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‘Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall’: the responsibility of free will in *Paradise Lost*

John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* raises plenty of theological and literary questions through its handling of the biblical narrative of the Fall. Scholars and historians have dedicated hours to poring over the text, theological papers of both the Commonwealth and Restoration period, as well as other of Milton's writings, to fully understand the thoughts and conventions influencing his portrayal of the Fall of Humanity. Such research shows us Milton's positions as a devout Protestant republican reformist, and helps us fully comprehend the depth of many tropes, characters and language which shape the narrative in *Paradise Lost*; discussions of predestination versus human choice dominate the epic, weighing up whether the Calvinist or Arminian perspective on the matter is most accurate. Curiously, it is the latter which Milton champions, and this opinion creates a dimension unique to the poem, of a merciful God who empowers his new creations by providing them with free-will, and most importantly, the ability of choice. Milton achieves this in several manners throughout the twelve books, starting first with the prevalence of Fate in all the Pandemonium speeches of Book Two; when attempting to consider their options, the fallen angels discuss the success of their plans being inexplicably linked to a predestined outcome created by their eschewed leader, despite the actions that banished them to Hell. Book Three moves our focus to the interaction between Father and Son in Heaven and this conversation offers the perspective from God himself, and then leads us to the Book Five juxtaposition of God and Satan's perceptions of salvation through volition or predestination respectively. Milton portrays a trusting God, who advocates the value of free-will in human worship, one which truly proves utter devotion as it is achieved through decision, contrasted with fallen Satan's insistence on placing blame elsewhere for his actions. Finally, the Separation Scene shows us the cost of Adam and Eve falling for Satan's words, and ultimately emphasise the belief in Fate is a self-fulfilling prophecy, despite the mercy of God providing them with an achievable path of worship. Through these four scenes, *Paradise Lost* reveals the ability of choosing subservience to God, but also the responsibility of it; Milton provides a cautionary tale of faithful worship and places the responsibility of salvation in the hands of mankind, whether on the page or in his seventeenth century world.

After our introduction to Satan in the first book, our protagonist takes us to the capital of hell, Pandemonium, for a conference deciding how the fallen angels will best tackle a coup of

heaven. Satan presides over “the great consult”¹ and welcomes his fellows with an impressive opening speech, one which a seventeenth century reader would indeed associate with the recently reinstated monarchy. Milton’s reflection of kingship through Satan may merely be an embodiment of his political beliefs, however the content of his rhetoric here deepens the significance of Satan’s character. References to fate litter his dialogue: Satan encourages his companions to “fear no second fate”; reminds them of “the fixed laws of heaven” and appears to mock God’s provision of free will as a lapse of judgement in leaving the “safe unenvied throne/Yielded with consent.”² Immediately, Milton poses Satan as the advocate for Fate, in defying the acceptance of God’s omnipotent power. Satan rejects any possibility of God’s involvement in his ability to act of his free will and choose sin, instead attributing it to an outside force to which his enemy can have no effect on, hindered more so by a foolish desire to trust. By aligning Fate as a belief, or perhaps tool, in Satan’s denouncement of God’s power, the poet sets a clear precedent in the narrative between predestination and free will; no sensible Protestant in Milton’s eyes would dare accept ideology validated by the Devil and thus the reader is guided away from such a concept. It then allows *Paradise Lost* to focus the remaining ten books on making a clear and convincing argument for the principle of God’s creation of free will, as placing Fate in the mouth of Satan denounces its legitimacy as a belief for devout Christian readers.

