

CHAPTER 6

Poetic tradition, dramatic

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Milton's dramatic influences range across Western literature, from Greek tragedy to Restoration drama. The extent of his debt to Greek tragedy is unique in the early modern period, and he draws as well on a rich tradition of humanist drama, an international vehicle for education and for political commentary. Although Milton grew increasingly uneasy about spectacle and actorly role-playing, the vibrant, generically disparate drama of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England supplied him with characters, plot constructions, metric innovation – and a high native bar. The major works that frame his career – 1634's *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle* (aka *Comus*) and 1671's *Samson Agonistes* – demonstrate Milton's shifting influences and attitudes but also testify to the abiding importance of drama for his poetry.

The closing of the theaters in 1642 divides Milton's career as a Caroline poet with a strong interest in contemporary theater, particularly masques, from his later years as an epic poet. Yet in trying to gauge Milton's dramatic contexts, it is important to avoid grand cultural narratives about the Renaissance and the Restoration. His career is a complex bridge between Shakespeare and Dryden, masque and opera, university culture and popular print culture, and theater and drama. If Milton had died young like his classmate Edward King, we would know him today as a gifted writer with a bent toward dramatic forms. "On Shakespeare," part of the front matter of the second folio of Shakespeare's plays (1632), was Milton's first published poem in English. It is a powerful act of both praise and oedipal resistance.¹ The "great heir of Fame" (line 5) has built his kingdom "in our wonder and astonishment" (line 7), in "our fancy" (line 13). His "easy numbers flow" (line 10). But in the process Shakespeare has killed our fancy, made us his sepulcher. The poem is Milton's opening gambit in a career that will repeatedly find inspiration in Shakespeare as well as creative energy in denying him.

Herbert Berry's discovery that Milton's father was one of the trustees who managed Burbage's share in Blackfriars for his widow and children is evidence that Milton and his family were, like many Puritans, comfortable with the professional stage.² As a boy at St. Paul's he would have acted in plays as part of his humanist training. When Milton was a student at Cambridge in the 1620s and early 1630s, theater was an important but, given the increasing influence of strict Puritanism there, a controversial part of university culture. Yet during his college years Milton was far from a stereotypically antitheatrical Puritan. In his first Elegy, addressed to Charles Diodati probably in 1626 near the beginning of his Cambridge years, Milton tells his friend that while at home in London and tired of studying, "*Excipit hinc fessum sinuosi pompa theatri*" ("When I am tired the spectacle of the curved theater attracts me," line 27). Some critics have argued that the plays Milton goes on to describe are Greek tragedies and Roman comedies, not plays he would have seen on the London stage. Since English drama borrows liberally from classical conventions, however, arguments that isolate Milton from London theater in his youth probably have more to do with a preconceived scholarly narrative than with the kind of rich theatrical experience Milton almost certainly had.

The paired speakers of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, poems Milton wrote around the time he wrote "On Shakespeare," refer, respectively, to theater and to drama, neatly demonstrating what was to prove a complicated polarity for Milton. The companion poems have often been seen as a sequence and the serious studiousness of *Il Penseroso* understood as autobiographical. But if the exaggerated persons of the companion poems are Milton, they are each Milton playing parts. As lyric versions of the seventeenth-century character genre, *Allegro* and *Penseroso* display a relationship with theater and drama that is consonant with each speaker's personality. The apparently joyful man, for example, is driven by a fear of loneliness. Yet, although he restlessly seeks company, he is always a spectator, never part of the groups he moves among. For him the city is a place of busy refuge once darkness falls, and:

Then to the well-trod stage anon,
If Jonson's learned sock be on,
Or sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child,
Warble his native wood-notes wild.

(lines 131–34)

The reclusive pensive man, *Allegro*'s matched opposite, reads plays rather than attending the theater. At night in his study he asks

Sometime let gorgeous Tragedy
 In scepter'd pall come sweeping by,
 Presenting Thebes, or Pelops' line,
 Or the tale of Troy divine.

(lines 97–100)

The learned Penserose prefers Greek tragedy, which in his typically florid manner he describes as “gorgeous” and “divine.” Like the lark and the nightingale or Euphrosyne and Melancholy, theater and drama weigh in the balance of these paired poems.

