

John Milton: An Appraisal of His Life and Poetry

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Abstract:

John Milton (1608-1674) was the greatest and most influential English poet after Shakespeare. In the seventeenth-century English literature, he was a dedicated writer with lofty conception of his vocation who was profoundly affected by the events of his time. The great debate on religion and politics which divided the English nation in the middle of the seventeenth century played a major role in the determination of the course of Milton's career and the shape of his literary ambitions. He started his poetic career and decided to write an epic fairly early in his life. His poetry shows the influence of both the movements of the Renaissance and the Reformation. His childhood was spent at a time when the Renaissance was in the ascendancy, his youth witnessed the rise of Puritanism and his old age saw the consummation of the Puritan ideals. In his poetry he fused the classical heritage of the Renaissance with the Christian spirit of the Reformation. Although poetry for him was a spiritual vocation divinely inspired by a religious muse yet his religious sensibility was not divorced from his political sensibility, the consequence of which was inevitably a strongly English nationalistic sensibility which he worked out in both humanist and Protestant-religious terms in his poetry. He was a superb poetic artist whose unique poetry is conspicuous for classicism, Puritanism, idealism, sublimity, majesty and musicality. The poetry of eighteenth century both classical and romantic was influenced by Milton and among the nineteenth-century poets Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelly and Yeats were influenced by Milton.

Key Words: Religion, Politics, Epic, Renaissance, Reformation, Classicism, Puritanism.

A. Milton's Life

John Milton the influential English poet and essayist was born on December 9, 1608 to John Milton (1562-1647) and his wife Sara Jeffrey (1572-1637) in Bread Street, Cheapside near St. Paul's Cathedral, London, about eight years before Shakespeare's death. He was baptized at the Parish church All Hallows Bread Street, on December 20, 1608. His father who was also named John Milton was a scrivener by profession and an accomplished musician. Poet

Milton's paternal grandfather Richard Milton was a staunch Roman catholic, who disinherited and expelled his son John Milton, the poet's father from the family home in Oxfordshire for his embracing Protestantism, the second largest form of Christianity after Catholic Church denying the universal authority of the Pope and affirming the Reformation principles of justification of faith alone, the priesthood of all believers and the primacy of the Bible as the only source of revealed truth. From Oxfordshire John Milton senior moved to London around 1583 and there he established himself successfully as a scrivener. Around 1600 he married Sara Jeffrey, the daughter of a prosperous tailor Paul Jeffrey. The couple had six children among whom only three survived infancy-Anne Milton, John Milton and Christopher Milton. As John Milton senior was a prosperous scrivener, he took utmost pains to have his children adequately educated. He employed several tutors to supplement his eldest son John Milton's formal education. One of his influential tutors was Thomas Young, a Scottish Presbyterian minister and theologian who tutored Milton from 1618 to 1622. Thomas Young was an eminent Puritan minister who influenced his gifted student John Milton in religion and politics and became the inspirer of much of his Puritan sympathies. It was Milton's Parish priest Richard Stock, a Puritan and anti-catholic who first influenced him when he attended the Parish church All Hallows Bread Street, London. John Milton also led a rather pampered life at home where he enjoyed the great advantage of growing up in the stimulating atmosphere of a cultured home-life and active encouragement towards self-development and self-realisation.

In 1620, John Milton senior enrolled his son John Milton at St. Paul's School, London, a prestigious English public school attached to St. Paul's Cathedral, London. The founder of St. Paul's School John Colet who was also Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral and a friend of Renaissance humanists like Erasmus and Sir Thomas More, had prescribed as part of the school curriculum the teaching of classical languages of Latin and Greece, the study of theology and philosophy and the beliefs and teachings of Christian thought the influence of which is directly traceable in John Milton's lofty poems and may have inspired his choice of sacred themes for his poems. At St. Paul's School, Milton followed the regular curriculum of Latin, Greek and Hebrew but he also learnt several modern languages from private tutors at home and acquired proficiency in them, especially Italian in which he composed some sonnets as well.

