Lycidas
John Milton (1638)

In this Monody the Author bewails a learned Friend, unfortunately drown'd in his Passage from Chester on the Irish Seas, 1637. And by occasion fortels the ruine of our corrupted Clergy then in their height.

YEt once more, O ye Laurels, and once more
Ye Myrtles brown, with Ivy never-sear,
I com to pluck your Berries harsh and crude,
And with forc'd fingers rude,
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year. [ 5 ]
Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear,
Compels me to disturb your season due:
For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer:
Who would not sing for Lycidas? he knew [ 10 ]
Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.
He must not flote upon his watry bear
Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
Without the meed of som melodious tear.

Begin then, Sisters of the sacred well, [ 15 ]
That from beneath the seat of Jove doth spring,
Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string.
Hence with denial vain, and coy excuse,
So may som gentle Muse
With lucky words favour my destin'd Urn, [ 20 ]
And as he passes turn,
And bid fair peace be to my sable shrowd.
For we were nurst upon the self-same hill,
Fed the same flock, by fountain, shade, and rill.

Together both, ere the high Lawns appear'd [ 25 ]
Under the opening eye-lids of the morn,
We drove a field, and both together heard
What time the Gray-fly winds her sultry horn,
Batt'ning our flocks with the fresh dews of night,
Oft till the Star that rose, at Ev'n'ing, bright [ 30 ]
Toward Heav'n's descent had slop'd his westering wheel.
Mean while the Rural ditties were not mute,
Temper'd to th' Oaten Flute,
Rough Satyrs danc'd, and Fauns with clov'n heel,
From the glad sound would not be absent long, [ 35 ]
And old Damætas lov'd to hear our song.

Source URL: http://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/lycidas/index.shtml
Saylor URL: http://www.saylor.org/courses/engl402/

Attributed to: [Thomas H. Luxon]
But O the heavy change, now thou art gon,
Now thou art gon, and never must return!
Thee Shepherd, thee the Woods, and desert Caves,
With wilde Thyme and the gadding Vine o'regrown, [ 40 ]
And all their echoes mourn.
The Willows, and the Hazle Copses green,
Shall now no more be seen,
Fanning their joyous Leaves to thy soft layes.
As killing as the Canker to the Rose, [ 45 ]
Or Taint-worm to the weanling Herds that graze,
Or Frost to Flowers, that their gay wardrop wear,
When first the White thorn blows;
Such, Lycidas, thy loss to Shepherds ear.

Where were ye Nymphs when the remorseless deep [ 50 ]
Clos'd o're the head of your lov'd Lycidas?
For neither were ye playing on the steep,
Where your old Bards, the famous Druids ly,
Nor on the shaggy top of Mona high,
Nor yet where Deva spreads her wisard stream: [ 55 ]
Ay me, I fondly dream!
Had ye bin there — for what could that have don?
What could the Muse her self that Orpheus bore,
The Muse her self, for her enchanting son
Whom Universal nature did lament, [ 60 ]
When by the rout that made the hideous roar,
His goary visage down the stream was sent,
Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore.

Alas! What boots it with uncessant care
To tend the homely slighted Shepherds trade, [ 65 ]
And strictly meditate the thankles Muse,
Were it not better don as others use,
To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,
Or with the tangles of Neæra's hair?
Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise [ 70 ]
(That last infirmity of Noble mind)
To scorn delights, and live laborious dayes;
But the fair Guerdon when we hope to find,
And think to burst out into sudden blaze,
Comes the blind Fury with th' abhorred shears, [ 75 ]
And slits the thin spun life. But not the praise,
Phoebus repli'd, and touch'd my trembling ears;
Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,
Nor in the glistening foil
Set off to th' world, nor in broad rumour lies, [ 80 ]
But lives and spreds aloft by those pure eyes,
And perfet witnes of all judging Jove;
As he pronounces lastly on each deed,
Of so much fame in Heav'n expect thy meed.
    O Fountain Arathuse, and thou honour'd flood, [ 85 ]
Smooth-sliding Mincius, crown'd with vocall reeds,
That strain I heard was of a higher mood:
But now my Oate proceeds,
And listens to the Herald of the Sea
That came in Neptune's plea, [ 90 ]
He ask'd the Waves, and ask'd the Fellon winds,
What hard mishap hath doom'd this gentle swain?
And question'd every gust of rugged wings
That/blows from off each beaked Promontory,
They knew not of his story, [ 95 ]
And sage Hippotades their answer brings,
That not a blast was from his dungeon stray'd,
The Ayr was calm, and on the level brine,
Sleek Panope with all her sisters play'd.
It was that fatall and perfidious Bark [ 100 ]
Built in th' eclipse, and rigg'd[ with curses dark,
That sunk so low that sacred head of thine.
    Next Camus, reverend Sire, went footing slow,
His Mantle hairy, and his Bonnet sedge,
Inwrought with figures dim, and on the edge [ 105 ]
Like to that sanguine flower inscrib'd with woe.
Ah! Who hath reft (quoth he) my dearest pledge?
Last came, and last did go,
The Pilot of the Galilean lake,
Two massy Keyes he bore of metals twain, [ 110 ]
(The Golden opes, the Iron shuts amain)
He shook his Miter'd locks, and stern bespake,
How well could I have spar'd for thee young
swainhttp://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/lycidas/notes.shtml -line113,
Anow of such as for their bellies sake,
Creep and intrude, and climb into the fold? [ 115 ]
Of other care they little reck'ning make,
Then how to scramble at the shearers feast,
And shove away the worthy bidden guest.
Blind mouthes! that scarce themselves know how to hold
A Sheep-hook, or have learn'd ought els the least [ 120 ]
That to the faithfull Herdmans art belongs!
What recks it them? What need they? They are sped;
And when they list, their lean and flashy songs
Grate on their scrannel Pipes of wretched straw,
The hungry Sheep look up, and are not fed, [125]
But swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw,
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread:
Besides what the grim Woolf with privy paw
Daily devours apace, and nothing sed,
But that two-handed engine at the door, [130]
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.

Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past,
That shrunk thy streams; Return Sicilian Muse,
And call the Vales, and bid them hither cast
Their Bels, and Flourrets of a thousand hues. [135]
Ye valleys low where the milde whispers use,
Of shades and wanton winds, and gushing brooks,
On whose fresh lap the swart Star sparely looks,
Throw hither all your quaint enameld eyes,
That on the green terf suck the honied showres, [140]
And purple all the ground with vernal flowres.
Bring the rathe Primrose that forsaken dies.
The tufted Crow-toe, and pale Jasmine,
The white Pink, and the Pansie freakt with jeat,
The glowing Violet. [145]
The Musk-rose, and the well attir'd Woodbine,
With Cowslips wan that hang the pensive hed,
And every flower that sad embroidery wears:
Bid Amaranthus all his beauty shed,
And Daffadillies fill their cups with tears, [150]
To strew the Laureat Herse where Lycid lies.
For so to interpose a little ease,
Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise.
Ay me! Whilst thee the shores and sounding Seas
Wash far away, where ere thy bones are hurld, [155]
Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides,
Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide
Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world;
Or whether thou to our moist vows deny'd,
Sleep'st by the fable of Bellerus old, [160]
Where the great vision of the guarded Mount
Looks toward Namancos and Bayona's hold;
Look homeward Angel now, and melt with ruth.
And, O ye Dolphins, waft the haples youth.

Weep no more, woful Shepherds weep no more, [165]
For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,
Sunk though he be beneath the watry floar,
So sinks the day-star in the Ocean bed,
And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
And tricks his beams, and with new-spangled Ore, [170]
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:
So _Lycidas_ sunk low, but mounted high,
Through the dear might of him that walk'd the waves;
Where other groves, and other streams along,
With _Nectar_ pure his oozy Lock's he laves, [175]
And hears the unexpressive nuptiall Song,
In the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love.
There entertain him all the Saints above,
In solemn troops, and sweet Societies
That sing, and singing in their glory move, [180]
And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.
Now _Lycidas_ the Shepherds weep no more;
Hence forth thou art the Genius of the shore,
In thy large recompense, and shalt be good
To all that wander in that perilous flood. [185]

Thus sang the uncouth Swain to th' Ækes and rills,
While the still morn went out with Sandals gray,
He touch'd the tender stops of various Quills,
With eager thought warbling his _Dorick_ lay:
And now the Sun had stretch'd out all the hills, [190]
And now was dropt into the Western bay;
At last he rose, and twitch'd his Mantle blew:
To morrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new.

Notes

*Introduction. Background and Text.* _Lycidas_ first appeared in a 1638 collection of elegies entitled _Justa Edouardo King Naufrago_. This collection commemorated the death of Edward King, a collegemate of Milton's at Cambridge who drowned when his ship sank off the coast of Wales in August, 1637. Milton volunteered or was asked to make a contribution to the collection. The present edition follows the copy of _Poems of Mr. John Milton_ (1645) in the Rauner Collection at Dartmouth College known as Hickmott 172. Milton made a few significant revisions to _Lycidas_ after 1638. These revisions are noted as they occur.

