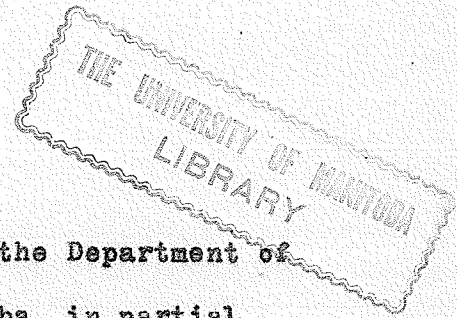


MILTON AND THE DRAMA

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Being a thesis presented to the Department of
English of the University of Manitoba, in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master
of Arts.

University of Manitoba,

May, 1919.

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MILTON AND THE DRAMA.

The life of Milton, unlike that of many of our great English poets is not shrouded in mystery. His biographers have found little difficulty in obtaining full particulars of his life, as much of his work, more particularly his prose pamphlets, is autobiographical. Our subject, however, does not demand a full account of his life, and we shall describe as briefly as possible the career of this poet only in its relation to dramatic literature.

Milton was born in the Golden Age of the English Drama, and many of the greatest dramatic masterpieces were produced when he was a child. The Golden Age soon passed and the decline of the drama had already begun before he had reached his early manhood.

Many critics have called Milton "the Last of the Elizabethans", a phrase that is only partially correct. It is true that he was born twenty years after the defeat of the Armada and five years after the death of Queen Elizabeth, but a study of his works proves that he was influenced by the Puritan beliefs and ideals even when he wrote his early poems; "Il Penseroso" and "L'Allegro". In his later works he shows very few Elizabethan qualities, as Puritanism had become the dominant force in his life.

There are several qualities that unite him with the great Elizabethan age, these are his fine choice of phrase, his powerful creative imagination, and his love for poetry.

Milton stood aloof from the prevailing influences of his day and did little for the decadent drama. His contact with dramatic literature was made in the study rather than in the play-house, and even when he mentions the theatres, he never shows any enthusiasm. He was, however, an ardent admirer of Shakespeare, Sophocles, Euripides, and Seneca, but unlike other writers of his age, he chose to devote his talents to those forms of literature which had been left untouched by the early Elizabethans, the pastoral drama, the pastoral elegy, and the masque.

The life of Milton extended from the great Shakespearean age, through the Puritan epoch and into the dark days of the Restoration. His position in English literature is second only to that of Shakespeare, and although his genius did not enable him to become a great dramatist, he left several dramatic pieces, and a study of his life and its relation to the drama will prove both interesting and instructive.

I. THE DRAMA IN MILTON'S TIME.

(1) The Drama up to 1642.

Milton belonged to an age that was intensely dramatic; it was an age when other writers were producing plays of every kind from the great masterpieces of the Elizabethan age to the corrupt plays of the period just previous to the closing of the theatres.

To understand Milton's relation to the drama we must have a general knowledge of English national history during this period.

The Puritan movement was the cause of a great upheaval in the first half of the seventeenth century. The Puritans were bitterly opposed to all dramatic productions, and to all public sports. They had very narrow religious views which made them intolerant of the views of others. Aside from their influence on political and religious matters they also assumed a control over the literature of the period. The Puritan literature is characterized by its religious fervor, its seriousness, and its lack of humor.

Milton's name is always associated with the movement, a movement which was shortly to reach its culmination in the execution of Charles I in 1649.

The approach of the Puritan revolution, like all great political and religious movements did not appear suddenly. There was no hard and fast line breaking the continuity of English national life.

The roots of the revolution had their beginning somewhere in the past, and there is even a conservative element in much of the political action of the period.

The struggle for political rights was not a new departure on the part of the English people. A similar struggle had been engaged in under the Tudors but with these strong sovereigns in control all such upheavals had been suppressed. The English people had always been loyal to their sovereigns but when loyalty meant the sacrifice of personal freedom, a rebellion was inevitable. The nation did not definitely divide itself into the two classes, the Cavaliers and the Roundheads, until James I raised his famous cry "No Bishop, no King".

The court and its surroundings, the church, the universities and the legal corporations were conservative by instinct. These were the forces that had always controlled the national literature. On several occasions the dramatists had given signs of a desire to shake off these influences, but in the main, they had held tenaciously to those forces which had supplied their inspiration. These writers could not be diverted from what seemed to them the traditions of the great Elizabethan age. The political preferences were also determined in large measure by a natural desire for self-preservation combined with a worship of dramatic precedents.

During the first two Stuart reigns the dramatists received nothing but good will from the court. It will be remembered that the court constituted the centre of the life of

the upper classes in London. In the first and second years of the reign of James the First, the principal companies which had formerly been attached to the service of great officers of state or noblemen of high distinction, were by virtue of royal patents taken into the service of the king, queen, and other members of the royal family. By this means, before the middle of the first Stuart reign, five companies, all officially connected with the royal family had come to constitute the chief body of actors in London. The natural result of such a method was that an exclusive connection between the stage and the royal family was created. This proceeding gave the crown the opportunity to assume more directly and systematically the control of the stage.

James I was not greatly interested in the drama; his great field of literary interest was theological controversy. It was natural that the great drama of the preceding reign should become a mere sentiment in the mind of this king. His queen was a patroness of masques, but her influence was not permanent. Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria had a genuine love for literature and art which inspired personal loyalty. But the drama needed greater influences than loyalty to check its downward course.

The first two Stuart monarchs refused to send an army to help the defenders of the Palatinate, although the people of England were extremely anxious to take an active part in this famous struggle. The natural outcome of such a peace policy

was that London became the sole focus of national aspiration. The final outcome of this national stagnation was that within the next two generations, Queen Elizabeth and the glories with which her name was identified were all but forgotten.

There were many causes which contributed to the decline of the drama, but the most important of these was the growing indifference to moral and religious matters. A growing apathy towards some of the most important restraining forces that operate in public and private relations was prevalent among the dramatic writers. Religion had come to be regarded as something outside the inner life of the people. It was an age of great exaggeration in dress and manners. Town life was exalted, and dramatists no longer described the beautiful rural scenery which contributes so largely to the charm of earlier writers like Greene and Shakespeare.

