

'Perswasive Rhetoric'

and the Harlot's Varnished Cheek:

Eloquence Good and Evil in Milton's Poetry

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The most terrible disaster in Christian history, the Fall, was engineered by evil eloquence, an instrument used maliciously by an accomplished rhetorician. We see Satan at his *inventio* soon after he first eavesdrops on Adam and Eve:

And do they only stand
By ignorance, is that their happy state,
The proof of their obedience and their faith?
Of fair foundation laid whereon to build
Their ruin! Hence I will excite their minds
With more desire to know, and to reject
Envious commands, invented with design
To keep them low whom knowledge might exalt
Equal with gods; aspiring to be such
They taste and die... (*PL* 4:518-27)¹

He prepares for his seductive speech with a trained rhetorician's concern for gesture, simulating indignation at the wrong done to Adam and Eve, "while each part, / Motion, each act won audience ere the tongue" (9:665-78). His oration is a masterpiece of lies, fraudulent suggestiveness and sophistry, as Doug Wurtele has so well

shown.² Eve tastes and dies. Returning to his companions in Hell, Satan presents himself for acclaim as a master rhetorician, working with style and deadly economy.

It has been argued that Milton grew deeply suspicious of the art of rhetoric itself in his mature years, condemning it and rejecting it as sly, underhand, and evil. John Major claimed the poet developed "an abiding distrust of the art which professes to teach eloquence."³ He argued that a "distinction between true and false eloquence is drawn early, largely on moral and religious grounds. In time, rhetoric itself comes under suspicion" (685). The poet was not content to avoid the evils of rhetoric but was at pains to construct "characters, situations, and speeches which...personify, as it were—Milton's antipathy to rhetoric: his habitual, almost instinctive practice, in the later works at least, of identifying moral evil by a verbal dress that, courtesan-like, dazzles the innocent with its false glitter and voluptuousness" (705). Berek also concluded that in the great epics, "the superiority of plain speech and gesture to poetic rhetoric is affirmed." It is Milton's "fit reader" who will be instructed to attend to the "simple unambiguous voice of truth instead of the superficially attractive but deceiving voice of fine rhetoric."⁴ For Broadbent, "as a poet he came to trust less and less in art."⁶ His disillusionment is dramatised ironically, we are told, when Satan praises "resistless eloquence" (*PR* 4:268) and Christ shows contempt for the seductive evil of rhetoric: "swelling epithets thick-laid / As varnish on a harlot's cheek" (*PR* 4:343-44). It is Satan, then, whose natural mode is rhetoric: Satan and Beelzebub and Belial and fallen Eve.

Thus they relate, erring. I hope to show that Milton does not even speak about rhetoric as negatively, let alone contemptuously, as suggested above. His later practice shows a surprising continuity with that implied in his early attack on truanting and debauched Clerks: "How few among them that know how to write, or speak in a pure stile, much lesse to distinguish the idea's, and various kinds of stile," (*CP* 1:934). The models he prefers are Cicero and "those Attick maisters of morall wisdom and eloquence." Milton had once argued that important laws should be given introductions that would move the reader to prefer the good life: "which being utter'd with those native colours and graces of speech, as true eloquence the daughter of vertue can best bestow upon her mothers praises, would so incite, and in a manner, charme the multitude into the love of that which is really good as to imbrace it ever after, not of custome and awe, which most men do, but of choice and purpose,

with true and constant delight" (*CP* 1: 746). His emphasis changes, his understanding of what he means changes, but it is on that important element of continuity that this essay will concentrate.⁶

My point is simply that when Milton speaks of or dramatises "evil eloquence," it is not eloquence that is evil. It is that eloquence which is perverted or misused for the purposes of evil. Major opposes false Satan as rhetoric to Christ as Truth (701): "persuasive rhetoric / That sleeked his tongue, and won so much on Eve, / So little here, nay lost" (*PR* 4:4-6). What Milton really does oppose is the user of lies and sophistry to the truth; the opposition is between evil and good, and evil is free to use rhetoric for its own purposes. Misuse of an instrument does not mean the instrument itself is perverted.

