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**JOHN MILTON**

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*COMUS & LYCIDAS*

EDITED BY

**A. W. VERITY, M.A.**

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## NOTE.

**T**HIS volume is partly a recast of the earlier editions of these poems in the “Pitt Press Series,” and I desire to repeat my acknowledgment of indebtedness to other Editors.

I have also the pleasure to thank the General Editor of the series for many valuable suggestions.

The Indexes were compiled for me.

A. W. V.

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## INTRODUCTION.

### LIFE OF MILTON.

MILTON's life falls into three clearly defined divisions. The first period ends with the poet's return from Italy in 1639; the second at the Restoration in 1660, when release from the fetters of politics enabled him to remind the world that he was a great poet, if not a great controversialist; the third is brought to a close with his death in 1674. The poems given in the present volume date from the first of these periods; but we propose to summarise briefly the main events of all three.

*The three  
 periods in  
 Milton's life.*

John Milton was born on December 9, 1608, in London. He came, in his own words, *ex genere honesto*. A family of Miltons had been settled in Oxfordshire since the reign of Elizabeth. The poet's father had been educated at an Oxford school, possibly as a chorister in one of the Collège choir-schools, and imbibing Anglican sympathies had conformed to the Established Church. For this he was disinherited by his father. He settled in London, following the profession of scrivener. A scrivener combined the occupations of lawyer and law-stationer. It appears to have been a lucrative calling; certainly John Milton (the poet was named after the father) attained to easy circumstances. He married about 1600,

*Born 1608;  
 the poet's  
 father.*

and had six children, of whom several died young. The third child was the poet.

The elder Milton was evidently a man of considerable culture, in particular an accomplished musician, and a composer<sup>1</sup> whose madrigals were deemed worthy of being printed side by side with those of Byrd, Orlando Gibbons and other leading musicians of the time. To him, no doubt, the poet owed the love of music of which we see frequent indications in the poems<sup>2</sup>. Realising, too, that in his son lay the promise and possibility of future greatness, John Milton took the utmost pains to have the boy adequately educated; and the lines *Ad Patrem* show that the ties of affection between father and child were of more than ordinary closeness.

Milton was sent to St Paul's School as a day-scholar about the year 1620. He also had a tutor, *Early Training*. Thomas Young, a Scotchman, who subsequently became Master of Jesus College, Cambridge. More important still, Milton grew up in the stimulating atmosphere of cultured home-life. This was a signal advantage. There are few who realise that the word 'culture' signifies anything very definite or desirable before they pass to the University; for Milton, however, home-life meant, from the first, not only broad interests and refinement, but active encouragement towards literature and study. In 1625 he left St Paul's. Of his extant English poems<sup>3</sup> only one, *On the Death of a Fair Infant*, dates from his school-days; but we are told that he had written much verse, English and Latin.

<sup>1</sup> See the article on him in Grove's *Dictionary of Music*.

<sup>2</sup> Milton was especially fond of the organ; see note on *Il Penseroso*, 161. During his residence at Horton Milton made occasional journeys to London to hear, and obtain instruction in, music.

<sup>3</sup> His paraphrases of *Psalms* cxiv, cxxxvi, scarcely come under this heading. Aubrey says in his quaint *Life of Milton*: "Anno Domini 1619 he was ten yeares old, as by his picture: and was then a poet."



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And his early training had done that which was all-important: it had laid the foundation of the far-ranging knowledge which makes *Paradise Lost* unique for diversity of suggestion and interest.

Milton entered at Christ's College, Cambridge, commencing residence in the Easter term of 1625. Seven years were spent at the *At Cambridge.* University. He took his B.A. degree in 1629, proceeded M.A. in 1632, and in the latter year left Cambridge. His experience of University life had not been wholly fortunate. He was, and felt himself to be, out of sympathy with his surroundings; and whenever in after-years he spoke of Cambridge<sup>1</sup> it was with something of the resentfulness of Gibbon, who complained that the fourteen months which he spent at Oxford were the least profitable part of his life. Milton, in fact, anticipates the laments that we find in the correspondence of Gray, addressed sometimes to Richard West and re-echoed from the banks of the Isis. It may, however,

<sup>1</sup> That Milton's feeling towards the authorities of his own college was not entirely unfriendly would appear from the following sentences written in 1642. He takes, he says, the opportunity to "acknowledge publicly, with all grateful mind, that more than ordinary respect which I found, above many of my equals, at the hands of those courteous and learned men, the Fellows of that college wherein I spent some years; who, at my parting after I had taken two degrees, as the manner is, signified many ways how much better it would content them that I would stay; as by many letters full of kindness and loving respect, both before that time and long after, I was assured of their singular good affection towards me."—*Apology for Smectymnuus*, *P. W.* III. 311. Perhaps Cambridge would have been more congenial to Milton had he been sent to Emmanuel College, long a stronghold of Puritanism. Dr John Preston, then Master of the College, was a noted leader of the Puritan party; see his *Life* by Thomas Ball, printed in 1885 by Mr E. W. Harcourt from the MS. at Newnham Court. (The abbreviation *P. W.* = Milton's Prose Works, Bohn's ed.)

