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INTRODUCTION



Two University Scenes

Two university scenes, half a century apart. First, Cambridge in the summer of 1632. John Milton supplicated for his Master of Arts degree on 3 July, at the age of twenty-three, after seven years of study. To be awarded the degree, he had to declare in writing, as he had done previously to obtain the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1629, his subscription to the liturgy and doctrines of the established Church of England and acknowledgement that the reigning monarch, Charles I, was ‘the King’s Majesty under God . . . the only Supream Governour of this Realm, and of all other his Highness Dominions and Countries, as well in all Spiritual or Ecclesiastical Things or Causes, as Temporal.’¹ It was this requirement that meant Roman Catholics, such as John Donne in an earlier generation, could study at university but not graduate. Since his arrival at Cambridge at the beginning of 1625, Milton had tried his hand, with varying degrees of success, at most of the various forms of poetry marking specific occasions in which a student with literary ambitions would have been expected to excel, mainly in Latin, the official language of the university, but also in the vernacular: satirical epigrams to mark the anniversary of the failed Gunpowder Plot; funeral elegies for noted ecclesiastical and university figures; verses for formal university exercises and college entertainments; and devotional poems linked to ceremonial feast days. He had in fact already written two thirds of the poems that he would collect in his first volume of verse, *Poems . . . Both English and Latin*, at the end of 1645. Milton was evidently known within his college, Christ’s, as an able Latinist, for he had ghost-written Latin verse for Fellows of Christ’s to recite at important occasions, possibly including the

visit of the French ambassador in September 1629.² But that reputation may not have stretched much beyond the college, as he did not appear in any of the printed university anthologies of verse of the years 1625–32, and he certainly did not leave Cambridge with the level of renown of such contemporaries as Richard Crashaw (1612/13–1648), whose collection of Latin devotional verse, *Epigrammatum Sacrorum liber* (A Book of Sacred Epigrams), would be given the honour of publication by the University Press on Crashaw's BA graduation in 1634.

Second, the Schools quadrangle of the Bodleian Library in Oxford in the summer of 1683. In the aftermath of the foiling of the so-called Rye House plot to assassinate Charles II and his brother, James, Duke of York, the Convocation of the University of Oxford met on Saturday, 21 July—the day on which Lord William Russell was executed for his alleged involvement in the plot—and issued a 'Judgment and Decree', printed at the Sheldonian Theatre. It included the writings of Milton among its list of 'pernicious books' containing 'certain Propositions . . . repugnant to the holy Scriptures, Decrees of Councils, Writings of the Fathers, the Faith and Profession of the Primitive Church: and also destructive of the Kingly Government, the safety of his Majestie's Person, the Public Peace, the Laws of Nature, and bonds of humane Society'. The Convocation forbade any member of the university from 'reading the said Books, under the penalties in the Statutes exprest', and ordered them to hand in such books 'to be publicly burnt, by the hand of our Marshal in the court of our Scholes'. Though it was nine years after Milton's death, the decree specifically cited Milton for advancing two propositions: 'That if lawful Governors become Tyrants, or govern otherwise then by the laws of God and man they ought to do, they forfeit the right they had unto their Government', and that 'King Charles the first was lawfully put to death, and his murtherers were the blessed instruments of Gods glory in their Generation.'³ The decree did not specify which of Milton's works were forbidden; presumably the books in question were his prose defences of the execution of Charles I published in English in 1649–50 and in Latin in 1651, the arguments of which correlate broadly with the propositions ascribed to him in the decree.

Two of these defences—*Eikonoklastes* (1649), in English, and the *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio* (Defence of the English People, 1651), in Latin—had previously been the subject of a proclamation by Charles II for their confiscation and public burning in London, Oxford, and Cambridge in August 1660, three months after the Stuart monarchy was restored after an absence of over eleven years (although signed by Charles as ‘given in the Twelfth Year of our Reign’), for containing ‘sundry Treasonable Passages against Us and Our Government, and most Impious endeavors to justifie the horrid and unmatchable Murther of Our late Dear Father, of Glorious Memory.’⁴ The effect of this earlier proclamation is indicated by an entry for the *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio* in the Donors’ Register of the library of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, which has been struck through and a marginal note inserted to explain that the book was ‘burnt by ye K[ing]’s p[ro]clamat[ion].’ The force of the 1683 Oxford decree was felt by James Parkinson, who in September 1683 was ejected from his Fellowship at Lincoln College for ‘holding, maintaining and defending some unwarrantable and seditious opinions’: one of the specific charges against Parkinson was that he ‘commended to some of his pupils Milton as an excellent book and an antidote against Sir Robert Filmer, whom [Parkinson] calls “too high a Tory”’.⁵ The ‘excellent book’ in question was likely either the 1651 *Defensio* or Milton’s first vernacular defence of the execution of Charles I, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), published within two weeks of the regicide, which secured Milton his position as Latin Secretary and, in effect, chief propagandist for the new republican government—a position that Milton retained throughout the decade of kingless rule of the 1650s. Filmer, renowned for his defence of the divine right of kings, had in his *Observations Concerning the Original of Government* (1652) specifically attacked the political arguments advanced by Milton in both the *Tenure* and the *Defensio*.

