

Milton Lecture

Epic

Epic is concerned with 'truth', albeit not necessarily historical. The travels of Odysseus, for eg, symbolised man's journey through life and its obstacles. There were Renaissance epics on creation and biblical narratives but the Fall is essentially unheroic (Adam and Eve fall so fail), which makes it a problematic subject for epic. It is of course epic in the broader sense ie it is enormously significant for the future of mankind. For Milton, we live in a post-lapsarian world [means after the fall]. All the political, moral and social corruption he sees around him is a living image of man's fallen state. His epic gives him an opportunity to construct imaginatively his image of the pre-lapsarian world (before the Fall). He gives the reader his vision of an ideal world which was exactly as God intended it (surprisingly for the time, Milton represents Adam and Eve as enjoying a sexual relationship before the fall; unsurprisingly for the period, he also represents Eve as inferior and subordinate to Adam).

Epic heroes are traditionally figures of great stature: physically large, very strong, skilful leaders and warriors, superhumanly brave in action and endurance of suffering ie fortitude. Satan, who is modelled on classical epic heroes, has heroic attributes eg he's huge, powerful, courageous and demonstrates resourcefulness and fortitude. As the poem progresses he steadily diminishes in stature, appearing in Bk 4 in the decidedly unheroic form of a toad. Helen Gardner compares Satan to the heroes of Elizabethan 'tragedies of damnation' eg *Macbeth*; the audience is compelled to feel for a character who deliberately embraces evil. In both *Macbeth* and *P Lost* we become involved in the psychology of the evil character – it is an essential part of the drama of each text that we understand and become imaginatively involved in the psychological steps of the protagonist as he becomes progressively evil.

The ambivalent representation of Satan forces the reader to evaluate his motivation, his rhetoric, to contemplate the nature of evil not just as embodied in Milton's Satan but in ourselves. In part, Satan represents the propensity to evil in all of us.

Adam, as the father of mankind, represents another side of humanity – the ability to love and be faithful. Milton uses heroic epic features such as broad shoulders and broad forehead to describe Adam, trying to set him up as our epic hero. The problem is that before the Fall there is little opportunity for heroism as we understand it. There's no pain, no great obstacle, nothing to fight or even struggle against. Temptation provides as opportunity for moral heroism but Adam fails. He comes closest to heroism in deciding to share Eve's fate because he cannot bear to be separated from her but for Milton he still fails because he places his allegiance to Eve above his allegiance to God.

Milton

Education

Went to Cambridge but was expelled after just one term for fighting with a tutor and was one of the last Cambridge students to be publicly flogged. Milton very well informed re contemporary political and scientific debates. Seems to have visited Galileo in Florence in 1638, when Galileo was imprisoned by the Inquisition for heresy (his scientific theories contravened the teachings of the Catholic church eg that the Earth was the centre of the universe).

Politics

Deeply involved in the political and religious controversies of his time. Served in Cromwell's government, translating government foreign dispatches into Latin. Cromwell established Puritanism as the state religion but allowed religious toleration ie other faiths. This essentially republican government was Puritan ie Protestant in its values. Milton wrote *P Lost* after the restoration ie in response to the failure of these ideals, which couldn't survive the death of Cromwell.

James II visited the elderly Milton and implied that his blindness was a divine punishment for having written in defence of the execution of Charles I (one of the many things Milton disagreed with was Charles dissolving Parliament for a period of 11 years personal rule). Milton retorted, 'If your Highness thinks that misfortunes are indexes of the wrath of heaven, what must you think of your father's tragical end? I have only lost my eyes – he lost his head'.

Milton's contemporaries were very conscious of his radical politics. Falconer notes [in her lecture 'The Difficulty of Milton's *Paradise Lost*'] that Milton's friends were concerned that *P Lost*, would be political in focus (Milton had been imprisoned and subject to the threat of execution for his political views). Milton's early notes lend weight to such fears in that they visualise a political hero at the poem's centre. Critics have smiled over the centuries at the reports of Milton's friends' relief when they found that the poem was overtly religious.

