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## SCEPTRE AND KEYS AS VISUAL IMAGES IN *PARADISE LOST*

T. S. ELIOT'S EARLIER IMPATIENCE with the visual imagery in *Paradise Lost* is well known. In his 1936 essay, Eliot pegged Milton's style as "rhetorical", a term that implies a supposedly exaggerated emphasis on the auditory as opposed to "the visual and tactile". For Eliot, the "most important fact about Milton . . . is his blindness." Eliot's recantation, in 1947, does nothing to alter his main point about visual imagery in Milton:

This limitation of visual power, like Milton's, limited interest in human beings, turns out to be not merely a negligible defect, but a positive virtue, when we visit Adam and Eve in Eden. Just as a higher degree of characterization of Adam and Eve would have been unsuitable, so a more vivid picture of the earthly paradise would have been less paradisiacal. . . . As it is, the impression of Eden which we retain, is the most suitable, and is that which Milton was most qualified to give: the impression of *light*—a daylight and a starlight, a light of dawn and of dusk, the light which, remembered by a man in his blindness, has a supernatural glory unexperienced by men of normal vision.

We must, then, in reading *Paradise Lost*, not expect to see clearly; our sense of sight must be blurred, so that our *hearing* may become more acute.<sup>1</sup>

This attitude toward Milton's *Paradise Lost* is about as wrongheaded, I believe, as an assertion that after about 1810 Beethoven's work was characteristically the creation of a man who was deaf.

The major difficulty seems to be critical and historical: Milton's idea of imagery in the *seventeenth* century was simply different from Eliot's in the *twentieth*. Obviously the possibilities of rich and diverse visual imagery for its own sake did not interest Milton, for he always relegates each small bit of carefully chosen imagistic detail to the intellectual configuration which is the poem as a whole. Variety must find its place within unity, for *Paradise Lost* is built in accord with a strictly ordered design. Visual imagery is present, but it does not stand apart from other elements of the epic. It is, therefore,

part of the critical task to understand exactly the principles behind the visual imagery in *Paradise Lost*. This paper thus examines the two recurring visual images—keys and the sceptre—which are emblematic of divine authority throughout the poem.

Indeed, the keys and the sceptre seem at first to be utterly commonplace as images representing authority in *Paradise Lost*. It is difficult not to feel a sense of loss whenever one remembers the greater variety of symbols available to the medieval artist, but it is clear that Milton was determined to use only those emblems that are necessary for the demonstration of the relationships existing between the various hierarchies of heaven, earth, and hell. Significantly, these emblems—the sceptre and the keys—have specific warrant from holy writ, though at times Milton makes us aware of parallels from classical myth or legend. The reader may remember, for example, that Janus, the Roman deity of the doorway, traditionally holds the key and rod of the doorkeeper as he guards the gate of the abode of the gods,<sup>2</sup> but for Milton the really significant fact was that these symbols are primarily the ones which in the Bible are used to illustrate the power of God.

When the reader is brought into the presence of God in Book III, however, the Father is not shown in the medieval manner as a royally-robed deity wearing a crown and holding a sceptre. He is encircled with a cloud of golden light and is enthroned "invisible/Amidst the glorious brightness" (III, 375-376). For Protestant Milton, the Father has not revealed himself directly to man: he has revealed himself only through the Son. Thus God the Father is "made visible" through Christ, who appears beside the cloud of radiance as the "Divine Similitude" (III, 384-386).<sup>3</sup> In *Paradise Lost*, the Father acts directly as neither Creator nor Judge, but delegates his power to his Son. The sceptre therefore is the visible symbol of the power which the eternal Father bestows upon the Son.<sup>4</sup>

Specifically, it is upon the third day of the War in Heaven when God reveals his gift of his "Sceptre and Power" to Christ (VI, 730), who then, armed with his authority and might from the Father, ejects Satan and his rebellious angels from heaven. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Father is said to have spoken to his Son: "Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom."<sup>5</sup> Christ's first great act in Milton's epic is an act of righteousness, the banishing of Satan and his host to deepest hell. While the Father's throne remains unshaken in the midst of the strange turmoil in heaven, he simultaneously reveals his authority

and power through Christ, who restores perfect order and tranquillity among the angels.

