

## “Lycidas”: Milton’s Growth in Critique

By Erin Lewis

Erin Lewis graduated in the year 2021 with a B.A. in English. Currently, they work as a Technical Writer in Aerospace and plan to continue writing within this field. What originally drew them to Milton was the description of the flowers in “Lycidas”. The first time they read these gorgeous lines, Erin wanted to explore the meaning of natural beauty being created and destroyed. They were later given the opportunity to explore this interest during their Capstone assignment. What began as studying flowers evolved into studying how a man cleverly and purposefully critiqued the Church using something that resonated with the congregation deeply: pastoral elegies.

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Before the publication of “Lycidas,” Milton’s loyalty to the Church began to fade after King Charles’ ascendancy. This was due to the Caroline ecclesiastical polity and their violent tendencies for regulation. Moreover, the Puritan narrative that Milton identified with was being replaced by a more Catholic one and through this, those in power also began to manipulate religious practices in a way that nursed power toward their own ideas of religion. Those that disagreed got punished. Being dissatisfied with the Church and receiving news that a member of the Church recently passed, Milton took this as an opportunity to call out the Church and its corruption.

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For most modern readers of “Lycidas,” Milton’s work is an intricately woven piece of art. The poem’s structure is filled with imagery, pastoral scenes, and elements that serve as a memory of the late Edward King. It is well known that “Lycidas” was publicly written as a dedication to the premature death of King. The work highlights the aspects of him that remained, according to Milton, still righteous and God-fearing. The poem’s use of pastoral tradition meets a satirical style; drawing attention to how this tradition has overall lost its true meaning through the Church’s rule at the time. For Milton, the pastoral element within “Lycidas” was neither alien nor coincidental. He was closely acquainted with poetry of this kind, recognizing the pastoral as a basic approach to literary expression. Knowing this, the setting of “Lycidas” becomes more than an accessory to the

poem, but rather a crucial component of its composition and style. Scholars have continuously discussed the actual relationship between Milton and King, providing evidence that they were either unlikely friends or lovers. Although, collectively, what has been overlooked in these conversations is what exactly King represented to Milton. King represented a once possible future version of him: a priest within the Anglican Church attempting to reform the Church from within. Regarding Milton’s severity of criticism, one may argue that “Lycidas” falls between his “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” written in 1629, and his “Eikonoklastes.” The former, being a scenic and conservative poem about Jesus’ birth, written while Milton was still studying to become an Anglican minister himself under the rule of King Charles, and the latter, a much more robust defense of the public execution of King Charles, written in support of a revolutionary Puritan government. This transition can be seen through how Milton utilizes the genre of the pastoral elegy, disguising his powerful claims through the portrayal of flowers and shepherds, to criticize both the Church and, ironically enough, the pastoral elegy.

To understand this shift in tone, we must first acknowledge that Milton’s loyalty to the Church began to fade after Charles’ ascendancy due to his dissatis-

faction with the Caroline ecclesiastical polity and their violent tendencies for regulation. Mainly, this disdain was due to the Puritan narrative and traditions that Milton identified with being replaced by more Catholic traditions. The key advocate of King Charles’ religious reforms was William Laud, a clergyman in the Church of England, appointed Archbishop of Canterbury by Charles I in 1633. During his time, Laud used religion to justify the acts of King Charles when the people disagreed. He manipulated religious practices and scripture in a way that nursed power toward his ideas of religion, not bothering to hear those around him. As Elizabeth Sauer explains in her essay, “Milton and Caroline Church Government,” Milton saw the clergy to be corrupted and at the height of their power “in 1636–37 when Laud reigned... and [he] saw the public torture of three Puritans” (203). Bastwick, Prynne, and Burton were these three puritans, damned to public humiliation due to their comments on the “innovations” made to the Church orders by Laud. As previously stated, Sauer describes this public display as an “act of humiliation” (203). However, it’s important to note that all three men were pilloried<sup>1</sup> and, unfortunately for Prynne, the “remaining parts of his ears were sawed off and his cheeks [were] branded” due to the severity of his earlier punishment of already having his ears cropped in

<sup>1</sup> “A means for exposing one to public scorn or ridicule.”