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be fairly assumed that, whether consciously or not, Milton owed a good deal to his University; and it must not be forgotten that the uncomplimentary and oft-quoted allusions to Cambridge date for the most part from the unhappy period when Milton the politician and polemical dogmatist had effectually divorced himself at once from Milton the scholar and Milton the poet. A poet he had proved himself before leaving the University. The short but exquisite ode *At a Solemn Music*, and the *Nativity Hymn* (1629), were already written.

Milton's father had settled<sup>1</sup> at Horton in Buckinghamshire. Thither the son retired in 1632. He had gone to Cambridge with the intention of qualifying for some profession, perhaps the Church<sup>2</sup>. This purpose was soon given up, and when Milton returned to his father's house he seems to have made up his mind that there was no profession which he cared to enter. He would choose the better part of studying and preparing himself, by rigorous self-discipline and application, for the far-off divine event to which his whole life moved.

It was Milton's constant resolve to achieve something

<sup>1</sup> As tenant of the Earl of Bridgewater, according to one account; but probably the tradition arose from Milton's subsequent connection with the Bridgewater family.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Milton's own words, "The Church, to whose service by the intention of my parents and friends I was destined of a child, and in my own resolutions." What kept him from taking orders was not, at first, any difference of belief, but solely his objection to Church discipline and government. "Coming to some maturity of years, and perceiving what tyranny had invaded in the church, that he who would take orders must subscribe slave.....(I) thought it better to prefer a blameless silence before the sacred office of speaking, bought and begun with servitude and forswearing."—*Reason of Church Government*, P. W. II. 482. Milton disliked in particular the episcopal system, and spoke of himself as "Church-outed by the prelates."

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that should vindicate the ways of God to men, something great<sup>1</sup> that should justify his own possession of unique powers—powers of which, with no trace of egotism, he proclaims himself proudly conscious. The feeling finds repeated expression in his prose; it is the guiding-star that shines clear and steadfast even through the mists of politics. He has a mission to fulfil, a purpose to accomplish, no less than the most earnest of religious enthusiasts; and the means whereby this end is to be attained are fourfold: devotion to learning, devotion to religion, ascetic purity of life, and the pursuit of *σπουδαιότης* or “excellent seriousness” of thought.

This period of self-centred isolation lasted from 1632 to 1637. Gibbon tells us among the many wise things contained in that most wise book the *Autobiography*, that every man has two educations: that which he receives from his teachers and that which he owes to himself; the latter being often the more important. During these five years Milton completed his second education; ranging the whole world of classical antiquity and absorbing the classical genius so thoroughly that the ancients were to him what they afterwards became to Landor, what they have perhaps never become to any other English poet in the same degree, even as the very breath of his being; learning, too, all of art, especially music, that contemporary England could furnish; wresting from modern languages and literatures their last secrets; and combining these vast and diverse influences into a splendid equipment of hard-won, well-ordered culture.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the second sonnet; “How soon hath Time.” Ten years later (1641) Milton speaks of the “inward prompting which grows daily upon me, that by labour and intent study, which I take to be my portion in this life, joined with the strong propensity of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to after times, as they should not willingly let it die”—*Reason of Church Government*, P. W. II. 477, 478.

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The world has known many greater scholars in the technical, limited sense than Milton, but few men, if any, who have mastered more things worth mastering in art, letters and scholarship<sup>1</sup>. It says much for the poet that he was sustained through this period of study, pursued *ohne Hast, ohne Rast*, by the full consciousness that all would be crowned by a masterpiece which should add one more testimony to the belief in that God who ordains the fates of men. It says also a very great deal for the father who suffered his son to follow in this manner the path of learning<sup>2</sup>.

True, Milton gave more than one earnest of his future fame. The dates of the early pieces—*L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, Arcades, Comus* and *Lycidas*—are not all certain; but probably each was composed at Horton before 1638. We must speak of them elsewhere. Here we may note that four of them have great autobiographic value as an indirect commentary, written from Milton's coign of seclusion, upon the moral crisis through which English life and thought were passing, the clash between the careless, pleasure-seeking Cavalier world and the deepening austerity of Puritanism. In *L'Allegro* the poet holds the balance almost equal between the two opposing tendencies. In *Il Penseroso* it becomes clear to which side his sympathies are leaning. *Comus* is a covert prophecy of the downfall of the Court-party, while *Lycidas* openly "foretells the ruine" of the Established Church. The latter poem is the final utterance of Milton's lyric genius.

<sup>1</sup> Milton's poems with their undercurrent of perpetual allusion are the best proof of the width of his reading; but interesting supplementary evidence is afforded by the commonplace book discovered in 1874, and printed by the *Camden Society*, 1876. It contains extracts from about 80 different authors whose works Milton had studied.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the poem *Ad Patrem*, 68—72, in which Milton thanks his father for not having forced him to be a merchant or lawyer.

