

ONOMASTIC STRATEGIES IN JOHN MILTON'S PARADISE LOST

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Abstract. This article examines the sources, typology, and diachronic transformations of personal names in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* under the impact of the Fall. Milton's onomastic strategies — drawing from biblical, apocryphal, cabbalistic sources, charactonyms, and pagan deities — are analyzed in naming angels and devils. The study highlights over 2,600 acts of naming and the Fall as a catastrophic onomastic event involving the loss and acquisition of names.

Keywords: onomastics, *Paradise Lost*, Milton, charactonym, angel names, demon names, the Fall, etymology, angelic hierarchy, lost name, biblical sources, cabbalistic sources.

ОСОБЕННОСТИ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЯ ОНОМАСТИЧЕСКИХ СТРАТЕГИЙ В ПОЭМЕ ДЖОНА МИЛЬТОНА «ПОТЕРЯННЫЙ РАЙ»

Аннотация. Настоящая статья исследует источники, типологию и диахронические изменения личных имён в эпосе Джона Мильтона «Потерянный рай» под влиянием Грехопадения. Анализируются ономастические стратегии Мильтона — библейские, апокрифические, каббалистические источники, характонимы и имена языческих богов при именовании ангелов и демонов. Особое внимание уделяется более 2662 актам именованию и Грехопадению как катастрофическому ономастическому событию, связанному с утратой и обретением имён.

Ключевые слова: ономастика, Потерянный рай, Мильтон, характоним, имена ангелов, имена демонов, Грехопадение, этимология, иерархия ангелов, утраченное имя, библейские источники, каббалистические источники.

1. Introduction

The study of proper names in literary texts — literary onomastics — occupies a productive intersection between linguistics, literary theory, and cultural history. Among the canonical texts of English literature, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) stands out as a monument of deliberate and philosophically informed naming. Larry Isitt's catalogue of the poem identifies no fewer than 2,662 acts of naming, counting place names, circumlocutions, and personal names alike [1]. This figure signals the centrality of onomastic concerns in Milton's epic project.

During the seventeenth century, naming was a major focus of philosophical and scientific inquiry. Philosophers debated the nature of "true names" in Adamic discourse and the possibility of universal, perfect languages, while naturalists worked to classify thousands of newly discovered species [2]. *Paradise Lost* reflects these concerns most visibly in the scenes where Adam and Eve name animals and plants. However, the present study turns to a narrower and more linguistically complex question: how did Milton select the personal names of his supernatural characters, and how does the Fall function as a transformative onomastic event?

2. Topicality and current state of research

The onomastics of *Paradise Lost* has received valuable but intermittent scholarly attention. Pioneering contributions include Masson (1890), Verity (1910), West (1955), Davidson (1971), Leonard (1990), Isitt (2002), and Raymond (2010) [1]. Most recently, John Leonard's *Naming in Paradise* (1990) offers the most systematic account of Milton's ideological method of withholding, assigning, and changing names. The topic has received little attention within Uzbek or Central Asian philological scholarship, despite its direct relevance to comparative and contrastive onomastics.

Milton learned from Spenser's *Faerie Queene* how naming might be made thematic. He borrowed from Spenser the device of doubled names (Fidessa, Duessa) and the idea of true versus false genealogies. At PL 1.508-10, a false genealogy is advanced and

immediately corrected — the Ionian gods "held Gods, yet confessed later than Heaven and Earth / Their boasted parents" [3]. This self-deluding inconsistency recalls the figures of Night and Mutability in Spenser. Milton, however, applies the device of paired names on a more diachronic plan, conceiving naming itself as a fundamental part of his great argument: the Fall.

3. Research methodology

The present study employs a descriptive-analytical method, drawing on close reading of *Paradise Lost* alongside the scholarly commentaries of Fowler (1998) and Leonard (1990). The primary analytical framework is onomastic typology: names are classified by source (biblical, apocryphal, cabbalistic, heathen-mythological, Aramaic-allegorical) and by function (designative, characterising, hierarchical, diachronic-transformative). Secondary analysis examines Milton's use of angelic titles as a distinct sub-system of nomenclature, and the way the Fall ruptures established onomastic order.

