

“The Childhood Shews the Man” 1608–1625

Milton's childhood and schooldays turned out to be a fortunate seedplot for a budding poet. Though his father expected him to take orders in the church, he encouraged and nurtured his poetic talents, his sheer delight in learning, and his wide-ranging scholarship. His schoolmasters taught him languages, literature, and verse writing (in Latin and Greek), and two of them became his friends. He also began a friendship with a schoolmate that was to be the most intense emotional attachment of his youth. He was reared in a bourgeois Puritan milieu that fostered in him qualities of self-discipline, diligent preparation for one's intended vocation, and responsibility before God for the development and use of one's talents, as well as a commitment to reformist, militant Protestantism. He grew up amid the sights and sounds and stimuli a great city like London can provide, and was conscious from early childhood of growing religious and political conflict in English society. These factors interacted with the gifts of nature: poetic genius, a prodigious intelligence, a serious and introspective temperament, a slender body, delicate features, and weak eyes.

In early youth Milton developed character traits and attitudes that lasted a lifetime: lofty aspirations and a driving compulsion to emulate and surpass the best and noblest; very exacting standards of personal morality and accomplishment; high expectations for human institutions (schools, marriage, government, the church); a disposition to challenge and resist institutional authorities who fell short of such standards; and a strong need for and high idealism about friendship and love. He gave evidence as a schoolboy of his intellectual and poetic gifts but may have begun to worry even then, as he certainly did later, about his comparatively slow maturation.

Milton's own retrospective comments supply much of what we know about his early years. Most often he resorts to autobiography for the rhetorical purpose of defending his qualifications and his character from polemic attack, but even so, his

remarks offer a fascinating insight into how he wished to remember his boyhood and represent it to others.

“Destined . . . in Early Childhood for the Study of Literature,”
and for the Church

Milton was born into a prosperous middle-class family of Puritan leanings and considerable culture, on “the 9th of December 1608 die Veneris [Friday] half an hour after 6 in the morning,” as he himself noted in a family Bible.¹ On December 20 he was baptized in his parish church of All Hallows, Bread Street.² The Miltons sub-leased spacious apartments on five floors of a building known as the Spread Eagle and also as the White Bear, on the east side of Bread Street, close to Cheapside – a street that was, according to Stow’s *Survey of London*, “wholly inhabited by rich merchants,” many of them in the cloth trade.³ Milton’s childhood home was a big house in the busy center of London, then a city of some 220,000. At the poet’s birth his father was about 46 and his mother about 36, and he had one older sibling, a sister, Anne (birthdate unknown). His maternal grandmother Ellen Jeffrey, then widowed, lived with the family until her death in 1611, and a younger brother Christopher was baptized December 3, 1615, at All Hallows.⁴ Two sisters died in infancy: Sara, christened for her mother on July 15, 1612 and buried on August 6; Tabitha, baptized on January 30, 1614 and buried on August 3, 1615.⁵ Besides the immediate family the household contained several apprentices and household servants.

The poet’s father, John Milton senior (1562?–1647), came from a yeoman family settled around the village of Stanton St John near Oxford. John Aubrey’s notes toward a life of Milton, gathered from family members and contemporaries, state that his father was “brought-up” in Oxford university, “at Christchurch”: his later musical interests and achievements suggest that he was trained there as a boy chorister.⁶ His father, Richard Milton, held fast to the Roman Catholic religion and paid fines for recusancy; John senior embraced Protestantism and (according to an often-repeated family story) was cast out and disinherited when Richard found him reading an English Bible.⁷ He came to London about 1583, was apprenticed to a scrivener, and in 1600 was admitted to the Company of Scriveners. His profession combined some functions of a notary, financial adviser, money-lender, and contract lawyer: records show that he drew bonds between borrowers and lenders, invested money for others, bought and sold property, loaned money at high interest, and gave depositions in legal cases. His shop on the ground floor bore the sign of the Spread Eagle, the scriveners’ emblem. The poet’s nephew and biographer Edward Phillips states that by “Industry and prudent conduct of his Affairs” Milton’s father (Phillips’ grandfather) obtained a “Competent Estate, whereby he was enabled to make a handsom Provision both for the Education and Maintenance of his

Children."⁸ In 1615, 1622, and 1625 he held minor offices in the Scriveners' Company. Later, in a rhetorical defense of himself, Milton claimed descent from an "honorable family" and described his father as a man of "supreme integrity" (*CPW* IV.1, 612) – a quality not often associated with scriveners. But he nowhere refers to more distant ancestors or seeks to trace a family tree, preferring to begin his story with the self-made bourgeois scrivener.

