

Milton's Serpent and Satan in *Paradise Lost*¹

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Abstract

Satan's temptation of Eve is regarded by most readers as the most important temptation event in Paradise Lost. Yet scholars have tended to ignore the difference between Satan's "entering" the Serpent, and Satan's "becoming" the Serpent when he is leading Eve astray. Other scholars regard the description of the Serpent as peripheral to the epic's main themes; still others, as demonstrating John Milton's confusion over snake and Satan, matter and spirit. My contention is that Milton in fact carefully considered and intentionally designed the interaction between Satan and Serpent. I will analyze the process of temptation and the punishment that follows from the perspective of Milton's animist materialism, and will attempt to show that, because the collocation of the Serpent and Satan are both agents in leading mankind astray, both must be punished. Milton's animist materialism thus becomes the basis for solving the exegetical puzzle posed by Satan's relationship with the Serpent.

Keywords: serpent, Satan, Eve, animist materialism, punishment

I. INTRODUCTION

It is not clear why Satan must use the Serpent as a tool to lead Eve astray. Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* is a malevolent scheming chameleon-type figure. As Milton says in the epic, Satan is so two-faced that he is an "artificer of fraud" (Book 4, line 121). Satan decides to be the one take expenditure to the Garden of Eden and observe new creature which God has just made. On his way to the Eden, he disguises himself as a stripling Cherube and asks Uriel the location of the Eden so he can see the new creature which God has just made. When he finally arrives in the Eden, he first turns himself into a cormorant and sits high up on the Tree of life to observe the Garden. Then he swiftly turns himself into a lion and a tiger so as to be better be able to approach and observe the activity of Adam and Eve. He watches their behavior and eavesdrops their conversations. After his investigation is complete he decides to lead Adam and Eve astray in order to have his revenge on God rather than opting to start a war against God. He arrives at the conclusion that he can exact his revenge much better on God by employing clever scheming than he can through violence. His reasons for wanting to enter a serpent are found below:

Thus, the Orb he roam's
With narrow search; and with inspection deep
Consider'd every Creature, which of all
Most opportune might serve his Wiles, and found
The Serpent subtlest Beast of all the Field.
Him after long debate, irresolute
Of thoughts revolv'd, his final sentence chose
Fit Vessel, fittest Imp of fraud, in whom

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To enter, and his dark suggestions hide
 From sharpest sight: for in the wilie Snake,
 Whatever sleights none would suspicious mark,
 As from his wit and native sottletie
 Proceeding, which in other Beasts observ'd
 Doubt might beget of Diabolic pow'r
 Active within beyond the sense of brute. (Book 9. line 82-96)

Unlike all the transformation he did before. Satan enters the Serpent. He does not transform into a serpent. Thus, the devil, Satan, and the animal Serpent share a body and together lead Eve astray. The description of Satan and the Serpent and their interaction raises a lot of interesting questions for the understanding of text and John Milton. Why does Satan need an agent to lead Eve astray? Why would he choose to enter an animal he so despised rather than remaining as an angel or becoming a tiger? There are so many creatures in the Eden. Why does he choose the Serpent? Why doesn't he transform himself into a serpent rather than choosing to enter the Serpent? Can the Serpent harm human beings without being possessed by Satan. As Christopher Hill pointed out, the "Bible was central to the whole of the life of society", and for Milton in the seventeenth century (Hill, 1993, p. 4). The Bible was the source of all the understanding for the people of Europe at that time. As a pious Christian poet, who was familiar with the Bible, what were the thought process of John Milton in the literary choices he makes here? Or is this a poor design for making his literary works to coincide with the source of the Bible?

II. THE PROCESS OF LEADING ASTRAY

John Milton is a Christian poet. His formulating of the plot of *Paradise Lost* has its origin in the Genesis story when the Serpent persuades Eve to eat the food of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil thus betraying God. Temptation has always been an important topic of discussion among critics and a point of controversy and even heated debate. It is worthy of note that in the Bible story there is no mention of the reason why the Serpent leads Eve astray. However, when it comes to Milton's rewrite of the story, he makes it quite clear that Satan enters the Serpent in Eden to seduce Eve for revenge God. The act of entering not only provides us with the motivation of Satan's act, but also adds colour and interest and a new dimension of John Milton's work of literature. At the same time, it makes interpreting the relationship between the Serpent and Satan more difficult.