The 1683 decree came sixteen years after the publication of the first edition of *Paradise Lost* in 1667. It is probably unlikely that Oxford students, facing punishment for being found with unspecified books by ‘Milton,’ would have handed in their copies of *Paradise Lost*, or of

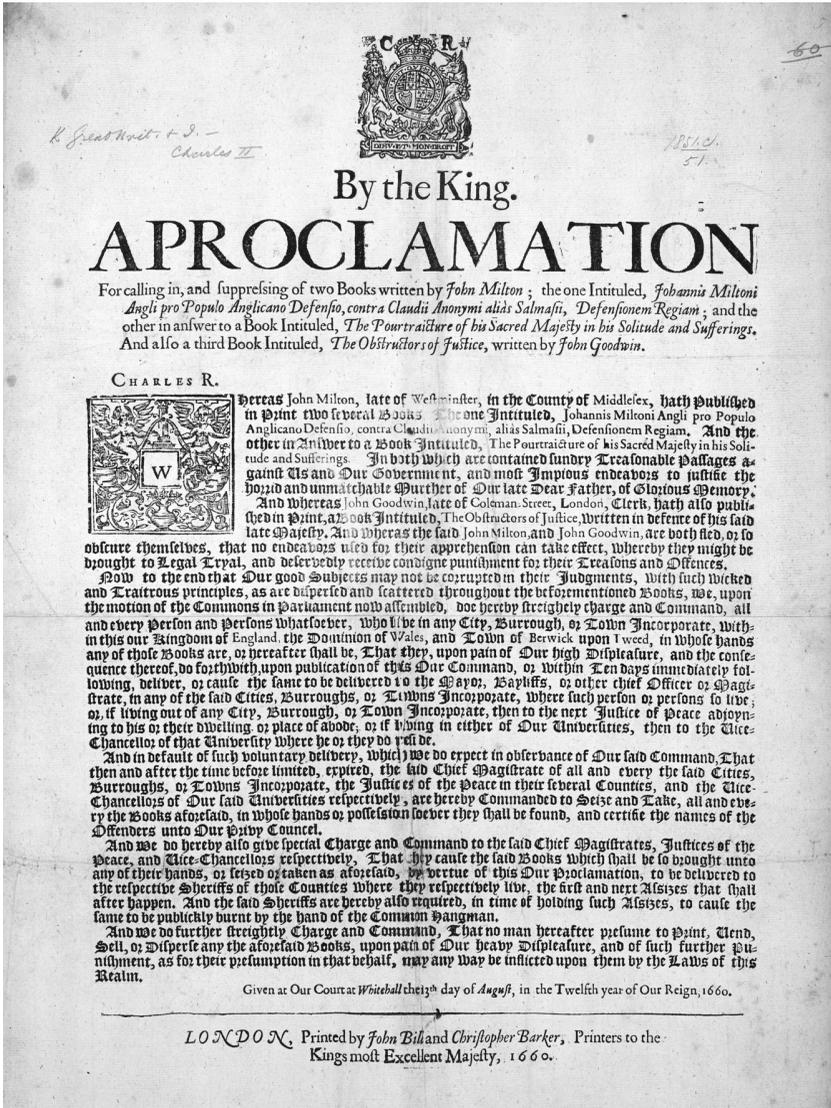


FIGURE 1. The 1660 proclamation by Charles II for the calling in and suppressing of two books by John Milton

the 1671 *Poems* containing *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. Yet readers of *Paradise Lost* in the months after its initial publication had perceived the principles of Milton's political writings in his epic poem. One of the earliest readers who has left his reactions to the epic to posterity, Sir John Hobart, observed at the beginning of 1668, less than six months after the publication of the first edition, that 'moderne cr[i] ticks . . . condemne [Milton] for being guilty (in this booke as well as others)'. Despite expressing his own admiration for the epic, Hobart called Milton a 'criminall and obsolete person'—'criminal' because of his support for the regicide and 'obsolete' in the sense of embodying an earlier and more barbarous age of civil war and king-killing.⁶ Another early reader, John Beale, thought in December 1669 that the epic showed how Milton 'holds to his old Principle', citing the lines that describe the biblical king Nimrod as the original of all the tyrants that will follow:

. . . till one shall rise
Of proud ambitious heart, who not content
With fair equalitie, fraternal state,
Will arrogate Dominion undeserv'd
Over his brethren, and quite dispossess
Concord and law of Nature from the Earth,
Hunting (and Men not Beasts shall be his game)
With Warr and hostile snare such as refuse
Subjection to his Empire tyrannous[.] (12. 25–32)

Beale, an Anglican cleric and early member of the Royal Society, even suggested in writing to his friend John Evelyn that the subversive political message of *Paradise Lost* justified the imposition of stricter censorship laws at a moment when he was concerned that arguments for greater toleration of religious dissent would lead to renewed civil disorder. Beale was prompted to comment again on the politics of *Paradise Lost* at the end of 1670: while Beale admired Milton's literary facility, he also 'hath great faults in his *Paradyce Lost* in his plea for our Original right'. The occasion for Beale's further reflections was the appearance of Milton's *History of Britain* (1670), on which Milton had begun work in the late 1640s, and of the 1671 *Poems*. 'Milton is abroad againe', Beale

noted, 'in Prose, & in Verse, Epick and Dramatick', as if a powerful and dangerous creature was on the loose.⁷ The question of whether 'it is lawful for a private man, having an inward motion from God, to kill a Tyrant', another of the pernicious propositions listed in the 1683 decree, is dramatically raised, after all, by the climactic episode of *Samson Agonistes*: Samson is impelled by '[s]ome rouzing motions in me' (line 1382) to tear down the temple of his captors, killing both himself and scores of the Philistines whom he regards as having enslaved his people, the Israelites.

The early responses to *Paradise Lost* of contemporary readers such as Hobart and Beale in unpublished correspondence have only been recovered comparatively recently, and they underline the extent to which Milton's reputation as a poet was overshadowed in his own lifetime, and for some years after his death, by his notoriety as a prose controversialist and defender of regicide. This was emphatically the case before the publication of *Paradise Lost*. Literary scholars are today proud to call themselves 'Miltonists', but the first use of the term is found in a polemical poem attached to Christopher Wase's translation of Sophocles's *Electra*, published less than three months after the execution of Charles I. Wase lamented in imagery of divorce and adultery the demand of the post-regicide government that all men take an oath of allegiance to the new regime. The name 'John Milton' had first become publicly infamous for prose arguments that Milton had published in 1643–5 for the religious and legal sanction of divorce on the grounds of incompatibility between a husband and wife. By the time that Wase published his translation of Sophocles in 1649, Milton had also become a salaried propagandist for a government which had violently divorced a nation from its monarch. He is given his own divorcing sect, the 'Miltonists', who have ushered in this brave new world of religious, political, and moral disorder:

While like the froward Miltonist,
We our old Nuptiall knot untwist:
And with the hands, late faith did joyn,
This Bill of plain Divorce must now signe.
Here their New Kingdom must commence

And Sinne conspire with Conscience.⁸

It is telling that when the leading royalist Edward Hyde, the future Earl of Clarendon, mentioned in a letter sent from exile in Jersey in 1647 that he had been reading Milton, the material in question was not the display of early poetic and linguistic virtuosity that Milton had so proudly displayed in his 1645 *Poems* but the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (first edition, 1643), Milton's first and most incendiary prose argument for a reform of the divorce laws. Even those who showed some immediate appreciation of Milton's 1645 *Poems* regarded the volume through the lens of Milton's activities as a polemicist. Peter Gunning included the 1645 *Poems* in the collection of books that he sent in March 1647 from London to his patron Christopher Hatton, first Baron Hatton, exiled in Paris after the end of the First Civil War. Two years before Milton first defended the regicide, Gunning felt he had to qualify his recommendation of Milton's verse in the light of the poet's political reputation: 'though the Gent hath not yet learned [tha]t le[ss]on to his prince, of the prince of poets'. Gunning then quotes in Greek a line voiced by Odysseus in Homer's *Iliad* (2. 204–5), a commonplace that was beloved of royalists: 'Let us obey that king, that Jove has set here in his place', as it was translated in Elizabethan England.⁹ Gunning presumably had in mind the series of aggressive prose polemics calling for the abolition of the episcopal Church of England that Milton issued in 1641–2; although it is conceivable that he was also thinking of 'Lycidas', Milton's elegy for his Cambridge contemporary Edward Young, first published in 1638, that he repackaged in 1645 with a new headnote as a prophecy of the 'ruin of our corrupted Clergy then in their height'.¹⁰ Milton's anti-episcopal polemics were evidently interpreted by some readers as implicit challenges to the political status quo several years before Milton actually challenged the legality and authority of Stuart monarchy.

