STEPHEN B. DOBRANSKI

Pondering Satan’s Shield in Milton’s Paradise Lost

Milton charges himself so full with thought, imagination, knowledge, that his style will hardly contain them. He is too full-stored to show us in much detail one conception, one piece of knowledge; he just shows it to us in a pregnant allusive way, and then he presses on to another.

—Matthew Arnold

As Satan lumbers off the burning lake in Paradise Lost, just before addressing the other fallen angels, readers first glimpse the arch-fiend’s armament. He wears a shield and carries a spear—specifically, a “ponderous shield / Ethereal temper, massy, large and round,” hanging “on his shoulders like the moon,” and a “spear, to equal which the tallest pine / Hewn on Norwegian hills, to be the mast / Of some great admiral, were but a wand” (I, 284–85, 287, 292–94). Critics have long noted that Satan does not use his spear properly: here it helps “to support [his] uneasy steps” as he reaches the shore (I, 295), and in heaven he again uses it as a crutch when Abdiel’s blow sends him recoiling (VI, 195). As Stanley Fish has observed, we do not even know how big the spear is. Readers may first think it “equal” in size to the tallest tree in Norway, until, on reaching the end of the simile, we discover the comparison’s inadequacy with the words, “were but a wand.” Still, lest we conclude that size doesn’t matter, James Freeman, with a nod to the weapon’s Freudian implications, has suggested that “the longer Satan is away from Heaven, the more his ‘spear’ shrinks.”

2. This and all subsequent references to the text are taken from Milton, Paradise Lost, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd ed. (London, 1998).
I would add that Satan’s spear also measures his material debasement: that he uses it literally as a crutch implies his misplaced dependence on external force and forecasts a larger pattern whereby Satan’s hardening heart is figured in his association with hardened matter. By casting this emblem of Greco-Roman warfare as a crutch, Milton may also subtly suggest that such conventions have become old and lame. Later, when Ithuriel wields his own spear against Satan, the cherub needs only touch Satan “lightly” to capture him (IV, 811). This simple gesture, a peaceful use for an offensive weapon, exemplifies Milton’s own larger project. The poet breathes new life into ancient epic and, like Ithuriel making a prince out of a toad, he turns a pagan genre preoccupied with warfare into a meditation on “the better fortitude / Of patience and heroic martyrdom” (IX, 31–32).

In this essay I would like to address how Satan’s “ponderous shield” (I, 284) from this same passage also advances Milton’s Christian epic. Commentators have traditionally glossed the lunar metaphor that Milton uses for Satan’s shield as either an allusion to Achilles’ “massive shield flashing far and wide / like a full round moon,” or an echo of Radigund’s lunar armament as she challenges Artegaill in *The Faerie Queene.* I want to offer a new reading of Milton’s epic simile by turning to contemporary discoveries in the natural world. When examined in the context of Renaissance warfare and, perhaps surprisingly, seventeenth-century animal histories, Satan’s shield symbolizes, updates, and subverts his heroic aspirations, and simultaneously it exposes his amphibious nature, creeping from lake to land, and transgressing from heaven to hell.

II

To understand fully the implications of the devil’s armament, we first need to recall that Milton had come to accept a monistic concept of the body and soul by the time he wrote *Paradise Lost.* His mature works reflect the belief that the body and soul are different degrees of the same

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substance. As Raphael succinctly puts it, “one first matter all, / Indued with various forms, various degrees / Of substance, and in things that live, of life” (V, 472–74). When, accordingly, Satan falls from heaven, his fall is not only moral but also material (and spatial and temporal); that is, Satan’s spirit becomes less rarefied, and he literally hardens (I, 572). If, as Raphael goes on to explain, God’s creations are “more refined, more spirituous, and pure, / As nearer to him placed or nearer tending” (V, 475–76), then, conversely, when Satan turns away from God, he must become less refined, less spirituous, less pure. Satan’s dependence on material weapons suggests this corporeal decline while pointing up his destructive narcissism: the devil is attracted to things like himself that are more matter than spirit. Instead of returning to God and seeking forgiveness, he again and again puts his faith in things, whether a sword, shield, or apple.

