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The City of London

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William Shakespeare and John Milton are the two most important poets in English. Shakespeare's achievements are unchallengeable and secure. Milton can make a far more controversial claim to eminence. He wrote the only poem in English recognised as an epic, a poem moreover which challenged the beliefs and presuppositions of all of its readers. As a literary writer, his political and historical significance is unique; he was at the centre, involved in, the most traumatic period of modern British history, and this left an imprint on his writings.

The family into which John Milton was born on Friday, 9 December 1608 exemplified the mutations and uncertainties of England at the beginning of the seventeenth century. His paternal grandfather, Richard, had been a yeoman and worked a farm near Stanton St John, a village about four miles north of Oxford. Richard had initially occupied a position in the social hierarchy only just above that of the medieval serf but by means still undisclosed, 'probably a good marriage', he acquired an estate that in 1577 was recorded as providing the considerable income of £500 per year.

Milton never made reference to his grandfather in print, which is not entirely surprising given that Richard was also a recusant whose public allegiance to Roman Catholicism earned him excommunication from the Elizabethan Church of England in 1582 and in 1601 fines amounting to £120. Religious difference caused a feud between Richard and his son John, Milton's father. It is known that John senior attended Christ Church, Oxford, sometime during the 1570s, although there is no record of whether he did so as a chorister or a student: he did not receive a degree. In any event it is likely that in Oxford John witnessed the disputations that attended the new theology of Protestantism, then in England barely fifty years old. One day after John had returned to the family home, Richard discovered his son in his room reading that symbolic testament to Anglicanism, the Bible in English. Quarrels between father and son intensified, with the eventual result that in the early 1580s John was

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disinherited and left Oxfordshire for London, never to return, nor as far as is known to communicate again with Richard.

We do not know how John, then in his early twenties (b. 1562), kept himself when he first arrived in London, but in 1583 or thereabouts he was taken on as an apprentice by James Colbron, a scrivener, and by 1590 had become a successful and independent member of that profession. Scriveners combined the functions of contract lawyer, accountant, financial adviser, money lender and debt collector. They had serviced the guilds and middle-ranking professional classes of the metropolis since the early Middle Ages and by the turn of the sixteenth century they had become, perhaps more than any other profession, the financial beneficiaries of the growing status of London as one of the major trading and seafaring capitals of Europe. John Milton senior did well. By 1600 he felt financially secure enough to court Sara Jeffrey, a woman from a comfortably off family of merchant tailors, whom he married within a year. The marital home would be a five-storey house in Bread Street, near Cheapside, a region favoured by wealthy, upwardly mobile traders and merchants (see Figure 1.1). A street carrying the same name still exists in roughly the same location but all of the properties from the Milton family's time were destroyed in the Great Fire. Their first child died before it could be baptized in May 1601 but a few years later a daughter, christened Anne, survived. John junior later entered the exact details of his own birth in the family Bible: 'the 9th of December 1608 die Veneris [Friday] half an hour after 6 in the morning.' He was baptized in All Hallows parish church, Bread Street on 20 December 1608.

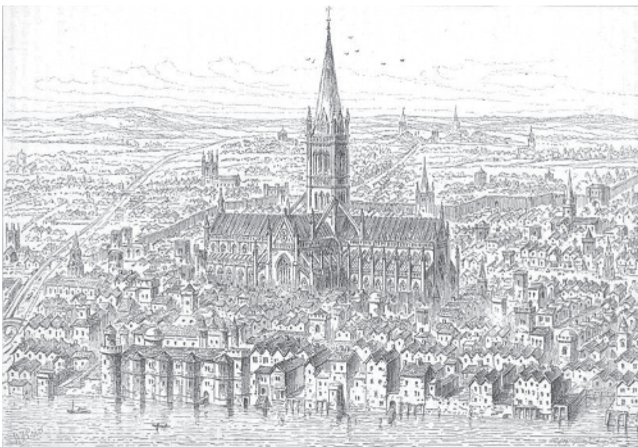

Figure 1.1 City of London and original St Paul's Cathedral before the Great Fire. Bread Street, where Milton grew up, would have been in the foreground between the Cathedral and the Thames. *Source:* Mayson Beeton Collection.

