Il Penseroso
John Milton (1645)

HEnce vain deluding joyes,
The brood of folly without father bred,
How little you bested,
Or fill the fixed mind with all your toyes;
Dwell in som idle brain, [ 5 ]
And fancies fond with gaudy shapes possess,
As thick and numberless
As the gay motes that people the Sun Beams,
Or likest hovering dreams
The fickle Pensioners of Morpheus train. [ 10 ]

But hail thou Goddes, sage and holy,
Hail divinest Melancholy,
Whose Saintly visage is too bright
To hit the Sense of human sight;
And therfore to our weaker view, [ 15 ]
Ore laid with black staid Wisdoms hue.
Black, but such as in esteem,
Prince Memnons sister might beseem,
Or that Starr'd Ethiope Queen that strove
To set her beauties praise above [ 20 ]
The Sea Nymphs, and their powers offended.
Yet thou art higher far descended,
Thee bright- hair'd Vesta long of yore,
To solitary Saturn bore;
His daughter she (in Saturns raign, [ 25 ]
Such mixture was not held a stain).
Oft in glimmering Bowres, and glades
He met her, and in secret shades
Of woody Ida's inmost grove,
While yet there was no fear of Jove. [ 30 ]
Com pensive Nun, devout and pure,
Sober, stedfast, and demure,
All in a robe of darkest grain,
Flowing with majestick train,
And sable stole of Cipres Lawn, [ 35 ]
Over thy decent shoulders drawn.
Com, but keep thy wonted state,
With ee'v'n step, and musing gate,
And looks commencing with the skies,
Thy rapt soul sitting in thine eyes: [ 40 ]
There held in holy passion still,
Forget thy self to Marble, till
With a sad Leaden downward cast,
Thou fix them on the earth as fast.
And joyn with thee calm Peace, and Quiet, [ 45 ]
Spare Fast, that oft with gods doth diet,
And hears the Muses in a ring,
Ay round about Joves Altar sing.
And adde to these retired leasure,
That in trim Gardens takes his pleasure; [ 50 ]
But first, and chiefest, with thee bring,
Him that yon soars on golden wing,
Guiding the fiery-wheeled throne,
The Cherub Contemplation,
And the mute Silence hist along, [ 55 ]
'Less Philomel will daign a Song,
In her sweetest, saddest plight,
Smoothing the rugged brow of night,
While Cynthia checks her Dragon yoke,
Gently o're th' accustom'd Oke; [ 60 ]
Sweet Bird that shunn'est the noise of folly,
Most musical, most melancholy!
Thee Chauntress oft the Woods among,
I woo to hear thy even-Song;
And missing thee, I walk unseen [ 65 ]
On the dry smooth-shaven Green,
To behold the wandring Moon,
Riding neer her highest noon,
Like one that had bin led astray
Through the Heav'ns wide pathles way; [ 70 ]
And oft, as if her head she bow'd,
Stooping through a fleecy cloud.
Oft on a Plat of rising ground,
I hear the far-off Curfeu sound,
Over som wide-water'd shoar, [ 75 ]
Swinging slow with sullen roar;
Or if the Ayr will not permit,
Som still removed place will fit,
Where glowing Embers through the room
Teach light to counterfeit a gloom, [ 80 ]
Far from all resort of mirth,
Save the Cricket on the hearth,
Or the Belmans drousie charm,
To bless the dores from nightly harm:
Or let my Lamp at midnight hour, [ 85 ]
Be seen in som high lonely Towr,
Where I may oft out-watch the Bear,
With thrice great Hermes, or unshear
The spirit of Plato to unfold
What Worlds, or what vast Regions hold [ 90 ]
The immortal mind that hath forsook
Her mansion in this fleshly nook:
And of those Daemons that are found
In fire, air, flood, or under ground,
Whose power hath a true consent [ 95 ]
With Planet, or with Element.
Som time let Gorgeous Tragedy
In Scepter’d Pall com sweeping by,
Presenting Thebs, or Pelops line,
Or the tale of Troy divine. [ 100 ]
Or what (though rare) of later age,
Ennobled hath the Buskind stage.
But, O said Virgin, that thy power
Might raise Musæus from his bower,
Or bid the soul of Orpheus sing [ 105 ]
Such notes as warbled to the string,
Drew Iron tears down Pluto’s cheek,
And made Hell grant what Love did seek.
Or call up him that left half told
The story of Cambuscan bold, [ 110 ]
Of Camball, and of Algarsife,
And who had Canace to wife,
That own’d the vertuous Ring and Glass,
And of the wondrous Hors of Brass,
On which the Tartar King did ride; [ 115 ]
And if ought els, great Bards beside,
In sage and solemn tunes have sung,
Of Turneys and of Trophies hung;
Of Forests, and enchantments drear,
Where more is meant then meets the ear. [ 120 ]
Thus night oft see me in thy pale career,
Till civil-suited Morn appeer,
Not trickt and frounc’t as she was wont,
With the Attick Boy to hunt,
But Cherchef’t in a comly Cloud, [ 125 ]
While rocking Winds are Piping loud,
Or usher’d with a shower still,
When the gust hath blown his fill,
Ending on the russling Leaves,
With minute drops from off the Eaves. [ 130 ]
And when the Sun begins to fling
His flaring beams, me Goddes bring
To arched walks of twilight groves,
And shadows brown that Sylvan loves
Of Pine, or monumental Oake, [ 135 ]
Where the rude Ax with heaved stroke,
Was never heard the Nymphs to daunt,
Or fright them from their hallow'd haunt.
There in close covert by som Brook,
Where no profaner eye may look, [ 140 ]
Hide me from Day's garish eie,
While the Bee with Honied thie,
That at her flowry work doth sing,
And the Waters murmuring
With such consort as they keep, [ 145 ]
Entice the dewy-feather'd Sleep;
And let som strange mysterious dream,
Wave at his Wings in Airy stream,
Of lively portrature display'd,
Softly on my eye-lids laid. [ 150 ]
And as I wake, sweet musick breath
Above, about, or underneath,
Sent by som spirit to mortals good,
Or th' unseen Genius of the Wood.
But let my due feet never fail, [ 155 ]
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. [ 160 ]
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, [ 165 ]
And bring all Heav'n before mine eyes.
And may at last my weary age
Find out the peacefull hermitage,
The Hairy Gown and Mossy Cell,
Where I may sit and rightly spell, [ 170 ]
Of every Star that Heav'n doth shew,
And every Herb that sips the dew;
Till old experience do attain
To somthing like Prophetic strain.
These pleasures Melancholy give, [ 175 ]
And I with thee will choose to live.
Notes

