

Structural conceptions of the spiritual hierarchy in paradise lost

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, angels and men are arranged in a divinely established hierarchy based on their relative proximity to God. Through the course of the epic, characters develop different and often conflicting conceptions of the spiritual hierarchy, based on differing interpretations of the underlying principles that govern action within the hierarchy. Such principles include the relationship between merit and rank, how freedom is defined within the hierarchy, and the reasons that one is promoted or demoted. Milton takes great care to illustrate the basis of each character's understanding of the spiritual hierarchy, and demonstrates for the reader the implications of each character's individual interpretation. The reader is thus able to struggle along with the main characters in making conclusions that will shape their personal approach to spirituality. In addition, the reader is able to draw comparisons between the spiritual hierarchy that exists in *Paradise Lost* and hierarchies that exist in the human world. In this way, Milton uses the spiritual hierarchy as an avenue towards an intellectual foundation for theology, asking the reader to struggle along with the main characters in understanding principles central to Christian thought. Milton illustrates that a one's conception of the relationship between divinely established rank and spiritual accomplishment is central to their intellectual understanding of spiritual hierarchy. Early in *Paradise Lost*, Milton makes it very clear that it is spiritual merit as assessed by God that authorizes rank, rather than rank indicating spiritual merit. In Book III, God tells the Son directly, "thou...hast been found / By merit more than birthright Son of God, / Found worthiest to be so by being so good" (III. 305-10). Though the exaltation of the Son appears to be an event separate from God's original

establishment of angelical hierarchy, we must recall that time does not exist in heaven in the way it does on Earth. As Ide explains, "...this moment in heaven is not the actual begetting of the Son, but the revelation of a prior begetting" (Ide 147). This contextual distinction is significant because it changes the meaning of the word "birthright", suggesting that "birthright" refers to God's original hierarchical establishment, which applies to all angels. Thus, Milton through God is making clear that spiritual merit was the factor that dictated the original establishment for all, as opposed to a more arbitrary factor such as those we might find in human hierarchies. This definition of the relationship between merit and rank provides a solid intellectual foundation from which the reader can begin to analyze the convergence of spiritual hierarchy and meritocracy in *Paradise Lost*. Milton uses Satan as a counterexample for how the reader should understand the relationship between spiritual merit and rank. Throughout the epic, Satan illustrates the folly in believing that established rank indicates spiritual merit. From the outset, Satan demonstrates the belief that his rank is what gives him spiritual authority over his minions. As Durham observes, "...throughout the poem [Satan] addresses his charges by title...as if titles were indicative of value (and as a subtle reminder of his own superior rank)" (Durham 16). Failing to understand that his rank does not define his value, Satan cannot recognize that one rises in the spiritual hierarchy by increasing spiritual worth in God's eyes. Instead, Satan attempts to rise by subverting the hierarchy entirely, a tactic that seems rational when compared to human hierarchical operation but results in complete failure in Heaven. The failure of Satan's coup demonstrates how a basic misconception of the nature of

spiritual hierarchy holds vast implications when contrasted to human hierarchies, thus guiding the reader's formation of an intellectual foundation for approaching spirituality. Instead of using the Son to counteract the Satan's incorrect understanding of rank and value in the spiritual hierarchy, Milton uses a lesser angel, Abdiel. The fact that Abdiel is congratulated for his meritorious desertion from Satan, despite his relatively low angelic rank, is significant in terms of building the reader's conception of hierarchical principles. Durham writes that "... Abdiel demonstrates ...being ' equally free' permits an angel of a lower rank to contend with one of a higher rank... so long as the lesser being is in accord with the commands of God" (Durham 16). Abdiel draws strength for his fight against Satan, the higher angel, by repeating the correct conception of hierarchical rank that God presented in his exaltation of the Son. Referring to the Son, Abdiel tells Satan directly that " God and nature bid the same, / When he who rules is worthiest, and excels / Them whom he governs." Abdiel here asserts that the Son through his great spiritual worth is truly deserving of heavenly authority. Abdiel himself, in fact, ultimately rises in hierarchical stature perhaps not in an overt change in title, but at least in being recognized and distinguished by God because he has raised his worth through both obedience and spreading God's word to Satan. Abdiel's intellectual triumph over Satan provides the reader a sharp contrast between spiritual hierarchy and human hierarchy, indicating that in the former individuals rise and fall irrespective of their established rank. The idea that within the spiritual hierarchy rank is merely an expression of merit holds large implications for newly created man.

