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## UNIT 21 'L'ALLEGRO', 'IL PENSEROSO' AND THE SONNETS

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### 21.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this block, you will study some of the major poems and sonnets of Milton.

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### 21.1 INTRODUCTION

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It is impossible to fully understand and appreciate John Milton's 'L'Allegro' without also reading its companion piece, 'Il Penseroso'. 'L'Allegro' gives an account of 'the happy person', imagined in the poem as spending an idyllic day in the country, followed by a gay evening in the city. 'Il Penseroso' repeats this but for 'the meditative person' whose hours are passed in meditative, solipsistic walking in the woods and studying in a 'lonely Tower'. First published in 1645, the two poems are thus deliberately posed as dialectical opposites with a strong complementarity of structure and images. When reading them, the sense of dual impulses, of a poet being drawn in two opposing directions simultaneously, is very strong. We may even read them as explicitly posing the two attitudes to the vocation of poetry that so haunt Milton, and that we have seen him striving to reconcile in our studies of the preceding units. Here again, the poems do not individually embody any one strain alone, of either the classical or the Christian, but weave the two together from two different standpoints. Let us now examine the poems in some detail.

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### 21.2 'L'ALLEGRO'

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The poem opens with an address to Melancholy, rather than Mirth, which takes the first ten lines. Following this the poem changes rhythm. The first ten lines are of alternating length, switching from the iambic pentameter to the trimeter. The staccato effect of this reinforces the sense of anger and revulsion towards Melancholy that the poem wishes to communicate. The switch to the more relaxed and consistent measure of the tetrameter for the rest of the poem announces the poet's fixity of attention in dealing with the theme.

The poem essentially outlines the events of one day, spent for the most part in the countryside, where the pleasures of the country and the beauty of the rural landscape are explored. Like with many of Milton's poems, there is a strong yet subdued

element of sensuality in his descriptions of the rural scenes. In this particular poem, the sensuality is enhanced by the trope of the union or coupling that haunts the poem.

Mountains on whose barren brest  
The labouring clouds do often rest:  
Meadows trim with Daisies pickt,  
Shallow Brooks, and Rivers wide.  
Towers, and Battlements it sees  
Boosom'd high in tufted Trees,  
Wher perhaps som beauty lies,  
The Cynosure of neighbouring eyes. [ll. 73-80]

Here the mountains and clouds are a pair, while the battlements 'boosoin'd' with tufted trees lead easily onto the figure of the beauty lying in wait within – almost as if the battlements were the external manifestation of the beauty inside. This subtle emphasis on sensuality and sexual union is never elaborated into a full-fledged theme but remains a condition of the possibility of Mirth. We must also keep in mind that sensuality and sexuality were and are conventionally an integral part of celebrations of Mirth or gaiety, part of the discourse of the comic and ludic that Milton inherits from the classical. While Milton's own poem never itself becomes comic, it celebrates comedy as inherent to Mirth or the condition of joy. One of the most striking images in the poem is that of the companions of Mirth:

Haste thee nymph, and bring with thee  
Jest and youthful Jollity,  
Quips and Cranks, and wanton Wiles,  
Nods, and Becks, and Wreathed Smiles,  
Such as hang on Hebe's cheek,  
And love to live in dimple sleek;  
Sport that wrinckled Care derides,  
And Laughter holding both his sides. [ll.25-32]

The comic dimension to the poem, like its sensuality, is never allowed to grow into a full theme. Rather, along with the sensuality, it serves to dignify Mirth, to give it credibility and honour as an attitude fit for the vocation of poetry. It thus leads on to become part of Milton's favourite concern, that of poetry and its relation to the attitude of the poet. After the rural scenes, with the close of day, the poem shifts to the city, and dwells on the pleasures and joys of night in the city, focusing on the court, its masques and music, and the pleasures of the spectacular.

And ever against eating Cares,  
Lap me in soft Lydian Aires,  
Married to immortal verse  
Such as the meeting soul may pierce  
In notes, with many a winding bout  
Of lincked sweetness long drawn out,  
With wanton heed, and giddy cunning... [ll. 135-141]

It is telling that the poem eventually locates the happening, the occurrence of poetry, only in the city. The countryside in this sense figures as an inchoate mass of sensuality that is given definition and substance in the more cultured practices of the artist in the city.

