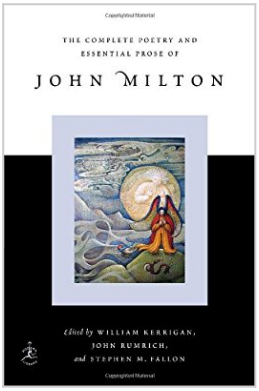

The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton (Modern Library (Hardcover))

By John Milton

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Editorial Review

Review
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About the Author
John Milton (1608-74), the great English poet, is best known for his epic masterpiece, *Paradise Lost*. In addition to writing brilliant verse and overtly political works, Milton was also a private tutor and, during the Commonwealth period, served as Secretary for Foreign Tongues, a position mostly involving the composition of the English Republic’s foreign correspondence in Latin.

About the Editors
William Kerrigan is the author of many books, including *The Sacred Complex: On the Psychogenesis of*

Paradise Lost, for which he won the James Holly Hanford Award of the Milton Society of America. A former president of the Milton Society, he has also earned numerous honors and distinctions from that group, including its award for lifetime achievement. He is professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts.

John Rumrich is the author of *Matter of Glory: A New Preface to Paradise Lost and Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation.* An award-winning editor and writer, he is Thaman Professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin, where he teaches early modern British literature.

Stephen M. Fallon is the author of *Milton's Peculiar Grace: Self-Representation and Authority* and *Milton Among the Philosophers: Poetry and Materialism in Seventeenth-Century England*, winner of the Milton Society's Hanford Award. He is professor of liberal studies and English at the University of Notre Dame.

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English Poems

"He had auburn hair. His complexion exceeding fair—he was so fair that they called him the Lady of Christ's College" (see Aubrey, p. xxvii). psalm 114

The 1645 Poems informed its readers that "this and the following Psalm were done by the author at fifteen years old." They could well have been school exercises, as is usually assumed, but Milton's father's combination of faith and musical skill expressed itself in a keen appreciation for the Psalter. Milton Sr. in fact contributed six settings to Thomas Ravenscroft's The Whole Book of Psalms (1621). These translations are his son's earliest surviving English compositions.

sG4

When the blest seed of Terah's faithful son,

After long toil their liberty had won,

And passed from Pharian fields to Canaan land,

Led by the strength of the Almighty's hand,

5Jehovah's wonders were in Israel shown,

His praise and glory was in Israel known.

That saw the troubled sea, and shivering fled,

And sought to hide his froth-becurlèd head

Low in the earth; Jordan's clear streams recoil,

10As a faint host that hath received the foil.

The high, huge-bellied mountains skip like rams

Amongst their ewes, the little hills like lambs.

Why fled the ocean? And why skipped the mountains?

Why turnèd Jordan toward his crystal fountains?

15Shake earth, and at the presence be aghast

Of him that ever was, and ay shall last,

That glassy floods from rugged rocks can crush,

And make soft rills from fiery flint-stones gush.

1. faithful son: Abraham.

3. Pharian: Egyptian.

10. foil: defeat.

psalm 136

Let us with a gladsome mind

Praise the Lord, for he is kind,

For his mercies ay endure,

Ever faithful, ever sure.

5Let us blaze his name abroad,

For of gods he is the God;

For, &c.

O let us his praises tell,

10Who doth the wrathful tyrants quell.

For, &c.

Who with his miracles doth make

Amazèd heav’n and earth to shake.

15For, &c.

Who by his wisdom did create

The painted heav’ns so full of state.

For, &c.

20

Who did the solid earth ordain

To rise above the wat’ry plain.

For, &c.

25Who by his all-commanding might,

Did fill the new-made world with light.

For, &c.

And caused the golden-tressèd sun,

30All the day long his course to run.

For, &c.

The hornèd moon to shine by night,

Amongst her spangled sisters bright.

35For, &c.