It is a great surprise that Milton scholars barely notice the significance of the detail of Satan's entering into the Serpent. When they study *Paradise Lost*, most often they skim over the fact and generally say Satan becomes a serpent which is not entirely true. Entering and becoming are two quite different things here and we would do well not to mix them up. Shen (2010) thinks Satan's transformation is closely related to the Renaissance prevailing witchcraft tradition of the time. He thinks Satan's transformation to a toad and a serpent means the same thing. The talking serpent is, in fact, "an enchanted serpent". But if the Serpent is only enchanted, he is innocent, and God will not punish an innocent animal (p.110). It is hard to persuade readers with the interpretation of the Serpent is only a tool used by Satan, which has nothing to do with the scheming. C. S. Lewis (1969) described Satan's descent as "from hero to general, from general to politician, from politician to secret service agent, and thence to a thing that peers in that bedroom or bathroom windows, and thence to a toad, and finally to a snake" (p. 99). Lewis states the order of Satan's fall. However, he jumped over the fact Satan is Satan, and a serpent is a real animal that exists in the real world. Some scholars notices Milton's using of "entering", but they thinks Milton's epic falls down here when he describes Satan as entering the Serpent. One of the most influential critics of Milton was Samuel Johnson. He found fault with Milton's poem at this

point claiming what Milton said amounted to “the confusion of spirit and matter” (Johnson, 2006, p. 109). Thus, in his opinion, Satan and the Serpent are more evidence of Milton’s confusion of spirit and matter. Stephen Fallon, on the other hand, stands by another side and discusses the contemporary philosophical context of Milton’s time and argues that Johnson in fact fails to grasp the idea of the form and the spirit of an angel, and in so doing wrongly interprets Milton’s idea of spirit and body (Fallon, 2007. p. 138). Fallon helps scholars to understand some of Johnson’s erroneous assertions by providing a historical context.

However, neither Johnson or Fallon comment on the significance of the connection between Satan’s “entering the Serpent” and its relationship to Milton’s animist materialism.

It has been an “insoluble problem” (Forsyth, 2003. p. 61). Neil Forsyth spells out the exegetical tradition by asking “Satan is Satan? Or Satan is Serpent?”. Leslie Brisman even questions “references to snakes...beyond what the story itself necessitates” and “dwells on rather than passes over the difficulty” on the confusion of serpent as animal and Satan (Brisman, 1970. p. 29). While Morrison(2009) believes the Serpent’s role and punishment are “key elements of God’s beneficent strategy of accommodation” (p. 174). The design of the “entering” shows Milton’s concern for the exegetical tradition. John Carey is among a minority of critics who draw our attention to the fact that Satan enters the Serpent and makes the insightful comment that “being inside a snake may have enabled Satan to take over the snake’s sensibility, which would aid his imagination” (Carey, 2004. p. 170). He implies that Satan uses the Serpent’s experience to enrich his description of the fruit on the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil and make it more persuasive to Eve. If it is true, it implies that Satan cannot easily lead Eve astray by himself. The idea runs contrary to the character of Satan in the epic.

