Sonnet 8
John Milton (1645)

Captain or Colonel, or Knight in Arms,
Whose chance on these defenceless dores may sease,
If ever deed of honour did thee please,
Guard them, and him within protect from harms,
He can requite thee, for he knows the charms [ 5 ]
That call Fame on such gentle acts as these,
And he can spred thy Name o're Lands and Seas,
What ever clime the Sun's bright circle warms.
Lift not thy spear against the Muses' Bowre,
The great Emathian Conqueror bid spare [ 10 ]
The house of Pindarus, when Temple and Towre
Went to the ground: and the repeated air
Of sad Electra's Poet had the power
To save th' Athenian Walls from ruine bare.

Notes

Introduction. According to Barbara Lewalski, this sonnet "inaugurates the political sonnet in the English tradition" (The Life of John Milton 158). The poem invites readers to imagine that the poet pins this sonnet to his door to protect his property during a military attack. Milton, like most of London in 1642, probably did expect the King's forces to attack the city. Milton therefore frames the poem as a plea for special protection for poets in time of war. In its gesture, the poem alludes to Alexander the Great, who is said to have spared the house of the poet Pindar during his invasion of Thebes. There was no title to this sonnet in the 1645 and 1673 editions. However, the Trinity Manuscript [TMS] offers the following for a title:

On his dore when ye Citty expected an assault
the
When assault was intended to ye Citty
Collin O'Mara and Amar Dhand

Colonel. Three syllables, usually pronounced "coronel."
sease. Seize. See OED2.

charms. Referring to both magic spells (Old English cierm) and songs (Latin carmen). See OED2.

gentle acts. Adjective suggesting both mild and noble; as well as generous, as becomes a knight in arms. See OED2.
Sonnet 8, line 9. In the Rauner copy of 1645, there is a hand-written apostrophe (') here that Milton may have added himself, as he was known to have edited presentation copies of his works after they were published.

Emathian Conqueror. Alexander the Great was given this title in recognition of his father's reign as king of the Emathia district of Macedonia. In Plutarch's Alexander 11.350, the conqueror spared the house of the poet Pindar during the sack of Thebes.

Temple and Towre. A frequent combination in the old metrical romances that recurs in Paradise Regain'd 3:268, 4:34.

sad. Serious, solemn. See OED2.

Electra’s Poet. Plutarch’s Lysander 15.3 tells the story of how Athens was spared from destruction by Lysander when a Spartan general recited the first chorus from Euripides’ Electra 167-69:
Electra, Agamemnon's child, I come
Unto thy desert home. . .