Chapter 1

Life

We do not know what Milton and Galileo discussed when in 1638 they met outside Florence. Seventy-five and nearly blind, Galileo had been sentenced to prison five years earlier, but his punishment was commuted, and he was living under house arrest in his villa in Arcetri. As Milton would later recall in *Areopagitica*, "There it was that I found and visited the famous *Galileo* grown old, a pris[o]ner to the Inquisition, for thinking in Astronomy otherwise then the Franciscan and Dominican licencers thought" (*CPW* II: 538). Although Milton's interview with the famous physicist and astronomer might surprise readers who think of Galileo as a founder of modern science and instead associate Milton with his ancient poetic forebears, the meeting of these great men hints at Milton's social nature and, as we will see in Chapter 4, points to the inclusiveness of his epic's subject. Certainly the conversation made an impression on the young poet: Galileo is the only contemporary whom Milton mentions by name in *Paradise Lost* (V.262), and his stellar, lunar, and galactic discoveries underlie the epic's astronomy.[1]

The two men would also prove to have much in common. Milton would begin losing his sight within the next four years, and, perhaps more important, would later discover firsthand the consequences of espousing controversial opinions. Milton lived to witness the burning of his books, both in England and on the Continent, and, after the Restoration, he went into hiding, was briefly imprisoned, and narrowly escaped worse punishment. Whereas Galileo's published writings about the motion of the earth upset members of the Catholic Church, Milton's radical ideas about divorce alarmed Episcopal divines, and his support of regicide threatened the foundation of English monarchy. Milton's unfinished theological treatise – in which he argued that the Son was not eternal, insisted on the legality of polygamy, and defended the view that a person's soul dies with the body – he would not have dared publish during the seventeenth century for fear of being put to death.

This chapter provides an overview of Milton's life so as to illustrate the evolution of his career as a poet and polemicist and the development of his sometimes heterodox beliefs and ideas. The assumption is not that an author's

biography should serve as an interpretive key for his works. However, knowing about crucial events from Milton's life and the tumultuous period in which he lived can help us interpret the effects of his circumstances on his various writings.

Too much information?

That we know the exact date and time of Milton's birth – Friday, 9 December 1608, at 6:30 a.m. – is itself revealing. This detail, recorded in Milton's own hand in his family Bible, not only suggests the author's orderly mind and acute self-concern but also indicates the wealth of information that survives about his life and writings.[2] Whereas biographies of Shakespeare occupy single books and require considerable guesswork, modern accounts of Milton's life are voluminous and copiously detailed. The best biographies remain David Masson's seven-volume *The Life of John Milton* (1859–80) and William Riley Parker's more than 1,500-page *Milton: A Biography* (1968; 1996). Admittedly, some significant gaps persist in our knowledge of the author's life – most notably, the obscure circumstances surrounding his first two marriages – but we have scores of personal, church-related, and governmental records as well as manuscript copies of several of his writings. The Trinity College Manuscript, for example, shows how Milton wrote and revised many of his early poems, and Milton's commonplace book records his reading and research from probably the late 1620s until about 1665. Also, because Milton revised and republished various of his poems and prose works, we can sometimes glimpse in print how his thinking developed. Some surviving copies of Milton's seventeenth-century publications even contain apparently authorial, hand-written corrections, reflecting either Milton's dissatisfaction with the printing process or his ideas for late revisions.

Yet, much of what we know about Milton, as with the date and time of his birth, comes from Milton himself, a not entirely reliable source. I do not mean to imply that Milton was especially dishonest, but the details that he preserved about his life often appear allusively within poetic works and thus require cautious interpretation, or he incorporated them rhetorically in polemical prose tracts to emphasize the integrity of his character and motives. When Milton in *An Apology against a Pamphlet* (1642) explains "that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himselfe to bee a true Poem, that is, a composition, and patterne of the best and honourablest things" (*CPW* I: 890), he raises the possibility that he sometimes was writing his life like a poem, and imposing a self-aggrandizing pattern. Years

later, for example, he would suggest in one of his tracts for the government, *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio Secunda* (1654), that he had approached his prose works systematically. He identifies three types of liberty – ecclesiastical, civil, and personal – and then neatly divides the third category into three subjects, suggesting that he devoted a treatise to each one: "the nature of marriage …, the education of the children, and … the existence of freedom to express oneself" (*CPW* IV: 624).

