MILTON'S MORALITY

by Micah Mattix, Regent University

In 2016, during the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's death, the Bard was feted by dozens of books, hundreds of magazine and newspaper articles, performances of his plays, lectures, and a Shakespeare Day gala attended by Prince Charles himself. The London Tube map replaced the names of its stops with titles of Shakespeare's plays. Google, of course, did a doodle.

In 2017, it was all Jane Austen—the 200th anniversary of the novelist's death. Like Shakespeare the year before, she was everywhere, not least in the pages of the *New York Times*, which ran some 20 articles on her, musing about everything from what she might tell us about Brexit to why the alt-right loves her so much. *The Atlantic* stated unambiguously that "Jane Austen Is Everything," and it sure did feel that way. Her face now graces the U.K.'s new £10 note.

Pity poor John Milton. Last year also marked the 350th anniversary of the publication of *Paradise Lost,* the greatest epic poem in English and one of the greatest works of Western literature, and hardly a word was said about either the man or the work: just three books—William Poole's *Milton and the Making of Paradise Lost,* John Carey's *The Essential Paradise Lost*, and a collection of essays on the poet in translation—and a BBC Radio 4 documentary.

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This rather paltry celebration of a great work and writer is all the more surprising considering the poem has been growing in global popularity. The editors of the recent essay collection *Milton in Translation* note that *Paradise Lost* has been translated more frequently in the last 30 years than it was in the preceding 300, mostly into non-Western languages. The book "demonstrates that around the world people are taking real interest in Milton," Islam Issa, one of the volume's editors, told the *Guardian*. But in Milton's home country? Not so much.

How did a poem that was lauded even by Milton's enemies as not only above "all moderne attempts in verse, but equall to any of ye Ancient Poets," as Sir John

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Satan Exulting Over Eve, one of William Blake's illustrations of Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Hobart put it in 1668, and that was translated in its entirety into Latin in 1690 and used in English-speaking classrooms to teach rhetoric instead of classical texts lose so much ground to both Shakespeare and Austen, particularly in Western countries?

One reason is that *Paradise Lost* is, well, a poem, and poems are not only more difficult to read than either prose fiction or plays, they are harder to put on a screen, the reigning medium of our day. There have been dozens of television and film adaptations of both Shakespeare and Austen, but very few of *Paradise Lost*. (A TV version produced by the British actor Martin Freeman is reportedly in the works, but if it ever gets made, don't expect anything close to the original. "*Paradise Lost* is like a biblical Game of Thrones," another of the producers has said.)

The other reason is that *Paradise Lost* is an unabashedly religious work. Early readers, Poole reminds us, shared Milton's belief "in the truth of his subject"—that is, of God, angels, and demons. Like many readers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, John Wesley read the poem devotionally. He even published a religious commentary on it in 1763. Today, however, "the vast majority of readers, both those who defend and those who attack Milton's project," Poole writes, look at the work as merely a "technical masterpiece. … This is our view today, and Milton would not like it."

Milton began the poem sometime after 1652—the year he went completely blind and lost his first wife—and perhaps as late as 1658. He finished it in 1665 at the latest. While Milton's nephew, Edward, claimed that Milton dictated the more than 11,500 lines of verse in nearly perfect form in groups of 10 to 30 at a time, Jonathan Richardson argued in another early account of the poet's life that he would dictate 40 lines while still in bed in the morning and later cut them by half. However *Paradise Lost* was composed, it is a stunning piece of artistry whose scope and complexity have yet to be matched by a single work in English.

Milton's lines can be both digressive and tight, packed with allusions and neologisms. An exceptional student of Latin and a gifted linguist, Milton coined more English words than Shakespeare, many of them first appearing in *Paradise Lost* (like "terrific," "jubilant," "space" to refer to outer space, as well as "pandemonium"). John Carey writes in his introduction to *The Essential Paradise Lost* that Milton's long sentences, running over several lines of verse, often establish surprising points of comparison. Recounting his first moments of consciousness, for example, Adam notes how both his "heart" and creation "smil'd . . . with joy":

By quick instinctive motion up I sprung As thitherward endevoring, and upright Stood on my feet; about me round I saw Hill, Dale, and shadie Woods, and sunnie Plaines, And liquid Lapse of murmuring Streams; by these, Creatures that livd, and movd, and walk'd, or flew, Birds on the branches warbling; all things smil'd, With fragrance and with joy my heart oreflow'd.

Carey argues that it is "impossible to say whether all things smiled with fragrance and joy, or whether Adam's heart overflowed with fragrance and joy . . . . What the subtle merging of meaning shows is that Adam is at one with nature. He does not . . . distinguish between what is happening in nature and what is happening in his own heart." Over 1,000 lines later, Adam feels a "falt'ring measure" within himself. He goes to find Eve and sees her returning from the Tree of Knowledge with "A bough of fairest fruit that downy smiled" in her hand. The pulling of the branch from the tree evidently ruptured Adam's heart even before he tastes its fruit.

Key words are also repeated but change in meaning as the narrative progresses. Carey remarks, for example, that when "lapse" is first used it refers to the innocent movement of streams. After the fall, however, it "comes to signify original sin, and the loss of man's freedom that goes with it."

