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Milton and the Mouse: Was *Paradise Lost* Lovingly Ripped Off?

A demon parade? Ghouls running amuck? A battle between good and evil? Are these scenes from an epic literary masterpiece or cartoon animation synced to the sounds of classic music? The answer to this question is simple: both.

John Milton created a beautiful literary retelling of the first chapter of the Bible, which explains what really happened between God, Satan, and why a war was waged between the good and the evil. Additionally, there is an animated story of a battle between a satanic figure named Chernabog, and the power of good. This particular retelling can be found in Disney's *Fantasia* within the piece entitled "A Night on Bald Mountain." Deems Taylor, the narrator for *Fantasia*, states within the movie,

Musically and dramatically, we have here a picture of the struggle between the profane and the sacred. "Bald Mountain" according to tradition, is the gathering place of Satan and his followers. Here, on Walpurgisnacht, which is the equivalent of our own Halloween, the creatures of evil gather to worship their master. Under his spell, they dance furiously until the coming of dawn and the sounds of church bells send the infernal army slinking back into their abodes of darkness. (Taylor *Fantasia*)

Are these stories closely related? Did Walt Disney and his artistic teams of animators borrow from the detailed writing of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* to create their own reputation-building masterpiece with "A Night on Bald Mountain?" John Milton's

Paradise Lost and Walt Disney's "Night on Bald Mountain" share many similarities, which brings to question how close the Disney animators relied on the works of John Milton.

John Milton's life was greatly influenced by music as is witnessed predominately in his poetry. Milton grew up around music with thanks to his father, John Milton Senior. Diane McColley, in "Milton in Context," states that Milton's father was "a Scrivener and a composer of music who had been schooled as a chorister at Christ Church College, Oxford," and "Held music meeting at his London house on Bread Street, near St. Paul's Cathedral" (McConley 394). These meetings were social events where musicians, choristers, and even madrigalists alike came together to create and discuss music. Thus, John Milton had frequent and easy access to music. Even the location of Milton's father's house in London was an area in which he was immersed in the music of "criers, in churches and college chapels, in theatrical performances" (McColley 394). This explains why John Milton's work, especially *Paradise Lost*, has a general flare for the dramatic and theatric approach.

Within Milton's work there is a great deal of music mentioned. With visions of muses, angels singing of Christ being born and cherubs playing golden harps while lifting their voices into song, it is evident that Milton is trying to bring his worlds together to show that music, literature and religion can go hand in hand. He also tries to prove that music is not the sin that the puritans had believed it to be. Diane McColley states,

Dedicated to the revolutionary and parliamentary side of the civil wars but opposed to censorship and deeply attached to music, Milton collaborated with a court composer, praised the church music that Puritans attempted to destroy, and

in his epics represented choral and instrumental music in Heaven, Hell, and Paradise. (394).

Like Milton, Walt Disney was greatly influenced by the classical music of his time. Steven Watts, writer of the article “Walt Disney: Art and Politics in the American Century,” states: “Having but little education and training in art, Disney largely followed his instincts in mashing political images, humor, comedy, and music to create mass entertainment” (Watts 90). In his early career Walt Disney produced many animated shorts that used music within the cartoon. In 1937 Walt Disney produced his first full-length animated feature film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. This masterpiece work was not only comprised of Walt’s many storytelling personal touches, but especially the use of music. Following the success of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Walt continued on to produce *Pinocchio* in 1940. Walt once again uses animation and music to tell the tale of a little wooden puppet who dreamt of becoming a real boy. Shortly after, in the same year, Walt produced a work that was extremely ground breaking for the time. He took classical music, such as “The Nutcracker Suite,” and animated a segment to tell a story within the music. Eric Smoodin accurately recounts in his book *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*:

Today, after twelve years, this young man, who shyly professes his ignorance of classical music, has just made a two-and-one-half-hour picture, the body of which is a full-rigged classical orchestral concert by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Symphony, and the *décor* of which is a pictorial fantasy on the screen contrived to interpret, animate, enrich, expand, and vitalize the music

and music has never before come to life. It is called *Fantasia* and it is a revolution. (Smoodin 25-26).