Perhaps the most abiding misperception that Milton helped to foment concerns the mythos of the solitary creator. Again and again in his works, Milton depicts himself as an isolated genius, claiming to have composed *Paradise Lost* "In darkness … / And solitude" (VII.27–28) and even describing his treatises commissioned by the government as acts of individual heroism. He boasts that he defeated the French intellectual Claude Salmasius "in single combat" (*CPW* IV: 556), for example, and interrupts his defense of the English people to defend his own habits and character. Critics have accordingly tended to downplay Milton's early vision of mirthful sociability in *L'Allegro* and instead identify the author with the speaker in *Il Penseroso*, a person who finds inspiration in a solitary nighttime stroll and shuns companionship in favor of "some high lonely tow'r" or a "peaceful hermitage" (lines 86, 168).

The problem with this image of isolation is that it contradicts the other information we have about Milton's life and the provenance of his writings. If Milton's strong authorial voice encourages readers to approach his works in terms of his individual identity, knowledge of the changing cultural and historical circumstances in which he lived suggests that his experiences influenced what he wrote and how he wrote it. Throughout his life Milton was a social writer, engaging directly and indirectly with other people, whether participating in a printed debate about church hierarchy, writing on behalf of the Interregnum government, or composing occasional verses about people whom he met and admired. Even after his political hopes were crushed by the Restoration, Milton remained active, producing three of his greatest poetic works. As he explains in *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642), he valued poetry not as a mode of self-expression but as a means of civic improvement. Among its various functions, he lists first the power "to imbreed and cherish in a great people the seeds of vertu, and publick civility" (*CPW* I: 816). Certainly Milton wrote at times about himself – meditating, for example, on his poetic ability in several of his sonnets – but he understood writing first and foremost as a public act, repeatedly comparing it to preaching (*CPW* I: 816–17, II: 548). If, as he suggests in *Areopagitica*, writing is also a collaborative process, requiring that an author "consults and conferrs with his

judicious friends" (*CPW* II: 532), then part of studying Milton's works should include an attempt to investigate the public context in which his works were written and printed.

Character and early years, 1608–1638

We can begin to appreciate the social nature of Milton's authorship by looking at his earliest days in London. He grew up not far from the madding crowd but in the midst of it; his family's home in Bread Street was in the heart of London, in the wealthy parish of All Hallows (see Figure 1). London was expanding rapidly during the early seventeenth century – its population more than doubled from 200,000 to 500,000 in Milton's lifetime[3] – and this bustling, metropolitan setting must have provided a wide array of experiences and opportunities for the young author. All Hallows was populated mostly by people we would today describe as middle class, prosperous merchants who for the first time were enrolling their sons at Cambridge or Oxford University. In addition to the bakeries on Bread Street and the lively produce market that filled nearby Cheapside, Milton would have grown up close to the center of the English book trade. In late 1620 when Milton began attending St. Paul's school, he would have walked daily past clusters of printers' and booksellers' shops as he made his way back and forth to the east end of the Old St. Paul's Cathedral. Among the other notable early influences on Milton were probably the parish's daily catechism for children (on alternating days for girls and boys) and the two services held on Sundays for the entire parish. Sitting in the congregation, Milton would have often heard Richard Stock, the rector of All Hallows church, vehemently denounce the popish threat and deliver unflinching reproofs of sinful behavior, even confronting the congregation's prestigious members when he thought it necessary.[4]

Milton's family home likely provided the young poet little opportunity for quiet and seclusion. He grew up in the Spread Eagle, a tenement comprising rooms on five floors of a larger house, the White Bear, in which at least seven other tenants had apartments or businesses. Milton lived with his parents, his younger brother Christopher, and his older sister Anne, along with the family's servants and his father's apprentices. Milton's father was a scrivener by trade, something akin today to a combination of public notary, copyist, and moneylender. About Milton's mother, we know comparatively little. Milton remembers her simply as "a woman of purest reputation, celebrated throughout the neighborhood for her acts of charity" (*CPW* IV: 612). A seventeenth-century portrait reveals a strong physical resemblance between mother and son, and

