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Angels of Punishment and the Sword of God: Symbols of Justice or Tyranny?

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He drove out the man; and at the east of the Garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.
(Genesis 3.24)

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
(Matthew 10.34)

A man and a woman, wretched and weeping, stumble out onto the dusty plain stretching interminably beyond the endless wall. The Gates of Paradise slam shut behind them with a booming finality that echoes across the arid plateau. They turn to take a last forlorn look at the Garden of Eden and watch as the implacable figures of the war-like Cherubim, brandishing huge flaming swords, stride forward to guard Paradise from humanity.

The expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden is one of the most striking images in the Bible. The depiction of angels armed with flaming swords overseeing their banishment is disturbingly ambiguous. On the one hand angels are God's enforcers, representatives of heavenly justice. The sword is literally blazing with divine glory. On the other hand, there is something deeply uncomfortable about the idea of an angel, traditionally an icon of winged purity and benevolent virtue, wielding a great sword wreathed in flames. These are not guardian angels but guards.

It is the inherent ambiguity of the imagery in Genesis 3.24 and Matthew 10.34 that provides the focus of this article, addressing the theme of Sacred and Sacrilegious by investigating how these biblical passages were used to express negative apprehensions of God and Christianity. The poets Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Thomas Love Peacock, along with the artist J.M.W. Turner, take the sacred images of the Sword of

God and the avenging angel, literal representations of the Glory of God, and reinterpret them in a sacrilegious manner. This group of men, loosely linked by the bonds of friendship and artistic admiration, question the validity of divine retribution and challenge the notion that such a vengeful deity is truly omnibenevolent. I hesitate to say they formed a school or sect, wishing to avoid following in Robert Southey's libellous footsteps.¹ However they can be linked together by their use of these specific scriptural passages in poetry and paint to challenge the supposed justice behind the punitive violence of the Old Testament God and question the loving tolerance of the New Testament Christ. They perceive passages such as Genesis 3.24 and Matthew 10.34 as proof that the biblical God is a bloodthirsty dictator who uses angelic mercenaries to threaten and oppress mankind. The flaming sword becomes a tangible metaphor for the infernal fires that await all humanity, unjustly damned by God because Eve ate a piece of fruit.

Despite the frequent allusions to Genesis 3.24 and Matthew 10.34 in literary works, particularly those of the Romantics who were attracted to the subversive possibilities of such ambiguous imagery, there has been no critical examination of the literary manifestations of these biblical verses. This article seeks to rectify this oversight.

Throughout the Bible, the 'sword' is the sanctified symbol of God's justice signifying its two separate aspects: judgement and punishment. The biblical concordances show that the 'sword' can be a literal weapon, as in Genesis 3.24. Alternatively, it becomes a metaphorical tool of divine retribution, "the judgement which God inflicts upon sinners" (Lev 26.2), which can include warfare, pestilence and natural disasters. After all, divine retribution against the wicked is a central precept of all forms of Christianity. "For the LORD will execute judgement by fire and His sword on all flesh" warns Isaiah, preceded by an unsettling description of how "the Sword of the LORD is filled with blood" on "the Day of the LORD's vengeance" (Isa 66.16, 34.1-8). Arguably human mortality itself

is an example of this metaphorical 'sword' of judgement, as Death only comes to the world after Adam and Eve sin, a celestial punishment visited on their children's children.

According to the Scriptures, the 'sword' can also be a person, human or angelic, whom God uses as a rod to chastise sinners. The most notable biblical example of this is the Assyrian king, Nebuchadnezzar, whom God used to punish Israel (Isa 10.5-16), while the eponymous anti-hero of Christopher Marlowe's play *Tamburlaine*, the self-confessed "scourge of God", provides the most renowned literary manifestation of this concept. There are also celestial scourges, many of whom are discussed in the *Dictionary of Angels* under the heading of "Angels of Punishment". Examples include Lahatiel, "the flaming one of God" and Pusiell or Puriel, "the fire of God". The Archangel leading these Angels of Punishment is referred to as the "Sword of Swords". This concept of angels as heavenly swords can be seen throughout the *Dictionary*. Many of the Seraphim are "appointed by God to the sword" while others are specifically described as "Angels of divine justice" and "Angels of vengeance" (Davidson 350-358). The figure of the avenging angel can be conflated with the image of the Sword of God, two facets of the same construct, the actual Sword of God and an angel as the Sword of God, tools of divine judgement directed against sinners.

