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*Paradise Lost* and the Devilish Danger of Great Rhetoric

The biblical story of Genesis and the origin of humanity is perhaps one of the most prevalent stories that mankind has to tell. It poses answers to many deeply rooted questions in our shared conscience regarding the history and nature of humanity, good, and evil. John Milton, influenced by the epic poetry prominent in Greece and Italy, attempts to give this common story new life in his most notable work, *Paradise Lost*. Published in 1674 and regarded as 'The English Epic', *Paradise Lost* dramatizes the Fall of Humanity, filling in the gaps left in the story of Genesis chapter three and the serpent's temptation of Eve. One of these gaps that Milton gives special attention to in his work is the actual mechanism of Satan's persuasion of Eve and why it worked in bringing ruin to humanity. In Milton's epic, Satan's temptation of the mother of mankind is a game of cunning rhetoric. Satan makes use of classic argumentative strategies such as personal anecdotes, rhetorical questions, appeals to knowledgeable authority, and purposeful understatements to achieve temptation, all of which successfully contribute to his ultimate persuasion of a highly curious Eve by manipulating her own inner logic to guide her to his corrupt conclusion.

What Satan presents as his own personal experiences through anecdotes acts as strong support for his argument to Eve by giving her fabricated examples from which to draw her conclusion. Satan uses these anecdotes in two major places throughout his long speech to Eve in Book 9. First, he attests to the apparent harmlessness of the fruit when he says, "Look on me, / Me who have touched and tasted, yet both live, / And life more perfect have attained than fate / Meant me, by vent'ring higher than my lot. / Shall that be shut to man, which to the beast / Is open?" (Milton 687-692). Then later in his argument, Satan compares his own rational development post-consumption to the humans' potential development when he claims, "That ye should be as gods, since I as man, / Internal man, is but proportion meet, / I of

brute human, ye of human gods." (Milton 710-712). Using personal experience in an argument can help support one's logic by acting as an irrefutable demonstration of the point they are trying to make, and Satan's use is no exception. In the first case of his use of a personal anecdote, he begins it with the words "Look on me," immediately thrusting himself into the center of Eve's attention as the evidence itself. He then directly addresses the sources of death that Eve mentions prior to his speech, claiming that himself, "who have touched and tasted" has yet lived, essentially disproving the promised death. Here, Satan is presenting himself to Eve as living proof of the powerlessness of God's threats and the validity of his own argument: If he had eaten the fruit and not died, then why would she die? He goes further with the second anecdote, this time by using himself as an analogy. In essence, Satan is reasoning hierarchically, claiming that, as a serpent, his newly obtained human-like characteristics ("since I as man") suggest that a human would be able to surpass their own knowledge and achieve that of gods ("ye of human gods"). In doing so, he makes an appealing promise that logically follows from the fabricated experiences he presents as his own. In reality, Satan lacks the evidence to make such an assertion, but pulling from his own 'experiences' creates a convincing argument despite this. These anecdotes both serve as examples given to Eve in an attempt to put her mind at ease from the threat of death and expand her mind to the seemingly reasonable possibility of her knowledge ascending to godhood.

The personal evidence that Satan presents Eve is seen to be a successful contributor to the logic that leads her to disobey God, for she herself uses it as reassurance regarding the nonexistence of the death that God had threatened. In her own analysis of Satan's speech and the evidence presented, she reasons that "In the day we eat / Of this fair fruit, our doom is, we shall die. / How dies the serpent? He hath eat'n and lives, / And knows, and speaks, and reasons, and discerns, / Irrational till then." (Milton 762-766). Here, Eve directly uses the serpent's own experiences to establish the steps in logic that lead to her ultimate disobedience. Without any experiences with prior deception, Eve takes the serpent's anecdotes at face value, fitting them into a simple logic that yields the exact result that Satan had intended: she begins to question God's command when she had never before, opening her up to the potential for sin.

