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RESEARCH PAPER

Subjectivity, Free Will, and the Reinterpretation of Divine Authority: A Frazerian Analysis of Satan's Discourse in *Paradise Lost*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Satan's rebellion in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* as an act of myth-making that distorts theological ideas of liberty, creation, fate, and the Fall. Using Frazer's conception of myth as subjective meaning-making, the study argues that Satan's speeches attempt to reframe his rebellion as autonomy, servitude as tyranny, and damnation as freedom. Yet these myths are consistently dismantled through the narrator's authority, the assertions of other beings, and Satan's own moments of doubt and misery. The analysis employs qualitative textual study, using close readings of key passages supported by Frazer's framework. The argument develops across interrelated themes. First, Satan redefines liberty as disobedience, but the text asserts that true freedom lies in rational obedience. Second, Adam grounds obligation in divine creation, while Satan invents self-creation myths. Finally, Satan's boast that "the mind is its own place" epitomizes his myth-making, yet his despair reveals these myths collapse under reality.

KEYWORDS *Paradise Lost*, Satan's Rebellion, Frazer, Myth-Making, Free-Will

Introduction

In *The Golden Bough*, James George Frazer understands mythology as the primitive human attempt to make sense of the world. He claims that, for primitive societies, myth was essential for survival. It enabled them "to acquaint themselves with everything that could aid man in his arduous struggle with nature" (Frazer, 1922, p.62). Myths were thus vital interpretive structures that gave meaning to the natural world. Frazer illustrates this by relating several myths. The Greeks, for instance, explained the seasonal cycle of growth and decay through the tale of Persephone's abduction by Hades. Demeter and Persephone are thus understood as "personifications of corn" (Frazer, 1922, p.396) within this mythological framework. Similarly, the Phoenician festival commemorating Adonis as a god of fertility occurred every spring when the red earth washed down from the mountains tinged the rivers and sea with a red hue. It was believed that the waters were stained by the blood of Adonis who was slain annually by a wild bear on Mount Lebanon.

Drawing on Frazer's understanding of myth as a process of subjective meaning-making, this article argues that John Milton's *Paradise Lost* dramatizes a similar dynamic through Satan's revolt against divine authority. It emphasizes the passages where Satan's rhetoric uses the notion of autonomy, fate, creation, and free-will to reinterpret his understanding of becoming a fallen angel. His revolt can thus be understood as the creation of a myth to counter the notion of divine justice as tyranny. In doing so, Satan also reframes his own fall as an act of free will rather than divine condemnation. Satan's speeches are

particularly analyzed in this article as mythic reinterpretations that transform his fall into a tale of autonomy and free will. His rebellion thus becomes a form of mythopoesis which ultimately reflects how humans throughout history have created their own counter-narratives against the haunting uncertainty of natural phenomena. Satan's act of reinterpretation introduces an alternative meaning to divine order.

Literature Review

Critical interpretations of Milton's Satan have long oscillated between admiration of his heroic stature and suspicion of his rhetorical strategies. John M. Steadman (1976) identifies this as one of the oldest controversies surrounding the epic, noting that Satan has often been compared to the epic heroes of classical antiquity. The Romantics have supported this idea by celebrating Satan as a figure of grandeur. According to Gordon, Blake expressed this idea most emphatically in his claim that Milton unwittingly backed Satan by presenting him as a character of admirable qualities. Percy Bysshe Shelley reinforced this position in his *Defense of Poetry*, insisting that Milton's Satan, "as a moral being, is as far superior to God" (as cited in Nafi, 2015). In more recent scholarship, critics such as Mary C. Fenton (2005) justify Satan's rebellion as an act of hope. For her, Satan is a figure who simply yearns for an alternative future. Her reading underscores the possibility that Satan's speeches are motivated less by malice than by a mythic impulse to reimagine existence.

Other critics, however, have resisted this valorization. Gerald Schiffhorst (1984), for instance, argues that Satan's supposed heroism is illusory. Satan, he suggests, is not a hero but the "antithesis of those virtues that define the ideal heroism of the Son" (p.1). Jack Foley (1970) has also read Satan's narrative as a manifestation of chaos and confusion. For Foley, Satan's internal state is fractured, revealing the instability behind his claims to authority. More recent scholarship continues this line of critique. Jamal Nafi (2015) dismisses the heroic interpretation altogether, contending that Satan embodies "absolute baseness" (p.22) motivated by unrestrained self-interest. Ben Gray Lumpkin (1947) situates this debate in terms of fate, noting that Satan appropriates the term to signify a power greater than God that determines the order of the universe. By redefining fate, Lumpkin argues, Satan crafts an alternative meaning. Thereby, he undermines divine authority through semantic and ideological manipulation. Lumpkin's insight is central to understanding how Satan engages in mythic reinterpretation and creates meanings that resist theological frameworks.

