

John Milton:
CLASSICAL
LEARNING
AND THE
PROGRESS OF
VIRTUE

GIANTS IN THE
HISTORY OF EDUCATION



Grant Horner

Series Editor: David Diener, PhD





John Milton: Classical Learning and the Progress of Virtue

© Classical Academic Press, 2015

Version 1.0

ISBN: 978-1-60051-270-4

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ESV Text Edition: 2007

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Cover & layout by Lenora Riley

Classical Academic Press
2151 Market Street
Camp Hill, PA 17011
www.ClassicalAcademicPress.com

This book is dedicated to two absolutely smashing ladies in my life: my wife Joanne, the brilliant and beautiful Artist, and my daughter Rachel Elizabeth, the lovely Little Scholar. You make my life wonderful and blessed every day.

*However many books
Wise men have said are wearisom; who reads
Incessantly, and to his reading brings not
A spirit and judgment equal or superior
(And what he brings, what needs he
elsewhere seek)
Uncertain and unsettl'd still remains,
Deep verst in books and shallow in himself,
Crude or intoxicate, collecting toys,
And trifles for choice matters, worth a sponge;
As Children gathering pibles on the shore.*

—John Milton, *Paradise Regained*



“As we continue in our day with the task of rebuilding classical Christian education, one of the things we absolutely must do is reexamine the thought of some of the giants produced in times past by an earlier iteration of that same kind of education. And that is exactly what Grant Horner has done in this fine treatment of Milton. Highly recommended.”

—Douglas Wilson

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am happy to acknowledge my colleagues at Trinity Classical Academy, which is blessed with marvelous leadership in Liz Caddow, Wendy Massetto, and Jeff Kulp. I am humbled to serve with you three. The goal of our school is to offer a challenging education grounded in the Christian faith and the classical tradition to produce young men and women of virtue, wisdom, purpose, and courage. I have been blessed to play a little role in growing our humanities core. This academy accords so fully with the Miltonic vision that I have no doubt the poet would be eminently pleased to wander our halls, smiling and questioning and conversing with our young scholars, watching them daily becoming “enflam’d with the study of Learning, and the admiration of Vertue.” I always enjoy and learn from the vigorous conversations among our brilliant and growing Rhetoric School faculty, including our humanities chair Zach Weichbrodt, as well as Andrew Richardson, Lucy Banduk, Josh Lawman, Matt Mehringer, Mark Phillips, Andrew Selby, and especially Christopher Leigh, who has accompanied me and helped lead several senior trips to Milton’s favorite city, Florence, Italy. I finished writing this book while Chris and I were on a train together, rolling across the breathtaking Tuscan countryside between Pisa and Florence, with a group of our beloved students. You are an inspiration to them: a dedicated family man, a lover of true heroism, and a scholar and gentleman.

In the same way I am indebted to the intellectual fellowship of my colleagues at The Master’s College over the last sixteen years, from whom I have learned more than I often realize. My academic dean, John Stead, has been an unwavering supporter of all my endeavors and

is a valued friend, as are English professors Esther Chua and Jo Suzuki, alongside our many wonderful literature students, who keep us energetically inquisitive about God's world and man's works.

Finally, great thanks to Chris Perrin for inviting me to join the august company of the Alcuin Fellows, to my insightful editor David Diener, and to both of you for your support for this project.

INTRODUCTION

The Puritan poet John Milton stands in the first rank of the world's authors. His influence on Western culture is tremendous and not limited to the arts. He was a major figure in revolutionary thought in the seventeenth century, and was deeply involved in the overthrow and eventual execution of King Charles I. He also was read by the American founders and influenced them heavily in the area of church-state relations, censorship, and the freedom of the press. Most people get their imagery of demons, hell, and the Garden of Eden from Milton even more than from Dante and the Bible. In addition to these influences, Milton is also a major theorist of Christian education in the classical sense.

