

The mystery of identity: an essay on satan's struggle against god the son

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Mel Gibson's recent film, *The Passion of the Christ*, opens with an ominous scene where Satan endeavours to dissuade Jesus from bearing the cross for the entire human race. What is peculiar about Satan's temptation are the questions that he addresses to the Son: "Who are you?" and "Who is your father?" It seems militarily unwise for Satan to even attempt to challenge an opponent whose identity to him is as obscure as the night fog. Likewise, John Milton's audience sees the same ignorance in Satan, which inflames his animosity towards the Son in the extensive epics entitled *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, in which Satan's incomplete knowledge of the Godhead deeply affects his thoughts and actions. In particular, because Milton's Satan believes himself to be another son of God, his interaction with the true Son makes a dramatic impression on Milton's reader: the fraternal conflict between the disfavoured prince and the rightful successor of the king. While Satan's initial combat with the Son in *Paradise Lost* results in his defeat, the Prince of Darkness resumes his confrontation with the Son in *Paradise Regained*, unraveling his identity behind a human mask. Like the futile struggle of an illegitimate prince, Satan's vision of the status and nature of the Father's heir is blurred by his prejudice and ignorance, ordaining his pathetic defeats in both epics. To begin discussing Satan's attitude towards the Son, it is essential to first examine the event that sparks Satan's awareness of the threat that endangers his princely status; it is in this atomic event that his envy and prejudice explode towards the Son of God. In essence, Milton's heaven in *Paradise Lost* is like a peaceful foster home in which God plays the role of a benevolent father who adopts angelic children into his care. On a New Year's Day, the father introduces his legitimate son

to the family for the first time by making him inherit all the rightful privileges and requesting that the other children surrender their toys to him—an act of favouritism that turns God’s nursery into a desk-pounding parliament. This is the scene that describes the exaltation of the Son in Heaven, where Satan shows the impulse to defend his overshadowed status and compete for the Father’s acknowledgment. In fact, Satan presents a justification of his relationship with the Omnipotence in this statement: “ The Son of God I also am, or was, / And if I was, I am; relation stands” (PR IV. 518-519). With these powerful words, the satanic prince passionately claims his birthright and offers a just cause for being envious of the Son, although in truth he has limited knowledge of the status of the Son at this moment. The setting of Paradise Lost is therefore the stage on which Satan makes his anguished cry of illegitimacy. It is clear that Satan’s ignorance of the Son’s filial unity to God is what convinces him to believe that he is an illegitimate prince.

Because Satan fails to recognize the fact that the Son is the true representation of the Godhead, in whom the Father has “ chief delight” (PL III. 168), one of his preconceived impressions of the Son is that he is merely an ordinary servant receiving an unworthy promotion to a regal status. This is shown in Satan’s words to his peers: “ Another now hath to himself engross’t / All power, and us eclipsed under the name / Of King anointed” (PL V. 775-77). Undeniably, Satan pours contempt on the nature of the Son by saying that he has no direct kinship with the Father, but is merely an angel upon whom the kingship of God has been arbitrarily bestowed. Furthermore, the word “ another” implies that anyone can potentially be elected as the candidate for God’s throne. “ This is why Satan,” writes Michael Bryson, “

regards the elevation of the Son as such a grievous affront: Satan's is a ' who does this ' Son' think he is, anyway?' reaction" (83). Infuriated by his disqualification of legitimacy, Satan's " sense of injur'd merit" (PL I. 98) reflects the resentful curses of Edmund, who also engages in an inner conflict with his social status in Shakespeare's tragic play King Lear: My services are bound. Wherefore should I stand in the plague of custom, and permit the curiosity of nations to deprive me?...Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?...With baseness, bastardy? Base, base? (I. ii. 2-4, 6, 9-10) This passage sheds light the psychological turmoil that Satan suffers as God's illegitimate son. If God the Father refers to all the angels as his " Progeny of Light" (PL V. 600), it is plausible for Satan to feel frustrated that he fails to win the Father's approval even though he is the most powerful and beautiful of all angels. In addition to Satan's prejudice towards the nature of the Son, he believes that he deserves equal status, power and authority, purposely neglecting the fact that the Father has already proclaimed the Son's transcendence above the angels: 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? (PL V. 794-797) Satan complains that the elevation of the Son literally disrupts the notion of equality in the ranking of the heavenly hosts. It also reveals his narrow perspective towards the supremacy attributed to the Son since the beginning of creation. In particular, Milton's poem offers another interesting passage to Satan's false view towards the Son: immediately after the Son's coronation, Satan whispers furtively to his peers, " new Laws thou seest impos'd; / New Laws from him who reigns, new minds may arise / In us who serve" (PL V.