Milton senior's considerable ability and reputation as a composer of madrigals and psalm settings contributed greatly to his son's enduring passion for music and to his development as a poet. Aubrey called attention to the "delicate, tuneable voice" of young John, noting that "his father instructed him" and that he played often on a small organ in the family home; he was also said to have played the bass-viol.⁹ Edward Phillips calls up the image of Milton taking part in small domestic consorts, either singing or playing: "Hee had an excellent Ear, and could bear a part both in Vocal & Instrumental Music" (*EL* 32). Through his father, Milton came into social contact with music publishers and composers such as Thomas Myriell, John Tomkins, Thomas Morley, and Henry Lawes. Edward Phillips describes the prosperous scrivener attending to business and music in happy combination: "he did not so far quit his own Generous and Ingenious Inclinations, as to make himself wholly a Slave to the World; for he sometimes found vacant hours to the Study (which he made his recreation) of the Noble Science of Musick" (*EL* 1). His skill was such, noted Aubrey, that he once composed an *In Nomine* of 40 parts, and for his songs "gained the Reputation of a considerable Master in this most charming of all the Liberal Sciences."¹⁰ He contributed a song, "Fair Orian," to a volume in tribute to Queen Elizabeth, *The Triumphs of Oriana* (1601), and four religious anthems to William Leighton's collection, *The Teares, or Lamentations of a Sorrowfull Soule* (1614),¹¹ joining such distinguished composers as Thomas Morley, John Wilbye, Thomas Weelkes, and William Byrd. He also provided four-part settings for six psalms in Thomas Ravenscroft's popular collection, *The Whole Book of Psalmes*.¹² That he had some interest in theater is indicated by his appointment in 1620 as one of the four trustees of the Blackfriars Playhouse.¹³ But his gifts did not extend to poetry, as is evident from his pedestrian commendatory sonnet for John Lane, who wrote an equally pedestrian poetic tribute to Milton senior's musical gifts.¹⁴ The scrivener's experience as amateur composer probably disposed him to assume that his son might pursue his literary interests along with his intended profession, the ministry. Milton later claimed that "My father destined me in early childhood for the study of literature" (*CPW* IV.1, 612), but also stated, in different rhetorical circumstances, that "by the intentions of my parents and friends I was destin'd of a child, and in mine own resolutions" to serve the church (*CPW* I, 822).

Almost nothing is known about Milton's mother, Sara Jeffrey (1572?–1637), the elder daughter of a merchant tailor, Paul Jeffrey, and his wife Ellen, of St Swithin's parish, London. There is no record of Sara's marriage to John senior, but it probably occurred in 1599 or 1600; on May 12, 1601 they buried at All Hallows an

unnamed infant who died soon after birth.¹⁵ Milton’s pupil and friend Cyriack Skinner attributes some of the scrivener’s success to “the Consortship of a prudent virtuous Wife,” and Edward Phillips termed her “a Woman of Incomparable Vertue and Goodness.”¹⁶ Milton described her as “a woman of purest reputation, celebrated throughout the neighborhood for her acts of charity” (*CPW* IV.1, 612). These laconic phrases are not entirely formulaic: they praise a woman who fulfilled the duties prescribed for the bourgeois Protestant wife – helpmeet to her husband and dispenser of a prosperous family’s charity. Aubrey supplies another detail, that she “had very weake eies, & used spectacles p[re]sently after she was thirty yeares old,” whereas the scrivener “read with out spectacles at 84” (*EL* 4–5). Aubrey, the family, and Milton himself apparently believed that he inherited his weak eyes from his mother.¹⁷ Milton’s rather impersonal description of her might suggest some lack of warmth in their relationship, or it may simply indicate that he took pride in, and found rhetorical force in, the public recognition of her goodness. His only other mention of her links her death with his decision to travel abroad. Milton often refers to his father as a major beneficent influence on his development, but if he felt some important debt to his mother he did not say so.

As a boy John Milton went to church and catechism at All Hallows, where the respected Puritan minister Richard Stock (1559?–1626) had been rector since 1611. Stock preached twice on Sunday, demanded strict observance of the Sabbath, inveighed against Roman Catholics and Jesuits, urged continuous reading of the Bible and the English commentaries, and catechized the parish children daily for an hour before school, boys and girls on alternate days. Milton later repudiated Stock’s sabbatarianism, defense of tithes, and conservative views of marriage and divorce, but his antipapist diatribes and his readiness to censure the sins of the powerful – usurers, oppressors of the poor, morally lax aristocrats – likely had an enduring influence.¹⁸ And of course Milton began reading the Bible early.