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Here he reaches, in Mr Mark Pattison's words, the high-water mark of English verse; and then—the pity of it—he resigns his place among poets, gives himself up to politics, and for nearly twenty years suffers his lyre to hang mute and rusty in the temple of the Muses.

The composition of *Lycidas* may be assigned to the year 1637. In the spring of the next year Milton started for Italy. He had long made himself a master of Italian, and it was natural that he should seek inspiration in the land where many English poets, from Chaucer to Shelley, have found it. Milton remained abroad some fifteen months. Originally he had intended to include Sicily and Greece in his travels, but news of the troubles in England hastened his return. He was brought face to face with the question whether or not he should bear his part in the coming struggle; whether without self-reproach he could lead any longer this life of learning and indifference to the public weal. He decided as we might have expected that he would decide, though some good critics see cause to regret the decision. Milton puts his position very clearly. "I considered it," he says, "dishonourable to be enjoying myself at my ease in foreign lands, while my countrymen were striking a blow for freedom." And again: "Perceiving that the true way to liberty followed on from these beginnings, inasmuch also as I had so prepared myself from my youth that, above all things, I could not be ignorant what is of Divine and what of human right, I resolved, though I was then meditating certain other matters, to transfer into this struggle all my genius and all the strength of my industry."

The summer of 1639 (July) found Milton back in England. Immediately after his return he wrote the *Epitaphium Damonis*, the beautiful elegy in which he lamented the death of his school friend, Diodati. *Lycidas* was the last

*Travels in Italy; close of the first period in his life.*

*Cause of his return to England.*

*The second period, 1639—1660. Milton abandons poetry.*

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of the English lyrics: the *Epitaphium*, which should be studied in close connection with *Lycidas*, the last of the long Latin poems. Thenceforth, for a long spell, the rest was silence, so far as concerned poetry. The period which for all men represents the strength and maturity of manhood, which in the cases of other poets produces the best and most characteristic work, is with Milton a blank. In twenty years he composed no more than a bare handful of Sonnets, and even some of these are infected by the taint of political *animus*. Other interests filled his thoughts—the question of Church-reform, education, marriage, and, above all, politics.

Milton's first treatise upon the government of the Established Church (*Of Reformation touching Church-Discipline in England*) appeared in 1641. Others followed in quick succession. The abolition of Episcopacy was the watchword of the enemies of the Anglican Church—the great rallying-cry of Puritanism, and no one enforced the point with greater eloquence than Milton. During 1641 and 1642 he wrote five pamphlets on the subject. Meanwhile he was studying the principles of education. On his return from Italy he had undertaken the training of his nephews<sup>1</sup>. This led to consideration of the best educational methods; and in the *Tractate on Education*, 1644, Milton assumed the part of educational theorist.

*Marriage.* In the previous year, May, 1643, he married<sup>2</sup>. The marriage proved, at the time, unfortunate. Its immediate outcome was the pamphlets on

<sup>1</sup> Edward and John Phillips, sons of Milton's only sister. Both subsequently joined the Royalist party. To Edward Phillips we owe a memoir of the poet.

<sup>2</sup> His wife (who was only seventeen) was Mary Powell, eldest daughter of Richard Powell, of Forest Hill, a village some little distance from Oxford. She went to stay with her father in July 1643, and refused to return to Milton; why, it is not certain. She was reconciled to her husband in 1645, bore him four children, and died in 1652, in her twenty-seventh year.

Divorce. Clearly he had little leisure for literature proper.

The finest of Milton's prose works, *Areopagitica*, a plea for the free expression of opinion, was published in 1644. In 1645<sup>1</sup> he edited the first collection of his poems. In 1649 his advocacy of the anti-royalist cause was recognised by the offer of a post under the newly appointed Council of State. His bold vindication of the trial of Charles I., *The Tenure of Kings*, had appeared earlier in the same year. Milton accepted the offer,

*Political  
Pamphlets.  
Appointment  
to Latin Se-  
cretaryship.*

No doubt, the scene in *Paradise Lost* x. 909—946, in which Eve begs forgiveness of Adam, reproduced the poet's personal experience, while many passages in *Samson Agonistes* must have been inspired by the same cause.

<sup>1</sup> i.e. old style. The volume was entered on the registers of the Stationers' Company under the date of October 6th, 1645. It was published on Jan. 2, 1646, with the following title-page:

*"Poems of Mr. John Milton, both English and Latin, compos'd at several times. Printed by his true Copies. The Songs were set in Musick by Mr. Henry Lawes, gentleman of the King's Chappel, and one of His Majesties private Musick.*

—————*Baccare frontem*

*Cingite, ne vati noceat mala lingua futuro.* VIRG. *Ecl.* 7.

*Printed and publish'd according to Order. London, Printed by Ruth Raworth, for Humphrey Moseley, and are to be sold at the signe of the Princes Arms in Pauls Churchyard. 1645."*

From the prefatory Address to the Reader it is clear that the collection was due to the initiative of the publisher. Milton's own feeling is expressed by the motto, where the words "*vati futuro*" show that, as he judged, his great achievement was yet to come. The volume was divided into two parts, the first containing the English, the second the Latin poems. *Comus* was printed at the close of the former, with a separate title-page to mark its importance.

