The Life and Writings of John Milton
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The Life and Writings of John Milton

Scope:
This lecture series examines the life and work of the English poet John Milton (1608–1674) in order to understand the richness and depth of his poetry, its ways of representing seventeenth-century English life and culture, and its impact on later writers and on English literary history as a whole. Milton is a great poet of personal struggle and spiritual devotion, and the theme of this course is the place of autobiography in writing poetry shaped by political events and biblical narrative. Milton is a poet of the first person singular, a poet of the self, and this course illustrate the ways in which he places that self at the center of all his writings. This course, too, seeks to understand the development of that self by tracing the trajectory of Milton’s literary career, from his early poems, through his political tracts, to the majestic Paradise Lost and the final Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes. Milton’s greatness has been awesome to some and stifling to others. One important concern of this course, therefore, will be how literary critics—and how we ourselves—respond to Milton.

After an introductory lecture on Milton’s life (Lecture One), the course moves through an engagement with the first major poems Milton wrote. These early works—the ode “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” the Latin poem “Ad Patrem” (“To His Father”), and the famous elegy “Lycidas”—announce Milton’s poetic vocation in a variety of ways. Lectures Two and Three invite the student to read these poems closely for their aesthetic and their personal meaning. But in addition to writing about himself, Milton wrote about his times. He was intimately involved in the political upheavals of the seventeenth century in England. It was a time when a King was deposed and killed, when Cromwell ran the country as Protector, when there was Civil War, and when a new King came in and an uneasy Restoration took shape. Milton was part of it all, and he wrote many political and social tracts (prose pamphlets) in which he gave his views on such subjects as freedom of the press, divorce, the rights of kings and subjects, education, and Christian doctrine. Lecture Four looks at this political Milton.

The following lectures focus on Paradise Lost (Lectures Five through Ten), introducing the student to the scope of Milton’s great poem. The approach of this course is to focus on the human books of Paradise Lost: the sections of the poem that trace out the narrative of the creation and Fall of Adam and Eve, Satan’s temptations, and Milton’s own struggles with his poem (Books I, II, III, IV, and IX). Each lecture focuses on the depth and details of a particular Book of the poem to illustrate Milton’s literary technique, the drama of his poetry, and the philosophical and social themes he explores. Lecture Eleven looks at Milton’s final major works, Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes, in terms of the major themes of Paradise Lost and of this course: the relationships of fathers and sons, the nature of social obedience, the heroics of moral choice, and the imagery of blindness, light, and vision (both physical and spiritual). Finally, Lecture Twelve illustrates the ways in which Milton had an impact on later literature, criticism, and teaching, especially the making of the novel Frankenstein by Mary Shelley (1818) and on the twentieth-century debates on teaching literature.

This course of lectures is both an introduction and an invitation: an introduction to a poet long considered one of the greatest, if not the greatest, writer in English (second only, perhaps, to Shakespeare), and an invitation to the modern reader to find ways of enjoying, appreciating, valuing, and even struggling through a poetry that says as much about human nature and political life now as it did over three centuries ago.
Lecture One
Introduction to Milton’s Life and Art

Scope: This introductory lecture places Milton’s life and work in the contexts of the poet’s own wide reading, his remarkable political life, and the contemporary events and institutions which shaped both Milton’s public and imaginative worlds. It calls attention to the immense learning Milton brought to all his activities, while at the same time surveying the central social upheavals that marked the seventeenth-century England in which he lived. It surveys, too, the range of Milton’s writings—both prose and poetry, polemical and literary—to convey a sense of his encyclopedic scope. Finally, this lecture looks forward to the overall approach of the course: a view of a poet who transforms his literary inheritance into a powerful statement about humankind’s place in the social and the created world. The bulk of the course centers on Paradise Lost, and this course offers, as it were, a set of grids through which we may appreciate, comprehend, and return more deeply than before to Milton’s great work. Some have said that Paradise Lost is the greatest poem in the English language. Others have sided with the eighteenth-century poet, critic, and lexicographer Samuel Johnson, when he remarked: “none wished it longer.” We will look closely at the inner narrative of Paradise Lost: the story of the making of the poem, the Falls of Satan and of humankind, and the human drama that unfolds in Books I, II, III, IV, and IX of this remarkable poem. Just what Milton’s achievement is, and what its impact has been on later English writers and thinkers will be our task to discover in this course.

Outline

I. Milton, life and art: Unlike Shakespeare, Marlowe, Chaucer, or Spenser—Milton’s peers in the pantheon of English literature—we know a great deal about Milton’s life, and furthermore, about how that life informs his poetry.
   A. Milton is in many ways an autobiographical author.
      1. The details of his life often form the subject of his works.
      2. He is very conscious, too, of when he wrote works; dating individual poems, tracts, or drafts of poems and tracts is not simply the modern scholar’s enterprise, it is Milton’s own.
      3. But Milton is also an autobiographical author in that he establishes rhetorically a writing “self” designed to foster our interest in his life.
   B. Milton is a poet of the first person singular.
      1. He is constantly searching out his own place as a son, man, political servant, father, and author.
      2. He finds that place amid both the inheritances of English literary history and the landscape of contemporary English politics.

II. Because Milton is so prepossessingly a poet of the self, he invites his readers (us) to find ourselves in reading him.
   A. “Finding ourselves” has a double sense here, much like the phrase “me ritrovai,” (“I found myself”) that opens Dante’s Divine Comedy.
      1. We must see what we are doing in the verse, to find its relevance to our lives and sensibilities.
      2. But also to find oneself is to discover who and what we are in the course of reading Milton.
   B. The theme of this course is that reading Milton is an education, a therapy, a journey of self-discovery we share with the poet.

III. To these ends, we need to see Milton’s work as part of the self-conscious construction of an author and his audience: a process of mutual education.
   A. Milton himself was, by all accounts, one of the best-educated English people of his time.
      1. He was born December 9, 1608, to John Milton, Sr., a scrivener and amateur musician.
      2. He was educated at home with private tutors, then (1620–25) at the famous St. Paul’s School, run by the great educational reformer Alexander Gill.
      3. He attended Christ’s College, Cambridge, from 1625 until 1632.
4. Milton learned a range of languages: Latin, Greek, Italian were not only languages he read but languages he wrote in.
5. Milton’s earliest verse, in fact, consists of school exercises in those languages.

B. But it is really after his formal education that Milton’s learning takes off.
1. From 1632 until 1638 Milton lived at his parents’ home in what he called his “studious retirement.”
2. Milton appears to have read everything, from Homer and Virgil through all the modern European writers. He may even have read older texts, such as ones in Old English newly coming to light in the seventeenth century.
3. He knew the biblical languages: not just Hebrew, but Aramaic and Syriac.

C. Milton traveled to Italy in the late 1630s.
1. He met many of the great figures of the day (he claims to have visited the aged Galileo).
2. He also began a Commonplace Book, a collection of quotations culled from his great reading which, read today, looks like a personal anthology of ancient and modern literature.

D. Milton’s later career is really founded on his knowledge.
1. During the Interregnum—when Oliver Cromwell held control after the execution of Charles I—Milton served as Secretary for Foreign Tongues to the Council of State (1649–59).
2. His position was really a diplomatic one, charged with maintaining correspondences with foreign ambassadors and governments.

IV. For all Milton’s learning, however, we also need to see his life as one of active politics.
A. Milton early on took controversial stands on many of the great social and political arguments of the day.
1. His own troubled first marriage may have, for example, given rise to his work on the Divorce Tracts, a set of pamphlets which argued that mutual incompatibility could be grounds for divorce (an argument then at odds with religious teaching and social practice).
2. His strongly held political beliefs led to his writing a treatise that mooted the possibility of regicide—after the execution of Charles I, such writings may have made Milton very attractive to the world of Cromwell’s Interregnum.
3. He also weighed in on such matters as education, censorship and freedom of the press, and the nature of Church doctrine.

B. Milton’s own politics is complex, and modern scholars are still sorting out his various allegiances.
1. It’s probably safe to say that Milton was, even by the standards of his own time, a radical Puritan.
2. His writings often assert the rights of individuals over the royalist state.
3. He defended the Commonwealth (what the state organization was called during the Interregnum) almost up until its end.

C. After the restoration of Charles II in 1660, Milton went into hiding.
1. Several of his works were publicly burned.
2. He was arrested and spent seven months in prison.
3. He was eventually freed through the intercession of his powerful friends (one of whom, notably, was the poet Andrew Marvell), who helped him pay a fine and secured his safety.

V. Milton’s work constantly intertwines, then, the worlds of experience and authority, politics and learning, the immediacy of human relationships and the inheritance of literature.
A. The theme of this course is thus to trace the ways in which Milton makes his authorial self and, in the process, makes us, too, as readers.
1. We begin with some exemplary early poems to see the problem of a poetic career.
2. Then, we look closely at a large selection of Paradise Lost.
3. Here, it is the narrative of individuality we need to identify: Milton’s invocations, Satan’s Fall, Eve’s temptations, Adam’s Fall.

B. We can read Milton productively and enjoyably with a minimal amount of information on his historical context for several reasons.
1. Milton writes a highly rhetorical language, one calculated to have a sonic, almost visceral effect on the reader or listener.
2. Milton self-consciously concerns himself with some of the great, trans-historical themes of literature: sin and retribution, obedience and dissent, love, anger, social pressure, human failure, personal ambition, political vanity.

3. Finally, Milton has had such a great impact on virtually all literature written since, that he is always part of our collective literary memory: from Dryden, through Samuel Johnson, to Keats and the Romantics, Tennyson and the Victorians, T. S. Eliot and the Moderns, Milton is always there—obeyed and argued with, challenged and embraced.

4. The ways in which later readers have grappled with Milton’s immense literary authority is itself a theme of Milton’s own poetry. He anticipates his own later reception, and the process of our confrontation with the grandeur of Miltonic poetry—especially Paradise Lost—is itself a process not unlike Milton’s own (or, for that matter, Satan’s) confrontation with the various authorities who shaped his life: his father, his Kings, his Cromwell, his literary predecessors, and his God.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What are some of the ways in which Milton’s personal life will inform his poetry?
2. What do you see as the central problems in reading a poet autobiographically?
Lecture Two
Milton’s Early Poetry

Scope: This lecture focuses on two of Milton’s early poems to approach what will be major themes and idioms for all his major writings. The stanzaic hymn of praise, “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” written in 1629 when Milton was 21, is widely recognized as his first major English poem. (Milton had, in fact, written a great deal of poetry in his youth, but nearly all of it was in Latin.) A close look at this work reveals Milton’s abiding fascination with the Incarnation itself, with the nature of creation (both divine and poetic), with the power of light (which, in the retrospect of Milton’s later blindness will take on exquisite poignancy), and with the relationships between fathers and sons (in this case, God and Jesus). The second poem we explore is “Ad Patrem” (“To His Father”), written in Latin sometime between 1632 and 1638, when Milton was about to embark on a set of travels to Europe. This poem, too, picks up the interests of the “Morning,” but focuses them specifically on human sons and fathers, and on how the creative process demands both enlightening inspiration and, quite simply, financial support. If these poems offer lenses through which we may read the later works, they also stand as great announcements of the career which would follow them: statements, in short, of what it means to be a poet in the world.

Outline

I. Milton had been writing poetry since he had been a schoolboy. His first published poem, in fact, is the unsigned poem to Shakespeare which appeared in the Second Folio of Shakespeare’s works, printed in 1632, when Milton was 24.
   A. In the 1630s, he produced a variety of poems in English, Latin, and Italian, many of which are concerned with the vocation of the poet.
      1. Many of these poems were collected in his first book publication as a poet, The Poems of Mr. John Milton, Both English and Latin, published in 1645.
      2. This volume brings together a range of texts: allegories such as “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso”; the dramatic mask, known now as Comus; the great elegy “Lycidas”; short occasional pieces; and ten early sonnets.
   B. Two poems in particular stand out, one in English and one in Latin, in this volume as signal works announcing Milton’s poetic vocation.
      1. “The Morning of Christ’s Nativity” may be Milton’s earliest sustained piece of poetry in English. It is the first poem in the 1645 volume.
      2. The Latin poem to his father is, while less known, an equally important announcement of the poetic calling, with striking verbal resonances to what will be the opening of Paradise Lost (published over thirty years after this poem was written).

