

And the Poets Created God:

Subversion and Critique of Orthodox Christianity in Behn, Blake, and Browning

By Molly Campbell

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Louis Althusser and other 20th century theorists argue for the idea of a polyvalent power relationship between the group, individual, or idea that appears to be dominant and the seemingly subjected group. Specifically interesting in the context of literature is the symbiotic relationship between “subjects” and the “Subject,” or controlling figure, in this case God (Althusser, 14). In order for the Subject, God, to exist it must have subjects to believe in it: “God needs men, the great Subject needs subjects, even in the terrible inversion of his image in them (when the subjects wallow in debauchery, i.e. sin)” (Althusser, 14). In essence, a power like God cannot exist without a congregation to believe in it, but once the belief exists the Subject gains power. Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, William Blake’s “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” and Robert Browning’s “The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church” illustrate the shifting ideologies of the subjects, the British citizens, as their worldview began to change and they began to believe more in Reason and Science than God, beginning the Enlightenment. This phenomena was described by Martin Fitzpatrick as the “application of critical reasoning to human problems in order to ameliorate the human condition and create a more harmonious, tolerant, and virtuous society and government” (Fitzpatrick, 299).

Althusser argues that ideologies are created so that men can “represent their real conditions of existence... in an imaginary form” (Althusser, 4). Thus, God was created, believed in, and maintained in order to represent the power relationship between rulers and subjects. The revolutionary “Spirit of the Age” that emerges in the Romantic period and the growing belief in individualism and democracy post-Enlightenment enhanced this shift away from unquestioning faith in orthodox religion. Throughout, as well as after the Enlightenment, “anti-clerical views also made considerable headway in an awakening of popular opinion, drawing on old resentments of clerical presumption and on a new awareness of abuses in the administration of

the church” in an effort to improve the lives of citizens. One can see a trend of critique and subversion of the idea of orthodox religion over the course of the Restoration, Romantic, and Victorian time periods. This trend away from orthodox religion is strongly depicted in *Oroonoko*, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” and “The Bishop Orders His Tomb....” Albeit these authors, like most Enlightenment thinkers, maintained a religious attitude toward life as seen through their choices of subjects, these texts show a significant shift in ideological worldviews away from religion and towards a modern emphasis on individualism and reason. This is significant because it allows individualistic ideas like science and capitalism to flourish, creating significant shifts in the structure and operation of society away the traditional ruler-subject relationship.

One can see the subversion and critique of orthodox Christianity in Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*. Behn uses the Noble Savage figure of Oroonoko to critique the hypocrisies found in Western religion. Instead of a typical colonization narrative which advocates and furthers the ideological conquest and “liberation” of “savages” from their ignorant ways by “saving” them, as the “Society for Propagating the Gospel in Foreign Parts” and other similar groups tried to do (Webb, 100), Behn subverts the traditional ideologies of her nation by saying “Religion would here but destroy that tranquility they possess by ignorance” (Behn, 96). This pre-lapsarian image of “ignorance” and the negativity associated with the word “destroy” begin a series of references that insinuate that orthodox religion is an oppressive or harmful ideological state apparatus, in Althusserian terms. Here “tranquility” refers to the state in which the natives live and connotes a peaceful existence within the realm of nature. Behn gives the supposedly formative, positive institution of religion a cancerous role through her use of the verb “destroy,” creating a critique

of colonial religion that claims that it does the exact opposite of what it claims to do and so desires.

