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Jack H. Wolfram  
*Emory University*

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## **PARADISE UNCAGED: JOHN MILTON'S SUBTLE FIXATION WITH CONSTRAINTS**

JACK H. WOLFRAM, EMORY UNIVERSITY  
MENTOR: SARAH HIGINBOTHAM

### **Abstract**

In this paper, I argue that John Milton's writings demonstrate a subtle preoccupation on the part of their author with the inherent limitations presented by various forms and conventions. In addressing and challenging the restrictive nature of poetic conventions, the human form, ontological conceptions, perceived gender binaries, and poetic verse itself, I find that Milton's writings illustrate an undercurrent of rebellion against the imposed limitations and conventions of the mediums they inhabit, as well as a fascination with the idea of form free from confinement. The lines and construction of the majority of Milton's English sonnets and his timeless lapsarian epic, *Paradise Lost*, as well as other works such as *Areopagitica*, "Lycidas," and "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," bear significant support for a rebellion against form and convention. The implication is that Milton exercised some degree of metaliterary thought amid the composition of his works and their unprecedented defiance of standard and convention.

Before there were such well-acknowledged norm-benders as the genre-busting megastar musician Prince, the revolutionary American gender theorist Judith Butler, or the diversity-minded rap-opera theater-maker Lin-Manuel Miranda, there was John Milton. The seventeenth-century poet, polemic, civil servant, and intellectual of sustained international notoriety nursed a preoccupation with the inherent limitations that various forms and conventions present. He challenged the restrictive nature of poetic conventions, ontological conceptions, perceived gender binaries, and poetic verse, and even the human form itself. Milton's writings illustrate an undercurrent of rebellion against the imposed limitations and conventions of the mediums they might inhabit, as well as a fascination with the idea of confinement-free form. And yet at the same time, he seemed to purposely seek out constraints, from the strict sonnet form to the highly stylized epic and pastoral genres. The majority of his English sonnets and his postlapsarian epic *Paradise Lost*—as well as other works such as *Areopagitica*, "Lycidas," and "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," although less blatantly so—

bear significant support in their lines and construction for an attraction to constraints as well as a simultaneous rebellion against typical form and convention. Milton's simultaneous seeking of and resistance to typical forms indicate a subtle but distinct fascination on his part with norms and how to purposefully push their boundaries.

Milton's portfolio of sonnets, twenty-four poems strong, first consisted of poems that respectfully and artfully explored Petrarchan/Tuscan sonnetary conventions. As a young man, he wrote "a fragmentary group of Italian poems" between 1629 and 1632 that intended to "explor[e], in the correct Tuscan dialect, the origins of the love sonnet" (Kerrigan et al. 137). Until 1632, the vast majority (if not entirety) of known sonnets, Tuscan or otherwise, were concerned with matters of love. That year, Milton broke poetic convention with his seventh sonnet, a self-reflective poem written in English. As Kerrigan et al. write, "Nothing [...] could have anticipated Milton's effort [in this sonnet] to gather religious strength in contemplating the end of an apparently unpromising youth" (137). Such a topic had never before been breached in sonnet form.

As Milton himself stated within the sonnet, "It shall be still in the strictest measure even" (10), and indeed, he played within the foundations of the Petrarchian sonnet with Sonnet 7 in his thematic structure and Italian language. The first quatrain introduces conflict, which—prior to Milton's sonnets—was always romantically grounded. In this seventh Italian sonnet, though, Milton writes to a friend of his progressing age and seemingly stagnant development as a writer: "How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth, / Stol'n on his wings my three and twentieth year! / My hasting days fly on with full career, / But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th" (1–4). He continues by developing this conflict in the second quatrain, then beginning the traditional sonnetary sestet with a volta that introduces a pronounced change in tone—in this case, a reaffirmation of self, that he will continue to march toward whatever goal "Time" and "the Will of Heaven" lead him (12). Milton's specific writing, while meeting the structural qualifications for a Petrarchian sonnet, could also be read as three quatrains and a couplet, which evokes the measure of Shakespearean sonnets. In Sonnet 7, Milton chronicles his woe and delay morphing into steadfastness and confidence within a poetic container previously exclusive to tales of love and loss, thus renegotiating the boundaries of sonnets and the stories within their stanzas.

