On the Morning of Christ's Nativity
Compos'd 1629
John Milton (1629)

I
This is the Month, and this the happy morn
Wherein the Son of Heav'n's eternal King,
Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,
Our great redemption from above did bring;
For so the holy sages once did sing, [ 5 ]
That he our deadly forfeit should release,
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

II
That glorious Form, that Light unsufferable,
And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,
Wherewith he wont at Heav'n's high Council-Table, [ 10 ]
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,
He laid aside; and here with us to be,
Forsook the Courts of everlasting Day,
And chose with us a darksomer House of mortal Clay.

III
Say Heav'nly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein [ 15 ]
Afford a present to the Infant God?
Hast thou no vers, no hymn, or solemn strain,
To welcom him to this his new abode,
Now while the Heav'n by the Sun's team untrod,
Hath took no print of the approaching light, [ 20 ]
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

IV
See how from far upon the Eastern rode
The Star-led Wisards haste with odours sweet:
O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,
And lay it lowly at his blessed feet; [ 25 ]
Have thou the honour first, thy Lord to greet,
And joyn thy voice unto the Angel Quire,
From out his secret Altar toucht with hallow'd fire.

The Hymn

I
It was the Winter wilde,
While the Heav'n-born-childe, [ 30 ]
All meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies;
Nature in aw to him
Had doff't her gawdy trim,
With her great Master so to sympathize:
It was no season then for her [35]
To wanton with the Sun her lusty Paramour.

II
Onely with speeches fair
She woo's the gentle Air
To hide her guilty front with innocent Snow,
And on her naked shame, [40]
Pollute with sinfull blame,
The Saintly Vail of Maiden white to throw,
Confounded, that her Makers eyes
Should look so neer upon her foul deformities.

III
But he her fears to cease, [45]
Sent down the meek-eyd Peace,
She crown'd with Olive green, came softly sliding
Down through the turning sphear,
His ready Harbinger,
With Turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing, [50]
And waving wide her mirtle wand,
She strikes a universall Peace through Sea and Land.

IV
No War, or Battails sound
Was heard the World around:
The idle spear and shield were high up hung; [55]
The hooked Chariot stood
Unstain'd with hostile blood,
The Trumpet spake not to the armed throng,
And Kings sate still with awfull eye,
As if they surely knew their sovran Lord was by. [60]

V
But peacefull was the night
Wherin the Prince of light
His raign of peace upon the earth began:
The Windes, with wonder whist,
Smoothly the waters kist, [65]
Whispering new joyes to the milde Ocean,
Who now hath quite forgot to rave,
While Birds of Calm sit brooding on the charmed wave.

VI
The Stars with deep amaze
Stand fixt in stedfast gaze, [ 70 ]
Bending one way their pretious influence,
And will not take their flight,
For all the morning light,
Or Lucifer that often warn'd them thence;
But in their glimmering Orbs did glow, [ 75 ]
Untill their Lord himself bespake, and bid them go.

VII
And though the shady gloom
Had given day her room,
The Sun himself with-held his wonted speed,
And hid his head for shame, [ 80 ]
As his inferiour flame,
The new-enlightn'd world no more should need;
He saw a greater Sun appear
Then his bright Throne, or burning Axletree could bear.

VIII
The Shepherds on the Lawn, [ 85 ]
Or ere the point of dawn,
Sate simply chatting in a rustick row;
Full little thought they than,
That the mighty Pan
Was kindly com to live with them below; [ 90 ]
Perhaps their loves, or els their sheep,
Was all that did their silly thoughts so busie keep.

IX
When such musick sweet
Their hearts and ears did greet,
As never was by mortall finger strook, [ 95 ]
Divinely-warbled voice
Answering the stringed noise,
As all their souls in blisfull rapture took:
The Air such pleasure loth to lose,
With thousand echo's still prolongs each heav'nly close. [ 100 ]

X
Nature that heard such sound
Beneath the hollow round

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Attributed to: [Thomas H. Luxon]
Of Cynthia's seat, the Airy region thrilling,
Now was almost won
To think her part was don, [ 105 ]
And that her raign had here its last fulfilling;
She knew such harmony alone
Could hold all Heav'n and Earth in happier union.