In 1625, Milton joined Christ's College Cambridge with the intention of pursuing a career as a minister. As he was not pleased with the medieval scholastic curriculum that still existed at Christ's College and voiced his displeasure in his own Latin oratorical exercises, the displeasure caused him to become involved in frequent disputes with his teachers, including some with his tutor William Chappel. In 1626 either because of this dispute or because of some other minor infraction, he was rusticated from the college for a brief period. During this period of rustication he composed his first elegy, *Elegia prima ad Carolum Diodatum*, a Latin verse letter called elegy because of its elegiac metre, at his father's house in London, in reply to a letter from Charles Diodati who was his schoolmate and closest friend until his death in 1638. In this letter, Milton explains that he is in London, his native city and is very happy to be there and that he has no interest in returning to Cambridge. He also complains that Cambridge is a bleak place, a place without trees and not in any way conducive to poetry or poetic temperament and that he cannot tolerate the threats of a hectoring tutor or the punitive measures which are galling to an independent spirit. He also informs his friend that at his father's house in London he devotes himself to poetry and literature which are his true aim and visits some park-land planted with elm trees where he sees visions of beauty that stir his young and susceptible heart and that he enjoys his unexpected holiday by reading, attending the theatre, watching London, the world-centre of beauty and love and doing many other things of youthful interest. This elegiac Latin verse of Milton shows that he was steeped in the roman poet Ovid whose style he could reproduce with uncanny skill. He was later reinstated under another tutor, Nathaniel Tovey and wrote many Latin poems in 1626 and 1627 at Cambridge. Milton was also an accomplished writer of Italian sonnets. In 1626 he wrote some Italian sonnets which show him as the lover, in Petrarchan style, of a foreign lady called Emilia. He was also well taught in the Classics, for his command of Latin vocabulary, of Latin idioms and phrases, of the hexameter and elegiac metres and of mythology is uniquely competent and masterful as one can judge from the Latin poems he wrote partly as academic exercises and partly as genuine pieces of self-expression at Cambridge.

In March 1629, Milton received his Bachelor of Arts degree and subsequently his Master of Arts degree in July 1632. At Christ's College Cambridge, he was nicknamed "the Lady of Christ's College" because of his fair complexion, delicate features and auburn hair. He was a handsome youth who, by his own account was throughout his younger days taken

up by the sensuality of Ovidian and other Roman poetry and was himself drawn to a life of sensuality which he forswore in the pursuit of the higher ambition of becoming an epic poet. On his leaving Cambridge, it was assumed that he would join the Church but he rejected this assumption outright due to the tyranny and the corrupt state of the Church of England and due to his Puritan inclinations which caused him to dislike the hierarchy of the established Church and its insistence on uniformity of worship. On taking his Master of Arts degree in 1632, he not only abandoned his intention of entering the Church but also did not adopt any profession as he had already made up his mind to prepare for a poetic career and be a great poet. He joined his parents in July 1632, first at Hammersmith and then at Horton, a small village in Buckinghamshire, some seventeen miles from London, where his father had withdrawn from business. At Horton, he stayed with his parents for six years until 1638, for preparing himself for poetry. In his Latin *The Second Defence of the English People* (1654), Milton writes of his early literary interests which he pursued with his father's encouragement, "I was born in London of an honest family;.....My father destined me from a child to the pursuits of literature; and my appetite for knowledge was so voracious that from twelve years of age, I hardly ever left my studies, or went to bed before midnight." At Horton, Milton enjoyed an interval of uninterrupted leisure which he entirely devoted to the deep study of Greek and Latin classics. He also read extensively both ancient and modern works of theology, philosophy, history, literature, politics, astronomy, mathematics and music- a liberal scholarship that was unavailable to him in Cambridge. In 1634, Milton wrote a poem in Latin titled 'Ad Patrem' ("To Father"), in which he praises his father and expresses gratitude to him for his generous support and also defends the career he had chosen. Following his mother's death in 1637, a year later Milton set out on a Continental tour to visit distinguished men of letters and absorb the atmosphere of Mediterranean culture for his poetic vocation. He spent two months in Florence, Italy where he demonstrated his skill as a Latin poet before one of the important literary societies there- one of the "private academies" as Milton called them, in which Italy at that time abounded, where literary men met for readings and conversation. After about fifteen months, he returned to England at the news of growing civil and political strife at home and settled down in London where he tutored his two orphaned nephews, Edward Philips and John Philips and other pupils. Milton writes in his *Second Defence* (1654), "when I was preparing to pass over into Sicily and Greece, the melancholy intelligence I received of the civil commotions in England made me alter my

purpose, for I thought it base to be travelling for amusement abroad, while my fellow-citizens were fighting for liberty at home.” Immediately after his return to England, he wrote the *Epitaphium Damonis*, the Latin elegy in which he lamented the death of his school friend Charles Diodati who had died in 1638.