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becoming Latin<sup>1</sup> Secretary to the Committee of Foreign Affairs. There was nothing distasteful about his duties. He drew up the despatches to foreign governments, translated state-papers, and served as interpreter to foreign envoys. Had his duties stopped here his acceptance of the post would, I think, have proved an unqualified gain. It brought him into contact with the

*The advantage of the post.* first men in the state<sup>2</sup>, gave him a practical insight into the working of national affairs and the motives of human action; in a word,

furnished him with that experience of life which is essential to all poets who aspire to be something more than “the idle

*Its disadvantage.* singers of an empty day.” But unfortunately the secretaryship entailed the necessity of defending at every turn the past course of the revolution and the present policy of the Council. Milton, in fact, held a perpetual brief as advocate for his party. Hence the endless and unedifying controversies into which he drifted; controversies which wasted the most precious years of his life, warped, as some critics think, his nature, and eventually cost him his eyesight.

Between 1649 and 1660 Milton produced no less than eleven pamphlets. Several of these arose out of the publication of the famous *Eikon Basilike*. The book was printed in 1649 and created so great an impression in the king’s favour that Milton was asked to reply to it. This he did with

*Milton’s writings on behalf of the Commonwealth.*  
<sup>1</sup> A Latin Secretary was required because the Council scorned, as Edward Phillips says, “to carry on their affairs in the wheedling, lispng jargon of the cringing French.” Milton’s salary was £288, in modern money about £900.

<sup>2</sup> There is no proof that Milton ever had personal intercourse with Cromwell, and Mr Mark Pattison implies that he was altogether neglected by the foremost men of the time. Yet it seems unlikely that the Secretary of the Committee should not have been on friendly terms with some of its members, Vane, for example, and Whitelocke.



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*Eikonoklastes*, introducing the wholly unworthy sneer at Sidney's *Arcadia* and the awkwardly expressed reference to Shakespeare<sup>1</sup>. Controversy of this barren type has the inherent disadvantage that once started it may never end. The Royalists commissioned the Leyden professor, Salmاسius, to prepare a counterblast, the *Defensio Regia*, and this in turn was met by Milton's *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio*, 1651, over the pre-<sup>His blind-</sup>paration of which he lost what little power <sup>ness.</sup> of eyesight remained<sup>2</sup>. Salmاسius retorted, and died before his second collection of scurrilities was issued: Milton was bound to answer, and the *Defensio Secunda*

<sup>1</sup> See *L'Al.* 133—134, note. It would have been more to the point to remind his readers that the imprisoned king must have spent a good many hours over La Calprenède's *Cassandra*.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this was the saddest part of the episode. Milton tells us in the *Defensio Secunda* that his eyesight was injured by excessive study in boyhood: "from the twelfth year of my age I scarce ever left my lessons and went to bed before midnight. This was the first cause of my blindness." Continual reading and writing must have increased the infirmity, and by 1650 the sight of the left eye had gone. He was warned that he must not use the other for book-work. Unfortunately this was just the time when the Commonwealth stood most in need of his services. If Milton had not written the first *Defence* he might have retained his partial vision. The choice lay between private good and public duty. He repeated in 1650 the sacrifice of 1639. "In such a case I could not listen to the physician, not if Æsculapius himself had spoken from his sanctuary; I could not but obey that inward monitor, I know not what, that spoke to me from heaven.....I concluded to employ the little remaining eyesight I was to enjoy in doing this, the greatest service to the common weal it was in my power to render" (*Second Defence*). By the Spring of 1652 Milton was quite blind. He was then in his forty-fourth year. The allusion in *Paradise Lost*, III. 21—26, leaves it doubtful from what disease he suffered, whether cataract or amaurosis. Throughout *Samson Agonistes* there are frequent references to his affliction.

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appeared in 1654. Neither of the combatants gained anything by the dispute; while the subsequent development of the controversy in which Milton crushed the Amsterdam pastor and professor, Morus, goes far to prove the contention of Mr Mark Pattison, that it was an evil day when the poet left his study at Horton to do battle for the Commonwealth amid the vulgar brawls of the market-place:

“Not here, O Apollo,  
 Were haunts meet for thee.”

Fortunately this poetic interregnum in Milton's life was not destined to last much longer. The Restoration came, a blessing in disguise, and in 1660 the ruin of Milton's political party and of his personal hopes, the absolute overthrow of the cause for which he had fought for twenty years, left him free. The author of *Lycidas* could once more become a poet<sup>1</sup>.