1633 for his anti-episcopal writings (Sauer 202). While being pilloried is a lighter punishment in comparison to what occurred to Prynne, his severe torture was the result of multiple publications, one of them being the “Breviate of the Prelates Intolerable Usurpations” in 1637. As it happens, the opening of the pamphlet contains Ezekiel 34. 2-3: “Thus saith the Lord God unto the Shepherds of Israel that doe feed themselves: Should not the Shepherds feed the Flock? Yee eate the fat, and yee clothe you with the wool, yee kill them that are fed, yee feed not the Flocke’ (*King James Version*). This verse calls the Church out directly, using conventional Christian pastoral imagery, indicating Prynne’s awareness of their hypocrisy. Milton performs a similar critique within “Lycidas,” focusing on idolatry; he transforms it into something that is, instead, a critique of concepts and devotion to certain figures. Later providing a pastoral scene that ticks off all the boxes: nature, grazing sheep, and shepherds yet matching it with a contrasting narration, Milton reveals the truth he sees within the misplaced values of the Church and how they have manipulated certain practices to gain more power.

As aforementioned, Charles’ ascendancy led to Laud being appointed power. Along with this came the introduction of a power dynamic within the

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Definition from “Pillory Definition & Meaning.”, Merriam-Webster

Church that Milton’s Puritan identity opposed, seeing that it placed a human hierarchy within the worship of God. For example, Ian Atherton, in his article, “Cathedrals, Laudianism, and the British Churches,” states that “... puritan critics of cathedrals denounced them as bastions of popery...” and furthers this by mentioning that Bishop David Lindsay of Edinburgh had defended the ceremonies in print with the sole purpose of these ceremonies and cathedrals to be that of status (897-899). Using the pre-established authority of religion, Laud and other bishops, under the rule of King Charles I, were able to reform and tend to their agenda. Amalgamating this with the public display of torture furthers the damage to the conceptualized loyalty Milton would have had to the Church due to his ties with Puritan beliefs. He could easily place himself within the role of each of the victims. It is shortly after this public torture that Milton decides to reject this idea of pursuing ministry, later recalling this resistance to the bondage of the Church because he refused to take the clergy’s orders (Sauer 199). This continuation of refusal to hear criticism met with intense punishment is exactly what Milton chooses to highlight within “Lycidas.” By placing the clergy within the role of shepherds just as Prynne had done,

Milton exposes their failure to imitate God and their overall abuse of power.

This combination of a Church’s crumbling appearance and King’s death provides Milton with a strange opportunity to face his transitioning beliefs. But first, to understand this poem as a moment of transition, we must also understand what King meant for Milton. Scholars such as Michael Gadaletto in his article, “Who Would Not Sing for Lycidas,” argues that the only true evidence critics possess for this famous literary relationship is the poem’s headnote describing Lycidas as “a Learned Friend” (155). While Bruce Boehrer in his work, “‘Lycidas’: The Pastoral Elegy as Same-Sex Epithalamium,” states that there are moments of romantic imagery within “Lycidas” that depict Milton and King to have been lovers. In regards to Gadaletto’s argument, the contents of “Lycidas” contain little to no praise or personal references in comparison to the other poems written by friends and colleagues of King for his memorial. Although, it is arguable that these are not crucial for a poet’s feelings to be genuine. However, the poetic style of “Lycidas” conspicuously contrasts with that of the other poets in a way that “raises pastoral directness and plainness over the [*Justa*’s] ‘poetry of tears’ and its elaborate baroque contortions” (Gadaletto, 157). This observation only furthers the idea that “Lycidas”

not only served as a tribute to King’s life on the surface but also as a personal narrative of Milton’s dance with religion and mortality when looking closer. However, the larger point being missed in this conversation is what King represented for Milton: a potential version of what he might have become.

Taking into consideration the similarities between King and Milton, their age, and the pursual of the same career path within the Church — a man who dies young and unfulfilled — places Milton in a space to seriously reflect on life’s fragility. Notably, King was a figure within the English Church at the time of his death while Milton was pondering the idea of growing further within the Church or dedicating himself to the life of a poet. Still, it is important to note that Milton identified more with Puritan values than he did with the new Laudian rule within the Church, causing his religious growth to become stunted. It is because of this that the narrative created within “Lycidas” appears as polemical writing, writing that criticizes the clergy using careful symbolism and pastoral references. This factor becomes a driving force towards the argument that King and Milton were unlikely friends. Although, if this were to be the case, then the question remains as to why Milton would write such a beautiful poem that memorializes someone that he despises. Again, it was not the

closeness shared with King, but what King represented to Milton: someone whose values, career goals, and future resembled such a strong likeness to his own.

