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# Absalom And Achitophel; And Milton's Paradise Lost

John W. Crawford

John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the epitome of epic poetry in the English language, exerted considerable influence in Milton's day. In 1681, fourteen years after its publication, another great English poet, John Dryden, composed what is perhaps the outstanding example of English political satire in poetry, *Absalom and Achitophel*. Although critics have recognized the influence of Milton on Dryden's work in general, little attention has been called to the relationship of these two poems in particular. It is my opinion that Dryden's allusions to *Paradise Lost* and the similarities and parallels in the two poems make a study of the influence of the epic on *Absalom and Achitophel* revealing.

It is general knowledge that Dryden admired Milton and knew him personally. An unknown early biographer called Dryden Milton's "familiar learned acquaintance" and recorded the much-discussed incident of his visiting Milton; Dryden asked permission "to put his *Paradise-lost* into a drama in rhyme: Mr. Milton received him civilly, and told him he would give him leave to tagge his Verses."<sup>1</sup> In 1677, Dryden published a rhymed five-act play, *The State of Innocence and Fall of Man*, based on *Paradise Lost*; his thorough knowledge of the epic is obvious.

A. W. Verral suggests that occasional archaisms, foreign to Dryden's own natural style, point directly to the influence of the English "epics" *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost* — this last then just coming, with Dryden's help, into fame and vogue. He quotes line 373 of *Absalom and Achitophel*, "Him staggering so when Hell's dire agent found," pointing out that such an inversion is

... not common in Dryden, nor is it in the manner proper to a narrative about contemporary politicians, or historical personages as such; it is obviously Miltonic and a Latinism and so carries with it a suggestion of Milton's Satan.<sup>2</sup>

Although various other critics, such as Raymond D. Havans,<sup>3</sup> P. S. Havens,<sup>4</sup> E. Yardley,<sup>5</sup> B. A. Wright,<sup>6</sup> A. J. A. Waldock,<sup>7</sup> and Bonamy Dobree<sup>8</sup> have commented on Dryden's admiration for *Paradise Lost* and have noted some similarities, none of them goes into any detail with comparisons. The only comprehensive treatment of Milton's influence on Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* is found in Professor Anne Ferry's book *Milton and the Miltonic Dryden*.<sup>9</sup> The early portions of the book deal specifically with Dryden's epic satire. Miss Ferry's purpose is to show here and elsewhere how Dryden reiterates the claims of Milton for the role of the poet as a moral voice in the restoration of human society. Though I must agree that a moral tone is evidently present and thus

strengthens the epic style, Professor Ferry seems to be placing Dryden on a much higher plane than most critics allow him. Milton's epic may imply eternal longings, but Dryden's feet seem to be firmly planted on earth. Can we overlook the fact, as Allardyce Nicoll, so aptly reminds us,<sup>10</sup> that Dryden's official position as Poet Laureate required his defense of the King? Further, are we to forget Dryden's staunch conservative political stand which comes to the forefront over the Exclusion Bill introduced by the Whigs, who were led by Shaftesbury? Dryden agreed with Charles II and the Tories at large that one should not set aside the constitutional principle of succession. The Whigs wanted to do just that, as Achitophel so effectively argues in the poem when he tempts innocent Absalom. The satire may be moral in tone, but it is satire with a contemporary purpose. As Professor Bredvold suggests, *Absalom and Achitophel* is a statement of Tory political doctrine which emphasizes that "Government must save human nature from itself."<sup>11</sup> Dryden's argument reassumes the theory of divine right. And for his time this simply meant there must be in government an ultimate authority; i.e., King Charles II. It is my contention that Dryden imitates Milton's epic in various ways in order to bring home to the public the kind of evil in Whig ideology that destroys national unity. Dryden evidently felt that a sufficiently persuasive writing would create a climate of public opinion strong enough to prove Shaftesbury guilty. With the culprit locked in the Tower, all the Tories needed was time to stir the public and the anonymous satire *Absalom and Achitophel* which appeared in November, 1681, was meant to do just that.

