



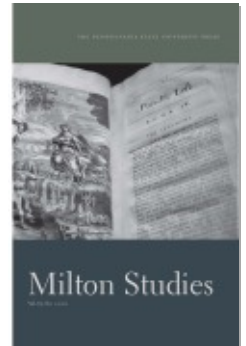
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The Pleasure of Milton

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ABSTRACT In debates today over the value of literature, Milton is one of the best advocates we might have for both the profound importance and the sheer pleasure of poetry. In his description of Eden and in the reading experience created through the form of the poem, Milton reminds us of the deep need for a rational, active, creative, but equally bodily, pleasure to give our lives meaning.

KEYWORDS *Paradise Lost*, poetic pleasure, Eden, prosody

Why read Milton today? It's a good question to ask ourselves and our students. It makes us articulate clearly and strongly the values of reading in general and, in particular, reading the works of a complex, demanding, and, of course, long-dead writer. As these two issues show, there are in fact many possible and powerful answers. But for me, Milton's deepest relevance today lies in what he has to teach us about the pleasures of reading. This is something I believe we must speak more about when discussing the value of literary studies today. On the defensive against administrations and publics who ask us to justify our existence, teachers of literature often fall back on reasons that seem to bestow needed *gravitas* on lives spent reading and teaching what are, after all, mere fictions. To justify the ways of English to parents who fear that their literature-loving children will have no future, we offer utilitarian defenses: literature teaches "transferable skills" of analysis and communication, which employers want, and so leads to good jobs after all. (A recent blog by a writer on trends in the workplace predicted

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that 2020 would be the year in which, spurred by advances in AI especially, tech companies would start to target aggressively humanities graduates for recruitment.¹) To counter the criticism that studying literature is socially irresponsible and to reassure ourselves that what we do matters in today's world, we present ethical arguments (literature teaches empathy) as well as political ones (literature empowers and builds responsible citizens). These claims are true and important. As other pieces in this issue show, Milton can play a crucial role in expanding our moral and political imaginations. Yet acquiring such skills or powers are actually *not* why students usually say they are drawn to literature in the first place—or, in most cases (I hope), why we professors ourselves decided to dedicate ourselves to it. What it comes down to is pleasure: the joy of informed, engaged reading, the excitement of discovery, of learning new things, of suddenly understanding the world in a new way.

We are often too embarrassed to admit this—as if such pleasure were somehow not respectable or childish and unscientific (though I am happy to say that I know scientists who are quite giddy about their research). Students often seem to worry that it is selfish to study something they enjoy—as opposed to acquiring skills selflessly that will lead to an extremely lucrative career. In a world where so many people lack basic needs, pleasure can seem a luxury. We need therefore to talk more about the nature and significance of the complexly profound pleasure that reading offers and what it can mean for us today.

Here there is no better teacher than Milton, as I have found in my classes, once students move beyond their initial terror and some unhelpful preconceptions. Far from being the cartoon puritan many expect, Milton is a passionate advocate for the importance of pleasure. It is the essence of existence in Eden, a word which in Hebrew means “pleasure.” In book 9 of *Paradise Lost*, Adam is surprised when Eve suggests they split up in order to tend the garden more efficiently and effectively. As he points out, there is no need to rush to get their job done:

not so strictly hath our Lord impos'd
Labour, as to debarr us when we need
Refreshment, whether food, or talk between,
Food of the mind, or this sweet intercourse
Of looks and smiles, for smiles from Reason flow,
To brute deni'd, and are of Love the food,
Love not the lowest end of human life.