This book attempts to situate Milton in the context of the Renaissance and Reformation of seventeenth-century Europe. This Old World was discovering a New World, both in the sense of physical exploration and also in the sense of the rediscovery of an ancient culture. Old books were widely reprinted and read due to the invention of the printing press; classical art was being rediscovered and imitated; Europeans were simultaneously learning about Plato and Aristotle as well as Indian spices and people with darker skin; and the Church was undergoing a convulsive period of reforms beginning in the early sixteenth century, a process which eventually divided it into numerous enclaves, each claiming to be the arbiter of ultimate truth. As the Renaissance and the Reformation eras both drew to a close in the seventeenth century, John Milton, poet and polemicist, artist and Puritan, wrote extensively about the human experience of living fallen in a fallen world. Central to his five decades of

writing is the theme of education: being led out of ignorance¹ and into the light of knowledge. Adam's final speech in Milton's great epic *Paradise Lost* begins: "Henceforth I learn . . ." Life is all about learning.

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This book is intended to be a readable account that gives a brief but thorough introduction to John Milton's views on education. Although he wrote just one short work explicitly on the subject, his thinking about study, learning, and teaching is manifest throughout his large body of work. The goal of this book is to distill that thinking into a single, manageable source for readers' convenience and edification.

To that end, chapter 1 gives a brief biographical sketch of Milton's life. Chapter 2 lays out what we know (quite a bit, actually) about Milton's own education at Saint Paul's School in London and Cambridge University, as well as about his extended periods of tutoring and private studies. Chapter 3 is a detailed analysis of Milton's 1644 tractate "Of Education," still considered by many to be the most important work on a theory of Christian education. Chapter 4 offers a similar analysis of Milton's much longer *Areopagitica* (also 1644), the central document on freedom of the press in Western intellectual history. Chapter 5 addresses Milton's rich ideas about learning, knowledge, and wisdom in *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Paradise Regained* (1671), Milton's two theological epics. The goal of these chapters is to stimulate the reader to think more deeply and more Christianly about the entire purpose of learning—not just its content and methodology. Milton was very good at inducing deeper reflection, and therefore his work will be presented so as to speak simply for itself rather than subjected to a predetermined theoretical or ideological grid. Seventeenth-century prose is not always easy to read, but Milton's ideas are not particularly complex. They will provide a rich and fertile ground on which educators may work to rebuild the drab ruins of a fallen world.

1. The Latin verb *educere* means "to lead out from."



CHAPTER ONE

A Biographical Sketch of John Milton

I began this farre to assent both to them and divers of my friends here at home, and not lesse to an inward prompting which now grew daily upon me, that by labour and intent study (which I take to be my portion in this life) joynd with the strong propensity of nature, I might perhaps leave something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let it die.¹

—Milton, “The Reason of Church Government”

Many have heard the name John Milton and can identify him as the author of *Paradise Lost*. Few in the modern age, however, have actually read his work or know much of him beyond a vague (and often negative) impression regarding a long and difficult poem about Eve, demons, and a certain problematic apple. Nonetheless, literary authors and other serious readers have appreciated him since the seventeenth century: The Romantics were obsessively torn over Milton because they loved his artistry but hated his Puritan theology; contemporary Italian poets—not known for their respect toward the English—wrote praise pieces about him and sought his company.

Milton exemplified what it meant to be a “Renaissance man,” is considered one of the leading figures in Western intellectual and cultural history, and is now ranked with Shakespeare as a premiere literary artist of the English language. His writings treat of many subjects, not the least of which is education, and all of his work is grounded in a powerful theological tradition which is Reformed and Puritan in nature—two deeply related movements with strong bases in

1. Milton’s original seventeenth-century spelling, syntax, and punctuation are retained in all direct quotations throughout this book.

and theories about study. In fact, this remarkably well-educated genius known as John Milton constantly wove the theme of learning throughout all of his considerable body of work composed over a fifty-year career. He must therefore be considered a major resource for anyone thinking about classical Christian education. His life is one of the best documented of any literary figure of the Renaissance, and he has been the subject of numerous biographical works, from brief contemporary sketches to full-length scholarly tomes.²

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John Milton was born December 9, 1608, into a well-to-do family that lived in a good neighborhood of London, practically in the shadow of Saint Paul's Cathedral. His father was a successful businessman—and a talented, well-regarded composer. His parents recognized the young Milton as a prodigy from an early age and had him tutored at home. Around age eleven or twelve they placed him at Saint Paul's Cathedral School, where he studied Latin and Greek as well as the classical trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. In 1625 he matriculated at Christ's College in Cambridge University. While there he penned one of his earliest great poems, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (1629), which

2. Throughout this chapter well-attested factual material about Milton's life that is easily available in numerous other works will not be cited. The classic biography of Milton is a massive, five thousand–page Victorian scholarly edition by David Masson titled *The Life of John Milton: Narrated in Connexion with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of His Time, in Seven Volumes* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1881–1894). The best modern treatment is Barbara K. Lewalski's *The Life of John Milton* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000). For a good reprint of the several contemporary biographical sketches from the seventeenth century, see Roy Flanagan's *The Riverside Milton* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998).

is still considered one of the finest literary works on the birth of Christ.³ During his grammar school and university years he gained a reputation as a master of many languages and as a gifted poet and rhetorician.