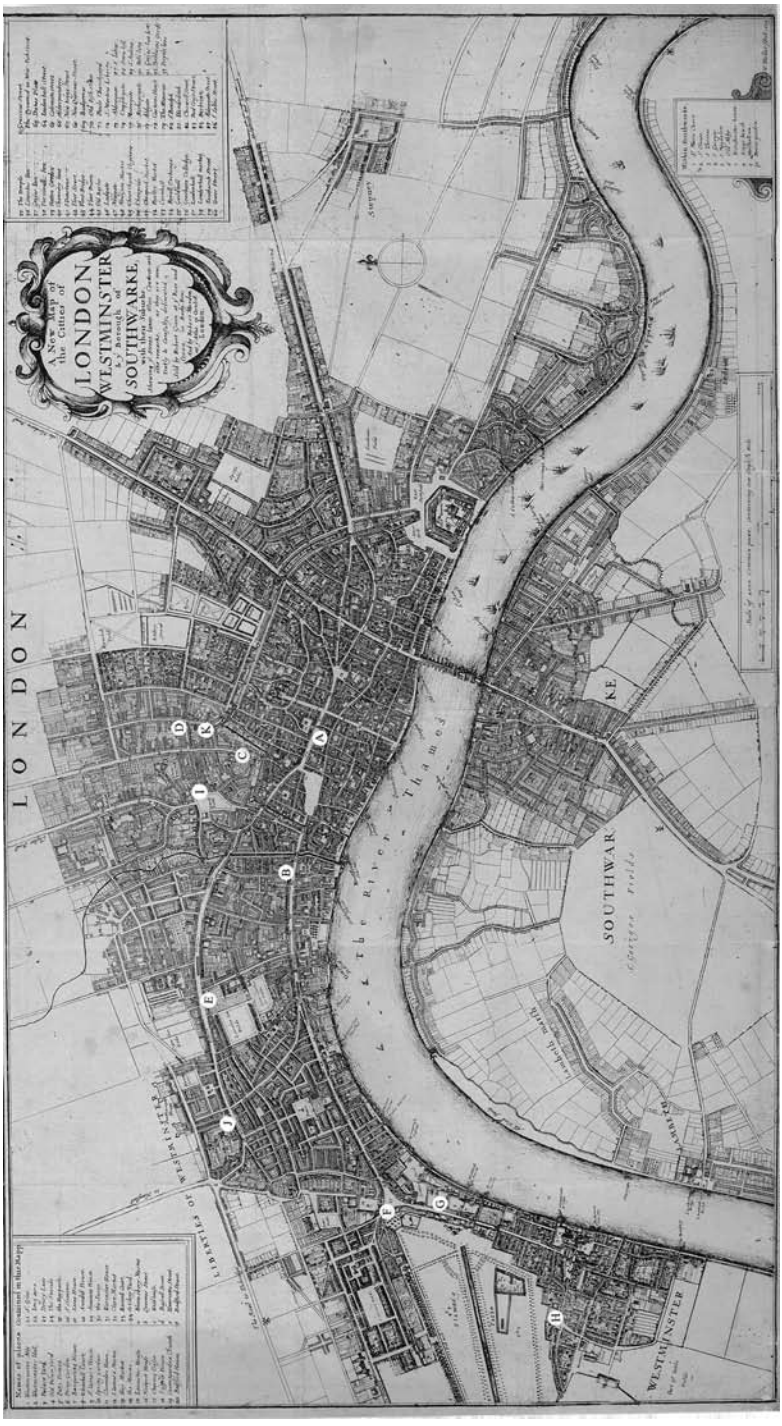
the seventeenth-century biographer John Aubrey adds that Milton might have inherited his failing eyesight from her. Aubrey writes that Milton's "mother had very weake eies, & used spectacles p[re]sently after she was thiry yeares old" (*EL* 5).

By comparison, Milton has much to say in his writings about his father, who achieved some fame in his own right as a musician. Milton's father was invited to contribute to a collection of madrigals published as a tribute to Queen Elizabeth (1601), and he was awarded a gold medal and chain by a Polish prince for one of his longer compositions, probably written in 1611 in honor of the prince's visit to England. In *Ad Patrem*, Milton defends his own enthusiasm for writing poetry by appealing to his father's musical talent:

> Nunc tibi quid mirum, si me genuisse poetam
> Contigerit, charo si tam prope sanguine iuncti
> Cognatas artes, studiumque affine sequamur? (lines 61–63)
>
> (Now, since it is my lot to have been born a poet, why does it seem strange to you that we, who are so closely united by dear blood, should pursue related arts and kindred interests?)