Introduction. It is nearly impossible to understand and appreciate Milton's *Il Penseroso* without also having read its companion piece, *L'Allegro*. In 1991 Casey Finch and Peter Bowen wrote that the poems are "unavoidably locked in a condition of textual self-consciousness where, no matter how hard each tries to extricate itself from the embrace of the other, neither can stop thinking and dreaming about its companion" (5).

Many critics have speculated that Milton prefers the pensive melancholy celebrated in *Il Penseroso* because it represents the ascetic life of study, as opposed to *L'Allegro*'s emphasis on a dionysian, pleasure-seeking lifestyle. Milton appears to make this preference explicit in his sixth Elegy, written to Charles Diodati, when he tells his friend that Apollo, "Bacchus, Ceres, and Venus all approve" of "light Elegy" and assist poets in such compositions, but poets whose ambitions reach higher to the epic and heroic modes must eschew the dionysiac lifestyle for a more ascetic practice:

But they who Demigods and Heroes praise
And feats perform'd in Jove's more youthful days,
Who now the counsels of high heav'n explore,
Now shades, that echo the Cerberean roar,
Simply let these, like him of Samos live
Let herbs to them a bloodless banquet give;
In beechen goblets let their bev'rage shine,
Cool from the chrystal spring, their sober wine!
Their youth should pass, in innocence, secure
From stain licentious, and in manners pure,
Pure as the priest's, when rob'd in white he stands
The fresh lustration ready in his hands. ("Elegy 6" 55-66)

The poet who seeks to attain the highest level of creative expression must embrace the divine, which can only be accomplished by following the path set out in *Il Penseroso*. In 1971, David Miller described this concept of the latter poem's superiority to its companion: "The delights of *L'Allegro* are real and valued, but like the glories of Greece they cannot stand against the ecstasy of Christian contemplation. Partial truth is inferior to complete truth. It is *Il Penseroso* who represents the proper Christian pattern" (7).

