

## Introduction to the 1645 Volume: *Poems of Mr. John Milton*

In 1645, Milton published most but not all of the poems he had composed by that date. The publisher Humphrey Moseley had been bringing out volumes of lyric poetry by royalist poets such as Edmund Waller, and it was likely, as he claims in the introduction to the volume, that he approached Milton and encouraged him to publish his verse. Moseley also arranged for the engraved portrait of Milton by William Marshall (see Figure 1), beneath which Milton, who considered the engraving unflattering, placed a witty Greek epigram ridiculing it in a language neither Marshall nor Moseley understood. Unlike most contemporary poets, Milton neither wrote a preface, solicited commendatory poems, nor acknowledged a patron. He organized his volume more or less chronologically, thus displaying his poetic development, but also carefully grouped together poems of similar themes and genres. With the Latin tag from Virgil's *Eclogues* on the title page ("Baccare frontem / Cingite, ne vati noceat mala lingua futuro" – "Bind my forehead with foxglove, lest evil tongues harm the future Bard"), he promises future poems on even greater themes.

In the Latin ode sent with a replacement copy of the volume to John Rouse, librarian of the Bodleian Library at Oxford, Milton describes the 1645 volume as a "twin book, rejoicing in a single cover, but with a double title page." The first section of the volume presents his vernacular poems (mostly in English, but also including a mini-sonnet sequence in Italian), and concludes with *A MASK Presented At LUDLOW-Castle*. The second section of the volume, entitled *Poemata*, contains his Latin poems, with a few included in Greek. This *Poemata* is prefaced by a series of tributes from friends and fellow poets he met while traveling in Italy in 1638–9. Some of his own Latin poems are tributes to Italian friends, but others are *Juvenilia*, college poems dated (sometimes inaccurately) to emphasize the poet's precocity. Because Milton so carefully designed the 1645 volume to present himself as a learned and wide-ranging poet who reinvents many of the genres he employs, we present the book, as Milton envisioned it, as an entity. Facing translations of the Italian, Latin, and Greek poems are added for the convenience of the reader.

## English and Italian Poems

The first volume of the 1645 *Poems* is a miscellany made up mostly of poems composed between the late 1620s and the early 1640s. They are metrically experimental and incorporate a variety of genres, though odes of several types predominate. Milton introduces himself to the reader with the ode "On the morning of CHRIST'S Nativity," composed at Christmastide shortly after his twenty-first birthday and universally regarded by critics as his coming-of-age poem. In a Latin verse letter to his close friend Charles Diodati ("Elegia sexta") he terms this poem his gift "for Christ's birth" written at daybreak on Christmas morning. It is an occasional poem of a well-established poetic type in which the poet imagines himself welcoming the Christ Child, as the shepherds of the Nativity had, and dismissing the pagan gods, now dislodged from worship by the arrival of the true god. Both Mantuan and Torquato Tasso had written Nativity odes that dismiss the pagan gods, but the length of Milton's passage may register Puritan anxieties about what many saw as contemporary forms of idolatry in the English Church. The ode also alludes indirectly to Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, which celebrates the return of the Golden Age with the birth (probably) of the Roman Consul Pollio's son, but which was generally thought by Christians to prophesy the coming of the true Messiah, who alone could restore the Golden Age. As the proem to the ode indicates, Milton presents Christ's birth as a cosmic event wherein the Son of God puts aside the glorious form of divinity to inhabit a "darksom House of mortal Clay." As a poet Milton joins his voice with the heavenly choir of angels to celebrate the entry of Christ into the natural order and to proclaim an event that is comparable only to the Creation and the Last Judgment.