For not to irksom toile, but to delight
 He made us, and delight to Reason joynd. (9.235–43)²

Eden is Milton's idea of what the perfect human life would be like. Although Adam and Eve have work to do in the garden, the purpose of their life is "delight," a delight that is crucially, as Adam notes, rational. Pleasure is what gives life meaning. The work they do is not "irksome toile" but is itself enjoyable. Given the negative associations of work, many representations of the Golden Age or biblical Eden imagine the perfect world as a kind of leisure garden. Labor is the punishment for human transgression in Genesis 3, as well as in classical works such as Hesiod's *Works and Days* and Virgil's *Georgics*. Milton's Adam and Eve, however, work before the Fall, and their work is a source of pleasure as it makes their lives meaningful. Through looking after the garden, Adam and Eve actively participate in making their own world. They are not passive recipients of God's bounty who simply dwell in the space given to them, but creative agents who imaginatively shape the world they live in.

As this suggests, for Milton the experience of pleasure is inherently active and creative. As Adam notes also, it is linked to reason. At the same time, Miltonic pleasure is also explicitly and deliciously bodily. As readers today observe with approval, Milton is very frank about the fact that Adam and Eve have sex in Eden. When they go to bed at night, Milton notes it is not just to sleep and denounces puritans who malign the pleasures of the flesh:

nor turnd I weene
Adam from his fair Spouse, nor *Eve* the Rites
 Mysterious of connubial Love refus'd:
 Whatever Hypocrites austerely talk
 Of puritie and place and innocence,
 Defaming as impure what God declares
 Pure . . . (4.741–47)

This celebration of the erotic seems to us a good and natural thing, indeed a requirement for a truly happy life. For Milton's time, however, it is remarkable. Many earlier Christian thinkers thought that sex, like work, was a consequence of the Fall. But for Milton sexual intercourse is one of the purest pleasures humans can experience. It is essential to the relationship between Adam and Eve, the means by which they know each other fully as embodied beings and show their love for each other.

Milton's representation of prelapsarian pleasure as both sensual and rational is politically as well as religiously charged, as he positions himself between the extremes of puritanical condemnations of the flesh and libertine abandon to mindless sensuality.³ For Milton true physical delight is neither superficial nor separate from the rational forms of pleasure that are also essential to life in Eden. In particular, sexual intercourse complements the verbal intercourse that is also a source of intense and creative fun for both Adam and Eve. Language allows them to know each other as inherently discursive creatures and offers them another means of expressing their mutual love by putting it into words. Even the way they address each other is meaningful and an opportunity for pleasure. When we first see Adam speaking to Eve, he tenderly and playfully calls her the "Sole partner and sole part of all these joyes" (4.411). The lines wittily express both his love and his respect for her, as well as his delight in their relationship: she is his *sole* partner, the only creature in Eden who is his equal, but also his *soul* partner. If the pun on sole/soul is clever, the play on part/partner is even better. The simple word "part" has many different meanings: as a noun, a part can be piece of something; as a verb, it can mean to separate things or to share (partake of) something. Here it demonstrates the complex, dynamic, and creative relationship between husband and wife who, beginning as literally one flesh, were separated but are now reunited as parts of a new whole in which they are only symbolically "one flesh" (8.499). With rather astonishing skill for a newly created being, Adam compresses the couple's entire dating history into a single line. Eve began as a *part* of him but is now his *partner*; it is because he *parted* from her (he was in fact taken *apart*) that he is able to *part* (share) his life with her.

It is not really surprising that for a poet like Milton language is itself a source of intense delight. *Paradise Lost* also asks us to think about the peculiar kind of pleasure poetic language gives us and the way it works. It would of course be faster and indeed more efficient if Adam just called Eve by her name. But speed and efficiency are again not the point of life in Eden, and it is more fun for Adam and Eve to take time and explore the creative potential of word play, and also more fun for readers as they recognize the wit here. Like sex, speech in Eden is a form of love, as Eve recognizes in book 8 when she prefers to let Adam relate to her what Raphael tells him rather than hearing it from Raphael directly. Adam will draw out the conversation, making mere information much more interesting:

hee, she knew would intermix
Grateful digressions, and solve high dispute

With conjugal Caresses, from his Lip
Not Words alone pleas'd her. (8.54–57)

Adam will not only creatively revise and elaborate what Raphael has told him, but he will mix words with kisses and those deliciously suggestive “conjugal Caresses.” His pedagogical style is quite different from that of Raphael, and appropriate for Milton’s Eden in which the most deeply intellectual knowledge involves the body as well. For Adam and Eve, kissing and speaking are necessary oral activities that complement each other.