Walt's *Fantasia* made strides within the full-length animated feature, making music an important factor within the art form. Walt Disney used instrumental music to convey good, evil, and Heaven and Hell on earth.

Both Milton and Disney used music to further their craft. During Milton's time it was commonplace for composers to seek out poems to use and set to music; causing the composers of music and the authors of poetry to come together to enhance each other's work. When reading Milton's *Paradise Lost* there is a musicality to the tone of the poem, making the words sing off the page. Disney used a similar technique with his animation. He took his cartoon images, like Milton took his words, and gave them a musical quality. This enriched the featured film with lushes, symphonies and melodies. Mark Clague writes in the article, "Playing in 'Toon: Walt Disney's '*Fantasia*' (1940) and the Imagineering of Classical Music,"

Hailed as a new kind of art form, Walt Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) harnessed recent developments in recording (multichannel editing and stereophonic surround playback) and photography (the Multiplan camera and Technicolor process) to bring a wider understanding of good music to the general public. (Clague 91).

Walt Disney found new and inventive ways to reach his audiences, using music, as Milton did in his works.

Images are very important within literature and animation. Great images can bring a work of art to life. Within John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Milton brings to life

three different worlds: a dark evil world that Satan and his fallen angels have been banished too; Heaven where God and his angels live; and God's creation, or earth and the pastoral images of Eden. Book one of *Paradise Lost* opens after the prologue where Milton employs a muse to help tell the story. Satan is lying next to his second in command, Beelzebub, in Hell where the fallen angels have been banished. They are lying in a lake of fire that gives off darkness; or as Milton famously wrote, "No light, but rather darkness made visible" (PL 1.63). Once out of the fire, Satan, who will not repent for his wrongdoing, calls the fallen angels to join him. In a parade like procession the angels fly up to Satan's side and join him.

A similar sight is seen within Disney's *Fantasia*. "A Night on Bald Mountain" begins with a piece of classical music by the same name; arranged by Russian composer Rimsky-Korsakov. As the haunting music begins the audience catches a glimpse of a figure coming to life on top of the mountain. This winged, demonic, creature is known as Chernabog. As he awakens, Chernabog reaches his hands down towards surrounding towns, creating a similar image as with the visible darkness in *Paradise Lost*. As the shadows blanket the town below the audience starts to witness ghostly ghouls who are leaving their gravestones. These angels of the afterlife fly up, in a parade procession, to be with Chernabog and to celebrate the night with him amongst the flames of Bald Mountain. The difference here between Walt Disney's piece and John Milton's poem is how Walt Disney sets "A Night on Bald Mountain" in a Victorian aged town, and Milton's masterpiece takes place before and during the creation of man. Both stories deal with the epic struggle of good versus evil, but within two different periods in history.

To contrast Heaven and Hell, Milton uses descriptions of light and dark to drastically differentiate the two places. In book three of *Paradise Lost* Milton uses light to describe the heavenly Father and Son: “Hail holy light, offspring of Heav’n firstborn/ Or of th’ Eternal Coeternal beam” (PL 3.1-2). The images of light that Milton uses resemble purity in Heaven contrasted against the darkness of the scorned and lost angels.

The Disney animators use contrasting images as well to showcase the differences between good and evil. The scenes with Chernabog and the ghouls he summons are sketched using dark, gruesome colors to bring out the evil and darkness of the characters and situation. As day begins to arrive, vanquishing the night, the audience begins to hear the classical piece, “Ave Maria.” The song begins, church bells chime, and bright glowing orbs appear in the distance. As the setting changes, Chernabog and his minions retract back to their places of suffering. Like Milton, the team at Disney uses imagery of light to portray the good and godly figures that walk amongst the evil within the world.