Within this philosophical context Satan’s armament in particular illustrates the folly of his rebellion. Unlike the spiritual armor that St. Paul described in his letter to the Ephesians (Eph. 6.11–17), Satan’s shield actually exists but it fails to protect him, first from Abdiel (VI, 192–93), then from Michael (VI, 323–28), until finally the rebels drop their shields while fleeing the Son:

> they astonished all resistance lost,  
> All courage; down their idle weapons dropped;  
> O’er shields and helms, and helmèd heads he rode  
> Of thrones and mighty seraphim prostráte. (VI, 838–41)

That the Son rides roughshod over the rebels’ weapons symbolizes both his imminent victory over Satan and the ascendance of a new type of heroism that will obviate traditional emblems of war. While this image of discarded armament is hardly original to Milton, the specific term “astonished” punningly suggests the link between the rebels’ material arms and their own material debasement: the rebels may drop their weapons, but their forms, like their hearts, are already becoming “stony.”


Later, Milton will repeat this image when Satan, returning to Hell, expects to hear his cohorts’ “high applause” but is instead confronted with “A dismal universal hiss” as God changes the rebels into serpents (X, 505, 508). Once again, the devils’ moral and material fall is figured in their hardening forms and falling weapons: “down their arms / Down fell both spear and shield, down they as fast” (X, 541–42). Milton invokes, too, Dante’s concept of contrapasso as Satan and the rebels are “punished in the shape he sinned” (X, 516). They not only take the shape of snakes, but also, having taken up material arms in a war against God, they fittingly come to resemble their own lost shields, fallen and hardened.

Arguably, the rebels’ shields prove most effective when bearing Satan’s body from the field on the first day of the war (VI, 337–38). Just as Satan misuses his spear as a crutch, so Milton associates these shields, not with military feats of heroism, but with Satan’s first experience of pain, presumably a result of his hardening body and ontological descent. Even the good angels during the war in heaven fail to use defensive weapons to their advantage. Assaulted with Satan’s cannon fire, they fall “The sooner for their arms, unarmed they might / Have easily as spirits evaded” the rebels’ “devilish glut” (VI, 595–96, 589). Stella Revard has suggested that Milton’s God wanted to teach the loyal angels a lesson: their dependence on traditional weapons leaves them “prey not only to discomfiture and defeat, but also to the laughter of their enemies.” But if, as Revard argues, “the loyal angels must learn how vain is their trust in material arms and the glory of material warfare,” the angels’ subsequent tactic of hurling “seated hills with all their load” (VI, 644) suggests that they do not immediately abandon a material war. Milton seems to use this

8. Readers may be reminded as well of Adam, listening to Eve’s glozing lies and standing “Astonied” while “From his slack hand the garland wreathed for Eve / Down dropped” (IX, 890, 892–93).

9. This use of shields to carry the wounded and dead from the field was no mere classical convention. Compare, e.g., the hasty bearing away of Patroklos’ body on a bier (Iliad, XVIII.267–73 [231–36]).


11. Revard, p. 190. See also her “Milton’s Critique of Heroic Warfare in Paradise Lost V and VI,” Studies in English Literature 7 (1967), 119–39, esp. 133–34; and James A. Winn, “Milton on Heroic Warfare,” The Yale Review 66 (October 1976), 70–86. Like Revard, Winn notes that the good angels are implicated in the rebels’ uncreative acts: the angels’ “failure to restore order raises questions about the efficacy of arms,” and “the ‘deformed rout’ and ‘foul disorder’ with which the day ends demean both sides” (p. 86).
scene to emphasize the destructiveness of defensive weapons. Whereas Satan and his consorts “Stood scoffing” at the failure of the good angels’ armament, they are now “Under the weight of mountains buried deep” and discover that their own “armour helped their harm, crushed in and bruised / Into their substance pent” (VI, 629, 652, 656–57). And Satan seems an especially slow learner: “Chained on the burning lake” after falling to hell (I, 210), he continues to carry a large, massive shield that must have accelerated his drop and now must weigh him down, increasing his torment.