*Form and Structure.* The structure of _Lycidas_ remains somewhat mysterious. J. Martin Evans argues that there are two movements with six sections each that seem to mirror each other. Arthur Barker believes that the body of _Lycidas_ is composed of three movements that run parallel in pattern. That is, each movement begins with an invocation, then explores the conventions of the pastoral, and ends with a conclusion to Milton's "emotional problem" (quoted in Womack).

*Voice.* Milton's epigram labels _Lycidas_ a "monody": a lyrical lament for one voice. But the poem has several voices or personae, including the "uncouth swain" (the
main narrator), who is "interrupted" first by Phoebus (Apollo), then Camus (the river Cam, and thus Cambridge University personified), and the "Pilot of the Galilean lake" (St. Peter). Finally, a second narrator appears for only the last eight lines to bring a conclusion in ottava rima (see F. T. Prince). Before the second narrator enters, the poem contains the irregular rhyme and meter characteristic of the Italian canzone form. Canzone is essentially a polyphonic lyrical form, hence creating a serious conflict with the "monody." Milton may have meant "monody" in the sense that the poem should be regarded more as a story told completely by one person as opposed to a chorus. This person would presumably be the final narrator, who seemingly masks himself as the "uncouth swain." This concept of story-telling ties Lycidas closer to the genre of pastoral elegy.

Genre. Lycidas is a pastoral elegy, a genre initiated by Theocritus, also put to famous use by Virgil and Spenser. Christopher Kendrick asserts that one's reading of Lycidas would be improved by treating the poem anachronistically, that is, as if it was one of the most original pastoral elegies. Also, as already stated, it employs the irregular rhyme and meter of an Italian canzone. Stella Revard suggests that Lycidas also exhibits the influence of Pindaric odes, especially in its allusions to Orpheus, Alpheus, and Arethusa. The poem's arrangement in verse paragraphs and its introduction of various voices and personae are also features that anticipate epic structures. Like the form, structure, and voice of Lycidas, its genre is deeply complex. 

Monody. A lyrical lament for one voice.

height. The headnote — "In this Monody ... height." — did not appear in 1638 (Justa Edouardo King). This addition might be due to the less strict laws regarding published texts. The Trinity MS has the headnote but without the final sentence: "And by occasion ... height." The clergy Milton refers to is the clergy of the English Church as ruled by William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, a champion of traditional liturgy and the bane of reformist Puritans. Bishops fell out of power in 1642, between the two editions.

Friend. Edward King, a schoolmate of Milton's at Cambridge who drowned when his ship sank off the coast of Wales in August, 1637. King entered Christ's College in 1626 when he was 14 years old. Upon finishing his studies, King was made a Fellow of Christ's thanks to his patron King Charles I. The Trinity MS of Lycidas is dated Nov. 1637, three months after King's death. Never-shear. Never withered. 1638 has "never-sere". Laurel was considered the emblem of Apollo, myrtle of Venus, and ivy of Bacchus.

Lycidas. The name Lycidas is common in ancient Greek pastorals, establishing the style Milton imitates for this poem. William Collins Watterson notes that in Theocritus' pastoral, Lycidas loses a singing competition. Watterson asserts that
Milton is aligning King with Lycidas in an attempt to portray himself as victorious over King. Virgil's ninth Eclogue is spoken in part by the shepherd Lycidas, a scene that includes, as Balachandra Rajan points out, a reference to social injustice. Lucan's Civil Wars 3.657-58 also tells the story of a Lycidas pulled to pieces during a sea battle by a grappling hook.

_Lycidas?_ An echo of Virgil; "Who would not sing for Gallus?" (Eclogue 10.5).

_Bear._ Bier, or funeral platform. 1638 has "biere".

Begin then, Sisters. Following the pastoral tradition of Theocritus, Moschus, and Virgil, Milton invokes the muses to begin the lament. See Virgil's Eclogue 4.1. The sisters are the nine muses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne (memory). Their sacred well is called Aganippe on Mount Helicon, just a bit lower than the "seat" of Jove.

_lucky._ It would certainly be bad luck to refuse an invitation to sing for the dead. Virgil's persona implies as much in Eclogue 10.5-6. See also OED2.

_opening._ 1638 has "glimmering" instead of "opening"; The Trinity MS replaces "glimmering" with "opening".

_Batt'ning._ Feeding.

_Star._ Venus as Hesperus, the evening star. 1638 has "ev'n-starre" in place of "Star that rose, at Ev'ning,". The Trinity MS corrected the 1638 reading to "Oft till the star that rose in evening bright".

