

## THE IMPORTANCE OF JOHN MILTON IN THE ENGLISH POETRY

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### Abstract

*John Milton was a very important English poet, author of the monumental Paradise Lost (1667), which was to have a major influence on literature in his country, and especially on the romantic poets. He was born in 1608 on Cheapside street in London. Born into a cultured religious bourgeois family, Milton is intended to take holy orders, but a trip to Italy after his mother's death together with reading the Italian poets Torquato Tasso (1544 - 1595) and Dante (1265 - 1321) would make him want to become a writer. After studying at Cambridge he decides against all odds to abandon the all-ready mapped out career in either the church or even at university in order to be able to dedicate himself to the art of writing. Some say today that already then Milton would have a sense he would leave the world the gift of his oeuvre. In any case, at this point he would retire instead to the family home, and would spend a lot of his time reading Greek and Latin classics, as well as studying political and religious history. It is then also he would start writing his first poems. Milton would also write a series of political pamphlets. Some would be against the church, both the Catholic and the Protestant, always as a fierce advocate of the freedom of worship. Others would be for the freedom of the press and for the right to divorce.*

### Introduction

Milton is the author of dramas such as Samson Agonistes (1671) as well as lyrical sonnets, of which the finest were in fact inspired by the death of his second wife. Altogether John Milton would write twenty-three sonnets. In a very real sense therefore these can be considered as exceptions. He uses such moments to express his thoughts and feelings on specific events, historical or personal. In his lifetime, moreover, he was mainly known for his political pamphlets. As a poet during the age of Shakespeare, he was born less than a decade after the death of this one. Milton might have been less appealing than such a master of the English language but he was nonetheless destined to become one of the best writers England would ever know.

Having sided with the parliamentarians against the monarchists, Milton would begin a political career with responsibilities comparable to that today of an under-secretary of state for foreign affairs. However the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 will mean that he is both fined and imprisoned in the famous still standing today Tower of London. Eventually pardoned, Milton would from then on lead a rather retired life devoted entirely to writing until his death in 1674.

Paradise Lost was first published in 1667 even though it had been written almost 10 years before. Milton was actually getting blind by the time he started work on it. To help him with his writing he would get assistants, and most famously the English metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell (1621 - 1678). It would take some time, but his epic poem Paradise Lost would be critically received even abroad where, for instance, the famous French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire (1821 - 1867) would praise it highly.

A kind of theological treaty through poetry on the origin of man, the work gets its inspiration as much from the Bible for its content as from Virgil's (70 - 19 BC) twelve-book Latin epic poem Aeneid for its form. Originally published in ten parts, the book would be written in blank verses. A second edition embellished with minor revisions would follow in 1674. Indeed this time it would be reorganized in twelve parts in order to be reminiscent of Virgil's famous work. More specifically, the poem deals with the Christian view on the origin of man, and refer to the temptation of Adam and Eve by Satan as well as their eventual expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

Paradise Lost tells the story of Lucifer, the fallen angel, who has just been defeated by the armies of God. With his army Lucifer is preparing to resume attacks against heaven when he hears of a prophecy. That a new species of creatures is about to be created by heaven. He then decides to go alone on an expedition to heaven and finds the new world. After having easily fooled an angel by changing his appearance he gets into heaven and finds Adam and Eve. God finds out about this but since he created man free, he decides to do nothing. His son, however, finds this rather cruel and begs his father to take upon himself the sins of men, to which God essentially agrees. After doubting a little Satan puts together a plan in order to undermine both God and man. Indeed, having learned that God forbade humans to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge he tries to get into Eve's dream and tempt her but unintentionally will also awaken Adam who will hunt him away.

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At this point God sends an angel in order to inform them of their enemy so that they would not be able to have any excuse if something bad were to happen. Later Satan will go at it again and take advantage of the fact that Eve will be away from Adam for the harvest and taking the form of a serpent he tempts her again. This time he will succeed and have her eat the forbidden fruit. Subsequently Eve will tell Adam all about it, suggesting even that he tastes it too, which he finally will agree to out of love for Eve. As soon as God is informed of this, he will send his son to tell them what the sentence is: they shall be cast out of heaven. The son will take pity on them. In spite of this, Adam realizes what he has lost and together with Eve they feel deep despair. God will then send an angel again to show Adam what the future of his descendants would be until the great flood. Adam would somehow feel reassured and will let himself be taken out of paradise with Eve by the angel named Michael. A flaming sword will fall right behind them as they left and little angels will from now on guard the entrance to heaven, which is now prohibited.

