Pride Goeth Before a Fall

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The character of Satan in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a subject of heavy debate among Milton scholars. Some, like C.S. Lewis, believe that Satan is a villain through and through, and any sympathy towards him shows the reader to be an atheist, or at the very least, not firmly Christian. Others, like William Blake, claim that Milton was "of the devil's party without knowing it," and consider Satan to be a tragic hero rather than a villain (Blake 88). The latter is an especially convincing argument when studying Paradise Lost as a tragedy, since one of the key elements of tragedy is *hamartia*, the hero's fatal flaw or error in judgement that inevitably brings about their downfall. For the most part, Satan certainly seems to fit the stereotype, but it is problematic to argue for his heroism and virtue in light of his mistakes. Perhaps this is because *Paradise Lost* is not a tragedy, at least not fully, and cannot be read as such without some serious difficulties. However, while Satan may not be able to fit the stock character of a tragic hero, he is not without a fatal flaw. Satan's downfall is brought on himself over and over again by his pride, and the tragic irony of his character is that he cannot see himself falling ever further in his attempt to overstep his place. Satan's downfall is a result of his *hamartia*, pride, and the narrator allows the reader to watch his descent through the evolution of his disdain for servitude, his descent down the renaissance image of the Great Chain of Being, and the symbolic imagery of the serpent.

To begin, it is necessary to closely examine the definition of *hamartia.* The Oxford English Dictionary's single definition of *hamartia* is rather brusque: "The fault or error which entails the destruction of the tragic hero" ("hamartia" n.). The curt efficiency of this definition fails to capture the term's nuances. Stephen Halliwell in his book *Aristotle's Poetics*, spends a great deal of time analyzing *hamartia* in context of Aristotelian tragedy. He first claims that *hamartia* results from a hero who is "not the victim of arbitrary misfortune and whose downfall must therefore be the result of an intelligible causal factor… which leaves his innocence intact (Halliwell 220). However, after further exploration, he comes to the general conclusion "that tragic *hamartia* could encompass one of a number of moral failings and errors," although if there must be an English definition, "the terms 'fallibility' and 'failing' seem…perhaps the least prejudicial ones available" (222). Milton's Satan does not perfectly fit into the tragic hero role – his innocence does not remain intact – but his downfall certainly is the result of a fallibility or failing. However, since *Paradise Lost* is a mixture of secular and sacred, the Biblical definition of *hamartia* must be examined as well. This definition is similar in the sense of "to err" and "be mistaken," but it also means "to miss or wander from the path of uprightness and honour," and more specifically, "to wander from the law of God, violate God's law" (G266 "hamartia"). Just as *Paradise Lost* combines classical and Biblical elements, Satan's *hamartia* must be defined by both categories as well. For Milton's Satan, then, *hamartia* is a moral error or fallibility which causes him to wander from the path of uprightness, resulting in his ultimate destruction.

Satan's *hamartia* is quite simply his pride, his desire to ascend to a higher position in order to look down on those around him. *Pride* is one of few English words that has not changed significantly over the last 400 years. In Milton's day, as in ours, *pride* referred to "a high, esp. an excessively high, opinion of one's own worth or importance which gives rise to a feeling or

attitude of superiority over others; inordinate self-esteem" (def. 1a). The key idea in this definition is that of elevation or height, for Satan consistently has the desire to be higher than those around him. When God elevates the Son to a position above all others, Satan "could not bear / through pride that sight, and thought himself impaired" (Milton 5.664-65). Satan's pride could not reconcile the thought of bowing to one whom he considered his equal. He believed himself to be "impaired" in that some part of his being was not good enough to be given the honoured position. But already at the beginning of his fall, Satan's pride is what blinds him; he is right to think himself impaired, but his pride impairs his reason and sight rather than his power. Instead of being content with his place, Satan feels the need to rise above his peers. Even in Hell, Satan seems compelled to assert himself above his fellow demons; seeking to prove himself the best, he is determined to break out of Hell and fly up to earth "with thoughts inflamed of highest design" (2.630). He is not humbled by his fall from heaven, but instead exclaims, "What though the field be lost? / All is not lost; the unconquerable will, / and study of revenge, immortal hate, / and courage never to submit or yield" (1.105-108). Satan's pride simply does not allow him to submit or be content, and though he may be physically brought down, this is not the case for his unconquerable will, a fitting adjective that could also be ascribed to his pride. Satan must rise above his peers, in Heaven or in Hell, and rather than being content to build a kingdom in Hell and be ruler there, he has an insatiable need to aim higher; even though heaven is out of reach, he cannot humble himself enough to accept Hell, and chooses to chase after earth instead.

