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The poetical works of John Milton

Paradise lost - a poem in twelve books / Notes upon the twelve books of Paradise lost

Milton, John

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The life of Mr. John Milton.

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T H E
L I F E
O F
MR. JOHN MILTON.

FROM a Family, & Town of his name in *Oxfordshire*, our Author deriv'd his descent; but he was born at *London* in the year 1608. The Publisher of his Works in prose (on whose veracity some part of this narrative must entirely depend) dates his birth two years earlier than this: but contradicting himself afterwards in his own computation, I reduce it to the time that *Monsieur Bayle* hath assign'd; and for the same reason which prevail'd with him to assign it. His Father, *John Milton*, by profession a Scrivener, liv'd in a reputable manner on a competent estate, entirely his own acquisition; having been early dis-inherited by his Parents for renouncing the communion of the Church of *Rome*, to which they were zealously devoted. By his wife *Sarah Caston* he had likewise one Daughter nam'd *Anna*; & another Son, *Christopher*, whom he train'd to the practice of the Common-Law; who in the great Rebellion adher'd to the Royal cause: and in the Reign of King *James II.* by too easy a compliance with the doctrines of the Court, both religious and civil, he attain'd to the dignity of being made a Judge of the Common-
Pleas;

Pleas; of which he dy'd devested not long after the Revolution.

But JOHN the subject of the present essay, was the favorite of his Father's hopes; who to cultivate the great genius which early display'd itself, was at the expense of a domestic Tutor: whose care and capacity his Pupil hath gratefully celebrated in an excellent Latin Elegy; the fourth in the present collection. At his initiation he is said to

An. Ætat. 12. have apply'd himself to letters with such indefatigable industry, that he rarely was prevail'd with to quit his studies before midnight: which not only made him frequently subject to severe pains in his head; but likewise occasion'd that weakness in his eyes, which terminated in a total privation of sight. From a domestic education he was remov'd to St. Paul's School, to complete his acquaintance with the Classics under the care of Dr. Gill: and after a short stay there, was transplanted to *Christ's College in Cambridge*, where he distin-

An. Ætat. 15. guish'd himself in all kinds of Academical exercises. Of this society he continued a Member 'till he commenc'd Master of Arts: and then leaving the University, he return'd to his Father; who had quitted the Town, and liv'd at *Horton near Colebrooke in Barksbire*; where he persu'd his studies with unparallel'd assiduity, and success.

After some years spent in this studious retirement, his Mother dy'd: and then he prevail'd with his Father to gratify an inclination he had long entertain'd of seeing foreign countries. Sir Henry Wotton, at that time Provost of *Eaton Col-*

An. Ætat. 30. lege, gave him a letter of advice for the direction of his travels: but by not observing * an excellent maxim in it, he incur'd great danger by disputing against the superstition of the

* *I pensieri stretti, ed il viso sciolto,*

the Church of *Rome*, within the verge of the *Vatican*. Having employ'd his curiosity about * two years in *France* and *Italy*, on the news of a civil war breaking out in *England* he return'd, without taking a survey of *Greece* and *Sicily*, as at his setting out the scheme was projected. † At *Paris* the Lord Viscount *Scudamore*, Ambassador from King *Charles I.* at the Court of *France*, introduc'd him to the acquaintance of *Grotius*; who at that time was honor'd with the same character there by *Christina* Queen of *Sweden*. In *Rome*, *Genoa*, *Florence*, and other cities of *Italy*, he contracted a familiarity with those who were of highest reputation for wit & learning: several of whom gave him very obliging testimonies of their friendship, and esteem, which are printed before his Latin Poems. The first of them was written by *Manso* Marquis of *Villa*, a great patron of *Tasso*, by whom he is celebrated in his ‡ Poem on the Conquest of *Jerusalem*. It is highly probable that to his conversation with this noble *Neapolitan* we owe the first design which *MILTON* conceiv'd of writing an Epic Poem: and it appears by some Latin verses address'd to the Marquis with the title of *Mansus*, that he intended to fix on King *Arthur* for his Heroe: but *Arthur* was reserv'd to another destiny!

