Chesterton, Gilbert Keith
Milton

MILTON: MAN AND POET.

BY GILBERT K. CHESTERTON.

ALL the mass of acute and valuable matter written or compiled about Milton leaves eternally an unanswered question; a difficulty felt by all, if expressed by few, of his readers. That difficulty is a contrast between the man and his poems. There exists in the world a group of persons who perpetually try to prove that Shakespeare was a clown and could not have written about princes, or that he was a drunkard and could not have written about virtue. I think there is a slight fallacy in the argument. But I wonder that they have not tried the much more tempting sport of separating the author of *L'Allegro* from the author of the *Defensus Populi Anglicani*. For the contrast between the man Milton and the poet Milton is very much greater than is commonly realized. I fear that the shortest and clearest way of stating it is that when all is said and done, he is a poet whom we cannot help liking, and a man whom we cannot like. I find it far easier to believe that an intoxicated Shakespeare wrote the marble parts of Shakespeare than that a marble Milton wrote the intoxicated, or, rather, intoxicating, parts of Milton. Milton's character was cold; he was one of those men who had every virtue except the one virtue needful. While other poets may have been polygamists from passion, he was polygamous on principle. While other artists were merely selfish, he was egoistic.

The public has a quick eye for portraits, a very keen nose for personality; and across two centuries the traditional picture of Milton dictating to his daughters till they were nearly dead has kept the truth about Milton; it has not taken the chill off. But though the mass of men feel the fact Milton after two hundred years, they seldom read the poetry of Milton at all. And so, because Milton the man was cold, they have got over the difficulty by saying that the poet Milton is cold too; cold, classical, marmoreal. But the poetry of Milton is not cold. He did in his later years, and in a fit of bad temper, write a classical drama, which is the only one of his works which is really difficult to read. But taken as a whole he is a particularly poetical poet, as fond

of symbols and witchery as Coleridge, as fond of colored pleasures as Keats. He is sometimes sufficiently amorous to be called tender; he is frequently sufficiently amorous to be called sensual. Even his religion is not always heathen in his poetry. If you heard for the first time the line,

> By the dear might of Him that walked the waves,

you would only fancy that some heart of true religious heat and humility, like Crashaw or George Herbert, had for a moment achieved a technical triumph and found a faultless line. If you read for the first time,

> But come, thou Goddess fair and free,
> In heaven yclept Euphrosyne,

you would think that the most irresponsible of the Elizabethans had uttered it as he went dancing down the street, believing himself in Arcady. If you read,

> Blossoms and fruits at once of golden hue
> Appeared, with gay enamelled colors mixed,

or

> Silence was pleased. Now glowed the firmament
> With living sapphires,

you would think that all the rich dyes of the Orient and the Middle Ages had met, as they do in some quite modern poet, such as Keats or even Swinburne. If you read the account of the ale and the elf and the Christmas sports in *L'Allegro,* you might think them written by the most rollicking of rustic poets; if you read some lines about Eve in *Paradise Lost,* you might think them written at once by the most passionate and the most chivalrous of lovers. *Paradise Lost* is not dull; it is not even frigid. Anyone who can remember reading the first few books as a boy will know what I mean; it is a romance, and even a fantastic romance. There is something in it of *Thalabe the Destroyer;* something wild and magical about the image of the empire in the abyss scaling the turrets of the magician who is king of the cosmos. There is something Oriental in its design and its strange colors. One cannot imagine Flaxman illustrating Milton as he illustrated Homer. Nor is it even true that the rich glimpse of tropical terrors are conveyed in a clear outline of language. No one took more liberties with English, with metre, and even with common sense than Milton; an instance, of course, is the well-known superlative about Adam and his children.