Both the literal Sword of God's vengeance and the metaphorical angelic swords have a long tradition of association with flames. What is the significance of these fires? There are various types of fire alluded to in the Bible. Two of the most important are the fires of God's judgement and the flame of God's glory. These are combined in the image of the blazing Sword of God. The concept of God's presence as a dazzling fire occurs frequently in Scripture, one of the most iconic images is the burning bush Moses converses with. Often termed *Kābōd*, this flame represents "the heavenly light [...] in which glory is clothed" (Ex 24.16, Eze 38.18, Isa 6.3). The fires cloaking the sword in Genesis 3.24 arguably signify God's actual presence at the Expulsion, ensuring His judgement is carried out. There are also implicit purgatorial connotations as although the flames of

God's earthly manifestation are peculiarly sacred, divine fires also have negative associations relating to punishment and spiritual destruction. Heavenly *Kābōd* and hellfire are two sides of the same coin, divine glory and divine retribution. The flaming sword not only oversees the expulsion of Adam and Eve but also the damnation of all humanity, seminally present in this post-lapsarian couple and tainted by their guilt, doomed to an eternity in the fires of hell.

It is not only the Old Testament God, traditionally perceived as the more bloodthirsty member of the Trinity, who is linked with images of fiery vengeance and devastation. Christ's association with fire and violence in the New Testament strikes a discordant note amidst the more traditional descriptions of His pacifism. In Luke 12.49 Christ announces that "I have come to cast fire upon the Earth; and how I wish it were already kindled". Although the fire in question is that of God's glory, this is a striking declaration from an individual who abjures us to love our neighbours and forgive errant sinners. His mission statement in Matthew 10.34 is equally incongruous:

Do not think that I came to bring peace on Earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be the members of his household.

Arguably, the 'sword' Christ brings is the Sword of God, the emblem of glorious divinity and heavenly justice. Although, unlike His divine Father, Christ does not work through angelic minions nor cloaks his appearance in fire, the implicit association of sword and fire with divinely-sent conflict is similar.

The Angel, the Sword of God, and divine fire unite in Genesis 3.24 to form a symbol of sacred justice, a motif representing divine Glory and omnipotence emphasising God's rule over the world and His judgement upon the wicked. However, even the most pious Christians seem to be troubled by this concept of a vengeful God meting out punitive justice, no matter how deserved.

One of the most expressive examples of this can be found in the renowned recreation of the Genesis narrative of the Creation and Fall of Man, Milton's *Paradise Lost*. This example is particularly relevant as the work was greatly admired by Byron, Shelley, and Peacock who all perceived Milton's epic as humanising a rebellious Satan, struggling to escape the oppressive yoke of a tyrannical dictator. These poets perceived Milton as one of them, promoting Satan and questioning God's omnibenevolent nature. Although there are contrasts between the 'Satanic School' poets' deliberately subversive representations of Genesis 3.24 and the unintentional atmosphere of dubious uncertainty pervading Milton's depiction of the Expulsion, the pronounced similarities testify to the fact that even the most Orthodox Christians were uncomfortable with a bloodthirsty deity. Milton was a devout Protestant. He stated that the purpose of his vast epic was to "justify the ways of God to men" (I.26). Yet the very fact that such a justification was apparently necessary implies that God's judgements are not self-evidently Just—not to men. There must be doubts concerning a potentially unjust God in order to necessitate Milton's justification.

One reason for these doubts comes across, perhaps inadvertently, in Milton's depiction of Genesis 3.24. Milton describes how "all in bright array / The Cherubim descended" to Eden, led by an "Archangel", to take up their stations along the walls (I.626-628).

Meanwhile:

The brandisht Sword of God before them blaz'd

Fierce as a comet.

(I.633-634)

The light imagery of "bright", "blaz'd", and "comet" implicitly link the Cherubim and the sword together, placing them under the auspices of God, blessed by divine fire.

Meanwhile, another "hastening Angel caught / Our lingring Parents" and led them out of the "Eastern Gate" and down to "the subjected Plaine", parched by the "torrid heat" of God's fiery sword (I.637-640). The destruction of this formerly "temperate Clime",

crisped into a barren “Libyan” desert by the “Fierce” fires of the “Sword of God” creates a vivid impression of the destructive forces of heavenly vengeance (I.635-636). “Fierce” contains an implication of malignant sentience directing the comet-like blasting heat—a possible further intimation of divine presence. As with the biblical text, there are a number of threatening undertones in this passage which infuse the scene with an uncomfortable menace.