Beginning to look at the religious similarities between King and Milton, both men, at the time of King's death, were currently considerable figures within the Church with two different sets of ideals. However, the Laudian's new perspective on Church worship had again affected the nation as well as a youthful Milton. Seeing as Milton grew up mainly Puritan, the continuation of Laud appointing his own men and repressing Calvinist predestinarian doctrine<sup>2</sup> and Puritan efforts to reform the Church and government becomes controversial regarding Milton's documented stance on religion. This being said, for Milton, King began to represent a version of himself that he could've been. As Gadaletto explains, King represented an unfortunate victim of powerful institutions such as the Laudian Church and Cambridge University, institutions which were meant to nurture and protect promising young scholars, but which finally, in Milton's view, corrupted and betrayed him (161). This representation, in the eyes of Gadaletto, furthers the idea that these similarities are not powerful enough to mark King and Milton as friends. In fact, Gadaletto claims that

<sup>2</sup> "The belief that God not only chooses some for salvation, but he also "devotes" others to damnation." Definition from David Luebke's, "The Doctrine of Double Predestination: A Summary."

King "represents certain religious, political, and cultural commitments that Milton oppose[ed] in 'Lycidas'" (160). These cultural commitments regard that of ornamentation, ecclesiastical careerism, and the seeking of royal patronage. On the other hand, critics such as Bruce Boehrer state the opposite, describing "Lycidas" to be an "erotic fantasy" based on an in-depth reading of the poem itself. Both readings are meritable, which makes the speculation about King and Milton's relationship even more mysterious and interesting. However, these readings also reveal that there is simply not enough textual or historical evidence to truly uncover the nature of that relationship, and the conclusions found within them rely too much on assumptions about Milton's personal feelings toward King. Moreover, the focus relies mainly on what King represented for Milton: King was a vision of Milton's future self within a Church that, Milton felt, had abandoned and betrayed him. Therefore, King is the catalyst through which Milton channels his personal political and religious evolution from docile reformer to polemical revolutionary.

Considering this, Prynne's work begins to serve as a helpful guide to the leading contributor to the corruption found within the transforming Church and demonstrates one of the key factors

resulting in Milton's disdain toward the Church: idolization and the way

it was performed. Referencing Exodus 20:3-5, it is known that there is a prohibition against the worship of other gods and, specifically, of graven images. Commonly, this would place Milton with the Puritans that understood any idolatry that pertains to worship to either represent the true God or some sort of falsehood. Matching this with the traditions of Catholicism: mass, clerical vestments, and religious statues and images would cause any Puritan to become weary of the changes that unfolded within the Church. This idolization and ornamentation reach farther than just physical objects for Milton, however. As Barbara Lewalski explains in her piece, "Milton and Idolatry," "God is incomprehensible" and "attach[ing] divinity or special sanctity to any person, pope, king, or to any human institution, was idolatry" (214). This meant that Milton's focus was not just on the stained glass and statues of Mary adorning the spaces of worship. Milton saw idolization within the figures of the Church, within Laud, and his refusal to allow change that did not serve himself.

An example of Milton displaying this belief against idolization and ornamentation other than the contents of "Lycidas" can be found in "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" which he wrote in 1629. Within it, Milton portrays

both nature and himself being led by music and glorious imagery, "That glorious Form, that Light insufferable" (8) to visualize Christ's second coming. The following passages focus on the senses being engaged by the astounding environment that surrounds the speaker. This, in turn, emphasizes the awe that the holy spirit possesses and begins to demonstrate how easy it may become for one to grow accustomed to seeing what is holy instead of feeling it. However, lines 165-166, "And then at last our bliss / Full and perfect is" reestablishes that this visual attraction is not needed. Here, Milton finalizes his belief that God is perfect as is, and that this all-consuming awe is only apprehensible through death. There is no need for ornamentation or to idolize something that is physical, for it is not

true to its representation. He furthers this in the passages before, "speckl'd vanity / Will sicken soon and die" (136-137), reinforcing the idea that these objects are nothing compared to what they are attempting to stand for. Lewalski describes these earlier passages as "iconoclasm" (215), that Milton is identifying these presented idols and breaking them down until they are nothing. Milton takes these idols, "the yellow-skirted Faves" and paints the image of them leaving, "Fly after the Night-steeds, leaving their Moon-lov'd maze" (235-236). By doing so, Milton solidifies his idea that these

idols are not immortal. They will leave, all the same, abandoning those that lay at their feet without remorse. These idols pertain to false promises – distractions. They will eventually lead those that follow astray, just as the Church and its members currently do.