There were several social types of the drama which kept repeating one another constantly. The dramatists exalted town life, and the countryman is usually the dupe of his city companion. Another popular theme was the decay of the country nobleman's estates.

The physician and the clergyman still have a subordinate rank in society, while the tradesman is not recognized at all by the upper classes. The endeavour of citizens to make their sons gentlemen is considered one of the surest marks of inferiority. Shirley has expressed this characteristic of the

working classes in his play "The Ganester" (Act.I Sc.1)

"We that had

Our breeding from a trade, cite, as you call us
Though we hate gentlemen ourselves; yet are
Ambitious to make our children gentlemen".

The decay of the drama was due in large measure to a choice of subjects. National history was a great field for dramatists to cultivate. Shakespeare had made use of this material with wonderful success, but even he had scarcely scratched the surface; there was still an inexhaustible source of material for many years to come. The dramatists, however, with very few exceptions like Ford, preferred Italian, Spanish, French, and Bysantine intrigues and court-plots to the domestic material of their own history.

The drama declined immediately after the death of Shakespeare, although for many years it still shewed the unmistakable influence of his genius. Similarly, other great dramatists, particularly Jonson and Fletcher, left the mark of their personalities upon the drama of the succeeding generations.

The great age in which Shakespeare, Jonson, Chapman, Be Beaumont, Fletcher and Webster, reigned supreme, has been called the Golden Age of the English drama. This was the age that flourished during Milton's early years, an age which soon gave way to what is known as the Silver or Jacobean age.

The chief characteristic of this drama was the freedom with which the players, in spite of the censorship of the Master of Revels, introduced political and contemporary events on the stage. Fletcher was the outstanding dramatist in this period, though aided by Field, Jonson, and Massinger. The followers of Fletcher are known by their slipshod work and their preference for Spanish intricacies of plot, rather than by the presentation of character which was the chief feature of men like Shakespeare and Jonson.

The next period in the decline of the drama has been characterized as the Brazen Age, it was "a time in which the afterglow still remaining testifies to the splendour of the foregone sunlight, but which has no original radiance of its own"¹

This was an age of gross exaggeration. Each of the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists had a metrical method, but these later writers did not have a metre that was worthy of the name of verse.

We shall now consider a few of the outstanding dramatists who were contemporaries of Milton. The first in importance among these was Ben Jonson. He was the one Elizabethan who adhered strictly to the classical standards,

1. Fleay, Frederick Gard, M.A. A Chronicle History of the London Stage, 1559-1642. New York. G.E. Stechert and Co. 1909. Chap. VI. Page 312.

although his fellow dramatists followed Shakespeare and the other writers of the Romantic school. His comedies are read to-day, but few scholars find much interest in them. Their chief interest is found in the realistic presentation of the characters, they are the men and women of his day. His best known comedies are "Volpone" "The Alchemist" and "Epicoene". Jonson is also famous as a writer of masques, and is our greatest masque writer although he never wrote any masque which can compare with Milton's "Comus". His best known masques are "The Satyr", "The Penates", "The Masque of Beauty" and "The Masque of Blackness". A study of Jonson's plays reveals a sad state of morals among the upper classes, and too often his works are marred by low intrigues.

The works of Beaumont and Fletcher reveal an adherence to Romantic ideals, and a certain refinement of character. There are a great many coarse and brutal scenes which are very characteristic of their age. The best known joint productions of these dramatists are "Philaster" and "Cymbeline and Griselda"

John Webster was another dramatist who flourished at this time. He is noted for his well-known blood and thunder plays, "The Duchess of Malfi" and "The White Devil". In these plays he tried to reproduce the Italian life of the sixteenth century. These plays are very realistic, but such scenes must have had a degrading effect on the tastes of an audience.

There are many other dramatists in this period, but we shall just mention a few of the most outstanding, such as Massinger, Ford, and Shirley. Massinger had great ability as a dramatist, but his plots are strained and artificial. His best plays are "The Great Duke of Florence", "The Virgin Martyr" and "The Maid of Honor". Ford and Shirley are mere names. They have left no works which are read to-day by anyone with the exception of a few students who might wish to trace the decline of the drama.

One of the great defects of all these minor dramatists was their weakness in characterization. These writers either lacked ability or were too careless to give special attention to this phase of dramatic art. It is very rarely that they get beyond a brilliant sketch or an impressive hint, and they always fail to convince the student of the presence of real men and women. Combined with their weakness of characterization there is poverty in their plot-construction. Had they even possessed the ability to create a well constructed plot, they might have given their characters a semblance of reality by this means; but it is here that their chief weakness is revealed, their construction is even more faulty than their characterization, so that when they do happen upon a fairly reasonable plot they have no ability to construct the necessary detail.

(2) The Drama from 1642 to 1660.

On September 2nd, 1642, the fatal Ordinance which abolished stage-plays was put into effect, and for eighteen years the spoken drama remained in abeyance in England. During this period several companies tried to act various plays, but they were usually surprised and punished. Two such attempts were the performance of Beaumont and Fletcher's "A King and no King" and Fletcher's "A Bloody Brother".

The drama contrived by the means of its flexibility to retain a hold in its lower orders by performing comic portions of various plays. These entertainments were held at the town and country fairs, and at the Red Bull. Such performances were called "drolls". Robert Cox was the principal actor and composer of these farces.

During the period in which Oliver Cromwell was protector private performances took place at several noblemen's houses, and even on several occasions entertainments were given at the Red Bull. Such performances, however, were usually disturbed by soldiers. One nobleman, Sir William D'avenant succeeded in getting permission¹ to produce an entertainment 'after the manner of the ancients' on May 21, 1656. Being successful in this attempt he managed to have

1. Ward, A. Wilson. A History of Dramatic Literature. London. Macmillan & Co. Vol. III Chap. IX. Page 281.

his own production "The Siege of Rhodes" staged at the same place. This piece was a kind of opera. Its first part was epitomised and produced after the Restoration.

