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Milton's social life

That eight biographies of John Milton were written within sixty years of his death in 1674 not only demonstrates the popularity of his works during the first half of the eighteenth century, but also suggests the enduring strength of Milton's personality. Because most of these accounts were published with editions of Milton's works, readers became accustomed to interpreting his writings biographically. Milton still had his detractors – William Winstanley in his 1687 dictionary of English poets, for example, dismissed Milton as 'a notorious Traytor' who had 'most impiously and villanously bely'd that blessed Martyr, King *Charles* the First' (195) – but such attacks only encouraged readers to approach Milton's works as a function of his identity. As Samuel Johnson complained in his *Lives of the English Poets*, the 'blaze' of Milton's reputation was preventing people from examining his poetry objectively (1: 163, 165).

Much of the information in Milton's early biographies came from Milton himself, a useful but not entirely reliable source. Whereas we know relatively little about other contemporary writers, Milton includes provocative autobiographical digressions in some of his poems and pamphlets, as if inviting readers to organize his works according to his sense of them. He describes his aspirations and experiences in *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642), *An Apology Against a Pamphlet* (1642), and *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio Secunda* (1654), and continues to construct a narrative of his poetic progress in other publications such as his collected *Poems* (1645, 1673) and *Paradise Lost* (1667, 1674). If scholars in discussing his works have overemphasized Milton's agency, the blame lies at least in part with Milton: his strong authorial voice has virtually drowned out the social conditions of his writing and publishing.

In its most recent and extreme form, this image of Milton as an independent author has mutated into the caricature of an isolated pedant. We imagine an aloof and avid scholar, cut off from seventeenth-century culture and holding conversation exclusively with Homer, Virgil, and God.

Rumours about Milton's domestic life also conjure the dubious but compelling image of a brilliant blind man bullying his frightened daughters for the sake of his art. And how can modern readers not feel daunted by Milton? Introducing a selection of his works, the editors of *The Norton Anthology* coolly observe that 'in his time' he 'likely' 'read just about everything of importance written in English, Latin, Greek, and Italian', adding parenthetically that 'of course, he had the Bible by heart' (1: 1434).

To remedy the misapprehension of Milton's autonomy, we need to approach him as a working writer and acknowledge the various social sites of his authorship. As epic poet and political pamphleteer; defender of divorce and supporter of regicide; teacher, businessman, and government employee – Milton was necessarily influenced by his changing historical circumstances. Reading beyond the persona of the independent poet that Milton implies in many of his texts, we discover a complex, sometimes inconsistent writer, predisposed to socializing and dependent on his friends and acquaintances as part of the creative process.

From an entry in Milton's handwriting in his family's Bible we learn that he was born on Friday, 9 December 1608, at 6.30 am; he was baptized eleven days later in the parish church of All Hallows, Bread Street. Milton's boyhood home in the heart of London afforded the young poet little opportunity for quiet and seclusion. Growing up amid merchants and drinking houses and not far from London's busiest business district in Old Cheap, Milton must have become accustomed at an early age to the noise and activity of the city. The family's six-storey tenement was in a building, the White Bear, occupied by at least seven other residents. Milton's family consisted of his parents, older sister Anne, and younger brother Christopher; his father, the elder John Milton, was a Scrivener (a trade involving money-lending and deed-writing) and may also have invited his apprentices to live with the family, as was common practice. In addition to servants, nurses, and tutors, the home saw the visits of various composers seeking the elder Milton's company: the poet's father had become well known as a musician, and the White Bear may have been the scene of musical performances for select audiences. Although we know considerably less about Sara Milton, the poet's mother, she too was active in the surrounding parish. In one of the few references that Milton makes about her in print, he notes her reputation throughout the neighbourhood for her acts of charity.

