

Queering Satan: The Politics of Sex, Gender, Visibility, and Fear in *Paradise Lost*

By Jennifer Kaplan

For millennia, Satan has been a popular model for representing transgressive forces. In John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Satan is a dynamic character—at once visible and invisible, manifest and ephemeral, masculine and feminine. By analyzing competing Protestant and folkloric interpretations of the Devil's relationship to invisibility and visibility, interpreting the changing views of both gender roles and biological sex in the seventeenth century, and examining the relationship between demonology and gender, I establish that Milton's Satan is "queered" through his subversion of socially enforced binaries. Throughout the text, Milton both plays off of and against contemporary satanic cultural motifs. Ultimately, his radical reinterpretation creates a Satan who exists as a transgressor against contemporary notions of gender and sexuality.

Satanic tropes and caricatures that have existed in England for centuries focus primarily on visibility and the grotesque, with later interpretations retaining Satan's deformity while freeing him from the restraints of corporality. Milton reinterprets these historical depictions to render his Satan as a transgressive, inherently gendered and sexualized force in *Paradise Lost*. The pre-Miltonic Satan of sixteenth century and medieval folklore existed as a chaotic bricolage of repressed and actualized social anxieties. In both artwork and literature, Satan possessed "both human and animal traits" and had the ability to appear as either "a young man or woman," thus manifesting in a naturally transgressive form that challenged the contemporary gender dichotomy and was further striking for its deviance from conventionally appealing standards of appearance (Oldridge 232). For example, Satan could "transform" himself from an aesthetically acceptable form, such as that of a "handsome man," into something grotesque, such

as “a hideous beast” (Oldridge 243). It is the visible that distinguishes Satan as a force of evil, and more specifically an *embodied* visibility: alternately gendered, sexualized, humanized, and animalized, and sometimes all at once. Through these transformations, Satan is defined by his visibility and its consequential grotesqueness. By contrast, the Protestant Revolution of the mid-seventeenth century saw Satan radically reconceptualized as an invisible, disembodied force— notions with which Milton would have also been familiar, and which freed his Satan from the restrictions of physical form (Oldridge 236).

Within *Paradise Lost*, there is a distinctive tension between Satan’s visible and invisible nature: as Milton phrases it, a tension between his linkage to the solid “Earth” and to the amorphous “Air,” a curiosity regarding physical form that plays off of the premodern idea of the Devil as being able to possess “the mind of the faithful through manifold appearance” coupled with a power for endless machinations via formlessness (Milton 4.940; qtd. in Dendle 30). In Puritanical narratives discussing Satan’s prowess for invisible machinations, Satan has moved beyond the restrictions of being “bodied” and into the realm of the invisible and omnipresent, in what may be deemed an antipodal, evil subversion of God’s omnipotence (Oldridge 235). Yet, even when the Puritanical Satan works in the shadows, he is still inherently linked with the visible realm, projecting visions of himself as an “agent of personal temptation” to sin in every possible way—including temptations into adultery (Oldridge 235). For the notion of Satan as “tempter” links him with the age-old idea of the “temptress.” In the scene where Satan first tempts Eve in a dream, she has “dream’d” his “gentle voice,” which is disembodied from Satan and in her mind associated with Adam (Milton 5.32, 5.37). When he does appear to her, he takes the form of an angel, “One shap’d and wing’d like one of those from Heav’n / By us oft seen; his dewy locks distill’d Ambrosia.” (Milton 5.55). Yet, here he is not physically manifest, but “a

dream,” mere ephemera existing between the physical and the imagined (Milton 5.57). Whether he chooses to take this form within Eve’s mind or Eve conjures this image herself is left ambiguous. If it is his choice, it reveals Satan’s longing for an alternate body that, in comparison to his present grotesque form as a damned “Leviathan,” is simultaneously more sexualized and more appealing for epitomizing a specific gender ideal (Milton 1.201).

In incorporating both folkloric notions of a “visible” Satan and newer, Protestant notions of an “invisible” Satan, Milton creates a radical new characterization that both unites the two views and recombines them into something completely new. But even when Milton’s Satan works through “invisible” mechanisms, he is still inherently associated with visual descriptors. As Peter Dendle explains, medieval folklore and emerging Protestant ideologies created a paradox of the Devil as both embodied and disembodied: “On the one hand, Satan is personal, subject to spatiotemporal laws and thus confined to a single place at a given time; on the other, he is a spiritual entity of such inconceivable scope and power that he may be said to inhere in all sinners, and in all sins, throughout the world” (Dendle 24). This is a paradox that Milton seemingly resolves by combining these two abilities in his characterization of Satan—a reinterpretation of canon which is in and of itself a transgressive act.

