Paradise Lost As A Classical Epic On A Christian Theme

A.S.P Woodhouse commented that ‘Paradise Lost is the outcome of Milton’s deliberate effort to write a classical epic on a Christian theme’ (492). Something that is fiercely debated and contested is the ambivalent portrayal of Milton’s Satan in Paradise Lost and how he is framed within this Christian Epic. Critics have noted the tensions created in attempting to impose a Christianised message on a palpably Classical form, given the apparent contradictions between the ideals of the classical world and the Christian Renaissance period. In view of this, I aim to explore Milton’s seeming ‘redefinition’ of heroism and revision of the classical epic genre within what is frequently referred to as his ‘Christian Epic’. The tensions between Christian ideals and pagan allusion in Paradise Lost generate difficulty in identifying the true hero of the poem; this confusion has given rise to a plethora of criticism relating to this ambivalence. Many have thus misinterpreted Satan as embodying the true hero of Paradise Lost due to his individualism being synonymous with the heroes of classical antiquity, however, this misinterprets Milton’s use of classical allusion. Rather, I argue through allusion and parody Satan becomes the antihero. In this essay, I argue that in The Son, Milton re-conceptualizes the classical definition of the hero and redefines it to produce a new ‘Christian heroism’. I will also explore Lucan’s Pharsalia as a parallel of the heroic formation of the poem as a sort of corrective to just how radical and revolutionary Milton’s portrayal may have been.

Whilst many critics often regard Satan as embodying the ideals of the classical hero, it would be reductive to consider Satan a conventionally classical hero. Obviously, it is Milton’s use of classical allusion and the epic form that has given rise to this notion. However, to consider Satan the hero of Paradise Lost is to criticize Milton’s literary prowess. Ultimately, Paradise Lost is, a Christian poem; therefore, to consider Satan the hero of the poem would undermine the Christian ethic Milton so fervently seeks to establish. Thus, I argue that Milton’s aligning Satan with classical heroism is parodic. Christopher Bond contests just this commenting that ‘For Milton, true heroism is found in the Son and in Adam, since virtù of Satan, while initially impressive, is always parodic and ultimately utterly degraded.’ (2). It is this which is key to remember when examining the character of Milton’s Satan. Incidentally too, Baumlin comments that ‘…to understand Satan we must consider how this fallen angel embodies the “old heroism”, the proud military heroism, of pagan epic, and how this heroism is qualified and devalued by other generic modes: by Satan’s role for example as the tragic villain, or as the allegorical personification of Pride’.(167) Again, this demonstrates how Milton’s analogizing of Satan with that of the ‘old heroes’ of the pagan epic is carefully constructed by Milton in order to pave the way for the new Christian kind of heroism that The Son so perfectly embodies. Satan does possess many of the qualities of a classical hero but ultimately, they are either the negative attributes of these heroes or parodic analogizations. Woodhouse says ‘Any attempt to isolate and explain the effect of the poem must seek to draw out the implications of this truism, and essay once more some comparison of Paradise Lost with its two great models, the Iliad and the Aeneid. It must watch the poet imposing an analogous pattern upon very different materials and be alert to detect the modifications and extensions of the pattern which his Christian theme, outlook, and purpose demand or permit’ (492). It is this idea that is at the crux of Milton’s use of classical allusion, which many critics do not give Milton proper credit for. Satan, for example, whilst compared to the ‘old heroes’ of classical antiquity, is neither a true classical hero nor the hero of the poem.

