

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69567-2 - John Milton: Paradise Lost Books IX and X

Edited by A. W. Verity

Excerpt

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PARADISE LOST.

BOOK IX.

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THE ARGUMENT.

Satan, having compassed the Earth, with meditated guile returns as a mist by night into Paradise; enters into the Serpent sleeping. Adam and Eve in the morning go forth to their labours, which Eve proposes to divide in several places, each labouring apart: Adam consents not, alleging the danger, lest that enemy, of whom they were forewarned, should attempt her found alone. Eve, loth to be thought not circumspect or firm enough, urges her going apart, the rather desirous to make trial of her strength; Adam at last yields. The Serpent finds her alone: his subtle approach, first gazing, then speaking, with much flattery extolling Eve above all other creatures. Eve, wondering to hear the Serpent speak, asks how he attained to human speech and such understanding, not till now; the Serpent answers, that by tasting of a certain tree in the garden he attained both to speech and reason, till then void of both. Eve requires him to bring her to that tree, and finds it to be the Tree of Knowledge forbidden. The Serpent, now grown bolder, with many wiles and arguments induces her at length to eat; she, pleased with the taste, deliberates a while whether to impart thereof to Adam or not; at last brings him of the fruit; relates what persuaded her to eat thereof. Adam, at first amazed, but perceiving her lost, resolves through vehemence of love to perish with her; and, extenuating the trespass, eats also of the fruit. The effects thereof in them both; they seek to cover their nakedness; then fall to variance and accusation of one another.

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NO more of talk where God or Angel-guest
 With Man, as with his friend, familiar used
 To sit indulgent, and with him partake
 Rural repast, permitting him the while
 Venial discourse unblamed. I now must change
 Those notes to tragic; foul distrust and breach
 Disloyal on the part of man, revolt
 And disobedience; on the part of Heaven,
 Now alienated, distance and distaste, 10
 Anger and just rebuke, and judgment given,
 That brought into this World a world of woe,
 Sin and her shadow Death, and Misery,
 Death's harbinger. Sad task! yet argument
 Not less but more heroic than the wrath
 Of stern Achilles on his foe pursued
 Thrice fugitive about Troy wall; or rage
 Of Turnus for Lavinia disespoused;
 Or Neptune's ire, or Juno's, that so long
 Perplexed the Greek, and Cytherea's son:
 If answerable style I can obtain 20
 Of my celestial patroness, who deigns
 Her nightly visitation unimplored,

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And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires
 Easy my unpremeditated verse,
 Since first this subject for heroic song
 Pleas'd me, long choosing and beginning late,
 Not sedulous by nature to indite
 Wars, hitherto the only argument
 Heroic deemed, chief mastery to dissect
 With long and tedious havoc fabled knights 30
 In battles feigned (the better fortitude
 Of patience and heroic martyrdom
 Unsung), or to describe races and games,
 Or tilting furniture, imblazoned shields,
 Impresses quaint, caparisons and steeds,
 Bases and tinsel trappings, gorgeous knights
 At joust and tournament; then marshalled feast
 Served up in hall with sewers and seneshals:
 The skill of artifice or office mean;
 Not that which justly gives heroic name 40
 To person or to poem. Me, of these
 Nor skilled nor studious, higher argument
 Remains, sufficient of itself to raise
 That name, unless an age too late, or cold
 Climate, or years, damp my intended wing
 Depressed; and much they may, if all be mine,
 Not hers who brings it nightly to my ear.

The sun was sunk, and after him the star
 Of Hesperus, whose office is to bring
 Twilight upon the Earth, short arbiter 50
 'Twixt day and night, and now from end to end
 Night's hemisphere had veiled the horizon round;
 When Satan, who late fled before the threats
 Of Gabriel out of Eden, now improved
 In meditated fraud and malice, bent

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BOOK IX.