Among men, however, there are only two hierarchical tiers, man and woman,

filled by Adam and Eve respectively. If one is to hold that this hierarchical rule among angels is also true for man, one will ultimately see that this is a bold statement by Milton that works both for and against the ideals of gender equality. The mere fact that Adam and Eve, at least spiritually, hold ranks equivalent to their spiritual worth supports the idea that Adam is closer to God than Eve. This can be alternately interpreted, however, that Eve has the capability of rising above Adam in terms of spiritual hierarchical rank, despite Adam's established superiority at creation. Thus, implicit in Milton's engineered structure is an ambiguity behind the spiritual potential of men and women, and in effect an ambiguity behind who would be more likely to fall when tempted. While every character in *Paradise Lost* has the ability to analyze the spiritual hierarchy objectively, we find that often one's conception is twisted by their rank and consequent perspective of hierarchical workings. In Book IV, Satan despairs, thinking that he has made the wrong decision in rebelling. In his personal debates, he suggests temporarily that part of his folly was a result of the perspective from his high rank. "O had his powerful destiny ordained / Me some inferior angel, I had stood / Then happy; no unbounded hope had raised / Ambition" (IV. 58-61), Satan laments, conceiving that his established position caused the fall because it fueled his growing ambition. However, Satan quickly and rightly dismisses this idea, considering that he as a lower angel may have fought God in much the same way, and that angels as high as he had been were still able to remain loyal. Through this illustrated internal confusion about the effect rank has on perception of hierarchy, Milton demonstrates Satan's continued inability to sort understand the nature of spiritual hierarchy. This

intellectual difficulty becomes the primary barrier that is placed between Satan and a possible spiritual redemption, and mirrors the intellectual difficulty that the reader is having with principles of spiritual hierarchy. Allowing the reader to identify with Satan, then, ensures that the reader will struggle with theological concepts from both correct and incorrect perspectives. Milton later gives us specific insight as to the source of Satan's difficulty with the spiritual hierarchy. In Book V, Satan gives a speech rallying his minions to rebel and asks how any angel could accept the Son as ruler when the angels are equals with Son. [The Son] can...without law Err not, much less for this to be our Lord, And look for adoration to th' abuse Of those imperial titles which assert Our being ordained to govern, not to serve? (V. 798-802) Satan maintains that because the angels and the Son were both created by God, they should share an equal freedom. The obvious problem with Satan's assertion is its hypocrisy. Satan has no problem being the primary and arguably only influential ruler of his minions, as evidenced by his meticulously staged conference in Hell, but he refuses to see merit in having God appoint a ruler who would be a source of authority. Any impediment to Satan, even the appointment of a Son who would help guide angels to higher spiritual levels, he sees as a threat to his freedom. Milton uses this argument about the nature of freedom to frame an ongoing debate in Paradise Lost concerning the difficult-to-grasp concept that one is always free if one always chooses good. Satan's apparent hypocrisy also serves to remind the reader that it is his intellectual conception of spiritual hierarchy, as opposed to solely base motives, that leads to his fall. Part of what Milton wants the reader to understand about the nature of spiritual hierarchy is that