That the warring angels in Paradise Lost even carry shields identifies them as classical rather than contemporary soldiers. Milton makes this point explicitly, describing the assembled fallen angels as “a horrid front / . . . in guise / Of warriors old” (I, 563–65). But, since the poet combines elements of classical, medieval, and modern battles, the epic’s fighting scenes transcend Greco-Roman warfare. Milton’s “defiance of archaeological consistency” and “large unity of impression,” as James Holly Hanford suggests, gives readers license to evaluate the poem’s battles within multiple military contexts.12

In the particular case of Satan’s shield, we should note that such defensive weapons had only recently fallen out of favor during England’s Civil War. While some seventeenth-century soldiers worried that metal fragments from armor could aggravate gun-shot wounds, the decline of defensive weapons primarily stemmed from their inconvenience and clumsiness.13 As soldiers strove to develop new fighting strategies, the demand increased, as one historian puts it, for “troops that could be moved like pieces on a board.”14 Both infantry and cavalry gained greater speed and mobility during the 1650’s by abandoning the use of defensive weapons.15 The musketeer, for example, wore no armor, and sometime


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during the Civil War—although historians have not pinpointed the exact transition—the armor for the dragoon and pikeman had either significantly declined or completely disappeared.16 Thus Lucy Hutchinson records that at the assault of Shelford House in 1645, her husband “put off a very good suite of armor . . . which . . . was so heavy that it heated him,” and “after their first experience in battle most of Colonel Hutchinson’s regiment discarded their armour” as well.17 In like manner, in July 1658, when Sir William Lockhart’s regiment was sent to serve in Flanders, the men reportedly brought no weapons other than their swords.18

This contemporary attitude finds expression in Paradise Regain’d when Jesus specifically dismisses “that cumbersome / Luggage of war” (III, 400–01). Here the Son’s language suggests that military equipment represents not, as the devil would have him believe, a means to power; it instead has become an awkward encumbrance. In Paradise Lost, Milton similarly indicates that Satan’s shield is obsolete with the description of it as “ponderous,” a term during the Renaissance that meant not just “weighty” but also “clumsy” and “unwieldy.”19 In this context the additional details that Satan’s shield is “massy” and “large” would only accentuate its inconvenience.

Yet if we briefly return to Paradise Regain’d, Jesus’ additional assertion that such weaponry is an “argument / Of human weakness rather than of strength” (III, 401–02) also seems to reflect new ways of thinking about military valor in seventeenth-century England. Most obviously, Jesus rejects Satan’s temptation to military might as a sign of spiritual weakness, but the Son’s diction also exposes a growing bias against defensive weapons that began during the Civil War period. As John Cruso explains in his 1640 treatise, soldiers were reluctant to use shields and armor not just because such weapons were uncomfortable but because soldiers thought them a sign of cowardice. Cruso believes that soldiers

16. David Blackmore, Arms and Armour of the English Civil Wars (London, 1990), pp. 14, 63; Firth, p. 124. Blackmore notes that the pikeman wore “a helmet, gorget [throat protector], backplate, breastplate and tassets.” Or at least that is what military manuals describe: “during the period of the civil wars the wearing of pikeman’s armour declined and there is no evidence for the manufacture of it in this country after the early 1640s. It is difficult to assess the rate at which it fell into disuse” (p. 63).


18. Firth, p. 123.

could “accustome” themselves to carrying defensive weaponry, despite the fact that “they publish . . . it is want of courage to go armed, and . . . they will go in their doublets into the most dangerous places, as well as they which are armed.”

While Cruso ultimately looks to “a good Captain” for keeping troops combat-ready and overcoming such prejudices, the writer of *Mercurius Aulicus* observes that officers themselves sometimes disdained defensive weapons for the same reason. Colonel George Lisle, fighting at the Second Battle of Newbury (1644), for example, “had not Armour on besides Courage . . . a good Cause, and a good Holland-shirt.” The newsbook’s writer interprets Lisle’s lack of defensive weaponry as a badge of courage and a sign of good leadership; he notes that the colonel “seldom wears defensive Arms” and speculates that “perhaps [it is] to animate his Men, that the meanest Souldier might see himself better armed than his Collonel, or because it was dark they might better discern him . . . to receive both Direction and Courage.”