There was nothing in either Milton's life or writing when he left Cambridge at twenty-three, however, to indicate that by the age of forty he would have launched violent attacks in print upon the Church to whose doctrines he had subscribed on that July graduation day; been condemned as a heretic and libertine for his views on divorce; defended the

public execution of the king to whom he had sworn allegiance; and become the chief literary spokesman for England's first (and so far only) republican government. Milton, having become completely blind in the early 1650s, had to hide for his life in London with the restoration of the Stuarts in 1660: the royal proclamation of 1660 refers to Milton having 'fled' and 'obscured' himself to evade 'Legal Tryal' and 'condigne punishment' for his 'Treason and Offences'. His imprisonment and release before finally completing the great English epic poem that he had long promised to write is a familiar story that has often been told. The story of how Milton came to write polemical prose during the English civil wars and eventually defend the execution of Charles I—the single most significant historical event in seventeenth-century Britain and Ireland, and one of the most significant in all of British history—remains fragmentary and contested, to the extent that recent biographies have advanced flatly contradictory narratives of Milton's intellectual and political formation. This stark division in accounts of Milton's early biography mirrors long-standing historiographical disputes over whether pre-civil war England was characterized by widespread consensus or by deeplying conflict.

A 'criminall and obsolete person': how and why did John Milton, the obscure occasional poet who took an oath pledging his allegiance to the episcopal Church of England and the Stuart monarch in Cambridge in 1632, and who mainly employed himself during the 1640s as a private tutor, become the infamous defender of regicide and propagandist for the republican governments of the 1650s whose books were burned for their capacity to 'to lead to Rebellion, murther of Princes, and Atheism itself'?¹¹ How did Milton's intellectual and political development relate to, or come into tension with, his profound sense of poetic vocation? How do the biography and the poetry speak to each other in this earlier period of his life? It is the principal aim of this book to offer answers to these questions. It offers a biography of the mind of the minor poet who became notorious as a prose polemicist and apologist for king-killers before he became renowned as the writer of the greatest narrative poem in English.

Attempts to write the life of Milton have been central to the development of English literary biography from Samuel Johnson's 'Life of Milton' (1779) to David Masson's epic, seven-volume *Life of John Milton: Narrated in Connexion with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of His Time* (1858–80). Yet for all this rich history of Miltonic biography, the two most significant biographies of Milton in the twenty-first century offer diametrically opposed portraits of his political and religious allegiances before his first venture into polemical prose writing as civil war broke out in England in 1641–2. Barbara Lewalski's *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography* (2000) is predicated on the assumption that 'at every stage [of his life, Milton] took up a reformist and oppositional stance which prepared him for the choice he would ultimately make: to defend the regicide and undertake to model anew the English church and state.'¹² Lewalski's statement may be unusually totalizing—note she writes 'at every stage'—but it epitomizes the dominant approach of biographically and historically oriented study of Milton during the twentieth century. The mid-twentieth-century work of North American scholars, pre-eminently A.S.P. Woodhouse's *Milton, Puritanism and Liberty* (1935), D. M. Wolfe's *Milton in the Puritan Revolution*, and Arthur Barker's *Milton and the Puritan Dilemma*, both published in 1941 in the midst of the Second World War, had apparently decisively categorized Milton's religious politics as 'Puritan'. There may have been some discussion about how radical a Puritan he was, and to what extent we should follow Christopher Hill, who in *Milton and the English Revolution* (1977) explained the more heterodox aspects of Milton's theology by placing him on the spectrum of Puritan belief closer to what Hill called the 'third culture' of popular religious radicalism; but Milton was definitively a Puritan nonetheless, and at the forefront of what was once called the 'Puritan Revolution' in the mid-seventeenth century.¹³ Lewalski's *Life of John Milton* is the most pure and comprehensive version of this understanding of Milton, in which the early life is always read retrospectively in the light of Milton's involvement in the regicide and in which he is always already on the path to becoming a fully weaponized Puritan revolutionary.

