

JOHN MILTON

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*Paradise Lost and  
Paradise Regained*

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With a New Introduction by  
*Susanne Woods*

Edited and with Notes by  
*Christopher Ricks*

*The Signet Classics Poetry Series*

GENERAL EDITOR: JOHN HOLLANDER



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# Introduction

In 1667 a blind man published a long poem that became an immediate sensation. *Paradise Lost*, followed seven years later by the shorter, more subdued *Paradise Regained*, has thrilled, challenged, and sometimes dismayed readers from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century. Centered around the biblical story of the fall of Adam and Eve, *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem that ranges from heaven to hell and offers an image of the universe and the human condition that reflects the turmoil of Milton's own time, and is still subject to heated debate. *Paradise Regained*, the story of Satan's threefold temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, complements the longer poem.

When Milton was born on December 9, 1608, Shakespeare was still writing plays for his all-male theatrical company, King James I was arguing with Parliament about taxation and religion, and Ben Jonson was producing extravagant court entertainments, called masques, for the separate courts of James and Queen Anne. When Milton died in 1674, the Restoration was in full swing. Charles II numbered one of the first actresses, Nell Gwynn, among his many mistresses, while the first successful woman writer, Aphra Behn, was publishing novels and having her plays produced on the London stage. John Dryden was perfecting the rhyming couplets and civilized satire that were to characterize poetry for the next one hundred years.

From the distance of three hundred years, little on the surface might seem to have changed except the somewhat greater visibility of women in the arts. Yet change characterized seventeenth-century England, with deep and continuing effects. In the sixty-six years of Milton's lifetime the English world, in a phrase from the time, "turned upside down"—a king executed, theaters closed for a generation, religious controversy rampant, Puritans leaving for North America, experimental science born. Milton lived,

worked, argued, and wrote in the heat of controversies that swirled around him.

### **Milton's Life**

John Milton Senior, a successful businessman and a musician, had migrated to London in large part because his Protestant views differed from his Catholic yeoman father's.<sup>o</sup> Young John Milton was the second of three surviving children and the first son. Milton's father recognized and encouraged his son's talents as an intellectual and poet, assuring him an excellent education destined to prepare him for a career in the church. The Scotch Presbyterian Thomas Young, Milton's tutor from the ages of about nine to twelve, introduced young John to classical learning and to radical Protestant theology. From twelve to sixteen Milton attended St. Paul's School, where the headmaster, Alexander Gil, and his son (and Milton's friend), Alexander Gil the younger, continued to nourish Milton's love of learning and encourage his development as a poet. From an early age, Milton combined what would become lifelong interests in religion, the classics, and poetry.

Milton was a student at Christ's College, Cambridge University, from ages eighteen to twenty-three. Despite the reputation of Cambridge, and Christ's, for fostering classical learning and training freethinking ministers, Milton often found the education that led to his bachelor's and master's degrees rigid and stifling. These years (1625–32) coincided with the early years of the reign of King Charles I, notable for heightening religious differences between those who favored the hierarchical rule of bishops and ceremonial worship associated with the new Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, and those who preferred a Presbyterian governance and Calvinist theology. Milton had at least one run-in with authority early in his university career, an argument with his tutor that sent him home (“rusticated” him) for a few weeks in 1626. His return to Cambridge, and to a new tutor, did not halt his developing sense of autonomy, nor his increasing belief

<sup>o</sup> Biographical information in this introduction relies on Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

in liberty of conscience over obedience to the rules of the English church. Although he proceeded to take the degrees requisite for ordination, he recognized that his unorthodox views would not allow him to serve in the church, and he focused his attention increasingly on a career as a poet. His father must have been disappointed; sometime during the decade after college Milton wrote a Latin elegy, "Ad Patrem," to thank him for his long support and to invite him to accept the younger Milton's calling to be a poet. Disappointed or not, Milton Senior continued to support his son, allowing him to live at home from ages twenty-three to twenty-nine (1632-38) and devote himself almost entirely to studies.

Milton began to publish as a poet during this time at his father's home. His commendatory couplets appeared anonymously in the second folio of Shakespeare's plays (1632), a curious debut for an unknown young poet, which probably owed something to his father's connections in the world of music and drama. In the early 1630s he wrote two masques for the Egerton family, the first, *Arcades*, a praise of the dowager countess of Derby, and the second, *A Mask*, presented in 1634 at Ludlow Castle to celebrate the Earl of Bridgewater's appointment as Lord President of Wales. This entertainment, popularly known as *Comus* after the evil enchanter who drives the plot, summarizes many of Milton's early ideas about the power of virtue, themes in stark contrast to the heroic sensuousness of the court masque as it had evolved under King Charles I and his Catholic wife, Henrietta Maria. In 1637 Milton's pastoral elegy *Lycidas*, on the death of a Cambridge friend, appeared as the last poem in a volume of poetic tributes. Its images of rising and falling, light and dark, and its concern with ideas of fame and virtue prefigure some of Milton's imagery and themes in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. In 1645 Milton gathered *Comus*, *Lycidas*, and several other works from his youth into a volume titled simply *Poems*.

