



## The allure of the irrational mind: An exploration of John Milton's *Satan* and Jane Austen's *Emma* as wilful participants in their self-delusion

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In his introduction to Jane Austen's *Emma*, John Mullan maintains that 'Emma bends the world to her desires,' a metaphor aligning her self-delusionary spirit with a transformative quality.<sup>1</sup> A similar mindset can be observed in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, embodied in Satan's chiasmic pledge to 'make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.'<sup>2</sup> While Emma is no devil, the narrator nonetheless introduces her 'evils,' a 'disposition to think a little too well of herself,' emulative of Satan's self-deluded vanity, stemming from blinding pride.<sup>3</sup> Susan Morgan contests this 'evil' label, instead positioning Emma's vanity as 'more that of the artist than the divine,' originating from her desire to make life interesting and, therefore, a transgression not merely 'easy to forgive,' but an 'attractive sin.'<sup>4</sup> This 'forgivable' attitude towards Emma's vanity, characterised as a charming attempt to mitigate life's monotony, parallels sympathetic readings of Milton's Satan as someone committed to ameliorating his troubled state. So, despite the outward gulf between Emma, the embodiment of 'loveliness itself' (p.31), and Satan, the 'infernal Serpent' (l.34), their inner psyches, both embedded in a desire to reshape their respective realities to relieve discontent, align the two. By considering Jordi Fernández's philosophical study on self-deception, specifically 'motivationalism' – wherein 'a subject forms a false belief due to casual influence of a motivational state, typically desire' – alongside an examination of both Emma and Satan's mental dispositions, this essay investigates the cognitive similarities behind their 'world-bending' motives, willfully embracing their self-delusions to evade their respective realities.<sup>5</sup>

Milton introduces this endeavour to avoid reality in Book I, manifest within Satan's 'heroic' rhetoric to assuage his army's fallen position. Despite awakening in 'A dungeon horrible' (l.61), 'Chained on the burning lake' (l.210), Satan rallies the angels by shifting their focus away from physical entrapment towards mental liberation, arguing 'All is not lost' as 'the unconquerable will' (l.106) endures. This resilience echoes romanticised depictions of courage and determination found in the ancient classics, like the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, positing Satan's rebelliousness alongside archetypal heroic qualities, notably the power of individual resolve encapsulated in his declaration to 'make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven' (l.255). While Satan's compelling oratory does echo traditional heroic tropes, romanticising his heroism ignores the self-absorbed 'pride' that 'cast him out from Heaven' (l.37) in the first place. Instead, considering this pride, Satan's rhetoric aligns less with selfless heroism and more with the self-serving bombast found in many modern-day political speeches whereby, beneath grandiose claims - like making a heaven of hell - lie

<sup>1</sup> John Mullan, 'Introduction,' in *Emma*, ed., by John Mullan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) p. xxii.

<sup>2</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed.by., Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), Book I, Line 255. All subsequent references will be to this edition given in parenthesis in my text.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed.by., John Mullan, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022) p.5. All subsequent references will be to this edition and given in parenthesis in my text.

<sup>4</sup> Susan Morgan, 'Emma Woodhouse and the Charms of Imagination,' *Studies in the Novel*, 7:1(1975) p.46.

<sup>5</sup> Jordi Fernández, 'Self-deception and self-knowledge,' *Philosophical Studies*, 162:2(2013) p.380.

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fundamentally weak guarantees, abstracts and vague promises, reinforcing John Steadman's view that Milton's Satanic image is 'not simply an illusion but a perversion of true heroism.'<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, Milton positions Satan's grandiloquence as insincere propaganda designed to regain political followers rather than offer honest reassurance, signified in the narrator's description of him 'Vaunting aloud, but racked with deep despair' (I.126), substantiating the dichotomy between his public and private self. Reconsidering Satan's optimism regarding the angels' position as only 'changed in outward lustre' but of 'fixed mind' (I.97) through a propagandistic lens, he reveals himself less concerned for liberation than preservation. His 'heroic' preoccupation with shielding his troops from their dismal reality is not selfless but self-centred, aimed at propelling them back to their pre-fallen, assured mindsets, so they might overlook the reality of his failure.