Oroonoko's people have their own religion and ways to explain their real relationships with their existence but the religion is more similar to Deism, the religious idea that nature teaches everything one needs to know about the physical universe and moral questions, than Catholicism or Anglicanism (Webb, 96). Instead of God, they refer to a "captain of the clouds," (108) a title which reflects their dominant role as a warrior nation as illustrated by the use of the title "captain." The belief that he is a higher power is shown by his location in the clouds where mortals cannot dwell as well as his high-ranked military title. Although this is a religious ideology, it is not that of the civilized Western world which Behn and other authors critique. In fact, many Restoration authors like Behn were subscribing to Deistic beliefs in an active dissention from orthodox religion (Webb, 96). Oroonoko's religion is polytheistic, as shown by the regular references to the plural "gods," so the power is not vested in a singular omnipotent being, represented ideologically as God and literally as the Pope or King in Western Society. This polytheistic, natural religion accompanies the trend toward democracy and a sharing of power that characterized this time through its individualistic structure. By portraying Oroonoko's religion in a positive light and by emphasizing the idea that this "noble" man was a result of a society that taught bravery, honesty, and dignity rather than subjugation, Behn undercuts and destabilizes the teachings of orthodox Christianity.

Behn's most powerful critiques of Christianity come from Oroonoko's fictionalized mouth. This gives Behn a level of protection and allows for her to say radical things, but since they come from this "savage" mouth they are not as provoking in the time period as if she had said them herself due to dehumanizing racism. Ironically, it is exactly because these critiques

come out of Oroonoko's mouth that they become so powerful. Throughout the story, Behn grooms her reader into believing that Oroonoko is innocent, noble, and heroic in all of his qualities (except his skin color) through her positive descriptions of his character and actions. Some examples of this include the use of descriptors such as "gallant" and "noble and just character" in regards to him. The reader tends to like him and listens when he speaks, becoming another case of what Behn describes as "whoever had heard him speak would have been convinced of their errors, that all fine wit is confined to the white men, especially to those of Christendom" (98) thus giving Oroonoko something of a dependable resume by offering examples of other whites who had been convinced of Oroonoko's vality and uprooted their own deep-seated convictions that white men were the only people who knew anything. Behn includes the reader in this description through her use of the totalizing term "whoever," which is universal in its anonymity and suggests that everyone is convinced that this man has something valuable to say. So when Oroonoko "told [Byam] there was no faith in the white men, or the gods they adored; who instructed them in principles so false that honest men could not live amongst them...[and] never to eat and drink with Christians, without [a] weapon of defense in his hand..." and criticized his fellow men for being "whipped into the knowledge of the Christian Gods," for being "the vilest of all creeping things; to learn to worship such deities as had not power to make them just, brave, or honest," the reader listens (Behn, 128). This speech, so full of strong descriptions of dishonesty and subjection of one's own self-respect to a deity who had done nothing to earn it is not simply disregarded due to the fact that it came out of the mouth of a fictionalized black man because the reader overcomes and forgets racial stereotypes in preference of Oroonoko's noble characterization. The reader is forced to reflect on the actions of the white men in comparison to Oroonoko's by the images of the white man's God as being

powerless to make what are commonly considered “good” men: “just, brave, [and] honest.” She also recalls the reader to the trickery involved in Oroonoko’s enslavement by the reference to the “falseties” of the white men. This comparison between good men and bad, with the “savages” as more good than the Christians, makes it clear that Behn is positioning unorthodox forms of religion as more honest than traditional Christianity.

Behn’s decision to ventriloquize this critique from the mouth of a man which the audience has grown to respect, especially when contrasted with the lying, cheating white men who commit unspeakable cruelties, makes it seem like a valid argument to consider. What she does not say in this speech is just as important as what is said, however. Oroonoko’s critique of the weakness of the Christian God and the deceitful, cowardly actions of the subjects who believe in and follow the doctrines of this God does not explicitly say ‘be honest and noble, have a belief in your individual self rather than a false God,’ but that is the message reversely articulated through the speech when considered next to the actions that it reflects upon. Thus, Behn presents a critique of orthodox Christianity by connecting Christians with deceitful, negative actions and the “savages” with honorable actions that come from within them and their position in nature rather than an omnipotent God. This comparison highlights the inadequacies of orthodox Christianity that formed a basis for the justification of a shift toward reason and logic that accompanied the shifting desires and worldviews of white Europeans away from simple servility to a king or God.

