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JOHN MILTON

John Milton, (born December 9, 1608, London, England—died November 8, 1674, London), English poet, pamphleteer, and historian, considered the most significant English author after William Shakespeare.

Milton is best known for *Paradise Lost*, widely regarded as the greatest epic poem in English. Together with *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, it confirms Milton's reputation as one of the greatest English poets. In his prose works Milton advocated the abolition of the Church of England and the execution of Charles I. From the beginning of the English Civil Wars in 1642 to long after the restoration of Charles II as king in 1660, he espoused in all his works a political philosophy that opposed tyranny and state-sanctioned religion. His influence extended not only through the civil wars and interregnum but also to the American and French revolutions. In his works on theology, he valued liberty of conscience, the paramount importance of Scripture as a guide in matters of faith, and religious toleration toward dissidents. As a civil servant, Milton became the voice of the English Commonwealth after 1649 through his handling of its international correspondence and his defense of the government against polemical attacks from abroad.

Early life and education

Milton's paternal grandfather, Richard, was a staunch Roman Catholic who expelled his son John, the poet's father, from the family home in Oxfordshire for reading an English (i.e., Protestant) Bible. Banished and disinherited, Milton's father established in London a business as a scrivener, preparing documents for legal transactions. He was also a moneylender, and he negotiated with creditors to arrange for loans on behalf of his clients. He and his wife, Sara Jeffrey, whose father was a merchant-tailor, had three children who survived their early years: Anne, the oldest, followed by John and Christopher. Though Christopher became a lawyer, a Royalist, and perhaps a Roman Catholic, he maintained throughout his life a cordial relationship with his older brother. After the Stuart monarchy was restored in 1660, Christopher, among others, may have interceded to prevent the execution of his brother.

The elder John Milton, who fostered cultural interests as a musician and composer, enrolled his son John at St. Paul's School, probably in 1620, and employed tutors to supplement his son's formal education. Milton was privately tutored by Thomas Young, a Scottish Presbyterian who may have influenced his gifted student in religion and politics while they maintained contact across subsequent decades. At St. Paul's Milton befriended Charles Diodati, a fellow student who would become his confidant through young adulthood. During his early years, Milton may have heard sermons by the poet John Donne, dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, which was within view of his school. Educated in Latin and Greek there, Milton in due course acquired proficiency in other languages, especially Italian, in which he composed some sonnets and which he spoke as proficiently as a native Italian, according to the testimony of Florentines whom he befriended during his travel abroad in 1638–39.

Milton enrolled at Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1625, presumably to be educated for the ministry. A year later he was "rusticated," or temporarily expelled, for a period of time because of a conflict with one of his tutors, the logician William Chappell. He was later reinstated under another tutor, Nathaniel Tovey. In 1629 Milton was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree, and in 1632 he received a Master of Arts degree. Despite his initial intent to enter

the ministry, Milton did not do so, a situation that has not been fully explained. Possible reasons are that Milton lacked respect for his fellow students who were planning to become ministers but whom he considered ill-equipped academically or that his Puritan inclinations, which became more radical as he matured, caused him to dislike the hierarchy of the established church and its insistence on uniformity of worship; perhaps, too, his self-evident disaffection impelled the Church of England to reject him for the ministry.

Overall, Milton was displeased with Cambridge, possibly because study there emphasized Scholasticism, which he found stultifying to the imagination. Moreover, in correspondence with a former tutor at St. Paul's School, Alexander Gill, Milton complained about a lack of friendship with fellow students. They called him the "Lady of Christ's College," perhaps because of his fair complexion, delicate features, and auburn hair. Nonetheless, Milton excelled academically. At Cambridge he composed several academic exercises called prolusions, which were presented as oratorical performances in the manner of a debate. In such exercises, students applied their learning in logic and rhetoric, among other disciplines. Milton authorized publication of seven of his prolusions, composed and recited in Latin, in 1674, the year of his death.

In 1632, after seven years at Cambridge, Milton returned to his family home, now in Hammersmith, on the outskirts of London. Three years later, perhaps because of an outbreak of the plague, the family relocated to a more pastoral setting, Horton, in Buckinghamshire. In these two locations, Milton spent approximately six years in studious retirement, during which he read Greek and Latin authors chiefly. Without gainful employment, Milton was supported by his father during this period.

