The Sixth Elegy
John Milton (1629)

To Charles Diodati, after he had visited the country.

When he wrote on December 13th, he begged forgiveness for his verses if they were not as good as usual, since amidst the magnificent welcome of his friends he was not able to give serious attention to the muse. Here is the reply:

I, on an empty stomach, send you best wishes for good health, of which you, on a full one, may feel the lack. But why does your muse draw out mine, and not permit her to seek her wonted obscurity? If you wanted to know by song how I return your love and how fond I am of you, believe me you would search in vain to find out by this song, for our love cannot fit into short modes, nor does it walk perfectly in these lame feet of poetry. How well you describe the sumptuous banquets, the December hilarity and the joyous festivals which honor the God departed from the sky — the delights, the joys of the country in winter, and drinking French vintages near the cozy fire.

Why do you complain that poetry flees from wine and festival banquets? Song loves Bacchus and Bacchus loves song. Phoebus was not ashamed to wear fresh ivy berries and to prefer it to his ivy laurel. Often on the Aonian hills the crowd of nine shouts "Euoe" and joins in chorus with the Thyoneian rout. Ovid sent bad verses from the Corallian fields; there were no sumptuous meals there, and no fruit of the vine. Of what but wine and roses and cluster-crowned Lyaeus did the Teian poet sing in his brief measures? Teumesian Euan inspired the Pindaric verses, and each page reeks of consumed wine — then the heavy overturned chariot with a broken axle, and the rush of the horsemen, gritty with Elean dust. The Roman lyricist drunk with four-year-old wine sang sweetly of Glycera and of golden-haired Chloe.

Now also for you a splendid and plentiful table is prepared; it feeds your mind and warms your genius. Massic cups skim the fruitful vein and you pour out sweet verses from the cup itself. To those let us add the arts and great Phoebus to your inmost heart. Bacchus, Apollo, and Ceres are inclined to wards one, alone. No wonder then that your songs are so sweet, brought forth by the three gods united.

Now also the Thracian lyre, gently inlaid with gold by a skilled hand, resounds for you, and the harp is heard in halls hung with tapestries and rules the feet of maidens by its tremulous art. At least let these scenes stay your muses and recall whatever too much drinking drives away. Believe me, while the ivory plucks the string and the holiday crowd fills the perfumed halls keeping time with the plectrum, you will feel quiet Phoebus stealing into your heart like a sudden kind
of heat that penetrates your bones. And through a maiden’s eyes and musical fingers Thalia will insinuate herself entirely into your fallen chest.

In fact, the light elegy is in the care of many of the gods, and she calls whomever pleases her to her lines. With Elegy stand Liber, Erato, Ceres, and Venus, and, next to his rosy mother is tender Love. For good dinner companions are valued by such poets, and very often old wine is ordered. But he who represents wars and heaven beneath a mature Jupiter and pious heroes and semi-divine rulers now sings the best in the sacred council of the gods, and now the infernal realm holding the howling dogs, let him live sparingly in the manner of the Samian teacher, and let herbs furnish his innocuous meals. Let glimmering pure water stand in a vessel made of beech, and let him drink sober draughts from the pure spring. Let it be added to this that his youth should be crime-free and chaste, his ways must be upright, and his hand without blemish. He should be of your type, O priest glittering with the sacred cloth and sacrificial water standing with the angry gods. By this rule wise Tiresias is said to have lived after his eyes were taken and Ogygian Linus and Calchas, a refugee from his accursed home, and Orpheus as an old man smote the wild beasts of the lonely cave. Thus Homer, spare eater and drinker of the stream water, sailed Ulysses through the wide sea and through the monster-making palace of Phoebus and Perseis, and through the shoals of the sirens, and through your houses, infernal king, where it is said swarms of shades are imprisoned by black blood. For truly the bard is sacred to the gods and he is priest to the divine. His secret heart and his lips breathe out Jove.

But if you will know what I am up to (if you, at least by custom, consider what I do of such importance to know), I sing to the peace-bringing God descended from heaven, and the blessed generations covenanted in the sacred books, the cries of the infant God who, stabled under a poor roof, dwells in the heavens with his father. I sing the starry axis and the singing hosts in the sky, and of the gods suddenly destroyed in their own shrines. We assuredly owe these gifts to Christ on his birthday, gifts which the first light before the dawn brought to me. For you also these reflective strains remain on my native pipes which, having been recited, you shall be my judge.

Translation by Glenn Buchberger and Thomas H. Luxon

Notes:

Introduction. Elegy 6 is another installment in the series of letters and epistolary poems exchanged between Milton and his dear friend, Charles Diodati. Extant are: a 1625 letter in Greek from Diodati to Milton (French 1.98-99), a 1626 letter in Greek from Diodati to Milton (French 1. 104-105), Elegia prima from Milton to Diodati, and Elegia Sexta. It was written in the winter of 1629, apparently in response to a letter (now lost) in which Diodati described his Christmas reveling...
and decorously begged forgiveness for the quality of his verse which had suffered amidst the festival atmosphere of his rural location. There is also a sense that Charles was encouraging John to cast off his austerity, at least for a little while, and to indulge at least briefly in the pleasures of youth. Milton adopts the playful tone of Diodati’s letter and incorporates it into his response, then he moves into much more serious claims about the relative ethics of lyric and heroic verse.