The above debate implies that Satan possesses the free will to not only disobey but also to create alternative meanings. The issue of free will and accountability is accordingly taken up by Wilma G. Armstrong (1992), who argues that Satan's actions stem from his own volition, committed with complete "self-knowledge" (p.93), rather than divine manipulation. His punishment, therefore, arises as a consequence of his freely chosen rebellion. Furthermore, she highlights Satan's attack as discursive, emphasizing that the epic concerns itself with "points of change or times of paradigm shift" (p.92). Thus, Armstrong's analysis highlights the significance of free will in *Paradise Lost* by positioning Satan's myth-making as self-generated and a discursive re-inscription of meaning against God's order.

Charles W. Durham (2005) extends this debate by juxtaposing Satan's rhetoric with Abdiel's. The confrontation of the two, he claims, emphasizes the tension between truth and falsity. While Satan's use of free speech distorts God's creative power as tyranny, Abdiel employs free speech to expose Satan as an "ingrate". This contrast illuminates how Satan's myth-making is a rhetorical construction that competes with other voices within

the poem. Jarod K. Anderson (2010) echoes a similar view in his analysis of Milton's portrayal of evil. For him, Milton complicates the notion of evil by presenting God's divine authority on the one hand, and forces that negate it on the other hand. By foregrounding this complexity, Anderson also emphasizes the thematic presence of free will within the poem.

Together, these perspectives reveal the richness of critical debate surrounding Satan's character. While some emphasize his heroism or hopeful vision, others underscore the chaos or ideological distortions evident in his rebellion. What unites these approaches, however, is the recognition that Satan does not passively accept divine definitions. He actively reworks the narrative to create alternative meanings. This paper extends these insights by situating Satan's rhetorical strategies within Frazer's theory of mythology as meaning-making. In this view, Satan's revolt is a mythopoetic endeavor that recasts disobedience into a narrative of independence and free will. Thereby, Satan demonstrates the power of myth to construct subjective truth.

Material and Methods

This study employees a qualitative methodology grounded in James Frazer's idea of myth as subjective meaning-making in *The Golden Bough*. The primary text under consideration is John Milton's *Paradise Lost,* with particular attention given to Satan's speeches. These speeches are chosen as the central focus because they function as sites where Satan actively reinterprets divine authority and attempts to construct new meanings. This study approaches his discourse as an active process of myth-making which becomes a tool for ideological confrontation against divine will.

The theoretical framework for this analysis is derived from James George Frazer's conception of mythology, as articulated in *The Golden Bough*. Frazer identifies myth as a cultural instrument through which human beings, especially in so-called "primitive" societies, sought to give meaning to "natural phenomena" (Frazer, 1922, p.50) and to their collective experiences. For Frazer, such subjective meaning-making was necessary in a time and place where humans felt powerless in the face of nature. In this, Frazer detects a thread of pre-scientific reasoning that relies on cause-and-effect patterns or "principles of association" (Frazer, 1922, p.49). In this sense, mythology emerges as humanity's earliest attempt to account for disasters, growth and decay, suffering, and change.

Applying this framework to *Paradise Lost*, Satan's speeches can be read as mythopoetic acts. When confronted with divine law as well as the catastrophe of exile from Heaven, Satan employes subjective meaning-making to make sense of his condition and justify his actions. In Frazerian terms, Satan's rhetoric reflects the human impulse to reorganize reality through myth. By applying this framework, this study understands Satan's rhetoric as mythopoesis: the construction of alternative meanings that challenge divine authority. This methodological choice enables the analysis to foreground not only Satan's rebellious motivations but also the ways in which rhetoric is employed for subjective meaning-making.

Close reading serves as the primary analytical technique. Specific attention is given to Satan's reinterpretation of categories such as fate, creation, omnipotence, freedom, and divine justice. This serves to highlight how his speeches attempt to recast subjugation as independence and punishment as heroic resistance. Close reading thus shows how, even as Satan attempts to contest divine categories, he still remains confined within them.

