

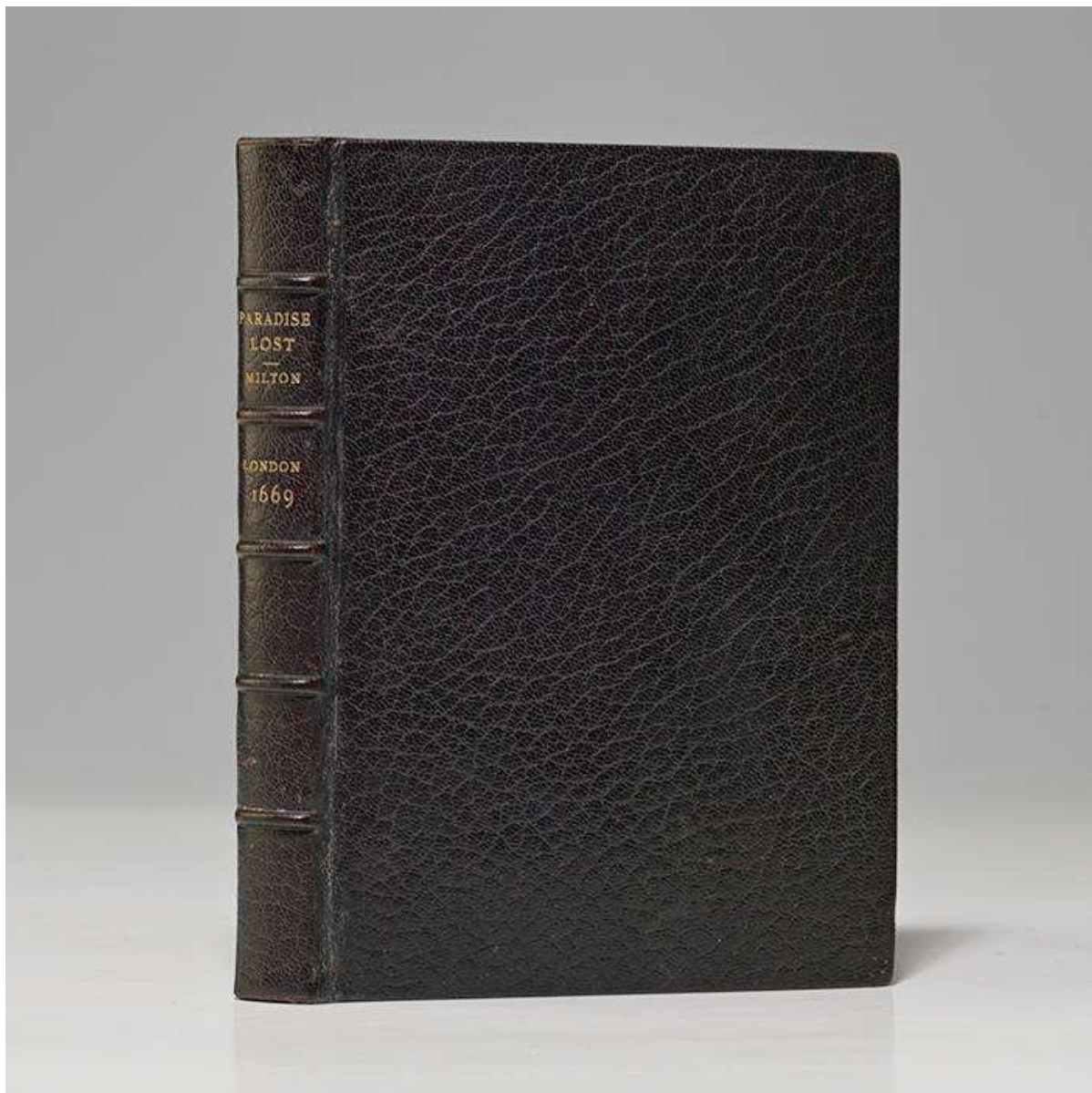
"Paradise Lost" (1667), by John Milton: A Canonical Book

Curated by Stephen A Batman

Sunday, March 16, 2025

Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1669



Paradise lost.
A
P O E M
IN
T E N B O O K S.