The other great oral pleasure of the garden is of course eating, and it is telling that when Raphael joins them in the garden, they begin their conversation over a good meal. Even spiritual beings eat, and Raphael tucks into Eve’s carefully prepared meal with relish:

down they sat,
And to thir viands fell, nor seemingly
The Angel, nor in mist, the common gloss
Of Theologians, but with keen dispatch
Of real hunger (5.433–37)

As the symposium with Raphael suggests also, knowledge in the garden is itself a source of pleasure that is as natural and necessary as eating. More accurately, pleasure is a form of knowledge, a way of understanding and experiencing the self, world, others, and God.

In book 9, Satan offers Eve an alternative, faster way of knowing that leads to the loss of this ideal world. The consequences of the Fall as Milton presents them involve the draining of pleasure from the world. Work is no longer satisfying and fun, sex pushes Adam and Eve apart rather than bringing them closer, and words become inadequate as people misunderstand each other and communication breaks down. The experience of knowing itself turns into complex and tedious labor.

The narrator reminds us that he, too, lives in this sad world; he writes in “solitude,” as he is “fall’n on evil dayes, / On evil dayes though fall’n, and evil tongues” (7.28, 25–26). At the same time, however, the poem reminds us that this is not the world for which we were originally intended. Through the description of Edenic life, Milton challenges us to imagine a better world, one in which we would be truly at home. As a poem, moreover, *Paradise Lost* not only describes what pleasure might look like but also offers its readers an experience of that pleasure through its own language and word-play. Like other Renaissance writers, Milton accepts the Roman poet

Horace's claim that poetry should be both pleasurable and useful.⁴ In his *Defence of Poetry*, Philip Sidney argued further that, of all disciplines, poetry is the best teacher *because* it delights us; it can be useful *because* it pleases us.⁵ It touches our emotions, engages us as whole human beings who have bodies as well as minds, and moves us profoundly in a way that abstract and purely intellectual concepts cannot. My students are often surprised at and excited by the beauty of Milton's language. This description of the garden shows how form and content can work together to create delight:

Thus was this place,
 A happy rural seat of various view;
 Groves whose rich Trees wept odorous Gumms and Balme,
 Others whose fruit burnisht with Golden Rinde
 Hung amiable, *Hesperian* Fables true,
 If true, here only, and of delicious taste:
 Betwixt them Lawns, or level Downs, and Flocks
 Grasing the tender herb, were interpos'd,
 Or palmie hilloc, or the flourie lap
 Of som irriguous Valley spred her store,
 Flours of all hue, and without Thorn the Rose:
 Another side, umbrageous Grots and Caves
 Of coole recess, o're which the mantling vine
 Layes forth her purple Grape, and gently creeps
 Luxuriant; mean while murmuring waters fall
 Down the slope hills, disperst, or in a Lake,
 That to the fringed Bank with Myrtle crown'd,
 Her chrystal mirror holds, unite thir streams.
 The Birds thir quire apply; aires, vernal aires,
 Breathing the smell of field and grove, attune
 The trembling leaves, while Universal *Pan*
 Knit with the *Graces* and the *Hours* in dance
 Led on th' Eternal Spring. (4.246–68)

Milton pauses the action of the poem to allow us to savor the landscape of Eden and momentarily experience what life might be like there. There is a lot to appeal to us. Milton imagines his paradise as a deeply sensual pleasure garden that satisfies all five senses: sight (“various view”); hearing (“aires,” in the sense of tunes); smell (“aires,” meaning also the air we breathe in; also