10. Who: 1673. 1645 has that here and in lines 13, 17, 21, and 25. In each case we follow 1673. He with his thunder-clasping hand,

Smote the first-born of Egypt land.

For, &c.

40

And in despite of Pharaoh fell,

He brought from thence his Israel.

For, &c.

45The ruddy waves he cleft in twain,

Of the Erythraean main.

For, &c.

The floods stood still like walls of glass,

50While the Hebrew bands did pass.

For, &c.

But full soon they did devour

The tawny king with all his power.

55For, &c.

His chosen people he did bless

In the wasteful wilderness.

For, &c.

60

In bloody battle he brought down

Kings of prowess and renown.

For, &c.

He foiled bold Seon and his host,

That ruled the Amorean coast.

For, &c.

And large-limbed Og he did subdue,

With all his over-hardy crew.

For, &c.

And to his servant Israel

He gave their land therein to dwell.

For, &c.

46. Erythraean: adjective from the Greek for “red,” applied by Herodotus 1.180; 2.8, 158 to the Red Sea.

65. Seon: Sihon, King of the Amorites (Num. 21.21–32).

66. Amorean: Amorite.

69. Og: giant King of Bashan, slain by Moses (Num. 21.33–35).

73. his servant Israel: Jacob.

He hath with a piteous eye

Beheld us in our misery.

For, &c.

And freed us from the slavery

Of the invading enemy.

For, &c.

All living creatures he doth feed,

And with full hand supplies their need.

For, &c.

Let us therefore warble forth

His mighty majesty and worth.

For, &c.

That his mansion hath on high

Above the reach of mortal eye.

For his mercies ay endure,

Ever faithful, ever sure.

on the death of a fair infant dying of a cough

This work belongs to a group of English lyrics that first appeared in the 1673 Poems. Based on the testimony of Milton's nephew Edward Phillips (Darbishire 1932, 62), the subject of the poem has generally been thought to have been Anne Phillips (b. January 1626 and d. January 1628), Milton's niece, and the mother addressed in the last stanza his sister Anne Phillips. Carey argues against these identifications, primarily on the grounds that Milton was nineteen and could not have written the elegy, as he claims to have, Anno aetatis 17 (at the age of seventeen). The alternative is that Milton, whether unconsciously or not, backdated the poem (LeComte 7–8). Others of Carey's arguments seem tendentious. He takes "Summer's chief honor if thou hadst outlasted/Bleak Winter's force that made thy blossom dry" to assert that the child did not outlive a single winter (and therefore could not have been little Anne Phillips, who lived two years), whereas in fact the lines declare that the child did not outlive the winter in which she contracted the cough "that made thy blossom dry," and are therefore consistent with the Anne Phillips hypothesis.

In Stanza 5 the poem erupts with questions that always haunt tragic deaths. Why did God permit this infant to die? "Could Heav'n for pity thee so strictly doom?" These painful questions open up the large subject of theodicy, the justification of God's ways to men, that will occupy the argumentative center of Paradise Lost. In this early lyric, perhaps his first original poem in English, Milton tries to lay doubts to rest by finding a providential scheme within which the infant's death can be seen as a divine attempt to bring Earth and

Heaven closer together or improve the lot of mankind.

The poem ends with a prophecy that we take literally: “This if thou do he will an offspring give,/That till the world’s last end shall make thy name to live.” Hoping to make “offspring” metaphorical, modern editors often cite God’s promise to the eunuchs in Isaiah 56.5: “Even unto them will I give . . . a name better than of sons and daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off.” So Milton’s “offspring” becomes salvation and eternal bliss, matters that render trivial all parental concern with earthly offspring. But Milton does not say that the fame of the offspring is eternal. Quite the opposite, he says that it will last until the end of the world. Recourse to Isaiah in interpreting “Fair Infant” probably does not occur before 1921 (Hughes et al. 2:135). Proponents clearly hope that the biblical passage can fend off the apparent sense of Milton’s lines, which in turn is thought to suppose a Milton so fame-crazed that he would console a patient sister with the promise of another child with a glorious future. But that is precisely what he has done. Milton’s sister was indeed pregnant at the time of the fair infant’s death, and she gave birth to Elizabeth Phillips in April 1628.