The Author
JOHN MILTON.

L O N D O N,

Printed by *S. Simmons*, and are to be sold by
T. Helder, at the *Angel in Little Brittain*
1 6 6 9.

**"ONE OF THE GREATEST, MOST NOBLE AND SUBLIME POEMS WHICH EITHER
THIS AGE OR NATION HAS PRODUCED": FIRST EDITION OF MILTON'S
PARADISE LOST, 1669**

First edition, sixth title page, of Milton's poetic masterpiece, his dramatic vision of Satan's expulsion from Heaven and the temptation of Adam and Eve. John Dryden referred to Paradise Lost as "one of the greatest, most noble and sublime poems which either this age or nation has produced."

Although the tremendously difficult circumstances under which Milton produced the work are legendary— he had been blinded by long years of service as secretary under Cromwell and was in political disfavor after the restoration of Charles II— the troubled printing history of the work is less well known. The publisher Samuel Simmons reluctantly agreed to print a small first edition of 1300 copies, as he was assuming a heavy risk in sponsoring an epic poem, for which no precedent in English publishing had been established. As payment for the first edition, Milton received a total of ten pounds.

The many issues of the first edition are distinguishable only by variations in the title page, and all six states of title pages can be found combined with one or other states of preliminary leaves (with or without the printer's note, itself appearing in two different settings—four lines and six lines). "The sheets of the various issues were evidently mixed and made up indiscriminately by the binder and therefore copies of apparently the same issue will be found to differ from each other in that some will have more of the errors corrected than others" (*Wither to Prior*).

This copy bears the sixth cancel title page as described in Wickenheiser (with T. Helder listed as bookseller and "Angel" set in italic type). Without the four-line "The Printer to the Reader" at usual with copies with this title page. According to Wickenheiser, the sixth title page is "Rare, considered to be even more scarce than the fourth and fifth issues" (Wickenheiser 602).

Wing M2142. Pforzheimer 718. *Wither to Prior*, 603. Lowndes, 1558 (called by him the eighth title page). Armorial bookplate of C.L.F. Robinson of Newport, Rhode Island.

MILTON, John. *Paradise Lost. A Poem in Ten Books.* The Author John Milton. London: Printed by S. Simmons and are to be sold by T. Helder at the Angel in Little Brittain, 1669. Small quarto, late 19th-century full black Morocco gilt, raised bands, all edges gilt. Housed in a custom chemise and clamshell box.

Interior generally quite clean, a few minor spots of marginal paper repair, not affecting text. Joints expertly repaired.

Introduction

John Milton's epic poem "Paradise Lost," first published in 1667, stands as one of the most significant literary achievements in the English language. This monumental work emerged during the tumultuous period of the Restoration in England, following the collapse of the Puritan Commonwealth and the return of the monarchy under Charles II in 1660. Milton, who had been a

passionate supporter of the Republican cause and served as Latin Secretary to Oliver Cromwell's government, found himself on the wrong side of history when the monarchy was restored [1](#).

The political and religious context of "Paradise Lost" is crucial to understanding its significance. The poem was composed during a period of profound disillusionment for Milton, as the Republican experiment he had championed had failed. Rather than abandoning his political ideals after the Restoration, Milton channeled them into this epic work that, while ostensibly biblical in subject matter, was deeply informed by the political upheavals of mid-seventeenth-century England [1](#). No contemporary of Milton would have read the poem as unrelated to the events of its time, as heroic verse was widely understood to address public issues [1](#).

The cultural climate surrounding the publication of "Paradise Lost" was one of transition and tension. The Restoration period saw a reaction against Puritan values and a return to more libertine cultural expressions. Yet Milton, steadfast in his Puritan and Republican convictions, produced a work that would ultimately transcend its immediate historical context to become "the most imitated poem in the English language" until the end of the nineteenth century [1](#).