The poem begins strong as follows:

“Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste brought death into the world, and all our woe (with loss of Eden, till one greater Man restore us, and regain the blissful seat)”

Some of the famous verses from Paradise Lost include:

“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heav'n of hell, a hell of heav'n.”

The context of this passage is that of Satan not yet really considering revenge. At that point he is instead deciding to make the most of the situation. This is confirmed only a few lines later when he makes the very famous utterance:

“Better to reign in hell, than serve in heav'n.”

The following quote is from a point in the work when God is talking with his son and angels about the fact that since angels and man were given free will, it would have been meant changing their nature to have intervened and prevented their sin:

“The first sort by their own suggestions fell,  
Self-tempted, self-depraved: man falls deceived  
By the other first: man therefore shall find grace,  
The other none”

Finally, let us consider the following quote where Milton tells us about Eve having been deceived:

“Greedily she engorged without restraint,  
And knew not eating death;”

It is interesting to note that even though Paradise Lost was to become considered as a major influential work, it did not meet immediate success when it was first published in 1667. It was not until 1688, a little over ten years after Milton's death that the poem would start to be widely recognized. Perhaps such late recognition has partly to do with the fact that by the time of his death Milton was not only broke, but he had been alienated out of intellectual life in his own country. In 1670 he would publish his controversial *The History of Britain*, and in 1671 *Paradise Regained*, dealing with the temptation of Christ. Milton would die in London on November 8 1674. The same year would appear the second edition of *Paradise Lost*.

### Importance in English Poet

While Milton's impact as a prose writer was profound, of equal or greater importance is his poetry. He referred to his prose works as the achievements of his “left hand.” In 1645 he published his first volume of poetry, *Poems of Mr. John Milton, Both English and Latin*, much of which was written before he was twenty years old. The volume manifests a rising poet, one who has planned his emergence and projected his development in numerous ways: mastery of ancient and modern languages Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Italian; awareness of various traditions in literature; and avowed inclination toward the vocation of poet. The poems in the 1645 edition run the gamut of various genres: psalm paraphrase, sonnet, canzone, masque, pastoral elegy, verse letter, English ode, epigram, obituary poem, companion poem, and occasional verse. Ranging from religious to political in subject matter, serious to mock-serious in tone, and traditional to innovative in the use of verse forms, the poems in this volume disclose a self-conscious author whose maturation is undertaken with certain models in mind, notably Virgil from classical antiquity and Edmund Spenser in the English Renaissance.

Like the illustrious literary forebears with whom he invites comparison, Milton used his poetry to address issues of religion and politics, the central concerns also of his prose. Placing him in a line of poets whose art was an outlet for their public voice and using, like them, the pastoral poem to present an outlook on politics, Milton aimed to promote an enlightened commonwealth, not unlike the polis of Greek antiquity or the cultured city-states in Renaissance Italy. When one considers that the 1645 volume was published when Milton was approximately thirty-seven years old, though some of the poems were written as early as his fifteenth year, it is evident that he sought to draw atten-

tion to his unfolding poetic career despite its interruption by governmental service. Perhaps he also sought to highlight the relationship of his poetry to his prose and to call attention to his aspiration, evident in several works in the 1645 volume, to become an epic poet. Thus, the poems in the volume were composed in Stuart England but published after the onset of the English Civil War. Furthermore, Milton may have begun to compose one or more of his mature works *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes* in the 1640s, but they were completed and revised much later and not published until after the Restoration.

This literary genius whose fame and influence are second to none, and on whose life and works more commentary is written than on any author except Shakespeare, was born at 6:30 in the morning on 9 December 1608. His parents were John Milton, Sr., and Sara Jeffrey Milton, and the place of birth was the family home, marked with the sign of the spread eagle, on Bread Street, London. Three days later, at the parish church of All Hallows, also on Bread Street, he was baptized into the Protestant faith of the Church of England. Other children of John and Sara who survived infancy included Anne, their oldest child, and Christopher, seven years younger than John. At least three others died shortly after birth, in infancy or in early childhood. Edward Phillips, Anne's son by her first husband, was tutored by Milton and later wrote a biography of his renowned uncle, which was published in Milton's *Letters of State* (1694). Christopher, in contrast to his older brother on all counts, became a Roman Catholic, a Royalist, and a lawyer.