“odorous” and “Breathing the smell of field and grove”); taste (“of delicious taste”); even touch (those wonderfully gooey “Gumms and Balme”). His Eden is an active world of overflowing fertility, lush with life and energy, in which nature sings and dances. Because of the Fall, of course, we can’t directly see, hear, smell, taste, or touch this world. But the words themselves are chosen to produce pleasure. One of the reasons why Milton always jumps on the opportunity to list the names of exotic places is that he simply loves the way they sound, and in this passage, he chooses words that themselves seem somehow rich and juicy to the palate. I relish rolling the word “umbrageous” around in my mouth, while other mouthwatering multisyllabic words ooze out amidst otherwise simple one- or two-syllable words: “odorous,” “Hesperian,” “delicious,” the luscious-sounding “irriguous,” “luxuriant,” “murmuring.” Long vowels—especially the long “o”s flowing through lines 248–56 (“groves,” “odorous,” “golden,” “interpos’d,” “store,” “rose”)—run through the passage like a breeze binding the words in a long sigh of ecstatic sonic harmony. Enjambment, especially in lines 257–61 describing the creeping of the vine and fall of the water, suggests a world in motion that can barely be contained by the meter of blank verse. I find it both exhilarating and soothing to read.

Not all parts of *Paradise Lost* can give us such pure unadulterated delight; the last books especially describing the consequences of the Fall are painful to read as they bring us back to the world we live in where there seems indeed little pleasure. Yet there is still delight in the act of reading itself. For us, as for Adam and Eve, pleasure is not detached from work, the *dulce* from the *utile*, as Milton’s poem is difficult. It asks us to be active and deeply attentive readers. But in return, such a reading experience stimulates and expands our imaginations in a way that is itself thrilling. The poetic form, blank verse, is crucial to this experience. Milton had used rhyme skillfully in his first collection of poetry and would again in places in his last, *Samson Agonistes*. Throughout his career he wrote sonnets, one of the most demanding of rhyming forms, and recognized the power of rhyme to create sound patterns that are themselves enjoyable. However, the headnote published with the 1668 edition of *Paradise Lost* belligerently denounces rhyme as “no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem or good Verse, in longer Works especially, but the Invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Meeter” (*PL* 10). Writing the poem transforms the past political revolutionary into a poetical revolutionary whose poem is “an example set, the first in *English*, of ancient liberty recover’d to Heroic

Poem from the troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing” (10). Milton presents himself as a freedom-fighter still whose aim now is to liberate poetry from the tyranny of inhibiting and unnatural customs.

To a modern eye, however, Milton’s blank verse may look anything but free. In comparison to twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry it seems extremely formal, staid, even monolithic and monumental. Visually it creates walls of imposing, even lines arranged in dense and often lengthy verse paragraphs. The form deliberately calls attention to its difference from mere prose or what William Wordsworth will celebrate as a “language really used by men,” especially as Milton’s often Latinate-seeming diction can appear dauntingly foreign and unnatural.⁶ But solid as Milton’s form may appear, it is remarkably dynamic and flexible. Unfettered by the requirements of rhyme, blank verse can propel narrative and thought forward to express complex ideas. The absence of rhyming words to mark the end of lines enables the verse to be fluid and expansive. As we saw in the description of Eden cited above, Milton’s lines are often enjambed, so that they run on without pause, pushing outward and forward like the weeping trees and running streams of Eden. The famous opening of *Paradise Lost* sweeps up the first sixteen lines into a single sentence:

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
 Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
 Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
 With loss of *Eden*, till one greater Man
 Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
 Sing Heav’nly Muse, that on the secret top
 Of *Oreb*, or of *Sinai*, didst inspire
 That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
 In the Beginning how the Heav’ns and Earth
 Rose out of *Chaos*: Or if *Sion* Hill
 Delight thee more, and *Siloa’s* Brook that flow’d
 Fast by the Oracle of God; I thence
 Invoke thy aid to my adventrous Song,
 That with no middle flight intends to soar
 Above th’ *Aonian* Mount, while it pursues
 Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime. (1.1–16)

This is a demanding passage to read, especially to read aloud, as with the lack of rhymes or pauses at the end of lines it is hard to find a place to breathe.

