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BENJAMIN KEACH: 'THE GLORIOUS LOVER'

An Analogue of 'Paradise Lost'?

The Glorious Lover, Benjamin Keach's¹ divine poem first published in 1679, is to a limited extent derivative from and a popularisation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. It was issued in two books, which were each divided into eight chapters. Although the form and style are not commensurate with the grandeur of the theme, Keach nevertheless claims in the Proem that it is to be a history 'such as not Greece nor Rome could ever yield'.²

So great the Subject, Lofty the Design . . .
My Muse is rais'd beyond a vulgar flight.³

Echoes of Milton's introductory lines are present in Keach's self-effacing statement of his inability to express divine truth. The 'light' motif is explicit from the beginning, but it has none of the power nor poignancy of the blind poet's.

High is my Theme, but weak and short my sight,
My Eyes oft dazzled with Excess of Light.⁴

Keach's debts, however, go beyond Milton. The poem has several derivative lines, including a borrowing from George Herbert's *Perirrhantarium*:

A verse may catch a wandering soul that flies
Profounder tracts and by a blest surprise
Convert Delight into a Sacrifice.⁵

Like Milton, Keach provides a prose Argument at the beginning of each section of his poem. Book 1 begins in Heaven, 'the fair Regions of approachless Light', where the Lord Jehovah expresses his design to dispose of his Son in marriage to a human soul.⁶ The rest of the poem is concerned with the wooing of this soul and the conspiracy of Satan and other infernal powers against the betrothal. Innocence and its loss in Eden are confined to some two hundred lines in the first chapter, and there is a triple coalescence of Eve, the Church and the Soul. It was not unknown for the biblical image of the Church as the Bride of Christ to be applied synecdochically to a single soul, sought in marriage by the divine Bridegroom. However, for the soul itself to be personified in the figure of Eve is unusual in seventeenth-century typology. In no place does Keach give her a name, although the description is clearly that of prelapsarian Woman:

Within that Garden dwelt in Ancient time
A very lovely Creature in her Prime,
Mirror of Beauty, and the World's chief glory.

This cursory treatment of Eve epitomises some of the weaknesses of the poem. Character delineation is weak and almost entirely generalised, and the description of locale and landscape lacks imaginative depth and scale. Paradise, for instance, is 'a most choice and lovely Garden', and that is all. More detail is given to the description of Heaven, but the language is unoriginal and Keach draws almost exclusively on biblical tropes, like 'streets of gold', 'dazzling throne', 'all-charming quire'. The narrative action is similarly skimmed, and the Fall is accomplished in five lines:

She did not long in this condition stand
Before a cursed and most traiterous Band

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provide more analogous links. Keach's prose Argument clearly suggests the derivative quality of his narrative:

Shewing what consultations there were amongst the infernal Spirits to bring Jesus, Prince of Light, under the power of Death, a Council called in Hell; the Princes of the fallen Angels in a deep combination against him, for fear their kingdom should fall, and the poor Creature be delivered. The grand counsel of old Satan is taken.

The arguments are predictable. Thus Beelzebub begins: 'My sentence is for War'.¹¹ In his advocacy he borrows arguments from Milton's Mammon and presses for an enterprise which

will make our Kingdom rise
And re-throne us in our Antient Skies
To a great Height and flourish, as before.

Lucifer's proem seeks to emulate the rhetoric of Milton's Pandemonium, although such eloquence hardly fits the vagueness of Keach's setting or the general level of debate, which rarely rises above that of a cabal. The rhetorical flourishes are few, and therefore conspicuous:

Dominions, Pow'rs and Principalities
You all in danger are, awake and rise.