Major goes on to say that the "bluntest attack on classical rhetoric" is made by Christ in rejecting Satan's temptation (701). But let us look at this moment:

Remove their swelling epithets thick-laid
 As varnish on a harlot's cheek, the rest,
 Thin-sown with aught of profit or delight,
 Will far be found unworthy to compare
 With Sion's songs, to all true tastes excelling,
 Where God is praised aright, and godlike men,
 The Holiest of Holies, and his saints;
 Such are from God inspired, not such from thee;
 Unless where moral virtue is expressed
 By light of nature not in all quite lost.
 Their orators thou then extoll'st, as those
 The top of eloquence, statist indeed,
 And lovers of their country, as may seem;
 But herein to our prophets far beneath,
 As men divinely taught, and better teaching
 The solid rules of civil government
 In their majestic unaffected style
 Than all the oratory of Greece and Rome. (4:343-60)

Professor Sloane has reminded us of the importance of "reading rhetorically," especially when considering the work of a consummate rhetorician like Milton.⁷ The

reader is as responsible while reading for the active exercise of *inventio* as the writer is in the process of composition, and by effort “finding the thought already present in the materials....rhetorical reading presupposes a certain attitude toward language: language reflects a speaker's designs as he confronts an audience, who he assumes are not possessed of *tabulae rasae* but of minds filled with associations, conventions, expectations, which he must direct, control, or take advantage of” (397-98). In this passage, Satan has just praised the “resistless eloquence” of ancient orators (269); his sly, blasphemous citation “Of fate, and chance, and change in human life” (265) would itself deserve passionate denunciation, implicitly denying as it does omnipotence and divine control of the universe; and it gets it (315-21). To call eloquence “resistless” is to allude to the naively optimistic faith of the early Tudor humanists in not only the power of rhetoric but also its supposedly talismanic goodness.⁸ Worse even than that, this is to deify a mere instrument; to give an idolatrous power to that instrument and affirm that it can overpower even the free will, which for God is such an important gift to humanity. It is not relevant here to examine Christ's defence of Hebraeo-Christian moral education over classical humanism. More to the point, as Christ denounces Satan's error and heresy, he does not denounce rhetoric itself. He himself finds pleasure in native hymn and song because here is the finest eloquence, in “our psalms with artful terms inscribed.” Indeed, Grecian eloquence may, in fact, be derived from the Hebrew and then “ill-imitated.” It is not rhetoric that is the varnish on a harlot's cheek: it is the corruption of the arts of speech that is the prostitution of discourse. He is speaking specifically of the celebration of the “vices of their deities” and their “gods ridiculous.” It is not style or an interest in style that he condemns. He goes on to praise a model of style that is pure, unaffected, majestic, “divinely taught.” We do not need to read Christ as a *dramatis persona* opposing the historical hellenisation of Israel to see that he respects the arts of speech and song, simply rejecting excess, over-decoration, idolatry, and improper artifice, preferring his own conception of what is fitting, apt, and decorous.

Here, too, there is continuity. Milton recognised early that rhetoric could be evil or shallow. He knew that “diligence, the parts, the language of a man” could well be used idly “if a vain subject were to be adorn'd or beautif'd” (*CP* 1:804-5). Our youth and gentry could surely be corrupted by “the corruption and bane which they suck in dayly from the writings and interludes of libidinous and ignorant Poetasters, who hav[e] scars ever heard of that which is the main consistence of a true poem”;

and so they “lap up vitious principles in sweet pills” (1:818). Vile writing is opposed to Truth. Truth does not purge or exclude rhetoric. It too can use rhetoric, rightly, as we shall see.

