

Milton and His Age*(Alumni Prize Essay)*

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The century which gave birth to Milton began amid a multitude of history-making events. The Tudor period had been marked by a succession of despotic rulers and Charles the First, of the House of Stuart, during whose reign Milton figured so prominently, would gladly have made himself an absolute ruler for he entertained the same exalted notions of the divine right of kings as had his predecessors. These heretical doctrines caused so many abuses on the part of kings that their subjects were forced to remedy their own condition by employing means equally as harsh as those to which their rulers were resorting in their attempts at despotism. There followed a period of shameful events which culminated in the execution of the king, a tragedy in which not all his subjects partook, but indeed only a very small group of extremists who claimed to be the administrators of the nation, and among whom was the unscrupulous Cromwell.

Throughout Cromwell's Protectorate we find a very important character in the background. Milton was born in the first decade of the eventful seventeenth century. This extremely interesting player on the political stage of that time was the offspring of Puritanical parents. His political stand at the time of the execution of Charles was with the army which had bested not only the Royalists, but Presbyterians and Parliamentarians. Hence he warmly defended the execution of the king. He was made Latin-Secretary to the new council of state in the same year, and in that capacity again plunged into that controversial writing which a reasonable judgment can only pronounce illogical, grossly abusive and ill-considered, though in every case scarcely more so than the pamphlets he was answering. In this warfare of spite and abuse Milton's untiring industry and zeal on behalf of the commonwealth resulted in the loss of his eyesight. Throughout Cromwell's Protectorate the poet-politician remained Latin-Secretary, and as such drafted or translated many important state papers.

For the most part, Milton's life was marked by a certain sequence of unpleasant events. We shall now try

to relate some of the really decisive incidents which tended to fashion his peculiar career and, in relating these, bridge over the interval between his youthful days and his formal entry into governmental offices.

The history of Milton's fame is so curious and interesting that it cannot be told in brief compass. His name was known in foreign countries where he travelled while it was yet unknown in his own land; indeed, his merits were known only to his personal friends. His destiny seemed from its very beginning to have been shrouded by mists which took time to dispel. It is true that he became infamous rather than famous at first, but his infamy contributed in some way to the establishment of his later fame. It was personal misery, the result of an unhappy marriage, which drove him to advocate and to support the heretical theory of divorce which brought down upon him an avalanche of censure. It might be said of Milton that his greatness had root in his grief, and he served to exemplify the statement long afterwards made by another poet—

“ Most wretched men
Are cradled into poetry by wrong,
They learn in suffering what they teach in song.”

Milton's relations in private life were of a most disagreeable nature. He was not understood even by his nearest ones with whom he was obliged to struggle on as best he could. His literary misdemeanours caused him to be brought before Parliament for an explanation. This event especially helped to place him in the limelight; but it was not until Milton the “divorcist” might be said to have sublimated into the defender of regicide and dared to apologize for what Cromwell had done that his reputation assumed its proper hue. To his contemporaries he seemed nothing better than a fierce, discontented scholar, whom disappointments and wounded pride had driven to support impossible measures and theories. Milton now sought to stabilize his uncertain and somewhat equivocal reputation by appearing more fully in his poetic character, but, with the Restoration, his questionable fame became decidedly dimmed.

It was about this time in Milton's literary career that his greatest effort, the one by which his true fame was established, was given to the world. It was with

difficulty that the merit of this great work, "Paradise Lost," laboured up against the obscurity that had enveloped its author. It is a vain task to try to praise or to sound the depth of beauty which Milton infused in *Paradise Lost*; so many famous critics have already exhausted the theme. Yet, coming from a regicide, such poetry was totally unexpected, and, when it came, was looked upon with suspicion, and like the killing of Charles himself, was deemed a monstrosity. In spite of prejudice and suspicion, however, the book made its way, and many who hated Milton and his illogical theories were forced to surrender their admiration to him as a poet.

It is well that death came to Milton about this time. The prejudice against his name and the admiration for his *Immortal Poem* continued to struggle with each other until the latter conquered, and it was then that the full tide of his glory set in. Had Milton lived to hear the break of that tide resounding everywhere so forcibly, it would probably only have helped to aggravate his already extremely vain-glorious nature.

However, it is almost invariably thus in the world's conduct towards men of lofty genius. At first their genius is confused with their beliefs, personal feelings, and is judged according to the usual arbitrary and conventional standards. It is for this reason that men say, "What a pity Milton was an exponent of regicide, Burns born a peasant! how different would they have been had their condition been other than it was!" But, later, men begin to realize that it is those very circumstances, surroundings, and even personal vices that determine the development of their genius.

Milton, had he not been so completely engrossed in the affairs of his time, would perhaps not have been competent to write the poem which afterwards brought such glory to his name. Dante's unhappy marriage, much like that of Milton, added the necessary acid and edge to his character, and, in the words of a recent writer, "fitted him to heat seven times hotter the furnace of his Hell." Men of genius derive their special faculty for literature, art, or music very often from the circumstances to which they are subjected.

Before speaking further of Milton's own genius, it might be well to examine a few of his critics. A motley collection, verily they are! Addison comes first with a

very long and loving analysis of the Poet's principal work, which did good at the time and served as an index pointing to the most sublime parts of the subject. Johnson's critique seems the outline of a whole volume of admiration and hatred, respect and scorn, the materials of which had been smouldering in his breast for a life-time. Whole articles have been written to answer some of Johnson's dicta, or to abate the force of his sneering remarks. Most of these writers have weakened their cause by towering into a passion and calling Johnson harsh names. Other ridiculous critiques have been offered by others who just dared to peep out of their holes and mutter words of Lilliputian protest against the enormous criticism of Johnson. It remained for Macaulay and Channing to adopt the true method in their rejoinder to Johnson. They proceeded not to depreciate him as others had done, but to distinguish him from the subject of his criticism. They stated the broad difference between Johnson and Milton and asked the unanswerable question, "How could two such minds sympathise?" Let it be said, however, that Milton's critics, constructive or destructive, have all given testimony to the sublimity of his poetry.

Unfortunately, the law of dimensions prevents the possibility of compressing the contents of Milton's life and age in the space of a few pages. Perhaps three words will go further than long and elaborate definition and discussion in expressing his genius,—and these are Wholeness, Sublimity, and Simplicity. Milton was not a bright fragment, but a man fitted with all natural capacities,—a man of reasoning and imagination, a man of truly creative talent. The result was that, in Milton, we have not a monster of mingled power and weakness, wisdom and folly, such as we find in a Caesar, a Voltaire, or a Napoleon, but a thoroughly finished and compactly-built man, truly what Caesar was falsely called, "the foremost man in all the world,"—only, shall we say, "a little lower than the angels."



Leaves have their time to fall,
And flowers to wither at the North wind's breath,
And stars to set—but all.
Thou hast all seasons for thine own, O Death.

—*Hemans*