Much has been written upon this second period, 1639—1660, and a word may be said here. We saw what parting of the ways confronted Milton on his return from Italy. Did he choose aright? Should he have continued upon the path of learned leisure? There are writers who argue that Milton made a mistake. A poet, they say, should keep clear of political strife: fierce controversy can benefit no man: who touches pitch must expect to be, certainly will be, defiled: Milton sacrificed twenty of the best years of his life, doing work which an underling could have done and which was not

<sup>1</sup> We have not attempted to trace the growth of Milton's political and religious opinions: “Through all these stages,” Mr Mark Pattison writes, “Milton passed in the space of twenty years—Church-Puritan, Presbyterian, Royalist, Independent, Commonwealth's man, Oliverian.” To illustrate this statement would need many pages.

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worth doing: another *Comus* might have been written, a loftier *Lycidas*: that literature should be the poorer by the absence of these possible masterpieces, that the second greatest genius which England has produced should in a way be the "inheritor of unfulfilled renown," is and must be a thing entirely and terribly deplorable. This is the view of the purely literary critic. Mr Mark Pattison writes very much to this effect.

There remains the other side of the question. It may fairly be contended that had Milton elected *The opposite view.* in 1639 to live the scholar's life apart from "the action of men," *Paradise Lost*, as we have it, could never have been written<sup>1</sup>. Knowledge of life and human nature, insight into the problems of men's motives and emotions, grasp of the broader issues of the human tragedy, all these were essential to the author of an epic poem; they could only be obtained through commerce with the world; they would have remained beyond the reach of a recluse. Dryden complained that Milton saw nature through the spectacles of books: we might have had to complain that he saw men through the same medium. Fortunately it is not so: and it is not so because at the age of twenty-two he threw in his fortunes with those of his country; like the diver in Schiller's ballad he took the plunge which was to cost him so dear. The mere man of letters will never move the world. Æschylus fought at Marathon: Shakespeare was practical to the tips of his fingers; a better business man than Goethe there was not within a radius of a hundred miles of Weimar.

This aspect of the question is emphasised by Milton himself. The man, he says, "who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well here- *Milton's own opinion.* after in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem, that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honour-

<sup>1</sup> This is equally true of *Samson Agonistes*.

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ablest things, *not*<sup>1</sup> *presuming to sing high praises of heroic men or famous cities, unless he have within himself the experience and the practice of all that which is praiseworthy.*" Again, in estimating the qualifications which the writer of an epic such as he contemplated should possess, he is careful to include "insight into all seemly and generous arts and *affairs*<sup>2</sup>."

Truth usually lies half-way between extremes: perhaps it does so here. No doubt, Milton did gain very greatly by breathing awhile the larger air of public life, even though that air was often tainted by impurities. No doubt, too, twenty years of unrest and controversy must have left their mark even on Milton. In one of the very few places<sup>3</sup> where he "abides our question," Shakespeare writes:

*How politics  
 may have in-  
 fluenced the  
 poet.*

"O! for my sake do you with Fortune chide,  
 The guilty goddess of my harmful deeds,  
 That did not better for my life provide,  
 Than public means, which public manners breeds:  
 Thence comes it that my name receives a brand;  
 And almost thence my nature is subdu'd  
 To what it works in, like the dyer's hand."

Milton's genius was subdued in this way. If we compare him, the Milton of the great epics and of *Samson Agonistes*, with Homer or Shakespeare—and none but the greatest can be his parallel—we find in him a certain want of humanity, a touch of narrowness. He lacks the large-heartedness, the genial, generous breadth of Shakespeare; the tolerant sympathy with his fellow men that even in *Troilus and Cressida* or *Timon of Athens* is there for those who have eyes wherewith to see it. Milton reflects many of the less gracious aspects of

<sup>1</sup> The italics are not Milton's.

<sup>2</sup> *Reason of Church Government*, P. W. II. 481.

<sup>3</sup> *Sonnet CXI*.

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Puritanism, its intolerance, want of humour, one-sided intensity. He is stern and austere, and it seems natural to assume that this narrowness was to a great extent the price he paid for many years of ceaseless special pleading and dispute. The real misfortune of his life lay in the fact that he fell on evil, angry days when there was no place for moderate men. He had to be one of two things: either a controversialist or a student: there was no *via media*. Probably he chose aright; but we could wish that there had been no necessity to make the choice.

The last part of Milton's life, 1660—1674, passed quietly. At the age of fifty-two he was thrown back upon poetry, and could at length discharge his self-imposed obligation.

*From the Restoration to Milton's death.*

The early poems he had never regarded as a fulfilment of the debt due to his Creator; even when the fire of political strife burned at its hottest Milton never lost sight of the purpose which had been with him since his boyhood. The main difficulty lay in the selection of a suitable subject. He had weighed themes drawn from the Scriptures and others taken from the history of his own country. For a time he was evidently inclined to choose the Arthurian story<sup>1</sup>, the only cycle of events in British history or legend which seems to lend itself naturally to epic treatment. Had he done so we should have lost the *Idylls of the King*. The rough drafts of his projected schemes, now among the Milton

*His great work; the subject and treatment.*

<sup>1</sup> This project is not mentioned among the schemes enumerated in the Trinity mss. But cf. the *Epitaphium Damonis*, 162—178, and the poem *Mansus*, 80—84. See also *Comus*, 826—842, *Lycidas*, 160 (note). Among Milton's prose works was a *History of Britain*, written for the most part about 1649, but not printed till 1670. In it he used the materials collected for his abandoned epic on the story of King Arthur.

