

The Rhetoric of “Heroism” and the “Problem of Authority” in *Paradise Lost*

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Abstract

This paper examines the rhetoric of “heroism” and the “problem of authority” in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, focusing on the contrasting representations of Satan and God. It explores how Milton initially presents Satan with qualities associated with epic heroism, including courage, endurance, leadership, eloquence, and an apparent commitment to freedom. However, the poem gradually reveals the destructive consequences of his pride and rebellion, questioning whether heroic appearance can be equated with genuine heroism. The paper also examines divine authority through the ideas of sovereignty, free will, obedience, justice, and mercy, avoiding a simple portrayal of God as tyrannical. Drawing on C. S. Lewis, William Empson, and the Romantic reception of Satan, the paper argues that Milton makes Satan’s rhetoric of rebellion compelling while simultaneously subjecting it to moral and theological scrutiny. Ultimately, *Paradise Lost* presents heroism and authority as complex ideas shaped by freedom, moral responsibility, and the purposes to which power is directed.

KEYWORDS

Paradise Lost, John Milton, Heroism, Satan, Divine Authority, Free Will, Rebellion, Moral Responsibility, Epic Tradition, Christian Heroism, Divine Justice, Freedom

Introduction

John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, first published in 1667, combines classical epic conventions with the Christian narrative of the ‘Fall’. Milton states his purpose as an attempt to “justify the ways of God to men” (Milton 1.26), making divine justice, free will, obedience, and moral responsibility central to the poem. These concerns also create a tension between individual will and divine authority, particularly through the character of Satan. Although Satan is ultimately presented as the source of evil, he initially possesses qualities associated with the epic hero, including courage, endurance, leadership, eloquence, and determination. After his defeat, he declares, “What though the field be lost? / All is not lost the unconquerable will” (Milton 1.105–06), and asserts that “courage never to submit or yield” remains unconquered (1.108). His claim, “Here at least / We shall be free” (Milton 1.258–59), followed by “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n” (Milton 1.263), presents rebellion as heroic resistance and freedom. Satan’s heroism is therefore closely linked to the problem of authority. While Satan views divine sovereignty as domination and obedience as servitude, Milton’s theological framework presents God as the source of cosmic and moral order. Their conflict consequently raises larger questions about freedom, responsibility, heroism, and legitimate authority.

II. Epic Heroism and Milton’s Christian Epic

The traditional epic hero is associated with courage, strength, endurance, leadership, honour, and determination. Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* represents martial courage and personal honour, while Aeneas in Virgil's *Aeneid* combines courage with duty and responsibility. Milton adopts these classical conventions in *Paradise Lost*, but gives them a distinctly Christian meaning.

Barbara Kiefer Lewalski observes that *Paradise Lost* draws extensively upon Homeric and Virgilian traditions and “undertakes in some fashion to redefine classical heroism in Christian terms” (Lewalski 113–29). This is evident in Satan, who initially displays courage, endurance, leadership, and determination. After his defeat, he declares, “What though the field be lost? / All is not lost, the unconquerable will” (Milton 1.105–06), presenting resistance as heroic strength. Yet Milton gradually separates heroic qualities from genuine moral heroism. Courage and determination alone do not constitute heroism; their value depends upon their purpose. Satan's strength of will increasingly serves pride, revenge, and destruction, making his apparent heroism morally problematic. Milton offers an alternative understanding of heroism in Book IX, where he refers to “the better fortitude / Of patience and heroic martyrdom” (Milton 9.31–32). Here, patience, self-control, endurance, and moral strength become more important than military victory. Frank Kermode similarly explains that Milton's Christian conception of heroic virtue differs from pagan models by giving importance to the mastery of desire through reason (Kermode 317–30).

Thus, Milton does not reject classical heroism but redefines and redirects it within a Christian moral framework. The distinction between heroic appearance and genuine moral heroism is therefore central to the portrayal of Satan in *Paradise Lost*.