Results and Discussion

Milton's Paradise Lost dramatizes the struggle between divine authority and Satan's rebellion. Central to this drama are Satan's speeches which represent a rhetorical struggle over meaning. This paper argues that Saturn's rhetoric can be understood as an act of myth making. Following Frazer's understanding of myth as a cultural tool to give meaning to "natural phenomena" (Frazer, 1922, p.50) and experience, Satan's rhetoric can be read as an attempt to rationalize his downfall. In the wake of his expulsion from heaven, Satan utilizes the categories of creation, free-will, and liberty to justify his actions. The poem itself validates this reading by observing that Satan operates "with calumnious art/ Of counterfeted truth" (Milton, 2001, V.767-768). This statement signals that the fallen angel's rhetoric thrives on partial truths twisted into myths. Through close attention to Satan's speeches and their reception by other characters, it becomes clear that his myths function as personal justifications as well as attempts to challenge divine authority, manipulate freedom, and reframe defeat as triumph.

The idea of Satan's myth-making is also epitomized in his famous declaration: "The mind is its own place, and in it self / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n: / What matter where, if I be still the same" (I.254-256). Here, Satan is essentially claiming the sovereign power of the mind to give new meaning to external circumstances. He implies that perception can alter reality. Yet, this paper argues that this is not a demonstration of his freedom. Rather, it is the foundation of his myth-making that seeks to obscure the reality of his downfall.

The Myth of Liberty

The most apparent myth Satan fashions is that of liberty. He claims that rebellion has secured freedom from God's dominion, suggesting that casting off divine authority is equivalent to authentic liberty. This vision is encapsulated in his assertion: "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (I.263). By framing servitude to God as intolerable and autonomy in Hell as glorious, Satan inverts the theological order, portraying submission as a vice and rebellion as a virtue. Fraser's theory of myth as a cultural meaning-making tool is particularly enlightening here. Satan's rhetoric exemplifies this process: in the aftermath of his catastrophic fall, he reinterprets rebellion as liberation, transforming defeat into a triumph through myth-making.

Satan's claim, "for inferior who is free?" (VIII.825), exemplifies the foundation of his entire narrative. Here, Satan equates freedom with a refusal of subordination. This suggests that, to him, any form of hierarchy is by definition servitude. He is essentially employing the oppositional terms of inferiority vs superiority to rebrand defiance as emancipation. The myth takes further shape when he assures his followers, "Here at least/ we shall be free" (I.258-259). The adverb "at least" signals concession. Though Hell is a place of torment, it is mythologized as the sole domain where they may exist outside God's rule.

This rebranding of Hell culminates in the famous declaration: "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heaven" (I.263). The statement is paradoxical: reign itself is presented as inherently valuable, regardless of the environment in which it is exercised. Here, loss is inverted into a semblance of gain: authority. Milton underscores the rhetorical effectiveness of this inversion by showing how Satan's followers echo his language. Mammon, for instance, valorizes "hard liberty before the easie yoke/ of servile Pomp" (II.256-257). while Sin credits Satan directly in the following words: "Thou hast atchiev'd our libertie"

(IX.368). Hence, myth does not remain confined to Satan's speeches. It is internalized and reproduced by others, creating a shared narrative.

Close reading reveals the subtle tension beneath this myth and the realities of Hell. Phrases such as "we shall be free" or "better to reign" show that they rely less on the actual conditions of Hell than on the imagined symbolic value of rebellion. In the Frazerian sense, this is precisely how myth operates: it provides coherence to chaos, meaning to catastrophe. By situating their suffering within a narrative of liberty, Satan and his followers reinterpret the harsh realities of their punishment as a chosen condition of independence. The myth of liberty thus becomes the most obvious and seductive of Satan's fabrications.

Free Will, Reason and Divine Authority

Closely tied to the myth of liberty is Satan's distortion of the doctrine of free will. While he insists that his rebellion has granted him freedom, Milton makes clear that God had already endowed angels and humankind with the liberty to obey or disobey. Satan thus creates a false dichotomy between divine rule and personal autonomy. In Book III, while speaking to the Son, God affirms the central principle of divine authority: "Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell. / Not free, what proof could they have giv'n sincere / Of true allegiance, constant faith or love" (III.102-104). Here Milton stresses that obedience has meaning precisely because it is chosen, not coerced. He provides nuance to the idea of obedience by highlighting that Being has the free will to choose.