Following up his success, D'Avenant had his entertainment transferred to the lockpit. He then produced several other similar works and even ventured upon the performance of regular plays. By this method he anticipated the post-Restoration drama.

Aside from this method of producing mutilated portions of ~~part~~ plays for performance, several pre-Restoration playwrights succeeded in publishing dramatic works. These were the collected works of Shirley 1647, "The Virgin Widow" of Francis Quarles 1644, "The Pharennida" of William Chamberlayne, "The Parson's Wedding" and "Claricilla" of Thomas Killigrew and two plays by Sir Aston Cokain.

(3) The Restoration Drama.

Milton lived fourteen years after the Restoration, a fact which links him with the drama of this period. The drama of this age has been considered by all critics the most corrupt of English dramatic literature.

A court as vicious as that of Charles II could not be expected to have a good influence on the drama. Many of the leading dramatists had followed the fortunes of the king through the civil war, and later during his exile in France.

While at the French capital these exiles had become greatly influenced by the French drama. Like all people who are willing to copy at the sacrifice of their own originality, these dramatists copied the vices and not the virtues of the French stage playwrights. This was the greatest period in the history of the French stage, Racine and Corneille reigned supreme in tragedy, and Molière was the great comic-writer.

The drama which was restored to London with the return of the Stuarts came back in a new guise and in foreign dress. The great pity was that this new form was neither English nor French but a hybrid between the two. The form and the wit were French, but there was nothing in its character to suggest the tragedy then flourishing in Paris. The French plays were written in rhyme and the introduction of the rhymed couplets to the English stage by Dryden produced an artificial type of literature. The French tragedians also adhered strictly to the classical standards of the Greek drama, and although the great French writers wrote masterpieces in this style, their works are French rather than Latin or Greek.

When the English dramatists introduced this drama to the Restoration stage, there was nothing in their works of the subtle penetration of human nature ^{or} as the economy of art, - these were for the most part exchanged for "fury and fustian".

It was natural that these Restoration dramatists should have a strong antipathy for what they believed to be the misguided morals of the Puritans. These new playwrights in their reaction from Puritan standards returned not only to the old vulgarity of the pre-Restoration age, but also to the barbarous lust for blood and horrors. These qualities were totally different from those practised by the French who regarded bloodshed in any form too coarse for presentation on the stage. Such scenes were never acted on their stage - they belonged to the "told" element of the play.

Up to the closing of the theatres women's parts in plays were taken by boys, but with the Restoration these roles were taken by actresses. This is a notable innovation in the presentation of plays. Similarly there was by this time the wide use of moveable scenery. No doubt the masque influence had much to do with these two important changes, as the female parts had always been taken by ladies in these performances, and moveable scenery was introduced on these private stages in the reign of Charles the First.

The Restoration drama does not express the national aspirations of the people, and it "failed to revive the old national drama, or to substitute a new national growth in its place"¹.

1. Ward, A History of English Dramatic Literature, London. Macmillan & Co. 1899. Vol.III. Page 299.

Beneath all the polished wit and laughter of these dramatists, one feels instinctively the presence of their immorality and their indifference to suffering. These playwrights did not know that a deliberate attempt to stimulate the animal passions is always destructive of the first purpose of Art. The works of Dryden, Congreve, Wycherly, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar are examples of the corrupt Restoration drama.

II. MILTON'S ATTITUDE TO THE DRAMA.

Milton is remembered as an epic poet. A study of his life and works proves that he was always interested in the drama. Two of his early works "Arcades" and "Comus" were not only dramatic in form, but were actually performed on the stage. As a youth he attended the theatres in London during his vacations from college and no doubt he had seen masques by Ben Jonson, Carew, and Shirley. In his poem "L'Allegro" he speaks of the stage as one of the recreations for a young man in his happy mood, and in this connection he pays a tribute to both Jonson and Shakespeare.

"Then to the well-trod stage anon,
If Jonson's learned sock be on,
Or sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child
Warble his native wood-notes wild."¹

1. "L'Allegro, ll. 131-4

One might suspect that Milton did not regard Shakespeare very highly if this were his only eulogy to our great dramatist. His short poem, which has been prefixed to the second edition of Shakespeare's plays, pays a very high tribute to our greatest poet. As the poem is very short we shall quote it in full. -

"What needs my Shakespeare for his honored bones
The labor of an age of piled stones?
Or that his hallowed reliques should be hid
Under a star -ypeinting pyramid?
Dear son of memory, great heir of fame,
Thou in our wonder and astonishment
Has built thyself a livelong monument.
For whilst, to the shame of slow-enduring art,
Thy easy numbers flow, and that each heart
Hath from the leaves of thy unvalued book
These Delphic lines with deep impression took.
Then thou, our fancy of itself bereaving,
Dost make us marble with too much conceiving,
And so sepulchred in such pomp dost lie
That kings for such a tomb would wish to die."

In "Il Penseroso", the poem in which Milton speaks of the joys of the serious minded man, he commends tragedy in these words:

"Sometimes let gorgeous tragedy,
In scepter'd pall come sweeping by,
Presenting Phebes, of Pelop's line,
Or tale of Troy divine;
Or what (though rare) of later age
Enobled has the buskin'd stage"¹.

It is evident that this poet as a young man had no objection to the stage. There is, however, greater evidence that he admired the drama, as his next production was in dramatic form. It was not in that of the regular stage-plays, but in private representation combining dialogue, action, music, and pageantry, which was called the masque. "Comus" is especially interesting as it marks a distinct period in Milton's development. Up to this time he had been regarded as a child of the Renaissance, but in this poem no one can fail to see that he has become influenced by the great Puritan movement. This poem unlike any of his earlier poems is marked by a seriousness of purpose. A great moral purpose lies behind the lyrical beauty of its poetry.