A major challenge to these assumptions was posed by Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns in *John Milton: Life, Work, and Thought* (2008), the weightiest and most innovative of the several biographies published in the quatercentenary year of Milton's birth. Campbell and Corns maintain that not only was Milton *not* a Puritan reformist before the late 1630s, he was in fact a 'Laudian'—a category synonymous with everything to which Puritans were supposed to be opposed. After being appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633, William Laud became the key figure in the religious disputes that played a vital role in the outbreak of civil war and the downfall of Charles I. During his 'Personal Rule' without Parliament from 1629 to 1640, Charles backed Laud's promotion across England of church services characterized by the increased prominence of set prayer, more elaborate clerical and sacramental ceremony, and the reintroduction of devotional objects and church ornamentation. Laud's execution in 1645 is testament to the blame that Parliamentarians ascribed to his influence and policies for the conflict. According to Campbell and Corns, before the civil wars 'Milton had been a contented Laudian both in his personal loyalties and in his theology'.¹⁴ Not just someone who conformed to the statutes of the Caroline Church of England, as he did when he graduated from Cambridge in 1629 and 1632, but an actual supporter of Laudian values, and a 'contented' one at that. Taken out of context, the claim sounded like a joke, or some sort of counter-factual thought experiment—what if the famous Puritan Milton, who wrote polemically and ferociously against episcopacy from at least 1641 and was the most strident defender of the regicide, had actually previously been a supporter of conservative, establishment values in both church and state?

Campbell and Corns are entirely serious, however, in their claim that until at least the composition of 'Lycidas' at the end of 1637, with its explosive moment of anti-clerical polemic—and they are not too sure even about 'Lycidas'—Milton should be characterized as an ideological conservative: a fully fledged supporter of Laudian values, who came from a Laudian background. Their argument rests both on archival evidence relating to Milton's family and contextualized interpretation of the early poetic work at Cambridge and in the two years immediately

after he left the university, in particular the Latin funeral elegies, the devotional poetry, and *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle* (or *Comus*, as it has become known), performed in 1634. This new biographical narrative creates another rather obvious problem: if Milton was in 1634 writing a masque, that Campbell and Corns describe as a ‘complex and thorough expression’ of Laudian theology and ‘Laudian style’, how is it that by 1641 Milton was writing violently anti-episcopal prose polemic?¹⁵ Campbell and Corns offer no concerted explanation of why Milton not only *changed* his religious and political beliefs but apparently *reversed* them. The virtue of the narrative of Milton as constantly emerging Puritan revolutionary, such as we find in Lewalski’s biography, is that it at least offers a consistent, comprehensible intellectual development, while the account by Campbell and Corns necessarily entails some sort of sharp break from, or profound disillusionment with, the Laudian regime that Milton had previously been ‘contented’ to support. The problem that their biography leaves us with is how to explain this profound ideological *volte-face*.

Campbell and Corns prefer not to speculate with any confidence or in any real depth on the process of what they term Milton’s ‘radicalization’ between the later 1630s and 1641, and the result is a crucial gap in their portrait of Milton’s intellectual development. Their narrative of Milton’s life is avowedly shaped by the so-called ‘revisionist’ historiography of the late 1980s and 1990s of early Stuart Britain, which called into question long-standing historical accounts of a polarized society and politics in the period leading up to the civil wars. Their authorities are those historians who have emphasized the persistence of widespread consensus in pre-war England rather than long-term conflict, and they argue that the implications of such revisionist histories for our understanding of religious and political identities in early Stuart society have not hitherto been fully appreciated by literary scholars. Consequently, the life of Milton portrayed by Campbell and Corns also invites the chief and obvious criticism that has been made of that revisionist approach: how does a state supposedly characterized more by agreement than division then descend into a decade-long civil war that killed a greater percentage of the English population than the First World War,

with likely worse rates of death in Scotland and Ireland?¹⁶ In the specific case of Milton, how exactly does a supposedly conservative and conformist young man become a leading defender of regicide, republicanism, and (forms of) religious toleration within little more than a decade?

The chapters which follow weigh these competing versions of Milton's youth and find them both wanting. The aspects of Milton's upbringing and education that have long been regarded as evidence of the intellectual formation of an oppositional Puritan need to be understood within the context of a less polarized society in which being 'Puritan' did not necessarily entail religious non-conformism or heterodox belief. At the same time, the new claim for the Laudian theology and poetic idiom of the young Milton, which in effect shifts his place on the religious spectrum of early Stuart England from one extreme to the other, does not stand up to a recovery of the academic conventions and values of Caroline Cambridge. The moments in Milton's life and writing prior to the later 1630s that have been claimed both for non-conformist Puritanism and ultra-conformist Laudianism have in fact less to do with ideology than with Milton's intense engagement with humanist ideals of learning and poetic eloquence. A consistency can be found in Milton's religious and political development between the 1620s and 1640s that is sensitive to his personality as an aspiring poet as well as his changing historical contexts; but it is to be found less in denominational labels and theological doctrines than in the educational, cultural, and literary principles which shaped his view of the world and of the place of the poet in it from an early age.

