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Epic Conventions: From *Gondibert* to
Paradise Lost

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Restoration & Eighteenth-Century English Literature (ANGBA3- Literature Survey Course)

Epic Conventions: From *Gondibert* to *Paradise Lost*

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SUMMARY:

This lesson will introduce the main features of the mid-seventeenth century English literary criticism (Restoration), and the emergence of neo-classical tradition relying on Aristotle, Horace, Cicero and Quintilian (and their appropriation by continental critics). It will focus on the function of the critic as that of deducing (and improving) “rules” of composition from the works of distinguished ancients to be followed by contemporary writers and used as grounds of judgement for discernible readers/critics. As these rules were prescribing the appropriate conventions of literary (mostly poetic) genres, the lessons will focus on these genres, the present one elaborating the epic.

Topics will include:

- the rise of classicism; the methods of Restoration critics: analytical (Aristotelian) and rhetorical (Horace); the application of the antique oratorical aspects of creation to composition of poetry; admiration of simplicity and propriety (*decorum*);
- the main genres deduced from the classics and their hierarchical structuring;
- the centrality of the epic in contemporary literary debates on heroic poem (Davenant, Hobbes, Cowley); the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns
- epic conventions
- John Milton (1608-1674) and the emerging idea of *Paradise Lost* (1667).

1 THE RISE OF CLASSICISM AND ENGLISH LITERARY CRITICISM

i The literature of Restoration and the eighteenth century is usually divided into **three periods**, each marked by the death of its prominent critic/author:

- the rise of classicism ending with the death of John Dryden in 1700;
- neo-classicism (and the rise of journalism) ending with the death of Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift in 1744 and 1745 respectively;
- the disintegration of classicism (rise of new literary modes, pre-romanticism), its end usually marked by the death of Samuel Johnson in 1784 (although some will mark it with the start of the French Revolution in 1798)

In all of these periods there is marked approach to classical antiquity and/or to the dogmatic approach to classical works formulated in the mid-seventeenth century modelled on French and Italian critics. Hence, this lesson will highlight the most prominent features of nascent neo-classical literary criticism of the Restoration period.

The function of the critic in the Restoration was to deduce **“the rules” of composition** appropriate for different literary (poetic) genres from distinguished writers of antiquity, with the ambition to better and improve even the classics when their works were deemed to fantastical or limited in their scope. The critics’ methods were predominantly **analytical** (based on Renaissance interpretations of Aristotle) or **rhetorical** (following Horace, Cicero and Quintilian):

- Aristotle provided a method for analysing literary texts as his work focused on certain forms of poetry (epic and tragedy), their component parts and structural principles, while
- the rhetorical tradition focused on the methods of affecting the readers, which has become the principal role of poets in Restoration.

The stirring of the reader’s **passions** (the contemporary term for emotions) also contributed to the structural preoccupation of the critics since the composition of effective oration, and by extension poetry, was seen to adhere to three rhetorical canons: *inventio* (finding of material), *dispositio* (arrangement of material) and *elocutio* (embodying of matter in fit



John Dryden on the frontispiece of his translation of [The Works of Virgil](#) (vol. 2). Printed by Jacob Tonson, 1709.

John Dryden (1631–1700), England’s first Poet Laureate, was considered by Samuel Johnson “the father of English criticism, as the writer who first taught us to determine upon principles the merit of composition” (103–4). Dryden’s reputation is due to his extensive literary criticism which, apart from *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668), was published in prefaces/prologues to his own works and translations with the primary intent of their justification but also in an attempt “to vindicate the honour of our English Writers, from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them.”

style). John Dryden, in the perfunctory letter to his historic poem *Annus Mirabilis* (1667), summarizes it like this:

The composition of all poems is, or ought to be, of wit, and wit in the poet, or wit writing [...] Wit written is that which is well designed, the happy result of thought, or product of imagination. [...] ... it is some lively and apt description, dressed in such colours of speech, that it sets before your eyes the absent object, as perfectly, and more delightfully than nature. So then the first happiness of the poet's imagination is properly **invention** or finding of the thought, the second is **fancy** [i.e. disposition], or the variation, deriving or moulding of that thought, as the judgment represents it proper to the subject, the third is **elocution**, or the art of clothing and adorning that thought, so found and varied, in apt, significant, and sounding words: **the quickness of the imagination is seen in the invention, the fertility in the fancy, and the accuracy in the expression.**

The idea of **wit** as the transcendent value of all literature is particularly important to Dryden and his contemporaries. It is intrinsically connected to their idea of natural simplicity, however, by nature they primarily think of human nature, and how that which is expressed in the simplest terms, comprehensible to this universal human nature, is wit in writing.

