

LYCIDAS

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Lycidas by John Milton

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LYCIDAS.



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

PREFACE.



WHY is it thought necessary to edit the English Classics, after the manner of the Ancient, with copious notes? As a rule there are few things told in the notes appended to many editions that the average student could not, with a little diligence, find out for himself; he merely needs to be put in the way of finding them out. To clear the way of obstacles is to forestall the very discipline that develops independent investigation. There is no surer way of making mental parasites than that of having everything served up in delectable notes. A boy with a nut only needs something with which to crack it in order to get at the kernel. With histories, dictionaries, and encyclopædias to be found in every community, the student can do for himself almost everything that is usually done for him in the way of notes.

There is that, on the other hand, which the student cannot do for himself, and which is not taken into account in the usual manner of editing our English masterpieces, namely, the Art. Do you claim this to

be the implied duty of the teacher and no concern of the editor's? Perhaps; but it is astonishing how great is the number of teachers who hold the naturally preconceived opinion that the notes explain all that does not lie on the surface. In such instances what becomes of the significance of, say, *Lycidas*, in its relation to the inner life of the Puritan Age? Does the student get any conception of the workmanship of the creative imagination? Not until he finds his way into the workshop of the artist's soul, and through an interpretation that re-creates a masterpiece can he understand the kind of study or work that exalts.

For all which reasons, instead of notes, find suggestions and suggestive questions. The aim is to arouse the spirit of inquiry, and, in a general way, to direct the student to its gratification. Some of the questions may appear to be obviously simple, but alertness of mind must be cultivated. Some may seem too difficult;

" Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what's a heaven for? "

With access to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, a Classical Dictionary, Unabridged Dictionaries, textbooks on Rhetoric, — all everywhere accessible, — and two or three other books procurable at small cost, the student is equipped, and with ordinary diligence and some activity of thought he can find satisfactory

answers to all the questions. References are made to books, articles, and chapters, and not to pages and paragraphs, in order to compass breadth in search.

It is not contended that these questions exhaust what is to be found in *Lycidas*; they merely suggest some things to look for, in the finding of which other riches will be gathered.

A verse translation of the *Epitaph on Bion* is appended for comparative study.

INTRODUCTORY.



For poetry is the blossom and the fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language. — COLERIDGE.

"Milton's life is a drama in three acts." What are the three periods and how characterized? In which was *Lycidas* composed? Read carefully the other poems of this period.

Milton has been styled "the last of the Elizabethans." Distinguish in *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* what is prominently Elizabethan. Is it in theme or manner or in both? In what lines does he take his farewell of what may properly be called the Elizabethan element? Did he not write *Comus* after this? In what is it less distinctively Elizabethan than *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*?

Read "Puritan England" in Green's *Short History of the English People*.

What was the effect of the Bible on literature and on the character of the people? What was the "temper of the Puritan gentleman"? How

was Milton a complete type of Puritanism? Who of the Elizabethans was his master? What of the royal despotism of James and the conduct of Charles? What of the fate of Wentworth, Laud, and Charles?

The conflict between the old Cavalier world, the years of gaiety and festivity of a splendid and pleasure-loving court, and the new Puritan world into which love and pleasure were not to enter, — this conflict which was commencing in the social life of England is also begun in Milton's own breast, and is reflected in *Lycidas*. — PATTISON.

In *Lycidas* (1637) we have reached the high-water mark of English poesy and of Milton's own production. A period of a century and a half was to elapse before poetry in England seemed, in Wordsworth's *Ode on Immortality* (1807), to be rising again towards the level of inspiration which it had once attained in *Lycidas*. And in the development of the Miltonic genius this wonderful dirge marks the culminating point. — PATTISON.

This piece, unmatched in the whole range of English poetry and never again equaled by Milton himself, leaves all criticism behind. Indeed, so high is the poetic note here reached that the common ear fails to catch it. *Lycidas* is the touchstone of taste; the eighteenth-century criticism could not make anything of it. — PATTISON.