

English 20: ENGL 4301 A

John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: The Encyclopedic Epic and the History of Ideas

Prof. Donald Beecher

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Class time: Fridays, 2:30-5:30

Ideas into Experience: Milton's *Paradise Lost* as an Epic Encyclopedia

The stature of Milton's great poem needs no special defense; even Dryden acknowledged with admiration and regret that Milton had surpassed them all, without fully realizing that he had also brought to a close the age of the pansophic poem. It is a monumental work in so many ways, not the least of them its dramatic representation of ideas drawn from a lifelong program of reading and study. This course is designed to bring its members into a close encounter with the text and into dialogic exchange with others in the seminar engaged in a mutual discovery of some of the prevailing ideas that find representation in this work. Milton's epic was created at a moment in cultural and intellectual time, but the ideas themselves have histories going back to ancient, medieval and Renaissance sources. The history of ideas is a critical perspective in its own right, worth knowing about as a discipline, and worth mastering as a vehicle to a fuller understanding of literature in general. Just what those ideas may include will be yours to discover, but among the master concepts, you might find justice, obedience, punishment, angels, hell, salvation, eschatology, creation, reprobation, uxoriousness, the fortunate fall, dreams, memory, prayer, paradise, and honeymoon (I left out hero and predestination). Unfolding this poem in relation to its informing ideas is a rewarding experience, one that from class to class has never come close to repeating itself. The material is so rich, you could take this course over and over!