Adam and Eve turn to look back at their erstwhile home, the glorious Paradise they will never enter again, and see:

Wav'd over by that flaming Brand, the Gate
With dreadful Faces throng'd and fierie Armes.
(I.643-644)

Despite the Orthodox nature of this religious poem, which in no way disputes God's omnibenevolent justice, the inherent ambiguity of the biblical image still comes through. Although Milton displays the awe-inspiring might of God's angelic armies, it is difficult to tell whether the “dreadful Faces” with their “fierie Armes” are heavenly angels, impassively doing their duty, or Hellish demons leering down at Adam and Eve over the walls. The “flaming Brand” refers to the Glory of God. However, the sword's flickering orange glow is reminiscent of infernal fires, particularly when combined with the almost demonic aspects of the Angels. Here again is the implicit link between heavenly glory and the punitive fires of hell. Even in this extremely Orthodox work one can discern an underlying discomfort concerning the righteousness of God's justice that seems unavoidable even for a pious Protestant such as Milton.

Milton believed his God was Just but many of his eighteenth- and nineteenth-century admirers did not. Despite being raised in similar Protestant precepts to Milton, Byron, Shelley and Peacock took the biblical motif of the flaming sword of divine judgement and gave it a diametrically opposed interpretation. Unlike Milton who sought to justify the ways of God to men, these men aimed to prove the injustice of God's ways. A

number of their works imply that although God might have the power to smite the wicked, such vengeful judgement does not equate with justice. The sacred images of divine justice and glory are inverted, used instead as evidence of tyrannical oppression, arrogant self-adulation and bloodlust. God and Christ are cast as diabolic figures wreaking unjustified destruction upon the world.

Lord Byron evinced a particularly pronounced revulsion for this image of the Sword of God, wreathed in divine flames and drenched in human blood (Paterson-Morgan, 2011). In *Cain: A Mystery*, Byron alludes to Genesis 3.24, employing the underlying subversion of the image of the “fiery swords which fence” the “cherub-guarded walls of Eden” to denounce the iniquity of the Old Testament Jehovah’s actions (II.ii.139-140). In the drama, the characters of Lucifer and Cain argue that such a blood thirsty Being, who “makes but to destroy” and created humanity so that “he may torture” them must be demonic (I.i.486, 144). The drama seeks to argue that Jehovah’s “evil is not good” (I.i.140). His use of “fiery sworded cherubim” to bar mankind from Paradise is of a piece with his demands for bloody sacrifices and delight in the scent of scorched flesh. Such depravity is only to be expected of the “Destroyer” (I.i.266).

In the gloom of the night, Adam’s family watch the angels “wave their fiery swords / before the gates” of Eden, weapons glimmering balefully across the darkened plain (I.i.84-85). Eve alludes to the punitive role of these angels when she curses Cain for his murder of Abel and begs that “the swords / And wings of fiery cherubim pursue him / By day and night” (III.i.325-327). Earlier, Cain expresses his bitter resentment of the “cherubim-defended battlements”, perceiving them as evidence of God’s injustice and the unfairness of his own fate, punished for sins not his own and barred from his “just inheritance” by the “fire-arm’d angels” patrolling the walls of Eden (I.i.84-91).

Byron had extensive knowledge of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament (BLJ IV.60; V.238; VIII.238). His detailed understanding of biblical imagery would have allowed

him to realise the significance of the flaming swords to which he so frequently refers in *Cain*. Given his pronounced distaste for the cruelties of the Old Testament God, it is possible to interpret the flames wreathing swords and angels alike as an indication of Jehovah's constant presence, a malevolent malice hovering above the walls of Eden gloating over the effects of His punitive retribution on humanity. Certainly this interpretation is consistent with the character of Byron's "Indissoluble Tyrant" as described by Cain and Lucifer (I.i.153).

