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PROLUSIONS VI AND VII

PREFATORY NOTE

Milton's Prolusions are academic exercises or orations delivered while he was a student at Christ's College, Cambridge. The Latin word *prolusio* refers to a preliminary exercise, trial, or essay. These exercises are based on his intensive rhetorical training, which sharpened his skills at verbal persuasion: the ability, as Jesus observes in Milton's late poem *Paradise Regained*, to employ "winning words to conquer willing hearts" (I, 222). Humanist rhetorical training stressed the practice of arguing questions from both sides (the ability to argue *in utramque partem*), and the Prolusions display Milton's ability to debate two sides of an issue as he also strives to win the goodwill of his audience. Milton is a versatile rhetorical performer in these early prose texts, much as he is in the English and Latin prose works he published during the decades of the English Revolution.

Milton would later publish seven Prolusions with his Latin correspondence in 1674 (in the last prose volume published in his lifetime), no doubt because they reveal his early development as a writer obsessed with his evolving sense of authorship. Prolusions VI and VII display a range of Milton's diverse rhetorical and verbal skills: his eloquence, wit, verbal playfulness, and bantering, sometimes grotesque undergraduate humor. They also reveal his keen interests in mythography, history, educational reform, and, of course, the aspirations and vocation of the poet.

Addressed to Milton's fellow students, Prolusion VI contains three parts, only two of which appear here because the third section is Milton's English poem, "At a Vacation Exercise in the College": part one is a mock oration in Latin prose, delivered in the paradoxical and ironic spirit of Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* and contending that light-hearted entertainments do not harm philosophical studies; part two, entitled "Prolusio" ("The Prolusion"), elaborates and deflates the argument with its lively display of learned but coarse undergraduate humor and jokes (with allusions to members of the College), while satirizing vapid university scholastic exercises. Moreover, the second part self-consciously calls attention to Milton's early literary identity as he comments on his change of title from "Lady" to "Father." The Prolusion may have been performed before his fellow students in early July 1628; or it may have been performed the first week of July 1631. (See the biography of Milton by Campbell and Corns, pp. 58–9, for discussion of the Prolusion's date.) The genre of Prolusion VI has been established as a "salting," an initiation ritual held in the College dining hall, as the year's freshmen were inducted to sophomore status in front of their seniors; in this case, Milton participated as master of ceremonies and inventive orator.

Delivered in the chapel of Christ's College (possibly in the autumn term of 1631) to an audience of students and fellows, Prolusion VII vigorously articulates a number of important themes in Milton's

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literary career: his eloquent commitment to humanist learning and the power of rhetoric; his disparagement of the university curriculum; his expression of the restless aspirations and wide-ranging curiosity characteristic of the Renaissance; and his articulation of the extraordinary heights that might be obtained by means of knowledge in all the arts and sciences ("He will indeed seem to be one whose rule and dominion the stars obey"). Also voiced here are the high Miltonic expectations associated with achieving poetic ambition: these include intense devotion to study; the value of solitude and contemplation; keeping the mind and body uncontaminated and living temperately; and the young Milton's fervent yearning to possess the powers of the mythic poet, musician, and prophet Orpheus.

The translations of Prolusions VI and VII are taken from *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 volumes, edited by Don M. Wolfe *et al.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953–82), Volume I, pp. 214–306. Used by permission of Yale University Press.

Prolusion VI

DELIVERED IN THE COLLEGE SUMMER VACATION, BUT IN THE PRESENCE OF ALMOST THE WHOLE BODY OF STUDENTS, AS IS CUSTOMARY

(i) THE ORATION

Sportive Exercises on occasion are not inconsistent with philosophical Studies

On my return from that city which is the chief of all cities,[1] Members of the University,[2] filled (I had almost said "to repletion") with all the good things which are to be found there in such abundance, I looked forward to enjoying once more a spell of cultured leisure, a mode of life in which, it is my belief, even the souls of the blessed find delight. I fully intended at last to bury myself in learning and to devote myself day and night to the charms of philosophy; for the alternation of toil and pleasure usually has the effect of annihilating the boredom brought about by satiety and of making us the more eager to resume our interrupted tasks. Just as I was warming to my work there came a sudden summons and I was dragged away by the yearly celebration of our ancient custom, and commanded to transfer that zeal, which I had intended to devote to the acquisition of knowledge, to foolery and the invention of new jests—as if the world were not already full of fools, as if that famous Ship of Fools,[3] as renowned in song as the Argo herself,[4] had been wrecked, or finally as if there were not matter enough already to make even Democritus laugh.[5]

But I ask your pardon, my hearers; for though I have spoken somewhat too freely, the custom which we celebrate to-day is assuredly no foolish one, but on the contrary most commendable, as I intend to make plain forthwith. And if Junius Brutus,[6] that second founder of Rome and great avenger of the lusts of kings, could bring himself to disguise his almost godlike mind and wonderful natural talents under the semblance of idiocy, there is assuredly no reason why I should be ashamed to play the wise fool for a

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1 London.

2 University of Cambridge; Milton was admitted to Christ's College in 1625.

3 The *Ship of Fools* (1509) by Alexander Barclay, adapted from the *Narrenschiff* of Sebastian Brant, satirizes the folly of modern life.

4 The ship Jason, the mythological Greek hero, and his team of champions sailed to find the Golden Fleece.

5 Democritus (c. 460–c. 370 BC) was a Greek philosopher known as the "laughing philosopher" – unable to restrain his mirth at the spectacle of human life.

6 Lucius Junius Brutus, the legendary founder of the Roman republic (in 509 BC), who feigned idiocy or stupidity (hence the name *brutus*) to escape death, then led a successful uprising against Tarquinius Superbus, traditionally the last Roman king.

while, especially at the bidding of him whose duty it is, like the aediles' at Rome,[7] to organise these shows, which are almost a regular custom. I was further strongly induced and persuaded to undertake this office by the new-found friendliness towards me of you who are fellow-students of my own college. For when, some months ago, I was to make an academic oration before you, I felt sure that any effort of mine would have but a cold reception from you, and would find in Aeacus or Minos a more lenient judge than in any one of you.[8] But quite contrary to my expectation, contrary indeed to any spark of hope I may have entertained, I heard, or rather I myself felt, that my speech was received with quite unusual applause on every hand, even on the part of those who had previously shown me only hostility and dislike, because of disagreements concerning our studies. A generous way indeed of displaying rivalry, and one worthy of a royal nature! For while friendship itself is often wont to misinterpret what is really free from faults, on this occasion keen and biting enmity was kind enough to construe in a more gentle and lenient spirit than I deserved both my mistakes, which may have been many, and my rhetorical failures, which were doubtless not a few. On this one occasion and in this one instance mad fury seemed to become sane, and by this action to free itself from the imputation of lunacy.

I am quite overcome with pride and joy at finding myself surrounded on all sides by such an assembly of learned men; and yet, when I take stock of myself and turning my eyes inward contemplate in my own heart the meagre powers I possess, I blush to myself and a sudden uprush of sadness overwhelms and chokes my rising joy.

But, gentlemen, do not, I beg of you, desert me as I lie here fallen, and stricken by your eyes as by lightning. Let the soft breeze of your goodwill refresh my fainting spirit, as well it can, and warm it into life again; so shall my sickness, thanks to you, be less acute, and the remedy, since it is you who apply it, the more willingly and gladly accepted; so that it would be a true pleasure to me often to faint thus, if I might as often be revived and restored by you. But what matchless power, what marvellous virtue is yours, which like Achilles' spear, the gift of Vulcan, at once inflicts the wound and heals it![9] For the rest, let no one wonder that I triumph, as though exalted to heaven, at finding so many men eminent for their learning, the very flower as it were of the University, gathered together here; for I can scarce believe that a greater number flocked of old to Athens to hear those two supreme orators, Demosthenes and Aeschines, contending for the crown of eloquence,[10] or that such felicity ever fell to the lot of Hortensius at any declamation of his,[11] or that so great a company of cultured men ever graced a speech of Cicero's.[12] So that with however poor success I perform my task, it will yet be no mean honour to me merely to have opened my lips before so large and crowded an assembly of our most eminent men. And by heaven, I cannot help flattering myself a little that I am, as I think, far more fortunate than Orpheus or Amphion; for they did but supply the trained and skilful touch to make the strings give forth their sweet harmony, and the exquisite music was due as much to the instrument itself as to their apt and dexterous handling of it. But if I win any praise here to-day, it will be entirely and truly my own, and the more glorious in proportion as the creations of the intellect are superior to manual skill. Besides,

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[7] Magistrates in charge of public festivals and games at Rome; they also had charge of temples, building, and markets.

[8] Legendary Greek kings who judge the dead in the Underworld.

[9] Vulcan, god of fire, made a spear for the Greek hero Achilles who wounded Telephus in battle. Telephus, guided by an oracle, convinced Achilles to allow him to apply bits of the spear to his wound, which then miraculously healed.