The notion of chosen obedience is echoed by other beings. Raphael, when speaking to Adam asserts, "freely we serve, / Because we freely love, as in our will/ To love or not; in this we stand or fall" (V.538-540). This statement signifies that, for the angel, obedience stems for willful love for God rather than from compulsion. This idea presents obedience as an act of freedom rather than servitude. Similarly, in Book VIII, Adam proclaims to Eve, "within himself the danger lies, yet lies within his power:/ Against his will he can receave no harme./ But God left free the Will, for what obeyes/ Reason, is free" (VIII.348-353). Here, Adam stresses that freedom is grounded in both Reason and Will. Rationality aligns with divine law, and free will grants the weight of choice. This ensures that obedience is voluntary and meaningful. Both divine and human testimony, then, establish that God's justice comes with the gift of reason and free will.

Satan, however, suppresses this nuance in favor of myth. His speeches repeatedly portray God as a tyrant who withholds liberty, while positioning himself as the champion of liberty. He insists that rebellion was an act of necessary self-assertion against God's tyranny. By denying that free will already existed under God, Satan reconfigures disobedience as the sole path to freedom. This myth obscures the justice inherent within God's authority and also justifies Satan's defiance. In doing so, Satan engages in the very "calumnious art of counterfeted truth" (V.767-768) the narrator warns of. This distortion exposes the cause-and-effect logic that Frazer identifies in myth-making. Rebellion is cast as the necessary "cause" of freedom, resulting in expulsion from Heaven.

Denial of Divine Creation and Reconfiguration of Fate

Another central myth that Satan constructs is his denial of God's role as Creator. Building on Satan's reconfiguration of liberty and the distortion of free will, his denial of God's creative authority emerges as another radical mythic maneuver. In Milton's cosmos, creation is a major ground of authority. Creation's obedience flows naturally from the recognition that all life is contingent upon God's making. Adam makes this notion explicit when explaining obedience of God's restrictions to Eve: "O Woman, best are all things as

the will / Of God ordained them, his creating hand / Nothing imperfect or deficient left" (VIII.343-346). Here, Adam acknowledges that Being is derived from God. Moreover, to accept the perfection of creation is to accept the legitimacy of God's authority. Herein lies the reason Adam invokes Reason as a precept to divine authority. Being created by a Creator grounds their responsibility to live within the order ordained by their Maker.

Satan, however, deliberately denies this premise. He seeks to erase this dependency by advancing a counter-myth of self-generation. In his rallying cry to the rebel angels, he insists, "That we were form'd then say'st thou? and the work / Of secondarie hands, by task transferr'd / From Father to his Son? strange point and new!" (V.850-852). Here, he completely undermines the Creator-creature relation between God and himself. By rejecting the idea that angels were created by God, Satan implies that they are eternal, thereby undermining the legitimacy of God's authority.

Satan goes on to intensify his denial of God's creation by boasting, "We know no time when we were not as now; / Know none before us, self-begot, self-rais'd / By our own quick'ning power, when fatal course / Had circl'd his full Orbe, the birth mature / Of this our native Heav'n, Ethereal Sons. / Our puissance is our own, our own right hand" (V.856-861). In these lines, Satan advances two distinct claims. First, he insists that the angels created themselves as "self-begot, self-rais'd" beings. In doing so, he implies that they owe allegiance to no one beyond themselves. Authority, in this reconfiguration, is internal, arising from their own "right hand" and "quick'ning power". The myth of self-origination therefore functions as the cornerstone of Satan's rebellion.

In addition to claiming self-birth,, Satan subtly redefines the role of fate itself. He suggests that their existence emerged when the "fatal course / Had circl'd his full Orbe" (V.858-559), implying that the fact of their birth was determined not by divine will but by an impersonal, inevitable, fated necessity. In this way, Satan displaces God with Fate as the true ordering principle of the cosmos. By doing so, he denies Divine creation as well as providence. What is left is not a moral universe governed by a just Creator but a world ruled by mechanical inevitability. This reconfiguration of fate serves Satan's mythic project by stripping obedience of its moral and rational grounding: if existence itself is fated, then obedience to God is not the moral and reasonable condition of existence it is to other Angels and to Adam.

