

NAXOS
AudioBooks

POETRY

The Great Poets
John Milton

Read by **Samantha Bond** and **Derek Jacobi**



NA185512D

1	At a Vacation Exercise	6:45
2	L'Allegro	7:19
3	Il Penseroso	5:21
4	<i>cont.</i> Or let my lamp, at midnight hour...	5:05
5	At a Solemn Musick	1:55
6	To Mr. H Lawes, on his Aires	1:04
7	On Time	1:15
8	On Shakespeare	1:03
9	On the morning of Christ's Nativity	5:49
10	<i>cont.</i> Yea Truth, and Justice then...	3:30
11	Sonnet: To the Lord General Cromwell	1:11
12	Sonnet: On the detraction which followed...	1:06
13	Sonnet: On the Late Massacre in Piedmont	0:53
14	Lycidas	6:25
15	<i>cont.</i> It was that fatal and perfidious bark...	6:46
16	Sonnet: To the Nightingale	0:55
17	Sonnet: On my 23rd Birthday	1:38
18	<i>from</i> Paradise Lost – <i>opening of Book I</i>	1:46

19	<i>from Paradise Lost – Book I – The fall of Mulciber</i>	1:29
20	<i>from Paradise Lost – opening of Book II</i>	1:52
21	<i>from Paradise Lost – from Book XII</i>	1:28
22	<i>from Paradise Regained</i>	1:38
23	Sonnet: Upon a Deceased Wife	1:11
24	Sonnet: On his Blindness	1:09
25	Sonnet: To Cyriack Skinner	1:11
26	<i>from Samson Agonistes</i>	2:03
27	The destruction of the Temple	2:09
28	The Final Chorus <i>from Samson Agonistes</i>	0:47
29	<i>from Comus, a Masque</i>	3:53

Total time: 79:21

Cover picture: John Milton, by W Holl
Courtesy Mary Evans Picture Library

The Great Poets

John Milton

John Milton is one of the great voices in English. Beside Shakespeare and the Bible, it is his cadences and rhythms that have sounded through the last four hundred years in the way the language is written and spoken. He created new words, formed phrases that are now in everyday use, and wrote about matters of eternal interest in a completely new fashion. *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* are the towering later works of his genius; but there are also sonnets of great tenderness and technical brilliance, as well as elegies and joyous experiments in classical forms. Beyond the language is the theology – his concerns over the nature of Man’s relationship with God – in which Milton was almost as much a revolutionary and an influence as he was in politics, the other great feature of his life.

John Milton was born in December

1608 to a father who was a scrivener (a form of legal notary) and also a distinguished composer. He was, too, a Protestant, disowned by his own father for breaking with the Roman Catholic Church. The England of the time was in the middle of a series of huge political, social and religious shifts, as the monarchy switched between the Catholic and the Protestant. At the same time, arguments over the legitimacy of monarchy itself were being discussed, and radical new theories of how to worship God, what God to worship, and the right of the individual to determine matters of faith for himself were continuing to ferment throughout Europe. Milton was born more than seven years before the death of Shakespeare – at the end of the Golden Age of English supremacy, of a Renaissance in trade, science and art – and just three years before the

publication of the King James Bible. He was thirty-four when the Civil War broke out, leading to the execution of a king and the establishment of a revolutionary form of parliamentary government. A few years later, and this New Order was itself overturned with the restitution of the monarchy. He died in 1674, fourteen years after the king returned to the throne, and fourteen years short of seeing another revolution in Britain that led to a recognisable form of democratic, constitutional monarchy.

A steadfast apologist for the parliamentarians, his professional output defending regicide was as robust as his pamphlets promoting the legitimacy of divorce or the freedom of the press; as a result, he has been quoted by revolutionaries and libertarians the world over. Milton's life was threatened by the changes in the politics of the period (once the king was back on the throne, there were calls for Milton's head) but he was saved by the genius of his art: his erstwhile assistant, the poet and satirist Andrew Marvell, had become an MP; and there were those who recognised the

worth of Milton's poetry, and saw the PR value of the king's mercifully allowing the now-blind poet to survive.

Milton had started to write poetry when at college (including the *Nativity Ode* and *Epitaph on Shakespeare*), but since he had always been independently minded, intellectually strong, dedicated, rigorous and brilliant, he had not been a very popular pupil at school. He used to read until midnight (or later) while at St Paul's school, where his father sent him after recognising the range of his son's talents. Later student life for Milton at Christ's College, Cambridge was no smoother – he thought his fellow students were fools for their playing around, while they mocked him as 'the Lady of Christ' for his long hair and dedication to his God. Milton also disagreed so violently with his tutor that he was suspended. Some reports suggest there was actually a fight between them! Certainly Milton defied him, as he did many of the prevailing mores of his time, with no apparent concern for the risk this caused to his reputation or his future.