Milton graduated with a master of arts degree from Cambridge in 1632, shortly after his first serious publication, a celebratory poem, “On Shakespear,” that appeared at the front of the Second Folio edition of the great playwright’s collected works—a stunning honor for a poet in his early twenties. Due to his strong Puritan leanings, he abandoned his original plans to become an Anglican priest and decided instead to be a poet. He spent the next five years studying extensively in relative seclusion at the family’s country home in Buckinghamshire, building his knowledge base in order to prepare for a career as a writer. In 1637—still in his twenties—he published two of his major masterpieces: *Comus* (a kind of theological/allegorical play set to music) and “Lycidas” (still considered the finest elegy or grief-poem ever composed).

During 1638–1639 Milton, barely thirty yet having already established an international reputation as a leading intellectual and author, traveled throughout Europe, where he was received as an honored guest in Italian intellectual circles. He met famous figures such as Hugo Grotius, Cardinal Francesco Barberini, and Galileo, and was even invited to a special dinner in Rome with exiled English Catholics hosted by the leadership of the Jesuits—not a part of the normal itinerary for Puritans, to say the least. He spent significant time in Florence but also visited Venice, Siena, Naples, and other major Italian cultural centers, as well as Paris and Geneva to the north. Upon hearing rumors of impending civil war in England, he canceled a trip to Greece and returned home.

3. Some scholars have argued that Milton was an Arian or perhaps an extreme Subordinationist, minimizing or denying the deity of Christ. This is based largely on an unpublished work that may or may not have been authored by the poet, a lengthy Latin theological work in manuscript known as *De doctrina christiana*. Direct evidence that this work is Milton’s is actually quite scanty and built upon a series of inferences. This document is nonetheless used by some scholars to gloss or comment on works known positively to be by Milton and to argue for his supposedly unorthodox Christology. I would argue that any fair-minded, theologically-informed reading of Milton’s published works demonstrate his orthodoxy. “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” is a perfect example, though there are many more. Puritans were not exactly known for a low view of Christ.

After settling in London, Milton began teaching in a small school run from his home while continuing to write and publish poetry, prose, and polemical works on theology and government. He was heavily invested in further reforming the English church along more Protestant and Puritan lines, and his learned treatises earned him a great deal of notoriety (and enmity) both in England and on the continent. Milton was clearly on the anti-Royalist side in the unfolding Civil War. In 1642 he attempted to collect a significant debt from a Richard Powell and ended up marrying Richard's daughter Mary, who was sixteen years old and not yet half his age. A month later she left him and went back to her family, who were dedicated Royalists, just as the hostilities were starting to break out. The couple later reconciled and lived together until her death in 1652.

The 1640s were very productive years for Milton. In 1644 alone he published *Areopagitica* and "Of Education," both supreme examples of English intellectual prose. The former work, a long essay on the perils of censorship and the glories of free speech and a free press, strongly influenced the American founders, and the latter work has often been called the central document on a Christian theory of education. Milton also published *Poems of Mr. John Milton, Both English and Latin* in 1645, which cemented his place as the leading English poet of his day. By 1646 King Charles I's forces were greatly weakened by the rebels, and the entire Royalist Powell family, being ejected from their home in Oxford as a result, moved into the poet's residence. Apparently the arrangements were less than amicable, though they were only temporary. The Powell family moved out in 1647, which was the same year that Milton's father died, leaving him a fairly sizeable estate. By the fall of 1648, John and Mary Milton had two daughters, and the Civil War was moving towards its end. In 1649 Charles I was publicly beheaded, the first European monarch to die at the hands of his own people. Milton was almost certainly in attendance at the execution. Just two weeks later he published *Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, which argued for the right of a people to self-govern—and to overthrow a tyrant.