sG4

anno aetatis 17

i

O fairest flower no sooner blown but blasted,

Soft silken primrose fading timelessly,

Summer’s chief honor if thou hadst outlasted

Bleak Winter’s force that made thy blossom dry;

5For he being amorous on that lovely dye

That did thy cheek envermeil, thought to kiss

But killed alas, and then bewailed his fatal bliss.

1–2. O fairest . . . fading: The opening echoes The Passionate Pilgrim 10.1–2: “Sweet rose, fair flower, untimely plucked, soon faded,/Plucked in the bud and faded in the spring!” This work was ascribed to Shakespeare in 1599 and 1640, but we now believe that Shakespeare wrote only five of its twenty sonnets. The author of the one echoed by Milton is unknown.

1. blown: bloomed.

2. timelessly: unseasonably, not in due time.

3. chief honor: that for which Summer would be honored.

5. amorous on: in love with.

6. envermeil: tinge with vermilion.

6–7. thought to kiss/But killed: Shakespeare also conjoins kiss and kill in VEN 1110 and OTH 5.2.356–57.

ii

For since grim Aquilo his charioteer

By boist’rous rape th’ Athenian damsel got,

He thought it touched his deity full near,

If likewise he some fair one wedded not,

Thereby to wipe away th’ infamous blot

Of long-uncoupled bed, and childless eld,

Which ’mongst the wanton gods a foul reproach was held.

iii

So mounting up in icy-pearlèd car,

Through middle empire of the freezing air

He wandered long, till thee he spied from far;

There ended was his quest, there ceased his care.

Down he descended from his snow-soft chair,

But all unwares with his cold-kind embrace

Unhoused thy virgin soul from her fair biding place.

iv

Yet art thou not inglorious in thy fate;

For so Apollo, with unweeting hand

Whilom did slay his dearly-lovèd mate,

Young Hyacinth born on Eurotas’ strand,

Young Hyacinth the pride of Spartan land;

But then transformed him to a purple flower:

Alack that so to change thee Winter had no power.

8–9. In Ovid, Boreas, the north wind, also called Aquilo, snatches away Orithyia, daughter of the king of Athens (Met. 6.682–710). Milton makes Aquilo into Winter's charioteer, and his boist'rous rape into the incitement of Winter's lust.

13. eld: old age.

15. icy-pearlèd car: chariot decorated with hailstones.

16. middle empire: the middle of the three traditional regions of air.

19. snow-soft chair: another description of the chariot of line 15, now seemingly cushioned with snow.

20. cold-kind embrace: an embrace kind in its intention but chilling in its consequences.

23–27. Apollo accidentally killed his beloved Hyacinthus with a discus and made a brightly colored (purpureus) flower spring from his blood (Ovid, Met. 10.162–216). At least one commentator (Servius; see Allen 49) blamed Boreas (Aquilo) for the accident.

23. unweeting: a variant of unwitting.

25. born . . . strand: Hyacinthus was born in Sparta, which is situtated on the river Eurotas.

v

Yet can I not persuade me thou art dead

Or that thy corse corrupts in earth's dark womb,

Or that thy beauties lie in wormy bed,

Hid from the world in a low delvèd tomb;

Could Heav'n for pity thee so strictly doom?

O no! For something in thy face did shine

Above mortality that showed thou wast divine.

vi

Resolve me then O soul most surely blest

(If so it be that thou these plaints dost hear),

Tell me bright spirit where'er thou hoverest,

Whether above that high first-moving sphere

Or in the Elysian fields (if such there were).