The Author

John Milton (1608-1674) was an English poet, polemicist, and civil servant whose life spanned one of the most turbulent periods in English history. Born into a prosperous middle-class family in London, Milton received an excellent education at St. Paul's School and later at Christ's College, Cambridge. His early life was marked by intensive study and travel throughout Europe, where he met many influential thinkers and writers of his time.

Milton's life took a dramatic turn when he became deeply involved in the political and religious controversies of the English Civil War. He emerged as a powerful voice for liberty, writing numerous pamphlets defending freedom of the press, divorce reform, and republican government. When the monarchy was overthrown and the Commonwealth established under Oliver Cromwell, Milton served as Latin Secretary to the Council of State, essentially functioning as a propagandist for the new regime.

Personal tragedy struck Milton when he began losing his eyesight in the late 1640s, becoming completely blind by 1652. Despite this devastating disability, he continued his governmental duties and literary pursuits with the aid of assistants. The Restoration of Charles II in 1660 marked a dangerous period for Milton, who had publicly defended the execution of Charles I. Though he was briefly imprisoned and his writings were burned by the public hangman, influential friends helped secure his release.

It was in the aftermath of these political reversals, blind and somewhat isolated, that Milton composed his greatest works. Far from retreating into purely spiritual concerns, Milton poured into his final poems "all that he had learned and thought and experienced about life, love, artistic creativity, religious faith, work, history, politics, man and woman, God and nature, liberty and

tyranny, monarchy and republicanism, learning and wisdom"[6](#). "Paradise Lost," completed during this period, stands as the crowning achievement of his literary career.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"Paradise Lost" must be included in the canon of books containing major ideas that reflect elements of America's politics, governance, and culture for several compelling reasons. First, Milton's epic profoundly influenced the intellectual foundations of American democracy. His exploration of free will, liberty, and rebellion against tyranny resonated deeply with America's founding fathers, who were steeped in Milton's works. The poem's examination of authority, governance, and the consequences of its abuse provided a philosophical framework that informed early American political thought.

The poem's central themes of liberty and choice align perfectly with core American values. Milton's Satan famously declares, "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven," a sentiment that, while morally complex, reflects the revolutionary spirit that would later animate America's own break from monarchical rule. Milton's insistence on the dignity of the individual and the right to self-determination echoes throughout American political philosophy.

Furthermore, "Paradise Lost" engages with religious freedom and pluralism in ways that prefigured America's approach to church-state relations. Milton, who advocated for religious tolerance in his prose works, creates in his epic a theological landscape that, while Christian, encourages readers to exercise "rigorous judgment, imaginative apprehension and choice"[6](#). This emphasis on individual conscience rather than institutional authority aligns with America's constitutional protection of religious liberty.

The poem also serves as a profound meditation on the nature of democracy itself. Milton uses his epic to educate readers "in the virtues, values and attitudes that make a people worthy of liberty"[6](#). This educational function mirrors America's own democratic project, which depends on an informed and virtuous citizenry. Milton's belief that liberty requires constant vigilance and moral responsibility has become a cornerstone of American civic culture.

Finally, "Paradise Lost" exemplifies the power of literature to sustain "civic hope" - that "preternatural American ability to maintain faith in democratic ideals despite bleak odds"[7](#). Milton wrote his masterpiece after the collapse of the republic he had championed, yet the work is infused with a resilient faith in human potential and divine providence. This combination of clear-eyed recognition of human failings with unwavering hope in higher possibilities exemplifies the American spirit at its best.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven."

This profound statement on the power of perception and mental freedom remains extraordinarily relevant today. In an age of increasing mental health challenges, political polarization, and information overload, Milton's insight reminds us that our internal perspective shapes our reality more than external circumstances. For Americans facing economic uncertainty, political division, and social change, this quote offers both a warning and a promise: our mindset determines whether we experience our circumstances as heaven or hell. This speaks directly to the American emphasis on self-determination and personal responsibility.

