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Topic: Joseph Addison's Views on John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Joseph Addison deals with John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* in eighteen papers published in *The Spectator*. His criticism of the poem is based upon the personal impression that it generated upon his mind as well as the classical rules formulated by the ancients on epics in general. His aim is to establish the reputation of *Paradise Lost* among all the European classical epics by comparing it with Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Here, we find a glimpse of Dryden when he states in his *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1668) that his aim is to establish the greatness of English dramatists among the European dramatists. According to Aristotle, epic has four parts, namely, plot, character, thought and diction. Addison applies this classical theory to analyze *Paradise Lost*.

So far as the plot is concerned, Milton's epic follows the classical principles by making it single, complete and great. The epic tells us a single and complete story of man's fall from the Garden of Eden. It is great because it talks about the whole mankind and great characters like man in his greatest perfection, woman in her greatest beauty, God, Satan and other fallen angels are involved in the story. The characterization also follows the benchmark of classical epics. All the characters are lively; Satan with his demonic qualities, the fallen angels with their pain, Adam and Eve with their sheer innocence, all have been depicted as naturally as they could be perceived in any reader's mind. The third part of an epic, that is, thought or sentiment is an area where Milton excels Homer and Virgil. Whereas the classical duos have dealt with characters that were already known to the common readers, Milton's characters were not part of daily conversation. Therefore, Milton had the scope of inventing them as per his plan. Addison says, "The loves of Dido and Aeneas are only copies of what has passed between other persons. Adam and Eve, before the fall, are a different species from that of mankind who were descended from them; and none but a poet of the most unbounded invention, and the most exquisite judgment,

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could have filled their conversation and behavior with so many circumstances during their state of innocence.” Milton’s sublimity of thought finds greatest expression in *Paradise Lost* Book-I, Book-II and Book-VI. This sublimity is also to be found in his diction or expression, the fourth part of an epic as per Aristotle. Great theme requires a great expression and *Paradise Lost* is not an exception. With the inclusion of noblest of words and phrases, unique use elaborate similes Milton not only gives artistic pleasures to the whole reading public but also carries forward the reputation of English language in general.

After all these praise Addison finds some defects also with *Paradise Lost*. He deals with the faults of this poem in his Essay No 297 of *The Spectator*. The first defect that he finds in this poem is that the poem ends unhappily which is not in accordance with Aristotle’s principle of happy ending in an epic. Again, according to Aristotle, Sin and Death should not be a part of the action in an epic; rather they should be only be briefly described. Here also Milton violates the classical rule. Addison criticizes Milton’s unnecessary incorporation of erudition into the poem. There is problem with his language also. Milton, according to Addison, was obsessed with rhyming words, for example ‘beseeching for besieging’, ‘tempted our attempt’ etc.

Please visit the following links for further study:

1. <https://pages.mtu.edu/~rlstrick/rsvtxt/addmil.htm>
2. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004856155.0001.000/1:7?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>

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