The late Renaissance lost that early unrealistic optimism about the incorruptible goodness of eloquence. Marc Fumaroli shows how this developed in France through an opposition between the practice of courtier and of judge: “[t]he way of pleasantness, ignorance, and dissimulation is obviously the courtly art of flattery; the way of rough strength, encyclopedic knowledge, and sincerity is the learned eloquence of the wearers of the Robe” (264). Naudé admires the power of eloquence to promote belief in the most fabulous religion or incite to the most iniquitous wars (273). Du Perron warns the King not to mistake reality because of charmed words (256). Milton knew as well as Montaigne that words can be vain and serve perverted ends but it is in the motivation of the user that the evil is located. When Gabriel confronts Satan, the rhetoric of truth and goodness pierces through the lies and obfuscations of the rhetoric of evil:

To say and straight unsay, pretending first
 Wise to fly pain, professing next the spy,
 Argues no leader but a liar traced,
 Satan, and couldst thou faithful add? O name,
 A sacred name of faithfulness profaned!
 Faithful to whom? To thy rebellious crew?
 Army of fiends, fit body to fit head... (*PL* 4:947-53)

Complex patterns of iteration underlie the meanings and emotions of Gabriel: polyp-ton in “say”/“unsay” and “faithful”/“faithfulness,” alliteration reinforcing parallelism in “pretending”/“professing” and antithesis in “leader”/“liar,” oxymoron of “faithfulness profaned,” rhetorical questions and apostrophatio of “O name,” the broken phrases, all powerfully communicate shock, contempt and revulsion. “Satan,” named for the first time in the poem,¹⁰ is arrived at through syntactically contorted clauses that adapt the figure of climax to mime the laborious process of unravelling a tissue of lies to uncover the truth. The rhetoric of truth strips falsehood naked.

It is true that rhetoric may be the cloak for evil. So Belial "with words clothed in reason's garb / Counsell'd ignoble ease" (2:226-27). Belial appears graceful, humane, and fair; he seems,

For dignity composed and high exploit:
 But all was false and hollow; though his tongue
 Dropt manna and could make the worse appear
 The better reason, to perplex and dash
 Maturest counsels: for his thoughts were low;
 To vice industrious, but to nobler deeds
 Timorous and slothful, yet he pleased the ear,
 And with persuasive accent thus began. (2: 111-18)

Major sees Belial as "the very incarnation of Milton's theory that wickedness seeks to disguise itself and to win others to wickedness by means of rhetoric" (699). True, but his conclusion that rhetoric is itself intrinsically evil is not. Those who would consign rhetoric in Milton's later work solely to the forces of evil would make his moral universe simplistic. If only it were so easy to recognise evil! If only there were so convenient a formula or key! Rhetoric is not denied to those who would misuse it, in discourse sweet, "For eloquence the soul, song charms the sense" (2:556); what matters is recognising when it is "false philosophy" that lies behind it (2:565). Satan's "high words, that bore / Semblance of worth, not substance" (1:528-29) can inspire diabolic courage and strength. It is the duty of the morally alert conscience to hold fast to substance. When Eve comes to tempt Adam, her first words are a lie. As he sins, she praises him with high words: "O glorious trial of exceeding love, / Illustrious evidence, example high" (9:961-62); the apostrophatio of her flattery is fulsome and it covers a series of lies and blasphemous misrepresentations. When the master rhetorician prepares to destroy Eve, his eloquence is brilliant. As Doug Wurtele says, pointing out his equivocations and false logic, "the supreme example of Satan's sophistry comes in the peroration clinching the seemingly wise argument presented to Eve....the skilful concealment of fallacious logic under insidious rhetoric demonstrates as nothing else the fascinated contempt in which Milton held the evils of the sophist's craft."¹¹

It is misleading, then, to set "the simple unambiguous voice of truth" up against the "superficially attractive but deceiving voice of fine rhetoric," as Berek does (246).

Truth speaks the finest rhetoric. The penitence of Adam and Eve is a vital moment in the exemplary process of regeneration. Milton uses a formal rhetorical figure to communicate it:

What better can we do, than to the place
 Repairing where he judged us, prostrate fall
 Before him reverent, and there confess
 Humbly our faults, and pardon beg, with tears
 Watering the ground, and with our sighs the air
 Frequenting, sent from hearts contrite, in sign
 Of sorrow unfeigned, and humiliation meek.
 Undoubtedly he will relent and turn
 From his displeasure; in whose look serene,
 When angry most he seemed and most severe,
 What else but favour, grace, and mercy shone?
 So spake our father penitent, nor Eve
 Felt less remorse: they forthwith to the place
 Repairing where he judged them prostrate fell
 Before him reverent, and both confessed
 Humbly their faults, and pardon begged, with tears
 Watering the ground, and with their sighs the air
 Frequenting, sent from hearts contrite, in sign
 Of sorrow unfeigned, and humiliation meek. (*PL* 10:1086-1104)