In some ways, one could argue that God set Satan up to fall, and then refused to allow him to repent. After all, Satan was, by Milton's admission, "of the first / if not the first Archangel," and it is only natural that such a position would command respect and prestige. Satan seems to have every reason to want to rise to a high position; according to Milton, he had

been given such a position by God himself. Nevertheless, Satan's speech as he enters Paradise and battles with himself reveals that he knows his own weakness. Had he been "some inferior angel," Satan knows that he would still have likely followed someone greater who rose up in the same way he did. His position would not necessarily have affected his pride, and he has no excuse. The other angels with high positions "fell not" but stood "unshaken" (4.64). Here we see *hamartia* at work; because of his pride, it seems that Satan cannot help trying to elevate himself, and in doing so, he inevitably falls. As Lewis puts it, "[the Devils] know they will not repent. That door out of Hell is firmly locked, by the devils themselves, on the inside" (Lewis 105). Furthermore, in this speech, Satan knows that he has made a mistake and can see that he is fallen. In perhaps his moment of greatest clarity, he realizes that "while [the demons] adore me on the throne of Hell, / with diadem and scepter high advanced / the lower still I fall, only supreme / in misery" (Milton 4.89-92). In a rare moment of truth, Satan realizes that "pride is his sin; he knows that had he been, even, an inferior Angel this same pride would have caused him again to where he now stands" (Musgrove 307). His *hamartia* is indeed a fatal flaw, and in the Biblical sense, he can no longer turn back from the path of unrighteousness upon which he has begun to journey. Unfortunately, the moment of clarity is short-lived, and his ultimate conclusion is that although heaven is out of reach, he can still take earth. The brief thought of humility disappears, and Satan is blinded by pride once more.

Although he never explicitly mentions them, Milton employs imagery from a few famous Greek myths which parallel Satan's fall from heaven, specifically related to *hubris*. *Hubris* is an "overweening presumption suggesting impious disregard of the limits governing human action in an orderly universe. It is the sin to which the great and gifted are most susceptible, and in Greek tragedy it is usually the hero's tragic flaw" ("hubris, n."). According to *A Handbook to*

Literature, *hubris* often "results from excessive pride, ambition, and overconfidence" (Thrall 225). Satan most certainly fits this description, especially in relation to his disregard of the set limits in God's created order. There are several classical examples of Greek myths in which *hubris* plays a large role, and Milton was likely drawing especially on the stories of Icarus and Phaeton, explained in David Quint's book:

> In his epic about the Fall, Milton includes versions of two famous characters of classical myth who fell from the heavens: Icarus, who fell when he ignored his father's warnings and flew too high on his wings of wax and feathers; and Phaeton, who fell, struck by Jupiter's thunderbolt, from the solar chariot of his father Apollo, the chariot he had unsuccessfully tried to drive through the sky, in spite of Apollo's plea that he forbear. (Quint 63).

Icarus and Phaeton are both perfect examples of *hubris*: pride and disregard for boundaries leads them too high, and they fall. Satan's fall in *Paradise Lost* maps onto both of these myths. With the Icarus story, Daedalus equips his son with wings but warns him that he will not be able to fly too high or he will die. In comparison, Milton's God puts Satan in a high position, and even creates him with his own set of wings. But Satan, like Icarus, aims too high despite Abdiel's ample warning to turn back, and ends up tumbling from the heavens. In Phaeton's case, his father is the sun god, and Phaeton therefore is granted a position of authority and has great cause for pride. His father swears on the river Styx to give him anything he wants, an irrevocable promise in Greek myth, and therefore cannot stop Phaeton when he attempts to drive the sun chariot for a day. In *Paradise Lost*, though Satan is somewhat of a son figure, God does not swear by anything to give Satan whatever he desires. However, God does stand by his promise of endowing all his creations with free will, and so he also does not stop Satan from disobeying his

commands. But in relation to this myth, God plays the role of Jupiter as well as Apollo: just as Jupiter had to strike Phaeton down from the sky for the chaos and destruction he was causing, so God had to cast Satan out of heaven for the chaos and destruction he caused there. Phaeton and Icarus both died after their fall. Satan, however, did not learn his lesson, and his pride, though injured, was not humbled by his descent to Hell.