[10] Demosthenes (384–322 BC) and Aeschines (c. 397–c. 322 BC) were famous orators and great rivals in the political realm of ancient Athens.

[11] Hortensius (114–50 BC), a distinguished Roman orator, was Cicero's chief rival in the law courts.

[12] Cicero (106–43 BC) was regarded by his contemporaries and subsequent generations as the greatest orator of ancient Rome; he was also a statesman, advocate of the republic, lawyer, and philosopher, whose many surviving works were influential during the Renaissance.

Orpheus and Amphion used to attract an audience consisting only of rocks and wild beasts and trees, and if any human beings came, they were at best but rude and rustic folk;[13] but *I* find the most learned men altogether engrossed in listening to my words and hanging on my lips. Lastly, those rustics and wild beasts used to follow after the stringed music which they already knew well and had often heard before; *you* have been drawn hither and held fast here by expectation alone.

But, Members of the University, I would before all have you know that I have not spoken thus in a spirit of boastfulness. For I only wish that such a stream of honeyed, or rather nectared, eloquence might be granted me, if but for this once, as of old ever steeped and as it were celestially bedewed the great minds of Athens and of Rome; would that I could suck out all the innermost marrow of persuasion, pilfer the notebooks of Mercury himself,[14] and empty all the coffers of wit, that I might produce something worthy of such great expectations, so notable a concourse, and so polished and refined an audience. So behold, my hearers, whither my consuming desire and longing to please you drives me and carries me away: all unexpectedly I find myself wafted in an ambition which is, however, a righteous one, and a virtuous sacrilege, if there can be such a thing.

Certainly I do not consider that I need beg and implore the help of the Muses, for I find myself surrounded by men in whom the Muses and the Graces are incarnate,[15] and it seems to me that Helicon and all the other shrines of the Muses have poured forth their nurslings to celebrate this day,[16] so that one might well believe that the laurels of Parnassus pine and fade for lack of them.[17] Therefore it will surely be useless to seek the Muses, the Graces, and the Loves in any other spot in all the world than this.[18] If so, Barbarity, Error, Ignorance, and all that tribe which the Muses loathe must needs take flight with all speed at sight of you, and hide themselves in a far distant clime. And then, why should not every barbarous, vulgar, or outworn word or phrase be forthwith banished from my speech, and I myself become straightway eloquent and accomplished, through the working of your influence and secret inspiration?

However that may be, I entreat you, my hearers, not to grudge a little of your time to my frivolities, for even the gods themselves are said often to have laid aside for the moment the cares of the commonwealth of heaven and to have been present as spectators of the wars of puny man. Sometimes, indeed, the stories tell, they did not disdain humble homes, but accepted the hospitality of the poor and gladly made a meal of beans and herbs.[19] So too I beg and beseech you, my kind hearers, to accept what I can offer as in some sort a humble banquet for your delicate and discerning taste.

I am indeed well aware that many sciolists are in the habit of arrogantly and stupidly belittling in others any subject of which they happen to know nothing themselves,[20] as if it were not worth spending trouble upon; so for instance one foolishly rails at Dialectic, because he could never master it; another despises Natural Philosophy, because, to be sure, the fairest of the goddesses, Nature, never so honoured him as to show herself naked to his eyes. But for my part I will not

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[13] Both Orpheus and Amphion played the lyre with legendary skill in Greek mythology. Orpheus charmed the rocks, rivers, and trees as well as all human and immortal listeners. When Amphion and his twin brother Zethus built the walls of Thebes, Amphion played a golden lyre; his music moved the stones to the wall.

[14] Mercury was the Roman god of eloquence, skill, trading, and thieving; he was herald and messenger of the gods.

[15] Muses: in classical myth, nine goddesses of the arts who bestow inspiration to mortals. Graces: goddesses, usually said to be daughters of Zeus and three in number (Aglaia meaning Radiance, Thalia meaning Flowering, and Euphrosyne meaning Joy), personifying charm, grace, and beauty.

[16] Helicon: mountain of Boeotia in Greece sacred to the Muses.

[17] Mount Parnassus in Greece is associated with the worship of Apollo and the Muses; the laurel, Apollo's sacred tree, represents honor and fame.

[18] Loves: goddesses of pleasure, devotees of Venus.

[19] Beans were offerings to the gods in several Roman festivals.

[20] Sciolists: conceited pretenders of knowledge.

shrink from singing the praises of jests and merriment to the best of my powers, even though I must admit that I have but very slight aptitude for them. I must however first point out that I am today to praise mirth in a serious style, which seems an arduous task indeed and far from easy.

Nor are these praises undeserved. For what is more likely to win friendship quickly and retain it long, than a pleasant and gay disposition? while if a man is devoid of wit and humour and elegant pleasantry, hardly anyone will find him agreeable or welcome. But in our own case, Members of the University, if we made it our daily custom to go to sleep and so to speak die in philosophy and grow old among the thorns and brambles of logic, without any relaxation or breathing-space, what, I ask, would the pursuit of philosophy amount to but to prophesying in the cave of Trophonius and following the over-rigid rule of Cato?[21] Why, the very rustics would say that we live on mustard. Besides, just as those who exercise themselves in wrestling and other sports grow much stronger than others and more ready for all emergencies, even so we usually find that these mental gymnastics strengthen the sinews of the mind and tone up its whole system, and polish and sharpen the intellect, making it versatile and adaptable. But if a man does not desire to be considered cultured and witty, he must not be annoyed if he is called a clown and a boor. There is, too, a certain mean kind of fellow, often enough met with, who, being themselves incapable of wit or gaiety, and conscious of their own dullness and stupidity, always conclude that any witty remark they may hear is made at their expense. It would indeed serve them right if their unreasonable suspicions were to be realised, and if they should find themselves the butt of everyone's witticisms, till they were almost driven to suicide. But such dregs of mankind as these cannot stand in the way of the pleasantry of polite society.

Would you now, gentlemen, have me build up a structure of proof from instances upon this foundation of reason? I can indeed find plenty of such instances. First of all comes Homer, the rising sun or morning star of cultured literature, at whose birth all learning was born also, as his twin. He sometimes withdrew his divine mind from the councils of the gods and the doings in heaven and diverted it to comic subjects, such as that most amusing description of the battle of frogs and mice.[22] Moreover Socrates,[23] according to the Pythian Apollo the wisest of men,[24] is said often to have bridled his wife's shrewish tongue with a jesting word. Besides, we read that the conversation of the ancient philosophers was always sprinkled with witty sayings and enlivened by a pleasant sparkle; and it was certainly this quality above all which conferred an immortal fame upon all the ancient writers of comedies and epigrams, whether Greek or Latin. Moreover we are told that Cicero's jokes and witticisms, collected by Tiro,[25] filled three volumes. And we are all familiar with that sprightly encomium of Folly composed by an author of no small repute,[26] while we have many other diverting essays on comic subjects by famous authors of our own times.

Would you have me cite great generals, kings, and heroes? Take then Pericles, Epaminondas, Agesilaus, and Philip of Macedon,[27] who, if I may

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[21] Those who consulted the Greek oracle in the cave of Trophonius emerged pale, shaken, and dejected. "Cato the Censor" (234–149 BC), Roman military and political leader, was known for his stern morality.

[22] Milton suggests that Homer (c. 8th century BC), the author of the foundational Greek epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, also composed the mock-epic poem *Battle of the Frogs and Mice* (*Batrachomyomachia*).

[23] Socrates (469–399 BC), famous Greek philosopher whose interrogatory method of philosophical inquiry became known as the "Socratic Method."

[24] After killing the monstrous python at Delphi, Apollo founded his oracle there, whose priestess was known as the Pythia. According to Plato (*Apology* 21), the Pythian prophetess asserted that there was no one wiser than Socrates.

[25] Tiro (Marcus Tullius): slave, confidential secretary, and biographer of Cicero, who freed him in 53 BC.

[26] Desiderius Erasmus, *Moriae Encomium* (*The Praise of Folly*), 1511; Erasmus was the leading northern European humanist of his time.

