

Lycidas

In this monody the author bewails a learned friend, unfortunately drowned in his passage from Chester on the Irish Seas, 1637. And by occasion foretells the ruin of our corrupted clergy then in their height.³

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more
 Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,
 I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,
 And with forced fingers rude,
 5 Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
 Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
 Compels me to disturb your season due:
 For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
 Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer:⁴
 10 Who would not sing for Lycidas? he knew
 Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.
 He must not float upon his watery bier
 Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
 Without the meed of some melodious tear.
 15 Begin then, sisters of the sacred well,
 That from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring,⁵
 Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string.
 Hence with denial vain, and coy excuse,
 So may some gentle muse
 20 With lucky words favour my destined urn,⁶
 And as he passes turn,
 And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud.
 For we were nursed upon the self-same hill,
 Fed the same flock; by fountain, shade, and rill.⁷

³ This headnote was added in 1645; it would have been highly impolitic in 1638, when the poem was first published.

⁴ *dead ere his prime* Edward King was twenty-five years old when he was drowned.

⁵ *sisters of the sacred well* the Muses.

⁶ *lucky words* fortunate, well-chosen, felicitous.

⁷ *the self-same hill* Cambridge, where Milton and King were students, is not conspicuously hilly; this is pastoral's way of saying that they studied in the same place. Critics have sometimes "interpreted" this section in terms of Cambridge undergraduate life in the early modern period. The point of pastoral here, however, is to link Milton's and

Alan Rudrum, Joseph Black, et al., ed.,
*The Broadview Anthology of Seventeenth-Century
 Verse and Prose* (Peterborough: Broadview, 2000)

25 Together both, ere the high lawns appeared
 Under the opening eyelids of the morn,
 We drove afield, and both together heard
 What time the grey-fly winds her sultry horn,
 Battening our flocks with the fresh dews of night,¹
 30 Oft till the star that rose, at evening, bright
 Toward heaven's descent had sloped his westering
 wheel.
 Meanwhile the rural ditties were not mute,
 Tempered to the oaten flute,
 Rough satyrs danced, and fauns with cloven heel,
 35 From the glad sound would not be absent long,
 And old Damoetas loved to hear our song.²
 But O the heavy change, now thou art gone,
 Now thou art gone, and never must return!
 Thee shepherd, thee the woods, and desert caves,
 40 With wild thyme and the gadding vine
 o'ergrown,³
 And all their echoes mourn.
 The willows, and the hazel copses green,
 Shall now no more be seen,
 Fanning their joyous leaves to thy soft lays.
 45 As killing as the canker to the rose,
 Or taint-worm to the weanling herds that graze,
 Or frost to flowers, that their gay wardrobe wear,
 When first the whitethorn blows;
 Such, Lycidas, thy loss to shepherd's ear.
 50 Where were ye nymphs when the remorseless
 deep
 Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?
 For neither were ye playing on the steep,

King's educational experience to an ancient poetic tradition, and to elevate it by placing it within the European tradition of education and culture. See Alan Rudrum, *Milton: Comus and Shorter Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 63–64.

¹ *Battening* fattening; see *OED* *batten* *v*¹. Compare Virgil, *Eclogue* 8:15: "Scarce had night's cool shade left the sky, what time the dew on the tender grass is sweetest to the flock" (Loeb).

² *Damoetas* a conventional pastoral name. Milton may have had a particular tutor in mind.

³ *gadding* straggling.

Where your old bards, the famous Druids lie,⁴
 Nor on the shaggy top of Mona high,⁵
 55 Nor yet where Deva spreads her wizard stream:⁶
 Ay me, I fondly dream!
 Had ye been there...for what could that have
 done?
 What could the muse herself that Orpheus bore,⁷
 The muse herself, for her enchanting son
 60 Whom universal nature did lament,⁸
 When by the rout that made the hideous roar,⁹
 His gory visage down the stream was sent,
 Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore.
 Alas! What boots it with uncessant care
 65 To tend the homely slighted shepherd's trade,
 And strictly meditate the thankless muse,
 Were it not better done as others use,
 To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,
 Or with the tangles of Neaera's hair?¹⁰
 70 Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise
 (That last infirmity of noble mind)
 To scorn delights, and live laborious days;
 But the fair guerdon when we hope to find,
 And think to burst out into sudden blaze,¹¹

⁴ *Druids* were both priests and poets, and so have particular relevance to Edward King.