The new republican government was impressed with his abilities and Milton was appointed Secretary for Foreign Tongues by the Council of State in early 1649. In this role he was in charge of translating foreign correspondence and producing government polemics, as well as functioning (quite ironically, given his arguments in *Areopagitica*) as a high-level censor. When a small book purporting to be the pre-execution prayers and meditations of Charles I (and presenting the dead king as a Christian martyr) became a best seller, Milton quickly penned his response, *Eikonoklastes* (1649), debunking the authorship and proving plagiarism of certain passages. He also openly argued for the acceptability of regicide among a Christian people, a position previously unimaginable. This was followed, over the next few years, by long, incredibly learned works on republican government, tyranny, and the relationship between church, state, and the individual.

John and Mary had a son, John, in 1651, but he lived only just over a year. In 1652 Milton's wife died due to complications during the birth of their daughter Deborah, just a few weeks before the death of little John. By 1654 Milton had become totally blind, losing his ability to read and forcing him to dictate all his future works to scribes.

Despite these tremendous setbacks Milton continued, with the help of a series of amanuenses, to produce voluminously: His works during this period include a Latin dictionary and a Greek lexicon, some vigorous political polemics, and early work on *Paradise Lost*. In 1656 he married Katherine Woodcock, who gave him his daughter Katherine. A little over a year after the wedding, however, his second wife died and was followed to the grave barely a month later by the infant daughter—neither of whom Milton had ever seen, of course, being blind. By 1658 the English Republic had collapsed into warring factions, which was a bitter disappointment to Milton.

The year 1659 was no better, and though he continued writing and publishing, Milton grew fearful of Royalist retaliation from the followers of King Charles II and went into hiding. Parliament, now more

Royalist, debated having Milton arrested, and his books were publicly burned by the London hangman. At some point that fall, the fifty-year-old blind scholar was arrested and imprisoned for several months, finally being released by order of Parliament due to the petitioning of his friend, the Royalist poet Andrew Marvell.

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In the spring of 1660 Charles I's son Charles II came to the throne, thus bringing in the Restoration period. Early in February, while continuing to write and publish a wide variety of works, Milton married for a third time. Elizabeth Minshull was thirty-one years his junior, but by all accounts the marriage was a happy one. In 1667 he completed and published his great epic, *Paradise Lost*, which was 10,576 lines long, modeled after the great classical works of Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Spenser, and retold in theological narrative the story of the fall of Satan and of Adam. Milton continued writing and publishing on theology, logic, and classical grammar until his death by gout and kidney failure in November of 1674. According to the earliest records, he simply died sitting in his chair by the fire, with his family around. He expired so peacefully, despite his painful medical condition, that no one noticed his passing.

CHAPTER TWO

The Education of John Milton

I had from my first yeeres by the ceaselesse diligence and care of my father, whom God recompence, bin exercis'd to the tongues, and some sciences, as my age would suffer, by sundry masters and teachers both at home and at the schools.

—Milton, “The Reason of Church Government”

John Milton may have had one of the finest educations of anyone in the Renaissance. This is no small claim: The grammar schools and universities of early modern Europe and England produced an unparalleled crop of fertile minds in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including William Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, John Donne, Desiderius Erasmus, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Milton was the quintessential classical Christian humanist scholar, deeply versed in Scripture as well as pagan learning, deeply studied across all subjects, and subsuming everything under the sovereignty of God. But how did he arrive at that place, and what did he have to say about education in general, and classical Christian education specifically?

Milton was the quintessential classical Christian humanist scholar, deeply versed in Scripture as well as pagan learning, deeply studied across all subjects, and subsuming everything under the sovereignty of God.

Much of what the contemporary American classical education movement aims to cultivate is precisely the early modern pedagogical and spiritual environment that produced the mind of Shakespeare, the

rise of science under Bacon, and the Reformation under Luther and Calvin. Educators enamored of this ancient system—itsself a revival from earlier antiquity—hope to reproduce it in the modern world, even if only marginally and incrementally. Certainly the full reinstatement of a historical situation is impossible. But the goal is noble, the evidence in support of the system is clear, and the advantages we now have in looking back to the remarkable general success of the Renaissance classical system, as well as the large-scale failure of the modern techno-educatic¹ system, lead us to press on with great hope for this revival. The impressive figure of John Milton, often called the greatest genius in the Age of Genius, serves as a bridge from the Renaissance that connects us moderns back to the ancient voices of Greek and Roman antiquity.