Falconer's reading allows both for a political and a religious context: 'there is a prevailing sense, in the poem, that something has gone terribly wrong with the history of the English nation'. She raises 2 possible readings: 'Is he suggesting, by analogy, that the Civil War was a fortunate fall, since it may eventually lead us back to a better, and more firmly grounded republic? Or does the Biblical analogy suggest, as Milton's friends hoped, that Puritans should turn their back on politics, and attend to the state of their souls?' I'm not sure that these are mutually exclusive. Milton was not a man to advocate political lethargy; as Falconer notes, it's a devil who advocates accepting the status quo in Bk 2, not Milton. *P Lost* depicts a world where mankind, unable to remain in paradise, is nonetheless redeemed (by Christ); wrongs are put right; order is reasserted after the chaos threatened by rebellion.

Clearly the poem addresses absolute monarchy (God is not elected; He rules because He is God). Satan thus characterises Him as a tyrant, although he admits in Bk 4 that God ruled justly, 'nor was his service hard'(l.45). The imperial imagery used to represent Satan in Bk 1 may represent the ambitions of Charles I or those of Cromwell or both in the sense that both Satan and the angels symbolise political ambition unchecked. [NB Cromwell wasn't primarily motivated by the desire for power and Milton certainly wouldn't have seen him as power hungry. Perhaps Satan's attractive independence and political rebellion owes something to Cromwell and his desire for absolute power reflects Charles.]

Satan gives his motivation in Bk 1: 'Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n'(l.263) [and again in Bk 4 eg 'I 'sdained subjection'(l.50)]. It strikes me that he owes something to Machiavelli here. Machiavelli writes of Oliverotto da Ferma's 'bodily strength and intrepidity, one of the foremost men in his service. But deeming it servile to act under the command of others'(ch 8). This explains Satan's position: he refuses to be subject to anyone, however good they may be.

Even the style in which *PL* is written has political overtones, as Milton's introductory note to Bk 1 indicates: it's 'English heroic verse...ancient liberty recovered...from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming'(Norton p.1817). Republicans stressed individualism and self-government; Royalists advocated social duty, not individual rights.

Falconer posits interestingly that *PL* 'demonstrates that at the mid-century, divine truth could not be known with any certainty. And any poet who set out to justify it must be writing in the dark. But Milton...combines rationality with faith; so even in the dark it's possible to construct a provisional image of the truth. Poetically, and ethically, Milton is still an apologist for individual liberty in *Paradise Lost*, just as he was in the pre-civil war years.'

Falconer argues that for Milton 'we are involved in the drama of the fall, in that the poem tests our perceptiveness just as the characters inside the narrative are tested'. She is aligning herself with Fish, who read the ambiguities of Milton's text as a critical re-enactment of the fall in that it demonstrated the impossibility for fallen readers (every reader is by definition fallen to Milton) of understanding God's truth. [Out of interest Johnston takes issue with this approach in his lecture.]

Religion

Ian Johnston's lecture on *P Lost* gives a great introduction to the poem, recent wars and the contemporary religious context eg he explains that 'the immediate cause of Luther's movement [which began the Reformation] was the sale, by officials licensed by the Vatican, of indulgences (ie days of purgatory) for money', noting pertinently, 'The greed of this practice disgusted Luther, and the cost to the local economy alarmed the secular princes'(p.5). Johnston rightly draws attention to the politicisation of religion (my term not his), reminding the reader of the recent wars between Protestant and Catholic powers and peace based on the rather strange decision that a country's religion should be determined by its monarch. I would strongly recommend that you read his lecture.

Johnston notes rightly that Milton 'puts his Protestant religion right at the centre of his poetic imagination'(p.3). Milton was Protestant so believed in the primacy of *The Bible* ie that Christians should trust to their understanding of the Bible and follow its teachings in their lives, rather than trusting priests to mediate truth as the Catholics did. The other defining principle of Protestantism was individualism: they emphasised the individual's relationship with God rather than believing that a priest was necessary to mediate between them and God as the Catholics did.

