

John Milton: An Annotated Chronology

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Abstract There are two schools of thought in literary criticism. One claims that a creative work should stand on its own, with no regard for the writer. According to adherents of this view, a poem should be evaluated only on its form, its language, its imagery, and other criteria commonly understood to apply to the evaluation of a work of art. Those critics assert that who created the piece, what forces shaped the writer's mind, and what environment there might have been at the time of the creation should have no value in determining the worth of the piece. On the other hand, some critics maintain that these matters are crucial in understanding or, at least, appreciating the work of art. We follow the latter school of thought. In this paper, we have a compilation of the events during the life of John Milton. It is based on the alternate perspective, that knowledge and understanding of the life and times of the author are at the very least helpful and more likely essential in discerning the meaning—or meanings—of the work. In the case of John Milton, for example, knowing that the writer of *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, *Samson Agonistes*, and such sonnets as “When I Consider How My Light is Spent,” was himself blind is absolutely essential if we are to mine the depth of the works for meaning or to appreciate the genius of the man who, along with Chaucer and Shakespeare, is considered to be one of the greatest writers in the English language. This latter school gives rise to the present chronology.

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1608

John Milton is born at The Spreddeagle, Bread Street, in Cheapside, London, on December 9, to parents John and Sara Jeffrey Milton. His father is a scrivener by trade, a person whose job is to be able to read and write, and who also dabbles as a composer of church music. He is baptized in All Hallows Church in December. Along with William Shakespeare, John Milton would become one of England's greatest writers. His family had the means to provide him with the best education and the desire to prepare him for an honorable profession, perhaps in the clergy. In his early forties, he would become completely blind. Though blind, he would write some of the most

important works in the English language, most notably the epic poem *Paradise Lost* (Lewalski, 2003).



Figure 1. A Young John Milton (1608-1674)
(The British Library)

1611

The King James Version (KJV) of *The Bible* is published, greatly influencing the development of the written language. John Milton's family Bible was the KJV and can be seen on display in the British Library in London (British Library, 2022).

1615

John Milton's brother Christopher is born in London.

1616

John Smith publishes *A Description of New England*, an account of his exploration of the region in 1614.

Shakespeare writes his will. Judith Shakespeare marries Thomas Quiney. Shakespeare alters his will in March, possibly because he wishes to exclude Quiney from benefiting from Judith's inheritance. Shakespeare dies on April 23, age 56, in Stratford-upon-Avon and is laid to rest in Holy Trinity Church in Stratford. On his tombstone are engraved these words, which appear to have been written by Shakespeare himself:

Good friend, for Jesus' sake
 forbear
 To dig the dust enclosed here.
 Blest be the man that spares these
 stones,
 And curst be he that moves my
 bones.

1619

The first African slaves in North America arrive in Jamestown, Virginia.

1620

John Milton enters St. Paul's School, under Alexander Gill. He is also tutored at home by Thomas Young.

The first English travelers, many of them Separatist Puritans, arrive in the Plymouth, Massachusetts Colony, from Plymouth, Port of Devon, by way of The Netherlands.

1622

The first English-language newspaper, the *Courante* or *Weekly News*, is published in London.

1623

The First Folio of Shakespeare's works is published.

1625

James I dies on March 27, age 58, in Theobalds Estate, Goff's Oak, Hertfordshire.

Charles I is crowned King of England. He marries Catholic Henrietta Maria.

Charles loses the battle at Cadiz. Parliament refuses to raise taxes to pay for war.

Charles dissolves Parliament.

John Milton is admitted to Christ's College, Cambridge, under William Chappell.



Figure 2. Charles I, King of England
 (History Today)

1626

Milton gets suspended from college after an argument with his tutor, William Chappell. Returns to his family in London and begins to write his first poetry. In November, he goes back to Cambridge but is assigned a new tutor, Nathaniel Tovey.

Milton writes epigrams on the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, which was led by Robert Catesby, with coconspirators, Thomas Winter, Thomas Percy, John Wright, and Guy Fawkes

1627

Milton lends £500 to his future father-in-law, Richard Powell.

Charles I loses the war in La Rochelle, France.

1628

Charles recalls Parliament to pay for his wars. Parliament refuses.