The Puritans had always considered dramatic performances immoral. Just a year before the publication of "Comus" Prynne published his famous "Histriomatrix" in which he denounced stage plays and all connected with them through a

thousand quarto pages, and quoted no less than four thousand texts from Scripture to prove the absolute sinfulness of plays both public and private. The work had scarcely appeared before Milton gave proof that one of the forms that he had denounced as hopelessly vile could be turned to the service of the highest and purest moral teaching. The poem was really a counterblast against the work of Prynne.

Shortly after the publication of "Comus" Milton became greatly influenced by the Puritan movement, but there is little evidence until his return from Italy that he had abandoned his admiration for the drama. Even then he did not cease to admire the drama as a form of literature, but it was at this time that he felt an especial dislike for the corrupt drama of the age.

In spite of this attitude to the contemporary drama, he still remained faithful to his admiration for the drama as one of the best mediums for expressing the highest thoughts of a great poet. In "The Reason of Church Government" Milton balances the claims of the epic, the lyric, and the drama, and concludes that "in any one of these a great poet might have congenial scope and the benefits of grand precedents and models". In his deliberations on the drama he asks himself the question "whether these dramatic constitutions in which

Sophocles and Euripedes reign shall be more doctrinal and exemplary to a nation?". He continues the discussion by referring to Scripture. He states that a divine pastoral drama is found in "The Song of Solomon" consisting of two persons and a double chorus. Later he says that it is the duty of the government in every well-constituted commonwealth to provide "our public sports and pastimes". He thinks the civil magistrate should provide, in the interests of education and morality, "eloquent and graceful" appeals to the intellect not only from pulpits, but also in the form of "set and solemn paneguries in theatres".

There is a reference to Senecan tragedy in the pamphlet "The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates". In this document Milton is trying to show the people that it is their privilege to overthrow a king if he has proved himself a traitor. He tells them that the Romans and the Greeks thought it a glorious and heroic deed to kill a tyrant at any time without a trial. He then gives the following quotation from Seneca:

"Victima hand ulla amplior

Potest, magisque opima mactari Jovi

Quam rex iniquus...

There can be slain

No sacrifice to God more acceptable

Than an unjust and wicked king."

It had always been Milton's ambition to produce a great English poem which should contain all his genius, a masterpiece that his countrymen "would not willingly let die". It is remarkable that in his considerations on this work he should first turn his thoughts to the drama. He did think of writing an epic on the Arthurian legend but the project was never seriously entertained. In Trinity College, Cambridge, there is a list of about one hundred subjects which were made out by Milton and preserved among his manuscripts. The first subject on the list is "Paradise Lost". This subject was to have been treated dramatically, as four drafts of a tragedy with *dramatis personae* have been preserved. Edward Phillips, a nephew of Milton, tells us in his "Memoirs" that his uncle had not only made out these memoirs drafts but that he had actually written ten verses of the tragedy. These lines constitute Satan's address to the sun.

"O thou that, with surpassing glory crowned,
Look'st from the sole dominion like a god
Of this new world - at whose sight all the stars
Hide their diminished heads - to thee I call,
But thou with no friendly voice, and add thy name,
O Sun, to tell thee how I hate thy beams,
That bring to my remembrance from what state

I fell, how glorious once above thy sphere,
Till pride and worse ambition threw me down
Warring in Heaven against Heaven's matchless king"¹.

During the period from 1642 to 1660 when there were no open theatres Milton had become so greatly influenced by Puritan beliefs and ideals that he abandoned his original intention of writing a tragedy on "Paradise Lost". The reason for this change was not that he had ceased to admire the drama, but because he was afraid of arousing the antipathy of the weaker Puritans who were too prejudiced to appreciate the difference between the written and the spoken drama. No doubt he would not have written a drama for presentation at this time. The substitution of the epic for the dramatic form may not have been altogether due to religious scruples. The fact that he did make the change proves his supremacy as a creative poet. We do not know the exact date in which he decided to change his original plan, but the decision shows the admirable judgment of the poet. He may have realized that the stage was incapable of exhibiting so great an action as the loss of Paradise, extended to include the rebellion of the angels. He may have seen that the epic was just as well

1. Paradise Lost. Book IV. lines 32-41.

fitted as the drama to express all those distinctions of heroic character, and all those conflicts of lofty debate which were involved in the subject. He may have recognised that by removing the action from the stage he would have greater freedom to set his imagination at liberty. Had he adhered to his original intention he could not have represented the infinite spaces of heaven, hell, and the starry universe on the stage, nor could he have had the same opportunity to exercise his wide range of knowledge.

Though Milton chose the epic form for his great poem he was faithful to his old affection for the drama. "Samson Agonistes" is the one experiment of his mature art in this form of literature. This poem proves conclusively that he, who in his early years had produced the beautiful masques "Comus" and "Arcades", had never ceased to like the dramatic form of poetry. The exact date of the composition of "Samson Agonistes" is not definitely known, but it was certainly written after the Restoration. It appeared in 1671 just eleven years after the return of Charles II.

Milton's attitude to the drama is clearly revealed in his prefix to "Samson Agonistes". "Of that form of Dramatic poem which is called a Tragedy". The general spirit of this preface is apologetic, as if he were afraid that he should have

to offer explanations why he, a Puritan and a religious man, should in any way countenance the dramatic form of poetry; he then calls attention to the chief points of difference between his own drama and the immoral plays of his contemporary dramatists. He says that "Tragedy as it was anciently composed hath ever been held the most profitable of all other poems, therefore said by Aristotle to be of power, by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such like passions"¹. He then gives several examples to show that the great religious leaders in all ages held the drama in high esteem. The Apostle Paul had used a verse of Euripides in (I.Cor. XV.3), and Gregory Nazianzene, a father of the church, had actually written a tragedy. These examples were mentioned, in all probability, to justify his own position. The Preface is also interesting as it shows us Milton's Classical tendencies. Like the Greek tragedians he did not believe that tragedy and comedy should appear in the same play. He may have had Shakespeare in mind when he speaks of the Poet's "error of intermixing comic stuff with tragic sadness and gravity"².