XI
At last surrounds their sight
A Globe of circular light, [ 110 ]
That with long beams the shame-fac't night array'd,
The helmed Cherubim
And sworded Seraphim
Are seen in glittering ranks with wings displaid,
Harping in loud and solemn quire, [ 115 ]
With unexpressive notes to Heav'ns new-born Heir.

XII
Such Musick (as 'tis said)
Before was never made,
But when of old the sons of morning sung,
While the Creator Great [ 120 ]
His constellations set,
And the well-balanc't world on hinges hung,
And cast the dark foundations deep,
And bid the weltring waves their oozy channel keep.

XIII
Ring out ye Crystall sphers, [ 125 ]
Once bless our human ears,
(If ye have power to touch our senses so)
And let your silver chime
Move in melodious time;
And let the Base of Heav'n's deep Organ blow, [ 130 ]
And with your ninefold harmony
Make up full consort to th' Angelike symphony.

XIV.
For if such holy Song
Enwrap our fancy long,
Time will run back, and fetch the age of gold, [ 135 ]
And speckl'd vanity
Will sicken soon and die,
And leprous sin will melt from earthly mould,
And Hell itself will pass away,
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day. [ 140 ]

XV
Yea Truth, and Justice then
Will down return to men,
Th’ enameld Arras of the Rainbow wearing,
And Mercy set between,
Thron’d in Celestial sheen, [ 145 ]
With radiant feet the tissued clouds down stearing,
And Heav’n as at som festivall,
Will open wide the Gates of her high Palace Hall.

XVI
But wisest Fate sayes no,
This must not yet be so, [ 150 ]
The Babe lies yet in smiling Infancy,
That on the bitter cross
Must redeem our loss;
So both himself and us to glorifie:
Yet first to those ychain’d in sleep, [ 155 ]
The wakefull trump of doom must thunder through the deep,

XVII
With such a horrid clang
As on mount Sinai rang
While the red fire, and smouldring clouds out brake:
The aged Earth agast [ 160 ]
With terrour of that blast,
Shall from the surface to the center shake,
When at the worlds last session,
The dreadfull Judge in middle Air shall spread his throne.

XVIII
And then at last our bliss [ 165 ]
Full and perfect is,
But now begins; for from this happy day
Th’ old Dragon under ground,
In straiter limits bound,
Not half so far casts his usurped sway, [ 170 ]
And wrath to see his Kingdom fail,
Swindges the scaly Horrour of his foulded tail.

XIX,
The Oracles are dumm,
No voice or hideous humm
Runs through the arched roof in words deceiving. [ 175 ]
Apollo from his shrine
Can no more divine,
With hollow shreik the steep of Delphos leaving.
No nightly trance, or breathed spell,
Inspire's the pale-ey'd Priest from the prophetic cell. [ 180 ]

**XX**
The lonely mountains o're,
And the resounding shore,
A voice of weeping heard, and loud lament;
From haunted spring and dale
Edg'd with poplar pale, [ 185 ]
The parting Genius is with sighing sent,
With flowre-inwov'n tresses torn
The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn.

**XXI**
In consecrated Earth,
And on the holy Hearth, [ 190 ]
The Lars, and Lemures moan with midnight plaint,
In Urns, and Altars round,
A drear, and dying sound
Affrights the Flamins at their service quaint;
And the chill Marble seems to sweat, [ 195 ]
While each peculiar power forgoes his wonted seat.

**XXII**
Peor, and Baalim,
Forsake their Temples dim,
With that twise-batter'd god of Palestine,
And mooned Ashtaroth, [ 200 ]
Heav'n's Queen and Mother both,
Now sits not girt with Tapers holy shine,
The Libyc Hammon shrinks his horn,
In vain the Tyrian Maids their wounded Thamuz mourn.