A study of the two poems under comparison reveals extensive influence, not only in style, as in the Miltonic inversion quoted by Verrall, but in the use of Biblical materials, similarity of phraseology, and especially in the parallels of characterization, i.e., Satan and Achitophel, Eve and Absalom, and God and David, some of which enter into Professor Ferry's treatment, but often in different ways from mine.

The most obvious similarity is the selection of Biblical materials as the basis of the poems. Milton chooses the expulsion of the rebel angels from heaven, the creation, and the fall of Adam and Eve; Dryden, because of his more earthly, more limited purpose, selects only the story of King David and his rebellious son Absalom, but therein lies the parallel with Milton's epic. Both choose Biblical incidents reflecting conflict between subject and lord. Each makes effective use of the Biblical stories chosen in achieving quite different objectives. Although the evil of unjustifiable rebellion becomes the focus of both works, Milton's poem makes no pretense of portraying objective events, and as Merritt Hughes tells us, "Milton was too much a humanist and too much interested in the historical truth to be found in the Bible" to be content with sheer allegory.<sup>12</sup> In casting his persuasive story in the mold of evil temptation, Dryden attempts to bring home to his audience the evil in Shaftesbury and thus the evil in the Wig cause.

Dryden not only begins with similar subject matter; his descriptive passages seem to echo Milton's. An outstanding example among several occurs in Book I of *Paradise Lost*. Here the "Lake with liquid fire" (229)<sup>13</sup> into which the apostate angels fall, "o'erwhelm'd with Floods and Whirlwinds of tempestous fire," (76-77), "Groveling and prostrate on yon Lake of Fire" (280), may have influenced Dryden's description of the

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Popish Plot, the contemporary backdrop for the satire, introduced in the poem interestingly enough with the rhetorical question". . . but who can know / How far the *Dev'l* and Jebusites may go?" (132-133). Dryden chooses his words carefully as he creates a picture of the Whigs acting as a swollen river moving its way downstream with hostile force:

For as when raging fevers boil the blood,  
The standing lake soon floats into a flood,  
And ev'ry hostile humor which before  
Slept quiet in its channels, bubbles o'er:  
So sev'ral factions from this first ferment  
Work up to foam, and threat the government. (136-141)<sup>14</sup>

The fiery lake and the boiling blood which had been a "standing lake," the use of the word *flood* by both poets, and the disturbed waters, "Floods and whirlwinds of tempestuous fire" and blood which "bubbles o'er," fermenting and foaming evoke similar images. Also, the fallen angels arise to plot new mischief against the heavens, while the plotters "foam," as overwrought they seek to "threat the government."

Perhaps even more important than the Biblical subject matter and the common descriptive passages in the two works are the parallels of characters. Many parallels can be drawn between Satan and Achitophel. It is especially cogent that Dryden patterned his Achitophel after Satan because he wants to persuade his audience that Shaftesbury (Achitophel) deceived Monmouth and in so doing acts as the force of evil tempting man to go astray, just as Satan appears deceitfully to tempt Eve. Many parallels can be drawn between Satan and Achitophel. One set of passages reveals the deceitful nature of both characters. In Book IV Satan is called the "Artificer of fraud; and was the first/That practis'd falsehood under saintly show. . . ." (121-122). Dryden says of the plotters,

Of these the false Achitophel was first  
A name to all succeeding ages curst.  
For close designs and crooked counsels fit . . .  
(150-152)

The words *first* and *false* connect the two passages and parallel the false nature of both Achitophel and Satan.

There are several striking similarities in the plots of Satan and Achitophel and in their motivation, planning, deceit, logic, method, and the unsuccessful outcome of their evil plans. To begin with, Satan's ambition is to replace God, and Achitophel's desire is to establish the weak Absalom as a figurehead so that he can be the power behind the throne. Both are determined to achieve power no matter what the price. Satan says, "To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:/Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n" (I.262-263); Achitophel is equally determined: "In friendship false, implacable in hate;/Resolv'd to ruin or to rule the state" (173-174).