_westering._ 1638 has "burnisht" in place of "westering"; Trinity MS initiated the change to "westering".

_th'Oaten Flute._ A Panpipe, or the flute used by Pan, traditionally associated with the songs of shepherds. See Virgil's Eclogues 10.64-5. Spenser calls him "God of shepheards all" in The Shepheardes Calendar, "December," 7. Drawing of Pan playing a panpipe.

_Satyrs._ Mythical goat-men renowned for lust. Milton is probably referring to his (and King's) classmates at Christ's. Picture.

_Damoetas._ A traditional pastoral name, see Virgil's Eclogue 3. Also a clownish shepherd named Damoetas appears in Sidney's Arcadia. Search Dartmouth's Library catalog. Milton might be referring to Christ's College tutor William Chappel.

_to hear our song._ The narrator imagines that he and King were shepherds (poets and students) in the same pasture (Christ's College, Cambridge) and learned
from the same master, William Chappel (perhaps personified here as Old Damoetas).

*gadding.* Wandering, unruly.

*Canker.* Cankerworm, a garden pest.

Taint-worm. Intestinal parasite that afflicts young calves, that is, weanlings.

*weanling.* Young livestock, recently weaned from mother's milk.

*wardrop.* Wardrobe. 1638 has "wardrobe".

*blows.* Blossoms.

*Bards.* Ancient Druid poet-singers: "An ancient Celtic order of minstrel-poets, whose primary function appears to have been to compose and sing (usually to the harp) verses celebrating the achievements of chiefs and warriors, and who committed to verse historical and traditional facts, religious precepts, laws, genealogies, etc." (OED2).

*Mona.* Anglesey, an Island off the west coast of Britain, once the home of Celtic druids.

*Deva.* The river Dee, where Chester, King's destination, stands. Spenser's Faerie Queene 4.11.39 refers to the Dee as "divine."

*fondly.* Foolishly, idly.

*Lesbian shore.* Calliope, daughter of Jupiter and Mnemosyne was Orpheus's mother and a muse. Orpheus, according to legend, could charm animals, birds, and even inanimate bits of nature with his music. For Milton, as for many others, he serves as a personified symbol of the power of poetic song. For the story of the death of Orpheus, see Ovid's Metamorphoses 11.1-66. Also see Albrecht Dürer's 1494 engraving, Death of Orpheus.

*strictly.* 1638 misprints this as "stridly".

*Or with.* 1638 has "Hid in the" in place of "Or with". "Or with" is a Trinity MS correction.

*Amaryllis.* The names of the nymphs, Amaryllis and Neaera, are conventional, borrowed from Virgil's Eclogues 1.4-5 and Eclogues 3.3.

*Guerdon.* Reward.
Fury. Milton refers to fate or destiny here as a "Fury," as if one of the Eumendies from classical Greek drama. Some traditions personify the Fates as three sisters, the sisters of destiny; one spins the thread of life, one measures out its length, and the third snips it with shears. Hughes asserts that this figure is Atropos. See Plato's *Republic* 620e.

Phoebus. Apollo. Virgil, in *Eclogues* 6.5-6, imagines the "Cynthian god" plucking at his ear.

foil. Hughes notes that a foil is the "setting of a gem".

Arethuse. A fountain in Sicily associated with poetic inspiration (see *Arcades* 30-31). Mincius is the river of Virgil's hometown, Mantua. Virgil associates the Mincius with his own pastoral verse in *Eclogues* 7. 15-16 and *Georgics* 3. 20-21. higher mood. Epic poetry was considered to be a more elevated form than pastoral, thus in a higher mode.

Herald. Triton, a sea-god usually pictured with a trumpet.

plea. That is, at Neptune's request, to testify in his defence.

swain. A shepherd; a word frequently used by Theocritus, Virgil, and Spenser.

Hippotades. Homeric epithet for Aeolus, the wind-god, son of Hippotas. See *Odyssey* 10.3.

Panope. A sea nymph.

Bark. Small ship.

th'eclipse. A ship built during an eclipse might be imagined to be either cursed with bad luck or simply ill-built as a result.

Camus. Personification of the river Cam, which runs through Cambridge. This personification draws comparisons to Virgil's personification of Mincius, the river that runs through his home town.

sanquine flower. The Hyacinth. Apollo made this flower from the blood of his beloved Hyacinthus, whom he accidentally killed. The story is in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 10.214-16.

The Pilot. It is commonly accepted that this refers to St. Peter, to whom Christ gave "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19). Peter's first meeting with Jesus is told in Luke 5:2-4.
**Miter'd.** A miter is a liturgical headress worn by bishops.

