"Never to Submit or Yield": Satan's Shield and Armour in *Paradise Lost*

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Abstract: In *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Milton emphasizes how Satan's power is not original but descends from God the Creator by using the moon as a metaphor for Satan's shield. This incorporation of scientific phenomena, specifically the references to Galileo and his work, strengthens the characterization of Satan as a lessened reflection of God. Milton continues to expand his characterization of Satan by alluding to the heroes and villains of classical epics; his use of concurrent scientific and classical allusions stresses the differences between Satan and mankind. Ultimately, Satan's characteristics are accentuated and intensified by a closer examination of his shield.

In *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Milton describes Satan's shield as "the broad circumference / Hung on his shoulders like the moon whose orb / Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views" (I 287–89). In this essay, I argue that Satan's shield serves as the central representation of Satan's defensive nature as well as his distance from God. Milton first demonstrates this relationship between Satan and his Creator through allusions to his contemporary Galileo; *Sidereus Nuncius*, which is directly referenced in *Paradise Lost*, presents Galileo's findings regarding the surface of the moon. This newfound knowledge is "woven into the Galileo images in Books 1 and 5 of *Paradise Lost* … [and] it provides, in Book 1, an analogy for Satan's battered shield" (Karkar 149–50). These references to Milton's coeval Galileo further enhance the celestial imagery Milton uses to describe Satan. In contrast to Milton's modern allusions, *Paradise Lost* is rampant with classical allusions that emphasize Satan's character. Milton positions the triumph of Satan in compar-

ison to other men by likening him to classical heroes, such as Achilles from Homer's *Iliad*. In contrast, Milton's descriptions of Satan's armour associate him with the villains from these same epics. The various allusions contained in Milton's description of Satan's armour enforce Satan's opposition to God. Examining Satan's shield more closely allows readers to see how Satan's position within different hierarchies in Heaven and on Earth in *Paradise Lost* symbolize Satan's lack of space within God's world. Satan's discomfort with this lack of belonging leads him to cling to defensive tactics, arms, and rhetoric. Satan's shield can be seen as a culmination of these defensive attributes that are only intensified by his differences from his Creator and mankind.

God is likened to the most powerful celestial body in our solar system: the sun. When Satan falls, he distances himself from God and experiences a loss of power. Milton emphasizes how Satan's power is not original but descends from God by using the moon as a metaphor for Satan's shield. The moon only reflects the sun and does not create its own light nor warmth. Satan's understanding of this descension of power is represented in Book IV when Satan addresses the sun as if it were God himself:

> O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams
> That bring to my remembrance from what state
> I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere
> Till pride and worse ambition threw me down,
> Warring in Heav'n against Heavn's' matchless King.
> (Milton IV 37–41)

Milton describes Hell—Satan's domain—as the "pris'n ordained / In utter darkness … / As far removed from God and light of Heav'n" (I 71–73). Satan cannot ignore the fact that he descended from God's light, but he can create his own domain in which God's existence penetrates less intensely—just as the moon appears independent but depends entirely on the sun to be seen.

A deeper understanding of the continued comparisons between Satan and astronomical phenomena intensifies the significance of Satan's shield as a "spotty globe" (Milton I 291). The repeated contrast of the distance between

Satan and the sun, which represents God, enforces that Satan is not a powerful separate being but a powerful dependent being. In Book III, Satan, disguised as a cherub, lands on the sun to talk with Uriel: "there lands the Fiend: a spot like which perhaps / Astronomer in the sun's lucent orb / Through his glazed optic tube yet never saw" (Milton III 588–90). When Galileo published his *Letters on Sunspots*, sunspots were not a new discovery; but, Galileo "discover[ed] that sunspots not only appeared and disappeared, they also changed shape, unlike stars and planets. Galileo believed sunspots to be made of some 'fluid substance,' 'situated upon or very close to the sun,' and compared them with clouds" (Karkar 149). Therefore, when Satan lands on the surface of the sun he becomes like a sunspot. The changing shapes of sunspots parallel Satan's ability to physically transform. Satan is metaphorically like a sunspot and his physical presence on the surface of the sun means that he is a sunspot: a blemish on the surface of the sun and not a separate astronomical body. In another of Galileo's writings, *Sidereus Nuncius*, the astronomer presents his findings regarding the surface of the moon: "The moon is not robed in a smooth and polished surface but is in fact rough and uneven, covered everywhere, just like the earth's surface, with huge prominences, deep valleys, and chasms" (qtd. in Karkar 149). These indentations are only visible through magnification, such as with a telescope. Although the telescope magnifies the perception of objects, it also enhances their defects. We can read into this effect a statement about Satan's character, as he tries to be perceived as more powerful than he truly is. Thus, when Milton compares Satan's spear with the tallest Norwegian pine (I 292–93) and his shield with "the moon" (I 287), Milton is undercutting descriptions of Satan's strength and might with descriptions of his extreme confidence and pride.