The Son, through whom the Father declares the fulfilment of his will (VI, 726-729), is also instrumental in the creation of the earth. Following the Epistle to the Hebrews, Milton represents the Father as the essential creator of the world, while the Son is the instrument who makes the creation visible. The sceptre, a visible image, is a symbol which makes apparent the ways of God. The Father speaks:

Effulgence of my Glory, Son belov'd,  
Son in whose face invisible is beheld  
Visibly, what by Deity I am,  
And in whose hand what by Decree I do . . . (VI, 680-683).

The Father's invisible nature and authority become incarnate and therefore visible to man through his Son, whose hand holds the visible sign of power. The sceptre does not, of course, represent mere physical strength, as Satan falsely assumes (I, 248-249), but stands for the perfect and righteous will of God the Father. Christ, in perfect accord with the divine will, is the Mediator between the Father and his obedient or penitent creatures. And he is given ultimate control even over those angels and men who remain rebellious toward perfect righteousness.

Beelzebub, speaking in hell, tells his fellow angels that he fears that God will

over Hell extend  
His Empire, and with Iron Sceptre rule  
Us here, as with his Golden those in Heav'n (II, 326-328).

The sceptre is the sceptre of righteousness whether it is turned against the disobedient spirits of hell or obeyed by the obedient in heaven. Beelzebub's statement, which refuses to recognize God's right to sovereignty in hell, nevertheless shows respect for his infinite power which actually has, as the fallen angel admits, two separate sides. In the matter of the dual nature of the sceptre, then, Beelzebub is not mistaken. Abdiel has already used the same terms at the beginning of the revolt, though as an unfallen angel he states the matter more exactly:

That Golden Sceptre which thou didst reject  
 Is now an Iron Rod to bruise and break  
 Thy disobedience (V, 886-888).

The iron sceptre represents the judgment of God, which is wholly delegated to Christ the Judge (X, 55-57), against those who do not submit *freely* to the divine authority of the golden sceptre.

The iron sceptre which is turned against the disobedient has its scriptural source in Psalm ii. "Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel", the psalmist writes. Milton's use of this psalm seems to be consistent with the usual Reformation interpretation. Luther, for example, identified the rod with Christ the Judge, and the earthen vessel with the world; thus it follows also that the rod is "a rod of salvation to all who believe."<sup>6</sup> The psalm is interpreted messianically, the rod being identified with Christ rather than with the Father. Milton, like Luther, also looks at the rod of Christ eschatologically, since the victory of Christ over Satan in the War in Heaven is intended as a foreshadowing of his final victory over the fallen angels at the Last Day.<sup>7</sup>

But Satan also claims for himself the power which God has delegated to Christ. Satan's authority, however, is not genuine, for his power by no means involves a visible image of God's omnipotence. In an epic simile in Book I, the poet refers to "the potent Rod" of Moses as an ironic analogy to Satan's power (I, 338-343): the fallen angels obey their general just as the locusts are called up by Moses' rod. Moses, however, is using the rod of his authority to call down just punishment upon the "impious *Pharaoh*" whose heart has been hardened by the petrifying power of sin. In Book XII, Michael describes the "potent Rod" of Moses as carrying out God's judgment against the Egyptians crossing through the Red Sea. It should be remembered that seventeenth-century Protestants saw Moses, the person through whom the divine law of the ten commandments was conveyed, as associated specifically with judgment.<sup>8</sup> For the chosen people of God, on the other hand, Moses is the deliverer who genuinely leads them out of bondage.