Returning from his travels he found *England* on the point of being involv'd *An. Ætat. 32.* in blood and confusion. It seems wonderful that one of so warm, and daring a spirit, as he certainly was, shou'd be restrain'd from the field in those unnatural commotions. I suppose we may

* 3

impute

* Et jam bis viridi surgebat culmus aristâ,
Et totidem flavas numerabant horrea messes, --
Nec dum aderat Thyrsis: pastorem scilicet illum
Dulcis amor Musa Thulcâ retinebat in urbe.

Epitaph. Dan.

† Defensio Secunda. pag. 96. Fol.

‡ Fra Cavalier magnanimi, e cortesi,
Risplende il Manso, --- Lib. 20.

impute it wholly to the great deference he paid to paternal authority, that he retir'd to lodgings provided for him in the City: which being commodious for the reception of his Sister's Sons, and some other young Gentlemen, he undertook their education: and is said to have form'd them on the same plan which he afterwards publish'd, in a short tractate inscrib'd to his friend Mr. *Hartlib*.

In this philosophical course he continued without a wife to the year 1643; when he marry'd *Mary* the Daughter of *Richard Powell* of *Forest-hill* in *Oxfordshire*: a Gentleman of estate and reputation in that County; and of principles so very opposite to his Son-in-Law, that the marriage is more to be wonder'd at, than the separation which ensu'd, in little more than a month after she had cohabited with him in *London*. Her desertion provok'd him both to write several treatises concerning the doctrine, and discipline of divorce; and also to make his addresses to a young Lady of great wit and beauty: but before he had engag'd her affections to conclude the marriage-treaty, in a visit at one of his Relations he found his Wife prostrate before him, imploring forgiveness, & reconciliation. It is not to be doubted but an interview of that nature, so little expected, must wonderfully affect him; and perhaps the impressions it made on his imagination contributed much to the painting of that pathetic scene in * *PARADISE LOST*, in which *Eve* addresseth herself to *Adam* for pardon, and peace. At the intercession of his friends who were present, after a short reluctance he generously sacrific'd all his resentment to her tears.

- - - *Soon his heart relented*
Tow'rs her, his life so late, and sole delight;
Now, at his feet submissive in distress!

And

* *Book X, ver. 902,*

And after this re-union, so far was he from retaining an unkind memory of the provocations which he had receiv'd from her ill conduct, that when the King's cause was entirely oppress'd, and her Father who had been active in his loyalty was expos'd to sequestration, MILTON receiv'd both him and his family to protection, and free entertainment, in his own house, till their affairs were accommodated by his interest in the victorious faction.

For he was now grown famous by his polemical writings of various kinds, *An. Ætat. 41.* and held in great favor, and esteem, by those who had power to dispose of all preferments in the State. 'Tis in vain to dissemble, and far be it from me to defend, his engaging with a party combin'd in the destruction of our Church and Monarchy. Yet, leaving the justification of a mis-guided sincerity to be debated in the schools, may I presume to observe in his favor, that his zeal, disemper'd & furious as it was, does not appear to have been inspirited by self-interested views: For it is affirm'd, that though he liv'd always in a frugal retirement, and before his death had dispos'd of his Library (which we may suppose to have been a valuable collection) he left no more than fifteen hundred pounds behind him for the support of his family: & whoever considers the Posts to which he was advanc'd, & the times in which he enjoy'd them, will I believe confess that he might have accumulated a much more plentiful fortune: in a dispassionate mind it will not require any extraordinary measure of candor to conclude, that though he abode in *the heritage of Oppressors*, and the spoils of his country lay at his feet, neither his conscience, nor his honor, cou'd stoop to gather them.

A Commission to constitute him *An. Ætat. 42.*
Adjutant-General to Sir William Waller
was promis'd, but soon superseded by Waller's being
laid

laid a-side, when his Masters thought it proper to new-model their Army. However, the keenness of his pen had so effectually recommended him to *Cromwell's* esteem, that when he took the reins of government into his own hand, he advanc'd him to be Latin Secretary, both to himself and the Parliament; the former of these preferments he enjoy'd both under the Usurper, and his Son; the other, 'till King *Charles II.* was restor'd. For some time he had an apartment for his family in *Whitehall*; but his health requiring a freer accession of air, he was oblig'd to remove from thence to lodgings which open'd into *St. James's Park*. Not long after his settlement there, his Wife dy'd in child-bed: and much about the time of her death, a *Gutta serena*, which had for several years been gradually increasing, totally extinguish'd his sight. In this melancholic condition he was easily prevail'd with to think of taking another wife; who was *Catharine* the Daughter of Captain *Woodcock* of *Hackney*: and she too, in less than a year after their marriage, dy'd in the same unfortunate manner as the former had done. In his twenty third Sonnet he does honor to her memory.

