



Milton as a Metrical Artist

Dr. Chirag M. Patel

Asst. Professor –Sanskar Institute of Technology, Affiliated to GTU, Gujarat, India

Abstract:

This Research Paper aims to highlight the artistic work of John Milton. The main purpose behind the research provides information students to get ideas of his mastery over the use of rhymes, verse, accents and stresses, spondees and Elision.

Keywords:

Rhymed verse; Blank verse; sense; stresses; spondees; Elision; Melody

Milton's Use of Rhymed Verse— His Early Versification:

Milton was a great metrical artist; one who has used a number of meters and a verse – forms with a great art and skill. In his *Preface to Paradise Lost* he expresses his contempt for rhyme and says that rhyme is “no necessary adjunct or true ornament of a poem “. However, his early or minor poems are in rhyme and are read with greater interest by the reader than his great works in blank verse. The lilting, dancing measure of *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, the delicate songs of *Arcades*, and *Comus*, the ‘rich and sonorous harmony’ of *Lycidas* – are all ultimately derived from the music of the Elizabethans, which Milton never ceased to admire in spite of his indiminate of rhyme. Milton's early poems as Raleigh points out, “grew on Elizabethan soil , and drank

Elizabethan air.” *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* as well as *Lycidas* bring out skill in the handling of rhyme in short lines of four, even three or two, stresses and his sonnets reveal his mastery over the sonnet form.

Use of Blank Verse: Milton's Originality:

Milton's early poetry reveals his mastery over his mastery over the use of rhyme; his later poetry including *Paradise Lost* brings out his skill in the handling of the blank verse (Iambic Pentameter line without Rhyme). Before him, blank verse had been effectively used by the dramatists like Marlowe and Shakespeare, but it had not been used with any success by the poets. Milton's originality is seen in his boldly adapting blank verse for the purposes of the poetry. In the hands of the dramatists themselves the blank verse had become degenerate and loose and was hardly to be distinguished from the prose. At the time when *Paradise Lost* was written, heroic couplet was in fashion and it was considered as the only fit metre for poetry. Milton showed great originality and boldness in going against the current vogue of the heroic couplet and using blank verse for his masterpiece. Says Raleigh in his this connection, “ At the time when blank verse was yielding to decay, Milton took it up, and used it neither for conversational nor for rhetorical purposes. In the interests of the pure poetry and melody he tightened its

joints, stiffened its texture, and one by one gave up almost all the licenses that the dramatists had used. By the variety of small observances, which when fully stated, make up a formidable code, he mended the shambling gait of the loose dramatic blank verse and made of it a worthy epic metre.”

The Nature of Blank Verse : The Need Of Variety:

A blank verse line is a lone of ten syllables of five feet without rhyme, with the accent falling on the second syllable in each foot, and with a pause or ‘caesura, about the middle, i.e., after the fourth or the fifth syllables. There is also a longer pause at the end of each line, equivalent to the full stop in prose. This is the norm, but if the norm is the strictly followed, especially in long narrative poetry, it results in monotony and lack of interest. Therefore, to impart variety and avoid monotony, variations are introduced, and Milton’s greatness as a metrist is seen in the skill with which he imparts variety to his blank verse.

Variety in Pauses and Stresses

First of all, Milton imparts variety by varying the stresses and accents, and the placing of the pause or Caesura. He continually varies the stresses in the line, their number, their weight, and their incidence, letting them fall, when it pleases his ear, on the first as well as on the second syllables of the line. The pause or the caesura he permits to fall at any place on the line, usually towards the middle, but on the occasion, even after the first or the ninth syllables. His chief care is to vary with the

word in relation to the foot, and the sentences in the verse in this regard, and no other metrist makes so splendid a use of its freedom. He never forgets the pattern; yet he never stoops to teach it by the repetition of a monotonous pattern.

Overflow of Sense:

Secondly the sense does not end with each line, but overflows from one line to line or lines which follow. There is enjambment or overflow and in Milton’s own words, “the sense is variously drawn out from one verse and in another”. This gives us the famous Miltonic verse- paragraphs. The meaning the poet wants to convey is for the most part conveyed not in single lines, nor in rigid couplets, but for the most part in combinations of verses, which are flexible and allow the thought to be merged in the expression. These combinations or paragraphs are informed by a preface internal rhythm or harmony. Milton’s constant practice is to have this overflow and this gives us his long verse paragraphs. The result of this practice of Milton is a great variety produced in the groupings and there is such a poise between language and the thought, that there is never even an approach to monotony.