Milton was not a simple epic poet like Homer, nor was he even a specially clear epic poet like Virgil. If these two gentlemen had studied his verse, they would have certainly acknowledged its power; but they would have shrunk from its inversions, its abrupt ellipses, its sentences that sometimes come tail foremost. I might even say that Homer reading Milton might have much the same feelings as Milton reading Browning. He would have found

Or of the eternal coeternal beam

a trifle obscure, and

nor sometimes forget,
Those other two, equalled with me in fate, etc., etc.,

almost entirely unintelligible. In this sense it is absurd to set up Milton as a superlatively clear and classic poet. In the art of turning his sentences inside out he never had an equal; and the only answer is to say that the result is perfect; though it is inside out, yet somehow it is right side out.

Nevertheless, the tradition which puts Milton with Virgil and the large and lucid poets, must possess and does possess some poetic significance. It lies, I think, in this: the startling contrast between Milton and the century in which he lived. He was not supremely classical; but he was classical in a time when classicism was almost forgotten. He was not specially lucid; but he was moderately intelligible in an age when nearly all poets were proud of being unintelligible; an age of one hundred Brownings gone mad. The seventeenth century was a most extraordinary time, which still awaits its adequate explanation. It was something coming after the Renaissance which developed and yet darkened and confused it, just as a tree might be more tangled for growing. The puns that had been in Shakespeare few and bad became numberless and ingenious. The schisms of thought which under Wickliffe and Luther had at least the virtue of heartiness, and were yet full of a human hesitation, became harsh, incessant, exclusive; every morning one heard that a new mad sect had excommunicated humanity. The grammars of Greek and Latin, which the young princes of the Renaissance had read as if they were romances, were now being complicated by bald-headed pedants until no one on earth could read them. Theology, which could always in light moments be given the zest of an amusement, became a disease with the Puritans. War, which had been the sport of gentlemen, was now

rapidly becoming the ill-smelling science for engineers it still remains. The air was full of anger; and not a young sort of anger; exasperation on points of detail perpetually renewed. If the Renaissance was like a splendid wine, the seventeenth century might be compared to the second fermentation into vinegar. But whatever metaphor we use the main fact is certain; the age was horribly complex; it was learned, it was crabbed, and in nearly all its art and utterance, it was crooked.

Remember the wonderfully witty poets of Charles I.; those wonderfully witty poets who were incomprehensible at the first reading and dull even when one could comprehend them. Think of the scurrilous war of pamphlets, in which Milton himself engaged; pages full of elaborate logic which no one can follow, and elaborate scandals which everyone has forgotten. Think of the tortured legalities of Crown and Parliament, quoting against each other precedents of an utterly different age; think of the thick darkness of diplomacy that covers the meaning (if it had any) of the Thirty Years' War. The seventeenth century was a labyrinth; it was full of corners and crotchets. And against this sort of background Milton stands up as simple and splendid as Apollo. His style, which must always have been splendid, appeared more pure and translucent than it really was in contrast with all the mad mystification and darkness.

A riddle itself, that time is full of minor riddles; and one of the most inexplicable of them involves the whole position of Milton. How far was there really a connection between Calvinism and the idea of liberty, or the idea of popular government? There is much to be said on both sides; indeed there is no more perplexing question than whereabouts at the Reformation, or just after the Reformation, lay the real seed of modern self-government and freedom, or, to speak more strictly, of the modern belief in them; for we rather praise these things than possess them.

The first and fundamental fact is certainly against the liberalizing character of Puritanism. It did not profess to be merely a moral movement; its whole point was that it was strictly a theological movement; its chief objection to its enemies was that they tried to exalt (as the Scotch Puritans said) "the cauld banes of morality" above the sustaining and comfortable doctrine of predestination. To a Calvinist the most important thing was Calvinism; to a Puritan the most important thing was the Puritan creed; and this in itself certainly did not favor the vague senti-

