

The Devil isn't Always an Ass: Milton's Revival of Satan in the Seventeenth Century

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Over the course of history, humanity has examined, interpreted, and framed the world using a number of binary divisions: good and bad, male and female, liberal and conservative. With religion being such a core component of people's lives, perhaps the most pertinent of these divisions has been that of God and the Devil: two supreme biblical forces who have long informed the religious beliefs of the masses. In England, during the tumultuous period that was the Renaissance, many authors sought to capitalize on the notoriety of Satan, and as such, shared their own depictions of the Devil and explanations of the chaos that he was thought to control. However, by the seventeenth century, demonological literature had grown stale in the eyes of the public, owing primarily to the standardization of the way in which the Devil was written and portrayed. In this literary landscape, Ben Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* was largely unsuccessful, as it framed Satan and other demonic figures in a one-dimensional way that was typical for the time, while John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which portrayed the archfiend to be a nuanced and complex character, garnered much acclaim and success, cementing itself as one of the greatest epic poems of all time.

While many authors in the Renaissance took inspiration from the demonic in their literature, the tradition of writing about the Devil extends back to the Hebrew Bible and the books of the Old Testament. In his article "The Doctrine of Satan: I. In the Old Testament," William Caldwell explains that "early Christian writers devoted pages to their discussion of the work of Satan and devils" (29). For instance, theology has often found similarities between the serpent from the Fall in Genesis and the Devil himself, and therefore, they have been recognized as one and the same. Although "Satan as a proper noun occurs in not more than three passages in the Old Testament," "[t]he word Satan is often used... as a verb, meaning to be or to act as an adversary" (Caldwell 32). As such, from the early biblical origins of literature, Satan has been established as an evil, morally corrupt tempter and an adversary to God, and this perception of the evil fiend has remained largely unchallenged throughout the years.

With these negative conceptions of the Devil invading the public's faculty of perception, people's world views were overcome by the demonic, and a stark dichotomy emerged in society. As Stuart Clark explains in his article "Inversion, Misrule, and the Meaning of Witchcraft," during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, "a predisposition to see things in terms of binary opposition was a distinctive aspect of a prevailing mentality" for many people (105). Many beliefs surrounding Satan and his subordinates evolved from this binary as well as from ideas of misrule and inversion. "Misrule necessarily presupposes the rule that it parodies," so in setting the Devil in direct opposition to God, not only were all things demonic condemned, but also, God's power and authority was solidified in the eyes of the masses (Clark 103). This binary view ushered in a division where the Devil, who was the very opposite of God in every way, and all those in league with him, were seen to be the peak of evil and came to be scapegoats for all that was wrong with the world.

Authors were quick to capitalize on the notorious villain that was the Devil during the Renaissance. By the early seventeenth century, demonological literature had become a stale genre in the eyes of many readers. According to Lyndal Roper in her article "Witchcraft and the Western Imagination," the "flowering of writings about the Devil in the 1570s and beyond" stimulated the minds of the masses for quite some time, but after a while, these stories became



far too predictable to garner any major interest from audiences (140). Furthermore, as Satan and the demonic were continually presented in a standardized and one-dimensional way, there were also a number of social factors that influenced the popularity of these works as well as the public's belief of the supernatural. As Nachman Ben-Yehuda states in his article "The European Witch Craze of the 14th to 17th Centuries: A Sociologist's Perspective," "once stability was achieved and religious pluralism accepted" following the Thirty Years' War, "there was a demarcation among science, magic, and religion," which pushed Satan and the demonic out of the societal spotlight (23). What had once been a thriving genre that stimulated the minds of the masses, was now almost dead and buried; demonology and the Devil had fallen out of fashion.

