

Is Satan properly described as a tragic hero?

Over the years, our idea of what constitutes a hero has changed dramatically, and with it our interpretation of Milton's Satan. Milton's awareness of his audience's changing notions of heroism is used to great effect to manipulate his readers into a moral lesson as they are taught the persuasive quality of sin. According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the first concrete definition of a tragic hero, Satan certainly fits the criterion, and this is only emphasised by the many parallels between him and Sophocles' Oedipus. On a first reading of *Paradise Lost* it is immediately apparent that pride is an important part of Satan's personality, however this is not, as many critics have suggested, his tragic flaw, something which becomes apparent when he is compared with his fellow angels. Unfortunately, the subject of Satan's heroism is hard to discuss in an unbiased way, since it is so difficult to separate the religious from the literary where characterisation is concerned.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defines a tragic hero as one who reaches a reversal of fortune 'through some flaw in him, he being one of those who are high in station and good fortune'.¹ As 'one of the first' / 'If not the first archangel, great in power, / In favour and pre-eminence' (V, 659-661), Satan is certainly high in station. His tragic flaw, however, is much more problematic to establish. Initially, his tragic flaw appears to be 'pride and worse ambition' (IV, 40), however upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that pride is merely a consequence of his true tragic flaw, which is instead his desire for self. A J A Waldock's statement that 'in the midst of light and love, of song and dance, he could find nothing more interesting than his own prestige'² is ridiculous in the extreme, particularly since his position as foremost amongst angels is never under threat. Instead, it is the far more sinister prospect of being 'united as one individual soul' (V, 610) under the Son's reign that Satan

¹Aristotle, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Vol. 23*, translated by W.H. Fyfe (London: Harvard University Press, 1932) Ebook, The Annenberg CPB, 143a

² A. J. A. Waldock, *Paradise Lost And Its Critics* (Cambridge: University Press, 1947) p. 73

your dauntless virtue' (IX, 693-694), promising that it will not 'incense his ire /For such petty trespass' (IX, 692-693). The similarities between him and Eve here momentarily causes him to slip into his own personal contemplations, suggesting that he believed his bravery in establishing his own individuality would be met with mercy, even praise. This expectation reveals that Satan's disobedience was not motivated by any malicious feeling, but instead his own heroic 'dauntless virtue' (IX, 694) in independence.

Aside from his tragic flaw, Satan undoubtedly possesses many other attributes we tend to associate with tragic heroes, particularly the courage demonstrated as he braves the 'dark, unbottomed, infinite abyss' (II, 405), something no other angel dares. Likewise, when confronted by Sin and Death, he is undeterred by their fearsome appearance. His indomitable spirit in the face of an adversary so much greater than himself can only be admired, as he refuses 'to bow and sue for grace' (I, 111), preferring to wage a hopeless war than fully submit. Rather than pride, his unwillingness to repent 'the Sunday /What feigned submission swore' (IV, 95-96) demonstrates the kind of honour usually associated with Hellenic heroes. Moreover, Satan, like so many other Hellenic heroes (e.g. Perseus, Achilles, Hercules), is more than human and has something of the divine about him.

Although in this respect they differ, there are many parallels between Satan and Sophocles' Oedipus (arguably the archetypal tragic hero), who similarly struggles against a supreme force, in his case fate itself. A connection between these two characters is hinted at in Book II through the bizarre incestuous relationship between Satan and Sin, reminiscent of Oedipus and his mother Jocasta. In both texts, their initial presentation as strong statesmen and charismatic leaders is immediately unsettling due to the level of devotion they inspire in others. In Satan's case, his followers are broken and defeated, 'yet to their general's voice they soon obeyed' (I, 337). He seems to have almost taken on the role of a deity to his vapid followers as he is described as 'their great commander, godlike shapes and forms excelling human'. Such devotion towards the great antagonist of contemporary