And indeed, while Milton held dramatic literature in high esteem, he also had a pronounced theatrical inclination. As a Cambridge undergraduate he wrote and played a starring role in a punning philosophical entertainment for his classmates at the end of the 1628 school year.³ “Salting,” an intermittent Cambridge tradition, was an end-of-term show featuring beer, undergraduate cleverness, gross jokes, and intellectual showing-off. Milton did not publish his college theatrical until the end of his life and then only in pieces in separate volumes (“At a Vacation Exercise” in the *Poems* of 1673 and Prolusion 6 in 1674’s *Epistolae Familiares* and *Prolusiones*), but his early performance as “Ens,” or Absolute Being, is his first public performance of himself as England’s great poet. When Ens/Milton speaks in Latin he is mildly embarrassed about playing a “fool” but also endearingly grateful that the peers he thought disliked him for his intellectual rigor wanted him to entertain them. He obliges with a scatological roasting based on the predicaments of Aristotle. When Ens/Milton turns to English, however, he openly confesses his ambition. In front of Milton’s peers, his character tells his native English language that he “had rather, if I were to choose, / Thy service in some graver subject use” (lines 29–30). In order to announce himself as a serious poet Milton plays a role in a performance of his own devising.

After leaving Cambridge to study at home, Milton wrote two commissioned pieces for performance, *Arcades* and *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle*. *Arcades*, the script Milton provided for the Egerton family to honor their matriarch, Alice, Dowager Countess of Derby, combines music and dance with charming lyrics. Although Milton called it an “entertainment,” *Arcades* certainly shares some of the techniques and sensibility of early modern masques, which wove elaborate compliments around slight narratives, often borrowed loosely from classical mythology. Yet, while masques are usually associated with the court, *Arcades* focuses on a family and was performed at the Dowager Countess’ country estate. And although its action gravitates toward the honoree’s “shining throne” (line 15), *Arcades* is

more interested in the dramatic possibilities of music than in the spectacle normally associated with the masque form. The Genius of the Wood, who plays the role of master of ceremonies, is able to hear “the celestial sirens’ harmony” (line 63) in the night, and he confesses an impossible longing, often expressed in Milton’s works, to achieve “the heavenly tune, which none can hear / Of human mold with gross unpurgèd ear” (lines 72–73).

Music is an increasingly significant component of dramatic practice throughout the seventeenth century. In 1634, soon after the pastoral lyricism of *Arcades*, Milton collaborated with Henry Lawes, famous court composer and singer, on a full-scale masque for the Egerton family. Milton wrote the role of the Attendant Spirit for the man he fondly called “Harry” (“To Mr. H. Lawes,” line 1), and Lawes wrote the music for the masque, acted as the music tutor for the Egerton children who played the Lady and the Elder and Younger Brothers, and served as the on-site director at Ludlow. Like *Arcades*, *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle* builds upon the Caroline masque, but here Milton fully realizes the dramatic potential of the form by opening it to recent masque innovations and by folding in his interest in Shakespeare’s comedies and romances. It is conventional to refer to this work by the name of its seductive antagonist, Comus. But it is surely important that Milton titled the piece *A Mask*, strongly signaling that he is deliberately working in this modern genre.

Since the masque is generally associated with the court, Milton’s serious interest in the form is initially surprising. But important aspects of the masque genre are compatible with Milton’s poetic ambitions.⁴ Although they were designed to be extravagant compliments for the monarchs and aristocrats who sponsored them, masques presented moral principles and sought to instruct the country’s elite. In *The Reason of Church-Government*, written eight years after *A Mask* and only months before the closing of the theaters, Milton encouraged the Commonwealth’s magistrates to “manag[e] . . . our publick sports, and festival pastimes,” procuring “wise and artfull recitations sweetned with eloquent and gracefull inticements to the love and practice of justice, temperance and fortitude, instructing and bettering the Nation” (*CPW* 1:819). The state-sponsored entertainments he proposes can be understood as more popular versions of the nation-building and moral uplift that were at the heart of the court masque’s lavish spectacle.

Milton did not restrict himself, however, to straightforward moral instruction in his masque.⁵ In contrast to court masques, Milton’s version not only has a complex plot and character development, but its