In July 1642, Milton married seventeen-year old Mary Powell, the young daughter of a royalist squire of Oxfordshire but the marriage proved the most unhappy one and six weeks after the marriage Mary, half of Milton’s age ,went back to her family, refusing to return to Milton. In 1643, Milton wrote the pamphlet *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* which was the result of his disastrous marriage to Mary Powell. In this pamphlet Milton argued that marriage was meant to be a perfect companionship spiritual, intellectual and physical, and if through well-meaning judgement it turned out to be something very different, release should be made possible. Milton’s defense of divorce provoked much opposition which led him to write three further pamphlets in 1644 and 1645, in more controversial vein. In 1645, Mary and Milton were reunited by friends and in the same year the first collection of his poems was published. In 1649, Milton was appointed Latin secretary to the newly formed Council of State after the establishment of the Commonwealth by Oliver Cromwell in the same year. In 1652, Milton’s wife Mary died three days after the birth of their third daughter. By this time his eyesight was failing which turned to complete blindness by the end of 1652, the same year his wife died. In 1656, he married Catherine Woodcock, then aged 28, who died in 1658, having given birth to a daughter who survived only a few months. With the restoration of monarchy in England in 1660, Milton’s life was in danger and he had to go into hiding for some months but the passage of *An Act of Free and General Pardon, Indemnity, and Oblivion (1660)* by the Parliament of England, granting clemency to the supporters of the Commonwealth made it safe for him to emerge, but even then the poet Andrew Marvell and the playwright William Davenant interceded on his behalf and saved his life. Now again he returned to poetry and set about the composition of the epic poem *Paradise Lost*, a sketch of Book iv of which he had shown his nephews as early as 1642. In 1663, he married his third wife Elizabeth Mynshull who survived him by more than fifty years, and moved to what is now Bunhill Row, where he spent the remaining years of his life. His *Paradise Lost* is said by John Aubrey to have been finished in 1663 but the agreement for his copyright was not signed until 1667. His *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* were

published in 1671. In 1673 appeared a second edition of his poems ,originally published in 1645. On November 8,1674, John Milton died of gout associated with the failure of kidneys, at the age of 65 and was buried beside his father in St. Giles, Cripplegate.

B. The Religious and Political Turmoil of the Age of Milton

The age of Milton is also called the age of Puritanism as Puritanism, a religious reform movement of a group of English Protestants, that arose within the Church of England in the late 16th century, to ‘purify’ it from its various catholic practices, emerged as a great controlling moral and social force in England. The Renaissance which exercised immense influence on the Elizabethan literature, was essentially pagan and sensuous. As it did not concern the moral nature of man, it brought little relief for the common masses from the despotism of rulers and did nothing for their religious, political and social emancipation. W.J. Long writes, “The Puritan movement may be regarded a second and greater Renaissance, a rebirth of the moral nature of man following the intellectual awakening of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.” Thus the Puritan movement was the greatest movement for the moral and political reform. It aimed at religious liberty for all so that people may be free to worship according to their conscience. It also aimed at full civil liberty for all unhampered by the state. In the course of time, “Puritanism became a great national movement. It included English churchmen as well as extreme separatists, Calvinists, Covenanters, Catholic noblemen- all bound together in resistance to the despotism in Church and State, and with a passion for liberty and righteousness such as the world has never since seen.” writes W.J. long.

In 1642, King Charles-I rejected Parliament’s Nineteen Propositions demanding more powers and substantial curbs in the royal power, it deteriorated the relationship between Charles-I and the members of the Parliament in which the Puritans had a majority and led to outbreak of Civil War (1642-1651) between the supporters of the king known as Cavaliers or Royalists and the supporters of Parliament who were known as ‘Roundheads’ from their custom of wearing their hair cut short. Under the command of Oliver Cromwell and Thomas

Fairfax, The New Model Army of veteran soldiers with Puritan religious beliefs, formed by the Parliamentarians in 1645, successfully gained superiority eventually leading to the capture and subsequent trial, conviction and execution of Charles-I for high treason in 1649. England was declared as a 'republic' named 'the Commonwealth'. The mistrust and antagonism amongst the members of the Parliament eventually led to Cromwell's use of his army to disband the Parliament on charges of corruption. He then took over direct rule of England, Ireland and Scotland the as Lord Protector of the realm in 1653, ruling till his death in 1658. During this period of dominance of Puritans, John Milton deeply engaged with and participated in the major political, religious and social issues of the time with a weighty erudition. Between 1641 and 1645, he wrote various trenchantly argued tracts on Church reform, divorce, and censorship, that had a great impact on the debates of the day. In this period of political upheavals he almost suspended his poetic ambitions in order to serve the Puritan cause through his prose. Though he wrote seventeen soul-animating sonnets from 1645 to 1658, ranging in subject from the deeply personal to the political, yet by 1660, the culmination of civil wars in England, he had written at least eighteen major prose works defending the Puritan rebellion and attacking its enemies, including some supporting the regicide of Charles-I.

