

Religion and Satire in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dryden's "Mac Flecknoe"

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Abstract

Religion can be defined as a belief system in human society which transcends the natural to the spiritual. Much as it is something that one considers oneself bound to, it is a common historical foundation for rivalry. This rivalry has always created room for hostility and division among the affiliated groups, an act which can be referred to as denominationalism. The negative consequences of this concept are many, but favoritism has stood out as it has always given room for preferential treatments and giving of unfair advantages to a person or thing above others. This problem is primitive and does not appeal to the civilized mind. The concept of denominationalism has inspired poets to write in favour of or against one cause or the other, mostly, through the application of such literary technique as satire. Starting from such a seventeenth century English poet, Milton, to a later neo classical poet, Milton, different categories of satire has been used to criticize denominationalism. This paper studied how the concept of religion inspired the writings of John Milton and John Dryden and their reactions to the problem. Based on the fact that different causes of denominationalism have earlier been identified to include economic gains, political reasons, spiritual problems, culture conflicts, and psychological reasons/complexes, the researcher proffers solution to the problems of denominationalism by drawing the attention of the society that this vice exists and is causing serious challenges to the socio-political institutions.

Introduction

Religion is as old as mankind. The first consciousness of man came with the quest to know who he is, who made him, and where he is going. This brought about many religious beliefs and practices. Founders of different religions usually had in mind the need to raise a people with one faith, one body and one goal. Christianity, for instance, is founded by Jesus Christ, while Islam is by Prophet Mohammed. Today, there are many religious groups with different doctrines and these factors have influenced poets in writing texts with religious themes and in some cases serious criticism against their opponents. Part of the problems leading to some of this writing is that of denominations. According to *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, "denomination is a "name" especially one given to a class or religious group of sect..." (230). As the group grows in length and bound, they usually accept the names given to them and see themselves as those united by one common destiny. It is this unity that naturally attracts soft feelings and undue helps to members of a religious group - this act is commonly referred to as favoritism. Favoritism has existed and continues to exist as an undue advantage given to one person or a group by another. It causes preferential treatments and results in having chaos or disorderly society. It is as a result of this that some writers have cultivated different styles of expression to condemn this act. One of such is the use of satire. The word satire means a literary technique of writing or art which principally ridicules its subject often as an intended means of provoking or preventing change. Humour is mostly used to actualize this satire.

Background to the Restoration Period

The early decades of the seventeenth century are referred to as the Jacobean and Caroline periods. Jacobus and Carolus being the Latin forms of the names of King James 1 and king Charles 1. The exuberant creative energies of the Renaissance began to decline during the first four decades of the new century giving way to a more somber, dark and melancholic world. Satire in poetry became the style of writing during this period following the models of the great Roman satirists Juvenal and Horace. New effects were sought for in poetry, and theatre lost their popular and wide interest that they enjoyed during the Renaissance era.

Charles I: Charles, son of King James I succeeded his father, after his death in 1625. He had a peaceful handover of power, but faced greater challenges with his foes who dominated both the House of Lords and the House of commons in the parliament. Both houses sought to control Charles by denying him approval of funds. According to parliament, taxes demanded by Charles were illegitimate and a threat to private property. This led to Charles's assertion of this

declared taxing legal, and his further claims that he ruled by “divine right” that is, by the “authority of God,” and that he is accountable to God, only, for his actions and policies, a claim that created heated disputes leading to civil war.

Civil War: The first civil war broke out in 1642 after King Charles I attempted to arrest five parliamentary leaders. Those in support of the king, known as the “Cavaliers” initially had upper hands, but this was later countered under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell, a country gentleman and a committed religious puritan, who championed the cause of the parliamentary forces, otherwise known as the “Roundheads”. The king was defeated after series of battles in 1644 and 1645 and eventually arrested, jailed, tried and finally executed in 1649.