Milton's father was born in 1562 in Oxfordshire; his father, Richard, was a Catholic who decried the Reformation. When John Milton, Sr., expressed sympathy for what his father viewed as Protestant heresy, their disagreements resulted in the son's disinheritance. He left home and traveled to London, where he became a scrivener and a professional composer responsible for more than twenty musical pieces. As a scrivener he performed services comparable to a present-day attorney's assistant, law stationer, and notary. Among the documents that a scrivener executed were wills, leases, deeds, and marriage agreements. Through such endeavors and by his practice of money lending, the elder Milton accumulated a handsome estate, which enabled him to provide a splendid formal education for his son John and to maintain him during several years of private study. In "Ad Patrem" (To His Father), a Latin poem composed probably in 1637-1638, Milton celebrated his "revered father." He compares his father's talent at musical composition, harmonizing sounds to numbers and modulating the voices of singers, to his own dedication to the muses and to his developing art-

istry as a poet. The father's "generosities" and "kindnesses" enabled the young man to study Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, and Italian."

Little is known of Sara Jeffrey, but in *Pro Propulo Anglicano Defensio Secunda* (The Second Defense of the People of England, 1654) Milton refers to the "esteem" in which his mother was held and to her reputation for almsgiving in their neighborhood. John Aubrey, in biographical notes made in 1681-1682, recorded that she had weak eyesight, which may have contributed to her son's similar problems. She died on 3 April 1637, not long before her son John departed for his European journey. Her husband died on 14 March 1647."

In the years 1618-1620 Milton was tutored in the family home. One of his tutors was Thomas Young, who became chaplain to the English merchants in Hamburg during the 1620s. Though he departed England when Milton was approximately eleven years old, Young's impression on the young pupil was long standing. Two of Milton's familiar letters, as well as "Elegia quarta" (Elegy IV), are addressed to Young. (The term elegy in the titles of seven of Milton's Latin poems designates the classical prosody in which they were written, couplets consisting of a verse of dactylic hexameter followed by a verse of pentameter; elegy, when used to describe poems of sorrow or lamentation, refers to Milton's meditations on the deaths of particular persons.) Also dedicated to Young is *Of Reformation* (1641), a prose tract; and the "TY" of the acronym SMECTYMNUUS in the title of Milton's antiprelatical tract of 1641 identifies Young as one of the five ministers whose stand against church government by bishops was admired by Milton."

## Conclusion

JOHN MILTON, by common consent of critical opinion, holds a place among the first three great English poets. This is not to say that there are not a dozen, or even twenty, writers in the succession of English poetry who at times in individual quality touch a height equal to Milton's own. The word "great" is one that is commonly used about poets, often too easily, and generally, I suppose, with a difference. What is meant at the moment is that Milton stands pre-eminently for a very important kind of achievement in poetry, and, so far as can be seen in perspective up to our own day, there are hardly more than two other poets of whom the same thing can so definitely be said. There were many poets among the Elizabethans who in their best moments had as clearly the stuff of poetry in them as Shakespeare himself, but in breadth and consistency of performance Shakespeare transcends them all. It may

be said that there is nothing which they did that he did not do as well and generally better. He was the chief and crowning glory of a vast range of poetic activity, practised by many men of great endowments, and, profiting as he did by their efforts and example, he brought the whole movement to its most perfect expression. So that, both by his personal quality and the actual volume of his work, it is of Shakespeare that we think instinctively as the great poet of his time. Because his time happened to be one of peculiar virtue as an inspiration to poetry, a time when the nation, both in adventure and culture, was first becoming delightedly aware of its own splendour and vitality, and was content to enjoy the spectacle of life, and share in its arduous purely for their own invigorating sake, without reducing them to moral or social problems, he comes to our mind always, perhaps, as the greatest poet of all. After him there are two other poets in the English story of whom something of the same kind may be said, John Milton and William Wordsworth. Circumstances of history made it impossible for either of these to inform their work with quite the same happy ease of spiritual youth that marks even the tragedies of Shakespeare, but each in his own way pre-eminently stood for one of the great natural movements in English history. After Wordsworth there is no poet of whom we can yet be quite sure in this matter. There are many whose work is certain of individual fame forever, but none of whom we can yet say that he, above all others, most clearly embodied that strange urge in one direction which underlies all the manifold workings of an epoch.

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