Although we cannot know how seriously Milton intended such defensive gestures or how strenuously his father ever objected to his son's literary ambitions, *Ad Patrem* mostly suggests that Milton senior supported his son's writing. Milton thanks his father for not forcing him to pursue a career in business or law and for helping with his education, specifically attributing to his father his knowledge of Latin, Greek, French, and Italian.[5]

One practical measure that Milton's parents took for their son was hiring private tutors before he began his formal schooling – a somewhat lavish provision more often associated with the sons of nobility than a businessman's child. Probably Milton's earliest tutor was Thomas Young, a staunch Presbyterian who instructed Milton for a period beginning around 1618. Young was one of five divines who later combined their initials into the pseudonym "Smectymnuus" and wrote a pair of treatises protesting the increased role granted bishops (also known as "prelates") within the Episcopal church hierarchy. Perhaps influenced by his friendship with Young, Milton would lend his pen to the Episcopal debate beginning in 1641 and ally himself with the Presbyterians in a series of anti-prelatical pamphlets (see Chapter 3). We might also detect Young's influence in Milton's earliest surviving portrait: it depicts a ten-year-old boy with closely cropped auburn hair, a fashion associated with those who supported Parliament and the Presbyterians (see Figure 2). According to Milton's widow, her late husband's schoolmaster, "a puritan in Essex," had "cutt his haire short."[6]



A	1608–32	On the east side of Bread Street
B	1640	St. Bride's Churchyard near Fleet Street
C	1640–45	Aldergate Street, in St. Botolph's parish
D	Fall 1645 – Fall 1647	Barbican
E	Fall 1647 – 1649	High Holborn, near Lincoln's Inn Fields
F	March–November 1649	Charing Cross, next to the Bull Head tavern
G	1649–51	Scotland Yard, Whitehall
H	December 1651–1660	Petty France in Westminster
I	May–August 1660	Bartholomew Close near West Smithfield
J	1660–61	Holborn, near Red Lion Fields
K	1661–63	Jewin Street (near Red Crosse Street)

Figure 1 Milton's London residences. Wenceslaus Hollar, *A New Map of the Cities of London, Westminster & ye Borough of Southwarke* (1675)

Figure 2 "Portrait of John Milton at the Age of Ten," by Cornelius Janssen van Ceulen

We do not know exactly how long Young continued as Milton's tutor, but their student–teacher relationship must have ended by 1620 when Young traveled to Germany as chaplain for a group of English businessmen. In that same year, Milton most likely enrolled at St. Paul's School where he would have continued to study classical languages and literature. The school's humanist curriculum focused on the linguistic arts – grammar, rhetoric, and logic – along with history, poetry, and moral philosophy. The goal was to produce boys who could write elegant Latin in verse and prose: students were expected to memorize their Latin and Greek grammars as well as their rhetoric textbooks and to gain proficiency through declamations and imitative exercises. While Milton's widow reported that her late husband had already begun writing verses at age ten (*EL* 2), it was the time he spent analyzing, translating, and paraphrasing classical literary works at St. Paul's

that provided him with the indispensable technical preparation he needed to become a great poet.

We cannot pinpoint when Milton graduated from St. Paul's – the Great Fire of 1666 destroyed the school and its records, along with Milton's boyhood home and much of the surrounding parish – but two months after he turned sixteen, on 12 February 1625, he entered Christ's College, Cambridge. He would earn his BA in 1629 and three years later graduate *cum laude* with an MA. With 265 members, Christ's was the third-largest college at Cambridge at that time, while the university as a whole comprised roughly 3,050 students, fellows, and other members.[7] Comparing Milton's experience at Christ's with modern university life is difficult. The university's statutes, though not consistently enforced, contained a set of rigid restrictions, including a nightly curfew at nine or ten, depending on the season; prohibitions against playing cards or dice, except at Christmas; and the expectation that students would speak only Latin, Greek, or Hebrew, except during free time.[8]