[27] Famous ancient military leaders and kings: Pericles (c. 495–429 BC), Athenian general and statesman; Epaminondas (d. 362 BC), famous Theban general and strategist; Agesilaus (c. 444–360 BC), Spartan king and military leader; Philip of Macedon (383/2–336 BC), king of Macedon, architect of Macedonian greatness, and father of Alexander the Great.

speak in Gellius's manner,[28] overflowed with humorous and witty sayings, according to the statements of historians. Take too Laelius, Scipio, Pompey, Julius Ceasar and Augustus, all of whom were, according to Cicero, pre-eminent among their contemporaries for wit.[29] Would you have yet greater names? Jove himself and the other deities are represented by the poets,[30] who give us the best pictures of the truth, as giving themselves up to merriment at their feasts and carouses. Finally, gentlemen, I invoke the seal of approval set by yourselves, which I consider worth all the rest. For that jests and jollity are far from displeasing to you is proved clearly enough by your coming here in crowds to-day, and to this every one of you seems to nod assent. Nor, I swear, is it to be wondered at that all honest and all eminent men find pleasure in this lively and elegant pleasantry, since it too has a place of honour in the famous Aristotelian classification of virtues,[31] and as in some Pantheon shines in splendour like a goddess among her sister deities.[32]

But perhaps there may be some bearded Masters of crabbed and surly nature, who, thinking themselves Catos not merely in a small way but on a grand scale, and composing their countenances to a Stoic severity,[33] shake their obstinate heads and uneasily complain that nowadays everything is in confusion and going from bad to worse, and that the newly-created Bachelors, instead of expounding the *Prior Analytics* of Aristotle,[34] shamelessly and unseasonably bandy about scurrilous and empty trivialities, and that to-day's exercises, which our forbears undoubtedly instituted with the proper and honest purpose of winning some solid gain either of rhetoric or of philosophy, have of late been perverted into a show of feeble witticism. But I have an answer to them ready to hand. Let them know, if they do not know already, that when the laws of our Republic of Letters were first laid down, learning had only just penetrated from foreign lands to our country; therefore, since the knowledge of Greek and Latin was exceedingly rare and unusual, it was necessary to strive and struggle toward them with the more intensive study and more unremitting efforts. We however, though inferior to our predecessors in morals, are superior to them in learning, and ought to turn our backs on those studies which offer but little difficulty, and betake ourselves to those to which they too would have turned their attention, had they had leisure to do so. And you are well aware that the earliest lawgivers were always wont to issue ordinances rather harder and more severe than men could endure, in order that as men grew less strict and accurate in their observance of them they might hit upon the right mean. Finally, since the circumstances are now entirely different, we must necessarily allow many laws and customs, if not to lapse and fall into disuse, at least to be narrowed in their application and disregarded in some details. But, they say, raising their eyebrows, if such frivolities are to be openly tolerated and approved and to win public praise, every student will straightway turn his attention away from sound and solid learning and devote it to shows and stage frivolity, so that the very training schools of philosophy will send out, instead of learned and prudent men, fools more shameless than buffoons and play-actors.

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[28] Aulus Gellius (c. 125–c. 180 BC), Roman author of *Noctes Atticae*, a collection of short essays and anecdotes on a wide variety of topics in philosophy, history, law, and grammar; he was highly regarded by Renaissance humanists.

[29] Famous Roman leaders: Laelius Gaius II (c. 190–after 129 BC), politician and orator renowned for his wisdom; Scipio Aemilianus (c. 185–129 BC), military leader, statesman, aristocrat, patron of philosophy and the arts; Pompey (106–48 BC), general and politician known as Pompey the Great; Julius Caesar (100–44 BC), general, politician, orator, and dictator; Augustus (63 BC–AD 14), first emperor of Rome.

[30] Jove: name of the highest deity of the ancient Romans; a poetical equivalent to Jupiter.

[31] Aristotle (384–322 BC), major Greek philosopher influenced by Plato, whose ethical treatises identified virtues or excellences of character such as courage, justice, and generosity.

[32] Pantheon: at Rome, a magnificent temple to all the gods.

[33] Stoicism: an ancient Greek philosophical movement that held rigorous virtue as the highest good and sought to subdue emotions through reason.

[34] One of Aristotle's works on logic and metaphysics.

For my part, I consider that a man who can be so given up to foolish jests as altogether to neglect for them his serious and really useful work, is incapable of distinguishing himself in either of these spheres: not in that of serious work, for if he were by nature adapted and suited to dealing with serious matters he would not, I am sure, allow himself to be so easily led away from them; nor yet in that of frivolity, because no one can be master of a fine and clever wit who has not first learnt how to behave seriously.

But I am afraid, gentlemen, that I have been spinning out my speech too long. I will not make excuses for this as I might, lest in excusing it I should aggravate my fault. In a moment we shall shake off the fetters of rhetoric and throw ourselves into comic licence. If in the course of this I outgo by a finger's breadth, as they say, my usual custom and the strict rules of modesty, I beg you, gentlemen, to accept this explanation: it is to give you pleasure that I have put off and for the moment laid aside my usual habit, and if anything I may say is loose or licentious, put it down to the suggestion, not of my real mind and character, but of the needs of the moment and the genius of the place.[35] And so I entreat at the beginning of my entertainment the favour which actors beg at the end of theirs: give me your laughter and applause.

(ii) THE PROLUSION

At a moment when the commonwealth of fools is, as it seems, tottering and on the brink of disaster, I have been made its Dictator, though I know not how I have deserved the honour. Why should the choice fall on me, when that famous leader and commander of all the Sophisters was an eager candidate for the post,[36] and would have fulfilled his duties valiantly; for that seasoned warrior on a previous occasion boldly led some fifty Sophisters, armed with short staves, across Barnwell Field,[37] and, as a step toward laying siege to the town in the approved military style, destroyed the aqueduct, in order to force the townsfolk to surrender through shortage of water. I am deeply distressed at this hero's recent departure, since his going leaves all us Sophisters not merely headless but beheaded.

I ask you now to imagine, gentlemen, although it is not the first of April, that we are celebrating the Hilaria in honour of the Mother of the Gods,[38] or a festival sacred to the god Laughter. Laugh, then, and raise a roar from your saucy lungs, smooth out the wrinkles of your brows, make a long nose if you like, but don't turn it up at anything; let the whole place resound with shouts of mirth, let unbridled hilarity make the tears of merriment flow freely, so that laughter may drain them dry, leaving not a drop to grace the triumph of grief. For my part, if I see anyone not opening his mouth as wide as he should to laugh, I shall say that he is trying to hide teeth which are foul and decayed, and yellow from neglect, or misplaced and projecting, or else that at to-day's feast he has so crammed his belly that he dares not put any extra strain upon it by laughing, for fear that not the Sphinx but his sphincter anus should sing a second part to his mouth's first and accidentally let out some enigmas, which I leave to the doctors instead of to Oedipus to explain.[39] For I should not like the cheerful sound of laughter to be drowned by groans from the posterior in this assembly. I leave it to the doctors, who can loosen the bowels, to loosen up all this. If anyone does not raise his voice loud and clear enough, I shall swear that his breath is so foul and poisonous that the fumes of Etna or Avernus

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[35] The tutelary and controlling spirit connected with a place or person.

[36] Sophist or sophister: someone distinguished in learning; a specious reasoner; also, a Cambridge student in his second or third year.

[37] One of two plots of farmland owned by Cambridge before the Enclosure Acts.

[38] Hilaria: Roman festival in honor of the Magna Mater (or mother of the gods).

[39] The Sphinx was a Theban monster with the head of a woman and the body of a lion, who charged all who passed by to answer her riddle; when people failed she strangled them until finally Oedipus, king of Thebes, gave the correct answer and she committed suicide.

could not be more noisome,[40] or at any rate that he has just been eating onions or leeks so that he dare not open his mouth for fear of making his neighbours choke with his evil-smelling breath. Next, there must be no trace of that dreadful and infernal sound, a hiss, anywhere near this assembly; for if it is heard here to-day, I shall believe that the Furies and Eumenides are skulking somewhere among you,[41] that their snakes and serpents have found their way into your bosoms, and that the madness of Athamas has come upon you.[42]

To be sure, gentlemen, I am quite overcome with wonder and admiration at the favour you have shown me, in forcing your way through flame and fire into this place to hear me speak. For at the very threshold there stands on the one hand our fiery Cerberus barking forth smoke to terrify us,[43] laying about him with his blazing staff, and puffing out mouthfuls of glowing embers. On the other hand that burning and all-consuming Furnace of ours belches forth lurid flames and pours out coiling wreaths of smoke, so that it would be as easy to force one's way past him as to traverse the road to Hades, and that against the will of Pluto; and certainly Jason himself encountered no greater danger in his attempt on the fire-breathing oxen of Mars.[44] But now, gentlemen, you may well believe yourselves to be in heaven, after having passed through purgatory, and come safe and sound out of the fiery furnace by some new miracle. I cannot think of any hero whose valour can fairly be compared with yours; for the renowned Bellerophon showed no greater courage in subduing the fire-vomiting Chimaera,[45] nor did those valiant champions of King Arthur more easily overcome and destroy the enchantments of the flaming, fiery castle. Hence I feel justified in promising myself a choice and select audience; for if any rubbish has passed through the furnaces and penetrated to this place, I can only say that our porters are mere jack-o'-lanterns, or "foolish fires."[46]

But how happy and how secure we are and always shall be! For at Rome it was the custom to guard the eternal fire most carefully and scrupulously, to secure the permanence of the empire; but we are ourselves guarded by living and watchful fires. Living and watchful, did I say? that expression slipped from my tongue unawares, for now that I come to think of it, they go out at the approach of dusk, and only rekindle in broad daylight. Still there is good hope that our House may shine once more, since none would deny that two of the greatest luminaries of the University preside over our college; yet they would not be more highly honoured anywhere than at Rome, for there Vestal Virgins would keep them aglow and awake all night long.[47] Or, it may be, these flaming brothers might be initiated into the seraphic order.[48] Lastly, that half-line of Virgil applies exactly to them, "They have the vital force of fire."[49] Indeed I am inclined to believe that Horace referred to these Lights of ours, for the elder of them, as he stands among his wife and children, "shines among them all, like the moon among lesser lights."[50] But I cannot pass over Ovid's

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[40] Italian volcanoes. Etna is the highest active volcano in Europe and Avernus is a volcanic crater that has become a lake.