ments either of emancipation or fraternity. Calvinism took away a man's liberty in the universe; why, then, should it favor his liberty in the State? Puritanism denied free will; why should it be likely to affirm free speech? Why should the Calvinist object to an aristocracy? The Calvinists *were* an aristocracy; they were the most arrogant and awful of aristocracies by the nature of their own belief: they were the elect. Why should the Puritans dislike a baby being born a nobleman? It was the whole philosophy of the Puritans that a baby is born a celestial nobleman; and he is at birth and before birth a member of the cosmic upper classes. It should have been a small matter to the Puritans to admit that one might be born a king, seeing that they maintained the much more paradoxical position that one might be born a saint. Nor is it easy to see upon their own ideal principles why the Puritans should have disliked despotism or arbitrary power; though it is certainly much more the fact that they did dislike despotism than that they did dislike oligarchy. The first conception of Calvinism is a fierce insistence on the utterly arbitrary nature of power. The King of the Cavaliers was certainly not so purely willful, so sublimely capricious a sultan, as the God of the Puritans.

But we can add something much more plain and practical. It is not merely that despotism or oligarchy might well have pleased the Puritans in theory: it is also true that they did please the Puritans in practice. Of the democratic element that did honestly exist in Puritanism I will speak in a moment; but the oligarchic and despotic elements were not merely things that logically ought to have appeared, but things that actually did appear. It is no longer denied, I think, by serious historians that the whole business of the Puritan revolt or triumph was anti-popular; that is to say, that at almost any given moment of the struggle, universal suffrage would have been a clear victory for the king. The really brilliant triumph of Cromwell was not his triumph over the monarchy, but his triumph over the democracy; the fact that he somehow kept the enormous crowd called England quiet. In short, his great glory was not in heading the Great Rebellion, but in avoiding the Great Rebellion. For the really Great Rebellion was the one that never happened. But, indeed, it is unnecessary even to urge so generally accepted a conjecture as this. Whatever may be true of the rebellion as a whole, no one will deny that at certain moments Puritanism appeared in politics as arrogant, fastidious and anti-popular; full of the pride of predestination and the scorn of

all flesh. Even the most enthusiastic upholder of the Whig or Republican theory of Puritanism will hardly pretend that when Colonel Pride drove out of Parliament at the point of the pike all the members that ventured to disagree with him, his soul was at that moment inflamed with an enthusiasm for free discussion or representative government. It was by no means democratic; but it was highly Calvinistic. It was a sort of public pantomime of the doctrine of election; of election in the theological, but by no means the political sense. It is still called "Pride's Purge;" and the phrase has quite a fine allegorical flavor, as if it came out of *Pilgrim's Progress*. In fact, one of the really happy coincidences of the historical epoch was that one distinguished officer at any rate had somehow got hold of the right surname. And upon larger grounds the alliance between oligarchy and Protestantism has become only too plain. For all we know the Reformation may have tried to make a democracy; all that we do know for certain is that it did make an aristocracy, the most powerful aristocracy of modern times. The great English landlords, who are the peers, arose after the destruction of the small English landlords, who were the abbots. The public schools, which were for the populace in the Middle Ages, became aristocratic after the Reformation. The universities, which were popular in the Middle Ages, became aristocratic after the Reformation. The tramp who went to a monastic inn in the Middle Ages, went to jail and the whipping-post after the Reformation. All this is scarcely denied.

Yet against all this must be put in fairness certain important facts; especially two facts illustrated in the figure and career of Milton. When we have clearly seen that Calvinism always favors aristocracy in theory and often favors it in practice, two great facts remain to be explained or to be explained away. First, that the Puritans did favor a deliberate or synodical method of church government, a government by debate; and, second, that most of the abstract republicans of the seventeenth century were either Puritans or upon the Puritan side. I am not, of course, discussing the synod as a mode of church government, nor a republic as a mode of national government. I only say that the clamor for these things must have corresponded to some kind of enthusiasm for liberty and equality alien to the more obvious lessons of Calvinism. But the republicanism was of a peculiar and frigid kind; there was very little human fraternity about it. Fletcher of Saltown was the author of some epigrams about the public good that read