It has been said that William Blake “went into [the Bible] for a revelation and seized chiefly upon those which other men were trying their best to be rid of” (Robinson, qtd. in Tucker, 3). His satirical work, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” possesses a strong critique of orthodox Christianity such as was somewhat common in post-French Revolution Europe (Webb, 98). The very fact that “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” is a satire and the subject of satire is

almost always a “social ill” points to a criticism of the system of religion. Blake uses a post-structural emphasis on the duality of what appear to be binary oppositions, like heaven and hell, to illustrate the interdependence of the two sides. In Blake’s work Heaven cannot exist without Hell and he places a heavy emphasis on the idea that corruption and sin are just as much the works of God as peace and love. For Blake, God and the Devil are one and the same. This is a radical shift away from the blind “sheep” of earlier congregations as Blake begins to articulate the opposition toward orthodox religion, as he does in “The Proverbs of Hell.” These epithetic snippets appear to make sense, while the words of the Bible and actions of Jesus are critiqued.

Blake satirizes the original Proverbs of the Bible in “The Proverbs of Hell” in order to subvert them and destabilize their definitive instructions. He writes new proverbs, such as: “The pride of the peacock is the glory of God./ The lust of the goat is the bounty of God./ The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God./ The nakedness of woman is the work of God” (Blake, 152). The repetitive parallel structure of these lines creates a listing effect that lends itself to the idea that they are factual and inarguable as often the things that are listed are material facts. This list reverses the conventional conception of sin, claiming that the traditional sins of hubris, lust, wrath, and flesh are in fact the “glory,” “bounty,” “wisdom,” and “work” of God. These particular words connote conventional religious language that idolizes the benevolent God of the Christian tradition but here he is said to create the sins which the proverbs of the Bible condemn. This recalls Blake’s thesis that God and the Devil, or the benevolence and wrath of one God, are one and the same. This idea stems from the original conception that God created *everything* so therefore he must have created these sins as well. Under consideration, it is possible to see how each of these sins is in fact as Blake claims: the beauty of the peacock’s feathers speaks to the glorious creative capacity of God; the lust of the goat breeds offspring which allow for feasting,

representative of great bounty; the wrath of the lion is wise because his hunt is indicative of a beautifully symmetric food chain; and the nakedness of woman is God's work as he is, conventionally, her sculptor. This sensibility lends believability to Blake's argument, which shows how the shift away from orthodox religion began to be more fathomable for the average person and resulted in the gradual destruction of totalitarian belief in entities like God, the pope, and the king.

Blake argued some of the same things as Louis Althusser, except he said them almost two hundred years earlier. Althusser claimed that priests and despots "'forged' the Beautiful Lies so that, in the belief that they were obeying God, men would in fact obey the Priests and Despots" (Althusser, 5). Centuries before, Blake offered the radical belief that even before the priests,

the ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive... Till a system was formed, which some took advantage of and enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects; thus began Priesthood,/choosing forms of worship from poetic tales./ And at length they pronounced that the Gods had ordered such things./ Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast.(153)

Thus, the power roles of orthodox Christianity were created. Blake reverses these traditional power roles through his claim that the poets created the Gods before the priests exploited them for their own benefit, rather than the traditional belief that God created man as claimed in the Book of Genesis. The "vulgar" referred to in this passage is the common people—

the blind flock of orthodox Christianity (OED). This is an ideal example of the polyvalent or symbiotic power relationship between those who appear to be in power and those who are subjects as the poets take over the traditional creative role of God but his dominance in society is still acknowledged. This subversion of authority resulted in Briton's adoption of a constitutional monarch, rather than a totalitarian one, but the shift away from the absolute power of the church took longer to enact. The writings of reactionary authors like these were crucial in shifting public opinion to allow those ideological shifts to take place.