1. Masson, David, The Poetical Works of John Milton. London. Macmillan, Vol.III. Page 93.

2. Masson, David. The Poetical Works of John Milton, London. Vol.III. Page 93.

III. MILTON'S DRAMATIC WORKS.

We shall now consider Milton's dramatic works.

These are the two masques "Arcades" and "Comus" and his one regular drama "Samson Agonistes".

1. Arcades and Comus.

Milton's name is always associated with the English masque as two of his poems "Arcades" and "Comus" appeared in this form. The masque was a form of literature of Italian origin which was introduced into England in Henry the Eighth's reign. It resembled the old pastimes of England in its disguising and in its dancing in character and costume. Specifically the masque was a setting, a lyric, scenic, and dramatic framework for a ball and "its invariable feature was a group of dancers called masquers"¹. In the developed masque there were two classes of participants, noble amateurs, who wore gorgeous costumes, and professional entertainers who spoke or sang.

Ben Jonson's name has always been associated with this form of entertainment. The Elizabethan drama which did not have scenery and elaborate stage apparatus, made its appeal to the mind and not to the eye, a fact which showed the intellectual character of this golden age of the drama. It is a false

1. Evans, A.E. "English Masques" London, Blackie & Son Ltd. 1897, Introduction Page XXXIV.

conception, however, to imagine that this drama was not sensuous. All through the Elizabethan age and until the closing of the theatres pageantry and masques held a prominent place among the Elizabethans.

The essential feature of the masque was the appeal it made to the eye and ear through the medium of its gorgeous costumes, its rapidly changing scenes and tableaux. It was this introduction of moveable scenes and female characters that paved the way for the post-Restoration drama.

During the reigns of the first two Stuart monarchs England had gone masque-mad, and enormous sums were spent on these entertainments. On one occasion a masque was presented at Whitehall in honor of Charles I and his queen which cost the huge sum of twenty-one thousand pounds.

The masques were generally offset by grotesque and comic actors, dancers, and buffoons, from the public theatres. These anti-masques formed a strong contrast between the visionary characters of the main plot and the ludicrous figures of the comic entertainers. The masques had a greater influence on the public theatre than is generally supposed. Professor Corson states that "A Midsummer Night's Dream" was probably not written in the first instance as a regular drama for the public stage, but as a masque, on the occasion of some noble marriage"¹. It was the great popularity of the masques that

1. Corson, Professor. Introduction to the Works of John Milton
Page 126.

caused Shakespeare to introduce several of these entertainments into his plays, notably in "Henry VIII", "The Winter's Tale", and in "The Tempest". The dumb show which was introduced into English tragedy had a similar origin. The best example of this is "The Mouse Trap" in "Hamlet". The introduction of dances and music into plays also owes its origin to the popularity of the masque. A great many of the older plays when revived at Court were altered to satisfy the prevailing taste of the public, the best examples of which are the introduction of "Hecate" in "Macbeth" and the Masque in "The Tempest".

"The extant masques have considerable literary merit, and they lead up to Milton's "Comus" in which Masque leads into Pastoral"¹

The pastoral drama was an offshoot from the legitimate drama which was adapted for outdoor performance. It has been described as an effort by amateurs to bring the theatres into their own halls and parks. This form did not reach any measure of success until it was taken up by professional poets like Fletcher, Jonson, and Milton.

Samuel Daniel attempted to reproduce the pastoral plays of Tasso and Guerini, as he had, on a previous occasion,

1. The Cam. Hist. of English Literature. Vol.VI. - Cambridge University Press, 1911. Vol.VI. Chap. XIII. P.329.

tried to reproduce the Senecan drama of Garnier. But these attempts have nothing of the passionate sentiment of their Italian originals, and his efforts failed to produce any results of importance. As the English drama declined several good pastoral plays were produced, such as "The Careless Shepherdess" of Thomas Gaffe, and "The Shepherd's Holiday" of Joseph Rutter.

Just previous to the decline of the drama three great writers produced pastoral plays that have almost sufficient merit to be called masterpieces. The three representative works of these authors are "The Faithfull Shepherdesse" of Fletcher "The Sad Shepherd" of Jonson, and "Amyntas" of Thomas Randolph.

There are many points of resemblance between Fletcher's "The Faithfull Shepherdesse" and Milton's "Comus". Both writers aimed at a kind of drama, but in both poems the extraordinary richness and beauty is obtained at the expense of dramatic interest. The great difference between the two works is in the writer's method of treating nature. Fletcher is an Elizabethan, and his work is always marked by spontaneity of expression; while in Milton there is a self-consciousness that puts him out of touch with nature. In "Comus" the beautiful descriptions are in no sense the aim or reason of the poem, but are purely incidental.

Milton's two masques differ but little from the Jonsonian type. It is true that the actual dramatic effect of his work is not great, and George Saintsbury has gone to the length of stating that "Comus" "has been pronounced too much of a fully equipped drama to be a masque"¹. The achievement of "Arcades" standing by itself is slight compared with that of "Comus". It consists of three brief songs and a monologue; the poem is merely a fragment which was probably written at the instigation of Henry Lawes, the chief musician of the period, who composed the music for it at Harefield House. It was part of an entertainment presented to the Dowager Countess of Derby. The great importance of this poem was that its creation by a natural sequence of events led to the production of "Comus", which was his most sustained effort before the production of "Paradise Lost". This masque has always been regarded as a masterpiece, and many scholars have considered it Milton's best work.

The occasion of the production of "Comus" is very interesting. Henry Lawes, the famous musician of the time, was teaching music to the children of John Edgerton, Earl of Bridgewater, at the time of that nobleman's appointment to the

1. Saintsbury, Cambridge History of English Literature. Vol.VII. Page 113.

Lord Presidency of Wales and the Marches. In 1633 the earl took up his residence in Ludlow Castle, in Shropshire, and after the custom of the age it was decided to celebrate the event by private festivities of which the chief feature was to be a masque. The principal parts were to be taken by the two sons of the earl and their sister who represented the two brothers and the Lady of the masque; Lawes was to take the part of the Attendant Spirit while other friends were to take the roles of Comus and Sabrina. The plot of the poem may have been suggested by a story told by Lawes that the earl's three children had been lost in a neighbouring wood, and that during their wanderings the sister had become separated from her brothers.