[41] Eumenides, also known as Furies, were goddesses of retribution and vengeance; the Greek dramatist Aeschylus (c. 525–456 BC) portrayed them with snake hair.

[42] Athamas, in Greek myth a king who, with his wife Ino, was entrusted with the child Dionysus (son of Zeus and Semele), in revenge for which a jealous Hera drove Athamas and his wife mad.

[43] Cerberus: the monstrous dog with multiple heads who guards the entrance to the classical underworld.

[44] The king of Colchis, assuming the task was impossible, required that Jason yoke two fire-breathing bulls in order to complete his mission and obtain the Golden Fleece.

[45] Hoping the hero would die, King Iobates sent Bellerophon to kill the fire-breathing monster Chimaera; however, mounted on the winged horse Pegasus, Bellerophon was victorious.

[46] Also "ignis fatuus" or "will-o'-the-wisp": a phosphorescent light that glows over marshes.

[47] Six virgin priestesses of the Roman hearth goddess Vesta; it was their duty to maintain their chastity and Vesta's undying fire, which represented the permanence of Rome.

[48] Seraphim, the highest order of angels, were often imagined as fiery beings burning with divine love.

[49] *Aeneid*, VI, 730.

[50] Horace, Quintus Hortius Flaccus (65–8 BC), Roman poet, wrote the *Epodes* c. 30 BC; see *Epodes*, XV, 1–2.

egregious error in saying "No creatures do we know which are born of flame."[51] For we see flitting all around us little Sparks, the off-spring of this Spark of ours. If Ovid denies this, he will necessarily be casting aspersions on their mother's good name.

To return to yourselves, gentlemen. That you may not regret having taken so difficult and dangerous a journey, here is a banquet ready prepared for you! Here are tables decked with all the luxury of Persia and loaded with rarest dainties, fit to delight and captivate the palate of a very Apicius.[52] For it is said that eight whole boars were set before Antony and Cleopatra at a banquet,[53] but behold, before *you* are set, as a first course, fifty fatted boars which have been pickled in beer for three years, and yet are still so tough that they may well tire out even our dog-teeth. Next, the same number of excellent oxen with magnificent tails, just roasted before the door by our fiery servant; only I am afraid all the juice has gone into the dripping-pan. After them come as many calves' heads, fat and fleshy enough, but with so little brains as not to be enough for seasoning. Then again a hundred kids, more or less, but too lean, I think, from over-indulgence in the pleasures of love. We expected a few rams with fine spreading horns, but our cooks have not yet brought them from the town. If anyone prefers birds, we can provide any number of them, long fattened on dough and flour and grated cheese. First of all, a kind of bird as green in character as in plumage, which, I fancy, must have come from the same part of the world as parrots; as they always fly about in flocks and nest in the same place, they will be served up all on one dish. I would advise you to partake of them sparingly, for besides being rather underdone and lacking in solid nutriment, they are apt to produce a rash in those who eat them, if our epicure is right. Now enjoy your feast with a right good will, for here comes a dish which I can most heartily recommend, namely an enormous turkey, so fat and stout after three years' fattening that one vast dish is scarcely big enough for it, and with such a long and horny beak that it could attack an elephant or a rhinoceros with impunity; but we have had it killed for to-day, just at the right moment since it was beginning to be a danger to young girls and to attack women, like the large apes.

This is followed by some Irish birds (of which I do not know the name but which are very like cranes in their gait and lanky figures),[54] though as a rule they are kept for the last course. This is a novel and rare, rather than wholesome dish, and I would therefore warn you not to taste them, for they are very apt, if our epicure is right, to produce lice. I consider that they are more likely to be useful to grooms, for they are naturally lively, spirited, and prancing, so that if they are given as a clyster[55] to lean horses they make them more lively and fleet than they would be even if they had swallowed a dozen live eels.

You see also several geese, some of this year's hatching and some older; they have good loud voices noisier than the frogs of Aristophanes.[56] You will easily recognise them—in fact it is a wonder that they have not already betrayed themselves by hissing, and perhaps you will hear them in a moment.

We have besides a few eggs, but they are "bad eggs." Of fruits we have only apples and medlars, and they are gallows-fruit and are not quite ripe, so that it would be better to hang them up again to ripen in the sun.

You see what we have provided, so I beg you to help yourselves to what you fancy. But I

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[51] Ovid, Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BC—AD 17), Roman poet much admired in the Renaissance; the quotation is from his *Fasti*, VI, 292.

[52] Apicius, gourmet of the reign of Tiberius (AD 14–37), though also a cognomen of several Roman connoisseurs of food.

[53] Marcus Antonius, or Mark Antony (c. 83–31 BC), Roman statesman and general whose infamous romance and grandiose excesses of luxury with Cleopatra (69–30 BC), queen of Egypt, were made legendary by Plutarch and Shakespeare.

[54] The passage enumerating various birds likely alludes to members of the College; here Milton seems to allude to the Irish undergraduates. See Campbell and Corns, *John Milton*, pp. 58–9, for Milton's allusions to College undergraduates.

[55] clyster: enema.

[56] In *The Frogs* by the Athenian comedic playwright Aristophanes (c. 450–386 BC), the patron god of tragedy, Dionysus (disguised as Heracles in order to bring back the dead Euripides), makes a journey in Charon's boat and is accompanied by the croaking of a chorus of frogs.

expect you will say that this banquet, like the nocturnal feasts offered by the devil to witches, is cooked without salt,[57] and I am afraid that you will go away hungrier than you came.

I will now turn to what concerns me more closely. The Romans had their Floralia, the rustics their Palilia, the bakers their Fornacalia,[58] and we too keep the custom of amusing ourselves as Socrates advised, especially at this season when we find ourselves released from cares and business. Now the Inns of Court[59] have their Lords, as they call them, so showing how ambitious they are of rank. But we, gentlemen, in our desire to come as near as may be to paternity, are eager to play in pretence a part which we should not dare really to play unless in secret; even as girls are wont to invent games of weddings and births, striving to catch and hold the shadows of those things for which they long and yearn.

Why this custom should have been neglected last year I cannot imagine, unless it was because those who were to be Fathers had shown such activity in the town that the master of the ceremonies, out of consideration for the labours they had already undergone, voluntarily excused them this duty.

But, I ask, how does it happen that I have so quickly become a Father? Good heavens, what a prodigy this is, more astonishing than any recorded by Pliny![60] Have I slain some serpent and incurred the fate of Tiresias?[61] Has some Thessalian witch poured magic ointment over me?[62] Or have I been violated by some god, like Caeneus of old,[63] and won my manhood as the price of my dishonour, that I should be thus suddenly changed from woman into man? Some of late called me "the Lady."[64] But why do I seem to them too little of a man? Have they no regard for Priscian?[65] Do these bungling grammarians attribute to the feminine gender what is proper to the masculine, like this? It is, I suppose, because I have never brought myself to toss off great bumpers like a prize-fighter, or because my hand has never grown horny with driving the plough, or because I was never a farm hand at seven or laid myself down full length in the midday sun; or last perhaps because I never showed my virility in the way these brothellers do. But I wish they could leave playing the ass as readily as I the woman.

But see how stupid and ill-advised they are to reproach me with a thing upon which I can most justly pride myself. For Demosthenes himself was said to be too little of a man by his rivals and opponents. Hortensius also, the most eminent orator after Cicero, was called by Torquatus Dionysia the lyre-player.[66] His reply was, "I would rather be Dionysia indeed than a man without taste, culture, or urbanity, like you, Torquatus." (But indeed as to any such nick-name as "Lord" or "Lady" I utterly reject and repudiate it; for, gentlemen, it is only in your courts and on your platforms that I have any ambition to lord it.) Who will forbid me to rejoice at so auspicious and happy an omen, and to exult at sharing a

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[57] A Miltonic pun: "sal" the Latin for "salt" also means "wit."

[58] Roman Festivals: Floralia celebrated Flora, goddess of flowers and cereals, and her Games included indecent farces; Palilia honored Pales, goddess of sheepfolds and pastures; Fornacalia honored the goddess Fornax, who presided over ovens and bread baking. Fornacalia was also called the fool's festival according to Ovid (*Fasti* II, 531–2).

[59] A legal organization that functioned as a college, a dormitory, club, and guild for law students in London.