Almost ten years later, “Lycidas” is published, shedding light on the very same ornamentation witnessed within the Church. However, what is important to note here, is the tone of the criticism being shared. The icons within Milton’s “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity” are subdued in a manner that reinforces the act of maintaining good relations with the Church and the public. Comparing the iconoclasm within both these poems identifies “Lycidas” as possessing a much more intense and purposefully jarring criticism. An example of this is the infamous line, “Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread” regarding the sheep that are being kept by the shepherds, or, in Milton’s case, the members of the Church (127). This line evokes both imagery and smell, depicting a horrific waste occurring to innocent animals due to the neglect of their owner. However, in “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” the shepherds’ sheep are “all that did their silly thoughts so busy keep” (Milton 92). The contrast between these two lines is striking. Not

only does Milton carry on the same pastoral writing as he did in “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity,” but he does so in a way that is impossible to go unnoticed. The writing is damning in a more explicit tone in “Lycidas,” as Milton no longer worries about keeping peace with the Church.

Taking this tone shift into account, “Lycidas” becomes more than just a monody<sup>3</sup>. It becomes a conscious work of art, a personal reflection from Milton on life, death, and religion. Using delicate imagery, Milton invites us to read traditional floral images within the ‘standard’ understanding of the pastoral genre and its ability to help us grieve the cycle of life. However, a deeper reading of the images reveals criticism of the Church and its ability to provide “rebirth” into heaven. An example of this is in Milton’s first line, “Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more” (1), which is followed by the later line, “I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude” (3). At first glance, this appears to be a basic pastoral scene. The speaker is greeting some flowers, announcing that “once more” they are coming to pluck away the berries that have grown to create funeral arrangements to honor the death of Lycidas. The pastoral environment within an elegy serves to embellish the intensity of grief that contrasts the angelic

atmosphere and cycle of life in which death disrupts it. It is meant to provide comfort due to its reference to religious imagery, enforcing the idea that death is just a passage into the next life. The use of “laurel” here is purposeful, for when the plant is presented within an arrangement, it represents triumph - a victory, as one now has achieved eternity. However, here, the act of removing such berries equates to the act of removing this sense of salvation, or a true tie to religion. This is because one must pluck the berries of a laurel before using it as decoration, for the berries are dark and needless when it comes to aesthetics. Yet the berries are the seeds in which the plant would continue to grow, “Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God.” (Luke 8:11). Tearing away this inward growth that later sprouts and blossoms into something natural and free causes the laurel to become a true decoration, a stagnant object that is no longer adhered to the natural world. It serves as a reminder that the person being mourned is gone, just as the plant is the moment one removes it from the soil and rids it of any seeds. Removing the “needless” ornamentation of the berries also reveals the facade of the Church. Ridding the laurel of them allows the speaker to encounter the deadness that is truly beneath. For although it is still said to represent something holy, the part of it that truly does is no longer

attached. The comfort that should be provided by religious sentiment is gone. It is separated and forgotten, while the dead leaves of the laurel will, instead, be focused upon and undoubtedly shrivel up and crack.

This involvement of the speaker with what is naturally grown and what is not serves as a mirror of the Laudian rule to emphasize Milton’s overall disdain towards it. Again, it is important to note Milton’s stance upon such ornamentations — that it was not just the aesthetics that he despised, but also the figures that represented religion upon Earth. “Plucking your berries” also resembles Milton’s previous acts of disassembling the ornamentation of religion within “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity.” The line, “Apollo from his shrine” indicates something holy leaving the manmade implications placed upon it, inherently causing this “shrine” to become meaningless (Milton 176). During the time of “Lycidas,” Laudianism was established on the idea that salvation was something that could be won by good deeds and that it was something that contributed more to the physical world. As Martin Evans explains in his work dedicated to John Milton, “the only way to achieve salvation [in the eyes of Puritans] was through the God-given gift of faith” (156). This focus on creating things that appeared visually holy inherently steered away from the belief