The suspension of verbs—the main verb, “Sing,” doesn’t come in until the sixth line—is not only unnatural and confusing but keeps us rushing forward to get to the action. It’s as if once the poet starts to speak, he can’t stop until he is soaring above the Aonian Mount of the ancient poets to do something completely new. Whereas the poet made us slow down in Eden to look at the garden or listen carefully to Adam and Eve in conversation, here he himself seems to be bursting with energy and wants to talk about everything at once: in the first five lines alone, the speaker jumps from the beginning of history told in the Bible (“Mans First Disobedience” 1.1) to the coming of Christ (“one greater Man” 1.4), from the story of the Fall to that of redemption, from the beginning of the Bible to its end! Where the restraints of rhyme might hold him back, here the language and thought seem to push forward freely without curbs. One of the great pleasures of rhyme is its predictability, which can produce a satisfying sense of harmony and closure. Rhyme gives the reader a sense of where the verse might be going: “June” always seems inevitably to lead to “tune” or “honeymoon.” But it can therefore also work against suspense, as meaning seems predetermined by sound. The pleasures of *Paradise Lost*’s verse are riskier and more demanding for the reader.⁷ Freed from the restrictions of rhyme, Milton’s language and thought seem able to go anywhere—and they do.

To make it even harder to predict where the poem is heading, words change meaning before our eyes. The word “fruit” has one meaning in line 1 and another in line 2: in the first line it is used figuratively, to mean the consequence or result of disobedience, but in the second line it suddenly becomes also the literal fruit of the tree that caused the disobedience. The lines don’t ask us to choose between the two meanings; they ask us to entertain a complex identification between them. In the first two lines Milton plunges us into an expansive way of thinking and knowing, and demands that we be ready to follow him anywhere. Although we know from the start how this story ends, the fact that we can’t tell where or how a sentence will end creates suspense and pushes back against the feeling of inevitability. With its formal language and often unnatural arrangement of syntax the poem makes us think differently, asking us to imagine new possibilities and, especially, a world that might be other than it is.

By pushing us this way *Paradise Lost* attempts to liberate not just poetic form but our minds. At the same time, Milton also liberates the idea of pleasure and reimagines its place in human life, redefining it not as a luxury but the essence of meaningful life. In some ways, the pleasure of reading is still like the pleasures he imagined in Eden. It is active and creative, and

involves meaningful work: in this case, in fact, the crucial work of making meaning. It too is not a solely intellectual pleasure, as it engages our senses and feelings and expands our imaginations. Like the pleasure in Eden, the pleasure of reading is a way of knowing and understanding the world, one different from many of our daily ways of thinking. In a world in which value is too often measured only in material terms, and universities themselves are becoming corporations producing commodified knowledge, such pleasure is not a luxury but a necessity.

NOTES

1. See Dan Schawbel, "The Top 10 Workplace Trends for 2020," *LinkedIn*, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/top-10-workplace-trends-2020-dan-schawbel/> (accessed November 1, 2019).

2. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Barbara K. Lewalski (Oxford, 2007). All further citations are taken from this edition and cited parenthetically by book and line numbers.

3. On Miltonic pleasure, see Steven N. Zwicker, *Lines of Authority: Politics and English Literary Culture 1649–1689* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993), 90–129; Joshua Scodel, *Excess and the Mean in Early Modern English Literature* (Princeton, N.J., 2002), 255–84.

4. Horace, *Ars Poetica*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, Mass., 1929), line 343.

5. Sir Philip Sidney, "The Defence of Poesy," in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford, 1989), 217–19.

6. William Wordsworth, "Preface," in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi (New York, 2014), 78.

7. On Milton's use of blank verse see the work of John Creaser, especially "Fear of Change': Closed Minds and Open Forms in Milton," *Milton Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (2008): 161–82; and "'Service Is Perfect Freedom': Paradox and Prosodic Style in *Paradise Lost*," *Review of English Studies* 58, no. 235 (2007): 268–315.