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The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost

Louis Schwartz

University of Richmond, lschwartz@richmond.edu

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THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
PARADISE LOST

EDITED BY
LOUIS SCHWARTZ
University of Richmond



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PREFACE

Milton's *Paradise Lost* makes enormous demands on a reader who tries to meet it on its own lofty and ambitious terms. Few texts, however, are as intensely rewarding to those willing to open themselves to its peculiar power and to the surprisingly open-ended trains of thought and feeling it can provoke. A reader is constantly pulled in various directions at once. Beneath the surface of the poem's expressed allegiance to a rational theology, images proliferate and double in ways that seem hardly rational at all. The poem is suffused with tremendous energies, presenting images of vast, cosmic spaces, angelic warfare, intense discussions on topics ranging from theology and politics to gender relations, astronomy, gardening, the nature of the erotic, and beyond. It also invites us to confuse things, to fuse seemingly incompatible concepts together in our minds and imaginations, and yet also to make surprisingly subtle distinctions that then lead to more confusions and then to even finer distinctions.

Each response and act of interpretation, each confusion and act of distinguishing, is like a choice made by a gardener: we allow one thing to grow, cut another, train something else along a trellis. But the work is never done. The thing we let grow today has to be cut tomorrow, the things we cut today grow back more abundantly, and the things we train need continual care, continual watch against their tending to wild. As W. Gardner Campbell observes in the essay on temptation in this volume, the temptation of the tree of knowledge, which is of course the central episode of the poem, is merely a paradigmatic and extreme example of what we face as readers throughout. "Reason is but choosing," Milton says in *Areopagitica*, and he has God the Father echo the phrase in Book 3 of the epic (3.108). And what is at stake in the choosing is nothing less than the question of whether or not existence as we know it can be said to have any meaning – and if so, what sources that meaning might have. Choosing is also meaning, therefore, and in the poem choices proliferate, a garden of forking paths, each one inviting us.

Part of what both disciplines our choosing and licenses our roving minds and feelings along each path is contextual knowledge and an awareness of what others have thought and felt as they have made their way through the vast cosmological spaces, the intimate bowers, and the mazes and mirrors of the poem. There are accessible beauties throughout, but readers are often discouraged by the poem's many allusions to and echoes of previous literary works. We are constantly aware, as we read, of the Hebrew scriptures, the New Testament, and a wide range of mythological and literary traditions. Their pressure is always felt, and we are asked to compare what we read to images and verbal patterns that we (hopefully) recall from our previous reading. We also always feel the poem's deep and complex engagement with the political, theological, and aesthetic debates of its time, as well as those stretching back through the history of Western European culture. These pressures and engagements are both tantalizing and daunting. If we only knew more, we often think, the poem would open itself more fully, reveal more of what we have been told is there.

The purpose of this *Companion* is to help new readers understand more of this vast scope of reference and context, providing advice and guidance about how to begin thinking about the poem and apprehending what so many readers of all kinds have found so richly compelling about it. To that end, the collection presents fifteen short, accessible essays, each by a recognized Milton scholar who is also a gifted teacher. The essays are designed to invite readers to begin their own independent exploration of the poem by equipping them with useful background knowledge, introducing them to key passages, and acquainting them with the current state of critical debates. They are arranged, moreover, to mirror the way the poem itself unfolds, offering exactly what readers need as they approach each movement of its grand design. The essays of Part I acquaint us with the characters we encounter first in the poem, the agents who frame its story and set its plot and its theological dynamics in motion. Stephen M. Fallon begins the collection by introducing us to the narrator who tells us the tale, a fictionalized version of Milton himself, who prays for the authority and inspiration to accomplish his unprecedented task, then sets out to accomplish it, turning the telling itself into an uncertain heroic drama. Neil Forsyth then introduces us to Satan, who is named near the start as the story's primary cause. He is also famously the character to whom Milton gave his best lines, and to some he is the hero of the poem in his indignant resistance to a God he sees as a tyrant. John Rumrich then helps us navigate our encounter with Sin, Death, and Chaos, a strange set of allegorical personae who suggest some of the darker aspects of human experience and some of the stranger aspects of Milton's ontology. Finally, Victoria Silver introduces us to the ironic poetic

power of Milton's difficult God, whose goodness, despite all the darkness we have witnessed already, the poem means to defend.

