

# Reading *Paradise Lost*



*David Hopkins*



“This lucid and entirely jargon-free guide to *Paradise Lost* will help any reader of the poem to find their feet, and to understand what makes it the best poem in the English language. Hopkins has one, and only one, resemblance to Milton’s Satan, which is that he can make intricate seem straight.”

*Colin Burrow, Oxford University*

“Where most Miltonists use *Paradise Lost* as a quarry for an investigation of the theological and political ideas of the period, Hopkins’ book restores the poem to where it properly belongs, the sphere of literature. It treats *Paradise Lost* as a great poem, indeed one of the greatest ever written, and shows what that claim means in its beautiful choice of quotations and illuminating commentary upon them, demonstrating the work’s imaginative reach, human interest, and supremely bold and varied verbal artistry. This is the best introduction to *Paradise Lost* there is, suitable for the intelligent sixth-former or undergraduate, or the enquiring general reader outside the academy – or indeed anyone who cares about poetry. It is also a joy to read, indeed a real page-turner – and of how many academic books can one say that?”

*Charles Martindale, Bristol University*

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David Hopkins



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# Preface

This book explores some of the main narrative and poetic qualities which have compelled and fascinated readers of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* for more than three centuries. Designed to be readable in a single sitting, it will, I hope, appeal both to beginners seeking some initial critical orientation, and to others wishing to refresh or extend their acquaintance with *Paradise Lost* after, perhaps, a preliminary encounter with parts of it at school or university. It may also have some interest for more experienced readers, since, though the scale and scope of the book preclude any sustained or detailed engagement with the vast body of secondary literature on *Paradise Lost*, it offers an implicit contribution to some of the most enduring and vigorously contested debates about Milton's poem.

There are already many books on *Paradise Lost*, from which readers will learn much of value. What, then, apart from its brevity, is distinctive about the present one? The best way of answering that question may be by way of a short account of the reception history of Milton's poem. This account, needless to say, is given in very broad brush-strokes, and ignores numerous local exceptions and nuances. But it is, I think, true enough in its general outlines for my present purposes.

For nearly two centuries after its appearance, *Paradise Lost* was widely admired for the grandeur and beauty of its imaginative vision, narrative sweep, and poetic language. Milton was felt to have told a story of human and cosmic significance with a mastery that rivets the reader's attention. His unique and challenging verse style, often employing blank-verse paragraphs of majestic compass, was thought to have successfully embraced the widest range of expressive effects, from awe-inspiring sublimity, through calm

philosophical survey, to sensuously delicate description, and the intimate rendering of human speech. Milton was thought to have enriched the English language with resonances from his Latin, Greek, and Hebrew reading. He was believed to have created the definitive modern epic, subsuming and eclipsing the achievements in that genre of the great poets of classical antiquity and renaissance Italy. 'This man,' the poet Dryden is reported to have remarked on first reading *Paradise Lost*, 'cuts us all out – and the ancients too.'

To be sure, some of Milton's earlier readers expressed (sometimes quite severe) reservations about specific details of the design and language of *Paradise Lost*. And the poem's reputation was no doubt enhanced in a general way by the fact that it was based on subject matter – the story of the Fall of Man as narrated in the Old Testament Book of Genesis – that was central to the teachings of the Christian religion which most of its readers professed. But local quibbles did not diminish the near-universal reverence in which *Paradise Lost* was held. Nor were the poem's admirers limited to those who shared the particular doctrinal or political beliefs of its author. *Paradise Lost* gave enormous pleasure to readers of both sexes, right across the political and religious spectrum. It soon established its reputation as the single greatest non-dramatic poem in English literature.

But around the middle of the nineteenth century, things began to change. In some respects, Milton's reputation continued to grow, and his status as (in Gordon Campbell's phrase) 'the national poet' was consolidated in the publication of David Masson's vast seven-volume biography (1859–94). But doubts began to be expressed about his greatest poem. *Paradise Lost* ceased to be generally regarded as a bountiful provider of rich, diverse, and awe-inspiring poetic pleasure, and started to be seen by some as a 'problem.' The poem's Old Testament subject matter – which, it was thought, Milton had believed in as 'literal' truth – had now begun in some quarters to seem embarrassingly primitive and out-moded. How, it was asked, could Milton possibly have made a coherent and appealing narrative poem out of such a grotesquely implausible story? How could he have hoped to deal satisfactorily, in the context of a poetic narrative, with issues – such as the origins of evil, and the compatibility of human free will with divine