Satan’s inherent visibility renders him “queer,” or “othered,” in juxtaposition with God, whose omnipresent invisibility defines him. God’s creations celebrate “th’invisible / Glory of him,” a divine being whose power resides in a lack of manifestation and an inability to be captured in words or images (Milton 1.369). By contrast, Milton’s Satan exists not only exclusively within variations of imagery, but in an imagery already warped—“transform[ed]” by his Fall, and transforming still, across binaries (Milton 1.370). Not given the luxury of passive invisibility, he exists purely in “Image”: that of “a Brute,” monstrous, manipulative, deceptive,

due to the permeability of that image and its relational gender and sexuality (Milton 1.371–72). Satan exists as a representation of the “visible” while God is the true definition of invisibility—a masculine force, certainly, but *neutrally* masculine, at once disembodied and innately nonsexual, despite his characterization as a force of creation. As Lorraine Daston argues in her essay “The Naturalized Female Intellect,” the gendered notions of the “female sex” imply explicit visibility—through inevitable sexualization, objectification, and the performative act of childbirth—while maleness is associated with a certain flexible “invisibility,” or “neutral” masculinity (219). As Rousseau once famously stated, every aspect of femininity—but especially its visual aspects—“reminds woman of her sex” in the same way Satan’s refusal to conform to a single gendered form reminds Satan of his otherness, or queerness (qtd. in Daston 218). Thus, Satan becomes simultaneously feminized and queered in his association with visibility, especially when measured against God’s neutrally masculine invisibility. Satan *is* image. But for all the tension between Satan’s invisible and visible natures, aspects of Satan’s visibility contain a distinctive tension of their own—that between his bestial and idealized forms.

When he is acting in the “visible” realm, Satan often assumes a bestial appearance, which Milton implies is his natural form after his Fall from heaven; his bestial nature places him in a liminal space between sexuality and sexual dysfunction. With his first appearance in the text, he is known as “th’ infernal Serpent,” far from human and further still from his ideal, “transcendent” form in heaven (Milton 1.34; Milton 1.86). He is now “in bulk as huge / As whom the Fables name of monstrous size, / Titanian, or Earth-born, that warr’d on Jove, Briareos or Typhon, whom the Den / by ancient Tarsus held, or that Sea-beast / Leviathan, which God of all his works / Created hugest,” monstrous and existing outside of the animal kingdom that God will soon so carefully craft in heaven (Milton 1.196–202) But even in his subhuman form, he is

simultaneously associated with an exaggerated male sexuality: the description of “His Spear, to equal which the tallest Pine / Hewn on Norwegian hills, to be the Mast of some great Ammiral” imbues him with male virility; yet at the same time, Satan’s Fall from grace has damaged his sexuality, as his “Spear”—a distinctively phallic symbol—is now shrunken, flaccid, weak, “but a wand / He walkt with to support uneasy steps,” and is in “drooping” form, thus implying the Fall as a castration that in turn renders him impotent and androgynous, both via his weakened “Spear” and his current savage, sexually unappealing appearance (Milton 2.292–95, 2.328). Furthermore, it is while in this grotesque form that God uses Satan’s appearance to hold him prisoner under heaven’s patriarchal gaze. Satan speaks of how God and heaven “Transfix us at the bottom of this Gulf,” turning “transfix” into a double entendre that implies it is the act of being looked at by God that keeps him and the other demons trapped in Hell (Milton 1.329). Made too monstrous for heaven, Satan is trapped in Hell not only by his subhuman form, but also by the threat of God’s omnipresent gaze observing his every move.

Imbued with the power to shift his appearance at will, Satan sheds his bestial figure for a human form when he first enters the Garden of Eden, playing into the trope of the beautiful, evil tempter—or temptress. Yet he refuses to conform to a single appearance, instead existing at an intersection between human, bestial, and divine form—a transgressive act that threatens the careful set of binaries between male and female, animal and beast that God has heretofore established. We first see him in a partially animal state, “Squat like a toad” (Milton 4.800). Though it is ambiguous as to whether this implies his entire body has been transformed into that of a toad or he is merely in human form but crouching in a grotesque, inhuman position, either way the resulting visual is uncanny and monstrous. Yet, it is in this form that he is more explicitly sexualized than ever. “By his Devilish art,” he creeps near Eve and reaches towards

“the Organs of her Fancy,” the latter an ambiguous phrase that implies both a nonconsensual entrance into Eve’s mind and her genitals (Milton 4.801–802). Here, Satan’s violation of Eve—one of God’s two ideal prototypes for the human race—challenges God’s authority on two counts: one, Satan has managed to corrupt Eve, despite her ideally feminine, innately human status and his ambiguously gendered, shiftingly monstrous existence, and two, this corruption calls into question God’s ability to enforce the (gendered, bestial) hierarchies that He has established.