A thing well said will be wit in all languages; and though it may lose something in the translation, yet to him who reads it in the original, 'tis still the same [...] Wit is best conveyed to us in the most easy language: and is most to be admired when a great thought comes dressed in words so commonly received that it is understood by the meanest apprehensions, as the best meat is the most easily digested. (NAEL C.78, 80)

 Read the following excerpt from Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis* and its Hungarian translation.

Note what strikes you as "easy languages" and/or simply to be "understood":

Night came, but without darkness or repose, —
A dismal picture of the general doom,
Where souls, distracted when the trumpet blows,
And half unready, with their bodies come.

Those who have homes, when home they do repair,
To a last lodging call their wandering friends:
Their short uneasy sleeps are broken with care,
To look how near their own destruction tends.

Those who have none, sit round where once it was,
And with full eyes each wanted room require;
Haunting the yet warm ashes of the place,
As murder'd men walk where they did expire.

Some stir up coals, and watch the vestal fire,
Others in vain from sight of ruin run;
And, while through burning labyrinths they retire,
With loathing eyes repeat what they would shun.

The most in fields like herded beasts lie down,
To dews obnoxious on the grassy floor;
And while their babes in sleep their sorrows drown,
Sad parents watch the remnants of their store.

Éj jön, de homály s nyugság nincs sehol.
A végítélet zord képe ez itt:
felvert lelkek — míg a harsona szól —
fél-készületlen, testük cipelik.

Kinek van háza még — ha megleli —,
bolygó barátját hálni hívja be,
ám a gond rossz, korcs álmuk elveri,
s lesik: saját végzetük közel-e.

Kinek nincs háza, hol volt: üldögél,
tág szemmel nemrég tűnt szobát kutat,
vagy a még langy hamuban jár le-fel,
mint holta-helyt kísért az áldozat.

Szenet szít egy s bámul Veszta-tüzet
más hiún fut a rémlátvány előtt,
s míg égő útvesztőkben tévelyeg,
szeme, mit kerül, azt találja föl.

A tömeg mezőn, hordákban hever,
földön, mérges harmatú fű között,
s míg gyermek kínját álma nyomja el,
amijük maradt: őrzik a szülőök.

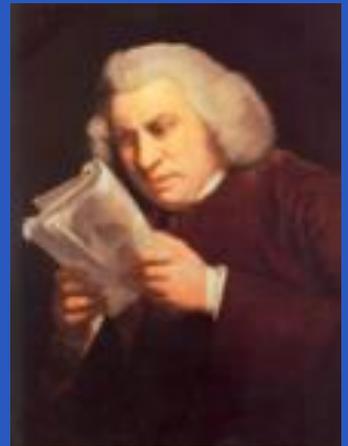
(Ford. Tellér Gyula)

This value of simplicity and propriety of expression led critics to shun the metaphorically too dense and hyperbolic style of their immediate predecessors (i.e. metaphysical poets), sometimes dubbed the Baroque of English Literature. Of course, all of these ideas were occasionally carried to extremes: rules became pedantries, critiques the hunting of faults in minutiae.

  Read the following excerpt from Dryden's preface, i.e. "The Author's Apology for Heroique Poetry; and Poeticque Licence" to his opera adaptation of Milton's epic. Note the following:

- criticism of the too pedantic application of the "rules";
- the idea of raising passion in the reader as the principal aim of poetry;
- how this rhetorical principle is connected to the idea of nature (i.e. human nature) and simple delivery.

... they wholly mistake the Nature of Criticism, who think its business is principally to find fault. Criticism, as it was first instituted by Aristotle, was meant a Standard of judging well. The chiefest part of which is to observe those Excellencies which should delight a reasonable Reader. If the Design, the Conduct, the Thoughts, and the Expressions of a POEM, be generally such as proceed from a true Genius of Poetry, the Critique ought to pass his judgement in favour of the Author [...] *Aristotle* rais'd the Fabrique of his Poetry, from observation of those things, in which *Euripides*, *Sophocles*, and *Aeschylus* pleas'd: He consider'd how they rais'd the Passions, and thence has drawn rules for our Imitation. From hence have sprung the Tropes and Figures, for which they wanted a name, who fist practis'd them, and succeeded in them, Thus I grant you, that the knowledge of Nature was the Original Rule; and that all Poets ought to study her; as well as *Aristotle* and *Horace* her Interpretors. But then this also undeniably follows, that those things which delight all Ages, must have been an imitation of Nature; which is all I contend. Therefore is Rhetorick made an Art: therefore the Names of so many Tropes and Figures were invented: because it was observ'd they had such and such an effect upon the Audience. Therefore *Catachreses* and *Hyperboles* have found their place amongst them; not that they were to be avoided, but to be us'd judiciously, and plac'd in Poetry, as heightnings and shadows are in Painting, to make the Figure bolder, and cause it to stand off to sight. [...] 'Tis ture, the boldness of the Figures are to be hidden, sometimes by the address of the Poet; that they may work their effect upon the Mind, without discovering the Art which caus'd it. (In [The State of Innocence](#), 1677)