Apparently, Satan has the ability to transform into anything he wants. Satan has successfully transformed into many different forms and not been noticed, for example as an angel who talks to Uriel, and an animal which can get close to Adam and Eve. If he wants to be a serpent, he can simply transform himself again. However, he chooses the Serpent as his revenging tool rather than be a serpent by himself. He thinks that of all the animals he will be at least noticed if he becomes a serpent, “Diabolic pow’r active with beyond the sense of brute” (Book 9. line 95-96). From Satan’s monologue we can see that it is a combination of Satan’s power and the Serpent’s cunning which leads Eve astray. Satan wants to use the sense of an animal which is something he does not have. With the Serpent body and his power, he successfully make his plan work. Raphael’s teaching to Adam “one first matter all” has been agreed to be as Milton’s animist materialism in his literary work. As Fallon(2007) reflected, “spirit is rarefied matter, and matter is dense spirit” (p. 80). Thus, all the things in the world are composed of the same matter. That means, Satan and Serpent are the same matter in a different forms. Milton’s animist materialism provides for the possibility that the Serpent and Satan combined together as two forms. Moreover, the assemblage of Satan and Serpent clearly has more power than either Satan or the Serpent alone. Satan makes the Serpent speak, and when the Serpent speaks, the Serpent expresses Satan’s ideas. That means he is not an animal who can just act but also one who can think. Milton always believes that the direction of transformation is a vital to our understanding of the world. The closer you are to God, the more spiritual you will be, and the more you descend, the more material you are. After Satan enters the Serpent’s body, he expresses his thoughts and emotions such that he seeks “nor hope to be myself less miserable...but others to make such as I” (Book 9. line 127-128). Ironically, he becomes a serpent in the end. In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton expresses his concept of potential power. “Every form... is produced from the power of matter” (Milton, 1938. p. 49). All things from God are thus made of the same matter, and all matter has potential. To activate the potential power inherent in matter, an external force is always needed. A serpent as an animal has potential, but he has thoughts only after Satan comes into it. He starts to have thoughts after the external force comes into it. Satan enters the Serpent and waits for the

morning. It is clear that he is going to take revenge in collaboration with the Serpent instead of doing so by himself alone. He was unable, before, to delay his revenge even for a moment. He traveled from the Hell to the Eden without stopping. So why is he waiting now?

After Satan enters the Serpent, “his brutal sense, In heart or head, possessing soon inspir’d With act intelligential” (Book 9. line 188-190). Satan is not a character who can wait, but he enters the Serpent and waits until morning. What happened during the time he stays in the Serpent’s body? According to the text, during the time he is in the Serpent’s body, he manages to impart to the Serpent intelligence. Before Satan’s enters, the Serpent only has animal sense. After his entering, both the Serpent and Satan go through lots of changes. According to Heidegger, nonhuman animals never counter being. Their activities are triggered by stimuli around them, “such as the scent of the flower or the light of the sun” (Campana and Maisano, 2016. p. 11). They never think or speak but take the act by reason of stimuli. The Serpent with Satan goes through “the open” process. He has the ability to help Satan to lead Eve astray. The Serpent’s body and nature, combined with Satan’s scheming, mean they together turn into something unique that has both beauty and power. When Satan and the serpent become one and approach Eve, they are the most beautiful and clever Serpent “never since of Serpent kind Lovelier” (Book 9. line 504-505). Satan is waiting for the “open” of the animal serpent after entering the Serpent. And by doing so, he may think he can escape secretly from the punishment by using the Serpent as a tool. What he does not expect is that he has to receive the more severer punishment. Even when he rebels against God, and his punishment is leaving Heaven, he is still a spiritual being who has power, but now he is an animal and in a body he despised. As an angel, if he reflects on his sin and behaves well, he will have the chance to rise again. However, he descends step by step until he becomes an animal.

III. THE PUNISHMENT OF LEADING ASTRAY

Is it the Serpent or Satan who leads Eve astray? More questions are following with this puzzle in the epic. Is the Serpent punished for its evil nature? Or is it punished simply because it was used as the tool of the Devil? If the latter, the Serpent is nothing but a victim. Since God is just and Milton’s writing purpose is to “justify the wayes of God to men” (Book 1. line 26), the Serpent would be punished as a victim. With reference to an historical and literary interpretation there are two ways to answer the question. One is that the Serpent is only an natural animal. That is to say, a serpent in the Eden lead Eve astray. Another is that Satan is the Serpent. In this sense, Satan himself is the Serpent that lead Eve astray. These two interpretations are both contrary to what Milton wants to explain. Harris (1983, p. 37) pointed out that the Serpent is not Satan’s disguise or tool. He argues that Milton describes Satan as the Serpent only in order to give the Serpent the ability to speak and lead Eve astray. However, Milton never casually use the image of serpent.

The description of the image of the Serpent is constantly changing in the epic. Some scholars even use the changes to separate the Serpent and Satan. Guilfoyle(1979) states that the natural serpent in Milton’s writing is beautiful and elegant while Satan is an “ugly serpent” (p. 132) But Milton has mentioned that the serpent is the “suttlest Beast of all” (Book 9. line 86), it has the diabolic power which other animals don’t have. When it comes to Satan, he is “the infernal Serpent”(Book 1. line 34). After Satan enter the natural serpent, it becomes the loveliest kind. So it is hard to say whether the Serpent is the natural serpent or the Serpent is Satan from the image.