2. "Long is the way / And hard, that out of Hell leads up to Light."

Milton's acknowledgment of the difficult path to redemption resonates powerfully in contemporary America's struggles with systemic injustice, addiction crises, and political reform. The quote acknowledges that meaningful change—whether personal or societal—requires sustained effort and perseverance. This aligns with America's narrative of progress through struggle, from civil rights movements to economic recoveries. It offers a realistic but ultimately hopeful perspective on the journey toward a more perfect union, suggesting that the difficulty of the path makes the destination all the more valuable.

3. "What in me is dark / Illumine, what is low, raise and support."

This humble request for divine assistance in elevating one's understanding speaks to our current moment of intellectual humility and the search for truth. In an era of misinformation and competing narratives, Milton's prayer for illumination reminds us of the importance of seeking clarity and elevation in our thinking. It resonates with America's educational ideals and the pursuit of knowledge as a civic virtue. The quote also acknowledges human limitations while aspiring to transcend them—a tension that has characterized American intellectual life from the Enlightenment through today.

4. "Awake, arise, or be forever fallen!"

This urgent call to action speaks directly to civic engagement in contemporary America. At a time when democratic participation faces challenges from apathy, disenfranchisement, and cynicism, Milton's exhortation reminds citizens that liberty requires vigilance and active participation. The stark binary—rise up or remain fallen—echoes through American political discourse, from revolutionary pamphlets to civil rights speeches to modern calls for democratic renewal. It embodies the American belief that freedom is never guaranteed but must be continuously claimed through civic action.

5. "They also serve who only stand and wait."

This reflection on different forms of service offers profound insight for a society often fixated on visible achievement and immediate results. Milton, writing this line in reference to his own blindness, acknowledges that patience, steadfastness, and quiet endurance are also forms of valuable service. In our hyperactive culture, this reminder of the dignity of waiting and watching

has special relevance. It speaks to caregivers, behind-the-scenes workers, and those whose contributions to American society may go unrecognized but remain essential. It also offers wisdom for a democratic process that sometimes requires patience and persistence before justice is achieved.

Five Major Ideas

1. Free Will and Its Consequences

At the heart of "Paradise Lost" lies Milton's profound exploration of free will—a theme that resonates deeply with American values of liberty and personal responsibility. Milton portrays God as granting genuine freedom of choice to both angels and humans, making their decisions meaningful rather than predetermined. This radical emphasis on free will was theologically controversial in Milton's time but aligns perfectly with America's foundational belief in self-determination. The poem demonstrates that freedom necessarily entails the possibility of making wrong choices, as both Satan and humanity do. Yet Milton insists this risk is worth taking, as without it, virtue would be meaningless. Through Adam and Eve's fall, Milton shows how memory becomes crucial in the postlapsarian world, helping humans "build a new identity, find a new meaning and cultivate new virtue"³. This complex understanding of freedom as both blessing and burden continues to inform American conceptions of liberty.

2. Rebellion and Authority

Milton's nuanced treatment of rebellion against authority offers a sophisticated framework for understanding political resistance that has influenced American thought from the Revolution to the present day. Satan's rebellion against God presents readers with a compelling but ultimately flawed model of resistance. While Satan's eloquent defiance initially appears heroic, Milton reveals how his rebellion degenerates into tyranny and self-deception. This complex portrayal invites readers to distinguish between justified resistance to tyranny and rebellion motivated by pride or self-interest—a distinction crucial to America's own revolutionary tradition. Milton's epic encourages readers to exercise "rigorous judgment" about when resistance is warranted and what forms it should take⁶. This sophisticated approach to authority and resistance has provided Americans with intellectual tools to navigate their own political conflicts, from constitutional crises to civil disobedience movements.