It is important to address the analogizing of Satan to the classical hero Aeneas. The building of Pandemonium, for example, can be compared to Aeneas' founding of Rome. City-founding is a fundamental theme in the Aeneid. Pandemonium, 'the high capital / Of Satan and his peers', is perhaps an example of Milton taking his sources from classical works, in particular Vergil's epic. Rebecca W. Smith comments on the similarity of the church of St. Peter in Rome with Pandemonium, which demonstrates that Milton is building Pandemonium from other sources, particularly the link to Rome draws into focus the Aeneid. (187) The description of Pandemonium's creation is decidedly Hellenic and mimics the grandiose of classical epic tradition: 'Anon out of the earth a fabric huge', 'Built like a temple where pilasters round' and 'With golden architrave' (Milton 1. 710-715). The epic building of Pandemonium and the huge classical edifice sets Satan up to be the classical hero of Paradise lost, like the city-founding Aeneas. However, ultimately this dramatic moment sets us up for an anti-climax; Pandemonium is built in all its impressive glory and ultimately all that takes place there is the council of the devils, which inverts the idea of epic heroism as embodying military glory. It is key to note too, that Aeneas has many failed attempts to found cities. Pandemonium could be a reflection of the failure of city-founding portrayed in the Aeneid. The devils are described as having to shrink in size in order to fit into the capital, demonstrating that Satan and the devils are not meant to be there. It becomes clear that the imperfect Pandemonium is not a fair comparison to the glory of Rome. If Milton is invoking the heroism attributed in Aeneas' city-founding, Pandemonium could in fact be a reflection of one of the failed cities Aeneas attempts, such as the plagued city of Pergamea, which he tries to found in Crete. Thus, Satan's suggested 'heroism' is parodied and degraded, which in turn implicates Vergil in the same degradation. It could also serve to parallel that Satan is no true match for God, the ultimate creator, as his Pandemonium is defective in comparison to the description of Eden with its '…goodliest trees loaden with fairest fruit / Blossoms and fruits once of golden hue' (Milton. 4.147-148), the superlatives here demonstrating the incomparable perfection of Paradise. In this, we see how the generative ability of God is far superior to that of Satan, and Satan's pagan counterparts.

Moreover, whilst imperfect, the grand edifice of Pandemonium sets us up for a decidedly anti-classical anti-climax. David Quint comments on the 'demilitarization of the fallen angels' (9) both referring to their reduced size and the council as in opposition to the military valor of the classical epics. Quint comments that 'In Paradise Lost the catalog of leading devils followed by the troop muster and promise of military action fizzles out into talk and the ensuing council of book 2.' (15). This anti-climax is an inversion of the Iliadic presentation of the 'hero'. Milton is parodying the martial nature of the Iliad. Satan is set up to be our classic hero, the high, lofty language of Satan's speech leaves us expecting some grand war, and the huge structure of Pandemonium sets us up for epic designs, only for Satan to ultimately lack the military prowess required for the role of hero. This inversion thus makes way for a new kind of Christianized hero, something I will discuss further.

If Satan isn't the classical hero of Milton's epic, then what role does he play in the epic? The model of Lucan's Caesar in the Pharsalia, for Milton, is useful as to what it means for the audience to know that its 'hero' will fail, and to want this, as well as to regret this failure. Given that both Satan and Caesar are the antagonists of their respective narratives it would be fitting to describe them as antiheroes. Christopher Bond has drawn the comparison between Lucan's Pharsalia and Milton's Paradise Lost. Among Bond's most incisive propositions is the parallel heroic formation of both texts, commenting on primary heroes and secondary heroes. Here, analogies can be drawn between Lucan's Cato and Milton's Son as primary heroes whose 'moral virtue renders him static and incapable of developing as a character' (8) and the

secondary heroes being Lucan's Pompey and Milton's Adam as 'weak, flawed, affectionate, and attractive of the reader's sympathy' (8). In this way, it becomes clear that Milton has taken the model of Lucan's pagan epic and Christianised this model for Paradise Lost. The Lucanian structure of the Pharsalia is mirrored in order to produce a distinction between the secondary hero, Adam, and the primary hero, The Son. What Milton therefore redefines is the concept of the primary hero. Both Cato and The Son are portrayals of heroic perfection, representing spiritual virtue, however, this innate and perfect virtue becomes Christianised and in the Son is foregrounded in complete dedication and obedience to God. In Milton's epic, Heroism is fragmented and distilled and the Christian parts are separated from the pagan. The Lucanic elements bring into question just how revolutionary Milton's epic is, given that he is mining the template already laid down by a Roman poet.

