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Satanic Irony

by Christine Dyslin

(Honors Seminar English 2220/History 2245)

The Assignment: Write a comparative analysis of the figure of Satan (or the tempter figures) in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and Milton's *Book 1 of The Paradise Lost* from such aspects as their situations, roles, and points of view, the use of figurative language in which they are embodied, the kinds of text both writers envision, their thematic functions, and the effectiveness of their role in each text.

How pliant is this Mephostophilis?

Full of obedience and humility.

(1.3.28-29)¹

Christopher Marlowe's *Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* is laden with ironies such as this one: here, while Dr. Faustus is rejoicing in what he perceives to be the obedience of the Satan figure, Mephostophilis, Satan is not truly obedient or humble or pliant. Rather, Marlowe uses irony to set up the insidious deception that is Satan and the idea of free will. The Satan figures in *Dr. Faustus* never seem to do what one would expect of the infamous tempters of Biblical mythology. There is a deep irony in the fact that Faustus is really his own undoing; Mephostophilis does not need to tempt Faustus into evil, because Faustus wills himself into it. Book One of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* offers a similar conundrum, even though Milton's Satan is of a completely different character from Marlowe's. Casting Satan as the hero of an epic worthy to be compared to Achilles is Milton's way of causing us to empathize (perhaps grudgingly) with Satan, an unaccustomed exercise for those who automatically "demonize" any Satan figure. By placing Satan figures in unfamiliar roles, performing unexpected deeds, both Milton and Marlowe capitalize on the irony of the satanic character; they challenge our preconceptions of Satan and cause us to examine our own free will.

In Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, the Satan figure is a conglomerate. He appears in the guise of Lucifer, Belzebub and Mephostophilis, with the agency of Mephostophilis being the most continuous representation; also, he appears almost humorously in the personifications of the seven deadly sins. These multifarious characterizations of Satan contribute to his irony; on one hand, he appears in very physical guises to help Faustus get hold of his reality, but on the other hand, his multiple personalities make him confusing and beyond Faustus's understanding of reality. Interestingly, however, Marlowe's Satan figures don't actively pursue evil. Rather, they act as agents for the working out of Faustus's will. And in fact, Mephostophilis is even seen attempting to dissuade Faustus from his desires:

Oh, Faustus, leave these frivolous demands,
Which strike a terror to my fainting soul. (1.3.80-81)

The Mephostophilis character emphasizes to Faustus that hell is a state of mind:

But where we are is hell,
And where hell is there must we ever be. (1.5.119-120)

His insistence on the existential nature of hell serves as a foil for Faustus's wild acting out of his

fantasies. Faustus always wants sensory experience, concrete evidence; when Faustus asks Mephostophilis about the physicality of hell, Mephostophilis refuses to allow hell to be physical. Likewise, Lucifer's repeated urges to Faustus to "think on the devil" (2.1.89, 102) imply not only that hell is a state of mind, but that it involves a free choice, in that Faustus must do the thinking himself; never does Satan, in his many guises, force Faustus to choose evil, and yet Faustus never seems to grasp that he is free to choose. Faustus constantly demonstrates a misunderstanding of hell and free will; while Satan attempts to show that hell is of the mind because it must be freely chosen, Faustus only understands it in terms of the physical and the sensory. This basic misunderstanding is Marlowe's irony, and it mirrors the gap between human preconceptions of hell and what is real; we tend to believe that only our sensory experience is real, but sensory experience is an outward symbol of inner reality.

Milton's hell, in Book One of *Paradise Lost*, unlike Marlowe's, is very physical. Milton uses tangible descriptors such as "fiery gulf" (52), "furnace" (62) and "darkness visible" (63) to give us a sensory impression of a burning, tortuous place. In the same vein, his description of Satan, by comparison to Leviathan (201ff), is sensory as well. But, like Marlowe, Milton toys with the existential²:

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven. (254-5)

Also like Marlowe, Milton here indicates that it is man's (and Satan's) free will to choose heaven or hell. Herein lies a paradox, however. Satan has chosen his rebellion to gain freedom from God's dominion:

Here at least
We shall be free; the Almighty hath not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:
Here we may reign secure, and in my choice
To reign is worth ambition, though in hell. (258-262)

He admits that hell is a place built by the Almighty and the Almighty has consigned Satan and his legions to hell; therefore, though Satan believes he has freedom to choose, in truth, he does not. Milton here demonstrates the ironic nature of free will; we believe our choices are made freely, but reality (God) is ever a constraint upon those choices.