The repeated use of anaphora, clausal balance, and climactic progression in the prayer makes it rhetoric, and it is pure and truthful. The Son of God is moved and intercedes successfully with the Father for mercy on them. Milton shapes the narrative into an extended iterative figure, which intensifies the solemnity of the moment, in all its redemptive importance. The iteration emphasises the importance of the stages in the process of regeneration and also creates a dramatic mood that is moving and poignant. Milton earlier uses this figure exquisitely to suggest Eve's love for Adam in her evening hymn, whose sweet, solemn, psalmic beauty comes from the rhetoric of repetition (4:641-56). Behind this rhetoric, there are no lies, no cheating manipulation, no sly omissions. The perfect rhetorician in the poem is not Satan but God. Smith shows how "the Father's argument dictates his use of balanced emphasis" and demonstrates that the greatest frequency of iterative figures is in the

dialogue in heaven,¹² a far higher incidence than in the council in hell. Also, he noticed a higher frequency of schemes used by God the Father and also the Son in dialogue than by Satan (6). Raphael uses iterative figures more frequently than almost any one else in the poem (7).

Not only are rhetorical schemes a characteristic and normal feature of Milton's poetic language, they are a functional and expressive organising feature of that language, clarifying statement, giving emphasis, organising syntax, and suggesting character, mood, and state of mind. They are not used for self-display, supposed euphony or decoration as they often were by most Tudor poets. As Smith says: "[i]nstead of decorating his verse or miming the Logos or embellishing ritual or seducing by sounds, Milton employs iterative rhetoric as a means to an emphatic and lucid style" (8). He shows how climax "lends impetus to the verse" (12), symproce serves "the difficult task of making Adam's decision both fully informed and plausible" (17), and that the schemes are functional, used to "accomplish specific grammatical and rhetorical purposes and set forth logical and other recurring relationships"(18).

If space permitted, it would be interesting to examine more of the delicate poetic effects Milton gains from rhetoric: for example, the arrogant egocentricity of Satan's anaphora: "I therefore, I alone first undertook / To wing the desolate abyss" (4:935-6); the stress on the other-in-self in this anaphora: "Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self, / Thy wish exactly to thy heart's desire" (8:450-51); the emphatic reversal in this anaphora: "All seemed well pleased, all seemed, but were not all" (5:617); rhetoric for various kinds of emphasis: epanalepsis for profound misery: "on the ground, / Outstretched he lay, on the cold ground, and oft / Cursed his creation" (10:850-52); or for absolute companionship: "Sole Eve, associate sole" (9:227); or to suggest power: "Held by thy voice, thy potent voice he hears" (7:100).

This is a magnificently rhetorical poem. Rhetoric conveys its finest moments, like Adam's unselfish prayer to bear all the punishment "me, me only" (10:832), an epizeuxis echoed in the unselfishness replicated by Eve (10:936) as they both enact the compassion of the Son of God, echoing the plocce Milton employs to stress that saving self-sacrifice (3:236ff., 11:30ff.) I will end with another example of plocce mixed with polyptoton at the culminating moment of *Paradise Regained*:

To whom thus Jesus: Also it is written,
 Tempt not the Lord thy God, he said and stood.
 But Satan smitten with amazement fell
 As when Earth's son Antaeus (to compare
 Small things with greatest) in Irassa strove
 With Jove's Alcides, and oft foiled still rose,
 Receiving from his mother Earth new strength,
 Fresh from his fall, and fiercer grapple joined,
 Throttled at length in the air, expired and fell;
 So after many a foil the tempter proud,
 Renewing fresh assaults, amidst his pride
 Fell whence he stood to see his victor fall.
 And as that Theban monster that proposed
 Her riddle, and him, who solved it not, devoured;
 That once found out and solved, for grief and spite
 Cast herself headlong from the Ismenian steep,
 So struck with dread and anguish fell the Fiend,
 And to his crew, that sat consulting, brought
 Joyless triumphals of his hoped success,
 Ruin, and desperation, and dismay,
 Who durst so proudly tempt the Son of God.
 So Satan fell... (4:560-581)