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On Man's destruction, maugre what might hap
 Of heavier on himself, fearless returned.
 By night he fled, and at midnight returned
 From compassing the Earth; cautious of day,
 Since Uriel, regent of the sun, descried 60
 His entrance, and forewarned the Cherubim
 That kept their watch. Thence, full of anguish, driven,
 The space of seven continued nights he rode
 With darkness; thrice the equinoctial line
 He circled, four times crossed the car of Night
 From pole to pole, traversing each colure;
 On the eighth returned, and on the coast averse
 From entrance or cherubic watch by stealth
 Found unsuspected way. There was a place
 (Now not, though sin, not time, first wrought the change) 70
 Where Tigris, at the foot of Paradise,
 Into a gulf shot under ground, till part
 Rose up a fountain by the Tree of Life.
 In with the river sunk, and with it rose,
 Satan, involved in rising mist; then sought
 Where to lie hid. Sea he had searched and land
 From Eden over Pontus, and the pool
 Mæotis, up beyond the river Ob;
 Downward as far antarctic; and in length
 West from Orontes to the ocean barred 80
 At Darien, thence to the land where flows
 Ganges and Indus. Thus the orb he roamed
 With narrow search, and with inspection deep
 Considered every creature, which of all
 Most opportune might serve his wiles, and found
 The serpent subtlest beast of all the field.
 Him, after long debate, irresolute
 Of thoughts revolved, his final sentence chose

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Fit vessel, fittest imp of fraud, in whom
 To enter, and his dark suggestions hide 90
 From sharpest sight; for in the wily snake
 Whatever sleights none would suspicious mark,
 As from his wit and native subtlety
 Proceeding, which, in other beasts observed,
 Doubt might beget of diabolic power
 Active within beyond the sense of brute.
 Thus he resolved, but first from inward grief
 His bursting passion into plaints thus poured:
 "O Earth, how like to Heaven, if not preferred
 More justly, seat worthier of Gods, as built 100
 With second thoughts, reforming what was old!
 For what God, after better, worse would build?
 Terrestrial Heaven, danced round by other Heavens
 That shine, yet bear their bright officious lamps,
 Light above light, for thee alone, as seems,
 In thee concentrating all their precious beams
 Of sacred influence! As God in Heaven
 Is centre, yet extends to all, so thou
 Centring receiv'st from all those orbs; in thee,
 Not in themselves, all their known virtue appears 110
 Productive in herb, plant, and nobler birth
 Of creatures animate with gradual life
 Of growth, sense, reason, all summed up in Man.
 With what delight could I have walked thee round,
 If I could joy in aught, sweet interchange
 Of hill and valley, rivers, woods, and plains,
 Now land, now sea, and shores with forest crowned,
 Rocks, dens, and caves! but I in none of these
 Find place or refuge; and the more I see
 Pleasures about me, so much more I feel 120
 Torment within me, as from the hateful siege

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BOOK IX.

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Of contraries ; all good to me becomes
 Bane, and in Heaven much worse would be my state.
 But neither here seek I, no, nor in Heaven
 To dwell, unless by mastering Heaven's Supreme ;
 Nor hope to be myself less miserable
 By what I seek, but others to make such
 As I, though thereby worse to me redound :
 For only in destroying I find ease
 To my relentless thoughts ; and, him destroyed, 130
 Or won to what may work his utter loss,
 For whom all this was made, all this will soon
 Follow, as to him linked in weal or woe ;
 In woe then, that destruction wide may range !
 To me shall be the glory sole among
 The infernal Powers, in one day to have marred
 What he, Almighty styled, six nights and days
 Continued making, and who knows how long
 Before had been contriving? though perhaps 140
 Not longer than since I in one night freed
 From servitude inglorious well nigh half
 The Angelic name, and thinner left the throng
 Of his adorers. He, to be avenged,
 And to repair his numbers thus impaired—
 Whether such virtue spent of old now failed
 More Angels to create, if they at least
 Are his created, or to spite us more—
 Determined to advance into our room
 A creature formed of earth, and him endow, 150
 Exalted from so base original,
 With Heavenly spoils, our spoils. What he decreed
 He effected ; Man he made, and for him built
 Magnificent this World, and Earth his seat,
 Him lord pronounced, and, O indignity !