The trend of not using armor became popular enough that General George Monck, writing in 1644, thought it necessary to argue for the value of “Defensive Arms.” He notes that defensive weapons “are much slighted by some in these times” but insists that “men wear not Arms because they are afraid of danger.” Surely such stories as Sir Philip Sidney’s famous death on the battlefield, an account retold and glorified in all seventeenth-century editions of the *Arcadia*, contributed to this changing perception. Fighting in the Netherlands, Sidney—who, as one early biographer claimed, represented the “exemplarie to all Gentlemen”—was fatally shot in the leg after racing into battle and neglecting to put on his thigh-pieces.

When judged by these contemporary standards, Satan’s use of a shield, “massy, large,” and “ponderous,” diminishes his heroic stature even as it allies him with Radigund and Achilles. Aside from the absurdity of


22. George Monck, *Observations upon Military and Political Affairs* (1671), sig. D4. Monck emphasizes the value of defensive weapons: “one Army well armed with Defensive Arms, may very well expect without any great difficulty to win twenty Battels one after another of Armies equal in strength, equally conducted, and fighting upon equal advantage of ground, but not armed with Defensive Arms” (sigs. D4-D4v).

brandishing such a weapon against an omnipotent God, Satan’s desire for the shield’s protection reveals that he is not as courageous as his opening speeches suggest. Unlike the rebels who dropped “their idle weapons” when they threw themselves from heaven (VI, 839), Satan evidently refused to let his go.

Milton first alerts us to the problem of Satan’s shield with the specific description that it was “Behind him cast; the broad circumference / Hung on his shoulders like the moon” (I, 286–87). Apparently, Satan has not attached his shield by a strap to his left arm as a protection from an enemy’s weapon, nor does he wear it slung over his left shoulder for ready use. Instead it hangs behind him. Modern readers of Milton, accustomed to toting backpacks over both shoulders, might initially appreciate the practical advantage of the shield’s placement. Strapping such a cumbersome weapon over both shoulders would distribute its weight more evenly and thus make it easier for Satan to bear. Yet little in ancient epics recommends this particular placement of Satan’s weapon. When, by comparison, Venus brings Aeneas his famous shield, he does not hang it on his back; instead, “Upon his shoulder he / lifts up the fame and fate of his sons’ sons” (VIII, 951–55).

Vergil’s use of the singular “shoulder,” umero, suggests that Aeneas’ shield hangs by his side, which would correspond to the illustrations of soldiers with shields on ancient vase-paintings and monuments. As Graham Sumner explains, “when circular shields are attached by a leather strap and carried over the shoulder, they almost naturally tuck under the left arm.”

In like manner, Achilles, donning his armor before rejoining the battle in the Iliad, does not wear his shield over both shoulders. Homer instead describes how the warrior “grasped” or “hoisted the massive shield flashing far and wide” (XIX,442 [372–73]). The Greek verb is βάλετο, which recurs in the arming scenes of both Paris (III,334) and Patroklos (XVI,135) and describes the act of placing over the head the shield’s


As with Roman shields, these Greek weapons were apparently worn over one shoulder by a strap that extended under the left arm and slanted across the back and chest like a baldric.27

That Milton describes Satan’s shield, in contrast, as “Behind him cast” and attached to both his “shoulders” (I, 286–87) means that the arch-fiend has broken with convention and his weapon hangs out of easy reach. Commentators have overlooked this important distinction: Satan wears his shield the wrong way around. Interestingly, many of Paradise Lost’s early illustrators, from the late seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth century, attempted to correct Satan’s error. James Barry, William Blake, Richard Corbould, John Henry Fuseli, William Hogarth, John Martin, George Romney, and Richard Westall—all these illustrators, presumably recognizing that Satan’s weapon does not belong behind him, drew the devil in various poses with the shield on his left arm. In “Satan Rises from the Burning Lake,” for example, Corbould portrays Satan holding the shield over his head by an arm-band and hand-grip, while both John Baptist Medina in “Satan Rising from the Flood” and Thomas Stothard in “Satan Rising from the Burning Lake” have solved the problem of Satan’s weapon by omitting it altogether.28

Milton may have purposefully misplaced Satan’s shield, however. Like the surprise punch of the phrase, “were but a wand” (I, 294), which undercuts the simile that describes Satan’s spear, the delayed phrase “Behind him cast” brings readers up short: we may acknowledge the classical weapons the shield alludes to and anticipates, but suddenly, we discover, Satan has things reversed. Whereas Vergil depicts Aeneas carrying his father on his shoulders out of a burning Troy (Aeneid, II. 721–24), Milton demeans Satan by having him climb off hell’s burning lake carrying on his back only this weapon—useless, obsolete, and cowardly. And just as using a spear as a crutch enfeebles the ancient traditions that it symbolizes, Satan’s backwards shield, in the context of Milton’s

26. H. L. Lorimer, Homer and the Monuments (London, 1950), pp. 188–92. Historians believe that early Greek soldiers also carried their shields by a single, central hand-grip or used a central arm-band with a hand-grip at the rim, neither of which methods would allow Satan to wear his shield on his back.


