

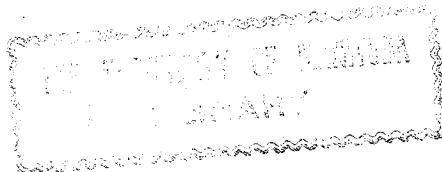
On THE PURITAN ELEMENT IN THE

WORKS OF JOHN MILTON

(1608 - 1674)

by

Harold Richard Sharples, B.A.



A Thesis presented to the Department of English
in the University of Manitoba in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

University of Manitoba.

April 1919.

P R E F A C E.

The following thesis is an attempt to arrive at a reasoned conclusion concerning these questions:

- (1) To what extent did Milton himself portray the Puritan character?
- (2) What development and modification does Milton's Puritanism undergo during the course of his long and somewhat chequered life?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter.

- I Milton's Early Life and Training
- II Cambridge, Horton and Travels.
- III Milton's Controversial Works and Sonnets.
- IV The Period of the Last Poems.
- V. The Conclusion.

THE PURITAN ELEMENT IN THE WORKS OF JOHN MILTON (1608-1674)

CHAPTER I.

Milton's Early Life and Training (1608-1625)

It is a moot question whether heredity or environment be the stronger factor in making us what we are. In the case of John Milton heredity and environment worked harmoniously together to produce the man and the poet as we know him in his writings.

The Miltons were people of firmly-held opinions. The poet's grandfather, a ranger of Shotover Park near Oxford, had been a bigoted Roman Catholic. His son, John Milton the elder, who became the father of the Puritan poet John Milton, embraced and held fast to the Reformed religion, even in the face of being disinherited by his bigoted father. In the poet himself we see the same tenacity of religious and political conviction.

The poet's father had adopted the Puritan form of the Reformed religion and all his friends were of the same shade of opinion. Puritanism had begun with the dissolution of the smaller monasteries in 1536. In Queen Elizabeth's reign, a spirit of revolt had produced a withdrawing from the orthodox Church of England of many bishops and clergy, who conducted worship with any congregation that they could gather, adopting the Genevan

(Calvinistic) Service Book. Others used Knox's Prayer Book and favored Presbyterianism. As Puritanism gained ground, the anger of the Church of England ecclesiastics who championed conformity was aroused and prosecution and imprisonment were meted out to recalcitrant Puritans. Four years before John Milton's birth (1604) was held the Hampton Court Conference.. a conference forced upon James I by the strength of Puritanical opinion, for James I, in love with his idea of Divine Right of Kings and consequently, of Bishops, was the avowed champion of the conforming Church of England, and had no more affection for Puritans than for Presbyterians.

The Hampton Court Conference was of importance to the Puritan cause in England because the direct outcome of the meetings was the Authorized Version of the Bible published in 1611. "A striking testimony to its essential greatness is the fact that, instead of a cause of division in this land of sectarianism, it has ever been a bond between the different sects, for it was soon adopted by the Puritans, and preferred even to the Geneva." 'The Age of Shakespeare' - Seccombe and Allen, p.223.

James I, however, detested the Puritans because of their revolt from the orthodox Episcopal Church, and in 1607 Archbishop Bancroft, with the King's connivance, began the persecutions of the Puritans, which continued throughout the whole period of Stuart domination, led to the expatriation of the

of the Pilgrim Fathers in 1620, and largely contributed to the determined and successful efforts of the Parliamentarians during the Civil War.

It was into a home of this Puritanical character that John Milton was born in 1608. It is certain that the Authorised Version of the Bible was the book to which he first turned, for throughout his works his knowledge of the Bible is displayed. Another book, which was very popular among the Puritans was Sylvester's translation of Du Bartas' Divine Weeks (published 1605 and 6). This had a Scriptural basis which commended it to the Puritans and no doubt Milton read it, as a boy.

Milton's home was not, however, devoid of innocent pleasures. "Puritanism already had its stronghold in the homes of the citizens of London and a reverent seriousness, which had in it nothing of moroseness or gloom, coloured the home-life of Milton's childhood". 'Age of Milton' by Masterman, p.2.