[60] Pliny the Elder (c. AD 23–79) wrote an encyclopedic natural history in thirty-seven volumes; some entries were quite fantastical.

[61] In Greek mythology, Tiresias was turned into a woman after he saw copulating snakes and killed one of them; when the same thing happened again, he changed back into a man.

[62] Thessalians, from Northern Greece, were thought to be heavily involved in magic; their witchcraft is described by Lucan (*Pharsalia 6*) and later in Apuleius' novel, *The Golden Ass*.

[63] Originally the girl Caenis who was loved by the god Poseidon; he then turned her into an invulnerable young man.

[64] Milton's fellow students teased him about his fair complexion and gave him the nickname "the Lady of Christ's College." The nickname likely recalls the *Vita Donati*, one of the ancient lives of the Roman poet Virgil whose author (Aelius Donatus) claims Virgil was "called the Lady" as a student because of his exemplary moral conduct; see Campbell and Corns, *Life of Milton*, p. 60.

[65] A late Latin grammarian who wrote two authoritative and comprehensive books on teaching Latin commonly used in the Middle Ages.

[66] Hortensius' flamboyant, ornate rhetorical style won him the name of Dionysia, a well-known dancer and citharist of the day.

reproach aimed at such great men? In the meantime, as I consider all good and excellent men to be above envy, even so I hold these spiteful fellows to be so far beneath all others that those who revile them are unworthy. And so I take up my *rôle* of Father and address myself to my sons, of whom I perceive a goodly number, and I see that the jolly rascals acknowledge me as their father by a furtive nod.

Do you ask their names? I should not like my sons to be given the names of various dishes, and to furnish forth a banquet for you, for that would be too like the savagery of Tantalus and Lycaon[67]; and I will not give them the names of the parts of the body, lest you should think me the father of so many bits of men instead of whole ones; nor do I fancy calling them after the various kinds of meat, lest in my remarks I should not keep to my muttons, as the proverb says. No, I will have them called after the Predicaments of Aristotle,[68] to indicate the nobility of their birth and the liberality of their habits; and I shall take good care, too, that all of them are promoted to some degree before I die.

As for my jokes, I don't want them to have no bite in them, or you may well say they are hackneyed and stale, and that some wheezy old woman has spat them out. At the same time I do not think that anyone will accuse my jokes of being too biting, unless he has no teeth himself and finds fault with them because they are not like his own. Certainly on this occasion I could wish that my lot were the same as Horace's, and that I were a fishmonger's son,[69] for then I should have just the right amount of salt, and I should send you all off so nicely pickled that you would be as sick of salt water as were those soldiers of ours who lately managed to escape from the island of Ré.[70]

I want to avoid being heavily sententious in my advice to you, my sons, so as not to seem to have taken more pains in educating than in begetting you. Only take care you do not turn prodigal sons, and mind you all keep off Bass,[71] or I will disown you as bastards. Any other advice I may have to offer had best be given in our native language; and I will do my utmost to make my meaning plain.

For the rest, I must pray to Neptune, Apollo, Vulcan, and all the artificer-gods,[72] to strengthen my ribs with wooden supports or to bind them round with iron plates. And I must beseech the goddess Ceres also, who gave Pelops a shoulder-blade of ivory,[73] to be so good as to repair my sides, which are nearly worn out, in a similar way. It is not surprising that after so much shouting and after begetting so many sons they are rather the worse for wear.

I have "dallied" (in the Neronian sense of the word)[74] more than long enough over these things. Now I will overleap the University Statutes as if they were the wall of Romulus and run off from Latin into English.[75] Lend me attentive ears and minds, you whom such things amuse.

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[67] Both Greek kings were guilty of serving human sacrifices to the gods. According to one myth, Tantalus invited the gods to dinner and served his son's flesh; Lycaon sacrificed a newborn child to Zeus and, according to other sources, entertained Zeus at a feast at which he offered the god human flesh to test his divinity.

[68] There are ten predicaments or categories of being according to Aristotle: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, action, passion, posture, and habit.

[69] The poet Horace's father was a freed slave, not necessarily a fishmonger as Milton suggests.

[70] A reference to the unsuccessful naval expedition led by George Villiers, first duke of Buckingham, in 1627 to assist the persecuted French Protestants (Huguenots).

[71] A popular brand of beer in England. The original Latin refers to wine; but since it is not possible to sustain Milton's original pun on *Liber* (i.e., "wine") and *liberi* (i.e., "children"), "Bass" seems an acceptable solution.

[72] These three gods were credited with various marvelous inventions and creations; Vulcan the god of fire, for example, patronized artists working in iron and other metals.

[73] After the gods discovered that Tantalus attempted to feed them his son in a stew, they restored the boy's life; however, Ceres accidentally ate part of his shoulder during the feast, so she gave him an ivory prosthesis.

[74] Neronian: belonging to the time of the emperor Nero's reign in Rome (AD 54–68). In the original, Milton employs a Latin pun on the word *mŏrari*, which means "to delay," but which when pronounced with a long "o" (i.e., *mōrari*) also means "to play the fool."

[75] Romulus and his twin brother Remus were the founders of Rome; Romulus built the wall around the initial settlement and had Remus executed for leaping over it.

Prolusion VII

DELIVERED IN THE COLLEGE CHAPEL IN DEFENCE OF LEARNING AN ORATION

Learning brings more Blessings to Men than Ignorance

Although, gentlemen, nothing could give me greater pleasure and satisfaction than your presence here, than this eager crowd in cap and gown, or than the honourable office of speaker, which I have already once or twice discharged before you gladly enough, I must, to be candid, confess that I scarcely ever undertake these speeches of my own free will; even though my own disposition and the trend of my studies make no impediment. In fact, if the choice had been offered me, I could well have dispensed with this evening's task. For I have learnt from the writings and sayings of wise men that nothing common or mediocre can be tolerated in an orator any more than in a poet, and that he who would be an orator in reality as well as by repute must first acquire a thorough knowledge of all the arts and sciences to form a complete background to his own calling. Since however this is impossible at my age, I would rather endeavour truly to deserve that reputation by long and concentrated study and by the preliminary acquisition of that background, than snatch at a false repute by a premature and hastily acquired eloquence.

Afire and aglow with these plans and notions, I found that there was no more serious hindrance or obstacle than the loss of time caused by these constant interruptions, while nothing better promoted the development and well-being of the mind, contrary to what is the case with the body, than a cultured and liberal leisure. This I believe to be the meaning of Hesiod's[76] holy sleep and Endymion's nightly meetings with the moon;[77] this was the significance of Prometheus' withdrawal, under the guidance of Mercury, to the lofty solitude of the Caucasus, where at last he became the wisest of gods and men, so that his advice was sought by Jupiter himself concerning the marriage of Thetis.[78] I can myself call to witness the woods and rivers and the beloved village elms,[79] under whose shade I enjoyed in the summer just passed

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[76] One of the earliest known Greek poets, Hesiod (c. 700 BC) tended sheep on Mount Helicon, which was sacred to the Muses, who inspired him to become a poet and sing of the gods (*Theogony* 22–3).

[77] In Greek myth, the moon-goddess, Selene, fell in love with Endymion, a beautiful young man, and visited him in the night while he was sleeping in a cave on Mount Latmus.

[78] Mercury took the Titan Prometheus to Mount Caucasus; he was gifted with prophecy, and consulted as an oracle by the gods. For refusing to tell Zeus the secret of the goddess Thetis' marriage, Prometheus was chained to a lonely rock in the Caucasus; there a vulture daily devoured his liver until he was freed by Heracles.

[79] Milton himself relished periods of studious retirement; from 1632 to 1638 he retired, with his family, to the villages of Hammersmith and Horton (outside London) in order to pursue his private studies.

(if I may tell the secrets of goddesses) such sweet intercourse with the Muses,[80] as I still remember with delight. There I too, amid rural scenes and woodland solitudes, felt that I had enjoyed a season of growth in a life of seclusion.

I might indeed have hoped to find here also the same opportunity for retirement, had not the distressing task of speaking been unseasonably imposed upon me. This so cruelly deprived me of my holy slumbers, so tormented my mind, intent upon other things, and so hindered and hampered me in the hard and arduous pursuit of learning, that I gave up all hope of finding any peace and began sadly to think how far removed I was from that tranquillity which learning had at first promised me, how hard my life was like to be amid this turmoil and agitation, and that all attempts to pursue Learning had best be abandoned. And so, almost beside myself, I rashly determined on singing the praise of Ignorance, since that was not subject to these disturbances, and I proposed as the theme of dispute the question whether Art or Ignorance bestowed greater blessings on its devotees. I know not how it is, but somehow either my destiny or my disposition forbade me to give up my old devotion to the Muses; indeed, blind chance itself seemed of a sudden to be endowed with prudence and foresight and to join in the prohibition. Sooner than I could have expected, Ignorance had found her champion, and the defence of Learning devolved on me. I am delighted thus to have been played with, and am not ashamed to confess that I owe the restoration of my sight to Fortune, who is herself blind.[81] For this she deserves my gratitude. Now I may at any rate be permitted to sing the praises of Learning, from whose embrace I have been torn, and as it were assuage my longing for the absent beloved by speaking of her. This can now hardly be called an interruption, for who would regard it as an interruption when he is called upon to praise or defend the object of his affection, his admiration, and his deepest desire?