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### 21.3 'IL PENSEROSO'

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Like its companion poem, 'Il Penseroso' begins with a staccato derision of Mirth, and following the same metrical pattern, switches to the more consistent tetrameter couplet in the subsequent invocation of Melancholy.

But hail thou Goddess, sage and holy,  
Hail divinest Melancholy,  
Whose Saintly visage is too bright  
To hit the Sense of human sight;  
And therefore to our weaker view, [ 15 ]  
Ore laid with black staid Wisdoms hue.

It may be immediately noticed that the poet rejects the sensuality of the earlier poem, at least thematically. Melancholy is perceived to be beyond the human senses, and therefore associated with the colour black. This denuding of the senses becomes the precondition for the development of wisdom. Again in contrast to the emphasis on coupling and union in the earlier poem, this poem dwells on the pleasures of solitude and renunciation of the world. Consequently, it is not surprising that Melancholy is hailed as a nun:

Com pensive Nun, devout and pure,  
Sober, stedfast, and demure,  
All in a robe of darkest grain,  
Flowing with majestick train,  
And sable stole of Cipres Lawn, [ 35 ]  
Over thy decent shoulders drawn.

The last line above also indicates the asexuality that Milton wished to endow Melancholy with. Much of the early part of the poem takes place in the night, but the experience of the night is a solitary one, dominated by a sense of distance from humanity and by the presence of philosophy and literature. The pleasures of Melancholy are thus revealed to be essentially of the mind and soul rather than the body. The paradox is of course that much of the poem remains replete with the language of sensuality, even as that sensuality is rejected in favour of more cerebral and spiritual pleasures:

But, O sad Virgin, that thy power  
Might raise Musæus from his bower,  
Or bid the soul of Orpheus sing [ 105 ]  
Such notes as warbled to the string,  
Drew Iron tears down Pluto's cheek,  
And made Hell grant what Love did seek. [ll.103-108]

We will return to comment on this paradox when we discuss the two poems comparatively in the next section; for now we must note that the affinity for Melancholy in the poem returns the poet to the themes of art and literature – to the ideal attitude for the vocation of poetry.

The dawn of day signals the time to retire and sleep, This inversion of routines is also an inversion of the temporal sequence of the companion poem, suggesting that 'L' Allegro' is a poem that addresses the everyday circumstances of life, while 'Il Penseroso' works on the principle of distance from these.

Hide me from Day's garish eie,  
While the Bee with Honied thie,  
That at her flowry work doth sing,  
And the Waters murmuring  
With such consort as they keep,  
Entice the dewy-feather'd Sleep;  
And let som strange mysterious dream,  
Wave at his Wings in Airy stream,  
Of lively portrature display'd,  
Softly on my eye-lids laid. [ll. 141-150]

The contrast with the bee that works busily through the day is not accidental, but emphasizes the distance that the poet – or rather his persona in the poem – seeks from the activities of the day. Eventually, this persona turns to the cloister and 'the Hairy Gown and Mossy Cell' as the final site of solitude and peace, as the true location of Melancholy.

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## 21.4 COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION

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The pair of poems we have examined could represent one or all of a series of tensions and oppositions: between Day and Night; between Mirth and Melancholy; or between opposing courses to follow (of sensuality and study) in the pursuit of transcendence and union with God; or yet, Milton's old personal struggle between the classical and the Christian traditions. Setting aside his practiced Latin poetic hand, Milton chose to write these mirrored poems in English, even as he retained Latinate titles for them. Further, as with the poems examined in the previous unit, here too the poems are a highly complex and subtle interweaving of classical and English folklore, as well as imagery. The poems should be read aloud in order fully to appreciate their complementary sounds; 'L'Allegro's' lilting pitch and images of crowing roosters and singing larks deeply contrasts with 'Il Penseroso's' somber tone and the 'Lamp at midnight hour'.