II. “The Morning of Christ’s Nativity.”
   A. In his Latin poem to his college friend Charles Diodati, Milton described this poem as a kind of coming of age, a song offered on his “native pipes,” which he was working on and planned to give his friend for his approval.
      1. Milton clearly considered the “Morning” an important statement of his calling.
      2. He completed it in December 1629, on or about his own 21st birthday.
   B. The poem is an ode, made up of stanzas of irregular lines, imitating the classical odes of the Greek Pindar and the Roman Horace.
      1. The ode was used originally to celebrate the heroes of athletic or military victory.
      2. Here, Milton adapts the form to make Christ a kind of classical hero, and in turn, to make himself into a public celebratory odist on the model of Pindar.
   C. The poem is in three broad sections.
      1. After an opening four stanzas, the Hymn itself addresses the silence that attends the immediate moments before Christ’s birth.
      2. Then, a series of stanzas celebrates the music—both literal and figurative, or cosmic—that attends the birth.
3. Finally, the closing stanzas argue for the conquest of the older pagan gods and beliefs—a paganism that is presented as discordant, or out of harmony with the glorious music of Christian faith.

D. Milton deploys several central images here that will appear throughout his poetry, especially at the opening of *Paradise Lost*.
1. In the prologue stanzas to the poem, Milton develops the imagery of all-controlling Light—“light unsufferable,” the “far-beaming blaze of Majesty”—which defines the Godhead. The image will take on new resonance later in *Paradise Lost*, in the opening of Book III, where the “holy light” of Heaven contrasts with Milton’s own blindness.
2. In Stanza V of the poem, Milton remarks how “Birds of Calm sit brooding on the charmed wave.” These are the halcyons, or kingfishers, which were long used as symbols of Christ. But the image will look forward to that opening of *Paradise Lost* where the Spirit “Dove-like sat’st brooding on the vast Abyss.”

E. The “Morning” is self-consciously a poem that announces a poetic career—not simply in that it celebrates Christ’s birth and that of the poet himself, or even in that it deploys a range of familiar motifs that poets have long used to present themselves. The poem also deals directly with the figure of Milton’s father.
1. The “Morning” is another way-station on the autobiographical trajectory of Milton’s self-making.
2. Milton’s father was an amateur musician, and one whose works were actually performed and celebrated in his own time.
3. His grandson and Milton’s nephew, Edward Philips, writes of John Sr.’s musical accomplishments in ways which resonate with Milton’s own presentation of musical form and identity in the “Morning,” *III. “Ad Patrem.”*

A. If the “Morning” is concerned with establishing Milton’s calling in relation to divine birth and in relation to his father’s avocation, “Ad Patrem” is concerned with establishing that calling in relation to his human inheritance and to his father’s actual profession.
1. The poem establishes Milton’s literary self in relationship to a father figure—here, John Milton, Sr.
2. Like the opening of *Paradise Lost* thirty years later, this poem begins with an invocation of great purpose: the imagery of “audacious wings” and the language of attempt.

B. The poem invests in the imagery of writing.
1. Think of the poem as a kind of account book, a reckoning presented to his father.
2. Or think of it as a bill for expenses: Milton is setting off on travels of education; he is requesting his father to foot the bill.
3. “I have reckoned up on this paper whatever I possess of abilities,” he writes.
4. Milton’s father was a professional scrivener: someone charged with preparing official documents. Scriveners were often involved in legal claims and financial transactions. They charged for these services, and scriveners in general—and Milton’s father in particular—often became very wealthy through their profession.
5. Recall, too, that Milton’s father was an amateur musician and composer.
6. It is important to recall Milton’s father’s profession and his avocation here, as the younger Milton thus addresses his father as writer-to-writer: except that the elder is not a creative but a public writer.
7. As Milton says here, on these matters: “You should not despise the poet’s task”; “do not contemn the sacred Muses”; “father and son, we possess the divided god.”

C. This is a poem, therefore, about justification.
1. Justifying the ways of the son to the father is its theme.
2. But that justification looks forward to the theme of *Paradise Lost*, as Milton will state at the poem’s opening: “to justify the ways of God to man.”

D. Milton’s travels took him through Europe to Italy. But the poem shows how the creative writer travels the world.
1. “Greater things demand my pen,” he writes.
2. “Ad Patrem” embraces the entire world: Rome, Greece, France, Italy, the Barbarians, Palestine, Austria (by which Milton means the “eastern lands”), Peru.
3. His goal is to “soar between Heaven and Earth.”

E. The goal of poetry is to win public favor and fame: ivy and laurels.
F. Milton poses a challenge to enemies described in terms that anticipate the struggle of *Paradise Lost*:
   1. Serpentine calumny.
   2. Viperous enemy.

G. The poem is also a coming of age. It signals a shift from the juvenilia of his previous work to a new, adult poetics.

H. It ends with a reference to light and dark—even before his blindness would come upon him, and provide Milton with the somatic equivalent of his figurative condition, Milton is invoking the tensions of light and dark in a poem about making a literary career in spite of his father.
   1. Think of “Ad Patrem” as the rebellion of the son.
   2. Consider it as a figurative coming of age in contrast to the “Morning,” now by showing disobedience, rather than obedience.

**Essential Reading:**
“On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” and “Ad Patrem.”

**Supplementary Reading:**
Rosemond Tuve, *Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton*.

**Questions to Consider:**
1. How does Milton’s early poetry prepare you for reading *Paradise Lost*?
2. Compare Milton’s early poems to the early work of other poets you know about. Are there any major lines of comparison or contrast?
Lecture Three

“Lycidas”

Scope: The pastoral elegy called “Lycidas”—written on the occasion of the death of Milton’s college friend Edward King and published in 1638—is universally regarded as the poet’s first truly great poem. With its form taken from the classical elegy, its theme bearing on the nature of life and death, and its dazzling rhetorical displays which testify to Milton’s poetic powers already in full force (he was probably only 28 when he wrote the poem), “Lycidas” has long been the benchmark of the Miltonic in literary study. Indeed, more titles, epigraphs, and catch phrases seem to come from this poem than from almost any other single work in English literature (perhaps, but only perhaps, with the exception of Hamlet). And for a poem of less than 200 lines to accomplish these feats, and to have this reputation, bears witness to Milton’s powers of compression and expression. This lecture introduces the student to “Lycidas:” its forms, its themes, its language, and its place in Milton’s literary career.

Outline

I. Milton published few poetic texts in his early life. The first was the unsigned poem to Shakespeare in the Second Folio. The second was “The Mask,” also called Comus. The third was “Lycidas,” published in a memorial volume put together by the Cambridge friends of Edward King, who had drowned in the Irish Sea, and printed in 1638. “Lycidas” was reprinted, with Comus and Milton’s earlier poetry, in the 1645 volume.
   A. “Lycidas” stands last (the place of honor) in the Edward King volume; and is the penultimate text in the 1645 poems.
   B. It clearly represents, in a more public and highly focused way, Milton’s self-conscious announcement of his poetic career than “The Morning of Christ’s Nativity” or “Ad Patrem” do.
   C. To understand how it functions in this way, and how it works as a poem, we need to approach it in three contexts.
      1. Occasion: when and how it was written.
      2. Genre: its literary form and antecedents.

II. Occasion.
   A. On August 10, 1637, Edward King—a friend of Milton’s from Cambridge—drowned in the Irish Sea when the ship carrying him on a visit to his family sank.
      1. He had many friends at Cambridge, and was himself an amateur poet.
      2. He was intending to pursue a career in the Church.
   B. Cambridge friends and colleagues organized a memorial volume, called Justa Edouardo King Naufragio, published in 1638.
      1. There were many poems, mostly in Greek and Latin.
      2. Milton’s was the last poem in the volume.
   C. Milton probably completed the poem in November 1637.
      1. While the poem is ostensibly in memory of King, it is also informed by other important recent events in Milton’s life.
      2. His mother died in April 1637.
      3. He decided not to pursue a career in the Church (against the wishes of his parents) and to take up the life of a poet. Thus, he planned his journeys of travel and education to Italy, which he ultimately undertook in the spring of 1638.
   D. So, “Lycidas” comes at an important turning point in Milton’s life.

III. Genre.
   A. The genre of “Lycidas” is the pastoral elegy, an ancient form developed by the Greek writer Theocritus, the Roman writer Virgil, and also used in the Renaissance by writers such as Spenser.
1. The pose of the pastoral elegy is that the poet represents himself as a shepherd mourning the death of a friend.
2. That death is presented, too, as having greater impact, extending to the world itself.
3. The poet appeals to the Muses for help, invites the entire natural world to share in his grief, and he recalls the pleasant days that he and his friend spent together.

B. Now, it is important to stress that the history of Western literature is replete with such elegies, and furthermore, that it an important way of poets announcing their own careers.
1. Chaucer’s first major poem is the elegy, “The Book of the Duchess.”
2. Spenser begins his career with “The Shepherd’s Calendar.”
3. Virgil had provided such poets, and it may be argued all subsequent literary history, with the model of the poet who inaugurates the career with pastoral elegy.
4. The larger point here is that the celebration of the death of a friend or patron becomes the occasion for the poet finding inspiration, and in turn, his own birth as a poet.
5. Elegy becomes the standard genre of poetic self-creation.

IV. Style and theme.

A. “Lycidas” begins with the poet announcing that he will pluck the “berries harsh and crude,”—in other words, that he will be attempting to write poetry in a mature manner.
1. Lycidas is a name borrowed from Virgil, here standing for the dead Edward King.
2. This Lycidas, says Milton, “well knew/Himself to sing”; that is, he was a poet too, and Milton’s lament becomes a lament about poetry itself.
3. He then calls upon the Muses and the nymphs to mourn, too.

B. Then, at line70 in the poem, Milton shifts to his real theme: the power of poetry to live on after its author and, in turn, the possibility of a literary career to convey fame.
1. The mourning for the dead also brings forth the Muses; mourning is itself a form of poetic utterance.
2. The natural world weeps, as the flowers and the waters are called upon in a catalogue of woes.

C. At line 165, the poem shifts again, calling upon the shepherds, “Weep no more, . . . For Lycidas . . . is not dead.”
1. The point here is that Lycidas lives on in the poetry he wrote—but more importantly, in the poetry written by others (i.e., Milton) on the occasion of his death.
2. Poetry becomes the means by which the poet is celebrated, and we tend to lose sight of King himself as the poem closes.
3. Lycidas is the “Genius of the shore”—that is, he becomes the new Muse, the inspiring spirit of the poet who at this point in the poem turns from the shoreline (the past where Lycidas/King has died), to the “fresh woods and pastures new” (the poem’s final line).
4. These woods and pastures represent the future life of Milton the poet—they symbolically stand for a subject matter that will be public and imaginative, but that will also be specifically English.

D. The poem thus traces a trajectory from unripeness (“crude”) to fulfillment (“pastures new”) in imagery derived from the details of the natural world.

E. The effects of reading “Lycidas” today, however, may have less to do with our understanding of its literary heritage, its personal occasion, or its historical moment, but may rather have to do with the familiarity of its lines.
1. Phrases such as “Fame is the spur,” “Look homeward angel,” “Weep no more,” and others have become the touchstones of our own, modern sense of literary calling and the making of the personal life.
2. In “Lycidas,” Milton distills emotion and aesthetic impression into brilliant aphorisms: phrases that are effectively designed to last as memorable formulations.
3. Milton’s own style thus ensures his literary fame; what becomes memorable about “Lycidas” is not Edward King, or even Milton himself, but the poem’s own words.

Essential Reading:
“Lycidas.”
Supplementary Reading:
Peter Sacks, The English Elegy.

Questions to Consider:
1. Compare “Lycidas” to other elegiac poems at the start of a literary career (for example, not just the obvious ones, such as Chaucer’s “Book of the Duchess,” but, say, T. S. Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” or Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning”). What do they share in common and how do they differ?
2. Go through “Lycidas” and look for familiar catch-phrases; what is the effect on you of reading a poem with so many familiar phrases?
Lecture Four
Political Milton

Scope: This lecture surveys some of Milton’s most important writings on political and social issues. The prose tract *Aereopagitica* (1645) remains a major statement on the need for a free press and on the pitfalls of censorship. The tracts on kingship, on divorce, and on education illustrate the central social and intellectual debates of Milton’s day, while at the same time showing us the poet’s own particular approach to problems which will become dramatized especially in *Paradise Lost*. And in several of the great sonnets, especially the sonnet to Cromwell, we can see Milton struggling with the problems of patronage and power: problems that look back to his earliest reflections in the “Ad Patrem” and look forward to his struggle not with a literal or a political father, but a divine one in *Paradise Lost*.

