

SATAN AND *THE SILMARILLION*: JOHN MILTON'S ANGELIC DECLINE IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S MELKOR

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Nearly all of J.R.R. Tolkien's fiction is a complex myriad of both numerous mythological influences and original concepts, and no segment of his work can be traced to a single predecessor. In order to speculate about Tolkien's outside sources, one must carefully select portions of tales and infer possible influences based not so much on intertextuality as on an overall *feel* to the writing. In order to create this feel, Tolkien's work ingeniously blends all sorts of mythology into a unified whole. For instance, Tolkien's Valar as described in the two initial chapters of *The Silmarillion*, the "Ainulindalë" and the "Valaquenta," conjure thoughts of Greek deities, the Norse pantheon, and Christian angels all at once. Much research has been compiled to determine the impact of ancient and medieval mythologies, as well as Catholicism, on Tolkien's fiction. Without a doubt, the Bible held a significant role in Tolkien's mind, and this influence flowed into his work. As an example, *The Silmarillion's* story of the creation of Arda—the "Ainulindalë"—at the bidding of Eru, also known as Ilúvatar, echoes certain themes of creation found in the book of Genesis. The "Valaquenta," on the other hand, spends its pages describing the various Valar and Maiar that take part in the events of *The Silmarillion*. However, much exists in these two chapters that is conspicuously absent from the passages of Genesis. Were Tolkien's only other influences pagan mythologies, or did other Christian texts affect his writing?

One other notable English author who presumed to address divine creation in an epic work is John Milton. His *Paradise Lost* poetically narrates the angelic war in Heaven, Satan's descent from Heaven, and his journey to Eden, where he seduces Eve (and through her, Adam) to taste of the Tree of Knowledge and thereby disobey God's command. Interestingly enough, the lines of *Paradise Lost* that deal with Satan's fall and banishment from Heaven often parallel the fall and banishment of Melkor in *The Silmarillion*, leading one to wonder what sort of influence Milton's poetry may have had on Tolkien's mythology. According to Tom Shippey, "*The Silmarillion*, with its exile from paradise, its ages of misery, and its Intercessor, is a calque on Christian story, an answer to *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*" (Road 176), but what room do the obviously present pagan mythologies leave for an unexplored Miltonic influence? Little has been said in the short life of Tolkien criticism about the influence of the Miltonic Satan's fall on that of the Tolkienian Melkor. Nevertheless, when examining both Milton's Satan and Tolkien's Melkor, one realizes that *Paradise Lost* may very well have contributed to the *feel* of Tolkien's complex mythology. The falls of Satan and Melkor, from their origins as angelic beings through their respective declines and their final states, echo and complement each other to such a point that their resemblance can hardly be coincidental.

Before delving into a discourse focusing primarily on Melkor and Satan, it makes sense first to establish an analysis of their respective backgrounds. The angelic orders from which both Satan and Melkor fall resemble each other; or, more accurately, the members of these groups resemble one another remarkably well. First, both Milton's Angels and Tolkien's Valar are inherently genderless, despite the fact that *Paradise Lost* addresses all angels as male and *The Silmarillion* utilizes both genders, male and female, for its Valar. As far as angels are concerned, C.S. Lewis explains the traditional use of gender (and the lack of sex) in referring to them: since "angels do not die, they need not breed. They are not therefore sexed in the human sense at all. An angel is, of

course, always He (not She) in human language, because whether the male is, or is not, the superior sex, the masculine is certainly the superior gender" (113). This linguistic approach to Milton's use of the masculine pronoun makes sense, but Tolkien applies a variation of it to his own angelic powers, one that involves both the masculine and feminine genders in reference to his Valar.

Just as Milton's angels are not "sexed in the human sense," the Valar are quite genderless, although they tend to have an inclination toward one specific gender. *The Silmarillion* reveals this tendency in the "Valaquenta," where it says that "when they desire to clothe themselves the Valar take upon them forms some as of male and some as of female; for that difference of temper they had even from their beginning, and it is but bodied forth in the choice of each, not made by the choice, even as with us male and female may be shown by the raiment but is not made thereby" (21). Thus, Tolkien's seraphic figures possess no inherent sexual gender, but in its place they have a predisposition toward a particular characteristic gender. The genders taken on by the Valar represent their individual inclinations; the Valar with traditionally masculine qualities take on male form, while those with typically feminine traits adopt female shape.

