

Milton's Anti-Monarchical Stances and His Poetical, Phonetic, Rhetorical, and Theological Crafts

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Abstract

While the topic of Milton's antimonarchical stances has been explored before, this research moves beyond the findings of the previous criticism to offer new insights into this issue by connecting between his antimonarchical stances and the numerous poetical, phonetic, rhetorical, and theological elements in his most celebrated masterpieces *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. This paper illumines the various implicit allusions, signs, and techniques under which Milton's political stances are veiled. It mainly explores the various allusive ways in which Milton skillfully and safely articulates his progressive anti-kingship attitude.

Key words: Milton; Antimonarchy; Rhetoric; Poetical; Phonetic; Theological; Crafts

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INTRODUCTION

There have been many controversial issues in interpreting John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regain'd*. Among the issues that occupied the minds of many critics were Milton's attitude towards the monarchy and the divinity of kings. If we read between the lines of these two epics, we can clearly see that he wrote them as a loud protest against the English monarch whose colonial

oppression of the English nation and other nations was intolerable. In fact, with the rise of Protestantism and the powerful impact it had on individuals, people started to think about their existence and believe in the necessity of having individual autonomy. The colonial ideology of the monarch which indoctrinated in the common people the idea of the superiority and divinity of kings started to vanish. Further, the Puritans, with their theological ideologies, taught the people how to be free from the chains of the king and the Roman Catholic Church. Milton was one of the important Puritan figures whose inflammatory and revolutionary writings inspired the people to seek their liberty and have new hope in a better life. *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* are pregnant with words and lines that carry to the people the message that they were created free from their first breaths. Indeed, Milton took on himself the task of raising the "banner of liberty and equality" (Lewis, 1970, p.96). A scrutiny of both epics would reveal how Milton appoints himself as the faithful savior of the people through his revolutionary protest against the illegitimacy of the king's rule; he tells the English people:

Will ye submit your necks, and chuse to bend
The supple knee? ye will not, if I trust
To know ye right, or if ye know your selves
Natives and Sons of Heav'n possess before
By none, and if not equal all, yet free,
Equally free; for Orders and Degrees
Jarr not with liberty, but well consist.
Who can in reason then or right assume
Monarchie over such as live by right
His equals, if in power and splendor less,
In freedome equal? or can introduce
Law and Edict on us, who without law
Erre not, much less for this to be our Lord,
And look for adoration to th' abuse
Of those Imperial Titles which assert
Our being ordain'd to govern, not to serve (Milton, *P. Lost*. V. 787-802).

In these lines, Milton clearly tells the king that he—the King— does not have the right to subjugate the free people. Milton encourages the people not to submit to the king and his restrictive laws. People are inspired by such intellectuals as Milton to believe that they are free-will agents, not servants to the king and his followers. Milton, who believed that monarchy was “restrictive to free thinking” (Claeys, 1989, p.202), tells them that nobody on earth has the right to control them, and he tries to create in them a sense of self-rule. This loud call for the people to break their silence reaches its zenith when Milton calls those who continue to submit to the king “a herd confused;” he sharply rebukes them:

And what the people but a herd confused,
A miscellaneous rabble, who extol
Things vulgar, and, well weighed, scarce worth the
praise?

They praise and they admire they know not what,
And know not whom, but as one leads the other;
And what delight to be by such extolled (iii. 49-54).

These lines strongly and plainly express Milton’s critique of all those who supported King Charles and gave him the chance to be their ruler. Throughout his epic, Milton tries to awaken the people who had long been in slumber. Milton’s poetic lines in these two epics are the vehicle which carries his attack on King Charles and the tool through which he expresses his condemnation of the monarch’s imperial power against his nation. He refers to Charles as a person who wants nothing but to “swell with pride, and must be titled Gods, / Great benefactors of mankind, Deliverers, / Worshipped with temple, priest and sacrifice” (iii. 81-3). All this shows that Milton was an eyewitness to all the injustices that his people suffered from.