Outline

I. Milton the moralist wrote on the politics of relationships between men and women. Milton viewed human relationships, especially relationships between the sexes, as fundamentally political: i.e., as concerned with proper hierarchies of power and obedience.

A. Milton’s notion of marriage comes straight from the Bible.
   1. Men and women should be married.
   2. Milton defines marriage as the only proper venue in which sexual relations can occur.
   3. But Milton also wrote tracts advocating divorce in certain kinds of circumstances.

B. Milton’s attitudes toward divorce are interesting and relevant to our discussion for several reasons.
   1. Milton himself went through a particularly difficult first marriage; his claims for the theory of divorce may have sprung from his personal experience and the problem of “compatibility.”
   2. *Paradise Lost* raises questions about marital devotion and the subordinate status of women in marriage.
   3. Broadly speaking, Milton argued that marriage was a gift of God, to man, for the purpose of benefiting man’s life. If a marriage did not live up to that purpose, then it could be ended.
   4. One recent scholar succinctly sums up Milton’s complex arguments as follows: “Since the spiritual relation of husband and wife is its true form, followed by the procreation of children and, as a lesser though important cause, the ‘mutual benevolence’ of the marriage bed, to allow divorce for physical infidelity but not for fundamental spiritual discord turns upside down the marriage covenant.”

C. Milton’s language, to our ears, is sexist and demeaning of women.
   1. In the tracts, women are presented as “purposely made for man.”
   2. In *Paradise Lost*, the relationships are as follows: “He for God only, she for God in him.”

II. The second set of relationships that informs Milton’s politics concerns relationships of obedience to the state. If marriage is about woman and man, the state is about people and their governors.

A. Milton has been associated with the strain of radical Puritanism that held to the rights of individuals over the state, in certain circumstances.
   1. He argued, in his tract *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, that there might be times when a king so violated his charge to his people that he should be removed (Milton stops short of outright advocating regicide, but he moots the possibility).
   2. His republican leanings made him a favorite of the Interregnum, but got him into trouble during the Restoration.

B. Perhaps the key to Milton’s sense of public politics is a notion of liberty.
   1. By liberty Milton means the right of individual expression.
   2. Thus, we may see the divorce tracts and Milton’s theories of marriage really as a species of liberty—what he called in his *Second Defense* (1654) “domestic or personal liberty.”
   3. His sense of political liberty is not simply a question of freedom for the people as a whole (in a kind of later, American revolutionary sense).
   4. Rather it involves the ability of individuals (in particular, men) to pursue their own callings and their own forms of self-expression.
C. Thus, in his tract *Of Education*, Milton advocates a humanist, classical education designed to enable the man to give full expression to himself.

1. *Of Education* should be seen, therefore, as a statement of personal identity shaped through the reading of books.

2. It is, in other words, a statement of poetics—a way of talking about how to train the mind and the mouth to best articulate the self.

III. *Aereopagitica* is perhaps Milton’s best-known political tract. It too focuses on a particular liberty, here liberty of the press. Its title is derived from an oration of Isocrates in the fourth century BC.

A. Here, Milton is writing against the 1643 Licensing Act that claimed the central government’s right to censure books before they were printed.

1. Milton wrote, famously, that one would “as good almost kill a Man as kill a good Book; who kills a Man kills a reasonable creature, God’s Image; but hee who destroys a good Booke, kills reason itselfe, kills the Image of God, as it were, in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the Earth; but a good Booke is the preussia life-blood of a master spirit, imbalmd’d and treasur’d up on purpose to a life beyond life.”

2. This is a wonderful and important sentiment, and we see it as generally true today.

B. But Milton is not, in the terms of his own time, advocating a general freedom of the press without any regulation.

1. Milton is concerned that pre-censorship impinges on the liberty of writers as well as readers: that it places power in the hands of a few men.

2. Milton is not opposed to post-publication censorship: indeed, he advocates it as the right of readers and society in general to determine if a work is slanderous or scandalous.

3. More specifically, Milton argues that pre-publication censorship is really a species of Papistry: i.e., it is akin to the index of banned books set up by the Vatican.

4. It is important to note therefore that, for all of Milton’s claims to liberty, he is describing a fundamentally anti-Catholic position in his writing on censorship; indeed, he would deny freedom of the press to Catholics in the England of his time.

IV. Milton’s poetry is highly political. His poems are, to a large degree, concerned with problems of liberty, obedience, power, service, and control (all issues that define politics). We can look at two short poems, two famous sonnets, as political texts in preparation for our reading of *Paradise Lost*.

A. The sonnet on his blindness is well-known for its power and beauty.

1. But it is really a poem about the place of the individual in the realm of the state and the order of creation.

2. Note the language of service and the state (capitalized in Milton’s original) here.

3. “They also serve who only stand and wait.”

B. The sonnet to Cromwell (May 1652) is an explicit statement of how to rule in peacetime.

1. Like the sonnet on his blindness, the Cromwell sonnet resonates with the language of *Paradise Lost*: recall this sonnet as you read of Satan in the counsel in Hell.

2. “yet much remains/to conquer still.” Conquest and control are central to Miltonic politics—whether it is conquest over desire, over woman, over the state, over kings, or over heresy (or at least what Milton thinks is heretical). Such will be the major theme of *Paradise Lost*.

Essential Reading:
*Aereopagitica, The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, Of Education*, Sonnets “On his Blindness” and to Cromwell.

Supplementary Reading:
There are excellent introductions and commentaries to Milton’s prose works in J. Max Patrick, ed., *The Prose of John Milton*.

See also Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. What is the difference between Milton’s views of freedom of the press and our own today?
2. Is it possible to read Milton’s work without condemning him as a recalcitrant sexist?
Lecture Five
Paradise Lost: An Introduction

Scope: This lecture introduces the major features of Paradise Lost: its genre, its themes, its style, and its narrative voice. Paradise Lost is so rich, so vast, and so long, that it can be approached in many ways. Our approach here is designed to get the student to read and appreciate the texture of Milton’s language and also to organize his or her responses along some key lines in Milton’s larger literary project. The lecture also seeks to define Milton’s epic technique, his notions of history, and some guidelines for a personal, individual experience of reading the poem.

Outline

I. The epic style: Paradise Lost is considered an “epic” poem, vast in length, deep in subject, rich in language.
   A. The key feature of the poem’s style, and the one that associates it with the classical epic, is the use of the simile.
      1. The simile is an extended comparison between two, usually unrelated, things, for purposes of commentary, criticism, or imaginative digression.
      2. Milton’s similes are encyclopaedic: i.e., they are the places where he deploys his vast knowledge of books, places, things, people, history, and literature.
      3. But similes are also the style of Satan. Satan always uses them, in effect rhetorically relating the world to himself and his own experience.
      4. Notice in the poem that God, by contrast, speaks in synonyms. God is repetitious, Satan is allusive. Put another way (as we will see thematically in the course of the poem), God is an author, Satan is a reader.
   B. Another central feature of the epic style is the use of unfamiliar words or constructions to create the impression of great importance or antiquity to the language.
      1. Milton revels in archaisms, in forms of the language no longer in current use, or even ancient languages.
      2. He often drops proper names, many of them unfamiliar or esoteric.
      3. His phrases are often memorable, too, for their purely sonic effect.
      4. He surveys the entire range of sense experience: light and dark, storm and calm, fragrance and stench.
      5. Notice, in particular, the use of the word “horrid” at the poem’s opening, and the way that Milton plays on its etymological sense (i.e., in Latin it means “bristling”) to create a tactile quality to the descriptions.
   C. And third, Milton builds an epic style out of the cultivation of his own vatic, or poetic-prophetic voice and its effect upon his reader.
      1. The function of the first twenty-six lines of the poem (its opening two sentences) is not so much to say anything specific as to create in the reader’s mind the sense that something great is about to happen.
      3. Thus, Paradise Lost, through its style, creates its author, its characters, and its ideal reader.
      4. Milton’s very line generates tensions between Latinate and English, divine and demonic, rhetoric and logic, reason and emotion that—taken together—make the reader a participant in the creation of epic meaning.

II. Milton and the past: Paradise Lost is a poem about many kinds of pasts: biblical, literary, national, and personal.
   A. Milton creates a sense of the deep biblical past by retelling the Genesis story, but also, by constantly alluding to other events and figures from the Bible.
      1. The past of the poem is the past of scriptural history.
      2. Its characters, ultimately, include almost everyone who ever lived.
   B. Milton is also intent on creating a literary past.
      1. His poem is full of allusions to earlier poets, and in particular, to Shakespeare and Spenser.
2. These two writers, as we will see in later lectures, make up what we might call Milton’s literary fathers.
3. In these terms, Milton’s poem struggles with and against his earlier English authors.
4. In the process, it helps redefine the nature of authorship itself, and the relationship of authorial control to inspiration, previous example, great reading, personal life, political patronage, etc.

C. Milton’s national past is the story of England itself.
1. The narrative of Paradise Lost is in many ways, too, the story of English history.
2. There are specific allusions throughout the poem to recent events in the fractious politics of seventeenth-century England.
3. There are, as we will see as well, many references to the colonial experience of England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. World history is encompassed in the search for Eden and its Fall.

D. Milton’s personal life is inscribed deeply in the poem.
1. His autobiographical impulses throughout his career take full flower here, especially in the images of blindness.
2. His struggles with paternal figures take on a new power in the story of Satan and God (and by contrast, of Jesus and God).

III. Milton and the present: Paradise Lost is in many ways a story of contemporary England.

A. Specific details relate the poem to recent events in English political life, especially Cromwell’s Interregnum.
1. More generally, we may ask how Paradise Lost is itself a form of political action: how is it a tool of indoctrination, and how does it question the very possibility of political poetry?
2. Cromwell himself plays a major allusive role in the poem: is he Satan? Is Pandemonium the Rump Parliament?

B. Much of Paradise Lost also concerns itself with the intellectual and social debates of the time.
1. The nature of marriage and divorce, the status of women, and the role of texts and education are central to the period (and to Milton’s own prose writings).
2. Eve becomes the nexus for many of these debates.
3. The representation of sexual activity is a place, too, where Milton reflects on social mores.
4. The representation of hair in the poem, too, will be a key place where Milton reflects on social and sexual roles in the terms of his contemporary debates (cf., the Roundheads in the English Revolution, whose name came from their hairstyle).

C. Paradise Lost is a poem about colonialism, too.
1. Eden is represented as a kind of new world—indeed, as we will see, there are two new worlds here: Pandemonium and Eden.
2. Each one has elements of current historical experience for Milton and his readers.
3. The poem raises important questions about the colonial experience, about power and control, and about the aesthetics of colonial life.

D. Paradise Lost also is full of new and current words.
1. The language of science, technology, trade, and intellectual inquiry greatly increased the working vocabulary of the seventeenth century.
2. Milton voraciously uses these words and even makes up some new ones.

IV. Milton and the future: How do we read him, and what is his poem’s afterlife?

A. Milton creates his reader as much as his characters.
1. Through style and rhetoric, he manipulates us.
2. At times, we are like Satan, looking in on a world we cannot have.
3. At times, we are like Eve, looking at and for ourselves only in the mirror of Milton’s lines.

B. Milton’s poem invites our responses. Indeed, I would suggest, its very theme is the education of its reader.
1. There are, in fact, many scenes of education in the poem.
2. These scenes contribute to the overall effect of Paradise Lost as a poem addressed to the future reader.
3. As we will see at this course’s conclusion, Milton’s legacy is precisely to have Paradise Lost at the center of future literary, social, and political debates.
Essential Reading:
Paradise Lost.

Supplementary Reading:
Stanley Fish, Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost.
C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost.