Satan does not reflect the authority of God, but instead wills to erase from his spirit the very image of his Creator. In his pride, he sets himself above his peers as their dictator, and he holds the false symbols—the "Diadem and Sceptre high advanc'd" (IV, 90)—which pretend to prove his primary place in the demonic scheme of things. Satan is a spurious "Idol of

Majesty Divine" (VI, 101), while Christ is the perfect image of true "Majesty Divine".

The relationship between Satan and Christ is further developed in the imagery of the keys which is first introduced in Book II. Sin, the daughter of Satan, is discovered to be "the Portress of Hell Gate" who possesses the key to the gates which have closed the mouth of the infernal place. The King of Heaven has forbidden her "to unlock/These Adamantine Gates" (II, 852-853), but of course it is in Sin's nature to be disobedient toward divine order. She yields to Satan's temptation; she unlocks the gates of fiery hell.

The idea that the key to hell is possessed by Sin is of course in line with Christian and Jewish tradition, but at first glance there nevertheless seem to be some difficulties with Milton's presentation. Christ, after his resurrection, is explicitly described (Revelation i, 18) as holding the keys of both death and hell. According to the Talmud, only God has the key to death, while in *III Baruch* Michael is described as the key-bearer.<sup>9</sup> From a hint in *Paradise Lost*, Book III (662-666), it may be argued that Milton derived this aspect of Sin from "the Night-Hag", Hecate, who was formerly represented in images as holding the keys to the underworld Hades.<sup>9</sup> Milton was doing far more, however, than attempting to adapt a classical gatekeeper of Hades to his Christian purpose, for a source of the key imagery is identifiable in the Apocalypse. Parallel passages follow:

I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit (Revelation ix, 1).

down they fell  
 Driv'n headlong from the Pitch of Heaven, down  
 Into this Deep, and in the general fall  
 I also; at which time this powerful Key  
 Into my hand was giv'n . . . (*PL*, II, 771-775).

And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace . . . (Revelation ix, 2).

She op'n'd. . . .  
 So wide [the gates] stood, and like a Furnace mouth  
 Cast forth redounding smoke and ruddy flame (*PL*, II, 883, 888-889).

The parallels are persuasive.

For Milton, the gates of hell are, generally, the traditional ones; they are barred with bars of "massy Iron or solid Rock" which suggest the "bars

of iron" of Hebrew Sheol in Psalm cvii and "the bars of the pit" in Job xvii, 16. In the theology of Milton's time, Psalm cvii was quite naturally given a messianic interpretation since it proclaims the breaking of the bars of hell. Sin's key, however, performs a different act and shows a lack of ultimate control over the gates rather than the definite control implied by Christ's victory over them. The heavy gates are opened by Sin's key, but their weight prevents the closing of them. Nor does Sin open the gates by her own strength alone; her key symbolizes a power put into her hands through the permissive will of the King of Heaven who alone has final power over hell.<sup>10</sup> The final power to "obstruct the mouth of Hell/Forever, and seal up his ravenous Jaws" will later be given to Christ, God's "well-pleasing Son" (X, 634-637).

The key as a symbol of authority and power in Christian thought relies heavily upon the Old Testament reference to the key to the house of David. In Isaiah xxii, 22, it is predicted that Eliakim will succeed to the office of governor of the palace, a position which for Isaiah is represented by the image of the key: "And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open." Apostolic practice was to interpret this passage messianically, with the key of David being associated with Christ, who was born (see Revelation iii, 7-8) into the house of David. Christ, therefore, has power over the "gate of life" through which the faithful enter heaven. He who possesses Christ also possesses the key to the eternal city.

Sin holds the key to open the gates of death exactly as Christ holds the key to life. The analogy is not accidental but is clearly part of Milton's logic for making everything in hell precisely the inverse of heaven.<sup>11</sup> Sin is the second person of the diabolic trinity.<sup>12</sup> To Satan she says:

Thou art my Father, thou my Author, thou  
 My being gav'st me; whom should I obey  
 But thee, whom follow? thou will bring me soon  
 To that new world of light and bliss, among  
 The Gods who live at ease, where I shall Reign  
 At thy right hand voluptuous, as beseems  
 Thy daughter and thy darling, without end (II, 864-870).