This passage, which claims that religion was created by poets (who have traditionally been seen as minimal contributors to society), is a step toward the creation of Higher Criticism, a German idea that sprang into British society in 1846 when Mary Ann Evans, the future George Eliot, published a translation of D.F. Strauss's *Leben Jesu* (Webb, 99). These critics began to study the Bible as a work of literature for the first time rather than the absolute Word of a higher power. The line "thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast" (Blake, 153) alludes to the creative power of man, but it also refers to the growing Behmenism movement that Blake subscribed to which advocated for "seeking a religion of the inner light" and was "antagonistic toward institutional religion" (McCalman, 420). This is seen through Blake's phrasing, which locates religion in the most intimate part of the human form, within "the human breast." Rather than a deity being in an ethereal region it is positioned within the "vulgar" form of man which is a distinct shift away from the orthodox power structure that put God significantly above man. Prior to the first English translation of the Bible around 1400, the common man could not even worship on his own and the very idea of individual worship was seen as highly radical. The idea of God being formed and remaining within the "vulgar" form of the common man is a continuation of this radical individualistic belief, which is contrary to orthodox Christianity, in

which God was superior to all mortal forms. In Christianity's advocacy of chastity, morality, and fear of the "sin of flesh" a distaste for mortal flesh is illustrated because the body "is often said to be in conflict with the spirit" (Jeffery, 284). This continues Blake's post-structural take on binary oppositions as body and spirit are seen to fall together and become one in the same in the text. This combination accentuates the idea that each man is his own person and is free to worship as he pleases which resulted in radical ideological worldview shifts to new forms and structures of society such as are seen in the 20th century and after.

The subversion and critique of traditional religious faith is also evident in Robert Browning's dramatic monologue, "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church." The poem, spoken by the Bishop as he dies and addressed to his "Nephews—sons mine... Oh God, I know not!" (Browning, #?) highlights the corruption and superficiality of the Catholic Church that was common fodder for writers in post-French Revolution Europe. Set in Rome in 15--, Browning uses the Church as a symbol of orthodox Christianity because at the time there were few alternatives, if any. This is contrasted with the prevalence of many different religious groups in Browning's time who were carving a space for themselves out of traditional religion by arguing for reformation of the Catholic church and for changes in religion that were more in step with the changing world. From the very beginning the Bishop, who acts as a representative symbol of the Clergy, is seen as corrupt as he addresses his illegitimate children on the requisite splendor of his tomb. This poem shows themes of debauchery, power, and greed and is littered with pagan images that directly contradict the monotheistic, virtuous basis of orthodox Christianity in order to subvert it and illustrate the potential benefits of a different-- or even a complete renunciation of-- religion.

There is recurring sexual imagery, aside from the address to the illegitimate sons, which alludes to the debauchery and hypocrisy of the Bishop, who, by church law, is supposed to be “pure.” He uses the simile of “Blue as a vein o’er the Madonna’s breast” (44) to describe a lump of precious stone. This comparison sexualizes the figure of the Virgin herself, who is traditionally held to be above the baseness of lust, by referencing the breast of the woman. This lustful simile debases the supposed purity of the church and exposes the hypocrisy of it in a radical critique which directly opposes St. Augustine’s admonition that “weakness of the flesh in sexual matters especially [was] a major impediment to spiritual development” thus calling into question the spirituality of this church leader (Jeffery, 284). The Bishop also promises to use his supposed influence with religious figures like Saint Praxed to pray for “mistresses with great smooth marbly limbs” for his sons if they fulfill his wishes for his tomb (75). The description of the women alludes to his belief that women are merely decorative artifacts as “marbly” effectually turns them into sculptures. This is an anti-individualistic, patriarchal view that objectifies women, a concept commonly echoed by the Church, particularly in their exclusionary practices towards females throughout history. More importantly, mistresses are not generally considered valid things to pray for, thus illustrating the Bishop’s disregard for the tenets of Christianity. The line also shows an abuse of power on the Bishops part as he offers his influence basically as a bribe in order to get what he wants. This demonstrates the corruption of the Catholic church in an effort to undermine it and force a shift away from its authoritarianism.

