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Milton's Tree of Knowledge as Highest Providence

In *Paradise Lost*, Satan uses the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to mislead Eve and indicate the hierarchal structure of power in the Tree. Milton deploys satanic logic to misrepresent the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge within a Christian context in order to construct the necessity of knowledge for mankind. This type of logic begins with a false premise and follows logically to a false conclusion. Milton's Satan represents the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, in opposition to the trees in Heaven, as more powerful and authoritative than God, thus deifying the Tree to further deceive humanity.

In his *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton defines "Providence," providing a progress-based theology according to the discernment of scripture. In the chapter "Of the Providence of God," Milton writes that "His general government is that whereby God the Father preserves and governs the whole of creation with wisdom and holiness according to the conditions of decree" (199). For members of Milton's early modern English audience, this would be a typical mindset. Milton's interpretation of Christian Doctrine defines "Providence" as God governing all the events within creation. In opposition to Milton's theism, Satan attributes these qualities to the Tree of Knowledge of

Good and Evil throughout *Paradise Lost*. As we shall see, given God's providential power as described in Milton's *De Doctrina*, Satan's language fashions the Tree of Knowledge as holding authority over God, leading to its deification.

In order to represent the fruit's power, Satan personifies what gave it life: the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Satan's arboreal deception begins:

O Sacred, Wise, and Wisdom-giving Plant,
Mother of Science, Now I feel thy Power
Within me cleere, not only to discern
Things in thir Causes, but to trace the ways
Of highest Agents, deemed however wise.
(Book IX, ll. 679-83)

This personification fashions the Tree as a "mother," and like any mother, it gave life to its offspring: the fruit. This suggests that much like a child being born from a mother's womb, the fruit naturally originates from within the Tree. In this sense, knowledge is rooted from the Tree itself, and the Tree holds the power to reveal it through the growth of the fruit. Given that knowledge is gained through consuming the fruit suggests that this knowledge is subordinate to the Tree's authority as a mother. Because children are below a mother's authority, they are logically subject to the mother's bidding. The Tree therefore holds the authority to reveal the fruit to others in its superiority over knowledge. According to such satanic logic, this indicates that God and his agents remain subordinate to the tree in the sense that they have knowledge only because the Tree allows them to have it.

The image of the "wisdom-giving plant" further constructs the power of the Tree in this deception. The word "giving" provides the tree with an active role in the distribution of knowledge. Like any plant, the Tree is rooted in the ground and produces harvest through the earth's nourishment. Knowledge is thus fashioned as a creation of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, being distributed to others at the discretion of the Tree. As the Tree holds the power to allocate knowledge regardless of God's authority, Satan fashions the Tree as a more powerful alternative to God. This language describes the Tree's authority as exceeding all else, implying that it alone holds the power to actively give knowledge.

Milton uses the term "deemed" in the phrase "highest Agents, deemed however wise" to discredit God's divinity, thus elevating the Tree of Knowledge higher in authority. The word "deemed" connotes regard, suggesting that God is merely considered wise, which leaves room for subjectivity. In constructing God's power as questionable, this term thus undermines His validity rather than indicating a natural wisdom. Satan's language fashions the Tree as being naturally sacred and wise, while "highest Agents" are simply *regarded* as wise without validity. This strengthens the wide contrasts between the two, representing the Tree as sacred by implying that it is wiser, and in turn, more powerful and authoritative than God.

The term "discern" in the statement "to discern/ Things in thir Causes" also provides this deceptive logic with seemingly positive connotations. Discernment suggests a distinct understanding of truth,

which further constructs the divinity of the Tree of Knowledge in its authority. Discernment is associated with understanding, but also suggests understanding something *through* gaining intellect or knowledge. This implies a dichotomy between ignorance and experience. Whereas ignorance becomes a state of darkness and lack of knowledge, experience correlates with enlightenment. Truth and knowledge convey the ideal, expressing a desire for its attainment. This satanic logic indicates that discernment can only be achieved through obtaining knowledge, and because Satan accredits this authority to the Tree, he represents it as the source of divine and thus true knowledge above God.

Milton fashions the trees in Heaven much as one would expect to find on earth in comparison to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. In Raphael and Adam's conversation, Raphael states that:

though in Heav'n the Trees
of life ambrosial frutage bear, and vines
Yield Nectar, though from off the boughs each Morn
We brush mellifluous Dewes, and find the ground
Cover'd with pearly grain (Book V, ll. 426-30).

The language used to illustrate the fruit that these Trees of Life produce significantly differs from the depiction of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The term "ambrosial" is indeed associated with divinity, but only as a source of nourishment for deities. In contrast to the "Wisdom-giving Plant" in Satan's description, Raphael fashions this tree as merely giving nourishment. The fruit on these trees provide sustenance for godlike figures, but there is no evidence of the tree being godlike *itself*. By comparison,

this construction suggests no distribution of knowledge to sustain the angels' intellect, thus lacking authority over these deities.

For context on Milton's interpretation of the angels, he not only offers a definition of providence in *De Doctrina* but also "of the special government of angels." Milton notes that angels "angels are upheld by their own strength no less than man himself was before his fall that they are called elect in the sense of beloved or excellent" (218). Milton understands angels through scripture as only "elect" because God appoints them as such. Milton chooses to exclude an indication that angels somehow *achieve* their position. They are merely "choices" of God's judgment. This reflects Milton's version of the trees in Heaven in that the angels do not receive additional knowledge or become "elect" from the fruit the tree bears. God appointing the angels is the source of their title. Accordingly, these trees provide the angels with no sense of divinity because God's authority provides their power.