The puritans who opposed the absolute powers of the king had not originally intended to depose him but only to cut down his powers, later protested the execution of king Charles. Also, there was no alternative form of government prepared to take over power in government, England was compelled by circumstance to become a republic, which is referred to as a commonwealth, with Oliver Cromwell as its head. The parliamentary system having broken down, the affairs of the state rested on the hands of the council of state with Cromwell as the protector. The death of Cromwell in 1658 led to the proclamation of his son Richard as the protector. Richard Cromwell nevertheless failed to have both kingly authority and the power of a military conqueror and later resigned and made moves to restore the monarchy. Charles Stuart, the son of King Charles I was later in 1660 restored to the monarchy under the name, Charles II, following the general agreement by the various factions in England who reached the agreement to restore the monarchy by recalling from exile Charles Stuart.

John Milton’s Background

John Milton (1608-1674) was an exception of the puritans who developed interest in poetry. Endowed with the Christian concept of Christianity with epic dignity and grandeur, Milton’s poetic ideas were grounded in the whole history and tradition of European literature and he transcends his age. Milton ostensibly took after Edmund Spenser, whose rich poetry imagination produced pleasant poetry in the services of morality. His great epics were composed during his retirement period. Milton was born in London to the family of a prosperous businessman. His father had an intention of giving him the best possible education. He attended the St. Paul’s School in London and later the Cambridge University, where in 1632; he took a Master’s Degree. As a major in Language option, Milton read Greek, Latin, Hebrew and the Modern European Languages. According to Prince in an introduction to *Paradise Lost*, “the elder John Milton had changed his religion from Catholic to Protestant, to the displeasure of his father” (7-8).

His poem “Aeropagitica” written in 1644 argued against the laws of censorship as he did not always agree with the policies of the parliament. Milton went blind about 1651 or 1652, partly because of his heavy load of government work, but he continued his duties with the aid of secretaries. His poems include, “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” “L’Allegro and Il Penseroso,” “Lycidas”, “Aeropagitica” and sonnets of which “When I Consider How my Light is Spent” is very prominent. His drama piece is *Samson Agonistes*. His married life was not very successful though.

Satire and Religious Views in *Paradise Lost*

The core of this epic poem is on Milton’s ability to create in Adam a Christian hero of conscience who rises above the usual epic hero. Adam is heroic in his acceptance of guilt. At first, the most impressive figure in the poem is Satan, who is as attractive as he is evil but who diminishes in stature as the epic progresses, gradually becoming a figure of meanness and spite. Milton made use of the blank verse, which before his time was used mostly for drama, due to the fact that he had a lengthy and complete story to tell and needed the flexibility that rhymeless line offered.

With its twelve books, the story of *Paradise Lost* started with man’s first disobedience and the punishment that follows, in which Satan and his crew of disobedient angels was expelled from Heaven. Adam is the central figure representing man and with his wife Eve, they lost paradise:

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the fruit
of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal task
brought death into the World, and all our woe,
with loss of Eden, till one greater Man
restore us, and regain the blissful Seat (Milton: 28).

In the words of Kathleen McCoy and Judith Harlan, “Milton’s purpose, stated early in Book 1, is to explain why God, being good, allows evil to plague peoples’ lives” (128). They further state that:

His puritan theology stresses the importance of individual moral choice. To be virtuous, people must be able to choose from among both good and evil actions, but even if they choose evil, they still may obtain mercy and forgiveness by repenting (128)

It is obvious that the major theme that runs through *Paradise Lost* is the Biblical teaching that man’s true happiness can only come through salvation which Jesus gives. This happiness is not without its opposition. We see in Book II the debate of the demons on the best ways of resisting God. These demons include Moloch, Chemos, Astoreth, Thammuz and Belial. God, of course, drove out of heaven the recalcitrant angels:

... But he who reigns
Monarch in Heaven, till then as one secure
Sat on his Throne, upheld by old repute
Consent or custom, and his Regal state....
What force effected not, our better part remains
To work in close design, by fraud or guile
What force effected not: that he no less
At length from us may find, who governs
By forces, hath overcome but half his foe
(Milton: 53).

The periods succeeding the Medieval and Classical in English literature still retained seeds of chivalry. The battle between good and evil is often portrayed as that between God and Satan, these are reflected in Milton’s *paradise lost* and were further drawn to a state of satire in the Neo-classical poetry, using the two sides of good and evil, for satiric poem, ‘Mac Flecknoe.’ Religious motivation continued to rule the inspiration and expressions of most English writers until they came to the state of writing modern poems.