Questions to Consider:
1. How does the epic simile work? How can you compare Milton’s use of the device to its appearance in other poets?
2. As you read the poem, notice the words you have to look up (i.e., unfamiliar, new, esoteric, or archaic words). How does Milton use them, and why is his language so full of such words?
Lecture Six

Paradise Lost, Book I

Scope: This lecture surveys the sweep of Book I of Paradise Lost to explore how Milton creates both his great poetic voice and Satan’s great malevolent control. It looks closely at the techniques of Milton’s verse—syntax and style, word choice, the epic simile, historical and literary allusion—to see how he effectively creates a world out of language. And it looks in detail at a clutch of individual words which will distill the tensions and the argumentative and literary effects of Milton’s poetry in the large.

Outline

I. The opening sentences: syntax as argument.
   A. Milton develops in the opening sentences of Book I (lines 1–26) a grand sweep of purpose for his poem.
      1. He deploys the device of the classical invocation.
      2. He raises the reader’s expectations.
      3. He develops a sequence of references to himself which help us frame the poem autobiographically.
   B. He asserts the primary theme of his poem.
      1. Obviously, it is to “justify the ways of God to men,” that is to explain God’s plan and purpose to his human readership.
      2. But also, it is to “attempt” the making of an epic hitherto untried by any previous poet.

II. The Satanic style.
   A. The description of Satan’s fall (lines 44–49) mirrors in syntax the twisting descent. His verse bristles (it is “horrid” in the archaic sense of the word).
      1. This syntax is characteristic of Satan’s own way of speaking.
      2. It also uses the important word “horrid” or “horrible” in ways that will anticipate later scenes in the poem.
   B. Satan’s first speech is a story of the self.
      1. Satan is a great speaker who always speaks about himself (“I,” “me,” “mine,” etc).
      2. Satan often is the best user of similes, as he is constantly comparing the world outside to his own experiences and goals.
   C. Satan’s condition: Hell in Heaven, Heaven in Hell.
      1. Satan creates his own external worlds to mirror his internal state of mind.
      2. He presents himself as a creature of “choice” rather than of obedience. Thus, he—not God—is the measure of all things.
   D. Satan as general.
      1. Satan appears as a military commander, rallying the troops.
      2. Allusions to Cromwell and to recent English history abound here, as we see the Satanic army resonant with real-world terrors.
   E. Satan’s great speech at lines 622–662.
      1. It is important to pay attention to the language of the speech: the use of similes, of arguments, and of rhetorical claims.
      2. “Space may produce new Worlds.”
      3. Satan calls for open war against God.

III. The language of sensation.
   A. Book I opens with a whole range of sensory experiences (but without sight):
      1. Touch: horrid, horrible.
      2. Smell: sulphur.
      4. Hearing: notice the alliterative sounds at lines 44–49.
B. All of Book I is, in essence, an essay on sense impressions and experiences.
   1. Satan and his followers are presented with an almost tactile feel.
   2. The making of Pandemonium, in particular, is the construction of a world of sensory delight.

IV. Pandemonium as colonial enterprise.
   A. The description of Pandemonium resonates with contemporary attitudes toward Spanish conquest of South America.
      1. It is the land of gold, a kind of hellish El Dorado.
      2. It is a world of bullion-fed wealth.
   B. Satan becomes a kind of colonial leader on the Spanish conquistador model.

V. Historical reference and simile.
   A. In Book I we see the first of only two references to recent historical, European figures.
      1. At lines 285ff, there is a reference to Galileo, whom Milton claims he met on his youthful Italian trip.
      2. The description of the telescope here is part of a larger interest in vision, sight, and description that controls the whole poem.
   B. This reference to Galileo segues into a long epic simile on the leaves at Vallombrosa, in Italy.
      1. Here, we are back in the world of Milton's youthful Italian journeys.
      2. But they are journeys funded by his own father, to whom he had written in the poem “Ad Patrem.”
      3. The opening of Paradise Lost thus looks back, too, on Milton’s own autobiographical experience to make the poem now a chronicle of personal as well as biblical struggle.

Essential Reading:
Paradise Lost, Book I.

Supplementary Reading:
Stanley Fish, Surprised by Sin.
C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost.

Questions to Consider:
1. What do you make of Satan? Why does he seem to have all the good lines in the poem?
2. How is Satan a political figure: i.e., how is he like a ruler, a general, a king, a conquistador?
Lecture Seven

Paradise Lost, Book II

Scope: Book II of Paradise Lost takes us from the political arguments of Hell through the weird and horrific journey Satan makes on his way to earth. We hear Satan’s cohorts argue; but we also meet Sin and Death. This lecture seeks to explain Book II as part of Milton’s encounter with the past: the political past of recent events in English history; but also the literary past, especially the allegories of medieval and Renaissance writers (for example, Edmund Spenser). By showing how Milton recasts certain key features of earlier allegorical writing (using Spenser’s Faerie Queene as the best and probably best-known example), this lecture illustrates how Book II challenges the generic expectations of Renaissance poetry. It also shows how Milton exposes the inherent sexuality in allegorical romance, and in the process, how Milton effectively criticizes his poetic forbears (or, to rephrase this process in the terms of the autobiographical journey of the poet himself, to challenge his poetic father figures).

Outline

I. Paradise Lost and the “fictions” of autobiography.

A. In Book I, Milton develops the theme of literary autobiography which had been building throughout his works.
   1. In “Ad Patrem” and the sonnets on Cromwell and his blindness, we saw Milton drawing on personal experience to give voice to the idea of poetic life and creation.
   2. Throughout his works, Milton develops what may be called the “fiction” of autobiography—that is, the way in which he simultaneously affirms and questions the ability of literature to establish links between the father and the son.
   3. Moreover, he concerns himself with the rational for intellectual creativity.

B. Thus, Book I is bracketed by two scenes of creation:
   1. The invocation of the opening twenty-six lines.
   2. The creation of Pandemonium.

C. Moreover, Book I offers specific references to what I call “Milton and the present.”
   1. The reference to the historical figure of Galileo is one example.
   2. The sense of a “present-ness” to reading Paradise Lost, to the experience of the lived “now” of reading is another example.

II. In Book II, we get Milton and the past. Here, it is specifically his literary past.

A. Many critics like to read Book II, however, as a commentary on the Parliamentary debates of the 1640s that led to and followed up on the dismissal and execution of King Charles I.
   1. The rhetoric of the arguments in Hell in Book II mirrors the language of the debates in Parliament at the time.
   2. Milton was deeply engaged in these political and social issues and arguments.

B. Certainly, we can see in the debate in Hell the various positions of the devils and they way they represent political positions.
   1. Moloch advocates open war against Heaven.
   2. Belial advocates capitulation and passive waiting.
   3. Mammon advocates living actively in Hell, making a new political life there.
   4. Beelzebub advocates going off and seeing this new world they have heard about (Eden), and he speaks in specifically colonialist terms that resonate with contemporary English politics (e.g., he refers to their own project in Hell as building “a growing Empire,” which he will later call a “vain Empire” [315, 377]).

C. Beelzebub asks who shall be sent on the journey (II.402–9), and his question recalls explicitly the language of the invocation of Book I.
   1. Thus Satan’s journey becomes parallel to Milton’s journey.
   2. Both are “attempts” to do what no one else has done before.
D. Both journeys, then, are confrontations with a political and creative present, as well as political and literary pasts. Satan and Milton reinvent themselves to take on a new test.
1. In Book II, Satan confronts his past (in the dark brood of Sin and Death).
2. In Book II, Milton confronts and radically rewrites his poetic past (in the legacy of Spenserian allegory).
3. In the process, Milton changes the nature of allegorical narrative and the experience of reading fantastic literature.

III. In Aereopagitica, Milton wrote that he thought “our sage and serious poet Spenser . . . a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas.” What did Milton learn from Spenser?
A. Spenser was a poet of allegorical romance. His Faerie Queene (written c. 1590) was a highly influential work of imaginative fiction that provided later writers with the model for a fantastic romance journey and elaborate encounters with monsters, men, and women.
1. Some key Spenserian devices include the deferral of naming (i.e., not naming a character when introduced, but only later, after a defining encounter).
2. They also include a fantastic descriptive ability, especially of monstrous or hellish creatures, especially women.
3. Spenser also has his heroes move through labyrinths of misunderstanding: dark woods, mazes, great buildings, forests, wildernesses—all of which represent forms of error.
4. Spenser also presents allegorical figures of sin and evil, and encounters with creatures of the night.
B. Book II of Paradise Lost begins with an allusion to Spenser’s Faerie Queene, and it develops a whole set of references that take us back to Spenser’s allegorical world.
1. The Devils in Paradise Lost in amusement are described in a full Spenserian vocabulary: wandering, perplexed, restless, in wandering mazes, pleasing sorcery, in labyrinths, roving on in a confused march, etc.
2. Book II of Paradise Lost offers up a “universe of death.”

IV. Satan’s journey as Romance quest: In Book II, Satan sets out to find the new world created by God for man. He begins, however, by encountering a whole set of horrific creatures straight out of Spenserian allegory.
A. Sin at lines 648–666. Notice the image of the horrific half-woman.
B. Death is introduced at line 666 of Book II.
1. Milton is acutely aware of the symbolic importance of the numbering of his lines (e.g., in Book IX, Adam will eat the apple at line 999).
2. 666 is the symbol of the Beast of Revelation.
C. Notice how the names of Sin and Death in these passages are deferred in classic Spenserian fashion.
1. Sin is named at 760, Death at 787.
2. The birth of Sin is described, too, in Spenserian language: “amazement seised/All the host of heaven” (758–59).
D. Satanic sexuality is horrible.
1. Beginning at line 727 we get a bizarre account of the relations of Satan, Sin, and Death (a perverted Trinity).
2. Satan is the Father of Sin, for she is born from his head.
3. Then, Satan commits incest with Sin and gives birth to Death.
E. Satan is also presented as a narcissist, as one who has claimed his own self-generation.
1. The word “author” is used in various senses throughout Book II to describe Satanic self-creation.
2. Satan’s great self-misunderstanding, of course, is his claim to self-creation (see lines 19–20).
3. Milton uses verbal patterns of pun and echo in Book II to reinforce the mirroring effect of Satan, in essence, seeing himself wherever he goes.
4. The imagery of pregnancy, too, throughout this book resonates with the opening image of the “brooding,” generating spirit that made “pregnant” the world—and, in turn, Milton’s poetic imagination.
V. In Book II, Milton thus exposes the inherent and disturbing sexuality of Spenser’s literary narrative.
   A. He brings to the surface the implicit tensions generated out of Spenser’s horrific women and their
      temptations to his chaste hero.
      1. Satan’s encounter with Sin and Death is an essay on the horrors of incest and the inability of allegory
         to contain and maintain a legitimate poetic structure to control it.
      2. While Milton uses the standard structures of Spenserian allegorical narrative, he does so against
         themselves.
   B. If Satan is a colonialist explorer, he is also a romance hero, and in both cases, he challenges the political
      and literary implications of those figures.
   C. The theme of Book II, then, is as in all his works, how Milton creates himself as a poet, and how the
      patterns of paternal obedience work in tension with the desire to break out and become an original and
      individual self.

Essential Reading:
*Paradise Lost*, Book II.
Edmund Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, Book I.

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. How does the debate in Hell compare with what you know of political debate generally? Is Milton commenting
   on the nature of political argument, and can we find contemporary resonances to this episode in the poem?
2. What problems confront you in reading allegorical poetry of the kind exemplified by the Sin and Death
   episode? Do you find these passages frightening or just bizarre?
Lecture Eight

Paradise Lost, Book III

Scope: Book III of Paradise Lost is like nothing else. It represents Milton’s attempt to imagine the language of Heaven. It shows us divine figures in literary form. And it takes us back again to the opening of the poem, in its language of light and invocation. Milton offers up a God, a Son, and a set of angels who speak. In so doing, he imagines the speech of unfallen individuals, and furthermore reflects on the nature of his own literary project. He also confronts, once again, the problem of authorship—here, as a question of creation itself, and also as a problem in free will and sin. When the Son offers himself up to God as the redeemer of Mankind, he becomes something of a hero himself, and his heroic enterprise contrasts sharply with Satan’s journey as we have seen it.