In this paper, I examine the devices, techniques, literary elements, metaphors, images, and crafts Milton uses to confirm his opposition to the crown and reveal his antimonarchical attitudes towards the divinity of leaders, tyranny, absolutism, and oppression. In many ways, Milton was an innovative progressive intellectual who could not help fighting tyranny, monarchy, hierarchy, and despotism. With this in mind, elements demonstrating Milton’s political, anti-hierarchical, and anti-monarchical apathies are ubiquitous in his masterpieces *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. However, readers need to develop keen and quick antennae in order to pick up his allegorical signals, for he uses various techniques and crafts to convey his messages and teach his *big* lessons about political freedom and liberty.

DISCUSSION

Although, for political and safety reasons, King Charles’ name is never mentioned in Milton’s poetry, readers can find many passages and indications where Milton harshly

critiques the monarchy and the king for being oppressive of the people of England. For instance, Milton draws many parallels and analogies between King Charles I and Satan: They are both portrayed as despot leaders who are ready to fight any one to preserve their royal/upper status. Motivated by greed for power, Satan fights God to become a king in heaven, and King Charles coerces his people to protect his monarchy. By pointing to a number of similarities between the description of Satan in *Paradise Lost* and King Charles I in *Eikonoclastes*, Joan S. Bennett (1989) tries to explain that Milton was just as hostile toward Satan as he was toward Charles I. Bennett argues that both Satan and Charles, for Milton, were ambitious for personal glory and both attempted to establish their power by relying on armed might, rather than on the justice of their cause (p.446). She states that

A true revolution like that against king Charles I in England, challenges, not the force that upholds the ruling power, but the right; valid revolution tests whether supremacy is accountable to law, which alone has the power to liberate and which Satan’s rebellion defies (p.450).

According to Milton, a good leader is the one who “Our voluntary service he requires, / not our necessitated” (*Paradise Lost*, V. 529-30). Milton likens the absolute rule to a strict necessity (food, water, and so on) where people don’t have any choice but to submit to the will of the ruler. This situation opposes the freedom and rationality given to human kind by God.

God also states that humanity is not overruled by “absolute leaders.” As Adam recites to Michael in Book XII, God has given humanity “only after Beast, Fish, Fowl / Dominion absolute; that right we hold / By his donation: but man over men / He made not Lord . . . human left from human free” (XII. 67-71). Milton compares oppressive leaders and subservient people to animals which tend to brutally dominate and capture each other, for real people never accept to play either role. He also alludes to the fact that neither King Charles nor any human being has the right to dominate and enslave other people. It is also God’s command that people rebel against and fight despotism and totalitarianism. Here, Milton draws parallels between freedom and reason, for reason causes freedom and the loss of it leads to servitude. He considers political freedom a characteristic of the Christian theology; therefore, good Christians refuse to be ruled by tyrants because freedom, according to Milton, is part of true Christianity.

Furthermore, in both the “council in hell” scenes of Book I and II and the council in heaven scenes of Book VI, Satan speaks against freedom and liberty, accusing God of being totalitarian: “Sole reigning holds the tyranny of heaven” (I. 123). Some readers might think that God and the son are portrayed as despot monarchs, but I personally disagree with this reading. Rather, I believe that Milton tries to show his readers that King Charles,

like Satan, exceeds his limits by trying to establish a monarchy similar to God's:

Such a foe / Is rising, who intends to erect his throne / Equal to
ours, throughout the specious north / nor so content, has in his
thought to try / In battle what our power is or our right (V. 125-29).

God declares that those who try to exceed their limits (Satan, Nimrod, and King Charles) by attempting to establish kingdoms similar to God's are His enemies. Thus, he puts them in the same category and distinguishes their despot, corrupt kingdoms from that of God.

More, in Milton's poetry, monarchies and totalitarian kingdoms are associated with harsh, negative, and unlikable language/rhetoric. Milton refers to such kingdoms using unfavorable words like "chaos," "dark," "wicked," "wretched," "pride" and so on to display his apathy towards monarchies. To put it differently, monarchy is associated with destruction, greed, and domination because rulers think of themselves as Gods, not servants of the interests and concerns of their people, thereby giving themselves the right to enslave others. And this will lead to the destruction of the monarchy as well as the subjects who don't rise up against despotism. The word "chaos" indicates that monarchies do not have order because they do not implement sincere laws and legislations that protect people's equal rights. This argument is particularly correct because the countries which are still under the yoke of dictators in the twenty-first century still lack order, for the citizens do not trust their political institutions. Indeed, it is fascinating that Milton tackled such issues more than four hundred years ago.

