ALLUSIONS TO THE AENEID IN PARADISE LOST, BOOKS XI AND XII

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Of all of Milton's works, the last two books of Paradise Lost are among those most roundly condemned. C. S. Lewis describes them as a "grave structural flaw." According to Lewis, Milton "makes his last two books into a brief outline of sacred history from the Fall to the Last Day. Such an untransmuted lump of futurity, coming in a position so momentous for the structural effect of the whole work, is inartistic. And what makes it worse is that the actual writing in this passage is curiously bad... Again and again, as we read his account of Abraham or of the Exodus or of the Passion, we find ourselves saying, as Johnson said of the ballad, 'the story cannot possibly be told in a manner that shall make less impression on the mind...'. If we stick to what we know we must be content to say that Milton's talent temporarily failed him... Perhaps Milton was in ill health. Perhaps being old, he yielded to a natural, though disastrous, impatience to get the work finished" (129-130). This is not an isolated opinion. Kenneth Muir (143) and E. M. W. Tillyard (216, 246) both found the final books of Paradise Lost to be inferior artistically to the rest of the poem. And Samuel Johnson was, I suspect, responding especially to the last two books when he said that, while Paradise Lost is widely acknowledged to be a great work, no one, coming to the end of it, has ever wished it to be longer (108).

My secondary purpose this afternoon is to demonstrate, at least in one respect, the care with which these books were fashioned, that respect being the use of epic allusions. My primary purpose, and the one that interests me more, is to argue that, to the first readers of Paradise Lost, the Aeneid was a guide, and that in Books 11 and 12 of Paradise Lost, Milton uses allusions to the Aeneid to define the meaning and the peculiar merit of his own epic.

As any annotated edition of Paradise Lost makes clear, the poem is replete with allusions to epics, not only to Vergil and Homer, but also to the later Italian epics of Dante, Ariosto, and Tasso. Constant allusion to other epics is part of the genre. The Aeneid is filled with lines from Homer and from Ennius and Statius, Vergil's predecessors in Latin epic. Such allusions necessarily invite comparison; Vergil is reputed to have said that "it is easier to steal the club from Hercules than to take a line from Homer" (Harding, 20). The point of such a risk is to claim equality with, if not superiority to, the works alluded to. The method is apparent in the opening lines of Paradise Lost, where Milton claims to pursue "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" (1.16). Here Milton paraphrases the opening of Ariosto's Orlando Furioso: "At the same time I shall say of Orlando something never said before in prose or rhyme: that through love he became frenzied and insane and not that man who earlier was judged so wise." Whatever we think of the novelty Ariosto claims for his subject, the obvious disparity between the subject of Paradise Lost and Orlando Furioso, revealed by this allusion, concisely implies the superiority of Milton's epic.

For many of Milton's readers, "epic" meant the Aeneid. According to Davis P. Harding, Vergil's "major works—the Eclogues, the Georgics, and the Aeneid—form what might be called the hard core of the Renaissance grammarschool curriculum.
Of all the school authors, only Cicero was studied with a comparable intensity. It is probably not too much to say that Renaissance schoolboys practically knew Virgil by heart" (7). The first allusion to the Aeneid in Book XI has the same purpose as the opening allusion to Orlando Furioso. The subject of the comparison is the nature of deity. When Adam and Eve pray for forgiveness,

... To heaven their prayers
Flew up, nor missed the way, by envious winds
Blown vagabond or frustrate... (11.14-16)

The description here echoes Apollo's response to Arruns' prayer in Book II of the Aeneid:

Phoebus had heard, and in his heart he answered
Half of that prayer; the other half he scattered
To the swift winds. He granted this: that Arruns
Should strike Camilla down with sudden death;
But did not grant him safe return to his
Illustrious homeland. This last request
The tempests carried to the south winds.

(11.794-98)

The contrast between the two prayers is sharp. Adam and Eve pray to God for pardon, and receive it. Arruns prays that he might slay Camilla in battle, and that he might return home safe. Apollo's response is that both Camilla and Arruns die.

Just as obvious a claim to a superior deity is Milton's use of augury in Book 11. After Eve remarks to Adam that, even though they are fallen, they might manage quite nicely in the garden of Paradise, Adam notices that the garden is changing:

Nigh in her sight
The bird of Jove, stooped from his airy tow'r,
Two birds of gayest plume before him drove.