This trait of gender ambivalence echoes descriptions of Heaven's angels in *Paradise Lost*, who

[. . .] when they please
Can either Sex assume, or both... [to] execute their aery purposes,
And works of love or enmity fulfil... and as they please,
They Limb themselves, and color, shape or size
Assume, as likes them best, condense or rare. (1.423-4 / 430-1 / 6.351-3)

Likewise, the daemons in Lewis's *Preface*¹ share this same trait, for they "have an aerial body which they can change at will into male or female because of its soft and ductile substance" (111). It would appear that Tolkien's concept of the Valar, unbound to a single concrete form and yet with strongly concrete characteristics, is heavily influenced by prior writings on the topic of angels. That the Valar "need [their shape] not, save only as we use raiment" is a critical point when looking at the various forms chosen by each individual Vala, particularly Melkor (*Silmarillion* 21). This point especially applies to Melkor immediately prior to the darkening of the Two Trees; but that point shall be discussed later.

Now, on to the initial decline of Melkor. Rather interestingly, in the "Ainulindalë" Tolkien perceives creation much like Milton, for "It was as music that Milton imagined the creation—the song of the angels shouting for joy" (Hughes 184). In the creation myth of *The Silmarillion*, the Ainur are first made from the thought of Ilúvatar; they then participate in his song, known as the Music of the Ainur. This act, while not actively creating the physical realm of Arda, lays the foundation in a sense for its future sculpting. Melkor, as the "mightiest" of the Ainur, participates in the Music with the rest of his peers; however, unlike his brethren, Melkor begins "to interweave matters of his own imagining that were not in accord with the theme of Ilúvatar" (*Silmarillion* 16). This initial seed of ambition—"for he sought therein to increase the power and glory of the part assigned to himself"—soon spreads to others in the heavenly choir, for "some began to attune their music to his rather than to the thought which they had at first. Then the discord of Melkor spread ever wider" (16). Unlike the other Ainur, Melkor decides to strive to increase his status and elevate his position among them, laying the groundwork for much strife to come.

In *Paradise Lost*, however, it is the post-musical Satan who corresponds with Melkor, for unlike *The Silmarillion*, Milton's epic does not narrate the initial creation in detail. Milton writes that Satan

¹ For a well-written, detailed discussion on the discursive history of angelic substances, see Chapter XV of C.S. Lewis's *A Preface to Paradise Lost*.

. . . aspir[ed]

To set himself in Glory above his Peers [the other angels of Heaven],
He trusted to have equall'd the most High,
If he oppos'd; and with ambitious aim
Against the Throne and Monarchy of God
Rais'd impious War in Heav'n and Battle proud
With vain attempt,

much as Melkor aspires to set himself above his fellow Ainur (*PL* 1.38-44). In doing so, Melkor may not instigate "impious War," but a battle of sorts takes place during the Music. When Melkor responds to Ilúvatar's new theme, his "discord... [rises] in uproar and contend[s] with it, and again there [is] a war of sound more violent than before," an occurrence closer to actual battle than any other event in Ilúvatar's presence (*Silmarillion* 16). The concept of performing acts of war with music seems peculiarly Tolkienian, but the concept of angelic and godly powers striving for dominance harkens back to Milton's epic.

Once the Music of the Ainur concludes with a single resounding chord, Ilúvatar addresses the rogue musician Melkor to set straight the matter of his rebellion. In essence, Eru informs Melkor that his symphonic insurgence is fruitless, for "no theme may be played that hath not its uttermost source in me [Ilúvatar], nor can any alter the music in my despite. For he that attempted this shall prove but mine instrument in the devising of things more wonderful, which he himself hath not imagined" (17). No matter what perversions of Ilúvatar's plan Melkor may attempt, he can only succeed in fulfilling his part of the design, at least according to Ilúvatar; for whatever evil Melkor tries will be converted to a greater good. This conversation mimics a discourse implied in Book I of *Paradise Lost*. After Satan's descent to Hell, he says to Beëlzebub,

If then [God's] Providence
Out of our evil seek to bring forth good,
Our labor must be to pervert that end,
And out of good still to find means of evil. (1.162-5)

Such a remark could easily be in response to a statement like Ilúvatar's above. It appears that Satan knows of God's design to convert Satan's evil to an ultimate good, but he is determined to foil this plan and bring greater evil to the world. Likewise, one can easily imagine Melkor responding to Ilúvatar in a similar fashion, for Melkor and Satan obviously share both a disdain for Eru's/God's plan and a tendency toward evil in altering that plan.

