

THE MILTONIAN CONTROVERSY

"C. C." contributes to the New York Tribune the following resume of the arguments for and against the newly-discovered poem which has been attributed to John Milton:

In the London Times of July 16 there appeared a letter from Professor Henry Morley, of University College, London, giving an account of his discovery of what he believed to be a hitherto unknown poem by John Milton. An account of the way in which the discovery came to be made will not be uninteresting, as showing the pains a conscientious scholar will take, to secure as great accuracy as possible in any work he is engaged upon, no matter how small, or apparently unimportant, it may be. Professor Morley had undertaken to compile for some publisher a small book of selections from the writings of the poets who lived in the time of Charles I. and the Commonwealth. On receiving from his printer a proof containing passages from Milton, he thought it might not be useless to compare it with the original edition of his English and Latin poems published in 1645. The British Museum contains two copies of this edition—one in the General Library, and the other in what is known as the King's Library, a magnificent collection of 70,000 volumes made by George III., and presented to the Museum in 1753 by George III. This last was the copy which Mr. Morley referred to, and will give him an account of what he found in it in his own words:

"The volume contains first the English, then the Latin poems of that first period of Milton's life, each separately pagged. The Latin poems end on page 87, leaving the reverse of the leaf blank; and this blank I found covered with handwriting which, to any one familiar with the collection of fac-similes in the late Mr. Southey's 'Rambles in Ectinction of Milton's Autograph,' would, I think, convey at first glance the impression that it conveyed to me, that this was the handwriting of John Milton. It proved to be a transcript of a poem in fifty-four lines which Milton, either for himself or for some friend, had added to this volume. It is entitled, simply, 'An Epitaph,' and signed by him, 'J. M., Oct. 1647.' He was then in his thirty-ninth year. As the page is about the size of a leaf of newspaper, the handwriting is small. Thirty-six lines were first written, which filled the left-hand side of the page, then a line was lightly drawn to the right of them, and the book being turned sideways, the rest of the poem was packed into three little columns, eight lines in each of the first two columns, and the other two lines at the top of the third column, followed by the initials and date. Upon the small blank space left in this corner of the page, the Museum stamp is affixed, covering a part of Milton's signature." To this letter Mr. Morley appended the newly-found poem, with its MS. contractions expanded, and the spelling modernized. Since then, it has been several times reprinted in its original form, but each successive reprinting has introduced some faded handwriting, with the old contractions, and peculiarly formed letters, has been subjected to a more and more careful scrutiny with magnifying glasses in the hands of adepts. But it is probable that we have not yet the poem exactly as it stands, for in the Times of July 29, a letter appears from Mr. Ingleby, who states positively that the date of the poem is not Oct. (October), but 1669 (December), and in a letter published in the Times of the 29th, though bearing the same date as Mr. Ingleby's, Mr. Bond, keeper of the Dept. of MS. in the British Museum, gives a version of the poem, intended to be exact, in which he makes an important change in a word not hitherto suspected, and also prints the date 1669, as read by Mr. Ingleby. It may be added that Mr. Bond, who does not believe that the handwriting is Milton's, appends the signature "J. M." instead of "J. M." to the version which he gives, that being the way in which he has read it from the first. Mr. Bond's contention that the signature is not Milton's, is first announced in a note to the Times of July 18th, from Mr. Rye of the Museum, written with a view to check the inconvenient rush by the public to the library to inspect the volume—has had a great influence in the formation of opinion on the authenticity of the poem. Nevertheless it does not appear to be considered as settling the matter, for both Professor Morley and Mr. Hopworth Dixon, while unwilling to take a position of decided opposition to the clearly-expressed opinion of each an expert as Mr. Bond, are yet strong in their belief that he is mistaken both as to signature and handwriting. Beside the changes which have been made in the reading of the poem by Mr. Bond and others, since Mr. Morley first published his transcript of it, it is possible that the suspicion of another Times correspondent may prove well founded, and that a closer examination which has given rather unnecessary trouble to the critics, seeing that Milton's grammatical constructions are sometimes careless, and often un-English, does not really exist in the manuscript. If this correction of "appears" for "appear" (line 4) shall come to be finally allowed, there will then have been eight changes made in the body of the poem since Mr. Morley first published it. Of these changes, one is essential for grammatical accuracy, and four are necessary to the sense; the remaining three are, perhaps, not of importance. It cannot be long, we think, especially if Mr. Morley shall publish, as he proposes, a fac-simile of the poem, before the true reading of every word will be settled beyond a question, and we shall be in full possession of the facts on which to found a decided opinion from internal evidence whether the poem was really written by Milton or not.

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force to the word 'pure,' which is a characteristic epithet more frequent in the works of Milton than I believe, in those of any other English poet." As for the quatrain itself, it may be well to remark that the thought contained in it is precisely the central thought of the Epitaph on Shakespeare, so that we have the striking coincidence of the occurrence, in both poems, of the same idea borrowed from another poet, but turned, and exalted in the turning, as to lead us from the conceit of a "fly in amber," to the inspiring thought that the dead may find a glorious sepulchre in the memory of those who survive them.

"Then pass on gently, ye that mourn! Touch not this one hollowed urn! These ashes when do here remain And by the hand of fate are slain A seminal form within the depths Of this little chaos sleeps; The thread of life unquiesced is Into its first consistencies Infant nature cradled here In its principles appear."

"Untill sweet Psyche shall inspire A sterner and a prouder life And in his fostering arms unfold This heavy and this earthly mould, Then as I am I'll be no more But bloom and blossom (as before) When this cold number shall retreat Into its native element."

We have printed in italics the words whose reading has been changed in consequence of a more careful study since Mr. Morley first published the poem. "Consistencies" was "existencies," "thus calcin'd" was "tho' enter'd," and "proffer" was "stiffle."

A writer signing himself "S. M. P.," publishes a letter in the Times of July 28, in which he concludes against the probability of the poem being Milton's, because, while the word "its" does not occur in the authorized translation of the Bible, nor, he believes, in Milton's Poems, and is only used three times in Shakespeare in the "Epitaph" it occurs no less than four times. This statement of "S. M. P." has had perhaps as much weight against the authenticity of the "Epitaph" as anything that has been brought forward; it has been extensively copied, and poor Lord Winchelsea, who in his zeal picks up any stone his hand touches without looking to see whether it be clean or not, has snatched this from S. M. P.'s hands, and thrown it with a resonant shout against Mr. Morley and his poem. But if, instead of the word "its" he had said "he had made a little inquiry, he would have found in a valuable book by that most accurate and pains-taking writer, Prof. George L. Craik, 'The English of Shakespeare,' that Shakespeare has used the word "its" four times, certainly, and according to some editions, seven times, and there may be other instances that have escaped Mr. Craik's observation, though it is difficult to speak positively, since Mrs. Clark's concordance does not include the word. So far as we know, and as is indeed probable, the word is not used in the authorized version of the Bible, but which is more to our purpose, Milton uses it at least twice. In Paradise Lost, l. 254: "The mind is its own place, and in itself Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven." And again, Paradise Lost, IV, 813:—