28. These illustrators’ works are reproduced in Marcia R. Pointon, Milton and English Art (Toronto, 1970), pp. 9, 82, 86.
Christian epic, suggests that classical modes of heroism are backwards, perhaps thoroughly wrong, at least retrograde.

The precedent for Satan’s misplaced shield is probably Homer’s account of Ajax’s flight from battle in the *Iliad*. Ajax turns his shield behind him for protection as he flees:

> He stood there a moment, stunned, then swinging his seven-ply oxhide shield behind him, drew back in caution, throwing a fast glance at his own Achaeans troops like a trapped beast, pivoting, backpedaling, step by short step. . . . (XI, 639–43 [544–47])

By evoking this scene of retreat and combining it, as we have seen, with an allusion to Achilles’ and Radigund’s lunar armaments, Milton simultaneously suggests both Satan’s heroism and cowardice. Satan in this scene is wrathful like Achilles, yet he also shares Ajax’s wariness and powerlessness. Milton may have also had in mind Ajax’s reputation for caring too much about material weapons. That the Greek soldier ultimately kills himself because he is not rewarded with Achilles’ armor prefigures Satan’s own self-destruction, which was prompted by a similar sense of having been slighted and is similarly expressed through his association with emblems of traditional warfare. Just as Ajax did not deserve Achilles’ defensive weaponry, Milton seems to imply, Satan, too, falls short of the glory that Achilles garnered.

More directly, the allusion to Ajax’s flight from battle suggests God’s omnipotence, for “Father Zeus on the heights *forced* Ajax to retreat” (XI, 638 [544], my emphasis), and it is God in *Paradise Lost* who causes Satan and his consorts to give up the fight and leap from heaven. But whereas Homer has Ajax pick on someone his own size until Zeus intervenes, Milton attempts to surpass the *Iliad* by pitting Satan against the Creator himself. And in Milton’s Arminian theodicy, God does not force Satan to retreat but instead forces Satan to choose whether he will stay or run away. Ultimately, Satan and the rebels “headlong themselves . . . threw / Down from the verge of heav’n” (VI, 864–65)—while Ajax fled from battle “much against his will” (XI, 654 [556–57])—which suggests once again that Satan fails to live up to his literary predecessors.

29. Milton uses a similar image of armored retreat in *Samson Agonistes*. The Chorus recalls how when Samson advanced on Ascalon “In scorn of their proud arms and warlike tools,” even “The bold Ascalonite / Fled,” and “old warriors turned / Their plated backs under his heel” (ll. 137–40).
We should not interpret Milton’s allusion to Ajax’s flight as a straightforward sign of Satan’s cowardice, however. Although Satan retreats, he, like the Greek warrior, remains enraged and truculent. Ajax does not sprint from battle but reluctantly ziggags:

the giant fighter would summon up his fury,
wheeling on them again, beating off platoons
of the stallion-breaking Trojans—and now again
he’d swerve around in flight. (XI, 666–69 [566–68])

Whereas in Samson Agonistes Milton allies Ajax with the vain, boastful Harapha, whose “gorgeous arms” (l. 1119) and “clattered iron” (l. 1124) include a “seven-times-folded shield” like Ajax’s (l. 1122), in Paradise Lost the poet instead uses Ajax to cast Satan as sullen and only temporarily subdued. Homer develops Ajax’s conflicted feelings in the above passage with a pair of epic similes comparing him to wild animals. Ajax resembles a “tawny lion” that “quails” and “slinks away” when accosted by “hounds and country field hands,” but he also acts like a “stubborn ass” that continues to ravage crops even as boys beat him with sticks (XI, 644–62 [548–65]).