The vast majority of Milton's other sonnets further challenged poetic convention. His tenth, thirteenth through seventeenth, twentieth, and twenty-first sonnets celebrate well-known individuals and his relationships with them, while his

eighth and eighteenth sonnets provide commentary on wartime skirmishes; his eleventh and twelfth sonnets defend his *Tetrachordon* divorce tracts, and his final English sonnet, “On the New Forces of Conscience,” was written in opposition to the Presbyterians. Milton defied convention with these poems in that he appropriated the sonnet as a means of political discourse best suited to his own compositional style as a self-identified poet. “Far from standing at odds with one another, poetic creation and political engagement [thus] turn out to be intimately connected. The artistry of the sonnets keeps pace with [...] Milton's specifically political understanding of events, parties, and leaders as well as his sense of their significance to himself and his nation as political entities” (Mueller 477). Thus, I argue not that Milton challenged the structural form of sonnet poetry but that, in harnessing his dexterity as a poet to supplement his political prose with sonnets, he transformed the perceived boundaries of sonnets.

Beyond politically repurposing their poetic form, Milton also used sonnets to express explicit feelings of frustration with other forms' limitations. Sonnets 19 and 22 both testify to Milton's frustrations with the limitations of form, in that their lines depict Milton's doubts and anxieties concerning his own human existence, limited by visual impairment and mortality. In both sonnets, the forty-three-year-old poet contemplates whether his developed blindness might make impossible his perceived divine responsibility to produce a literary work “unattempted yet in prose or rhyme” (1.16)—a subject that, like those touched on by the majority of his English sonnets, had never before been addressed in this particular medium. We know, however, that despite his blindness, Milton ultimately did produce such a work in *Paradise Lost*, a literary masterpiece that illustrates Milton's form obsession perhaps more than any other piece he conceived.

*Paradise Lost* is a mutiny against form in myriad ways, one of which is its construction—that is, the medium in which John Milton produced it. In his 1672 *Artis Logicae*, Milton defines matter as “the cause from which a thing is [*causa ex qua res es*]” and form as “the cause through which a thing is what it is [*causa per quam res est id quod es*]” (*Artis* 866–67; Lieb 207). This work's ontological exploration of form provides a logical basis for the great deal of thought that Milton seems to have put into choosing an appropriately limitless form for his intended masterpiece. Milton's Trinity College manuscript from the early 1640s contains a series of outlines and ideas for such a work, four of which are outlines for *Paradise Lost* as a tragic drama (Kerrigan et al. 252). It seems, however, that Milton decided that a theatrical medium could not realistically accommodate Adam and Eve's “first naked glory” (4.1115) and switched forms, opting instead for a work of “English

heroic verse without rhyme, as that of Homer in Greek, and of Virgil in Latin,” as he stated in his postpublication argument, “The Printer to the Reader.” Milton explicitly targets the limitations of form—specifically, poetic form—in this originally unintended foreword of sorts, having written and included it with his epic as a response to public outcry concerning “why the poem rhymes not”:

[R]hyme being 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 meter [...] [t]his neglect of rhyme so little is to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar readers, that it rather is to be esteemed an example set, the first in English, of ancient liberty recovered to heroic poem from the troublesome and modern bondage of rhyming. (*Paradise* 291)

In his *Between Worlds: The Rhetorical Universe of Paradise Lost*, Will Pallister argues that the particular blank verse form Milton chose for his lapsarian epic enabled Milton to weave near-countless political, religious, philosophical, historical, mythological, literary, justice-related, and gender-related elements and references into the work’s “encyclopedic scope” while still maintaining such elements’ subordinacy to the work’s “overarching poetic agenda” and “aesthetic achievement” (241). Renaissance critical theory, too, offers support for the notion of the epic as a compendious storytelling medium. At frequent points within *Paradise Lost*, Milton references the similarly blind poet Homer, a Grecian whose epics were widely considered an original source for philosophy, mathematics, history, geography, military, art, and numerous other disciplines in their time (Lewalski 5). The continuous union of all these fields via the relatively unrestrictive nature of *Paradise Lost*’s rhetorical form aligns with Milton’s own monist ontology, a philosophy entailing that everything in the universe is constructed of the same matter—“one first matter all” (5.472)—but “endued in various forms, various degrees / Of substance” (*Paradise Lost* 5.473–74; Lieb 224). Milton’s monism underlies much of the anti-form sentiments expressed within the actual line and lyric of *Paradise Lost*.

