**Rebel Verses**

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In a second-rate Victorian mystery novel, Fergus Hume’s *The Indian Bangle*,a young woman captures the fate of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. ‘Everybody talks about it’, she says, ‘and no one reads it.’ This witticism goes unappreciated. The woman’s friend, a Miss Slarge, responds humourlessly: ‘I have read it’. The exchange is a fitting comment on the fate of literary classics: always on the brink of disappearing, but still famous and still obstinately read. This is especially true of Milton’s Biblical epic, which has had a rich afterlife in the modern age.

*Paradise Lost* was published in its final form in July 1674, exactly three hundred and fifty years ago. It had been published seven years earlier, but the first print run had sold out and Milton took the opportunity to make some important changes. He reorganised it from ten books to twelve to imitate Virgil’s *Aeneid*. He added prose summaries of the plot to the beginning of each book. In doing so, the ageing poet, who was blind and reliant on secretaries to write down his work, made his poem more readable. Milton believed his poem would be appreciated only by a ‘fit audience … though few’ – a small group of highly educated and virtuous readers – but he was wrong. In the past four centuries, it has circulated among women and men, Christians and atheists, the fit and the defiantly unfit.

In the first century after its publication, *Paradise Lost* became a classic. Milton was a radical who supported Parliament in the English Civil War, and worked for the republic established after the execution of King Charles I in 1649, but many people were content to forget this. In an age of neoclassical tastes, his ability to imitate the epics of Homer and Virgil, and in some ways even surpass them, was widely admired. Marie Antoinette’s lady’s maid recalled King Louis XVI translating passages from Milton. It wasn’t just elites who read it: Ann Yearsley, a working-class Bristolian woman known as the ‘milkmaid poet’ echoed it in her celebrated poetry. Milton’s epic was used as a manual for married couples and priests and a mine of examples for grammar books. English readers could hardly avoid it.

At the end of the 18th century, revolutions in America and France led to the revival of Milton’s reputation as a radical. *Paradise Lost* seemed to mutate. Thomas Jefferson copied out passages from *Paradise Lost* as a young man and saw Milton as an important predecessor to the American Revolution; in France, a bust of Milton sat in the radical Jacobin Club, where Milton’s name rang through debates. In the Age of Revolutions, Satan took on a new glamour. The earliest readers had noticed that Milton’s poem – which tells of the temptation of Adam and Eve by Satan and their fall – gave some its best lines to the Devil. But Satan’s defiant speeches against God, whom he calls a tyrant, now sounded like revolutionary proclamations.

In the early 19th century, as Napoleon betrayed the Revolution and restored slavery in France’s colonies, and United States failed to abolish slavery, *Paradise Lost* was reimagined once again. Baron de Vastey, a Haitian philosopher and secretary to King Henri Christophe, compared French slave owners threatening to recolonise Haiti to Milton’s fallen angels plotting to take back Heaven. In the 1830s and 1840s, the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* used *Paradise Lost* to represent the hell of slavery in the American South. Milton’s own attitude to slavery was ambiguous – perhaps even approving – but that didn’t matter to the many abolitionists who mined his poem for their own ends.

The rise of popular entertainment and the secularisation of Western society threatened the decline of *Paradise Lost*, and in 1898, a critic complained that one in a hundred people read it. The newly minted subject of English literature led to a further degradation. F R Leavis, the Cambridge academic who pioneered the discipline, declared that Milton had been dislodged from the canon. But *Paradise Lost* survived, often in the very works that declared it obsolete: T S Eliot and Virginia Woolf quoted it, and the black nationalist Malcolm X and the Trinidadian socialist C L R James discussed it as they attempted to move beyond the Western political tradition.

Today, *Paradise Lost* is rarely read outside universities; even within them, its unwieldy place on syllabuses is endangered. But whenever I meet someone who has read it – in the past four years, while writing a book about it, I have met many – they almost always love it. Its commitment to freedom, accessible plot and rich ambiguities have inspired readers to take it in their own, wild directions. One of its most famous living interpreters is the right-wing internet celebrity Jordan Peterson, who discusses it in two of his books and several YouTubevideos. In an age when many people are understandably suspicious of monuments to our imperial past, discussion of classic literature has increasingly fallen to conservatives. But the afterlife of *Paradise Lost* should remind us that it is not their property.