Homer’s animal similes may have recommended Milton’s specific depiction of how Satan carries his shield at the opening of Paradise Lost, for Milton also seems to have been thinking about the animal world as he imagined the arch-fiend’s armament. Undermining Satan’s heroic pretensions and his weapon’s “Ethereal temper” (I, 285), Milton slyly uses Satan’s shield to compare him with one of Earth’s newly created “creeping things” (VII, 452). Commentators have previously overlooked this additional nuance. Wearing his shield on his back, crawling from lake to land, slowly moving with “uneasy steps” (I, 295), Satan momentarily resembles—to compare great things with small—one of the amphibious tortoises described in seventeenth-century animal encyclopedias. Here we find accounts of the tortoise’s “shield,” a term during the Renaissance that signified not only a piece of defensive armor but also an animal’s “protective covering or shelter,” as in a tortoise’s mottled or “spotty” shell.\(^{30}\) Such a humiliating image both captures Satan’s amphibious or twofold nature and anticipates his transformation into a serpent, the animal during the Renaissance with which the tortoise was

\(^{30}\) OED, 2nd ed., s. v. “shield” II.5.
most commonly allied. In *A Description of the Nature of Four-Footed Beasts* (1678), for example, Joannes Jonston observes that tortoises not only make a sound “a little louder than a snake’s hiss” but they also “fight with Serpents, senseing themselves.” Edward Topsell in *The History of Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents* (1658) similarly notes that the tortoise “in the head and tail . . . resembleth a Serpent” and reports that these shelled animals are, like serpents, “accounted crafty and subtle.”

Satan’s appearance as a tortoise may also evoke traditional renditions of that animal being dropped from the sky by its enemies and punished by Jove with its shell. According to one story, Jupiter imprisoned the tortoise in its shell for disrespecting him. Although the tortoise had not attempted anything so audacious as overthrowing heaven, its punishment still recalls Satan’s sentence. Just as the tortoise in the story was forced to carry its shelter on its shoulders, always at home no matter how far it traveled, so Milton’s Satan cannot escape the hell of his own making: “Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell,” he famously laments (IV, 75). Nor should we ignore the tradition, noted by Jonston, that fresh-water tortoises were sometimes called “divells,” and tortoises’ hard shells were, in turn, actually used by African and Arabian soldiers to make defensive weaponry.

Even Milton’s earlier simile comparing Satan to “that sea-beast / Leviathan,” mistaken for an island by the pilot of a Norwegian skiff (I, 200–08), finds an analogue in the lore surrounding tortoises. As Karen Edwards has observed, the name “leviathan simply denotes a large water animal or sea monster,” and scholars during the Renaissance debated what type of animal it might have been. Given Satan’s resemblance to a tortoise as he reaches the shore, it is pleasing to speculate whether Milton could have thought of this beast as a giant sea tortoise, an explanation which would help to account for his reference to the creature’s “scaly rind” (I, 206) and which finds precedent in Renaissance animal encyclopedias. Topsell, for example, records a version of the same story in which a weary traveler fell asleep on a giant tortoise that he had mistaken for land (3Y1v).

32. Edward Topsell, *The History of Four-Footed Beasts and Serpents* (1658), sigs. 3Y1v, 3Y2.
33. Topsell, sig. 3Y2.
34. Jonston, sigs. O3v; O2v, O4.
A seventeenth-century edition of *Aesop's Fables* (1650), to take one last example, also associates the tortoise with a punitive fall and presumptive ascent. The tortoise deceives an eagle into carrying her by promising to "descry / Jewells that did upon some Mountain lie." When the tortoise fails to live up to this promise, the eagle in one version devours her and in the other "scratcheth her" to death. But the moral, that "who lifts his thoughts 'bove his estate, / Falls in th' attempt, and hastens his own Fate," evokes both Satan's fall and foolish insolence.

We cannot know whether Milton had such lore in mind while composing *Paradise Lost*; nor do I wish to suggest that all the traditions associated with tortoises were germane for Milton’s depiction of the arch-fiend. Still, these popular, contemporary perceptions support the relevance of the tortoise image as Satan reaches the shore in hell, and they may have influenced seventeenth-century interpretations of Satan’s outdated weaponry.