(11.184-86)

In the Aeneid, the fate of swans pursued by an eagle twice influences the course of events. In Book 2, Venus uses the regrouping of a scattered flock to persuade Aeneas that his fleet, scattered by storm, has gathered safely at Carthage, and that he can

find safety there also (2.393-401). In Book 12, a flock of swans attacks an eagle, forcing it to drop its prey. Juturna uses this event to persuade the Italians to break the truce and attack Aeneas (244-265). Both Venus and Juturna are divine, but their auguries are misleading and disastrous for their human audience. Juturna's counsel leads to the defeat of the Italians and the death of her brother, Turnus. Venus's counsel leads Aeneas to Carthage, where he falls in love with the queen, Dido, abandons his mission of founding Rome, is rebuked by Jupiter and so deserts Dido, who kills herself. Adam, without divine help, draws the correct conclusion, that their present situation is not secure; if the sign is misleading, it is misleading only in that it portends a worse fate for Adam and Eve than in fact occurs. Through prayer and augury, then, Milton reminds us that the classical gods, in contrast to the Christian God, are capricious, self-serving, and deceptive.

Milton does not always use the classical gods merely as obvious foils. At the beginning of Adam's vision, the archangel Michael is twice associated with Venus, and this association helps us to understand his mission. The form in which Michael appears is "solemn and sublime" (11.236):

over his lucid Arms
A military Vest of purple flow'd

His starry Helm unbuckl'd show'd him prime
In Manhood where Youth ended; by his side
As in a glistening Zodiac hung the Sword,
Satan's dire dread, and in his hand the Spear.

(11.240-41, 245-48)

Despite this militaristic and stern guise, the first allusion associates Michael with a resplendent Venus. Adam warns Eve that he sees

From yonder blazing Cloud that veils the Hill
One of the heav'nly Host, and by his Gait
None of the meanest, some Great Potentate
Or of the Thrones above, such Majesty
Invests him coming.

(11.228-33)
When Venus appears to Aeneas to urge him to Carthage, she has disguised herself as a huntress, and Aeneas recognizes her as his mother only as she leaves him:

When she turned, 
Her neck was glittering with a rose brightness; 
Her hair adorned with ambrosia, 
Her head gave all a fragrance of the gods; 
Her gown was long and to the ground; even 
Her walk was sign enough she was a goddess. 

(1.402-409)

This allusion, for all its apparent incongruity, significantly qualifies Michael’s role. Although Venus refuses to grant Aeneas the ordinary personal relationship between a son and his mother that Aeneas desires, and although Venus is in part motivated by her rivalry with Juno, she is also undeniably motivated by love for her son. Venus repeatedly intercedes with Jupiter on behalf of Aeneas and often herself gives Aeneas aid. Michael obviously is the agent of God the Father’s divine justice, but the association of Michael with Venus makes us realize that Michael is, for all his military and judicial sternness, also the God the Son’s agent, also the agent of divine, even parental love.

This is also the burden of the second allusion linking Michael and Venus. Having ascended the highest hill in the garden.

Michael from Adam’s eyes the film removed 
Which that false fruit that promised clearer sight 
Had bred; 

(11.412-14)

The allusion is to the fall of Troy. Aeneas has seen Priam slain, the Trojan forces scattered, and, frenzied, he is about to kill Helen, the cause of the Trojan War, whom he has discovered hiding at Vesta’s altar. Venus appears and prevents him:

‘And those to blame are not 
the hated face of the Laconian woman, 
the daughter of Tyndareos, or Paris: 
it is the gods’ relentlessness, the gods’ 
that overturns these riches, tumbles Troy 
from its high pinnacle. Look now—for I 
shall tear away each cloud that cloaks your eyes 
and clogs your human seeing, darkening 

all things with its damp fog; you must not fear 
the orders of your mother; do not doubt, 
but carry out what she commands. For here, 
where you see huge blocks ripped apart and 
stones 
torn free from stones and smoke that joins 
with dust 
in surges, Neptune shakes the walls, his giant 
trident is tearing Troy from its foundations; 
and here the first to hold the Scaean gates 
is fiercest Juno; gift with iron, she 
calls furiously to the fleet for more 
Greek troops. Now turn and look: Tritonian 
Pallas 
is planted there; upon the tallest towers 
she glares with her storm cloud and her grim 
Gorgon. 
And he who furnishes the Greeks with force 
that favors and with spirit is the Father 
himself, for he himself goads on the gods 
against the Dardan weapons. Son, be quick 
to flee, have done with fighting. I shall never 
desert your side until I set you safe 
upon your father’s threshold.’ So she spoke, 
then hid herself within the night’s thick 
shadows. 
Ferocious forms appear—the fearful powers 
of gods that are the enemies of Troy. (2.601-23)