But, gentlemen, it is my opinion that the power of eloquence is most manifest when it deals with subjects which rouse no particular enthusiasm. Those which most stir our admiration can hardly be compassed within the bounds of a speech: the very abundance of material is a drawback, and the multiplicity of subjects narrows and confines the swelling stream of eloquence. I am now suffering from this excess of material: that which should be my strength makes me weak, and that which should be my defence makes me defenceless. So I must make my choice, or at least mention only in passing rather than discuss at length the numerous arguments on whose powerful support our cause relies for its defence and security. On this occasion it seems to me that my efforts must be directed entirely to showing how and to what extent Learning and Ignorance respectively promote that happiness which is the aim of every one of us. With this question I shall easily deal in my speech, nor need I be over-anxious about what objections Folly may bring against Knowledge, or Ignorance against Learning. Yet the very ability of Ignorance to raise any objection, to make a speech, or even to open her lips in this great and learned assembly, she has received as a favour, or rather an alms, from Learning.

It is, I think, a belief familiar and generally accepted that the great Creator of the world, while constituting all else fleeting and perishable, infused into man, besides what was mortal, a certain divine spirit, a part of Himself, as it were, which is immortal, imperishable, and exempt from death and extinction. After wandering about upon the earth for some time, like some heavenly visitant, in holiness and righteousness, this spirit was to take its flight upward to the heaven whence it had come and to return once more to the abode and home which was its birthright. It follows that nothing can be reckoned as a cause of our happiness which does not somehow take into account both that everlasting

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[80] See Prolusion VI, note 15.

[81] Fortune was the inconstant goddess of antiquity who bestowed her favors at random; she was often depicted as a goddess wearing a blindfold who turned the wheel of men's fortunes.

life and our ordinary life here on earth. This eternal life, as almost everyone admits, is to be found in contemplation alone, by which the mind is uplifted, without the aid of the body, and gathered within itself so that it attains, to its inexpressible joy, a life akin to that of the immortal gods. But without Art the mind is fruitless, joyless, and altogether null and void. For who can worthily gaze upon and contemplate the Ideas of things[82] human or divine, unless he possesses a mind trained and ennobled by Learning and study, without which he can know practically nothing of them: for indeed every approach to the happy life seems barred to the man who has no part in Learning. God would indeed seem to have endowed us to no purpose, or even to our distress, with this soul which is capable and indeed insatiably desirous of the highest wisdom, if he had not intended us to strive with all our might toward the lofty understanding of those things, for which he had at our creation instilled so great a longing into the human mind. Survey from every angle the entire aspect of these things and you will perceive that the great Artificer of this mighty fabric established it for His own glory. The more deeply we delve into the wondrous wisdom, the marvellous skill, and the astounding variety of its creation (which we cannot do without the aid of Learning), the greater grows the wonder and awe we feel for its Creator and the louder the praises we offer Him, which we believe and are fully persuaded that He delights to accept. Can we indeed believe, my hearers, that the vast spaces of boundless air are illuminated and adorned with everlasting lights, that these are endowed with such rapidity of motion and pass through such intricate revolutions, merely to serve as a lantern for base and slothful men, and to light the path of the idle and the sluggard here below? Do we perceive no purpose in the luxuriance of fruit and herb beyond the short-lived beauty of verdure? Of a truth, if we are so little able to appraise their value that we make no effort to go beyond the crass perceptions of the senses, we shall show ourselves not merely servile and abject, but ungracious and wicked before the goodness of God; for by our unresponsiveness and grudging spirit He is deprived of much of the glory which is His due, and of the reverence which His mighty power exacts. If then Learning is our guide and leader in the search after happiness, if it is ordained and approved by almighty God, and most conformable to His glory, surely it cannot but bring the greatest blessings upon those who follow after it.

I am well aware, gentlemen, that this contemplation, by which we strive to reach the highest goal, cannot partake of true happiness unless it is conjoined with integrity of life and uprightness of character. I know, too, that many men eminent for learning have been of bad character, and slaves to anger, hatred, and evil passions, while on the other hand many utterly ignorant men have shown themselves righteous and just. What of it? Does it follow that Ignorance is more blessed? By no means. For the truth is, gentlemen, that though the corrupt morals of their country and the evil communications of the illiterate have in some instances lured into wicked courses a few men distinguished for their learning, yet the influence of a single wise and prudent man has often kept loyal to their duty a large number of men who lacked the advantages of Learning. And indeed a single household, even a single individual, endowed with the gifts of Art and Wisdom, may often prove to be a great gift of God, and sufficient to lead a whole state to righteousness. But where no Arts flourish, where all scholarship is banished, there you will find no single trace of a good man, but savagery and barbarity stalk abroad. As instances of this I adduce no one country, province, or race alone, but Europe itself, forming as it does one fourth of the entire globe. Throughout this continent a few hundred years ago all the noble arts had perished and the Muses had deserted all the universities of the day, over which they had long presided; blind illiteracy had penetrated and entrenched itself

[82] An allusion to Plato's world of Ideas or ideally perfected forms (of things). Ideas are eternal and unvarying, in contrast to objects of this world which are forever changing and an imperfect reflection of the world of Ideas.

everywhere, nothing was heard in the schools but the absurd doctrines of drivelling monks, and that profane and hideous monster, Ignorance, assumed the gown and lorded it on our empty platforms and pulpits and in our deserted professorial chairs. Then Piety went in mourning, and Religion sickened and flagged, so that only after prolonged suffering, and hardly even to this very day, has she recovered from her grievous wound.[83]

But, gentlemen, it is, I believe, an established maxim of philosophy that the cognisance of every art and science appertains to the Intellect only and that the home and sanctuary of virtue and uprightness is the Will. But all agree that while the human Intellect shines forth as the lord and governor of all the other faculties, it guides and illuminates with its radiance the Will also, which would else be blind, and the Will shines with a borrowed light, even as the moon does. So, even though we grant and willingly concede that Virtue without Learning is more conducive to happiness than Learning without Virtue, yet when these two are once wedded in happy union as they surely ought to be, and often are, then indeed Knowledge raises her head aloft and shows herself far superior, and shining forth takes her seat on high beside the king and governor, Intellect, and gazes upon the doings of the Will below as upon some object lying far beneath her feet; and thereafter for evermore she claims as her right all excellence and splendour and a majesty next to that of God Himself.

Let us now leave these heights to consider our ordinary life, and see what advantages Learning and Ignorance respectively can offer in private and in public life. I will say nothing of the argument that Learning is the fairest ornament of youth, the strong defence of manhood, and the glory and solace of age. Nor will I mention that many men highly honoured in their day, and even some of the greatest men of ancient Rome, after performing many noble deeds and winning great glory by their exploits, turned from the strife and turmoil of ambition to the study of literature as into a port and welcome refuge.[84] Clearly these honoured sages realised that the best part of the life which yet remained to them must be spent to the best advantage. They were first among men; they wished by virtue of these arts to be not the last among the gods. They had once striven for glory, and now strove for immortality. Their warfare against the foes of their country had been far other, but now that they were facing death, the greatest enemy of mankind, these were the weapons they took up, these the legions they enrolled, and these the resources from which they derived their strength.

But the chief part of human happiness is derived from the society of one's fellows and the formation of friendships, and it is often asserted that the learned are as a rule hard to please, lacking in courtesy, odd in manner, and seldom gifted with the gracious address that wins men's hearts. I admit that a man who is almost entirely absorbed and immersed in study finds it much easier to converse with gods than with men, either because he habitually associates with the gods but is unaccustomed to human affairs and a stranger among them, or because the mind, expanding through constant meditation on things divine and therefore feeling cramped within the narrow limits of the body, is less expert in the nicer formalities of social life. But if such a man once forms a worthy and congenial friendship, there is none who cultivates it more assiduously. For what can we imagine more delightful and happy than those conversations of learned and wise men, such as those which the divine Plato is said often to have held in the shade of that famous plane-tree,[85] conversations which all mankind might well have

[83] Milton describes, negatively, the influence of the Roman Catholic church and "monkishness" on European culture and religion during the Middle Ages and before the Protestant Reformation began to transform the religious landscape of Europe.

[84] Milton refers to the classical pursuit of glory by means of warfare; "Cato the Censor" (234–149 BC) is an example of a prominent cultured Roman who turned from military pursuits to intellectual and literary ones, including writing the first historical work in Latin and a treatise on agriculture.

