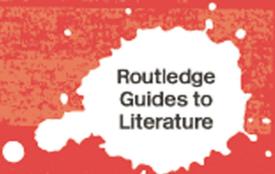


John Milton

Richard Bradford

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John Milton

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Richard Bradford is Professor of English at the University of Ulster at Coleraine

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John Milton



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To Helen and Gerard Burns
And Amy, Cork's Eve

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ABBREVIATIONS AND REFERENCING

Throughout the book, references to the works of Milton are taken from the following texts and abbreviated as shown:

- TP* *The Poems*, eds J. Carey and A. Fowler (London: Longman, 1968)
- CPW* *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, ed. D.M. Wolfe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953–82)
- WJM* *The Works of John Milton*, ed. F.A. Patterson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–40)

For the poetry, all references are to line numbers. For the prose works, all references are to page numbers. Where *CPW* or *WJM* are followed by a Roman numeral, e.g. *CPW III*, the reference includes a volume number.

For all other references, the Harvard system is used; full details of items cited can be found in the bibliography.

Cross-referencing between sections is one of the features of this series. Cross-references to relevant page numbers appear in bold type and square brackets: **[28]**.

INTRODUCTION

The three-part format of this guide is largely self-explanatory. A brief biography of Milton, his life and times, is followed by a middle section in which each of his poems is examined in detail. The third part considers the critical controversies and questions addressed by Milton's critics from the seventeenth century to the present day.

More important than the separate functions of each section are their mutual relationships, and here John Milton almost demands this Guide's triple perspective. Few, if any, major British writers have been so closely involved with the crucial issues and events of their time. If Milton had never written a poem his vast number of pamphlets and tracts of the 1640s and 1650s and his role in the post-war Cromwellian government would have earned him a place in surveys of seventeenth century British history. But he did, of course, write many poems, one of which, *Paradise Lost*, remains as the only serious British contender for equal ranking with the epics of Virgil and Homer. Readers and critics of Milton have speculated constantly on how the different dimensions of his life and work intersect. This Guide will not offer final answers to the questions raised by such speculations, but it will, for the first time in a single book, provide the reader with a map and a set of directions so that they can follow with confidence their own enquiries and reach their own conclusions.

For example, it has often been suggested that the picture of Satan and his defeated compatriots offered in Books I and II of *Paradise Lost* is a political allegory. Perhaps Milton expected his reader to find parallels between the denizens of hell and another more recent group of failed rebels: by 1667, when *Paradise Lost* was published, the Cromwellian experiment in republican government was a recent memory. A survey of what actually happens in Books I and II is available in Part II of this Guide, which will address the reader to the question of political allegory. To properly consider the question the reader will need a clear perception of what the Civil War and its aftermath involved, particularly for Milton: a detailed account of this will be provided in Part I. The reader will also want to know how literary critics have dealt with the same questions and what conclusions they have reached. Part III will deal with this. Throughout the Guide bracketed references will assist the reader in their pursuit of such contentious issues, directing them to the relevant parts of each section.

INTRODUCTION

The principal benefit for the reader of this triple perspective on Milton is that it strikes a unique balance between the provision of information and explanation. The fact that Milton's first wife left him in 1642 and that the following year he published *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* is beyond dispute. The dispute to which these events contribute also involves Milton's representation of gender in his poems: was he a misogynist and, if so, how did personal experience contribute to his state of mind? This question has divided modern feminist critics. The reader must make their own decision and the Guide will assist them in this by pointing them to relevant features of Milton's life and work and engaging them with the consequent critical debates. In doing so it will provide the reader with a uniquely multidimensional framework against which they can test their own responses and inclinations, and will better enable them to organise their thinking without imposing upon them a final conclusion. That is up to you: read on.

PART I

LIFE AND CONTEXTS

(a) INTRODUCTION

This section is a brief biography of Milton, involving the political, religious and cultural contexts of his life, which also includes discussions of his prose pamphlets and essays. The poems will be mentioned here but dealt with in more detail and exclusively in Part 2. Full publication details of the three biographies referred to in this section as ‘Phillips’ (1694), ‘Parker’ (1968) and ‘Wilson’ (1983) can be found in the bibliography. These and other biographies of Milton are discussed in ‘Further Reading’ at the end of this section.

(b) BREAD STREET 1608–1625

The family into which John Milton was born on Friday, 9 December 1608 exemplified the mutations and uncertainties of England at the beginning of the seventeenth century.

His paternal grandfather, Richard, had been a yeoman and worked a farm near Stanton St. John, a village about four miles north of Oxford. Richard had initially occupied a position in the social hierarchy only just above that of the medieval serf but by means still undisclosed, probably a good marriage, he acquired an estate that in 1577 was recorded as providing the considerable income of £500 per year.