Sitting under a Puritan minister and growing up among hard-working tradesmen proud of their steadily expanding wealth, power, and status as citizens of London, Milton would have become conscious early on of political, religious, and cultural strains in the national fabric. While the divisions were not yet unbridgeable, they were manifestly widening during the Jacobean era (1603–25). A king who vigorously defended royal absolutism was opposed by a parliament increasingly jealous of its rights and privileges. A pacifist king disposed to mediate between Catholic and Protestant powers in Europe and a queen openly supportive of Spanish interests were opposed by a militant war party eager to fight for international Protestantism – especially after the loss of Bohemia and the Palatinate by the Protestant Elector Palatine touched off the Thirty Years War.¹⁹ A court perceived as extravagant, morally decadent, infiltrated by Papists, rife with scandal, and increasingly controlled by the king’s homosexual favorites was opposed by a London citizenry self-styled as hard-working, wealth-producing, and morally upright, and a county-based aristocracy sensible of its diminished honor and power. An estab-

lished church perceived to be clinging to the idolatrous remnants of Roman Catholic liturgy, ceremony, and church government, and to be promoting an Arminian theology that made some place for free will and personal merit, was opposed by an energetic Puritan clergy bent on preaching the Word of God, reforming morals, holding fast to Calvinist predestinarian theology, and bringing the government of the English church into closer harmony with the Presbyterian model in Geneva and Scotland. A bright child had to be aware, at least subconsciously, that his life would be affected by such controversies and tensions.

The 1612 family Bible (Authorized Version) into which Milton later entered records of family births and deaths contains what seem to be a coherent set of underlinings and marginal annotations with the initials KJ marking verses from 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Psalms. Cedric Brown argues plausibly that the initials invite comparison of various biblical kings with King James and that they were most likely made in 1620–5, reflecting concerns among militant Protestants about the danger from Catholic enemies, the defection of kings, foreign and idolatrous queens, and purity of religion.²⁰ While the annotator cannot be identified – the handwriting does not seem to match that of Milton’s father, nor the scant samples we have of Milton’s youthful hand – the likely presence of the Bible in the Milton family reinforces the evidence that he grew up in a reformist political milieu.

Much of Milton’s childhood was given over to study, arranged by a father who was eager to give his extraordinary son the best education possible. Between the ages of five and seven, most likely from a private tutor, Milton learned to read and write in English and to do arithmetic; seven was the usual age for beginning Latin with a tutor or at a grammar school. Milton mentions having “sundry masters and teachers both at home and at the schools” (*CPWI*, 809) but we know the name of only one, Thomas Young (1587?–1655), a Scots Presbyterian who may have been recommended by Stock. Richard Baxter commended his great learning, judgment, piety, and humility, and especially his knowledge of the church Fathers.²¹ Thomas Young seems to have been Milton’s tutor between the ages of nine and twelve and was apparently the schoolmaster Aubrey heard about from Milton’s widow: “Anno Dom. 1619 he was ten yeares old, as by his picture, & was then a Poet. his schoolmaster was a puritan in Essex, who cutt his haire short” (*EL* 2). Young’s benefice, Ware, is in Hertfordshire, not Essex, but it is very close to the Essex border and about 20 miles from London.²² Aubrey’s note points to the striking portrait, said to be by Cornelius Janssen, depicting an elegantly garbed, rather wistful child with close-cropped auburn hair – almost certainly Milton (plate 1).²³ His parents had him painted as a young gentleman and the haircut (ascribed to the tutor) marks him also as a young Puritan.

In a Latin letter written at college Milton addressed Young as “best of Teachers” and as another Father who merits his “unparalleled gratitude”; in a Latin Elegy to Young he recalls that “Under his guidance I first visited the Aonian retreats . . . I

drank the Pierian waters and by the favor of Clio I thrice wet my blessed lips with Castalian wine.”²⁴ This could mean that Young was Milton’s first teacher in classics, beginning around 1615 when he was seven, but the terms probably suggest that Young introduced Milton to the reading and writing of Latin (and perhaps Greek) poetry at some later stage. If the “thrice” (“ter ora”) refers to three years under Young’s tutelage, their association probably began about 1618, since Young went to Hamburg in 1620 as chaplain to the Merchant Adventurers. Young was clearly an important influence in nurturing Milton’s classicism and his Puritanism.