Satan makes his move carefully. He assembles the angels under the pretense of



preparing “Fit entertainment to receive our King/The great *Messiah* and his new commands (V.690-691). In similar fashion, Achitophel manipulates Absalom subtly, turning Absalom’s praise of his father’s goodness to his own purposes: “Not that your father’s mildness I contemn,/But manly force becomes the diadem” (V.381-382). When Absalom speaks of David’s generosity to his people, Achitophel agrees, then transforms the compliment into criticism:

‘Tis true, he grants the people all they crave,  
And more perhaps than subjects ought to have;  
For lavish grants suppose a monarch tame,  
And more his goodness than his wit proclaim.  
(381-384)

In both Satan and Achitophel the combination of intellect and evil is devastatingly effective.

Neither hesitates to lie, implanting a suspicion and distrust of the ruling power in their unsuspecting followers. Both men and angels panic at the threat of insecurity hinted by the wily schemers, and they fall into waiting snares. Satan “infus’d/Bad influence into the unwary breast/Of his Associate . . .” (694-696) and casts between/Ambiguous words and Jealousies, to sound/Or taint integrity” (V.702-704) as he raises questions about the additional authority given the Son. He fears “New Laws from him, who reigns, new minds may raise/In us who serve, new counsels to debate/What doubtful may ensue . . .” (V.679-681). Achitophel wields the same weapon of rumor and unfounded fears to set the stage for Absalom’s bid for the throne — a move which is supposed to save England from what many considered to be her worst foe, Roman Catholicism:

The wish’d occasion of the Plot that he takes;  
Some circumstances finds, but more he makes.  
By buzzing emissaries fills the ears  
Of list’ning crowds with jealousies and fears  
Of arbitrary counsels, brought to light,  
And proves the King himself a Jebusite.  
(207-214)

Satan and Achitophel use as a front the same popular cause: freedom, equality, the rights of man (and angels). Achitophel uses the same kind of psychology as Satan in winning the apostate angels. As Dryden comments, “and pity never ceases to be shown/To him who makes the people’s wrongs his own” (724-725), Satan speaks movingly to his audience:

Will ye submit your necks, and choose to bend  
The supple knee? Ye will not, if I trust  
To know ye right, or if ye know yourselves  
By none, and if not equal all, yet free

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Equally free; for Orders and Degrees  
Jar not with liberty, but well consist.  
Who can in reason then or right assume  
Monarchy over such as live by right  
His equals, if in power and splendor less,  
In freedom equal? or can introduce  
Law and Edict on us, who without law  
Err not? much less for this to be our Lord,  
And look for adoration to th' abuse  
Of those Imperial Titles which assert  
Our being ordain'd to govern, not to serve?  
(V.787-803)

Achitophel, too, knows the role to play. He urges Absalom to usurp the monarch David's throne because ". . . the people have a right supreme/To make their kings; for kings are made for them" (409-410).

Achitophel preys on Absalom's weakness just as Satan preys on Eve's. Satan decides he will approach Eve, arousing

At least distemper'd discontented thoughts,  
Vain hopes, vain aims, inordinate desires  
Blown up with high conceits ingend'ring pride.  
(IV.805-810)

Achitophel, in like manner, appeals to Absalom's pride and vanity: "Him he attempts with studi'd arts to please,/And sheds his venom in such words as these" (228-229). Both serpent-like Achitophel and Satan, experienced in manipulating others, recognize the moment of weakness in their victims and renew their attacks. Satan's first overtures to Eve are calm, fraught with reason, but he knows exactly how and when to become carried away with emotion:

. . . with show of Zeal and Love  
To Man, and indignation at his wrong,  
New part puts on, and as to passion mov'd,  
Fluctuates disturb'd, yet comely, and in act  
Rais'd, as of some great matter to begin . . .  
(IX.665-669)

In like manner, the moment that Absalom rationalizes "Desire of greatness is a godlike sin" (372), Achitophel knows he is winning and pushes his argument:

Him stagg'ring so when Hell's dire agent found,  
While fainting Virtue scarce maintain'd her ground,  
He pours fresh forces in . . . .  
(373-375)