Both artists used pastoral imagery within their works. Specifically, Milton used pastoral elements within Eden. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski comments on the use of pastoral within the poem *The Genres of Paradise Lost* by stating, “The panoply of kinds includes pastoral: landscape descriptions of Arcadian vistas; pastoral scenes and eclogue-like passages presenting the *otium* (ease, contentment) of heaven and unfallen Eden” (Lewalski 114). The pastoral imagery in both *Paradise Lost* and *Fantasia* are equal and appear when good and new life is being portrayed within the stories. Mark Langer, author of the article *Regionalism in Disney Animation: Pink Elephants and Dumbo*, states, “...through this style, Disney was perceived as expressing cultural “truths” in the fantastic form of the folktale and was seen as replicating life through artificial process”

(Langer 305). The way Walt Disney and his animators brought to life techniques used in poetry and folktale, such as the pastoral element, brought greater meaning to the work. Milton also proved this to be true with his mastery of literary devices and imagery within his epic poem.

Robin Allan writes in his book *Walt Disney and Europe*,

Disney was a master of technological and cultural manipulation, taking stories and characters and style and mood and themes from Europe, and recreating them in animated form. An examination of his early life shows how much Disney was himself a product of the mass culture of the twentieth century. (Allan 1-2).

Walt Disney uses his influences from European culture with his pastoral images and also his choice of composers and music within *Fantasia*. Another link between Walt Disney and Milton was Disney's love for European culture.

During the time Walt and his animators were in school, Milton's *Paradise Lost* was a core work of study within the curriculum. Clark Kerr states in his article, "Higher Education: Paradise Lost?" that, "...for the United States it [Academic Paradise] commenced with the land-grant movement and the rise of modern university beginning in the 1860s and 1870s" (Kerr 262). Along with the culture's great influence on education there was also an influence on great literary works; *Paradise Lost* being one of them.

Editors David Scott Kastan and Merritt Yerkes Hughes of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* write an excerpt explaining, "...the poem justifiably remains at the center of the curriculum of English literature, and, as Milton has been returned to the vital intellectual and political life of his times by the work of modern scholars..." (Milton xii). With Milton being a popular subject within the field of Education and *Paradise Lost* being a

piece of literature that is continuously taught, that is continuously taught, the artistic team of Walt Disney has had to come into contact with the popular work at some point in their life. There is a possibility that the strong images in *Paradise Lost* has been an influence within the strong imagery portraying the struggle of good and evil within “A Night on Bald Mountain.”

Elemire Zolla defines archetypes, in the article “Archetypes,” stating that, “An archetype is what can permanently order objects into sets, gather together emotions and direct thoughts” (Zolla 191). By studying the similarities between *Paradise Lost* and “A Night on Bald Mountain” it is important to look at the main character, the archetypes of evil: Satan and Chernabog. These two characters are an archetypal metaphor for sin, and death. Michael Osborn, in his article “Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric: The light –Dark Family,” states, “Archetypal metaphors are grounded in prominent features of experience, in objects, actions, or conditions which are inescapably salient in human consciousness. For example, death and sex are promontories in the geography of experience” (Osborn). Both Satan and Chernabog symbolize the archetypal metaphor of the human experience of sin, the evils of sin, and the cause of the fall of man.

There are many names for Satan that appears in different translations. Commonplace names for Satan are Beelzebub or Belial. But within *Paradise Lost* Milton separates those names to different fallen angels and not of one singular being. In *The Origin of Satan: How Christians Demonized Jews, Pagans, and Heretics* Elaine Pagels discusses and describes:

What fascinates us about Satan is the way he expresses qualities that go beyond what we ordinarily recognize as human. Satan evokes more than the

greed, envy, lust, and anger we identify with our own worst impulses, and more than what we call brutality, which imputes to human beings a resemblance to animals ('brutes')" (Pagels xvii).