The Neo-classical Poetry

The Neo-classical poetry was championed by John Dryden. It was upheld and distinguished by the other English poets like Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson. The most outstanding feature of the Neo-classical poetry is its use of wit and reasoning to criticize or lampoon the ills of the society. Remarkably the Neo-classical is known with such movements that looked back to the classical for development of forms of writing. The basic nature expected of the Neo-classical poetry is that they must be satirical, witty and have respect for classical will. These factors are found in the writings of Dryden, Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson.

John Dryden: John Dryden (1631-1700) was born at Aldwinkle, All Saints, Northamptonshire on 9 August 1631 and he died at Gerrard Street, London on 1 May 1700. The complete collection of his poetry was published by the Clarendon Press in 1958. It contains all the original poems; poems of which Dryden was part author; prologues, epilogues, and songs from plays in which he collaborated with others, a few pieces ascribed to him on good if inconclusive evidence; and the complete text of *Fables Ancient and Modern*. According to Kermode:

Dryden’s poetic career began with a school boy poem, an elegy to Lord Hastings, who had died of smallpox at nineteen. Dryden wrote with hectic extravagance in the fashionable late Metaphysical manner of John Cleveland, and he did remarkable things with poor Hastings pustules... (1600)

Mac Flecknoe: Dryden’s poem “Mack Flecknoe” depicts the action of a mock-heroic procession through the streets of London, culminating in a coronation ceremony that was filled with boring speeches. The poem was first published in 1682, but was written in 1678 as a highly entertaining lampoon on Shadwell. A mock epic written in heroic couplet, the poem lampoons Thomas Shadwell, Dryden’s friend, who had a strained relationship with him as a rival playwright. As a satire, Dryden comically raises Flecknoe to the status of a monarch; the king is Richard Flecknoe, the Prince is Shadwell. Richard Flecknoe was an Irish poor playwright who raised his successor that resembles him in all the ‘Realms of Non-sense’:

And pond’ ring which of all his Sons was fit
To Reign and wage, immortal War with wit;
Cry’d, ‘tis resolved; for Nature pleased that He

Should onely rule, who most resembles me:
Sh- alone my perfect image bears,
Mature in dullness from his tender years (238)

Shadwell has written a poem to disgrace Dryden and Dryden replies with a stronger poem. Shadwell however made a mistake in this for he was weaker literarily. Thomas Shadwell is the object of satire in the poem "Mac Flecknoe". In 1678, a relationship between Shadwell and Dryden (as friends) started experiencing some strain. Shadwell was accused of being jealous of Dryden's position as poet by a colleague like John Sandbury. It is this state of jealousy that started the cold war between him and Dryden. This war was not fought with physical weapons, nor in a political arena, but in the literary world. Apart from describing Shadwell as a hack, the image of Flecknoe as an emperor who chooses Shadwell to succeed him places the poem under the category of poems referred to as satire.

The Cultivation of Satire

M.H. Abrams defines satire as "the literary art of diminishing a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, indignation or scorn" (167). *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, quoting Samuel Johnson, defines satire as "a poem in which wickedness or folly is censured and that wherever wit is employed to expose something foolish, there, satire exists" (Vol. 16:268). In the *Random House Dictionary of English Language*, satire is defined as "a literary composition, in verse or prose in which human folly and "foibles" are held up to scorn, derision or ridicule. (1270)

Historically, satire has satisfied the popular need of men to debunk and ridicule the major ailing figures in politics, economy, religion and other realms of authority. Satire confronts public discourse and the collective imaginary, playing as a public opinion counter weight to power (being political, economic, religious, symbolic or otherwise) by challenging leaders and authorities. The job of satire is to expose problems and contradictions, and it is not under obligation to solve them for its nature and social role, satire has enjoyed in many societies a special freedom license to mock prominent individuals and institutions; the satire impulse, and its situated expression, carry out the function of resolving social tensions. Two types of satire recorded over time are Horatian and Juvenalian satires. In Horatian Satire, the character of the satirist is that of an urbane, witty and tolerant man of the world who is moved to laughter rather than rage at the spectacle of human folly, pretentiousness and hypocrisy. Ultimately the aim of using a relaxed and informal language to evoke a gentle and broadly sympathetic laughter at human follies and absurdities is to correct them. The key element in Horatian satire is that the audience is also laughing at themselves as well as at the subject of the mockery.

