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Abstract: That Prince Philip was Queen Elizabeth II's "strength and stay" came to memorialise their relationship. This article shows that the queen's now familiar words in fact are those of the great British poet, John Milton (1608–1674), from his epic retelling of the biblical Fall, *Paradise Lost* (1667/1674). Appreciating how and why Elizabeth integrates the quotation from *Paradise Lost* into the Golden Wedding anniversary speech (20 November 1997) sheds light on the value of literature and Milton's poem, specifically, to the queen's diplomacy after the death of Princess Diana. The queen's immediate response to the tragedy, she came to understand, made the monarchy's future precarious. In consequence of the public reaction and a series of royal humiliations prior, Queen Elizabeth alludes to, and further, adopts in the Golden Wedding speech the reconciliatory humility of Milton's Eve; the character who, through "fault / Acknowledged" appeals to her "strength and stay" (10.938–939, 921). This article ultimately argues that, by establishing a Miltonic diplomacy in the Golden Wedding speech, the queen cleverly encompasses and solidifies her private, political, and public relationships in the nuptial symbolism of the occasion.

Keywords: Elizabeth II; diplomacy; Milton; *Paradise Lost*; Prince Philip; 1997; Diana, Princess of Wales

That magnetically poetic phrase from Queen Elizabeth II's Golden Wedding speech appeared in almost every headline following her death on 8 September 2022. Having gained traction after Prince Philip's death on 9 April the previous year, it was solidified in Britain's national consciousness by the prime minister: "We remember the Duke," he asserted, "above all for his steadfast support [of] Her Majesty The Queen. Not just as her consort, ... but as her husband, her 'strength and stay', of more than 70 years."¹ On Twitter, news outlets, organisations, and individuals relished the memory of the queen's "strength and stay"—"a quote I always

¹ "Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Statement on the Death of His Royal Highness The Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh," Gov.uk, 9 April 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-the-death-of-his-royal-highness-the-prince-philip-duke-of-edinburgh>.

found really moving” said ITV’s Katy Rickitt—and by the time of the queen’s own death, she was declared by some the “strength and stay” of the nation.² Royal biographers attribute these words to the monarch.³ Yet we owe their pervasiveness and the queen’s deployment of them to one of the greatest poets in the English language: John Milton (1608–1674).

The detail merits our attention, this article shows, because, in the Golden Wedding speech, the queen integrates both the words from Milton’s epic poem, *Paradise Lost* (1667/1674), with her own, and the allusion she has in mind with her diplomacy. Scholarship on Queen Elizabeth II’s reign centres on its being marked throughout “by the power of speech,” how her language creates an identity appropriate to her status and role, and even how Elizabeth’s pronunciation develops.⁴ Interest in her speech as a vehicle for diplomacy, however, is confined to the queen’s tribute to Princess Diana—a speech that, in fact, was written for the queen by her government.⁵ Contrastingly, Queen Elizabeth’s personal speeches, which include her Christmas broadcasts, usually were collaborations with private secretaries and Prince Philip. Only in these speeches could she express her own feelings (while adhering to government sentiment), and here, great British poets often are named and quoted directly.⁶

² Examples of usage after Philip’s death include: Sky News, Twitter post, 9 April 2021, 3.33pm, <https://twitter.com/SkyNews/status/1380529195277815810?s=20>; Reuters, Twitter post, 10 April 2021, 12.10am, <https://twitter.com/Reuters/status/1380659287517712384?s=20>; English Heritage, Twitter post, 9 April 2021, 1.43pm, <https://twitter.com/EnglishHeritage/status/1380501517560639491?s=20>; Katy Rickitt, Twitter post, 9 April 2021, 3.28pm, <https://twitter.com/KatyRickittITV/status/1380528154851303430?s=20>. On the queen as the nation’s “strength and stay,” see, for example, Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst, Twitter post, 8 September 2022, 12.41pm, <https://twitter.com/DrNShastriHurst/status/1567840600996679682?s=20> and James Roscoe, Twitter post, 8 September 2022, 11.33pm, <https://twitter.com/jmsroscoe/status/1568004553856917505?s=20>.

³ See, for example, Ingrid Seward, *The Queen’s Speech: An Intimate Portrait of the Queen in her Own Words* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 8; Tina Brown, *The Palace Papers: Inside the House of Windsor—The Truth and the Turmoil* (London: Penguin Random House, 2022), 97.

⁴ Kathleen Mollick, “Queen Elizabeth II and Princess Diana: Saving the Monarchy,” in *Global Women Leaders: Studies in Feminist Political Rhetoric*, ed. Michele Lockhart and Kathleen Mollick (London: Lexington, 2014), 19; Marina-Christiana Rotaru, “Royal Speech Prevents Crisis: Queen Elizabeth’s Speech on the Death of Princess Diana,” *Professional Communication and Translation Studies* 3, no. 1–2 (2010): 41–48, 45; Jose A. Mompean, “/r/-sandhi in the Speech of Queen Elizabeth II,” *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 52, no. 2 (2022): 246–277, 273.

⁵ Richard Power Sayeed, 1997: *The Future that Never Happened* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 147. For recent trends in scholarship on modern monarchy as an institution, see Andjrez Olechnowicz, ed., *The Monarchy and the British Nation, 1780 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27, 32, 312.