Thanks to his father's successes –

and generous understanding of his son's linguistic and poetical talents – Milton was able to spend the six years after he graduated in a kind of intellectual retreat, continuing to develop his vast knowledge of languages (including Latin, Greek, French, Italian and Hebrew) as well as writing *Comus*, a dramatic masque, and such poems as *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso* and *Lycidas* – the latter considered probably the finest pastoral elegy in English. He then headed off to Europe for a grand tour. Although he was hugely stimulated by the people he met there – including, it is thought, Galileo – Milton believed that there were greater tasks to undertake as a writer and a profound (if not precisely conventional) Protestant. For him, the nature of Man's relationship to God, and how this should be expressed politically and socially, was the vital question of his time, so when he heard rumours of a civil war in England, he returned.

For the next twenty years he dedicated his life to politics. During the Civil War, he taught, and also published pamphlets and polemics on educational, political and religious

matters (including *Areopagitica*, a treatise against censorship), which brought him to the attention of the parliamentarians. On their victory, he was employed as Secretary for Foreign Tongues, which essentially meant that it was his job to write, in Latin, responses to criticisms of the turmoil that had overtaken England. Here was Milton's great prose platform from which he rallied his magisterial tone and extraordinary reserves of knowledge in the cause of liberty. Any optimism he may have had about the republican ideal was, however, to be tempered by the inevitable intolerance of the new government towards any dissent.

On a personal level his life went through a turmoil almost as great as the political and social one of his country. In 1642 he had married Mary Powell, half his age and from a Royalist family. Unsurprisingly it was not a success (hence his tracts in favour of divorce), but they were reconciled in 1645 despite her entire family accompanying her back to London and moving in. The couple had a child, Anne; and – once they had moved away from Mary's family – a

second girl (also called Mary). In 1651 their son John was born, and in 1652 a third daughter, Deborah. But his wife died from complications following the birth, and his son died only months later. In that same year, Milton became totally blind. He had been aware that his eyesight was deteriorating, but he would be no more likely to reduce his reading and writing than he would be to give up his republican ideals or his idiosyncratic religious convictions: he simply had people to read and write for him. He was married again, to Catherine Woodcock, in 1656; but she too died in childbirth just two years later, prompting the *Sonnet Upon a Deceased Wife*. He finally found lasting happiness with Elizabeth Minshull, a younger woman whom he married in 1663 despite his daughters' unhappiness at the match; Milton's relationship with them was never an easy one.

Having been spared by the intervention of Marvell and others following the restitution of the monarchy, Milton lived out his life in relatively quiet retirement. But his days were filled with creating some of the greatest poetry

ever written. He would spend hours composing and remembering the blank verse of *Paradise Lost* before dictating it to his various amanuenses. In it Milton is trying to explain the nature of Man, of evil and of God's intentions, an issue that reinvented the intellectual and artistic world for the likes of Blake and the Romantics – and even for current artists, who are constantly imagining the Devil in versions that owe much to Milton. But the paradise that was lost to Milton was also that of political liberty and republican freedoms; and even the optimistic title of *Paradise Regained* disguises a mournful sense of loss for the failed republican dream and for the people's easy acceptance of the returned king. *Samson Agonistes* is more rebellious in tone: the hero is a man of enormous strength who has been blinded and duped by those he loved and is vowing vengeance. For Milton himself – it is difficult not to see him as a poetic Samson – the temple of the monarchy did not come crashing around his ears to end his life. He died in 1674, probably from gout.

For some, Milton is not an easy poet.

His style deliberately follows classical forms and uses classical techniques, references and allusions that are not immediately accessible to those who have not followed his rather proscriptive tenets on education. As a result, to some (such as T.S. Eliot), his poems are ‘withered by book-learning’ – in some fashion disconnected from the emotional or intellectual striving at their heart. If not actually a misogynist, Milton certainly believed in the subordination of women. His puritan ethics are out of fashion (although his belief that the chaste are likely to find marriage more difficult than those who enjoyed a variety of experiences before settling down might find more general favour). His theology was considered almost heretical at the time – questioning as it did the divinity of Jesus, among other things – and 17th century quibblings over the nature of God are rarely populist four centuries later. But to some extent this difficulty is the point. Here was a man of formidable intellectual gifts that were allied to a magnificent ear for the music of English. He took on the largest issues – politics, freedom,

religion – and combined his learning with his understanding of the complex power of language itself. The poetry is a rare combination of profound intent profoundly expressed, yet carrying this burden with a touch as light, beautiful and balanced as it is masterful and weighty.

Notes by Roy McMillan

This selection

Of the triumvirate of the Greatest English Poets – Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton – it is only the work of the greatest of them that is relatively popular and well known. That is probably because most of Shakespeare's poetry is enmeshed within story-telling and characterisation, and is intended for performance.

Yet how many people are acquainted with his Sonnets, all 154 of them? Or his longer poems, *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, and *The Phoenix and the Turtle*?

Most people have experienced Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* in some form or other, perhaps on television or as a long-running musical. But do many know (or even know of) his greatest poetic work *Troilus and Cressyde*?