In the four-stanza proem of the ode Milton adapts rhyme royal but employs in the hymn proper an elegant stanzaic pattern with lines of varying length and an intricate, interlaced rhyme scheme with a concluding alexandrine. A Spenserian presence can be detected throughout the 1645 *Poems*, particularly in the Nativity Ode and in the *Ludlow Mask*. Milton personifies Nature as an attendant goddess and invokes Peace, Truth, Justice, and Mercy as allegorical presences to return to earth in preparation for the Second Coming. He accompanies allusion to the music of the spheres with musical effects and anticipates the Last Judgment and the dismissal of the pagan gods with dissonance. Alluding to the silencing of the oracles at the birth of Christ, Milton describes Apollo, the god of prophecy, as the first pagan deity to flee from his shrine. Typhon, a monster often identified with Satan, is the last to be dislodged by Christ, who is characterized as an infant Hercules controlling the damned crew. Not until the last stanza does Milton return to the scene at the stable where the Virgin lays her babe to rest. This early poem already displays qualities that remain constants in Milton's poetry: allusiveness, revisionism, mixing of genres, cosmic scope, and prophetic voice.

Milton may have envisioned the Nativity ode as the first of a sequence of religious odes on liturgical events. After two Psalm paraphrases identified in a headnote as

written “at age fifteen” he presents an incomplete and unsuccessful ode, “The Passion,” using the stanzaic verse form of the Nativity proem; an endnote explains that he left it unfinished because he found the subject “above the yeers he had.” In the ode “Upon the Circumcision” he invokes the power of music to mourn rather than to rejoice. Two other odes – “On Time” and “At a solemn Musick” – also treat religious themes. The first is structured as an invocation, with Time apostrophized at the beginning and the end. In the latter Milton invokes the Sirens, Voice and Verse, as personifications of sacred vocal music and poetry. The ode is set in antiphonal form with the second part responding to the first. Like the Nativity ode, these brief odes have apocalyptic overtones and depict present time in relation to eternal time that stretches from the Creation to the Last Judgment. The epitaph/ode on the death of the Marchioness of Winchester that follows employs, as do the other odes, metaphysical themes. It may have been composed for inclusion in a Cambridge commemorative volume that never materialized. As a lament for the death of a young mother in childbirth, it exploits the paradoxes of birth and death, flowering and untimely plucking. With its conventional opening it reads like an inscription on a monument and resembles the epigrammatical epitaphs of Ben Jonson. Like “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso,” its octosyllabic and heptasyllabic couplets have complex shifts between iambic and trochaic rhythms.

The epitaph “On *Shakespear*,” dated 1630, was Milton’s first published poem, appearing initially in the second folio edition of Shakespeare’s plays (1632). Composed in iambic pentameter couplets, the poem reworks the conventional epitaph into a tribute that not only makes the poet’s works his best monument, but also turns his readers to “Marble” in “wonder and astonishment,” impressing his “Delphick lines” on their hearts. The two epitaphs on Hobson are of a different sort. Composed on the occasion of the death of the carrier Hobson who transported students and mail between London and Cambridge, they appeared in Cambridge collections and miscellanies of wit. Though irreverent and filled with puns and paradoxes, they resemble in some ways the Latin funera (included in the *Poemata*) that Milton wrote for Cambridge dignitaries, as they allow the poet to exercise his pungent wit with one conceit after another that allude to Hobson’s occupation.

The graceful, urbane, fanciful twin odes, “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso,” are organized as hymnic addresses to classical deities – the Grace Euphrosyne (Mirth) and a muse-like Melancholy. After a ten-line introduction in which the wrong kind of melancholy and joy are dismissed, Milton introduces the patron goddesses as daughters of appropriate parents – Mirth of Venus and Bacchus (or alternately Zephyr and Aurora); Melancholy of Saturn and Vesta. Both goddesses are patrons of poetry, and the title characters – the cheerful and the pensive man – request from them not only pleasures appropriate to each, but also powers of inspiration specifically due the poet. Each poem is cast chiefly in octosyllabic couplets, but from that verse form Milton elicits completely different tonal effects and tempi: a lilting, dancing quality in the first, and a sober stateliness in the second. *L’Allegro* embodies pleasure, free from blame