4. Analysis and discussion

4.1. Biblical Sources and the -el Suffix Pattern

Milton's primary onomastic resource was the Hebrew Bible and the Apocrypha. A standard feature of Latin Bibles was an alphabetic glossary of Hebrew personal names. From this resource Milton could access the etymological meanings of key names: Michael ("who is like God?", 1 Chron. 7:3), Gabriel ("man of God" or "strength of God", Dan. 8:16), and Uriel ("light or fire of God", 2 Chron. 13:2) [5]. Agrippa (1486–1535) observed that good angels' names characteristically end in the divine-name morphemes -el, -on, -jah, or -jod. The three angels named in the Old Testament — Gabriel, Raphael ("healing of God"), and Michael — all conform to this morphological pattern.

Milton applies the title Archangel with studied elusiveness, granting it to Michael, Raphael, and Uriel — and notably also to Satan — while withholding it from Gabriel, who is named "Chief of the angelic guards" (PL 4.550) but not given the formal rank. This suggests that "Archangel" in *Paradise Lost* implies mission and office rather than a fixed position in a rigid hierarchy [6].

4.2. Cabbalistic Sources and Angelic Charactonyms of Human Origin

For his minor angelic characters, Milton required a far larger inventory than Scripture provided. He therefore quarried cabbalistic and occultist sources, using biblical names originally belonging to humans rather than angels. The faithful Abdiel appears in Scripture only in human genealogies (1 Chronicles) and in the form "Abdeel, servant of God" (Jeremiah 36:26); his angelic status derives from The Book of the Angel Raziel [7]. Similarly, Uriel appears both as the Archangel of 2 Esdras 4 and as Uriel of Gibeah, a human figure in 2 Chronicles 13:2. Such transfers of human proper names into angelic nomenclature constitute a productive onomastic mechanism — producing what may be termed angelic charactonyms of human origin.

4.3. The Fall as Onomastic Catastrophe: Lost and Acquired Names

One of Milton's most original contributions to literary onomastics is his representation of the Fall as a catastrophic onomastic event. He imagines the Fall as deforming the rebel angels so profoundly that they lose not only their original characters but their very names. The protagonist's naming passes through three stages. Before the Fall he was Lucifer; after it, Raphael instructs us: "So call him now, his former name / Is heard no more in heaven" (PL 5.658-9). The name Satan, meaning "Antagonist", is the third and final stage. Satan himself first hears his fallen name when brought to Gabriel: "Why hast thou, Satan, broke the bounds prescribed?" (PL 4.478). He later exults in it: "I glory in the name, / Antagonist of heaven's almighty king" (PL 10.386-7) [4].

The fallen angels as a group are presented as initially nameless in their new condition: "Cancelled from heaven and sacred memory, / Nameless in dark oblivion let them dwell" (PL 6.379-80). The very word ignominy, meaning "namelessness" (in- + nomen), encodes this condition etymologically. Nor had the devils yet acquired new names from their postlapsarian experience: "Though of their Names in heavenly Records now / Be no memorial, blotted out and rased / By their Rebellion" (PL 1.361-3). Milton's point is theological: to lose one's name is to lose reputation, honour, integrity, and ultimately one's nature. What the devils had been was gone, forgotten even by their former companions.

This loss of names has direct stylistic consequences. Satan, no longer knowing his companion's name, must resort to circumlocution: "Fallen Cherub" (PL 1.157). For his part, Beelzebub cannot say "Lucifer" but must address his superior as "Leader of those armies bright" (PL 1.272) — where "bright" is a residual trace of the former name Lucifer, etymologically meaning "light-bearer". Milton scholars have often remarked his "adjectival style"; the present analysis reveals its onomastic motivation: in hell, as in certain formal assemblies, circumlocutory naming is the rule because direct names are unavailable.

John Leonard's study *Naming in Paradise* (1990) identifies a related difficulty: at the time of Raphael's narration of the war in heaven, the fallen angels had not yet acquired their postlapsarian names. Leonard asks: "how can Raphael know these 'new names' when they have not yet been 'Got' by their owners?" [4]. He suggests Raphael speaks from foreknowledge. It is equally plausible that angelic intelligence intuitively falls names from corrupt natures — just as unfallen Adam could apprehend the names of the animals from their natures.

4.4. Heathen-Mythological and Allegorical Devil Names

Some devils bear the names of heathen gods. Beelzebub ("Lord of the Flies", Syrian origin) is introduced as "next him also in power" (PL 1.79), acquiring his name only long after: "known in Palestine, and named Beelzebub" (PL 1.78-81).

Milton's Satan collects twelve parodic devil-disciples whose names are drawn from Near Eastern and Egyptian pantheons: Moloch, Chemos, Baal, Ashtaroth, Astarte, Thammuz, Dagon, Rimmon, Osiris, Isis, Horus, and Belial (PL 1.392-490). Through this onomastic device, Milton enacts a theological argument: by identifying the fallen angels with pagan gods, the minor devils drag classical antiquity's deities down into hell with them — a demotion effected through naming itself [3].

