

Milton Essay: Knowing, Uttering, and Arguing Freely
Due Tuesday, April 17

“Give me liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely
according to conscience, above all liberties”

John Milton, *Areopagitica*.

In this essay, you can write about one of the shorter poems, such as “Lycidas” or “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” or one of the prose works such as *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* or *Areopagitica*, or you can write about something that struck you in *Paradise Lost*. You should be motivated by a question or by a response of awe, anger, or enlightenment to something that Milton wrote: What puzzles you about free will and the rule of law in Eden? What kinds of self-representation strategies does Milton employ, and what is their effect? (Are they convincing?) How is economic language of “debt” employed by Satan and what might it indicate about him? How are the Son and God different, either philosophically or rhetorically? How is Milton using a specific myth, parable, scripture, or historical text?

Avoid an oversimplified thesis, such as “God is not justified in *Paradise Lost*” or “the virtues of melancholy in ‘Il Pensaroso’ transcend mirth in ‘Le Alegro.’” Milton was a complicated, nuanced thinker and writer and he deserves for his work to be considered in a similarly complex way. Approach the essay as a way to explore an idea rather than to argue a point. That said, you should arrive at a clear thesis in the process of writing and support it with specific evidence.

For this paper, please do not use the “work of secondary hands” (*Paradise Lost* 5.853-54) or other scholars’ interpretations. While doing so will define most of your college writing, and in fact most of Milton’s own writing, this essay is your own engagement with John Milton’s ideas. A conversation of two. Quote Milton at a rate of about 10-20% of your entire essay.

At some point in your paper, make it clear what you are *not* doing or claiming. For example, explain that while authorial self-representation spans many works, you will be focusing narrowly on *Paradise Lost*. Note Alison Chapman as a rhetorical model:

My argument also pushes back against those critics who see Milton as embracing a position of conflicted ambivalence. However, **I am not suggesting** that Milton had no doubts about God’s justice. While *Paradise Lost*’s legal allusions help untie – or at least loosen – many of the knots in this poem, other knots remain fastened tight (How can Satan be ‘self-tempted’? [3.130] Why is the Son’s sacrifice necessary for humanity’s salvation? Why is Adam’s guilt visited upon his offspring? Etc.) **Rather than arguing that** the law works as a universal solvent for the stubborn problem of God, **my claim is that** if we read *Paradise Lost* on the lookout for its moments of incertitude and divine impenetrability, we can miss the ways in which law helps to create rational order and stability. (8, emphasis mine)

Notice Chapman's orienting phrases: "My argument also pushes back," "I am not suggesting," "Rather than arguing... my claim is..." These kinds of clarifying signposts help the reader understand what you are *and are not* attempting to convey.

Start with a strong, specific, visual introduction that will transition your reader into your essay. Assume your reader has already read Milton closely, but has not thought about (and perhaps is not particularly interested in) your specific claim. When quoting from Milton – which is absolutely necessary, especially when his language is compelling or central to your point – follow MLA guidelines on quoting poetry or prose. In your conclusion, avoid summarizing what you've already written. Instead, point out the wider implications of your claim, indicate what new kinds of questions your research raises, or connect your argument to a contemporary issue.

Specifics

- 8-10 pages
- formatted in MLA
- in-text, parenthetical citing and Works Cited, per MLA
- Times New Roman font, 12 pt
- printed and stapled. *Stapling is crucial*

Works Cited

Chapman, Alison A. *The Legal Epic: Paradise Lost and the Early Modern Law*. U of Chicago P, 2017.

Milton, John. *Aeropagitica*. The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton. Ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon. New York: Modern Library, 2007.