one's freedom is not impaired simply because they are content with their divinely established rank. Satan makes the mistake of viewing the established hierarchical structure as a confining prison from which he desires to break free. In one of his most revealing lines, Satan tells Michael that he would "turn this heav'n itself into the hell / Thou fablest, here however to dwell free, / If not to reign" (VI. 291-93). By remarking that he would be content to be merely free of the Son's authority, Satan shows that he is not rebelling simply because he is power-hungry. However, Satan's falsely idealistic motive of attaining freedom is based on his misconception that one can subvert the spiritual hierarchy to attain freedom. Abdiel, however, again provides the alternative to Satan's conception of hierarchy. He tells Satan during the battle in heaven that true servitude, or lack of freedom, is "To serve th' unwise, or him who hath rebelled / Against his worthier, as thine [minions] now serve thee" (VI. 178-80). Abdiel here illustrates a central principle inherent in Milton's spiritual hierarchy: that trying to jump past a worthier individual in the hierarchy through subversion is futile. He also reinforces the idea that one is always free to choose good by explaining that servitude or loss of freedom is about making the wrong spiritual choices, for example, choosing to serve Satan. Milton also introduces the idea that an individual's conception of the nature of spiritual hierarchy is affected by the perspective they have from their particular rank. Adam, for example, is very aware of his established superiority over Eve, and this affects the way he interprets the nature of the spiritual hierarchy. Because of this taste of authority, Adam's conception of spiritual hierarchy tends to waver between that of the two heavenly characters that hold similar positions: the Son and

Satan. Benet writes that Adam tries to emulate the Son in the separation scene, asking Eve to remain with him so that he could have the opportunity to deny Satan for both of them much as the Son volunteers to sacrifice himself for all of man's sins. However, Adam after the fall reveals that like Satan he puts great faith into rank over merit, or rather, potential merit. "But from me what can proceed, / But all corrupt, both mind and will depraved" (X. 824-25), Adam cries out, convinced that his lowered status after the fall will destroy the chance for his children to rise in rank. The reader, by understanding that Adam's conceptions of spiritual hierarchy are due in part to his perceived rank, can conceptualize how these theological ideas apply to the real world. Because Eve is on the lowest rung of the spiritual hierarchy, her perspective and hence conception of the spiritual hierarchy is quite different than Adam's. Benet writes that Eve desires alternately to emulate Abdiel "...because his status vis-vis the tempter and other high-ranking angels corresponds to her own in relation to Adam's" (Benet 132). She goes on to propose that Eve's wanting to separate was because of a desire to thwart Satan in the way that Abdiel had, an active display of obedience to God. While perhaps Eve did not act solely because she could relate to Abdiel in his lowered position, it is still useful to note that their similar hierarchical statuses resulted in similar conceptions of success within the spiritual hierarchy. Of course, Eve fails at thwarting Satan, but because she is not torn between conceptions of the spiritual hierarchy, as Adam is, she is able to take almost immediate responsibility for her actions and help Adam to begin repentance. God's originally established spiritual hierarchy is, as mentioned earlier, not a permanent one. In fact, Milton

shows that there are different ways that one can raise one's spiritual status. The most visible strategy for spiritual promotion that Milton presents is the idea of assuming a lower hierarchical position in order to become closer to God. Nowhere is this more overt than in the Son's volunteering to take the form of man to redeem mankind for its sins. God affirms that this action would ultimately be a positive spiritual step when he tells him that "thy humiliation shall exalt / With thee thy manhood also to this throne" (III. 313-14). Milton also takes great care to clarify that lowering oneself is not equivalent to removing oneself from God. After the Son volunteers to assume human form, God tells the Son directly that he will not "by descending to assume / Man's nature, lessen or degrade [his] own" (III. 303-4). Milton here reinforces the idea that a lower rank does not translate into lower value in God's eyes. We see some evidence of lowering oneself in hierarchical stature to bring oneself closer to God in Adam and Eve. For example, Eve after the fall prostrates herself before Adam, offering to take the punishment for both of them if God would allow it. In this we have a physical and symbolic lowering that, though unanswered by God, gives the reader a sense of possibility for spiritual renewal. Later, the pair lower themselves to the ground and weep in repentance, in a passage that stands out as being the only set of closely repeated lines in the text. Again, God does not answer these cries, but because of the hierarchical implications that were set up earlier the reader recognizes a greater significance to the scene and thus Adam and Eve effectively rise in spiritual status. When the Son is exalted above all other angels, however, Satan reacts exactly as if his own position, and hence value, has been lowered. Abdiel, who serves