This allusion has several functions. It demonstrates once again the arbitrariness and vindictiveness of the classical gods, yet it demonstrates Venus’s love for her son, and it thereby represents Michael’s mission not as vindictive, but as just and loving. It is also significant (and this is the reason for so extended a quotation) for the understanding it provides us of Adam. To that vision Aeneas must submit and abandon Troy, and in doing so he takes the first step toward a new identity, toward becoming the archetypal Roman, pater Aeneas. That transformation demands that Aeneas dedicate himself totally to the founding of the Roman empire and to comply with the will of Jupiter. Consequently, that transformation demands that Aeneas abandon his homeland, lose his wife, deny his love for Dido and desert her, lose his father, wage a prolonged war, unwillingly, against the Italians, and die in a military
camp, never, in fact, founding a city. It demands the complete subjugation of his individuality to the state. The vision that Michael shows Adam separates him from the garden of Paradise, not by its destructiveness, but by its promise. In the course of the vision Adam comes to an understanding of his new identity, as father of a fallen race. Also, like Aeneas, through the process of the vision Adam is taught the role his descendants are to emulate. For Aeneas, it is resignation to the will of the gods and self-sacrifice for the good of the state. For Adam it is spiritual discernment and trust in God, for the sake of his descendants, but also (and this is the key difference) for his own sake.

The significance of the vision of the gods destroying Troy is underscored by a second reference to it at the end of Paradise Lost. This brings us to Eve, who has been sleeping through much of Books 11 and 12. Allusions to the Aeneid suggest that her re-appearance is delayed, in part, to emphasize her importance. Eve tells Adam:

Weared I fell asleep. But now lead on;
In me is no delay; with thee to go,
Is to stay here; without thee here to stay,
Is to go hence unwilling. (12.614-16)

Her words are those of Anchises, the father of Aeneas, who refused to flee Troy without a sign from Jupiter. This was duly supplied:

No sooner had the old man spoken than sudden thunder crashed upon the left, and through the shadows ran a shooting star, its trail a torch of flooding light. (2.938-41)

Anchises declares:

Now my delay is done; I follow; where you lead, I am. Gods of my homeland, save my household, save my grandson. (2.701-03)

And what follows becomes one of the most famous images of antiquity, Aeneas, fleeing the flames of Troy, bearing his aged father on his shoulders, holding his young son by the hand. This image was especially celebrated during the Roman Empire, for it expresses the devotion of youth, strength, and military prowess to the service of empire and of patriarchy. What is missing from this image is Aeneas's wife, Creusa, who does not escape Troy. She follows her husband, her son, and her father-in-law as they flee, but she becomes separated from them and is killed. Eve, of course, leaves paradise with Adam, and her association with Anchises makes Adam's and Eve's final view of Paradise an especially complex image:

They, looking back, all th' eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
Waved over by that flaming brand, the gate
With dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms.

This second allusion to the gods destroying Troy reminds us again of the contrast between classical and Christian gods, and reminds us that separation from Paradise, as from Troy, is a necessary step in the development of a new identity. The association of Eve with Anchises defines further that new identity, and especially distinguishes Paradise Lost from the Aeneid, for it indicates that the most important human relationship is not father and son, but husband and wife.

Milton uses the Aeneid to define for the reader the peculiar character of his epic. Obviously this discussion has not addressed the opinion of C. S. Lewis that the writing in Books 11 and 12 is "curiously bad," nor does it fully address the argument that the final books of Paradise Lost necessarily imply a decline in artistic power or reveal an unseemly haste to finish writing the poem. But it does demonstrate that, to the very end of Paradise Lost, Milton invokes the Aeneid as the standard by which to measure the argument of his own epic. And that suggests that Milton's own confidence in his artistic achievement had not diminished.

NOTES


Harding, Davis P. The Club of Hercules: Studies