Ultimately, Satan's rhetoric in Book I attempts to retain the pre-fallen mental position of 'unconquerable will' (I.106). Marshall Grossman's claim that 'the reader sees through Satan's eyes... an external world that mirrors [his] internal distress' supports the desperation behind Satan's charisma, with his visions of 'huge affliction and dismay' (I.57), reflecting his ruptured self-confidence amidst the reality of his fallen environment.<sup>7</sup> Book V recalls the mentality Satan seeks to regain, manifest in Raphael's recount of his absolute self-assurance regarding the first revolt in heaven, his confident 'envy against the Son of God' (V.662) exclaiming that the angels are 'ordained to govern, not to serve' (V.802). Abdiel contests Satan's oratory, declaring it 'false, and proud' (V.809), while revealing his argument's futility through the rhetorical question, 'shalt thou dispute / with Him the points of liberty, who made / Thee' (V.822-824) confronting the vanity and flawed logic behind Satan's desire to assert freedom from God - the source of freedom itself.

Milton's inclusion of Abdiel, described by Charles Durham as the embodiment of 'truth,' is noteworthy in furthering Satan's 'falsehood', catalysing his irrational defence in countering Abdiel's reasoning, asking 'When this creation was?' (V.857) to support his claim that the angels are 'self-begot, self-raised / By our own quickening power' (V.860-861).<sup>8</sup> While rhetorically powerful, Satan's argument is inherently weak, collapsing under absurdity and self-contradiction as he rejects the reality of existence and negates his argument of 'self-creation' when he concedes that 'We know no time when we were not as now' (V.859). Regardless, through a mental process of actualising the abstract, Satan invents truths from his lies, believing his illogical arguments and embodying C.S Lewis' review that 'early in his career he has become more a Lie than a Liar, a personified self-contradiction.'<sup>9</sup> Satan's desire to restore his pre-fallen mindset parallels his hunger to return to a personified Lie, a blind yet blissful self-delusion wherein he can reshape reality to match his flawed self-perception and consequently embody his rhetoric, not just convincing others but *himself* that their 'strife / Was not inglorious,' and hope remains (I.623-624).

This 'heroism' - postured as a desire to help others yet rooted in self-centred ambition - mirrors the false-heroic motives behind Emma's urge to 'aid' Harriet, to 'improve her [É] detach her from her bad acquaintance, and introduce her into good society' (p.19). Alluding to the idea of 'noblesse oblige,' Shinobu Minma interrogates Emma's moral motives, aligning her 'official

<sup>6</sup> John Steadman, 'The Idea of Satan as the Hero of Paradise Lost,' *American Philosophical Society*, 120:4(1976), p.255.

<sup>7</sup> Marshall Grossman, *Authors to Themselves: Milton and the Revelation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p.29.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Durham, 'Suffering for Truth's Sake: The Conflict Between Abdiel and Satan in Paradise Lost,' *Johns Hopkins University Press*, 68:1(2006) p.61.

<sup>9</sup> C.S Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1961) p.95.

patronage' with a selfish effort to 'indulge in the pleasure of feeling superior.'<sup>10</sup> Emma's review that Harriet would be 'an interesting, and certainly a very kind undertaking' (p.19) supports this self-serving premise, manifest in the sentence structure's prioritisation of self-interest over 'kindness' to others. Notably, Emma's 'interest' in Harriet correlates with her experience of an evening that 'flew away at a very unusual rate' (Ibid). This juxtaposition against her earlier reflections of the 'long evening[s]' (p.1) spent at Highbury expands Minma's view, suggesting that the 'pleasure of feeling' bred from her undertakings for Harriet derive not only from her sense of being superior, but also from being entertained, relieving her boredom. Lee Overmann's review that 'idleness can persuade a person with potential [É] to slide into a pattern of self-serving motives' supports this notion of boredom as a motivation behind Emma's infatuation with Harriet.<sup>11</sup> His reference to Emma's 'potential' reflects the stifled nature of her mental abilities wherein, despite surpassing her father who 'could not meet her in conversation' (p.6), she remains constrained by conventional feminine stereotypes, expected to channel her energies into activities such as managing the home, her music or art, rather than intellectually stimulating pursuits. Consequently, Emma exercises her energetic mind through match-making, 'the greatest amusement in the world!' (p.10), a seemingly exaggerated claim that, when considered in the context of her limited Highbury-bubble world, is not so hyperbolic after all. She embodies this 'heroic' construct to cure her boredom, using Harriet as a mentally stimulative project to protect her from a 'great danger of suffering from intellectual solitude' (p.6), similar to Satan's heroism as an antidote to his depressed position in hell.

