

## “Strength: An Evil Inclination in *Paradise Lost*?”

Will Squiers

### *Excerpt*

The first issue with the term “strong” as it is used in *Paradise Lost* is that it is often used as a relative or comparative term. The fallen angels and the narrator use the term “strength” to compare the fallen angels in power to each other or to God. When the narrator introduces Moloch in Book II, he is described as “the strongest and the fiercest Spirit / That fought in Heaven” (II.44-45), which is comparing Moloch’s fighting power to the other angels. The “strength” of Moloch is defined by his more powerful fighting abilities relative to his peers. Moloch goes on to discuss himself how God has more power than he does, using the word “strong”: “Should we again provoke / Our stronger” (II.82-83). Moloch defines God’s power by its magnitude relative to his own power. Along with Moloch, Satan discusses God’s power by saying “so much the stronger proved / He with his thunder” (I.92-93) and “his high supremacy, / Whether upheld by strength, or chance, or fate” (I.132-133). In both cases, Satan is comparing God’s “strength” to that of the fallen angels—God was proved “stronger” than the fallen, and God “upheld” his “supremacy” because his “strength” is greater relative to the fallen angels’ “strength.” The underlying idea with this comparison is that if Satan and his companions had more power, they could have defeated God. Before commenting on how this is problematic, I will talk about the second characteristic of the use of “strong” in *Paradise Lost*.

The second issue with the usage of “strength” by the fallen angels is that the fallen angels try to claim by using the word that their power is entirely their own, separate from God. The word choice and the excessive use of possessive pronouns surrounding the word “strong” indicate the fallen angels’ desire to possess their power as their own. Satan starts this trend as he first speaks to Beelzebub and claims that “by fate the strength of gods / And this empyreal substance cannot fail” (I.116-117). Instantly, Satan is attempting to elevate the status of the

fallen to “gods” in order to claim their power as self-contained instead of received from the true God. Beelzebub responds with the same mindset, saying “what if he...left us this our spirit and strength entire / Strongly to suffer...what can it avail though yet we feel / Strength undiminished” (I.143, 146-147, and 153-154). Beelzebub’s use of “our...strength” and “we feel” attempts to emphasize the agency the fallen have on their own. Both of these fallen angels want to be individuals exempt from God’s control, whose power really does come from and belong entirely to them alone. The narrator is quick to pick up on this delusion of the fallen: “Both glorying to have scaped the Stygian flood / As gods, and by their own recovered strength, / Not by the sufferance of supernal power” (I.239-241). Again, Beelzebub and Satan want to believe they are “gods” who escaped the wrath of God through “their own” power, or “strength,” not God’s choice. However, the reader learns in Book VI that this was not true—the Son shepherded the “timorous flock...before him thunderstruck... into the wasteful deep” (VI.857-858 and 862). The fallen never escaped punishment by their own power but were herded into Hell and away from God’s punishments by God’s choice carried out by his Son. The narrator sums up this attempt at independence as Satan’s “heart...hardening in his strength” (I.571-572). Satan and the fallen angels’ hearts are hardening when they use the word “strength” because they are turning away from God and trying to reject his power over them.

This comparative nature and desire for self-governance underlying the fallen angels’ term “strength” are sinful because God is incomparable and all power comes from God. The incomparability of God is firmly established in Book III of *Paradise Lost* as part of Milton’s theology. The narrator clearly proclaims “beyond compare the Son of God was seen / Most glorious, in him all his Father shone / Substantially expressed” (III.138-140). The Son, and through him God the Father, are above all comparison. The fallen angels’ attempt at comparing their power with that of God, their “strength” with that of God, is not only impossible but also sinful. Underlying their use of the word “strong,” Satan and his comrades are attempting to elevate themselves to God’s level, and that is a sin. The idea that the fallen angels possess their

power within themselves is equally sinful. The angel Gabriel points this out to Satan in their encounter at the end of Book IV. Gabriel explains, “Satan, I know thy strength, and thou knowest mine, / Neither our own, but given...thine no more / Than heaven permits, nor mine” (IV.1006-1009). All of creation, Satan included, receives its power from God the creator, and Satan is deluded in thinking otherwise. As God himself declares, “I created all the ethereal powers” (III.100). For the fallen to suggest that their power is their own and therefore not given to them by God would again be challenging God’s authority as creator, yet another a sinful action. In the end, these two characteristics of the fallen angels’ use of “strength” can be found at the root of Satan’s original rebellion against God.

### *Abstract*

The angel Raphael leaves Adam and Eve in Paradise at the end of Book VIII of *Paradise Lost* with a supplication that begins with two words: “Be strong” (VIII.633). As harmless as these words might seem, Adam and Eve go on to eat the forbidden fruit and fall from grace in the very next book, and I believe it has everything to do with these two words. In *Paradise Lost*, “strength” and “strong” are not words in God’s vocabulary but are Satanic terms used in comparison with and separation from God. As a result, Raphael’s use of “strong” in his conversation with Adam in the Garden of Eden and then in his final supplication to Adam and Eve actually lead to Adam and Eve’s ultimate transgression.