Outline

I. Book III of Paradise Lost is radically different from any of the other books of the poem. Its central problem is: how can a human poet describe an unfallen Heaven in what is undeniably (for Milton, anyway) a fallen, human language?
   A. Heaven is presented as a world without texts.
      1. Poetry, expression, argument, and discourse generally are presented as said or sung.
      2. There are not references to books or to writing, but only to the unmediated expression of prayer and celebration.
   B. The language of Heaven is the language of repetition.
      1. There are no similes used to describe Heaven (similes are used only to describe earth and Hell, or the human condition now).
      2. There are no complex arguments or reasonings; things simply are stated as they are.
      3. Instead of metaphors or comparisons, as in other sections of the poem, the figures in Heaven speak by using synonyms, or simply repeat themselves.
   C. Heaven is a world without number; things are not specified, measured, or accounted here.
      1. Heaven is presented as a world of the innumerable.
      2. God’s power is measureless.
   D. Book III is also one of the shortest books of Paradise Lost (only 742 lines long).
      1. It is short because things are just said, rather than explained.
      2. Our problem, as readers, is to get used to a new way of talking in this Book, in contrast to the authorial musings or the Satanic rhetorical convolutions of the first two Books.

II. Book III begins with a new invocation, in effect, a rewriting of the opening of Book I: now not about darkness, but about light.
   A. The language of the opening lines is repetitious.
      1. Sounds mirror themselves.
      2. There are many synonyms strung together.
      3. The opening is a prayer, but also an attempt to imitate what Milton imagines for us as the language of Heaven.
   B. The opening lines also recall the imagery of flight, intellection, poetic creation, and inspiration in the opening of Book I.
      1. But Milton here now takes his own blindness as a theme, illustrating how the imagery of Book I becomes autobiographical.
      2. Now, he imagines himself as Homer, the blind, unlettered Greek epic bard.
      3. Milton himself becomes a speaker not a reader; in spite of his immense learning and wide range, he positions himself at the opening of this book as a prophetic oral poet.
III. The language of God: In Book III God speaks in a manner different from any other character we have met thus far.

A. As the Creator who sees all things, past, present, and future, God must speak in a manner that sounds not only convincing but omniscient.
   1. Milton has God speak directly, without similes.
   2. Yet, God can be confusing at times. His is the language of philosophical observation and scientific explanation, not of poetic imagining; and yet, God can apparently confuse, excuse, and self-justify (especially in His first speech of the Book).

B. God exemplifies the self-authorizing figure of the work, and often speaks in repetitions.
   1. He is, in fact, the unique true “author,” and God invokes problems of authorship as problems of sin.
   2. For example, when the angels fell, they “trespass, Authors to themselves in all” (122).

IV. The Son of God and the heroic quest: In the course of the discussion in Book III, the Son of God comes forward to offer Himself up to save humankind.

A. God, as all foreknowing Creator, knows that Man will fall. The question becomes who will arise to save Man?

B. The Son offers himself up in his major speech at lines 226–65.
   1. Here, the Son becomes the anti-type of Satan.
   2. Both are, in effect, romance heroes on a great quest; yet the Son will be a moral success.

C. The theme of this exchange is what Milton calls “filial obedience.”
   1. The phrase resonates with the opening of *Paradise Lost* itself, “man’s first disobedience.”
   2. But it also resonates with the ongoing autobiographical narrative of Milton’s own encounters with fathers, literal and figurative.

V. Book III then takes us back to Satan moving through Chaos.

A. And when it does, it almost immediately takes us back to similes.
   1. Satan’s reentry into the poem is marked by the first simile of Book III (431ff).
   2. We are back to the world of present reference and the telling of the poem.

B. Another important simile appears when Satan lands on earth, and he is described like a sunspot seen by “the Astronomer” (588–90).
   1. This is another reference to Galileo, who saw sunspots in 1609.
   2. But the larger point is that Satan can only be expressed, indeed conceived of in “presentist” human terms.
   3. The nature of the simile is to take us back to the world of now, to the fallen world that Satan has already created and to make us understand him in terms of lived human experience.

C. Satan changes his shape and deceives the guardian of the gate to Earth, Uriel.
   1. Milton makes the point that “nether Man nor Angel can discern Hypocrisie” (682–83).
   2. There are also resonances here with seventeenth-century English politics. Who was the hypocrite—Cromwell? Milton?
   3. Satan becomes a figure of dissemblance, and as such, comes to resonate with his earlier Spenserian literary types: in this case, the magician Archimago who constantly transforms himself into deluding shapes and forms in order to beguile the hero.

D. Book III closes with Satan entering Paradise, yet also with a punning look back into the world of heaven.
   1. The final words of Book III are that Satan flies down to earth and on Mount “Niphates top he lights” (742).
   2. The last word of the book is “lights,” a pun on “alighting” and “light.” This double sense returns the reader back to the “holy light” of Heaven at the opening of the book, but it also recalls again the opening of *Paradise Lost* itself, as the bird-like creature sits “brooding,” alighted on the world.
Essential Reading:
*Paradise Lost*, Book III

Supplementary Reading:
Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*.

Questions to Consider:
1. Does Milton’s Heaven correspond to your own sense of Heaven? How does it compare with, or differ from, what we—in our various religious or ethical instructions—consider it to be?
2. Is God boring? Compare and contrast God and Satan as speakers; just how does God talk in the poem, and is Milton presenting him as something of an anti-literary figure?
Lecture Nine
Book IV: Theatrical Milton

Scope: Book IV of *Paradise Lost* is perhaps the most poetically rich, and yet critically challenging of all the poem’s books. We see, for the first time, Eden, Adam, and Eve. Yet we do so, often, through Satan’s eyes. Satan in this book becomes akin to a tragic hero of the theater—no accident, as we know that Milton began his poem by imagining a tragic play, rather than an epic, and we know, too, that some of the earliest drafts of that epic (including Satan’s opening soliloquy) were incorporated into Book IV. Satan and Eden are crafted things here, rich with rhetoric and all the skill of Milton’s poetic artistry. Among the questions Book IV asks, therefore, are: What is the place of human artifice in describing the artistry of divine creation? How does Satan function as “artificer of fraud”? What is the nature of artificiality and control in the cosmetic, and also the moral, presentation of the human body (hair, in particular, is very important in this Book). Finally, and perhaps most central to our larger concerns, what does it mean to put a woman on the stage: that is, what does it mean to place Eve as the central character in this drama of the Fall?

Outline

I. Book IV of *Paradise Lost* is the most “theatrical” portion of the work, in a variety of ways.
   A. It incorporates the earliest drafts of *Paradise Lost* when Milton first conceived of it (around 1642) as a tragedy. We know that Milton’s nephew and first biographer, Edward Phillips, saw a draft of an opening speech by Satan which is now the speech beginning at line 32.
   B. It deploys a vocabulary of theatrical artifice to describe Eden.
      1. It thus raises the question about the nature of Eden itself, about its reality, its staginess, its artificiality.
      2. It also raises questions about the nature of Milton’s own art, and about his ability to conjure up this stage-set out of his imagination.
   C. It consciously recalls the traditions of Renaissance theater, especially in Marlowe and Shakespeare, where heroic figures become stage-managers and the purpose of literature is questioned from a theatrical perspective.
      1. For example, Satan becomes a figure like Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus, finding himself in a Hell of his own making.
      2. The Miltonic narrator becomes akin to Prospero in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*, where a controlling paternalistic figure of artifice manipulates the world for all to see.

II. Satan’s first speech fits perfectly with the conventions of Renaissance tragic heroism.
   A. Lines 73–75 locate him in the self-absorption of a figure such as Dr. Faustus.
      1. They recall directly lines from Marlowe’s play.
      2. But they also recall Satan’s own speech in Book I, 252–63, in which Hell becomes a state of mind, not just a place.
   B. Satan becomes a figure of the overreacher, the defining figure of Renaissance tragedy, and his first speech rhetorically functions as a dramatic soliloquy.

III. The stage-set of Eden: Eden is constantly described in terms taken from theatrical artifice and from the visual and plastic arts.
   A. Notice the effect of such words as: artificer, shew, conceal, practiced, disfigured, gestures, grottesque, woodie theatre, statliest view, enameled, lantskip (i.e., landscape).
      1. Notice, too, Milton’s particular spellings of these words.
      2. Many of them are recent loan-words in English, and Milton keeps their non-English spellings to remind his readers that they are technical terms of other arts.
   B. The central question that emerges as we see this Eden is: is it a world of artifice itself, or is it that in seeing Eden through the eyes of Satan (the artificer of fraud), we only are permitted to see its theatrical, artificial surfaces?
IV. Eden is also presented as a kind of body. Two central images emerge in this description:

A. Eden is a hairy world: hairy sides, shaggie hill, crisped brooks, curious knots.
   1. In addition, the whole description at lines 257–63 shows us an Eden very much like a human body.
   2. Hair is very important in this poem, as it is the marker of identity and morality, as we will shortly see.

B. Eden is also a serpentine world: wandering, mazie error; entwined, tangling, perplexed—and, of course, the wonderful vision of the elephant who “wreath’d his lithe proboscis” (346–47).
   1. These pervasive images create the impression that Eden is already a world of tortuous paths and mazes.
   2. The moral quality of Eden is perhaps already in doubt.
   3. The serpentine twists of things foreshadow the fall that is about to happen.

V. Adam and Eve are similarly described in terms of interlacings and interlockings, hair and limbs.

A. Lines 295–311 define the couple in terms of their hair.
   1. Adam has relatively short hair, not hanging below his shoulders.
   2. Adam is a figure of “erect” control, of assuredness, of vision.
   3. Eve, by contrast, has hair that goes all the way down her back.
   4. Eve’s hair is “disheveld” and “wanton” (which for Milton means undisciplined, but which certainly carries a moral edge to it).
   5. Eve is presented, perhaps, as a creature ready to fall.

B. Hand in hand: the interlacements of Adam and Eve’s fingers mark their moral progress throughout the poem. Notice here lines 321, 488–89, 506, 689, 739 (and look forward to the Fall in Book IX when their hands reveal a new passion; and again, at the poem’s very end, in Book XII, when they leave Eden hand-in-hand).

C. The speeches of Adam and Eve also reflect Milton’s sense of their respective moral vision.
   1. Adam’s first speech talks about God (411–39).
   2. Eve’s first speech talks about Eve herself (440–91).

D. Eve’s speeches are full of turns and twists, of mirror imagery and of rhetorical mirroring.
   1. Eve is a creature of surfaces and shapes.
   2. Adam is a creature of forms and ideas.
   3. Adam and Eve later speak in 24-line passages each; Eve’s one here (635–58) is a complex of interlaced words and repeated phrases.

E. The key point is that in these passages, Milton rhetorically represents the inner moral character of his speakers. One cannot come away from listening to Eve without feeling that Milton imagines her, if not already fallen, then ready for the fall.

VI. Satan the questioner: Satan’s rhetorical technique is interrogation.

A. He is the master of the rhetorical question.
   1. He often asks questions of himself, which cannot be answered.
   2. Lines 515–27 are a string of rhetorical questions.

B. What Satan will do is make Eve question; once she questions, then she falls.

VII. Edenic sex. What does Milton imagine sex to have been like before the Fall?

A. Lines 736–75 present Adam and Eve together, clearly engaged in “connubial Love.”
   1. Milton presents prelapsarian sex as “straight.”
   2. The central imagery of turning or of serpentine shifts is absent, if not absolutely denied here.
   3. Adam and Eve lay “Strait side by side” (741).

B. But the narrator of this passage (Milton himself, or his narratorial voice) is clearly uncomfortable presenting this scene.
   1. There is a kind of voyeuristic feel to this moment.
   2. Milton constantly interrupts the description with asides about his own subjective impressions: “I ween,” “I should write,” “sleep on blest pair.”
3. Milton, and his readers, cannot but respond as fallen individuals to this scene of prelapsarian bliss, regardless of how pure it may be.
4. The Miltonic narrator thus shows us the problems of presenting a world before the Fall to fallen people.

**Essential Reading:**

*Paradise Lost*, Book IV.