conclusion is fraught with ambiguity. Many critics have been disturbed by the conclusion of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* where the Duke steps out of his surveillance role and claims a newly silent Isabella as his wife. The Lady's position at the end of *A Mask* is similarly disturbing — her father has watched her heroic chastity throughout the body of the masque, but in the end she is silent, delivered to his court ready for marriage. Milton finds other important sources of imaginative complexity in early modern theater. The Attendant Spirit echoes *The Tempest's* Ariel, and Comus' bestial crew enacts a dark version of Bottom's temporary fate in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Comus himself is an early version of brilliantly seductive Satan, but he is also a dramatic development of Ben Jonson's crucial masque innovation, the comic or threatening antimasque, in which disruptive, carnivalesque forces such as witches, Welshmen, or drunks began the performance and were then counteracted and defeated by the opposing forces of order and morality. Milton transformed the antimasque into a dramatic through-line, producing a work much closer to a fully developed play. Indeed, we might call Milton's version a "problem masque." Jonson deployed a charming, drunken stumblebum version of Comus as the leader of a troupe of dancing bottles and kegs in *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue* (1618), for example, an opponent both amusing and easy to overcome. Milton's Comus, in contrast, has a razor-sharp intellect, a sinister goal, and he is wholly integrated into the plot of *A Mask*, escaping in the end to cast a shadow of danger over the work's final triumphant celebration.

The range of contemporary masques and plays from which Milton directly borrowed turns on its head any separatist notion of Milton as above his own culture. Milton used John Fletcher's *Faithful Shepherdess*, a pastoral play first performed in 1608–09 but revived by Henrietta Maria at court in 1633, as a significant source. He borrowed lines from his Cambridge classmate, the scholar and playwright Thomas Randolph, and he is directly in dialogue with the masques presented at court in the early 1630s. Henry Lawes, Milton's collaborator, was involved in virtually every masque performed at court from 1629 on. Two court masques of particular significance for Milton's 1634 work are Aurelian Townshend's *Tempe Restored*, performed in 1632, and Thomas Carew's *Coelum Britannicum*, performed just months before Milton's masque was presented at Ludlow Castle (the Egerton children participated in both these masques). The cult of heroic chastity fostered by the masques of Charles I and Henrietta Maria's court appealed to Milton's idealism, and he used his commission to produce the most sensuously beautiful example of the form.

Milton did not die young, and theatrical performance is not the first and perhaps almost the last thing we think of in connection with him now. Nevertheless, drama continued to be an important source for Milton. The years between the publication of *Lycidas* in 1638 and *Paradise Lost* in 1667 were momentous not only for Milton but for his country. In 1638 and 1639 Milton traveled in Italy, and he returned to a changed life in England, beginning almost twenty years of active engagement in polemical prose writing. Milton continued, however, to consider his literary career. In the autobiographical digression at the beginning of book two of *The Reason of Church-Government*, for example, Milton wonders whether "Dramatick constitutions, wherein *Sophocles* and *Euripides* raigue shall be found more doctrinal and exemplary to a Nation" than epic poetry (CPW 1:814–15). Such a play seems to be what Milton was imagining when, in his Commonplace Book under the heading "Public Shows," he rebuts as "absurd beyond measure" Lactantius' rejection of drama. For "what in all philosophy is more important or more sacred or more exalted than a tragedy rightly produced, what more useful for seeing at a single view the events and changes of human life?" (CPW 1:491).

The Reason of Church-Government was published in February 1642, but by September 1642 parliament had closed the theaters. Although this may have been meant as a temporary measure, the theaters remained closed until the Restoration. Once again, an automatic association of Milton with Puritan antitheatricality distorts our understanding of his interests. Starting soon after he returned from Italy in 1639, Milton worked on a number of ideas for plays in his workbook (now called the Trinity Manuscript), and he frequently returned to these plans, revising and expanding them. In the end, Milton did not write for the stage, but these notes make clear that he was thinking in the 1640s of writing plays for performance. Although the section of his notebook devoted to plays is often called Milton's plans for tragedies, Milton's ideas imply a range of genres from tragedies to pastoral comedies, from rhetorical contests to dark masques. He considered about sixty-four biblical possibilities, thirty-three British subjects and five ideas he lists under "Scotch stories or rather brittish of the north parts."⁶ Milton generally tried to find ideas that would be workable within the constraints of the unities of time, place, and action, and he relied on messengers, choruses, and narrators to supply off-stage action. He was not squeamish about composing an old-fashioned finale piled with dead bodies, and his thoughts about British and Scottish plays appear to be indebted to English tragedies and history plays, particularly Marlowe's and Shakespeare's.