As a Protestant, Milton had supported the Presbyterians in the Parliament but when in 1643, the Parliament, dominated by the Presbyterian party, who were anxious to silence opposition views, passed the *Ordinance for the Regulating of Printing* requiring all authors to have a license approved by an official censor before publishing their work, he retorted to this ordinance with the greatest of all his tracts *Speech of Mr. John Milton for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, to the Parliament of England* (1644), a classic defense of the liberty of the press. In the same year, he also published his little treatise *Of Education*, a typically Renaissance humanist text on the ideal Christian education for young boys.

After the execution of Charles-I, Milton published *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649) in which he argued that a people 'free by nature' had a right to depose and punish tyrants and also attacked the Presbyterians, whose belief in church discipline and state authority posed in his view a growing threat to freedom. After he was appointed Latin secretary to the newly formed Council of State in 1649, he produced no less than eleven pamphlets upto 1660. Even on the eve of the restoration of monarchy in England, Milton

boldly published his political pamphlet *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* (1660), his last-minute attempt to defend the 'Good old Cause' of republicanism and to halt the growing tide of Royalism .

C. Milton's Poetry

John Milton started his poetic career fairly early in his life. The young Milton began his poetic career with verse paraphrases of Psalms and the Latin elegies of Ovid-the Christian and the Humanist each producing his own kind of verse. In 1624, at the age of 15 and in his final year at St. Paul's School, he paraphrased Psalms 114 and 136 from Hebrew into English verse in heroic couplets (rhymed iambic pentameter). These two English verse paraphrases of the two Psalms are the earliest available poetic pieces from his pre-Cambridge verse. They show the poetic promise of Milton in his teen age, which he fulfilled in his later years. Milton also wrote a lot of Latin poetry from 1625 when at the age of sixteen he joined Christ's College ,Cambridge, to 1639 when he came back to England after the fifteen-month European tour. His Latin poems consist of some long and some very short pieces in elegiac couplets, amounting to seven hundred and twenty verses in all, which were first published in 1645 in a small volume titled : *Poems of Mr. John Milton, both English and Latin, composed at several times*. The Latin poems in this volume present a portrayal of the young Milton who is very different from the austere character of his later life. Among his Latin poems, the *Epitaphium Damonis*, an elegy written on the death of his school friend, Charles Diodati ,is the best and most interesting .

In 1628, Milton wrote the first of his own English poems titled '*On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough*', an Elizabethan-style elegy written on the death of his two-year old niece Anne Phillips, daughter of his elder sister Anne Milton, in January 1628. The conceits, classical allusions and the theological overtones emphasize that the child entered the supernatural realm. In the poem, Milton allegorizes the child's death as being at the hands of Winter that has been personified as a cold being, seeking the warmth of love. Milton transforms the innocent girl-child into a quasi- divine being, who in her limitless innocence and in her early death will now serve as a medium between a sinful humanity and a wrathful God. The poet then turns to address the bereaved mother in the last stanza and consoles her

with the thought that if she bore this loss, she would be rewarded by God with another child, probably a son, who ‘till the world’s last end shall make thy name to live.’

In July 1628, Milton wrote another poem titled ‘*At a Vacation Exercise*’ in which he affirmed his devotion to English and exalted themes concerning nature and humanity. He made this poem a part of his Latin prose speech that Milton delivered to the festive assembly marking the end of the College year. He interrupts the speech with the poem to hail his native language English and goes on to declare how he would use it in his poetic career. This unusual occasion which he chose to announce his decision indicates the importance he gave his intended poetic calling with English as the medium of expression.

In 1629, while still at Cambridge, Milton wrote his first wholly successful, fine and stately English poem, ‘*On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity*’ about which he had informed his friend Charles Diodati through his sixth elegy, a Latin letter sent to him in December, 1629- that he was “singing of the heaven-born King, harbinger of peace, and of the happy centuries promised in the holy books.” This ode celebrates the birth of Christ on the morning of 25th of December as a unique event in the history of mankind. The poem consists of four opening stanzas of seven lines each, followed by the main hymn of twenty seven stanzas of eight lines each. The opening four stanzas follow a rhyme scheme different from the rest of the poem-

This is the month, and this the happy morn,
Wherein the Son of Heaven’s Eternal King,
Of wedded maid and virgin mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring:
For so the holy sages once did sing,
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.....