In this same passage, Satan is both perpetrator and recipient of sexual violence, as the Angel Ithuriel brutalizes him in turn; however, it is Satan’s surprising reaction to this act that once again highlights his opposition to societal norms, particularly regarding sexual relations. “Touch’d lightly” by the angel’s ambiguously phallic “spear” as an admonishing act for trespassing in the Garden, Satan is symbolically sodomized. Yet, even during an act that in other contexts would be perceived as a violation, Satan becomes immediately aroused, ignited with a violent “spark” such as occurs when one “light[s] nitrous powder...Smuttly grain / with sudden blaze diffus’d,” explosive imagery which implies an orgasm of rage (Milton 4.819, 4.810–17). The “Smuttly” grain is sullied in both the literal and sexual sense; the emotional blast is at once paroxysm and a fiery surge of pleasure. Though it may be tempting to read this passage as an association between homosexuality and personal evil, one must understand that seventeenth-century English people regarded homosexuality much differently from their twenty-first-century counterparts. At that time, society viewed sodomy as a personal failing to which men from a variety of backgrounds might succumb. Sodomy was considered an isolated instance of vice, purely physical in nature, rather than linked to an inherent “flaw” in nature or character; such views wouldn’t emerge until a distinctive homosexual, or “Molly,” culture began in the early

eighteenth century, well after the publication of *Paradise Lost* (Oldridge 307). However, the act of sodomy was still illegal during Milton's time, so any implication of Satan as desiring acts of sodomy would still have been repulsive to English society at large.

When Satan enters the Garden a second time, it is through radical transformation that implies a different kind of disruptive sexuality rooted in performative gender expression. He adopts the form of a "serpent"—an obvious phallic image meant to tempt Eve (Milton 9.529). Satan further associates himself with male sexuality when he moves from being a "Serpent sleeping" to one "erect" once he is aware of Eve's presence, thus both simulating and stimulating sexual arousal (Milton 9.162, 9.501). When he perceives Eve for the first time, he sees "Virtue in her shape how lovely" and "pin'd / His loss" when he cannot corrupt her (Milton 4.847–48). Whereas earlier he envies angels' "Godlike," masculine "forms" and bemoans the loss of his own "transcendent brightness," he now yearns for the feminine ideal while still flaunting his virility, transforming both his gender and sexual appeal as an exercise in power and as a form of devilish "trickery" that mocks the strict gender binary that God has attempted to enforce in creating Adam and Eve (Milton 1.358, 1.86). Moreover, Satan not only desires Eve sexually; he also desires her very existence as his polar opposite: a creature of virtue and "Sanctitude," in whom "the image of [her] glorious maker shon," feminine in her physical "softness" and personal "Grace" (Milton 4.292–98). This is something that he himself—despite his transformative powers—longs to become but finds he cannot, either from self-restraint or a newfound limit to his transformative powers that traps him in a monstrous, bestial body, so he can only appear as idealized or divinely gendered forms in others' dreams, but never in reality. Satan's striking visibility is used to emphasize his evil nature—specifically, Milton's Satan exists through a form of visibility that is both intrinsically gendered and made grotesque because

of his refusal to conform to any specific morphology. This cautions readers that either engaging in lascivious sexuality or exploring beyond assigned gender roles within God's carefully constructed gender binary would be socially and personally condemnable for its violation of God's design.

The gender binary was of primary concern in seventeenth-century English culture, and Satan's refusal to conform to its strict mandates reveals emerging social discord. In the years leading up to *Paradise Lost's* publication, social and political forces intersected to create radical new notions of gender roles that solidified patriarchal oppression within English society, thus making Satan's ambiguous relationship with gender all the more transgressive. Even within the social sphere, which had thus far seen radical reinterpretations of gender roles, the notion of sex stubbornly persisted as monolithic. As McKeon argues, in seventeenth-century England, "there [was] only one sex, and sex [was] a sociological rather than an ontological category," and a more complex discourse on human sexuality wouldn't emerge until the eighteenth century (301). Contemporary belief held that a given individual could become more feminine or more masculine depending on how they acted, rendering gender a performative act and the threat of aberrant behavior severe. Thus, Satan's ability to transform across genders manifests the anxieties surrounding gender roles in Puritanical England.