A portrait of Samuel Johnson by Joshua Reynolds, ca. 1775. (Wikimedia Commons). Click on the image for a larger resolution.

 Samuel Johnson writes the following interesting effect Dryden's critical prefaces had (allegedly) on the 18th-century readers:

To increase the value of his copies, he [Dryden] often accompanied his work with a preface of criticism; a kind of learning then almost new in English language, and which he, who had considered with great accuracy the principles of writing, was able to distribute copiously as occasions arose. By these dissertations the public judgement must have been much improved; and Swift, who conversed with Dryden, relates that he regretted the success of his own instructions, and found his readers made suddenly too skilful to be easily satisfied. (*Lives*, 48).

As Aristotle's *Poetics* — originally a work in two books (papyri) of which only the first remains extant — elaborates only on tragedy and epic, establishing them in a hierarchical position, the deductions of seventeenth century critics concerning other literary genres were drawn from primary sources on antiquity, and continental critics, like Ludovico Castelvetro and Nicolas Boileau. John Dennise's *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704) summarizes a dogmatic division of poetry into greater and lesser genres as follows:

1. The great Poetry is an Art by which a Poet justly and reasonably excites great Passion, that he may please and instruct, and comprehends Epic, Tragick, and the greater Lyrick Poetry.
2. The less Poetry is an Art by which a Poet excites less Passion for the forementioned Ends; and includes in it, Comedy and Satyr, and the little Ode, and Elegiack, and Pastoral Poems. (1704, 14)

Although the epic, also termed the heroic poem, will eventually give room to the emerging genre on novel (Mikhail Bakhtin) — the topical shift already on display in successful mock epics of Samuel Butler and Alexander Pope —, the genre itself exerted a considerable theoretical preoccupation, as expressed by Dryden's editor W. P. Ker:

...from the days of Petrarch and Boccaccio to those of Dr. Johnson, and more especially from the sixteenth century onward, it [heroic poem] was a subject that engaged some of the strongest intellects in the world (among them, Hobbes, Gibbon, and Hume); it was studied and discussed as fully and with as much thought as any of the problems by which the face of the world was changed in those centuries. There might be difference of opinion about the essence of the Heroic Poem or the Tragedy, but there was no doubt about their value. Truth about them was ascertainable, and truth about them was necessary to the intellect of man, for they were the noblest things belonging to him. ([1900, xvi](#))

Hence, in the following section, we will start our exploration of literary genres with the epic and its accepted conventions (rules).

2 EPIC CONVENTIONS AND THE QUARREL OF THE ANCIENTS AND MODERNS

i The **epic or heroic poem**, as defined by modern scholarship, is in a strict sense a “work that meets at least the following criteria: it is a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centred on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose action depends the fate of a tribe, a nation” (Abrams & Harpham 2009, 97). There are two standard types of epic: **the traditional (primary) epics**, originally oral poems recorded by subsequent generations and ascribed to an author, and **the literary epics** composed by individual authors imitating the traditional form.

TRADITIONAL

Illiad, Odyssey
Beowulf
Chanson de Roland
Peoma del Cid
Nibelungenlied

LITERARY

Vergil, *Aeneid*
 T. Tasso, *La Gerusalemme liberate*
 J. Milton, *Paradise Lost*
 W. Blake, *The Four Zoas* (1797, uncompleted)
 J. Keats, *Hyperion* (1818, abandoned)

Epic is considered to be the most ambitious of poetic endeavours because in it a poet attempts to give account of the whole world and its accumulated knowledge of history, geography and nature, as well as of its mythology — in a sense, epic is the most comprehensive (encyclopedic) poetic genre. This comprehensiveness is reflected in epic conventions, all of which are derived from traditional epics and later imitated and cemented by authors of literary epics:

- starts with the statement of the theme (the **argument**)
- **in medias res** (starts by jumping “into the middle of things”)
- begins with an invocation to a muse (**epic invocation**) — cultural
- **set in a vast universe**, encompassing many nations, worlds
- uses **epithets** and **epic similes** (cf. parataxis)
- contains long lists, called **epic catalogues**
- features long and **formal speeches**
- employs **machinery**, i.e. divine/superhuman intervention into human affairs
- features **heroes** embodying the values of a given society (civilization)
- the hero often descends into an **underworld** or hell

However, what we now see as established norms and conventions of the genre were highly contested issues in mid-17th century and post-Restoration England as part of the **quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns**. The quarrel was between

- a) the Ancients, advocating classical literature as the only acceptable model of literary excellence, and
- b) the Moderns, challenging the pre-eminence of the writers of antiquity.

i In England it will eventually be called “[The Battle of Books](#)”, after Jonathan Swift’s preface to his *A Tale of a Tub* published in 1704.

The most significant contributors to the early debate were, apart from Dryden, William Davenant, Thomas Hobbes, Samuel Butler and John Milton.

William Davenant (1606–1668), in the preface to his half-finished epic *Gondibert, an heroic poem* (1651), compares the classics (Homer) to Sea-marks guiding timid Seafarers (i.e. writers modelling their work on the classics) hugging the coastline. However, the more ambitious “discoverers, that love to sail in untried seas” consider “it a deficiency and meanness of mind, to stay and depend upon the authority of example” (2). Since Davenant counts himself among the later crew, he chooses completely fictional characters for his narrative (as these allow more poetic licence), structures his epic on the symmetry of drama (“proportioning five Books to five Acts, and Canto’s to Scenes” [16]), and uses rhymed four-line stanzas (to give his readers a “respite or pause” and not run them “out of breath with continu’d Couplets” [18]). But more importantly, Davenant eliminates the machinery (i.e. the supernatural characters and wonders) and invocation from *Gondibert*, claiming them a vestige of bygone days when poets were posing as Prophets and/or Statements in a “frequent necessitie of dissembling for the ease of Government” (24). Finally, anticipating critique from the proponents of Ancients, he offers the following defence: “If I be accus’d of Innovation, or to have transgress’d against the method of the Ancients; I shall think my self secure in believing, that a Poet who hath wrought with his own instruments at a new design, is no more answerable for disobedience to Predecessours, than Law-makers are lyable to those old Laws which themselves have repealed” (19). Hobbes, to whom the preface is addressed, wholeheartedly supports Davenant’s decisions to eschew pagan models as “a reasonless imitation of custom, of a foolish custom” (Davenant 1651, 56).

Dryden agrees in many accounts with Davenant, perhaps being more cautious when it comes to criticising the Ancients but nevertheless aligning himself with the Moderns, as when he is justifying the

use of “quatrains or stanza’s of four in alternate rhyme” judging “them more noble and of greater dignity for the Sound and Number than any other Verse in use among us” and at the same time acknowledging that “learned Languages have certainly a great advantage of us in not being tied to the slavery of any Rhyme, and [...] less constrained in the quantity of every syllable” (1913).

Samuel Butler’s popular **mock-epic**, *Hudibras* (1663; 1664) written in octosyllabic couplets is debunking the genre itself by subverting almost all of its conventions, starting with his pompous and conceited knight errant hero, Sir Hudibras. The work itself is a satirical take on the religious civil war between the parliamentary and royal forces, the Puritans taking the brunt of Butler’s satire as he was a staunch royalist. The popularity of the work at the time was astounding (cf. the [advertisement](#) to its 19th-century edition).

 &  A **mock epic** or **mock-heroic poem** is a type of parody that imitates the elaborate form and style of the epic genre but applies it to common, trivial matters. Read the following two short excerpts from Butler’s *Hudibras* (the argument and the description of the hero’s wit) and note the parody of the epic conventions:

THE ARGUMENT

Sir Hudibras his passing worth,
The manner how he sally’d forth;
His arms and equipage are shewn;
His horse’s virtues and his own.
Th’ adventure of the bear and fiddle
Is sung, but breaks of in the middle.



William Hogarth became known in his profession by the twelve prints illustrating Butler’s *Hudibras* published in 1726. Excerpt from the 2nd plate. [The Hogarth Project. La clé des langues](#). Click on the image for a larger resolution.