These private calamities were much
An. Ætat. 52. heighten'd, by the different figure he was likely to make in the new scene of affairs, which was going to be acted in the State. For all things now conspiring to promote the King's restoration, he was too conscious of his own activity during the Usurpation, to expect any favor from the Crown: & therefore he prudently absconded 'till the Act of oblivion was publish'd; by which he was only render'd incapable of bearing any office in the Nation. Many had a very just esteem of his admirable parts and learning, who detested his principles; by whose intercession his Pardon pass'd the Seals: and I wish the laws of civil History could have extended the benefit of that oblivion to the memory of his guilt, which

which was indulg'd to his person; *ne tanti facinoris immanitas aut extitisse, aut non vindicata fuisse videatur.*

Having thus gain'd a full protection from the Government, (which was in truth more than he cou'd have reasonably hop'd) he appear'd as much in publick as he formerly us'd to do; and employing his Friend Dr. *Paget* to make choice of a third consort, on his recommendation he married *Elizabeth* the Daughter of Mr. *Minshul* a *Cheshire* Gentleman, by whom he had no issue. Three Daughters by his first wife were then living; the two elder of whom are said to have been very serviceable to him in his studies. For having been instructed to pronounce not only the modern, but also the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew languages; they read in their respective originals whatever Authors he wanted to consult; though they understood none but their mother-tongue. This employment, however, was too un-pleasant to be continued for any long process of time; and therefore he dismiss'd them to receive an education more agreeable to their Sex, and temper.

We come now to take a survey of him in that point of view, in which he will be look'd on by all succeeding ages with equal delight, and admiration. An interval of above twenty years had elaps'd since he wrote the Mask of * *Comus*,
L' Allegro, Il Penseroso, & † *Lycidas*; *An. Æt.* * 26. † 29.
 all of such an exquisite strain! that though he had left no other monument of his Genius behind him, his name had been immortal. But neither the infirmities of age and constitution, nor the vicissitudes of fortune, cou'd depress the vigor of his mind; or divert it from executing a design he had ‡ long conceiv'd of writing: an Heroic Poem. The Fall of Man was a subject which he had some years before fix'd on for a Tragedy, which he intended to form

‡ *Par. Lost B. 2. V. 26.*

form by the models of Antiquity: and some, not without probability, say the Play open'd with that Speech in the fourth book of *PARADISE LOST*, ver. 32, which is address'd by *Satan* to the Sun. Were it material, I believe I cou'd produce other passages which more plainly appear to have been originally intended for the Scene. But whatever truth there may be in this report, 'tis certain that he did not begin to mold his subject in the form which it bears now, before he had concluded his controversy with *Salmasius* and *More*; when he had wholly lost the use of his eyes; and was forc'd to employ in the office of an amanuensis any friend who accidentally paid him a visit. Yet under all these discouragements,

& various interruptions, in the * year *An. Ætat. 61. 1669.* He publish'd his *PARADISE LOST*; the noblest Poem, next to those of *Homer* and *Virgil*, that ever the wit of man produc'd in the any age or nation. Nor need I mention any other evidence of its inestimable worth, than that the finest geniuses who have succeeded him have ever esteem'd it a merit to relish, and illustrate, its beauties: whilst the Critic who gaz'd with so much wanton malice on the nakedness of *Shakespear* when he slept, after having † formally declar'd war against it, wanted courage to make his attack; flush'd though he was with his conquest over *Julius Cesar*, and *The Moor*; which insolence his Muse, like the other Assassines of *Cesar*, ‡ severely reveng'd on herself; and not long after her triumph became her own executioner. Nor is it unworthy our observation, that though, perhaps, no one of our *English* Poets hath excited so many admirers to imitate his manner, yet I think never any was known to aspire to emulation:

* *Milton's Contract with his Bookseller S. Simmons for the Copy*, bears date April 27th, 1667.

† *The Tragedies of the last age consider'd*, p. 142.