Satan and Melkor each fall because of their mutinous actions and contempt for their creators. Physically, their falls are different—the former is driven out of Heaven and literally falls for nine days to the depths of Hell, while the other chooses to reside in Arda but is gradually banned from Valinor, the land of the Valar—but if "fall" is to be taken figuratively rather than literally, then their falls are very much the same. One passage in particular from the "Valaquenta" details the fall of Melkor:

From splendour he fell through arrogance to contempt for all things save himself, a spirit wasteful and pitiless. Understanding he turned to subtlety in perverting to his own will all that he would use, until he became a liar without shame. He began with the desire of Light, but when he could not possess it for himself alone, he descended through fire and wrath into a great burning, down into Darkness. (*Silmarillion* 31)

Whether taken literally or metaphorically, this account of Melkor's fall bears a remarkable resemblance to that of Satan in Milton's epic. Compared to the first line of the above passage, Lewis's observation that "In the midst of a world of light and love, of song and feast and dance, [Satan] could find nothing to think of more interesting than his own prestige" rings a solid bell (96). Lewis notes in the same passage that "No one had in fact done anything to Satan; he was not hungry, nor over-tasked, nor removed from his place, nor shunned, nor hated--he only thought himself impaired," a line that applies equally well to Melkor as to Satan (96).

Further examination of the above passage from *The Silmarillion* reveals other parallels between Melkor and his literary predecessor. What is especially interesting about the passage is the description of Melkor's descent "through fire and wrath *into a great burning, down into Darkness*" (my emphasis). The final segment of the passage implies that the "great burning" and the "Darkness" are one and the same, a seeming contradiction. However, as Satan awakes in the bowels of Hell after his long descent, he views his surroundings "As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible" (*PL* 1.62-3). This famous line has fascinated readers for centuries, for what sort of fire can emit darkness rather than light? Whatever sort of mysterious flame exists in Hell, it would appear that Melkor has encountered it as well. Tolkien makes curious use of the concept of visible darkness as a concrete element, a force opposite light as opposed to the mere absence of light, with the beastly arachnid Ungoliant when she accompanies Morgoth in the chapter "Of the Darkening of Valinor" in *The Silmarillion*.

Perhaps fires of darkness suit these post-fall demonic figures better than any other illumination; at any rate, both develop an intense hatred for the sun after their descents. Rather, Satan and Melkor, recalling their former seats and observing their current situations, allow their shame to fester and direct the resultant anger at the heavenly body most representative of their past. Milton's Satan, for instance, originally resides in a Heaven in which night and day occur, although the light of each is undoubtedly rich and vibrant. Upon his arrival on Earth, Satan shouts skyward,

"O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams
That bring to my remembrance from what state
I fell, how glorious once above thy Sphere;
Till Pride and worse Ambition threw me down." (*PL* 4.37-40)

Satan directs his anger in this passage not so much at the sun as at his own mistakes. However much Satan may blame God for his circumstances in the poem, here at least Satan seems to recognize his own folly, blaming himself. The Sun merely represents that which Satan formerly held by right, and thus receives a portion of Satan's rage and frustration.

Likewise, Melkor too detests the Sun and Moon. These bodies, set in the sky by the Valar to compensate for the loss of the Two Trees of Valinor, are but a dim remembrance of their arboreal predecessors; but, they still hold the capability of challenging Melkor's mighty darkness. Upon the first risings of the Sun in Middle-earth, it is noted that "Morgoth hated the new lights [the Sun and Moon], and was for a while confounded by this unlooked-for stroke of the Valar. [...] And Arien [the Sun] Morgoth feared with a great fear, but dared not come nigh her, having indeed no longer the power" (*Silmarillion* 101). Presumably Melkor's hatred for all things associated with Ilúvatar or the unfallen Valar continues to grow in his progressive corruption throughout *The Silmarillion*; and these heavenly lights, as a primary symbol of these beings and their love for the Children of Ilúvatar, Elves and Men, draw nearly as much hatred from Melkor as do the Eldar themselves. However, more than symbolizing Tolkien's good angelic powers, the Sun and Moon here seem to represent Melkor's past, the position from which he has fallen. Melkor hates the lights not nearly as much as he hates the fact that he can no longer partake in the creation and enjoyment of such things of beauty, and he resents his downfall and exile, just as Satan does his own.