That Milton's parents arranged for a formal portrait of him to be painted at age ten suggests, as William Riley Parker has observed, both the family's pride and prosperity (8). The painter, commonly thought to be Cornelius

Janssen, has captured a serious-looking boy, not completely comfortable in his genteel doublet and starched collar. Milton's close-cropped haircut was probably given him by Thomas Young, his first preceptor. Again Milton's parents were indulging in behaviour more typical of the gentry than the middle class: before beginning formal schooling, Milton was taught at home, first by his father, then by the Scottish minister Young. Although Young may have occupied this position for only a few years, he later played an important role in the antiprelatical controversy of the 1640s and probably influenced Milton's early Presbyterian sympathies.

According to Milton's widow, it was around age ten that the author composed his first poetry, now lost. The earliest surviving works by Milton that we can confidently identify are his English translations of Psalms 114 and 136, which he wrote at age fifteen, perhaps as an assignment during his last year at St Paul's School. The language of these poems reflects Milton's early interest in Ovid and Propertius; the fact that he chose to translate songs from the Old Testament suggests his religious conviction and his father's musical influence. Although few records exist about Milton's time at St Paul's, we know that he learned to read and write Latin fluently, and eventually studied Greek and Hebrew. There he befriended the under-usher, Alexander Gil, Jr, with whom he would continue to exchange poetry and correspondence after graduating. Also at St Paul's, Milton formed a special friendship with one of his schoolmates, Charles Diodati. From their surviving correspondence (Diodati's written in Greek, Milton's in Latin) we sense that this relationship was important for both young men; Milton wrote at least four of his early verses to or about Diodati.

Finishing at St Paul's in 1624, Milton began attending Christ's College, Cambridge, where he would ultimately earn his BA in 1629 and graduate *cum laude* with his MA three years later. At Cambridge, Milton claimed to have received 'more then ordinary favour and respect . . . above any of my equals' (*YP* 1: 884). Milton's nephew, Edward Phillips, also reports that the author 'was lov'd and admir'd by the whole University, particularly by the Fellows and most Ingenious Persons of his House'. When Milton left Cambridge, Phillips claims, it caused 'no small trouble' to his 'Fellow-Collegiates, who in general regretted his Absence' (Darbishire, 54, 55). Even if we suspect Milton and Phillips of overstating Milton's reputation, his peers liked him well enough to invite him to speak at various university functions. The sly allusions and coarse puns in Milton's surviving Latin orations imply that he had a good rapport with members of the college. Thus, as the biographer Christopher Hill suggests, Milton's university nickname 'the Lady of Christ's' need not have been pejorative (35). In his vacation exercise, Milton seems to appreciate such humour as he playfully

derides his classmates' poor grammar and devises a list of bawdy explanations for the epithet.

During this time, Milton stayed in contact with Thomas Young, and probably formed lasting relationships with some of his acquaintances from Cambridge, such as Henry More, an undergraduate with Milton; Joseph Meade, a Fellow of Christ's College; Thomas Bainbrigge, the Master of Christ's; and the Reverend Nathaniel Tovey, Milton's second tutor at Christ's. In *An Apology Against a Pamphlet*, Milton refers to the 'many Letters full of kindness and loving respect' that he received from his friends at Cambridge both before and after his graduation (*YP* 1: 884). Surely Milton would have stayed in contact with his 'learned Friend' Edward King, whose tragic death in 1637 inspired *Lycidas* and with whom, Edward Phillips claims, Milton had 'contracted a particular Friendship and Intimacy' (Darbishire, 54).