and care, but also jest and jollity; *Il Penseroso* solitary contemplation. The title character of the first ode hears the lark, the second the nightingale. The landscapes through which each wander are rural, but Allegro mixes with plowmen, shepherds and shepherdesses, and the countryfolk of a pastoral England as they work or as they enjoy their sunny holidays. Penseroso wanders alone through a solitary landscape with “twilight groves,” “shadows brown,” observing only the moon and the constellations of the nocturnal sky. Towered cities and the busy hum of men please Allegro, as well as jousts, masques, and pageants; Penseroso seeks the quiet of studious cloisters and peaceful hermitages. The literary tastes of these opposing personae are also opposite. Allegro enjoys Jonson’s “learned Sock” and Shakespeare’s “native Wood-notes wilde,” but Penseroso admires Plato and Hermes Trismegistus, romances like Chaucer’s unfinished *Squire’s Tale*, and the Greek tragedies about Thebes and Troy. Orpheus, the supreme poet, is invoked by both Allegro and Penseroso, perhaps as the epitome of their own poetic aspirations. Although some sections of *Il Penseroso* are slightly longer, structurally, the two poems are parallel. However, *Il Penseroso* concludes with a ten-line coda that praises the old age that will bring knowledge and “something like Prophetic strain.” Each ode ends with an appeal to the patron goddess to grant those pleasures in her provenance and to accept Allegro or Penseroso as her devotee.

Sonnets in Italian and English form an important group in the 1645 volume, to which Milton adds in the second edition of 1673. The sonnets include Milton’s most personal poetry – the Italian sonnets his only amatory verse and his only verse in that language. All follow the Petrarchan rhyme scheme with the conventional division into octave and sestet. Milton had purchased a copy of Giovanni Della Casa’s *Rime e Prose* (1563) in 1629, and his annotations indicate his close study of the text. In *An Apology for Smectymnuus*, Milton records his admiration for Dante and Petrarch and their poems of devotion to Beatrice and Laura. The opening of his first English sonnet, a wistful love poem to the Nightingale, may even echo the first line of one of Bembo’s sonnets. This opening sonnet is followed by the mini-sequence in Italian – five sonnets and a canzone – in which Milton addresses a dark Italian lady and confides his love for her to the confidant of the Latin elegies, Charles Diodati. The style and even the verbal echoes recall the tradition of Italian sonnet in which a lover addresses a distant beauty.

The four sonnets that follow are diverse, two recording Milton’s devotion to the vocation of poetry, the other two expressing his admiration for two women. Sonnet 7 explores the spiritual crisis occasioned by the end of his twenty-third year and his approaching twenty-fourth birthday. Although he regrets that he has not yet attained the accomplishment that should attend maturity as a poet, Milton determines to leave to God the taskmaster the fulfillment of the lot God has ordained for him. Sonnet 8 fuses personal experience with a contemporary political event – a threatened attack on London in 1642. It combines an anxiety that the Civil War will disrupt, as indeed it would, the vocation of poetry, with a conviction that poetry (as two classical

allusions illustrate) has a power to transcend politics. Milton alludes both to Alexander's sparing the house of the poet Pindar at the siege of Thebes and to the Spartans' sparing the Athenian walls upon hearing the recitation of Euripides' chorus from *Electra*. The other two sonnets contrast with the Italian sonnets, in expressing not love but friendship for two exemplary women. Sonnet 9 is to an unknown young lady whose piety Milton illustrates by biblical allusion: like Mary and Ruth she has chosen the better part and, like the virgins awaiting the bridegroom Christ, she has kept the lamp of her devotion ever lit. Sonnet 10 is both a tribute to Milton's neighbor Margaret Ley, who embodies her father's noble virtues, and a recollection of her father, who died not long after Charles I's breaking of the English Parliament in 1629. Milton compares Ley to Isocrates, who reportedly chose to starve to death after Philip of Macedon's "dishonest" victory at Charonaea rather than witness the end of Athenian democracy.