Many critics have speculated that Milton prefers the pensive melancholy celebrated in 'Il Penseroso' because it represents the ascetic life of study, as opposed to 'L'Allegro's' which emphasizes a Dionysian, pleasure-seeking lifestyle. Milton appears to make this preference explicit in his sixth Elegy, written to Charles Diodati, when he tells his friend that Apollo, 'Bacchus, Ceres, and Venus all approve' of 'light Elegy' and assist poets in such compositions, but poets whose ambitions reach higher to the epic and heroic modes must eschew the dionysiac lifestyle for a more ascetic practice:

But they who Demigods and Heroes praise  
And feats perform'd in Jove's more youthful days,  
Who now the counsels of high heav'n explore,  
Now shades, that echo the Cerberian roar,  
Simply let these, like him of Samos live  
Let herbs to them a bloodless banquet give;  
In beechen goblets let their bev'rage shine,  
Cool from the chrystal spring, their sober wine!  
Their youth should pass, in innocence, secure  
From stain licentious, and in manners pure,  
Pure as the priest's, when robed in while he stands  
The fresh lustration ready in his hands. ('Elegy 6', 55-66)

The poet who seeks to attain the highest level of creative expression must embrace the divine, which can only be accomplished by following the path set out in 'Il Penseroso'.

Milton's invocation of the goddess Melancholy reminds one of his salutation to Mirth in 'L'Allegro', and sets up the parallel structure of the two poems. It also suggests a very specific body of sources, such as Robert Burton's comprehensive *Anatomy of Melancholy*, John Fletcher's song 'Melancholy', and Shakespeare's Hamlet Act 2, sc. 2, line 309. The concept of 'melancholia', however, has its origins in ancient Greece with Hippocrates and his 'humours theory' of the body, which was later revised by Aristotle and Galen. Milton's choice of 'Penseroso' in the title, over 'Melancolico' or 'Afflito', indicates his emphasis on the positive and spiritual aspects of Melancholy. While some critics argue that the two poems refer equally to Milton, others believe

that 'L'Allegro' was about his friend, Charles Diodati, while 'Il Penseroso' was autobiographical in nature.

Both the poems open with brief introductory stanzas of ten lines each, and in each case, the introduction is through the denouncement of the opposite emotion in the counterpart poem, locking the two poems into a necessarily dialectical reading. In both cases, the main bodies of the poems, after the introductory stanzas, follow the same fixed line and meter: rhyming couplets in the iambic tetrameter. The opening stanzas too, share an identical structure: a quatrain followed by a sestet. In both cases the rhyme scheme of the opening stanzas is a-b-b-a, followed by c-d-d-e-e-c. Again, the understanding we arrived at earlier for the 'Nativity' ode holds here too. The problem that Milton encounters in introductory passages, where he has to offer a somewhat discursive account of what will follow, is negotiated by alternating the rhyming lines to accommodate more complex sentences. This is abjured in the rest of the poem, for the terser rhyming couplet, sufficient to the demands of descriptive praise, as for instance in these lines from 'Il Penseroso':

Thee Chauntress oft the Woods among,  
I woo to hear thy eeven-Song;  
And missing thee, I walk unseen  
On the dry smooth-shaven Green,  
To behold the wandring Moon,  
Riding neer her highest noon,  
Like one that had bin led astray  
Through the Heav'ns wide pathles way;  
And oft, as if her head she bow'd,  
Stooping through a fleecy cloud. (ll. 63-72)

As importantly, the rhyming couplet maintains the sense of discipline necessary to the themes of the two poems, even as it permits an energetic, staccato rhythm to flow through the lines. While this adds to the sense of their being companion poems, it also indicates to us Milton's strong sense that both sensibilities – gaiety and melancholia – possess the power to produce powerful, passionate, yet controlled poetry, and at least on this criterion, there is little to choose between the two. If, as critics have suggested, Milton finally favours Melancholia, it is more likely to be because of his own poetic and thematic inclinations than because the one sensibility is in some way innately superior to the other. In this light if we return to the paradox we noted earlier while discussing 'Il Penseroso', we see that it emerges because the two attitudes are posed as oppositional, when in reality they are not, they are merely extensions within a continuum of human attitudes.