Although the influence that Satan and the supernatural had on society had severely diminished during the seventeenth century, there were some authors who continued to write about this subject matter. Ben Jonson, claimed by Michael Cordner in *Ben Jonson: The Devil is an Ass and Other Plays*, to be "the greatest dramatic satirist of the English Renaissance," is one such author who continued to write about the demonic in his drama, *The Devil is an Ass* (i). First printed in 1631, *The Devil is an Ass* takes the form of a city comedy, which, as a genre, features stock characters that experience no growth throughout, and satirizes the day to day lives and experiences of the urban middle-class (Cordner). However, Jonson "adapts the city comedy format through the introduction of elements of the traditional devil play, or interlude, a genre which [had been] especially popular" in years prior (Cordner xxii). By combining these two types of dramas, Jonson, whether intentionally or not, played into the stereotypical representations of Satan and the demonic that were common during this time.

Jonson's *The Devil is an Ass* depicts the demonic in two distinct ways, but the devils in the work are both presented as stock characters with no depth or growth throughout the entirety of the play, as per the conventions of the city comedy genre. Satan's role in the drama is to instruct and coordinate the evil happenings that take place on Earth: "To do the commonwealth of Hell some service... / you go to earth and visit men a day" (Jonson 1.1.132-34). As such, for Jonson, Satan, a supposedly powerful and villainous character, becomes nothing more than an overseer; never interacting directly with humanity, and instead instructing his subordinates to enact his malicious biddings. Furthermore, Satan plays a minor role in the drama, only appearing in the opening scene and later in Act 5, Scene 6, to scorn a lesser devil for his ineptitude: "Bane o' your itch / And scratching for employment! I'll ha' brimstone / to allay it sure, and fire to singe your nails off" (Jonson 5.6.66-68). Not only is Satan presented as being inherently evil with no real motives behind his actions, but also, the managerial-type role that he plays, downplays the power that he is said to have.

The Devil is an Ass features another devil, named Pug, and while he provides some comedic relief, he, like Satan, is also written to be a one-dimensional character. At the beginning of the play, Pug is portrayed to be too foolish and incompetent to achieve anything of fiendish significance on Earth: "Stay i' your place, know your own strengths, and put not / Beyond the sphere of your activity. / You are too dull a devil to be trusted" (Jonson 1.1.24-26). After much convincing, Satan allows Pug to visit London, where he is forced into the service of a gullible squire, Fitzdottrel, and bears witness to a series of complex and interlocking scams. However, by the end of the play, in an inversion of the conventions of the traditional devil play, Pug is carried away by the vice, Iniquity, which solidifies his uselessness in the mind of the reader: "The devil was wont to carry away the evil; / But now the evil out-carries the devil" (Jonson 5.6.76-77). Although the roles that Pug and Satan have in the play are unique in respect of each other, they,

like many other devils of the Renaissance, were for the most part, stock characters who showed no growth or complexity.

Along with the lack of interest in the supernatural that permeated society during the time that *The Devil is an Ass* was written, Jonson's stereotypically simplistic portrayal of devil figures was a great hindrance to the success of his drama. As Brian Woolland states in his article written for *The Modern Language Review*, *The Devil is an Ass* "has [never] had a professional revival since its first performance" and has "been similarly neglected by publishers" ever since (982). While Jonson's satire set him apart from his contemporaries, his treatment of the demonic unfortunately did not; his ideas regarding Satan and lesser devils were nothing out of the ordinary and did very little to entice his audiences. In his article, "Contemporary Contexts of Jonson's 'The Devil is an Ass,'" Robert C. Evans explains that despite the unappealing representation of Satan and lesser devils, the play "has hardly been considered a total failure," as the other subplots that are present in the work have accrued some interest. However, it could be argued that Jonson's tired and monotonous depictions of the demonic are one reason why the drama has failed to receive any real critical acclaim over time.

While it was common for authors, like Jonson, to play into longstanding, one-dimensional beliefs regarding the Devil during the seventeenth century, there were others who chose to go against these notions in their literary works. John Milton is one such author who provided an alternate perspective on Satan, and in doing so, according to Gordon Teskey in his book, *Paradise Lost: A Norton Critical Edition*, he positioned himself to be "one of the very greatest poets of the modern world" (xxxix). Published in 1667 and written in blank verse, Milton's *Paradise Lost* drew much inspiration from the story of the Fall in Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament. With this biblical lens, Milton aimed to define evil, which "is embodied in one of the grandest characters in English literature: Milton's rebel angel, his seductive antagonist, Satan" (Teskey xxvii). Milton's portrayal of Satan was so starkly different from other seventeenth-century depictions of the archfiend, that he was able to revive the public's interest in the supernatural, solidifying *Paradise Lost* as one of the greatest epic poems in the history of the English language (Smith).