"Maze," "error," "serpent" and "wandering" are other words that fall. When, at the creation, God separates land and water, the rivers, "with serpent error wandering" are innocent, so are the brooks in Paradise that run "With mazy error under pendant shades." But once sin has entered the world these words are overtaken by evil. The devils in hell debate philosophy, "in wandering mazes lost."

We see this use of doubling in the structure of the poem, as well. The first 10 books of the poem, as David Quint has observed, mirror each other in meaningful ways. Beginning *in medias res*, shortly after God has cast Satan out of heaven, the poem follows the Devil's "rise" as chief enemy of God in the first three books, culminating in his provocative offers to "save" his fellow demons, as well as his daughter, Sin, and his son, Death, by bringing destruction to God's creation. This "rise" is mirrored in Adam and Eve's fall in books 8 to 10. Book 4 offers Eve's account of creation; book 7 offers Adam's. The middle books—5 and 6—recount the war in heaven. Thus, we have a sort of circle, moving from Satan's expulsion from heaven in book 1 to Adam and Eve's removal from Eden in book 11, with the war in heaven at the core. It seems fitting, too, that the final two books of the poem—11 and 12—address the future judgment and redemption.

The point of all this mirroring is to show how closely evil resembles good. Poole writes in *Milton and the Making of Paradise Lost* that Milton "regards evil as disarmingly close in appearance to the good," and it is only by careful moral reasoning that the two can be separated. Shortly after Milton returned from Italy in 1639, where he met Galileo and spent several months participating in various Florentine literary salons, he wrote in his commonplace book, "In moral evil much good may be mixed, and that with singular craft."

Notwithstanding Milton's famous promise in the opening section of the poem to "assert eternal providence / And justify the ways of God to men," it is Satan's poem from beginning to end. He is the first character to speak, and he is eloquent, bold, full of feeling for others. His first words are ones of consolation for his fellow fallen angel Beelzebub:

O how fall'n! how changed
From him who in the happy realms of light
Clothed with transcendent brightness didst outshine
Myriads, though bright!

He follows this with a word of encouragement:

All is not lost: th'unconquerable will
And study of revenge, immortal hate
And courage never to submit or yield—
And what is else not to be overcome?

He promises the other demons that he will never yield to God's tyranny and tells Sin, with whom he had relations after she burst from his head Athena-like, that he will set her and her son free from "this dark and dismal house of pain" and, like a loving husband and father (at least until the mask slips), provide a home where "ye shall be fed and filled / Immeasurably: all things shall be your prey!"

The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley praised Milton's Satan as "a moral being . . . far superior to his God . . . who perseveres in some purpose which he has conceived to be excellent in spite of adversity and torture." The problem is that Satan's "excellent" purpose is the destruction of "harmless innocence" for personal and political ends. This makes him, Carey writes, "English literature's first terrorist."

In short, Satan says all the rightly compassionate things only to the "right" people, who are, of course, *his* people, and only when his own interests are at stake. He is unflappable only in front of a crowd, courageous only when it is personally advantageous. He acts like a good leader, father, and husband—and even argues with *nearly* perfect reasoning that he is more morally upright than God himself—all while serving only himself. He is a god of *unchecked* liberty, and, therefore, in Milton's view, a god of chaos and destruction.

What is particularly chilling about the character of Satan is the extent to which he believes all his actions, no matter how violent, are not only justified but morally right. As C. S. Lewis put it, "we see in Satan . . . the horrible co-existence of a subtle and incessant intellectual activity with an incapacity to understand anything," particularly his own selfish motivations. Satan wants the freedom to do as he pleases, but it is a freedom that always comes at the expense of others' liberty.

Milton, of course, was something of an individualist himself. He wrote in defense of the freedom of the press and divorce and was one of the few supporters of the abolition of the monarchy in favor of executing Charles I. He served as secretary for foreign tongues to the council of state in Cromwell's Protectorate. It's strange, then, that Satan often sounds like a republican. In book 1, he speaks out against monarchical tyranny and he democratically offers his fellow demons a chance to travel to Eden to destroy God's creation.

But like everything else that Satan does, the offer is a façade. Unsurprisingly, no one volunteers after Satan's bleak description of the "perilous attempt" and he quickly chooses to do it himself, thus showing himself of "highest worth" and solidifying his authority over his peers. In book 12, after the archangel Michael tells Adam about the Tower of Babel, Adam laments that his progeny, following Satan's example, will desire to raise themselves above their peers and assume "Authority usurped from God not giv'n." Michael responds that political tyranny is the direct result of men neglecting to rule their own liberty with reason and using that liberty instead to pursue "upstart passions":

Reason in man obscured or not obeyed
Immediately inordinate desires
And upstart passions catch the government
From reason and to servitude reduce
Man till then free.

Today we prefer a simpler moral reasoning. We are taught to trust our feelings and to believe that bad people are obviously bad and good people are obviously good. Avoiding evil is merely the result of staying informed not discernment, of "raising awareness" on social media or with a Friday-night protest.

Paradise Lost shows otherwise.