*Paradise Lost*’s narrative content exhibits many challenges against form. Narrative character descriptions serve as one means by which Milton achieves the undertone of formlessness pervading his epic. For instance, the narrator begins *Paradise Lost* by calling on its muse, to which the narrator ascribes abilities characteristic of both genders: “Dove-like sat’st brooding on the vast abyss,” behaving as a female dove would behave (1.21), “[a]nd mad’st it pregnant,” which is an ability typically attributed only to males (1.22). The narrator’s description of

the fallen angels later in Book 1 further blurs the binary form that Milton's contemporaries assigned to gender, simultaneously offering a restrictive interpretation of the human form through its verbiage: "For spirits when they please / Can either sex assume, or both" (1.423–24). The concrete nature of shape also lands under Milton's microscope, as the narrator explains that fallen angels' otherworldly essences are "[n]ot tied or manacled with joint or limb, / Not founded on the brittle strength of bones, / [...] but in what shape they choose / Dilated or condensed, bright or obscure, can execute their airy purposes" (1.426–30). This shapeshifting frequently resurfaces throughout *Paradise Lost* with regard to the fallen angels. They shrink as they enter Pandemonium, as "[t]hey who seemed / In bigness to surpass Earth's giant sons / Now less than the smallest dwarves" (1.777–79), and Satan demonstrates their ability to take on earthly forms when he infiltrates Eden within "his borrowed visage" of the serpent (3.154–56). In fact, Milton's narrator goes so far as to defy the very concept of visualizable concrete form itself with the description of Death. Introduced as a shapeless, indistinguishably limbed being of equal parts shadow and substance (2.666–79), Death defies the confines of physical form altogether to such a degree that we as readers struggle to mentally envision him (Trubowitz 393).

On the other end of the heavenly spectrum, too, Milton ingrains formlessness into his epic: in its address at the introduction of Book 3, the narrator uses ephemeral but self-contradictory language to describe God and the Holy Trinity. The narrator praises two halves of the Holy Trinity simultaneously—"Hail holy light, offspring of heav'n first-born" (3.1)—in referring to the Son, but the narrator continues, "Since God is light, / And never but in unapproachéd light / Dwelt from eternity, dwelt then in thee" (3.3–5), a description that evokes the same sense of depth as did that of Death. In this sense, Milton uses his narrator to establish an underlying defiance of form from the very beginnings of *Paradise Lost*.

Milton continues to develop the form-defying, gender-fluid characteristics conveyed within his descriptions of his muse (1.21–22) and the fallen angels (1.423–28) in the dialogue he invents between Adam and the archangel Raphael. In their lengthy conversation, Raphael provides insights into the formless, fluid nature of Milton's pre-lapsarian universe. After unabashedly gushing about the logistics of heavenly sex—"and obstacle find none / Of membrane, joint, or limb, exclusive bars" (8.622–26)—the archangel directly touches on Milton's monist philosophy in response to one of Adam's questions concerning the basis for all things' existence: "one first matter all" (5.432). He explains to Adam that everything in the entire universe is composed of the same matter and that everything exists on a

“scale of nature” (5.509) up which humans can ascend toward angelic heights by following God’s commandments: “Time may come when [hu]man[s] / With angels may participate, and find / No inconvenient diet, nor too light fare: / And from these corporal nutriments perhaps / [Their] bodies may at last turn all to spirit” (5.493–97). Milton thus fundamentally undermines the notion of concrete form altogether in *Paradise Lost*, as pre-lapsarian humans could attain angel status through obedience.

The notion of concrete form is later critiqued by none other than Satan himself, upon his transformation into a serpent. Satan bemoans the slimy form he chose to inhabit, having once been of the highest angelic form yet now “constrained / Into a beast” (4.164–65). In this manner, Milton reframes earthly form as something of a cage rather than a vessel. Toward the end of his epic, Milton also reiterates Satan’s frustrations with the confines that his serpentine form imposed upon him in establishing that God’s punishment for Satan and the fallen angels’ misdeeds would be permanent imprisonment in snake form:

[H]e hears / On all sides, from innumerable tongues / A dismal universal hiss, the sound / Of public scorn; he wondered, but not long / Had leisure, wond’ring at himself now more; / His visage drawn he felt to sharp and spare, / His arms clung to his ribs, his legs entwining / Each other, till supplanted down he fell / A monstrous serpent on his belly prone[.] (5.504–14)

In short, *Paradise Lost* appears ripe with elements both formless, form-defying, and form-critiquing. Many of its primary characters—Satan, the Holy Trinity, Death, all the angels, and all the fallen angels—either transcend or explicitly condemn form. The ontological philosophy within which *Paradise Lost* operates undermines the concrete nature of form. The very form in which Milton wrote it was seemingly chosen in repudiation of literary form’s confines and the restrictions that a dramatic or poetic form would otherwise impose. All in all, *Paradise Lost* seems to mutiny against form in both narrative and construction.