In Juvenalian satire, the character of the speaker is that of a serious moralist who uses a dignified and public style of utterance to decry modes of vice and error which are biting, bitter and angry. Social vices, individuals, companies and organization can be the target. The aim of such invectives is to provoke an angry reaction from the audience aimed at the subject. The result of this intention is that humour is put into the back ground and biting social criticism and polarized opinion come to the forefront. These features are noted in Dryden's "Mac Flecknoe". As a Juvenalian satire, we see the image of Flecknoe as that of an emperor who chooses Shadwell to succeed him. Indeed Richard Flecknoe was an Irish playwright and poet who died in 1788 as a result of poverty, and his hack writing died with him. For Dryden to raise this hack to the status of a monarch is comical to say the least and furthermore, Dryden portrays Flecknoe as Augustus who chooses the successor on merit. It is not strange therefore that Flecknoe addresses the audience on his worthy successor and tries to convince them by way of chance that he tries to gain support for the prince of dullness throughout the realms of nonsense:

Heavens bless my Son, from Ireland let him reign
To farr Barbadoes on the Western main;
Of his Dominion may no end be known,
And greater then his Father's be his Throne.
Beyond loves kingdom let him stretch his pen;
He paus'd, and all the people cry'd Amen.
(Dryden: 241)

With all the ironies surrounding this coronation, Shadwell, in the spirit of satire, is seen as Arion, a Greek god whose music charms small animals. It is such that in Shadwell's case, instead of a dolphin charmed by Arion's music, it is

little fishes which Shadwell charms. A royal bawd, Shadwell is seen not as sailing down the sea, but as sailing down sewer (i.e. water toilet). Shadwell's poetic genius manifests in his repetitions:

So Sh- swore, nor should his vow bee vain,
That he till Death true dullness would maintain;
And in his father's Right, and Realms defence,
Ne'er to have peace with wit, Nor truce with sense
(240-241)

Dryden is often suspected to be a double minded critic. His religious backgrounds depict him as such. In the words of Kermode *et al*

Dryden's religious attitudes were the occasion for severe doubts of his sincerity. Born into a family of puritan sympathies, he wrote one of the great defenses of the Anglican middle way in *Religio Laici* (1682). But the restless search for an authority that would resolve doubts and establish peace - both within the mind and among men - led him finally to Roman Catholicism. That he was led there just as the Catholic James II ascended the throne inevitably aroused suspicion of motives less honorable than sincere conviction... (1601-1602)

One common theme that strides the Neo-classical writing is the battle between the intellect (wit) and anti-intellect (dullness). This battle is often associated with that between the classical and medieval periods in English literature. While the Classical loved philosophy and other elevated reasonings, the Medieval preferred Christianity and suppressed intellect. To the Restoration and Neo-classical, this is the battle between good and evil. Whether the power is vested in God or in a Monarch, the winner is always on the part of righteousness and controls the good deeds, while the loser is on the part of guilt and represents evil. The Renaissance writers, it should be recalled, assimilated the classical ideas and exert this to bear on the succeeding generations. Gair opines that:

The medieval and renaissance scholar commonly looked upon the outside world in terms of the Aristotelian theory of hierarchical motion: according to it all objects possess special innate qualities which cause them to move towards a divinely predetermined place in creation. Any explanation about the physical world, therefore, had to square with this a priori presupposition: scholastic logic was, then, a process of deduction from general axiomatic principles which were based upon insufficient evidence (122)

The facts above justify the advancement of learning in different periods of English literature. The phase of religion links that of reason. They are asymmetrically related, just as Broadbent stipulates that, "under the gospel we possess, as it were, a twofold scripture: one external, which is the written word, and the other internal, which is the Holy Spirit, written in the hearts of believers, according to promise of God..." (151)

Conclusion

Religion and satire have been identified as two major disciplines that interact very well. These factors have inspired writers in the past, especially in the restoration and neo-classical periods of English literature. The underlying motive behind religion and satire is as a result of different political interests that resulted in the English literature, giving rise to conflicts. Writers of this period often used satire to point out wrong or ills in the society.

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