The legend of *Dr. Faustus* was a folk tale; we know that the tale appeared as a song in print in *The Stationers' Company Register* in 1580, predating Marlowe's play setting (Springfels 7). So when Marlowe set the legend as a play, we can assume that the tale would have been somewhat familiar to Elizabethan audiences. It is important to remember the historical context of the play; our modern sensibilities tend to dismiss the Faustus character as somewhat ridiculous, but to the Elizabethan mind, a contract was a serious thing, and a contract with the devil held a supernatural awe which we can only try to understand. Nicholas Brooke reminds us that while Marlowe calls his play a tragedy, it is, perhaps more importantly, a morality play, and it is the situation more than the characters which make it appealing. "Marlowe's drama was never concerned primarily with character – his heroes are not in that sense clearly defined at all: his plays take their source from ideas, and the excitement of their presentation; and his human drama... lies... more in predicament than character" (95). The satanic figures, then, in this morality play are not the primary focus, but rather servants of the moral situation.

Book One of *Paradise Lost* is a heroic epic, and here, Satan is its hero. W.H. Auden and Norman Holmes Pearson make note of the fact that Milton is really inventing his own style; he uses

blank verse like his predecessors Marlowe and Shakespeare, but because his verse is serving the epic form, his models are more appropriately Homer and Virgil (243). C.S. Lewis dismisses the enigmatic phrase “and justify the ways of God to Man” (line 26) as being subservient to the epic nature of the opening invocation: “The real function of these twenty-six lines is to give us the sensation *that some great thing is now about to begin*” (41). And indeed, Milton launches directly into the aftermath of the Fall, as Satan and his legions lay stunned in the fiery depths of hell.

Th’ infernal Serpent; hee it was, whose guile
 Stirr’d up with Envy and Revenge, deceiv’d
 The Mother of Mankind; what time his Pride
 Had cast him out from Heav’n, with all his Host
 Of Rebel Angels, by whose aid aspiring
 To set himself in Glory above his Peers,
 He trusted to have equall’d the most High,
 If he oppos’d; and with ambitious aim
 Against the Throne and Monarchy of God
 Rais’d impious War in Heav’n and Battle proud
 With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power
 Hurl’d headlong flaming from th’ Ethereal Sky
 With hideous ruin and combustion down
 To bottomless perdition, there to dwell
 In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire
 Who durst defy th’ Omnipotent to Arms. (34-49)

It is a wondrous scene, and immediately engrossing for its style and its main figure, Satan, for whom Milton ironically shows a grudging admiration. That such a one would dare to challenge the Almighty is worthy of an epic poem.

The use of language is very different for Milton and Marlowe, but both achieve seriousness of tone, and at the same time, a sense of unreality that is purposely confusing; this tone serves to emphasize the dizzying effect of damnation as well as to display its inherent literary irony. Marlowe uses exaggeration to demonstrate Faustus’s violent swings between boastful pride and self-abasement as in the following passage:

Scarce can I name salvation, faith or heaven,
 But fearful echoes thunder in mine ears
 ‘Faustus, thou art damned.’ Then swords and knives,
 Poison, guns, halters and envenomed steel
 Are laid before me to dispatch myself. (2.1.19-24)

Within one short scene, Faustus climbs from these suicidal depths to challenge Mephostophilis while bragging about his own knowledge of astronomy.

Hath Mephostophilis no greater skill? Who knows not the double motion of the planets? That the first is finished in a natural day? The second thus, as Saturn in thirty years, Jupiter in twelve, Mars in four, the sun, Venus and Mercury in twenty-eight days. Tush, these are freshmen’s suppositions. (2.1.48-52)

The critic Leo Kirschbaum refers to these emotional shifts as “compressed dramatic irony” and emphasizes that the effect is intentionally jarring to Marlowe’s audience, showing the real battle

raging between good and evil, God and the devil. Kirschbaum points out another, more shocking instance of Marlowe's use of dramatic irony. When Faustus finally is able to write his contract with the devil in his own blood, he utters, "*Consummatum est*," (2.1.73) mimicking the last words of Christ on the cross. Kirschbaum interprets this phrase in two ways; literally, by signing his soul away, Faustus's hope of achieving heaven is finished, and figuratively, Kirschbaum says, "Jesus died that Faustus's soul might live; Faustus flings away this priceless gift for a mess of earthly pottage!" (84-86). Time and again, Faustus embodies the irony of free will; he possesses the freedom to make ridiculously bad choices.

