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Earth's Revealing Wound: Debunking the Unorthodox Trinity in *Paradise Lost*

Perhaps the most common interpretation of Satan, Sin, and Death—Hell's first family of *Paradise Lost*—is as a counterfeit of the heavenly Trinity. Such a reading is understandable, for the similarities are certainly evident. For instance, in Hell, Satan, like the heavenly Father, parthenogenically begets Sin, the second person in his trinity. But closer scrutiny reveals discrepancies with the heavenly Godhead. The heavenly Father addresses the second person of the holy Trinity as the "Son of my bosom" (2.169), and Raphael tells Adam that before the creation of the world "imbosom'd sat the Son" (5.597). The Son is begotten from the most intimate part of the Father, near to His very heart. Contrarily, Sin, Satan's begotten, does not emerge from his bosom, but springs from the left side (in Latin, the *sinister* side) of his head (2.755). Stephen M. Fallon, in pointing out Milton's Augustinian belief that "evil is nonentity, the negation rather than the expression of being" (170), sheds light on this discrepancy in the two begettings. According to Augustine, all creatures that have substance, or being, have some goodness. Evil, the privation of good, can only exist as a quality, or what philosophers might call an *accident*, of an existing being. Augustine writes:

[I]f things are deprived of all good, they cease altogether to be [. . .] as long as they *are*, they are good. Therefore, whatever *is*, is good: and evil [. . .] is not a

substance, because if it were a substance it would be good. (VII.13, emphasis added)

Since existence is good, total privation of all good would be non-existence. Without the existence of a being there can be no existence of its qualities, including its evil. Thus Satan, as one of God's creatures, must possess some goodness even after having chosen to rebel. Hence, Sin does not emanate from the "bosom" of Satan's substance; instead Satan's begotten child springs from the head of the counterfeit father. Although Sin and the Son are begotten from different places, this slight divergence raises no significant problems with the standard Trinitarian interpretation of the infernal family.

Further analysis, however, reveals differences between Heaven's Trinity and Hell's counterfeit which prove more troublesome. These more problematic deviations stem primarily from Sin's depiction as a begotten daughter, unlike Heaven's begotten Son. One critic argues that such a depiction of Sin as a female is "an example of Milton's inheritance of a medieval misogynous tradition" in which the female anatomy "function[s] as a trope of inversion [. . . .]"(Magro 105). This argument, coupled with Augustine's definition of evil as privation of good and having no substance of its own, might lead to an interpretation of Sin's gender itself as representative of privation that was previously within the accidents of Satan's being. Readers, however, may have difficulty with such an interpretation upon encountering the third person in the false trinity, Death, the incestuous offspring of Satan and Sin. Hell's firstborn is represented as a son. If Milton has chosen to represent Sin as a female, it would stand to reason that Death—the privation of life—should be as well. The reading of Milton's feminine representation of Sin as being based upon a received medieval convention only raises further questions regarding the reason for Milton's inconsistency in his depiction of Death. One plausible but unsatisfying

attempt to avoid such problems would be to argue that death's insatiability is best seen in a character forever unsatisfied and rapacious, and this rapacity is depicted more believably in a male character than in a female. Milton tells readers that after Death's birth he pursued Sin and, having overtaken his mother, he "in embraces forcible and foul" raped her (2.793). It is safe to assume that Milton also has inherited with his tradition tropes that would make a male character a more effective representation of violent and predatory lust.

But the birth of Death and his subsequent rape of Sin unveils the fundamental difficulty with the reading of the satanic threesome as a counterfeit trinity—that is, the presence of sexual generation in any form. Such generation implies that there is a cause-effect relationship between Satan and Sin, and Death. The orthodox understanding of the Trinity is that each person in the Godhead is coeternal with the others. There is, therefore, no antecedent-consequent relationship between the parts of the Godhead of orthodoxy. Furthermore, the heavenly family is not spoken of as being joined in matrimonial bonds. Rather, the Son is eternally united with the Father in his unwavering filial obedience; the Father is joined to the Son in paternal devotion. The Holy Spirit is that "third" person who eternally emanates from their relationship. The language of marital love, however, is employed in Scripture to describe the relationship existing between God and His chosen people, not the Father and His beloved Son.

So, what does Milton mean to convey in his rather unorthodox depiction? The poet may have chosen to depict his hellish threesome in such a manner because of his own unorthodox view of the Trinity. In *The Christian Doctrine*, Milton explains his own conception of the Godhead. There he writes that "nothing can be said of the one God [. . .] which implies at the same time the unity and plurality of the Godhead" (909). Clearly, Milton here denies the nature of the Trinity as understood by orthodox believers. In setting forth his conception of the Son,

which denies his coeternality with the Father, Milton writes, “[T]he Son was begotten of the Father in *consequence* of his decree, and therefore within the limits of time, for the decree itself must have been *anterior* to the execution of the decree” (934, emphasis added). In no uncertain terms Milton refuses to accept the belief in the coeternality of the persons of the Trinity. Furthermore, he makes clear his rejection of the orthodox belief that the Son is of the same essence as the Father:

Unity and duality cannot consist of one and the same essence. God is one *ens*, not two, one essence and one subsistence, which is nothing but a substantial essence, appertain to one *ens*; if two subsistences or two persons be assigned to one essence, it involves a contradiction of terms, by representing the essence as at once simple and compound. (935)

Having already moved away from the traditional understanding of the Trinity, Milton is able to develop his allegory of Satan, Sin, and Death and their sexual reproduction without seeing any contradictions with the truth as he conceives of it. The conceptual alignment between Milton’s heretical beliefs concerning the Father and Son and his depiction of the sequential generation found in his counterfeit Trinity reveal the depth of the poet’s own unorthodoxy.