"Darkness" reveals that monarchies are controlled by one person, so the future of the country remains vague since nobody knows about the king's or the despot's plans. Besides, the future of the country is unclear, for it is not discussed by the parliament members. "Wickedness" usually refers to the kings' intentions: they care about their personal interests more than the future of their country or their people. Similarly, monarchs are too proud to discuss the future of the country with other politicians, feeling weak and manipulated if they do so. "Pride" is what led Satan to ruin, and it is what prevents monarchs from establishing democratic rules and ultimately leads to their devastation. Thus, pride is mentioned whenever Satan, King Charles, and other monarchs are referred to.

Milton tends to associate the description of despots with a certain set of English explosive consonants that are pronounced with a sudden release of air. These sounds include t, d, p, b, k, g; these sounds tend to rhyme the verses describing kings, monarchs, and patriarchs. In fact, these intentionally selected sounds disclose Milton's discomfort with the institution of kingship as readers need to exert more effort to pronounce such sounds. In this way, Milton draws readers' attention to the viciousness of totalitarianism via these hard, explosive sounds. Even

the rhyme that is supposed to sound harmonious, smooth, and musical becomes discordant and irregular when connected to kingship. He, as a result, successfully and implicitly sends a strong message against dictatorships.

This situation is manifested in the following passage:

But what if better councils might erect
Our minds, and teach us to cast off this yoke?
Will you submit your necks, and choose to bend
The supple knee? Ye will not, if I trust
To know you are right, or if you know yourselves
Native and sons of heaven possessed before
By non, 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 (V. 785-95).

Here, Milton rails against King Charles' absolutism as well as the people who accept being subjugated and stripped of their political freedom. He asserts that King Charles does not have the right of sitting on the throne and ruling people in a self-serving and self-pleasing fashion. To convey this implicit message, Milton resorts to certain unfavorable explosive sounds to describe monarchs and despotism. In addition to that, he frequently breaks the rhymes and shifts from explosives to sibilants or mellifluent sounds (e.g. from t, k, and d to s, r, i, and m). The poem's "theme sublime" itself becomes a counter in the polemics over the legitimacy of rhymed couplets: "Thy verse created like thy theme sublime, / In number, Weight and measure Needs not Rhyme" (*Paradise Lost*, I. 53-4). This break of the rhyme demonstrates Milton's uneasiness towards Monarchies. One can perceive Milton's distress when the rhyme is absent, when images are few, and when the diction of words tends to be abstract. This technique illustrates Milton's genius in composing poetry and his ability to hide his contempt of monarchies under such devices. First, he manages to hide his agitation with the monarchy under allegorical language. Then, he reveals his opposition to the crown via these crafts. Again, the break of the rhyme is another indication of Milton's poetical craftiness that indirectly manifests his political affiliations. Milton uses the explosive consonants when speaking of Satan or monarchies:

But this usurper his encouragement proud
Stays not on man; to God his tower intends
Siege and defiance. Wretched man! What food. . . (XII.
73-5).

On the other hand, he breaks the rhyme and shifts to soft, mellifluent sounds when speaking of the Son: "O execrable son, so to aspire / above his brethren to himself assuming" (XII. 65-66). This, of course, shows his preference to and acclamation of the rule of the Son.

Moreover, Milton usually alludes to his own suffering which complicates his struggle against kingship and tyranny. In spite of his physical blindness and political

oppression, Milton is never silenced even under the most severe circumstances:

More safe I sing with mortal voice, unchanged
To hoarse or mute, though fallen on evil days
On evil days though fallen, and evil tongues
In darkness, and with dangers compassed round
And solitude; yet not alone, while thou
Visit'st my slumbers nightly, or when morn (VII. 24-30).