This counter-myth gains further force when echoed by Satan's daughter, Sin, when she hails him as "thir Author and prime Architect" (IX.356). Through this proclamation, Sin transfers to him the creative role belonging to God, reiterating the myth that Satan has sought to construct. Yet, these words are infused with irony. Sin being born from Satan is a parody of the divine act of creation. Her calling him "Author" exposes the grotesque inversion brought about by Satan's usurpation of the role of the creator. Instead of a harmonious and perfect order, he generates deformity and disorder in the form of Sin. Thus, Sin's existence does not validate Satan's myth. Instead, it highlights the destructive consequences of denying God's authority.

The Reality of the Fall vs. Satan's Myth

Despite the elaborate myths Satan constructs regarding liberty, free will, and self-origination, the poem repeatedly exposes the gap between his rhetoric and reality. The narrator underscores this from the beginning, warning that Satan operates "with calumnious art of counterfeted truth" (V.767-768). As the tale progresses, the supposed liberty of rebellion collapses into tangible torment.

Milton contrasts Satan's myth-making with the stark reality of his rebellion and its consequences. The narrator sets the tone from the outset by depicting Satan's defeat in unambiguous terms: "Him the Almighty Power / Hurld headlong flaming from th' Ethereal Skie / With hideous ruine and combustion down / To bottomless perdition, there to dwell / In Adamantine Chains and penal Fire, / Who durst defie th' Omnipotent to Arms" (I.44-49). The epic voice strips away Satan's rhetoric of liberty. Instead, it shows a spectacle of divine justice. Satan's rebellion clearly ends in catastrophic ruin, consigning him to chains and fire.

Although Satan seeks to construct alternative myths, he himself experiences this reality in ways that belie his outward bravado. The contradiction between Satan's reality and his rhetoric is made evident in his own assertions. In a moment of bitterness, he admits, "Which way I flie is Hell; myself am Hell" (V.75). This recognition collapses the distinction between external punishment and internal condition. Hell has become his very being. Here, the myth of freedom is shattered by the reality that rebellion has only brought about damnation. Hell is no longer a separate place but a state of being inseparable from Satan's identity. There is a stark contrast between his earlier boast, "Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (I.263) **,** and this confession. This demonstrates the collapse of his mythic narrative.

Later, the portrayal of Satan's torment deepens when he confesses, "Ay me, they little know / How dearly I abide that boast so vaine, / Under what torments inwardly I groane; / While they adore me on the Throne of Hell, / With Diadem and Scepter high advanc'd / The lower still I fall, onely Supream / In miserie" (IV.86-92). Here, Satan reveals the hollowness of his own myth. His followers see him enthroned in apparent majesty, but he knows this image is sustained only through deceit. Inwardly, he is consumed by misery which would reduce his authority to a mockery of true sovereignty.

This internal conflict is thrown into sharper relief when set against his earlier declaration that "The mind is its own place, and in it self / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n. / What matter where, if I be still the same" (1.254-256). At the time, this claim exemplified the power of myth-making. Satan asserts the sovereignty of will over circumstance, suggesting that perception alone can transform reality. Yet, as his later confessions reveal, this assertion proves unsustainable. The mind that once promised mastery instead becomes his prison. Milton thus reveals the disintegration of Satan's myth over the course of the poem. While he begins with confident rhetoric, it eventually dissolves into contradiction, self-deception, and despair.

Conclusion

This paper argues that Milton's *Paradise Lost* presents Satan as a myth-maker. The argument is based on Frazer 's conception of myth as an act of subjective meaning-making that attempts to explain the world. Read through this lens, Satan's rhetoric appears as an attempt to rewrite the meaning of his subjection to divine will. He invents myths of free will, self-origination, and autonomous sovereignty to obscure the reality of his fall and sustain both his own pride and his followers' loyalty. Yet, as the analysis of four thematic areas has shown, these myths can be dismantled to show Satan's actual motivation: jealousy, desperation chaos and confusion.

First, the paper exposes how Satan redefines liberty by casting disobedience as freedom. Other beings, however, emphasize that true freedom is inherently bound to God through reason and will. Second, the theme of chosen obedience highlights the contrast between angelic and human idea of free servitude on the one hand, and Satan's distorted

myth of servitude on the other hand. Third, the question of creation reveals the deepest tension. For Adam, divine creation justifies his obligation to the Creator, while Satan denies this origin itself by claiming self-generation. This myth of creation is parodied in Sin. Finally, the actual reality of Satan's downfall dismantles his myth-making. Despite his claims that "mind is it's own olace,", he admits that "myself am Hell" This represents his supposed reign collapsing into internal torment and despair.

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