*Arcades*, presented at Harefield (probably in 1632), to celebrate its matriarch Alice, the dowager Countess of Derby, is a poetic entertainment with music, perhaps Milton's first attempt at a masque. It compliments an aristocratic lady, who was a relative by marriage to the Egertons, the family for whom Milton would two years later compose the *Ludlow Mask*. The Countess does not take part in the masque, however, but is the figure before whom the masque is presented. She sits in majesty while the Genius of the Wood and the chorus (which included several of her grandchildren) commend her virtues and compare her to the classical goddesses Latona and Cybele. As in the *Ludlow Mask* the principal speaker is a daemon, an intermediary between heaven and earth, who celebrates the fertility of the wood in his charge and mediates between the music of the spheres and earthly music. The role was probably performed by Henry Lawes, the music tutor of the Egerton children, who also probably commissioned Milton to compose both *Arcades* and the *Ludlow Mask*.

*Lycidas*, placed last of the English lyrical poems, is the most ambitious ode of the first book. Commonly referred to as a funeral elegy, *Lycidas* was designated in 1645 by Milton as a monody, an ode for a single voice. The poem had previously been published in a slightly different version, in 1638, as the final poem in a memorial volume by friends and associates of Edward King at Cambridge University of Latin, Greek, and English poems, *Iusta Edovardo King Naufrago*. King had been a fellow student with Milton at Christ's College, Cambridge, a minor poet and an ordained minister, who was drowned in the Irish Sea off Chester while on his way to visit relatives in Ireland. In the headnote added in 1645, Milton refers to King as a learned friend whom he bewails, but also notes that the poem "by occasion fortells the ruine of our corrupted Clergy then in their height." Even as it laments the good pastor struck down in his prime, it excoriates the bad pastors left in his place. Although occasioned by the death of King, *Lycidas* transcends the poetry of personal grief. King and Milton were not close friends, so the sense of personal loss that characterizes *Epitaphium Damonis*, Milton's lament for Charles Diodati, is missing from *Lycidas*. In its place Milton expresses anxiety about early death, questions his own calling as poet, and

voices concern both for the punishment of the bad pastors and for the Christian's reward after death.

The poem's achievement is partly due to its experimental form, part pastoral eclogue, part ode or monody. With its elaborate opening figure – the image of the shattered garland – its complex mythic allusions, its digressions, and its abrupt shifts in theme and direction, it owes something to Pindaric ode, a form Milton was proposing at the time to imitate. Like Pindaric ode, *Lycidas* is a poem whose principal aim – to lament the death of Edward King – combines with other aims – to defend the vocation of poetry, to indict the bad pastors, who are also bad poets (lines 124–5), and generally to explore the meaning of life and death. It also borrows many devices from Theocritean idyll and Virgilian pastoral – invocation of the muses, a mini-refrain, a procession of mourners, and a closing pastoral frame. As in Theocritus' first idyll and Virgil's Eclogue 10, a shepherd-swain, who is the principal speaker, mourns a fellow poet, regretfully recalling the "Rural ditties" once enjoyed by the community of fellow shepherds. Although the pastoral mode was out of fashion for funeral poems when Milton wrote *Lycidas* (his is the only pastoral in the Cambridge memorial volume), Milton may deliberately be harking back to the earlier tradition, wherein Latin pastorals mourn the Elizabethan poet Sir Philip Sidney both as Daphnis and Lycidas. Also, the classical tradition of the shepherd-poet relates intimately to the Christian tradition of the shepherd-pastor/minister (Christ as Good Shepherd), the biblical tradition of the shepherd-prophet, and the biblical denunciation of bad shepherds.

