

Classical Learning in *Paradise Regained*

John Milton is a celebrated author who was much invested in the social, political, and religious context of England in the seventeenth century. He was an active civil participant and fervent social commentator. He wrote and had published tracts making clear his republican, protestant perspective. He was also a tremendously gifted poet, able to work as freely in Latin or Italian as in his native English. His most widely known work is the *Paradise Lost*, a twelve book work in blank verse, which placed the biblical origin of man and his resultant fall in an epic context. The lesser known companion work is the *Paradise Regained*, also in blank verse but a third the size of its predecessor. In this smaller volume is dramatized the Temptation of Christ by Satan as contained in the Gospel of Luke. Milton's love of classical literature is evident in both the epics. Of interest for this paper is the second of two epic similes at the end of the *Paradise Regained*.

To whom thus Jesus: also it is written,
Tempt not the Lord thy God, he said and stood.
But Satan smitten with amazement fell
As when Earths Son Antæus (to compare
Small things with greatest) in Irassa strove
With Joves Alcides, and oft foil'd still rose,
Receiving from his mother Earth new strength,
Fresh from his fall, and fiercer grapple joyn'd,
Throttl'd at length in th' Air, expir'd and fell;
So after many a foil the Tempter proud,
Renewing fresh assaults, amidst his pride
Fell whence he stood to see his Victor fall.

And as that Theban Monster that propos'd
Her riddle, and him, who solv'd it not, devour'd;
That once found out and solv'd, for grief and spight
Cast her self headlong from th' Ismenian steep,
So strook with dread and anguish fell the Fiend¹

These similes follow and describe Christ's victory over Satan who is cast down from the pinnacle of the Temple . Then the respective combatants and the result of their battle are compared to prominent contests from pagan literature. Christ is first likened unto Jove's Alcides who threw down Antaeus (Satan), having separated him from nourishing Earth, strangling him in the air, and casting him down defeated. The next comparison is to the Theban Monster and her conqueror, unnamed in the poem.

Milton was a brilliant classicist, and Oedipus is a strong and prominent figure in classical mythology, known universally for his unwitting transgression against the order of nature in his conjugal relationship. Such a polarizing figure is not unintentionally situated in any circumstance, least of all in comparison with a sacred personage. In this paper I will suggest that Milton intentionally likened Christ to Oedipus as a rejection of Trinitarian doctrine as defined in the creeds of ancient Christianity (the Nicene and the Athanasian). The comparison is offered so as to make visible a perceived similarity between the union of the Godhead as outlined in the aforementioned creeds and the blurring of the roles of father and son in the conjugal violation of Oedipus; in effect, Milton presents the simile as the unavoidable conclusion of a doctrine with which he disagrees.

Bibliography

Shawcross, John T. 1971. *The Complete Poetry of John Milton*, New York: Doubleday

¹ Paradise Regained, 4.560-76