Milton is fulsome about the power of poetry and his own poetic ambition in the early prose attacks on the English bishops, most strikingly in the extraordinary promise of 1642 that he would go on to write the great national epic of the English-speaking peoples—a promise conditional not only on his own commitment and endeavour but, crucially, on 'the Land ha[ving] once infranchis'd her self from this impertinent yoke of prelaty, under whose inquisitorious and tyrannical duncery, no free and splendid wit can flourish.'¹⁷ Milton understood poetry to be a vital aspect of the larger national culture of learning and 'wit'—an im-

portant term for this study and one that in the seventeenth century had a larger meaning than it does now, encompassing both intellectual ingenuity (in the Latin, *ingenium*) and the mental and perceptual qualities required to advance learning of all kinds.¹⁸ The conviction that ‘wit’ can only flourish when it is free, and that it can only be free when a nation has rid itself of the ‘tyrannical duncery’ of a persecutory clergy, finds its most eloquent and memorable expression in *Areopagitica* (1644), Milton’s powerful argument for the free circulation of knowledge and ideas—which is also, and not coincidentally, acknowledged as his most ‘poetic’ piece of prose. This same conviction drives the escalating *political* radicalism of Milton’s thought in the 1640s. In short, Milton’s peculiar intellectual development originates in his poetic ambition, even if his ideas grew into something larger than even that in his arguments for free speech, religious toleration, and political liberty. Hence the central role in my argument of ‘Lycidas’, Milton’s greatest early work, in which contemporary external events become explicitly a part of the poetry for the first time.

Milton’s political development is shaped by his evolving understanding of the ways in which ‘tyranny’—defined initially in ecclesiastical and clerical terms but which grows to encompass political organization—retards the intellectual and cultural progress of a nation. This understanding was shaped not only by historical experience of the unprecedented political turbulence of mid-seventeenth-century Britain, but by the interaction between that experience and his intellectual life. Milton’s period of intensive and almost entirely orthodox reading in political and religious history in the mid-1630s, the record of some of which survives in the notebook that was rediscovered in 1874, revealed to him how clerical censorship and heresy-hunting had suppressed intellectual and literary life in other countries. Milton regarded the cultural decline of Italy under the Counter-Reformation and Inquisition from the glory days of Dante and Petrarch, two of his pre-eminent post-classical models of the poetic career, as the starkest instance of this process. His tour of Italy in 1638–9 confirmed the lesson of his reading: that in nations where ‘this kind of inquisition tyrannizes’, as he put it in *Areopagitica*, learning is brought into a ‘servil condition’ and the ‘glory’ of ‘wits’ is ‘dampt.’¹⁹ It

was such an ‘inquisitorial’ process of clerical encroachment on civil power that Milton began to perceive in the policies of the episcopal Church of England under Archbishop Laud in the late 1630s and which led him first to enter the world of controversial prose in the early 1640s. It was his identification of this same tyrannical ambition in the Presbyterians whom he had initially supported in their opposition to episcopacy that provoked several of his satirical sonnets of the mid-1640s and led him to turn to explicitly political prose writing in the defence of regicide at the beginning of 1649.

The chronological narrative of this volume, intended as the first of a two-volume account of the complete life, follows Milton up to his early thirties, from his early education through his university life to his emergence as a polemical prose writer in 1641–2. It concludes in 1642, with the last of his five prose works attacking the episcopal polity of the Church of England and at the point of his (initially) failed first marriage. This period covers the composition of almost all the poems that would be included in his first volume of verse at the end of 1645, including the ‘Nativity Ode’, ‘L’Allegro’ and ‘Il Penseroso’, *A Maske presented at Ludlow Castle*, and ‘Lycidas’. These early poems have been claimed for ‘Puritanism’ or for ‘Laudianism’, for ‘radical’ or ‘conservative’ varieties of Protestant belief, but what will become apparent in the chapters which follow is the degree to which the poetic imagination of the young Milton was fired by Platonic and Neoplatonic notions of the *δαίμων*, or daemon—a winged soul or spiritualized being, intermediate between man and God, empowered to convey divine knowledge from the heavenly to the earthly realm. The pagan notion of the ‘positional ambiguity of the daemon as a being situated between the human and the divine’ was linked in ancient Greek thought to how the gods distributed their favours to humans and the divine forces which shaped an individual’s fate.²⁰ Any reader of Milton is soon struck by his almost overwhelming awareness of his divine gifts as a poet and of the intensity with which he felt it was his duty to justify the giving of those gifts by writing an epic poem for his nation. A rebirth of creative fascination with the daemonic is more usually associated with European Romanticism—with Goethe, Shelley, and Coleridge.²¹ Yet daemons are everywhere in early Milton,

and his fascination with the potential to become daemonic through bodily acts of will—primarily, for Milton, strenuous study and sexual abstinence as a precondition of extraordinary artistic achievement—sheds more light on his poetic representation of the relationship between vocation, moral action, and divine reward than theological disputes over election and free will between Puritan and Laudian, even if it remains opaque how metaphorically and not literally he thought about the possibility of attaining such a daemonic nature.