Another trademark tactic of Satan's temptation of Eve is his repetitive use of rhetorical questions, which guides Eve through his argument rapidly and allows him to manipulate Eve's thoughts by loading these questions with his own desired answers. These questions are littered throughout his long speech to Eve, like when he questions the mechanism of their promised death by saying, "ye shall not die: / How should ye? By the fruit? It gives you life / To knowledge. By the Threat'ner?" (Milton 9.685-687), or when he doubts the true purpose of God's command in saying, "Why then was this forbid? Why but to awe, / Why but to keep ye low and ignorant, / His worshippers;" (Milton 701-703). Through these questions, Satan attempts two things to advance his argument. First, he transitions rapidly from one question to the next, not allowing Eve any time to process the questions that he is frantically throwing at her. Within these questions, he is also jumping from one entire subject to another ("By the fruit?" to "By the Threat'ner?"), which serves to dislodge Eve's focus even further and leave her without answers of her own. Satan then takes advantage of this dislodged and answerless state by presenting potential answers to these questions in the form of more questions which push Eve closer and closer to reaching his desired end. His myriad rhetorical questions act as the train tracks that guide Eve's reasoning, and this can be seen especially in the phrase "Why but…", which has the built-in assumption that there is no other answer than the one Satan presents. In short, Satan's constant barrage of guiding questions discourages Eve from critically thinking about these questions on her own and offers her an easier way out in Satan's own, freely presented 'logic'.

The rhetorical questions that fill Satan's speech turn out to be very effective tools in persuading Eve, as this question-based logic of his aligns well with the curious reasoning that Milton paints Eve with throughout the epic. In one of the first interactions between Adam and Eve presented to the reader, Eve's soliloquy to Adam reveals a questioning nature that comes from nowhere else than her own curiosity, demonstrated in her words, "But wherefore all night long shine these, for whom / This glorious sight, when sleep hath shut all eyes?" (Milton 4.657-658). Here, in response to Adam's obedience to rest, she asks a very reasonable question regarding the beauty of night, demonstrating a propensity to question the world around her in a scientific way. This curiosity becomes a trademark for her to a fault, as it is this

curiosity that leads her to follow the serpent to the Tree of Knowledge in the first place: “But say, where grows the tree, from hence how far?” (Milton 9.617). Satan continues to take advantage of Eve’s innocent curiosity within his own speech through constant questioning, and she soon latches onto this kind of reasoning in her analysis. For example, in regards to death, she reasons “For us alone / Was death invented? Or to us denied / This intellectual food, for beasts reserved?” (Milton 766-768). Satan’s questioning fits so well with Eve’s own inner logic that, once presented to her, she adopts it for herself, unknowingly playing right into his hands. Thus, Satan’s rhetorical questions prove to be very successful contributors to Eve’s temptation, as they allow Satan to prey upon Eve’s pre-established curiosity and question-based reasoning with his own deceitful logic.

Satan also utilizes an appeal to authority (and not just any authority, but knowledge incarnate) in order to establish an external basis for his argument and arbitrarily imbue his speech with a ‘higher knowledge’ to help persuade Eve of the truth of his reasoning. He chooses to begin his long argument not addressing Eve directly, but the Tree of Knowledge instead, saying, “O sacred, wise, and wisdom-giving plant, / Mother of science, now I feel thy power / Within me clear, not only to discern / Things in their causes, but to trace the ways / Of highest agents, deemed however wise.” (Milton 9.679-683). Appealing to authority is a common rhetorical tactic, as it helps to increase the argument’s ethos by grounding it on the wisdom of a more knowledgeable third party. In this case, the Tree of Knowledge becomes personified as a wise teaching figure from which Satan claims to derive his insight, which serves to do two things. First, in making his argument appear to be based upon the wisdom of this Tree that is presented as knowledge incarnate (despite this being untrue), he attempts to give his argument more persuasive power by implying that the logic he is about to reason through comes from a higher source and is therefore more valuable than Eve’s current knowledge. Secondly, he speaks of the Tree of Knowledge in a favorable light as an authority figure (“Mother of science”) that can be trusted to make one wise, an image which directly opposes the way Eve has been told to view the Tree. This praise-filled introduction helps to prime Eve to view the Tree of Knowledge in a more nuanced way. All in all, Satan’s appeal to the authority of highest Knowledge attempts to get Eve to more easily believe his words and trust them over

