

Milton's Paradise Lost: Originally Traditional; Traditionally Original

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ABSTRACT

John Milton is one of the most prominent figures of the seventeenth-century not only with his prose, poetry, political works, and literary criticism but also with his theological works. Milton draws on the Bible both in his prose works, such as in his divorce pamphlets, and in his poetry. He lived in an era when the Bible was in more popular use, perhaps, than at any other time in English history; “During the English Civil War, soldiers carried a Bible into Battle; before entering the fray, they sang its psalms; before bedtime, parents recounted its narratives; during parliamentary conflicts, proponents cited its verses. The bible was used in Parliament, in pamphlet wars, in education, in courtship and in conversation to an extent that is hardly imaginable today” (Schwartz qtd. in Corns 37). Besides, his personal religious convictions combined with the fact that he could rely on his audience to pick up biblical allusions easily. This is why, like many other writers and poets, Milton based most of his works on biblical narratives.

In the first Book of Paradise Lost Milton states his purpose explicitly: “To justify the ways of God to men” (I. 26). In this work, in spite of basing his epic on biblical narratives, Milton creates “a deeply traditional and a boldly original poem” (Abrams 1475). Sticking to classical traditions while trying to be original at the same time was the major difficulty Milton faced writing Paradise Lost. This article intends to analyse the difficulty the author faced in two distinct aspects: The first one is the maintenance of decorum with biblical characters, and the second one is the achievement of originality while retelling biblical stories from Genesis.