He was in Logic a great critic,
Profoundly skill’d in Analytic;
He could distinguish, and divide
A hair ‘twixt south, and south-west side;
On either side he would dispute,
Confute, change hands, and still confute;
He’d undertake to prove, by force
Of argument, a man’s no horse;
He’d prove a buzzard is no fowl,
And that a Lord may be an owl;
A calf an Alderman, a goose a Justice,
And rooks Committee-Men or Trustees.
He’d run in debt by disputation,
And pay with ratiocination.
All this by syllogism true,
In mood and figure, he would do.
For Rhetoric, he could not ope
His mouth, but out there flew a trope:
And when he happen’d to break off
I’ th’ middle of his speech, or cough,
H’ had hard words, ready to shew why,
And tell what rules he did it by.
[...]
His ordinary rate of speech
In loftiness of sound was rich;
A Babylonish dialect,
Which learned pedants much affect;
[...] ‘Twas English cut on Greek and Latin,
Like fustian heretofore on satin.
It had an odd promiscuous tone,
As if h’ had talk’d three parts in one;
Which made some think, when he did gabble,
Th’ had heard three labourers of Babel; (1.65–86)

3 MILTON'S VERSE

Compared to his contemporaries John Milton (1608–1674) is almost laconic in presenting his *Paradise Lost* which will prove the single most lasting, grand epic written in English. The present lecture concentrates only on Milton's contribution to the genre dispute while the poem itself will be addressed in a separate lesson.

Milton's decision on the subject and genre of his masterpiece was long in choosing and beginning late. In a religious prose tract, *The Reason of Church Government*, he divulges the dilemma he faced as an ambitious poet, namely, what genre to pursue and how to pursue it. It reflects all of the issues raised by the English literati of the time: the ambition to produce in English a work that would rival that of products of learned languages (primarily Greek, Latin, and lately Italian and French), a choice of subject and the appropriate genre to express it, and finally whether one should strictly adhere to the model of the ancients or be inventive and follow "nature."



Reproduction of Faithomore's engraving of Milton at age 62 (Marsh

Dryden: ON MILTON

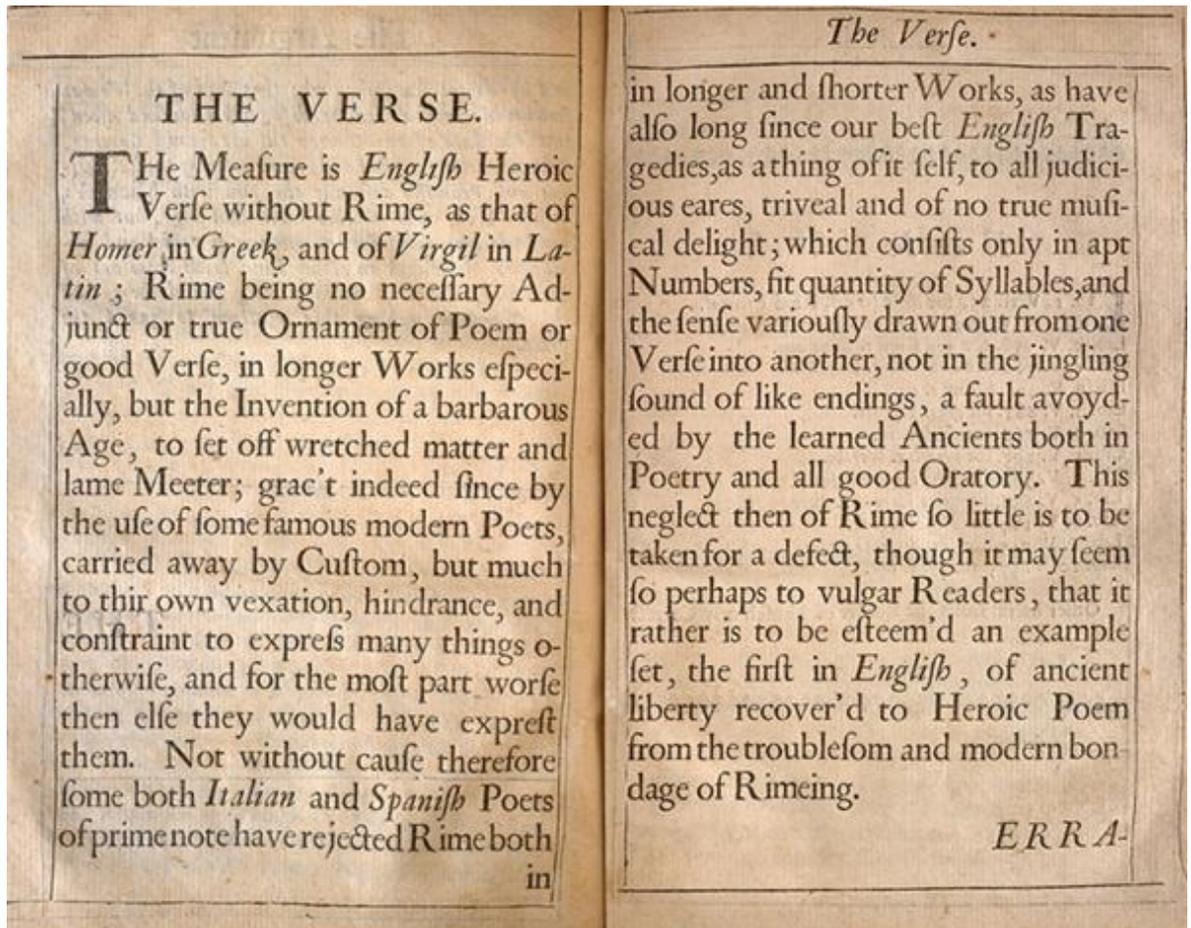
Three poets, in three distant ages born,
Greece, Italy and England did adorn.
The first in loftiness of thought surpassed;
The next in majesty; in both the last.
The force of nature could no further go;
To make a third, she joined the former two.