Milton's invocation of the goddess Melancholy reminds one of his salutation to Mirth in *L'Allegro*, and sets up the parallel structure of the two poems. It also suggests a very specific body of sources, such as Robert Burton's comprehensive *Anatomy of Melancholy*, John Fletcher's song "Melancholy," and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* 2.2.309. The concept of "melancholia," however, has its
origins in ancient Greece with Hippocrates and his "humours theory" of the body, which was later revised by Aristotle and Galen. Lawrence Babb discovered two forms of melancholy in his study of Il Penseroso: "black" and "golden tinged with purple." While black melancholy was responsible for severe depression, the Aristotlian gold melancholy "was the concern, not of physicians, but of poets. And its products were not despondency amid madness, but the highest of man's artistic achievements" (Miller 32). Milton's choice of "Penseroso" in the title, over "Melancolico" or "Afflitto," indicates his emphasis on the positive and spiritual aspects of Melancholy (Hughes, Variorum 237).

In her book The Gendering of Melancholia, Juliana Schiesari writes that "the very nature of the melancholic was to be that of a self split against itself" (8). It is significant, then, that Il Penseroso has a companion. While some critics argue that the two poems refer equally to Milton (Hughes, Variorum 245), others believe that L'Allegro was about his friend, Charles Diodati, while Il Penseroso was autobiographical in nature. If this was the case, then Milton may have consciously adopted part of Spenser's theory of friendship in writing the poem — namely, the idea that friends "express different aspects of the same principle, [as] shown by the frequent citing of one of them to prove the other" (Smith 43). Il Penseroso's initial banishment of Mirth — as well as L'Allegro's exile of Melancholy — demonstrates this principle at work.

The copytext for this edition of Il Penseroso is a copy of Milton's 1645 Poems owned by Rauner Library at Dartmouth College (Hickmot 172).

Katherine Lynch

Il Penseroso. A brooding or melancholy person or personality. See OED2.

Hence vain deluding joyes. The opening line mirrors that of L'Allegro.

bested. Bestead; help, assist, relieve. See OED2.

toyes. Idle fancies and imaginary playthings.

som. 1673 has "some".

fond. Foolish.

Pensioners. "One who is in receipt of pension or regular pay; one who is in the pay of another; in early use, a paid or hired soldier, a mercenary; in 17-18th c. often with implication of base motives: a hireling, tool, creature." But also "At Cambridge University: An undergraduate student who is not a Scholar on the foundation of a college, or a Sizar; one who pays for his own commons and other expenses; = Commoner at Oxford" (OED2).

Morpheus. In Greek mythology, Morpheus is the god of dreams — one of the sons of Hypnos, the god of sleep. He and his brothers, Phobetor and Phantasus, are responsible for the variety of dreams experienced by human beings. Morpheus sends human shapes (in Greek, morphai) to dreamers, while Phobetor and Phantasus send the forms of animals and inanimate things, respectively. It is possible that Morpheus' name actually meant "Dark," from the Greek morphai, morphos (Encyclopedia Britannica "Morpheus").

Melancholy. Stella Revard believes that Milton's goddess Melancholy is an earlier version of Urania, the Muse he invokes in Paradise Lost 7.1 (Revard 342).

visage. The face or features as expressive of feeling or temperament; the countenance (OED2).

To hit the Sense. Literally, too bright for the human sense of sight to apprehend it, or endure it. Milton imagines the female personification of Melancholy has been "O'erlaid with black" to accommodate "our weaker view," or sense of sight. therefore. 1673 has "therefore".

Ore. Shawcross takes this as a misprint for "O're" in Flannagan xvii.

with black. Melancholy was one of ancient medicine's four humours: black bile, under Saturn's influence. Milton allows his personification to appear to have a black face, but this is simply the way she must appear to worldly mortals. Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy (1632) was the standard treatise on this humour and all its effects. See also Juliana Schiesari's The Gendering of Melancholia (1992).