⁶ Seward, *The Queen’s Speech*, 13. See, for example, “A Speech by the Queen on Her 21st Birthday, 1947,” *Royal.uk*, 21 April 1947, <https://www.royal.uk/21st-birthday-speech-21-april-1947>; “Christmas Broadcast

The queen likely had significant input, therefore, to the speech she delivered on the personal occasion of her Golden Wedding anniversary, 20 November 1997. Crucially, it was the first of this kind since the death of Princess Diana on 31 August 1997, after which, palace advisors believed the monarchy's future hung in the balance. The Golden Wedding speech consequently appeals for reconciliation in the queen's public, political, and private relationships simultaneously. I argue, furthermore, that attending to Queen Elizabeth's sensitive reading of *Paradise Lost* reveals in the Golden Wedding speech a profound and distinctly *literary* kind of diplomacy. In a new era of political media performance, we will see, this quiet strategy captures the monarchy's emerging identity, having mitigated ostensibly its greatest threat.

Elizabeth's Familiarity with Milton

Alan Bennett's Queen Elizabeth in *The Uncommon Reader* (2006) laments her lack of reading, "particularly in the period following Princess Diana's death," since it is only by Elizabeth's *late* learning that she "understood ... her predicament."⁷ In reality, Elizabeth had been encouraged by her governess, Marion Crawford, to "read and read and read," knew many classic works as a child, and had "a good grounding in literature." Her study of Milton even encompassed the less-known poem, "At a Solemn Musick" (1645).⁸ Since childhood, the queen had access to at least 129 works written by or about John Milton in the Royal Collection, including concordances and scholarly volumes.⁹ Elizabeth's own copy of *English Minor Poems: Paradise Lost, Samson Agonistes, Areopagitica, By John Milton* (1952) was given to her by the publisher at a presentation dinner, barely a month after her accession to the throne.¹⁰

The gift was well considered because, as head of state, Elizabeth could find in *Paradise Lost* the complex diplomatic machinery of which she was a part. After the execution

1980," Royal.uk, 25 December 1980, <https://www.royal.uk/christmas-broadcast-1980>; "Christmas Broadcast 1994," Royal.uk, 25 December 1994, <https://www.royal.uk/christmas-broadcast-1994>.

⁷ Alan Bennett, *The Uncommon Reader* (London: London Review of Books, 2006; London: Faber and Faber 2007), 83.

⁸ Marion Crawford, *The Little Princesses: The Story of the Queen's Childhood*, by Her Nanny Marion Crawford. Introduced by Jennie Bond (London: Cassell & Co, 1950; London: Orion Books 2003), 170, 107.

⁹ See Royal Collection Trust, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/page/1>.

¹⁰ "John Milton (1608-1674) English Minor Poems: Paradise Lost, Samson Agonistes, Areopagitica / by John Milton. (Great Books of the Western World; No. 32). 1952. RCIN 1056239," Royal Collection Trust, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/8/collection/1056239/english-minor-poems-paradise-lost-samson-agonistes-areopagitica-by-john-milton>.

of King Charles I in 1649, a Council of State was created to replace “the framework of diplomatic relations” that had been largely the preserve of a monarch, and it employed Milton as official English and Latin translator. As Julianne Werlin argues, diplomatic and scholarly correspondence are part of the context of *Paradise Lost*, which was conceived and begun during Milton’s government employment. In the poem, “like the members of the Council of State,” Milton’s fallen angels gather to discuss “foreign affairs They have received a report ... and must decide whether the information is reliable enough to act upon.” In this way, the fallen angels “mirror Parliament’s—and later Cromwell’s—executive committee,” suggests Werlin, while the busy role of correspondence given to Milton’s *unfallen* angels reflects “the emerging system of political correspondence in Europe.” Even the construction of the poem rests on techniques learned by the later blind Milton during his government years, Werlin notes, so that a range of details in the poem echo Milton’s diplomatic experience.¹¹ Details that would be recognisable, even appealing, perhaps, to Queen Elizabeth.

And yet, when Elizabeth says in the Golden Wedding speech that Philip “has, quite simply, been my strength and stay all these years,” she chooses to highlight a more domestic and vulnerable quality in the poem and herself. The key passage on which she ruminates is from book 10 of *Paradise Lost*.¹² By this point in the poem, Milton’s Adam and Eve, for the first time, have experienced the effects of the forbidden fruit, and thereby disobedience to God: “Their inward state of mind, calm region once / And full of peace, now tossed and turbulent” (9.1125–1126).¹³ Intemperate and unfamiliar, the emotions of the pair lead to “vain contést” and argument (9.1189), but Milton’s Eve comes to initiate reconciliation. First, “Soft words to [Adam’s] fierce passion she assayed: / But her with stern regard he thus repelled” (10.865–866) and “from her turned, but Eve / Not so repulsed, with tears that ceased not flowing,” falls “humble” at Adam’s feet, embraces them, and pleads (10.909–913).

Forsake me not thus, Adam, witness Heav’n
What love sincere, and reverence in my heart

¹¹ Julianne Werlin, “Paper Angels: *Paradise Lost* and the European State System,” *Milton Studies* 61, no. 2 (2019): 212–238, 215, 218, 219, 216, 221, 234, 216.

¹² “A Speech by the Queen on Her Golden Wedding Anniversary,” *Royal.uk*, 20 November 1997, <https://www.royal.uk/golden-wedding-speech>.

¹³ All references to *Paradise Lost* are from John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2000), unless indicated otherwise, and are cited in the text.

I bear thee, and unweeting have offended,
Unhappily deceived; thy suppliant
I beg, and clasp thy knees; bereave me not,
Whereon I live, thy gentle looks, thy aid,
Thy counsel in this uttermost distress,
My only strength and stay: forlorn of thee,
Whither shall I betake me, where subsist?
While yet we live, scarce one short hour perhaps,
Between us two let there be peace, ... (10.914–924).