Milton never in print made reference to his grandfather, which is not entirely surprising given that Richard’s public allegiance to Roman Catholicism earned him excommunication from the Elizabethan Church of England in 1582 and in 1601 fines amounting to £120. Religious difference caused a feud between Richard and his son John, Milton’s father. It is known that John senior attended Christ Church, Oxford sometime during the 1570s, although there is no record of whether he did so as a chorister or a student: he did not receive a degree. In any event it is likely that in Oxford John witnessed the disputations that attended the new theology of Protestantism, then in England barely fifty years old. One day after John had returned to the family home Richard discovered his son in his room reading that symbolic testament to Anglicanism, the Bible in English. Quarrels between father and son intensified, with the eventual result that in the early 1580s John was disinherited and left Oxfordshire for London, never to return, nor as far as is known to communicate again with Richard.

Nothing is known of how John, then in his early twenties (b. 1562) kept himself when he first arrived in London, but in 1583 or thereabouts

JOHN MILTON

he was taken on as an apprentice by James Colbron, a scrivener, and by 1590 had become a successful and independent member of that profession. Scriveners combined the functions of contract lawyer, accountant, financial adviser, money lender and debt collector. They had serviced the guilds and middle ranking professional classes of the metropolis since the early Middle Ages and by the turn of the sixteenth century they had become, perhaps more than any other profession, the financial beneficiaries of the growing status of London as one of the major trading and seafaring capitals of Europe. John Milton senior did well. By 1600 he felt financially secure enough to court Sara Jeffrey, from a comfortably off family of merchant tailors, whom he married within a year. The marital home would be a five storey house in Bread Street, near Cheapside, a region favoured by wealthy, upwardly mobile traders and merchants. Their first child died before it could be baptised in May 1601 but a few years later a daughter, christened Anne, survived. Their son, John, was baptised in All Hallows parish church, Bread Street on 20 December 1608.

Milton was the child of what in modern parlance is called the professional middle classes, the bourgeoisie. John senior planned for his son a conventional route to success via the educational channels that had been denied to himself. When Milton was ten his father hired for him a private tutor called Thomas Young, a graduate of St. Andrews University. Two years later John was admitted to St. Paul's School, an esteemed institution adjacent to the Cathedral and only a few minutes walk from Bread Street. Five years after that, aged 16, he would matriculate as an undergraduate at Christ's College, Cambridge, and enjoy the decent status of a 'lesser pensioner', meaning that his father was wealthy enough to pay for modest privileges and accommodation in college.

The influence of these years upon John Milton the writer is a matter of speculation but what we know of them is more than suggestive of their effect. Milton during the later seventeenth century was to become the most esteemed and controversial living poet in England, and *Paradise Lost* would remain as the poem in English most deserving of the title of epic. His status and reputation were sustained partly by his mastery of language and verse form, but only partly. In his writing he addressed himself to fundamental issues – our relationship with God, our origins, our condition as a species and our fate. These are recurrent features of all Renaissance verse, but Milton had a special, almost unique perspective upon them. He was born into the cauldron of tensions and divisions that characterised English society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a state which began with Henry VIII's break from the Roman

Catholic Church in 1534 and which would reach its apocalyptic climax in the Civil War of the 1640s. Milton not only observed these events, he was a participant in them. He served the republican cause as its most eminent pamphleteer and polemicist during the Civil War years and he would become Latin Secretary – an office not unlike the modern post of a foreign minister – for the victorious Cromwellian government. No other major English writer has been so closely involved with the intellectual and political shaping of their age. His early years had trained him well for his role and to properly appreciate the nature of this involvement we should have a clear perception of the world – essentially England and Europe – into which Milton was born.

**(c) RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL
CONTEXTS**

In 1517 Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, fixed on a church door in Wittenberg his ‘theses’ against the corrupt ‘indulgences’ of the Roman Catholic church. He initiated the Reformation, but it was John Calvin, a Geneva theologian, who created the most radical branch of Protestant theology. His *Institutions of Christian Religion* (1535) became the benchmark for division. In it he proposed a complex theological, indeed philosophical, thesis. Essentially Calvinism was founded upon the tenet of predestination, which holds that God has in advance ‘elected’ those who will be rewarded with eternal, heavenly existence. Human beings enter life in a state of sinfulness, carrying the burden of Adam and Eve’s Fall. Therefore we are offered the possibility of redemption, but God has already decided which of us will choose the path to redemption or damnation.

Calvinists maintained that the difficult and some would argue paradoxical tenet that (a), we must by our actions redeem ourselves, while (b), the redeemed have been preselected by God, troubles us because the original sin of Adam and Eve condemned the human race to a state of punitive detachment from God’s wisdom: we must accept even that which we cannot properly understand. Consequently, Calvinists argued that the ceremonial rituals of the Roman Church were self indulgent, even decadent, distractions from an attainment even of a limited knowledge of our God-willed condition and fate.

In its early years the English Reformation, particularly during the reign of Henry VIII, was less a theological than a political rebellion; the Protestant monarch rather than the Catholic Pope became the acknowledged head of the Church, with all the financial, ideological