Satan, appearing in the bible, is very cunning and he shifts his shape to a snake, fooling Eve to take a bit of the apple. Milton uses this same characteristic within *Paradise Lost*. The character is portrayed as a sly, cunning, creation bent on revenge.

Within "A Night on Bald Mountain" we lose the cunning characteristic within the satanic creature, Chernabog. He shows more of a brute strength compared to the sly, cunning traits Milton uses. Chernabog summons his fallen angels and has a mastery of dark magic but he does not use it to seek revenge on the good. Instead he flees when he hears the church bells and the distant singing of "Ave Maria." A frightening character, yes, but not one who is determined to fight within "A Night on Bald Mountain."

The character of Satan has been evolving for many years. John Carey states in his essay on "Milton's Satan," "Appearances of Satan in literature, sub literature, and theology multiplied. Scores of literary Satans evolved, and some of them-notably those created by Du Bartas, Andreini, Grotius, and Vondel-possibly influenced Milton. However, no convincing single source for Milton's Satan has been found" (Carey 160). Art draws from many different sources to create new life. "A Night on Bald Mountain" resembles many images from Milton's poem

Chernabog and Satan both, are vastly wicked, within their own fictitious world, that some readers cannot identify with the characters but view both to be controversial. Raphael Jehudah Zwi Werblowsky discusses the constant fear of evil in *Lucifer and Prometheus: A Study of Milton's Satan*,

The apocalyptic beast let loose has become a reality to our generation, and nobody knows what is still ahead of us. It is understandable therefore that books on the devil have been on the increase lately. ... If the attempts of this school have not yet borne much fruit, it is because we fear the devil's sight more than his activity, and because of a very understandable reticence to force open our 'whited sepulchers.'" (Werblowsky)

Both figures, conveyed as evil, are determined to thrust wickedness down onto the world that shunned them. The satanic characters reciprocate by creating more demons, creating more pain within the new human race, pain within the town in which borders their mountain, and pain to the holy powers above. In *Disney and the Bible: A Scriptural Critique of the Magic Kingdom* written by Perucci Ferraiuolo, it states, "In the final sequence, Chernabog-the embodiment of Satan-was the complete antithesis of the Bible" (Perucci). Making both Chernabog and Satan controversial figures to the modern day audience member. As Dennis Danielson states in, "The Fall and Milton's Theodicy," "Milton's presentation of his various literary characteristics can be controversial because so many people still believe in, or worry about, the actual existence of some of his important ones" (Danielson 144).

Even though these two characters initiate fear within us, the way they are portrayed in the text we start to adore and grow accustomed to their ways. Rostrevor G. Hamilton, *Hero or Fool: A Study of Milton's Satan*, explains about Milton's Satan: "he wins our admiration the more firmly because he is ultimately real, while the inhabitants of Heaven are remote and strange" (Hamilton 39). This is true to Disney's Chernabog. We are in awe with the magic he can practice, and he looks as if he knows how to through a

celebration of a lifetime. Where there characters in the “Ave Maria” segment, that portray good and holy creature, we never see or are introduced to besides gleaming orbs of light.

Charles Solomon, author of *The Disney That Never Was: The Stories and Art From Five Decades of Unproduced Animation*, states: “Walt Disney foresaw the enduring appeal of the film he wrote in 1940, ‘*Fantasia*’ is timeless” (Solomon 155). Whether Walt Disney and his artistic team borrowed from Milton, or not, they created a masterpiece combining different elements that forever changed animation. Just as Milton changed the face of literature with his groundbreaking work: *Paradise Lost*. Both Milton and Disney have created strong, fear inducing, characters in Satan and Chernabog. The pair brought their stories to life by adding musicality, using literary and animation techniques within their words and images, and portrayed the great struggle of good and evil making both pieces, *Paradise Lost* and *Fantasia*, masterpieces in similar ways and individually.

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