



EFOP-3.4.3-16-2016-00014

SZÉCHENYI 2020

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Paradise Lost: Milton's Grand Epic

This teaching material has been made at the
University of Szeged and supported by the
European Union.

Project identity number: EFOP-3.4.3-16-2016-00014





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

Paradise Lost: Milton's Grand Epic

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SUMMARY:

This lesson will attempt a general overview of the English grand epic, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (*PL*). The attempt will be abortive and fragmented at best, as Milton's work has generated profuse reactions both from his readers and from his critics at least until the first half of the 20th century. The lesson will however focus on the work itself and its reception in the 18th century, especially the critical remarks of Samuel Johnson that will anticipate subsequent literary debates on Milton's epic. The focus on the 18th-century reception will also highlight its divergence from Milton's later popular reputation advocated by the Romantics and holding sway to this day, namely, that Milton "was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (Blake).

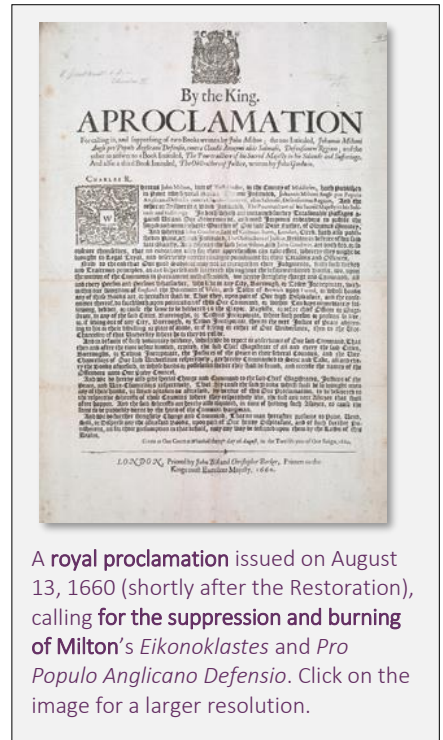
Topics will include:

- A glimpse of Milton's life as it pertains to the genesis and the topical preoccupations of *PL*
- Syntax and style of *PL*
- Chronological and spatial structure of the plot
- Characters and the "hero" debate
- The Romantics view of Milton vs the 18th century (& illustrations)


1 MILTON, HIMSELF “A TRUE POEM”

John Milton (1608–1674) was born eight years before the death of Shakespeare. His life and work link the English Renaissance to the Restoration. Not only has he been a witness to the constitutional crisis and its culmination in the civil war, he was also active proponent and advocate of the Parliamentary cause. In the year of Charles I’s trial and execution (1649) Milton published the *Tenures of Kings and Magistrates* and the *Eikonoklastes*. In the first he defended the right of people to “call to account a Tyrant, or wicked King, and after due conviction, to depose, and put him to death”, while the latter (“the image breaker”) was written in response to *Eikon Basilike* (“the king’s image”), a popular propaganda book upholding the executed king as the martyr of the royalist cause. Already as early as 1642 he was engaging in **ecclesiastical controversies** — remember, the constitutional crisis had strong religious overtones —, which, together with the subsequent political polemics, forced him to abandon for a time his early poetic ambitions. Although Milton has claimed the polemical writing inferior to his natural proclivity towards poetry, there is no denying that his personal involvements and passion for liberty informed much of his prose writing.

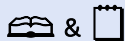
Probably the best examples of his personal involvement are the **divorce tracts**, written between 1643–1645, in which Milton argued for a then shocking proposition, namely, that marriage should be dissolved not only on grounds of adultery but also on grounds of mutual spiritual incompatibility. Milton argument suggested an inversion of marriage priorities — privileging mind over body, and companionship over procreation. The first tract called *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce (Restored to the good of both Sexes)* was published anonymously and was spurred by Milton’s own unhappy marriage. The tracts were condemned as heretical and libertine (earning Milton the reputation of divorcer and polygamist), and were subsequently suppressed, giving rise to **Milton’s most famous prose tract *Areopagitica* (1644) arguing for the liberty of unlicensed printing** (cf. first lesson) **and the freedom of speech and learning.**