Travel abroad

In 1638, accompanied by a manservant, Milton undertook a tour of the Continent for about 15 months, most of which he spent in Italy, primarily Rome and Florence. The Florentine academies especially appealed to Milton, and he befriended young members of the Italian literati, whose similar humanistic interests he found gratifying. Invigorated by their admiration for him, he corresponded with his Italian friends after his return to England, though he never saw them again. While in Florence, Milton also met with Galileo, who was under virtual house arrest. The circumstances of this extraordinary meeting, whereby a young Englishman about 30 years old gained access to the aged and blind astronomer, are unknown. (Galileo would become the only contemporary whom Milton mentioned by name in *Paradise Lost*.) While in Italy, Milton learned of the death in 1638 of Charles Diodati, his closest boyhood companion from St. Paul's School, possibly a victim of the plague; he also learned of impending civil war in England, news that caused him to return home sooner than anticipated. Back in England, Milton took up residence in London, not far from Bread Street, where he had been born. In his household were John and Edward Phillips—sons of his sister, Anne—whom he tutored. Upon his return he composed an elegy in Latin, "Epitaphium Damonis" ("Damon's Epitaph"), which commemorated Diodati.

Early translations and poems

By the time he returned to England in 1639, Milton had manifested remarkable talent as a linguist and translator and extraordinary versatility as a poet. While at St. Paul's, as a 15-year-old student, Milton had translated Psalm 114 from the original Hebrew, a text that recounts the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt. This translation into English was a poetic paraphrase in heroic couplets (rhymed iambic pentameter), and later he translated and paraphrased the same psalm into Greek. Beginning such work early in his boyhood, he continued it into adulthood, especially from 1648 to 1653, a period when he was also composing pamphlets against the Church of England and the monarchy. Also in his early youth Milton composed letters in Latin verse. These letters, which range over many topics, are

called elegies because they employ elegiac metre—a verse form, Classical in origin that consists of couplets, the first line dactylic hexameter, the second dactylic pentameter. Milton's first elegy, "Elegia prima ad Carolum Diodatum," was a letter to Diodati, who was a student at Oxford while Milton attended Cambridge. But Milton's letter was written from London in 1626, during his period of rustication; in the poem he anticipates his reinstatement, when he will "go back to the reedy fens of the Cam and return again to the hum of the noisy school."

Another early poem in Latin is "In Quintum Novembris" ("On the Fifth of November"), which Milton composed in 1626 at Cambridge. The poem celebrates the anniversary of the failed Gunpowder Plot of 1605, when Guy Fawkes was discovered preparing to detonate explosives at the opening of Parliament, an event in which King James I and his family would participate. On the event's anniversary, university students typically composed poems that attacked Roman Catholics for their involvement in treachery of this kind. The papacy and the Catholic nations on the Continent also came under attack. Milton's poem includes two larger themes that would later inform *Paradise Lost*: that the evil perpetrated by sinful humankind may be counteracted by Providence and that God will bring greater goodness out of evil. Throughout his career, Milton inveighed against Catholicism, though during his travels in Italy in 1638–39 he developed cordial personal relationships with Catholics, including high-ranking officials who oversaw the library at the Vatican.

In 1628 Milton composed an occasional poem, "On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough," which mourns the loss of his niece Anne, the daughter of his older sister. Milton tenderly commemorates the child, who was two years old. The poem's conceits, Classical allusions, and theological overtones emphasize that the child entered the supernal realm because the human condition, having been enlightened by her brief presence, was ill-suited to bear her any longer.

In this early period, Milton's principal poems included "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," "On Shakespeare," and the so-called companion poems "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso." Milton's sixth elegy ("Elegia sexta"), a verse letter in Latin sent to Diodati in December 1629, provides valuable insight into his conception of "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity." Informing Diodati of his literary activity, Milton recounts that he is singing the heaven-descended King, the bringer of peace, and the blessed times promised in the sacred books—the infant cries of our God and his stabling under a mean roof who, with his Father, governs the realms above.