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MSS. at Trinity College<sup>1</sup>, shew that exactly ninety-nine possible themes occupied his thoughts from time to time; but even as early as 1641 the story of the lost Paradise began to assume prominence. Still, even when the subject was definitely chosen, the question of its treatment—dramatic or epic—remained. Milton contemplated the former. He even commenced work upon a drama of which Satan's address to the sun in the fourth book of *Paradise Lost*<sup>2</sup> formed the exordium. These lines were written about 1642. Milton recited them to his nephew Phillips at the time of their composition. Possibly, had Milton not been distracted and diverted from poetry by political and other interests, he might from 1642 onwards have continued this drama, and thus produced a dramatic masterpiece akin to *Samson Agonistes*. As things fell out, the scheme was dropped, and never taken up again. When he finally addressed himself to the composition of *Paradise Lost* he had decided in favour of the epic or narrative form.

Following Aubrey (from Aubrey and Phillips most of our information concerning Milton is derived) we may assume that Milton began to write *Paradise Lost* about 1658. He worked continuously at the epic for some five years. It was finished in 1663, the year of his third<sup>3</sup> marriage. Two more years, however,

<sup>1</sup> They include the original drafts of *Arcades*, *Comus*, *Lycidas*, and some of the minor poems, together with Milton's notes on the design of the long poem he meditated composing, and other less important papers. The MSS. were presented to Trinity by a former member of the college, Sir Henry Newton Puckering, who died in 1700. It is not known how they originally came into his possession.

<sup>2</sup> Bk. iv. ll. 32 *et seq.*

<sup>3</sup> Milton's second marriage took place in the autumn of 1656, i.e. after he had become blind. His wife died in February, 1658. Cf. the *Sonnet*, "Methought I saw my late espoused

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were spent in the necessary revision, and in 1665 Milton placed the completed poem in the hands of his friend Thomas Ellwood<sup>1</sup>. In 1667 *Paradise Lost* was issued from the press<sup>2</sup>. Milton received £5. Before his death he was paid a second instalment, £5. Six editions of the poem had been published by the close of the century.

When Ellwood returned the MS. of *Paradise Lost* to Milton he remarked: "Thou hast said much here of *Paradise Lost*, but what hast thou to say of *Paradise found*?" Possibly we owe *Paradise Regained* to these chance words; or the poem, forming as it does a natural pendant to its predecessor, may have been included in Milton's original design. In any case he must have commenced the second epic about the year 1665. *Samson Agonistes* appears to have been written a little later. The two poems were published together in 1671.

In giving this bare summary of facts it has not been saint," the pathos of which is heightened by the fact that he had never seen her.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the account given in Ellwood's *Autobiography*: "after some common discourses had passed between us, he called for a manuscript of his; which, being brought, he delivered to me, bidding me take it home with me and read it at my leisure, and, when I had so done, return it to him with my judgment thereupon. When I came home, and had set myself to read it, I found it was that excellent poem which he intituled *Paradise Lost*."

<sup>2</sup> The delay was due to external circumstances. Milton had been forced by the Plague to leave London, settling for a time at Chalfont St Giles in Buckinghamshire, where Ellwood had taken a cottage for him. On his return to London, after "the sickness was over, and the city well cleansed," the Great Fire threw everything into disorder; and there was some little difficulty over the licensing of the poem. For these reasons the publication of *Paradise Lost* was delayed till the autumn of 1667 (Masson).

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our purpose to offer any criticism upon the poems. It would take too much space to show why *Samson Agonistes* is in subject-matter the poet's threnody over the fallen form of Puritanism, and in style the most perfectly classical poem in English literature; or again, why some great writers (among them Coleridge and Wordsworth) have pronounced *Paradise Regained* to be in point of artistic execution the most consummate of Milton's works—a judgment which would have pleased the author himself since, according to Phillips, he could never endure to hear *Paradise Regained* "censured to be much inferior to *Paradise Lost*." The latter speaks for itself in the rolling splendour of those harmonies which Tennyson has celebrated and alone in his time equalled.

In 1673 Milton brought out a reprint of the 1645 edition of his *Poems*, adding most of the *Close of Milton's life.* sonnets<sup>1</sup> written in the interval. The last four years of his life were devoted to prose works of no

<sup>1</sup> The number of Milton's sonnets is twenty-three (if we exclude the piece on "The New Forcers of Conscience"), five of which were written in Italian, probably during the time of his travels in Italy, 1638—9. Ten sonnets were printed in the edition of 1645, the last of them being that entitled (from the *Cambridge MS.*) "To the Lady Margaret Ley." The remaining thirteen were composed between 1645 and 1658. The concluding sonnet, therefore (to the memory of Milton's second wife), immediately preceded his commencement of *Paradise Lost*. Four of these poems (xv. xvi. xvii. xxii.) could not, on account of their political tone, be included in the edition of 1673. They were first published by Edward Phillips at the end of his memoir of Milton, 1694. The sonnet on the "Massacre in Piedmont" is usually considered the finest of the collection, of which the late Rector of Lincoln College edited a well-known edition, 1883. The sonnet inscribed with a diamond on a window pane in the cottage at Chalfont where the poet stayed in 1665 is (in the judgment of a good critic) Miltonic, if not Milton's (*Garnett's Life of Milton*, p. 175).