Milton's vocation as a poet was reinforced during a trip to Italy in 1638-39. There he met and charmed the last remnants of the high Renaissance, the artists and intellectuals of the private academies in Florence who praised his poetry and befriended him. He also met the aged Galileo



and, in Naples, Giovanni Battista Manso, a patron of the great sixteenth-century Italian poet Torquato Tasso. News of political trouble in England kept Milton from continuing to Greece, and instead he returned home somewhat before he had planned. Poetry then took a secondary place for twenty years, as Milton engaged in the intricately interwoven political and religious controversies of the English Civil War period, gained influence in Cromwell's government, lost his sight, and with the return of the monarchy in 1660, found himself in some danger of losing his life.

The English Civil War pitted king and bishops against Parliament and the Presbyterian and Congregationalist systems of church government. There were dozens of issues that separated the two groups, from the power of taxation to the doctrine of predestination, with political and theological issues intertwined. Milton's interest was in the free exercise of an informed conscience, and he saw tyranny and superstition as twin evils that must be uprooted and replaced by republican government and free and open debate. Among his first pamphlets, *Of Reformation* (1641) and *The Reason of Church Government* (1642) argue for a church without bishops, answerable to a free people, but do not attack the idea of kingship. His most famous pamphlet, *Areopagitica* (1644), is a speech to Parliament, the new seat of power, arguing against press censorship. Milton also wrote in favor of divorce (what he called "domestic liberty") during an unhappy first marriage, later reconciled. After King Charles was executed in January 1649, Milton wrote in elegant and thoughtful Latin to the horrified intelligentsia of Europe in support of what he called tyrannicide.

During the 1650s Milton served as Latin Secretary to Oliver Cromwell, which meant he composed in Latin the formal state papers and correspondence the government needed to continue its role as a European nation. After Cromwell's death in 1658, it became increasingly clear that the English people would welcome the Stuart monarchy back from exile in France and that Charles I's son would become Charles II. As Milton's colleagues began to accommodate reality, Milton stepped up his writing, urging to the last that England embrace a special godly destiny by re-

jecting monarchy and a state church in favor of a republican form of government and congregational autonomy.

Milton was briefly imprisoned at the start of the Restoration, spent time in the country to avoid the further attention of monarchists and the plague, and completed his greatest works, *Paradise Lost* (first published in ten books in 1667) and *Paradise Regained* (published in 1671, along with the magnificent biblical drama *Samson Agonistes*). Before his death in 1674, he also completed a revised and expanded version of his collected *Poems* (1673) and the revised, twelve-book version of *Paradise Lost*. Blind and living with the failure of his political and religious causes, he nevertheless spent the final years of his life in great productivity, surrounded by friends and family (including his three "undutiful daughters" and his third evidently more dutiful wife).

### *Paradise Lost*

Milton intended to write an epic poem for the English people in the great tradition of Homer celebrating the Greeks, and Virgil the Romans. In language strongly reminiscent of *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, Milton announces his great topic ("Man's first disobedience, and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree") and invokes a "heavenly Muse" to help him tell of "things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme" (PL I, 1-2, 16). In the images of light and darkness, low and high, that pervade the work, he prays:

. . . What in me is dark  
Illumine, what is low raise and support;  
That to the heighth of this great Argument  
I may assert Eternal Providence,  
And justify the ways of God to men.  
(PL I, 22-26)

Whether the poem adequately explains "the ways of God to men" is a subject of continuing dispute, but Milton unquestionably offers an imaginative vision of great magnitude and power. In the course of the poem's twelve books we see Satan falling from heaven, rousing his rebel angels, building their city, Pandemonium, and leading a plot to destroy mankind in revenge for the loss of heaven.