What happens, however, if we consider the poem irrespective of its author’s personal heresies that readers might discover only outside of the poem? Interpretations of Satan and Sin in Hell that are more consistent with orthodox Christianity might be discovered. One possibility is to view them as *non-trinitarian* analogs to an altogether different threesome within the Christian tradition. What I will propose in my remaining time is a reading of the threesome as analogous to Adam, Eve, and their offspring, the human race.

In such a reading, both brides spring forth from their respective mates—Sin from Satan’s head, Eve from Adam’s side. Upon noting this similarity, Cleanth Brooks writes:

These passages prepare for, and insist upon, a parallelism between Eve’s relation to Adam and Sin’s to Lucifer. If we still have any doubt of this, listen to Sin’s speech to Lucifer:

Thou art my Father, thou my Author, thou
 My being gav’st me; whom should I obey
 But thee, whom follow?

And compare it with Eve’s speech to Adam in Book IV:

My author and Disposer, what thou bidst
 Unargu’d I obey. . . . (177)

Harold Fisch acknowledges the reading of Sin and Death as “devilish parallels” to “the mode of existence in Eden where Eve (like Sin) is born out of the body of Adam who becomes in a sense her progenitor and who afterward begets on her the human race” (113). We have already seen how the parallels to the Trinity, though they are apparent, can take readers only so far before they begin to diverge. The similarities between Satan and Sin and their Edenic counterparts are arguably more compelling, for they withstand the test of scrutiny. I would also like to suggest that the analogs existing in Hell and Earth are compelling because they possess a third and final set of parallels in Heaven, itself.

One particular incident in Milton’s work best illustrates this alternate reading: God’s pronouncement to Eve of her curse after eating the fruit. Upon confessing, Eve is told, “Thy

sorrow I will greatly multiply / By thy Conception; Children thou shalt bring / In sorrow forth” (*PL* 10.193-95). Milton’s source for this scene is Genesis 3.16. Where Milton says, like the King James Bible, that Eve’s “sorrow” will be multiplied, more modern translations of the verse say prosaically that it is Eve’s “pain” in childbearing that will increase. Eve, however, has just heard God’s prophetic curse of the serpent: “Between Thee and the Woman I will put / Enmity, and between thine and her Seed; / Her Seed shall bruise thy head, thou bruise his heel” (10.179-81). Later, upon choosing to “seek Death” rather than be a cause of misery to others, Adam consoles her, saying, “Pains only in Child-bearing were foretold, / And bringing forth, soon recompens’ t with joy, / Fruit of thy Womb” (10.1050-53). At the moment of Eve’s pain (i.e., labor pain), she is to be reminded of the serpent’s defeat. Ken Hiltner points out the dual nature of her curse, with the wound serving both as a reminder of the separation from God brought about by the fall, and as the promise of the redemption and eventual restoration to perfect unanimity between God and man in Eve’s Seed (114). To make sure that the effect of the fall is seen accurately, Milton, on two more occasions, reiterates the particular happiness that will result from Eve’s fall and its subsequent pain. In Book 11 Adam addresses his wife, “*Eve* rightly call’ d, Mother of all Mankind, / Mother of all things living, since by thee / Man is to live, and all things live for Man” (159-61). Later, after being visited by heavenly messengers in a dream, Eve says, “[T]hough all by mee is lost, / Such favor I unworthy am voutsaf’ t, / By mee the Promis’ d Seed shall all restore” (12.621-23). Adam and Eve have fallen into mortality, but not hopelessly so, for it is Eve’s Seed, brought forth as a mortal child, that will move them back into the kingdom of Life. Now, as they are banished from the Garden, they and their progeny are promised an existence in that middle state between eternal life and utter death until Eve’s Seed is born.

Contrariwise, Satan and Sin are wholly within the realm of evil. Thus their offspring is Death itself, the privation of all life, both physical and spiritual. Sin tells of the birth of Death in vividly painful terms. She says that he, “breaking violently away / Tore through my entrails” (2.781-82). The pain that Eve will feel is parallel to Sin’s pain at the birth of her son, Death. In Hell, however, Sin’s pain is without hope and is cause only for greater suffering and despair. After Death’s birth, the fiend violently begets upon his mother the Hell Hounds that surround her middle. These monstrosities are hourly born, not with the relatively mild “multiplied” sorrow that Eve is to feel, but with “sorrow infinite” (2.797), for they return to the womb of Sin and make her bowels their “repast” (2.800). These new lives, produced by Sin and Death, do not generate more life, but they prove to be births that are self-destructive of all vestiges of life. Sin’s sorrowful and painful births are not reminders of her hope, as Eve’s are, but only cause for greater misery.

