John Milton was one of England’s most controversial, celebrated, and reviled writers. As the course title suggests, we will study Milton’s poetry and prose within the context of the many revolutions in which he was a major figure: revolutions in politics, theology, poetics, and philosophy. One of our goals will be to examine not only how Milton – and the culture in which he was embedded – constructed meaning but also why it is important for us to undertake such an examination. We will consider how reading Milton’s works enables us to understand more fully our own constructed selves. With careful attention to textual analysis, students will share Milton’s engagement with the complexity and versatility of language, literature, and culture.

Our class will examine works from many of the different genres in which Milton wrote: sonnets, epic, masque, polemical prose tracts, pastoral elegy, etc. We will consider the richly generative contradictions that informed both the author’s oeuvre and his character. For example, Milton was a devout Christian who, according to William Blake, “was of the devil’s party and didn’t know it.” He was variously allied with the Puritans, and yet he created some of the most sensual and voluptuous verse in the English language. He was a politician who supported regicide and violent rebellion but who figured heaven as a monarchy and Satan as an armed insurrectionist. In the most extravagant and aristocratic genre of his era—the masque, which was predicated on conspicuous consumption and upper class entitlement—he embeds a proto-socialistic argument for equitable distribution of resources and consumer moderation. In one of the most celebrated epics ever written, he repeatedly derides classical epic values and conventional epic heroism.

Reading Schedule

October 4: Introduction to Milton, his culture, and the Baroque; discussion of short poems

“How Soon Hath Time” [sonnet 7];
“When I Consider How My Light Is Spent” [sonnet 16];
“To Mr. Cyriack Skinner Upon His Blindness” [not sonnet 18];
“On the Late Massacre in Piemont” [sonnet 15];
“On the New Forcers of Conscience”;
“On Time”;
"L'Allegro" and "II Penseroso"

October 11: Lycidas and Comus [A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle

October 18: Areopagitica and selections from The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce

October 25: The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates and introduction to Paradise Lost

November 1: Books 1 and 2 of Paradise Lost

November 8: Books 3 and 4 of Paradise Lost

November 15: Books 5 and 6 of Paradise Lost

November 22: Books 7 and 8 of Paradise Lost

November 29: No class (Thanksgiving break)

December 6: Books 9 and 10 of Paradise Lost

December 13: Books 11 and 12 of Paradise Lost