679-681). Evidently, the word new imposes a revolutionary notion on Satan that convinces him to believe that the Son is a new creation of the Father who imperiously – and unjustly – demands to be worshipped. Neil Forsyth, author of *The Satanic Epic*, presents a brilliant analysis of Satan's inaccurate perception of the Son's essence: Satan sees that God the Father violates the pre-existing hierarchy in the heavenly realm by ordering the angels to worship a newly-created man, not his Son, thus arousing Satan's mutinous reaction to God's decree. Like Satan's partial knowledge of the Son, his concept of the Godhead proves to be equally objective. To be specific, Satan's immature understanding of the Godhead is like that of a child whose judgment is often led astray by outward appearances, and who fails to recognize the intrinsic value behind the surface. In other words, the problem with Satan's theological perspective lies within his belief and experience that God's nature is not innate, is but rather manifested by external qualities such as his sovereignty and power. In *Paradise Lost*, the shaping of Satan's misconception towards the Divinity is best illustrated by Satan's witnessing of the Son's sacred unction hosted by the Father, in which Satan sees that God's power and authority are externally transferable. This is shown when God proclaims before multitudes of angels, " My only Son, and on this holy Hill / Him have anointed, whom ye now behold / At my right hand; your Head I him appoint" (PL. V. 604-6). It seems as though the divine power is being transferred directly to the Son in the process of anointment, much like blood being transfused from one into another. Returning to the image of the illegitimate prince, Milton describes Satan's sullen withdrawal from the celebrative feast following the enthronement of the Son: " he resolv'd / With

all his Legions to dislodge, and leave / Unworshipt, unobey'd the Throne supreme" (PL V. 668-670). Later, the heavenly warfare after the anointing of the Son portrays the painful price inflicted upon the rebellious prince as a result of his ignorance of the Son's power. In fact, the war in Heaven paints the most fascinating picture of the conflict between spiritual forces, in which Satan receives the privilege as the first among the angels to taste the bone-shattering power of the Son's fury. Milton's poem offers a concrete manifestation of the Son's unstoppable energy that generates a compulsive defeat of the Prince of Darkness: Among them [the Son] arriv'd; in his right hand Grasping ten thousand Thunders, which he sent Before him, such as in their Soul infix'd Plagues; they astonisht all resistance lost, All courage; down their idle weapons dropp'd. (PL VI. 835-839) In this picture, not only the flashes of fire and thunder bedazzle Satan to the point of scurrying off like a mouse, but the wounds inflicted upon him leave indelible evidence of the Son's superior strength – merely one aspect of the Godhead that creates Satan's uncertainty in the incarnated form of the Son in *Paradise Regained*. After his fall into Hell, Satan's ignorance of the Son's power is fully revealed in the following line: " He with his Thunder / and till then who knew / The force of those dire arms" (PL I. 93-94). Because of Satan's miscalculation of the Son's superior strength and the unawareness of the crucial fact that the " Second Omnipotence" (PL VI. 684) is God's chosen victor, he reaps only shame and dishonour from his fruitless struggle against the chosen one. Stella P. Revard offers this comment on Satan's tragic *harmartia*: " For the first time since he warred in Heaven and met with the greater power of the Son, Satan is made to bow and recognize his [illegitimacy] and God's

[begotten Son]" (273). Satan's feelings towards the reincarnated Son in *Paradise Regained* are more complex than the simple prejudice that is witnessed in *Paradise Lost*, although Milton wittingly retains the ignorant quality in Satan for the effect of dramatic irony throughout the second epic. First, Satan shows signs of anxiety concerning the prophecy about the serpent's wound inflicted by a woman's descent. "That fatal wound," remarks Satan nervously, "Shall be inflicted by the Seed of Eve / Upon my head" (PR I. 53-55). Evidently, the arrival of the Messiah gives Satan a sensation of fear because the prophecy exposes the truth about the divine vengeance that the Son will bring upon him. Second, it is the divine radiance that shines from the Son's face that excites Satan's curiosity to explore the identity of his enemy: "Who is this we must learn, for man he seems / In all his lineaments, though in his face / The glimpses of his Father's glory shine" (PR I. 91-93). This feeling of wonder becomes the momentum that pushes Satan to observe the Son since the day of his birth to his adulthood. Interestingly, unlike the angry prince in *Paradise Lost*, Milton assigns a new cast to his satanic antagonist in *Paradise Regained* as a detective who is desperate to unmask the secret agent that God the Father sends down to earth. Despite the fact that Satan's attitude shows significant changes, his absolute ignorance about the Son again disappoints Milton's reader in *Paradise Regained*. That is, Satan's objective view of the manifestation of the Godhead is based on extrinsic qualities, as mentioned earlier. To be specific, the way in which he interacts with the Son involves exclusively external elements, causing the imprudent detective to overlook the clues that point towards the presence of the Divinity in the Son. For instance, Satan believes