This passage tells about Milton's suffering under King Charles' rule, where he was always in danger of being tortured by the king's soldiers. He emphasizes that his epoch was composed during "evil days"—during King Charles' rule. Still, he bravely says his mind in spite of all the danger in which he constantly was and the solitude and loneliness from which he was suffering. I believe he tries to urge his readers to take him as a relentless model of fighting political and religious repression. Milton characterizes King Charles' rule as a period saturated with insecurity, "evil," "darkness," "danger," "solitude," and loneliness. Though Milton doesn't mention the reason behind all this agony and suffering, attentive readers can establish connections between King Charles and the characteristics of the period in which he ruled. Milton's misery represents the agony of the critical thinkers, intellectuals, and political activists who were not able to freely say their minds. His diction of words like evil, darkness, danger and so on exhibits Milton's gloomy view of the king's policies. It is also important here to remember that under the yoke of King Charles I, England was divided into two classes: the bourgeois or aristocrats, who controlled the country, and the marginalized, exploited, and humiliated common people who didn't play any role in the political life. Milton verbally fights to liberate England from the bondage of the king. However, he knew that only few people would appreciate his message: "still govern thou my song / Urania, and fit audience find, though few" (VII. 31).

Milton's condemnation of kingship and empires is ubiquitous in *Paradise Regan'd* as well. In one of his most loaded passages, Milton criticizes submissive people for accepting tyrannical rule:

Thou neither dost persuade me to seek wealth
For empire's sake, nor empire to Empire to affect
For glories sake by all thy argument.
For what is glory but the blaze of fame,
The people's praise, if always praise unmixed?
And what the people but a herd confused
A miscellaneous rabble who extol
Things vulgar, & well weigh'd scarce worth the praise,
They praise and they admire they no not what;
And no not whom, but as one leads the other (III.44-53).

Milton pays more attention to constructing the argument than the verse. Indeed, the argument here

overruns the structure of the lines, and the simile between submissive people and the "confused herd" marks a big assault on those who accept dictatorships. There is also a recurrent image of likening passive subjects to domestic animals in Milton's poetry. This is a powerful image that conveys the writer's attitudes towards political issues. Also, the above mentioned lines don't follow any metrical pattern or rhyme; rather, they end with seven different sounds and the explosive ones end the lines that talk about empires. Indeed, the fact that Milton doesn't pay much attention to the structure of the verses demonstrates how much the author is bothered with this kind of submissive people.

Further, Milton's rhetoric, through which he implicitly indicts the absolutist kingdom of King Charles, is best seen in the juxtaposition of the Son's Kingdom and Charles' kingdom. For instance, unlike the earthly kingdom of Charles, the Son's kingdom is not characterized by hierarchical structure or having "to him bow / all knees in heav'n" (Bryson, 2004, pp.102-03). The characteristics of the Son's kingdom are clearly articulated in Book II:

To guide nations to the way of truth
By saving doctrine and from err lead
To know, and knowing worship God aright
Is yet more Kingly; this attracts the Soul
Governs the inner man, the nobler part
That other ov'r the body only reins,
And oft by force, which to a generous mind
So reining can be no sincere delight.
Besides to give a kingdom hath been thought
Greater and nobler done, and to lay down
Far more magnanimous than to assume (*Paradise Regained*, 473-83).

The most important difference between the two kingdoms is that the Son's kingdom is characterized by equality, all individuals are united in one soul; thus, hierarchical distinction does not exist. Milton's favor for such kind of government is manifested in his rhetoric, where he uses very moving and beautiful words to describe the Son's rule—his desired democratic government. The previous quote from *Paradise Regained* is saturated with positive words, including "truth," "aright," "attracts," "noble," "generous mind," "sincere delight," "Greater and nobler," and "magnanimous." In fact, these words expose Milton's desire for such kind of rule on earth. On the contrary, passages alluding to King Charles' despot rule are satiated by negative and dark words like "brute," "Tyrannical power," "vulgar," and so on.

CONCLUSION

Indeed, John Milton poses as a powerful political writer who uses many poetical, social, and theological devices to implicitly communicate his messages. Political allusions are everywhere in his poetry, but readers need to develop certain skills in order to perceive and understand these

prevalent references. Images, metaphors, historical instances, rhyme, scheme, diction, and sounds manifest Milton's political affiliations and effectively give a political dimension to his poetry. I think that Milton's work should be taught to subjugated nations so that they can rise up and regain their dignity and humanity, for, as Milton points out in many places, politically and theologically dominated people lose their humanity if they surrender to the will of their dictators. Finally, I see many similarities between Arabic poetry and Milton's, for most Arab poets tend to veil their political affiliations under highly allegorical language in order to avoid punishment by their dictators. Palestinian poets do the same thing to escape the punishment of the Israeli occupation. In other words, Milton's poetry is universally important because it deals with universal issues.

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