Milton, through the narrator of *Paradise Lost*, also shows the progress of Satan's downfall by tracking his place on the Great Chain of Being. The Great Chain of Being was an Elizabethan concept regarding the correct ordering of creation, a metaphor which "served to express the unimaginable plenitude of God's creation, its unfaltering order, and its ultimate unity. The chain stretched from the foot of God's throne to the meanest of inanimate objects" (Tillyard 37-38). Essentially, all of God's creation had a specific order, with the lowest link on the chain being inanimate objects and the highest being God himself. As long as everything remained in its perfectly ordained place, creation would exist in harmonious order. When Satan's pride led to *hubris,* he attempted to ascend from the second highest link to the highest link, and as a result, he was cast out of Heaven into Hell, a realm that lay below even the bottom link in the chain. Although this act is a clear chastisement of Satan's desire to aim high, his pride is not humbled; he is never content with his current position, and undeterred by his fall, he continues to reach for a higher link on the chain than the one he has been assigned.

While Satan's first initial fall is obviously the greatest and most extreme, Milton also subtly shows Satan's descent more slowly and gradually, attempting to disorder the rest of creation along the way. Here, Satan fulfils the Biblical concept of *hamartia* as falling short of the mark. Every time he leaps upward, every ascent he attempts, he falls short. After breaking out of Hell, Satan takes the form of a "stripling Cherub… / not of the prime" (Milton 3.636-37). *Prime*

here refers to the foremost, or first class, of angels, the class that Satan was previously a member of. Thus, changing his form to a young cherub is a lower link on the Chain: he cannot quite reach as high as he did before, for he has already corrupted that form and been cast down from that level. After descending to earth and discovering Eden, the narrator describes how Satan sits on the Tree of Life "like a cormorant" (4.196). Though he no longer resembles the angelic caste, he retains his wings and a position of height. Not long after, however, he comes down from the tree to "among the sportful herd / of those four-footed kinds, himself now one, / now other," ending in the shape of a tiger (4.397-99). Satan is gradually, and unconsciously it seems, coming down the Chain one link at a time. He has now entered the caste of beasts who walk on the ground. Nor does he remain a great tiger for long: to whisper in Eve's ear, he is found "squat like a toad," nearer the ground than ever before. Finally, of course, he takes the form of a serpent. Milton may have banished Satan with a long fall to Hell, but he also illustrates this descent by showing Satan's migration down the Chain of Being, creeping ever lower.

In each form that Satan takes, there is a corruption that takes place, causing him to fall a little further down the chain. Angels should adore God, but Satan uses the form to rebel. Cherubs should be filled with truth, but Satan uses the form for deceit. Cormorants should fly high and light on trees, but Satan descends to the ground. Tigers and toads ought to adore Adam and Eve fondly, but Satan uses them to spy on the humans and disrupt Eve's sleep. And snakes, of course, should not flatter or tempt, let alone be able to speak at all. Satan's *hamartia* is evident here, especially in the Biblical sense: he is straying from God's law and order, disrupting the natural purposes of creation.

The one link in the chain that Satan never embodies is humanity itself, but this does not stop him from corrupting their natural order as well. Satan's tempts Eve by making her desire a

higher position, to be a god or angel instead of a mere human. Satan teaches Eve this inversion of the Great Chain of Being, this *hubris*, by claiming that the inversion has worked: how else could a lowly snake have become capable of reason and speech? Milton explains this metaphor of attempting to ascend to a higher link in the chain by using the physical height of the tree, for by Satan's own admission, "high from the ground the branches would require / [Eve's] utmost reach or Adam's" (9.590-91). In order for Eve to eat the fruit, she would have to deliberately reach up on tip-toe to pick it, almost physically disobeying her God-given limits. In the words of C.S. Lewis, "the Fall is simply and solely Disobedience – doing what you have been told not to do: and it results from Pride – from being too big for your boots, forgetting your place, thinking that you are God" (Lewis 70-71). Satan's *hamartia* causes him to disobey the rules of God's created order: everything he corrupts involves a forgetting of one's ordained place.