In supporting her endeavours, Emma leans toward self-delusion, convinced that despite Harriet's unknown heritage, 'there can be no doubt of her being a gentleman's daughter' (p.24). Her paradoxical conviction over the unknown aligns with William Hirstein's notion of pathological certainty; her conversion of subjective judgement into objective fact paralleling the qualities of a 'confabulator,' where 'whatever springs to mind is simply true,' for example, Robert Martin being 'undoubtedly [Harriet's] inferior' (p.49).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Emma's description of Robert as 'remarkably plain' (p.26) reinforces the selfish motivation behind this conviction, with such 'plainness' emulating the unexciting nature of a match that would conclude her scheme to 'improve' Harriet's situation. Thus, for both their sakes, Emma preys on Harriet's position of 'know[ing] nothing of herself, and look[ing] upon Emma as knowing everything' (p.30), manipulating her vulnerable judgement to believe she is above this 'vulgar farmer' (p.40). George Knightley instantly identifies this 'mischief' as 'vanity working on a weak head' (50), sentiments echoed by Mira Zaman's claim that 'while [Emma's] intentions may not resemble Satan's, her persuasive tactics do.'<sup>13</sup> In other words, Emma's inflation of Harriet's worth, manipulating her rejection of Robert's proposal, parallels Satan's flattery of Eve, reflecting Milton's claim, 'Into her heart too easy entrance won' (IX.734). Knightley confronts this flattery in his review of Harriet's portrait as 'too tall,' declaring 'I cannot rate her beauty as you do' (p.46), a blatant denial of Emma's romanticised vision that situates his character as the voice of 'truth' – the Abdiel of Austen's novel. This confrontation supports Morgan's argument that 'Austen never allows [Emma] to be wrong from ignorance,'<sup>14</sup> reinforcing

<sup>10</sup> Shinobu Minma 'Self-Deception and Superiority Complex: Derangement of Hierarchy in Jane Austen's Emma,' *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 14:1(2001) p.59.

<sup>11</sup> Lee Overmann, 'Darcy and Emma: Austen's Ironic Meditation on Gender,' *Persuasions*, 31(2009) p.233.

<sup>12</sup> William Hirstein, *Brain Fiction: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005) p.4.

<sup>13</sup> Mira Zaman, 'Your Reasonings Carry My Judgement: Deception, Mischief and Satanic Persuasion in Austen's Emma,' *A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles*, 29:2(2016), p.69.

<sup>14</sup> Morgan, *Charms of Imagination*, p.37.

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her 'confabulator' quality whereby 'despite evidence to the contrary,' - Knightley's contestation - Emma defends her influence on Harriet's rejection of Robert claiming, 'I should not feel that I had done wrong [É] I cannot admit him to be Harriet's equal' (p.48).<sup>15</sup> Here, despite the subjectivity surrounding 'I cannot admit' highlighting the bias clouding her reasoning, Emma nonetheless maintains the absolute conviction of self-deceivers, a defence against 'truth' whereby, as Zaman identifies, 'unlike Satan, she actually believes the falsities she spouts.'<sup>16</sup>

While Zaman's allusion to Satan's deliberate deception resonates with his 'propagandistic' and 'tempter' dispositions, to consider him wholly conscious of his deceit is incorrect. Milton reveals Satan's authentic mental state in Book IV via soliloquy, exhibiting his mental turmoil through what Catherine Belsey describes as his 'series of conflicting voices,' the battle between rational and irrational reasoning.<sup>17</sup> Absent of audience, Satan hints towards a rational acknowledgement of his injustice against God, who 'deserved no such return' (IV.42), quickly overwhelmed by a 'dread of shame' (IV.82) that extinguishes any consideration of repentance by characterising it as 'submission' - substantiating the authority of his irrational mind. Accordingly, Satan repeatedly excuses his fault through blame, epitomised in his claim that 'pride and worse ambition threw me down' (IV.40), a calculated rhetoric that acknowledges his flaws yet positions them as external forces beyond his control. Notably, even in Hell, Satan displaces the blame of his sustained rebellion onto God, manifest in the non-consensual tone behind his corruption of Eden, maintaining that such 'despair' is 'what must be' (IV.23,25), while proclaiming to man 'Thank him who puts me, loath, to this revenge / On you' (IV 386-387), alongside his alluded guilt towards spoiling their 'Simplicity and spotless innocence' (IV.318). In positioning himself as the victim of 'destiny ordained' (IV.58), Satan encapsulates Kimberly Johnson's review of the prevailing 'tension between free will and an omniscient God in Milton's text.'<sup>18</sup> Milton highlights this tension through Satan's self-contradictory attempt to both exploit and deny these two notions as a means of mental self-defence: on the one hand, blaming God's omniscience to justify his limited choice, while on the other, defending his dire position in Hell as, at least, free. Ultimately, Satan's mishmash defence indicates a loss of rational reasoning. These contradictory convictions mirror his illogical arguments against Abdiel, exemplifying Satan's re-transition into Lewis' depiction as 'more a Lie than a Liar,' and accordingly, his return to blissful self-delusion: justifying the necessity of his fall, extinguishing his guilt and restoring his confidence.<sup>19</sup>

