

Richard Rambuss  
English 717  
Graduate Seminar

## Milton

This graduate seminar undertakes a close reading of Milton's monumentally significant epic poem *Paradise Lost* in the cultural context of Restoration England. We will also treat several other major poetic works by Milton: "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity"; selected sonnets; *Comus*; and *Samson Agonistes*.

In addition, the seminar will entail 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 and theoretical innovation than, say, Shakespeare or even Spenser criticism? If so, why, and what might we do about that?

As we ponder and debate these questions, the seminar will also look to the emerging interdisciplinary field of disability studies to consider what it might offer us in the way of rereading Milton. *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. What he had heard there he dictated, upon waking, to various amanuenses, including, most famously, his daughter Deborah. 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? Blindness continued to inform Milton's poetry through his last published work, *Samson Agonistes*. The seminar will conclude with its rendering of a famous sightless hero, who is, in some respects, not unlike Milton himself at the end of his days.

### Required texts:

### Course Requirements:

Attendance and participation in all seminars.

An annotated bibliography, with an attendant seminar presentation.

A final seminar paper.

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### Schedule of Seminars

- Seminar 1            Milton and the Single-Author Course
- Seminar 2            “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity”; Sonnets  
Jonathan Goldberg, “Dating Milton” (handout)
- Seminar 3            *Comus*  
William Kerrigan, *The Sacred Complex*, 1-72
- Seminar 4            *Paradise Lost*
- Seminar 4            *Paradise Lost*  
Fish, *How Milton Works*, chapter 1
- Seminar 5            *Paradise Lost*  
Acts 9 (the conversion of Saul)  
Barbara K. Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton* (passages re:  
Milton’s blindness)  
Georgina Kleege, “Call It Blindness,” in *Sight Unseen*, 9-42

- Seminar 6            *Paradise Lost*
- Guillory, “From the Superfluous to the Supernumerary: Reading Gender into *Paradise Lost*” (handout)
- Halley, “Female Autonomy in Milton’s Sexual Poetics” (handout)
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- Seminar 7            *Paradise Lost*
- Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution* (selections)
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- Seminar 8            *Paradise Lost*
- Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric, and Politics 1627-1660* (selections)
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- Seminar 9            *Paradise Lost*
- Schwartz, *Remembering and Repeating*
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- Seminar 10           *Paradise Lost*
- David Glimp, “Paradisal Arithmetic: *Paradise Lost* and the Genesis of Populations,” in *Increase and Multiply* (handout)
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- Seminar 11           *Paradise Lost*

## Seminar 12

(Early Modern) Disability Studies—and Milton

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

Douglas C. Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History”

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”

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

## Seminar 13

*Samson Agonistes*

Susannah Mintz, *Threshold Poetics* (selections)

Joseph Wittreich, *Why Milton Matters* (selections)