The words of Milton's Eve mark the culmination of the queen's Golden Wedding speech and her cherishing Prince Philip. Understood in their proper context, however, the queen's Miltonic words unlock the extraordinary kind of diplomacy being undertaken. I will show that the queen depicts herself to her husband *and* her public and prime minister with the humility of Milton's Eve: as one who humbly kneels to "beg" forgiveness, fully aware of the value of external "counsel" in distressing times.

A Decade of Humiliation and Strategy

Like "humble" and "humility," "humiliation" is related to the Latin *humus*, meaning ground, or earth.¹⁴ In the passage from *Paradise Lost* to which Queen Elizabeth alludes in the Golden Wedding speech, Eve's lowly posture underscores her humiliation, and it is a conceit entirely apt. Public disgruntlement over royal taxes preceded the divorces of all the queen's married children in the 1990s: two with significant extra-marital fallout.¹⁵ Andrew Morton's book, *Diana: Her True Story* (1992) painted a princess suffering and her husband's affair; this, and photographs published in the *Mirror* (1992) of a topless Duchess of York and a Texan billionaire's attention to her toes would be superseded by the heir to throne's leaked telephone conversation with his mistress (1993), named sardonically by the press, "Camillagate."¹⁶

The Prince of Wales then provided 10,000 letters, diaries, and revealing interviews for a disastrous TV documentary (1994) in which he confirmed his adultery.¹⁷ After his

¹⁴ See *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, 2023), "humble," *adj.* Etymology.

¹⁵ Seward, *The Queen's Speech*, 145; Robert Hardman, *Our Queen* (London: Hutchinson, 2011), 87.

¹⁶ Nicola Oakley, "The Toe-Sucking Photo that Drove Sarah Ferguson out of the Royal Family," *Mirror*, 28 May 2020, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/toe-sucking-photo-drove-sarah-13384631>; Brown, *The Palace Papers*, 59.

¹⁷ Brown, *The Palace Papers*, 62, 63.

wife's globally televised response, which questioned the prince's prospects as monarch, Charles's popularity was "in the tank at 4 per cent" and the implications were felt by his parents: "five European kings and queens who attended Lord Mountbatten's funeral fifteen years before were all now in exile."¹⁸ Just two years before the Waleses' interviews, the queen and Prince Philip "received a lukewarm reception" in Australia compared with earlier visits, while a state visit to Germany saw the queen pelted with eggs. Of the separations and divorces, Philip said privately that "everything" in his forty years' work "has been in vain."¹⁹ The royal family were not accustomed to this kind of public humiliation.²⁰

An effort was made consequently to improve the queen's image at this time by redefining her traditional role, and crucial to this project was the work of Sir Anthony Jay, writer of the *Royal Family* (1969) and *Elizabeth R* (1992) film scripts and accompanying book. Jay gives the queen, in addition to head of state, a new title: head of the nation. "It was the mid-nineties and we were constantly questioning ourselves about everything," says one former advisor, "this made sense." Head of the nation was perceived by the palace as an equally important role, but a more personal and relevant one. Without it, the link between nation and state, the palace felt, could weaken and break. As Robert Hardman observes, while the monarch sought to move forward from "the unhappy rows about money and marriages which dominated the early nineties," this new dual role explained simply what monarchy is for.²¹

"We were running out of respect and money," says a former advisor. Thus emerged the Way Ahead Group, a public relations strategy committee comprising family members and senior officials. In 1996, the group appointed the impressive civil servant from Downing Street, Mary Francis, a Cambridge historian and previously private secretary to John Major. "I was told the Palace wanted someone with a background like mine," Francis recalls; "they wanted someone to help think about change and future strategy" and more people with "analytical approaches" were brought in using headhunters.²² As Charles Anson, the queen's press secretary at the time, explains, the palace wanted "to get ahead of the media and not always be reacting." One senior official likens the situation to the

¹⁸ Hardman, *Our Queen*, 99; Brown, *The Palace Papers*, 61.

¹⁹ Seward, *The Queen's Speech*, 149, 153, 149; Ingrid Seward, *Prince Philip Revealed: A Man of His Century* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 333.

²⁰ Sayeed, 1997: *The Future that Never Happened*, 126.

²¹ Hardman, *Our Queen*, 16, 17.

²² Hardman, *Our Queen*, 23, 24, 25.

financial crisis of 2008: "Our attitude was almost: 'We must use this crisis well.'" The queen wanted no sense of competition with Princess Diana; even so, suggests Hardman, the occasional sense of competition from Diana was clearly felt.²³ Evaluated in the context of a string of public humiliations for the monarch, the queen's Miltonic diplomacy in the Golden Wedding speech, the final section of this article shows, acknowledges the sense of contest with Diana and how close the monarch came to losing.

