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Why Did Milton Portray Sin in the Way He Did in Book II of *Paradise Lost*?

Paradise Lost features Satan as a dynamic character, with particular emphasis on how he employs logic and reason using the newly fallen mind. Due to how recognizable Satan is as a result of the reader's own fallen state, his assertion that God was complicit in the fall of mankind and at fault for the creation of evil in a divine universe is convincing to some readers. However, the portrayal of Sin in Book II of this epic poem re-establishes Satan's agency and malice. In this section, Satan interacts with the allegory of Sin in its personified form and her description of her birth and the sexual violence she is eternally subject to displays Sin as a victim and product of Satan's malevolence, rather than as an originator of evil herself. In order to analyze Milton's representation of Sin, I have presented a series of more focused questions to deconstruct the allegory and assign significance to each aspect of Sin's origin story.

Satan's abstraction from his own evil — embodied in the allegory of Sin — begs the question of why malice is portrayed in two separate forms, and what this severance suggests about the relationship or hierarchy between these two characters in *Paradise Lost*. In the first interaction between Satan and Sin after the fall of the archangel Lucifer, Satan is unable to recognize Sin — “Hast thou forgot me then, and do I seem/ Now in thine eyes so foul, once deemed so fair/ In heaven...” (747-749); his perception, as well as his mind in its entirety, has been permanently altered by the fall from heaven and the creation of hell. Sin informs her maker that she spontaneously emerged from the “bold conspiracy against heaven's king” (751) that

Satan and his evil counterparts were waging. This conspiracy resulted in the “sudden...[birth of] miserable pain” (752); according to the OED, the term “sudden” not only refers to actions, events, or conditions happening without warning or premonition (sudden, adj. 1a), but also spurred from emotions or impulses (sudden, adj. 1b). The former of these definitions suggest that there was no precedent for or antecedent to Sin’s existence in the universe. Sin also recalls that her emergence “surprised” (753) Satan, which similarly implies that Lucifer had no understanding of the consequences of waging war in heaven, nor did he conceive of what such a rebellion could yield. Furthermore, Sin being born from Satan’s impulsive evil signifies that Sin did not will her own existence; rather, Sin was a direct result of Satan’s decision to rebel against God, which assigns culpability to Satan for the presence of sin in the world. Furthermore, Sin as separate from her maker initially implies to readers that she possesses agency, presumably to effect misery on others, but Milton frustrates that assumption by portraying Sin as not malicious in and of herself. The externalization of Sin from Satan demonstrates that Satan’s moral failures produced Sin, rather than Sin independently willing her own being.

As Sin recounts her own origin story, the similarities between the Greek goddess Athena and the allegory of Sin are brought to the forefront: what does this proposed contrast between wisdom and knowledge indicate about Sin’s position in the newly ruptured universe? At the moment of Sin’s birth, “darkness” (754) — which denotes the total or partial absence of light (darkness, n. 2a) — ensued, thus marking the first moment in the universe in which heaven’s light was obscured. Sin was born from the “left side” (755) of Lucifer’s mind, and emerged fully grown as a “goddess armed” (757), which parallels the birth of Athena — the daughter of Zeus and the Greek goddess of wisdom. Due to the simultaneity of Sin’s birth and Lucifer’s resolve to rebel “against heaven’s king” (751), Sin symbolizes a kind of knowledge. Milton positions

Athena and Sin in direct relation to one another so as to highlight the contrast between heavenly wisdom and fallen knowledge. More specifically, Sin's symbolic association with knowledge, by way of comparison to Athena, solidifies her knowledge as the direct result of questioning and transgressing against divine law. Evil remains theoretical until it is experienced, and Sin was born into the universe as the embodiment of suffering, which signals the new possibility for others to experience the same suffering she was condemned to endure since the moment of her creation. In this sense, Sin was born into a fallen state, and was thus not granted any free will, nor any ability to enact change. Thus, she embodies complete depravity to Milton, who conceives of free will as the only space beyond God's omniscience and omnipotence. Sin epitomizes the ultimate consequence of exercising one's free will to act against God; according to Milton's conception, free will is a blessing bestowed by God, but that gift places the responsibility of choice onto the individual. Sin represents the grave dangers of free will — a testament to Lucifer's unawareness of the precarity of his position in heaven.