throughout *Paradise Lost* as an example of one who possesses correct conceptions of the spiritual hierarchy, explains to Satan during their battle the flaw in his logic. Angels of all positions in heaven, Abdiel tells Satan, are not “by his reign obscured, / But more illustrious made, since he the head / One of our number thus reduced becomes, / His laws our laws, all honor to him done / Returns our own” (V. 841-45). Abdiel sees the Son not as an authority figure whose presence diminishes the worth of all below, but as a spiritual bridge between angels and God. As Ide notes, the exaltation “...is a loving act of condescension on God’s part...God now gives the opportunity for closer participation with him [to the angels]” (Ide 148). Satan fails to realize that, much in the same way that Eve relates to God through Adam, the Son provides him and all angels an opportunity to develop a fuller spiritual bond with God. When he refuses to accept the Son as a link between angels and God, Satan once again cuts himself off from the possibility of redemption because of intellectual misconceptions of hierarchy. Another interesting aspect of the spiritual hierarchy in *Paradise Lost* is the way Milton presents the role of ambition. Satan clearly recognizes at least temporarily that his rebellion was motivated by ambition when he cries that “pride and worse ambition threw me down” (IV. 40). What Satan does not recognize is how his conception of the spiritual hierarchy makes him suspicious of the values of all other angels, and this suspicion to the point of cynicism blocks his path to any possible redemption. When Abdiel angrily defects from Satan’s authority, we understand his motives are pure because God himself congratulates him. Servant of God, well done, well hast thou fought
The better fight, who single hast maintained
Against revolted

multitudes the cause of truth, in word mightier than they in arms (VI. 29-32) God clearly ascribes Abdiel's righteous act as a fight to preserve truth. Satan, however, wrongly interprets the motives behind Abdiel's obedience as merely an ambitious attempt to raise himself in the established hierarchy. "But well thy com'st / Before thy fellows, ambitious to win / From me some plume" (VI. 159-61), Satan tells Abdiel. Not only does Satan accuse Abdiel of detestable ambition, Satan immediately assumes that Abdiel's ambition was to rise above himself specifically. This suspicion illustrates the depth to which Satan's misconception of the spiritual hierarchy is effecting his actions and perspective. Satan accuses the Son of ascribing to similar base motives. In Book V he tells his minions, "The great Messiah... / ...speedily though all the hierarchies / Intends to pass triumphant, and give laws" (V. 691-93). Here Satan implies a twofold accusation: first, that the Son is not worthy of the right to rule, and second, that the Son is rising "speedily," and thus has not paid his dues. The insinuation here is that every righteous act, whether performed by the lowest cherub or the Son himself, is done selfishly so that God will award status or power in return. Satan has here revealed his belief that the rationale behind serving and performing righteous acts is to only gain status within the spiritual hierarchy. The way Satan views his relationship with God as being dependent on mutually beneficial transactions of service and reward can be identified directly in the text. Michals highlights the way in Book IV Satan analyzes his decision to rebel against God primarily in economic terms. "His language," she writes, "reflects a mixed conception of value, a feudal hierarchy that is not so much imagined in terms of reciprocal duties as it is rationalized in terms of debt and payment" (Michals