Mammon (PL 1.678-9) exemplifies the allegorical category. His name is an Aramaic abstract noun meaning "Wealth" (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13), functioning simultaneously as proper name, theological label, and personified vice. Milton's literary conception of this character owes much to Spenser's Mammon in *The Faerie Queene* 2.7, illustrating how onomastic tradition mediates between Scripture and literary invention.

4.5. Angelic Titles as a Hierarchical Nomenclature System

Alongside personal names, Milton deploys a system of collective titles for the angelic orders. God addresses the angels as "Thrones, Princedoms, Powers, Dominions" (PL 3.320) and "Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers" (PL 5.600-1). These titles are authorised by Colossians 1:16 in the Geneva Bible: "whether they be Thrones, or Dominions, or Principalities, or Powers". The Virtues are similarly scriptural, authorised by Mark 13:25 in the Wycliffe and Vulgate traditions.

Milton draws also on Pseudo-Dionysius' Celestial Hierarchy, whose nine fixed orders (Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Powers, Virtues, Principalities, Archangels, Angels) were commonly arranged as three triads. Agrippa's *Scala Novenarii* preserves this complete list. However, Milton's hierarchy is explicitly meritocratic rather than ontological: office and merit, not fixed nature, determine rank. As he writes, the "name of Angel is a word of Office, not of nature" [3]. Satan's sardonic challenge — "If these magnificent Titles yet remain / Not merely titular" (PL 5.773-4) — foregrounds the gap between titular nomenclature and real power, a gap the Fall both creates and exploits.

4.6. Etymological Wordplay at the Onomastic-Literary Interface

A defining feature of Milton's onomastic art is the activation of etymological meaning as a literary device, noted at least since Thomas Newton (1704-1782). Gabriel's role as messenger in events concerning the manifestation of Christ aligns with his name's meaning. Raphael's name ("healing of God") anticipates his role as educator and guide. In the case of human names, Milton extends this practice to anagram and phonetic association: Eva encodes the Latin *væ* ("woe"), and reversed yields Ave — the salutation of the Annunciation — suggesting redemptive possibility within the onomastic form itself [11]. The word ignominy, as noted above, carries its onomastic meaning ("namelessness") into the text as semantic commentary.

4.7. Hidden Names and Anagrammatic Onomastics in *Paradise Lost*

An often overlooked aspect of Milton's onomastic technique is his use of hidden names embedded within the textual structure of *Paradise Lost*. While modern readers typically focus on the semantic and etymological significance of names, seventeenth-century literary culture remained receptive to more intricate forms of verbal patterning, including acrostics, anagrams, palindromes, and other graphic arrangements of letters. Such devices had a long history stretching back to classical antiquity and continued to influence Renaissance and early modern poetics. Within this tradition, names could function on both an explicit and a concealed level, allowing authors to create additional layers of meaning beyond the immediate narrative.

The practice of embedding names in poetic texts was closely associated with the belief that language possessed symbolic and structural significance extending beyond ordinary communication. Names were often viewed not merely as arbitrary labels but as repositories of moral, historical, and spiritual meaning. Consequently, the concealment of names through letter patterns was understood as a legitimate artistic strategy rather than a decorative curiosity. Milton inherited this tradition and adapted it to the intellectual and theological concerns of his epic.

One of the most frequently cited examples occurs in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*, where Satan, disguised as a serpent, approaches Eve in preparation for the temptation. At this crucial narrative moment, the initial letters of a sequence of consecutive lines form the acrostic "SATANAS," the Latin form of Satan's name. The placement of this hidden signature is particularly significant because it coincides with the moment when evil begins to operate through deception and disguise. Although Eve does not recognize the identity of her tempter, the text itself subtly discloses it to attentive readers. The acrostic therefore functions as a form of dramatic irony, exposing the truth concealed beneath Satan's outward appearance.

The significance of such devices extends beyond mere wordplay. By embedding Satan's name within the visual structure of the verse, Milton reinforces one of the central themes of the poem: the contrast between appearance and reality. Satan repeatedly assumes false identities, manipulates language, and disguises his intentions. The hidden acrostic mirrors these actions formally, creating a correspondence between linguistic structure and narrative content. In this way, the poem's onomastic patterns become an integral part of its thematic architecture.