3. The Power of Rhetoric and Language

Milton's exploration of rhetoric's power to persuade, deceive, illuminate, or obscure truth has special relevance in today's information landscape. The poem presents distinct "rhetorical registers" in Heaven, Hell, and Paradise, demonstrating how language shapes understanding and action⁵. Satan's seductive eloquence shows how persuasive language can mask malicious intent, while God's perfect rhetoric represents the ideal union of truth and expression. Adam and Eve's dialogues reveal how communication can either strengthen or undermine human relationships.

Milton's attention to "rhetorical methods" throughout the poem highlights his belief that citizens must develop rhetorical discernment to maintain a healthy democracy⁵. This emphasis on language as both powerful and potentially dangerous speaks directly to contemporary American concerns about media literacy, political discourse, and the ethics of persuasion.

4. Gender and Relationship

Milton's portrayal of gender relations through Adam and Eve offers a complex meditation on equality, difference, and interdependence that continues to inform American discussions of gender. While reflecting some patriarchal assumptions of his time, Milton also creates in Eve a character of remarkable depth, agency, and moral complexity. The relationship between Adam and Eve evolves throughout the poem, from prelapsarian harmony through conflict to a postlapsarian partnership that must navigate a fallen world together. Milton explores how gender relations intersect with questions of knowledge, authority, and responsibility. This nuanced treatment of gender and relationship has provided Americans across the political spectrum with rich material for reflecting on changing gender norms and family structures. Milton's vision of marriage as a spiritual and intellectual partnership, not merely a social or economic arrangement, has particularly influenced American conceptions of marriage.

5. Redemption and Renewal

Milton's vision of redemption after catastrophic failure speaks powerfully to America's own narrative of continual renewal and second chances. After the Fall, Milton does not end with despair but shows how Adam and Eve begin to forge a new path forward, guided by divine providence but exercising their own agency. This pattern of fall and redemption, of learning from failure and building anew, resonates with America's self-conception as a nation constantly reinventing itself while striving toward its ideals. Milton's emphasis on how memory functions "as a mediator enabling one to see 'what he has experienced' and 'what the true meaning is in it'"³ parallels America's own complex relationship with its history. The final books of the epic, where Michael teaches Adam "how to face the changeable future"³ rather than simply mourning paradise lost, offer a model of forward-looking hope grounded in honest reckoning with the past—a balance America continually strives to achieve.

Three Major Controversies

1. Religious Heterodoxy and Theological Challenges

"Paradise Lost" generated significant controversy for its unorthodox theological positions, many of which Milton developed in his theological treatise "De Doctrina Christiana." Milton's portrayal of God, Christ, and creation often departed from established Anglican and Calvinist orthodoxy of his time⁶. His emphasis on free will challenged Calvinist predestination, while his portrayal of the Son as subordinate to God the Father (a position known as Arianism) contradicted Trinitarian doctrine. These theological innovations were not merely academic—they

had profound political implications in a society where religious conformity was tied to political loyalty.

The controversy extended beyond Milton's lifetime, as subsequent generations debated whether the poem was, as William Blake famously suggested, "of the Devil's party without knowing it." Some religious critics argued that Milton's sympathetic portrayal of Satan undermined Christian morality, while others objected to his humanization of Adam and Eve. In America, these theological controversies played out in different ways. Some American religious thinkers embraced Milton's emphasis on individual conscience and free will, seeing it as aligned with democratic values. Others, particularly in more conservative theological traditions, viewed his departures from orthodoxy as dangerous. This tension continues today, as American religious and political thought grapples with questions of determinism versus free will, and the proper relationship between religious doctrine and political liberty.

2. Political Radicalism and Monarchical Reaction

Milton's political radicalism infused "Paradise Lost" with republican ideals that generated strong reactions from monarchical supporters. Though the poem's biblical subject matter provided some cover, contemporary readers would have recognized its political implications¹. Milton's portrayal of God's kingdom as based on merit rather than hereditary right directly challenged Restoration political theory, which emphasized the divine right of kings. His depiction of Satan as a charismatic but ultimately tyrannical leader offered a thinly veiled critique of monarchical excess.