But the preponderance of his ideas, and those he develops most extensively, are drawn from the Bible. In it, as he points out in *The Reason of Church-Government*, there are important dramatic precedents: "Scripture also affords us," he muses, the model of "a divine pastoral Drama" from the Song of Songs or "the majestick image of a high and stately Tragedy" (CPW 1:815) that he finds in the Apocalypse of St. John. Milton could find models for biblical tragedy outside the Bible as well. He had a vigorous English precedent in the drama of John Bale (1495–1563), monk turned ardent Protestant reformer, who wrote what is regarded as the first English history play, *King Johan*, and jauntily colloquial biblical plays on such subjects as Christ's temptation in the wilderness and John the Baptist preaching. As a humanist and as a teacher, Milton would have been particularly interested in neo-Latin plays by leading Protestant intellectuals such as George Buchanan and Hugo Grotius, Milton's admired contemporary. Buchanan's tragedies, *Jephtes* and *Baptistes*, are part of the mid sixteenth-century wave of what are called Christian Terence plays: modeled on the structure of Terence's plays, based on biblical subjects, and usually driven by a Reformed agenda. Buchanan wrote his plays to be performed by his students (including Montaigne), but they were also widely published. Buchanan's *Baptistes* (London, 1577) was reprinted a remarkable number of times, in many countries and languages, often at moments of political turmoil. The English parliament, for example, ordered a translation of Buchanan's play in 1642 as *Tyranicall-Government Anatomized: A Discourse Concerning Evil-Councillors*. Hugo Grotius, whom Milton sought out in Paris in 1638 and who is virtually the only modern authority Milton cites in *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643 and 1644), wrote three highly regarded plays, including *Adamus Exul* (1601), which has frequently been suggested as a model for *Paradise Lost*. When Milton was in Italy we know he saw an opera at the Barbarini court. He would almost certainly also have been present at oratorios, performances of sacred stories where singers sang individual parts. Especially because music was so important to Milton, these dramatic musical stories are intriguing influences. It is also possible that Giambattista Andreini's play *L'Adamo* (1613) suggested aspects of *Paradise Lost*.⁷ And Joost van den Vondel's brilliant *Lucifer* (1654) in Dutch has been put forward as a Miltonic influence. Although the direct influence of any of these works is difficult to determine, we can certainly conclude that the interest across Europe in dramatic representations of biblical stories, particularly Satan and the fall, frames Milton's turn to this subject in *Paradise Lost*.

A drama of the fall attracts Milton's attention more than any other idea, and it grows and changes as he plays with possible characters and plot. There are four versions in the Trinity Manuscript (as well as a simple title, "Adam in Banishment," which may have been the idea for another play entirely). The first two are lists of characters, with Michael the narrator in the first and Moses in the second. A more detailed version, titled "Paradise Lost," is outlined in five acts, divided by choruses, and Moses is again the narrator. The final version is written out in narrative form and called "Adam Unparadiz'd." Gabriel is now the narrator, and he "causes to passe before [Adam's] eyes in shapes a mask of all the evils of this life & world."⁸ These surviving notes inhabit a tantalizing middle space – hinting at past influences, sketching unrealized possibilities, and suggesting elusive connections with *Paradise Lost*. The one firm connection we have is Edward Phillips' testimony that the first lines of Satan's soliloquy to the sun in *Paradise Lost* (IV.32–41) were originally part of the opening scene of a tragedy.⁹

In *Eikonoklastes* (1649), published in the wake of the king's execution and full of disgust for those who fell under the theatrical spell of Charles, Milton mocks Charles for reading Shakespeare as he prepares for his death. Nevertheless, drama's presence is profound and pervasive in *Paradise Lost*.¹⁰ First, the blank verse of *Paradise Lost* was associated in English almost exclusively with the stage. Milton cites Homer's Greek and Virgil's Latin as his precedent, but in his native language Milton says it is "our best English tragedies" that have "long since" understood the "ancient liberty" of blank verse and its ability to draw "the sense variously . . . from one verse into another" ("The Verse," CPEP 291). The plot, the characters, and the dialogues of *Paradise Lost* pull from a range of dramatic genres: tragedy in books IX and X, but also comedy for the scenes of Edenic marriage, masque for the construction of Pandemonium and for the education of Adam in book XI, and, in the end, the Christian tragicomedy of the fortunate fall. Satan resembles a Renaissance revenge tragedy antihero, and the choirs of angels perform the role of heavenly chorus. The nuanced roles of Satan, Eve and Adam, their tragic flaws, and the turning point when they act upon them and bring tragedy upon their heads are all portrayed in lively dialogue and in dramatic soliloquies.