<sup>3</sup> “An elegy or dirge performed by one person.”  
Definition from “Monody Definition & Meaning,” Merriam-Webster

that salvation pertained to a personal connection with God because it placed a distraction between the two. The similarity between the speaker and what Laud had continuously done to the Church is simply coincidental, seeing that the Speaker would correctly bury their deceased friend, Lycidas, in the proper way of their beliefs. Therefore, Milton performs this act of interference only to honor the unfortunate passing of a beloved friend and to highlight the sorrow that is experienced when acknowledging what this decoration truly is.

This emotional strain is experienced and emphasized within the following lines. As the poem continues, Milton writes, “myrtles brown, with ivy never-sear,” expanding on the sentiment of nature that surrounds the speaker and their decaying state (2). Again, the plant that is chosen is purposeful. Myrtles are shrubs, like laurels, that represent love. Depicting these myrtles to be “never-sear” indicates that this “love” has withered, that it has been harmed in some sense. This act of “pluck[ing]... berries harsh and crude” is more than just the removal of something that is grown naturally from within an individual, it is aggressive, “harsh,” and “crude.” I am also positive critics like Boehrer would raise awareness of the obvious connection between a dying love and the death of King regarding the meaning of myrtles. However, I again

propose that this symbolism ties to the love found within salvation/the clergy. By having the speaker remove what is still alive, blossoming, and growing from a plant that is surely withered away, Milton is suggesting his views on what Laudianism has continued to have done to the faith. This speaker claiming that collecting these flowers with “forc’d fingers rude,” demonstrates this unwanted dynamic (Milton 4). Being “forc’d” to remove these flowers for the sole purpose of the burial of Lycidas brings Milton pain, as the act is unwanted, and the flowers are dying. The only meaning these future arrangements have in reference to Milton is what they represent for Lycidas, for in Milton’s eyes, they are just dead flowers.

The loss of salvation due to the misguidance of the Church finds itself in the line, “shatter your leaves before the mellowing year” (Milton 5). The visual verbiage here, ‘shatter,’ pushes the reader to see the full destruction inflicted on a plant, a common symbol established as representing salvation or personal connection with one’s creator. This is important when viewing the following phrase, “before the mellowing year,” an obvious reference to the unexpectedness of King’s death and death in general. Together, these two lines illustrate an immediate and unexpectedness for Milton. There is a sense of unpreparedness that Milton blames solely on the clergy. As Neil

Forsyth states in his essay, “Lycidas’: A Wolf in Saints Clothing” the teachings of the current Church “created enormous anxiety” as “no one really knew whether he or she belonged to the chosen elite” (687). Milton found himself in a place of anger when it came to Puritanism and the current Laudianism conversion. On one hand, Puritanism believes that salvation is something God can only give to you, that believing in Jesus and participating in the sacraments were not enough to affect one’s salvation, and that salvation is not chosen by the believer or awarded, for it is the privilege of God alone. At the same time, Laudianism was preaching that salvation was something that could be bought and won. It was because of this that Milton detested the hierarchical power of the Church. The shock of King’s death and the revelation that it evoked within Milton was due to the corrupted clergy and their interference with people’s devotion to God. Therefore, the phrase, “mellowing year” transforms into a futuristic peacefulness that one might obtain if the leaves were not shattered. Without the interference of the Church, one might be able to obtain true salvation, to blossom fully as the natural world intended.

Milton begins to dissect the underlying means of corruption within the Church, directing his audience to a desperate desire to accumulate money,

power, and an attractive outward appearance in lines 78-79. Here, Milton writes, “Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil / Nor in the glistening foil.” Again, Milton draws from the concepts of naturalism and ornamentation. These lines claim that fame is not something that can be truly gained through a mortal life. It is only awarded in death. He then adds the line, “glistening foil” which references a glittering structure alluding again, to the idea of embellishment. This statement is powerful in the sense that Milton is telling the Church directly, stating his beliefs in a way that predetermines their failure at achieving such selfish awards. Continuing to the line, “Set off to th’world, nor in broad rumor lies / But lives and spreads aloft by those pure eyes” (Milton, 80-81), these lines draw attention to the same theme of righteousness, that “fame” is not found through false claims. Here, Milton is declaring that the rule of Laudianism has done this. It has twisted scripture in a way that suits them better than what Milton believes to be the truth. This “fame” or “salvation” that the Church is apparently after is only obtained through those with “pure” eyes. They will never reach this fame because just as the plucking of the berries has shown — beneath their ornamentation and corruption is nothing. These lines point to the salvation that is promised within the clergy and the unbecoming

truth that is offered instead. According to Milton, following the Church is a meaningless waste of time. It will not offer you true “fame” because that fame is only awarded in Heaven and by God.