Yet the consideration of Fate ruling supreme is not Satan’s alone; as other speakers consider the problem ahead of them in recovering Heaven, themes of predestination and God’s role in their downfalls feature in their speeches too. Moloch begins the discussion, and his proposal of violent battle consistently places blame on their former Lord for casting them out of Heaven: he and his peers in Hell are “Heaven’s fugitives” under a “prison of his tyranny”³ and it was God’s decision to have the fallen angels “driven out from bliss, condemned/In this abhorred deep to utter woe;” and not their choice to disobey and abandon faithful service. Belial makes more direct reference to Fate as he takes over the discussion, dissuading his fellows from a plan of open war. He reiterates his predecessor’s resignation of existence “Reserved and destined to eternal woe”⁴ yet ruefully asserts that residing in Hell is still an outcome more desirable than a worsening of hell which may accompany the risk of losing war. Indeed, Belial cannot see any

¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd edn. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 109.

² *Ibid.*, p. 111.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

possible victory against “Our supreme foe” and accepts “since fate inevitable/Subdues us”,⁵ any resistance would be futile. Mammon also insists that it is only when “everlasting fate shall yield/To fickle Chance”⁶ that action against God will be possible, and the applause which echoes around the chamber emphasises the majority share his opinion; as Ben Gray Lumpkin observes in his analysis of the Pandemonium consultation, it appears to Mammon unfeasible “that Fate will ever change to their side... they cannot hope to unthroned God”⁷ and escape their destiny. Lumpkin also makes an interesting distinction in the angels’ understanding of predestination, in that “Satan and his followers know that God is the Almighty, but Satan originates the conception of Fate as a power superior to God, and he uses it in seducing the angels”⁸ in this scene. By insisting the control of their existence is under Fate, Satan takes the power away from God’s omnipotence, and gives it to another supremacy, undermining the Almighty Power most blasphemously. In an attempt to escape the consequence of their defiance, Satan and the other fallen angels cite predestination as the decider of their destinies, yet in Milton’s poem this does not triumph; as Lumpkin rightly notes, “Milton and the characters on God’s side continuously warn angels and man against trying to shift the responsibility for their misconduct to some power which men call predestination or Fate” and by doing this, Satan and his peers further prove that “God is the only controlling power”.⁹

After setting up the residents of Hell, primarily our antagonistic protagonist Satan, with the viewpoint of their situation as destined by a cruel leader, Milton then changes the scene to feature God in both familial forms: the Son and the Father. Now, the stage is cleared to allow God to present the reality of his rule, one of merciful trust which allows his new race and his fellow angels the glory of choosing salvation through their own decision. Book Three depicts an enthralling conversation between the Father and the Son, and discussion of free will versus Fate features prominently here. In the Father’s first speech, and indeed the first dialogue of this new book, religious observance is outlined consistently as a choice; heavenly beings as well as the new race have the ability to defy or follow the holy path, and the responsibility of being faithful is theirs alone. Although the Father predicts that Man may be turned by Satan’s “glozing lyes,/And easily transgress the sole Command”¹⁰, His new creature does indeed have the

⁵ Ibid., p. 119.

⁶ Ibid., p. 120.

⁷ Ben Gray Lumpkin, ‘Fate in “Paradise Lost”’, in *Studies in Philology*, 44.1 (January 1947), pp. 56-68. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4172791>> [accessed 26 May 2020], p. 62.

⁸ Ibid., p. 67-8.

⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁰ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, p. 172.

capacity to remain faithful. It is their duty to commit to a "pledge of his obedience" and God reiterates this using a spectacular expression of this binary relationship:

"whose fault?

Whose but his own? ingrate, he had of me
All he could have; I made him just and right,
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall."¹¹

Here the Father explains clearly that Man has the choice and the means to be faithful to God's word, and any action or words otherwise are of his own volition. All of God's sentient creations can be 'just and right' as their leader advises; it is a decision to disobey this word which would leave them 'free to fall.' Once again, the idea of predestination is diminished. After associating Fate as a concept manipulated by Satan to remove blame for his actions, Milton then juxtaposes destined sin with the word of the Father, and as the established deity of Milton's England, automatically the seventeenth century reader leans heavily towards the idea expressed so poetically by God Himself. As Benjamin Myers reminds us in his examination of 'Predestination and freedom in Milton's *Paradise Lost*', "God's grace is predestined for and bestowed on all people. But the individual always remains free to reject grace and so to perish."¹²