In the same passages that offer allusions to Galileo, there are also prominent and critical classical allusions that continue to enhance Satan's characterization. The classical allusions to Greek and Roman epics emphasize the contrast between Satan and mankind. One of the most prominent

classical allusions in *Paradise Lost* is to Aeneas from Virgil's *Aeneid*. Milton often invokes Aeneas in Satan's character by "repeatedly mapping Aeneas's words and actions onto … Satan" (Calloway 82). Although Satan's words may echo Aeneas's, the intent with which they are spoken signals the larger contrast between the two characters. When Aeneas addresses his troops after landing in Carthage he says, "*Talia voce refert, curisque ingentibus aeger Spem vultu simulat, permit altum corde dolorem* / With such words he replied, and, ill with heavy cares, he feigned hope in his countenance, he repressed anguish deep in his heart" (Virgil I 208–09). Satan echoes these lines when speaking to Beezlebub: for "so spake th' Apostate Angel, though in pain, / Vaunting aloud, but rackt with deep despare" (Milton I 125–26). Aeneas intends to rally his troops with his subsequent speech and give his men hope, whereas Satan is not addressing his troops but rather himself (Milton I 243–70). The contrast in their speeches reveals the contrast in their beliefs: Aeneas trusts the pagan gods and puts his faith in them saying, "*dabit his deus quoque finem* / to these things too shall the god give an end" (Virgil I 199), while Satan declares he will never repent to God and will "wage by force or guile eternal War / irreconcilable" (Milton I 121–22). Milton equates Satan and Aeneas through their political rhetoric but contrasts them by the motivation behind their speeches. Milton lauds Aeneas' piety by contrasting it with Satan's selfish and evil desires. These comparisons reveal that Satan's greatest sin is his refusal to repent, thereby exposing his fatal flaw: his hubris.

Milton continues to contrast Satan's character with classical epic heroes, such as the protagonists from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The description of Satan's shield bears reference to Achilles's "massive shield flashing far and wide / like a full round moon" (*Iliad* XIX 442–43). Milton later undoes this comparison by having Satan declare the exact opposite to what dead Achilles speaks to Odysseus in the underworld. Achilles tells Odysseus, "I'd rather be a hired hand back up on earth, / slaving away for some poor dirt farmer, / than lord it over all these withered dead" (*Odyssey*

XI 511–13). Achilles' words evoke Satan's words "better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (Milton I 263). Therefore, while Satan and Achilles may be similar in terms of their armour, their moral values are oppositional.

Milton's references to Aeneas and Achilles help readers distinguish Satan from the best of humankind, but classical allusions in *Paradise Lost* are not limited to Homer's heroes. Satan's shield likens him to Achilles, yet the same description also likens him to Achilles' nemesis Ajax. Milton describes Satan wearing his shield on his back just as Homer describes Ajax wearing his shield: "[Ajax] stood there a moment, stunned, / then swinging his seven-ply ox-hide shield behind him" (*Iliad* XI 639–40). While Ajax and Satan may wear their shields in a similar fashion, their retreat from the battlefield occurs for different reasons. Ajax flees because "Father Zeus on the heights forced Ajax to retreat" (*Iliad* XI 638). In contrast, "God does not force Satan to retreat but instead forces Satan to choose whether he will stay or run away" (Dobranski 499). Through his comparison of Ajax and Satan, Milton implies that Satan's "own self-destruction … was prompted by a similar sense of having been slighted and is similarly expressed through his association with emblems of traditional warfare" (Dobranski 499). Like Satan, Ajax overestimates the power of armour. The Greeks' reliance on armour in the Trojan War was their downfall, for they put faith in a physical object instead of their gods. This false faith parallels Satan's beliefs, as Satan also puts his trust in arms:

> Perhaps more valid arms,
> Weapons more violent when next we meet,
> May serve to better us and worse our foes
> Or equal what between us made the odds—
> In nature none. (Milton VI 438–42)

"Just as Ajax did not deserve Achilles' defensive weaponry … Satan, too, falls short of the glory that Achilles garnered" (Dobranski 499). Ajax's envy of Achilles' armour parallels Satan's desire to rival God's power. Both characters are misguided in their beliefs because armour was never the cause of the downfall of Ajax nor Satan; instead, their demise

came from their excessive envy and pride.

Satan's shield is a small but significant detail in *Paradise Lost*, but further examination of Milton's imagery rewards readers with an increased understanding of Satan's role of opposition. This imagery, as well as allusions to Milton's contemporary Galileo, expands upon the relationship between Satan and his Creator. The significance of the moon as a metaphor for Satan reflects how the moon's light is not original, just as Satan's power descends from God and is a weaker manifestation of light in comparison to the source—the sun. Descriptions of Satan and God are expanded by these cosmological comparisons within the poem. These references work alongside the classical allusions that liken Satan to heroes and villains from classical epics through their use of defensive weapons. These armours may be the same as those used by mankind in classical epics; yet, by examining how these same weapons contrast Satan from God, the distinction between Satan and mankind becomes more apparent. Satan belongs in his own category—not powerful enough to be considered a god, yet not heroic enough to be considered equal among men.

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