In Milton's familiar letters we glimpse not a reclusive scholar but an author who so enjoyed companionship that, hearing on one occasion of Charles Diodati's visit to London, he dashed 'straightway and as if by storm' ('*confestim & quasi* autoboei *proripui me ad cellam tuam*') to meet his boyhood friend (*CM* 12: 20–1). While not all Milton's friendships were as intimate as his relationship with Diodati, Milton's enthusiasm for his former schoolfellow contributes to our sense of the social author. 'Why do you complain that poetry is a fugitive from wine and feasting?' ('*Quid quereris refugam vino dapibusque poesin*?' line 13), Milton asks his friend in Elegy 6, referring to the classical tradition that associates inspiration and pleasure. In one of Milton's oratorical exercises from Cambridge, he admits that those who immerse themselves in study 'find it much easier to converse with gods than with men' (*YP* 1: 295). On the other hand, Milton claims, no one cultivates a friendship more diligently than a man who has devoted himself to learning. For Milton, 'the chief part of human happiness is derived from the society of one's fellows and the formation of friendships' (*CM* 12: 262).

Not all of Milton's memories of Cambridge would have been pleasant, however. In 1626 he was suspended and briefly returned to his parents' home in London. Although the exact reason for Milton's suspension remains unknown, it may have involved his first tutor, William Chappell, reputedly a strict disciplinarian. The seventeenth-century biographer John Aubrey recorded that Milton received 'some unkindnesse' from Chappell and has added in the margin, 'whip't him' (Darbishire, 10).

It is the six years after Milton left Cambridge that modern critics have especially characterized as a period of intense study and isolation. From 1632 to 1635, Milton lived with his parents in Hammersmith, a suburban

town about six or seven miles west of St Paul's Cathedral, and from 1635 to 1638 the family resided at Horton, a town even further west, approximately seventeen miles outside of London. Living with his family outside of London, away from the distractions that the city offered, Milton no doubt had ample opportunity to concentrate on his studies. In a letter to Charles Diodati from London in 1637, Milton compares his friend's reading habits with his own:

> I know your method of studying to be so arranged that you frequently take breath in the middle, visit your friends, write much, sometimes make a journey, whereas my genius is such that no delay, no rest, no care or thought almost of anything, holds me aside until I reach the end I am making for, and round off, as it were, some great period of my studies. (*CM* 12: 18–19)

The entries in Milton's Commonplace Book also attest to the extensive reading that he accomplished after graduating from Cambridge, and in *Defensio Secunda* Milton specifically recalls his time in the country as a period of intense study: 'At my father's country place, wither he had retired to spend his declining years, I devoted myself entirely to the study of Greek and Latin writers, completely at leisure' (*YP* 4: 613–14).

Although such claims suggest Milton's passion for learning, we ought not to mistake his avidity for reclusiveness. Milton says not that he but that his father had retired to the country. When he does refer to his own retirement in Elegy 1 to Charles Diodati, he is most likely writing euphemistically about his suspension from Cambridge in 1626. In this poem Milton at first claims that his books are his life and that he devotes his time to them and the Muses ('*Tempora nam licet hic placidis dare libera Musis, / Et totum rapiunt me mea vita libri*', lines 25–6) – but here, too, he admits to his friend that he frequents the theatre and often enjoys leaving the city to watch young women.

Milton's letters and publications suggest that even while living in Hammersmith and Horton he travelled frequently and socialized often. In *Defensio Secunda* he fondly remembers travelling to London, 'exchanging the country for the city, either to purchase books or to become acquainted with some new discovery in mathematics or music' (*YP* 4: 614). Living with his family in the country posed little difficulty for such journeys: he needed only two hours to travel from Horton to London, and travelling from the suburb of Hammersmith to London required considerably less time. Rather than secluding himself at his parents' home to pursue his studies, Milton may have chosen to live with his family out of convenience. Just out of college, he had not yet chosen a vocation and had no ostensible means of supporting himself while formulating his plans. Milton writes in

The Reason of Church-Government that he had been preparing from his earliest youth for a career in the ministry 'by the intentions of my parents and friends . . . and in mine own resolutions' (*YP* 1: 822). He became disillusioned, however, by the clergy's corrupt practices. In his own words, he was 'Church-outed by the Prelats' (*YP* 1: 823), that is, he grew so disgusted with the Episcopal form of church-government that he could not in good conscience be ordained.