Another unorthodox aspect of Milton's allegorical portrayal of Sin is that her spontaneous birth occurred in heaven: what does Sin's physical form in heaven indicate about Lucifer's fall from grace? Sin states that she resembled her maker "in shape and countenance bright" (756), meaning that she appeared angelic and "heavenly fair" (757) just as Lucifer did before his fall from heaven. The term "countenance" refers to mere appearance or show, as well as feigned or assumed appearance (OED countenance, n. 2b), which reveals, through Sin's similarly deceptive aspect, that Lucifer's angelic appearance in heaven was illusory and served to conceal the malice within his mind. Furthermore, Sin describes that her spontaneous birth was met with "amazement" (758) — the sudden feeling of fear or alarm (OED amazement, n. 3) — from "All host of heaven" (759) and thus they understood her as a "portentous" (760-761), or ominous,

omen. The people of heaven “recoiled afraid” (759) at the first sight of her and named her Sin at that moment, thus signifying that the term “sin” spontaneously emerged for such a notion had never before existed in the universe. Notably, Sin emerged from Lucifer’s mind in heaven and prior to his fall. The existence of Sin allowed for the creation of hell and the severance of the universe into good and evil domains. However, Lucifer, not yet recognizing Sin as the product of his own intellectual evil and moral failure, was allured by Sin’s “attractive graces” (762). The word “grace” most often denotes a quality of God that is reflective of His benevolence (OED grace, n. 1a); in this instance however, Milton suggests that “grace” has now changed irrevocably in meaning as it no longer possesses solely benevolent usages and connotations. Due to the fact that “grace” can now be imbued with deception, Sin “pleased” Satan’s desires and “averse” temptations using her “attractive graces” (762-763). Satan subsequently raped Sin with “such joy” (765), which not only constitutes the first instance of lust and sexual violence, but also led to the conception of a “growing burden” (767) in Sin’s womb – what would become Death in the universe. Moreover, Sin as the “perfect image” (764) of Satan denotes that she was wholly and completely (OED perfect, adj. 2a) reflective of him; in other words, any malevolence associated with Sin, both the allegory and the act it represents, is in actuality derived from Satan.

Sin describes Death as her “inbred enemy” (785) who was “made to destroy”(787), which not only demonstrates that Death is not subservient to Sin, but forces the question of what their offspring symbolize in the newly formed domain of hell. Death’s ceaseless pursuit of Sin is described as “Inflamed with lust [rather than] rage” (791), signifying his insatiable need to consume and possess her. Death’s “forcible and foul” (793) rape of Sin produces “yelling monsters” (795) that are “hourly conceived/ And hourly born” (796-797), and whose “ceaseless cry” (795) reverberates throughout hell. These terrible creatures emerge from Sin’s womb only to

return shortly thereafter “and howl and gnaw/ [Her] bowels, their repast” (799-800); repast refers to food or nourishment (OED repast, n. 3), thus Sin’s womb, bowels, and body serve as the only source of sustenance to her offspring. Furthermore, these incestual creations are born with “conscious terrors” (801), with “conscious” in this instance referring to that which is present to the mind, or resulting from the possession of awareness or consciousness (OED conscious, adj. 4). The terrors of Sin’s offspring result from their possession of knowledge at birth — the same knowledge that God decreed forbidden to Adam and Eve. Knowledge denotes the sum of what is known (OED knowledge, n. 9b), and using that definition, the knowledge that Sin, her offspring, and Satan possess is the awareness that both good and evil exist in the universe. Due to Sin’s knowledge of God and the kingdom of heaven, her perpetual suffering is made all the more miserable. Her incessant pain and agony is symptomatic of the fallen world and the fallen mind, and underscores the depth of suffering experienced in hell with the awareness of heavenly bliss.