This malevolent figure appears again in Byron's second biblical play, *Heaven and Earth*, in which he retells the Enochic tale of forbidden angelic love for mortal women and details the all-encompassing destruction of the Genesis Deluge. The apparent cruelty of this act is reminiscent of Jehovah's unforgiving nature and bloodlust in *Cain*. The similarities between these two representations of the Old Testament deity are heightened by the angel Raphael's mention of the fact that:

The flaming sword,
Which chased the first-born out of Paradise
Still flashes in the angelic hands.
(I.iii.785-787)

This reference to the first Fall, described in the previous drama, prepares the reader for the second which is about to take place and has also been decreed by an incomprehensibly destructive creator-tyrant. Moreover, once again the language of this passage creates the impression that the "flaming sword" is an actively sentient being, or at least directed by a malignant awareness, deliberately hounding Adam and Eve from Eden.

The destructiveness of divine light is a recurrent theme in Byron's poetry, possibly reflecting his pervasive doubt concerning God's omnibenevolent justice. In 'On Jordan's Banks', Byron describes how no one can "see" God's "glory shrouded in its garb of fire" and "not expire", shrivelled by His destructive magnificence (St 2). In *Sardanapalus*, the

sun is worshipped as the physical manifestation of Ba'al in a similar fashion to the biblical *Kābōd*. The sun is the “burning oracle of all that live” and the “symbol of Him who bestows” life (II.i.14-17). The slave girl, Myrrha, describes the blinding effects of looking at the sun, the divinity incarnate, which breaks:

Through all the clouds, and fills my eyes with light
That shuts the world out. I can look no more.
(V.i.57-58)

Although obviously retinal burns occur when staring into bright light, the religious overtones of the sun-as-Ba'al lend a secondary meaning to the text. The divine light is all-encompassing, blinding Myrrha and eventually driving her away with its force.

Throughout *Cain*, Byron uses his understanding of the traditional symbolism of God's destructive “glory shrouded in its garb of fire” to challenge the concept of Divine omnibenevolence. The eponymous protagonist gradually comes to the conclusion that God's light does not stem from goodness, simply from power. There is no justice, merely despotic force.

Aside from the inevitable infernal connotations, Byron emphasises how fire itself is not pure; it is smoky and destructive, causing blackened charring – an odd symbol for benevolent divinity but an apt one for a vicious, venal deity. Cain's God takes his “high pleasure” in the “fumes of scorching flesh and smoking blood” (III.i.299-300). The language forcefully evokes Cain's disgust and there is a pronounced contrast between the noble celestial connotations of “high” and the vile depravity of Jehovah's amusements. Cain is actively repulsed by Jehovah's perverted pleasures, denouncing him as:

Yon vile flatt'rer of the clouds
The smoky harbinger of thy dull prayers.
(III.i.290-291)

The combination of “smoky” with “clouds” and “dull” stresses the fact that Jehovah is not associated with the purity and glory of *Kābōd*, but with dirt, corruption and death. Byron

highlights the disparity between Abel's pious mouthings to the "sole lord of light, / Of good and glory and eternity" (III.i.231-232) and the bloodstained, smoke-blackened reality denounced by Cain. The flaming sword-wielding cherubim become the perfect backdrop to Byron's depictions of a vicious tyrant who demands bloody sacrifices and charred flesh, a concept utterly at odds with the Orthodox descriptions of a paternal Being meting out loving justice for our own good.

Byron was not alone in changing the symbolism of the fiery sword from a sign of divinity and righteous retribution into an emblem of malicious injustice. A number of his friends and literary contemporaries were equally fascinated by the subversive possibilities of this image of an avenging angel wielding a flaming sword. One such was Byron's friend Shelley, "crazy against religion", who shared similar ideas and perceptions of the alleged justice of the Old Testament God (BLJ VII.174). Shelley's fragment, 'The Wandering Jew's Soliloquy', denounces God as the "Tyrant of Earth" who directs the "magazines" of His "fierce hate" against humanity (ll.11, 13). The term "magazines" conjures an image of God battering the world with a vast barrage of weapons, ranging from "poison" and "pestilence" to the "Earthquake demon" (ll.14, 16, 21). The poem then lists the "angel's two-edged sword of fire" as part of God's arsenal of "fierce hate" (l.23). Shelley describes how this fiery sword "urged / Our primal parents from their bower of bliss" (ll.23-24). Like Byron's Cain, Shelley's Wandering Jew questions the basis of God's punishment of Adam and Eve "for errors not their own", their actions "foredoomed" by the divine decrees of an "omniscient" God (ll.25, 26). Like Byron, Shelley has seized upon the disturbing undertones of Genesis 3.24, using the sacred text to challenge the validity of God's justice. Both poets found Christian teachings on this profoundly shocking and denounced the injustice of the Old Testament deity.