505). Satan, in other words, cannot understand why one would serve God without receiving an equal return on their investment. This contrasts directly with the advice of Milton's narrator, who earlier commented that service without expectation is God's most appreciated type of service. This contrast further demonstrates the depth of Satan's misconception, and the economic quality of the misconception helps the reader relate the concepts of spiritual hierarchy to knowledge of how hierarchies function in the human world. By reducing service to God to the level of mutually beneficial transactions, Satan eliminates the true spiritual nature of God's established hierarchy. He is, however, not the only character to diminish the merit aspect of the hierarchy. Adam, whom we have already seen to have an inclination towards Satan's conception of spiritual structure, makes a similar mistake. He suggests that those who are merely faced with temptation are degraded in God's eyes. Such thought has considerable moral implications, and, as Benet proposes, "...disparages the positive achievement of loyalty..." (Benet 133). Eve, too, reduces the spiritual nature of the hierarchy when she mixes ambition and service by seeking to thwart Satan for, apparently, expected appreciation from God and/or Adam. These examples of hierarchical conceptions that reduce the significance of spirituality and merit without becoming critical elements of the epic's action demonstrate how Paradise Lost helps guide the reader away from incorrect theological assumptions. Another significant concept that helps clarify the nature of spiritual hierarchy in Paradise Lost is that of relative perfection, the idea that two characters can exist on different hierarchical tiers and still maintain a level of perfection. Part of this perfection is established in the concept that all

creations of God are infused with elements of Godliness, for example, man is created in God's image. What makes relative perfection critical to understanding the nature of spiritual hierarchy, however, is that it provides a way in which a level of equality can be identified among occupants of different positions. Relative perfection allows all individuals the ability to seek God's approval without actually competing or feeling competitive about such approval. Durham writes that in the beginning of the war in Heaven, "... all the angels perform admirably...in the heat of battle, hierarchical rank becomes insignificant to the warriors" (Durham 18). Satan, as we well know, appears to have a level of envy for the Son's exalted position, and this envy stems from the fact that Satan sees himself not as relatively perfect yet lower than the Son, but as an equal who has been unfairly diminished. Finally, one must analyze the effects of spiritual hierarchy on Adam and Eve in the context of their worldly knowledge. There is a case to be made that the idea of spiritual hierarchy is somewhat extraneous to the fall of man because man has incomplete knowledge of its operation. This position, however, seems to negate the spiritual implications that the concepts detailed in *Paradise Lost* have on the reader, because man's understanding of God and heaven are universally accepted in the real world as incomplete at best. A more justifiable argument is that man's partial understanding of the spiritual hierarchy is an essential component of man's hierarchical position, and gives meaning to the fall. Benet writes that concrete knowledge of the nature of God's hierarchy would make choosing not to eat the apple easy, "...and meaningless as an affirmation of faith, love, and obedience" (Benet 142). Having a level of uncertainty about death and the other aspects

of the trial, Benet suggests, puts emphasis on the idea that Adam and Eve's trial has nothing to do with intellectual understanding. Instead, knowing only what God's wishes were specifically makes man's fall to a degree equivalent to that of Satan and his minions, who were similarly unsure of the consequences of their actions. This continuity strengthens the idea of the spiritual hierarchy as a model whose close analysis could have reduced Adam and Eve's decision to a level of childish simplicity. Benet goes on to point out that Michael himself had explained to Adam in Book XII that "Not intellect but faith and love are the vital weapons..." in resisting Satan's temptation. One of Milton's great successes in *Paradise Lost* is the way that he has arranged familiar biblical characters into a spiritual hierarchy whose structure can be readily examined. In-depth examination of the structure reveals a complex system of rules and concepts that serve both to perpetuate the actual events of the epic and give meaning to the theological debates that occur between characters. Furthermore, in assessing each character's perception of the spiritual hierarchy, one can begin to understand the motivations governing their actions and their specific approach to spirituality. Satan, for example, upon examination of his perception seems bound to his duty more by intellectual misconception than evil or stupidity. In addition, Adam and Eve appear to have chosen models in heaven to emulate in their dealings with God and the Son and Abdiel, respectively. Perhaps with more detailed examination of Milton's engineered hierarchical structure, coupled with comparative analysis using Milton's theological essays and sources, we will further be able to explore and decipher the detailed subtext and rich theological undertones of *Paradise*

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