referring to the two types of heroism as Hellenic and Biblical. He points out that the former is not concerned with morality, as seen in the character of Achilles, and that the major difference can be boiled down to two opposing values: "The Hellenic obtains glory through defiance; the Biblical hero obtains glory through submission" (Herman 13). Milton's Christian hero is wise, obedient, and has the moral fortitude to endure and reject the evils and temptations of the world.



Herman and Chambers both recognize that Satan cannot be the Christian Hero that Milton advocates. He has numerous opportunities to take the path of the Christian hero after “his Pride / Had cast him out of Heav’n” (Milton Paradise I, 36-37), but favors the defiance of Herman’s Hellenic hero instead. His pride makes him unwilling to repent “from sense of injur’d merit” (Milton Paradise I, 98), preferring to “reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n” (Milton Paradise I, 263).

It is important to understand that Satan knows what he is getting himself into, and more importantly, he knows that the actions produced by his Hellenic values are unwise and unjust:

O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams  
That bring to my remembrance from what state  
I fell, how glorious once above thy Sphere;  
Till Pride and worse Ambition threw me down  
Warring in Heav’n against Heav’n’s matchless  
King: Ah wherefore! He deserv’d no such  
return from me ... (Milton Paradise IV, 37-43)

He attributes his fall to pride and “worse” ambition, acknowledging that these attributes of the Classical hero are responsible for his moral degradation. This passage also shows that he is aware of the injustice of his rebellion, for God “deserv’d no such return.” We are thereby less awed and sympathetic when we see the

courage of Satan’s Hellenic heroism, as in the passage in which “he with difficulty and labor hard” passed through Chaos, “harder beset and more endanger’d, than when Argo pass’d/ Through Bosphorus betwixt the jostling Rocks:/ Or when Ulysses on the Larboard shunn’d/ Charybdis” (Milton Paradise, III, 1021, 1016-1020).

Samson shares many of Satan’s Hellenic qualities, but unlike Satan, is initially unaware of his folly in valuing them over the principles of the Christian Hero. Unlike Satan, his grief at the beginning of the poem is due to the inadequacy he feels from his loss of strength and sight, not from the injustice he has done God in revealing his divine secret. His loss is also social. He laments, “O glorious strength/ Put to the labor of a Beast, debas’t/Lower than bondslave!” (Milton Samson, 36-38). Samson’s status as famous hero has been reversed, injuring his pride. As Chambers puts it, “his sorrow concerns that ignominious fall from the heroic condition which he claims once to have possessed” (Chambers 317).

Samson’s superficiality gradually gives way to the *sapientia et fortitudo* of the Christian Hero. Carol Barton sees his conversations with his father, Dalila and Harapha as temptations to sin that appeal to his former Classical heroic values. She cites his rejection of Dalila’s seduction as a key moment in his

transformation from Hellenic to Christian hero. Barton says of his rejection of her “warbling Charms” (Milton Samson 935); “In this declaration, Samson aligns himself with the only classical warrior ever celebrated for his intellect [Odysseus], who likewise refused to let himself be transformed into a beast by his passion for a beautiful seductress” (Barton 11). Samson’s refusal to become a ‘beast’ is now in regard to Christian fortitude rather than the fame and social standing he had previously alluded to.

Chambers’ article argues that Samson’s heroism is most likely the greatest form of Christian Heroism. Because his martyrdom displays fortitude in the face of death, the greatest mortal fear, it requires the greatest amount of courage, similar to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (Chambers 316). Closer to the other end of the spectrum is Brendan Quigley, who grants Samson the possibility of becoming a Christian hero, but says that “the question of heroism precedes that of religious identity” (Quigley 529). He believes that Samson is a “tragic” hero first and foremost, all the way through the end of the poem, calling his decision to go to the temple with the messenger “unprincipled” (Quigley 544), or without religious consideration.

The different interpretations of Samson offered by Quigley and Chambers both

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present important insights into the nature of his character, but each is taken to an extreme. Samson would be better understood as somewhere between the two; he is undoubtedly a Christian Hero by the end of the poem, but his pride and tendency toward violence keep him from being the ideal religious hero personified by Adam. In many ways, Samson and Satan exude these tragic or Hellenic qualities throughout their respective poems.

The Muse and the more virtuous characters of *Paradise Lost* continuously stress that the use of violence, an attribute so highly valued by the Classical Epics, is ineffective and even harmful to whoever uses it. In Book V, God tells Raphael that Adam should be wary of Satan’s antagonism, but “By violence, no, for that shall be withheld” (Milton Paradise V, 242). Abdiel proves this at the end of the book by challenging Satan’s disobedience in the face of a horde of his followers, with the wise and courageous fortitude of the Christian hero; he is “Unshak’n, unseduc’d, unterrif’d ... From amidst them forth he pass’d,/ Long way through hostile scorn, which he sustain’d/ Superior, nor of violence fear’d aught” (Milton Paradise V 899, 903-905). Compare Abdiel’s courage to hold tight to his values without fear of violence to the physical struggles of Satan in Chaos, which are motivated by revenge. God commends Abdiel for his obedience, saying he is “in word mightier than they in Arms;/ And for the testimony of Truth hast borne/ Universal reproach, far worse to bear/ Than violence ... ” (Milton Paradise VI, 32-35). Milton believes

that the mental strength to overcome false ideas is much more difficult to maintain than withstanding physical assault.