**XXIII**
And sullen Moloch fled, [ 205 ]
Hath left in shadows dred.
His burning Idol all of blackest hue,
In vain with Cymbals ring,
They call the grisly king,
In dismall dance about the furnace blue; [210]
The brutish gods of Nile as fast,
Isis and Orus, and the Dog Anubis hast.

XXIV
Nor is Osiris seen
In Memphian Grove, or Green,
Trampling the unshow'r'd Grasse with lowings loud: [215]
Nor can he be at rest
Within his sacred chest,
Naught but profoundest Hell can be his shroud:
In vain with Timbrel'd Anthems dark
The sable-stoled Sorcerers bear his worshipt Ark. [220]

XXV
He feels from Juda's land
The dreeded Infants hand,
The rayes of Bethlehem blind his dusky eyn;
Nor all the gods beside,
Longer dare abide, [225]
Nor Typhon huge ending in snaky twine:
Our Babe, to shew his Godhead true,
Can in his swadling bands controul the damned crew.

XXVI
So when the Sun in bed,
Curtain'd with cloudy red, [230]
Pillows his chin upon an Orient wave.
The flocking shadows pale
Troop to th' infernall jail,
Each fetter'd Ghost slips to his severall grave,
And the yellow-skirted Fayes [235]
Fly after the Night-steeds, leaving their Moon-lov'd maze.

XXVII
But see the Virgin blest,
Hath laid her Babe to rest.
Time is our tedious Song should here have ending,
Heav'n's youngest-teemed Star [240]
Hath fixt her polisht Car,
Her sleeping Lord with Handmaid Lamp attending.
And all about the Courtly Stable,
Bright-harnest Angels sit in order serviceable.

Notes:
Introduction. John Milton's "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" is significant for its merit alone, though this remarkable poem is also important in the context of the artist's career. His first major work in English, the nativity ode reflects "his desire to attempt the highest subjects and to take on the role of bardic Poet-Priest" (Barbara Lewalski, *Life of John Milton* 38). Milton himself declares such ambition in a letter to his friend Charles Diodati: "I sing to the peace-bringing God descended from heaven, and the blessed generations covenanted in the sacred books,. . . I sing the starry axis and the singing hosts in the sky, and of the gods suddenly destroyed in their own shrines." ("Elegia sexta"). Milton's lofty tone suits the elevation of his artistry, as the nativity ode is the "first realization" of Milton's high poetic aspirations (Lewalski 37).

Stella Revard writes that the poem "marks Milton's coming of age as a Christian English writer" (*Milton and the Tangles of Neaera's Hair: The Making of the 1645 Poems* 64). Milton's header, "Compos'd 1629," dates the poem as written in Milton's twenty-first year, leading A.S.P. Woodhouse to call the Ode a coming-of-age poem (*Variorum Commentary* 41). This is perhaps what Milton intended: the poem appears first in his 1645 *Poems*, after a frontispiece engraving of himself supposedly at twenty-one. Moreover, as Barbara Lewalski explains, the poem "displays elements that remain constants in Milton's poetry: allusiveness, revisionism, mixture of genres, stunning originality, cosmic scope, prophetic voice" (Lewalski 46). According to Stanley Fish, Milton's works all voice the same concerns (Fish 3). It makes sense, then, that Milton's first major work speaks to his life-long preoccupations.

The poem is formally divided into two sections. The first four stanzas make up the proem. Each of these stanzas consists of six lines of iambic pentameter, which conclude in an alexandrine. This echoes Chaucerian and Spenserian tradition, and also imitates the form practiced in Milton's earlier poem "On the Death of Fair Infant Dying of a Cough." The second half of the poem, in which Milton creates his own form, has been alternately called the "hymn" and the "ode." In this section, the eight lines of each stanza vary in length (6, 6, 19, 6, 6, 10, 8, 12), each terminating in an alexandrine. The rhyme scheme follows the pattern aabccbdd. Whether this section is an ode or a hymn, J. Martin Evans points out that either "automatically implies a choric rather than an individual speaker" (*The Miltonic Moment* 12). This is critical to Evans's thesis that the Ode is the most "rigorously depersonalized of all Milton's nondramatic works" (Evans 12).