In 1631, Milton wrote his twin poems, ‘*L’ Allegro*’ and ‘*Il Penseroso*’ which are autobiographical and reflect the two sides of Milton’s own temperament. The two companion poems are his skillful exercises in creating a mode of appropriate imagery and tone. Both the poems have Italian titles which mean “the cheerful man” and “the thoughtful man” respectively. ‘*L’ Allegro*’, a poem in rhymed octosyllabics with a ten-line prelude by Milton, gives an account of the various interests, tastes, pleasures and desires of the cheerful man

who is always in deep love with nature. It is an invocation to the goddess Mirth to allow the poet to live with her. The poem essentially outlines the events of one day spent for the most part in the country side, where the pleasures of the country and the natural beauty of the rural landscape are explored. 'Il Penseroso' is also a poem in rhymed octosyllabics with a ten-line prelude by Milton. The poem is the author's invocation to goddess Melancholy to come to him along with her companions-Calm, Peace and Quiet, Spare Fast, Retired Leisure and Cherub Contemplation. It gives an account of the various interests, likes and dislikes of the contemplative man for a sober, steadfast life given to study and meditation.

In 1634, Milton wrote *Comus, A Masque Presented at Ludlow Castle*, at the suggestion of his friend Henry Lawes who was a famous musician, to celebrate the earl of Bridgewater's appointment to the high office of Lord President of Wales, an office that brought with it Ludlow Castle as his official residence. Most of *Comus* is written in blank verse, Milton's first venture in that medium and its variety in movement from the smooth and semi-lyrical to the irregular and colloquial. In it Milton expresses Puritanic moral zeal in the Renaissance form of mask.

In 1637, he wrote *Lycidas*, a pastoral elegy that laments the death of Edward King (1612-1637), Milton's college friend and poet. He drowned while crossing from Chester Bay to Dublin when his ship struck a rock and sank in calm weather. Edward king who like Milton had devoted his life to poetry, becomes the basis for Milton's searching questions on the worth of such a life, in the face of unpredictability of death. The two poets are imagined as shepherds in the poem in the classical tradition in which shepherds are poets, and in the Christian tradition in which shepherds are religious and spiritual leaders.' *Lycidas*' is the finest of the early poems of Milton that illustrates some of the best features of his early poetry as well as his mature style, the style of great epics as the elegy is heavy with a lot of allusions both classical and Biblical.

During the period of political and religious controversies (1640-60), the period in which Milton was largely busy in prose-writing ,he also wrote sonnets on the themes of patriotism, duty, music, politics etc. His English sonnets number twenty-three in all. Six of them were written by him in his youth and the rest were written during 1645-1658. His well-

known sonnets are *On His Deceased Wife*, *To the Nightingale*, *The Massacre in Piedmont* and *On his Blindness*.

Milton's finest poetry was written when he was blind and suffering. His noblest and finest works, *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* were written during this period. *Paradise Lost* (1667), is an epic poem in twelve books. In the first edition, the influential poem had only ten books but as Homer's epic *Iliad* and Virgil's epic *Aenied* have twelve books each, it was also published in twelve books in its second edition in 1675. It was made possible by the division of its 7th and 10th books into two each. It is considered as the greatest work of its type in English language which received recognition as soon as it appeared in public domain. The opening lines of *Paradise Lost* outline the scope of the poet's plan. The main theme of the epic is man's disobedience, the immediate result of which is the loss of Paradise. The aim of the poet is to "justify the ways of God to men". Its characters are mostly superhuman- God, and His angels, Satan and his followers. There are only two human characters in it-Adam and Eve. Satan is described first in the epic and is mentioned as the instrument of man's fall. Satan, the fallen angel tempts Eve in the form of a serpent, to taste the fruit of the forbidden tree. He succeeds in seducing Eve, and Adam, despite the warning of God's archangel Raphael, tastes the fruit and thus commits the Sin of Disobedience. The consequence is divine punishment, the fall of man and the loss of Paradise due to which suffering becomes the lot of man.

Paradise Lost is written in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter) and the author's handling of his metre is superb. It is full of classical allusions and contains similes of Homeric type.

Paradise Regained (1671), is an epic poem in four books. It is a sequel to *Paradise Lost* and deals exclusively with the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. According to Milton's conception, whereas paradise was lost by the yielding of Adam and Eve to the temptations of Satan, it was regained by the resistance of the Son of God to the temptation of the same spirit.

Samson Agonistes is the last great work of Milton's life, which was published with *Paradise Regained* in 1671. The tragedy deals with the life and death of the Hebrew Champion Samson, who were then being persecuted by the Philistines, a godless people who

lived in the land of Gaza in great luxury. Based loosely on the biblical Book of Judges, the tragedy deals with the last phase of Samson's life when he is blinded and captive, a phase many have likened to Milton's situation after the collapse of the Commonwealth he supported. It is classical in form but Hebraic in spirit and its verse is the blank verse of Elizabethan tragedy, with in evitable Miltonic adaptations.

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