In terms of the similarities between the two poems, it is worth noting here that this is one instance when Milton seems to have drawn as close as he possibly ever does to the poetic fashions of his age. The poets we refer to as the Metaphysicals, like Donne and Marvell, were particularly fond of writing poetry that used dialogic voices, as for instance in Marvell's poem, 'A Dialogue between the Soul and the Body'. Just as in that poem, the basic conflict expressed in Milton's twin poems is that between the pleasures of the flesh and the pleasures of the mind or the spirit. The difference of course lies in the fact that in Marvell's poem the schism between body and soul is expressed internally, in the poem, as part of the same speaking voice, while the schism in Milton's two poems is external to the poem itself, and is perceptible only when the poems are read jointly. It is here that we identify a central humanistic concern emerging, in the treatment of the human spirit as torn between two equal forces, the call of the sensual world and the seductions of the intellectual and spiritual one. The difference in this regard between Marvell and Milton is as important as the similarity: where Milton is still able to externalise the schism, and present the voice within the poem as an integrated whole, in Marvell's poem the schism is already internalised and negotiated within the same poem, and the poetic voice itself splits in

two to accommodate it. In this Milton evidently remains closer to the older renaissance humanism.

'L'Allegro', 'Il Penseroso' and the Sonnets

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## 21.5 SONNETS 19 AND 23

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Dates ranging from 1651 to 1655 have been suggested for both Sonnet 19 and 23, but 1652 appears to be the best estimate. Sonnet 19's second line has often led readers to assume an earlier date because no one in the seventeenth century would express confidence about living much past 70, if that. If he wrote this line in 1652, he would be counting on 86 years. Milton's own father lived to be at least 84. Milton often understated his age and predated several poems in the 1645 *Poems*. He was anxious about his age and his personal attractiveness. He was also anxious about vocational belatedness. By 1652 Milton was totally blind. He had spent years fulfilling his duties to the Council of State. Now he was under malicious attack for defending Cromwell's government to the world and for his own advocacy of divorce, and even ridiculed for his blindness. He had always meant to write a great English epic, and now it must have seemed impossible. This brilliant sonnet is proof enough that his talent has not been rendered 'useless' by age and blindness.

Both sonnets follow the iambic pentameter of conventional sonnet as well as the octave-sestet pattern, and the octave in both sonnets follows the same kind of rhyme scheme, which is a-b-b-a-a-b-b-a. The sestet in the two sonnets however, differ slightly: where Sonnet 19 follows the scheme c-d-e-c-d-e, Sonnet 23 goes c-d-c-d-c-d. We will discuss these patterns in a moment; for now it is important to note that both sonnets deal with Milton's blindness. But the way in which the sense of blindness is experienced is different in each poem. In Sonnet 19 the blindness comes to represent for the poet a blindness of purpose in life itself, since it suggests the inability to practise his craft without which he feels he has

...one Talent which is death to hide,  
Lodg'd with me useless, though my Soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account... (ll. 3-6)

But having stated the lament, he is instructed by 'patience' to 'bear his milde yoaik' patiently, for as the famous last line of the sonnet states, 'They also serve who only stand and waite.' The poet thus derives consolation from humility, the poem then serving as a reminder to the poet and re-focusing his attention on the purpose of his poetry, which is not just the exercise of the talent for its own sake, but in the service of God. The sonnet is in this sense finally a religious sonnet. To this end, the octave-sestet scheme is adhered to in the progression of the poem itself, for the lament of the poet takes up the octave, while the argument against the lament follows in the sestet, which thus serves as a counter-point to the octave.

In contrast Sonnet 23 is a more ambiguous, somewhat mysterious sonnet, the person who is the object of which is not very clear. Apart from (but consistent with) the thematic ambiguity, the imagery in the sonnet is striking in its employment of light and dark, visibility and invisibility. The lady is presented to us as

...vail'd, yet to my fancied sight,  
Love, sweetness, goodness, in her person shin'd  
So clear, as in no face with more delight. (ll. 10-12)

This effect is furthered and intensified by the wraith-like quality of the figure which, Milton informs us, is like Alcestis, 'Rescu'd from death by force though pale and faint' (l. 4). Unlike the earlier sonnet which is fairly clear even in its articulation of an essentially religious doubt, this sonnet is seemingly simpler in its topic, yet far more

richly ambiguous in its treatment. It is further different from the previous sonnet in being closer to the metaphysical style that we have noted of the other poets of the age, especially in its brilliant yoking together of night and day in the last line. This is perhaps inevitable, given the poem's rather peculiarly metaphysical subject, which is the fundamental connection between vision and notions of reality – or in other words, the way in which transformations in perception can transform one's understanding of reality itself. A final difference between the two sonnets lies in the thematic refusal to adhere to the octave-sestet division, in Sonnet 23. The vision in the poem occupies 'almost all of it, and it is only in the final couplet that a reversal of perspective is effected, and we realise that the poet is talking about a fantastic vision rather than an actual one.