While continuing the home tutorials Milton’s father also sent him to one of the finest grammar schools in the country, St Paul’s, founded in 1512 by the humanist John Colet and managed by the Mercers Company of London.²⁵ He may have entered at age seven (1615), but probably did so at Young’s departure in 1620.²⁶ He was then twelve, the age Milton proposed for entry into his model academy in *Of Education*, and he would then have joined the Upper School (forms five to eight). In the *Defensio Secunda* (1654), Milton designated his twelfth year as marking a new intensity of application to his books: “For the study of literature . . . I had so keen an appetite that from my twelfth year scarcely ever did I leave my studies for my bed before the hour of midnight.” Answering taunts that his blindness was a divine punishment for wickedness, he claimed rather that these youthful nocturnal studies were “the first cause of injury to my eyes, whose natural weakness was augmented by frequent headaches.” But, he continued, “since none of these defects slackened my assault upon knowledge, my father took care that I should be instructed daily both in school and under other masters at home” (*CPW* IV.1, 612). He represented these arrangements as the admirable manifestation of his father’s care and affection in nurturing his natural talents for languages, literature, and philosophy. From Milton’s brother Christopher, Aubrey was led to associate his nocturnal study with going to school and making poetry: “When he went to Schoole, when he was very young he studied very hard and sate-up very late, commonly till 12 or one a'clock at night, & his father ordered ye mayde to sitt-up for him, and in those yeares composed many Copies of verses, which might well become a riper age.”²⁷ Breaking through this language of industry and paternal encouragement is the image of a delighted child enthralled by learning and literature.

Whenever he became a “pigeon of Pauls” – the epithet bestowed on the school-boys in allusion to the many pigeons in Paul’s courtyard – Milton then entered into a stimulating environment for a poet-in-the-making. The school was located in a stone building at the northeast corner of the courtyard only a few blocks from the Milton home in Bread Street. Walking back and forth, Milton daily passed by the thronging booksellers’ stalls in the courtyard, which he was later to frequent. Also, he daily saw the massive (then gothic) cathedral with its clustered pillars, pointed arches, and famous rose window; and often heard the music of organ and choir; on occasion he may have heard sermons by John Donne, who was Dean of St Paul’s from 1621 to 1631. The Milton family likely knew John Tomkins the cathedral

organist, given Milton senior’s musical connections and the fact that both men contributed settings for Ravenscroft’s *Psalmes*. These early sights and sounds contribute to a memorable passage in *Il Penseroso*:

But let my due feet never fail,
To walk the studious Cloysters pale,
And love the high embowed Roof,
With antick Pillars massy proof,
And storied Windows richly dight,
Casting a dimm religious light.
There let the pealing Organ blow,
To the full voic’d Quire below
In Service high, and Anthems cleer,
As may with sweetnes, through mine ear,
Dissolve me into extasies,
And bring all Heav’n before mine eyes. (ll. 155–66)

John Strype, a student of Paul’s from 1657 to 1661, describes the physical appearance and operation of the school at that period. It was much the same as when Milton was there:

The Schoole House is large and spacious, fronting the Street on the *East* of *St. Paul’s* Cathedral. It consisteth of Eight *Classes* or *Forms*: in the first whereof Children learn their Rudiments; and so according to their Proficiency are advanced unto the other *Forms* till they rise to the Eighth. Whence, being commonly made perfect *Grammarians*, good orators and *Poets*, well instructed in *Latin*, *Greek*, and *Hebrew*, and sometime in other *Oriental* Languages, they remove to the *Universities*. . . . The School is governed and taught by two *Masters*, *viz.* an *High Master*, and a *Surmaster*, and a *Chaplain*: Whose customary Office was to read the *Latin* Prayers in the *School* . . . and to instruct the Children of the two first *Forms* in the *Elements* of the *Latin* Tongue, and also in the *Catechism* and *Christian Manners*; for which there is a *Room* called the *Vestibulum*, being the *Anti-room* to the *School*, where the *Youth* are to be initiated into the *Grounds* and *Principles* of *Christian Knowledge*, as a good and proper *Introduction* into other *Human Learning*.²⁸

The high master taught and dictated from a chair on a raised platform at the front of the schoolroom. A curtain that could be drawn aside separated the first four forms taught by the surmaster from the last four taught by the high master; an under-usher helped teach the younger boys. The pupils sat on benches arranged in three tiers along each side of the long hall; the best scholar in each of the forms (Milton, often?) had a small desk of his own. There was also a chapel for divine services.

The school was charged by its statutes to admit 153 students. A prospective student must already know how to “rede & wryte latyn & englisse sufficiently, soo that he be able to rede & wryte his owne lessons.”²⁹ The school was free, save for a

fee of fourpence at entrance which was to be paid to a poor scholar or poor man for keeping the school clean. Students attended classes for eight hours – from seven to eleven in the morning and one to five in the afternoon – for about 242 days, with half-holidays on Thursdays. The rules required the boys to speak only in Latin, to sit in the places assigned, to write neatly, to have books and writing implements always ready, to ask questions when in doubt, and to serve, if asked, as pupil teachers for the younger children. Milton’s angry denunciation in *Areopagitica*, “I hate a pupil teacher, I endure not an instructor that comes to me under the wardship of an overseeing fist” (*CPW* II, 533) may register his antipathy to this practice at Paul’s.