Milton at least seems to have used this passage to suggest Satan’s hardening heart and corporeal debasement: Satan’s backwards shield initiates a string of gradually ossifying animal imagery that charts his ontological descent. Beginning with this subtle allusion, Milton then turns to more direct animal metaphors—Satan enters Eden, for example, like a cormorant and wolf (IV, 183–96)—until with the image of Satan, “Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve” (IV, 800), readers are unsure: has he metaphorically or literally changed? Certainly, Satan’s later transformations are literal; he approaches Adam and Eve first as a lion, then tiger, then as a serpent (IV, 402–08), until ultimately in book X, Satan and the rebels are imprisoned in the shape of monstrous snakes (511–45). These animal comparisons seem to calcify just as Satan’s matter continues to harden the further he moves away from God, although the overarching metamorphosis, from tortoise to the closely-related serpent, would fit within the epic’s larger recoiling motif. For all Satan’s apparent motions, in other

36. *Æsops Fables* (Cambridge, 1650), sig. G10. Although modern readers may be familiar with Aesop’s story of the “Tortoise and the Hare,” Renaissance editions of Aesop’s fables instead relate how a hare races, and eventually loses to, a snail. The link between snails and tortoises extends back at least to the late fourteenth century when “snail” was used to signify shell-carrying gastropods as well as tortoises and turtles. Long before 1650, however, this latter meaning for “snail” had evidently become obsolete (*OED*, 2nd ed., s. v. “snail” 1.a and 1.b.). Nevertheless, the description “Of the Snail” in Wolfgang Franz, *The History of Brutes* (1670), attributes to snails the qualities and anecdotes traditionally associated with tortoises (sigs. R1v-R3).

37. The tragic poet Aeschylus, for example, purportedly died when an eagle dropped a hard-shelled tortoise on his head.
words, he ends where he began, forced backwards into a semblance of his former shape.

VI

The image of a tortoise suggested by Satan’s shield may also help to explain Milton’s subsequent lunar simile—what Cleanth Brooks once called “perhaps the most famous simile of them all.”

38 Satan’s shield hangs

. . . on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb
Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views
At evening from the top of Fesole,
Or in Valdarno, to descry new lands,
Rivers or mountains in her spotty globe. (I, 287–91)

Whereas some critics have seen Milton’s allusion to Galileo (“the Tuscan artist”) as an odd digression, I would suggest that the glimpse of Satan as a tortoise quietly prepares us for this comparison.

39 Milton has rooted Satan firmly in the material world, whether through the image of a tortoise with a spotty shield, or this description of the moon and the Florentine landscape. For Milton to turn from one branch of natural philosophy to another, to blend the old science of animal encyclopedias with the new observational science of Galileo’s astronomy, constitutes less of a leap than juxtaposing classical warfare and Galileo’s telescope, especially since Galileo’s own arguments challenged the ontological distinctions between the stars and the Earth.

40 Still, such a juxtaposition—alluding to both Ajax and Galileo to describe Satan’s shield—further chips away at Satan’s heroic posturing. Following J. B. Broadbent, some critics have interpreted Galileo as an “admirable figure to displace Satan,” while others, following Joan

39. T. S. Eliot, e.g., singled out this simile’s “sudden transitions” as “inspired frivolity, an enjoyment by the author in the exercise of his own virtuosity, which is a mark of the first rank of genius.” See his “Milton,” The Sewanee Review 56 (1948), 204.
41. J. B. Broadbent, Some Graver Subject: An Essay on Paradise Lost (New York, 1960), p. 72; and see Freeman, p. 130. Broadbent suggests that “Galileo represents a culture quite different from, and implicitly superior to, the military heroism and phallicism of the moon’s blank orb and the flagship’s mast, fixing the gaze of 17th-century rationality on the heroic shield” (p. 72).
Webber, have thought the link between Galileo and Satan to be a repudiation of the astronomer’s enterprise. But, like the allusion to a tortoise, this reference to Galileo also refracts Satan’s resemblance to his epic precursors and reflects his newly fallen state. Whereas in heaven Satan’s shield resembles a sun (VI, 305), in hell its luster has faded so that it looks like a “spotty globe” that can only be appreciated “Through an optic glass” (I, 291, 288). This pair of astronomical metaphors measures Satan’s diminished radiance and heavenly estrangement.