ANCIENT LEARNING

The educational landscape of late antiquity (third to eighth centuries AD) was not highly systematized. Islamic learning was spectacularly advanced, but much of Christian Europe was so politically and culturally fragmented that the intellectual research, scholarship, and consolidation that did take place was extraordinarily difficult to share over great distances and long time frames. The era of laboriously hand-copied manuscripts minimized the growth and spread of learning by simple paucity of materials. Book production was costly, slow, prone to error, and incredibly painstaking. Travel was expensive, dangerous, and time consuming. Literacy was low, and libraries were small and easily destroyed by fire, pests, moisture, and war. The Greek language was

1. By “techno-educatic” I mean the concept developed in the twentieth century—with roots in nineteenth-century Prussia—that A) humans are basically machines; B) these machines can be “programmed” in schools to perform in certain desired ways; C) the necessary programming is an experimental blending of various highly theoretical disciplines such as behavioral psychology, a mechanistic approach to neuroscience, Chicago-school sociology, and a fairly progressive political/cultural ideology. In other words, education is science over art. It is brain work over soul work, behavior work over character work. Education functions under this approach to produce compliant citizens rather than thoughtful, fulfilled humans.

almost entirely unknown in the West, so many of the greatest ancient texts were simply closed books; the Greek works that were available in Latin translation came through Arabic, and many of these were thought to be unreliable. The lingua franca of Latin expedited the cross-cultural experience of knowledge, but with the development of the Romance and Germanic languages during the eighth through twelfth centuries and the slow ossification and segregation of Latin into a purely scholarly and ecclesial mode of communication, this already difficult educational environment was made even more taxing.

With the rise of medieval² Europe in the ninth to fourteenth centuries, however, these structural and cultural problems began to change in a spectacular fashion. Although the printing press helped both generate and spread the ideas of the Renaissance, it was not invented until the mid-fifteenth century and hence was not primarily responsible for these changes. Rather it was the medieval university that brought about the great rise of learning in medieval Europe. A localized and concentrated group of scholar-teachers, gathered around a library and a chapel for study and for worship—categories then largely indistinguishable—was the new paradigm that enabled the first great systematization of Western thought. Most great cities, just as they desired to have a cathedral to honor God with liturgical worship, also hoped to have a university to honor God with the ordered life of the mind, a mind bent on exploring and understanding God's ordered world.

Universities³ developed in Europe from the eleventh century forward, with many of the greatest examples fully functional by the sixteenth century. They often grew out of monastic or cathedral schools that had already been in place for many generations. The universities' always-growing collection of books and manuscripts was the central

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2. The word *medieval* comes from the Latin *media* (middle) and *aevum* (age) and is thus later historians' term for that period of history that lies between ancient classical culture and its revival in the Renaissance.
 3. *University* comes from the Latin phrase *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, which means "community of teachers and students."

attraction for scholars—even today, the core processes of research, thought, writing, and teaching remain as the central purposes and activities of colleges and universities the world over. Medieval and Renaissance university students studied the seven classical liberal arts (the trivium: grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and the quadrivium: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music)⁴ and in some cases philosophy; they also could specialize in law, medicine, and theology, the latter of which was considered the ultimate discipline and hence denominated as the “Queen of the Sciences.” The knowledge of God reigned over all, grounding the mind’s understanding of everything else solidly in the recognition of God’s holy and benevolent design.

Instruction (and all conversation) on the university campus was in Latin. Majors as we now know them did not really exist, nor did prescribed coursework per se. Students attended lectures and meetings as they saw fit in order to prepare themselves for the examinations and rhetorical disputations which were required for graduation. A “class” was simply a series of lectures on a particular book; students of course rarely owned such precious items. Professors studied the books and gave detailed talks about them while students took notes. Despite this less prescriptive system, virtually all students apparently studied the same curriculum eventually.

There were many great universities established in Europe during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. The most prestigious and influential were Paris and Oxford, and of course Cambridge, where John Milton went to study at age sixteen. Universities, originally built around the idea of preserving and redeploying the ideas of past thinkers, were naturally conservative institutions, and very little changed from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance in either content or pedagogy. Lectures by professors and carefully prepared disputations (formal student debates) on topics generated by their teachers were the order of the day.

4. *Trivium* is derived from the Latin for “three roads”; *quadrivium* means “four roads.”