In many ways, one could say, Lucan's characters are refracted in Milton's Paradise Lost. Satan and Caesar are both the antagonists and are inherently evil. Satan is often perceived as the embodiment of all evil and Caesar as bloodthirsty and ruthless. But Caesar, like Satan, is often mistaken for the hero of Lucan's Pharsalia. The role of both Caesar and Satan in the narratives is to provide an antithetical comparison, in order to emphasize the true heroism of both the Son and Cato. At one point, Lucan likens Caesar to a thunderbolt; 'it splits the sky and terrifies the panicked/ people, searing eyes with slanting flame;/against its own precincts it rages, and, with nothing solid stopping / its course, both as it falls and then returns great is the devastation/ dealt far and wide before it gathers again its scattered fires.' (1.151-7). This apocalyptic description is something deeply resonant in Milton's Satan, whose destructive plot to cause the Fall and corrupt God's creation is in itself apocalyptical. Additionally, both Lucan and Milton are portraying stories so foundational that few readers would not be wholly aware that both Caesar and Satan are ultimately doomed. As antiheroes a reader acknowledges their successes; Caesar wins the civil war and Satan does cause the Fall of humanity. However, we also know Caesar is fated to the brutal assassination and Satan ultimately does not triumph against The Son and God.

The parallels thus continue in the hubristic nature of both characters. Both possess huge amounts of pride and attempt to transgress their limitations to no avail. John Henderson writes that 'Lucan's Caesar seen as the representative Ego at its ultimate extreme of success-as-futility offers you the question of your own cultural future.' (124) Satan tries to defy his creator and Caesar aspires to divine status, both self-aggrandizing aspirations that transgress their limitations. Satan's hubris is his constant failure to acknowledge and identify God's omnipotence, going so far as to deny God's role as Creator: 'who saw / When this creation was? Remember'st thou / Thy making while the Maker gave the being? / We know no time when we were not as now, /Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised / By our own quickening power…'(Milton 5.856-861). Lehnoff comments on the gift of life and the obligations of gratitude that foregrounded Satan's resentment against God. 'Although Satan yearns to disown this creaturely debt, the epic asserts the futility of all such efforts.' (16). Satan is unwilling to recognize that God's omnipotence comes from his ability to create, something Satan will never be able to achieve, much like Caesar's aspirations of divinity.

Similarities too, can be drawn between Cato and The Son. Both take on the burdens of others; Cato continues the war after Pompey's death becoming the 'guardian of his country' (Morford 123) and the Son takes on the sufferings on mankind. Milton had a special interest in acts of bravery, which is foregrounded by the self-sacrifice of the Son. 'Behold me then, me for him, life for life / I offer, on me let thine anger fall. / Account Me Man. I for his sake will leave / Thy

bosom and this glory next to Thee. / Freely put off and for him lastly die / Well pleased. On me let Death wreck all his rage!' (Milton. 3.236-241). The Son's self-sacrifice here echoes the suicidal martyrdom of Cato. In Cato, Lucan displays that the remedy against the evil of the victorious Caesar is legacy. John Henderson furthers this conception of the Lucanian Hero 'The cult of war has at its base a perverse barbarism, not that of the savage but that of the conquering Hero. Who marks his success in the memorialization of the opened and defaced bodies he appropriates for his mission.' (Henderson. 124). This Lucanian heroic 'memorialisation' Henderson describes is something one can certainly read into the narrative of Satan and the Son. Cato's suicide commemorates the idealized image of the pre-Caesarean Rome whilst Son's sacrifice acts as a remedy to the sin of mankind. Whilst in both texts, the antagonists, or antiheroes, succeed in their destructive aims, the ultimate victory is won in the martyrdom of the heroes, Cato, and the Son. This kind of heroism draws on the principle of virtue which in classical antiquity was embodied by stoicism, which was foregrounded by patience. Thus, Cato embodies a divinely classical virtues whereas Milton Christianises the pagan concept of virtue where the classical stoic devotion of Cato becomes the Christian devotion to God in the Son. But in each instance, this virtue becomes the antidote to the malevolence of the antagonists. It is important to note that Lucan's Pharsalia was an unusual epic; Quint comments that '…the Son's humiliation and death stand in contrast to the conventional military heroism of the epic…' (43); this is certainly true and therefore Milton's heroism depicted in the Son inverts the conventional epic but parallels heroism of Lucan's Pharsalia, an unconventional – but still classical – poem.