Sin is the personification of disobedience to God; Christ, on the contrary, is the divine revelation of perfect righteousness and obedience. Furthermore, Death, who proceeds from his father Satan and his mother Sin in demonic

parody of the third person of the Trinity,<sup>13</sup> gives death while the Holy Spirit giveth life.

Since the key in Isaiah presupposes a possessor who stands in support of divine law and order, Milton's use of the key as hanging at Sin's side is ultimately ironic. For Milton, the good of God is associated with order and creative power just as the evil of Satan is linked with damnation and the destruction of order. The offspring of Sin and Satan is appropriately destructive of all peace and order: he has raped his mother and is prepared to attack his father. Through sin, man also falls from a state of perfect obedience which involves living in accord with divine law, and it is man's consequent alienation from God that makes the destructive principle operative in the world. Sin, turning her "fatal key," looses discord and damnation. The gates fly open "With impetuous recoil and jarring sound/ . . . and on their hinges grate/Harsh Thunder, that the lowest bottom shook/Of *Erebus*" (II, 871, 880-883). In contrast, when Christ goes forth to perform the task of creating the order of the world out of chaos, the "ever-during Gates" of heaven open on "golden hinges" which move with "Harmonious sound" (VII, 206-207).

Through Sin, then, the gates of hell are opened, though Sin herself by this act of disobedience has lost the freedom to act further. Sin's key, the "Sad instrument of all our woe" (II, 872), in a very real sense foreshadows the forbidden fruit which is instrumental in man's fall. After the fall, man also has lost his freedom, which is only restored through the mediation of Christ. The key which has unlocked the gate of hell cannot lock it again.

Sin's act, however, is more than a mere foreshadowing of Adam's fall; dramatically it makes the fall possible. Coming before the fall of man, the act in the allegory seems to provide the confirmation of the possibility of disobedience. Sin in the allegory personifies abstract sin; without the abstract possibility of disobedience, man could never have sinned. Both Sin and Adam knowingly perform as a matter of free choice an act which is contrary to a direct command from heaven. In the concrete instance, once Adam has allowed evil to make an entrance, it dominates; a higher power is needed to effect one's release from the bondage of evil.

Since, in Milton's theology, it is the existential and intellectual knowledge of Christ which is necessary for salvation, Christ's Word is indeed "the key of knowledge". On the other hand, Sin's key is also a key of knowledge, for it is the sin of disobedience that leads Adam and Eve to the knowledge of evil—and hence also to the knowledge of good through evil. In Saint

Luke's gospel (xi, 52), "the key of knowledge" refers to that which is given to the scribe or teacher. Sin as well as Christ pretends to be a teacher in *Paradise Lost*; Satan guilefully leads Eve to the tree "of prohibition" to teach her to eat of the "Wisdom-giving Plant" (IX, 645, 679). Of course, Satan's knowledge, to which Sin has the key, has a limiting and enfeebling effect on the human soul, while the knowledge of Christ is the key to spiritual health, salvation, and perfect truth.

Milton's treatment of the symbolism of the keys also reminds us that he very definitely took sides in the great theological controversies of his time. As a staunch Reformed Protestant, he obviously draws upon certain Roman Catholic doctrines and practices in his vision of Sin, who seems to be visualized from details drawn from Spenser's Duessa and the monster Error as well as from the biblical Whore of Babylon and the classical Hecate and Scylla.<sup>14</sup> Duessa, fair to the Red Cross Knight though she is deformed beneath, sets the pattern for Sin, who "seem'd Woman to the waist, and fair,/But ended foul . . ." (II, 650-651). And, like the monster Error, Sin's lower parts terminate "in many a scaly fold/Voluminous and vast, a Serpent arm'd/With mortal sting" (II, 651-653). Milton not only refused to accept the authority represented by the keys on the arms of the Pope, but also insisted upon regarding the Roman Catholic Church as the promoter of *fatal error* and superstition and as the adversary of all true knowledge of Christ.