[85] A reference to the plane-tree (on the banks of the river Ilissus outside Athens) under which Socrates and his friend Phaedrus conduct their conversation in Plato's famous dialogue *Phaedrus*.

flocked to hear in spell-bound silence? But gross talk and mutual incitement to indulge in luxury and lust is the friendship of ignorance, or rather the ignorance of friendship.

Moreover if this human happiness consists in the honourable and liberal joys of the mind, such a pleasure is to be found in Study and Learning as far surpasses every other. What a thing it is to grasp the nature of the whole firmament and of its stars, all the movements and changes of the atmosphere, whether it strikes terror into ignorant minds by the majestic roll of thunder or by fiery comets, or whether it freezes into snow or hail, or whether again it falls softly and gently in showers of dew; then perfectly to understand the shifting winds and all the exhalations and vapours which earth and sea give forth; next to know the hidden virtues of plants and metals and understand the nature and the feelings, if that may be, of every living creature; next the delicate structure of the human body and the art of keeping it in health; and, to crown all, the divine might and power of the soul, and any knowledge we may have gained concerning those beings which we call spirits and genii and daemons.[86] There is an infinite number of subjects besides these, a great part of which might be learnt in less time than it would take to enumerate them all. So at length, my hearers, when universal learning has once completed its cycle, the spirit of man, no longer confined within this dark prison-house, will reach out far and wide, till it fills the whole world and the space far beyond with the expansion of its divine greatness. Then at last most of the chances and changes of the world will be so quickly perceived that to him who holds this stronghold of wisdom hardly anything can happen in his life which is unforeseen or fortuitous. He will indeed seem to be one whose rule and dominion the stars obey, to whose command earth and sea hearken, and whom winds and tempests serve; to whom, lastly, Mother Nature herself has surrendered, as if indeed some god had abdicated the throne of the world and entrusted its rights, laws, and administration to him as governor.[87]

Besides this, what delight it affords to the mind to take its flight through the history and geography of every nation and to observe the changes in the conditions of kingdoms, races, cities, and peoples, to the increase of wisdom and righteousness. This, my hearers, is to live in every period of the world's history, and to be as it were coeval with time itself. And indeed, while we look to the future for the glory of our name, this will be to extend and stretch our lives backward before our birth, and to wrest from grudging Fate a kind of retrospective immortality. I pass over a pleasure with which none can compare—to be the oracle of many nations, to find one's home regarded as a kind of temple, to be a man whom kings and states invite to come to them, whom men from near and far flock to visit, while to others it is a matter for pride if they have but set eyes on him once. These are the rewards of study, these are the prizes which learning can and often does bestow upon her votaries in private life.[88]

What, then, of public life? It is true that few have been raised to the height of majesty through a reputation for learning, and not many more through a reputation for uprightness. Such men certainly enjoy a kingdom in themselves far more glorious than any earthly dominion; and who can lay claim to a twofold sovereignty without incurring the charge of ambition? I will, however, add this one thing more: that there have hitherto been but two men who have ruled the whole world, as by divine right, and shared

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[86] "spirit" and "genius" refer to supernatural spirits or powers that, in Roman religion and culture, protect, oversee, or control places, households, and people. "Daemon" (from the Greek, "divine spirit"): a spirit or supernatural power that either protects or brings harm to mortals.

[87] In his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486), the Italian humanist Pico della Mirandola had argued that man could achieve angelic powers by means of philosophy, learning, and wisdom; cf., Prospero, the poet as Renaissance *magus*, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

[88] See Milton's retiring, studious, and contemplative Il Penseroso who yearns to "attain / To somthing like Prophetic strain" ("Il Penseroso," lines 173–4).

an empire over all kings and princes equal to that of the gods themselves; namely Alexander the Great and Augustus, both of whom were students of philosophy.[89] It is as though Providence had specially singled them out as examples to humanity, to show to what sort of man the helm or reins of government should be entrusted.

But, it may be objected, many nations have won fame by their deeds or their wealth, without owing anything to learning. We know of but few Spartans, for example, who took any interest in liberal education, and the Romans only admitted philosophy within the walls of their city after a long time. But the Spartans found a lawgiver in Lycurgus,[90] who was both a philosopher and so ardent a student of poetry that he was the first to gather together with extreme care the writings of Homer, which were scattered throughout Ionia.[91] The Romans, hardly able to support themselves after the various risings and disturbances which had taken place in the city, sent ambassadors to beg for the Decemviral Laws, also called the Twelve Tables, from Athens, which was at that time foremost in the study of the liberal Arts.[92]

How are we to answer the objection that the Turks of to-day have acquired an extensive dominion over the wealthy kingdoms of Asia[93] in spite of being entirely devoid of culture? For my part, I have certainly never heard of anything in that state which deserves to be regarded as an example to us—if indeed one should dignify with the name of "state" the power which a horde of utter barbarians united by complicity in crime has seized by violence and murder. The provision of the necessaries of life, and their maintenance when acquired, we owe not to Art but to Nature; greedy attacks on the property of others, mutual assistance for purposes of plunder, and criminal conspiracy are the outcome of the perversion of Nature. Some kind of justice indeed is exercised in such states, as might be expected; for while the other virtues are easily put to flight, Justice from her throne compels homage, for without her even the most unjust states would soon fall into decay. I must not, however, omit to mention that the Saracens,[94] to whom the Turks are indebted almost for their existence, enlarged their empire as much by the study of liberal culture as by force of arms.

If we go back to antiquity, we shall find that some states owed not merely their laws but their very foundation to culture. The oldest progenitors of every race are said to have wandered through the woods and mountains, seeking their livelihood after the fashion of wild beasts, with head erect but stooping posture. One might well think that they shared everything with the animals, except the dignity of their form; the same caves, the same dens, afforded them shelter from rain and frost. There were then no cities, no marble palaces, no shining altars or temples of the gods; they had no religion to guide them, no laws or law-courts, no bridal torches, no festal dance, no song at the joyful board, no funeral rites, no mourning, hardly even a grave paid honour to the dead. There were no feasts, no games; no sound of music was ever heard: all these refinements were then lacking which idleness now misuses to foster luxury. Then of a sudden the Arts and Sciences breathed their divine breath into the savage breasts of men, and instilling into them the knowledge of themselves, gently drew them to dwell together within the walls of cities. Therefore of a surety cities may well expect to have a long and happy history under the

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[89] Alexander the Great: King of Macedonia (*356–323* BC) and greatest general of antiquity was taught by the philosopher Aristotle before he went on to conquer vast territory, including Persia, Egypt, and India. Augustus: see note 29 to Prolusion VI.

[90] The Spartans were famous in antiquity for their military prowess; Lycurgus was the legendary founder of Sparta's legal system and military and social systems.

[91] A region of ancient Greece on the West coast of Asia Minor.

[92] The Roman plebeians (common people) sought to end the oppressive legal monopoly of the patricians (ruling families or clans) and the priests; ten men ("decemvirs") were elected to create statutes for the good of the people in 451 BC. They collected legal codes from Athens and wrote the Twelve Tables, which became the early foundations of Roman law.

[93] Referring to the Ottoman Empire which included Asia Minor.

[94] Nomadic Muslims of the Syrian and Arabian desert.

direction of those guides by whom they were first of all founded, then firmly based on laws, and finally fortified by wise counsels.

What now of Ignorance? I perceive, gentlemen, that Ignorance is struck blind and senseless, skulks at a distance, casts about for a way of escape, and complains that life is short and Art long. But if we do but remove two great obstacles to our studies, namely first our bad methods of teaching the Arts, and secondly our lack of enthusiasm, we shall find that, with all deference to Galen[95] or whoever may have been the author of the saying, quite the contrary is the truth, and that life is long and Art short. There is nothing so excellent and at the same time so exacting as Art, nothing more sluggish and languid than ourselves. We allow ourselves to be outdone by labourers and husbandmen in working after dark and before dawn; they show greater energy in a mean occupation, to gain a miserable livelihood, than we do in the noblest of occupations, to win a life of true happiness. Though we aspire to the highest and best of human conditions we can endure neither hard work nor yet the reproach of idleness; in fact we are ashamed of owning the very character which we hate not to have imputed to us.

But, we object, our health forbids late hours and hard study. It is a shameful admission that we neglect to cultivate our minds out of consideration for our bodies, whose health all should be ready to impair if thereby their minds might gain the more. Yet those who make this excuse are certainly for the most part worthless fellows; for though they disregard every consideration of their time, their talents, and their health, and give themselves up to gluttony, to drinking like whales, and to spending their nights in gaming and debauchery, they never complain that they are any the worse for it. Since, then, it is their constant habit and practice to show eagerness and energy in the pursuit of vice, but listlessness and lethargy where any activity of virtue or intelligence is concerned, they cannot lay the blame on Nature or the shortness of life with any show of truth or justice. But if we were to set ourselves to live modestly and temperately, and to tame the first impulses of headstrong youth by reason and steady devotion to study, keeping the divine vigour of our minds unstained and uncontaminated by any impurity or pollution, we should be astonished to find, gentlemen, looking back over a period of years, how great a distance we had covered and across how wide a sea of learning we had sailed, without a check on our voyage.