There are different forms of Protestantism. For the purposes of this course you need to be aware of Anglicans (Swift), Dissenters ie those who dissented from the established Anglican Church of England (Defoe) and Puritans, although there were also Baptists, Methodists, Quakers etc.

Milton was Puritan. They were often viewed as kill-joys (think of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*) because they didn't believe in pleasurable activities on Sundays (most people's day off). Cromwell closed the theatres, for example. [mind you, if you know that theatres were full of petty thieves, prostitutes dressed as respectable ladies, it makes more sense].

Puritans were also known for honesty, simple living (they were against all forms of luxury and excess) and extremely hard work. Puritan businessmen were often highly successful in business and therefore became associated with early capitalism. This link between money and faith isn't significant to *P Lost* but it is very strong in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and, in a rather perverse form, in *Moll Flanders* (more of that next semester).

Milton and 'The Woman Question'

Personal experience of marriage

1st wife, Mary Powell (16 years his junior), came from Royalist family. After 6 weeks of marriage she went to visit her parents – and didn't return. This may well have inspired Milton's essays on divorce. Mary didn't return to Milton for 3 years (friends persuaded her to). She died in childbirth. Milton didn't get on with his 2nd wife, Catherine Woodcock, either (she was 20 years his junior). Story has it that the Duke of Buckingham once referred to Milton's second wife as a rose and that Milton (now blind) replied: 'I am no judge of colours anymore...but it may be so, for I feel the thorns daily'. Milton's third wife, who survived him, was 30 years younger than him.

Milton and Contemporary Views on Gender

Milton's actually being pretty radical in representing Adam and Eve enjoying a sinless sexual relationship before the Fall in Bk 4 (see ll.288-318,440-8,477-91,635-8 re their relationship; ll.741-9 esp re their sexual relationship).

The Greek Stoics taught that female sexuality could distract men from their studies and that sex was only acceptable for procreation; they valued celibacy and asceticism. Such teaching influenced Augustine, who believed that if Adam and Eve had not fallen, sex would never have been necessary for procreation. This somewhat hysterical view of women is related to a fear of female sexuality which characterised Greek culture and informed early modern English church teaching. Aquinas believed that sex is sinful if it is enjoyed, since sexual desire causes man to behave in a way akin to animals, encouraging him to give in to base instincts.

John Sprint articulated the views of early modern Church patriarchy in *The Bride-Woman Counsellor*, first preached as a wedding sermon in 1699. He exhorted, 'woman...should be careful and diligent to content and please [the husband], otherwise, she doth wickedly pervert the end of her creation'. Sprint is one of many clergymen to convince themselves that women are responsible even for male misbehaviour and cruelty, taunting that if a woman is beaten, 'this may be a memento to her of her original sin', telling women to 'thank your mother Eve'(p.16) for suffering in marriage.

Masculine authority

William Whatley regarded authority not only as a prerogative but as a condition of masculinity: 'two things also be required of him: one, that he keep his authority; the other, that he do use it.' Vives goes so far as to advocate 'a wife must obey her husband's commands as if they were the law of God. The husband takes God's place on earth'. Compare Milton's representation of Adam and Eve, 'He for God only, she for God in him'(Bk 4 l.299)

Female inferiority

Whatley insists, 'the wife, being resolved that her place is the lower, must carry herself as an inferior', arguing that she should be in 'fear (not slavish but loving)'(p.260) of her husband. Thus 'her speeches to himself must neither be cutted, sharp, sullen, passionate, tetchy, nor yet rude, careless, unmannerly, and contemptuous, but all such as carry the stamp of fear upon them, testifying that she well considers who herself is and to whom she speaketh'(p.261). He criticises women who 'chase and scold with their husbands, railing upon them and reviling' as 'Stains of womankind, blemishes of their sex, monsters in nature, botches of the family, rude, shameless, graceless, next to harlots if not the same with them'. The hysterical language testifies to intense anxiety about the dangers of female insubordination.