This decision must have come as a disappointment to Milton's parents, in particular his father, whom Milton credits with providing his education. In the poem *Ad Patrem* Milton thanks his father for not forcing him into business or law, and tries to convince him that his own musical abilities resemble his son's poetic skills. We may detect a similarly defensive tone in a letter Milton penned to an unknown friend shortly after graduating from Cambridge. Milton denies that he has chosen a life of seclusion. Although he admits that 'I am something suspicious of my selfe, & doe take notice of a certaine belatednesse in me' (*CM* 12: 325), he insists that he is not indulging in 'the endlesse delight of speculation'; on the contrary, he is preparing himself for his career, 'not taking thought of beeing late so it give advantage to be more fit' (*CM* 12: 324).

As part of this preparation, Milton found his acquaintances and friends especially useful. In 1633 Milton received an invitation from the Countess-Dowager of Derby to contribute to an entertainment called *Arcades*, which her family had planned in her honour; and his decision one year later to write *A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle* again grew out of an association with the Egerton family, specifically the Earl of Bridgewater, the step-son to the Countess-Dowager. Although Milton may have agreed to compose these courtly entertainments because he was considering the Egertons as potential patrons, we do not know why the family chose to have Milton write for them. One of the most highly regarded families in England, the Egertons could have presumably called upon a writer with a more established reputation, someone like Ben Jonson, rather than selecting a relatively inexperienced young poet from Hammersmith.

If Milton had indeed led a secluded life, he would not have earned such prestigious, aristocratic commissions. Nor would he have written two affectionately humorous poems to the University Mail Carrier, Hobson, on his death in January 1631; versions of these poems circulated in manuscript and were printed in three separate verse collections. It also seems unlikely that a shy, bookish young man would have published *Lycidas* or 'An Epitaph on the admirable Dramaticke Poet W. Shakespeare'. In the former case, Milton's reputation at the university surely recommended him as a contributor to *Justa Edouardo King*, the 1638 anthology of poems com-

memorating his late friend; and the inclusion of Milton's 'Epitaph' in the Second Folio of Shakespeare's plays raises the possibility that members of the book trade – perhaps through his father's intervention? – were also familiar with Milton as early as the 1630s.

'An Epitaph on . . . Shakespeare' was probably not, however, Milton's first published poem: he may have had published an earlier work while still at Cambridge. In a letter to Alexander Gil, Jr, dated 2 July 1628, Milton refers to the customary commencement verses that a fellow of his college asked him to write. He enclosed a printed copy of the verses with his letter as a gift for Gil to judge, but because Gil's copy is now lost, we cannot determine which poem Milton composed and had printed for this event – perhaps *Naturam non pati senium*, or, more likely, *De Idea Platonica*.

In all these instances – *Arcades*, *A Masque*, the Hobson poems, *Lycidas*, 'An Epitaph on . . . Shakespeare', and the commencement verses – Milton was writing for or about someone else. Collectively, these texts suggest the social nature of even his earliest authorship; he was familiar with both the courtly world of the Egertons and the culture of printing. In both contexts, what Milton wrote and where his writing appeared depended on the interaction and collaboration of a number of agents – even if we do not know for certain who those agents were. As E. M. W. Tillyard has observed, Milton 'first broke silence concerning his poetic ambitions' in 1628 at age nineteen when he delivered the annual vacation exercise at Cambridge, a public occasion, which 'argues something very different from the instinct of isolation' (170).