The fascination with Platonic perfectionism and ideas of the daemonic in the early work is exemplary of how different the young Milton portrayed in this book can look from the alien and austere Old Testament figure we associate with *Paradise Lost* and the final poems, who represented his blindness and persecution by the Restoration authorities as testimony to his prophetic powers. That elder Milton, who can appear understandably forbidding to many modern readers, is a persona that he himself began to cultivate in the early prose works of 1641–2, and it has roots in the ideal of the scholar-poet as dedicated to painful intellectual exertion with which he was obsessed from an early age and that he inherited from leading Renaissance humanists. But the young Milton was, of course, much less sure of himself and his writing at university shows him experimenting with a range of occasional poetic genres in various languages, mainly Latin and English, and in the modes that were popular among his successful contemporaries. It can be difficult to distinguish between Milton's own personality and the conventional personae of the genres in which he was writing, but the social life of the young Milton emerges in his early poems, university exercises, and letters—or at least those that he chose to preserve; much of this writing is in Latin, and his close friendships were with those whom he felt he could communicate more openly because he respected their knowledge and intellectual abilities. Milton was not particularly successful as a university poet, even if we probably now read more of his university verse than that of any other writer from the period.

The 1645 *Poems*, which comprises nearly all of the poetry that is discussed in this book, can seem oddly divided between the younger, more insecure and often more vibrant Milton, defined by his institutional

contexts, and the aloof persona of the prophetic poet that he would project in *Paradise Lost*. On the one hand, the 1645 *Poems* is stuffed with poems of praise and recommendations from scholars, poets, and musicians, especially those Milton encountered in his tour of Italy in 1638–9, and many of the poems were written for particular occasions; on the other, the volume is characterized by an insistent effort to remove poems from their original contexts and grant them an air of permanence. Hence his tendency to extract his Latin elegies and his sonnets, in English and Italian, from their occasions and chronology and instead put them in a numbered sequence. The persistent revision of his poetry that is evident in the surviving notebook of his literary drafts, the so-called Trinity manuscript, is testament to his desire to reshape his early work into an image of himself as a poet who would transcend his own moment. The addition in 1645 of the headnote to ‘Lycidas’, turning an elegy for a Cambridge contemporary into a prophecy of civil war, is the most striking instance of how Milton had begun to refashion himself as a prophetic and political writer.

In focusing so closely on Milton’s intellectual and literary formation in the 1620s and 1630s, I have been able to draw upon the several archival discoveries that have been made even since Campbell and Corns published their biography in 2008. With the ever greater access to the records of libraries and archives by digitization, there will doubtless be further discoveries that will continue to alter how we regard Milton’s life and work. In the very week that the text of this book was submitted to the publisher, it was convincingly claimed that a copy of the 1623 First Folio of Shakespeare now in the Free Library of Philadelphia once belonged to Milton, on the basis of extensive textual annotation and emendation in his hand, dating from both before and after his travels to Italy in 1638–9.²² This sensational find—which might reasonably be described as the copy of the works of the greatest dramatic poet in English that belonged to the greatest non-dramatic poet in English—shows Milton to have treated Shakespeare, who died when Milton was seven, in the same way that he treated a writer such as Euripides: as a canonical author deserving of the most scrupulous textual attention. He inserted, for example, the prologue from a quarto edition of *Romeo and Juliet* that

