

**THE RIVERSIDE LITERATURE
SERIES. L'ALLEGRO, AND
OTHER POEMS. PARADISE
LOST, BOOKS I-III**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649624270

The Riverside Literature Series. L'Allegro, and Other Poems. Paradise Lost, Books I-III by John Milton

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JOHN MILTON

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The Riverside Literature Series

L'ALLEGRO AND OTHER
POEMS

PARADISE LOST
BOOKS I-III

BY

JOHN MILTON

WITH A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
INTRODUCTIONS, AND NOTES



HOUGHTON, MIFFLIN AND COMPANY
Boston: 4 Park Street; New York: 11 East Seventeenth Street
Chicago: 375-388 Wabash Avenue
The Riverside Press, Cambridge

14485-12-116
V A



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The Riverside Press, Cambridge, Mass., U. S. A.
Electrotyped and Printed by H. O. Houghton and Company.

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BY

JOHN MILTON

*EDITED, WITH A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH
INTRODUCTIONS, AND NOTES
BY HORACE E. SCUDDER*

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

JOHN MILTON was born in the heart of London, December 9, 1608. His father was born very near the time of Shakespeare's birth, and was a student at Oxford in his youth. It was while he was a student that England was wavering between Catholicism and Protestantism. The poet's grandfather held to the old order, and when his son was found leaning toward the new he disinherited him, and left him to his own devices. Thereupon the student went up to London, and shortly established himself as a scrivener, a term applied to men at that time who were copyists of legal documents, law stationers, and draftsmen also of legal papers. Milton the scrivener prospered, married, and had three children who lived, a daughter and two sons, John Milton being younger than his sister and seven years older than his brother.

Thus the poet came of a father who sympathized with the new order of things, and who was a contemporary of Shakespeare. Shakespeare died when Milton was eight years old, but Milton was nearly thirty when Ben Jonson, who was more widely known than Shakespeare in his day, died, and he was eighteen years old when Bacon died. Milton's youth therefore was contemporaneous with the closing years of the august period of English dramatic poetry, and the glory of the spacious days of the great Queen Elizabeth was still within the near memory of men. He grew up also in a time when there were mutterings

of the rising storm which was to shake England to its centre. He must have heard much in his boyhood of the attempt made by King James to marry his son to a Spanish princess, an heir to the throne of Protestant England, and a daughter of the house which was the staunch defender of the Pope, and the great rival and enemy of England in the days of Elizabeth. He must have been aware also of the widening breach between King and Parliament. He was seventeen years old when Charles I. ascended the throne.

When this took place, Milton had just been entered at Christ's College, Cambridge. His schooldays had been spent in London at St. Paul's school, and he has himself recorded his devotion to books. "My father," he writes, "destined me while yet a little boy for the study of humane letters, which I seized with such eagerness that from the twelfth year of my age I scarcely ever went from my lessons to bed before midnight; which, indeed, was the first cause of injury to my eyes, to whose natural weakness there were also added frequent headaches. All which not retarding my impetuosity in learning, he caused me to be daily instructed both at the grammar-school and under other masters at home; and then, when I had acquired various tongues and also some not insignificant taste for the sweetness of philosophy, he sent me to Cambridge, one of our two national universities."

The great studies in which Milton was nurtured were Latin and Greek. The latter had been generally studied in school only for a generation or so. It was a new study, very much as science is a new study now. Hebrew also was taught, and Milton studied it. Moreover by his father's advice he

learned to read and speak French and Italian, and his best friend at school was Charles Diodati, a young Englishman of Italian descent. But besides his learned studies, Milton was a reader of English poetry. The first folio of Shakespeare's plays was published in 1623, when Milton was fifteen, and it is clear from his own writing that he knew Shakespeare well, but after all Shakespeare was a great dramatist, and Milton was born out of the days when the drama was the great form. The poetry of English origin which he loved best was that of Edmund Spenser, whose *Faerie Queene* was published in 1590. Spenser has sometimes been called the poet's poet. He was Milton's at all events, and when we consider that the body of great English poetry which we know to-day consisted in Milton's time of Chaucer, Spenser, and Shakespeare, and that two of these poets were very modern to him,—for Milton to read Spenser was like our reading Tennyson,—we can see how largely he drew his poetic nourishment from classic literature. Indeed, though scholars did not despise the English tongue, it did not have to them then the value it has now. Bacon wrote his greatest work in Latin so as to be read more generally by scholars, and a considerable body of Milton's poetry is in Latin. When he was nineteen years old he had occasion to engage in a public exercise at college. There had been some Latin speeches, and when they were over, Milton made an address in English verse to his native language which is interesting for showing the profound respect he had for it, and how energetically he desired to put his best thoughts into it, and to use its best form:—