Unlike the stereotypically simplistic representations of the Devil that were prevalent in the literature of Milton's time, *Paradise Lost* depicts Satan as a nuanced and complex character. The epic poem begins, after Satan's failed attempt to overthrow Heaven, with God casting him into the fiery pits of Hell: "his pride / Had cast him out from Heav'n with all his host / Of rebel angels" (Milton 1.36-38). As the archfiend and his horrid crew sat in the bottomless perdition that was Hell, they grew spiteful and vindictive of God and began to plot against Him. In addressing his peer, Beelzebub, Satan explains their new impetus in life: "To do aught good will never be our task / But ever to do ill our sole delight / As being the contrary to His high will / Whom we resist" (Milton 1.59-62). It is here, at perhaps the Devil's lowest point, that Milton first explores the complexity of the archfiend and gives readers what many authors have not once bothered to explain: Satan's motive.

In the pursuit of revenge, Satan, and the other fallen angels, deviously plotted to conquer and corrupt God's creations, Earth and humanity, and it is in Satan's undertaking of this plan that Milton further delves into the nuance of the Devil. As he sits atop the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, Satan first spies Adam and Eve, and while admiring their ethereal beauty, he has a moment of pity for the pair: "Thank him who puts me, loath to this revenge, / On you who wrong me not for Him who wronged" (Milton 4.386-87). Satan realizes that his grievances are with God, not these two humans, and as such, he tries to rationalize the pain and suffering that he will

ultimately inflict on them. However, upon seeing their unabashed – almost naïve – happiness, Satan looks upon Adam and Eve with envy and disdain: “Sight hateful! sight tormenting! Thus these two... shall enjoy their fill / Of bliss on bliss while I to Hell am thrust” (Milton 4.505-08). Satan is jealous of the pair’s plot in Eden and their relationship with God – something he had once had – which only further angers him and fuels his malicious desire for evil.

While other authors positioned Satan to be an inherently evil character and expected their readers to already believe such a notion, Milton delved deeper into the mind and the motives of the archfiend, creating a new perspective on him. As S. Musgrove explains in their article “Is the Devil an Ass?” these conventional beliefs regarding Satan were so widespread during the seventeenth century, that in reading *Paradise Lost*, “the reader must hate, or be prepared to hate, Satan before the poem starts, because [they] already [knew] that he [was] evil and proud” (303). Milton uses this to his advantage and surprises his readers by presenting them with a character outside of the norm: one who is humanistic, flawed, relatable, and capable of evoking empathy and compassion. “In Milton’s Satan we do not see the horrible figure of the medieval imagination,” but instead, “[w]e see the darkened splendor and the reserved, explosive power of an archangel” (Teskey xxvii). It is in this reinvigoration of the archfiend that Milton garnered much of his success and is one of the reasons why his epic poem has remained popular and admired to this very day.

During the Renaissance, particularly the seventeenth century, people had a very potent and solidified impression of Satan; he was the opposite of God in every way and the embodiment of evil. These beliefs had been set centuries prior through the religious institutions of the Church and the Bible, but throughout the years, they were continually reinforced by authors and their demonological literature. Many authors, like Ben Jonson in his drama, *The Devil is an Ass*, presented Satan in a stereotypically simplistic and plain way; inherently evil, but lacking motives, and never developing as a character. As such, many of these works failed to resonate with the public because they had grown weary of these stale representations of the Devil. However, in *Paradise Lost*, John Milton did not surrender to portraying the archfiend in such a way, and instead chose to give his version of the Devil depth and nuance. In this light, Milton delved further into Satan’s mind than many of his peers ever had and developed a complex and compelling character who captivated readers in a time when the Devil had largely fallen out of the literary vogue.

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