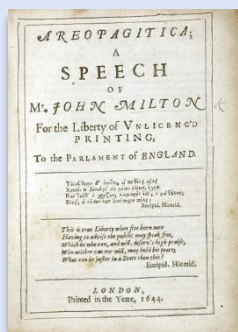
A royal proclamation issued on August 13, 1660 (shortly after the Restoration), calling for the suppression and burning of Milton’s *Eikonoklastes* and *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio*. Click on the image for a larger resolution.

 An introductory passage from Milton’s *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643):

For although God in the first ordaining of marriage, taught us to what end he did it, in words expressly implying the apt and cheerfull conversation of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evil of solitary life, not mentioning the purpose of generation till afterwards, a being but a secondary end in dignity, though not in necessity; yet now, if any two be but once handed in the Church, and have tasted in any sort the nuptiall bed, let them finde themselves never so mistak’n in their dispositions through any error, concealment, or misadventure, that through their different tempers, thoughts, and constitutions, they can neither be to one another a remedy against lonelines, nor live in any union or contentment all their days, yet they shall, so they be but found suitably weapon’d to the least possibility of sensual enjoyment, be made, spite of antipathy to fadge together, and combine as they may to their unspeakable wearisomnes and despair of all sociable delight in the ordinance which God established to that very end. ([Book 1](#))



Read the following excerpts from Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644). Note his argument about the interwoven nature of good and evil and how it echoes in his epic (cf. topics of *Paradise Lost*).



Good and evill we know in the field of this World grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involv'd and interwoven with the knowledge of evill, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discern'd, that those confused seeds which were impos'd on *Psyche* as an incessant labour to cull out, and sort asunder, were not more intermixt. It was from out the rinde of one apple tasted, that the knowledge of good and evill as two twins cleaving together leapt forth into the World. And perhaps this is that doom which *Adam* fell into of knowing good and evill, that is to say of knowing good by evill. As therefore the state of man now is; what wisdom can there be to choose, what continence to forbear without the knowledge of evill? He that can apprehend and consider vice with all her

baits and seeming pleasures, and yet abstain, and yet distinguish, and yet prefer that which is truly better, he is the true wayfaring Christian. I cannot praise a fugitive and cloister'd virtue, unexercis'd & unbreath'd, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortall garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat. Assuredly we bring no innocence into the world, we bring impurity much rather: that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary. That virtue therefore which is but a youngling in the contemplation of evill, and knows not the utmost that vice promises to her followers, and rejects it, is but a blank virtue, not a pure; her whiteness is but an excrementall whiteness; Which was the reason why our sage and serious Poet *Spencer*, whom I dare be known to think a better teacher then *Scotus* or *Aquinas*, describing true temperance under the person of Guion, brings him in with this palmer through the cave of Mammon, and the bower of earthly blisse that he might see and know, and yet abstain. Since therefore the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth, how can we more safely, and with lesse danger scout into the regions of sin and falsity then by reading all manner of tracts, and hearing all manner of reason? And this is the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously read. ([link](#))

In *Apology for Smectymnuus* published in 1642, the last among the antiprelatical tracts, Milton voiced his early conviction that “he who would not be frustrated of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem” by which he meant “a composition and pattern of the best and honourable things; not presuming to sing high praise of heroic men, or famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and practice of all that which is praiseworthy” ([Craik 1916](#)). This puritanical attitude did not so much spring from Milton's religious views as from the conventions of the epic genre itself — from the alleged repute of epic writers Milton aimed to emulate. In his “*Elegia sexta*” (1629) addressed to his friend Charles Diodati, Milton makes this connection between the genre and the repute of its practitioners clear:

When reading Milton “*Elegia sexta*” bear in mind that epic was considered to have generic association with “vatic” poetry (from Latin *vates* for “seer” or “prophet.” According to Merriam-Webster the Latin root is “distantly related to the Old English *wōth*, meaning ‘poetry,’ the Old High German *wuot* meaning ‘madness,’ and the Old Irish *fáith*, meaning both ‘seer’ and ‘poet’” [s.v. “*vates*”]). See also Davenant reasoning in *Gondibert* (cf. Lesson 2.2)

... he who tells of heaven under adult Jove,
of wars, of pious heroes, godlike leaders,
and at one time sings of the god's sacred plans, and at another
infernal kingdoms with their wild *howling dog*,^a
he should live frugally, in the way of *the teacher*
from Samos,^b and let herbs supply his harmless food.

Let clear water stand nearby in a beechwood bowl;
let him drink sober cups from a pure spring.
And add to this a youth spent chaste and free of crimes —
unbending morals, a hand undefiled.

Like you, augur, glittering in holy clothes with purifying
waters, as you rise to face the angry gods.

They say *Tiresias*^c the sage lived by this practice
once his eyes were taken, *Ogygian Linus*^d
as well, *Calchas*^e that fled his doomed home, and old
Orpheus^f in lonely caves with the beasts he tamed.

Sparing of feast, drinking at rivers, *Homer* steered
the *Dulichian hero*^g through vast oceans,
[...]

For to the gods the poet's holy, the gods' own priest.

(55–77, translated from Latin by Lawrence Revard)

^a Cerberus, guardian of the underworld

^b Pythagoras, who was a vegetarian and drank no wine

^c Tiresias, Theban prophet

^d Theban bard, tutor to Orpheus

^e Trojan prophet in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*; ^f some versions of the narrative make Orpheus into a hermit

^g Odysseus, king of Dulichium

By the time Milton started working on *PL* (ca. 1660) he was completely blind, thus, sharing yet another, tradition fueled trait of the antique prophet bards (cf. Homer, Tiresias). He was relying on amanuenses to write his verse. The Romantic tradition will paint an image of the blind poet dictating *PL* to his daughters although they were far too young for the task, especially Deborah — often portrayed as the preferred daughter to record her father's epic (e.g. in Jókai Mór's drama *Milton*) — who at the time of the epic's earliest composition was 8 years old. So, bear in mind when reading *PL* that it **was** “oral in conception, execution, and first reception” (Hale 2007, 17).



📍 Munkácsy Mihály's *Blind Milton dictating Paradise Lost to his daughters*, 1877. The New York Public Library, [New York Public Library Archives](https://www.nypl.org/en/locations/5-avenuenew-york-public-library-archives).

2 SYNTAX AND STYLE IN *PL*

As mentioned in the previous lesson, the first issue of *PL* 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. The year Milton died (1674) *PL* was published again, this time in twelve books following the epic convention established by Vergil's *Aeneas*. Most of the subsequent editions follow the epic's 1674 edition as the representation of Milton's final thought, although some critics doubt its primacy (Shawcorss and Lieb 2007). For our purposes, we will adhere to the twelve-book structure of the 1674 edition.


Although it is impossible to recover Milton's own punctuation of *PL* — he dictated the verse blindly to amanuenses, and the production of the text(s) involved to many intermediaries whom Milton was not able to check —, modern readers of the epic need to be familiar (to a certain extent) with the **seventeenth-century punctuation** to appreciate the oral effect of the poem. Primarily because, as T. S. Eliot notes, *PL* exerts a “peculiar demand for a readjustment of the reader's mode of apprehension” in which emphasis is “on the sound, not the vision, upon the word, not the idea” (1668, 41). It would be however a grievous mistake to concentrate on the single words Milton used in *PL*, as the epic's true structural units are its paragraph long sentences:

It is the period, the sentence and still more the paragraph, that is the unit of Milton's verse [...] It is only in the period that the wave-length of Milton's verse is to be found: it is his ability to give a perfect and unique pattern to every paragraph, such that the full beauty of the lines is found in its context, and his ability to work in larger musical units than many other poets — that is to me the most conclusive evidence of Milton's supreme mastery. The peculiar feeling, almost a physical sensation of a greatness leap, communicated by Milton's long periods, and by his alone, is impossible to procure from rhymed verse. (Eliot 1668, 42)

