

Milton and the Water Supply of Cambridge

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When I turned 50, I somehow managed to get on the mailing list of Saga, the British company that specialises in services for the elderly. Opening the Saga magazine, I found advertisements for denture paste, incontinence pads, Zimmer frames and stair lifts. This was a vision of old age worthy of Hieronymus Bosch. Soon I would be sitting with my great-grandchildren, absent-mindedly stirring salt into my tea, and boring the youngsters with tales of my youth. In this context it is difficult to offer any consolation to our honorand on the occasion of this Festschrift. The celebration of an academic life is a cheering event, but it also marks a change in the rhythms of life, as the cycle of term and vacation mutates into a perpetual long vacation and thoughts turn to the question of how one will be remembered by academic colleagues at home and overseas. In the case of Jean Isserow, the short answer is that colleagues will think of her as one whose academic life had at its centre a notion of community that ranged in its expression from hospitality to countless small acts of kindness to colleagues. As academic life becomes more 'professional' and less humane, Jean stands as a smiling symbol of the world we have lost. This is not, however, a self-fashioned image, but one that her admirers have constructed around her.

Milton, by contrast, wanted to be in charge of the ways he was to be remembered. In 1674, at the age of 65, he began to think about the profile of publications that he would bequeath to posterity. In the years since his sixtieth birthday he had begun to empty his filing cabinet with a view to publishing those youthful works that had never found a publisher. In 1669 he had blown the dust off the Latin grammar that he had written in the 1640s and published it as *Accedence Commenced Grammar*; in 1670 he had registered *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* for publication: the former was a fairly recent work, but *Samson* was a play on which Milton had worked intermittently for many years, and he revised it thoroughly before publication. He published these two works

together in 1671, and the following year published his youthful *Artis Logicae*. In 1673 he published the second edition of his *Poems*, adding the short poems that he had written since the first edition of 1645. In 1674 he published the second edition of *Paradise Lost*, which he had reworked as a poem in 12 books. The filing cabinet was almost empty, but Milton's timing was exemplary—a few months later he was to move to the great seminar room in the sky.

At the bottom of the cabinet lay copies of 31 Latin letters which Milton had written over the years, and he decided to publish them. The publisher fretted that there would be too little substance and too many blank pages in such a collection, and so asked Milton for some extra material, something that might serve, as he was to explain in his Latin preface, 'as a makeweight to compensate for the slimness of the letters or at least fill in the blank pages'. Milton was happy to oblige, and produced for the delighted publisher seven of the academic exercises that he had written half a century earlier, when he had been a student at Cambridge. These academic exercises were published as Milton's *Prolusiones*, and so came to be known in English as prolusions, a term now in use only by members of the tribe of Miltonisti.

Little is known about the dates or occasions of these prolusions, and their relationship, especially that of *Prolusion 6*, to the University's formal requirements is imperfectly understood. The MA, on which Milton embarked after taking his BA in 1629, required six academic exercises, three of which were to be delivered in College (like Milton's *Prolusions 1, 4 and 7*) and three in the Public Schools (like Milton's *2, 3 and 5*); the glove does not quite fit, however, because some of Milton's prolusions are clearly undergraduate exercises. *Prolusion 6* is an anomaly, in part because only the opening section resembles a normal academic exercise, but also because this prolusion was occasioned by a college festivity rather than a university regulation. One of the commonplaces of Milton criticism is that the only safe point of anchorage in the perilous waters of the prolusions is the fact that *Prolusion 6* can confidently be dated July 1628, at the end of Milton's penultimate year as an undergraduate. My destructive purpose in this essay is to declare that anchorage point unsafe.

Prolusion 6 consists of Milton's contribution, in three parts, to an academic entertainment known in English as a vacation exercise. The Latin portion consists of an oration on the theme *exercitationes nonnunquam ludicras philosophiae studiis non obesse* ('that light-hearted entertainments are sometimes not prejudicial to philosophical studies') and a second section, unhelpfully headed

'*Prolusio*', which introduces a student entertainment; this section ends with Milton's defiant announcement that he proposed to leap over the walls of the college regulations (which forbade the use of English); the third section is Milton's English poem 'At a Vacation Exercise in the College'. Listening to old men telling dirty jokes is always embarrassing, and in this instance the blushes are compounded by our awareness that as an undergraduate Milton was shy and inhibited; he refused to join the lads in visits to the local brothels, and when his manhood was consequently called into question by the cruel nickname 'the Lady', he responded by invoking a dormant college regulation that allowed undergraduates to wear a sword. The prolusion offered an occasion for Milton to ingratiate himself to his fellow students with some coarse humour. In one typical passage, Milton challenges any member of the audience who is sitting like a Sphinx and not laughing (I cite the brilliant translation of John Hale) to 'express some gastric riddles to us, not from his Sphinx but from his sphincter, his Posterior Analytics'. The pun would please Lacan, if not his (m)other.