Wisdoms hue. See Song of Solomon 1:5. Solomon often is cited as wisdom personified.


Ethiope Queen. Cassiopeia, Queen to Ethiopian King Cephalus. She was stellified—changed into a constellation—after she claimed to be more beautiful than the sea nymphs or Nereids. Her daughter, Andromeda ("fair" though
"dusky"), was chained to a rock as a sacrifice, but rescued by Perseus (Ovid's *Heroides* 15.36). See a vase image of Cassiopeia, Andromeda, and Eros.

*offended.* 1673 has "offended," here, but the full stop of 1645 seems preferable.

*higher far descended.* Compare Melancholy's single genealogy with the two versions of Mirth's origins in *L'Allegro* 14-23.

**Vesta.** Roman goddess of the hearth, and daughter of Saturn, Vesta vowed to remain a virgin. See Virgil's *Aeneid* 1.272. The Goddess's temple and flame in Rome were tended by a select band of virgin priestesses. Milton imagines his personified Melancholy as Vesta's daughter, and Saturn as her Father. Helen Vendler, in a lecture presented to the Northeast Milton Seminar at Harvard on October 12, 2007, remarked on Milton's willingness to risk an image of apparently unchaste incest here in order to secure an image of utterly pure lineage. What could be more unmixed, more same, than the union of Old Saturn with his own chaste daughter? "Such mixture was not held a stain," says the speaker.

**Saturns raign.** In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which tells a story of the world's beginnings, the reign of Saturn, or Saturnine age, was a golden age (*Metamorphoses* 1.89-112).

**Bowres.** A place closed in or overarched with branches of trees, shrubs, or other plants; a shady recess, leafy covert, arbour (*OED2*).

**Ida's inmost grove.** Saturn's capital was, according to legend, on Mount Ida in Crete. There Jove was born; he ended the golden age and ushered in the silver by usurping his father's throne. See *Paradise Lost* 1.511-16.

**Nun.** An archaic word for pagan priestess (*OED2*), but Milton would also have consiered Catholic nuns virtually pagan.

**demure.** Sober, grave, serious; reserved or composed in demeanour (*OED2*).

**grain.** Dye. "Darkest grain" refers back to "staid Wisdoms hue" (line 16 above; and see Fish, "What It's Like to Read *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*").

**Cipres Lawn.** Cypress (fine black) linen.

**wonted state.** The dignity and attendance to which she is accustomed.

**eev'n step, and musing gate.** Constrast with *L'Allegro's* tripping gait (line 33, Finch and Bowen).
commercing with the skies. Conversing with the skies. Helen Vendler quite rightly reminds us that Melancholy follows the practice of a "pensive nun" by complying with the "custody of the eyes," looking ever and only toward heaven in prayer or toward earth in modesty (Lecture to the Northeast Milton Symposium, Harvard, October 12, 2007).

Forget thyself to marble. The reader is similarly imagined as changed into a marble monument in "On Shakespeare" 13-14. This may allude to the myth of Niobe, who was turned to stone for bragging that her children were greater than Latona's children, Apollo and Diana (Apollodorus Library 3.5.6). The mourner for Shakespeare could, like Niobe, become a stone monument to his memory while grieving. See also Shakespeare's Sonnet 55: "Not marble, nor the gilded monuments" (use your browser's searcher).

Lead. According to the Renaissance astrological systems, lead is linked to Saturn (Flannagan 73).

fiery-wheeled throne. This phrase probably alludes to the story of the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 2:11). Also see "The Passion" 36-38 and the "chariot of paternal deity" in Paradise Lost 6.749-753.

Cherub. Cherubim, one of the higher orders of angels, passed their time in contemplation of God. See Pico della Mirandola's Oration on the Dignity of Man and (Pseudo) Dionysius the Areopagite's The Celestial Hierarchy 7 (search repeatedly for "cherub"). See also Milton's Nativity Ode 111-12.

hist. Summon silently (Orgel & Goldberg 748).

Philomel. A nightingale. For the story of the rape of Philomela and her transformation into a nightingale, see Metamorphoses 6.440. Milton refers to the nightingale more often than any other bird. See Paradise Lost 3.38-40; 4.602-4, 648; 5.40; and 8.518-20, A Mask 230-43, and Sonnet 1. Also, contrast the nightingale with Milton's mention of the lark in L'Allegro and his treatment of both birds in the Second Prolusion (Flannagan 851).