The essays of Part II deal with the key contextual issues raised by the early books, matters most readers will need to understand before they continue on to the episodes at its center. The first, by Maggie Kilgour, introduces readers to what is at stake in reading the poem as an epic against the backdrop of its great classical models. Jeffrey Shoulson's essay on Milton's treatment of his biblical sources follows, explaining how Milton both adhered to and altered his scriptural precedents. John Creaser then introduces readers to the principle features and originality of Milton's verse style, with special attention to the way Milton's innovations help express and embody key themes of the poem. Paul Stevens then discusses the poem's intense interest in politics – a “pre-secular” politics that grounds its values of freedom and responsibility in Christian faith and action. Karen L. Edwards, finally, puts the poem's cosmology into its proper historical and intellectual contexts, helping unravel for us Milton's poetic treatment of the astronomical debates of his day.

Part III introduces the key conceptual issues of the epic's central and final episodes. The first essay, by William Shullenberger, explores the bewildering beauty of Milton's Eden, into which we are invited in Book 4, a place of great natural beauty and sensual delight, but also a place that tends to “wild,” creating unexpected challenges both for its two inhabitants and for the reader. Next, Joad Raymond provides an introduction to Milton's angels, suggesting how important it is that we grasp their difference from us if we are to understand what the poem ultimately has to say about humanity. The third essay, by Shannon Miller, examines the centrality of gender difference to Milton's conception of human (as opposed to angelic) existence and introduces us to the historical contexts that help make sense of Milton's depiction of gender hierarchy. She shows just how conflicted Milton sometimes was about such hierarchy, at times reinforcing the assumptions that underpin early modern conceptions of male superiority, and at other times undermining them. The fourth essay offers W. Gardner Campbell's account of the dynamics of temptation at the heart of the poem, offering an answer to a key question: Why did Milton write his justification of God's goodness in the form of a poem at all? Campbell suggests that he did so to make use of the peculiar power that symbol has to express the tension between discipline and liberty that Milton felt was central to reality, and in an important sense constitutive of its value. The final essay, by Mary C. Fenton, guides readers through the poem's final books with their introduction of the counterdynamics of regeneration and consolation in the midst of ongoing sorrow and loss. The collection then concludes with a summary essay by William Kolbrener on the reception history of the poem, tracing the way aspects of its

poetic and intellectual dynamics have driven readers to opposed positions. He also surveys the current state of Milton studies and offers a list of works for further reading.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to commission the essays collected here and to work with each of their authors. I want to thank them all for being gracious and flexible about taking direction from me when I offered it and for working hard in the “narrow room” of a very tight word count. Each essay, I hope, has grown luxuriant by restraint. Several colleagues – some included in this collection, some not – offered welcome advice, encouragement, and sometimes solace along the way. I especially wish to thank Peter Herman, Stephen Buhler (I’m sorry we had to turn off the music), Mary C. Fenton, W. Gardner Campbell, and Anthony Russell. In addition, I want to thank Ray Ryan at Cambridge University Press for proposing this project to me and for being so patient with my slow delivery. The anonymous readers at the Press also offered important suggestions and encouragement, and Louis Gulino and everyone else in the New York office were unfailingly supportive and helpful with all the details on the Press’s side of things. Thanks also, finally, to the English Department and the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Richmond, to Emily Tarchokov for helping with logistics and communication, and to my family for coping with my frequent periods of grumpy inattention.

I dedicate this volume to the memory of my grandmother, Ella Ash, who left this earth after somewhere between 98 and 101 years while I was preparing the manuscript for the Press. Although she thought I should have been a “real doctor” instead of getting a PhD in literature, and although she would never have actually read the book – “eh,” she would have said with a wave of her hand – still, she would have been proud, as she always was, that her grandson was publishing something again. It is a long way from the shtetl to Cambridge University Press, and no one could see all the way across that “vast abrupt” better than she could. Even if she did not always understand what she saw, knowing her and loving her (and being loved by her) helped *me* to see and, in part at least, to understand.

Louis Schwartz