⁵ *shaggy* top of Mona. Mona (Anglesey) was not wooded in Milton's time, but Drayton remarks that it had once been dark with sacred oaks (*Poly-Olbion* 9:452–459).

⁶ *where Deva spreads her wizard stream* The river Dee was credited with powers of divination (*Poly-Olbion* 10:186–210). Drayton used the adjective "wizard" of another river, the Weaver.

⁷ *the muse herself that Orpheus bore* Calliope.

⁸ *enchanting* The word is used in a strict sense, in relation to the magical powers of Orpheus.

⁹ *the rout that made the hideous roar* Orpheus was torn to pieces by the Maenads, female followers of Bacchus.

¹⁰ *To sport...hair?* Amaryllis and Neaera are conventional names for shepherdesses or nymphs in pastoral verse.

¹¹ *guerdon* reward or recompense (*OED* *guerdon* *sb*). The apparently noble but ultimately futile aspiration to fame is expressed in terms of that courtly chivalry ("spurs," "guerdon") which Milton was later to reject in the prologue to Book IX of *Paradise Lost*.

75 Comes the blind Fury with th' abhorrèd shears,
 And slits the thin-spun life. But not the praise,¹
 Phoebus replied, and touched my trembling ears;
 Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,
 Nor in the glistering foil
 80 Set off to the world, nor in broad rumour lies,
 But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes,
 And perfect witness of all-judging Jove;
 As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
 Of so much fame in heaven expect thy meed.²
 85 O fountain Arethuse, and thou honoured flood,
 Smooth-sliding Mincius, crowned with vocal
 reeds,³
 That strain I heard was of a higher mood:⁴
 But now my oat proceeds,⁵
 And listens to the herald of the sea⁶
 90 That came in Neptune's plea,⁷
 He asked the waves, and asked the felon winds,

¹ *the blind Fury* Milton's attention to mythological detail is remarkable. Conventionally, it was the Fates, not the Furies, who cut the thread of life. The Fates were inexorable, but also impartial and just; the Furies on the other hand were spirits of vengeance, seeking out a particular person.

² *Phoebus, Jove* It used to be argued, on the basis of these pagan names, that this is a passage of false consolation, to be superseded by the Christian consolation of the poem's close. This argument ignores the common practice of Milton and many other Renaissance poets. Phoebus Apollo, the god of poetry, was frequently equated with Christ; and one only has to go to the first line of *A Mask* for another example of Milton using "Jove" for "God."

³ *Arethuse, and...Mincius* The fountain-nymph Arethusa fled from the river-god Alpheus and reappeared in Sicily as a spring welling up near the sea; this is one of the poem's resurrection-images, all of which, appropriately to an elegy for a man who was drowned, are related to water. Mincius is an Italian river mentioned ("honoured") by Virgil (*Georgics* 3:14–15). Together, they represent Greek and Roman pastoral poetry.

⁴ *That strain I heard was of a higher mood* This refers back to the end of the previous section, placing it higher than the inspiration of the pastoral poets, who lived in pagan times.

⁵ *oat* the oaten flute of pastoral.

⁶ *the herald of the sea* Triton, Neptune's son.

⁷ *in Neptune's plea* in view of the lines which follow, to gather evidence for Neptune's court. See *OED* plea *sb* I.

What hard mishap hath doomed this gentle swain?
 And questioned every gust of rugged wings
 That blows from off each beakèd promontory;
 95 They knew not of his story,
 And sage Hippotades their answer brings,
 That not a blast was from his dungeon strayed,⁸
 The air was calm, and on the level brine,
 Sleek Panope with all her sisters played.⁹
 100 It was that fatal and perfidious bark
 Built in th' eclipse, and rigged with curses dark,
 That sunk so low that sacred head of thine.
 Next Camus, reverend sire, went footing slow,
 His mantle hairy, and his bonnet sedge,¹⁰
 105 Inwrought with figures dim, and on the edge
 Like to that sanguine flower inscribed with woe.¹¹
 Ah! who hath reft (quoth he) my dearest pledge?
 Last came, and last did go,
 The pilot of the Galilean lake,
 110 Two massy keys he bore of metals twain
 (The golden opes, the iron shuts amain),¹²
 He shook his mitred locks, and stern bespake,
 How well could I have spared for thee, young swain,
 Enow of such as for their bellies' sake,
 115 Creep and intrude, and climb into the fold?