Milton’s teachers at Paul’s were Alexander Gil (1564–1635), the high master, William Sound the surmaster, and Oliver Smythe the under-usher. Gil was a Greek and Latin scholar and theologian of considerable repute, and his theological writings – *A Treatise Concerning the Trinitie* (1601) and *The Sacred Philosophie of the Holy Scripture* (1635) – defended the uses of reason in religion. If Young helped form Milton as a Puritan, Gil pointed him toward the tradition of Protestant rationalism from Hooker to the Cambridge Platonists. Gil was also an avid proponent of English spelling reform and the preservation of native Anglo-Saxon elements in the English language – views urged in his *Logonomia Anglica* (1619), an English grammar for foreign students. That book’s practice of illustrating rhetorical schemes and tropes from the English poets – Spenser (“our Homer”), George Wither (“our Juvenal”), Samuel Daniel (“our Lucan”), Philip Sidney (“our Anacreon”), John Harington (“our Martial”) – suggests that Gil may have encouraged that early love of English and of the English poets that Milton attests to in his poem “At a Vacation Exercise.” In his masque *Time Vindicated* (1623), Ben Jonson ridiculed Gil’s practice of having his pupils turn George Wither’s satires into Latin, but such a practice indicates that Gil was remarkably progressive in attempting to bring contemporary English poetry into relation with the Latin canon. Gil also had a reputation for flogging that exceeded the norm in an age when the practice was common. Aubrey calls him “a very ingeniose person” but given to “moodes and humours, particularly his whipping fits.”³⁰

In describing his schoolboy self later, Milton emphasized his warm relationships with various teachers and friends who valued and nurtured his talents. In curiously involuted terms, as if afraid to offend good taste in recording such comments, he points to his teachers’ early praise of him as prose writer and poet: “it was found that whether ought was impos’d me by them . . . or betak’n to of mine own choise in English, or other tongue, prosing or versing, but chiefly this latter, the stile by certain vital signes it had, was likely to live” (*CPW* I, 809). He found a good friend and early literary mentor in the high master’s son, Alexander Gil, Jr. (c. 1597–1642), who became under-usher at Paul’s in 1621. Milton was then in the higher forms, so Gil Jr. was not formally his teacher. Milton’s later letters to him (in Latin) refer to their “almost constant conversations” at school, from which he never departed “without a visible increase and growth of Knowledge, quite as if I had been

to some Market of Learning” (*CPW* I, 314). He exchanged poems and literary critiques with Gil over several years, and expressed his admiration for Gil’s Latin and Greek poetry, for his judgment as a critic, and for his politics. On the basis of his collected Latin verse (1632) Anthony à Wood termed the younger Gil “one of the best Latin poets in the nation.”³¹ While Milton was still at Paul’s Gil wrote Latin and Greek occasional poems and contributed several of them to miscellanies; he also wrote a virulent poem (1623) celebrating the death of over 90 Roman Catholics when their chapel in Blackfriars collapsed. That poem afforded Milton an example close to hand of militant Protestant politics and poetics.³²

Some 30 of Milton’s schoolmates at Paul’s have been identified, among them Nathaniel Gil, another son of the headmaster, and Henry Myriell, son of the music publisher Thomas Myriell.³³ But Milton seems to have formed only one close friendship, with Charles Diodati (1609–38). The headnote to his funeral elegy for Diodati in 1639 emphasizes their special amity based on shared interests: they “had pursued the same studies” and were “most intimate friends from childhood on.”³⁴ The Diodatis were a distinguished Protestant family who became voluntary exiles from Catholic Italy. Charles’s father, Theodore, was a prominent London physician with patients at court and in aristocratic families. His uncle was Giovanni Diodati of Geneva, a well-known Calvinist theologian, Hebraeist, promoter of international Protestant collaboration, and distinguished biblical scholar, known especially for his translation of the Bible into Italian (1603) and for his *Pious Annotations upon the Bible*, published in English translation in 1645. Milton visited him in Geneva in 1639 and may have met him when he visited England in 1619 and 1627.³⁵

Charles Diodati entered St Paul’s School in 1617 or 1618; if Milton entered in 1620 they were schoolfellows for three years. Charles, though a few months younger than Milton, was conspicuously on a faster track: he went to Paul’s earlier and left earlier, matriculating at Trinity College, Oxford at age 13 (February 7, 1623). Less than three years later (1625) he graduated AB when Milton was in his first year of college; and nine months before Milton took his Baccalaureate Diodati received his Master’s degree (1628). He was an accomplished Latinist and poet who published an artful Latin poetic tribute to William Camden in 1624, while Milton was still at school.³⁶ He seems to have been one of those bright students to whom everything in the realm of conventional academic expectation comes very easily. Milton admired and loved Diodati for his virtue, his liveliness, his conversation, his learning, and his poetry. But Diodati’s precocious accomplishment probably contributed to Milton’s anxieties about his tardiness in fulfilling his obvious promise.