We see God, the Son, and the loyal angels observe the Satanic plotting, and the Son volunteer to sacrifice himself in order to overturn what God's foreknowledge sees will be a successful subversion of mankind. We see Adam and Eve in joyous possession of Eden, and each other, and a jealous Satan whispering dangerous thoughts into Eve's ear as she dreams. We see the Archangel Raphaël come down to Eden for lunch with Adam and Eve in order to tell the story of the war in heaven, followed by Adam's own account, including his rich new world, the creation of Eve, and God's one test of obedience: that they not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

In Book IX, Milton "now must change / [his] Notes to Tragic" (PL IX, 5-6), as Satan again enters the garden, contemplates his own alienation and anger, and admits to himself: "Revenge, at first though sweet / Bitter erelong back on itself recoils" (PL IX, 171-72). He nonetheless descends into the form of a serpent to attempt that revenge against God by tempting mankind into disobedience. We see Adam and Eve separate to tend the garden alone, despite Raphaël's warnings of danger. We see Eve, cleverly manipulated by Satan, whom she believes is a talking serpent, eat the fruit and give it to Adam, who, though not deceived, eats it as well. We see their loss, repentance, God's judgment, and Satan's triumph as he creates a bridge for Sin and Death to enter the world. We see the Archangel Michael giving Adam and Eve a vision of earthly history and the tragic consequences of "Man's First Disobedience," along with the promise of redemption through the sacrifice of the Son. Finally, we see Adam's wonder, joy, frequent misunderstandings, and Michael's corrections as this panorama of the future unfolds.

The poem has epic proportions and language. It is a long narrative, ranging across vast areas of time and space. It begins, like classical epics, in *medias res*, in the middle of things, with the fall of Satan after the war in heaven. As in classical epic, the earlier part of the story is told over a meal in the middle of the poem, in this case by Raphaël as he enjoys what Eve has prepared. Raphaël

describes the war in heaven by using the physical world that humankind, locked in time, can understand,

*By lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms,  
As may express them best, but what if Earth  
Be but the shadow of Heav'n, and things therein  
Each to other like, more than on earth is thought?*  
(PL V, 573–76)

Milton's angels are sensuous creatures, who eat, make love, and at least once in heaven, fight violently. What if, indeed, the author seems to suggest, earth and heaven are more alike than we think?

Although, like Raphaël, Milton seeks to convey an enormous universe in terms human beings can understand, Milton's "high style" can be initially confusing to a modern reader. He tends to write in long, periodic sentences, with the principal verb toward the end (as in Latin, or modern German). He uses epic similes—extended comparisons that can cover vast distances of time or space. He makes frequent reference to classical or biblical stories, common to educated readers of his own time, but much less so today. Yet he almost always explains those references within the text, and once a modern reader becomes used to the movement of his blank verse lines and the somewhat unfamiliar syntax, Milton's magnificent language serves his epic vision very well.

Milton does expect us to know something of the Bible, however, and designs his rhetorical strategy with that in mind. At the beginning of *Paradise Lost* we, who have presumably read the biblical account, know more than Adam and Eve. We know, as God does, that they will not remain obedient, despite the happiness they have been given: "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat" (Genesis 3:6, King James Version). After Adam and Eve fall, we who have read the biblical stories of the New Testament know that the story is not over. The suffering and death which is the "fruit" of this original

disobedience is to be transformed by the obedience of the Son (the topic of *Paradise Regained*). At the end of *Paradise Lost*, however, after the Archangel Michael has revealed the biblical future, we know no more than Adam and Eve; their situation—to work and suffer, not without hope—has become our situation. As they leave the garden, they must make choices no longer easy, though God is still watching out for them, and their comfort is in being together, though never again perfectly:

*Some natural tears they dropp'd, but wip'd them soon;  
The World was all before them, where to choose  
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:  
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,  
Through Eden took their solitary way.*

(PL XII, 645–49)

### Critical Issues in *Paradise Lost*

Critics have generally agreed about the basic story *Paradise Lost* seeks to tell, the ambition of Milton's effort, and the magnificence of his language. Beyond that there is much disagreement, even on whether the magnificent language is a good thing. (T. S. Eliot thought not.)<sup>o</sup> Although "readers' reception of *Paradise Lost* has been, ever since its publication in 1667, largely determined by the prevailing political and religious attitudes" (Stocker, 10), certain controversies about the work recur. The central debate is over what the poem is really saying about God, mankind, and the human condition, and whether it matters to a changing cultural view of the universe. Another is the role of Satan, or its variation: if *Paradise Lost* is an epic, and epics are supposed to have central heroes, who is the hero of the poem?