her own thoughts, as well as to break down her defensive wall towards the Tree of Knowledge, showing her that it is not as bad as she has been led to believe.

Satan's appeal to knowledgeable authority was successful in its attempt to persuade Eve due to her own view of reason itself and her changed view of the Tree of Knowledge that resulted from this appeal. Before the serpent's attempt at temptation, Eve explains the basis for her behavior, summing it up in the words "our reason is our law.'" (Milton 9.654). This idea is the result of trust that their human reasoning is incorruptible because of their perfect Creator, and necessarily assumes that there would be no deception to lead this reasoning to incorrect conclusions. The lies which Satan tells are thus viewed as logical truths by Eve because they appear to follow her reason and are seemingly derived from a highly knowledgeable source. Speaking of this source, the Tree of Knowledge, her shift in view of this Tree was an essential piece of the logic that led her astray and was the result of Satan's appeal and praise of it. Prior to Satan's words, she tells him "'Serpent, we might have spared our coming hither, / Fruitless to me," (Milton 647-648) when approaching the Tree of Knowledge. It is important to note that she makes this assertion while already knowing of the fruit's positive effect on the serpent, demonstrating that it is Satan's words themselves that open the door for her to consider a better view of the Tree and not just his ability to speak. After Satan's speech offers this favorable view of the Tree, Eve's perception of it seems to have changed dramatically, saying "Great are thy virtues, doubtless, best of fruits," (Milton 745) and "naming thee the Tree / of Knowledge, knowledge of both good and evil; / Forbids us then to taste, but his forbidding / Commends thee more," (Milton 751-754). Much more respect and praise is given to the Tree of Knowledge by Eve after Satan presents it as a wise authority figure. Thus, Satan's appeal to knowledgeable authority is able to greatly influence Eve by shifting her view of the Tree of Knowledge from a negative condemnation to a positive source of undeniable wisdom, which he is able to do because of her own view of reason as law.

One of Satan's other wicked rhetorical tricks comes in the form of his purposeful understatement, which he uses to minimize the severity of sin's weight and arbitrarily change the perfect nature of God to get Eve to become more willing to disobey. He begins to do this in his use of the adjective 'petty' when

he says, “Or will God increase his ire / For such a petty trespass,” (Milton 692-693), and goes even further when he swaps in ‘gods’ in place of ‘God’ in sentences like, “And what are gods that man may not become / As they, participating in godlike food? / The gods are first, and that advantage use / On our belief, that all from them proceeds; / I question it,” (Milton 716-720). Purposeful understatement can be a powerful rhetorical tool in helping to minimize the perceived importance or stature of someone or something, and Satan uses it without restraint. In this first instance, Satan is adding in a qualifier where there was not one before, inviting Eve to see that there are different levels of trespasses and that this sin is, in the serpent’s mind, only a small one. In reality, Eve does not have to view disobedience in this hierarchical way that Satan presents everything, and Satan has no ground for qualifying the consumption of the fruit as ‘petty’, yet by nonchalantly throwing this understatement into his monologue, he makes a compelling case by exploiting Eve’s inability to know any better, planting a seed of doubt in her mind. As for the second instance, Satan takes a far more explicit approach to his understatement, deceitfully substituting the entire concept of who ‘God’ is with the far less powerful portrait of ‘gods.’ Nowhere is this made clearer than his opening phrase, “And what are gods”, which serves to both minimize God’s sole perfection and invite Eve to adopt a polytheistic view of reality, bringing her ever closer to equality with the divine. This diminished view of God and divinity tries to make the concept of Eve’s own ascension to godhood more real while distracting her from the truth of God’s power and wrath. Both of these examples of purposeful understatement help Satan manipulate the truth in an attempt to drastically alter Eve’s view of disobedience and God Himself, all to further increase her willingness to sin.