III. Satan and the Rhetoric of Heroism

Satan's presentation in *Paradise Lost* creates an important problem of heroism. Milton gives him qualities traditionally associated with the epic hero, including courage, endurance, determination, leadership, and powerful speech. After his defeat in Heaven, he declares, “What though the field be lost? / All is not lost—the unconquerable will” (Milton 1.105–06). His language transforms defeat into an assertion of heroic strength. Satan further presents rebellion as freedom, declaring, “Here at least / We shall be free” (Milton 1.258–59), and “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n” (1.263). Through such rhetoric, he portrays obedience as servitude and rebellion as heroic resistance, while establishing authority among the fallen angels. However, Milton gradually exposes the difference between heroic rhetoric and genuine heroism. Satan himself declares, “To do aught good never will be our task, / But ever to do ill our sole delight” (Milton 1.158–59). His courage and determination are thus directed towards destruction rather than moral good.

John Carey observes that Milton's Satan has produced unusually strong and conflicting responses among readers because of the complexity of his characterization (Carey 160 - 74). C. S. Lewis similarly distinguishes between Satan's impressive poetic presentation and genuine moral heroism, warning against confusing the grandeur of Satan's language with approval of his character (Lewis 90 - 98). Satan therefore possesses the language and appearance of an epic hero, but Milton questions the moral basis of his heroism. The poem

suggests that courage and resistance alone cannot constitute heroism; they must be guided by a morally responsible purpose.

IV. From Heroic Resistance to Destructive Rebellion

Satan's initial resistance appears heroic because of his courage and determination. However, Milton gradually reveals that his rebellion is driven by pride, envy, and revenge. His heroic image therefore loses its moral strength.

This change is particularly clear in "Book IV", where Satan reflects on his condition and considers repentance: "But say I could repent and could obtain / By Act of Grace my former state" (Milton 4.93–94). Although he recognizes the possibility of reconciliation, he rejects it and chooses to continue his rebellion. His decision is expressed in the declaration, "Evil, be thou my Good" (Milton 4.110). This marks a crucial shift from resistance to a conscious rejection of goodness. Milton thus suggests that the problem is not Satan's strength of will, but the direction of that will.

John Carey points out that Satan's inner debate makes him a complex and psychologically compelling character. His ability to recognize his own conflict can create sympathy in the reader, even though his final choice is destructive (Carey 163). Yet Satan's choice ultimately brings consequences. In "Book IX", he acknowledges that "Revenge, at first though sweet, / Bitter ere long back on itself recoils" (Milton 9.171–72), while his pursuit of revenge leads to his degradation into the form of a serpent.

Thus, Satan's movement from heroic resistance to destructive rebellion reinforces Milton's distinction between courage and moral heroism. When courage is governed by pride and revenge, it becomes an instrument of destruction rather than genuine moral strength.

V. Satan, Free Will, and the Meaning of Freedom

The question of heroism in *Paradise Lost* is closely connected with freedom. Satan presents himself as its defender because he rejects the authority of Heaven, declaring, "Here at least / We shall be free" and "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (Milton 1.258–63). He thus presents independence from divine authority as the highest form of freedom.

Milton, however, gives freedom a more complex meaning. It is not merely freedom from external authority but the ability to choose responsibly. Satan is not forced to rebel; his actions arise from his own will. Dennis Danielson argues that Milton's *Paradise Lost* works within a conception of free will in which rational beings possess genuine freedom to choose, and that this freedom is central to Milton's treatment of divine justice (Danielson 131–63). Satan's freedom is therefore real, but it does not guarantee the wisdom or goodness of his choices.

Satan's claim that he can make "a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (Milton 1.254–55) expresses his confidence in the power of his own mind. Yet his attachment to pride and revenge shows that his will is increasingly controlled by the passions he chooses to follow.

The poem consequently distinguishes between freedom of choice and freedom from moral consequence. Satan is free to choose rebellion, but he cannot escape its consequences. Milton therefore suggests that genuine

freedom involves responsible choice and moral self-direction. Satan's tragedy lies not in possessing free will, but in using that freedom to pursue pride, revenge, and destruction.

VI. Divine Authority: Sovereignty, Justice, and Mercy

Satan's rebellion naturally raises the question of divine authority in *Paradise Lost*. Milton does not present God merely as a powerful ruler demanding obedience; divine authority is connected with justice, order, freedom, and mercy. Satan, however, understands authority as domination, declaring, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (Milton 1.263), and therefore views obedience as a loss of freedom.

In "Book III", God emphasizes that his created beings possess genuine freedom. He states that they were "just and right, / Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (Milton 3.98–99), and explains that "Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell" (3.102). These lines suggest that obedience has moral value only when it is freely chosen.