**Supplementary Reading:**

Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin*.
Joseph Wittreich, *Feminist Milton*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Is Eden described in terms that imply that Milton sees it already, from its creation, as a place destined to fail?
2. Is Eve described in terms that imply that Milton sees her from the start as a person destined to fall?
3. “He for God only, she for God in him.” What do you think?
Lecture Ten  

Book IX: The Fall

Scope: There are many ways of understanding the Fall of Man in *Paradise Lost*. Perhaps the best way to approach this moment in the larger drama of the poem’s human story is to see it as Eve’s tale. Book IV had placed Eve at the center of a complex and potentially already fallen Eden. Books V–VIII are really Adams’s books, or to put it more precisely, the books in which Adam is instructed in the nature of creation and the future of humankind. Book IX, narratively speaking, effectively takes up where Book IV had left off, and we can read this book—and conclude our introduction to *Paradise Lost*—in many of the terms set up for Book IV. It is a story of “amazement” in all the senses of that word: of being trapped in a maze, of being astonished at the power of Satanic language, of being awed at Milton’s poetry, of being struck by the profound consequences of the moral choice made by Adam. This lecture concludes by looking at the poem’s close in Book XII and by looking forward to the impact of this story both on Milton’s later work (the subject of Lecture Eleven) and on later English and American literature and culture (the subject of Lecture Twelve).

Outline

I. Amazing Eve: Eve is an amazing character in *Paradise Lost*, and her fall is a species of seduction. But in that seduction, Satan’s charge is to amaze Eve herself, and in the process amaze us, almost to fall again.
   A. Satan becomes the serpent, and he is a creature of the maze and of amazement.
      1. Look at him, as he inhabits the sleeping snake in his “mazie foulds” to which he will bring his “dark Intent” (161–62).
      2. Satan enters the serpent in his “labyrinth”-like folds; here, the physical form of the snake mimics the rhetorical and argumentative structures of Satanic speech.
   B. Eve and Adam discuss their various roles, and Eve suggests that they divide their labors.
      1. This is clearly a mistake, a kind of error, and Eve’s language in this passage (205–25) anticipates the serpentine wiles of Satan and the maze of error into which she will step.
      2. Eve begins to question Adam’s decisions (321–25); Adam replies “fervently” (342). Is Adam losing patience?
      3. Eve goes off on her own: “from her Husbands hand her hand/soft she withdrew” (385–86)—Milton signals an anticipation of the Fall by having them unclasp hands, a key image from Book IV.
   C. Satan spies Eve and speaks to her. Satan flatters Eve in his speech (531ff). He seduces her and gets her to eat the apple.
      1. Satan uses the word “gaze” and the imagery of sight to flatter Eve.
      2. He makes Eve an object of male vision, playing to the narcissism that may inhere in her already.
      3. Remember in Book IV how Eve was captivated by her own reflection in the pool; remember how Milton describes Eve as a creature of surfaces?
      4. Satan leads Eve, both literally and rhetorically, to the tree of knowledge: he “made intricate seem strait” (631).
      5. Satan gives a great oratorical speech in praise of the tree and its fruit; he provokes Eve, gets her to experience the fruit in all five of its senses. Eve becomes the gazer now (up to line 744).
      6. Eve eats the apple (781).
   D. After eating, Eve becomes amazing.
      1. Milton describes Eve as an erotic object (lines 886ff).
      2. Adam realizes what has happened, and his response is clearly, for the first time in the poem, highly sexualized (lines 886–85).

II. Adam’s fall. Adam eats the apple at line 999 of Book IX.
   A. After Adam eats, Milton returns to the vocabulary of the initial invocation of the poem and to the language of his earlier “*Ad Patrem*” to define their seeing as a kind of blindness.
      1. 1008–10: compare the reference to “breeding wings.”
      2. Adam’s first words after eating: “Eve now I see that thou art exact of taste” (1016).
3. But they are blind for all their newfound vision: their eyes are opened, “and their minds/How dark’n’d” (1054).

B. Carnality emerges in Eden from this point.

III. Fallen rhetoric. The central question of Book IX is how to represent not simply unfallen language and behavior, but how—for fallen readers—to convey the change in Adam and Eve rhetorically. In other words, how can Milton make his readers effectively fall again, feel the power of the fall anew?

A. What happens when Eve eats?
   1. Milton rhymes: 781–82; remember this is a poem in blank verse, unrhymed verse. Milton rhymes here in his seventeenth-century pronunciation.
   2. Eve becomes an idolator (795–815).
   3. Eve becomes like Satan; she seeks to change her shape. NB: lines 816ff, “But to Adam in what sort/Shall I appear…”
   4. Eve becomes a questioner. Her first words to Adam after she has eaten the apple are a rhetorical question (856).
   5. Tumescent rhetoric: Eve tries to arouse Adam in a carnal way (875ff).

B. The sounds of the Fall are sounds not heard in the poem to this point; therefore:
   1. Rhyme and alliteration are Milton’s attempts to mime sonically the groaning of the earth.
   2. For example, see 1067: “O Eve, in evil hour thou didst give ear.”

C. And when Adam does eat, he does not clasp hands with Eve: “Her hand he seis’d” (1037). Hand-in-hand is now passion, not love.

IV. Eden and the New World: When Adam and Eve fall, they recognize their nakedness and they seek to clothe themselves in large fig leaves.

A. Milton compares this to the way in which Columbus found the native Americans (lines 1114–18).
   1. This is a very important passage, for it is the single mention of a European historical figure by name in the poem (Galileo is referred to, but only allusively as “the Astronomer,” not by his true name).
   2. This passage also makes explicit a set of comparisons building throughout the poem: that Eden is in some sense a kind of New World.

B. Milton posits in effect two New Worlds in the Poem:
   1. Pandemonium, recall, was like a Spanish, Catholic South America: bullion culture, a place of conquest not of colonization, a place where gold was ripped from the ribs of earth.
   2. Eden, by contrast, had been presented in Book IV as a kind of Anglo-Dutch, Protestant North America: an agrarian, colonial land, a place that looks Dutch (recall the word “lantskip” used to describe it), a place of pacific ease and reasonable labor.

C. By these lines in Book IX, we may ask whether Milton is himself asking if America is already fallen?
   1. Columbus is historically a representative of the Spanish Catholic imperium.
   2. He lands, in fact, not in North America but in the Caribbean.
   3. Milton’s comparison now makes Eden into that Spanish territory of the south, rather than the Anglo-Dutch lantskip of the North.

V. Ending with the Fall. How can we, as fallen readers, keep going?

A. We are now on a par with Adam and Eve, and with Milton, too.
   1. It has taken the better part of nine books of the poem to tease our fantasies and involve us in Milton’s epic.
   2. If that epic is a story of self-understanding (on Milton’s part) it is also a story of self-understanding on our part.
   3. Milton takes so long to get to the Fall because he has to get us in the right frame of mind.
   4. Finally, when they do Fall, we have been so manipulated by the poem to feel the ache of their sin.

B. What does it mean to read in a fallen world? Milton describes Adam and Eve after the Fall in the closing lines of Book IX:

   Thus they in mutual accusation spent
   The fruitless hours, but neither self-condemning,
And of their vain contest appear’d no end. (1187–89)

1. These lines exemplify the condition of fallen language.
2. It is the language of politics, and the world of both Hell’s Pandemonium and England’s Parliament.
3. It is also the language of literary response: of arguing over the meaning of literary works.
4. Milton, I wish to suggest, imagines us reading his poem, arguing over its meaning, and in turn, trying to make sense out of its story.
5. The great pun of this moment is, of course, “fruitless.”

VI. After the Fall. Books X, XI, and XII concern themselves with Adam and Eve receiving new instructions from the angels and being sent out of Paradise.

A. In Book XII, they realize—and by implication we are to realize as well—that at the day of judgment we will all possess “a Paradise within thee, happier farr” (587).
   1. Paradise will become a state of mind.
   2. It becomes the alternative to Hell, a place as we have seen throughout the poem as the Satanic state of mind, regardless of where Satan is.

B. Adam and Eve leave Paradise through the eastern gate, and the poem’s final lines take us back to the central image of hand-holding to show us a hopeful, if uneasy, truce between the man and woman and what Milton sees as human future life.
   1. These final lines show Adam and Eve wandering with slow steps; they are still in error here, still in the maze.
   2. But their choices are many, and Milton will not have them choose, but show his reader, instead, that individual choice is what distinguishes humankind in a fallen world:

   The world was all before them, where to choose
   Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
   They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow
   Through Eden took their solitarie way. (XII, 646–649)

Essential Reading:
Paradise Lost, Books IX and XII.

Supplementary Reading:
Stanley Fish, Surprised by Sin.

Questions to Consider:
1. Is Satan seductive? Just why do you think Eve falls for him? Is Eve seductive? Do you fall for her?
2. Is there hope for Adam and Eve at the end of the poem? How does Milton suggest that there is (and in turn, that there is hope for us)?
Lecture Eleven
Late Milton: *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*

**Scope:** Late in life, Milton devoted himself to two extended meditations on the nature of scriptural history and the closure of his own literary career. *Paradise Regained* offers in the epic language of *Paradise Lost* a story of Jesus’ encounter with Satan. Through a series of temptations in the wilderness, Jesus and Satan debate the nature of biblical truth, the desires of the flesh, and the rewards of the spirit. Milton was probably working on this poem throughout the 1640s and 1650s, though it appeared in its final form, in the same volume as *Samson Agonistes*, in 1671. Samson is a “closet drama,” a long poem in the form of a tragic play, that retells the biblical story of its hero. But in its specific focus on Samson’s blindness, and its emphases on certain key images and idioms from *Paradise Lost* (especially the importance of hair, of male/female relationships, and of the politics of public life), *Samson Agonistes* becomes another major landmark in the autobiographical journey of Milton’s artistic career.

**Outline**

I. *Paradise Regained* may be approached as a poetic retelling of the stories of Jesus’s temptation in the New Testament. But it may also be understood as part of the larger autobiographical project of Milton’s whole career—an attempt to understand what it means to be obedient: as a son, as a public figure, and as a man.

A. The opening invocation is full of themes and tropes we have seen elsewhere in Milton.

B. The poem begins with Satan and Jesus discussing the nature of holy Scripture.

1. Satan is a great literalist. He reads Scripture literally, arguing that the Messiah must be an earthly king and, therefore, Jesus will be incapable of fulfilling that role.

2. Jesus counters through a more spiritual, or allegorical, reading of the Testament texts, arguing that His status as a “king” is figurative, and that He must attain—through self-sacrifice and personal trial—not a worldly but a heavenly kingship.

C. Throughout the poem, Satan and Jesus argue over the interpretation of Scripture.

1. *Paradise Regained* is thus an epic about reading: it is a story about how to understand the Bible and, in turn, about the proper ways in which an individual reader can come to spiritual understanding.

2. As an epic about reading, *Paradise Regained* dovetails with the arguments of *Aereopagitica* nearly three decades before: the liberty of publication and interpretation.

3. Milton had also explored many of these issues in his own prose treatise, *De Doctrina Christiana* (On Christian Teaching). Note the following passage: “If Christians would but know thir own dignitie, thir libertie, thir adoption, and let it not be wondered if I say, thir spiritual priesthood, whereby they have all equall access to any ministerial function whenever calld by thir own abilities and the church.”

4. Compare this sentiment, too, with that of the famous sonnet on his blindness.

D. The language of Satan and Christ gives insights into their respective personalities or characters.

II. The sonnet on his blindness offers a good fulcrum, too, on which to balance *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*.

A. The sonnet, as we have said, is about obedience and patience.

1. It defines the nature of public and private service.

2. It contrasts earthly and spiritual kingship.

3. It takes us back to the language of investment and account—the mercantile and actuarial imagery of “Ad Patrem.”

4. But it looks forward to the major themes of *Paradise Regained*.

B. Like *Paradise Regained*, the sonnet is a poetic recasting of Biblical language.

1. The challenge of this sonnet, like both *Paradise Lost* and, more pointedly, *Paradise Regained*, is how Milton can become a biblical poet.

2. The question is for Milton, and for us: is scriptural language enough?
3. In other words, can a human poet add anything in terms of content or style to the language of the Bible, be it the Old Testament of Paradise Lost or the New Testament of Paradise Regained?

C. Milton wants to illustrate how the human poet can exercise his own liberty in retelling biblical narrative and, in the process, how that poetic activity becomes, in the words of his De Doctrina Christiana, a “spiritual priesthood.”