Much of the inspiration of the poem is due to Fletcher's "The Faithfull Shepherdess" and to George Peele's "Old Wives' Tale". In the former drama the powers of Chastity were represented in the person of the constant clorin, and in the latter work, two brothers and a sister fall into the hands of an enchanter. Out of this material Milton weaves the elaborate episode of Comus and his rout. Many of the details of the story were taken from the Odyssey, but the great majority were the product of the Poet's own fancy. The whole poem is one of the most original of Milton's works.

The unity of conception and action is unbroken throughout, and every incident in the poem has the function of

bringing the central idea into stronger relief. There is also great skill exercised in the manner in which the poet blends the beauty of the music and the romance of the scene-painting with his remarkable knowledge of classical mythology.

The masques were usually the expression of pomp and fashion, and a large number of persons usually took part in the entertainment. "Comus" on the other hand, has remarkably few characters, with the result that the people are at least human.

"Comus" as a drama is slight and unconvincing. Dr. Samuel Johnson who was very harsh in his criticism of this poem, says that the action was impossible even in those parts in which it is merely human. This criticism is not just, as Johnson failed to recognize that Milton did not undertake to present even the semblance of a real action. It is true that the lyrical beauty in this poem greatly surpasses its dramatic effectiveness, but in criticising this poem one must not forget that a masque is of its nature a piece written for a special occasion, and that its literary value is quite independent of its dramatic effectiveness.

The great feature in which this masque differs from all other similar productions is found in its underlying seriousness. It is much more than the entertainment of an idle hour. It is here that Milton shows his Puritan influence.

He could not be satisfied with such a pastime. Consequently, this poem, while it possesses all the gorgeous scenic effects of such entertainments, has a moral purpose. Long says that another name for this masque might have been "The Triumph of Virtue"¹. The great teaching of the poem is that virtue can walk through this world without any permanent harm.

"He that has the light in his own dear breast
Can sit i' the centre and enjoy bright day.
But he that hides a dark soul and foul thoughts
Benighted walks under the mid-day sun.
Himself his own dungeon"²

The plan of "Comus" is exceedingly simple.
There are three scenes which may be characterized in the following manner:

1. The tempter and the tempted. ll. 1-658
Scene: A wild wood.
2. The Temptation and the rescue ll. 659-958
Scene: the palace of Comus.
3. The Triumph.
Scene: The President's Castle. ll. 959-1023.

In the first scene the interest rises when Comus and his rout are introduced; it begins after what ought to be called

1. Long, W.J. "English Literature" Ginn and Co. Boston, N.Y. 1909. Page 211.
2. Comus - ll. 380-386

a prologue (lines 1-192). Our interest is further aroused by the plight of the Lady who has been lost in the night and who has become separated from her companions. The meeting of Comus and the Lady is one of the most interesting incidents in the poem. The nature of the Lady's trial and her victory is foreshadowed in the conversation between the brothers and the Attendant Spirit. The Spirit speaking of a charm uses these words:

"He called it Haemony, and gave it me,
And bade me keep it as of sovran use
'Gainst all enchantments, mildew blast, or damp
Or ghastly Furies' apparition.
I pursed it up, but little reckoning made,
Till now that this extremity compelled,
But now I find it true; for by this means
I knew the foul enchanter though disguised,
Entered the very lime-twigs of his spells,
And yet came off. If you have this about you
(As I will give you where we go) you may
Boldly assault the necromancer's hall,
Where if he be, with dauntless hardihood
And brandished blade rush on him, break his gladd,
And shed the luscious liquor on the ground,
But seize his wand"¹

1. "Comus" lines 638-653.

The second scene introduces us to the unhallowed dwelling of Comus and his band of rioters. It is here that the wily tempter tries to make the Lady drink his charmed liquor, but is driven off by the two brothers and Thyris, their own shepherd in disguise. The great interest in the masque culminates in this scene, for it is here that the great purpose of the poem is revealed. It has been said that "It is a song to temperance as the ground of freedom, to temperance as the guard of all the virtues, to beauty as secured by temperance, and its central point and climax is in the pleading of these motives by the Lady against their opposites in the mouth of the Lord of Sensual Revel".

The third scene presents the Lady and her brothers to their father and mother after their triumph over intemperance. The central teaching of the poem is contained in the epilogue. It is expressed by the Attendant Spirit in these words:

"Love Virtue; she alone is free
She can teach ye how to climb
Higher than the sphery chime;
Or, if feeble were,
Heaven itself would stoop to her."¹

In spite of all the criticism that has been levelled against this masque, the poem compares favorably with the other

1. "Comus" lines 1019-1023.

masques of the period, and from the point of view of lyric beauty and of moral purpose it greatly surpasses them. It has the distinction of being the greatest English masque that has ever been written.

(2) Samson Agonistes.

As "Comus" is not a drama in the popular sense of the term, we shall turn to "Samson Agonistes" which was Milton's one experiment in regular dramatic literature.

Samson was not a new subject to Milton. It had attracted him many years before he was able to write his tragedy. In 1641-1642 he had contemplated writing a Scriptural drama on the subject of Samson. There are five subjects preserved among his manuscripts at Trinity College in which Samson was to be the hero. As these drafts were drawn up at the same time as those of "Paradise Lost", it may be assumed that had the latter poem been written as a Tragedy according to Milton's first intention, it would have been cast in the same mould as "Samson Agonistes", that is, in the form of the ancient Greek drama.