O say me true if thou wert mortal wight,

And why from us so quickly thou didst take thy flight.

vii

Wert thou some star which from the ruined roof

Of shaked Olympus by mischance didst fall;

Which careful Jove in nature's true behoof

Took up, and in fit place did reinstall?

Or did of late Earth's sons besiege the wall

Of sheeny Heav'n, and thou some goddess fled

Amongst us here below to hide thy nectared head?

36. Resolve me: Answer my questions, solve my problems (OED 3.11b).

39. first-moving sphere: the primum mobile, the outermost sphere of the Ptolemaic universe.

40. Elysian fields: home of the blessed dead in Homer (Od. 4.561–69) and Plato (Phaedo 112E).

45. behoof: benefit.

47. Earth's sons: the Giants, who warred against the gods (Hesiod, Theog. 183–85).

viii

Or wert thou that just maid who once before

Forsook the hated earth, O tell me sooth,

And cam'st again to visit us once more?

Or wert thou that sweet smiling youth?

Or that crowned matron, sage white-robèd Truth?

Or any other of that Heav'nly brood

Let down in cloudy throne to do the world some good?

ix

Or wert thou of the golden-wingèd host,

Who having clad thyself in human weed,

To earth from thy prefixèd seat didst post,

And after short abode fly back with speed,

As if to show what creatures Heav’n doth breed,

Thereby to set the hearts of men on fire

To scorn the sordid world, and unto Heav’n aspire?

x

But O why didst thou not stay here below

To bless us with thy Heav’n-loved innocence,

To slake his wrath whom sin hath made our foe,

To turn swift-rushing black perdition hence,

Or drive away the slaughtering pestilence,

To stand ’twixt us and our deservèd smart?

But thou canst best perform that office where thou art.

50. that just maid: Astraea, goddess of Justice, who fled the earth when corruption followed the golden age. See Nat Ode 141–46.

53. Something apparently dropped out of this line when the poem was first printed, in 1673. It is missing a metrical foot, and the youth lacks his allegorical identity. Words such as Mercy and Virtue have been inserted between thou and that, which saves the meter; but these allegorical figures are never male, and youth in Milton always refers to a male.

54. white-robèd Truth: See Cesare Ripa, Iconologia 530.

57. golden-wingèd host: the angels.

59. prefixèd: preordained.

66. his: God’s.

68. pestilence: There was a major outbreak of plague in 1625–26. Milton could be assuming that the birth of Anne Phillips did drive away that plague. She will be an even more effective advocate in Heaven.

Then thou the mother of so sweet a child

Her false imagined loss cease to lament,

And wisely learn to curb thy sorrows wild;

Think what a present thou to God hast sent,

75And render him with patience what he lent;

This if thou do he will an offspring give,

That till the world's last end shall make thy name to live.

71. Then thou: The address has shifted from the dead child to its mother.

75. render: give back; lent: The idea that life is lent to us by God and in the end must be paid back was commonplace (see Jonson, "On My First Son" 3–5, "On My First Daughter" 2–4).

76–77. See headnote.

at a vacation exercise

At some point during the summer vacation months (July through October) of 1628, Milton presided over festive exercises at Christ's College. In keeping with the traditions behind such saturnalian occasions, he first of all delivered the two raucous Latin orations that constitute Prolusion 6. The speeches were peppered with boisterous jokes about gender, sex, farts, and the like. Then the master of ceremonies broke into these pentameter English couplets. Milton's opening address to the English language, including his dismissal of the stylistic tastes of "late fantastics" (l. 20), is playful. With "Yet I had rather, if I were to choose" (l. 29), the tone shifts from schoolboy fun to personal yearnings serious enough to be already drafting at age nineteen a life plan dedicated to their realization: for a noble epic subject, an answerable style, a unique access to the divine secrets of the universe, and an enraptured audience. After exhibiting his literary dreams, Milton returns via a beautiful imitation of Horace (see 53–58n) to the business at hand, which is to play out the role of mocking the "Ens," or Father of the concepts of Aristotelian logic first adopted in the earlier Latin segment of the college entertainment. In graver minds, however, the hall must have kept on shimmering with the revelation of what this amusing student, if he were to choose, would rather be doing.