Use of Extra Syllables:

There are a number of other ways in which variations are introduced with great art and skill. Sometimes, though not frequently, we get an extra syllable at the end of a line as in the following:



*Cornice or frieze with bossy sculptures
graven*

In this line the extra syllable is 'en'. Sometimes these extra syllables are inserted not at the end, but somewhere inside the line. At other time, he makes use of *anapests* (a foot of two unaccented syllables followed by a tied accented syllable) as in the following from Book //:

As at the Olympian Games or python games

The verse of Samson Agonists has been criticized as harsh because there is an overabundance of extra syllables at the end of a line. Every sixth line has an extra syllable in this dramatic poem.

Variation in stresses:

On still other times, though rarely, both the syllables in a foot remain unaccented. One of the very frequent variations is the use of a trochee, i.e., a foot in which the stress is laid on the first syllable instead of the second. Then there is the use of a spondee (in which both the syllables in a foot are stressed) as in the following:

*Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens, and
shades of death.*

By such variation in stresses, Milton modulates the pace of his versification to the requirements of thought and thought and emotion and this is the sign of perfection.

Use of spondees:

To impress slowness of action or struggling or vacillating thought, Virgil expresses

himself by means of Spondees, and Milton, the most Virgilian of all English poets, has captured the trick. Thus in the following passage the upward progress of the son of god and his companion is skillfully conveyed by the movement of his verse,

The heavens and all the constellations rang,

The planets in their station listening stood,

While the bright pomp ascended jubilant.

In the last line the first four words marshal the great procession in solid array; the last two lift it high into the empyrean.

Use of Elision and Contraction:

Elision (the slurring over of an unaccented syllable) is frequently used by Milton. Thus *laboring* becomes 'laboring' and *adventures* become 'adventures'. Similar to elision is *contraction*, another metrical device frequently used by Milton. By all these devices Milton avoids monotony and weariness and imparts a rare flexibility and ease to his versification. As Raleigh says, "His verse, even in its least admirable passages, does not sing, nor with regular alternative streets; its movement suggested neither dance nor song, but rather the advancing march of a body of troops skillfully handled, with incessant changes in their disposition as they pass over broken ground, "He can furnish his verse with wings or make it move slowly as it pleases. His blank verse is the verse of an inspired artist and no analysis of his prosody can do justice to the wonders of his workmanship. In the choruses of *Samson Agonistes*. Where he reaches the top of his skill, Milton varies



even the length of the line. *So he has hardly a rule left, save the iambic pattern, which he treats merely as a point of departure or reference, a background or framework to carry the variations imposed upon it by the luxuriance of a perfectly controlled art.*

Verbal Melody:

“By his deliberate attention to the element of verbal melody”, says **Raleigh**, “Milton gave a new character to English blank verse.” Verbal melody is a characteristic of his diction as well as versification. Words are carefully chosen with reference to their sound. As already noted above (in connection with diction), he uses long catalogues of sonorous and melodies proper names. Often a proper name is modified or contracted to make it more musical. Alliteration and assonance are constantly used with this end in view. ‘Battering-engine’ and ‘Pennons’, and ‘plumb downs’, ‘vast vacuity’ and ‘cloud chair’, are all examples picked up at random from *Paradise Lost*. More may be gathered from practically every page of the epic. Repetition is another musical device frequently used by Milton. Thus the repetition of *Sweet* in the following line:

Sweet is the breath of morning her rising sweet

Creates music its own, as entire well as serves to impress the sweetness of Eve’s idyllic life. Many of Milton’s Latinisms also result from Milton’s ear for sweet sounding, sonorous words. Thus *resounding alchemy* is used for its sonorousness, instead of the ordinary, ‘trumpets of brass’. ‘The figure

called *Onomatopoeia*, in which the sound of words echoes their senses, is also used for the same reason. The following are good examples of Milton’s use of *Onomatopoeia*, as well as of his exploitation of vowel-music by the use of monosyllabic words

1. *Rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, dens and shades of death.*
2. *Over bog, or steep, through strait or rough, dense or rare.*

Conclusion:

In short, Milton is an inspired metrical artist who uses his chosen verse-form as a master, with perfect ease and command, subordinating it to the effects he wants to create. By his use he demonstrated the possibilities of blank verse for poetry, and in this field none has ever excelled or even equaled him, just as none has ever equaled Shakespeare in the use of blank verse for dramatic purposes. Milton is unique in the sure and flawless perfection of his diction and versification.

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