The prolusion is commonly dated July 1628, and Milton is assumed to have read it to the assembled students of Christ's College on or close to 4 July, the last day of the Easter Term. The reason for this confidence is that the accompanying poem, 'At a Vacation Exercise', was dated *anno aetatis 19* by Milton when he first printed it in 1674. Milton's usual practice in deploying this Latin formula would suggest that it means 'at the age of 19' rather than 'in his nineteenth year' so that the poem must have been written for the Vacation Exercise of July 1628, when Milton was 19 years old. The two prose pieces are dated *in feriis aetivis Collegii* ('in the College vacation'), which may imply that the festivities took place immediately after the end of term. This is not as problematical as it might sound to academics accustomed to the delightful thunder of student feet that marks the exodus at the beginning of the summer vacation, because seventeenth-century English undergraduates did not keep term: they often arrived in the middle of term and stayed up during the vacations. At the beginning of the prolusion Milton speaks of himself as a sophister, which means that he was a second or third year undergraduate; in the summer of 1628 he had just completed his third year.

The case for 4 July 1628 is never questioned by scholars, but it is not unproblematical. It seems odd that Milton did not mention his central role in the vacation exercise when he wrote from Cambridge to his friend Alexander Gil on 2 July 1628, nor when he wrote (again from Cambridge) to his former tutor

S.A. JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES

Thomas Young on 21 July. Another difficulty is presented by Milton's statement that the exercises had not been held the previous year. The year in which public exercises were cancelled was not 1627, but rather 1630, when the University was closed from April to November because of an outbreak of plague. The allusion to cancelled festivities the previous year would therefore seem to point to 1631 as a likely date for the prolusion. After an interval of more than 40 years, Milton's memory may not have been entirely accurate.

In 1982 *Prolusion 6* was shown to be a 'salting', a raucous ceremonial initiation for first-year students, and subsequent research has fleshed out that discovery (see Freidberg, Milton, Nelson and Richek). It therefore seems possible that contemporary references could help to date the prolusion. The English poem, in commanding 'Rivers' to arise, seems to be addressing either George or Nizell Rivers, the sons of Sir John Rivers who were admitted on 10 May 1628. (Records of students may be found in the 'Admissions Books' and in Peile.) Similarly, the student playing the part of Substance, of whom Milton says that 'o'er all his brethren he shall reign as king', is likely to refer to one of the King brothers, but they were so numerous that one or more of the brothers was in residence at every possible date: John King may have left after taking his BA in early 1624, but Roger and Edward (later Milton's Lycidas) had been admitted on 9 June 1626, and Henry and Adam on 9 June 1631. The 'spark-flashing Cerberus' who stands at the threshold must be the porter who is named in the college accounts (from 1626–32) as Sparks; the 'burning furnace' may be Edward Furnise, who had been admitted on 29 May 1628.

The passage in which Milton enumerates various birds also seems promising. The two Irish birds were presumably King brothers, who were the only Irish undergraduates, unless John Digby, Anglo-Hibernicus, admitted 24 March 1627, is part of the allusion. But who were the other birds? Even if we set aside undergraduates called Philip (who could conceivably be construed as sparrows) and those whose names contain ornithic elements (e.g. Roger Hawkridge, Richard Duckset, William Fincham and Brian Fowler), the roll call of Christ's as set out in its Admissions Book positively flutters with birdnames. A few months after Milton matriculated, William Finch (BA 1629, MA 1632) was admitted to the College (2 July 1625); Jeremiah Goose (BA 1631, MA 1634) was registered on 25 April 1627, and his younger brother John Goose (who left without a degree) was admitted on 26 January 1630. If Milton's joke about geese refers to these brothers, 1628 would be too early; the allusion is, however, rendered problematical by the fact that Milton refers to 'several' geese (*complures*), and

two is an insufficient number. The birds also include Thomas Bird (BA 1631), who was admitted on 29 January 1627, and his younger brother Samuel Bird (BA 1632, MA 1635), who joined the College on 17 May 1628. Finally George Cocke was admitted on 28 January 1628 and his younger brother Robert Cocke on 24 February 1631.