1997: Tragedy and Reputation Saving

As Britain returned Hong Kong to the Beijing government on 1 July 1997, the exchange of flags was, for Prince Charles, "the pinnacle of humiliations." Britain's new prime minister, Tony Blair, also found the triumphalism "somewhat humiliating"; Charles wrote of him: "He understands only too well the identity problem that Britain has with the loss of an empire."²⁴ Moreover, the landslide-winning Labour Party manifesto had promised a referendum on the question of devolution and a Welsh assembly, which Conservatives warned "would mean the end of the union."²⁵ To some, therefore, the UK appeared unstable: the empire was over and the union was weakening—the Scottish referendum was scheduled for 11 September 1997, the 700th anniversary of William Wallace's victory over English forces at the Battle of Stirling Bridge.²⁶

But the sudden and tragic death of Princess Diana on 31 August, biographers and former staff say, brought the gravest crisis of the queen's reign. "That's when the stakes were highest," says a former private secretary, "I can honestly say that I thought it was going to be the end of the monarchy."²⁷ The queen's reaction to the tragedy was deemed inadequate by the crowd that gathered in front of Buckingham Palace, who appeared "almost mutinous."²⁸ The queen and Prince Charles have publicly contested each other's version of events through friends and staff, but when the Press Association broke the embargo two hours after Diana's death, the Windsors' response was private.²⁹ *The Times* reported the following day: "No Mention of Accident," which, as Richard Power Sayeed

²³ Hardman, *Our Queen*, 26, 99.

²⁴ Sayeed, 1997: *The Future that Never Happened*, 13, 16. Extracts from Charles's diary were published in "The Handover of Hong Kong or the Great Chinese Takeaway," *Mail on Sunday*, 13 November 2005.

²⁵ "Labour's Campaign, The Background," *BBC Politics* 97, 1997, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/background/pastelec/ge97lab.shtml>.

²⁶ Sayeed, 1997: *The Future that Never Happened*, 27, 34.

²⁷ Hardman, *Our Queen*, 26.

²⁸ Seward, *The Queen's Speech*, 11.

²⁹ Sayeed, 1997: *The Future that Never Happened*, 127, 128, 129, 130.

infers, implicitly demanded the royals “show their feelings in public” and “was a sign of the coming storm.”³⁰ It also was not strictly true. The morning of Diana's death, *The Sunday Times* had reported the palace's statement: that the queen and Prince of Wales were “deeply shocked and distressed by this terrible news.”³¹

Blair's apparently improvised but pre-prepared speech on that news redefined Diana as “the People's Princess,” a phrase, Alwyn Turner notes, that captured the public mood and “implied that other royals ... weren't part of, the people.”³² Indeed, as Sayeed argues, since the Labour Party's political aim was to emphasise community, to discourage the “distrust” that prevented Britain's “free market revolution,” an attack on the monarchy threatened that vision. The week following Diana's death, moreover, brought “criticism of the royal family unlike anything since the 1936 abdication of Edward VIII,” and was a turning point that forced Diana's former in-laws to emulate her “egalitarian and open approach to public life.” Prince Philip and the queen initially believed things would settle down, but royal aides were concerned by media sentiment: “SHOW US YOU CARE,” the *Daily Express* headline read.³³

“The stuffy old uncaring royals” now were being contrasted by the media with “the emotionally literate public.”³⁴ The queen was obliged to return to London from Balmoral for a public walkabout, made a rare TV broadcast to the nation (written by Blair with his advisor and “spin doctor,” Alastair Campbell), and capitulated to tabloid demands to lower the Union Jack over Buckingham Palace. According to protocol, only a Royal Standard should fly above the palace. In fact, the “flag saga” was the only occasion, Mary Francis recalls, when the queen expressed real anger.³⁵ Correspondingly, Tina Brown writes: “I am told that Prince Philip regarded it as a great humiliation.” The queen was “completely wrong-footed” over protocols that were being challenged by the public and media, says Michael Paterson. “One could not argue points of protocol with a public that was out for

³⁰ Nicholas Watt, “No Mention of Accident as Princes Join Church Service,” *The Times*, 1 September 1997, 5; Sayeed, 1997: *The Future that Never Happened*, 130.

³¹ Andrew Alderson and Charles Masters, “Princess Diana and Lover Dodi Die in Paris Car Crash,” *The Sunday Times*, 31 August 1997, 1.

³² Sayeed, 1997: *The Future that Never Happened*, 131; Alwyn W. Turner, *A Classless Society: Britain in the 1990s* (London: Aurum Press, 2014), 374.

³³ Sayeed, 1997: *The Future that Never Happened*, 132, 116, 142, 140–141; “SHOW US YOU CARE,” *Daily Express*, 4 September 1997, 1.

³⁴ Turner, *A Classless Society*, 376.

³⁵ Sayeed, 1997: *The Future that Never Happened*, 147, 145; Hardman, *Our Queen*, 47–48.

blood,” he writes, so the queen “authorized the change that opinion demanded.”³⁶ This manoeuvring is key to a full appreciation of the Golden Wedding speech because, there, the queen acknowledges implicitly the public anger fuelled by the media: her humble, Eve-like persona stems from the queen’s ostensible mistake.

The recovery of the monarchy’s image began with Princess Diana’s funeral arrangements, a palace collaboration with Blair and Campbell. Public opinion, Blair reflects, was “a tide that had to be channelled” away from the royals’ inimical relationship with Diana.³⁷ It could be directed instead, Sayeed infers, to “New Labour’s own vision for Britain, if they were represented as having forced the monarchy to modernize.” Thus, Blair offered Campbell’s services to the royal aides.³⁸ The queen ultimately was convinced of public opinion and that Blair and Campbell could pull her out of the mire—another key context of her diplomacy in the Golden Wedding speech. To Campbell, the palace was behind the times and out of its depth. “It was the big Alastair Campbell takeover,” says a royal advisor, “We’ll take it over. She was the People’s Princess’ and all that.” After some of his more “insane” ideas were vetoed, says the palace, Campbell “took a back seat,” but, according to his memoirs, the royal family and staff needed “constant reassurance that they were keeping in step” and he describes their repeated gratitude for his insights. Hardman suggests that “at times, Campbell seems to misinterpret the genuine expression of warm appreciation—which the palace does very well—as signs of inadequacy,” yet the queen’s use of Milton in the Golden Wedding speech suggests she is both grateful for and humbled by the relationships she acknowledges.³⁹ As the next and final section elucidates, the anniversary of Queen Elizabeth’s marriage to her husband becomes in the speech a means of acknowledging her humility in relation to Tony Blair, the government, and the nation.

