

JOHN MILTON (1608-1674)

Paper Outline:

- (A) Contradiction between Milton the Puritan, and Milton the republican or bourgeois revolutionist, and Milton the Renaissance humanist
- (B) The writer as a staunch fighter for freedom and against tyranny
- (C) Miltonic blank verse Characteristics

From 1638 to 1639, he *travelled* through France to Italy, spending sixteen months in Florence, Rome, Naples and other Italian Cities and meeting a number of prominent figures there (including Galileo in prison) and writing some Latin and Italian verses. This trip intensified the poet's hatred of *papacy* and *absolutism*. From Italy he planned to make an extended trip eastward to Greece and the Palestine, but the political developments in England at the time made him decide to cut short his journey and return.

According to *Milton* himself: "When I was preparing to pass over into Sicily and Greece, the melancholy intelligence which I received of the civil commotion in England made me alter my purpose; for I thought it base to be travelling for amusement abroad, while my fellow-citizens were fighting for liberty at home."

He started making orations against tyranny and scholasticism and writing some Latin verses and also a few English poems (including chiefly the ode "*On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*" and the sonnet "*On Shakespeare*"). From his early childhood his family had destined him to a career of religion but he gave it up on account of the distaste he and his family had toward the oppressions within the Anglican Church.

The earliest of his *five anti-episcopal* pamphlets, "*Of Reformation*", appeared in 1641, and the other four followed in rapid succession from 1641 to 1642. These early pamphlets of Milton's, like all his later ones, were part of the actual religious controversy and political struggle then going on, and in them Milton stood on the side of the Puritans and argued for religious freedom and against the authority of the bishops in church government.

*Comus*, the theme here, a typical one for the *Puritan* poet, is that of the power of virtue and purity to subdue the forces of evil, but this poetic drama contains also a definitely political meaning, for *Comus* in a way represents the wild life of drunkenness and immorality at the court of *Charles I* and his *Cavaliers*, and the lady stands for virtue and purity while the Attendant Spirit and Sabina symbolize help from God who protects the good and the virtuous.

So here we may see the reflection of the *conflict* in *England* then between the *Puritans* and the *Cavaliers*, and Milton obviously meant to suggest by this masque that though the spirit of evil as represented by the king and his *Cavaliers* may triumph for a while, yet eventually with the help of God the virtuous though persecuted Puritans will frustrate the vicious tricks and brut violence of the evil forces and free themselves from tyranny. However, "*Comus*" was first of all