Sin, tricked up with imagery reminiscent of the apocalyptic Whore of Babylon (commonly interpreted by early Protestants as symbolic of the Catholic Church), promises to "Reign . . . voluptuous" with her father Satan. Her statement echoes Revelation xvii, 18: "And the woman which thou sawest is that great city [Babylon], which reigneth over the kings of the earth."<sup>15</sup> Also, with the help of her son, she creates a bridge of stone from hell to earth "by wondrous art/Pontifical (X, 312-313). "Pontifical" is obviously a pun alluding to the Pope. Later, Satan calls this bridge "a broad way" (X, 473), which of course differs from the narrow (Reformed) way which leads up to heaven.

Roman Catholic theology pointed to the gift of the keys to Saint Peter by Christ who says, "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."<sup>16</sup> Dryden, becoming a Roman Catholic convert, wrote that the right hand of the Roman Church



holds the sceptre and the keys,  
 To shew whom she commands, and who obeys;  
 With these to bind, or set the sinner free,  
 With that t'assert spiritual royalty.<sup>17</sup>

Precisely this view of the keys of the Church is attacked by Milton in *Paradise Lost*.

The Western Church had traditionally associated binding and loosing with John xx, 23, which would mean that the power of the keys includes the forgiveness of sins.<sup>18</sup> Milton asserts, however, that the Church does *not* have the power to "set the sinner free" from sin, and hence he who thinks himself safely in the way of salvation through the action of the earthly Church is a fool.

And now Saint *Peter* at Heav'n's Wicket seems  
 To wait them with his Keys, and now at foot  
 Of Heav'n's ascent they lift their Feet, when lo  
 A violent cross wind from either Coast  
 Blows them transverse ten thousand Leagues awry  
 Into the devious Air. . . . [They fly]  
 Into a *Limbo* large and broad, since call'd  
 The Paradise of Fools . . . (III, 484-496).

Worldly vanity is the source of the illusion that the keys of Christ are placed in the hands of the Roman Church, Milton implies.

In *De Doctrina Christiana*, Milton asserts that the keys of the kingdom are not committed to Saint Peter alone, and he denies that

the office of feeding the flock of Christ was committed to Peter in any higher sense than to the others. . . . For to feed the sheep of Christ, that is, to teach all nations, was the common office of all the apostles. Matt. xxviii, 19.

Granting, however, to Peter all that is claimed for him, what proof have we that the same privileges are continued to his successors? or that these successors are the Roman pontiffs?<sup>19</sup>

In his assumption that the keys refer basically to the feeding of the Christian flock,<sup>20</sup> Milton is in apparent agreement with Calvin.<sup>21</sup>

In his epic, Milton makes use of the visual images of the keys and the sceptre to delineate with precision his hierarchy of values. The relationships between the divine, the angelic, the human, and the demonic are most carefully presented, with the agents of evil taking into their hands the emblems of power and authority which are only inaccurate shadows of the true symbols in the possession of Christ and his ministers.

Similarly, Milton's symbols are not promiscuously chosen merely to titillate the visual or tactile sense of the reader, for that would be to confuse false with true images in the defence of the ways of God. The serious nature of the epic absolutely demands that the imagery should depend upon a symbolic meaning which is relevant to the structure of the poem as a whole. Image, therefore, can not legitimately be separated from symbol.<sup>22</sup> Everything must find its place in the hierarchic order of a symbolic cosmos which, despite the shattering impact of the fall of man, nevertheless reveals to us the natural pattern of God's creation.

Milton's cosmos, indeed, is at times very close to Shakespeare's. The lines from *Macbeth* which Eliot quotes approvingly in his first essay on Milton neither evidence free pyrotechnics of the visual imagination nor are they exactly examples of "perpetual novelty".<sup>1</sup> The lines from Shakespeare are, of course, very fine lines indeed, but the "temple-haunting martlet" and "the crow [that]/Makes wing to the rooky wood" are potent with symbolic value. The martlet and the crow are symbols, respectively, of divine creativity and of demonic sterility; the images are intended to be directly illustrative of the relationship between Duncan, the exemplar of goodness, and Macbeth, the mad butcher of Dunsinane. The bird of good and the bird of evil are not far removed from the true and false symbols of divine authority in *Paradise Lost*.