Both Satan and Achitophel use flattery to appeal to the pride and vanity of their unwary prey. Satan addresses Eve as “soveran Mistress” (IX.532), “Empress of this fair World, resplendent Eve” (IX.568), and “Queen of this Universe” (IX.684). He tells her how he has ascended one step in the Great Chain of Being, and he encourages her to follow his example: “Taste this, and be henceforth among the Gods/Thyself a Goddess, not to Earth confin’d” (V.77-78). He laments that only one man sees her beauty, she “who shouldst be seen/By Angels numberless, they daily Train” (IX.546-547). Such compliments would be quite difficult for any woman to ignore, as Satan knows. Achitophel is equally exorbitant in his flattery of Absalom. He addresses him as if he were godlike royalty instead of one of the several bastard sons of Charles II. The fact that Absalom does not recognize this false praise for what it is is no compliment to his intellect. Achitophel orates:

Auspicious Prince! at whose nativity  
Some royal planet rul’d the southern sky;  
Thy longing country’s darling and desire,  
Their cloudy pillar and their guardian fire;  
Their second Moses, whose extended wand  
Divides the seas, and shows the promis’d land;  
Whose dawning day in ev’ry distant age  
Has exercis’d the sacred prophets’ rage;  
The young men’s vision, and the old men’s dream!  
Thee, savior, thee, the nation’s vows confess,  
And, never satisfi’d with seeing, bless,  
(230-241)

Both Satan and Achitophel convince their willing listeners that their disobedient actions will not cause real offense to the one against whom they rebelling. Satan reasons that nothing can hurt God if everything is His anyway. Besides, Eve’s eating the forbidden fruit is such a “petty Tresspass” that God will perhaps even praise her “dauntless virtue” (IX.725-728). Achitophel tells Absalom that by usurping the crown he will be saving his father from plots of “seeming friend and secret foes” (466). David may even actually wish his son to seize the crown. It is quite likely that “by force he wishes to be gain’d” (471). The truth is not in either of these purveyors of evil. Miss Ferry suggests in her treatment of *Absalom and Achitophel* that Dryden creates the parallel of Satan and Achitophel in order to imply the larger-than-life size of the evil force. I suggest that Dryden goes beyond this to a specific reason. In making his epic contemporary, he is defending Toryism and refuting Whiggism.

Just as many parallels may be drawn between Satan and Achitophel, the tempters, so likenesses exist in Eve and Absalom, the fallen ones. Neither is as clever as the adversary. Both make rather feeble attempts at first to do what they feel to be right. Eve tells the serpent they might as well not have come to the tree, for God has forbidden them to taste or touch its fruit, has “left that Command/Sole Daughter of his voice; the rest, we

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live/Law to ourselves” (652-654). Absalom’s first reaction to Achitophel’s suggestion is to defend his father as being “The faith’s defender, and mankind’s delight/Good, gracious, just, observant of the laws” (318-319). Also, he owes David his gratitude. Like Eve, Absalom confesses of his father, “His favor leaves me nothing to require,/Prevents my wishes, and outruns desire” (343-344).

It is interesting to note the similarity in the manner of concluding both epics. Milton devotes six of the twelve books, approximately nine hundred lines, to a description of Satan’s plot to overthrow God and the fierce battle between the rebel angels and the loyal angels. But when God decides it is time to end the rebellion, it is a matter of a few lines. He sends His Son by Himself to drive out the rebels. They flee “Thunder-struck, pursu’d/With terrors and with furies” (VI. 858-859). Although “half his strength he put not forth,”

... headlong themselves they threw  
Down from the verge of Heav’n Eternal wrath  
Burn’d after them to the bottomless pit.  
(VI.853)

Dryden likewise devotes nine-hundred-thirty-two lines to the plots of schemes against David. Then the conclusion comes quickly. “His patience tir’d” after considering the controversy and rebellion, “the godlike David spoke” (935,939), and in one speech he disposes of the matter. Dryden says, “Th’ Almighty, nodding, gave consent,/And peals of thunder shook the firmament” (1026-1028). Just as Satan and the rebel angels are driven from heaven with a single godly decision and action, so Achitophel and his followers and their plots “disintegrate” in a seemingly anticlimactic four-line conclusion:

Henceforth a series of new times began,  
The mighty years in long procession ran:  
Once more the godlike David was restor’d  
And willing nations knew their lawful lord.  
(1026-1031)

King David has already reminded us that the rebels will kill themselves.