As in *Paradise Lost*, the issue is how assault might best be effected: is it to be 'by fraud or force'? Keach's Satan emulates Milton's and devises a stratagem 'to bring about the Ruin of our Foe', namely the subversion of one of God's subjects, in this instance Judas. Predictably Satan's counsel prevails and he flies to Earth to 'take possession of poor Judas heart'. Thus all the narrative elements of *Paradise Lost* are repeated, in the same order, but in different proportions: the infernal debate, the ascendance of Satan, the journey to Earth, Satan's adoption of a proxy agent, betrayal and death.

There is one other significant perspective which Keach, when he composed *The Glorious Lover*, shared with Milton. Both present the human dilemma from an Arminian theological position.¹² Keach's later works have a much stronger Calvinistic emphasis. In *The Glorious Lover* both fallen and unfallen spokesmen assert the doctrine of free choice. Thus the Soul replies to Christ's approaches:

It lies not in your power, to command
Against my will . . .
Will you the liberty of Choice deny?

and Theologue reminds the Soul:

The Devil has no power to compel
Thee to have tasted this his poisonous Feast
But wilfully thou has God's Law transgress . . .
Thou to thy self dost thy destruction owe.

The last edition of *The Glorious Lover* was published in 1764. It never achieved wide popularity, although Keach's allegory *War with the Devil* actually ran to twenty-two editions in a hundred years.¹³ *The Glorious Lover* has had no abiding appeal, and as a literary work its best claim for recognition is as an inferior analogue of Milton's great epic.

KEACH: THE GLORIOUS LOVER

NOTES

1. Benjamin Keach, 1640-1704, like John Bunyan, was a Baptist preacher of humble origins who became a successful and prolific writer. See Raymond Brown, *The English Baptists of the Eighteenth Century*, 1986.
2. cf. Me of these
Nor skilled not studious, higher argument
Remains
Paradise Lost Book 9:41-43.
3. cf. I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above the Aonian mount
Paradise Lost Book 1:12-15.
4. cf. there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight.
Paradise Lost Book 3:53-55.
5. cf. A verse may find him, who a sermon flies
And turn delight into a sacrifice
George Herbert, *Perirrhaneium* 5-6.
6. cf. *Paradise Lost* Book 5:600ff, the chronological beginning of the epic's action, where God declares his first decree in Heaven.
7. Keach's perspective lacks the universal and generic quality of *Paradise Lost*. *The Glorious Lover* is an allegorisation of an individual Christian conversion.
8. Besides throughout the ruined Land
A Black and fearful King had great
command,
Who had revolted many years before
From his Liege Lord.
The Glorious Lover p.15.
The emphasis in *Paradise Lost* is different, since Milton removes Satan from Earth after Book 9, despite the biblical view of him as 'prince of this world'. This device enables Adam and Eve to take centre stage in their search for selfhood. The main events of Keach's poem are later than Milton's. Satan now has possession of the Earth.
9. cf. *Paradise Lost* Book 2: 650-870. Sin is female, the daughter of Satan.
10. cf. *Paradise Lost* Book 9:1127-30.
11. cf. My sentence is for open war. *Paradise Lost* Book 2:51.
12. Milton's Arminianism is well attested. I have argued elsewhere why God in *Paradise Lost* is a self-justifying Arminian. David Aitken, 'Milton's Use of "Stand" and the Doctrine of Perseverance' in *English Language Notes*, Volume XIX No.3. 'Benjamin Keach left the General Baptists when he was in his early thirties and had become one of the most dynamic and colourful ministers among the London Particular Baptists. Whenever he discussed Arminianism he did so with uncompromising ferocity.' Raymond Brown, op.cit., p.26.
13. 'As for Benjamin Keach's *War with the Devil* and *Travels of True Godliness*, he thought they would both sell "till the end of time".' James Sutherland, *English Literature of the Late Seventeenth Century*, Oxford 1969.
In what seems to be becoming the standard work in this field, N. H. Keeble discusses four of Keach's works but, significantly, does not mention *The Glorious Lover*. N. H. Keeble, *The Literary Culture of Nonconformity in Later Seventeenth Century England*, Leicester 1986.

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