The evidence is not conclusive, but it would seem that the birds only begin to flock in large numbers if the date of the prolusion is 1631. That date would be consistent with Milton's allusion to the ceremonies having been cancelled the previous year. Our uncertainty about the date could be resolved if we could date the student disturbance described by Milton as the cause of the sudden departure of the master of ceremonies, whom Milton had replaced at short notice. Again I cite John Hale's sparkling translation:

The republic of fools is in crisis, it seems, and almost collapsing; and I have been made its emergency leader to save it—though goodness knows how I earned the distinction. Why me? Why indeed, when the famous leader and commander of the Sophisters has been eagerly touting for the job, and would have carried out its duties bravely! After all, it's not long since this hardened warrior resolutely led a force of up to fifty Sophisters, armed with short staves, across Barnwell Field. He was all set to besiege the town in best military fashion, and wrecked their aqueduct, in order to force the townsfolk to surrender from thirst. I feel utmost grief at the man's recent departure from Cambridge; it leaves us, one and all, not only unheaded but beheaded.

No record of a student attack on the water supply has ever been found. The archives of Cambridge University and Christ's College record no disturbances involving the students of Christ's in the summer of 1628 (though Trinity students rioted in June 1628). The records of the Vice-Chancellor's Court, to which I was pointed by Dr Elisabeth Leedham-Green (Deputy University Archivist), contain a fragmentary account of an incident involving five students of Christ's College in April 1631 (fols 132–33). The two postgraduates were Ewers Gower (BA 1627, later BD) and Richard Buckenham (BA 1629, MA 1632); the three undergraduates were William Troutbeck (BA 1632, MA 1635), Henry Bate (matriculated 1628, did not graduate) and Alexander Kirby (BA 1632, MA 1635).

S.A. JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE STUDIES

The account in the court records is fragmentary, and reads like a set of notes rather than a narrative. Some rowdy students misbehaving in the nearby village of Chesterton were arrested by Chesterton constables and locked up in a room in a tavern called the Green Dragon. Some Chesterton men, presumably customers at the tavern, joined these 'schollers' and carried on drinking with them, eventually releasing them. The narrative lapses, but it would seem that the students were pursued and recaptured, and Gower and Troutbeck are said to have effected a 'rescue' near the 'backside' of Christ's. This would seem to imply that someone had fallen into the river or, more likely, the King's Ditch, an artificial watercourse (completed in 1215 and rebuilt in 1610) that drew a line across the loop of the River Cam that contains Cambridge, so turning Cambridge (technically) into an island. The King's Ditch ran behind Christ's College (and fed a pond in its garden), so could have been the site of a rescue.

How might this account be reconciled to Milton's description of the attack on the town's water supply? Chesterton and Barnwell Field are so close to each other that either name could be used. Henry Bate did not graduate, so he could have been the leader of the sophisters who was sent down for bad behaviour; if, on the other hand, the leader was merely rusticated for a time, then the better candidate is Gower, who was the oldest of the students, and in the court records is called Sir Gower as a term of respect. The attack on the water supply seems problematical until one realises that Milton is a student speaking to other students about a group of drunken students who were in all likelihood urinating in the river.

This legal record does not solve the problem of the date of Milton's prolusion, because the connection with Milton's account is possible rather than proven, and some strands of evidence (particularly the fact that Milton describes himself as a sophister) point to composition in 1628 rather than 1631. The prolusion is filled with topical references, many of which are not now understood. When the prolusion has been subjected to detailed study, it may yield more of its secrets, but in the interim its date must be regarded as uncertain. By the time the riddle is solved, both the honorand of this volume and the present author may have advanced so far into senility that on hearing the news we might remember Milton only as a brand of sterilising fluid. Indeed, Milton's Fluid is in use: Miltonists who have occasion to visit British hospitals are sometimes startled to see a sign informing staff that 'Milton must be kept locked up at all times'.

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