Parliament presents The Petition of Right to the King.

1629

Milton receives his Bachelor of Arts degree from Cambridge University at age 21.

William Laud becomes Bishop of London. He opposes the Puritans and is supported by Charles.

The Eleven Years Tyranny begins; Charles rules without Parliament until 1640.

John Milton composes the poem "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" on Christmas morning at Cambridge.

1632

John Milton receives the degree of Master of Arts cum laude from Cambridge on July 3. Because of his family's comfortable financial status, he does not have to seek immediate employment but settles into family homes in Hammersmith, London, and Buckinghamshire to study and write poetry. His poem "On Shakespeare" is published anonymously soon after.

1633

Charles I appoints William Laud Archbishop of Canterbury. Laud was determined to suppress Puritans. He was a key advocate of Charles I's religious reforms. He would be arrested by Parliament in 1640 and executed towards the end of the First English Civil War in January 1645.

1634

A Masque (*Comus*), Milton's play in praise of chastity, was performed for the first time at Ludlow Castle, on September 29. The event was the installation of Thomas Egerton as Lord President of Wales.

1637

Milton and his family move to Horton, Buckinghamshire to escape the Plague.

Milton's mother, Sara Jeffrey Milton, dies and is buried in the town of Horton.

Milton writes the poem *Lycidas* as an elegy for his Cambridge colleague, Edward

King, who drowned on the Irish Sea three months earlier while returning to his home in Ireland. The poem is a scarcely hidden condemnation of the church and its corrupt clergy.

Milton considers entering the Inns of Court, the professional associations for barristers in England and Wales. There are four Inns of Court – Gray's Inn, Lincoln's Inn, Inner Temple, and Middle Temple.

William Laud and Charles I try to impose their new Anglican prayer book in Scotland. It was immediately denounced by the Scottish people and never put into use.

1638

Scottish nobles and ministers sign the National Covenant.

In May, Milton sets out to tour France, Switzerland, and Italy, where he meets the 74-year-old Florentine astronomer, mathematician, and philosopher, Galileo Galilei. He is forced to return home in July 1639, as rumors swell of Civil War in England.

Milton's best childhood friend, Charles Diodati, dies.

Milton publishes the pastoral elegy *Lycidas* in *Justa Eduardo King Naufrago*, a book in memory of Edward King, lost at sea. King was three years younger than Milton and one year behind at Cambridge. *Lycidas* was exceedingly popular and considered Milton's best poem. Many today consider it the greatest lyrical poem in the English language. In parallel to *Epitaphium Damonis*, it is the last English elegy that Milton will write.

1639

Charles I invades Scotland and loses the Bishop's War to the Scots. The only significant engagement of the war took place on 18 June, at the Battle of the Brig of Dee, south of Aberdeen. It resulted in a Covenanter victory and casualties were minimal.

Charles I signs the Peace of Berwick.

In July, Milton returns from his travels. He composes the poem *Epitaphium Damonis*,

Epitaph of Damon as an elegy for Charles Diodati, who died during Milton's European tour. It is his last elegy in Latin. The reference is to the story of *Damon and Pythias*, a legend in Greek historic writings illustrating the Pythagorean ideal of friendship, in which Damon pledges his life for his friend Pythias. The first line is: "Thyrsis and Damon, shepherds of the same neighborhood, had pursued the same interests and been friends since childhood – the closest friends it is possible to be."

1640

Epitaphium Damonis is published.

Milton moves to his own house in Aldersgate and begins teaching two students, John and Edward Phillips, along with several other children of aristocrats.

Milton takes Richard Powell's lands in Wheatley for nonpayment of loan debt.

April to May 5: The Short Parliament.

Charles I loses the Second Bishops War to the Scots.

In November, the Long Parliament passes the Triennial Act: Parliament must be called every three years.

1641

In May, the despised advisor of Charles I, Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, is executed for treason.

In July, Parliament abolishes the hated Court of the Star Chamber.

Charles abandons all efforts to impose religious changes on Scotland. Scots leave England.

In November, Parliament passes Grand Remonstrances, a list of grievances.

As the civil war between England's Parliamentarians and Royalists heats up, the pro-Parliamentarian Milton publishes the political tracts *Of Reformation, Animadversions, Of Prelatical Episcopacy, and The Reason of Church Government*.