Unlike the great majority of dissenting Christians with whom Milton aligned himself, Milton believed in free will and the continuing responsibility of Christians to exercise

<sup>o</sup> References to critics refer to works listed in the bibliography; for a good summary of Milton's critical history, see Margarita Stocker, *An Introduction to the Variety of Criticism: Paradise Lost* (London: Macmillan, 1988), and for many of the chief issues in current debate, see Dennis Danielson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).



their freedom by making knowledgeable choices. A key question for most readers of *Paradise Lost*, however, is whether Adam and Eve are truly free, and what their freedom says about the goodness of their Creator. In Book III, God, who is outside of time, sees everything that happens in time, including in what we could think of as the future; God therefore sees that Adam and Eve will disobey. God also insists that His foreknowledge does not cause the disobedience (PL III, 93–128). Since the Victorian period, when elite readers began less and less to believe in the picture Milton creates of heaven, hell, and what it means to be human, critics and readers have put a skeptical and sometimes horrified eye on Milton's God, judging Him evil for creating an Adam and Eve who could fall (Empson). Milton's God, however, insists that creating an Adam and Eve who must obey God would deny the foundation of their dignity, and deny the principal way in which they are made in the image of God: their ability to choose and therefore to participate in their own becoming.

The debate over Milton's God and the issue of free will spills over into the debate about the hero of *Paradise Lost*. How could a rebel such as Milton not admire the rebel angel Satan? Readers who know the outline of Milton's own history, or who are moved by Satan's powerful rhetoric in the first two books of *Paradise Lost*, may well see Satan as the hero of *Paradise Lost*, as Romantic poets such as Blake and Shelley did. As the poem progresses, however, Satan's motives and even his language become increasingly less attractive, so that most readers over the centuries have had little trouble seeing him, finally, as the quintessential, unrepentant evil that he knows himself to be. Readers as different as C. S. Lewis and Stanley Fish have made the point that Satan must be an attractive figure in order for the reader to understand the distorting power of evil; we have to be taught that he is the father of lies (*Preface to Paradise Lost; Surprised by Sin*). Barbara Lewalski reminds us that Satan, not God, is most like an earthly monarch, and that Milton objected to human hierarchy as a sinful parody of the true divine hierarchy (*The Life*, 468–69).

In Milton's theology, God is the omnipotent and omni-

scient Creator, whose creatures, including the rebel angels, cannot possibly overpower Him. In Milton's scheme, God gives angels and mankind free will in order to glorify them and Himself. If they rebel, their separation from God as the source of all power and happiness necessarily diminishes their own. Nonetheless, God, as Adam understands toward the end of Book XII, will always find ways to overcome evil by turning it into good. Since the Son is God's agent in this effort—he wins the war in heaven and volunteers to save mankind—he, not Satan, is presumably the hero of *Paradise Lost*.

While critics continue to debate heroism and the fine points of Milton's theology in *Paradise Lost* (is Milton antitrinitarian? is it a "fortunate fall"?), a larger question is the continuing relevance of the work to contemporary society. In fact, *Paradise Lost* has often been vigorously ejected from the literary canon that it once helped to construct. The Victorians thought it a "monument to dead ideas." The New Critics—literary critics who dominated British and American letters from the 1930s through the 1950s—pronounced Milton bombastic and irrelevant. Feminist critics in the 1970s saw him as the worst example of patriarchal canonizing because Eve, though magnificent, is second to Adam, and Milton in his own life sometimes had vexed relationships with women. Critics during the 1980s who would deconstruct a text into a social document absent any true "author" would prefer to ignore Milton, who may be the first English poet to insist absolutely on his personal identity as author.

Still, cultural critics have found *Paradise Lost* a document of continuing interest, and those interested in mythology and psychology find rich material in Milton's imaginative vision (Hill, Frye). Even feminists have noted that Milton was both of his time, and in some ways in advance of it (essays in Walker; Wittreich). Milton and *Paradise Lost* are not easily pushed out of the canon so long as we insist on having a canon—a set of works that most of us agree should be made available and taught from generation to generation. Every attempt to devalue Milton's work so far has failed. But the history of both the man and the work continues to raise issues about how we see our universe, and what we value in it.



Whether we read it for its magnificent poetry, its imaginative vision, or its complex and passionate view of human suffering, *Paradise Lost* will continue to compel the attention of readers who care about the idea of human freedom.

### *Paradise Regained*

Milton's "brief epic," in four books, is a much simpler and more contained work than *Paradise Lost*. In *Paradise Regained*, Milton tells the story of the Son of God's temptation by Satan in the wilderness, based principally on the account in Luke 4:1–13 (a slightly different version is in Matthew 3:13–4:11). Most Christian writers telling the story of the Son's redemptive acts focus on his suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection. Milton's choice of the temptation in the wilderness is at first surprising, but fits perfectly with Milton's own belief that inner strength, knowledge, and moral choice produce "deeds / Above Heroic, though in secret done" (PR I, 14–15). If Adam's disobedience lost Paradise, the Son's obedience reunites God and mankind.