I first examine how and where the words “strength” and “strong” are used in *Paradise Lost* leading up to the fall of Adam and Eve. “Strength” is never used by God himself but is almost exclusively used by fallen angels or by the narrator describing them. The fallen angels use “strong” both to draw comparisons between themselves and God and to separate themselves from God’s power. These two traits of “strong,” the comparative and separating nature of the word, are central to Satan’s fall from grace and are antithetical to the example of the Son. I then analyze Raphael’s discussion with Adam about the conflict in heaven where he uses the word

“strength” multiple times to accurately describe the fallen angels. Throughout the conversation, Raphael ensures that Adam and Eve understand the negative connotations of the word, so his use of “strong” in his warning is troubling. Finally, by a close reading of Adam and Eve’s conversations preceding their first sin in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, it is clear that Adam and Eve were misled by the term “strength,” fall victim to the Satanic nature of the term, and are led to their fall as a result.

*Fellow Commentary*

Shannon K. Winston

Body paragraphs carry the weight of the paper; they help solidify, elaborate, and complicate a paper’s central claims (thesis). Ideally, each paragraph should elaborate a *part* of the principal argument and build logically towards ever-increasing complexity, much like Will Squiers’s paper, “Strength: An Evil Inclination in *Paradise Lost*?” For this reason, we asked Will to write an abstract, which clearly reveals a methodical and well-reasoned structure.

The strength (pun intended!) of this paper resides in its analysis of the **key word** “strength” through close reading. Like all strong analysis, Will looks for patterns: how, under what context, and by whom the word is used. He not only counts how many times the word appears (in a section not included in this issue) but also charts how the word’s connotation shifts and becomes a comparative notion throughout *Paradise Lost*. In other words, by examining who speaks of strength and in what context, Will explores the contradictory and multiple ways in which meaning is created.

Structurally, the topic sentences are clear and idea-driven; that is, they do not summarize what is happening in *Paradise Lost* but instead further understandings of how and to what end the word “strength” is invoked. For example, Will writes: “The second issue with the usage of “strength” by the fallen angels is that the fallen angels try to claim by using the word that their power is entirely their own, separate from God.” With a focus on his key word, Will introduces a *second* use of the word “strength” and an “issue”—a competing interpretation of the word. Here, readers can begin to see that Will is adding to the multiple and comparative notions of the word “strength.” By focusing on this single word, he is able to introduce a complex and multifaceted argument that is nevertheless anchored in a *single key word*. The strength of Will’s paper is that it does not remain entangled in the word that is static and unchanging, but analyzes how the word functions in relational, dynamic ways within Milton’s text.

Furthermore, while the topic sentences help structure the paragraphs and foreshadow the principal themes, this paper also does an excellent job with analysis. First, Will integrates the quote into his own argument and uses only the words he needs in order to prove his point. For example, “Along with Moloch, Satan discusses God’s power by saying “so much the stronger proved / He with his thunder” (I.92-93) and “his high supremacy, / Whether upheld by strength, or chance, or fate” (I.132-133). Yet, he does not stop there but tells his readers why this quote is important and how it relates to his thesis. In a paper that is ultimately about different and competing notions of the word “strength,” Will’s own analysis of the word offers another critical layer to the word, so that his close reading becomes a metacommentary, adding yet another layer to the dynamics he describes.

*Author Commentary*

Will Squiers

The beauty of a great piece of literature is that it never fails to surprise the reader. Going into a class on Milton and *Paradise Lost* last year, I was not expecting any surprises. This was my second time reading the epic poem, and everyone knows exactly what happens in the dramatization of Adam and Eve’s fall from grace. So, when the angel Raphael exhorts Adam and Eve to “be strong” to avoid sin immediately before they both sin, I figured that Adam and Eve misunderstood what “strength” was and that led them to sin. For my paper, I decided to learn what “strength” really meant, and then I would be able to demonstrate where Adam and Eve went wrong and failed to “be strong.”

Boy, was I surprised. As I looked back through the numerous times “strength” is used in the ten books of *Paradise Lost*, I noticed some very odd things. For one, God never uses the word “strength” or any word derived from it in the entire epic poem. On the other hand, Satan and the fallen angels could not shut up about “strength.” After these discoveries, I had so many questions. What about “strength” is so fascinating to the fallen? Why does Raphael tell Adam and Eve to “be strong” when that is what the fallen want to be? And why does the omnipotent God, the one being who should have all the “strength” in the world, never once use the word “strength”?

What I found was a consistent pattern and meaning to the word “strength” that built up throughout the first eight books of the poem up to the warning that initially intrigued me, and not only did Adam and Eve correctly understand “strength,” but Adam and Eve’s attempts to “be strong” contributed to mankind’s fall. Since the pattern and definition of this single word was so crucial and took so long to develop, I had to carefully consider how to effectively structure the paper to establish the definition of “strength,” reveal what Raphael meant by using that word, and finally what all of that meant to Adam and Eve. Hopefully, what I discovered will be as surprising to you as it was for me.