In this regard, considering Fernández's description of 'motivationalist' self-deception, Satan reveals his 'casual influence' as twin desires: not to be wrong and to silence his 'troubled thoughts' (IV.19), a state analogous to Emma's after Knightley's reproach towards her meddling, declaring herself 'sorry' but unable 'to repent,' regarding instead 'her plans and proceedings [as] more and more justified' (p.54). Here, Emma's pursued conviction of having Harriet's best interest at heart feeds into her confabulator tendencies - a constructed defence of her guilty conscience. Wendy Jones' assessment of Emma's 'cognitive solipsism' reinforces her deceptive self-positioning as 'caring,' catalysed by her 'tendency to remain locked within the hermetic sphere of her mind' that triggers her mis-readings of other people's thoughts 'in light of her own concerns,' as exhibited by her ignorant interpretation of Harriet's 'smiling face' and 'flutter of spirits' after an early encounter

<sup>15</sup> Hirstein, *Brain Fiction*, p.4.

<sup>16</sup> Zaman, *Satanic Persuasion in Austen's Emma*, p.70.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Belsey, *John Milton: Language, Gender, Power* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) p.89.

<sup>18</sup> Kimberly Johnson, 'Milton's Satan and the Grammar of Evil,' *New Ohio Review*, 32(2023) p.1.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, *A preface to Paradise Lost*, p.95.

with Robert as showing 'no alarming symptoms of love' (p.25).<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Emma exhibits this 'cognitive solipsism' in misconstruing Mr Elton's acts of affection to correspond with her illusions, directing them towards Harriet, his 'perfect' match. For example, his adoration of Harriet's portrait, defending it 'through every criticism' (p.37), while unable to 'keep [his] eyes from it' (p.38), provokes Emma's review of a man 'in continual raptures' (p.37), a correct reading, yet misinterpreted as being adoration of the painting's subject rather than its artist - the personification of this 'most admirable' art (p.38). Consequently, Emma's self-deception results in her dramatically ironic surprise at his proposal: the 'lover of Harriet [É] professing

himself *her* lover' (p.101), rationalising the shock of her guilt through a self-assurance that she 'would gladly have submitted to more disgrace,' could Harriet's hurt 'have been confined to herself' (p.104). Notably, even this 'selfless' admission is rooted in the self-defence of her guilty conscience, supporting Minma's recognition of the common trope in Austen's novels wherein characters 'replace unpalatable motives with palatable ones and thus justify to themselves to their own unpalatable acts,' such as this transition from ignorance to awareness of Harriet's feelings that conveniently supports her narrative of selflessness.<sup>21</sup>

This act of masking unpleasant truths recalls Satan's evasion of the reality of his fallen position with his irrational belief in the possibility of triumph. Lewis stresses the paradoxical harm this defensive act, describing it as if 'sawing off the branch he is sitting on,' a metaphor for the self-sabotaging effects of 'Protesting Fate supreme' (X.480).<sup>22</sup> While logic identifies this futile attempt to undermine God's omniscience, Henry Coleman defends Satan's mindset, whereby 'in relation to fallen consciousness, [he] is highly rational,' a consideration that encapsulates the tragic nature of Satan's spiral into a vicious-cycle of self-harm stirred by corrupted reason.<sup>23</sup> In Satan's head, he *is* rational, a blinding self-conviction that ultimately contributes to the tragedy of his downfall - the harsh slap of reality across the face of peaceful delusion. Milton illustrates the extent of this delusion by paralleling Satan's assumed peak - declaring his rebellion on Earth as 'Successful beyond hope' (X.463) - alongside the irony of him celebrating their new position as 'Triumphant out of this infernal Pit' (X.464), moments before hitting rock bottom. Milton marks this 'rock bottom' by God's mockery of Satan's uplifting rhetoric, physically pulling him down, 'on his belly prone' (X.514), humiliating him 'in the shape he [had] sinned' (X.516). Satan's anticipation of 'high applause' (X.505), replaced by 'A dismal universal hiss' (X.508), completes his downfall with 'the sound / Of public scorn' (X.508-509), echoing the sound of moral justice. Notably, in defining this punishment as an 'annual humbling' (X.576) Milton focuses God's rebuke of Satan on his 'pride, and joy' (X.577), grounding this punishment not upon Satan's actions but his mentality, specifically his immoral self-deluded disposition defined by Steadman as a 'moral zombie' with his 'liberty of will enslaved by sin.'<sup>24</sup> In other words, Satan's conclusion does not position Milton against his independent spirit but rather against its corrupted demeanour, a focus on the evil workings of the self-deceptive mind encapsulated in Johnson's review that, in Milton's version, 'more than the enemy of God, Satan is the enemy of reason.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Wendy Jones, *Jane on the Brain: Exploring the Science of Social Intelligence with Jane Austen* (New York: Pegasus, 2017) p.235.