The political controversy surrounding "Paradise Lost" was intensified by Milton's own biography as a defender of regicide and republican government. Royalists viewed the poem as the dangerous work of an unrepentant revolutionary, while supporters of the failed Commonwealth found in it a coded affirmation of their political ideals. This controversy crossed the Atlantic to shape American political thought, where Milton's republican values found fertile ground. During the American Revolution, Milton's critique of tyranny and defense of liberty were frequently invoked by revolutionary writers. Later, both abolitionists and defenders of slavery would claim Milton's epic supported their positions, demonstrating how the poem's political controversies continued to evolve in the American context.

3. Gender Hierarchy and Modern Feminist Critiques

Milton's treatment of gender relations in "Paradise Lost" has generated perhaps the most enduring controversy, particularly in modern feminist readings of the poem. Milton's Eve, though complex and compelling, is described as "inferior" to Adam in certain passages, reflecting patriarchal assumptions of the seventeenth century. The narrative of the Fall, which places significant responsibility on Eve, has been criticized for reinforcing negative stereotypes about women's susceptibility to temptation and their role in human suffering.

This controversy intensified in the twentieth century with feminist critics like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar arguing that Milton's epic reinforced patriarchal power structures. Others, however, have defended Milton's portrayal of Eve as remarkably nuanced for his time, pointing to passages that emphasize her intelligence, autonomy, and essential equality with Adam. In America, this controversy has played out against the backdrop of evolving gender norms and the women's rights movement. Milton's complex portrayal of gender has provided material for both conservative defenses of traditional gender roles and progressive arguments for gender equality. The continuing debate over Milton's treatment of Eve reflects broader American conversations about gender, authority, and the interpretation of foundational texts, whether religious, literary, or political.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "Paradise Lost" because it offers an unparalleled exploration of the very principles that underlie American democracy. Milton's epic is fundamentally concerned with freedom—its possibilities, responsibilities, and costs. In an era when democratic values face challenges both domestic and international, Milton's sophisticated treatment of liberty provides intellectual resources for defending and deepening our commitment to freedom. The poem demonstrates that true liberty requires more than the absence of constraint; it demands moral discernment, mutual responsibility, and continuous vigilance.

"Paradise Lost" also cultivates the habit of "rigorous judgment" essential to democratic citizenship⁶. By presenting complex moral situations without simple answers, Milton trains readers to think critically about authority, rebellion, persuasion, and choice. This intellectual training is precisely what a healthy democracy requires—citizens capable of evaluating competing claims and making informed decisions. Milton's epic encourages what Roderick P. Hart calls "civic hope," that essential American quality of maintaining "faith in democratic ideals despite bleak odds"⁷.

Furthermore, the poem speaks directly to America's ongoing project of creating "a more perfect union" out of diversity and difference. Milton shows how Adam and Eve, after their fall, must learn to build a new community based on forgiveness, mutual support, and shared purpose. This process mirrors America's own continuous effort to forge national unity while respecting individual liberty. Milton's emphasis on how memory functions as "a mediator enabling one to see 'what he has experienced' and 'what the true meaning is in it'"³ offers wisdom for a nation still reckoning with its complex history.

Finally, civic-minded Americans should read "Paradise Lost" because it demonstrates the power of art to sustain democratic culture. Milton wrote his masterpiece after the failure of the republican government he had championed, channeling his political ideals into an enduring work of art that would influence generations. This transformation of political defeat into artistic triumph offers a model for civic resilience. In times of political disappointment or division,

Milton's example reminds us that cultural creation can preserve and transmit democratic values even when political institutions falter.

In sum, "Paradise Lost" is not merely a great poem but a profound meditation on the very principles that animate American democracy. By engaging with Milton's epic, civic-minded Americans participate in a centuries-long conversation about freedom, responsibility, and human potential—a conversation that remains essential to the vitality of democratic life.

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