The success of Milton's subsequent trip to the continent exemplifies his sociability. Following the death of his mother in April 1637, the author undertook a fifteen-month Italian journey that brought him in contact with people who continued to influence his writing throughout his life. Accompanied by a servant and armed with letters of introduction from friends such as senior diplomat Sir Henry Wotton and court musician Henry Lawes, Milton was able to put aside his anti-Catholicism and 'at once became the friend of many gentlemen eminent in rank and learning, whose private academies I frequented' (*YP* 4: 614–15). In Italy he was befriended by, among others, the scholar Carlo Dati, the nobleman Giovanni Battista Manso, the theologian Giovanni Diodati (Charles Diodati's uncle), and the poet Antonio Malatesti; he also visited Hugo Grotius in Paris and, very likely, Galileo in Florence. In *Defensio Secunda* Milton describes his Italian trip not in terms of the places or things he saw but in terms of the people he met. In order to establish his credibility and illustrate that 'I have always led a pure and honourable life' (*YP* 4: 611), Milton would naturally have emphasized his distinguished foreign acquaintances. But his praise for

Italian academies exceeds the requirements of the rhetorical occasion; from among his many experiences abroad, he celebrates this one institution, 'which deserves great praise not only for promoting humane studies but also for encouraging friendly intercourse' (*YP* 4: 615–16).

Milton's Italian journey was a manifestation of his social nature complementary to, not in conflict with, the behaviour he exhibited while with his family. In Italian academies he found a public model for what he had already pursued with Diodati, Gil, and his other Cambridge and London acquaintances. Instead of closeting himself away to compose his works, Milton was inspired by and wrote about social occasions; instead of trying to control all aspects of his publications, he developed a method of authorship that was similarly 'social' – that is, he solicited friends' advice while writing his works, shared printed and scribal copies with friends, and depended on members of the book trade in publishing his texts. He even needed his acquaintances to help him distribute his poems. As J. W. Saunders has observed, Milton would later ask friends, such as Andrew Marvell and Henry Oldenburg, to act as his 'postmen' and circulate complimentary copies of his works in England and on the continent (89).

To understand why so many critics have overlooked this social dimension of Milton's works, we need to examine the authorial persona he helped to create during the antiprelatical controversy of the 1640s. In late January 1639 Charles I had declared war against Scotland over its rejection of the Episcopal policies that he wanted to enforce on the Presbyterian Church. Scottish success in defying the King's authority encouraged a resistance of national proportions. Although Milton had already criticized the Episcopal clergy in *Lycidas* – there he describes bishops as worldly-minded shepherds who 'for their bellies sake, / Creep and intrude, and climb into the fold' (lines 114–15) – he now focused his energies more fully on the debate against Episcopacy and wrote five prose tracts during a period of twelve months. Returning from Italy prematurely in 1639, he joined forces with 'Smectymnuus', a group of Presbyterian clerics who defined their collective identity by combining their initials – Stephen Marshall, Edmund Calamy, Thomas Young, Matthew Newcomen, and William Spurstowe. These five men collaborated on a pair of treatises and probably invited Milton to assist them. Young had tutored Milton in Bread Street, and Newcomen and Spurstowe, Milton's contemporaries at Cambridge, would have heard the young author delivering his speech in 1627 at the college's annual vacation exercise.

Ironically, Milton's church-government pamphlets, though produced through a social process, first established the perception of the author as a solitary figure; Milton emerged from the debate against Episcopacy with a

discrete, authorial identity. His first three pamphlets appeared anonymously – *Of Reformation Touching Church-Discipline in England* (May 1641), *Of Prelatical Episcopacy* (June or July 1641), and *Animadversions upon the Remonstrants Defence* (July 1641). However, with the fourth tract, *The Reason of Church-Government Urg'd against Prelaty* (January or February 1642), not only does the title page read 'By Mr. *John Milton*', but the preface to Book 2 addresses Milton's career as a poet. In the middle of the pamphlet, Milton turns away from his argument about the bishops to talk about himself.

