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Milton 383

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Milton's Paradox: Justifying Classical Allusions in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Christian Text

One's perspective can make all the difference in understanding and interpreting the communications of another person. Take for instance, Michelangelo's statue of David. When looking at the statue from the left side, he looks like the epitome of youth and innocence, serene and unfamiliar with the evils of the world. Face on we see the determination and perhaps an incline of uncertainty creasing the brows of the now more learned visage. And from directly below we see the expression of a burgeoning warrior, righteous indignation unveiled as if his marble eyes can see Goliath tout his taunts at Israel (Insalaco, Michelangelo). Sometimes the ambiguity in such cases is intended. Other times it is not. Regardless, it is necessary to be familiar with the history, context, and intent of the author to infer as accurate of an interpretation as possible. This is especially important in one of Milton's later works *Paradise Regained*. Although at first glance, Christ's speech in John Milton's *Paradise Regained* appears to condemn classical learning, subsequently undermining Milton's past works, this speech should not be read as a change in Milton's opinions or a paradox but rather as a method to relate to contemporary society and a call to use pagan traditions as archetypes for rhetorical means to divine and teach gospel truths.

The use of classical pagan allusions in Milton's, as well as other Christian, works may be surprising at first especially when looking at the creation account in *Paradise Lost*, one of the most Christian events of all time rendered into Homeric epic and positively rife with classical allusions. And yet as we continue delving, the incongruence of this juxtaposition fades, the idea of Eve being compared to Athena or Venus, while different does not bring doubt to the document, narrative, or motives

themselves. This particular notion of using classical traditions to convey Christian themes was widespread, reflected in the writings and art of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. A few examples include, Erasmus' "In Praise of Folly," Thomas More's "Utopia," Dante's "Divine Comedy," Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel, and Raphael's "The School of Athens" hanging in a chapel in the Vatican City itself (Insalaco, Classical). Milton is not alone.

As simple and as accepted as the use of pagan themes in these and other works are today, such was not the universal case from the beginning. In the Middle Ages, pagan classical learning was only acceptable insofar as it could be seen as allegorical to Christianity and one's journey to Paradise (Insalaco, Dante). Dante illustrates this in his scene where the Pilgrim encounters Paulo and Francesca, led to sin and damned by the actions resulting from reading literature without an eye single to Christ (Dante 26-31). While this was one way of thinking, there were others. More along the lines of Milton are the arguments that Desiderius Erasmus and St. Augustine represented in *Antibarbari* and *De Doctrina Christiana* respectively. Erasmus and St. Augustine both argued the idea that classical tradition and learning was best used to aid the progression of Christianity through rhetorical means.

St. Augustine had two overarching claims in which classical learning helped gain access to Scriptures by providing "a way of discovering those things which are to be understood and a way of teaching what we have learned" (Campion 468). He believed classical learning could provide a great advantage to Christianity while undermining the power and authority to pagan sources. For example, Augustine argues that since evil people use rhetoric "in defense of iniquity," sincere Christians should use the same tools "in the service of truth," also known as *antistrephon*—turning the enemies rhetoric upon themselves (469). Not only would individuals have the capacity and understanding to defend what they believe—pagan rhetorical theory had excellent tried and established methods and patterns which could be used to teach Christian truths.

St. Augustine went so far as to say that if philosophers "have said things which are indeed true

and are well accommodated to our faith, they should not be feared; rather, what they have said should be taken from them as unjust possessors and converted to our use” (Campion 470). The pursuit of truth for Christianity could be felt as a moral obligation under such circumstances. Erasmus, nearly a thousand years later, had similar ideas, displaying such endeavors to be expected by Christ; “Everything in the pagan world that was valiantly done, brilliantly said, ingeniously thought, diligently transmitted had been prepared by Christ for this society” (468). Edmund Campion, who collaborated the connections between St. Augustine’s and Erasmus’ similar work, claims that “Erasmus affirms that Christ wants Christians to use pagan classical literature and philosophy in order to strengthen their own and others belief in Christianity” (468). From such sources it is obvious from at least one source Milton inherits and develops his “characteristic use of classical motifs and myths to carry Christian meaning” (Lewalski 27).

Milton was educated in a time when the curriculum of Cambridge was steeped in classical learning. While few would have attained the proficiency that Milton did, the audiences Milton would have been writing to would have been familiar with the sources of his classical allusions. At the time of his attendance the curriculum was focusing on “logic, rhetoric, ethics, metaphysics, and theology (Lewalski 20). Young John Milton was very eager to attend a college. Upon his arrival, however, and throughout the years he attended “he was disappointed by and sharply critical of the education he received at Cambridge University” (15). Expecting to be surrounded by “challenging studies, learned teachers, stimulating companions,” the reality of the opposite disgusted him (17). “Scholastic logic-chopping, staged debates, and the repetitious review of materials he had already mastered” filled the curriculum and practices of his peers and tutors (21). Unlike other students, Milton pushed past the expected bar eventually earning the praise of many. Unlike other students “rather than imitating specific poems, Milton absorbs, plays with, and freely transforms Ovid and the others, turning them to his own purposes” (17). Much of what we find characteristic of Milton’s later works stems from seeds planted at this time. He had the special talent of synthesizing the style and rhetoric he saw in the classics and recreating it while adding his own spark of

originality, rather than filling in the blanks and regurgitating the form like many of the fellow students he disdained.

For Milton, the use of pagan allusions, of demonstrating a deep understanding of classical literature and ideology was as necessary to writing as was the pen and paper. His innate intelligence and determination to learn drove him to search out and master the things that were to his mind most worthy of studying. Milton before and during his time at college knew classical literature, and he knew it in its native tongues, for “Except during hours of relaxation they were to speak only Latin, Greek, or Hebrew” the languages of the classics (20). Once one becomes fluent in something, like a language, it becomes a part of you. Bits and pieces seem to fit into ordinary life that other, unlearned people, will not see or understand. Thus for Milton, to ingratiate classical literature into his works was, as he saw it, a natural and effective way of expressing his ideas. Not only did Milton feel divinely called to create a masterpiece but he wrote his *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* in English, the common language of the masses. He wrote in a manner that would be relatable to people at the time, much like Christ teaching the Jews through parables. Knowing Milton’s background regarding classical learning without understanding the Christian motives behind it make the apparent rejection in *Paradise Regained* all the more confusing.

And so we reach the pinching point. Although prior to this I have been referring to Christ’s speech, it is important to understand under what duress that speech was given, namely Satan’s argument. Satan repeatedly attempts to tempt Christ—in some way—to sin. Having failed to convince him to seek the praise of kings and armies he tries to make it an imperative to use wisdom, the understanding of everything from who are the scholars, what they argued and discovered, to how they formed their arguments. All of this in order for Christ to gain obeisance and glory from the world that he is assured he will need. Satan makes it seem that unfamiliarity with these philosophers and schools of thought puts Christ at a distinct disadvantage, even a blocking point as “with the Gentiles much thou must converse, / Ruling them by persuasion as thou mean’st (l.229-230). Satan, covering a jibe with seeming concern that

Christ is limiting his scope and understanding, asserts, “All knowledge is not couched in Moses’ law, / The Pentateuch or what the prophets wrote (l. 225-226). Maybe Satan had an incline why Christ was wandering in the wilderness, trying to decide how he was going to fulfill his Father’s work and bring salvation to His children when he ultimately questions, “Without their learning how wilt thou with them, / Or they with thee hold conversation meet?” (l. 231-232). How will you convince them of your truth if you cannot talk on the same plane with them?

Satan leaves off with what we can almost see is a satisfied smirk and nod of the head that says, “How are you going to compete with that?” At this point considering the intense focus and high reputation of classical learning, the reader is left wondering the same question. Satan has just seemingly aligned himself with *the* great ones—the time-tested and honored scholars. Where is there to go from here? Satan has used the very argument and methods St. Augustine claimed Christians needed to combat. Christ’s speech sets a pattern and example for all Christians to follow. He begins by establishing that, no, contrary to what Satan claims, Christ knows these things as has he already assessed their value. (Recall that according to Erasmus, any truth in them would have been inspired by Christ in the first place.) “Think not but that I know these things or think / I know them not” (l. 286-287). He goes on to carefully and without question put Satan as well as classical learning in their place. “He who receives / Light from above, from the fountain of light, / No other doctrine needs” (l. 288-290). Christ’s gospel, the work of the Father, does not require or base its foundation on anything but the word of God. It is not a partnership or mutual effort on behalf of philosophers and God. Divine truth does not equate itself to things of lesser value, even if it seems to bring some sort of gain. “But these are false, or little else but dreams/ Conjectures, fancies, built on nothing firm” (l.291-292). These are the lines that trip up any reader cursorily familiar with Milton. Even if they had managed to bulldoze their way through the first couple lines of Christ’s remarks they would get caught here. This appears to be *Milton* declaring through *Christ*—through which all truth disseminates—that the philosophies and learning of pagan scholars “are

false...conjectures, fancies..." Does this not rescind or at least diminish the justifying Milton had attempted so diligently in *Paradise Lost*? Here is where we must apply the traditions of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the conclusions of Erasmus and St. Augustine and carefully tease out the rhetoric lying within.

During his spiel, Satan brings up the fact that Socrates was counted as the "wisest of men" intending to imply that his knowledge would be invaluable to Christ's progression (PR.IV.276). Christ turns this "defense of iniquity" into a "service of truth" when he, compounding on Satan's claim, "the first and wisest of them all professed / To know this only, that he nothing knew" (PR.IV.293-294). If Socrates—the wisest—concluded that he knew nothing, why would it be imperative that Christ couple himself with any of their supposed wisdom? Satan's argument is effectively neutralized with that cake-taking realization. But Christ (and Milton) does not stop there. He goes on to place Plato, the Skeptics, Aristotelians, Epicurus, and Stoics under scrutiny, pointing out their worldliness, unnecessary complexity, apathy, and over-all emptiness (295-306). He specifies the Stoics claim to God-like equality by their disregard for anything outside of themselves and even claiming the power to take their own lives whenever they saw fit. Christ describes "for all his tedious talk is but vain boast, / Or subtle shifts conviction to evade," displaying only the answers they do not have (PR.IV.307-308).

In reference to all such learning Christ cries, "Alas what can they teach, and not mislead / Ignorant of themselves, of God much more" (IV.309-310). Christ notes the disjunction of the logic—how could these mortal men be seen as part-and-parcel to the gospel of salvation without connection with omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent God? Christ draws connection to the Garden of Eden and the Fall—man caused their own degradation; the idea that offspring of such would have knowledge that God and Christ did not already have is ludicrous. Man falling on the learning and glory of man to find truth will get nowhere. Only man falling on the learning and glory of God will therein be blessed with truth. Those endeavoring without access to "the fountain" end up with "false resemblance" a feeling of

hollowness and continual dissatisfaction. Christ claims it is his prophets who, although low in temporal standing, are “better teaching / The solid rules of government / In their majestic unaffected style / Than all the oratory of Greece and Rome” (IV.357-360). This can be seen as a jab on Milton’s part in defense of Christianity at Virgil’s *Aeneid* in which Virgil stated that it was Rome’s explicit and sole duty to perfect the art of ruling (Virgil). “In them is plainest taught, and easiest learnt, / What makes a nation happy, and keeps it so,” further orienting Christians to the ideas of classical learning rather than their contemporary intent (IV.361-362).

Christ explains to Satan while Milton cleverly orates to his readers that classical learning used as a tool—simply one effective means to an end—is acceptable and expected by Christ. Milton has not suggested an equal standing between the learning of men and the learning of God through his use of classical literature. It is not a contradiction that Christ states that these teachings are incorrect but rather the interpretation that they are as equally valuable or qualify in any way to object to the teachings of the gospel is incorrect. Much like the parables that Christ used to teach his followers while on the earth, they were an able vesicle to render truth to those that would have the tools to understand it. By extension, Milton is not undermining the connections and logic he laid out in *Paradise Lost* and other of his works but rather supporting his method of utilizing the tools available to further the work of Christ. Milton’s goals are to effectively and intelligently express truth and provide a pattern to gain more truth. (Doctrina)

Not only is this speech a call to further Christianity but also it can be seen as a critique on his education, of the formulaic, check-the-box results. Simply learning the means and events is not good enough. We have to do something with the knowledge and skills we attain. Perhaps Milton fears he has given the impression that Christ and the gospel depend on the reasoning of men. Or maybe he is chastising those who do not do any personal searching for truth and are content with their stagnant cup of faith. Regardless of his motive, seen in such a light it is clear that Milton is saying that Christ does in no way lean upon the arm of man, but solely on the grace of God. Using classical traditions is one way to

relate to humanity much like Christ did when speaking in parables. Not having that divine stamp of approval to display to the world around him, Milton has to qualify his methods—not to justify himself but to help the lay people understand why he is doing what he is doing to “justify the ways of God to men” and aid men in coming personally closer to Christ.

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