And as Alastair Fowler notes in the introduction to his edition of Milton's *PL*, “[f]or Milton's long verse paragraphs to take full effect, they must be sustained grammatically and rhythmically beyond ordinary syntactic breath, their sense ‘drawn out’ in such a way as to require light punctuation” (Fowler 2007, 9). **The function of the seventeenth-century punctuation was often rhetorical, namely, signaling the physical pauses and stresses of speech.** Hence, a full stop was used before comparisons and direct speech, functioning as the modern colon. Consequently, colon is often functioning as modern full stop, but it also marks logical divisions, introducing “alternatives, reasons, concessions, comparisons, afterthoughts, interruptions, and defining clauses” and it is the semicolon that “separates stages in a narrative or items in a catalogue” (9).

Although all of this might seem intimidating to the modern reader, Fowler assures as that the “punctuation of *PL* will not give much trouble if a fast enough reading pace is kept up to allow the movement of thought through the paragraph to assert itself” (2007, 10).



Read the invocation of *PL* Book 1 and note the punctuation, marking their seventeenth-century functions. Then listen to the passage's recording. Click on the  icon to start the audio.





Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of *Eden*, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
Rose out of *Chaos*: Or if *Sion* Hill
Delight thee more, and *Siloa's* Brook that flow'd
Fast by the Oracle of God; I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous Song,

That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th' *Aonian* Mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime.
And chiefly Thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all Temples th' upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first
Was present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss
And mad'st it pregnant: What in me is dark
Illumin, what is low raise and support;
That to the highth of this great Argument
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justifie the ways of God to men.

(*PL* 1.1-26)

The wave length of Milton's sentences, however, gives rise to critical remarks about the **convoluted syntax** of his verse (e.g. inverted word order, use of foreign idioms and Latinism). **Samuel Johnson criticism of Milton** in *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (published in four volumes between 1779 and 1781) will preclude much of the twentieth-century critics complaints about Milton's style (c.f. T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, F. R. Leavis):

[Milton] was desirous to use English words with a foreign idiom. [...] Of him, at last, may be said what [Ben] Jonson says of Spenser, that 'he wrote no language' but has formed what [Samuel] Butler calls 'a Babylonish Dialect', in itself harsh and barbarous, but made by exalted genius and extensive learning the vehicle of so much instruction and so much pleasure that like other lovers, we find grace in its deformity. (Johnson 2009, 112)

 |  Reread (and listen to) *PL* 1.1-26 and note which words, expressions, and syntactical solutions strike you as foreign to English.

Despite his criticism Johnson nevertheless maintains that Milton must be praised for "copiousness and variety" being a "master of his language in its full extent" so much so "that from his book alone the Art of English Poetry might be learned" (2009, 112) — the last remark especially ironic, as Johnson was loath to abandon his conviction that the language Milton uses is not English but "*his language*", i.e. Milton's own peculiar brand of "Babylonish Dialect."


Not all readers and critics see Milton's style as impediment to the epic's understanding. For example, remarking on the opening lines of the poem, Christopher Ricks justifies Milton decision to withhold the first word of action, the verb "sing" — "Of Mans First Disobedience... Sing" — as it allows Milton to "state the magnitude of the poem's subject and so the magnitude of its task (*Disobedience... Death... woe... loss of Eden... one greater Man*), while still insisting that this vastness is within the poet's compass. The word-order quite literally encompasses the huge theme" (1963, 29).