Alongside acrostics, Milton also employs anagrammatic techniques. Anagrams enjoyed considerable popularity in Renaissance Europe and were frequently used to encode political, religious, and personal meanings. The rearrangement of letters was often believed to reveal hidden truths about individuals or events, reflecting a broader cultural fascination with linguistic symbolism. Although the popularity of anagrams began to decline during the seventeenth century, Milton remained one of the last major English poets to exploit their literary potential in a serious and systematic manner.

In *Paradise Lost*, anagrams rarely appear in obvious forms. Instead, letters are often dispersed across phrases, clauses, or groups of words, making the concealed names difficult to detect. This complexity suggests that Milton intended

such patterns for highly attentive readers capable of recognizing sophisticated verbal structures. Rather than functioning as isolated puzzles, these hidden names contribute to the poem's broader system of symbolic representation and ideological commentary.

The political implications of Milton's anagrammatic practice are particularly noteworthy. Following the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, open criticism of royal authority carried considerable personal risk, especially for Milton, whose association with the Commonwealth government and defence of republican principles were well known. Under such circumstances, indirect forms of expression offered a means of engaging with contemporary political issues while avoiding explicit statement. Several scholars have therefore argued that certain passages associated with Satan and the rebel angels contain concealed references to major political figures of Milton's age.

Among the names identified in scholarly discussions are those of Charles I, Charles II, and Oliver Cromwell. The presence of these names within contexts of rebellion, ambition, military organization, and political authority suggests that Milton may have been encouraging readers to draw analogies between biblical events and the turbulent history of seventeenth-century England. Such associations are rarely straightforward allegories. Rather than equating individual characters with specific historical figures, Milton constructs a complex network of correspondences that invites reflection on the nature of power, legitimacy, obedience, and political corruption.

These hidden references also challenge modern interpretations of Satan as a straightforward symbol of revolutionary resistance. Many contemporary readers, influenced by later Romantic interpretations, have viewed Satan primarily as a heroic rebel opposing tyranny. However, Milton's political thought was considerably more nuanced. Throughout his life, his attitude toward political authority evolved in response to the failures of both monarchy and republican government. The possible inclusion of concealed political names within Satanic contexts suggests that the poem critiques not only kingship but also the dangers of personal ambition and authoritarian rule in all forms.

Furthermore, hidden names contribute to Milton's broader exploration of the relationship between language and identity. Throughout *Paradise Lost*, names are repeatedly linked to moral character, spiritual condition, and social status. The Fall itself results in the loss, transformation, or corruption of names, particularly among the rebel angels. Within this context, concealed names represent an additional dimension of the poem's onomastic system. They reveal that identity in Milton's universe is not always transparent or immediately visible; it may be obscured, fragmented, or embedded within deeper linguistic structures.

From a literary-onomastic perspective, Milton's use of acrostics and anagrams demonstrates the remarkable sophistication of his naming practices. Hidden names operate simultaneously on aesthetic, theological, and political levels, enriching the interpretative possibilities of the text. They illustrate how the poet integrates visual, phonological, and semantic elements into a unified artistic design. Consequently, the study of embedded names offers valuable insight into Milton's conception of language as a medium capable of expressing multiple layers of meaning at once.

The presence of these concealed onomastic structures ultimately confirms that naming in *Paradise Lost* extends far beyond the simple identification of characters. Whether openly stated or secretly encoded, names function as carriers of ideology, theology, and literary symbolism. Milton's hidden names therefore represent an important component of his overall onomastic strategy, revealing the extraordinary complexity with which he constructs meaning throughout the epic.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of personal naming in *Paradise Lost* reveals a sophisticated, multi-layered onomastic system. Milton's naming strategies fall into five principal types: (1) biblical names with transparent etymological meaning, used for major angelic figures; (2) apocryphal and cabalistic names of human origin repurposed as angelic charactonyms; (3) heathen-mythological names assigned to demonic characters as theological demotion; (4) Aramaic abstract nouns functioning as allegorical devil-names; and (5) collective hierarchical titles constituting a distinct sub-system of angelic nomenclature.

Most strikingly, Milton represents the Fall itself as a catastrophic onomastic event: the rebel angels lose their original names — the most visible markers of identity and moral standing — and must acquire new, debased names in their postlapsarian condition. This diachronic dimension of Milton's onomastics, whereby names change, disappear, and re-emerge as the narrative unfolds, is without parallel in earlier English epic and constitutes a major contribution to the literary history of proper names. These findings are directly relevant to comparative onomastics and to the study of anthroponyms in literary discourse, enriching the theoretical frameworks available within contrastive linguistics.

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