like those of some great pagan; but he was also the author of a proposal to reduce the poorer inhabitants of Scotland to a condition of personal slavery. There was a flavor of Fletcher of Saltown about Milton. Shakespeare puts into the mouth of some character (generally a silly character) some contemptuous talk about the greasy rabble, talk which is common to all literary work, but especially common in work which—like Shakespeare's—was intended to please the greasy rabble. Whenever this happens critics point to it and say, "Look at the Tory prejudices of the Royalist Shakespeare! Observe the Jacobite servility of the follower of James I.!" But as a matter of fact Milton despised the populace much more than Shakespeare; and Milton put his contempt for common men not into the mouth of silly or stupid characters, but into that of the one wise character, the Chorus, who is supposed to express the moral of a play:

> Nor do I name of men the common rout.....
> But such as thou hast solemnly elected.

I cannot help thinking that Milton was successful with Satan, because he was rather like Satan himself. I mean his own Satan: I will not be so intemperate as to say that he resembled the genuine article. The kind of strength which supported Milton in blindness and outlawry was very like the kind of strength that supported Satan on the flaming marl; it is the same quality, and for merely literary purposes we need not quarrel about whether it should be called spiritual nobility or spiritual pride. It was almost wholly intellectual; it was unsmiling and it was empty of affection. And in justice to the genial, if somewhat vague, people who made up the bulk of the Royalist party and probably the bulk of the English people, we must remember that there was about the high republican type, the type of Vane, or Sydney, or Milton, something of this austerity which chilled and even alarmed. There was something in these republicans which was not brotherly; there was something in these republicans which was not democratic. The compound of the new Puritan and the old pagan citizen produced none of those hearty or homely drinkers, soldiers, or ruffians, men like Danton or Dumouriez, who lent laughter to the terrors of the French Revolution. The deepest dislike which the Cavaliers felt for the Puritans, and no unjust dislike either, had reference to this nameless feeling.

It is possible, I fancy, to frame a fair statement that shall admit this element of the pride of the elect while doing justice to the democratic germ in Puritanism. It was the misfortune of that age that the synodic or debating club idea was applied, not to the whole people as among the pagans, but to small groups or sections among the people. Equality appeared in the form of little separate chapels, not in the form of a great national temple. Thus the Puritan movement encouraged the sense of the equality of members without encouraging the sense of the equality of men. Each little sect was a democracy internally considered, but an oligarchy externally considered. For an aristocracy is none the less aristocratic because its members are all on a level; indeed this is rather a mark of aristocracy; in this sense most aristocracies have been levelers. Even the House of Lords is called the House of Equals: the House of Peers. Thus arose a spirit which had the plainness and much of the harshness of democracy without any of its sympathy or *abandon*. Thus arose the great race of the aristocratic republicans, half pagan and half Puritan, the greatest of whom was Milton.

The effect of this great type has been immense; but it has been largely a negative effect. If the English peoples have remained somewhat inaccessible to the more ideal aspect of the republican idea, and they certainly have; if, through failing to understand it, they have done gross injustice to the heroisms and even the crimes of the French Revolution, it is in no small degree due to this uncongenial element in the only great school of English republicans. The ultimate victory of Shakespeare over Milton has been very largely due to the primary victory of *Il Penseroso* over *L'Allegro*. The return of Charles II. was the return of a certain snobbish compromise which has never been shaken off, and which is certainly far less heroic than the dreadful patriotism of the great regicides; but the balance and excuse of that snobbishness was that it was the return of English humor and good nature. So we see it in Milton, in the one great Elizabethan who became a Puritan. His earlier poems are the dying cries of Merry England. England, like his own Samson, lost its strength when it lost its long hair. Milton was one of the slayers; but he was also of the slain. The mystery of his strange mind confronts us forever; we do not know of what god or demon or destiny he had really caught sight afar off; we do not know what he really saw with his sightless eyes. We only know that it turned him to stone.