There are a great many points of resemblance between the lives of Samson and Milton, and all scholars have been greatly impressed by this fact. Milton, like Samson, lived in an age that was wholly given up to the corrupt practices of an

alien people. In the days following the Restoration he, like his Hebrew prototype, was the sole defender of an unpopular cause, and was also blind among his enemies, helplessly dependent on the guidance of others. The reference to Samson's blindness is one of the most pathetic utterances in literature, and one feels instinctively that Milton was writing his own experience when he said:

"But chief of all,

O loss of sight, of thee I most complain;
Blind among enemies! O worse than chains,
Dungeon, or beggary, or decrepit age!
Light the prime work of God, to me is extinct,
And all her various objects of delight
Annulled, which in part my grief have eased,
Inferior to the vilest now become
Of man or worm; the vilest here excel me,
They creep yet see; I, dark in light, exposed
To daily fraud, contempt, abuse, and wrong,
Within doors, or without, still as a fool,
In power of others, never in my own -
Scarce half I seem to live, dead more than half.
O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day!"¹

1. Samson Agonistes - lines 67-82.

Like Samson, Milton had married a woman who had no sympathies in common with his own. There is no doubt that the poet was relating much of his own experience in the episode of Dalila's meeting with Samson. These few incidents will serve as illustrations to show how closely the lives and experiences of these two men resemble each other.

The poetry of "Samson Agonistes" does not make such a strong appeal to the average reader as that of the early poems, "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso", and the whole poem embraces a much smaller span of life than "Paradise Lost". But even with these limitations many readers have considered it the best of Milton's works.

Although this tragedy is Greek in form, it is vitalized by the inspiration of the Hebrew prophets. "Samson" in some respects resembles the temptations and sufferings of Job. There is the same struggle of the human soul against the insurmountable forces of the world which are in direct opposition to the will of God. But Samson like Job overcomes his temptations, and there is the air of triumph which is not found in the Greek tragedies. The central idea is still that of obedience and loyalty to a divine ruler in the great contention between good and evil. The human actors stand forth from a background of providential purpose. The protagonist in the drama is not Samson but Jehovah. The great champion, whom God had chosen to deliver His

people from their enemies had been led away from his path of duty by the wiles of a wicked woman. His punishment was his loss of sight and his imprisonment in Gaza.

Coleridge once remarked that "Samson Agonistes" was the finest imitation of the Greek drama that had ever been written.

One of the essential features in Greek tragedy was its strict adherence to dramatic unities of time, place, and action. In this poem, Milton followed these principles very closely; the time of the action begins at sunrise and ends at noon, thus occupying about eight hours, the place of the action is before the Prison of Gaza which satisfies the unity of place. The unity of action is also strictly observed. According to the laws governing tragedy, there was to be but one main plot with no underplot such as we see in modern plays. Even the incidents which are essential must not be of such a nature as to detract attention from the main plot.

The use of the chorus in an English play was certainly a new departure, and Milton shows great skill in this feature. In Sophocles the chorus was one of the characters gifted with a clearer vision than any of the other characters in the play; its purpose was to review the past action and to prepare the audience for what was to come. In "Samson" the chorus has a similar function, but with this difference that it is so built

into the structure of the play that without it the plot would fall to pieces. The purpose of the chorus in this play is to review the past life of Samson, to point out his weaknesses and his strength, and to illustrate his character in such a way that the reader might know just what kind of man he was.

The pre-eminent interest in this drama is Samson's revenge on the Philistines,. Milton endeavours to reach a climax in two ways; first, by a revelation of the character of the hero; and, secondly, by the invention of incident. He was successful in revealing the character of Samson, but he was not so fortunate in the invention of incident. The climax is altogether satisfactory, and the character of the hero is all that could be desired. But there is poverty in the plot which unites the character with the climax.

There are three incidents in this drama which have the function of advancing the action; these are, the interview between Samson and his Father Manoah; and the dialogue between Samson and Dalila, and the quarrel between Samson and the giant Harapha. The first of these incidents has a real interest in the advancement of the action, as it gives us an insight into the inner life of Samson, and prepares us for his attitude towards his enemies. This attitude, which was the chief cause of his final overthrow and revenge, is the first step in the required provocation of Samson.

The second episode is interesting as it satisfies our desire to see Samson in the presence of his wife who had so shamelessly betrayed him. The Scriptures do not give us any hint of such an incident in the life of Samson, a fact which makes the episode all the more interesting. We learn that Samson has recovered completely from his former infatuation, and that he will never again fall into a similar temptation. Aside from this interest there is nothing in the incident which advances the action of the play as a whole.

The third incident is the quarrel between Samson and the great giant Harapha. This incident has a direct bearing on the complication of the plot. It is through this giant that Samson is provoked to the extent that he loses all control of himself and heaps insults upon this coward who hurries back to the Philistines with a report that leads to the summons of Samson to the feast. This summons which leads to the revenge and death of the protagonist.

"Samson Agonistes" resembles the classical tragedies in its use of tragic irony. The use of irony was one of the methods by which these ancient writers added freshness to what might appear stale themes. These dramatists did not invent new stories, but obtained their material from a cycle of tales which were common property. As the audience knew exactly how the plays would end the dramatists had to invent

some new method whereby they could relieve this monotony, hence the use of tragic irony. There are many good examples of this irony in Milton's play. Manoa is the character in the drama who is entrusted with this function. The two following quotations will serve as examples. In Manoa's speech which begins at line 472, he says:

"With cause this hope relieves thee; and these words
I as a prophecy receive; for God
(Nothing more certain) will not long defer
To vindicate the glory of his name
Against all competition, nor will long
Endure it doubtful whether God be Lord
Or Dagon. But for thee what shall be done
Thou must not in the meanwhile, here forget,
Lie in this miserable loathsome plight
Neglected. I already have made way
To some Philistian lords, with whom to treat
About thy ransom, Well they may by this
Have satisfied their utmost of revenge
By pains and slaveries, worse than death, inflicted
On thee who now no more can do them harm."¹

The spectator knows that Samson is still able to inflict punishment on his enemies, and this knowledge throws

1. "Samson Agonistes" lines 472-486.

into relief the confident unconsciousness of the speaker. Later, Manoah encourages Samson to hope that God must still require some service of him, because He has given him his great strength again. In line 588 he says: "His might continues in thee not for naught", which is another example of the irony of the unconscious.