Quint comments on the 'substitution in Paradise Lost of biblical epic and spiritual heroism for military valor' (244), which for me becomes true in the final book of Paradise Lost in which Adam and Eve leave Eden as man and wife into the new world. Thus, with Milton ending the poem with an affirmation of love and marriage, the military heroism of conventional classical epics is further inverted. The Iliad begins in media res nearing the end of the Trojan War, and ends with the death of Hector by Achilles, in convention with an epic focus on military strength. Paradise Lost, as a Christian epic begins with war and ends with love, inverting classical epic tradition. Katherine Calloway's assertion that 'Milton clearly wished to Christianize his pagan sources, but this does not necessarily imply that he saw his text as in competition with its predecessors.' (83), rings true here. Milton's epic foregrounds a special emphasis on love rather than war, inverting the conventional military heroic model. In Schullenberger's words: 'Paradise Lost is an epic of domestic heroism, and its cosmic reach and eschatological resonance center on a woman and a man in a garden plot enjoying the fruits and making the difficult choices of daily existence, the choices upon which their very being in the universe and in history depend.'(73). Adam, like the Son and Cato makes the ultimate self-sacrifice, leaving Eden and thus becoming mortal. He chooses to die for love. There is an interesting paradox in the character of Adam. Knowing that he can't live without Eve, he eats the apple. In this act, Adam could be considered a classical hero representing the classical ideals of defiance and individualism. However, in Milton's Christian epic, it is the obedience and devotion to God which the Son displays which is represented as truly heroic, therefore Adam's disobedience strips him of any claim to being the true hero of the epic. As William R. Herman puts it 'The Hellene obtains glory through defiance, the biblical hero through submission' (13). If we look at Paradise Lost as a domestic epic, we can draw further analogies with Lucan's Pharsalia. In the opening lines of Lucan's Pharsalia the story is introduced as portraying 'how a powerful people turned their own right hands against themselves; / of strife within families' therefore (1.2.4). Lucan's epic can too thus be seen as a domestic epic of the family turning on itself. However, there is one crucial difference in the domesticity of Milton's epic; whereas in the Pharsalia, we

see the destruction of family bonds, Paradise Lost ends with a union, the affirmation of marriage of Adam and Eve who ‘Fall’ together and with a promise of creating future generations.

In essence, Milton appropriates characteristics of classical epic tradition in order to Christianise the pagan epic genre. The intertextuality and intermingling of genre create a unique and compelling ambivalence in identifying the roles of characters in the poem. Whilst the Son is heralded as the embodiment of idealized heroic perfection, the tensions between the classical and Christian make Adam and Satan more difficult to place, although these distinctions are much clearer if we perceive Lucan’s unusual epic, the Pharsalia, as a possible template for Milton’s epic, calling into question just how revolutionary or radical some suggest Milton’s ‘Christian epic’ really is. Critics focus heavily on how Milton Christianises and appropriates pagan epic, however, for me, Paradise Lost is just as much a paganization of Christianity as it is a Christianization of paganism. If we look at Milton’s epic in accordance with the conventional ancient epics, we can see how Milton has inverted and redefined the genre, in its concern not with war but love, and how, most often, it contradicts the ideals of classical epics. However, if we look at Lucanian epic ideals foregrounded by the Pharsalia, we can identify many analogies in Milton’s Paradise Lost. Instead of Christianity imposing its ideals on pagan myth and vice versa, the texts of both Lucan and Milton seem to speak meaningfully to each other. The presence of Lucanian thought in Milton’s Paradise Lost strengthens, rather than detracts from the Christian message.