

Jakub Jenč

The Depiction of the Anti-Hero in Milton's Paradise Lost
(ÚALK, FF UK, Praha 2019, 45 pp.)

Opponent's review

The thesis addresses one of the central points of controversy in the history of the reception of *Paradise Lost*, the interpretation of the complex portrayal of the figure of Satan and its role in the poem which expressly purports to “justify the ways of God to men”. William Blake's famous assessment of Milton's position in *Paradise Lost* (“of the devil's party without knowing it”) forms a suitably forceful though inherently somewhat problematic introduction to a survey of the basic positions in the debate which serves Jakub Jenč to identify his own initial standpoint: making Satan attractive to readers is Milton's way of making them aware of their fallen humanity and their distance from God. What I especially appreciate in the thesis is the intellectual sincerity with which the author admits in conclusion that his own reading does not sustain this initial framework.

Jakub Jenč proposes to focus on Milton's “strategies [...] to ignite our sympathy for the devil”. In three chapters he thus maps Satan's affinities with the heroes of classical epic, his rhetorics and finally his portrayal as a tragic hero. It has to be said that the terminology used for the reader's response to Satan is slightly misleading, as it quite regularly conflates admiration with sympathy: endowing the character with the formidable qualities of a classical hero and impressive rhetorical skills certainly makes him stunning but does not necessarily provoke a sympathetic reaction. Thus it is only the third chapter that is truly concerned with situations when we can feel for Satan.

The first two chapters also go beyond the stated aim of the thesis in that they discuss not only the strategies that make Satan attractive but also those that provide a corrective impulse, be it the way in which some classical allusions assume parodic overtones (Satan using his spear as a walking stick), the labelling of classical tradition as false (Mulciber's = Vulcan's fall), or the juxtaposition of Satanic pathos with divine logos. As this is a consistent tendency in the thesis it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of the balancing of attractive and repellent aspects in the portrayal of Satan.

Looking more closely at individual chapters I have to say that the first, examining Satan's relation to the protagonists of heroic epic, is the least convincing. Although Jakub Jenč does briefly touch on the way in which the poem directly confronts epic and biblical allusions and traditions (it is symptomatic that the problem of the initial invocation of the Muse/Holy Spirit gets a mere passing mention in a footnote), as well as building a firm association between the gods and heroes of Classical Antiquity and the devil's party, he still resolutely interprets Satan's epic dimension as designed to evoke a positive response; it is only the moments when Satan supposedly falls short of the epic ideal that are presumed to throw a negative light on the character. Moreover, the identification of such moments appears somewhat arbitrary (the reading of Satan's supporting his steps with a spear vs. that of his failing flight on the way through Chaos as challenging / confirming his heroic stature respectively; the Homeric epic offers parallels for both a positive and a negative reading in the first case). All in all, the issue of the relation of *Paradise Lost* to heroic epic models is so complex that it seems virtually impossible to treat of the matter without much simplification within a scope allowed by the author's focus on the figure of Satan and the format of a B.A. thesis.

This is most visible in the final subchapter in this section, focusing on Satan's affinities with Odysseus. At the same time, part of the disappointment is due to the fact that most themes briefly outlined here are elaborated in “The Imaginative Satan”, a section that is nevertheless separated from the “Odyssean” subchapter by a discussion of divine rhetoric. If the two thematically related chapters were presented in a sequence and the analysis of divine rhetoric was postponed so as to form the coda of the chapter on “Satanic discourse”, it would provide for a smoother transition, a more effective argument and a more consistent structuring conforming to the pattern established in the first chapter, where the survey of aspects which make Satan apparently attractive is followed by a discussion of contrary or corrective features.

Generally, the second and the third chapter represent a thorough and balanced analysis of their respective themes (Satan's rhetoric and Satan as a tragic hero). One marginal comment would concern the comparison of the portrayal of Satan and God and the discussion of Satan's human-like features (both of which are of course integral to any interpretation of Satan's role in the poem): it would seem expedient to distinguish between the image of God the Father and the Son (especially with regard to Milton's anti-Trinitarian stance in *De Doctrina Christiana* which is suppressed but not wholly eliminated in the *Paradise Lost*) and between pre- and postlapsarian humanity. If Satan rebels against the "tyranny of Heaven", what is the Son's role in this tyranny? If Satan is all too human, is it not perhaps just our fallen humanity that responds to this aspect?

In formal terms the thesis is competently written and well presented. One important oversight which makes navigation difficult is the missing pagination and table of contents and it would be well if these were supplied for the archived version.

To conclude, despite the reservations listed above the thesis represents a thorough study of a difficult and complex subject with a potential for further research. I recommend it for defence with VERY GOOD as the preliminary grade.

Mgr. Helena Znojemská, Ph.D.
29 January 2019