Milton begins by lightly castigating Charles for his apparent intemperance, but reminds him that wine and song are not enemies of poetry. He observes that Bacchus and revelry can inspire poetry and that even Phoebus, god of poetry, indulged in Dionysian pleasures. According to Milton, many gods are patrons of the "light elegy" inspired by wine. Though we may be tempted to wonder whether Milton speaks sarcastically, his own use of elegy confirms the regard he has for the genre and invites us to take his words at face value.

As valuable as elegy may be as a means of expressing the joy of feasting and love, Milton considers heroic poetry a higher calling, and more suited to his own talents and vocation. Temperance is the appropriate way of life for the epic poet, an idea that Milton advanced in the preface to Book 2 of his Reason of Church Government as well as in The Apology to a Pamphlet. Milton aligns himself with the sober, "water-drinking" Homer of Greek epic. He deftly rejects his friend’s exhortations to put aside serious study for awhile and enjoy himself, maintaining that even the early years of an epic poet must be absolutely devoted to unyielding temperance in life and in art.

Milton closes his address with a brief reference to his recently finished poem, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity." Placing his own work after his description of the life of an epic poet is clearly intended to link the two. It further implies that the ascetic lifestyle is necessary to write properly about the birth of the Son of God, implying that he is more suited to the task than his less temperate friend. He describes the parties Diodati attends as pagan saturnalia. By contrast, his Nativity Ode describes Christ's advent as a noble condescension, a violent supersession of pagan deities, and the beginning of an apocalyptic end to the world.

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December hilarity. Milton alludes here to pagan celebrations of the Saturnalia, a winter holiday of classical origins. For a full description of Saturnalia, please see the relevant Encyclopedia Britannica article. Note also the contrast between the December festivals described in this elegy and the description of the birth of Christ in Milton’s "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity." Later in this elegy, Milton alludes to his Nativity Ode project.
departed from the sky. A rather obtuse allusion to the Son of God who left heaven to become incarnate on Earth. Obtuse, because the locution "the god" sounds as if it refers to a pagan deity.

fresh ivy berries. According to classical legend, Dionysius (Bacchus) wore a garland of berries, sometimes ivy, sometimes grapes. See Caravaggio's Bacchus (1597) and Rubens' Bacchus (1638-40). According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Dionysiac revelers carried thyrsoi, wands of fennel tipped with ivy berries.

Aonian hills. Mount Helicon. This mountain in Boeotia was sacred to the Nine Muses.

crowd of nine. The Nine Muses.

Thyoneian. Bacchus's mother, Semele, was sometimes also called Thyone; thus Bacchus would sometimes be referred to as the Thyoneian, that is, of or from Thyone.

Corallian fields. A reference to Ovid's exile in Tomis. See Elegy 1 for a fuller reference to the poet's exile.

Lyaeus. Still another name for Bacchus.

Teian poet. The Teian (or Thalian, after Thalia the muse of comic song) was Anacreon, composer of drinking songs in short verses.

Teumesian Euan. Yet another name for Bacchus.

Pindaric verses. Pindar was a lyric poet of ancient Greece. He composed odes about the victories of charioteers in Pythian, Olympic, Isthmian, and Nemean games. It was said that Bacchus was his principle inspiration.


Massic cups. Campanian cups. Campania is a region in Eastern Italy known for its fine wine during the last century BCE and the first CE. The area was extremely fertile due to the volcanic ash that made up the soil.

Phoebus stealing into your heart. Milton uses "serpere" to describe how Apollo will insinuate himself into Charles's heart. The verb has obvious snake-like
connotations and may reflect the negative quality Milton attached to celebrations he considered pagan.

*Sudden kind of heat.* See Elegy 1 for a similar description of sudden erotic heat.

*Samian teacher.* Pythagoras of Samos. According to Ovid in *Metamorphoses* 15. 60-142, Pythagoras stressed the intemperance of eating meat.

*Tiresias.* In Greek mythology: as a young man, Tiresias happened upon Minerva as she was taking a bath. As punishment for viewing her naked body, Minerva deprived Tiresias of his sight. She later took pity on him and gave him the power to foresee events, replacing his physical sense of sight with the sense of the soothsayer.

*Ogygian Linus and Calchas.* In Greek mythology, Linus taught Heracles to play the lyre. Heracles struck Linus dead in a fit of rage after his teacher criticized him. According to Homer, Calchas was the seer whom the Achaeans brought with them as they sailed against Troy. He died of envy after meeting another seer whose abilities were greater than his own.

*Monster making palace of Phoebus and Perseis.* This probably refers to the ocean as the home of sea monsters. Perseis was one of the Oceanids and was also the mother of Calypso, Aeetes, Circe, Pasiphae, and Perses. Milton here is using a version of Perseis's life in which Apollo was the father of her children, but Helios is more often recorded as the father.

*Shrines.* Milton's refers to his almost contemporaneous composition, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity," a poem that he placed first in his first published collection of poems in 1645.