The difference in the rhyme schemes of the sestets between the two sonnets draws our attention yet again to the difference in theme and treatment. While Sonnet 19's c-d-e-c-d-e scheme serves well to articulate the longish argument which constitutes the consolation to the blind poet, since it permits the elaboration of extended sentences, Sonnet 23's c-d-c-d-c-d pattern works to limit the length of the sentences and statements, the pauses serving to enhance the sense of mystery. Further, in the latter scheme, the repetition of the same rhymes also serves to draw together and integrate the total experience of the poem as a singular one. In this sense at least, Milton's use of the sonnet form, while conventional, even classical, in Sonnet 19, becomes slightly unconventional with Sonnet 23.

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## 21.6 SOME ADDITIONAL REMARKS

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We have in this and the previous unit focused on Milton's evolution as a poet, through a brief study of some of his more important short poems. We have seen how he remains, in almost all his poetry, rooted in Biblical thought and imagery, which may therefore be understood to be the single most important influence on his work. In addition to this, however, we traced the influence of some earlier and classical poets, like Virgil and Ovid, and Spenser among his immediate predecessors. We noted how music plays an important role in Milton's poetry, both in theme and in form. We also noted how these early shorter works prefigure to a lesser or greater extent the themes, concerns and styles of his later epic, *Paradise Lost*. We focused primarily on understanding some of the stylistic and formal issues involved in the poems, in the course of the study. This is not to suggest that the poems are to be interpreted or studied only in this way. Milton's writing is no exception from the general rule-of-thumb that all literature has fundamental roots in its historical context, and may well be studied in these terms, alongside and integrating the more formal aspects of study.

This may appear a more difficult task with Milton than would normally be the case. We have seen the extent to which his writing is steeped in classical allusions and myths, and in the Bible. It can be deeply allegorical, as with the twin poems 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', or highly personal as with the sonnets. There seems little in his shorter poetry that alludes to the great social and political events of his age, at first glance, and they seem to constitute a universe of their own. This however, should not discourage the student from exploring the poems for their contextual affiliations. Some of these may be found as oblique presences, in descriptive passage in the poems, as for instance in these lines from 'L'Allegro':

Towred Cities please us then,  
And the busie humm of men,  
Where throngs of Knights and Barons bold,  
In weeds of Peace high triumphs hold,  
With store of Ladies, whose bright eies  
Rain influence, and judge the prise

Of Wit, or Arms, while both contend  
To win her Grace, whom all commend.  
There let *Hymen* oft appear  
In Saffron robe, with Taper clear,  
And pomp, and feast, and revelry,  
With mask, and antique Pageantry,  
Such sights as youthful Poets dream  
On Summer eves by haunted stream. [ll. 117-130]

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While at first glance these lines may appear to be no more than part of the idyllic setting that the poet paints for the gay speaker of the poem, a more thoughtful look will suggest that what Milton is describing here is the court of Charles I, in all its pomp and pageantry. Certainly through the description of the cities as 'towed' Milton is drawing up a host of associations for his seventeenth century readers: that the city is London, and is associated with the palace, the royalty and the nobility; this is further associated with a moral and spiritual degeneracy that has an almost pagan air to it; in implicit contrast is the country, and that invisible city of the commoners, where such riches and pomp do not exist; which in turn would be associated by the seventeenth century reader with a more clearly Puritan, and therefore Christian air. When we read this poem then, as we must, with its companion poem, which we might understand to emerge from precisely this latter social section, we realise that the two poems actually embody – albeit in a coded and broad way – the values of the two oppositional classes and political factions of the middle of the seventeenth century.