Milton’s separation from Laudian rule lies within the appearance of nature and its state when viewed. The following line “With wild thyme and the gadding vine o’ergrown,” indicates thyme and vines that are beginning to outgrow themselves, they are no longer being controlled (Milton 40). King’s death pushed Milton to see the infection of the Church. Its lust for power and wealth lying beneath the lie of salvation was inside both men. It was not until King’s death that Milton began to outgrow this lie, to outgrow the control of the Church. However, in their article, “Who is Lycidas,” Louis Martz points out that, “Despite the hints of sorrow and death, created nature is a place of comfort and rest...” (184). This idea of comfort and rest opposing the darker themes within “Lycidas” connects directly with the fact that Milton was utilizing the popularity of pastoral tradition at the time of its publication. Beginning with “the glowing violet,” this later-mentioned burial scene is full of specifically named flowers to adorn the body of Lycidas, furthering Milton’s personification of nature (145). The “glowing violet,” however, represents faithfulness according to Lee Jacobus

4 Pansy section within the *Plant Encyclopedia* on Better Homes & Gardens

5 Pansy section within the *Plant Encyclopedia* on Better Homes & Gardens

in their article, “Lycidas’ in the ‘Nestor Episode’” (192). This faithfulness, in the eyes of Milton, may be tied to the blind faithfulness King had continued to have to the Church during his life. Additionally, “The white pink, and the pansy freak’d with jet” (Milton 144). It can be noted that the pansy flower is a symbol of freethought, seeing that it derives its name from the French word *pensée*, which means “thought.” Allegedly, it also received this name because the flower resembles a human face, and in mid-to-late summer it nods forward as if deep in thought, something that, at this time, Milton cherished.<sup>4</sup> Opposingly, King was unable to think this freely due to the influence of the Church. The specific colors of a pansy — yellow, purple, and white — are also meant to symbolize memories and loving thoughts — all of which are more than appropriate for a funeral.<sup>5</sup> Although, drawing attention to the description of these flowers within this line, “freak’d with jet” depicts a spotting overtaking the petals. This may represent an illness or infection brought on by a parasite, a common theme that Milton includes throughout “Lycidas” — this rotting from within. Or, perhaps, the flowers are personified in a way that signifies this abnormal coloring to be a representation of their mournful states. Overall, this section continues a theme of Milton’s, this mirroring of bringing

meaning to things that are not directly tied to what they apparently represent. By doing so, Milton emphasizes the meaninglessness of the ornamentation that Laud’s rule enforces. Although these flowers are beautiful, they offer no ability to console a mourning Milton. They cannot heal the wounds brought on by death nor can they can provide ease to the eyes. This is something only God can do.

We are brought back to the line, “The musk-rose, and the well attir’d woodbine,” (146). The woodbine flower is a type of honeysuckle that vines. It is known to be very fragrant and carries colors like the pansy.<sup>6</sup> Both flowers combined are extremely fragrant and pertain to love. Although, Jacobus explains that this “erotic image” from the appearance of the rose may have been “somewhat attenuated in Milton” (192). However, in this instance the “musk rose” is known to hold white petals. This coloring separates it from the traditional connotations of the colors red and pink: love and romance. As Jacobus previously expressed, the symbolism of the rose here is diluted in comparison to its common usage. However, I disagree. Milton, as he does with all his symbolism throughout “Lycidas,” purposefully chooses this rose due to its meaning of purity, innocence, and remembrance.<sup>7</sup> Doing

6 Woodbine section within the *Plant Encyclopedia* on Better Homes & Gardens

7 Rose section within the *Plant Encyclopedia* on Better Homes & Gardens

8 Lee Townsend’s *Cankerworms*

this excludes King from the criticism of the Church that develops within “Lycidas,” continuing the idea that Milton truly saw some version of himself within King. King was just another victim of the Church’s misguidance.

