

August 2023

Paradise and Paradiso: Echoes of a Fortunate Fall

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Recommended Citations

MLA:

Alley, Kathryn "Paradise and Paradiso: Echoes of a Fortunate Fall," *The Kabod* 7. 1 (2023) Article 1.
Liberty University Digital Commons. Web. [xx Month xxxx].

APA:

Alley, Kathryn (2023) "Paradise and Paradiso: Echoes of a Fortunate Fall" *The Kabod* 7(1 (2023)), Article 1. Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/kabod/vol7/iss1/1>

Turabian:

Alley, Kathryn "Paradise and Paradiso: Echoes of a Fortunate Fall" *The Kabod* 7 , no. 1 2023 (2023)
Accessed [Month x, xxxx]. [Liberty University Digital Commons](#).

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“Paradise and Paradiso: Echoes of a Fortunate Fall”

Humans have always longed to understand why God allowed the fortunate fall of a perfect creation. Milton’s masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*, is a free-verse epic poem that chronicles the Genesis account of Adam and Eve, the devastating fall and original sin, and the banishment of humanity from the Garden of Eden. For readers, *Paradise Lost* is the tragic origin of how God’s creation loses perfection. Although “sufficient to have stood” Adam and Eve succumbed to Satan’s temptation of evil (Milton, 3.129), allowing sin to enter the world and infect all future generations. Milton’s primary goal in the poem is to assure readers of God’s infinite love for creation and “justify God’s ways to men” (1.25-36). Throughout his scholastic pursuits, Milton drew inspiration by examining the hierarchy of realms in Hell’s *Inferno* from crucial Italian poet, Dante Alighieri. Both *The Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* retain echoes of similar sentiments from the Renaissance seeking answers for a fallen world; however, Milton and Dante have different intentions for their story that illuminate the author’s core beliefs about Satan the betrayer, the dangers of sin, and the power of literature.

Few cultural movements have had such profound impacts on English life and literature as the Renaissance in the mid-sixteenth century. The Renaissance was a liberating revival, prompting writers to reexamine Greek literature with a fresh perspective. Comparatively, religious communities answered the Renaissance's dissolution of morality with Puritanism. The Puritans sought to purify the church from Catholic remnants, debauchery, and hierarchy. Milton was a devout scholar of classical philosophy and poetry, but also a deeply spiritual person with a desire to understand the Word of God. Although a child of both the Puritan age and Renaissance era, Milton’s individualistic tendencies make it difficult to assign a specific category. Rather, Milton writes with a unique voice that blends seemingly disparate parties: a rebirth of learning

from the Renaissance and the authority of Scripture from the Reformation. Milton successfully combined the wonder of ancient art with the moral order of the Bible, powerfully mingling religion and culture harmoniously like no other English poet (Kuhns 1). *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667, toward the end of the seventeenth century, and represents Milton's marriage of Puritan and Renaissance ideas without conforming entirely to one side or the other.

Without compromising the integrity of storytelling, Milton achieves a daring feat: publishing a Renaissance epic that retains the Biblical truth of the Genesis origin and constructs an imaginative narrative reminiscent of Greek masterpieces. *Paradise Lost* includes many classical elements of epic poetry such as the adventurous atmosphere, heroic protagonist, grand theme, and subject matter that deals with human nature and moral issues. Likewise, Milton makes use of a Greek reference by calling upon a heavenly muse to help him in his writing quest, similar to Hesiod, Virgil, and Homer who draw inspiration from muses (1.12-13). Instead of utilizing Apollo's lyrical guidance, Milton asks the Holy Spirit to illuminate the truth of Scripture by artistically "justifying God's ways to men" (1.25-30). Milton also draws from classical literature by beginning the epic "in media res" or in the middle of the story. With these classical elements, Milton's poetry remains distinctly Christian and dramatizes Biblical events and characters in a powerful fashion.

Before Milton and the English Renaissance, there was a spark of creativity flourishing throughout Italy in the fourteenth century. Dante Alighieri, acclaimed philosopher and poet, crafted one of the most impressive works of literature in the world known as the *Divine Comedy*. This work in Italian literature is a wondrous vision of the afterlife that is reflective of the Roman Catholic church and follows one's soul through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Additionally, the epic is divided into three volumes *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* which are broken into

individual cantos for musical accompaniment to the rhyme scheme. Throughout the narrative, Dante examines sin nature and how it causes humanity to exist apart from a righteous, holy God. A man, which Dante presumably bases after himself, undertakes an allegorical journey to purify his soul before God by recognizing sin in Hell, atoning for sin in Purgatory, and living a holy life in Heaven. Originally named *The Commedia*, Dante's crown jewel offers a lighthearted ending reminiscent of classic comedies, beginning with the bad and closing with good (Arias 2). Commentators posthumously refer to Dante's work as *The Divine Comedy* in part for the immanence of its religious content and its cultural significance for Europe's literary achievements.

Much like Milton, Dante was a scholar, deeply versed in learning, the political climate, and illuminating the religious corruption and debauchery in the church. The two authors were also intensely patriotic and gave themselves up without reserve to serve the interests of their country and boldly engage with social issues. Christoph Singer, author of *Dante and Milton: Envisioned Visionaries* offers insight writing "Dante and Milton, the two vernacular composers of epic poems, hold firm positions in the literary canons of Italy and England respectively" (34). The acclaimed writers became carriers of a cultural memory from the collective impact of the Renaissance, in political, artistic, and religious spheres. Dante suffered toward the end of his life in a similar manner to Milton. Neither men were able to achieve complete social acceptance and belonging during their lifetime; Dante was an exile and a beggar, and Milton was blind (Singer 40). Ultimately, Milton and Dante retain similar sentiments in their hopes of exploring the nature of divine moral powers and demystifying concepts of afterlife for sinners and saints.

Throughout his early life, Milton grew to appreciate the intricacies of Dante's writing and the poet's unique artistic voice within European literature. Irene Samuel writes that Milton's

chief interest was always the *Commedia*; external evidence suggests that he knew it well (Samuel 34). Within *Of Reformation* and *Commonplace Book*, Milton cites the *Commedia* eight times in admiration, showing the impression made at an early age for future writing inspiration. Samuel remarks that Milton “was certainly aware that the *Commedia* opposes the fusion of church and state as corruption” and recognized Dante as a target of the counter-Reformation (38). Laying aside religious differences, Milton recognized a kindred spirit in Dante, regularly citing indirect and direct mentions to the Italian poet (Hollander 2). Samuel writes that “Milton was one of the first English poets to get at the heart of the *Commedia* to recognize its larger meanings, as he was the first to adapt its techniques of instruction through narrative to his own purpose” (41). The references in various letters and doctrines are unable to prove entirely that Dante was Milton’s primary influence, but they express Milton’s fascination with the imaginative world Dante constructed and the spark of inspiration it provided. Samuel concludes that “Together with all the echoes, analogues, and parallels in the poem itself, they leave no doubt of the importance of the *Commedia* in the writing of *Paradise Lost*” (45). Dante’s inspiration for Milton displays his love of learning as a key factor in establishing his permanence in the English literary canon.

Milton’s goal in *Paradise Lost* is to justify God’s plan of redemption for humanity through the fortunate fall. This justification is a common theme throughout many of Milton’s poems, where the author is consistently examining tragic circumstances and searching for God’s hand of protection and healing. Milton’s personal voice can be heard within the masses of Renaissance and Reformation people desperately seeking closure for his physical blindness, public hatred, marriage problems, and societal isolation. Establishing God as an all-knowing, all-powerful God that loves creation enough to give them liberty and autonomy over their decisions is a powerful illustration. Though Adam and Eve’s sin resulted in banishment and sin for future

generations, God promises to destroy death and have the ultimate victory. Eden is lost but an eternal paradise with the Creator of the universe is the warfaring Christian's hope. The overarching message of the epic is that however evil may flourish for a season, righteousness and justice will always be triumphant in the end (Smith 1). The fall of humanity is truly fortunate because it allowed for the greatest example of love ever displayed to eliminate prideful separation and fundamentally change the world for the better.

Milton and Dante diverge in intention for their literary creations. Dante's goal for *The Divine Comedy* suggests a more personal concern for his audience, revealed most prominently in Canto V of the *Inferno*. A seemingly minor character, Francesca, describes how she and her lover were reading the Arthurian romance of Guinevere and Lancelot which led to an adulterous affair and her permanent residence in the circle of lust. The temptation from the courtly love displayed in the book sparked Francesca and Paolo to get swept away in desire as "that day they read no more" (Dante Canto V). Dante understands the sway of persuasion that alluring literature can have. This recognition that the eyes are one of the primary guides of the body echoes Psalm 101:3 which says, "I will not set before my eyes anything that is worthless" (*English Standard Version*). A key phrase by Francesca illustrates the crucial role of the book in their adultery. Francesca says that "[o]ur Galehot was that book and he who wrote it" (Canto V) meaning that the courtly love text brought Francesca and Paolo together, as a pander, for an illicit liaison. Fear becomes a motivator for Dante as he refuses to become a Galehot for his audiences, but a righteous author of God's truth.

Although not explicit, one of Dante's purposes in showcasing the various circles of hell is to convict audiences of sin and prevent illicit liaisons between the text and the reader. Dante recognizes the power of the written word and how inappropriate content can cause humanity to

stumble. As Milton writes *Paradise Lost* as a justification for God's actions toward His creation, Dante seems to express a more personal plea for salvation and preserving one's soul. By using the pilgrim Dante as the protagonist, the author communicates that the goal of the *Divine Comedy* is to warn of the consequences of sin and "to remove those living in this life from a state of wretchedness" (Canto XIII). Ultimately a comedy, and not a tragedy, Dante strives to guide readers to a more fulfilled, blissful life that honors God.

This understanding of literature is vastly different from Milton, as expressed in his published work *Areopagitica*. Milton directly mentions the temptation of Adam and Eve, asserting that it was the naivety of censorship and false protection that caused them to stumble into Satan's willing arms (247). Without the capability to discern right from wrong through literature and textual application, readers may never escape the bonds of sin and experience true liberty which can come from books. Comparatively, Milton recognizes the power of literature like Dante writing, "Books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as the soul was whose progeny they are " (240). Milton acknowledges that not only are books active, but they contain fragments of life from the author who penned them. This potency is apparent when reading *Paradise Lost* and much of Milton's personal voice seeps through the pages. However, according to Milton, reading that is done for the purpose of cultivating an active mind and understanding of good apart from evil is not something to be fearful of; reading is not only a worthy pursuit, but is one of the most beneficial activities for Christians. Although separate from Dante's perspective, Milton cares deeply about his audience's reaction to *Paradise Lost* and is hopeful that although blindly dictating many of the words in the text, his goal of justification will bring rest to a post-Renaissance world.

Paradise Lost and *The Divine Comedy* offer rich portrayals of Heaven and Hell that reveal specific hierarchical structures within the fixed separation between the powers of light and dark. Public perception, understanding, and explanation of the nature and quality of evil have been fundamentally influenced by the works of the two epic writers, Milton and Dante (Singer 4). For Milton, it was necessary to establish a hierarchy within Satan's Hell to show his flawed reason and fatal pride. Book I illustrates that Satan believes "it is better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven" (263). Hierarchy is what Satan despised in Heaven, but something he needed to create for dominance in Hell. Additionally, the concept of hierarchy is what Satan tempts Adam and Eve within the climax of Book IX. Man and woman are below the authority and control of Creator God, but Satan coaxes that "why was this forbid... but to keep ye low and ignorant, his worshiper" (9.703-04). Just like Satan, Eve is encouraged by sinful desires to place herself higher in rank above an omniscient God. Similarly, the issue of hierarchy is displayed prominently in Dante's writing. Within the *Inferno*, the circles of Hell display the effects of certain kinds of moral error. In this afterlife, there is no opportunity for free will anymore, and sinners are eternally fixed to a circle that is poetic retribution for their sin. Dante's hierarchy is seen within the ranking of circles; the lower they are placed, movement is increasingly restricted. Minos is introduced in Canto V and is referred to by Dante as "the great connoisseur of sin" (5.8) because the monstrous creature wraps his tail around sinners, with the number of circles condemning a person to their forever punishment.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the two authors to examine is the character Satan. Both Milton and Dante choose to write about the plight of the sinful antagonist yet decide to focus on different interpretations of the character that offer insight into the author's goal for the literature. Satan's characterization in Milton is arguably the most fascinating plot, as the anti-

hero trope allows for a warped attraction to the misguided, tragic villain. Milton chooses to begin the poem in the middle of the narrative, with Satan and his demons in a post-rebellion state. This is opposite Dante who portrays Satan in the deepest circle of Hell, without a spark of hope or personality. Dante's Satan is a towering demon frozen in ice and experiencing the greatest punishment of all: he is the farthest from God's presence. In *Paradise Lost*, God has complete control over Satan, but he can physically move and experience his sole delight of "ever doing ill" (Milton, 1.362). Although Dante seems to have culturally shaped humanity's visual portrait of Satan as a hideous demon with eternal anger at good, Milton's Satan is incredibly complex and encompasses a nuanced dichotomy of emotional turmoil between resentment and revenge. Robert Hillier remarks that "[i]n contrary but complimentary ways, then, Milton's Dantean miniatures are inflections of Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* within the epic landscape of Milton's cosmos" (2). Although Milton takes the side of free will against Dante's purgatorial predestination or punishment, both authors have established that Satan is the eternal betrayer and God always has the ultimate victory.

Milton and Dante refused to leave audiences with the despair of sin and a life apart from God. Dante defines hope as "the sure expectancy of pure bliss" (*Paradiso*, 25) and after a journey through the depths of hell where hope is all but abandoned, Paradise in the presence of the Lord is the most welcome sight and joyous celebration. Likewise, the despair of leaving Paradise for Adam and Eve is softened by the future fulfillment of revenge on Satan and eternity with God once more. The guilt of Adam and Eve's sin no longer needed to remain a burden but is released with the angel Michael speaking of future days where "the earth shall all be paradise, far happier place than this of Eden, and far happier days" (Milton, XII. 463-465). Despite one work being

more dramatized than the other, both *Paradise Lost* and the *Divine Comedy* are proponents of the fortunate fall and the miraculous mercy of God.

Ultimately, despite key differences with authorial intention and interpretations of Satan, the antithesis of good, Milton and Dante illuminate the gracious nature of God and encourage readers to turn from wickedness for a life of eternal bliss. *Paradise Lost* and the *Divine Comedy* changed the scope of European prose and established a genre of epic poetry unlike anything the world has ever seen. For audiences in the 're-birth' culture of the Renaissance, a message of morality would have been a controversial choice, but the message of hope from despair remains the greatest support for the fortunate fall and a worthy addition to the greatest works of literature. Milton and Dante share a love of learning and appreciation for the active power of literature that allowed them both to convince audiences of their need to repent of sin, accept God as their only savior, and experience the beauty of hope amidst a fallen world.

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