The need to demonstrate this quality was compounded on the occasion of Princess Diana’s funeral by the speech of her brother, Earl Spencer. As Tina Brown observes, “especially insulting” for the royals was his implication that Diana “was bigger than HRH: ‘[she] proved ... she needed no royal title to continue to generate her particular brand of magic,’” after which “the whole congregation—except for the Royal Family—was

³⁶ Brown, *The Palace Papers*, 16; Michael Paterson, *A Brief History of the Private Life of Elizabeth II* (London: Constable & Robinson, 2011), 181.

³⁷ Tony Blair, *A Journey* (London: Hutchinson, 2010), 147.

³⁸ Sayeed, 1997: *The Future that Never Happened*, 133–134, 135.

³⁹ Hardman, *Our Queen*, 103–104; Alastair Campbell, *The Alastair Campbell Diaries Volume 2: Power and the People 1997–1999*, ed. Alastair Campbell and Bill Hagerty (London: Hutchinson, 2011), 131, 143.

clapping.” This was, as Sayeed notes, “the most visible and angry attack on a British monarch in living memory.”⁴⁰ Philip was furious and had to be talked down; the Queen Mother, through clamped teeth, said: “very bold,” and almost seven years later at the opening of the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Foundation in Hyde Park, Queen Elizabeth “tossed a gibe at Earl Spencer: ‘I hope you feel satisfied.’”⁴¹

In the aftermath of Diana’s funeral, moreover, as Turner explains, the “communality” of public voices “reflected the deluded mood of the moment,” even if, as Sayeed argues, the public were “far less obsessed” with the story of Princess Diana’s death than the media were.⁴² However, one particularly powerful indication of public grief and affection apparently is neglected in accounts of the time: the response to Elton John’s tribute to Diana, the song “Candle in the Wind.” Released one week after the princess’s funeral, on 13 September 1997, it became the best-selling single in UK chart history, and is globally the second highest-selling physical single of all time.⁴³ In reusing the melody of John’s 1973 song of the same title, the 1997 version is loaded with the sentiments of the previous song for Norma Jean (Marilyn Monroe), an anger that appears too heartbreaking to vocalise in the later song.

The lyric, “Even when you died / Oh, the press still hounded you,” from 1973, has a particularly powerful unspoken resonance in the song for Diana (which itself acknowledges: “even though we try / The truth brings us to tears”). “You were the grace that placed itself / Where lives were torn apart / You called out to our country / And you whispered to those in pain” writes John of Diana. The princess is “our nation’s golden child,” he says: “Goodbye England’s rose / From a country lost without your soul / Who’ll miss the wings of your compassion.”⁴⁴ According to Hardman, “some of the most experienced members of the royal household still look back on that moment as the most pivotal of the queen’s entire reign.” Combined with the media response to Diana’s death, the success of the Elton John single is a humbling vindication of the queen’s perceived

⁴⁰ Brown, *The Palace Papers*, 19; Sayeed, 1997: *The Future that Never Happened*, 154.

⁴¹ Brown, *The Palace Papers*, 19, 23.

⁴² Turner, *A Classless Society*, 381; Sayeed, 1997: *The Future that Never Happened*, 133.

⁴³ “Entertainment Elton’s Candle Burns in Canada,” *BBC News*, 11 October 1999, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/471353.stm>; Guinness Book of World Records 2007 (London: Guinness World Records Limited, 2006), 187.

⁴⁴ “Candle in the Wind Lyrics,” *Genius*, 5 October 1973, <https://genius.com/Elton-john-candle-in-the-wind-lyrics>; “Candle in the Wind 1997 Lyrics,” *Genius*, 13 September 1997, <https://genius.com/Elton-john-candle-in-the-wind-1997-lyrics>.

mistakes. She did not forget what her aides called “the revolution,” when, as one of them puts it, the British people found “a chink in the armour” of monarchy.⁴⁵

Epic Diplomacy

Between the Princess's funeral on 6 September and the queen's Golden Wedding speech, given on 20 November, the monarch's tour of India and Pakistan in the October of 1997 sparked another humiliating furore that required Blair's intervention. With the headline, “A Royal Trip—And Stumble, and Gaffe...,” the *Washington Post* reported “a royal mess back home,” owing to “a series of gaffes, snubs, misunderstandings and now, inevitably, finger-pointing.” Most criticism was aimed at Britain's foreign secretary, Robin Cook, who professed he “stood ready” to mediate a solution over the border state of Kashmir, but the queen also urged a settling of differences and was accused of unwelcome “meddling.” At the site of a British massacre of interned Indians at Amritsar (1919), Prince Philip added insult to injury by disputing “that 2,000 Indians had been killed,” since “Britain asserts that 379 protesters died in the massacre.”⁴⁶ Pia Krishnankutty suggests the royal visit caused trouble for the UK government and “friction” between the queen and Tony Blair, because “allegations of a ‘hidden agenda’” came at “a sensitive time” for the prime minister, about a week before he was to meet his Indian counterpart, Gurjal, at the Commonwealth summit in Edinburgh.⁴⁷ “With the situation deteriorating,” Dan Balz reported at the time, “Prime Minister Tony Blair ordered his cabinet to undertake a full-scale damage-control mission designed to highlight the successes of the queen's visit”; the government dismissed the account of the blunders as without “foundation.”⁴⁸

Just weeks later, at a “People's Banquet” with Prince Philip, the prime minister, and guests from “all walks of life,” the queen delivered her Golden Wedding anniversary speech.⁴⁹ Essential to the queen's diplomatic efforts here is the 1990s cavalcade of humbling events, especially the recent “revolution” and “damage control.” The allusion to *Paradise*

⁴⁵ Hardman, *Our Queen*, 106, 26.