At Christ's, Milton would have probably studied Greek and Hebrew along with ethics, logic, and rhetoric as well as some metaphysics and mathematics. Almost certainly he also studied theology and likely became familiar with Reformist works by such recent fellows as William Perkins and William Ames. In particular, Ames's *Marrow of Sacred Divinity* (London, 1642) later served as one of the base texts for Milton's own theological treatise, *De Doctrina Christiana*, and the Ramist logic that Milton studied at Christ's shaped both *De Doctrina* and his *Artis Logicae*. Also studying at Cambridge during Milton's seven years there were the dramatist Thomas Randolph, the poet John Cleveland, and the Neoplatonic philosopher Henry More – none of whom Milton mentions by name in his works but with whom he probably became familiar. Milton also must have known Joseph Mede, the most renowned tutor at Christ's, best known as the author of a millenarian scholarly book, *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627).

Milton apparently became popular among his peers and instructors at Cambridge. He was invited to write and deliver orations at university events, and his nickname, "The Lady of Christ's" – perhaps attributable to his fair features or long hair – rather than a term of derision, seems to have been given him in good humor. Milton pokes fun at it in one of his surviving college speeches and devises a bawdy list of possible explanations: "because my hand has never hardened with gripping the shaft of a plough-handle, or because I have never lain down with someone, supine in the midday sun" ("*quia manus tenendâ stivâ non occaluit, aut quia nunquam ad meridianum Solem supinus jacui septennis bubulcus*").[9] Milton would later recollect that he received at Cambridge "more then ordinary favour and respect … above any of my

equals" (*CPW* I: 884), and his nephew Edward Phillips would similarly recall that Milton "was lov'd and admir'd by the whole University, particularly by the Fellows and most Ingenious Persons of his House" (*EL* 54).

Nevertheless, Milton experienced some difficulty during his first year at Christ's and may have been temporarily suspended for misconduct. The seventeenth-century biographer Aubrey learned from Milton's brother that the poet received "some unkindnesse" from his tutor, William Chappell; Aubrey adds in the margin that Chappell, who had a reputation for both considerable learning and strict discipline, "whip't" Milton (*EL* 10). The evidence for Milton's subsequent suspension derives chiefly from one of his early poems, *Elegia prima*, in which he refers cryptically to his "rough tutor," "forbidden quarters," and "banishment" or "exile" in London (lines 11–20) – all of which could have been his playful way of describing a standard university vacation or could allude to a punishment doled out by Chappell. Whatever the nature of Chappell's "unkindnesse," we know that in 1626 by the start of the Easter term Milton was assigned a new tutor, Nathaniel Tovey. Tovey continued in that role during Milton's remaining time at Cambridge, and five years later he went on to tutor Milton's brother Christopher.

Milton's *Elegia prima* remains perhaps more notable for what it reveals about the young author's habits and character. Addressed to his closest boyhood friend, Charles Diodati, the poem offers a provocative glimpse into Milton's interests: he writes that he enjoys reading, going to the theater, taking walks, and watching girls (he brags that English girls are the most beautiful). We can also begin to appreciate the strong bond that Milton and Diodati forged. The two attended St. Paul's together before Diodati went off to Oxford and Milton enrolled at Cambridge. In addition to this poem and two surviving letters, Milton wrote *Elegia sexta* to Diodati along with Sonnet IV and a Latin pastoral elegy on his friend's early death. Hearing on one occasion that Diodati was visiting London, Milton writes that he rushed "straightway and as if by storm" to meet his boyhood friend ("*confestim & quasi* αὐτοβοεὶ *proripui me ad cellam tuam*," *WJM* XII: 20–21). And in another letter to Diodati, Milton describes his affection for his friend in Neoplatonic terms: Milton tells Diodati, "I cannot help loving people like you. For though I do not know what else God may have decreed for me, this certainly is true: He has instilled into me, if into anyone, a vehement love of the beautiful" (*CPW* I: 326).

Although not all of Milton's friendships were as close as his relationship with Diodati, Milton's enthusiasm for his former schoolfellow contributes to our sense of the author's sociable disposition. The early biographers depict Milton as a good-natured man who, even when he later suffered from painful bouts of gout, "would be chearfull … & sing" (*EL* 5). The German scholar