The punishment to both Satan and Serpent is the best proof we have that Satan and the Serpent together influence Eve. Otherwise why are they both punished by God. The original text in the Bible for the punishment is that “on your belly will you go, and dust you will eat”. Another is “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:14). William Kerrigan pointed out that

historically most theologians think that the groveling is the punishment to the real snake and the enmity refers to Satan (Kerrigan, 2004. p. 327). The aim of *Paradise Lost* is to “justify the wayes of God to man” (Book 1. line 12). Without Satan’s effort, the Serpent’s talent is nothing to do with Adam and Eve. The loveliest serpent is neither Satan nor the Serpent as an animal, but the combination of Satan and Serpent. Once Eve took the fruit, “Back to Thicket slunk The guiltie Serpent” (Book 9. line 784-785). The serpent which Satan took as a vessel never appeared after the scheme is done. Why would God punish the Serpent if it is innocent? When Eve tries to point to the Serpent as his excuse for eating the fruit, the Son of God says the serpent is but “instrument of mischief” (Book 10. line 166). The serpent is “vitiating in Nature”(Book 10. line 169) . The Serpent cannot be innocent. What the role does the serpent play in the process of leading Eve astray? Satan and the Serpent were punished in different ways. The Son of God judges Satan and Serpent that “the third best absent is condemn’d, Convict by flight, and Rebel to all Law Conviction to the Serpent non belongs” (Book 10. line 82-84). Thus, Satan is proved guilty by flight. Satan “fled” when he sees the Son of God is coming. Satan must be “the third absent”, and the Serpent is judged directly (Book 10. line 339). Regarding the Serpent, it will be groveling for the rest of its life as will all its offspring. Before the fall of Adam and Eve, the Serpent can walk upright, and not on its belly. The main punishment for the is being made to grovel. “To Satan first in sin his doom apply’d Though in mysterious terms” (Book 10. line 172-173). The punishment is severe. He goes from being an angel to being a serpent. He turns into an animal, in other words he goes from spirit to matter. This punishment follows with another consequence. Satan was so proud of the power he had when he was an angel. Angels never die nor suffer death. Another is groveling. He will suffer the serpent’s punishment and there will be no end to it and it will carry on from generation to generation.

The serpent has a character that Satan deems to be useful to the success of his scheme.. Satan can transform into a serpent, but he refuses to do so. He carefully examines animals and chooses a serpent as his agent. As Satan examined, the serpent is the canniest animal in the Garden. Satan’s “entering” changes the Serpent’s body. The corruption of substance thus makes for the corruption of spirit. What happens is that Satan and the Serpent have a punishment done to their body. Milton describes Satan and all his rebellions as turning into serpents. Thus there is no more distinction between Satan and serpent as an animal. After the punishment, Satan is the Serpent, and the Serpent is Satan.

IV. Milton’s Animist Materialism

The intention of Milton’s design is revealed by the process by which Satan and Serpent lead Adam and Eve astray, and the punishment for Satan and Serpent. The poet clearly distinguishes between the Serpent and Satan instead of arbitrarily mixing serpent and Satan which is something he has been criticized for. Before the leading astray happened, serpent is just a natural serpent, and Satan is Satan. However, during the process of leading astray Adam and Eve, the Serpent becomes a mix of natural serpent and Satan. When the leading astray is done. The Serpent is Satan, and Satan is the serpent. Since the Serpent is just a tool chosen by Satan for his own ends why the Serpent is inevitably guilty and must be punished?

In the early modern literature, animal imagery is quite popular. Denis points out that early modern writers use animal imagery and human cognitive activity in literature works as “materialism imagination” (Tunstall, 2016. p. 205). The climate of political and religious revolution in the Seventeenth century influenced the society in many different ways. The scientific revolution makes the time also a time of intelligence. One of the heated discussion was on the “thinking matter hypothesis”, on whether spirit needs a substance, and matter needs a spiritual substance. Hobbes and Decartes are the spokesmen on the issue. Hobbes believed that the world is moving and all we have in the world is the result of movement. His materialism was taken as a threat to religion. Decartes, on the other hand, stated that spirit and

substance exist independently of each other. He believed that animals do not have the incorporeal soul like human beings. At that time, philosophers took their stance on this debate.