**Line 113.** 1645 has a period at the end of this line, but that appears to be an error, especially since the line is the last on the page in 1645.

**Anow.** Enough. 1638 has "Enough".

**into the fold.** See John 10:1.

**Blind mouthes!** John Ruskin suggests that "a bishop means a person who sees" and a "pastor means one who feeds. The most unbishoply character...is therefore to be blind. The most unpastoral is, instead of feeding, to want to be fed,—to be a mouth" (quoted in Orgel and Goldberg).

**scrannel.** Thin, shriveled.

**Lines 121-127.** An echo of Menalcas' sentiments in Virgil's *Ecologues* 3.8 1, 4-9, 30-4.

**Woolf.** The Roman Catholic Church.

**privy.** Secret. See 2 Peter 2:1. Perhaps also a pun on the Privy Council.

**nothing.** Critics dispute whether "little" should stand. In accordance with 1645, most modern editions use "nothing."

**sed.** 1638 has "said".

**two-handed engine.** The meaning of this phrase has generated much commentary. Orgel's assertion, that it is a sword large enough to require two hands to use, is commonly accepted.

**smite once, and smite no more.** See Matthew 26:31 and Mark 14: 27-9. *Alpheus.* Personification of a river in Greece and also the god who fell in love with Arethusa and pursued her until she was turned into a fountain. See Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 5.865-875.

**swart Star.** Sirius, the dog star, is ascendant during the hottest days of the year; hence the term, "dog days."

**rathe.** Ready to bloom.

**Crow-toe.** Wild hyacinth.

**Gessamine.** Jasmine, a climbing shrub with fragrant flowers.
freakt. Flecked or streaked whimsically or capriciously; variegated. See OED2.

"Freakt with jeat" (jet, black) means flecked with black streaks or spots.

wan. Pale.

Amaranthus. In the garden of Eden, an immortal flower (Paradise Lost 3.353-57). See also Spenser's Faerie Queene 3.6.45 (search "Amaranthus").

Daffadillies. This flower list, a typical pastoral element, was first added to the Trinity MS on a separate sheet of paper and marked for insertion here. Sacks contrasts this section with the plucking at the beginning of the poem (line 3). He asserts, "the anger has been purged, and the rewards (the undying flowers of praise) have been established."

Hebrides. The Hebrides lie off the west coast of Scotland.

whelming. Overwhelming, or drowning. 1638 has "humming". Trinity MS also has "humming", changed to "whelming" by marginal hand in BM and Cambridge copies of Justa Eduardo King (Carey & Fowler).

moist. Tear-dampened.

Bellerus. A giant for whom Land's End was called Bellerium in Roman times.

guarded Mount. Mount St. Michael's, near Land's End on the Cornish coast, across the Channel from Mont St. Michel. Milton imagines the patron saint of England looking out from here to guard England from overseas (Catholic) religion. Namancos is in Spain and Bayona a fortress near Cape Finisterre.

Look homeward. The Angel could refer to either St. Michael, whose mount it is, or Lycidas. In either case, the injunction is for him to turn his eye from the threat of Spain (represented by Namancos and Bayona) and instead to look homeward, where Lycidas has drowned (Orgel & Goldberg). Lawrence Lipking identifies the angel with Michael.

Dolphins. Dolphins were thought by sailors to be a good omen at sea, looking after the ship and guarding it from peril.

him that walk'd the waves. Alluding to Jesus, who walked on water according to Matthew 14:25-26.

weep no more. Recalls the opening line of the poem "Yet once more, O ye Laurels, and once more." The invocation to begin the lament is repeated as the invitation to end the lament.
unexpressive nuptial Song. According to Hughes, "the unutterable nuptial Song is sung at the marriage supper of the Lamb." See Revelation 14:9. Janet E. Halley makes important points about the unacknowledged homoerotic features of Milton's pastoral heaven here and in Epitaphium Damonis (see her "Female Autonomy" 241-242).

In the blest Kingdoms meek of joy and love. 1638 omits this line entirely. wipe the tears. See Revelation 7:17.

Genius. The spirit or guardian angel of the place.

Dorick. The sort of Greek spoken in Crete and Laconia. Also the dialect preferred by Theocritus and Bion, the earliest practitioners of pastoral verse. A doric lay is the sort of song sung by pastoral poets in doric.

Quills. The hollow reeds of the shepherd's pipes; the stops are the holes one covers with fingers to make different notes sound.

Pastures new. See the end of Virgil's Eclogues10. 70-97.