

Criticism on Milton's Minor Poems

By MISS MAY TRAVIS

Read before Senior English class of Marion High School Dec. 12.

Milton, the author of "Paradise Lost" is so transcendently great that he quit over shadows Milton, the author of L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, Arcades, Comus, and Lycidas. Yet had the latter been all that he ever wrote they would place him almost as high as Shakespeare. After Melton had completed his college course at Cambridge he went to his father's at Horton and it was during his stay of six years here, that the Minor Poems were written.

L'Allegro and Il Penseroso were written in 1633 and are a very beautiful reflection of Milton and his surroundings. They are masterpieces of English literature which have few equals and perhaps one superior in the poems of Shakespears. Each piece is directly in contrast with the other, yet each is necessary to complete the thought. Garnett has said that they "may be in a sense regarded as one poem, whose theme is the reasonable life."

Throughout L'Allegro, mirthful though it is, there is an undertone not of cheerfulness but of sadness while in Il Penseroso, the poem of Melancholy, there is an undertone of gayety. In these poems Milton shows himself a cavalier in all save his severe chastity. In them he demonstrates his belief in the close connection of seriousness and gayety of heart.

As a painter of nature Milton shows himself an artist of marvelous skill. His method was that of the time in which he lived, "absolutely true in broad effects, sometimes ill-defined and even inaccurate in minute details." He displays a true love of the beautiful in nature, though he saw it so largely through books. We see the

"Meadows trim, with daisies pied, in shallow brooks and rivers wide,"

L'Allegro or in Il Penseroso the "Arched walks of twilight groves, and shadows brown that Sylvan loves.

As plainly almost as if they were really before our eyes.

Milton uses many classical allusions in the poems, especially in the "Il Penseroso," when understood, these add greatly to the beauty of the poems; but when they are not, they detract from our interest. Some critics condemn Melton for this, others commend him. A notable feature in their use, is their blending with the Christian religion and the worship of the true God. This makes them even more difficult to understand.

Some critics have accused Melton of inaccuracy in his mythology, because he does not follow the old accepted canons. This is not exactly just, however, for he did this not through lack of knowledge, but for the purposes of the poem. Thus he makes Venus, the Goddess of Beauty and Bacchus, the god of revelry and wine, the parents of Mith, while melancholy is the daughter of Vesta, the goddess of the home, and Saturn, the duty of civilization. Certainly no one can deny that in both cases the genealogy is most appropriate.

In L'Allegro and Il Penseroso we see the full soul of the complete man. The true man has sympathy for every thing that is pure and good, whether it be gay or grave in the whole life. He would turn away not only from the "vain deluding joys" of folly and sin, but also from the "loathed melancholy of dark despair and unbelief. There is a time for cheerfulness and harmless mirth as well as for quiet thoughtfulness and retrospect.

"Never were ideas of such dignity and power embodied in verse so easy and familiar, and with such apparent absence of effort, as in L'Allegro and Il Penseroso." Though Spenser was in some ways Milton's model in these poems, yet he (Milton) never copies from him, but waxes what is distinctively his own. He clothed even such ideas as he did borrow, in

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such beautiful language and that so entirely his own that we recognize his right as a great poet to borrow from others in this way.

L'Allegro and Il Penseroso each cover a period of about one day. L'Allegro begins in the morning, showing the delights of a day in the country, and comes to an end when

"When done, the tales, to bed they creep By whispering winds soon lulled asleep."

Il Penseroso begins at night and lasts

"Till civil-suited morn appear, Not tricked and frowned as she was wont

With the Attic boy to hunt, But kerchieft in a comely cloud."

Milton makes skillful use of the figures of speech, especially personification. "Loathed melancholy," "heart-easing mirth," "brooding Darkness," "wrinkled Care," in L'Allegro, and "vain deluding Joys," "divinest melancholy," "mute silence," "deny-feathered sleep," in Il Penseroso are examples of this. Milton regarded man as the theme around which the rest of the poem should be grouped and therefore he gave added force to the thought by personifying these things.

These two poems are the best portrait which we could have of Milton at this time. They prove that he was a close student of nature and he must have used his eyes to good advantage for greatly as he depended on books for his knowledge of nature he certainly had some intimate experience of his own while living in the country sor Horton is situated in a very beautiful part of England. They show two moods which he doubtless felt at different times for he had made no definite decision yet as to his future and it must have been a time of unrest and disquietude for him.

Arcades was also written in 1633. It was a "masque" or mask given in honor of the seventieth birthday of the Dowager Countess of Derby. A mask was a historic spectacle, Italian in origin, which somewhat resembled a drama, and which was very popular in England at this time. When Arcades was written the masks had fallen off in literary value but it showed the influence of the earlier masks and was superior to the bulk of the work at that time.

Arcades has often been considered of too little value and has been passed over as a mere understanding for Comus. This is unjust hower for though the better is more pretentious yet Arcades is to all intents and purposes quite as good. "Throughout the poem a high level of poetry and humanity is maintained; some serene interest in all things worthy and of good report prevails.