The London into which Milton was born and where he would spend most of his life was undergoing the most radical changes in its history. In 1608 it was effectively two different places. The City itself was an assembly of parishes crowded around the old Gothic St Paul's Cathedral and the Tower, a thriving centre for trade and finance and the obvious location for a scrivener such as Milton senior to base his home and business. Roughly three miles along the curve of the Thames to the west would bring one to Westminster and Whitehall. This was the nation's seat of government, where the monarch held court and the Lords and representatives of the commoners met. Between these two sites there were the Inns of Court, effectively England's third university and devoted entirely to the study of law. Milton's brother Christopher would begin his career as a lawyer at one of the Inns and during his youth Milton himself spent brief periods in residence there, without registering as a student. Fleet Street and the Strand made up the main highways between Westminster and the City, though our notion of them as urban thoroughfares bears no relation to their character in the early seventeenth century when they were surrounded by what amounted to small palaces and rural estates occupied by the aristocracy and the senior episcopy. To the north of these, the region that we now refer to as the West End, there was little more than lanes and open countryside. Throughout the 1620s and 1630s this area became a magnet for England's first wave of property speculators. In 1609 Robert Cecil, Early of Salisbury, received James's consent to develop a 'Close of fine houses near Leicester Fields' (what is now Leicester Square). Many other similar projects in this region followed and in 1631 Francis Russell, 4th Earl of Bedford, received permission to construct a number of even grander residences in the so-called Covent ('convent') Garden, again north of the Strand. The likely residents would either be members of a growing gentry and aristocracy – both James and Charles were profligate in their conferring of titles and privileges – or those who were amassing wealth from the growing import/export economy based on the river to the east of the City, in what would eventually become London's thriving docklands. Their employees, along with various tradesmen who serviced this expanding metropolis, created an overspill from the City and set themselves up in squalid residences adjacent to the ever expanding squares of the new West End.

The topography of the area altered year by year and it was symbolic of a deeper social and demographic tension. Bedford, for example, was not simply indulging his taste for luxury in his Covent Garden development. His move was tactical. He, like many others in the gentry and aristocracy, was becoming alienated from the Court of Charles I. Eventually, the alliance between disaffected gentry and those with interests in the City – individuals like John Milton senior – would make up the power base of the Civil War anti-monarchists. The Bread Street house, where Milton grew up, would have been a spacious, but

shapeless, half-timbered structure, each storey being added at various points in its history by a worthy individual with ambitions for more space. The street would have been narrow, crowded and filthy. Drains, as we understand them, did not exist in seventeenth-century London and waste, domestic and human, would lie in these open thoroughfares awaiting heavy, scouring rain. Fresh water, supplied by elm pipes, came at cost shortly after Milton's birth and it is probable that his family would be able to afford this. Milton, from Cambridge onwards, cultivated an intense love for the peace and innate beauty of the natural countryside and his upbringing in the crowded dirty city must have played some part in this.

John senior planned for his son a conventional route to success via the educational channels that had been denied to himself. When Milton was ten his father hired for him a private tutor called Thomas Young, a graduate of St Andrews University. Two years later John was admitted to St Paul's School, an esteemed institution adjacent to the Cathedral and only a few minutes' walk from Bread Street. Five years after that, aged sixteen, he would matriculate as an undergraduate at Christ's College, Cambridge, and enjoy the decent status of a 'lesser pensioner', meaning that his father was wealthy enough to pay for modest privileges and accommodation in college.

The influence of these years upon John Milton the writer is a matter of speculation but what we know of them is more than suggestive of their effect. Milton, during the later seventeenth century, was to become the most esteemed and controversial living poet in England, and *Paradise Lost* would remain as the poem in English most deserving of the title of epic. His status and reputation were sustained partly by his mastery of language and verse form, but only partly. In his writing he addressed himself to fundamental issues – our relationship with God, our origins, our condition as a species and our fate. These are recurrent features of all Renaissance verse, but Milton had a special, almost unique perspective upon them. He was born into the cauldron of tensions and divisions that characterised English society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a state which began with Henry VIII's break from the Roman Catholic Church in 1534 and which would reach its apocalyptic climax in the Civil War of the 1640s. Milton not only observed these events, he was a participant in them. He served the republican cause as its most eminent pamphleteer and polemicist during the Civil War years and he would become Latin Secretary – an office not unlike the modern post of a foreign minister – for the victorious Cromwellian governments. No other major English writer has been so closely involved with the intellectual and political shaping of their age. His early years had trained him well for his role and to properly appreciate the nature of this involvement we should broaden the context, allow ourselves a clearer understanding of the world – essentially the religious turbulence which prevailed in

England and much of Northern Europe – which greeted the arrival of John Milton.

