

**The Cambridge History of English and American Literature in 18 Volumes,  
Volume VII. v. Milton. § 22. His versification and style.  
Cavalier and Puritan (1907-21)**

The exact principles of Miltonic versification, in the epics and *Samson*, have been matters of sharp controversy; and, in such a History as this, it is the duty of a writer to be an expositor and not an advocate. The various opinions on the subject may be reduced, with less violence than in some other cases, to the usual three. The older opinion—long considered the orthodox one and still held by some, though chiefly by foreign, critics—is that Milton's blank verse lines are strictly decasyllabic, apparent exceptions being due to actual elision or running together of syllables; and that, though it cannot be said that they are all strictly iambic or arranged in rising stress, variations from this are due only to wrenched accent, "impure" construction for the sake of preventing monotony and so forth. The opposite view is that Milton, not more from his study of the classics than from that of English poets and, especially, Shakespeare, was fully conversant with the practice, if not the theory, of substitution of equivalent feet—disyllabic or trisyllabic, trochee, spondee, dactyl, anapaest—for the iambic; and that he used this deliberately for the purpose of obtaining varied and concerted music. This opinion, which is that of the present writer, grew up slowly during the eighteenth century, but has been increasingly common in the nineteenth, though not often thoroughly worked out. Between the two, and held by some critics of great distinction, is a theory (or, perhaps, more than one) according to which Milton always intended the strict five-foot ten-syllabled line, but gave himself certain intricate dispensations, capable of being more or less rigidly systematised, by which a larger number of syllables than ten could be written in the line; could (in some cases, though not in all) be actually pronounced in it; but could be metrically elided. To put the thing, perhaps, more intelligibly by examples: according to theory (i) "ominous," when the *i* makes an eleventh syllable, and "the Eternal," when the *is* is in the same case, should be pronounced "om'nous" and "th' Eternal" and, in at least the latter case, printed so. According to (ii) "ominous" and "the Eternal" should be written in full, pronounced in full, and reckoned metrically as trisyllabic feet, or (in another notation) as combinations of two unaccented syllables and one accented. According to (iii) they should be written and pronounced in full, but the *i* and the first *e* should be regarded as metrically "vanished."

Putting aside this capital point, on which the student must make up his mind after full consideration of the subject, there are not a few lines of Milton where unusual combinations of foot or arrangements of stress give rise to difficulty. On another great general feature, there is not, nor can there be, any difference of opinion as to fact; and this is that Milton pays no attention to the supposed necessity, or, at least, propriety, of putting a pause near the middle of the line, and that his freedom of handling here is vital to his versification. On the propriety, as distinguished from the fact, of the variation, such unanimity has not prevailed.

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The more rigid eighteenth century critics regarded the central or centripetal pause as an absolute law, the breach of which was to be justified by no success of result. Johnson was not quite so strait-laced as this; but as, with him, regularity of correspondence was the main article of poetry, he objected to such confusions of “the methods of the poet and the declaimer”; and, consistently enough, disliked blank verse altogether. It is, at any rate, certain, that it is by variety of line material (attained by whatever means), and by further variation of pause, that Milton achieves the extraordinary freedom from monotony, and the force of character, which distinguish his verse. And it has been recognised, with increasing decision, that he does not employ these means in a fashion merely continuous or strung together, that his verse construction is really periodic or paragraphic—the sections corresponding in division of sense and substance, as it were, to long but unequal stanzas or strophes of verses identical at first sight, but individually variable.

If the reader will compare the sketches of the progress of English prosody given at intervals in this History; if he will remember that Milton was a careful scholar and a fluent writer of Latin verse; and if he will pay particular attention to the Rous ode in Latin, and to Samson in English—he will not have much difficulty in appreciating the position of the poet in regard to quality of versification. So far as Milton’s historical position is concerned, he is almost the central figure in the whole history of our verse. Brought into definite form as that verse had been, after two centuries of experiment, by Chaucer; restored and reformed, after nearly two more of disarray, by Spenser; enormously varied and advanced by Shakespeare and the later Elizabethans—Milton found it liable to fresh disorders. He did not so much directly attack these as elaborate, for non-dramatic poetry, a medium practically involving all the order and all the freedom possible in English verse—yet without rime. And, in Samson, he returned to rime itself in choruses, though not universally or regularly, but, rather, with an extension of the occasional use which he had tried in Lycidas.

In the larger sense of style, Milton holds so great a place that we may almost let the arrangement of this chapter pass here into a conclusion-summary. He is, admittedly, in the least disputed sense of that much debated term, “the grand style,” the grandest-styled of English poets. He never, indeed, attains to the absolute zenith of expression—as does Shakespeare often and, perhaps, Dante sometimes. He is, unlike them, strangely unmodern; he has, indeed, it has been quite correctly said, little even of the renaissance about him, except those tricks and fashions of form which have been noticed. Biblical, classical and medieval influences almost alone work on him—especially the former two. Under their joint pressure, he has elaborated a manner so all-pervading, that, if it were not also great, it might, or must, be called a mannerism. But it is always a mannerism of grandeur and never—this is another of the points in which Milton is unique—one of grandiosity. It does break down sometimes, though rarely, when he attempts humour; when he lets himself prose, and so forth; but, even then, it does not

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become grandiose, still less bombastic: it is merely flat and dull or, sometimes, grotesque. Almost everywhere, the magnificent state and ceremony covers and carries off the occasion, the subject, resistlessly.