The work was first printed in 1673.

sG4

anno aetatis 19

The Latin speeches ended, the English thus began.

Hail native language, that by sinews weak

Didst move my first endeavoring tongue to speak,

And mad’st imperfect words with childish trips,

Half unpronounced, slide through my infant lips,

Driving dumb silence from the portal door,

Where he had mutely sat two years before:

Here I salute thee and thy pardon ask,

That now I use thee in my latter task:

Small loss it is that thence can come unto thee,

I know my tongue but little grace can do thee:

Thou need’st not be ambitious to be first,

Believe me I have thither packed the worst:

And, if it happen as I did forecast,

The daintiest dishes shall be served up last.

I pray thee then, deny me not thy aid

For this same small neglect that I have made:

But haste thee straight to do me once a pleasure,

And from thy wardrobe bring thy chiefest treasure;

Not those new-fangled toys, and trimming slight

Which takes our late fantastics with delight,

But cull those richest robes, and gay’st attire

Which deepest spirits, and choicest wits desire:

I have some naked thoughts that rove about

And loudly knock to have their passage out;

And weary of their place do only stay

Till thou hast decked them in thy best array;

That so they may without suspect or fears

Fly swiftly to this fair assembly’s ears;

Yet I had rather, if I were to choose,

Thy service in some graver subject use,

12. thither: in the Latin oration that preceded these English couplets.

19. new-fangled toys: idle fancies, appealing in their novelty.

20. takes: captivates, puts a spell upon; late fantastics: in the immediate context, showy dressers; but since dressing throughout lines 18–26 refers metaphorically to adopting a poetic style or manner, the late (recent) fantastics apparently names a modish school of writers given to fanciful notions. Some have taken Milton to be criticizing the metaphysical manner, but he might just as well be tweaking a form of expression cultivated by some of his fellow students.

27. suspect: suspicion.

29–52. Here Milton digresses from the academic conviviality of the immediate occasion to reveal his literary ambitions.

Such as may make thee search thy coffers round,

Before thou clothe my fancy in fit sound:

Such where the deep transported mind may soar

Above the wheeling poles, and at Heav’n’s door

Look in, and see each blissful deity

How he before the thunderous throne doth lie,

Listening to what unshorn Apollo sings

To th’ touch of golden wires, while Hebe brings

Immortal nectar to her kingly sire:

Then passing through the spheres of watchful fire,

And misty regions of wide air next under,

And hills of snow and lofts of pilèd thunder,

May tell at length how green-eyed Neptune raves,

In Heav’n’s defiance mustering all his waves;

Then sing of secret things that came to pass

When beldam Nature in her cradle was;

And last of kings and queens and heroes old,

Such as the wise Demodocus once told

In solemn songs at King Alcinous' feast,

While sad Ulysses' soul and all the rest

Are held with his melodious harmony

In willing chains and sweet captivity.

But fie my wand'ring Muse, how thou dost stray!

Expectance calls thee now another way;

Thou know'st it must be now thy only bent

To keep in compass of thy predicament:

Then quick about thy purposed business come,

That to the next I may resign my room.

Then ENS is represented as Father of the Predicaments, his ten sons, whereof the eldest stood for SUBSTANCE with his Canons, which ENS thus speaking, explains.

32. fancy: invention.

33. deep: high (Lat. altus means both "high" and "deep").

34. the wheeling poles: the spheres of the Ptolemaic universe.

37. unshorn: stock epithet for Apollo.

38. Hebe: goddess of youth, daughter of Zeus.

40. spheres of watchful fire: The celestial spheres were manned by watchful angels.

42. lofts: layers or stages of air; pilèd: stockpiled.