Cynthia. The moon. Another name for Diana, goddess of the moon, sometimes identified or associated with Hecate. See, for example Virgil's Aeneid 4.504. Legend had it that she rode a chariot drawn by dragons (John Leonard).

daign. 1673 prints "deign".

In. 1645 prints "ld" here, but a pen-and-ink correction lines out the "d" and supplies an "n"; Shawcross indicates that Milton made exactly such a correction to the copy he presented to the Bodleian Library (Flannagan xvii). The copytext
used here, from Rauner Library at Dartmouth, has exactly the same correction, in what appears to be a seventeenth-century hand.

**musicall.** 1673 prints "musical". The nightingale sings a very melodic cascade of sounds over many frequencies.

**eeven-Song.** 1673 prints "Even-Song;". The rooster of *L'Allegro* 114 sings matins or morning-song.

**Plat.** Patch, plot.

**som.** 1673 has "some".

**mirth.** 1673 has a full stop here — "mirth." Clearly a misprint.

**drousie.** 1673 has "drowsie". Hughes indicates that "the cry of the Bellman calling the hours is like a chant" (Hughes 74).

**charm.** Can mean both "song" and "spell" (Orgel & Goldberg 748).

**Lamp.** The presence of a lamp indicates that the pensive one is reading when the "Gorgeous Tragedy" comes "sweeping by" in line 96, above. Miller indicates that "it is significant that Il Penseroso reads, rather than views, the plays. He uses them as materials for meditation rather than as entertainment" (Miller 34). **som.** 1673 has "some".

**Towr.** Contrast Il Penseroso being inside the tower, while L'Allegro views a tower from a distance (*L'Allegro* 77-78) (Finch and Bowen).

**Bear.** Viewed from the northern hemisphere, the constellation Ursa Major (the great bear) never sets. Thus to "outwatch the bear" is never to go to bed.

**thrice great Hermes.** Hermes Trismegistus (three times great), traditionally the author of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a body of mystical writings dating from sometime in the first three centuries of the Common Era. Neoplatonists of the Renaissance regarded Hermes as knowing everything. See the *Britannica* article for more on hermeticism, ancient and early modern.

**unsphear.** 1673 misprints a full-stop here — "unsphear." To unsphere would be to summon a spirit (in this case Plato's) from his celestial sphere.

**fleshly nook.** An allusion to the Neo-Platonic idea of human souls as trapped within fleshly bodies (See also Plato's *Phaedo*).
**Daemons.** Daimons were thought to be spirits, half mortal and half immortal, that served to communicate between the gods and mortals. In hermetic philosophy daimons presided over the four elements of created things. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Diotima argues that Eros (Love) is such a daimon (*Symposium* 202d forward).

**(Pall.** "Fine or rich cloth (as a material); especially as used for the robes of persons of high rank" (*OED2*). A sceptered pall, then, would be one befitting a king. There is a description of tragedy in Ovid’s *Amores* 3.1.11-13 that uses both *palla* and *sceptrum*.

**Thebes.** Thebes is the setting for Sophocles’ tragedy *Oedipus the King*, and for other tragedies by Aeschylus (*Seven Against Thebes*) and Euripides.

**Pelops line.** Pelops’ descendants make up the characters of much of Greek tragedy: Atreus, Thyestes, Agamemnon, Orestes, Electra, and Iphigeneia.

**Troy.** A sacred city according to Homer (*Odyssey* 1). It is also the setting for several ancient Greek tragedies, for example Euripides’ *Trojan Women* and Sophocles’ *Ajax*.

**Buskind.** The buskin was the traditional footwear of the tragic actor, as opposed to the sock of the comic actor in *L’Allegro* 132.

**Musaeus.** A mythical poet, sometimes described as the son of Orpheus and a priest of Demeter, and is thus interpreted as the founder of religious poetry. The fifth-century poem "Hero and Leander" is ascribed to him. See also Christopher Marlowe's poem of the same name.