This pastoral narrative shifts, however, as Milton announces the death of Lycidas. Milton states in lines 45-46 mourn for Lycidas, saying, “As killing as the canker to the rose / Or taint-worm to the weanling herds that graze.” Again, Milton addresses the inner corruption of the Church through the imagery of nature. Both lines involve parasites that affect the outward appearance of their hosts. A cankerworm produces a canker within the blossom upon feeding on it and a taint worm infects the cow’s body.<sup>8</sup> This means that, according to Milton, King’s life is more than the unfortunate event of someone passing. For Milton, King’s death is an awakening, a call to evaluate what Milton truly thinks of his salvation and the Church. Not only is King’s death a tragedy, but it is parasitic, an infestation that manifests within Milton constantly. However, by threading these beautiful flowers with an inward rot, Milton also exposes his idea that these idols and the Church both contain nothing more than death from within. What once appeared as a beautiful, holy place for believers has

developed into something foul in the eyes of Milton. This imagery paints a vivid picture of something delicately beautiful beginning to shape into something devastatingly foreign.

This infestation takes on a different meaning in the lines, "Where were ye, Nymphs, when the remorseless deep / Clos'd o'er the head of your lov'd Lycidas?" (Milton 51-52). As King was a follower of the Church, his salvation was something completely unknown to Milton, perhaps even unreceived due to the differences in their beliefs. Because of this, a sense of responsibility goes unaccounted for, and Milton expresses this through the image of the nymphs. He goes on to write, "Had ye bin there'--for what could that have done?" mocking the Church's own belief in their power in a way that makes it clear that it is still beneath that of God's (57). If the Church could promise their followers the gift of salvation, a gift that Milton thought only God could give, how could they not prevent an innocent, young man from dying so tragically? This question is not directly answered, except by the possibility that fame, that 'last infirmity of noble mind,' might give a better return on investment in the Church's eyes (Forsyth 694). This attaches itself again to the idea that ornamentation and even outward appearance appears to be the focus of the Church. However, this focus is meaningless because it offers one

nothing but empty structures. Just as removing the berries from the laurel caused it to become a lifeless, hollow thing, living a life dedicated to physical possessions, power, and appearance contains nothing applicable to an afterlife.

The tone shift in Milton's criticism towards the Church's rule is especially heavily applied within the pastoral imagery of the shepherds and in the lines, "The hungry Sheep look up, and are not fed, / But swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw, / Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread" (Milton 125-27). Critics such as Bruce Boehrer, Gadaletto, and Neil Forsyth have also extensively analyzed the role of the shepherd in "Lycidas," however. Bruce Boehrer views this role as something intimate, almost domestic, between the two, highlighting the traditional delicate light of the pastoral tradition, "It performs the act of wedlock... celebrat[ing] the union of God and Humanity" (223). In contrast, Gadaletto and Neil Forsyth see the representation of sinners and saints through the usage of sheep and shepherds. Forsyth draws attention to how the shepherds of Milton and Lycidas reveal "the frustration of a sincere shepherd in a corrupt church" (691). Agreeing with Gadaletto and Forsyth's argument, this role shows to have been incorporated to chastise the Church and its rule, lacking the

previous circumlocute found within "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity."

Beginning with the role of the shepherd is referenced through the lines where, "under the opening eyelids of the morn" the speaker and King "...drove a field" (Milton 26-27). Here, the act of "[driving] a field" equates to the flock of sheep shepherds have responsibility over. One could argue that this scene is a representation of the similarities between Milton and King, that each man sought out righteousness and took their positions within the Church seriously. This idea is furthered through the line, "For we were nurs'd upon the self-same hill," emphasizing again, that Milton and King were both notable believers of the Church. This use of the shepherd's role ties to previous acts of Milton, highlighting the use of idols and figures to advertise one thing, yet perform another. Notably, the passage that includes pastoral imagery of shepherds remains light and tranquil, matching its traditional form. Furthermore, Lycidas and the speaker remain responsible throughout the lines as well, taking care of their flock as they should, "Batt'ning our flocks with the fresh dews of night" (Milton 29). Here, Milton and King's similarities serve a purpose. Seeing that Milton writes this passage in a way that presents them as responsible shepherds, one can conclude that, in Milton's eyes, King and him were

separate from the Church through their youth and moral righteousness. They were not actively seeking power, money, or status. Their minds were simply focused on following the rules of the faith. As Forsyth explains in this passage, it "moves us between what the imagination can offer and what reality actually consists of" (691). Seeing that they both were able to see what their purpose was as shepherds, to lead their flock away from danger and to protect them, they only assumed their fellow Church leaders would do the same.