48. Demodocus: minstrel who sang of the fall of Troy at the court of Alcinous (Od. 8.487–543) and brought tears to the eyes of Odysseus.

53. Milton's abrupt return to the occasion echoes Horace's rejection of epic Trojan tales (Quo, Musa,

tendis?) in Odes 3.3.70.

53–58. Milton in the role of Ens or Father on this occasion must now introduce by name his ten Sons, the "categories" Aristotle defined in his Categories. The Muse's bent (aim) must be to keep within the compass (limits) of her predicament, or present situation. In scholastic logic based on Aristotle, the grammatical "accidents" that befell a "substance" or particular entity were called "predicaments."

Good luck befriend thee son; for at thy birth

The fairy ladies danced upon the hearth;

Thy drowsy nurse hath sworn she did them spy

Come tripping to the room where thou didst lie;

And sweetly singing round about thy bed

Strew all their blessings on thy sleeping head.

She heard them give thee this, that thou shouldst still

From eyes of mortals walk invisible;

Yet there is something that doth force my fear,

For once it was my dismal hap to hear

A sibyl old, bow-bent with crookèd age,

That far events full wisely could presage,

And in time's long and dark prospective glass

Foresaw what future days should bring to pass.

"Your Son," said she, "(nor can you it prevent)

Shall subject be to many an accident.

O'er all his brethren he shall reign as king,

Yet every one shall make him underling,

And those that cannot live from him asunder

Ungratefully shall strive to keep him under;

In worth and excellence he shall outgo them,

Yet being above them, he shall be below them;

From others he shall stand in need of nothing,

Yet on his brothers shall depend for clothing.

To find a foe it shall not be his hap,

And Peace shall lull him in her flow'ry lap;

Yet shall he live in strife, and at his door

Devouring War shall never cease to roar:

Yea, it shall be his natural property

To harbor those that are at enmity."

What power, what force, what mighty spell, if not

Your learned hands, can loose this Gordian knot?

The next, QUANTITY and QUALITY, spoke in prose, then RELATION was called by his name.

66. walk invisible: Because substance is an abstraction known only through particular accidents, Milton jokingly suggests that his personified Substance received at birth the gift of invisibility.

71. time's . . . glass: a crystal in which future events can be seen.

87–88. Cp. Aristotle, Categories 5.4a: "But what is most characteristic of substance appears to be this: that, although it remains, notwithstanding, numerically one and the same, it is capable of being the recipient of contrary qualifications."

90. loose this Gordian knot: overcome the paradoxes of Aristotle's logic. The knot to which the proverb alludes was originally tied by Gordius. The oracle declared that whoever untied it would rule Asia. Alexander cut it.

Rivers arise; whether thou be the son

Of utmost Tweed, or Ouse, or gulfy Dun,

Or Trent, who like some Earth-born giant spreads

His thirty arms along th' indented meads,

Or sullen Mole that runneth underneath,

Or Severn swift, guilty of maiden's death,

Or rocky Avon, or of sedgy Lea,

Or coaly Tyne, or ancient hallowed Dee,

Or Humber loud that keeps the Scythian's name,

100Or Medway smooth, or royal-towered Thame.

The rest was prose.

91. Rivers arise: Two brothers named Rivers (George and Nizel) had been admitted to Christ's College in 1628. One of them played Relation, and is here called by his name. Milton proceeds to burlesque the catalogs of rivers found in Spenser (FQ 4.11.24–47) and often in Drayton's Polyolbion.

92. gulfy: full of eddies.

95. sullen: flowing sluggishly.