Milton's tone is more measured in *PL* but he insists nonetheless in Bk 4 (before the Fall) that Adam and Eve are 'Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed'(l.296). Indeed Milton views the fall as being caused by Eve's desire to transgress the gender hierarchy: 'Thus it shall befall / Him who to worth in women overtrusting / Lets her will rule'(Bk 9 ll.1182-4).

In order to understand Milton's view on gender and marriage (v important topics of debate throughout this period) I want to consider his tract *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* [extracts available on IBIS]. In the Preface Milton looks back to *Genesis* to explain God's intentions for His creation: 'God in the first ordaining of Marriage, taught us to what end he did it...the apt and chearful Conversation of Man with Woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evil of solitary life'. Those who regard Milton as sympathetic to women will draw attention to his representation of marriage (in both the divorce tracts and *P Lost*) as a partnership. True but he also reflects contemporary ideals in representing the woman as man's comfort and helper as opposed to an egalitarian relationship where each supports and comforts the other.

However, Milton does want love to be reciprocal: 'Love in Marriage cannot live nor subsist unless it be mutual; and where Love cannot be, there can be left of Wedlock nothing but the empty husk of an outside Matrimony'(ch 6).

In chapter 1 Milton argues that 'or contrariety of mind, arising from a cause in nature unchangeable, hindering, and ever likely to hinder the main benefits of conjugal Society, which are Solace and Peace, is a greater reason of Divorce than natural Frigidity' ie divorce should be possible on the grounds of incompatibility.

Arguing for divorce is radical for the period. It was only possible for men to obtain divorce if they could prove adultery; this meant taking the wife's lover to court, calling witnesses to testify in often salacious detail to the alleged sexual activities. This process was humiliating for all concerned, took years and cost a fortune. In theory a woman could divorce her husband but not simply for adultery – she had to prove considerable cruelty too. In reality divorce was not possible for anyone other than the very rich and even then only if they could deal with the scandal.

Milton's plea for divorce on grounds of incompatibility demonstrates his belief in the importance of companionship in marriage. It is all the more daring because he insists that far from divorce being offensive to God, loveless marriages are as 'unpleasing to God, as any other kind of hypocrisy'(ch 6).

Milton has his conservative side too. In chapter 18 he notes approvingly, 'Men of high Wisdom and reputed Piety, decreed it to be a divorcive Fornication, if the Wife attempted either against the knowledge, or obstinately against the will of her Husband, such things as gave open suspicion of adulterizing, as the wilful haunting of Feasts, and Invitations with men not of her near Kindred, the lying forth of her House, without probable cause, the frequenting of Theatres against her Husband's mind, her endeavour to prevent or destroy Conception...Fornication...in this place of the Judges is understood for stubborn Disobedience against the Husband, and not for Adultery'. Bear this in mind when we come to look at the women in Behn's play *The Rover*!

Chapter 21 reinforces the conservative view, insisting (in terms useful to understanding Milton's Adam and Eve before the fall: 'the freedom and eminence of Man's creation gives him to be a Law in this matter to himself, being the head of the other sex which was made for him; whom therefore though he ought not to injure, yet neither should he be forc'd to retain in society to his own overthrow, nor to hear any Judge therein above himself.' Milton's argument is based on the premise that since

Adam was created before Eve, he was superior and created to rule over her. The problem with that argument was that animals were created before Adam; clearly Milton wouldn't want to take this argument to its logical conclusion. If he retorts that Adam was clearly the height of creation (which he clearly was) then the argument would dictate that Eve was an even more perfect model – tempting perhaps but clearly not what *Genesis* demonstrates. The *Genesis* text focuses on complementarity, 2 people created to be together.