Symbolically, if not literally, the final step in the descents of Satan and Melkor involves their corporeal beings. As described above, both Tolkien's and Milton's angelic powers possess the capability to adopt whatever physical form they choose; as original members of these orders, Melkor and Satan possess the same trait. However, Melkor loses this ability in *The Silmarillion* and seemingly can never regain it. When Melkor travels to Avathar to seek out Ungoliant as part of his devilish plot, he "put[s] on again the form that he had worn as the tyrant of Utumno: a dark Lord, tall and terrible. In that form he remain[s] ever after" (73). It is unlikely that Melkor's shape is permanently transfixed because he made an ugly face and the wind changed; rather, his deeds

lead to a point where his divine benefits are revoked and he becomes trapped in a form visually fitting to his sinful nature.

Satan experiences a somewhat similar occurrence in Hell after he returns from tempting Eve in Eden. As *Paradise Lost* tells in a generous interpretation of Genesis, Satan adopts the body of a serpent—whether he simply transforms his own being or commandeers a living snake is debatable—in which he speaks to Eve of the Tree, convincing her to partake of its sinful Fruit. Returning to Hell where the other fallen angels have awaited, Satan proudly announces his deed. Expecting to hear triumphant applause from his followers, his ears are greeted only with "A dismal universal hiss" (*PL* 10.508). Immediately, Satan realizes that he himself has been transformed into

A monstrous Serpent on his Belly prone,
Reluctant, but in vain: a greater power
Now rul'd him, punisht in the shape he sinn'd
According to his doom. (*PL* 10.514-7)

The emphasis of this strange metamorphosis lies in line 516. The reason for Satan's unwilling serpentine transformation is due to the incredible sin he has performed, and it is only appropriate that the chief sinner in Hell should bear the form of his sin. Just as Melkor becomes forever locked in the appearance of a dark lord, so Satan mutates into a snake's skin, a badge of corruption, ambition, and pride to wear in remembrance of his deeds.

And thus, from this point Satan cannot fall much further. Technically speaking, he grovels on his scaly stomach on the floor; from a less literal perspective, "he sinks to that great design which makes the main subject of the poem—the design of ruining two creatures who had never done him any harm, no longer in the serious hope of victory, but only to annoy the Enemy whom he cannot directly attack" (Lewis 99). Melkor, too, resorts to meddling in the affairs of Ilúvatar's creations, both Elves and Men, being no longer able to challenge Ilúvatar or even the faithful Valar directly. These actions seem pathetic for two creatures of such original high standing, but they fall so deeply that they cannot aspire to higher goals. Heaven is entirely out of reach for Satan, and both Valinor and the Imperishable Flame of Eru are out of Melkor's reach. In the end, they resort to disturbing the lives of God's creations in a final attempt to overcome their creators.

Exactly how much impact does the Miltonic Satan have on the character and story of Melkor? No conclusion may be definite, for Tolkien's sources are so faintly and yet so thickly intertwined in much of his fiction that picking out a single strand from the elaborate rope of Middle-earth is almost always impossible to do with certainty. However, it is entirely possible that Tolkien the Englishman recognized the importance of Milton's writing, although Tolkien the Catholic may have disagreed with much of his predecessor's theology. Shippey suspects "that Tolkien [may not have] had much love for Milton, with his determinedly Protestant epic *Paradise Lost* and his revolutionary political views, but he accepted him like Shakespeare as a poet capable of true poetry" (*Author* 204). Thus, it may be reckoned, Tolkien may have allowed Milton's epic into his grab bag of mythological influences. Furthermore, considering the friendship Tolkien shared with Lewis, who wrote extensively on *Paradise Lost*, conversations between the two scholars may have made a significant impact on the writings of the former. Many of the parallels between Satan's and Melkor's respective falls resemble one another too closely to be mere coincidence. Yet, because Tolkien wrote little regarding Milton or his poetry, such analyses can be made only by exploring the numerous intertextualities between *Paradise Lost* and *The Silmarillion*. Despite the religious differences between the two authors, it is clear that, as far as the story of creation, neither man had "forgotten the beauty of the matter even 'as a story'" in his own work (*Letters* 109), and whether or not Tolkien consciously intended it, he thoroughly incorporated the Miltonic Satan and his fall into the design of his own mythology.

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