It is impossible to give a sufficient account of Milton's style in a single lecture. One is by necessity forced to make a choice of what to mention out of the "copiousness and variety" in the epic. Perhaps, the most noticeable feature is Milton's generous use of **enjambment**. Enjambement (also called **run-on line**) refers to the **incomplete syntax at the end of the poetic line**, where the pause at the line's end and the incomplete meaning creates a tension that is released in the following line(s) when a word or expression completes the previously aborted syntax. Ricks observes (2009, 45):

Milton often uses half lines [...] to jar against the previous line, as in the final phrase of

... and with ambitious aim
Against the Throne and Monarchy of God
Rais'd impious War in Heav'n and Battle proud
With vain attempt. (1.41-44)

That deflates. Dr. Davie might say it 'dangles limply', but the limpness is that of Satan. Dr. Boradbent commented crisply on these lines: "The very heavy final stress on 'proud' lengthens the pause before the next line, so that "With vain attempt" comes as a surprising snort of derision.

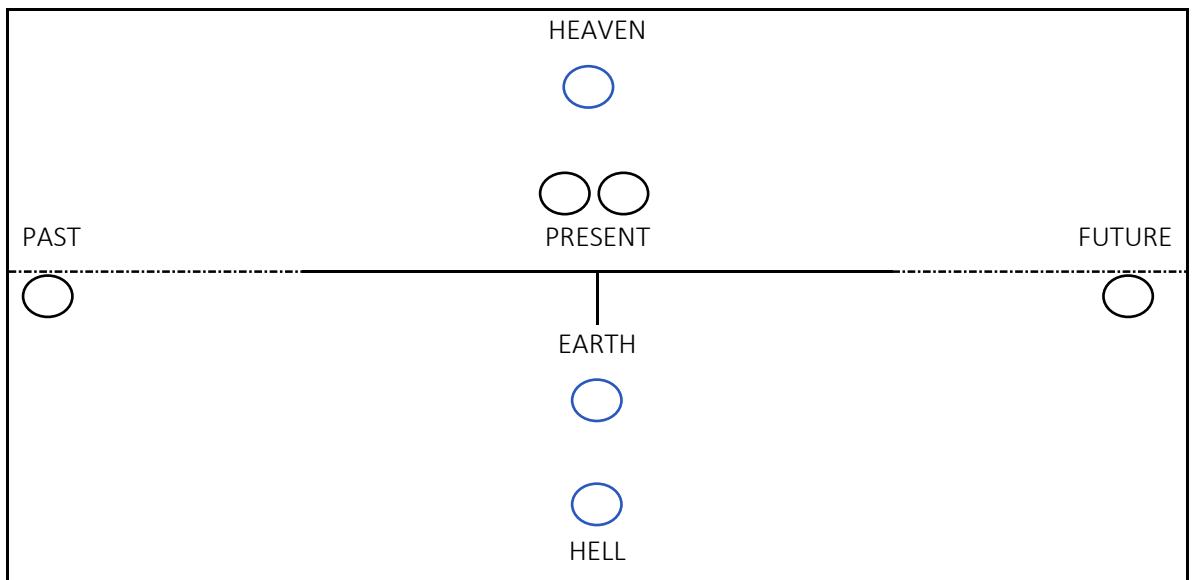
 For a superb critical exposition on Milton's use of enjambment read Stanley Fish's exposition on Satan's Spear from *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1967), 23-26.

3 CHRONOLOGICAL AND SPATIAL STRUCTURE OF THE PLOT

Read Milton's introductory arguments and identify the chronology (present, past, future event) and the location of the events narrated in the corresponding Books of *PL* (highlight the appropriate numbers).

PAST				HEAVEN			
1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	9	10	11	12
PRESENT				EARTH			
1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	9	10	11	12
FUTURE				HELL			
1	2	3	4	0	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	9	10	11	12

On the diagram bellow, draw the movement of the events with arrows according to their timeline (numbering the black circles 1, 2, 3, 4) and according to their location (mark the blue circles with a, b, c).