Milton developed his unique animist materialism in the 1750s. He believed that all matter is alive and free. In *Paradise Lost*, he expressed his ideas through the angel Raphael, “one first matter all,/ indu’d with various forms, various degrees/ Of substance” (Book 5. line 471-473). For the poet, spirit and matter are just different forms of substance. “spirit is rarefied matter, and matter is dense spirit” as Fallon (1991. p. 80) states. Milton’s idea is different from Hobbes and Decartes for he insists God creates everything and everything has spirit. That means the world is composed of matter. Matter is changeable. It can change other things and the world. It does not mean the denial of human power. Instead, it advocates life and energy as existing parallel to the human world.

Milton mentions the serpent many times in his epic. In the very beginning he directly states that men fall because of “the Serpent, or rather Satan in the Serpent”(Book 1. the argument), then he says it is “the infernal Serpent”(Book 1. line 34) lead Adam and Eve astray. During the process of Satan’s scheming, Satan is “meer Serpent in appearance” (Book 9. line 414).

At the end of the epic, when Satan boasts his success of leading human beings astray to his rebellious army. They “for now were all transforme’d Alike, to Serpent all as accessories To his bold Riot”(Book 10. line 519 - 521). Milton’s writing of the serpent not only refers to Satan, it also adds thought and life to the animal serpent.

Satan’s entering the Serpent echoes Lucretius’s atomic motion. Because the atom which composes the soul is rather tiny, even subtler than those atoms which make up smoke or fog, the move of the atom appears as being like a cloud or mist. The process of Satan entering the Serpent is like the movement of atom. Due to collision and movement, atoms can form brand-new models of existence, as a new energetic combination, and an actant. Satan enters the Serpent and thus controls the ideas of the Serpent. The words of the Serpent are the key factor for the success of leading astray. Eve did not notice the Serpent at all before it started to speak. Satan can speak but he has no real form. The Serpent has the corporeal form but it can not speak. Clearly, a serpent that can speak is the combination of Satan and a serpent. Since animal and human both have soul and cognitive competence, they have a mutual influence on one another. The Serpent gave Satan the image of a serpent, so enabling Satan to take on the form of an entity to finish his scheme. At the same time, what happened generated an imaginary description of an animal thinking. After entering the body of the Serpent, Satan tells the story and what he experiences from the point of view of his own and the serpent’s senses. He has the Serpent’s experiences. At the end, when Satan becomes the Serpent, he is not the spiritual angel he was so proud of anymore. Once he thinks he is superior than the human being made by mud, he now falls as a created animal. The punishment God put on Satan and the Serpent makes him a real Serpent and he can never change that fact by anything he does anymore.

V. CONCLUSION

Milton reveals his posthumanism through his animist materialism and the embodiment. Milton takes the Bible as his original text and from a simple line in the Bible, he invents a world of his own. Satan and the Serpent are only a small part of this world. If Satan did not enter Serpent, the Serpent may never have the chance to “open” himself. In that case the Serpent and Adam and Eve will remain in a state of innocence. Satan’s wants to hurt Adam with God’s hand. He triggers the animal sense and then triggers Eve’s desire. He uses his body to change the body of the Serpent. By using the word “enter”, Milton clarifies the punishment of Satan and the Snake and makes his epic so meaningful. It has many purposes. Firstly, it satisfies being true to the original text of the Bible. Secondly, it explains the punishment for Satan and to the snake as an animal. Thirdly, to make his literary work more interesting. Fourthly, it gives expression to his

ideas of the relationship between men and animals. Before the fall of men, Adam and Eve are the owners of the Garden. Men have the power to govern the Garden and all the creatures in the Garden before men fall. At the very end, when men and animals become enemies, men lose the power to govern animals, including the Serpent and others. The end of *Paradise Lost* when we see Adam and Eve walking out of the Garden and going to a new world to find their happiness implies that they can also find new happiness in their relationship with the animals. However, it will all depend on what they do and the decisions they made.

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