Music was the favourite pastime of the poet's father, who, as a musician, took rank with Dowland, Gibbons and Ford. Taught by him, Milton became a skilful organist; all his life Milton appreciated and enjoyed music. In this particular he was not so strict a Puritan as many to whom a church organ was anathema.

Milton says of his parents (Prose Works Vol.I, p.254)

"My father was distinguished by the undeviating integrity of his life: my mother by the esteem in which she was held and the alms which she bestowed. My father destined me from a child to the pursuits of literature. He had me daily instructed in the Grammar School and by other masters at home".

(Defensio Secunda).

His earliest tutor, Thomas Young, was "a Puritan in Essex", a Scotch Presbyterian minister, afterwards Master of Jesus College, Cambridge, who was driven out of England because of his religious views. From the affectionate character of Milton's letters to him written from Cambridge, 1625, it is clear that he had great influence over the poet, and the austerity of the poet's view of life is due to Young's teaching and example.

As a schoolboy he was a hard student, for he tells us in the Second Defence of the People of England (Vol.I. p.254) "My appetite for knowledge was so voracious, that, from twelve years of age, I hardly ever left my studies, or went to bed before midnight". Hence he had little time or inclination to indulge in the frivolities of his more careless school-fellows, and his religious convictions grew deeper.

CHAPTER II.

Cambridge, Horton and Travels 1625-1639.

On February 12th, 1625, Milton was admitted a lesser pensioner at Christ's College, Cambridge. He was only sixteen years of age, and had come direct from a Puritan home into a large university where all sorts and conditions of men were congregated. His tutor, William Chappelle, afterwards Dean of Cashel and Bishop of Cork, was a High Churchman, with whom Milton had little in common. Milton's aloofness and delicacy of feeling procured for him the nickname of "The Lady of Christ's".

Milton's father had sent him to Cambridge with the idea that the poet should become a clergyman of the Church of England. In the "Apology for Smectymnus" (Prose Works III p.122) he says "That care was ever had of me, with my earliest capacity, not to be negligently trained in the precepts of the Christian religion": and in his "Reason of Church Government urged against Prelaty" (Prose Vol.II p.482) we find "The Church to whose service, by the intention of my parents and friends, I was destined of a child and of my own resolution till coming to some maturity of years and perceiving what tyranny had invaded the Church, that he who would take orders must subscribe slave, and take oath withal, which unless he took with a conscience that would retch, must either straight perjure or straight split his faith; I

thought it better to prefer blameless silence before the sacred office of speaking, bought and begun with servitude and forswearing".

During Milton's residence at Cambridge (1625-1632) many important events took place in England, both as regards politics and religion. 1627 saw the unsuccessful expedition of Buckingham to La Rochelle which was followed by his assassination by the fanatic Felton in 1628. The death of Buckingham was hailed as a victory by the Puritans and was followed by the Petition of Right being accepted by Charles I.

In the same year William Laud was appointed Bishop of London. He began at once to press forward the High Church ideas with which he was obsessed; particularly the elaborate ritual, chanting, music, and vestments grew in use by those who desired preferment. Laud's "beauty of holiness" was steadily opposed by the Puritans, and no doubt Milton himself by this time had abandoned the idea of taking holy orders, because his training and predilections were opposed to such "prelacy".

He seems to have been encouraged in this decision by the spectacle of "So many of the young divines and those in next aptitude for divinity seen on the stage, writhing and unbending their clergy limbs to all the antic and dishonest gestures of Trinculoes, buffoons and bawds" (Prose III 114 and 115)

But up to the time of his admission as B.A. (March 29th 1629) Milton's Puritanism was rather in the nature of a protest against the endless ceremonial and ritual of the High Church or Laudian party than against the doctrines of the Church of England, for he signed "willingly and exanimè" the three articles of assent to the Royal Supremacy, the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty-nine Articles. On taking his M.A. degree in July, 1632, he subscribed to the same three articles.