This voyage, too, will be much shortened if we know how to select branches of learning that are useful, and what is useful within them. In the first place, how many despicable quibbles there are in grammar and rhetoric! One may hear the teachers of them talking sometimes like savages and sometimes like babies. What about logic? That is indeed the queen of the Arts, if taught as it should be, but unfortunately how much foolishness there is in reason! Its teachers are not like men at all, but like finches which live on thorns and thistles. "O iron stomachs of the harvesters!"[96] What am I to say of that branch of learning which the Peripatetics[97] call metaphysics? It is not, as the authority of great men would have me believe, an exceedingly rich Art; it is, I say, not an Art at all, but a sinister rock, a Lernian bog of fallacies,[98] devised to cause shipwreck and pestilence. These are the wounds, to which I have already referred, which the ignorance of gownsmen inflicts; and this monkish disease has already infected natural philosophy to a considerable extent; the mathematicians too are afflicted with a longing for the petty triumph of demonstrative

[95] The famous Greek physician and polymath (129–c. 199 AD) whose medical texts and anatomical studies became a foundation of early modern medicine; he also wrote about philosophy and mathematics, and his complete works totaled about three hundred volumes.

[96] Horace, *Epodes*, III, 4; see also note 50 to Prolusion VI.

[97] Peripatetics: Aristotle's school of philosophers and his followers.

[98] The second labor of Hercules was to kill the Hydra, a monster with multiple heads that lived in the bog of Lerna near Argos. Each time he cut off one head, another grew in its place, much like, Milton suggests, the erroneous schools of learning based on Aristotle.

rhetoric. If we disregard and curtail all these subjects, which can be of no use to us, as we should, we shall be surprised to find how many whole years we shall save. Jurisprudence in particular suffers much from our confused methods of teaching, and from what is even worse, a jargon which one might well take for some Red Indian dialect, or even no human speech at all. Often, when I have heard our lawyers shouting at each other in this lingo, it has occured to me to wonder whether men who had neither a human tongue nor human speech could have any human feelings either. I do indeed fear that sacred Justice will pay no attention to us and that she will never understand our complaints and wrongs, as she cannot speak our language.

Therefore, gentlemen, if from our childhood onward we never allow a day to pass by without its lesson and diligent study, if we are wise enough to rule out of every art what is irrelevant, superfluous, or unprofitable, we shall assuredly, before we have attained the age of Alexander the Great, have made ourselves masters of something greater and more glorious than that world of his. And so far from complaining of the shortness of life and the slowness of Art, I think we shall be more likely to weep and wail, as Alexander did, because there are no more worlds for us to conquer.

Ignorance is breathing her last, and you are now watching her final efforts and her dying struggle. She declares that glory is mankind's most powerful incentive, and that whereas a long succession and course of years has bestowed glory on the illustrious men of old, we live under the shadow of the world's old age and decrepitude, and of the impending dissolution of all things,[99] so that even if we leave behind us anything deserving of everlasting fame, the scope of our glory is narrowed, since there will be few succeeding generations to remember us. It is therefore to no purpose that we produce so many books and noble monuments of learning, seeing that the approaching conflagration of the world will destroy them all. I do not deny that this may indeed be so; but yet to have no thought of glory when we do well is above all glory. The ancients could indeed derive no satisfaction from the empty praise of men, seeing that no joy or knowledge of it could reach them when they were dead and gone. But we may hope for an eternal life, which will never allow the memory of the good deeds we performed on earth to perish; in which, if we have done well here, we shall ourselves be present to hear our praise; and in which, according to a wise philosophy held by many, those who have lived temperately and devoted all their time to noble arts, and have thus been of service to mankind, will be rewarded by the bestowal of a wisdom matchless and supreme over all others.

Let the idle now cease to upbraid us with the uncertainties and perplexities of learning, which are indeed the fault not so much of learning as of the frailty of man. It is this consideration, gentlemen, which disproves or mitigates or compensates for Socrates' famous ignorance and the Sceptics' timid suspension of judgment.[100]

And finally, we may well ask, what is the happiness which Ignorance promises? To enjoy what one possesses, to have no enemies, to be beyond the reach of all care and trouble, to pass one's life in peace and quiet so far as may be—this is but the life of a beast, or of some bird which builds its little nest in the farthest depths of the forest as near to the sky as it can, in security, rears its offspring, flits about in search of sustenance without fear of the fowler, and pours forth its sweet melodies at dawn and dusk. Why should one ask for that divine activity of the mind in addition? Well, if such is the argument, we will offer Ignorance Circe's cup,[101] and bid her throw off

[99] In Milton's age the topic of the decay of nature and the world had been examined by George Hakewill in *An Apologie of the Power of God in the Government of the World* (1627); see also Milton's Latin poem of 1628, "Naturam non Pati Senium" ("That Nature is Not Subject to Decay").

[100] Plato's Socrates insisted that his wisdom was his awareness of his own ignorance; the Sceptics refused dogmatism and suspended judgment on everything.

[101] In Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus' men landed on her island on their way home from Troy, Circe turned them into pigs with a magical potion. See also Milton's *A Maske* (1634), lines 50–3.

her human shape, walk no longer erect, and betake her to the beasts. To the beasts, did I say? they will surely refuse to receive so infamous a guest, at any rate if they are either endowed with some kind of inferior reasoning power, as many maintain, or guided by some powerful instinct, enabling them to practise the Arts, or something resembling the Arts, among themselves. For Plutarch tells us that in the pursuit of game, dogs show some knowledge of dialectic, and if they chance to come to cross-roads, they obviously make use of a disjunctive syllogism.[102] Aristotle points out that the nightingale in some sort instructs her offspring in the principles of music.[103] Almost every animal is its own physician, and many of them have given valuable lessons in medicine to man; the Egyptian ibis teaches us the value of purgatives, the hippopotamus that of blood-letting.[104] Who can maintain that creatures which so often give us warning of coming wind, rain, floods, or fair weather, know nothing of astronomy? What prudent and strict ethics are shown by those geese which check their dangerous loquacity by holding pebbles in their beaks as they fly over Mount Taurus! Our domestic economy owes much to the ants, our commonwealth to the bees, while military science admits its indebtedness to the cranes for the practice of posting sentinels and for the triangular formation in battle.[105] The beasts are too wise to admit Ignorance to their fellowship and society; they will force her to a lower station. What then? To stocks and stones? Why even trees, bushes, and whole woods once tore up their roots and hurried to hear the skilful strains of Orpheus.[106] Often, too, they were endowed with mysterious powers and uttered divine oracles, as for instance did the oaks of Dodona.[107] Rocks, too, show a certain aptitude for learning in that they reply to the sacred words of poets; will not these also reject Ignorance? Therefore, driven lower than any kind of beast, lower than stocks and stones, lower than any natural species, will Ignorance be permitted to find repose in the famous "non-existent" of the Epicureans?[108] No, not even there; for Ignorance must be something yet worse, yet more vile, yet more wretched, in a word the very depth of degradation.

I come now to you, my clever hearers, for even without any words of mine I see in you not so much arguments on my side as darts which I shall hurl at Ignorance till she is slain. I have sounded the attack, do you rush into battle; put this enemy to flight, drive her from your porticos and walks. If you allow her to exist, you yourselves will be that which you know to be the most wretched thing in the world. This cause is the personal concern of you all. So, if I have perchance spoken at much greater length than is customary in this place, not forgetting that this was demanded by the importance of the subject, you will, I hope, pardon me, my judges, since it is one more proof of the interest I feel in you, of my zeal on your behalf, and of the nights of toil and wakefulness I consented to endure for your sakes. I have done.

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[102] Plutarch (c. AD 46–c. 120), Greek biographer, historian, and moral philosopher, describes the reasoning powers of dogs and their use of dialectic in his *Moralia*.

[103] See *Historia Animalium* (IV, ix, 536[b]).

[104] See Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II, 1, or Pliny, *Natural History*, VIII, xl–xli.

[105] Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II, xlix (on cranes), or Pliny, *Natural History*, X, xxx (on cranes), XI, iii (on bees), XI, xxxvi (on ants), VIII, xlii (on animals predicting weather).

[106] See note 13 to Prolusion VI; among Milton's early Latin verses, see also *Elegy VI*, line 70, and *Ad Patrem*, line 52.

[107] Dodona was the temple of Zeus and reputedly the oldest Greek oracle (mentioned in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*), which spoke through the rustling of the leaves of the sacred oaks or the doves in their branches.

[108] Epicurus (341–270 BC) was an ancient Athenian moral and natural philosopher, who believed that atoms composed all existing things, that nothing could come from nothing, and that the highest good was freedom from pain (caused by unsatisfied desire) and to secure a happy life, including the pleasure and tranquility of the soul.