The other poems may be read in a similar vein. It is possible for instance, to read the repeated invocation of the Muses in the different poems as epitomising the relations between the sexes of the age – the masculine voice retaining control and presence, summoning the feminine voice to fulfil its aims, even as it projects the latter as quasi-divine. Even if Milton was among the first to argue for the equal status of women in society, his figuring of femininity remains deeply bound by the imagination of his age, which is, that the role of women is essentially as support, instrument and silent spectator (witness the figuring of Nature in the 'Nativity' ode) to the operations of men. These are of course, very sketchy analyses, intended more as directions for exploration than as complete statements. Closer analyses will reveal more complex relations between the poetry and its social world, and especially to the complex and multilayered processes of gender relations. Such analyses will first demand that one study the complexities of the age itself, socially, politically and culturally. In this sense, the above remarks are offered as no more than a very small window to a very large prospect.

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## 21.7 LET'S SUM UP \_\_\_\_\_

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In this unit we examined four of Milton's shorter poems. We studied the relation between the twin poems 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' as poems that deliberately adopt oppositional attitudes to the vocation of poetry. We studied the poems individually and in comparison. In the course of doing so, we noted that this led to certain paradoxes that were inherent to understanding the poems in this light. The two sonnets that we chose for study are from Milton's later literary phase, and revealed other dimensions to his writings like the preoccupation with blindness and its implications, and with death. These are in this sense more personal poems than the others we have studied so far. We then went on to discuss some aspects of the relation between formal elements and the historical context in which the poems were written. This we hope will serve as a preliminary guide to the analyses of poetry through the location of its formal qualities within, rather than separated from, its contexts of creation.



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## 21.8 REVISION QUESTIONS

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1. In the twin poems, 'L'allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', Milton seeks to offer not just a vision of two moods but the two extreme sentiments of an extreme age. Do you agree? Give a reasoned answer.
2. Which of the two poems 'L'allegro' and 'Il Penseroso', in your considered opinion, would more accurately represent Milton's own personal view? Why?
3. In both the two sonnets in your course, Milton reflects on his blindness. Does that make them identical? Give a reasoned answer.
4. Analyse the similarities and distinctions between Sonnets 19 & 23. Which of the two, in your considered opinion, more effectively employs the sonnet form?
5. Milton's poetry is transcendent, in themes as well as style, rather than historically rooted. Would you agree? Why, or why not?

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## 21.9 ADDITIONAL READING

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## APPENDICES

### I

#### ON THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S NATIVITY COMPOS'D 1629

##### I

This is the Month, and this the happy mom  
Wherein the Son of Heav'ns eternal King,  
Of wedded Maid, and Virgin Mother born,  
Our great redemption from above did bring;  
For so the holy sages once did sing, [ 5 ]  
That he our deadly forfeit should release,  
And with his Father work us a perpetual peace.

##### II

That glorious **Form**, that Light unsufferable,  
And that far-beaming blaze of Majesty,  
Wherewith he wont at Heav'ns high Councel-Table, [ 10 ]  
To sit the midst of Trinal Unity,  
He laid aside; and here with us **lo** be,  
Forsook the Courts of everlasting Day,  
And chose with us a **darksome** House of mortal Clay.

##### III

Say Heav'nly Muse, **shall** not thy sacred vein [ 15 ]  
Afford a present to the Infant God?  
**Hast** thou no vers, no hymn, or **solemn strein**,  
To **welcom** him to this his new abode,  
Now while the Heav'n by the Suns **tear** untrod,  
**Hath** took no print of the approaching light, [ 20 ]  
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

##### IV

See how from far upon the Eastern rode  
The Star-led **Wisards** haste with odours sweet:  
O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,  
And lay it lowly at his blessed feet; [ 25 ]  
**Have** thou the honour first, thy Lord to **greet**  
And joyn thy voice unto the Angel Quire,  
From out his secret Altar toucht with hallow'd fire.

#### The Hymn

##### I

It was the Winter wilde,  
**While** the Heav'n-born-childe, [ 30 ]  
All meanly **wrapt** in the rude manger lies;  
Nature in aw to him  
Had **doff't** her gawdy trim,  
With her great Master so to sympathize:  
It was no season then for her [ 35 ]  
To wanton with the Sun her lusty Paramour.

##### II

Onely with speeches fair  
She woo's the gentle Air  
To hide her guilty front with innocent Snow,  
And on her naked shame, [ 40 ]  
Pollute with **sinfull** blame,