99. The name of the river Humber supposedly came from a Scythian invader who drowned in it after being defeated by Locrine.

song: on may morning

Dates from 1629 to 1631 have been proposed for this poem in the absence of any evidence. Whenever Milton wrote this aubade or dawn song, it is a small gem. It hearkens back to Elizabethan songs such as Thomas Nashe's "Spring, the sweet spring" (the opening poem in Francis Turner Palgrave's famous anthology The Golden Treasury) and Shakespeare's "It was a lover and his lass" (from AYL 5.3). Like his predecessors, and it must be said, without a hint of what is popularly known as Puritanism, Milton joins in the ritual dance of the year's renewal, the return of flowers, the reaffirmation of "Mirth and youth, and warm desire." The lyric is an "early song," sung on the dawn of a May morning with the early charm of the English Renaissance song still blossoming in its shifting meters and exuberant enjambments.

As he often does, Milton saves the most remarkable effect for the end. We "wish thee long" when of course May is never long enough, and our annual wishes are doomed to disappointment. The message of the final words rolls back retrospectively through the entire poem, and we behold a second time, under the sign of "gone too soon," the dawn of a May morning. The effect anticipates what the mature poet will achieve with the endless spring of Paradise: represent it responsively and thoroughly while all the while making us ever more hopelessly aware of its having been lost too soon.

sG4

Now the bright morning Star, day's harbinger,

Comes dancing from the East, and leads with her

The flow'ry May, who from her green lap throws

The yellow cowslip, and the pale primrose.

5Hail bounteous May that dost inspire

Mirth and youth, and warm desire;

Woods and groves are of thy dressing,

Hill and dale doth boast thy blessing.

Thus we salute thee with our early song,

10And welcome thee, and wish thee long.

1. morning Star: Venus.

3. Milton's flower-throwing May recalls Spenser's "faire May . . . throwing flowers out of her lap around" (FQ 7.7.34).

the fifth ode of horace, lib. i

This famous translation appeared for the first time in the 1673 Poems. Proponents of a late date, noting likenesses between the translation and Milton's mature style, suppose that he was deliberately studying Horace in an attempt to perfect his own literary gifts. But the fact that we have no other examples of such studious translations (unless we imagine that Milton was primarily tinkering with his style in the Psalm paraphrases) argues for an earlier date, perhaps 1629, on the assumption that the poem grew out of an academic exercise. It was not unusual for teachers to have their students compete in translating or adapting a classical work. By the eighteenth century, the practice extended to Milton's works. Thomas Warton in his 1785 edition notes that "Mr. Benson [presumably William Benson (1682–1754), who erected the Milton monument in Westminster Abbey] gave medals as prizes for the best verses that were produced on Milton at all our great schools."

The Horace translation was in fact immensely popular in the eighteenth century. "From 1700 to 1837," Raymond Havens reports, "no fewer than eighty-three poems, and probably many more, were written in Milton's Horatian stanza, which thus had a vogue almost as great, in proportion to the length and importance of the poem, as any of his own verse-forms enjoyed" (560). The best-known of the imitations is Collins's Ode to Evening, and the influence of Milton's unrhymed lines of shifting length can still be heard in such Victorian pieces as Tennyson's "Tears, idle tears" and Arnold's Philomela.

It is doubtful that Milton himself would have considered this vogue a sign of artistic health. The words of the headnote, "as near as the language will permit," indicate his awareness that this version of a Horatian ode is not a manifesto or an exemplar but a tour de force, a fantastic one-off. For the language does not permit. English word order cannot approach the free arrangements possible in an inflected language. Nor can Latin quantitative measures be imposed but for an enchanted moment on the accentual-syllabic system native to English. The poem affords us a brief look at an ideal English classicism that never happened. "Milton's youthful version of the Pyrrha Ode . . . is the only English translation in which it is really possible to perceive something of what makes the original what it is: the inimitable combination of difficulty and ease, artifice and grace, gravity and lightness" (Leishman, 52–53).

sG4

Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa

Rendered almost word for word without rhyme according to the Latin measure, as near as the language will permit.