Martin Luther had initiated the Protestant break with Rome, but it was John Calvin, a Geneva theologian, who had created the most radical branch of Protestant theology. His *Institutions of Christian Religion* (1535) became the benchmark for division. In it he proposed a complex theological, indeed philosophical thesis. Essentially, Calvinism was founded upon the tenet of predestination. God has in advance 'elected' those who will be rewarded with eternal, heavenly existence. Human beings enter life in a state of sinfulness, carrying the burden of Adam and Eve's Fall. Therefore we are offered the possibility of redemption, but God has already decided which of us will choose the path to redemption or damnation.

Calvinists maintained the difficult, and some would argue, paradoxical tenet that (a) we must by our actions redeem ourselves, while (b) the redeemed have been preselected by God. This might trouble us because the original sin of Adam and Eve condemned the human race to a state of punitive detachment from God's wisdom: we must accept even that which we cannot properly understand. Consequently Calvinists argued that the ceremonial rituals of the Roman Church were self-indulgent, even decadent distractions from an attainment even of a limited knowledge of our God-willed condition and fate.

In its early years the English Reformation, particularly during the reign of Henry VIII, was less a theological than a political rebellion; the monarch rather than the Pope became the acknowledged head of the Church, with all the financial, ideological and legislative benefits carried by that role. The practices of the Church itself were largely unaltered by Henry's 1534 Act of Settlement but gradually, through the sixteenth century, more and more Anglicans become apologists and campaigners for what they perceived to be true Protestantism. Influenced by Calvinism they acquired the collective title of 'Puritans'; they sought to purify the Church of England of its Roman practices and beliefs. As a result there was conflict, evidenced respectively in the reigns of Henry's son Edward VI (1547–53) and daughter Mary I (1553–8). Edward, the so-called boy-King, was pro-Calvinist. He instituted the persecution and execution of Catholics and licensed the radical *Book of Common Prayer* (1549) which for the first time ever offered scripture in vernacular English, an act of independence from predominantly Latinate Roman doctrine. Mary, his sister, went to the other extreme, married Philip II of Spain, a fanatical anti-Protestant, reinstituted Roman Catholicism as the state religion and persecuted radical Protestants. Bishop Latimer and Archbishop of Canterbury Cranmer, both Anglicans with Calvinist sympathies, were burnt at the stake. The reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603) restored a degree of compromise. Despite the official re-establishment of an independent Church of England the nation remained

divided, with numerous factions of Protestantism as much set against each other as united in opposition to Catholicism.

Elizabeth was obliged to play the role of mediator, which she did with tactical brilliance.

Significantly, the Elizabethan period also involved the emergence of England as a major financial centre. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 was more than a military/religious victory. English sea power, along with its Dutch counterpart, became the instrument for early colonialism. The West Indies, America and the Indian subcontinent became predominantly English trading centres. The East India Company (referring to the region now comprising the states of India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh) was founded in 1600, and the 'Company' part of its title reflects the rapidly changing economic condition of London in the later sixteenth century. The establishment of a company whose profits were distributed among shareholders and which was a speculative enterprise was an inaugural feature of modern capitalism. London at the turn of the sixteenth century was alive with companies, and this environment provided Milton's father with a very profitable profession, what in modern terms would be referred to as an accountant and stockbroker.

These economic transformations were closely related to the ongoing state of religious conflicts: what we now call the middle classes, the traders and entrepreneurs of the period, were predominantly Protestant and Calvinist. And there were a number of reasons for this. Roman Catholicism embodied the feudal, hierarchical systems of medieval Europe and, particularly in England, a new class was emerging, managed by enterprise and endeavour rather than birthright.