Stylistically, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" demonstrates a conflation of various genres. Woodhouse remarks: Milton's ode has been called Spenserian, Italianate, Baroque, or Mannerist . . . Later Milton himself, surveying the genres in his defence of the religious and
moral aims of poetry, spoke of both classical and Biblical models and linked odes with hymns. (Woodhouse 39)

Not surprisingly, critics often discuss Milton's relationship with the classics. Most believe that Milton expected the poem to be read in the tradition of Virgil's fourth ecologue, "which heralds the return of the Golden Age under Augustus and associates it with the birth of a child" (Woodhouse 34). However, Milton's appropriation of classical elements is not pagan. As Woodhouse goes on to explain, "through many centuries of the Christian era Virgil's poem was interpreted as an unconscious prophecy of the birth of Christ" (Woodhouse 35).

Thematically, the poem does not discuss Christmas, but rather examines the cosmic significance of the incarnation. It is worth noting that Milton wrote the poem as a Trinitarian ("Trinal Unity" line 11), a point of doctrine he later abandoned. Most critics observe that pagan and Christian stories co-inhabit the poem, especially in the last section, where the purging of idols suggests modern reformation (Lewalski 48). The extensive list of idols suggests "the long and difficult process that must precede it: completing a reformation of the church by ridding humankind of all its idols, lovely as well as hideous" (Lewalski 48).

Critics disagree as to how successfully Milton appropriates the classics. David Quint argues that the pagan influence of the poem undermines its theological message, characterizing the Ode as "the story of great expectations that fail to be realized in the way they are initially projected" (Quint, "Expectation and Prematurity in Milton's Nativity Ode" 195). He believes that the poem expresses "a longing to escape from or put an end to history" and for "a purified poetry that separates itself from a fleshly, pagan inspiration" (Quint 195). Quint further claims that:

the double problem posed to Milton's poem by its models and analogues- that its celebration of the birth of the true God repeats the pattern of a pagan nativity hymn, that pagan error has the potential to return after his supposedly been definitively banished- is, in fact, built into its subject and unfolding argument. (Quint 200)

However, given Milton's open admiration for the classics, Quint's thesis somewhat misses the mark. Rosemond Tuve is more accurate in her explanation of the pagan-Christian collision in the Ode: "there is no conflict between these realms of reference . . . because the power of Milton's basic theme of the redemptive promise of the Incarnation had centuries before him Christianized these and other classical images" (Images and Themes in Five Poems by Milton 41). Furthermore, Tuve explains Milton's intent in framing his Christian message in the pagan tradition: "Milton commonly uses inherited figures when he wishes to make sure of some refinement within a conception" (Tuve 43).
While Evans takes a look at popular views of the nativity ode as a conversion poem—"from pagan illusion to Christian truth"—he rejects this "confessional autobiography" reading of the poem, and instead compares Milton's work to contemporary nativity poems of the period, observing that, in contrast to the norm, "what strikes us immediately is the absence of any reference in Milton's poem to the effect of Christ's birth on the poet himself" (Evans 13). Evans is correct in noting that neither poet, nor magi, nor holy family appear in this "completely dehumanized poem," where the only figures are "personified abstractions" (Evans 15-16). This effect, combined with the immediacy created by the "collapsed tenses," creates what Evans calls a "timeless present" (Evans 16). Unlike other critics, Evans believes that, if a conversion takes place in the poem, it is the reader's, stressing that the poem is more about "cosmic revolution" than anything else (Evans 17).

Alison Moe and Thomas H. Luxon

_holy sages._ Ancient Hebrew prophets, but perhaps also Virgil, who predicts the birth of a peace-bearing child in _Eclogues_ 4.

_Trinal Unity._ Later in life, Milton rejected the doctrine of the trinity; see _Christian Doctrine_ 1.5.

_spangled host._ The stars, and perhaps also the angelic orders they were thought to represent.

_Wisards._ The three wise men of Matthew 2 were often associated with wizardry and Persians; see the Geneva annotations to Matthew 2:1. See also Flemalle's _Nativity_ (1425).