Satan is clearly more concerned with the effects of violence. This is most evident in the battle in Heaven. He scoffs at Michael’s threats, saying, “Nor think thou with wind/ Of airy threats to awe whom yet with deeds/ Thou canst not” (Milton Paradise VI, 282-284). Satan reverses the power of words and violence that God makes clear in his speech to Abdiel, giving precedence to action rather than the conviction of words. The weakness of his “Arms” is demonstrated during the battle, when the angels “... fell/ By thousands ... The sooner for thir Arms; unarm’d they might/Have easily as Spirits evaded swift” (Milton Paradise 593-596), and later on, when the opposing army’s “armor help’d thir harm” (Milton Paradise 656).

The peak of Satan’s Hellenic heroism – his victorious speech in front of a crowd of fallen angels after his temptation of Eve and revenge on the Almighty – is the final, anticlimactic moment in which Milton shows us the folly of his vengeful agenda. Instead of the fame and veneration that a Hellenic hero expects from the masses, Satan is met with hissing:

So having said, a while he stood, expecting  
Thir universal shout and high applause  
To fill his ear, when contrary he hears  
On all sides, from innumerable tongues  
A dismal universal hiss, the sound  
Of public scorn ...  
(Milton Paradise X, 504-509)

Satan’s moment of triumph becomes his moment of defeat. Like Samson at the beginning of *Samson Agonistes*, he is reduced from the peak of social recognition to the shame of public scorn, “Lower than bondslave” (Milton Samson 36-38). In Satan’s case, his transformation into a serpent makes him literally reduced to a beast.

Samson’s comparable passion for individuality and violence is disconcerting if we are to see him as becoming the perfect Christian hero that Chambers believes him to be. Even as his transformation to Religious hero takes place, he maintains some of his satanic qualities. Like Satan, he recognizes God’s justice; he tells Manoa, “Appoint not heavenly disposition, Father,/ Nothing of all these evils hath befall’n me/ But justly” (Milton Samson 373-374). However, he differs from Satan in his willingness to be punished, asking Manoa to “let me here,/ As I deserve, pay on my punishment” (Milton Samson 488-489).

What is troubling, however, is that after he makes these morally heroic statements, he lapses back into the logic of the Hellenic hero. He selfishly wishes for death to alleviate his pain: “This one prayer yet remains, might I be heard,/ No long petition, speedy death,/ The close of all my miseries, and the balm” (Milton Samson 649-651). Quigley notes that his rejection of Dalila is not nearly on the same level of Eve’s temptation of Adam. “For Sampson, the tearful Dalila is unquestionably and obviously false, and in such a case there can be no possibility of genuine temptation” (Quigley 533). Even in his forgiveness of Dalila,

which is religiously heroic in principle, he warns her to keep a distance, “lest fierce remembrance wake/My sudden rage to tear thee joint by joint./At distance I forgive thee, go with that” (Milton Samson 952-954). He does not trust himself to resist his violent inclinations, betraying his satanic propensity to violent action.

Samson’s encounter with Harapha is equally revealing. According to Barton and other optimistic readers of “Samson Agonistes,” “Samson’s confrontation with this swaggering boor forces him at least temporarily to see himself as others see him, and to realize both what he was, and what he has become, a Janus-like perspective that is unavailable to the fallen

fact, the God of *Paradise Lost* doesn’t ever create physical conflict or death; it’s Satan who ultimately brings them about. Harapha only taunts Samson. Samson is unable to have the ‘wise fortitude’ to withstand the verbal assault, and although his challenge is in God’s name, it demonstrates his satanic tendency to play the Hellenic hero.

For much of “Paradise Lost,” Adam is susceptible to some of the same faults as both Satan and Samson. For instance, all three of them suffer similar falls. Samson chooses a wife, Dalila, and is eventually tempted into sin by her feminine charms, just as Adam asks God for a woman in the form of Eve, whose charms lead to his fall as well. Satan’s seduction by Sin,

Though Samson successfully resists temptation and learns to obey the will of God, his trial proves that the remnants of pride and violence within him through his death, which is “dearly bought revenge, yet glorious!” (Milton Samson 1660). Adam is also inclined to seek revenge at one point. He is told that Satan will suffer the consequences of his temptation when the seed of Eve will “bruise” his head. After the fall, Adam tells Eve they should avoid suicide because “... to crush his head/ would be revenge indeed; which will be lost/ By death brought on ourselves, or childless days/Resolv’d, as thou proposest” (Milton Paradise X, 1035-1038). Adam’s language is the same violent, aggressive language that we see