Although Milton’s sonnets and epic poem can be said to most prominently convey his personal rebellion against the expectations of form, his other works express similar attractions to and resistance against their forms’ confines. *Areopagitica*, Milton’s 1644 argument for unlicensed printing in England, could be interpreted as a polemic argument rallying against the unjust restrictions inherent to the regulatory confines—in other words, the form—within which Parliament decided that all writing should be printed and distributed. He argues that restricting what the population can and cannot read not only hinders those who have written

pieces that Parliament deems unfit for print but also stifles the intellectual growth and moral fortitude of those who would otherwise have read such purportedly “evil” works (*Areopagitica* 939). Playing off of the same heretical concept underlying the Book of Genesis’s tale of the Fall of Humanity, upon which *Paradise Lost* would eventually be based, Milton puts forth the notion that people cannot determine what is good without first discovering what is evil: “It was from out the rind of one apple tasted that the knowledge of good and evil as two twins cleaving together leapt forward into the world” (*Areopagitica* 939). Thus, the man who would hypocritically become a print licenser himself under Cromwell’s reign asserts that licensed printing removes all opportunity for readers to learn for themselves the difference between good and evil works and seems to be a flawed regulatory form at its core.

Milton’s “Lycidas” and “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” rather than offering explicit critiques on one form or another, both defy the conventions of their respective forms. “Lycidas,” “one of the most famous, most powerful, and most studied poems in English literature,” is an elegy written in the wake of the untimely death of Edward King, a contemporary of Milton’s at Christ’s College of Cambridge (Kerrigan et al. 99). Milton elegizes King with a “pastoral elegy,” the first of its kind: he uses the character Lycidas, a relatively common name in classical pastoral (Kerrigan et al. 100) in place of King, depicting how shepherds, the sea god Neptune, and even Nature herself mourn Lycidas’s premature death. Using gentle, pastoral imagery to elegize the dead is a Miltonian invention, and such departure from convention did not come without criticism. Samuel Johnson argued in his review of “Lycidas” that “[w]here there is leisure for fiction, there is little grief.” Regardless of how Johnson or others might have received it, however, Milton certainly broke from convention in writing Edward King’s elegy and challenged the expectations of elegiac form in the process. Similarly, “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” depicts a refreshingly original take on the traditional Christian nativity poem. Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon write that other Nativity odes dwell on the traditional Christmas-card aspects of the Christ child’s birth, whereas in lieu of such conventional themes, Milton depicts “a sense of the meaning of the Nativity within the full scope of Christian history” as well as within “the various cultures, religions, and artistic traditions found in the world at its advent” (18). Much like his elegy of Edward King, Milton’s Nativity poem therefore departs from the form that convention would expect such a piece to take.

With the understanding that Milton was both drawn to and compelled to resist constraints, I close by considering the wider implications of such a claim. The

connection between Milton's definitions and exploration of form and matter in his *Artis Logicae* and his chosen blank-verse epic medium for *Paradise Lost* implies metaliterary strategy in Milton's other works. In other words, Milton seemed to choose mediums that would inherently restrict his forms and then, within those restrictions, to push back. His sonnets also support such a concept; he was the first to appropriate the sonnet as a vehicle of political discourse. These plausible realities bring up the question: Why? Why consciously *choose* highly constrained forms, such as the sonnet, the epic, and even the iconic first male and female, Adam and Eve, only to then resist them? Contemporary neuroscience and social science research suggest the reason. In 2019, Oguz, Tarakci, and van Knippenberg reviewed almost 150 empirical studies and found not only that people thrive amid constraints but also that constraints make people more, not less, creative. Somehow, Milton already knew that.

Milton's preoccupation with both form and form-play, if you will, bears out contemporary research on limitations. Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *Areopagitica*, "Lycidas," "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," and English sonnets all suggest that the famed poet, polemic, civil servant, and intellectual found paradise in first consciously choosing and then defying form's confining bars. John Milton's version of paradise, it seems, was a paradise uncaged.

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