Milton gradually begins to call out the authoritative Church members' behavior after some floral passages. Emphasizing the labor that is tethered to the role of a shepherd, Milton makes sure to open a stanza with the lines, "Alas! what boots it with incessant care / To tend the homely, slighted shepherd's trade" (64-65) By incorporating these lines, Milton is reminding the Church of the true role of the shepherd. He is not directly tying them to the symbolization of shepherds as he did earlier within himself and King but as the prime examples of what a shepherd should not be. It is laborious work to be righteous, to see that those that follow the Church are not doomed. Milton then goes on to say, "Were it not better done, as others use / To sport with Amaryllis in the shade / Or with the tangles of Neæra's hair" (67-69). Here, Milton describes actions of lust and

relaxation. Both the names Neæra and Amaryllis are also names well-known within erotic pastoral poetry at the time. Instead of keeping their promise of “incessant care,” these authoritative leaders are instead tangling themselves with lovers in the shade, or simply stated, sinful behavior in the eyes of Milton. It is extensively clear that this use of pastoral imagery throughout this passage derives from Milton’s outrage towards the danger posed by Laudianism to England’s Church and hence to vulnerable contemporaries like King himself (Gadaletto 179). By exposing the actions of the Church, Milton returns to this act of tearing down idols. Represented as shepherds through a pastoral tradition, the current members of the Church are false idols. They do not carry out the responsibilities that they should.

The introduction of the Pilot of the Galilean Lake who alludes to Saint Peter then delivers a condemnation dedicated to Laudian power. Here, St. Peter indicates that it is due to the inter-related problems of bad pastorship, “The hungry Sheep look up, and are not fed, / But swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw, / Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread” (Milton 125–27). This is clearly because those in leadership positions within the Church, academy, and even arts have become drowned in their own corruption. Through these lazy and selfish shepherds comes a

wave of destruction and malice that affects those that innocently follow them through the rope of trust. These lines are damning, lacking any sort of sympathy regarding the members of the Church. The “hungry sheep look up,” the followers of the Church follow blindly, seeking comfort and salvation. Yet, they are not fed. They are left to be outwardly harmed by the winds, by the natural pains of life. Not only do they suffer outwardly, they “rot inwardly.” Without true salvation, these members of the Church can offer nothing to their followers and are to blame for the isolation felt within the death of Lycidas through the poem.

As Milton began his college education towards becoming a priest in the Anglican Church, King’s unfortunate death proved to be the perfect opportunity for Milton to explore and consider his vocation. Exposing the constant neglect of the Church led by their sinful desire to achieve power, money, and worldly fame mislead followers of the Church. This greed also cost followers their salvation. The infamous lines, “The hungry Sheep look up, and are not fed, / But swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw, / Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread”, offer a stunning escalation of critical rhetoric in comparison to the glittering imagery found within “On the Morning of Christ’s Nativity.” This act is on purpose, for Milton knows eyes will

be upon this written dedication made to King. Making an obvious connection to figures within the Church and shepherds calls out the Laudian rule, revealing to them that a once-follower is fully separated from them and their current ideals. Just as Prynne’s previous work may have influenced Milton, Milton’s work becomes a voice for those unable to speak, or in Edward King’s case, for those that it became too late. The pastoral elegy works as a genre due to its emphasis on rebirth, focusing on the cycle of seasons. Although winter comes to freeze and kill what is naturally grown, spring and warmth emerge to restore it once again. However, Milton refuses this comfort to the audience reading “Lycidas” because this version of himself that King once represented is not returning. The burial of Lycidas is a burial for Milton’s old self, the self that countered disagreement in subtle ways hidden within imagery and prose. “Lycidas” is Milton unashamedly voicing his transitioning beliefs to people he once found comfort and identity within. He refuses to be, in his eyes, a false shepherd or, undoubtedly, a sheep that rots from within.



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