Dennis Danielson argues that free will is central to Milton's attempt to reconcile divine justice with human and angelic responsibility (Danielson 144–59). Divine authority therefore does not eliminate creaturely responsibility but exists alongside genuine freedom.

Divine authority is also associated with mercy as well as judgment. After the Fall, the Son offers himself for human redemption, showing that divine justice is accompanied by divine mercy (Milton 3.227–65). Authority is thus presented not only through punishment but also through forgiveness and restoration.

Thus, *Paradise Lost* does not simply oppose Satan's freedom to God's authority. Milton explores how legitimate authority can coexist with genuine freedom. Satan's error lies in treating authority as oppression, while Milton presents divine authority as part of a moral order in which freedom carries responsibility.

VII. Critical Debate: Is Satan a Hero?

The complex presentation of Satan has produced considerable debate among readers and critics of *Paradise Lost*. The question is not simply whether Satan is evil, since Milton's Christian framework clearly presents him as a fallen and destructive figure. The more interesting question is why Satan can nevertheless appear heroic, attractive, and powerful to readers. The Romantic poets played an important role in developing this interpretation. William Blake famously observed that Milton was "of the Devil's party without knowing it" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*). Blake's statement does not necessarily mean that Milton approved of Satan; rather, it points to the extraordinary energy and imaginative power with which Milton presents his rebellious character. Percy Bysshe Shelley similarly admired Satan's resistance to tyranny and saw him as a figure of intellectual and moral opposition (Shelley 53–54). These Romantic interpretations helped establish the tradition of reading Satan as a heroic rebel.

C. S. Lewis strongly challenges this interpretation. In "A Preface to *Paradise Lost*", he argues that Satan's impressive language should not be confused with genuine heroism. According to Lewis, Satan's central weakness is his excessive concern with himself and his own supposed rights (Lewis 92–98). His pride gradually transforms resistance into self-destruction. Lewis therefore encourages readers to distinguish between poetic grandeur and moral greatness. *John Carey* offers a more complex understanding of Satan. He emphasizes the unusual power of Milton's characterization and the conflicting responses it has produced

among readers (Carey 160–74). Satan’s moments of self-awareness, particularly his struggle in Book IV, make him psychologically compelling even when his actions remain morally destructive. *William Empson* takes a more questioning approach to Milton’s representation of God and divine authority in *Milton’s God*. His interpretation demonstrates that the poem can raise difficult questions about divine justice without necessarily reducing Satan’s actions to heroic ones (Empson 36–90).

These critical positions show why Satan remains difficult to categorize. The Romantic critics highlight his energy and resistance, Lewis stresses his moral failure, Carey emphasizes his complexity, and Empson draws attention to the problem of authority. Taken together, they suggest that *Paradise Lost* deliberately makes the reader examine the difference between the appearance of heroism and genuine moral heroism.

VIII. Reconsidering Heroism and Legitimate Authority

Paradise Lost offers a more complex understanding of heroism than the traditional epic. Milton does not reject classical heroic qualities but questions what happens when courage, strength, and determination are separated from moral responsibility. Satan possesses these qualities, but his actions show that they alone cannot make him genuinely heroic.

Satan’s heroism is based on self-assertion and resistance. His declaration, “Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav’n” (Milton 1.263), presents independence as more valuable than obedience. Yet Milton shows that freedom can become destructive when governed by pride and revenge.

In contrast, Milton refers to “the better fortitude / Of patience and heroic martyrdom” (Milton 9.31–32), associating heroism with patience, endurance, self-control, sacrifice, and moral strength. As Stella P. Revard observes, Milton places the Christian ideal of heroic patience against the traditional model of the martial hero (Revard 329–41). True strength, therefore, may lie in self-control rather than conquest.

This distinction also applies to authority. Satan views authority as domination, while Milton presents divine authority within a framework of free will, justice, and moral order. God’s statement that created beings were “free to fall” (Milton 3.99) suggests that obedience has meaning because it is freely chosen.

Ultimately, *Paradise Lost* suggests that genuine heroism requires responsible freedom, while legitimate authority must exist within a moral order. Satan’s tragedy is that his extraordinary strength of will is directed towards destructive ends. Milton therefore shifts the meaning of heroism from mere strength and resistance to the wise and moral use of power.

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