III. The sonnet on his blindness also, of course, looks forward to Samson Agonistes: a story drawn from the Old Testament about blindness, suffering, and political rebellion.

A. At the beginning of Samson Agonistes, we see Samson struggling with his own failure in his divine mission.
1. His charge was to liberate Israel.
2. Yet his people have themselves failed. They seem “to love bondage more than liberty” (270).
3. The political resonances to Milton’s own time are obvious: here is the old revolutionary looking back on the failed revolution, the old tractarian of liberty seeing an England, as he wrote in 1659, choosing “bondage with ease” in its willingness to restore the Kingdom.
4. Samson feels at the play’s opening that he has failed in his “promise” (38–41), and the word “promise” is an important one for the play as a whole (as it is for Milton’s entire literary and political career).

B. Samson sees himself as responsible for his own pain and punishment. Blind, humiliated, powerless, he gives voice to a sense of responsibility in terms that recall explicitly the key terms of Milton’s earlier works.

C. Delilah in the play also summarizes much of Milton’s earlier work: here, on the nature of women and on marital and social relations between the sexes.
1. She has betrayed Samson, turning him over to the Philistine authorities in return for public honor and wealth.
2. She is, in some ways, Eve-like, especially in her representation of her own gender. Notice her weak and self-aggrandizing defense at lines 773–89.

D. Finally, Samson Agonistes is a play again about fathers and sons: here Samson’s father Manoa stands, too, as a figure torn between support and betrayal.
1. Manoa intends to procure Samson’s liberty by ransom (as Milton summarizes it in “The Argument” to the play).
2. But Samson prevents this ransoming, creating the great catastrophe at the close of the play.
3. The Messenger at the close of the play describes the “spectacle” of Samson destroying the temple and, in the process, killing himself.
4. The Semichorus of the play describes Samson’s newfound power in terms of illumination and in the imagery of bird-like flight that recall, once again, the opening of Paradise Lost (cf. Samson Agonistes, lines 1687–95).
5. Samson lies dead, but “on his Enemies/Fully reveng’d” (1711–12), in the words of his father Manoa.
6. Samson Agonistes stands as Milton’s last word on the enemies and father figures he has struggled with throughout his life. That he has Manoa offer a eulogy to the dead son is a striking and fantastic vision of the aged Milton looking back on a father who never really approved of his son’s choice of calling.

IV. Both Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes are in the end, stories of autobiography.

A. Jesus continually retells the story of His own life in Paradise Regained, and Samson is called upon to recount his own tale in Samson Agonistes.

B. In his final major works, Milton returns to the autobiographical impulse which began his career, and he thus caps his own life with stories, now, not of justifying the ways of God to man, but of justifying the life of one man to himself and his public.

Essential Reading:
Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes.

Supplementary Reading:


**Questions to Consider:**

1. Can you read *Paradise Regained* with the same level of interest and reward as *Paradise Lost*? Why or why not?

2. *Samson Agonistes* is a closet drama, never intended for the stage. Just how theatrical is it, however, and can you imagine it staged? Put another way, how do you compare its theatricality to Book IV of *Paradise Lost*?
Lecture Twelve
Milton’s Living Influence

Scope: Almost immediately after its publication, *Paradise Lost* achieved canonical status in English literature. Its qualities have been debated—it has been loved and hated, embraced and rejected—but it has rarely, if ever been ignored. Milton has had an immense impact on the literature and culture of the English-speaking world, perhaps second only to Shakespeare and the King James Bible. This lecture traces the key moments in Milton’s reception and transformation, from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century criticism, through Romantic engagement, nineteenth-century appropriation, and twentieth-century academic debate. Milton became a “classic” by the early eighteenth century, and his impact has been decisive on such landmarks of English literature as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Moreover, the modern debate on just what should be taught in schools and universities has long been played out over Milton’s work and reputation. We read him today for his grandeur, his eloquence, his anger, his brilliance, and his sweep of mind—and if we quarrel with his sexism or bristle at his rhetorical excesses, at the very least we have him before us.

Outline

I. Milton and his early readers.
   A. *Paradise Lost* first appeared in a version in ten books in 1667. Milton was dissatisfied with this version (it also did not sell well), and rewrote the poem’s final portion, expanding it into the twelve-book version we know today. That twelve-book version was published in 1674. The poem has never, since then, been out of print.
      1. In 1732, *Paradise Lost* appeared in an edition with complete scholarly apparatus—making it look like a classical Greek or Latin text and thus confirming Milton’s canonical status.
      2. Milton’s epic had great influence on subsequent literary writers.
      3. Early eighteenth-century poets work either within or against his example. There is a spate of poems centering on finding Paradise on earth that are strongly influenced by Milton.
      4. But Milton’s work also gives rise to the “mock-epic,” the parodic or satiric work that uses Milton’s example to critique social mores and mock pretense.
      5. Alexander Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* (1714) is perhaps the best example of the early eighteenth-century mock-epic—a poem which must be understood and appreciated with Milton in mind.
   B. Milton’s life itself became the subject of many biographies.
      1. The first life of Milton was published in 1694 and written by Edward Phillips, Milton’s nephew. (It was probably dictated in large part by Milton himself late in life, and put together for publication after Milton’s death.)
      2. Phillip’s biography is very full, but also very unreliable; it provides us with some wonderful anecdotes, but it is really more of an apology for Milton than an objective record of his life.
      3. Several early biographers and polemicists appropriated Milton as a founder of their own brand of politics—in particular the politics of Parliamentary control over royal rule. In the eighteenth century, tensions between king and Parliament were acute, and some even claimed Milton as the father of a constitutional system of government.
   C. Samuel Johnson’s famous *Life of Milton* (1779) is perhaps the most acute and critical.
      1. Johnson is well known for his aesthetic judgments and his aphoristic expressions of criticism (of *Paradise Lost*, “none wished it longer”).
      2. Johnson was highly critical of what he saw as Milton’s politics and estrangement of feeling from language.

II. Milton also inspired later poets and visual artists.
   A. Among the most notable of writer/artists influenced by and struggling with Milton was William Blake.
      1. Early in his career, Blake was struck with Milton’s poetry; he noted in his own poem, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” (1790–93), that Milton was “of the Devil’s party without knowing it.”
2. From the years 1801–25, Blake produced about ninety illustrations to a variety of Milton’s works (e.g., *Comus*, “The Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” “*L’Allegro*” and “*Il Penseroso*,” and *Paradise Lost*).

3. Blake also wrote a long poem called “Milton” (1804–8), in which he imagines Milton come back to earth, almost Christ-like.

B. Milton also stood behind the Romantic literary project of the great personal epic.
   1. William Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, a huge multi-book poem that he tinkered with from the 1790s until almost until his death in 1850, is Miltonic in its project, as it puts it, to chronicle “the growth of a poet’s mind.”
   2. Percy Shelley engaged with Milton’s God and Satan in his *Defence of Poetry*, arguing that Satan was superior to God as a “moral being.” Shelley views his own literary career through Milton’s Satan, imagining Satan to be like Prometheus.
   3. We can find Milton in John Keats (cf. Keats’ poem “Bright Star” to Milton’s first unsigned poem to Shakespeare).

C. But Milton also helped to shape the Romantic literary idea of the great strong poet, grappling with the poetic forebear.
   1. Milton’s relationships to his own father figures—e.g., God, Cromwell, his father—became the model for a kind of literary history, where poets struggled against literary fathers.
   2. This notion of literary history is deeply embedded in Romantic literature (the poetry of Shelley, Keats, Byron, Wordsworth, and Blake) and literary criticism (especially the writings of figures such as Hazlitt), and it informs a good deal of modern literary criticism about how poets work and write.

III. Milton’s most sustained literary effect, however, may be seen in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818).
   A. *Paradise Lost* provides the central paradigm for the idea of the novel: the relationship of the creator to the created.
      1. *Frankenstein* has, on its title page in the original edition, the following quotation from *Paradise Lost*:
         
         Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
         To mould me man? Did I solicit thee
         From darkness to promote me?
      2. In addition to the relationship of creator to created, there is the theme of the search for knowledge and wisdom.
      3. Frankenstein himself, not the monster, is in many ways a Miltonic character—is he like Adam and Eve, tempted by knowledge; or is he really like Satan, the active tempter and the rebel in the world of social orthodoxy? Is he like Milton himself?

B. Throughout the novel, individual quotations and allusions to *Paradise Lost* also create a filter through which Shelley’s characters may be seen.
   1. Note, for example, the reference early on to Frankenstein’s concern that a desire for wisdom and knowledge “may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been.”
   2. When the creature offers up his own autobiography, he presents himself like Adam awakening in Eden.
   3. Scenes in the creature’s life are often described with reference to *Paradise Lost*, for example, the Pandemonium of natural life, or the vision of himself in the water (recalling Eve’s first view of herself in the pool).
   4. When the creature comes upon a satchel of books, he takes them to his hovel. First listed among them is *Paradise Lost*.
   5. The creature states at another point, “Many times I considered Satan [rather than Adam] as the fitter emblem of my condition; for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.” And later, “from that moment I declared everlasting war against the species, and more than all, against him who had formed me…”

IV. Milton also stands at the center of modern debates on teaching literature.
   A. T. S. Eliot in the 1930s rejected Milton for what he called Milton’s “dissociation of sensibility.”
      1. Eliot and his followers rejected the poet because they found his rhetorical stance and the tone of his poetry far removed from the emotional content of the verse.
2. Eliot favored the “Metaphysical Poets” (e.g., John Donne) over Milton, for their controlled use of metaphor and imagery and for their attempts to express emotion directly.

3. Eliot favored, for modern poetry, a style that conveyed speech conversationally or directly. He considered Milton a “bad influence” on later poetry.

B. Critic F. R. Leavis in Cambridge took up Eliot’s argument.
1. “We dislike his verse,” Leavis announced.
2. Leavis considered Milton, in fact, to represent not so much seventeenth-century values as Victorian ones. Matthew Arnold had said, “Milton is English,” and nineteenth-century readers and writers embraced Milton as the high point of English literature. Leavis and his heirs rejected this position.

C. Modern Milton: Since the time of Eliot and Leavis, Milton criticism and response has been of three kinds.
1. Resuscitating Milton: The English critic C. S. Lewis published the influential Preface to Paradise Lost in 1942. The American scholar Douglas Bush published Milton in Our Time in 1945. Both, broadly speaking, sought to understand the Christian humanist quality of Milton and his poem. They argued that Milton’s work espoused timeless values concerning humankind, sin and redemption, and the quality of great poetry (both were, perhaps, responding to the traumas of WWII in seeking to find a stable place for literature and culture in a fractured world).
2. Reviving the reader: The American Stanley Fish published Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost in 1967. He argued that the experience of reading the poem is most important: that Milton is creating a readership that must experience again the Fall of man and that, more than doctrine, what the poem is basically about is the emotional and rhetorical effect it has on readers. Thus, individual reader response, rather than any authorial intention, is what gives the poem meaning.
3. Redeeming Eve: Anglo-American feminist critics have sought to locate Milton’s Eve (and more generally his ideas of women) in the historical contexts of his time and to contrast them with our own. They have also sought to understand the history of women writers, and in the process, to critique Milton within the contexts of a female literary tradition and a modern political consciousness.

V. Milton now.
A. Regardless of our point of view, we can still read Milton today for his power and his provocations.
B. Milton is a great writer of the human condition.
C. But he is also a master of the English language, and whether we love or loathe him, he is there to be grappled with, enjoyed, argued against, worshipped, condemned, or simply awed by.

Essential Reading:
Mary Shelley, Frankenstein.

Supplementary Reading:
C. S. Lewis, A Preface to Paradise Lost.
Stanley Fish, Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost.

Questions to Consider:
1. Why read Milton today? What do you personally get from reading his poetry, or his prose?
2. How was Milton taught to you, where and when did you first encounter his writings, and in what contexts? Did those encounters help or hinder your appreciation of his work?
Timeline

1608................................. John Milton born on December 9 in London. His father, John, Sr., is a successful scrivener and amateur musician.

1615–24.............................. Milton a student at St. Paul’s School in London.