Classical and Christian appear side by side in *Lycidas*, with appeals to the muses and classical deities and mythic references interlaced with Christian allusions. In the central long section of the poem the speaker moves from his lament for Lycidas to pose questions about the poet's untimely demise and about poetic vocation itself. Querying why the deities of nature as well as the Muse should abandon the poet, the swain alludes to the Muse's son, the archetypal poet Orpheus, torn apart by the Bacchantes, and complains that sudden and perhaps savage death await those devoted to poetry. To refute the swain's complaints of the Muse's thanklessness, Milton introduces the god Phoebus Apollo, who reassures him of the ultimate reward for the poet – from the all-judging eyes of Jove. Other mythic figures appear on the scene and attempt to exonerate nature; Triton, Aeolus, and the sea nymphs assert that the sea and winds were calm and that the cause of the shipwreck was in the world of men – the "fatall and perfidious Bark / Built in th'eclipse and rigg'd with curses dark." The river god Camus, the personification of Cambridge University, comes to lament the loss of his dearest pledge, together with St. Peter, who delivers a stinging denunciation of the bad shepherds, promising ultimate justice in the form of a two-handed engine at the door that "stands ready to smite once and smite no more."

The consolatory movement begins with the recalling of the pastoral figures Alpheus and Arethuse, and the framing of a floral tribute for Lycidas – "Flourets of a thousand hues" to strew his "Laureate Herse." But real consolation is illusory, for Lycidas' dead body is absent, hurled about in the seas, where he perhaps visits "the

bottom of the monstrous world.” It requires the agency of the angel Michael, who stands guardian at the Mount on the Cornish coast, to call Lycidas home, wafted to shore by classical dolphins. Christian and classical blend in the final consolation. The shepherd-swain bids the other shepherds to weep no more. Lycidas is not dead, but alive through the power of Christ, here alluded to as the day-star who sinks and rises again and as the one “who walk’d the waves.” Other groves and other streams await Lycidas in a Christian heaven, where he hears the “unexpressive nuptiall song” of the Lamb.

Water is the transforming medium throughout the poem: the water that drowned Lycidas, the watery tears – melodious and lamenting – for Lycidas, the inspiring water of the muses’ sacred well, the freshwater stream that bears Orpheus’ head in contrast to Alpheus’ amorous stream that pursues the nymph Arethusa and mingles its waters with hers, the water on which Christ triumphantly walks, the water of other streams in heaven, and finally the watery tears forever wiped from Lycidas’ eyes. The resurrected Lycidas not only enjoys the society of the saints in heaven, but becomes also a protective “Genius of the shore,” beckoning home all those who “wander in that perilous flood.” In the final coda another voice describes how the uncouth swain who has warbled this “*Dorick*” lay gathers his mantle about himself and departs for “fresh Woods, and Pastures new,” thereby signaling perhaps Milton’s own move from pastoral to higher genres.

Milton’s *Mask Presented At Ludlow-Castle* is placed last in the English volume, with a separate title page and prefatory material by Henry Lawes and Henry Wotton setting it apart from the rest of the volume. The *Mask* was popularly titled *Comus* throughout the eighteenth century and well into the twentieth century. It exists in five different versions: the Bridgewater MS, which is probably close to the acting version (a copy is included in the Appendix of this edition); a version in the Trinity MS in Milton’s hand (with corrections); a version printed by Henry Lawes in 1637 (to which Milton declined to affix his name), and almost identical versions in Milton’s 1645 and 1673 *Poems*. The *Mask* was performed in the great hall of Ludlow Castle on Michaelmas night (September 29, 1634) to celebrate the appointment of the Earl of Bridgewater as Lord President of the Council of Wales. Its principal characters are the Earl’s three unmarried children – Lady Alice Egerton (age 15), the heir John, Lord Brackley (age 11), and Thomas Egerton (age 9). The masque takes advantage of the specific occasion – the journey of the Earl’s three children to Ludlow to celebrate their father’s appointment. Henry Lawes, the children’s own music tutor, took the part of the Attendant Spirit or Daemon, sent to guard them from the dangers and seductions of Comus. He takes on the disguise of Thyrsis, a shepherd-servant of the household. The Attendant Spirit has the first and the last words in the masque and performs four of the five extant songs. (A copy of Lawes’ music for the songs is included in this edition.)