#### NOTES

1. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (Penguin Books, 1955), pp. 129, 124, 144-145, 125.
2. See J. A. MacCulloch, "Locks and Keys," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York, 1958), VIII, 123, and B. E. Burchett, *Janus in Roman Life and Cult* (Menasha, Wisconsin, 1918), pp. 3, 10.
3. Quotations from *Paradise Lost* are from John Milton, *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957).
4. For a brief summary of Milton's Arianism, see Maurice Kelly, *This Great Argument* (Princeton, 1941), p. 84.
5. Hebrews i, 8, which cites Psalm xlv, 6-7 (KJV). For a discussion of some significant parallels between *Paradise Lost* and the Bible, see Allan H. Gilbert, "The Theological Basis of Satan's Rebellion and the Function of Abdiel in *Paradise Lost*", *MP*, XL (1942), 19-42.
6. *Selected Psalms*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther's Works*, XII (St. Louis, 1955), p. 63.
7. *Paradise Lost*, VI, 842-843, for example, closely parallels Revelation vi, 6, which is concerned with the wicked at the Last Day.

8. Milton discusses the Mosaic Law in *De Doctrina Christiana*, in *The Works of John Milton*, ed. Frank Allen Patterson, et al., XVI (New York, 1934), 124-155.
9. Emil G. Hirsch and Max Seligsohn, "Key", *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, VII (New York, 1925), 480; *III Baruch* xi, 2, as cited by MacCulloch, p. 123.
10. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Pt. I, Q. 19, Reply Obj. 3: "God . . . neither wills evil to be done, nor wills it not to be done; but He wills to permit evil to be done, and this is a good."
11. For example, gold is the material of the floor of heaven and, inversely, of the roof of Pandemonium.
12. See B. Rajan, *Paradise Lost and the Seventeenth Century Reader* (London, 1962), p. 50.
13. The form of the Nicene Creed in the Western Church is as follows: "And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, and Giver of Life, *Who proceedeth from the Father and the Son. . .*" (Italics mine).
14. See John M. Steadman, "Tradition and Innovation in Milton's 'Sin': The Problem of Literary Indebtedness," *PQ*, XXXIX (1960), 93-103.
15. See also Revelation xvii, 8, in which the beast, upon which the Whore rides, "shall ascend out of the bottomless pit. . ."
16. Matthew xvi, 19, xviii, 18.
17. *The Hind and the Panther*, ll. 1238-1241.
18. See J. K. Mozley, "Binding and Loosing," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, II, 619.
19. *The Works of John Milton*, XVI, 231-233 [translation by Charles R. Summner].
20. See *Lycidas*, 113-121. Milton in *Lycidas* associates the keys of the kingdom with the iron and gold sceptres: "The Golden opes, the Iron shuts amain." The ministerial task here is to feed the sheep of Christ. Of course, Milton had once dramatically changed his mind concerning this issue, as is demonstrated in his poem "On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament" (c. 1646). His earlier opinion is preserved in his *Of Reformation Touching Church-Discipline in England*, in *The Works*, III, i (1931), 69: the just, he asserts, ought not to object to the "Pastorly Rod, and Sheep-hooke of CHRIST, and those cords of love, and not feare to fall under the iron *Sceptre* of his anger. . . ." When Milton later rejected the idea of Presbyterian discipline, he found the Reformed "Pastorly Rod" to be a tyrant's force oppressing "our consciences that Christ set free."
21. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, xi, 1-2.
22. See René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1956), p. 178. See also Don Cameron Allen, *The Harmonious Vision* (Baltimore, 1954), p. 109.