_prevent._ Come before.

_blessed feet._ Michael Lieb writes of these lines: "through both the humility of his posture and the humble nature of his gift, he desires metaphorically to take upon himself the form of a servant. His desire, in turn, reveals his gratitude for Christ's corresponding act" (Lieb _Sinews_ 45).

_hallow'd fire._ See Isaiah 6:5-7.

_sympathize._ Lieb writes; "While Christ disrobes himself of the insignia of his dignity, Nature appropriately disrobes herself of the outward signs of her corruption" in sympathy for his act and in preparation for his arrival (Lieb _Sinews_ 49). Lieb also notes that "to sympathize" may mean to resemble._

_sphere._ The Ptolemaic version of the universe had the stars revolving around the Earth in a sphere.
amorous clouds. The image suggests Jupiter assuming the form of a cloud to seduce Io in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 1.

*mirtle*. Associated with Venus in Virgil's *Eclogues* 7.62.

*whist*. Hushed.

*Birds of Calm*. The halcyons or kingfishers that Ovid describes in *Metamorphoses* 11.745-6 making love and nesting on the seas calmed especially for them. Kingfisher picture.


*Axletree*. A metonymy for the sun's chariot.

*greater Sun*. For the conceit of "another Sunne," see Spenser, *Shepheardes Calender* "April" 73-81.

*Pan*. The [great] Pan is an image of Christ in Spenser's *Shepheardes Calender* "May."

*hollow round of Cynthia's seat*. The sphere of the moon.

*sons of morning*. See Job 38: 6-8.

*power to touch our senses*. The Lines allude to the Pythagorean notion that the celestial spheres make music as they turn, a music mortals cannot normally hear. The notion is elaborated by Lorenzo in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* 5.1.


*Sinai*. See the account of Moses receiving the Law on Mount Sinai: Exodus 19:16.

*throne*. See Matthew 24:30.


*Genius*. The guardian spirit of a place.

*Lars and Lemures*. Roman gods of home and spirits of the dead.
Flamins. Priests serving a Roman deity.

Peor and Baalim. Mount Peor was the home of the Phoenician deity Baal-peor (Numbers 23:28 and Psalm 106:28). Baalim in general are Phoenician deities. Palestine. Dagon was twice cast down (1 Samuel 5:4). See also Dagon's role in Samson Agonistes and his description in Paradise Lost 1.462-63.

Ashtaroth. Astarte, a powerful goddess of the moon and fertility. She is described in Paradise Lost 1.437-446.

Hammon. Lybian god, Jupiter-Ammon, represented as a ram.

Thamuz. Also known as Dammuzi, a Phoenician god whose death was celebrated annually. He was the lover of the more powerful Astarte. His death and re-birth symbolized the cyclical growing season. The Greeks knew him as Adonis, beloved of Venus.

Moloch. The name is Ammonite for "king." A god whose rites included child sacrifice to a calf-headed brass idol filled with fire. See 2 Kings 23:10 and Paradise Lost 1.392.

gods of Nile. Isis was the Egyptian moon goddess, horned like a cow according to Herodotus (History 2.41). Horus, the Egyptian sun god, was her son by her brother Osiris. Anubis, his son, was figured with a jackal's head.

Osiris. The principal Egyptian ("Memphian") god also known as Apis, usually figured as a black bull with a white triangle on its forehead (Herodotus Histories 3.27-29).

his worshipt Ark. According to Herodotus (Histories 2.63), the Egyptian festival of Ares in Pampremis included carrying an image of Apis or Osirus in a gilt wooden shrine or ark.

Typhon. In Greek myth, Typhon or Typhoneus was a fire-breathing giant with 100 heads and a serpentine body. See Hesiod's Theogony 820.

his Godhead true. These Lines compare Christ to Hercules, who strangled two serpents a jealous Hera sent to destroy him while he was only an infant. See the story in the Pseudo Apollodorus' Library 1.175.

Orient. Eastern.

teeemed. Born.