Those dire artificers of death shall bleed,  
Against themselves their witnesses will swear,  
Till viperlike their mother Plot they tear;  
And suck for nutriment that bloody gore  
Which was principle of life before,  
Their Belial withtheir Belzebub will fight . . .  
(1011-1016)

This too is an echo of Milton. Sin in *Paradise Lost* pictures Death’s progeny as

These yelling Monsters with ceaseless cry



Surround me, as thou saw'st hourly conceiv'd  
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, thir repast . . .

(II.794-800)

It is the similarity of the monsters devouring the bowels and the "viperlike" plotters sucking the bloody life-giving gore that is especially noticeable. As Satanic monsters destroy the source of their creation so do the 17th Century plotters destroy their own security, their government. With the plotters prone to destroy themselves, restoration is now possible. Just as law and order once again prevailed in heaven when God spoke, so it was on earth when the "godlike David" spoke. So the conclusions of both poems produce another parallel in characterization: God and David assume like roles in administering justice. The Divine role of the King is recognized and national unity returns.

It is evident then that Dryden relied heavily upon Milton's epic materials for the writing of *Paradise Lost*, and for a definite purpose. His reliance upon the Biblical story of rebellion, his choice of similar forceful language, and his use of character parallels all effectively concretize the picture of chaos as opposed to order and the close of the poem ensures the benefits of the latter. Perhaps it is appropriate in concluding to suggest that Dryden's personal praise of Milton as recorded in verse is sufficient for understanding why:

Lines on Milton

Three *Poets*, in three distant Ages born,  
*Greece, Italy, and England* did adorn.  
The *First* in loftiness of thought Surpass'd;  
The *Next* in Majesty; in both the *Last*.  
The force of *Nature* cou'd no farther goe:  
To make a Third she joyn'd the former two.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> B. A. Wright, *Milton's Paradise Lost* (New York, 1962), pp. 29-30.

<sup>2</sup> *Lectures on Dryden*, ed. Margaret De G. Verrall (New York, 1963), p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> "Dryden's Visit to Milton," *Review of English Studies*, I (1925), pp. 348-349.

<sup>4</sup> "Dryden's 'Tagged' Version of *Paradise Lost*," *Essays in Dramatic Literature: The Parrott Presentation Volume*, ed. Hardin Craig (Princeton, 1935), pp. 383-397.

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<sup>5</sup> Dryden, *Notes and Queries*, 9th Ser., V, 353.

<sup>6</sup> See Footnote 1.

<sup>7</sup> *Paradise Lost and its Critics* (Cambridge, 1947), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> "Milton and Dryden: A Comparison and Contrast in Poetic Ideas and Poetic Method," *PMLA* III (1936), pp. 83-100.

<sup>9</sup> (Harvard, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> *Dryden and His Poetry* (N.Y., 1967), p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> Louis I. Bredvold, *The Intellectual Milieu of John Dryden* (Ann Arbor, 1956), p. 145.

<sup>12</sup> "Introduction," *Paradise Lost* (N.Y., 1957), p. 178.

<sup>13</sup> *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York 1957). All excerpts from *Paradise Lost* are taken from this book, pp. 211-469.

<sup>14</sup> *Poems on Affairs of State, Vol. II: 1678-1681*, ed. Elias F. Mengel, Jr. (New Haven, 1965). All excerpts from *Absalom and Achitophel* are taken from this book, pp. 458-493.

<sup>15</sup> *The Poems and Fables of John Dryden*, ed. James Kinsley (London, 1962), p. 424.