In December 1631, or early in 1632, he sent a memorable letter (to a friend who had been calling him to account for his apparent indifference to his work in life) in which was enclosed his Sonnet "On Being arrived at the Age of 23". This poem is of importance to our purpose in establishing how far Milton himself portrays the Puritan character, in that it contains the following lines:

" Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,
It shall be still in strictest measure even
To that same lot, however mean or high,
Towards which Time leads me, and the will of Heaven.
All is, if I have grace to use it so,
As ever in my great Task-Master's eye."

These give expression to Milton's Puritanic seriousness and sense of responsibility for the profitable use of his lifetime. In further evidence of his seriousness and steadiness of purpose,

despite his seeming indifference to a definite career we have (Apology for Smeectymnuus - Prose III. p. 118). "He who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem: that is a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things; not presuming to sing high praises of heroic men and famous cities, unless he have in himself the experience and practice of all that is praiseworthy. These reasons, together with a certain niceness of nature, an honest haughtiness, and self esteem either of what I was, or what I might be..... and lastly modesty..... all these uniting the supply of their natural aid together, kept me still above those low descents of mind, beneath which he must deject and plunge himself, that can agree to saleable and unlawful prostitutions".

In 1632 Milton retired from Christ's College. "The fellows of that college signified many ways how much better it would content them that I would stay" (Prose III. p.111). He retired to his father's house at Horton where he remained for five years, engaged in study.

In 1633 Laud was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury. Religious controversies were fast growing to bitterness, aggravated by the cruel persecutions used by the dominant Church party against the Puritans. In 1630 Dr. Leighton was publicly whipped, had his ear cut off and his nose slit, by order of the

Star Chamber, because he had published a book against Episcopacy. This is but one example of the methods adopted by Wentworth and Laud to carry out their "Thorough" Policy and to silence hostile criticism.

The murmurs of discontent with which men saw the tightening of Laud's grip over ecclesiastical affairs must have disturbed Milton's quiet village life, for they colour the plot of "Comus" and break in thunder in "Lycidas". The date of the writing of "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" is uncertain; probably they were written during the earlier years of Milton's stay at Horton. The two poems are complementary. In them Milton sets before himself the occupations, amusements, and associations of a life led in accordance with the cheerful traditions of "Merry England" in contrast to those of an existence more thoughtful, retired and subdued. Both "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" are expressions of differing moods of Milton, and the former no more portrays the reckless gallantry of the Godless cavalier than does the latter show the bigoted austerity of the Puritan" (Eng. Poems by Jno. Milton, Clarendon Press, Introduction, p.XLI).

J. H. B. Masterman in the "Age of Milton" p.16. says of these poems:- "The happiness of 'L'Allegro' is as far removed from the boisterous gaiety of the Cavalier gallant as is the most sober contemplative life of 'Il Penseroso' from the moroseness of the extreme Puritan". Mark Pattison in his handbook

upon Milton (E.M. of L. Series pp. 28 and 29) says of the two poems:- "In Milton, nature is not put forward as the poet's theme. His theme is man, in the two contrasted moods of joyous emotion or grave reflection. The shifting scenery ministers to the varying mood Milton in these two idylls has recorded a day of twenty-four hours. But he has not registered the phenomena: he places us at the standpoint of the man before whom they deploy. And the man, joyous or melancholy, is not a bare spectator of them; he is the student, compounded of sensibility and intelligence of whom we are not told that he saw so and so, or that he felt so, but with whom we are made co-partners of his thoughts and feelings. Description melts into emotion, and contemplation bodies itself in imagery. All the charm of rural life is there, but it is not tendered to us in the form of a landscape: the scenery is subordinated to the human figure in the centre."

Milton's environment while he was engaged in writing these poems may give us some data upon which to base our decision respecting how far they bear upon his Puritanism. He was living "Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife", free from pecuniary worry or controversial disturbance. His pursuits were literary (he tells us that he read upwards of eighty authors in Greek, Latin, French, Italian, and English during the Horton period) and congenial. Hence these poems bear the impress of the circumstances under which they were written. Milton, for the