The advent of the Christ child, he continues, results in the pagan gods being "destroyed in their own shrines." In effect, Milton likens Christ to the source of light that, by dispelling the darkness of paganism, initiates the onset of Christianity and silences the pagan oracles. Milton's summary in the sixth elegy makes clear his central argument in "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity": that the Godhead's descent and humiliation is crucial to the Christ child's triumph. Through this exercise of humility, the Godhead on behalf of humankind becomes victorious over the powers of death and darkness.

"On Shakespeare," though composed in 1630, first appeared anonymously as one of the many encomiums in the Second Folio (1632) of Shakespeare's plays. It was Milton's first published poem in English. In the 16-line epigram Milton contends that no man-made monument is a suitable tribute to Shakespeare's achievement. According to Milton, Shakespeare himself created the most enduring monument to befit his genius: the readers of the plays, who, transfixed with awe and wonder, become living monuments, a process renewed at each generation through the panorama of time. "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," written about 1631, may reflect the dialectic that informed the prolusions that Milton composed at Cambridge. The former celebrates the activities of daytime, and the latter muses on the sights, sounds, and emotions associated with darkness. The former describes a lively and sanguine personality, whereas the latter dwells on a pensive, even melancholic, temperament. In their complementary interaction, the poems may dramatize how a wholesome personality blends aspects of mirth and melancholy. Some commentators suggest that Milton may be

allegorically portraying his own personality in “Il Penseroso” and Diodati’s more outgoing and carefree disposition in “L’Allegro.” If such is the case, then in their friendship Diodati provided the balance that offset Milton’s marked temperament of studious retirement.

Comus and “Lycidas”

Milton’s most important early poems, *Comus* and “Lycidas,” are major literary achievements, to the extent that his reputation as an author would have been secure by 1640 even without his later works. *Comus*, a dramatic entertainment, or masque, is also called *A Mask*; it was first published as *A Maske Presented at Ludlow Castle* in 1638, but, since the late 17th century, it has typically been called by the name of its most vivid character, the villainous Comus. Performed in 1634 on Michaelmas (September 29) at Ludlow Castle in Shropshire, *Comus* celebrates the installation of John Egerton, earl of Bridgewater and Viscount Brackley and a member of Charles I’s Privy Council, as lord president of Wales. In addition to various English and Welsh dignitaries, the installation was attended by Egerton’s wife and children; the latter—Alice (15 years old), John (11), and Thomas (9)—all had parts in the dramatic entertainment. Other characters include Thyrsis, an attendant spirit to the children; Sabrina, a nymph of the River Severn; and Comus, a necromancer and seducer. Henry Lawes, who played the part of Thyrsis, was a musician and composer, the music teacher of the Egerton children, and the composer of the music for the songs of *Comus*. Presumably Lawes invited Milton to write the masque, which not only consists of songs and dialogue but also features dances, scenery, and stage properties.

Late in 1637 Milton composed a pastoral elegy called “Lycidas,” which commemorates the death of a fellow student at Cambridge, Edward King, who drowned while crossing the Irish Sea. Published in 1638 in *Justa Edouardo King Naufrago* (“Obsequies in Memory of Edward King”), a compilation of elegies by Cambridge students, “Lycidas” is one of several poems in English, whereas most of the others are in Greek and Latin. As a pastoral elegy—often considered the most outstanding example of the genre—Milton’s poem is richly allegorical. King is called Lycidas, a shepherd’s name that recurs in Classical elegies. By choosing this name, Milton signals his participation in the tradition of memorializing a loved one through pastoral poetry, a practice that may be traced from ancient Greek Sicily through Roman culture and into the Christian Middle Ages and early Renaissance.

Antiprelatical tracts

Having returned from abroad in 1639, Milton turned his attention from poetry to prose. In doing so, he entered the controversies surrounding the abolition of the Church of England and of the Royalist government, at times replying to, and often attacking vehemently, English and Continental polemicists who targeted him as the apologist of radical religious and political dissent. In 1641–42 Milton composed five tracts on the reformation of church government. One of these tracts, *Of Reformation*, examines the historical changes in the Church of England since its inception under King Henry VIII and criticizes the continuing resemblances between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church, especially the hierarchy in ecclesiastical government. In this tract and others, Milton also calls attention to resemblances between the ecclesiastical and political hierarchies in England, suggesting that the monarchical civil government influences the similar structure of the church. He likewise decries the unduly complicated arguments of theologians, whereas he praises the simplicity and clarity of Scripture.