⁸ *Hippotades* the ruler of the winds, more familiar by his name of Aeolus.

⁹ *Panope* one of the fifty Nereids (sea-nymphs) who calmed the seas.

¹⁰ *Camus, reverend sire* the river Cam, "reverend" because Cambridge was already an ancient university in the seventeenth century. Camus is not a pagan god, and so the passage provides a subtle transition to the explicit Christianity of the last spirit of the waters: St. Peter, the "pilot of the Galilean lake." Neptune, Camus and the pilot of the Galilean lake form a progression: Nature, Culture, Religion. See Rudrum, *Comus and Shorter Poems*, 71–72.

¹¹ *that sanguine flower inscribed with woe* the hyacinth, supposed to have sprung from the blood of a youth accidentally killed by Apollo during a game of quoits. It is supposed to be marked with the letters *ai ai*, the Greek exclamation expressing grief.

¹² *Two massy keys* "thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:18–19).

Of other care they little reckoning make,
 Than how to scramble at the shearers' feast,
 And shove away the worthy bidden guest.
 Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how
 to hold
 120 A sheep-hook, or have learned aught else the least
 That to the faithful herdman's art belongs!¹
 What recks it them? What need they? They are sped;
 And when they list, their lean and flashy songs
 Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw,
 125 The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,
 But swoll'n with wind, and the rank mist they draw,
 Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread:
 Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw²
 Daily devours apace, and nothing said,
 130 But that two-handed engine at the door,
 Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.³
 Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past,
 That shrunk thy streams; return Sicilian muse,⁴
 And call the vales, and bid them hither cast
 135 Their bells, and flowrets of a thousand hues.
 Ye valleys low where the mild whispers use,

¹ *Blind mouths* John Ruskin drew attention to the force of this in the first lecture of *Sesame and Lilies*, pointing out that a bishop means one who sees and a pastor is one who feeds, and commenting "The most unbishoply character a man can have is to be blind. The most unpastoral is, instead of feeding, to want to be fed—to be a Mouth."

² *the grim wolf with privy paw* the Roman Catholic church, operating in England in secret to undo the Reformation. This was Milton's (and a good many others') view of what was happening in the 1630s; Archbishop Laud and other Anglican clerics were thought to be crypto-Catholics.

³ *that two-handed engine at the door* a famous crux. Innumerable solutions have been offered, ranging from the Houses of Parliament to the "Jack o'th'Clock" which adorned several churches in Milton's day. The last two lines of this section of the poem may be vague, but they suggest, with adequate clarity and force, the terror and finality of God's avenging justice.

⁴ *Return Alpheus...return Sicilian muse* The transition to the third section is achieved in a manner similar to that from the first to the second, in a modulation back to pagan pastoralism. Alpheus is the god of one of the rivers of Arcadia. The Sicilian muse refers to pastoral poetry, the Sicilian Theocritus being traditionally regarded as the father of pastoral poets.

Of shades and wanton winds, and gushing brooks,
 On whose fresh lap the swart star sparely looks,
 Throw hither all your quaint enamelled eyes,
 140 That on the green turf suck the honied showers,
 And purple all the ground with vernal flowers.
 Bring the rathe primrose that forsaken dies,
 The tufted crow-toe, and pale jessamine,
 The white pink, and the pansy freaked with jet,
 145 The glowing violet,
 The musk-rose, and the well-attired woodbine,
 With cowslips wan that hang the pensive head,
 And every flower that sad embroidery wears:
 Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed,
 150 And daffodillies fill their cups with tears,
 To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies.⁵
 For so to interpose a little ease,
 Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise
 (Ay me!) Whilst thee the shores, and sounding
 seas⁶
 155 Wash far away, where'er thy bones are hurled,
 Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides
 Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide
 Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world;
 Or whether thou to our moist vows denied,
 160 Sleep'st by the fable of Bellerus old,⁷