The emphasis on decision over destiny does not end here, instead becoming more explicit as God discusses the dangers of placing trust in Fate as a master. The Father reiterates the ability of the angels to "have given sincere/Of true allegiance, constant faith or love"¹³ or to have eschewed this, as creations who "retain the power to reject the grace of God".¹⁴ God then identifies the two core elements which govern this choice as 'Will and Reason' and if Man and the ethereal are to let these forces become "of freedom both despoiled",¹⁵ they must then face the responsibility of the consequences which follow. The Father creates an incredibly ingenious argument here: if God's creations are to invest in the idea that "if predestination overruled /Their will, disposed by absolute decree/Or high foreknowledge; they themselves decreed/Their own revolt, not I".¹⁶ Although predestination is used by Satan to

¹¹ Ibid., p. 173.

¹² Benjamin Myers, 'Predestination and freedom in Milton's *Paradise Lost*', in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 59.1 (February 2006), pp. 64- 80. <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930605001614>> [accessed 29 May 2020], p. 73.

¹³ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, p. 173.

¹⁴ Myers, 'Predestination', p. 71.

¹⁵ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, p.173.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 174.

shift the responsibility of his actions onto God's shoulders, the latter cleverly explains that the guise of Fate used here is not a power created by Him, and therefore is a restriction placed on the Fallen which negates the notion of God's accountability for their decisions. The Father states clearly that the ability of choice allows them to make the decision to trust predestination, "free they must remain,/Till they enthrall themselves"¹⁷ which implies that it is their own undoing which leads to their own downfall: "they themselves ordained their fall./The first sort by their own suggestion fell,/Self-tempted, self-depraved".¹⁸ By firmly defining the concept of Fate as a tool used for the conscience of wrongdoers, Milton excludes the Father from any possible blame; if He mercifully gave Man and ethereal beings the ability to discern and exercise their freewill, any idea of predestination cannot be attached to His decree. Indeed, it remains the sole responsibility of Satan and other disobedient followers, as the "integrity and autonomy of human nature are such that God himself, having decreed and created human freedom, cannot compromise or alter it."¹⁹ God is the clear champion of free will in *Paradise Lost*, as Milton illustrates to us in Book Three: "all human beings are among the elect, but remain free to reject their own election and so to exclude themselves from the grace of God"²⁰ and any Fate which they insist is leading them against Him, is a self-made one.

Now that Milton has illustrated the argument through both God and Satan's eyes, he must of course present the victory of this debate to The Lord and uses Book Five as the setting to do this. Satan has already begun his plan to corrupt mankind, infiltrating Eve's dream, and Raphael's report back to Heaven spurs an interesting scene, where readers listen to speeches made by both leaders to their respective congregations, concerned with the manipulation of humanity's free will. God takes the stage first, upon hearing of the seed placed in Eve's mind, tempting her to disobey God's word and taste the Knowledge tree fruit. Yet God does not curse the ability of choice he has presented to Adam and Eve, instead advising Raphael to remind Adam "of his happy state,/Happiness in his power left free to will" and to warn him against the "enemy/Late fallen himself from heaven, is plotting now/The fall of others from like state of bliss".²¹ There are no sanctions, threats or orders made by the Father; to him, gentle reminders should be enough. Once again, Milton portrays a merciful god trusting in man's abilities to remain faithful, compassion so understanding that an undeserving creature, in the poet's eyes,

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 174.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 175.

¹⁹ Myers, 'Predestination', p. 77.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 75.