If you take the view that the gender hierarchy and resulting conflict are a result of the Fall (as I do) then *Genesis* presents a far more challenging model of relationships than Milton. [I have spent some time researching this for a book I'm writing on gender and early modern literature and I'm firmly of the opinion that man and woman were created equal. Of course academics are divided on this. If you're interested I can recommend books arguing either way.] Milton's ideal approximates to *Genesis* but asserts that the gender hierarchy existed before the fall ie in the perfect world, as God intended it to be. To Milton the gender hierarchy is divinely ordained.

Milton and Theodicy (vindication of God's justice in world where evil exists)

Of course we mustn't lose sight of Milton's expressed aim to 'justify [explain] the ways of God to man'(Bk 1 l.26). Johnston notes rightly in his lecture, 'discussion about the poem can become arguments about the rationality or viability of Christianity in general...that is quite beside the point. Our concern here is Milton's vision of God in *P Lost*, not the presentation of God in Protestant Christianity'(p.18). This is, after all, a work of art, with aesthetic as well as spiritual (and political) principles.

Johnston raises the importance of poetic language in determining our response to the characters and the positions they represent; he refers to this rather nicely as 'emotional intelligibility'(p.20). He draws our attention to one of the primary difficulties of *P Lost*: whatever Milton's intentions, his 'imagination was most fully alive in rebellion against God rather than worshipful poetic service'(p.21). He cites Blake's famous analysis: 'The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing is'(*Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Norton 7th edition pp.4-5). Shelley also approved of Satan's energy, in particular his rebellion, his fortitude and determination to determine his own path. Falconer writes interestingly, 'If Satan is the external representation of Milton's rebellious ego, then the Miltonic superego (Puritan conscience) places him in Hell, in order to exorcise that rebellious nature. In this reading Hell becomes both the space in which ambition is most firmly confined.'

Satan's attractiveness is a problem which has generated considerable critical concern over the centuries, from Romantics such as Blake and Shelley (characteristically seeing themselves in Satan, translating their own values onto him as revolutionary symbol) to 20thc literary critics such as Empson, paraphrased effectively by Johnston: 'What makes the poem fascinating in Empson's view is the moral confusion of a narrator wrestling with questions which he cannot resolve because he is divided between his unconscious imagination and his willed belief'(p.22). [this is a great eg of using a critic's ideas to structure one's own discussion but avoiding plagiarism – Johnston makes it clear he's articulating Empson's ideas, then he goes on to extrapolate an argument of his own from them – good critical practice].

Johnston testifies to the difficulty of reconciling Milton's avowed intention with his representation of the central characters. Not only do we have the seductive and powerful rhetoric of

Satan in the early books. Milton's God comes across rather negatively when He speaks in Bk 3, something approximating to the egocentric tyrant Satan speaks of in Bk 1. Johnston argues that when God calls for a volunteer to sacrifice himself to save mankind, He 'outlines (with some pleasure, it seems), the pain and sacrifice involved'. He notes that dramatically this makes Christ's volunteering more impressive but argues that the refusal of the angels to come forward makes them appear unheroic next to the rebel angels. I think the answer lies in Milton's implied reader: one who understands, even if s/he doesn't fully share, Milton's theological standpoint.

Milton and his implied reader know that the angels could not have saved humanity: only Christ was fully divine and able to live as a human but without sin. As for Johnston's objection that Milton's God appears tyrannical in demanding sacrifice, the theologically informed reader will know that God and Christ are one and so God was prepared to sacrifice Himself. Milton's dramatic description of the necessary sacrifice presumably reflects his awe at the willingness of God and Christ to undergo such pain to pay the penalty for man's sin. Clearly Milton didn't intend his vision of God to appear to revel in such detail but Johnston is right that the language of Milton's poetic representation of God sits uneasily alongside Milton's faith – one of many instances of tension between Milton's creative and religious impulses.