Milton completed the regular curriculum of studies at Paul’s, which retained John Colet’s humanist emphasis on pure classical Latin and Greek models for reading, writing, and speaking.³⁷ He probably covered with his tutor(s) at home the matter of the first four forms, which would have included the Latin grammar text by William Lily, first master of Paul’s (mandated by royal authority),³⁸ Cato’s *Disticha Moralia*, Aesop’s Fables, Erasmus’s *Colloquies*, Caesar for history, Terence’s Com-

edies, Ovid’s *De Tristibus*, *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses*, and several elegiac poets, especially Ovid. He memorized grammar rules and model passages, paraphrased Latin texts and analyzed in minute detail their language and rhetorical figures, translated passages from Latin to English and back again, and wrote short themes and poems on various topics drawn from or imitating Aesop, Cato, Cicero, Ovid, and Terence. He read a good deal of Latin literature, and started Greek. And of course he studied the Bible and the principles of Protestant Christianity.

In the Upper School (the last four forms) when he was certainly at Paul’s, he studied Greek grammar and continued with Latin. He would have been assigned selections from Sallust, Virgil’s *Ecloques*, *Georgics*, and *Aeneid*, Cicero’s *Epistles* and *Offices*, Horace, Martial, Persius, and Juvenal. In Greek, in addition to the Greek New Testament, he read poetry from Hesiod, Pindar, Theocritus, Homer, and Euripides, Isocrates or Democritus for oratory, Plutarch’s Moral Essays, and perhaps Dionysius for history. He became adept at keeping commonplace books of notable passages from his reading, arranged by topic; at double translation of Greek into Latin and back again; at freely imitating the best models – Cicero for letters and orations, Ovid and Propertius for elegiac verse, verse letters and brief narratives, and Virgil for other poetic styles and genres. In his last year he began Hebrew grammar and read the Hebrew Psalter. However, the school offered only meager instruction in the mathematical sciences of the quadrivium: Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and (Ptolemaic) Astronomy.³⁹ Students’ extra-curricular activities included viewing an occasional play (probably Terence) at the Mercer’s Hall, and disputing – traditionally on St Bartholomew’s Eve – about principles of grammar with students from other schools.⁴⁰

Milton was also taught to compose and declaim more or less original Latin and Greek themes and orations on set topics, and to write poems of various kinds in several meters. A few of his school exercises survive in manuscript: a Latin essay and Latin verses on the theme of “Early Rising” probably date from his final two years at Paul’s.⁴¹ The essay is based on and takes its title from a proverb in Lily’s *Grammar*, “Betimes in the Morning Leave Thy Bed”; its structure follows closely a model theme in Reinhard Lorich’s widely used rhetorical exercise book based on Aphthonius’ *Progymnasmata*; and it is filled with echoes of Cicero, Virgil, Quintilian, Homer, Lily, Erasmus, and more, in a typical display of schoolboy learning.⁴² His “Carmen Elegiacum,” twenty lines in elegiac verse, offers a stock catalogue of the delights of dawn and spring filled with echoes of Ovid, Catullus, Virgil, Propertius, and Horace, among others.⁴³ Also, an eight-line poem in lesser Aesclapiad meter, “Ignavus satrapam,” is based on *Aeneid* 9.176–449, the slaughter wreaked on the sleeping Rutulians by Nilus and Euryalus. Milton may have preserved these set exercises because their theme – anxiety about time and the need to make proper use of it – was important to him early and late. In his 1673 *Poems* Milton chose to publish some elegiac verses on Aesop’s fable of the Peasant and the Landlord, “Apologus De Rustico Et Hero,” that probably originated as a school assignment

of the sort William Bullokar proposed in his *Aesop's Fables in True Orthography* (1585). Milton's closest model and the source of some verbal parallels was Mantuan's Latin metrical version of the fable.⁴⁴ He published in the 1645 *Poems* another early exercise, the Greek epigram "Philosophus ad regem," written to a King as from a Philosopher wrongfully condemned to death because captured along with some criminals. It may have been a school assignment, but its sharp warning to the king that the philosopher's death will silence a wise man the city badly needs shows schoolboy Milton voicing an early critique of kings.