And, then, we've all heard of *Paradise Lost*, but of its twelve Books how many of us have got beyond Chapters one and two? And that was probably at school when force-fed the work for English Literature exams. What of Milton's other works – *Lycidas*, *Il Penseroso*, *L'Allegro*,

the Sonnets, the masque *Comus* or the mighty tragedy *Samson Agonistes*, written by the blind poet towards the end of his life?

Alas, all one can do on a simple eighty minute CD in celebration of the 400th anniversary of John Milton's birth on 9 December 1608 is to present a kind of birthday card with a selection of and from the very best of his poetic works.

The most famous sonnets are here and the three great poems – *Lycidas*, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*, all read in their entirety by two consummate artists, Derek Jacobi and Samantha Bond. They can, however, only give a taste of the Epics – *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, the masque *Comus* and the great tragedy *Samson Agonistes*.

As with the plays and poems of Shakespeare, or the tales and poems of Chaucer, I suggest that Milton's works are more readily assimilated through the listening ear than through the reading eye. It is worth recalling that Milton was blind for the better part of his creative life and his poetry was dictated.

This small selection of Milton's poetry

has been put together to mark the celebration of one of England's three greatest poets on the occasion of his quatercentenary. But this is a very small slice (though crammed with the best of his fruits) of a very large cake indeed. Let us hope that the appetite is whetted for more!

John Tydeman

Milton and Music

Milton's last centenary in 1908 was in many ways a very musical affair. The masque *Comus* was staged, music by his contemporaries was performed, and settings of his work, both old and new, were sung. Many of the best-known names in early 20th century English music were present, including Charles Parry and Frank Bridge, who both gave speeches on the subject.

Music was indeed central to Milton's upbringing. His father, also John Milton, was a talented amateur composer and musician whose madrigals were included in a collection with Byrd and Tallis. A similar passion for music was instilled in his son, who learned at an early age to sing and to play the organ; his poetry is saturated with musical language and imagery. One of his closest friends was the well-known composer Henry Lawes, to whom the poem *To Mr. H Lawes, on his Aires*, is dedicated. Their mutual admiration bore musical as well as poetic fruit – apart from many shorter settings of his poetry, Henry Lawes also wrote the

music to *Comus*. Henry's brother William, whose music accompanies this collection, also found inspiration in Milton's work, as did composers as diverse as Thomas Arne, Gaspare Spontini, George Frideric Handel and Parry.

Milton's verse is rarely set in the 21st century. Yet no celebration of Milton's life would be complete without acknowledging the part that music played for the blind poet – not just professionally, but emotionally and spiritually too. This is perhaps best expressed in Milton's own words:

There let the pealing organ blow,
To the full-voiced quire below,
In service high and anthems clear,
As may with sweetness, through
mine ear,
Dissolve me into ecstasies,
And bring all Heaven before mine
eyes.

from *Il Penseroso*

Caroline Waight



Samantha Bond is one of Britain's best-known actresses. She trained at the Bristol Old Vic and has since been active in theatre, television and film. Theatre credits include *Rubinstein's Kiss* at the Hampstead Theatre, *Amy's View* at the National Theatre, West End and Broadway, and *A Woman of No Importance* at the Haymarket Theatre. She has appeared in *Midsomer Murders* and *Inspector Morse*, as well as in several BBC period adaptations, including *Mansfield Park* and *Fanny Hill*. She also starred as Miss Moneypenny in several James Bond films.



Derek Jacobi is one of Britain's leading actors, having made his mark on stage, film and television – and notably on audiobook. He is particularly known for the roles of I Claudius and Brother Caedfael, both of which he has recorded for audiobook. His extensive theatrical credits, from London's West End to Broadway, include numerous roles encompassing the whole range of theatre. He also reads *The History of Theatre*, *The History of English Literature* and *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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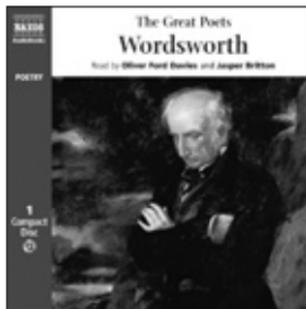
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The Great Poets

John Milton

Read by **Samantha Bond** and **Derek Jacobi**

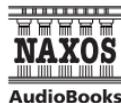
Milton stands alongside Shakespeare and the Bible in the power of his verse and its continuing impact. He is one of the great voices of English poetry.

Born in 1608, he is best known for his epic *Paradise Lost*, but most of his writing life was spent composing shorter works. This collection brings together his brilliant early poems, including *Il Penseroso*, *L'Allegro* and *Lycidas*, as well as some of the finest and most touching works of his maturity, such as *On His Blindness* and *Sonnet Upon a Deceased Wife*.

This anthology will serve as an introduction, or as a reminder of the range and variety of John Milton's great gifts.

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Total time
1:19:21

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