On an even deeper level, divisiveness over gender difference in seventeenth-century England may be linked back to "internal affect and external enterprise, between the private and the public spheres," which in turn relates back to the concepts of "maleness" and "femaleness" as a tension between the invisible and the visible, thus paralleling Satan's own struggle in conforming to these spheres throughout *Paradise Lost* (McKeon 307). Because of the belief in gender fluidity, there was an underlying societal anxiety that anyone's physical gender might

shift at any given time; this process was reviled, a form of natural punishment for acting outside of gender norms, and thus something to be feared. These anxieties over gender performance and the threat of transformation are never more evident in *Paradise Lost* than when Milton's narrator describes the androgynous nature of spirits:

For Spirits when they please  
 Can either Sex assume, or both; So soft  
 And uncompounded is their Essence pure,  
 Not ti'd or mannacl'd with joint or limb,  
 Nor founded on the brittle strength of bones,  
 Like cumbrous flesh; but in what shape they choose,  
 Dilated or condens't, bright or obscure,  
 Can execute their airy purposes,  
 And works of love or enmity fulfill. (Milton 1.421–430)

It is evident that “Spirits”—including Satan—are not restricted to exhibiting solely male or female characteristics. Unlike earthy, “cumbrous” humans (such as Adam and Eve), “Spirits” are not trapped within the primitive form of the gender binary that existed during the seventeenth century. They not only have the capability to “assume” the form of “either Sex,” but also the ability to completely transform outside any gendered form, instead existing as “pure” “Essence” that cannot be defined in physical terms. Most significantly, “Spirits” are not only able to transcend physical and gender expression; they also possess the power to choose to do so, implying a sense of agency that no other of God's creations possess. Once more, however, this transformative ability is based on a heightened visibility. It is the spirits' forms, not their nature, that are transformed, as they can only be described through their visible presences—as new

forms “condens’t, bright or obscure,” defined by the *degree* to which they are perceivable rather than their ability to be or not be perceived—and thus they never exist completely outside of perception.

Finally, as Satan visibly transgresses the gender roles that God establishes, he defies societal expectations of patriarchal authority. While Satan’s exact relationship to God is never made explicit, in heaven he “didst outshine / Myriads” and was expelled for attempting to show he’d “equall’d the most High,” thereafter identifying himself as “The Adversary of God,” a purely relational epithet that challenges God’s omnipotence (Milton 1.86–87, 1.40, 2.629). In order to understand why this epithet is transgressive, one must consider seventeenth-century English society’s hierarchical structure. Milton’s time saw the rediscovery of Aristotle, and with it a new discourse on natural differences between men and women (Daston 213). Aristotelian philosophy emphasizes relational hierarchies, particularly within families wherein the male head of household—“the father, the husband, and the master”—is the natural superior; this is not unlike God’s assumed supremacy through His intertwined roles as “Father” of humanity and “Monarch” of heaven (McKeon 296; Milton 1.41–42). Satan, then, commits a transgressive act in subverting this hierarchy. He is deemed “rebellious” against “the will of Heav’n,” and is punitively transformed into the monstrous leviathan we encounter in *Paradise Lost*’s opening passages, his body made grotesque to visibly reflect his transgression, his physical appearance an aberration in the same way women’s bodies were viewed as “aberrations” of the male body within seventeenth-century biological hierarchy (Milton 1.71, 2.1025; McKeon 301).

In establishing himself as God’s “Adversary” and natural antithesis, Satan appears to create a binary of his own; but upon further analysis, it is evident that in Satan’s view he has not established a binary between “good” and “evil,” but rather one between servitude and freedom.

Through establishing Hell outside of Heaven and its tyrannical and “all-powerful king,” despite the pain and suffering Satan endures for his transgression, he proclaims that “Here at last / We shall be free”—free from the “command[ing]” force of God and the strict control (and strict binaries) He enforces on Earth and heaven alike (Milton 1.258–260, 2.851). It is not God’s benevolence that repels Satan, but rather His insistence upon hierarchies establishing Himself as the supreme master. Thus, patriarchal authority is the true fount of Satan’s ire, and he is punished for defying it in the same way a woman or other person inferior to a male head-of-household would have been punished: through social exclusion.

Milton’s Satan exists at the intersection of a variety of transgressive historical and societal forces. The ambiguous nature of both his sexuality and his gender conflate him with the specific, omnipresent threat of “nonconformity” that haunted Protestant religious circles. In combining both folkloric and Protestant interpretations of satanic imagery, Milton presents a radical new version of Satan that both exists within and subverts established narratives on visibility, evil, sexuality and gender—a Satan whose primary challenge to God’s authority is his refusal to conform to the binaries that God establishes. Satan is image, image is sex, sex is power, and power is to be feared when in the possession of anyone outside of God and His patriarchal authority.

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