4 IS THERE A HERO IN *PARADISE LOST*? THE RECEPTION

In the poem “At a Vacation Exercise” (btw 1628–1631) Milton has articulated his early ambition to write epic and romance in his “native Language” and sing “last of Kings and Queens and *Hero’s* old / Such as wise *Demodocus* once told” (47-8). He later entertains the idea of writing a tragedy about King Arthur, but ultimately decides on *Paradise Lost* – first as a drama, finally as an epic. About Adam and Eve, God, the angels, rebels and steadfast, warring and (occasionally) making love, Christ and Satan. An unlikely crew. Or so thought **Voltaire** when writing *Upon Epic Poetry of European Nations from Homer to Milton* (1727):

The French answer with scornful smile when they are told there is in England an epic poem the subject whereof is the Devil fighting against God, and Adam and Eve eating an apple at the persuasion of a snake. As that topic hath afforded nothing among them but some lively lampoons [...] they cannot imagine it possible to build an epic poem upon the subject of their ballads. [...] What Milton so boldly undertook he performed with a superior strength of judgment, and with an imagination productive of beauties not dreamt of before him. [...] There is something above the reach of human forces to have attempted the creation without bombast; to have described gluttony and curiosity of a woman without flatness; to have brought probability and reason amidst the hurry of imaginary things belonging to another world, and as far remote from the limits of our notions as they are from our earth; in short to force the reader to say, “If God, if the Angels, if Satan would speak, I believe they would speak as they do in Milton.” (Elledge 1975, 477-8)

Bear in mind that this was written by a man who wrote his satire *Candid* (1759) to ridicule Leibnitz for the latter’s attempt at **theodicy** (i.e. vindication of God in face of evil).

This list of unlikely characters (there are also allegorical figures like Sin, Death and Chaos) has often spurred a debate: who *is* the hero of *PL*? Is it the human pair? Adam or Eve, or both? The poem starts with “Of Mans Disobedience.... Sing” but we have already established that the ellipsis in this quotation encompasses so much more. Is it Satan, the rebel hero warring against the monarchy of heaven? How does it relate to Milton the anti-royalist, the parliamentarian, and/or the protestant Christian? Or is the hero Christ, the “one greater Man”? Or one of the angels, Abdiel perhaps, “Among the innumerable false, unmov’d, / unshak’n, uneduc’d, unterrifi’d”?

 Read the following passages from *PL* introducing some of the most notable characters. Which would you consider the hero and why?

- Satan (first and second impression) 1.242–270 and 4.9–113
- the begetting of Sin: 2.629–889
- the dialogue of redemption between God and the Son 3.56–269
- Eve's recollection of her creation: 4.450–491
- Adam's argument for a mate: 8.379–499
- Adam's lamentation: 10.720–844

A century after the first reception of *PL* the **Romantics**, most notably Blake, has seen Milton as a spoke person for the character of Satan. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (ca. 1790-93) William Blake inverts the conventional hierarchy of Heaven and Hell and refers to *PL* as the source of such inversion:

Those who restrain desire, do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained; and the restrainer or reason usurps its place & governs the unwilling.

And being restrained, it by degrees becomes passive, till it is only the shadow of desire.

The history of this is written in *Paradise Lost*, & the Governor or Reason is call'd Messiah.

And the original Archangel, or possessor of the command of the heavenly host, is called the Devil or Satan, and his children are call'd Sin & Death.

For in the Book of Job, Milton's Messiah is call'd Satan.*

For this history has been adopted by both parties.

It indeed appear'd to Reason as if Desire was cast out; but the Devil's account is, that the Messiah fell, & formed a heaven of what he stole from the Abyss.

*Note. The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devil & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it.

(Blake 1908, 13-23)

i The difference in the perception of the character of Satan is discernible even in the illustrations to *PL*. Compare the engravings created by the epic's **first illustrator, John Baptist Medina** (published by Jacob Tonson in 1688), and the plates created by **William Blake** (The Butt Set of illustrations for *Paradise Lost*, 1808). British Library. Click on the images to see the rest.





Test your knowledge with the following quiz: [03_R18CEL](#)

5 REFERENCE LIST:

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6 SUGGESTED READING:

- Milton, John. 2007. *Paradise Lost*. Edited by Barbara K. Lewalski. Malden, MA: Blackwell.