The phrase "yield nectar" in Raphael's speech is reminiscent of the language Satan uses to describe the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The term "yield" also implies a distribution, but in this case, it is of nectar rather than knowledge. Classical mythology recognizes nectar as a life-giving drink for the gods, reiterating that these trees are a source of nourishment. This tree, although able to sustain life of the divine, does not produce a life with knowledge. The trees in heaven, as observed by Raphael, preserve the ability to give life, but the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil holds the authority to

select which life should be that of ignorance or of enlightenment through knowledge. In comparison, the tree in Heaven maintains a subordinate role in the sense that the life that it sustains is subject to the bidding of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, as represented by Satan. Given a model for the trees in Heaven, the reader is, by comparison, able to recognize the authority that Satan implies of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Milton also briefly addresses the Tree of Life in his *De Doctrina* within the context of the Fall, much like the trees in Heaven portrayed in the epic poem. He writes "The tree of life, in my opinion, ought not be considered so much a sacrament, as a symbol of eternal life, or rather perhaps the nutriment by which that life is sustained" (228). This distinction references Milton's protestant iconoclasm, which rejects images of the sacred as idolatrous. The worship of an image or depiction rather than the actual deity is considered an immense sin according to a protestant Christian such as Milton. *De Doctrina* reiterates the concept that these trees offer only nourishment for the divine in this passage. Milton's *Paradise Lost* also claims that the fruit from the Trees of Life hold no exceptional authority, but simply provide sustenance in the statement "ambrosial frutage bear." The Tree of Life, according to Milton, was not a sacramental object because it was not a "a seal of the covenant of grace" (444). Unlike Satan's representation of the Tree of Knowledge, the trees in heaven were no more than symbolically representational of eternal life.

In his examination of the scriptural Tree of Knowledge, Milton writes that it "was not a sacrament as it is generally called for a sacrament is a thing to be used not abstained from but a pledge as it were and memorial of obedience" (227). Just because the Tree of Good and Evil was not a sacramental object, does not mean that it shares no qualities with a one. Much like sacraments are a "seal of covenant grace," the Tree of Knowledge becomes the less strict form of a covenant: a pledge. This distinction of a "covenant" evokes an image of a more concrete contract. If broken, contracts often have severe repercussions resulting in a loss of trust. Seen as more of an oath taken on the word of another, a "pledge" assumes trust without the need for a concrete assurance. In this sense, Milton understands the Tree of Knowledge as a symbol of God's trust in humanity's obedience.

Satan uses such deification to represent the Tree as providential in order to shift Eve's focus from God to the forbidden Tree. Satan goes on to flatter Eve by declaring:

Queen of the Universe, doe not believe
Those rigid threats of Death; ye shall not Die:
How should ye? By the Fruit? It gives you Life
To Knowledge, By the Threat'ner, look on mee.
(Book IX, ll. 684-87)

The use of "rigid threats" creates negative connotations of malice and harsh punishment. Rigidness and threats are often associated with severe and unyielding behavior. By suggesting that God's threats are severe, Satan fashions him as a merciless punisher. Using the blunt word "threat'ner" as a formal title to portray God extends Satan's negative representation in further characterizing the Tree as more

powerful. A threat is often viewed as a harsh and severe intimidation mechanism that will result in discipline. As Satan characterizes God as a ruthless punisher, He therein embodies mercilessness. Being that the Tree has already been personified as a nurturing mother and a caregiver, it logically provides mercy to its subordinates. This representation contrasts greatly to the construction of God as a merciless punisher, thus giving the tree a gentler and preferable image. Within a Christian context, Milton and others have defined "Providence" as merciful and forgiving. Because Satan represents the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as such and fashions God as merciless, the Tree surpasses God in true divinity.

In order to further designate the Tree as embodying highest providence, Satan presents its dominion over all else. Through describing his condition as a serpent, Satan intrigues Eve by presenting her with the question, "Shall that be shut to Man, which to the Beast / is Open?" (ll. 691 - 692). The binaries "shut" and "open" create a strong image of permission and control in this satanic logic. The term "shut," connotes something restricted and without opportunity for circulation. According to satanic logic, knowledge is needed to open a door. Satan cannot be saved because of this self-feeding and, in this sense, a shut door needs knowledge to become available. On the other side of Satan's rhetorical spectrum, the word "open," suggests a sense of accessibility, allowing for knowledge to enter through providence. Because Satan implies that the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil alone allows for the circulation of

knowledge, this binary provides the Tree with the power to choose those capable of receiving enlightenment.

Satan's binary of "Man" and "Beast" also constructs an image of power and dominance in order to represent the divinity of the Tree. The word "beast" has been associated with a wild and brutish animal. In contrast, the word "man" suggests a much gentler, civilized, and intelligent creature. As God created man with authority over the beasts, Satan proposes that because beasts receive knowledge from the Tree, man can obtain such knowledge as well. The wide contrast between these two extremes provides the reader with an image of the Tree's authority. The use of these terms also appears in the majority of Christian creation stories, which state that, in essence, Providence has power over all, including man and beast. Within this binary, Satan emphasizes an inversion of traditional Christian roles in scripture, giving beasts this knowledge over mankind. The Tree is thus given providential authority with the Christian definition of "Providence" in its knowledge and superiority.

Satan's use of biblical imagery effectively deceives mankind by constructing an authoritative and godlike character out of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The satanic logic in conjunction with Milton's understanding of scripture in *De Doctrina Christiana* creates a dichotomy between the trees in Heaven and the Tree of Knowledge. Raphael's description of the trees in Heaven also provides a model by which Satan fashions the authority of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil as providential. In a sense, the Tree of Knowledge of Good

and Evil experiences its own fall: from being represented as highest providence and deified in Milton's *Paradise Lost* to being associated with sweet earthly fruit in modern society.

Works Cited

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