

"Answerable Style": The Genre of *Paradise Lost* Cordelia Zukerman and Thomas H. Luxon (2008)

In his [*Preface to Paradise Lost*](#), C. S. Lewis wrote, "Every poem can be considered in two ways — as what the poet has to say, and as a thing which he makes. From the one point of view it is an expression of opinions and emotions; from the other, it is an organization of words which exists to produce a particular kind of patterned experience in the readers" (2). Genre, therefore, is important not only as a mode of framing a story, but also as a model that produces expectations in readers. In Book 2 of *The Reason of Church Government*, Milton declares his desire to write a great work that will serve to glorify England as earlier poets had glorified their native lands and cultures: "what the greatest and choicest wits of Athens, Rome, or modern Italy, and those Hebrews of old did for their country, I in my proportion with this over and above of being a Christian, might doe for mine" ([RCG 2](#)). He declares his intention to write in English rather than another language such as Latin, and then ponders what genre to adopt: epic, tragic, or lyric ([RCG 2](#)). These three genres of poetry have existed since ancient Greece, and by Milton's time they carried with them a set of connotations and expectations that most educated people recognized. Milton's concern about which genre to choose, therefore, was not simply a matter of seeking the perfect medium for his story, but the anxiety of a writer seeking to place himself within a centuries-old poetic tradition.

In deciding to write an epic, Milton consciously places himself in the tradition of prior epic writers, such as the ancients Homer and Virgil, and the Medieval and Renaissance poets Dante, Tasso, Ariosto, and Spenser. By doing this, he raises specific sets of expectations both for himself and for readers. Formally, *Paradise Lost* contains many classical and Renaissance epic conceits: it begins *in medias res*; it concerns heavenly and earthly beings and the interactions between them; it uses conventions such as epic similes, catalogues of people and places, and invocations to a muse; and it contains themes common to epics, such as war, nationalism, empire, and stories of origin.

Milton's range of variations on epic conventions contribute to *Paradise Lost's* stunning effects. Unlike classics such as the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, *Paradise Lost* has no easily identified hero. The most Achilles-like character in the poem is Satan, whom Milton surrounds with "epic matter and motivations, epic genre conventions, and constant allusions to specific passages in famous heroic poems" (Barbara Lewalski, [Paradise Lost](#) and the Rhetoric of Literary Forms 55). Critics and writers such as William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley believed Satan to be the hero of *Paradise Lost*. Yet the problems inherent in viewing Satan as a hero have led modern critics to reject this idea. As Lewalski writes, "by measuring Satan against the heroic standards, we become conscious of the inadequacy and fragility of all the heroic virtues celebrated in literature, of the susceptibility of them all to demonic perversion" (78).

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Another possibility for the hero of *Paradise Lost* is the Son of God, but although he is an important force in the poem, the story is not ultimately about him. The most likely possibility, therefore, is Adam. Adam resembles Aeneas in many respects: he is the father of a new race, responsible for founding civilization on earth. But unlike Aeneas, Adam's primary heroic act is not heroic at all: it is the first act of disobedience. The heroism celebrated in Book 9 as "Patience and Heroic Martyrdom" stands in stark contrast to traditional epic heroism ([PL](#) 31-2). Is Adam's disobedience an indictment of traditional heroism? If the quiet Adam is the true hero of *Paradise Lost*, and Satan with all his heroic oratory is not, then Milton is simultaneously entering into a dialogue with previous works about the nature of heroism, reconfiguring the old model, and effectively redefining notions of heroism for his seventeenth-century English Protestant audience.

The hero is not the only epic tradition to be reconfigured in *Paradise Lost*; the poem also plays on readers' expectations about epic form. Although it most resembles an epic, *Paradise Lost* contains elements of many other genres: there are elements of lyric poetry, including the pastoral mode, as in the descriptions of Paradise, the conversations between the unfallen Adam and Eve, and their joyful prayers to God in the Garden ([PL](#) 4.589-735). There is an aubade ([PL](#) 5.136-208), a type of symposium (Raphael's visit, [PL](#) 5-8), and examples of georgic verse ([PL](#) 4.618-33, 5.209-19, 9.205-225). There are also elements of tragedy, as in Book 9 when Milton, preparing his readers for the fall, writes, "I now must change / Those Notes to Tragic," and continues throughout the book to employ tragic conventions, as when he apostrophizes Eve ([PL](#) 9.404-411) and describes the earth's response to the eating of the fruit ([PL](#) 9.782-4 and 9.1000-4). Throughout the poem Milton makes use of soliloquy, another tragic convention. And even the ten-book structure of the 1667 edition, according to John Leonard, "might owe something to English tragedy, forming five dramatic acts of two books each" (Introduction to [PL](#) xi). In fact, Milton's first attempts to write the story of man's fall took the form of a tragedy that he later rejected in favor of epic. Scott Elledge writes that Milton favored tragedy because of its "affective and curative powers," which are no less present in *Paradise Lost* than in his more formal tragedy, *Samson Agonistes* (Introduction to [PL](#) xxvi). As Barbara Lewalski writes, the incorporation of multiple genres into the poem invites us "to identify certain patterns and certain poems as subtexts for portions of Milton's poem, and then to attend to the completion or transformation of those allusive patterns as the poem proceeds" (20).

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