What slender youth bedewed with liquid odors

Courts thee on roses in some pleasant cave,

Pyrrha? For whom bind’st thou

In wreaths thy golden hair,

5Plain in thy neatness? O how oft shall he

On faith and changèd gods complain: and seas

Rough with black winds and storms

Unwonted shall admire:

Who now enjoys thee credulous, all gold,

10Who always vacant, always amiable

Hopes thee, of flattering gales

Unmindful? Hapless they

To whom thou untried seem’st fair. Me in my vowed

Picture the sacred wall declares t’ have hung

15My dank and dropping weeds

To the stern god of sea.

5. Plain in thy neatness: Milton’s restrained rendition of Horace’s famously rich simplex munditie (or simplex munditiis, as modern editions read). The phrase has been taken as a comment on Horace’s own poetic art but in context asserts that Pyrrha is ordinarily plain in adorning herself, which makes the wreaths of her current hairdo all the more suggestive of a new love interest.

8. shall admire: shall wonder at (in surprise).

9. all gold: entirely pure, gold through and through (not just in the tresses).

10. vacant: without other lovers; amiable: lovable.

11. flattering: treacherous, deceitful.

13–16. Me . . . sea: Vota or “vows” were prayers to the gods to avert some danger, accompanied by the promise of a thanksgiving offering should the danger pass. They were often commemorated by placing a votive tablet containing an inscription or a picture summarizing the vow on the wall of the temple. Horace’s thankful speaker, having escaped metaphorical shipwreck (ill-fated love) through the favor of Neptune, has pictured himself hanging clothes still wet from the sea on the walls of Neptune’s temple.

on the morning of christ’s nativity

Though by no means the earliest of Milton’s poems, the Nativity Ode, as it is commonly called, was printed first in both the 1645 and 1673 Poems, as if its author (or its publisher, or both) were entirely confident of the work’s power. Here the mature poet presents his calling card. For the first time we see him shift from a personal voice seeking inspiration in the opening four stanzas to a communal voice performing our human part in the celestial harmonies that accompany the Incarnation, and defining with authoritative ease the proportions of joy and sorrow, wonder and apprehension, pride and shame, appropriate to this watershed moment. Other Nativity odes of the period dwelled on the paradox of an eternal God become a mortal child; Milton does that briefly in Stanza 2 of his induction. Other Nativity odes dwelled as modern Christmas cards do on the tender love passing back and forth between Mary and the infant Jesus; Milton touches on this theme in his final stanza. What Milton’s poem has, in place of the conventional themes that consumed other lyrics on this topic, is a sense of the meaning of the Nativity within the full scope of Christian history, and an interest in the relationship between Christianity and the various cultures, religions, and artistic traditions found in the world at its advent.

Two of the most influential treatments of the ode are Arthur Barker’s account of its structure (1940–41) and Rosemond Tuve’s study of its imagery (37–72). See also the important recent studies by C.W.R.D. Moseley (99–114), David Quint, and Mary Oates O’Reilly.

sG4

Composed 1629

1

This is the month, and this the happy morn

Wherein the Son of Heav’n’s eternal King,

Of wedded maid, and virgin mother born,

Our great redemption from above did bring;

5For so the holy sages once did sing,

That he our deadly forfeit should release,

And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

1. this the happy morn: Milton told Diodati that he began the poem on Christmas morning 1629. See Elegy 6 88.

5. holy sages: Hebrew prophets.

6. deadly forfeit: sin and its penalty, death.

ii

That glorious form, that light unsufferable,

And that far-beaming blaze of majesty,

Wherewith he wont at Heav'n's high council table,

To sit the midst of trinal unity,

He laid aside; and here with us to be,

Forsook the courts of everlasting day,

And chose with us a darksome house of mortal clay.

iii

Say Heav'nly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein

Afford a present to the infant God?

Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,

To welcome him to this his new abode,

Now while the heav'n by the sun's team untrod,

Hath took no print of the approaching light,

And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

iv

See how from far upon the eastern road

The star-led wizards haste with odors sweet:

O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,

And lay it lowly at his blessèd feet;

Have thou the honor first, thy Lord to greet,

And join thy v

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