⁴⁶ Dan Balz, “A Royal Trip—And Stumble, and Gaffe...,” *The Washington Post*, 18 October 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1997/10/18/a-royal-trip-and-stumble-and-gaffe/ca302552-8e70-4514-8619-056f415fb6c1/>.

⁴⁷ Pia Krishnankutty, “A Look Back at Queen Elizabeth's 1997 Visit to India, Pakistan, and the Royal ‘Scandals’ She Navigated,” *The Print*, 9 September 2022, <https://theprint.in/world/a-look-back-at-queen-elizabeths-1997-visit-to-india-pakistan-the-royal-scandals-she-navigated/1122333/>.

⁴⁸ Balz, “A Royal Trip— And Stumble, And Gaffe...”

⁴⁹ Clare Garner, “Royal Anniversary Celebrated with ‘People's Banquet,’” *Independent*, 21 November 1997, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/royal-anniversary-celebrated-with-people-s-banquet-1295220.html>.

Lost—the “strength and stay” (10.921) provided by loving counsel and the humble appeal for reconciliation that Milton’s words represent—is consequently echoed throughout the speech. In fact, the queen’s allusion also encompasses what, for the poet, is the inseparable nature of loving and learning.

As Karen Edwards observes, the “power” that leads to reconciliation between Milton’s Adam and Eve and, eventually, God, “is the couple’s love for each other, damaged though it is.” Despite Adam’s rejection of Eve, as we saw, she “attests her love for him: ‘Forsake me not thus, Adam, witness heaven / What love sincere, and reverence in my heart / I bear thee’ (10.914–16).” Adam’s own love for Eve is stirred to reconciliation: “Let us no more contend ... but strive / In offices of love, how we may light’n / Each other’s burden in our share of woe” (10.958–61). It is only after the scene alluded to by Queen Elizabeth that “Adam and Eve think to ask God’s forgiveness.” As Edwards puts it, “their love for each other leads to their first step in learning how to be in a world that is new to them.” The message, we will see below, is not lost on the queen. She acknowledges, in the Golden Wedding speech, that, as with Milton’s Adam and Eve, “mistaking plays a crucial role” in learning and “providing strength” for future experiences.⁵⁰

Thus, the queen’s speech begins by acknowledging “a very different Britain” to the one she knew on her wedding day and explicitly praises Tony Blair: “The economy in your charge, and which you inherited, is soundly based and growing.” The queen highlights how “mass-media culture” has allowed us “to learn more about our fellow human beings than, in 1947, we would have thought possible,” and this includes, of course, the lives of the royal family and the impact of Princess Diana. But “to learn more” than one could imagine through the media also encompasses the queen’s own learning; the evolution of her role as queen. “Think what we would have missed,” she continues, “if we had never ... surfed the Net (or, to be honest, listened to other people talking about surfing the Net).”⁵¹ Subtly, with light-hearted humility, the queen reveals gaps in her learning.

Indeed, emphasis on the *scope* of her reign—her first prime minister, Winston Churchill, “had charged with the cavalry at Omdurman [1898]” and “You, Prime Minister, were born in the year of my Coronation [1952]”—underscores the sense of 1997’s “different Britain.” To her prime ministers, the queen says, “Your advice to me has been invaluable ... I have listened carefully to it all. I say, most sincerely, that I could not have done my job

⁵⁰ Karen Edwards, “Learning and Loving in *Paradise Lost*,” *Milton Studies* 62, no. 2 (2020): 239–251, 244, 245, 248.

⁵¹ Queen Elizabeth II, “A Speech by the Queen on her Golden Wedding Anniversary.”

without it.”⁵² As head of state, the queen traditionally has the right to be consulted, to encourage, and to warn, principles that were central to Elizabeth's preparation for her role, but here the *reverse* is emphasised.⁵³ Plausibly with recent events in mind and their bearing on her new role as head of the nation, again the queen places herself in a position of humility. Indeed, later in the speech she notes how “it often falls to the Prime Minister, and Government of the day, to be the bearer of the messages sent from people to Sovereign,” and she thanks Blair for communicating those “without fear or favour,” a clear nod to the Diana crisis.

Queen Elizabeth also wishes Blair and his wife their own Golden Wedding anniversary, speaking “as one working couple to another.” The uncharacteristic social levelling implied humanises Elizabeth and Philip and diplomatically aligns the institutions the couples represent. “Despite the huge constitutional difference between a hereditary monarchy and elected government,” says the queen, “in reality the gulf is not so wide. They are complementary institutions, each with its own role to play.”⁵⁴ On the anniversary of the queen's wedding to Prince Philip, she speaks of the institutions of monarchy and government as “complementary,” as though they, too, exist in a mutual relationship like Adam and Eve's. By implication, the relationship of monarchy and government requires the same humility in reconciliation; it parallels the private—the reason for the gathering.