²¹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, p. 295.

should be overjoyed to receive and respect. Clearly to God, his word should be enough to sustain Adam and Eve against Satan's "deceit and lies"²², and it is therefore their responsibility to do as God intended and to resist temptation: God has given them the ability to endure, they must exercise it. It is this faith in humanity which Sayeed Abtahi believes Milton is emphasising here; rather than revealing God's gift of choice as a flawed decision, Abtahi argues that Milton's portrayal "draws a distinction between God's knowledge about the matters of the world and the Divine commands."²³ With a depiction of God so forgiving, understanding and trusting, Milton demonstrates that any consequence of man's choice is theirs to bear, as "submission, imposition and coercion are on men's part" and to God, the most important subservience will be that which was shown "when they are performed out of decision and volition".²⁴

God's compassion is then promptly juxtaposed with Satan's plan of corruption later in Book Five; after Satan has sown the initial seed of doubt in Eve's mind, he meets with his fallen fellows upon "The Mountain of Congregation"²⁵ and attempts to seduce them to his plan through intricate discourse:

"Will ye submit your necks, and choose to bend
The supple knee? Ye will not, if I trust
To know ye right, or if ye know yourselves
Natives and sons of heaven possessed before
By none, and if not equal all, yet free,
Equally free; for orders and degrees
Jar not with liberty, but well consist.
Who can in reason then or right assume
Monarchy over such as live by right
His equals, if in power and splendour less,
In freedom equal?"²⁶

Satan uses images of submission and kneeling but warps them to fit his purpose, before reminding them of the freedom all angels have, granted by God, to be perverted by his enemy. But even in this perversion, Satan cannot ignore the power of their eschewed Lord, admitting 'orders and degrees' do indeed align with the 'liberty' they possess. The equality of freedom

²² Ibid., p. 295.

²³ Sayeed Vahid Abtahi, '[An Epistemological Analysis of] Predestination and Free-Will in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*', in *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 3.3 (May 2014), pp. 83-89. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.3n.3p.83>> [accessed 26 May 2020], p. 86.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 88.

²⁵ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, p.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 332-3.

seems to be the core issue in Satan's mind, disregarding the fatal flaw in his logic: as God granted free will to all his servants, Satan included, the sinful choices and evil corruption planned are still tied to the gift granted by Satan's enemy in the first place. The supposed champion of predestination, who convinced his Pandemonium fellows in Book Three that it was God's deliberate decision which caused their collective downfalls, appears to celebrate his power of volition as a weapon against God, without recognising its true creator. Satan can rebel because of God, and indeed his decision to corrupt and manipulate illustrates the dangers of free will that God voiced a mere four hundred lines earlier. Milton employs this contrast efficiently, utilising it the just kindness of God even more powerful, against the ignorant evil Satan represents. No matter Satan's justification, it is God's power which gave him the ability to rebel, once again reinforcing Milton's belief that while God may have the power to provide "the possibilities of the growth for all beings... the acceptance of those responsibilities is left to the people."²⁷

Yet unfortunately Adam and Eve are to listen to Satan's lies, and it is the events of Book Nine which highlight the irony of Earth's first inhabitants choosing the path supposedly predestined, according to Satan. The infamous Separation scene takes place here, and Satan comes between husband and wife, as God forewarned he would. Indeed, before Eve insists on being independent of Adam, he aptly reminds her of the dangers "within himself" and that "Reason, is free"²⁸ just as much as free will is accessible to them for sin. Of the two, Adam has not been subjected to the temptation directly, and remains, rightly in Milton's eyes, focused on choosing obedience; Eve, however, begins to be ruled by the other aspect of free will and allows temptation to separate herself from her partner. In her own critical analysis of the Separation Scene, McColley identifies the thematic importance of this initial separation, especially considering it is a choice made by Eve. The critic emphasises that seventeenth century England will "know from the event that her action is potentially destructive; but if Milton's characterization is based on free will, she must have departed with sufficient openness of mind to make the choice freely".²⁹ Therefore, no blame can be placed upon anyone else for her choice; while Satan may have created the temptation to lure her here, Eve herself was given the ability, in addition to consistent advice on the matter, to resist and follow the words of God. Eve's decision

²⁷ Abtahi, 'Predestination', p. 85.