1625–29.............................. Milton studies at Christ’s College, Cambridge, receiving his BA in 1629 and his MA (an honorific degree) in 1632.


1632–34.............................. Milton at home in Hammersmith, reading and studying.

1634................................. *Comus* (also called *A Masque*) performed at Ludlow Castle.

1635–38.............................. Milton at home at family estate, Horton, Buckinghamshire, reading and studying.

1637................................. Death of Milton’s mother. Death of Edward King, Cambridge classmate and subject of “Lycidas.”

1638................................. Publication of “Lycidas” in a collection of poems for Edward King.

1638–39.............................. Milton travels to Italy; meets Galileo.

1639................................. Milton returns to London; supports himself with family money and private tutoring.

1641................................. Publication of political tracts.

1642................................. English Civil War begins on August 22. Milton publishes *Reason of Church Government*; marries 16-year old Mary Powell, who returns to her family after only a few months.

1643................................. Milton publishes divorce tracts.

1644................................. *Aereopagitica* and other political tracts published, as well as revised version of divorce tracts.

1645................................. Mary Powell returns to live with Milton.

1646................................. Publication of *Poems of Mr. John Milton* (actually dated 1645), which includes such early poems as “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” “Lycidas,” *Comus*, sonnets, and poems in Latin and Italian.

1647................................. Milton’s father dies.

1648................................. Milton’s daughter Mary born.

1649................................. Execution of King Charles I. Milton publishes *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (a tract in which he discusses regicide); Milton named Cromwell’s Secretary for Foreign Tongues.

1652................................. Milton completely blind by this date. Wife Mary dies; son John (born 1651) dies.

1654................................. Cromwell named Protector.

1656................................. Milton marries Katherine Woodcock.

1658................................. Death of Milton’s second wife; death of Cromwell.

1660................................. The Restoration; Charles II returns from exile; Milton arrested and serves seven months in prison.
1663................................. Milton marries again (Elisabeth Minshull).
1667................................. Publication of Paradise Lost (in the original ten-book version).
1671................................. Publication of Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes together.
1674................................. Publication of revised, twelve-book version of Paradise Lost; Milton dies on November 8.
1694................................. Publication of The Life of Milton by Milton’s nephew, Edward Phillips (from materials largely dictated by Milton himself).
Glossary

**allegory**: the literary device of saying one thing and meaning another; more generally, a way of telling a story by means of elaborate symbols and symbolic characters (e.g., with names like Sin and Death) who stand for moral categories; also, a means of telling a story about highly charged current, political events in a manner that is oblique or allusive (e.g., the debate in Hell may represent an allegory of political debates in Milton’s England).

**closet drama**: a literary genre in which a work is structured like a play, but is never intended for theatrical performance. *Samson Agonistes* is a closet drama.

**epic**: a long poem on a great theme, often concerned with war, heroism, or social and cosmic foundations.

**epic simile**: a rhetorical device, whereby an event, character, or object in a poem is compared at great length to an event, character, or object from classical antiquity or from some distant country. The device is characteristic of epic poetry from Homer and Virgil on, and Milton uses it throughout *Paradise Lost*, especially in his characterizations of Satan and of Eden.

**Interregnum**: the period between the deposition of Charles I in 1649 and the restoration of Charles II in 1660, when England was ruled by a Council of State under the aegis of Oliver Cromwell, known as the Protector.

**invocation**: the calling upon the Muses, or the divine spirit, for inspiration at the beginning of a great poem or poetic career.

**masque**: a play performed at the royal court, or at an aristocratic gathering. It frequently uses mythological characters, elaborate scenery, and heightened formal rhetoric to convey a sense of stately entertainment and moral education. Milton’s *Comus* is a masque.

**mock epic**: a long poem written as a parody of epic subject matter and style, often for purposes of social satire or for purposes of literary critique. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* spurred the writing of such mock epics as Pope’s *Rape of the Lock*.

**ode**: a poetic form written in praise of a hero, often made up of irregularly lineated stanzas and written in a high rhetorical style. Milton adopts the classical ode to the subject of Christ’s birth in the “Morning of Christ’s Nativity.”

**pastoral elegy**: a genre of literature in which the poet presents himself as a shepherd mourning the death of a close friend. The friend’s death becomes the occasion for the poet’s reflections and the nature of cosmic or social order. Pastoral elegies were often used to announce poetic careers, as Virgil, Chaucer, Spenser, and Milton did (the last in his “Lycidas”).

**regicide**: the act of killing a king, or the political position that a king could be justly killed for the good of a country. Milton comes close to advocating regicide in the *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*.

**scrivener**: a professional writer or copyist employed to prepare wills, contracts, and other legal documents. As they were often themselves advisors in such documents, especially in financial arrangements, scriveners themselves could become very wealthy (by charging fees for consultation as well as copying). Milton’s father was a scrivener, and was so successful at it that he was able to afford homes in London and in the country and was able to support Milton for the first four decades of his life.

**sonnet**: a short poem of fourteen lines often on a personal subject. Milton writes sonnets on both personal and political subjects, most notably those on his blindness and to Cromwell.

**tract**: a political document, in prose, published as a short pamphlet, often on a subject of current social interest or debate. Milton wrote many tracts on issues such as divorce, the rule of kings, freedom of the press, education, and the status of women.
Biographical Notes

Charles I, King of England (1600–49). Second son of James VI of Scotland (James I of England); succeeded his father in 1625. His Roman Catholic leanings and his poor administration prompted Parliamentary resistance, and his formation of an army against those who dissented against him fomented the English Civil War. Deposed, imprisoned, and finally executed.

Charles II, King of England (1630–85). Second son of Charles I. After exile in Europe, returned to England in 1660 upon the conclusion of the Civil War and the earlier death of Cromwell. His reign was marked by public disaster (e.g., the Fire of London of 1666 and the plague) and continued political upheaval. Died avowing himself a Roman Catholic. Reopened the theaters in England after they had been closed by the Puritans in the 1640s.

Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658). Cambridge-educated politician and military leader, active in the campaigns against Charles I in the 1640s. Upon the execution of Charles I in 1649, became commander-in-chief of the army, dissolved Parliament, and was named Protector (i.e., executive political head of the country) in 1653. Named his own son, Richard Cromwell, as his successor (who served as Protector in 1658–69 before being deposed by the army). He died in 1658, and his body was dug up and hanged in 1661.

John Dryden (1631–1700). English poet, scholar, and critic. He reworked Shakespeare’s plays for the late seventeenth-century stage, and in 1674 sought to mount an opera based on Milton’s Paradise Lost. His literary criticism influenced English literature (and in particular the reception of Milton) for over a century.

Eliot, T. S. (1888–1965). American-born English poet, critic, and essayist. Wrote disparagingly of Milton, whom he accused of “dissociation of sensibility” (i.e., writing in a high, rhetorical style that did not fit the subject matter or the emotional content of his work). His criticism of Milton was highly influential on American and British readers. He softened his stance in the 1940s, but still never fully embraced Milton or his work.

Stanley E. Fish (1937– ). American university professor, author of revisionary studies of Milton and seventeenth-century poetry in the 1960s and 1970s (including Surprised by Sin, 1967). Developed the theory of reader response criticism, where the meaning of a literary work is to be found in the experience of the individual reader’s reactions, rather than in the discovery of a historical author’s intentions. He was responsible for reviving Milton studies in America after the disparagement of Eliot and the subsequent Christian humanist evaluations of C. S. Lewis.

Galileo Galilei (1564–1642). Italian scientist and astronomer. First used the telescope to discern the craters of the moon and the moons of Jupiter; condemned by the Inquisition for claiming that the earth and planets orbited around the sun. Visited by Milton in 1638 while under house arrest. Mentioned twice in Paradise Lost (the only contemporary historical figure ever mentioned in the poem) as a figure of artistry and intellectual inquiry (and also, by the time Milton met him, blind).

Samuel Johnson (1709–84). English poet, critic, and lexicographer. Best known for his Dictionary of 1755, but also the author of the Lives of the Poets (1779–81), which included a life of Milton. Dismissive of Milton and his poem, said of Paradise Lost, “none wished it longer.”

Edward King (1612–37). Cambridge friend of Milton. His death by drowning in the Irish Sea prompted a group of Cambridge classmates to assemble a volume of memorial poetry in 1638, the last poem of which was Milton’s “Lycidas.”

F. R. Leavis (1895–1979). English university professor, sought to create a school of literary criticism that would reevaluate the canonical works of English literature. Like Eliot, he was critical of Milton for his rhetorical excesses and his style; more vigorously than Eliot, however, he denigrated Milton as emblematic of the tastes of a later, Victorian set of values.

C. S. Lewis (1898–1963). English university professor, novelist, and critic. His Preface to Paradise Lost (1942) sought to rehabilitate Milton in the light of Christian humanism and, perhaps too, in the context of the shattering experience of WWII.

Andrew Marvell (1621–78). English poet and friend and supporter of Milton. Was also a supporter of Cromwell (writing poems in his honor), and served as a Member of Parliament. Interceded successfully with Restoration leaders to release Milton and pay his fines in 1660 (after the Act of Oblivion pardoned those who had served
Cromwell). Marvell vigorously supported Milton’s poetry and politics, and wrote the prefatory poetry to the second edition of *Paradise Lost*.

**Milton, John, Sr.** (c. 1563–1647). English scrivener and amateur musician, father of the poet John Milton. His financial success enabled the young poet to reside at home for much of the 1630s and study, as well as to travel to Italy for continued education. Subject of Milton’s poem “*Ad Patrem*” (“To His Father”); in spite of his financial support, he apparently never fully embraced his son’s choice of a literary career, preferring for him a career in the Church.

**Milton, John** (1608–74). English poet and political pamphleteer, author of *Paradise Lost* and many other poems on religious, political, biblical, and historical subjects. Associated with the supporters of Cromwell and the radical republicans, was Cromwell’s Secretary for Foreign Tongues during the Interregnum. Arrested and imprisoned with the Restoration in 1660, was eventually released upon the intercession of important friends. Published *Paradise Lost* in an early ten-book version in 1667, and a revised twelve-book version in 1674. Totally blind after 1652.


**Edmund Spenser** (c. 1552–99). English poet, author of the *Faerie Queene* and other works. His poetry established the norms of allegorical romance in England at the end of the sixteenth century, and Milton responds directly to his work in Book II of *Paradise Lost*. Milton called Spenser “sage and serious” and “a better teacher than Scotus or Aquinas” in *Aereopagitica*.

**Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley** (1797–1851). English writer, wife of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Published *Frankenstein* in 1818, the plot and character details of which involve a close reading of *Paradise Lost* and thus bear witness to the impact of Milton’s poem on the Romantic literary sensibility.
There are many good editions of Milton’s poetry and prose available. Perhaps the best and most affordable edition of the poetry, with selections from the prose, is the Oxford Authors Series, *John Milton*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford, 1991). It presents Milton’s English writings in modernized spellings and offers up-to-date translations of the Latin and Italian works. It also offers a concise review of Milton’s life, works, and critical reception in its introduction.


Readers interested in the histories of scholarship, printing, and interpretation of the complete works should consult Douglas Bush and A. S. P. Woodhouse, *A Variorum Commentary on the Poems of John Milton* (New York, 1970). There are excellent biographies of Milton available. The best and most recent are:


Literary criticism of Milton is a vast field, and it is often bound up with studies of his times. Some of the best available book-length studies are the following:

William Empson, *Milton’s God* (London, 1961; reissued Cambridge, 1985), a landmark, if idiosyncratic, study following the Romantic literary tradition that Milton was of Satan’s party, if without knowing it, and that *Paradise Lost* defends disobedience to God.

Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (California, 1967), a dazzling and revisionary account of reading the poem, focusing on the responses of the reader and the ways in which Milton educates and manipulates his audience.

John Guillory, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History* (New York, 1983), a scholarly study of Milton’s relationships to his literary predecessors and to the concept of literary history raised by Milton’s work.


There are also two excellent collections of essays on Milton’s work, both of which give the student a good sense of the varieties of criticism and the various schools of interpretation currently at work in Milton studies: Dennis Danielson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Milton* (Cambridge, 1989), a collection with separate essays by different scholars on individual major poems, literary problems, and Milton’s literary influence. There is a full, annotated bibliography at the end.