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archangel” (Barton 12). If his confrontation with the powerful and aggressive giant does grant him some revelation of his previous faults, his violent tendencies still make one question how complete his revelation actually is. Samson challenges Harapha to violent combat, saying “Defy thee to the trial of mortal fight,/By combat to decide whose god is God” (Milton Samson 1175-1176). Although Samson is using his strength for the glory of God rather than his own glory, showing his progression towards the Christian hero, he is still the instigator. The epic battle of *Paradise Lost* is a result of Satan’s violent aggression, not God’s desire to inflict harm on Satan. In

although a bit more obscure, is also presented as the result of feminine “attractive graces” (Milton Paradise II, 762). The result of this is the situation of all three characters in a similar starting point. They have all given into sinful temptation (although Satan’s is less influenced by outward provocation) and are fallen because of their disobedience to God. The difference is in the final outcome of each character’s moral progression. While Samson has only sorted out some of his moral issues before his death, the Adam we see sauntering out of Eden is fully ready to face the world with the patience and wisdom of the Christian hero.

throughout *Samson Agonistes*. Not only does he want to get revenge by bruising Satan’s head; he wants to crush it.

However, unlike Samson’s adherence to his violent ways, Adam learns that violence is not the path to God. In his explanation of the “Patience and the Education of Adam in *Paradise Lost*,” Gerald Schiffhorst uses Milton’s Christian Doctrine to explain that “hope, constancy, temperance, and perseverance – are explicitly defined as constituting the ideal Christian response to adversity” (Schiffhorst 55). The patience needed to uphold these ideals requires that the passions are held under control; as Michael tells Adam in the final book,

“ ... upstart Passions catch the Government/  
From Reason, and to servitude reduce/ Man till  
then free” (Milton Paradise XII, 88-90).

The violent passions of Samson and Satan are nowhere to be found in Adam at the end of *Paradise Lost*. However, images of such passions are plentiful in the last two books. The last visions given by Michael before the flood are of uncontrolled violence:

“...on each hand slaughter and gigantic  
deeds ... till at last, Of middle Ago one rising,  
eminent, In wise deport, spake much of Right  
and Wrong, Of Justice, of Religion, Truth and  
Peace, And Judgment from above: him old and  
young, Exploded, and had seiz'd with violent  
hands, Had not a cloud descending snatch'd  
him thence, Unseen amid the throng ... ”  
(Milton Paradise XI, 659-671)

Michael's lesson to Adam is clear: the man whose courage allows him to surmount the social pride of the Hellenic hero becomes the real hero. Like Abdiel, Enoch is rewarded for valuing virtue over violence, even while “beset/ With Foes for daring single to be just ... to show [Adam] what reward/Awaits the good, the rest what punishment”  
(Milton, Paradise XI, 702-710).

Adam must finally come to understand that violence is never endorsed by God, for it is by definition averse to the “Religion, Truth and Peace” of Enoch. Upon learning that Christ will be the agent of Satan's punishment, he is at first eager to know “where and when/ their fight, what stroke shall bruise the Victor's heel” (Milton Paradise XII, 384-385). Micheal explains that Christ's punishment of Satan will manifest itself through the opposite of violence: “The Law of God exact he shall fulfil/ Both by obedience and by love, though love/ Alone fulfil the Law ... ” (Milton Paradise XII, 402-403). Love is the active element, not feats of strength. Like Enoch and Abdiel, he will have to have the fortitude of the Christian hero, because like them, “For this he shall live hated, be blasphem'd,/Seiz'd on by force ... ” (Milton Paradise XII, 411-412).

Thus Adam has finally learned the virtue of the Christian hero. He must resist his passions and endure the scorn of others with love and patience, knowing that in the end he'll receive Divine reward. He thanks Michael, saying,

“Henceforth I learn, that to obey is best,  
And love with fear the only God ...  
... with good, Still overcoming evil, and by

small, Accomplishing great things, by things  
deem'd weak, Subverting worldly strong, and  
worldly wise, By simply meek; That suffering  
for Truth's sake, Is fortitude to highest victory.”  
(Milton Paradise XII 561-570)

The strengths of the Christian hero are summed up in these final reflections. The love, patience, and meekness “deem'd weak” by some are “fortitude to highest victory.” Although Adam has still not proven that he will abide by this philosophy, he has proven to Michael that he has “attain'd the sum/Of wisdom” (Milton Paradise XII, 575-576). Neither Satan nor Samson ever get this far. Samson does sacrifice himself for the glory of God, but before ever proving wholly that he has attained the wisdom to lead a life guided by Christian fortitude. Christ, Abdiel and Enoch provide examples for both Adam and the reader to live by; it remains to be found whether those examples will be followed.

by Matt Stayman