that he can induce the Son to show eagerness towards the possession of power, stating that “ Great acts require great means of enterprise” (PR II. 412) and implicitly referring to power. To make his offer more appealing, Satan assumes the role of an expert in geography by presenting different regions where kingdoms thrive: The City which thou seest no other deem Than great and glorious Rome, Queen of the Earth So far renown’d, and with the spoils enrich To Rome’s great Emperor, whose wide domain In ample Territory, wealth and power. (PR IV. 44-46, 81-82) It is not surprising, therefore, to realize that the devices that Satan uses to reveal the Son’s identity concern only tangible elements such as wealth and power. Pathetic as it may seem, Satan’s ability to see the truth is corrupted by superficial images and by his belief that God’s power is only physical. To summarize, “ Satan simply does not know for certain who [the Son] is, and can only imagine the mission of this ‘ Woman’s Seed’ in terms of the external and hierarchical categories in which he has lived, moved, and had his being” (Bryson 160). Equally naive is Satan’s biased opinion towards the outward appearance of the Son. Believing that he is born of human flesh, he falsely assumes that the Son will likely succumb to basic human needs and expose his weakness as an ordinary human being. In fact, one of Satan’s most disarming temptations appears in the form of the food banquet in which he hopes to gain proof from the Son’s confessing tongue that he is really the descendant of God: “ What doubt’st thou Son of God? Sit down and eat” (PR II. 376). The effect of this test, however, is only to make Satan even more frustrated while simultaneously revealing the irony inherent in the poem. In Stanley Fish’s essay “ Inaction and Silence”, Fish offers penetrating insight

into the ignorance that constructs the framework of Milton's dramatic irony: No amount of "bad success" will provoke Satan to reconsider his strategy and the assumptions behind it. He learns nothing from experience and is thus a perfect example of one who is "morally so indisposed toward truth that nothing would suffice to make him see," a mind so complacent in its own [ignorance] as to be unteachable, even by the searchingly irenic method of dialectic. (Wittreich 36) The fact that Satan never seems to fully comprehend the true identity of the Son is the irony that throws Satan's own quote back in his face: "Thenceforth I thought thee worth my nearer view / And narrower Scrutiny, that I might [learn]" (PR IV. 514-515). Indeed, Satan's capacity to learn never seems to achieve maturity, despite his zeal to determine the Son's true nature. Consequently, the miserable taste of defeat returns to haunt the satanic prince at the pinnacle of the temple, where he finally discovers the true identity of his target. In the pivotal scene on the top of the temple, all of Satan's questions about the identity of the Son are resolved in an epiphany where the Son simultaneously reveals his Godhood and proclaims his judgment on Satan. Like waking up from a nightmare, the illegitimate prince is forced to confront the truth of his erroneous preconceptions. To illustrate this climatic moment, the solemn words of the Son, "Tempt not the Lord thy God" (PR V. 561) are like a piercing ray of light that thrusts into the cloud of ignorance in Satan's mind. In other words, the Messiah whom Satan sees in the form of a human being is not an angelic host, a heavenly warrior, nor a newly-created man, but God himself: God the Son. Satan's ultimate defeat at the apex of the temple is equally pathetic compared to his banishment from Heaven after the war: "But Satan smitten

with amazement fell / Fresh from his fall, and fiercer grapple join'd / Throttled
at length in the Air, expir'd and fell" (PR IV. 562, 567-568); doubtless, the
revelation of the Son's identity is something that Satan is incapable of
bearing, so the word from the Son pushes Satan and causes him to fall from
atop the temple. Whether it is a physical combat or an issue of obedience to
the Father, the illegitimate prince fails to overcome the tragic destiny as a
treacherous son, defeated by the word of the Father's true Son. At the
conclusion of *Paradise Regained*, Satan recalls the image of the dying
Edmund, who finally discovers that it is his legitimate brother Edgar who
slices a fatal wound in his side: EDGAR. I am no less in blood than thou art,
Edmund; If more, the more thou'st wronged me. My name is Edgar and thy
father's son. EDMUND. Thou'st spoken right, 'tis true; The wheel has come
full circle, I am here. (*King Lear* V. iii. 165-167, 171) In John Milton's *Paradise
Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, the satanic prince is blindfolded by his
ignorance, resulting in his inglorious defeat and tragic destiny. To most
readers, it is clear that the most notable flaw displayed in Satan in both epics
is his insufficient knowledge of the Godhead, an ignorance that causes him
to draw partial conclusions about the status of the Son. Intermingled with the
characteristics of prejudice, envy and suspicion, Milton's portrayal of Satan
has created a lasting sensation in his readers for decades. The only regret is
that Satan never hears the Father speak these words to him: "Thou art my
beloved son". Whether in Mel Gibson's film or John Milton's epics, the
entitlement to being God's heir seems, for Satan, to be as unattainable as
the Morning Star. Works Cited Bryson, Michael. *The Tyranny of Heaven:
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