Moreover, the necessary perspective of Galileo’s telescope prompts a series of reversals that, like the backwards shield, reinforce Satan’s paradoxical status as a fallen angel and “superior fiend” (I, 283). Readers initially learn that Satan’s shield “Hung on his shoulders like the moon” (I, 287) until, upon reaching the end of the simile, we discover that the shield more precisely resembles the moon as magnified through Galileo’s optic glass (I, 288–91). Viewed first without, then with the telescope, Satan’s shield is rendered both small and large—just as his spear in this same passage resembles both a “wand” and “mast” (I, 293, 294), just as his shield is both “ethereal” and earthy, and just as the lunar metaphor takes us from Florence to hell, and from the “top of Fesole” to the valley of the Arno (I, 289, 290). Through the lens of both the old and new sciences Milton focuses readers’ attention on the failure of the inflated heroic ideals that Satan’s shield symbolizes: like the animal encyclopedias that expose Satan’s tortoise-like qualities, Galileo’s telescope reveals that, upon closer inspection, the devil’s weaponry is blotchy.

Milton encourages this bifocal perspective throughout Paradise Lost: not only that readers must again and again confront Satan’s amphibious nature—simultaneously courageous and cowardly, heroic and heinous—but also that readers must work hard to interpret the poet’s overlapping allusions and subtle imagery. Objects in the epic, we discover, may be larger, or more significant, than they initially appear. Whereas Stanley Fish has compared Paradise Lost’s uninformed reader to the pilot of the Norwegian skiff who, in mistaking the leviathan for


43. Lienhard Bergel, “Milton’s Paradise Lost, I, 284–295,” Explicator 10 (1951), item 3, observes that Hell’s desolation is heightened by “the poetic intensity of the passage” and “the luxuriant atmosphere of Italy which is evoked by the place names.”
land, does not see below the surface (p. 36), I would suggest that the Tuscan astronomer represents Milton’s informed reader peering intently into the text to descry new allusions and previously ignored contexts and ideas.

Among the various ideas embedded within Milton’s description of Satan’s shield we should also consider the image’s potentially personal significance. Responding in *Defensio Secunda* (1654) to a libelous attack on his character, Milton expresses his sense of national responsibility in terms of classical armament: “I should like to be Ulysses—should like, that is, to have deserved as well as possible of my country—yet I do not covet the arms of Achilles. I do not seek to bear before me heaven painted on a shield, for others, not myself to see in battle, while I carry on my shoulders a burden, not painted, but real, for myself, and not for others to perceive.”44 Here Milton aspires to become a sage counselor like Ulysses rather than a soldier like Ajax or Achilles. But this passage from the *Defensio* also points up by comparison Satan’s selfishness and vanity at the opening of *Paradise Lost*. While the burden that Milton shoulders suggests once again that Satan’s similarly positioned shield represents not an aid but an encumbrance, Milton emphasizes that his own burden has nothing to do with protecting himself nor impressing others. Armed with his faith in God, he has no use for a shield that, like Satan’s weapon, merely resembles the heavens; the poet instead carries the real responsibility of serving heaven and his country. He rejects a soldier’s material armor for the divine “shield of faith” that, as St. Paul describes in Ephesians 6.11, 16, will help him “stand against the wiles of the devil.”

When viewed within its contemporary context, Satan’s shield in *Paradise Lost* ultimately recalls Chaucer’s knight whose rust-stained tunic raises questions about the currency of his chivalric code and the truthfulness of his purported achievements on the battlefield. Within this brief passage Milton has forged for Satan a defensive weapon as well as an ornamental impresa, a visual device worn by both sides during the Civil War. Rather than wearing the family’s coat of arms, soldiers often preferred these personal, sometimes witty devices, specifically designed for battle—what Milton alludes to elsewhere as he describes the warring

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angels’ “shields / Various, with boastful argument portrayed” (VI, 83–84). In practical terms, such visual devices helped soldiers on both sides of the Civil War to distinguish between their opponents and allies, a common problem on the battlefield. Appropriately for a character whose slippery speech and heroic qualities continue to win readers’ sympathies, Satan’s spotty shield helps to identify his moral and material deterioration even as he appears at his most resolute.