The specific author we encounter in *The Reason of Church-Government* is the aloof and avid scholar who has mesmerized modern critics. This persona serves in part as an ethical proof: Milton portrays himself as a bookish young man who has chosen to endure the 'unlearned drudgery' of his Episcopal opponents and is magnanimously sacrificing 'a calme and pleasing solitarynes' (*YP* 1: 821–2). Milton contrasts the dishonest prelates' self-interested motives with his own desire 'to impart and bestow without any gain to himselfe . . . sharp, but saving words' (*YP* 1: 804). He characterizes his opponents as pseudo-intellectuals, 'men whose learning and beleif [*sic*] lies in marginal stuffings' (*YP* 1: 822). He, on the other hand, has been training to become a national poet, 'to be an interpreter & relater of the best and sagest things among mine own Citizens throughout this Iland in the mother dialect' (*YP* 1: 811–12). Whereas he has the use 'but of my left hand' in this present prose controversy, he claims to be 'led by the genial power of nature' to a higher, poetic task (*YP* 1: 808). He announces audaciously – and with uncanny accuracy – 'I might perhaps leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die' (*YP* 1: 810).

In his next prose tract, Milton continued to construct this authorial persona in the process of refuting an ad hominem attack on his character. In January 1642, around the same time that *The Reason of Church-Government* was published, an anonymous author lashed out at the 'grim, lowring, bitter fool' who had written *Animadversions*. Three months later, Milton responded with *An Apology Against a Pamphlet Called A Modest Confutation* (April 1642), again emphasizing his virtue and learning. Here he offers his famous prescription that 'he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought him selfe to bee a true Poem' (*YP* 1: 890). Whether Milton actually lived up to this high standard, we do not know. But in describing his studies and forecasting his accomplishments, he had already begun to draft for us the 'Poem' of his life – and it remains one of the things he left 'written to aftertimes' that critics have refused to let die.

Rather than distracting Milton from his future poetic endeavours, his prose-writing thus complemented them. Milton relied on his participation in the debate against Episcopacy both to forge his individual identity and assist his development as a writer. The experience he gained as a pamphleteer – first during the antiprelatical debate, later during the divorce controversy and as a defender of Commonwealth and regicide – helped him to mature as an author; it enabled him to fulfil the role he casts for himself in *The Reason of Church-Government*.

During the 1640s Milton was also establishing his career as a teacher and at the encouragement of Samuel Hartlib would eventually commit his pedagogical philosophy to print in a small treatise entitled *Of Education* (June 1644). Taking up residence in London after his journey to Italy, Milton began a school with two pupils, his sister's sons, John and Edward Phillips, aged eight and nine. It was also at this time that Milton composed and had published separately *Epitaphium Damonis* (1640), his elegy to his recently deceased friend, Charles Diodati: in the guise of a shepherd, the poet mourns his lost companion and wonders who will now inspire him with conversation and song.

In *Epitaphium Damonis* and *Mansus*, another Latin poem probably composed around 1638–9, Milton continues to discuss his poetic aspirations, specifically raising the possibility of writing a longer work about various British and biblical subjects. Milton was turning his thoughts away from the pastoral mode to a more ambitious genre. From seven pages of his surviving manuscript notes, we know that he was considering an epic about King Arthur or King Alfred, as well as a play about such topics as Abraham, John the Baptist, 'Sodom Burning', 'Moabitides or Phineas', or 'Christus Patiens'. Perhaps most notably, he began outlining ideas for a tragedy to be called 'Adam unparadiz'd' or 'Paradise Lost' (French, 2: 3–4).

Financially, though, even Milton's greatest poetic achievements would never be especially rewarding. During the seventeenth century writers were sometimes paid a small sum for their work, but only when publishers were confident of books selling well. More often authors turned over their manuscripts to printers and received a few complimentary copies; or they subsidized the publication themselves, sometimes with the help of a patron. Milton's contract with Samuel Simmons for the publication of *Paradise Lost* in 1667 remains the earliest surviving formal agreement of its kind in England: Milton received £5 up front and £5 (along with perhaps 200 copies) at the end of the first three impressions. Although these terms were fair by seventeenth-century standards, Milton could hardly support his family on this income. For much of his life he instead lived off the interest from his father's, and subsequently his own, loans and investments.