In Sin’s sorrowful description of the birth of Death, her wretched state takes on a new dimension as distinctly feminine: why did Milton portray Sin as female, and what role does sexual violence play in the allegory’s design and impact? The latter part of Sin’s speech to Satan portrays the horrible degree of sexual violence that Sin is subject to by Death and their offspring. Sin’s complete inability to stop Death’s need to consume epitomizes her powerlessness and victimhood. The allegory of Sin is gendered as female and describing herself as the “dismayed” (792) mother of Death positions Sin as the anthesis of Eve — divine beauty and grace personified, as well as the mother of all humanity. Sin is the mother of all derivatives of malice and evil, and yet is only so because of Death’s “hourly” (796) rape of her. By portraying Sin in such a wretched state, the hierarchy between men and women that Milton showcased in his description of Eve as subservient to both Adam and God is shown to persist in hell as well. Furthermore,

Sin's remark that "Hell trembled at the hideous name [of Death], and sighed/ From all her caves" (788-789) demonstrates that hell is also gendered as female. The establishment of hell as a female domain may be an instance of Milton superimposing his own patriarchal understanding of the world onto the narrative of *Paradise Lost*, which would inform Sin as the embodiment of all negative attributes associated with femininity. However, Sin is plagued by sexual violence that results in "sorrow infinite" (797) from which she finds no "rest or intermission" (802), thus solidifying that she has no ability to exercise free will. Her debased and dejected state, therefore, did not result from her own depraved mind or choices. Sin has been condemned by Satan to endure a physical existence characterized by the complete absence of choice. Milton's depiction of Sin as female forces a reckoning with assumptions concerning women's greater susceptibility to evil temptations. By showcasing Sin as a victimized woman, Milton rejects the notion that sin has agency of its own; it is rather through an individual's free will that sin becomes present.

Completing this focused rumination on Sin and how her character reflects the gendered divisions present in both the divine and fallen worlds has proven to me that Sin embodies the consequences of using one's free will to act against God. Sin also serves as a clear indication of Satan's culpability in the creation of evil in a divine universe. However, I am still unclear as to the rationale behind Milton's choice to portray the ramifications of wrongdoing in a woman. This narrative choice may reflect Milton's subscription to a patriarchal world view, but portraying Sin as a woman does make her dejection and wretchedness more impactful to me. Sin's suffering is poignantly bodily and physical, and I wonder if that degree of sorrow and agony could only be represented through a female body. Regardless, Sin does demonstrate that she does not share Satan's evil intent and by doing so, she reveals Satan's initial unwillingness to recognize his own malice, thereby establishing the fallen mind as fickle and reluctant to admit personal fault.

In bold conspiracy against heaven's king,
All on a sudden miserable pain
Surprised thee, dim thine eyes, and dizzy swum
In darkness, while thy head flames thick and fast
Threw forth, till on the left side opening wide,
Likest to thee in shape and countenance bright,
Then shining heavenly fair, a goddess armed
Out of thy head I sprung: amazement seized
All the host of heaven; back they recoiled afraid
At first, and called me Sin, and for a sign
Portentous held me; but familiar grown,
I pleased, and with attractive graces won
The most averse, thee chiefly, who full oft
Thyself in me thy perfect image viewing
Becam'st enamoured, and such joy thou took'st
With me in secret, that my womb conceived
A growing burden. (751-767)

...but he my inbred enemy
Forth issued, brandishing his fatal dart
Made to destroy: I fled, and cried out Death;
Hell trembled at the hideous name, and sighed
From all her caves, and back resounded Death.

I fled, but he pursued (though more, it seems,
Inflamed with lust than rage) and swifter far,
Me overtook his mother all dismayed,
And in embraces forcible and foul
Engendering with me, of that rape begot
These yelling monsters that with ceaseless cry
Surround me, as thou sawest, hourly conceived
And hourly born, with sorrow infinite
To me, for when they list into the womb
That bred them they return, and howl and gnaw
My bowels, their repast; then bursting forth
Afresh with conscious terrors vex me round,
That rest or intermission none I find. (785-802)