<sup>21</sup> Minma, *Self-Deception and Superiority Complex*, p.49.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, *A preface to Paradise Lost*, p.94.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Coleman, 'Man in Devil's Guise: Satan's Exceptional Humanity in Milton's Paradise Lost,' (Thesis, University of Canterbury, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Steadman, *Satan as the Hero*, p.291.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson, *Satan and the Grammar of Evil*, p.2.

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In contrast to Satan's downfall, Emma is 'saved' by the personification of good reason himself, Knightley. However, she does not evade downfall without enduring her share of humiliation, a paralleled 'slap of reality' inflicted through recognition of her immoral behaviour. Describing herself as never having felt so 'mortified [...] at any circumstance in her life' (289), Emma pinpoints the apex moment of her self-awareness as the aftermath of her cruelty towards Miss Bates at Box Hill: a release of vexation on the 'dull' woman symbolic of her pent-up discontent towards dull society as a whole. Like disciplining a disobedient child, Mr Knightley patronisingly castigates Emma's remark as 'badly done, indeed!' (p.288), triggering a moral awakening set into stone upon realising her final, 'deplorable mistake' (p.312) of mind - Harriet's love for Knightley. Here, suddenly aware of her 'blindness' and view that Knightley 'must marry no one but herself' (p.313), Emma's imaginist mind switches off, signified through her new vision of Harriet as 'a debasement' for Knightley, inverting her prior rhetoric of romanticisation in recognition of 'the deceptions she had been thus practising on herself' (p.316). However, Emma's now 'saved' position is not that simple. In marrying Knightley, the 'parental' voice of reason, Austen positions her moral reform as child-like obedience, complicit with women's inferiority in early 19th-century marital structures. Moreover, finally embodying her earlier promise to 'repress imagination all the rest of her life' (p.110), Patricia Spacks positions Emma's 'perfect happiness' (p.372) as unconvincing, wherein boredom is merely 'accept[ed]... as a condition of women's experience.'<sup>26</sup> This view encompasses a broader dialogue of criticism surrounding Austen's conclusion as not a symbol of 'growth' but 'repression,' silencing Emma's liberationist voice which, as J.S Lawry observes, 'dared to present imaginative options to extremely literal, commonplace minds.'<sup>27</sup> Ultimately, Overmann's review of Emma's 'disappearance into the unremarkability of compliance with social convention' reflects the limitations of Austen's writing: marked by progressive implications yet suppressed by her commitment to prevailing convention, re-aligning not just her protagonist but also her text's feminist echoes into an orthodox form.<sup>28</sup>

Overall, in layering this 'unremarkability' of *Emma*'s conclusion with Morgan's earlier view of her self-delusion as 'that of the artist,' Emma's dissatisfying snap back into reality mirrors convention's dulling effects on individual creativity. Be it the creation of a 'heaven of hell' or the 'daughter of a tradesman' (p.370) into an upper-class lady, in both Emma and Satan's irrational minds, artistic creation is limitless. Thus, in considering the 'motivationalist' nature of Emma and Satan's self-delusions, their irrationality stems not solely from pride but from a complex desire to escape their dissatisfactory circumstances, rationalise their actions and push the boundaries of limitations through the unrestrictive spirit afforded by the irrational mind. Nevertheless, this comes at a cost. Encapsulated in both texts' sharp return to reality, Milton and Austen explore the self-harming nature of these characters' liberating yet destructive delusions, positioned in downward spirals under the illusion of going up. While the irrational mind may entice, it is precarious; Satan and Emma's conclusions correspondingly 'slap' the sympathetic reader back into the reality that, although captivating, their 'world-bending' endeavours are ultimately fruitless, destined to crumble upon the foundations of irrational reason.

<sup>26</sup> Patricia Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: University of CP, 1995) p.252.

<sup>27</sup> J.S Lawry, 'Decided and Open: Structure in *Emma*,' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 24:1(1969) p.8.

<sup>28</sup> Overmann, *Ironic Meditation on Gender*, p.228.

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