In the realm of evil, Sin suffers the self-destructive pains of childbearing. Eve is promised similar pains—though neither self-destructive nor without hope—in her realm between life and death, absolute good and utter evil. I have also suggested that there may be ultimate analogs in Heaven to the two lower realms. Satan and Adam, the progenitors in their respective realms, find their correspondent in the Father. One might be able to move from these parallels to see that Death and mankind will find their analog in Christ, the Son of God. If this is the case, then we are left with the challenge of trying to determine the remaining parallel in Heaven for the two brides, Sin and Eve. Perhaps the answer is indicated in one of the comments made by the narrator when Eve plucks and eats the fruit. There readers are told, “Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat / Sighing through all her Works gave sighs of woe, / That all was lost”

(9.782-84). Hiltner points out the peculiarity of a sentient Earth that experiences pain at Eve's sin. He writes,

Given that [. . .] the iconography of Milton's time included a tradition approaching a "typology of regeneration," making "the Fall a type of Crucifixion" [. . .], it would seem far more likely that if an account of the Fall depicted a wound being opened at all, it would have been Christ's [. . .]. [O]ne certainly might have expected the Son to have "felt the Wound" at the Fall he knew he was destined to receive. (113)

The Son, however, does not, even though he already has learned that that the human race will be saved only by his own "death for death" (3.212). When Adam eats the fruit, Nature gives "a second groan" (9.1001), but this time we are told the "Earth trembl'd from her entrails, as again / In pangs" (1000-01). The use of *pangs*—a term used exclusively in the context of a woman's labor in the King James Bible—evokes the aforementioned suffering specifically associated with childbirth. Moreover, Milton's poignant repetition of *entrails*, which has already been seen in Sin's recounting of the birth of Death, is further evidence of the correlation. We can reasonably conclude that Earth's wound is the first pain of a labor that will end with the resurrection of Christ, called by Paul in Colossians, the "firstborn from the dead" (1.18). Milton's language also reminds readers of Romans 8.22, where Paul writes, "For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now." The pain under which creation has travailed is the curse that paradoxically points to hope. Paul continues in verse 24, "For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?" Though she has not yet seen her promised Seed, the pangs that she will know in childbearing will remind her of what God has promised. Likewise, though the Earth suffers its wounding

passively, it is also given a hope of one day bringing forth the second Adam, Christ, the promised Seed, who will conquer Death brought into the world by the first Adam.

Milton's evidence for Nature as an analog to Eve and Sin is found throughout his work. When Adam tells Raphael of the creation of Eve, he says that he was "call'd / By Nature" into a sleep (8.458-59). The writer of Genesis, however, tells us that "God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam" (2.21). Why does Milton have Nature, not God, call Adam to sleep? Later, when Adam speculates about his weakness against Eve's charms, Milton similarly places Nature where we might expect the Creator. He says, "Nature fail'd in mee" (8.534). Raphael's response reveals that he is more concerned with Adam's blame-shifting than he is with his curious theology that would attribute God's work to Nature, for he replies, "Accuse not Nature, *she* hath done her part" (8.561, emphasis added). If Raphael were to have said of Nature that "*he* hath done *his* part," we might assume Nature to be a euphemism for God, himself. But Raphael's use of the feminine pronouns *she* and *her* rule out any possibility that he is speaking equivocally of a single entity. Nature alongside God has participated in bringing Adam into existence. In Book 6 we find further evidence of Milton's position. There the angel tells Adam of Abdiel's response to Satan who had argued that submission to God is servitude. Abdiel says, "Unjustly thou deprav'st it with the name / Of *Servitude* to serve whom God ordains, / Or Nature" (6.174-176). Were the passage to end here, readers again might conclude that Nature here is used as an appositive of the Creator, but Abdiel continues: "God and Nature bid the same" (176). Milton distinguishes between the two beings, God and Nature, but shows that they are in perfect unanimity, possessing a single will.

In conclusion, we might look ahead to the promised Seed of Eve, Christ, realizing that Milton would have expected readers to be familiar with the climax of the Christian story. There,

in the incarnation, Heaven, Earth, and Hell find one more set of analogs. Throughout his insightful article, Ken Hiltner points out the connections that should continue to be made between the first Adam and the “second,” Christ. If Christ is understood as the second Adam, the father of a new race of men, then one might expect the second Eve also to be born from his side. Milton’s narrator tells readers that it is Mary who will be the second Eve, but the parallels projected forward seem to point to another possibility. The Earth, the “womb” from which God brings forth the first Adam, may prove a more fitting analog to Mary. Hence, the second Eve, brought forth from the side of the second Adam, would seem to be the Church, the Bride of Christ, from whom will come the new race of men, born not of the flesh, but of the Spirit. And, like Adam’s mate, Christ’s Bride will likewise be brought forth from the side of her Groom.

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