⁵ The passage which ends here draws upon one of the conventions of pastoral verse, the passage of the flowers. These are flowers that seem to mourn, but the feeling is different from that in the opening section: the passage has more colour than the "brown" myrtles and the "never-sere" ivy. In its gentleness, and delicacy of colour, the passage conveys consolation as much as lament; but it is a false consolation, as the poet recognizes in the close, because Lycidas is not lying on a "laureate hearse"; he died too soon to win poetic laurels, and his body is in the ocean, beyond the reach of his mourners.

⁶ *with false surmise / (Ay me!)* Early modern texts tended to be punctuated for sound, for example to indicate pauses, rather than "grammatically." If we are modernizing at all, the original period after "surmise" has to be deleted. I have indicated the pause that it intended by bracketing (Ay me!). The point is that the period after "surmise" yields a syntax in which the "angel" who is asked to "look homeward" must logically be Lycidas rather than Michael.

⁷ *fable of Bellerus old* the fabled abode of Bellerus; the latter is a giant or hero invented by Milton in accordance with "Bellerium," the Latin name for Land's End in Cornwall.

JOHN MILTON

Where the great vision of the guarded mount
 Looks toward Namancos and Bayona's hold;¹
 Look homeward angel now, and melt with ruth.²
 And, O ye dolphins, waft the hapless youth.³
 165 Weep no more, woeful shepherds weep no more,
 For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,
 Sunk though he be beneath the watery floor,
 So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,
 And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
 170 And tricks his beams, and with new spangled ore,
 Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:⁴
 So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high,
 Through the dear might of him that walked the
 waves,⁵
 Where other groves, and other streams along,
 175 With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves,
 And hears the unexpressive nuptial song,
 In the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love.⁶
 There entertain him all the saints above,
 In solemn troops, and sweet societies
 180 That sing, and singing in their glory move,
 And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.
 Now Lycidas the shepherds weep no more;

Henceforth thou art the genius of the shore,⁷
 In thy large recompense, and shalt be good
 185 To all that wander in that perilous flood.
 Thus sang the uncouth swain to th' oaks and
 rills,
 While the still morn went out with sandals grey,
 He touched the tender stops of various quills,
 With eager thought warbling his Doric lay:⁸
 190 And now the sun had stretched out all the hills,
 And now was dropped into the western bay;
 At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:⁹
 Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.¹⁰
 —1638, 1645

¹ *the great vision of the guarded mount* St. Michael, the guardian angel who was said to have appeared to fishermen on St. Michael's Mount in Cornwall in 495 C.E.; *Namancos and Bayona's hold* a region in north-west Spain and a Spanish fortress respectively.

² *Look homeward angel now, and melt with ruth* because the Catholic threat, since the defeat of the Armada in 1588 and the failure of the Gunpowder Plot in 1604, is no longer from Spain but within England itself. In this context we may dismiss the notion that the angel's home is in heaven; there is no reason why he should "melt with ruth" when looking in that particular direction. The relevant consideration is Michael's status as guardian angel of England.

³ *waft* convey safely to land (*OED* waft v¹2). Dolphins are friendly to humans, and were thought to perform this service both to the living and the dead.

⁴ *the day-star* perhaps Lucifer, the morning star; more likely the sun. Both were symbols of resurrection.

⁵ *him that walked the waves* Jesus. See Matthew 14:22–33.

⁶ *unexpressive* inexpressible; *nuptial song* the marriage song of the Lamb (Revelation 19:1–9).

⁷ *genius of the shore* that is, the *genius loci*, the guardian spirit of that place.

⁸ *eager thought* in contrast to the reluctance expressed in the beginning of the poem; *Doric lay* The pastoral poets Theocritus, Moschus and Bion wrote in the Doric dialect.

⁹ *blue* the colour of hope.

¹⁰ *fresh woods, and pastures new* echoing Phineas Fletcher, *The Purple Island* (1633), 6:77: "Tomorrow shall ye feast in pastures new."