

**THE LAKE ENGLISH CLASSICS:
MILTON'S MINOR POEMS.
L'ALLEGRO, IL PENSEROSO,
COMUS, AND LYCIDAS, ED. FOR
SCHOOL USE**

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The Lake English Classics: Milton's Minor Poems. L'allegro, Il Penseroso, Comus, and Lycidas,
Ed. For School Use by William Allan Neilson

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WILLIAM ALLAN NEILSON

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Milton's Poems

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MINOR POEMS

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AND LYCIDAS

EDITED FOR SCHOOL USE

BY

WILLIAM ALLAN NEILSON, M. A., Ph. D.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

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PREFACE

In the present edition the main endeavor has been to provide an apparatus that should ensure the complete intelligibility of the four poems forming the text, and an understanding of the circumstances in which they were written. This has made necessary not only an outline of the poet's life, but also a sketch of some of the main tendencies in English politics, civil and ecclesiastical, during his youth. Without some such view, it is impossible for the student to grasp the significance of the political allusions in *Lycidas*, while the other three poems all gain immensely in interest when it is seen how they are related to the Puritanism of which the poetry of Milton is the supreme literary expression.

In addition to the biographical and historical material, a concise statement is given of what is known of the sources of the poems. Teachers using the book have a right to demand that this should be supplied, yet it is by no means to be understood that all students should be required to study it in detail. It is doubtful, indeed, whether the minds of young students should be burdened by more than the general bearing of such a statement of Milton's real or supposed debt to previous writers. More important, because more vital to

the understanding of literary history, is the attempt to outline the development of such forms as the pastoral elegy and the masque previous to their being used by Milton.

The work of æsthetic interpretation has been left almost entirely to the teacher, but a few suggestions may be made. An unusually good opportunity for bringing out the beauty of coherent structure in short poems is afforded by the present texts. The plan of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, which is roughly traced in the Introduction, should be worked out in detail by the student. *Lycidas* will be grasped in a much more satisfactory way if it is clearly brought out in class that there is a regular sequence of parts in the elegy, interrupted by digressions. On the basis of the analysis of the masque elements in *Comus* which will be found on pp. 63-8, the teacher may enlarge on the characteristically Miltonic elements in the poem.

The main facts in connection with the versification of the poems have been stated as simply as possible. The artistic value of the lines, however, will be best imparted *viva voce*, and here again the opportunity is exceptional. The alternating long and short lines at the beginning of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, and the short, rapid measure of the main parts of these poems; the blank verse and the lyrical passages in *Comus*; and the seeming irregularity in the arrangement of rhymes in *Lycidas*, all

afford admirable examples of the use a great poet makes of metrical devices, and should give rise to stimulating discussions. Attention should be drawn also to Milton's double epithets, and the question of the justification of his coinages raised. The first two poems consist of series of pictures, and the student should be induced to test the vividness of these, one by one, by attempting to visualize them. The characteristic ethical elements which appear in all Milton's productions might also be educed and illustrated by reference to his own life.

The great mine of information on the life and times of Milton is Professor David Masson's magnificent work, *The Life of John Milton, narrated in connection with the political, ecclesiastical, and literary history of his time* (6 vols., Macmillan & Co., new ed., Lond., 1881-94). For those to whom this is not accessible, or who desire something on a smaller scale, Mark Pattison's *Milton* in the *English Men of Letters* series, Dr. Garnett's in the *Great Writers* series, and the recent volumes on Milton by Professor Trent (Macmillan, N. Y., 1899) and Professor Raleigh (Putnam, N. Y., 1900) may be mentioned. Dr. Garnett's book contains an excellent bibliography. Of annotated editions of Milton's poems the most elaborate is again Masson's (2d ed., 3 vols., Macmillan, Lond., 1894). Verity's editions (Cambridge University Press) are very full and scholarly, and Professor Trent's edition of the poems contained in the present volume (Longmans, 1898) has

a number of suggestive interpretative notes. Professor Corson has recently published an *Introduction to Milton* which conveniently brings together the more important autobiographical passages from the prose works, but its value is lessened by the lack of exact references to the sources of the texts quoted. Discussions of Milton's versification will be found in the third volume of Masson's large edition of the poems, and in *Milton's Prosody* by Robert Bridges (Clarendon Press). It is, perhaps, unnecessary to refer to the well known essays on Milton by Macaulay and Lowell.

In the preparation of the introduction and notes I have freely consulted the work of previous editors, especially Masson, Verity, Browne, and Trent, and detailed acknowledgment of obligations to these and others will be found in the appropriate places. To Professor Masson, as author of the *Life of Milton*, every modern student of Milton owes an immense debt, and I have to add to this general recognition that of the more personal obligation which a student owes to an inspiring teacher. I also wish to thank, for suggestions in connection with the treatment of the masque, my friends Dr. A. H. Thorndike of Western Reserve University, and Dr. John Lester, recently of Harvard, and, for helpful criticisms throughout, Mr. L. T. Damon of the University of Chicago.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY, September, 1900.

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