‡ *Vid. EDGAR.*

lation: even the late ingenious Mr. *Philips*, who, in the colors of style, came the nearest of all the Copiers to resemble the great Original, made his distant advances with a filial reverence; and restrain'd his ambition within the same bounds which *Lucretius* prescrib'd to his own imitation:

*Non ita certandi cupidus, quàm propter amorem
Quod TE imitari augeo: quid enim contendat hirundo
Cycnis? - - -*

And now perhaps it may pass for fiction, what with great veracity I affirm to be fact, that MILTON, after having with much difficulty prevail'd to have this divine Poem licens'd for the Press, cou'd sell the Copy for no more than fifteen pounds: the payment of which *valuable consideration* depended on the sale of three numerous impressions. So unreasonably may personal prejudice affect the most excellent performances!

About * two years after, together *An. Ætat. 63.* with SAMSON AGONISTES (a Tragedy not unworthy the Grecian Stage when *Athens* was in her glory) he publish'd PARADISE REGAIN'D. But, *Oh! what a falling-off was there! - - -* Of which I will say no more, than that there is scarcely a more remarkable instance of the frailty of human reason, than our Author gave in preferring this Poem to PARADISE LOST; nor a more instructive caution to the best writers, to be very diffident in deciding the merit of their own productions.

And thus having attended him to the sixty sixth year of his age, as closely as such imperfect lights as men of Letters, & retirement usually leave to guide our inquiry wou'd allow; it now only remains to be

re-

* They were Licens'd July 2. 1670, but not printed before the year ensuing.

An. Ætat. 67⁶ recorded, that in the year 1674 the Gout put a period to his life at *Bunhill* near *London*; from whence his body was convey'd to *St. Giles's Church* by *Cripplegate*, where it lyes inter'd in the chancel; but neither has, nor wants a monument to perpetuate his memory.

In his youth he is said to have been extremely handsome: the color of his hair was a light brown; the symetry of his features exact; enliven'd with an agreeable air, & a beautiful mixture of fair & ruddy: which occasion'd the Marquis of *Villa* to give his * Epigram the same turn of thought, which *Gregory* Arch-Deacon of *Rome* had employ'd above a thousand years before, in praising the amiable complexions of some *English* Youths, before their conversion to Christianity. His stature († as we find it measur'd by himself) did not exceed the middle-size; neither too lean, nor corpulent: his limbs well-proportion'd, nervous, and active; serviceable in all respects to his exercising the Sword, in which he much delighted; & wanted neither skill nor courage to resent an affront, from men of the most athletic constitutions. In his diet he was abstemious; not delicate in the choice of his dishes; and strong liquors of all kinds were his aversion. Being too sadly convinc'd how much his health had suffer'd by night-studies in his younger years, he used to go early (seldom later than nine) to rest; and rose commonly before five in the morning. It is reported, (and there is a passage in one of his Latin Elegies to countenance the tradition) that his fancy made the happiest flights in the spring: but one of his Nephews used to deliver it as *MILTON's* own observation, that his Invention was in its highest perfection from September to the vernal *Æquinox*: however it was, the great inequalities to be found in his

* *Ut mens, forma, decor, facies, mos, si pietas sic,
Non Anglus, verum herclè Angelus ipse fores.*

† *Defensio secunda. p. 87. Fol.*

his composures are incontestable proofs, that in some seasons he was but one of the people. When blindness restrain'd him from other exercises, he had a machine to swing in, for the preservation of his health; and diverted himself in his chamber with playing on an Organ. His deportment was erect, open, affable; his conversation easy, chearful, instructive; his wit on all occasions at command, facetious, grave, or satirical, as the subject requir'd. His judgement, when dis-engag'd from religious and political speculations, was just and penetrating; his apprehension, quick; his memory, tenacious of what he read; his reading, only not so extensive as his genius, for that was universal. And having treasur'd up such immense stores of Science, perhaps the faculties of his Soul grew more vigorous after he was depriv'd of his sight: and his imagination (naturally sublime, and enlarg'd by reading Romances, * of which he was much inamor'd in his youth.) when it was wholly abstracted from material objects, was more at liberty to make such amazing excursions into the ideal world, when in composing his divine work he was tempted to range

Beyond the visible diurnal sphere.

And with so many accomplishments, not to have had some faults, & misfortunes, to be laid in the balance with the fame, and felicity, of writing PARADISE LOST, wou'd have been too great a portion for humanity.

* *His Apology for Smeđymnus, p. 177. Fel.*