The lyrics which were sung in the mask were very skillfully written combining with artistic taste, grace and delicacy with praise to the venerable Countess-Dowager in whose honor they were written. In form for example, Milton was past-master of the harmony of words but he had but small skill in little tunes. "His was not a parlour voice." This was well illustrated in the songs of both Arcades and Comus. We cannot doubt that they were effective in their proper setting, but they are never sung now. Milton's songs the reader suspects, came from his brain and conscience by way of his deep-toned organ harmonies and must have overpowered many an unsophisticated reader. Or with their complexity of

suggestion they must have seemed artificial to plain folk who missed heartiness and melody in all the measures of these book lyrics.

Classical illusions, especially to the old forest duties as Pan, Syrinx, and the wood nymphs, are often employed in Arcades. There is the same beauty in these when understood as in L'Allegro and Il Penseroso. The descriptive passages are also considered very beautiful for instance the shady roof, of branching elm star-proof, or many others might be mentioned.

Comus was written in 1634 and like Arcades was a mask. It was presented at Ludlow Castle before the Earl of Bridgewater in honor of his avving been made President of Wales. This mask shows that the Puritan spirit was growing on Milton but yet it belonged to the earlier age. Like the masks of the time of Queen Elizabeth it had music and dancing but it also contained a growing strain of moral earnestness. Comus settled Milton's rank forever as a poet. It displaced itself as a mask to rise as a magnificent poem, a song to temperance.

Comus teaches that purity and innocence can tread the darkest paths and most tangled mazes of earth without receiving harm and this through the inherent strength of goodness. Milton enjoyed the masks quite as keenly as any courtier of Charles I and in Comus he wished to set forth in finer and more glorious verse than had been dedicated to courtly tastes, the battle between virtue and its tempters and the Divine help which is always aiding it. We see that the very powers of Heaven come down to protect and care for assailed Innocence and that virtue is a mighty power within itself

"Against the threats of malice or of scrocery, or that power, Which erring men call chance."

Hallowman says: "Comus was sufficient to convince any one of taste and feeling that a great poet had arisen in England and one partly formed in a different school from his contemporaries." In many ways Comus was the most ambitious of Milton's works in his earlier days. "The Lady is the sweet embodiment of Milton's youthful idea of virtue." Comus, although he is wicked and vile inwardly, has an outward beauty and grace that are scarcely surpassed villain though he is, yet he is the real hero of the mask.

The versification of Comus rendered it them unparalleled. "It was marked by a greater grandeur of style and thought, by a graver beauty and more exercised and conscious art than any poem of its character which England had as yet known. It belonged to the Elizabethan spirit, but it went beyond it and made a new departve for English poetry."

Dswden says: "Milton as an artist works in the manner of an idealist. Comus is the work of a youthful spirit. There are some features in Comus which do not appear in his other poems. Humor, the quality which Milton almost entirely lacked is best displayed in Comus. It is in Comus also that his poetic power is greatest. It teaches that the struggle between good and evil is the prime factor of life and that the good must always win.

Lycidas, the last of the Minor poems, was written in 1637. It was an elegy, or poem mourning the death of his friend, Edward King. It was also written in the form of a pastoral and represents King and him-

self as two shepherd lads brought up together. It is not a poem of passionate sorrow and grief it does express is too often only dignified and intelligent and it is courteous rather than lamentable.

Let us remember however that such friendship as that of Tennyson and Hallam, Shelley and Keats, or Wordsworth and Coleridge, did not exist between them and that they were merely school friends. "Probably Milton's own account is sufficiently accurate, when due allowance has been made for the large and remote phraseology characteristic of Milton's muse:

"For we were nursed upon the self-same hill Fed the same flock by mountain, shade and rill; Together both, ere the high lawns appeared, Under the opening eyelids of the morn."

Lycidas follows the usual form of pastoral poetry, having its introduction and its epilogue, while between them is the monody of the shepherd who has lost his friend. As Virgil had copied from the old Greeks so the Italians of the Renaissance copied from Virgil also adding an element of moralizing which verged on satire. With Renaissance the pastoral came to England and reached its height in the works of Spenser. Lycidas is of this same type and is regarded by some as superior to the "Faerve Queen."

There is a tone of religious earnestness pervading all of Milton's poems which were written while he was at Horton. In Lycidas it takes the form of a fierce denunciation of the corruption of church and the clergy—describing the former as that "grim wolf with the privy paw." The bishops are the faithless shepherds of the flock.

"The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,"

But the time of retribution is near and they will receive punishment.

By common verdict of the critics, Lycidas is reckoned to be one of the very finest poems ever written by any poet; and that it was never again matched by Milton himself, is an opinion equally strongly held some critics though not so generally. Milton pays a beautiful tribute to his dead friend, praising him highly. He recognizes that we are all living under the pure eye of God, and that Duty and not selfishness should be our motto.

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