This manner has some modes and phases which are worth particularising, especially in the attempt to complete the presentation in little of the work and figure of so great a poet. One of the most remarkable of these is the famous “Miltonic vague”—the preference of vast but rather indeterminate pictures, tinted with a sort of dim gorgeousness or luridity, as the case may be—to sharper outlines and more definite colours. Another—as it may seem in a different sphere of thought—is the peculiar moral atmosphere of a kind of magnanimous intransigence which pervades the whole. The common saying that “Satan is the hero of Paradise Lost” is merely a way of expressing this wider truth to the vulgar mind. It is not at all probable that Milton meant anything of the kind; according to “the rules,” a hero ought to be victorious, and Satan’s victory is exceedingly Pyrrhic; according to “the rules,” he ought to be good, if not faultless, and certainly Milton did not think Satan good. But he has made Satan the most interesting person, and his unflinching nonconformity the most interesting thing, in the poem. In Paradise Regained, he enjoys a double presentation of this kind—the persistence of Satan, unconquered by past or future certainty of defeat, and the resistance of Christ, to which Milton’s semi-Arian views must, as has been said, have given a peculiar interest. As regards Agonistes, the other common saying, that “Samson is Milton,” contains the general truth again. Samson is incarnate resistance; he has resisted grace and the Philistines alike, in the past; his repentance and atonement consist in resisting his father, the chorus, Harapha, the officer, the lords, Dalila, everybody; and his final simulated compliance is only to obtain the means of making this resistance triumph. Even some forty years earlier, the centre of Comus is the invincible resolution of the Lady; and the real inspiration of Lycidas, apart from the poetry, is the defiant denunciation—utterly different from the parallel and, no doubt, suggesting passage in Dante—of St. Peter. Now this pervading irreconcilableness, wherein Milton and Dante, to some extent, come together again, can only be made poetical by a style of severe splendour; and it meets this eminently in both, but more exclusively and restrictively in Milton.

It is almost a necessary consequence of this peculiar kind of magnificence that Milton has always been more admired and written about than loved and read, except in his earlier and smaller poems. Some have been bold enough to say that even *Il Penseroso* is generally known only in a few passages of its brightest purple; and the extraordinary beauty of the latter part of *Comus* has not prevented persons who united cultivation with frankness from pronouncing it heavy. That this is unfortunate need hardly be said. To begin with, it is a loss, to him who does not read it, of some of the greatest poetry in the world—of poetry which scarcely ever declines below a level that most poets scarcely ever reach. But the loss is greater than this. Careless folk are sometimes found who decry

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the historic estimate altogether, and who maintain that a minor poet of the twentieth century is better worth reading than a minor poet of the thirteenth, though the later, for the most part, is simply a hand at the machine which the earlier had helped to construct. But Milton is not a minor poet, and his influence is omnipresent in almost all later English poetry, and in not a little of later prose English literature. At first, at second, at third, hand, he has permeated almost all his successors. Without Milton, you cannot understand, in the real sense of understanding, writers so different as Landor and Tennyson, as Thomson and Wordsworth. He might walk through English letters and, like the unwelcome apparition in one of Dickens's shorter stories, ejaculate "Mine!" as he laid his hand on rhythm after rhythm, phrase after phrase, design after design, in poetical arrangement. Although there was some plagiarism, even from his early poems, by men like Baron and Benlowes, he was not much followed immediately; but, as usual, the long germinating seed took the deeper and wider hold, and bore the most abundant and perennial crops. In particular, he, with Shakespeare, maintained the citadel of true English prosody through all the deviations and shortcomings of the eighteenth century.

With whatever allowance, in however grudging a manner, the greatness of these two was always allowed, and could be taken as pattern when the time came.

But this reflected and incidental glory, of course, is not the whole, or, with most people, the main, glory of Milton. His praises have been the theme of many excellent discourses; and it is quite superfluous, especially in such a place as this, to be rhetorical in regard to him. But the indication—if only the reindication—of the special quality and quiddity of writers great and small cannot be superfluous in a history of literature.

Although Dryden was merely repeating the common criticism on Homer and Vergil in ascribing "loftiness of mind" to the first and "majesty" to the second, and although his claim for a combination of the two in Milton is a sufficiently obvious figure of rhetoric, yet there was more of his own great critical genius in the hyperbole. One would, perhaps, rather choose "variety" and "nature" for Homer, "grace" and "perfection of art" for Vergil. But "loftiness of mind" and "majesty" (of expression, which, no doubt, was understood) remain true and keep their combination in regard to Milton. Great variety he has not; in his longer and later poems certainly not; while the contrast of later and earlier only supplies it to a limited extent. Although he is never unnatural, nature is never the first thing that suggests itself in him; and, though he is never (except in the rare instances often referred to) ungraceful, yet grace is too delicate a thing to be attributed to his work, at least after *Comus*. But in loftiness—sublimity—of thought and majesty of expression, both sustained at almost superhuman pitch, he has no superior, and no rival except Dante. That, despite this, he has had few admirers out of England and those few (like Scherer for instance) for more or less special reasons, is not

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surprising. For, in order to appreciate Milton, it is necessary to know the English language not merely, as has sometimes been said, with more than usual acquired scholarship, but thoroughly, and with a native intimacy. His subjects may attract or repel; his temper may be repellent and can hardly be very attractive, though it may have its admirers. But the magnificence of his poetical command of the language in which he writes has only to be perceived in order to carry all before it.