

The War Won with Words, and the Country Rebuilt by Them

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The downfall of many leaders throughout the annals of history is best attributed to their failure to understand the paramount importance of confronting foes with the use of a pen, rather than a sword. European politics underwent a monumental transformation in the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century due to the sudden, widespread development of literary comprehension amongst the middle and lower classes in European society. As a result, the English Civil War became one of the first major conflicts in British history to rely heavily upon the influence of written media to determine the outcome of the war. Wary adversaries from both Parliamentary and Royalist allegiances adopted the use of literature to bring awareness to controversial issues, to draw the support of sympathetic audiences and to sling propaganda against opposing forces. Upon close inspection of the tangible impacts literature had on British citizens prior to, during and immediately after the civil war, it is undeniable that the triumph of the Parliamentarians was inextricably linked to their use of literary works as tools for dismantling King Charles I and his Royalist constituents, and that restructuring British society in the war's aftermath was also facilitated by literary contributions such as *Paradise Lost* by John Milton.

With the advent of Johannes Gutenberg's printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, the ability to read and write, a skillset which had previously been exclusive to the privileged classes, became readily accessible to a broader demographic in Europe. Printed text could be affordably reproduced, which accomplished three things: it reduced the cost of books, increased the number of books in circulation, and made it easier for less affluent authors to publish their creations on a reasonable budget. Less than half a century after the introduction of the printing press "male literacy in England slowly and steadily increased from ten percent in 1500 to forty-five percent in 1714 and to sixty percent in 1750. Female literacy in England increased from a mere one percent in 1500 to twenty-five percent in 1714 and to forty percent in 1750" (Brewer 155). This unprecedented change in social dynamics meant that a freer exchange of ideas could now take place, and more careful analysis could be given to previously overlooked idiosyncrasies in law, religion, and human interaction.

Meanwhile, several politicians embraced the spread of literacy once they realized that they now had a vehicle for communicating with (and in many instances, effectively infiltrating and manipulating) the rapidly emerging European middle class, as well as some members of lower class society. Supporters of King Charles I were certainly privy to the fact that literature

swiftly became an indispensable component of ensuring a Royalist position of authority: "During the first half of the sixteenth century, the English gentry came to realize that its continued access to the controls of power would depend less on birth and military prowess and more on literacy and learning" (Levy 11). Cavalier poets, such as Richard Lovelace and Robert Herrick, contributed their artful talents to garnering support for King Charles I, filling volume upon volume with verses dedicated to the royal family in the hopes that their words would inspire loyalty to the sovereignty of the crown.

However, by the same token, the Royalists came to fear the revolutionary potential of literature as texts began to surface that called for a purging of government corruption under the reign of King Charles I. A plethora of Puritan authors, all firm supporters of Parliamentary ideals, used their writing as a means of releasing subversive commentary on the political turmoil that wrought England during the seventeenth century (and in particular, the religious implications of said political discord). In retaliation to the publishing of these offensive texts, King Charles I imprisoned several Parliamentary authors for their transgressions against his kingship. Men like John Bastwick and William Prynne, who were at the forefront of the Puritan authors' rebellion, "had their ears cut off as punishment, and to serve as a warning against future impudence" (Purkiss 201). Ironically, the actions of King Charles I only served to further his own dissention in public opinion, as many outspoken citizens erupted into a furious tirade against the king's blatant tyranny, thereby instigating the first major battles of the English Civil War in the 1640s.

As the English Civil War continued on for the next decade, Parliamentary leaders came to appreciate the benefit of supplementing their strides on the battlefield with a steady flow of new publications to generate positive public regard for their position in the war. For the first two years of the contention for supremacy, things remained relatively stagnant as both factions faced off exclusively in physical combat. As this war of attrition began to drag on, Oliver Cromwell, though he would later become a hugely controversial figure during the English Commonwealth, proved himself to be an invaluable asset for rallying support behind Parliamentary efforts, ingeniously enlisting several authors to publish material in Scotland and Ireland in an attempt to position himself for a pincer-attack on King Charles I: "from 1654 to 1655 the tide began to drastically shift in favor of Parliamentary support in the British Isles. In the span of less than a year, Parliament expanded its favorability to nearly 80 percent of Britain's population" (Purkiss 23). In subsequent years, it became increasingly evident that a Royalist defeat had been secured by Cromwell's effective leadership and refocusing of political tactics.