Calvinism did not explicitly incorporate a political philosophy but its conception of man's relationship with God found a sympathetic secular counterpart in the state of mind of the latent middle classes. Calvin emphasised that the elect was an assembly of individuals, unlike the institution of the Church with its self-sustaining hierarchies and oppressive conventions. There seemed for many middle-class Protestants to be an obvious parallel between their unsteady relationship with the monarchical, aristocratic structures of the medieval state and with the similarly reactionary characteristics of the old church, in both its Roman and High Anglican manifestations. But even among Calvinist orientated Protestants there were divisions, caused principally by the notion of predestination. If the elect had already been chosen by God then matters such as conscience in determining an individual's choice between virtuous or sinful acts were at once irrelevant and self-contradictory. The writings of the sixteenth-century Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius inspired the most divisive feature of Calvinism. Arminius held that the tenet of predestination was flawed – God might well be aware of the choices which would be made by human

beings between virtuous and sinful acts but such acts were on our part deliberate. Even though God knew in advance who the elect would be, we, because of our post-lapsarian gift of free will, could still choose our destiny.

The influence of these events upon Milton's beliefs and the course of his life was immense. From his first days at school to his declining years during the Restoration he found himself at the centre of a whirlwind of savagely divided opinions on every aspect of the human condition, from how our faith determined our private demeanour to whether Kingship or radical republicanism carried the sanction of God. Some, for the sake of their safety and sanity, might have maintained the lowest possible profile, entering the storm only when obliged to do so. Milton, though never an inflexible zealot, devoted his existence to the defence of what he believed was both God's will and the common-good of his countrymen. Opinions on his political and religious views will continue to differ but no-one would dispute that his turmoils bequeathed us some of the finest poems ever written.

Arminianist theology did not become the foundation of a particular religious sect or political grouping; rather, it indicates the inherent tensions within the broad spectrum of Protestantism and late Renaissance intellectual life. On the one hand, Calvinism replaced attendance to Papal doctrine with an empiricist reading of scripture, while at the same time its findings appeared to impose restrictions upon interpretive freedom and the fundamental notion of the believer as a self-determining individual – Arminius reacted against the latter and these doctrinal divisions would be re-enacted within the religious/political fabric of England during the Civil War and its aftermath. Milton's relationship with Arminianism is important because it operates as an index to his position within and responses to the complex factionalism of English political and religious life. For example, the term Independents is applied to a large number of prominent individuals of the Parliamentarian cause, Cromwell included. Independency advocated an early version of the modern concept of freedom of the individual, arguing that within the institution of the Protestant Church certain particulars of belief should be left to the scrutiny and choice of the particular worshipper. Independency could be regarded as an enactment of Arminianist doctrine, in that both emphasise the importance of choice and self-determination in individual's dealings with religious practice. This went against the regimen of the Presbyterian Church, one of the most powerful and influential elements of the Parliamentarian cause. Presbyterianism, originating mainly in Scotland, was organised Calvinism. As an institution it was radical – it rejected the hierarchical Anglican structure of bishops for example – yet authoritarian in that it imposed upon members of its congregation theological ordinances just as unbending as those of the Catholics. As we shall see, the conflicts between Presbyterianism, organised religion, and the Independents were continuous

during the late 1640s and early 1650s, when the victorious Parliamentarians were restructuring the civic, political and religious fabric of England. Milton, in his early years, sometimes allied himself with aspects of the Calvinist-Presbyterian cause – this was the most emphatically anti-Catholic grouping in Britain – but as he began to establish his reputation as a pamphleteer on religious and political issues and eventually became a civil servant in the English republic, he shifted his allegiance to the Independents, the advocates of theological individualism, free speech and free will. Sometimes Milton would attack Arminianism (see *Areopagitica*, *WJM*, p. 313), not so much as a doctrine in its own right but because it had occasionally, and paradoxically, been adopted by Royalist High Anglicans often as a wedge to further divide the factional constituency of radical Protestantism. Laud, Charles I's notoriously conservative Archbishop of Canterbury was an advocate of Arminianisn but this was more a political tactic than a genuine conviction. He wished to alienate the Presbyterians.

Like many codes of belief, religious and secular, which treat the relation between the conscience of the individual and institutionalised structure in a dialectical, potentially ambiguous manner, Arminianism was attractive to otherwise radically opposed parties. In essence, however, it promoted free choice and singularity, and for this reason in much of his later writing Milton supported it (see 'The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a free Commonwealth', 1660, *WJM*, p. 366 and *Of True Religion* ..., 1673, *WJM*, p. 168). His two most radical and controversial works, the prose tract *De Doctrina Christiana* and the poem *Paradise Lost* are treated by all commentators as sympathetic to Arminianism: the latter foregrounds the tension between free will and doctrinal obligation by situating it in the lives, thoughts and actions of the two original human beings.