²⁸ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, p. 489.

²⁹ Diane Kelsey McColley, 'Free Will and Obedience in the Separation Scene of *Paradise Lost*', in *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 12.1 (Winter 1972), pp. 103-120. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/449976>> [accessed 27 May 2020], p. 113.

to forgo reason and choose temptation is the catalyst for the events that follow, and Milton's reference to free will throughout the earlier books build an argument for a merciful God who gifted his creations with volition, while dutifully admonishing them against sinful choices. When Eve makes this fateful choice, she has full opportunity to show awareness that it is not literally 'fateful', but rather an indication "that without choice there is no opportunity for exercising free will, and that harmonious exercise of free will is the essence of obedience to God."³⁰

Eve is not the only person fallible to choosing temptation, as Adam also succumbs to it: this time his temptation is Eve herself. Upon falling for the Serpent's deceit, Eve begins to convince Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, becoming the opposing choice against Adam's subservience to God. Yet her request for Adam to "freely taste,/ And fear of death deliver to the winds"³¹ highlights the responsibility in Adam's response; he must 'freely taste' the fruit, not forcibly, upon manipulation, but of his own volition. Adam also has the opportunity and ability to remain obedient to God's request over Eve's, yet he allows himself to become "fondly overcome with female charm"³² instead. Adam later attempts in anger to deflect the blame entirely on Eve, minimising his part to being "upbraided, as the cause/Of thy transgressing", and reminding Eve of his warning that the dangerous force of sin and temptation "upon free will hath here no place."³³ Yet his own argument unravels his own defence: if Eve is to be reprimanded due to her choice, Adam ought to consider his own use of free will in this scene. While Eve falls to direct temptation from sinful Satan, Adam's choice is arguably easier – choose to obey his creator or wife, created also by God. Milton demonstrates flaws in both man and woman here and McColley asserts this is another illustration of the author's belief in dutiful choice, as not knowing the extent of sin and evil does not negate their ability to choose "that harmonious exercise of free will... the essence of obedience to God."³⁴ They have the ability to choose subservience, according to Milton, and Adam and Eve are perfect literary representations of "developing individuals who are responsible for their actions because their wills are free; and this responsibility is necessary both to the justice of their chastening and to their capacity for regeneration."³⁵

³⁰ Ibid., p. 117.

³¹ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, p. 527.

³² Ibid., p. 527.

³³ Ibid., p. 537.

³⁴ McColley, 'Separation Scene', p. 117.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 120.

Milton's portrayal of the Fall places consistent emphasis on man's ability to act upon free will, eschewing Calvinist principles of predestination for a newer Arminian viewpoint. The concept of Fate is quickly dismissed in Book Two, by correlating it with the Pandemonium speeches, connecting ideas of Fate and a cruel divine predestination with the fallen angels who rebel against God's word for personal glory and gain. This is then contrasted with an explanation from God himself, as the Father in the third Book; he sets out the truth and explains his decision to grant his creations, including the new human race, with free will. For him, "exercise of free will is the essence of obedience to God",³⁶ as deciding consciously to listen to and obey God's word is a stronger devotion than blindly following. The fifth book brings us a direct contrast between Satan's insistence on predestination and free will that God champions, with language expertly utilised and linked by Milton. Satan may dismiss free will as an error on God's part but cannot recognise his ability to disagree and make decisions opposing his creator are once again a product of this free will he supposedly disregards. Finally, the actions of Satan, Eve and Adam in the separation scene of Book Nine all reinforce the dangers of free will, warned by God, and the consequences of poor choice are permanent. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton uses these four scenes to not only educate his seventeenth century reader in his idea of God given free will, but to emphasise the responsibility of choice. As Milton shows us here, the gift of volition can be used for corruption, as well as for obedience.

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³⁶ McColley, 'Separation Scene', p. 117.

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