Goethe was a great admirer of Milton. In his "Conversations" there is a very interesting reference to "Samson Agonistes". He says: "I have read the "Samson" which has more of the antique spirit than any other production of any modern poet, he is very great"¹. This is a very true criticism, as the words "Antique spirit" express the outstanding characteristic of the play. It is its spirit rather than its form that unites it with the great Greek tragedies of Sophocles and of Euripides. Many other writers have known all the "Canons" of the "Poetics" but have failed to produce a work in which the spirit of the Greek drama really lives.

T. R. Glover in criticising this play says that "drama is neither here nor in "Comus" Milton's proper sphere". He also states "'Samson Agonistes' has no middle though the beginning and the end are equally sublime"². This is also a true criticism, as the "middle" in this poem ~~exhibits~~ exhibits

1. Goethe, "Conversations with Eckermann," English Translation Vol. II, 1830. Page 220.
2. Glover, T.R. "Poets and Puritans" Methuen, London, 1915. Page 72.

two defects, the analytical method of characterization and the lack of incident.

Milton's method of characterization constitutes the chief weakness in the drama. His method was that of debate rather than representation of action. This system may be employed by the novelist, but the dramatist must never make use of it. The dramatist should endeavour to reveal his characters by placing them in situations that will compel them to act their lives before us. The test of action is the method that must be employed by the dramatist. In "Samson Agonistes" there is too much character analysis and not enough incident, with the result that the drama lacks interest. Our knowledge of the hero is obtained through a long series of monologues. Had Shakespeare undertaken to write this play he would have invented a chain of incidents in which the hero under necessity of action would have shown what kind of man he really was. We believe that Shakespeare could have achieved this success even had he labored under all the restrictions of the Greek drama, for he understood tragedy and knew that it could not exist without action. Milton may have known this too, but he did not have sufficient genius to put his knowledge into practice.

In the Shakespearean drama the reactions of the dramatic characters were instinctive and not reasoned. The circumstances

were given without any attempt at explaining their causes. The result of such a method was that the drama became realistic, because it took life at its seeming. A philosophical analysis of causes always wearies an audience. People are not anxious to know how the initial circumstances came to be what they are, or how the author regards them. This sense of causation is one of Milton's underlying motives. He looks to the past to explain the present, and there is always a feeling for unity in his works that destroys much of his dramatic force.

Milton was not a dramatist by nature, and his training was not the kind to make him one. His knowledge of men was limited, an all-important factor in a dramatist. The study of "Samson Agonistes" convinces us that had Milton written "Paradise Lost" as a drama, it would have fallen far below its present standard as an epic. As a study of character the great epic is a failure. Adam is not a character to be admired from the human point of view, and Eve reveals Milton's rather low standard of women. The Messiah, Michael, Raphael, and the angels are mere mouthpieces for the poet's declamations, without either personal or human interest. Satan is a magnificent creation, so great indeed that he overshadows Christ, the real hero of the poem. The Almighty, considered purely as a literary figure, reflects all the narrow and literary theology of the time. Satan has some excellent qualities which make him the one human figure in the poem. No one can fail to admire the

undaunting spirit of this fallen angel. He is the very embodiment of Puritan courage and endurance.

Another defect in this poem which makes it unfit for a drama is that Milton has the misfortune to state his purpose too early in the poem. He intended that the end should be Nemesis, but at the very beginning he states that Satan's plots only serve to augment the glory of God. That is, he tells the secret too soon, so that there is no sharp edge possible in our interest, since the characters are already determined past repentance.

"Paradise Lost" regarded as a drama could never have been a success. Its greatness is found in its wonderful pictures, its lofty thought, and its marvellous melody.

CONCLUSION.

Milton's Place in English Dramatic Literature.

Our study of Milton and the Drama has shown us that Milton did not make any dramatic contribution that was suitable for performance on the stage. "Comus" was acted on the occasion for which it was written, but since that time it has not appeared on the stage. The poem is still considered one of our best lyrics, and no short poem in our language has enjoyed a greater popularity. "Samson Agonistes", as a drama,

enjoys a unique position. It was written after the dramatic system of the Greek models. "It resembles them in the solemn music of its utterance, in its deep sense of gravity of the issues on which human life hangs"¹. This drama is such a perfect imitation of the Sophoclean tragedy that it has been said that "a reader unacquainted with the Greek language would form a more correct notion from reading this poem than from studying even the finest and most accurate translation"².

Milton's dramatic works were not written with any intention of reforming or elevating the drama of his day. They simply show that he always admired the drama, and that this form of literature was capable of expressing the highest thoughts of a great poet.

We have been led to believe that his genius was not dramatic, and that the success he attained in dramatic literature was due to the lofty thought and wonderful melody which was characteristic of all his works. Wordsworth in his great Sonnet on Milton said "Thy soul was a star and dwelt apart". This expresses Milton's relation to the drama as well as to the other forms of literature. He does not resemble any other

1. John Bailey. "Milton" London. Williams & Norgate. 1915 Page 241.
2. Fleming, J.P. "Samson Agonistes" London, Longmans, Green & Co. 1876. Page 15.

English dramatist either in his choice of subject or in his method of treatment. One feels that he wrote his later drama under restraint, and that he was just a little afraid of public opinion.

It is our opinion that he did not have sufficient dramatic ability to make any real impression on the drama of his age. Before the closing of the theatres in 1642 he had lived the life of a quiet student. His knowledge of men and affairs was limited, and it was natural that he, with these limitations, could not exert a great influence on the English drama.

Although Milton has a very small place among our great dramatists, we must not forget that his few dramatic works are immortal masterpieces, and that a poet who wrote the best English masque and the only perfect classical tragedy occupies no humble place in our national drama.

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