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particular interest to us<sup>1</sup>. He continued to live in London. His third marriage had proved happy, and he enjoyed something of the renown which was rightly his. Various well-known men used to visit him—notably Dryden<sup>2</sup>, who on one of his visits asked and received permission to dramatise *Paradise Lost*.

Milton died in 1674, November 8th. He was buried in St Giles's Church, Cripplegate. When we think of him we have to think of a man who lived a life of very singular purity and devotion to duty; who for what he conceived to be his country's good sacrificed—and no one can well estimate the sacrifice—during twenty years the aim that was nearest to his heart and best suited to his genius; who, however, eventually realised his desire of writing a great work *in gloriam Dei*.

<sup>1</sup> The treatise on *Christian Doctrine* is valuable as throwing much light on the theological views expressed in the two epic poems and *Samson Agonistes*.

<sup>2</sup> The lines by Dryden which were printed beneath the portrait of Milton in Tonson's folio edition of *Paradise Lost* published in 1688 are too familiar to need quotation; but it is worth noting that the younger poet had in Milton's lifetime described the great epic as "one of the most noble, and most sublime poems which either this age or nation has produced" (prefatory essay to *The State of Innocence*, 1674). Further, tradition assigned to Dryden (a Roman Catholic and a Royalist) the remark, "this fellow (Milton) cuts us all out and the ancients too."

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INTRODUCTION.

## COMUS.

*Comus* was probably written in the spring of 1634. There can be no doubt that its composition was due to Milton's intimate friend Henry Lawes, the musician. Among Lawes's pupils were the family of the Earl of

Bridgewater, son-in-law of the Countess of Derby, in whose honour *Arcades* was written.

*Why written, and when.* In July 1631 the Earl of Bridgewater was made Lord-Lieutenant of the counties on the Welsh border and of North and South Wales—a viceregal post similar to the Lord-Lieutenancy of Ireland. For some reason the Earl's formal entry on his duties was delayed till the autumn of 1634. To celebrate the event great festivities were held at his official residence, Ludlow Castle. The first performance of *Comus* was part of these festivities. It took place on Michaelmas night, 1634. Doubtless Lawes, as music-master to the Earl's family, and as a practised writer of Masque-music, had been asked to undertake the provision of an entertainment suitable to the occasion, and had applied to Milton for help. With the Puritan Milton of later years, who in *Paradise Lost*, IV. 764, decried "mixed dance or wanton masque," the petition would have fared ill. But at this time there could be nothing distasteful in it. Milton showed himself in *L'Allegro* friendly to the stage, admitting "masque and antique pageantry" among the legitimate delights that Mirth might offer. Further, there was the desire to do a service to his friend Lawes. Milton accepted the commission, and *Comus* was the outcome.

*Date of "Comus."* Probably he wrote the piece early in 1634. It had to be ready by the autumn; and time would be required for the setting of the music, and for all the preparations incidental to the representation of an unusually long Masque. The spring

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therefore of 1634 may be received with some confidence as the date of the composition of *Comus*.

Whether the play was successful at its representation we do not know. Many of Lawes's friends evidently appreciated it. Some were present in the Hall at Ludlow Castle on that September evening; others, perhaps, heard the songs afterwards sung by Lawes himself or his pupils. They realised that there was in England a poet of rare promise and exquisite performance. Copies of *Comus* were asked for; it became "much desired<sup>1</sup>." At last, to save himself the trouble of making these transcripts, Lawes published an edition of *Comus*, probably from the MS. which had been used as the acting-version. This, the first edition of *Comus*, was issued in 1637. The title-page describes the poem as *The first edition of "Comus."* "A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634, on Michaelmasse Night, before the Right Honourable John, Earle of Bridgewater, Viscount Brackley, Lord President of Wales, and one of his Majestie's most honourable Privy Counsell.

*'Eheu quid volui misero mihi! floribus Austrum  
 Perditus—'*

It will be observed that Milton's name is omitted. The motto, however (from Vergil, *Eclogue*, II. 58, 59), shows that his consent to the publication had been obtained: "Alas! what have I been about in my folly! On my flowers I have let in the sirocco (i.e. the hot south-east wind), infatuate as I am." The last words imply that Milton had some doubt as to the expediency of printing the volume. Had Lawes issued the imprint against the wishes of Milton, the motto chosen would have been pointless. It reminds us of the reluctance to break his silence "before the mellowing year" which he expressed at the beginning of *Lycidas* in that same year,

<sup>1</sup> See p. 3.