The institutions of power that underpin the queen's relationship with Tony Blair, she acknowledges, exist “only with the support and consent of the people. That consent, or the lack of it, is expressed for you, Prime Minister, through the ballot box ... at least the message is a clear one for all to read.”⁵⁵ Indeed, in May 1997, it was categorical. Labour's landslide victory gave the Conservatives their worst election defeat since 1906, adding significant clout to Labour's advice to the queen on public sentiment.⁵⁶ The stakes after Diana's death are therefore recognised by Elizabeth's emphasis on the “consent of the people.” More strongly hinting at recent events, she continues: “For us, a Royal Family, however, the message is often harder to read, obscured as it can be by deference, rhetoric or the conflicting currents of public opinion. But read it we must. I have done my best,” she says, “with Prince Philip's constant love and help, to interpret it correctly ... And we shall,

⁵² Queen Elizabeth II, “A Speech by the Queen on her Golden Wedding Anniversary.”

⁵³ Hardman, *Our Queen*, 15.

⁵⁴ Queen Elizabeth II, “A Speech by the Queen on her Golden Wedding Anniversary.”

⁵⁵ Queen Elizabeth II, “A Speech by the Queen on her Golden Wedding Anniversary.”

⁵⁶ “1 May 1997: The Results,” *BBC Politics* 97, 1997,

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/background/pastelec/ge97.shtml>.

as a family, try together to do so in the future.” Implicit is the idea of missing the mark; of trying, doing one’s “best,” but not always succeeding. Like Milton’s Eve in Elizabeth’s allusion, the queen humbly accepts that she, too, may misinterpret the consequences of her actions.

In the prayer of “humble and hearty thanks” that Queen Elizabeth offers before closing, moreover, her air of Miltonic humility is hammered home.⁵⁷ The original prayer appeals to “Almighty God,” and asserts that “we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving kindness to us.”⁵⁸ But the queen innovates this prayer, addressing it “to all those in Britain and around the world who have welcomed us and sustained us and our family, in the good times and the bad.” By Elizabeth’s reworking, the royal family are “unworthy servants,” not of God, but the people. That the people have “given us strength, most recently during the sad days after the tragedy of Diana’s death” is the closest Queen Elizabeth comes to acknowledging the criticism she faced: “We are deeply grateful to you, each and every one.” If the people give the queen and Prince Philip “strength,” they, too, are encompassed in the symbolism of the royal wedding anniversary; the fact that, Prince Philip “has, quite simply, been my strength and stay all these years.”⁵⁹ More than a compliment to Philip, however, the queen’s carefully chosen words, from book 10 of *Paradise Lost*, point to the couple’s own “vain contést[s]” (9.1189): the humiliation of lowering the Union Jack and capitulating to other media and government demands after Diana’s death. In the queen’s Golden Wedding anniversary speech, her personal relationship becomes the anchor that tethers her other relationships, each providing strength, each working on complementary principles, and each, in this moment, soliciting from the queen the reconciliatory humility of Milton’s Eve.

In fact, there is an irony in the queen’s acknowledgement of Prince Philip’s speech the previous day (“Today the roles are reversed”), because in Philip’s anniversary speech, he, too, alludes to the relationship of Milton’s Adam and Eve.⁶⁰ “It’s been a challenge for us,” Philip reflects in his speech, “but by trial and experience, I believe that we have achieved a sensible division of labour.”⁶¹ These concepts are quintessentially Miltonic: they cluster around the Fall (or disobedience) of humankind in *Paradise Lost*, which is

⁵⁷ Queen Elizabeth II, “A Speech by the Queen on her Golden Wedding Anniversary.”

⁵⁸ “A General Thanksgiving,” *The Church of England*, 2024, <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/prayers-and-thanksgivings>.

⁵⁹ Queen Elizabeth II, “A Speech by the Queen on her Golden Wedding Anniversary.”

⁶⁰ Queen Elizabeth II, “A Speech by the Queen on her Golden Wedding Anniversary.”

⁶¹ “Speech by the Duke of Edinburgh,” *BBC News*, 19 November 1997, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/33020.stm>.

precipitated by “division of labour.” In book 9, Milton’s Adam and Eve struggle to cope with the prolific and “wanton growth” (9.211) of the garden, so Eve comes up with an idea:

Let us divide our labours, thou where choice
Leads thee, or where most needs, whether to wind
The woodbine round this arbour, or direct
The clasping ivy where to climb, while I
In yonder spring of roses intermixed
With myrtle, find what to redress till noon (9.214–219).

The problem is: the pair have been warned of an “attempt ... intended by our Foe” (9.295), so Adam is uneasy about separating from Eve. He suggests she would be better off by his side: “thy trial choose / With me” (9.316–317), but Eve disagrees.

“Frail is our happiness” (9.340) if we have not been created to withstand such an attempt, she reasons; Adam replies, “Trial will come unsought. / ... But if thou think, trial unsought may find / Us both securer than thus warned thou seem’st, / Go; for thy stay, not free, absents thee more” (9.366–372). He would not force Eve to stay against her will. By her interpretation of Adam’s words, Eve is emboldened:

With thy permission, then, and thus forewarned
Chiefly by what thy own last reasoning words
Touched only, that our trial, when least sought,
May find us both perhaps far less prepared,
The willinger I go, ... (9.378–382).