1642

Thirty-four-year-old Milton marries seventeen-year-old Mary Powell in May or June. The match is not a good one, and Mary returns to her family's home after one

month. Despite the acrimonious start to their ten-year marriage, the couple will eventually reunite, and Mary will bear three daughters and a son.

In January, Charles I enters Parliament to arrest five members for treason. Precipitates Civil War.

In April, Charles I tries to seize arms in Hull; the town refuses to allow him to enter.

In October, John Milton's brother, Christopher, enlists with the Royalists.

Parliament begins raising its own army.

The English Civil War between King and Parliament begins. Indecisive battle of Edgehill.

The Navy supports Parliament.

1643

Parliament enlists Scots in opposition to Charles I.

Unhappy in his marriage, Milton writes a pamphlet condemning England's divorce laws entitled *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, followed by *The Judgment of Martin Bucer Concerning Divorce*. The so-called "Divorce Tracts" earn Milton the derisive nickname "Milton the Divorcer."

1644

In January, the Scottish army enters England in support of the Royalists.

Parliament wins the battle of Marston Moor.

After the Stationers' Company attempts to censor his *Judgment of Martin Bucer*, Milton publishes the impassioned *Areopagitica* in support of a free press.

Milton publishes his letter, "Of Education," along with *Areopagitica*.

1645

Parliament wins the battle of Naseby.

William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, is executed.

Parliamentary forces reorganized into the New Model Army under Sir Thomas Fairfax.

Milton publishes *Tetrachordon* and *Colasterion* in March. Mary Powell returns to her husband.

1646

Charles I surrenders to the Scots, and the first Civil War comes to an end.

John Liburne, a Leveller, publishes London's *Liberty in Chains*.

After a rapprochement in their relationship, Mary Powell Milton gives birth in July to Milton's first child, daughter Anne.

1647

Milton's father, John, dies in March. In April, Milton moves to a smaller house in High Holborn, the highest point in the City of London, near Lincoln's Inn Fields.

Oliver Cromwell defeats the Royalist army of English and Scots at Preston in Lancashire. It resulted in a victory for the New Model Army under the command of Oliver Cromwell over the Royalists and Scots commanded by the Duke of Hamilton. The Parliamentary victory presaged the end of the Second English Civil War.

Pride's Purge removes Parliament members who are too lenient to Charles. Soldiers prevented members of Parliament considered hostile to the New Model Army from entering the House of Commons of England.

About 60 members remain in "Rump Parliament."

1648

The Miltons' second child, a daughter named Mary, is born in October.

Charles starts another Civil War with allies in Scotland.

Battle of Preston ends the hopes of restoring Charles to power.

1649

Parliament passes act abolishing the monarchy and House of Lords.

Charles I is tried, convicted, and, on January 30, beheaded, ushering in a republican government led by Oliver Cromwell.

Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers publish *The True Levellers Standard Advanced*.

Milton supports the removal of the king, and publishes *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* in February, *Articles of Peace* in May. He is ordered to write a response to *Eikon Basilike*. He writes *Eikonoklastes* in October.

In March, Milton is appointed Secretary for the Foreign Tongues, an official position in the English government handling diplomatic correspondence. He receives a salary of £288 per year and lodgings at Scotland Yard.



Figure 3. Oliver Cromwell.
 (Historic UK)

1650

Cromwell enters Scotland and crushes Royalist Scots army at Dunbar.

Instrument of Government is drawn up. Cromwell is proposed as Lord Protector.

The poems of Massachusetts author Anne Bradstreet are published in London under the title *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*.

1651

In March, Mary Powell Milton gives birth to the couple's son, John.

A Scottish army invades England in an attempt to put Charles II on the throne.

The Scots are defeated at Worcester, and Charles II flees abroad.

Milton publishes *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio Secunda* in May.

In exile, Charles II convinces polemicists Claudius Salmasius and Alexander More to

compose a Latin tract intended for a Continental audience that would indict the Englishmen who tried and executed Charles I.

Milton writes *Defense of the English People against Salmasius*, a Latin tract, that focuses on inconsistencies in Salmasius's argument.