The final link to which Satan descends is that of a snake, the most significant of the shapes he takes, and one that ends up defining Satan's character. Interestingly, Satan does see the irony in this form when he exclaims "O foul descent! That I who erst contended / with gods to sit the highest, am now constrained / into a beast, and mixed with bestial slime" (Milton 9.163-65). However, Satan's pride is such that he will not even bear self-humiliation; only a few lines later manages to twist his situation by declaring that "who aspires must down as low / As high he soared" (9.169-70). Satan will quite literally stoop to any means to get his way, even to the level of a snake.

Milton uses the symbol of a snake to show Satan's fall from heaven to earth in other ways as well. When Satan surveys the cosmos before diving down, he can see from "the eastern point / of Libra to the fleecy star," or the two constellations of Libra and Aries (3.557-58). When he hurries back to Hell after successfully tempting Eve, he leaves "betwixt the Centaur and the

Scorpion" (10.328). Satan's flight pattern here aligns with the "constellation Anguis" or Serpens, a serpent; in doing this, "Satan entered the universe at the head of the serpent, in Libra, and now leaves it at the tail of the serpent, enacting in astrological terms his possession of the snake" (Kerrigan 562, n.2). Upon entering the universe, Satan "winds with ease / through the pure marble air his oblique way / amongst innumerable stars," his movements mirroring the zig-zag of a slithering snake as well as following the pattern of the constellation he unwittingly represents. Thus, Milton shows Satan's serpentine descent in the stars, mirroring how he tumbles from heaven.

But having fallen from heaven through the symbol of a serpent, Milton tracks Satan's descent on earth as well through his possession of the snake. When Satan in the snake is tempting Eve, the narrator tells how the serpent moves towards Eve "on his rear, / circular base of rising folds, that tow'red / fold above fold a surging maze, his head / crested aloft" (9.497-99). Milton uses a mixture of enjambment and first or second foot anapests in this description, the effect of which mirrors the writhing coils of the serpent. However, he also brings to the reader's attention that the snake is upright, not slithering along the ground. In a minute version of the Great Chain of Being, the many layers of the serpent show Satan holding a hierarchy within his own body. Even this mean attempt at rising up is quelled, however, in Christ's judgement on the snake, in which he says, "upon thy belly groveling thou shalt go, / and dust shalt eat all the days of thy life" (10.177-78). Even the snake's own bodily levels must fall, and its head "crested aloft" will eat dust (9.499). The final blow is that Christ will ultimately "bruise [his] head," bringing Satan as low as he could possibly be. And as a finishing touch, Milton brings Satan's serpentine descent all the way down to Hell itself. The devils are all transformed into snakes as an "annual humbling… / to dash their pride" (10.576-77). This completes Satan's fall: because of

his pride, he goes from being one of the foremost angels in Heaven to a serpent eating dust in Hell.

In conclusion, although Satan is not the tragic hero of *Paradise Lost* that the Romantics claim him to be, he still possesses one of the key traits: *hamartia*. Satan's character flaw is pride, a trait that causes him to fall in both the tragic literary sense and the sinful Biblical sense. Unlike Phaeton and Icarus, Satan's pride is not humbled by his fall, and he continues to attempt to rise above his ordained place, systematically corrupting each consecutive link on the Great Chain of Being until ultimately he is completely crushed in serpentine form. But the ramifications of Satan's pride have wider ripples than his own destruction and can be traced in the rest of creation as well. In the last two books of *Paradise Lost*, Michael shows Adam the results of Satan's corruption with examples like the Tower of Babel where man, infected by pride, attempt to overstep his boundaries and reach to heaven to be like God. Because of Satan, *hubris* becomes a malady that afflicts the entire human race and all of creation. Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* truly becomes an embodiment of the old proverb: pride goeth before a fall.

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