Satan’s understatement seems to be successful in its alteration of Eve’s perceptions, and this is most clearly seen in the shift in her fear from before and after his speech. During Eve’s recounting of her dream to Adam in Book 5, she tells of her reaction to the angel-figure’s consumption of the fruit, saying “He plucked, he tasted; me damp horror chilled” (Milton 65). In response to what would become the exact same disobedience she is later convinced of in Book 9, she describes herself as being petrified with fear. Yet, after Satan presents God and this disobedience in lesser terms, her fear changes completely, demonstrated in her words, “What fear I then, rather what know to fear / Under the ignorance of good and

evil, / Of God or death, of law or penalty?" (Milton 9.773-775). Regarding the same action, she goes from being "chilled" in "damp horror" to asking "What fear I then", showing a drastic shift in reasoning. Satan's logic of a "petty trespass" and "gods" becomes Eve's, and exactly as Satan was hoping, her fear was dismissed, replaced with a new perception of both God and his prohibition that lacked the safety mechanism of fear to maintain obedience.

In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Satan's achievement of temptation is done through the use of many rhetorical strategies which all contribute to the manipulation of Eve's curious inner logic, guiding her in different ways towards Satan's desired end. His use of fabricated personal anecdotes presents undeniable evidence in his argument which gives Eve reasonable reassurance to disregard the threat of death. His constant questioning overwhelms Eve and uses her disarrayed logic to present his own twisted solutions to the logical problems he creates. His appealing to the Tree of Knowledge as an authority figure grants ethos to Satan through the identity of his supposed source and makes Eve reconsider her negative view of the Tree. His purposeful understatement minimizes the true nature of sin and God, causing Eve's perception to shift and leave behind the fear that helped her stay faithful. Through the cunning logic of Satan's argument, Milton presents a telling of the Fall of Humanity that prompts a shift in the reader's perception of Eve's sin: *Paradise Lost* undoubtedly shows Eve more sympathy than is often given to her in the story of the Fall. The complex reasoning and tricky rhetoric Satan uses in his temptation gives Eve a bit of innocence when the reader considers her inexperience with guile and the curious nature Milton paints her with. In a way, any reader can see themselves in her position, falling for the same tricks. Milton also throws her a bone by presenting her with a supplementary temptation: her own hunger, as explained when the text reads "Meanwhile the hour of noon drew on, and waked / An eager appetite, raised by the smell / So savory of that fruit," (Milton 9.739-741). Both of these temptations serve to give the reader a sense of sympathy for Eve and the decision she makes. Yet I would argue that Milton does not relieve Eve of the fault completely, opting instead for a slightly more ambivalent view of her disobedience. After all, Milton chooses to add a completely new feature to the story: Eve's dream, relayed to Adam in Book 5. The temptation she receives and gives into within the dream is eerily similar to what she experiences with

the serpent in Book 9, yet she seems entirely unable to recall the details of the dream that may have stirred her to reject Satan's deceitful temptation. In this way, Milton still gives her some of the fault by preparing her for the temptation beforehand. Thus, Milton's view of Eve is more so ambivalent, using common rhetorical strategies in Satan's argument to make Eve's ultimate decision more understandable while employing a nearly prophetic dream to leave her with some of the fault, a multi-faceted view that somewhat aligns with his own Christian roots.

Works Cited

Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 9th ed., B, Norton, New York, NY, 2012, pp. 1945–2175.

*Note: Dear Dr. Rubright, I would like your feedback on this essay. Thank you!