**Orpheus.** Contrast this reference to Orpheus with that in *L’Allegro* 145-150. Miller believes that "the superiority of the pattern set by II Penseroso is signaled by the use Milton makes of the Orpheus myth in the two poems. . . . in *Il Penseroso* the emphasis is upon the power of Orphean music; in *L’Allegro* it is Orpheus’ failure to return Eurydice to the world (Miller 37). Robin Headlam Wells argues that Hercules and Orpheus served as competing models of masculinity throughout the Renaissance (*Shakespeare on Masculinity*).

**him that left half told.** The poem refers to Geoffrey Chaucer. The story referred to in the next six lines is the unfinished *Squire’s Tale*, which tells of the Tartar king, Cambuscan, who has two sons, Algarsife and Camball, and a daughter Canace. During Cambuscan’s birthday feast, an Arabic knight rides into his court bearing gifts: a mechanical brass horse, a magic mirror, a ring whose bearer can understand the language of birds, and a sword that will cure any wound that it inflicts.
The. Shawcross believes this is a misprint for "Th"; see Flannagan xvii.

*Vertuous.* Magical (Orgel & Goldberg 749).

civil-suited. Soberly attired (Orgel & Goldberg 749).

*Morn.* Ovid's Aurora, who seduced Cephalus the Attic boy. See "Elegy 5" 49-51.

*Cherchef't.* Kerchiefed (Orgel & Goldberg 749).

comly. 1673 has "comely".

som. 1673 has "some".

brown. Dusky, dark (OED2).

*Sylvan.* Pertaining to Sylva, the Roman woodland deity.

*Bee with Honied thie.* See Michael Drayton's image in *The Owle*: "Each bee with Honey on her laden thye" (Flannagan 76).

*Sing.* 1673 introduces a full stop here — "sing."

dream. See Night's speech in Ben Jonson's *The Vision of Delight*:
Break, Phat'sie, from thy cave of cloud
And spread thy purple wings;
Now all thy figures are allowed,
And various shapes of things;
Create of airy forms a stream (Hughes 75).

dream. Shawcross suggests the comma ending this line is a misprint in both 1645 and 1673 (Flannagan xvii).

*Genius.* The spirit of the place, or *genius loci*.

fail. Shawcross suggests the comma ending this line is a misprint in both 1645 and 1673 (Flannagan xvii).

*Cloysters.* Flannagan thinks this probably refers not to the cloisters of a monastery, but of a university college (Flannagan 77). However, the poem goes on to speak of stained glass windows and "Service high," complete with organ and choir, so it is hard to avoid the sense of Laudian church ritual in a cathedral or elaborate chapel like Kings College.

*pale.* 1673 introduces a full stop here — "pale."
massy proof. Massive strength (Orgel & Goldberg 749). Milton always used the older "massy" instead of "massive" (Hughes, Variorum 335).

dight. Decorated, decked.

pealing Organ. Contrast with L'Allegro 136-142. Sandra Corse believes that Milton is describing what Monteverdi called the *primera practica* or Renaissance polyphonic style, as opposed to the *stile rappresentativo* (Corse 112).

blow. Shawcross suggests the comma ending this line is a misprint in both 1645 and 1673 (Flannagan xvii).

all Heav’n before mine eyes. See Paradise Lost 3.51-55.

Hairy Gown and Mossy Cell. This phrase reinforces the preceding line's mention of "hermitage." A hair shirt would often be worn by a man doing penance. Sir Thomas More was famous for wearing a hair shirt under his daily clothes. "Cell" can mean "a dwelling consisting of a single chamber inhabited by a hermit or other solitary" (OED2).

spell. 1673 has no comma here — "spell". "Spell" can mean "to engage in a study or contemplation of something" (OED2 definition 6b). Orgel and Goldberg indicate a slightly different connotation: "to decipher, with an overtone of its magical sense" (Orgel and Goldberg 749).

somthing. 1673 has "something".

I with thee will choose to live. Compare this with L'Allegro's concluding couplet: These delights, if thou cast give, Mirth with thee, I mean to live.

Miller believes that the superiority of Il Penseroso's accomplishment is subtly asserted by the relative security of the poem's closing couplet. "There is no doubt that Melancholy can give such pleasures; there is some question of Mirth's power" (Miller 37).