Unlike most masques of the period, the Ludlow *Mask* has more extensive dialogue, a more complex plot, and characters that evince some development and conflict.

However, it retains the song and dance central to most court masques – the antic dances of Comus's rout (the antimasque), the rustic dances of the shepherds, the stately masque dances at Ludlow castle. Milton's masque requires no elaborate machinery or sets, its principal spectacle consisting of Sabrina's rising from the Severn river with her attendants.

The plot is derived from Homer's account of Circe's transformation of Odysseus' companions into swine, a circumstance imitated in the Renaissance notably in Ariosto's, Tasso's, and Spenser's epic romances, where a sorceress entraps or seduces a heroic male. In Milton's masque, however, a male rather than a female entraps his victim, recalling Busirane's detaining of Amoret in book 3 of *The Faerie Queene*. In making Comus a male version of his mother Circe and a reveler like his father Bacchus, Milton is original. In most plays and masques in which the Comus figure appears, he is simply a figure of revelry or drunkenness and not a sorcerer, and though connected with Bacchus, he is neither his nor Circe's son, a parentage uniquely invented by Milton. Comus also embodies a contemporary cultural type: the refined, dissolute, licentious courtier, who possesses the seductive power of false rhetoric. The Attendant Spirit takes over the Homeric role of Hermes, warning the brothers of the wives of Comus and providing them with haemony, a herb, which like the moly of the *Odyssey*, protects them from enchantment. But Milton makes the Attendant Spirit more than the messenger god of the *Odyssey*. As a protective deity he oversees the rescue of the Lady, informing the brothers of her danger, guiding them to her, escorting the three to Ludlow castle, and also providing most of the music of the masque.

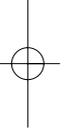
Although the Attendant Spirit is the masque's principal speaker, its main debates occur between the brothers and between the Lady and Comus – and they concern the masque's theme – the trial of virtue. The brothers debate whether the Lady's chastity possesses a kind of magical power (like Diana's or Minerva's) that will be sufficient to protect her or whether (as the younger brother fears) her beauty will attract and make her inevitably the prey of some evil predator. The Lady, bound to a chair by Comus' spells, claims only the ability to preserve the freedom of her mind. However, she undertakes to refute Comus' specious *carpe diem* arguments and to argue temperance and moderation as better guides for life than Comus' advocacy of the incessant consumption of nature's goods. Nonetheless, when the brothers permit the sorcerer to escape, the Lady is unable to rise from Comus' chair.

The pastoralism of the masque is reinforced with the summoning of the nymph Sabrina. The erstwhile daughter of the British king Lochrine, she died, escaping pursuit, by throwing herself into the Severn river and was thereafter transformed into the goddess of the river. The Attendant Spirit invokes her and her attendant water deities to secure the release of the Lady. As a virgin, Sabrina serves as the counterpart of the Lady, introduces a feminizing presence into the masque, and balances Comus' seductive magic with her own chaste spells. At length the Attendant Spirit escorts the three children to Ludlow castle where they celebrate the triumph of virtue over sensual folly and intemperance.

*Introduction*

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For the printed editions of *A Mask* Milton balances the Attendant Spirit's speech of descent at the beginning of the masque with an epilogue at the end in which the Spirit proposes to reascend to his own regions. Some of the material for the final speech was used in the opening speech of the acting version (compare Bridgewater MS, pp. 00–0), but the final epilogue of the printed versions ends with a mythic rhapsody on the fulfilled loves of Venus and Adonis in the Garden of the Hesperides and on the union of Cupid and Psyche. Milton's masque on the triumph of chastity concludes with the celestial lovers Cupid and Psyche bringing forth Youth and Joy rather than Pleasure, the offspring traditionally attributed to them. As he returns above, his task fulfilled, the Attendant Spirit invites all who would follow him to love Virtue.

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