The effect of Satan's repeated "fell," "fall," fell" is vertiginous and giddy, bringing to mind an endless abyss. It overlaps with the images of the other falling monsters, struggling to rise but destroyed by a superior force, or embracing suicidal despair. Another ploc on "foil" picks up the echo, and the polyptoton on "proud," "pride" sets up a contrapuntal pattern that only ends later with "the tempter proud" (595).

Irene Samuel concludes: Milton "had no quarrel with eloquence or with the rhetoric that produces it: a true rhetoric gives its attention to substance, not to formulas for a factitious eloquence."¹³ Rhetoric can be seductive when it promotes an evil purpose, as Doug Wurtele's essays have so effectively shown. It is like the beauty of Spenser's Duessa, covering what is repellent and loathsome—that is the varnish on the harlot's cheek. Rhetoric itself is not intrinsically evil. Indeed, for Milton it is "God who is the author both of purity and eloquence" (*CP* 1:902).

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Notes

1 Abbreviations: *PL* = *Paradise Lost*; *PR* = *Paradise Regained*; *SA* = *Samson Agonistes*; *Poems* = poetry cited from *Poems of John Milton*, eds John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longmans, 1968); *CP* = *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, eds Don M. Wolfe *et al* 8 vols (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1953-82).

2 Douglas Wurtele, "'Perswasive Rhetoric': The Techniques of Milton's Archetypal Sophist," *English Studies in Canada* 3 (1977), pp. 18-33, especially pp. 26-30. See also his "Milton, Satan and the Sophists," *Renaissance and Reformation* n.s. 3 (1979), pp. 189-200.

3 John M. Major, "Milton's View of Rhetoric," *Studies in Philology* 64 (1967), pp. 685-711, p. 685.

4 Peter Berek, "'Plain' and 'Ornate' Styles and the Structure of *Paradise Lost*," *PMLA* 85 (1970), pp. 237-46, p. 246.

5 John B. Broadbent, "Milton's Rhetoric," *Modern Philology* 56 (1958-59), pp. 224-42, p. 234. See also his *Some Graver Subject: An Essay on Paradise Lost* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967).

6 I have discussed some of these matters elsewhere in "'That Divine Spirit of Utterance that Moves Them': John Milton and the Power of Rhetoric," in *Rhetorica Movet. Studies in Renaissance and Modern Rhetoric*, eds Peter L. Oesterreich and Thomas O. Sloane (Brill:Berlin, forthcoming).

7 Thomas O. Sloane, "Reading Milton Rhetorically," in *Renaissance Eloquence: Studies in the Theory and Practice of Renaissance Rhetoric*, ed. James J. Murphy (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983), pp. 394-410.

8 See Brian Vickers, "'The Power of Persuasion': Images of the Orator, Elyot to Shakespeare," in *Renaissance Eloquence*, pp. 411-35, especially pp. 412-22.

9 Marc Fumaroli, "Rhetoric, Politics, and Society: From Italian Ciceronianism to French Classicism," in Murphy, *Renaissance Eloquence*, pp. 253-73, especially pp. 255-66.

10 See John Leonard, *Naming in Paradise: Milton and the Language of Adam and Eve* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 126.

11 Wurtele, "Rhetoric," p. 26.

12 George William Smith Jr. "Iterative Rhetoric in *Paradise Lost*," *Modern Philology* 74 (1976-77), pp. 1-19, p. 10. See also John Porter Houston, *The Rhetoric of Poetry in the Renaissance and Seventeenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1983), chapter 9, for a helpful discussion of rhetoric in Milton's poetry.

13 Irene Samuel, "Milton on Style," *Cornell Library Journal* 9 (1969), pp. 39-58, p. 56. See also her study "Milton on the Province of Rhetoric," *Milton Studies* 10 (1977), pp. 177-93.