The story is principally a series of debates between Satan and the Son, or rather of Satan offering temptations and the Son steadfastly rejecting them. As in *Paradise Lost*, Satan hopes to get this man, Jesus, to fall, but unlike Adam and Eve, Jesus stands. Critics have complained about the static nature of the story, but there is a rather remarkable tension. We know, of course, that Jesus will stand, and the Jesus in *Paradise Regained* never seems in danger of falling, but in Milton's story he needs to learn who he is, and what he should be doing on behalf of God. In *Paradise Lost* the Son, from the vantage of timeless heaven, knows about the fall of mankind and volunteers to be the agent of salvation, knowing, as well, it will mean becoming human and dying on behalf of humankind (PL III, 227–65). In *Paradise Regained* the Son is incarnate as Jesus. Although he has help—inner promptings, the dramatic voice from the sky at his baptism by John, "thou art my beloved son; in thee I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22, PR I 29–32)—he is inside time, and must make choices without the absolute vision of the future available to those in heaven.



A central tension of the story lies in Satan's effort to determine who this particular son of God might be, unable to comprehend that he is the same one who conquered Satan and his rebel angels in heaven. In the last of his temptations, Satan takes Jesus to the tower of the temple, setting him on the "highest Pinnacle," telling Him to "stand, if thou wilt stand; to stand upright / Will ask thee skill" (PR IV, 549, 551-52). Or, Satan says, Jesus could cast himself off the tower, and if he is the true Son of God, then God will surely keep him safe from harm. Jesus' response is the simplest in the poem, and taken directly from Luke 4:12:

*"Also it is written  
'Tempt not the Lord thy God,' " he said and stood,  
But Satan smitten with amazement fell  
(PR IV, 560-62)*

As Adam and Eve gave into temptation, disobeyed, and lost Paradise, this is the moment for Milton when the Son resists temptation, obeys the word of God, and positions himself to regain Paradise. The reader understands that there is a sacrifice to come, but that painful outward symbol of obedience would not be possible without the inner fortitude that this story represents.

To a degree stronger and more visible than his predecessors or contemporaries, Milton valued and praised individual integrity. There was nothing new in his insistence that outward virtue was a product of inward virtue; Plato made the point as early as the fifth century B.C.E. What was new was Milton's insistence on the value of individual conscience and individual choice over every other authority. The most radical Protestants of his own time, such as the Anabaptists or the antiauthoritarian Levellers, set the Bible above all else, or believed, as the Quakers did, that God came to mankind directly through an "inner light." Milton went a step farther, and yet remains a paradox. He allowed biblical interpretation based on an inward light that came as much from study as it did from direct divine inspiration, and tended to see study and divine

knowledge as related. Nonetheless, Adam and Eve fall because they desire knowledge of both good and evil, to be "like gods." Jesus, in *Paradise Regained*, resists all temptations, including the temptation of worldly knowledge.

Milton, seeing himself as God's poet, offers these texts of enormous linguistic power and thematic complexity. Rather than telling the reader how to think, he presents portraits of a universe created by a divine power, and invites his reader to engage in exploring the complexities of that universe. Since the fall, as Adam discovers at the end of *Paradise Lost*, each of us must "have [our] fill / Of knowledge, what this vessel can contain" (PL XII, 558–59), but not aspire to be gods. The model of Jesus in *Paradise Regained* fits precisely Adam's recognition that it is not by heroic bombast, such as Satan offers at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, but by relying on Providence and

*by small*  
*Accomplishing great things, by things deem'd weak*  
*Subverting worldly strong, and worldly wise*  
*By simply meek*

(PL XII, 566–69)

And just in case this seems a little too passive from a man who lost his eyesight in public service, the Archangel Michael concludes the lesson of Book XII with the admonition that Adam

*only add*  
*Deeds to thy knowledge answerable, add Faith,*  
*Add Virtue, Patience, Temperance, add Love,*  
*By name to come call'd Charity, the soul*  
*Of all the rest: then will thou not be loath*  
*To leave this Paradise, but shalt possess*  
*A Paradise within thee, happier far.*

(PL XII, 581–87)

Milton invites each reader to test his or her idea of what it means to be human against the stories he tells of "the ways of God to men." The pleasure most readers find in

this blind man's rich vision—his storytelling, imagery, powerful language—is likely to keep *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* part of our cultural conversation for a very long time.

—Susanne Woods