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1637. That at least one competent and discerning critic was ready to welcome the new voice in English verse we may judge from Sir Henry Wotton's complimentary letter to Milton<sup>1</sup>.

Editions of Milton's minor poems appeared in 1645 and 1673. *Comus*, of course, was printed in each. In neither, however, did he describe the poem by the name it has long borne. The title in the 1645 edition reads thus: "A Mask of the Same Author, Presented at Ludlow Castle, 1634, before the Earl of Bridgewater, then President of Wales: Anno Dom. 1645." The title of the later edition is almost identical. A more definite designation being desirable, the Masque was named *Comus* after its chief character.

The basis of the text of *Comus* is supplied by the three above-mentioned editions—that of Lawes, 1637, and those of Milton, 1645 and 1673. Milton's original draft of the poem is among the MSS.<sup>2</sup> at Cambridge; and the Bridgewater manuscript, supposed to be the stage-copy from which the actors learned their parts, and believed to be in Lawes's handwriting, also survives. All the differences between these five authorities—on the whole, not inconsiderable differences—we have not attempted to record. A careful comparison of them was given by Todd, and it is instructive to note the unerring instinct with which Milton, like Tennyson, always corrected his work for the better. Perhaps the last of the editions published during Milton's life has the most weight. It gives us *Comus*, not as the Masque originally left Milton's hands—for that we must turn to the Cambridge MS.—but in the finally revised form which he wished it to assume. There is a single passage where one is fain to believe that the Cambridge manuscript is right, and the printed copies

<sup>1</sup> See p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *i.e.* the Milton MSS. at Trinity College; see p. xxii.

wrong. This is line 553. Milton's blindness necessarily introduces a slight uncertainty as to the text of his poems published in the latter part of his life.

Such, in brief, is the external history of *Comus*. Something must be said about the poem itself—the sources from which Milton drew, the undercurrent of idea that runs throughout, the dramatic value of the Masque, its ethical and literary qualities.

In lines 43—45 the Attendant Spirit says :

“I will tell you now  
 What never yet was heard in tale or song,  
 From old or modern bard, in hall or bower.”

*The sources  
of “Comus.”*

This claim to absolute originality must not be pressed. Milton was indebted in *Comus*, in some measure, to previous writers. We shall best be able to estimate the debt if we split up the Masque into its chief component parts.

There is (1) the main story : that of the sister lost in a wood, entrapped by a magician, and rescued by her brothers ; with the attendant incidents. This Milton owed, it is almost certain, to the *Old Wives' Tale* (1595) of George Peele, the Elizabethan poet (1558—1598). Warton summarised thus the points of contact between *Comus* and the *Old Wives' Tale* : “This curious piece (i.e. Peele's play) exhibits, among other parallel incidents, two Brothers wandering in quest of their Sister, whom an Enchanter had imprisoned. This magician had learned his art from his mother Meroe, as *Comus* had been instructed by his mother Circe. The Brothers call out the Lady's name, and Echo replies<sup>1</sup>. The Enchanter had given her a potion which suspends the power of reason, and superinduces oblivion of herself. The Brothers afterwards meet with an Old Man, who is also skilled in magic ; and by listening to his soothsayings,

<sup>1</sup> In *Comus* it is the Lady who invokes the Echo.

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## INTRODUCTION.

they recover their lost Sister. But not till the Enchanter's wreath has been torn from his head, his sword wrested from his hand, a glass broken, and a light extinguished."

Warton's abstract of the *Old Wives' Tale* somewhat accentuates the resemblance. It does not strike us quite so forcibly when we read Peele's work. Still the similarity is there, and Milton's indebtedness to Peele is universally admitted.

The popular tradition, still extant, as to the genesis of

*The traditional account of the origin of "Comus."*

*Comus* must also be mentioned. This was to the effect that the young Lady Alice Egerton and her two brothers, Viscount Brackley and Mr Thomas Egerton, were actually overtaken

by nightfall in Haywood Forest, near Ludlow: they were returning to the castle from a visit to their relatives, the Egertons, in Herefordshire, and the sister was separated from her brothers. If this ever took place and news of it reached Milton's ears, then he simply dramatised the episode; though part of his debt to Peele, viz. the introduction of the magician, would still remain. But it seems more probable that the legend, which cannot be traced further back than the last century, grew out of the Masque.

(2) The chief character of the piece, *Comus*, introduces another element in the story. He is in all essentials the creation of Milton. In classical

*The character of Comus, the magician.*

Greek κῶμος signifies 'revel' or 'revelling-band.' The word κῶμος was specially used

of the band of revellers<sup>1</sup> at the vintage festivals held in honour of Dionysus the god of wine (=the Roman god Bacchus). Thence naturally arose the personification *Comus*, i.e. revelling or sensual pleasure regarded as a

<sup>1</sup> The Cambridge MS of *Comus* has the stage-direction "intrans κωμῶστρον" ('they enter in revelling fashion') at line 93. And in the list of possible subjects of Milton's great poem is the entry "*Comazontes*, or The Benjaminites, or The Rioters," with references to *Judges* xix, xx, xxi.