1652

The Act of Uniformity is passed. It set the order of prayer to be used in the English Book of Common Prayer and was part of the Elizabethan Religious Settlement in England instituted by Elizabeth I, who wanted to unify the Church.

After years of diminishing eyesight likely caused by glaucoma, Milton becomes totally blind. He will dictate to his wife and daughters some of his greatest works, including *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*.

In May, Milton's wife, Mary, dies three days after giving birth to the couple's fourth child, daughter Deborah. After Mary's death, Milton was left to care for four children, all under the age of six. Soon afterward, in June 1652, the infant John also died. His father had never seen him.

1653

December: Oliver Cromwell is confirmed as Lord Protector of England.

1655

Cromwell dissolves Parliament in January. Divides the country into 11 districts.

1656

In November, Milton marries his second wife, Katherine Woodcock.

1657

John Milton's daughter, Katherine, is born in October.

1658

Milton's second wife, Katherine Woodcock, dies four months after giving birth to the couple's only child, Katherine. Soon after, the baby girl dies, as well.

Oliver Cromwell dies. His son Richard is installed as successor in September.

1659

In May, Richard Cromwell resigns. His fall from power is so swift he becomes known as 'Tumbledown Dick.'

Milton publishes *A Treatise of Civil Power* in February and *Considerations Touching the Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings* in August.

1660

Charles II returns from France and lands at Dover. Becomes King. Restoration begins.

Following the restoration of Charles II to the English throne, John Milton is arrested and imprisoned for about two months and fined.

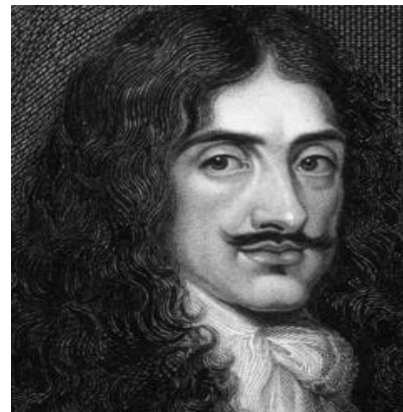


Figure 4. Charles II (Biography.com)

1662

Milton starts tutoring Thomas Ellwood. Charles II marries Portuguese Catholic Princess Catherine of Braganza.

The Royal Society of London appoints a committee to consider ways of "improving" English as a language of science.

1663

Over the objections of his daughters, Milton marries his third wife, Elizabeth Minshull in February. She's 24. He's 55. According to John Aubrey's *Brief Life*, she was "A genteel person, a peaceful and agreeable woman," pretty and golden-haired. She sang to Milton's bass-viol accompaniment (Aagaard, 2022).

1665

The Great Plague, 1665-1666, last major epidemic of bubonic plague in England.

Thomas Ellwood secures a house for Milton in Chalfont-St. Giles in Buckinghamshire to escape the plague in London.

1666

The Great Fire of London destroys most of the City of London inside the old Roman City Wall. Much of the city is destroyed but it is soon rebuilt.



Figure 5. The Great Fire of London, 1666 (Listverse)

1667

Milton's masterpiece *Paradise Lost* is published in ten books to immediate acclaim. On reading the epic, poet and critic John Dryden remarked, "This man cuts us all out, and the ancients, too" (Fiore, 1959).

1668

Paradise Lost is reissued with a new title page, the arguments, and other matter.

1670

Charles II makes a secret treaty with French Louis XIV, promising he would announce he is a Catholic. Louis promises 6,000 men if the English people rebel.

Milton publishes *The History of Britain* in November.

1671

John Milton publishes the poems *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* in one volume.

1672

Charles II issues Royal Declaration of Indulgence suspending laws against nonconformists.

1673

The Test Act is passed. Catholics and Protestant dissenters (who do not belong to the Church of England) are prevented from holding public office.

Milton publishes the sonnet, "When I Consider How My Light is Spent." (Titled "On His Blindness" a century later by Thomas Newton in his 1761 edition of Milton's poetry.)

1674

The second edition of *Paradise Lost* is published in twelve books.

November 8 or 9, John Milton dies at age 65 of gout and is buried in St. Giles Church in the Cripplegate neighborhood of London. A memorial to Milton is placed in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey.



Figure 6. Poet's Corner (Westminster-abbey.org)

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