But unease about theatricality also saturates Milton's great Restoration poems. *Paradise Regained's* actorly Satan makes a mockery of the stage, a platform for which Milton says his enigmatic tragedy, *Samson Agonistes*, was "never . . . intended."¹¹ Instead, Milton carefully provides other contexts for his dramatic work in the brief essay that prefaces *Samson Agonistes*,

"Of the Sort of Dramatic Poem which is Called Tragedy." He defends tragedy as "the gravest, moralest, and most profitable of all other poems," but "as it was anciently composed." Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are "the three tragic poets unequalled yet by any, and the best rule to all who endeavor to write tragedy." Euripides particularly attracted Milton. (In 1634, while pursuing his private course of study at Hammersmith, Milton purchased a two-volume edition of Euripides, now in the Bodleian Library, which he worked through and annotated carefully at least twice.) Yet while *Samson Agonistes* is a careful imitation of a Greek tragedy, it is an imitation so authentically Miltonic that it is difficult to assert any particular Greek tragedy as his model.¹² In fact, rather than clarify, Milton's brief critical essay has occasioned almost as much disagreement as the work it prefaces. He begins, for example, with Aristotle's definition, in Greek, in Latin, and then in English: tragedy has the "power by raising pity and fear, or terror, to purge the mind of those and such-like passions, that is to temper and reduce them to just measure with a kind of delight, stirred up by reading and seeing those passions well imitated." Milton's choice of words and his homeopathic understanding of tragedy's effects open the possibility that his interpretation of Aristotle agrees with such Italian commentators as Minturno or Castelvetro and thus allows for a redemptive reading. But Irene Samuels' authoritative essay, "*Samson Agonistes* as Tragedy," demonstrates how irremediably tragic the poem remains if we accept Aristotle's *Poetics* directly as Milton's guide.¹³

What does seem certain, at least at first, is Milton's unrelenting rejection of the current stage. He must defend tragedy because of "the small esteem, or rather infamy, which . . . it undergoes at this day." Tragedy has been demeaned because "comic stuff" has been intermingled "with tragic sadness and gravity." "Trivial and vulgar persons" people the stage, which the "judicious" know is "absurd" but is done "corruptly to gratify the people." Yet here at the end of Milton's career, Shakespeare, "Dear son of memory," remains a brilliant presence ("On Shakespeare," 5). *Antony and Cleopatra*, with all of its "comic stuff" and vulgarity, is, for example, a constant and revealing intertext for Milton's dramatic poem. What Milton may be rejecting then is the bawdiness and bombast of Restoration drama. Yet even this is wonderfully uncertain – for Milton pleasantly agreed when Dryden asked him if he could adapt *Paradise Lost* into a rhymed opera, *The State of Innocence*. And Milton's works have been adapted for musical, dance, and theater performances in hundreds of ways since. Milton, whom we think we know personally, disappears, like Shakespeare, into the dramas he wrote.

NOTES

- 1 See John Guillory, *Poetic Authority: Spenser, Milton, and Literary History* (New York, 1983).
- 2 Herbert Berry, "The Miltons and the Blackfriars Playhouse," *Modern Philology* 89 (1992): 510–14; and Gordon Campbell, "Shakespeare and the Youth of Milton," *Milton Quarterly* 33 (1999): 95–105.
- 3 John K. Hale, "Milton Plays the Fool: The Christ's College Salting, 1628," *Classical and Modern Literature* 20 (2000): 51–70; and Ann Baynes Coiro, "Anonymous Milton, or, A Maske Masked," *ELH* 71 (2004): 609–29.
- 4 John G. Demaray, *Milton and the Masque Tradition: the Early Poems, "Arcades," and "Comus"* (Cambridge, MA, 1968).
- 5 Stephen Orgel, "The Case for Comus," *Representations* 81 (2003): 31–45.
- 6 *Poems, Reproduced in Facsimile from the Manuscript in Trinity College, Cambridge* (Menston, UK, 1970), 39.
- 7 John Arthos, *Milton and the Italian Cities* (London, 1968).
- 8 *Poems*, 38.
- 9 *EL* 13, 72–73.
- 10 See Paul Stevens, *Imagination and the Presence of Shakespeare in "Paradise Lost"* (Madison, WI, 1985); and Barbara K. Lewalski, "*Paradise Lost*" and the Rhetoric of *Literary Forms* (Princeton, 1985).
- 11 This and subsequent references to Milton's preface to *Samson Agonistes* are to *CPEP* 707–08.
- 12 William Riley Parker, *Milton's Debt to Greek Tragedy in "Samson Agonistes"* (Baltimore, MD, 1937).
- 13 Irene Samuels, "Samson Agonistes as Tragedy," in *Calm of Mind*, ed. Joseph A. Wittreich, Jr. (Cleveland, OH, 1971), 235–57.