In another tract from this period, *The Reason of Church Government*, Milton appears to endorse Scottish Presbyterianism as a replacement for the episcopal hierarchy of the Church of England. A few years thereafter, he came to realize that Presbyterianism could be as inflexible as the Church of England in matters of theology, and he became more independent from established religion of all kinds, arguing for the primacy of Scripture and for the

conscience of each believer as the guide to interpretation. In another tract from the period 1641–42, *An Apology Against a Pamphlet*, Milton verges on autobiography as he refutes scurrilous allegations attributed to Bishop Joseph Hall.

Divorce tracts

Soon after these controversies, Milton became embroiled in another conflict, one in his domestic life. Having married Mary Powell in 1642, Milton was a few months afterward deserted by his wife, who returned to her family's residence in Oxfordshire. The reason for their separation is unknown, though perhaps Mary adhered to the Royalist inclinations of her family whereas her husband was progressively anti-Royalist. Or perhaps the discrepancy in their ages—he was 34, she was 17—led to a lack of mutual understanding. During her absence of approximately three years, Milton may have been planning marriage to another woman. But after Mary's return, she and Milton evidently overcame the causes of their estrangement. Three daughters (Anne, Mary, and Deborah) were born, but a son, John, died at age one. Milton's wife died in 1652 after giving birth to Deborah.

During his domestic strife and after his wife's desertion, Milton probably began to frame the arguments of four prose tracts: *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643, enlarged 2nd ed. 1644), *The Judgment of Martin Bucer Concerning Divorce* (1644), *Tetrachordon* (1645), and *Colasterion* (1645). Whether or not his personal experience with Mary affected his views on marriage, Milton mounts a cogent, radical argument for divorce, an argument informed by the concepts of personal liberty and individual volition, the latter being instrumental in maintaining or ending a marriage. For Milton, marriage depends on the compatibility of the partners, and to maintain a marriage that is without mutual love and sympathy violates one's personal liberty. In such circumstances, the marriage has already ceased. In his later divorce tracts, Milton buttresses his arguments with citations of scholars, such as the 16th-century reformer Martin Bucer, and with biblical passages that he marshals as proof texts.

Tracts on education and free expression

About the time that the first and second editions of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* appeared, Milton published *Of Education* (1644). In line with the ideal of the Renaissance gentleman, Milton outlines a curriculum emphasizing the Greek and Latin languages not merely in and of themselves but as the means to learn directly the wisdom of Classical antiquity in literature, philosophy, and politics. The curriculum, which mirrors Milton's own education at St. Paul's, is intended to equip a gentleman to perform "all the offices, both private and public, of peace and war." Aimed at the nobility, not commoners, Milton's plan does not include public education. Nor does it include a university education, possible evidence of Milton's dissatisfaction with Cambridge.

The most renowned tract by Milton is *Areopagitica* (1644), which opposes governmental licensing of publications or procedures of censorship. Milton contends that governments insisting on the expression of uniform beliefs are tyrannical. In his tract, he investigates historical examples of censorship, which, he argues, invariably emanate from repressive governments. The aim of *Areopagitica*, he explains, is to promote knowledge, test experience, and strive for the truth without any hindrances. Milton composed it after the manner of a Classical oration of the same title by Isocrates, directed to the Areopagus, or Athenian council. Informed by Milton's knowledge of Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* and of orations by Demosthenes and Cicero, *Areopagitica* is a product of the very kind of learning that Milton advocates in *Of Education*. It is ultimately a fierce, passionate defense of the freedom of speech:

For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are.... Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature,

God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye.

Works on history and theology

Three extraordinary prose works highlight the depth of Milton's erudition and the scope of his interests. *History of Britain* (1670) was long in the making, for it reflects extensive reading that he began as a very young man. Presumably because he initially contemplated an epic centring upon British history and the heroic involvement of the legendary king Arthur, Milton researched early accounts of Britain, ranging across records from the Anglo-Saxon era through works by the Venerable Bede and Geoffrey of Monmouth and into 16th- and 17th-century accounts by Raphael Holinshed and William Camden, along with many others. All the while, Milton critically evaluated his sources for their veracity. Because his own research and writing were interrupted by his service in Cromwell's government, *History of Britain* remained incomplete even at publication, for the account ends with the Norman Conquest.