Unfortunately, the brilliance exhibited by Cromwell during Parliament's turnabout years of the English Civil War has been eclipsed by his controversial actions as Lord Protector of the short-lived British Commonwealth.

Thankfully, there remains yet another element to literature's importance as a cultural device: for post-war/trauma recovery, literature provides ever-vigilant scrutiny as the victors of war begin their attempt to restructure society. In many ways, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* represents a foray into the dismay experienced by Parliamentarians who, while triumphant over the Royalists, were forced to witness Cromwell's fall from grace as his religious fanaticism and extremist views turned him against the Scottish and Irish supporters he had adopted during the civil war.

In recent years, a number of scholars have begun a discussion for how, in *Paradise Lost*, John Milton creates strong parallels between Satan's defiance of God and Cromwell's dangerous and irrational ambition. Gabriel Roberts, a graduate of the University of Cambridge and recipient of several academic distinctions for his dissertations on the subject of British Literature, discusses Milton's epic poem in an article entitled "Milton's Political Context." Roberts assesses the political landscape during Milton's time and how Milton challenged the political fallacies committed by Cromwell. He suggests that, "Satan's speeches provide the strongest example of a distinctively political voice appearing in the poem... he can be seen to represent something of Milton and Cromwell in their revolutionary struggles against the king" (Roberts 3). Though Satan, like Cromwell, starts out the story as a sympathetic character, perhaps even one with admirable qualities, Milton "weave[s] subtle flaws into Satan's arguments" (Roberts 2). Those discernible flaws and logical inconsistencies represent Milton's own disillusionment with Cromwell's leadership. Roberts continues by saying that "Milton strikes a fascinating balance between making Satan convincing and making sure that his arguments are misleading" (Roberts 3). After evaluating *Paradise Lost* in light of Roberts's dissection of Milton's characterizations, it is apparent that the character of Eve is set up to be deceived by Satan in much the same way that Milton believes he was deceived by Cromwell.

Still, while other researchers agree that Milton's writing indeed served a purpose in aiding British reconstruction, they do not perceive that Milton's agenda intended to be interpreted as attacking Cromwell. It's entirely possible that Milton sought to use *Paradise Lost* as a way to liberate the few remaining Royalists from their unyielding admiration of King Charles I, thus allowing the British Isles to unify cohesively under Parliamentarian ideals. While most scholars are in congruence with that fact that "Milton's conception...has always been recognized as political in nature," it would appear that instead of being written about Cromwell, "Charles was the tyrant with whose ways Milton was most familiar" (Bennett 441). *Paradise Lost* was likely written in rebuttal to "a royalist publication appearing shortly after Charles's execution that attempted to picture Charles as

a Christlike martyr-king," an inaccurate depiction that had little logical or historical substantiation considering the well-documented tyranny of King Charles I, and one that spat in the face of Milton's own ideological standing (Bennett 442).

Taking both possibilities into consideration while reading Milton's *Paradise Lost*, both sides hold some level of feasibility. In fact, many clues suggest that Milton's rhetoric aims at jointly attacking both Charles and Cromwell, venting his frustrations with persistent Royalists while simultaneously lamenting Cromwell's betrayal of his own faction. In *Paradise Lost*, part of Satan's soliloquy in Book I appears to directly satirize the Royalist party and the abuses of King Charles I: "Be it so, since he / Who now is sov'reign can dispose and bid / What shall be right" (Milton I.245-247). In this instance, Milton is undoubtedly concerned with exposing and documenting the crimes of Charles, using Satan's powerless state against God as a representation of Parliament's powerlessness against Charles during the Eleven Years' Tyranny. However, Milton's later depiction of Satan during the manipulation of Eve echoes Milton's resentment towards Cromwell:

Queen of this universe, do not believe
Those rigid threats of death: ye shall not die
How should ye? By the fruit? It gives you life
To knowledge. By the Threat'ner? Look on me
Me who have touched and tasted, yet both live.
(Milton IX.684-688)

Though Eve knows Satan's suggested path is treacherous and in clear defiance of God, she allows herself to be beguiled by his unfounded, heretic logic. Cromwell, likewise, was responsible for beguiling an entire nation and using his newfound affluence as a victor of the English Civil War to commit heinous persecutions against Protestants under the guise of political and religious reform. In some ways, Milton's remorse for trusting Cromwell is also represented through the pitiable moment of epiphany when Satan reaches the conclusion that he committed an awful travesty by attempting to usurp God's dominion:

I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere;
Till pride and worse ambition threw me down
Warring in Heav'n against Heav'n's matchless
King: Ah wherefore! He deserved no such return.
(Milton IV.39-42)

As a Puritan, Milton's message of the importance of repentance shines through all of the turmoil present in his poem. Satan remarks that "the easiest recompense" for his crimes would be to simply seek God's forgiveness, and yet he condemns himself by belligerently refusing to "afford him praise" (Milton IV.46-47). Much like in the tragedy of Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, Satan's only obstacle in reconnecting with God is himself; a typical folly of man that Milton understands thoroughly. Thus, *Paradise Lost* may be viewed as the repentance given by

Milton on behalf of Parliamentarians and Puritans alike for their failure to ostracize Cromwell. In any case, the fact remains that Milton's work has undeniably impacted historical perceptions of both Cromwell and King Charles I by elucidating their more contemptible attributes.

Since the English Civil War, written media has seen extensive application in nearly every major conflict of the last few centuries—from the compelling arguments made by abolitionist authors during the American Civil War, to the wartime propaganda that fueled anti-communist sentiments during the Cold War. Now, more than ever, politicians find themselves relying on media exposure to develop the supportive base needed to drive themselves to their goals. Literature is meant to engage critical thinking and bring awareness to concerning issues, hopefully steering audiences to act in favor of certain individuals, principals or values. Authors, journalists and historians all play a vital role in providing context to the way we view events in our past, offering us choices for how we identify with the reality of our present and constructing platforms for advancing society into the future. This concept was thoroughly understood by individuals such as Oliver Cromwell and John Milton, whose literary contributions had a staggering impact on the sociopolitical landscape of their era.

Annotated Bibliography

- Bennett, Joan. "God, Satan, and King Charles: Milton's Royal Portraits." *PMLA* 92.3 (1977): 441-57. Print.
Joan Bennett is the founder of the University of Delaware's undergraduate research program and a two-time recipient of the James Holly Hanford award for her essays on John Milton. I found Bennett's insight intriguing as it took a position contrary to that of another of my authors (Gabriel Roberts), providing some clash of ideas for how Milton's work may be interpreted. I used Bennett's analysis in conjunction with Roberts's to develop my own evaluation of the text.
- Brewer, John. *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1997. Print.
John Brewer holds a Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge, and has conducted extensive research on the subject of English cultural developments in the time period discussed in my paper. My primary reason for using Brewer's text is to offer statistical backing to support my claim that the period in which the English politics began to adopt written media as a viable tool correlates directly to the growth of literacy in Britain.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 9th ed. Vol. B. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. N. pag. Print.
- Levy, F. J. "How Information Spread among the Gentry, 1550-1640." *Journal of British Studies* 21.2 (1982): 11-34. Print.
The article cited above, published by F.J. Levy in the *Journal of British Studies*, is integral to showing that the wealthy and privileged classes in British society took notice to the change in attitude towards the importance of education, and that they wouldn't be able to maintain power simply through birthright (especially with the emergence of a middle class that filled to gap between the polarized extremes of fabulously luxurious living and utter poverty). Levy is an expert historian on the subject of Tudor-era British politics.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Comp. Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: Odyssey, 1935. Print.
- Purkiss, Diane. *The English Civil War: A People's History*. London: Harper Perennial, 2006. Print.
Diane Purkiss holds the position of Fellow and Tutor of English at Keble College, Oxford. Her studies encompass the entirety of the English Civil War, up until the instatement of King Charles II. I used some of the historical and statistical data compiled by Purkiss in order to demonstrate the tangible impact that literature had on determining a Parliamentary victory over King Charles I and the Royalists.
- Roberts, Gabriel. "Milton's Political Context." *Darkness Visible*. University of Cambridge, May 2008. Web. 24 Nov. 2012. <<http://www.christs.cam.ac.uk/darknessvisible/politics.html>>.
Like John Brewer, Gabriel Roberts is also a graduate from the University of Cambridge. He has been recognized by several academic journals for his contributions to the analysis of literature as a component of British politics in the era my paper discusses. Roberts offered a launching pad to begin my investigation into the nature of Milton's *Paradise Lost* as a political allegory. His work also provided some historical context for Milton's position as a Puritan Parliamentarian, and how his religious and political affiliations can be readily identified in the poem.