Milton's use of extended simile serves not only the poetic purpose of illustrating, in heroic style, the characters and events of the epic, but the ponderous diversions from the narrative engender in the reader a sense of bewilderment, intimating the confusion of hell and emphasizing the ironic gap between what is real and what only seems to be real. In the following passage we see two similes encompassed in a single sentence; the first compares Satan's legions to the locusts called up by Moses to infest Egypt, and the second is a comparison of the legions to the Barbarian invasions of the Roman Empire.

As when the potent rod
Of Amram's Son in Egypt's evil day
Wav'd round the Coast, up call'd a pitchy cloud
Of Locusts, warping on the Eastern Wind,
That o'er the Realm of impious Pharaoh hung
Like Night, and darken'd all the Land of Nile:
So numberless were those bad Angels seen
Hovering on wing under the Cope of Hell
'Twixt upper, nether, and surrounding Fires;
Till, as a signal giv'n, th' uplifted Spear
Of thir great Sultan waving to direct
Thir course, in even balance down they light
On the firm brimstone, and fill all the Plain;
A multitude, like which the populous North
Pour'd never from her frozen loins, to pass
Rhone or the Danaw, when her barbarous Sons
Came like a Deluge on the South, and spread
Beneath Gibraltar to the Lybian sands. (338-355)

In reading Milton's description of the Satanic legions, we travel to distant lands, we experience freezing temperatures and hot brimstone, we feel the wings of swarms of insects, and we relive two major historical catastrophes. Certainly this dizzying array of experiences contributes to the ironic sense of confusion which Milton intends to create in his hell; we are not sure where the simile ends and hell begins, what is real and what only imagined. It is the character of Satan himself, however, into whom Milton pumps the greatest irony; C.S. Lewis describes him as "sawing off the branch he is sitting on" (96). When Satan gives his speech to rally his legions, he attempts, almost comically, to explain the reason for their defeat and consequent consignment to hell:

But he who reigns
Monarch in Heav'n, till then as one secure
Sat on his Throne, upheld by old repute,
Consent or custom, and his Regal State
Put forth at full, but still his strength conceal'd,

Which tempted our attempt, and wrought our fall. (637-642)

Satan's attempt at logic is flawed and certainly ironic; he explains that the fault for the current undesirable circumstances of his legions lies with God, who really rules only because it is customary for him to do so, and who hides his true strength and tempts (isn't that Satan's occupation?) the rebellion. Lewis muses about why Satan is such an engrossing character. He posits that for Milton, as for any author writing about an evil character, it is relatively easy to take the wickedness which we as civil human beings must restrain in ourselves and release it into a character which is at once fascinating and revolting. "All that is said about Milton's 'sympathy' with Satan, his expression in Satan of his own pride, malice, folly, misery, and lust, is true in a sense, but not in a sense peculiar to Milton. The Satan in Milton enables him to draw the character well just as the Satan in us enables us to receive it" (101).

The literary Satan is an attractive character because he is ironic; he draws us to him because he seems to have our human qualities, and he repels us because we see in him our human flaws and the futility of what we believe is our free will. It is this inherent irony in the character of Satan which makes him fertile ground for great literature. As was apparent with Sir Galahad, characters which are all goodness are uninteresting; we cannot see ourselves in such a character. We like to see our own rebellions enacted in literature, and a great author helps us to find redemption hidden in the dire consequences:

Regard his hellish fall,
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise
Only to wonder at unlawful things,
Whose deepness doth entice such forward wits,
To practice more than heavenly power permits. (Epilogue)

Notes

¹ All references to the play are to the following edition of the play and will be indicated by act, scene, and lines: Marlowe, Christopher. *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 1B. Gen. Ed. David Damrosch. New York: Longman, 2003. 1143-1191.

² All references to the *Book I* of the epic are to the following edition: Milton, John. *Paradise Lost, Book I*. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature*. Vol. 1B. Gen. Ed. David Damrosch. New York: Longman, 2003. 1837-1856.

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