Artis Logicae (1672; "Art of Logic") was composed in Latin, perhaps to gain the attention also of a Continental audience. It is a textbook derived from the logic of Petrus Ramus, a 16th-century French scholar whose work reflected the impact of Renaissance humanism on the so-called medieval trivium: the arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Countering the orthodox Aristotelian approach to logic, Ramus adduced a number of methods by which to reorganize the arts of the trivium. Milton's textbook is a redaction of Ramus's methods.

De Doctrina Christiana ("On Christian Doctrine") was probably composed between 1655 and 1660, though Milton never completed it. The unfinished manuscript was discovered in the Public Record Office in London in 1823, translated from Latin into English by Charles Sumner and published in 1825 as *A Treatise on Christian Doctrine*. The comprehensive and systematic theology presented in this work reflects Milton's close engagement with Scripture, from which he draws numerous proof texts in order to buttress his concepts of the Godhead and of moral theology, among others. Like his historical account of Britain and his textbook on logic, this work is highly derivative, for many of its ideas are traceable to works by Protestant thinkers, such as the Reformed theologian John Wolleb (Johannes Wollebius). Milton also drew on other theologians, notably the English Puritans William Perkins and his student William Ames. Though Milton did not agree with all elements of their theology, like them he tended to subordinate the Son to the Father and to oppose the trinitarian orthodoxy of Roman Catholicism.

Major poems

Blind and once a widower, Milton married Katherine Woodcock in 1656. Their marriage lasted only 15 months: she died within months of the birth of their child. He wedded Elizabeth Minshull in 1663, who, along with the daughters from his first marriage, assisted him with his personal needs, read from books at his request, and served as an amanuensis to record verses that he dictated. In the era after the Restoration, Milton published his three major poems, though he had begun work on two of them, *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*, many years earlier.

Fame and reputation

Milton's fame and reputation derive chiefly from *Paradise Lost*, which, when first published in 1667, did not gain wide admiration. Because of Milton's political and religious views, only his close friends and associates commended his epic. Marvell, who assisted Milton when he was Latin secretary during the interregnum, expressed extraordinary admiration of *Paradise Lost* in verses at the outset of the 1674 edition. John Dryden, after having consulted with Milton and elicited his approval, adapted the epic to heroic couplets, the measure that characterized much verse in that era. The result was *The State of Innocence and Fall of Man*, an operatic

adaptation published in 1677, though never performed. At the end of the 17th century, admiration of *Paradise Lost* extended beyond a small circle. Indeed, five editions of the poem appeared between 1688 and 1698, three of them in English and two in Latin; the 1695 edition in English, with Patrick Hume's commentary and annotations, is considered the first scholarly edition.

Milton's later years and death

After the Restoration and despite jeopardy to himself, Milton continued to advocate freedom of worship and republicanism for England while he supervised the publication of his major poems and other works. For a time soon after the succession of Charles II, Milton was under arrest and menaced by possible execution for involvement in the regicide and in Cromwell's government. Although the circumstances of clemency toward Milton are not fully known, it is likely that certain figures influential with the regime of Charles II—such as Christopher Milton, Andrew Marvell, and William Davenant—interceded on his behalf. The exact date and location of Milton's death remain unknown; he likely died in London on November 8, 1674, from complications of the gout (possibly renal failure). He was buried inside St. Giles Cripplegate in London.

Selected Bibliography

Poetry

Lycidas (1638)

Poems (1645)

Paradise Lost (1667)

Paradise Regained (1671)

Samson Agonistes (1671)

Drama

Arcades (1632)

Comus (1634)

Non-Fiction

Of Reformation Touching Church Discipline in England (1641)

The Reason of Church Government Urged Against Prelaty (1642)

The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce (1643)

Areopagitica (1644)

Of Education (1644)

The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates (1649)

A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes (1659)

Quotes:

Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven.

A mind not to be changed by place or time. The mind is its own place, and in itself Can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.

Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties.