

Richard Rambuss
Departments of English
and Comparative Literature
“Alternative Miltons”
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Statement:

Emory’s Piedmont Project faculty workshop was a profoundly transformative experience for me—personally, intellectually, politically. I don’t think that I’m being hyperbolic in saying that what I learned and experienced in it over those few days has altered the way that I move through the world. But a college classroom is not the same kind of place as a workshop devoted to consciousness-raising and activism. The question for me thus became: How might what I learned about sustainability inform what I teach in class? That question, I think, should be answered differently according to discipline. From my vantage as an English professor, it didn’t seem appropriate for me to try to turn my literature classes into “science-light” literary versions of Environmental Studies. Nor did it seem right for me to use my classroom as a pulpit to preach the gospel of sustainability, no matter how much I believe in it myself. I feel the same way about all critical and theoretical approaches. I think that one should expose students to a variety of critical methodologies—to “teach the conflicts” (as Gerald Graff has put it)—rather than trumpeting “the truth” of a particular approach. Hence, instead of developing an entire new course on “Milton and Ecocriticism,” I decided to make that perspective one unit—I’m calling it “Green Milton”—in a graduate seminar on Milton and Milton criticism that considers three vanguard approaches to reading him and early modern literature.

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English 717

Alternative Miltons

This graduate seminar derives its title from the book *Alternative Shakespeares*, edited by John Drakakis: a critical anthology of new theoretical approaches to Shakespeare. Over the past four decades, Shakespeare studies has been an incubator for new kinds of critical practice, including feminism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, poststructuralism, and new historicism, among other approaches. These innovations have proven to be widely influential in literary studies more generally.

Can the same be said about Milton studies?

Most of the course will be devoted to Milton's monumentally significant epic poem *Paradise Lost*, though we will conclude with *Samson Agonistes*. Alongside our close reading of these two poems, we will undertake a consideration of the state of the art of Milton criticism. What's new in scholarship concerned with Milton? What approaches have been holding the fort? Has Milton criticism, generally speaking, been slower to take to critical innovation than, say, Shakespeare or even Spenser criticism? If so, why, *and what might we do about it?*

As we ponder and debate these questions, the seminar will also look to three new interdisciplinary critical practices—disability studies, ecocriticism, and technoculture studies—to consider what they might offer us in the way of rereading of Milton and his epic.

Milton and (Early Modern) Disability Studies: *Paradise Lost* is, after all, the composition of a blind man: one who claims that the poem comes to him aurally in his nightly dreams. The epic itself features an extended meta-poetic meditation on what it means to be a blind poet. Indeed, Milton figures his blindness—his disability—not as incidental to the poem's composition and cultural status, but rather as integral to it. Is *Paradise Lost*, then, a materially different kind of text for the fact that its author didn't actually write it or ever see it, that he instead heard and spoke it?

Milton and Ecocriticism: What competing attitudes about nature are rendered in *Paradise Lost*? Can we think of Milton, the author of what is probably the most famous poem set in a garden—the ur-garden of Eden—as a proto-environmentalist? Milton innovatively gives the unfallen Adam and Eve work to do in Paradise. They not only get to live in Eden, they also have to tend to it daily. Milton's pastoralized epic also figurally identifies Adam and Eve with Eden's ecosystem: that is, in tending to the garden they are metaphorically tending to themselves and their own spirituality. (Stanley Fish has described this phenomenon as it occurs elsewhere in Renaissance literature as “a georgics

of the mind.”) Might we then think of Milton’s Adam and Eve as being involved in the first effort of sustainability? Are there ways in which Milton’s fairly idiosyncratic materialism—his vitalism—anticipates aspects of ecological science? Also, what in Milton’s influential poem sets the stage for the environmental concerns of later literary figures, including Pope and Wordsworth on one side of the Atlantic, and Emerson and Thoreau on the other?

Milton and Technoculture: *Paradise Lost* features a number of spectacular machines, including God’s compass, Satan’s infernal canons, and the Son’s chariot. In considering Milton’s representation of machines and the machinic, we will be moving from the question of nature to that of technology. The latter is typically conceived of as antagonistic to the former. Is this the case in Milton’s epic? Is technology a sign of the Fall, or a marker of human progress?

Required texts:

John Milton: The Major Works, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg

Ken Hiltner, *Milton and Ecology*

Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works*

Jonathan Sawday, *Engines of the Imagination: Renaissance Culture and the Rise of the Machine*

Course Requirements:

Attendance and participation in all seminars

An annotated critical bibliography, with an attendant seminar presentation

A final seminar paper

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Schedule of Seminars

Introduction

Seminar 1 Milton and the Single-Author Course

Seminar 2 *Paradise Lost*, Book 1

Fish, *How Milton Works* (selections)

Milton and (Early Modern) Disability Studies

Seminar 3 *Paradise Lost*, Book 2

Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton* (passages re: Milton’s blindness)

Georgina Kleege, “Call It Blindness,” in *Sight Unseen*

Acts 9 (the conversion of Saul)

Seminar 4 *Paradise Lost*, Book 3

Lennard Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader* (selections)

Catherine J. Kudlick, “Disability History: Why We Need Another ‘Other’”

Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum, *Defects: Engendering the Modern Body* (selections)

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Feminist Disability Studies”

Robert McRuer, “As Good As It Gets: Queer Theory and Critical Disability”

TechnoMilton

Seminar 10

Paradise Lost, Book 10

David Glimp, "Paradisal Arithmetic: *Paradise Lost* and the Genesis of Populations," in Glimp, *Increase and Multiply*

Seminar 11

Paradise Lost, Book 11

Donna Haraway, "The Cyborg Manifesto"

Seminar 12

Paradise Lost, Book 12

Jonathan Sawday, *Engines of the Imagination: Renaissance Culture and the Rise of the Machine*

Conclusion

Seminar 13

Samson Agonistes

Joseph Wittreich, *Why Milton Matters* (selections)