It is certain that even as a child Milton would have become aware of the tensions and polarities of belief that informed all aspects of English politics and religious affiliation. Young, his pre-school tutor, had come to London in the wake of James I's succession to the English throne and would in 1620 take up the post of Pastor of the English church in Hamburg. Young's life in Scotland and his move to Hamburg reflected his Calvinist convictions, and his pupil's lessons in Greek, Latin and Hebrew would have been invested with rather more than a disinterested respect for classical scholarship. Richard Stock, the rector of Milton's parish church, All Hallows, was a Puritan whose Sunday sermons regularly involved the lambasting of Jesuits as the army of Satan and the Pope as their general. Stock had already attained a degree of public notoriety by writing a book in which he claimed that the lax, indulgent nature of the reign of James I had encouraged the return of subversive Papist activists to English life (*A Sermon Preached at Paules Crosse*, 1609). It was licensed for publication two

days before John Milton was born. The high master of St Paul's School, Alexander Gill, the surmaster, William Sound and under usher, Alexander Gill junior, all belonged to the more radical wing of the Church of England, and while St Paul's was famous for its emphasis upon classical literature as the bedrock of learning, the writings of Virgil, Cicero, Horace, Homer and Juvenal would all have been examined through the lens of contemporaneous religious doctrine. At St Paul's Milton met Charles Diodati, a boy of his own age who would remain one of his closest friends, and Diodati would have informed him of his family history: his father, a physician, had first been exiled from his native Italy because of his Protestantism, had lived for a while in Geneva, the home of Calvinism, and then moved north to practise his profession in a city, London, in which his religious beliefs would be sympathetically treated: his uncle, Giovanni, had stayed in Geneva to become an influential and controversial theologian, of the Calvinist persuasion.

We cannot be certain of the way the young Milton responded to his early encounters with the prevailing conflicts of the period, but if the writings of the adult are an extension of the inclinations of the child he did not submit to indoctrination. He would throughout his life remain a radical Protestant, but Milton's radicalism was of the non-peremptory, undogmatic kind. The features of Calvinism that corresponded most with his temperament were the concepts of individualism and free will, God's generous allocation to his fallen species of the opportunity to speculate on the nature of absolute truth before accepting a pre-formed actuality.

At St Paul's an attainment of competence in Greek and Latin was regarded as of equal importance as a pupil's mastery of his native English, and a knowledge of the poetic conventions of all three languages was ranked almost as highly as a command of their grammar. Pupils were asked to write poems, not as vehicles for expressive creativity but as exercises of self-discipline; a practical awareness of metre and figurative devices inculcated a greater understanding of linguistic operations per se. This ranking of poetry as an intrinsic feature of language, rather than as a self-conscious excursion from its ordinary uses, reflects its broader status within Renaissance culture. Gill senior was a quintessential Renaissance schoolteacher in that he treated Greek, Latin and English as living languages whose interrelationships were mutually productive. He informed his pupils of the relative qualities of contemporary English poets, of how they had adapted, transformed and extended the precedents set by their classical precursors: Spenser was 'our Homer', Sidney was the English Anacreon, Samuel Daniel the modern Lucan and John Harington the Elizabethan Martial (Shakespeare, as a playwright, was in Gill's opinion a little too populist for serious scrutiny; see Parker, 1968, p. 14).

At home poetry was treated as a necessary feature of the civilised household. His father, despite lacking a formal education, was an enthusiastic poet. He was a close friend of John Lane, an editor and publisher of verse and himself a writer, albeit of questionable competence. Milton senior set a number of psalms to music and contributed poems to several of Lane's collections (see Parker, 1968, p. 16). Milton's father's verse reminds one of William McGonagall's late-nineteenth-century combination of disarming sincerity and embarrassing ineptitude. Milton's opinions upon his father's poems are a matter for speculation but one is tempted to wonder if they encouraged an early regard for stylistic probity. Milton himself certainly wrote verse during this period. Undated epigrams on the Gunpowder Plot survive, along with exercises in Latin elegiac verse, but they might have been produced by anyone; Milton the poet would not find his individual voice, at least in English, until he was in his twenties.