Read the following excerpt from Milton's *The Reason of Church Government* and note how the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns is mixed in his narrative:

I appy'd my self to that resolution which Ariosto follow'd against the perswasions of Bembo, to fix all the industry and art I could unite to the adorning of my native tongue; not to make verbal curiosities the end, that were a toylsom vanity, but to be an interpreter & relater of the best and sagest things among mine own Citizens throughout this land in the mother dialect. That what the greatest and choycest wits of Athens, Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for their country, I in my proportion with this over and above of being a Christian, might doe for mine [:::] Whether that Epick form whereof the two poems of Homer, and those other two of Virgil and Tasso are a diffuse, and the book of Job a brief model: or whether the rules of Aristotle herein are strictly to be kept, or nature to be follow'd, which in them that know art, and use judgement is no transgression, but an enriching of art. [...] Or whether those Dramatick constitutions, wherein Sophocles and Euripides raigne shall be found more doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation, the Scripture also affords us a divine pastoral Drama [...] And the Apocalyps of Saint John is the majestic image of a high and stately Tragedy, shutting up and intermingling her solemn Scenes and Acts with a sevenfold Chorus of halleluja's and harping symphonies [...] Or if occasion shall lead to imitate those magnifick Odes and Hymns wherein Pindarus and Callimachus are in most things worthy... (Book 2).

The first issue of *Paradise Lost* published in 1667 contained no perfunctory matter, its subtitle merely hinting at the genre ("A Poem Written in Ten Books"). In the reissues of 1668 and 1669, the publisher, Samuel Simmons, has asked Milton to write prose arguments to each of the books and an explanatory matter on the verse choice for his epic. Milton, ever reluctant to write under pressure (cf. Samuel Hartlib's cajoling for a tract on education), has managed meager two quarto pages of disclaimer, thinking perhaps that the poem itself will be sufficient testament of his critical stance.



From Milton's *Paradise Lost*, printed by S. Simmons in 1668. The Morgan Library & Museum, PML 48475.

TRANSCRIPT of the digitalized text image:

The measure is English heroic verse without rhyme, as that of Homer in Greek and of Virgil in Latin; rhyme being no necessary adjunct or true ornament of poem or good verse, in longer works especially, but the invention of a barbarous age, to set off wretched matter and lame meter; graced indeed since by the use of some famous modern poets, carried away by custom, but much to th(e)ir own vexation, hindrance, and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for the most part worse then else they would have expressed them. Not without cause therefore some both Italian and Spanish poets of prime note have rejected rhyme both in longer and shorter works, as have also long since our best English tragedies, as a thing of itself, to all judicious ears, trivial and of no true musical delight; which [i.e. musical delight] consists only in apt numbers, fit quantity of syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from verse into another, not in the jingling sound of like endings, a fault avoided by the learned Ancients both in poetry and all good oratory. This neglect then of rhyme so little is to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar readers, that it rather is to be esteemed an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming.

The following lesson will focus on Milton and *Paradise Lost* in more detail.



Test your knowledge with the following quiz: [02_R18CEL](#)

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5 SUGGESTED READING:

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