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**ABSTRACT**

There have been many studies of keywords in *Paradise Lost*. Over the last fifty or so years words such as ‘wander’, ‘lapse’, ‘error’, ‘fruit’, ‘balmy’, ‘fall’, ‘hands’, among others, have attracted critics’ attention. The present enquiry brings under scrutiny three linked keywords which have up to now escaped notice. These are the words ‘bliss’, ‘delight’, and ‘pleasure’. The fundamental proposition of the thesis is that Milton does not use these words haphazardly or interchangeably in his epic poem (though in other of his poetic productions he is by no means as fastidious). On the contrary, he self-consciously distinguishes among the three terms, assigning to each its own particular ‘theatre of operations’. Meant by this is that each keyword is selectively referred to a separate structural division of the epic: thus, ‘bliss’ has reference specifically to Heaven (or to the earthly paradise viewed as a simulacrum of Heaven), ‘delight’ to the earthly paradise in Eden and to the prelapsarian condition nourished by it; while ‘pleasure’, whose signification is ambiguous, refers in its favourable sense (which is but little removed from ‘delight’) to the Garden and the sensations associated with it, and in its unfavourable one to postlapsarian sensations and to the fallen characters. Insofar as the three structural divisions taken into account (Hell is not) are hierarchically organized in the epic, so too are the three keywords that answer to them. Moreover, in relating keywords to considerations of structure, the thesis breaks new ground in *Paradise Lost* studies.