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Subjected to his service Angel-wings,
 And flaming ministers to watch and tend
 Their earthy charge. Of these the vigilance
 I dread, and, to elude, thus wrapt in mist
 Of midnight vapour glide obscure, and pry
 In every bush and brake, where hap may find 160
 The serpent sleeping, in whose mazy folds
 To hide me, and the dark intent I bring.
 O foul descent! that I, who erst contended
 With Gods to sit the highest, am now constrained
 Into a beast, and, mixed with bestial slime,
 This essence to incarnate and imbrute,
 That to the highth of deity aspired!
 But what will not ambition and revenge
 Descend to? Who aspires must down as low
 As high he soared, obnoxious first or last 170
 To basest things. Revenge, at first though sweet,
 Bitter ere long back on itself recoils.
 Let it; I reck not, so it light well aimed
 (Since higher I fall short) on him who next
 Provokes my envy, this new favourite
 Of Heaven, this man of clay, son of despite,
 Whom, us the more to spite, his Maker raised
 From dust: spite then with spite is best repaid.”
 So saying, through each thicket, dank or dry,
 Like a black mist low-creeping, he held on 180
 His midnight search, where soonest he might find
 The serpent. Him fast sleeping soon he found,
 In labyrinth of many a round self-rolled,
 His head the midst, well stored with subtle wiles:
 Not yet in horrid shade or dismal den,
 Nor nocent yet, but on the grassy herb,
 Fearless, unfeared, he slept. In at his mouth

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BOOK IX.

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The Devil entered, and his brutal sense,
 In heart or head, possessing soon inspired
 With act intelligential; but his sleep 190
 Disturbed not, waiting close the approach of morn.

Now, whenas sacred light began to dawn
 In Eden on the humid flowers, that breathed
 Their morning incense, when all things that breathe
 From the Earth's great altar send up silent praise
 To the Creator, and his nostrils fill
 With grateful smell, forth came the human pair,
 And joined their vocal worship to the quire
 Of creatures wanting voice; that done, partake
 The season, prime for sweetest scents and airs; 200
 Then commune how that day they best may ply
 Their growing work; for much their work outgrew
 The hands' dispatch of two, gardening so wide:
 And Eve first to her husband thus began:

“Adam, well may we labour still to dress
 This garden, still to tend plant, herb, and flower,
 Our pleasant task enjoined; but, till more hands
 Aid us, the work under our labour grows,
 Luxurious by restraint: what we by day
 Lop overgrown, or prune, or prop, or bind, 210
 One night or two with wanton growth derides,
 Tending to wild. Thou therefore now advise,
 Or hear what to my mind first thoughts present:
 Let us divide our labours—thou where choice
 Leads thee, or where most needs, whether to wind
 The woodbine round this arbour, or direct
 The clasping ivy where to climb; while I,
 In yonder spring of roses intermixed
 With myrtle, find what to redress till noon.
 For, while so near each other thus all day 220

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Our task we choose, what wonder if so near
 Looks intervene and smiles, or object new
 Casual discourse draw on, which intermits
 Our day's work, brought to little, though begun
 Early, and the hour of supper comes unearned!"

To whom mild answer Adam thus returned:
 "Sole Eve, associate sole, to me beyond
 Compare above all living creatures dear!
 Well hast thou motioned, well thy thoughts employed
 How we might best fulfil the work which here 230
 God hath assigned us, nor of me shalt pass
 Unpraised; for nothing lovelier can be found
 In woman than to study household good,
 And good works in her husband to promote.
 Yet not so strictly hath our Lord imposed
 Labour, as to debar us when we need
 Refreshment, whether food, or talk between
 Food of the mind, or this sweet intercourse
 Of looks and smiles; for smiles from reason flow,
 To brute denied, and are of love the food— 240
 Love, not the lowest end of human life.
 For not to irksome toil, but to delight,
 He made us, and delight to reason joined.
 These paths and bowers doubt not but our joint hands
 Will keep from wilderness with ease, as wide
 As we need walk, till younger hands ere long
 Assist us. But if much converse perhaps
 Thee satiate, to short absence I could yield;
 For solitude sometimes is best society,
 And short retirement urges sweet return. 250
 But other doubt possesses me, lest harm
 Befall thee severed from me; for thou know'st
 What hath been warned us, what malicious foe,