Milton credited his father with giving him early access to languages and sciences outside the usual school curriculum, by tutorial instruction: "I had from my first yeeres by the ceaseless diligence and care of my father, whom God recompence, bin exercis'd to the tongues, and some sciences, as my age would suffer, by sundry masters and teachers both at home and at the schooles" (*CPW* I, 808–9). In "Ad Patrem" (1637?) he specifies French, Italian and Hebrew (possibly including Aramaic and Syriac)⁴⁵ as the languages he then learned in addition to his schoolboy Latin and Greek:

I will not mention a father's usual generosities, for greater things have a claim on me. It was at your expense, dear father, after I had got the mastery of the language of Romulus and the graces of Latin, and acquired the lofty speech of the magniloquent Greeks which is fit for the lips of Jove himself, that you persuaded me to add the flowers which France boasts and the eloquence which the modern Italian pours from his degenerate mouth – testifying by his accent to the barbarian wars – and the mysteries uttered by the Palestinian prophet. (Hughes, ll. 77–85)

Milton's *Apology Against a Pamphlet* (1642) includes a fascinating retrospective account of his literary interests and private reading from schooldays through the university and after (*CPW* I, 889–90). Though designed to demonstrate how his early reading led him to develop a lofty ideal of premarital chastity as an answer to scurrilous charges that he was licentious and frequented brothels, the narrative rings true enough. It tells the story of a sensitive, bookish schoolboy and aspiring poet who found in literature a means of sublimation and a support for the sexual abstinence urged upon him by his strong sense of religious duty, his adolescent anxieties, and his high idealism in matters of love and sex. Some of this reading (and certainly his reflections upon it) pertain to his Cambridge years and after, but we can preview the passage here since he claims to have begun working through this reading program while yet at Paul's. The climactic organization of the several kinds – elegies, Italian sonnets, romances, philosophy, the Bible – is only partly chronological: it recognizes their relative nobility and importance in forming his standard of sexual morality. He offers the review as "the summe of my thoughts in this matter through the course of my yeares and studies" (*CPW* I, 888).

Again pointing with pride to the "good learning" bestowed upon him at "those

places, where the opinion was it might be soonest attain’d,” he notes that at school he studied the authors “most commended,” and that he was at first most attracted to, and best able to imitate, the elegiac poets, Ovid, Propertius, and others:

Some were grave Orators & Historians; whose matter me thought I lov’d indeed, but as my age then was, so I understood them; others were smooth Elegiac Poets, whereof the Schooles are not scarce. Whom both for the pleasing sound of their numerous writing, which in imitation I found most easie; and most agreeable to natures part in me, and for their matter which what it is, there be few who know not, I was so allur’d to read, that no recreation came to me better welcome. (*CPW* I, 889)

He insists that he found moral value in those often erotic poets by supposing that they meant to celebrate “high perfections” under various women’s names: clearly, he was disposed early on to redeem recalcitrant texts by forcing them to conform to a nobler interpretation. Also, he claims that these poets sparked his resolve to choose his own objects of praise “much more wisely, and with more love of vertue” than they sometimes did. They taught him, as well, to distinguish between biography and art: “if I found those authors any where speaking unworthy things of themselves; or unchaste of those names which before they had extoll’d . . . from that time forward their art I still applauded, but the men I deplor’d” (*CPW* I, 889–90).

He then turned to Dante and Petrarch, in whom he found a more elevated concept of love: “the two famous renowners of *Beatrice* and *Laura* who never write but honour of them to whom they devote their verse, displaying sublime and pure thoughts, without transgression” (*CPW* I, 890). Romances – Spenser, Chaucer, perhaps Malory, and no doubt others – he identifies as recreational reading, “whether my younger feet wander’d” (*CPW* I, 890–1). Romances were notorious for inciting to wantonness, but Milton insists that they strengthened his idealism and commitment to premarital celibacy and chaste marital love:

Next . . . I betook me among those lofty Fables and Romances, which recount in solemne canto’s the deeds of Knighthood founded by our victorious Kings; & from hence had in renowne over all Christendome. There I read it in the oath of every Knight, that he should defend to the expence of his best blood, or of his life, if it so befell him, the honour and chastity of Virgin or Matron. From whence even then I learnt what a noble vertue chastity sure must be. . . . Only this my minde gave me that every free and gentle spirit without that oath ought to be borne a Knight . . . to secure and protect the weaknesse of any attempted chastity. So that even those books which to many others have bin the fuell of wantonnesse and loose living, I cannot thinke how unlesse by divine indulgence prov’d to me so many incitements as you have heard, to the love and stedfast observation of [chastity]. (*CPW* I, 890–1)

Though he claims to have “tasted by no means superficially the sweetness of philosophy” as a schoolboy (*CPW* IV.1, 613) he assigns to his “riper yeares” read-

ings from Plato and Xenophon that further refined his concept of virtuous love (*CPW* I, 891–2). But he points to his continued reading and instruction in the Bible from early childhood as providing the firmest basis for his developing views about chastity, gender hierarchy, and virtuous marriage:

Last of all not in time, but as perfection is last, that care was ever had of me, with my earliest capacity not to be negligently train’d in the precepts of Christian Religion. . . . Having had the doctrine of holy Scripture unfolding those chaste and high mysteries with timeliest care infus’d, that *the body is for the Lord and the Lord for the body*, thus also I argu’d to my selfe; that if unchastity in a woman whom Saint *Paul* termes the glory of man, be such a scandall and dishonour, then certainly in a man who is both the image and glory of God, it must, though commonly not so thought, be much more deflouring and dishonourable. (*CPW* I, 892)

While Milton was still at school his sister Anne married Edward Phillips, a government official, at St Stephen’s Walbrook on November 22, 1623; the minister who officiated, Thomas Myriell, was the music collector who published Milton senior’s songs.⁴⁶ The scrivener bestowed a considerable dowry upon Anne: £800 as well as property rights secured to her interest and that of her future children. Milton and his mother Sara witnessed the settlement; this is Milton’s first recorded signature.⁴⁷ Their first child, John, was baptized on January 16, 1625. Milton entered Cambridge that year, at age 16, later than several of his schoolmates but better prepared than most by his rigorous program of preparatory studies.

“The Stile by Certain Vital Signes it Had, Was Likely to Live”

The story of Milton’s writing also begins during these early years. According to John Aubrey he wrote poetry from the age of ten (*EL* 2, 10), though he preserved very few examples. But he chose to publish two free psalm paraphrases written in 1623–4 that sound some continuing themes: Psalm 114 in English decasyllabic couplets and Psalm 136 in iambic tetrameter. He dated them carefully in 1645 as “done by the Author at fifteen years old,” and placed them just after the Nativity Ode. These may have been school exercises, or they may have been proposed by Milton senior, who had composed several psalm settings. Alternatively, the choice of psalms may have been Milton’s own. Psalm 114, “When Israel went out of Egypt, and the house of Jacob from the barbarous people,” had political resonance in late 1623: that Exodus Psalm was sung in thanksgiving at St Paul’s Cathedral when Prince Charles delighted the nation by returning from Spain in October without the Catholic Infanta he had hoped to wed.⁴⁸ The 136th Psalm, “O give thanks unto the Lord: for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever,” had a similar resonance, since its chief example of God’s goodness is the Exodus story of Israel’s deliverance from Pharaoh and establishment in the Promised Land.

These psalms, Milton’s earliest extant English poems, were influenced by George Buchanan’s Latin metrical psalter (1566) and Joshua Sylvester’s enormously popular translation of Du Bartas under the title, *Divine Weekes and Workes*.⁴⁹ Milton imitates Du Bartas’s vowel elisions, use of simple meters and simple rhymes, ornate language, and picturesque epithets. He calls on Sylvester for some linguistic embellishments – “glassy floods,” “crystal fountains,” “Erythraean main” (for the Red Sea), and “walls of glass” (for the Red Sea divided). In devising compound epithets he looks to both Homer and Sylvester: for example, the sea’s “froth-becurled head,” God’s “thunder-clasping hand,” the “golden-tressed sun.”⁵⁰ Also, these earliest English poems display Milton’s characteristic fascination with unusual geographical names and verbal sonorities.

Milton elaborates the eight verses of Psalm 114 into 18 pentameter lines, and makes each of the 26 verses of Psalm 136 into a four-line stanza with a couplet refrain. At times his lines have no biblical equivalent. In the *Book of Common Prayer* the first two lines of Psalm 114 simply record the Exodus event: “When Israel came out of Egypt, and the house of Jacob from among the strange people, / Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion.” But Milton’s six-line paraphrase underscores the Israelites’ hard-won liberty and God’s protective power:

When the blest seed of *Terah’s* faithfull Son,
After long toil their liberty had won,
And past from Pharian fields to *Canaan* Land,
Led by the strength of the Almighty hand,
Jehovah’s wonders were in *Israel* shown,
His praise and glory was in *Israel* known.

Also, his paraphrase of Psalm 136 echoes Buchanan’s “*Cui domini rerum submitunt scepra tyranni*” in offering a politically charged interpretation of “Lord of Lords”:

O let us his praises tell,
That doth the wrathful tyrants quell.
For his mercies ay endure,
Ever faithfull, ever sure.

It is remarkable but hardly surprising that the original passages in the 15-year-old Milton’s psalm paraphrases reveal attitudes prevalent in his cultural milieu and announce themes that he reiterated throughout his life and in many forms: the people’s hard struggle for liberty and God’s power to destroy tyrants.