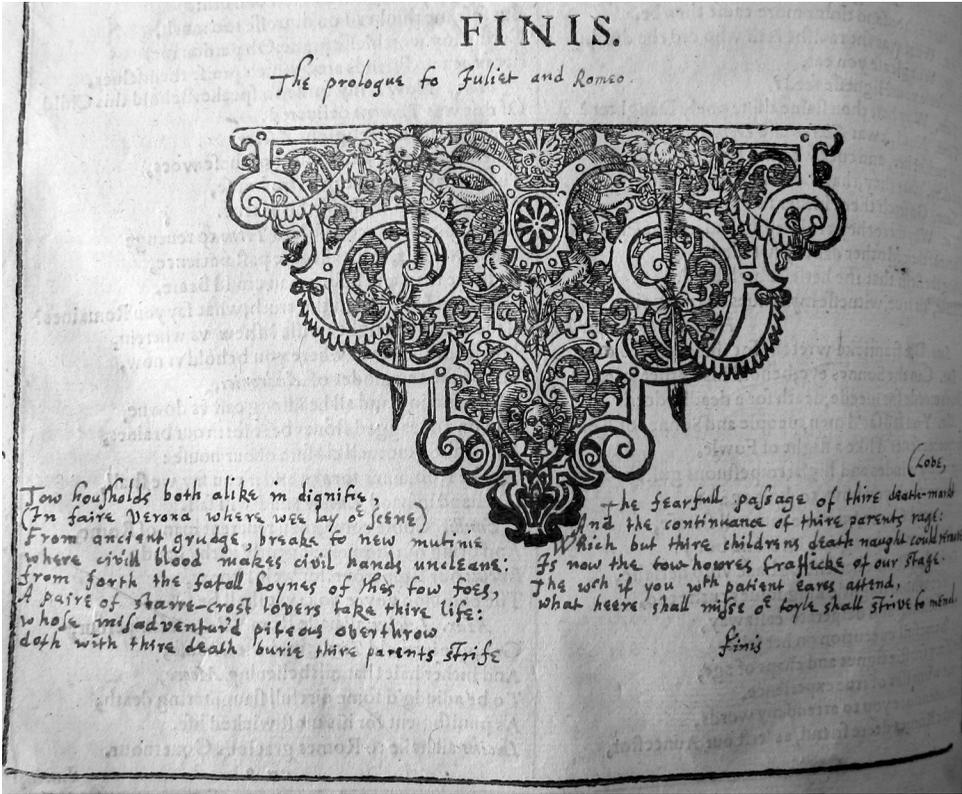


FIGURE 2. The Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* transcribed by Milton in his copy of Shakespeare's First Folio.

was missing from the text in the Folio, probably at some point in the early to mid-1630s. This same scholarly method of textual collation is evident in the small number of extant books that we know to have belonged to him, including copies of Euripides and Boccaccio's life of Dante that he was likely annotating around the same time as his Shakespeare. That Milton paid the same attention to a book of vernacular drama by a near-contemporary Englishman confirms the unusual ardour (for his time) of his admiration for Shakespeare, on whom he wrote one of his best-known early poems, but also reflects his confidence that modern English writers could aspire to the status of the greatest writers of antiquity and the Italian Renaissance—that he himself might rival Virgil and Dante as an epic poet.²³

This is a book, then, about the formation of the mind that would go on to create *Paradise Lost* but would first justify the killing of a king. I seek to combine literary criticism with biography, political narrative, and intellectual history in a manner that can do justice both to what Hazlitt called the ‘weight’ of Milton’s ‘intellectual obligations’ and to the revolutionary force of Milton’s writing and thought. While my approach includes elements of psychological speculation, I am interested in the details of Milton’s personal life primarily for what they might tell us about his poetic and intellectual development in relation to the ideological and cultural issues of his age: in this respect, my method more resembles that of intellectual biography than traditional literary or personal biography.²⁴ Can one speak of the intellectual biography of a poet? Milton assuredly qualifies as an ‘intellectual’ in the sense that Marco Santagata has recently applied the term to Dante for ‘his endless reflection on what he is doing, both as an author and as a man.’²⁵ But if we define ‘intellectual biography’ as the history of the development of an individual mind, then in the case of a poet it must surely either become a *critical* biography, an exercise in literary interpretation, or remain a bare record of the educational curricula to which the poet was exposed and the books that he likely read, along the lines of Harris Fletcher’s massive, two-volume *Intellectual Development of John Milton* (1956–61)—which still only got as far as his graduation from Cambridge in 1632! In a study of the origins of intellectual biography, it has been suggested that it is best defined not as a distinct genre but as ‘something approaching a style, less a *kind* of biography than a *quality* found in certain works.’²⁶ This notion of intellectual biography as a ‘style’ or ‘quality’ of inquiry, rather than an individual ‘kind’ of writing, is a helpful way to think about writing the intellectual life of a poet. Milton’s life must always finally be written as literary or critical biography, but his poetic development can be approached from the perspective of the education, the reading, the society, and the intellectual experiences which shaped his mind.

Reassuringly, some of the first intellectual biographies recognizable as such by their style of inquiry included not only lives of poets, but a life of Milton himself. Samuel Johnson’s life of Milton is one of the full-

est of his *Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1779–81), as well as one of his spikiest and most critical, and has exerted an influence on all subsequent study of Milton greater than probably any other work. Johnson sought to give some account of what he called Milton's 'intellectual operations' and followed a chronological structure that incorporated sayings of the author and sayings about him, while the biographical narrative is characterized by Johnson's own interpretations and criticisms of Milton's poetry—and personality. For Johnson, the appalling thing about Milton was the political consequence of his character: 'He hated monarchs in the state and prelates in the church; for he hated all whom he was required to obey. It is to be suspected that his predominant desire was to destroy rather than establish, and that he felt not so much the love of liberty as repugnance to authority.'²⁷ The chapters which follow tell a different story.

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