Seizing on Adam’s suggestion that their enemy “may find / Us both,” Eve naively does not “expect” that enemy, more shamefully, to “first the weaker seek” (9.382–383). The scene is a remarkably tender and human depiction of a relationship. We see Eve, at first, “As one who loves, and some unkindness meets” (9.271); her first cautious words in reply to Adam, with their stilted, fricative repetition, beautifully evoke the feeling of her being stung: “But that thou shouldst my firmness therefore doubt / To God or thee, because we have a foe / May tempt it, I expected not to hear” (9.279–281). The “trial” is for their relationship, not just from their adversary.

This is why Adam ultimately chooses to share with Eve in the forbidden fruit. Eve finds, after eating it, “I grow mature / In knowledge” (9.803–804), and concludes: “Experience, next to thee I owe, / Best guide; not following thee, I had remained / In

ignorance, thou open'st wisdom's way" (9.807–809). Prince Philip is alluding precisely to this kind of trial and experience: to disagreement, to making mistakes, and to learning together. Thus, Adam concludes: "Our state cannot be severed, we are one, / One flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself" (9.958–959). And Eve replies: "O glorious trial of exceeding Love" (9.961); the situation becomes "This happy trial of thy love, which else / So eminently never had been known" (9.975–976).

If I thought death was something menacing, Eve says, "I would sustain alone the worst, and not persuade thee, rather die / Deserted" (9.977–980), but she explains, "I feel / Far otherwise th' event, not death, but life / Augmented ... On my experience, Adam, freely taste" (9.983–988). Adam's partaking of the forbidden fruit is the "completing of the mortal sin / Original" (9.1003–1004), and only then does the couple's experience change. "As with new wine intoxicated," for the first time the pair feel "Carnal desire inflaming," then "Shame" at their nakedness (9.1013, 9.1058). For the first time, they begin to argue. "I warned thee, I admonished thee," says Adam, "But confidence then bore thee on, ..." (9.1171, 9.1175). Milton writes: "Thus they in mutual accusation spent / The fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning, / And of their vain contest appeared no end" (9.1187–1189). But Milton's Eve does come to "self-condemn," in the reconciliation scene alluded to by Queen Elizabeth.

Like the queen's "strength and stay," Prince Philip's Miltonic suggestion that, "by trial and experience," the couple have "achieved a sensible division of labour" also acknowledges the mistakes and learning that has developed in their relationship. Given that Philip is "renowned for writing his own material" and for assisting the queen with hers, the allusions to *Paradise Lost* we see in *both* Golden Wedding speeches likely are the couple's own.⁶² Milton's epic is saturated with theological ideas, moreover, and Prince Philip was deeply interested in theology; he established St George's House at Windsor Castle as a place for individuals "in positions of influence and responsibility" to test out religious ideas and doubts. The house provides training courses for new ministers and Christian leaders, to enable "a realistic relationship of their ministry to the modern world."⁶³ In the published correspondence between Prince Philip and Bishop Michael Mann, Dean of Windsor, the idea that theologians need to "go on learning humility" recurs.⁶⁴

⁶² Ingrid Seward, *Prince Philip Revealed*, 316.

⁶³ Launcelot Fleming, "Introduction," in *A Windsor Correspondence Between HRH The Duke of Edinburgh and The Rt Rev Michael Mann, Dean of Windsor* (Salisbury: Michael Russell, 1984), 9.

⁶⁴ Fleming, "Introduction," see 32, 37, 42.

Indeed, evidence for the queen's Miltonic diplomacy further derives from a speech on "Satisfaction and Contentment," given by Philip at Queen's University, Ontario, on 19 May 1980. The latter, in fact, is a forerunner to the techniques we see in the Golden Wedding speeches, since, in a published introduction, the duke explains in his own words how he took inspiration from a great work of literature and found parallels with it in modern life.

I suppose I was merely expanding on Shakespeare's comment when he made Caesar say:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus; and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs, and peep about
To find ourselves dishonourable graves.
Men at some time are masters of their fates;
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves ...

The Commonwealth Study Conferences, Philip continues, are designed "to allow the decision-makers of tomorrow to take their noses off the grindstone and to stand back long enough to get a general view of human life" in society.⁶⁵ Taking the speech's theme from a great British writer like Shakespeare makes it all the plausible that Prince Philip and Queen Elizabeth had Milton's *Paradise Lost* in mind when reflecting, in the diplomatic context of 1997, upon fifty years of marriage.

At the time of the queen's Golden Wedding speech then, as Ingrid Seward puts it, "to many, it had appeared as though the new prime minister, Tony Blair, had judged the mood of the nation far more accurately." This is why the Golden Wedding speech appeared to be "a frank acknowledgement" that the queen had heard, accepted, and learned from the criticisms of that year.⁶⁶ What is striking about Queen Elizabeth's diplomacy there, however, is its literary inspiration, its *Miltonic* quality. As the screen writer Peter Morgan observes, for the royal family, "ultimately, it's in the tiny detail that the big statements are made."⁶⁷ The queen's allusion to Milton, by "strength and stay," signals the poet's impact on diplomacy in the Golden Wedding speech and the significance, in November 1997, of Eve's humility in *Paradise Lost*. As a result, the words of John Milton, renowned literary

⁶⁵ H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh, *A Question of Balance* (Salisbury: Michael Russell, 1982), 137.

⁶⁶ Seward, *The Queen's Speech*, 163, 167.

⁶⁷ Trevor Johnston, "DRAMA QUEEN," *Sight and Sound* (2016): 46–48, 48.

genius—and *republican*—invisibly, unwittingly for the queen's most vocal audiences, helped recast and rehabilitate the monarchy, and are synonymous with Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip.

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