The Bishop mixes pagan and Christian images on his tomb in a lustful manner as well. He describes the scene he wants created in “bas-relief” on his tomb, asking for “Saint Praxed in a glory, and one Pan/ Ready to twitch the Nymph’s last garment off” (60-61). “The Nymph” refers to Saint Praxed according to the syntax of the sentence. Therefore, the Saint, who was celebrated

for her virginity, is being described as a nearly-naked pagan figure in a subversion of Catholic imagery. The term “a glory” can in fact be interpreted as the Saint being at the peak of sexual ecstasy due to its close connection with “exaltation,” which calls to mind other instances where this image appears, such as in Bernini’s sculpture “The Ecstasy of St. Theresa,” sculpted around 1650. This illustrates the continued sexualization of the pure religious figure of Praxed in the Bishop’s mind as he imagines her in sexual ecstasy.

Most prevalent and indicative of the corruption and worldliness (as opposed to the typical transcendentalism) of the Catholic Church is the heavy emphasis on the Bishop’s greed. Browning depicts the Bishop as a wealthy man who becomes increasingly greedy as he comes closer to his death. His desire for the style of his tomb grows more luxurious as the poem progresses and his tomb is described in various stages of luxury: it begins as Basalt, then becomes “Peach-blossom marble all,” (29) with a lump of lapis lazuli as “Big as a jew’s head cut off at the nape” poised “between his knees” (43,47). He then decides on black marble with “the bas-relief in bronze” depicting pagan images, then in order to have a more magnificent tomb than his predecessor Gandolf he asks for Jasper, “One block, pure green as a pistachio nut” (68-71). This list of increasingly luxurious tomb designs culminates in his exasperated demand for “Gritstone” as he thinks his sons have “stabbed him with ingratitude” (114). This focus on wealth and appearance is the sum of the Bishop’s final time on earth: rather than praying for his salvation or something equally religious he dwells on whether or not his tomb will get the most attention in the church. This preoccupation with his monument divulges the idea that the tomb will be his only lasting legacy on earth, meaning that his legacy as a religious leader is inconsequential, therefore pointing to the fact that he was ineffective as one.

Browning's Bishop is a disciple to the sins condemned by the Bible—lust, greed, and pride. John Ruskin said that the poem encapsulates “the Renaissance spirit—its worldliness, inconsistency, pride, hypocrisy, ignorance of itself, love of art, of luxury, and of good Latin” (1286). The hypocrisy of the location of the Bishop's tomb, in the church of a virgin saint who “gave her riches to poor Christians” is a poignant critique of the paradoxical actions of the church especially during the Renaissance. These texts with their critiques of orthodox religion begin to appear during the Restoration period as a reaction toward the hyper-sensuality of the Renaissance and continued through Browning's time in the 19th century. Browning's poem is a treatise on many of the hypocrisies and deviations that occurred in the upper levels of religious institutions, which were supposed to be closest to God and therefore most religious, that resulted in the reactionary dismantling of universal faith in religion that is illustrated in the words of these authors.

A subversion of the traditional faith in institutional religion is evident in Behn, Blake, and Browning's texts. This recurring theme that crosses generations of writers signifies a shifting ideological worldview that Althusser would claim illustrates a change in the real existence of British citizens, marked by the heightened desire for the more democratic society that multiple revolutions around Europe fought for. Behn's promotion of the values of a pre-lapsarian society, Blake's post-modern melding of the apparent oppositions between Heaven and Hell, and Browning's dramatic monologue from the mouth of corruption itself make up a varied sample of the reasons behind and methods taken by authors and activists to attempt to bring about change. Albeit, as Althusser would say, everyone is always already a subject to ideologies, be they God, government, or patriotism, but these authors are acting as the wheels of revolution as they speak out in their various ways to change an ideology that they saw as oppressive. Although there is no

escape from ideologies and these texts merely promote an ideology different than the one which was the norm at the time, they signify an ongoing trend in the history of literature and mark an important moment in Western cultural history.

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