Johnston also objects that Milton's version of the Fall suggests that God is in some sense responsible for evil in that He allowed the angels and then mankind the freedom to choose whether or not to obey Him rather than using His omnipotent power to ensure obedience and thus avoid evil. This position was advanced by early modern atheists, who argued that it is impossible to reconcile the notion of a benevolent God with the presence of evil ie if God is all powerful why does He allow man to do evil things? Johnston has some textual authority for this view in that Satan blames God for not demonstrating His power openly and thus allowing the rebellious angels to delude themselves that they might win. But then we know that we can't trust Satan's voice in *PL* (for one thing it's inconsistent and at times admits its own deception). Lest we confuse his religious with his political agenda, Milton's narrator reminds us on occasion that Satan's words cannot be trusted.

Milton clearly assumes that we are familiar with the doctrine of free will ie man has the freedom to choose to believe in God or to turn from Him; this freedom of action also extends to acts of evil. If free will did not exist humans would be automata, lacking any dignity, compelled to serve God. If this were the case then Satan's argument in Bk 1, where he describes God as a tyrant, would be true. Free will is thus both the problem (it leads to evil) and the solution (God is not tyrannical and man is free, able to create his own path). I would argue that the persuasive rhetoric of Bk 1 where Satan presents God as tyrant, springs from Milton's political imagination; clearly Milton is thinking of earthly monarchs.

Interpretative Difficulties

P Lost is legendarily difficult to read, resisting careless reading. Critics sympathetic to Milton's enterprise argue that the central difficulty of the text, the reader's difficulty in reconciling the world of *P Lost* with Milton's avowed intention to 'justify [explain] the ways of God to man' is deliberate, forcing us to confront our inadequacy as fallen readers, our inability to comprehend the divine. I think there is some truth to this, although I suspect that some of the interpretative difficulties of this text derive simply from conflicts in Milton's mind.

Johnston writes interestingly and persuasively about the tension between Milton's will (his agenda in writing) and his imagination: 'he has conscious intentions about what he wants the poem to do, but his imagination is instinctively rebelling against this intention ... inviting us to see in the shifting quality of the work an intense drama going on within the spirit of the poet himself' (p.14).

I would suggest that there is also tension between the political Milton and the poet of faith, between his radical politics and his religious ideals. Puritans in particular and Protestants more broadly historically distrusted figures of authority; this informs the political sub-text in *P Lost* but if we focus on absolute monarchy in *P Lost*, this conflicts with Milton's beliefs because the only absolute monarch we see is God. It can be argued that Satan tries to be absolute monarch in Hell; this reading posits him as a kind of revolutionary leader corrupted by power into the thing he claims to hate. Clearly there is some truth to this, particularly when following a political reading but the political sub-text can be as seductive as Satan himself and can lead us, like Satan, to forget issues which are central to Milton's thinking: Satan is evil, his attractive rhetoric and heroic spirit are a reminder of how seductive evil can be. Falconer cites Milton's *Areopagitica* to demonstrate Milton's awareness of such difficulties: 'what wisdom can there be to choose...without the knowledge of evil?' She argues, 'We have to start with evil, and get to know good, through knowing evil'.

Johnston sensibly takes Milton's famous declaration of intent in evaluating the success (or otherwise) of the poem. He argues that it would have been possible for Milton 'to render intelligible the ways of God' by rational justification or by emotional justification, something which 'makes sense emotionally' and brings 'emotional closure'. He concludes that 'Milton fails on both counts' (p.15).

Falconer argues interestingly that the linguistic and interpretative difficulties of *PL* demonstrate 'a divorce between the language God might use (logos, clarity, absolute truth), and the language that human beings use, which is full of ambiguity...Milton, being a post-fall poet, is obliged to write in a fallen language, for fallen readers'.

It is often remarked that this poem feels very modern, dealing as it does with the difficulty, even impossibility, of interpretation, of finding meaning, be it in literature or by extension life itself. For Milton, as for Donne, the only reliable truth lies in God. He also believed that human beings should use their rationality to work out their beliefs for themselves (under the guidance of God in religious matters). Thus we are left with a poem which explores and embodies the difficulties of interpreting literature and reminds us that the answer lies in our own careful, enlightened reading.