Shelley also questioned the morality of the New Testament Christ. In his notorious and ill-received *Queen Mab*, Shelley again centres upon a scriptural passage, in this case the aforementioned Matthew 10.34. Like Byron in *Cain*, Shelley draws attention to the

inconsistency between this biblical verse and the prevailing message of the Gospels. He highlights the discordance between Christ's words and the actions these words inspired in his followers, accentuating contrast between a message of peace and acts of violence:

he taught them justice, truth, and peace,
In semblance; but he lit within their souls
The quenchless flames of zeal, and blest the sword
He brought on earth to satiate with blood
Of truth and freedom his malignant soul.
(VII.167-172)

The key word in this excerpt is "semblance". Many writers and theologians, Byron included, blame "human passions" for disfiguring the Word of God (BLJ IX.45). Shelley's use of the word "semblance" implies otherwise, as Christ only *appeared* to be preaching "justice, truth, and peace" but in actual fact encouraged hatred and violence in his adherents. Arguably, Shelley presents the Word of God as disfiguring humanity, turning men into bloodthirsty zealots. Certainly the blood-drenched history of Christianity, the central topic of *Queen Mab*, would seem to support Shelley's claim. The description of Christ as a "malignant soul" craving blood is strikingly similar to Byron's depiction of Jehovah, and wholly at odds with traditional Christian depictions of Christ as the self-sacrificing advocate of peace and humility.

Shelley's vehement denunciation of the "massacres and miseries" which had been "sanctioned" in the name of the "horrible Godhead" is characteristic of a number of poets during this period (VII.167, 170). Byron also condemns the "villainous sects" who "tear each other to pieces" for "love of the lord and hatred of each other" although, unlike Shelley, he continues to admire the "Innocent" Christ (BLJ II.89). Many of Shelley's other works display similarly fierce castigations of the Christian God and organised Religion. Interestingly, however, Joukovsky attributes the "uncharacteristically harsh" tone of this particular passage to Thomas Love Peacock's influence on the young Shelley, an

influence based on the friendship that continued throughout Shelley's sadly foreshortened life ('Anapests' 372).

Peacock's relationship with Shelley, combined with his well-publicised distaste for Christianity, invites a discussion of his own appropriation of sacred texts to challenge the very sanctity of God which are markedly similar to those methods used by Shelley and Byron. Thomas Love Peacock was a notorious opponent of Christianity, perceiving modern religion as having created a slaving "three-headed Cerberus" baying for the blood of humanity. In a similar fashion to Byron, Peacock muses on the "incomprehensible" nature of the God who produced mankind "only to inflict and suffer misery", actively delighting in the "frightful spectacle of [...] those abject sufferings of the multitude" (Joukovsky *Letters* I.72). Peacock provides a particularly useful comparison, as he was not only a close friend of Shelley's but was also co-executor of Shelley's will with Byron, a man he never met. Although he deplored the morals and frequently worried over the mental state of Byron-the-man in discussions with Shelley, Peacock's letters nevertheless reveal a pronounced admiration for Byron-the-poet, in particular works such as *Cain*, *Don Juan* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Canto IV, which number amongst Byron's most explicit denunciations of the corruptions of Christianity and the cruelty of its God (Joukovsky *Letters* I.132, 152, 186).

Peacock wrote a Greek anapaest based on Matthew 10.34 which was so shocking in its vituperative condemnation of the violence following Christ's visit to earth that it was subsequently destroyed by Peacock's pious granddaughter Edith Nicholls. Like Shelley, Peacock uses sacred Scriptures to challenge the very sanctity of God. He warns those "who use [their] utmost exertions to avoid all false worship and to hate all teachers of falsehood" that their Christ is a "cursed imposter, the people destroying son of Erebus [...] a causer of death". This "false prophet" has snuck down to earth "like a THIEF", bringing with him not peace but the sword. This weapon of destruction "is defiled with blood newly shed". Peacock abjures his readers to destroy this false god, to "break [Him]

in pieces” for he is “the destroyer of the world, CHRIST” (‘Anapest’ 369-372). As with Byron and Shelley, Peacock focuses on the themes of blood, deception and destruction associated with Christ’s assertion that he brings “not peace but the sword”, using them to denounce what he perceived as a “grovelling, misanthropical, bloodthirsty superstition” (Joukovsky *Letters* I.173).

Not all works dealing with the overtones of menace in Genesis 3.24 and Matthew 10.34 actively challenge the underlying issues concerning the alleged benevolent justice of a God who directs angels to chastise mankind with a flaming sword for sins *He* decreed. Nor are reproductions of these biblical texts limited to literary representations.

A brief digression into the paintings of the arch-Romantic Turner provides an interesting adjunct to this topic. Turner’s famous statement that “the sun is God” (Bullen 39), in conjunction with the fact that Turner’s deity seems to have been “a jealous God and cruel” (Honour 96), renders his depictions of light extremely relevant to this study. Even the briefest glance at Turner’s paintings reveals his overwhelming fascination with the opaque characteristics of sunlight. However, his interest was not limited to artistic representations of natural phenomena. Turner used his understanding of the deceptive nature of light to portray it as a negative force in a number of paintings, such as *Regulus* and *Angel Standing in the Sun*.

Although there is no explicit mention of Genesis 3.24 and Matthew 10.34, nonetheless the painting of the *Angel Standing in the Sun* does serve to illustrate how pervasive these Scriptural images were amongst the Romantics and their contemporaries. In this painting, the Angel stands with an upraised sword in a threatening position surrounded by a glowing penumbra of holy light, as if in the very heart of the sun. Turner’s use of light is ominous in its misty lack of detail however, if one looks closely, in the foreground are the faint images of the biblical damned such as Cain and Judas. They are suffering in the bowels of light rather than the depths of darkness. Sunlight is an unusual medium for

divine punishment, hellfire is more typical. The fact that Turner uses light rather than darkness or hellfire arguably shows his awareness of the biblical image of the flaming sword of divine retribution. The impression of heavenly vengeance is reinforced by the passages accompanying the painting. The first is taken from the Book of Revelation 19.17-18:

And I saw an Angel standing in the sun; and he cried with a loud voice, saying to all the fowls that fly in the midst of heaven, Come and gather yourselves together unto the supper of the Great God; that ye may eat of the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men and the flesh of horses, and of them that sit on them, both free and bond, both small and great.

The second epigraph comes from Samuel Rogers' *Voyage of Columbus*, subtitled 'The Angel of Darkness':

The morning march that flashes to the sun;

The feast of vultures when the day is done.

It is interesting that one excerpt links the Angel with sunlight while the other associates him with darkness, yet the message of death is the same. The fact that the Angel is described as being "in the sun", combined with Turner's belief that "the sun is God", allows the blazing sunlight in the painting to function in a similar fashion to the flames on the Sword of God – a tangible manifestation of divine presence and power, consecrating the Angel's vengeance on the wicked. This powerful painting arguably creates a stronger impression of the threatening undertones of this intrinsically menacing image than all of the vituperative invective and cunning inversions used by Byron, Shelley and Peacock. In this case, to recourse to an overused adage, a picture really is worth a thousand words.

Although not sacrilegious in and of itself, Turner's *Angel Standing in the Sun* with its accompanying epigraphs does explain why poets such as Byron, Shelley and Peacock were able to make use of the sacred image of the angelic enforcer wielding a blazing sword to challenge the concept of divine omnibenevolent justice and, arguably, the very

Godhood of God Himself. Implicit in all Christian depictions of these images is the assumption that God's retribution is *justified*, a legitimate and acceptable response to the sins of the wicked. However, it is this conviction that God is inherently 'just', meting out judgement with probity and integrity that Byron, Shelley, and Peacock object to. They oppose the concept of God's benevolent justice and claim that He was in fact a diabolic Satan, an "infernal God" (Byron *Manfred* III.iv.63). This is the ultimate sacrilege. In the works discussed here, the images of divine fire, the Sword of God and guarding angels might still be indicative of divinity but they have ceased to reflect the innate goodness and inherent justice that Christians perceived as a necessary aspect of Godhood: a sacred image turned to a sacrilegious purpose.

¹ Southey's notorious 'Satanic School' tirade condemned Byron and his contemporaries for creating a 'system of opinions' likened to a 'moral virus', a virulent plague spreading blasphemy and hatred of God, Preface to *Vision of Judgement*, (Rutherford 179-181).

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